

Groton Daily Independent

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Thursday, Feb. 6

Senior Menu: BBQ Chicken, rice pilaf, mixed vegetables, pineapple, whole wheat bread.

Basketball doubleheader hosts Deuel. boys JV at 4 p.m., girls JV at 5 p.m., boys varsity and girls varsity to follow.

Groton United Methodist: Caring Team Meeting, 5 p.m.

Good Morning Thursday Blessings

1 Chronicles 16:34 KJV.

O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever.



God's Spoken
Word Ministries

Have a blessed day and
a joyful and thankful day.

Friday, Feb. 7

Senior Menu: Scalloped potato with ham, beets, fruited Jell-O, whole wheat bread.

Girls Wrestling at Yankton, 9 a.m.

Boys Basketball at Vermillion: C game at 4 p.m., JV at 5 p.m., varsity to follow.

JH Boys Basketball at Waubay, 7th grade only, 4:30 p.m.

Boys Wrestling at Lyman, 6 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 8

Girls Basketball at DAK XII/NEC Clash at Madison.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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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.

Federal Buyout Deadline

Nearly 2 million federal workers have until tonight to either return to the office or accept a buyout offer from the Trump administration. At least 20,000 federal employees have already accepted the package, which provides eight months of salary through Sept. 30. The figure is below the White House's target of 5% to 10% acceptance—though it may rise by the end of the day—and critics have raised questions about its feasibility.

The offer is part of President Donald Trump's plans to reshape the government and slash federal spending. Spearheading the effort is the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency, which Trump formally established with the broad task of auditing various agency systems. Recent efforts have led to the curtailment of the US Agency for International Development and an examination of Medicare and Medicaid systems.

DOGE staff have also been given "read-only" access to more than \$6T of payments made annually by the federal government to purportedly review the system's efficiency, though Musk's tweets suggest DOGE may be rejecting certain payments.

Separately, the White House yesterday clarified Trump's prior proposal for the Gaza Strip, saying he meant Palestinians would be only temporarily relocated to allow for reconstruction.

Degenerated Muscles Restored

A trio of patients suffering from spinal muscular atrophy saw significant improvements in their muscle function while receiving electrical stimulation in their lower spines, according to research released yesterday. The process is the first neurotechnology to reverse the decay of nerve circuitry and revive cell function in patients with a neurodegenerative disease.

Spinal muscular atrophy is a rare, inherited disease that gradually kills off spinal nerve cells responsible for muscle movement. As the so-called motor neurons die, the muscles they control wither, causing significant mobility issues. There is currently no cure, though treatments exist to slow the disease's progression.

In the trial, two spinal cord stimulation electrodes implanted in three individuals with the disease's milder form (Types 3 or 4) were stimulated for four hours at a time over 29 days. During the test period, each patient saw gains in leg strength, walking distance, and more, though upon removal, the implant's benefits faded. Larger clinical trials are expected, as well as applications to other neurodegenerative diseases.

Duterte Impeached

Vice President Sara Duterte of the Philippines was impeached yesterday by the House of Representatives, where 215 of 306 legislators voted against her just weeks before midterm elections. The decision follows allegations that Duterte misused public funds and plotted to assassinate President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the first lady, and the lower house speaker.

Duterte and her father—former President Rodrigo Duterte—have been publicly feuding with Marcos for the past few months. Duterte and her supporters believe the impeachment is an effort to prevent her from running for president in 2028. The vice president will face a trial in the Senate, likely after Congress reconvenes in June. If found guilty, she will be removed from office and could face criminal charges in court.

Approval ratings for both Duterte and Marcos have dipped in recent months, with critics finding the spectacle distracting from pressing issues in the country, such as poverty and unemployment.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

President Donald Trump signs executive order banning transgender athletes from competing in women's and girls' sporting events that receive federal funds, including the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.

National Women's Soccer League agrees to \$5M settlement stemming from 2021 lawsuit alleging sexual misconduct by coaches and other league personnel.

Black Sabbath to reunite for Ozzy Osbourne's final concert July 5 at fundraiser festival that will also feature Metallica and Pantera.

FireAid concert raises more than \$100M for Los Angeles wildfire relief efforts.

Science & Technology

Cyber researchers say Chinese AI company DeepSeek, whose low-cost chatbot went viral last week, is directly connected to infrastructure of the state-owned telecom firm China Mobile.

Study of large crowds reveals surprisingly predictable collective motion; highly packed crowds at Spain's running of the bulls behaved like a fluid, with repeating oscillations every 18 seconds.

Paleontologists discover skull fossil of oldest known relative of modern birds; 69-million-year-old specimen suggests a number of Antarctic birds survived the Cretaceous extinction event.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.4%, Dow +0.7%, Nasdaq +0.2%) led by big tech.

Chip giant AMD shares close down 6% after missing Wall Street estimates on data center sales.

USPS resumes accepting inbound packages from China, Hong Kong less than a day after saying it would stop.

US trade deficit in goods reached record \$1.2T last year; imports of goods and services grew 6.6% to \$4.1T, while exports hit record \$3.2T.

Workday—a human resource management software provider—lays off 1,750 people, or about 8.5% of its workforce, as it shifts to investing in AI.

Politics & World Affairs

Maryland federal judge blocks executive order seeking to end birthright citizenship; latest block is more permanent than 14-day temporary block issued Jan. 23 by a Seattle federal judge.

The US sends 104 migrants accused of entering the US illegally back to India.

Winter weather pattern to bring mix of snow and ice storms across portions of the US Midwest and Northeast through this weekend.

Argentina to withdraw from World Health Organization following US exit last month; Argentina was expected to provide \$8M toward WHO's \$6.9B 2024-25 budget.

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Tina's Baskets! Text/Call at 605-397-7285 to reserve your basket now. They are going fast! Cash, check or Venmo.



2. White vase with sour suckers. \$7.50



3. Kit Kat Cake with Valentine suckers on top. \$35



4. Hersheys Cake, two tier with strawberry hard candy. \$40



7. Valentine container with fake roses and white bears. \$5



8. Reeses candy bars with Valentine suckers. \$50



9. Heart basket with assorted candy. \$15



10. Vase filled with strawberry drops and chocolate rose candy. \$9



12. Valentine's love balloon with fake flowers, MMs, skittles. \$15



14. Mini chip ahoy's cookies, be mine valentines book, a bear with a love heart on it and some hot wheels in it. \$12



15. Betsie Voucher book, puppy, mini chocolate hearts. Behind the dog a bag of heart bear gummies and a small box of mix chocolates. \$12

Groton council delays vote on hail repair, discusses airport updates by Elizabeth Varin

The City Council opened bids for numerous repairs to city buildings on Tuesday, but a decision on repair work will have to wait for two more weeks.

The council tabled making a decision on hail damage repairs in order to have more time to review different bids and to have more input from council members.

Tuesday's council meeting almost didn't happen as a quorum wasn't available until just after the 7 p.m. scheduled start time. Council members Brian Bahr, Jason Wambach, Jon Cutler and Shirley Wells attended Tuesday's meeting, while Councilwoman Karyn Babcock, Councilman Kevin Nehls and Mayor Scott Hanlon were absent.

The council received bids from five different construction companies for roof repair work on the city's main pump house, cemetery repair shop, police department, city shop, community center, park restrooms, park picnic shelter, pool bathhouse, pool gazebo, pool storage shed and city hall/library. However, each bid contained somewhat different options. A few bids didn't include work on some of the buildings, and some included both shingles and tin as options for roofing material.

Bids included

- Braden Miller Construction out of Houghton with a low-end cost of \$79,500 using Owens Corning Duration shingles and a high-end cost of \$87,500 for Malarkey Vista shingles. Bid included shingle buildings only, but not the tin roof buildings.

- Weismantel Roofing out of Aberdeen with costs split out by building. The packet included work at the police department for \$9,415.75, city shop for \$14,727.03, park restrooms for \$1,489.21, park picnic shelter for \$4,743.97, pool bathhouse for \$16,048.90, pool gazebo for \$3,315.46 and pool storage shed for \$1,265.19.

- Ringneck Construction out of Aberdeen with costs split out by building. The packet included work at the cemetery repair shop for \$5,980.93, police department for \$8,627.63 (tin price) or \$8,823.71 (shingle price), city shop for \$19,014.16 (tin price) or \$19,446.30 (shingle price), community center for \$29,901.30 (tin price) or \$30,580.88 (shingle price), park restrooms for \$2,281.90, park picnic shelter for \$5,058.17, pool bathhouse \$19,986.48 (tin price) or \$20,470.02 (shingles price), pool gazebo for \$3,367 (tin price) or \$3,709.68 (shingle price), and pool storage shed \$1,193.92.

- Dakota Roofing out of Aberdeen with a bid of \$99,985 for 11 buildings.

- Witte Exteriors out of Grenville with \$97,340 for metal roofing, \$82,690 for shingle replacement, \$4,500 for gutters and \$11,700 for repairs of the roof at City Hall.

Councilman Brian Bahr, who led Tuesday's meeting as the mayor wasn't present, told contractors in the council chambers that the council would likely table making a decision to get opinions from the other council members and to weigh the different bids.

"I think we're going to discuss it a little more," he said. "I want to make sure we're doing our due diligence and selecting the right contractor for the job. We're making sure everything is compared apples to apples."

The council received updates on progress at the Groton Airport. Darrell Hillestad reported he had purchased a tractor and snowblower for the airport (with funding provided by donors). He also gave an update on getting hangars built at the airport.

"Everybody's very excited about it," he said. "We just need to take baby steps."

He expects some hangar construction will begin this summer.

The council approved purchasing a mini excavator after reviewing a few bids for machines in North Dakota. The council also directed Electric Utility Supervisor Todd Gay to get the city on the build list for a new electric department truck. The machine won't be available until around 2026, but the city's current vehicle is reaching the end of its lifespan.

"I'm afraid it's getting to the point where it will nickel and dime us," Gay said. "I would hate to put \$10,000 in if it's only worth \$30,000."

The council also authorized the mayor to sign a letter of commitment to participate in the Brown County Multi-jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan.

An agenda item to hire summer recreational employees was removed from the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, but a reminder was still included on the agenda that applications are open for summer recreational positions.

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Groton Legion remodeling project

The Groton American Legion is remodeling their main area. It is a \$40,000 project, according to the building permit. They are enclosing the lottery machine area, putting a new bar top, replacing the tiles and the carpet, and will also have some painting done. The main area will be out of commission for about 4-5 weeks; however, the bar area and lottery machines have been moved to the back room. Pictured below are John Sippel and Todd McGannon doing the tile work. The photo to the left shows behind the counter with the old tile removed. The bottom left photo shows the lottery machine area being enclosed.



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Queen of Hearts

The 16th week of the Queen of Hearts was held Wednesday evening. It was moved up due to a private party in the back room of the Legion scheduled for today. Ticket sales were \$845. The jackpot is \$13,397. Ron Worlie's name was drawn and he choose card 44 which was the seven of hearts. He won the consolation prize of \$84.

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area
Tigers

GT



Thursday, Feb. 06

Deuel in Groton for a doubleheader

4 p.m.: Boys JV
Sponsored by Hefty Seed

5 p.m.: Girls JV
Sponsored by Weber Landscaping

Followed by Boys Varsity then Girls Varsity

Sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Co-op of Ferney and Conde, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover

**\$5 ticket or
GDI Subscription**

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Groton Chamber of Commerce

February 5, 2025

12pm City Hall

- Members present: Katelyn Nehlich, Douglas Heinrich, Ashley Bentz, April Abeln, and Hannah Hochstetler
 - A Facebook live was posted to announce the winners of the Hwy 12 electronic sign spots. The east side was awarded to Front Porch 605 and the west side to Kolker Law Office.
 - Minutes from the previous meeting were approved by Heinrich and seconded by Abeln. All members present voted aye.
 - The treasurer's report was given. Dacotah Bank checking account balance is \$23,950.45 in addition to the \$10,000 CD. The bucks account balance is \$2874.80. The report was approved by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich. All members present voted aye.
 - A thank you card from Rosewood Court was shared for their 2025 Groton Independent subscription.
 - About 60 businesses have paid dues for 2025.
 - The Facebook page has become more active again with recent posts about our members.
 - Discussion was held on offering \$5 Chamber bucks. A quote was received from Quality Quick Print, but the board decided to stay with continuing just \$10 and \$25 increments.
 - President Bentz will be present at the February 18th Council meeting to gift members tumblers and thank them for the 2025 donation.
 - Abeln mentioned sponsoring free popcorn at a GHS game.
 - Scholarships will be reviewed February 26th at 5:30pm at Topper's store. Pizza will be served. A photo opportunity with winners is scheduled for May 14th at 1:30pm at the GHS library.
 - Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to gift a bike to one lucky winner at the Lions Easter Egg Hunt. Max value to be \$200. All members present voted aye.
 - Glacial Lakes advertising for 2025 was shared. No more rack cards are needed. Dakota Broadcasting will again offer radio ads in exchange for their baseball sponsorship.
 - Motion by Nehlich and seconded by Abeln to sponsor GDI Live broadcast for post season basketball events. \$25 per event for a maximum of 6. All members present voted aye.
 - Motion by Nehlich and seconded by Abeln to donate a shirt to the Spring Vendor Fair giveaway basket. All members present voted aye.
 - No new business welcomes have been scheduled.
 - Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to advertise Summer Fest, Pumpkin Fest, both rummage days, the Halloween events, and Family Fun Fest in exchange for Dakota Broadcasting's baseball advertising. All members present voted aye.
 - Discussion was held on Hwy 12 electronic sign contracts. It was suggested to ask for a quote for the replacement of all 6 spots for when contracts are complete.
 - It was suggested that 2025 members be listed on the Hwy 12 electronic scrolling marquee.
 - Next Meeting: March 5th, 12pm at City Hall
- Upcoming events
- 02/14/2025 Groton Community Blood Drive 8:45am-12pm Community Center
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser 10am-1pm Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawmaker loses vice chairmanship after trying to defund Huron schools over bathroom issue

Meanwhile, separate statewide school bathroom bill filed that criminalizes violations

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 5:27 PM

PIERRE — A firestorm of criticism Wednesday forced a South Dakota lawmaker to lose a committee vice chairmanship and withdraw his bill to defund the Huron School District, which he filed in reaction to a tip about the district's bathroom policy.

Meanwhile, a separate bill was filed to make school bathrooms "exclusively" male or female, as determined by a student's "biological" sex at birth. That bill would also criminalize violations.

The demoted legislator is Rep. Phil Jensen, a Republican from Rapid City. He filed a bill Tuesday to cut off state funding for the Huron schools — which are 300 miles from his own legislative district — with no reason given in the text of the legislation.

Backlash was immediate at the Capitol, where lawmakers are gathered for their annual legislative session. Reactions to the bill dominated morning conversations.

House Education Committee Chairwoman Lana Greenfield, R-Doland — whose district includes Huron — asked Jensen, the vice chairman, to stay away from the committee's Wednesday morning hearing.

Jensen's bill wasn't on the agenda, but Greenfield told Searchlight she knew there would be upset school administrators attending the hearing. They were in town for the School Administrators of South Dakota's Outstanding Administrator Banquet, which was scheduled for later Wednesday at a Pierre hotel and conference center.

"I just thought instead of inciting any kind of a problem, it would be better if he would leave," Greenfield said.

Jensen left the hearing but came back before it was over. He told Searchlight afterward that he had recently received a tip about Huron school officials, and he filed his bill "so they could come to Pierre and answer as to why they think it's OK" for transgender students to use the bathroom or locker room of their choice.

When asked whether he knew the school district's bathroom policy or any further details, Jensen deflected. "They allow boys to go in the girls' bathrooms now," he said. "And that's unacceptable."



State Rep. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, speaks to another legislator in the South Dakota House of Representatives on Feb. 5, 2025. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

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Jensen said he was willing to withdraw his bill and did so because he had been informed that another representative was introducing a bill addressing school bathrooms statewide. That bill is from Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer, R-Aberdeen, with Jensen as a cosponsor. It would require school administrators to ensure that areas such as changing rooms, restrooms and shower rooms are "designated for use exclusively by females or for use exclusively by males."

Schaeffbauer's bill would make it a misdemeanor crime to knowingly enter and refuse to leave such a room in violation of the law.

Amid the hubbub surrounding Jensen's Huron bill, House leaders asked him to step down as vice chair of the Education Committee, he said, adding that he agreed because he was willing to surrender his vice chairmanship to retain his seat on the committee.

The House clerk announced the demotion during the start of the House floor session Wednesday afternoon, saying "the speaker announced that Rep. Jensen was removed as vice chairman of the House Committee on Education." Afterward, Speaker Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, confirmed to South Dakota Searchlight that Jensen would remain a member of the committee.

A bit of theater ensued during the House floor session, due to Huron School Superintendent Kraig Steinhoff's presence after his attendance at the administrators' banquet. Lawmakers routinely ask for a "personal privilege" to recognize people in the gallery, and Rep. Kevin Van Diepen, R-Huron, was granted one to recognize Steinhoff and other Huron officials.

Van Diepen introduced Steinhoff as the superintendent of "the wonderful Huron School District." Jensen applauded but remained seated as other members of the House stood to applaud and welcome the Huron contingent.

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Steinhoff declined to answer questions from South Dakota Searchlight and instead provided a written statement about Jensen and his legislation, House Bill 1224.

"Representative Jensen and I have not communicated. I understand HB 1224 has been withdrawn," Steinhoff's statement said. "The bill caused fear, confusion, and unnecessary stress. As the superintendent, I am proud to serve ALL students of the Huron School District and will support and defend HSD with every breath I take."

An article on the IW Features website relates an account — unconfirmed by South Dakota Searchlight — that may have motivated Jensen's bill. IW Features is a project of the Independent Women's Forum, a nonprofit that argues against the inclusion of transgender women in women's sports and other settings.

The IW Features article alleges that two girls who attend Huron High School complained to school officials about a transgender girl using girls' bathrooms and were told to use the school's family restroom if they were uncomfortable.

Susan Williams, executive director of the Transformation Project in Sioux Falls, which advocates for transgender people, said Jensen's bill and rhetoric were not surprising.

"For almost a decade we have seen Rep. Phil Jensen propose hateful, discriminatory legislation that targets transgender South Dakotans," Williams said in a statement. "His demotion after his latest incidence of transphobia is well deserved. Rep. Jensen's desire to use his position to hurt marginalized people, rather than help them is deplorable."

But the particulars of the situation in Huron remained largely unknown around the Capitol as lobbyists and lawmakers swiftly condemned Jensen for his targeting of the Huron School District.

Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, called Jensen's bill "a terrible waste of time for everybody."

Rob Monson, executive director of School Administrators of South Dakota, released a statement on social media saying he and Steinhoff had met with House leaders and had requested that Jensen not only lose his vice chairmanship but also be removed from the committee. Monson said Jensen is "unfit to serve on that committee," and later said there was still "ongoing discussion" about a removal.

South Dakota Democratic Party Executive Director Dan Ahlers, a former legislator, released a statement saying "these actions are beneath the office that Rep. Jensen holds."

Monson and Ahlers described Jensen's bill as part of a broader attack on public education this legislative session.

That attack, they said, consists of efforts including a less-than-inflation state funding increase of 1.25% proposed by former Gov. Kristi Noem, a pending bill that would require the Ten Commandments to be posted in every public school classroom, and a Noem proposal to create education savings accounts that would provide public funding to help families pay for private school tuition, homeschooling or other forms of alternative instruction. A bill that would have required public schools to allow chaplains failed Wednesday in the House.

Wednesday was not Jensen's first experience with widespread condemnation of his actions or statements.

In 2016, he told the Rapid City Journal that one of his constituents witnessed "dozens of South Americans" fleeing a parked van in downtown Rapid City, and then Jensen described how they looked in language that the state Democratic Party called "bigoted." At the time, Jensen was supporting legislation to close the state to refugees.

In 2014, Jensen told the Journal that businesses should have the right to deny service based on a customer's race or religion, because the situation is best left to the free market.

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.

House restores 'loan loophole' bill back to original form

\$10,000 cap on federal campaign transfers introduced as separate legislation

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 6:22 PM

A bill that would close a campaign finance loophole allowing unlimited funds into a campaign is headed to the governor's desk.

"If you believe that restoring reasonable limits to South Dakota's political process is what our citizens expect of us, please vote green," said Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard.

The state House of Representatives passed the bill 38-29 on Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre. It would prevent the ability to make unlimited campaign donations as long as the donation is categorized as a loan.

Reisch is the bill's House sponsor. First, he successfully persuaded fellow lawmakers to strike an amendment added during the bill's recent House committee hearing. It would have imposed a \$10,000 cap on

federal campaign transfers to state political committees. That amendment, introduced by Rep. Spencer Gosch, R-Glenham, was reintroduced by Reisch as a standalone bill.

Reisch said it was necessary to strip Gosch's amendment because it might violate South Dakota's single-subject rule for legislation.

"It's better to be on the safe side than to risk having the entire bill thrown out," Reisch said.

Gosch, however, said the amendment was a natural extension of the bill's purpose: closing campaign finance loopholes.

"I would argue this is good," Gosch said. "I would urge you to turn down this motion."

Reisch's proposed reversion passed 34-33.

A tense turn

The debate took a tense turn when Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer, R-Aberdeen, accused the bill's sponsors of using it as a tool to target Aberdeen businessman Toby Doeden.

Doeden's actions did shine a light on the loophole. In the most recent election cycle, he reported a \$100,000 contribution to his own Dakota First Action committee. The contribution exceeded the state's \$10,000 limit on individual contributions to political action committees.

Doeden later amended the report, reclassifying the contribution as a loan. Current state law allows loans to be forgiven, effectively providing a way to nullify contribution limits.

"This bill was brought to the State Affairs Committee to specifically weaponize government against political opponents," Schaeffbauer said. She donated \$750 to Doeden's PAC ahead of the recent general election.

Reisch said the vote tests whether lawmakers believe in unlimited campaign contributions.

The bill now heads to Gov. Larry Rhoden for final consideration.

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



Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard, speaks on the House floor during the 2025 legislative session. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

House defeats bill requiring public schools to set policies for chaplain visits, services in SD

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 5:13 PM

A bill requiring public school districts in South Dakota to set policies allowing chaplains to serve within school buildings failed in the South Dakota House of Representatives in a 49-18 vote.

Rep. Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen, introduced House Bill 1054, saying that it would formalize religious outreach efforts in schools and help students to develop relationships with spiritual mentors. Chaplains would serve in schools based on school board policies, including qualification requirements and parental consent.

Lawmakers opposed to the bill shared how faith leaders are already involved in many South Dakota schools through clubs and outreach efforts, and worried that a mandated policy would confuse practices in place. Brookings Republican Rep. Mellissa Heermann said she worried about variation in minimum qualifications and teaching standards by school district.

Religion is a personal decision that should be left to a child and their family, said Sioux Falls Democratic Rep. Erin Healy.

The bill "doesn't strengthen religious freedom, it threatens it," she said. It could potentially alienate a child if a school chaplain instructs different religious values than the student and their family believe.

"Parents send their children to public school to learn to read, to learn to write, and learn to have critical thinking skills," Healy said. "They don't send them to public school to have religious instruction imposed on them by government-mandated chaplains."

Proponents of the legislation argued it was written loosely enough to allow for local control and account for concerns raised during debate.

Lawmakers this session are also weighing Senate Bill 51, which would mandate that public schools display the Ten Commandments in every classroom. That measure passed the Senate and heads to the House of Representatives.

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.



Rep. Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen, listens to a budgetary brief in Pierre on Jan. 14, 2025. (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

Rhoden appoints Sioux Falls businessman to fill lieutenant governor's former legislative seat

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 9:01 PM



State Sen. Jack Kolbeck, R-Sioux Falls, attends a rally featuring former President Donald Trump on Sept. 8, 2023, at The Monument in Rapid City. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

Governor Larry Rhoden appointed Jack Kolbeck, a former state senator from Sioux Falls, to the open South Dakota House seat for District 13, which includes portions of Lincoln and Minnehaha counties.

The seat was vacated recently when Rhoden chose Rep. Tony Venhuizen to serve as lieutenant governor, after Rhoden succeeded Gov. Kristi Noem when she departed to become secretary of the federal Department of Homeland Security.

Rhoden announced Kolbeck's appointment in a statement Wednesday evening.

"I worked with Jack for years as presiding officer of the state Senate," Rhoden said. "He has a steady head on his shoulders and will be a strong partner to keep South Dakota strong, safe, and free."

Kolbeck served District 13 in the Senate from 2017 to 2024, including as majority whip from 2023 to 2024. He has worked for more than 50 years in the malt beverage industry and has been the key accounts manager for Beal Distributing since 2002.

U.S. House members battle over eliminating Department of Education at hearing

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 6:50 PM

WASHINGTON — The largely partisan clash over whether to abolish the U.S. Department of Education came to the forefront at a Wednesday hearing by a U.S. House education panel, as rumors continue to circulate over President Donald Trump's plans to dismantle the federal agency that's just four-and-a-half decades old.

Trump campaigned heavily on a pledge to get rid of the department, which, among many responsibilities, administers funding for key programs, including for low-income school districts and special education, and also administers federal student aid.

Trump is reported to possibly issue some sort of executive order that seeks to diminish the department internally and calls on Congress to abolish the agency. He alone does not have the authority to close the department, and the effort would require congressional approval.

Lawmakers clashed at a House Committee on Education and Workforce hearing focused on "the state of American education," particularly school choice, parental rights in education and diversity, equity and

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inclusion initiatives.

The president's sweeping plan outlined throughout his campaign to "save American education" has already burst out of the floodgates since he took office last month.

He issued a series of education-related executive orders last week focused on prioritizing school choice funding, ending what the administration sees as "radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling" and taking "additional measures to combat anti-semitism."

Trump also signed executive orders in January that gut DEI programs and activities across the federal government.

Restoring 'common sense'

Rep. Tim Walberg, chair of the House education panel, said he is "pleased to see that the Trump administration is taking excellent steps to restore common sense, personal responsibility and parental choice through our education system."

"In K-12 education, there's much work that needs to be done," the Michigan Republican said, pointing to the latest data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The report found that average math and reading scores in 2024 for pupils in fourth grade and eighth grade were lower compared to before the coronavirus pandemic, in 2019.

Nicole Neily, president and founder of Parents Defending Education, a parents' rights group, said "American education is in crisis."

"For far too long, U.S. schools have focused on everything but educating children, and as last week's NAEP scores have shown, our children are bearing the brunt of these bad decisions," she said.

'We will fight any attempt'

Meanwhile, Democrats on the panel warned over the repercussions of dismantling the Education Department.

"The irony is not lost on me that we're here to discuss the state of American education while the current administration is actively discussing how to dismantle the main federal agency responsible for ensuring safe, quality education for all students," said Rep. Bobby Scott, ranking member of the panel.

"We will fight any attempt to dismantle the department, and so, we don't know what the plan will be, but count on our opposition to any plan that will abolish the Department of Education and the programs in it," the Virginia Democrat added.

Connecticut Democratic Rep. Jahana Hayes noted that since being created in 1979, the Education Department "has been committed to ensuring high-quality education for children across the country."

"As (Chairman Walberg) noted, there are about 1 million children who participate in private school choice programs, but 49.6 million children participate in public school education — what about them? Who is advocating for them?" Hayes said.

Janai Nelson, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, said Trump's execu-



The Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building pictured on Nov. 25, 2024. (Photo by Shauneen Miranda/States Newsroom)

tive orders to “restrict teaching and learning in inclusive and supportive environments and his threats to dismantle the Department of Education and upend critical enforcement of federal civil rights laws will demolish the very foundation of good citizenship.”

“We must reject these proposals out of the Project 2025 playbook and approach public education with common sense and common purpose, not separatism and self-dealing,” Nelson said.

Project 2025, the nearly 900-page policy proposal from the Heritage Foundation, outlines a vast conservative blueprint that, among many education-related priorities, calls for eliminating the Education Department.

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.

Trump signs executive order banning transgender athletes from women’s school sports

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 6:39 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump signed an executive order Wednesday that prohibits transgender athletes from competing on women’s sports teams consistent with their gender identity.

Trump, who repeatedly pledged throughout his campaign to “keep men out of women’s sports,” is already following through on his broader anti-trans agenda in just the two weeks since he took office.

Trump recently signed an executive order barring openly transgender service members from the U.S. military and another that restricts access to gender-affirming care for kids.

He also signed an executive order on his first day in office that makes it the “policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female.”

Just last month, the U.S. House passed a measure that would bar transgender students from participating on women’s school sports teams consistent with their gender identity.

Speaking at the signing ceremony inside a crowded White House room, Trump said that under his administration, “we will defend the proud tradition of female athletes, and we will not allow men to beat up, injure and cheat our women and our girls.”

“From now on, women’s sports will be only for women,” he said.

Dozens of women and young girls, some wearing sports uniforms, stood behind him.

The room was full of prominent GOP senators, members of Congress, governors, state attorneys general and leading voices in the movement opposing trans athletes’ participation in sports that align with their



President Donald Trump signs the “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports” executive order in the East Room at the White House on Feb. 5, 2025, in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

gender identity.

The Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, has noted that there has been “considerable disinformation and misinformation about what the inclusion of transgender youth in sports entails” and that trans students’ sports participation “has been a non-issue.”

Language of order

The order states that it is “the policy of the United States to rescind all funds from educational programs that deprive women and girls of fair athletic opportunities, which results in the endangerment, humiliation, and silencing of women and girls and deprives them of privacy.”

The order also directs all departments and agencies to “review grants to educational programs and, where appropriate, rescind funding to programs that fail to comply with the policy established in this order.”

Trump also asks the Department of Justice to offer resources to relevant agencies to “ensure expeditious enforcement of the policy established in this order.”

The order also calls on the assistant to the president for domestic policy to, within the next two months, convene state attorneys general to “identify best practices in defining and enforcing” the measure.

The executive order is sure to be met with legal challenges.

“We all want sports to be fair, students to be safe, and young people to have the opportunity to participate alongside their peers,” Kelley Robinson, president of the Human Rights Campaign, said in a statement ahead of the executive order.

“But an attempted blanket ban deprives kids of those things. This order could expose young people to harassment and discrimination, emboldening people to question the gender of kids who don’t fit a narrow view of how they’re supposed to dress or look,” Robinson said.

Biden rule struck down

In January, a federal judge in Kentucky struck down the Biden administration’s final rule for Title IX, part of which aimed to bolster federal protections for LGBTQ+ students.

Title IX is a landmark federal civil rights law that bars schools that receive federal funding from practicing sex-based discrimination.

The Education Department, under the Trump administration, clarified in a Dear Colleague letter last week that, following the judge’s order, the agency will enforce an earlier interpretation of Title IX from Trump’s first White House term.

“The department will return to enforcing Title IX protections on the basis of biological sex in schools and on campuses,” the agency noted.

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.

Protest erupts in D.C. against Trump administration plans to spike global humanitarian aid

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 5:14 PM

WASHINGTON — Thousands gathered on Capitol Hill Wednesday to protest the Trump administration’s bulldozing of U.S. disaster aid and critical medical care in war-torn and poverty-stricken regions around the globe.

The future of American humanitarian efforts is unclear after U.S. Agency for International Development employees were told late Tuesday to prepare for administrative leave and abandon global posts within a few weeks.

A throng of demonstrators near the U.S. Senate office buildings carried signs reading “Republicans, where are your spines?” and “USAID makes America safe, strong and prosperous.”

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They encircled Democratic lawmakers and former USAID officials, who pleaded with the crowd to “not give up” as the Republican-held Congress allows “Elon Musk’s illegal takeover of USAID” — as Democratic Rep. Sara Jacobs of California put it.

“And let’s be clear, while USAID might be first, it is not going to be the last. But joke’s on them because who knows better how to work in an authoritarian country than all of you?” she said to a cheering crowd that included humanitarian workers.

DOGE takeover

Individuals identifying themselves as part of Musk’s so-called “Department of Government Efficiency” forcefully entered the computer systems at USAID’s Washington, D.C., headquarters over the weekend.

Democratic lawmakers have vowed “to fight this legally in every way we can,” Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey told the crowd.

“We will fight their violation of civil service laws. We will fight their violation of civil rights laws. We will fight their violations of separation of powers. We will fight their violations of our Constitution of the United States of America,” Booker said, issuing a plea for Republicans to join in sponsoring legislation to save USAID.

“This is not about demonizing a political party. It is about telling the truth about Donald Trump’s actions and Elon Musk’s actions,” Booker said.

Rep. Madeleine Dean told the crowd “do not fatigue.”

“These are not normal times,” said the Pennsylvania Democrat. “What is going on is corrupt. It is cruel, it is chaotic, it is lawless, it is unconstitutional, and that’s the point. Do not go home. Please stay with us. Bring more people to us and demand the same of our Republican colleagues. Where are they? When will they stand up to this lawless administration?”

