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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.

Saturday, Feb. 22

Boys Region Wrestling at Hamlin, 9:30 a.m.

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



Everyone has bad days.
Don't give up.
Pause. Rest. Reset. Restart.
But, never quit.
Always pick yourself up
and keep going.

Sunday, Feb. 23

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

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde, 8:15 a.m.; Groton, 9:30 a.m.; Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.

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

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

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

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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.

Bolsonaro Charged

Brazilian authorities charged former President Jair Bolsonaro and 33 others yesterday with orchestrating a coup after the 2022 presidential election, among other crimes. The country's Supreme Court will now decide whether to accept the charges in the coming weeks. The indictments mark the first time in the nation's history that military leaders have been charged with coup-related crimes.

After ruling from 2019 to 2023, Bolsonaro lost reelection to current President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The indictment charges the former army captain with overseeing a plan to poison the president-elect, his vice president, and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes. Four major generals and dozens of aides are accused of planning to assume power amid the storming of government buildings by Bolsonaro supporters Jan. 8, 2023, days into the new administration's term.

The 69-year-old and his codefendants face decades in prison if found guilty. In 2023, the Supreme Court banned Bolsonaro from public office until 2030 for casting doubt on the country's electronic voting system ahead of the election.

(Potential) Quantum Breakthrough

Microsoft unveiled a quantum computing chip it says is powered by topological qubits, an exotic state of matter that some scientists said wasn't possible to harness for such applications. The Majorana 1—named after the physical phenomenon harnessed in the device—marks the culmination of close to two decades of research on the application.

Quantum computers that can be used for practical applications are considered a "Holy Grail" for many scientists and engineers. While most approaches use ultracold atoms or tiny superconducting qubits, Microsoft's chip relies on many electrons moving in unison as if they were a single particle. The technique would provide qubits that are much more resilient against noise—a central challenge for quantum computers—and would allow qubits to be quickly scaled for use in the real world.

Some said the company's results, published in a paper yesterday, did not provide explicit confirmation of calculations carried out by topological states of matter.

Nikola Bows Out

Electric vehicle startup Nikola filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection yesterday following a dramatic decrease in sales, a fraud scandal, and the incarceration of its founder.

Launched in 2015, the company made promises to revolutionize the industry by developing long-haul semi-trucks powered by hydrogen and electricity. The zero-emissions pitch sparked enthusiasm among investors until 2020, when Nikola was targeted in a short-seller report alleging that founder Trevor Milton had exaggerated claims about his business's technology and production. Milton was ousted and later convicted of fraud in 2022 for misrepresenting Nikola to investors, including sharing a promo video of an electric truck rolling downhill. He received a four-year prison sentence, which he is now appealing.

The automaker reported having \$47M in cash to fund its bankruptcy proceedings and provide limited service for trucks on the road.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Team USA hockey takes on Canada in 4 Nations Face-Off Final tonight (8 pm ET, ESPN). Hockey great Bobby Hull had Stage 2 chronic traumatic encephalopathy at the time of his death in 2023, reports suggest.

Former Vice President Kamala Harris signs with talent firm Creative Artists Agency; CAA signed former President Joe Biden to a similar deal two weeks ago.

“Wicked” star Cynthia Erivo tapped to host 2025 Tony Awards.

Seven men charged for roles in a string of robberies at athletes’ homes, including Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce, and Joe Burrow.

Los Angeles Chargers tapped to host Week 1 matchup in NFL’s second-ever game in São Paulo, Brazil.

Science & Technology

Nvidia and the Arc Institute release largest-ever AI model for biology, trained on the genomes of more than 100,000 animals; platform may identify disease-causing mutations, design new genomes, and more.

Static electricity buildup in different materials depends on their history of being touched, study reveals; despite being a well-known phenomenon, the physics behind charge buildup in regular materials remains elusive.

Paleontologists discover 120-million-year-old fossils of apex carnivores previously found in South America in Australia; the landmasses were connected in the early Cretaceous via Antarctica.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.2%, Dow +0.2%, Nasdaq +0.1%) as investors digest Federal Reserve’s meeting minutes; S&P 500 notches another record close.

Palantir shares close down 10% on reports the Trump administration is eyeing defense budget cuts.

Tapestry to sell footwear brand Stuart Weitzman to Caleres—owner of brands like Sam Edelman and Famous Footwear—in \$105M all-cash deal; sale allows Tapestry to focus on its handbag brands Coach and Kate Spade.

Europe’s largest lender HSBC announces share buyback of up to \$2B, reports annual profit in 2024 rose 6.5%.

Politics & World Affairs

Transportation Department rescinds approval of New York City’s congestion pricing program, which went into effect in January.

Judge hears arguments in Justice Department-led request to dismiss corruption charges against NYC Mayor Eric Adams (D).

Tensions rise between President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the two leaders trade barbs over Ukraine-Russia war.

Pope Francis has pneumonia in both lungs and remains hospitalized in Rome after suffering from bronchitis and a mix of respiratory infections, Vatican says.

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Service Notice: Leonard Garness

Services for Leonard Garness, 90, of Sun City West, Arizona and formerly of Groton will be 2:00 p.m., Saturday, March 1st at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Pastor Mike Kampa will officiate. Burial with military honors will be held in Union Cemetery, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the funeral chapel on Friday from 5-7 p.m.

Leonard passed away February 14, 2025 at Aria Ranch in Sun City West, Arizona.

Service Notice: Dennis K. Larson

Services for Dennis K. Larson, 84, of Groton will be Saturday, March 1st. 10:30 a.m., at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Pastor Nicole Phillips will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Feb. 28th from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m.

Dennis passed away February 18, 2025 at his home.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

South Dakota House advances bill policing bathroom use, but related ID bill fails

Legislation sparks debate over the rights of transgender people

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 19, 2025 6:33 PM

The South Dakota House of Representatives supported a bill Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre to prohibit transgender people from using restrooms or changing rooms aligned with their gender identity in public schools or on state-owned property — including prisons and higher education campuses.

The same body failed to advance a bill that would prevent transgender people from updating a birth certificate or driver's license to reflect their gender identity.

House supports bathroom bill

The chamber endorsed House Bill 1259 in a 49-21 vote and sent it to the Senate.

The legislation requires schools and state-owned properties to designate multi-occupancy changing rooms, restrooms or sleeping quarters exclusively for females or males. That includes private property for school-sanctioned events. Schools would be responsible for finding "reasonable accommodation" for people, but state-owned properties would not have to provide any accommodations.

Similar bills were introduced in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2022.

Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer, R-Aberdeen, said she introduced the bill because "men shouldn't be allowed in women's private spaces."

School districts, local governments and the state could be sued and held responsible for plaintiff's attorney fees and costs if someone sues them for a "member of the opposite sex" using a bathroom or changing room with the permission of the political entity or administration, or because the political entity didn't take "reasonable steps to prohibit the member of the opposite sex" from using the space.

School districts differ on policies for bathroom use. The Vermilion School District has a policy that allows students to use the restroom they prefer that corresponds with their "consistently asserted gender."

Lawmakers opposed to the legislation compared the bill's intention to race-segregated bathrooms and worried about the potential legal ramifications school districts and the state could face if the bill passed. Yankton Republican Rep. Mike Stevens said the bill is "not necessary" because school districts have managed their own policies and accommodations for decades.

Sioux Falls Democratic Rep. Erin Healy told lawmakers who expressed safety concerns that it is illegal in the state to enter a bathroom with the intent to harm another person. She said the bill was rooted in "fear and misinformation."

"Passing this bill is going to leave girls and women — transgender or not — vulnerable to accusations and discrimination based on how they conform to someone else's standard of gender," Healy said, "and protecting the rights of transgender people expands protections for all women by ensuring that nobody's going to dictate who you are by how you look."

House rejects legislation prohibiting gender changes on government documents

Lawmakers split 35-35 — and therefore failed to pass — House Bill 1260. It would prohibit birth certificate and driver's license updates regarding gender identification.

Schaeffbauer, who introduced the bill, said it would provide clarity for governments to make public policy and for third parties, such as medical providers, to assist unresponsive patients in an emergency situation.

The bill would only allow birth certificates to be amended within a year of a person being born or after a court finds the document was factually inaccurate.

Fort Pierre Republican Will Mortenson told lawmakers he voted in support of the bathroom bill but would vote against HB 1260. He could identify how the prior legislation might "impact someone else."

"I can't see how it impacts me when it just says what's on someone's driver's license," Mortenson said.

Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, said the bill could negatively impact people with sex chromosome anomalies found later in life.

After the tie vote, Rep. Logan Manhart, R-Aberdeen, announced an intent to reconsider the bill. The House could revive the bill later if it draws enough support from lawmakers.

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.

Lawmakers approve sweeping approach to internet porn age verification

South Dakota legislation would apply to sites that regularly host any amount of adult content

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 19, 2025 6:20 PM

PIERRE — More than a dozen states have passed or are considering laws to require porn sites to ask adults who want to visit them for personal information to prove their age.

So far, each of them — including Texas, whose law had an audience with the U.S. Supreme Court last month — have applied the rule to sites on which a third or more of the content counts as pornography.

South Dakota could soon be the first state to affix the expectation to any site that hosts any pornography in the "regular course of the website's trade or business."

On Wednesday at the state Capitol, the Senate voted 34-0 to send that bill to the desk of Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden.

"It's a huge step forward," said Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, a prime sponsor of House Bill 1053. "It's time to jump on board and protect our children from pornography on the internet."

No senators spoke against the bill on the Senate floor. The Senate Judiciary Committee spent more than an hour hearing testimony on age verification on Tuesday, however.

There was broad agreement in the committee room on the need to address the omnipresence of online pornography.

"It used to be years ago that when we went into schools, we only heard the word 'porn' in schools. Then it became middle school," said Holly Strand, a Rapid City forensic interviewer in child sex crime investigations. "About five years ago, we had a kindergartner ask us how to handle pornography. It was all downhill from there."

Two options: One-third porn or any porn?

The Senate panel had two options for age verification on its plate Tuesday.

Each aimed to force adult sites to ask visitors for something like a credit card or state-issued driver's license to prove they're old enough to be there. Both required the deletion of that data after the visit. Each would let South Dakota's attorney general levy criminal fines against companies that don't comply.

One of them, Senate Bill 18, rejected by the committee, follows the model of Texas by targeting sites where one-third of the content is adult material.

HB 1053 draws no such line.

The House bill came from Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls. On Tuesday, she said the one-third figure

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was pulled from thin air by Louisiana lawmakers looking to preempt concerns about an overly broad restriction in their age verification legislation.

"Every state just blindly copied them," said Soye, who is an attorney. "And I think that we can do better than that."

To her, the one-third standard amounts to an invitation for porn sites to find ways to keep their total adult content just below the line, perhaps at 29.9% pornography.

"You can already see the loophole," Soye said.

The Texas law, which is similar to Louisiana's, had a hearing in the U.S. Supreme Court last month. The justices won't decide themselves if such laws violate the First Amendment. Instead, the high court is poised to decide how strict lower courts must be as they rule on the constitutionality of age verification laws.

Attorney general to Legislature: I'll defend whatever you do

Attorney General Marty Jackley told the committee his office would support the state in a lawsuit over either bill.

"I believe this is something that should've been addressed by Congress, but in their absence, you have to act," Jackley said.

He'd prefer to defend the Senate version that mirrors Texas, though.

So would Doug Abraham. He's the South Dakota lobbyist for The App Association, which bills itself as a trade group for small tech businesses. He said the lack of a standard for how much content needs to be adult material creates "overbreadth" concerns.

Expecting every app or website with potentially pornographic content to ask for personal information from its users is akin to expecting a mall with a liquor store to make sure every visitor is 21, Abraham said.

"You'd be carding everybody who goes into the mall," he told the committee.

No bill will prevent determined children from accessing pornography, many supporters conceded, but the stricter the rules, the better the chances.

"Even if this prevents one child in our state from earlier exposure to porn, this bill is a success," said Strand, the forensic examiner.

Constitutional, legal challenge concerns

Samantha Chapman of the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota voiced concerns about constitutionality.

"All means of age verification that are currently available to us today present substantial risks to anonymous web browsing and internet privacy, which will create a chilling effect on content that is legally available," Chapman said.

There are tools available to parents now, she said. There are other approaches that haven't been tried yet, such as age verification that ties content access to the age of a device's user.

Beyond First Amendment concerns with HB 1053's approach, she pointed to worries over the practice of scanning and sharing personal data to access sensitive content. People could intercept the data for use in extortion, she suggested, regardless of a state law's requirement that data be deleted.

"The mere presence of government-issued IDs being scanned and transmitted online, presents risk, the potential for hackers and thieves, and potentially hostile foreign governments to take that data into and to use it," she said.

Chapman testified against both bills, while conceding that SB 18 would be preferable because it would sweep in fewer websites.

Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, is chair of the Judiciary Committee. He had questions about how broadly HB 1053 would apply, wondering if it could sweep up streaming services like Netflix if the site regularly hosts movies arguably deemed pornographic.

After the committee rejected the other bill, he joined other committee members in voting for Soye's bill.

"At this point, since I have no other option, I'm going to support 1053," Wheeler said.

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

Legislative committee endorses prosecution of librarians who lend books deemed harmful to children

Bill would also subject employees of schools, universities and museums to potential jail time

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 19, 2025 1:39 PM

A South Dakota legislative committee advanced a bill Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre that would subject schools, universities, museums, libraries and their employees to criminal prosecution and jail time for allowing children to view material defined in state law as obscene or harmful to minors.

An opponent of the bill said it would put "librarians in handcuffs" for lending a book to a child that some adults might consider inappropriate. One member of the House Education Committee who voted in favor of the legislation, Rep. Travis Ismay, R-Newell, suggested an arrest might be insufficient punishment.

"If a librarian rented this out to my son or daughter, you'd be lucky if you got hauled out of there in handcuffs," Ismay said. "So, yes, if they're breaking the law anyway, why would we have any problem with librarians getting hauled out of the library in handcuffs?"

Ismay and other committee members who voted for the bill focused some of their comments on the book "Tricks," which is marketed as a young adult novel from author Ellen Hopkins about five troubled teenagers who work as prostitutes. Several supporters of the bill criticized the book in their testimony as inappropriate for children and said it's available in many high school libraries in the state. They said parents have had difficulty convincing local school administrators and school boards to remove such books from school library shelves.

Opponents of the bill said criminalizing the lending of a book with a class one misdemeanor is an out-of-proportion response to concerns about a book's content. Eric E. Erickson, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Library Association, said that's the same class of punishment applied to hiring a prostitute and committing simple assault, with a maximum penalty of one year in jail and a \$2,000 fine.

"Locking up our librarians, our professors, our teachers, our museum curators is not the answer," Erickson said.

Other bill opponents said some parents may not like the local procedures available to request the removal of a book from a school library, but those procedures are the appropriate venue for complaints. Rep. Mike Stevens, R-Yankton, who voted against the bill, said parents unhappy with the outcome of those procedures already have the ability to file a lawsuit.

Stevens sponsored a bill adopted by the Legislature last year that requires public schools and libraries to publish their policies for restricting minors from accessing obscene materials. He said that requirement, which took effect on Jan. 1 this year, is a better approach to the problem than the bill endorsed Wednesday by the committee.

The sponsor of the new bill, Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, said last year's bill is ineffective because of the existence of another state law. That law exempts schools, colleges, universities, museums, public libraries and their employees from prosecution for disseminating material harmful to minors and related offenses. Soye's bill would repeal that exemption.

State law defines material harmful to minors as any description or representation of nudity, sexual conduct, sexual excitement or "sado-masochistic abuse" if it predominantly appeals to a "prurient, shameful or morbid interest," is patently offensive to prevailing standards about suitable material for children, and is without "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

Soye said the protection for material with "literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" is sufficient.

"This is not a ban on any books," she said. "If, specifically, we're talking about a public library, you can still have the books. Adults, obviously, can read anything they want. We're just saying this is material that's harmful to minors, so you can't check it out to a minor."

Opponents of the bill said it would infringe on free speech and subject employees of the targeted institutions to prosecution for making subjective decisions.

"Many people will have a fundamental disagreement on what is defined as obscene," said Sandra Waltman, of the South Dakota Education Association. "Often it comes down to a difference in values — something that should not be criminalized."

The committee voted 10-5 to send House Bill 1239 to the full House of Representatives.

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

SD House Republican leaders support comprehensive property tax study

Committee rejects tax shift proposal in anticipation of debate on governor's legislation

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 19, 2025 1:32 PM

Property tax reform should start with government spending cuts and include difficult discussions about public education funding, House of Representatives leaders on the State Affairs Committee said Wednesday at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre.

The committee rejected legislation that would shift the property tax burden from homeowners to sales taxes and endorsed a proposed legislative summer study to investigate property tax policy. Property tax revenue goes to cities, counties and schools, while the state depends on sales tax revenue and cities also receive sales tax revenue.

House Speaker Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, said he opposed the tax shift bill because it didn't address the root issue of rising taxes.

"Our first look should be how we can reduce the government, how we can provide cuts, before we start thinking about how we're going to increase taxes to pay for a tax," Hansen said.

Republican caucus not receptive to tax shift, leaders say

House Bill 1019 would reduce the property tax mill levy on owner-occupied homes for general education and special education from \$4.167 to zero, thereby saving homeowners \$416.70 for every \$100,000 of a home's assessed value. The proposal would save homeowners \$280 million in total, said Rapid City Republican Rep. Tim Goodwin, prime sponsor of the legislation.

An increase in the sales tax rate from 4.2% to 5% would raise the equivalent \$280 million to fund the property tax reduction. The legislation would allow "property tax reform to pay for itself," Goodwin said.

Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard, said tourists would help foot the bill by shifting the burden to sales taxes.

Opponents, including organizations representing businesses in the state, the South Dakota Farm Bureau and Americans for Prosperity-South Dakota, said the legislation would shift the tax burden from one group of South Dakotans to another. The Bureau of Finance and Management also spoke against the bill, telling lawmakers the Governor's Office prefers a more "targeted" approach.

Rep. Greg Jamison, R-Sioux Falls, one of the House majority whips, said that although the legislation offers "what the people want" in a sizable property tax cut for homeowners, the House of Representatives Republican caucus "doesn't have an appetite" for shifting taxes.

"Generating new revenue isn't what this body wants to do, it'd rather cut spending," Jamison said.

The committee voted 8-3 to defeat HB 1019.

Committee endorses summer study recommendation

The House State Affairs Committee is scheduled to consider several other property tax proposals on Friday. Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden incorporated some of the ideas into his legislative proposal revealed last week, saying that other "reasonable proposals" could move through the legislative process.

Rhoden's legislation would cap growth in owner-occupied home valuations for five years, put stricter limits on the annual growth of local governments' property tax collections and expand eligibility for property tax relief programs.

The Senate Taxation Committee voted on Wednesday to table three other property tax bills because they were incorporated into the governor's legislation or were "not workable," said Senate Taxation Chairman Steve Kolbeck, R-Brandon.

Whatever the Legislature moves forward with, Hansen said, it needs to "stop the bleeding" of rising property taxes. After the Legislature passes some sort of legislation this session, the body should establish a summer study committee to analyze property tax policies and government spending, he said.

Hansen introduced the resolution to create such a study, which the committee endorsed Wednesday. The resolution does not call for studying government spending but proposes "a comprehensive review of property tax policies."

"Over the next year, the people are demanding that we identify impactful, substantive measures to provide significant and lasting tax relief for families," Hansen said.

Legislators conducted studies on property taxes in 2024 and 2022.

Education funding is "the elephant in the room" when discussing property taxes, Jamison said. Other lawmakers agreed, saying the summer study should review government funding and spending.

"If it doesn't involve a spending cut then we'll never fix the tax," said House Assistant Majority Leader Marty Overweg, R-New Holland. "That's the way it is."

No opponents spoke against the proposed summer study.

The committee voted to endorse the resolution 11-1. Reisch was the sole vote against the resolution. It'll head to the House next.

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

Protesters in D.C. rally against Trump firings of federal scientists, health researchers

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 19, 2025 4:52 PM

WASHINGTON — Hundreds rallied in support of former and current federal scientists and health workers Wednesday in Washington, D.C., as President Donald Trump's administration slashes the workforce across federal agencies.

Mass firings mostly targeting probationary employees began last week at the Department of Education, General Services Administration, Office of Personnel Management, the Small Business Administration, the U.S. Forest Service, Veterans Affairs, National Nuclear Security Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies, with several major news outlets reporting roughly 10,000 terminations.

Probationary employees total roughly 220,000 of the federal workforce. While they are generally early career workers, some employees who have recently been promoted to a new position are also considered probationary.

The dismissals come as Trump's U.S. DOGE Service continues to access agencies' internal systems, one by one, and as White House adviser and billionaire campaign donor Elon Musk pushes to purge the

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federal workforce.

A noon rally outside the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services largely focused on cuts at the nation's research and health regulatory agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Food and Drug Administration. The HHS headquarters building is on Independence Avenue SW near the Capitol.

A late-night email

Alexander Jordan Lara told the crowd of his shock when he received a late-night email on Feb. 11 from his boss, Dr. Lawrence Tabak, who said he was immediately retiring. Tabak, the No. 2 official at NIH, did not provide a reason for his sudden departure, but Lara said the incident set off "a week that aged me a year."

"In between experiments, on Friday, I ran around my institute collecting people's testimonies, contact information, while trying to provide resources, guidance and reassurance. The most productive and accomplished fellows in my institute were facing the prospect of losing their jobs, careers and visa status, all because of the whims of some oligarchs," said Lara, who told the crowd he was speaking in a personal capacity.

Lara, a research fellow in what was Tabak's lab at the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, said those still employed were "expected to continue as if it was business as usual."

"How can we expect people to discover cures and treatments when they're occupied discovering if they still have a job?" said Lara, who specializes in glycoproteomics, a field that analyzes sugars attached to proteins and can be applied to diagnostics of cancer, Alzheimer's and microbiome issues.

'Hands off the FDA'

Democratic members of Congress spoke alongside the former and current government workers, and unionized scientists and researchers.

U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin, who represents Maryland's 8th Congressional District, led the crowd in a chant of "Hey, hey, RFK, hands off the FDA," referencing Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s recent confirmation as secretary of Health and Human Services.

Despite his well-recorded history of spreading falsehoods about vaccine safety, the U.S. Senate confirmed Kennedy to head the massive health agency in a 52-48 vote. Kentucky Republican Mitch McConnell was the only one in his party to join Democrats in opposition.

Raskin, whose district includes several federal agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, said the Trump administration is "waging war on the health care workers in America" and that he's heard from government health researchers who were recently promoted but who got swept up in the firings of probationary employees.

"That's stupid, that's cruel," Raskin said.

"I've got constituents who are doing the critical research America needs into AIDS and HIV, into autism, into breast cancer, into colon cancer, into leukemia, into cystic fibrosis, into multiple sclerosis, into malignant narcissistic personality disorder," Raskin said to cheers.

The majority of federal workers live outside of the Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., region.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment about the rally.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen and Rep. Glenn Ivey, both of Maryland, also spoke at the rally.

Ivey told the crowd that he wants to see continued protests. "We need every mini-march on Washington, day after day, to push this forward. We got to fight to take the Congress back. We got to wait two years to do it, but we're going to take it back and make Hakeem Jeffries, the speaker of the House, in two years, right?"

Republicans hold majorities in both the Senate and House and have offered no recourse to Democrats in pushing back on Trump and Musk's dismantling of federal agencies.

Young scientists worry

Several aspiring scientists at the rally worried aloud about their employment prospects. PhD students and post-doctoral researchers are largely dependent on grants to fund their jobs.

Sydney Woods is in the fourth year of a PhD program in neuroscience at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Woods said she's nervous about job prospects for young scientists.

"I'm watching people that I know from the NIH and other agencies lose their jobs, and it's a tough time to be a PhD student that's looking to make their next career step," Woods, 27, said.

Connor Phillips, 25, told the crowd he's losing his research training position at the National Institutes of Health.

Phillips, a post-baccalaureate fellow who previously benefited from treatment to manage his cerebral palsy, said he signed on as an unpaid researcher for an NIH program developing therapies for children with cerebral palsy.

"When I hear people say these cuts are making our government more efficient, I am at a loss. How can that be true when I'm prevented from working for free as someone who hopes to be a great scientist one day?" Phillips told the crowd. "I'm questioning whether that will still be possible in the United States. If this story speaks to you, call your senators and tell them to fund our science."

Samriddhi Patankar, an undergrad at George Washington University, held a sign bearing the message "Truth = Power."

"My parents are researchers, and their jobs, I feel like under threat, as everyone is in the research field," said Patankar, 19. "And I just want to make sure that when I'm out in the field, I have a space to believe in science, and it sounds crazy, but where facts are facts."

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

Trump prefers U.S. House budget, but Thune and Senate GOP forge ahead with their version

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 19, 2025 2:49 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Senate Republicans plan to vote on their budget resolution this week as planned, despite President Donald Trump throwing his support behind the House's budget on Wednesday morning.

