

Groton Daily Independent

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First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.;
Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship,
10:30 a.m.;

Monday, Feb. 17

PRESIDENT'S DAY - No School
National FFA Week

Boys Basketball hosts Florence-Henry: C game at
5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow; in gym: boys
8th at 4 p.m., boys 7th at 5 p.m.

Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Groton Community
Center

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle,
7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 18

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken, sweet potato, mon-
terery blend, oranges, whole wheat bread.

Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209
N Main.

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center
Groton United Methodist Bible Study, 10 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.

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 and boys junior varsity
games at 1 p.m. followed by boys varsity and girls
varsity.

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

Sunday, Feb. 16

Open gym, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Junior High State Wrestling at Pierre.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion
at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; No Sunday
School.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday
School; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde, 8:15 a.m.; Groton, 9:30
a.m.; Britton, 11:15 a.m.; No Sunday School; Coffee
Hour, 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS
Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45
a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

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.

Rain Pounds California

California has been battered by its biggest winter storm this season over the last two days, with flooding, mudslides, hurricane-force winds, and heavy snow. The storm caused significant damage, particularly in areas near burn scars from January's wildfires, with mud and debris blocking roadways in areas including Malibu. Evacuations were ordered near the Palisades Fire and Eaton Fire burn areas due to the risk of mudslides and flash flooding.

Some areas received more than 10 inches of rain, and Death Valley National Park—North America's hottest place—also received some rainfall. The Sierra Nevada experienced extreme conditions with a 126 mph wind gust and up to 55 inches of new snow at Mammoth Mountain. The latter figure is more snow than in December and January combined. Conditions are expected to improve by the weekend, aiding cleanup efforts.

The weather system is fueled by an atmospheric river—a band of moisture in the sky with water vapor levels comparable to average flow levels at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Treasury watchdog begins audit of DOGE's access to payment systems.

The Office of Inspector General initiated an audit into the security controls of the government's payment system and the access granted to the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency. The audit, prompted by worries over DOGE's activities, will also review the past two years of transactions in relation to alleged fraud.

Rwanda-backed rebels capture second Congo airport.

The M23 rebels have seized control of Kavumu Airport, a strategic facility serving Bukavu, the capital of the South Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The development comes just before the annual African Union summit in Ethiopia and has heightened fears of an imminent attack on Bukavu.

Study finds ancient Egyptian mummy remains smell pleasant.

Well-preserved Egyptian mummies emit pleasant aromas described as "woody," "spicy," and "sweet," which is attributed to the oils, waxes, and balms used during the mummification process. By analyzing these scents, researchers aim to recreate them for museum exhibits and gain insights into a mummy's social status and preservation state, potentially improving conservation efforts.

"Goonies 2" officially in the works with Steven Spielberg producing.

Almost 40 years after the original film's release in 1985, Warner Bros. is moving forward with a sequel to "The Goonies." The original film centered on a group of misfit kids who find an old map and embark on an adventure to find a pirate's lost treasure. A screenwriter has been tapped, and a director has yet to sign on. It is unclear which of the original cast members are set to return.

Russian drone strike on Chernobyl plant damages reactor shield.

Ukraine said Russia's drone struck the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant early Friday, damaging the protective shield over the destroyed fourth reactor and starting a fire, which was later extinguished. Radiation levels remain normal at this time. Chernobyl was the site of the world's worst civil nuclear accident when one of its four reactors exploded in 1986.

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Pope Francis admitted to hospital for bronchitis, Vatican says.

The 88-year-old was diagnosed with bronchitis last week and is being hospitalized for treatment and diagnostic tests. The Vatican said the pope had a respiratory tract infection, a slight fever, and difficulty breathing. The hospitalization is the latest in a string of health issues for the pontiff, including a recent lung infection and previous hospitalizations for intestinal problems.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Wendy R. in Covington, Virginia.

"I was taking my 5-year-old granddaughter into the city on the high-speed train for a day of fun. It was her first train ride, and she was excited but nervous. She took her favorite stuffed animal to hold and hug. When the train arrived for boarding, she forgot her stuffie on the bench on the platform, and she immediately started crying. Since the train was leaving in less than a minute I didn't want to go back and risk missing the train."

"A young man who had just exited the train heard her crying and ran and grabbed the stuffie, then darted back thru the doors as they were closing. He had retrieved her beloved baby but was now stuck on the train! His smile never faltered as I thanked him and apologized that he'd missed his stop. He was so humble and unbothered. We were able to chat with him to the next stop and got to know him a little. He's a great example of a fine, kind young man, and I will forever be grateful he saved a little stuffie loved by a little girl."

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25% OFF

EVERYTHING!

- Cakes in stock
- Cones
- Sundaes
- Blizzards
- Burgers
- Chicken Strips
- Fries

**Monday,
Feb. 17th**



11 E HWY 12
Groton
(605) 397-8627

It's the Battle of the Tigers

Saturday, at Mobridge-Pollock

Groton Area

Tigers

Girls: 13-5

Boys: 11-5

Mobridge-Pollock

Tigers

Girls: 14-2

Boys: 11-4



VS.



11:00 - 8th boys in the MS/C girls in the HS

12:00- 7th boys in the MS/C boys in the HS

1:00 - JV girls in the MS/JV boys in the HS

Varsity boys

Varsity girls

Games to be broadcast on GDILIVE.COM are as follows:

- C Girls at 11 a.m. sponsored by Locke Electric
- C Boys at Noon sponsored for the grandparents watching
- JV girls in the MS Gym (scoreboard - no commentary) at 1 p.m. sponsored by Weber Landscaping
- JV boys in the HS gym sponsored by Hefty Seed, at 1 p.m.
- Varsity Boys
- Varsity Girls

Varsity Sponsors: Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover

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Men's Basketball Loses Road Contest to No. 24 Concordia-St. Paul

St. Paul, Minn. – Trailing by just three at the half, the Northern State University men's basketball team fell behind by double digits in the second, falling to No. 24 Concordia-St. Paul. Four Wolves scored in double figures in the contest, led by Kaleb Mitchell with 16 points.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 66, CSP 87

Records: NSU 2-23 (1-18 NSIC), CSP 19-6 (14-5 NSIC)

Attendance: 558

HOW IT HAPPENED

The scoreboard read 31-28 at the half in favor of the Golden Bears, however CSP out-scored NSU 56-38 in the second

Northern tallied 32 rebounds, 19 assists, seven made 3-pointers, two blocks, and a game high eight steals

The defense forced 11 turnovers, while the offense gave up just nine in the contest

The Wolves scored 32 points in the paint, 15 points off the bench and nine fast break points in the game

They shot 40.0% from the floor, 31.8% from the 3-point line, and a season high 87.5% from the foul line, while the Golden Bears shot 46.5% from the floor, 39.4% from beyond the arc, and 61.5% from the charity stripe

Mitchell knocked down 7-of-14 from the floor, scoring 16 points, and adding four rebounds, one assist, and one block

James Glenn followed with 14 points and four assists, while Tobi Obiora led the team off the bench with 13 points and six rebounds

Devon Brooke rounded out the double figure scorers with ten points and six rebounds

Marcus Burks led the team off the glass with seven rebounds, dished out a team high nine assists, and grabbed a game leading four steals

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Kaleb Mitchell: 16 points, 50.0 field goal%, 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 block

James Glenn: 14 points, 4 assists, 2 rebounds, 2 steals

Tobi Obiora: 13 points, 6 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 block, 1 steal

Devon Brooke: 10 points, 75.0 field goal%, 6 rebounds

UP NEXT

The Wolves will play their final road game of the 2024-25 season today at Minnesota Duluth. Tip-off is set for 3:30 p.m. against the Bulldogs.

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Wolves' Rally Falls Short Against No. 12 Golden Bears

St. Paul, Minn. – The Northern State University women's basketball team came up short against #12 Concordia-St. Paul, falling 75-69 in NSIC action. An early deficit kept the win out of reach for the Wolves, despite a rally second half in which they outscored the Golden Bears by 14 points. Madelyn Bragg led the way for the Wolves with 23 points on the night.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 69, CSP 75

Records: NSU 15-10 (NSIC 12-7), CSP 23-2 (NSIC 17-2)

Attendance: 489

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State posted 14 points in the first, 11 in the second, 20 in the third, and 24 in the fourth quarter. The Wolves shot 42.9% from the field, 26.7% from beyond the three-point line, and 73.9% from the free-throw line.

NSU tallied 38 points in the paint, 17 points off free throws, 16 points off turnovers, 12 second-chance points, and 11 points from the bench.

Leading the team was Madelyn Bragg with 23 points and five rebounds, along with a 60.0% field goal percentage.

The playmaker for the Wolves was Rianna Fillipi, who contributed seven assists, 18 points, and four rebounds.

Izzy Moore was the first off the bench, scoring 11 points in 19 minutes of play.

Michaela Jewett rounded out the top scorers with eight points and eight rebounds.

NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 23 points, 5 rebounds, 3 steals, 2 blocks, 60.0 FG%

Rianna Fillipi: 18 points, 5 rebounds, 7 assists, 2 steals

Izzy Moore: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 50.0 FG%

Michaela Jewett: 8 points, 8 rebounds, 1 block, 1 steal

UP NEXT

Northern State closes out the weekend against Minnesota Duluth in NSIC action. Tip-off is set for 5:30 p.m. tomorrow, Saturday, February 15, in Duluth, Minnesota, against the Bulldogs.

Gov. Rhoden Announces Expansion of Highway Patrol in Sioux Falls

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Larry Rhoden announced a major force expansion of the South Dakota Highway Patrol in the Sioux Falls area. This public safety enhancement was announced at a press conference at the Sioux Falls Public Safety Campus.

“This squad will support local law enforcement to fight crime and keep our communities safe,” said Governor Larry Rhoden. “As Governor of South Dakota, it is my duty to protect the people of this great state. This new squad is long overdue, and I am confident that it will lead to a brighter future.”

The new squad, which will be comprised of one Sergeant and eight Troopers, will be paid for by the State Highway Fund.

This is the first time in 25 years that a force expansion of the Highway Patrol in Sioux Falls has occurred. Over the last 15 years, the Sioux Falls Police Department has added an additional 50 positions. In that same timeframe, the Minnehaha County Sheriff’s Office force has nearly doubled, and the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office’s force has more than doubled.

“We greatly appreciate Governor Rhoden’s partnership and the State’s continued commitment to prioritize these investments to keep our communities safe and thriving,” said Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken. “As Sioux Falls and our surrounding communities continue to grow, collaborative investments in public safety must grow with it.”

Governor Rhoden was joined by Mayor Paul TenHaken, Sioux Falls Police Chief Jon Thum, Minnehaha County State’s Attorney Daniel Haggar, Minnehaha County Chief Deputy Sheriff Jeff Gromer, Secretary of Public Safety Bob Perry, and Colonel Casey Collins of the South Dakota Highway Patrol.

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**BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY
February 18, 2025, 8:45 A.M.
COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD**

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of the Agenda
3. Opportunity for Public Comment
4. First Reading of Ordinance #289 – Rezone for Donald & David Johnston
5. Rachel Kippley, Fair/Fairgrounds/Parks Manager
 - a. Bid opening for Small Animal Barn
 - b. Camping Procedures for 2025
 - c. Golf Cart Rules & Regulations
 - d. Fair Contracts
 - i. Revised Home Clean Home
 - ii. Hub City Radio
 - iii. Lizzy Hofer Band
6. Patricia Kendall, Dacotah Prairie Museum Director
 - a. Resolution #2025-11 – Approval of Dacotah Prairie Museum Expansion
7. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of February 11, 2025
 - b. Claims
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Landfill Tonnage Report
 - e. Claim Assignment
 - f. Abatements
 - g. December 2024 Auditors Report of Account
 - h. Travel Requests
 - i. Lease Agreements
 - j. Authorize Chairman to sign Commitment Letter for FEMA Hazard Mitigation
8. Other Business
9. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
10. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting
Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.
<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: +1 (872) 240-3311
Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission.
Presentations may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board) - Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at <https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

SD House defeats gender identity notification bill and taxpayer-funded education lobbying ban

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 14, 2025 12:02 PM

The South Dakota House of Representatives voted down bills Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre that would have barred taxpayer-funded lobbying by school districts and required school staff to notify parents if students talk about their gender identity.

Lobbying ban was a reaction to other failed bills

The chamber voted 40-28 to defeat House Bill 1185, which would prohibit education lobbying using taxpayer dollars from school districts. A registered lobbyist in South Dakota is hired by another person or a public or private organization to influence legislation.

Prime sponsor of the bill Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, said she's grown frustrated with opposition from a coalition of public education lobbyists, some of whom are funded by school board memberships in their organization. May said the bill was meant to "send a message" to encourage cooperation for innovative education reform, rather than consistently opposing new ideas.

Some of those failed ideas this legislative session have included various proposals to provide public funding for nonpublic education, and attempts to make public schools post the Ten Commandments and the state motto, "Under God, the People Rule," in every classroom.

Lawmakers opposed to the lobbying ban said it was politically motivated, while others were concerned about singling out one group of lobbyists for using public money to influence legislative policy. Hundreds of lobbyists in the state represent public professions and industries, as well as state and local government. Those groups were not included in the lobbying ban.

Questions about parental abuse lead to gender identity bill's downfall

State representatives largely didn't debate the merits of House Bill 1201 before voting 40-28 to defeat it. The legislation would require public school and state-accredited private school counselors, teachers, administrators and staff to alert parents if a student discusses gender identity with them.

Aberdeen Republican Rep. Logan Manhart told lawmakers that schools would not have to report that discussion to parents if they suspect the student is abused or could face abuse if that information is shared with the parent.

But because the legislation doesn't explicitly say that, Rep. Peri Pourier, D-Pine Ridge, said she worried schools would still report to parents and potentially endanger students.

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.

Republican states claim zero abortions. A red-state doctor calls that 'ludicrous.'

BY: SARAH VARNEY, KFF HEALTH NEWS - FEBRUARY 14, 2025 10:00 AM

In Arkansas, state health officials announced a stunning statistic for 2023: The total number of abortions in the state, where some 1.5 million women live, was zero.

In South Dakota, too, official records show zero abortions that year.

And in Idaho, home to abortion battles that have recently made their way to the U.S. Supreme Court, the official number of recorded abortions was just five.

In nearly a dozen states with total or near-total abortion bans, government officials claimed that zero or very few abortions occurred in 2023, the first full year after the Supreme Court eliminated federal abortion rights.

Those statistics, the most recent available and published in government records, have been celebrated by anti-abortion activists. Medical professionals say such accounts are not only untrue but fundamentally dishonest.

"To say there are no abortions going on in South Dakota is ludicrous," said Amy Kelley, an OB-GYN in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, citing female patients who have come to her hospital after taking abortion pills or to have medical procedures meant to prevent death or end nonviable pregnancies. "I can think of five off the top of my head that I dealt with," she said, "and I have 15 partners."

For some data scientists, these statistics also suggest a troubling trend: the potential politicization of vital statistics.

"It's so clinically dishonest," said Ushma Upadhyay, a public health scientist at the University of California-San Francisco, who co-chairs WeCount, an academic research effort that has kept a tally of the number of abortions nationwide since April 2022.

The zeroing out is statistically unlikely, Upadhyay said, and also runs counter to the reality that pregnancy "comes with many risks and in many cases emergency abortion care will be needed."

"We know they are sometimes necessary to save the pregnant person's life," she said, "so I do hope there are abortions occurring in South Dakota."

State officials reported a sharp decline in the official number of abortions after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022.

Arkansas reported zero abortions in 2023, compared with 1,621 in 2022.

Texas reported 60 in 2023, after reporting 50,783 abortions in the state in 2021.

Idaho reported five in 2023 compared with 1,553 in 2021.

South Dakota, which had severely restricted abortions years ahead of the *Dobbs* ruling, reported zero in 2023 compared with 192 abortions in 2021.

Anti-abortion politicians and activists have cited these statistics to bolster their claims that their decades-long crusade to end abortion is a success.

"Undoubtedly, many Arkansas pregnant mothers were spared from the lifelong regrets and physical complications abortion can cause and babies are alive today in Arkansas," Rose Mimms, executive director of Arkansas Right to Life, said in a press statement. "That's a win-win for them and our state."

A spokesperson for the Arkansas Department of Health, Ashley Whitlow, said in an email that the department "is not able to track abortions that take place out of the state or outside of a healthcare facility." State officials, she said, collect data from "in-state providers and facilities for the Induced Abortion data reports as required by Arkansas law."

WeCount's tallies of observed telehealth abortions do not appear in the official state numbers. For instance, from April to June 2024 it counted an average of 240 telehealth abortions a month in Arkansas.

Groups that oppose abortion rights acknowledge that state surveillance reports do not tell the full story of abortion care occurring in their states. Mimms, of Arkansas Right to Life, said she would not expect abortions to be reported in the state, since the procedure is illegal except to prevent a patient's death.

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"Women are still seeking out abortions in Arkansas, whether it's illegally or going out of state for illegal abortion," Mimms told KFF Health News. "We're not naive."

The South Dakota Department of Health "compiles information it receives from health care organizations around the state and reports it accordingly," Tia Kafka, its marketing and outreach director, said in an email responding to questions about the statistics. Kafka declined to comment on specific questions about abortions being performed in the state or characterizations that South Dakota's report is flawed.

Kim Floren, who serves as director of the Justice Empowerment Network, which provides funds and practical support to help South Dakota patients receive abortion care, expressed disbelief in the state's official figures.

"In 2023, we served over 500 patients," she said. "Most of them were from South Dakota."

"For better or worse, government data is the official record," said Ishan Mehta, director for media and democracy at Common Cause, the nonpartisan public interest group. "You are not just reporting data. You are feeding into an ecosystem that is going to have much larger ramifications."

When there is a mismatch in the data reported by state governments and credible researchers, including WeCount and the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health research group that supports abortion rights, state researchers need to dig deeper, Mehta said.

"This is going to create a historical record for archivists and researchers and people who are going to look at the decades-long trend and try to understand how big public policy changes affected maternal health care," Mehta said. And now, the recordkeepers "don't seem to be fully thinking through the ramifications of their actions."

A Culture of Fear

Abortion rights supporters agree that there has been a steep drop in the number of abortions in every state that enacted laws criminalizing abortion. In states with total bans, 63 clinics have stopped providing abortions. And doctors and medical providers face criminal charges for providing or assisting in abortion care in at least a dozen states.

Practitioners find themselves working in a culture of confusion and fear, which could contribute to a hesitancy to report abortions — despite some state efforts to make clear when abortion is allowed.

For instance, South Dakota Department of Health Secretary Melissa Magstadt released a video to clarify when an abortion is legal under the state's strict ban.

The procedure is legal in South Dakota only when a pregnant woman is facing death. Magstadt said doctors should use "reasonable medical judgment" and "document their thought process."

Any doctor convicted of performing an unlawful abortion faces up to two years in prison.

In the place of reliable statistics, academic researchers at WeCount use symbols like dashes to indicate they can't accurately capture the reality on the ground.

"We try to make an effort to make clear that it's not zero. That's the approach these departments of health should take," said WeCount's Upadhyay, adding that health departments "should acknowledge that abortions are happening in their states but they can't count them because they have created a culture of fear, a fear of lawsuits, having licenses revoked."

"Maybe that's what they should say," she said, "instead of putting a zero in their reports."

Mixed Mandates for Abortion Data

For decades, dozens of states have required abortion providers to collect detailed demographic information on the women who have abortions, including race, age, city, and county — and, in some cases, marital status and the reason for ending the pregnancy.

Researchers who compile data on abortion say there can be sound public health reasons for monitoring the statistics surrounding medical care, namely to evaluate the impact of policy changes. That has become particularly important in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2022 Dobbs decision, which ended the federal right to an abortion and opened the door to laws in Republican-led states restricting and some-

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times outlawing abortion care.

Isaac Maddow-Zimet, a Guttmacher data scientist, said data collection has been used by abortion opponents to overburden clinics with paperwork and force patients to answer intrusive questions. "It's part of a pretty long history of those tools being used to stigmatize abortion," he said.

In South Dakota, clinic staff members were required to report the weight of the contents of the uterus, including the woman's blood, a requirement that had no medical purpose and had the effect of exaggerating the weight of pregnancy tissue, said Floren, who worked at a clinic that provided abortion care before the state's ban.

"If it was a procedural abortion, you had to weigh everything that came out and write that down on the report," Floren said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not mandate abortion reporting, and some Democratic-led states, including California, do not require clinics or health care providers to collect data. Each year, the CDC requests abortion data from the central health agencies for every state, the District of Columbia, and New York City, and these states and jurisdictions voluntarily report aggregated data for inclusion in the CDC's annual "Abortion Surveillance" report.

In states that mandate public abortion tracking, hospitals, clinics, and physicians report the number of abortions to state health departments in what are typically called "induced termination of pregnancy" reports, or ITOPs.

Before Dobbs, such reports recorded procedural and medication abortions. But following the elimination of federal abortion rights, clinics shuttered in states with criminal abortion bans. More patients began accessing abortion medication through online organizations, including Aid Access, that do not fall under mandatory state reporting laws.

At least six states have enacted what are called "shield laws" to protect providers who send pills to patients in states with abortion bans. That includes New York, where Linda Prine, a family physician employed by Aid Access, prescribes and sends abortion pills to patients across the country.

Asked about states reporting zero or very few abortions in 2023, Prine said she was certain those statistics were wrong. Texas, for example, reported 50,783 abortions in the state in 2021. Now the state reports on average five a month. WeCount reported an average of 2,800 telehealth abortions a month in Texas from April to June 2024.

"In 2023, Aid Access absolutely mailed pills to all three states in question — South Dakota, Arkansas, and Texas," Prine said.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed a lawsuit in January against a New York-based physician, Maggie Carpenter, co-founder of the Abortion Coalition for Telemedicine, for prescribing abortion pills to a Texas patient in violation of Texas' near-total abortion ban. It's the first legal challenge to New York's shield law and threatens to derail access to medication abortion.

Still, some state officials in states with abortion bans have sought to choke off the supply of medication that induces abortion. In May, Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin wrote cease and desist letters to Aid Access in the Netherlands and Choices Women's Medical Center in New York City, stating that "abortion pills may not legally be shipped to Arkansas" and accusing the medical organizations of potentially "false, deceptive, and unconscionable trade practices" that carry up to \$10,000 per violation.

Good-government groups like Common Cause say that the dangers of officials relying on misleading statistics are myriad, including a disintegration of public trust as well as ill-informed legislation.

These concerns have been heightened by misinformation surrounding health care, including an entrenched and vocal anti-vaccine movement and the objections of some conservative politicians to mandates related to covid-19, including masks, physical distancing, and school and business closures.

"If the state is not going to put in a little more than the bare minimum to just find out if their data is accurate or not," Mehta said, "we are in a very dangerous place."

Sarah Varney was a senior correspondent for KFF Health News until August 2023.

Federal workforce hit by Trump's sweeping firings of thousands of probationary employees

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 14, 2025 5:29 PM

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration Friday continued its mass firing of thousands of probationary federal employees in an attempt to remove workers recently hired under the Biden administration and to cull the federal workforce.

President Donald Trump wants to shrink the federal government's 2.4 million-person workforce, and the targeting of roughly 220,000 probationary employees is the easiest route, as relatively few federal employees accepted an earlier resignation offer pushed by Trump adviser and billionaire Elon Musk.

Those probationary workers are either newly hired, or have worked in the federal government for decades and started a new role that subjects them to a probationary status of one to two years.

The federal workforce is employed all over the country, with 80% outside the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia metro area. States with a high presence of federal employees include California, Texas, Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Alaska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Oregon.

The White House did not respond to States Newsroom's request for comment about exactly how many federal workers were fired or where they were located.

Latest action by Trump

It's the latest attempt by the Trump administration to decimate federal agencies and the workforce following the halting of work at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Media reports of federal agencies that fired employees within the probationary window include the Department of Education, General Services Administration, Office of Personnel Management, the Small Business Administration, the U.S. Forest Service, Veterans Affairs, National Nuclear Security Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The decision has drawn swift backlash from unions. The National Federation of Federal Employees, with 110,000 members, has filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration over the mass firings as well as the resignation offer.

Another union of 800,000 federal workers, the American Federation of Government Employees, also slammed the White House.

AFGE President Everett Kelley said in a statement that the Trump administration "has abused the probationary period to conduct a politically driven mass firing spree, targeting employees not because of performance, but because they were hired before Trump took office."

"These firings are not about poor performance — there is no evidence these employees were anything but dedicated public servants," Kelley said. "They are about power. They are about gutting the federal government, silencing workers, and forcing agencies into submission to a radical agenda that prioritizes cronyism over competence."

'Indefensible, indiscriminate'

Democratic lawmakers have also blasted the Trump administration for the mass firings.

Georgia's Sen. Jon Ossoff, slammed the firing of more than 1,000 CDC workers. The agency is based in Atlanta.

"President Trump's indefensible, indiscriminate firing of more than 1,000 CDC personnel in a single day leaves Americans exposed to disease and devastates careers and livelihoods for the world's most talented doctors and scientists, many of them here in Georgia," Ossoff said on the Senate floor.

The federal agency that employs 21% of the workforce, Veterans Affairs, fired more than 1,000 federal employees Friday.

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VA Secretary Doug Collins said the action will save the agency \$98 million. For fiscal year 2024, Congress appropriated \$135.3 billion in non-defense discretionary funding and \$161.7 billion in mandatory funding for the VA, as well as advance funding for medical care and benefits.

"At VA, we are focused on saving money so it can be better spent on Veteran care. We thank these employees for their service to VA," Collins said in a statement. "This was a tough decision, but ultimately it's the right call to better support the Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors the department exists to serve."

Roughly 30% of the 2.3 million federal workforce are veterans.

Maryland's Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen on Thursday held a rally outside the VA with union representatives, protesting the incoming firings of federal workers.

"Their real ultimate goal is to shut down very important services to the American people and use the savings from denying those services to working Americans to provide tax cuts to the very wealthy, like Elon Musk and the others who were behind President Trump on inauguration day," Van Hollen said. "When he talked about the 'golden age' he was talking about delivering even more money to Elon Musk and the tech titans."

Firings at Forest Service, Interior

The U.S. Forest Service will fire roughly 3,400 federal workers, according to Politico.

And the U.S. Interior Department announced it was firing up to 2,300 probationary employees, according to Reuters. The agency has regional offices in Denver, Colorado; Portland Oregon; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Atlanta, Georgia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Anchorage, Alaska; Oakland, California; and Boston, Massachusetts.

Deputy Director Aaron Weiss of the Center for Western Priorities slammed Interior Secretary Doug Burgum for the firing of workers from the Interior Department.

"Firing the next generation of America's park rangers, scientists, and land managers is a recipe for literal disaster," Weiss said. "I don't know whether we'll see overflowing latrines, polluted streams, or deadly wildfires first, but Doug Burgum is already leaving a path of destruction across America's parks and public lands."

South Dakota impact

FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes out was among the South Dakotans sounding alarms this week about mass firings of federal employees by the Trump administration.

Star Comes Out published a statement Thursday saying he expected impacts to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service.

"We will make every effort to protect Indian country according to Trust and Treaty obligation and keep everyone aware of changes as we find out," Star Comes Out said on Facebook.

