

# Groton Daily Independent

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**Maturity is learning to walk away from people and situations that threaten your peace of mind, self-respect, values, morals, and self-worth.**

## Thursday, Feb. 13

Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, rice, California blend, peach crips, whole wheat bread.

Parent-Teacher Conferences, 1:30 p.m. to 8 p.m.  
Early dismissal of school.

Groton Lions Club meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

## Friday, Feb. 14

VALENTINE'S DAY

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, wild rice, glazed carrots, cheesecake with frost glaze, dinner roll.

No School, Faculty In-service

Community Blood Drive, 8:45 a.m. to noon, Groton Community Center

## Saturday, Feb. 15

Basketball Double-Header at Mobridge-Pollock.  
Boys 8th at 11 a.m., boys 7th at noon, girls C at 11 a.m., boys C at noon, girls varsity and boys varsity to follow.

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

**Groton Daily Independent**  
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# 1440

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

## Trump-Putin Call

President Donald Trump spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday, signaling a first step toward negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. It was the first conversation between the leaders of both countries since early 2022, and the pair reportedly agreed to visit each other's country to meet in person in the future.

The conversation came as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth laid out a first look at the administration's goals in ending the conflict, describing Ukraine's desire to recover territory lost since 2014—including the strategic Crimean Peninsula—as unrealistic and calling on Ukraine to end its bid to join NATO. Trump reportedly spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy shortly after the call with Putin.

In related news, former House Rep. Tulsi Gabbard was confirmed as director of national intelligence in a 52-48 vote, while health secretary nominee Robert F. Kennedy Jr. advanced to a final floor vote, likely to be held today. They were considered two of the most at-risk Trump nominees.

## La Cosa Nostra Sting

Italian officials orchestrated a series of raids in Palermo and neighboring towns Tuesday, targeting suspected members of the Mafia and arresting around 150 people. The large-scale operation was part of a continuous effort by Italy to dismantle organized crime.

More than 1,200 officers helped conduct raids—reportedly the largest scale since 1984—against Cosa Nostra. Targeting people for crimes including Mafia affiliation, attempted murder, and drug trafficking, the arrests are part of an ongoing weakening of the infamous Sicilian Mafia that served as inspiration for the "Godfather" movies. The mobsters wreaked havoc on the southern Italian island in the late 20th century, but have since lost influence due to authority crackdowns and the growing power of the Calabrian group, 'Ndrangheta.

Prior to the raids, two years of investigations revealed how clans cooperate, recruit new members, and exercise control in the region while also revealing a wide network of informants. Despite these efforts, the Mafia continues to wield influence in industries ranging from tourism to prisons.

## America's New Gulf

Apple Maps users in the US will see the Gulf of Mexico renamed the Gulf of America, a change made this week to align with President Donald Trump's January executive order. The iPhone maker joins Google in adopting the new name, which only appears for US users—Mexican users will see it called Gulf of Mexico, while other countries will see both names.

Mexico, Cuba, and the US each border the Gulf, which was first named the Gulf of Mexico in the 16th century. The US controls more than 1,600 miles of the Gulf's coastline—a little less than half of the total—and its sovereign territory extends 12 nautical miles beyond the coast. The country possesses economic rights over a further 200 miles offshore.

The US place names are typically determined by the US Board on Geographic Names, a federal body under the Interior Department. Founded in 1890, the board rules on hundreds of naming conventions annually and has maintained the Geographic Names Information System since the 1970s. In the Gulf's case, the executive order instructed the agency to update the name.

Apple's adoption of the change wasn't legally required, as the president's order only applies to federal agencies.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Mariah Carey, Oasis, and Outkast headline the list of 14 nominees for the 2025 class of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Super Bowl LIX pulls in record \$800M in ad revenue for Fox Corp.

Sean "Diddy" Combs files \$100M defamation lawsuit against NBCUniversal, claiming false allegations against Combs in a documentary that premiered in January on Peacock.

President Donald Trump named chair of Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in unanimous vote by newly appointed board of trustees; vote comes one week after Trump removed Democratic members of the board.

## Science & Technology

Underwater observatory detects the most energetic neutrino to date; known as the "ghost particle," an estimated 10 trillion neutrinos pass through your body every second.

Sea turtles create mental maps of Earth's magnetic field to help guide them to foraging areas, study finds; the animals also "dance" when sensing food-related magnetic fields.

Engineers develop functioning, fully 3D-printed spray engine at much lower cost than existing technology; devices are used to propel crafts like small satellites through space.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.3%, Dow -0.5%, Nasdaq +0.0%) as US 10-year Treasury yield rises above 4.6% after hotter-than-expected inflation data.

Core consumer price index rose 0.4% month over month and 3.3% year over year in January.

Chevron to lay off between 15% and 20% of its global workforce, or as many as 9,000 people, by end of 2026; move is part of efforts to cut costs by between \$2B and \$3B and comes amid pending \$53B acquisition of Hess Corp.

Olipop prebiotic soda valued at \$1.85B after raising \$50M in latest funding round.

NYSE Chicago to reincorporate in Texas, rebrand as NYSE Texas.

## Politics & World Affairs

Eight inspectors general sue the Trump administration for allegedly violating federal law by terminating a group of government watchdogs last month without notifying Congress.

Judge allows federal worker buyout plan to proceed.

More than 90 million people under winter weather advisories or warnings as snowstorms sweep across US Midwest and East Coast; Chicago, Detroit, and Kansas City, Missouri, among places to be hit with largest snowfall.

US Coast Guard releases recording thought to be the sound of 2023 Titanic submersible implosion.

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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 as-sorted 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. Bet-sie Voucher book, puppy, mini chocolate hearts. Behind the dog a bag of heart bear gummies and a small box of mix chocolates. \$12**

## **SDHSAA apologies for state dual wrestling confusion after mix-up over who's in**

**SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos apologized after initial brackets included 10 participating teams, but then was reverted back to eight on Tuesday.**

PIERRE — After backlash regarding the decision to include 10, then revert back to eight teams at this week's South Dakota state dual wrestling tournament, the South Dakota High School Activities Association's executive director apologized for the confusion.

The backlash came after the activities association released brackets on Monday for the Class A and Class B dual tournaments for this week in Pierre, including 10 teams instead of the traditional eight. Under the 10-team format, the four lowest-seeded teams in each bracket would face each other in a dual before the quarterfinal round to determine who would earn the No. 7 and No. 8 seeds in each bracket.

That wasn't in the rulebook, which calls for eight teams to go to the dual tournament based on how they performed during the season.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said the initial decision came after teams raised concerns about the seeding process during the season in both classes. Swartos said those issues concerned the rescheduling of dual dates and how the common opponents criteria was applied.

Swartos said that himself and other SDHSAA board members without conflict of interests regarding involved teams made the decision on Monday to go with 10 teams.

"We needed to move forward with the event and at that time, I made a decision that because we wouldn't have time to fully vet this, we were going to take all 10 teams, which is different than what our policy manual says," Swartos said. "It was done with good intentions, but following that, we received significant pushback from membership on that."

Following that pushback, the decision was reversed and new brackets were released on Tuesday with only the top eight seeded teams included. This left Class A teams Pierre and Tea Area along with Class B programs Kimball/White Lake/Platte-Geddes and Groton Area out of the competition after they were originally told they would be participating.

The dual tournament, which is being held Feb. 14 and 15 in Pierre, is supposed to have a Feb. 8 deadline for teams to finish dual matches for state tournament seeding.

After the decision to revert back to eight teams, Swartos said he reached out to superintendents of all four schools that were initially told they would compete and apologized for the confusion caused.

"It was a lesson in leadership to me and it created some chaos, and I own that," Swartos said. "I regret that it caused chaos, caused a lot of confusion for people and the people making plans and changing plans."

KWLPG head coach Thomas Konechne provided a statement to the Mitchell Republic and said he was disappointed, but respected the decision.

"We are disappointed to not be included in the State Dual Tournament especially as a top contender in Class B. We appreciate our school administrations, the SDHSAA office, especially Dr. Swartos, for the time and effort put into this decision," Konechne said. "Their decision to move to 10 teams truly was in the best interest of all competitors. We will respect the final decision of the SDHSAA office and hope the State Dual tournament will be exciting and entertaining for the fans of South Dakota wrestling in order to continue to grow our sport. KWLPG wrestling will move forward and focus on the next best thing for our program."

According to the SDHSAA handbook, seeding is decided based on the following criteria, none of which Swartos said changed this season:

"To determine the eight teams in the State Dual, the top ten teams by seed points will be evaluated for qualification. Evaluation will be done by criteria in order, much as individuals are determined. Qualifications will be, in order: head-to-head matchups, records vs. common opponents, power point average, last year's place at the State Duals, last year's place at State Individual, coin flip."

Swartos said following the pushback regarding this year's selection process, the SDHSAA would look into clarifying and refining the seeding process for future state dual tournaments. He specifically mentioned

two areas the SDHSAA would review.

"One of the things we need to address is the issue of changing the date of a dual during a season, as opposed to adding a dual and clarifying that language," Swartos said. "And then the second part would be clarifying exactly the system we use to whittle that down from 10 to eight, that seed-point system, how we use that exactly in there so that was clear to everybody."

## **Name Released in Turner County Fatal Crash**

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: Riverview Road, near 293rd Street, four miles north of Centerville, SD

When: 10:19 p.m., Saturday, February 8, 2025

Driver 1: Zuriel Ramirez Meda, 26-year-old male from Centerville, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2006 Nissan Pathfinder

Seat belt Used: Under investigation

Turner County, S.D.- One person died in a single vehicle crash Saturday evening, four miles north of Centerville, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Zuriel Ramirez Meda, the driver of a 2006 Nissan Pathfinder, was traveling northbound on Riverview Road when the vehicle entered the ditch, went airborne, then crashed into the river bank, coming to rest on the frozen river.

Meda passed away at the scene.

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

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

## Don't miss out - Build Dakota Scholarship deadline nears

WATERTOWN, SD – Officials at Lake Area Technical College are reminding prospective college students that the Build Dakota Scholarship application deadline is quickly approaching.

Foundation Scholarship Coordinator Brittany Rost said scholars who are interested in one of 27 eligible programs at Lake Area Tech should complete and submit their applications before the March 31, 2025 deadline. The Build Dakota Scholarship Program covers full tuition, fees, books and equipment for students entering high-demand career fields at Lake Area Tech including:

- Agriculture – Agri-Production
- Agriculture – Dairy
- Agriculture – Natural Resources
- Agriculture – Precision Technology
- Auto Body & Paint Technology
- Automotive Technology
- Building Trades Technology
- Computer Information Systems
- Dental Assisting
- Dental Hygiene
- Diesel Technology – Ag/Industrial
- Diesel Technology – Truck
- Electronic Systems Technology
- Energy Operations
- Energy Technology
- Heavy Equipment Operator
- Law Enforcement
- Med/Fire Rescue
- Med/Fire Rescue – Paramedic
- Medical Assisting
- Medical Lab Technician
- Practical Nursing
- Precision Machining
- Registered Nursing
- Robotics
- Surgical Technology
- Welding



“Students with Build Dakota Scholarships truly receive a jump-start in life,” Rost said. “They graduate with no student debt and enter a competitive job market with the tools needed to be successful. It’s a win for our students and it’s a win for our state’s employers.”

Rost said the program is open to both South Dakota resident and nonresident scholars of all ages. Recipients must be a U.S. Citizen or U.S. National and must complete the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA.

Students interested in learning more about the Build Dakota Scholarship should visit Lake Area Tech’s website at: [www.lakeareatech.edu](http://www.lakeareatech.edu) or contact Rost at (605) 882-5284, X292.

Lake Area Tech was established in 1965 as South Dakota’s first accredited technical school. It now offers more than 30 programs, including hybrid and online E-degrees. The college is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and currently serves more than 2,600 students.

## Groton to host State U10 Blue Baseball Tournament

The state tourney locations have been announced. The White and Blue locations for U10 and U12 is something new and Groton is the site for the U10 Blue. Registration ends June 1. I assume we will know more then about where we play.

### CLASS B

- **8U: 7/11-13/2025: Madison**
  - *Class structure to be determined ranking in pool play*
- **12U: 7/11-13/2025: Elkton (White) & Hot Springs (Blue)**
  - *Team assignment TBD after Registration*
- **10U: 7/18-20/2025: Webster (White) & Groton (Blue)**
  - *Team assignment TBD after Registration*
- **17U: 7/25-27/2025: Gregory**
  - *(Regions should be completed by 7/17)*
- **14U: 8/8-10/2025: Britton**
  - *(Regions should be completed by 8/1)*

**17U All Star Game and Showcase: 8/17/2025 2-6**

**PM: TBD**



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## DQ® CUPID CAKE

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## Are more elderly South Dakotans working?

**By Megan Luther  
South Dakota News Watch**

Yes.

A growing number of South Dakotans continue to work past retirement age.

In 2018, a quarter of South Dakotans 65 and older were in the labor force. Five years later, that number climbed to 29%, above the national rate of 19%.

As of July 2024, 18% of South Dakotans were 65 and older. That's up from 14% in 2010.

From 2000-2020 the nationwide share of workers 60 and older doubled, due in part to the aging population and falling birth rates.

Other contributing factors include employers shifting away from pension type retirement plans, which encourage workers to retire at a specific age, and the Social Security system raising the age for when workers can receive full benefits from 65 to 67.

This fact brief responds to conversations such as this one.

South Dakota News Watch partners with Gigafact, a nonprofit network of nonpartisan newsrooms, to verify trending claims through fact briefs. Read previous fact briefs and our verification standards and other best practices policies.

Have a question we can answer? Submit it at the South Dakota News Watch Tipline. Send questions or feedback to [factbrief@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:factbrief@sdnewswatch.org).

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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **SD House panel lukewarm on bill to finalize new men's prison funding**

**Questions about ongoing operational costs and road construction dog controversial project**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 6:10 PM**

PIERRE — A panel of lawmakers dealt a symbolic blow to the push for a new men's prison Wednesday morning, signaling a possible rough road for what's expected to be the most expensive taxpayer-funded building project in South Dakota history.

The House State Affairs Committee didn't say no after a hearing at the state Capitol, but it didn't say yes, either.

Gov. Larry Rhoden's office and the state Department of Corrections (DOC) wanted the committee to send a bill that would permit them to spend \$763 million on the prison to the state House's budget-setting panel with a "do pass" recommendation. Last year, lawmakers gave the DOC authority to spend \$62 million to prepare the site.

The guaranteed maximum price for the facility is \$825 million. Lawmakers dumped most of the money for the prison into an interest-bearing fund last year, before the DOC's November announcement of the final price tag.

Instead of blessing House Bill 1025 – the bill to top off the prison fund and unlock it for use – committee members voted 12-1 to send it to the House Appropriations Committee with no recommendation at all.

Several members said they want that budget panel to dig into cost to run the facility, and to build out the roadways necessary to transform the corn field selected as its site into a complex for 1,500 inmates and hundreds of staff.

Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko said the prison would help the state manage its correctional needs for 100 years.

Rep. Karla Lems, R-Canton, said that language underscores the importance of caution.

"For a hundred-year project, we had really better know what we're doing before we rubber-stamp this," Lems said.

Her constituency includes a host of the project's detractors. The selected site is about 14 miles south of Sioux Falls, between Harrisburg and Canton. Many of its Lincoln County neighbors banded together in a lawsuit, hoping to force the state to request a zoning permit from county officials before building on the 360 acres of farm ground.

The state was the victor in that case at the circuit court level; the opponents are appealing to the state Supreme Court.

#### **Opposition: Price tag incomplete**

The opposition testimony from those neighbors pointed out that the \$825 million "guaranteed maximum price" does not include change orders, post-construction operational costs, or the cost to pave the gravel roads surrounding the property.

That's true, according to Wasko and Ryan Brunner, a senior adviser with Gov. Rhoden's office. But they also said estimates for those numbers are either done or in the works.

The state has a contingency fund of \$24 million for change orders. Change orders that add work could conceivably come, Wasko conceded, but the hope with what she described as a well-conceived site plan is that "we get it right the first time."

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The annual cost to run the 1,500-bed facility would be \$21.6 million more each year than it takes to fund the 144-year-old, 800-bed state penitentiary right now, she said. The new prison would replace the Sioux Falls penitentiary, and the fate of that older facility has not been determined.

Brunner pointed to an ongoing study by the state Department of Transportation that aims to evaluate traffic flows and options for road construction. The state has yet to produce a cost estimate for the three options outlined on its traffic study website.

He said the department expects to put money aside for the work in 2027, and that it would involve "state and federal highway funds."

He also urged the committee to think about another number: \$40 million. That, he said, is the upper limit of the higher price the state would pay by way of inflation if it waits another year to move forward.

Project opponents suggested alternatives: Using the DOC's 68-acre West Farm site near Sioux Falls, expanding its existing Jameson Annex in Sioux Falls or purchasing the shuttered former Citibank building just north of the penitentiary to meet the need for prison beds.

There are bills circulating in Pierre meant to stop the DOC from spending any more money on the men's prison, and to force a reevaluation of the project site. Wasko addressed some of the ideas for alternative sites, including a reminder that there are juvenile detainees at the West Farm facility the DOC doesn't have another place for at the moment.

There were 28 juveniles at West Farm as of Wednesday, DOC spokesman Michael Winder told South Dakota Searchlight after the hearing. The farm has a 68-bed capacity across two separate programs, known as Falls Academy and Brighter Transition.

Brunner urged lawmakers to think about another figure, specifically a dollar amount, when considering alternatives.

The state's already spent money on the site in Lincoln County.

"You start moving those around and redesigning, then you're no longer utilizing the \$62 million we're already spending on the current site," Brunner said.

## **Lawmakers: Let appropriators learn more**

Three prison staff members described the current penitentiary as outdated and dangerous. One spoke of the "deafening" sound drummed up when hundreds of inmates are released for meals because of the building's multi-tiered, linear layout.

On the higher tiers, if somebody has to make a call for help from the lower tiers, "how's anybody going to hear you down there?" said Nick Rodriguez, a 10-year correctional officer.

"Yes, we have radios, but there are times we've had communications issues with those," he said.

Shortly after the House State Affairs vote, Gov. Rhoden's office sent a press release pointing out that the state's law enforcement organizations support the prison project. The statement also addressed security.

"The construction of a new prison is one way that we can improve public safety," the governor wrote. "The condition of our current facility is unacceptable."

The new prison would have cell blocks arranged in a circular fashion to allow for easier monitoring of offenders and more orderly movement from one place to the other.

"Clearly we need a new prison," said Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Greg Jamison, who tried unsuccessfully to convince the committee to recommend passage of HB 1025. "The location and the money are the issue. But it's been well thought out, and it's been well planned."

But Rep. Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, said it makes more sense to let House appropriators dig into the figures. There's been plenty of talk about the need for a prison in recent years, he said, but "what we haven't talked a lot about is how we're going to pay to run it," Overweg said.

His move to send it along to the budget panel with a neutral vote was opposed only by Rep. Spencer Gosch, R-Glenham.

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

## Bill to change name of Department of Corrections advances

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 5:57 PM

PIERRE — Less than an hour after a contentious vote on millions in funding for a new men's prison, another corrections bill sailed through a Senate panel that met in the same room.

That one, by contrast, wouldn't cost a dime — at least not right away.

Senate Bill 192 comes from Sen. Jamie Smith, D-Sioux Falls. The four-sentence bill would change the name of the state's prison system to the "Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation."

The bill had its first hearing at the Capitol in Pierre during a meeting of the Senate State Affairs Committee.

Several states, including North Dakota, have embraced similar nomenclature as a nod to the need to rehabilitate offenders, the majority of whom are released back into their communities.

The bill would not require immediate changes to stationary, uniforms, signage or references to the agency in state law. Instead, it would direct the state's code commission to adjust verbiage in future updates and leave operational changes to the agency and future legislatures to make.

A name change alone doesn't do much, Smith said, but it does lead the way to change. He said the 1943 decision to change the U.S. Department of War to the Department of Defense was a sign of a shift in philosophy that helped guide the agency's mission thereafter.

"We recognize the power of names to reflect who we are, and more importantly where we're headed," Smith said.

Before moving to send Smith's bill to the Senate floor, Sen. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, mentioned a previous name change. Former Gov. Dennis Daugaard's administration changed the name of the Division of Drug and Alcohol in the Department of Human Services to the Division of Behavioral Health, and Jensen said it helped address the stigma surrounding addiction and the reality that most addicts also deal with co-occurring mental health issues.

Sen. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, said he understands that shifting toward rehabilitation takes more than a name change. But he also agreed with Smith and Jensen's take on the power of verbiage to an organization's mission.

"I heard in the hallway that it's a nothing burger, but I do think names matter," Karr said. "This is a step in the right direction."

The Department of Corrections has not taken a position on the bill, according to spokesman Michael Winder.

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

## New revenue forecasts don't improve grim budget situation for South Dakota lawmakers

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 5:49 PM

South Dakota lawmakers already knew it was a tight budget year. They learned Wednesday it could be worse than they thought.

State government's day-to-day operations are funded by "ongoing" revenue, such as sales taxes, while money from federal stimulus programs and other "one-time" sources are typically used for one-time needs such as construction projects.

Legislative Research Council Fiscal Chief Jeff Mehlhaff spoke to the Legislature's main budget committee at the Capitol in Pierre and said ongoing revenues, including sales taxes, "will see negative growth" this year.

"The last time this occurred was fiscal year 2010, in the midst of the 2009 recession," he said.

Lawmakers will adopt official 2026 revenue estimates Thursday, and those estimates will be used to help build the next annual budget. On Wednesday, Mehlhaff, who works for the Legislature, and State

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Economist Derek Johnson, who works for the governor, separately presented their revenue estimates to the budget committee.

Before the legislative session began last month, then-Gov. Kristi Noem's budget proposal estimated \$2.46 billion in ongoing revenue for the 2026 budget.

Her budget plan — inherited by new Gov. Larry Rhoden after Noem departed to become U.S. secretary of Homeland Security — includes numerous cuts to close a \$51 million gap between ongoing revenue and ongoing expenses.

Johnson estimated Wednesday that 2026 revenues will be \$17.6 million less than Noem's budget proposal originally estimated.

Johnson also provided updated numbers for the current budget year. The bureau estimates this year's ongoing revenue to be \$2.38 billion — about \$9 million less than lawmakers expected when they made this year's budget last winter.

The picture presented by Mehlhaff was different. The Legislative Research Council's earlier ongoing revenue estimate for the current budget year was \$2.42 billion, and he said the new estimate is \$2.39 billion, a nearly \$30 million decline.

Mehlhaff's estimate for the next budget year is \$2.46 billion in ongoing revenue, putting the council's estimate in line with Noem's initial estimate.

Both state officials outlined economic conditions affecting the state's revenue, including persistent inflation, lower farm income, and a slowdown of people filling jobs.

"Since about January 2024, we've been flat to negative on employees in South Dakota," Mehlhaff said. "That, to me, is a bit concerning in terms of growing the economy."

Noem estimated \$1.45 billion in sales tax revenue for this year. The council's revised estimate is \$10 million less than that, while the bureau's is about \$14 million less.

Johnson said the outlook is negative.

"The consensus seems to be that interest rates are going to be higher for longer," Johnson said. "That suppresses economic activity."

One factor in the budgetary difficulties is the Legislature's own doing. During the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers reduced the state sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2% until 2027, costing an estimated \$100 million annually in lost revenue.

*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.*

## Bill to allow concealed pistols on college campuses clears state Senate

**Updated bill requires enhanced permit and secure storage**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 6:38 PM**

PIERRE — A bill to let students carry concealed pistols in South Dakota's public institutions of higher education is on its way to the state House of Representatives.

The proposal morphed from its more permissive initial form into one less objectionable to the state Board of Regents before earning a 33-2 endorsement on the Senate floor Wednesday.

State institutions currently bar the possession of guns on school grounds.

Freshman Sen. Mykala Voita, R-Bonesteel, said the amended version of Senate Bill 100 isn't the bill she originally wanted. Even so, she worked with the regents on guardrails to achieve her goal of allowing responsible student gun owners to protect themselves.

Under the amendment she requested and her fellow senators passed, students would need an enhanced

concealed carry permit to arm themselves with firearms on campus. The original bill had no such caveats. To obtain such a permit, the permittee must complete firearms safety training and pass an FBI background check.

People who go through that kind of trouble and “commit to carrying every day,” Voita said, are responsible. “I’ve been carrying since I was 18, so I can personally speak to this,” Voita said.

The amended bill would also require on-campus gun owners to lock their weapons up when they’re not carrying them, and bar firearms near research areas and areas with volatile chemicals. As with the original, it doesn’t specify whether a student can open carry.

A host of senators sang Voita’s praises for working with the regents to find a compromise. Pierre Republican Jim Mehlhaff, the majority leader, said it might be the best bill he’d ever seen at the statehouse.

Sioux Falls Democrats Jamie Smith and Liz Larsen cast the two dissenting votes. Smith praised the idea of encouraging gun safety training – valuable for all citizens, he said – but said he felt compelled to interrupt the parade of accolades to speak up for South Dakotans who might still feel nervous about weapons on campus.

Deaths by firearm are “out of control” in the U.S., Smith said. The majority of firearm deaths are suicides.

“I just don’t want this body to stand here and think everybody in South Dakota thinks, ‘Hey, this is a great idea,’” Smith said.

Mehlhaff’s comments came moments later.

“This allows young people to protect themselves,” Mehlhaff said. “I don’t think any of us need to be protected from ourselves.”

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

## Legislative committee endorses ban on taxpayer-funded education lobbying

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 4:22 PM**

School boards would be prohibited from spending taxpayer money on lobbying under a bill endorsed by a legislative committee Wednesday at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre.