"I think he's made it clear for a long time that he would prefer one big, beautiful bill," Senate Majority Leader John Thune said. "And we're fine with that too. If the House can produce one big, beautiful bill, we're prepared to work with them to get that across the finish line."

"But we believe that the president also likes optionality. And the legislation that we'll be working and voting on tomorrow addresses those three critical priorities," the South Dakota Republican added, referring to border security, defense and energy.

Normally, the House and Senate each could continue down their own paths and then simply go to conference to work out the differences between their two versions of legislation.

But the GOP plans to use the complicated budget reconciliation process, which requires the two chambers first vote to adopt identical budget resolutions with reconciliation instructions. They can then draft, debate and vote on the actual reconciliation bill without needing any Democratic votes.

That's not currently happening and instead, House and Senate Republicans are essentially holding a staring contest over the budget resolution.

Democrats predict either option will mean "massive cuts" in Medicaid, the health care program for lower income people, and on Wednesday urged Americans throughout the country who rely on Medicaid for their or a family member's health care to call up GOP members of Congress and urge them not to cut benefits.

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The Senate option

The Senate released its budget resolution and voted it out of the Budget Committee earlier this month. The 62-page document proposes that Congress provide hundreds of billions of dollars for border security and defense programs along with substantial changes to energy policy in one bill.

Under the Senate's proposal, Congress then would adopt a second budget resolution with reconciliation instructions later this year to extend the 2017 Republican tax law, much of which is set to expire at the end of the year.

Senate Budget Chairman Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said this approach would get the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security the funding they need right now, while giving the GOP a bit more time to debate tax law and figure out how to pay for that legislation.

The House option

House Republicans released their own budget resolution last week and approved it in committee. Their reconciliation instructions propose making all of the changes at one time in one bill.

Trump posted on social media Wednesday morning he favored the House's budget resolution, after staying out of the disagreement for months.

"The House and Senate are doing a SPECTACULAR job of working together as one unified, and unbeatable, TEAM, however, unlike the Lindsey Graham version of the very important Legislation currently being discussed, the House Resolution implements my FULL America First Agenda, EVERYTHING, not just parts of it!" Trump wrote.

"We need both Chambers to pass the House Budget to 'kickstart' the Reconciliation process, and move all of our priorities to the concept of, 'ONE BIG BEAUTIFUL BILL,'" Trump added. "It will, without question, MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!"

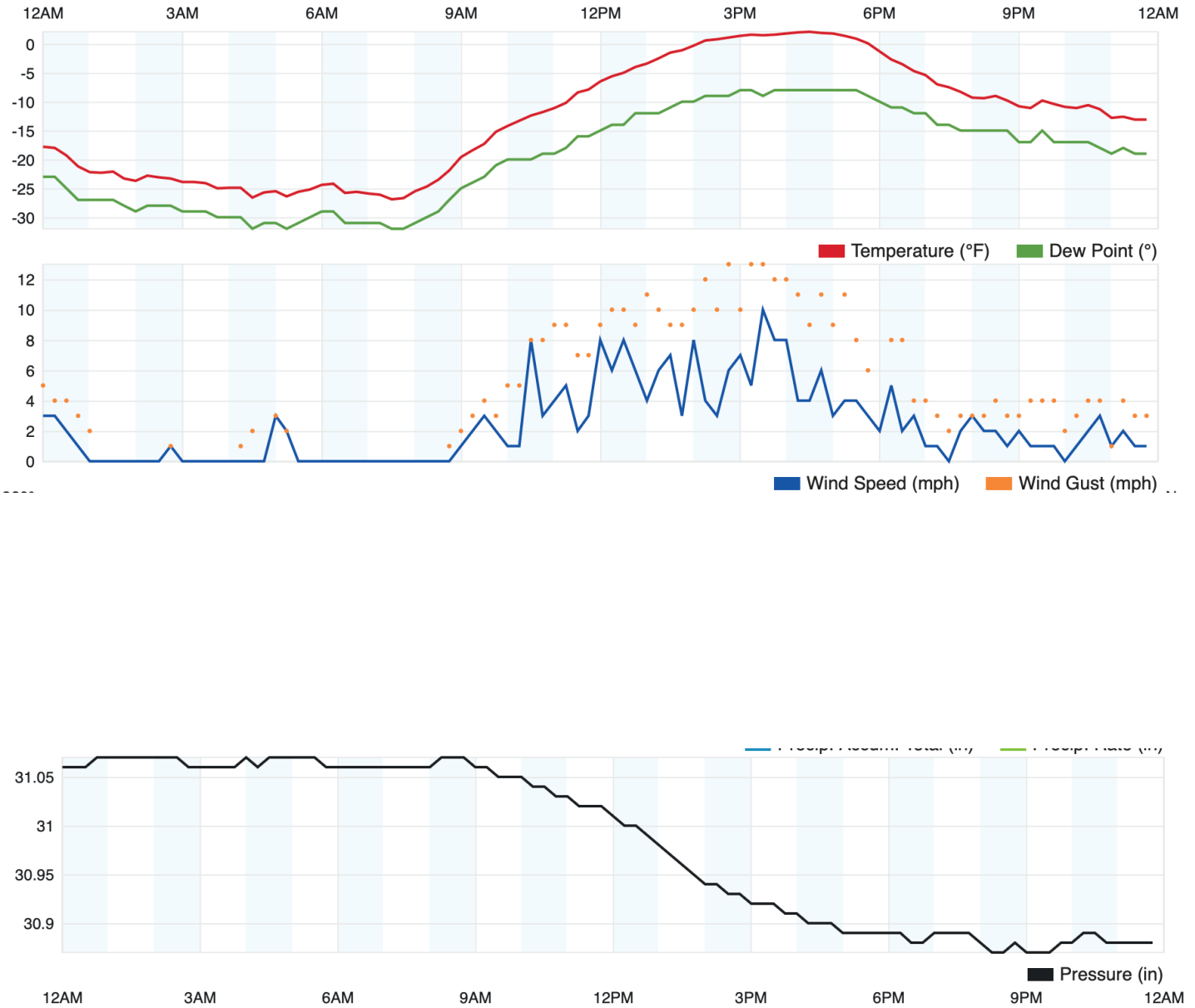
House Budget Committee Chair Jodey Arrington, R-Texas, welcomed Trump's announcement, writing in a statement "Republicans in both chambers should follow Trump's lead – endorse it, unlock the most consequential legislation in modern history, and Make America Great Again!"

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 10 °F

Cold

Tonight



Low: -6 °F

Clear

Friday



High: 28 °F

Sunny

Friday Night



Low: 7 °F

Partly Cloudy

Saturday



High: 39 °F

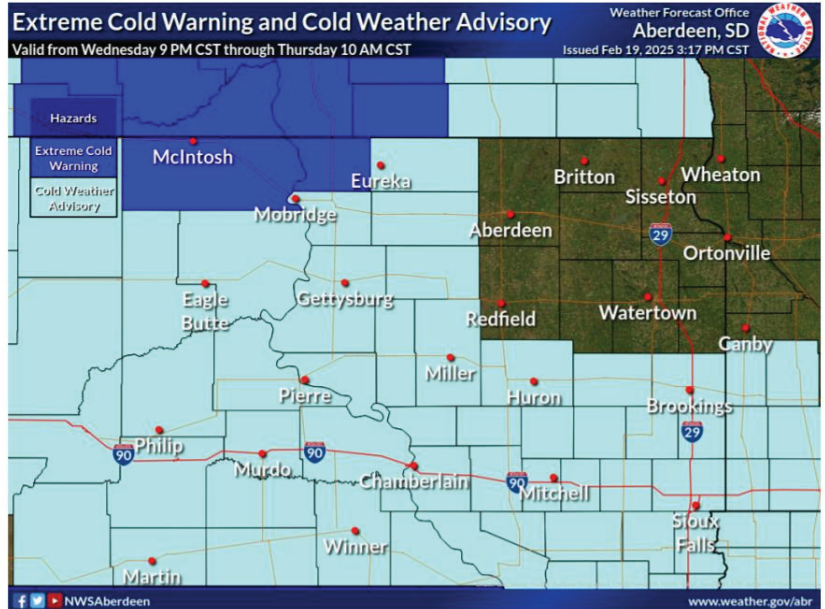
Partly Sunny



Dangerously Cold Tonight into Thursday AM

February 19, 2025
3:26 PM

- **Extreme Cold Warning** for Corson and Campbell Counties tonight through Thursday morning
- **Cold Weather Advisory** for portions of north central to south central SD tonight through Thursday morning
- Wind chills as low as **-25° to -45°** this morning, which could cause **frostbite in as little as 10 to 30 minutes**



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

An Extreme Cold Warning is in effect for Corson and Campbell counties tonight through Thursday morning. A Cold Weather Advisory is also in effect for portions of central and north central South Dakota through Thursday morning. Wind Chills as low as -25° to -45° are possible.

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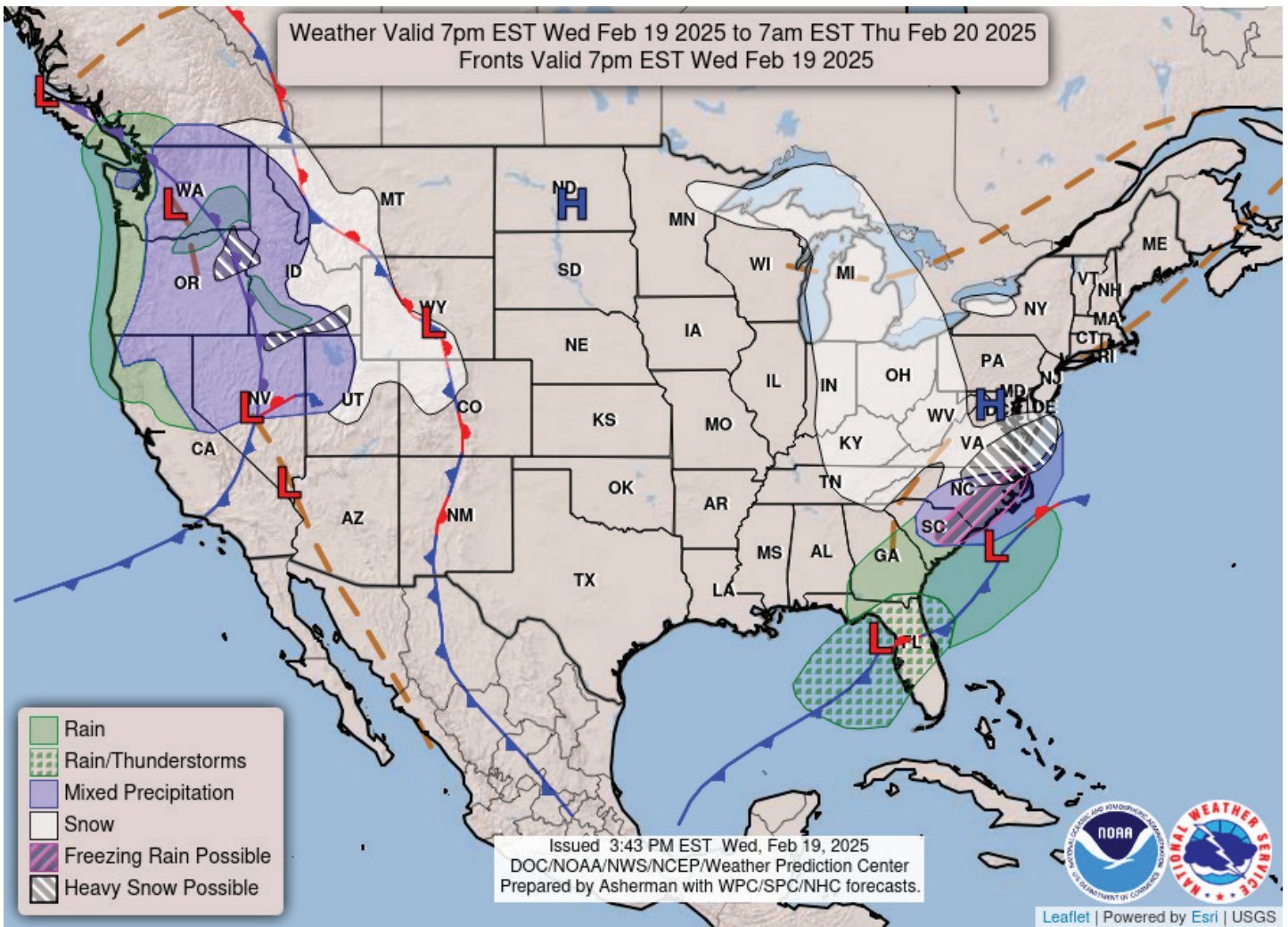
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 2 °F at 4:17 PM
Low Temp: -27 °F at 7:36 AM
Wind: 14 mph at 3:35 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 45 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 61 in 1930
Record Low: --30 in 1918
Average High: 30
Average Low: 8
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.42
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20
Average Precip to date: 0.97
Precip Year to Date: 0.20
Sunset Tonight: 6:08:35 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:21:48 am



Today in Weather History

February 20th, 1962: A round of heavy snow fell across the southeastern half of the state from the 20th through the 22nd, producing 10 inches. Snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Bryant, 6 inches at Kennebec, 7 inches at Redfield, Brookings, Mitchell, and Sioux Falls, 8 inches at Miller, and 10 inches at Huron. Snowfall amounts for the record-setting month of February 1962 ranged from 30 - 50 inches across much of the southeast part of the state.

February 20th, 1997: Warm weather resulted in snowmelt runoff and ice breakup on the Bad River. As a result, the Bad River went above flood stage from Capa to Fort Pierre late in the evening of the 20th. The flood stage at Fort Pierre is 21 feet, and the river rose to around 25 feet on the 21st. The Bad River went below flood stage during the afternoon of the 22nd. Lowlands near the river were flooded along with some county roads, with some of the roads damaged. Late in the evening of the 20th, the trailer court on the southern edge of Fort Pierre was evacuated, where they did some sandbagging. Also, on the west side of Fort Pierre, some roads were flooded.

February 20th, 2011: The snowfall/blizzard event on 20-21 February 2011 produced yet another round of impressive snowfall totals across central and northeastern South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Storm total snowfall amounts ranged from 8" to 12" with locally higher amounts of more than 18" reported in a few locations.

1912: A strong area of low pressure produced snow in Amarillo and high winds to Austin, Texas. In the warm sector of the low, severe storms developed and produced an estimated F3 tornado in Shreveport, Louisiana. The tornado killed nine people and injured 50 others. The tornado passed near Centenary College, where windows were damaged, and the grandstand at the ballpark was partially damaged. In addition, significant damage occurred in the Freewater section, where an estimated 75 to 100 houses were demolished.

1912: During the 20th and 21st, a severe snowstorm attended by high winds lasting from 34 to 30 hours swept over Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. The amount of snow that fell in this storm was not only large, but it drifted severely. In many places, snowbanks 5 feet and higher were formed, railroad cuts were filled, highways in many places were impassable, electric service wires of all kinds were temporarily put out of commission, all trade and traffic generally demoralized. This snowstorm was part of a general disturbance that developed over the southwest on the 20th and moved northeastward over the Central and Eastern States, increasing in strength during the 21st and 22nd, and which proved to be one of the most severe and most extensive general disturbances that have passed over this section of the country for several years past. Besides the heavy snow in the northern part of the storm, heavy rains, gales, and destructive thunderstorms attended over most of the southern and eastern portions. Wind velocities of 50 to 75 miles per hour were reported at many places during the passage of this storm. Some wind blew steadily at high velocities for several hours.

1995: The temperature at the Civic Center in Los Angeles, California, soared to 95 degrees, the highest ever recorded at the location during February.

2004: A nor'easter brought heavy snow and strong winds to Nova Scotia and Prince Edwards Island from February 17th through 20th, 2004. The Maritimers called this storm White Juan, a hurricane disguised as a blizzard. Halifax, Yarmouth, and Charlottetown broke all-time 24-hour snowfall records, receiving about 3 feet of snow. The 34.8 inches of snow on February 19th nearly doubled its previous record for a single day for Halifax.



CRITICISM

Paderewski was a great Polish pianist. But when he first chose to take piano lessons a teacher said to him, "Your hands are too small. You will never be able to master the keyboard."

Caruso was one of the greatest tenors who ever lived. When he went for his first voice lesson in Italy, the teacher said to him, "Your voice is like wind whistling through a window." He refused to give him voice lessons.

Alexander Graham Bell spent years working to develop and perfect his telephone. When he displayed it to a group of people, they said, "You are a fool with a useless toy."

As Christians, we must learn to look at criticism as a "challenge and call to courage" and turn to the Lord as our guide and guard. If we are grateful for the skills and talents God has given us, we will accept every challenge as an opportunity to "become better" as a gift to honor Him for the gifts He has given us. The choice is ours: We can choose to rise to the occasion, meet it and be victorious, or give up in fear because we do not trust in Him to give us victory over our opportunities. The God of our salvation and hope promises us that with His help all things are possible. We must accept, trust, and act in His strength, wisdom and power, not ours!

Prayer: Lord of our lives, whenever we face an obstacle, may we see it as an opportunity to turn to You for grace and guidance. All things are possible through You! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy. Colossians 1:11

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: 1 Days 17 Hrs 8 Mins 8 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

3 22 23 35 41 2

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$24,470,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 23 Mins 8 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

7 21 30 41 42 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 38 Mins 8 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

6 9 16 27 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$41,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 38 Mins 8 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

15 21 34 43 60 23

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 7 Mins 8 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

6 21 28 49 60 20

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$215,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 7 Mins 8 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Forte's 30 lead South Dakota past St. Thomas 85-80

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Chase Forte's 30 points led South Dakota past St. Thomas 85-80 on Wednesday night.

Forte also contributed nine rebounds and three steals for the Coyotes (17-11, 8-5 Summit League). Quandre Bullock scored 15 points while going 5 of 10 from the floor, including 1 for 6 from 3-point range, and 4 for 4 from the free-throw line. Max Burchill had 13 points and shot 3 for 8 (3 for 6 from 3-point range) and 4 of 4 from the free-throw line.

Miles Barnstable finished with 16 points for the Tommies (20-8, 10-3). Carter Bjerke added 14 points for St. Thomas. Kendall Blue had 14 points.

Moni puts up 28, North Dakota State defeats South Dakota State 77-68

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Jacksen Moni's 28 points helped North Dakota State defeat South Dakota State 77-68 on Wednesday night.

Moni also contributed six rebounds for the Bison (20-9, 9-5 Summit League). Tajavis Miller shot 5 for 7 (2 for 4 from 3-point range) and 3 of 3 from the free-throw line to add 15 points. Masen Miller had 14 points and went 5 of 8 from the field (4 for 7 from 3-point range).

Oscar Cluff and Joe Saylor led the Jackrabbits (18-10, 9-4) in scoring, finishing with 14 points apiece. Owen Larson had 13 points, six rebounds and four assists.

North Dakota State's next game is Saturday against North Dakota on the road. South Dakota State hosts Kansas City on Sunday.

China begins repatriation from Thailand of more than 1,000 online scam workers rescued from Myanmar

By JUTARAT SKULPICHETRAT and GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — An airlift carrying more than 1,000 Chinese nationals who had worked at online scam centers in eastern Myanmar began Thursday, after the rescued workers were taken across the border to Thailand and put on chartered flights to China.

Thailand, China and Myanmar have coordinated efforts over the past month to shut down the scam centers that bilked victims around the world out of billions of dollars through false romantic ploys, bogus investment pitches and illegal gambling schemes.

Hundreds of thousands of people from Southeast Asia and elsewhere are estimated to have worked at such centers in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, and many were recruited under false pretenses for other jobs and found themselves trapped in virtual slavery.

Thai officials said recently that as many as 10,000 people may be repatriated from Myanmar from the online scam centers.

So far, 16 flights, or about four a day, have been scheduled to repatriate the Chinese nationals, accompanied by police. Because of the large number of Chinese — the projected number so far is 1,041 — Thailand is allowing Beijing to handle most of their processing and investigations on their return to China.

Thai officials told reporters on Thursday the rescued workers were being taken in batches of 50 across a bridge from Myanmar's Myawaddy to Thailand's Mae Sot, where they were processed — including with biometric scans — and sent on by bus to Mae Sot's airport.

There they boarded China Southern Airlines planes, whose destination was shown by flight tracking websites as Jinghong in southwestern China's Yunnan province.

Thai authorities are overseeing the evacuation and processing of scam center workers from other nations. Last week, some 260 people from 20 nations, including many from Africa, crossed from Myanmar into Thai custody after they were reportedly rescued from scam centers.

The organized repatriation of freed scam workers from nations other than China will begin on Sunday, Thai PBS reported.

Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra on a visit to Beijing earlier this month told Chinese leader Xi Jinping that Thailand would crack down on the scam networks. Just ahead of her visit, Thailand cut off electricity, internet and gas supplies to several areas in Myanmar hosting scam centers along the border, citing national security and the damage that Thailand has suffered from the operations.

Thailand wants to cooperate with China since reports about scam workers being trafficked through Thailand have circulated widely on Chinese social media. The Thai government and others fear it will discourage the lucrative market of inbound Chinese tourists.

The Border Guard Force in Myawaddy, a militia of the Karen ethnic minority that controls the area, has organized the repatriation of foreign workers from Myanmar. But critics have accused the group of involvement in the criminal activities by providing protection to the scam centers. It denies the accusations.

An earlier crackdown on scam centers in Myanmar happened in late 2023, after China expressed embarrassment and concern over illegal casinos and scam operations along its border in Myanmar's northern Shan state.

Ethnic guerrilla groups with close ties to Beijing shut down many operations, and an estimated 45,000 Chinese nationals suspected of involvement were repatriated.

Who are the hostages freed by Hamas as part of the ceasefire in Gaza?

JERUSALEM (AP) — The bodies of four Israelis taken captive by Hamas, including those said to be of the last female and child hostages in Gaza, were released Thursday, bringing to 28 the number of captives freed since the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas began on Jan. 19.

The bodies returned to Israel are presumed to include Shiri Bibas and her two sons, Ariel and Kfir, whose plight has captivated Israelis since they were taken during Hamas' deadly attack on Oct. 7, 2023. The body of one of the oldest hostages held was also said to have been returned. The remains now need to be formally identified.

In the first phase of the ceasefire deal, a total of 33 hostages in Gaza — eight of whom are dead — are supposed to be freed in exchange for almost 2,000 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. Five Thai citizens who were working in Israel on the day of the attack were freed last month as part of a separate deal.

Hamas-led militants took 251 hostages during their Oct. 7, 2023, attack that launched the war in Gaza. More than 60 hostages remain in Gaza, although about half are believed to be dead. The others were released, rescued, or their bodies recovered.

Israel's military campaign has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were fighters but says more than half were women or children.

Here's a look at the hostages returned so far:

Shiri, Ariel and Kfir Bibas

The bodies said to be of Shiri Bibas and her two sons, Ariel and Kfir Bibas, were returned Thursday. They were abducted along with Shiri's husband, Yarden, from Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7, 2023. Hamas said the three were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Yarden Bibas was released earlier this month during the ceasefire deal.

A video capturing their abduction showed a terrified Shiri Bibas swaddling her two redheaded sons in a blanket and being carried away by militants. The footage ricocheted around the world in the hours after the attack began.

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Ariel was 4 years old at the time of the attack and his brother, Kfir, was 9 months old, making him the youngest captive taken by Hamas. Ariel Bibas loved Batman and family photos showed the four Bibases dressed as the character. Kfir, the infant with red hair and a toothless smile, became a symbol across Israel for the feelings of helplessness and anger over the hostages' captivity.

Oded Lifshitz, 84

The body said to be of Oded Lifshitz, one of the oldest hostages held by the militants, was returned Thursday. He was taken captive from his home in Kibbutz Nir Oz, along with his wife, Yocheved Lifshitz, who was freed during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

Oded Lifshitz was shot in the hand in the attack. His family has suspected for months that he died in captivity.

The couple are among the founders of Nir Oz. Oded, a journalist, campaigned for the recognition of Palestinian rights and peace between Arabs and Jews. In retirement, he drove to the Erez border crossing on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip once a week to ferry Palestinians to medical appointments in Israel as part of a group called On the Way to Recovery.

Oded took pride in his work helping the traditionally nomadic Bedouin people of the Negev Desert, his daughter told The Associated Press, describing a case that went to Israel's High Court and resulted in the return of some of their land.

Sagui Dekel Chen, 36

An Israeli-American, Chen was working outside on his pet project, bus conversions, when militants stormed his kibbutz. He instructed his wife, Avital, to hide in the safe room with their two daughters. Chen, one of the first people to raise alarm of the infiltration on the kibbutz, was taken captive.

Avital was seven months pregnant at the time of the attack; she gave birth to a third daughter, Shachar Mazal, in December 2023.