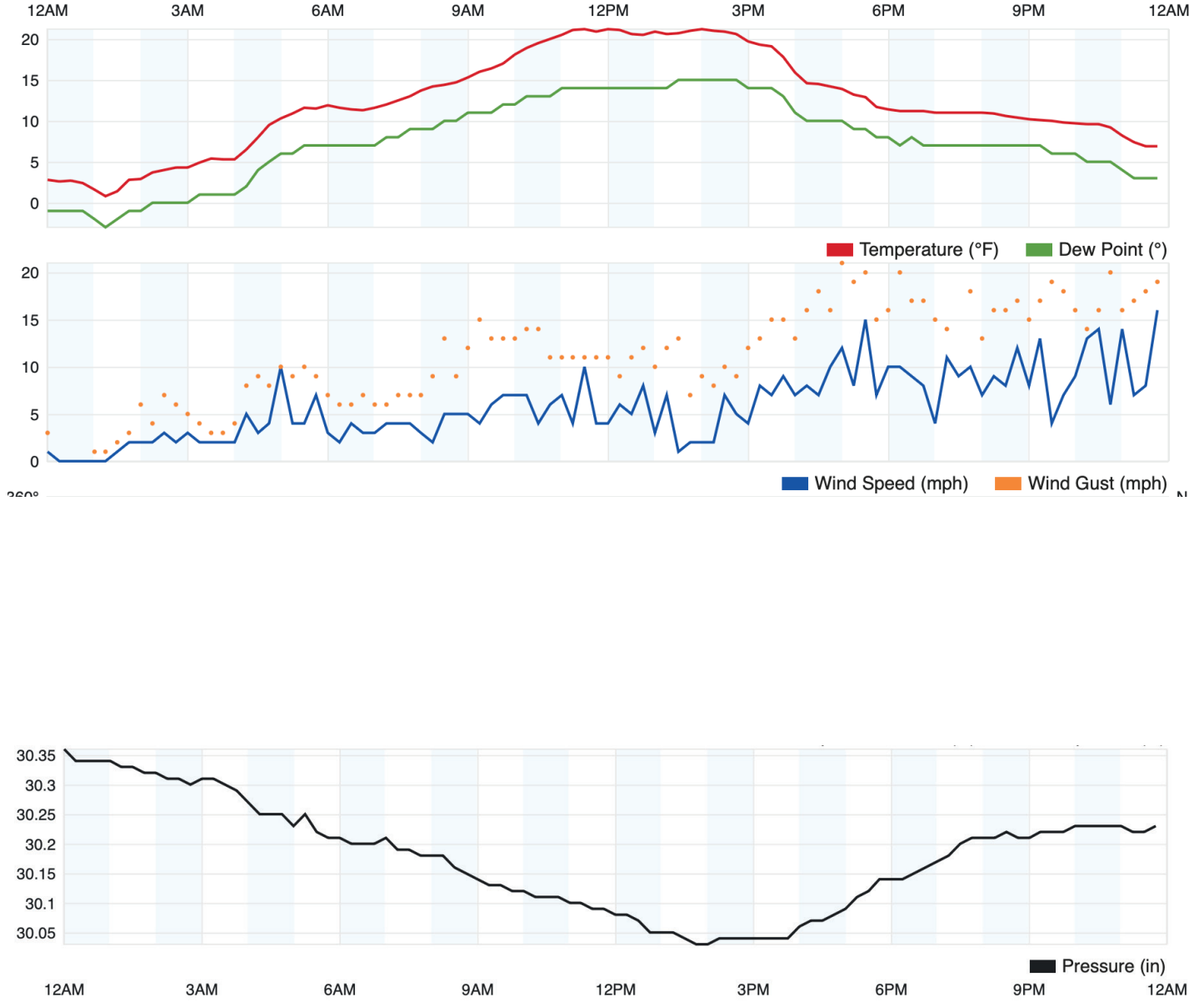
News of the impact on other federal agencies with a presence in the state was slow to emerge. Those agencies include the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. According to the Partnership for Public Service, there are nearly 8,000 federal employees in South Dakota.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Saturday



High: 6 °F

Cloudy and Blustery then Slight Chance Snow

Saturday Night



Low: -10 °F

Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy

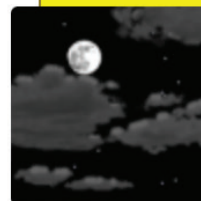
Sunday



High: 5 °F

Cold

Sunday Night



Low: -26 °F

Partly Cloudy

Washington's Birthday



High: -8 °F

Cold



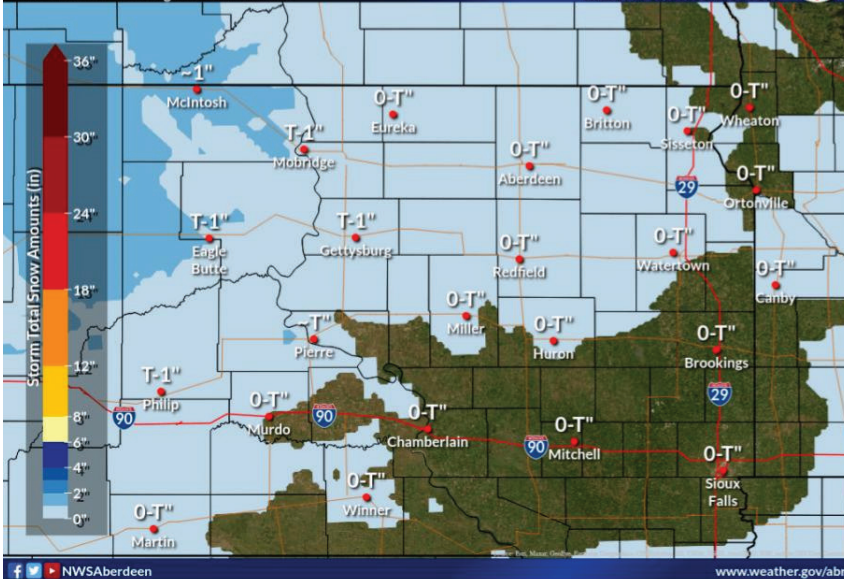
Light Snow Saturday

February 15, 2025
4:45 AM

Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast

Valid Sat 6:00AM through Sun 6:00AM CST

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Feb 15, 2025 2:07 AM CST



- Light snow Saturday afternoon into the evening
 - Snow accumulations of 1 inch or less expected.
- Falling snow may lower visibilities at times.
 - Roads may be slick. Use caution when driving.
 - Plan to take extra time to make it to your destination.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Light snow will move into central and eastern SD Saturday with snow accumulations of generally less than an inch expected. The light falling snow may lower visibilities and cause some roads to become slick, so be careful if you are driving.



Bitterly Cold Sunday Evening through Wednesday

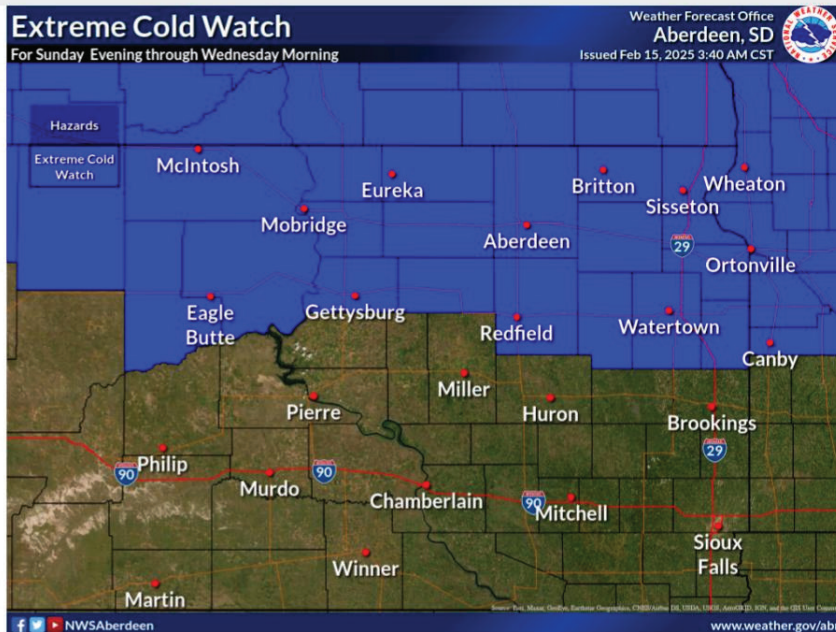
February 15, 2025
4:47 AM

- An **Extreme Cold Watch** is in effect from Sunday evening through Wednesday morning.

- Wind chills as **low as -45°** are possible during these times



- *These wind chills could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes.*



An Extreme Cold Watch is in effect from Sunday evening through Wednesday morning because of bitterly cold temperatures and the potential for wind chills in areas across northern SD to reach below -45 degrees. These wind chills could cause frostbite in as little as 10 minutes on exposed skin.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 22 °F at 11:54 AM

Low Temp: 1 °F at 1:19 AM

Wind: 21 mph at 4:53 PM

Precip: 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 29 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 65 in 1921

Record Low: -35 in 1939

Average High: 28

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.31

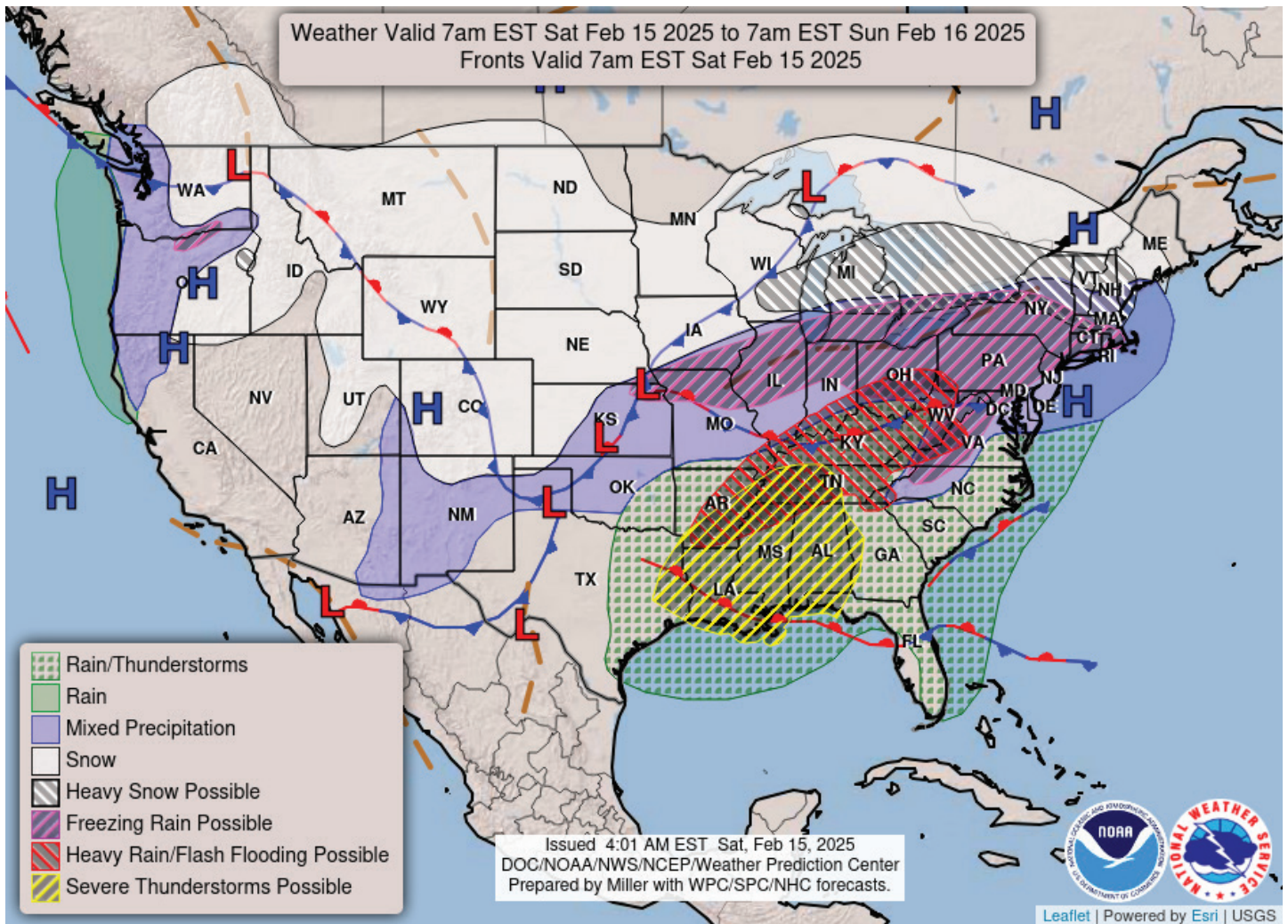
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20

Average Precip to date: 0.86

Precip Year to Date: 0.20

Sunset Tonight: 6:01:26 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:29:54 am



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Today in Weather History

February 15th, 1969: Heavy snow and winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which closed many roads. The heaviest snow fell in the southeast part of the state, where a foot of snow was reported.

February 15th, 1990: Heavy snow developed across southwest South Dakota early on the 15th and moved slowly across the state before ending early on the 16th. A narrow band of 10 to 12 inches accumulated in Central South Dakota from Pierre to near Huron. Lesser amounts of 3 to 6 inches fell north and south of the heavy snow band. Some heavier snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Aberdeen and Sioux Falls, 10 inches Pierre, and 12 inches at Huron.

1564: Galileo Galilei, who invented the telescope, the compass, and the thermometer, was born on February 15th, 1564.

1895 - A big Gulf snowstorm produced six inches at Brownsville TX and Mobile AL, 15 inches at Galveston TX, and 24 inches of snow at Rayne LA in 24 hours. Snow fell at the very mouth of the Mississippi River. Houston TX received 22 inches of snow, and nine inches blanketed New Orleans LA. (David Ludlum)

1936 - The temperature at Parshall ND plunged to 60 degrees below zero to establish a state record. On the 6th of July that same year the temperature at Steele ND hit 121 degrees, also a state record. (David Ludlum)

1982 - An intense cyclone off the Atlantic coast capsized a drilling rig killing 84 persons, and sank a Soviet freighter resulting in 33 more deaths. The cyclone produced 80 mph winds which whipped the water into waves fifty feet high. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm crossing the central U.S. produced severe thunderstorms which spawned tornadoes in Louisiana and Mississippi. Tornadoes injured four persons at Pierre Pass LA, three persons at Tangipahoa LA, two persons at Lexie MS and two persons at Nicholson MS. Thunderstorm winds gusting to 100 mph killed one person south of Sulphur LA. Jackson MS was drenched with 1.5 inches of rain in ten minutes. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure brought heavy snow to parts of Michigan, with eleven inches reported at Rogers City. A cold front crossing the Northern Rockies produced wind gusts to 74 mph at Livingston MT, and created blizzard conditions in Idaho. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thirty-seven cities in the southeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 80 degrees at Atlanta GA was a February record. Highs of 79 degrees at Chattanooga TN, 84 degrees at Columbia SC and 85 degrees at New Orleans LA equalled February records. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Snow, sleet and freezing rain along an arctic cold front prevailed from the north central U.S. to the Northern Atlantic Coast Region. High winds created near blizzard conditions in southern Wyoming, closing Interstate 80, while up to eleven inches of snow fell across central Minnesota.

1990 - Heavy snow also blanketed the Northern Atlantic Coast States, with ten inches reported at Buffalo NY and Mount Washington NH. Freezing rain over southern New England knocked out electricity to more than 10,000 homes in the western suburbs of Boston MA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2000: Amarillo, Texas, set unusual temperature records today. The high of 82 degrees smashed the old daily high of 76 degrees set in 1921. Likewise, the morning low of 41 degrees broke the old high-low record of 40 degrees, established in 1921.

2004 - Up to 11 inches of snow fell in areas south of Nashville, TN, causing power outages and producing hazardous driving conditions. The Weather Doctor

2013: A meteor entered the Earth's atmosphere and exploded over the Russian town of Chelyabinsk.



LUNCH BOX RELIGION

In a "Peanuts" comic strip, Linus carefully listened to Lucy as she boasted about her religious zeal. She wanted him to think that she was all about witnessing to others.

"You know, Linus," she bragged, "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know the kid that sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion was better than his religion!"

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"I hit him with my lunch box until he gave in," she replied.

Jesus said, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." Jesus knew that love would work better than a lunch box!

Biblical love must never be confused with warm, fuzzy feelings or emotional ups and downs. Biblical love is a love that would open one's lunch box to someone who is hungry and in need of food even though the lunch box owner would have to do without food. It is a love that may cause us to give until we ourselves have to do without. It is a love that will, at times, drain us of energy and finances to help those who are victims of wrongdoing through no fault of their own. It is a love that absorbs the hurts of others without complaining or holding back when we think that we are being taken advantage of. It is a kind of love that is hard to do. But it is the kind of love we see revealed in the life of Jesus.

Prayer: We see in Your Son, Father, the ultimate definition of love – a love that had or has no limits or draws no lines. Fill our hearts with a love like Your Son. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:35

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: 02.14.25

11 19 31 49 56 16

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$145,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[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: 16 Hrs 16 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.25

7 11 12 22 34 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

4 7 8 17 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$35,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

11 24 26 31 39 15

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 21 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: 17 Hrs 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 66, Dupree 13
Bennett County 52, New Underwood 23
Chester 57, Canistota 20
Colman-Egan 61, Deubrook 56
Corsica/Stickney 60, Jones County 40
DeSmet 91, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 60
Edgemont 61, Oelrichs 27
Elk Point-Jefferson 70, Beresford 47
Elkton-Lake Benton 53, Garretson 30
Ethan 47, Parkston 31
Faulkton 56, Langford 27
Freeman 67, Philip 63
Hamlin 61, Dell Rapids St Mary 50
Harrisburg 51, Rapid City Central 28
Howard 51, Potter County 45
Ipswich 68, Sunshine Bible Academy 21
Lennox 62, Hanson 29
Platte-Geddes 52, Bon Homme 48
Rapid City Stevens 68, Yankton 42
S.C. East, Iowa 62, Tea 50
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 60, Highmore-Harrold 36
Scotland/Menno 47, Gregory 41
Sioux Falls Christian 64, Lyman 45
Sioux Falls Jefferson 66, Brookings 45
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 87, Sioux Falls Washington 60
St Thomas More 40, Clark-Willow Lake 35
Sturgis Brown High School 48, Hot Springs 11
Timber Lake 38, Newell 34
Viborg-Hurley 40, McCook Central-Montrose 35
Wagner 57, Chamberlain 24
Wall 67, Bridgewater-Emery 49
Watertown 32, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 30
Waubay/Summit 56, Waverly-South Shore 42
Winner 50, McLaughlin 44
DWU Classic=
Dakota Valley 64, Dell Rapids 56

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 56, Dupree 46
Bison 56, Herreid-Selby 46
Crazy Horse 82, Crow Creek Tribal School 45
Dakota Valley 58, Dell Rapids 53
Deubrook 70, Colman-Egan 59

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Edgemont 72, Oelrichs 40
Elk Point-Jefferson 56, Beresford 46
Faulkton 52, Langford 36
Florence-Henry 65, Warner 49
Garretson 63, Elkton-Lake Benton 53
Gregory 68, Scotland/Menno 51
Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 52, Harding County 44
Huron 56, Aberdeen Central 38
Ipswich 69, Sunshine Bible Academy 49
Iroquois-Lake Preston 74, Arlington 59
New Underwood 66, Bennett County 23
North Central 50, Tiospaye Topa 49
Platte-Geddes 72, Bon Homme 48
Rapid City Central 62, Harrisburg 58, OT
S.C. East, Iowa 66, Tea 62
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 53, Highmore-Harrold 45
Sioux Falls Jefferson 57, Brookings 43
Sioux Falls Lincoln 69, Brandon Valley 58
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 72, Sioux Falls Washington 67
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 72, Watertown 50
Sisseton 67, Tiospa Zina 50
St. Francis Indian 70, Lower Brule 60
Sturgis Brown High School 56, Hot Springs 41
Wagner 61, Chamberlain 51
West Central 70, Madison 41
Winner 60, McLaughlin 30
Yankton 47, Rapid City Stevens 44

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

Tigers, zebras and other stuffed animals will get new homes after health concerns kept them hidden

By JACK DURA Associated Press

Crocodiles, monkeys, tigers, zebras and dozens of other taxidermy animals will move to new homes after concerns about arsenic exposure forced the closure of the South Dakota museum where they had been displayed for decades.

The Delbridge Museum of Natural History at the Great Plains Zoo in Sioux Falls closed in August 2023 after testing showed potentially hazardous levels of arsenic present in 80% of the specimens of the Brockhouse Collection.

The decision raised concerns that the 152 specimens, some dating back to the 1940s, would no longer be displayed. But after a search, the Sioux Falls City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved a resolution for donating the mounts to several institutions. Under the deal, 117 specimens will go to the University of Notre Dame Museum of Biodiversity, 33 to the Atlanta-based Oddities Museum Inc., and two to the Institute for Natural History Arts Inc. in New Jersey.

The move "ensures that none of the collection will be disposed of, and all items will be put to good use by reputable natural history institutions," Sioux Falls Director of Parks & Recreation Don Kearney told the council.

The arsenic doesn't mean the animals can't be displayed with proper measures in places, said Denise DePaolo, the zoo's marketing director. The museum doesn't have sufficient barriers to keep people from

touching the specimens, which became a liability issue, DePaolo said.

The mounts' recipients will display the animals where they can't be touched — likely behind glass — and have experts and equipment to care for the aging taxidermy, DePaolo said.

Sioux Falls businessman and hunter Henry Brockhouse built and displayed the animal collection for years in his hardware store until he died in 1978. Subsequent owners donated the collection to the city, which displayed the menagerie at the museum for nearly 40 years. After testing revealed the arsenic, the museum was closed until officials could sort out the collection's future, which included passing state legislation last year to help.

Some residents were upset about the irreplaceable collection leaving their town. Council Member Curt Soehl said, "There is no path forward to keep it in Sioux Falls. Pains me to say that. It's going to be sad for me to let that go."

Council Member Miranda Basye said, "With as much memory and as much legacy as I think is really wrapped up into this collection and the story of it being in Sioux Falls, I think the right place for it is with these other institutions that are going to care for it, that are going to give it a long-term life."

The gifting agreements state that the recipients will take the animals as is, and the mounts are theirs forever, City Attorney Dave Pfeifle said.

Hamas frees 3 hostages, Israel releases hundreds of prisoners as fragile ceasefire holds

By MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH, MELANIE LIDMAN and JALAL BWAITEL Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas-led militants released three male Israeli hostages Saturday and Israeli forces began releasing hundreds of prisoners in return, in the latest indication that a fragile ceasefire that has paused fighting in the Gaza Strip but had teetered in recent days, is holding.

Militants in the southern Gaza Strip paraded the three hostages — Iair Horn, 46, a dual citizen of Israel and Argentina; American-Israeli Sagui Dekel Chen, 36; and Russian-Israeli Alexander (Sasha) Troufanov, 29 — before a crowd before releasing them.

All had been abducted from Kibbutz Nir Oz, a community that was hard-hit in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that ignited the war. They appeared pale and worn, but seemed in better physical condition than the three men released last Saturday, who had emerged emaciated from 16 months of captivity.

The truce that began nearly four weeks ago had been jeopardized in recent days by a tense dispute that threatened to renew the fighting.

U.S. President Donald Trump's controversial proposal to remove more than 2 million Palestinians from Gaza and settle them elsewhere in the region has cast even more doubt on the future of the ceasefire.

But Hamas said Thursday it would move ahead with the release of more hostages after talks with Egyptian and Qatari officials. The group said the mediators had pledged to "remove all hurdles" to ensure Israel would allow more tents, medical supplies and other essentials into Gaza.

As with previous exchanges, the hostage release was heavily choreographed, with the captives made to walk onto a stage and speak into microphones before the crowd. Dozens of masked, armed Hamas fighters lined up near the stage festooned with Palestinian flags and banners of militant factions.

In Tel Aviv's Hostages Square, a huge cheer went up as the hostages were transferred to the Red Cross. "Iair, Sagui and Sasha are on their way home!" an announcer said.

In return for the hostages' release, Israel began releasing 369 Palestinian prisoners and detainees, including 36 serving life sentences over deadly attacks. A bus carrying the first released prisoners arrived in the occupied West Bank town of Beitunia and were greeted by a cheering crowd of relatives and supporters. Some appeared gaunt, and the Palestinian Red Crescent emergency service said four were immediately taken for medical treatment.

It is the sixth swap since the ceasefire took effect on Jan. 19. Before Saturday, 21 hostages and over 730 Palestinian prisoners were freed during the first phase of the truce.

Who are the hostages and prisoners being released?

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Horn was abducted along with his brother, Eitan Horn, who had been staying with him at the time. Eitan, 37, remains in captivity and is not on the list of hostages expected to be released in the ceasefire's first stage.

"Now, we can breathe a little. Our Iair is home after surviving hell in Gaza," his family said in a statement. "Now, we need to bring Eitan back so our family can truly breathe."

Dekel Chen had been working outside when militants stormed the kibbutz. His pregnant wife, Avital Dekel Chen, hid in a safe room with their two daughters. She gave birth to their third daughter two months later. Speaking to Israeli media Saturday, she said she was overwhelmed with happiness to see Sagui back in Israel, where he will meet his youngest daughter, Shachar, for the first time.

Troufanov, whose father was killed during the Oct. 7 attack, was taken hostage along with his grandmother, mother and girlfriend. The three women were released during a brief ceasefire in November 2023. Troufanov was informed of his father's death after his release, shortly before being reunited with his family, who said they were "overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude" as he crossed into Israeli territory.

Of the 369 Palestinians who were being released from Israeli prisons, 36 were serving life sentences, according to the Hamas-linked Prisoners' Information Office.

Among the most prominent is Ahmed Barghouti, 48, a close aide of militant leader and iconic Palestinian political figure Marwan Barghouti.

Israel sentenced Ahmed Barghouti to life on charges that he dispatched suicide bombers during the Second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, in the early 2000s to carry out attacks that killed Israeli civilians. He was arrested alongside Marwan Barghouti in 2002.

Concerns are high about the remaining hostages' condition

Of the 251 people abducted during the Oct. 7 attack, 73 remain in Gaza, around half of whom are believed to be dead. Nearly all the remaining hostages are men, including Israeli soldiers.

Concern has been growing about their condition, particularly after the release of three last Saturday, who emerged looking emaciated and frail.

One of them, 65-year-old Keith Siegel, said Friday in a video message addressed to Trump that his captors treated him worse as the 15-month war intensified, kicking him, spitting on him and holding him without water or light.

The truce remains very fragile

The ceasefire appeared dangerously close to collapse in recent days.

Hamas had said it would delay the release of the hostages after accusing Israel of not adhering to their agreement by not allowing in enough shelters, medical supplies, fuel and heavy equipment for clearing rubble. Israel said it would resume fighting Saturday unless hostages were freed.

While the immediate crisis may have been averted, the truce faces a much bigger challenge with the deal's first phase set to conclude in early March. There have not yet been substantive negotiations over the second phase, in which Hamas would release all remaining hostages in return for an end to the war.

At its height, the fighting displaced 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million. Hundreds of thousands have since returned to their homes as the ceasefire took hold, though many found only rubble, buried human remains and unexploded ordnance.

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.

Trump's plan increases uncertainty

Trump's proposal to remove some 2 million Palestinians from Gaza and settle them elsewhere in the region has thrown the truce's future into further doubt.

The idea has been welcomed by Israel's government. But it has been strongly rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries. Human rights groups say it could amount to a war crime under international law.

Trump has proposed 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."

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 destroying Hamas and implementing Trump's plan. The militant group remains in control of the territory after surviving one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

Hamas may be unwilling to release any more hostages if it believes the war will resume. The captives are among the only bargaining chips it has left.

Zelenskyy says time has come for the creation of 'armed forces of Europe'

By PHILIPP JENNE Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Saturday the time has come for the creation of an "armed forces of Europe" and that his country's fight against Russia has proved that a foundation for it already exists.

The Ukrainian leader said Europe cannot rule out the possibility that "American might say no to Europe on issues that threaten it," and noted that many leaders have long spoken about how Europe needs its own military.

"I really believe that time has come," Zelenskyy told the Munich Security Conference. "The armed forces of Europe must be created."

Zelenskyy also alluded to a phone conversation between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, after which Trump said the two leaders would likely meet soon to negotiate a peace deal over Ukraine. Trump later assured Zelenskyy that he, too, would have a seat at the table to end the war that was sparked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

"Ukraine will never accept deals made behind our backs without our involvement, and the same rule should apply to all of Europe," Zelenskyy said.

"A few days ago, President Trump told me about his conversation with Putin. Not once did he mention that America needs Europe at the table. That says a lot," he added. "The old days are over when America supported Europe just because it always had."

Zelenskyy insisted that "three years of full-scale war have proven that we already have the foundation for a united European military force. And now, as we fight this war and lay the groundwork for peace and security, we must build the armed forces of Europe."

Noting the presence of NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte in the audience, Zelenskyy said his idea "wasn't about replacing the alliance. This is about making Europe's contribution to our partnership equal to America's."

