

Groton Daily Independent

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There was no city council meeting last night, due to lack of a quorum.

Wednesday, Feb. 19

The Groton Area School District will be two hours late on Tuesday, February 18, 2025.

OST will open at 7 a.m.

Senior Menu: Chesseburger casserole, brussel sprouts, fruit, bread stick.

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

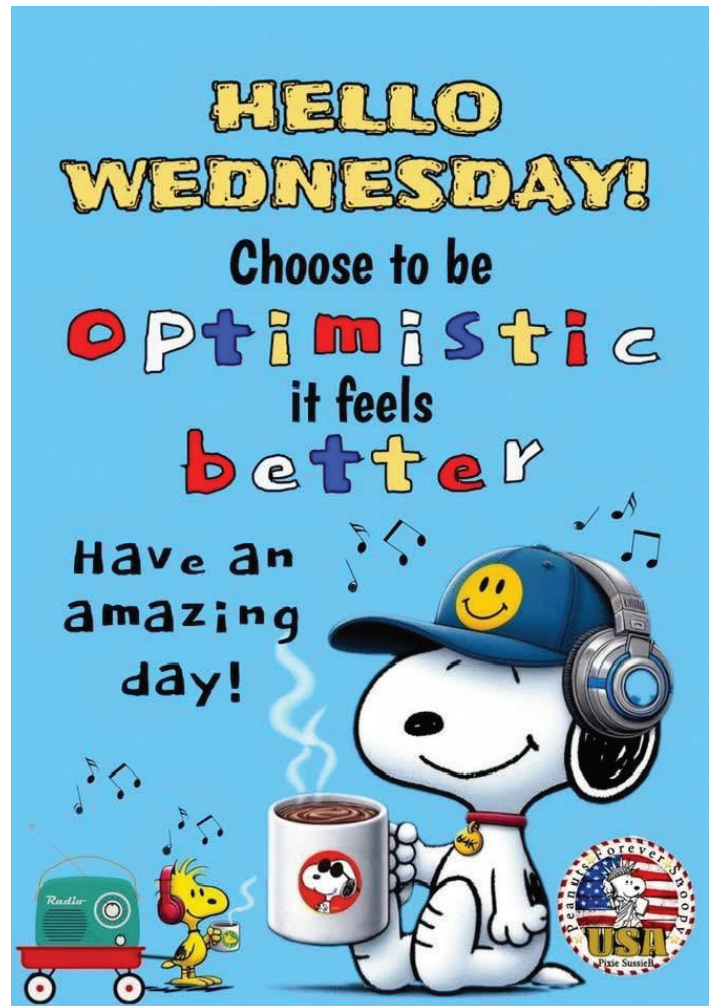
Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

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PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

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



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

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

Thursday, Feb. 20

Senior Menu: Turkey, mashed potato with gravy, carrots, mixed fruit, dinner roll.

Junior High Boys Basketball at Warner: 7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.

Girls Region Wrestling in Clark (4:30pm)

Friday, Feb. 21

Senior Menu: Taco salad, Mexican rice with beans, breadstick, fruit.

Basketball Double Header at Britton-Hecla: Girls C/Boys C at 4 p.m.; Girls JV/Boys JV at 5 p.m., followed by girls varsity and boys varsity.

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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.

Ukraine Talks Begin

The US and Russia have agreed to work toward ending the three-year war in Ukraine following high-level talks in Saudi Arabia yesterday. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met for more than four hours and outlined key principles, including reestablishing embassies, appointing a high-level team to facilitate negotiations, exploring economic and geopolitical cooperation after a ceasefire, and committing to ongoing dialogue.

This meeting signifies a shift in US foreign policy under President Donald Trump, whose administration has called Ukraine's bid to join NATO unrealistic and said Ukraine may need to concede territory. The talks mark the most significant engagement between top US and Russian diplomats since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and pave the way for a possible meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine and European nations were not included in yesterday's discussions. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he would not recognize any agreements made without Ukraine's participation.

Iwo Jima Anniversary

Today marks the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II, the first invasion of a home island of the Japanese Empire in the conflict. Commemorations are planned across the country, including at the Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, where a bronze replica stands of the battle's iconic photo featuring six Marines hoisting the flag on the island's Mount Suribachi—the second, much larger flag to be raised there.

The battle saw three Marine divisions—roughly 70,000 men—take the 8-square-mile volcanic island over 36 days of vicious combat in what remains the largest force of US Marines ever deployed in a single battle. More than 21,000 Japanese fighters—sworn to fight to the death—were entrenched in concealed fortifications and miles of underground tunnels; only 216 were taken prisoner.

More than 6,800 Americans were killed and 26,000 wounded. The Marines' ultimate success prevented Japan from receiving early attack warnings, provided an emergency landing strip for US bombers, and brought the US within 800 miles of the mainland.

A 'Language Gene'?

Researchers have pinpointed a single genetic mutation that enables some mice to produce more complex chirps and squeaks, according to a study published yesterday. The results suggest a single protein variant may be largely responsible for the emergence of complex language.

Interest arose in the gene, known as NOVA1, more than a decade ago when it was found to be just one of about two dozen that appeared identical in most mammals—except humans. Mice without any copy of the gene at all die shortly after birth; in the current study, mice engineered with the mutated version produced more complex sounds beginning at birth. The change was reportedly most notable in mating vocalizations between males and females.

Previous studies reveal ancient human relatives like Neanderthals possessed the original gene, while at least 99.99% of modern humans carry the variant. Researchers say the mutation likely had significant evolutionary benefits and appeared after Homo sapiens split from other species around 300,000 years ago.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Rapper A\$AP Rocky found not guilty in 2021 shooting; Rocky had faced two felony assault charges, which carried up to 24 years in prison if convicted.

Racing legend Lewis Hamilton makes first public appearance with new Formula One team Ferrari at F1 75 season launch event in London; Hamilton will officially debut at the Australian Grand Prix (March 16).

Paul Simon announces four-month tour across 20 North American cities; Simon previously retired from touring in 2018 due to hearing loss.

China's "Ne Zha 2" hauls in \$1.69B at box office to pass "Inside Out 2" as the highest-grossing animated film ever.

Science & Technology

Elon Musk-owned xAI releases Grok 3, the latest version of its flagship AI model.

Former OpenAI CTO Mira Murati launches AI startup Thinking Machines Labs.

Engineers develop "bio-glue" by combining proteins extracted from the human body with polymers inspired by mussels; biomedical adhesive is water- and bacteria-proof.

Researchers reveal how the bacteria that causes staph infection extracts iron from the hemoglobin in blood; discovery may help develop treatments for antimicrobial-resistant strains.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close roughly flat (S&P 500 +0.2%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq +0.1%); S&P 500 reaches new record.

Intel shares close up 16% in best day since March 2020 on report of Broadcom, TSMC exploring potential deals.

Coca-Cola introduces prebiotic soda brand Simply Pop in the US Southeast and West Coast in bid to compete with startups Olipop and Poppi.

KFC moving headquarters from Kentucky to Texas.

Nike partners with Kim Kardashian's shapewear brand Skims to launch women's activewear brand this spring.

Argentine President Javier Milei faces fraud probe for role in promoting cryptocurrency token \$LIBRA, whose value collapsed shortly after launch.

Politics & World Affairs

Federal judge allows Department of Government Efficiency staff access to Department of Education databases, including federal student loan information.

White House says Elon Musk is not leading day-to-day DOGE operations, is a senior adviser to the president.

Hamas to release six Israelis Saturday, return the bodies of four others Thursday; hostages would be the last freed under the first phase of current ceasefire.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams (D) to attend hearing today over Justice Department-led dismissal of corruption charges; seven federal prosecutors and four Adams aides have resigned over the fallout.

Death Notice: Dennis K. Larson

Dennis K. Larson, 84, of Groton passed away February 18, 2025 at his home. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

The Life of Mary Fliehs



Services for Mary Fliehs, 78, of Groton will be 3:00 p.m., Saturday, February 22nd at St. John's Lutheran Church, Groton. Rev. Jeremy Yeadon will officiate. Inurnment will take place in the spring in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held for one hour prior to services at the church.

Mary passed away February 10, 2025 at Bethesda Home of Aberdeen.

Mary Kathryn was born on August 15, 1946 in Sisseton to Phillip and LaVera (Arbach) Seurer. She attended grade school in Sisseton and then graduated from Groton High School in 1964. Mary continued her education at the Aberdeen School of Commerce. She graduated with a one-year degree in business office work and bookkeeping. On November 27, 1965, she was united in marriage with Darrel Marvin Fliehs and together they were blessed with two children.

Mary was talented in so many ways. Her ability to work with numbers and finances amazed everyone. Her calculations were spot on. If she was off one cent, she would start back over and keep working until everything balanced. She never sat still. She was working constantly from Bostwick's, High Grade Oil, Darrel's Sinclair, Eide Helmeke, Fritz's, to Walmart just to name a few.

She had a knack with customers far and wide. She taught her children to work hard, build relationships, and above all how to care for others. Mary showed her love and care for others through her gardening, canning, cooking, and baking. Her garden was her sanctuary, and she worked in it tirelessly. She was proud to show it to anyone who was interested. She spent countless hours tending to it to reap what she needed to can for each year. Her cucumbers and beans were picked almost daily to be the perfect size to make her famous canned beans and her prized dill pickles. There was never an August day that the canner wasn't on the stove and clean jars somewhere close by. She loved to bake! She was always baking something and sharing it. Mary's homemade bun recipe was known all over town. It was a special surprise when you were delivered those buns or something that she baked. Customers would come running at Darrel's Sinclair when it was Customer Appreciation Days. Mary made everything and it was all from scratch. Her baking was a part of many family holiday traditions: Christmas, Thanksgiving, graduation parties, birthdays, and baptisms. Her ability to take a recipe to the next level with "a little of this" did not often answer the question, "Do you have a recipe for that?" Mary's wonderful ability in the kitchen was what brought us all together.

Her grandchildren were the apple of her eye. She loved being with them and showing her love for them by taking care of them when needed, for a long weekend, or just spending time with them in the garden. She spent time with them teaching them her ways of picking and gathering. She wanted them to understand the value and great reward you acquire from the garden to the table. Her favorite question to the grandchildren was, "Do you know how much I love you? Big Bunches!" and she would spread her arms as wide as they could go. Mary loved and loved big.

Mary was active in St. John's Lutheran Church and the Legion Auxiliary.

Celebrating her life are her children, Rich and Heather Fliehs of Groton, Becky and Eric Larson of Mitchell, grandchildren: Connor Larson, Lauren Larson and fiancé Matthew Billion, Adam Fliehs, Anna Fliehs, and Samuel Fliehs, her brother, Dick & Wava Seurer of Groton and in laws, Carol Seurer, Dick & Judy Fliehs, Duane & Rhonda Fliehs, Dale & Claire Fliehs, Doris Briggs, Diane Hickenbotham, Sharon & Mike Dell and many nieces and nephews.

Preceding her in death were her parents Phillip Seurer and LaVera Skogen, her husband, Darrel in 2012, her brother, Kenny Seurer, and in-laws, Harvey & Bernice Fliehs, Carlman Briggs, Arvilla and Alan Gross, Irene Fliehs and Betty Ann Fliehs.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Felonies for silent supervisors a sticking point as anti-corruption bills clear SD Senate

Attorney general, governor disagree on aspect of legislation to address criminal behavior by state employees

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 4:15 PM

PIERRE — Supervisors who know about state employee malfeasance and don't report it deserve a felony charge and possible prison time, Attorney General Marty Jackley says.

Since a good share of such malfeasance would only net the misbehaving employee a misdemeanor charge, Gov. Larry Rhoden's office says, a felony for the supervisor is a bit much.

That disagreement represents the brightest remaining daylight between Jackley and Rhoden on Jackley's four-bill anti-corruption package.

All four bills started in the state Senate and have now cleared that chamber; action is pending in the House. The anti-corruption bills were born of a half dozen recent criminal investigations into state employee misbehavior.

The governor and attorney general agree on the language in three of the bills, but the question of felonies for state employee supervisors has confounded attempts for consensus on the fourth.

Felony charges remain sticking point

Senate Bill 62, which outlines the circumstances under which a supervisor must disclose employee fraud, theft, double dealing or conflicts of interest – and the penalties for failure to do so – cleared the House Judiciary Committee 5-1 on Feb. 11.

On Tuesday, the full Senate passed the bill 33-2.

Katie Hruska, a staff attorney in Rhoden's office, pleaded with the committee on Feb. 11 to strike the felony charge from the bill. She noted that the failure of the average citizen to report a hit-and-run traffic accident, to report child and elder abuse, and to disclose knowledge of a felony are all misdemeanor charges under state law.

Hruska argued that fear of a class one misdemeanor charge, punishable by up to a year in jail, would be enough to scare skittish supervisors into disclosure "without creating a climate of fear" among state employees.

Her comments convinced Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, who nonetheless supported sending SB 62 to the Senate floor, that the governor's office had valid concerns to address.

"If not reporting child abuse is a class one misdemeanor," Hulse said, not reporting a conflict of interest doesn't belong in the felony category.

Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, sided with Jackley. Employee misconduct is serious, he said, and the recent cases are proof that the state's current laws are inadequate.

"I applaud the attorney general for not backing down," Pischke said.

One of the recent investigations into former state employees involved an alleged \$1.8 million theft by a former Department of Social Services employee.

Another involved a Department of Public Safety employee signing off on – and getting paid for performing – food safety inspections that never took place. That one came to light, Jackley said, when a whistleblowing employee reached out to a lawmaker and asked her to report the issue on her behalf without revealing her name.

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"I don't think we should learn about a criminal case when a state employee calls a legislator," Jackley said. On Feb. 11, Jackley told the committee his office is looking into three other cases involving state employees.

An attempt to switch the penalties to a misdemeanor reappeared on the Senate floor on Tuesday.

"Failing to report a crime is not the same as committing the crime itself," said Sen. Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule.

Opponents of the amendment urged senators to side with the attorney general. Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, said amending a bill on the Senate floor is not "respectful to the process," as it doesn't allow non-legislators to make their case for or against the change.

Hulse rejected that notion.

"As legislators, we always have the ability to amend the legislation as we decide," Hulse said in support. "It is ultimately our decision."

The Senate voted 22-13 to defeat the amendment.

Whistleblower protections

Senate Bill 63, designed to protect whistleblowers, sailed through the Judiciary Committee on the strength of a compromise between the Jackley and Rhoden camps.

Initially, Jackley's proposed protective measures included his own office signing on to defend state employee whistleblowers sued over their disclosures. That "got a lot of resistance," he told the committee.

He agreed to dial that back to a provision that would cover the whistleblower's attorney fees in such a lawsuit. The bill wouldn't protect an employee from prosecution if the employee was involved in the reported corruption, and its shielding provisions would expire two years after the whistle is blown.

SB 63 passed the Senate 35-0 on Feb. 13.

Auditor power expansion

The first of the anti-corruption bills, Senate Bill 60, would give the state auditor the authority to access state agency financial records – which the auditor doesn't currently have – but no longer gives the auditor the ability to conduct forensic audits.

Sattgast told South Dakota Public Broadcasting in the wake of the recent scandals that his office's limited authority is a measure of the state's divided duties and limits the elected officer's ability to monitor state records. The state's auditor general is the official charged with monitoring agency inner workings.

The governor's office argued that would be duplicative of current auditing rules, and that elected auditors don't necessarily have the experience as professional auditors.

The forensic auditing provision was stripped from SB 60 as part of a compromise between Jackley, Rhoden and Auditor Rich Sattgast.

SB 60 and the last of the anti-corruption bills, Senate Bill 61, cleared the Senate on the same day, Feb. 6. SB 61 expands the authority of the state's Internal Control Board. Rhoden's office was involved in crafting that bill, a Jackley spokesman told South Dakota Searchlight.

Other pending legislation filed in reaction to the recent investigations include bills from lawmakers that would strengthen and clarify the ability of the Legislature's Government Operations and Audit Committee to issue subpoenas compelling written or in-person testimony.

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

Thune says U.S. Senate will tackle budget resolution this week

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 3:54 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate will debate a budget resolution this week that Republicans in that chamber hope will pave the way for Congress to approve hundreds of billions of dollars in defense and border security funding later this year in a separate bill.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., posted on social media Tuesday that it's "time to act on the decisive mandate the American people gave to President Trump in November."

"Securing the border, rebuilding our defense, and unleashing American energy. That starts this week with passing Chairman @LindseyGrahamSC's budget," Thune wrote, referring to Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. "Let's get it done."

Graham said earlier this month the new spending would be paid for by "taking money away from other parts of the government that are less worthy."

Senate debate on the budget resolution will likely include a vote-a-rama, where senators vote on amendments throughout the night before taking a final vote on the budget resolution.

Party-line vote

Senate Republicans released their budget resolution earlier this month and the Budget Committee voted along party lines last week to send it to the floor for debate.

House Republican Leader Steve Scalise, R-La., appeared to criticize Thune's decision to bring the budget resolution up for floor debate this week, continuing the months-long debate between the two chambers about how exactly to advance policy changes.

"It's time to act on ALL of the powerful mandates the American people gave to @realDonaldTrump in November: Securing the border, opening up American energy to lower costs, keeping tax rates low (including no tax on tips), strengthening our national defense, a two-year extension of the debt ceiling, and passing into law @DOGE's identified waste in government," Scalise wrote in a social media post. "All of Trump's priorities in one big, beautiful bill start moving when we pass @RepArrington 's budget."

The House Budget Committee released its own budget resolution last week and sent it to the floor. The earliest House GOP leaders could bring it to the floor is next week, since the chamber is on a week-long break and won't return until Feb. 24.

One bill or two

The central disagreement between House and Senate Republicans is over whether to approve all of their policy goals in one bill or two.

Senate Republicans propose a two-step process in their budget resolution, while House GOP leaders want to bundle everything together in one package.

The two chambers must figure out a solution if they're going to use the budget reconciliation process to get legislation to President Donald Trump's desk without needing Democratic votes to get around the Senate's legislative filibuster.

That procedural hurdle requires at least 60 senators vote to limit debate on legislation and move onto final passage. Republicans hold 53 votes in that chamber at the moment.

The House and Senate must adopt the same budget resolution with reconciliation instructions before the GOP-controlled Congress can move partisan legislation.

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

Lawmakers aim to stabilize 'volatile' unclaimed property revenue with trust fund

State Senate budget committee unanimously endorses plan

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 1:53 PM

South Dakota lawmakers, the Governor's Office and the state Treasurer's Office hope to bring more predictability to a volatile revenue source and protect the state from a large liability by creating a trust fund for unclaimed property.

Senate Bill 155, advanced by the Senate Appropriations Committee on Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre, would limit the amount of unclaimed property funds that could be used in the state's general fund budget. The bill would also create an interest-bearing trust fund to pay claims and accrue interest on the rest of the money. That interest could then be used as a revenue stream.

Unclaimed property consists of an array of abandoned or forgotten private assets, including money from bank accounts, PayPal accounts, stocks, life insurance payouts, uncashed checks, unused refunds, and even the contents of safe deposit boxes. Holders of the money or items, such as banks, try to find the owners. The property reverts to the state after three years.

Unclaimed property revenue surged to record levels during the past few years as people left assets behind during pandemic-motivated relocations, and because of Bancorp's relocation of its national headquarters to Sioux Falls.

The state typically spends much of the revenue, while setting aside only a portion of it for people who come forward to claim their property. Yet rightful owners can claim their assets from the state at any time, which has so far created a \$1.2 billion perpetual and unfunded liability for the state, said Sen. Taffy Howard, R-Rapid City, who introduced the bill.

Much of the money is never claimed. Last year, as the state took in about \$175 million of unclaimed property, it paid out \$38 million in claims to 6,768 claimants. South Dakota has received \$310 million worth of unclaimed property so far this year.

"It's been a benefit for our citizens, but I hope you'll agree that the time is now to create this trust fund and alleviate the burden that has also been placed on our citizens because of this," Howard said.

Unclaimed property "is fine in some ways," Lt. Gov. Tony Venhuizen told lawmakers, but it's problematic, volatile and unpredictable as well, he said.

"Even though we know that a lot of these unclaimed property items will never be claimed, they could be and they stay on our books as a claim against the state," Venhuizen said.

Under SB 155, lawmakers would only be able to use \$61.4 million of unclaimed property money for the general fund in fiscal year 2026. The rest of the funds would be placed into a trust fund used to pay out claims and accrue interest.

The amount of unclaimed property that could be used for general fund expenses would gradually decrease to \$25 million in fiscal year 2035 and would remain there. The state would begin drawing 4% of the market value of the trust fund to use as general fund revenue by 2031, while still retaining the rest of the trust fund to pay potential claims.

"There's concern that we may not have some one-time money or we're going to slowly reduce our ongoing revenue," said state Treasurer Josh Haeder, "but you're going to make it up from that interest earned at the end of the day."

The Senate Appropriations Committee unanimously approved the bill, sending it to the Senate.

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

SD Senate rejects effort to boost Native American history, culture lessons in schools

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 5:31 PM

PIERRE — A bill to move Native American culture and history from a permitted to a required part of South Dakota's curriculum was loosened by its sponsor in the state Senate on Tuesday, but still failed its floor vote.

In its original form, Senate Bill 196 would have mandated the teaching of the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings. The phrase "Oceti Sakowin" refers to the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people.

The set of standards and lessons was adopted seven years ago by the South Dakota Board of Education Standards with input from tribal leaders, educators and elders. A survey conducted by the state Department of Education indicated use of the Essential Understandings by 62% of teachers, but the survey was voluntary and hundreds of teachers did not respond.

The bill from Sen. Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule, passed the Senate Education Committee unanimously one week ago.

On the Senate floor, Grove moved an amendment that tossed the requirement that the standards be taught in favor of a requirement that the state's Indian Education Advisory Council and heads of the education departments in the state's nine tribes be involved in the next rewrite of the understandings.

"This amendment addresses the concerns of the education department," Grove said Tuesday.

Education Secretary Joe Graves told the Education Committee last week that the state doesn't need additional mandates beyond math, science, social studies and English-language arts/reading.

Grove said mandated deeper involvement by tribes and the advisory council would mean Native Americans would "be at the table when the sausage is made."

Sen. John Carley, R-Piedmont, spoke against the amended bill. He called it "a mandate of a mandate," as portions of the understandings are already folded into the social studies standards created at the state level.

The state's educators have more important things to worry about than Oceti Sakowin lessons, he argued.

"If we're going to remandate a mandate, I'd recommend we remandate math and reading," Carley said.

The Senate voted 28-7 to defeat the bill.

Meanwhile, Gov. Larry Rhoden announced Tuesday that he signed related legislation into law that will require all certified teachers, rather than only new educators or those moving from out-of-state, to take a course in South Dakota Indian Studies.

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

Bill prohibiting required campus living for SD university students fails in the House

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 4:48 PM

The South Dakota House of Representatives voted down a bill Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre that would have prohibited public universities from requiring students to live on campus the first two years of their education.

Republican Rapid City Rep. Phil Jensen introduced House Bill 1193, calling the South Dakota Board of Regents policy "unnecessary" because "dorm life isn't great" and legal adults should be able to choose where they live and what they eat. He added that students face an "incredible amount of debt" to earn college degrees, with required on-campus housing and meal plans adding to that debt.

Heather Forney, vice president of finance and administration for the state Board of Regents, which oversees the university system, told lawmakers during the bill's committee hearing last week that the system relies on student housing fees and meal plans to help pay for infrastructure for dining, housing, student

unions, book stores and wellness centers at South Dakota's six public universities.

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

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

Opponents of the bill said the policy helps students transition to college living, increases retention among students, and improves networking among students. About 93% of students who ask for an exemption are granted it, according to the regental system. Other students are granted modifications to fit their needs, said Rep. Amber Arlint, R-Sioux Falls.

The House rejected the bill 42-28.

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

SD governor signs bill closing loan loophole in campaign finance law

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 3:10 PM

South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden signed a bill into law that would close a campaign finance loophole, he announced Tuesday.

The bill, from Sen. Mike Rohl, R-Aberdeen, was introduced as a response to something that occurred during the most recent election cycle. Toby Doeden, an Aberdeen businessman, reported a \$100,000 contribution to his own Dakota First Action committee. The contribution exceeded the state's \$10,000 limit on individual contributions to political action committees.

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

The new law says any loan, when combined with contributions from the same source, cannot exceed contribution limits in state law. In other words, in the case of Doeden, he would have been limited to a combined \$10,000 of annual contributions and loans to his political action committee.

Another Rohl bill awaiting the governor's consideration would require candidates to file pre-primary reports of their fundraising and spending even if they're not involved in a primary race. A third campaign finance bill from Rohl that proposed new restrictions on contributions from inactive candidate committees has been defeated.

Rhoden also signed 12 other bills into law recently, raising the total number of bills signed into law so far this legislative session to 34. Lawmakers have introduced more than 500 bills, resolutions or commemorations since the legislative session started last month, and the session continues until mid-March.

Among other bills Rhoden signed recently is legislation requiring all certified educators, rather than only new educators or those moving from out-of-state, to take a course in South Dakota Indian Studies.

State Senate panel foresees easy path for bill to protect Uber, Lyft from product liability lawsuits

South Dakota law already requires \$1 million in liability coverage for ride-hailing companies

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 2:07 PM

PIERRE — A bill to shield ride-hailing companies from product liability lawsuits earned unanimous support from a South Dakota legislative committee.

The Senate Judiciary Committee took up that legislation, Senate Bill 166, on Tuesday at the Capitol.

The idea, according to Republican Sen. Carl Perry of Aberdeen, is to make sure companies like Uber or Lyft aren't held accountable under civil law in a manner that matches the standard applied to products like toothpaste, coffee makers or car seats. The one-sentence bill says product liability "may not be maintained" against a "digital network."

In a South Dakota law, that means ride-hailing companies.

SD lawmakers previously eased path for Uber, Lyft

Under a bill passed in 2016 with the support of app-based taxi companies like Uber and Lyft, a "digital network" is defined as "any online-enabled application, software, website, or system offered or utilized by a transportation network company that enables a prearranged ride with a transportation network company driver."

In 2022, state lawmakers passed a bill clarifying that drivers for such companies are independent contractors, not employees. That put the state on the side of tech companies in an issue that's divided state legislatures and voters for years.

California voters, for example, passed a measure in 2020 to classify such drivers as independent contractors in a campaign that received financial backing from tech companies. A lawsuit from labor groups attempted to overturn the law and won in a lower court, but the state's supreme court overturned the lower court's decision last summer.

Minnesota lawmakers, however, advanced worker protections for Uber drivers last year. Washington state and New York also have minimum pay provisions for such drivers.

Perry called his legislation "a common sense bill to further clarify the rule in an already regulated industry."

Uber Industries lobbyist Grace Beck told committee members the ride-hailing business is fundamentally different from one that makes things.

"These companies do not manufacture, design or sell physical products," she said. "It's only a phone app. Uber operates a digital platform that offers an important service to South Dakotans."

Uber: Insurance requirements protect riders

Brad Nail, a public policy lobbyist for Uber, pointed out that state law requires a ride-hailing company to carry \$1 million in liability insurance to cover "death, bodily injury, and property damage" to cover potential issues that might arise during a ride.

"The bill before you does not change that, and does not decrease the amount of insurance required," Nail said.

The bill isn't tied to a South Dakota case, but to what Nail called "a novel situation that has arisen in other states" where plaintiffs have tried to sue under product liability laws.

Nail didn't elaborate, but a case filed last fall in California alleges that the company failed to design an app that considers or adequately protects against the possibility of sexual assault by a driver.