Chen is an avid tennis player who co-founded an arts center for young people in southern Israel, according to the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, an advocacy group representing the families of hostages, Iair Horn, 46

Horn is an Israel-Argentinian who was taken captive along with his brother, Eitan Horn, who was staying with him at the time. Eitan Horn remains in captivity and his name is not on the list of hostages to be released during the ceasefire's first phase.

Iair Horn managed the kibbutz pub and is a fan of the local soccer team in Beer Sheba, according to the hostages forum. Friends gathered at the kibbutz pub on Nir Oz to watch Horn's release from captivity and to toast his return, according to Israeli media.

Alexander (Sasha) Troufanov, 29

Sasha Trufanov, an Israeli-Russian, was taken hostage along with three members of his family: grandmother Irena Tati, mother Yelena (Lena) and girlfriend Sapir Cohen. His father, Vitaly Trufanov, was killed on Oct. 7, 2023. The rest of his family was freed during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

Sasha Troufanov works as an engineer for Amazon, according to the hostages forum. His family immigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union 25 years ago.

He was believed to be held by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, another militant group in Gaza, which has released multiple videos of him in captivity, including one just hours before his release.

Eli Sharabi, 52

Eli Sharabi was taken captive by the militants from Kibbutz Beeri, a communal farm that was one of the hardest hit in the Hamas attack. His British-born wife, Lianne, and their teenage daughters, Noiya and Yahel, were killed by militants while hiding in their safe room. His brother, Yossi Sharabi, who lived next door, was killed in captivity. Hamas militants are holding his body, according to the Hostages Forum.

Eli Sharabi's home bore marks from the attack months later. AP journalists saw bullet holes in the walls and the shattered oven and TV screens. Nearby homes were torched by militants and their roofs blasted off during fighting on Oct. 7.

Ohad Ben Ami, 56

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Ohad Ben Ami, a father to three, was taken captive with his wife, Raz, from Kibbutz Beeri, where he was an accountant. Raz Ben Ami was released during the weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

The hostages forum described Ohad Ben Ami as a "passionate nature enthusiast" and the "cornerstone of his family."

Or Levy, 34

Or Levy was pulled out by the militants from a bomb shelter near the Nova music festival in southern Israel. His wife, Einav Levy, was killed during the attack. Their son Almog, now 3, has been in the care of relatives since the assault.

Levy was taken captive alongside American-Israeli Hersh Goldberg-Polin as well as two other hostages — Eliya Cohen and Alon Ohel. Goldberg-Polin, whose parents staged a high-profile campaign for his release, was killed in Hamas captivity.

Or Levy is from the city of Rishon Lezion, where he worked as a computer programmer for a startup.

Yarden Bibas, 35

The release of Yarden Bibas dimmed hopes that his wife and children were still alive in Gaza.

Hamas has claimed that the three were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Israel has not confirmed that, but a military spokesperson said last month that the government was "extremely concerned" about their welfare.

Yarden Bibas was taken from Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7. Photos from the abduction show him wounded, bleeding from the head.

Keith Siegel, 65

Keith Siegel, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was abducted with his wife, Aviva Siegel, from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, a communal farming village heavily damaged by the attack. She was freed during the November 2023 ceasefire deal, and has campaigned across the world for the release of her husband and other hostages.

Aviva Siegel said that she was held hostage with her husband during her 51 days in captivity. She said she took comfort from having her husband by her side as they were moved from tunnel to tunnel, the two given almost no food or water. Her parting words to him were, "Be strong for me."

Ofer Kalderon, 54

Ofer Kalderon, a French-Israeli hostage, was taken captive from Kibbutz Nir Oz. His teenage children, Sahar and Erez, were also abducted, but they were freed during the weeklong ceasefire in 2023.

Arbel Yehoud, 29

Arbel Yehoud was taken hostage with her boyfriend, Ariel Cunio, from Kibbutz Nir Oz. A third-generation resident of the kibbutz, she loves science and space, and her friends held a public star gazing to mark her birthday in captivity.

Her brother, Dolev Yehoud, was killed on Oct. 7.

Agam Berger, 20

In videos of Agam Berger's abduction, her face is covered in blood, though it's unclear if it is from her own wound or those of other soldiers.

Berger is a violin player from a suburb of Tel Aviv who enlisted in the army just two months before the attack.

Gadi Moses, 80

Gadi Moses was one of the oldest hostages who remained in captivity in Gaza.

He was taken from his home on Kibbutz Nir Oz, one of the communities hardest-hit in the Hamas-led attack. The hostages forum described Moses as an expert agronomist who lectured on agriculture and helped maintain the kibbutz's community vegetable garden.

Moses' partner, Efrat, was killed during the attack.

Watchara Sriaoun, 33

In the Oct. 7 attack, militants overran the compound where agricultural workers lived on Kibbutz Nir Oz. Out of the 16 Thai workers living there, 11 were killed and five, including Watchara Sriaoun, were abducted.

They were among at least 31 Thai workers taken in the assault. In the November 2023 ceasefire, 23 were released in a deal negotiated between Thailand and Hamas, with assistance from Qatar and Iran.

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Sathian Suwannakham, 35

Sathian Suwannakham was also taken from Nir Oz. The kibbutz has continued to advocate for the release of the Thai workers by posting regularly about them on social media, in addition to the Israeli hostages.

Surasak Rumnao, 32

Surasak Rumnao was abducted from the town of Yesha, located near the southern Gaza Strip.

His mother, Khammee Lamnao, said the Thai Embassy in Israel called her to let her know her son would be released.

Pongsak Thaenna, 36

Pongsak Thaenna was also taken from the town of Yesha. Thais make up the largest group of foreigners held in Gaza.

In the early days after the Oct. 7 attack, then-Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin pressed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in phone conversations to assist the Thai hostages.

Bannawat Saethao, 27

Bannawat Saethao was also abducted from the town of Yesha.

Liri Albag, 19

Liri Albag, who was among those abducted from the Nahal Oz military base, was featured in a video Hamas released in early January, filmed under duress. Her family said the video was "difficult to watch" because of Albag's clear emotional distress. They were particularly active in the protest movement pushing for a deal with Hamas to bring the hostages home.

"Liri, if you're hearing us, tell the others that all the families are moving heaven and earth and want their children home, and we will fight until all hostages are returned," her father said in a statement after the video was released.

Karina Arieu, 20

Karina Arieu was also taken from Nahal Oz.

Just before she was abducted, she she sent a message to her family, saying: "If I don't live, take care of mom and dad all their lives. Don't give up, live," according to Israeli media. Her family said she loves to cook, sing, dance and write poetry.

Daniella Gilboa, 20

Also taken from Nahal Oz, Daniella Gilboa was originally named Danielle. Her parents changed it after she was taken captive, in line with a Jewish tradition that is believed to bring God's protection.

Gilboa, from Petah Tikva, a suburb of Tel Aviv, played piano and studied music in high school. She dreams of being a singer, according to Israeli media.

Naama Levy, 20

The footage from Naama Levy's abduction, in which she is wearing gray sweatpants covered in blood, was shown around the world.

Levy, among those taken from Nahal Oz, is a triathlete. When she was younger, she participated in the "Hands of Peace" delegation, which brings together Americans, Israelis and Palestinians to work on coexistence.

Romi Gonen, 24

Romi Gonen was taken from the Nova music festival in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. She spoke to her family for nearly five hours as militants marauded through the festival grounds. She told them that roads clogged with abandoned cars made escape impossible and that she would seek shelter in some bushes.

Her father, Eitan Goren, said she survived in part by learning Arabic, as it was the only way to communicate with her captors. "I just enjoy being with her even in silence, touching, hugging, watching her," he said, a week after her release. "I missed it so much."

Emily Damari, 28

Emily Damari is a British-Israeli citizen abducted from her apartment on Kibbutz Kfar Aza. She lived in a small apartment in a neighborhood for young adults, the closest part of the kibbutz to Gaza. Militants broke through the border fence of the kibbutz and ransacked the neighborhood.

The day after her release, Emily's mother, Mandy, said her daughter was "in high spirits and on the road to recovery."

Doron Steinbrecher, 31

Doron Steinbrecher is a veterinary nurse who loves animals, and a neighbor to Damari in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. Steinbrecher holds both Israeli and Romanian citizenship.

Steinbrecher was featured in a video released by Hamas in January 2024, along with two female Israeli soldiers. Her brother said the video gave them hope that she was alive but sparked concern because she looked tired, weak and gaunt.

Israel grieves as Hamas turns over the remains said to be of a mother and her 2 young children

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Ariel and Kfir Bibas — two of the youngest hostages held in Gaza — became a symbol for Israelis of the brutality of Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack. The return of what are presumed to be their bodies on Thursday dashed hopes they had survived captivity and struck another blow to a nation still reeling from Hamas' assault.

The fate of Ariel and Kfir, just 4 years old and 9 months old when they were abducted, captivated Israelis, and the return, along with a body said to be that of their mother, Shiri Bibas, brings a tragic measure of closure to the country.

But it is also likely to fuel anger over the government's failure to bring home some 250 hostages sooner and safely, and it could step up pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to extend the ceasefire.

The mother and children were taken captive from Kibbutz Nir Oz. Video of the abduction, with a terrified Shiri Bibas seen swaddling her two redheaded boys in a blanket and being whisked away by armed men, ricocheted around the world in the hours after the attack.

Yarden Bibas, the father, was abducted and held separately and released on Feb. 1, as part of the first phase of the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas that paused the 15-month-long war in Gaza. During the first phase, a total of 33 hostages are to be freed in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Eight of those 33 were said by Israel to be dead.

Since his release, Yarden Bibas has pleaded for information about his family, whose fate has been unclear for much of the war.

While Hamas last year released a video of Yarden Bibas in captivity as a sign of life, nothing had been heard from his wife or children. The militant group claimed they were killed in an Israeli airstrike in the first weeks of the war, and filmed Yarden Bibas receiving the news. Israel did not confirm the claim, saying just that it had "grave concern" for their lives.

The bodies released Thursday will now be formally identified, which could take up to 48 hours.

The Bibas boys became icons and their plight transfixed Israelis

The Bibas family's struggle became a rallying cry for protesters demanding the hostages be freed. Concern for their well-being emerged during a November 2023 ceasefire, when most women and children were freed, and grew in recent weeks when living women hostages were freed.

At just 9 months old, Kfir was the youngest of about 30 children taken hostage Oct. 7. The infant with red hair and a toothless smile became an icon across Israel and his ordeal was raised by Israeli leaders on podiums around the world.

The extended Bibas family has been active at protests, branding the color orange as the symbol of their fight for the "ginger babies." They marked Kfir Bibas' first birthday with a release of orange balloons and lobbied world leaders for support.

Family photos aired on TV and posted across social media created a national bond with the two boys and made them familiar faces. Israelis learned of Ariel Bibas' love for Batman and photos from a happier time showed the entire family dressed up as the character.

The Hostages Families Forum said there were more hostages in Gaza whose lives could still be saved,

and called for an extension to the ceasefire.

"There is no more time to waste," it said in a statement.

The fate of the young boys and their mother was unclear

The lack of information about Shiri Bibas and her children created uncertainty and ambiguity, including among their relatives.

Shiri Bibas' sister, Dana Silberman-Sitton, has said she did not believe her sister or the children were still alive. She told Israeli news site Ynet that she decided to tell her children in December 2023 that Aunt Shiri and their cousins had died, after Hamas claimed they were killed by Israeli airstrikes.

"I created a defense mechanism for myself: Because I cannot live with uncertainty anymore, I live with the knowledge that Shiri and the kids are dead," she told Ynet in September.

Silberman-Sitton's parents, Yossi and Margit Silberman, were also killed on Oct. 7, 2023, at Kibbutz Nir Oz.

Yarden Bibas' sister, Ofri Bibas Levy, took the opposite approach: She insisted that Shiri and the children were still alive, traveled abroad on missions and gave numerous interviews to ensure their story was constantly being mentioned.

The story of the family captured Israel's attention and much of the world because it encapsulated many of the worst aspects of Hamas' attack, explained Ruth Pat-Horenczyk, a professor at the Hebrew University school of social work who specializes in trauma.

"The graphic scene of the mother trying to protect the two babies was burned into the mind in the country," she said.

"Everything together created a kind of capsulated example of pain that really became the most dramatic symbol of Oct. 7."

Yoon appears in 2 different South Korean courts while defending his martial law decree

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Traveling around Seoul in a prison transport vehicle, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared in two different courts on Thursday, contesting his arrest on rebellion charges in one and fighting an effort to remove him from office in the other.

Both cases — one on criminal charges, one an impeachment — are related to his brief imposition of martial law in December.

Security was heightened at the Seoul Central District Court as the motorcade transporting Yoon arrived for a preliminary hearing that involved discussions of witnesses, proposed evidence and other preparations for his criminal trial.

The court, which scheduled another preliminary hearing in March, was also reviewing a request by Yoon's lawyers to cancel his arrest and release him from custody. Such challenges are rarely successful. The court was expected to make a decision later Thursday.

Yoon next traveled across the capital to the Constitutional Court, which is nearing a decision on whether to formally remove him from office after was impeached by the National Assembly. Yoon temporarily left the courtroom when Prime Minister Han Duck-soo appeared as a witness. Yoon's lawyer explained to the justices that his client believed it would damage the country's image if both were seen in court together.

Han supported Yoon's claim that the liberal opposition, with its legislative majority, had disrupted state affairs through pushing for impeachments of senior officials and undermining the government budget. However, Han repeated his previous statements to lawmakers and investigators that Yoon had violated constitutional requirements by failing to deliberate in a formal Cabinet meeting before declaring martial law on Dec. 3. Han said he didn't know of any Cabinet member who expressed support of Yoon's step.

Yoon returned to the courtroom as the justices called another witness, Hong Jang-won, former first deputy director of South Korea's spy agency. Hong has said that Yoon ordered him to help a defense counterintelligence unit detain key politicians, including National Assembly speaker Woo Won Shik and opposition leader Lee Jae-myung.

Yoon was indicted Jan. 26 on rebellion charges, which carry a potential punishment of death or life in prison. In South Korea, presidents have immunity from most criminal prosecutions, but not on charges of rebellion or treason.

The indictment alleges his imposition of martial law was an illegal attempt to shut down the National Assembly and arrest politicians and election authorities. The conservative Yoon has said his martial law declaration was intended as a temporary warning to the liberal opposition and that he had always planned to respect lawmakers' will if they voted to lift the measure.

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended when he was impeached Dec. 14, leaving him to fight for his political life at the Constitutional Court.

Martial law was lifted about six hours after Yoon declared it but has caused political turmoil, disrupted high-level diplomacy and tested the resiliency of the country's democracy. Yoon's conservative supporters rioted at the Seoul Western District Court after it authorized his arrest last month, while his lawyers and ruling party have openly questioned the credibility of courts and law enforcement institutions handling the case.

Yoon has continued to express contempt for his liberal rivals for obstructing his agenda and endorsed baseless conspiracy theories about election fraud to justify his ill-fated authoritarian push.

Yoon's defense minister, police chief and several military commanders have also been arrested and indicted on rebellion, abuse of power and other charges related to the martial law decree, which involved hundreds of heavily armed troops deployed to the National Assembly and National Election Commission offices.

G20 meeting of foreign ministers gets underway in South Africa amid tensions with US

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME and MICHELLE GUMEDE Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — A meeting of foreign ministers from G20 countries will take place in Johannesburg on Thursday, but U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio will not attend amid diplomatic tensions between South Africa and the U.S.

Diplomats including Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi are expected to attend the gathering, while the U.S. will be represented by acting ambassador to South Africa Dana Brown.

The European Union, the United Nations and the African Union, which is part of the G20, will also be in attendance.

Rubio snubbed the meeting after an executive order by U.S. President Donald Trump stopped foreign aid to the country over a law that the White House said amounts to discrimination against the country's white minority. The U.S. is also displeased with South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

South African Foreign Minister Ronald Lamola has said that Rubio's decision was "not a complete boycott of South Africa's G20." He said the U.S. would be represented in Johannesburg this week "in one form or shape or another."

U.S. Secretary of Treasury Scott Bessent has also confirmed he will not attend a meeting of G20 finance ministers scheduled to take place in South Africa next week.

Bessent said on the social media platform X that he would not participate in the event because of obligations in Washington. A senior Treasury official will attend in his place, he said.

Analysts say that Rubio and Bessent's absence signalled the U.S. was pulling back from the G20 and demonstrated how strained relations are.

"I think if we want to really know what message the US administration is trying to send, you have to know whether the treasury secretary will come next week or not. And if he chooses not to come as well, that's a quite serious sign," said political analyst Daniel Bradlow.

President Cyril Ramaphosa is expected to officially open and address the gathering under the theme

"Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability," which Rubio has described as a diversity, equality and inclusion framework — one that the new Trump administration vocally opposes.

South Africa will host over 130 working group meetings and 23 ministerial-level meetings this year as part of their G20 presidency, which began in December last year.

The U.S. is expected to take over the G20 presidency in 2026 after South Africa's tenure.

Hamas returns bodies of 4 Israeli hostages said to include a mother and her 2 young children

By MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH, WAFAA SHURAFU and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas on Thursday released the bodies of four Israeli hostages, said to include a mother and her two children who have long been feared dead and had come to embody the nation's agony following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack.

The remains were said to be of Shiri Bibas and her two children, Ariel and Kfir, as well as Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted. Kfir, who was 9 months old when he was taken, was the youngest captive. Hamas has said all four were killed along with their guards in Israeli airstrikes.

"Our hearts — the hearts of an entire nation — lie in tatters," Israeli President Isaac Herzog said in a statement. "On behalf of the State of Israel, I bow my head and ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness for not protecting you on that terrible day. Forgiveness for not bringing you home safely."

The militants displayed four black coffins on a stage in the Gaza Strip surrounded by banners, including a large one depicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire. Thousands of people, including large numbers of masked and armed militants, looked on as the coffins were loaded onto Red Cross vehicles before being driven to Israeli forces.

The military planned to hold a small funeral ceremony, at the request of the families, before transferring the bodies to a laboratory for formal identification using DNA, a process that could take up to two days. Only then will the families be given the final notification.

Israeli channels did not broadcast the handover. In Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, where Israelis have gathered to watch the release of living hostages, a large screen showed a compilation of photos and videos of Lifshitz and the Bibas family, including a chuckling baby Kfir and the family dressed up in Batman costumes.

Israelis have celebrated the return of 24 living hostages in recent weeks under a tenuous ceasefire that paused over 15 months of war. But the handover on Thursday was a grim reminder of those who died in captivity as the talks leading up to the truce dragged on for over a year.

It could also provide impetus for negotiations on the second stage of the ceasefire that have hardly begun. The first phase is set to end at the beginning of March.

Infant was the youngest taken hostage

Kfir Bibas was just 9 months old, a red-headed infant with a toothless smile, when militants stormed into the family's home on Oct. 7, 2023. His brother Ariel was 4. Video shot that day showed a terrified Shiri swaddling the two boys as militants led them into Gaza.

Her husband, Yarden Bibas, was taken separately and released this month after 16 months in captivity.

Relatives in Israel have clung to hope, marking Kfir's first and second birthdays and his brother's fifth. The Bibas family said in a statement Wednesday that it would wait for "identification procedures" before acknowledging that their loved ones were dead.

Supporters throughout Israel have worn orange in solidarity with the family — a reference to two boys' red hair — and a popular children's song was written in their honor.

Like the Bibas family, Oded Lifshitz was abducted from Kibbutz Nir Oz, along with his wife Yocheved, who was freed during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023. Oded was a journalist who campaigned for the recognition of Palestinian rights and peace between Arabs and Jews.

Hamas-led militants abducted 251 hostages, including some 30 children, in the Oct. 7 attack, in which they also killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

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More than half the hostages, and most of the women and children, have been released in ceasefire agreements or other deals. Israeli forces have rescued eight and have recovered dozens of bodies of people killed in the initial attack or who died in captivity.

It's not clear if the ceasefire will last

Hamas is set to free six living hostages on Saturday in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, and says it will release four more bodies next week, completing the ceasefire's first phase. That will leave the militants with some 60 hostages, all men, around half of whom are believed to be dead.

Hamas has said it won't release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal. Netanyahu, with the full backing of the Trump administration, says he is committed to destroying Hamas' military and governing capacities and returning all the hostages, goals widely seen as mutually exclusive.

Trump's proposal to remove some 2 million Palestinians from Gaza so the U.S. can own and rebuild it, which has been welcomed by Netanyahu but universally rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, has thrown the ceasefire into further doubt.

Hamas could be reluctant to free more hostages if it believes the war will resume with the goal of annihilating the group or forcibly transferring Gaza's population.

Israel's military offensive killed over 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its records. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The offensive destroyed vast areas of Gaza, reducing entire neighborhoods to fields of rubble and bombed-out buildings. At its height, the war displaced 90% of Gaza's population. Many have returned to their homes to find nothing left and no way of rebuilding.

Pope is sitting up out of bed at hospital as he recovers from pneumonia

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis is continuing his recovery from pneumonia, eating breakfast out of bed on Thursday morning after a sixth peaceful night at the hospital, the Vatican said.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni issued a new update after confirming late Wednesday that new blood tests showed a "slight improvement" in some inflammation indices for the 88-year-old pontiff, who had an acute case of pneumonia in 2023 and is prone to respiratory infections in winter.

Francis was visited Wednesday by Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, his first known VIP visitor. She reported after their 20-minute visit that Francis was in good spirits and had "joked around as always."

Francis was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital Feb. 14 after a bout of bronchitis worsened. Doctors on Tuesday diagnosed pneumonia in both lungs, on top of a polymicrobial infection in his respiratory tract, meaning a combination of bacteria, viral and other organisms. He is taking a combination of antibiotics and cortisone for what doctors also diagnosed as asthmatic bronchitis.

Doctors say pneumonia in such a fragile, elderly patient makes him particularly prone to complications given the difficulty in being able to effectively expel fluid from his lungs. While his heart is strong, Francis isn't a particularly healthy 88-year-old. He isn't physically active, uses a wheelchair because of bad knees, had part of one lung removed as a young man, and has admitted to being a not-terribly-cooperative patient in the past.

Germany votes Sunday for a new government that will shape Europe's response to an assertive Trump

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — German voters go to the polls Sunday to elect a new parliament that will determine how the country is run for the next four years.

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Europe's biggest economy is the 27-nation European Union's most populous nation and a leading member of NATO, as well as the second-biggest weapons supplier to Ukraine, after the United States, following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Germany's next government will be central to Europe's response to an assertive new U.S. administration.

Here's a look at what to expect for Sunday and beyond.

What happens on election day?

Polls are due to open at 8 a.m. and close at 6 p.m.. Germans can also vote by postal ballot, but their ballot must arrive by the time polling stations close on election day to be counted.

Exit polls will come and vote-counting will begin immediately after voting ends, and the general picture of the outcome should be clear very quickly. A final official result is expected early Monday.

Who are the contenders?

Four candidates are running to be Germany's next leader: incumbent Chancellor Olaf Scholz, of the center-left Social Democrats; Friedrich Merz, the candidate of the mainstream conservative Christian Democratic Union party; current Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, of the environmentalist Greens; and Alice Weidel, of the far-right, anti-immigration Alternative for Germany, or AfD.

Preelection polls have put Merz's Union bloc in the lead with support of about 30%, ahead of AfD, with around 20%. Scholz's Social Democrats and Habeck's Greens are further back.

Merz is favored to replace Scholz as chancellor, but it's not yet clear what governing coalitions will be possible after the election. How easy it is to form a government may depend in part on how many parties are in the new parliament. Opinion polls show three parties hovering around the 5% of the vote needed to win seats.

All mainstream parties say they won't work with AfD.

What's up for grabs?

At least 59.2 million people in a country of 84 million are eligible to vote for the new Bundestag, or lower house of parliament. It is the 630-member Bundestag that will elect the next chancellor, Germany's equivalent of a prime minister.

There are 29 parties on the ballot, but it's likely that between five and eight of them will get enough votes to win seats in parliament. In most cases, parties must win at least 5% of the vote to get a share of the seats.

What happens after polls close?

Germany's electoral system rarely gives any party an absolute majority and opinion polls suggest that no party is anywhere near one this time. The country has no tradition of minority governments at national level, which means that two or more parties will most likely form a coalition.

There is no formal referee for the process of forming a new government, and no set time limit. Parties hold exploratory talks to determine who they have most common ground with, and one combination of parties then moves on to formal coalition talks.

Those negotiations typically produce a detailed coalition agreement setting out the new government's plans. That will typically need approval at least from conventions of the parties involved. Some parties may choose to put it to a ballot of their entire membership.

Once that process is complete, the Bundestag can elect the new chancellor.

What's at stake?

A strong German government would be important to Europe's response to the new U.S. administration and to turmoil in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Germany and neighboring France have traditionally been the motor of the EU, but both heavyweights have been consumed by domestic political instability in recent months.

This election is being held seven months earlier than originally planned because Scholz's three-party coalition collapsed in November as it argued about how to reinvigorate the economy, which has shrunk for the past two years. One of the new government's most urgent tasks will be to find a coherent response to that problem.