In response to questions about Musk’s personnel gaining entry to USAID, President Donald Trump told reporters Sunday that the agency is “run by radical lunatics, and we’re getting them out and we’ll make a decision.”

Trump placed Musk in charge of the “U.S. DOGE Service Temporary Organization” that, according to Trump’s own executive order, is supposed to modernize federal technology and software. Musk has used it to gain access to USAID, as well as the Treasury Department’s payment systems — for which the department is now facing a lawsuit.



Demonstrators gathered on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, to protest the Trump administration’s dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development. (Photo by Ashley Murray/States Newsroom)

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All workers on leave

All "direct hire" USAID workers will be placed on leave as of 11:59 p.m. Eastern on Friday, according to a message posted late Tuesday on USAID.gov. The message is the first item to appear on the website since it went dark Saturday.

Workers who are "designated personnel responsible for mission-critical functions, core leadership and specially designated programs" will be notified by Thursday at 3 p.m. Eastern if they are expected to continue working, according to the memo. Overseas workers have 30 days to leave their posts unless given an exception for a special circumstance.

"Thank you for your service," the message concluded.

The Department of State did not respond to States Newsroom's questions regarding how many workers will remain employed and where they will continue humanitarian missions.

Two-thirds of the roughly 10,000 USAID employees work overseas. The top 10 recipients of USAID assistance in 2023, the most recent complete data available, were Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Syria, according to the Congressional Research Service.

"You know who's cheering today?" Bama Athreya, former USAID deputy administrator, asked the crowd. "ISIS is cheering. Al Qaeda is cheering as we recall thousands of people around the world" who give young people and families "options," she said.

Ukraine aid

Congress allocated roughly \$40 billion for USAID in 2023. That year, the agency allocated a large chunk to governance and humanitarian aid for Ukraine as the Eastern European nation faces a continued invasion from Russia.

The agency also carries a reputation for its work containing global health emergencies — perhaps best known for administering funds to fight the global AIDS epidemic under President George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR.

Atul Gawande, a surgeon who led USAID's global health program for three years prior to Trump's second administration, led the crowd in a "Let them work" chant.

"Until two weeks ago, there was a malaria team with world experts, and they are gone. Until two weeks ago, there was a TB (tuberculosis) team, and they are gone," Gawande said.

"They have called this 'shock and awe.' It is shock and destroy. You cannot dismantle a plane and fire the crew in mid-flight, but that's what an oligarch with unchecked power is doing to life-saving foreign assistance programs," Gawande said.

Brian York, 41, of Fairfax County, Virginia, stood in the crowd with a double-sided hand-drawn sign bearing the messages "Let's Make America Gracious Again" and "Defend USAID."

"I support my government. I was a Boy Scout. My father was a naval aviator. I actually like this country, and I want it to do better than this," York said.

List of 'waste, fraud and abuse'

The White House maintains that USAID "has been completely unaccountable for decades, run by bureaucrats with agendas who believed they answered to nobody."

In a post on X Wednesday, White House communications personnel listed 28 of what they characterized as problematic USAID projects.

Without specifying details, including the length of funding, the post specifically listed: "\$6.3 million for men who have sex with men in South Africa," "\$1.3 million to Arab and Jewish photographers," "\$20 million for a new Sesame Street show in Iraq," "\$1.5 million for 'art for inclusion of people with disabilities,'" and "\$500K to solve sectarian violence in Israel."

"President Trump is STOPPING the waste, fraud, and abuse," concluded the post on X, which is owned by Musk, a billionaire Trump campaign donor.

USAID's X account disappeared over the weekend.

Democratic lawmakers protested outside USAID headquarters Monday as Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced he was now acting administrator of the agency.

Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii, one of the protesting lawmakers, said he would block Trump's forthcoming Department of State nominations — a move that will slow down, but not stop, the nominations in the GOP-led chamber.

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

Trump notion U.S. should control Gaza met with little enthusiasm in Congress

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 5, 2025 3:25 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's proposal to have the United States take over Gaza and potentially deploy American troops in the extremely volatile region failed to win over members of Congress, many of whom — including Republicans — said during interviews Wednesday they either won't support it or need more details.

Maine GOP Sen. Susan Collins, chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee, which would need to supply the funding for the United States to take charge in Gaza, said she wasn't inclined to support Trump's proposal.

"I do not know the details of the president's plan. It came out of the blue. It may be a negotiating tactic rather than a real plan," Collins said. "But I do not see it as feasible based on the little that I know about it at this point, particularly if it's going to involve the deployment of U.S. troops."

Michigan Democratic Sen. Elissa Slotkin rejected Trump's idea and questioned

if he would be able to deploy U.S. troops under an existing Authorization for Use of Military Force that Congress approved following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. That AUMF has been used by several presidencies to combat terrorism in multiple countries, not just Afghanistan.

"He got a very public rebuke from the Saudis in the middle of the night," she said. "And you know, many of the people in the Gaza Strip were already refugees from 1948. So the idea that there'd be forced removal, not only is it a violation of international law, it's just a completely unfeasible and immoral thing to do."

Slotkin said she would have to see the details of when and how Trump would potentially send U.S. troops to Gaza, but said she didn't expect the existing AUMFs would provide him the authority needed.

"I think there's a difference between sending U.S. troops for a mission just to be there and then forcibly removing a population, which violates international law," Slotkin said.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Donald Trump hold a joint news conference in the East Room of the White House on Feb. 4, 2025, in Washington, D.C. Netanyahu is the first foreign leader to visit Trump since his return to the White House last month. (Photo by Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

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Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski said she didn't believe the United States taking over Gaza would benefit the people who live there.

"I think they've seen enough turmoil in that region," Murkowski said. "I don't think that we need to contribute."

Murkowski didn't want to address whether Trump has the authority under an existing AUMF to deploy U.S. troops to Gaza or whether he'd need a new one from Congress.

"I don't even want to speculate to that question, because I think that is quite frightening," Murkowski said.

A role for U.S. troops?

North Dakota GOP Sen. John Hoeven said he would support the U.S. taking over Gaza in some capacity and the deployment of U.S. troops to the region, even if that means Congress needs to pass a new AUMF.

"If there's a role there for U.S. troops, yes, I'm inclined to be supportive of that. We'd have to see the how and the particulars, but I'm very open to that. I think we do need to take strong action. I think that's what President Trump is doing," Hoeven said. "And if it would require an AUMF, I would certainly be open to that. So we have to see what role they play, make that decision. But yes, I'm supportive of strong action for a long-term fix here."

Hoeven said it would be "jumping ahead" to speculate about U.S. casualties, should troops be deployed to Gaza.

"It's a dangerous place, right? And we have the finest military, the best trained military in the world," Hoeven said. "And this is a strategic ally for us. And we're fighting a global war on terror, remember?"

Trump not committed to troops in Gaza 'yet'

Trump announced his proposal during a joint press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday evening, saying the "U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip and we will do a job with it too."

"We'll own it and be responsible for dismantling all of the dangerous unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site," Trump said. "Level the site and get rid of the destroyed buildings. Level it out. Create an economic development that will supply unlimited numbers of jobs and the people of the area."

Trump didn't rule out placing American troops in Gaza, potentially bringing the United States into direct conflict with Hamas, the Iranian-backed terrorist organization that controls the area.

"If it's necessary, we'll do that," Trump said.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said more than once during a press briefing Wednesday that Trump hasn't committed to placing U.S. troops in Gaza "yet."

Leavitt also rejected the idea that America taking ownership of Gaza would lead the "United States to be entangled in conflicts abroad."

"This is an out-of-the-box idea," Leavitt said. "That's who President Trump is, that's why the American people elected him."

Details to come

House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, said during a press conference Wednesday there will be "more details forthcoming" on Trump's announcement that he wants the U.S. to assume control of Gaza. But Johnson seemed generally supportive of the idea.

"Here's the problem, if you leave Gaza in its current form there's always a risk of another October 7, there's always a risk of proxies of Iran, all these terrorist organizations whose openly stated goal is to eliminate Israel as a state," Johnson said.

"So it just makes sense to make the neighborhood there safer. I think that's logical. I think that follows common sense. I think people understand the necessity of it," Johnson added. "And we're going to stand with Israel as they work toward this goal and we're going to stand with the president on his initiatives."

Johnson said he plans to speak with Netanyahu, who is on an official trip to Washington, D.C., later this week about the proposal.

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Johnson said Trump's recommendation the U.S. take over Gaza, "was greeted by surprise by many, but cheer by, I think, people all around the world."

"Why? Because that area is so dangerous," Johnson said. "And he's taking bold, decisive action to try to ensure the peace of that region."

World leaders critical

Leaders from numerous countries as well as the United Nations have sharply criticized Trump's pitch, with several saying a two-state solution is the best pathway forward for Palestinians and Israel.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said: "They (Palestinians) must be allowed home, they must be allowed to rebuild, and we should be with them in that rebuild on the way to a two-state solution."

Louisiana Republican Sen. John Kennedy said he expects Trump to release details on how exactly he wants the U.S. to take over Gaza, but said he would oppose any efforts to have Americans pay to rebuild the 140 square miles.

"There are two main issues with respect to Gaza," Kennedy said. "Number one, who's going to pay to rebuild it if we decide to rebuild it. And number two, who's going to run the place."

Kennedy said he does expect Congress would have some role to play if Trump were to try to claim Gaza as sovereign territory, but conceded he wasn't sure what that role would be.

Kennedy seemed opposed to U.S. troops being deployed to Gaza, though he tried to brush aside questions about that as inconsequential hypotheticals.

"I don't think any of us want to see American troops put in harm's way, but you're speculating," Kennedy said.

Senators mull the concept

North Carolina Republican Sen. Thom Tillis said he believes Trump "was trying to paint a picture of a Gaza without Hamas, which I completely agree with."

Tillis said a question about whether he would support U.S. troops on the ground in Gaza was "jumping way ahead."

"You know that's not even likely but it's good clickbait," Tillis said.

Hawaii Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz, ranking member on the State-Foreign Operations spending panel, said "anybody who thought when they voted for Donald Trump that they were getting someone oriented towards peace and against American empire is getting a rude awakening."

"This guy wants to establish a United States colony in the Middle East, and that is deeply, deeply, dangerous," he said.

Schatz gave a thumbs down in response to a question about whether he expects Congress would approve the trillions of dollars that would likely be needed to rebuild Gaza and cover the cost of a U.S. troop deployment throughout that area.

'Trying to shake things up'

Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. John Fetterman said he would describe Trump's proposal for Gaza as "provocative," though he said he believes the suggestion of the U.S. taking ownership of the region was about starting a conversation.

"To me, it's about, I think, trying to shake things up and to acknowledge people have to start having an honest conversation about what's going to be done about Gaza, because people can't live in rubble and they don't have, you know, utilities," Fetterman said.

Alabama Republican Sen. Katie Britt said her "concern is to make sure the innocent people of Gaza have an opportunity to thrive and so do the people of Israel."

Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy said he has been focused on the confirmation process for Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Trump's pick for Health and Human Services secretary, and hadn't seen Trump's comments about taking over Gaza.

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"My brain has been so fried from everything," Cassidy said. "Let me kind of digest everything that has happened since my process going through RFK."

Arkansas Republican Sen. John Boozman said he wasn't familiar with Trump's comments and couldn't weigh in on whether he would support such a plan or not.

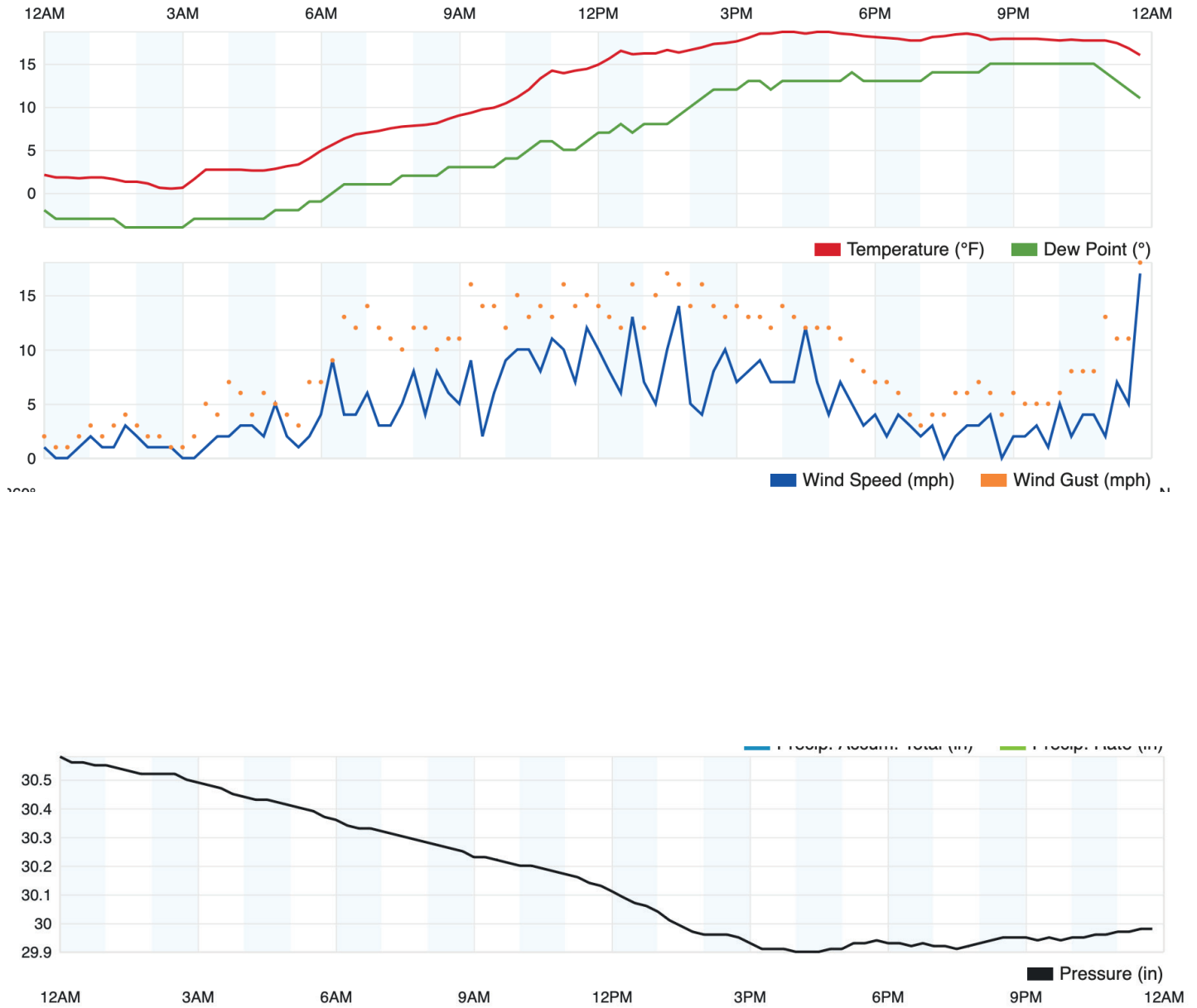
South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham said "not now" when asked about Trump's plan for Gaza.

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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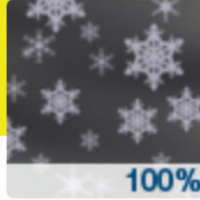

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
High: 19 °F	Low: 2 °F	High: 20 °F	Low: 7 °F	High: 14 °F
Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery	Increasing Clouds	Mostly Cloudy then Chance Snow	Heavy Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow	Snow then Partly Sunny

Winter Storm Watch Friday into Saturday February 6, 2025 4:21 AM

Valid 12 PM Fri-12 PM Sat for north central SD and 6 PM Fri-3 PM Sat for NE SD & western MN

Key Messages

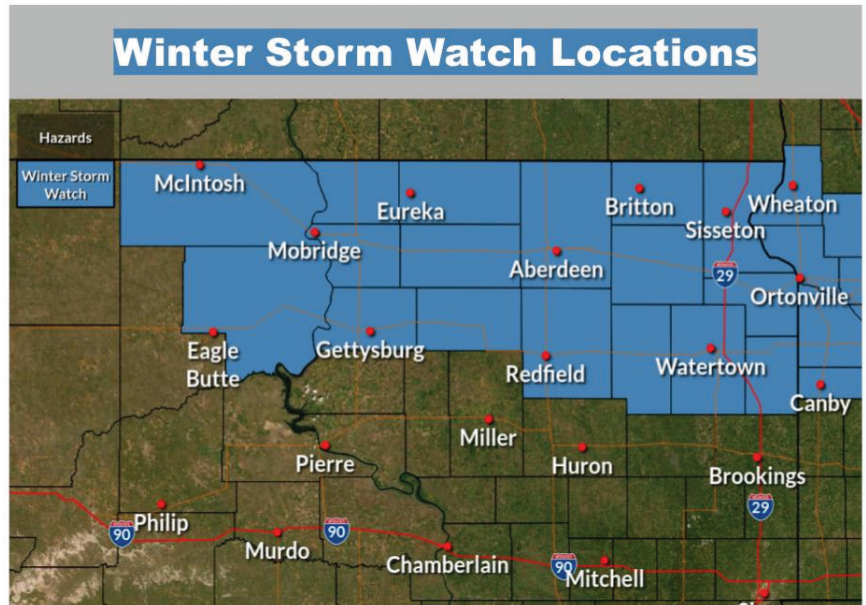
- A winter storm is possible beginning Friday afternoon persisting through Saturday.
- There are increasing probabilities of a band of 6+ inches of snow north of US Highway 212.
- Peak snowfall currently expected early Saturday morning (midnight to 6 AM).
- **Changes to snowfall amounts are still expected, especially over north central South Dakota.**

NEW What Has Changed?

- A Winter Storm Watch has been issued for the US-212 corridor, northward to the Dakotas border

Next Scheduled Update

- This afternoon



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A Winter Storm Watch has been issued for north central and northeastern South Dakota, as well as western Minnesota for Friday afternoon through Saturday afternoon.

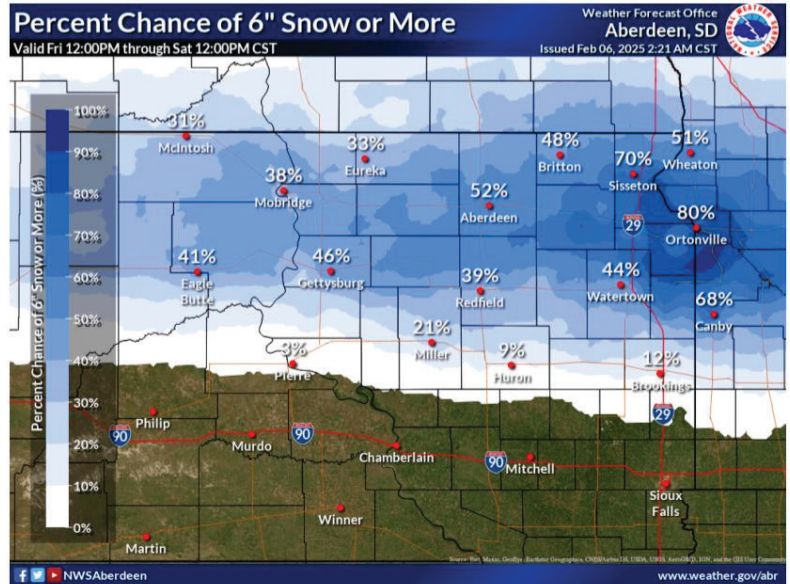


Probability of 6 Inches or More

February 6, 2025
4:21 AM

>50% chance of 6" of snow accumulation exists over much of NE SD and western MN

- Probabilities of 6 inches of snow accumulation or more continue to increase.
- Northeastern South Dakota and western Minnesota may see between 6-10" of accumulation.
 - **Snowfall rates may exceed 1" per hour between Midnight and 6 AM Saturday, which would cause reductions in visibility.**
- North Central South Dakota may see 5-8" of accumulation.
 - Gusts of 15-25 miles per hour would also reduce visibilities here.
- Despite some reductions in visibility, blizzard conditions are not expected at this time.

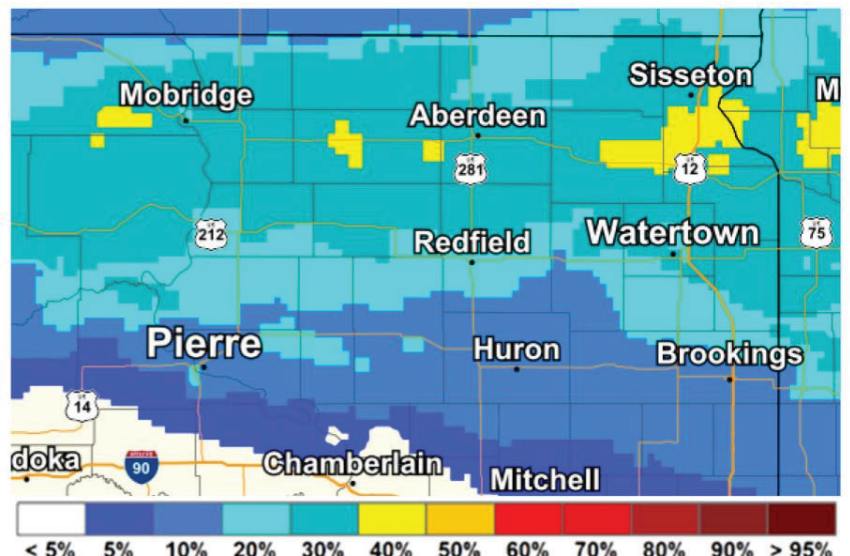


Moderate Impacts Possible

February 6, 2025
4:21 AM

Probability of **MODERATE** Impacts from Friday through Saturday

- **Weekend travel will be impacted. Stay home if possible, and use caution if you must travel.**
- Moderate to locally heavy snowfall over northeastern South Dakota and western Minnesota may reduce visibilities significantly.
- Wind gusts of 15-25 mph will also combine with falling snow to reduce visibilities, mainly over north central South Dakota.



Potential Winter Storm Impacts

Moderate Impacts

- Expect disruptions to daily life.
- Hazardous driving conditions. **Use extra caution while driving.**
 - Closures and disruptions to infrastructure may occur.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 19 °F at 4:06 PM

Low Temp: 0 °F at 2:33 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 1:45 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 03 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1987

Record Low: -33 in 1907

Average High: 26

Average Low: 3

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.12

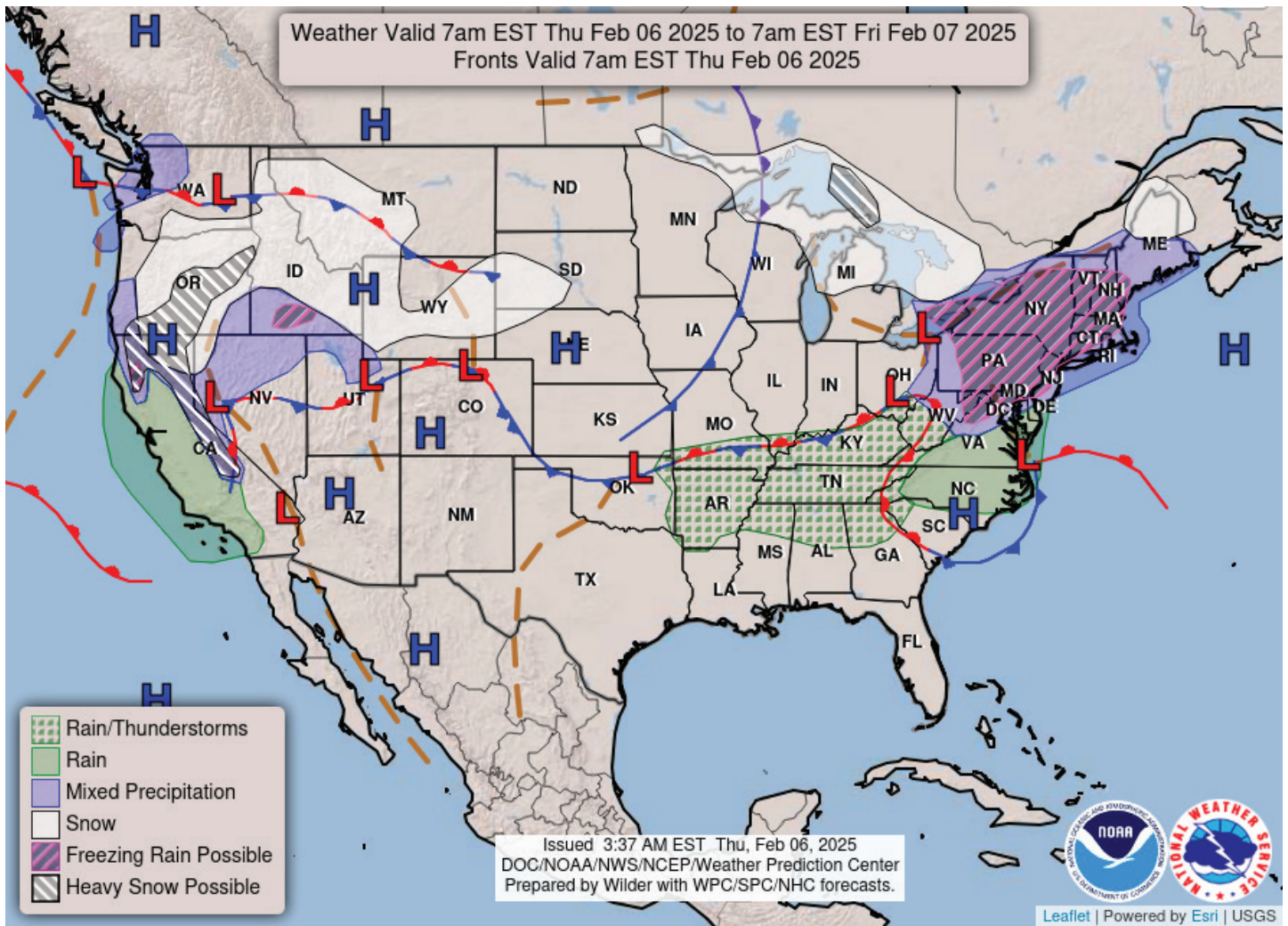
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.14

Average Precip to date: 0.67

Precip Year to Date: 0.14

Sunset Tonight: 5:48:24 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:43:10 am



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Today in Weather History

February 6, 1959: A man from Gary in Deuel County was in critical condition with frozen hands, feet, and arms after spending the night in his car in subzero weather. Click [HERE](#) for information on a Winter Storm Survival Kit for Travelers.

February 6, 1987: Record warmth occurred across all of central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, with highs in the mid-50s to the lower 60s. Aberdeen, Kennebec, Mobridge, Pierre, Sisseton, Timber Lake, Watertown, and Wheaton all set record highs on this date in 1987. Pierre recorded the warmest temperature for the day with 62 degrees.

1807 - It was the famous "Cold Friday" in the Midwest and South. The temperature did not rise above zero in Ohio and Kentucky. (David Ludlum)

1958: The Munich air disaster occurred when British European Airways Flight 609 crashed on its third attempt to take off from a slush-covered runway at Munich-Riem Airport, West Germany. On the plane was the Manchester United football team, nicknamed the "Busby Babes," along with supporters and journalists. Twenty of the 44 on the aircraft died at the scene. The injured, some unconscious, were taken to the Rechts der Isar Hospital in Munich, where three more died, resulting in 23 fatalities with 21 survivors.

1978: A massive nor'easter buried the northeastern U.S. Storm totals' cities, including 18 inches in New York City, 16 inches at Philadelphia, and 14 inches in Baltimore. The Boston MA area received 25 to 30 inches in "The Great New England Blizzard." The mayor outlawed travel in the city for an entire week.

1987 - Brownsville, TX, was deluged with seven inches of rain in just two hours, and flooding in some parts of the city was worse than that caused by Hurricane Beulah in 1967. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Arctic cold invaded the south central and eastern U.S. Sixteen cities reported new record low temperatures for the date. Squalls in the Great Lakes Region produced a foot of snow at Arcade NY in three hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Forty-one cities in the western U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. Lows of -30 degrees at Ely NV and -33 degrees at Richfield UT were all-time records. Morning lows of 31 degrees at San Francisco CA and -15 degrees at Reno NV were records for February. Logan Canyon UT was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 54 degrees below zero, and Craig CO hit 51 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - A second cold front brought more heavy snow to the high elevations of Oregon, with 12 inches reported at Sunset Summit. Ten inches of snow blanketed Crater Lake and Mount Bachelor. Heavy snow also blanketed northeastern Nevada and parts of Washington State. In Nevada, up to a foot of snow was reported between Spring Creek and Lamoille. Stevens Pass WA received 14 inches of snow in 24 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010: On February 5-6, a severe nor'easter, commonly referred to as Snowmageddon, impacted the east coast from North Carolina to New York. Some snowfall amounts include; 32.9 inches at Washington Dulles International Airport; 28.5 inches at the Philadelphia International Airport; 21.1 inches at the Pittsburgh International Airport; 18.2 in Atlantic City; Trace in Central Park.

2020: The Esperanza Base, the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, 63°23'S, reached 18.3°C (64.94°F), February 6th, 2020. The 18.3°C sets a new, all-time high temperature for the continent of Antarctica. The previous record was 17.5°C in 2015, also at Esperanza. Please Note: A verification process needs to be done before certifying as a new record.



FACING THE ENEMY

Sometime ago, the DENVER POST reported a most unusual incident. A rancher, Ms. Lexy of Montana, was losing many of her lambs to coyotes that roamed her pastures. She tried every suggestion that her friends and fellow ranchers made but nothing solved the problem. Nothing she tried protected her lambs.

One day, quite by accident, she read an article that described llamas as afraid-of-nothing animals. The article reported that "when the llamas see something, they put up their heads and walk straight toward it." She decided to purchase some and place them in her pastures.

And it worked! When the llamas saw the coyotes, they walked straight toward them, heads held high and frightened them so much that they ran away.

Is there a lesson here for the Christian? It seems that there is.

What would happen in this sin-hardened world if, when we Christians recognized someone or something that was destroying lives or the very fabric of society, we would face it bravely, walk into it confidently and with God's power expose its dangers? Sadly, we have surrendered our convictions to "being politically correct" and fearful of "offending" the enemy and expecting politicians to do God's work. We have retreated hastily because we no longer choose "to resist the devil."

Prayer: Convict us, Lord, for being weak and fearful in the face of the enemy. Empower us with Your Holy Spirit and the strength of Your Word to battle Satan. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. James 4:7

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: 02.04.25

14 24 31 53 54 1

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$94,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 24 Mins
37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

4 13 17 44 45 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$23,520,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 39
Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

7 9 25 37 39 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 54 Mins 38
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

19 20 22 30 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$29,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 54
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

13 24 40 41 50 4

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 23
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

19 27 30 50 62 14

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$133,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 23
Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

News from the **AP** Associated Press

South Dakota Legislature: Property taxes, pipelines, prisons (and more)

South Dakota News Watch undefined

Sioux Falls, SD (South Dakota News Watch)

What to watch for as the state's 105 lawmakers convene in Pierre on Tuesday for the 100th session.

The 100th session of the South Dakota Legislature in Pierre will be historic not just for its centennial landmark but because of transitions in power.

Gov. Kristi Noem is scheduled to give her State of the State address Jan. 14 and then head to Washington for hearings on her nomination to become secretary of the Department of Homeland Security in the administration of President-elect Donald Trump.

She can't be officially confirmed until about a week later, when Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden is expected to be sworn in as South Dakota's 34th governor, just in time for a legislative session rife with Republican power shifts and looming budget battles.

Even with these developments, the 2025 session in Pierre is more about issues than eras. Lawmakers are prepared to tackle the three Ps - property taxes, pipelines and prisons - as well as school vouchers, Medicaid funding and child care programs.

It's hard to keep up without a scorecard, so here's a primer on what to watch for as the South Dakota legislative session opens Tuesday.

Property tax relief is a hot topic in Pierre, given that total payments have increased by nearly 60% for residential housing and nearly 50% for commercial property over the past decade in South Dakota.

The problem with cutting property taxes, which help fund local school districts and city and county governments, is that typically you need to backfill that lost revenue with general fund dollars to pay for education and reduce the local effort for school districts.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen (R-Sioux Falls) has floated a proposal to increase the sales tax rate from 4.2% to 5%, which would raise an estimated \$280 million in general fund revenue. That money would be used to reduce the levy for owner-occupied homes to fund education at the local level to zero.

"This is meant to start the conversation on property tax relief and to make the point that it costs a lot of money," said Venhuizen, whose plan is co-sponsored by Sen. Randy Deibert (R-Spearfish). "I'd say that property tax relief is easily the top issue that I hear about from other legislators."

Raising the sales tax rate, which legislators temporarily lowered from 4.5% to 4.2% in 2023, would require a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers. It could encounter turbulence from limited-government leadership in Pierre, even with the property tax offsets elsewhere.

The measure is also unlikely to win over Democrats, who are outnumbered by Republicans 31-4 in the Senate and 63-7 in the House of Representatives.