Nail told lawmakers the \$1 million liability coverage required by state law renders product liability lawsuits unnecessary.

The committee heard no opposition testimony. It voted unanimously to send SB 166 to the Senate floor. It then certified the bill for the consent calendar, meaning the Senate will vote for or against it without

debate as part of a package of uncontroversial bills, unless any senator asks for the bill to be moved to the regular calendar.

Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, said the bill "makes sense."

"Obviously there wasn't any opposition testimony," Hulse said. "If there was a problem, I would assume somebody would be up here saying it."

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

Budget committee approves \$3 million cut to SD's tobacco-use prevention fund

Action overrides prior committee that endorsed a \$2 million cut

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 12:37 PM

A South Dakota legislative budget committee advanced a bill on Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre to reduce state funding for tobacco and vaping prevention efforts.

The Senate Appropriations Committee voted to decrease annual funding for the state's Tobacco Prevention and Reduction Trust Fund from \$5 million to \$2 million, going against the wishes of a previous committee that voted to set the funding at \$3 million. South Dakota could still access an additional \$1 million in potential federal tobacco prevention grants, said Bureau of Finance and Management Commissioner Jim Terwilliger.

The fund sustains the South Dakota Tobacco Control Program, aimed at preventing South Dakotans from using tobacco products and helping residents quit through the South Dakota QuitLine.

Terwilliger said the state needs to "be smarter with tobacco prevention dollars" and make budget cuts to help cover a \$62 million increase in Medicaid costs. He said the cut is justified by a decline in tobacco use in the last decade.

South Dakota spends the highest amount per smoker on prevention efforts, Terwilliger said, at \$20.19 while the national average is \$10.53. He did not cite a source for that information.

Tobacco tax revenues, which support the trust fund and the general fund, have declined because of less tobacco use in the state, dipping to a projected \$41.1 million this fiscal year. But \$75.5 million in Medicaid costs "as a result of smoking" demonstrate the need for continued prevention, said Jennifer Stalley, a lobbyist for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

Stalley told lawmakers that the better solution to addressing the state's budget concerns while still prioritizing prevention would be to increase the tax rate on tobacco products and expand taxable tobacco products to include e-cigarettes and other nicotine products "that did not exist" when the trust fund was created.

"We've not changed the rate of tobacco tax in nearly two decades," Stalley said. "Tobacco taxes are and still remain the most effective way to reduce tobacco use, but they're a declining source of revenue by design."

Another bill, introduced by Mitchell Republican Sen. Paul Miskimins, would implement both of Stalley's recommendations while retaining the annual \$5 million for the trust fund. It would also create a \$10 million annual health care workforce development fund if more than \$60 million is collected in tobacco tax revenue.

Miskimins' bill is scheduled to be heard Wednesday in the Senate Taxation Committee. The bill reducing funding for the tobacco trust fund will head to the Senate.

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.

Trump's cuts to federal wildfire crews could have 'scary' consequences

States, tribes and fire chiefs are preparing for a fire season with minimal federal support

BY: ALEX BROWN, STATELINE - FEBRUARY 18, 2025 8:00 AM

ISSAQUAH, Wash. — President Donald Trump's moves to slash the federal workforce have gutted the ranks of wildland firefighters and support personnel, fire professionals warn, leaving communities to face deadly consequences when big blazes arrive this summer.

"There's going to be firefighters that die because of this, there will be communities that burn," said Steve Gutierrez, a union official who served 15 years as a firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service.

Gutierrez now serves as a labor relations representative with the National Federation of Federal Employees, which represents government workers. He said thousands of wildland firefighters have had their jobs thrown into limbo by Trump's government-wide hiring freeze.

Brian Fennessy, chief of the Orange County Fire Authority and president of the California Fire Chiefs Association, echoed that concern. "The public needs to know they're at risk," Fennessy said. "If the public knew all of this, they would lose their minds."

Federal agencies depend on an army of seasonal firefighters to fill their ranks during the months when wildfires are most active. Scott, a Forest Service firefighter with six years of experience in the Western United States, who asked to be identified by a pseudonym to avoid retaliation, is among those whose role has been thrown into uncertainty.

"It's just going to be a disaster for the wildfire response this season," he said.

Scott was slated to move to a new Forest Service fire station this spring. But following the federal hiring freeze, he was told by his captain that it's unclear whether his new job still exists. Thousands of his colleagues are in a similar state of limbo.

In a statement to Stateline, the Forest Service said wildland firefighting jobs are considered public safety positions that are exempted from the hiring freeze, and the agency is working with the federal Office of Personnel Management on those positions. The agency did not respond to follow-up questions about the number of unfilled positions under review.

The U.S. Department of the Interior and Bureau of Indian Affairs did not grant Stateline interview requests.

Federal agencies employed more than 17,000 wildland fire staffers last year, many of them in seasonal roles. This year, many of those workers had job offers rescinded — or had their transfers and promotions put on hold — just as they were set to begin onboarding and training for the 2025 fire season.

Trump's efforts to cut the federal workforce are led by his newly created commission dubbed the Department of Government Efficiency, helmed by billionaire Elon Musk, the world's richest man.

Aside from the hiring freeze, the Forest Service fired an additional 3,400 staffers this week, many of whom provided critical support for wildfire operations. Meanwhile, Trump's freeze on federal spending has cut off funding for projects such as prescribed burns to reduce future risk. Wildfire officials offer mixed reports on whether that funding has been restored in the wake of judicial rulings.

"We are watching a valuable [federal] partner in wildland fire suppression go into this fire season unnecessarily handicapped," said Thomas Kyle-Milward, wildfire communications manager with the Washington State Department of Natural Resources. "That's concerning."

States, tribes and fire chiefs are all watching the situation closely. Officials say they're preparing for a fire season in which they may have minimal federal support. While they plead with Trump to reverse course quickly, they fear much of the damage may be irreversible. Many wildland fire officials noted that seasonal workers will likely move on to other jobs if their position with a federal agency is in doubt.

"If there's not enough federal firefighters, that affects everybody in the state," said Jake Rhoades, fire chief of Buckeye Fire-Medical-Rescue Department in the Phoenix suburbs and president of the Arizona Fire Chiefs Association. "That's scary for me."

Rhoades and others noted that firefighters need significant training and qualifications to fill leadership

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positions. Trump's actions have delayed that onboarding process. As a result, engine crews could be grounded this summer because they don't have a certified leader, or teams could be sent into harm's way without the proper training.

The federal role

Wildland fire response in the U.S. is a collaborative effort shared by a variety of entities, from tiny local fire districts to massive federal agencies. In Western states especially, the feds play a crucial role. Agencies manage a vast landscape of national forests, national parks and Bureau of Land Management parcels. The Bureau of Indian Affairs also provides wildfire response on tribal reservations.

While state agencies have invested heavily in their own wildfire crews, they say the federal agencies are critical partners.

"If they're unable to fill the majority of their positions, it would have an impact on everybody this summer," said Vaughn Jones, wildland fire management section chief with the Colorado Department of Public Safety. "We have to partner with them every day of every fire season."

Trump's orders have thrown those agencies into chaos.

"I hear it multiple times a day from folks who are applying for jobs, from folks who are trying to fill positions, and they're all getting stymied," said Bobbie Scopa, executive secretary with Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, a nonprofit that advocates for federal staffers. "These folks are worried about their families and paying the mortgage, and they're worried about their physical safety if they're going to be responding to fires with a crew that's not staffed up all the way."

Federal firefighters corroborated that account.

"They're saying there's this public safety exemption, and that's a blatant lie, because I'm a wildland firefighter and my job has been frozen," said Scott, the Forest Service employee.

Scott said many of his colleagues were among the 3,400 Forest Service employees fired last week. While the agency said those cuts do not include firefighters, wildland fire experts note that many staffers in other roles hold wildfire certifications and serve on the line during fire season. And nearly all of them play critical support roles for the agency's wildfire response.

Another Forest Service firefighter, who asked to remain anonymous, said the cuts to his unit included an aviation manager who supervised helicopter contracts and crews, as well as mapping specialists who provided key information to wildfire crews.

"There's going to be days where we can't call a helicopter because of staffing," he said. "From a mapping perspective, our intelligence-gathering is going to be really affected by losing those people."

Scott said he's begun applying for other jobs, but is still holding out hope he can stay with the Forest Service. But he said many other firefighters will have moved on by the time the feds get their act together.

A wildfire planner in a Western state, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid retaliation, said the impacts of Trump's cuts will be felt long beyond this fire season.

"This could end up costing us a generation of firefighters," he said. "They think a two-month delay doesn't mean anything, but people get laid off and they find other work. This is a very specific skillset, and there ain't many people in this work."

Officials at all levels say that recruitment and retention of firefighters is already a major challenge. Wildland fire workers must accept unsteady seasonal positions, with grueling hours and exposure to dangerous conditions and cancer-causing smoke. Many suffer from mental health issues as a result. And the profession's paltry salaries, experts say, rarely match the demands.

Contingency plans

State and local leaders say they're still working to make sense of the federal chaos. In Nevada, where 86% of the land is managed by federal agencies, the turmoil could have an outsized impact.

"Obviously, we're a little nervous right now," said Kacey KC, the Nevada state forester and fire warden. "We're putting contingency plans in place for emergency hires for fire season, if need be."

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KC said a loss in federal support would be a huge blow to Nevada's wildfire response efforts. As the state works to staff up its own crews, it has seen an increase in applicants from federal agencies, perhaps indicating that the uncertainty is driving Forest Service and BLM employees to other jobs.

In Arizona, officials say they plan to lean on an interstate compact that allows them to share resources with Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Jones, the Colorado official, said such agreements could be essential this year.

"If [federal support] is diminished, those compacts and the states finding ways to make things happen will be critical," he said.

Nevada is one of the few states that has not signed onto a wildfire compact. KC said she's pushing lawmakers to authorize the state to join such agreements.

In Washington state, the Department of Natural Resources is planning to meet with regional Forest Service leaders to assess what adjustments they may have to make.

"Are the feds able to field an adequate number of firefighters that they can cover their jurisdiction within Washington state?" said Kyle-Milward, the DNR official. "We're concerned that they won't."

In recent years, the state has invested heavily in its own response, staffing up to 700 firefighters, in an effort to become less dependent on federal agencies.

Tribal nations are also trying to make sense of the situation. The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs employs thousands of firefighters that respond to fires on tribal lands. And many tribes staff their own wildfire crews using federal funding that's now in doubt.

For the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, in northeast Washington state, it's unclear whether they'll be able to hire the seasonal firefighters they rely on during wildfire season.

"It's definitely a touch-and-go situation right now," said Chairman Jarred-Michael Erickson. "We're hoping to get answers sooner than later. I really hope they're looking at this, because wildfire season comes really quick and if you're not prepared..."

In 2023, wildfires burned more than 57,000 acres on the Colville Reservation.

Prevention work

Trump's freeze on federal spending is another major concern for wildfire professionals. In Washington state, for instance, officials have lost access to more than \$200 million in wildfire preparedness funds, the Seattle Times reported. That money was intended to help agencies purchase equipment, train local departments, plan evacuation routes and conduct fuels reduction projects like prescribed burns to reduce risk.

Wildfire experts say the Inflation Reduction Act and infrastructure law passed under President Joe Biden made significant investments in projects to improve forest health and prevent out-of-control megafires. Trump has attempted to block those grants.

"If we're not able to do that in certain areas, then the fuel load is going to be impacted, and that increases the possibility of the magnitude of some of these fires," said Rhoades, the president of the Arizona Fire Chiefs Association.

The Western wildfire planner, who asked to remain anonymous, said the funding freeze is threatening projects to improve the safety of local communities.

"[Trump] is driving the wildfire prevention train off the rails," he said. "I'm hoping that this year is not the year that the big fire shows up in my neighborhood."

In California, leaders have not yet seen a cutoff in federal money to support wildfire projects, said Patrick Wright, director of the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force, a coalition of state and federal agencies. He noted that the state has committed billions of its own funds to ensure the work continues.

Wright said the state expects to retain a strong partnership with federal land management agencies. But he noted that the recent firings of thousands of federal staff would impact the pace of their work.

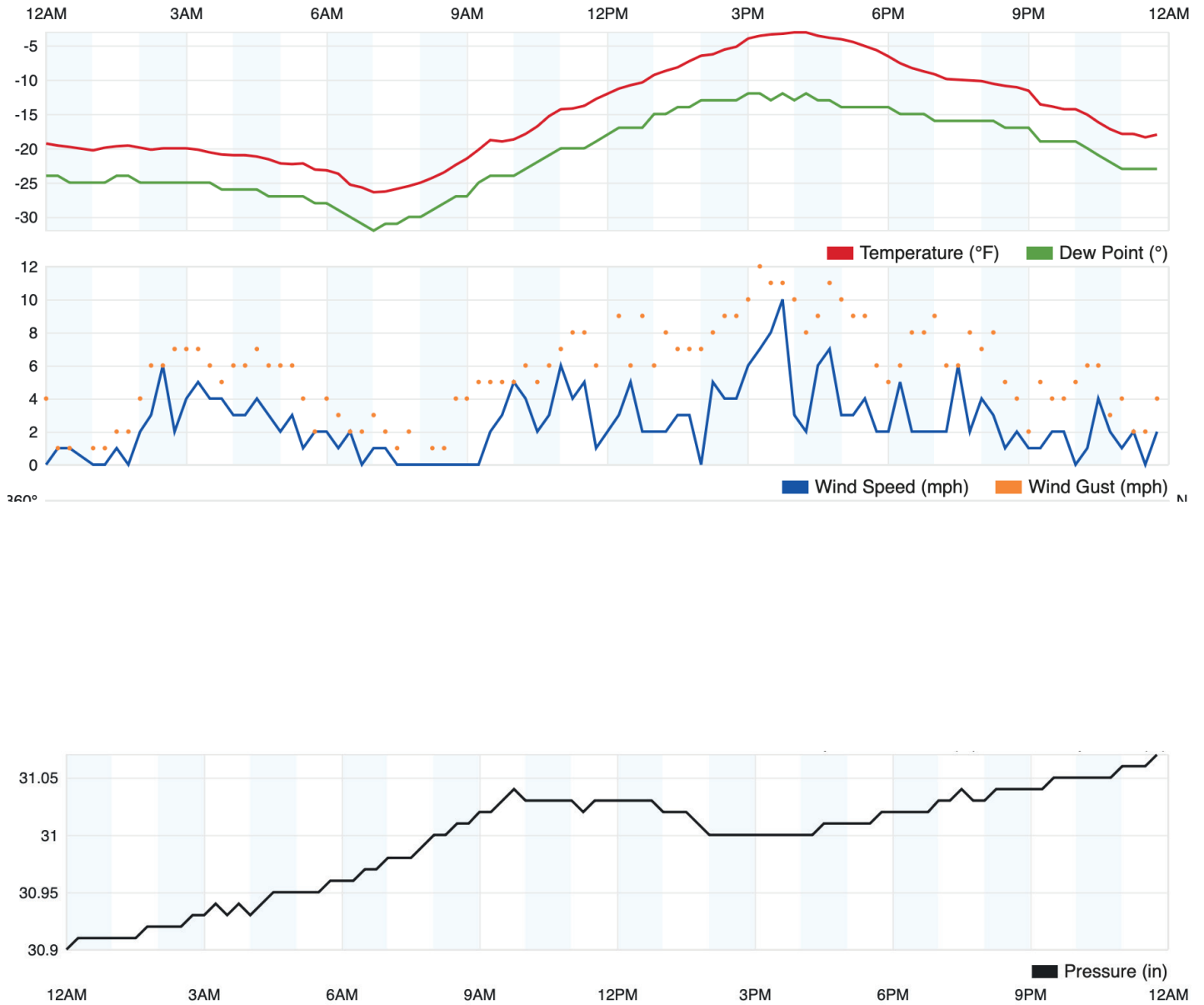
"It will slow things down," he said. "We're all facing shortages in workforce across the board. Clearly, losing more of that workforce is going to have an impact."

Based in Seattle, Alex Brown covers environmental issues for Stateline. Prior to joining Stateline, Brown wrote for The Chronicle in Lewis County, Washington state.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Extre...

Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
High: 1 °F	Low: -24 °F	High: 9 °F	Low: -6 °F	High: 27 °F
Cold	Clear	Cold	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny



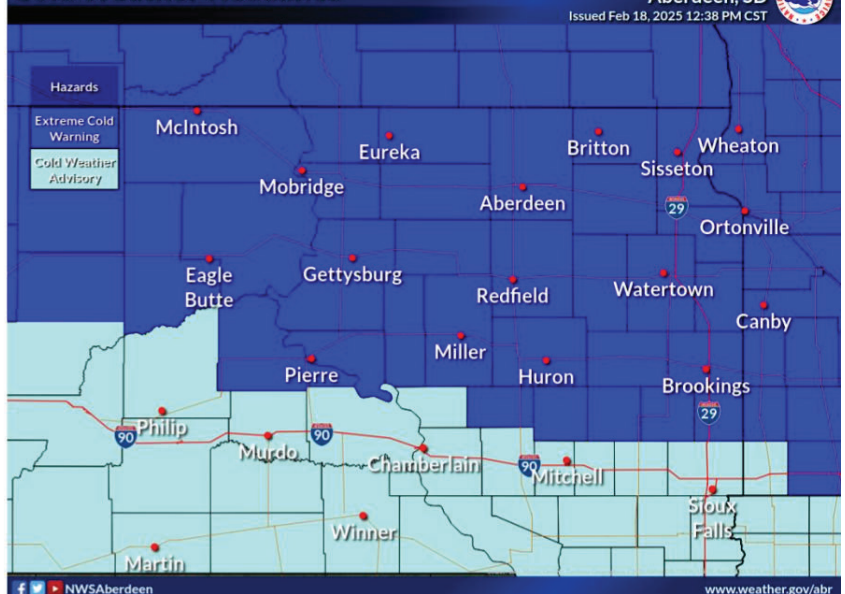
Dangerously Cold Through Wednesday

February 18, 2025
2:44 PM

- **Extreme Cold Warning** in effect for north central and northeastern SD through west central MN
 - Until 12 PM CST Wednesday
- **Cold Weather Advisory** in effect for portions of south central SD
 - Midnight through 12 PM CST Wednesday
- Wind chills as low as **-30° to -50°** are expected during these times.
 - ***These wind chills could cause frostbite in as little as 10 minutes.***



Cold Weather Headlines



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will remain dangerously cold through tomorrow, however they will slowly improve slowly, we promise, but its still going to be another 48-72 hours before we start seeing temperatures anywhere closer to normal.

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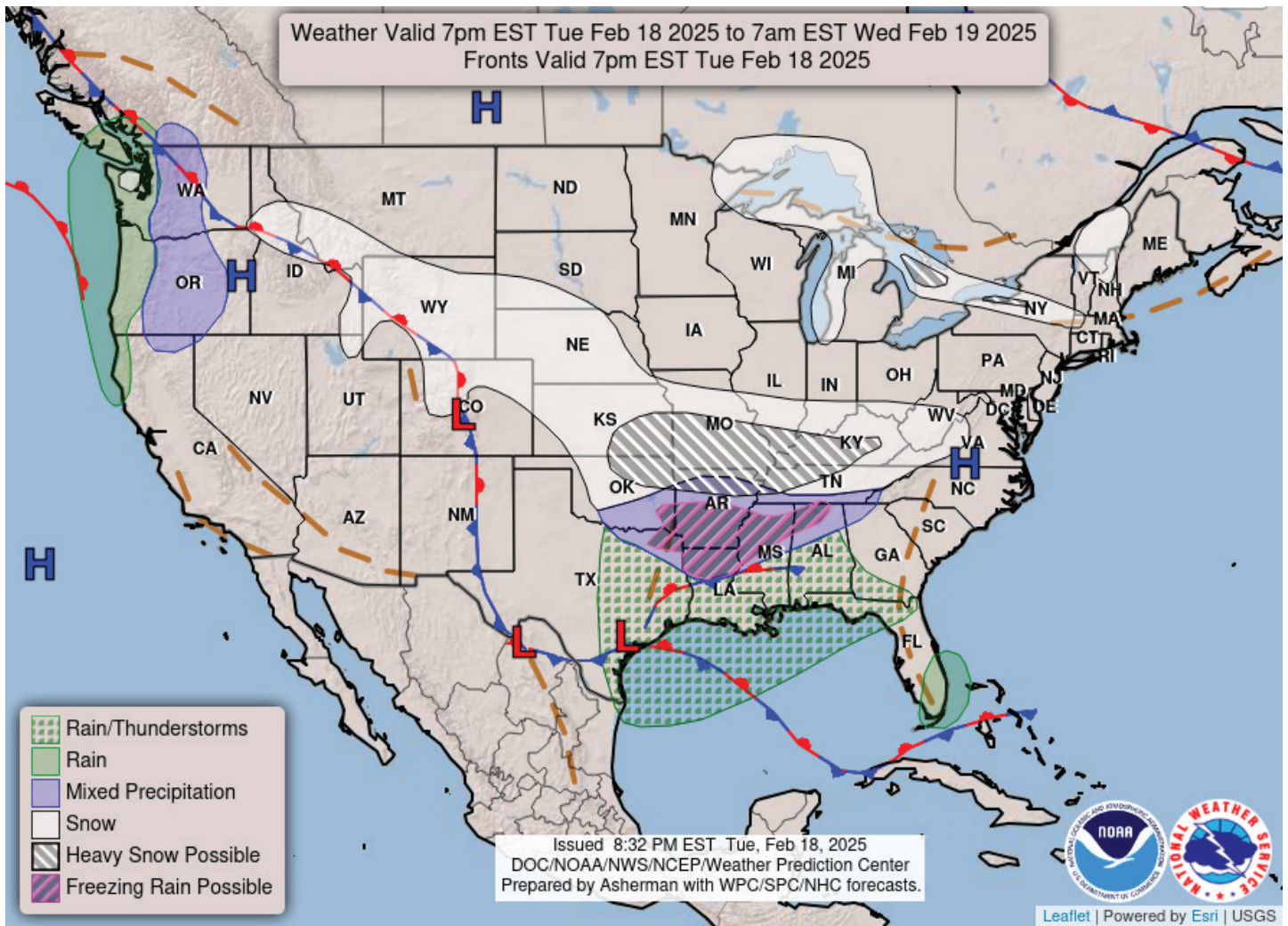
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: -3 °F at 4:01 PM
Low Temp: -26 °F at 7:01 AM
Wind: 12 mph at 3:03 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1930
Record Low: -34 in 1929
Average High: 30
Average Low: 8
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.40
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20
Average Precip to date: 0.95
Precip Year to Date: 0.20
Sunset Tonight: 6:07:10 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:23:28 am

Day length: 10 hours, 42 minutes



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Today in Weather History

February 19th, 2000: Due to the arid and windy conditions, a fire believed to have been started by a discarded cigarette burnt about 1,300-acre of grassland between Kennebec and Lower Brule. The fire threatened a ranch but changed directions before anyone had to be evacuated.

February 19th, 2008: An Arctic air mass and blustery northwest winds brought extreme wind chills during the evening and early morning hours to northeast South Dakota. Wind chills ranged from 35 to 50 degrees below zero. The winds diminished in the early morning hours of the 20th, allowing air temperatures to fall to record or near-record lows across northeast South Dakota. Ten new record lows, ranging from 23 to 30 degrees below zero, were set for February 20th. Several water pipes were broken in Aberdeen and Roslyn. Also, many vehicles did not start along with late school starts or closings.

1884: Severe thunderstorms spawned sixty tornadoes in the southeastern U.S., killing more than 420 people and causing three million dollars damage. The tornado outbreak hit Georgia and the Carolinas the hardest.

1888: Severe thunderstorms over southern Illinois spawned a violent tornado in Jefferson County and devastated the southeast half of Mount Vernon. The tornado killed 24 people, injured 80 others, and destroyed or damaged 300 homes and 50 businesses. In addition, overturned wood stoves ignited many fires in the wreckage. The tornado currently stands as the 9th deadliest Illinois tornado on record and was one of the first disasters to which the American Red Cross responded.

1884 - Severe thunderstorms spawned sixty tornadoes in the southeastern U.S., killing more than 420 persons and causing three million dollars damage. Georgia and the Carolinas hardest were hit in the tornado outbreak. (David Ludlum)

1954 - High winds across the southern half of the Great Plains, gusting to 85 mph, caused the worst duststorms since the 1930s. Graders were needed in places to clear fence high dirt drifts. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm over the southern and central Rockies produced 28 inches of snow at Echo Lake CO, and two feet of snow at Gascon NM and Los Alamos NM. Mora County NM was declared a disaster area following the storm. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Showers and thunderstorms in the southeastern U.S. drenched Valdosta GA with more than five inches of rain, and the 24 hour rainfall total of 7.10 inches at Apalachicola FL more than doubled their previous 24 hour record for February. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - An upper level weather disturbance brought heavy snow to parts of Nebraska, with six inches reported at Loup City and Surprise. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A moist Pacific storm worked its way into New Mexico and southern Colorado. Up to 36 inches of snow blanketed the Wolf Creek and Red Mountain passes of southwest Colorado, and up to 15 inches of snow was reported around Trinidad. In New Mexico, the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains were blanketed with 9 to 28 inches of snow, and 50 to 60 mph wind gusts were reported from Taos to Albuquerque. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2011 - Strong winds reaching as high as 40 mph with gusts to 53 mph topple the 48 year old National Christmas tree. The 42 foot tall Colorado blue spruce sat just south of the White House on the Ellipse. It was transplanted there from York, Pennsylvania in 1978. The Weather Doctor



REFUSE TO BE DISCOURAGED

Dr. Jonas Salk, one of the world's foremost microbiologists, was the first person to discover and develop a vaccine against polio. It was not an easy process and took years.

Once he said, "Ideas come to me as they do to everyone else. But I take each one of them seriously, consider them carefully, examine them thoroughly and study them endlessly. I do not allow anyone to discourage me, though many try."

For the Christian, discouragement overcomes us when we are no longer aware of the presence of God in our lives, become unconcerned for the plans He has for our lives, refuse to believe that He will provide for our every need and doubt that He will fulfill the promises He has made in His Word.

God told Moses to "be strong and very courageous...to study and obey His law..." and then, and only then, could he count on being successful. Why? Because then, and only then, could he count on God to be with him, protect him and empower him wherever he went.

God wanted Moses to know, understand, believe and accept the fact that it was important for him to be obedient and following "all that is written." He also wanted him to know that faithfulness to God is not a guarantee that he would be successful in the eyes of the world. God did, however, assure Him that He would be successful in His eyes and that type of success lasts throughout eternity.