German chancellor responds to Vance

He spoke shortly after German Chancellor Olaf Scholz took aim at the new political tack from Washington under the Trump administration. Scholz shot back strongly in defense of his stance against the far-right and said his country won't accept people who "intervene in our democracy" — alluding to remarks by U.S. Vice President JD Vance who scolded European leaders over their approach to democracy.

Even while lashing out at alleged U.S. meddling in Germany's election next week, Scholz said he was "pleased" at what he called a shared commitment with the United States to the "preserving the sovereign independence of Ukraine," and agreed with Trump that the Russia-Ukraine war must end.

Polls show the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party — whose co-leader met with Vance on Friday — currently in second, ahead of Scholz's own Social Democrats.

But when it came to domestic politics, Scholz also alluded to Germany's Nazi past, and said the longstanding commitment to "Never Again" — a return to the extreme right — was not reconcilable with support for AfD.

"We will not accept that people who look at Germany from the outside intervene in our democracy and our elections and in the democratic opinion-forming process in the interest of this party," he said. "That's

just not done, certainly not amongst friends and allies. We resolutely reject this.”

“Where our democracy goes from here is for us to decide,” Scholz added.

A day earlier, Vance said that he fears free speech is “in retreat” across the continent.

He said that many Americans saw in Europe “entrenched interests hiding behind ugly Soviet-era words like misinformation and disinformation, who simply don’t like the idea that somebody with an alternative viewpoint might express a different opinion or, God forbid, vote a different way, or even worse, win an election.”

Scholz, shooting back, said “free speech in Europe means that you are not attacking others in ways that are against legislation and laws we have in our country.” He was referring to rules in Germany that restrict hate speech.

Europe looking for clues from new US administration

European leaders have been trying to make sense of a tough new line from Washington on issues including democracy and Ukraine’s future, as the Trump administration continues to upend transatlantic conventions that have been in place since after World War II.

Zelenskyy said Friday that his country wants security guarantees before any talks with Russia. Shortly before meeting with Vance in Munich, Zelenskyy said he will only agree to meet in-person with Putin after a common plan is negotiated with Trump.

After a 40-minute meeting with Zelenskyy, Vance said the Trump administration wants the war to end.

Beforehand, Vance lectured European officials on free speech and illegal migration on the continent, warning that they risk losing public support if they don’t quickly change course.

“The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia. It’s not China. It’s not any other external actor,” Vance said in a speech that drew a tepid response. “What I worry about is the threat from within — the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America.”

Rwanda-backed rebels advance into eastern Congo’s second major city of Bukavu, residents say

By CHINEDU ASADU and JUSTIN KABUMBA Associated Press

GOMA, Congo (AP) — Residents and business owners in eastern Congo’s second largest city sat in wait on Saturday morning after a night of loud gunfire marking the ongoing advance of Rwanda-backed rebels.

Families remained indoors and shops remained closed as M23 fighters entered the outskirts of Bukavu — a city of about 1.3 million people that lies 63 miles (101 kilometers) south of Goma, the region’s largest city taken by the rebels last month.

The group, backed by about 4,000 troops from neighboring Rwanda, is the most prominent of more than 100 armed groups vying for control of Congo’s mineral-rich east. Its southward expansion encompasses more territory than rebels had previously seized and poses an unprecedented challenge to the central government’s authority.

The rebellion has killed at least 2,000 people in and around Goma and left hundreds of thousands of displaced stranded, the U.N. and Congolese authorities have said.

The rebels on Friday also claimed to have seized a second airport in the region, in the town of Kavumu outside Bukavu. The U.N. warned that the recent escalation of fighting with government forces has left 350,000 internally displaced people without shelter.

The Associated Press could not immediately confirm who was in control of the strategically important airport, which Congolese forces have used to resupply troops and humanitarian groups used to import aid.

Government officials and local civil society leaders did not immediately comment, though Congo’s Communications Ministry said the rebels had violated ceasefire agreements and attacked Congolese troops working to avoid urban warfare and violence in Bukavu.

M23 spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka said on X that the rebels took over Kavumu airport and its surroundings to “eliminate the threat at the source.”

"The airport posed a danger to the civilian population," he said.

A local civil society leader in Kavumu reported seeing soldiers "abandon their positions and head towards Bukavu" — a repeat of events that transpired last month in the lead-up to the M23's capture of Goma. Congo's military, despite its size and funding, has long been hindered by shortcomings in training and coordination and recurring reports of corruption.

International leaders are expected to discuss the conflict at the African Union summit in Ethiopia this weekend as Congo's President Félix Tshisekedi continues to plead the international community to intervene to contain the rebels from advancing. However, little progress has been made since the government dismissed a ceasefire that M23 declared last week unilaterally as false.

Chaos and panic among residents

Meanwhile, in South Kivu province, residents fled Bukavu into neighboring towns and stocked up on household supplies in anticipation of further bloodshed in the streets. The U.N. refugee agency has said that shelling and looting have already destroyed 70,000 emergency shelters, leaving those displaced with few places to go.

"I noticed that the soldiers were dropping out and fleeing, so I told myself that I could no longer stay in this place," said Chirimwami Alexis, among residents fleeing from Kavumu. "The fear we have is people moving without any preparation or food. We are running away just because of this situation."

Serbia's striking students and populist president to hold parallel rallies as tensions spike

By IVANA BZGANOVIC Associated Press

KRAGUJEVAC, Serbia (AP) — Serbia's striking students and supporters of populist President Aleksandar Vucic have planned parallel rallies on Saturday as both mark the country's Statehood Day with notably contrasting messages.

The student-led protest is the latest in a nationwide anti-graft movement that reflects mounting calls for fundamental political changes in the Balkan state, triggered after a concrete canopy on a railway station in the northern city of Novi Sad collapsed on Nov. 1, killing 15 people.

The rally, in the central industrial city of Kragujevac, is set to draw tens of thousands of people who, besides demanding justice over a fatal accident, have been asking to root out rampant endemic corruption and respect for the rule of law.

Students chose Kragujevac for Saturday's rally because of its history; In 1835, Serbia was still part of the Ottoman Empire. People in Kragujevac announced a new constitution that sought to limit the powers of the then-rulers. The date is now celebrated as the Statehood Day.

The students arrived at the city on Friday and were met with cheers and support by the residents. Ahead of Saturday's protest, they organized marches in various parts of the country, encouraging people to converge in Kragujevac. Some walked, others ran or cycled. Along their journey, people greeted them with food and refreshments and offered accommodation, many crying and expressing hope for change.

Meanwhile, in Sremska Mitrovica, a small town northwest of Belgrade, Vucic is expected to recycle a traditional nationalist theme, warning that the West wants to unseat him by force and that this could lead to the breakup of the country.

Serbian authorities are expected to bus in thousands of their supporters from throughout Serbia as well as Bosnia to Sremska Mitrovica on Saturday. Some opposition activists have said they will try to prevent their arrival.

The anti-graft movement is Vucic's biggest challenge in recent years. The president — who has ruled Serbia with a firm grip on power for more than a decade — and his right-wing Serbian Progressive Party have been previously accused of stifling democratic freedoms, publicly discrediting opponents and rigging elections, according to international vote observers.

The canopy disaster, widely believed to have happened due to government corruption, has become a flashpoint for wider discontent with the authoritarian rule, with university students at the forefront of the

anti-graft uprising. Their determination, youth and creativity have struck a cord among people widely disillusioned with politicians.

Prosecutors have charged 13 people over the canopy fall, and protests have forced the resignation of Serbia's prime minister. But students have said their protests will continue until their demands for full accountability are met.

In the past three months, the president has shifted between accusing the students of working for foreign powers to offering concessions and claiming he has fulfilled each of their demands. But during a trip to the Serb-controlled part of neighboring Bosnia this week, Vucic has reiterated claims about an alleged plot from abroad to overthrow him and his government.

The authorities, Vucic said, "couldn't believe how much money has been invested to bring down the government in Serbia." He offered no proof for the claims.

Vucic's trip to the Serb-controlled part of Bosnia was apparently designed to stress Serbian unity with the Serbs in Bosnia, where a bid to create a pan-Serb state in the 1990s' was widely blamed for triggering a bloody war that left more than 100,000 people killed and millions displaced.

Hong Kong residents compete to name twin panda cubs who just turned 6 months old

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Panda craze has once again gripped Hong Kong as residents compete to name the territory's first locally-born giant panda cubs who just turned six months old.

The competition to name the twin cubs, born Aug. 15, launched Saturday following a celebratory ceremony attended by Hong Kong leader John Lee and other officials at Ocean Park, the theme park that houses the twins, their parents and two other giant pandas that arrived from mainland China last year. Residents can submit their suggestions via the park's website.

Lee said the southern Chinese city now has the largest number of pandas in captivity outside of mainland China, and the cubs' names would be announced in the first half of this year.

The pair, currently identified as the "Elder Sister" and the "Little Brother," will make their public debut on Sunday and meet visitors for five hours daily. Those who want to enjoy time with the cubs outside regular visiting hours, before the park opens, can pay 1,500 Hong Kong dollars (about \$190).

During a media preview session on Saturday, the male cub laid on a swing playing with a tree stick before a carer placed him on a slide. The female cub explored the enclosure before climbing onto a tree.

The panda carers said the female cub seemed more active than her male twin. She loves climbing the tree inside the enclosure and resting there while her brother likes to wander around and play with the plants. The male cub has been marked with two purple food-coloring spots on its back to distinguish it from his sister.

The birth of the baby pandas last year made their mother Ying Ying the world's oldest first-time panda mom.

Their popularity on social media also raised hopes for the city's tourism boost. Officials have encouraged businesses to capitalize on the panda craze to seize opportunities in what some lawmakers have dubbed the "panda economy."

Ocean Park's chairman Paulo Pong told reporters on Saturday that the park already saw income increases over the Christmas period and Lunar New Year holiday, alongside an uptake in overseas tourists, after the newly arrived pandas from mainland China started to greet the public.

"We're turning the page and we believe the pandas are definitely helping the income of the park," he said.

But caring for pandas in captivity is expensive. Ocean Park recorded a deficit of 71.6 million Hong Kong dollars (\$9.2 million) last financial year, and in 2020 required a government relief fund to stay afloat. Observers are watching if taking care of six pandas will add to its burden or give it a chance to revive its business.

Pong said raising pandas was about animal conservation and education, instead of "just a money exercise."

Pandas are considered China's unofficial national mascot. The country's giant panda loan program with overseas zoos has long been seen as a tool of Beijing's soft-power diplomacy.

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Cher, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, Snoop Dogg: 'Saturday Night Live' is feted with a concert for the ages

By DAVID BAUDER and JOCELYN NOVECK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — By the time Cher sang "If I Could Turn Back Time," it seemed as if time had indeed been turned back, and every single "Saturday Night Live" musical guest of 50 years had magically found their way to Radio City Music Hall.

Of course, it was only a smattering. But "SNL50: The Homecoming Concert" boasted an epic lineup. It was an evening of memorable solo performances and often fascinating, one-time-only collaborations: Bonnie Raitt and Chris Martin. Arcade Fire, David Byrne, St. Vincent and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Post Malone and Nirvana.

The concert, hosted by Jimmy Fallon, was only one element of what has become an enormous celebration of the show's 50 years in existence, leading up to Sunday's "SNL50: The Anniversary Special," live from Studio 8H.

But Friday night was all about music.

Some highlights:

Return of the 1990s

If a decade can win the night, let's hear it for the 1990s. A classic performance from that decade was most likely to get the Radio City audience on its feet, singing along and pulling out their phones to record.

The Backstreet Boys proved irresistible when they broke into "I Want It That Way." Snoop Dogg may have sung "Gin and Juice," but he was trailed by enough smoke to give nearby audience members a contact high.

Wearing a gigantic coat befitting a winter night, Lauryn Hill commanded the stage with Wyclef Jean and the crowd melted at the first notes of "Killing Me Softly."

Yes, (some) comics can do music

Naturally, some former "SNL" cast members reprised old characters, with varying levels of success.

The Culpes, the stuffy music teachers played by Will Ferrell and Ana Gastayer, hit harder and funnier than they ever did on the show. Their attempts at being current were hilarious and they even worked in a few verses of "Not Like Us," with a plea for harmony between Kendrick Lamar and Drake.

Andy Samberg and Chris Parnell's "Lazy Sunday" was welcome, but too short. Lady Gaga was a good sport, replacing Justin Timberlake to sing about a Christmas gift whose title can't be repeated here. But Bill Murray's lounge singer "foursome" routine with Gastayer, Maya Rudolph and Cecily Strong fell a bit flat.

They love Lorne

"SNL" creator Lorne Michaels didn't perform, but he was referred to all night long.

"I love you, Lorne Michaels," declared Miley Cyrus, dedicating her hit song "Flowers" to the show's founder.

Raitt, finishing "I Can't Make You Love Me," thanked Michaels for having her on the show so many times.

"Let's give it up for Lorne," said former cast member Adam Sandler, introducing a collaboration between Post Malone and Nirvana. "We love you buddy."

And Marcus Mumford, lead singer of the British folk band Mumford & Sons, said he was there to represent Michaels' admirers from across the pond.

Creative collabs

The night featured fascinating collaborations that brought together musicians of all kinds.

Cyrus teamed with Brittany Howard to sing Queen's "Crazy Little Thing Called Love."

Arcade Fire joined with David Byrne, St. Vincent and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band to perform David Bowie's "Heroes." Byrne later also collaborated with Robyn, in matching khaki suits, for "Dancing On My Own" and "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)."

And for Raitt's second song, she sat down with Chris Martin, the Coldplay frontman who became her pianist for "I Can't Make You Love Me."

In another collab of sorts, the B-52s were joined on "Love Shack" by former and current SNL cast members Fred Armisen, Bowen Yang and Sarah Sherman, singing the "bang bang" lyrics.

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Lady Gaga collaborated with herself, singing both parts of "Shallow" and bringing down the house.

Most valuable player

Questlove is more associated with the "Tonight" show, but he is proving to be the MVP of these "Saturday Night Live" anniversary festivities.

Not only did the drummer produce the splendid documentary on the "SNL" musical legacy, but he effortlessly kept the beat with The Roots, his legendary hip-hop group and "Tonight" show house band, as they covered every style imaginable, from Snoop to Eddie Vedder to Brandi Carlile. Byrne bowed in appreciation.

No 'Joke'

Carlile has become known lately for her collaborations, most notably coaxing Joni Mitchell back to the stage.

Friday night provided a reminder of her own artistry with the political climate adding a special urgency to her impassioned version of "The Joke."

A second Nirvana reunion

For the second time in as many weeks, the surviving members of Nirvana reunited.

Rather than the quartet of women who fronted the band for the Fire Aid concert, Malone took Kurt Cobain's place on Friday.

Their version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was fierce, a reminder of why the song packed such a wallop when it was first heard.

Kentucky bourbon bottles signed by the pope raise thousands for charity

By BRUCE SCHREINER and DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) — It sounds like the opening line of a joke: What happens when the pope gets his hands on two bottles of Kentucky bourbon? But it actually occurred and the punch line is heartwarming: the autographed bottles raised tens of thousands of dollars to help poor and sick people, as well as homeless cats and dogs.

The plan was concocted by the Rev. Jim Sichko, a Kentucky-based Roman Catholic priest. He saw an opportunity to turn a signature Kentucky product, and his access to Pope Francis as a papal missionary of mercy, into a way to help those in need by auctioning off bourbon bottles signed by the pope.

"I understand that at times people say, 'What is this priest doing?' I get it," Sichko said in a recent interview. "I think outside the box all the time."

His unconventional idea raised about \$30,000 when Sotheby's auctioned off two bottles signed by the pope, plus another bourbon bottle autographed by former Super Bowl-winning quarterback Tom Brady.

The proceeds are being divided among organizations selected by Sichko. He presented the first check on Jan. 31 to Paws 4 the Cause, an animal rescue organization in Lexington, Kentucky. Other checks will help hospice care in his native Texas and a legal clinic in Lexington that assists immigrants, he said.

The Catholic Diocese of Lexington, where Sichko is based, will use some of the money to help people in need.

It all began several years ago when Sichko gave Francis a bottle of hard-to-get Pappy Van Winkle bourbon as a gift when the priest visited Rome. After that, Sichko routinely presented a gift, often Kentucky bourbon, when encountering the pope as part of his role as a papal missionary of mercy.

Sichko is one of hundreds of such missionaries appointed by Francis. They are assigned to travel the world spreading kindness, forgiveness, joy and mercy to people they encounter. Sichko, 58, said he travels the world about 300 days a year as a missionary and evangelist.

During a visit to the Vatican last year, Sichko carried with him two bottles of bourbon, but with a different mission. He wanted to spread good to others by having the pope sign the two bottles donated by Willett Distillery in Kentucky. The bottles carried special seals and contained Willett bourbon that had aged for 10 years.

When the time came, he mustered the nerve to seek the papal signatures.

"I just pulled out the bottle of bourbon with a pen," Sichko recalled. "And he looked at me and he signed it. And I was shocked. And then what I did was I pulled out the other bottle. And he signed that."

Sichko wasn't ready for what happened next.

"He looked at both bottles and he looked at me and he said, 'Father, which one of these is mine?'" Sichko recalled. That led to an uncomfortable confession.

"I said, 'Neither one of these are for you. I want to come up with a creative way to auction them off for the good of others,'" Sichko said. "And that's how it came about."

Sichko's teammate on the project was Drew Kulsveen, the master distiller at Willett Distillery.

"From the first conversation, our door was open knowing this contribution can impact countless people in need through his work," Kulsveen said in a statement.

Kulsveen and his wife joined Sichko on the journey to Rome. He called it a "tremendous honor" watching the pope sign the bottles of bourbon from his distillery.

Sichko received a warm welcome from workers at the animal shelter when he arrived carrying a \$7,375 donation. Anita Spreitzer, vice president and general manager of Paws 4 the Cause, said it would help pay for an expansion of the shelter that was underway.

Part of the donation, however, will be passed along to another animal rescue group, she said. That brought a hearty approval from Sichko, who said, "That's the way it goes — give and receive."

Sichko said he expects to return to the Vatican in about six months but doesn't know if he will ask the pope to sign more bourbon bottles.

"It loses its flair if you're constantly getting him to autograph things," the priest said.

Sichko said he hopes his work has a ripple effect, inspiring acts of kindness by others. It can be as small as opening the door for someone or letting someone go ahead of them in the grocery checkout line.

"Everyone can do something," Sichko said. "It costs nothing to be kind."

"Our world is turning into a very angry world," he added. "And I think it's time that we just chill out a bit and recognize truly what we're called to be. And that is brothers and sisters. We may all have different skin colors. We may have all different ways of life. But I think we all come from the same place, and that is love and love of God."

How a traffic stop in Vermont cracked open a cultlike group linked to deaths in multiple states

By HOLLY RAMER, PATRICK WHITTLE and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

In the wooded outskirts of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a perplexed landlord noticed odd sights at two of his rental properties.

Tenants wore long black coats and parked box trucks outside the duplexes. They ran an electrical cord from one box truck into one of the condos, and kept a stretcher inside another.

A neighbor remembers similarly dressed figures walking around at night holding hands. They never spoke a word.

By the time the FBI searched the property last week, one of the most recent tenants had been killed in a shootout with U.S. Border Patrol agents in Vermont, and a second was under arrest. A third, a shadowy figure known online as "Ziz," remains missing after authorities linked their cultlike group to six deaths in three states.

Officials have offered few details of the cross-country investigation, which broke open after the Jan. 20 shooting death of a Border Patrol trooper in Vermont during a traffic stop. Associated Press interviews and a review of court records and online postings tell the story of how a group of young, highly intelligent computer scientists, most of them in their 20s and 30s, met online, shared anarchist beliefs, and became increasingly violent.

Their goals aren't clear, but online writings span topics from radical veganism and gender identity to artificial intelligence.

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At the middle of it all is "Ziz," who appears to be the leader of the strange group, who called themselves "Zizians." She has been seen near multiple crime scenes and has connections to various suspects.

She was even declared dead for a time, before reappearing amid more violence.

Who is Ziz?

Jack LaSota moved to the San Francisco Bay area after earning a computer science degree from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 2013 and interning at NASA, according to a profile on a hiring site for programmers, coders and other freelance workers. NASA officials did not respond to a request to confirm LaSota's internship, but a Jack LaSota is listed on a website about past interns.

In 2016, she began publishing a dark and rambling blog under the name Ziz, describing her theory that the two hemispheres of the brain could hold separate values and genders and "often desire to kill each other."

LaSota used she/her pronouns, and in her writings says she is a transgender woman. She railed against perceived enemies, including so-called rationalist groups, which operate mostly online and seek to understand human cognition through reason and knowledge. Some are concerned with the potential dangers of artificial intelligence.

LaSota began promoting an extreme mix of rationalism, ethical veganism, anarchism and other value systems, said Jessica Taylor, an AI researcher who met LaSota both in person and online through the rationalist community and knew her as Ziz.

When LaSota left the rationalists behind, she took with her a group of "extremely vulnerable and isolated" followers, Anna Salamon, executive director of the Center for Applied Rationality, told the San Francisco Chronicle.

Taylor said Ziz adherents use the rationalist ideology as a reason to commit violence. "Stuff like, thinking it's reasonable to avoid paying rent and defend oneself from being evicted," she said.

Poulomi Saha, a professor who has studied cults, said LaSota's beliefs and writings may have made readers feel seen, an often central factor in the formation of groups commonly labeled cults. That's especially true in the era of online communities, in which it's easier for marginalized people to seek fellow believers.

"For the person who feels hailed by that blog post, there is likely to be a kind of dual experience," said Saha, co-director of the program in critical theory at the University of California, Berkeley. "One where they feel like 'I have been saying this, or thinking this, all along, and no one has believed me.'"

LaSota, 34, has not responded to multiple Associated Press emails in recent weeks, and her attorney Daniel McGarrigle declined to comment when asked whether she is connected to any of the deaths. She has missed court appearances in two states, and bench warrants have been issued for her arrest. Associated Press reporters have left numerous phone and e-mail messages with LaSota's family and received no response.

Ziz and followers' first run-in with the law

In November 2019, LaSota was arrested along with several other people at a protest outside a Northern California retreat center where the Center for Applied Rationality was holding an event. Sheriff's deputies called in a SWAT team and armored vehicle after the mask-wearing group blocked the property's exits and handed out fliers railing against the rationalist organization. The group said they were protesting sexual misconduct inside the rationalist group.

The case against LaSota, Emma Borhanian, 31, Gwen Danielson and Alexander Leatham, 29, was pending in August 2022 when the U.S. Coast Guard responded to a report that LaSota had fallen out of a boat in San Francisco Bay. Her body wasn't found, but her mother confirmed the death and an obituary was published.

It wasn't long before Ziz surfaced again.

A landlord is attacked in California

By the autumn of 2022, LaSota had moved with other group members, including Borhanian and Leatham, into vans and box trucks on property owned by Curtis Lind in Vallejo, about 30 miles north of San Francisco.

"Emma's van was amazing," said someone who knew Borhanian. "It had a refrigerator and freezer and microwave. It was truly a work of art."

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The person, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of fears for her safety, described Borhanian as a kind and loving young woman so smart that she worked at Google while in college. Google did not respond to an inquiry about Borhanian's employment there.

Prosecutors say she was among those who attacked Lind on Nov. 13 when he tried to evict the group for not paying rent.

Impaled by a sword and partially blinded, Lind fought back, fatally shooting Borhanian. Concluding that Lind acted in self-defense, officials charged Leatham and Suri Dao, 23, with murder in Borhanian's death, as well as attempted murder of Lind.

A person reached by an Associated Press reporter at a phone number listed for Alex Leatham's father declined to comment. Attempts to reach family members for Dao were not successful.

Police believe LaSota was at the scene of the crime, but she was not arrested.

An elderly couple is killed in Pennsylvania

On New Year's Eve of 2022, a couple was shot and killed in their home in Chester Heights, Pennsylvania.

A doorbell camera captured audio and video of a car pulling up to the home of Richard Zajko, 71, and his wife, Rita, 69. A voice shouts "Mom!" and another voice exclaims, "Oh my God! Oh, God, God!" according to a Pennsylvania state police affidavit. Police found the couple shot in the head in an upstairs bedroom after they failed to show up to take care of Rita's mother.

Police questioned the couple's daughter, Michelle, at her home in Vermont, and a few weeks later, took her into custody at a Pennsylvania hotel. She wasn't arrested or charged with anything. LaSota was at the hotel, too, and was arrested after refusing to cooperate with officers, and charged with obstructing law enforcement and disorderly conduct.

Six months later, LaSota was released on bail but stopped showing up for court.

LaSota's attorney, Daniel McGarrigle, said last month his client was "wholly and unequivocally innocent of the charges filed in this case."

The landlord in California is found dead

Meanwhile, the case regarding the landlord in California was headed to trial. The landlord, who was 82, was the only eyewitness, and prosecutors wanted to hurry along the proceedings.

But on Jan. 17, Lind's throat was cut, and he died, not far from where he had survived the earlier attack.

Maximilian Snyder, 22, who is charged with murder, appeared in court Feb. 6, only long enough to request a new attorney. It's not clear how he was identified as a suspect; he has ties to a woman who just days later would be involved in a shootout.

Snyder is listed as in custody in the Solano County Jail in California. Attempts to reach family members of Snyder were not successful.

A Border Patrol agent dies in a shootout Vermont

On Jan. 20, in Vermont, U.S. Border Patrol agents stopped a vehicle carrying two people connected to the Ziz group. A hotel worker had called authorities after seeing one of them, Teresa Youngblut, with a gun.

Youngblut was driving the car when it was pulled over on Jan. 20, and authorities say she quickly opened fire on officers. The passenger, Felix Bauckholt, a German national who is also listed in court documents as Ophelia, died, along with the border patrol agent, David Maland.

Youngblut was wounded and arrested and has pleaded not guilty to firearms charges.

Authorities who searched the car found a ballistic helmet, night-vision goggles, respirators and ammunition, the FBI said. They also found two-way radios and used shooting range targets.

Youngblut applied for a marriage license with Snyder, the man accused of murdering the elderly landlord. He was a childhood friend; it was unclear if they were married. Authorities say the gun she was carrying was purchased by a person of interest in the Zajko killings.

The last sighting of Ziz

Youngblut and Bauckholt had been living at the two condos in North Carolina, where the landlord and neighbors now say they saw the odd behavior.

LaSota also had been living there as recently as this winter, said the landlord, who reviewed LaSota's

2019 police booking photo. He spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because he was concerned for his safety.

Expressing similar concerns, a neighbor who lived in the other side of Bauckholt's duplex until September 2023 recalled seeing three people wearing long black robes and tactical clothes.

"They rarely came out during the day but would walk around the neighborhood and in the woods at night," the former neighbor said, who also spoke only on condition of anonymity because of concerns for their safety. "Sometimes all three of them would go for a walk and they all held hands. They seemed to care for each other a great deal."

Fearful immigrants ask Florida activist to sign guardianship papers for their children

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

HOMESTEAD, Fla. (AP) — The day before President Donald Trump's inauguration, a dozen immigrant families came to Nora Sandigo's ranch to ask her to be a legal guardian of their children. Now they are insisting she come over to their homes to sign the necessary paperwork.

It's a result of the many ways immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally have changed their travel patterns as many try to stay home as much as possible and avoid going to the homes and offices of advocates such as Sandigo. Many fear they could be caught up in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement operation after Trump campaigned on a promise of mass deportations and has terminated programs that had given immigrants a legal way into the U.S.

In the past few weeks, Sandigo has received hundreds of calls from immigrant parents across the U.S. She said she has been in at least 15 houses where parents have filled out paperwork so Sandigo could sign documents on behalf of their children at schools, hospitals and courts if they are deported. The power of attorney also allows her to help the children travel to reunite with their families.

"Now people are telling us that they are afraid to go out on the street, that they are afraid to drive, that they are afraid that they will stop them on the street," said Sandigo, a 59-year-old mother of two daughters who lives in Homestead, a city of about 80,000 people south of Miami. "They have asked me to go to where they are instead of them coming to me."

Immigration arrests under Trump

The White House has said over 8,000 immigrants who were in the country illegally have been arrested since Trump's inauguration on Jan. 20. ICE averaged 787 arrests a day from Jan. 23 to Jan. 31, compared with a daily average of 311 during a 12-month period that ended Sept. 30 during the Biden administration. ICE has stopped publishing daily arrest totals.