Rep. Kady Wittman (D-Sioux Falls) noted that property tax relief does little to help low-income residents and non-homeowners who would be impacted by higher sales tax rates on purchases.

"If you really want to impact every single South Dakotan in a tangible way, it would be better to look at removing the grocery tax," Wittman told News Watch. "I think that would be a better utilization of our legislative powers."

Voters rejected a grocery plan repeal on the 2024 ballot, but critics mainly derided the measure's overly broad language rather than the merits of eliminating the food tax.

Venhuizen's property tax relief plan harkens back to 1995, when Gov. Bill Janklow pushed through a 30% property tax reduction, offsetting the lost tax revenue to schools by increasing the state's education contribution. The program also updated the state's education aid formula and established property tax caps.

Rep. Will Mortenson of Fort Pierre, who served as Republican House majority leader the past two years, called the proposal "bold and clear-headed" amid all the property tax noise.

"A lot of people have been talking about property taxes as a campaign issue, but to this point, any

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changes have been kind of around the periphery," Mortenson told News Watch. "This proposal would deliver substantial, noticeable property tax relief to homeowners across the state. I wouldn't make a guess as to whether it's going to pass or not, but I applaud (Venhuizen and Deibert) for having the guts to do it."

Lively debate is also expected on Noem's push for "education savings accounts" that would provide state money to help students enroll in private schools or help parents pay for homeschooling outside the traditional public school system.

In her Dec. 3 budget address, the governor proposed spending \$4 million in ongoing state dollars to provide about \$3,000 per eligible student to offset the cost of private or alternative schools as a way to "prioritize education" in the state.

In her budget explanation, Noem said the funds would initially be eligible for "South Dakota kids who need it most" but added that the program could later expand to make all families in the state eligible for payments. She said the program will create new options for parents and increase competition in the educational landscape across the state.

The proposal was formally introduced on Jan. 8 as House Bill 1020 by House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach (R-Spearfish) and Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff (R-Pierre).

The so-called school choice bill would allow the money to be used for tuition at private schools and "micro-schools" for materials for homeschooling or for entrance exam or virtual learning fees not covered by a local school district.

Critics of the proposal -- including several organizations focused on improving public education -- said it is a veiled attempt to begin a school voucher program. Voucher programs in other states have resulted mostly from conservative-led efforts to enable more children to attend private, religious or charter schools or to expand home-schooling.

Noem said her program would not reduce funding to the state K-12 system, though her proposed budget includes only a 1.25% spending increase for public schools, well below the recent inflation rate.

Rob Monson, executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota, said during a Jan. 8 conference call that conservatives in the Legislature have been trying for years to create a voucher program.

Monson said Noem's proposal, as well as other proposed measures such as House Bill 1009, will ultimately siphon funding from the public education system that serves all children regardless of income, race, ethnicity or disability status.

Monson said backers of voucher programs try to demonize public education and claim it is failing and "indoctrinates" students, which he said is false. He and other public education backers also pointed out that private schools, alternative schools and home-schooled children do not have to undergo the same levels of transparency and accountability that public schools must meet.

Monson said the new leadership in the Legislature appears to be more favorable to vouchers or Noem's proposed education savings accounts in the upcoming session, and he expects a big battle in Pierre.

"We're going to see an attack this year, we believe, on the public school institution bigger than we have ever seen (in South Dakota)" he said.

Republican populists are still feeling the energy from the 2024 election defeat of Referred Law 21, a "Landowner Bill of Rights" package that critics decried as more favorable to ethanol producers and carbon pipeline companies.

Groups such as the Freedom Caucus and Dakota First PAC exploited the pipeline issue in GOP primaries by highlighting the votes of incumbent legislators, several of whom were defeated to set up the leadership shift.

Though the fate of Summit Carbon Solutions' \$5.5 billion, 2,500-mile pipeline plan will likely play out in the courts and Public Utilities Commission hearings, expect more fireworks in Pierre.

Jim Eschenbaum of the South Dakota Property Rights and Local Control Alliance told News Watch that the focus will be on tightening restrictions on eminent domain, which involves taking private property for public use while requiring fair compensation.

"I've heard people say that the interstate system couldn't have been built without eminent domain," said Eschenbaum, who is also running for chair of the South Dakota Republican Party. "But the interstate

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system was literally for the use of all, and it was for the greater good. This pipeline doesn't fit that description at all."

Whether Summit Carbon Solutions qualifies as a "common carrier" under state legal parameters for eminent domain is being litigated in court and will likely play a large role in legislative debates.

Property rights supporters will rally at the state Capitol rotunda on Jan. 13, the day before session opens. Republican legislators expected to attend include Speaker of the House Jon Hansen (Dell Rapids) and House Speaker Pro Tempore Karla Lems (Canton), both of whom are strident opponents of the pipeline project.

Amanda Radke, a Mitchell rancher and ag representative who has emerged as a leader on the issue, will address the gathering. Eschenbaum said he will be on hand to emphasize the need to "clarify the limits of eminent domain."

The movement will test the remaining influence of mainstream, pro-business Republicans, who have stressed the positive impact of eminent domain for large-scale development projects that create jobs and increase tax revenue for the state.

"The thing that concerns me most is this "not in my backyard" sentiment bleeding over into other areas of commerce or industry," Mortenson said. "South Dakota has been viewed as a place where you can come and build something without the government getting in the way. I really worry that because of anger over the pipeline, some of these folks will go too far and cut off our nose to spite our face by blocking construction and development of businesses that could keep our small towns vital and allow other towns to grow."

South Dakota voters passed Medicaid expansion in 2022, extending health care coverage to more low-income residents under the Affordable Care Act, with the federal government covering 90 percent of the cost.

That arrangement will cost South Dakota about \$20 million each fiscal year if the matching rate remains the same.

Venhuizen and Sen. Casey Crabtree (R-Madison) have put forth a joint resolution proposing a constitutional amendment that ties Medicaid expansion in South Dakota to the level of federal assistance.

If the federal matching rate drops below 90%, as some have suggested it could as the Trump administration looks to reform spending strategies, the South Dakota Constitution would no longer require the state to continue Medicaid expansion.

"As things stand now, if they cut the match rate from 90% to 80% or 70%, we would have no choice," said Venhuizen. "We would have to come up with the money and pay it. So the point of this amendment is to say, if it drops below 90%, then it's up to the Legislature. We don't have to get out. If they drop it to 88% or 89%, we would probably stay in. If they drop it more than that, at what point does it become so expensive that the state can't afford it?"

Medicaid is a joint federal and state program that helps cover medical costs for qualified individuals with limited income and resources.

The Affordable Care Act in 2010 expanded Medicaid to include nearly all adults with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty level, which translates to an annual gross salary of about \$21,000 for an individual or \$43,000 for a family of four.

South Dakota was one of the Republican-led states that resisted expansion, which meant childless adults without a disability were ineligible for Medicaid coverage regardless of income level. Many also didn't qualify for ACA subsidies to help obtain private coverage.

In 2022, South Dakota became one of 40 states to expand Medicaid when voters approved a constitutional amendment with 56% of the vote.

Two years later, Venhuizen sponsored a ballot amendment that allowed work requirements to be used in connection with able-bodied adults receiving Medicaid benefits in South Dakota, subject to federal approval. That measure also passed with 56% approval.

Wittman criticized the latest effort, saying that measures that could eliminate Medicaid expansion in South Dakota altogether show a lack of regard for state residents that require assistance.

"I'm really tired of the South Dakota Legislature continuing to punish people who are vulnerable and

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marginalized and living in poverty," Wittman told News Watch. "I really do not understand Rep. Venhuizen's vitriol towards individuals that utilize this particular government support system. If this is truly about him wanting to make smart use of taxpayer dollars, I believe there are other places in our budget where he could focus his efforts and it would not further marginalize an already vulnerable population."

Among the belt-tightening measures proposed by Noem in her budget address, cutting South Dakota Public Broadcasting's funding by 65% has received a lot of attention.

The governor put the \$3.6 million budget cut in national terms when presenting her proposal, which earmarked \$1.9 million for SDPB in fiscal year 2026. The network had requested \$5.6 million.

"Currently, South Dakota has the third-highest per capita funding of public broadcasting of any state in the nation," Noem said in her budget address. "We've been paying more than double the national average."

SDPB, which relies on state funding and private donations, provides livestreamed coverage of state legislative hearings as well as South Dakota High School Activities Association championship events, in addition to its news, weather and commentary programming, which includes National Public Radio.

"A cut of this size and scale will force significant reductions to all these important services," the network said in a statement. "This cut is likely to disproportionately affect rural service, where SDPB's programming is most valued."

During her 2022 re-election campaign, Noem refused to participate in a debate sponsored by the public broadcasting network, with her team saying in a statement that "SDPB's extreme leftward swing precludes the possibility of a fair debate."

While her likely exit from Pierre might shield her from political fallout from the budget cuts, some lawmakers view it differently. Pulling support from something that serves as a conduit to legislative proceedings as well as statewide sports and fine arts events has caused some angst among constituents.

"It's probably the cut that I've heard the most opposition to since the budget address," said Venhuizen. "I know a lot of legislators are hoping that we can avoid that cut, but the reality of the budget situation this year is that it's a zero-sum game. And so unless we have cause to increase our revenue estimate in a month, we're going to have to find a dollar elsewhere for every dollar we restore."

South Dakota Department of Corrections officials have informed legislators that the guaranteed maximum price for a planned new men's state prison is \$825 million, higher than previous estimates.

That includes \$737 million in construction for the 1,500-inmate facility at the proposed site between Harrisburg and Canton in Lincoln County, making it the largest one-time capital investment in state history.

The fact that the prison involves "one time" dollars puts it on a different tier of budget discussion from ongoing expenditures such as health care and education funding, but the governor is looking to close the deal.

Noem's proposal includes putting \$182 million in a prison fund that, combined with interest already accrued, would fully fund the project, a clear priority when it comes to shaping her executive legacy.

The Legislature has already committed \$87 million to build a new women's prison in Rapid City, with a likely completion date of early 2026.

Some of the same lawmakers who opposed the carbon pipeline project have expressed concern about the men's prison site, which could lead to some interesting discussions in Pierre.

If the project goes through as planned, the outgoing governor will be justified in chalking it up as a win for her administration, said Mortenson.

"It's not a popular thing to build a prison," he told News Watch. "The public would rather spend this money on education or nursing homes or other things, but she saw a need. Our current facilities are falling short of their mission of rehabilitating people and being a Department of Corrections, not just a department of incarceration. She said, "You know what, we've got the money, let's do something about it," and I give her credit for that."

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Israel begins preparations for Gaza exodus as Egypt lobbies against Trump plan

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Israel said on Thursday it has begun preparations for the departure of large numbers of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip in line with President Donald Trump's plan for the territory. Officials meanwhile said Egypt has launched an diplomatic blitz behind the scenes to try and head off the plan.

The Trump administration has already dialed back aspects of the proposal after it was widely rejected internationally, saying the relocation of Palestinians would be temporary. U.S. officials have provided few details about how or when the plan would be carried out.

The Palestinians have vehemently rejected Trump's proposal, fearing Israel will never allow the refugees to return and that it would destabilize the region. Egypt has warned that such a plan could undermine its peace treaty with Israel, a cornerstone of stability and American influence in the Middle East for decades.

Saudi Arabia, another key U.S. ally, has also rejected any mass transfer of Palestinians and says it will not normalize relations with Israel — a key goal of the Trump administration — without the creation of a Palestinian state that includes Gaza.

Trump and Israeli officials have depicted the proposed relocation from war-ravaged Gaza as voluntary, but the Palestinians have universally expressed their determination to remain in their homeland.

Trump and Israeli officials have not said how they would respond if Palestinians refuse to leave. But Human Rights Watch and other groups say the plan, if implemented, would amount to "ethnic cleansing," the forcible relocation of the civilian population of an ethnic group from a geographic area.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said he has ordered the military to make preparations to facilitate the emigration of large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza through land crossings as well as "special arrangements for exit by sea and air."

There were no immediate signs of such preparations on the ground.

Egypt wages a behind-the-scenes campaign

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has not publicly responded to Trump's stunning proposal that most of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians be relocated and the United States take charge of rebuilding the territory. Israel's 15-month campaign against the militant Hamas group had reduced large parts of Gaza to rubble before a fragile ceasefire took hold last month.

But Egyptian officials, speaking Wednesday on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks, said Cairo has made clear to the Trump administration and Israel that it will resist any such proposal, and that the peace deal with Israel — which has stood for nearly half a century — is at risk.

One official said the message has been delivered to the Pentagon, the State Department and members of the U.S. Congress. A second official said it has also been conveyed to Israel and its Western European allies, including Britain, France and Germany.

A Western diplomat in Cairo, also speaking anonymously because the discussions have not been made public, confirmed receiving the message from Egypt through multiple channels. The diplomat said Egypt was very serious and viewed the plan as a threat to its national security.

The diplomat said Egypt rejected similar proposals from the Biden administration and European countries early in the war, which was sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack into southern Israel. The earlier proposals were broached privately, while Trump announced his plan at a White House press conference alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

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US officials scale back Trump's proposal

Trump said he wanted to "permanently" resettle most of Gaza's population in other countries and for the United States to take charge of clearing debris and rebuilding Gaza as a "Riviera of the Middle East" for all people. He did not rule out the deployment of U.S. troops there.

U.S. officials later appeared to walk it back, saying the relocation of Palestinians would be temporary and that Trump had not committed to putting American boots on the ground or spending American tax dollars in Gaza.

The Egyptian officials said their government does not believe the Palestinians need to be relocated for reconstruction to proceed and is committed to the creation of a Palestinian state in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories Israel seized in the 1967 Mideast war.

Israel's government is opposed to Palestinian statehood and has said it will maintain open-ended security control over both Gaza and the occupied West Bank. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in a move not recognized by most of the international community and considers the entire city its capital.

Last week, Egypt hosted a meeting of top diplomats from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — which was the driving force behind the 2020 Abraham Accords Trump brokered with Israel. All five Arab nations rejected the transfer of Palestinians out of Gaza or the West Bank.

In an editorial on Thursday, Egypt's main state-run daily, Al-Ahram, warned that "the Arab countries' independence, their peoples' unity and their territorial integrity are under grave threat."

The US is freezing and La Nina usually eases warming. Earth just set another heat record anyway

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The world warmed to yet another monthly heat record in January, despite an abnormally chilly United States, a cooling La Nina and predictions of a slightly less hot 2025, according to the European climate service Copernicus.

The surprising January heat record coincides with a new study by a climate science heavyweight, former top NASA scientist James Hansen, and others arguing that global warming is accelerating. It's a claim that's dividing the research community.

January 2025 globally was 0.09 degrees Celsius (0.16 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer than January 2024, the previous hottest January, and was 1.75 C (3.15 F) warmer than it was before industrial times, Copernicus calculated. It was the 18th month of the last 19 that the world hit or passed the internationally agreed upon warming limit of 1.5 C (2.7 F) above pre-industrial times. Scientists won't regard the limit as breached unless and until global temperatures stay above it for 20 years.

Copernicus records date to 1940, but other U.S. and British records go back to 1850, and scientists using proxies such as tree rings say this era is the warmest in about 120,000 years or since the start of human civilization.

By far the biggest driver of record heat is greenhouse gas buildup from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas, but the natural contributions to temperature change have not been acting quite as expected, said Samantha Burgess, strategic lead for climate for the European weather agency.

The big natural factor in global temperatures is usually the natural cycle of changes in the equatorial Pacific Ocean waters. When the central Pacific is especially warm, it's an El Nino and global temperatures tend to spike. Last year was a substantial El Nino, though it ended last June and the year was even warmer than initially expected, the hottest on record.

El Nino's cooler flip side, a La Nina, tends to dampen the effects of global warming, making record temperatures far less likely. A La Nina started in January after brewing for months. Just last month, climate scientists were predicting that 2025 wouldn't be as hot as 2024 or 2023, with the La Nina a major reason.

"Even though the equatorial Pacific isn't creating conditions that are warming for our global climate, we're still seeing record temperatures," Burgess said, adding much of that is because of record warmth in the rest of the world's oceans.

Usually after an El Nino like last year, temperatures fall rapidly, but "we've not seen that," Burgess told The Associated Press.

For Americans, news of a record warm January might seem odd given how cold it was. But the U.S. is just a tiny fraction of the planet's surface, and "a much larger area of the planet's surface was much, much warmer than average," Burgess said.

January was unseasonably mild in the Arctic. Parts of the Canadian Arctic had temperatures 30 C (54 F) warmer than average and temperatures got so warm sea ice started melting in places, Burgess said.

Copernicus said the Arctic this month tied the January record for lowest sea ice. The U.S.-based National Snow and Ice Data Center had it as second-lowest, behind 2018.

February has already started cooler than last year, Burgess said.

Don't count 2025 out in the race for hottest year, said Hansen, the former NASA scientist who has been called the godfather of climate science. He's now at Columbia University. In a study in the journal *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Hansen and colleagues said the last 15 years have warmed at about twice the rate of the previous 40 years.

"I'm confident that this higher rate will continue for at least several years," Hansen told The Associated Press in an interview. "Over the full year it's going to be nip-and-tuck between 2024 and 2025."

There's been a noticeable temperature rise even when taking out El Nino variations and expected climate change since 2020, Hansen said. He noted recent shipping regulations that have resulted in reduced sulfur pollution, which reflects some sunlight away from Earth and effectively reduces warming. And that will continue, he said.

"The persistence of record warmth through 2023, 2024 and now into the first month of 2025 is jarring to say the least," said University of Michigan environment dean Jonathan Overpeck, who wasn't part of the Hansen study. "There seems little doubt that global warming and the impacts of climate change are accelerating."

But Princeton's Gabe Vecchi and University of Pennsylvania's Michael Mann said they don't agree with Hansen on acceleration. Vecchi said there's not enough data to show that this isn't random chance. Mann said that temperature increases are still within what climate models forecast.

Middle East latest: Israeli defense minister tells army to set plans for Palestinians to leave Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

Israel's defense minister says he has instructed the army to prepare plans for large numbers of Palestinians to leave the Gaza Strip in line with President Donald Trump's proposal for the war-ravaged territory.

Defense Minister Israel Katz said Thursday the plan "will include options for exit at land crossings as well as special arrangements for exit by sea and air."

He said he welcomed Trump's "bold plan, which could allow a large population in Gaza to leave for various places in the world."

He did not say whether Palestinians would be able to one day return to Gaza, which has been rendered largely uninhabitable by Israel's 15-month military campaign against Hamas.

Trump on Wednesday proposed that most of Gaza's population be "permanently" resettled elsewhere while the United States rebuilds the territory.

Palestinians say they don't want to leave. Trump's plan was roundly rejected by the Palestinians and much of the international community. Rights groups said it would amount to forcible displacement in violation of international law.

U.S. officials later said the relocation would only be temporary, but Palestinians fear Israel would never allow them to return, deepening and perpetuating a refugee crisis dating back to the establishment of the state.

Here's the latest:

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Egyptian officials try to head off Trump's proposal for Gaza

CAIRO — Egypt has launched a behind-the-scenes diplomatic blitz to try and head off President Donald Trump's proposal for the mass relocation of Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip.

Egypt has warned that such a plan could undermine its peace treaty with Israel, a cornerstone of stability and American influence in the Middle East for decades.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has not publicly responded to Trump's stunning proposal that most of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians be relocated and the United States take charge of rebuilding the territory.

But two Egyptian officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks, said Cairo has made clear to the Trump administration and Israel that it will resist any such proposal, and that the peace deal with Israel — which has stood for nearly half a century — is at risk.

They said the message has been delivered to the Pentagon, the State Department and members of the U.S. Congress, as well as Israel's Western European allies, including Britain, France and Germany.

A Western diplomat in Cairo, also speaking anonymously because the discussions have not been made public, confirmed receiving the message from Egypt through multiple channels. The diplomat said Egypt viewed the plan as a threat to its national security.

The diplomat said Egypt rejected similar proposals from the Biden administration and European countries early in the war, which was sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack into southern Israel. The earlier proposals were broached privately, while Trump announced his plan Tuesday at a White House press conference alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

-- By Samy Magdy

2 Israeli soldiers die after crane accidentally collapses in Gaza

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says two soldiers died and another was severely injured in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli media on Thursday reported that the deaths were caused by the accidental collapse of a crane in the border area. The military did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

They are the first Israeli soldiers to die in Gaza since a ceasefire agreement took hold last month, halting the 15-month war sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack.

Under the first phase of the ceasefire, which runs until early March, Israeli forces have withdrawn from most of the territory and are mainly concentrated along the border. The military has warned Palestinians to avoid areas where troops are operating and has opened fire on people accused of violating the terms of the agreement.

In the current phase, Hamas is set to gradually free a total of 33 hostages captured in the initial attack in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The terms of the second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens more hostages in return for more prisoners and a lasting ceasefire, have yet to be agreed upon.

Is it real or is it a trick? Federal workers debate legitimacy of buyout offer as deadline nears

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, COLLIN BINKLEY and BYRON TAU Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of miles from Elon Musk's office in the White House complex, a federal worker based in the Pacific Northwest is wondering whether to quit.

Musk, one of President Donald Trump's most powerful advisers, has orchestrated an unprecedented financial incentive for people to leave their government jobs, promising several months of pay in return for their resignation. The worker, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, wants to take the money and move overseas.

But she's worried. What if the offer is too good to be true? What if this is really a covert effort to make a list of disloyal government employees?

Her situation is a microcosm of the uncertainty sweeping through the federal government, which is the

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country's single largest employer. More than 2 million workers — analysts, nurses, scientists, accountants, food inspectors and loan processors — face a deadline of 11:59 p.m. EST Thursday to decide if they should leave.

Trump administration is urging workers to take the deal

The deferred resignation program is part of Trump's plan to remake the federal government, weakening what allies describe as the "deep state" that undermined the Republican president during his first term. Administration officials said they can save taxpayer money by presenting employees with "a valuable, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" to stop working while still collecting a paycheck until Sept. 30.

On Wednesday, the administration ramped up its pressure on employees to leave, sending a reminder that layoffs or furloughs could come next.

"The majority of federal agencies are likely to be downsized through restructurings, realignments, and reductions in force," said the message from the Office of Personnel Management, which has been a nexus of Musk's efforts to downsize the government.

The email said anyone who remains will be expected to be "loyal" and "will be subject to enhanced standards of suitability and conduct as we move forward." Some employees could be reclassified to limit civil service protections as well.

"Employees who engage in unlawful behavior or other misconduct will be prioritized for appropriate investigation and discipline, including termination," the email said.

Democrats and unions warn that workers could be stiffed

Democrats said workers shouldn't accept the deferred resignation program because it wasn't authorized by Congress, raising the risk they won't get paid. Unions have sued to stop Trump's plans, and a judge will consider whether to block the buyout offer at a hearing Thursday afternoon in Boston.

"It's a scam and not a buyout," said Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees.

Kelley said he tells workers that "if it was me, I wouldn't do it."

An employee at the Department of Education, who also spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation, said the administration appeared desperate to get people to sign the agreement. However, she said there were too many red flags, such as a clause waiving the right to sue if the government failed to honor its side of the deal.

The deal is 'exactly what it looks like,' says Trump official

Trump put Musk, the world's richest man, in charge of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, which is a sweeping initiative to reduce the size and scope of the federal government. The original email offering the deferred resignation program was titled "Fork in the road," echoing a similar message that Musk sent Twitter employees two years ago after he bought the social media platform.

Trump administration officials have organized question-and-answer sessions with employees as the deadline approaches.

Rachel Oglesby, the chief of staff at the U.S. Department of Education who previously worked at the America First Policy Institute, said Trump is trying to reduce the federal workforce.

"I know there's been a lot of questions out there about whether it's real and whether it's a trick," she said, according to a recording obtained by The Associated Press. "And it's exactly what it looks like. It's one of the many tools that he's using to try to achieve the campaign promise to bring reform to the civil service and changes to D.C."

The issue was also discussed during a meeting with Department of Agriculture employees, according to another recording obtained by the AP. Marlon Taubenheim, a human resources official, acknowledged that "these are very trying times" and "there's a lot of stress."

"Unfortunately, we don't have all the answers," he said.

Jacqueline Ponti-Lazaruk, another agency leader, said employees "probably didn't have the runway of time that you might have liked to make a life-changing decision."

For those who remain, she said, "we'll just keep plugging along."

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Assurances from administration officials have not alleviated concerns across a range of agencies. Some federal workers said they did not trust the validity of the offers, doubting that Trump has the authority to disburse money. Others point to his record of stiffing contractors as a New York real estate mogul.

Musk's plans spark demonstrations in Washington

Scattered protests have sprung up outside federal buildings, including on Tuesday at the Office of Personnel Management.

"I'm taking a risk and being bold and trying to get more federal workers to take a risk to speak out," said Dante O'Hara, who said he works for the government. "Because if we don't, then we're all going to lose our jobs and they're going to put all these loyalists or people that will be their shock troops."

Government jobs have often been considered secure positions, but O'Hara said there's fear in the workforce. The sense from his colleagues is "I don't know if I'm going to be here tomorrow because, like, we don't know what's going to happen."

Dan Smith, a Maryland resident whose father was a research scientist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said federal workers are "so underappreciated and so taken for granted."

"It's one thing to downsize the government. It's one thing to try to obliterate it," Smith said. "And that's what's going on. And that is what is so frightening and disgusting and requires pushback."

Mary-Jean Burke, a physical therapist for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Indianapolis, said she's worried that too many people will leave, jeopardizing health care services.

Burke, who also serves as a union official, said doubts have also been growing over whether to take the offer.

"Originally, I think people were like, 'I'm out of here,'" she said. But then they saw a social media post from DOGE, which said employees can "take the vacation you always wanted, or just watch movies and chill, while receiving your full government pay and benefits."

The message backfired because "that kind of thing sounded a little bit too good to be true and people were hesitant," Burke said.

Either way, she said, Trump has achieved his apparent goal of shaking up the federal workforce.

"Every day, it's something," Burke said. "If he signed up to be a disrupter, he's doing it."

Second type of bird flu detected in US dairy cows

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Dairy cattle in Nevada have been infected with a new type of bird flu that's different from the version that has spread in U.S. herds since last year, Agriculture Department officials said Wednesday.

The detection indicates that distinct forms of the virus known as Type A H5N1 have spilled over from wild birds into cattle at least twice. Experts said it raises new questions about wider spread and the difficulty of controlling infections in animals and the people who work closely with them.

"I always thought one bird-to-cow transmission was a very rare event. Seems that may not be the case," said Richard Webby, an influenza expert at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

A version of the H5N1 bird flu virus known as B3.13 was confirmed in March after being introduced to cattle in late 2023, scientists said. It has infected more than 950 herds in 16 states. The new version, known as D1.1, was confirmed in Nevada cattle on Friday, according to USDA. It was detected in milk collected as part of a surveillance program launched in December.

"Now we know why it's really important to test and continue testing," said Angela Rasmussen, a virus expert at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, who helped identify the first spillover.

The D1.1 version of the virus was the type linked to the first U.S. death tied to bird flu and a severe illness in Canada. A person in Louisiana died in January after developing severe respiratory symptoms following contact with wild and backyard birds. In British Columbia, a teen girl was hospitalized for months with a virus traced to poultry.

At least 67 people in the U.S. have been infected with bird flu, mostly those who work closely with dairy or cattle, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

USDA officials said they would post genetic sequences and other information about the new form of the virus to a public repository later this week. Scientists said that would be key to understanding whether the spillover was a recent event or whether the virus has been circulating, perhaps widely, for longer.

"If this turns out to have been something that crossed into cattle a couple months ago, a couple months is a long time not to detect it," said Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona who has studied the H5N1 virus in cattle.

He added that it's important for federal officials to share promptly information about a virus that has the potential to trigger a pandemic that could "make COVID seem like a walk in the park."

"It's a vital part of national security, global security, the well-being of people, of animals and of businesses in the U.S.," Worobey added.

Racial gap widened in deaths among US moms around the time of childbirth

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Black women in the U.S. died at a rate nearly 3.5 times higher than white women around the time of childbirth in 2023, as maternal mortality fell below prepandemic levels overall but racial gaps widened, according to federal health data released Wednesday.

In 2021 and 2022, the maternal death rate for Black women was about 2.6 times higher than white women.

The data suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic, at its peak, impacted all pregnant women. But "once we went back to 'usual activities,' then the impact of systemic racism and unequal access (to medical care) ... came right back into place," said Dr. Amanda Williams, interim medical director for the March of Dimes.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's report Wednesday on the 2023 deaths was drawn from death certificates. The CDC counts women who died while pregnant, during childbirth and up to 42 days after birth. Accidental deaths are excluded.

The report found:

— The maternal death rate for white women dropped from 19 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2022 to 14.5 per 100,000 in 2023.

— The rate for Black women went from 49.5 to a little above 50, though the report says that increase was not statistically significant.

— The rate for Hispanic women dropped from about 17 to about 12.

— The rate for Asian Americans fell from about 13 to about 11.

In total, 669 women died in 2023 during pregnancy or shortly after childbirth, the CDC reported. That's down from 817 deaths in 2022 and 1,205 in 2021, when it was the highest in more than 50 years.

Excessive bleeding, blood vessel blockages and infections are leading causes of maternal deaths.

Among those infections is COVID-19. The coronavirus and its complications proved dangerous to pregnant women. And, in the worst days of the pandemic, burned out physicians may have added to the risk by ignoring pregnant women's worries, experts say.

COVID-19's overall impact on pregnancies declined as the pandemic subsided and as hospitals and birthing centers returned to normal operations.

Also, the federal Medicaid program expanded to cover postpartum care for up to 12 months, instead of just seven weeks. That helped more moms recover and made them healthier for the next time they tried to have a baby, Williams said.

The number of maternal deaths is also tied to the number of pregnancies. U.S. births have been declining, and fewer pregnancies contributes to fewer pregnancy-related deaths, noted Eugene Declercq, a maternal deaths researcher at Boston University.

CDC officials refused an Associated Press request to talk to a report author.

The government is still receiving and processing death reports from last year. But Declercq said his analysis of available data suggests the number of 2024 maternal deaths may end up about the same as 2023.

Two years on, survivors of Turkish earthquake still struggle with loss and hardship

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Two years have passed since a devastating earthquake shattered Turkey's southern region, but for Omer Aydin and many other of its survivors the memory and the suffering remain fresh.

While struggling with a third winter in the cold inside a shipping container-like temporary housing unit, the single father of three is grappling with a cost-of-living crisis that is affecting the whole country as well as still trying to heal the scars from the disaster.

The magnitude 7.8 earthquake on Feb. 6, 2023, and a second powerful tremor that came hours later, destroyed or damaged hundreds of thousands of buildings in 11 southern and southeastern Turkish provinces, leaving more than 53,000 people dead. Another 6,000 people were killed in the northern parts of neighboring Syria.

It was one of Turkey's worst disasters.

Aydin, a 51-year-old electrician who survived along with his elderly mother and his children, said sounds from the earthquake still echo in his mind.

"The sounds of the homes crashing down, the sounds of the cries for help ... I still shake when they come to my mind," Aydin told The Associated Press over the phone.

The house Aydin shared with his mother and children in the Mediterranean port city of Iskenderun — in the worst-hit province of Hatay — split into two, he said. The family were lucky to get out without injuries, he said, but ended up spending four days in the cold inside a makeshift tent he constructed with plastic sheets and pieces of wood.

Aydin now lives in a container home at a temporary housing settlement called a "container city" in Iskenderun but is struggling to make ends meet on a small state pension that he says barely covers anything.

He occasionally finds work as an electrician but jobs in Iskenderun are scarce, he says.

He is the sole provider for his family. His oldest son, who is 26, is receiving cancer treatment and needs to travel regularly to a hospital in the city of Adana, some 135 kilometers (84 miles) away, adding to the financial burden. His youngest child, a daughter, is at school while his middle son is also unemployed while waiting to start his military service.

Life in the container city is a daily struggle, and sanitary conditions can be poor, he says.

His family will qualify to receive one of the hundreds of thousands of government houses that are under construction, but Aydin is worried about furnishing it or paying the bills once they move in.

"I don't even own a pin, what will I do once I move in?" he said.

On Thursday, special prayers seeking blessings for the dead were recited from mosques, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported. Survivors visited cemeteries to pay respects to their loved ones, leaving carnations on their graves and offering their condolences to fellow visitors.

Mourners held a minute of silence to remember the dead at 04:17 a.m. — the time the earthquake struck. Shouts of "can anyone hear me?" marked the ceremonies, echoing the cries of those who were trapped under the rubble two years ago.

Small scuffles broke out between police and mourners in Antakya, the provincial capital of Hatay, after officers set up barriers to prevent people marching to a main square. The barriers were eventually lifted, allowing mourners to place flowers on the surface of the Orontes River.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said recently that 45% of the earthquake housing had been completed by the end of 2024. The government was aiming to deliver a total of 452,983 homes, shops and other work spaces by the end of 2025.

