

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Thursday, March 6

Senior Menu: New England Ham Dinner, carrots, Mandarin Orange salad, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Ballroom Breakfast Pizza.  
School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.  
Girls SoDak16 Basketball  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

## Friday, March 7

### WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hotdish, mixed vegetables, baked apples, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Confidential Egg Wraps.  
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.  
Region 1A Boys. Basketball  
End of Third Quarter

## Saturday, March 8

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**

## Good Morning

### It's Thankful Thursday

May this Thankful Thursday bring you peace, joy, and a heart full of gratitude. Take a moment to count your blessings and embrace the beauty of today.

Lord, we are  
so grateful for  
everything!

*Amen*



## Sunday, March 9

### SPRING FORWARD - Turn Clocks ahead 1 hour

Open Gym: 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.  
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.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/Milestones for 7th and 8th graders, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.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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Newsweek

The  
**Bulletin**

YOUR DAILY BRIEFING OF  
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

## WORLD IN BRIEF

Trump's speech to Congress: Laughter broke out from Democrats in the House chamber on Tuesday as President Trump said that "unelected bureaucrats" no longer control the government.

DOGE Stimulus Check requirements: James Fishback, CEO of the Azoria investment firm, created a template of sorts for how the stimulus checks would be distributed.

Trump doubles down on plan for Gaza: The United States has rejected a \$53 billion Arab reconstruction plan for Gaza set out as an alternative to President Trump's proposal to take over the strip and remove its Palestinian inhabitants to create a "Gaza Riviera".

Russia troops killed in HIMARS strike: Approximately 30 Russian soldiers were killed in a Ukrainian cluster munitions strike on a training ground in the country's southeastern Kherson region, according to a Ukrainian regiment.

US sends warship to South Pacific: A United States warship was deployed in the South Pacific Ocean as a Chinese naval flotilla continued its circumnavigation of Australia, a major American ally in the region.

Medvedev makes Russia's plan clear: Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia, said Moscow's "main task today" remains "inflicting maximum defeat" on Ukraine.

What if Social Security collapses in 30 days? Recent developments have raised alarms about the stability of Social Security benefits. Significant budgetary measures targeting the Social Security Administration could potentially disrupt benefit payments to millions of Americans.

## Northern State Women Sit Ninth in Third NCAA Regional Ranking Release

Indianapolis – In the third and final NCAA Regional Rankings prior to Sunday’s selection show Northern State University women’s basketball team dropped one spot to No. 9. Northern holds both an in-region and Division II record of 19-10 in this week’s release which includes games played through Sunday.

The NSIC, the Great American Conference (GAC) and the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) make up the 41-team NCAA Central Region in 2024-25. The top eight teams in the region advance to the NCAA Regional Tournament on March 14-17. Automatic bids are granted to the winners of the NSIC, GAC and MIAA postseason tournaments, with the remaining five spots being awarded on an at-large basis.

The NCAA Women’s Basketball Selection Show is on Sunday, March 9 at 9:30 p.m. (CT). The NCAA Elite Eight will take place on March 24, 26, 28 at UMPC Cooper Fieldhouse in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

### Central Region Rankings

Rank		DII Rec	In-Region Rec
1	Pittsburg State	25-3	25-1
2	Concordia-St. Paul	27-2	27-2
3	Fort Hays State	24-3	23-3
4	Missouri Western	19-8	19-6
5	Minnesota State Mankato	22-6	21-5
6	Southern Nazarene	22-6	22-6
7	Southwest Minnesota State	24-3	24-3
8	Nebraska-Kearney	17-8	17-8
9	Northern State	19-10	19-10
10	Harding	21-6	20-6

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## GROTON AREA TIGERS BASEBALL VARSITY 2025

<b>DATE</b>	<b>OPPONENT</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>TIME</b>
April 6	Redfield Area/Hitchcock-Tulare	Redfield	2:00pm
April 7	Madison/Chester	Madison	7:00pm
April 13	Oldham-Ramona-Rutland/Arlington	Clark	TBD
April 16	Faulton Area/Miller/Highmore- Harrold/Wolsey-Wessington/Wessington Springs	Miller	6:00pm
<b>April 25</b>	<b>Warner/Ipswich/Northwestern/Frederick</b>	<b>Groton</b>	<b>5:30pm</b>
April 27	Howard	Canova	2:00pm
<b>April 30</b>	<b>Sioux Valley</b>	<b>Groton</b>	<b>6:00pm</b>
<b>May 4</b>	<b>Elkton</b>	<b>Groton</b>	<b>2:00pm</b>
	<b>Clark/Willow Lake/Hamlin/Castlewood</b>		<b>6:00pm</b>
<b>May 11</b>	<b>Sisseton-Britton-Webster</b>	<b>Groton</b>	<b>2:00pm</b>
May 21	Regional Tournament	Highest 2 Seeds	TBD
May 26-27	State B Tournament	Brookings	TBD

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## GROTON AREA TIGERS BASEBALL JV 2025

<b>DATE</b>	<b>OPPONENT</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>TIME</b>
April 6	Redfield/Hitchcock-Tulare	Redfield	4:00pm
April 13	Sisseton-Britton-Webster	Sisseton	2:00 (DH)
April 14	Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern- Frederick	Northville	5:30pm (DH)
April 16	Faulkton Area/Miller/Highmore- Harrold/Wolsey Wessington/ Wessington Springs	Miller	8:00pm
April 25	Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern- Frederick	Groton	7:30pm
May 11	Sisseton-Britton-Webster	Groton	TBD
TBD	JV Triangular	Groton	TBD (DH)



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **SD House defeats bill requiring 'forever chemical' labels on firefighting gear**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 5, 2025 5:27 PM**

PIERRE — Legislation that would have required protective firefighting equipment purchased by fire departments in South Dakota to be labeled with its "forever chemical" status failed Wednesday in the state House of Representatives.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) have been used in industry and consumer products since the 1940s and don't break down easily in the environment or in the human body. The chemicals can be found in everything from firefighting foam to thermal and water-resistant clothing to soil and water. Research indicates PFAS exposure may be linked to negative developmental and reproductive effects, and an increased risk of some cancers.

The federal government finalized phased-in limits on some types of PFAS in drinking water earlier this year. PFAS has been found in preliminary testing of Mount Rushmore drinking water and in the Big Sioux River.

Senate Bill 163 would have required South Dakota fire departments' future purchases of coats, coveralls, footwear, gloves, helmets, hoods and trousers to have a permanent label from the manufacturer identifying whether the material includes PFAS.

Occupational cancer is the leading cause of line-of-duty death in the fire service, and the International Association of Firefighters attributes 66% of firefighter deaths between 2002 and 2019 to cancer.

Rep. David Kull, R-Brandon, carried the bill on the House floor, saying that the legislation would send a message to companies to develop PFAS-free gear and protect South Dakota firefighters from increased cancer risks.

The National Fire Protection Association, a nonprofit organization that develops and publishes safety codes and standards, issued new standards in August 2024. The standards require manufacturer-suppliers of firefighting safety gear to test their materials for some types of PFAS.

Lawmakers who spoke against the bill largely cited opposition from local fire chiefs, saying the legislation would amount to government overreach by the state. The state Department of Public Safety and the South Dakota Joint Fire Council opposed the legislation during its committee hearing.

"We're going to make them spend more money on things that they could buy cheaper because it doesn't have a label," said Rep. Kevin Van Diepen, R-Huron, "and we're going to force them to do this."

The House voted 57-13 to defeat the legislation.

*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.*

## Governor prevails in dispute over penalties for supervisors who stay silent on misdeeds

**With disagreement settled, attorney general's anti-corruption package continues to advance**

**BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 5, 2025 5:09 PM**

South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden's preferred version of a bill to punish supervisors who hide misbehavior by state employees is headed to his desk.

Senate Bill 62 is part of a legislative package from Attorney General Marty Jackley as a response to a host of state employee malfeasance cases since last summer.

On Wednesday at the state Capitol, the Senate voted 20-14 to agree with Rhoden-supported changes applied to the bill earlier by the state House of Representatives.

Jackley wanted supervisors who fail to report employee misdeeds to face felony charges – even if the misdeeds in question amounted to misdemeanor crimes.

The bill's basic outlines were broadly popular in both chambers, but the clause on felonies for supervisors proved divisive. Rhoden's lobbyists unsuccessfully pushed to reduce the penalty for supervisors to a misdemeanor in both the House and Senate judiciary committees. Senators narrowly rejected an effort to do the same during SB 62's first appearance on the floor in that chamber.

Earlier this week, the House voted 38-31 to go Rhoden's way.

The Senate was asked Wednesday to concur. Senators could've appointed a conference committee in hopes of hammering out the differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill.

A handful of senators, including Pierre Republican Jim Mehlhaff, wanted to restore Jackley's preferences and hoped a conference committee could pull that off.

"This was an unfriendly amendment," Mehlhaff said of the House's actions.

The majority of his colleagues, however, decided against another volley.

"I'm not sure a conference committee will resolve this, and I'd like to be done with this today," said Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs.

Jackley filed at least five criminal cases against former state employees last year, for allegations ranging from faked food-service health inspections to \$1.8 million of embezzlement from a state department.

His package of anti-corruption legislation includes other bills that would expand the investigatory authority of the state auditor, strengthen the Board of Internal Controls, and establish protections for whistleblowers. Each bill has passed both chambers, with some pending amendments made by one chamber or the other.

Jackley issued a statement Wednesday praising the Legislature for approving the package.

"I remain convinced that there must be significant consequences when a government supervisor does not report a crime or government misbehavior," Jackley said. "The number of cases in the last year demonstrates that such crimes should be charged as a felony, not a misdemeanor. The Legislature thought differently, and I respect its decision."

*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.*

## For Indian Country, federal cuts decimate core tribal programs

BY: ALEX BROWN, STATELINE - MARCH 5, 2025 10:54 AM

President Donald Trump's sweeping cuts to the federal workforce and government spending have reverberated across Indian Country, leaving tribes with deep uncertainty about their health clinics, schools, police agencies and wildfire crews.

Native officials say the cuts could hit a vast array of core public services in tribal communities — even though the federal government is legally required to provide those services.

"These are real jobs that our society depends on. These are cops, nurses in clinics, people who manage our forests and fisheries," said W. Ron Allen, chairman of the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe in Washington state and a longtime leader on Native sovereignty issues.

"You can't just come in with a chainsaw and slash everything and think you can get away with undermining this [responsibility]."

Allen, like many tribal leaders, flew to Washington, D.C., last week to lobby federal officials to change course. Tribal experts note that the cuts will be felt far beyond reservation boundaries.

"This is going to destroy whole regional economies in rural areas around the country," said Matthew Fletcher, an Indian law professor at the University of Michigan and a member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians.

The federal government's unique role in supporting tribal services is not an act of generosity. It's a legal mandate based on treaty rights guaranteed to tribal nations in exchange for conceding land. Tribes across the country signed nearly 400 treaties in the 18th and 19th centuries, and modern legal efforts have reaffirmed the feds' obligation to uphold those promises.

In addition to the specific rights outlined in those treaties, the federal government also must uphold its trust responsibility to tribes — a legal obligation under which the United States must protect tribal sovereignty and provide basic social services for tribal nations.

Many legal experts say the Trump administration's efforts to gut federal agencies and cut off funds to Native communities likely violate the government's obligations. Tribal leaders have called on Trump to reverse the cuts — and earned at least one reprieve last month when Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. verbally rescinded layoffs at the Indian Health Service.

"There's certainly a lot of trepidation in Indian Country because so many tribal programs rely on federal funding," said Gussie Lord, managing attorney of the Tribal Partnerships Program with Earthjustice, an environmental law group. "These are absolutely legal obligations based on the federal trust responsibility."

Some tribal observers also fear that Trump's administration could roll back regulations that allow tribes to protect their water quality. That's imperative for tribal members whose diet features high amounts of traditional foods such as salmon and wild rice.

Meanwhile, Trump has pledged to block funding for DEI programs — efforts to boost diversity, equity and inclusion. Tribes told Stateline they have been warned by federal agency insiders that many of their grants could be at risk. Native leaders are pushing Trump officials to acknowledge that the feds' relationship with tribes is based on their status as sovereign nations, not racial preference.

Tribes are still working to understand how their communities will be affected, and many tribal nations and organizations did not respond to interview requests. Some observers have noted that Trump's penchant for targeting his political enemies may make some officials wary of putting their tribe in the crosshairs by speaking out publicly.

Officials at the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Education did not respond to interview requests.

### Health care

When Trump announced a freeze on all government grant funding in late January, the Seattle Indian Health Board found it had been locked out of its payment management system. The community health center serves thousands of patients and offers a variety of services; more than half of its expenses are



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reimbursed from federal money.

Judges have since blocked Trump's move to freeze the funding. The health center is now able to access the payment system during brief windows, officials there said. The organization is managing so far, leaders said, but they fear the worst is yet to come.

"The looming threat that our resources will get cut off again is terrifying," said Esther Lucero, the board's president and CEO, who is of Diné (Navajo) descent. "We're operating with very little confidence."

Lucero said the health center is concerned it will lose federal funding to construct a planned 92-bed residential treatment facility. The group has halted its work on multiple construction projects — including a clinic and housing project — based on fears that federal money will disappear.

The Seattle Indian Health Board has enough reserves to maintain services for about four months if its federal support were to be cut altogether, she said. But Lucero noted that many tribal clinics and organizations are run directly by the Indian Health Service, making them even more vulnerable to cuts.

In mid-February, 950 staffers at the Indian Health Service were told they were being laid off. A coalition of Native organizations raised the alarm, sending a letter to the feds that the cuts would have "life and death" consequences, according to ICT, a news service formerly known as Indian Country Today that covers Indigenous issues. The letter noted that 214 tribal nations receive direct care from the agency.

Hours later, Kennedy said that the layoffs had been rescinded, telling the news outlet in a written statement that IHS, long the "redheaded stepchild" of the federal health bureaucracy, would be a "priority" during Trump's second term.

While tribal groups were relieved at the sudden reversal, experts say the prospect of cuts at the agency remains a major threat.

"IHS is already underfunded," said Dean Seneca, an epidemiologist and member of the Seneca Nation who spent years working for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support. Seneca now runs his own private firm. "Any kind of cut to the IHS would literally cripple the agency. There will be tribes that won't be able to provide services."

## Education

Trump's cuts also have targeted schools serving tribal members. Education, like health care, is part of the federal government's legal trust responsibility to Native people. The federal Bureau of Indian Education operates 55 elementary and secondary schools, while funding another 128 schools that are managed by tribes.

The agency also operates a university and community college, which were hit hardest by the layoffs. Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas, which had roughly 160 employees, saw more than a quarter of its staff get cut.

Dalton Henry, the interim president of the school's Board of Regents, shared with Stateline a letter he sent to federal leaders. The cuts, he argued, would "have disastrous consequences for fulfilling its educational mission," noting that Haskell exists to uphold the government's legal trust responsibility to Native people.

"We desperately need to get this fixed," said Ahniwake Rose, president and CEO of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, which advocates for tribal colleges. "We already have students that are questioning staying out the rest of the semester."

Rose said the cuts have thrown Haskell, as well as the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute in New Mexico, into chaos. Overnight, the schools lost numerous instructors, safety personnel, cafeteria workers and coaches when the layoffs came down last month.