In Homestead, where many immigrants from Mexico and Central America live and work in nurseries and fruit and vegetable fields, some avoid the supermarkets and instead ask neighbors to do their grocery shopping. In front of stores like Home Depot, men no longer stand around looking for work. Others have even stopped going to Sacred Heart Church on Sundays.

"People have stopped coming, and when they come, they ask if the immigration officials came here," said Elisaul Velazco, the owner of a clothing store downtown. "Everything is paralyzed. Sales have dropped by 60%."

Parents fear their children will be taken from them

For years, Sandigo has prepared immigrant parents for the worst-case scenario: being separated from their children.

Now she goes to those parents instead of having them come to her.

One recent Sunday, she visited four houses and received documents involving over 20 children. In some cases, the children were born in the U.S. and are citizens. The documents do not provide her full legal guardianship or transfer parental rights, but simply allow Sandigo to make decisions on their behalf.

Most parents fear if they do not name a legal guardian, their children will enter the foster care system,

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they will lose their parental rights and someone else will adopt their children.

Visiting immigrant parents' homes

Julia, a 36-year-old Guatemalan woman who insisted she be identified only by her first name out of fear of deportation, waited a few minutes before opening the door for Sandigo as a group of people ran out the back door.

"It's me, Nora, the lady you phoned to come," Sandigo told her.

Julia opened the door a crack, saw Sandigo and then came out. Julia explained her husband had been detained days earlier while in a van with other immigrants on their way to a construction job.

After a brief conversation, Julia invited Sandigo, a notary and a volunteer into her small house.

Julia recalled that eight years ago her first husband, also Guatemalan, was deported, leaving her behind with their two American children, now 18 and 11 years old.

"We are afraid. I feel very sad with life because of what I am going through," said Julia, her voice breaking and her eyes getting watery.

The notary asked Julia to show her daughter's birth certificate and explained the son is an adult and doesn't need a guardian.

"I don't want my children to be taken away from me. If something happens to me, I want them with me," she said before signing the power of attorney naming Sandigo as the legal guardian of the youngest.

In the backyard of another home, Albertina, a 36-year-old Mexican mother, held her 2-month-old baby while explaining what she wants for her six children if she is deported. Albertina also insisted only her first name be used.

"I am very afraid that they will grab me on the road and take me away. What's going to happen to them?" she said of her children.

She asked Sandigo to take care of her two oldest daughters, 15 and 17, because they do not want to go to Mexico, while Sandigo should send the other four to her home country.

Sandigo has been a guardian for 2,000 children

Sandigo relates to the families she helps. A devout Catholic, she fled Nicaragua when she was 16, leaving behind her parents after the Sandinista government confiscated her family's farm. She is now a U.S. citizen.

About 15 years ago, she began offering to be a legal guardian to immigrant children. About 22 children of deported parents have lived in her house temporarily since then. More than 2,000 children have been under her guardianship, although some are now adults. Sandigo said she has assisted hundreds of those children.

"I feel empathy for them, solidarity, love for God. I want to do something," she said.

Anger, chaos and confusion take hold as federal workers face mass layoffs

By JILL COLVIN, BRIAN WITTE, MIKE HOUSEHOLDER and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Workers across the country responded with anger and confusion Friday as they grappled with the Trump administration's aggressive effort to shrink the size of the federal workforce by ordering agencies to lay off probationary employees who have yet to qualify for civil service protections.

While much of the administration's attention was focused on disrupting bureaucracy in Washington, the broad-based effort to slash the government workforce was impacting a far wider swath of workers. As layoff notices were sent out agency by agency, federal employees from Michigan to Florida were left reeling from being told that their services were no longer needed.

In a sign of how chaotic the firings have been, some who received layoff notices had already accepted the administration's deferred resignation offer, under which they were supposed to be paid until Sept. 30 if they agreed to quit, raising questions about whether others who signed the deal would nonetheless be fired. On Friday evening, the Office of Personnel Management, which serves as a human resources department for the federal government, acknowledged that some employees may have received termination notices in error and said the buyouts agreements would be honored.

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"This has been slash and burn," said Nicholas Detter, who had been working in Kansas as a natural resource specialist, helping farmers reduce soil and water erosion, until he was fired by email late Thursday night. He said there seemed to be little thought about how employees and the farmers and ranchers he helped would be impacted.

"None of this has been done thoughtfully or carefully," he said.

The White House and OPM declined to say Friday how many probationary workers, who generally have less than a year on the job, have so far been dismissed. According to government data maintained by OPM, 220,000 workers had less than a year on the job as of March 2024.

OPM has given agencies until 8 p.m. Tuesday to issue layoff notices, according to a person familiar with the plan who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The probationary layoffs are the latest salvo in the new administration's sweeping efforts to reduce the size of the federal workforce, which are being led by billionaire Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency. Trump, in an executive order Tuesday, told agency leaders to plan for "large-scale reductions" after their initial attempt to downsize the workforce — the voluntary buyout - was accepted by only 75,000 workers.

The layoffs begin

On Thursday night, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced the dismissal of more than 1,000 employees who had served for less than two years. That included researchers working on cancer treatment, opioid addiction, prosthetics and burn pit exposure, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, a Democrat, said Thursday.

Dozens were fired from the Education Department, including special education specialists and student aid officials, according to a union that represents agency workers.

At the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 1,300 probationary employees — roughly one-tenth of the agency's total workforce — are being forced out. The Atlanta-based agency's leadership was notified of the decision Friday morning, according to a federal official who was at the meeting and was not authorized to discuss the orders and requested anonymity.

The new Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said Friday that her agency had invited Musk's DOGE team with "open arms" and that layoffs "will be forthcoming."

"Clearly, it's a new day," Rollins said at the White House. "I think the American people spoke on November 5th, that they believe that government was too big."

Workers impacted

Andrew Lennox, a 10-year Marine veteran, was part of a new supervisor training program at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He said he received an email "out of the blue" Thursday evening informing him that he was being terminated.

"In order to help veterans, you just fired a veteran," said Lennox, 35, a former USMC infantryman who was deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

Lennox had been working as an administrative officer at the VA since mid-December and said he "would love nothing more" than to keep working.

"This is my family, and I would like to do this forever," he said.

In a post on its website, the VA announced the dismissal of more than 1,000 employees, saying the personnel moves "will save the department more than \$98 million per year" and be better equipped to help vets.

"I was like: 'What about this one?'" Lennox said

David Rice, a disabled Army paratrooper who has been on probation since joining the U.S. Department of Energy in September, also learned Thursday night that he had lost his job.

Rice, who has been working as a foreign affairs specialist on health matters relating to radiation exposure, said he'd been led to believe that his job would likely be safe. But on Thursday night, when he logged into his computer for a meeting with Japanese representatives, he saw an email saying he'd been fired.

"It's just been chaos," said Rice, 50, who had just bought a house in Melbourne, Florida, after he got the job.

Rice said he agrees with the Trump administration's goal of making the government more efficient, but

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objects to the random, scattershot approach being taken.

Fired despite agreeing to the buyout

Some of those impacted had already signed the buyout agreements offered by the administration that were supposed to protect them from dismissal.

Detter, 25, who had worked for the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service, said he had accepted the buyout because he knew that, as a probationary employee, he'd likely be first on the chopping block if he didn't accept.

But late Thursday night, Detter received an email saying he had been laid off effective immediately, even though he had received "completely positive" evaluations during his time on the job.

He said the decision left him feeling "disrespected" and a "a little bit helpless."

"You're just kind of a pawn in a much bigger struggle that Elon Musk — in particular, I feel like — is his kind of battle he's decided to take on to shrink the government," Detter said.

Detter said two of the four employees in the Kansas county where he worked were laid off even though they were already struggling with their workload helping farmers manage their land to prevent soil erosion and water pollution, a program that was created in the wake of the 1930s Dust Bowl to help keep America's farmland healthy and productive.

Challenging the administration

The National Treasury Employees Union and a group of other unions filed a lawsuit Thursday challenging what they call unlawful terminations.

Terminating probationary employees who have gone through extensive training "will have a devastating impact on agency missions and government operations," NTEU President Doreen Greenwald wrote in a Thursday letter to union members. She said many federal agencies are already "severely understaffed due to years of frozen or slashed budgets that prevented them from replacing retiring employees."

On Friday evening, the advocacy group Democracy Forward filed a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel, the federal agency dedicated to protecting whistleblowers, asking for an investigation into whether the mass firings violated federal personnel practices and asking that they be halted while the inquiry is being conducted.

Labor activists and government workers rallied outside the Hubert H. Humphrey Building in Washington Friday morning, to protest the cuts.

"They're picking us off, one by one," said one federal contractor who has not yet lost her job, but who, like others, declined to identify herself for fear of reprisal. "First, it's the probationary workers, then we're next," she said.

Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican, issued a statement Friday evening on X, formerly Twitter, saying, in part, "indiscriminate workforce cuts aren't efficient and won't fix the federal budget."

She said her office has attempted to get answers from various agencies, but "the response so far has been evasive and inadequate."

Will the cuts reduce the deficit?

The layoffs are unlikely to yield significant deficit savings. The government spends about \$270 billion annually compensating civilian federal workers, according to the Congressional Budget Office, with about 60% going to workers at the departments of Defense, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs.

Even if the government cut all of those workers, it would still run a deficit of over \$1 trillion.

But Trump's mass layoffs of federal workers could come back to bite him in economic data. The monthly jobs reports could start to show a slowdown in hiring, if not turn negative at some point after the February numbers are released.

The last time the economy lost jobs was in December 2020, when the United States was still recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Given everything that is happening in the federal government, it is very plausible that job growth could turn negative at some point," said Martha Gimbel, executive director of the Budget Lab at Yale University. She noted that employers that rely on government grants and contracts would also show declines.

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Those who have been fired say the people they serve will soon feel the impact, too. Rice, the disabled paratrooper working on radiation exposure at the Department of Energy, said the work he was doing made a difference.

"We're just out here trying to do something that we actually believe in, that matters," he said. "I really believe that we're actually out there helping people."

Trump's reciprocal tariffs will overturn decades of trade policy

By PAUL WISEMAN and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is taking a blowtorch to the rules that have governed world trade for decades. The "reciprocal" tariffs that he announced Thursday are likely to create chaos for global businesses and conflict with America's allies and adversaries alike.

Since the 1960s, tariffs — or import taxes — have emerged from negotiations between dozens of countries. Trump wants to seize the process.

"Obviously, it disrupts the way that things have been done for a very long time," said Richard Mojica, a trade attorney at Miller & Chevalier. "Trump is throwing that out the window ... Clearly this is ripping up trade. There are going to have to be adjustments all over the place."

Pointing to America's massive and persistent trade deficits — not since 1975 has the U.S. sold the rest of the world more than it's bought -- Trump charges that the playing field is tilted against U.S. companies. A big reason for that, he and his advisers say, is because other countries usually tax American exports at a higher rate than America taxes theirs.

Trump has a fix: He's raising U.S. tariffs to match what other countries charge.

The president is an unabashed tariff supporter. He used them in his first term, and three weeks into his second he has already slapped 10% tariffs on China; effectively raised U.S. taxes on foreign steel and aluminum; and threatened, then delayed for 30 days, 25% taxes on goods from Canada and Mexico.

Economists don't share Trump's enthusiasm for tariffs. They're a tax on importers that usually get passed on to consumers. But it's possible that Trump's reciprocal tariff threat could bring other countries to the table and get them to lower their own import taxes.

"It could be win-win," said Christine McDaniel, a former U.S. trade official now at George Mason University's Mercatus Center. "It's in other countries' interests to reduce those tariffs."

She noted that India has already cut tariffs on items from motorcycles to luxury cars and agreed to ramp up purchases of U.S. energy.

What are reciprocal tariffs and how do they work?

They sound simple: The United States would raise its tariff on foreign goods to match what other countries impose on U.S. products.

"If they charge us, we charge them," the president told reporters on Sunday. "If they're at 25, we're at 25. If they're at 10, we're at 10. And if they're much higher than 25, that's what we are too."

But the White House didn't reveal many details. It has directed Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick to deliver a report April 1 about how the new tariffs would actually work.

Among the outstanding questions, noted Antonio Rivera, a partner at ArentFox Schiff and a former attorney with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, is whether the U.S. is going to look at the thousands of items in the tariff code — from motorcycles to mangos -- and try to level the tariff rates out one by one, country by country. Or whether it will look more broadly at each country's average tariff and how it compares to America. Or something else entirely.

"It's just a very, very chaotic environment," said Stephen Lamar, president and CEO of the American Apparel & Footwear Association. "It's hard to plan in any sort of long-term, sustainable way."

How did tariffs get so lopsided?

America's tariffs are generally lower than those of its trading partners. After World War II, the United States pushed for other countries to lower trade barriers and tariffs, seeing free trade as a way to promote peace, prosperity and American exports around the world. And it mostly practiced what it preached, generally keeping its own tariffs low and giving American consumers access to inexpensive foreign goods.

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Trump has broken with the old free trade consensus, saying unfair foreign competition has hurt American manufacturers and devastated factory towns in the American heartland. During his first term, he slapped tariffs on foreign steel, aluminum, washing machines, solar panels and almost everything from China. Democratic President Joe Biden largely continued Trump's protectionist policies.

The White House has cited several examples of especially lopsided tariffs: Brazil taxes ethanol imports, including America's, at 18%, but the U.S. tariff on ethanol is just 2.5%. Likewise, India taxes foreign motorcycles at 100%, America just 2.4%.

Does this mean the U.S. been taken advantage of?

The higher foreign tariffs that Trump complains about weren't sneakily adopted by foreign countries. The United States agreed to them after years of complex negotiations known as the Uruguay Round, which ended in a trade pact involving 123 countries.

As part of the deal, the countries could set their own tariffs on different products – but under the "most favored nation" approach, they couldn't charge one country more than they charged another. So the high tariffs Trump complains about aren't aimed at the United States alone. They hit everybody.

Trump's grievances against U.S. trading partners also come at an odd time. The United States, running on strong consumer spending and healthy improvements in productivity, is outperforming the world's other advanced economies. The U.S. economy grew nearly 9% from just before COVID-19 hit through the middle of last year — compared with just 5.5% for Canada and just 1.9% for the European Union. Germany's economy shrank 2% during that time.

Trump's plan goes beyond foreign countries' tariffs

Not satisfied with scrambling the tariff code, Trump is also going after other foreign practices he sees as unfair barriers to American exports. These include subsidies that give homegrown producers an advantage over U.S. exports; ostensible health rules that are used to keep out foreign products; and loose regulations that encourage the theft of trade secrets and other intellectual property.

Figuring out an import tax that offsets the damage from those practices will add another level of complexity to Trump's reciprocal tariff scheme.

The Trump team is also picking a fight with the European Union and other trading partners over so-called value-added taxes. Known as VATs, these levies are essentially a sales tax on products that are consumed within a country's borders. Trump and his advisers consider VATs a tariff because they apply to U.S. exports.

Yet most economists disagree, for a simple reason: VATs are applied to domestic and imported products alike, so they don't specifically target foreign goods and haven't traditionally been seen as a trade barrier.

And there's a bigger problem: VATs are huge revenue raisers for European governments. "There is no way most countries can negotiate over their VAT ... as it is a critical part of their revenue base," Brad Setser, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, posted on X.

Paul Ashworth, chief North America economist for Capital Economics, says that the top 15 countries that export to the U.S. have average VATs topping 14%, as well as duties of 6%. That would mean U.S. retaliatory tariffs could reach 20% — much higher than Trump's campaign proposal of universal 10% duties.

Tariffs and the trade deficit

Trump and some of his advisers argue that steeper tariffs would help reverse the United States' long-standing trade deficits.

But tariffs haven't proven successful at narrowing the trade gap: Despite the Trump-Biden import taxes, the deficit rose last year to \$918 billion, second-highest on record.

The deficit, economists say, is a result of the unique features of the U.S. economy. Because the federal government runs a huge deficit, and American consumers like to spend so much, U.S. consumption and investment far outpaces savings. As a result, a chunk of that demand goes to overseas goods and services.

The U.S. covers the cost of the trade gap by essentially borrowing from overseas, in part by selling treasury securities and other assets.

"The trade deficit is really a macroeconomic imbalance," said Kimberly Clausing, a UCLA economist and former Treasury official. "It comes from this lack of desire to save and this lack of desire to tax. Until you fix those things, we'll run a trade imbalance."

After heavy rains, debris flows hit Southern California community scarred by fire

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and EUGENE GARCIA Associated Press

SIERRA MADRE, Calif. (AP) — Residents of a Southern California mountain community near the Eaton Fire burn scar dug out of roads submerged in sludge Friday after the strongest storm of the year swept through the area, unleashing debris flows and muddy messes in several neighborhoods recently torched by wildfires.

Dry weather returned to the region but the risk of rock and mudslides on wildfire-scarred hillsides continued Friday since dangerous slides can strike even after rain stops, particularly in scorched areas where vegetation that helps keep soil anchored has burned away.

Water, debris and boulders rushed down the mountain in the city of Sierra Madre on Thursday night, trapping at least one car in the mud and damaging several home garages with mud and debris. Bulldozers on Friday were cleaning up the mud-covered streets in the city of 10,000 people.

"It happened very quickly but it was very loud and you could even hear the ground or feel the ground shaking," Bull Duvall, who has lived in Sierra Madre for 28 years, said of the debris flows.

Sierra Madre officials issued evacuation orders for areas affected by the Eaton Fire, warning that fire, police and public works personnel would not enter areas experiencing active mud and debris flows and anyone who remained in a home under evacuation orders would need to shelter in place until areas are deemed safe for city personnel to enter. Residents of the city also had to evacuate during the Eaton Fire, which destroyed 15 homes in the community.

In Pacific Palisades on Friday, some residents washed their mud-covered driveways and bulldozers worked to clear mud-coated roads not far from where, just weeks ago, officials moved abandoned cars after people fleeing last month's wildfires got stuck in traffic and fled on foot.

The vehicle of a member of the Los Angeles Fire Department was pulled out of the water in Malibu after it was pushed into the ocean on Thursday. A fire department employee was able to exit with minor injuries, department spokesperson Erik Scott said.

About 45 miles (72 kilometers) west of LA, the storm system produced a small tornado Thursday afternoon in the city of Oxnard that tore down power lines and fences, and ripped off roofs at two mobile home parks, according to the National Weather Service.

Southern California reported 1 to 3 inches (2.5 to 7 centimeters) of rain in coastal areas and valleys and 3 to 6 inches (7.6 to 15.2 centimeters) across the coastal slopes on Thursday, said Mike Wofford, a meteorologist with the weather service.

The precipitation was badly needed, as much of Southern California remains in extreme or severe drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. In neighboring Nevada, the weather service said it recorded a measurable amount of rain in Las Vegas, ending a streak of 214 days without precipitation.

A storm in the Sierra Nevada mountains dumped 6 feet (1.8 meters) of snow over 36 hours. Two ski patrol staff from Mammoth Mountain were caught in an avalanche during avalanche mitigation work Friday morning, the resort said in a Facebook post. One was extracted and was responsive, while the other was taken to a hospital with serious injuries.

More winter weather is descending on the U.S.

In the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area, warming shelters stayed open Friday and officials were seeking volunteers to help staff them after the area saw 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10 centimeters) of snow and some ice. Most schools, city and county offices were closed Friday because of the weather. Major pileups on highways in Oregon and Washington injured at least 10 people on Thursday.

The West Coast storms are just the latest in a week of bad weather across the U.S. that cut power to tens of thousands.

Over the coming weekend, heavy snow was expected to shift from the mountains of the West into the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes while an icy mix spreads into the Northeast, the weather service warned Friday.

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Severe weather was expected Saturday from east Texas into much of the Southeast and parts of the mid-South, where dangers could include tornadoes, flash flooding and widespread damaging wind gusts of 70 mph (113 mph) or higher.

"Tornadoes and destructive storms that strike at night greatly increase the risk of injuries and loss of life since many people are sleeping," said AccuWeather Chief Meteorologist Jonathan Porter. "It is crucial that families have multiple ways to receive severe weather alerts this weekend."

Nashville and Memphis in Tennessee; Shreveport, Louisiana; Jackson, Mississippi; and Birmingham, Alabama, are some of the population centers at risk from the thunderstorms, Porter said.

Meanwhile, meteorologists warn that the U.S. is about to get its 10th and coldest polar vortex stretching event this season. Weather forces in the Arctic are combining to push the chilly air that usually stays near the North Pole into the U.S. and Europe. The latest projected cold outbreak should first hit the northern Rockies and northern Plains on Saturday and then stick around all next week.

In Denver, where temperatures are expected to dip as low as 14 degrees (minus 10 degrees Celsius) over the weekend, the city has extended its cold weather shelters for those living on the streets. The Denver Coliseum — an arena with some 10,000 seats — will be opened Saturday for additional space, while a free bus will loop between the shelters across the city.

In the Rocky Mountains, skiers eager for the long Presidents' Day weekend are already facing a closure on a section of Interstate 70 due to snow as officials warn of hazardous conditions on the mountain roads over the weekend.

In northern Utah, rain and snow created dangerous conditions on mountain roads leading to ski resorts. The state Department of Transportation issued a road safety alert warning of a mix of heavy snow and rain through Friday.

And in Kentucky, Gov. Andy Beshear declared a state of emergency on Friday as a flood watch was in effect for early Saturday through midday Sunday with another 2 to 5 inches (5 to 13 centimeters) of rainfall expected.

Justice Department asks court to dismiss corruption charges against New York City Mayor Eric Adams

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, LARRY NEUMEISTER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Justice Department asked a court Friday to dismiss corruption charges against New York City Mayor Eric Adams, with a top official from Washington intervening after federal prosecutors in Manhattan rebuffed his demands to drop the case and some quit in protest.

Acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove, the department's second-in-command, and lawyers from the public integrity section and criminal division filed paperwork asking to end the case. They contend it was marred by appearances of impropriety and that letting it continue would interfere with the mayor's reelection bid. A judge must still approve the request.

The filing came hours after Bove convened a call with the prosecutors in the Justice Department's public integrity section — which handles corruption cases — and gave them an hour to pick two people to sign onto the motion to dismiss, saying those who did so could be promoted, according to a person familiar with the matter.

After prosecutors got off the call with Bove, the consensus among the group was that they would all resign. But a veteran prosecutor stepped up out of concern for the jobs of the younger people in the unit, said the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss details of the private meeting.

The three-page dismissal motion bore Bove's signature and the names of Edward Sullivan, the public integrity section's senior litigation counsel, and Antoinette Bacon, a supervisory official in the department's criminal division. No one from the federal prosecutor's office in Manhattan, which brought the Adams case, signed the document.

The move came five days into a showdown between Justice Department leadership in Washington and

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its Manhattan office, which has long prided itself on its independence as it has taken on Wall Street malfeasance, political corruption and international terrorism.

At least seven prosecutors in Manhattan and Washington quit rather than carry out Bove's directive to halt the case, including interim Manhattan U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon and the acting chief of the public integrity section in Washington.

The Justice Department said in its motion to Judge Dale E. Ho that it was seeking to dismiss Adams' charges with the option of refileing them later. Ho had yet to take action on the request as of Friday evening.

"I imagine the judge is going to want to explore what his role is under the rules," said Joshua Naftalis, a former Manhattan federal prosecutor who is not involved in Adams' case. "I would expect the court to either ask the parties to come in person to court or to file papers, or both."

Bove said earlier this week that Trump's permanent, appointed Manhattan U.S. attorney, who has yet to be confirmed by the Senate, can decide whether to refile the charges after the November election. Adams faces a Democratic primary in June, with several challengers lined up. His trial had been on track to be held in the spring.

Bove concluded that continuing the prosecution would interfere with Adams' ability to govern, posing "unacceptable threats to public safety, national security, and related federal immigration initiatives and policies," the dismissal motion said. Among other things, it said, the case caused Adams to be denied access to sensitive information necessary to help protect the city.

Adams pleaded not guilty in September to charges he accepted more than \$100,000 in illegal campaign contributions and lavish travel perks from foreign nationals looking to buy his influence while he was Brooklyn borough president campaigning to be mayor.

Though critical in the past, Adams has bonded at times with Trump recently and visited him at his Florida golf club last month. The president has criticized the case against Adams and said he was open to giving the mayor, who was a registered Republican in the 1990s, a pardon.

Bove sent a memo Monday directing Sassoon, a Republican, to drop the case. He argued the mayor was needed in President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown and echoed Adams' claims that the case was retaliation for his criticism of Biden administration immigration policies.

Instead of complying, Sassoon resigned Thursday, along with five high-ranking Justice Department officials in Washington. A day earlier, she sent a letter to Trump's new attorney general, Pam Bondi, asking her to meet and reconsider the directive to drop the case.

Sassoon suggested in her letter that Ho "appears likely to conduct a searching inquiry" as to why the case should be dismissed. She noted that in at least one instance, a judge has rejected such a request as contrary to the public interest. "A rigorous inquiry here would be consistent with precedent and practice in this and other districts," she wrote.

Seven former Manhattan U.S. attorneys, including James Comey, Geoffrey S. Berman and Mary Jo White, issued a statement lauding Sassoon's "commitment to integrity and the rule of law."

On Friday, Hagan Scotten, an assistant U.S. attorney in Manhattan who worked for Sassoon and had a leading role in Adams' case, became the seventh prosecutor to resign — and blasted Bove in the process.

Scotten wrote in a resignation letter to Bove that it would take a "fool" or a "coward" to meet his demand to drop the charges, "But it was never going to be me." He told Bove he was "entirely in agreement" with Sassoon's decision.

Scotten and other Adams case prosecutors were suspended with pay on Thursday by Bove, who launched a probe of the prosecutors that he said would determine whether they kept their jobs.

Scotten is an Army veteran who earned two Bronze medals serving in Iraq as a Special Forces troop commander. He graduated from Harvard Law School at the top of his class in 2010 and clerked for Chief Justice John Roberts.

In her letter to Bondi, Sassoon accused Adams' lawyers of offering what amounted to a "quid pro quo" — his help on immigration in exchange for dropping the case — when they met with Justice Department officials in Washington last month.

Adams' lawyer Alex Spiro said Thursday that the allegation of a quid pro quo was a "total lie."

"We were asked if the case had any bearing on national security and immigration enforcement and we truthfully answered it did," Spiro said in an email to reporters.

On Friday, Adams added: "I never offered — nor did anyone offer on my behalf — any trade of my authority as your mayor for an end to my case. Never."

Scotten seconded Sassoon's objections in his letter, writing: "No system of ordered liberty can allow the Government to use the carrot of dismissing charges, or the stick of threatening to bring them again, to induce an elected official to support its policy objectives."

The prosecutor, who appeared in court for various hearings in the case, said he was following "a tradition in public service of resigning in a last-ditch effort to head off a serious mistake."

He said he could see how a president such as Trump, with a background in business and politics, "might see the contemplated dismissal-with-leverage as a good, if distasteful, deal." But he said any prosecutor "would know that our laws and traditions do not allow using the prosecutorial power to influence other citizens, much less elected officials, in this way."

Woman withdraws civil lawsuit against Jay-Z, Sean 'Diddy' Combs alleging she was raped at age 13

By SUSAN HAIGH and JONATHAN LANDRUM JR. Associated Press

An Alabama woman who said she was raped by rappers Jay-Z and Sean "Diddy" Combs when she was 13 withdrew her civil lawsuit against both men on Friday, according to court filings.

The unidentified woman in December added Jay-Z, whose legal name is Shawn Carter, to a lawsuit she had filed against Combs in Manhattan federal court, alleging that she was attacked by the singers in 2000 after Combs' limo driver offered her a ride to an MTV Video Music Awards after-party.

The court document submitted by the woman's attorneys announcing the voluntary dismissal did not include any reasons or explanation for the withdrawal.

Jay-Z, who vehemently denied the claims and tried to get extracted from the lawsuit, called the woman's decision to withdraw her claim "a victory" and said the "fictional tale" she and her lawyers created was "laughable."

"The frivolous, fictitious and appalling allegations have been dismissed," he said in a statement posted on social media. "This civil suit was without merit and never going anywhere."