House Bill 1185, introduced by Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, would also prohibit school boards from becoming members of a nonprofit that lobbies the Legislature. She told lawmakers that the bill “challenges the status quo” and advocates for accountability.

House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, said the bill would encourage more “innovative” legislation to pass through the Legislature because education lobbyists wouldn’t be able to “shoot it full of holes.” He referenced the role education lobbyists played in opposing the failed education savings account bill he carried earlier this session, which would have provided public funds for private school tuition, homeschooling and other forms of alternative instruction.

A majority of school boards are members of at least one association that represents public school interests at the Legislature and provides other resources to schools throughout the year. Other education lobbyists represent specific education professions, including teachers and school administrators.

A registered lobbyist in South Dakota is hired by another person or a public or private organization to influence legislation.

There are 414 registered lobbyists for public organizations so far during the 2025 legislative session, according to the Secretary of State’s website. That includes lobbyists for state government offices, such as the Governor’s Office, Attorney General’s Office and state departments.

There are 755 private lobbyists so far for the 2025 legislative session. “Private” includes associations funded with membership dues from public entities, such as public school districts, municipalities and

counties.

Opponents of the bill took issue with the focus on education lobbyists. Dianna Miller, a longtime lobbyist in the Capitol representing the Large School Group, said lobbyists are hired to represent their clients' interests and answer lawmaker questions.

"We serve a useful purpose here," Miller said. "It's very difficult to not look at this bill and not see it's an attack on us because we have a different opinion."

The House Education Committee voted 8-7 to send the bill to the House floor. Rep. Tesa Schwans, R-Hartford, said she supports the bill because education lobbyists who testified did not answer questions about how much taxpayer funds approved by school boards are spent on lobbying.

"That's a red flag to me," Schwans said.

Committee Chair Rep. Lana Greenfield, R-Doland, cautioned lawmakers against singling out one lobbying group, adding that lawmakers and state employees are paid with taxpayer dollars and are not restricted from trying to influence legislation.

"If we're going to be asking questions about what they make and what we're using our taxpayer dollars for in that area," Greenfield said, "please also question the Governor's Office and all of their lobbyists – their mega, mega lobbyists."

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.

## **SD university students wouldn't be required to live on campus under committee-endorsed legislation**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 2:58 PM**

Students attending South Dakota public universities would no longer be required to live on campus the first two years of their education under legislation endorsed by a legislative committee Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre.

Republican Rapid City Rep. Phil Jensen introduced House Bill 1193, calling the South Dakota Board of Regents' two-year housing policy "impoverishing" for students. The legislation came from students who want to change the policy because they believe it would be cheaper to live off-campus.

Students said they met with university officials about their concerns, but their request to change the housing policy was turned down.

"Making students do this for two years is completely unnecessary and, rather frankly, it is a money grab by the universities," said Levi Taglioli, a student at the University of South Dakota and a legislative intern.

Heather Forney, vice president of finance and administration for the state Board of Regents, which oversees the university system, told lawmakers that the legislation would create an "untenable" situation. She said student housing fees and meal plans help to pay for infrastructure for dining, housing, student unions, book stores and wellness centers at South Dakota's six public universities.

The system could lose up to \$87 million annually if the legislation passes, Forney told lawmakers, which would cause the university system to default on roughly \$263 million in bonds used to build those facilities.

The Bureau of Finance and Management also opposed the legislation because of concerns that a potential default would impact the state's AAA bond rating. A state's bond rating is used by investors to evaluate the risk of a bond investment for projects, with a higher rating leading to better rates for taxpayers.

The cost will be much greater than \$87 million, said Rep. Mike Stevens, R-Yankton, because it would cost the state, cities, counties and schools significantly more to borrow money for infrastructure projects if the state loses its AAA bond rating.

"I think all of us are in for saving our taxpayers money," Stevens said. "You're costing our taxpayers mil-



lions of dollars by passing this bill.”

Rep. Travis Ismay, R-Newell, said he supported the legislation because adults shouldn't be forced to live somewhere to go to college. Forney told lawmakers that the housing policy does have exceptions, with about 93% of requested waivers granted for students.

Lawmakers on the House Education Committee passed the bill with an 8-7 vote. It'll head to the House floor next.

*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.*

## Gabbard confirmed as director of national intelligence; SD's Thune, Rounds vote yes

**BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 12:05 PM**

WASHINGTON — Former Hawaii U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard was confirmed and sworn in as director of national intelligence Wednesday.

Gabbard — confirmed in the U.S. Senate 52-48, largely along party lines — will now be responsible for a budget of more than \$100 billion and oversee 18 organizations and agencies across the vast intelligence community.

Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell was the only GOP senator to oppose Gabbard's confirmation. He voted to advance her Cabinet bid earlier in the week.

Every Democratic and independent senator also opposed Gabbard on Wednesday.

At her swearing-in ceremony in the White House, Gabbard thanked Trump for trusting her to “fulfill this critical position as director of national intelligence at any time but specifically during this time.”

“Unfortunately, the American people have very little trust in the intelligence community, largely because they've seen the weaponization and politicization of an entity that is supposed to be purely focused on ensuring our national security,” she said.

“So, I look forward to being able to help fulfill that mandate that the American people delivered to you very clearly in this election to refocus our intelligence community by empowering the great patriots who have chosen to serve our country in this way and focus on ensuring the safety, security and freedom of the American people.”

The lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve ran an unsuccessful 2020 Democratic presidential campaign and later joined the Republican Party.

She faced serious concerns from lawmakers of both sides of the aisle regarding her bid to serve as director of national intelligence but managed to secure the support of every Republican except McConnell.

Gabbard was mired in several controversies, including her views on foreign policy, meetings she took part in with then-Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and accusations of promoting Russian propaganda.

At her confirmation hearing in late January, Gabbard clarified more of her past statements and actions and said she would “work to end the politicization of the intelligence community.”

Gabbard's confirmation followed a procedural vote Monday, where she advanced 52-46 in a party-line vote. North Carolina GOP Sen. Thom Tillis and Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. John Fetterman did not vote in Monday's round.

Ahead of the confirmation vote, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said on the Senate floor Wednesday that every Democrat would oppose Gabbard's “awful” nomination “because we simply cannot, in good conscience, trust our most classified secrets to someone who echoes Russian propaganda and falls for conspiracy theories.”

Virginia Sen. Mark Warner also spoke on the Senate floor opposing Gabbard's nomination prior to the

vote, saying he's "profoundly worried that she lacks the qualifications or judgments" to be the director of national intelligence. Warner is the top Democrat on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

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

## **U.S. House GOP releases budget that raises debt limit by \$4 trillion, extends tax cuts**

**BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 11:07 AM**

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans released their budget resolution Wednesday, laying out a vision for raising the debt limit and drafting a reconciliation package that is significantly different from the one Senate Republicans released last week.

The House budget resolution proposes Congress pass one bill that would extend the 2017 tax cuts passed during Donald Trump's first term and boost spending on border security and defense, while paying for the trillions in an increase to the deficit with cuts to other government programs.

The House's budget resolution, which the committee will mark up on Thursday, would also raise the debt limit by \$4 trillion. The United States has amassed \$36.22 trillion in debt over decades.

Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., wrote in a social media post there are still many steps for GOP lawmakers to go through before they'll be able to send Trump a bill.

"With nearly every House Republican directly engaged in this deliberative process, this resolution reflects our collective commitment to enacting the President's full agenda—not just a part of it," Johnson said.

"There will be ongoing debates and discussions in the coming weeks, and we remain focused on working through the process to deliver on our promises made to the American people," Johnson added. "There's still much work to be done, but we are starting on the right path."

Democrats predict a substantial portion of those cuts will be made to Medicaid, which is the nation's health care and long-term care program for 80 million people with low incomes, run in partnership with states.

House Democratic Assistant Leader Joe Neguse, of Colorado, said during a press conference the GOP budget resolution and the outline for a reconciliation package were a "betrayal of the middle class" that would "cut Medicaid, end it as we know it, and ultimately reward billionaires and corporations."

"We know that this rip-off plan that they're pursuing within the Budget Committee will increase costs, not decrease costs," Neguse said. "You don't decrease costs by gutting Medicaid."

### **Senate plows ahead**

Senate Republicans were meeting Wednesday on their own budget resolution, which would move core policy goals through two separate bills.

The first would include \$175 billion for border security, \$150 billion for defense and about \$20 billion for the Coast Guard. All of it would be paid for by cutting funding on other government programs.

Congress would need to adopt a second budget resolution under the Senate's plan in order to extend the 2017 GOP tax law.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said during the markup that he believes Congress needs to move quickly to approve spending on defense and border security, before coming back to negotiate a tax bill.

Graham also said that under his proposal for reconciliation, work on "comprehensive immigration reform" would wait until later.

"I am dying to work with my Democratic colleagues to fix a broken immigration system, but that only happens after you regain control of your border and you deport the people that should have never been here to begin with," Graham said.

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## How it works

Both chambers of Congress must vote to approve the same budget resolution with identical reconciliation instructions before they can unlock the process that allows them to move a bill through the Senate without getting at least 60 votes to advance past the legislative filibuster.

Republicans in the House and Senate are currently on different paths, but will ultimately have to agree on one or two reconciliation bills. Their other options include negotiating a deal with Democrats or setting aside many of their campaign promises.

The House budget resolution would send reconciliation instructions to several committees that would then be tasked with drafting their portion of the package before March 27.

The House Committee on Ways and Means, chaired by Missouri Rep. Jason Smith, would be able to increase the deficit by up to \$4.5 trillion in its bill, which would extend the elements in the 2017 tax cuts law set to expire late this year.

The Armed Services Committee, led by Alabama Rep. Mike Rogers, would draft a bill to spend about \$100 billion on various defense programs.

The Homeland Security Committee could spend up to \$90 billion on various border security programs. Tennessee Rep. Mark E. Green will draft that bill as chairman of the panel.

The Judiciary Committee, run by Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, would be able to write its bill to spend up to \$110 billion.

## Areas to be cut include agriculture

The Agriculture Committee, chaired by Pennsylvania Rep. Glenn Thompson, would write a bill cutting at least \$230 billion from the various programs in its jurisdiction.

The Education and Workforce Committee, led by Michigan Rep. Tim Walberg, would need to cut at least \$330 billion from the departments and programs under its purview.

The Energy and Commerce Committee, run by Kentucky Rep. Brett Guthrie, would need to find at least \$880 billion in cost savings to help Republicans pay for the other parts of the bill.

Energy and Commerce Committee ranking member Frank Pallone Jr., a New Jersey Democrat, wrote in a statement the panel's eventual reconciliation bill would likely impact Medicaid, calling it a "heartless and cruel proposal."

"The consequences of this budget will be devastating. One in three Americans rely on Medicaid for their health coverage and this Republican budget will eviscerate that care," Pallone wrote. "Millions of Americans will lose their coverage, hospitals will be forced to close, and Community Health Centers will be forced to lay off doctors and nurses."

The Financial Services Committee, chaired by Arkansas Rep. J. French Hill, is charged with finding at least \$1 billion in savings to help offset the cost of the border security, defense and tax provisions.

The Natural Resources Committee, led by Arkansas Rep. Bruce Westerman, would need to find at least \$1 billion in savings.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, run by Kentucky Rep. James Comer, would need to cut at least \$50 billion.

The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, chaired by Missouri Rep. Sam Graves, is tasked with cutting at least \$10 billion.

*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.*

## Anti-abortion 'Baby Olivia' video could become required viewing for some schoolkids

**Bill introduced in South Dakota fails in legislative committee**

**BY: ELISHA BROWN - FEBRUARY 12, 2025 8:00 AM**

Grade school students in several Republican-led states may soon be required to watch a fetal development video produced by a prominent anti-abortion group as part of their curricula.

Live Action uploaded the "Baby Olivia" video featuring a British narrator and "Bridgerton"-esque background music in August 2021. It has since racked up more than 9 million views.

The organization says that the clip was reviewed and accredited by a group of doctors. They are all affiliated with anti-abortion or Christian organizations: American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American College of Pediatricians, Charlotte Lozier Institute, Christian Academic Physicians and Scientists, and Christian Medical and Dental Associations.

The video has been pitched as an educational tool for children in some states that enacted abortion restrictions after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* nearly three years ago. Critics say the video is misleading and contains medical inaccuracies.

"This isn't sex education. This is a disinformation campaign designed to brainwash young children and force an out-of-touch and wildly unpopular regressive and false reproductive agenda in the public education system, using anti-abortion, anti-science propaganda about fetal development," said Christine Soyong Harley, president and CEO of SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change last year.

Soyong Harley's statement was a response to Tennessee lawmakers passing the "Baby Olivia Act." Republican Gov. Bill Lee signed the legislation in April 2024.

South Dakota's House Education Committee voted 12-3 on Monday to reject a bill that included a video mandate, with a specific mention in the bill that the "Baby Olivia" video would have met the requirement.

Similar proposals are advancing this year in Arkansas, Iowa and Nebraska. The Arkansas House passed a measure Thursday that would make public school students in grades 5-12 watch the fetal development video. According to Arkansas Advocate, Democratic Rep. Steve Magie, an ophthalmologist, said fifth grade is too early to watch the video and derided the clip for measuring gestation from fertilization instead of a patient's last menstrual period — an obstetrics standard.

Republican Rep. Mary Bentley, the bill's sponsor and a nurse, said the video is accurate and endorsed by OB-GYNs who oppose abortion, the Advocate reported. "Kids are seeing so much already on their phones, and they're hearing stuff in the bathroom," she said. "I want them to see some truth and know what's happening so they can have honest discussions."

GOP lawmakers in Iowa are arguing that fetal development videos should be shown to first graders. While a state Senate bill does not reference the Live Action video, it says children in first through 12th grades should watch depictions of "the unborn child by showing prenatal human development, starting at fertilization," Iowa Capital Dispatch reported. The state House passed a similar law referencing "Baby Olivia," Live Action and anti-abortion groups last spring.

A Nebraska Republican filed a somewhat toned-down version in January. State Sen. Rick Holdcroft's legislation would require education officials to adopt standards for human development curricula and show videos depicting the creation of vital organs, Nebraska Examiner reported.

The proposal was referred to an education committee last month. "Part of the bill is that if parents think that's too much for their child, well, then they can opt out," Holdcroft said.

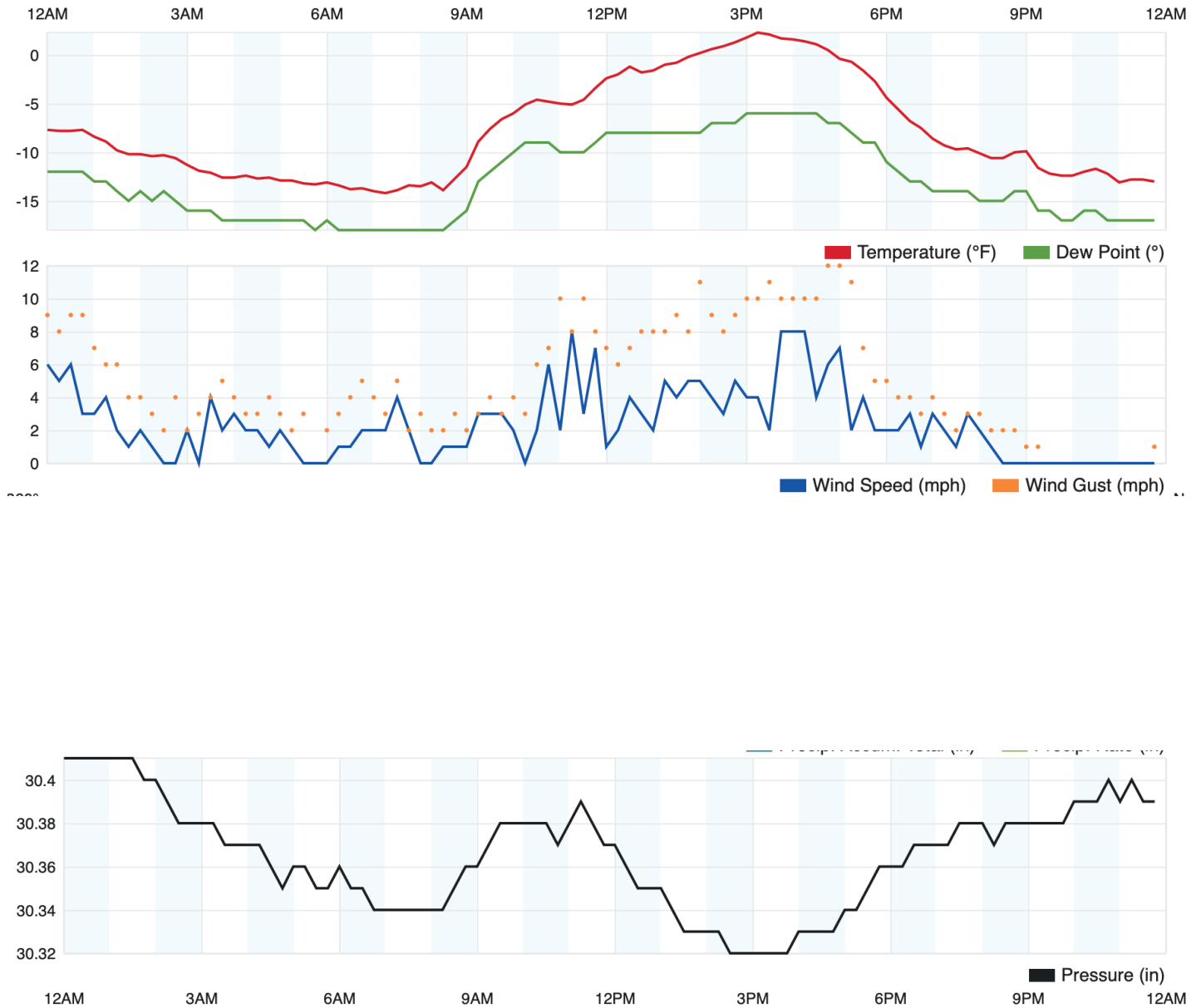
*The staff of South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.*

*Elisha Brown is the Reproductive Rights Today newsletter author at States Newsroom. She is based in Durham, North Carolina, where she previously worked as a reporter covering reproductive rights, policy, and inequality for Facing South. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Daily Beast, The Atlantic, and Vox. She attended American University in Washington, D.C. and was raised in South Carolina.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
<b>High: 15 °F</b>	<b>Low: -3 °F</b>	<b>High: 23 °F</b>	<b>Low: -4 °F</b>	<b>High: 4 °F</b>
Sunny	Increasing Clouds	Chance Snow	Slight Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy	Slight Chance Snow

## Hourly Wind Chills This Morning February 13, 2025 3:07 AM

- Actual low temperatures will range from -15 to -25°
- Very cold to dangerously cold wind chills of -20° to near -45° below zero
- Lowest wind chills near the ND/SD border around daybreak
- Frostbite possible on exposed skin in as little as 10 to 30 minutes

**Minimum Wind Chill Forecast (°F)**

	2/13											
	Thu											
	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm		
<b>Aberdeen</b>	-15	-15	-15	-31	-42	-43	-39	-31	-21	-15		
Britton	-41	-43	-45	-44	-43	-45	-37	-30	-25	-18		
Brookings	-30	-28	-31	-19	-18	-18	-23	-21	-17	-14		
<b>Chamberlain</b>	-15	-15	-26	-27	-27	-28	-21	-14	-9	-3		
Clark	-14	-14	-25	-31	-38	-41	-32	-27	-21	-15		
Eagle Butte	-29	-27	-28	-30	-32	-32	-27	-21	-13	-6		
Ellendale	-19	-20	-33	-40	-47	-47	-41	-36	-29	-21		
Eureka	-37	-40	-40	-42	-45	-46	-40	-33	-22	-14		
Gettysburg	-27	-28	-29	-32	-36	-37	-31	-24	-16	-8		
Huron	-17	-18	-20	-29	-30	-31	-28	-23	-19	-13		
Kennebec	-25	-26	-29	-29	-28	-29	-24	-17	-9	-3		
McIntosh	-35	-36	-37	-41	-47	-46	-42	-33	-22	-14		
<b>Milbank</b>	-31	-32	-32	-33	-34	-34	-29	-22	-16	-10		
Miller	-20	-22	-22	-25	-30	-31	-25	-18	-12	-7		
<b>Mobridge</b>	-30	-32	-33	-36	-39	-40	-35	-26	-18	-11		
Murdo	-27	-29	-30	-30	-29	-29	-24	-16	-7	2		
<b>Pierre</b>	-19	-20	-23	-26	-31	-33	-28	-21	-13	-5		
Redfield	-16	-17	-17	-27	-35	-35	-30	-23	-17	-12		
Sisseton	-25	-27	-27	-31	-38	-38	-32	-25	-19	-14		
<b>Watertown</b>	-31	-31	-32	-34	-37	-39	-35	-28	-19	-15		
Webster	-25	-26	-30	-34	-39	-39	-35	-30	-21	-15		
Wheaton	-16	-16	-17	-20	-35	-35	-33	-29	-22	-18		



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Extreme Cold Warnings and Cold Weather Advisories remain in effect through 9 AM CST across the area for very cold to dangerous wind chills of -20 to -45°. This can cause frostbite on exposed skin in 10 to 30 minutes.

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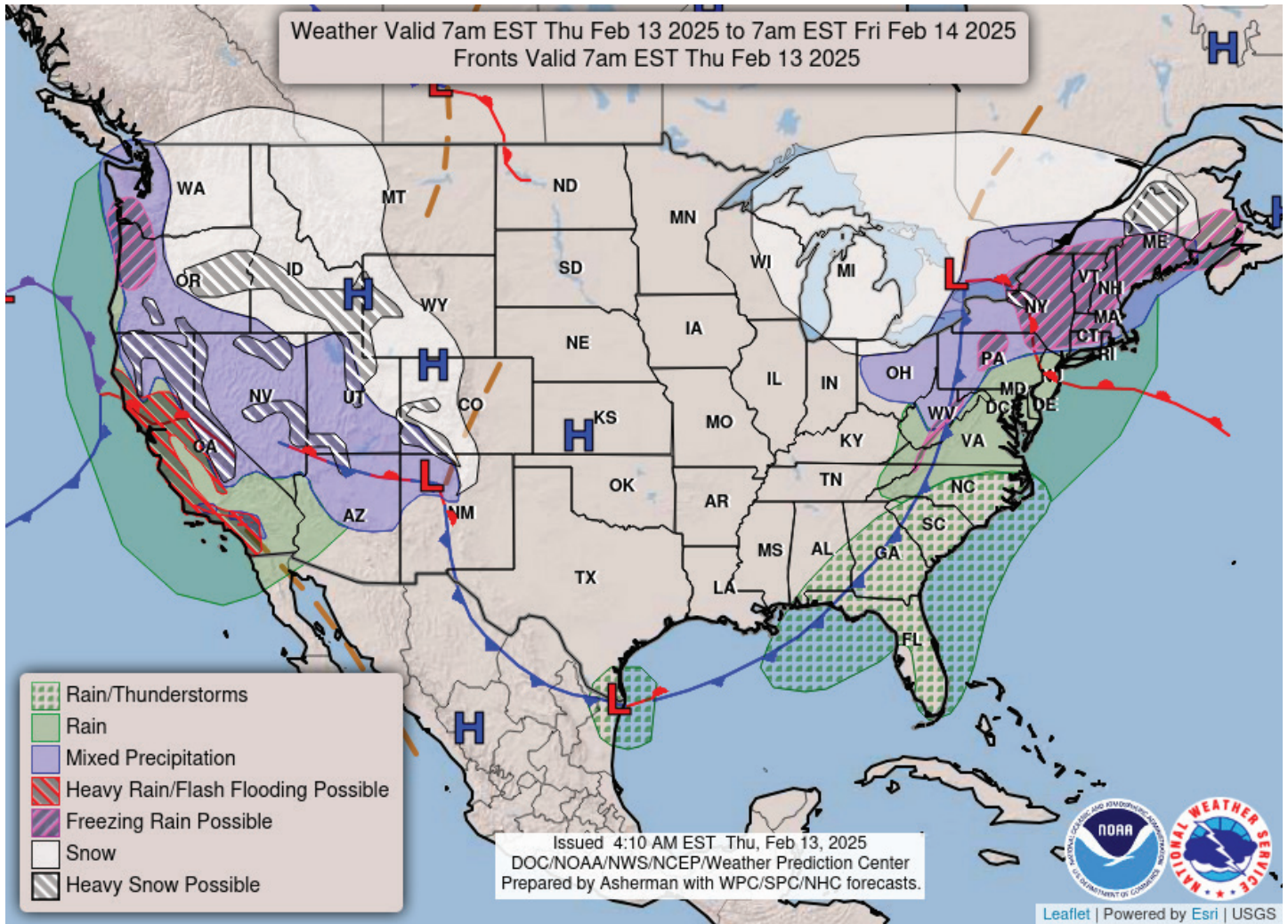
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 2 °F at 3:16 PM**  
**Low Temp: -14 °F at 7:04 AM**  
**Wind: 12 mph at 3:16 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

Day length: 10 hours, 24 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1901  
Record Low: -34 in 1905  
Average High: 28  
Average Low: 5  
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.26  
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20  
Average Precip to date: 0.81  
Precip Year to Date: 0.20  
Sunset Tonight: 5:58:33 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:33:00 am



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## Today in Weather History

February 13, 1995: Snow fell over a broad strip from southwest to northeast South Dakota. The snow began as freezing rain in the northeast, and there were several vehicle accidents attributed to the icing. The most substantial snow was at Custer in the Black Hills, with 14 inches. A few six to eight inches amounts were reported over the southwest, central, and northeast South Dakota plains. In addition, strong winds caused some blowing and drifting snow in northeastern South Dakota.