Meanwhile, staffers at K-12 schools run by the federal agency have had a \$1 purchase limit placed on their work credit cards, she said, making it impossible for them to buy supplies.

Federal funding cuts have also crippled a science and health program at Northern Arizona University that was largely made up of Indigenous students, Cronkite News reported. The program, which is now in danger of shutting down, was targeted due to Trump's ban on DEI funds, although it did not exclusively serve Native students.

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## Environment

During President Joe Biden's term in the White House, federal agencies adopted new regulations to ensure that environmental standards protected tribes' rights to hunt, fish and harvest. The feds also moved in recent years to bolster tribes' ability to set their own water quality standards and weigh in on federal permitting decisions.

Ken Norton, a top environmental official with the Hoopa Valley Tribe in California, said the tribe had a strong relationship with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's local project officer when Biden was in the White House. Following the cuts to federal staff, they've had no communication from the EPA.

"Where is your contingency plan, and who are our contacts?" Norton said in an interview. "You left us in the dark. This is a breach of your trust responsibility to tribes."

Norton also chairs the National Tribal Water Council, a tribal advocacy group. He said some EPA officials have quietly warned tribal leaders that Trump loyalists are using artificial intelligence to single out Clean Water Act grant proposals that include terms such as "climate change" or "environmental injustice."

Trump is also attempting to dismantle the National Environmental Policy Act, a keystone law that requires environmental reviews of major projects that need federal permits. Norton said the act is crucial for protecting natural resources in Indian Country.

"They're dismantling these regulatory agencies — reducing the staffing, reducing the funding, chipping away at the regulatory authorities — until they become nonfunctional," Norton said.

Trump said last week that he intends to cut 65% of EPA staff.

Lord, the Earthjustice attorney, said the cuts could particularly hurt tribal water treatment facilities.

"Any cuts there, even 10 or 15%, could potentially be devastating and have long term effects on water quality," she said.

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs has lost 118 employees as a result of Trump's cuts, ICT reported. The agency supports a vast array of tribal programs including energy development, natural resources, law enforcement and irrigation.

Meanwhile, U.S. House Democrats on the Natural Resources Committee said that Trump's administration is planning to close more than a quarter of the agency's offices, covering 25 locations.

The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Washington state depend on the BIA to provide support during wildfire season, and for funding to hire the tribe's own firefighters. Trump's freeze on federal hiring has halted the onboarding process for those staffers.

"A lot of the funding we do get comes from federal appropriations," said Chairman Jarred-Michael Erickson. "It's a big concern. We're not only worried about it from a fire standpoint, but health care, law enforcement, education."

The funding freeze also affected a federal grant to install 112 electric vehicle chargers in Cherokee Nation communities in Oklahoma. Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr., in a statement to Stateline, said the cut would be a major setback for the regional economy if the funds are not restored. He said the tribe is still evaluating the full effects of the federal cuts, and is concerned about their impact on schools, housing funds and BIA programs.

## Other programs

Meanwhile, tribal leaders warn that Trump's efforts to cut national programs, such as Medicaid and the Department of Veterans Affairs, will have a disproportionate effect in tribal communities.

Nearly a fifth of Native Americans and Alaska Natives were covered by Medicaid as of 2020, according to the National Council of Urban Indian Health.

Last week, the Department of Veterans Affairs paused cuts to billions of dollars in contracts after significant public backlash. The cuts would have affected programs including cancer care and toxic exposure assessments, The Associated Press reported. Prior to the contracts dispute, the VA also cut more than 1,000 employees due to Trump's staffing reductions.

Native Americans serve in the military at higher rates than any other group, leaving them particularly

vulnerable to cuts to veterans care.

Tribal leaders are also concerned that Trump's ongoing efforts to slash DEI programs could mistakenly target funding for Native communities.

"A lot of people who object to Indian affairs just straight-up think it's racial preferences," said Fletcher, the Indian law professor. "It's not DEI at all, but that doesn't mean the Trump administration won't go after it that way."

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

## **COMMENTARY**

### **Laughing at this year's silly season of legislation**

**South Dakota lawmakers file bills to repeal the seat belt law, defund a school district and lock up librarians**

**by Dana Hess**

In 2016 I was in my first year of covering the legislative session for the South Dakota Newspaper Association. During the course of my work there, I was struck by how good-humored legislators were as they went about making laws. I started to keep a place in the back of my notebook where I wrote down their quips and asides. Eventually that collection resulted in a decent feature story.

As I look back on that story, I see that one of the most frequent jokers was Lt. Gov. Matt Michels, who is once again in Pierre serving in Gov. Larry Rhoden's administration. Welcoming Pierre fifth-graders in the Senate gallery, Michels asked his colleagues, "Are we smarter than a fifth grader?" Opening debate on a bill that would put South Dakota permanently on daylight saving time, Michels asked, "Does anybody really know what time it is?"

Somehow that feature got dropped the next year, and the subsequent years I was in Pierre. Maybe I got lazy. Maybe lawmakers weren't funny anymore. Maybe they were sticking all their humor into the bills that they filed. There sure have been a few this year that have been worth a chuckle.

#### **First, let's go ahead and unbuckle those seat belts**

Mercifully killed in committee early in the session, House Bill 1065 would have repealed the state's seat belt law. Never mind the years of statistics that show that seat belts save lives. Never mind that if the state were to ever rescind the seat belt law, it stands to lose millions of dollars in federal highway funds.

None of that mattered to the bill's sponsor, Rep. Dylan Jordan, a Clear Lake Republican. In a story by The Dakota Scout, Jordan told the House Transportation Committee that the state's seat belt law was a matter of government overreach that took away his personal freedom.

Jordan's rationale was that South Dakotans would buckle up anyway. "We don't need the government to tell us how to protect ourselves. We can do that on our own."

That kind of logic could lead to more legislation that drops the age requirements for consuming alcohol. Thirsty 18-year-olds would probably recognize the need for public safety and refuse to consume any alcohol until they were 21.

#### **While we're at it, let's defund the Huron School District**

It's not often when a piece of legislation angers so many people that it's withdrawn by the sponsor before it gets a hearing and causes the sponsor to lose the vice chairmanship of a committee in the process.

That's what happened to Rep. Phil Jensen when the Rapid City Republican sponsored HB 1224, a bill that called for defunding the Huron School District.

The bill didn't include any reason for the defunding, though Jensen said he had heard bad things about the school's bathroom policy for transgender students. It seems that the only way to bring the school

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district in line was to take away its state funding.

A bill that empowers people to file lawsuits against schools when students use the wrong bathroom is working its way through the Legislature. Jensen might still be vice-chairman of the House Education Committee if that bill had been filed before his. (Jensen, by the way, is on the House Transportation Committee and was one of two representatives to vote for abolishing the seat belt law.)

## Then let's lead away a few librarians in handcuffs

HB 1239 would have librarians face arrest and jail time if they allow youngsters to view material that's defined by state law as obscene or harmful to minors. According to at least one lawmaker on the House Education Committee, arrest is too good for them if they let kids see the naughty bits.

"If a librarian rented this out to my son or daughter, you'd be lucky if you got hauled out in handcuffs," Rep. Travis Ismay, a Newell Republican, was quoted as saying in a South Dakota Searchlight story. "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?"

"Librarians in handcuffs" sounds like the title of a book that Ismay wouldn't want his kids to read.

State law has a long legal definition of what's obscene. However, obscenity is too often in the eye of the beholder, leaving librarians open to accusations of providing improper material to minors for a whole range of books. If HB 1239 becomes law, it may be safer for librarians to insist that every child who checks out a book is accompanied by a parent.

Librarians have been fighting off book banning nationwide. Often those bans are aimed at books for young readers. While HB 1239 doesn't ban any books, it still puts a bullseye on librarians, making them the likely target of anyone who's disgruntled enough to want to make trouble in the name of protecting children.

There has to come a time when legislation isn't required for every facet of life. Lawmakers should leave highway safety, school bathroom policies and library check-out rules to the professionals in those fields. There used to be a time when Republicans were for smaller government and not nitpicking every decision made by someone else.

(By the way, Jensen is still on the House Education Committee. He was one of 10 committee members who voted in favor of HB 1239.)

*Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.*

## U.S. Supreme Court sides against Trump in legal fight over \$2B in frozen foreign aid

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 5, 2025 11:38 AM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered the Trump administration to continue payments on \$2 billion in foreign aid that had been frozen, overturning an administrative stay that Chief Justice John Roberts entered in late February.

Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Clarence Thomas dissented with the ruling. Alito wrote that he was "stunned" by the decision to let a district court judge's temporary restraining order stand while the case moves forward.

"Today, the Court makes a most unfortunate misstep that rewards an act of judicial hubris and imposes a \$2 billion penalty on American taxpayers," Alito wrote. "The District Court has made plain its frustration with the Government, and respondents raise serious concerns about nonpayment for completed work. But the relief ordered is, quite simply, too extreme a response."

The Supreme Court's order, which isn't signed by any of the justices, called on the district court to "clarify what obligations the Government must fulfill to ensure compliance with the temporary restraining order, with due regard for the feasibility of any compliance timelines." It represented the first time the high court

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has weighed in on a major element of one of the many cases filed against the Trump administration.

The other justices are Roberts, Elena Kagan, Sonia Sotomayor, Amy Coney Barrett and Ketanji Brown Jackson.

Judge Amir H. Ali of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia, who is overseeing the case, AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition v. Department of State, has scheduled a hearing on the request for a preliminary injunction for Thursday.

A preliminary injunction generally would have a longer period of time in place than a temporary restraining order.

## Programs authorized by Congress

American Civil Liberties Union Executive Director Anthony D. Romero released a written statement that the district court "rightly held that President Trump exceeded his authority when he unilaterally declared he was freezing funding for programs Congress had already authorized, stiffing federal contractors who had already done work."

"We're pleased to see the Supreme Court uphold the Constitution and act as an essential check on the executive branch in this case brought by Public Citizen," Romero wrote.

"What happens next is critical," he added. "The Trump administration has a constitutional duty to comply with this order. At its core, this is a case about checks and balances and the rule of law."

## Alito dissent

Alito wrote in his dissent the district court's temporary restraining order, which called on the Trump administration to continue payment on that foreign aid while the case proceeded, should be treated as a preliminary injunction.

"A TRO, as its name suggests, is 'temporary,' and its proper role is to 'restrain' challenged conduct for a short time while the court considers whether more lasting relief is warranted," Alito wrote. "The order here, which commanded the payment of a vast sum that in all likelihood can never be fully recovered, is in no sense 'temporary.' Nor did the order merely 'restrain' the Government's challenged action in order to 'preserve the status quo.'"

Alito wrote the Trump administration was "likely to suffer irreparable harm if the District Court's order," requiring the \$2 billion in foreign aid payments to be paid out for completed work, was allowed to stand.

But, Alito also wrote that the organizations that brought the lawsuit would have experienced "serious" repercussions under the Trump administration's halt to billions in foreign aid payments for already completed work.

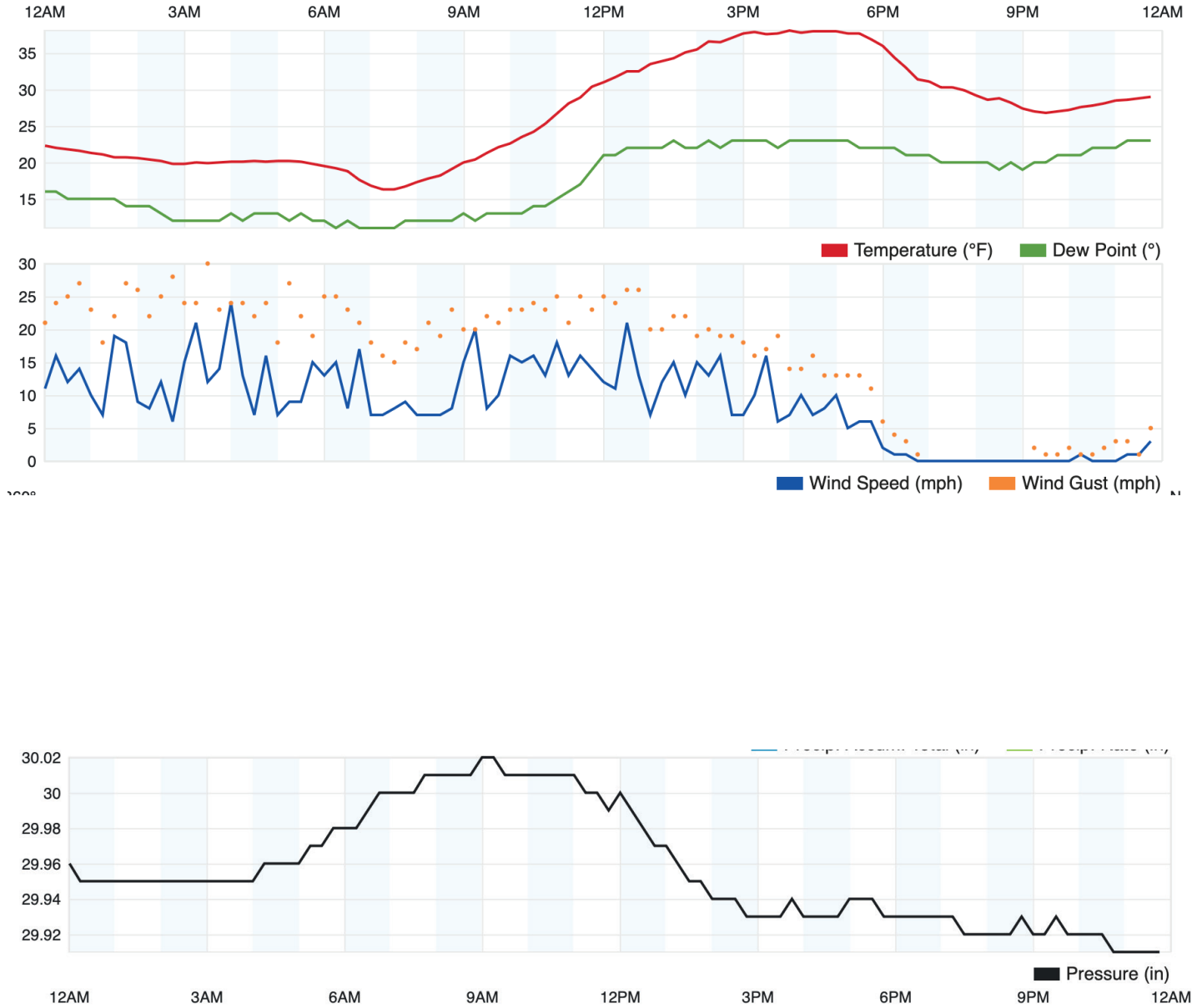
"They contend that the failure to pay the money in question would cause them irreparable harm because without those funds, they could not continue to operate or would have to reduce the work they do," Alito wrote. "As a result, they claim, recipients of their services would suffer. These potential consequences are, of course, serious."