Combs remains jailed in New York awaiting a criminal trial on federal sex trafficking charges. He also faces a wave of sexual assault lawsuits, many of which were filed by the plaintiff's lawyer, Tony Buzbee, a Texas attorney who says his firm represents over 150 people, both men and women, who allege sexual abuse and exploitation by Combs.

Lawyers for Combs said dismissal of the lawsuit without a settlement confirmed that other lawsuits he is facing are built on falsehoods.

"For months, we have seen case after case filed by individuals hiding behind anonymity, pushed forward by an attorney more focused on media headlines than legal merit. Just like this claim, the others will fall apart because there is no truth to them," they said in a statement, adding that Combs "has never sexually assaulted or trafficked anyone — man or woman, adult or minor."

When asked for a response, Buzbee responded "no comment" in an email Friday night.

Buzbee's firm, which has set up a 1-800 number for accusers, has filed a wave of lawsuits against the hip-hop mogul. Buzbee's lawsuits allege that many of the people he represents were abused at parties in New York, California and Florida where individuals were given drinks that were laced with drugs.

Statements from both rappers derisively referred to Buzbee and his firm as the "1-800-lawyer." Jay-Z accused him of "hiding behind Jane Doe" for financial gain.

"When they quickly realize that the money grab is going fail, they get to walk away with no repercussions," he wrote. "The system has failed."

Jay-Z and Combs are part of a generation of hip-hop titans who rose to prominence in the 2000s, emerg-

ing as wide-ranging entrepreneurs and two of the world's wealthiest rappers.

The artists have collaborated over the years, with Jay-Z being featured on Combs' debut album, "No Way Out," and Combs appearing on Jay-Z's sophomore album, "In My Lifetime, Vol. 1."

Diddy launched his Bad Boy Records around the same time Jay-Z launched his Roc-A-Fella record label. The pair has been frequently photographed together at events.

Jay-Z has won 25 Grammys while Diddy has collected three trophies. His Roc Nation company served as co-executive producer of the recent Super Bowl halftime show.

Helicopter crew in collision with plane may not have heard key instruction from tower, NTSB says

By GARY FIELDS, JOSH FUNK and TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The crew of the Army helicopter that collided in midair with an American Airlines jet near Washington, D.C.'s Ronald Reagan National Airport may have had inaccurate altitude readings in the moments before the crash, and also may not have heard key instructions from air traffic controllers to move behind the plane, investigators said Friday.

National Transportation Safety Board Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy told reporters that the recording from the Black Hawk helicopter cockpit suggested an incomplete radio transmission may have left the crew without understanding how it should shift position just before the Jan. 29 crash, in which all 67 aboard the two aircraft were killed,

"That transmission was interrupted -- it was stepped on," she said, leaving them unable to hear the words "pass behind the" because the helicopter's microphone key was pressed at the same moment.

The helicopter pilots may have also missed part of another communication, when the tower said the jet was turning toward a different runway, she said.

Homendy said the helicopter was on a "check" flight that night where the pilot was undergoing an annual test and a test on using night vision goggles. Investigators believe the crew was wearing night vision goggles throughout the flight.

It will take more than a year to get the final NTSB report on the collision, and Homendy warned reporters that many issues were still being probed.

"We're only a couple weeks out," from the crash, she said. "We have a lot of work to do."

The collision was the deadliest plane crash in the U.S. since 2001, when a jet slammed into a New York City neighborhood just after takeoff, killing all 260 people on board and five more on the ground.

William Waldo, professor of safety science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, said stepped-on transmissions — where a pressed microphone key blocks incoming communication — is a well-known problem in aviation.

"It's an old story and it's one of the problems oftentimes with radio communications," he said.

It's unclear, though, if that led to the crash.

Retired airline pilot John Cox, CEO of the aviation safety consulting firm Safety Operating Systems, said the helicopter's pilots had accepted responsibility to avoid the plane two minutes earlier when they asked for and received permission to maintain "visual separation" with the jet — allowing it to fly closer than otherwise may have been allowed if the pilots didn't see the plane.

"At that moment, the helicopter becomes responsible for separation, period. He accepts the responsibility of staying clear of the other aircraft," Cox said. If the helicopter pilots suspected they had missed any crucial information from the tower, they could have asked for it to be repeated.

Serious questions have yet to be answered about the helicopter's altimeters.

The collision likely occurred at an altitude just under 300 feet (91 meters), as the plane descended toward the helicopter, which was well above its 200-foot (61-meter) limit for that location.

Cockpit conversations a few minutes before the crash indicated conflicting altitude data, Homendy said, with the helicopter's pilot calling out that they were then at 300 feet (91 meters), but the instructor pilot saying they were at 400 feet (122 meters), Homendy said.

"We are looking at the possibility there may be bad data," she said.

That generation of Black Hawks typically has two types of altimeters — one relying on barometric pressure and the other on radio frequency signals bounced off the ground. Helicopter pilots typically rely on barometric readings while flying, but the helicopter's black box captures its radio altitude.

The radio altitude at the time of the impact put the Black Hawk at 278 feet (85 meters), Homendy said. "But I want to caution, that does not mean that's what the Black Hawk crew was seeing on the barometric altimeters in the cockpit," she said.

Waldock said the helicopter pilots, with their night vision goggles interfering with their peripheral vision, may have wrongly focused on a plane that took off just before the collision.

"If they did indeed lock onto that departing airplane and assume that's the traffic they were supposed to be avoiding, they didn't see the other airplane coming," he said.

The jet also angled sharply upward in the last second before impact, Homendy said.

Waldock and Cox both saw that as a clear evasive maneuver by the American Airlines pilot.

"It's a last ditch attempt to escape," said Waldock.

The victims

The Army has said the Black Hawk crew was highly experienced, and accustomed to the crowded skies around the nation's capital.

The Army identified the crew as Capt. Rebecca M. Lobach of Durham, North Carolina; Staff Sgt. Ryan Austin O'Hara, 28, of Lilburn, Georgia; and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Andrew Loyd Eaves, 39, of Great Mills, Maryland. O'Hara was the crew chief and Eaves and Lobach were pilots.

Lobach's friends and fellow soldiers called her deeply meticulous, "brilliant and fearless."

The American Airlines jet, which was flying from Wichita, Kansas, and preparing to land at the time of the crash, was piloted by 34-year-old Jonathan Campos, whose relatives said he had dreamed of flying since he was 3.

The jet's passengers ranged from a group of hunters to students and parents from northern Virginia schools to members of the Skating Club of Boston. They were returning from a development camp for elite junior skaters that followed the 2025 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Wichita.

Almost immediately after the crash, President Donald Trump publicly faulted the helicopter for flying too high. He also blamed federal diversity and inclusion efforts, particularly regarding air traffic controllers. When pressed by reporters, the president could not back up those claims. A few days later, Trump placed the blame on what he called an "obsolete" air traffic control system.

Treasury watchdog begins audit of Musk DOGE team's access to the US government's payment system

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Treasury Department's Office of Inspector General on Friday said it was launching an audit of the security controls for the federal government's payment system, as Democratic lawmakers raised red flags about the access provided to Trump aide Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency team.

The audit will also review the past two years of the system's transactions as it relates to Musk's assertion of "alleged fraudulent payments," according to a letter from Loren J. Sciarba, Treasury's deputy inspector general, that was obtained by The Associated Press.

The audit marks part of the broader effort led by Democratic lawmakers and federal employee unions to provide transparency and accountability about DOGE's activities under President Donald Trump's Republican administration. The Musk team has pushed for access to the government's computer systems and sought to remove tens of thousands of federal workers.

"We expect to begin our fieldwork immediately," Sciarba wrote. "Given the breadth of this effort, the audit will likely not be completed until August; however, we recognize the danger that improper access or inadequate controls can pose to the integrity of sensitive payment systems. As such, if critical issues

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come to light before that time, we will issue interim updates and reports.”

Treasury’s inspector general began the audit before Democratic lawmakers asked for it. A. J. Altemus, acting counsel to the inspector general, said “our work is independently initiated” and standards dictate that the audit “must be non-partisan and objective. These standards remain unchanged.”

Tech billionaire Musk, who continues to control Tesla, X and SpaceX among other companies, claims to be finding waste, fraud and abuse while providing savings to taxpayers. Many of his claims are so far unsubstantiated. But there is a risk that his team’s aggressive efforts could lead to the failure of government computer systems and enable Musk and his partners to profit off private information maintained by the government.

The audit would overlap with increased pressure that the Trump administration is placing on inspectors general, presidential appointees who are supposed to serve as an independent check against mismanagement and abuse of government power. In January, the administration fired several independent inspectors general at government agencies, a move that some members of Congress said violated federal oversight laws. The firings prompted a lawsuit filed on Wednesday in federal court in Washington that seeks to return the inspectors general to their jobs.

Democratic Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Ron Wyden of Oregon led the push in the Senate for the inspector general office’s inquiry at the Treasury.

On Wednesday, Warren, Wyden and Sen. Jack Reed, D-Rhode Island, sent a letter to Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent noting the inconsistencies in the accounts provided by his department about DOGE.

“Your lack of candor about these events is deeply troubling given the threats to the economy and the public from DOGE’s meddling, and you need to provide a clear, complete, and public accounting of who accessed the systems, what they were doing, and why they were doing it,” the Democratic lawmakers wrote in their letter.

Democrats on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform also called on inspectors general to investigate DOGE and welcomed the Treasury audit.

“Elon Musk and DOGE can’t be allowed to creep on Americans’ most sensitive data as they operate in the shadows,” said Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-Va., the committee’s ranking member. “This is an important step, and inspectors general must be free to pursue their investigations without interference.”

The Treasury Department provided conflicting information about DOGE’s access to the payment system. Initially, it claimed the access was read only, only to then acknowledge that a DOGE team member briefly had the ability to edit code, and then to say in an employee-sworn statement that the ability to edit was granted by accident.

The 25-year-old employee granted the access, Marko Elez, resigned this month after racist posts were discovered on one of his social media accounts, only for Musk to call for his rehiring with the backing of Trump and Vice President JD Vance.

Earlier this week, the Treasury declined to brief a pair of the highest-ranking lawmakers on the Senate Finance Committee, including Wyden, on the controversy related to DOGE’s use of Treasury payment systems, citing ongoing litigation.

Advocacy groups and labor unions have filed lawsuits over DOGE’s potentially unauthorized access to sensitive Treasury payment systems. Five former treasury secretaries have sounded the alarm on the risks associated with Musk’s DOGE access.

A federal judge in Manhattan on Friday heard arguments in a lawsuit brought by Democratic state attorneys general seeking to prevent DOGE from accessing Treasury Department data.

Judge Jeannette Vargas said she’d issue a decision at a later date and a temporary restraining order imposed by a prior judge would remain in place until then.

Lawyers for the federal government argued that Treasury and DOGE staffers were acting appropriately. “There was nothing unlawful about Treasury carrying out the priorities of a new administration using Treasury employees,” said Jeffrey Oestericher, of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York. “They were perfectly within their lawful duties.”

But Vargas at times pushed back at the federal government’s arguments that adequate protections were

in place, noting that the plans were set in motion only in a matter of weeks. "Why so rushed?" she asked. Lawyers for the Democratic attorneys general argued there was no effort to remove or redact private individual information and no evidence that DOGE staff were given proper training on how to handle such sensitive data.

"States have had their bank account information accessed by people with no reason to access it," said Andrew Amer of the New York attorney general's office.

A timeline of last month's air disaster in Washington, the deadliest in the US since 2001

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

More than two weeks after a helicopter and airplane collision over Washington killed 67 people, investigators have completed their work at the scene where both aircraft fell into the Potomac River in the deadliest U.S. air disaster since 2001.

The National Transportation Safety Board offered a detailed timeline Friday of the events leading up to the crash, but there are still many unanswered questions.

President Donald Trump publicly faulted the helicopter, which had a flight ceiling of 200 feet (61 meters), for flying too high. The NTSB confirmed Friday that it was at 278 feet (85 meters), but it's not clear if the pilots knew that. Trump also blamed federal diversity and inclusion efforts, particularly regarding air traffic controllers. When pressed by reporters, the president could not back up those claims. A few days later, Trump placed the blame on what he called an "obsolete" air traffic control system.

Investigators are looking closely at whether the helicopter's pilots had inaccurate information about its altitude and how their vision would have been affected by their night vision goggles.

Here's a look at the timeline of events before the crash and in the days afterward:

Jan. 29

At around 8:15 p.m. American Airlines Flight 5342, with 64 people on board, begins its initial descent into Reagan National.

At 8:43, from the airport's tower, a controller asks the plane's pilots to switch from landing on Runway 1 to Runway 33. Nearby an Army Black Hawk helicopter, referred to as PAT25 by air traffic control, is flying south over the River. The skies are clear.

As the helicopter is approaching the airport, the cockpit voice recorder captures the pilot saying it is flying at 300 feet (91 meters) and the instructor pilot says it is at 400 feet (122 meters). The discrepancy isn't explained and the helicopter continues to descend. The ceiling for the helicopter flight gets progressively lower as it approaches the airport.

At 8:46, the controller radios the Black Hawk crew to say a passenger jet, referred to as CRJ, is at 1,200 feet (365 meters) and circling to Runway 33. The helicopter's pilots say they see the jet and ask for permission to maintain visual separation — allowing it to fly closer than otherwise may have been allowed if the pilots didn't see the plane. Controllers approve the request.

At 8:47 — 20 seconds before impact — the controller again radios: "PAT25, do you have the CRJ in sight?" while a conflict alarm sounds in the background. Then, again: "PAT25, pass behind the CRJ." But the NTSB said the helicopter's recorder shows the pilots may never have heard that instruction.

One second later the plane's crew gets an alert from their collision avoidance system declaring "Traffic! Traffic!"

A few seconds after that, a crewmember on the helicopter replies that the aircraft "is in sight" and again requests "visual separation" with the incoming plane.

Just after the plane descends past its last recorded altitude of 313 feet (95 meters), the pilots pull up the nose of the plane sharply in an evasive maneuver one second before impact.

Then a commotion is heard on the tower audio. A flash appears in the sky, and both aircraft fall into the river. Moments later someone says over the radio, "Tower, did you see that?"

In the ensuing hours, helicopters and inflatable boats light up the Potomac in search of survivors.

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Jan. 30

In the morning Trump tells reporters there are no survivors and says it is unclear what led to the collision. The names of those on both flights begin to emerge online, appearing in Facebook eulogies or statements from grieving families.

By midday the bodies of all three soldiers in the helicopter have been recovered.

About 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) downriver from the crash site, Dean Naujoks, who patrols the Potomac for the Waterkeeper Alliance, finds pages from the flight manual, a piece of the plane's cabin wall and dozens of sugar packets stamped with the American Airlines logo. He turns the items over to the FBI.

In the evening the airplane's cockpit voice and flight data recorders are recovered and sent to labs for evaluation.

Jan. 31

It is raining as police boats comb the Potomac for victims and investigators search for clues as to what happened.

Officials announce that the Black Hawk's black box has been recovered and the flight data is being reviewed, along with the actions of the military pilot and air traffic control.

Over 300 responders are on the scene throughout the day, including dive teams. By the afternoon the remains of 41 people have been pulled recovered.

The Army releases the names of two of the dead soldiers: Staff Sgt. Ryan Austin O'Hara, 28, of Lilburn, Georgia, the crew chief; and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Andrew Loyd Eaves, 39, of Great Mills, Maryland.

Feb. 1

The rain clears. A Coast Guard cutter outfitted with a crane waits nearby as recovery team members slip into the chilly water to continue the search.

At a news conference, investigators say they are trying to work out a discrepancy in the altitude data between the helicopter and the airliner.

Investigators say they hope the helicopter's black box can help reconcile the difference. The box is waterlogged, delaying retrieval of its data.

The Army identifies the third soldier who died in the helicopter: Capt. Rebecca M. Lobach. She is described by friends as "brilliant and fearless."

Feb. 2

Officials say the number of victims whose remains have been recovered has risen to 55 and they are confident the rest will be found.

As the search continues, salvage crews prepare to lift wreckage from the Potomac.

Col. Francis B. Pera of the Army Corps of Engineers says divers and salvage workers are adhering to strict protocols and will stop moving debris if a body is found.

The "dignified recovery" of remains takes precedence over all else, he says.

Feb. 3

Salvage crews recover an engine and large pieces of fuselage of the airliner and work to retrieve a wing. Portions of the helicopter and plane that were pulled from the water are loaded onto flatbed trucks and taken to a hangar for investigation.

Families of the victims gather on the banks of the Potomac.

Feb. 4

Early on in the day, crews working in choppy conditions raise a number of large pieces of the jetliner including the right wing, the center fuselage and parts of the forward cabin, cockpit, tail cone and rudder.

Investigators announce that they are examining new data that could shed light on the altitude discrepancy.

Authorities say the remains of all 67 victims of the collision have been recovered and all but one have been identified.

Feb. 5

One of the first memorial services is held for one of the victims of the crash. A flight attendant who died is remembered at the service in North Carolina as a loving father, stepfather, husband, brother and uncle who loved the career that afforded him the opportunity to connect with people and explore the world.

Organizers announce plans for a figure skating tribute that will take place in Washington, D.C., in early March. Many of the crash victims had just been to a development camp after the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Wichita, Kansas.

Authorities say they have identified all of the victims and the medical examiner is working to return the remains to families.

Feb. 6

Salvage crews finish removing all major components of the helicopter and jet from the river. The wreckage is trucked to a secure hanger where NTSB investigators can examine it for clues.

Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz says NTSB officials in a briefing told senators that the helicopter's Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) — an aviation surveillance technology that transmits aircraft location and other data to air traffic control and other aircraft — was off. He questions why it was turned off.

AP reporter and photographer barred from Air Force One over 'Gulf of Mexico' terminology dispute

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

The White House barred a credentialed Associated Press reporter and photographer from boarding the presidential airplane Friday for a weekend trip with Donald Trump, saying the news agency's stance on how to refer to the Gulf of Mexico was to blame for the exclusion. It represented a significant escalation by the White House in a four-day dispute with the AP over access to the presidency.

The administration has blocked the AP from covering a handful of events at the White House this week, including a news conference with India's leader and several times in the Oval Office. It's all because the news outlet has not followed Trump's lead in renaming the body of water, which lies partially outside U.S. territory, to the "Gulf of America."

AP reporters and photographers travel with the president virtually everywhere as part of a press "pool" and have for decades. AP journalism serves millions of readers and thousands of news outlets around the world.

Journalists consider the administration's move a violation of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment — a governmental attempt to dictate what a news company publishes under threat of retribution. The Trump administration says the AP has no special right of access to events where space is limited, particularly given the news service's "commitment to misinformation."

AP calls that assertion entirely untrue.

"Freedom of speech is a pillar of American democracy and a core value of the American people. The White House has said it supports these principles," AP spokeswoman Lauren Easton said Friday night. "The actions taken to restrict AP's coverage of presidential events because of how we refer to a geographic location chip away at this important right enshrined in the U.S. Constitution for all Americans."

The body of water in question has been called the Gulf of Mexico for hundreds of years. AP, whose influential stylebook is used by news outlets as an arbiter of language and usage, advised that because of its broad set of global customers, it would both refer to the body of water as the Gulf of Mexico and also reference Trump's order changing the name to the Gulf of America within the United States.

At the same time, the AP switched style last month from Denali to Mount McKinley for the mountain in Alaska that Trump ordered renamed. That location lies entirely within U.S. jurisdiction.

Taylor Budowich, White House deputy chief of staff, said in a post to X Friday — one that was later released as a White House statement — that the AP "continues to ignore the lawful geographic name change of the Gulf of America. This decision is not just divisive, but it also exposes The Associated Press' commitment to misinformation."

While the First Amendment protects the AP's "right to irresponsible and dishonest reporting," it doesn't ensure unfettered access to limited spaces like the Oval Office and Air Force One, Budowich said. He said AP would retain its credentials to the White House complex overall.

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On Friday, an AP reporter and photographer had traveled to Joint Base Andrews for their participation in the traveling press pool to Trump's Florida residence. But, after clearing security, neither was allowed to board Air Force One, a decision they were told was "outlet-specific." Meanwhile, reporters in the press pool who were permitted on the plane sent the AP journalists pictures of cards with their names saying "welcome aboard" on their empty seats.

Other news organizations, like The New York Times and Washington Post, have also said they would primarily use Gulf of Mexico. Fox News said that it was switching to Gulf of America.

The White House Correspondents Association has issued statements condemning the action against AP. Although there are talks going on behind the scenes, individual news outlets have been relatively quiet.

The Times, through spokesman Charles Stadtlander, said on Friday that "we stand by The Associated Press in condemning repeated acts of retribution by this administration for editorial decisions it disagrees with. Any move to limit access or impede reporters doing their jobs is at odds with the press freedoms enshrined in the Constitution."

In a statement, the Washington Post said that the AP's "access to the administration is central for all journalistic organizations, including The Washington Post, in serving millions of Americans with fact-based, independent journalism each day."

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, who on Wednesday used the word "lies" in describing AP content, posted on X Friday afternoon about executive orders Trump had signed before his departure. She ended her post: "The @AP was not invited."

The Latest: Federal workers face mass layoffs

By The Associated Press undefined

Federal workers all over the country responded with anger and confusion Friday toward President Donald Trump and his administration's aggressive effort to shrink the size of the federal workforce by ordering agencies to lay off probationary employees who have yet to qualify for civil service protections.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he will only agree to meet in person with Russian leader Vladimir Putin after a common plan is negotiated with Trump. Vice President JD Vance will meet with Zelenskyy later on for talks about how to negotiate a settlement to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Here's the latest:

Advocacy group asks for investigation into whether federal layoffs violated personnel rules

An advocacy group has filed a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel, the federal agency dedicated to protecting whistleblowers, asking for an investigation into whether the mass firings violated federal personnel practices.

Democracy Forward's complaint also asked that the firings be halted while that inquiry is being conducted.

The complaint charges that the Trump administration violated federal personnel rules by dismissing employees solely because they were in their probationary periods — not because of work performance.

How many dismissed employees are represented in the complaint has not been made public. But, like a class-action lawsuit, that number could grow over time.

Ex-wideout Antonio Brown invited to White House Black History Month reception

The White House is planning to hold a reception honoring Black History Month next week and has invited former wide receiver Antonio Brown.

The onetime Pittsburgh Steelers star posted an invitation to the Feb. 20 event on social media.

The White House press office confirmed Brown's invitation but offered no further details about the event.

Brown played in Pittsburgh from 2010 to 2018 before he was traded to the Raiders — a team then-based in Oakland — in the spring of 2019. That followed a series of public missteps, including famously opting not to show up for the team's 2018 season finale.

AP reporter and photographer barred from Air Force One over 'Gulf of Mexico' terminology dispute

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Judge hears arguments on case challenging Musk and DOGE's authority

U.S. District Court Judge Tanya Chutkan heard arguments Friday in Washington on a restraining order request to stop Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency from accessing federal agencies' data and initiating government layoffs.

Attorneys general from 14 states are challenging Musk and his DOGE team's authority to access sensitive government data and exercise "virtually unchecked power," citing constitutional provisions that delineate the powers of Congress and the president.

Chutkan made no immediate decision and asked plaintiffs to draft a proposed restraining order by Saturday evening.

"Once financial or other confidential data is made public you can't un-ring that bell, you can't get it back," Chutkan said.

Chutkan previously presided over Trump's election interference case before it was dismissed.

Attorneys warned to keep things short and efficient in Trump lawsuit

A federal judge has offered a stern warning to attorneys challenging moves made by Trump's administration: Don't expect a hearing when a phone call will do.

U.S. District Judge Ana Reyes gave the verbal rebuke Friday to former U.S. Solicitor General Seth Waxman, who now is representing eight government watchdogs suing the Trump administration over their mass firing last month.

Waxman's legal firm had filed an emergency motion asking that the inspectors general be reinstated to their positions at various federal agencies. The judge refused, instead setting an expedited briefing schedule for the case.

"Why on earth this could not have been handled with a five-minute phone call is beyond my comprehension," Reyes said.

She and her clerk have been "working around the clock on really monumental, time-sensitive issues," such as a lawsuit challenging Trump's ban on transgender people in the military, she said.

More than 30 lawsuits against the Trump administration are pending in federal court in Washington.

Justice Department asks court to dismiss corruption charges against New York's mayor

The Justice Department has formally asked a court to dismiss corruption charges against New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

Acting Deputy U.S. Attorney General Emil Bove and lawyers from the department's public integrity section and criminal division in Washington filed paperwork seeking to end the case. A judge still has to sign off on the request.

The formal move to end the prosecution was expected, and it came after days of turmoil in the Justice Department. At least seven prosecutors in New York and Washington quit rather than carry out a directive to halt the case.

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Among the people leaving were the interim U.S. attorney in Manhattan and a veteran prosecutor who worked on the Adams case, along with the acting chief of the public integrity section.

The Justice Department's three-page motion sought to dismiss the case without prejudice, meaning the charges could be revived in the future.

Trump pushes to drive up domestic oil and gas production

Trump has signed an executive order formally creating a National Energy Dominance Council and directed it to move quickly to drive up already record-setting domestic oil and gas production.

Trump's administration also announced it has granted conditional export authorization for a huge liquefied natural gas project in Louisiana, the first approval of new LNG exports since former President Joe Biden paused consideration of them a year ago.

And Trump said he has directed Interior Secretary Doug Burgum to undo Biden's ban on future offshore oil drilling on the East and West coasts. Biden's last-minute action last month "viciously took out" more than 625 million acres (253 million hectares) offshore that could contribute to the nation's "net worth," Trump said.

'It's just been chaos'

David Rice, a disabled Army paratrooper who had been a probationary employee since joining the U.S. Department of Energy in September, found out Thursday night he had lost his job.

Rice, who worked as a foreign affairs specialist on health matters for the department relating to radiation exposure, said he had initially been led to believe that his job would be safe. But when he logged in for a meeting Thursday night, he saw an email saying he'd been fired.

"It's just been chaos," said Rice, 50, who bought a house and moved to Melbourne, Florida, after getting the job.

Rice said he is in favor of making the government more efficient, but he's frustrated with how it's being done.

"It's just random people, they're probational people, getting fired for no reason other than the fact that they're easier to let go," he said.

He also said he hopes people realize that government employees aren't the bad guys.

"We're just out here trying to do something that we actually believe in, that matters," Rice said.

Court order pauses any mass layoffs and data deletion at Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

The Trump administration agreed to halt any plans for mass layoffs, deletion of data or removal of funding from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

The agreement was ordered by a judge after the employees' union filed a lawsuit to prevent the agency's dismantling. Their lawyers argued Friday that fast action was needed to prevent large-scale firings and deletion of its data.

The order will stay in place at least until March 3, when U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson will hear arguments in the case.

The administration has already ordered the CFPB to stop nearly all its work and closed its building.

The agency was created to protect consumers after the 2008 financial crisis and subprime mortgage-lending scandal.

'None of this has been done thoughtfully or carefully'

Nicholas Detter had been working in Kansas as a natural resource specialist, helping farmers reduce soil and water erosion, until he was fired by email late Thursday night.

That's despite Detter, who had been employed by the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service, agreeing to the administration's deferred resignation program, under which he was supposed to be paid until Sept. 30 if he agreed to quit.

Detter responded to the letter accepting the deferred resignation, according to documents shared with The Associated Press. While his response was acknowledged, he never received the official agreement.

He said when the Trump administration first announced the deferred resignation program, he understood

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that it was part of an effort to improve the efficiency of the federal government, but he said "that's not what this has been."

"None of this has been done thoughtfully or carefully," he said

Detter said laying off workers like him will create backlogs in the program that was created in the wake of the 1930s Dust Bowl to try keep America's farmland healthy and productive.

'In order to help veterans, you just fired a veteran'

Among those impacted by the federal layoffs is Andrew Lennox, a 10-year Marine veteran who was working as a probationary employee at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

He received an email Thursday evening "out of the blue" informing him that he was being terminated.

"In order to help veterans, you just fired a veteran," said Lennox, 35, a former USMC infantryman who was deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

Lennox had been working as an administrative officer at the VA since mid-December and said he "would love nothing more" than to continue the work.

"This is my family, and I would like to do this forever," he said.

In a post on its website, the VA announced the dismissal of more than 1,000 employees, saying the personnel moves "will save the department more than \$98 million per year" and be better equipped to help vets.