Jessie Thomson, the head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Turkey, said nearly half a million people remain in temporary container cities two years after the earthquake struck.

"Hundreds of thousands continue to face immense challenges securing sustainable incomes, with depres-

sion and despair rising," Thomson said. "The road to recovery is long and arduous, demanding continued support and solidarity."

Aydin told the AP that when he rests his head on a pillow, he prays that he won't wake up to face another day.

"I swear, every day when I go to bed and put my head on the pillow, I pray to God to not wake me up in the morning," he said.

Songul Erol, a 29-year-old mother of two girls aged 7 and 3, is slowly rebuilding her life in Samandag, another town in Hatay province, after spending months in tents and a container home.

With the help of funds provided by the Turkish Red Crescent to small businesses, she was able to rent a shop and reopen her business selling bait, nets, knives or other gear used by fishermen and hunters. She has turned a room at the back of the shop into a living space for herself and her daughters, whose severe allergies were exacerbated by the conditions in the tents and the container home.

Haunted by memory of buildings that tumbled in Samandag, she told the AP in a video call that she has only one dream: "That is to move to a one-story house that is not surrounded by apartment buildings."

What to know about what's tying up a \$4B settlement for Hawaii wildfire victims

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Hawaii's Supreme Court is set to hear arguments Thursday over insurance issues that are tying up a potential \$4 billion settlement over Maui's catastrophic 2023 wildfire, the deadliest in the U.S. in more than a century.

The massive inferno decimated the historic town of Lahaina, killing more than 100 people, destroying thousands of properties and causing an estimated \$5.5 billion in damage. Soon afterward, attorneys began lodging hundreds of lawsuits.

A settlement was announced last summer, but insurance companies held out, insisting that they should have the right to go after the defendants separately to recoup money paid out to policyholders.

Here are things to know about the settlement and the issues that could thwart the deal:

The settlement won't be enough

A few days before the one-year anniversary of the Aug. 8, 2023, fire, Gov. Josh Green announced that seven defendants accused of causing the tragedy had agreed to pay \$4 billion to resolve claims by thousands of people.

Attorneys representing the individual plaintiffs agreed to the deal amid fears that main defendant Hawaiian Electric, the power company blamed for sparking the blaze, could be on the brink of bankruptcy. Other defendants include the state, Maui County and Kamehameha Schools, the largest private landowner in Hawaii.

Victims' attorneys acknowledged that \$4 billion wasn't enough to make up for what was lost but said the deal was worth accepting, given Hawaiian Electric's limited assets.

Legal wrangling threatens the deal

Attorneys for the victims asked Judge Peter Cahill to bar insurance companies from going after the defendants separately to recoup money — a requirement that was key to the settlement. Cahill agreed, saying insurers could seek reimbursement only from the \$4 billion pool the defendants have already agreed to pay.

That didn't sit well with a group of about 200 property and casualty insurers that remain holdouts to the settlement. So far they have paid more than \$2.3 billion to people and businesses and expect to pay \$1 billion more. They want to be able to pursue their own claims against the defendants.

Cahill has asked the state high court questions about subrogation, or how insurance companies can go about recouping money.

Among the issues before the court is whether state laws controlling health care insurance reimbursement also apply to casualty and property insurance in limiting companies' ability to pursue independent

legal action against those held liable.

It's not clear when the justices will issue a ruling.

A last-minute deal between victims' lawyers last week averted a separate trial over how to split the \$4 billion between individual plaintiffs and others covered by a class-action lawsuit. Some victims had been ready to take the witness stand, while others submitted pre-recorded testimony describing pain made all the more fresh by the recent destruction in Los Angeles.

What is subrogation?

Common in the insurance industry, subrogation is a legal process that allows an insurance company to pursue a party that caused a covered loss. It's one way companies recover the amount of claims paid to policyholders.

Insurance companies say subrogation is a way to offset costs associated with a catastrophic event so premiums won't have to go up. The process isn't for natural disasters such as hurricanes, but for when there is someone at fault.

Hawaii's governor has previously denounced subrogation.

When insurance companies collect huge profits and no disasters occur, they don't send refunds back to policyholders, Green noted in comments quoted in court filings. But when a tragedy does happen, they look to recoup their payments to the victims.

"It's fundamentally unfair, and they call it subrogation," he said.

Insurance companies say they have been unfairly villainized

The insurance industry has been unfairly villainized as outsiders taking resources from the community while those responsible for the fires won't be held accountable, Vincent Raboteau, an attorney representing the insurers, told Cahill during a hearing last year.

Insurance lawyers have said they want to hold the defendants accountable and aren't trying to get in the way of fire victims getting settlement money.

Origin and cause investigations are "time-intensive and costly," lawyers said in a court brief of insurers who "assume the burden of these investigations," and take on the risk of those costs.

Insurers promptly paid claims, which are helping victims rebuild, the brief said: "For many wildfire victims, payment of claims by their insurer provided quick access to desperately needed funds."

When will victims get paid?

Not for a while.

If the state Supreme Court agrees that an insurance company can sue defendants directly, "that would likely destroy the global settlement agreement," said Jacob Lowenthal, an attorney representing individual plaintiffs. The plaintiffs would go back to Cahill's courtroom to figure out trial dates for their lawsuits.

If the justices rule the other way, the settlement could head toward finalization, putting in motion an administrative process for doling out money.

It's possible that whichever side loses will seek review at the U.S. Supreme Court.

What to know about the court cases over President Trump's birthright citizenship order

By GENE JOHNSON and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — A federal judge who already questioned the constitutionality of President Donald Trump's birthright citizenship executive order is set to hear arguments Thursday over a longer-term pause of the directive, which aims to end citizenship for children born to parents not legally in the country.

U.S. District Judge John Coughenour in Seattle has scheduled a hearing involving lawyers from the Trump administration, four states suing to stop the order, and an immigrant rights organization, which is challenging it on behalf of a proposed class of expectant parents.

The latest proceeding comes just a day after a Maryland federal judge issued a nationwide pause in a separate but similar case involving immigrants' rights groups and pregnant women whose soon-to-born

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children could be affected.

Here's a closer look at where things stand on the president's birthright citizenship order.

Where do things stand on birthright citizenship?

The president's executive order seeks to end the automatic grant of citizenship to children born on U.S. soil to parents who are in the country illegally or who are here on a temporary, but lawful, basis such as those on student or tourist visas.

For now, though, it's on hold. Two weeks ago, Coughenour called the order "blatantly unconstitutional" and issued a 14-day temporary restraining order blocking its implementation. On Wednesday, U.S. District Judge Deborah Boardman followed that up with an injunction keeping it on hold long-term, until the merits of the case are resolved, barring a successful appeal by the Trump administration.

Asked by Boardman if the administration would appeal, an attorney for the administration said he didn't immediately have the authority to make that decision.

What's happening in the latest case?

On Thursday, the birthright citizenship issue is back before Coughenour, a Ronald Reagan appointee. During a hearing last month, he said the case stood out in his more than four decades as a federal judge. "I can't remember another case where the question presented was as clear as this one is," he told a Justice Department attorney.

His temporary order blocking the executive action was set to expire Thursday when he'll hear arguments over whether he should issue an injunction similar to the one issued by the judge in Maryland.

What about the other cases challenging the president's order?

In total, 22 states, as well as other organizations, have sued to try to stop the executive action.

The matter before the Seattle judge Thursday involves four states: Arizona, Illinois, Oregon and Washington. It also has been consolidated with a lawsuit brought by the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project. Eighteen states, led by Iowa, have filed a "friend-of-the-court" brief supporting the Trump administration's position in the case.

Yet another hearing is set for Friday in a Massachusetts court. That case involves a different group of 18 states challenging the order, including New Jersey, which is the lead plaintiff.

What's at issue here?

At the heart of the lawsuits is the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1868 after the Civil War and the infamous Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, which held Scott, an enslaved man, wasn't a citizen despite having lived in a state where slavery was outlawed.

The plaintiffs argue the amendment, which holds that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside," are indisputably citizens.

The Trump administration has asserted that children of noncitizens are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States and therefore not entitled to citizenship.

"The Constitution does not harbor a windfall clause granting American citizenship to ... the children of those who have circumvented (or outright defied) federal immigration laws," the government argued in reply to the Maryland plaintiffs' suit.

Attorneys for the states have argued that it certainly does — and that has been recognized since the amendment's adoption, notably in an 1898 U.S. Supreme Court decision. That decision, *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, held that the only children who did not automatically receive U.S. citizenship upon being born on U.S. soil were children of diplomats, who have allegiance to another government; enemies present in the U.S. during hostile occupation; those born on foreign ships; and those born to members of sovereign Native American tribes.

The U.S. is among about 30 countries where birthright citizenship — the principle of *jus soli* or "right of the soil" — is applied. Most are in the Americas, and Canada and Mexico are among them.

Mexican border cities are in limbo as tariff threats spark fears of a recession

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico (AP) — As soon as the sun glints over miles of border fence dividing the United States and Mexico, the engines of cargo trucks packed with auto and computer parts roar to life along border bridges and bleary-eyed workers file into factories to assemble a multitude of products geared toward the U.S. market.

For more than half a century, this daily rhythm has helped fuel the heartbeat of a transnational machine that generated more than \$800 billion in trade between the U.S. and Mexico in 2024 alone.

Over the past year, however, President Donald Trump's threatened 25% tariffs against Mexico and Canada have plunged manufacturing hubs all along the northern Mexican border into limbo, a state that persists despite a one-month reprieve to which Trump agreed on Monday.

Tariffs would cripple Mexican border economies that are reliant on factories churning out products for the U.S. — auto parts, medical supplies, computer components, myriad electronics — and likely thrust the country into a recession, economic forecasters have warned. Some workers wonder how much longer they'll have jobs, while business leaders say the uncertainty has already led many investors to start tightening their purse strings.

"It's a conflict between governments and we're the ones most affected," said 58-year-old truck driver Carlos Ponce, leaning against his rig at the customs border crossing between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas. "Tomorrow, who knows what will happen?"

Ponce, who was driving a truck full of car shock absorbers, said he's spent the past 35 years moving goods across the border, just as his father did before him. Now, he's unsure how much longer that will last.

Manufacturing in export-oriented assembly plants known as maquiladoras are the heart of Ciudad Juárez's economy, with 97% of its goods going to the U.S., according to figures from Mexico's Economic Ministry.

The factories were born in the 1960s in an attempt to boost economic development in northern Mexico and lower prices for U.S. consumers. The maquiladora program later took off after the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, was signed in 1994. The agreement was supplanted by a similar pact, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, negotiated between the three countries during Trump's first term.

Today, neon signs with the dollar-to-peso exchange rate flash across the city, a reminder of the close ties binding both sides of the border.

"Everything that happens in the United States: its economic, social policy ... directly affects us because companies here in Mexico depend on what they sell in the United States," said Thor Salayandia, head of his family's auto-parts manufacturing facility in Ciudad Juárez. "The United States also needs Mexico to keep manufacturing, but they're not seeing things like that."

This week, workers and business leaders alike breathed a sigh of relief when Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum announced she had negotiated with Trump to delay tariffs one month.

"Now, we're buying time," Salayandia said.

Workers here assemble everything from auto parts to computer panels to T-shirts emblazoned with the American flag, logos of popular U.S. football teams and slogans such as "Proud to be a federal employee."

Parts can cross the border multiple times before the final product is sold to U.S. consumers. That economic interdependence has left many in the city struggling to imagine a future without it. One U.S. company said it would likely have to move part of its manufacturing in the city to the U.S., but at a sharp cost.

Antonio Ruiz, a compliance officer at Tecma, a U.S. firm that helps foreign companies set up shop along the border, said his was among a number of businesses to call emergency meetings over the weekend as economic forecasters warned that the tariffs could drive Mexico into a recession.

"It's very difficult to be prepared for something that has never happened before," Ruiz said. "As much as you want to prepare for it, the best you can do is prepare to brace yourself in the short term."

Salayandia and economists warn that any sort of tax could lead to cascading unemployment and rising

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prices on both sides of the border. In Mexico, they say, it could also spur a rise in violence in border areas by pushing the unemployed into the hands of drug cartels, as well as an increase in Mexican migration to the U.S.

Manuel Sotelo, a leader of Mexico's National Chamber of Freight Transportation who owns a fleet of trucks that cross the border every day, sees the tariff threats as more of a political power move than a future economic reality.

"Both countries would be paralyzed," said Sotelo, who sat at a desk covered with local newspapers carrying bold headlines on the tariffs, a Trump bobblehead positioned behind him. "Let's say he did slap a 25% tariff (on Mexico), what would they do during the Super Bowl without avocados?"

On the other hand, Sotelo acknowledges that the tariff talk has already inflicted some damage. He and other business leaders say that over the past year they've watched investment dip in Ciudad Juárez because of political uncertainty, as investors hesitate to funnel their money into businesses that could collapse with the stroke of a pen in Washington.

While Trump's election has been the primary driver of that uncertainty, June elections in Mexico and a controversial judicial reform carried out by Mexico's governing party have added to it. Sotelo said he saw a 7% drop in business last year, and only expects that to continue until lingering tariff threats are resolved.

One collective of maquiladoras in the city says it has seen at least three factories halt production.

"Every time we hear this discourse from political leaders, the people running our governments, it sends shock waves through the border," Salayandia said. "Because the border is a global thermometer. Our products go all over the world. Those companies will go look in other parts of the world where they offer conditions to keep competing."

Baltic nations count final hours to ending electricity ties to Russia

By LIUDAS DAPKUS Associated Press

VILNIUS, Lithuania (AP) — Nearly 3 1/2 decades after leaving the Soviet Union, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania this weekend will flip a switch to end electricity-grid connections to neighboring Russia and Belarus — and turn to their European Union allies.

The severing of electricity ties to oil- and gas-rich Russia is steeped in geopolitical and symbolic significance. Work toward it sped up after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his troops to invade Ukraine three years ago, battering Moscow's EU relations.

"This is physical disconnection from the last remaining element of our reliance on the Russian and Belarusian energy system," Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda told The Associated Press in a recent interview.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen and other dignitaries are expected at a ceremony on Sunday as a specially-made 9-meter (29.5-foot) tall clock in downtown Vilnius counts down the final seconds of the Baltic states' electricity ties to Russia.

Chilly ties since the fall of the Soviet Union

The Baltic countries, which are all NATO members, have often had chilly ties with Russia since declaring independence from the USSR in 1990 — and relations soured further over Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Sixteen power lines that used to connect the three Baltic states with Russia and Belarus were dismantled over the years as a new grid linking them with the rest of the EU was created, including underwater cables in the Baltic Sea.

On Saturday, all remaining transmission lines between them and Russia, Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad — a Russian exclave wedged between EU members Poland and Lithuania and the sea — will be switched off one by one.

Then, for 24 hours, the Baltic Power System will operate solo in an "island operation mode." The next day, the power system is set to merge with the Continental European and Nordic grids through several links with Finland, Sweden and Poland.

The Kaliningrad region, which has no land ties to mainland Russia, already relies on its own power gen-

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eration, according to Litgrid, Lithuania's electricity transmission system operator.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the disconnection plan was announced in advance by the Baltic countries and the Russian energy sector had taken preparatory steps to ensure smooth operation on its side.

"Those plans were announced long time ago, and they required certain actions by our and their electric companies," Peskov told reporters. "We have taken all necessary measures to ensure reliable and uninterrupted operation of our unified energy system."

Risks of troublemaking?

The three Baltic countries, which together share a 1,633-kilometer (1,015-mile) -long border with Russia and Belarus, officially informed Moscow and Minsk of the disconnection plan in July. Their national transmission system operators credited 1.2 billion euros (\$1.25 billion) in EU and other support to help the countries synchronize with the Continental Europe Synchronous Area.

"Lithuania has done a lot in the last 30 years to disconnect, to become independent," Nausėda said. Three years ago, "we stopped buying any kind of energy resources from Russia. It was our response to the war in Ukraine."

Despite the advance notice, the Baltic nations are still on watch for a possible response from their former Soviet partners.

"The risk of cyberattacks remains substantial," Litgrid said last week, adding that continued vigilance, collaboration, defensive steps and "robust" cybersecurity measures were needed to effectively mitigate potential threats.

Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa warned Wednesday of possible provocations, but said Latvia was well-prepared and services including the armed forces and national guard were stepping up their vigilance and security measures.

"Clearly there are risks, we understand that very well. But the risks are identified and there is a contingency plan in case these risks materialize," Siliņa said.

After the disconnection plans were announced, propaganda campaigns cropped up on social media and in printed leaflets in city streets that issued fake-news warnings about blackouts, severe energy shortages and sky-high energy bills for consumers.

"We heard those rumors, but we are used to such things already" said Jolanta Karavaitienė, a retired teacher, in central Vilnius. "Of course we must disconnect from them. Given the geopolitical situation, I see no reason for us to be there (in the Russian grid)."

Still, some in the region were taking precautionary measures.

Estonia's public broadcaster ERR has reported surging sales of generators. Home appliance chain Bauhof sold dozens more generators last month compared to January a year ago, and rival Ehituse ABC had to limit their purchases the report said.

A long road toward energy independence

The Baltic countries' steps toward energy independence have been decades in the making.

In 2003, prior to joining the EU, Lithuania decided to shut down the Soviet-built Ignalina nuclear power plant in response to concerns in Brussels over its safety. It was decommissioned in 2009.

Lithuania built an offshore oil terminal in the Baltic Sea in 1999. Seven years later, it became the country's sole crude oil import point after Russia's surprise move to halt supplies of oil to Lithuania through Russia's vast Druzhba pipeline network.

Rokas Masiulis, the CEO of Litgrid, said Lithuania has "suffered a great deal" because of Russian actions in the past, such as through halting oil supplies and jacking up prices for gas that his country once depended on.

He said Lithuania today has "much more than we need" in terms of electricity capacity, from both fossil fuels but also increasingly solar and wind. "So we are safe," he said.

The disconnection with Russia "is neither bad for them, (nor) bad for us," Masiulis said. "We were sort of interconnected and interdependent on each other. Now we will just part our ways."

The three Baltic countries have rebuilt power lines and launched a vast construction and reconstruction

program to turn their networks away from Russia and toward the West, the Litgrid CEO added, calling it a technological feat.

"Actions by Russia -- by them being aggressive and pushing their neighbors -- has really helped us," Masiulis said. "Maybe we've suffered a little with oil prices, with gas prices, but we were forced to act. So we built alternative routes."

"Now we're in much better state than we were before," he added. "So maybe they wished us ill, but ultimately everything worked very well for us."

Kendrick Lamar to discuss Super Bowl halftime performance in New Orleans

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — What can viewers expect from Kendrick Lamar's highly anticipated Super Bowl halftime performance? So far, we know SZA will join him on stage, but more details could be revealed Thursday when the Grammy winner speaks ahead of Sunday's game.

Apple Music's Ebro Darden and Nadeska Alexis will interview Lamar and pre-game performers beginning at 10 a.m. Central time. The rap megastar takes the Super Bowl stage fresh off a Grammy triumph, where he claimed two of the night's biggest awards — song and record of the year — for his diss track "Not Like Us."

Apple Music will broadcast the interview on its platform and social media sites like YouTube and Facebook.

It's not Lamar's first time on what has become entertainment's biggest musical stage. He's looking forward to bringing hip-hop back to the NFL's championship game, where he performed as a guest artist with Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Mary J. Blige, 50 Cent and Eminem in 2022.

The pre-game media session might reveal some details about the performance, but headlines often keep a few secrets. Rihanna sure did, waiting until her Super Bowl performance in 2023 to reveal she was pregnant with her second child.

The Super Bowl will be held Sunday at the the Caesars Superdome, with the two-defending champions Kansas City Chiefs facing off against the Philadelphia Eagles in a championship rematch.

Who else is performing at the Super Bowl?

The Super Bowl pregame will have some Louisiana flavor: Jon Batiste will hit the stage to sing the national anthem, while Trombone Shorty and Lauren Daigle are slated to perform "America the Beautiful." Ledisi will perform "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as part of the pregame performances.

The national anthem and "America the Beautiful" will be performed by actor Stephanie Noguera in American sign language. Otis Jones IV will sign "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and the halftime show will be signed by Matt Maxey.

The pregame performers are all Louisiana natives.

Mexico deploys the first of 10,000 National Guard troops to US border after Trump's tariff threat

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico (AP) — A line of Mexican National Guard and Army trucks rumbled along the border separating Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas, on Wednesday, among the first of 10,000 troops Mexico has sent to its northern frontier following tariff threats by President Donald Trump.

Masked and armed National Guard members picked through brush running along the border barrier on the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez, pulling out makeshift ladders and ropes tucked away in the trenches, and pulling them onto trucks. Patrols were also seen on other parts of the border near Tijuana.

It comes after a turbulent week along the border after Trump announced he would delay imposing crippling tariffs on Mexico for at least a month. In exchange, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum promised she would send the country's National Guard to reinforce the border and crack down on fentanyl smuggling.

Trump has declared an emergency on the border despite migration levels and fentanyl overdoses significantly dipping over the past year. The U.S. said it would, in turn, do more to stop American guns from being trafficked into Mexico to fuel cartel violence, which has rippled to other parts of the country as criminal groups fight to control the lucrative migrant smuggling industry.

On Tuesday, the first of those forces arrived in border cities, climbing out of government planes. Guard members in the Wednesday patrol confirmed that they were part of the new force.

"There will be permanent surveillance on the border," José Luis Santos Iza, one of the National Guard leaders heading off the deployment in the city, told media upon the arrival of the first set of soldiers. "This operation is primarily to prevent drug trafficking from Mexico to the United States, mainly fentanyl."

At least 1,650 troops were expected to be sent to Ciudad Juárez, according to government figures, making it one of the biggest receivers of border reinforcements in the country, second only to Tijuana, where 1,949 are slated to be sent.

During U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's trip through Latin America — where migration was at the top of the agenda — the top American diplomat thanked the Mexican government for the forces, according to a statement by the Mexican government.

The negotiation by Sheinbaum was viewed by observers as a bit of shrewd political maneuvering by the newly elected Mexican leader. Many had previously cast doubt that she'd be able to navigate Trump's presidency as effectively as her predecessor and ally, former President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

Guatemala gives Rubio a second deportation deal for migrants being sent home from the US

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

GUATEMALA CITY (AP) — Guatemalan President Bernardo Arévalo said Wednesday his country will accept migrants from other countries who are being deported from the United States, the second deportation deal that Secretary of State Marco Rubio has reached during a Central America trip that has been focused mainly on immigration.

Under the agreement announced by Arévalo, the deportees would be returned to their home countries at U.S. expense.

"We have agreed to increase by 40% the number of flights of deportees both of our nationality as well as deportees from other nationalities," Arévalo said at a news conference with Rubio.

Previously, including under the Biden administration, Guatemala had been accepting on average seven to eight flights of its citizens from the U.S. per week. Under President Donald Trump it's also been one of the countries that have had migrants returned on U.S. military planes.

El Salvador announced a similar but broader agreement on Monday. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele said his country would accept U.S. deportees of any nationality, including American citizens and legal residents who are imprisoned for violent crimes.

Both Trump and Rubio acknowledged the legal uncertainty of sending Americans to another country for imprisonment.

"I'm just saying if we had a legal right to do it, I would do it in a heartbeat," Trump told reporters Tuesday in the Oval Office. "I don't know if we do or not, we're looking at that right now."

Rubio called it a very generous offer but said there were "obviously legalities involved. We have a Constitution."

Immigration, a Trump administration priority, has been the major focus of Rubio's first foreign trip as America's top diplomat, a five-country tour spanning Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic.

The agreements with El Salvador and Guatemala potentially help the Trump administration address what has always been a key sticking point in immigration enforcement since not everyone in the U.S. illegally can be easily sent back home.

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Venezuela, for example, has been a major source of migrants coming to the U.S. in recent years, but rarely can the U.S. deport Venezuelans back to their home country. But the U.S. already has a robust network set up to send people to several Central American countries.

Guatemala will expand its capacity to receive not just Guatemalans, but also migrants from other countries who will then be repatriated to their home countries. The details still need to be worked out.

"However, the permanent answer to immigration is to bring development so that no one has to leave the country," Arévalo said. To that end, a high-level Guatemalan delegation, including from the private sector, will travel to Washington in the coming weeks.

Arévalo also announced the formation of a new border security force that will patrol Guatemala's borders with Honduras and El Salvador. The force will be made up of police and soldiers and will combat transnational crime of all kinds, he said.

Rubio's trip has been dogged by the administration's dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, including a late Tuesday order abruptly pulling almost all agency staffers off the job.

After the news conference with Guatemala's president, Rubio headed directly to the U.S. Embassy, where staffers and their families who were unsure of their futures gathered to hear from their new boss.

The meet-and-greet event was closed to the press, as was an earlier similar event in El Salvador. Both Guatemala and El Salvador have significant USAID missions. In Panama on Sunday before the shut down announcement, Rubio's embassy event had been open to journalists.

From there Rubio wrapped up his Guatemala stop by visiting a local migration facility near an air force base where deportees are processed for integration back into their home communities. Under the measures announced Wednesday by Guatemala's president, the number of deportees is expected to rise by as much as 40%. The program has been supported by the U.S. State Department and Department of Homeland Security.

Rubio also got a briefing on Guatemala's counternarcotics efforts, including the interception of at least four shipments of fentanyl precursors since late November totaling 127.5 kilograms (280 pounds), enough to produce more than 114 million doses of the drug.

Rubio, who has offered exemptions to Trump's sweeping freeze on foreign assistance, has signed waivers to allow funding for both programs to continue, officials said.

"This is an example of foreign aid that's in our national interest. That's why I've issued a waiver for these programs. That's why these programs are coming back online. And they will be functioning because it's a way of showing to the American people this is the kind of foreign aid that's aligned with our foreign policy, with our national interest," Rubio said.

Rubio also spoke Wednesday with Mexican Foreign Secretary Juan Ramón de la Fuente to discuss ways to secure the U.S.-Mexico border, fight fentanyl and transnational criminal organizations and end illegal immigration, according to a State Department statement.

With Gaza rehab and other global policy ideas, Trump goes from America First to America Everywhere

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump promised voters an administration that wouldn't waste precious American lives and taxpayer treasure on far-off wars and nation building.

But just weeks into his second go-around in the White House, the Republican leader laid out plans to use American might to "take over" and reconstruct Gaza, threatened to reclaim U.S. control of the Panama Canal and floated the idea that the U.S. could buy Greenland from Denmark, which has shown no interest in parting with the island.

The rhetorical shift from America First to America Everywhere is leaving even some of his allies slack-jawed — and wondering if he's really serious.

"The pursuit for peace should be that of the Israelis and the Palestinians," a flummoxed Sen. Rand Paul, the Kentucky Republican and Trump ally, posted Wednesday on social media. "I thought we voted for

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America First. We have no business contemplating yet another occupation to doom our treasure and spill our soldiers' blood."

The president's shocking declaration Tuesday that he wants to remove roughly 1.8 million Palestinians from Gaza and redevelop the war-scarred territory into the "Riviera of the Middle East" with "long-term" American ownership raises anew questions about the direction of Trump's foreign policy during his norm-breaking second term.

Is Trump's imperialist talk just meant to appear tough on the world stage? Is he merely trying to give Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cover with far-right members of his governing coalition who oppose moving forward with the second phase of the ceasefire deal with Hamas? Is the Gaza takeover proposal a land grab by a president who sees the world through the prism of a New York real estate developer? Or is it, possibly, a bit of all of above?

Whatever the answer, Trump's play on Gaza has perplexed Washington — and the world — as they try to make sense of the president's foreign policy doctrine.

Trump advisers try to temper concerns

The president's advisers sought Wednesday to temper concerns about his plans for the territory, just a day after Trump shocked the world with his call for a "world-class" American rehab of Gaza that would take place after relocating Palestinians to neighboring Arab nations.

Both his top diplomat, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and his press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, edged away from Trump's suggestion that Gazans would be relocated "permanently."

Rubio said Trump's proposal to take "ownership" of Gaza and redevelop the area should be seen as a "generous" offer.

"It was not meant as a hostile move," Rubio said during his visit to Guatemala. "It was meant as ... a very generous move."

Rubio added that the moment was "akin to a natural disaster." People won't be able to live in Gaza for years to come because there are unexploded munitions, debris and rubble.

"In the interim, obviously people are going to have to live somewhere while you're rebuilding it," he said.

Trump would not rule out the possibility of U.S. troops being deployed to carry out his plan.

But Leavitt downplayed the prospects that Trump's plan would come with a cost to American taxpayers or that Trump would deploy U.S. forces.

"It's been made very clear to the president that the United States needs to be involved in this rebuilding effort, to ensure stability in the region for all people," Leavitt told reporters at the White House. "But that does not mean boots on the ground in Gaza. It does not mean American taxpayers will be funding this effort."

The White House has yet to explain under what authority Trump could carry his Gaza proposal. Nor has the administration clarified how Trump would get around stiff opposition to any relocation of Gaza's population from Arab allies, including Egypt and Jordan, that he expects to take in Palestinians.

Still, they insist that Trump is just looking for an answer to the generational strife between Israelis and Palestinians that's convulsed the region for decades and foiled many of his White House predecessors.

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results," Leavitt said. "President Trump is an outside-of-the-box thinker and a visionary leader who solves problems that many others, especially in this city, claim are unsolvable."

Democrats criticize expansionist talk

The expansionist talk in Gaza is playing out as Trump has begun an effort to shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development, the federal agency that provides crucial aid that funds education and fights starvation, epidemics and poverty overseas. Trump sees it as a poster child of government waste and advancement of liberal social programs.

That split screen has galled some of Trump's Democratic detractors.

Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., called Trump's Gaza proposal "offensive and insane and dangerous and foolish." Even worse, he said, it "risks the rest of the world thinking that we are an unbalanced and unreliable

partner because our president makes insane proposals.”

Coons added that it was particularly infuriating that Trump floated the idea at a moment when he is also insisting that USAID be dismantled in the name of fighting government waste.

“Why on earth would we abandon decades of well-established humanitarian programs around the world, and now launch into one of the world’s greatest humanitarian challenges?” Coons said.

Mideast allies reject moving displaced Palestinians in Gaza

Trump’s push was roundly rejected Wednesday by European and Middle East allies, including those he’s calling on to take in hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have been left homeless by the war.

The Arab League, the 22-member regional grouping, said the proposal “represents a recipe for instability.” British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said displaced Palestinians in Gaza “must be allowed home.” German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said displacement of the Palestinian civilian population from Gaza would be “unacceptable” and “against international law.”

Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Trump ally, said “the idea of Americans going in on the ground in Gaza is a nonstarter for every senator.”

“So I would suggest we go back to what we’ve been trying to do, which is destroy Hamas and find a way for the Arab world to take over Gaza and the West Bank, in a fashion that would lead to a Palestinian state that Israel can live with,” Graham said.

But even as his Gaza proposal was panned, Trump continued to insist that it has widespread support.

“Everybody loves it,” Trump said in a brief exchange with reporters.

And Netanyahu reiterated his praise, telling Fox News’ Sean Hannity: “It’s a remarkable idea and I think it should be really pursued. Examined, pursued and done, because I think it will create a different future for everyone.”

A Texas man is executed for the killing of a pastor during a robbery at a church

By JIM VERTUNO and MICHAEL GRACZYK Associated Press

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (AP) — A Texas man convicted of beating and suffocating a Dallas area pastor in his church during a robbery was put to death Wednesday evening, the second execution in the U.S. this year and the first of four scheduled in Texas over the next three months.

Steven Lawayne Nelson, 37, received a lethal injection and was pronounced dead at 6:50 p.m. CST at the state penitentiary in Huntsville. He was convicted of the 2011 killing of the Rev. Clint Dobson, a 28-year-old pastor who was beaten, strangled and suffocated with a plastic bag inside NorthPointe Baptist Church in Arlington. The church’s secretary, Judy Elliott, 67, was severely beaten but survived.

Shortly before the injection began, the inmate repeatedly told his wife, who watched through a window a short distance from him, that he loved her and that he was thankful and grateful.

“It is what it is,” Nelson said. When he added that she should “enjoy life,” the woman, Helene Noa Dubois, held up to the window a white service dog that she was allowed to bring into the witness area.

“I’m not scared. I’m at peace,” Nelson added. “Let’s ride, Warden.”

As the lethal dose of the sedative pentobarbital began to be administered, he told Dubois, who married him recently while he was in prison, “Let me go to sleep.” The drug appeared to take effect as he said the word, “Love,” the he gasped twice and appeared to try to hold his breath. His head, shoulders and arms trembled for a few seconds before all movement stopped. He was pronounced dead 24 minutes later.