*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



# Groton Daily Independent

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Today



High: 42 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 17 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Friday



High: 48 °F

Sunny

Friday Night



Low: 25 °F

Mostly Clear

Saturday



High: 55 °F

Mostly Sunny

**Thursday** Highs: 35-43°  
Lows: 15-24°  
Light snow across South central SD

**Friday** Highs: 42-50°  
Lows: 23-26°

**Saturday** Highs: 50-57°  
Lows: 28-35°

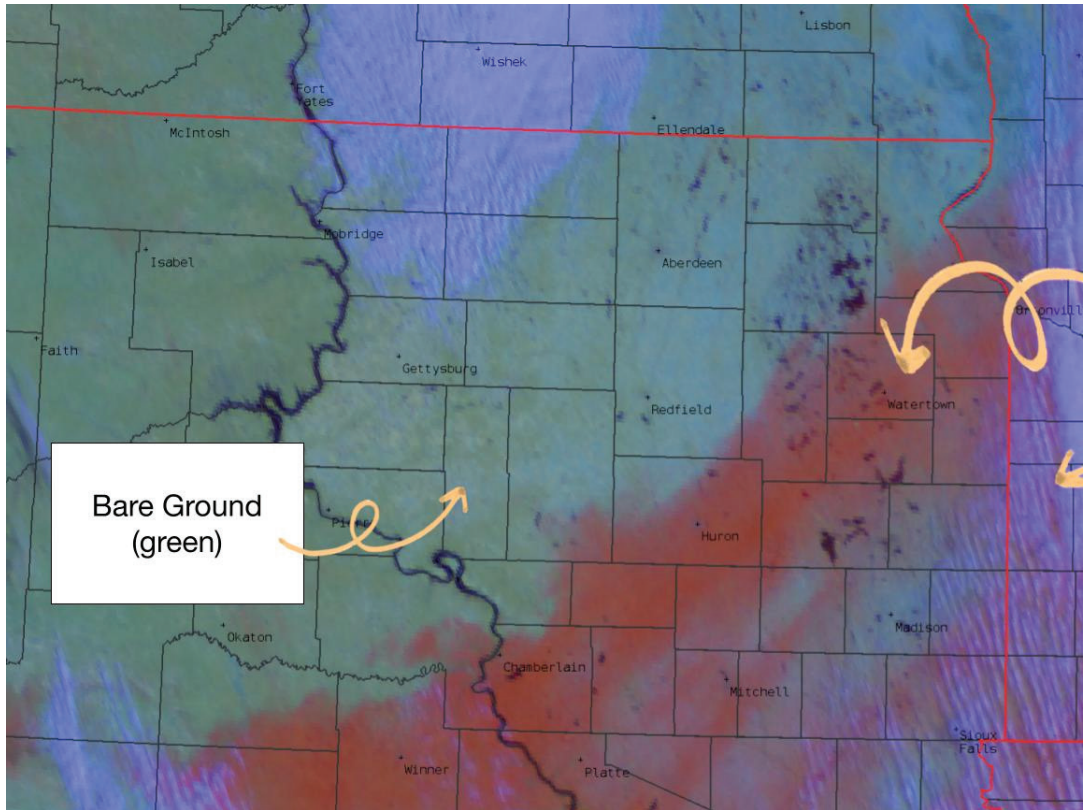
**Sunday** Highs: 59-65°

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD  
March 6, 2025 3:56 AM

Temperatures will start to warm through the end of the work week into the weekend, as other than some light snow late Thursday afternoon into the evening over south central SD, precipitation stays out of central and eastern SD. The snow will move out of south central SD by Friday morning, with snow accumulations staying less than an inch.

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## Lingering Snow Seen on Satellite

Snow cover from yesterday's snow band (red)

Remaining clouds (purple)

Aberdeen, SD



On satellite, we can see the snow left behind from yesterday's banded snow event. The red area is the snow, the purple is remaining clouds (that will continue to move east through the day), and the green is bare ground. Some reports from around the area include: 8.1" in Watertown, 5" 2.3 E of Watertown, and 2.4" in Castlewood.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38 °F at 5:00 PM

Low Temp: 11 °F at 6:15 AM

Wind: 25 mph at 5:15 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 29 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 69 in 2000

Record Low: -16 in 1899

Average High: 36

Average Low: 15

Average Precip in March.: 0.14

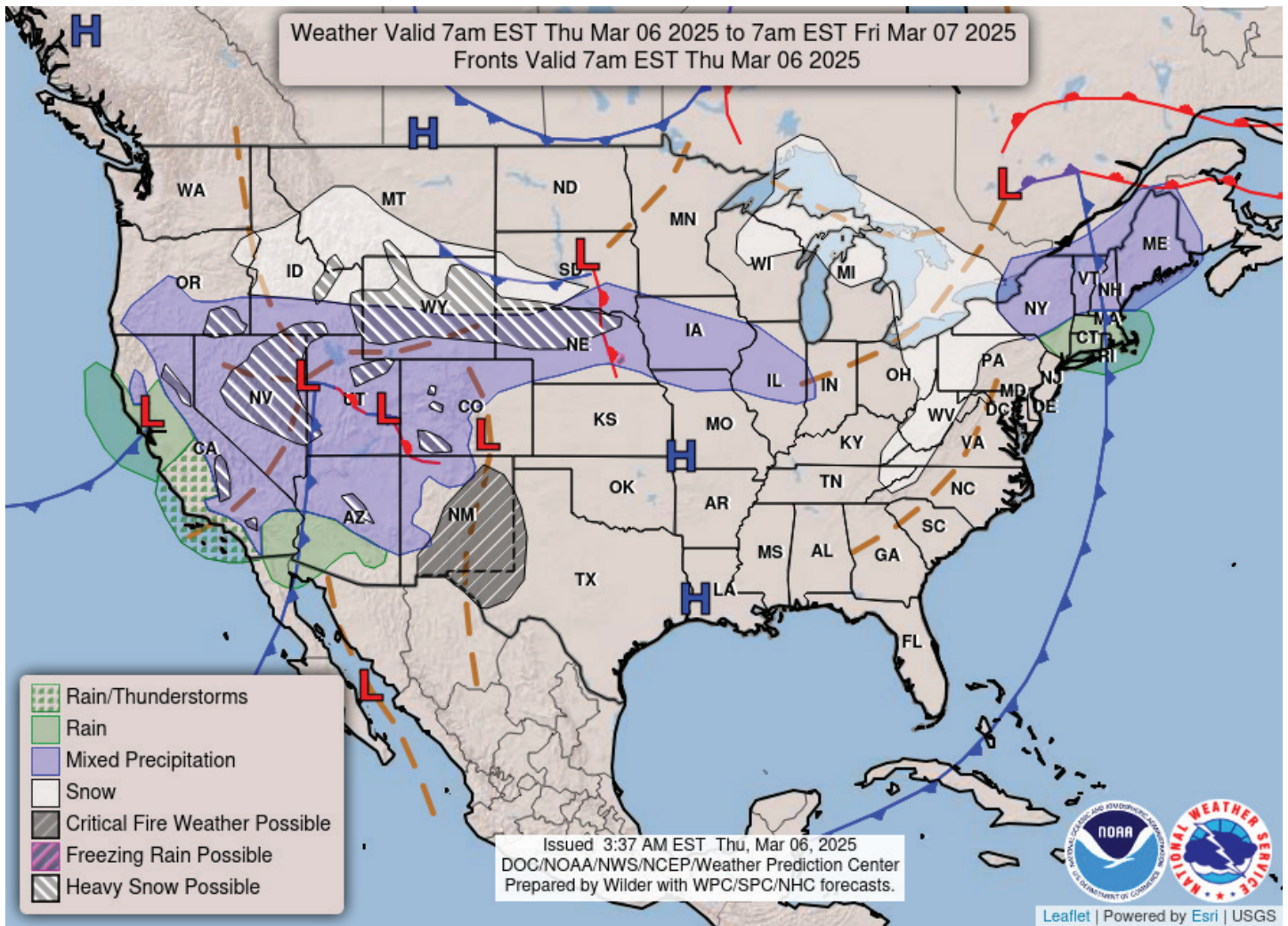
Precip to date in March.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.31

Precip Year to Date: 0.45

Sunset Tonight: 6:28:00 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:57:10 am



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## Today in Weather History

March 6, 1987: Twenty-eight cities in the north-central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Pickstown, South Dakota, was the hot spot in the nation with a reading of 83 degrees. The high of 71 at Saint Cloud, Minnesota, smashed their previous record by 21 degrees.

March 6, 2000: A grass fire of unknown origin was exacerbated by dry conditions and strong winds, burning 1500 acres of grassland northwest and north of Brandon in Minnehaha County. The fire threatened several homes, but no homes were damaged, although farmland and equipment burned. In a separate event the same day, a controlled burn went out of control, exacerbated by the conditions and strong winds. The fire caused one fatality and one injury. The damage was confined to grassland.

1875: Heavy snow fell in much of Arkansas, with the highest amounts in the central and west. Twelve inches of snow fell at Little Rock, which remains the highest calendar day snowfall on record in the capital city. 30 inches fell near Mena.

1908: A tropical storm developed about 500 miles northeast of San Juan, Puerto Rico, on March 6. The storm intensified to Category 2 strength near the Leeward Islands of Saint-Barthélemy and Saint Kitts. Since 1842, this was the only hurricane to develop in the Atlantic Ocean in March.

1962: The strongest nor'easter of this century struck the Mid-Atlantic Region on March 5-9, 1962. It is known as the "Ash Wednesday Storm" and caused over \$200 million (1962 dollars) in property damage and significant coastal erosion from North Carolina to Long Island, New York. It was estimated to have destroyed or significantly damaged 45,000 homes in New Jersey alone. The Red Cross recorded that the storm killed 40 people. It hit during "Spring Tide." When the sun and moon are in phase, they produce a higher-than-average astronomical tide. Water reached nine feet at Norfolk (flooding begins around five feet). Houses were toppled into the ocean, and boardwalks were broken and twisted. The islands of Chincoteague and Assateague, Maryland, were completely underwater. Ocean City, Maryland, sustained significant damage, mainly to the island's south end. Winds up to 70 mph built 40-foot waves at sea. Heavy snow fell in the Appalachian Mountains. Big Meadows, southeast of Luray, recorded Virginia's greatest 24-hour snowfall with 33 inches and the most significant single storm snowfall with 42 inches. (Luray, Virginia reported 33.5 inches on March 2-3, 1994, making this later snow their maximum 24-hour snowfall total.) Roads were blocked, and electrical service was out for several days. Washington and Baltimore fell into the mixed precipitation zone. The Ash Wednesday storm is noteworthy for producing devastating tidal flooding along the Atlantic Coast and record snows and the interior of Virginia. The extremely high tides and massive waves caused tremendous damage -worse than many hurricanes that have hit the region. Along the Atlantic Coast, tide ran for 2 to 6 ft above average with 20 to 40 ft waves crashing ashore. National Airport received only 4 inches of snow with a liquid equivalent of 1.33 inches. However, close-in suburbs, such as Silver Spring, Maryland, and Falls Church, Virginia, received 11 inches of snow. Outlying areas such as Rockville, Maryland, received 19 inches of snow, and Leesburg, Virginia, received 20 inches of snow. Other snow totals included 15 inches at Richmond; 23 inches at Culpeper; 26 inches at Charlottesville; 32 inches at Winchester; and 35 inches at Fort Royal, Virginia, and Big Meadows on the Skyline Drive top the list with 42 inches of snow. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the Washington Post.

2004: More snow fell on March 6, 2004, than ever recorded for a single day in March since the Korea Meteorological Administration began keeping records in 1904. According to news reports, the city of Daejeon (Taejon) in central South Korea received 19 inches of snow on Friday, with an additional 6 inches (15 centimeters) forecast for Saturday. As the storm moved away from the peninsula on March 7.

2010: At least seven funnel clouds were observed along the Orange County coast in southern California. Two were spotted near John Wayne Airport.

2014: The Great Lakes saw some of their worst ice covers in nearly four decades because of a frigid winter with months of below-freezing temperatures in large sections of the northern United States, the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration said. As of March 6, 2014, the federal agency said that 92.2 percent of the five lakes were under ice, breaking a record set in 1973 but still short of the 94.7 percent established in 1979.



## ABLE BUT NOT ALWAYS WILLING

Little Susie was getting dressed for a very important birthday party. Looking at the beautifully wrapped present on the table, she asked, "Mommy, when is my birthday? You know, I want to get a lot of nice presents like this one for Jamie."

"Your birthday is next month, on the 23rd," said her mother.

"My goodness," said Susie, "I guess it's time for me to start being good so I'll get some nice presents!"

"Being good" is not always easy. There are times when the choice is difficult, the lines between right and wrong are "blurred" or we choose to say we are in a "grey" area. Could it be that "being good" is easy but not simple? Could it be that we want to complicate things so we can excuse our wrongdoings? Remember the comedian who often said, "The devil made me do it?" Was he right? Are they good excuses or sound reasons?

Paul wrote, "I do the very things I hate...because of my sinful nature!" Our "sinful nature" is stronger than we are but cannot equal the power of God that is available to the Christian through Christ. We must always remember that. He defeated Satan once and for all and freed us from the power of sin.

Without the enabling power of Christ, sin will triumph and dominate our lives. But if we remain in Him and look to Him for His help and strength, we will be victorious over sin and be more than conquerors thru Christ!

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be willing and able to overcome sin in our lives through the power of Christ. Forgive us when we do not call upon You for strength. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. Romans 7:15-8:1

*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: 03.04.25

14 19 47 52 70 6

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$233,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 31 Mins  
54 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

10 15 23 35 41 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$25,560,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 46  
Mins 54 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

4 12 21 22 40 17

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 1 Mins 55  
Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

5 20 22 28 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$56,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 1 Mins  
55 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

22 36 39 45 50 14

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 30  
Mins 54 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

24 28 40 63 65 20

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$320,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 30  
Mins 54 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  
05/12/2025 High School Girls Golf Meet at Olive Grove  
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm  
06/07/2025 Day of Play  
06/13/2025 SDSU 4 Person Scramble at Olive Grove  
06/21/2025 Groton Triathlon  
06/23/2025 Ladies 2 Person Scramble at Olive Grove  
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  
07/16/2025 Men's Pro Am Golf at Olive Grove  
07/25/2025 Ferney Open Scramble Golf at Olive Grove  
08/01/2025 Wine on Nine Fundraiser at Olive Grove  
08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm  
08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove  
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove  
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm  
12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### **Brown scores 24, UMKC knocks off Oral Roberts in Summit League Tournament 73-56**

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Jamar Brown had 24 points in UMKC's 73-56 victory over Oral Roberts on Wednesday in the Summit League Tournament.

UMKC (13-19), seeded eighth, advances to face top-seeded Omaha on Thursday. Oral Roberts (7-23) was the ninth and final seed into the tourney.

Brown went 9 of 15 from the field (5 for 10 from 3-point range) for the Kangaroos. Jayson Petty scored 18 points and added seven rebounds. Cameron Faas had 15 points and shot 6 for 12, including 3 for 7 from beyond the arc.

The Golden Eagles were led in scoring by Issac McBride, who finished with 19 points and six rebounds. Oral Roberts also got 12 points and six rebounds from Sam Alajiki. Jalen Miller had eight points.

Petty scored 16 points in the second half to help lead the way as UMKC went on to secure a victory, outscoring Oral Roberts by 11 points in the second half.