"I was like: 'What about this one,'" Lennox said.

Anger, chaos and confusion take hold as federal workers face mass layoffs

Federal workers were responding with anger and confusion Friday as they grappled with the Trump administration's latest effort to shrink the size of the federal workforce by ordering agencies to lay off probationary employees who have yet to qualify for civil service protections.

As layoff notices began to go out agency by agency this week, federal employees from Michigan to Florida were left reeling from being told that their services were no longer needed.

Many of those impacted say they had already accepted the administration's deferred resignation offer, under which they were supposed to be paid until Sept. 30 if they agreed to quit. That left some wondering how many others who signed will nonetheless be fired.

The White House and Office of Personnel Management, which serves as a human resources department for the federal government, declined to say Friday how many probationary workers, who generally have less than a year on the job, have so far been dismissed.

Victoria Canal to perform as scheduled at Kennedy Center after others canceled

Singer-songwriter Victoria Canal has decided to perform as scheduled at the Kennedy Center on Saturday, but she will donate all of her proceeds to Trans Equality Now.

Since Trump fired the board of directors and was elected board chair of the center, numerous officials and performers have quit or canceled appearances, including the actor Issa Rae.

In a statement issued Friday through her manager, Canal noted she had been recognized at the Kennedy Center during the Obama administration as a Presidential Scholar in the Arts, a "memory I still cherish."

"After learning about the changes in leadership at the Kennedy Center, including Trump becoming self-appointed Chairman, I was debating whether or not to perform," she said.

"I am a proud queer, Latina, disabled woman and ally to the unprotected and vulnerable trans community in the United States," she added. "I figured if the new guys want to eliminate DEI, I'll let them decide to cancel the show if they want to — otherwise, see you February 15th."

North Carolina State University freezes hiring over 'uncertain' federal budget

NCSU is the state's largest public university by population, with more than 38,400 students as of Fall 2024.

"Given the uncertain impacts of the presidential administration's Executive Orders and guidance, the potential shut down of the federal government on March 14, and financial challenges that the state government is dealing with, leadership is becoming increasingly concerned with our budgets over the next year or two," Warwick Arden, the university's executive vice chancellor, said in a memo to the university's

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college deans and vice provosts.

Student workers, including graduate student appointments, and part-time employees are not a part of the hiring freeze, Arden said.

"I also encourage you to be conservative in the use of all your funds given the challenging financial climate we currently find ourselves in," Arden added.

Trump and Musk will jointly appear with Sean Hannity

The president and the billionaire will sit with the Fox News host next week, the network announced on Friday.

It's their first televised sit-down together and comes as Musk leads Trump's effort to slash the size and scope of the government, with efforts to freeze spending and fire federal workers proceeding in earnest.

New VA secretary plans 1,000-plus layoffs, promises no harm to veteran care or benefits

Top Republicans say they trust Doug Collins. Democrats have no such faith that cutting \$98 million through dismissals won't harm veterans.

"I take Secretary Collins at his word when he says there will be no impact to the delivery of care, benefits, and services for veterans with this plan," said Rep. Mike Bost, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

The ranking Democrat, Rep. Mark Takano, said the firings show a shocking disregard. The terminated include disabled veterans, military spouses and medical researchers.

Trump spoke to Britain's prime minister, plans to meet soon

Trump said Keir Starmer asked during their phone call Thursday to visit him in the U.S., which he accepted.

"Friendly meeting, very good. We have a lot of good things going on," he said.

No date was set, Trump said, but it could be next week or the week after.

Vance met with German far-right leader during visit to Munich, his office says

Alice Weidel is the co-leader and candidate for chancellor of the far-right and anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany party.

Vance met Weidel during a visit to Munich on Friday, nine days before a German election, in which he lectured European leaders about the state of democracy and said there is no place for "firewalls."

Mainstream German parties say they won't work with the party, which polls put in second place ahead of the Feb. 23 election.

Trump order targets schools and colleges mandating COVID-19 vaccines

Schools, colleges and states that require immunizations against COVID-19 may risk of losing federal money under an executive order President Donald Trump signed Friday.

It should have little national impact: Most schools have dropped such mandates. And it isn't clear what money is at risk.

Candidate Trump often said he would "not give one penny to any school that has a vaccine mandate," but this order applies only to COVID-19 vaccines.

All states require schoolchildren to be vaccinated against certain diseases including measles, mumps, polio, tetanus, whooping cough and chickenpox. And all allow exemptions for certain medical or religious reasons.

Trump denied knowing about handling of NYC mayor's case and then opined

The president was asked by a reporter at the White House about the prosecutors resigning over the Justice Department's push to drop the criminal case against New York City's mayor.

"I know nothing about the individual case. I know that they didn't feel that it was much of a case," Trump said.

"It looked to me to be very political," he added, and questioned why the prosecutors didn't complain weeks earlier, though the prosecutors began raising objections this week when instructed to drop the case.

Another prosecutor resigns with Justice Department in turmoil over NYC mayor's case

Prosecutor Hagan Scotten is at least the seventh to resign rather than follow Trump administration

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orders in the corruption case.

Scotton told acting deputy U.S. Attorney General Emil Bove on Friday it would take a "fool" or a "coward" to meet his demand to drop the charges.

Bove told prosecutors that Mayor Eric Adams is needed to support the administration's immigration enforcement and that the charges could be reinstated after this year's mayoral election.

A Special Forces troop commander in Iraq who graduated at the top of his Harvard Law class and clerked for Chief Justice John Roberts, Scotton wrote Bove: "No system of ordered liberty can allow the Government to use the carrot of dismissing charges, or the stick of threatening to bring them again, to induce an elected official to support its policy objectives."

The art of the deal? Ukraine's president says peace with Russia depends on Trump

Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed to Trump's dealmaking history in seeking the U.S. president's leadership to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

"He is a strong man. And if he will choose our side, and if he will not be in the middle, I think he will pressure and he will push Putin to stop the war. He can do it," Zelenskyy said.

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said, "President Trump will be the one at the table with Zelenskyy and Putin," and he expects Putin to claim victory "no matter what."

"I think everyone will try to come out of this situation as winners," Zelensky acknowledged. "The United States wants victory. The Russians want this victory very much, you understand. And Ukraine — it deserves it, that's all."

Second federal judge pauses Trump's order against gender-affirming care for youth

A second federal judge on Friday paused Trump's executive order halting federal support for gender-affirming care for transgender youth under 19.

U.S. District Court Judge Lauren King granted a temporary restraining order after the Democratic attorneys general of Washington state, Oregon and Minnesota sued the Trump administration last week. Three doctors joined as plaintiffs in the suit, which was filed in the Western District of Washington.

The decision came one day after a federal judge in Baltimore temporarily blocked the executive order in response to a separate lawsuit filed on behalf of families with transgender or nonbinary children.

Judge Brendan Hurson's temporary restraining order will last 14 days but could be extended, and essentially puts Trump's directive on hold while the case proceeds. Hurston and King were both appointed by former President Joe Biden.

Veteran budget hawks give mixed reviews on Musk's progress

The Associated Press interviewed four such conservatives about Musk's effort to slash the federal workforce and disfavored programs.

Some point to early successes. Others see DOGE stoking outrage without targeting the biggest spending: defense spending and programs with bipartisan support like Medicare and Social Security.

The DOGE website claims at least \$5.6 billion in savings so far — a tiny fraction of Musk's initial goal of \$2 trillion.

"This thing has paid for itself many times over now," said Grover Norquist, founder of Americans for Tax Relief.

But Manhattan Institute senior fellow Jessica Riedl said: "So far, DOGE seems more about looking for symbolic culture war savings than truly reducing the budget deficit in any meaningful way."

New Ag secretary promises layoffs at her agency

"Clearly it's a new day," new Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins told reporters outside the White House.

She said Trump's winning back the presidency shows the American people "believe that government was too big."

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Rollins said Elon Musk's government efficiency team was working at her agency and that it had already canceled some contracts and nearly 1,000 employee trainings related to diversity, equality and inclusion.

Rollins also said she'd welcome input from the Department of Government Efficiency on the nation's food stamp program.

Trump's government layoffs could affect economic numbers

Trump's mass layoffs of federal workers and spending freezes could come back to bite him in the economic data.

The monthly jobs reports could start to show a slowdown in hiring, if not go negative at some point after the February numbers are released. The last time the economy lost jobs during a month was in December 2020, when the United States was still muscling its way out of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Overall, it doesn't seem that DOGE has managed to actually cut spending substantively yet — instead they've just created chaos," said Martha Gimbel, executive director of the Budget Lab at Yale University. She noted that employers that rely on government grants and contracts would also show declines in hiring, if not worse.

"Given everything that is happening in the federal government, it is very plausible that job growth could turn negative at some point," Gimbel said. "But it may take a few more reports for the impact to show up."

Trump's new tariffs are being felt on Broadway

The Golden Theatre marquee for the new musical "Operation Mincemeat" is dark because special light bulbs ordered to spell out the show's title are stuck in China, said Rick Miramontez, president of DKC/O&M and a spokesman for the show.

Thousands of the ceramic yellow LED bulbs by Satco were meant to arrive in early February, in time to install them for Saturday's first preview. Now the show on the Great White Way, named after Broadway's famous theater lights, will have to welcome theatergoers with a blank space.

On Feb. 1, Trump announced a 10% tariff on imports from China, which led the country to quickly implement retaliatory tariffs on select American imports.

The bulbs have apparently been caught in the contest. The ad agency in charge of the marquee was told March would be the earliest they'd arrive.

Ukraine wants 'security guarantees' as Trump seeks to end Ukraine-Russia war, Zelenskyy says

Zelenskyy made his remarks Friday during a meeting with U.S. Vice President JD Vance. The two met at the Munich Security Conference.

Many observers, particularly in Europe, are hoping Vance will shed at least some light on U.S. President Donald Trump's ideas for a negotiated settlement to the war.

European ministers hit back against Vance's complaints about the state of their democracies

German defense minister Boris Pistorius said U.S. Vice President JD Vance's comparison of Europe to "ugly Soviet-era" authoritarianism was unacceptable.

Vance lectured European governments about free speech nine days before Germany's election, accusing them of hostility to the idea that "somebody with an alternative viewpoint might express a different opinion or, God forbid, vote a different way, or even worse, win an election."

Pistorius countered that Germany's right-wing AfD party can campaign completely normally, and "democracy doesn't mean that the loud minority is automatically right."

"Democracy must be able to defend itself against the extremists who want to destroy it," Pistorius said.

Democrats tell White House that firing USAID's top watchdog was illegal

Two senior Senate Democrats are asking President Donald Trump to reinstate the top watchdog for the U.S. Agency for International Development, calling his firing illegal.

Sens. Jeanne Shaheen, the ranking Democrat on the foreign affairs committee, and Gary Peters, the top Democrat on the homeland security committee, wrote Trump saying the firing of Inspector General Paul Martin without justification appeared to be an act of retaliation.

Martin's office had released a report the day before warning that dismantling USAID had all but eliminated proper oversight for billions of dollars in unspent humanitarian funds.

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Shaheen and Peters say the law requires 30 days notice to Congress and a reason.

Study: Excluding people in the US illegally from Census results wouldn't impact party power

Republicans are trying again to exclude people in the U.S. illegally from the numbers used to portion out congressional seats among the states. But a new study suggests their inclusion has had little impact on presidential elections or control of Congress.

If residents lacking permanent legal status had been excluded from the apportionment process from 1980 to 2020, no more than two House seats and three Electoral College votes would have shifted between Democrats and Republicans, according to demographers from the University of Minnesota and the Center for Migration Studies of New York.

"This would have had no bearing on party control of the House or the outcome of presidential elections," they wrote.

Viktor Orbán predicts Trump will bring Russia back into Western fold after end of Ukraine war

Hungary's nationalist prime minister said Trump's administration will reconnect Russia with Europe's economies and energy networks if the war in Ukraine ends.

"The United States has initiated a change that puts the whole Western world's system of arguments, value system, and way of thinking on a new track," Orbán said on Hungary's state radio. "This process is progressing much faster than many people thought. We call this the Trump tornado."

Hungary, unlike most European countries, continues to rely on Russian oil and gas. Orbán predicted the European Union will "fall apart" if energy prices aren't brought down.

Zelenskyy says he will only agree to meet with Putin after common plan with Trump is negotiated

During the Munich Security Conference, Zelenskyy said he would only agree to meet in person with Russian leader Vladimir Putin after a common plan is negotiated with U.S. President Trump.

He also said he believes Trump is the key to ending the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and that the U.S. president had given him his cellphone number.

Trump envoy Richard Grenell says he might run for California governor if Kamala Harris runs

Grenell, currently working on special projects for Trump, suggested he'd be interested in the 2026 race to succeed Democrat Gavin Newsom if the former vice president throws her hat in the ring.

"If Kamala Harris runs for governor, I believe that she has such baggage ... that it's a new day in California, and that the Republican actually has a shot," Grenell told reporters. "And I wouldn't say no."

Grenell spoke after taking part in Vice President JD Vance's meetings with world leaders in Munich.

Harris hasn't publicly expressed an interest in the governor's race, but would be a heavy favorite to win the Democratic nomination.

Federal workers rally against government-wide layoffs

A large group of federal workers and labor activists rallied in Washington Friday morning against the layoffs.

Many wore masks to protect their identities, for fear of reprisal from the administration. One carried an enormous silver spoon covered in aluminum foil, in reference to the "Fork in the Road" letter informing federal workers of government-wide buyouts.

One rally-goer who identified himself as Jeff, held a "No One Voted for Elon Musk" sign. He said Democrats should be more forceful, saying "We can't fight illegality with legality."

Zelenskyy calls for US and Europe to band together to support Ukraine in war against Russia

Zelenskyy spoke Friday at the Munich Security Conference, saying that the United States, including the Biden administration, never saw Ukraine as a NATO member.

He is expected to meet later with U.S. Vice President JD Vance.

Trump has upended years of steadfast U.S. support for Ukraine. Many observers, particularly in Europe, hope Vance will shed at least some light on Trump's ideas for a negotiated settlement to the war following a phone call between Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin this week.

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CDC to lose one-tenth of workforce under Trump administration job cuts

Nearly 1,300 probationary employees at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — roughly one-tenth of the agency's workforce — are being forced out under the Trump administration's move to get rid of all probationary employees.

The Atlanta-based agency's leadership was notified of the decision on Friday morning. The verbal notice came from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in a meeting with CDC leaders, according to a federal official who was at the meeting. The official was not authorized to discuss it and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The affected employees are supposed to receive four weeks of paid administrative leave, the official said, adding that it wasn't clear when individual workers would receive notice.

With a \$9.2 billion core budget, the CDC is charged with protecting Americans from outbreaks and other public health threats. Before the cuts, the agency had about 13,000 employees, including more than 2,000 staff work in other countries.

JD Vance: 'In Washington, there is a new sheriff in town'

The vice president warned Europe's elected officials that they risk losing public support if they don't quickly change course.

"If you're running in fear of your own voters there's nothing America can do for you," he told the Munich security conference.

Vance's speech made just a passing mention of the 3-year-old Russia-Ukraine conflict at a time of intense concern and uncertainty over the Trump administration's foreign policy.

Treasury watchdog begins audit of Musk DOGE team's access to federal government's payment system

The Treasury Department's Office of Inspector General said it was launching an audit of the security controls for the federal government's payment system after Democratic senators raised red flags about the access provided to Trump aide Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency team.

The audit will also review the past two years of the system's transactions as it relates to Musk's assertion of "alleged fraudulent payments," according to a letter from Loren J. Sciarba, Treasury's deputy inspector general, that was obtained by The Associated Press.

The audit marks part of the broader effort led by Democratic lawmakers and federal employee unions to provide transparency and accountability about DOGE's activities under President Donald Trump's Republican administration. The Musk team has pushed for access to the government's computer systems and sought to remove tens of thousands of federal workers.

Education Department cuts over \$300 million in contracts to help schools apply best practices

The Trump administration is cutting \$336 million in contracts designed to help schools and states adopt best practices in the classroom.

An Education Department news release said officials uncovered "wasteful and ideologically driven spending" at 10 regional centers hired to help schools apply research such as "equity audits."

The department said it plans to open new contracts to replace the Regional Educational Laboratories. They were ordered by Congress in 1965 and are still required under federal law, with a mission to support school policies that improve student outcomes.

Trump officials also cut four contracts for equity service centers totaling \$33 million. Without providing evidence, the department said the centers supported "divisive training in DEI, Critical Race Theory and gender identity."

'Power of Europe and America in the world' at stake in Russia-Ukraine talks

Vance met separately with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte and British Foreign Secretary David Lammy, and said NATO members must spend more on their militaries.

Vance told Rutte that the Trump administration wants to ensure "that NATO does a little bit more burden

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sharing in Europe, so the United States can focus on some of our challenges in East Asia.”

Rutte agreed: “We have to grow up in that sense and spend much more.”

Steinmeier told the conference that how exactly the Russia-Ukraine war ends “will have a lasting influence on our security order and on the position of power of Europe and America in the world.”

Philadelphia turns green on Valentine’s Day to celebrate Super Bowl champions

By MARYCLAIRE DALE and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Philadelphia was awash in green on Valentine’s Day to celebrate its Super Bowl champions.

Swooning fans screamed and cheered Friday as MVP quarterback Jalen Hurts and Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie took turns hoisting the Vince Lombardi Trophy at the start of the team’s victory parade through the City of Brotherly Love.

Many fans camped out along the parade route overnight, huddling under blankets and in tents to secure prime spots near the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where the Eagles took the stage on the “Rocky” steps.

“You know I told myself that when I got drafted, that I wouldn’t come to the ‘Rocky’ steps until I won a championship,” Hurts said. “And now we’re here.”

A few rowdy fans lobbed beer cans to players riding on the open-air buses, and a wayward throw smacked Eagles general manager Howie Roseman in the forehead.

“I bleed for this city,” Roseman said later during the celebration.

Other fans decked out in Eagles jerseys climbed trees and light poles, perched themselves atop ladders and clung to a statue of Benjamin Franklin near City Hall to get a glimpse of record-setting running back Saquon Barkley and Cooper DeJean, the rookie defensive back who ran an interception into the end zone on his 22nd birthday.

“This team is special. We can’t be great without the greatness of others, and that certainly applies to our fans,” head coach Nick Sirianni said.

Barkley, along with many other players, hopped off the buses to walk along the parade route and exchange high-fives with fans who pressed against teetering barricades.

Jordan Jandl, who couldn’t make it to the 2018 parade after the Eagles won their first Super Bowl, wasn’t going to miss this one, bringing his wife and three daughters from Binghamton, New York. This team, he said, was the embodiment of the city.

“Their work ethic,” he said. “How they have to grind for each win. We have to grind here in Philly.”

Fans showed up with grocery carts stocked with food and booze, while a few stayed warm in a hotel, sipping champagne. One group roasted a pig with the number “15” carved into the side — a final shot at Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes.

The Eagles, despite being underdogs, dominated the Chiefs in the big game last Sunday, shutting them out in the first half before finishing with a 40-22 victory.

“I’m so happy you didn’t have to go through a nail-biter game,” veteran defensive end Brandon Graham said. “It’s about us being gritty. We’re going to stay gritty.”

Earlier this week Mayor Chelle Parker and other city leaders implored the team’s exuberant fans to stay safe and keep the mood festive.

“In the midst of all this beauty, all of the sacrifices this team has made to meet this moment, we don’t want it to all go by the wayside,” the mayor said.

Just weeks ago a college student died falling from a street pole after the Eagles won the NFC championship game. And a year ago, a shooting at Kansas City’s Super Bowl victory rally left one person dead and nearly two dozen wounded.

Two women were shot in the legs Friday during an argument with another person near the parade, police said, but it was not clear exactly where it took place or whether it had any connection to the celebration.

There was a large police presence along the route, which stretched from South Philadelphia, where the

Eagles play, all the way to City Hall and on to the art museum.

Dump trucks and heavy equipment blocked many side streets, and city schools, courts and other agencies closed for the parade.

OpenAI board unanimously rejects Elon Musk's \$97.4 billion proposal

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — OpenAI says its board of directors has unanimously rejected a \$97.4 billion takeover bid by Elon Musk.

"OpenAI is not for sale, and the board has unanimously rejected Mr. Musk's latest attempt to disrupt his competition," said a statement Friday from Bret Taylor, chair of OpenAI's board.

OpenAI attorney William Savitt in a letter to Musk's attorney Friday said the proposal "is not in the best interests of OAI's mission and is rejected."

Musk, an early OpenAI investor, began a legal offensive against the ChatGPT maker nearly a year ago, suing for breach of contract over what he said was the betrayal of its founding aims as a nonprofit.

OpenAI has increasingly sought to capitalize on the commercial success of generative AI. But the for-profit company is a subsidiary of a nonprofit entity that's bound to a mission — which Musk helped set — to safely build better-than-human AI for humanity's benefit. OpenAI is now seeking to more fully convert itself to a for-profit company, but would first have to buy out the nonprofit's assets.

Throwing a wrench in those plans, Musk and his own AI startup, xAI, and a group of investment firms announced a bid Monday to buy the nonprofit that controls OpenAI. Musk in a court filing Wednesday further detailed the proposal to acquire the nonprofit's controlling stake.

Savitt's letter Friday said that court filing added "new material conditions to the proposal. As a result of that filing, it is now apparent that your clients' much-publicized 'bid' is in fact not a bid at all." In any event, "even as first presented," the board has unanimously rejected it, Savitt said.

Musk has alleged in the lawsuit that OpenAI is violating the terms of his foundational contributions to the charity. Musk had invested about \$45 million in the startup from its founding until 2018, his lawyer has said.

He escalated the legal dispute late last year, adding new claims and defendants, including OpenAI's business partner Microsoft, and asking for a court order that would halt OpenAI's for-profit conversion. Musk also added xAI as a plaintiff, claiming that OpenAI was also unfairly stifling business competition. A judge is still considering Musk's request but expressed skepticism about some of his claims in a court hearing last week.

The Pentagon moves to take back troops discharged over COVID-19 vaccine refusals

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Defense Department has told the military services to reach out once again to service members who were forced out or voluntarily left the military because they refused to get the COVID vaccine and see if they want to reenlist.

The directive reflects the executive order signed by President Donald Trump a week after he took office, and it says that all service members who opt to return to the military will have to reenlist for at least two years.

According to a memo released on X, Darin Selnick, who is working as the defense undersecretary for personnel, said the vaccine mandate was an "unfair, overbroad, and completely unnecessary burden" on service members. It directs the services to set up a program to contact troops and begin doing so in two months.

At least 8,200 troops were forced out of the military in 2021 for refusing to obey a lawful order when they declined to get the vaccine. The military services sent out notices in 2023 to all troops discharged over the vaccine, advising them they could return to the military, but just 113 have reenlisted. Defense

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officials said at the time that many troops appeared to use the vaccine mandate as a way to get out of their service obligations quickly and easily.

It's unclear how many more may now be interested, since this new offer will allow eligible troops to come in at their previous rank and give them back pay, benefits and bonuses, as long as they meet all requirements for the reinstatement. Officials have not provided any cost estimates.

To return, all would have to meet weight, fitness, medical and other requirements, and they could be refused if they now have a criminal record or other disqualifying factor. Officers would have to get re-commissioned, which is a simple appointment process.

The memo directs the services to "broadly apply waiver authorities to permit maximum eligibility, as appropriate." And, in a highly unusual move, only very senior civilian leaders confirmed by the Senate will have the authority to reject a waiver request.

In addition, any recommendation to reject a service member's request for reinstatement must be sent to the secretary of that service, and that authority cannot be delegated to anyone else. Traditionally waivers or other similar decisions are made at much lower levels.

The services will have 30 days to identify those who were forced out "solely" for refusing the vaccine order, and within 60 days must begin a program to contact them.

Once service members receive the estimate of back pay and other compensation, they will have 60 days to decide whether to return to the military. The offer is only good for one year from the date of the memo, which was Feb. 7. It wasn't posted publicly until late Thursday afternoon.

Service members must go through screening through the Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records process. The memo directs the boards to move swiftly and give priority to COVID-related applications.

Troops who left the service voluntarily to avoid the vaccine may also seek reinstatement but must submit a written statement saying they left for that reason. They will not receive back pay, but will have to commit to a two-year reenlistment.

According to the services, 3,748 Marines were discharged, and 25 opted to re-enlist since the 2023 offer went out; 1,903 Army soldiers were discharged, and 73 returned; 1,878 sailors were discharged and two returned; 671 airmen were discharged and 13 returned.

The Pentagon made the COVID-19 vaccine mandatory in August 2021 for all service members, including the National Guard and Reserve. Then-Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said getting the vaccine was critical to maintaining a healthy force prepared to defend the nation.

The Pentagon dropped the mandate in January 2023.

Second federal judge pauses Trump's order against gender-affirming care for youth

By MANUEL VALDES Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — A second federal judge on Friday paused President Donald Trump's executive order halting federal support for gender-affirming care for transgender youth under 19.

U.S. District Court Judge Lauren King granted a temporary restraining order after the Democratic attorneys general of Washington state, Oregon and Minnesota sued the Trump administration last week. Three doctors joined as plaintiffs in the suit, which was filed in the Western District of Washington.

The decision came one day after a federal judge in Baltimore temporarily blocked the executive order in response to a separate lawsuit filed on behalf of families with transgender or nonbinary children. Judge Brendan Hurson's temporary restraining order will last 14 days but could be extended, and essentially puts Trump's directive on hold while the case proceeds. Hurston and King were both appointed by former President Joe Biden.

Trump signed an executive order last month halting federal funding for institutions that provide the care and directing federally run insurance programs, including Medicaid and TRICARE for military families, to exclude coverage for it. The order also calls on the Department of Justice to pursue litigation and legislation to oppose it.

Medicaid programs in some states cover gender-affirming care. Trump's order suggests that the practice could end, and targets hospitals and universities that receive federal money and provide the care.

In the complaint filed in Seattle, the three Democratic attorneys general argue that the executive order violates equal rights protections, the separation of powers and states' powers to regulate what is not specifically delegated to the federal government.

The Trump administration disputed those claims in court filings. "The President's authority to direct subordinate agencies to implement his agenda, subject to those agencies' own statutory authorities, is well established," Justice Department attorneys wrote.

A large crowd of people went to the federal courthouse to watch Friday's hearing. Outside, some carried signs with phrases including "Protect Trans Kids" or Pride flags with the words, "You are loved."

"We had over 100 declarants submit their personal stories about the impact of this illegal and unconstitutional and hateful order, and their bravery allowed for justice to be done today," Washington Attorney General Nick Brown said after the ruling.

The temporary restraining order is just the first step in a long fight, Brown said, adding that he hopes the order reassures health care providers in the state that they can continue to provide gender-affirming care to their patients.

"The word I would use is relief, right?" third-year medical student Natalie Koconis said when asked for a response to the judge's ruling. One of a group of medical students and doctors in white coats who held signs outside the courthouse, Koconis said Trump's executive order "is something that has already had material impacts on our ability" to treat transgender youth. "All we want is just everybody to get the care that they need and deserve."

In addition to the orders on health care access and defining the sexes as unchangeable, Trump has also signed orders that open the door to banning transgender people from military service; set up new rules about how schools can teach about gender; and intend to ban transgender athletes from participating in girls and women's sports.

Legal challenges have already been filed on the military order, the plan to move transgender women in federal prisons to men's facilities and the recognition only of people's sex as assigned at birth, which led to the halting of allowing gender markers to be changed on passports.

Other lawsuits are likely to be filed, just as there have been challenges to a variety of Trump's policies.

As transgender people have gained visibility and acceptance in some ways, there's been vehement pushback. At least 26 states have passed laws to restrict or ban gender-affirming care for minors. The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments last year but has not yet ruled on whether Tennessee's ban on the care is constitutional.

Idle buses, empty Border Patrol boats: Arrests for illegal crossings fall in the Rio Grande Valley

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

MISSION, Texas (AP) — An idled Border Patrol bus sat empty this week, on standby for any migrants surrendering near the southern tip of Texas.

Agents in two speedboats zipped past pockets of sandy shores, known landing spots for people entering the U.S. illegally from Mexico on inner tubes but saw nothing suspicious.