Nelson was the first Texas death row inmate executed since Robert Roberson’s Oct. 17, 2024, execution date was delayed in what would have been the first in the U.S. tied to a diagnosis of shaken baby syndrome.

South Carolina carried out the nation’s first execution of 2025 on Friday. Marion Bowman Jr. received a lethal injection for his murder conviction in the shooting death of a friend whose burned body was found in a car in 2001.

Relatives of the victims declined to speak with reporters and released statements earlier Wednesday.

“As a family, we have chosen to take this day to focus on the great memories we have of Clint rather

than giving time to his killer," Dobson's family said in its statement. "Steven Nelson forever changed our lives, but he has never occupied our minds. ... We miss Clint every day. We miss his laughter and his wit, his advice and his love for us."

Bradley Elliott, whose mother Judy survived the attack, said: "I hope that today as Mr. Nelson took his last breath that he was greeted by the same loving and gracious Savior that has stood by us through all we have been a part of." The statement added: "Mr. Nelson, we forgive you and hope to see you when we are called home from here."

Nelson was a laborer and high school dropout with a long history of legal trouble and arrests that started as early as age 6. Nelson had pleaded for mercy, claiming that he had only served as a robbery lookout and blamed two other men for killing Dobson.

Nelson testified at trial and has maintained that he waited outside the church for about 25 minutes before going in and seeing that Dobson and the secretary had been beaten, and he insisted Dobson was still alive. Nelson said he took Dobson's laptop and that one of the other men gave him Elliott's car keys and credit cards.

The victims were later found by Elliott's husband, the church's part-time music minister, who didn't immediately recognize her because she had been so severely beaten.

Trial evidence showed Nelson's fingerprints and pieces of his broken belt at the crime scene, drops of the victims' blood on his sneakers, and surveillance video showing him driving Elliott's car and using her credit cards. Investigators also said the two men Nelson blamed for the attack had detailed alibis.

Nelson's attorneys appealed on claims of bad legal representation at his trial and sentencing, saying this lawyers did little to challenge the alibis of the other men, or present mitigating evidence of a troubled childhood in Oklahoma and Texas.

While awaiting trial, Nelson was indicted in the killing of another jail inmate. He was never tried on that charge after his guilty verdict and death sentence.

Nelson's appeals had been denied by state and federal courts. The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals denied a stay of execution on Jan. 28, and the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a request for a stay hours before the execution.

Three more executions are scheduled in Texas before the end of April. The first is scheduled for Feb. 13. Richard Lee Tabler was condemned for gunning down a strip club manager and the manager's friend in 2004.

In their own words: What Trump said about Gaza and how top administration officials contradicted him

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Trump administration voices on Wednesday contradicted some of the comments the president made a day earlier about the U.S. taking long-term control of war-shattered Gaza, the possibility of sending in American troops and the area's residents being permanently resettled.

President Donald Trump 's remarks Tuesday set off alarm in Arab countries and even among some of his Republican allies before Secretary of State Marco Rubio and White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt tried to walk them back.

Here's a look at what Trump, Rubio and Leavitt said, and the key areas in which they disagree:

On refugee resettlement outside of Gaza

Trump: "I hope we can do something where they wouldn't want to go back."

"If we can get a beautiful area to resettle people, permanently, in nice homes where they can be happy and not be shot and not be killed and not be knifed to death like what's happening in Gaza."

Rubio: "In the interim, obviously, people are going to have to live somewhere while you're rebuilding it. It is akin to a natural disaster. What he very generously has offered is the ability of the United States to go in and help with debris removal, help with munitions removal, help with reconstruction — the rebuilding of homes and businesses and things of this nature, so that then people can move back in."

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Leavitt: "The president has made it clear that they need to be temporarily relocated out of Gaza."

On sending US troops to Gaza

Trump: "We will do what is necessary. If it's necessary, we'll do that."

Leavitt: "The president has not committed to putting boots on the ground in Gaza."

Rubio: "It was not meant as a hostile move. It was meant as, I think, a very generous move, the offer to rebuild and to be in charge of the rebuilding."

On the US taking long-term control and overseeing reconstruction of Gaza

Trump: "I do see a long-term ownership position, and I see it bringing great stability to that part of the Middle East, and maybe the entire Middle East."

"We're going to take over that piece and we're going to develop it, create thousands and thousands of jobs. And it will be something that the entire Middle East can be very proud of."

"We have an opportunity to do something that could be phenomenal. And I don't want to be cute. I don't want to be a wise guy. But the Riviera of the Middle East."

"This could be so magnificent. But more importantly than that is the people that have been absolutely destroyed that live there now can live in peace in a much better situation because they are living in hell. And those people will now be able to live in peace. We'll make sure that it's done world class."

Rubio: "What President Trump announced yesterday is the offer, the willingness, of the United States to become responsible for the reconstruction of that area."

Leavitt: "It's been made very clear to the president that the United States needs to be involved in this rebuilding effort to ensure stability in the region for all people. It does not mean American taxpayers will be funding this effort. It means Donald Trump, who is the best dealmaker on the planet, is going to strike a deal with our partners in the region."

Trump administration plans to pressure the IOC to come up with a uniform transgender athlete ban

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

President Donald Trump is ready to take his fight against transgender athletes to the International Olympic Committee.

Trump said Wednesday during a signing ceremony for an executive order aimed at banning transgender athletes from women's sports that his administration wants the IOC to "change everything having to do with the Olympics and having to do with this absolutely ridiculous subject" ahead of the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

The order empowers the Secretary of State's office to pressure the IOC to amend standards governing Olympic sporting events "to promote fairness, safety and the best interests of female athletes by ensuring that eligibility for participation in women's sporting events is determined according to sex and not gender identity or testosterone reduction."

The order also calls for the Secretary of State and the Department of Homeland Security to "review and adjust, as needed, policies permitting admission to the United States of males seeking to participate in women's sports." There is no evidence that male athletes have competed in women's Olympics events.

Outgoing IOC President Thomas Bach said in December that Olympic organizers were "very confident" they could work with the Trump administration. The president initially backed Los Angeles during his first administration when the city bid for the 2024 Games that were awarded to Paris.

Officials with the LA28 organizing committee did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

LA28 organizing committee chairman Casey Wasserman reportedly met with Trump in Florida last month before Trump's second term began, with Wasserman saying afterward both were looking forward to delivering a successful Games.

The IOC has largely stayed out of the discussion around transgender athletes, letting the international governing bodies for each sport set the parameters for gender participation.

The rules can run the gamut. Entities like World Aquatics have very strict guidelines, while World Tri-

athlon rules are more liberal.

The IOC's stance could change considerably in the near future following Bach's retirement. Among the candidates to replace Bach is former track star Sebastian Coe, now the leader of World Athletics. Coe has been a strong proponent of limiting participation in female sports to cisgender women.

Two years ago, track and field under Coe banned transgender athletes from international competition — adopting the same rules as swimming — and adopted new regulations requiring some athletes to undergo hormone-suppressing treatment for six months before competing to be eligible.

The rhetoric around transgender athletes heated up at the Paris Olympics last summer, with Trump eagerly entering the fray.

On the campaign trail, Trump frequently misgendered two Olympic female boxers as men and said their ability to participate in the Paris Games was "demeaning to women" even though both Imane Khelif of Algeria and Li Yu-ting of Taiwan were assigned female at birth and identify as women.

Trump referenced both athletes again on Wednesday.

"They had two women or two people that transitioned and both of them won gold medals and they won them very convincingly," Trump said. "But all of that ends today because with this executive order, the war on women's sports is over."

The question going forward is what kind of leverage the United States can use to influence the IOC. Given the volatile nature of the issue, Trump's order could begin a groundswell among international federations for the IOC to come up with a uniform standard.

Google scraps its diversity hiring goals as it complies with Trump's new government contractor rules

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google is scrapping some of its diversity hiring targets, joining a lengthening list of U.S. companies that have abandoned or scaled back their diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

The move, which was outlined in an email sent to Google employees on Wednesday, came in the wake of an executive order issued by President Donald Trump that was aimed in part at pressuring government contractors to scrap their DEI initiatives.

Like several other major tech companies, Google sells some of its technology and services to the federal government, including its rapidly growing cloud division that's a key piece of its push into artificial technology.

Google's parent company, Alphabet, also signaled the shift in its annual 10-K report it filed this week with the Securities and Exchange Commission. In it, Google removed a line included in previous annual reports saying that it's "committed to making diversity, equity, and inclusion part of everything we do and to growing a workforce that is representative of the users we serve."

Google generates most of Alphabet's annual revenue of \$350 billion and accounts for almost all of its worldwide workforce of 183,000.

"We're committed to creating a workplace where all our employees can succeed and have equal opportunities, and over the last year we've been reviewing our programs designed to help us get there," Google said in a statement to The Associated Press. "We've updated our 10-K language to reflect this, and as a federal contractor, our teams are also evaluating changes required following recent court decisions and executive orders on this topic."

The change in language also comes slightly more than two weeks after Google CEO Sundar Pichai and other prominent technology executives — including Tesla CEO Elon Musk, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Apple CEO Tim Cook and Meta Platforms CEO Mark Zuckerberg — stood behind Trump during his inauguration.

Meta jettisoned its DEI program last month, shortly before the inauguration, while Amazon halted some of its DEI programs in December following Trump's election.

Many companies outside of the technology industry also have backed away from DEI. Those include Walt Disney Co., McDonald's, Ford, Walmart, Target, Lowe's and John Deere.

Trump's recent executive order threatens to impose financial sanctions on federal contractors deemed to

have "illegal" DEI programs. If the companies are found to be in violation, they could be subject to massive damages under the 1863 False Claims Act. That law states that contractors that make false claims to the government could be liable for three times the government's damages.

The order also directed all federal agencies to choose the targets of up to nine investigations of publicly traded companies, large non-profits and other institutions with DEI policies that constitute "illegal discrimination or preference."

The challenge for companies is knowing which DEI policies the Trump administration may decide are "illegal." Trump's executive order seeks to "terminate all discriminatory and illegal preferences, mandates, policies, programs" and other activities of the federal government, and to compel federal agencies "to , combat illegal private-sector DEI preferences, mandates, policies, programs, and activities."

In both the public and private sector, diversity initiatives have covered a range of practices, from anti-discrimination training and conducting pay equity studies to making efforts to recruit more members of minority groups and women as employees.

Google, which is based in Mountain View, California, has tried to hire more people from underrepresented groups for more than a decade but stepped up those efforts in 2020 after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis triggered an outcry for more social justice.

Shortly after Floyd died, Pichai set a goal to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in the Mountain View, California, company's largely Asian and white leadership ranks by 30% by 2025. Google has made some headway since then, but the makeup of its leadership has not changed dramatically.

The representation of Black people in the company's leadership ranks rose from 2.6% in 2020 to 5.1% last year, according to Google's annual diversity report. For Hispanic people, the change was 3.7% to 4.3%. The share of women in leadership roles, meanwhile, increased from 26.7% in 2020 to 32.8% in 2024, according to the company's report.

The numbers aren't much different in Google's overall workforce, with Black employees comprising just 5.7% and Latino employees 7.5%. Two-thirds of Google's worldwide workforce is made up of men, according to the diversity report.

New Attorney General Pam Bondi orders review of Trump cases as she takes over the Justice Dept.

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — New Attorney General Pam Bondi on Wednesday ordered a review of the federal prosecution of Donald Trump as she unveiled a series of directives designed to overhaul a Justice Department the president claims is biased against conservatives.

Hours after she was sworn in at the White House, Bondi called for the creation of "weaponization working group" that will scrutinize the work of special counsel Jack Smith, who charged Trump in two criminal cases. The group will also review "unethical prosecutions" stemming from the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, among other things, according to the memo.

The memo satisfies the longstanding contention of Trump and his allies that the Justice Department under the Biden administration had become "weaponized" against conservatives, even though some of its most high-profile probes concerned the Democratic president and his son, and there's been no evidence to support the idea that the prosecutions against Trump were launched for a partisan purpose.

It was one of 14 directives signed by Bondi designed to roll back Biden administration policies and align the Justice Department with the priorities of a White House determined to exert control over federal law enforcement and purge agencies of career employees it views as disloyal.

Among other directives Bondi signed were orders to lift the moratorium on the federal death penalty and end federal grants administered by the Justice Department for jurisdictions that "unlawfully interfere with federal law enforcement."

Bondi herself had foreshadowed the "weaponization" working group's creation by asserting at her confirmation hearing last month that the Justice Department had "targeted Donald Trump." The Justice

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Department will provide quarterly reports to the White House on the progress of the review, which will look for instances where agencies' actions "appear to have been designed to achieve political objectives or other improper aims rather than pursuing justice," according to the memo.

In another memo, Bondi wrote that prosecutors could face firings if they refuse to sign onto briefs or appear in court to argue on behalf of the administration, saying it's the department lawyers' job to "vigorously defend presidential policies and actions against legal challenges."

The flurry of activity signals a dramatic reshaping of the Justice Department under Bondi, a longtime Trump ally and former Florida attorney general who defended the president during his first impeachment trial against allegations that he abused the power of his office.

Democrats who opposed Bondi's confirmation have raised concerns about whether she would be able to lead a Justice Department free of influence from the White House given her close relationship with the president, who repeatedly suggested on the campaign trail that he would seek to use the justice system to exact revenge on his perceived enemies.

Bondi has said that politics will play no role in her decision-making, but she also refused at her confirmation hearing last month to rule out potential investigations into Trump's adversaries. She also has repeated Trump's claims that the prosecutions against him amounted to political persecution, telling senators that the Justice Department "had been weaponized for years and years and years, and it's got to stop."

Despite the wide-ranging ambitions of the "weaponization working group" memo, there's no indication that the group will have prosecutorial powers or tools such as subpoenas that could compel subjects of the inquiries to cooperate with the new unit.

And though the memo purports to take aim at the "weaponization" of the Justice Department, it notably excludes from review investigations into Democrats by Biden's Justice Department, including special counsel probes into the former president's handling of classified information and his son Hunter's gun and tax allegations, which resulted in felony convictions before he was pardoned by his father in December.

Smith's team investigated Trump over his efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election and his hoarding of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. Both of those cases resulted in indictments that were withdrawn after Trump's November presidential win because of longstanding Justice Department policy prohibiting the federal prosecution of a sitting president.

Smith has forcefully defended the prosecutions, saying politics played no part in the decisions of his team, who he said "stood up for the rule of law." In his final report to then-Attorney General Merrick Garland, Smith said the evidence his team gathered was sufficient enough to convict Trump on charges of scheming to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, accusing Trump of an "unprecedented criminal effort to overturn the legitimate results of the election in order to retain power."

Bondi was sworn in by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas earlier Wednesday alongside Trump in the Oval Office. It the first time that Trump had participated in a second-term swearing-in of a Cabinet member, underscoring Trump's intense personal interest in the operations of the department that investigated him during his first term and indicted him after he left office in 2021.

Trump praised Bondi's record as a prosecutor and said she will restore "fair, equal and impartial justice" at the department.

Bondi told the president that she would not let him down.

"I will make you proud and I will make this country proud," she told him. "I will restore integrity to the Justice Department and I will fight violent crime throughout this country and throughout this world, and make America safe again."

Bondi enters with the department roiled by the firings of career prosecutors and senior FBI officials, along with the highly unusual scrutiny of thousands of agents involved in the sprawling Jan. 6 investigation.

FBI agents this week sued after the Justice Department demanded that the bureau turn over the names of all agents involved in the Jan. 6 probe, which agents believe may be a precursor to mass firings.

Acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove said in a memo to the workforce Wednesday that FBI agents "who simply followed orders and carried out their duties in an ethical manner" are not at risk of being fired. The only employees who should be concerned, Bove wrote, "are those who acted with corrupt or

partisan intent.”

“There is no honor in the ongoing efforts to distort that simple truth or protect culpable actors from scrutiny on these issues, which have politicized the Bureau, harmed its credibility and distracted the public from the excellent work being done everyday,” Bove wrote.

‘I won’t leave. Put that in your brain.’ Palestinians reject Trump’s call to expel them from Gaza

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Saeed Abu Elaish’s wife, two of his daughters and two dozen others from his extended family were killed by Israeli airstrikes over the past 15 months. His house in northern Gaza was destroyed. He and surviving family now live in a tent set up in the rubble of his home.

But he says he will not be driven out, after President Donald Trump called for transferring all Palestinians from Gaza so the United States could take over the devastated territory and rebuild it for others. Rights groups said his comments were tantamount to a call for “ethnic cleansing” and forcible expulsion.

“We categorically reject and will resist any plans to deport and transfer us from our land,” he said from the Jabaliya refugee camp.

Trump’s call for depopulating Gaza has stunned Palestinians. Hundreds of thousands in the territory rushed to return to their homes – even if destroyed – as soon as they could following the ceasefire reached last month between Israel and Hamas.

Though some experts speculated that Trump’s proposal might be a negotiating tactic, Palestinians across the region saw in it an effort to erase them completely from their homeland, a continuation of the expulsion and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 war surrounding its creation.

That event is known among Palestinians as the “Nakba,” Arabic for the “Catastrophe.” Trump’s statement — a wild swing away from years of U.S. policy — meshed with calls from far-right politicians in Israel to push Palestinians out of Gaza, particularly into Egypt.

“We don’t want a repeat of our ancestors’ tragedy,” said Abu Elaish, a health care worker.

Like many, Abu Elaish could point to his own family’s experience. In May 1948, Israeli forces expelled his grandparents and other Palestinians and demolished their homes in the village of Hoj in what’s now southern Israel just outside the Gaza Strip, he said. The family resettled in Gaza’s Jabaliya camp, which over the decades grew into a densely built urban neighborhood. Israeli troops leveled most of the district during fierce fighting with Hamas militants over recent months.

Mustafa al-Gazzar was 5 years old, he said, when his family and other residents were forced to flee as Israeli forces in 1948 attacked their town of Yabneh in what is now central Israel.

Now in his 80s, he sat outside his home in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, flattened by an airstrike, and said it was unthinkable to go after surviving 15 months of war.

“You think you’ll expel me abroad and bring other people in my place? ... I would rather live in my tent, under rubble,” he said. “I won’t leave. Put that in your brain.”

“Instead of being sent abroad, I should return to my original land where I was born and will die,” he said, referring to Yabneh, located near what is now the central Israeli city of Yavneh. He said Trump should be seeking a two-state solution. “This is the ideal, clear solution, peace for the Israelis and peace for the Palestinians, living side by side,” he said.

In his comments Tuesday alongside visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump said Palestinians from Gaza should be resettled in lands in Egypt, Jordan or elsewhere, promising them a “beautiful place.” Egypt and Jordan have both rejected Trump’s call to resettle Palestinians on their soil.

Trump said the U.S. would take over Gaza and rebuild it into a “Riviera of the Middle East” for “the world’s people,” dismissing the idea that Palestinians would refuse to leave or want to return. Trump’s top diplomat and his main spokesperson on Wednesday walked back the president’s proposal, saying he only wants to temporarily relocate Palestinians from Gaza to allow for reconstruction.

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Amna Omar, a 71-year-old from the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah, called Trump a "madman." Omar was able to go to Egypt during the war after her husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In Cairo, doctors told them his cancer had gone untreated for too long and he died in October. She said she intends to go back home as soon as she can, as did other Palestinians in Egypt. "Gaza is our land, our home. We as Gazans have the right to the land and want to rebuild it," she said. "I don't want to die in Egypt like my husband. I want to die at home."

Palestinians have shown a powerful determination to return to their homes after nearly the entire population was displaced by the war. Joyous crowds streamed back to northern Gaza and Rafah, both of which were devastated by Israeli bombardment and ground offensives.

With their neighborhoods reduced to landscapes of rubble, many returnees are homeless, water is scarce and electricity is largely non-existent in most areas. Still, for most, the destruction has not diminished their will to stay.

"We remain here, even if it means living in the rubble of our homes — better that than living in humiliation elsewhere," said Ibrahim Abu Rizk, who returned to Rafah to find his home in ruins. "For a year and a half, we have been slaughtered, bombed, and destroyed, only to then leave just like that?"

The ceasefire deal brokered by the U.S., Egypt and Qatar, calls for a return of Palestinians to their homes as well as a massive international reconstruction effort in its third phase — assuming Israel and Hamas can reach a deal on who will govern the territory.

International law forbids the forced removal of populations. The Israeli rights group B'tselem said Trump's statement "constitutes a call for ethnic cleansing through uprooting and forcibly transferring some 2 million people. This is Trump and Netanyahu's roadmap for a second Nakba of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip."

Palestinian refugees have long demanded they be allowed to return to homes in what is now Israel, citing the right to return widely recognized for refugees under international law. Israel argues that right does not apply to the Palestinians and says a mass return would end the Jewish majority in the country.

Throughout the 15-month war in Gaza, many Palestinians expressed fear that Israel's goal was to drive the population into neighboring Egypt. The government denied that aim, though some hard-right members of the coalition called for encouraging Palestinians to leave Gaza and for restoring Jewish settlements there. The Israeli-occupied West Bank — home to more than 500,000 settlers — has also seen more than a year of escalated violence.

The rejection of Trump's call was echoed by Palestinians in the West Bank and in surrounding Arab countries like Jordan and Lebanon that are also home to large refugee populations.

"If he wants to displace the population of Gaza," Mohammed al-Amiri, a resident in the West Bank city of Ramallah, said of Trump, "then he should return them to their original homeland from which they were displaced in 1948, inside Israel, in the depopulated villages."

West Point shuts down clubs for women and students of color in response to Trump's DEI policies

WEST POINT, N.Y. (AP) — The U.S. Military Academy has disbanded a dozen West Point cadet clubs centered on ethnicity, gender, race and sexuality in response to the Trump administration's push to eliminate diversity programs throughout government.

The famed military academy in New York issued a memo Tuesday shutting down groups including the Asian-Pacific Forum Club, Latin Cultural Club, National Society of Black Engineers Club and Society of Women Engineers Club in order to adhere to recent guidance from the Army and Defense Department. It also shut down the Corbin Forum, a decades-old leadership club for female cadets, and Spectrum, a gay-straight alliance.

President Donald Trump last month signed an executive order aimed at halting diversity, equity and inclusion programs in the federal government and ordered the federal diversity, equity and inclusion staff be put on paid leave and eventually be laid off.

The West Point memo also ordered all other cadet clubs to pause activities until officials can review the

groups to ensure that they comply with Trump administration rules.

The U.S. Military Academy at West Point released a statement that said it is reviewing programs affiliated with its former office of diversity and inclusion and that the clubs that were shut down were sponsored by that office.

"More than one hundred clubs remain at the U.S. Military Academy, and our leadership will continue to provide opportunities for cadets to pursue their academic, military, and physical fitness interests while following Army policy, directives, and guidance," the statement reads.

The Department of Defense directed questions on the memo to the Army and West Point but sent a link to recent Defense Department guidance that said "Going forward, DoD Components and Military Departments will not use official resources, to include man-hours, to host celebrations or events related to cultural awareness months" such as Black History Month.

"Efforts to divide the force — to put one group ahead of another — erode camaraderie and threaten mission execution," the Defense guidance reads.

West Point graduate Geoffrey Easterling, who was a member of one of the now-disbanded clubs when he was at the academy, said the groups were open to all cadets and provided a way for students to interact with people from different cultures and build relationships with classmates.

"It was just community. There wasn't any teaching of all these things people are worried about," he said. "You could find help with your homework from upperclassmen, get help to know the military."

Diversity, equity and inclusion programs are intended to provide support for communities that have been historically marginalized. But such initiatives have been criticized by conservatives who argue they are discriminatory against white people.

The nation's military service academies have slowly become more racially diverse and have admitted more women in recent decades, but female cadets and cadets of color have spoken out about having to overcome hostility.

Drake and Kendrick Lamar's beef — from its beginnings to the Super Bowl — explained

By The Associated Press undefined

Drake vs Kendrick Lamar is the biggest beef in recent rap history. It's a fight that's gone miles beyond the usual lyrical martial artistry, though there has certainly been plenty of that. It has spurred multiple court actions and a stunning rebellion against their shared record label. It spawned a song that just won two of the big four Grammys and will almost certainly be performed at the Super Bowl this weekend.

It wasn't always this way. They once were collaborators: On Drake's 2011 track "Buried Alive Interlude," on Lamar's 2012 release "Poetic Justice," and on A\$AP Rocky's "(Expletive) Problems" that same year.

It didn't last long. In 2013, the Pulitzer Prize winner Lamar was featured on Big Sean's "Control," in which he called out a slew of contemporary rappers including J. Cole, Meek Mill, A\$AP Rocky, Big Sean himself and Drake.

"I got love for you all, but I'm trying to murder you," he rapped. "Trying to make sure your core fans never heard of you."

Drake responded in a Billboard cover story, saying "Kendrick's not murdering me, at all, in any platform." Lamar took another jab just afterward, at the 2013 BET Hip-Hop Awards.

The rappers launched occasional disses at each other in the following years. Drake beefed with other performers, most infamously Pusha T in 2018, where the latter rapper dropped "The Story of Adidon," revealing Drake is a father.

In October 2023, J. Cole may have accidentally reignited the beef on "First Person Shooter" with Drake. He rapped "Love when they argue the hardest MC / Is it K-Dot? Is it Aubrey? Or me?" referencing Lamar and Drake's birth name, Aubrey Graham.

Then, just over a year ago, it exploded exponentially. Here's a timeline of the major developments. It should be noted that diss tracks between rappers often include exaggerated truths and unsubstantiated

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rumors for dramatic effect.

March 22: Lamar disses Drake on Future and Metro Boomin's "Like That"

"The big three," Lamar raps, calling back to J. Cole, "It's just big me."

He references Drake's 2023 album "For All the Dogs," and also compares himself to Prince and Drake to Michael Jackson: "Prince outlived Mike Jack."

April 13: Drake's "Push Ups" leaks

Drake's response leaks. "You ain't in no Big Three, SZA got you wiped down, Travis got you wiped down, Savage got you wiped down," he raps. (SZA would later be announced as Lamar's Super Bowl collaborator.)

April 24: Drake responds with a second, AI-assisted diss track and pulls in Taylor Swift

Drake's second diss track used artificial intelligence technology to include verses from Tupac and Snoop Dogg, two of Lamar's influences. In his own verse, Drake accuses Lamar of delaying his response track because of the imminent release of Taylor Swift's "The Tortured Poets Department." (Lamar collaborated with Swift on "Bad Blood.")

Tupac's estate threatened to sue Drake in response, so he removed the song from his social channels.

April 30: Lamar hits back with a nearly six-and-a-half-minute track, "Euphoria"

This is where it gets more complicated. Lamar's "Euphoria" hits like an opus, unleashing a slew of allegations against Drake. He comes after Drake's skills as a rapper, use of AI, appearance, racial identity, and parenting.

"I got a son to raise, but I can see you know nothin' 'bout that," Lamar raps.

The title is a reference to the HBO series "Euphoria," of which Drake is an executive producer.

May 3: Lamar drops a follow-up, "6:16 in LA"

In Lamar's next diss, titled after a time and location like Drake is wont to do, Lamar targets the company Drizzy keeps. "Have you ever thought that OVO was working for me? / Fake bully, I hate bullies," he raps, referencing Drake's record label. "You must be a terrible person."

According to Billboard, the song was produced by Sounwave and Jack Antonoff — the latter notably Swift's longtime producer. It samples Al Green's "What a Wonderful Thing Love Is," on which one of Drake's relatives played guitar.

May 3: Drake launches "Family Matters"

Drake hits back with a music video and a nearly eight-minute response, in which he alleges abuse and infidelity in Lamar's relationship with his fiancée.

May 4: Lamar responds with "Meet the Grahams"

Almost immediately afterward, Lamar addresses Drake's son in "Meet the Grahams:" "I'm sorry that man is your father." Lamar also addresses Drake's parents, and "a baby girl," alleging Drake has a secret daughter.

He also labels Drake a "predator," without elaborating.

May 4: Less than 24 hours later, Lamar drops "Not Like Us"

Lamar doubles down, releasing "Not Like Us," produced by DJ Mustard.

"Say, Drake, I hear you like 'em young / You better not ever go to cell block one," Lamar raps.

It would later reach stratospheric levels for a diss track.

May 5: Drake softens his blows on "The Heart Part 6"

Referencing Lamar's "The Heart" series, Drake drops "The Heart Part 6." In the song "Prove It," Drake challenges Lamar's allegations, doubles down on his own against him, and says that he does not have a secret daughter.

He sounds notably lethargic on the song — potentially taking a final bow with verses like, "You know, at least your fans are gettin' some raps out of you / I'm happy I could motivate you."

May 18: 'Not Like Us' hits No. 1

Lamar's "Not Like Us" goes to No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. It will spend two weeks at the spot, 38 weeks on the chart, and end become the year's No. 6 song. It would also do stratospheric streaming numbers, ending 2024 atop Apple Music's global song chart.

June 19: A hometown victory lap for Lamar

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Lamar takes a de facto victory lap with his Juneteenth "Pop Out" concert at the Forum in Los Angeles. He performs "Euphoria" and "6:16 in LA," then is joined by Dr. Dre.

The two West Coast titans perform "Still D.R.E." and "California Love" before Dre quiets the roaring crowd. He then delivers the "Sixth Sense" quote that opens "Not Like Us": "I see dead people."

A crowd of 17,000 including The Weeknd, LeBron James, Ayo Edebiri and Rick Ross rap along to every word. Lamar restarts it twice after the first verse and performs it four times in full.

September 9: Lamar heading to the Super Bowl

Lamar is announced as the halftime headliner at the Feb. 9 Super Bowl at the Superdome in New Orleans. SZA is later announced as a guest performer, before the two tour together this spring.

November 8: Lamar racks up Grammy nominations for Drake diss tracks

Lamar is nominated for seven Grammys, all of them for Drake diss tracks. Two are for "Like That," the Metro Boomin' collaboration, and five are for "Not Like Us," including nods for record of the year and song of the year.

November 25: Drake broadens the beef to courts and label

After months of relative silence, Drake takes the fight to court, and takes the beef to another level. He alleges in a New York filing that Universal Music Group — the parent label for both him and Lamar — pumped up the popularity of "Not Like Us" on Spotify and other streaming services. The filing is a precursor to a potential lawsuit that demands the two companies preserve documents.

UMG calls the allegations in the filing "offensive and untrue." Spotify did not publicly respond but has broadly denied assertions that its streaming figures are or can be inflated.

On the same day, Drake announces that he will tour Australia for the first time in eight years, starting on the day Lamar performs at the Super Bowl.

November 26: Drake strikes in court again

Drake strikes again, this time in a Texas court, where he aims at the radio play for "Not Like Us." His filing, another lawsuit precursor, alleges UMG conspired with iHeartMedia, the biggest owner of radio stations in the U.S., to inflate plays and numbers for the track.

iHeartMedia did not respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press at the time, and did not immediately reply to a new request for a response.

January 15: Drake drops the big legal bomb

Drake makes his major legal move, for which the previous ones were only openers: A defamation lawsuit against UMG, alleging it put out and promoted "Not Like Us" even though it promotes false pedophilia allegations against him and suggests listeners should resort to vigilante justice.

It blames the label and the song for attempted break-ins and the shooting of a security guard at Drake's Toronto home, online hate and harassment and the devaluation of his brand.

The suit does not name Lamar as a defendant.

UMG responds that the allegations are not only untrue but illogical given their years of investment in Drake.

February 2: Lamar wins five Grammys, including two of the biggest for 'Not Like Us'

A week before his Super Bowl headlining gig, Lamar and "Not Like Us" have an epic night at the Grammy Awards. The track wins song of the year and record of the year and Lamar takes five.

He's gracious and positive in victory, not mentioning Drake and saying "We're gonna dedicate this one to the city" before shouting out Los Angeles area neighborhoods.

Trump signs executive order intended to bar transgender athletes from girls' and women's sports

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Wednesday intended to ban transgender athletes from participating in girls' and women's sports.

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The order, titled "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports," gives federal agencies wide latitude to ensure entities that receive federal funding abide by Title IX in alignment with the Trump administration's view, which interprets "sex" as the gender someone was assigned at birth.

"With this executive order, the war on women's sports is over," Trump said at a signing ceremony in the East Room that included lawmakers and female athletes who have come out in support of a ban, including former collegiate swimmer Riley Gaines.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the order "upholds the promise of Title IX" and will require "immediate action, including enforcement actions, against schools and athletic associations" that deny women single-sex sports and single-sex locker rooms.

The timing of the order coincided with National Girls and Women in Sports Day, and is the latest in a string of executive actions from the Republican president aimed at transgender people.

Trump found during the campaign that the topic resonated beyond the usual party lines. More than half the voters surveyed by AP VoteCast said support for transgender rights in government and society has gone too far. He leaned into the rhetoric before the election, pledging to get rid of "transgender insanity," though his campaign offered little in the way of details.