1905: Freezing temperatures were recorded over the states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri. Morning lows of 29 degrees below zero at Gravette, Arkansas, 40 below at Lebanon, Kansas, and 40 below at Warsaw, Missouri, established all-time records for those three states.

The low temperature at Vinita, Oklahoma, plummeted to 27 degrees below zero. The temperature would be tied at Watts in January 1930 and Blackwell and Medford in February 2011. The negative 27-degree reading is cold enough to be the 2nd lowest temperature on record in Oklahoma. The coldest is currently 31 degrees below zero, recorded at Nowata on February 10, 2011.

1784 - Ice floes blocked the Mississippi River at New Orleans, then passed into the Gulf of Mexico. The only other time this occurred was during the "Great Arctic Outbreak" of 1899. (David Ludlum)

1885 - The "Friday the 13th" avalanche at Alva, UT, killed sixteen persons, and left thirteen others buried for twelve hours before being rescued. (David Ludlum)

1889 - It was the coldest morning of record along the Gulf Coast. The temperature dipped to 7 above zero at New Orleans LA and Pensacola FL, and plunged to -1 degree at Mobile AL. The mercury dipped to -2 degrees at Tallahassee, the coldest reading of record for the state of Florida. (David Ludlum)

1905 - Morning lows of -29 degrees at Pond AR, -40 degrees at Lebanon KS, and -40 degrees at Warsaw MO established all-time records for those three states. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy rain over central California. Chews Ridge reported nearly eleven inches of rain in 24 hours, and extensive flooding occurred in San Benito County. The Mount Rose ski resort in Nevada experienced a "white-out" with 60 mph winds and 36 inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong winds in the wake of a storm in the northeastern U.S., gusting to 60 mph at Oswego NY, produced six foot snow drifts in northeastern Ohio. High winds in the mountains of Utah, gusting to 106 mph at the Snowbird ski resort, contributed to a forty car pile-up on Interstate 15, near the town of Bluffdale. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms produced locally heavy rain and flash flooding from central Texas to western Pennsylvania. Up to ten inches of rain deluged western Kentucky in two days, with five day totals ranging up to 13.16 inches at Gilbertsville Dam KY. Flooding caused tens of millions of dollars damage, including 18 million dollars damage at Frankfort KY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A slow moving cold front brought heavy snow to Utah, Colorado and Wyoming. Big Horn WY reported 15 inches of snow, and up to 22 inches was reported in Utah. In Colorado, 8 to 12 inches of snow fell over the northwest suburbs of Denver, while 16 to 22 inches was reported in the high mountain elevations west of Fort Collins. Strong winds accompanied the heavy snow, and bitter cold weather followed in its wake. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995: A National Weather Service Survey Team concluded a weak (F1) tornado occurred at the General Motors Desert Proving Grounds facility in Mesa, Arizona. Moderate damage was observed. A roof was damaged, and about 20 vehicles were destroyed and moved around. One car was lifted, moved several feet, and set down inside a roped-off area containing solar exposure equipment. The tornado traveled northeast and lasted about five minutes. The image below is from the February 1995 Storm Data.

2000: Late in the day and into the early morning hours of the 14th, severe thunderstorms spawned six tornadoes over southwestern Georgia that killed 19, injured 202, and caused \$35 million in damages. An F3 tornado hit southern Camilla, killing 11 people and wounding 175 others in the town.





## IS IT THE END OR THE BEGINNING?

Two men met for prayer early one morning. After reading a passage of Scripture, they knelt in prayer. Said the first, "Lord, it's hard for me to pray. You know that I am at the end of all my resources. I have nothing left."

Upon hearing his brokenness, his prayer partner put his arm around his shoulder and shouted, "How wonderful! Now you are at the beginning of God's resources."

Mark's Gospel has an interesting story about a ruler and his resources. It reminds us of the importance and necessity of eternal values rather than earthly riches.

Jesus, in speaking of the emphasis we place on money, said, "People with wealth will have a difficult time in getting into heaven." In astonishment his disciples asked, "Well, if money won't get us into heaven, what will?"

Calmly He replied, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God."

Material possessions and our desire to acquire them tend to fix our hearts on the things of this world. When this happens, we lose sight of what is truly valuable: our relationship with God. He becomes unimportant.

For many, it is easier to pass the test of adversity than the test of prosperity. Prosperity places the focus on ourselves while adversity proves our need for God.

Prayer: Help us to realize, Lord, that without placing our trust in Your saving power and the redeeming love of God, we will never be with You in heaven! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Matthew 19:26

*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: 02.11.25

7 30 39 41 70 13

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$129,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 39 Mins 43 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

6 16 23 27 30 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$23,700,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 54 Mins 43 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

8 29 34 36 42 11

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 9 Mins 43 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

4 7 8 17 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$35,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 9 Mins 43 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

11 24 26 31 39 15

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 38 Mins 43 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

21 32 36 45 49 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$172,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 38 Mins 43 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

### California's burn scars brace for flooding as freezing rain and snow head for Oregon

By BEN FINLEY and JOHN RABY Associated Press

Officials in California distributed sandbags, prepositioned rescue swimmers and told residents to have their go-bags ready as the state prepares for an atmospheric river that could bring heavy rain, winds and flooding Thursday to areas ravaged by wildfires.

Meanwhile, Portland coated its streets with 2,000 gallons of liquid anti-icer while officials in Oregon and Idaho opened emergency shelters to prepare for a punishing mix of snow and ice starting Thursday.

Southern California could see as much as 6 inches (about 15 centimeters) of rain in the mountains and 3 inches (about 7.6 centimeters) in coastal areas and valleys, according to Brent Bower, hydrologist with the National Weather Service. Strong wind gusts could bring down trees, cause power outages and delay flights.

Evacuation warnings were issued in Mandeville Canyon and other areas ravaged by the Palisades Fire, the most destructive fire in Los Angeles city history, over concerns about potential debris flows during the upcoming storm. There were also warnings for Trabuco Canyon and other areas near the burn scar for the Airport Fire.

All Malibu schools were closed Thursday and the Knott's Berry Farm shuttered due to the atmospheric river, a long band of water vapor that can transport moisture from the tropics to more northern areas.

Daniel Swain, a climate scientist for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, said the area is in desperate need of rain but this may come too hard and fast. The result could be debris flows and flash flooding around wildfire burn areas.

These burned areas are more at risk to debris flows because vegetation that helps to keep soil anchored has been burned away and loose debris, including ash, soil and rocks, have been added, he said in a statement.

County officials said roads may be closed and urged residents to be prepared should a mandatory evacuation order become necessary.

East hit with heavy snow and freezing rain

The rain follows storms Wednesday that dumped heavy snow and freezing rain on a swath of the U.S. East from Kentucky to the nation's capital, causing hundreds of traffic accidents, knocking out power in places and threatening to flood waterways.

The storm system, which cut a path from Kentucky to Maryland and points farther north on Tuesday, brought more than 14 inches (37 centimeters) of snow to Iron Gate, a tiny Appalachian town in western Virginia, and 12 inches (30.5 centimeters) to White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, a small city about 65 miles (105 kilometers) to the west, the National Weather Service said.

By early Thursday, more than 150,000 customers in Virginia and more than 13,000 in North Carolina were still without electricity, according to PowerOutage.us. Appalachian Power, which serves a million customers in West Virginia, Virginia and Tennessee, said more than 5,700 workers were trying to restore power.

The region's airports received several inches of snow, according to Scott Kleebauer, a meteorologist with the weather service's Weather Prediction Center.

Nearly 7,000 flights were canceled or delayed across the United States Wednesday, including almost 300 into Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, according to the flight-tracking site FlightAware.com.

Hundreds of accidents

In Kentucky, snowy roads caused a head-on fatal crash Tuesday in Nelson County, south of Louisville. The driver of a car lost control going into a curve, crossed the center line and hit an oncoming semi truck head on, according to the county's emergency management director, Brad Metcalf. The driver died at the scene.

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In Virginia, where Gov. Glenn Youngkin declared a state of emergency, the state police reported about 850 crashes on Tuesday and Wednesday, dozens of which involved injuries. Officials said it was not known if they were caused by the weather.

Maryland State Police reported 235 crashes and 185 inoperable or unattended vehicles.

In southern West Virginia, multiple crashes temporarily shut down several major highways Tuesday.

Pacific Northwest ice storm

Freezing rain and snow were expected in northwest Oregon and Southwest Washington, which could cause power outages, according to the National Weather Service.

Officials in Oregon's Multnomah County extended a state of emergency through at least Thursday and said six emergency shelters would be open. Officials said 356 people went to the shelters Tuesday night. Wind chill readings could dip to 10 degrees (minus 12 Celsius) in Portland, the weather service said.

In Idaho, a cold weather advisory was in effect, with wind chills potentially as low as minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 25 degrees Celsius) in the north central part of the state.

An ice storm forecast for the Portland area early Thursday and Friday could challenge deliveries of flowers and other gifts for Valentine's Day. Temperatures plummeted earlier this week in Portland, which is more known for its rainfall.

Julia Duncan, a co-owner of Flowers in Flight, shrugged off the weather, saying the area endured ice storms in past winters and customers are willing to go the extra mile for the people they love.

"It's Valentine's Day!" Duncan said. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens."

"We're in the neighborhood where a lot of people tend to do pickups, too, and (we've) got a couple of drivers who are willing to drive in the ice and snow," Duncan said. "So hopefully it won't affect us too much."

## **Hamas says it will release more hostages as planned, paving the way to resolve ceasefire dispute**

By SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Hamas said Thursday it would release the next group of Israeli hostages as planned, paving the war toward resolving a major dispute that threatened the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

The militant group said Egyptian and Qatari mediators have affirmed that they will work to "remove all hurdles," and that it would implement the truce deal.

The statement indicated three more Israeli hostages would be freed Saturday. There was no immediate comment from Israel on Hamas' announcement.

Hamas' move should allow the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip to continue for now, but its future remains in doubt.

Hamas had threatened to delay the next release of Israeli hostages, accusing Israel of failing to meet its obligations to allow in tents and shelters, among other alleged violations of the truce. Israel, with the support of U.S. President Donald Trump, had threatened to renew its offensive if hostages were not freed.

Hamas said its delegation held talks in Cairo with Egyptian officials and was in contact with Qatar's prime minister about increasing the entry of shelters, medical supplies, fuel and heavy equipment for clearing rubble into Gaza.

Egypt's state-run Qahera TV, which is close to the country's security services, reported that Egypt and Qatar had succeeded in resolving the dispute. The two Arab countries have served as key mediators with Hamas and helped broker the ceasefire, which took effect in January, 15 months into the war.

Egyptian media also aired footage showing trucks carrying temporary housing and bulldozers on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing with Gaza. They reported that the trucks were heading to an Israeli inspection area before crossing into Gaza.

Trump has introduced more uncertainty

The truce faces a much bigger challenge in the coming weeks. The first phase is set to conclude at the beginning of March, and there have not yet been substantive negotiations over the second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens of remaining hostages in return for an end to the war.

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A Trump proposal to remove some 2 million Palestinians from Gaza and settle them in other countries has thrown the truce's future into further doubt. The plan has been welcomed by Israel but vehemently rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, which have refused to accept any influx of refugees. Human rights groups say it could amount to a war crime under international law.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right allies are already calling for a resumption of the war after the first phase with the goal of implementing Trump's plan and annihilating Hamas, which remains in control of the territory after surviving one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

The war began on Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and abducting around 250 people. More than half have been released in deals with Hamas or other agreements, eight have been rescued and dozens of bodies have been recovered.

The captives are among the only bargaining chips Hamas has left, and it may be difficult to get the group to commit to further releases if it believes the war will resume.

Trump has given mixed signals about what he wants to see in Gaza.

He took credit for brokering the ceasefire, which was reached days before he took office after more than a year of negotiations mediated by the Biden administration. But he has also expressed misgivings about how the agreement is unfolding and says it's up to Israel whether to resume the war or not, while pledging continued U.S. military support.

Seventy-three hostages have not yet been released, around half of whom are believed to be dead. Nearly all the remaining hostages are men, including Israeli soldiers.

The war has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's health Ministry, which does not say how many were fighters. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Israel's offensive has obliterated large parts of Gaza. At its height, the fighting had displaced 90% of the territory's population of 2.3 million. Hundreds of thousands have returned to their homes since the ceasefire took hold, though many have found only mounds of rubble and buried human remains and unexploded ordnance.

A 'new war' would likely be far worse

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz, echoing Trump, said Wednesday that "all hell will break loose" if Hamas stops releasing hostages. He said a "new Gaza war" wouldn't end until Hamas was defeated, which would allow for Trump's vision of mass displacement to be carried out.

With far fewer hostages remaining in Gaza, Israel would have more freedom of action militarily.

It would also face far fewer constraints from the United States, its main military patron. The Biden administration, while providing crucial military and diplomatic support, had occasionally pressed Israel to allow in more aid and at one point suspended some weapons shipments. It had also said there should be no permanent displacement of its Palestinian population.

Trump has lifted restrictions on arms transfers, and his administration is pressing ahead with the sale of \$7 billion worth of weapons approved under President Joe Biden.

Trump has said Gaza's population should be resettled elsewhere in the region, with wealthy Arab countries paying for it. He has suggested that once the fighting ends, Israel would transfer control of Gaza to the United States, which would then redevelop it as the "Riviera of the Middle East."

Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a key partner in Netanyahu's fragile governing coalition, has called for a resumption of the war, the "voluntary migration" of large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza and the reestablishment of Jewish settlements there.

## This is what happens to the body when HIV drugs are stopped for millions of people

By The Associated Press

A generation has passed since the world saw the peak in AIDS-related deaths. Those deaths — agonizing, from diseases or infections the body might otherwise fight off — sent loved ones into the streets, pressuring governments to act. The United States eventually did, creating PEPFAR, arguably the most successful foreign aid program in history. HIV, which causes AIDS, is now manageable, though there is still no cure.

Now the Trump administration has put the brakes on foreign aid while alleging it's wasteful, causing chaos in the system that for over 20 years has kept millions of people alive. Confusion over a temporary waiver for PEPFAR — and the difficulty of restarting its work, with U.S. workers, contractors and payments in upheaval — means the clock is ticking for many who are suddenly unable to obtain medications to keep AIDS at bay.

The U.S.-led global response to HIV has been so effective that AIDS wards of people wasting away are a vision of the past. Now health experts, patients and others fear those days could return if the Trump administration doesn't reverse course or no other global power steps into the void, and fast.

"In the next five years, we could have 6.3 million AIDS-related deaths," the U.N. AIDS agency told The Associated Press. That's a shock at a time of rising complacency around HIV, declining condom use among some young people and the rise of a medication that some believe could end AIDS for good.

The agency has begun publicly tracking new HIV infections since the aid freeze.

Here's a look at what happens to the body when HIV drugs are stopped:

**An immune system collapse**

HIV is spread by bodily fluids such as blood, breast milk or semen. It gradually weakens the body's immune system and makes it vulnerable to disease, including ones rarely seen in otherwise healthy people. The surprising emergence of such cases in the 1980s is what tipped off health experts to what became known as the AIDS epidemic.

Years of intense advocacy and shocking sights of children, young adults and others dying of pneumonia and other infections led to the response that created PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Twenty million people around the world died before the program was founded. Now millions of people take drugs known as antiretrovirals that keep HIV from spreading in the body.

Stopping those drugs lets the virus start multiplying in the body again, and it could become drug-resistant. HIV can rebound to detectable levels in people's blood in just a few weeks, putting sexual partners at risk. Babies born to mothers with HIV can escape infection only if the woman was properly treated during pregnancy or the infant is treated immediately after birth.

If the drugs are not taken, a body is heading toward AIDS, the final stage of infection.

**The daily danger of germs**

"Without HIV treatment, people with AIDS typically survive about three years," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says.

For a long time, there may be no noticeable symptoms. But a person can easily spread HIV to others, and the immune system becomes vulnerable to what are called opportunistic diseases.

The National Institutes of Health says opportunistic diseases include fungal infections, pneumonia, salmonella and tuberculosis. For a country like South Africa, with the world's highest number of HIV cases and one of the largest numbers of TB cases, the toll could be immense.

Unchecked by HIV treatment, the damage continues. The immune system is increasingly unable to fight off diseases. Every action, from eating to travel, must consider the potential exposure to germs.

**Every day counts**

For years, the importance of taking the drugs every day, even at the same time of day, has been emphasized to people with HIV. Now the ability to follow that essential rule has been shaken.

Already, hundreds or thousands of U.S.-funded health partners in countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have been laid off, causing widespread gaps in HIV testing, messaging, care and support on the continent



most helped by PEPFAR. At some African clinics, people with HIV have been turned away.

Restoring the effects caused by the Trump administration's foreign aid freeze during a 90-day review period, and understanding what's allowed under the waiver for PEPFAR, will take time that health experts say many people don't have.

Meanwhile, the head of the U.N. AIDS agency, Winnie Byanyima, told the AP that more resistant strains of the disease could emerge.

And an additional 3.4 million children could be made orphans — another echo of the time when the world raced to confront AIDS with few tools at hand.

## How South Korea's Constitutional Court is deciding on the president's future

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol is putting up a desperate fight for his political life at Seoul's Constitutional Court after being impeached and arrested for his short-lived imposition of martial law last year. After weeks of hearings, the court is nearing a decision on whether to formally remove him from office.

Yoon's legal saga, which also includes a separate criminal indictment on rebellion charges, has become a stress test for the country's democracy, which has been challenged by deepening political polarization and distrust.

Yoon's conservative supporters rioted at a Seoul court that authorized his arrest; his lawyers and ruling party have openly questioned the credibility of courts and law enforcement institutions; and Yoon has continued to express contempt for his liberal rivals, endorsing baseless conspiracy theories about election fraud to justify his ill-fated authoritarian push.

If Yoon is dismissed, that would trigger a presidential by-election that could test voters' trust in the electoral process, while a decision to reinstate him could fuel further instability if the public see it as unjust.

The Constitutional Court's ruling, expected by March, will be a crucial moment for South Korea. Here's a look at how it's being decided.

How the process works

Under South Korea's constitution, the National Assembly has the power to impeach presidents but not to remove them from office. After an impeachment, the president's powers are temporarily suspended and a trial begins at the Constitutional Court. The court has 180 days to either remove Yoon from office or reject the impeachment and restore his powers. If he's thrown out of office, a national election to choose his successor must be held within 60 days.

The Assembly made specific charges against Yoon when impeaching him — misusing military force, circumventing legal processes to declare a state of emergency, and attempting to disband the legislature — but the court is only required to rule on whether or not he can remain in office. Removing Yoon would need the votes of six of the court's eight justices.

Was the declaration of martial law legal?

Yoon faces criminal accusations of attempted rebellion over his short-lived declaration of martial law, but the Constitutional Court is focusing on a relatively simple question: whether he had legitimate grounds to declare martial law on Dec. 3.

The constitution limits the exercise of that power to times of war or comparable national emergencies.

Yoon has argued that his martial law decree was necessary to overcome the "anti-state" liberal opposition, which he claims improperly used its legislative majority to block his agenda.

After winning a landslide victory in last year's legislative elections, the liberal opposition impeached several of Yoon's key officials and blocked his budget bill. Yoon's side says those moves created a crisis that required drastic action.

But Yoon's National Security Director Shin Won-shik told the Constitutional Court on Tuesday that Yoon

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began floating the idea of using his emergency powers before the general elections in April.

Did Yoon follow legal protocols?

The National Assembly has also said that Yoon sidestepped a constitutional requirement to deliberate in a formal meeting of the Cabinet before declaring martial law.

Yoon called 11 Cabinet members to his office shortly before declaring martial law on late-night television, but most participants, including Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, have said the gathering did not qualify as a meeting and that Yoon unilaterally informed them of his decision rather than inviting deliberation.

The meeting also failed to follow legal procedures required for formal state council meetings: no agenda was proposed, no signatures were collected from participants and no minutes were recorded. Yoon told the court Tuesday that he thought the records could be produced later through electronic approval.

Several top officials, including Han, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, and Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, said they attempted to talk Yoon out of the decision, citing potential damage to the country's international reputation and economy.

But Yoon went ahead with the martial law declaration, saying that his "perception of the situation" was different, according to public prosecutors' criminal indictments of Yoon and his former Defense Minister, Kim Yong Hyun, who played a key role in the events.

Former Interior and Safety Minister Lee Sang-min, one of Yoon's closest allies, is the only participant who has said the Dec. 3 Cabinet meeting had substance, telling the court on Tuesday that officials engaged in "passionate debates." Yoon has said that it makes "absolutely no sense to suggest that Cabinet members came to the presidential office just for an informal meeting or to hang out."

Did Yoon try to disband the legislature?

Finally, the Assembly accused Yoon of attempting to dissolve the legislature, something that is beyond his constitutional powers even under martial law.

A military decree that followed Yoon's declaration stated that "all political activities are prohibited, including activities of the National Assembly and local councils," and hundreds of troops were deployed to the National Assembly, including special operation units who broke windows while unsuccessfully attempting to reach the main chamber.

Legislators managed to assemble a quorum in the chamber despite the assault and voted unanimously to lift the state of martial law.

Yoon and his lawyers have maintained that the martial law declaration was intended as a temporary and "peaceful" warning to the liberal opposition, and that he had always planned to respect lawmakers' will if they voted to lift the measure.

He said the troops were there to maintain order, not to disrupt the legislature.

But the Assembly has pointed to testimonies by some military commanders, who have described a deliberate attempt to seize the legislature that was thwarted by hundreds of civilians and legislative staff who helped lawmakers enter the assembly, and by the troops' reluctance or refusal to follow Yoon's orders.

Yoon's claims have been contradicted by testimony from Kwak Jong-keun, the now-arrested commander of the Army Special Warfare Command. Kwak said the president directly instructed him to have troops pull the lawmakers out, desperate to prevent the 300-member Assembly from gathering the 150 votes necessary to overturn his martial law order. Yoon has denied accusations that he sought to arrest key politicians and election officials.

In addition to surrounding the legislature, hundreds of other troops were sent to National Election Commission offices the same day. Yoon says he was aiming to investigate election fraud allegations, which remain unsubstantiated.

## **Saudi educator known for charity and prisoner work wins \$1 million Global Teacher Prize**

By JON GAMBRELL and MALAK HARB Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A Saudi educator known for his charity work and instructing prisoners won the \$1 million Global Teacher Prize on Thursday.

Mansour al-Mansour received the award at the end of the World Governments Summit in Dubai, an annual event that draws leaders from across the globe.

Al-Mansour is also an author and is known for work in his community, including a program that helped ensure people had access to air conditioning maintenance during Saudi Arabia's scorching summer months.

The prize is awarded by the Varkey Foundation, whose founder, Sunny Varkey, established the for-profit GEMS Education company that runs dozens of schools in Egypt, Qatar and the UAE.

Al-Mansour is the ninth teacher to win the award from the foundation, which first began handing out the prize in 2015.

Past winners have included a Kenyan teacher from a remote village who gave away most of his earnings to the poor, a Palestinian primary school teacher who teaches her students about non-violence and a Canadian educator who taught a remote Arctic village of Inuit students.

GEMS Education, or Global Education Management Systems, is one of the world's largest private school operators and is believed to be worth billions. Its success has followed that of Dubai, where only private schools offer classes for the children of the foreigners who power its economy.

GEMS plans to open a school later this year targeting the children of the ultra-wealthy families now moving to booming, skyscraper-studded Dubai.

The Gems School of Research and Innovation in Dubai, which is planned to have a robotics lab, an Olympic-size swimming pool and an elevated football pitch that doubles as a helipad, will charge fees running from \$31,000 for students in pre-K and kindergarten to \$56,000 for high-school seniors.

## **Gas explosion at Taiwan food court kills 4 and injures 26**

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — A gas explosion at a department store in Taiwan on Thursday killed four people and injured 26, fire authorities said.

The blast occurred at the food court on the 12th floor of the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi department store in Taichung city, the Taichung Fire Bureau said. The higher floors of the upscale department store were blown out, raining debris on pedestrians below.

Among the dead were two people visiting from Macau, Macao's Tourism Office confirmed Thursday. Local media reported that they were part of a family of seven who were there for tourism. The other five were also injured and are now being treated at local hospitals in Taichung.

Part of the store was under renovation, but it's not clear if the work was connected to the explosion, Taichung Vice Mayor Cheng Chao-hsin told reporters at the scene. "If it's found there were illegal actions or parts that violated renovation regulations, it will be dealt with appropriately," Cheng said.

Dozens of firefighters were deployed to the scene at about 11:30 a.m. Parts of the building's exterior were damaged and scattered fragments were strewn on the streets.

Taichung Mayor Lu Shiow-yen told reporters at the scene that she felt the shock at her office nearby. She said the fire bureau would focus on a rescue operation first, but an investigation was also underway and officers were checking whether there were other sources of danger.

Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te said he had asked all relevant government agencies to investigate the cause of the accident.

## NATO allies insist Ukraine and Europe must be in peace talks as Trump touts Putin meeting

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Several NATO allies stressed on Thursday that Ukraine and Europe must not be cut out of any peace negotiations as U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth denied that the United States is betraying the war-ravaged country.

European governments are reeling after the Trump administration signaled that it is planning face-to-face talks with Russia on ending the Ukraine war without involving them, insisted that Kyiv should not join NATO, and said that it's up to Europe to protect itself and Ukraine from whatever Russia might do next.

"There can be no negotiation about Ukraine without Ukraine. And Ukraine's voice must be at the heart of any talks," U.K. Defence Secretary John Healey told reporters at NATO headquarters, as the organization's 32 defense ministers met for talks on Ukraine.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said: "For me, it's clear ... that Europe must be involved in the negotiations — and I think that's very easy to understand," particularly if Europe is "supposed to play a central or the main role in the peace order."