Once busy river landings near the Texas border city of Mission were barren of the migrants who previously crossed there, though the river bank was littered with clothes, plastic bracelets issued by smugglers and a teddy bear on an unusually cold Thursday morning.

Arrests for illegal crossings have fallen dramatically from an all-time monthly high of 250,000 in December 2023, perhaps most strikingly in the Rio Grande Valley, the epicenter for migrant arrivals from 2013 to 2022.

Associated Press journalists accompanying Border Patrol agents in an SUV and on speedboats that traversed 30 miles along the Rio Grande Valley and river for five hours Thursday didn't encounter a single migrant.

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Arrests, already at their lowest levels since 2019 when President Donald Trump took office on Jan. 20, have fallen sharply in recent weeks. Border Patrol Chief Michael Banks said Friday they are currently about 350 a day, down from more than 1,500 daily in December, the last month of published data.

Border Patrol agents in the Rio Grande Valley, home to about 1.4 million people, have been making about 50 arrests a day, down from a daily average of 325 in December and nearly 3,000 on the busiest days of 2021.

Despite the relative calm, Trump declared a national emergency at the border on his first day in office.

In an immigration policy memo, as she took office last week, Attorney General Pam Bondi wrote: "Unlawful border crossings and illegal migration into the United States have reached record levels, resulting in a substantial and unacceptable threat to our national security and public safety."

Overnight Thursday, there were arrests along the Rio Grande, as well as a shooting Wednesday. The Border Patrol said an agent fired at someone in a suspected smuggling incident in the town of Boca Chica, wounding one suspect.

But migrants were nowhere to be found along the river by Thursday morning in former hot spots like Mission, a city of 87,000 where as recently as December asylum-seekers waited in open fields near a busy international bridge for agents to pick them up, or in many other spots along the winding river lined by thick, giant cane.

Heightened enforcement by Mexican authorities within their own borders and severe U.S. asylum restrictions contributed to sharp declines in illegal crossings before Trump took office.

In recent years, the Texas National Guard and state police have become a major presence under Gov. Greg Abbott's "Operation Lone Star," a multibillion-dollar border crackdown. U.S. Customs and Border Protection recently agreed to let the Texas Guard arrest and detain people for illegal crossings, which had been the sole domain of the federal government.

On Thursday, 300 Texas Guard members were deputized to conduct immigration arrests alongside Border Patrol agents and enlarge their show of force along the border.

Zelenskyy to Vance: Ukraine wants 'security guarantees' as Trump seeks to end Ukraine-Russia war

By AAMER MADHANI, EMMA BURROWS and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Friday that his country wants "security guarantees" before any talks with Russia, as the Trump administration presses both countries to find a quick endgame to the three-year war.

Shortly before sitting down with Vice President JD Vance for highly anticipated talks at the Munich Security Conference, Zelenskyy said he will only agree to meet in-person with Russian leader Vladimir Putin after a common plan is negotiated with U.S. President Donald Trump.

The roughly 40-minute meeting between Vance and Zelenskyy produced no major announcements detailing the way out of the deadliest war in Europe since World War II. Zelenskyy made a plaintive statement about the state of play.

"We want peace very much," Zelenskyy said. "But we need real security guarantees."

Vance, for his part, said the Trump administration is committed to finding a lasting peace between Ukraine and Russia.

"Fundamentally, the goal is, as President Trump outlined it, we want the war to come to a close," Vance said. "We want the killings to stop. Not the kind of peace that's going to have Eastern Europe in conflict just a couple of years down the road."

Trump upended years of steadfast U.S. support for Ukraine this week following a phone call with Putin, when he said the two leaders would likely meet soon to negotiate a peace deal. Trump later assured Zelenskyy that he, too, would have a seat at the table.

'New sheriff in town'

Before his meeting with Zelenskyy, Vance lectured European officials on free speech and illegal migration

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on the continent, warning that they risk losing public support if they don't quickly change course.

"The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia. It's not China. It's not any other external actor," Vance said in an address to the Munich Security Conference. "What I worry about is the threat from within — the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America."

He warned European officials: "If you're running in fear of your own voters there's nothing America can do for you."

The speech and Trump's push for a quick way out of Ukraine have been met with intense concern and uncertainty at the annual gathering of world leaders and national security officials.

The vice president also warned the European officials against illegal migration, saying Europeans didn't vote to open "floodgates to millions of unvetted immigrants" and referencing an attack Thursday in Munich where the suspect is a 24-year-old Afghan who arrived in Germany as an asylum-seeker in 2016.

The violence left more than 30 people injured and appears to have had an Islamic extremist motive.

NATO defense spending

Earlier Friday, Vance met separately with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte and British Foreign Secretary David Lammy. He used the engagements to reiterate the Republican administration's call for NATO members to spend more on defense.

Currently, 23 of NATO's 32 member nations are hitting the Western military alliance's target of spending 2% of their GDP on defense.

But European leaders are pushing back that the White House's characterizations of a dependent Europe doesn't play out in the data. The continent has rallied to get behind Ukraine since Putin launched the February 2022 invasion. The U.S. has poured more than \$66 billion in weapons and military assistance into Ukraine, while European and other allies have sent \$60 billion in weaponry to Kyiv.

"We have put in place hard-hitting sanctions, substantially weakening Russia's economy," EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in remarks to the conference. "We have broken one taboo after another and smashed our reliance on Russian gas, making us more resilient permanently. And we are about to do more."

Chernobyl drone strike

Hours before Vance and Zelenskyy were set to meet, a Russian drone with a high-explosive warhead hit the protective confinement shell of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Kyiv region, the Ukrainian president said. Radiation levels have not increased, Zelenskyy and the U.N. atomic agency said.

Zelenskyy told reporters that he thinks the Chernobyl drone strike is a "very clear greeting from Putin and Russian Federation to the security conference."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Friday denied Ukraine's claims. And Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said the Munich organizers haven't invited Russia for several years.

Trump has been vague about his specific intentions for Ukraine and Russia — other than suggesting that a deal will likely result in Ukraine being forced to cede territory that Russia has seized since it annexed Crimea in 2014.

Ukraine's bid to join NATO

Trump's musings have left Europeans in a quandary, wondering how — or even if — they can maintain the post-WWII security that NATO afforded them or fill the gap in the billions of dollars of security assistance that the Democratic Biden administration provided to Ukraine since Russia's invasion.

Trump has been highly skeptical of that aid and is expected to cut or otherwise limit it as negotiations get underway.

Both Trump and U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth this week undercut Ukraine's hopes of becoming part of NATO, which the alliance said less than a year ago was "irreversible," or of getting back territory captured by Russia, which currently occupies close to 20% including Crimea.

"I don't see any way that a country in Russia's position could allow ... them to join NATO," Trump said Thursday. "I don't see that happening."

Zelenskyy, in his own remarks during the conference, said the United States, including the Biden admin-

istration, never saw Ukraine as a NATO member.

Possible sanctions against Russia

Vance, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal, said the U.S. would hit Moscow with sanctions and potentially military action if Putin won't agree to a peace deal with Ukraine that guarantees Kyiv's long-term independence.

The warning that military options "remain on the table" was striking language from a Trump administration that's repeatedly underscored a desire to quickly end the war.

Vance's team later pushed back on the newspaper's report, saying he "didn't make any threats."

"He simply stated the fact that no one is going to take options away from President Trump as these negotiations begin," said Will Martin, Vance's communications director.

European turning point

The track Trump is taking also has rocked Europe.

Increasingly alarmed that U.S. security priorities lie elsewhere, a group of European countries has been quietly working on a plan to send troops into Ukraine to help enforce any future peace settlement with Russia. Britain and France are at the forefront of the effort, though details remain scarce.

French President Emmanuel Macron said he spoke with Zelenskyy on Friday evening.

"If President Donald Trump can truly convince President Putin to stop the aggression against Ukraine, that is great news," he said in a message on X. "Then, it will be the Ukrainians alone who can drive the discussions for a solid and lasting peace. We will help them in this endeavor."

Macron added: "we, Europeans, will need to strengthen our collective security and become more autonomous... A stronger and more sovereign Europe, let's make it happen now."

From roses in Vietnam to engraved 'love locks' in Germany, the world celebrates Valentine's Day

For anyone who's been searching for signs of love in this world, there was proof of it this Valentine's Day on the Eiffel Tower, where a couple embraced in a kiss that was 674 steps above the avenues of Paris.

But love was also on display in far less iconic locales: A couple kissed on a park bench in Bucharest, Romania. Florists made bouquets in a flower shop in Lagos, Nigeria. Heart-shaped plaques were tied to a tree branch at a shrine in Tokyo.

Associated Press photographers on Friday captured moments of the holiday around the world.

In Germany, people walked across the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne, where an estimated 500,000 "love locks" were attached, the padlocks engraved with inscriptions of lovers. In Erbstetten on the Swabian Alb, a wedding couple was made of bales of straw.

In Rome, flowers were placed next to "St. Valentine Skull" in the Santa Maria in Cosmedin Basilica. On Thursday, visitors admired the statue "Paolina Borghese as Venus Victorious" during an event at the Galleria Borghese museum.

And in a different take on the tradition of giving flowers to one's Valentine, in Cambodia's southern Phnom Penh, villagers made flowers from corn husks in Tnout Chum Village. While back to the traditional, a florist arranged a rose bouquet outside a flower shop in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Hamas names 3 more Israeli hostages to be freed from Gaza

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Hamas named three Israeli hostages on Friday it will release in a weekend trade for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the latest sign that the shaky Gaza ceasefire deal appears to be holding in spite of a tense dispute that has threatened to renew fighting.

The three men set to be freed Saturday are Israeli-Argentinian Iair Horn, 46; Israeli-American Sagui Dekel Chen, 36; and Israeli-Russian Alexander (Sasha) Troufanov, 29. The trio were abducted from one of the hardest-hit communities in southern Israel during the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that ignited the war.

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Under the terms of the ceasefire, Israel is to release more than 300 Palestinian prisoners held in its jails in return for the three hostages. It will be the sixth swap since the ceasefire took effect on Jan. 19.

So far, 21 hostages and over 730 Palestinian prisoners have been freed during the first phase of the truce. But the ceasefire had appeared dangerously close to collapse in recent days.

Hamas had said it would delay the next release after accusing Israel of not adhering to their agreement by not allowing in enough shelters, medical supplies, fuel and heavy equipment for clearing rubble.

Israel has said it would resume fighting Saturday unless hostages were freed — leaving it unclear whether it meant the three hostages as scheduled in the ceasefire deal, or all remaining hostages, as U.S. President Donald Trump demanded earlier this week.

An Israeli government official on Friday confirmed Israel had received the list of hostages to be released. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

The Hamas-linked prisoners' information office said Friday that 369 Palestinians were set to be released from Israeli prisons in the exchange. It said 36 of those were serving life sentences.

The list includes Ahmed Barghouti, 48, a close aide to Marwan Barghouti, a militant leader and iconic Palestinian political figure. Ahmed Barghouti was sentenced to life on charges that he dispatched suicide bombers during the Second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, in the early 2000s to carry out attacks that killed Israeli civilians. He was arrested alongside Marwan Barghouti in 2002.

Who are the hostages slated for release Saturday

Horn, Dekel Chen and Troufanov were abducted from Kibbutz Nir Oz, where some 80 of roughly 400 residents were taken hostage during the Oct. 7 attack.

Horn was abducted along with his brother, Eitan Horn, who had been staying with him at the time. Eitan remains in captivity.

Dekel Chen had been working in the kibbutz machine shop when militants attacked. His wife, Avital, who was seven months pregnant at the time, hid in a safe room with their two daughters. Avital gave birth to their third daughter in December 2023.

Troufanov was taken hostage along with his grandmother, Irena Tati; mother, Yelena (Lena); and girlfriend, Sapir Cohen. The three women were released during a brief ceasefire in November 2023. Troufanov's father was killed in the Oct. 7 attack.

Concern about remaining hostages' condition

Of the 251 people abducted, 73 remain in Gaza, around half of whom are believed to be dead. Nearly all the remaining hostages are men, including Israeli soldiers.

Concern has been growing about the remaining hostages' condition, particularly after the release of three last Saturday, who emerged looking emaciated and frail.

One of them, 65-year-old Keith Siegel, said in a video message addressed to Trump Friday that his captors had treated him worse as the 15-month war intensified, kicking him, spitting on him and holding him without water or light. The statement marked one of the first accounts of Hamas captivity from a hostage released during the ceasefire.

Siegel, originally from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, implored Trump to use his "leadership and strength" to ensure the ceasefire holds and all hostages return home.

The truce faces a much bigger challenge in the coming weeks. The deal's 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 all remaining hostages in return for an end to the war.

Gaza residents worry about what's to come

Palestinians uprooted by the war voiced fears Friday that fighting could start up again even as they struggle to secure food and living quarters.

"I'm scared the war would resume," said Abdel Qader Saed, who was displaced from his home in northern Gaza. He spoke at a camp in the central Gaza town of Deir Al-Balah filled with tents made from torn fabric and tarps.

"I hope the situation would improve and things get calm and that equipment to remove the rubble would

be brought in," he said, "so that if any of us went back home then we would be able to set up a tent for shelter."

Nearby, about 30 people lined up in front of a charity kitchen, holding buckets and pots to collect a share of the rice and meat being distributed. Frozen meat is now available in the market, an AP journalist confirmed.

U.N. officials said Friday that since the ceasefire began its World Food Program has provided food parcels, hot meals, bread and cash assistance to more than 860,000 Palestinians in Gaza. The group is working to set up more distribution points in the territory's north, as displaced residents return.

"The war paused, but starvation is still ongoing," said Um Yehia Shaheen, who fled her home in Gaza City.

"If it wasn't for the charity kitchen we wouldn't have been able to find an alternative for ourselves because everything is expensive and there are no humanitarian assistance coupons," she said.

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

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.

Trump's plan raises uncertainty

Trump's proposal to remove some 2 million Palestinians from Gaza and settle them elsewhere in the region has thrown the truce's future into further doubt.

His plan has been welcomed by Israel's government, 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.

Trump has proposed 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."

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 destroying Hamas and implementing Trump's plan. The militant group remains in control of the territory after surviving one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

Hamas may be unwilling to release any more hostages if it believes the war will resume. The captives are among the only bargaining chips it has left.

A drone pierced the outer shell of Ukraine's Chernobyl nuclear plant. Radiation levels are normal

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and EFREM LUKATSKY Associated Press

CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR POWER STATION, Ukraine (AP) — A drone armed with a warhead hit the protective outer shell of Ukraine's Chernobyl nuclear plant early Friday, punching a hole in the structure and briefly starting a fire, in an attack Kyiv blamed on Russia. The Kremlin denied it was responsible.

Radiation levels at the shuttered plant in the Kyiv region — site of the world's worst nuclear accident — have not increased, according to the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency, which said the strike did not breach the plant's inner containment shell.

The IAEA did not attribute blame, saying only that its team stationed at the site heard an explosion and was informed that a drone had struck the shell.

Fighting around nuclear power plants has repeatedly raised fears of a nuclear catastrophe during three years of war, particularly in a country where many vividly remember the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which killed at least 30 people and spewed radioactive fallout over much of the Northern Hemisphere.

The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is Europe's biggest, has occasionally been hit by drones during the war without causing significant damage.

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The strike came two days after President Donald Trump upended U.S. policy on Ukraine, saying he would meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss ending the war. The move seemed to identify Putin as the only player that matters and looked set to sideline Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as well as European governments, in any peace talks.

The hit on Chernobyl occurred as Ukraine is being slowly pushed back by Russia's bigger army along parts of the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line and is desperately seeking more Western help.

Zelenskyy said a Russian drone with a high-explosive warhead hit the plant's outer shell and started a fire, which has been put out. The shell was built in 2016 over another heavy concrete containment structure, which was placed on the plant's fourth reactor soon after the 1986 disaster. Both shells seek to prevent radiation leaks.

The Ukrainian Emergency Service provided a photograph that showed a hole in the roof of the outer shield, which is a massive steel-and-concrete structure weighing some 40,000 tons (36,000 metric tons) and tall enough to fit Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral inside.

The impact and fire also damaged equipment in a maintenance garage, Ukraine's state nuclear regulator said in a report.

There was "no immediate danger" to the facility or risk of radioactive leaks, according to Oleksandr Kharchenko, director of the Kyiv-based Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air.

"The protective structure is strong and reliable, though it has been damaged," he told The Associated Press.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Russia was responsible. "There is no talk about strikes on nuclear infrastructure, nuclear energy facilities. Any such claim isn't true. Our military doesn't do that," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

It was not possible to independently confirm who was behind the strike. Both sides frequently trade blame when nuclear sites come under attack.

Peskov alleged that the strike was a "false flag" attack staged by Ukraine to incriminate Russia and to thwart efforts to end the war through negotiations between Trump and Putin.

"It's obvious that there are those (in the Ukrainian government) who will continue to oppose any attempts to launch a negotiation process, and it's obvious that those people will do everything to try to derail this process," Peskov said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova described the drone attack as a "reckless" act by Kyiv and noted that Russia had been part of the international effort to build the structure that was hit.

Ukraine planned to provide detailed information to U.S. officials about the Chernobyl strike during the Munich Security Conference that started Friday, the head of Ukraine's Presidential Office, Andrii Yermak, wrote on his Telegram channel.

In Munich, Zelenskyy told reporters that he thinks the blow against Chernobyl was a "very clear greeting from Putin and Russian Federation" to the conference.

In other remarks Friday, the Ukrainian president said his country wants security guarantees before any talks to end the war. He also said he would agree to meet in-person with Putin only after a common plan is negotiated with Trump.

IAEA chief Rafael Grossi said on X that the strike and the recent increase in military activity near Zaporizhzhia "underline persistent nuclear safety risks," adding that the IAEA remains "on high alert."

The IAEA said its personnel at the site responded within minutes of the strike and that no one was hurt. "Radiation levels inside and outside remain normal and stable," the IAEA said on X.

Speaking on Telegram, Zelenskyy said the Chernobyl strike showed that Putin "is certainly not preparing for negotiations" — a claim Ukrainian officials have repeatedly made.

"The only state in the world that can attack such facilities, occupy the territory of nuclear power plants, and conduct hostilities without any regard for the consequences is today's Russia. And this is a terrorist threat to the entire world," he wrote.

"Russia must be held accountable for what it is doing," he added.

Where US adults think the government is spending too much, according to AP-NORC polling

By LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many U.S. adults believe the federal government is overspending — but polling also shows that many Americans, including Republicans, think the country is spending too little on major government programs such as Social Security.

The polls from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research suggest that as President Donald Trump and adviser Elon Musk push for extensive cuts throughout the federal government, slashing funding for humanitarian aid and turning their attention to the Department of Education and the military, Americans may not agree with where Trump and Musk's cuts should ultimately fall.

About two-thirds of Americans say the U.S. government is spending "too little" on Social Security and education, according to a January AP-NORC poll. Another 6 in 10, roughly, say too little money is going to assistance to the poor. A similar share say spending is too low for Medicare, the national health care insurance program for seniors, and most also say Medicaid is under-funded by the federal government. About half say border security is not receiving enough funding.

The perpetual challenge for lawmakers is that although U.S. adults mostly think the government isn't spending enough on key issues and programs, they are broadly in favor of cuts to the federal budget. AP-NORC polling from March 2023 found that 6 in 10 U.S. adults said the U.S. government was spending "too much" overall.

Most think the US is overspending on foreign aid

Foreign aid is one area where there is broad consensus that the U.S. is overspending. The 2023 AP-NORC polling suggests that Americans tend to believe too much money is going to other countries.

Roughly 7 in 10 U.S. adults said the government was putting too much money toward "assistance to other countries." About 9 in 10 Republicans and just over half of Democrats agreed that the country was overspending on foreign aid at the time.

Richard Tunnell, a 33-year-old veteran living in Huntsville, Texas, said he believes the United States gets involved in other countries' problems too often. Tunnell, an independent who voted for Trump in November, is glad that Trump, a Republican, is prioritizing his "America First" policies.

"Americans need to worry about Americans," Tunnell said. "There's atrocities happening on American soil just as much as there is on foreign soil. You know, if we can't clean up our own house, why the hell are we trying to clean up somebody else's house?"

At the same time, polling has shown that U.S. adults tend to overestimate the share of the federal budget that is spent on foreign aid. Surveys from KFF have found that, on average, Americans say spending on foreign aid makes up 31% of the federal budget rather than the actual answer: closer to 1% or less.

Republicans and Democrats say spending is too low for Social Security

On both sides of the political aisle, very few U.S. adults think the country is spending too much on Social Security and Medicare, according to the January AP-NORC poll. But there are bigger divides on spending for the military, border security, Medicaid and assistance to the poor.

About one-third of U.S. adults say the federal government is spending "too much" on the military. About one-third say the military is getting "too little" funding, and another one-third say it takes in "about the right amount." But most Republicans say the military is underfunded, while slightly less than half of Democrats say it's getting too much money.

Jeremy Shouse, a 38-year-old Democrat in Durham, North Carolina, said he believes government assistance programs for ordinary Americans should be as well-funded as the U.S. military is.

"I think it's really a slap in our faces as Americans," he said, referring to the underfunding of programs like Medicaid, which he has needed to use.

"When it comes down to school, Medicaid, any type of government assistance programs, the money is

just kind of not there," he said. "Not like it is for the military or the Army."

Strong majorities of Democrats say the U.S. government spends "too little" on assistance to the poor, education, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. They are divided on funding for border security — about 4 in 10 say the funding is about the right amount, while 3 in 10 say it's too high and about 3 in 10 say it's too little — and tend to say federal law enforcement agencies such as the CIA and the FBI are getting the right amount of funding.

Republicans tend to want more money for border security, Social Security and the military. About 8 in 10 Republicans say too little money is allocated to border security, and about two-thirds say that about Social Security.

Hostages freed from Gaza discover personal lives shattered by Hamas

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

RAMAT GAN, Israel (AP) — After 484 days of captivity in Gaza, Keith Siegel had many questions. Was his 97-year-old mother still alive? Which of his neighbors was killed in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack? Why did it take so long to free him?

With minimal access to media, the dual American-Israeli citizen only learned months after he was captured that his son had survived the attack that launched the war in Gaza. He had heard that his family and others' were advocating for hostages' freedom. But beyond that, he knew very little about life outside his confines in Gaza.

"He really wanted to know everything as soon as possible, just to put all the question marks away and to know what happened," said his daughter, Elan Siegel.

Hostages freed as part of a tenuous ceasefire in Gaza are confronting a flood of information about loved ones and destroyed communities, and are still figuring out their place in a changed world. Their families are grappling with how to fill them in on what they missed without potentially deepening their trauma.

Experts say it is important to be cautious.

"The information is definitely traumatic so you have to really be sensitive, careful and monitor the pace in which you expose the information," said Einat Yehene, who heads the rehabilitation division at the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

Paraded by Hamas, then shattered by reality

For many freed captives, catching up has been excruciating.

Eli Sharabi, 52, had no exposure to media during his 16-month ordeal, according to his brother, Sharon Sharabi.

Forced to speak at a staged Hamas ceremony before his release, a gaunt Sharabi told a crowd of masked militants and journalists that he was looking forward to seeing his wife and two teenage daughters back in Israel.

Then he learned the crushing reality shortly after his arrival in Israel: all three had been killed at home during the Oct. 7 attack.

"Beyond the emotional burden and difficult experiences he faced in captivity, he had to bear this horrible loss on the first day that he left from there," his brother told Israeli Army Radio.

Or Levy, 34, was dealt a similar blow upon being freed. That is when he learned that his wife, Einav, was killed on Oct. 7.

"For 491 days, he held onto hope that he would return to her," his brother, Michael Levy, told reporters.

Levy was reunited with his young son, who hit key developmental milestones, like being potty trained, while his father was in captivity. "It took you a long time to come back," the 3-year-old told his father, according to Israeli media.

Facing uncertainty even after being freed

The first person Keith Siegel asked about upon returning home was his mother, Gladys. When his wife's

eyes welled up, he immediately understood she had died, his daughter recounted.

Siegel picked up some information about his family while in captivity. Months into the war, he heard his daughter on the radio, speaking about how his son had survived Hamas' attack. Other freed hostages have also reported hearing messages from their families through the news media.

Yarden Bibas, who was freed earlier this month, was told by his captors that his wife, Shiri, and their two young sons, Ariel and Kfir, were dead. But he was also told they were spotted in Tel Aviv, according to Israeli media.

Now that he is out, he still lacks clarity. They remain in Gaza, and the Israeli government has said it has "serious concern" for their lives.

A relentless need to know more

Beyond their personal lives, freed hostages are also taking in more than a year's worth of world events: President Donald Trump is back in the White House; Israel and Iran engaged in their first direct attacks; Israel killed the longtime chief of the militant group Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah.

Keith Siegel's family is sharing information sparingly, as one might with a child. "You answer only what he asks and not more than that," his daughter, Elan, said.

But the questions are relentless.

Siegel wanted to know what happened to his community of Kfar Aza. Was anyone watering the plants? Who was killed in Hamas' attack?

"We asked him if he's sure that he's ready. And he said 'yes,' that he just wants to know. So I read him the list of 64 people" who were killed, his daughter said. She said his reaction to the news has been muted because "it's almost like he forgot how to feel" while in captivity.

Siegel's photo has been a mainstay at protests and on banners highlighting the plight of hostages, making him recognizable across Israel. Ahead of his release, dozens of Israelis posted videos of themselves on social media making his favorite pancake recipe.

Siegel's wife, Aviva, who was freed from captivity in the early weeks of the war, prepared a book for him that includes notes from the important figures she had lobbied on his behalf — from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to former U.S. President Joe Biden.

Siegel was especially befuddled by the revelation that world leaders knew about his captivity.

His daughter, Elan, recalled him saying: "If they knew, how can it be that I was there for so long?"

Rwanda-backed rebels advance into eastern Congo's 2nd major city of Bukavu, residents say

By CHINEDU ASADU and JUSTIN KABUMBA Associated Press

GOMA, Congo (AP) — Rwanda-backed rebels in eastern Congo entered the region's second-largest city of Bukavu on Friday, local and civil society leaders said, the latest ground gained since a major escalation of their yearslong fighting with government forces.

The M23 rebels entered the city's Kazingu and Bagira zone and were advancing towards the center of the city of about 1.3 million people, according to Jean Samy, vice-president of the civil society in South Kivu. He reported gunfire in parts of the city.

Videos posted online appeared to show rebels marching toward the Bagira area. In one of the videos, a voice in the background shouted: "They are there ... there are many of them."

Hours earlier, the rebels had claimed to have seized a second airport in the region, in the town of Kavumu, following a days-long advance, while the U.N. warned that the recent escalation of fighting with government forces has left 350,000 internally displaced people without shelter.

The M23, which is supported by about 4,000 troops from neighboring Rwanda, took control of eastern Congo's biggest city, Goma, in late January. The rebels are the most prominent of more than 100 armed groups vying for control of Congo's mineral-rich east.

The rebellion has killed at least 2,000 people in and around Goma and left hundreds of thousands of

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displaced people stranded, the U.N. and Congolese authorities have said.

The Associated Press could not immediately confirm who was in control of the Kavumu national airport, which is located about 30 kilometres (18.5 miles) from Bukavu, which is the capital of South Kivu province. Government officials and civil society leaders did not immediately comment.

Kavumu airport became a target after the M23 rebels seized Goma and its international airport. Goma is a critical trade and humanitarian hub that hosted many of the close to 6.5 million people displaced in the conflict, the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

M23 spokesperson Lawrence Kanyuka said on X that the rebels took over Kavumu airport and its surroundings to "eliminate the threat at the source."

"The airport posed a danger to the civilian population," he said.

Congo's Communication Ministry issued a statement criticizing the rebels for violating a ceasefire that regional leaders have called for. The rebels were "imposing an urban war by attacking the positions of the FARDC (Congolese military) who are keen to avoid bloodshed in Bukavu," the ministry said.

A local civil society leader in Kavumu reported seeing soldiers "abandon their positions and head towards Bukavu."

"This caused fear within the community (and) I took the necessary measures to bring my family to safety," the leader said, speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

Congo's President Félix Tshisekedi criticized what he described as the failure of the international community to stop the aggression from the rebels and troops from Rwanda.