### **EU leaders open emergency summit on defense and Ukraine aid as US security support wanes**

By RAF CASERT and LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Facing the prospect that the United States might cut them adrift under President Donald Trump, European Union leaders launched a day of emergency talks Thursday in a bid to beef up their own security and ensure that Ukraine will still be properly protected.

Friedrich Merz, the likely next chancellor of Germany, and summit chairman Antonio Costa discussed over breakfast in Brussels ways to fortify Europe's defenses on a short deadline. Merz pushed plans this week to loosen the nation's rules on running up debt to allow for higher defense spending.

Meanwhile, the 27-nation bloc was waking up to news that French President Emmanuel Macron would confer with EU leaders about the possibility of using France's nuclear deterrent to protect the continent from Russian threats.

It all underscored the sea change that has taken place in the two months since Trump took office and immediately started questioning the cornerstones of cooperation between the United States and Europe that had been the bedrock of Western security since World War II.

"Given these profound shifts in U.S. policy, and the existential threat of another war on the continent, Europe must manage its essential defence tasks," the European Policy Center think tank said in a commentary.

The bloc will "take decisive steps forward," Macron told the French nation Wednesday evening. "Member states will be able to increase their military spending" and "massive joint funding will be provided to buy and produce some of the most innovative munitions, tanks, weapons and equipment in Europe," he said.

Adding to the ebullient message, he said that "Europe's future does not have to be decided in Washington or Moscow."

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is taking part in the summit.

Limited room to increase spending

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has proposed a plan to loosen budget rules so countries that are willing can spend much more on defense. Her proposal is underpinned by 150 billion euros (\$162 billion) worth of loans to buy priority military equipment.

Most of the increased defense spending would have to come from national budgets at a time when many countries are already overburdened with debt.

France is struggling to reduce an excessive annual budget deficit of 5% of GDP, after running up its total debt burden to 112% of GDP with spending on relief for businesses and consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Five other countries using the euro currency have debt levels over 100% of GDP: Belgium, Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal.

Europe's largest economy, Germany, has more room to borrow, with a debt level of 62% of GDP.

Pressing security needs

Part of any security plan is also to protect the increasingly beleaguered position of Ukraine.

A Russian missile killed four people staying at a hotel in Zelenskyy's hometown overnight. He said that a humanitarian organization's volunteers had moved into the hotel in Kryvyi Rih, in central Ukraine, just before the strike. The volunteers included Ukrainian, American and British nationals, but it wasn't clear whether those people were among the 31 injured.

Early this week, Trump ordered a pause to U.S. military supplies to Ukraine as he sought to press Zelenskyy to engage in negotiations to end the war with Russia, bringing fresh urgency to Thursday's summit.

Thursday's meeting is unlikely to address Ukraine's most pressing needs. It is not aimed at urgently drumming up more arms and ammunition to fill any supply vacuum created by the U.S. freeze. Nor will all nations agree to unblock the estimated 183 billion euros (\$196 billion) in frozen Russian assets held in a Belgian clearing house, a pot of ready cash that could be seized.

Still, the Europeans underlined the importance of the moment.

"Europe faces a clear and present danger on a scale that none of us have seen in our adult lifetime. Some of our fundamental assumptions are being undermined to their very core," von der Leyen warned in a letter to the leaders ahead of their meeting.

But perhaps the biggest challenge for the EU will be to take a united stance at a moment when it's fractured, since much of what the bloc does requires unanimous support. Hungary is threatening to veto part of the summit statement on Ukraine.

Even if the challenges are so daunting, Thursday's summit is unlikely to produce immediate decisions on spending for Ukraine or its own defenses. Another EU summit where the real contours of decisions would be much clearer is set for March 20-21.

## **Hamas brushes off Trump's threat and says it will only free hostages in return for a lasting truce**

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The Hamas militant group on Thursday brushed off President Donald Trump's latest threat and reiterated that it will only free the remaining Israeli hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas accused Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of trying to back out of the ceasefire agreement they reached in January. The agreement calls for negotiations over a second phase in which the hostages would be released in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners, a permanent ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Hamas spokesman Abdel-Latif al-Qanoua said the "best path to free the remaining Israeli hostages" is through negotiations on that phase, which were supposed to begin in early February. Only limited preparatory talks have been held so far.

On Wednesday, Trump issued what he said was a "last warning" to Hamas after meeting with eight former hostages. The White House meanwhile confirmed it had held unprecedented direct talks with the militant group, which Israel and Western countries view as a terrorist organization.

"Release all of the Hostages now, not later, and immediately return all of the dead bodies of the people you murdered, or it is OVER for you," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform. "Only sick and twisted people keep bodies, and you are sick and twisted!"

Both Israel and Hamas have a longstanding practice of holding onto the remains of their adversaries in



order to trade them in hostage-prisoner deals.

Hamas is believed to still have 24 living hostages taken in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war, including Israeli-American Edan Alexander. It is also holding the bodies of 34 others who were either killed in the initial attack or in captivity, as well as the remains of a soldier killed in the 2014 war.

Hamas released 25 Israeli hostages and the bodies of eight more in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in the first, 42-day phase of the ceasefire, which ended on Saturday.

Israel supports what it says is a new U.S. plan for the second phase in which Hamas would release half the remaining hostages immediately and the rest when a permanent ceasefire is negotiated. Hamas has rejected the proposal and says it is sticking with the agreement signed in January.

Israel has cut off the delivery of food, fuel, medicine and other supplies to Gaza's roughly 2 million Palestinians in an attempt to pressure Hamas into accepting the new arrangement. It has threatened "additional consequences" if Hamas does not resume the release of hostages.

It's unclear if the U.S.-Hamas talks made any progress. The Trump administration has pledged full support for Israel's main war goals of returning all the hostages and eradicating Hamas, which may be incompatible.

Hamas-led militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, in the Oct. 7 attack and took a total of 251 people hostage. Most have been released in ceasefire agreements or other arrangements. Israeli forces have rescued eight living hostages and recovered the bodies of dozens more.

Israel's military offensive has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many of the dead were militants. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The offensive destroyed vast areas in Gaza and displaced most of its population. Hundreds of thousands of people are living in tents, schools-turned-shelters or war-damaged buildings, and the population relies on international aid.

## **France steps in to provide military intelligence to Ukraine as the U.S. freezes vital information**

PARIS (AP) — France is providing military intelligence to Ukraine after Washington announced it was freezing the sharing of information with Kyiv, French defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said Thursday.

The U.S. said Wednesday it had paused its intelligence sharing with Ukraine, cutting off the flow of vital information that has helped the war-torn nation target Russian invaders, but Trump administration officials have said that positive talks between Washington and Kyiv mean it may only be a short suspension.

American intelligence is vital for Ukraine to track Russian troop movements and select targets.

Speaking to France Inter radio on Thursday, Lecornu said France is continuing its intelligence sharing.

"Our intelligence is sovereign," Lecornu said. "We have intelligence that we allow Ukraine to benefit from."

Lecornu added that following the US decision to suspend all military aid to Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron asked him to "accelerate the various French aid packages" to make up for the lack of American assistance.

Lecornu said that in the wake of the U.S. decision, shipments of Ukraine-bound aid departing from Poland had been suspended, adding however that "Ukrainians, unfortunately, have learned to fight this war for three years now and know how to stockpile."

## **A charity kitchen brings hope to displaced Palestinians in the West Bank during Ramadan**

By AREF TUFHAHA Associated Press

TULKAREM, West Bank (AP) — At a makeshift kitchen inside a city office building, volunteers rub paprika, oil and salt on slabs of chicken before arraying them on trays and slipping them into an oven. Once the meat is done, it is divided into portions and tucked into plastic foam containers along with piles of yellow rice scooped from large steel pots.

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The unpaid chefs at the Yasser Arafat Charity Kitchen in the city of Tulkarem are hoping their labors will provide a modicum of joy to displaced Palestinians trying to mark the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

An Israeli military raid launched in the West Bank weeks ago has uprooted more than 40,000 people. Israel says it was meant to stamp out militancy in the occupied region, which has experienced a surge of violence since the start of the war in Gaza in October 2023.

The raid has been deadly and destructive, emptying out several urban refugee camps that house descendants of Palestinians who fled wars with Israel decades ago.

The refugees have been told they will not be allowed to return for a year. In the meantime, many of them have no access to kitchens, are separated from their communities, and are struggling to mark the end of the daily Ramadan fast with what are typically lavish meals.

"The situation is difficult," said Abdullah Kamil, governor of the Tulkarem area. He said some are drawing hope from the charity kitchen, which has expanded its usual operations to provide daily meals for up to 700 refugees, an effort to "meet the needs of the people, especially during the month of Ramadan."

For Mansour Awfa, 60, the meals are a bright spot in a dark time. He fled from the Tulkarem refugee camp in early February and does not know when he can return.

"This is the house where I was raised, where I lived, and where I spent my life," he said of the camp. "I'm not allowed to go there."

Awfa, his wife and four children have been living in a relative's city apartment, where they sleep on thin mattresses on the floor.

"Where do we go? Where is there to go?" he asked. "But thanks to God, we are waiting to receive meals and aid from some warmhearted people."

## South Korean fighter jets accidentally drop bombs, injuring 8 people

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Two South Korean fighter jets accidentally dropped eight bombs on a civilian area during a joint live-fire exercise with the U.S. military Thursday, injuring eight people, officials said.

The MK-82 bombs released by the KF-16 fighter jets fell outside a firing range, causing civilian damage, the air force said in a statement.

The air force said it will establish a committee to investigate why the accident happened and examine the scale of the civilian damage. It said the fighter jets were taking part in the one-day firing drill with the U.S. military.

An unidentified air force official told local reporters that a pilot of one of the KF-16s put in a wrong coordinate for a bombing site. An unidentified Defense Ministry official also told reporters that more investigation was needed to find why the second KF-16 also dropped bombs on a civilian area.

The contents of the officials' briefing were shared with foreign media.

The air force apologized and expressed hopes for a speedy recovery of the injured people. It said it will actively offer compensation and take other necessary steps.

The accident happened in Pocheon, a city close to the heavily armed border with North Korea.

In a televised briefing, Pocheon Mayor Paek Young-hyun called the bombings "awful" and urged the military to halt drills in the city until it formulates reliable steps that can prevent a recurrence. He said that Pocheon, a city of 140,000 people, provides three major firing ranges for the South Korean and U.S. militaries.

The military later said it has decided to suspend all live-fire drills across South Korea. Observers say the military will resume firing exercises after it learns the exact cause of Thursday's accident and maps out steps to prevent recurrences.

Pocheon's disaster response department said six civilians and two soldiers were injured and were being treated at hospitals. Four of the injured — all civilians — were in serious condition, the department said. Two of the seriously injured are foreigners — one from Thailand and the other from Myanmar.

Three houses, a Catholic church and a greenhouse were partially damaged but they did not appear to have been directly hit by the bombs, according to the Pocheon department.

## **An Okinawan bone digger searches for remains from one of the fiercest battles of World War II**

By AYAKA MCGILL, HIRO KOMAE and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

ITOMAN, Japan (AP) — Takamatsu Gushiken turns on a headtorch and enters a cave buried in Okinawa's jungle. He gently runs his fingers through the gravel until two pieces of bone emerge. These are from the skulls, he says, of an infant and possibly an adult.

He carefully places them in a ceramic rice bowl and takes a moment to imagine people dying 80 years ago as they hid in this cave during one of the fiercest battles of World War II. His hope is that the dead can be reunited with their families.

The remains of some 1,400 people found on Okinawa sit in storage for possible identification with DNA testing. So far just six have been identified and returned to their families. Volunteer bone hunters and families looking for their loved ones say the government should do more to help.

Gushiken says the bones are silent witnesses to Okinawa's wartime tragedy, carrying a warning to the present generation as Japan ups its defense spending in the face of tensions with China over territorial disputes and Beijing's claim to the nearby self-governing island Taiwan.

"The best way to honor the war dead is never to allow another war," Gushiken says. "I'm worried about Okinawa's situation now. ... I'm afraid there is a growing risk that Okinawa may become a battlefield again."

An island haunted by one of the deadliest battles of World War II

On April 1, 1945, U.S. troops landed on Okinawa during their push toward mainland Japan, beginning a battle that lasted until late June and killed about 12,000 Americans and more than 188,000 Japanese, half of them Okinawan civilians. That included students and victims of mass suicides ordered by the Japanese military, historians say.

The fighting ended at Itoman, where Gushiken and other volunteer cave diggers — or "gamahuya" in their native Okinawan language — have found the remains of what are likely hundreds of people.

Gushiken tries to imagine being in the cave during the fighting. Where would he hide? What would he feel? He makes a guess about the age of the victims, whether they died by gunshot or explosion, and puts details about the bones in a small red notebook.

After the war, Okinawa remained under U.S. occupation until 1972, 20 years longer than most of Japan, and it remains host to a major U.S. military presence to this day. As Japan enjoyed a postwar economic rise, Okinawa's economic, educational and social development lagged behind.

Gushiken says when he was a child growing up in Okinawa's capital, Naha, he would go out hunting bugs and find skulls still wearing helmets.

A slow search for remains

Nearly 80 years after the end of World War II, 1.2 million Japanese war dead are still unaccounted for. That's about half of the 2.4 million Japanese, mostly soldiers, who died during Japan's early 20th century wars.

Thousands of unidentified bones have been sitting in storage for years waiting for testing that could help match them with surviving families.

Gushiken says the government's DNA matching efforts have been too little and too slow.

Of the estimated 188,140 Japanese killed in the Battle of Okinawa, most of their remains had been collected and placed in the national cemetery on the island, the health ministry says. Around 1,400 remains found in recent decades sit in storage. The process of identification has been painfully slow.

It was only in 2003 that the Japanese government started DNA matching after requests from the families of the dead, but tests were limited to the remains found with teeth and manmade artifacts that could provide hints to their identities.

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In 2016, Japan enacted a law launching a remains recovery initiative to promote more DNA matching and cooperation with the U.S. Department of Defense. A year later, the government expanded the work to civilians and authorized testing on limb bones.

In all, 1,280 remains of Japanese war-dead, including six on Okinawa, have been identified by DNA tests since 2003, the health ministry said. The remains of around 14,000 people are stored in the ministry mortuary for future testing.

Hundreds of American soldiers remain unaccounted for. Their remains, as well as those of the Koreans mobilized by the Japanese during the war, may yet be found, Gushiken says.

Locating and identifying decades-old remains have become increasingly difficult as families and relatives age, memories fade, artifacts and documents get lost, and the remains deteriorate, says Naoki Tezuka, a health ministry official.

"The progress has been slow everywhere," Tezuka said. "Ideally, we hope to not just collect the remains but return them to their families."

The burden of history

Japan is undertaking an accelerating military buildup, sending more troops and weapons to Okinawa and its outer islands. Many here who have bitter memories of the Japanese army's wartime brutality view the current military buildup with wariness.

Washington and Tokyo see the strong U.S. military presence as a crucial bulwark against China and North Korea, but many Okinawans have long complained about noise, pollution, aircraft accidents and crime related to American troops.