Prayer: Thank You, Heavenly Father, for assuring us of Your presence and power in our lives if we obey Your Word. Give us strength and courage as we follow You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

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: 02.18.25

1 20 25 58 61 22

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$165,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 22 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.17.25

20 22 24 37 48 5

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$24,190,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 37 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.18.25

2 5 16 19 46 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 52 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.15.25

19 25 30 32 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$38,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 52 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.17.25

17 18 49 56 59 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 21 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.17.25

4 44 47 52 57 9

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$195,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 21 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 44, Watertown 33
Aberdeen Roncalli 56, Florence-Henry 32
Alcester-Hudson 52, Freeman Academy-Marion 31
Centerville 57, Dell Rapids St Mary 52
Chester 71, Arlington 48
Colman-Egan 51, Iroquois-Lake Preston 13
Corsica/Stickney 40, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 30
DeSmet 61, Estelline-Hendricks 28
Elkton-Lake Benton 53, Canistota 50
Ethan 66, Freeman 42
Flandreau 56, Baltic 26
Garretson 48, Parker 30
Hamlin 79, Britton-Hecla 23
Hanson 62, Chamberlain 31
Highmore-Harrold 63, Ipswich 58
Langford 49, Aberdeen Christian 28
Milbank 60, Madison 20
Miller 51, Faulkton 32
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 49, Bon Homme 36
Northwestern 39, Redfield 29
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 55, James Valley Christian School 15
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 57, Harrisburg 24
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 49, Sioux Falls Lincoln 22
Sioux Falls Washington 64, Mitchell 48
Sioux Valley 70, Castlewood 51
Sisseton 59, Deuel 35
T F Riggs High School 72, Brookings 59
Viborg-Hurley 51, Scotland/Menno 43
Wagner 72, Gregory 25
Wessington Springs 53, Kimball-White Lake 30
West Central 57, Canton 49
Winner 58, Platte-Geddes 37

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 83, Langford 51
Alcester-Hudson 75, Freeman Academy-Marion 73
Baltic 52, Flandreau 33
Brandon Valley 67, Tea 63, OT
Burke 64, Colome 23
Castlewood 61, Sioux Valley 42
Chester 60, Arlington 30
Dell Rapids St Mary 66, Centerville 47
Deuel 71, Sisseton 57

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Estelline-Hendricks 75, DeSmet 64
Flandreau Indian 55, Mitchell Christian 54
Freeman 56, Ethan 41
Garretson 61, Parker 58
Gregory 61, Wagner 55
Hamlin 61, Britton-Hecla 16
Hanson 62, Chamberlain 38
James Valley Christian School 72, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 65
McCook Central-Montrose 68, Tri-Valley 60
Miller 50, Faulkton 47
Mitchell 67, Sioux Falls Washington 59
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 60, Bon Homme 51
Northwestern 86, Redfield 52
Sioux Falls Lincoln 55, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 52
T F Riggs High School 67, Brookings 47
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 58, Corsica/Stickney 38
Viborg-Hurley 69, Scotland/Menno 21
Watertown 60, Aberdeen Central 51
Wessington Springs 61, Kimball-White Lake 37
West Central 85, Canton 34
Winner 48, Platte-Geddes 40
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Sioux City, West, Iowa vs. Dakota Valley, ccd.

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

Native American activist released from prison will be welcomed to North Dakota home

BELCOURT, N.D. (AP) — Supporters of Native American activist Leonard Peltier plan to welcome him back to his North Dakota community on Wednesday, a day after his release from a Florida prison where he had been serving a life sentence in the 1975 killings of two FBI agents.

Peltier, 80, is expected to join family and supporters at an events center in Belcourt, a small town just south of the Canadian border on the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians' reservation.

"We're so excited for this moment," Jenipher Jones, one of Peltier's attorneys said soon before his release. "He is in good spirits. He has the soul of a warrior."

Then-President Joe Biden commuted Peltier's life sentence to home confinement, leading to his release Tuesday from the Coleman penitentiary. Peltier was convicted of two counts of first-degree murder and given two consecutive life sentences stemming from a 1975 confrontation on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

FBI agents Jack Coler and Ronald Williams were killed, and while Peltier acknowledged firing shots during the confrontation, he denied being the person whose shots killed the men. Native Americans widely believe he was a political prisoner who was wrongly convicted because he fought for tribal rights as a member of the American Indian Movement.

Some in law enforcement have argued for years against freeing Peltier. As Biden considered his options as his term ended, former FBI Director Christopher Wray sent the president a letter in which he called Peltier "a remorseless killer" who should remain in prison.

In a statement about the commutation, Biden said numerous individuals and groups supported releasing Peltier due to the time he spent in prison, his age and his leadership role among Native Americans.

Republicans consider cuts and work requirements for Medicaid, jeopardizing care for millions

By AMANDA SEITZ, ANDREW DEMILLO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans are weighing billions of dollars in cuts to Medicaid, threatening health care coverage for some of the 80 million U.S. adults and children enrolled in the safety net program.

Millions more Americans signed up for taxpayer-funded health care coverage like Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act's marketplace during the Biden administration, a shift lauded by Democrats as a success.

But Republicans, who are looking to slash federal spending and offer lucrative tax cuts to corporations and wealthier Americans, now see a big target ripe for trimming. The \$880 billion Medicaid program is financed mostly by federal taxpayers, who pick up as much as 80% of the tab in some states. And states, too, have said they're having trouble financing years of growth and sicker patients who enrolled in Medicaid.

To whittle down the budget, the GOP-controlled Congress is eyeing work requirements for Medicaid. It's also considering paying a shrunken, fixed rate to states. All told, over the next decade, Republican lawmakers could try to siphon billions of dollars from the nearly-free health care coverage offered to the poorest Americans.

Weeks before Congress began debating those changes, Republican governors in Arkansas, Ohio and South Dakota were making moves to implement Medicaid work rules of their own, likely to be approved by President Donald Trump's administration.

And other cuts could be on the way. Already on Friday, the Republican administration announced it would shrink the Affordable Care Act's navigator program annual budget by 90% to \$10 million. Navigators are stationed throughout the country to help people enroll in ACA and Medicaid coverage and are credited with boosting the programs' enrollment in recent years.

What Republicans are proposing

Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana has floated the idea of tying work to Medicaid.

"It's common sense," Johnson said. "Little things like that make a big difference not only in the budgeting process but in the morale of the people. You know, work is good for you. You find dignity in work."

But about 92% of Medicaid enrollees are already working, attending school or caregiving, according to an analysis by KFF, a health policy research firm.

Republicans have suggested a work requirement similar to the conditions for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly called food stamps. Those ages 16 to 59 must work or volunteer at least 80 hours a month if they are not in school, caring for a child under age 6, disabled, pregnant or homeless. On average, a SNAP enrollee's monthly household income is \$852, and the enrollee typically receives \$239 in benefits.

During a GOP House retreat last month at Trump's golf resort in Doral, Florida, Republicans said the requirement could motivate people to find employment — maybe even a job that comes with health insurance.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., said the spending cuts should not be "on the back of the poor and needy" but instead target those who shouldn't be getting the benefit.

"Why should somebody literally sit on the beach and surf, buy their sandwiches from the food truck with their food stamps and then pick up low-cost housing and so on, while writing a book," Issa said, noting that he was describing a constituent from more than a decade ago.

Other cuts on the table include a proposal to change the federal government's reimbursement to a per-person limit.

That would shift the costs to states, which might be forced to make tough choices about who or what they cover, said Joan Alker, executive director of the Georgetown Center for Children and Families.

"People still have health care needs even if you cut their coverage," Alker said. "Their health care needs are not going to go away."

Cuts to the program could also prompt upset, with just over half of U.S. adults saying the government spends "too little" on Medicaid. Only 15% say it's spending "too much," according to a January Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll.

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Some states are already making moves

President Joe Biden's administration largely blocked states from enacting work rules of their own and required 10 states to remove the requirement for Medicaid coverage.

With Trump now back in charge, some Republican-led states are pressing ahead of Congress to add work rules again. Governors in Arkansas, Iowa and Ohio have announced they'd pursue approval from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to introduce work requirements again. And last fall, South Dakota voters signed off on a plan to add a work rule.

When Arkansas enacted a work requirement during the Trump years, about 18,000 people lost coverage. The rule was later blocked by a federal judge and Biden's Democratic administration.

Some people lost coverage because they had trouble accessing the state's website to log their hours or had other procedural problems, said Trevor Hawkins, an attorney with Legal Aid of Arkansas. The organization sued on behalf of Medicaid beneficiaries who were dropped from coverage.

"These hoops, these things are very consequential," Hawkins said "There were a lot of people having hard times."

In Georgia, 47-year-old Paul Mikell is all too familiar with those hoops.

He's enrolled in Georgia's Pathways to Coverage plan, which offers Medicaid for a slice of impoverished people who make just too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid. Georgia, which has not expanded Medicaid like most other states, requires that people work, volunteer or go to school for 80 hours a month in exchange for accessing the expanded health coverage.

Mikell makes 15-mile (24-kilometer) monthly drives to a government office where he reports his work hours. Sometimes, he said, when he goes online to check whether his hours were logged, they're not there.

He likened navigating the online system to a battle — one fought on a computer at the library or borrowed from a friend.

In Idaho, where lawmakers are considering a state work rule and a three-year limit for Medicaid benefits, family physician Peter Crane estimates about two-thirds of his patients are enrolled in the program.

Many work on farms, on ranches or in the local phosphate mines. Before the state expanded Medicaid to cover those with incomes of up to 138% of the poverty level, many of his uninsured patients avoided the doctor entirely. One ignored abdominal pain for months, to the point of needing hospitalization for a severe gallbladder infection, he said.

"They're not outliers," Crane said of those enrolled in Medicaid during a state hearing last week. "They're hardworking citizens of our state who are employed and running small businesses."

Democrats are warning of the side effects for health care facilities, including rural hospitals and nursing homes. Hospitals have benefited from increased enrollment in health insurance programs such as Medicaid because it guarantees payment for a patient's treatment.

"Hospitals will close, including in rural America and urban America and the heartland of America," House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York warned during a recent speech on the House floor. "Nursing homes will be shut down, and everyday Americans, children, seniors, those who are suffering with disabilities, will be hurt."

Pakistan wants to expel all Afghan refugees from the country, says Afghan embassy

By MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan wants to remove all Afghan refugees from the country and they face expulsion in the near future, the Afghan embassy in Islamabad warned Wednesday.

The embassy issued a strongly worded statement about Pakistan's plans, saying Afghan nationals in the capital, Islamabad, and the nearby garrison city of Rawalpindi have been subjected to arrests, searches, and orders from the police to leave the twin cities and relocate to other parts of Pakistan.

"This process of detaining Afghans, which began without any formal announcement, has not been officially communicated to the Embassy of Afghanistan in Islamabad through any formal correspondence," it said.

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"Ultimately, officials from Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that there is a definitive and final plan to deport all Afghan refugees not only from Islamabad and Rawalpindi but also from the entire country in the near future," the embassy said.

There was no immediate comment from the Pakistani government on the Afghan statement.

The latest development comes more than two weeks after Pakistan's government threatened to deport Afghan nationals living in the country illegally. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had approved a deadline of March 31 to deport those awaiting relocation to third countries unless their cases are swiftly processed by the governments who have agreed to take them after the Afghan Taliban seized power in 2021.

The Afghan embassy criticized "the short timeframe" given and "the unilateral nature of Pakistan's decision".

Besides hundreds of thousands of those living illegally in Pakistan, there are around 1.45 million Afghan nationals registered with UNHCR as refugees. Pakistani Authorities say those who were registered earlier had their stay extended until June 2025, and will not be arrested or deported at least until the extension expires.

Earlier this month, Shafqat Ali Khan, the spokesman at Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had said: "This resettlement problem can't be indefinite. So, for us, the Afghans who are here, awaiting resettlement also has to be a transitory phase. This is not a permanent thing."

He said Pakistan has been collaborating with Western countries to expedite the resettlement program and "will continue to do that."

In the past three years, tens of thousands of Afghans have fled to Pakistan. Many of them were approved for resettlement in the U.S. through a program that helps people at risk because of their work with the American government, media, aid agencies and rights groups. However, after U.S. President Donald Trump paused U.S. refugee programs last month, around 20,000 Afghans are now in limbo in Pakistan.

These Afghans have been facing harassment and even arrest since October 2023, when Pakistan began cracking down on foreigners living in the country illegally.

Although the government said the campaign was not aimed at Afghans, they make up the majority of foreigners in Pakistan. Since then, more than 800,000 Afghan nationals have been deported or forced to leave the country under a so-called voluntary repatriation plan.

The International Organization for Migration has also reported an increase in deportation of Afghans in January.

IOM this week in a report said, "Afghan nationals are being deported to Afghanistan from Islamabad and Rawalpindi." It said there is an increase of 13% in those Afghans returning home from Jan. 16 to 31 compared to the first two weeks in January. It said 824,568 Afghans have returned home since 2023.

Ahmad Shah, a member of an Afghan advocacy group, urged Pakistan on Wednesday to allow Afghans waiting for relocation to continue living in Islamabad at least until the Trump administration makes a final decision about their fate.

He said it would be hard for them to visit Western embassies in the Pakistani capital if they are moved to other areas.

The pope slept peacefully, got up and had breakfast after diagnosis of pneumonia, Vatican says

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis slept well, got out of bed and ate breakfast Wednesday, the Vatican said, after tests confirmed the 88-year-old pontiff had developed pneumonia in both lungs in a further complication that raised concerns about his ability to fight off the infection.

In an early update Wednesday morning, the Vatican said Francis spent his fifth night in Rome's Gemelli hospital peacefully. "He had a tranquil night, woke up and had breakfast," spokesman Matteo Bruni said.

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The Vatican on Tuesday said tests confirmed the pneumonia in both lungs and that respiratory infection also involves asthmatic bronchitis, which requires the use of cortisone antibiotic treatment. "Laboratory tests, chest X-ray, and the Holy Father's clinical condition continue to present a complex picture," the Vatican said.

Nevertheless the pope, who had the upper lobe of his right lung removed as a young man, is in good spirits and is grateful for the prayers for his recovery, Bruni said. On Wednesday, Francis' vicar for Rome urged all the faithful to devote an hour of silent prayer before evening vespers services.

Francis was admitted to the Gemelli hospital in a "fair" condition on Friday after a weeklong bout of bronchitis worsened. On Monday, medical personnel determined that he was suffering from a polymicrobial respiratory tract infection, meaning a mix of viruses, bacteria and possibly other organisms had colonized in his respiratory tract.

"The follow-up chest CT scan which the Holy Father underwent this afternoon ... demonstrated the onset of bilateral pneumonia, which required additional drug therapy," Bruni said Tuesday.

Bronchitis can lead to pneumonia, which is a deeper and far more serious infection of the lungs' air sacs. Pneumonia can develop in part of one lung or an entire lung or both lungs. It tends to be more serious when both lungs are affected because there isn't healthy lung tissue to compensate.

Treatment varies by severity but can include providing oxygen through a nasal tube or mask, intravenous fluids — and treatment of the underlying cause of the infection. To date, Francis is breathing on his own, has eaten breakfast every day, gotten out of bed, read the newspapers and done some work from his hospital room.

The Vatican hasn't provided any information about how Francis is responding to any of the drugs he has been given other than to say he isn't running a fever.

Dr. Carmelo D'Asero, an infectious disease and geriatric disease expert in Rome, said Francis' lack of a fever was not necessarily a positive thing, given the seriousness of his infection.

"A high fever is a sign of an immune response to a pathogen," he said. "Having a low fever and having a serious bronchial infection ... is a sign of a decreased immune response and that makes us worry a little bit more, let's say. Maybe if he had a fever, it would have been better."

The Vatican has given no indication of how long the pope might remain hospitalized, only saying that the treatment of such a "complex clinical picture," which has already required several changes in his drug regimen, would require an "adequate" stay.

Despite the less than positive news about Francis' condition, a rainbow appeared over the Gemelli hospital on Tuesday afternoon and Francis received get-well drawings and cards from children being treated in the hospital's oncology ward.

Migrant groups say racist attacks increase in German city after deadly Christmas market violence

By FANNY BRODERSEN and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — When Haben Gebregergish first immigrated to the German city of Magdeburg seven years ago, the Eritrean immigrant was walking to the supermarket with her child when an intoxicated woman approached her on the street.

At the time, Gebregergish did not speak German well enough to comprehend what the woman was saying. But Gebregergish says that when the woman threw a beer bottle at her head, she immediately understood.

It was one of her first encounters with racism, but certainly not the last. In the aftermath of a deadly attack at a Christmas market in Magdeburg late last year, Gebregergish and other migrants who have settled in the city say they have experienced a sharp increase in racism and anti-immigration sentiments.

"We are the same as you," Gebregergish said earlier this month. "We are not different. Just like you, we have feelings. Sometimes we are sad, sometimes we are happy, just like everyone else."

The Christmas market violence was one of five high-profile attacks committed by immigrants in the

past nine months that have made migration a key issue as the country heads toward an early election on Sunday. The suspect, a Saudi doctor, drove into the holiday market teeming with shoppers and left five women and a 9-year-old boy dead and 200 people injured.

The suspect arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency, and authorities say the suspect does not fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks. He is being held in custody as authorities investigate him.

Just one day after Dec. 20 violence, there was a large right-wing demonstration in Magdeburg, and verbal and physical attacks on people with a migrant background have increased significantly in the city since then, according to the German-Syrian Cultural Association in Magdeburg.

"The migrant community and the advice centers report that attacks have increased by more than 70% here in the city," said Saeed Saeed, who came to Germany from Syria seven years ago and is a member of the association. "Racism already exists here and everywhere. But it has increased enormously since the attack."

Ketevan Asatiani-Hermann, newly elected chair of the board for the Advisory Council for Integration and Migration in Magdeburg, said victims of racist attacks in the city often do not feel support from politicians or police.

"The hatred has always been there, people just didn't dare to say it so clearly before," said Asatiani-Hermann, who came to Magdeburg in 2011 from Georgia.

Officers sometimes target or search the victims first before the perpetrator, she alleged, and they also worry reporting an attack could have a negative impact on their residence status.

The Magdeburg Police Department did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Mayor Simone Borris, in a statement, said: "Cohesion and community are fundamental values of a city that are inviolable." The mayor also referred media to online services for migrants, and said the city's Cooperation with the Advisory Council for Integration and Migration will be expanded.

Magdeburg is located in the former communist east, an area where the far-right and anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has its highest support. The party is polling in second place going into the upcoming election with about 20% support and is fielding its first candidate to lead the country.

Even though it's highly unlikely to take a share of power soon, it has become a factor that other politicians can't ignore and has helped shape Germany's debate on migration.

The election's outcome — and a potential gain in influence for AfD — could have a large impact on Magdeburg's politics and everyday life, Asatiani-Hermann said.

Saeed said the city's migrants feel alone, and want to hear directly from their elected officials to address their concerns.

"We will not allow Magdeburg to become a playing field for racism and hatred," he said.

Middle East latest: Netanyahu appoints advisor with Trump ties to lead ceasefire talks

By The Associated Press undefined

An Israeli official said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has appointed a close confidant to lead negotiations for the second stage of the ceasefire with Hamas.

The U.S.-born Ron Dermer is a Cabinet minister who's widely seen as Netanyahu's closest adviser. He previously served as Israel's ambassador to the U.S. and is a former Republican activist with strong ties to the Trump White House.

Israel and Hamas have yet to negotiate a second and more difficult phase of the ceasefire, and the first ends in early March. Palestinians and Arab countries have universally rejected U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal to remove the Palestinian population from Gaza and take over the territory.

Since the war in Gaza was sparked by Hamas' attack on Oct. 7, 2023, more than 50,000 people have died in Gaza and Lebanon and nearly 70% of the buildings in Gaza have been devastated, according to health ministries in Gaza and Lebanon. Around 1,200 people were killed in Israel during the Oct. 7 attack.

Here's the latest:

Netanyahu appoints close adviser with Trump ties to lead ceasefire negotiations

An Israeli official said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has appointed a close confidant to lead negotiations for the second stage of the ceasefire with Hamas.

The official says that Cabinet Minister Ron Dermer will head the Israeli team. Previous talks have been led by the heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet security agencies.

Talks have not yet started on the second stage, which is meant to include an end to the war, return of all hostages and Israeli pullout from Gaza.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the appointment has not been officially announced.

The U.S.-born Dermer is widely seen as Netanyahu's closest adviser. He previously served as Israel's ambassador to the U.S. and is a former Republican activist with strong ties to the Trump White House.

Dermer currently serves as Israel's strategic affairs minister, where he has been a key player in relations with the U.S. as well as Gulf Arab countries.

Israel's West Bank crackdown triggers a wave of displacement unseen in decades

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

FAR'A REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank (AP) — By car and on foot, through muddy olive groves and snipers' sight lines, tens of thousands of Palestinians in recent weeks have fled Israeli military operations across the northern West Bank — the largest displacement in the occupied territory since the 1967 Mideast war.

After announcing a widespread crackdown against West Bank militants on Jan. 21 — just two days after its ceasefire deal with Hamas in Gaza — Israeli forces descended on the restive city of Jenin, as they have dozens of times since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

But unlike past operations, Israeli forces then pushed deeper and more forcefully into several other nearby towns, including Tulkarem, Far'a and Nur Shams, scattering families and stirring bitter memories of the 1948 war over Israel's creation.

During that war, 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forced from their homes in what is now Israel. That Nakba, or "catastrophe," as Palestinians call it, gave rise to the crowded West Bank towns now under assault and still known as refugee camps.

"This is our nakba," said Abed Sabagh, 53, who bundled his seven children into the car on Feb. 9 as sound bombs blared in Nur Shams camp, where he was born to parents who fled the 1948 war.

Tactics from Gaza

Humanitarian officials say they haven't seen such displacement in the West Bank since the 1967 Mideast war, when Israel captured the territory west of the Jordan River, along with east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, displacing another 300,000 Palestinians.

"This is unprecedented. When you add to this the destruction of infrastructure, we're reaching a point where the camps are becoming uninhabitable," said Roland Friedrich, director of West Bank affairs for the U.N. Palestinian refugee agency. More than 40,100 Palestinians have fled their homes in the ongoing military operation, according to the agency.

Experts say that Israel's tactics in the West Bank are becoming almost indistinguishable from those deployed in Gaza. Already, President Donald Trump's plan for the mass transfer of Palestinians out of Gaza has emboldened Israel's far-right to renew calls for annexation of the West Bank.

"The idea of 'cleansing' the land of Palestinians is more popular today than ever before," said Yagil Levy, head of the Institute for the Study of Civil-Military Relations at Britain's Open University.

The Israeli army denies issuing evacuation orders in the West Bank. It said troops secure passages for those wanting to leave on their own accord.

Seven minutes to leave home

Over a dozen displaced Palestinians interviewed in the last week said they did not flee their homes out of fear, but on the orders of Israeli security forces. Associated Press journalists in the Nur Shams camp

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also heard Israeli soldiers shouting through mosque megaphones, ordering people to leave.

Some displaced families said soldiers were polite, knocking on doors and assuring them they could return when the army left. Others said they were ruthless, ransacking rooms, waving rifles and hustling residents out of their homes despite pleas for more time.

"I was sobbing, asking them, 'Why do you want me to leave my house?' My baby is upstairs, just let me get my baby please," Ayat Abdullah, 30, recalled from a shelter for displaced people in the village of Kafr al-Labd. "They gave us seven minutes. I brought my children, thank God. Nothing else."

Told to make their own way, Abdullah trudged 10 kilometers (six miles) on a path lighted only by the glow from her phone as rain turned the ground to mud. She said she clutched her children tight, braving possible snipers that had killed a 23-year-old pregnant woman just hours earlier on Feb. 9.

Her 5-year-old son, Nidal, interrupted her story, pursing his lips together to make a loud buzzing sound. "You're right, my love," she replied. "That's the sound the drones made when we left home."

Hospitality, for now

In the nearby town of Anabta, volunteers moved in and out of mosques and government buildings that have become makeshift shelters — delivering donated blankets, serving bitter coffee, distributing boiled eggs for breakfast and whipping up vats of rice and chicken for dinner.

Residents have opened their homes to families fleeing Nur Shams and Tulkarem.

"This is our duty in the current security situation," said Thabet A'mar, the mayor of Anabta.

But he stressed that the town's welcoming hand should not be mistaken for anything more.

"We insist that their displacement is temporary," he said.

Staying put

When the invasion started on Feb. 2, Israeli bulldozers ruptured underground pipes. Taps ran dry. Sewage gushed. Internet service was shut off. Schools closed. Food supplies dwindled. Explosions echoed.

Ahmad Sobuh could understand how his neighbors chose to flee the Far'a refugee camp during Israel's 10-day incursion. But he scavenged rainwater to drink and hunkered down in his home, swearing to himself, his family and the Israeli soldiers knocking at his door that he would stay.

The soldiers advised against that, informing Sobuh's family on Feb. 11 that, because a room had raised suspicion for containing security cameras and an object resembling a weapon, they would blow up the second floor.

The surveillance cameras, which Israeli soldiers argued could be exploited by Palestinian militants, were not unusual in the volatile neighborhood, Sobuh said, as families can observe street battles and Israeli army operations from inside.

But the second claim sent him clambering upstairs, where he found his nephew's water pipe, shaped like a rifle.

Hours later, the explosion left his nephew's room naked to the wind and shattered most others. It was too dangerous to stay.

"They are doing everything they can to push us out," he said of Israel's military, which, according to the U.N. agency for refugees, has demolished hundreds of homes across the four camps this year.

The Israeli army has described its ongoing campaign as a crucial counterterrorism effort to prevent attacks like Oct. 7, and said steps were taken to mitigate the impact on civilians.

A chilling return

The first thing Doha Abu Dgehish noticed about her family's five-story home 10 days after Israeli troops forced them to leave, she said, was the smell.

Venturing inside as Israeli troops withdrew from Far'a camp, she found rotten food and toilets piled with excrement. Pet parakeets had vanished from their cages. Pages of the Quran had been defaced with graphic drawings. Israeli forces had apparently used explosives to blow every door off its hinges, even though none had been locked.

Rama, her 11-year-old daughter with Down syndrome, screamed upon finding her doll's skirt torn and its face covered with more graphic drawings.

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AP journalists visited the Abu Dgehish home on Feb. 12, hours after their return.

Nearly two dozen Palestinians interviewed across the four West Bank refugee camps this month described army units taking over civilian homes to use as a dormitories, storerooms or lookout points. The Abu Dgehish family accused Israeli soldiers of vandalizing their home, as did multiple families in Far'a.

The Israeli army blamed militants for embedding themselves in civilian infrastructure. Soldiers may be "required to operate from civilian homes for varying periods," it said, adding that the destruction of civilian property was a violation of the military's rules and does not conform to its values.

It said "any exceptional incidents that raise concerns regarding a deviation from these orders" are "thoroughly addressed," without elaborating.

For Abu Dgehish, the mess was emblematic of the emotional whiplash of return. No one knows when they'll have to flee again.

"It's like they want us to feel that we're never safe," she said. "That we have no control."

Winter's next wave of storms takes aim at the East Coast

By BEN FINLEY and JOHN RABY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — The latest in a long line of winter storms is taking direct aim at the East Coast, threatening to dump heavy snow and some ice in several states.

A storm that dropped snow in the Midwest was spreading across the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys on Wednesday, bringing more misery to some places just starting to clean up from deadly weekend floods.

Up to 10 inches (25 centimeters) of snow was possible along the Atlantic Coast in Virginia and significant ice accumulations were forecast in eastern North Carolina, the National Weather Service said.

Elsewhere, a polar vortex took over from Montana to southern Texas. Bismarck, North Dakota, hit minus 39 degrees (minus 39.4 C) early Tuesday, breaking a record for the date set in 1910. The biggest batch of record cold temperatures are likely to hit early Thursday and Friday, said weather service meteorologist Andrew Orrison.

Deja storm all over again

North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein declared a state of emergency Tuesday in anticipation of Wednesday's ice-and-snow mix.

"What we fear the most are road conditions and loss of power due to ice accumulation," Stein said Tuesday on the social platform X. "So folks need to be prepared."

Virginia remained under a similar declaration that Gov. Glenn Youngkin issued for another storm on Feb. 10 that allowed the National Guard and state agencies to assist local governments.

Both Stein and Youngkin asked motorists to stay off roads.

Snow after floods

Weekend storms that pummeled the eastern U.S. killed at least 17 people, including 14 in Kentucky, where a half-foot (15 centimeters) or more of snow was expected starting Wednesday.