"This raises the question of the United Nations, which for me has become a two-tier organization depending on whether you are among the powerful or privileged (countries) or whether you are among the weak and disadvantaged," said Tshisekedi, who is attending the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

Chaos and panic among residents

The rebels' latest advance caused chaos and panic among residents in different parts of South Kivu. Some were fleeing from Kavumu into the provincial capital of Bukavu, while others were emptying from Bukavu into neighboring towns. Some were also stocking up on household supplies as economic activities appeared to be collapsing.

"I noticed that the soldiers were dropping out and fleeing, so I told myself that I could no longer stay in this place," said Chirimwami Alexis, among residents fleeing from Kavumu. "The fear we have is people moving without any preparation or food. We are running away just because of this situation," he added.

The rebels last week declared a unilateral ceasefire that the government dismissed as false. They later continued to advance toward Bukavu, seizing several nearby towns, including the town of Katana on Friday. The town is 7 kilometers (4 miles) from Kavumu airport.

African leaders to hold summit

The U.N. refugee agency said Friday that hundreds of thousands of displaced people are now in overcrowded makeshift shelters, churches, schools and hospitals.

"Heavy artillery shelling and looting have destroyed 70,000 emergency shelters around Goma and Minova in North and South Kivu provinces, leaving some 350,000 internally displaced people once again without roofs over their heads," the agency said.

African leaders will gather in Ethiopia at the weekend for a summit of the African Union, a continent-wide body that has previously been criticized for inaction amid conflicts in different parts of the region.

A recent meeting of leaders from eastern and southern Africa called for a ceasefire in eastern Congo but did not urge the M23 rebels to stop their advance.

Who is Danielle Sassoon, the US attorney who resigned rather than drop charges against Eric Adams?

The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Danielle Sassoon had served just three weeks as interim U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York when she penned a letter to recently confirmed U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi

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saying she could not follow a directive to drop the office's corruption case against New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

Sassoon wrote in her letter obtained by The Associated Press that the directive to drop the charges issued by Bove would violate her sworn duty to uphold the law.

The directive, "raises serious concerns that render the contemplated dismissal inconsistent with my ability and duty to prosecute federal crimes without fear or favor and to advance good-faith arguments before the courts," she wrote.

Sassoon did not return a message seeking comment. But in her letter, she alluded to some details of her 10 years of public service that shed light on how she came to the decision to resign and who the now-former federal prosecutor who made headlines for defying the new DOJ is.

What are Sassoon's credentials?

Sassoon, 38, graduated from Harvard College in 2008 and from Yale Law School in 2011, according to her biography on the Department of Justice website, which was taken down Thursday.

Sassoon served as a foreign law clerk to Justice Hanan Melcer of the Israel Supreme Court in 2009, according to a biography attached to an essay she wrote while on a legal scholarship in London. Sassoon wrote in an editorial while at Harvard about her grandmother's journey as a Jewish teenager fleeing persecution from Syria to Lebanon and eventually Italy in 1947.

Sassoon also clerked for U.S. Court of Appeals Judge J. Harvie Wilkinson III in the Fourth Circuit in Charlottesville, Virginia, and for late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

In a 2016 tribute to the late justice, who was an outspoken stalwart for the court's conservative wing, Sassoon, a Republican, called Scalia "the real deal."

"Sometimes, when you peek behind the curtain of power, you suffer a rude awakening. What you find is corruption, ego, or a lack of ideals and intellectual heft. Stepping behind closed doors with Justice Scalia elevated my faith in the judiciary and deepened my love of the law," she wrote in the tribute posted to the SCOTUS blog.

Sassoon also cited Scalia in her letter objecting to the directive to drop charges against Adams, a Democrat who has curried favor with President Donald Trump's administration partly based on immigration issues.

Sassoon cited her objections to what she called a political "quid pro quo" with Adams' legal team for the mayor to enforce Trump's immigration policies only if he was freed from the looming prosecution. Attorneys for Adams, who pleaded not guilty to the charges, denied any offer or suggestion of a quid pro quo.

What is Sassoon's track record at the U.S. attorney's office?

After clerking for Scalia, Sassoon was a litigation lawyer and an adjunct law professor at New York University before being hired in 2016 as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York. She focused on murder and racketeering cases as part of the Violent and Organized Crime Unit, according to the now-defunct DOJ biography.

She worked on a handful of high-profile cases including the case against Lawrence Ray, who was convicted of trafficking and other offenses after living in his daughter's college dorm room and coercing a group of college students to engage in prostitution. Sassoon also conducted the cross-examination of Sam Bankman-Fried, the cryptocurrency executive convicted of defrauding customers out of billions of dollars. Both men are appealing their convictions.

The DOJ biography notes she was most recently co-chief of the Criminal Appeals division in the office. It also notes numerous awards from the department in recent years, including the FBI Director's Award in 2024 for Outstanding Criminal Prosecution.

She was appointed as the interim U.S. Attorney for the district on Jan. 21 and had not brought the initial charges against Adams. Those charges were brought by former U.S. Attorney Damian Williams, a Democrat who resigned after Trump won reelection.

What happens next?

After a stunning dayslong standoff, Sassoon's resignation was accepted in a scathing letter Thursday from acting Attorney General Emil Bove. Bove placed case prosecutors on paid administrative leave and said they and Sassoon would be subject to internal investigations.

It was unclear what agency would do that investigation and what sanctions would be at stake since Sassoon is no longer employed by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Meanwhile, Matthew Podolsky, who has spent a decade in the office, was named the new acting U.S. attorney after Sassoon's departure. Trump's ultimate pick for the office, Jay Clayton, a former U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission chairman, has not yet been confirmed.

As of Friday afternoon, motions to dismiss the charges against Adams had not been filed and a handful of employees from the department's public integrity section have also left.

McConnell tests the strengths and limits of his power opposing a trio of Trump's Cabinet nominees

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — No longer in charge, Sen. Mitch McConnell has been speaking his mind, the long-serving GOP leader rejecting President Donald Trump's more high-profile Cabinet nominees — alone at times, among the Republicans, casting his no votes.

When it came to Pete Hegseth, now the defense secretary, who faced allegations of excessive drinking and aggressive behavior toward women, McConnell said the combat veteran had "failed, as yet, to demonstrate" he was ready for the job.

The "desire to be a change agent is not enough," McConnell said.

On Tulsi Gabbard, who was sworn in this week as director of national intelligence, he said she has displayed "a history of alarming lapses in judgment," citing in particular her views toward Russia, China and the security breach by former government contractor Edward Snowden.

And as Senate Republicans confirmed Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, McConnell, a survivor of childhood polio who used a wheelchair during the vote, opposed.

"A record of trafficking in dangerous conspiracy theories and eroding trust in public health institutions does not entitle Mr. Kennedy to lead these important efforts," the Kentucky senator said.

This is McConnell unplugged, three weeks into the Trump administration, and his new role as no longer the Senate GOP leader but one of 100 senators. It is testing the strength, but also the limits, of his influence on the institution, where he has been a monumental presence for nearly 40 years.

McConnell is far from an anti-Trump Republican and hardly the face of the GOP opposition to the White House. He has voted to confirm Trump's other nominees and said he expects to support Trump's agenda.

But his opposition to the trio of Trump's most controversial nominees stands out. Taken together, McConnell's votes against Hegseth, Gabbard and RFK Jr. provide a window into the type of leader he intends to be outside the stately leadership office. And it shows the shifts in his power, as few other Republicans joined him, leaving him often on his own, with Democrats, unable to stop Trump's choices.

"McConnell's votes on the Trump nominees reflect, at least in part, the fact that he is more free to vote in accord with personal preferences than he was when he was responsible for serving as the leader and voice for Senate Republicans," said Frances Lee, a professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton.

Just two other Republicans, the independent-minded Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, also voted against Hegseth.

"Now that he is no longer in leadership, Sen. McConnell enjoys more freedom to simply exercise his own individual judgment and personal discretion," Lee said.

Trump lashed out after the latest votes, calling McConnell "bitter" and "not equipped mentally" during a lengthy rant in the Oval Office late Thursday, after Kennedy was sworn into office.

"I feel sorry for Mitch," the Republican president said.

"He votes against almost everything now. He's a, you know, very bitter guy," Trump said of McConnell, who had been a crucial partner as the Senate majority leader during Trump's first term.

Together, Trump and McConnell passed shared priorities, notably the 2017 GOP tax bill, but the two also clashed — the president calling the senator "Old Crow," which McConnell turned into a badge of honor

— and had a very public falling out after the 2020 election, which Trump lost to Democrat Joe Biden. McConnell called Trump “morally responsible” for the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection by a mob of his supporters at the Capitol but ultimately endorsed Trump’s reelection bid.

Trump did not appear Thursday to understand that McConnell had polio as a child, a factor as he weighed Kennedy’s nomination.

“He’s lost his power,” Trump said. “It’s one of those things.”

When he announced he was stepping down as GOP leader, McConnell said he would finish his Senate term, which expires after the 2026 election. It’s unclear if he will run again.

To be sure, McConnell is far from marginalized. He commands prime positions as chairman of the influential Rules Committee as well as the chairman of the Appropriation Committee’s subcommittee on defense, where he has signaled he intends to make his mark shoring up the nation’s military assets and assuring U.S. leadership on the global stage.

“I expect to support most of what this administration is trying to accomplish,” McConnell said during a recent interview on CBS’ “60 Minutes.”

The senator still faces polio’s lingering effects, particularly in his left leg. McConnell fell twice recently, on the steps from the Senate chamber, where he was swiftly caught and steadied by two GOP colleagues, and a short time later in the private GOP lunchroom. He sometimes uses a wheelchair as he did this week as a precaution.

Other senators are watching and weighing the turn of events.

“He seems to be liberated, and I think he’s voting his conscience,” said Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat.

Blumenthal said while other Republicans are “in a state of trembling in fear” over primary threats if they don’t fall in line with Trump’s agenda, particularly from billionaire Trump aide Elon Musk’s political group, McConnell is not among them.

“Whatever his motivation, he is certainly demonstrating that courage and conscience still matter,” he said.

New Sen. Bernie Moreno, R-Ohio, said, “The great part about being a senator is that you get to decide what’s important to you, what your priorities are, and he should represent the people who elected him.”

McConnell’s critics have also taken notice. Nate Morris, a businessman in Kentucky, said this week he is considering a Senate run in 2026.

“I think President Trump needs less of these weak, career politicians running for office and more outside businessmen who are going to fight for his America First agenda,” Morris posted on social media this week.

Citing McConnell’s opposition to Hegseth, Morris said McConnell “turned his back on President Trump.”

German prosecutors investigate possible Islamic extremist motive for Munich car-ramming attack

By PHILIPP JENNE and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — The suspect in the car-ramming attack in Munich that injured 39 people appears to have had an Islamic extremist motive, but there’s no evidence that he was involved with any radical network, authorities said Friday.

The 24-year-old Afghan, who arrived in Germany as an asylum-seeker in 2016 and lived in Munich, was arrested after driving a Mini Cooper into a labor union demonstration in the Bavarian city on Thursday. He was arrested after police officers pulled him out of the car after firing a shot at the vehicle, which didn’t hit him.

Authorities said 39 people were injured in the attack, two of them very seriously and eight seriously. A judge on Friday ordered that the suspect — whom authorities identified only as Farhad N. in line with German privacy rules — remain in custody pending a possible indictment.

It was the fifth in a series of attacks involving immigrants over the past nine months that have pushed migration to the forefront of the campaign for Germany’s Feb. 23 election.

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Prosecutor Gabriele Tilmann said that the suspect said "Allahu Akbar," or "God is great," to police and then prayed after his arrest — which prompted a department that investigates extremism and terror to take on the case immediately.

In questioning, he admitted deliberately driving into the demonstration and "gave an explanation that I would summarize as religious motivation," Tilmann said.

She didn't give details, but added: "According to all we know at the moment, I would venture to speak of an Islamist motivation." However, there were no indications the suspect was in any Islamic extremist organization, she added.

He posted content with religious references — such as "Allah, protect us always" — on social media, where he described himself as a bodybuilder and fitness model, Tilmann said.

The deputy head of Bavaria's state criminal police office, Guido Limmer, said investigators found a chat, apparently with relatives, in which the suspect wrote "perhaps I won't be there anymore tomorrow," but so far they have found nothing that points to concrete preparations for the attack or anyone else being involved.

The suspect had no previous convictions and had a valid residence permit, although his asylum application had been rejected. He had jobs, including as a store detective. Tilmann said there was no indication of mental illness.

Federal prosecutors, who deal with national security and terror cases in Germany, said later Friday they were taking over the investigation because of the "particular significance of the case."

The suspect is under investigation on 39 counts of attempted murder, as well as bodily harm and dangerous interference with road traffic.

Well-wishers laid flowers and lit candles near the site of the attack.

"I'm speechless," said Anna Zagkoti, 37. "We had too many other cases like this in other German cities. For me its really sad and it can't continue. Politicians have to do something and we as society as well. We have to stand together and fight it."

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier laid a flower at the scene Friday morning. He condemned "the brutality of this act" and said that it "leaves us stunned."

The attack happened a day before the opening of the Munich Security Conference, an annual gathering of international foreign and security policy officials that is accompanied by heavy security.

U.S. Vice President JD Vance offered his condolences at the start of a bilateral meeting with Steinmeier on the sidelines of the event. "We wish the government the best as you recover and try to care for the victims and families," he said.

Pope has respiratory tract infection, is in fair condition and running mild fever, Vatican says

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was hospitalized Friday after a weeklong bout of bronchitis worsened and was receiving drug therapy for a respiratory tract infection, the Vatican said. It was the latest setback to the 88-year-old's pontiff's health that forced him to cancel his agenda through Monday at least.

Francis was serene, in good spirits and had read some newspapers after arriving at Rome's Gemelli hospital after presiding over his morning audiences, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said.

In an evening bulletin, the Vatican said preliminary tests showed Francis had a respiratory tract infection, was running a mild fever and was in "fair" condition at Gemelli where he was undergoing drug therapy.

Francis has complained of breathing trouble and was diagnosed with bronchitis Feb. 6, but had continued to hold daily audiences in his Vatican hotel suite. He had presided at an outdoor Mass on Sunday and attended his general audience Wednesday. But he has been handing off his speeches for an aide to read aloud, saying he was having trouble breathing.

On Friday, he appeared bloated and pale during the handful of audiences he held before going to the

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hospital. The bloating appeared to indicate that the medication he was taking to help treat the lung infection was making him retain water.

Christopher Lamb, CNN's Vatican correspondent, saw Francis at the beginning of an audience Friday with CNN head Mark Thompson, and said the pope was mentally alert but struggling to speak for extended periods due to breathing difficulties.

Francis, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has long battled health problems, especially bouts of acute bronchitis in winter. He uses a wheelchair, walker or cane when moving around his apartment and recently fell twice, hurting his arm and chin.

Francis is being treated at Rome's Gemelli hospital, where he was last admitted in June 2023 to have surgery to remove intestinal scar tissue and repair a hernia in the abdominal wall. A few months before that, he spent three days in Gemelli to receive intravenous antibiotics for a respiratory infection.

He later revealed that he had been rushed to the hospital March 29, 2023 after spiking a high fever and feeling a sharp pain in his chest. He said he was diagnosed with what he said was "an acute and strong pneumonia, in the lower part of the lungs."

The Vatican said Francis was admitted to Gemelli after his Friday audiences. In addition to regular Vatican officials and Thompson, the pope met Friday morning with the Slovak prime minister, Robert Fico.

"This morning, at the end of the audiences, Pope Francis will be admitted to the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic for some necessary diagnostic tests and to continue in a hospital setting treatment for bronchitis that is still ongoing," a Vatican statement said.

No details were given about the duration of Francis' hospitalization, but the Vatican later announced the pope was canceling his participation in Holy Year events through Monday.

The pope had a busy weekend agenda planned, including an audience with artists in town for the Jubilee on Saturday, a Mass for them on Sunday and a trip to Rome's famed Cinecitta studios on Monday. While a Vatican cardinal will preside over the Mass in Francis' place, the Vatican said the other events were canceled "due to the impossibility of the pope to participate."

At Gemelli, where popes enjoy a private suite on the hospital's 10th floor, passers-by were concerned but hopeful. Votive candles, including some featuring Francis' photo, surrounded the statue of St. John Paul II that greets visitors at the hospital entrance.

"I wish with all my heart that he will get better because these awful illnesses, you don't wish them on anyone," said Nino Davi, who himself was receiving treatment at Gemelli and had arrived earlier Friday from Palermo, Sicily. "So I wish with all my heart that he gets better."

The Vatican announcement, delivered ahead of Francis' hospitalization, came in sharp contrast to the way it announced his 2023 hospitalization that caused confusion.

Initially, the Vatican had said he had gone in for scheduled tests, but the pontiff later revealed the situation was far more urgent and that he had been rushed to the hospital where pneumonia was diagnosed. He was put on intravenous antibiotics and was released April 1, quipping as he left that he was "still alive."

"Thank God I can tell the story, because the organism, the body, responded well to the treatment," he later told reporters.

Francis spent 10 days at the same hospital in July 2021 following intestinal surgery for a bowel narrowing. He credited his personal nurse then with saving his life for having insisted he get the problem checked out.

It wasn't the first time he credited a nurse with saving his life. Francis recounted his near-death experience with his youthful lung infection in his recent autobiographies "Hope" and "Life," in which he credited his survival to a nurse, an Italian nun named Sister Cornelia Caraglio.

"She was an experienced, cultured woman who had worked as a teacher in Greece, and she quickly realized the seriousness of my situation: She called the specialist, who drained one and a half liters of fluid from my lungs. It began a slow and unsteady climb back from the brink between life and death," he recalled in "Hope."

It was she who, after the doctor prescribed a certain dose of penicillin and streptomycin, ordered that it be doubled, he recalled.

"She had intuition and practical experience, and certainly no lack of courage," he recalled. "My companions came from the seminary to visit me; some also gave me their blood for transfusions. Gradually the fevers decided to leave me, and the light began to return."

Francis survived, but during the course of his treatment he had to have the upper lobe of his right lung removed after it developed three cysts.

"The surgical procedure used the techniques of the day: You can imagine the incisions they made, and how I suffered," he said in "Life."

Women have dominated 'Tournament of Champions.' Here's what winners say is a key ingredient

By AKIRA OLIVIA KUMAMOTO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Maneet Chauhan delicately sprinkled saffron onto her gushtaba goat meatballs as the live audience began the final countdown. She and competitor Antonia Lofaso scrambled to finish their dishes on the season five finale of Food Network's "Tournament of Champions."

As the timer buzzed, Chauhan tossed a mixing bowl onto the cluttered counter, throwing her hands up in surrender to the clock. She and Lofaso embraced, neither breaking a sweat.

History was on the line for Chauhan, a highly decorated Indian American chef famous for her mastery of spices, who was hoping to become the first two-time "Tournament of Champions" winner.

Chauhan would prevail, and in the process help the show extend its own history streak. "ToC" as it is known, is the only cooking competition series that includes people of all genders where no man has ever won, let alone made it as a top-two finalist.

As the show readies to air its qualifying episodes for its sixth season starting Sunday and its full season on March 2, it remains to be seen whether women continue to dominate. But as viewers and chefs have noticed the trend, the show's unique format is seen as both the reason and proof of what woman chefs have been saying for years.

"This is the UFC of culinary. That's what I was trying to create," said Guy Fieri, who conceived of the show and pitched it for years. "I'm a fan of giving people a platform. There are other culinary competitions out there, but they're a little more drama-oriented. I want to cut the (BS) and just see the best of the best going through the most."

Fieri, host of "Guy's Grocery Games" and "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives," saw an opening for a no-frills, professional Food Network cooking competition that "Iron Chef America" once occupied. "ToC" debuted in March 2020, just as the pandemic started.

The show has chefs from all corners of the country compete one-on-one until only two finalists are left. In every match, the chefs are at the mercy of a creation Fieri calls "the Randomizer," a spinning, five-category board inspired by the "Wheel of Fortune" wheel.

The categories include a required protein, produce ingredient, specialized equipment, cooking style and time limit. Requirements have ranged from cooking grasshoppers in paella style to combining mussels and cabbage.

Dishes are blind-judged from a private trailer away from the studio where they've been cooked.

Many players are relatively unknown outside the culinary world, which makes for high-stakes battles when they're pitted against household names and big television personalities. This held true for Brooke Williamson, the first "ToC" winner.

"I've done my best over the years to go in with a game plan and some familiarity with what I will be facing," said Williamson. "Generally, that goes out the window the moment that clock starts or the moment the ingredients are revealed."

In a remarkable series of events, Williamson, the self-proclaimed underdog, swept through her competitors, beating well-known Food Network stars Jet Tila and Lofaso. In the finale, she pulled off a huge upset, defeating renowned Food Network personality Amanda Freitag by one point.

"I didn't know her. Holy (expletive). She just knocked it out," Fieri said of his initial reaction to William-

son's victory. At that moment, he knew "ToC" was different.

And the surprises didn't end there. Season after season, lesser-known talents gave Food Network titans and Iron Chefs a run for their money.

And above all, one fact remained clear: only women were making it to the finale.

According to Fieri, who pushed for blind judging, the judges cannot, under any circumstances, know who is cooking in the competition at any point. Judges are sequestered in private trailers far from the kitchen and competitors until it's time for them to taste.

Tiffani Faison, a James Beard Award-winning restaurateur who won "ToC" season three, feels blind judging plays a clear role in the outcome of "ToC."

"It completely removes implicit bias," said Faison. "There's no one in front of you that looks a certain way, that speaks a certain way, that wants to tell you about what this dish means to them or where it's from. It (is) just the food."

In the U.S., only 23.3% of chefs and head cooks in 2023 were women, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Only 6% of Michelin-starred restaurants worldwide are run by women, as reported by Chef's Pencil.

"For the longest time, as women chefs, we've been trying to say, 'Judge us on our food, not on who we are.' And that's exactly what's happening on this show," said Chauhan, who beat out 40 male chefs for the executive chef position at Vermilion in Chicago at age 23.

Chauhan was no stranger to having to prove her skills in kitchens dominated by men. She was the only woman among 70 male students at her hotel management school in Manipal, India, and she graduated at the top of her class.

"I think that part of the reason why women do so well on "ToC" is because we are a little bit more focused," said "ToC" season four winner Mei Lin, who grew up in family-owned restaurants and felt pressure to prove herself in kitchens run by men. "We're a lot more organized in the kitchen. We just put our heads down and work, and that's really all it is."

Chauhan said "the Randomizer" forces contestants to multitask, a skill she believes women are raised to excel in.

"I think women are very thoughtful about how they enter a situation like 'ToC,' especially having been put in a position to have to prove themselves throughout their career," she said.

"What really makes a big difference is when there are young girls who look like me, who reach out to me and say, 'You can do it. I'm going to push myself, and I'll do it too.'"

Guarded optimism in India as Trump and Modi outline plans to deepen defense partnership

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

SRINAGAR, India (AP) — There was guarded optimism among military experts in India as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump outlined plans to ramp up sales of defense systems to New Delhi, including F-35 stealth fighter jets, to deepen the U.S.-India strategic relationship.

"Defense sector is a big money, and India happens to be one of the top buyers in the world," said Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia, India's director-general for military operations from 2012 to 2014. "As long as we buy, Trump will be happy but it's surely going to expand our conventional deterrence."

The meeting signaled that "defense diplomacy is the core of diplomacy these days," Bhatia said.

In a joint statement at the White House, the two leaders announced plans to sign a new 10-year framework later this year for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership.

Modi and Trump "pledged to elevate military cooperation across all domains — air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace — through enhanced training, exercises, and operations, incorporating the latest technologies," the statement said.

The leaders also "committed to break new ground to support and sustain the overseas deployments of the U.S. and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific, including enhanced logistics and intelligence sharing,"

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the statement said.

While Indian military experts have long sought to diversify national defense procurements, analysts say it will take years to reduce New Delhi's dependency on Russian arms, even with expanded defense cooperation with the U.S.

Raja Mohan, an analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore, said expansion in defense cooperation would take time.

"What India wants is coproduction and more research and development in India. It's a long-term project," he said.

It is difficult for India to remain dependent on Russia for defense equipment owing to difficulties obtaining parts and upgrades. However, a deal with the U.S. for F-35 stealth fighter jets will not fill India's immediate need for more than 100 aircraft, said Rahul Bedi, an independent defense analyst based in India.

"They are not going to come tomorrow," Bedi said. "It's going to take several years to start arriving," he added.

As its geostrategic competition with China has grown manifold in recent years, India has diversified defense acquisitions from the U.S., Israel and France while seeking to move toward self-reliance in this sector. But New Delhi is still far from getting over its dependence on supplies and spare parts from Russia that makes up to 60% of Indian defense equipment.

With vast borders and protracted border conflicts with neighboring countries Pakistan and China, India also relies hugely on Moscow for military upgrades and modernization.

"India faces threats from China and Pakistan, and a threat from collaborative Pakistan-China. We need technologically capable systems to counter these threats and one country that can give such systems is America," said Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda, who from 2014 to 2016 headed the Indian military's Northern Command.

China's rise as a global power also has pushed India closer to the U.S. and to the Quad, a new Indo-Pacific strategic alliance among the U.S., India, Australia and Japan.

The growing strategic alliance accuses China of economic coercion and military maneuvering in the region, upsetting the status quo, and has ruffled feathers in Beijing, which sees the relationship as a counterweight against China's rise.

Indian fears of Chinese territorial expansion are bolstered by the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean and Beijing's efforts to strengthen ties with not only Pakistan but also Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

"The major threat is from China which is outstripping India's capability," Hooda said.

In the early 1990s, about 70% of Indian army weapons, 80% of its air force systems and 85% of its navy platforms were of Soviet origin. From 2016 to 2020, Russia accounted for nearly 49% of India's defense imports while French and Israeli shares were 18% and 13%, respectively, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Major Indian purchases from the U.S. included long-range maritime patrol aircraft, C-130 transport aircraft, missiles and drones.

The defense sales also can potentially offset the trade deficit between the two countries, Hooda said.

"It's a win-win for all. America will get more business, and we'll get modern weapons," Hooda said. "It will also help to ease pressure on the tariff issue and trade deficit."

Today in History: February 15 USS Maine explodes in Havana Harbor

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Feb. 15, the 46th day of 2025. There are 319 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 15, 1898, the battleship USS Maine mysteriously exploded in Havana Harbor, killing more than 260 crew members and bringing the United States closer to war with Spain.

Also on this date:

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In 1879, President Rutherford B. Hayes signed a law allowing female attorneys to argue cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1933, President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt escaped an assassination attempt in Miami that mortally wounded Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak; gunman Giuseppe Zangara was executed by electric chair the following month.

In 1950, Walt Disney's animated film "Cinderella" premiered in Boston.

In 1961, 73 people, including all 18 members of the U.S. figure skating team en route to the World Championships in Czechoslovakia, were killed in the crash of a Sabena Airlines Boeing 707 in Belgium.

In 1978, boxer Leon Spinks scored a massive upset as he defeated Muhammad Ali by split decision to become the world heavyweight champion.

In 1989, the Soviet Union announced that the last of its troops had left Afghanistan, after more than nine years of military intervention.

In 2005, defrocked priest Paul Shanley was sentenced in Boston to 12 to 15 years in prison on child rape charges.

In 2013, with a blinding flash and a booming shock wave, a meteor blazed across Russia's western Siberian sky and exploded, injuring nearly 1,500 people as it blasted out windows.

In 2022, the families of nine victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting agreed to a \$73 million settlement of a lawsuit against Remington Arms, the maker of the rifle used to kill 20 first graders and six educators in 2012.

Today's birthdays: Actor Claire Bloom is 94. Songwriter Brian Holland is 84. Jazz musician Henry Threadgill is 81. Composer John Adams is 78. Cartoonist Art Spiegelman is 77. Actor Jane Seymour is 74. Singer Melissa Manchester is 74. Actor Lynn Whitfield is 72. "The Simpsons" creator Matt Groening is 71. Model Janice Dickinson is 70. Actor Christopher McDonald is 70. Football Hall of Famer Darrell Green is 65. Actor Alex Borstein is 54. Hockey great Jaromir Jagr is 53. Olympic swimming gold medalist Amy Van Dyken-Rouen is 52. Actor-singer Amber Riley is 39. Rapper Megan Thee Stallion is 30.