Okinawa today is home to more than half of the 50,000 American troops stationed in Japan, with the majority of U.S. military facilities on the small southern island. Tokyo has promised to relocate a U.S. Marine Corps air station that sits in a crowded town after years of friction, but Okinawans remain angry at a plan that would only move it to the island's east coast and may use the soil possibly containing the remains for construction.

Gushiken says the Itoman caves should be protected from development so that younger generations can learn about the war's history, and so searchers like him can complete their work.

Like him, some Okinawans say they fear the lessons of their wartime suffering are being forgotten.

Tomoyuki Kobashigawa's half-sister Michiko was killed soon after she got married. He wants to apply for DNA matching to help find her. "It's so sad ... If she would have lived, we could have been such good siblings."

The missing remains show the government's "lack of remorse over its responsibility in the war," Kobashigawa says. "I'm afraid the Okinawan people will be embroiled in a war again."

## **Pope Francis rests after peaceful night during third week of hospital treatment for pneumonia**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was resting Thursday after a peaceful night during his third week of hospital treatment for double pneumonia, the Vatican said.

The pope has been sleeping with a non-invasive mechanical mask to guarantee that his lungs expand properly overnight and help his recovery. He has been transitioning to receiving oxygen with a nasal tube during the day.

The 88-year-old pope, who has chronic lung disease and had part of one lung removed as a young man, has been stable for two days after suffering a pair of respiratory crises Monday. Doctors underlined that his prognosis remained guarded due to the complex picture.

The pope on Wednesday marked the start of Lent by receiving ashes on his forehead and by calling the parish priest in Gaza, the Vatican said. He also added physical therapy to his hospital routine of respiratory therapy.

The Catholic Church opened the solemn Lenten season leading to Easter without the pope's participation.

A cardinal took his place leading a short penitential procession between two churches on the Aventine Hill, and opened an Ash Wednesday homily prepared for the pontiff with words of solidarity and thanks for Francis.

"We feel deeply united with him in this moment," Cardinal Angelo De Donatis said. "And we thank him for the offering of his prayer and his suffering for the good of the entire church in all the world."

On Ash Wednesday, observant Catholics receive a sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads, a gesture that underscores human mortality. It is an obligatory day of fasting and abstinence that signals the start of Christianity's most penitent season, leading to Easter on April 20.

"The condition of fragility reminds us of the tragedy of death," De Donatis said in his homily. "In many ways, we try to banish death from our societies, so dependent on appearances, and even remove it from our language. Death, however, imposes itself as a reality with which we have to reckon, a sign of the precariousness and brevity of our lives."

The pope was supposed to attend a spiritual retreat this weekend with the rest of the Holy See hierarchy. On Tuesday, the Vatican said the retreat would go ahead without Francis but in "spiritual communion" with him. The theme, selected before Francis got sick, was "Hope in eternal life."

## Trump issues 'last warning' to Hamas to release all remaining hostages held in Gaza

By AAMER MADHANI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Wednesday issued what he called a "last warning" to Hamas to release all remaining hostages held in Gaza, directing a sharply worded message after the White House confirmed that he had recently dispatched an envoy for unprecedented direct talks with the militant group.

In a statement on his Truth Social platform soon after meeting at the White House with eight former hostages, Trump added that he was "sending Israel everything it needs to finish the job."

"Release all of the Hostages now, not later, and immediately return all of the dead bodies of the people you murdered, or it is OVER for you," Trump said. "Only sick and twisted people keep bodies, and you are sick and twisted!"

The pointed language from Trump came after the White House said Wednesday that U.S. officials have engaged in "ongoing talks and discussions" with Hamas officials, stepping away from a long-held U.S. policy of not directly engaging with the militant group.

Confirmation of the talks in the Qatari capital of Doha came as the Israel-Hamas ceasefire remains in the balance. It's the first known direct engagement between the United States and Hamas since the State Department designated the group a foreign terrorist organization in 1997.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt declined to provide detail on the substance of talks, but said President Donald Trump has authorized his envoys to "talk to anyone." Egyptian and Qatari intermediaries have served as mediators with Hamas for the U.S. and Israel since the group launched its Oct. 7, 2023 attack on Israel that sparked the war.

"Look, dialogue and talking to people around the world to do what's in the best interest of the American people is something that the president ... believes is a good-faith effort to do what's right for the American people," she said.

Leavitt added that Israel has been consulted about the direct engagement with Hamas officials, and noted that there are "American lives at stake."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office offered a terse acknowledgement of the U.S.-Hamas talks. "Israel has expressed to the United States its position regarding direct talks with Hamas," the prime minister's office said.

Israeli officials say about 24 living hostages — including Edan Alexander, an American citizen — as well as the bodies of at least 35 others are believed to still be held in Gaza.

Adam Boehler, Trump's nominee to be special envoy for hostage affairs, led the direct talks with Hamas.

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Boehler, founder and CEO of Rubicon Founders, a healthcare investment firm, was a lead negotiator on the Abraham Accords team during Trump's first term that strove to win broader recognition of Israel in the Arab world.

The talks, which took place last month, focused mainly on the release of American hostages, and a potential end of the war without Hamas in power in Gaza, according to a Hamas official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The official added that no progress was made but "the step itself is promising" and more talks are expected. Egyptian and Qatari mediators helped arrange the talks.

The direct engagement comes as continuation of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire remains uncertain. Trump has signaled that he has no intentions of pushing Netanyahu away from a return to combat if Hamas doesn't agree to terms of a new ceasefire proposal, which the Israelis have billed as being drafted by U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff.

The new plan would require Hamas to release half its remaining hostages — the militant group's main bargaining chip — in exchange for a ceasefire extension and a promise to negotiate a lasting truce. Israel made no mention of releasing more Palestinian prisoners, a key component of the first phase.

Trump on Wednesday welcomed eight former hostages — Iair Horn, Omer Shem Tov, Eli Sharabi, Keith Siegel, Aviva Siegel, Naama Levy, Doron Steinbrecher and Noa Argamani — to the White House.

"The President listened intently to their heartbreaking stories," Leavitt said. "The hostages thanked President Trump for his steadfast efforts to bring all of the hostages home."

Keith Siegel, an Israeli-American released last month as part of the ceasefire, said they came to the White House to express their appreciation to Trump and Witkoff, the Mideast envoy.

"We urged them to continue their enormous efforts. They have done so much. We trust them and we know they will get the job done to get all the rest of the 59 remaining hostages held in Gaza back to their families," he said in a statement.

The talks between U.S. and Hamas officials were first reported earlier Wednesday by the news site Axios.

Leavitt, the White House press secretary, is one of three administration officials who face a lawsuit from The Associated Press on First- and Fifth-Amendment grounds. The AP says the three are punishing the news agency for editorial decisions they oppose. The White House says the AP is not following an executive order to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America.

## Takeaways from AP's report on why so many Greenlanders are Lutheran

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

NUUK, Greenland (AP) — About 90% of the 57,000 Greenlanders identify as Inuit and the vast majority of them belong to the Lutheran Church today, more than 300 years after a Danish missionary brought that branch of Christianity to the world's largest island.

For many, their devotion to ritual and tradition is as much a part of what it means to be a Greenlander as is their fierce deference to the homeland. The one so many want U.S. President Donald Trump to understand is not for sale despite his threats to seize it.

The link between religion and the harsh climate in Greenland

Greenland is huge — about three times the size of Texas; most of it covered in ice. Still, its 17 parishes are located across many settlements in the icy land and people endure the frigid Arctic climate to fill up church pews on Sundays.

Some even tune in to radio-transmitted services on their phones on a break from fishing and hunting for seals, whales and polar bears, as their ancestors have done for generations.

That rugged yet vulnerable lifestyle helps fuel people's devotion, said Bishop Paneeraq Siegstad Munk, leader of Greenland's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Greenlanders don't have to believe to belong to the Lutheran Church

Religiosity levels vary in Greenland as it does elsewhere. Sometimes being a member of the Lutheran

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Church here doesn't mean one believes fully — or at all — in the church's teachings, or even the presence of God.

Recently, Salik Schmidt, 35, and Malu Schmidt, 33, celebrated their wedding with family members, at Church of Our Savior. Built in 1849, it is known as the Nuuk Cathedral.

Malu is spiritual but not religious; Salik is an atheist. Both said they'll proudly belong to the Lutheran Church for life.

"Traditions are important to me because they pass on from my grandparents to my parents, and it's been my way of honoring them," Malu said.

It also provides a sense of safety and permanence among change, Salik said.

The complicated history of Nuuk's Lutheran founder

There are two Lutheran churches in Nuuk. The Hans Egede Church is named for the Danish-Norwegian missionary who came to Greenland in 1721 with the aim of spreading Christianity, and who founded the capital city seven years later.

A short distance away stands the cathedral, and next to it, a statue of Egede remains on a hill in the Old District. In recent years, the statue was vandalized, doused with red paint and marked with the word "decolonize."

Egede's legacy is divisive. Some credit him for helping educate the local population and spreading Lutheranism, which continues to unite many Greenlanders under rituals and tradition.

But for some, Egede symbolizes the arrival of colonialism and the suppression of rich Inuit traditions and culture by Lutheran missionaries and Denmark's rule.

Independence, Trump and the upcoming election

Greenland is now a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark, and Greenlanders are increasingly in favor of getting full independence — a crucial issue in the election on March 11.

Some say Greenland's independence movement has received a boost after Trump pushed their Arctic homeland into the spotlight by threatening to take it over.

At a time of uncertainty, "it's important for us to have faith," said the Rev. John Johansen after a service at the Hans Egede Church, where an American couple visiting Greenland attended wearing pins that read: "I didn't vote for him."

The tension of shared Lutheran and Inuit traditions

The Church of Greenland separated from Denmark's Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2009 and is funded by Greenland's government. Although the Lutheran Church comes from Denmark, the leader of the church in Greenland is proud that it remains uniquely Greenlandic.

In recent years, young people have increasingly demanded the revival of pre-Christian shamanistic traditions like drum dancing; some have been getting Inuit tattoos to proudly reclaim their ancestral roots. For some, it's a way to publicly and permanently reject the legacy of Danish colonialism and European influence.

Still, the Lutheran Church remains for many an important part of the national identity.

Greenland was a colony under Denmark's crown until 1953, when it became a province in the Scandinavian country. In 1979, the island was granted home rule, and 30 years later Greenland became a self-governing entity. But Denmark retains control over foreign and defense affairs.

Until 1953, no other denominations were allowed to register and work in Greenland other than the Lutheran Church, said Gimmi Olsen, an assistant professor in the theology department at the University of Greenland.

Since then, Pentecostal and Catholic churches — mostly serving immigrants from the Philippines — have settled in Greenland. Other Christians include Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

## Most Greenlanders are Lutheran, 300 years after a missionary brought the faith to the remote island

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

NUUK, Greenland (AP) — Most Greenlanders are proudly Inuit, having survived and thrived in one of most remote and climatically inhospitable places on Earth.

And they're Lutheran.

About 90% of the 57,000 Greenlanders identify as Inuit and the vast majority of them belong to the Lutheran Church today, more than 300 years after a Danish missionary brought that branch of Christianity to the world's largest island.

For many, their devotion to ritual and tradition is as much a part of what it means to be a Greenlander as is their fierce deference to the homeland. The one so many want U.S. President Donald Trump to understand is not for sale despite his threats to seize it.

Greenland is huge — about three times the size of Texas; most of it covered in ice. Still, its 17 parishes are located across many settlements in the icy land and people endure the frigid Arctic climate to fill up church pews on Sundays.

Some even tune in to radio-transmitted services on their phones on a break from fishing and hunting for seals, whales and polar bears, as their ancestors have done for generations.

That rugged yet vulnerable lifestyle helps fuel people's devotion, said Bishop Paneeraq Siegstad Munk, leader of Greenland's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

"If you see outside, nature is enormous, huge, and man is so little," she told The Associated Press after a recent Sunday service in the capital city, Nuuk, where slippery ice covered the city's streets.

"You know you won't be able to survive by yourself," she said.

That is, unless "you have faith," she added. "God is not only in the building of the church but everywhere where he has created."

Religiosity levels vary in Greenland as it does elsewhere. Sometimes being a member of the Lutheran Church here doesn't mean one believes fully — or at all — in the church's teachings, or even the presence of God.

Recently, Salik Schmidt, 35, and Malu Schmidt, 33, celebrated their wedding with family members, who joyously threw rice on them to wish them good fortune outside the red-painted wooden Church of Our Savior. Built in 1849, it is known as the Nuuk Cathedral.

Malu is spiritual but not religious; Salik is an atheist. Both said they'll proudly belong to the Lutheran Church for life.

"Traditions are important to me because they pass on from my grandparents to my parents, and it's been my way of honoring them," Malu said later in their home while her sister babysat their daughter.

It also provides a sense of safety and permanence among change, Salik said.

"It's something that is always there," he said. "It brings joy to us."

There are two Lutheran churches in Nuuk.

The Hans Egede Church is named for the Danish-Norwegian missionary who came to Greenland in 1721 with the aim of spreading Christianity, and who founded the capital city seven years later.

A short distance away stands the cathedral, and next to it, a statue of Egede remains on a hill in the Old District. In recent years, the statue was vandalized, doused with red paint and marked with the word "decolonize."

Egede's legacy is divisive. Some credit him for helping educate the local population and spreading Lutheranism, which continues to unite many Greenlanders under rituals and tradition.

"The positive side is that the church made people literate in less than a hundred years after the mission started," said Flemming Nielsen, head of the University of Greenland's theology department.

"When you can read, you use your skill for anything," he said. "We have a rich Greenlandic literature starting at the middle of the 19th century. ... It was the missionaries who invented a written language. And that is an important legacy."



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But for some, Egede symbolizes the arrival of colonialism and the suppression of rich Inuit traditions and culture by Lutheran missionaries and Denmark's rule.

"His statue should be taken down," wrote Juno Berthelsen, a co-founder of the Greenlandic organization Nalik, in a widely shared social media post in 2020.

"The reason is simple," said Berthelsen, who is a candidate in next week's parliamentary election for the Naleraq party. "These statues symbolize colonial violence and stand as an insult and an institutionalized daily slap-in-the face of people who have suffered and still suffer from the consequences of colonial violence and legacies."

Greenland is now a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark, and Greenlanders are increasingly in favor of getting full independence — a crucial issue in the election on March 11.

Some say Greenland's independence movement has received a boost after Trump pushed their Arctic homeland into the spotlight by threatening to take it over.

At a time of uncertainty, "it's important for us to have faith," said the Rev. John Johansen after a service at the Hans Egede Church, where an American couple visiting Greenland attended wearing pins that read: "I didn't vote for him."

Greenlanders "always have faith, no matter what," Johansen said. "Of course they worry about Trump because they can lose their independence, their freedom. They don't want to be American; they don't want to be Danes. They only wish for their own independence."

The Church of Greenland separated from Denmark's Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2009 and is funded by Greenland's government. Although the Lutheran Church comes from Denmark, the leader of the church in Greenland is proud that it remains uniquely Greenlandic.

"It was translated often from Danish rituals, but since the beginning we have always used our language and it goes directly to our heart," Siegstad Munk said. "When I see other Indigenous people, most go to their church in the state's language. But here in Greenland, everything goes from Greenlandic. It's good for us to have our own religious language."