"This is a snowstorm in the middle of a natural disaster," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said Tuesday.

In southern West Virginia, weekend floods killed three people in McDowell County, destroyed roads and severed public water systems. Thousands remained without power Tuesday night. Shelters were open at multiple churches and schools while more than a dozen locations were serving hot meals.

The incoming snowstorm "is going to severely hinder, if not halt, a lot of the efforts that we have," said McDowell County Commissioner Michael Brooks. "We want to ensure that we are doing our best to at least keep people warm."

Bone-chilling cold

More than 80 million people in the nation's midsection were in the midst of gripping cold, the weather service said. Hundreds of public school districts canceled classes or switched to online learning for a second day Wednesday in Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri.

Some relief was in sight with readings expected to climb above freezing by the weekend.

Stephanie Hatzenbuehler's family has been contending with the cold in many ways on their farm and ranch

west of Mandan, North Dakota, from their calving operation, to vehicles and equipment starting without issues, to their coal-fired furnace keeping up.

"There's always something new to learn and something new to experience. It doesn't matter how many times you've done this, so you have to adapt," said Hatzenbuhler, who called the cold spell "the Siberian experience."

Slick roads caused minor injuries in the crash of a tractor-trailer carrying eggs on the Will Rogers Turnpike in northeastern Oklahoma on Tuesday.

"Expensive cargo right now," the Oklahoma Highway Patrol said on X.

Dominican officials cram thousands of inmates facing no charges into overcrowded prisons

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic (AP) — They're known as "frog men," inmates who are forced to sleep on prison floors across the Dominican Republic, often next to overflowing toilets or holes in the ground that serve as one.

Thousands of them are crammed into the country's severely overcrowded prisons, some operating at seven times their capacity. A majority languish there without ever having been charged with a crime, and activists warn they face inhuman conditions and a lack of medical care.

Despite promises to improve the system, critics say the Dominican Republic continues to push for and allow pretrial detentions in nearly all criminal cases where no charges have been filed and has made few changes as problems within prisons keep mounting.

"Prisons have become no man's land," said Rodolfo Valentín Santos, director of the Dominican Republic's National Public Defense Office.

Over 60% of the country's roughly 26,000 inmates are being held under preventive detention, without any charges, according to the National Public Defense Office. Proponents argue the measure aims to protect society and allows authorities time to collect evidence in a case.

But some detainees have spent up to 20 years in prison without ever being found guilty of a crime, Valentín said.

He noted that the country's Constitution and penal code dictate that preventive detention is an "exceptional" measure. There are six other measures that don't involve prison time, including bail, but Valentín said they are rarely used.

'We have a situation'

On a recent afternoon, Darwin Lugo and Yason Guzmán walked out of La Victoria National Penitentiary, in the northeast corner of the sprawling capital, Santo Domingo.

The prison was built for a maximum of 2,100 inmates but holds more than 7,000 of them, with more than 3,300 under pretrial detention, according to the National Public Defense Office.

It is the country's oldest and most populated prison.

"You have to watch out for your life," said Lugo, who with Guzmán visited several friends held there, some under pretrial detention.

"There are a lot of them who are not doing well," Guzmán said of inmates there. "There's extreme poverty."

They said their friends, who have spent more than five years incarcerated there, are well-connected and only occasionally request money or ask that their cell phone's SIM card be recharged.

Last year, at least 11 inmates died at La Victoria following a short circuit in a cell that sparked a fire and an explosion. It was one of the country's deadliest prison fires since 2005, when at least 134 inmates were killed in the eastern town of Higüey after rival gangs set their bedding ablaze.

After last year's fire at La Victoria, Dominican President Luis Abinader appointed former prisons director Roberto Santana as head of a commission tasked with overhauling and improving the country's more than 40 prisons.

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"We must admit, gentlemen, that we have a situation in all of the country's prisons," Abinader said when he announced the appointment last March. He also announced that money recovered from corruption cases would help fund construction of new prisons.

Santana has long called for the closure of La Victoria and the 15 de Azua prison, located in the country's western region. The commission he leads is working on those and other monumental tasks, free from outside interference, he said.

"We don't take orders from politicians or anyone else," said Santana, who previously trained staff for the new prisons built in the early 2000s.

Santana, who once served as president of the Federation of Dominican Students in the 1970s, was arrested multiple times under President Joaquín Balaguer, known for having political opponents and dissidents jailed and sometimes killed.

Santana knows first-hand the conditions of La Victoria — he spent two years in solitary confinement there. 'On the brink of collapse'

In the early 2000s, the Dominican Republic began building 21 new prisons to improve conditions. They were staffed by trained personnel, not police and soldiers, which oversee the country's other 19 prisons.

But conditions in the new prisons have deteriorated, according to the Dominican Republic's National Commission of Human Rights.

"The Dominican Republic's prison system is on the brink of collapse," the commission said in its 2023 report, the latest one available.

In prisons across the country, overcrowding is rampant. Cells lack bathrooms, natural light and ventilation, leading to worsening health conditions. Some 5,000 inmates are ill with conditions ranging from heart problems to cancer to HIV, but they receive only the most basic medication, if that, and some prisons have no medical staff, according to Valentín, whose office issues a yearly in-depth report on the conditions of all prisons.

In its 2023 report, the latest year available, his office called for the closure of prisons including one in the north coastal city of Nagua.

"The level of overcrowding...makes it impossible to achieve true rehabilitation for the inmates since they have been forgotten by the state," the report read. "In the conditions they are in, it is obvious that they are treated as objects and not as human beings endowed with rights."

Another prison was so overcrowded that the government held inmates outdoors in trucks with metal roofs that broiled under the sun, sparking lawsuits, Valentín said.

A spokesperson for Col. Roberto Hernández Basilio, director of prisons, did not respond to requests for an interview. Hernández has previously said his office is taking measures to improve conditions.

Meanwhile, Dominican Attorney General Miriam Germán Brito has repeatedly spoken out against pretrial detention but noted that the decision lies in the hands of judges. A spokesperson for Germán said she is not granting media interviews.

Both Santana and Valentín said they believe government corruption is one reason the country has dragged its feet in overhauling the system, accusing soldiers and police who run prisons of benefiting from illegal activities.

Public corruption also prompted authorities to halt construction of a much-touted prison in recent years that was expected to ease overcrowding.

Even as that half-built prison wastes away, Santana said he expects that 25 new prisons capable of holding more than 20,000 inmates will be built by 2028.

While those are expected to help ease overcrowding, concerns remain. Activists note that inmates are not freed even when a judge has legally released them.

The National Commission of Human Rights noted that roughly 2,700 inmates are still in prison because their paperwork is paralyzed in backlogged courts. Meanwhile, hundreds of others remain incarcerated despite being officially freed because they owe the government money and are unable to pay fines ordered by a judge.

Justice Department and New York City mayor face judge's scrutiny in bid to dismiss criminal charges

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Justice Department lawyers and New York City Mayor Eric Adams are set to face a federal judge who is signaling that he's unlikely to rubber stamp their request to drop the mayor's corruption charges weeks before an April trial.

Judge Dale E. Ho in Manhattan scheduled the Wednesday afternoon hearing after three government lawyers from Washington made the dismissal request on Friday. Manhattan's top federal prosecutor resigned after she refused an order to do so.

Ho already indicated that the hearing was likely to be only an initial step when he wrote in an order Tuesday that one subject on the agenda will be a discussion of "procedure for resolution of the motion."

Also set for discussion are the reasons for the request to dismiss the indictment against the Democrat that charges the first-term mayor with accepting over \$100,000 in illegal campaign contributions and lavish travel perks from a Turkish official and business leaders seeking to buy his influence while he was Brooklyn borough president. He has pleaded not guilty.

Early last week, Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove told prosecutors in New York in a memo to drop the charges because the prosecution "has unduly restricted Mayor Adams' ability to devote full attention and resources to the illegal immigration and violent crime." He said charges could be reinstated after November's mayoral election.

Two days later, then-interim U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon wrote to Attorney General Pam Bondi, saying Bove's request to drop charges in return for assistance in enforcing federal immigration laws would betray Bondi's own words that she "will not tolerate abuses of the criminal justice process, coercive behavior, or other forms of misconduct."

"Dismissal of the indictment for no other reason than to influence Adams's mayoral decision-making would be all three," Sassoon, a Republican, said of what she called a "quid pro quo" deal as she offered to resign. She also said prosecutors were about to bring additional obstruction of justice charges against Adams.

Bove responded to Sassoon with apparent anger, accepting her resignation and accusing her of "pursuing a politically motivated prosecution despite an express instruction to dismiss the case." He then informed her that two prosecutors assigned to the case were suspended with pay and that an investigation would determine if they keep their jobs.

If either of those prosecutors wished to comply with his directive to dismiss charges, he welcomed them to do so, but Hagan Scotten quit the following day, writing in a resignation letter that he supported Sassoon's actions.

Scotten wrote 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."

In all, seven prosecutors, including five high-ranking prosecutors at the Justice Department in Washington, had resigned by Friday.

Since then, a small army of former prosecutors have gotten behind the defiant stand by Sassoon and other prosecutors.

On Friday, 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 Monday, three former U.S. attorneys from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut submitted papers to Ho suggesting that he appoint a special prosecutor if he finds the Justice Department acted improperly or that he order all evidence be made available to state and local prosecutors.

A former Watergate prosecutor filed papers separately, telling the judge to reject the government's request and consider assigning a special counsel to explore the legal issues and ultimately consider appointing an independent special prosecutor to try the case.

Also Monday, Justice Connection, an organization advocating for Justice Department employees, released a letter signed by over 900 former federal prosecutors to career federal prosecutors that said they have

"watched with alarm" as values "foundational to a fair and justice legal system" have been tested.

In the letter, the former prosecutors said they "salute and admire the courage many of you have already exhibited. You have responded to ethical challenges of a type no public servant should ever be forced to confront with principle and conviction, in the finest traditions of the Department of Justice."

On Tuesday, Alex Spiro, a lawyer for the mayor, wrote to the judge, saying those who believed that Adams struck a "quid pro quo" with prosecutors were wrong.

"There was no quid pro quo. Period," he said.

Trump imposes his vision on America in departure from first-term stumbles

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Months into his first term as president, Donald Trump was furious with the snowballing Russia investigation and ordered White House Counsel Don McGahn to make sure that special counsel Robert Mueller got fired.

"Mueller has to go," McGahn recalled Trump saying. "Call me back when you do it."

But McGahn didn't do it, and Trump didn't even bring it up the next time they saw each other. Such incidents were common during Trump's initial experience in the White House, where officials would soften or ignore his most outrageous decisions and the president seemed unwilling to enforce his will.

It's hard to imagine the same thing happening during Trump's second term. Instead of repeating his laissez-faire attitude toward his own administration, the Republican president is asserting control at every opportunity, backed up by loyalists at all levels of government. Despite occasional disorganization and confusion, there's a headstrong determination to push through any obstacles.

Trump doesn't just want to change course from Joe Biden's presidency, his team is holding back congressionally authorized funding championed by his predecessor.

Not only did Trump officials tell the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to stop working, his team set up a tip line so people could report unauthorized actions taken by staff at the agency.

Trump wasn't satisfied with simply firing all the board members at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He made himself chairman.

This time, Trump seems to be saying, his orders will not be ignored. This time, there will be follow through.

The White House summarizes Trump's approach with the mantra "promises made, promises kept." Administration officials also dismiss concerns that the president is exercising too much control. They say Trump is entitled to impose his vision on the government that he was elected to lead.

Others see something darker and more menacing for the country and its future.

"Donald Trump's instincts haven't changed," said Timothy Naftali, a Columbia University historian. "He's just angrier, meaner and more effective than he was in his first term."

Trump often felt like he was undermined in his first term by the "deep state," a term used by his allies to describe civil servants and career officials. Now, he's moving swiftly to cut the federal bureaucracy with the help of Elon Musk, the billionaire entrepreneur Trump has empowered to oversee the downsizing of the workforce.

"We've never had a president come into office with such a deep desire for revenge," Naftali said. "Donald Trump is trying to hollow out institutions that he thinks embarrassed him."

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which was created to protect Americans from financial fraud, abuse and deceptive practices, has been brought to a standstill. The U.S. Agency for International Development, a leading distributor of humanitarian assistance, was shut down.

A prime target is the Department of Justice, which infuriated Trump by investigating him during his first term and after leaving office. He was indicted twice by federal authorities, although the cases were dropped after he won last year's election because sitting presidents can't be prosecuted while in office.

Now Trump has placed loyalists in leadership positions, such as Emil Bove, the acting deputy attorney

general who was previously Trump's defense attorney.

Last week, Bove pushed to drop corruption charges against New York City Mayor Eric Adams, saying it was more important for Adams to help Trump enact stricter immigration policies.

"The pending prosecution has unduly restricted Mayor Adams' ability to devote full attention and resources to the illegal immigration and violent crime that escalated under the policies of the prior Administration," Bove wrote.

Several prosecutors in New York and Washington resigned in protest, and a court hearing is scheduled for Wednesday.

Trump said that he wasn't involved in the decision to drop the case against Adams, but he's previously said that the mayor had been unfairly targeted for political reasons.

Another example of Trump's heavy-handed approach this time has been his handling of criminal charges against supporters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Hours after taking the oath of office a month ago, the president pardoned roughly 1,500 people, including those who attacked police officers.

Then his administration decided to push even further. Thousands of FBI employees are being questioned about their role in Jan. 6 investigations, with suggestions that they could face punishment.

Bove said agents "who simply followed orders and carried out their duties in an ethical manner" were not at risk, adding that "the only individuals who should be concerned ... are those who acted with corrupt or partisan intent."

It's a sharp change from Trump's first administration, which included a number of establishment figures who resisted his impulses.

Olivia Troye, a former national security official who has been a critic of Trump, said staff members would confer with each other after meetings with the president.

"Why don't you hold on that before you go do something, and let's see what happens," Troye recalled people saying. "Let's see if it passes."

The mixed signals were partly a matter of inexperience. The president and some of his advisers had never served in government.

"During the first administration, quite frankly, they had no idea what they were doing," Troye said. "Now they have people in place who were there the first time around. They've been preparing to execute for several years."

Trump has taken a scorched-earth approach to uprooting diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, commonly known as DEI. He's signed executive orders to end the programs, but that wasn't enough for his administration.

Messages distributed by the Office of Personnel Management, which functions as the human resources agency for the federal government, said employees should not try to "disguise these programs by using coded or imprecise language."

Anyone who sees evidence of DEI should immediately disclose it.

"There will be no adverse consequences for timely reporting this information," the messages said. "However, failure to report this information within 10 days may result in adverse consequences."

Malaysia is betting on data centers to boost its economy. But experts warn they come at a price.

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and VINCENT THIAN Associated Press

JOHOR BAHRU, Malaysia (AP) — Winson Lau has always had contingency plans. But he wasn't prepared for data centers.

Lau relies on water and electricity to operate his thriving export business in Malaysia's Johor province, where he raises a kaleidoscope of tropical fish in rows of aquariums, including albino fish with red spots that can fetch up to \$10,000 from collectors. His contingency plans in the event of an outage involve an intricate system of purifying wastewater through friendly bacteria and an alarm system to quickly switch to backup power.

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But these measures can't compete with the gigantic, power-guzzling and thirsty data centers being built in Johor. The province is on track to have at least 1.6 gigawatts of data centers at any given moment from nearly nothing in 2019, making it the fastest-growing data center market in Southeast Asia, according to a report published in April.

Data centers are large, windowless buildings filled with racks of computers that need lots of electricity. To prevent overheating, they rely on energy-intensive air conditioning systems using pumped water. Increasingly used by tech companies for running artificial intelligence systems, the power demand from future facilities in Malaysia may rise to over 5 gigawatts by 2035, according to researchers at Malaysia's Kenanga Investment Bank. This is more than half of Malaysia's entire renewable capacity in 2023.

Over 95% of the energy available to Malaysia in 2022 was from fossil fuels, according to the International Energy Agency. The country is now fifth-largest exporter of liquefied natural gas globally. And with planned renewable projects, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said in September that the country was "confident of a surplus of energy" to fuel large projects and keep exporting.

But Lau doesn't fancy the chances of his homegrown business competing against the foreign-funded behemoths for energy. Even without data centers, Malaysia is susceptible to power interruptions because of storms, including one that lasted 30 minutes last year and killed 300,000 fish, costing Lau over \$1 million. He worries that data centers would result in longer outages.

To survive, he is moving to Thailand and already scouting potential locations for a new fish farm.

"Big data center is coming and there is shortage of power," he said. "It'll be crazy."

Costs versus benefits

Malaysia is betting that potential economic growth from data centers justifies the risk. Once touted as an Asian tiger on the cusp of becoming rich, its industries shrunk in the late 1990s after the Asian financial crisis. It has since languished in the middle-income trap. Data centers, the government hopes, will modernize its economy and indirectly create thousands of high-paying jobs.

But experts worry that Malaysia, and others like Vietnam, Indonesia and India vying for billion-dollar investments from tech giants, may be overstating data centers' transformative capabilities that also come at a price: Data centers gobble up land, water and electricity while creating far fewer jobs than they promise. Most data centers provide 30 to 50 permanent jobs while the larger ones create 200 jobs at most, according to a report by the American nonprofit Good Jobs First.

Add to this the rapid increase in power and water use and some experts like Sofia Scasserra, who researches digital economies at the Amsterdam-based think tank Transnational Institute, said that tech companies exploiting resources in poorer countries while extracting data from their populations to get rich is akin to "digital colonialism." She compared data extraction to silver mining in Bolivia, which enriched colonial Spain but left nothing behind for Latin America.

"They are extracting data in the same way. Data doesn't even leave (behind) taxes," she said.

Indeed, only a small portion of Malaysia's data center capacity is actually for Malaysian users. Through a network of submarine cables that fans out into the world, they service East Asia, China and Europe. And the data centers themselves are run by foreign companies like America's Equinix and Microsoft as well as Chinese competitor GDS Holdings that works with tech giants like Alibaba.

These data centers are also on the front lines of AI competition between the U.S. and China. Shortly before he left office, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration proposed new rules that would limit exports of advanced AI chips made by U.S. companies like Nvidia, part of a strategy to deprive China and other U.S. adversaries from gaining access to AI technology through data centers in places like Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Although it's unclear if the Trump administration will retain the policy, which hasn't yet taken effect, GDS Holdings saw its stock drop more than 18% on the day of the announcement.

Filling the void

For now, artificial intelligence is driving the hunger for even more data centers, with tech companies seeking out bigger — and cheaper — sites worldwide as a part of a "global strategy," said Rangu Salgame, chairman and CEO of Singapore's Princeton Digital Group, which is building a 170-megawatt site in Johor. Data centers larger than 40 megawatt typically need land the size of seven football fields — about enough

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power for 36,000 American homes, according to data center service provider Stream Data Centers.

That's costly to build in rich nations like the U.S., which over time has built more data centers than any other country but where land comes at a high price. Enter Malaysia, with its inexpensive land, excess power capacity and tax incentives. The country was the fastest growing data center market in Asia Pacific in the first half of 2024, according to global real estate firm Cushman and Wakefield. This makes Malaysia the eighth-largest data center market in terms of operations and the fifth-largest behind China, India, Japan and Australia when accounting for projects already in the pipeline.

Globally Malaysia ranks 14th in terms of operational capacity — still smaller than Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam, Paris and Dublin — but it is on track to be among the top 10 markets in five to seven years, according to Pritesh Swamy, who heads research on data centers in Asia for the real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield.

"We are talking about a region that really grew at a pace that nowhere in the world has seen," Salgame said.

Next door to Malaysia is Singapore, which paused the construction of new data centers in 2019. The moratorium was over concerns that the energy-guzzling infrastructure was straining the tiny country's limited resources. In 2019, data centers consumed 7% of the total electricity in the city-state that imports both power and water while aiming to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. They have been trying to build data centers sustainably since 2022, when the moratorium ended.

In the meantime, Malaysia has stepped in to fill the void, attracting investments of over \$31 billion — three times the investments for 2023 — in the first 10 months of 2024, according to research by real estate firm Knight Frank. Johor already has 22 mostly foreign data centers spanning over 21 hectares, according to the research firm Baxtel. That's the equivalent of nearly 40 football fields, although not all of the data centers are operational.

Concerns over power and water shortages

The data centers that are running look anonymous from the outside. But they can be identified by the tell-tale signs of barbed wire fences, CCTV cameras and patrolling security guards. Elsewhere, a thicket of cranes and workers operating construction machinery is transforming the landscape in the sleepy province.

Salgame said that he hoped data centers could accelerate clean energy growth and experts like Putra Adhiguna of the Jakarta-based think tank Energy Shift Institute agreed that this could happen, but warned that the sheer volume of unforeseen, future demand complicates the transition.

"Add data centers on top of that, it just becomes much more challenging," he said.

Tropical Malaysia is warmer than the countries that were initially preferred by data centers, including Ireland, and would require more water and power for cooling, said Alex de Vries, the founder of Digiconomist, a research company studying the unintended consequences of digital trends. He said that these companies are moving to new countries after their promises of economic growth were found to be "empty." And while new solar or wind farms can be built faster than other forms of energy, data centers need a lot of electricity from the get-go.

"These big tech companies are trying to distract you from the really simple math," he said.

Malaysia acknowledges that the energy demand from data centers is "substantial" but believes that Johor's rise as a "data center powerhouse" will make it a "key player in Southeast Asia's digital ecosystem," said Malaysian Investment, Trade and Industry minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz in an email. He added that Malaysia was writing efficiency guidelines for data centers and has a policy to let them buy clean energy directly from producers.

But concerns are rising among residents about potential water shortages in the future — echoing the concerns of other developing countries like Chile. Malaysia, like much of Southeast Asia, is at risk of extreme weather including drought, according to a 2022 U.N. climate change report. Francis Hutchinson, an analyst at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, said that Johor has faced recent disruptions and new stressors, like a growing population and water parks to boost tourism, could exacerbate the crisis.

"Water, more than power, is a potential issue," he said.

Nearly 300 deportees from US held in Panama hotel as officials try to return them to their countries

By JUAN ZAMORANO Associated Press

PANAMA CITY (AP) — Panama is detaining in a hotel nearly 300 people from various countries deported under U.S. President Donald Trump, not allowing them to leave while waiting for international authorities to organize a return to their countries.

More than 40% of the migrants, authorities say, won't voluntarily return to their homeland. Migrants in the hotel rooms held messages to the windows reading "Help" and "We are not save (sic) in our country."

The migrants hailed from 10 mostly Asian countries, including Iran, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and others. The U.S. has difficulty deporting directly to some of those countries so Panama is being used as a stopover. Costa Rica was expected to receive a similar flight of third-country deportees on Wednesday.

Panama's Security Minister Frank Abrego said Tuesday the migrants are receiving medical attention and food as part of a migration agreement between Panama and the U.S.

The Panamanian government has now agreed to serve as a "bridge" or transit country for deportees, while the U.S. bears all the costs of the operation. The agreement was announced earlier this month after U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's visit.

Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino, who faces political pressure over Trump's threats of retaking control of the Panama Canal, announced the arrival of the first of the deportation flights last Thursday.

The confinement and legal limbo the deportees face has raised alarm in the Central American country, especially as images spread of migrants peaking through the windows of their rooms on high floors of the hotel and displaying the notes pleading for help.

Abrego denied the foreigners are being detained even though they cannot leave the rooms of their hotel, which is being guarded by police.

Abrego said that 171 of the 299 deportees have agreed to return voluntarily to their respective countries with help from the International Organization for Migration and the U.N. Refugee Agency. U.N. agencies are talking with the other 128 migrants in an effort to find a destination for them in third countries. Abrego said that one deported Irish citizen has already returned to her country.

Those who do not agree to return to their countries will be temporarily held in a facility in the remote Darien province through which hundreds of thousands of migrants have crossed on their journey north in recent years, Abrego said.

The Panamanian Ombudsman's Office was scheduled to provide more details on the deportees' situation later Tuesday.

Brazil's former President Bolsonaro charged over alleged coup that included a plan to poison Lula

By ELÉONORE HUGHES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazil's prosecutor-general on Tuesday formally charged former President Jair Bolsonaro with attempting a coup to stay in office after his 2022 election defeat, in a plot that included a plan to poison his successor and current President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and kill a Supreme Court judge.

Prosecutor-General Paulo Gonet alleges that Bolsonaro and 33 others participated in a plan to remain in power. The alleged plot, he wrote, included a plan to poison Lula and shoot dead Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, a foe of the former president.

"The members of the criminal organization structured a plan at the presidential palace to attack institutions, aiming to bring down the system of the powers and the democratic order, which received the sinister name of 'Green and Yellow Dagger,'" Gonet wrote in a 272-page indictment. "The plan was conceived and taken to the knowledge of the president, and he agreed to it."

Bolsonaro is often seen in Brazil's yellow-and-green national soccer jersey and the colors have become

associated with his political movement.

Bolsonaro's defense team said it met the accusations with "dismay and indignation," adding in a statement that the former "President has never agreed to any movement aimed at deconstructing the democratic rule of law or the institutions that underpin it."

Bolsonaro's son, Flávio Bolsonaro, who is a senator, said on the social platform X that the indictment was "empty" and there was no evidence of wrongdoing. He accused the Prosecutor-General's Office of serving "the nefarious interests of Lula."

In November, Brazil's Federal Police filed a 884-page report with Gonet detailing the scheme. They allege a systematic effort to sow distrust in the electoral system, drafting a decree to provide legal cover for the plot, pressuring top military brass to go along with the plan and inciting a riot in the capital.

In the indictment, Gonet described the alleged crimes as part of a chain of events articulated with an overarching objective of stopping Bolsonaro from leaving office, "contrary to the result of the popular will at the polls."

The Supreme Court will analyze the charges and, if accepted, Bolsonaro will stand trial.

The far-right leader denies wrongdoing. "I have no concerns about the accusations, zero," Bolsonaro told journalists earlier on Tuesday during a visit to the Senate in Brasilia.

"Have you seen the coup decree, by any chance? You haven't. Neither have I," he added.

As well as participating in a coup d'état, the 34 defendants are accused of participating in an armed criminal organization, attempted violent abolition of the democratic rule of law, damage qualified by violence and serious threat against the state's assets, and deterioration of listed heritage, according to a statement from the Prosecutor General's press office.

Gonet said the criminal organization he charged "had as leaders the (then) president himself and his running mate, Gen. Braga Netto."

"Both accepted, stimulated, and performed acts that are described in our criminal legislation as attacking the existence and the Independence of (the branches) of power and of the democratic rule," Gonet wrote in his report.

The crimes have varying penalties. If Bolsonaro is convicted of attempting a coup and the violent abolition of the democratic rule of law, he could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison, according to the country's criminal code.

The indictments, based on manuscripts, digital files, spreadsheets, and message exchanges, expose a scheme to disrupt democratic order, according to the prosecutor-general's office.

The charges are "historic," said Luis Henrique Machado, a criminal attorney and professor at the IDP university in Brasilia, adding that he expects the Supreme Court to accept the charges and put Bolsonaro on trial sometime before the end of next year.

"The charges show Brazil's institutions are robust, independent and agile," Machado said. "They are a role model for other countries where democracy is at risk."

Bolsonaro is barred from running in the 2026 election after judges with the country's top electoral court ruled that he abused his power and cast unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system.

Following Tuesday's charges, Bolsonaro will "position himself as a victim," said Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo. Bolsonaro has previously said his legal woes are an attempt to stop him from returning to office.

"There are polls saying he would be competitive in the 2026 elections against Lula, one of them published today," said Melo. "There's going to be political dust, but it will settle."