Europe, he said, "will have to live directly" with the consequences, so "it goes without saying that we must be part of the negotiations."

Hegseth denied that the U.S. has betrayed Ukraine by launching negotiations about its future without Kyiv's full involvement. After talks with Putin and then Zelenskyy, Trump said on Wednesday he would "probably" meet in person with the Russian leader in the near term, possibly in Saudi Arabia.

"There is no betrayal there. There is a recognition that the whole world and the United States is invested and interested in peace. A negotiated peace," Hegseth told reporters.

Hegseth warned that the war in Ukraine must "be a wakeup call" for NATO's European allies to spend more on their own defense budgets.

Twenty-three of the 32 member countries were forecast to have met the organization's guideline of spending 2% of gross domestic product on their national defense budgets last year, but a third still do not.

But Hegseth's French counterpart, Sébastien Lecornu, described the wrangling over greater defense spending as "a false debate," saying that governments and parliaments across Europe are already approving more weapons purchases and bigger military budgets while helping Ukraine stave off an invasion.

Lecornu warned that the future of NATO itself is now in question.

"To say that it's the biggest and most robust alliance in history is true, historically speaking. But the real question is will that still be the case in 10 or 15 years," he said, after the U.S. — by far NATO's biggest and most powerful member — signaled that its security priorities lie elsewhere, including in Asia.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who was chairing Thursday's meeting, said that whatever agreement is struck between Russia and Ukraine, it is crucial that the "peace deal is enduring, that Putin knows that this is the end, that he can never again try to capture a piece of Ukraine."

Touting Europe's investment in Ukraine, Swedish Defense Minister Pål Jonson said European nations provided about 60% of the military support to Kyiv last year and must be involved, especially given U.S. demands that Europe take more responsibility for Ukraine's security in the longer term.

"It's very natural that we're engaged into the discussions," Jonson said.

His Estonian counterpart, Hanno Pevkur, underlined that the European Union has driven sanctions against Russia, has invested heavily in Ukraine's defense, and will be asked to foot the bill for rebuilding the war-ravaged country.

"We have to be there. So there is no question about it. Otherwise this peace will not be long lasting," Pevkur warned.

## Elon Musk calls for US government to 'delete entire agencies'

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Elon Musk called Thursday to "delete entire agencies" from the U.S. government as part of his push under President Donald Trump to radically cut spending and restructure its priorities.

Musk offered a wide-ranging survey via a videocall to the World Governments Summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, of what he described as the priorities of the Trump administration interspersed with multiple references to "thermonuclear warfare" and the possible dangers of artificial intelligence.

"We really have here rule of the bureaucracy as opposed to rule of the people — democracy," Musk said, wearing a black T-shirt that read: "Tech Support." He also joked that he was the "White House's tech support," borrowing from his profile on the social platform X, which he owns.

"I think we do need to delete entire agencies as opposed to leave a lot of them behind," Musk said. "If we don't remove the roots of the weed, then it's easy for the weed to grow back."

While Musk has spoken to the summit in the past, his appearance Thursday comes as he has consolidated control over large swaths of the government with Trump's blessing since assuming leadership of the Department of Government Efficiency. That's included sidelining career officials, gaining access to sensitive databases and inviting a constitutional clash over the limits of presidential authority.

Musk's new role imbued his comments with more weight beyond being the world's wealthiest person through his investments in SpaceX and electric carmaker Tesla.

His remarks also offered a more-isolationist view of American power in the Middle East, where the U.S. has fought wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

"A lot of attention has been on USAID for example," Musk said, referring to Trump's dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development. "There's like the National Endowment for Democracy. But I'm like, 'Okay, well, how much democracy have they achieved lately?'"

He added that the U.S. under Trump is "less interested in interfering with the affairs of other countries."

There are "times the United States has been kind of pushy in international affairs, which may resonate with some members of the audience," Musk said, speaking to the crowd in the UAE, an autocratically ruled nation of seven sheikhdoms.

"Basically, America should mind its own business, rather than push for regime change all over the place," he said.

He also noted the Trump administration's focus on eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion work, at one point linking it to AI.

"If hypothetically, AI is designed for DEI, you know, diversity at all costs, it could decide that there's too many men in power and execute them," Musk said.

On AI, Musk said he believed X's newly updated AI chatbot, Grok 3, would be ready in about two weeks, calling it at one point "kind of scary." He criticized Sam Altman's management of OpenAI, which Musk just led a \$97.4 billion takeover bid for, describing it as akin to a nonprofit aimed at saving the Amazon rainforest becoming a "lumber company that chops down the trees."

Musk also announced plans for a "Dubai Loop" project in line with his work in the Boring Company — which is digging tunnels in Las Vegas to speed transit. However, he and the Emirati government official speaking with him offered no immediate details of the plan.

"It's going to be like a wormhole," Musk promised. "You just wormhole from one part of the city — boom — and you're out in another part of the city."

## A far-right party is heading for its strongest result yet in Germany's election. Here's what to know

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Alternative for Germany appears to be heading for its strongest national election result yet this month and is fielding its first candidate to lead the country. Even though it's highly unlikely to take a share of power soon, it has become a factor that other politicians can't ignore and helped shape Germany's debate on migration.

The far-right party first entered Germany's national parliament eight years ago on the back of discontent with the arrival of large numbers of migrants in the mid-2010s, and curbing migration remains its signature theme. But the party has proven adept at harnessing discontent with other issues: Germany's move away from fossil fuels, restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and support for Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion nearly three years ago.

How did it start?

Alternative for Germany, or AfD, was founded in 2013 and initially focused on opposition to bailouts for struggling countries in the eurozone debt crisis — measures that then Chancellor Angela Merkel described as "without alternative." It was sometimes known as a "party of professors," a reference to leading figures in the early days, though it already had a strong streak of hard-right, anti-establishment identity.

Over the years, AfD became more radical and repeatedly changed leaders. It was Merkel's decision in 2015 to allow in large numbers of migrants that supercharged it as a political force, and in the 2017 national election, it won 12.6% of the vote to take seats in the German parliament for the first time.

Where does it stand now?

After returning to parliament in 2021 with reduced support of 10.3%, AfD picked up strength as Chancellor Olaf Scholz's center-left government bickered through a series of crises — some of its own making — and finally collapsed.

Germany saw a wave of protests a year ago triggered by a report that right-wing extremists met to discuss the deportation of millions of immigrants, including some with German citizenship, and that AfD members were present.

But that didn't do long-term poll damage to AfD. It finished second in the European Parliament election in June, and in September, the best-known figure on its hardest-right wing, Björn Höcke, secured the first far-right win in a state election in post-World War II Germany.

AfD is going into this election with renewed confidence and radical language. Alice Weidel, its first candidate for chancellor, has embraced the term "remigration" as the party calls for large-scale deportations of people with no legal entitlement to be in Germany — a politically loaded word that featured in last year's controversy.

AfD calls for the immediate lifting of sanctions against Russia and opposes weapons deliveries to Ukraine. It wants Germany to reintroduce a national currency and for the European Union to be turned into a looser "association of European nations," though it isn't explicitly advocating leaving the 27-nation bloc.

Germany's domestic intelligence agency has the party under observation for suspected right-wing extremism. The AfD's branches in three eastern states are designated "proven right-wing extremist" groups. AfD strongly objects to those assessments and rejects any association with the Nazi past. Höcke has appealed two convictions for knowingly using a Nazi slogan at a political event.

Who supports it?

AfD has support across Germany and is represented in all but two of the 16 state legislatures, but the party is strongest in the formerly communist and less prosperous east.

It has a unique ability to seize on issues "that other parties don't handle with this clarity, with this intensity, with this radicalism and this emotionality," said Wolfgang Schroeder, a political science professor at the Berlin Social Science Center. "And on top of that, it's an internet party and from the beginning used the emotionalizing power of the internet for its own communication — much better than all other German parties together."

That has helped it to perform strongly among young voters in recent regional elections. The party portrays itself as an anti-establishment force at a time of low trust in politicians, sometimes dismissing the "old parties" as a "cartel."

Schroeder described it as "something like an aircraft carrier for resentment and anger." Other parties say they won't work with it.

Who are its friends abroad?

AfD's rise has coincided with that of far-right parties in many other European countries, including Austria's Freedom Party and the National Rally in France, with which it has plenty of common ground. Weidel was in Budapest to visit Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Wednesday.

However, it isn't part of those parties' Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament after some tensions before last year's EU elections. AfD was thrown out of one of the group's predecessors after its leading candidate at the time, Maximilian Krah, said that not all Nazi SS men "were necessarily criminals."

The party has found an enthusiastic supporter in billionaire Elon Musk, a close ally of U.S. President Donald Trump. Musk has declared that "only the AfD can save Germany." He held a live chat on X with Weidel and appeared live by video link at an AfD campaign rally.

At that rally, Weidel vowed to "make Germany great again" in an echo of the U.S. president's slogan.

## **VP Vance is visiting the Dachau concentration camp memorial on eve of his big meeting with Zelenskyy**

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

MUNICH, Germany (AP) — U.S. Vice President JD Vance will visit the Dachau concentration camp memorial Thursday, making a stop at one of the most powerful symbols of World War II on the eve of his critical talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the three-year Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Vance, along with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, is due to sit down Friday with Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference to discuss President Donald Trump's intensifying push for Ukraine and Russia to begin negotiations to end Europe's deadliest conflict since World War II.

But first Vance is stopping at the solemn memorial that is a powerful reminder of the Nazis' World War II-era atrocities and the U.S. and Western allies' slowness to take decisive action to confront Adolf Hitler and the rise of his violent nationalist ideology.

Dachau was established in 1933 — the same year Hitler took power — as one of the first concentration camps. More than 200,000 people from across Europe were held at the camp, and over 40,000 prisoners died there in horrendous conditions. U.S. soldiers completed the liberation on April 29, 1945.

Vance is in the midst of a five-day visit to France and Germany, his first overseas travel since becoming vice president last month. His wife, Usha Vance, is expected to join him for the Dachau visit.

The moment at Dachau will offer Vance a chance to reflect on the scourges of war just as his boss, Donald Trump, is ratcheting up his efforts to end the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Trump on Wednesday spoke separately with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Zelenskyy. Trump said that he and Putin agreed it was time to "start negotiations immediately" to end the war.

And as Trump announced his agreement on negotiations with Putin, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said that NATO membership for Ukraine was unrealistic and suggested Kyiv should abandon hopes of winning all its territory back from Russia and instead prepare for a negotiated peace settlement to be backed up by international troops.

In addition to his talks with Zelenskyy, Vance is scheduled to deliver an address on Friday to the annual Munich Security Conference.

The war in Europe and NATO members' defense spending are expected to be front and center for the world leaders gathering in Munich.

Vance, like Trump, has been a sharp critic of U.S. allies' spending what the administration deems as too little on their defense budgets.

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"The Trump administration has been clear that we care a lot about Europe," Vance said during a meeting this week with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. "But we also want to make sure that we're engaged in a security partnership that's both good for Europe and the United States."

Over nearly three years of war, 50 countries — known as the Ukraine Contact Group — have collectively provided Ukraine with more than \$126 billion in weapons and military assistance, including more than \$66.5 billion from the U.S., which has served as chair of the group since its creation.

Trump in his 2024 campaign derided the enormous amount of U.S. military aid poured into Ukraine and vowed to end the conflict within 24 hours of returning to the White House.

Since his November election victory over Democrat Kamala Harris, Trump and his advisers have dialed back on their boldest timelines and set a goal of ending the war in about six months.

## Trump's third-term musings seem more a tease than a pledge

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

President Donald Trump has just started his second term, his last one permitted under the U.S. Constitution. But he's already started making quips about serving a third one.

"Am I allowed to run again?" Trump joked during the House Republican retreat in Florida last month. Whether teasing or taunting, it seems to be part of a pattern. Just a week after he won election last fall, Trump suggested in a meeting with House Republicans that he might want to stick around after his second term was over.

"I suspect I won't be running again unless you say, 'He's so good we got to figure something else out,'" Trump said to laughs from the lawmakers.

Over the years, Trump and his supporters have often joked about him serving more than his two constitutionally permitted terms. But his musings often spark alarm among his critics, given that he unsuccessfully tried to overturn his 2020 election loss and has since pardoned supporters who violently attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

But Trump, who will be 82 when his term ends, has repeatedly said that this will be his last term. Trying for another also would flatly violate the Constitution.

Here are some questions and answers related to Trump's occasional comments about a third term:

What does the Constitution say?

"No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice," begins the 22nd Amendment, adopted after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected four times in a row. He was last elected in 1944.

It's a fairly straightforward ban on serving more than two terms. Some Trump supporters argue the language is meant to apply only to two consecutive terms because Roosevelt's terms were consecutive, but notably that's not what the amendment says.

Others contend that because the ban is just on being "elected" more than twice, Trump could run as the next president's vice president and, if the ticket won, could simply replace that person if he or she resigns. To put it mildly, that would be quite a complex plan to pull off, in no small part because Trump would be 82 during the next election, a year older than former President Joe Biden was during last year's campaign.

At least one Republican in Congress has been bold enough to propose a constitutional amendment that would allow Trump to seek another term. It has no chance of going anywhere, given the high bar for amending the Constitution.

Who would stop Trump?

Even assuming Trump would attempt another run, a combination of election officials and courts would virtually ensure that he stayed off the ballot.

State officials have long kept would-be candidates off presidential ballots if they didn't meet the basic constitutional criteria, such as being a natural-born U.S. citizen or being at least 35 years old. They would do the same with someone clearly violating the limit on presidential terms.

A version of this unfolded in 2023, when a few states tried to keep Trump off the ballot because they



found he violated the 14th Amendment's ban on officials who engaged in insurrection. The U.S. Supreme Court reversed those decisions because no one had ever used the insurrection clause on a presidential candidate before and there were a lot of legal questions about its implementation.

There would be no similar questions about the meaning of the 22nd Amendment, said Derek Muller, a professor at Notre Dame Law School.

"You would not have the factual disputes, so it would be much wider," Muller said of the number of states keeping Trump off their ballots. "I'm not persuaded the Supreme Court is going to roll over."

So why is Trump doing this?

Trump has a long history of taunting his critics to flex his power, but there also could be a strategic reason for his keeping the third-term discussion alive.

Trump is a lame duck president in his final term. Because these politicians will never be on the ballot for the same office again, their political clout usually wanes quickly. The third-term flirtation is a way to try to convince people that Trump will be around in the future.

Trump's aggressive actions at the start of his new term shows that Trump knows his time is dwindling, Muller said.

"He's governing like he's a lame duck right now, with nothing to lose," Muller said.

## **Trump's foreign aid freeze forces health clinics in a vulnerable region of Syria to close**

By ROBERT BADENDIECK and GHAITH ALSAYED Associated Press

SARMADA, Syria (AP) — In the town of Sarmada in northern Syria, Dr. Mohammad Fares unlocked a clinic that once bustled with patients. Now it's empty, and shelves of medicine reduced to a few boxes of bandages and expired drugs.

This is what it looks like after the Trump administration halted U.S. foreign assistance last month. The U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID, issued stop-work orders during a 90-day review for what the administration has alleged is wasteful spending.

Fares had been working in three clinics run by Médecins du Monde, or Doctors of the World, offering free health care to the displaced population in northern Syria, which until the fall of former President Bashar Assad in December had been the country's main rebel-held enclave. It sheltered millions of people who had fled years of civil war.

Their already grim camps swelled again in 2023 after a deadly magnitude 7.8 earthquake hit Turkey and northern Syria. Since the fall of Assad, some displaced Syrians have begun to return home, but many have no homes left.

Fares' clinic in Sarmada used to support 16 camps in the region, assisting approximately 35,000 people. Since the aid freeze, 10 such clinics receiving USAID funding had to close, and Doctors of the World had to lay off 184 people, officials with the organization said.

"If the support is not resumed, there will be a major disaster and serious harm to vulnerable groups," said Fares, who heads the organization's medical programs. "Operating costs of clinics are much lower than those of hospitals. The cessation of work in these clinics will put increased pressure on emergency hospitals and other healthcare facilities"

This part of Syria lacks centralized government healthcare, leaving people reliant on nonprofit providers and making the impact of the sudden U.S. cuts especially dire, aid workers and experts said.

"Our analysis shows that withdrawing all of USAID's support in Syria would be equivalent to a devastating shock of 5% to its already struggling economy. This is among the largest impacts on any recipient," said Ian Mitchell, senior policy fellow at the Washington based Center for Global Development.

The U.S. had been providing 25 cents in foreign aid for every \$100 of U.S. income, Mitchell said, but that relatively small contribution had outsized impact: "Without U.S. support in places like Gaza and Syria, the world will become a more dangerous place."

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In one camp that had been served by a Doctors of the World clinic, near Kawkaba village, children played among the crowded tents.

Camp director Abdelkareem Khaled said the suspension of aid has exacerbated already difficult conditions. "Patients, especially those who need medicine every month, can no longer afford it at the pharmacy," he said, leaving those with chronic diseases like diabetes with wrenching decisions to make.

In one tent, Bassam Hussein, father of 4 daughters, said he was forced to pull his 12-year-old daughter out of school so she could work in an almond field to help pay for the medicine he uses for his thyroid illness.

"Every twenty days, I need a pack of medicine that costs \$12," he said, "If I don't secure the cost of the medicine, I experience complications — weakness, depression and so on." He said he was unable to work because of past injuries and illnesses.

Other organizations are in limbo. Some have continued providing services without knowing where they will find the money.

Dr. Mufaddal Hamadeh, president of the Syrian American Medical Society, which runs hospitals and mobile clinics across the north, said some services had to continue, such as the maternity ward and incubators. But it's unclear how long that will remain sustainable.

"We're not certain if we'll get a waiver or reimbursement for the expenses we've already covered," he said, referring to the U.S. government. "That already put a huge financial burden on us." He refused to give details.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has issued a waiver to exempt emergency food aid and "life-saving" programs. But Hamadeh and others said funding has not resumed to a point that would allow them to fully restore services.

"We're going to have to shut down some of these hospitals and shrink," Hamadeh said. "We can't be providing free services anymore."

Some programs, such as mental health support for refugees in Turkey and an autism center for children, may not be deemed life-saving.

"We have a grant that supports survivors of torture and sexual assault," Hamadeh said. "Are these services life-saving or not? Likely they will be shut down."

USAID and the U.S. government did not respond to questions. Elsewhere, USAID workers and aid officials have said funding hasn't resumed despite waivers, or USAID staffers who would process them are now gone.

SAMS relies on USAID for about 25 to 30% of its funds. It's significant, but some other organizations working in Syria receive much more.

Doctors of the World's Istanbul office, which oversees operations in northern Syria, was receiving 60% of its funding from USAID.

Sitting in a new, downsized office, Turkish branch director Hakan Bilgin recalled the day they were told to halt services.

"We just received the stop-work order suddenly. Nobody was expecting it," he said. "As a medical organization providing life-saving services, you're basically telling us: Close all the clinics, stop all your doctors, and you're not providing services to women, children, and the elderly."

Bilgin said his group has cut its daily consultations across northern Syria from 5,000 to 500. The organization has applied for a waiver from the U.S. but has received no response.

Trump and Elon Musk, who runs what is billed as a cost-cutting Department of Government Efficiency, have taken aim at various government agencies. But USAID has been hit the hardest, with Trump and Musk accusing the agency's work of being out of line with Trump's agenda.

Hamadeh, the SAMS president, said the aid cuts are short-sighted and could harm Washington's standing abroad.

"This money is helping people, saving lives," he said. "You can't just shut down USAID, which has helped millions across the world and actually did help improve America's reputation."

Northwest Syria has been devastated by years of war and neglect, he said. "Pulling the plug over that will just increase the suffering."

## With doors closed to the US, asylum-seekers turn to their Plan B: A new life in Mexico

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — When Angelica Delgado took a one-way flight to Mexico as she fled Cuba in December, she was set on seeking asylum in the United States.

But after President Donald Trump effectively slammed the door on asylum-seekers crossing the U.S. border when he took office last month, the 23-year-old recalibrated her plans.

She decided she would seek protection in Mexico.

"Like almost all Cubans, our objective was to go to the United States," she said. "It wasn't in our plans to stay, but now we have to face reality."

Amid a clampdown on asylum under Trump and tightening restrictions in recent years under the Biden administration, Delgado is among a growing number of migrants from across the world to ditch — or at least pause — their ambitions of reaching the U.S., and focus instead on building a life in Mexico.

Migrants trying to apply for asylum in Mexico in January more than tripled compared to the monthly average from the previous year, according to an international official with knowledge of the numbers who was not authorized to discuss them publicly. Mexico's refugee agency has not yet published figures for January.

"All of these policies Trump is pushing are leading more people to seek international protection in Mexico," said Andrés Ramírez, former director of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid, which processes asylum cases.

Delgado was among hundreds of migrants from Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti, Afghanistan and other countries gathering outside the refugee agency in Mexico City after Trump unleashed executive orders last month meant to slash access to asylum and militarize the border.

The Associated Press spoke to around a half-dozen people who had asylum appointments in the U.S. through the Biden-era app, CBP One, that Trump canceled on Inauguration Day. They were left stranded on the Mexican side of the border, their dreams of a legal pathway into the U.S. snuffed.

Many more said they now intended to seek asylum in Mexico, citing increasingly harsh restrictions in recent years in the U.S. or what they said was anti-immigrant sentiment there.

"Now, it's the Mexican dream," said a Mexican man helping Haitian friends try to get an appointment this month to apply for asylum in Mexico following the Trump executive orders.

Delgado, her partner and many others had put their hopes on pathways opened by the Biden administration to legally seek asylum in the U.S. They said they had no intention of hiring a smuggler to enter the U.S. illegally.

They said the risks of returning to Cuba were too great following a government clampdown on protests in recent years.

"Crossing illegally isn't an option for us. We'd rather stay here" in Mexico, Delgado said, adding that if they crossed illegally into the U.S. and were caught "they'll deport us and they'll send us back to Cuba."

Delgado, who is an architect, and her partner, a doctor, aren't able to work in their fields in Mexico because their training in Cuba is not recognized there, she said. So for now she's washing dishes in a market.

Mexico has long opened its doors to refugees and exiles, but asylum applications have soared in recent years, growing from 1,295 in 2013 to a record 140,982 in 2023.

That number dipped to 78,975 in 2024, as the CBP One app allowed migrants in southern Mexico to apply for appointments for entry into the U.S. before heading to the northern border.

The rise in petitions for asylum in Mexico may not result in an immediate uptick in refugees there as only a couple hundred applications can be processed each day, fueling criticism about Mexico's capacity to take on the burgeoning asylum demand.

Amid criticisms over the backlog, President Claudia Sheinbaum has sharply boosted funding for Mexican

agencies handling migration and asylum.

Venezuelan asylum-seeker Harry Luzardo, 37, said life in Mexico is an improvement after scrambling for years to scrape by in Ecuador and Chile.

Ecuador, Chile, Peru and Colombia were once the epicenter of the exodus of 8 million people from Venezuela, fleeing spiraling economic and political crises.

But with little international aid and an array of their own economic and security crises, Chile was among countries that began closing their doors to migrants.

"In Chile, you don't receive any kind of support," Luzardo said, waiting patiently in line earlier this month to make an asylum petition request in Mexico City. "In Chile, there's nothing for migrants."

Luzardo left Venezuela four years ago, but unable to get legal status to stay and work in Chile, he decided he'd try his luck at reuniting with family in the U.S.

Now, with that door closed, Mexico is his plan B.

"For now, I feel good here," he said. Still, he conceded, he'd rather be in the U.S.

## The latest inflation report shows that high prices are Trump's major economic challenge

By JOSH BOAK and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As a candidate last year, Donald Trump suggested he could easily conquer inflation and ease voters' fears about the economy.

"I will very quickly deflate," he promised at a California rally. "We are going to take inflation, and we are going to deflate it. We are going to deflate inflation. We are going to defeat inflation. We're going to knock the hell out of inflation."

Wednesday's consumer price index report showed that inflation is punching back — and President Trump could end up facing the same challenges that dragged down his predecessor, President Joe Biden.

The annual inflation rate has risen in the three months since the November election to 3%, with gasoline prices climbing despite Trump's claims that his return to the White House would signal increased oil production that would lower energy costs.

Trump frequently makes far-reaching assertions about his power to bring about change only to find that it is no match for market forces. It's a humbling reminder that even U.S. presidents are subject to the invisible hand of supply and demand, rather than the masters of it.

Consumer sentiment measures suggest the public already sees Trump's plans to expand tariffs as increasing inflation. On Wednesday, the president called for interest rate cuts, even though rate hikes by the Federal Reserve helped lower inflation that spiked at a four-decade high in 2022.

The latest consumer price figures have unnerved economists and the financial markets because they suggest that strong consumer spending, solid job gains and a falling unemployment rate could reignite inflation. Steady demand, particularly from wealthier consumers, makes it easier for companies to keep raising prices.

The cost of goods — including toys and auto parts — rose last month even before the imposition of tariffs. Trump has placed 10% tariffs on China, in addition to announcing the removal of exemptions on his 2018 steel and aluminum tariffs. There are also potential tariff hikes on Canada and Mexico and a potential executive order that would increase tariffs to match the import taxes charged by other countries.

All of this means that baseline inflationary pressures could be at their highest level in decades.

"Disinflation may be dead, and we may be looking at a higher rate of inflation than we observed for the 20 years prior to the pandemic," said Joseph Brusuelas, chief economist at RSM, a tax and advisory firm.

Trump's call for lower rates puts him in opposition to Fed Chairman Jerome Powell.

"If inflation goes up in general, we will use our tools, which is the interest rate, to bring it back down to 2% over time," Powell told a congressional committee on Wednesday. Powell also said that Trump's calls to lower rates wouldn't sway the Fed.