In recent years, young people have increasingly demanded the revival of pre-Christian shamanistic traditions like drum dancing; some have been getting Inuit tattoos to proudly reclaim their ancestral roots. For some, it's a way to publicly and permanently reject the legacy of Danish colonialism and European influence.

Still, the Lutheran Church, Nielsen said, remains for many an important part of the national identity.

"People wear the national costumes when children are present or at funerals and weddings and the religious holidays," he said.

Greenland was a colony under Denmark's crown until 1953, when it became a province in the Scandinavian country. In 1979, the island was granted home rule, and 30 years later Greenland became a self-governing entity. But Denmark retains control over foreign and defense affairs.

Until 1953, no other denominations were allowed to register and work in Greenland other than the Lutheran Church, said Gimmi Olsen, an assistant professor in the theology department at the University of Greenland.

Since then, Pentecostal and Catholic churches — mostly serving immigrants from the Philippines — have settled in Greenland. Other Christians include Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

As in other parts of the world, younger people tend to go to church less, and more are joining the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated — even when, at least on paper, they remain part of the Greenlandic Lutheran Church.

"People are not always 'belonging' to the church, in the sense, that they do not go there every Sunday," said Olsen.

"For the vast majority of the Greenlandic Society, being a member of the Lutheran Folk-Church is the normal," he said, even if it is normal to only go to church a few times a year, for baptisms, weddings, funerals, or on Christmas and Easter.

That kind of solemnity and joy coexist through ritual and tradition. On the same day, even in the same service, there can be contrasting emotions.

In Nuuk, a pastor dressed in black robes and white ruff collar faces the altar with the rest of the congregation to somberly speak to God. In nearly full wooden pews, congregants follow the service in silence.

But then, the quiet, prayerful service goes from what seems like a black-and-white silent film to a technicolor talkie. Pastor and congregants will sing hymns and beam with a smile and cheer on the couple about to get married, or the baby about to be christened. The men are in white anoraks and women in the traditional national dress of shawls stitched with colorful beads and boots made of sealskin reserved for formal occasions.

"I'm not worried about the church," said the Rev. Aviaja Rohmann Hansen, a pastor of the Hans Egede Church.

"If we saw few people like in Denmark, I'd be worried. But we have people at the church every Sunday. We have a lot of baptisms, we have a lot of confirmations, we have a lot of marriages. So, I'm not worried about the church. I hope this will continue because it makes Greenlanders come together."

On a recent day, she baptized Marie Louise Nissen's grandson at the Nuuk Cathedral.

"Baptism is important," Nissen said, smiling as she was briefly interrupted when one of her young family members had to be rescued from slippery ice outside the church.

"It's important to us to invite the kids into the Christian faith," she said. "This is a good day to celebrate and give a name — that's what is important to us."

Her daughter, Malou Nissen, then chimed in: "I think it's more a tradition thing for me. It's a day you'll remember forever." When asked what the Lutheran Church means to her, she said: "Everybody is welcome. It's a place for tears and for happiness."

Her mother agreed: "Today is a celebration; maybe next month it's a funeral, and it's the same place we go — it's the same place to make memories."

## A youth theater production rises from the ashes of the Los Angeles fires

By JOCELYN GECKER AP Education Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The day after her house burned down, Lara Ganz sent a group message to the youth theater troupe she runs: They would not let the Los Angeles firestorm stop their upcoming show.

"So many of our castmates have lost everything," wrote Ganz, the director of youth theater at a beloved playhouse in the Pacific Palisades. "We will continue with rehearsals. I am confident we will find a stage."

The devastating Jan. 7 fire gutted every inch of the 125-seat Pierson Playhouse, from the basement to the roof, leaving behind only a mangled steel skeleton. Many of the young actors watched it burn on live TV. About half of the show's 45 cast members, aged 8 to 17, lost their homes or can't yet return because of severe damage. Many also lost their schools to the fire.

But the show did go on. A two-week run of the musical "Crazy for You" opened last weekend, in a nearby school auditorium, marking a triumphant return to the stage for a community determined to see its theater rise from the ashes. Five more shows are scheduled for this weekend.

The experience lifted the young performers of Theatre Palisades Youth from an unfathomable low point, teaching them the healing power of art in the face of disaster.

"The first time I felt happy after the fire was when I walked into that first rehearsal," said Callum Ganz, 17, the director's son, who plays a tap-dancing cowboy in the show. "When I'm singing or dancing, I forget about everything else. I don't think about the fire. All I feel is happiness."

"It's always a shock," he said, "when it comes back to me and I remember, 'Oh, right. My house is gone.'"

More than 6,800 homes and other structures were flattened in the Palisades fire. Places of worship, shops and schools were destroyed, along with favorite student hangouts downtown — the local skate shop, a pizza place, the Yogurt Shoppe, where the young performers would walk after shows for a celebratory treat.

The idea of rebuilding is still a distant dream. The fire destroyed the theater's performance space and everything else — hundreds of costumes and shoes in the downstairs wardrobe department, vintage and new props, their piano and other musical instruments, lights and sound equipment.

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Parents took to social media, posting pleas for donations. They were met with an outpouring of generosity from the artistic community, stretching from Hollywood to Broadway.

Emmy-award winning hairstylist Joy Zapata saw one of the posts, emailed the mother who wrote it to make sure it wasn't a scam, and then put out a call to friends in the business.

"I have done horror films with 100 extras running down the Pacific Coast Highway. But this time, the story was real, and it blew me away," Zapata said. She held a tutorial for the cast during dress rehearsals and then returned for opening night with a team of seven Hollywood hair and makeup artists.

"I wanted these kids to walk away feeling beautiful," Zapata said, as she curled and sprayed the hair of showgirls into upswept buns. Cowgirls got braided pigtails.

A few weeks earlier, Broadway actress Kerry Butler, a Tony-nominated star of "Beetlejuice," had invited the kids to sing with her during a concert in Orange County, south of Los Angeles. Then, she spent a day leading them in a master class on character development and vocal technique.

"I will never forget my time with them," Butler wrote on Instagram. "I met people who lost their homes, schools. But they told me when they heard the theatre was gone — that was when they felt the deepest loss."

The group also received wireless mics from Guitar Center and costumes from neighboring schools. The Paul Revere Charter Middle School, for now, has become the troupe's home.

"Home" is a charged word in a community where so many have lost theirs. Yet for these young actors and their families, it fits.

"I'm learning that a home is not a physical thing. It's the people," said Scarlett Shelton, a 16-year-old from nearby Culver City who has been part of the theater since middle school.

It's the type of small-town playhouse that no longer exists in many parts of the country. Kids join young and stay until high school, often leaving with dreams of Broadway. About half of the kids in the cast lived nearby in Pacific Palisades, and the rest come from all over the Los Angeles area.

On opening night in a new venue, much of the pre-show jitters and rituals felt the same. The big kids helped calm the nerves of "the littles," as the young actors are affectionately called. Before the show, the entire cast circled up behind the curtain and took turns giving inspirational pep talks. "Knock their socks off!" said one child. Another stepped up to say: "Everyone, dance the night away!"

Putting on the show was not the primary goal when Ganz sent out her group text, as her own family evacuated and then learned their home was gone.

"That day of the fires, her whole life was destroyed in a few hours. But it wasn't, 'Woe is me, I lost everything,'" said choreographer Rebecca Barragan. "She said: 'We need to have rehearsal right away and get these kids back on their feet. And let them know that life isn't over.'"

The original cast of 58 kids dwindled to 45, as families scattered to new homes. Many are mired in a post-wildfire bureaucracy of insurance and government assistance and still figuring out where to go next.

"To be with the other kids and create something and have a purpose has been the most healing thing for all of us," said Wendy Levine, whose sixth grader, Tyler, is in the show.

"It's been a light in the darkness," said her husband, Eric Levine. The family had just finished remodeling their home and was unpacking boxes mid-morning Jan. 7, when they were ordered to evacuate. They learned that night the home was gone.

Ironically, "Crazy for You" is about a small-town theater struggling to survive, set to the music of George and Ira Gershwin. As the story goes, the townsfolk are energized by coming together to create a show after their hometown is hit with hard times.

That's what real life felt like these past few weeks, said Sebastian Florido, 14, who plays the lead character and loved getting to perform one number in particular — "I Can't Be Bothered Now," which is about the power of song and dance to chase away bad news.

"One of the lines is, 'I'm dancing and I can't be bothered now,'" the teen said. "It's really relatable. All this bad stuff was happening, but I'm tap dancing with my best friends. It was like a getaway to a little paradise."

## Facing Trump's threats, Columbia investigates students critical of Israel

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Columbia University senior Maryam Alwan was visiting family in Jordan over winter break when she received an email from the school accusing her of harassment. Her supposed top offense: writing an op-ed in the student newspaper calling for divestment from Israel.

The university has launched a flurry of investigations, led by a new disciplinary committee — the Office of Institutional Equity — to identify Columbia students who have expressed criticism of Israel, according to records shared with The Associated Press.

In recent weeks, it has sent notices to dozens of students for activities ranging from sharing social media posts in support of Palestinian people to joining "unauthorized" protests. One student activist is under investigation for putting up stickers off campus that mimicked "Wanted" posters, bearing the likenesses of university trustees. Another, the president of a campus literary club, faces sanction for co-hosting an art exhibition off campus that focused on last spring's occupation of a campus building.

In Alwan's case, investigators said the unsigned op-ed in the Columbia Spectator, which also urged the school to curtail academic ties to Israel, may have subjected other students to "unwelcome conduct" based on their religion, national origin or military service. Jewish students are among those under investigation for criticizing Israel.

"It just felt so dystopian to have something go through rigorous edits, only to be labeled discriminatory because it's about Palestine," said Alwan, a Palestinian-American comparative studies major. "It made me not want to write or say anything on the subject anymore."

The committee informed her that possible sanctions for violating school policy ranged from a simple warning to expulsion.

The new disciplinary office is raising alarm among students, faculty and free speech advocates, who accuse the school of bowing to President Donald Trump's threats to slash funding to universities and deport campus "agitators."

"Based on how these cases have proceeded, the university now appears to be responding to governmental pressure to suppress and chill protected speech," said Amy Greer, an attorney who is advising students accused of discrimination. "It's operating as a business by protecting its assets ahead of its students, faculty and staff."

Columbia is under financial pressure

On Monday, federal agencies announced they would consider cutting \$51 million in contracts to the school — along with billions more in additional grants — due to its "ongoing inaction in the face of relentless harassment of Jewish students."

"We are resolute that calling for, promoting, or glorifying violence or terror has no place at our university," Columbia said in a statement following the announcement.

House Republicans have also launched their own review of Columbia's disciplinary process. Their most recent letter gave administrators until Feb. 27 to turn over student disciplinary records for nearly a dozen campus incidents, including protests it claimed "promoted terrorism and vilified the U.S. military," as well as the off-campus art exhibition.

A spokesperson for Columbia declined to specify what, if any, records were turned over to Congress and whether they included the names of students, adding that they could not comment on pending investigations.

The new disciplinary committee was created last summer. According to the university's updated harassment policy, criticism of another country's policies could be considered harassment if "directed at or infused with discriminatory comments about persons from, or associated with, that country." The policy notes that "the use of code words may implicate" it.

Some Jewish students at Columbia took part in pro-Palestinian protests. Other Jewish students have said

that rhetoric at protests has crossed into antisemitism and that the administration has been too tolerant of demonstrators who created a hostile environment for people who support Israel.

Disciplinary committee works in secret

Under the office's policies, students are required to sign a non-disclosure agreement before accessing case materials or speaking with investigators, ensuring the process has remained shrouded in secrecy since it began late last year. Aspect of the committee's work were first reported this week by the online publication Drop Site News.

Those who have met with investigators say they were asked to name other people involved in pro-Palestinian groups and protests on campus. They said the investigators did not provide clear guidance on whether certain terms — such as "Zionist" or "genocide" — would be considered harassment.

Several students and faculty who spoke with the AP said the committee accused them of participating in demonstrations they did not attend or helping to circulate social media messages they did not post.

Mahmoud Khalil, a graduate student who served as a negotiator for pro-Palestinian protesters during the previous spring's encampment, said he was accused by the office of misconduct just weeks before his graduation this December. "I have around 13 allegations against me, most of them are social media posts that I had nothing to do with," he said.

After refusing to sign the non-disclosure agreement, Khalil said the university put a hold on his transcript and threatened to block him from graduating. But when he appealed the decision through a lawyer, they eventually backed down, Khalil said.

"They just want to show Congress and right-wing politicians that they're doing something, regardless of the stakes for students," Khalil said. "It's mainly an office to chill pro-Palestine speech."

According to some students, the disciplinary push may be reigniting the pro-Palestinian protest movement that roiled campuses last year.

In recent days, students have occupied multiple buildings at Barnard College, an affiliate of Columbia University, to protest the expulsion of two students accused of disrupting an Israeli history class. Several students were arrested following an hourslong takeover of a building Wednesday night.

## Women's rights are under attack 30 years after leaders adopted a blueprint for equality, UN says

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Thirty years after world leaders adopted a historic blueprint to achieve gender equality, a new United Nations report says women's and girls' rights are under attack and gender discrimination remains deeply embedded in economies and societies.

The report released Thursday by the U.N. agency focused on women's rights and gender equality found that nearly one-quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash to women's rights last year.

Despite some progress, including on girls' education and access to family planning, UN Women said a woman or girl is killed every 10 minutes by a partner or family member and that cases of conflict-related sexual violence have increased by 50% since 2022. The report, released ahead of International Women's Day on Saturday, also noted that only 87 countries have ever been led by a woman.

"Globally, women's human rights are under attack," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement. "Instead of mainstreaming equal rights, we're seeing the mainstreaming of misogyny."

He said the world must stand firm "in making human rights, equality and empowerment a reality for all women and girls, for everyone, everywhere."

The 189 countries that attended a 1995 Beijing women's conference adopted a landmark declaration and 150-page platform for action to achieve gender equality, calling for bold action in 12 areas, including combating poverty and gender-based violence and putting women at top levels in business, government and at peacemaking tables.

It also said for the first time in a U.N. document that human rights include the right of women to control and decide "on matters relating to their sexuality, including their sexual and reproductive health, free of

discrimination, coercion and violence.”

In the new review, which includes contributions from 159 countries, UN Women said countries have taken many steps forward on gender equality and women’s rights in the past five years but that such rights still are facing growing threats worldwide.

On the positive side, the report said some 88% of countries have passed laws to combat violence against women and established services to help victims in the past five years. Most countries have banned workplace discrimination, and 44% are improving the quality of education and training for girls and women, it said.

Yet gender discrimination is deeply embedded, with wide gaps in power and resources that restrain women’s rights, the report said.

“The weakening of democratic institutions has gone hand in hand with backlash on gender equality,” UN Women said.

It warned that “anti-rights actors are actively undermining longstanding consensus on key women’s rights issues” and seeking to block or slow legal and policy gains they can’t roll back.

UN Women said almost 25% of countries reported that backlash on gender equality is hampering implementation of the Beijing platform.

According to the report, women have only 64% of the legal rights of men, and while the proportion of female lawmakers has more than doubled since 1995, three-quarters of lawmakers are still men.