Another challenge will be further reducing irregular migration, which has been a top issue in the campaign. Merz has said he hopes to form a new government by mid-April if he wins. Scholz's outgoing government will remain in office on a caretaker basis until the Bundestag elects the new chancellor.

Kim Sae-ron's death underscores the huge pressure on South Korean celebrities

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — In the about 1,000 days between her drunken-driving crash in May 2022 and her death, South Korean mainstream news organizations published at least around 2,000 stories on film actor Kim Sae-rom.

They illustrate how the local media often cover a celebrity's fall from grace. Previously one of the brightest young stars in South Korean cinema, Kim was condemned and ridiculed for driving drunk; for talking about her financial struggles after losing roles; for taking a job at a coffee shop; for attempting a comeback in theater; for going out with friends instead of "showing remorse"; and for being seen smiling on set while shooting an indie movie.

After the 24-year-old actor was found dead at her home Sunday, the headlines predictably swung to calling for changes to the way celebrities are treated in the public arena.

Kim's death, which police consider a suicide, adds to a growing list of high-profile celebrity deaths in the country, which some experts attribute to the enormous pressure celebrities face under the gaze of a relentlessly unforgiving media that seizes on every misstep.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In South Korea, callers can receive 24-hour counseling through the suicide prevention hotline 1577-0199, the "Life Line" service at 1588-9191, the "Hope Phone" at 129 and the "Youth Phone" at 1388.

Here's a look at the intense pressure faced by South Korean celebrities who fall from grace.

A sudden fall from grace

South Korea is notoriously harsh on its celebrities, particularly women.

Kim rose to stardom as a child actor with the 2010 hit crime thriller "The Man from Nowhere" and garnered acclaim and popularity for her acting in movies and TV dramas for years.

But that changed after May 18, 2022, when Kim crashed a vehicle into a tree and an electrical transformer while driving drunk in southern Seoul. She posted a handwritten apology on Instagram and reportedly compensated around 60 shops that lost power temporarily because of the crash, but that did little to defuse negative coverage and she struggled to find acting work.

When a Seoul court issued a 200 million won (\$139,000) fine over the crash in April 2023, Kim expressed her fears about the media to reporters, saying many articles about her private life were untrue.

"I'm too scared to say anything about them," she said.

Relentless negative coverage

In the wake of Kim's drunken-driving crash, celebrity gossip channels on YouTube began posting negative videos about her private life, suggesting without providing evidence that she was exaggerating her financial straits by working at coffee shops, and arguing that social media posts showing her socializing with friends meant she wasn't showing enough remorse.

Other entertainers, especially female, have struggled to find work after run-ins with the law, including drunken driving or substance abuse, and experts say many of them are reluctant to seek treatment for mental health problems like depression, fearing further negative coverage.

Kwon Young-chan, a comedian-turned-scholar who leads a group helping celebrities with mental health issues, said celebrities often feel helpless when the coverage turns negative after spending years carefully cultivating their public image. Kwon, who stayed with Kim's relatives during a traditional three-day funeral process, said her family is considering legal action against a YouTube creator with hundreds of thousands

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of subscribers for what they describe as groundless attacks on Kim's private life.

Peter Jongho Na, a professor of psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine, lamented on Facebook that South Korean society had become a giant version of "Squid Game," the brutal Netflix survival drama, "abandoning people who make mistakes or fall behind, acting as though nothing happened."

Media blamed for celebrity deaths

The National Police Agency said officers found no signs of foul play at Kim's home and that she left no note.

But a spate of high-profile deaths has sparked discussions about how news organizations cover the private lives of celebrities and whether floods of critical online comments are harming their mental health. Similar conversations happened after the 2008 death of mega movie star Choi Jin-sil; the death of her former baseball star husband, Cho Sung-min, in 2013; the deaths of K-Pop singers Sulli and Goo Hara in 2019; and the death of "Parasite" actor Lee Sun-kyun in 2023.

Sensational but unsubstantiated claims like from social media are widely recycled and amplified by traditional media outlets as they compete for audience attention, said Hyun-jae Yu, a communications professor at Seoul's Sogang University.

Struggling with a sharp decline in traditional media readership, he said, media turn to covering YouTube drama as the easiest way to drive up traffic, often skipping the work of reporting and verifying facts.

Following the 2019 deaths of Sulli and Goo Hara, which were widely attributed to cyberbullying and sexual harassment both in the public and media, lawmakers proposed various measures to discourage harsh online comments. These included expanding real-name requirements and strengthening websites' requirements to weed out hate speech and false information, but none of these proposed laws passed.

Reforms remain elusive

South Korean management agencies are getting increasingly active in taking legal action to protect their entertainers from online bullying. Hybe, which manages several K-Pop groups including BTS, publishes regular updates about lawsuits it's filing against social media commentators it deems malicious.

But Yu said it's crucial for mainstream media companies to strengthen self-regulation and limit their use of YouTube content as news sources. Government authorities could also compel YouTube and other social media platforms to take greater responsibility for content created by their users, he said, including actively removing problematic videos and preventing creators from monetizing them.

The South Korean office of Google, YouTube's parent company, didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Heo Chanhaeng, an executive director at the Center for Media Responsibility and Human Rights, said news organizations and websites should consider shutting down the comments sections on entertainment stories entirely.

"Her private life was indiscriminately reported beyond what was necessary," Heo said. "That's not a legitimate matter of public interest."

Trump backs idea to send some DOGE savings to American citizens

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Wednesday that he likes the idea of giving some of the savings from Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency back to U.S. citizens as a kind of dividend.

He said at an investment conference in Miami that the administration is considering a concept in which 20% of the savings produced by DOGE's cost-cutting efforts goes to American citizens and another 20% goes to paying down the national debt.

Trump also said the potential for dividend payments would incentivize people to report wasteful spending.

"They'll be reporting it themselves," Trump said. "They participate in the process of saving us money."

Later, as he flew back to Washington aboard Air Force One, he was asked by a reporter about the plan floated by Musk.

"I love it," the Republican president told reporters on the plane.

A day earlier, Musk wrote on his social media platform that he "will check with the President" in response to a suggestion that Trump and Musk should announce a "DOGE Dividend" that would send a refund to taxpayers from part of the savings created by DOGE. Its efforts have already led to thousands of federal government employees being fired or laid off.

Republicans are pursuing separate paths to get Trump's priorities through Congress

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader John Thune teed up a vote this week on a budget plan that sets the stage for a massive boost in defense and border security spending, and leaves a looming tax cut fight for later this year.

The move is designed to give President Donald Trump an early policy win and put pressure on House Republicans to join rather than pursue a separate, more comprehensive effort that also risks taking far longer to pass, if at all.

Trump undercut the Senate GOP's efforts on Wednesday, calling on both chambers to pass the House budget resolution. "The House Resolution implements my FULL America First Agenda, EVERYTHING, not just parts of it," Trump wrote on social media.

Yet Thune is proceeding as planned, despite Trump's stated preference for the House effort.

"If the House can produce one big beautiful bill, we're prepared to work with them to get that across the finish line, but we believe the president also likes optionality," Thune said.

The resolution is not a bill and does not get signed into law by the president, but its passage unlocks a process that allows Republicans to enact their priorities later this year even if Democrats unanimously oppose it.

Here's what to know.

What's in the Senate plan?

The budget resolution, authored by Sen. Lindsey Graham, the Republican chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, sets the stage for about \$342 billion in increased spending on border security, defense and the Coast Guard.

Graham said the spending would take place over four years and be paid for with reduced spending elsewhere in the federal government, though the resolution itself does not specify how those cuts would occur.

The budget resolution advanced out of committee last week on a party-line vote. It directs the Senate Homeland Security Committee to increase spending by up to \$175 billion, the Senate Armed Services Committee to spend up to \$150 billion more and the Senate Commerce panel to increase spending by about \$20 billion. This is on top of the annual spending that Congress provides through a separate legislative process.

"Build the wall, deport illegal aliens, and create additional detention space so we don't have to release illegal immigrants into the community," Graham said. "And God knows the military needs more money in these dangerous times."

What happens this week?

The Senate proceeded to Graham's budget plan on Tuesday evening, opening it up to 50 hours of debate. Once the debate time has expired — but before a vote on final passage — senators will hold what's known in Congress as a "vote-arama." It's a whirlwind series of votes over several hours in which senators seek to amend the plan.

The votes often last into the early morning hours before exhausted lawmakers decide they've had enough and move to a final vote.

The amendments often are designed to force lawmakers from the other party to take difficult votes on hot-button issues that could prove difficult to explain in the next election cycle.

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Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said Republicans should “get ready for a late night and an early morning.” “We are going to make sure the people back home know that Elon Musk is firing VA doctors and food safety inspectors — for no cause whatsoever — and illegally defunding the programs that Americans care about,” Murray said.

A long way to go

Once a budget plan is approved, committees would draft legislation consistent with their instructions to find savings or increase spending in programs under their jurisdiction. But the formal work needed to advance those recommendations can’t take place until both the House and Senate pass identical budget plans.

At some point, Republicans in the House and Senate will have to resolve their differences for them to use the tool that will allow the package to pass with a simple majority in the Senate and sidestep a Democratic filibuster. For now, they are competing with each other to win Trump’s favor.

Where the House stands

The House does have momentum for its efforts after a few weeks of delay. The chamber’s Budget panel has advanced its more comprehensive budget plan to the floor on a party-line vote. Speaker Mike Johnson’s office said it will come up for a vote in the full chamber next week when the House returns to Washington.

Their plan would allow committees to provide for up to \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts and \$300 billion in new spending. It would also instruct committees to make at least \$1.5 trillion in spending reductions elsewhere in the federal government over the next decade. And it would lift the debt ceiling so that the U.S. can borrow and continue paying its bills.

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a nonpartisan fiscal watchdog, estimates that the House budget plan would allow for a nearly \$4 trillion debt increase over the next decade.

Johnson can spare only one defection if Democrats are unanimous in opposing the plan next week, creating a high-wire act for his leadership team.

Some Republicans have raised concerns about the level of spending cuts that could occur with programs like Medicaid. But those lawmakers will also feel pressure to help Trump enact his priorities or face his wrath for not going along.

White House will celebrate Black History Month as some government agencies skip after anti-DEI order

By MATT BROWN and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration will celebrate Black History Month at the White House on Thursday, preserving a tradition at the same time that President Donald Trump’s executive order ending the federal government’s diversity, equity and inclusion programs has disrupted its observance elsewhere.

The ceremony comes as Trump has called DEI programs “discrimination” and pushed to eradicate diversity programs from the government, directed that DEI workers eventually be laid off and exerted similar pressure on the private sector to shift to an exclusive focus on merit.

The sweeping effort has sown discord and confusion across federal agencies, which have variously interpreted the order to limit how they can acknowledge race in history and culture or report demographic data on race and gender.

Joining Trump at the East Room event will be Black political figures and activists who have been his vocal supporters. The guests, according to a White House official, include Republican Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina; Republican Rep. John James of Michigan; prison reform advocate Alice Johnson, whom he pardoned in 2020; Alveda King, a niece of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.; and Herschel Walker, the football legend who is Trump’s choice as U.S. ambassador to the Bahamas.

Other guests will include figures from sports and entertainment, including former ESPN host Sage Steele; former NFL player Jack Brewer; and rap stars Kodak Black, Lil Boosie and Rod Wave, according to the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The event was originally scheduled to be held last week but was postponed due to inclement weather.

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In the wake of his executive order, the Defense Department issued guidance declaring "identity months dead" and said that working hours would no longer be used to mark cultural awareness months such as Black History Month, Women's History Month and National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

That seemed to clash with a National Black History Month proclamation signed the same day by Trump, which called for "public officials, educators, librarians, and all the people of the United States to observe this month with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities."

While the White House has issued its position, agencies of the government have discretion on whether to continue to recognize Black History Month, according to the official.

On Feb. 1, the first day of Black History Month, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy announced that his department "will no longer participate in celebrations based on immutable traits or any other identity-based observances." And in a diplomatic cable, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the agency's removal of DEI policies would dovetail with "eliminating our focus on political and cultural causes that are divisive at home and deeply unpopular abroad."

The administration has issued a deadline to schools and universities to eliminate diversity initiatives or risk losing federal money. Major corporations have backtracked on DEI policies in hiring, promotion and workplace culture in recent months, with many citing potential legal challenges from the administration.

Black History Month has been recognized by every U.S. president since 1976, including Trump during his first term.

"Black History is American history. And similar to the story of our nation, it is a story of strength, resilience, and dogged perseverance," said CJ Pearson, a national co-chair of the Republican National Committee's youth advisory council. Pearson, who is Black, has been an outspoken defender of Trump against Black civic leaders, civil rights advocates and Democrats who lambast the president as racist.

"President Trump's anti-DEI policies aren't promoting racism but what they are doing is manifesting the dream of the great Martin Luther King, Jr.: a nation where one isn't judged by the color of their skin but instead by the content of their character," said Pearson, who will attend the White House event.

Other Black Republicans aren't so sanguine about the administration's current course or what it portends for the GOP's nascent inroads with Black voters or other communities of color.

"Trump can build upon the coalition he pulled together in November with Blacks and Asians and Hispanics and young folks," said Raynard Jackson, a Republican strategist. "But if they leave it the way it stands right now, Trump is going to destroy the very coalition he so marvelously brought to the table in November."

To Jackson, DEI is a catch-all for liberal policies that are "unrecognizable" from the original intent of civil rights laws meant to promote the social and economic progress of Black Americans. But in removing and denigrating the policies, Jackson said, the White House risked being labeled as discriminatory by offering no alternative framework for how disadvantaged communities can get ahead.

"How do you have diversity without it being a mandated bean-counting situation?" Jackson asked. "They've done a masterful job at telling me what they're against. I'm waiting to hear what they're for."

During the 2024 campaign, Trump tried to reach Black voters through in-person events in Atlanta, Chicago and New York. His campaign courted Black celebrities and media personalities to boost his message. Trump's Black conservative allies, including Rep. Byron Donalds, R-Fla., conducted roundtables at Black barbershops and bus tours through majority-Black cities.

But Trump also frequently denigrated Black communities in his pitch and made claims that pitted voters of color against immigrants, who he said were taking "Black jobs" and "Hispanic jobs."

The efforts to boost support among Black voters seemed to have some success. He won a larger share of Black voters than he did in 2020, particularly among young Black men, according to AP VoteCast, a nationwide survey of more than 120,000 voters in the 2024 election.

Overall, about 16% of Black voters supported Trump in November, while about 8 in 10 voted for Democrat Kamala Harris. But that represented an improvement for Trump from 2020, when only 8% of Black voters backed him and about 9 in 10 went for Democrat Joe Biden.

As the Ukraine war reaches its 3-year mark, Russia seems to have time on its side as talks start

By The Associated Press undefined

When Russian troops rolled into Ukraine three years ago, they brought their parade uniforms with them on the push to Kyiv. President Vladimir Putin expected a quick victory.

What Putin dubbed the "special military operation" has turned into Europe's largest conflict since World War II. Tens of thousands have been killed, entire cities have been reduced to smoldering ruins, millions of Ukrainians became refugees, and Russia was isolated from the West.

Now as senior Russian and U.S. officials are talking again and setting the stage for summit meeting, Putin appears closer than ever to cementing Moscow's gains of about a fifth of Ukraine's territory and keeping it out of NATO.

President Donald Trump sharply reversed the three-year U.S. policy of isolating Russia when he called Putin and said afterward they agreed "to work together very closely" to end the war. He said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "will be involved" in negotiations but didn't elaborate.

Trump also expressed understanding of Putin's key demand on the pivotal issue of Ukraine's prospective NATO membership that the U.S. and other alliance members previously described as irreversible. "They've been saying that for a long time that Ukraine cannot go into NATO," Trump said of Russia. "And I'm OK with that."

Changing fortunes

Putin invaded on Feb. 24, 2022, after demanding that NATO abandon membership for Ukraine and pull back the alliance's troops on NATO's eastern flank -- actions rejected by the West.

He claimed his move was necessary to safeguard Russia's security interests and protect Russian speakers in Ukraine. Kyiv and its allies denounced his move as an unprovoked act of aggression. Ukrainians saw it as Moscow's attempt to destroy their national sovereignty and identity.

Russian troops reached the outskirts of Kyiv early in the invasion but pulled back a month later amid heavy losses and Ukraine's attacks on supply lines. More humiliating setbacks came in September and October 2022, when a Ukrainian counteroffensive forced Russia to pull back from large parts of the Kharkiv region in the northeast and the Kherson region in the south.

Fortunes changed in 2023 when a Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south failed to cut Russia's land route to the Crimea Peninsula, which Moscow illegally annexed from Kyiv in 2014.

Russia seized the combat initiative last year with offensives along the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front, making slow but persistent gains. In the fall, Russian forces captured the most territory since the opening of the war.

Moscow also pummeled Ukrainian infrastructure with waves of missiles and drones, destroying much of its power generating capacity.

Ukraine struck back in August with an incursion into Russia's Kursk region to try to distract Moscow's forces in the east and gain more leverage in potential peace talks. Ukraine still holds some of those gains, but its limited resources are stretched, making it difficult to defend strongholds in the east.

Ukraine's demands, Trump's view

While Zelenskyy earlier demanded Russia's full withdrawal from all occupied areas as a precondition for talks, he later acknowledged Kyiv can't immediately reclaim all its territory. He said Ukraine won't abandon its goal of joining NATO — even though Trump dismissed that as "impractical" — and Zelenskyy emphasized needing reliable Western security guarantees and a robust European peacekeeping force to prevent Russian attacks.

Trump's call with Putin and ensuing Russia-U.S. talks in Saudi Arabia shattered the Biden administration's "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine" policy. Trump blamed Kyiv for failing to make a deal with Moscow that could have prevented the war, praised Russia's military might and even suggested that Ukraine "may be Russian someday."

Zelenskyy said Ukraine won't accept any deal negotiated without Kyiv and insisted that European allies

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must participate in peace talks. He dismissed a U.S.-proposed draft agreement that would give Washington a large share of Ukraine's rare earth minerals as too focused on U.S. interests and had no security guarantees for Kyiv.

Europe in the cold

Trump's approach stunned European allies, whose shock deepened when Vice President JD Vance sharply rebuked them at the Munich security conference over free speech and migration.

While the Trump administration said European allies weren't welcome at the peace talks, it encouraged them to provide security guarantees for Kyiv in what former British ambassador Nigel Gould-Davies called a contradictory approach.

Washington "has signaled that the U.S. alone will negotiate an end to the war but also that Europe alone must pay for and enforce an outcome it has not played a role in deciding," said Gould-Davies, a senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia with the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Putin's goals

Putin's key goals remain much the same — that Ukraine renounce joining NATO and enforce the use of the Russian language to keep the country in Moscow's orbit — but now wants Kyiv to withdraw its forces from the four regions Moscow has seized but doesn't fully control.

He said a peace agreement could be broadly based on a draft negotiated early in the war that obliged Ukraine to declare neutrality, scale down its military and protect Russian language and culture. Those talks collapsed in April 2022 with no deal.

Putin ruled out a truce, arguing it would benefit Kyiv. But some Kremlin-watchers believe he could accept it if Kyiv agrees to hold elections after a ceasefire.

Trump echoed Putin's line that Zelenskyy, whose term expired last year, needs to face voters, while Kyiv maintains elections are impossible to hold amid a war. Trump escalated that notion Wednesday by posting on social media that Zelenskyy was "a Dictator without Elections."

Putin could hope an election would weaken Zelenskyy and lead to political instability, said Tatiana Stanovaya, senior fellow at Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.

"In his view, most potential outcomes would be advantageous for Moscow — whether through heightened political infighting, possible protests, or a fragile victory for a new president," she wrote.

Jack Watling of London's Royal United Services Institute says Ukraine faces "a politically divisive election, economic paralysis due to a lack of foreign direct investment, and coercive threats from Russia to restart the war" after a truce.

Keeping peace

It's unclear who would monitor any potential ceasefire.

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said NATO should play no role and that any European troops taking part should not be covered by NATO's charter obliging allies to aid of any member under attack — conditions that could dampen European enthusiasm about the mission.

While the U.K. and others signal readiness to deploy troops for such a mission, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said after the U.S.-Russian talks in Saudi Arabia that Moscow won't accept troops from any NATO members in a peacekeeping force.

Some reports suggested Chinese or Brazilian troops as part of a monitoring force, but those countries haven't signaled any intention of participation.

Many believe Putin is no rush to make a peace deal.

"Negotiations appear desirable but by no means necessary for Russia to achieve its goals in its war against Ukraine," Stanovaya wrote.

"Virtually any outcome will be a good result for Moscow," she said, pointing at the erosion of Western unity and reduced Western support for Kyiv amid Moscow's gains.

"Putin has repeatedly made it clear that he believes Russia can achieve its goals in Ukraine without any U.S.-brokered deal," Stanovaya noted. "As far as he is concerned, Moscow simply needs to wait until Ukraine falls apart of its own accord, after which the Russian army will crush any remaining resistance among the Ukrainian army."

Trump's freeze on foreign aid could give China an opening on the world stage

By DIDI TANG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's restrictions on foreign aid and targeting of a key agency funding programs around the world may be offering an opening to America's biggest adversary — China.

From the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development to quitting international groups, Trump's drastic "America First" moves have raised concerns among some lawmakers and experts about whether the U.S. is ceding global influence to its rivals, especially at a time when Washington is fretting over Beijing's growing clout at the cost to American interests.

Foreign assistance offered the U.S. a source of "soft power" — allowing it to cultivate goodwill, build alliances and counter adversaries in a bid to shore up national security without having to dispatch troops, weapons or other more coercive measures.

In Cambodia, the contrast could not be sharper than China sending \$4.4 million to support demining operations, as Trump halted a \$6.3 million grant from the State Department's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement partly meant to clear "U.S.-origin unexploded ordnances as the remnants of war."

Administration officials say it's past time to review how America spends money abroad.

Asked if the U.S. was giving China and Russia an opening for greater global influence, national security adviser Mike Waltz denied that, telling NBC's "Meet the Press" recently that "all too often, these missions and these programs ... are not in line with strategic U.S. interests like pushing back on China."

In Panama, the Trump administration got the government to quit the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing's flagship overseas development program, prompting condemnation from China.

What it means for the US to step back

Experts and lawmakers disagree on the impact of the U.S. taking a step back from foreign aid. Lawsuits are challenging the administration's freeze on foreign assistance and moves against USAID, with temporary holds on some of those efforts.

"The second Trump administration will deliver the goal for China" of wielding greater global influence, Feng Zhang, a visiting scholar at Yale Law School's Paul Tsai China Center, said at a recent debate in Washington.

Sen. Andy Kim, a Democrat from New Jersey, was worried for the same reason. "China doesn't even need to fight for their influence around the world now because of our own effort," Kim said recently on "Meet the Press."

Rep. John Moolenaar, a Republican from Michigan who chairs the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, said it could be time for change on foreign assistance.

"I think as we dig into this, we're going to find out what's been working and what hasn't been working," he said. "And then how do we innovate to a new way of promoting American interests, American values and being clear on what those values are."

Dennis Wilder, a senior fellow at the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues at Georgetown University, said global influence goes beyond foreign aid, with the U.S. commanding the world's most powerful military and its dollar dominating the financial system.

Let's not "accept at face value that China is ready or able to step in where the U.S. may be leaving a vacuum," Wilder said.

The Chinese embassy in Washington said Beijing is "willing to work with all countries and parties, including the U.S., to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the field of development, so as to promote common development and prosperity among all countries."

The foreign aid rivalry

The two countries — the primary players in global development — are spending foreign assistance differently. Most Chinese money is issued as debt and typically spent on energy and infrastructure projects.

Most U.S. funds were disbursed as grants or loans with low or no interest rates in areas like public

health and humanitarian aid, said AidData, an international development research lab at William & Mary University's Global Research Institute.

In Peru, Chinese money helped build the \$1.3 billion megaport in Chancay, which opened in November during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping. U.S. foreign aid in Peru, by contrast, was used to finance coffee and cacao as alternatives to cocaine production.

Elsewhere, American dollars helped fight HIV/AIDS in Africa, treated malnourished children in South Sudan and provided medical services at an immigrant shelter in Mexico.

Acknowledging that the U.S. should fund tangible foreign projects like ports and factories, Congress in 2018 established an institution to combine government funding with private investments for projects such as the trans-Africa rail project in Angola.

Overall, China spent \$1.34 trillion on nearly 18,000 overseas development projects between 2000 and 2021, averaging about \$61 billion a year, AidData said.

The U.S. disbursed \$1.24 trillion in foreign aid, including military assistance, between 2001 and 2023, the research lab said.

USAID, created during the Cold War to counter Soviet influence, is the single largest U.S. government player in foreign aid. It paid out \$43.8 billion in 2023, AidData said. That is equivalent to less than 1% of total annual government spending.

US could risk goodwill abroad

Because of the differences in the types of projects funded, China is unlikely to step in as the U.S. retreats, but Beijing still wins because foreign aid is about building relationships and goodwill, said Samantha Custer, director of policy analysis at AidData.