Trump signs order to study how to expand IVF and calls for 'radical transparency' from government

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed an executive order meant to expand access to and reduce costs of in vitro fertilization and issued a presidential memorandum calling

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for “radical transparency requirements” from the government, which he suggested could reduce wasteful spending.

On the campaign trail, Trump called for universal coverage of IVF treatment after his Supreme Court nominees helped to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, leading to a wave of restrictions in Republican-led states, including some that have threatened access to IVF by trying to define life as beginning at conception.

Trump, who was at his Florida residence and club Mar-a-Lago, also signed another executive order as well as a presidential memorandum. The second executive order outlined the oversight functions of the Office of Management and Budget, while the memo requires the government to detail the “waste, fraud and abuse” that’s found as the Department of Government Efficiency, overseen by Tesla CEO Elon Musk, looks to cut government spending.

DOGE has often fallen short of the administration’s promises of transparency. Musk has taken questions from journalists only once since becoming Trump’s most powerful adviser, and he’s claimed it’s illegal to name people who are working for him. Sometimes DOGE staff members have demanded access to sensitive government databases with little explanation.

Trump took more than 30 minutes of questions Tuesday on a range of topics and bashed the Biden administration throughout, highlighting issues such as its handling of the U.S.-Mexico border, Venezuela policy and Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Trump said he thought he had a “good chance” to end Russia’s war in Ukraine but bristled at suggestions that the U.S. and Russia had begun negotiations to end fighting without Ukraine playing a role. He even seemed to suggest that Ukraine was to blame for a war that began only after Russia invaded that country.

“Today I heard, ‘Well, we weren’t invited.’ Well, you’ve been there for three years,” Trump said of Ukraine’s leaders. “You should have never started it.”

In anticipation of questions about his administration’s efforts to slash federal spending, the president said he wrote down examples of government programs around the world which he then listed off at length. They included funding to promote voter turnout in India and social cohesion initiatives in Mali — all of which Trump suggested collectively amounted to fraud.

Asked about the White House’s arguing in a court filing that Musk wasn’t the head of Trump’s government efficiency efforts, Trump said: “You could call him an employee, you could call him a consultant, you could call him whatever you want. But he’s a patriot.”

Trump said he thinks “women and families, husbands, are very appreciative” of his executive order on IVF, which offers a possible solution when a woman has trouble getting pregnant. The procedure involves retrieving her eggs and combining them in a lab dish with a man’s sperm to create a fertilized embryo, which is then transferred into the woman’s uterus in an attempt to create a pregnancy. IVF is done in cycles, and more than one may be required.

Barbara Collura, president and CEO of RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association, said that what the White House put out “looks extremely promising.”

“The biggest barriers for people to building their families are the out-of-pocket costs, the lack of insurance coverage for this care,” she said.

Illinois Sen. Tammy Duckworth, a Democrat, said: “Donald Trump’s executive order does nothing to expand access to IVF. In fact, he’s the reason IVF is at risk in the first place.”

Duckworth said if Trump is going to follow through on his campaign promise to provide free IVF, he can start by supporting her legislation that would require insurance plans to cover IVF.

Trump, who spent the morning at his golf club in West Palm Beach, Florida, spoke to reporters hours before his first joint TV interview with Musk aired in prime time on Fox News Channel. The president acknowledged during it that “inflation is back,” but noted that he’d only been in office a few weeks and insisted “I had nothing to do” with prices that remain stubbornly high.

Trump mentioned during that same interview that Musk is “probably not that happy” with things like tax breaks for electric vehicles likely not being included in tax legislation now being discussed in Congress, but he said Musk didn’t seek special treatment for Tesla.

"I haven't asked the president for anything, ever," Musk added. Asked about potential conflicts of interest between Musk's governmental efforts and his businesses and how they will be handled, Trump said, "He won't be involved" and Musk said he'd recuse himself.

Musk has drawn criticism from Democrats in Congress and others for the methods he and his team at DOGE are using to cut spending, including foreign aid, and eliminate jobs across the bureaucracy.

The joint interview follows Musk's appearance with Trump in the Oval Office last week, when both defended Musk's approach to federal cost-cutting.

Also Tuesday night, an awards program was held at Mar-a-Lago by America's Future. That's a conservative group led by Mike Flynn, who briefly served as national security adviser in the Republican president's first term. The program aims to preserve individual rights and promote American values and traditions, according to its website. The event honored one member each from the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Space Force.

The event included a poolside reception, musical performances and dinner in Mar-a-Lago's Grand Ballroom. The lineup included such names as Russell Brand, Ted Nugent and Mike Tyson.

Trump made an appearance at the event, according to video posted on social media Tuesday night, addressing the crowd on the patio as he stood near Tyson, Flynn and Nugent and declaring, "This is very, very friendly territory."

Trump praised the men, including Flynn, who was one of the leading proponents of Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election. The president called him "the real deal" and indicated he wanted to bring Flynn into his administration, saying he offered him "about 10 jobs."

"Anytime you want to come in, you know that, Mike, OK?" Trump said.

Flynn resigned from the first Trump administration less than a month after Trump's inauguration. He was charged in 2017 with lying to the FBI about conversations he had with the Russians on Trump's behalf. He twice pleaded guilty, but Trump pardoned him in the final weeks of his presidency.

A\$AP Rocky dives into Rihanna's arms as not guilty verdict is read at felony assault trial

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A\$AP Rocky dove into the arms of Rihanna Tuesday as a clerk read the not guilty verdict at his trial on two felony counts of assault with a semiautomatic firearm.

The Los Angeles courtroom, full of fans of the hip-hop performer and his singing superstar partner, exploded into screaming glee as Rocky leapt from the defense table into the gallery, where Rihanna sat between his mother and sister. They embraced and sobbed.

After a three-week trial, the jury deliberated for just three hours to reach the verdict that spared Rocky, whose legal name is Rakim Mayers, a prison sentence that could have run more than two decades.

"Thank y'all for saving my life," he told the jurors as they left.

Amid the chaos, it took the clerk a while to read the second not guilty verdict, though it was very unlikely the jury would split on the counts.

"Mr. Mayers, you're excused," Judge Mark Arnold said.

On the eve of trial, Rocky turned down a prosecution offer of just six months in jail, along with probation and other conditions, if he would plead guilty to one count.

Insisting on his innocence, Rocky decided to gamble that a jury would feel the same. It paid off. The jurors felt at least that there was reasonable doubt of his guilt.

Rihanna hugged the defense lawyers, as did Rocky. She attended the trial sporadically and brought the couple's two sons — 2-year-old RZA Athelston Mayers and 1-year-old Riot Rose Mayers — for some of the closing arguments.

The couple had to fight through a crush of photographers, reporters, YouTubers and fans to get into a waiting SUV outside the courthouse after the verdict.

"This whole experience has been crazy for the past 4 years,' Rocky said amid the mob scene. "I'm thank-

ful and it's blessed to be here right now to be a free man talking to y'all."

District Attorney Nathan Hochman said he respected the jury's decision.

"Our office remains committed to seeking accountability for those who break the law, no matter their status or influence," Hochman said in a statement. "Fame does not place anyone above the law, and we will not waver in our pursuit of justice for victims and the community."

The verdict came at the height of Rocky's fame, if not the pinnacle of his music career. The three-time Grammy nominee, fashion mogul and actor has a banner year in the works, and can now look to it without the threat of prison hanging over him. He is scheduled to headline the Rolling Loud music festival in March; he is one of the celebrity co-chairs of fashion's biggest night, the Met Gala, in May; and he stars with Denzel Washington in director Spike Lee's film "Highest 2 Lowest," set for release in early summer.

Prosecutors and their witnesses said that he was beefing with a former friend, A\$AP Relli, with whom he had been in a crew who called themselves the A\$AP Mob since high school. They said the two men met up in Hollywood on Nov. 6, 2021, and after a scuffle Rocky pulled the gun and fired twice at Relli, who said one of the shots grazed his knuckle but was not seriously hurt.

Rocky's lawyer Joe Tacopina said in his closing argument that Relli is "an angry pathological liar" who "committed perjury again and again and again and again."

Rocky's lawyers and witnesses they called said Rocky had shot a prop gun that only fires blanks, which he had been carrying for security since taking it from a music video set months earlier. They said he fired it as a warning because Relli was attacking another member of their crew.

The jurors were also instructed that if they found that Rocky reasonably believed that he or one of the two friends with him that night were in imminent danger of injury, and that he used reasonable force, they could find the defendant not guilty.

The jurors were escorted from the courthouse and all left promptly without speaking to reporters. It wasn't clear whether they reached the verdict because they believed he was in fact carrying a prop gun or that he acted in self-defense. They did not have to agree on their reasoning, or explain it outside of the jury room. They just had to reach the same conclusion.

"They saw through this mirage of a case," Tacopina said. "He turned down a plea for almost no jail time because he was innocent."

In his closing argument, Deputy District Attorney John Lewin urged the jurors not to be influenced by the celebrity or family aspects of the case, and suggested Rihanna bringing the kids to closing arguments was an attempt to manipulate the jury.

"You are not allowed to consider how this might affect Rihanna and his kids," the prosecutor said. "We are all responsible for our own actions in the world."

After the verdict, Tacopina said outside the courthouse that "Rocky did not want her here, I will tell you that."

He said Rocky "wanted to shield her from this. Wild horses couldn't keep her away."

Rocky was more than 30 minutes late for the reading of the verdict, and looked shaken and tense as he waited for it.

"There was a moment when before we heard the words from the clerk, he didn't know if he was going to be spending the next two decades in jail or going home," Tacopina said.

Then came the explosion of the emotion, and the leap into the crowd.

"I didn't know how athletic he was," Tacopina said. "That was raw emotion, you guys got to see that. Even for us it was insane."

A deeper look at the talks between US and Russian officials as Trump suggests Ukraine is to blame

By MATTHEW LEE and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Top U.S. and Russian officials had their most extensive high-level engagement since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine almost three years ago, meeting for four hours Tuesday

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before President Donald Trump suggested that Kyiv was to blame for the conflict.

Trump showed little patience for Ukraine's objections to being excluded from the talks in Saudi Arabia. He said repeatedly that Ukraine's leaders never should have allowed the conflict to begin, indicating Kyiv should have been willing to make concessions to Russia before it sent troops into Ukraine in 2022.

"Today I heard, 'Oh, well, we weren't invited.' Well, you been there for three years. You should have ended it three years" ago, Trump told reporters at his Florida residence. "You should have never started it. You could have made a deal."

Such comments and Trump's goal of mending ties with Moscow may come at a cost to the transatlantic alliance of the U.S. and Europe and significantly damage Washington's standing with Ukraine as well as with other nations counting on U.S. leadership in NATO and elsewhere for their security and protection.

During former President Joe Biden's administration, the U.S. and Europe focused on isolating Russia and defending the post-World War II international order.

In Riyadh, the delegations led by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed to set up teams to look into restoring staffing at the U.S. and Russian embassies in Moscow and Washington that have been decimated by a series of tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions.

The effort is aimed at using those channels to support Ukraine peace negotiations and to explore ways to restart economic and global cooperation. A Russian official pointed to possible joint energy ventures.

Here's a look at the meeting and what comes next:

Reestablishing tattered diplomatic relations

First on both countries' list of accomplishments was an agreement to end what has been years of dwindling diplomatic relations that hit a post-Cold War low point after Russian President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022.

The meeting, which came just a week after Trump spoke to Putin by phone, was the first substantive face-to-face discussion between the nations' top diplomats since former Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Lavrov in Geneva in January 2022 in an unsuccessful bid to prevent the Ukraine conflict.

Lavrov said after Tuesday's talks that the sides agreed to fast-track the appointment of new ambassadors, adding that senior diplomats from the two countries will meet shortly to discuss specifics related to "lifting artificial barriers to the work of the U.S. and Russian embassies and other missions."

In reality, the decimation of the U.S. and Russian embassies' personnel began well before Russian troops rolled into Ukraine in 2022, starting after 2014 Russia's annexation of Crimea. That was seen as illegal by most of the world during the Obama administration, which ordered several Russian offices in the U.S. to close.

It picked up steam after the 2018 poisoning in Britain of an exiled Russian spy and his daughter, which British authorities blamed on Russia, and which resulted in mass expulsions of diplomats and the closure of numerous consulates in both countries and Europe.

Asked by The Associated Press if the U.S. now considered those cases closed, Rubio declined to say but said it would be impossible to get a Ukraine peace agreement without diplomatic engagement.

"I'm not going to negotiate or talk through every element of the disruptions that exist or have existed in our diplomatic relations, on the mechanics of it," he said. Bringing an end to the conflict cannot happen "unless we have at least some normalcy in the way our diplomatic missions operate in Moscow and in Washington, D.C."

Negotiating an end to the conflict in Ukraine

The two sides agreed to set up high-level working groups to begin exploring a negotiated end to the conflict. It was not immediately clear when these teams would first meet, but both said it would be soon.

As to concessions that may need to be made by all sides, Trump's national security adviser, Mike Waltz, who participated in the talks Tuesday, said the issue of territory and security guarantees would be among the subjects discussed.

Rubio said a high-level team, including experts who know technical details, will begin to engage with the Russian side on "parameters of what an end to this conflict would look like."

On the key issue of a prospective peacekeeping mission to monitor a potential ceasefire in Ukraine, the

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top Russian diplomat said Moscow would not accept any troops from NATO members, repeating its assertion that Ukraine's bid to join the Western military alliance poses a major security issue.

"We explained that the deployment of troops from the countries that are NATO members, even if they are deployed under the EU or national flags, will not change anything and will certainly be unacceptable for us," Lavrov said.

Exclusion of Ukraine and Europe from the talks

Neither Ukraine nor European nations were invited to Tuesday's talks in Riyadh, but U.S. officials said there is no intention to exclude them from peace negotiations should they begin in earnest.

"No one is being sidelined here," Rubio said. "Obviously, there's going to be engagement and consultation with Ukraine, with our partners in Europe and others. But ultimately, the Russian side will be indispensable to this effort."

Waltz agreed: "If you're going to bring both sides together, you have to talk to both sides. ... We are absolutely talking to both sides."

He noted that Trump spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy immediately after speaking with Putin last week and that U.S. Vice President JD Vance and Rubio met Friday with Zelenskyy in Germany.

Still, Zelenskyy was clearly peeved at being omitted from the meeting, postponing plans to visit Saudi Arabia on Wednesday to avoid any linkage of his trip with Tuesday's U.S.-Russia talks.

And that was before Trump's comments suggesting Kyiv was at fault in starting the fighting.

"This whole negotiation from the start seems very tilted in Russia's favor. And it's even a question whether it should be termed a negotiation or in some sense, a series of American capitulations," said Nigel Gould-Davies, senior fellow for Eurasia and Russia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and a former British ambassador to Belarus.

Possible lifting of US sanctions against Russia

Asked whether the U.S. could lift sanctions against Moscow imposed during the Biden presidency, Rubio noted that "to bring an end to any conflict, there has to be concessions made by all sides" and "we're not going to predetermine what those are."

Asked if the U.S. could officially remove Lavrov from its sanctions list, Rubio said that "we're just not at that level of conversation yet."

Potential US-Russian cooperation

Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund who joined the Russian delegation in Riyadh, told reporters that Russia and the U.S. should develop joint energy ventures.

"We need joint projects, including in the Arctic and other regions," he said.

Should the parties succeed in negotiating an end to the Ukraine conflict, Rubio said, it could open "incredible opportunities" to partner with the Russians "on issues that hopefully will be good for the world and also improve our relations in the long term."

He did not say what those would entail.

Arctic air sweeping south over Plains shatters record temperatures in North Dakota

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — More than 95 million people are facing gripping cold Tuesday as a polar vortex sends temperatures plunging to record levels, closing schools, bursting pipes and forcing communities to set up more temporary shelters for the homeless.

"Some of the coldest temperatures of the entire winter season right now across the central United States," said Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

The harsh cold descended on the nation's midsection Monday on the heels of weekend storms that pummeled the Eastern U.S. killing at least 17 people. Some areas in the Midwest have wind chills as cold as -50 to -60 degrees, Orrison said.

It is so dangerous that hundreds of public school districts canceled classes or switched to online learning

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Tuesday in Oklahoma, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Kansas and Missouri. And in Kansas City, Kansas, dozens of tents were set up in one building to house the homeless.

The biggest batch of record-setting cold temperatures are likely to hit early Thursday and Friday, Orison said. But North Dakota already felt more like the North Pole on Tuesday as Bismarck hit minus 39, breaking the record of minus 37 (minus 38.3 C) set in 1910 for the same date.

Stephanie Hatzenbuehler's family has been contending with the cold in many ways on their farm and ranch west of Mandan, North Dakota, from their calving operation, to vehicles and equipment starting, to their coal-fired furnace keeping up.

"There's always something new to learn and something new to experience. It doesn't matter how many times you've done this, so you have to adapt," said Hatzenbuehler, who called the cold spell "the Siberian experience."

Conditions were rapidly deteriorating across northeast, east and central Oklahoma as residents in these parts of the state were dealing with freezing rain, ice and snow, according to the National Weather Service.

The Oklahoma Highway Patrol said US Highway 75 between Tulsa and Okmulgee was shut down in both directions because of the amount of vehicles and semi-tractor trailers that were stuck on the road due to ice.

"Our troopers are working to get salt and sand trucks to the area to treat the roads but it is extremely slick in that area," the Oklahoma Highway Patrol said in post on X.

In upstate New York, a foot or more of lake-effect snow was expected to fall Tuesday in some areas east of Lake Ontario. The blowing snow created white-out conditions and prompted travel advisories.

Snowfall across the U.S. measured as much as 3 feet (0.91 meters) to 6.5 feet (1.98 meter) in south-eastern Wyoming's Snowy Range, to several inches from South Dakota to Missouri.

Kentucky braces for winter storm

In flood-battered Kentucky, the state was bracing for a winter storm that could dump a half-foot or more of snow in some parts of the state, starting Wednesday.

"This is a snowstorm in the middle of a natural disaster," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said at a news conference Tuesday in Frankfort, the capital city.

The weather-related death toll in Kentucky rose to 14, the governor said, with the two latest fatalities in Jefferson County, which includes Louisville. The two, an adult male and an adult female, were apparently homeless and both appeared to die from hypothermia, he said.

"So that should tell all of us that the weather conditions are as dangerous as that water is," Beshear said.

Part of Virginia prepares for a foot of snow

Officials in Virginia prepared for up to a foot of snow in the state's southern region, less than a week after being pummeled with snow, freezing rain and floodwaters.

"If you are not where you want to be by midnight tonight, please don't go," Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin said in a news conference on Tuesday.

Youngkin said the National Guard will be deployed across the state, and officials have also stockpiled water and meals for those in need. Local governments will also keep the doors of their homeless shelters open.

North Carolina governor declares a state of emergency

In North Carolina, Gov. Josh Stein declared a state of emergency on Tuesday as the National Weather Service forecast the approaching storm could bring up to 9 inches (22.9 centimeters) in far northeastern counties near the Atlantic coast.

The most populated areas of the state, including Charlotte, Raleigh and Greensboro, could see from 1 to 3 inches (2.5 to 7.6 centimeters) of snow, according to the weather service. Mountain areas still recovering from Hurricane Helene in the fall are largely expected to receive an inch or two.

Stein and state Emergency Management Director Will Ray also warned residents -- particularly in east-central counties -- about freezing rain and ice accumulation that could threaten power outages and make roads treacherous.

"At this time our greatest concerns are potential power outages and road safety," Stein said at a media

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briefing.

Ray said more than 180 North Carolina National Guard members have been activated to help any affected communities. Over 1,300 state Transportation Department employees and contractors were preparing for the storm in part by pretreating roads.

In Tennessee, Obion County Mayor Steve Carr said on social media Monday evening that there are currently no reports of missing people or deaths after a levee failed Saturday, flooding the small community of Rives, home to around 300 people in the western part of the state.

After assessing the destruction with the sheriff, the mayor said it is "unprecedented and has profoundly impacted the community." Rives remains under a state of emergency and more than 75% of the city has had power restored, the mayor said.

West Virginia had 3 storm-related deaths

In southern West Virginia, officials announced three flood-related deaths in McDowell County, where multiple roads were destroyed, public water systems were severed, schools remain closed and thousands were still without power Tuesday.

The county has one of the highest poverty rates in the nation.

More than 90 people have been helped from their southwest Detroit homes after a nearly century-old water main burst Monday, leaving streets and basements flooded during below-freezing temperatures. The flood waters receded later Monday morning after the break was found and the water flow stopped, according to the Great Lakes Water Authority.

What caused the break has not yet been determined. Nearly 400 homes are in the emergency flood zone, Mayor Mike Duggan told reporters Tuesday.

Scores of snow-covered vehicles were stuck in water up to their wheel wells or engine hoods. Fire and dive team crews used inflatable boats to help some people from homes. A few people were driven out in the bucket of a front-end loader.

Senate confirms Howard Lutnick as commerce secretary, a key role for Trump's trade agenda

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate confirmed wealthy financier Howard Lutnick as commerce secretary Tuesday, putting in place a staunch supporter of President Donald Trump's hardline trade policies.

At the Commerce Department, Lutnick, who was CEO at the investment firm Cantor Fitzgerald, will oversee 50,000 employees who do everything from collecting economic statistics to running the census to issuing weather reports. But he's likely to spend a lot of time — along with Jamieson Greer, Trump's nominee to be the top U.S. trade negotiator — managing the president's aggressive plans to impose import taxes on U.S. trading partners, including allies and adversaries alike.

The Senate vote to confirm Lutnick was 51-45.

Trump views the tariffs as a versatile economic tool. They can raise money to finance his tax cuts elsewhere, protect U.S. industries and pressure other countries into making concessions on such issues as their own trade barriers, immigration and drug trafficking. Mainstream economists mostly view tariffs as counterproductive: They are paid by import companies in the United States, which try to pass along the higher costs to consumers and can thereby add to inflationary pressures throughout the economy.

At his confirmation hearing last month, Lutnick dismissed as "nonsense" the idea that tariffs contribute to inflation. He expressed support for deploying across-the-board tariffs "country by country" to strong-arm other countries into lowering barriers to American exports.

Trump last week announced plans for "reciprocal" tariffs — raising U.S. import tax rates to match the higher taxes that other countries impose on goods from the U.S. The move would shatter the rules that have governed world trade for decades. Since the 1960s, tariff rates have mostly emerged from negotiations between dozens of countries. Trump is commandeering the process.

The president has also imposed 10% tariffs on Chinese imports and effectively raised U.S. taxes on

foreign steel and aluminum. He has threatened — and delayed until March 4 — 25% tariffs on goods from Canada and Mexico.

Lutnick was CEO at Cantor Fitzgerald when its offices were hit in the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center. The firm lost two-thirds of its employees — 658 people — that day, including Lutnick's brother. Howard Lutnick led the firm's recovery and is a member of the Board of Directors of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

Lutnick has promised to sell off his business holdings. They're complicated. His financial disclosure statement showed that he had positions in more than 800 businesses and other private organizations.

Federal judge won't immediately block Elon Musk or DOGE from federal data or worker layoffs

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge refused Tuesday to immediately block billionaire Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency from accessing government data systems or participating in worker layoffs.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan found that there are legitimate questions about Musk's authority but said there isn't enough evidence of grave legal harm to justify a temporary restraining order.

The decision came in a lawsuit filed by 14 Democratic states challenging DOGE's authority to access sensitive government data. The attorneys general argued that Musk is wielding the kind of power that the Constitution says can be held only by those elected or confirmed by the Senate.

The Trump administration has maintained that layoffs are coming from agency heads and asserted that despite his public cheering of the effort, Musk isn't running DOGE's day-to-day operations himself.

DOGE has tapped into computer systems across multiple agencies with the blessing of President Donald Trump, digging into budgets and searching for what he calls waste, fraud and abuse, even as a growing number of lawsuits allege DOGE is violating the law.

Chutkan recognized the concerns of the states, which include New Mexico and Arizona.

"DOGE's unpredictable actions have resulted in considerable uncertainty and confusion," she wrote. Their questions about Musk's apparent "unchecked authority" and lack of congressional oversight for DOGE are legitimate and they may be able to successfully argue them later, she found.

Still, at this point, it remains unclear exactly how DOGE's work will affect the states, and judges can only issue orders to block specific, immediate harms, she found.

Chutkan, who was nominated by Democratic President Barack Obama, previously oversaw the now-dismissed criminal election interference case against Trump in Washington, D.C.

The states' lawsuit seeks to bar DOGE from the federal Office of Personnel Management and the departments of Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, Energy, Transportation and Commerce.

In other DOGE lawsuits, two other judges in Washington have similarly declined to immediately block DOGE from access to agency systems. A federal judge in New York has blocked DOGE's access to Treasury Department data for now.

US Catholic bishops sue Trump administration for halt in funding for refugee settlement

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Catholic bishops sued the Trump administration on Tuesday over its abrupt halt to funding of refugee resettlement, calling the action unlawful and harmful to newly arrived refugees and to the nation's largest private resettlement program.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says the administration, by withholding millions even for reimbursements of costs incurred before the sudden cut-off of funding, violates various laws as well as the constitutional provision giving the power of the purse to Congress, which already approved the funding.

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The conference's Migration and Refugee Services has sent layoff notices to 50 workers, more than half its staff, with additional cuts expected in local Catholic Charities offices that partner with the national office, the lawsuit said.

"The Catholic Church always works to uphold the common good of all and promote the dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable among us," said Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the USCCB. "That includes the unborn, the poor, the stranger, the elderly and infirm, and migrants." The funding suspension prevents the church from doing so, he said.

"The conference suddenly finds itself unable to sustain its work to care for the thousands of refugees who were welcomed into our country and assigned to the care of the USCCB by the government after being granted legal status," Broglio said.

The conference is trying to keep the program going, but it's "financially unsustainable," he said, adding that it's trying to hold the U.S. government to its "moral and legal commitments."

The conference is one of 10 national agencies, most of them faith-based, that serve refugees and that have been sent scrambling since receiving a Jan. 24 State Department letter informing them of an immediate suspension of funding pending a review of foreign-aid programs.

The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, notes that the resettlement program isn't even foreign aid. It's a domestic program to help newly arrived refugees — who arrive legally after being vetted overseas — meet initial needs such as housing and job placement.

"USCCB spends more on refugee resettlement each year than it receives in funding from the federal government, but it cannot sustain its programs without the millions in federal funding that provide the foundation of this private-public partnership," the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit said the government is attempting to "pull the rug out" from under the program, causing it longstanding damage.

The lawsuit names the departments of State and Health and Human Services as well as their respective secretaries, Marco Rubio and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Both departments have roles in delegating resettlement work to the bishops conference.

There was no immediate reply in court from those departments. An HHS spokesperson said the department does not comment on pending litigation.

The USCCB said it is still awaiting about \$13 million in reimbursements for expenses prior to Jan. 24.

As of Jan. 25, it said, there were 6,758 refugees assigned by the government to USCCB's care that had been in the country less than 90 days, the period of time for which they're eligible for resettlement aid.

The conference said suspending the resettlement effort will only prolong the time it takes for refugees to find employment and become self-sufficient.

President Donald Trump, whose first administration sharply cut refugee admissions, immediately suspended the decades-old program upon taking office again in January. He and his proxies have criticized refugee resettlement and other avenues of immigration.

Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic convert, recently accused the bishops conference for resettling "illegal immigrants" in order to get millions in federal funding — an apparent reference to the resettlement program, which involves legally approved refugees. The lawsuit noted that federal reimbursements don't cover the entire cost of the program and that in 2023 the conference paid \$4 million more than it received, while additional donors supported resettlement efforts by local Catholic Charities and other recipients.