UN Women also said women aged 15 to 24 lag behind other age groups on access to modern family planning; maternal mortality ratios have remained almost unchanged since 2015; and 10% of women and girls live in extremely poor households.

The U.N. agency said cases of conflict-related sexual violence have increased 50% since 2022 — and women and girls are victims of 95% of these crimes.

UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous said that based on the report’s findings, the agency has adopted a roadmap to bring the world closer to the U.N. goal of achieving gender equality by 2030.

It calls for a digital revolution ensuring equal access to technology for all women and girls; investments in social protections, including universal health care and quality education to lift them out of poverty; and zero violence against girls and women. The roadmap also includes equal decision-making power for women and financing for “gender-responsive humanitarian aid” in conflicts and crises.

## **Trump has dropped a high-profile abortion case in Idaho.**

### **Here’s what that means**

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and LAURA UNGAR Associated Press

A yearslong legal battle over the right to an emergency abortion in Idaho has been abruptly upended now that President Donald Trump has moved to drop the high-profile case.

Under the Biden administration, the Justice Department had argued that emergency-room doctors treating pregnant women had to provide terminations if it was needed to save their lives or to avoid serious health consequences.

Yet a little more than a month after taking over the White House, Trump’s decision to abandon the legal fight signals how the Republican administration plans on interpreting federal law designed to protect urgent care when up against states’ abortion bans.

Here’s what to know:

How did we get here?

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion. The ruling came down while President Joe Biden, a Democrat, was in office, but many of the justices who helped reverse *Roe v. Wade* were appointed under Trump.

So in response, Biden warned that his administration considered abortion part of the stabilizing care that federal law requires facilities to provide to patients who show up at an emergency room. A month later, Biden sued Idaho, which had enacted an abortion ban that makes it a crime with a prison term of up to five years for anyone who performs or assists in an abortion.

The Biden administration argued that Idaho's abortion ban prevented ER doctors from offering an abortion if a woman needs one in a medical emergency. But Idaho's attorney general has pointed out that federal law also requires hospitals to consider the health of the "unborn child" in its treatment, too.

The lawsuit has twisted and turned in the legal system ever since. Last year, the Supreme Court agreed to step into the Idaho case, but it handed down a narrow ruling: Hospitals were allowed to make determinations about emergency pregnancy terminations, but the key legal question about what care hospitals should legally provide remains unresolved.

Tell me more about this federal law

Known as the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act, or EMTALA, the 1986 law requires emergency rooms to offer a medical exam if you turn up at their facility. The law applies to any ERs that accept Medicare funding — so nearly all of them.

Those ERs are also required to stabilize patients experiencing a medical emergency before discharging or transferring them. Notably, if the ER doesn't have the resources or staff to treat a patient, medical staffers must arrange a medical transfer to another hospital — they can't simply direct a patient to go elsewhere.

EMTALA is more scrutinized than ever since Roe was overturned. Multiple doctors and families have told The Associated Press about pregnant women with dangerous medical conditions showing up in hospitals and doctors' offices only to be denied the abortions that could help treat them. Some women described facing harmful delays.

Has Trump said why he's dropping the case?

Not yet. And the DOJ's three-page motion didn't explain why they wanted to abandon the lawsuit either. However, since having a hand in revoking the constitutional right to abortion, Trump has repeatedly touted his support of leaving abortion regulations up to the states.

Meanwhile, ending the effort to use federal law to protect emergency abortions was a goal of Project 2025, the blueprint created by the Heritage Foundation for a second Trump term, which calls for reversing what it describes as "distorted pro-abortion" interpretations of federal law. Trump insisted during his 2024 presidential campaign that Project 2025 was not part of his agenda.

"Their move to drop this case against Idaho I think really shows what their true priorities are — and it is to push an anti-abortion political agenda rather than support the lives, health and well being of pregnant women and people, not just in Idaho but across the country because this case does have far-reaching impact," said Brittany Fonteno, president and CEO of the National Abortion Federation, an association of abortion providers.

What's going on elsewhere?

Trump's decision to drop the Idaho case comes several months after the Supreme Court said the federal government couldn't require hospitals to provide pregnancy terminations when it would violate Texas' abortion ban.

Texas had sued over the Biden administration's enforcement of EMTALA, and a lower federal court eventually sided with the state. But similar to the case in Idaho, the Supreme Court stopped short of deciding whether the federal law can supersede a state's abortion ban.

Meanwhile, concern has grown over whether Trump's decision in the Idaho case is a sign that his administration may also reverse course in a longstanding legal battle over telehealth access to mifepristone, the medication used in the nation's most common abortion method.

The Department of Justice under Biden had sought to dismiss a complaint brought by a handful of states seeking to roll back access to mifepristone. It's currently unclear how Trump plans on proceeding.

## Texas Rep. Al Green unrepentant as he faces censure vote in House for disrupting Trump speech

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House is expected to vote on censuring an unrepentant Rep. Al Green, D-Texas, on Thursday for his outburst during President Donald Trump's address to Congress.

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House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., had Green removed from the chamber during the early moments of Trump's speech Tuesday night. The Houston lawmaker stood and shouted at Trump after the president said the Nov. 5 election had delivered a mandate not seen for many decades.

"You have no mandate," Green said, refusing an order from Johnson to "take your seat, sir!"

Republicans moved swiftly to rebuke Green with a censure resolution that officially registers the House's deep disapproval of a member's conduct. Once it's approved by majority vote, the member is asked to stand in the well of the House while the speaker or presiding officer reads the resolution.

Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., and the resolution's sponsor, called it a "necessary, but difficult step."

"This resolution is offered in all seriousness, something that I believe we must do in order to get us to the next level of conduct in this hallowed chamber," Newhouse said.

The censure resolution is just the latest example of the boisterous behavior that has occurred during presidential addresses to Congress. It's certainly happened on both sides of the political aisle.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., noted that Republicans were silent when members of their conference interrupted President Joe Biden's speech last year.

Some yelled "say her name" in reference to nursing student Laken Riley, as Biden spoke about immigration legislation some lawmakers were working on. Riley was killed while running on the University of Georgia campus by a Venezuelan citizen who illegally entered the U.S. in 2022 and had been allowed to stay to pursue his immigration case.

"Where were my Republican friends? Nobody apologized for interrupting Joe Biden time and again," McGovern said. "You talk about lack of decorum. Go back and look at the tapes, and there was silence from the other side."

The censure resolution states that Green's actions were a "breach of proper conduct" during a joint address and noted his removal "after numerous disruptions." Democrats tried to table it Wednesday, but that effort failed on a party-line vote.

Green, now serving his 11th term, offered no regrets when he explained his actions on the House floor Wednesday. Before speaking in his own defense, he walked up to the Republican side of the chamber and shook Newhouse's hand. He said he didn't blame Johnson or those who escorted him out.

"Friends, I would do it again," Green said.

He explained his actions by saying Trump had indicated he had a mandate. But Green said Trump doesn't have a mandate to cut Medicaid, a program that many of his constituents rely on.

"This is a matter of principle. This is a matter of conscience," Green said. "There are people suffering in this country because they don't have health care."

He concluded his remarks by saying, "on some issues that are matters of conscience, it is better to stand alone than not stand at all."

Some Democratic lawmakers skipped Trump's address. Others walked out during it. With tensions clearly on the rise, House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries had told colleagues "it is important to have a strong, determined and dignified Democratic presence in the chamber."

Rep. Jennifer McClellan, D-Va., said it was a hard speech to sit through and that she imagined it would be particularly difficult for Green, noting he had lived through the Civil Rights movement and was now seeing a backlash from Republicans on diversity and equity efforts.

"I think Al Green was telling the truth. He does not have the mandate to cut Medicaid," said Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif. Takano was among the dozens of Democrats who held up signs reading "False" and other protest slogans throughout Trump's speech.

Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., said that Democrats like Green "need to go get some medical help" over the "level of derangement" the opposition party displayed during the speech.

"I think my Democratic colleagues really embarrassed themselves tonight, and their leadership should be even more ashamed of themselves. They sat there and allowed it to happen and didn't say a word," said Lawler.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who served as speaker during Trump's first term, recalled her own memorable moment during a Trump address when she ripped his speech up after he handed it to her following



his address.

"Everybody has to make their expression of how they see things. I think we should keep our focus on the president's speech," Pelosi said.

## Veterans fired from federal jobs say they feel betrayed, including some who voted for Trump

By BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

Nathan Hooven is a disabled Air Force veteran who voted for Donald Trump in November. Barely three months later, he's now unemployed and says he feels betrayed by the president's dramatic downsizing of the federal government that cost him his job.

"I think a lot of other veterans voted the same way, and we have been betrayed," said Hooven, who was fired in February from a Virginia medical facility for veterans. "I feel like my life and the lives of so many like me, so many that have sacrificed so much for this country, are being destroyed."

The mass firing of federal employees since Trump took office in January is pushing out veterans who make up 30% of the nation's federal workforce. The exact number of veterans who have lost their job is unknown, although House Democrats last month estimated that it was potentially in the thousands.

More could be on the way. The Department of Veterans Affairs — a major employer of veterans — is planning a reorganization that includes cutting over 80,000 jobs from the sprawling agency, according to an internal memo obtained by The Associated Press. Veterans represent more than 25% of the VA's workforce.

In interviews, several veterans who supported candidates of both parties described their recent job losses as a betrayal of their military service. They are particularly angered by how it happened: in an email that cited inadequate job performance — despite, they say, receiving positive reviews in their roles.

James Stancil, a 62-year-old Army veteran who was fired last month from his job as a supply technician at a VA hospital in Milwaukee, said it felt like he'd been shot and dumped out of a helicopter.

"And you just free fall and hit the ground — that's it," said Stancil, who supported Democrat Kamala Harris last year. "I'm not dead weight. You're tossing off the wrong stuff."

Stancil said the email he received telling him his performance wasn't good enough came as "a complete shock" because he had previously received positive feedback. Hooven also said his performance was cited despite similarly positive feedback during his 11 months as a probationary employee.

"I've been blindsided," Hooven said. "My life has been completely upended with zero chance to prepare. I was fired without notice, unjustly, based on a lie that I'm a subpar, poor performer at my job."

Stancil said he believes Trump owes fired veterans an apology.

Asked this week about fired federal workers who are veterans, Alina Habba, a former member of Trump's personal legal team who now serves as a counselor in the White House, defended the cuts.

"But at the same time, we have taxpayer dollars, we have a fiscal responsibility to use taxpayer dollars to pay people that actually work," Habba told reporters. "That doesn't mean that we forget our veterans, by any means. We are going to care for them in the right way. But perhaps they're not fit to have a job at this moment, or not willing to come to work."

Veterans were much likelier to support Trump than Harris in November's presidential election, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of the American electorate conducted in all 50 states. Nearly 6 in 10 voters who are veterans backed Trump, while about 4 in 10 voted for Harris.

Cynthia Williams, an Army veteran who lost her job as a dispatcher at a VA in Ann Arbor, Michigan, said she didn't vote for either candidate but suspects fellow veterans who backed Trump might have changed their minds had they known this was coming.

"It was blindsiding, because he said he wanted to make the country great again ... but this is not making it great again," Williams said.

Matthew Sims, an Army veteran, lost his job last month as a program support assistant at a mental health clinic at a VA in Salem, Virginia, after moving with his wife and three children from Texas. He voted

for Trump and said he supports reducing the size of the federal government but not this way.

"I support downsizing, but it's just the way they're going about doing it. It's like the chainsaw approach, I guess, versus the surgical approach that they should be doing," Sims said.

Jared Evans, a recreation therapist at the Salem VA, was fired in February, his eighth month as a probationary worker. Evans said a patient had just told him how much he appreciated his work when he received his email. He had moved from California with his wife, 3-year-old son and 1-year-old daughter for a job that he had long wanted.

Evans, a 36-year-old Army veteran, was the only one working in his family. He said he feels scared, numb and angry.

"I cried," Evans said about learning of his firing. "I haven't done that in a while, because you're just kind of free falling now. You're in an area to where you're not really familiar with, and you're just being left out to dry."

## Top Hong Kong court overturns convictions of 3 former organizers of Tiananmen vigils

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong's top court on Thursday overturned the convictions of three former organizers of an annual vigil in remembrance of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown over their refusal to provide information to police, marking a rare victory for the city's pro-democracy activists.

Chow Hang-tung, Tang Ngok-kwan and Tsui Hon-kwong — core members of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China — were convicted in 2023 during Beijing's crackdown on the city's pro-democracy movement. They received a sentence of 4 1/2 months and have already served their terms.

The alliance was long known for organizing candlelight vigils in the city on the anniversary of the Chinese military's crushing of the 1989 pro-democracy protests in Beijing. But it voted to disband in 2021 under the shadow of a sweeping national security law imposed by China.

Critics said the shutdown and the case showed that the city's Western-style civil liberties were shrinking despite promises they would be kept intact when the former British colony returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Before the group dissolved, police had sought details about its operations and finances in connection with alleged links to pro-democracy groups overseas, accusing it of being a foreign agent. But the group refused to cooperate, insisting it was not.

On Thursday, judges at the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal unanimously ruled in the trio's favor. Chief Justice Andrew Cheung announced the decision in court.

The prosecution needed to prove that the alliance was a foreign agent, the judges wrote, adding that the lower courts "fell into error" in holding that it was sufficient merely that the police commissioner said he had reasonable grounds to believe the alliance was a foreign agent.

In their appeal, the appellants also took issue with crucial details that were redacted, including the names of groups that were alleged to have links with the alliance.

The top court's judges ruled that by redacting the only potential evidential basis for establishing that the alliance was a foreign agent, the prosecution disabled itself from proving its case.

"Non-disclosure of the redacted facts in any event deprived the appellants of a fair trial so that their convictions involved a miscarriage of justice," they wrote.

After the ruling, Tang told reporters outside the court that he hoped the top court's ruling proved that the alliance was not a foreign agent and that in the future they could prove that the 1989 movement was not a counter-revolutionary riot.

"Justice lives in people's hearts. Regardless of the outcome, everyone knows the truth in their hearts," he said.

During an earlier hearing at the top court in January, Chow, who represented herself and prepared the

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appeal in prison, said her case highlighted what a police state is.

"A police state is created by the complicity of the court in endorsing such abuses. This kind of complicity must stop now," she said.

Since the security law was introduced in 2020, several non-permanent overseas judges have quit the top court, raising questions over confidence in the city's judicial system. In 2024, Jonathan Sumption quit his position and said the rule of law was profoundly compromised.

But Cheung in January said the judges' premature departures did not mean the judiciary's independence was weakening.

The annual vigil at Hong Kong's Victoria Park was the only large-scale public commemoration of the June 4 crackdown on Chinese soil for decades. Thousands attended it annually until authorities banned it in 2020, citing anti-pandemic measures.

After COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, the park was occupied instead by a carnival organized by pro-Beijing groups. Those who tried to commemorate the event near the site were detained.

Chow and two other former alliance leaders, Lee Cheuk-yan and Albert Ho, were charged with subversion in a separate case under the security law. They remain in custody, awaiting the beginning of their trial.

In a separate ruling on Thursday, judges at the top court dismissed jailed pro-democracy activist Tam Tak-chi's bid to overturn his sedition convictions in a landmark case brought under a colonial-era law that was used to crush dissent.