"These countries are watching the U.S. and how it engages with its partners and its workers, and they're making determinations as to whether the U.S. is a reliable economic and security partner, and increasingly there are concerns that we are not," Custer said.

That will feed into Beijing's narrative that it's a responsible partner and global leader while sowing doubt about the U.S., she said.

New York-based China Labor Watch, which monitors labor conditions and investigates practices such as the use of forced labor in China, relies on U.S. funding for about 90% of its budget, and the aid freeze has forced the group to lay off or put on unpaid leave most of its U.S. staff, group founder Li Qiang said.

China now has a strategic opening as the go-to alternative for countries seeking investments without political conditions, said Salvador Santino Regilme, an associate professor of international relations at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

"The broader implication of the U.S. aid freeze is a return to militarized diplomacy, where soft power is sidelined in favor of hard-power coercion," he said.

Stax Music Academy's teen students mark 25th anniversary, Black History Month with concert

By ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — The Memphis music studio where some of America's most recognizable songs were recorded decades ago is now a museum. But next door, trumpets blare, drums boom, and singers craft the soulful sounds of Stax Records' biggest hits.

At Stax Music Academy, young musicians rehearse the unmistakable intro to "Theme from Shaft," the Isaac Hayes tour de force that won an Oscar in 1972 and tantalizes listeners with its pulsating bass line, crisp hi-hat and funky guitar. There's an air of professionalism among the students as their teacher hands out sheets of music and words of wisdom.

"Here we go. Read the ink that's on the paper. From the top, one, two, ready and ...," says Sam Franklin IV, the academy's music director. When they finish, Franklin says, "Hey y'all, that was good."

Under the guidance of Franklin and other instructors, the students are practicing for three concerts in

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Memphis, Tennessee, on Friday to celebrate Black History Month and the academy's 25th anniversary. Created in 2000, the academy is an after-school program for teens that teaches them to sing, dance and play instruments. Some pay nothing to attend.

The academy has graduated more than 4,000 students since it started in the working-class neighborhood of Soulsville, where Stax Records produced soul and R&B classics in the 1960s and 1970s. Since 2008, every high school senior has been accepted to a college or university, many on full scholarships. The academy has performed at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, the Kennedy Center in Washington, and in Europe and Australia.

Students take pride and joy in continuing the legacy of the influential record company, where Otis Redding cut "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," Sam and Dave worked on "Soul Man," and The Staple Singers made "Respect Yourself." Other mainstays of the Stax catalog include Booker T. and the MGs, Rufus and Carla Thomas, Wilson Pickett and Johnnie Taylor.

Before it went bankrupt in 1975, Stax Records helped develop the raw, emotional Memphis Sound, driven by tight horn and rhythm sections, and strong-voiced singers. Some Stax songs were energetic and raucous, others smooth and sexy. Stax Records no longer churns out chart-topping music, although it still has a program for songwriters. The building has been converted into the Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

The Stax Music Academy group practicing on a rainy January evening includes both Black and white players. Before the work begins, some students joke around and dance in the hallway outside the rehearsal room, which boasts a high ceiling and a whiteboard with musical notes written on it. In a separate room, vocalists clap for each other as they take turns singing for their instructors.

"It's so fun," said Tatiyana Clark, a 17-year-old singer who joined the academy in 2023. "I've been in places where we would have the same interest in music, but nothing is like the connection that I have here. Honestly, it's a different level of friendship, when you have the exact same feelings towards music, the same experiences — almost."

Stax began online Black History Month presentations in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous programs have included specific themes, with this year's being the U.S. labor movement and how it involved and affected Black people, including work training, entrepreneurship and unionization. But this year's show is a series of in-person concerts at a downtown Memphis venue where attendees will hear Sam and Dave's "Hold On, I'm Comin'", Arthur Conley's "Sweet Soul Music," and "Cause I Love You," by the father and daughter duet of Rufus and Carla Thomas.

A companion study guide includes lessons and activities highlighting key figures and events that shaped labor policies and standards.

"It's all about the message for me," said Johnathan Cole, an 18-year-old singer and songwriter. "It feels good because with the world going crazy right now, everybody just needs a little bit of love, happiness and music. That's what Stax Music Academy has always been about: love, music, creativity."

When the labor and civil rights movements were striving for racial equality and social justice, Booker T. and the MGs churned out "Green Onions" and other toe-tapping instrumental songs, with Black men at organ and drums — Booker T. Jones and Al Jackson Jr. — and white players on lead and bass guitar — Steve Cropper and Donald "Duck" Dunn.

"I would describe Stax as 'change,'" said Johnathan McKinnie, a 16-year-old piano and organ player. "It drastically changed how music was formed ... It was definitely an advocate for civil rights."

In the vocalists' rehearsal room, the group is perfecting Eddie Floyd's song about luck and love, "Knock on Wood."

"It's like thunder, and lightning, the way you love me is frightening ... better knock, knock, knock on wood," three vocalists sing in harmony.

"Breathe. You're not breathing," one instructor tells a student, who smiles and nods.

The exchange exemplifies the spirit of cooperation and dedication that permeates the academy. Pasley Thompson, a 17-year-old singer and songwriter, calls the academy "an escape from the every day."

"Being able to be in a space with people that get you on a creative level, and on a personal level, because

we're around each other all the time, it's a really great feeling to have," she said.

Trump says federal government should 'take over' DC, backing congressional GOP push

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Wednesday threw his support behind congressional efforts for a federal takeover of the nation's capital, saying he approves putting the District of Columbia back under direct federal control.

Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One, Trump complained about crime and homelessness in the district, saying, "I think we should take over Washington, D.C. — make it safe." He added, "I think that we should govern District of Columbia."

Under terms of the city's Home Rule authority, Congress already vets all D.C. laws and can outright overturn them. Some congressional Republicans have sought to go further, eroding decades of the city's limited autonomy and putting it back under direct federal control, as it was at its founding.

Trump said he liked District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser personally, but complained about the city's governance.

"They're not doing the job," Trump said. "Too much crime, too much — too many tents on the lawns — these magnificent lawns."

He argued that he can't have sights of homelessness when he hosts foreign leaders in Washington. "You just can't let that happen," Trump said. "You can't have tents on all your beautiful — your once magnificent plaza and lawns."

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Winter-weary East Coast hit with another storm as temperatures plunge elsewhere

By BEN FINLEY and JOHN RABY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Officials urged people to stay off the roads Wednesday in portions of Virginia and North Carolina where a storm dropped heavy snow and caused hundreds of accidents in places unaccustomed to significant accumulations.

The storm that already dropped snow in the Midwest spread across the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys and

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into places that are just starting to clean up after a weekend of deadly floods.

Up to 10 inches (25 centimeters) of snow was possible through Thursday along the Atlantic Coast in Virginia and major ice accumulations were forecast in eastern North Carolina.

The National Weather Service said snowfall rates of up to 2 inches (5 centimeters) per hour were seen in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia and in northeastern North Carolina.

Meteorologist Alec Butner said additional accumulations were likely Thursday morning. While Butner said the snowfall in Norfolk won't approach the 1892 record of 18.6 inches (47.2 centimeters), it's still "fairly infrequent" to reach snowfall totals of about 8 to 9 inches (20 to 23 centimeters).

Virginia State Police reported 275 accidents by late Wednesday afternoon, including at least two dozen involving injuries. Accidents also closed portions of Interstate 95 and I-85 near Raleigh, North Carolina.

Nearly 5,600 flights were canceled or delayed across the U.S., including more than 400 in and out of Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina, according to the flight-tracking site FlightAware.com.

Elsewhere, a polar vortex sent temperatures plunging from Montana to southern Texas.

'Too much for us'

As thick snowflakes pelted Norfolk, Virginia, a line of shoppers snaked deep into a Harris Teeter grocery store, past loaves of bread on shelves. In the parking lot of a Total Wine store, college students in fraternity sweatshirts lugged a keg of beer to their car.

But on the sidewalks of the city's historic Ghent neighborhood, there was an eerie quiet. A white-haired shih tzu named Sasha tramped delicately in newly fallen snow Wednesday.

"This is a little weird for her. I love the snow, but it looks like this is a bit too much for us," said Sasha's owner, Lotfi Hamdi, who stocked up on milk and bread. "If it's more than five inches, I think that's a bit risky for us. Luckily I'm off for the next couple of days."

Sasha isn't alone in feeling out of sorts. The winter months in this city of 230,000 people on the Chesapeake Bay sometimes pass with barely a dusting of snow. Schools and many businesses closed Wednesday throughout the Hampton Roads region and could remain shuttered into the weekend. The Norfolk Naval Shipyard reduced operations.

Deja storm all over again

Virginia remained under a state of emergency that Gov. Glenn Youngkin issued for another storm last week that allowed the National Guard and state agencies to assist local governments. North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein followed with an emergency declaration Tuesday. Both urged motorists to stay off the roads.

As snow, sleet and freezing rain arrived, Stein warned that "our greatest concerns remain power outages and road safety."

Potential ice accumulations of up to one-half inch (1.3 centimeters) in places like Greenville and Goldsboro would cause tree branches to snap, said North Carolina Emergency Management Director Will Ray.

Officials said more than 1,200 crew members were ready or already clearing roads.

Snow after floods

Weekend storms that pummeled the eastern U.S. killed at least 19 people, including 14 in Kentucky, where a half-foot (15 centimeters) or more of snow was expected Wednesday.

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

In southern West Virginia, weekend floods killed three people in McDowell County, destroying roads and disrupting public water systems. Shelters remained open at churches and schools.

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.

Bone-chilling cold

About 100 million people in the nation's midsection were gripped by a cold wave. Hundreds of public school districts canceled classes or switched to online learning for a second day Wednesday in Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri.

Ashley Pippin, a spokeswoman for Special Olympics Kansas, is getting tired of the cold even as the group organizes a series of fundraising polar plunges, including three this weekend. It's so cold, firefighters might

have to go out and break the ice.

"We've done it before," Pippin said.

Hettinger, North Dakota, recorded a low temperature of minus 45 degrees (minus 42 Celsius) on Wednesday and had warmed to minus 13 (minus 25 Celsius) by midday. Denver broke a 19-year-old record when it dipped to minus 6 (minus 21 Celsius). In San Antonio, Texas, wind chill readings could dip as low as minus 2 (minus 19 Celsius) early Thursday.

Earlier this month, famous groundhog Punxsatawney Phil predicted six more weeks of winter weather.

"I was thinking I'd like to choke him," said Robin White Stevens of hard-hit Grundy, Virginia, whose challenges this winter have included falling on her hip while walking along icy ditch lines. "We can't catch a break weatherwise. Snow, flood. It's a mess around here."

But Michele Hunter, who drives a bus for a southeast Virginia transit authority and hails from Buffalo, New York, had a different take on winter. While she stocked up on groceries because stores were closing down, she said she's more accustomed to blizzards that bring feet of snow — not inches.

In Buffalo, life still mostly goes on, she said, unlike the standstill she's witnessing in coastal Virginia.

"This is light," she said of the snow falling around her. "In Buffalo, we have to dig tunnels in order to get to the end of the street, to get on a snowmobile, to go get groceries. This is nothing."

IRS plans to lay off 7,000 probationary workers beginning Thursday, AP source says

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The IRS will lay off roughly 7,000 workers in Washington and around the country beginning Thursday, a person familiar with the plans told The Associated Press.

The layoffs affect probationary employees with roughly one year or less of service at the agency and largely include workers in compliance departments, according to the person, who was not authorized to disclose the plans and spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday. Compliance work includes ensuring that taxpayers are abiding by the tax code, filing their returns and paying their taxes, among other duties.

The layoffs are part of the Trump administration's intensified efforts to shrink the size of the federal workforce through the Department of Government Efficiency by ordering agencies to lay off nearly all probationary employees who have not yet gained civil service protection. They come despite IRS employees involved in the 2025 tax season being told earlier this month that they would not be allowed to accept a buyout offer from the Trump administration until mid-May, after the taxpayer filing deadline.

It's unclear how the layoffs may affect tax collection services this year. As the nation's revenue collector, the IRS was tasked during the Biden administration with targeting high-wealth tax evaders for an additional stream of income to the U.S., which is \$36 trillion in debt. By the end of 2024, the IRS collected over \$1.3 billion in back taxes from rich tax dodgers.

The IRS has roughly 90,000 employees total across the United States, according to the latest IRS data. Racial minorities make up 56% of the IRS workforce, and women represent 65%.

In addition to the planned layoffs, the Trump administration intends to lend IRS workers to the Department of Homeland Security to assist with immigration enforcement. In a letter sent earlier this month, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem asked Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to borrow IRS workers to help with ongoing immigration crackdown efforts.

Representatives from the IRS and U.S. Treasury did not respond to requests for comment from the AP.

Justice Department official urges quick dismissal of criminal case against New York City mayor

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ, MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — In an extraordinary courtroom showdown, a federal judge pressed the Justice Department on Wednesday on its demand to throw out New York City Mayor Eric Adams' corruption case,

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grilling a top official and putting the Democratic mayor under oath to answer concerns that the Trump administration's lifeline came with strings attached.

"Not at all," Adams responded stoically, his liberty and political future at stake.

Manhattan federal Judge Dale E. Ho declined to rule immediately, leaving in place for now charges that Adams accepted lavish travel perks and illegal campaign contributions from foreign interests seeking to buy his influence. Adams has pleaded not guilty and denies wrongdoing.

The Justice Department's push to end the case has caused a rift between its leadership in Washington, who see him as an ally in pursuing President Donald Trump's immigration goals, and the federal prosecutors' office in Manhattan, which brought the charges and rebuffed commands to drop them. Seven prosecutors resigned in protest.

"I'm not going to shoot from the hip right here on the bench," Ho said, sighing heavily as he closed the 80-minute proceeding.

The judge said he wanted to carefully review the "unusual situation." Acknowledging political and legal implications, which include Adams' reelection campaign and April 21 trial date, Ho indicated that he would rule soon, saying, "it is not in anyone's interest for this to drag on."

No one objecting to the Justice Department's request spoke Wednesday, though some have written to the court, Ho said. He also touched on letters in which now-former prosecutors urged Justice Department officials last week to keep the case alive.

Ho called the hearing after Acting Deputy U.S. Attorney General Emil Bove and two other lawyers from Justice Department headquarters filed paperwork last Friday seeking a dismissal. Bove stepped in after Manhattan's top federal prosecutor quit rather than drop the case.

Closely watching how things play out is Gov. Kathy Hochul, who has said she is considering removing Adams from office amid concerns that his reliance on the Trump administration to end his criminal case has left him politically compromised.

Adams appeared in high spirits as he came and went from court, a shift from past appearances. Strolling slowly into the courtroom, he embraced Black clergy members sitting in the front row.

Bove, sitting alone at the prosecution table, told Ho that the Justice Department was simply exercising "prosecutorial discretion" based on a Trump executive order outlining his criminal justice priorities and that granting the request was the only option. Bove said the decision to seek dismissal was reached without assessing the strength of the evidence.

The request is "virtually unreviewable in this courtroom," he argued.

Adams' lawyer, Alex Spiro, said no appeals court has ever sided with a judge who rejected an unopposed motion to dismiss a criminal case. Pressed by Ho, Bove conceded that he was not aware of another case where the Justice Department went to bat to dismiss an indictment or cease a prosecution for a public official like this.

Reiterating arguments from the dismissal motion and a Feb. 10 memorandum that set off a firestorm about the future of the case, Bove said the charges were impeding Adams' ability to govern, hampering his campaign for a second term and impeding his cooperation with the administration's immigration crackdown.

"Frankly I think the fact that Mayor Adams is sitting to my left right now is part of the problem," Bove said. "He's not able to be out running the city and campaigning. I think that is actual interference with the election."

Bove urged Ho to ignore outside voices and reject suggestions that the Justice Department's interest in Adams was part of a quid pro quo.

Adams testified that there was no "other agreement" between himself and the government.

"You have a record, undisputed, that there is no quid pro quo," Bove argued. "I don't concede — and I don't think it's correct — that even if there was a quid pro quo, there would be any issue with this motion."

Ho also questioned the mayor about a provision in the dismissal motion that would allow the Justice Department to revive the case at a later date.

"I understand that, judge," Adams said. "I have not committed a crime, and I don't see them bringing

it back.”

Adams was indicted in September and accused of accepting more than \$100,000 in illegal campaign contributions and travel perks from a Turkish official and business leaders seeking to buy influence while he was Brooklyn borough president. He faces multiple challengers in June’s Democratic primary.

Bove ordered then-interim U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon to ditch the case last week after meeting with Adams’ lawyers last month in Washington.

Sassoon, who attended the meeting, wrote to U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi urging her to reconsider. In a Feb. 12 letter, Sassoon wrote that dismissing the charges in return for Adams’ assistance on immigration 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,” said Sassoon, a Republican. She said it amounted to a quid pro quo and disclosed that her office had been about to charge Adams with additional crimes.

Another prosecutor, Hagan Scotten, told Bove in a resignation letter that it would take a “fool” or a “coward” to meet Bove’s demand, “but it was never going to be me.”

Bondi’s chief of staff, Chad Mizelle, defended the department’s dismissal request in a social media blitz before Wednesday’s hearing, writing on X: “The case against Mayor Adams was just one in a long history of past DOJ actions that represent grave errors of judgement.”

Sassoon and her colleagues have found support for their stand from a small army of former prosecutors.

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

What’s the key to surviving a plane crash? Skilled crew, strong seats and wings that detach

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

After watching videos of a Delta Air Lines jet catch fire upon landing and flip over on a Toronto runway, it’s fair to wonder how anyone could have survived.

But aviation experts said it was not surprising that all 76 passengers and four crew walked away from Monday’s disaster, with 21 people suffering minor injuries and only one still hospitalized on Wednesday. It’s a credit, they said, to advances in plane design as well as a crew that flawlessly executed an evacuation plan.

“When I first saw (footage of) that aircraft upside down at the airport, I was like: ‘How can that happen? And how can anybody survive that?’” Michael McCormick, an assistant professor and program coordinator for air traffic management at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida, said. “It was absolutely astounding to watch the people actually climbing out.”

Passenger jet design a factor

McCormick and others said the fact that there were only minor injuries shows that passenger jet design and engineering have greatly improved over time.

Fuel tanks are stored in the wings, so the wings are designed to break off in a crash to remove a seriously explosive hazard, he said. The tail-like fin of a plane known as a vertical stabilizer is frangible — or easily broken — meaning an aircraft that has flipped over can stay flat on the ground and passengers and crew are able to evacuate, he said.

“Aviation is and remains the safest form of transportation,” McCormick said, adding that it was no fluke 80 people were able to walk away from the Toronto crash. “That is because the safety of aviation is constantly improving.”

Jeff Guzzetti, an airline safety consultant and a former investigator for the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board, said the seats and seat belts also helped to prevent fatalities. He noted that passenger jet seats are designed to withstand impacts of up to 16 times the force of

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gravity and that the seat belts restrained the passengers who were suspended upside down as the plane slid to a halt on the runway at Toronto Pearson International Airport.

"The odds of getting injured or killed in an commercial airline accident is far less than driving in your car," Guzzetti said.

Crew executed the evacuation plan

Experts also credited the crew, who calmly and quickly shepherded many of the passengers off the plane before emergency crews even arrived on the scene. Deborah Flint, CEO of Greater Toronto Airports Authority, called the flight crew "heroes," while their boss, Delta CEO Ed Bastian, praised their response as a "testament to the safety that's embedded in the systems."

"It's horrifying. When you look at the video you can imagine when I received the text minutes after it happened, hearing that there was a regional jet upside down on an active runway with 80 people on board, how I felt without knowing it, what was transpiring," Bastian said in an interview with CBS Mornings.

"But the reality is that safety is embedded into our system," he said. "Air travel in the United States is the safest form of transportation and travel there is. Period. And it's because we train for events like this."

What was it like inside the cabin?

Flight 4819 from Minneapolis to Toronto, operated by Delta subsidiary Endeavor Air, crashed on landing around 2:30 p.m. Monday. Videos show the plane hitting the runway hard, bursting into flames then skidding along the tarmac and flipping over.

"It was very uncomfortable, a very just solid, uncomfortable experience — forceful on the impact, sideways movement and suddenly just inverted," Peter Carlson, a paramedic who was traveling to Toronto for a conference, told The Associated Press. "The only mission was to get out."

Carlson was awarded at the paramedics conference for his "courageous and meritorious actions" in helping other passengers. The certificate says his actions "preserved life, reduced injury and provided calm."

"I have a laceration, abrasion, some bruises on my legs, some bruises on my ribs, but alive," Carlson said. "Everyone is alive. I don't know if I am deserving of going into miracle territory but it's amazing."

Other videos appear to show passengers scrambling out of an upside-down cabin as workers assist them off the plane onto the snowy tarmac and emergency crews hose the aircraft with water.

Passengers take action

Some passengers "who have been harmed as a result of the crash" retained the law firm Rochon Genova, according to Vincent Genova, head of the company's Aviation Litigation Group.

"Our clients, similar to many other passengers, suffered personal injuries of a serious nature that required hospital attention," Genova said in a statement. "With our involvement, we expect to reach a timely and fair resolution for these clients and others who reach out to us."

A spokesperson for Delta confirmed it has offered each passenger \$30,000 and is "telling customers this gesture has no strings attached and does not affect rights."

A Canadian investigator refused to comment on preliminary theories, although aviation experts told The Associated Press they will likely consider weather conditions, as well as the possibility of human error or an aircraft malfunction.

"At this point, it's far too early to say what the cause of this accident might be," Ken Webster, a senior investigator for the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, said in a video statement Tuesday. He said investigators will examine the wreckage and runway, and that the cockpit voice and flight data recorders are being analyzed.

TSB announced Wednesday afternoon that crews were moving the wreckage from the runway to a hangar for further examination.

Italy PM Meloni visits pope in hospital, says he's in good spirits as tests show slight improvement

By NICOLE WINFIELD, ANDREA ROSA and PAOLO SANTALUCIA Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni visited Pope Francis for 20 minutes in the hospital Wednesday

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and reported he was "alert and responsive" and full of good humor, despite his diagnosis of pneumonia and a complicated bronchial infection that has sidelined the 88-year-old pontiff for six days.

The Vatican said Francis' overall condition remained stationary, but that blood tests showed a "slight improvement" in key inflammation indices. Francis also worked in the afternoon with his collaborators, the Vatican said in a late statement.

Meloni said she wanted to bring get-well wishes to the pope on behalf of the government and entire nation. "We joked around as always. He has not lost his proverbial sense of humor," she said in a statement issued by her office.

Meloni is the first confirmed outside visitor known to have called on the pope, beyond his secretaries and medical team, since his admission Friday at Rome's Gemelli hospital, where popes have their own suite on the 10th floor. Her visit, announced only after it was over, appeared aimed at sending a reassuring message, especially to Italians who haven't seen even a photograph of Francis since Friday.

The Vatican has said Francis was up, eating and had gotten out of bed after a tranquil night, a day after tests confirmed he had pneumonia in both lungs on top of asthmatic bronchitis.

The Italian premier, who came to power in 2022 with a message touting her Christian credentials, has referred in glowing terms to the influence on her of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both reference points for European conservatives like herself. While she and Francis don't see eye-to-eye on her crack-down on migrants, they have teamed up constructively on a campaign to reverse Italy's low birthrate.

Her visit came as prayers were pouring in for Francis' recovery. On Wednesday, Francis' vicar for Rome urged all the faithful to devote an hour of silent prayer for the pope before evening vespers services, some visitors to Gemelli lit a candle in his honor and pilgrims who had planned to attend his weekly general audience came to St. Peter's Square anyway to offer a prayer after it was cancelled.

"I think many people are disappointed but I think more importantly we really have to pray for his health," said Sister Charlene, a nun from Singapore who was in the piazza.

Francis also received another get-well wish from U.S. Vice President JD Vance, whom the pope recently targeted in criticizing the Trump administration's plans for mass deportations of migrants.

"Let's all say a prayer for Pope Francis, who appears to have some serious health issues," Vance, a Catholic, posted on X from his private account.

Double pneumonia shows a more serious infection

Francis was admitted to the Gemelli hospital 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. Late Tuesday, the Vatican said a chest CT scan showed the onset of bilateral pneumonia on top of asthmatic bronchitis, which is being treated with cortisone and antibiotics.

"I think the key will be how well and quickly he responds to treatment," said Dr. Andrew Chadwick, a respiratory and intensive care specialist at Oxford University Hospitals.

Bronchitis can lead to pneumonia, which is a deeper and far more serious infection of the lungs' air sacs. Pneumonia can develop in part or all of one lung or in both lungs. It tends to be more serious when both lungs are affected because there isn't healthy 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 and his heart function is said to be good. He has eaten breakfast every day, gotten out of bed, read the newspapers and done some work from his hospital room.