Vance's criticisms drew rejoinders not only from U.S. bishops but an implicit rebuke from Pope Francis, who said Christian charity requires helping those in need, not just those in one's closest circles.

Trump has signed an executive order on IVF. Here's what you should know about the procedure

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed an executive order aiming to reduce the costs of in vitro fertilization, a medical procedure that helps people facing infertility build their families.

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"Americans need reliable access to IVF and more affordable treatment options, as the cost per cycle can range from \$12,000 to \$25,000," the order said. "Providing support, awareness, and access to affordable fertility treatments can help these families navigate their path to parenthood with hope and confidence."

The order instructed the assistant to the president for domestic policy to give Trump a list of policy recommendations on protecting IVF access and "aggressively reducing out-of-pocket and health plan costs for IVF treatment" within 90 days.

IVF became a talking point during the 2024 presidential campaign when Alabama agreed to protect in vitro fertilization providers from legal liability a couple of weeks after the state Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos can be considered children under state law.

Trump said at the time he strongly supported its availability. And a June poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that about 6 in 10 U.S. adults support protecting access to IVF, with 26% neutral and about 1 in 10 opposed.

In 2018, assisted reproductive technology, including IVF, contributed to 2% of all infants born in the United States, according to a report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Here's what to know about this increasingly common fertility treatment.

What is IVF?

The procedure offers a possible solution when a woman has trouble getting pregnant, and it's normally tried after other, less expensive fertility treatments have failed.

It involves retrieving the woman's eggs and combining them in a lab dish with a man's sperm to create a fertilized embryo, which is then transferred into her uterus in an attempt to create a pregnancy.

IVF is done in cycles and may take more than one. The procedure can use a couple's eggs and sperm or those from a donor.

Does insurance cover the procedure?

Insurance coverage of IVF and other fertility treatments can be patchy and depends on who provides insurance for the patient.

More large employers are offering the coverage to attract and keep workers. Many businesses also are extending coverage beyond those with an infertility diagnosis, making it accessible to LGBTQ+ couples and single women.

Government-funded programs such as Medicaid largely limit fertility treatment coverage. Coverage is less common among smaller employers.

Critics have said the lack of widespread coverage creates a divide, limiting treatments mainly to people who can pay thousands of dollars out of pocket.

What is the history of IVF?

The first baby conceived through IVF was born in 1978 in England. But the first in the U.S. was in 1981 in Norfolk, Virginia, with the birth of Elizabeth Carr.

Her mother, Judith Carr, had had three abnormal pregnancies, forcing the removal of her fallopian tubes. She and her husband sought treatment from Howard and Georgeanna Jones, doctors who opened a fertility clinic at Eastern Virginia Medical School.

The Norfolk clinic faced resistance before it even opened. When it sought a required state certificate in 1979, more than 600 people jammed into a public hearing. Several women voiced support for IVF and testified about wanting to start a family, while anti-abortion groups raised concerns about doctors interfering with human conception and embryos being discarded.

Despite proposed state legislation to stop the clinic, it opened in 1980, with others following soon afterward in California, Tennessee and Texas. By 1988, at least 169 in vitro centers were operating in 41 states.

The use of IVF continued to grow, but sentiments against it never really went away in the American anti-abortion movement, said Margaret Marsh, a history professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Many abortion opponents had made an uneasy peace with the technology as a treatment for infertility, Marsh said. But opposition to IVF has gained momentum since the overturn of Roe v. Wade in 2022.

"Not everyone in the anti-abortion movement opposes these reproductive technologies, but many do,"

she said.

How are embryos made?

The treatment often uses hormones to trigger ovulation so multiple eggs are produced and a needle is used to remove them from the ovaries.

Eggs can be fertilized by adding the sperm to the eggs in a lab, or a single sperm can be injected into each egg.

The fertilized egg is cultured over about five to six days to create the blastocyst — the early stage of an embryo — and is either transferred or stored for future use, said Dr. Jason Griffith, a reproductive endocrinologist in Houston.

Griffith said that on day three after fertilization, an embryo is anywhere from six to 10 cells. By day six, it's between 100 and 300 cells. In comparison, he said, a person contains more than 1 trillion cells.

How are embryos frozen and stored?

Frozen embryos can be used for future pregnancies, and the vast majority survive the thawing process.

The freezing process involves replacing the water in embryo cells with a protectant fluid and flash-freezing with liquid nitrogen, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Frozen embryos are stored in tanks containing liquid nitrogen at hospital labs or reproductive medicine centers. Griffith said they can also be kept in storage facilities contracted by health care facilities, especially when they are stored for many years. Frozen embryos can be safely preserved for a decade or more.

Griffith said conditions are monitored in these facilities and there are physical security mechanisms to safeguard the tanks and backup generators in case of power outages.

Hamas says it will free 6 living hostages and hand over 4 bodies, accelerating Gaza releases

By SAMY MAGDY and NATALIE MELZER Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A top Hamas official says the militant group will free six living Israeli hostages on Saturday and return the bodies of four others on Thursday, a surprise acceleration in releases apparently in trade for Israel's allowing mobile homes and construction equipment into the devastated Gaza Strip.

The six are the last living hostages set to be freed during the ceasefire's first phase in exchange for hundreds of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

The announcement by Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya, in prerecorded remarks released Tuesday, said the dead would include the "Bibas family" — two young boys and their mother who for many Israelis have come to symbolize the plight of those taken captive. Israel has not confirmed their deaths, and the prime minister's office urged the public not to distribute "photos, names and rumors" after the announcement by Hamas.

"In the past few hours, we have been in turmoil," surviving members of the Bibas family said in a statement released Tuesday by a group representing the relatives of hostages. "Until we receive definitive confirmation, our journey is not over."

Israel has long expressed grave concern about Shiri Bibas and her sons, Kfir and Ariel, who Hamas claimed had been killed in an Israeli airstrike early in the war. Husband and father Yarden Bibas was kidnapped separately and released this month.

Kfir, who was 9 months old at the time, was the youngest hostage taken in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that killed 1,200 in Israel and ignited the war. A video of the abduction showed Shiri swaddling her redheaded boys in a blanket and being whisked away by armed men.

The six living hostages slated for release are Eliya Cohen, Tal Shoham, Omer Shem Tov, Omer Wenkert, Hisham Al-Sayed, and Avera Mengistu, the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said Tuesday. Cohen, 27, Shem Tov, 22, and Wenkert, 23, were abducted from a music festival. Shoham was taken from the hard-hit community of Kibbutz Beeri. Al-Sayed, 36, and Mengistu, 39, have both been held since crossing into Gaza years before the Oct. 7 attack.

The release of all six this week would mark an acceleration of the ceasefire deal, which called for Hamas

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to release three living hostages Saturday, with three more to be freed a week later. When the deal was made, it called only for the bodies of the dead to be returned by the end of the first phase.

Israel is expected to continue releasing hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including many serving life sentences for deadly attacks, in exchange for the hostages. Others were detained without charge. During the first phase, Israel is also due to release all women and children seized from Gaza since the war began.

The warring sides have yet to negotiate the second and more difficult phase, in which Hamas would release dozens more hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal.

Equipment allowed in

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had agreed to allow long-requested mobile homes and construction equipment into Gaza as part of efforts to accelerate the hostages' release.

Hamas last week threatened to hold up releases, citing the refusal to allow in mobile homes and heavy equipment among other alleged violations of the truce.

Israel began allowing entry of rubble-removing equipment Tuesday, according to an Associated Press journalist in southern Gaza and Egypt's state-run media. The AP journalist saw two bulldozers clearing rubble in an area near the Palestinian side of the Rafah border crossing. An Egyptian driver told AP that dozens of bulldozers and tractors were at another crossing, awaiting Israeli permission to enter.

Rebuilding Gaza could cost \$53.2 billion, according to a report released Tuesday by the World Bank, the U.N. and the European Union. The report identified almost \$30 billion in damage from the war, nearly half reflecting destruction of homes.

Palestinians want to stay in their homeland

The ceasefire that began in mid-January paused fighting that has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants.

But Israel's government still says it wants to eliminate Hamas as a military and governing force in Gaza. And U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal to permanently remove Gaza's 2 million residents and redevelop the territory, though rejected by the Arab world and the Palestinians, has stirred even more uncertainty. Egypt is working on a counter-plan to rebuild without moving Palestinians.

"We will not leave our country, no matter what happens," Muhammad Shaaban, a resident of Jabaliya in northern Gaza, told the AP. The area was hit by some of the fiercest bombardment of the war and most of its buildings and infrastructure was destroyed or damaged.

Mohammad Bahjat, also from Jabaliya, said Trump's proposal is "unacceptable" and that he and his family would resist being expelled.

Israel has embraced the plan, and it and the Trump administration have emphasized they share the same goals in the war.

Israelis were horrified by the sight of three emaciated hostages in an earlier release this month, and revelations about hostages being held alone, barefoot or in chains have increased the pressure on Netanyahu's government to push ahead with the ceasefire's next phase. A number of Palestinians released from Israeli prisons have shown emaciation, and some have reported abuses including beatings.

Fears fighting will resume

The deal's first phase calls for Hamas to gradually release 33 Israeli hostages, eight of whom are believed to be dead. So far, 19 living Israeli hostages have been released in the current phase, in addition to five Thai farmworkers who were abducted. If this week's releases go as planned, four bodies will remain and are set to be returned next week.

Hamas-led militants would still hold some 60 captives, around half believed to be dead.

The ceasefire's current phase runs until the beginning of March, and there are fears that fighting will resume. Talks on the second phase were to start early this month.

Questions emerge about what may have caused Delta plane to burst into flames and flip over

By JOHN WAWROW and MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Investigators will consider the weather conditions, as well as the possibility of human error or an aircraft malfunction as they try to determine why a Delta Air Lines jet burst into flames and flipped upside down as it tried to land in Toronto, aviation experts said Tuesday.

Witnesses and video from the scene Monday afternoon shows the plane landing so hard that its right wing is sheared off. It bursts into flames before sliding down the runway and flipping over. Miraculously, all 80 people on board the flight from Minneapolis to Toronto's Pearson International Airport survived.

"It appears from the video that the plane landed so hard that the right main gear collapsed. The tail and right wing began skidding causing the plane to roll over to the right," Ella Atkins, the head of Virginia Tech's aerospace and ocean engineering department and a pilot. "During the rollover, the right wing and tail sheared off, and a fire ignited, likely due to skidding and fuel leakage at least from a right wing tank."

All but two of the 21 people injured on the flight have been released from hospitals, the airport CEO said Tuesday.

"How grateful we are there was no loss of life or life threatening injuries," Deborah Flint, CEO of Greater Toronto Airports Authority, said during a news conference. "The crew heroically led passengers to safety."

Crash investigation

Communications between the tower and pilot were normal on approach and it's not clear what went wrong when the plane — a Mitsubishi CRJ-900 made by the Canadian company Bombardier — touched down.

Aviation experts said investigators will consider conditions on the ground, the pilot's actions before landing, and potential problems with the landing gear. The Transportation Safety Board of Canada is leading the investigation with support from the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board.

Juan Browne, a commercial pilot who discusses aviation incidents on his popular YouTube channel, said preliminary data suggests the speed and rate of descent, crosswinds and the weather were "within limits."

But Browne raised concerns about the pilots' actions before landing.

"It appears that the aircraft simply did not flare at all," Browne said. Flaring slows the aircraft's rate of descent. "They just drove it into the runway."

At the time of the crash, Pearson was experiencing blowing snow and winds of 32 mph (51 kph) gusting to 40 mph (65 kph), according to the Meteorological Service of Canada. The temperature was about 16.5 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 8.6 degrees Celsius). Browne said blowing snow reduces visibility.

Michael McCormick, an assistant professor and program coordinator for air traffic management at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida, said investigators would look closely at the landing gear to make sure it was properly locked in place, and would consider staffing on the ground and in the aircraft.

"They will look at the number of people working both on the aircraft and the control towers. And they will look at their schedules," McCormick said. "Are they well rested? Are they well staffed?"

But a Canadian investigator refused to comment on preliminary theories.

"At this point, it's far too early to say what the cause of this accident might be," TSB Senior Investigator Ken Webster said in a video statement Tuesday, as he stood near the remains of the aircraft.

He said investigators will examine the wreckage and runway, and have removed the cockpit voice and flight data recorders and sent them to the lab for analysis.

'Everything just kind of went sideways'

Peter Carlson, who was traveling to Toronto for a paramedics conference, said the landing was "very forceful."

"All the sudden everything just kind of went sideways and the next thing I know, it's kind of a blink and I'm upside down still strapped in," he told CBC News.

That everyone survived the Delta crash is a testament to the safety improvements made by airlines and

aircraft manufacturers, including wings that are designed to come off to reduce explosions, well-trained flight crews and seats built to withstand impacts of up to 16 times the force of gravity.

"That seat is your single best resource in order to keep you protected," McCormick said. "There's a reason why the flight attendants walk around the aircraft prior to (landing) ... to make sure everybody has their seat belts fastened."

But is it safe to fly?

The crash was the fourth major aviation accident in North America in recent weeks. A commercial jetliner and an Army helicopter collided near Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 29, killing 67 people. A medical transportation plane crashed in Philadelphia on Jan. 31, killing the six people on board and another person on the ground. And on Feb. 6, 10 people were killed in a plane crash in Alaska.

Nevertheless, according to Jeff Guzzetti, an airline safety consultant and a former FAA and NTSB investigator, air travel is "extremely safe."

"The odds of getting injured or killed in an commercial airline accident is far less than driving in your car," Guzzetti said.

Still, he worries about layoffs at the Federal Aviation Administration under the Trump administration. "I am concerned that the proposed cuts and changes to the FAA may increase the risk of further accidents," he said.

The Delta flight was cleared to land at about 2:10 p.m. Audio recordings show the control tower warned the pilots of a possible air flow "bump" on approach.

"It was windy, but the airplanes are designed and certified to handle that," said John Cox, CEO of aviation safety consulting firm Safety Operating Systems in St. Petersburg, Florida. "The pilots are trained and experienced to handle that."

Carlson said when he took off his seat belt he crashed onto the ceiling, which had become the floor. He smelled gas, saw aviation fuel cascading down the cabin windows and knew they all had to get out. Carlson and another man assisted a mother and her son out of the plane, then Carlson dropped onto the snowy tarmac.

"All of us just wanted to be out of the aircraft," he said.

Kennedy says panel will examine childhood vaccine schedule after promising not to change it

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — To earn the vote he needed to become the nation's top health official, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. made a special promise to a U.S. senator: He would not change the nation's current vaccination schedule.

But on Tuesday, speaking for the first time to thousands of U.S. Health and Human Services agency employees, he vowed to investigate the childhood vaccine schedule that prevents measles, polio and other dangerous diseases.

"Nothing is going to be off limits," Kennedy said, adding that pesticides, food additives, microplastics, antidepressants and the electromagnetic waves emitted by cellphones and microwaves also would be studied.

Kennedy's remarks, which circulated on social media, were delivered during a welcome ceremony for the new health secretary at the agency's headquarters in Washington as a measles outbreak among mostly unvaccinated people raged in West Texas. The event was held after a weekend of mass firings of thousands of HHS employees. More dismissals are expected.

In his comments Tuesday, Kennedy promised that a new "Make America Healthy Again" commission would investigate vaccines, pesticides and antidepressants to see if they have contributed to a rise in chronic illnesses such as diabetes and obesity that have plagued the American public. The commission was formed last week in an executive order by Donald Trump immediately after Kennedy was sworn in

as the president's new health secretary.

That directive said the commission will be made up of cabinet members and other officials from the administration and will develop a strategy around children's health within the next six months. Kennedy said it will investigate issues, including childhood vaccinations, that "were formally taboo or insufficiently scrutinized."

While Kennedy did not directly call for changes to the vaccination schedule on Tuesday, his plan to investigate it raises questions about his commitment to Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy, a Louisiana physician who harbored deep misgivings over the health secretary's anti-vaccine advocacy. Cassidy ultimately voted to send Kennedy's nomination to the Senate floor after he said Kennedy gave him assurances that he would not alter the federal vaccine schedule.

"On this topic, the science is good, the science is credible," Cassidy said during a Senate floor speech earlier this month explaining his vote. "Vaccines save lives. They are safe."

Rigorous studies of thousands of people followed by decades of real-world use have proven that the vaccines approved by the Food and Drug Administration for both children and adults safely and effectively prevent diseases.

Cassidy said during his Senate speech last month that Kennedy had made a number of promises that stemmed from "intense conversations" to garner his support. Specifically, Cassidy said Kennedy would "maintain the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices' recommendations without changes."

Those recommendations are what pediatricians around the country use to decide the safest and most effective ages at which to offer vaccinations to children. The committee meets every year to review the latest data on both old and new vaccines to ensure there are no red flags for safety or other issues before publishing its annual schedule.

When contacted about Kennedy's remarks, Cassidy's office did not comment.

Kennedy gained a loyal following for his nonprofit by raising objections to COVID-19 protocols and doubts around the COVID-19 vaccine. Despite his work, Kennedy repeatedly told senators that he was not "anti-vaccine" during his confirmation hearings.

Dr. Paul Offit, an infectious-disease expert at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia who sits on a federal vaccine panel, didn't believe him.

"I think he will do everything he can to make vaccines less available and less affordable because he's an anti-vaccine activist," Offit, who developed the rotavirus vaccine that is on the CDC's childhood immunization schedule, said last week.

Kennedy promised staffers on Tuesday during his speech that he would keep an open mind in his new job and asked them to return the favor.

"A lot of times when I read these articles characterizing myself, I think I wouldn't want to work for that guy, either," Kennedy said, eliciting some laughs from the crowd. "Let's start a relationship by letting go of any preconceived perceptions you may have of me."

What to know about the airplane that crashed while landing at Toronto's airport

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

A passenger jet made a hard landing before it lost a wing, burst into flames and flipped onto its roof at Toronto's airport, the fourth major aviation accident in North America in the past three weeks.

Although 21 people were injured, all 80 people on board the Delta Air Lines flight from Minneapolis survived the crash Monday.

Here are some things to know about the crash:

What caused the airplane to flip?

Investigators and airport officials have been careful to avoid talking about what went wrong when the plane touched down.

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Communications between the tower at Toronto's Pearson International Airport and the pilot were normal on approach and airport officials said Monday was a clear day with normal operations before the crash.

What are investigators focusing on?

Aviation experts said investigators will consider whether the pilot's actions, potential landing gear problems or weather conditions caused the hard landing.

Were strong winds a factor in the crash?

Toronto Pearson Fire Chief Todd Aitken said the runway was dry and there was no crosswind conditions. Audio recordings indicate the control tower warned the pilots of a possible air flow "bump" on the approach. Winds were gusting up to 40 mph (65 kph).

But airplanes and pilots should be equipped to handle those kinds of winds while landing, said John Cox, CEO of aviation safety consulting firm Safety Operating Systems in Florida.

Were the passengers badly injured?

Of the 21 people who were transported for treatment, all but two have been released from hospitals, the airport's chief executive said Tuesday.

The two who remain in the hospital do not have life-threatening injuries, said Deborah Flint, CEO of Greater Toronto Airports Authority.

Some of those injured were exposed to leaking fuel, according to airport fire officials.

What happened inside the plane?

One passenger told CBC News that he found himself upside down and still strapped in his seat after a forceful landing.

Peter Carlson said he crashed onto the ceiling when he took off his seat belt and smelled gas. He and another man helped a mother and her young son out of the plane before getting out.

Most of the passengers were able to begin evacuating on their own, fire officials who responded to the crash said.

Who is investigating?

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration said the Transportation Safety Board of Canada will lead the investigation. The National Transportation Safety Board in the U.S. was sending a team to assist.

Is it safe to fly?

The fourth major aviation accident in North America in less than a month has many people concerned about the safety of flying. Fatal crashes remain rare and the track record of U.S. airlines is remarkably safe.

But there have been deadly crashes recently around the world and U.S. officials have been raising concerns about an overtaxed and understaffed air traffic control system for years

Red carpet, fashion and music: F1 launches its 2025 season Hollywood style

By JAMES ELLINGWORTH AP Sports Writer

LONDON (AP) — Formula 1 kick-started its 75th anniversary season with music, glitz and glamor Tuesday as the race series aims to reach beyond a sports audience with a two-hour televised arena show.

Lewis Hamilton arrived wearing a tie in Ferrari red for his biggest event yet since joining the Italian team, before the seven-time champion emerged to rousing cheers in a full race suit to present the team's livery alongside teammate Charles Leclerc.

Asked to pick a word to describe his mood ahead of the new season, Hamilton picked "invigorated, because I feel so full of life and so much energy, because everything's new."

"Just focused on what's up ahead. I'm so proud to be part of the team, something new and exciting for me."

The F1 75 Live event at London's O2 arena was the first time the sport hosted its own large-scale launch event, rather than leaving it to the individual teams.

Drivers arrived on the red carpet for a show unlike any other event in F1 history which ended with all 20

drivers on a stage transformed into a grid, standing alongside cars in each team's 2025 livery.

Lavish team presentations included a James Bond parody for Aston Martin, a line of drummers with glowing sticks, cars sliding down the stage on motorized platforms, a parade of title-winning McLarens, and a comedy skit that played on Racing Bulls' sponsor-heavy full name.

The live crowd of F1 fans brought some unpredictability, with some boos for a mention of the governing body, the FIA, which has been in dispute with drivers over how it enforces punishments for swearing, and for Red Bull team principal Christian Horner.

There were also musical acts like country singer Kane Brown, who introduced Haas, British band Take That. American rapper and singer MGK, also known as Machine Gun Kelly, gave the show a high-energy, guitar-heavy intro.

Teams presented their 2025 liveries, but didn't have to show off the actual cars they'll race this season. Teams are still allowed to hold their own launch events to present their 2025 cars, as McLaren and Williams did last week and Ferrari is expected to do Wednesday.

It comes at a time when F1 is keen to expand beyond a sports audience, with races in cities like Miami and Las Vegas, a movie called "F1" starring Brad Pitt releasing in June, and the ongoing popularity of the "Drive To Survive" series on Netflix.

"To have this many fans out shows that we bring the sport together away from the racetrack. There's a lot of excitement," McLaren chief executive Zak Brown said Tuesday.

"The Brad Pitt movie will no doubt create a huge amount of awareness for the sport. Netflix, I'm sure, knowing what happened last year, will be a drama-filled television show again, which has been great for all of us. So I think the sport's going from strength to strength."

Drivers broadly welcomed the new launch show, though two-time champion Fernando Alonso warned it could be "a little bit of distraction" at a time when drivers and teams are fine-tuning their approach to the season.

Asked if he thought the launch would become a regular event, Horner said: "I'm sure if they think they can make some money out of it, we'll be doing this most years."

F1's preparations for the new season — which marks the series' 75th anniversary — continue with pre-season testing next week at the Bahrain International Circuit. The first race is the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 16.

Border arrests plummet 39% in January in an early gauge of Trump's immigration policies

WASHINGTON (AP) — Arrests for illegal border crossings from Mexico plummeted 39% in January from a month earlier, authorities said Tuesday, an early gauge of President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown.

The Border Patrol made 21,593 arrests during the month, down from 47,316 in December and the lowest mark since May 2020 near the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

"Call it the Trump Effect," the White House said in a statement.

Border arrests fell sharply well before Trump took office from an all-time high of 250,000 in December 2023. Mexican authorities increased enforcement within their own borders and then-President Joe Biden introduced severe asylum restrictions in June.

Arrests sank even further after Trump was sworn in on Jan. 20 and issued a slew of orders on immigration, including one to suspend asylum on grounds that the United States is under "invasion" at the southern border.

Border czar Tom Homan said Monday that there were 229 border arrests in a 24-hour period, the lowest he remembered since becoming a Border Patrol agent in 1984. Homeland Security Department officials say they want to drive that to zero.

Border Patrol Chief Michael Banks said Friday in Edinburg, Texas, that he will "not be satisfied that our border is secure until we have operational control of our border, which means anyone that crosses illegally

is apprehended or no one crosses.”

Homeland Security said Tuesday that it launched a multimillion-dollar video ad campaign in the U.S. and internationally that features Secretary Kristi Noem warning people to leave or not to come. “If you are here illegally, we will find you and deport you. You will never return,” she said in the video.

Judge questions motives for Trump’s order banning transgender troops

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Tuesday questioned President Donald Trump’s motives for issuing an executive order that calls for banning transgender troops from serving in the U.S. military, describing a portion of the directive as “frankly ridiculous.”

U.S. District Judge Ana Reyes indicated that she won’t rule before early March on whether to temporarily block the Trump administration from enforcing the order, which plaintiffs’ attorneys have said illegally discriminates against transgender troops.

But her questions and remarks during Tuesday’s hearing suggest that she is deeply skeptical of the administration’s reasoning for ordering a policy change. Reyes also lauded the service of several active-duty troops who sued to block the order.

“If you were in a foxhole, would you care about these individuals’ gender identity?” the judge asked a government attorney, who answered that it “would not be a primary concern of mine.”

Trump’s Jan. 27 order claims the sexual identity of transgender service members “conflicts with a soldier’s commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle, even in one’s personal life” and is harmful to military readiness. It requires Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to issue a revised policy.

Six transgender people who are active-duty service members and two others seeking to join the military sued to block the Trump administration from enforcing the order. In a court filing, plaintiffs’ lawyers argued that Trump’s order openly expresses “hostility” and constitutionally impermissible “animus” toward transgender people.

Reyes said the order’s language smears thousands of transgender troops as dishonest, dishonorable and undisciplined.

She asked Justice Department attorney Jason Lynch: “How is that anything other than showing animus?”

“I don’t have an answer for you,” Lynch responded.

“No, you have an answer. You just don’t want to give it,” the judge shot back.

Trump’s order also says that “use of pronouns that inaccurately reflect an individual’s sex” is inconsistent with a government policy to “establish high standards for troop readiness, lethality, cohesion, honesty, humility, uniformity, and integrity.”

Reyes said it is “frankly ridiculous” to suggest that pronoun usage could impact the military readiness of the U.S. armed forces.

“Because it doesn’t. Because any common sense, rational person would understand that it doesn’t,” said Reyes, who was nominated by President Joe Biden, a Democrat.

Reyes peppered Lynch for several hours with questions about the executive order. They disagreed on whether the language of the executive order explicitly bans transgender people from serving in the military.

Reyes asked Lynch if Trump himself would call it a ban, then added, “He would say, ‘Of course it is,’ because he calls it a transgender ban.” Lynch said the order itself doesn’t require the discharge of service members while Hegseth crafts a policy that reflects it.

“Everyone knows a change is coming. I’m not denying that,” Lynch said.

Reyes is expected to hear more arguments on Wednesday and again on March 3.

Plaintiffs’ attorneys contend Trump’s order violates transgender people’s rights to equal protection under the Fifth Amendment, marking them as “unequal and dispensable, demeaning them in the eyes of their fellow service members and the public.”

“The ban is an irrational and prejudicial attack on service members who have risked their lives to serve

their country," they wrote in a court filing.

Government attorneys say the plaintiffs are prematurely challenging an order that doesn't immediately require transgender troops to be discharged. The Justice Department also argues that the constitutional right to equal protection "requires only that similarly situated persons be treated alike."

"A transgender individual identifying as a woman is not similarly situated to a biological female, nor is a transgender individual identifying as a man similarly situated to a biological male," they wrote.

During Trump's first term, the Republican issued a directive to ban transgender service members. The Supreme Court allowed the ban to take effect. Biden scrapped it when he took office.

Thousands of transgender people serve in the military, but they represent less than 1 percent of all active-duty service members.