The order offers some clarity. For example, it authorizes the Education Department to penalize schools that allow transgender athletes to compete, citing noncompliance with Title IX, which prohibits sexual discrimination in schools. Any school found in violation could potentially be ineligible for federal funding.

Enforcing Trump's orders will be a priority of the embattled department. In a call this week, the acting director of the Office for Civil Rights told staff they would need to align their investigations with Trump's priorities, according to people who were on the call who spoke on the condition of anonymity to AP for fear of reprisals.

Already since Trump took office, the department has opened an inquiry into Denver public schools over an all-gender bathroom that replaced a girls' bathroom, while leaving another one exclusive to boys.

Trump also issued a warning to the International Olympic Committee ahead of the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The president said he had empowered Secretary of State Marco Rubio to make it clear to the IOC that "America categorically rejects transgender lunacy. We want them to change everything having to do with the Olympics and having to do with this absolutely ridiculous subject."

The IOC has essentially passed the buck on transgender participation, deferring to the international federations for each sport.

That could change, however, when a new IOC president comes on to replace the retiring Thomas Bach. Former track star Sebastian Coe, now the leader of World Athletics, is among the candidates up for election in March. Coe has been a strong proponent of limiting participation in female sports to cisgender women.

Trump also said that Director of Homeland Security Kristi Noem will "deny any and all visa applications made by men attempting to fraudulently enter the United States while identifying themselves as women athletes to try and get into the Games."

Organizers for the 2028 Olympics did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The order is the latest of a series of moves by the Trump administration targeting transgender people.

Previous ones have sought to have the federal government reject the idea that people can transition to a gender other than the one assigned at birth. That has implications for areas including passports and prisons. He's also opened the door to barring transgender service members from the military; called to end federal health insurance and other funding for gender-affirming care for transgender people under age 19; and restrict the way lessons on gender can be taught in schools.

The latest order was condemned by trans-rights advocates, including the National Women's Law Center and GLAAD.

"Contrary to what the president wants you to believe, trans students do not pose threats to sports, schools or this country, and they deserve the same opportunities as their peers to learn, play and grow up in safe environments," said Fatima Goss Graves, president and CEO of the National Women's Law Center.

Pushback on some of the administration's initiatives has already begun in court. Transgender people have sued over several of the policies and more are likely to come. Civil rights lawyers handling the cases

have asserted that in some instances, Trump's orders violate laws adopted by Congress and protections in the Constitution – and that they overstep the authority of the president.

There could be similar questions for this order, for instance: Can the president demand that the NCAA change its policies?

NCAA President Charlie Baker said its Board of Governors was reviewing the order and "will take necessary steps to align NCAA policy in the coming days, subject to further guidance from the administration." Baker, who said last year he was aware of fewer than 10 active NCAA athletes who identified as transgender, noted the order at least provides a uniform policy instead of a patchwork of state laws.

The order came a day after three former teammates of transgender swimmer Lia Thomas filed a lawsuit accusing the NCAA, Ivy League, Harvard and their own school, Penn, of conspiring to allow Thomas to compete at conference and national championships.

The lawsuit, which makes similar allegations to those filed last year by Gaines and others, alleges the defendants violated Title IX by allowing Thomas to swim "and acted in bad faith."

The LA Rams will be the home team in 2026 for the first NFL game in Australia

By JOSH DUBOW AP Pro Football Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The NFL is expanding its international footprint to Australia.

The league announced Wednesday that it will be playing a game in 2026 in Melbourne at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, a venue that holds about 100,000 spectators. The Los Angeles Rams will be the home team for that game, part of a multi-year commitment to play in Melbourne.

"This is a big statement," league executive Peter O'Reilly said. "Probably a few years ago, you may not have thought this was a reality. I'd say the commissioner, the 32 owners, there's a commitment to become a true global sport property. That means expanding our footprint, that means going to different parts of the world and exposing more fans around the world, in this case fans in Australia and Melbourne, to our great sport."

O'Reilly said the game will likely be played in Week 1 to give the teams extra time to acclimate to the time zone and promote the sport before the game. It would likely be scheduled for prime time on the East Coast of the United States, which could mean a start time of about noon in Melbourne.

The NFL opened an academy in Australia last year to help develop promising teenagers in the Asia-Pacific region into college and pro prospects. The Super Bowl being played Sunday in New Orleans features Australia's most successful NFL player: Philadelphia Eagles left tackle Jordan Mailata.

The Rams have had marketing rights in Australia since the NFL started its international marketing program in 2022.

"We could not be more excited," team President Kevin Demoff said. "As soon as this opportunity came about, we were the first to raise our hands and say we want to play in that first game in Australia."

The NFL hopes committing to Australia will help boost the chances that flag football will be part of the 2032 Olympics set to be held there in Brisbane. Flag football will make its Olympic debut in Los Angeles in 2028 and a decision on whether it will be part of the 2032 Olympics will be made in the next few years.

Australia will be the seventh country outside the United States to host an NFL game. The league has played games in England annually since 2007 and has also played games in Mexico, Germany, Brazil and Canada. The Miami Dolphins will be the hosts for the first game in Spain in 2025 at Real Madrid's venue.

As of the 2025 season, the NFL can schedule up to eight league-operated regular-season games internationally.

London will host three games next season — two at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium and one at Wembley Stadium. The Browns and the New York Jets are the home teams at Tottenham; and the Jacksonville Jaguars at Wembley.

The Colts are the home team for a game in Berlin at Olympic Stadium, and the other game will be in

Madrid.

O'Reilly also said the league is committed to return to Mexico after renovations to Azteca Stadium for the 2026 World Cup are finished.

This won't be the first time a major U.S.-based sports league went to Australia with Major League Baseball playing a season-opening series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and Arizona Diamondbacks in Sydney in 2014.

There have also been several major college football games played in Australia over the years, with the most recent being games between Stanford and Rice in 2017 and California and Hawaii in 2016.

Democratic senators protest after they say Trump gives Musk's staff access to classified info

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee are demanding answers after they say President Donald Trump gave billionaire Elon Musk and his staff access to sensitive data and classified secrets as part of their work to overhaul the federal government.

The lawmakers on Wednesday wrote to Susie Wiles, Trump's chief of staff, and asked what security precautions had been taken to prevent unauthorized leaks of information by staff at the Department of Government Efficiency, known as DOGE. Trump tapped Musk to run the taskforce, which has quickly gotten to work dismantling whole agencies of the federal government.

As part of that effort, Musk and his staff have gained access to computer systems that the senators say contain potentially sensitive medical and financial information about millions of Americans as well as federal payroll information, classified documents, information from foreign intelligence partners and the identities of undercover agents and intelligence sources.

In the letter, the senators warned that national security and the personal privacy of Americans could be at risk if the information is mishandled — intentionally or through negligence. They ask whether Musk's team has met with U.S. intelligence officials to discuss how to reduce the chances of the data being misused and what steps to take to protect classified information, such as the identities of CIA informants or the actions of overseas intelligence operatives.

Such information would be highly valuable to the spy agencies of Russia, China, Iran and other nations, and its loss could put lives at risk while undermining efforts to prevent terrorism and other threats to the U.S., the senators wrote.

"No information has been provided to Congress or the public as to who has been formally hired under DOGE, under what authority or regulations DOGE is operating, or how DOGE is vetting and monitoring its staff and representatives before providing them seemingly unfettered access to classified materials and Americans' personal information," the Senators wrote.

The letter was signed by seven Democrats serving on the Intelligence Committee as well as independent Sen. Angus King of Maine. It was released on the same day the CIA announced it had offered buyouts to an unspecified number of staffers.

Rep. Jim Himes of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, expressed his own concerns that the Trump administration's review of CIA staffing could reveal details that jeopardize national security and agents in the field.

"Those details are secret for a reason — because protecting the identities of CIA employees is critical to their safety and mission, a mission that helps keep Americans safe every day," Himes said.

The White House did not immediately respond to the senators' questions. Musk has dismissed criticism of his government involvement, saying it just shows his effort is needed.

Trump's demand that US aid workers return home sparks outrage in Washington and anxiety overseas

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MATTHEW LEE and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Frustration boiled over Wednesday among supporters of the United States' lead aid agency at a Washington rally, and anxious aid workers abroad scrambled to pack up households after the Trump administration abruptly pulled almost all agency staffers off the job and out of the field.

The order issued Tuesday followed 2 1/2 weeks that have seen the Trump administration and teams led by billionaire ally Elon Musk dismantle much of the U.S. Agency for International Development, shutting down a six-decade mission intended to shore up U.S. security by educating children, fighting epidemics and advancing other development abroad.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who has been touring Central America on his first visit in office, defended the administration's broad shutdown of aid funding and other actions while saying, "Our preference would have been to do this in a more orderly fashion."

But, Rubio said, the administration faced a lack of cooperation in an attempt to review the worth of each agency program. He gave no evidence, and agency staffers deny his and Musk's claims of obstruction. As a result, Rubio said, the administration would now "work from the bottom up" to determine which U.S. aid and development missions abroad were in the national interest and would be allowed to resume.

"This is not about ending foreign aid. It is about structuring it in a way that furthers the national interest of the United States," he said in the Guatemalan capital of Guatemala City.

In Washington, Democratic lawmakers and hundreds of others rallied outside the Capitol to protest the fast-moving shutdown of an independent government agency. "This is illegal and this is a coup," California Democratic Rep. Sara Jacobs cried.

"We are witnessing in real time the most corrupt bargain in American history," Maryland Sen. Chris Van Hollen shouted to supporters at the rally, referring to Musk, his support for President Donald Trump and his role in challenging USAID and other targeted agencies.

"Lock him up!" members of the crowd chanted. Addressing Democratic lawmakers, who have promised court battles and other efforts but have been unable to slow the assault on USAID, they said: "Do your job!"

Scott Paul, a director at the Oxfam American humanitarian nonprofit, said the damage already done meant that key parts of the global aid and development system would have to be rebuilt "from scratch."

Jennifer Kates, senior vice president and director of the global health and HIV policy program at KFF, cited one large organization alone that expects to close up to 1,226 maternal and child-care clinics serving more than 630,000 women.

"The health care system is not one that you just press on and off," Kates said. If the U.S. shutdown lays off staffers and closes those clinics, "you can't just say, 'All right, we're ready to start again. Let's go.'"

USAID has been one of the agencies hardest hit as the new administration and Musk's budget-cutting team target federal programs they say are wasteful or not aligned with a conservative agenda.

U.S. embassies in many of the more than 100 countries where USAID operates convened emergency town hall meetings for the thousands of agency staffers and contractors looking for answers. Embassy officials said they had been given no guidance on what to tell staffers, particularly local hires, about their employment status.

A USAID contractor posted in an often violent region of the Middle East said the shutdown had placed the contractor and the contractor's family in danger because they were unable to reach the U.S. government for help if needed.

The contractor woke up one morning earlier this week blocked from access to government email and other systems, and an emergency "panic button" app was wiped off the contractor's smartphone.

"You really do feel cut off from a lifeline," the contract staffer said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of a Trump administration ban forbidding USAID workers from speaking to people outside their agency.

USAID staffers and families had already faced wrenching decisions as the rumored order loomed, in-

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cluding whether to pull children out of school midyear. Some gave away pet cats and dogs, fearing the administration would not give workers time to complete the paperwork to bring the animals with them.

Despite the administration's assurances that the U.S. government would bring the agency's workers safely home as ordered within 30 days, some feared being stranded and left to make their own way back.

Most agency spending has been ordered frozen, and most workers at the Washington headquarters have been taken off the job, making it unclear how the administration will manage and pay for the sudden relocation of thousands of staffers and their families.

The mass removal of thousands of staffers would doom billions of dollars in projects in some 120 countries, including security assistance for Ukraine and other countries, as well as development work for clean water, job training and education, including for schoolgirls under Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

The online notification to USAID workers and contractors said they would be off the job, effective just before midnight Friday, unless deemed essential. Direct hires of the agency overseas got 30 days to return home, the notice said.

The United States is the world's largest humanitarian donor by far. It spends less than 1% of its budget on foreign assistance, a smaller share of its budget than some countries.

Hundreds of millions of dollars of food and medication already delivered by U.S. companies are sitting in ports because of the shutdown.

Health programs like those credited with helping end polio and smallpox epidemics and an acclaimed HIV/AIDS program that saved more than 20 million lives in Africa have stopped. So have programs for monitoring and deploying rapid-response teams for contagious diseases such as Ebola.

South African Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi told Parliament on Wednesday that officials scrambled to meet with U.S. Embassy staff for information after receiving no warning the Trump administration would freeze crucial funding for the world's biggest national HIV/AIDS program.

South Africa has the world's highest number of people living with HIV, at around 8 million, and the United States funds around 17% of its \$2.3 billion-a-year program through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR. The health minister did not say whether U.S. exemptions for lifesaving care affect that work.

Democrats and others say the USAID is enshrined in legislation as an independent agency and cannot be shut down without congressional approval. Supporters of USAID from both political parties say its work overseas is essential to countering the influence of Russia, China and other adversaries and rivals abroad, and to cementing alliances and partnerships.

In Istanbul on Wednesday, Hakan Bilgin sat in the downsized office of his medical-care nonprofit, surrounded by half-unpacked boxes and worried colleagues. Days ago, Doctors of the World Turkey received an unexpected stop-work order from USAID, forcing them to close 12 field hospitals and lay off over 300 staff members in northern Syria.

"As a medical organization providing lifesaving services, you're basically saying, 'Close all the clinics, stop all your doctors, and you're not providing services to women, children and the elderly,'" Bilgin said.

Oscar presenters will include Emma Stone and Cillian Murphy.

Here's what to know about the show

By The Associated Press undefined

After devastating wildfires tore through Los Angeles, the 97th Academy Awards are going forward.

Like the Grammys and other awards shows this year, the ceremony will be transformed by the fires and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has pledged to help its members and the broader film community recover.

Here's everything you need to know about this year's show:

When are the Oscars?

The Academy Awards will be held on Sunday, March 2 at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. The show, to be broadcast live by ABC, is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. ET/4 p.m. PT.

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Are the Oscars streaming?

For the first time, the Oscars will be streamed live on Hulu. You can also watch via Hulu Live TV, YouTubeTV, AT&T TV and FuboTV. With authentication from your provider, you can watch on ABC.com and the ABC app.

Who's hosting the Oscars?

For the first time, Conan O'Brien is hosting the Academy Awards. O'Brien, the late night host turned podcaster and occasional movie star, said upon the announcement: "America demanded it and now it's happening: Taco Bell's new Cheesy Chalupa Supreme. In other news, I'm hosting the Oscars."

How have the wildfires altered the show?

The wildfires that consumed large parts of Los Angeles in early January led some to call for the cancellation of the Academy Awards. The academy twice postponed the announcement of nominations but never pushed the March 2 date of the ceremony. Academy leaders have argued the show must go ahead, for their economic impact on Los Angeles and as a symbol of resilience.

Organizers have vowed this year's awards will "celebrate the work that unites us as a global film community and acknowledge those who fought so bravely against the wildfires."

Still, the fires have curtailed much of the usual frothiness of Hollywood's awards season. The film academy canceled its annual nominees luncheon.

For many involved in the Oscars, the fires have been felt acutely. O'Brien's Pacific Palisades home survived but his family has been unable to go back to it. O'Brien's assistant and podcast co-host Sona Movsesian lost her home.

"I know so many people who lost their homes and I'm just, was ridiculously lucky," O'Brien told The Associated Press. "So we want to make sure that that show reflects what's happening and that we put a light on the right people in the right way."

Who's presenting at the Oscars?

The academy announced Wednesday that last year's acting winners — Emma Stone, Robert Downey Jr., Cillian Murphy, Da'Vine Joy Randolph Joy — will all return to the Oscar stage. Though the academy initially said it would bring back the "fab five" style of presenting the acting awards, with five previous winners per category, organizers has reportedly abandoned those plans for this year's ceremony.

Will there be any performances?

The academy has announced that unlike previous years, the original song nominees will not be performed this time. That doesn't mean there won't be music, though. "Wicked," one of the biggest box-office hits of 2024, could feasibly figure into the Oscar plans. (Its songs weren't eligible for best song since, hailing from the Broadway musical, they aren't original to the movie.)

What's nominated for best picture?

The 10 nominees for best picture are: "Anora"; "The Brutalist"; "A Complete Unknown"; "Conclave"; "Dune: Part 2"; "Emilia Pérez"; "I'm Still Here"; "Nickel Boys"; "The Substance"; "Wicked"

How can I watch the Oscar-nominated films?

Some of the nominees are still in theaters, but many of this year's Oscar nominees are streaming on various platforms. The AP has this handy guide to help with Oscar cramming.

Who are the favorites?

More than most years, that's a tricky question. The best picture race is seen as unusually wide open, with "Conclave," "The Brutalist," "A Complete Unknown," "Anora" and "Emilia Pérez" all with legitimate hopes of winning. In the acting categories, Demi Moore ("The Substance") is favored for best actress, Adrien Brody ("The Brutalist") is most likely in best actor, Zoe Saldaña ("Emilia Pérez") is the supporting actress frontrunner and Kieran Culkin ("A Real Pain") is the favorite for best supporting actor. None of those awards, however, are considered definite locks.

What's the deal with 'Emilia Pérez'?

Jacques Audiard's "Emilia Pérez," a narco-musical about a Mexican drug lord who undergoes gender affirming surgery, comes in with a leading 13 nominations. The film, at one point, seemed like Netflix's best chance yet to land the streamer its first best picture nomination. Its star, Karla Sofía Gascón, made

history by becoming the first openly trans actor nominated for an Oscar.

But no nominee has had a rockier post-nominations Oscar campaign. After old offensive tweets by Gascón were uncovered, the actress issued an apology. The fallout, though, has badly damaged a movie that was already a divisive contender, and led Netflix to radically refocus its flagging campaign.

Justice Dept. official accuses FBI chief of 'insubordination,' tamps down talk of revenge on agents

By ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A top Justice Department official accused the FBI's acting leaders of "insubordination" in a Wednesday memo in which he sought to soothe anxiety inside the bureau over the potential for a broad purge of agents involved in investigating the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol.

The memo from acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove said agents "who simply followed orders and carried out their duties in an ethical manner" while investigating the Capitol attack face no risk of being fired.

But the memo also provided no reassurances for any agents found to have "acted with corrupt or partisan intent" and suggests those employees, if there are any, are at risk of discipline or even termination as part of a highly unusual review process the Trump administration is embarking upon to identify what it says is potential misconduct.

The scrutiny of career FBI agents being undertaken by the department is highly unusual given that rank-and-file agents do not select the cases they are assigned to work on and are not generally disciplined because of their participation in matters seen as politically sensitive. There's also been no evidence any FBI agents or lawyers who investigated or prosecuted the cases did anything wrong.

The message from Bove is aimed at providing a measure of clarity after days of turmoil and uncertainty at the FBI as a result of an extraordinary Justice Department demand on Friday for the names of agents who participated in the investigations so that officials could determine whether additional personnel action was merited.

Many within the FBI had seen that request as a precursor for mass firings, particularly in light of separate moves to fire members of special counsel Jack Smith's team that investigated Donald Trump, reassign senior career Justice Department officials and force out prosecutors on Jan. 6 cases and multiple top FBI executives.

Trump and his Republican allies have long accused then-President Joe Biden's Justice Department of being "weaponized" against conservatives. They have focused particular ire on prosecutions arising from the Capitol attack on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters stormed the building in a failed effort to halt the certification of the 2020 election after the incumbent Republican lost to Democrat Biden. On the first day of Trump's second term, he granted sweeping clemency — through pardons and sentence commutations — to more than 1,500 rioters.

Adding to the angst was that thousands of FBI employees who participated in investigations related to Jan. 6 were asked over the weekend to complete in-depth questionnaires about their involvement in the inquiries as Trump's Justice Department weighs disciplinary actions.

FBI employees filed two lawsuits Tuesday to halt the collection and potential dissemination of names of investigators. A hearing is scheduled on Thursday.

Bove, in his memo Wednesday, accused the FBI's acting leadership of "insubordination" for resisting his requests last week "to identify the core team" responsible for Jan. 6 investigations. He said the requests were meant to "permit the Justice Department to conduct a review of those particular agents' conduct pursuant to Trump's executive order" on "weaponization" in the Biden administration.

After acting Director Brian Driscoll refused to comply, Bove wrote, he broadened the request for information about all FBI employees who participated in the investigations. Driscoll had no response to the insubordination allegation, the FBI said.

Responding to Bove's request, the FBI provided personnel details about several thousand employees, identifying them by unique employee numbers rather than by names.

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"Let me be clear," wrote Bove, who was previously part of Trump's legal team in his criminal cases. "No FBI employee who simply followed orders and carried out their duties in an ethical manner with respect to January 6 investigations is at risk of termination or other penalties."

But, he added, "The only individuals who should be concerned about the process initiated by my January 31, 2025 memo are those who acted with corrupt or partisan intent, who blatantly defied orders from Department leadership, or who exercised discretion in weaponizing the FBI."

Aliens, sloths and silliness: Super Bowl ads offer laughs, celebs and surprises to win over viewers

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Eugene Levy's trademark eyebrows fly off for Little Caesars. A tongue dances to Shania Twain to promote Nestle's Coffee Mate Cold Foam. And Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal reunite at Katz's Deli in an ad for Hellmann's.

A frenzied mix of silliness and celebrities is hitting the airwaves and the internet, and that means one thing: it is Super Bowl ad time again.

Veteran advertisers are using tried-and-true tactics like celebrity cameos, humor and cute animals to win over watchers. Meanwhile, first-time and newer advertisers are courting outrageousness and using stunts to try to stand out in the battle to capture the attention of the more than 120 million viewers expected to tune into Sunday's game between the Philadelphia Eagles and Kansas City Chiefs on Fox.

Super Bowl viewers are a unique audience because they're as primed to watch the ads as they are the game.

"This is a societal moment where we come together as a country," said Kimberly Whitler, marketing professor at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. "We may be on different sides, you know, of the gridiron or the field. But we come together."

With 80-plus ad spots divvied up among the 50-something advertisers during the game, it's tough to make sure viewers remember your brand message. And with a few ad spots going for a record \$8 million for 30 seconds this year, the stakes have never been higher.

But the price tag is worth it, advertisers say. Rachel Jaiven, head of Häagen-Dazs marketing, said the brand decided to make its first-ever appearance in the game due to the size of the viewership and its association with snacking.

"We know at the Super Bowl these days that everyone watches, it's a wide audience," Jaiven said. The brand's ad shows stars from the "Fast & Furious" franchise enjoying an ice cream bar. "We thought it was time for us to tell our story, remind people what they love about Häagen-Dazs and of course, have them stock up on Häagen-Dazs in their freezer."

In order to garner more publicity, many advertisers release their ads ahead of the game. Of the ads that have already been released, here's a sampling of the approaches advertisers are taking during the big game this year.

CELEBRITY-PALOOZA

Hellmann's

Hellmann's ad made a splash ahead of the game by reuniting Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal's "When Harry Met Sally" characters at Katz's Deli enjoying a sandwich with Hellmann's. Sydney Sweeney joins to utter the famous line "I'll have what she's having."

Meta

Chris Pratt and Chris Hemsworth wear Ray-Ban Meta AI-powered glasses while looking at art. Hemsworth accidentally eats a banana in an art piece worth \$6.2 million, and Kris Jenner appears to scold them.

Michelob Ultra

Actors Catherine O'Hara and Willem Dafoe star as pickleball players hustling younger players to win Michelob Ultras.

Stella Artois

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Soccer star David Beckham learns he has a twin named Dave Beckham who turns out to be Matt Damon. They don't have much in common but both drink Stella Artois.

Uber Eats

Matthew McConaughey explains a conspiracy theory that football was invented to sell food, with cameos by Martha Stewart, Greta Gerwig, Charli XCX, Kevin Bacon and YouTuber Sean Evans.

SILLY HUMOR

Coors Light

Adorable sloths undergo mishaps because they're slow, like a kitchen fire and running into a glass door; they have a "Case of the Mondays," like many people sluggish at work the day after the Super Bowl.

Little Caesars

Actor Eugene Levy's eyebrows fly off and fly around after he tries the pizza chain's Crazy Puffs in what is strangely not the only ad with flying facial hair in it (see Pringles).

Nestle Coffee Mate

The first-time advertiser goes for silly humor in an ad that shows a man's tongue dancing, and even doing a flip, to a song sung by Shania Twain to represent how good Nestle Coffee Mate Cold Foam tastes.

Pringles

Actor Nick Offerman, Kansas City Chiefs head coach Andy Reid and L.A. Clippers' James Harden watch their famous mustaches fly away to help deliver Pringles.

SERIOUS MESSAGES

Dove

Dove highlights the problem of low body confidence in young girls and depicts a young girl running down the sidewalk to H.E.R.'s version of "Born to Run."

Foundation to Combat Antisemitism

Patriot owner Robert Kraft has an ad in the game for the second year in a row. Snoop Dogg and Tom Brady voice reasons why people hate each other in an effort to combat hate speech.

Hims and Hers

First-time advertiser Telehealth company Hims & Hers highlights the obesity epidemic and says weight loss drugs should be more affordable.

Novartis

First-time advertiser Novartis is focusing on breast cancer awareness in its ad featuring Wanda Sykes and Hailee Steinfeld.

FIRST-TIME ADVERTISERS

Häagen-Dazs

The ice-cream brand reunites "Fast & Furious" stars Michelle Rodriguez, Vin Diesel and Ludacris, except this time, they're going slow. They cruise down the Pacific Coast Highway in a Chevrolet Chevelle slowly so they can enjoy eating an ice cream bar.

Instacart

First-timer Instacart joins DoorDash and Uber Eats and a battle between food delivery services during the game. Instacart loads up its ad with tons of brand characters it hopes viewers recognize: from Mountain Dew's "PuppyMonkeyBaby" character from a 2016 Super Bowl ad to the Jolly Green Giant and the Pillsbury Doughboy. The characters represent all the things you can get delivered from the food delivery service.

Totinos Pizza Rolls

In one of several ads featuring aliens, comedian Tim Robinson and actor Sam Richardson say goodbye to an alien who was living in their neighborhood. Cookware brand Hexclad and Doritos ads also feature aliens.

SURPRISES

Not all advertisers release their ads early, so there are always plenty of surprises on game day. Only two auto brands, Stellantis' Jeep and Ram, have announced Super Bowl ad plans, but they haven't given any details on the ads.

Dunkin' has secured the first ad spot after kickoff but is staying mum on details other than teasing that it will star Ben and Casey Affleck and Jeremy Strong. Canned water company Liquid Death will advertise

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for the first time with an ad created in-house. Duracell has teased that its ad will feature a "Duracell Scientist" but hasn't given any other details.

Ad experts think it is unlikely that an A.I.-generated ad will debut during advertising's biggest night after Coca-Cola's holiday ad created with the help of A.I. technology drew some backlash. But if one did debut, it would be sure to make a splash.

USAID is going away. Here's what it's been doing in South America

By FABIANO MAISONNAVE Associated Press

BRASILANDIA, Brazil (AP) — The dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development will deliver a major blow to efforts including humanitarian assistance in Colombia, conservation efforts in Brazil and coca eradication in Peru — South American countries that have been a priority for the support.

Even if some foreign aid resumes after the 90-day suspension ordered by President Donald Trump, many USAID-backed projects focus on areas he has derided as ideological: climate change, biodiversity and minority and women's rights, so several recipients fear their projects are now dead.

Colombia has long been the largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance in South America. Recent USAID money has supported emergency humanitarian aid to more than 2.8 million Venezuelans who fled economic crisis. In 2024 alone, the agency transferred some \$45 million to the U.N. World Food Programme, mostly to assist them.

The end of U.S. humanitarian assistance in Colombia, Brazil and other Latin American countries is another huge setback for Venezuelans abroad. Last week, the Trump administration also revoked a temporary immigration status that has allowed roughly 600,000 people from Venezuela to stay in the U.S. The first large group could be deported in about two months.

"Trump's cuts will hit Latin America's most vulnerable populations, including millions of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, as grassroots organizations providing essential care, guidance, and food are left without funding," Bram Ebus, a Bogota-based consultant at the International Crisis Group, told The Associated Press. "Migrant populations are targeted by organized crime and armed groups. If aid projects are not resumed quickly, it will allow these groups to abuse and exploit vulnerable migrants."

Despite the fact that the U.S. is the largest source of aid to Colombia, President Gustavo Petro said some of this help is not welcome and has to go. "Hundreds of immigration officials who guard our borders were paid by the United States. This aid is poison," he said during a cabinet meeting Monday. "That should never be allowed. We are going to pay with our money."

In 2024, the agency paid nearly \$385 million to Colombia.

Trump told reporters Monday that shutting down USAID "should have been done a long time ago." Billionaire Elon Musk, who is leading government cost reduction in the new administration, said the agency was run by "radical left lunatics."

In Brazil, USAID's largest initiative is the Partnership for the Conservation of Amazon Biodiversity, which focuses on conservation and improving livelihoods for Indigenous peoples and other forest communities. About two-thirds of the world's largest rainforest is in Brazil.

One Brazilian organization USAID has supported is the Amazon-based Roraima Indigenous Council, which operates in 35 areas including the territory of the Yanomami tribe, totaling some 157,000 square kilometers (60,600 square miles), larger than Greece. This direct support is representative of a shift at USAID over the last few years, to prioritize funding grassroots organizations.

In a region vulnerable to illegal gold mining and drug-trafficking, the Roraima Indigenous Council is using the money for improved family farming, adapting to climate change and income generation for women.

Now everything is at risk, Edinho Macuxi, the tuxaua (leader) of the Indigenous Council, told the AP. In recent weeks, his organization, which represents some 60,000 people, laid off workers and canceled activities due to lack of funds. "The partnership with USAID has existed for seven years. If the decision is to end it, this will shake our organizational structure and projects that are very important for strengthening the economy and autonomy of Indigenous peoples," he said.

"Our message to President Trump is that he should maintain the resources not only for Brazil but for other countries as well. In Brazil, Indigenous peoples who access this funding are the ones who effectively keep most of the forest standing, ensuring life not just for people in Brazil, but also the world," Macuxi said.

In recent years, USAID also supported arguably the most successful sustainable resource effort in the Amazon, the managed fishing of pirarucu, the region's famously giant fish. The U.S. funds built a slaughterhouse where fishers could work during the legal catch. Indigenous and riverine communities helped recover what was an endangered species, at the same time getting income and food.

In 2024, USAID disbursed \$22.6 million to Brazil. Over half, close to \$14 million, went to general environmental protection, with the Amazon, which stores crucial amounts of carbon from the atmosphere, as a top priority.

For Peru, the humanitarian agency disbursed some \$135 million in 2024. Part of it is to control cocaine production by financing alternatives such as coffee and cacao. Those efforts date back to the early 1980s. Peru is the world's second-largest cocaine producer after Colombia, which runs similar programs financed with American assistance.

In a statement, Peru's Premier Gustavo Adrianzén said his government will continue the crop substitution program without U.S. funding. The Peruvian National Commission for Development and Life Without Drugs, known as DEVIDA, declined to comment on the new U.S. administration's freeze.

A former DEVIDA chief, Ricardo Soberón, said that USAID's pause is an opportunity to review a partnership that has not been effective. "It has always been conditional assistance, with politics involved. It has been minimal, often delayed, and not integrated with the actions of the Peruvian state," he told AP.

Soberón said that neighboring Bolivia, which expelled the U.S. agency in 2013, has achieved better results in controlling cocaine production since then. "Despite its problems and external limitations (the economic and political crisis), the withdrawal of USAID has provided Bolivia with a high degree of autonomy to develop social control policies, which have been much more efficient."

Trump's birthright citizenship order is put on hold by a second federal judge

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

GREENBELT, Md. (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday ordered a second nationwide pause on President Donald Trump's executive order seeking to end birthright citizenship for anyone born in the U.S. to someone in the country illegally, calling citizenship a "most precious right."

U.S. District Judge Deborah Boardman said no court in the country has endorsed the Trump administration's interpretation of the 14th Amendment.

"This court will not be the first," she said.

She added: "Citizenship is a most precious right, expressly granted by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution."

Boardman said citizenship is a "national concern that demands a uniform policy," adding that "only a nationwide injunction will provide complete relief to the plaintiffs."

After reading her ruling from the bench, the judge asked a government attorney if they would be appealing her decision. The attorney said he didn't have the authority to immediately take a position on that question.

Trump's inauguration week order had already been on temporary hold nationally because of a separate suit brought by four states in Washington state, where a judge called the order "blatantly unconstitutional."

That temporary hold is set to expire on Thursday. Boardman's preliminary injunction puts the executive order on hold until the merits of the case are resolved, barring a successful appeal by the Trump administration.

In total, 22 states, as well as other organizations, have sued to try to stop the executive action. Further hearings, similar to the one Boardman conducted on Wednesday, are due later this week in other birthright citizenship cases.