So far, the Trump White House's main response to this challenge has been to blame Biden, an argument

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with a short lifespan as Trump is exerting more control over economic policy.

"The Biden administration indeed left us with a mess to deal with," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said at Wednesday's news briefing. "It's far worse than I think anybody anticipated."

But Trump allies are also starting to float new ideas for tackling inflation. Standing in the Oval Office on Tuesday, billionaire Elon Musk, the head of the president's Department of Government Efficiency, proposed \$1 trillion in spending cuts this year.

Musk, the world's richest man who continues to control Tesla, X and SpaceX among other companies, wants to eliminate \$1 out of every \$7 spent by the federal government in order to bring the inflation rate to zero. It's not clear based on lawsuits and Congress' responsibility for government funding that Musk can deliver those savings.

"If you cut the budget deficit by a trillion between now and next year, there is no inflation," Musk said. "And if the government is not borrowing as much, it means that interest costs decline. So everyone's mortgage, their car payment, their credit card bills, anything, their student debt, the monthly payments drop. That's a fantastic scenario for the average American."

Such a steep cut might bring lower prices but also the pain of a sharp economic downturn.

"That would be a roughly 4% of GDP cut to federal spending, all in one year," said Michael Linden, a senior policy fellow at the Washington Center for Equitable Growth. "It would be an instant recession."

For now, markets are anticipating more inflation as consumer demand stays strong and Trump has yet to show how exactly his policies would keep prices low, as he promised to voters.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury note jumped Wednesday to 4.62% in response to the inflation report, a sign that investors expect interest rates, growth and inflation to be higher in the coming months.

Consumers also say that inflation will rise. Americans' expectations of inflation over the next year have soared, according to the University of Michigan's consumer sentiment survey. The February survey said that inflation this year will be 4.3%, up sharply from 3.3% the previous month. Many respondents mentioned tariffs as a concern.

When asked Wednesday why Trump's call for lower interest rates would temper inflation, Leavitt focused on what the president "wants" instead of what he would do.

"He wants interest rates to be lower," she said. "He wants inflation to be lower. And he believes that the whole of government economic approach that this administration is taking will result in lower inflation."

## **Modi is meeting with Trump in a visit meant to boost the US-India relationship and avoid tariffs**

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is meeting Thursday with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has heaped praise on him and is hoping to avoid tariffs that the new administration has slapped on other countries in its opening weeks.

Modi is a nationalist and has talked up his warm relationship with Trump during his first term while cheering his winning back the White House. The Indian leader is looking to improve relations with Washington and the West overall, which have been frosty lately after Modi refused to condemn Russia for its war on Ukraine.

The trip comes after Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist party's victory during a high-stakes state legislature election last weekend in India's federal territory, including New Delhi. The prime minister said before leaving for Washington that the visit was a chance to "deepen our partnership" in key areas such as technology, trade, defense and energy.

The White House visit isn't likely to be all smiles, though.

Trump has already imposed tariffs on China and says more are coming against the European Union, while threatening similar against Canada and Mexico and expanding tariffs on steel and aluminum he initially imposed during his first term.

Trump has repeatedly dubbed India a "tariff king." In response, New Delhi has shown a willingness to

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buy more American oil while lowering its own tariffs on U.S. goods, including on some Harley-Davidson motorcycles, from 50% to 40%.

Also, India in 2023 dropped retaliatory tariffs on U.S. almonds, apples, chickpeas, lentils and walnuts.

Then there's a recent deal allowing U.S.-based General Electric to partner with India-based Hindustan Aeronautics to produce jet engines for Indian aircraft in India, and the sale of U.S.-made armed MQ-9B SeaGuardian drones.

Still, Trump has decried U.S. trade deficits around the world and said he'll work to shrink them, including during his meetings at the White House last week with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba.

The U.S. is India's largest trade partner, but the two countries have a trade deficit of \$50 billion in India's favor.

The Indo-U.S. goods and services trade totaled around \$190.1 billion in 2023. According to India's External Affairs Ministry, the U.S. exports to India were worth nearly \$70 billion and imports \$120 billion.

Another topic likely to be discussed is immigration. Modi can point to India's having accepted the return of 104 migrants brought back on a U.S. military plane — the first such flight to the country as part of the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border.

For the Trump administration, meanwhile, India is seen as integral to the U.S. strategy of containing China in the Indo-Pacific. Modi's country is hosting a summit of a group of countries known as the Quad — made up of the U.S., India, Japan and Australia — later this year.

## Israel threatens 'all hell will break loose' on Hamas in latest Gaza ceasefire crisis

By TIA GOLDENBERG and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's defense minister on Wednesday vowed that "all hell will break loose" on Hamas if it fails to free hostages this weekend as planned, stepping up threats against the militant group as mediators worked to salvage their ceasefire.

There were signs that the gaps could be bridged. The dispute was sparked when Hamas accused Israel of failing to meet some commitments under the truce, including the delivery of tents and other aid, and said it would delay the next hostage release on Saturday.

Hamas official Mahmoud Merdawi told The Associated Press there were "positive signals" the three hostages will be released as planned on Saturday but the group had not yet received a commitment from Israel that it would adhere to the deal.

An Egyptian official with knowledge of the talks said the two sides were close to an agreement. The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss private negotiations, said Israel had committed to delivering more tents, shelters and heavy equipment to Gaza.

Israeli officials had no immediate comment. Israel says it is fulfilling its obligations under the deal, which went into effect on Jan. 19 and has paused the 16-month war in Gaza, bringing respite to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

In the ceasefire's current first stage, which is to last 42 days, Israel is to deliver large quantities of aid. Hamas is meant to free 33 hostages taken during its cross-border attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war. Eight of them are said to be dead. Twenty-one have been released so far, along with hundreds of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli custody.

Israel and Hamas trade threats

Hamas' threat to delay the hostage release sparked fury from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who vowed to resume the fighting if Hamas didn't follow through and ordered troops to be strengthened around Gaza. They pulled back from the territory's populated areas during the ceasefire.

On Wednesday, Defense Minister Israel Katz said he was echoing U.S. President Donald Trump by threatening that "all hell will break loose" if there is no hostage release on Saturday as planned.

"If Hamas stops releasing the hostages, then there is no deal and there is war," he said during a visit to a military command center. He said the "new Gaza war" wouldn't end until Hamas was defeated, which

would allow for Trump's "vision" on transferring Gaza's population to neighboring countries to be realized.

Hamas spokesperson Hazem Kasseem rejected "the language of U.S. and Israeli threats" and called on Israel to implement the terms of the ceasefire deal. Among other claims, Hamas says Israel is not allowing an agreed-upon number of tents, prefabricated homes and heavy machinery into Gaza.

Trump's remarks test the delicate truce

The ceasefire's stability has also been rocked by Trump, who has proposed relocating Palestinians out of Gaza to neighboring Arab countries so the U.S. can "own" and rebuild the territory – not necessarily for its current inhabitants.

Jordan and Egypt, where Trump wants Palestinians moved, have repeatedly and vehemently rejected the proposal. Jordan's King Abdullah II did so again after his meeting with Trump at the White House on Tuesday.

Trump has also suggested Hamas release all the hostages yet to be freed under the ceasefire's first phase at once – which emboldened Israel to call for more hostages to be freed on Saturday. The releases have been gradual and almost weekly so far.

The latest ceasefire dispute came as Israel and Hamas were expected to begin negotiations on a second phase of the deal, which would extend the truce, bring about the full withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza and see the remaining living hostages freed.

But there appears to have been little progress on those talks.

Netanyahu is under pressure from his political partners, on whom he relies to remain in power, to resume the war after the first phase. But he also faces surging outrage from many Israelis, who are stunned by the emaciated condition of the three hostages released last Saturday and want him to follow through with the deal.

## **Denver Public Schools sues to stop Trump administration policy allowing ICE agents in schools**

By HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

Denver Public Schools became the first U.S. school district Wednesday to sue the Trump administration challenging its policy allowing ICE immigration agents in schools.

Colorado's largest public school district argued in the federal lawsuit that the policy has forced schools to divert vital educational resources and caused attendance to plummet.

"DPS is hindered in fulfilling its mission of providing education and life services to the students who are refraining from attending DPS schools for fear of immigration enforcement actions occurring on DPS school grounds," the lawsuit states.

The federal lawsuit against the Department of Homeland Security and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem says the Trump administration hasn't provided "good reason" for rescinding the rules nor adequately considered or addressed the fallout.

Last month, President Donald Trump lifted longtime rules restricting immigration enforcement near sensitive locations, including schools. The announcement came as the new president seeks to make good on campaign promises to carry out mass deportations.

"Denver is standing up for its children and families and protecting the right of all children, regardless of their immigration status, to attend public schools," Elora Mukherjee, director of the Immigrants' Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School, said in an email.

Denver Public Schools serve more than 90,000 students — about 4,000 of which are immigrants, according to the lawsuit, which cites 2023-2024 school year numbers. More than half of the students are Hispanic or Latinx.

The city of Denver has seen an increase in migrants recently. Since 2023, about 43,000 people have arrived in the city from the U.S. southern border, according to the lawsuit.

"Parents across Denver enroll their children in public schools believing that while at school, their children will be educated and enriched without fear the government will enforce immigration laws on those

premises," the lawsuit said.

The school district says it has had to devote a lot of time and resources to adding policies that keep students safe and training faculty and staff on how to respond to people claiming they are conducting immigration enforcement at schools.

Denver Public Schools also want to see DHS publish the directive publicly, saying that not being able to view the change in policy has impeded their ability to prepare for it, according to the lawsuit.

The Trump administration did not immediately respond to an email from The Associated Press seeking comment.

## Seoul says North Korea is destroying facility that hosted reunions of war-separated families

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea is demolishing a South Korea-built property that had been used to host reunions of families separated during the 1950-53 Korean War, the South's government said Thursday, as it continues to eliminate symbols of engagement between the war-divided rivals.

Relations between the Koreas are at their worst in years, with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un continuing to flaunt his expanding nuclear weapons program and declaring to abandon long-standing goals of inter-Korean reconciliation, while describing the South as a permanent enemy.

The 12-story building at the North's scenic Diamond Mountain resort, which has 206 rooms and banquet facilities for hosting meetings, had been used for family reunions since 2009. The Koreas last held a family reunion in 2018, after Kim initiated diplomacy with Seoul and Washington in an effort to leverage his nuclear program for economic benefits.

Negotiations derailed in 2019 after a failed summit between Kim and U.S. President Donald Trump, who was serving his first term, when the Americans rejected North Korea's demands for a major release of U.S.-led economic sanctions in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities. The North has since suspended virtually all diplomatic activity with the South and ignored U.S. requests to resume talks while accelerating the development of nuclear weapons and missiles.

Seoul's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs, said it had confirmed that North Korea was demolishing the building, named the Reunion Center for the Separated Families, and urged the North to suspend the destruction. The North had previously removed a South Korea-built hotel, golf course and other tourist facilities from the Diamond Mountain resort.

"Demolishing the reunion center is an act against humanity that crushes the yearning of separated families, as well as a grave infringement of our state-owned property," the ministry said in a statement. The ministry said the South's government will consider "necessary" countermeasures, including legal action and international pressure, but it isn't clear whether Seoul has any effective options.

In 2023, South Korea filed a 44.7 billion won (\$30 million) damage suit against North Korea for blowing up a joint liaison office just north of their border in 2020. The lawsuit was seen as symbolic as there's no clear way for South Korea to force North Korea to pay if it is found liable for damages.

## Senate confirms Gabbard as Trump's director of national intelligence after Republicans fall in line

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tulsi Gabbard was sworn in as President Donald Trump's director of national intelligence on Wednesday shortly after she was confirmed by the Senate, where Republicans who had initially questioned her experience and judgment fell in line behind her nomination.

Gabbard is an unconventional pick to oversee and coordinate the country's 18 intelligence agencies, given her past comments sympathetic to Russia, a meeting she held with now-deposed Syrian President



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Bashar Assad and her previous support for government leaker Edward Snowden.

A military veteran and former Democratic congresswoman from Hawaii, Gabbard was confirmed on Wednesday by a 52-48 vote, with the Senate's slim Republican majority beating back Democratic opposition. The only "no" vote from a Republican came from Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

She is the latest high-ranking nominee to win Senate confirmation as the new administration works to reshape vast portions of the federal government, including the intelligence apparatus.

Staffers at the CIA and other intelligence agencies have received buyout offers, while lawmakers and security experts have raised concerns about Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency accessing databases containing information about intelligence operations.

Speaking after she was sworn in at the White House, Gabbard promised to work to "refocus" the intelligence community in line with Trump's vision.

"Unfortunately, the American people have very little trust in the intelligence community, largely because they've seen the weaponization and politicization of an entity that is supposed to be purely focused on ensuring our national security," Gabbard said.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence was created to address intelligence failures exposed by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Republicans have increasingly criticized the office, saying it has grown too large and politicized. Trump himself has long viewed the nation's intelligence services with suspicion.

GOP senators who had expressed concerns about Gabbard's stance on Snowden, Syria and Russia said they were won over by her promise to refocus on the office's core missions: coordinating federal intelligence work and serving as the president's chief intelligence adviser.

"While I continue to have concerns about certain positions she has previously taken, I appreciate her commitment to rein in the outsized scope of the agency," said Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, adding that Gabbard will bring "independent thinking" to the job.

McConnell, the former GOP leader, said in a statement after the vote that in his assessment, Gabbard brings "unnecessary risk" to the position.

"The nation should not have to worry that the intelligence assessments the President receives are tainted by a Director of National Intelligence with a history of alarming lapses in judgment," McConnell said.

At the White House, press secretary Karoline Leavitt said, "I think we're greatly disappointed in any Republican who chooses willfully to vote against the president's exceptionally qualified nominees."

McConnell also voted against confirming Pete Hegseth for defense secretary.

Democrats noted that Gabbard had no experience working for an intelligence agency and they said her past stances on Russia, Syria and Snowden were disqualifying. They also questioned whether she would stand up to Trump if necessary and could maintain vital intelligence sharing with American allies.

"We simply cannot in good conscience trust our most classified secrets to someone who echoes Russian propaganda and falls for conspiracy theories," said Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York, who accused Republicans of buckling under pressure from Trump and Musk.

"Is Ms. Gabbard really who Republicans want to lead intelligence agencies? I'll bet not," Schumer said.

Until GOP support fell into place, it was unclear whether Gabbard's nomination would succeed. Given the 53-47 split in the Senate, Gabbard needed virtually all Republicans to vote "yes."

Trump's "Make America Great Again" base has pressured senators to support Trump's nominees, and Elon Musk, the president's ally, took to social media recently to brand Sen. Todd Young, R-Ind., as a "deep-state puppet." Young had raised concerns about Gabbard but announced his support after speaking with Musk. The post was deleted after they spoke, and Musk later called Young an ally.

At Gabbard's swearing-in ceremony Trump called her a "courageous and often lonely voice" and urged her to "just stay the way you are."

"She'll be clear-eyed and she'll be focused on the threat of radical Islamic terrorism and lots of other threats too, threats from within," Trump said.

Gabbard is a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard who deployed twice to the Middle East and ran for president in 2020. She has no formal intelligence experience and has never run a government agency

or department.

Gabbard's past praise of Snowden drew particularly harsh questions during her confirmation hearing. Snowden, a former National Security Agency contractor, fled to Russia after he was charged with revealing classified information about U.S. surveillance programs.

Gabbard said that while Snowden disclosed important facts about such programs that she believes are unconstitutional, he violated rules about protecting classified secrets. "Edward Snowden broke the law," she said.

Gabbard's 2017 visit with Assad was another flashpoint. He was recently deposed following a brutal civil war in which he was accused of using chemical weapons.

Following her visit, Gabbard faced criticism that she was legitimizing a dictator, and then there were more questions when she said she was skeptical that Assad had used such weapons.

Gabbard defended her meeting with Assad, saying she used the opportunity to press the Syrian leader on his human rights record.

"I asked him tough questions about his own regime's actions," Gabbard said.

She also has repeatedly echoed Russian propaganda used to justify the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. In the past, she opposed a key U.S. surveillance program known as Section 702, which allows authorities to collect the communications of suspected terrorists overseas.

## Judge removes key legal hurdle for Trump's plan to trim federal workforce with deferred resignations

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, CHRIS MEGERIAN and MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday removed a key legal hurdle stalling President Donald Trump's plan to downsize the federal workforce with a deferred resignation program.

The Boston-based judge's order in the challenge filed by a group of labor unions was a significant legal victory for the Republican president after a string of courtroom setbacks.

"This goes to show that lawfare will not ultimately prevail over the will of 77 million Americans who supported President Trump and his priorities," said White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Another group of unions filed a lawsuit in Washington, D.C. late Wednesday, though its potential impacts were not immediately clear.

About 75,000 federal workers accepted the offer to quit in return for being paid until Sept. 30, according to McLaurine Pinover, a spokesperson for the Office of Personnel Management. She said the deferred resignation program "provides generous benefits so federal workers can plan for their futures," and it was now closed to additional workers.

American Federation of Government Employees National President Everett Kelley said in a statement that the union's lawyers are assessing the next steps.

"Today's ruling is a setback in the fight for dignity and fairness for public servants," Kelley said. "But it's not the end of that fight. Importantly, this decision did not address the underlying lawfulness of the program."

The union continues to maintain that it's illegal to force American citizens to make a decision, in a few short days, without adequate information, about "whether to uproot their families and leave their careers for what amounts to an unfunded IOU from Elon Musk," the statement said.

U.S. District Judge George O'Toole Jr. in Boston found that the unions weren't directly affected, so they didn't have legal standing to challenge the program, commonly described as a buyout. O'Toole was nominated by former President Bill Clinton, a Democrat.

The deferred resignation program has been spearheaded by Elon Musk, who is serving as Trump's top adviser for reducing federal spending. Under the plan, employees can stop working and get paid until Sept. 30.

Labor unions argued the plan is illegal and asked for O'Toole to keep it on hold and prevent the Office of Personnel Management, or OPM, from soliciting more workers to sign up.

A Justice Department lawyer has called the plan a "humane off ramp" for federal employees who may have structured their lives around working remotely and have been ordered to return to government offices.

## Trump upends US policy on Ukraine and says he and Putin have agreed to begin talks on ending the war

By MATTHEW LEE, WILL WEISSERT and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump upended three years of U.S. policy toward Ukraine on Wednesday, saying that he and Russian leader Vladimir Putin had agreed to begin negotiations on ending the war following a sudden prisoner swap.

Trump said he spent more than an hour on the phone with Putin and “I think we’re on the way to getting peace.” He noted that he later spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, but he was noncommittal about whether Ukraine would be an equal participant in U.S. negotiations with Russia.

“I think President Putin wants peace and President Zelenskyy wants peace and I want peace,” Trump told reporters in the Oval Office. “I just want to see people stop being killed.”

Of his conversation with Putin, Trump said, “People didn’t really know what President Putin’s thoughts were. But I think I can say with great confidence, he wants to see it ended also, so that’s good — and we’re going to work toward getting it ended and as fast as possible.”

Trump noted that he would “probably” meet in person with Putin in the near term, suggesting that could happen in Saudi Arabia.

Trump speaking to Putin sent a potentially dramatic signal that Washington and Moscow could work to hammer out a deal to end fighting in Ukraine by going around that country’s government. Doing so would break with the Biden administration, which steadfastly insisted Kyiv would be a full participant in any decisions made.

Asked specifically about Ukraine being an equal member in the peace process, Trump responded, “Interesting question. I think they have to make peace.”

In another blow to Ukraine’s Western-leaning aspirations, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said at NATO headquarters in Brussels that NATO membership was unrealistic for Ukraine.

“I don’t think it’s practical to have it, personally,” Trump said later about NATO membership for Ukraine. He added that Hegseth had said “it’s unlikely or impractical. I think probably that’s true.”

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration joined other NATO members in vowing that membership in the Western military alliance was “inevitable.”

Trump said Wednesday of Russia: “I think long before President Putin, they said there’s no way they’d allow that.”

“They’ve been saying that for a long time that Ukraine cannot go into NATO,” Trump said. “And I’m OK with that.”

Response from Zelenskyy and the Kremlin

Despite all that, Zelenskyy sought to put a brave face on what many in Ukraine will see as a major disappointment. In a social media post, he said he had “a meaningful conversation” with Trump that included discussion of “opportunities to achieve peace” and Kyiv’s “readiness to work together at the team level.”

“I am grateful to President Trump,” he said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the conversation between Trump and Putin covered a good deal of ground, including the Middle East and Iran, but that Ukraine was the main focus.

Peskov said Trump called for a quick cessation of hostilities and a peaceful settlement, and that “President Putin, in his turn, emphasized the need to remove the root causes of the conflict and agreed with Trump that a long-term settlement could be achieved through peace talks.”

“The Russian president supported one of the main theses of the U.S. president that the time has come for our two countries to work together,” Peskov told reporters. “The Russian president invited the U.S. president to visit Moscow and expressed readiness to host U.S. officials in Russia for issues of mutual interest, naturally including Ukraine, the Ukrainian settlement.”

In the meantime, Ukraine has offered to strike a deal with Trump for continued American military aid in exchange for developing Ukraine’s mineral industry — which could provide a valuable source of the rare earth elements that are essential for many kinds of technology.

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Trump suggested that aid would continue to flow but that Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent was in Ukraine working to get written assurances that the U.S. would get access to its rare earth elements and oil and gas.

"We're asking for security on our money," Trump said, noting of Ukraine: "They've agreed to it."

Zelenskyy tweeted earlier about the meeting with Bessent, saying "we value our partnership with the United States" and "strive to expand our joint capabilities."

Asked about Trump's views on Russia and Putin, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said, "I believe this nation views Putin and Russia as a great competitor in the region. At times, an adversary." But she also noted of Trump: "At times, he enjoys having good diplomatic relationships with leaders around the world."

Working more closely with Putin on Ukraine defies the long-held stance of Biden, who, together with his top national security aides, repeatedly insisted, "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine."

Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Trump's special Russia-Ukraine envoy, retired Gen. Keith Kellogg, will all be in Germany this week for the annual Munich Security Conference, which Zelenskyy also will attend.

Calls follow US-Russia prisoner exchange

Wednesday's Trump-Putin call, and the resulting policy sea change, followed a prisoner swap that resulted in Russia releasing Pennsylvania schoolteacher Marc Fogel after more than three years of detention in return for convicted Russian criminal Alexander Vinnik.

The White House described the prisoner swap as evidence of a diplomatic thaw that could advance negotiations to end the fighting in Ukraine.

In a social media post detailing his call with Putin, Trump wrote, "We each talked about the strengths of our respective Nations, and the great benefit that we will someday have in working together."

Trump also noted they "agreed to have our respective teams start negotiations immediately." The president appointed Rubio, CIA director John Ratcliffe, national security adviser Michael Waltz and his special Mideast envoy Steven Witkoff to lead those talks.

Fogel, who was deemed wrongfully detained by Russia, was arrested in August 2021 for possession of marijuana and was serving a 14-year prison sentence. He had been left out of previous prisoner swaps with Russia that were negotiated by the Biden administration.

Vinnik — the other person involved, according to two U.S. officials — was arrested in 2017 in Greece at the request of the U.S. on cryptocurrency fraud charges and was later extradited to the United States, where he pleaded guilty last year to conspiracy to commit money laundering.

He is in custody in California awaiting transport to Russia, the officials said. The Kremlin confirmed that a Russian citizen was freed in the United States in exchange for Fogel but refused to identify him until he arrives in Russia.

Trump welcomed Fogel at the White House on Tuesday evening after his return to the U.S. on Witkoff's personal plane.

## Eastern storm cuts power to tens of thousands as California braces for flooding

By BEN FINLEY and JOHN RABY Associated Press

Storms dumped heavy snow and freezing rain on a swath of the U.S. East from Kentucky to the nation's capital, causing hundreds of traffic accidents, knocking out power in places and threatening to flood waterways as temperatures began rising Wednesday. California, meanwhile, was bracing for an atmospheric river that could flood areas ravaged by the recent wildfires.

The storm system, which cut a path from Kentucky to Maryland and points farther north on Tuesday, brought more than 14 inches (37 centimeters) of snow to Iron Gate, a tiny Appalachian town in western Virginia, and 12 inches to White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, a small city about 65 miles (105 kilometers) to the west, the National Weather Service said.

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By Wednesday more than 190,000 customers in Virginia and nearly 16,000 in North Carolina had lost electricity, according to PowerOutage.us. Appalachian Power, which serves a million customers in West Virginia, Virginia and Tennessee, said more than 5,700 workers were trying to restore power.

The region's airports received several inches of snow, according to Scott Kleebauer, a meteorologist with the weather service's Weather Prediction Center.

"After a pretty quiet few seasons here, things have kind of picked back up again," he said.

Nearly 7,000 flights were canceled or delayed across the United States, including almost 300 into Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, according to the flight-tracking site FlightAware.com.

School was canceled throughout Virginia for a second straight day, and districts in the Baltimore and Washington areas also told students and teachers to take Wednesday off. Some families took the opportunity to go sledding outside the U.S. Capitol.

### Flood threat

The snow-and-ice mix was expected to become rain by the afternoon as temperatures climbed. Concerns emerged about rain and melting snow washing into rivers and streams in regions already saturated from previous storms.

A flood threat through Thursday morning stretched from eastern Tennessee to southwestern Virginia into other parts of South, the weather service said.

"Our main concern once we get into Thursday will be potential flooding impacts as we see rivers and streams swell with the combined impact of melting snowpack and rain at the same time," said Vance Joyner, a weather service meteorologist in Blacksburg, Virginia.