"Pope Francis is a strong man who does not let difficulties get him down," said the Rev. Enzo Fortunato, who heads a new Vatican committee on children. The fact that Francis is keeping up with his ordinary routine, including receiving the Eucharist, "is a sign of a man who wants to experience the ordinariness of illness in the hospital."

Pope at risk of complications

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. The Argentine pope, who has previously admit-

ted to being a non-compliant patient, has a number of conditions that make him particularly at risk for complications: Aside from his age, he is not physically active and uses a wheelchair, limiting his ability to clear the fluids building up in his lungs.

Dr. Meredith McCormack, director of pulmonary and critical care medicine at Johns Hopkins University, said doctors will be looking to see if Francis responds to the therapy, which can include physiotherapy to help clear the lungs. Severe cases of pneumonia are typically treated for about one to two weeks, but recovery in an older person could extend beyond that.

"Lack of worsening would be an encouraging sign," said McCormack, who is not involved in Francis' care.

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" would require an "adequate" stay.

Pilgrimages continue despite pope's canceled engagements

Despite the less than positive news about Francis' condition, Francis was receiving get-well drawings and cards from children being treated in the hospital's oncology ward. And at the Vatican on Wednesday, Holy Year pilgrimages continued, with groups of faithful walking through the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica on a chilly and cloudy day.

"We are very happy to be here but we are also sad for the pope's sickness," said Amparo Alcala', who was leading a large group of pilgrims from Valencia, Spain. "He is doing great things, most of all for the women in the church, and this gives us a lot of joy. We are praying for his recovery and that he might come back, if this is God's will."

Trump and Musk say they like working together and will keep at it. Will it last?

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's been a burning political question for weeks: How long will President Donald Trump — who doesn't like sharing the spotlight — be able to do just that with Elon Musk, a billionaire also overly fond of attention?

In a joint Fox News Channel interview that aired Tuesday, both insisted they like each other a lot and would stick with their arrangement despite what Trump said were attempts by the media to "drive us apart."

At times, Trump sat back as Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity heaped praise on Musk in an attempt to counteract a Democratic narrative that he's a callous and unelected force out to destroy the government and upend civil society through sweeping cuts being imposed by the Department of Government Efficiency.

There were also moments when Trump and Musk were all but finishing each other's sentences, as if they were part of a buddy comedy and not the president and his most powerful aide.

Here's a look at how the friendship formed, what it means for them both and why Trump's history suggests it may not last:

They weren't always friends

Trump told Hannity that he wasn't really acquainted with Musk until recently, saying, "I knew him a little bit through the White House originally" but didn't know him before that.

Musk was born in Pretoria, South Africa, and became a U.S. citizen in 2002. He's the world's richest man, with a net worth exceeding \$400 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. His vast business holdings include X, Tesla and SpaceX, as well as the satellite internet service provider Starlink.

Musk said he voted for Democrat Joe Biden in 2020 and Democrat Hillary Clinton in 2016. Musk has recently said that Tesla was being unfairly targeted by regulations in its original home state of California. Musk and the company's headquarters moved to Austin, Texas, in 2021, and he increasingly soured on Biden with the then-president's embrace of unions that clashed frequently with Tesla.

In the past, Musk butted heads with Trump over climate change. They feuded as recently as July 2022 — with Trump calling Musk a "bulls--- artist." He also suggested then that Musk came to the White House during his first term seeking federal subsidies for "electric cars that don't drive long enough, driverless cars that crash, or rocketships to nowhere."

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"I could have said, 'drop to your knees and beg,' and he would have done it," Trump previously said on his social media site.

Musk originally backed Ron DeSantis in last year's Republican presidential primary, even helping the Florida governor launch his White House bid in a glitch-marred presentation on X. But Musk met with Trump at his Florida residence last March and endorsed the then-candidate in July, after the first assassination attempt.

"I was going to do it anyway, but that was a precipitating event," Musk told Hannity.

Musk appeared at his first Trump rally in early October, and his super PAC spent around \$200 million to boost the Republican's campaign. X also amplified messaging — and often disinformation — promoted by Trump and his "Make America Great Again" movement.

The pair spent election night at the president's Mar-a-Lago club. Less than a week after securing victory, Trump announced that Musk would lead DOGE, the new push to shrink government, alongside former GOP presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, who left the commission by Inauguration Day.

Their relationship is mutually beneficial

The affection continued Wednesday, when Trump traveled to a Saudi-backed investment meeting in Miami, where Musk was in attendance. Trump asked the billionaire to stand up so the crowd could applaud him.

"He's doing a great job," Trump said. The president also suggested that the ratings for Tuesday night's interview were high, telling the crowd: "You coulda seen him last night. He's a very committed person, a very serious person."

"He's a seriously high IQ individual," Trump added. "He's got his faults also, I'll tell you that. But not too many of them."

Trump has empowered Musk to help him keep a campaign promise to "shatter the deep state" by firing scores of federal workers, shrinking or shuttering agencies and slashing the size of government.

"There's a vast federal bureaucracy that is implacably opposed to the the president," Musk said during the Hannity interview. He added, "What we're seeing here is the sort of the thrashing of the bureaucracy as we try to restore democracy and the will of the people."

Tesla and SpaceX have benefited from lucrative government contracts from the Defense Department, NASA and other federal entities, as well as plenty of tax breaks and subsidies over the years. The Trump administration could also take a lot of regulatory heat off Musk, including dismissing crash investigations into Tesla's partially automated vehicles and a Justice Department criminal probe examining whether Musk and Tesla have overstated their cars' self-driving capabilities.

Musk nonetheless insisted to Hannity, "I haven't asked the president for anything, ever." Trump said the billionaire "won't be involved" in areas where his government efforts and business concerns overlap — though that seems dubious given that Musk's team has already begun scrutinizing federal contracts in areas that would seem to present conflict-of-interest concerns.

Trump's friendships often don't last

Trump and Musk say they won't turn on each other. But those closest to Trump often end up as his fiercest critics.

His former vice president, Mike Pence, said Trump endangered his family in the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the Capitol and attempted to bully him into violating the Constitution. His former attorney general, Bill Barr, refuted Trump's falsehoods about widespread fraud in the 2020 election and has since said he "shouldn't be anywhere near the Oval Office."

Michael Cohen, Trump's longtime lawyer who testified against him in a hush money case, told a House committee in 2019, "People that follow Mr. Trump, as I did blindly, are going to suffer the same consequences that I'm suffering."

More recently, Trump shrugged off potential security risks while ending Secret Service protection for former top officials in his first administration, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former White House chief of staff John Kelly.

Trump also has shown repeatedly that he doesn't like being overshadowed, even hinting at such where Musk is concerned. Asked recently about Musk appearing on the cover of Time from behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office, Trump quipped, "Is Time Magazine still in business?"

But Trump has also been fiercely loyal to those he perceives as having stood by him.

Former White House adviser Peter Navarro, who served time in prison related to the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, is back helping dictate Trump trade policy. Trump's valet, Walt Nauta, is working anew at the White House after once being a codefendant with Trump in the classified documents case. Trump has also said he'd offered "about 10 jobs" to his former national security adviser, Mike Flynn, whom he pardoned after Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI.

Four weeks in, they seem genuinely fond of each other

Throughout the interview, Hannity was friendly and his questions were mostly fawning. But what came through most clearly was how complimentary Trump and Musk were of each other — even amid skepticism about how their friendship enduring.

"He's an amazing person," Trump said of Musk.

"I love the president, I just want to be clear about that," Musk offered of Trump.

"I feel like I'm interviewing two brothers here," Hannity finally said.

Hegseth directs Pentagon to find \$50 billion in cuts this year to fund Trump military priorities

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has directed the military services to identify \$50 billion in programs that could be cut next year in order to redirect those savings to fund President Donald Trump's priorities.

Hegseth has committed to redirecting Pentagon spending to more directly support warfighters. In a statement late Wednesday, Robert Salesses, who is performing the duties of deputy secretary of defense, said "the time for preparation is over" and "excessive bureaucracy" and programs targeting climate change or "other woke programs" such as diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives would be targeted.

"To achieve our mandate from President Trump, we are guided by his priorities including securing our borders, building the Iron Dome for America, and ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing," Salesses said.

Iron Dome is envisioned as an extensive, multilayered air defense system for the U.S. that Trump has said should include the ability to shoot down incoming missiles from space.

The roughly \$50 billion would represent about 8% of the military's budget. It was not immediately clear which parts of the Pentagon's spending on diversity and equity programs, or its spending to address climate change — such as buying alternate fuels for aircraft, or making bases more resistant to the effects of extreme weather, such as the 2018 hurricane that caused significant damage to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida — would be targeted or could add up to \$50 billion in savings.

The spending cuts mandate comes as the military is quickly trying to build its fiscal year 2026 request, a congressional process that often starts late during transitions between new presidential administrations. Hegseth has asked the Pentagon to find offsets — programs that can be cut to achieve spending elsewhere — for fiscal year 2026, which starts Oct. 1.

The cuts would be as drastic as the single-year ordered savings across the military in the 2013 sequestration, a law passed by Congress that was intended to force the legislative branch to reach agreement on budget deficit reductions and instead forced the services to cut \$56 billion in a matter of months.

Because of the way the military budget is structured, long-term, high-dollar procurement programs at the time were protected, as were most entitlements such as military retirement and health care.

At the time, the accounts that were easier to cut were found in operations, maintenance and personnel. The services lost noncommissioned officers — highly trained mid-level enlisted personnel — and cut training such as flight hours. Military training accidents quickly climbed.

In the years since the sequester, Congress and the services have directed additional protections to operations and maintenance spending.

DOGE notches courtroom wins as Elon Musk crusades to slash federal government

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, CHRIS MEGERIAN and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — Although some parts of President Donald Trump's agenda are getting bogged down by litigation, Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency is having better luck in the courtroom. Labor unions, Democrats and federal employees have filed several lawsuits arguing that DOGE is running roughshod over privacy protections or usurping power from other branches of government.

But judges appointed by Democratic and Republican presidents haven't always gone along with those arguments, at least so far. Most notably, DOGE critics are failing to obtain temporary restraining orders that would prevent Musk's team from accessing sensitive government databases.

"It is not the job of the federal courts to police the security of the information systems in the executive branch," wrote U.S. District Judge Randolph Moss in a case involving the Office of Personnel Management. Moss was appointed by President Barack Obama.

The success is striking given the other challenges that Trump has faced in the judicial system, which has blocked — at least temporarily — his efforts to limit birthright citizenship, freeze congressionally authorized foreign aid and stop some healthcare services for transgender youth.

If Musk's opponents continue struggling to gain traction with lawsuits, he could be largely unencumbered in his crusade to downsize the federal government and workforce.

"The continued successes in the courts in favor of the Trump administration shouldn't be a surprise to anyone who has ever read our great Constitution, which clearly lays out the role of the Executive Branch, and which President Trump and his entire administration are following to a T," Harrison Fields, the White House deputy press secretary, said in a statement. "The resistance campaign can try, but they will continue to fail in their pursuit to rewrite the Constitution and deny the people the legal authority of the President to run the Executive Branch."

Cary Coglianese, an expert on administrative law and regulatory processes at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, said plaintiffs haven't been successful at demonstrating there would be irreparable harm if DOGE's plans move forward.

"This is a very fast moving train and they're well ahead of where the judiciary is," he said.

Skye Perryman, the leader of Democracy Forward, an advocacy group organizing lawsuits against the Trump administration, said they would continue to put legal pressure on the White House.

"We have seen no federal judge consider DOGE's actions and endorse them," she said.

An exception to DOGE's legal victories has been two lawsuits regarding Treasury Department systems, which are used to distribute trillions of dollars in federal money. The databases can include sensitive information like bank accounts and Social Security numbers, and they're traditionally maintained only by nonpartisan career officials.

A judge in Washington restricted DOGE's access to two staff members, while another judge in New York has temporarily blocked DOGE altogether.

Norm Eisen, a lawyer who worked for House Democrats during their first impeachment of Trump, said it was too early to say that the legal efforts wouldn't work. He noted that U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan, also appointed by Obama, expressed concern about Musk's apparent "unchecked authority" in a case involving federal data and worker layoffs.

Although she didn't issue a temporary restraining sought by Democratic attorneys general from 14 states, Chutkan said they could still make a strong argument Musk and DOGE violated the Constitution as the case progresses.

Eisen is representing current and former employees at the U.S. Agency for International Development, which was shut down by Musk and Trump. His lawsuit alleges that Musk and DOGE are exercising powers that should only belong to those elected by voters or confirmed by the Senate.

"These are not minor peccadillos," Eisen said. "These are some of the most fundamental issues that our

Constitution and laws address.”

John Yoo, a law professor at the University of California in Berkeley, said an important factor has been the administration’s contention that Musk is a presidential adviser without any independent authority. He said there are echoes of another legal battle from the 1990s, when Hillary Clinton chaired a healthcare task force as first lady. A federal appeals court in Washington ruled that the task force did not need to comply with rules on open meetings.

“That’s how they’re winning the lawsuits,” Yoo said. “They’re trying to stay on the side of the line that the D.C. circuit has drawn.”

U.S. District Judge Deborah Boardman heard more than three hours of arguments Wednesday on a request for a temporary restraining order in a lawsuit challenging DOGE’s access to personal information collected by the federal government.

She did not issue a decision, and expressed skepticism about the argument from labor unions. But she also pressed administration lawyers on why DOGE representatives “need to know everything.”

Emily Hall of the Justice Department said DOGE was tasked with making “broad, sweeping reforms” that require such access.

“It’s a pretty vague answer,” responded Boardman, who was appointed by President Joe Biden.

A major victory for Trump and Musk came in Boston, where U.S. District Judge George O’Toole Jr. allowed the administration to implement its deferred resignation program.

Commonly described as a buyout, the program allows workers to quit while getting paid until Sept. 30. It was challenged by a group of labor unions, but O’Toole ruled against them on technical legal grounds, saying they didn’t have standing to sue. O’Toole was appointed by President Bill Clinton.

Moss, the judge in the case involving the Office of Personnel Management, also decided not to block Musk’s team from viewing Education Department data. He pointed out that DOGE employees had testified in court papers they would follow laws around information sharing.

U.S. District Judge John Bates, an appointee of President George W. Bush, also did not stand in the way of DOGE’s involvement at the Department of Labor, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

Although Bates said he had “serious concerns” about the privacy issues raised by the legally complex case, he found the evidence did not yet justify a court block.

Administration lawyers said the DOGE team was not “running rampant, accessing any data system they desire” and had gotten security training and signed nondisclosure agreements.

Trump and Zelenskyy trade barbs as US-Ukraine relations sour over the war with Russia

By HANNA ARHIROVA and JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Relations between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump deteriorated rapidly Wednesday as Zelenskyy said Trump was living in a Russian-made “disinformation space” and Trump called Zelenskyy “a dictator without elections” in comments that were sure to complicate efforts to end the war.

Zelenskyy also said he would like Trump’s team “to be more truthful” as he offered his first response to a series of striking claims that Trump made a day earlier, including falsely suggesting that Kyiv was to blame for the war, which enters its fourth year next week.

The comments were a staggering back-and-forth between leaders of two countries that have been staunch allies in recent years under Trump’s predecessor. While former President Joe Biden was in the White House, the U.S. provided crucial military equipment to Kyiv to fend off the invasion and used its political weight to defend Ukraine and isolate Russia on the world stage.

The Trump administration has started charting a new course, reaching out to Russia and pushing for a peace deal. Senior officials from both countries held talks Tuesday to discuss improving ties, negotiating

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an end to the war and potentially preparing a meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin after years of frosty relations.

Trump lashes out on social media

Trump lashed out at Zelenskyy in a social media post that apparently referred to the fact that Ukraine has delayed elections because of the invasion and the subsequent imposition of martial law in accordance with the Ukrainian Constitution. Trump suggested Ukraine ought to hold elections.

Trump also called Zelenskyy "a modestly successful comedian" who "talked the United States of America into spending \$350 Billion Dollars, to go into a War that couldn't be won, that never had to start, but a War that he, without the U.S. and 'TRUMP,' will never be able to settle."

The president went on to say that the only thing Zelenskyy "was good at was playing Biden 'like a fiddle.'" He advised Zelenskyy to "move fast or he is not going to have a Country left."

He later repeated many of the criticisms of Zelenskyy, who he said has done a "terrible job," during an address before a meeting in Miami of business executives hosted by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund.

Meanwhile, Putin said he would like to meet with Trump.

Russia's army crossed the border on Feb. 24, 2022, in an all-out invasion that Putin sought to justify by falsely asserting that it was needed to protect civilians in eastern Ukraine. He also accused the U.S. and its allies of ignoring Russia's demand to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and to offer Moscow security guarantees. Ukraine and its allies denounced the assault as an unprovoked act of aggression.

"I would like to have a meeting, but it needs to be prepared so that it brings results," Putin said Wednesday in televised remarks. He added that he would be "pleased" to meet Trump but noted that Trump has acknowledged that a Ukrainian settlement could take longer than he initially hoped.

Putin says he wants to rebuild US-Russia relations

The Russian leader hailed Tuesday's talks between senior Russian and U.S. officials in the Saudi capital of Riyadh as "very positive." He said officials who took part in the talks described the U.S. delegation to him as "completely different people who were open to the negotiation process without any bias, without any condemnation of what was done in the past," and determined to work together with Moscow.

Putin said "the goal and subject" of Tuesday's talks "was the restoration of Russia-U.S. relations."

"Without increasing the level of trust between Russia and the United States, it is impossible to resolve many issues, including the Ukrainian crisis. The goal of this meeting was precisely to increase trust between Russia and the United States," Putin said.

He brushed off Zelenskyy's complaints about Ukraine being left out of the U.S.-Russian talks amid larger worries that the deal taking shape could be unfavorable to Kyiv. Putin said Kyiv's reaction was "unfounded."

"President Trump told me during our phone call that the United States are proceeding from the assumption that the negotiations process will involve Russia and Ukraine," Putin said. "No one is going to exclude Ukraine out of it."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that it was "wrong and dangerous" to deny Zelenskyy's democratic legitimacy. Germany has been Kyiv's second-biggest weapons supplier after the U.S.

"That no orderly elections can be held in the middle of the war corresponds to the stipulations of the Ukrainian Constitution and election laws. No one should say anything different," Scholz told news outlet Der Spiegel.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke Wednesday to Zelenskyy and "stressed the need for everyone to work together," according to Starmer's office, which added that it is "perfectly reasonable" to suspend elections during wartime, as the U.K. did during World War II.

Ukrainian president meets with US special envoy

Zelenskyy's remarks Wednesday came shortly before he was to meet with Keith Kellogg, the U.S. special envoy for Ukraine and Russia as part of the administration's recent diplomatic blitz.

At a news conference Tuesday, Trump showed little patience for Ukraine's objections to being excluded from the talks between top American and Russian diplomats in Saudi Arabia. He also said, without providing the source, that Zelenskyy's approval rating stood at 4%, while telling reporters that Ukraine "should have never started" the war and "could have made a deal" to prevent it.

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Zelenskyy replied Wednesday at his own news conference: "We have seen this disinformation. We understand that it is coming from Russia." He said that Trump "lives in this disinformation space."

Zelenskyy said he hoped Kellogg would walk through Kyiv and ask Ukrainians "if they trust their president? Do they trust Putin? Let him ask about Trump, what they think after the statements made by their president."

The Ukrainian leader also referred to "the story" that 90% of all aid received by Ukraine comes from the United States. He said, for instance, that about 34% of all weapons in Ukraine are domestically produced and over 30% of support comes from Europe.

In other developments, a poll released Wednesday by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology put public trust in Zelenskyy at 57%. The survey was conducted Feb. 4 to Feb. 9 among 1,000 people living across Ukraine in regions and territories controlled by the Ukrainian government.

The institute's executive director, Anton Hrushetskyi, described the result as "very good" for a democratic society. In addition to public trust, he said, Zelenskyy "retains his legitimacy."

Trump's treatment of Zelenskyy makes Russia media gleeful

Russian state TV and other state-controlled media reacted with glee to what they portrayed as Trump's cold shoulder to Zelenskyy.

"Trump isn't even trying to hide his irritation with Zelenskyy," the Rossiya channel said at the top of its newscast.

"Trump steamrolled Zelenskyy for his complaints about the talks with Russia," the daily Komsomolskaya Pravda said.

On the battlefield, a relentless onslaught in eastern areas by Russia's bigger army is grinding down Ukrainian forces, which are slowly but steadily being pushed back at some points on the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line.

American officials have signaled that Ukraine's hopes of joining NATO after reaching a possible peace agreement won't happen. Zelenskyy says any settlement will require U.S. security commitments to keep Russia at bay.

Israel confirms 4 dead hostages who will be returned from Gaza include young family

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The remains of the youngest and one of the oldest captives seized by Hamas during the attack that ignited the war in the Gaza Strip are expected to be returned on Thursday, an Israeli official said Wednesday.

The handover, part of the ceasefire agreement that has paused the fighting in Gaza, will include the bodies of a mother and her two young children whose fate was uncertain and a retired journalist in his 80s, said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

It was the first Israeli confirmation that the bodies of Ariel and Kfir Bibas, who were 4 years old and 9 months old when they were taken captive on Oct. 7, 2023, were being returned along with their mother Shiri. A grassroots forum representing hostage families also confirmed the names.

For many Israelis, the family has come to symbolize the plight of those taken captive. The fate of the Bibas mother and boys was unclear for much of the war, and the family released a statement Wednesday asking Israelis to wait for forensic identification of the remains before "eulogizing our loved ones."

The body of Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted, also will be returned, the official said.

"The heart of an entire nation breaks," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday.

Hamas has said all four were killed in Israeli airstrikes while Israel had previously said it had "grave concern" for the lives of the Bibas family.

A top Hamas official announced earlier this week that the militant group will return the four bodies and free six living Israeli hostages on Saturday in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners during the

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ceasefire's first phase.

The deal's first phase calls for Hamas to gradually release 33 hostages, eight of whom are believed to be dead.

So far, the return of 19 living Israeli hostages has been celebrated across the nation, but the handover of the bodies on Thursday is sure to be met with a somber tone.

Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya said on Tuesday the dead would include the "Bibas family."

The Bibas family were taken hostage from Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7, 2023. Their plight captivated Israelis who saw in them an embodiment of the brutality of Hamas' attack. Yarden Bibas, the husband and father, was freed from captivity earlier this month.

Lifshitz, who spent his life fighting for Arab rights, was one of the oldest hostages taken by Hamas. His daughter, a London-based artist, said in January she was holding onto hope that he survived but also prepared for the worst.

"These are difficult hours for us, after being informed that our beloved Oded is among the deceased hostages who will be returned," his family said in a statement. "For 502 days we hoped and prayed for a different outcome. However, until we receive absolute certainty, our journey is not over, and even afterwards we will continue to fight until the last hostage is returned."

As a journalist, Lifshitz campaigned for the recognition of Palestinian rights and peace between Arabs and Jews. In his later years, he drove Palestinians to medical appointments in Israel as part of a group called On the Way to Recovery.

The release of the six living hostages on Saturday would be an acceleration of the ceasefire deal. Israel is expected to continue releasing hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including many serving life sentences for deadly attacks. During the first phase, Israel is also due to release all women and children seized from Gaza since the war began.

A Mississippi judge ordered a newspaper to remove an editorial. Press advocates are outraged

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

A Mississippi judge ordered a newspaper to remove an editorial criticizing the mayor and city leaders after the officials sued, sparking complaints from press advocates that it violates the First Amendment.

Chancery Judge Crystal Wise Martin issued the restraining order against the Clarksdale Press Register on Tuesday in connection with a Feb. 8 editorial titled "Secrecy, Deception Erode Public Trust." The piece criticized the city for not sending the newspaper notice about a meeting the City Council held regarding a proposed tax on alcohol, marijuana and tobacco.

"I think it's dangerous that a judge would issue a temporary restraining order without a hearing," said Wyatt Emmerich, president of the paper's parent company, Emmerich Newspapers. "We'll fight it and see where it goes."

The city's lawsuit called the editorial libelous and said it "chilled and hindered" the city's efforts to lobby for the tax with state legislators.

The editorial was no longer available on the newspaper's website by Wednesday afternoon. Martin scheduled a Feb. 27 hearing in the case.

Mayor Chuck Espy said the editorial unfairly implied that the city had broken the law with its meeting and cited another portion that questioned, "Have commissioners or the mayor gotten kick-backs from the community?"

"We're all for the press doing their job. We're all for as much transparency as possible," he said. "Just tell the truth. I don't think that's too much to ask for."

Clarksdale is about 71 miles (115 kilometers) south of Memphis. The order drew complaints from press advocates in Mississippi and nationwide.

"This is a rather astounding order and we feel it is egregious and chilling," said Layne Bruce, executive director of the Mississippi Press Association. "It clearly runs afoul of the First Amendment and we fully

support the Press Register's right to report and offer commentary on the business of Clarksdale's city government."

Lisa Zycherman, vice president of legal programs at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said the order "constitutes censorship and is unquestionably a serious First Amendment violation."