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Boardman, nominated by former President Joe Biden, agreed to the preliminary injunction after a hearing federal court in Greenbelt, Maryland. Immigrant-rights advocacy groups CASA and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project, and a handful of expectant mothers brought the suit before Boardman.

Plaintiffs' attorney Joseph Mead said many parents who would be impacted by Trump's executive order have lived in the U.S. for months or even years.

"They're not temporary visitors," he told the judge. "They have made America their home."

At the heart of the lawsuits is the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1868 after the Civil War and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision that determined Scott, a slave, wasn't a citizen.

"The principle of birthright citizenship is a foundation of our national democracy, is woven throughout the laws of our nation, and has shaped a shared sense of national belonging for generation after generation of citizens," the plaintiffs argued in the suit.

The Trump administration asserts that children of noncitizens are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States and therefore not entitled to citizenship.

"The Constitution does not harbor a windfall clause granting American citizenship to, inter alia: the children of those who have circumvented (or outright defied) federal immigration laws," the government argued in reply to the Maryland plaintiffs' suit.

The 14th Amendment was added in the aftermath of the Civil War to ensure citizenship for former slaves and free African Americans. It states: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

In addition to the 22 states with Democratic attorneys general seeking to stop the order, 18 Republican attorneys general announced this week that they're seeking to defend the president's order by joining one of the federal suits brought in New Hampshire.

The U.S. is among about 30 countries where birthright citizenship — the principle of jus soli or "right of the soil" — is applied. Most are in the Americas, and Canada and Mexico are among them.

During his first week in office, Trump signed 10 executive orders on immigration and issued edicts to carry out promises of mass deportations and border security.

Some actions were felt immediately. Others face legal challenges. If they happen at all, other orders may take years to happen but have led to fear in immigrant communities.

Whether Trump can enact his agenda could come down to money. Congress is expected to consider funding support soon. Trump may use emergency powers to tap the Defense Department, as he did for a border wall during his first term.

Mahomes, Kelce and the Chiefs' quest for a three-peat faces its toughest challenge vs. the Eagles

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce and the Kansas City Chiefs are pursuing history and a few of Taylor Swift's records.

Saquon Barkley, Jalen Hurts and the Philadelphia Eagles stand in their way.

The Chiefs (17-2) will try to become the first team to win three straight Super Bowls when they face the Eagles (17-3) on Sunday in the Superdome.

It's a rematch from two years ago when Hurts nearly led the Eagles to a championship only to watch Mahomes snatch it away by rallying Kansas City to a 38-35 win on Harrison Butker's 27-yard field goal with 8 seconds left.

Mahomes lifted the Chiefs to an overtime win against San Francisco in another Super Bowl rematch last year. Now, they're poised for a three-peat, a word coach Andy Reid doesn't use much.

"I think the only time I've heard him say it is to the media whenever y'all ask him about it," Mahomes said. "He's very locked in on just, 'How can we be great with our cadence today at practice?' so that's just the stuff that Coach Reid focuses on."

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Reid won more games than any coach in franchise history during his 14 seasons in Philadelphia but couldn't win the big one, going 1-4 in NFC championship games and losing a Super Bowl to the Patriots. He went right to Kansas City after the Eagles fired him following the 2012 season and has built a dynasty thanks to Mahomes, Kelce, Chris Jones and others.

"You don't have time to think about all that," Reid said of the three-peat. "You're focused in on the job at hand here and that's playing against a great Eagles team."

Jones, the three-time All-Pro defensive tackle, echoed his coach's viewpoint.

"We don't talk about no three-peat," Jones said. "I think that's what we're here for. We understand that. We understand there's one more game until the offseason and we can do whatever we want to do. Our main focus is making sure we're prepared for the Eagles."

No matter what the Chiefs say, everyone else is talking about it. No team has done it in the Super Bowl era, though the Green Bay Packers won an NFL championship in 1965 and followed by winning the first two Super Bowls. Kelce even started all the three-peat talk on stage last year when he said the team's goal was to win three.

"This is gonna be our biggest test yet," Kelce said. "They got a lot of great players but the biggest thing is they play great together. You could see their communication. You could see the accountability they have, especially in the secondary. It's not gonna make my job any easier."

These Eagles are different from the group that fell just short against Kansas City in Arizona two years ago.

They have the NFL's most dynamic player in the backfield. Barkley rushed for 2,447 yards with seven touchdowns of 60-plus yards in the regular season and playoffs.

"The goal has always been to win it, not just to get here," Barkley said.

Losing to the Chiefs two years ago only motivated Hurts even more. He's determined to hoist a Lombardi trophy and even had a photo of him walking off the field with Kansas City's red and yellow confetti falling around him as the background on his phone.

"It's had a great driving force," Hurts said of that loss. "It lit a flame, lit a fire in me, and to have this opportunity again is exactly what you work for."

Hurts, Barkley, A.J. Brown, DeVonta Smith and a dominant offensive line present a major challenge for Chiefs defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo.

The Eagles also have the league's No. 1-ranked defense, featuring eight new starters from 2022 and defensive coordinator Vic Fangio.

All-Pro linebacker Zack Baun and rookie cornerbacks Quinyon Mitchell and Cooper DeJean plus the emergence of defensive tackle Jalen Carter and edge rusher Nolan Smith has transformed a defensive unit that fell apart last season.

"We're fortunate to have Steve Spagnuolo, but I tell you that Vic is one of those guys," Reid said. "He's just one of those really creative defensive minds that survived a long time in this league. He's been time-tested, and, he has the trust of his players."

If the Chiefs win, Reid and Mahomes will be one step closer to Bill Belichick and Tom Brady. They're halfway to the six Belichick and Brady won together in New England and Mahomes is still four away from Brady's seven rings.

"I'm trying to be the greatest Patrick Mahomes that I can be. That's obviously a goal of anyone's — to be the greatest at their profession — but in order to do that, you have to be the greatest that you can be every single day," Mahomes said.

"Whenever I'm done with football, if I leave everything out there — the way that I feel like I have so far — as far as effort and mentality, I'll be happy with the results."

A win for Kansas City also would give Kelce his fourth ring, the same number of Grammy Awards his pop star girlfriend has won for best album. Overall, Kelce has 18 playoff wins and Swift has 14 Grammys.

"She's up there being the superstar that she is and never taking no for an answer and always working her tail off. I better match that energy for sure," Kelce said.

11 NFL teams have never had a Black head coach. Players find that disappointing

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

ASHBURN, Va. (AP) — Washington Commanders wide receiver Terry McLaurin paused for a moment to think while speaking to a reporter after a practice this season.

"Now that you mention it," McLaurin said, "I've never had a Black head coach in high school, college or the NFL. Coordinators and position coaches only."

McLaurin, like the majority of NFL players, is Black, and, like some of his colleagues, harbors concerns about the lack of Black head coaches. The Associated Press surveyed more than 65 Black players from 25 teams about the topic, and more than a third — about 36% — were discouraged or disappointed by the number of Black coaches.

"Until you see more coaches," Dolphins linebacker Anthony Walker Jr. said, "we're all going to look at it the same way: There aren't enough Black coaches."

For Sunday's Super Bowl between the Kansas City Chiefs and Philadelphia Eagles, both starting quarterbacks are Black. Neither coach is.

Panthers safety Nick Scott sees a parallel with how long it took clubs to discard biases about Black QBs.

"They were labeled as 'not as cerebral.' That was the narrative. But I don't know how you go about changing that (for coaches)," Scott said. "I would hate for it to turn into some affirmative action thing, where people are getting pushed into a job whether they are qualified or not. So it's a tricky balance, right? ... But I think there are plenty of guys who are qualified."

At a time when President Donald Trump has moved to end federal government diversity, equity and inclusion programs, and a number of prominent companies scaled back DEI initiatives, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said Monday the league will continue its "diversity efforts."

Several players the AP interviewed noted the gap between the proportion of Black athletes in the NFL — 53.5% in 2023, according to The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) — and that of Black head coaches, 22% to start this season. That might drop to 19% next season (six of 32), depending on the New Orleans Saints' pick for the last opening.

"You can't just overlook that discrepancy," McLaurin said. "Obviously, you want the best candidate for the job, whether it's someone who is Black, white, Asian or whoever. However, when you have a big representation of African-American players that are in your league, you would like to see that represented in coaching, as well."

How many NFL teams never had a full-time head coach who is Black?

Setting aside interim hires, McLaurin's Commanders is one of 11 clubs that never employed a full-time head coach who is Black, joining the Bills, Cowboys, Giants, Jaguars, Panthers, Rams, Ravens, Saints, Seahawks and Titans. That's about a third of the NFL.

"No! Are you saying most Southern teams have never? That's crazy! How many have never drafted a Black quarterback? Have you done that one?" Saints defensive end Cameron Jordan said. "There's obvious franchises that won't hire a Black coach."

Over 25 seasons from 2000 through 2024, an AP count shows, 31 of 173 new NFL coaches — 18% — are Black. In that same span, eight of the 19 head coaches — 42% — fired after their first full season are Black.

"You'd be blind not to be discouraged," Cowboys special teams player C.J. Goodwin said. "Black coaches can do it, can get the job done. ... You don't want to have the glass ceiling."

Raiders defensive end Malcolm Koonce spoke for the 58% of surveyed players who answered "No" to that question (6% weren't sure how they felt) by responding: "It's, like, eyebrow-raising when you actually hear the number, but it's not discouraging."

Two of three new full-time NFL coaches who are Black got fired

This season began with seven Black head coaches: holdovers Mike McDaniel of the Dolphins, Todd Bowles of the Buccaneers, DeMeco Ryans of the Texans and Mike Tomlin of the Steelers, and newcomers Antonio Pierce of the Raiders (who began on an interim basis the prior season), Jerod Mayo of the Patriots and

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Raheem Morris of the Falcons.

Pierce and Mayo were fired in January. One of six hires this offseason is Black, Aaron Glenn of the Jets. "It's still like, 'Oh, wow, it's a Black coach!'" Jets defensive lineman Solomon Thomas said. "In a league that's predominantly Black, I definitely believe there should be more."

Brandon Brown, the director of TIDES, said it makes sense players would feel that way. "We always need to continue the upward progress. Anytime you see downward progress, it's a bit discouraging," Brown said. "In talking to people at the NFL, there is no lack of trying to be diverse in their hires. What that eventually looks like is one thing."

How many Black coaches are in the NBA, MLB and NHL?
In the NBA, where about 70% of players are Black, 11 of 30 teams — 37% — have a Black coach. In Major League Baseball, three of 30 teams have a Black manager. In the 30-team NHL, there's been one Black coach, Dirk Graham, who was fired by the Blackhawks during his only season.

Nearly 40% of the NFL players who participated in the AP survey would like to be a head coach in the league; others are more likely to try to be an assistant or work in college, high school or youth football.

More than 90% were encouraged by the number of Black head coaches getting new full-time positions last offseason. Those three hires tied for the most since 2000.

What is the NFL's Rooney Rule?
The NFL's Rooney Rule was created in 2003 — named for Steelers owner Dan Rooney, who died in 2017 — to increase diversity among coaches (and, later, front-office executives) by making clubs interview minority candidates.

"The Rooney Rule's a great rule," Washington's McLaurin said, "but ... from what I've heard, some teams kind of use that to check a box, which is unfortunate, instead of using the rule the way it was intended."

That is one of the elements in the 2022 lawsuit filed by former Dolphins head coach — now Vikings defensive coordinator — Brian Flores, who accused the NFL and three teams of racist hiring practices.

"I knew what Mr. Rooney was trying to accomplish with that," Steelers defensive tackle Cam Heyward said. "And so to see people work around it and say, 'Well, this guy was already getting the job; we're just (talking to a Black candidate) to appease the many' — I don't think that's right."

Recent searches by the Patriots and Jaguars, for example, raised eyebrows with interviews perceived by some as merely aimed at satisfying the Rooney requirements.

"We follow up with the candidates," Goodell said. "We speak about the sincerity and the thoroughness of an interview to make sure that we're doing that in the proper fashion."

Why are there so few Black head coaches in the NFL?
As for underlying causes, some, like Ravens safety Kyle Hamilton, pointed to networking — and nepotism. "For Black people in this league, it's an uphill battle. ... There's been a plethora of white head coaches over the course of the history of the NFL. Those coaches have sons who get into coaching," Hamilton said. "Look at the big 'Shanahan tree.' No disrespect to them, but they have a step up in the business. It's not about what you know; it's about who you know. ... Black people have kind of been behind."

Others found connections to larger issues.
"It's just American society," the Cowboys' Goodwin said. "That's more of a societal question than it is a question about the NFL."

Trump's Gaza plan has stunned the region. Here's a look at the serious obstacles it faces

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

President Donald Trump's stunning proposal to forcibly transfer hundreds of thousands of Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip and develop it as a tourist destination faces major obstacles.

The Palestinians and many others view such plans as an attempt to drive them from their homeland after Israel's 15-month offensive against Hamas rendered much of it uninhabitable. It was also seen as

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an attempt to liquidate their decades-long struggle for a state, which has wide international support.

Arab countries, including Egypt and Jordan — close U.S. allies at peace with Israel — have condemned such plans and roundly rejected Trump's suggestion that they take in more Palestinian refugees.

Saudi Arabia issued a rare overnight statement rejecting the idea of transfer and reiterating that it won't normalize relations with Israel — a key goal of the Trump administration — without the establishment of a Palestinian state including Gaza.

The proposal also risks undermining the ceasefire in Gaza and the continued release of hostages taken in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war. Trump has claimed credit for brokering the truce, but its future is now more uncertain.

The Palestinians don't want to leave

Palestinians view Gaza as an integral part of their national homeland and aspire to an independent state in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

Most of Gaza's population are descendants of refugees from the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were driven out of what is now Israel. They were not allowed to return because they would have outnumbered the new state's Jewish population.

The Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations, Riyad Mansour, suggested that if Trump's goal is to send the Palestinians to a "happy, nice place," they should return to their ancestral homes in Israel.

The ideal of remaining on one's land despite threats of expulsion is at the heart of the Palestinians' struggle and self-identity, and was on vivid display last week when hundreds of thousands returned to northern Gaza despite its near-total destruction.

Both Hamas and the Western-backed Palestinian Authority, which recognizes Israel and cooperates with it on security, have vehemently condemned Trump's proposal.

Arab countries will not accept Palestinian refugees

Egypt and Jordan, which made peace with Israel decades ago, have repeatedly rejected previous proposals to resettle Palestinians within their borders.

They too fear that Israel would never allow the Palestinians to return, and that a mass influx of Palestinian refugees would once again destabilize the region, as it did in the decades after 1948, when it was a key factor in Lebanon's civil war and Israel's two invasions of that country. Both countries also have struggling economies that would have a hard time absorbing large numbers of refugees.

Trump suggested that wealthy Gulf countries could pay to resettle the Palestinians, but that appears unlikely.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have joined Egypt and Jordan in rejecting any transfer plans, and the Saudis repudiated the plan almost immediately.

The Saudi statement reiterated remarks made in September by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who said Saudi Arabia would not normalize relations with Israel without the creation of a Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital.

The kingdom said its "unwavering position is non-negotiable and not subject to compromises."

Trump has leverage, but so do Mideast leaders

Trump seems to relish using tariffs, sanctions and aid cutoffs to pressure allies and adversaries alike, and could apply economic pressure on countries like Egypt and Jordan, which have long relied on American aid.

But those countries have levers of their own in the face of what they see as a major threat to their national security. And wealthy Gulf countries, which have also historically provided aid to Egypt and Jordan, could help cushion any economic blow.

Egypt has already warned that any mass transfer of Palestinians into the Sinai Peninsula bordering Gaza could undermine its peace treaty with Israel — a cornerstone of regional stability and American influence for nearly a half-century.

Egypt and Qatar have also served as key mediators with Hamas in the talks that led to the ceasefire, and both are working with Trump's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, to try to extend it.

Israelis welcome the plan, but hostages are a priority

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The idea of mass transfer has historically been confined to the far-right in Israel, but on Wednesday, mainstream leaders said Trump's plan was worth considering.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at the press conference with Trump, acknowledged that "jaws drop" when the U.S. president proposes unorthodox ideas, but then "people scratch their heads and they say, 'You know, he's right.'"

Benny Gantz, a centrist politician and former general long seen as a more moderate alternative to Netanyahu, said Trump's proposal showed "creative, original and intriguing thinking," and should be studied alongside other war goals, "prioritizing the return of all the hostages."

Opposition leader Yair Lapid, a fierce critic of Netanyahu who has voiced support for a two-state solution in the past, did not object to the idea. Instead, he said in an interview with local media that it was too early to react to Trump's proposal since there are no concrete details, and that returning the hostages was most important.

The current phase of the Gaza ceasefire, in which Hamas is to release 33 hostages in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, ends in early March. The second phase, in which the remaining 60 or so hostages would be freed in exchange for more prisoners, is being negotiated.

Hamas has said it will not release the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal — which would likely preclude any forcible transfer.

Israel's far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who supports what he refers to as the "voluntary emigration" of large numbers of Palestinians and the re-establishment of Jewish settlements in Gaza, has threatened to leave Netanyahu's coalition if he doesn't resume the war after the first phase, which would likely lead to early elections. He welcomed Trump's proposal.

The resumption of the war would put the remaining hostages' lives at risk, and there's no guarantee it would eliminate Hamas, which still controls most of Gaza. It would also undo what Trump has portrayed as a major accomplishment and further delay any normalization with Saudi Arabia.

An opening gambit?

There's another possibility: That Trump's proposal is an opening gambit in a bargaining process aimed at eventually securing the kind of Middle East mega-deal he says he is seeking.

It was only last week that Trump was threatening major tariffs against Canada and Mexico, America's two biggest trading partners, before putting them on hold after their leaders took steps to appease his concerns about border security and drug trafficking.

During his first term, Trump flirted with the possibility of Israel annexing parts of the occupied West Bank before the idea was shelved as part of a normalization agreement with the United Arab Emirates.

Trump could ultimately pare down his proposal or put it on hold in exchange for concessions from Arab leaders, perhaps on Gaza's reconstruction or on normalization with Israel — though the Saudi statement appeared to rule that out.

There could be more clarity when the shock wears off, and when Trump meets with Jordan's King Abdullah II at the White House next week.

Researchers link DeepSeek's blockbuster chatbot to Chinese telecom banned from doing business in US

By BYRON TAU Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The website of the Chinese artificial intelligence company DeepSeek, whose chatbot became the most downloaded app in the United States, has computer code that could send some user login information to a Chinese state-owned telecommunications company that has been barred from operating in the United States, security researchers say.

The web login page of DeepSeek's chatbot contains heavily obfuscated computer script that when deciphered shows connections to computer infrastructure owned by China Mobile, a state-owned telecommunications company. The code appears to be part of the account creation and user login process for

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DeepSeek.

In its privacy policy, DeepSeek acknowledged storing data on servers inside the People's Republic of China. But its chatbot appears more directly tied to the Chinese state than previously known through the link revealed by researchers to China Mobile. The U.S. has claimed there are close ties between China Mobile and the Chinese military as justification for placing limited sanctions on the company. DeepSeek and China Mobile did not respond to emails seeking comment.

The growth of Chinese-controlled digital services has become a major topic of concern for U.S. national security officials. Lawmakers in Congress last year on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis voted to force the Chinese parent company of the popular video-sharing app TikTok to divest or face a nationwide ban though the app has since received a 75-day reprieve from President Donald Trump, who is hoping to work out a sale.

The code linking DeepSeek to one of China's leading mobile phone providers was first discovered by Feroot Security, a Canadian cybersecurity company, which shared its findings with The Associated Press. The AP took Feroot's findings to a second set of computer experts, who independently confirmed that China Mobile code is present. Neither Feroot nor the other researchers observed data transferred to China Mobile when testing logins in North America, but they could not rule out that data for some users was being transferred to the Chinese telecom.

The analysis only applies to the web version of DeepSeek. They did not analyze the mobile version, which remains one of the most downloaded pieces of software on both the Apple and the Google app stores.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission unanimously denied China Mobile authority to operate in the United States in 2019, citing "substantial" national security concerns about links between the company and the Chinese state. In 2021, the Biden administration also issued sanctions limiting the ability of Americans to invest in China Mobile after the Pentagon linked it to the Chinese military.

"It's mindboggling that we are unknowingly allowing China to survey Americans and we're doing nothing about it," said Ivan Tsarynny, CEO of Feroot.

"It's hard to believe that something like this was accidental. There are so many unusual things to this. You know that saying 'Where there's smoke, there's fire'? In this instance, there's a lot of smoke," Tsarynny said.

Stewart Baker, a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer and consultant who has previously served as a top official at the Department of Homeland Security and the National Security Agency, said DeepSeek "raises all of the TikTok concerns plus you're talking about information that is highly likely to be of more national security and personal significance than anything people do on TikTok," one of the world's most popular social media platforms.

Users are increasingly putting sensitive data into generative AI systems — everything from confidential business information to highly personal details about themselves. People are using generative AI systems for spell-checking, research and even highly personal queries and conversations. The data security risks of such technology are magnified when the platform is owned by a geopolitical adversary and could represent an intelligence goldmine for a country, experts warn.

"The implications of this are significantly larger because personal and proprietary information could be exposed. It's like TikTok but at a much grander scale and with more precision. It's not just sharing entertainment videos. It's sharing queries and information that could include highly personal and sensitive business information," said Tsarynny, of Feroot.

Feroot, which specializes in identifying threats on the web, identified computer code that is downloaded and triggered when a user logs into DeepSeek. According to the company's analysis, the code appears to capture detailed information about the device a user logs in from — a process called fingerprinting. Such techniques are widely used by tech companies around the world for security, verification and ad targeting.

The company's analysis of the code determined that there were links in that code pointing to China Mobile authentication and identity management computer systems, meaning it could be part of the login process for some users accessing DeepSeek.

The AP asked two academic cybersecurity experts — Joel Reardon of the University of Calgary and

Serge Egelman of the University of California, Berkeley — to verify Feroot's findings. In their independent analysis of the DeepSeek code, they confirmed there were links between the chatbot's login system and China Mobile.

"It's clear that China Mobile is somehow involved in registering for DeepSeek," said Reardon. He didn't see data being transferred in his testing but concluded that it is likely being activated for some users or in some login methods.

Trump won't rule out deploying US troops to support rebuilding Gaza, sees 'long-term' US ownership

By AAMER MADHANI, ZEKE MILLER and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump suggested that displaced Palestinians in Gaza be permanently resettled outside the war-torn territory and proposed the U.S. take "ownership" in redeveloping the area into "the Riviera of the Middle East."

Trump's brazen proposal Tuesday appears certain to roil the next stage of talks meant to extend the tenuous ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and secure the release of the remaining hostages held in Gaza.

The provocative comments came as talks are ramping up this week with the promise of surging humanitarian aid and reconstruction supplies to help the people of Gaza recover after more than 15 months of devastating conflict. Now Trump wants to push roughly 1.8 million people to leave the land they have called home and claim it for the U.S., perhaps with American troops.

"The U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too," Trump said at an evening news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by his side. The president who made his name as a New York real estate developer added: "We'll make sure that it's done world-class. It'll be wonderful for the people — Palestinians, Palestinians mostly, we're talking about."

Trump outlined his thinking as he held talks with Netanyahu at the White House, where the two leaders also discussed the fragile ceasefire and hostage deal in the Israeli-Hamas conflict and shared concerns about Iran.

Trump said the U.S. would redevelop the territory after Palestinians are resettled elsewhere and turn the territory into a place where the "world's people"— including Palestinians — would live. He offered no detail about what authority the U.S. would use to take the land and develop it.

Allies reject the idea

Egypt, Jordan and other U.S. allies in the Mideast have cautioned Trump that relocating Palestinians from Gaza would threaten Mideast stability, risk expanding the conflict and undermine a decades-long push by the U.S. and allies for a two-state solution.

Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry issued a sharply worded reaction to Trump, noting their long call for an independent Palestinian state was a "firm, steadfast and unwavering position." Saudi Arabia has been in negotiations with the U.S. over a deal to diplomatically recognize Israel in exchange for a security pact and other terms.

"The duty of the international community today is to work to alleviate the severe human suffering endured by the Palestinian people, who will remain committed to their land and will not budge from it," the Saudi statement said.

Still, Trump insists the Palestinians "have no alternative" but to leave the "big pile of rubble" that is Gaza. He spoke out as his top aides stressed that a three-to-five-year timeline for reconstruction of the war-torn territory, as laid out in a temporary truce agreement, is not viable.

Last week, both Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Jordanian King Abdullah II dismissed Trump's calls to resettle Palestinians in Gaza.

But Trump said he believes Egypt and Jordan — as well as other countries, which he did not name — will ultimately agree to take in Palestinians.

"You look over the decades, it's all death in Gaza," Trump said. "This has been happening for years. It's all death. If we can get a beautiful area to resettle people, permanently, in nice homes where they can

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be happy and not be shot and not be killed and not be knifed to death like what's happening in Gaza."

Trump also said he isn't ruling out deploying U.S. troops to support reconstruction of Gaza. He envisions "long-term" U.S. ownership of a redevelopment of the territory.

The president's proposal was greeted with alarm by Democrats and a measure of skepticism by his Republican allies.

"He's completely lost it," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn. "He wants a U.S. invasion of Gaza, which would cost thousands of American lives and set the Middle East on fire for 20 years? It's sick."

"We'll see what our Arab friends say about that," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and a Trump ally. "And I think most South Carolinians are probably not excited about sending Americans to take over Gaza. I think that might be problematic, but I'll keep an open mind."

A fragile ceasefire

The White House's focus on the future of Gaza comes as the nascent truce between Israel and Hamas hangs in the balance.

Netanyahu is facing competing pressure from his right-wing coalition to end a temporary truce against Hamas militants in Gaza and from war-weary Israelis who want the remaining hostages home and for the 15-month conflict to end.

Trump may be betting he can persuade Egypt and Jordan to come around to accept displaced Palestinians because of the significant aid that the U.S. provides Cairo and Amman. Hard-line right-wing members of Netanyahu's government have embraced the call to move displaced Palestinians out of Gaza.

"To me, it is unfair to explain to Palestinians that they might be back in five years," Trump's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, said. "That's just preposterous."

Trump also signaled that he may be reconsidering an independent Palestinian state as part of a broader two-state solution to the decades-long Israel-Palestinian conflict.

"Well, a lot of plans change with time," he told reporters when asked if he was still committed to a plan like the one he laid out in 2020 that called for a Palestinian state. "A lot of death has occurred since I left and now came back."

Netanyahu's arrival in Washington for the first foreign leader visit of Trump's second term coincides with the prime minister's popular support sagging.

The prime minister is in the middle of weekslong testimony in an ongoing corruption trial that centers on allegations he exchanged favors with media moguls and wealthy associates. He has decried the accusations and said he is the victim of a "witch hunt."

Being seen with Trump, who is popular in Israel, could help distract the public from the trial and boost Netanyahu's standing.

"We have the right leader of Israel who's done a great job," Trump said of Netanyahu.

Netanyahu praised Trump's leadership in getting the hostage and ceasefire deal. The prime minister also spoke glowingly of Trump thinking outside the box.

"You say things others refuse to say. And after the jaws drop, people scratch their heads and they say, 'You know he's right.'"

Hamas in a statement decried Trump's comments.

"We reject Trump's statements in which he said that the residents of the Gaza Strip have no choice but to leave, and we consider them a recipe for creating chaos and tension in the region," the group said.

Netanyahu met with White House national security adviser Mike Waltz and Witkoff on Monday to begin the daunting work of brokering the next phase of a ceasefire agreement.

The Israeli leader said he would send a delegation to Qatar to continue indirect talks with Hamas that are being mediated by the Gulf Arab country, the first confirmation that those negotiations would continue. Netanyahu also said he would convene his security Cabinet to discuss Israel's demands for the next phase of the ceasefire when he returns to Israel at the end of the week.

Witkoff, meanwhile, said he plans to meet with Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, in Florida on Thursday to discuss the next phase in the ceasefire. Qatar and Egypt have served as key intermediaries with Hamas throughout the conflict.

Netanyahu is under intense pressure from hard-right members of his governing coalition to abandon the ceasefire and resume fighting in Gaza to eliminate Hamas. Bezalel Smotrich, one of Netanyahu's key partners, vows to topple the government if the war isn't relaunched, a step that could lead to early elections.

Hamas, which has reasserted control over Gaza since the ceasefire began last month, has said it will not release hostages in the second phase without an end to the war and Israeli forces' full withdrawal. Netanyahu, meanwhile, maintains that Israel is committed to victory over Hamas and the return of all hostages captured in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war.

Trump's suggestion the US 'take over' the Gaza Strip is rejected by allies and adversaries alike

By DAVID RISING and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — President Donald Trump's proposal that the United States "take over" the Gaza Strip and permanently resettle its Palestinian residents was swiftly rejected and denounced on Wednesday by American allies and adversaries alike.

Trump's suggestion came at a White House news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who smiled several times as the president detailed a plan to build new settlements for Palestinians outside the Gaza Strip, and for the U.S. to take "ownership" in redeveloping the war-torn territory into "the Riviera of the Middle East."

"The U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too," Trump said. "We'll own it and be responsible for dismantling all of the dangerous unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site, level the site, and get rid of the destroyed buildings, level it out, create an economic development that will supply unlimited numbers of jobs."

The comments came amid a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, during which the militant group has been turning over hostages in exchange for the release of prisoners held by Israel.

Egypt, Jordan and other American allies in the Middle East have already rejected the idea of relocating more than 2 million Palestinians from Gaza elsewhere in the region. Following Trump's remarks, Egypt's Foreign Ministry issued a statement stressing the need for rebuilding "without moving the Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip."

Saudi Arabia, an important American ally, weighed in quickly on Trump's expanded idea to take over the Gaza Strip in a sharply worded statement, noting that its long call for an independent Palestinian state was a "firm, steadfast and unwavering position."

"The kingdom of Saudi Arabia also stresses what it had previously announced regarding its absolute rejection of infringement on the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, whether through Israeli settlement policies, annexation of Palestinian lands or efforts to displace the Palestinian people from their land," the statement said.

The prime ministers of Australia and Ireland, foreign ministries from China, New Zealand and Germany, and a Kremlin spokesman all reiterated support for a two-state solution.

"Australia's position is the same as it was this morning, as it was last year, as it was 10 years ago," Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said.

Trump has already made waves — and upset longtime allies — suggesting the purchase of Greenland, the annexation of Canada and the possible takeover of the Panama Canal. It was not immediately clear whether the idea of taking over the Gaza Strip was a well thought out plan, or an opening gambit in negotiations.

"The comments last night were, of course, very concerning," said Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin. "I always adopt the approach when it comes to the U.S. administration of: judge them based on what they do and not what they say."

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told state-run Anadolu Agency that Trump's proposal on "deportations from Gaza is not something that either the region or we would accept."

"Even thinking about it, in my opinion, is wrong and absurd," Fidan said.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for the United Nations to "protect the Palestinian people and their inalienable rights," saying that what Trump wanted to do would be "a serious violation of international law."

Representatives of Palestinian refugee groups in Mar Elias refugee camp in Beirut rejected the proposal and said it was doomed to fail. Lebanon hosts about 200,000 refugees, many of whom live in camps set up after 1948, when their parents or grandparents fled their homes in land that became Israel.

Fathi Kallab, a member of the leftist political faction Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, said the plan would violate international law.

"Displacement of residents under humanitarian pretexts is considered a war crime punishable by law, as recognized by multiple international organizations," he said. "It exploits the humanitarian conditions that the people of Gaza are suffering from in most cases."

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer referred to images of "thousands of Palestinians walking through the rubble" to get back to what remains of their homes.

"They must be allowed home," Starmer said. "They must be allowed to rebuild, and we should be with them in that rebuild, on the way to a two-state solution."

Hamas, which sparked the war with its Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, said Trump's proposal was a "recipe for creating chaos and tension in the region."

"Instead of holding the Zionist occupation accountable for the crime of genocide and displacement, it is being rewarded, not punished," the militant group said in a statement.

In its attack on Israel, Hamas killed some 1,200 people, primarily civilians, and took about 250 hostages.

Israel's ensuing air and ground war has killed over 47,000 Palestinians, more than half of them women and children, according to local health authorities who do not say how many of the dead were fighters. The war has left large parts of several cities in ruins and displaced around 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people.

In the U.S., opposition politicians quickly rejected Trump's idea, with Democratic Sen. Chris Coons calling his comments "offensive and insane and dangerous and foolish."

The idea "risks the rest of the world thinking that we are an unbalanced and unreliable partner because our president makes insane proposals," Coons said, noting the irony of the proposal coming shortly after Trump had moved to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"Why on earth would we abandon decades of well-established humanitarian programs around the world, and now launch into one of the world's greatest humanitarian challenges?" Coons said.

Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib, a Palestinian American member of Congress from Michigan, accused Trump in a social media post of "openly calling for ethnic cleansing" with the idea of resettling Gaza's entire population.