The plaintiffs include an Army Reserves platoon leader, an Army major who was awarded a Bronze Star for service in Afghanistan and a Sailor of the Year award winner serving in the Navy. They are represented by attorneys for the National Center for Lesbian Rights and GLAD Law.

Texas measles cases are up, and New Mexico now has an outbreak. Here's what you need to know

By DEVI SHASTRI and MORGAN LEE Associated Press

The measles outbreak in rural West Texas has grown to 58 cases as of Tuesday, and eight people in neighboring eastern New Mexico also have been diagnosed with measles.

New Mexico health department spokesman Robert Nott said Tuesday that the agency hadn't "identified any direct contact" between cases in its state and cases in Texas.

Measles is a highly contagious disease. Here's what you should know about how to protect yourself against measles, as well as what's happening in Texas and New Mexico.

Where is measles spreading?

The West Texas cases are concentrated in Gaines County, which has 45 infections. Terry County to the north has nine confirmed cases, while Lubbock and Lynn counties have a case each and Yoakum County has two.

The Texas Department of State Health Services said Monday that 13 people are hospitalized with measles.

State health officials say this outbreak is Texas' largest in nearly 30 years. Health department spokeswoman Lara Anton said last week that cases have been concentrated in a "close-knit, undervaccinated" Mennonite community — especially among families who attend small private religious schools or are homeschooled.

The New Mexico cases are in Lea County, which borders Gaines County in Texas. The cases include a family of five that's in isolation, the state health department said Tuesday, but none of those infected have needed to be hospitalized. Six people who have measles are not vaccinated, officials said.

New Mexico officials also said people may have been exposed at a grocery store, an elementary school, a church, Nor-Lea Hospital and a Walgreens in Hobbs.

What is measles?

Measles is a respiratory virus that can survive in the air for up to two hours. Up to 9 out of 10 people who are susceptible will get the virus if exposed, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Most kids will recover from the measles if they get it, but infection can lead to dangerous complications like pneumonia, blindness, brain swelling and death.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes, the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine is safe and highly effective in preventing measles infection and severe cases of the disease.

The first shot is recommended for children between 12 and 15 months old and the second between 4 and 6 years old. The vaccine series is required for kids before entering kindergarten in public schools nationwide.

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Before the vaccine was introduced in 1963, the U.S. saw some 3 million to 4 million cases per year. Now, it's usually fewer than 200 in a normal year.

There is no link between the vaccine and autism, despite a now-discredited study and health disinformation.

Why do vaccination rates matter?

In communities with high vaccination rates — above 95% — diseases like measles have a harder time spreading through communities. This is called "herd immunity."

But childhood vaccination rates have declined nationwide since the pandemic and more parents are claiming religious or personal conscience waivers to exempt their kids from required shots.

The U.S. saw a rise in measles cases in 2024, including an outbreak in Chicago that sickened more than 60. Five years earlier, measles cases were the worst in almost three decades in 2019.

Gaines County has one of the highest rates in Texas of school-aged children who opt out of at least one required vaccine, with nearly 14% of K-12 children in the 2023-24 school year. Health officials say that number is likely higher because it doesn't include many children who are homeschooled and whose data would not be reported.

What are public health officials doing to stop the spread?

Health workers are hosting regular vaccination clinic and screening efforts in Texas. They are also working with schools to educate people about the importance of vaccination and offering shots.

New Mexico medical providers are being urged to watch for and report measles infections, while state health authorities are attempting to trace and notify people who may have been exposed. The state health department is also doing free vaccination clinics in Hobbs and Lovington this week.

Leader of cultlike Zizians linked to 6 killings ordered held without bail in Maryland

By LEA SKENE, HOLLY RAMER and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

CUMBERLAND, Md. (AP) — The leader of a cultlike group connected to six killings in three states was ordered held without bail Tuesday in Maryland, where she faces trespassing and other charges.

Jack LaSota, 34, and two others arrested with her on Sunday appeared via videoconference for bail hearings in Allegany District Court. A judge ordered all three held without bail, describing them as dangerous flight risks.

Allegany County State's Attorney James Elliott said during the hearing Tuesday that LaSota has faked her own death in the past and "appears to be the leader of an extremist group" called the Zizians that has been linked to multiple deaths.

But LaSota, who is known online as Ziz, asked for pretrial release, saying she was homeless with no means of traveling. Speaking haltingly, she also repeatedly requested a vegan diet, saying she could starve otherwise and was already "in a mild state of delirium" due to lack of food.

"I haven't done anything wrong," she told the judge.

Members of the group have been tied to the death of a woman during an attack on a California landlord in November 2022, the landlord's subsequent slaying in January, and the deaths of a Pennsylvania couple in between. Most recently, the group has been linked to a highway shootout in Vermont that left a U.S. Border Patrol agent and a car passenger dead.

The Pennsylvania victims were the parents of Michelle Zajko, who was arrested with LaSota and Daniel Blank.

All three were charged with trespassing and obstructing law enforcement after a Frostburg, Maryland, resident told police that three "suspicious" people had parked two box trucks on his property and asked to camp there for a month. The trucks were found in a largely remote wooded area near the Maryland-Pennsylvania line, according to police.

Zajko, 32, also was charged with resisting arrest and carrying a handgun; LaSota was charged with having a gun in a vehicle.

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They were dressed in black and two wore gun belts holding ammunition, according to police. Officers found a rifle in the back of one truck and a handgun on the front floorboard. Zajko, who refused to put her hands behind her back and was taken to the ground, also was carrying a handgun, police said.

Elliott, the prosecutor, said two other guns Zajko purchased were recovered in connection with the Jan. 20 shooting death of Border Patrol Agent Chris Maland, 44, following a traffic stop in Coventry, Vermont. Felix Baukholt, a passenger in the car, also died, and the driver, Teresa Youngblut, has pleaded not guilty to federal firearms charges.

Officials have said the guns they were carrying were bought by a person of interest in the Dec. 31, 2022, deaths of Richard and Rita Zajko in Chester Heights, Pennsylvania, and that Youngblut had been in close contact with a person of interest in a homicide in Vallejo, California.

Maximilian Snyder, who applied for a marriage license with Youngblut in November, is charged with the Jan. 17 stabbing death of Curtis Lind, a Vallejo landlord who had survived an earlier attack by members of the Zizian group and was set to testify against them.

Officials have offered few details of the cross-country investigation, but 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 met online, shared anarchist beliefs and became increasingly violent.

Their goals aren't clear, but online writings included topics such as radical veganism, gender identity and artificial intelligence. At the middle of it all is LaSota, a transgender woman who published a dark and sometimes violent blog under the name Ziz.

Rebecca Francoeur-Breeden, a public defender representing LaSota, said she had spoken with LaSota's mother twice since the arrest. The attorney noted LaSota's educational achievements, including a degree in computer engineering.

"This is a very, very bright person we're dealing with," she said.

Francoeur-Breeden also represented the other two defendants. Zajko and Blank did not directly address the charges against them during the hearing or through their attorney, who described them all as high-achieving young people and listed some of their educational and professional accomplishments.

Francoeur-Breeden described Blank, 26, as a "brilliant young man" with serious mental health concerns and said he was listed as a missing or endangered person before his arrest. Blank's stepfather also addressed the judge, saying he hadn't seen Blank in two years but was willing to get him housing locally to help ensure he shows up for court.

Pennsylvania state police records describe Blank as Zajko's housemate in Vermont. In January 2023, police investigating the shooting deaths of Zajko's parents detained both LaSota and Blank at a hotel where Zajko was staying. Blank was not charged. LaSota was charged with obstructing law enforcement and disorderly conduct.

Supreme Court should keep whistleblower agency head in place for now, lawyers say in reply to Trump

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court should reject an emergency appeal from the Trump administration asking for quick action to allow the firing of the head of the federal agency that protects whistleblowers, lawyers for the embattled official told the justices on Tuesday.

The legal fight over the administration's move to oust Hampton Dellinger as the leader of the Office of Special Counsel is the first of an anticipated steady stream of pleas to the high court from lawyers for President Donald Trump and his administration seeking to block court orders that have slowed his second-term agenda.

After Dellinger sued to block his removal from office, a district judge in Washington, D.C., temporarily reinstated him in an order that expires on Feb. 26. A federal appeals court panel refused to intervene.

A day later, the Justice Department took the case to the justices, arguing that Trump has unbridled power to fire the heads of independent agencies. The brief cited last year's Supreme Court decision that

gave Trump immunity from criminal prosecution and reflected a muscular view of executive power.

Dellinger has argued that the law that created the whistleblowers' office says he can only be fired for problems with the performance of his job, none of which were cited in the email dismissing him.

But on Tuesday, his lawyers said the justices don't have to reach potentially weighty issues of presidential power at the moment. They should rely on standard legal rules that typically do not allow the appeal of a short-lasting court order known as a temporary restraining order, Dellinger's lawyers wrote.

"At bottom, there is no merit to the government's effort to declare a five-alarm fire based on a short-lived TRO that preserves" Dellinger's job while lower courts weigh the legal issues, Dellinger's lawyers wrote.

The Office of Special Counsel is responsible for guarding the federal workforce from illegal personnel actions, such as retaliation for whistleblowing. Dellinger was appointed by Democratic President Joe Biden and confirmed by the Senate to a five-year term in 2024.

US Postal Service head DeJoy to step down after 5 years marked by pandemic, losses and cost cuts

Associated Press undefined

WASHINGTON (AP) — Louis DeJoy, the head of the U.S. Postal Service, intends to step down, the federal agency said Tuesday, after a nearly five-year tenure marked by the coronavirus pandemic, surges in mail-in election ballots and efforts to stem losses through cost and service cuts.

In a Monday letter, Postmaster General DeJoy asked the Postal Service Board of Governors to begin looking for his successor.

"As you know, I have worked tirelessly to lead the 640,000 men and women of the Postal Service in accomplishing an extraordinary transformation," he wrote. "We have served the American people through an unprecedented pandemic and through a period of high inflation and sensationalized politics."

DeJoy took the helm of the postal service in the summer of 2020 during President Donald Trump's first term. He was a Republican donor who owned a logistics business before taking office and was the first postmaster general in nearly two decades who was not a career postal employee.

DeJoy developed a 10-year plan to modernize operations and stem losses. He previously said that postal customers should get used to "uncomfortable" rate hikes as the postal service seeks to stabilize its finances and become more self-sufficient.

The plan calls for making the mail delivery system more efficient and less costly by consolidating mail processing centers. Critics, including members of Congress from several states, have said the first consolidations slowed service and that further consolidations could particularly hurt rural mail delivery.

DeJoy has disputed that and told a U.S. House subcommittee during a contentious September hearing that the Postal Service had embarked on long-overdue investments in "ratty" facilities and making other changes to create "a Postal Service for the future" that delivered mail more quickly.

DeJoy also oversaw the postal service during two presidential elections that saw spikes in mail-in ballots.

Ahead of the 2020 presidential election, a federal judge limited one of the postal service's cost-cutting practices after finding it contributed to delays in mail delivery. DeJoy had restricted overtime payments for postal workers and stopped the agency's longtime practice of allowing late and extra truck deliveries in the summer of 2020. The moves reduced costs but meant some mail was left behind to be delivered the following day.

DeJoy said in his letter that he was committed to being "as helpful as possible in facilitating a transition."

Nevada judge reschedules trial for the suspect in Tupac Shakur's 1996 killing for next year

By TY ONEIL Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A Nevada judge on Tuesday postponed the murder trial of the only suspect ever charged in the 1996 killing of rap icon Tupac Shakur for nearly a year, saying she had little choice given new developments presented by his defense attorneys and the need to ensure a fair trial.

The trial of Duane "Keffe D" Davis, previously set for next month in Las Vegas, has been rescheduled for Feb. 9, 2026. The judge ordered prosecutors and the defense to return to court over the summer for a status hearing.

"It looks like there are quite a few things that are left to be done to get this case prepared so that Mr. Davis can have effective assistance of counsel," Clark County District Court Judge Carli Kierny said during a short hearing.

When asked by the judge if he was OK with moving the trial that far out, Davis agreed.

Davis' defense team filed a motion Friday seeking more time, saying critical investigative work had to be done and witnesses needed to be interviewed to ensure he gets a fair trial. The lawyers said a private investigator identified witnesses who can testify that Davis was not at the scene of the shooting.

Attorney Carl Arnold, who is leading the defense, said the case involves decades-old allegations and critical facts have yet to be fully examined.

On the night of Sept. 7, 1996, Shakur was in a BMW being driven by Death Row Records founder Marion "Suge" Knight. They were waiting at a red light when a white Cadillac pulled up next to them and gunfire erupted.

Davis, an ex-gang leader who is accused of orchestrating Shakur's killing near the Las Vegas Strip, has pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder and has been jailed since his September 2023 arrest.

Davis has acknowledged in interviews and in his tell-all memoir that he provided the gun used in the drive-by shooting and that he was in the car. But his court filings say his descriptions in recent years of orchestrating the shooting were "done for entertainment purposes and to make money."

Arnold has argued that Davis never should have been charged because of immunity agreements that Davis says he reached years ago with federal and local prosecutors while living in California.

Prosecutors disagree, saying they have strong evidence against Davis and any immunity agreement was limited.

Defense attorneys also are raising questions about the manner of Shakur's death, saying they have witness information indicating that he was in stable condition after the shooting and died suddenly after being hospitalized for a week. They want to consult medical and forensic experts to evaluate potential alternative causes of death.

Attacks by Sudanese RSF paramilitaries leave hundreds dead in White Nile State

By FATMA KHALED Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Attacks by Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Force have killed hundreds of civilians, including infants, in White Nile state, Sudanese officials and rights groups said Tuesday.

Sudan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the paramilitary group targeted civilians in the past few days in villages in the al-Gitaina area after they were "overwhelmed by its devastating defeat" by the Sudanese army. The statement put the death toll at 433, while the Preliminary Committee of Sudan Doctors' Trade Union put that figure at 300.

Emergency Lawyers, a rights group tracking violence against civilians, said in a statement Tuesday morning that more than 200 people, including women and children, were killed in RSF attacks and hundreds of others were injured over the past three days.

"The attacks included executions, kidnapping, forced disappearance, looting, and shooting those trying to escape," the group said.

Minister of Culture and Information Khalid Ali Aleisir said on Facebook that recent attacks by the RSF in Al-Kadaris and Al-Khalwat villages in White Nile state are the latest "systematic violence against defenseless civilians."

The Sudanese military said Saturday it had advanced in White Nile and "liberated more cities and villages," cutting crucial supply routes to the RSF, a rival group it has battled for control of the country since April 2023.

The war in Sudan has killed more than 24,000 people and driven over 14 million people — about 30% of the population — from their homes, according to the United Nations. An estimated 3.2 million Sudanese have escaped to neighboring countries.

The U.N. on Tuesday said that throughout 2024, its human rights office documented more than 4,200 civilian killings, adding that the total number is likely much higher.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs appealed on Monday for \$6 billion for its 2025 humanitarian response in Sudan, to help about 21 million people in the country and the millions who fled the war abroad.

“This is a humanitarian crisis that is truly unprecedented in its scale and gravity,” said UN aid chief Tom Fletcher in a statement, “and it demands a response unprecedented in scale and intent.”

Meanwhile, Norway’s Minister of International Development Åsmund Aukrust denounced the escalation in violence and attacks against civilians.

“I am deeply concerned about the sharp increase in civilian deaths caused by the intensified conflict in Sudan. I am also shocked by reports of indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure. Any such attacks must stop immediately,” Aukrust said in a statement published on the web portal for the Norwegian Government.

The developments on the ground have given the military the upper hand in the war as the paramilitary suffered multiple blows, including losing control of the city of Wad Medani, the capital of Gezira province, and other areas in the province. The Sudanese military also regained control of the country’s largest oil refinery.

The RSF appears to have lost control of the Greater Khartoum area and the cities of Omdurman and Khartoum Bahri.

The war has shown no end in sight despite international mediation attempts, including a U.S. assessment that the RSF and its proxies are committing genocide.

Researchers link a gene to the emergence of spoken language

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Why did humans start speaking? Scientists suggest genetics played a big role – and they say the evolution of this singular ability was key to our survival.

A new study links a particular gene to the ancient origins of spoken language, proposing that a protein variant found only in humans may have helped us communicate in a novel way. Speech allowed us to share information, coordinate activities and pass down knowledge, giving us an edge over extinct cousins like Neanderthals and Denisovans.

The new study is “a good first step to start looking at the specific genes” that may affect speech and language development, said Liza Finestack at the University of Minnesota, who was not involved with the research.

What scientists learn may someday even help people with speech problems.

The genetic variant researchers were looking at was one of a variety of genes “that contributed to the emergence of Homo sapiens as the dominant species, which we are today” said Dr. Robert Darnell, an author of the study published Tuesday in the journal Nature Communications.

Darnell has been studying the protein – called NOVA1 and known to be crucial to brain development – since the early 1990s. For the latest research, scientists in his lab at New York’s Rockefeller University used CRISPR gene editing to replace the NOVA1 protein found in mice with the exclusively human type to test the real-life effects of the genetic variant. To their surprise, it changed the way the animals vocalized when they called out to each other.

Baby mice with the human variant squeaked differently than normal littermates when their mom came around. Adult male mice with the variant chirped differently than their normal counterparts when they saw a female in heat.

Both are settings where mice are motivated to speak, Darnell said, “and they spoke differently” with the

human variant, illustrating its role in speech.

This isn't the first time a gene has been linked to speech. In 2001, British scientists said they had discovered the first gene tied to a language and speech disorder.

Called FOXP2, it was referred to as the human language gene. But though FOXP2 is involved in human language, it turned out that the variant in modern humans wasn't unique to us. Later research found it was shared with Neanderthals. The NOVA1 variant in modern humans, on the other hand, is found exclusively in our species, Darnell said.

The presence of a gene variant isn't the only reason people can speak. The ability also depends on things like anatomical features in the human throat and areas of the brain that work together to allow people to speak and understand language.

Darnell hopes the recent work not only helps people better understand their origins but also eventually leads to new ways to treat speech-related problems.

University of Minnesota's Finestack said it's more likely the genetic findings might someday allow scientists to detect, very early in life, who might need speech and language interventions.

"That's certainly a possibility," she said.

Villagers in southern Lebanon begin to return home as Israeli army withdraws under ceasefire deal

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

KFAR KILA, Lebanon (AP) — Israeli forces withdrew Tuesday from border villages in southern Lebanon under a deadline spelled out in a U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement that ended the latest Israel-Hezbollah war, but stayed in five strategic overlook locations inside Lebanon.

Top Lebanese leaders denounced the continued presence of the Israeli troops as an occupation and a violation of the deal, maintaining that Israel was required to make a full withdrawal by Tuesday. The troops' presence is also a sore point with the militant Hezbollah group, which has demanded action from the authorities.

Lebanese soldiers moved into the areas from which the Israeli troops withdrew and began clearing roadblocks set up by Israeli forces and checking for unexploded ordnance. They blocked the main road leading to villages, preventing anyone from entering while the military was looking for any explosives left behind.

Most of the villagers waited by the roadside for permission to go and check on their homes but scores pushed aside the roadblocks to march in. Elsewhere, the army allowed the residents to enter.

Many of their houses were demolished during the more than yearlong conflict or in the two months after November's ceasefire agreement when Israeli forces were still occupying the area.

In the border village of Kfar Kila, people were stunned by the amount of destruction, with entire sections of houses wiped out. Some knelt on the ground and prayed in the village's main square.

"What I'm seeing is beyond belief. I am in a state of shock," said Khodor Suleiman, a construction contractor, pointing to his destroyed home on a hilltop. "I am feeling a mixture of happiness and pain," said Suleiman, who had last been in Kfar Kila six months ago.

In Kfar Kila's main square, Lebanese troops deployed as a military bulldozer removed rubble from the street. As people gathered in the square, a young man ran in, screaming that he had found two men alive on the edge of the village.

An ambulance rushed to the distant area and then quickly drove away from the village, preventing anyone from looking inside. Residents said later the two young men were members of Hezbollah and had been hiding out inside a grocery shop for three months until they were found on Tuesday.

Abbas Fadallah, a Shiite Muslim cleric from Kfar Kila, said that his family's house that was built 105 years ago was now a pile of debris. Fadallah said he is happy to return but sad because "many civilians were martyred."

Kfar Kila's mayor, Hassan Sheet, told The Associated Press that 90% of the village homes are completely destroyed while the remaining 10% are damaged. "There are no homes nor buildings standing," he said,

adding that rebuilding will start from scratch.

Also Tuesday, Ayman Jaber entered Mhaibib, a village perched on a hill close to the Israeli border that was leveled by a series of explosions on Oct. 16. The Israeli army had released a video showing blasts ripping through the village in the Marjayoun region.

The Associated Press interviewed Jaber and his family early November when Jaber said he worried Israel would again set up a permanent presence in southern Lebanon and that the home he had built over the past six years for himself, his wife and their two sons, would be gone.

That worry, at least, turned out to be well-founded. "Not a single house in the village is still standing," Jaber said. "It is like an earthquake wiped out the village."

"The situation breaks my heart," Jaber said, as he stood inside the village's cemetery. "They dug up the graves and opened the vaults. I don't understand what security threat the dead posed to them."

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said the Israeli army "will stay in a buffer zone in Lebanon in five control posts" to guard against any ceasefire violations by Hezbollah. He also said the army had erected new posts on the Israeli side of the border, and sent reinforcements there.

"We are determined to provide full security to every northern community," Katz said.

However, Lebanon's three top officials — the country's president, prime minister and parliament speaker — in a joint statement said that Israel's continued presence at the five locations was in violation of the ceasefire agreement. They called on the U.N. Security Council to take action to force a complete Israeli withdrawal.

"The continued Israeli presence in any inch of Lebanese territory is an occupation, with all the legal consequences that result from that according to international legitimacy," the statement said.

The Israeli military presence was also criticized in a joint statement by the U.N. special coordinator for Lebanon, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, and the head of the U.N. peacekeeping force in the country, Lt. Gen. Aroldo Lázaro.

The two, however, warned that this should not "overshadow the tangible progress that has been made" since the ceasefire agreement.

Hezbollah began firing rockets across the border on Oct. 8, 2023, one day after a deadly Hamas-led incursion into southern Israel that sparked the war in Gaza. Israel responded with shelling and airstrikes in Lebanon, and the two sides became locked in an escalating conflict that became a full-blown war in late September.

More than 4,000 people were killed in Lebanon and more than 1 million were displaced at the height of the conflict, more than 100,000 of whom have not been able to return home. On the Israeli side, dozens of people were killed and some 60,000 are displaced.

Hussein Fares left Kfar Kila in October 2023 for the southern city of Nabatiyeh. When the fighting intensified in September he moved with his family to the city of Sidon, where they were given a room in a school housing displaced people.

"I have been waiting for a year and a half to return," said Fares who has a pickup truck and works as a laborer. He said he understands that the reconstruction process will take time.

French lawmakers mull banning headscarves in sport. Amnesty International says it's discriminatory

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN AP Sports Writer

Amnesty International is urging French lawmakers to reject a bill this week that would ban headscarves in all sporting competitions.

The bill is backed by right-wing senators and will be debated from Tuesday in the upper house of the French parliament. Its aim is to ban all "ostensibly religious" clothing and symbols during competitions. Amnesty International says the move would be discriminatory.

The vote is likely to refuel the lingering debate on secularism — still volatile more than a century after

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the 1905 law on separation of church and state that established it as a principle of the French Republic. Until now, sporting federations have been free to decide whether or not to allow headscarves, with two of the country's most powerful sports, soccer and rugby, opting to ban them.

The bill is at an early stage and this week's vote marks the beginning of a long legislative process with an uncertain outcome. Even if senators vote in favor, the bill's future will remain unclear since the lower house has the final say.

To pass, the bill would need a coalition of forces that don't usually collaborate in the deeply divided lower house.

Amnesty International's calls come after French sprinter Sounkamba Sylla said last summer she was barred from the opening ceremony at the Paris Olympics because she wears a hijab. She was eventually allowed to take part wearing a cap to cover her hair.

France enforces a strict principle of "laïcité," loosely translated as "secularism." At the Games, the president of the French Olympic Committee said its Olympians were bound by the secular principles that apply to public sector workers in the country, which include a ban on hijabs and other religious signs.

"At the Paris Olympics, France's ban on French women athletes who wear headscarves from competing at the Games drew international outrage," said Anna Błus, an Amnesty International researcher on gender justice.

"Just six months on, French authorities are not only doubling down on the discriminatory hijab ban but are attempting to extend it to all sports."

Experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council have previously criticized the decision by the French soccer and basketball federations to exclude players wearing the hijab, and the French government's decision to prevent its athletes wearing headscarves from representing the country at the Paris Games.

Amnesty International said the bill in reality targets Muslim women and girls by excluding them from sporting competitions if they wear a headscarf or other religious clothing.

"Laïcité...which is theoretically embedded in the French constitution to protect everyone's religious freedom, has often been used as a pretext to block Muslim women's access to public spaces in France," Amnesty International said.

"Over several years, the French authorities have enacted laws and policies to regulate Muslim women's and girls' clothing, in discriminatory ways. Sport federations have followed suit, imposing hijab bans in several sports."

Two years ago, France's highest administrative court said the country's soccer federation was entitled to ban headscarves in competitions even though the measure can limit freedom of expression.

Wielding the principle of religious neutrality enshrined in the constitution, the country's soccer federation also does not make things easy for international players who want to refrain from drinking or eating from dawn to sunset during the Ramadan, Islamic holy month.

Supporters of the bill cite growing attacks on secularism in sport, arguing that its core values are based on a principle of universality. To protect sports grounds from any non-sporting confrontation, they say, a principle of neutrality needs to be implemented to ensure that no political, religious or racial demonstration or propaganda can be promoted.

The bill also states that using part of a sports facility as a place of worship would be a misuse of its purpose, and bans the wearing of religious clothing, such as the burkini, in public swimming pools.

"By placing the wearing of a headscarf on the spectrum of "attacks on secularism", which range from "permissiveness" to "terrorism", this legislation, if passed, would fuel racism and reinforce the growing hostile environment facing Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim in France," Amnesty International said.

Billionaire Jim Ratcliffe's first year at Man United has not gone to plan

By JAMES ROBSON AP Soccer Writer

MANCHESTER, England (AP) — It's been a year since one of Britain's richest men bought into its most famous soccer team and vowed to bring the good times back.

So far, it hasn't gone to plan for Manchester United or Jim Ratcliffe.

The record 20-time English champion is languishing in the bottom half of the Premier League, losing vast sums of money every year and facing fan unrest.

Even head coach Ruben Amorim said recently that this might be the worst team in the club's storied history.

That's not all on Ratcliffe, the billionaire owner of petrochemicals giant INEOS, but it has been a rocky start since he paid \$1.3 billion for an initial 25% stake in United and assumed control of its soccer operations.

There have been high profile hirings and firings, brutal cost cutting, a hike in ticket prices and new lows on the field for a team that had been in decline for more than a decade before he became minority owner.

While there was triumph in the FA Cup last year, that success has been overshadowed by supporter protests, job losses, unconvincing transfers and humbling defeats.

Bold plans

Ratcliffe said his investment was "just the beginning of our journey to take Manchester United back to the top of English, European and world football."

Those ambitions feel further away now than they have in decades, with United 15th in the standings and closer to the relegation zone than the top six after a woeful campaign. Sunday's 1-0 loss to Tottenham was the 12th in the league this season and an eighth under Amorim, who only took charge in November.

Amorim said: "I have a lot of problems, my job is so hard, but I am here to continue my job to the next week with my beliefs."