### Hundreds of accidents

In Kentucky, snowy roads caused a head-on fatal crash Tuesday in Nelson County, south of Louisville. The driver of a car lost control going into a curve, crossed the center line and hit an oncoming semi truck head on, according to the county's emergency management director, Brad Metcalf. The driver died at the scene.

In Virginia, where Gov. Glenn Youngkin declared a state of emergency, the state police reported about 850 crashes on Tuesday and Wednesday, dozens of which involved injuries. Officials said it was not known if they were caused by the weather.

Maryland State Police reported 235 crashes and 185 inoperable or unattended vehicles.

In southern West Virginia, multiple crashes temporarily shut down several major highways Tuesday.

### Mess to the west

Points farther west were not spared the wintry mess. A separate storm system was expected to dump heavy snow from Oklahoma to the Great Lakes on Wednesday, the weather service said.

Government offices were closed in parts of Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri, and some universities in those states and Iowa canceled classes.

In Missouri, GoJet Airlines Flight 4427 slid off an icy taxiway at St. Louis Lambert International Airport, the airline said in a statement. The plane came to a stop in the grass, and no injuries were reported among the 27 people on board, it said. The runway was closed afterward, and passengers were bused to the terminal and reassigned to another aircraft.

On the West Coast, officials in Oregon's Multnomah County extended a state of emergency through at least Thursday and said six emergency shelters would be open. Officials said 356 people went to the shelters Tuesday night. Wind chill readings could dip to 10 degrees (minus 12 Celsius) in Portland, the weather service said.

An ice storm forecast for the Portland area early Thursday and Friday could challenge deliveries of flowers and other gifts for Valentine's Day. Temperatures plummeted earlier this week in Portland, which is more known for its rainfall.

Julia Duncan, a co-owner of Flowers in Flight, shrugged off the weather, saying the area endured ice storms in past winters and customers are willing to go the extra mile for the people they love.

"It's Valentine's Day!" Duncan said. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens."

"We're in the neighborhood where a lot of people tend to do pickups, too, and (we've) got a couple of drivers who are willing to drive in the ice and snow," Duncan said. "So hopefully it won't affect us too much."

California rain

Authorities in the state issued a voluntary evacuation warning for areas in Orange County, southeast of Los Angeles, that were affected by a wildfire last year over concerns about potential debris flows during an upcoming storm. The warning for Trabuco Canyon and other areas near the burn scar for the Airport Fire takes effect Thursday.

County officials said roads may be closed and urged residents to be prepared should a mandatory evacuation order become necessary.

California is preparing for an atmospheric river that could flood areas recently ravaged by wildfires. Light rain began falling Wednesday, and more than 10,000 customers lost power.

## White House says it has the right to punish AP reporters over Gulf naming dispute

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The White House said Wednesday that news organizations that refuse to use President Donald Trump's new name for the Gulf of Mexico were telling "lies" and insisted it would continue to bar Associated Press journalists from presidential events.

Trump has decreed that the international body of water — which borders Mexico, the United States and other nations — be called the Gulf of America. In its influential Stylebook, the AP said it would continue to use Gulf of Mexico, while also noting Trump's decision, to ensure that names of geographical features are recognizable around the world.

The White House's outright attempt at regulating language used by independent media — and the punitive measures attached to it — mark a sharp escalation in Trump's often fraught dealings with news organizations.

At a regular briefing Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said that "it is a fact that the body of water off the coast of Louisiana is called the Gulf of America, and I'm not sure why news outlets don't want to call it that."

In reality, the body lies partially in waters that don't belong to the United States and has been called the Gulf of Mexico for hundreds of years.

On Tuesday, AP reporters were blocked from attending events in the Oval Office and the White House's Diplomatic Reception Room. While an AP reporter was in the White House briefing room Wednesday for Leavitt's remarks, they were turned away at a later event in the Oval Office for the swearing in of Tulsi Gabbard as national intelligence director.

Julie Pace, AP's senior vice president and executive editor, wrote to White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles on Wednesday objecting to the moves.

"The actions taken by this White House were plainly intended to punish the AP for the content of its speech," Pace wrote. "It is among the most basic tenets of the First Amendment that the government cannot retaliate against the public or the press for what they say."

White House says Oval Office access is a privilege

The White House pointed out that the AP was allowed into its briefing Wednesday but continued to take issue with the style of the gulf's name. "Nobody has the right to go into the Oval Office and ask the president of the United States questions," Leavitt said. "We reserve the right to decide who gets to go into the Oval Office."

Generally, when the press is permitted to cover White House events where space is tight, a small pool of journalists are allowed in. The AP, which transmits news to thousands of clients, has traditionally been a part of that pool in past administrations.

Asked if barring AP reporters was retaliatory, Leavitt said that the Interior Secretary has codified the name change in official documents and that "pretty much every other outlet in this room has recognized

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that body of water as the Gulf of America.”

The move raised alarms among several advocates for the press. “Barring an AP journalist from covering an Oval Office event because the AP has not adopted President Trump’s change of name to what has long been called the Gulf of Mexico is an affront to the First Amendment,” said noted attorney Floyd Abrams.

A major consortium of news organizations, the Inter American Press Association, said Wednesday that the White House move was “an act of censorship and intimidation that violates the freedom of the press enshrined in the United States Constitution.”

The president of the IAPA, José Roberto Dutriz, expressed concern about this measure: “Restricting press coverage and warning against the AP demonstrate a troubling intention to impose official criteria on public interest information, with the threat of reprisals for those who do not comply,” said Dutriz, CEO and general director of La Prensa Gráfica in El Salvador.

Many who write follow AP style

Users of the Google map app in the United States will now see the body of water referred to as the Gulf of America, the company said. Mexican users would see “Gulf of Mexico.” Elsewhere in the world, Google identifies it as “Gulf of Mexico (Gulf of America).”

But the AP’s decision is influential because many news outlets and other organizations use it as an arbiter of how to consistently refer to things.

Some larger outlets have their own rules.

—The New York Times said it would continue to use Gulf of Mexico, while noting Trump’s renaming in stories that discuss that issue. The gulf, which borders Mexico and Cuba as well as the United States, has been known as the Gulf of Mexico for more than 400 years.

—The Washington Post also said it would use Gulf of Mexico in most references because it “is not solely within the United States’ jurisdiction and the name of Gulf of America might confuse global readers.”

—Fox News said that, starting Sunday, it would use Gulf of America in all of its references.

Trump has also ordered that the United States’ tallest mountain revert to the name Mount McKinley after President Barack Obama changed the Alaska peak to its Indigenous name, Denali. AP says it would follow Trump’s decision because he has the authority to rename areas that are solely within the United States.

## Baseball welcomes another season, with most pitchers and catchers reporting Wednesday

By MARK ANDERSON AP Sports Writer

There’s a new No. 2 in the New York Yankees’ rotation behind Gerrit Cole. A familiar face is getting a fresh start leading the Cincinnati Reds. Meanwhile, Shohei Ohtani & Co. are preparing a title defense.

There was plenty to see as baseball returned Wednesday for most big league clubs, with pitchers and catchers working out at sites across Arizona and Florida. The Chicago Cubs and Los Angeles Dodgers got an early start ahead of their opening series in Tokyo on March 18 and 19, and a few clubs won’t get going until Thursday.

The Yankees welcomed back Cole, the 2023 AL Cy Young Award winner, after he chose to remain with New York rather than opt out of his contract, which runs through 2028.

“The intention wasn’t to do anything but stay,” Cole said. “I was happy to be where my feet were back in Yankee Stadium.”

Yankees manager Aaron Boone said Cole did not make the offseason contract situation a distraction.

“He came in and talked about it openly after the fact,” Boone said. “He kind of put us at ease a little bit and a laugh. Certainly, I’m excited he came back. Great pitchers get attractive on the market. As great as he’s been, you never know.”

Cole is joined in the rotation by Max Fried as they try to return to the World Series and win their first title since 2009.

New York fell to the Dodgers in five games, lost Juan Soto to the rival Mets in free agency, then signed Fried to a \$218 million, eight-year contract, the largest for a left-handed pitcher. Fried went 54-25 with a

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2.81 ERA over the past five seasons with Atlanta and was instrumental in the Braves' 2021 World Series victory over the Astros.

Terry Francona watched his first workout as Cincinnati Reds manager. The Reds went 77-85 last season but have promising young talent led by speedy infielder Elly De La Cruz and ace Hunter Greene. Francona won two World Series titles with Boston and took Cleveland to the playoffs six times from 2013-23, including the 2016 World Series.

"I think the normal thought is, 'it's the first day' and everybody wants to go out and throw 100 (mph)," Francona told the Cincinnati Enquirer. "So, I reminded them today, the pitchers, that, hey, there's a progression here. Regardless of how old you are, get ready because you can't make the club in the training room."

The Dodgers added even more star power this offseason with two-time Cy Young winner Blake Snell and 23-year-old Japanese right-hander Roki Sasaki. The biggest boost to LA's rotation could be Shohei Ohtani, expected to return to the mound at some point in the first half of the season from elbow surgery that prevented the two-way star from pitching in 2024.

"He's excited to pitch," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "I don't know when he's going to pitch for us this year. It will be sooner than later, but that's all contingent on when he's throwing pens and facing hitters."

Ohtani said through an interpreter he's been throwing his usual arsenal of pitches during flat ground workouts, mixing in his sweeper for the first time on Wednesday. He added when he begins bullpen work is "going to depend on how my fastball feels."

Dodgers relievers Michael Kopech (forearm) and Evan Phillips (shoulder) could begin the season on the injured list, Roberts said, but said he would have a better idea "in the next couple of weeks."

Los Angeles' other team will be without third baseman Anthony Rendon for an extended period because of impending hip surgery, Angels general manager Perry Minasian told reporters.

Rendon, in the sixth season of a \$245 million, seven-year contract, has played in just 205 games over the past four seasons. In 257 games with the Angels, he has hit just .242 with 22 home runs 125 RBIs. Rendon batted .290 with 136 homers and 546 RBIs in seven seasons with the Washington Nationals.

Reigning National League Rookie of the Year Paul Skenes arrived for his first spring training as a true major leaguer rocking a beard and a T-shirt featuring Pittsburgh Pirates Hall of Famer Honus Wagner.

The 22-year-old then stood alongside Mitch Keller and Bubba Chandler for a bullpen session watched intently by every member of the Pirates baseball operations staff. Throwing to starting catcher Joey Bart, with new assistant pitching coach Brent Strom and coaches, support staff and equipment on a platform behind them, Skenes made Bart's mitt pop with regularity.

The two embraced when the session was over, the first step in what should be a normal spring training for Skenes. The Pirates last year brought the top pick in the 2023 amateur draft along slowly.

Skenes talked openly last month about wanting to be more vocal this season, though the club expects the National League All-Star starter to continue to lead by example following a year in which he went 11-3 with a 1.96 ERA.

"He's obviously got really high-quality pitches," general manager Ben Cherington said. "And we know ... there are certain parts of his arsenal that he went into the offseason looking to refine even further and we know he's working on it and we'll let him answer that question as he gets in here."

The Detroit Tigers don't expect to have starting pitcher Alex Cobb ready when the season opens because of hip inflammation. He signed a \$15 million, one-year contract after pitching in just three regular-season games for the Guardians last season because of injuries. Cobb did appear in two playoff games for Cleveland, and the Tigers were hopeful he will be an important part of a rotation that also includes AL Cy Young winner Tarik Skubal and recently signed Jack Flaherty.



## Sean 'Diddy' Combs sues NBC over new documentary as he awaits trial on sex trafficking charges

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Sean 'Diddy' Combs is suing NBC Universal over a documentary that he says falsely accuses him of being a serial murderer who had sex with underage girls as he awaits trial on federal sex trafficking charges.

The lawsuit filed Wednesday in New York state court says the documentary, "Diddy: Making of a Bad Boy," included statements that NBC Universal either knew were false or published with reckless disregard for the truth in order to defame the founder of Bad Boy Records.

"Indeed, the entire premise of the Documentary assumes that Mr. Combs has committed numerous heinous crimes, including serial murder, rape of minors, and sex trafficking of minors, and attempts to crudely psychologize him," the complaint reads. "It maliciously and baselessly jumps to the conclusion that Mr. Combs is a 'monster' and 'an embodiment of Lucifer' with 'a lot of similarities' to Jeffrey Epstein."

Spokespersons for NBC Universal and the entertainment company that produced the documentary, which is also named in the suit, didn't immediately respond to emails seeking comment. The documentary premiered last month on Peacock TV, the network's streaming service.

"From his childhood to becoming a mogul, this raw look at Sean Combs' journey through exclusive footage and candid interviews explores his rise, controversies and the man behind the music," a description of the documentary on Peacock's website reads.

Combs, who is seeking no less than \$100 million in damages, has been in a Brooklyn federal jail since his September arrest on racketeering conspiracy and sex trafficking charges.

Federal prosecutors say he used his wealth and influence to coerce female victims and male sex workers into drug-fueled, dayslong sexual performances known as "Freak Offs."

They say Combs used blackmail and violence to intimidate and threaten his victims in a pattern of abuse that goes back to the early 2000s.

Combs has pleaded not guilty. His trial is slated to start in May.

In the criminal case on Wednesday, a federal judge rejected a request by Combs' lawyers that a hearing be conducted over 19 pages of Combs' notes that were taken from his cell during a Bureau of Prisons sweep of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, where Combs is held without bail.

Defense lawyers say the seizure violated Combs' constitutional rights, but Judge Arun Subramanian said in a written opinion that a review shows the government did not intentionally invade Combs' attorney-client privilege, that appropriate steps were taken afterward and the issue is moot because prosecutors say they will not use any of the information at trial.

In the civil lawsuit Wednesday, Erica Wolff, an attorney for Combs, said NBC and the other entities named in the suit "maliciously and recklessly broadcast outrageous lies" in order to "line their own pockets" by driving viewership to the documentary.

"In making and broadcasting these falsehoods, among others, Defendants seek only to capitalize on the public's appetite for scandal without any regard for the truth and at the expense of Mr. Combs' right to a fair trial," she said in a statement. "Mr. Combs brings this lawsuit to hold Defendants accountable for the extraordinary damage their reckless statements have caused."

Combs' lawsuit says the documentary "falsely, recklessly, and maliciously" accuses him of murdering Kimberly Porter, Christopher Wallace and Dwight Arrington Myers, among other notable names.

Porter, a model who had been Combs' longtime girlfriend and the mother of some of his children, died in 2008 at the age of 47 from complications from pneumonia.

Wallace, the rapper known as The Notorious B.I.G., was killed in 1997 in a still-unsolved drive-by shooting in Los Angeles at age 24.

Myers, the rapper known as "Heavy D," died from a pulmonary embolism in 2011 at the age of 44.

"It shamelessly advances conspiracy theories that lack any foundation in reality, repeatedly insinuating that Mr. Combs is a serial killer because it cannot be a 'coincidence' that multiple people in Mr. Combs'

orbit have died," the complaint reads.

Elsewhere, the complaint says the documentary delved into claims Combs had sex with underage girls, citing as evidence a civil complaint that's been "thoroughly discredited." Combs' lawyers say the women referenced in that complaint have since confirmed they were adults at the time.

## **The relationship between the White House and its press corps is time-tested — and can be contentious**

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

This week, the White House barred Associated Press journalists from three media appearances by President Donald Trump — two of them in the Oval Office itself. Some of the reaction said, effectively, this: What right do you have to be there, anyway?

The answer is a combination of tradition, independent reporting and the First Amendment's guarantee of a free press.

The AP, a global news outlet founded in 1846, is a source of fact-based, independent news that reaches billions of people every day. The news cooperative has been a member of the 13-person White House press pool that has reported on the president and held him accountable since its inception more than a century ago.

The pool gets access to the president on the understanding that it distributes his comments and activities to other news outlets, congressional offices and more.

When the Trump administration blocked the AP from three events, it didn't just bar the outlet from access to the president; it did so after an or-else demand that the news agency change its style from "Gulf of Mexico" to "Gulf of America," per Trump's presidential order.

The AP has said that it will refer to the water as the Gulf of Mexico, while noting Trump's decision to rename it as well. As a global news agency that disseminates news around the world, the AP says it must ensure that place names and geography are easily recognizable to all audiences.

Here is some background about the relationship between the presidency and the press — now and across the years.

There are First Amendment issues

The First Amendment to the Bill of Rights states that the government "shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." To AP Executive Editor Julie Pace, Trump's move — an attempt to use a news outlet's access to him to control the content it published — is "a plain violation of the First Amendment."

"The actions taken by this White House were plainly intended to punish the AP for the content of its speech," Pace wrote Wednesday to Trump Chief of Staff Susie Wiles. "It is among the most basic tenets of the First Amendment that the government cannot retaliate against the public or the press for what they say."

The White House pointed out that the AP was allowed into its briefing Wednesday but continued to take issue with the style of the gulf's name.

"Nobody has the right to go into the Oval Office and ask the president of the United States questions," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said on Wednesday. "We reserve the right to decide who gets to go into the Oval Office."

The White House does not pick the members of the press pool that goes in to the Oval Office. The pool makeup is decided by the members of the press corps themselves and is designed to represent everyone in all formats.

The relationship between the president and the press is intended to be adversarial. That's essential for knowing what the president and his administration are — or are not — doing in the United States' name with taxpayer money.

Freely questioning elected lawmakers is the reason, for example, why congressional reporters can roam most of the same Capitol hallways as members of the House and Senate and pose questions on behalf of Americans. At the White House, a smaller secure compound that functions as a residence, work space

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and event venue, the rules of access are more strict. But it, too, belongs to Americans.

"The press is there to represent readers, viewers and listeners all over the world whose lives are going to be affected by what happens in the Oval Office but who are not able to be physically present themselves," said Kathy Kiely, professor of free press studies at the Missouri School of Journalism. "The reporters ensure that the public gets information beyond the self-interested accounts provided by the president and his public relations team."

What is the White House press pool?

The first known instance of a so-called pool reporter inside the White House was in 1881 after President James A. Garfield was shot. As the chief executive lay in bed, AP reporter Franklin Trusdell sat outside his sick room, listening to him breathe and sharing updates with other correspondents.

Now, it's a group of news outlets that ideally are almost everywhere the president goes: in the Oval Office, to state dinners, on Air Force One, in the motorcade, and when the president goes golfing or biking, It was with Trump at the Super Bowl. The pool is also always on standby in case something happens in the world about which the president needs to speak to the nation.

One reason the pool exists is because the Oval Office, the president's official work space, is too small to accommodate every news outlet that would want to cover his executive order signings or meetings with foreign dignitaries. So the pool operates with a representative of each medium acting as eyes and ears for the others who can't get in. When a "pooled" event is over, the print, television and radio poolers share written notes, video and audio with everyone else who is interested.

The pool maintains strict decorum, according to the White House Correspondents' Association guidelines. It is standard practice to stand when the president enters the room. Even though shouting is "unacceptable," presidential appearances can get rowdy.

The White House press pool represents every media format and daily includes the AP and other wire-service writers, the AP and other photographers, a television crew, radio correspondent and writers for print and online publications.

The pool was in John F. Kennedy's motorcade in Dallas when he was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963. That allowed for firsthand accounts of the event as conspiracy theories spread, an example of why independent reporting is critical to understanding what is happening around the president.

"There was a loud bang as though a giant firecracker had exploded in the cavern between the tall buildings we were just leaving behind us," AP reporter Jack Bell, who was in the motorcade with other reporters, recalled to Columbia Journalism Review. "The man in front of me screamed, 'My God, they're shooting at the president!'"

George W. Bush was on camera at a school in Florida Sept. 11, 2001, when an aide whispered in his ear that America was under attack. More recently, the pool was in St. Croix on the night that former President Jimmy Carter died. The White House told the pool to stand by, and at a certain point transported the pool to a downtown hotel where then-President Joe Biden spoke about his predecessor and answered some questions.

Presidents and reporters: An inherently adversarial relationship

Trump is famous for courting reporters even as he publicly criticizes them. Now, legacy media is on its heels amid an atmosphere of distrust as people get news from other sources — some less credible than others.

He's not the first to try to go around traditional outlets. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had his fireside chats over the radio as some of the nation's biggest newspapers took issue with government expansion under the New Deal. More recently, television and social media — and especially podcasts during the 2024 election — have provided similar workarounds for presidents.

In 1798, John Adams signed the Sedition Act, which made it a crime for American citizens to "print, utter, or publish...any false, scandalous, and malicious writing" about the government and used it to jail journalists, according to the National Archives. In 1913, Woodrow Wilson threatened to end presidential briefings with reporters, resulting in what became the White House Correspondents' Association.

For all the tensions, the nation's founders recognized the value of a free press in American democracy.

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government," future President Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter in 1787, "I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

## **NASCAR's lone Black Cup driver Bubba Wallace 'couldn't care less' if Trump attends Daytona 500**

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Bubba Wallace said he "couldn't care less" if Donald Trump attends the Daytona 500 on Sunday, nearly five years after the president accused the NASCAR Cup Series' only Black full-time driver of perpetrating "a hoax" when a crew member found a noose in the team garage stall.

Trump suggested in July 2020 that Wallace should apologize after the sport rallied around him following the discovery of the noose in his assigned stall at Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama. Federal authorities ruled that the noose had been hanging since October and was not a hate crime. NASCAR and the FBI have referred exclusively to the rope — which was used to pull the garage door closed — as a noose.

Wallace, who drives for the 23XI Racing team owned by Michael Jordan and driver Denny Hamlin, declined to say much about the possibility that Trump could return to NASCAR's biggest race as a sitting president for the second time.

"We're here to race," Wallace said at the Daytona 500 media day. "Not for the show."

A notice from the Federal Aviation Administration posted Monday indicated that Trump was expected to attend the race, but NASCAR said Wednesday it had gotten no confirmation.

Trump, who has chimed in through the years on several intertwined NASCAR and political issues, went after Wallace in 2020 on social media after the noose was found.

"Has @BubbaWallace apologized to all of those great NASCAR drivers & officials who came to his aid, stood by his side, & were willing to sacrifice everything for him, only to find out that the whole thing was just another HOAX?," he wrote in July 2020.

Wallace responded on social media in 2020 to Trump calling him out, writing, "Always deal with the hate being thrown at you with LOVE!... Love should come naturally as people are TAUGHT to hate. Even when it's HATE from the POTUS. "

Trump served as grand marshal for the 2020 Daytona 500 and gave the command for drivers to start their engines. He also took a parade lap around the 2 1/2-mile speedway in his armored limousine, leading the 40-car field before the green flag. The presidential motorcade remained on the apron in the corners instead of taking to the high-banked turns.

Thousands cheered and a band played patriotic music when Air Force One flew over the famed track, a flyover that was simultaneously shown on big screens. Trump's presence energized fans and caused huge headaches because of logistical issues at entrance points.

Trump, with first lady Melania Trump by his side, addressed the crowd before the race and called the Daytona 500 "a legendary display of roaring engines, soaring spirits and the American skill, speed and power that we've been hearing about for so many years."

Trump made history last Sunday as the first sitting president to attend the Super Bowl. He watched the Philadelphia Eagles defeat the Kansas City Chiefs from a suite after flying in with a group of some of his closest Republican allies in Congress, including Sens. Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott of South Carolina.

## **What's going to win best picture? We rank the Oscar field**

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The inner-Vatican machinations of "Conclave" have nothing on this year's Oscar race. Just as Edward Berger's film juggles various candidates for the papacy, the race for best picture at the Academy Awards has seen one favorite replaced by another, and then another.

While some clarity has lately emerged, with a handful of big wins for Sean Baker's "Anora," it seems

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likely to be a nail biter until a winner is declared at the March 2 Oscars, when white smoke unfurls from the Sistine Chapel, I mean the Dolby Theatre.

As of now, "Anora" is the clear frontrunner thanks to wins with the Producers Guild and the Directors Guild — both prizes with a long history of predicting Oscar winners. Where the Screen Actors Guild and the BAFTAs fall will offer the last major clues.

But unlike years like last year, when "Oppenheimer" was way ahead wire to wire, no lead in this year's best picture race seems ironclad. So, with that in mind, here are the best picture nominees, ranked in order of least likely to win to most likely to win. It's telling that at least half of these films, with three weeks to go, still have a chance.

## 10. "Nickel Boys"

If this was a ranking of merit, RaMell Ross's movie would be first. Ross' film, thrillingly and thoughtfully shot largely in first person, introduced a new filmic grammar to American movies. But "Nickel Boys" was seemingly on the cusp of getting a nomination, so we should just be glad it's counted here among the best of the year.

## 9. "Dune: Part Two"

Denis Villeneuve's first Frank Herbert adaptation garnered 10 nominations and won six. "Part Two" hasn't been the same awards force. It's up for five nominations and will probably walk home with one or two Oscars, possibly for visual effects and sound. People like "Dune: Part Two" but sequels tend to have a harder go of it at the Academy Awards. Blame it on the sandworms.

## 8. "I'm Still Here"

Arguably no film has risen up the Oscar ranks more than Walter Salles' portrait of political resistance under Brazil's military dictatorship. The film, a box-office sensation in its native country, was once one of the many international underdogs vying for a place at the Academy Awards. It won't win best picture, but it's a testament to the film's appeal that it could upset "Emilia Pérez" in best international film.

## 7. "The Substance"

Coralie Fargeat's body-horror film has turned out to be much more of an Oscar contender than initially believed — certainly by Universal, which financed the film but sold it to Mubi to distribute. It's up for five awards but its best chance comes in the best actress category where Demi Moore is the favorite. Mikey Madison ("Anora") and Fernanda Torres ("I'm Still Here") could make that a close call, too, but Moore — propelled by her "popcorn actress" narrative and the movie's biting showbiz satire — is the frontrunner.