A spine-zapping implant helped 3 people with a muscle-wasting disease walk better

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Three people with a muscle-destroying disease destined to worsen got a little stronger — able to stand and walk more easily — when an implanted device zapped their spinal cord.

On Wednesday, researchers reported what they called the first evidence that a spine-stimulating implant already being tested for paralysis might also aid neurodegenerative diseases like spinal muscle atrophy — by restoring some muscle function, at least temporarily.

"These people were definitely not expecting an improvement," said Marco Capogrosso, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh who led the research. Yet over the month-long pilot study, "they were getting better and better."

Spinal muscle atrophy or SMA is a genetic disease that gradually destroys motor neurons, nerve cells in the spinal cord that control muscles. That leads muscles to waste away, especially in the legs, hips and

shoulders and sometimes those involved with breathing and swallowing. There is no cure. A gene therapy can save the lives of very young children with a severe form of the disease, and there are some medicines to slow worsening in older patients.

Stimulating the spinal cord with low levels of electricity has long been used to treat chronic pain but Capogrosso's team also has tested it to help people paralyzed from strokes or spinal cord injury move their limbs unaided. While turned on, it zaps circuits of dormant nerves downstream of the injury to activate muscles.

Then Capogrosso wondered if that same technology might help SMA in a similar way — by revving up related sensory nerves so they wake up damaged muscle cells, helping them move to combat wasting.

The Pitt researchers implanted electrodes over the lower spinal cord of three adults with SMA and tested their muscle strength, fatigue, range of motion and changes in gait and walking distance when the device was firing and when it was turned off.

It didn't restore normal movement but with just a few hours of spinal stimulation a week, all quickly saw improvements in muscle strength and function, researchers reported in the journal *Nature Medicine*.

"With a progressive disease you never get any better," said study participant Doug McCullough, 57, of Franklin Park, New Jersey. "Either you're staying stable or getting worse. So having any improvement is just a really surreal and very exciting benefit."

All three participants significantly increased how far they could walk in six minutes, and one who initially couldn't stand from a kneeling position could by the study's end, Capogrosso said. And McCullough's gait changed so that each step was about three times longer.

"They get less fatigued so they can walk for longer," Capogrosso said. "Even a person this many years into the disease can improve."

Intriguingly, researchers found the improvements didn't disappear as soon as the stimulator was switched off, though they did fade as participants were tracked after the study ended.

McCullough said even when the stimulator was turned off, some nights his legs "would just feel super-charged."

While he understood that the device had to be removed at the study's end, he was disappointed. He said there were some lingering benefits at his six-week checkup, but none after six months.

Neuroscientist Susan Harkema, who led pioneering studies of stimulation for spinal cord injuries while at the University of Louisville, cautioned the new study is small and short but called it an important proof of concept. She said it's logical to test the technique against a list of muscle-degenerating diseases.

"Human spinal circuitry is very sophisticated — it's not just a bunch of reflexes controlled by the brain," said Harkema, now with the Kessler Foundation, a rehabilitation research nonprofit. "This is a very solid study, an important contribution to move forward."

At Pitt, Capogrosso said some small but longer studies are getting underway.

Sweden's worst mass shooting leaves at least 11 dead, including the gunman

By ALEKSANDAR FURTULA, SERGEI GRITS and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press
OREBRO, Sweden (AP) — Sweden's worst mass shooting left at least 11 people dead, including the gunman, and at least five seriously wounded at an adult education center west of Stockholm.

The gunman's motive hadn't been determined on Wednesday, a day after the shooting, as the Scandinavian nation — where gun violence at schools is very rare — reeled from the attack.

"Not in this place," Malin Hilmerberg, 37, told The Associated Press as she stood near a growing makeshift memorial near the scene. "I mean, we heard about it in different parts of the world, but of course it's a shock. It's your hometown and so many lives destroyed. It's hard to find words."

Officials said three women and two men, all with gunshot wounds, underwent surgery at Orebro University Hospital. All were in serious but stable condition after being admitted to the hospital with life-threatening

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injuries. Another woman was treated for minor injuries and was stable.

Jonas Claesson, regional director of health and medical services, said that two of the gunshot victims were in intensive care Wednesday. All of the victims are over age 18, officials said.

Tragedy 'shakes our entire society to its core'

The school, Campus Risbergska, offers primary and secondary educational classes for adults age 20 and older, Swedish-language classes for immigrants, vocational training and programs for people with intellectual disabilities. It is on the outskirts of Orebro, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) west of Stockholm.

Justice Minister Gunnar Strömmer called the shooting "an event that shakes our entire society to its core." King Carl XVI Gustaf and Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson ordered flags flown at half-staff at the Royal Palace and government buildings. Mourners gathered outside the school, comforting one another and dropping off candles and flowers to honor the victims.

"It's very strange to be in the middle, where I live in Sweden, in Orebro, and this is all over the world," Emelia Fredriksson, 53, said. "They're seeing us now and it's a very strange feeling."

The king and Queen Silvia visited Orebro Wednesday and attended a memorial service along with Kristersson.

"We are here to show our grief to all the families who have their loved ones, who have people who have lost their lives," the monarch told reporters outside the makeshift memorial. "But also they should always remember that they are not alone. I think today the whole of Sweden will take part and are standing behind them."

Soccer teams Degerfors IF and Orebro Syrianska planned to wear black armbands at a preseason match on Wednesday evening and hold a minute's silence before kickoff.

'The worst hours of my life'

The shooting started Tuesday afternoon after many students had gone home following a national exam. Survivors scrambled for cover as the shots rang out, sheltering behind or under whatever they could find to escape the gunman and the gore. One woman with children feared she might never see them again, while another used her friend's shawl to staunch the bleeding of a man who'd been shot in the shoulder.

"Those were the worst hours of my life. I did not know if I would get shot there and then, or in 10 minutes. You simply waited," Hellen Werme, 35, told the Expressen newspaper.

Other students sheltered in nearby buildings, and other parts of the school were evacuated following the shooting.

Authorities were working to identify the deceased. Police said that officers discovered the gunman dead at the school when they arrived. It was unclear how he died.

Roberto Eid Forest, head of the local police, said that the school's large premises meant it took a long time for officers to search the campus to ensure there were no more victims. Police heard gunshots when they arrived and initially thought they were being fired upon, he said.

Eid Forest said that six officers were treated for smoke inhalation. There wasn't a fire, he said, but authorities didn't immediately know what caused the smoke.

Guns in Sweden

Police wouldn't say whether the shooter had multiple guns, nor would they say what kind of firearm was used in the shooting. While gun violence at schools is very rare in Sweden, people were wounded or killed with other weapons such as knives or axes in several incidents in recent years.

In order to possess a firearm legally, applicants must obtain a weapon license and demonstrate that it will be used for an acceptable purpose, such as hunting or target shooting. Applicants must also submit previously obtained hunting or target shooting certificates. Hunting certificates require people to pass a training course, while target shooters must be certified as active and experienced members of clubs.

All weapons must be stored in secure cabinets approved by the police. Applications for fully automatic weapons or one-handed weapons are only granted for exceptional reasons, and such permits are generally time-limited.

Permits are revoked if the weapon is modified to be substantially different from its original function.

No motive yet

There were no warnings beforehand, and police believe the perpetrator acted alone. Police haven't said if the man was a student at the school. They haven't released a possible motive, but authorities said there were no suspected connections to terrorism at this point.

Police raided the suspect's home after Tuesday's shooting, but it wasn't immediately clear what they found. Police cautioned the public against spreading incorrect narratives on social media.

Trump and Musk's dismantling of government is shaking the foundations of US democracy

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Elon Musk debuted the Department of Government Efficiency recently at the Capitol, House Speaker Mike Johnson enthusiastically predicted the coming Trump administration would bring “a lot of change around here.”

Three weeks in, the change the Trump administration has brought is a disruption of the federal government on an unprecedented scale, dismantling longstanding programs, sparking widespread public outcry and challenging the very role of Congress to create the nation's laws and pay its bills.

Government workers are being pushed to resign. Entire agencies are being shuttered. Federal funding to states and nonprofits was temporarily frozen. And the most sensitive Treasury Department information of countless Americans was opened to Musk's DOGE team in an unprecedented breach of privacy and protocol.

“This is an erosion of our democracy,” said Brian Riedl, a longtime economic adviser to conservative Republicans, now at the Manhattan Institute think tank.

President Donald Trump has tapped Musk, the world's richest man, to take on inner workings of the world's oldest democracy, and so far the results are stunning, if not alarming and unlawful, being challenged in dozens of court cases nationwide.

Congress is proving little match for DOGE as wary lawmakers watch it march through the bureaucracy. Instead, a rush of lawsuits is demanding interventions to stop the Republican president's team from unilaterally gutting government. And protests are erupting outside government agencies and clogging the congressional phone lines.

“Whatever DOGE is doing, it is certainly not — not — what democracy looks like or has ever looked like in the grand history of this country,” Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said.

“An unelected shadow government is conducting a hostile takeover of the federal government,” Schumer posted on Musk's social media site X.

Musk responded on his platform: “Hysterical reactions like this is how you know that DOGE is doing work that really matters.”

Congress has been here before, tested during Trump's first term by his willingness to break the norms and skirt the outer banks of legality, most notably when he steamrolled Congress and poached federal military housing and construction funds to build parts of his promised wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

But Trump's second-term partnership with Musk, who spent some \$200 million on Trump's White House bid and employs the tech world ethos of moving fast and breaking things, is escalating the confrontation. On a stated quest to save money by rooting out waste, fraud and abuse, they are making moves to up-end American institutions, decimate the civil service and leave a reformed — or hollowed-out — federal government in its place.

Sharon Parrott, president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, said it would be “catastrophic to our system of government” if the effort succeeds.

“Many of the things they are doing are brazenly unlawful, and we've seen that the courts have been willing to intervene — and intervene quickly,” Parrott said. “There's a real readiness and understanding of the stakes.”

In many ways, Trump is pursuing by force what Republicans have long promised but have been un-

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able to deliver by congressional action: shrinking the size and scope of the federal government. Anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist quipped more than a decade ago about the goal of making government small enough to drown in a bathtub.

But facing pushback from within their ranks about cutting programs Americans rely upon, Republicans have repeatedly failed to accomplish their budget-slashing goals even when they fully control Congress and the White House, as they do now.

While Congress has the power to pass legislation to fund government operations, the president can veto bills or sign them into law. Instead, Trump is testing an idea championed by his nominee for budget director, Russ Vought, that the executive has the ability to "impound" federal funds, clawing the money back.

Republican Sen. Kevin Cramer of North Dakota said DOGE provides "cover" for some Republicans who want to cut federal funds, when Congress has failed to do so.

And other Republicans say they are comfortable with Trump's pause of certain federal operations, particularly the U.S. Agency for International Development, which sends aid around the world. Closing the Department of Education is next on deck.

"We've got oversight," said Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina. "If he goes too far, I'll be the first person to step up."

Taken together the actions of the administration and DOGE have been swift, relentless and wide open to debate.

Trump's Office of Management and Budget's move to abruptly freeze federal grants and loans drew outrage nationwide as states and nonprofit organizations feared being locked out of funds they need to provide housing, health care and other services. A day later, the White House reversed course.

The shutdown of funds to USAID is largely seen as a test case for the Impoundment Control Act, which Vought has discussed using as a way to roll back congressionally approved funding. Vought's nomination is on track for Senate confirmation this week, despite all Senate Democrats saying they will oppose him.

And DOGE dipped into the inner-workings of the Treasury Department to access its payment system — and the private information of millions of Americans — in what is widely viewed as a way for the White House to eventually stop federal funds to various entities.

On Monday, U.S. District Judge Loren L. AliKhan said the administration's actions with the federal funding "potentially run roughshod over a 'bulwark of the Constitution' by interfering with Congress's appropriation of federal funds."

"Defendants' actions appear to suffer from infirmities of a constitutional magnitude," she wrote, extending an order issued last week that had paused OMB's sweeping funding freeze. "The appropriation of the government's resources is reserved for Congress, not the Executive Branch. And a wealth of legal authority supports this fundamental separation of powers."

Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, said what gives her pause now is how Congress moves forward with legislation to fund the government by the upcoming March 14 deadline.

"What if we do all that and come to an agreement ... vote it in — and this administration says, 'That's bunk. We don't have to go by that,'" she said. "So the level of trust is at the lowest I have ever seen it here."

Asked if the administration could do what it's doing, Johnson, the speaker, insisted, "There will be an appropriate action for Congress to take, but we haven't yet sorted out what's happening with it."

Pressed if Trump had the authority to shut agencies, he said: "I don't have all the answers."

How an ancient asteroid strike carved out 2 grand canyons on the moon

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — New research shows that when an asteroid slammed into the moon billions of years ago, it carved out a pair of grand canyons on the lunar far side.

That's good news for scientists and NASA, which is looking to land astronauts at the south pole on the

near, Earth-facing side untouched by that impact and containing older rocks in original condition.

U.S. and British scientists used photos and data from NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter to map the area and calculate the path of debris that produced these canyons about 3.8 billion years ago. They reported their findings Tuesday in the journal *Nature Communications*.

The incoming space rock passed over the lunar south pole before hitting, creating a huge basin and sending streams of boulders hurtling at a speed of nearly 1 mile a second (1 kilometer a second). The debris landed like missiles, digging out two canyons comparable in size to Arizona's Grand Canyon in barely 10 minutes. The latter, by comparison, took millions of years to form.

"This was a very violent, a very dramatic geologic process," said lead author David Kring of the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston.

Kring and his team estimate the asteroid was 15 miles (25 kilometers) across and that the energy needed to create these two canyons would have been more than 130 times that in the world's current inventory of nuclear weapons.

Most of the ejected debris was thrown in a direction away from the south pole, Kring said.

That means NASA's targeted exploration zone around the pole mostly on the moon's near side won't be buried under debris, keeping older rocks from 4 billion plus years ago exposed for collection by moonwalkers. These older rocks can help shed light not only on the moon's origins, but also Earth's.

Kring said it's unclear whether these two canyons are permanently shadowed like some of the craters at the moon's south pole. "That is something that we're clearly going to be reexamining," he said.

Permanently shadowed areas at the bottom of the moon are thought to hold considerable ice, which could be turned into rocket fuel and drinking water by future moonwalkers.

NASA's Artemis program, the successor to Apollo, aims to return astronauts to the moon this decade. The plan is to send astronauts around the moon next year, followed a year or so later by the first lunar touchdown by astronauts since Apollo.

An Arkansas organist is playing 18 hours of Bach this year, one lunch break at a time

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — It was hushed inside a 140-year-old cathedral on the outskirts of Little Rock's downtown as about five dozen people sat in the pews during a recent lunch break in January.

The nave filled with the sounds of the Gothic church's pipe organ, and a screen showed a man performing the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Those gathered weren't there for church, but for the third concert in a series Colin MacKnight is performing over the next year to commemorate the 275th anniversary of Bach's death.

MacKnight, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral's music director, is performing all of Bach's organ works throughout 2025 — one lunch break at a time. The ambitious plan entails performing 18 hours of music in half-hour increments nearly every Wednesday.

"I've wanted to for a really long time because it's, I think, the most thorough way of immersing myself in the brilliance of Johann Sebastian Bach," MacKnight said one morning as he rehearsed in the empty cathedral the day before a concert.

The concerts in Little Rock are among several events around the world this year commemorating the German composer's legacy and the anniversary of his death.

MacKnight, who is from Bethesda, Maryland, has been music director at Trinity for three years. He said the first time he remembers hearing Bach was at a relative's funeral when he was about 12 years old.

"Something about hearing it that time just really mesmerized me and that was the beginning of my love of Bach," he said.

The 31-year-old's hands move easily between the four keyboards of the organ console, flanked by knobs controlling different sounds that are assembled into various combinations.

Underneath, his feet press on the pedalboards — combining to create the notes of Bach's works. MacK-

night, who has played the organ since he was 16, acknowledges how dizzying the sight of the instrument can be for newcomers.

"If you don't know what you're looking at, it's a little overwhelming, like an airplane console," he said.

MacKnight's concerts — which are free and open to the public — are also mini-lessons for those who come, with a glossary of terms like concerto and fugue included in the program. In between pieces, MacKnight gives audience members some background on Bach and his organ works.

"These pieces are in the unfortunate category of being much, much harder than they sound," he says.

Generally regarded as one of the greatest composers of all time, Bach is known in particular for his organ works and their heavy use of pedals and complex structures. Few organists perform the composer's complete organ works, given the difficulty and quantity of the music.

They include Grammy-winning organist Paul Jacobs, who taught MacKnight at the Juilliard School. Jacobs performed an 18-hour nonstop concert of Bach's organ works to mark the 250th anniversary of the composer's death in 2000.

The free concerts so far have drawn a mix of church members, classical music aficionados and newcomers who say they want a quiet break from the daily bustle.

"I like the complexity of the music and the power of the organ, which stirs me internally," said Barry Coplin, a member of the church who has attended two of MacKnight's concerts.

Ben Wiley, who lives about 30 minutes away, is a classical music fan who was attending his third of MacKnight's shows and said he appreciates being able to hear Bach's works in half-hour increments.

"It's a good way to be able to get it done in short bursts, to be able to absorb it better and come back to get the next batch," he said.

MacKnight is also performing a 100-minute concert of Bach's most extensive organ work — the Clavier-Ubung III, sometimes referred to as the German Organ Mass — on July 28, the day the German composer died in 1750 at 65.

The Rev. Thomas Alexander, a priest at Trinity, said the concerts allow the public to enjoy MacKnight's talents, come together and learn more about Bach in a way they normally wouldn't be able to.

"It's like reading someone's complete collection of novels. You get to really get to know someone in a comprehensive way," Alexander said. "But it also builds a sense of community."

Hermoso's teammate and brother say in court the Spain player was pressured to downplay Rubiales kiss

By TALES AZZONI AP Sports Writer

MADRID (AP) — The brother of Jenni Hermoso and one of her teammates told a judge Wednesday there were attempts to pressure the player into downplaying the unsolicited kiss by former Spanish federation president Luis Rubiales in the awards presentation ceremony following the 2023 Women's World Cup.

Rafael Hermoso said in court that former women's national team coach Jorge Vilda asked him to tell Jenni to record a video together with the former president to show she was OK with the kiss.

Former teammate Misa Rodríguez said Jenni told the other players that she was being coerced and that she was "not well" after what happened.

Rubiales is on trial for sexual assault for kissing Jenni Hermoso after the World Cup won by Spain in Sydney, as well as for coercion for allegedly trying to convince the player to support his version of the kiss.

Vilda and two other former members of the federation are also on trial for coercion. All four deny wrongdoing.

Jenni Hermoso says she did not consent to the kiss while Rubiales says it was consensual. The kiss marred the title celebrations and sparked outrage in Spain about the prevalence of sexism in sports and beyond.

Rafael Hermoso said his sister told him she was pressurised several times by members of the Spanish federation.

"She came to us half-crying and told us that they were pressuring her to take a stance downplaying the

kiss," Rafael said.

Rodríguez said Jenni told them about the kiss and that she did not know how to react to it. She also said that Jenni told them she was being pressurised to record a video and downplay the kiss.

"She told us that she didn't want to do it and we supported her decision," Rodríguez said. "We told her that she should not talk to anybody anymore and should try to get some rest, because we noticed that she was not well."

Rafael Hermoso said Vilda came to him on the plane returning from the final in Australia to ask him to talk to his sister.

"We were talking about soccer and the achievement of the team and suddenly he mentioned the kiss," Rafael said. "He said that the president wanted me to talk to Jenni to ask her to record the video together downplaying the kiss, because that would be the best thing for everyone."

Rafael added that Vilda told him that Rubiales' daughters were crying and that the president was worried about losing his job because of what happened. He said Vilda told him that he had already talked to Jenni and that she had not agreed to do the video.

"I told him that I was not going to try to convince her to do something that I also don't agree with," Rafael said.

Rafael said he felt Vilda threatened his sister by hinting that things would not be good for her in the federation if she decided not to help. He also said Vilda implied that Jenni owed that to Rubiales' daughters and the president himself.

Jenni Hermoso was not called up to the national team immediately after the World Cup, with new coach Montse Tomé saying she wanted to protect the player.

Rubiales has yet to testify and denied the charges. He resigned under pressure three weeks later and was banned by FIFA for three years. He said he was the victim of a "witch hunt" by "false feminists."

Prosecutors, Hermoso and the Spain players' association want Rubiales jailed for two and a half years, fined 50,000 euros (\$51,800) for damages, and banned from working as a sports official. They want the other three defendants sentenced to one and a half years in prison.

The trial is expected to last at least 10 days. Rubiales attended the first day on Monday. The coach of the men's national team, Luis de la Fuente, testified on Tuesday.

Trump's administration is pulling almost all USAID workers off the job worldwide

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration said Tuesday that it is pulling almost all U.S. Agency for International Development workers off the job and out of the field worldwide, moving to all but end a six-decade mission to shore up American security by fighting starvation, funding education and working to end epidemics.

The administration notified USAID workers in emails and a notice posted online, the latest in a sudden dismantling of the aid agency by returning political appointees from President Donald Trump's first term and billionaire Elon Musk's government-efficiency teams who call much of the spending on programs overseas wasteful.

The order takes effect just before midnight Friday and gives direct hires of the agency overseas — many of whom have been frantically packing up households in expectation of the announcement — 30 days to return home unless they are deemed essential. Contractors not determined to be essential also would be fired, the notice said.

The move had been rumored for several days and was the most extreme of several proposals considered for consolidating the agency into the State Department. Other options had included closures of smaller USAID missions and partial closures of larger ones.

Thousands of USAID employees already had been laid off and programs worldwide shut down after

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Trump, a Republican, imposed a sweeping freeze on foreign assistance. Despite outcry from Democratic lawmakers, the aid agency has been a special target as the new administration and Musk's budget-slashing Department of Government Efficiency look to shrink the federal government.

They have ordered a spending stop that has paralyzed U.S.-funded aid and development work around the world, gutted the senior leadership and workforce with furloughs and firings, and closed Washington headquarters to staffers Monday. Lawmakers said the agency's computer servers were carted away.

"Spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper," Musk boasted on X.

The mass removal of thousands of staffers overseas and in Washington would doom billions of dollars in projects in some 120 countries, including security assistance to partners such as Ukraine as well as development work for clean water, job training and education, including for schoolgirls under Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

The U.S. is the world's largest humanitarian donor by far. It spends less than 1% of its budget on foreign assistance, a smaller share of its budget than some countries.

Health programs like those credited with helping end polio and smallpox epidemics and an acclaimed HIV/AIDS program that saved more than 20 million lives in Africa already have stopped. So have monitoring and deployments of rapid-response teams for contagious diseases such as an Ebola outbreak in Uganda.

Hundreds of millions of dollars of food and medication already delivered by U.S. companies are sitting in ports because of the administration's sudden shutdown of the agency.

Democratic lawmakers and others say the USAID is enshrined in legislation as an independent agency, and cannot be shut down without congressional approval. Supporters of USAID from both political parties say its work overseas is essential to countering the influence of Russia, China and other adversaries and rivals abroad, and to cementing alliances and partnerships.

The decision to withdraw direct-hire staff and their families earlier than their planned departures will likely cost the government tens of millions of dollars in travel and relocation costs.

Staff being placed on leave include both foreign and civil service officers who have legal protection against arbitrary dismissal and being placed on leave without reason.

The American Foreign Service Association, the union which represents U.S. diplomats, sent a notice to its members denouncing the decision and saying it was preparing legal action to counter or halt it.

Locally employed USAID staff, however, do not have much recourse and were excluded from the federal government's voluntary buyout offer.

USAID staffers and families faced wrenching decisions as the rumored order loomed, including whether to pull children out of school midyear. Some gave away pet cats and dogs, fearing the Trump administration would not give them time to complete the paperwork to bring the animals with them.

Tuesday's notice said it would consider case-by-case exceptions for those needing more time. But with most of the agency's staff soon off the job, it was unclear who would process such claims or other paperwork needed for the mass removal of thousands of overseas staffers.

Musk's teams had taken USAID's website offline over the weekend and it came back online Tuesday night, with the notice of recall or termination for global staffers its sole post.

The announcement came as Secretary of State Marco Rubio was on a five-nation tour of Central America and met with embassy and USAID staff at two of the region's largest USAID missions: El Salvador and Guatemala on Monday and Tuesday.

Journalists accompanying Rubio were not allowed to witness the so-called "meet and greet" sessions in those two countries, but had been allowed in for a similar event in Panama on Sunday in which Rubio praised employees, particularly locals, for their dedication and service.

At a news conference earlier Tuesday, Rubio said he has "long supported foreign aid. I continue to support foreign aid. But foreign aid is not charity." He noted that every dollar the U.S. spends must advance its national interests.

The online notice says those who will be exempted from leave include staffers responsible for "mission-critical functions, core leadership and specially designated programs" and would be informed by Thursday

afternoon.

"Thank you for your service," the notice concluded.

Iran praises US for cutting foreign aid funding as it looks for a Trump message on nuclear talks

By NASSER KARIMI and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran's government seems to be welcoming some recent decisions by the United States — even though they happen to come from a man Iranian operatives have allegedly been plotting to assassinate.

President Donald Trump's moves to freeze spending on foreign aid and overhaul, maybe even end, the U.S. Agency for International Development have been lauded in Iranian state media.

The reports say the decisions will halt funding for opponents of the country's Shiite theocracy — pro-democracy activists and others supported through programs as part of U.S. government's efforts to help democracy worldwide.

At the same time, Iranian officials appear to be signaling that they are waiting for a message from Trump on whether he wants to negotiate over Tehran's rapidly advancing nuclear program. At stake are potentially billions of dollars withheld from Iran through crushing sanctions and the future of a program on the precipice of enriching weapons-grade uranium.

And even when signing an executive order to reimpose his "maximum pressure on Iran" on Tuesday, Trump suggested he wanted to deal with Tehran.

Meanwhile, ordinary Iranians worry what all this could mean for them. On Wednesday, Iran's currency, the rial, plunged to a record low of 850,000 to \$1 after Trump's order, showing the ongoing economic volatility they face. A decade ago, it stood at 32,000 rials to \$1.

"It encourages hard-liners inside Iran to continue repressions because they feel the U.S. would have less capability in supporting Iranian people who seek freedom," said Maryam Faraji, a 27-year-old waitress in a coffee shop in northern Tehran.

Iranian media say Trump's cuts could stop the opposition in Iran

The state-run IRNA news agency said that "cutting the budget of foreign-based opposition" could "affect the sphere of relations" between Tehran and Washington.

Newspapers, like the conservative Hamshhari daily, described Iran's opposition as "counterrevolutionaries" who had been "celebrating" Trump's election as heralding the "last days of life of the Islamic Republic."

They then "suddenly faced the surprise of cut funding from their employer," the newspaper crowed.

Even the reformist newspaper Hammihan compared it to a "cold shower" for opponents of Iran's theocracy abroad, an idea also expressed by the Foreign Ministry.

"Those financial resources are not charity donations," Esmail Bagahei, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, said during a briefing with reporters on Monday. "They are wages paid in exchange for services."

"This is a clear sign of America's interventionist policy particularly during the Biden administration, which tried to pressure Iran and meddle in its domestic affairs through financial aid," Bagahei added.

It remains unclear how funding for Iranian activists and opposition figures would be affected by the USAID decision.

The lion's share of money for civil society in Iran has come through the U.S. State Department's Near East Regional Democracy fund, known by the acronym NERD, which grew as an American response to the Green Movement protests in 2009.

In 2024, the Biden administration requested \$65 million for NERD after over \$600 million had been appropriated by Congress for the fund, according to the Congressional Research Service. That money and other funding had gone in the past toward training journalists and activists on how to report on human rights abuses, funding access to the internet amid government shutdowns and other issues.

The State Department did not respond to a request for comment over the NERD funding and its future.

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American officials for years have kept the awardees of NERD grants secret due to what they describe as the risk activists face from Iran, particularly after Iranian intelligence officers have allegedly targeted in kidnapping or assassination plots, U.S. prosecutors say.

Iran repeatedly hints it's ready to talk to Trump

Iran also noticed that the U.S. avoided direct criticism of the Islamic Republic during a review by the United Nations Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva last week. For those in Iran's government, there's anticipation this could mean that Trump is willing to negotiate, something he repeatedly brought up in his election campaign as a possibility.

Even Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters, in a speech in September opened the door to talks with the U.S., saying there is "no harm" in engaging with the "enemy." More recently, he tempered that, warning that sinister plots could still be "concealed behind diplomatic smiles."

"We must be careful about who we are dealing with, who we are negotiating with, and who we are speaking to," Khamenei said last week.

While Bagaheh, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, acknowledged Iran hasn't seen any "green light" yet for talks, Iran is trying to do everything it can to signal it wants them.

The country's reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who campaigned on outreach to the West, urged officials on Monday to listen to dissent from the Iranian people and avoid further crackdowns like those that followed the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini.

"The enemies are hoping that by stirring up disputes within the country, they will throw people into the streets and then ride the wave of protests themselves," Pezeshkian said.

As he signed the executive order on Iran on Tuesday, Trump warned the country would be "obliterated" if he was assassinated by Tehran. The order calls for putting "Iran's export of oil to zero," including to China, which buys Tehran's crude at a discount. It also seeks a so-called "snapback" of United Nations sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program.

However, Trump still left the door open for talks.

"I'm going to sign it, but hopefully we're not going to have to use it very much," he said from the Oval Office. "We will see whether or not we can arrange or work out a deal with Iran."

"We don't want to be tough on Iran. We don't want to be tough on anybody," Trump added. "But they just can't have a nuclear bomb."

Trump followed with another online message on Wednesday, saying: "Reports that the United States, working in conjunction with Israel, is going to blow Iran into smithereens, ARE GREATLY EXAGGERATED."

"I would much prefer a Verified Nuclear Peace Agreement, which will let Iran peacefully grow and prosper," he wrote on Truth Social. "We should start working on it immediately, and have a big Middle East Celebration when it is signed and completed."

He did not elaborate.

However, factions within Iran's theocracy are still likely to oppose talks, whether out of their own self interest or over anger that Trump ordered the 2020 drone strike that killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the country's top general and a revered figure.

That killing fueled Iranian calls for Trump's assassination — and alleged plots against him. In November, the Justice Department disclosed an Iranian murder-for-hire plot to kill Trump. While Iran denied being involved, Tehran has a history of plotting the killing of opponents abroad.

"This will not have any impact on the factions that oppose talks with the U.S. but maybe some moderates find it as an excuse to say that Trump is taking some steps," Iranian political analyst Ahmad Zeiabadi said.

For now though, much of this can seem as conjecture and theorizing to many of Iran's over 80 million people who continue to struggle in the grips of the country's ailing economy.

Tehran taxi driver Gholanhossein Akbari, 27, insisted Iranians like him never benefitted from U.S. support of Iran's pro-democracy activists abroad.

"We did not see any result from the funds the U.S. paid to foreign-based Iranian activists who only make comments in the media," Akbari said.

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Today in History: February 6, Queen Elizabeth II accedes to throne

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Feb. 6, the 37th day of 2025. There are 328 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 6, 1952, Britain's King George VI, 56, died at Sandringham House in Norfolk, England; he was succeeded as monarch by his 25-year-old eldest daughter, who became Queen Elizabeth II.

Also on this date:

In 1778, during the American Revolutionary War, the United States won official recognition and military support from France with the signing of a Treaty of Alliance in Paris.

In 1862, during the Civil War, Fort Henry in Tennessee fell to Union forces.

In 1899, a peace treaty between the United States and Spain was ratified by the U.S. Senate; the treaty ended the Spanish-American War and ceded the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States.

In 1921, "The Kid," Charlie Chaplin's first feature-length film, was released across the United States.

In 1998, Washington National Airport was renamed Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, honoring the former president on his 87th birthday.

In 2008, the Bush White House defended the use of the interrogation technique known as waterboarding, saying it was legal, not torture, and had saved American lives.

In 2013, toy maker Hasbro Inc. announced that Monopoly fans had voted online to add a cat token to the board game, replacing the iron.

In 2022, Queen Elizabeth II celebrated the 70th anniversary of her ascendance to the British throne, an unprecedented reign that made her a symbol of stability in the United Kingdom.

In 2023, a powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Turkey and Syria, toppling thousands of buildings and trapping residents under mounds of rubble; the death toll would eventually surpass 50,000.

Today's birthdays: Actor Mike Farrell is 86. Former NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw is 85. Singer Fabian is 82. Filmmaker Jim Sheridan is 76. Tennis Hall of Famer Manuel Orantes is 76. Actor Kathy Najimy is 68. Actor-director Robert Townsend is 68. Rock singer Axl Rose (Guns N' Roses) is 63. Singer Rick Astley is 59. Actor Charlie Heaton is 31. Golfer Collin Morikawa is 29.