There have been other attempts to silence news outlets in recent years. In 2023, a Kansas police department raided a newspaper's office and the home of its owner and publisher after claiming the paper and a reporter potentially committed identity theft and other computer crimes in obtaining and verifying information about a local business owner's driving record. The raid was later investigated and the former police chief who led it was charged last year with obstruction of justice.

Trump administration orders halt to NYC toll meant to fight traffic and fund mass transit

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE and PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — President Donald Trump's administration on Wednesday ordered a halt to congestion pricing tolls in New York City, which thin traffic and fund mass transit by making people pay to drive into Manhattan's core.

Launched on Jan. 5, the city's system uses license plate readers to impose a \$9 toll on most vehicles entering Manhattan neighborhoods south of Central Park. In its early days, transit officials said the toll has brought modest but measurable traffic reductions.

The federal government has rescinded its approval of the program, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy announced Wednesday, calling the toll's financial burden "a slap in the face to working class Americans and small business owners."

The Federal Highway Administration will work with the state on an "orderly termination of the tolls," according to the statement.

Within minutes of the announcement, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, a state agency that runs the New York City subway and other public transit, filed a federal lawsuit to keep congestion pricing alive.

Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, said the toll program would continue while the lawsuit plays out.

Trump takes a victory lap

The president, whose namesake Trump Tower penthouse and other properties are within the congestion zone, vowed to kill the plan as soon as he took office. The Republican declared victory on his social networking site Truth Social after the Transportation Department announcement.

"CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD. Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED." Trump wrote, adding, "LONG LIVE THE KING!" The White House later posted an image of Trump wearing a crown in front of the New York skyline.

Hochul was quick to fire back.

"New York hasn't labored under a king in over 250 years," she said at a news conference at Grand Central Terminal, one of the city's train hubs. "We sure as hell are not going to start now."

A divisive plan for gridlock

Similar toll programs for getting people into public transit by making it cost-prohibitive to drive have long existed in other global cities, including London, Stockholm, Milan and Singapore, but the system had never been tried before in the U.S.

New York intends to use the money from tolls to issue bonds that would fund billions of dollars in improvements and repairs for the city's creaky and cash-strapped transit system, which carries some 4 million riders daily.

As in other cities, New York's congestion fee varies depending on the time and the size of the vehicle. Trucks and other large automobiles pay a higher rate, and the fee goes drops to \$2.25 for most cars during the quieter overnight hours — less than the cost of a subway ride.

The tolling system has been divisive, with most opposition coming from suburban commuters or from those living in areas not well-served by the subway system.

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Transit advocates and environmentalists heralded it as an innovative step to reduce air pollution and speed up traffic for vehicles that truly need to be on the road like delivery trucks, police cars and other first responders.

"By blocking this successful policy, Trump will be directly responsible for more traffic, more crashes, more polluted air, slower buses and less funding for our transit system," said state Sen. Andrew Gounardes, a city Democrat.

Some Democratic leaders were uneasy about supporting the toll

The tolling plan was approved by New York lawmakers in 2019, but stalled for years awaiting a federal environmental review during Trump's first term before being approved under the Biden administration.

The toll survived several lawsuits trying to halt it before its launch. Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy of neighboring New Jersey fought it in court and wrote a letter to Trump on Inauguration Day imploring him to kill the program.

Hochul also had misgivings. Last June, she abruptly halted the tolling system's planned launch, citing concerns about its impact on the local economy. The Democrat then revived the toll in November following Trump's election, but reduced the toll for passenger vehicles from \$15 to \$9.

Since then, she has lauded it as a win for the city and discussed the issue multiple times with the president.

New York City's embattled Mayor Eric Adams, also a Democrat, was once a supporter of congestion pricing but has more recently punted on the subject, appearing unwilling to wade into a brewing fight between Trump and the state.

"If the federal government has the authority to do something within their powers, then we can't sit back and complain about it, because we do things within our powers," Adams told reporters last month when asked about Trump potentially canceling congestion pricing.

New Social Security chief contradicts claims that millions of dead people are getting payouts

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The new head of the Social Security Administration said Wednesday that deceased centenarians are "not necessarily receiving benefits," contradicting claims that tens of millions of dead people over the age of 100 are getting payments from the agency.

Lee Dudek, the new acting SSA commissioner who was placed in the role by President Donald Trump, gave the clarification after Trump and billionaire adviser Elon Musk falsely claimed on social media and in press briefings that people who are 100, 200 and even 300 years old are improperly and routinely getting benefits.

While it is true that improper payments have been made, including some to dead people, the numbers thrown out by Trump and Musk are overstated and misrepresent Social Security data.

Here are the facts:

What has the Trump administration said about payments to centenarians?

On Tuesday, Trump said at a press briefing in Florida that "we have millions and millions of people over 100 years old" receiving Social Security benefits. "They're obviously fraudulent or incompetent," Trump said.

"If you take all of those millions of people off Social Security, all of a sudden we have a very powerful Social Security with people that are 80 and 70 and 90, but not 200 years old," he said. He also said that there's one person in the system listed as 360 years old.

He repeated the false claims while speaking at a Miami conference of international investors and billionaires Wednesday, despite the SSA commissioner's earlier statement.

Musk, whose Department of Government Efficiency is seeking to root out fraud, waste and abuse, issued a slew of posts on his social media platform X on Monday night, including: "Maybe Twilight is real and there are a lot of vampires collecting Social Security" and "Having tens of millions of people marked in Social Security as "ALIVE" when they are definitely dead is a HUGE problem. Obviously. Some of these people would have been alive before America existed as a country. Think about that for a second ..."

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So are tens of millions of people over 100 years old receiving benefits?

No.

Part of the confusion comes from Social Security's software system based on the COBOL programming language, which has a lack of date type. This means that some entries with missing or incomplete birth-dates will default to a reference point of more than 150 years ago. The news organization WIRED first reported on the use of COBOL programming language at the Social Security Administration.

Additionally, a series of reports from the Social Security Administration's inspector general in March 2023 and July 2024 state that the agency has not established a new system to properly annotate death information in its database, which included roughly 18.9 million Social Security numbers of people born in 1920 or earlier but were not marked as deceased. This does not mean, however, that these individuals were receiving benefits.

The agency decided not to update the database because of the cost to do so, which would run upward of \$9 million.

A July 2023 Social Security OIG report states that "almost none of the numberholders discussed in the report currently receive SSA payments." And, as of September 2015, the agency automatically stops payments to people who are older than 115 years old.

What does the acting Social Security commissioner say about that?

Dudek, who was named acting chief of the Social Security Administration after the resignation of Michelle King, issued a news release Wednesday reiterating the agency's commitment to transparency. The last lines of the note acknowledged recent reporting about people older than 100 receiving benefits from the agency.

He seemed to confirm that confusion had arisen because of the default settings on the database.

"The reported data are people in our records with a Social Security number who do not have a date of death associated with their record. These individuals are not necessarily receiving benefits," he said.

"I am confident that with DOGE's help and the commitment of our executive team and workforce, that Social Security will continue to deliver for the American people," Dudek said.

How big of a problem is Social Security fraud?

A July 2024 report from Social Security's inspector general states that from fiscal years 2015 through 2022, the agency paid out almost \$8.6 trillion in benefits, including \$71.8 billion — or less than 1% — in improper payments. Most of the erroneous payments were overpayments to living people.

In addition, in early January, the U.S. Treasury clawed back more than \$31 million in a variety of federal payments— not just Social Security payments— that improperly went to dead people, a recovery that former Treasury official David Lebryk said was "just the tip of the iceberg."

The money was reclaimed as part of a five-month pilot program after Congress gave the Department of Treasury temporary access to the Social Security Administration's "Full Death Master File" for three years as part of the omnibus appropriations bill in 2021. The SSA maintains the most complete federal database of individuals who have died, and the file contains more than 142 million records, which go back to 1899, according to the Treasury.

Treasury estimated in January that it would recover more than \$215 million during its three-year access period, which runs from December 2023 through 2026.

What are some of the concerns about misinformation on Social Security payments?

Chuck Blahous, a senior research strategist at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, said, "Two cheers for Elon Musk if he can root out and put a stop to improper payments."

But to pick the places in the federal government where error rates are high, "Social Security would be near the bottom of the list, not near the top," Blahous said. "Medicaid improper payment rates are quite substantial, and soared after the Medicaid expansion of the ACA."

"By all means — go after any improper payments that are found, but let's not pretend that's where the system's biggest financial problems are," he said.

Sita Nataraj Slavov, a professor of public policy at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, said the claims by Musk and Trump will make people think the solutions to the govern-

ment's financial problems are simpler than they appear.

"The real concern is that this claim may mislead people into thinking there's an easy fix to Social Security's financial problems — that we can somehow restore solvency without making sacrifices through higher taxes or lower benefits," Slavov said. "This is simply not true."

What does the White House say about the criticism?

Karoline Leavitt, the White House spokesperson, referred back to the Social Security's inspector general report.

"A previous investigation revealed the SSA paid at least \$71.8 billion in improper payments," she said. "The Social Security Administration is now working to find even more waste, fraud, and abuse in the Administration's whole-of-government effort to protect American taxpayers."

Senate GOP budget bill back on track hours after Trump threw it into turmoil

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Back on track, Senate Republicans pushed ahead Wednesday with their \$340 billion budget bill focused on funding the White House's mass deportations and border security agenda after Vice President JD Vance gave a green light to proceed despite a morning dust-up caused by President Donald Trump.

The package was in jeopardy after Trump publicly bashed the approach from the Senate Budget Committee chairman, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. Trump said he favored the "big beautiful bill" from House Republicans, a more politically fraught package that includes \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts but slashes government programs and services. Senators want to address those priorities later, in a second package.

"We are moving forward," said Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the GOP whip, after a lunch meeting with Vance at the Capitol. "Foot on the gas, moving forward."

The start-stop process is complicating what's already a heavy legislative lift for Republicans, who have a rare sweep of power with majority control of Congress, but face big hurdles enacting Trump's agenda as Democrats prepare to counter with steep objections at every step.

Ongoing GOP divisions over whether to do one package or two — the House thinks they can only muscle one package to passage, while the Senate believes two will be easier — has created a push-pull dynamic that Trump is leveraging as he goads the two chambers of Congress to compete with each other.

Trump, in his own private talks with the senators, including last weekend at Mar-a-Lago, has essentially told them just to "get the result."

It all comes as Democrats, without the votes to stop Trump's plans, are warning Americans what's at stake — particularly as the administration's Department of Government Efficiency effort is slashing across government departments, leaving a trail of fired federal workers and dismantling programs on which many Americans depend.

"These bills that they have have one purpose — and that is they're trying to give a tax break to their billionaire buddies and have you, the average American person, pay for it," Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York told The Associated Press.

Schumer convened a private call over the weekend with Democratic senators and agreed on a strategy to challenge Republicans for prioritizing tax cuts that primarily flow to the wealthy at the expense of program and service reductions in health care, scientific research, veterans services and elsewhere.

"This is going to be a long, drawn-out fight," Schumer said later.

With a party line vote, 50-47, the Senate launched the cumbersome budget process late Tuesday and by Wednesday was slogging through an initial 50 hours of debate. That all leads up to an expected all-night session Thursday with rapid-fire attempts to amend the package in what's typically called a "vote-a-rama."

The Republican package would allow \$175 billion to be spent on border security, including money for mass deportation operations and building the U.S.-Mexico border wall, in addition to a \$150 billion boost to the Pentagon and \$20 billion for the Coast Guard.

Trump border czar Tom Homan and top aide Stephen Miller told senators privately last week that they are running short of cash to accomplish the president's immigration and deportation priorities, spurring Republicans to move swiftly.

Eyeing ways to pay for it, Republican senators are considering a rollback of the Biden administration's methane emissions fee, which was approved by Democrats as part of climate change strategies in the Inflation Reduction Act, and hoping to draw new revenue from energy leases as they aim to spur domestic energy production.

But all that was in jeopardy when Trump said early Wednesday he wanted the House's version passed as a way to "kickstart" the process and "move all of our priorities to the concept of, 'ONE BIG BEAUTIFUL BILL.'"

Trump said, "Unlike the Lindsey Graham version of the very important Legislation currently being discussed, the House Resolution implements my FULL America First Agenda, EVERYTHING, not just parts of it!"

The Senate's Republican leadership was blindsided by the post.

"As they say, I did not see that one coming," said Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D.

Thune had engineered the two-bill approach as a way to deliver an early victory for the White House and had pushed the Senate forward while the House is away on recess this week, saying it was time to act.

By lunchtime, after Vance met with the senators, his message was for them to simply carry on.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said afterward that Vance told them: "The president wants whatever you guys want. Just do whatever you want. He's going to support it."

Cramer said Trump enjoys watching the House and Senate compete over his agenda.

The House GOP bill is multiple times larger, with \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts and \$1.5 trillion in spending reductions over the decade across Medicaid health care programs, food stamps and other services used by large swaths of the country. The cuts could ultimately grow to \$2 trillion to appease hard-right conservatives.

The budget plans are being considered under what's called the reconciliation process, which allows passage on a simple majority vote without many of the procedural hurdles that stall legislation. Once rare, reconciliation is increasingly being used in the House and Senate to pass big packages on party-line votes when one party controls the White House and Congress.

During Trump's first term, Republicans used the reconciliation process to pass GOP tax cuts in 2017. Democrats used reconciliation during the Biden presidency era to approve COVID relief and the Inflation Reduction Act.

The white man who pleaded guilty to shooting a Black teen who rang a wrong doorbell dies

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — An 86-year-old Missouri man has died just days after pleading guilty to a lesser charge in the 2023 shooting of Ralph Yarl, a Black honor student who rang the white man's doorbell by mistake, prosecutors announced Wednesday.

Andrew Lester of Kansas City was charged with first-degree assault and armed criminal action in the shooting of the then-16-year-old, who survived and is now a freshman at Texas A&M. Before his trial was scheduled to begin, he pleaded guilty Friday to a lesser charge of second-degree assault, which carries up to seven years behind bars. He was scheduled to be sentenced on March 7.

Cher Congour, a spokeswoman for the Clay County prosecutor's office, said Lester's attorney informed them of his death.

"We have learned of the passing of Andrew Lester and extend our sincere condolences to his family during this difficult time," the prosecutor's office said in a news release. "While the legal proceedings have now concluded, we acknowledge that Mr. Lester did take responsibility for his actions by pleading guilty in this case."

The news release offered no cause of death. Kansas City police said they weren't conducting a death investigation. And Sarah Boyd, a spokeswoman for the Clay County sheriff's office, said she had no infor-

mation on Lester's cause of death since he wasn't in custody, but noted that he was in "poor health" at last week's plea hearing.

Yarl's family said in a written statement Wednesday that what happened was one of the reasons they had pushed for a speedy trial.

"Now, another Black child harmed by prejudice will never see the man who shot him face the full weight of the justice system. While Lester finally admitted guilt, it came at the very last moment—after two years of stalling. That delay leaves our family reeling," the statement said.

The case shocked the country and renewed national debate about gun policies and race in the U.S.

Yarl showed up on Lester's doorstep on the night of April 13, 2023, after he mixed up the streets where he was supposed to pick up his twin siblings.

Lester's attorney, Steve Salmon, had argued that Lester was acting in self-defense and that he was terrified by the stranger who knocked on his door as he settled into bed. Authorities say Lester shot Yarl twice: first in the head, then in the arm.

Yarl testified at a hearing that he rang the bell and then waited for someone to answer for what seemed "longer than normal." As the inner door opened, Yarl said, he reached out to grab the storm door, assuming he was at his brothers' friends' parents.

He said Lester shot him in the head and uttered, "Don't come here ever again." Although the bullet didn't penetrate Yarl's brain, the impact knocked him to the ground. Yarl said Lester then shot him in the arm. The teen was taken to the hospital and released three days later.

His family said the shooting took a big emotional toll and they had filed a lawsuit against the retired aircraft mechanic.

Salmon said last year that Lester's physical and mental condition had deteriorated. He said Lester had heart issues, a broken hip and had been hospitalized. Lester also lost 50 pounds (23 kilograms), which Salmon blamed on the stress of intense media coverage and death threats he subsequently received.

During Friday's hearing, Lester was hunched over as he was wheeled into the courtroom, his hands folded. Asked whether he was in poor health, Lester responded yes.

The judge had previously ordered a mental evaluation of Lester but allowed for the trial to proceed after its completion. The results of that evaluation were not released publicly.

Lester's grandson, Daniel Ludwig, didn't immediately return a text message from The Associated Press seeking comment.

Apple unveils a souped-up and more expensive version of its lowest priced iPhone

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Apple has released a sleeker and more expensive version of its lowest priced iPhone in an attempt to widen the audience for a bundle of artificial intelligence technology that the company has been hoping will revive demand for its most profitable product lineup.

The iPhone 16e unveiled Wednesday is the fourth-generation of a model that's sold at a dramatically lower price than the iPhone's standard and premium models. The previous bargain-bin models were called the iPhone SE, with the last version coming out in 2022.

Like the higher-priced iPhone 16 lineup unveiled last September, the iPhone 16e includes the souped-up computer chip needed to process an array of AI features that automatically summarize text, audio and create on-the-fly emojis while smartening up the device's virtual assistant, Siri. It will also have a more powerful battery and camera.

All those upgrades will translate into a higher starting price for an iPhone 16e at \$600, a 40% increase from \$430 for the last iPhone SE. But iPhone 16e will be more affordable than the cheapest standard iPhone 16 at \$800. The new phone will be available in stores Feb. 28, but can be pre-ordered beginning Friday.

"We're so excited for iPhone 16e to complete the lineup as a powerful, more affordable option to bring the iPhone experience to even more people," said Kaiann Drance, an Apple vice president in charge of

promoting a device lineup that accounts for more than half of the company's revenue.

But Apple is also trying to balance its desire to offer a more affordable iPhone that will lure more people into its sphere of product against its self interest in maximizing its profits from selling higher price products, according to Forrester Research analyst Dipanjan Chatterjee.

"The problem with a lower-end product in a luxury portfolio is that you want it to be good but not so good as to cannibalize the crown jewels," Chatterjee said.

Although Apple has been hyping its foray into AI since last June, the complete set of features still haven't been released in the U.S. and the technology still isn't even available in some parts of the world.

The delays in making the iPhone's AI — dubbed "Apple Intelligence" — more widely available through free software updates dinged the Cupertino, California, company during the past holiday when sales of the device dipped slightly from their 2023 levels.

Apple has primarily been losing the ground in China, where it hasn't yet specified when the iPhone's AI technology will be available. But the company recently struck an AI partnership with Alibaba in China that could pave the way for the technology coming to iPhones in that country this spring.

Besides being able to handle AI for the first time, the iPhone 16e has a different look from previous SE models. It boasts a 6.1-inch display screen, slightly larger than the 4.7-inch display on SE model and no longer has a home screen button like the SE had. The new iPhone 16e will rely include a facial recognition option for unlocking the device, just like the higher priced models do.

Apple's shares edged higher Wednesday to close at \$244.87, below the stock's peak of roughly \$260 reached in late December.

Thousands of Palestinian families flee West Bank homes as Israel confronts militants

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.

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"The idea of 'cleansing' the land of Palestinians is more popular today than ever before," said Yagil Levy, a professor and head of the Institute for the Study of Civil-Military Relations at Israel'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 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 Dgheish 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.

AP journalists visited the Abu Dgheish 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 Dgheish 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 Dgheish, 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."

Tens of millions of dead people aren't getting Social Security checks, despite Trump and Musk claims

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration is falsely claiming that tens of millions of dead people over 100 years old are receiving Social Security payments.

Over the past few days, President Donald Trump and billionaire adviser Elon Musk have said on social media and in press briefings that people who are 100, 200 and even 300 years old are improperly getting benefits — a "HUGE problem," Musk wrote, as his Department of Government Efficiency digs into federal agencies to root out waste, fraud and abuse.

It is true that improper payments have been made, including some to dead people. But the numbers thrown out by Musk and the White House are overstated and misrepresent Social Security data.

Here are the facts:

What has the Trump administration said about payments to centenarians?

On Tuesday, Trump said at a press briefing in Florida that "we have millions and millions of people over 100 years old" receiving Social Security benefits. "They're obviously fraudulent or incompetent," Trump said.

"If you take all of those millions of people off Social Security, all of a sudden we have a very powerful Social Security with people that are 80 and 70 and 90, but not 200 years old," he said. He also said that there's one person in the system listed as 360 years old.

Late Monday, Musk posted a slew of posts on his social media platform X, including: "Maybe Twilight is real and there are a lot of vampires collecting Social Security," and "Having tens of millions of people marked in Social Security as 'ALIVE' when they are definitely dead is a HUGE problem. Obviously. Some of these people would have been alive before America existed as a country. Think about that for a second ..."

On Wednesday, Social Security's new acting commissioner, Lee Dudek, acknowledged recent reporting about the number of people older than age 100 who may be receiving benefits from Social Security. "The reported data are people in our records with a Social Security number who do not have a date of death associated with their record. These individuals are not necessarily receiving benefits."

"I am confident that with DOGE's help and the commitment of our executive team and workforce, that Social Security will continue to deliver for the American people," Dudek said.

How big of a problem is Social Security fraud?

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A July 2024 report from Social Security's inspector general states that from fiscal years 2015 through 2022, the agency paid out almost \$8.6 trillion in benefits, including \$71.8 billion — or less than 1% — in improper payments. Most of the erroneous payments were overpayments to living people.

In addition, in early January, the U.S. Treasury clawed back more than \$31 million in a variety of federal payments— not just Social Security payments— that improperly went to dead people, a recovery that former Treasury official David Lebryk said was "just the tip of the iceberg."

The money was reclaimed as part of a five-month pilot program after Congress gave the Department of Treasury temporary access to the Social Security Administration's "Full Death Master File" for three years as part of the omnibus appropriations bill in 2021. The SSA maintains the most complete federal database of individuals who have died, and the file contains more than 142 million records, which go back to 1899, according to the Treasury.

Treasury estimated in January that it would recover more than \$215 million during its three-year access period, which runs from December 2023 through 2026.

So are tens of millions of people over 100 years old receiving benefits?

No.

Part of the confusion comes from Social Security's software system based on the COBOL programming language, which has a lack of date type. This means that some entries with missing or incomplete birth-dates will default to a reference point of more than 150 years ago. The news organization WIRED first reported on the use of COBOL programming language at the Social Security Administration.

Additionally, a series of reports from the Social Security Administration's inspector general in March 2023 and July 2024 state that the agency has not established a new system to properly annotate death information in its database, which included roughly 18.9 million Social Security numbers of people born in 1920 or earlier but were not marked as deceased. This does not mean, however, that these individuals were receiving benefits.

The agency decided not to update the database because of the cost to do so, which would run upward of \$9 million.

A July 2023 Social Security OIG report states that "almost none of the numberholders discussed in the report currently receive SSA payments." And, as of September 2015, the agency automatically stops payments to people who are older than 115 years old.

What are some of the concerns about misinformation on Social Security payments?

Chuck Blahous, a senior research strategist at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, said, "Two cheers for Elon Musk if he can root out and put a stop to improper payments."

But to pick the places in the federal government where error rates are high, "Social Security would be near the bottom of the list, not near the top," Blahous said. "Medicaid improper payment rates are quite substantial, and soared after the Medicaid expansion of the ACA."

"By all means — go after any improper payments that are found, but let's not pretend that's where the system's biggest financial problems are," he said.

Sita Nataraj Slavov, a professor of public policy at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, said the claims by Musk and Trump will make people think the solutions to the government's financial problems are simpler than they appear.

"The real concern is that this claim may mislead people into thinking there's an easy fix to Social Security's financial problems — that we can somehow restore solvency without making sacrifices through higher taxes or lower benefits," Slavov said. "This is simply not true."

What does the White House say about the criticism?

Karoline Leavitt, the White House spokesperson, referred back to the Social Security's inspector general report.

"A previous investigation revealed the SSA paid at least \$71.8 billion in improper payments," she said. "The Social Security Administration is now working to find even more waste, fraud, and abuse in the Administration's whole-of-government effort to protect American taxpayers."

Brazil's former President Bolsonaro has been charged over an alleged coup. What's next for him?

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and ELÉONORE HUGHES Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro has been charged with orchestrating a plot to stay in office despite losing the 2022 election — a plot that the country's top prosecutor says included a plan to poison his opponent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The unprecedented charges handed down on Tuesday accuse the far-right former leader of five crimes, including a coup attempt. Another 33 people linked to Bolsonaro have also been charged.

Bolsonaro, already banned by Brazil's top electoral court to run in elections until 2030 over abuse of power while in office and casting unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system, has denied any wrongdoing and has claimed that he is being politically persecuted.

Here is where Bolsonaro's case now stands and what could happen next:

A plot to stay in power

Bolsonaro's case is now with Brazil's Supreme Court, which will decide whether he will stand trial. If convicted, he could face years behind bars.