## 6. "Emilia Pérez"

How far can a former frontrunner fall? Jacques Audiard's narco-musical leads all films with 13 nominations but the Netflix movie has been in freefall since its star, Karla Sofía Gascón, became ensnared by a scandal over old tweets. I'm not completely counting "Emilia Pérez" out — you don't get 13 nominations for nothing. But "Emilia Pérez," a divisive movie to begin with, is now in the business of salvaging its chances in other categories, like best supporting actress, where Zoe Saldaña could win.

## 5. "Wicked"

Now we're into the top contenders. Most likely, the winner is coming from one of these next five. Jon M. Chu's Broadway adaptation might have the most moviegoers rooting for it to win, but it's missing some key ingredients for pulling out best picture. Chu missed on a nomination for best director and the "Wicked" has mostly been out-musical-ed by "Emilia Pérez" on the awards circuit. Still, "Wicked" has cornered the market on the role of Big Studio Movie contender. However it does, the film academy is going to make sure "Wicked" is front and center during the ceremony.

## 4. "Conclave"

Here we have our Everyone Likes It contender. Berger's papal thriller, starring Ralph Fiennes as a cardinal tasked with leading a conclave, feels like the most universally respected nominee. In a year where votes are spread across a lot of films, that might be a quality that — particularly considering the academy's preferential ballot — leaves "Conclave" driving the Oscar home in a popemobile. What's the main knock against this happening, aside from the potential difficulty of renting a popemobile? Berger was passed

over on a directing nomination, and "Conclave" hasn't yet won a major award. More than any other movie, it needs a victory at the BAFTAs.

### 3. "A Complete Unknown"

James Mangold's Bob Dylan movie is also widely liked and lacks any precursor win. But admiration for "A Complete Unknown" is widespread and it could, just as "Conclave" might, pull out an upset by rising high on a plethora of ballots. Unlike "Conclave," Mangold was nominated for best director, though, and it has the benefit of being led by Hollywood's biggest young star, Timothée Chalamet. Hollywood likes to, in picking a best picture winner, say something about its future. Chalamet's star power could be convincing enough. Plus Searchlight Pictures has previously steered quite a few best-picture winners ("Nomadland," "The Shape of Water"). Mangold's movie has momentum, which, even if it doesn't lead to best picture, may propel Chalamet to best actor over Adrien Brody for "The Brutalist."

### 2. "The Brutalist"

Until recently, Brady Corbet's postwar epic might have been the top pick. "The Brutalist" has been an award-winner at Venice and the Golden Globes. It's up for 10 Oscars. It's roundly been hailed as visionary, hugely ambitious cinema — all made, remarkably, with a budget under \$10 million. It's also three and a half hours long. Not every Oscar voter, I assure you, is watching it all the way through. That, though, might not be a bad thing for a movie that falls off in the second half.

### 1. "Anora"

Half a year ago, "Anora" was the odds-on pick to win best picture and now, after a topsy-turvy awards season, it is again. A trio of wins — at the PGA Awards, the DGA Awards and Critics Choice — has reestablished "Anora" as the movie to beat.

If it wins at the SAG Awards, too, the race is probably over. Not everything with similar credentials has won before, though; "1917" had the same wins before being defeated by "Parasite" five years ago. "Anora," however, also won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, like "Parasite" did, so it should do well among international voters — a crucial voting bloc in today's academy.

It's also just really good. "Anora" comes from a widely respected filmmaker in Baker, a prominent defender of the theatrical release. And his movie, a sly and devastating twist on a "Pretty Woman"-like fable, is as connected to Hollywood's celebrated '70s as it is to its indie filmmaking present.

## Brazil's Lula backs oil exploration in the Amazon ahead of hosting UN climate talks

By FABIANO MAISONNAVE Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is pressing the country's environmental regulator to approve exploratory drilling near the mouth of the Amazon River, defending the push by saying new oil revenues could finance a transition to green energies.

The offshore site, Bloc 59, is located in the Equatorial Margin, about 160 kilometers (99 miles) off Brazil's eastern coast. In May 2023, Ibama, the environmental regulator, rejected a license, citing issues such as a weak wildlife protection plan in the event of an oil spill that could affect one of the world's most biodiverse regions. State-owned oil company Petrobras appealed and a decision is pending.

"I want it (oil) to be explored. But before exploring, we need to research and see if there is oil and how much oil there is," Lula said Wednesday during an interview with radio station Diarío. "What we can't do is stay in this endless chatter that drags and drags—Ibama is a government agency, but it seems like it's working against the government."

Offshore drilling near the Amazon would certainly draw scrutiny to Brazil, which is hosting the next United Nations climate summit, COP30. It's scheduled to take place in November in Belem, a port city located near the mouth of the Amazon, a few hundred miles from Bloc 59. A central push of the annual climate talks has been to reduce the use of fossil fuels such as oil, which when burned released greenhouse gas that heat up the planet.

In an attempt to reconcile both agendas, Lula said that the oil money would be used to finance clean

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energy projects. Brazil is a major oil-producing country, with an output roughly as big as Iraq, and is increasingly an exporter. On the other hand, about 90% of its electricity comes from renewable sources, primarily hydropower, according to government figures.

"We will follow all the necessary procedures to ensure no harm to nature, but we can't ignore the wealth beneath us and choose not to explore it—especially because this wealth will provide the funds for the much-needed and long-awaited energy transition," he said.

Exploring for new sources of oil near the Amazon just ahead COP30 will harm Brazil's image as a climate leader, said Marcio Astrini, executive secretary of the Climate Observatory, a network of 133 environmental, civil society and academic groups.

"President Lula often says that Brazil should lead by example," he told The Associated Press. "Exploring more oil is not a model action in the climate agenda."

## US inflation got worse with rising groceries and gasoline prices

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. inflation accelerated last month as the cost of groceries, gasoline and rents rose, a disappointment for families and businesses struggling with higher costs and likely underscoring the Federal Reserve's resolve to delay further interest rate cuts.

The consumer price index increased 3% in January from a year ago, Wednesday's report from the Labor Department showed, up from 2.9% the previous month. It has increased from a 3 1/2 year low of 2.4% in September.

The new data shows that inflation has remained stubbornly above the Fed's 2% target for roughly the past six months after it fell steadily for about a year and a half. Elevated prices turned into a major political hurdle for former President Joe Biden. President Donald Trump pledged to reduce prices on "Day 1" if elected, though most economists worry that his many proposed tariffs could at least temporarily increase costs.

The unexpected boost in inflation could dampen some of the business enthusiasm that arose after Trump's election on promises to reduce regulation and cut taxes. The Dow fell 400 points in mid-day trading Wednesday. Bond yields rose, a sign traders expect inflation and interest rates to remain high.

"We're really not making progress on inflation right now," Sarah House, senior economist at Wells Fargo. "This just extends the Fed's hold."

Inflation often jumps in January as many companies raise their prices at the beginning of the year, though the government's seasonal adjustment process is supposed to filter out those effects.

Yet House said inflation's stubbornness wasn't just a one-month blip. Consumers — particularly wealthier ones — are still spending at a robust pace, giving many companies less reason to hold down prices. And much of the decline in inflation in 2023 and early last year stemmed from supply-chain improvements, but that trend has mostly played out.

Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, core consumer prices rose 3.3% in January compared with a year ago, up from 3.2% in December. Economists closely watch core prices because they can provide a better read of inflation's future path.

Inflation also worsened on a monthly basis, with prices jumping 0.5% in January from December, the largest increase since August 2023. Core prices climbed 0.4% last month, the most since March 2024.

Grocery prices climbed 0.5% just in January, pushed higher by a 15.2% surge in egg prices, the biggest monthly increase since June of 2015. Egg prices have soared 53% compared with a year ago.

An avian flu epidemic has forced egg producers to cull from their flocks about 40 million birds in December and January. Stores have imposed limits on egg purchases and restaurants have placed surcharges on egg dishes.

The cost of car insurance continues to rise, and picked up 2% just from December to January. Hotel prices rose 1.4% last month, while the cost of a gallon of gas moved up 1.8%.

Trump's tariffs are making life more complicated for Phil Hannon, vice president of operations at Abt, a

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consumer electronics store in Glenview, Illinois. Roughly 60% of Abt's sales are appliances, big and small. The rest are in consumer electronics like TVs and computers, and furniture.

Hannon expects to raise prices between 3% and 15% as soon as March to offset the impact of tariffs, including the steel and aluminum duties.

He's received notices from vendors over the past two weeks warning about eventual price increases, though they're not specific. To get ahead of the cost increases, Hannon has been locking in orders from suppliers for up to 90 days.

Hannon said that many customers are already asking about price increases and when the tariffs are coming. He started seeing a noticeable pickup of customers ordering products like washing machines this month to get ahead of the tariffs.

Separately, Fed Chair Jerome Powell said Wednesday in testimony before the House Financial Services Committee that the Fed "has made great progress" on inflation "but we're not quite there yet."

"Today's inflation print ... says the same thing," he added. As a result, the Fed wants to keep rates "restrictive for now," he said. At its current level, the Fed's key rate is restricting borrowing and spending by consumers and businesses, Powell has said.

With inflation down significantly from its 9.1% peak in June 2022, the Fed cut its rate to about 4.3% in its final three meetings last year. It raised its benchmark rate in 2022 and 2023 to a two-decade high of 5.3% to combat inflation.

The Fed's rate typically influences other borrowing costs for everything from mortgages to credit cards.

Early Wednesday, Trump said on social media that interest rates should be lowered, "something which would go hand in hand with upcoming Tariffs!!!" Yet the tick up in consumer prices makes it less likely the Fed will cut rates anytime soon.

One sign of concern for economists is that goods prices, excluding food and energy, rose 0.3% in January from the previous month. Prices for cars, furniture, and appliances had been flat or falling after supply-chain kinks stemming from the pandemic were resolved. Yet now those prices have ticked up even before tariffs have been launched.

Trump has imposed 25% tariffs on steel and aluminum, which could push the cost of cars, appliances, and industrial machinery higher. He also said earlier this week he would impose "reciprocal tariffs" on countries that have high duties on U.S. goods.

"There's just a stew of uncertainty that if it lasts and lingers over the next couple months, you could see business confidence come down," Anthony Saglimbene, chief market strategist at Ameriprise, said. That could reduce hiring and investment, he said.

On Tuesday, Powell acknowledged that higher tariffs could lift inflation and limit the central bank's ability to cut rates, calling it "a possible outcome."

But he emphasized that it would depend on how many imports are hit with tariffs and for how long.

"In some cases it doesn't reach the consumer much, and in some cases it does," Powell said. "And it really does depend on facts that we we haven't seen yet."

## Could obesity drugs help with alcohol cravings? New study suggests potential

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Medications that have transformed the treatment of obesity may also help people drink less alcohol, according to new government-funded research.

The study was small — just 48 adults — and lasted just over two months, so it's not the final word. Experts say it's not yet clear how safe these drugs are for people who don't need to lose weight.

But the results add to evidence from animal studies and reports that people are finding drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy helpful to manage cravings, not just for food, but also for tobacco and alcohol. Scientists are studying these drugs in smokers, people with opioid addiction and cocaine users.

"This is such promising data. And we need more of it," said study co-author Dr. Klara Klein, of the Uni-



versity of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who treats patients with diabetes and obesity. "We frequently will hear that once people start these medications that their desire to drink is very reduced, if not completely abolished."

The drugs, known as GLP-1 receptor agonists, work by mimicking hormones in the gut and the brain to regulate appetite and feelings of fullness. The new study looked at one of these drugs, semaglutide, which is the drug in Ozempic and Wegovy.

The research, published Wednesday in the journal JAMA Psychiatry, was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the National Institutes of Health.

There are already three medications approved to treat alcohol use disorder, so until larger studies can confirm the findings, people should talk to their doctor about what's already available, said lead author Christian Hendershot, an addiction researcher at University of Southern California.

For the new study, researchers recruited people who reported symptoms of alcohol use disorder, such as difficulty controlling their drinking, but weren't actively seeking treatment for it.

First, each person came to a lab where they were served their favorite alcoholic beverage and could drink as much as they wanted over two hours.

Then, researchers randomly assigned half the people to get a weekly injection of semaglutide. The other half got sham injections.

For nine weeks, everyone kept track of their drinking habits and their desire for alcohol. A lab visit with their favorite alcohol was repeated at the end of the study.

During the last weeks of the study, nearly 40% in the semaglutide group reported no heavy drinking days compared with 20% in the placebo group. And in the final lab test, the semaglutide group drank roughly half the amount, on average, compared to those who got the placebo.

Everyone in the study was overweight. It's unclear how safe the drugs would be for a person of normal weight, Klein said.

Smokers in the study who got the semaglutide also cut back on cigarettes, noted Luba Yammine of UTHealth Houston, who is leading other research on GLP-1 drugs for people who want to quit smoking. The finding is promising but more data is needed, Yammine said.

The study "provides additional important information on the potential role of this new class of medications" in treating certain addictions, said Dr. Lorenzo Leggio, an NIH researcher who is leading a 20-week trial of semaglutide for alcohol use disorder now underway in Baltimore.

"It is important to keep in mind that we need larger randomized clinical trials to confirm these findings," Leggio said.

## **As DOGE hammers away at the US government, Republicans stir with quiet objections**

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Sen. Katie Britt has been working to make sure the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency doesn't hit what she called "life-saving, groundbreaking research at high-achieving institutions," including her state's beloved University of Alabama.

Kansas GOP Sen. Jerry Moran is worried that food from heartland farmers would spoil rather than be sent around the world as the U.S. Agency for International Development shuts.

And Idaho GOP Rep. Mike Simpson warns national parks could be impaired by cutbacks at the start of summer hiring in preparation for the onslaught of visitors.

"We need to have a conversation with DOGE and the administration about exactly what they've done here," said Simpson, a seasoned lawmaker who sits on the powerful Appropriations Committee. "It's a concern to all of us."

One by one, in public statements and private conversations, Republican lawmakers are beginning to speak up to protect home-state interests, industries and jobs that are endangered by President Donald Trump's executive actions and the slash-and-burn tactics erupting across the federal government by bil-

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lionaire Elon Musk 's DOGE.

While Democrats have been denouncing the impact of Trump's cuts on Americans, the stirrings from Republicans are less a collective action than targeted complaints. Almost none are openly questioning the purpose or legality of the DOGE effort, which the party has largely cheered. But taken together, the quiet concerns are the first glimmers of GOP pushback against Trump's upending of the federal government.

"The people voted for major government reform, and that's what the people are going to get," Musk said Tuesday in the Oval Office with Trump.

The situation unfolding on a scale like nothing Washington has ever seen as Trump issues executive actions at a rapid clip and Musk's team roams agency to agency, tapping into computer systems, digging into budgets and searching for what he calls waste, fraud and abuse. Dozens of lawsuits are piling up claiming Trump and DOGE are violating the law.

While presidents have long taken liberty with their authority to issue executive orders, actions and proclamations toward their goals, the White House typically chooses a few signature priorities to make a mark rather than employ such vast power to sweep across the government.

Former President Barack Obama, for example, used executive authority to protect from deportation an entire group of immigrants — the young " Dreamers " who came to the U.S. as children without proper paperwork. Former President Joe Biden used his executive authority to cancel student loan debt for millions. Both actions have been in court and are still making their way through the legal system.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said DOGE is taking a "meat ax" to the federal government.

"If you want to make cuts, then you do it through a debate in Congress," said the New York senator, "not lawlessly."

It raises questions about what happens next as judges are quickly slapping on limits and halting many of the White House actions. Both Musk and Vice President JD Vance have questioned the legitimacy of judicial oversight, which is a mainstay of the U.S. democracy and its balance of power.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said he met with Musk at the start of the week and has no concern that DOGE is going too far or treading on Congress' authority to direct taxpayer dollars or provide oversight of the executive branch.

"To me, it's very exciting what they're able to do because what Elon and the DOGE is doing right now is what Congress has been unable to do in recent years," the Louisiana Republican said, referring to the spending reviews underway.

Johnson said he agrees with Vance and suggested the courts should cool it.

"The courts should take a step back and allow these processes to play out," he said. "What we're doing is good and right for the American people."

Alabama's Britt was far from alone in speaking up about Trump's caps on the National Institutes of Health grant program that hit universities, medical centers and research institutions coast to coast.

"While the administration works to achieve this goal at NIH, a smart, targeted approach is needed," the senator said in a statement.

North Carolina GOP Sen. Ted Budd said he has heard from constituents in his state, home to the Raleigh area's influential Research Triangle. And Sen. Susan Collins, the chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, listed the ways scientists in Maine are conducting "much-needed research on Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses, Alzheimer's, diabetes, Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy," as well as other research as she decried the funding caps.

"There is no investment that pays greater dividends to American families than our investment in biomedical research," Collins said in a statement.

As the U.S. Agency for International Development was being dismantled, Kansas' Moran said on social media that "U.S. food aid feeds the hungry, bolsters our national security & provides an important market for our farmers, especially when commodity prices are low."

The senator said he spoke to the Department of Agriculture and "the White House about the importance of resuming the procurement, shipping & distribution of American-grown food."

Moran and others have been working on legislation that would move management of food aid program

from USAID to USDA.

On Saturday, Moran shared an update: "GOOD NEWS: State Dept. has approved shipping to resume, allowing NGOs to distribute the \$560 million of American-grown food aid sitting in US & global ports to those in need."

He thanked Secretary of State Marco Rubio "for helping make certain this life-saving aid gets to those in need before it spoils."

It's unclear, however, if the aid work will have the funding to resume. And the gutting of global supply lines for aid shipments, thanks to the shuttering of USAID, also makes it uncertain that enough workers can be found to deliver stalled food aid, aid groups say.

In Florida, GOP Rep. Carlos Gimenez is trying to help Venezuelans, who fled their homeland and are now living in the Miami area under Temporary Protected Status, from being deported as Trump ends the program.

Gimenez wrote last month to ask the administration to consider Venezuelans on a case-by-case basis.

"I support the president in the vast majority of things he does," Gimenez told the Associated Press.

"As a member of Congress, I also have to represent the interests of my constituents," he said.

Asked if he felt he had the power to make a difference, he replied: "I'm not powerless. I'm a member of Congress."

## Federal appeals court upholds singer R. Kelly's convictions and 30-year prison term

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — R. Kelly's racketeering and sex trafficking convictions, along with a 30-year prison sentence, were upheld Wednesday by a federal appeals court that concluded the singer exploited his fame for over a quarter century to sexually abuse girls and young women.

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan ruled Wednesday after hearing arguments last March.

The Grammy-winning, multiplatinum-selling R&B songwriter was convicted in 2021 in Brooklyn federal court of multiple charges, including racketeering and sex trafficking.

Attorney Jennifer Bonjean, representing R. Kelly, said in a statement that she believed the Supreme Court will agree to hear an appeal. She called the 2nd Circuit ruling "unprecedented," saying it gives prosecutors limitless discretion to apply the racketeering law "to situations absurdly remote" from the statute's intent.

Last year, the high court declined to hear an appeal of a 20-year sentence Kelly received after he was convicted in 2022 of child sex charges including charges of producing images of child sexual abuse in Chicago.

The 2nd Circuit rejected Kelly's arguments that the trial evidence was inadequate, the constitutionality of some state laws used against him were questionable, four jurors were biased, the trial judge made some improper rulings and a racketeering charge more commonly used in organized crime cases was improper.

"Enabled by a constellation of managers, assistants, and other staff for over twenty-five years, Kelly exploited his fame to lure girls and young women into his grasp," the appeals court said, noting members of his entourage helped introduce him to underage girls.

"Evidence at trial showed that he would isolate them from friends and family, control nearly every aspect of their lives, and abuse them verbally, physically, and sexually," the three-judge panel said.

The appeals court said it was "neither arbitrary nor irrational" that several accusers were permitted to testify at trial that Kelly gave them herpes without disclosing he had an STD, and it was not unduly prejudicial or cumulative that seven witnesses who were not yet adults when Kelly began to abuse them were allowed to testify.

"None of the testimony was more inflammatory than the charged acts," the appeals court said.

The 2nd Circuit also said it was not unfairly prejudicial for the trial judge to let jurors view graphic videos. The videos, the appeals court said, "were properly admitted to show the means and methods of the enterprise, including the level of control and dominance Kelly had over his victims."

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Bonjean, in her statement on R. Kelly's behalf, also cited a partial dissent in which one 2nd Circuit judge, Richard J. Sullivan, concurred with what he described as the majority's "excellent opinion," but dissented in part over a restitution award given one victim for a lifetime supply of a suppressive regime of herpes medication. The award was based on the cost of the brand-name drug when a generic drug is available.

"This was not restitution. This was an effort by the government to unfairly enrich government witnesses for their testimony," Bonjean said.

Kelly, born Robert Sylvester Kelly, is known for work including the 1996 hit "I Believe I Can Fly" and the cult classic "Trapped in the Closet," a multipart tale of sexual betrayal and intrigue.

Kelly sold millions of albums and remained in demand even after allegations about his abuse of young girls began circulating publicly in the 1990s. He was acquitted of child sexual abuse image charges in Chicago in 2008, but a second trial in Chicago in 2022 ended with his conviction on charges of producing images of child sexual abuse and enticing girls for sex.

Widespread outrage over Kelly's sexual misconduct did not emerge until the #MeToo reckoning, reaching a crescendo after the release of the documentary "Surviving R. Kelly."

## Government watchdogs fired by Trump sue his administration and ask a judge to reinstate them

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Eight government watchdogs have sued over their mass firing that removed oversight of President Donald Trump's new administration.

The lawsuit filed Wednesday in federal court in Washington asks a judge to declare the firings unlawful and restore the inspectors general to their positions at the agencies.

The watchdogs are charged with rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse at government agencies, playing a nonpartisan oversight role over trillions of dollars in federal spending and the conduct of millions of federal employees, according to the lawsuit.

Presidents can remove inspectors general, but the Trump administration did not give Congress a legally required 30-day notice, something that even a top Republican decried.

The White House did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment on the lawsuit. Trump has said he would put new "good people" in the jobs.

The administration dismissed more than a dozen inspectors general in a Friday-night sweep on the fourth full day of Trump's second term. Though inspectors general are presidential appointees, some serve presidents of both parties. All are expected to be nonpartisan. Two of the plaintiffs had been nominated to inspector general roles by Trump in his first term.

"The firing of the independent, nonpartisan inspector general was a clear violation of the law," said Michael Missal, the former inspector general of the Department of Veterans Affairs. "The IGs are bringing this action for reinstatement so that they can go back to work fighting fraud waste and abuse on behalf the American public."

At the time of the firings, Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, said there may have been good reasons for the terminations but that Congress needed to know.

The lawsuit comes a day after the White House fired the inspector general for the U.S. Agency for International Development, following a warning from his office that the administration's dismantling of that agency had made it all but impossible to monitor \$8.2 billion in unspent humanitarian funds.

The role of the modern-day inspector general dates to post-Watergate Washington, when Congress installed offices inside agencies as an independent check against mismanagement and abuse of power.

Democrats and watchdog groups said the firings raise alarms that Trump is making it easier to take advantage of the government.

Trump, said at the time the firings were "a very common thing to do." But the lawsuit says that is not true and that mass firings have been considered improper since the 1980s.

The dismissals came through similarly worded emails from the director or deputy director of the Office

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of Presidential Personnel. The watchdogs' computers, phones, and agency access badges were collected within days. The officials were escorted into their respective agencies to collect their personal belongings under supervision, they said in the lawsuit.

The inspector general of the Agriculture Department, however, returned to work as normal the Monday after being informed of the firing, "recognizing the email as not effective," the lawsuit said. The watchdog conducted several meetings before agency employees cut off her access to government systems and took her computer and phone.

Trump in the past has challenged their authority. In 2020, in his first term, he replaced multiple inspectors general, including those leading the Defense Department and intelligence community, as well as the one tapped to chair a special oversight board for the \$2.2 trillion pandemic economic relief package.

The latest round of dismissals spared Michael Horowitz, the longtime Justice Department inspector general who has issued reports on assorted politically explosive criminal investigations over the past decade.

In December 2019, for instance, Horowitz released a report faulting the FBI for surveillance warrant applications in the investigation into ties between Russia and Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. But the report also found that the investigation had been opened for a legitimate purpose and did not find evidence that partisan bias had guided investigative decisions.

The lawsuit was filed by the inspectors general of the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Health and Human Services, State, Education, Agriculture, and Labor, and the Small Business Administration.

## **Too few tents entering Gaza threatens the truce. Here's what's happening**

By JULIA FRANKEL and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Three weeks into the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, the number of tents and temporary homes entering Gaza risks falling short of the goals set for the deal's first phase.

The looming deficit sits at the heart of a dispute between Israel and Hamas that could topple the tenuous truce.

Hamas said it would delay the scheduled release of three hostages on Saturday if Israel did not ramp up delivery of tents, pre-fabricated homes and heavy machinery into the devastated territory, where the majority of people are displaced and many live beside the rubble of blasted-out buildings.

Israel rejects the accusation, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened to withdraw from the ceasefire in Gaza and resume the war if Hamas does not release more hostages on schedule.

Getting enough shelter into Gaza has been difficult because aid workers prioritized deliveries of food at the start of the ceasefire. Israeli inspections and restrictions on what can enter Gaza also complicate the process.

The delivery of temporary shelters could soon ramp up, according to officials from Egypt and Hamas who signaled Wednesday that resolution of the dispute was within sight, paving the way for the hostages to be released as planned.

Here's a look at where things stand with aid into Gaza:

What does the ceasefire agreement say about aid to Gaza?

The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas says that during the first 42-day phase, Israel must allow at least 60,000 temporary homes and 200,000 tents into Gaza. It also must allow entry of an agreed-upon amount of equipment for rubble removal.