Major overhaul

He was one of a number of key hires made as part of Ratcliffe's overhaul of United's soccer operations.

Omar Berrada was lured away from Manchester City to become CEO and Dan Ashworth left Newcastle to take up the role of sporting director. Jason Wilcox, formerly director of City's academy, became technical director.

Key figures at Ratcliffe's Ineos Sport, Dave Brailsford and Jean-Claude Blanc, were appointed to the board and Amorim became the final piece of a new leadership team after former manager Erik ten Hag was fired in October.

But that restructuring has been far from a smooth process.

Ten Hag was fired three months after being handed a one-year contract extension with United having lost four of its opening nine league games.

Ashworth left the club less than six months after taking up his role, and after months of negotiations to take him away from Newcastle.

They were expensive missteps.

In total it cost United 10.4 million pounds (\$13.09 million) to pay off Ten Hag and his staff and another 11 million pounds (\$13.85 million) to trigger Amorim's release from Sporting Lisbon.

It was reported it cost between 2 and 3 million pounds (\$2.5-3.78 million) to hire Ashworth, who spent five months on gardening leave during negotiations with Newcastle.

Cost cutting

Those numbers make uncomfortable reading at a time when United has implemented cost-saving initiatives that it said included staff redundancies of around 250 roles. More could be on the way, according to reports.

In October it emerged that managerial great Alex Ferguson was not beyond the reach of those measures. He will step down from his lucrative role as club ambassador at the end of the season.

In addition to cuts, United raised its lowest-priced tickets to 66 pounds (\$81) partway through the sea-

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son, up from 40 pounds (\$49).

It defended that decision by telling fans it could not sustain its current financial losses and was in danger of breaching league rules if it did not act. United reported losses last year of 113.2 million pounds (\$140 million).

"We will get back to a cash positive position as soon as possible and we will have to make some difficult choices to get there," it said in a letter to fans.

Fan protests

That explanation has not gone down well with supporters.

"Fans should not be paying the price for previous bad ownership & bad management," Manchester United Supporters Trust posted on X. "The supporters bring far more value than the simple collective ticket revenue."

Supporters spent years trying to drive out the American Glazer family, which is still majority owner, and there continues to be anger towards them after Ratcliffe's investment.

There have been jeers for the team while United's performances on the field have continued to slide.

New lows

Ratcliffe's first season as co-owner saw United endure its worst league campaign in 34 years when it finished in eighth place.

The end of his first full season could be even worse.

The last time it lost 12 of its first 25 games in a league season was in the 1973-74 campaign when it was relegated from the top flight.

Transfer strategy

United has spent around \$260 million on players in the two transfer windows under Ratcliffe, but the squad still looks well short of the quality required to challenge for the title.

Forward Joshua Zirkzee has struggled to adapt to the Premier League and defender Leny Yoro missed a large part of the season through injury.

The pressure of complying with the league's financial rules has placed uncertainty on United's ability to spend big in the summer to bring in players to suit Amorim's preferred system, and there is unlikely to be a quick fix.

Stadium rebuild

Ratcliffe wants a world class stadium, either by way of redeveloping United's iconic Old Trafford or building one from new.

His plans, which include an ambitious redevelopment of the surrounding area, have been backed by the U.K. government. Financing them, however, is another issue and it is not yet clear where that money will come from.

The modernization of United's Carrington training ground is well underway after 50 million pounds (\$63 million) of investment.

The future

United hasn't lifted the league title since Ferguson's last season in 2013 and behind the scenes the focus is on winning it for a record-extending 21st time. But with Liverpool on course to equal United's haul of 20 this season, it is the club's great rival from Merseyside that could set that new bar first.

Ratcliffe is a hugely successful businessman but, as he is discovering, that does not guarantee success in soccer.

How US tech giants supplied Israel with AI models, raising questions about tech's role in warfare

By SAM MEDNICK, GARANCE BURKE, and MICHAEL BIESECKER Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — U.S. tech giants have quietly empowered Israel to track and kill many more alleged militants more quickly in Gaza and Lebanon through a sharp spike in artificial intelligence and

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computing services. But the number of civilians killed has also soared, along with fears that these tools are contributing to the deaths of innocent people.

Militaries have for years hired private companies to build custom autonomous weapons. However, Israel's recent wars mark a leading instance in which commercial AI models made in the United States have been used in active warfare, despite concerns that they were not originally developed to help decide who lives and who dies.

The Israeli military uses AI to sift through vast troves of intelligence, intercepted communications and surveillance to find suspicious speech or behavior and learn the movements of its enemies. After a surprise attack by Hamas militants on Oct. 7, 2023, its use of Microsoft and OpenAI technology skyrocketed, an Associated Press investigation found.

The investigation also revealed new details of how AI systems select targets and ways they can go wrong, including faulty data or flawed algorithms. It was based on internal documents, data and exclusive interviews with current and former Israeli officials and company employees.

Israel's goal after the attack that killed about 1,200 people and took over 250 hostages was to eradicate Hamas, and its military has called AI a "game changer" in yielding targets more swiftly. Since the war started, more than 50,000 people have died in Gaza and Lebanon and nearly 70% of the buildings in Gaza have been devastated, according to health ministries in Gaza and Lebanon.

"This is the first confirmation we have gotten that commercial AI models are directly being used in warfare," said Heidi Khlaaf, chief AI scientist at the AI Now Institute and former senior safety engineer at OpenAI. "The implications are enormous for the role of tech in enabling this type of unethical and unlawful warfare going forward."

Israel's Use of AI and Cloud Computing Soared During War

Among U.S. tech firms, Microsoft has had an especially close relationship with the Israeli military spanning decades.

That relationship, alongside those with other tech companies, stepped up after the Hamas attack. Israel's war response strained its own servers and increased its reliance on outside, third-party vendors, according to a presentation last year by Col. Racheli Dembinsky, the military's top information technology officer. As she described how AI had provided Israel "very significant operational effectiveness" in Gaza, the logos of Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud and Amazon Web Services appeared on a large screen behind her.

The Israeli military's usage of Microsoft and OpenAI artificial intelligence spiked last March to nearly 200 times higher than before the week leading up to the Oct. 7 attack, the AP found in reviewing internal company information. The amount of data it stored on Microsoft servers doubled between that time and July 2024 to more than 13.6 petabytes — roughly 350 times the digital memory needed to store every book in the Library of Congress. Usage of Microsoft's huge banks of computer servers by the military also rose by almost two-thirds in the first two months of the war alone.

Microsoft declined to provide any comment for this story and did not respond to a detailed list of written questions about the cloud and AI services it provides to the Israeli military.

In an expansive statement on its website, the company says "respecting human rights is a core value of Microsoft" and it is committed "to champion the positive role of technology across the globe." In its 40-page Responsible AI Transparency Report for 2024, Microsoft pledges to "map, measure, and manage generative AI risks throughout the development cycle to reduce the risk of harm," and does not mention its lucrative military contracts.

Advanced AI models are provided through OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, through Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, where they are purchased by the Israeli military, the documents and data show. Microsoft has been OpenAI's largest investor.

OpenAI said it does not have a partnership with Israel's military, and its usage policies say its customers should not use its products to develop weapons, destroy property or harm people. About a year ago, however, OpenAI changed its terms of use from barring military use to allowing for "national security use cases that align with our mission."

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The Israeli military declined to answer detailed written questions from The AP about its use of commercial AI products from American tech companies, but said its analysts use AI-enabled systems to help identify targets and independently examine them together with high-ranking officers to meet international law, weighing the military advantage against the collateral damage.

"These AI tools make the intelligence process more accurate and more effective," said an Israeli military statement to the AP. "They make more targets faster, but not at the expense of accuracy, and many times in this war they've been able to minimize civilian casualties."

Other U.S. Tech Firms Also Work With Israel's Military

Google and Amazon provide cloud computing and AI services to the Israeli military under "Project Nimbus," a \$1.2 billion contract signed in 2021, when Israel first tested out its in-house AI-powered targeting systems. The IDF has used Cisco and Dell server farms or data centers. Red Hat, an independent IBM subsidiary, also has provided cloud computing technologies to the Israeli military, while Palantir Technologies, a Microsoft partner in U.S. defense contracts, has a "strategic partnership" providing AI systems to help Israel's war efforts.

After OpenAI changed its terms of use last year to allow for national security purposes, Google followed suit earlier this month with a similar change to its public ethics policy to remove language saying it wouldn't use its AI for weapons and surveillance.

Google said it is committed to responsibly developing and deploying AI "that protects people, promotes global growth, and supports national security."

What Is Commercial AI Used For?

The Israel Defense Forces uses Microsoft Azure to compile information gathered through mass surveillance, which it transcribes and translates, including phone calls, texts and audio messages, according to an Israeli intelligence officer who works with the systems. That data can then be cross-checked with Israel's in-house targeting systems and vice versa.

He said he relies on Azure to quickly search for terms and patterns within massive text troves, such as finding conversations between two people within a 50-page document. Azure also can find people giving directions to one another in the text, which can then be cross-referenced with the military's own AI systems to pinpoint locations.

The Microsoft data AP reviewed shows that since the Oct. 7 attack, the Israeli military has made heavy use of transcription and translation tools and OpenAI models, although it does not detail which. Typically, AI models that transcribe and translate perform best in English. OpenAI has acknowledged that its popular AI-powered translation model Whisper, which can transcribe and translate into multiple languages including Arabic, can make up text that no one said, including adding racial commentary and violent rhetoric.

Are Israel's AI Systems Reliable?

Errors can happen for many reasons involving AI, said Israeli military officers who have worked with the targeting systems and other tech experts. Intercepted phone calls tied to a person's profile include the time the person called and the names and numbers of those on the call. But it takes an extra step to listen to and verify the original audio, or to see a translated transcript.

The Israeli military says a person who knows Arabic is supposed to check translations. Still, one intelligence officer said he had seen targeting mistakes that relied on incorrect machine translations from Arabic to Hebrew.

As Israel uses US-made AI models in war, concerns arise about tech's role in who lives and who dies

By MICHAEL BIESECKER, SAM MEDNICK and GARANCE BURKE Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — U.S. tech giants have quietly empowered Israel to track and kill many more alleged militants more quickly in Gaza and Lebanon through a sharp spike in artificial intelligence and computing services. But the number of civilians killed has also soared, fueling fears that these tools are

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contributing to the deaths of innocent people.

Militaries have for years hired private companies to build custom autonomous weapons. However, Israel's recent wars mark a leading instance in which commercial AI models made in the United States have been used in active warfare, despite concerns that they were not originally developed to help decide who lives and who dies.

The Israeli military uses AI to sift through vast troves of intelligence, intercepted communications and surveillance to find suspicious speech or behavior and learn the movements of its enemies. After a deadly surprise attack by Hamas militants on Oct. 7, 2023, its use of Microsoft and OpenAI technology skyrocketed, an Associated Press investigation found. The investigation also revealed new details of how AI systems select targets and ways they can go wrong, including faulty data or flawed algorithms. It was based on internal documents, data and exclusive interviews with current and former Israeli officials and company employees.

"This is the first confirmation we have gotten that commercial AI models are directly being used in warfare," said Heidi Khlaaf, chief AI scientist at the AI Now Institute and former senior safety engineer at OpenAI. "The implications are enormous for the role of tech in enabling this type of unethical and unlawful warfare going forward."

The rise of AI

As U.S. tech titans ascend to prominent roles under President Donald Trump, the AP's findings raise questions about Silicon Valley's role in the future of automated warfare. Microsoft expects its partnership with the Israeli military to grow, and what happens with Israel may help determine the use of these emerging technologies around the world.

The Israeli military's usage of Microsoft and OpenAI artificial intelligence spiked last March to nearly 200 times higher than before the week leading up to the Oct. 7 attack, the AP found in reviewing internal company information. The amount of data it stored on Microsoft servers doubled between that time and July 2024 to more than 13.6 petabytes — roughly 350 times the digital memory needed to store every book in the Library of Congress. Usage of Microsoft's huge banks of computer servers by the military also rose by almost two-thirds in the first two months of the war alone.

Israel's goal after the attack that killed about 1,200 people and took over 250 hostages was to eradicate Hamas, and its military has called AI a "game changer" in yielding targets more swiftly. Since the war started, more than 50,000 people have died in Gaza and Lebanon and nearly 70% of the buildings in Gaza have been devastated, according to health ministries in Gaza and Lebanon.

The AP's investigation drew on interviews with six current and former members of the Israeli army, including three reserve intelligence officers. Most spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss sensitive military operations.

The AP also interviewed 14 current and former employees inside Microsoft, OpenAI, Google and Amazon, most of whom also spoke anonymously for fear of retribution. Journalists reviewed internal company data and documents, including one detailing the terms of a \$133 million contract between Microsoft and Israel's Ministry of Defense.

The Israeli military says its analysts use AI-enabled systems to help identify targets but independently examine them together with high-ranking officers to meet international law, weighing the military advantage against the collateral damage. A senior Israeli intelligence official authorized to speak to the AP said lawful military targets may include combatants fighting against Israel, wherever they are, and buildings used by militants. Officials insist that even when AI plays a role, there are always several layers of humans in the loop.

"These AI tools make the intelligence process more accurate and more effective," said an Israeli military statement to the AP. "They make more targets faster, but not at the expense of accuracy, and many times in this war they've been able to minimize civilian casualties."

The Israeli military declined to answer detailed written questions from the AP about its use of commercial AI products from American tech companies.

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Microsoft declined to comment for this story and did not respond to a detailed list of written questions about cloud and AI services provided to the Israeli military. In a statement on its website, the company says it is committed "to champion the positive role of technology across the globe." In its 40-page Responsible AI Transparency Report for 2024, Microsoft pledges to manage the risks of AI throughout development "to reduce the risk of harm," and does not mention its lucrative military contracts.

Advanced AI models are provided through OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, through Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, where they are purchased by the Israeli military, the documents and data show. Microsoft has been OpenAI's largest investor. OpenAI said it does not have a partnership with Israel's military, and its usage policies say its customers should not use its products to develop weapons, destroy property or harm people. About a year ago, however, OpenAI changed its terms of use from barring military use to allowing for "national security use cases that align with our mission."

The human toll of AI

It's extremely hard to identify when AI systems enable errors because they are used with so many other forms of intelligence, including human intelligence, sources said. But together they can lead to wrongful deaths.

In November 2023, Hoda Hijazi was fleeing with her three young daughters and her mother from clashes between Israel and Hamas ally Hezbollah on the Lebanese border when their car was bombed.

Before they left, the adults told the girls to play in front of the house so that Israeli drones would know they were traveling with children. The women and girls drove alongside Hijazi's uncle, Samir Ayoub, a journalist with a leftist radio station, who was caravanning in his own car. They heard the frenetic buzz of a drone very low overhead.

Soon, an airstrike hit the car Hijazi was driving. It careened down a slope and burst into flames. Ayoub managed to pull Hijazi out, but her mother — Ayoub's sister — and the three girls — Rimas, 14, Taline, 12, and Liane, 10 — were dead.

Before they left their home, Hijazi recalled, one of the girls had insisted on taking pictures of the cats in the garden "because maybe we won't see them again."

In the end, she said, "the cats survived and the girls are gone."

Video footage from a security camera at a convenience store shortly before the strike showed the Hijazi family in a Hyundai SUV, with the mother and one of the girls loading jugs of water. The family says the video proves Israeli drones should have seen the women and children.

The day after the family was hit, the Israeli military released video of the strike along with a package of similar videos and photos. A statement released with the images said Israeli fighter jets had "struck just over 450 Hamas targets." The AP's visual analysis matched the road and other geographical features in the Israeli military video to satellite imagery of the location where the three girls died, 1 mile (1.7 kilometers) from the store.

An Israeli intelligence officer told the AP that AI has been used to help pinpoint all targets in the past three years. In this case, AI likely pinpointed a residence, and other intelligence gathering could have placed a person there. At some point, the car left the residence.

Humans in the target room would have decided to strike. The error could have happened at any point, he said: Previous faulty information could have flagged the wrong residence, or they could have hit the wrong vehicle.

The AP also saw a message from a second source with knowledge of that airstrike who confirmed it was a mistake, but didn't elaborate.

A spokesperson for the Israeli military denied that AI systems were used during the airstrike itself, but refused to answer whether AI helped select the target or whether it was wrong. The military told the AP that officials examined the incident and expressed "sorrow for the outcome."

How it works

Microsoft and the San Francisco-based startup OpenAI are among a legion of U.S. tech firms that have supported Israel's wars in recent years.

Google and Amazon provide cloud computing and AI services to the Israeli military under "Project Nim-

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bus," a \$1.2 billion contract signed in 2021 when Israel first tested out its in-house AI-powered targeting systems. The military has used Cisco and Dell server farms or data centers. Red Hat, an independent IBM subsidiary, also has provided cloud computing technologies to the Israeli military, and Palantir Technologies, a Microsoft partner in U.S. defense contracts, has a "strategic partnership" providing AI systems to help Israel's war efforts.

Google said it is committed to responsibly developing and deploying AI "that protects people, promotes global growth, and supports national security." Dell provided a statement saying the company commits to the highest standards in working with public and private organizations globally, including in Israel. Red Hat spokesperson Allison Showalter said the company is proud of its global customers, who comply with Red Hat's terms to adhere to applicable laws and regulations.

Palantir, Cisco and Oracle did not respond to requests for comment. Amazon declined to comment.

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"Should we be basing these decisions on things that the model could be making up?" said Joshua Kroll, an assistant professor of computer science at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, who spoke to the AP in his personal capacity, not reflecting the views of the U.S. government.

The Israeli military said any phone conversation translated from Arabic or intelligence used in identifying a target has to be reviewed by an Arabic-speaking officer.

Errors can still happen for many reasons involving AI, said Israeli military officers who have worked with the targeting systems and other tech experts. One intelligence officer said he had seen targeting mistakes that relied on incorrect machine translations from Arabic to Hebrew.

The Arabic word describing the grip on the launch tube for a rocket-propelled grenade is the same as the word for "payment." In one instance the machine translated it wrong, and the person verifying the translation initially didn't catch the error, he said, which could have added people speaking about payments to target lists. The officer was there by chance and caught the problem, he said.

Intercepted phone calls tied to a person's profile also include the time the person called and the names and numbers of those on the call. But it takes an extra step to listen to and verify the original audio, or to see a translated transcript.

Sometimes the data attached to people's profiles is wrong. For example, the system misidentified a list of high school students as potential militants, according to the officer. An Excel spreadsheet attached to several people's profiles titled "finals" in Arabic, contained at least 1,000 students' names on an exam list in one area of Gaza, he said. This was the only piece of incriminating evidence attached to people's files, he said, and had he not caught the mistake, those Palestinians could have been wrongly flagged.

He said he also worried that young officers, some still younger than 20, under pressure to find targets quickly with the help of AI would jump to conclusions.

AI alone could lead to the wrong conclusion, said another soldier who worked with the targeting systems. For example, AI might flag a house owned by someone linked to Hamas who does not live there. Before the house is hit, humans must confirm who is actually in it, he said.

"Obviously there are things that I live peacefully with and things that I could have done better in some

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targeted attacks that I'm responsible for," the soldier told the AP. "It's war, things happen, mistakes happen, we are human."

Tal Mimran served 10 years as a reserve legal officer for the Israeli military, and on three NATO working groups examining the use of new technologies, including AI, in warfare. Previously, he said, it took a team of up to 20 people a day or more to review and approve a single airstrike. Now, with AI systems, the military is approving hundreds a week.

Mimran said over-reliance on AI could harden people's existing biases.

"Confirmation bias can prevent people from investigating on their own," said Mimran, who teaches cyber law policy. "Some people might be lazy, but others might be afraid to go against the machine and be wrong and make a mistake."

Deep ties

Among U.S. tech firms, Microsoft has had an especially close relationship with the Israeli military spanning decades.

That relationship, alongside those with other tech companies, stepped up after the Hamas attack. Israel's war response strained its own servers and increased its reliance on outside, third-party vendors, according to a presentation last year by the military's top information technology officer. As she described how AI had provided Israel "very significant operational effectiveness" in Gaza, the logos of Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud and Amazon Web Services appeared on a large screen behind her.

"We've already reached a point where our systems really need it," said Col. Racheli Dembinsky, commander of the Center of Computing and Information Systems, known by its Hebrew acronym, Mamram.

One three-year contract between Microsoft and the Israeli Ministry of Defense began in 2021 and was worth \$133 million, making it the company's second largest military customer globally after the U.S., according to a document reviewed by the AP. The Israeli military is classified within Microsoft as an "S500" client, meaning that it gets top priority as one of the company's most important customers globally.

The Israeli military's service agreements with Microsoft include at least 635 individual subscriptions listed under specific divisions, units, bases or project code words. Subscription names reviewed by the AP included "Mamram" and "8200," an elite intelligence unit known for its technological prowess.

One urgent Azure support ticket filed about two weeks after the Oct. 7 attack asked for delays of planned maintenance outages for the rest of the year due to the war, because any downtime could have "a direct impact on life-saving systems." The request was flagged as being from "Gllilot – 8200," a highly secure army base that houses Unit 8200, responsible for clandestine operations, collecting signal intelligence and code decryption, cyber warfare and surveillance.

Records show Microsoft's global Azure support team responded to about 130 direct requests from the Israeli military through the first 10 months of the war. Microsoft's consulting services unit also works closely with Israel's military, which represented half of that section's overall revenue, an internal document said.

Within Israel, a team of at least nine Microsoft employees is dedicated to serving the military's account. Among them is a senior executive who served 14 years in Unit 8200 and a former IT leader for military intelligence, according to their online resumes. Microsoft data is housed in server farms within two massive buildings outside Tel Aviv, enclosed behind high walls topped with barbed wire. Microsoft also operates a 46,000-square-meter corporate campus in Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv, and another office in Gav-Yam in southern Israel, which has displayed a large Israeli flag.

The Israel Defense Forces has long been at the forefront of deploying artificial intelligence for military use. In early 2021, it launched Gospel, an AI tool that sorts through Israel's vast array of digitized information to suggest targets for potential strikes. It also developed Lavender, which uses machine learning to filter out requested criteria from intelligence databases and narrow down lists of potential targets, including people.

Lavender ranks people between 0 and 100 based on how likely it is they are a militant, said an intelligence officer who used the systems. The ranking is based on intelligence, such as the person's family tree, if someone's father is a known militant who served time, and intercepted phone calls, he said.

In May 2021, the Israeli military launched what Israeli intelligence officials described as their "First AI

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War," an 11-day bombing campaign against Hamas. At the time, Israeli military officials described AI as a "force-multiplier," allowing them to carry out far more airstrikes than in prior conflicts.

A 2021 post by the Israeli military also described the stakes surrounding the use of AI in war: "Unlike in the realms of AdTech and Gaming, wrong decisions in the realm of intelligence may cost lives," it read. The same post described the military's incorporation of AI approaches to analyze the emotional tone of communications, a technique experts have found can fail to pick slang, jargon or nuance in people's speech.

Pushback from workers

The relationship between tech companies and the Israeli military also has ramifications in the U.S., where some employees have raised ethical concerns.

In October, Microsoft fired two workers for helping organize an unauthorized lunchtime vigil for Palestinian refugees at its corporate campus in Redmond, Washington. Microsoft said at the time that it ended the employment of some people "in accordance with internal policy" but declined to give details.

Hossam Nasr, one of the employees fired by Microsoft who works with the advocacy group No Azure for Apartheid, said he and former colleagues are pushing for Microsoft to stop selling cloud and AI services to the Israeli military.

"Cloud and AI are the bombs and bullets of the 21st century," Nasr said. "Microsoft is providing the Israeli military with digital weapons to kill, maim and displace Palestinians, in the gravest moral travesty of our time."

In April, Google fired about 50 of its workers over a sit-in at the company's California headquarters protesting the war in Gaza.

Former Google software engineer Emaan Haseem was among those fired. Haseem said she worked on a team that helped test the reliability of a "sovereign cloud" — a secure system of servers kept so separate from the rest of Google's global cloud infrastructure that even the company itself couldn't access or track the data it stores. She later learned through media reports that Google was building a sovereign cloud for Israel.

"It seemed to be more and more obvious that we are literally just trying to design something where we won't have to care about how our clients are using it, and if they're using it unfairly or unethically," Haseem said.

Google said the employees were fired because they disrupted work spaces and made colleagues feel unsafe. Google did not respond to specific questions about whether it was contracted to build a sovereign cloud for the Israeli military and whether it provided restrictions on the wartime use of its AI models.

Gaza is now in an uneasy ceasefire. But recently, the Israeli government announced it would expand its artificial intelligence developments across all its military branches.

Meanwhile, U.S. tech titans keep consolidating power in Washington. Microsoft gave \$1 million to Trump's inauguration fund. Google CEO Sundar Pichai got a prime seat at the president's inauguration. And OpenAI CEO Sam Altman met with the president on Trump's second full day in office to talk up a joint venture investing up to \$500 billion for AI infrastructure.

In a new book set to be published Tuesday, Palantir CEO Alexander Karp calls for the U.S. military and its allies to work closely with Silicon Valley to design, build and acquire AI weaponry, including "the unmanned drone swarms and robots that will dominate the coming battlefield."

"The fate of the United States, and its allies, depends on the ability of their defense and intelligence agencies to evolve, and briskly," Karp wrote, according to an advance copy obtained by the AP.

After OpenAI changed its terms of use last year to allow for national security purposes, Google followed suit earlier this month with a similar change to its public ethics policy to remove language saying it wouldn't use its AI for weapons and surveillance. Google said it is committed to responsibly developing and deploying AI "that protects people, promotes global growth, and supports national security."

As tech companies jockey for contracts, those who lost relatives still search for answers.

"Even with all this pain, I can't stop asking: Why?" said Mahmoud Adnan Chour, the father of the three girls killed in the car in southern Lebanon, an engineer who was away at the time. "Why did the plane

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choose that car — the one filled with my children’s laughter echoing from its windows?”

Today in History: February 19

FDR signs order authorizing Japanese-American internment

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 19, the 50th day of 2025. There are 315 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 19, 1942, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which paved the way for the internment of 125,000 people of Japanese ancestry, including U.S.-born citizens.

Also on this date:

In 1473, astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus was born in Torun, Poland.

In 1847, the first rescuers reached members of the Donner Party, who had been snowbound in the Sierra Nevada mountains near the California-Nevada border for nearly four months.

In 1878, inventor Thomas Edison was issued a patent for the phonograph.

In 1945, Operation Detachment began during World War II as the first wave of U.S. Marines landed at Iwo Jima, where they commenced a successful monthlong battle to seize control of the island from Japanese forces.

In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford, calling the issuing of the 1942 internment order for people of Japanese ancestry “a sad day in American history,” signed a proclamation formally confirming its termination.

In 2003, an Iranian military plane carrying members of the elite Revolutionary Guards crashed in south-eastern Iran, killing all 275 people on board.

In 2008, an ailing Fidel Castro resigned the Cuban presidency after nearly a half-century in power; his brother Raúl was later named to succeed him.

Today’s birthdays: Singer Smokey Robinson is 85. Rock musician Tony Iommi (Black Sabbath) is 77. Author Amy Tan is 73. Actor Jeff Daniels is 70. Actor Ray Winstone is 68. Actor Leslie David Baker is 67. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell is 66. Tennis Hall of Famer Hana Mandlíková is 63. Singer Seal is 62. Actor Benicio Del Toro is 58. Author-cartoonist Jeff Kinney is 54. NBA center Nikola Jokić is 30. Singer-songwriter Chappell Roan is 27. Actor Millie Bobby Brown is 21.