Under Brazilian law, coup charges alone carry a penalty of up to 12 years but combined with the other crimes he is charged with, it could all amount to decades in prison.

The charges are based on a police investigation, concluded in November, that accused Bolsonaro of a multi-step scheme to cling to power. Brazil's prosecutor general Paulo Gonet says Bolsonaro headed a criminal organization, active at least since 2021, that disseminated fake news about Brazil's electronic voting system.

According to Gonet, Bolsonaro backed a plan to overturn the election result after his narrow defeat. One point of the plan, dubbed "Green and Yellow dagger," involved poisoning Lula and killing Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes.

Gonet has not elaborated how far the plan evolved.

On Jan. 8, 2023, Bolsonaro's supporters stormed and trashed the Supreme Court, Presidential Palace and Congress in the capital of Brasilia, a week after Lula took office, in a last-ditch attempt to hold onto power, Gonet said.

Bolsonaro, a former military officer who was known to express nostalgia for the country's 1964-1985 dictatorship, had openly defied Brazil's judicial system during his 2019-2022 term in office.

Could Bolsonaro go to prison?

Brazil's Supreme Court will decide whether to put Bolsonaro on trial or send the charges' document back to the prosecutor for clarification or changes — or throw it out altogether.

Two of the top court's 11 justices were appointed by Bolsonaro, but much of his fate will be decided by a 5-judge panel that does not include either judge appointed by Bolsonaro. Its chair is Justice Alexandre de Moraes, whose rulings Bolsonaro once threatened to defy.

There is no deadline for a decision in the case.

The five crimes Bolsonaro is charged with include leading a criminal organization tasked with keeping him in office after his 2022 defeat; trying to abolish the democratic rule of law with violence; attempting a coup; damaging Brazilian state assets and harming the country's heritage. The last two stem from the Brasilia riots.

Bolsonaro's other legal woes

Even if acquitted, Bolsonaro's legal woes won't end there.

Police have also formally accused Bolsonaro of ordering an official to tamper with a public health database to make it appear as though he and his 12-year-old daughter had received the COVID-19 vaccine in order to bypass entry requirements for the United States during the pandemic.

Police also say Bolsonaro ordered officials to smuggle jewelry worth more than a million dollars from

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to Brazil, then attempted to keep the jewels himself instead of having them incorporated in the presidential collection, which is state owned.

The most serious charge against Bolsonaro is the one on the attempted coup. The former president is expected to keep pushing lawmakers to issue a kind of pardon to those involved in the Jan. 8 riot, which legal experts say he sees as a path to get back into the political arena.

Still, several of Bolsonaro's allies insist that he will be on the ballot in next year's presidential election, rather than behind bars.

Federal Reserve officials see risks of higher inflation ahead, support pause in rate cuts

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal Reserve officials at a meeting last month pointed to rising risks that inflation could worsen, a key reason they kept their benchmark interest rate unchanged.

According to minutes of the Jan. 28-29 meeting, which were released Wednesday, Fed officials said that President Donald Trump's proposed tariffs and mass deportations of migrants, as well as strong consumer spending, were factors that could push inflation higher this year.

The Fed's 19 officials who participate in its interest-rate decisions indicated that "they would want to see further progress on inflation before making" any further cuts. They kept the Fed's key rate at 4.3%, after cutting it from a two-decade high of 5.3% late last year. The Fed's pause makes it less likely that borrowing costs for consumers, including for mortgages, auto loans, and credit cards, will decline anytime soon.

Just last week, the government released data that suggested inflation was actually getting worse, leading many economists to forecast just one — if any — rate cut this year. Consumer prices rose 3% in January from a year ago, the Labor Department said, up from a 3 1/2 year low of 2.4% last September. The Fed, however, more closely follows a separate inflation measure that shows inflation is closer to 2.5%.

The minutes also cited a "high degree of uncertainty" surrounding the economy, which made it appropriate for the Fed to "take a careful approach" in considering any further changes to its key interest rate.

All of the Fed's policymakers supported keeping its key rate unchanged last month, the minutes said. The unanimity comes after signs of a growing disagreement in recent months between those officials who supported further rate reductions and those more worried about stubborn inflation.

A key issue, particularly on Wall Street, is how long the Fed's pause on rate cuts will last. Wall Street investors expect the central bank won't cut again until July, according to futures prices. They don't forecast a second cut until 2026.

Many Fed officials have also said they want to see how Trump's proposed tariffs and immigration crack-down affect the economy. Most economists forecast that the tariffs will push up inflation, though some also argue that Trump's promises to reduce regulation could lower consumer prices over time.

On Monday, Fed governor Christopher Waller said in a speech in Australia that he still expects rates to come down this year, but for now he supports a pause.

Waller said that if the inflation uptick last month turns out to be a blip, as it did in January 2024, "rate cuts would be appropriate at some point this year."

Waller also said that he didn't think new tariffs would significantly raise inflation, and added that any increase in prices would likely be temporary. As a result, he said the Fed shouldn't necessarily change its policies because of tariffs.

"I haven't altered my outlook based on what has been implemented to date," he said, referring to Trump's tariff announcements.

Brazil's Bolsonaro slams 'vague' accusations after attempted coup indictment

By ELÉONORE HUGHES Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro on Wednesday dismissed as vague accusations that he orchestrated an attempted coup to stay in office despite his 2022 election defeat and said the charges were the result of an authoritarian regime manufacturing internal enemies.

Prosecutor-General Paulo Gonet on Tuesday charged Bolsonaro with devising a multi-pronged scheme to remain in power despite his loss to current President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, including an alleged plan to poison Lula and shoot dead Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, a foe of the former president.

Lula on Wednesday said the current stage was "only the indictment" and said Bolsonaro and the other 33 people facing charges of plotting a coup would have every right to defend themselves.

Bolsonaro took to X and Instagram saying that "the trick of accusing democratic opposition leaders of plotting coups is not something new."

"Every authoritarian regime, in its lust for power, needs to manufacture internal enemies to justify persecution, censorship and arbitrary arrests," Bolsonaro said. He compared his legal woes with problems faced by opposition leaders in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, all led by left-leaning leaders.

"The playbook is familiar: they fabricate vague accusations, claim to be concerned about democracy or sovereignty, and persecute opponents, silence dissenting voices and concentrate power," Bolsonaro said.

The charges filed against Bolsonaro are based on a Federal Police investigation, concluded in November. In that 884-page report, police described a multi-step scheme, substantiated by evidence and testimony, to keep Bolsonaro in power.

The plan included systematically sowing distrust of the electoral system among the populace, drafting a decree to give the plot a veneer of legal basis, pressuring top military brass to go along with the plan, and inciting a riot in the capital.

Top military personnel's refusal to endorse the coup was essential in its failure, police say.

The prosecutor's report is important "to distinguish between individual conduct and that of the Armed Forces," Brazil's Ministry of Defense said in a statement Wednesday, adding that Minister José Mucio Monteiro believes the charges are another step towards accountability.

Bolsonaro's reaction to the accusations is "a strategy that is part of the political game" that attempts to discredit the report by describing it as political persecution, said Antônio José Teixeira Martins, a law professor at Rio de Janeiro State University. "But the fact is that it is an indictment very much based on facts and legal aspects, dealt with in detail."

Responding to journalists' questions about Tuesday's charges, Lula on Wednesday said that everyone is entitled to the presumption of innocence.

"If they prove that they did not attempt a coup, and if they prove that they did not attempt to kill the president, the vice president and the president of the Supreme Electoral Court, they will be free," Lula said. "If when judges trial they come to the conclusion that they are guilty, they will have to pay for the crime they committed."

Trump administration labels 8 Latin American cartels as 'foreign terrorist organizations'

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MARIA VERZA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration is formally designating eight Latin American crime organizations as "foreign terrorist organizations," upping its pressure on cartels operating in the U.S. and on anyone aiding them.

The move, carrying out a Jan. 20 executive order by President Donald Trump, names Tren de Aragua in Venezuela, MS-13 in El Salvador and six groups based in Mexico. The designation will be published in Thursday's edition of the Federal Register, according to a notice Wednesday.

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Trump, a Republican, has made securing the U.S.-Mexico border among his top priorities, vowing to carry out mass deportations, sending active duty troops to the border and reaching deals with some countries to take in more migrants.

The "foreign terrorist organization" label is unusual because it deploys a terrorist designation normally reserved for groups like al-Qaida or the Islamic State group that use violence for political ends — not for money-focused crime rings such as the Latin American cartels.

The Trump administration argues that the international connections and operations of the groups — including drug trafficking, migrant smuggling and violent pushes to extend their territory — warrant the designation.

Critics of the move call it an unnecessarily broad and harsh one that could damage relations and paralyze trade with Latin America. Businesses, banks and buyers could fear possible U.S. prosecution if they knowingly or unknowingly have any transactions that touch the world of the cartels.

Such cartels permeate Mexico's economy, dealing not only in drug trafficking and migrant smuggling but in fighting for control of the multibillion-dollar avocado business.

Aid groups say some past U.S. designations of groups as foreign terrorist organizations have threatened overall food imports into countries, for example, by making shipping companies fearful that U.S. prosecutors may accuse them of directly or indirectly supporting the targeted groups.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Wednesday before the designations were published that "if that decree has to do with extraterritorial actions (in Mexico), those we do not accept."

But she said Mexico was in agreement on the need to advance joint investigations.

"If they make this decree to investigate even more in the United States the money laundering and the criminal groups that operate in the United States, that carry out those drug sales, it's very good," Sheinbaum said. "What we do not accept is the violation of our sovereignty."

Trump over the years has singled out two of the groups — MS-13 and Tren de Aragua — in political speeches and other appearances.

U.S. authorities say Tren de Aragua poses a threat in various U.S. cities. Trump and his allies have seized on the gang's presence and made it the face of the alleged threat posed by migrants.

In his first term, Trump similarly pointed to the violent street gang MS-13 as a risk of immigration. But it originated in Los Angeles in the 1980s in communities made up largely of refugees from El Salvador's civil war and other immigrants, growing to include many U.S. citizens. The gang is known for brutal violence and street-level drug sales.

The six Mexico-based groups designated as terrorist groups include the Sinaloa cartel, Mexico's oldest criminal group, which traffics drugs, weapons and people.

One of Sinaloa's most lucrative businesses in recent years has been the production of fentanyl, blamed for tens of thousands of overdose deaths each year in the U.S. Sinaloa imports the precursor chemicals from China, produces the drug and smuggles it across the border.

The other cartels targeted by the U.S. are Jalisco New Generation, Gulf, Northeast, La Nueva Familia Michoacana and United.

Senate confirms Kelly Loeffler, former Georgia senator, to lead Small Business Administration

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Senate on Wednesday confirmed Kelly Loeffler, a Georgia businesswoman and former senator, to lead the Small Business Administration, returning a stalwart supporter of President Donald Trump to Washington.

At SBA, Loeffler will oversee the entity that describes itself as the only Cabinet-level federal agency "fully dedicated to small business" by providing "counseling, capital, and contracting expertise as the nation's only go-to resource and voice for small businesses." Typically, the agency — which was founded in

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1953 — offers Economic Injury Disaster Loans to help meet working capital needs caused by a disaster, loans that can be used to pay fixed debts, payroll, accounts payable and other expenses that would have been met if not for the disaster.

The Senate confirmed Loeffler on a 52-46 vote.

Loeffler, who co-chaired Trump's second inaugural committee, served briefly in the U.S. Senate in the final year of the president's first term. Appointing her to the Senate to fill out the term of Johnny Isakson, Georgia GOP Gov. Brian Kemp touted Loeffler as a successor in the Republican's moderate mold. But facing an immediate reelection campaign in 2020, Loeffler hewed closely to Trump to stave off challengers from her right flank, characterizing herself as "more conservative than Attila the Hun."

She and fellow Republican incumbent David Perdue, another Trump ally, advanced to the January 2021 runoff following a November election in which Biden narrowly beat Trump in Georgia. Trump infamously pressured Republican Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find" enough votes to flip the results, then blasted Raffensperger and Kemp for not helping overturn the election.

Loeffler called for Raffensperger's resignation after he certified Biden's victory in the state.

With Loeffler, Perdue and Trump casting doubts on Georgia's election system, and with Trump not on the January runoff ballot, GOP turnout dipped, resulting in Loeffler's defeat to Raphael Warnock and Perdue's loss to Jon Ossoff, one day before Trump supporters ransacked the U.S. Capitol in the Jan. 6 riots.

The Republican losses in Georgia gave Democrats control of the Senate by the slimmest of margins. Trump won Georgia in last year's election, and Loeffler's home state continues to be critical for the fortunes of both the president and his party nationally.

Since her loss to Warnock, Loeffler started a conservative voter registration organization and dove into GOP fundraising, becoming one of the top individual donors and bundlers to Trump's 2024 comeback campaign.

Loeffler's confirmation also adds another Cabinet member of significant wealth to the billionaire president's second administration. Loeffler — a former WNBA owner and executive who during her brief stint on Capitol Hill was the Senate's wealthiest member — is married to Jeffrey Sprecher, CEO of Intercontinental Exchange, the publicly traded firm that owns the New York Stock Exchange.

Learn a few laundry secrets from the baseball pros — the clubhouse staffers who wash MLB uniforms

By JAY COHEN AP Baseball Writer

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (AP) — From the pinstripes of New York all the way to the Dodger blues of Los Angeles, there is a strong connection among the clubhouse staffers who wash the dirt-caked, hard-worn uniforms of the major leagues.

Just like the players who wear the jerseys.

"The clubhouse community is really close," says Riley Halpin, 29, a clubhouse attendant for the San Francisco Giants.

"There's not a guy in the league I don't think that I can't call with a laundry question that won't answer it," says Kiere Bulls, a home clubhouse manager for the Pittsburgh Pirates.

On the eve of another season — as players throw their spring training apparel into hampers on wheels in Arizona and Florida — here is a closer look how laundry is done in the major leagues, along with a few tips for your own dirty uniforms — and other items — at home:

Dirt is worse than grass stains

TEAM: Chicago White Sox

LAUNDERER: Rob Warren, clubhouse manager

TIP: Dirt on uniforms is more difficult to get out than grass stains. When it comes to the biggest laundry challenges, he preaches patience. "We'll throw it in, and then usually check it again," he says. "We'll run it through once and then after that first load is when we kind of do the scrubbing and spraying."

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QUOTABLE: "So we'll get the first load started within 15, 20 minutes after the end of a game," Warren says. "Basically as soon as we have enough to start a load, we'll start a load. Things will change that time. Sometimes a win is quicker or shorter, or you know, getaway day, hopefully quicker."

First, soak it

TEAM: Cleveland Guardians

LAUNDERER: Sam Hindes, home clubhouse supervisor

TIP: Soaking is important. When it comes to tough stains, sometimes they let the uniforms soak overnight in a mixture of detergent and other products. "Then a big thing that works is a lot of people don't know that pressure, like not necessarily a pressure washer, but the higher the pressure on the water, the better it gets stains out," he says. "I never really knew that until I started doing the uniforms."

QUOTABLE: Hindes says position players usually have the dirtiest uniforms — one in particular. "José Ramírez is one that you always know is going to come back that night and it's going to need some work on it," Hindes says. "He has pine tar on his jersey and he's always out there, he's a grinder. He steals bases. He's always diving all over the place. He plays his heart out."

Let that 'pretreat' sit for a bit

TEAM: New York Yankees

LAUNDERER: Lou Cucuzza Jr., director of clubhouse operations

LAUNDRY TIP: It's all about "pretreating" and letting the pretreat treatment soak in for a while. "So if you've got something dirty and you're pretreating it, don't throw it right into the machine because that pretreat's just going to get washed away. You want that pretreat really to soak up that stain and separate the fibers of the uniform or apparel, whatever you're wearing."

QUOTABLE: The clay that surrounds the field differs around the majors, presenting a unique challenge "So we could come off the road or I'll get a team off the road that played, let's say, in Baltimore. They have a tough clay or Boston, their clay is very different than the clay at Yankee Stadium," Cucuzza says. "The clay at Yankee Stadium, I have no problem getting visiting uniforms clean. It's really quick. Sometimes I'll get a team, maybe from Baltimore, and it's like, wow, that's a tough red clay. It's a little hard getting out so it may have to go through two washes to get it out."

Make sure you're using the right solutions

TEAM: Philadelphia Phillies

LAUNDERER: Sean Bowers, home clubhouse assistant

TIP: Using the right chemicals is crucial. Some of the laundry chemicals in big league clubhouses aren't widely available, but Bowers says he likes Goof Off for pine tar stains and detergents with protein release for dirt-related issues.

QUOTABLE: "When the field gets painted, getting the paint out is really tough. Just a regular grass stain I can get out fairly easily. But the paint, especially around opening day or after there's concerts and where the stage was, they have to take care of that part of the field. Those outfielders, it's really difficult to get that out."

Spray, spray and spray again

TEAM: Pittsburgh Pirates

LAUNDERER: Kiere Bulls, home clubhouse manager

TIP: For uniforms (and, presumably, anything else) caked with dirt, Bulls recommends spraying off as much of it as possible before it even goes into the laundry. He has some chemicals that he uses at the ballpark, but he likes OxiClean and Shout for dirt predicaments at home.

QUOTABLE: "There's a lot of times that if a player's real, real bad that it may have to get washed three times just to get the stains out. But the uniforms are hung dry. ... They don't go in the dryer. They just get washed and hung right outside the lockers."

If at first you don't succeed ...

TEAM: San Francisco Giants

LAUNDERER: Riley Halpin, clubhouse attendant

TIP: Halpin says washing uniforms is "a trial-and-error process" much of the time. "Obviously when it

comes to the at-home kind of washing, you don't have these top-of-the-line chemicals that professional teams have," he says. "So I would say just do a little bit of research. ... Find out what the top kind of brands people are using at the Walmarts and stuff like that. And go with it."

QUOTABLE: Halpin says he gets to the ballpark around noon for a typical night game and leaves around 1 a.m. "It's long days. But it's kind of what you sign up for, you know, with this job. And it's super cool just to obviously get to do what we get to do. So we all put up with it."

Trump officials want to ban junk food from SNAP. Past efforts show it's not easy to do

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

A push to ban sugary drinks, candy and more from the U.S. program that helps low-income families pay for nutritious food has been tried before — but it may soon get a boost from new Trump administration officials.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the newly confirmed health and human services secretary, and Brooke Rollins, the new agriculture secretary, have both signaled that they favor stripping such treats from SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Kennedy has been most vocal, calling for the government to stop allowing the nearly \$113 billion program that serves about 42 million Americans to use benefits to pay for "soda or processed foods."

"The one place that I would say that we need to really change policy is the SNAP program and food stamps and in school lunches," Kennedy told Fox News host Laura Ingraham last week. "There, the federal government in many cases is paying for it. And we shouldn't be subsidizing people to eat poison."

In one of her first interviews after being confirmed, Rollins said she looked forward to working with Kennedy on the issue.

"When a taxpayer is putting money into SNAP, are they OK with us using their tax dollars to feed really bad food and sugary drinks to children who perhaps need something more nutritious?" Rollins said. "These are all massive questions we're going to be asking and working on in the coming months and years."

But removing certain foods from SNAP — known for years as food stamps — isn't as simple as it sounds. The program is run by the USDA, not HHS, and is administered through individual states. It is authorized by the federal Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, which says SNAP benefits can be used for "any food or food product intended for human consumption," except alcohol, tobacco and hot foods, including those prepared for immediate consumption.

Excluding any foods would require Congress to change the law — or for states to get waivers that would let them restrict purchases, said Katie Bergh, a senior policy analyst for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research group. Over the past 20 years, lawmakers in several states have proposed stopping SNAP from paying for bottled water, soda, chips, ice cream, decorated cakes and "luxury meats" like steak.

"None of those requests have ever been approved under either Republican or Democratic presidents," Bergh said.

In the past, Agriculture Department officials rejected the waivers, saying in a 2007 paper that no clear standards exist to define foods "as good or bad, or healthy or not healthy." In addition, the agency said restrictions would be difficult to implement, complicated and costly. And they might not change recipients' food purchases or reduce conditions such as obesity.

Anti-hunger advocates point to research that shows SNAP recipients are no more likely than other low-income Americans to buy sugary drinks or snack foods. And they say that limiting food choices undermines the autonomy and dignity of people who receive, on average, about \$187 per month — or about \$6.16 per day, according to latest figures.

"This is just another way to cut benefits," said Gina Plata-Nino, a deputy director at the Food Research and Action Center, a nonprofit advocacy group. "It's like, how do we restrict people more? How do we stigmatize them more?"

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Bills are pending in Congress and in several states to restrict SNAP benefits from paying for soda, candy and other items.

Rep. Josh Breechan, an Oklahoma Republican, sponsored the Healthy SNAP Act.

"If someone wants to buy junk food on their own dime, that's up to them," he said. "But what we're saying is, 'Don't ask the taxpayer to pay for it and then also expect the taxpayer to pick up the tab for the resulting health consequences.'"

One SNAP recipient said she uses her monthly \$291 benefit to buy necessities such as meat, oil, milk and coffee. Martina Santos, 66, of New York City, supplements those foods with fresh vegetables and fruits from a pantry run by the West Side Campaign Against Hunger, where she's also a volunteer. Because she has diabetes and other health conditions, she said she understands the importance of using the benefits only for nutritious options.

"For me, SNAP is to be used toward healthy food to get people to avoid all the disease they're having around right now: obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure," Santos said.

In Kansas and elsewhere, bills that would ban soft drinks and candy highlight some of the challenges of such changes.

Several pending bills seek to keep SNAP from paying for soft drinks, but they would continue to allow drinks containing milk, milk alternatives like soy or almond milk, or drinks with more than 50% vegetable or fruit juice. Candy is characterized as any unrefrigerated, flourless preparation of "sugar, honey or other natural or artificial sweeteners in combination with chocolate, fruits, nuts or other ingredients or flavorings in the form of bars, drops or pieces."

By that definition, Kit Kat and Twix bars, which contain flour, wouldn't be banned. And juices that contain high amounts of sugar, but are more than half fruit juice by volume, would be allowed.

Such conundrums have stymied changes to the SNAP program for decades. But this moment could be different, said Dr. Anand Parekh, chief medical officer of the Bipartisan Policy Center, a think tank based in Washington, D.C.

The momentum behind Kennedy's "Make America Healthy Again" movement could spur a new focus on solutions to poor diets that account for leading risk factors for early disease and death.

"When we talk about the SNAP program, we have to remind people that the 'N' stands for nutrition," Parekh said. "It's about time that both parties can come together and see what are the innovations here to improve diet quality and nutrition."

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.

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

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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 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

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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 Digicono-mist, 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.

Trump moves swiftly on his agenda in a departure from his 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 Democratic 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 as though 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 filled leadership positions with loyalists, 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.

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Trump said that he wasn't involved in the decision to drop the case against Adams, but he's previously said that the Democratic 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."

Today in History: February 20

John Glenn becomes first American to orbit the Earth

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Feb. 20, the 51st day of 2025. There are 314 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 20, 1962, astronaut John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth as he flew aboard Project Mercury's Friendship 7 spacecraft, which circled the globe three times in a flight lasting 4 hours, 55 minutes and 23 seconds before splashing down safely in the Atlantic Ocean about 200 miles northwest of Puerto Rico.

Also on this date:

In 1792, President George Washington signed an act creating the United States Post Office Department, the predecessor of the U.S. Postal Service.

In 1862, William Wallace Lincoln, the 11-year-old son of President Abraham Lincoln and first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, died at the White House from what was believed to be typhoid fever.

In 1905, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, upheld, 7-2, compulsory vaccination laws intended to protect the public's health.

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt signed an immigration act which excluded "idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons," among others, from being admitted to the United States.

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In 1939, more than 20,000 people attended rally held by the German American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization, at New York's Madison Square Garden.

In 1965, America's Ranger 8 spacecraft crashed into the moon's surface, as planned, after sending back thousands of pictures of the lunar surface.

In 1998, American Tara Lipinski became the youngest-ever Olympic figure skating gold medalist when she won the ladies' title at the Nagano (NAH'-guh-noh) Olympic Winter Games; American Michelle Kwan won the silver.

In 2003, a fire sparked by pyrotechnics broke out during a concert by the rock group Great White at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, killing 100 people and injuring over 200 others.

Today's birthdays: Racing Hall of Famer Roger Penske is 88. Hockey Hall of Famer Phil Esposito is 83. Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., is 83. Film director Mike Leigh is 82. Actor Brenda Blethyn is 79. Actor Sandy Duncan is 79. Newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst is 71. Basketball Hall of Famer Charles Barkley is 62. Model Cindy Crawford is 59. Actor Andrew Shue is 58. Actor Lili Taylor is 58. Singer Brian Littrell (Backstreet Boys) is 50. Actor Lauren Ambrose is 47. Actor Jay Hernandez is 47. MLB pitcher Justin Verlander is 42. Comedian-TV host Trevor Noah is 41. Actor Miles Teller is 38. Singer Rihanna is 37. Singer-actor Olivia Rodrigo is 22.