Repairs to Gaza's badly damaged electricity, water, sewage and communications systems — as well as its torn up roads — are to begin during phase one. So is the planning process for rebuilding homes decimated by the war. All of the repairs and planning are being overseen by the U.N. and ceasefire mediators Egypt and Qatar.

Simply removing the rubble — let alone beginning reconstruction — could take decades, according to the U.N. It may also be premature, especially if the ceasefire falls apart and Israel resumes its bombing campaign there. U.S. President Donald J. Trump's stated intention to rebuild Gaza as the "Riviera of the

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Middle East" adds uncertainty.

In the deal's first phase, Hamas is to release 33 Israeli hostages in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. Hamas so far has released 16 of the hostages, in addition to five Thai hostages who were not part of the deal.

Whether the exchanges continue, the agreement says, depends on how the parties adhere to its regulations on humanitarian aid, among other stipulations.

How many tents and temporary homes are getting into Gaza?

Hamas spokesperson Abdul Latif al-Qanou said Israel had so far permitted 20,000 tents into the territory since the ceasefire took effect on Jan. 19. He said Israel hadn't let any temporary homes in and was not allowing entry of heavy machinery to remove rubble and recover dead bodies.

COGAT, the Israeli defense body that coordinates the deliveries of humanitarian supplies, disputed part of Hamas' claims, saying in a statement it had allowed entry of even more tents.

A U.S. official, an Israeli official and aid worker involved in tracking deliveries into Gaza confirmed Hamas' claim that as of Tuesday morning no prefabricated homes had been allowed in. Both spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

But the aid worker estimated that between 25,000 and 50,000 tents had entered. The Israeli official said at least 30,000 tents had entered.

Why has it been difficult to get shelter material inside?

Aid workers say a number of factors are complicating the quick delivery of tents and other temporary shelters into Gaza. For one, the priority at the start of the ceasefire period was getting food and water into a territory on the brink of famine.

Shaina Low, communications adviser for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said humanitarian groups "prioritized bringing in food during the first couple of weeks of the ceasefire to address Gaza's acute starvation crisis."

Also, anticipating "mass population movements," aid groups held back from sending tents in immediately because people would have a hard time carrying them along with all their belongings, she said.

The latest report from the coalition of groups tracking population movement in Gaza says that at least 586,000 Palestinians have gone north since late January and over 56,000 have moved south.

Ramping up shelter supplies so suddenly proved a tall order, said Tania Hary, the director of Gisha, an Israeli organization dedicated to protecting Palestinians' right to freedom of movement. She added that the initial focus in the first days of the ceasefire was meeting the threshold of 600 trucks a day.

"They're scrambling to get in all the tents in their pipeline," she said. "Getting in 60,000 caravans is a huge production."

There is another factor slowing the pace of aid deliveries: Israel deems some items "dual-use," meaning they could potentially be diverted for military means.

According to a list circulated to humanitarian aid groups by COGAT, "mobile homes" and large tents require Israeli inspection, even though they are on the list for being fast-tracked. The same goes for cleaning materials, water trucks, generators, metal waste containers, sewer inspection devices and iron waste containers.

Large storage tents, desalination facilities, toilets and showers with certain kinds of metal, x-ray machines and diesel generators require an even more intense approval process.

What does this mean for the deal?

Mediators were hopeful Wednesday they could resolve the dispute by Saturday and get the ceasefire back on track.

An Egyptian official with knowledge of the talks said the two sides were close to an agreement. The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss private negotiations, said Israel had committed to delivering more tents, shelters and heavy equipment to Gaza.

An official with Hamas, Mahmoud Merdawi, cited "positive signals" that the hostages would be released on Saturday. But he cautioned that the group had yet to receive the guarantees it seeks from Israel regarding the delivery of humanitarian aid.

## Christian aid groups weigh life-threatening choices about who to help after USAID funding pause

By TIFFANY STANLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a warehouse in Haiti, nearly four metric tons of seeds cannot be distributed. Soon the planting season will be gone and with it, the best chance for those seeds to produce emergency food.

Across the world in South Sudan, a program treating severely malnourished children under age 5 has halted.

Both projects are led by World Relief, an evangelical organization whose work has collapsed in certain countries after the Trump administration froze most foreign aid and sidelined the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Faith-based organizations that partner with the U.S. government to deliver international aid are being hard-hit by the USAID shutdown, and are now facing their own layoffs, furloughs and severe funding shortages.

Remaining staff are being forced to make difficult choices about which lifesaving programs can continue without government funding.

"That's what keeps me up at night," said Matthew Soerens, World Relief's vice president of advocacy and policy.

Two of the 12 largest non-governmental recipients of USAID funds are faith-based: Catholic Relief Services and World Vision. These Christian nonprofits serve millions of people globally and provide food, water and health care in conflict zones.

Catholic Relief Services — founded by U.S. Catholic bishops in 1943 — told staff to expect drastic reductions in their workforce this year, as much as 50 percent, due to cuts in U.S. foreign assistance. CRS receives more USAID support than any other non-governmental organization. The U.S. government funded nearly half of the 2023 CRS budget of \$1.2 billion.

The Vatican's global charity arm, Caritas, on Monday warned that millions of people will die as a result of the "ruthless" U.S. decision to "recklessly" stop USAID funding, and hundreds of millions more will be condemned to "dehumanizing poverty."

The State Department has offered select waivers for organizations to continue "lifesaving" humanitarian work. But many organizations that have received waivers say federal funding has not arrived for those exempted projects, and they have been unable to get meaningful guidance from the U.S. government.

USAID headquarters staffers — in affidavits filed this week as part of a court challenge to the Trump administration's dismantling of the agency — say they know of no one in USAID who has been told what process will be followed in accepting and reviewing waiver requests, and no funding is getting through to aid partners and programs.

World Relief received a waiver to continue its lifesaving work in one country — civil-war-torn Sudan — but it is still waiting on government payments for those programs and previously completed work.

"We can't afford to misunderstand the instructions and spend resources that we don't have," Soerens said. "We have some cash reserves, but like most nonprofits, we don't sit on months and months' worth of cash."

Churches and private donors have helped World Relief raise \$4.5 million in two weeks to support international aid and its work in the U.S. with refugees. But the organization has furloughed employees and still faces a funding gap of \$3.5 million for immediate needs.

Franklin Graham, an evangelical leader who prayed at both of Donald Trump's presidential inaugurations, runs Samaritan's Purse, an evangelical humanitarian organization that has received USAID funds. Graham said in a statement that "the details of the waiver process are not yet clear."

Samaritan's Purse has not stopped its emergency food and medical programs overseas, he noted, and less than 5% of the organization's 2024 funding came from government grants.

"I think it's a good thing for the government to assess and reexamine the various programs that the

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U.S. is funding around the world," Graham said. "We trust that the new leadership will analyze all of the information and make good decisions."

A spokesperson for World Vision, a Christian aid group that is separate from World Relief, said the organization was working on securing waivers and resuming critical programs as soon as possible. "Our commitment to serving vulnerable communities through humanitarian and development work remains strong, and we will continue to comply with all relevant regulations," its statement said.

The first Trump administration did some "incredible work" at USAID, according to Adam Phillips, who led the USAID faith-based office during the Biden administration. Phillips continued some of the data-driven approaches to working with faith communities that the Trump team pioneered at the agency.

"It's so mystifying to see what the second Trump administration is doing," Phillips said, "because they're really going backwards on some extraordinary commitments when it comes to faith-based partners."

Supporters of USAID's work argue it not only alleviates global suffering and promotes stability but also functions as a form of soft power to create goodwill and counter rivals like China and Russia.

Many conservatives have championed the type of public-private partnerships that USAID and religious groups traditionally have had. Indeed, when Trump again established a White House faith office, the Feb. 7 executive order said it wanted faith-based entities "to compete on a level playing field for grants, contracts, programs, and other Federal funding opportunities."

Faith-based groups hope their humanitarian work will pass muster with the second Trump administration after a 90-day review is completed.

"At World Relief, we're also pro-life Christians. We believe in the value of human life," Soerens said. "Our hope is that the president and the secretary of state examine this as quickly as possible and get things moving on that genuinely lifesaving humanitarian support."

A USAID employee who works on lifesaving humanitarian assistance said she has been instructed not to communicate with grantees. She was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

She still finds common cause with faith-based organizations: She has long viewed her secular work of helping the vulnerable as an extension of her own Christian faith.

"I can't say that if I weren't a person of faith, that I wouldn't be in this in this field," she said. "But I do think my main motivation is that Christ calls us to be his hands and feet in this world. That's what I want to be."

## Which US companies are pulling back on diversity initiatives?

By The Associated Press undefined

A growing number of prominent companies have scaled back or set aside the diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives that much of corporate America endorsed following the protests that accompanied the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, a Black man, in 2020.

The changes have come in response to a campaign by conservative activists to target workplace programs in the courts and social media, and more recently, President Donald Trump's executive orders aimed at upending DEI policies in both the federal government and private sector.

DEI policies typically are intended to root out systemic barriers to the advancement of historically marginalized groups in certain fields or roles. Critics argue that some education, government and business programs are discriminatory because they single out participants based on factors such as race, gender and sexual orientation. They have targeted corporate sponsorships, employee-led affinity groups, programs aimed at steering contracts to minority or women-owned businesses, and goals that some companies established for increasing minority representation in leadership ranks.

While hiring or promotion decisions based on race or gender is illegal under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in most circumstances, companies say they are not doing that. Instead, they say they aspire to diversify their workforce over time through policies like widening candidate pools for job openings.

These are some of the companies that have retreated from DEI:



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## Goldman Sachs

Investment firm Goldman Sachs confirmed that it was dropping a requirement that forced IPO clients to include women and members of minority groups on their board of directors.

"As a result of legal developments related to board diversity requirements, we ended our formal board diversity policy," said a Goldman Sachs spokesman in an email to The Associated Press. "We continue to believe that successful boards benefit from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and we will encourage them to take this approach."

Goldman Sachs said that it will still have a placement service that connects its clients with diverse candidates to serve on their boards.

## Google

Google rescinded a goal it had set in 2020 to increase representation of underrepresented groups among the company's leadership team by 30% within five years. In a memo to employees, the company also said it was considering other changes in response to Trump's executive order aimed at prohibiting federal contractors from conducting DEI practices that constitute "illegal discrimination."

Google's parent company Alphabet also signaled things were changing in its annual 10-K report filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The report dropped a boilerplate sentence it has used since 2020 declaring that the company is "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."

## Target

The retailer said that changes to its "Belonging at the Bullseye" strategy would include ending a program it established to help Black employees build meaningful careers, improve the experience of Black shoppers and to promote Black-owned businesses following Floyd's death in Minneapolis, where Target has its headquarters.

Target, which operates nearly 2,000 stores nationwide and employs more than 400,000 people, said it also would conclude the diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, goals it previously set in three-year cycles.

The goals included hiring and promoting more women and members of racial minority groups, and recruiting more diverse suppliers, including businesses owned by people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, veterans and people with disabilities.

Target also will no longer participate in surveys designed to gauge the effectiveness of its actions, including an annual index compiled by the Human Rights Campaign, a national LGBTQ+ rights organization. Target also said it would further evaluate corporate partnerships to ensure they're connected directly to business objectives, but declined to share details.

## Meta Platforms

The parent company of Facebook and Instagram said it was getting rid of its diversity, equity and inclusion program, which featured policies for hiring, training and picking vendors.

Like other companies that announced similar changes before Meta, the social media giant said it had been reviewing the program since the Supreme Court's July 2023 ruling upending affirmative action in higher education.

Citing an internal memo sent to employees, news website Axios reported the Menlo Park, California-based tech giant said it would no longer have a team focused on diversity and inclusion and will instead "focus on how to apply fair and consistent practices that mitigate bias for all, no matter your background." The change means the company will also end its "diverse slate approach" to hiring, which involved considering a diverse pool of candidates for every open position.

## Amazon

Amazon said it was halting some of its DEI programs, although it did not specify which ones. In a Dec. 16 memo to employees, Candi Castleberry, a senior human resources executive, said the company has been "winding down outdated programs and materials, and we're aiming to complete that by the end of 2024."

"We also know there will always be individuals or teams who continue to do well-intentioned things that don't align with our company-wide approach, and we might not always see those right away. But we'll

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keep at it," she wrote.

Rather than "have individual groups build programs," Castleberry said, Amazon is "focusing on programs with proven outcomes – and we also aim to foster a more truly inclusive culture."

McDonald's

Four years after launching a push for more diversity in its ranks, McDonald's said earlier this month that it is ending some of its diversity practices.

McDonald's said on Jan. 6 that it will retire specific goals for achieving diversity at senior leadership levels. It also intends to end a program that encourages its suppliers to develop diversity training and to increase the number of minority group members represented within their own leadership ranks.

McDonald's said it will also pause "external surveys." The burger giant didn't elaborate, but several other companies have suspended their participation in an annual survey by the HRC.

In an open letter to employees and franchisees, McDonald's senior leadership team said it remained committed to inclusion and believes that having a diverse workforce is a competitive advantage.

Walmart

The world's largest retailer confirmed in November that it would not be renewing a five-year commitment to a racial equity center set up in 2020 after the police killing of George Floyd, and that it would stop participating in the HRC's Corporate Equality Index.

Walmart also said it will better monitor its third-party marketplace to make sure items sold there do not include products aimed at LGBTQ+ minors, including chest binders intended for transgender youth.

Additionally, the company will no longer consider race and gender as a litmus test to improve diversity when it offers supplier contracts and it won't be gathering demographic data when determining financing eligibility for those grants.

Ford

CEO Jim Farley sent a memo to the automaker's employees in August outlining changes to the company's DEI policies, including a decision to stop taking part in HRC's Corporate Equality Index.

Ford, he wrote, had been looking at its policies for a year. The company doesn't use hiring quotas or tie compensation to specific diversity goals but remains committed to "fostering a safe and inclusive workplace," Farley said.

"We will continue to put our effort and resources into taking care of our customers, our team, and our communities versus publicly commenting on the many polarizing issues of the day," the memo said.

Lowe's

In August, Lowe's executive leadership said the company began "reviewing" its programs following the Supreme Court's affirmative action ruling and decided to combine its employee resource groups into one umbrella organization. Previously, the company had "individual groups representing diverse sections of our associate population."

The retailer also will no longer participate in the HRC index, and will stop sponsoring and participating in events, such as festivals and parades, that are outside of its business areas.

Harley-Davidson

In a post on X in August, Harley-Davidson said the company would review all sponsorships and organizations it was affiliated with, and that all would have to be centrally approved. It said the company would focus exclusively on growing the sport of motorcycling and retaining its loyal riding community, in addition to supporting first responders, active military members and veterans.

The motorcycle maker said it would no longer participate in the ranking of workplace equality compiled by the HRC, and that its trainings would be related to the needs of the business and absent of socially motivated content.

Harley-Davidson also said it does not have hiring quotas and would no longer have supplier diversity spending goals.

Brown-Forman

The parent company of Jack Daniels also pulled out from participating in the HRC's Corporate Equal-

ity Index, among other changes. Its leaders sent an email to employees in August saying the company launched its diversity and inclusion strategy in 2019, but since then “the world has evolved, our business has changed, and the legal and external landscape has shifted dramatically.”

The company said it would remove its quantitative workforce and supplier diversity ambitions, ensure incentives and employee goals were tied to business performance, and review training programs for consistency with a revised strategy.

“Brown-Forman continues to foster an inclusive work environment where everyone is welcomed, respected, and able to bring their best self to work,” spokeswoman Elizabeth Conway said in an email.

John Deere

The farm equipment maker said in July that it would no longer sponsor “social or cultural awareness” events, and that it would audit all training materials “to ensure the absence of socially-motivated messages” in compliance with federal and local laws.

Moline, Illinois-based John Deere added “the existence of diversity quotas and pronoun identification have never been and are not company policy.” But it noted that it would still continue to “track and advance” the diversity of the company.

Tractor Supply

The retailer in June said it was ending an array of corporate diversity and climate efforts, a move that came after weeks of online conservative backlash against the rural retailer.

Tractor Supply said it would be eliminating all of its DEI roles while retiring current DEI goals. The company added that it would “stop sponsoring non-business activities” such as Pride festivals or voting campaigns — and no longer submit data for the HRC index.

The Brentwood, Tennessee-based company, which sells products ranging from farming equipment to pet supplies, also said that it would withdraw from its carbon emission goals to instead “focus on our land and water conservation efforts.”

The National Black Farmers Association called on Tractor Supply’s president and CEO to step down shortly after the company’s announcement.

## UN rights office estimates up to 1,400 killed in crackdown on protests in Bangladesh

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The U.N. human rights office on Wednesday estimated that up to 1,400 people may have been killed in Bangladesh over three weeks last summer in a crackdown on student-led protests against the now-ousted former prime minister.

In a new report, the Geneva-based office says security and intelligence services “systematically engaged” in rights violations that could amount to crimes against humanity and require further investigation.

Citing “various credible sources,” the rights office said it estimated that as many as 1,400 people may have been killed in the protests between July 15 and Aug. 5 — the day longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to India amid the uprising.

Thousands more were injured in the weeks leading up to and after the protests, and the vast majority of those killed and injured “were shot by Bangladesh’s security forces,” the report said.

Over 11,700 people were detained, the report said, citing information from security services. It said that about 12 to 13% of people estimated to have been killed — or as many as about 180 people — were children.

In some cases, “security forces engaged in summary executions by deliberately shooting unarmed protesters at point blank range,” it said.

U.N. human rights chief Volker Türk cited signs that “extrajudicial killings, extensive arbitrary arrests and detentions, and torture” were conducted with the knowledge and coordination of the political leadership and top security officials as a way to suppress the protests.

The U.N. fact-finding team was deployed to Bangladesh at the invitation of the country’s interim leader,

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the Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus, to look into the uprising and violent crackdown.

The team of investigators said the interim government has reportedly made 100 arrests in connection with attacks on religious and indigenous groups. The report said "many perpetrators of acts of revenge, violence and attacks on distinct groups apparently continue to enjoy impunity."

The human rights situation in Bangladesh continues to raise concerns, the U.N. office said.

While the government has changed, "the system has not necessarily changed," Rory Mungoven, head of the rights office's Asia-Pacific region, told reporters. "Many officials and people who had served or been appointed under the previous regime continue to function," he said.

Such a situation creates "a potential conflict of interest" and could impede reforms and accountability, Mungoven added.

The investigators issued dozens of recommendations to the government, such as steps to improve the justice system and setting up a witness protection program. It also recommended banning the use of lethal firearms by security forces to disperse crowds unless they are faced with "imminent threat of death or serious injury."

In a statement after the report was published, Yunus reiterated his government's commitment to upholding the rule of law and said it was crucial to reform the country's law enforcement and justice sectors.

"I call on everyone working inside these institutions to side with justice, the law, and the people of Bangladesh in holding to account their own peers and others who have broken the law and violated the human and civil rights of their fellow citizens," he said.

What began as peaceful demonstrations by students frustrated with a quota system for government jobs unexpectedly grew into a major uprising against Hasina and her ruling Awami League party.

A High Court decision in early June that reinstated the quota system was the "immediate trigger" to the protests, which were also fueled by long standing grievances about economic inequality and a lack of rights, the report said.

## Modi and Trump's friendly rapport may be tested as Indian prime minister visits Washington

By ASHOK SHARMA and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Prime Minister Narendra Modi's longstanding bonhomie with President Donald Trump could be tested as the Indian leader kicks off a visit to Washington on Wednesday, eager to avoid tariffs that have been slapped on others and threats of further taxes and imports.

India, a key strategic partner of the United States, has so far been spared any new tariffs, and the two leaders have cultivated a personal relationship. Modi — a nationalist criticized over India's democratic backsliding — has welcomed Trump's return to the White House, seeking to reset India's relationship with the West over his refusal to condemn Russia for its war on Ukraine.

But Trump has repeatedly referred to India as a "tariff king" and pressed the South Asian country on the deportation of migrants. In response, New Delhi has shown a willingness to lower its own tariffs on U.S. products, accept Indian citizens back and buy American oil.

But as tariff threats loom, the question remains how much a good rapport between two leaders matters and how far India will go to cut a deal.

Body language will be closely watched

Modi had established a good working relationship with Trump during his first term in office, and the two can build on the areas of convergence and "minimize areas of friction without conceding on core areas of national interest," says Meera Shankar, India's former ambassador to the U.S.

"Most other partners have their reciprocal lists ready from the word go, because it's a point of leverage when you negotiate," Shankar added, expressing hope that India "will find the right balance between firmness and flexibility" on the tariffs issue.

Modi — boosted by his ruling Hindu nationalist party's victory in the high-stakes state legislature elec-

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tion last weekend in India's federal territory, including New Delhi — said before leaving for Washington that the visit was an "opportunity to build upon" collaboration during Trump's first term and "deepen our partnership" in areas such as technology, trade, defense and energy.

What has Trump said?

Speaking with Modi in January, Trump emphasized the importance of India buying more American-made military gear and weapons, as well as reducing the trade imbalance. Last year, the U.S. imported \$50 billion more in goods than it sold to India.

A readout from the White House at the time said Trump "emphasized the importance of India increasing its procurement of American-made security equipment and moving toward a fair bilateral trading relationship."

Earlier this month, India accepted the return of 104 migrants brought back on a U.S. military plane, the first such flight to the country as part of a crackdown ordered by the Trump administration.

Also, Modi's government lowered some high tariffs, including on some Harley-Davidson motorcycles, from 50% to 40%. In 2023, India had dropped retaliatory tariffs on U.S. almonds, apples, chickpeas, lentils, and walnuts.

"Another thing we can expect is that Modi would offer to purchase more American (natural) gas to narrow the U.S. trade deficit," said Lisa Curtis, director of the Indo-Pacific security program at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington-based think tank. "This will help a little bit."

Concerns over China

India is seen as integral to the U.S. strategy of containing China in the Indo-Pacific and is to host a summit of a group of countries known as the Quad — made up of the U.S., India, Japan and Australia — later this year.

But India will likely have to recalibrate its stand in case of a Washington-Beijing thaw under Trump.

"Trump's outreach to China will complicate India's ability to cultivate the American desire to use India as a proxy against China without actually ever becoming one," said Happymon Jacob, founder of the New Delhi-based Council for Strategic and Defense Research.

India turned the page with China and in December agreed to work toward a solution to their long-running border dispute in the Himalayas after a military standoff that began with a deadly clash in 2020.

"Even a tactical accommodation between the U.S. and China has implications for India," Shankar said.

Defense deals on the agenda?

The U.S. is India's largest trade partner, with a trade deficit of \$50 billion in India's favor. The Indo-U.S. goods and services trade totaled around \$190.1 billion in 2023. According to India's External Affairs Ministry, the U.S. exports to India were worth nearly \$70 billion and imports \$120 billion.

India depends on Russia for nearly 60% of its defense equipment, but the war in Ukraine has added to doubts about future supplies, and New Delhi has been looking more toward the U.S., Israel, Britain, and others.

A recently struck deal will allow U.S.-based General Electric to partner with India-based Hindustan Aeronautics to produce jet engines for Indian aircraft in India and the sale of U.S.-made armed MQ-9B SeaGuardian drones.

Since 2008, India has contracted over \$20 billion worth of U.S.-origin defense equipment.

"For India, that could also be an area where we see some synergies with the U.S.," Shankar said, adding that Trump will likely seek to persuade India to buy more defense equipment.

Raja Mohan, an analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore, said Modi's visit will be a good time to advance Indo-U.S. ties.

"India's diplomatic skills will be tested, so the general goodwill that exists between Trump and Modi should be translated into concrete outcomes," Mohan said.

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## Today in History: February 13 The World War II bombing of Dresden

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Feb. 13, the 44th day of 2025. There are 321 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 13, 1945, Allied forces in World War II began a three-day bombing raid on Dresden, Germany, killing as many as 25,000 people and triggering a firestorm that swept through the city center.

Also on this date:

In 1935, a jury in Flemington, New Jersey, found Bruno Richard Hauptmann guilty of first-degree murder in the kidnap-slaying of Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., the 20-month-old son of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh. (Hauptmann was executed by electric chair the following year.)

In 1965, during the Vietnam War, President Lyndon B. Johnson authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, an extended bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese.

In 1980, the 13th Winter Olympics opened in Lake Placid, New York.

In 1996, the rock musical "Rent," by Jonathan Larson, premiered off-Broadway less than three weeks after Larson's death.

In 2002, John Walker Lindh pleaded not guilty in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, to conspiring to kill Americans and supporting the Taliban and terrorist organizations. (Lindh later pleaded guilty to lesser offenses and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.)

In 2016, Justice Antonin Scalia, the influential conservative member of the U.S. Supreme Court, was found dead at a private residence in the Big Bend area of West Texas; he was 79.

In 2017, President Donald Trump's embattled national security adviser, Michael Flynn, resigned following reports he had misled Vice President Mike Pence and other officials about his contacts with Russia.

In 2018, President Donald Trump's personal attorney, Michael Cohen, said he had paid \$130,000 out of his own pocket to Stephanie Clifford (aka Stormy Daniels), a porn actor who claimed to have had a sexual encounter with Trump.

In 2021, former President Donald Trump was acquitted by the Senate at his second impeachment trial – the first to involve a former president – in which he was accused of inciting the attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Seven Republicans joined all 50 Democrats in voting to convict, less than the two-thirds threshold required.

Today's birthdays: Actor Kim Novak is 92. Actor Stockard Channing is 81. Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut is 79. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Mike Krzyzewski is 78. Musician Peter Gabriel is 75. Musician Peter Hook is 69. Singer-writer Henry Rollins is 64. Hockey Hall of Famer Mats Sundin is 54. Singer Robbie Williams is 51. Football Hall of Famer Randy Moss is 48. Actor Mena Suvari (MEE'-nuh soo-VAHR'-ee) is 46.