Tam Tak-chi was the first person tried under the sedition law since the 1997 handover and was found guilty of 11 charges in 2022, including seven counts of "uttering seditious words." The judges ruled that the prosecution was not required to establish that the words uttered by the appellant were intended to incite violence or public disorder.

The colonial-era law was repealed last year after the government introduced a new, home-grown security law that it said was necessary for stability. Critics worry the law will further curtail freedoms.

## US charges Chinese hackers, government officials in broad cybercrime campaign

By ERIC TUCKER and DAKE KANG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Twelve Chinese nationals — including mercenary hackers, law enforcement officers and employees of a private hacking company — have been charged in connection with global cybercrime campaigns targeting dissidents, news organizations, U.S. agencies and universities, the Justice Department announced Wednesday.

A set of criminal cases filed in New York and Washington add new detail to what U.S. officials say is a booming hacking-for-hire ecosystem in China, in which private companies and contractors are paid by the Chinese government to target victims of particular interest to Beijing in an arrangement meant to provide Chinese state security forces cover and deniability.

The indictments come as the U.S. government has warned of an increasingly sophisticated cyber threat from China, such as a hack last year of telecom firms called Salt Typhoon that gave Beijing access to private texts and phone conversations of an unknown number of Americans, including U.S. government officials and prominent public figures.

One indictment charges eight leaders and employees of a private hacking company known as I-Soon with conducting a sweeping array of computer breaches around the world meant to suppress speech, locate dissidents and steal data from victims. Among those charged is Wu Haibo, who founded I-Soon in Shanghai in 2010 and was a member of China's first hacktivist group, Green Army, and who is accused in the indictment of overseeing and directing hacking operations.

Earlier reporting by The Associated Press on leaked documents from I-Soon mainly showed I-Soon was targeting a wide range of governments such as India, Taiwan or Mongolia, but little on the United States.

But the indictment contains new revelations about I-Soon's activities targeting a wide range of Chinese dissidents, religious organizations and media outlets based in the U.S., including a newspaper identified

as publishing news related to China and opposed to the Chinese Communist Party. Other targets included individual critics of China living in the U.S., the Defense Intelligence Agency and a research university.

The intended targets were in some cases directed by China's Ministry of Public Security — two law enforcement officers were charged with tasking certain assignments — but in other instances the hackers acted at their own initiative and tried to sell the stolen information to the government afterward, the indictment says.

The company charged the Chinese government the equivalent of between approximately \$10,000 and \$75,000 for each email inbox it successfully hacked, officials said.

Phone numbers listed for I-Soon on a Chinese corporate registry rang unanswered, and I-Soon representatives did not immediately respond to an AP email requesting comment.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, Liu Pengyu, suggested Wednesday that the allegations were a "smear" and said, "We hope that relevant parties will adopt a professional and responsible attitude and base their characterization of cyber incidents on sufficient evidence rather than groundless speculation and accusations."

A separate indictment charges two other Chinese hackers, identified as Yin Kecheng and Zhou Shuai, in a for-profit hacking campaign that targeted victims including U.S. technology companies, think tanks, defense contractors and health care systems. Among the targets was the U.S. Treasury Department, which disclosed a breach by Chinese actors late last year in what it called a "major cybersecurity incident."

The Treasury Department announced sanctions Wednesday in connection with the hacking, and the State Department announced multimillion-dollar rewards for information about the defendants.

I-Soon is part of a sprawling industry in China, documented in an AP investigation last year, of private hacking contractors that steal data from other countries to sell to the Chinese authorities.

Over the past two decades, Chinese state security's demand for overseas intelligence has soared, giving rise to a vast network of these private hackers-for-hire companies that have infiltrated hundreds of systems outside China.

China's hacking industry rose in the early days of the internet, when Wu and other Chinese hackers declared themselves "red hackers" — patriots who offered their services to the Chinese Communist Party, in contrast to the anti-establishment ethos popular among many coders.

The indictment "proved the close ties and interaction among China's first generation patriotic hackers," said Mei Danowski, a cybersecurity analyst who wrote about I-Soon on her blog, Natto Thoughts. They "all turned to entrepreneurs now — doing businesses with the governments and making profits through other means."

Since I-Soon documents were leaked online last year, the company has been suffering but is still in operation, according to Chinese corporate records. They've downsized and moved offices.

"Apparently i-SOON companies have been struggling to survive," Danowski wrote on her blog. "To Chinese state agencies, a company like i-SOON is disposable."

## Alex Ovechkin gets 885th career goal to move nine away from tying Wayne Gretzky's NHL record

By VIN A. CHERWOO AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Alex Ovechkin scored his 885th career goal midway through the third period of the Washington Capitals' game against New York Rangers on Wednesday night, moving nine away from tying Wayne Gretzky's NHL record.

The Capitals' captain scored as he knocked in a loose puck from the left side with 9:32 left in the third period to tie the score 2-2. Ovechkin now has 46 goals in 76 career games against the Rangers.

"Great job on faceoff," Ovechkin said of the play. "Great battle and the puck came to me."

Capitals coach Spencer Carbery was more effusive in his praise for his star forward.

"He has a flair for the dramatics at a key moment in the game," Carbery said. "The puck squirts to him and he makes no mistake. That's a huge goal for our team, huge goal on the power play. It's not him in

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his office, it's him jumping on a loose puck."

The Capitals went on to win 3-2 in overtime on Tom Wilson's goal at 4:07.

Ovechkin has 32 goals in 46 games this season. He had 15 goals in his first 18 games, then missed 16 games with a fractured left fibula. He returned Dec. 28 and has scored 17 in 28 games since.

The Russian star is on pace to break Gretzky's mark of 894, which had long seemed unapproachable, in early April, well before the regular season is over.

"What do we need, 10 more (to set the record)," Carbery said. "Ten more. We got this."

Ovechkin now has 321 power-play goals, extending his NHL record, and is one point away from becoming the 11th player to reach 1,600 career points.

Ovechkin had two shots blocked and an attempt denied by Igor Shesterkin on his first shift in the opening minutes of the game. In the second period, he fired a wrist shot that was gloved by Shesterkin 2 1/2 minutes in, and turned and sent a shot that was saved by the goalie with 1:11 to go in the period.

He broke through in the third period and then nearly won it 2 minutes into overtime but Shesterkin gloved the puck as he fell to the ice with his legs spread.

## China's premier and the American president: Two leaders, two speeches, two differing world visions

By KEN MORITSUGU and DIDI TANG Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Their words came just an hour apart this week — two major speeches by two of the world's most powerful leaders, delivered on opposite sides of the planet. Together, they illustrate the very different approaches the world's 21st-century powers are taking to achieve their respective national ambitions.

For China, it was a call for unity to overcome obstacles through innovation and "opening up" — a time-honored phrase in Chinese politics — to eventually accomplish national rejuvenation. It came from Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Beijing as he delivered an annual work report to the National People's Congress, nearly 3,000 representatives from a nation of 1.4 billion people.

Seven thousand miles away and an hour later, at 9 p.m. in Washington, President Donald Trump addressed both chambers of the U.S. Congress, more than 500 lawmakers representing a nation of 340 million, as he vowed to levy tariffs on imports and defeat inflation to "make America great again" — an equally resonant phrase for many in the United States.

From setting to speaking style, the speeches were an ocean apart. Yet they struck a similar tone — that of a desire for greatness at a moment when the reigning superpower and its biggest challenger are seeing their interests increasingly at odds.

The paths their leaders choose will shape both countries' futures — and the rest of the world's, too.

Divided democracy vs. authoritarian unity

Li's speech was a set piece delivered to a loyal audience. For 55 minutes, he read a condensed version of a mostly dry and laudatory report on the government's performance last year and its plans for 2025.

He spoke from the stage of a grand, theater-like chamber in the Great Hall of the People, a monumental edifice on Beijing's renowned Tiananmen Square. China's top leader, Xi Jinping, sat on the dais behind him. The thousands of delegates arrayed before them politely applauded at the appropriate junctures.

Trump's address, which clocked at about an hour and 40 minutes, took place in the white-domed Capitol on the eastern end of the National Mall, dotted with national monuments. With his vice president and the Republican House speaker behind him, Trump delivered a longer, more theatrical speech to a divided Congress reflecting a divided nation.

Republicans clapped and cheered robustly at times. Democrats mostly sat in stony silence and occasionally shouted in protest. One, Rep. Al Green of Texas, was ejected from the chamber early on after he stood up and interrupted the president.

Such unscripted moments — and the high emotions visible behind them — are rare in China. It is a one-party state, and the Communist Party brooks no dissent in public. It strives to present a facade of

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unity. In his remarks, Li praised unity and urged the country to "rally more closely" around Xi's leadership.

In Washington, Trump lamented that "there is absolutely nothing I can say to make" Democrats "happy or to make them stand or smile or applaud" and called his Democratic predecessor, Joe Biden, "the worst president in American history."

Tariffs vs. globalization

Trump was upbeat about the economy, in the cheerleading way of American politicians pumping up support for their policies. He promised steps — including cutting energy costs — to defeat inflation, a pain point for many Americans. And he pledged to put more tariffs on imports, a move he claimed would boost U.S. industries but threatens to upset the global trade order and inflict pain on China and its export-dependent economy.

"Plants are opening up all over the place. Deals are being made like never seen. That's a combination of the election win and tariffs. It's a beautiful word, isn't it?" Trump said.

China is more worried about deflation than inflation. But Li acknowledged the other challenges the economy faces, chiefly falling real estate prices and depressed consumer spending. He reaffirmed Beijing's "unswerving commitment" to opening up.

"Regardless of changes in the external environment, we should remain steadfast in our commitment to opening up," Li said. "We will continue to expand our globally oriented network of high-standard free trade areas."

In a statement that no doubt referred in large part to the United States, he cautioned that "an increasingly complex and severe external environment may exert a greater impact on China in areas such as trade, science and technology."

Leaving climate accord vs. green transition

Trump touted his move to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord and described his energy policy with the moniker "drill, baby, drill." He boasted of ending the previous administration's environmental restrictions and (incorrectly) its electric vehicle mandate, "saving our auto workers and companies from economic destruction."

Beijing, on the contrary, is betting on a greener economy. Li said it would be a priority to accelerate "green transition" for "all areas of economic and social development". China already has the world's largest electric vehicle industry. Echoing earlier pledges by Xi, Li said China would "actively and prudently" work towards carbon peak and carbon neutrality.

Li stressed the importance of innovation and of developing the tech economy in China, including artificial intelligence. It's a push that many U.S. policymakers worry could challenge America's lead in technology, with impacts on both the economic and military rivalry between the two.

Trump made no mention of technology except to say that it would help build "a golden dome" missile defense shield over the U.S. He declared his focus as commander-in-chief to be "building the most powerful military of the future." One measure, he said, was to resurrect the American shipbuilding industry. Li's report touched on defense only briefly but said China would "speed up the development of new combat capabilities."

MAGA vs. Chinese 'rejuvenation'

There's something in common, too: Both countries are yearning for greatness again.

The United States, as a rising and then reigning power, dominated the second half of the 20th century and the start of the 21st. Its economy and military are still the world's most powerful. As China emerges as a rising power, its interests increasingly and inevitably collide with those of Americans and their allies over trade, technology and far-flung Pacific islands.

Today, through China's control of its domestic media, it plays up America's divisions and violent crimes. The message to its people: It offers a better choice for their future than the messiness of democracy.

Trump presented a different view. He opened his speech much as he spent great parts of his inaugural address in January: by declaring that "America's momentum is back."

"Our spirit is back. Our pride is back. Our confidence is back. And the American Dream is surging bigger

and better than ever before," Trump said. "Our country is on the verge of a comeback."

Xi has fashioned what has been called the "Chinese Dream," by which the nation would be rejuvenated or restored to a position of greatness it held in centuries past.

China doesn't necessarily want to be a leader in the U.S. sense, but it wants to be considered an equal. Concretely, China wants a greater say in setting rules in a global system long dominated by the United States.

Trump appears more intent on freeing the U.S. from global rules. Aside from the Paris agreement, he has pulled the U.S. from other global groups including the World Health Organization and the U.N. Human Rights Council — withdrawals that he held up as accomplishments in his speech.

As Trump pulls the United States back from international involvement, it creates an opportunity for China to fill the void. What's unclear is to what extent the Communist Party thinks that doing so is in its interest and is able and willing to do so.

At the start of his speech, Li told the delegates that China has made "solid new strides" in advancing its modernization — an echo of the "Four Modernizations" that became a mantra during the rule of the late Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and 1980s.

In ending his report, Li, as expected, made the call that so many Chinese leaders do at these annual March meetings: "Build a great country," he said, "and advance national rejuvenation."

## Scientists raise concerns as the US stops sharing air quality data from embassies worldwide

By TAIWO ADEBAYO and SIBI ARASU Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — The U.S. government will stop sharing air quality data gathered from its embassies and consulates, worrying local scientists and experts who say the effort was vital to monitor global air quality and improve public health.

In response to an inquiry from The Associated Press, the State Department said Wednesday that its air quality monitoring program would no longer transmit air pollution data from embassies and consulates to the Environmental Protection Agency's AirNow app and other platforms, which allowed locals in various countries, along with scientists around the globe, to see and analyze air quality in cities around the world.

The stop in sharing data was "due to funding constraints that have caused the Department to turn off the underlying network" read the statement, which added that embassies and consulates were directed to keep their monitors running and the sharing of data could resume in the future if funding was restored. The fiscal cut, first reported by the New York Times, is one of many under President Donald Trump, whose administration has been deprioritizing environmental and climate initiatives.

The U.S. air quality monitors measured dangerous fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, which can penetrate deep into the lungs and lead to respiratory diseases, heart conditions, and premature death. The World Health Organization estimates that air pollution kills around 7 million people each year.

News of the data sharing being cut prompted immediate reaction from scientists who said the data were reliable, allowed for air quality monitoring around the world and helped prompt governments to clean up the air.

"A big blow" to global air quality research

Bhargav Krishna, an air pollution expert at New Delhi-based Sustainable Futures Collaborative, called the loss of data "a big blow" to air quality research.

"They were part of a handful of sensors in many developing countries and served as a reference for understanding what air quality was like," Krishna said. "They were also seen to be a well-calibrated and unbiased source of data to cross-check local data if there were concerns about quality."

"It's a real shame", said Alejandro Piracoca Mayorga, a Bogota, Colombia-based freelance air quality consultant. U.S. embassies and consulates in Lima, Peru, Sao Paulo and Bogota have had the public air monitoring. "It was a source of access to air quality information independent of local monitoring networks. They provided another source of information for comparison."

Khalid Khan, an environmental expert and advocate based in Pakistan, agreed, saying the shutdown of air quality monitoring will "have significant consequences."

Khan noted that the monitors in Peshawar, Pakistan, one of the most polluted cities in the world, "provided crucial real-time data" which helped policy makers, researchers and the public to take decisions on their health.

"Their removal means a critical gap in environmental monitoring, leaving residents without accurate information on hazardous air conditions," Khan said. He said vulnerable people in Pakistan and around the world are particularly at risk as they are the least likely to have access to other reliable data.

In Africa, the program provided air quality data for over a dozen countries including Senegal, Nigeria, Chad and Madagascar. Some of those countries depend almost entirely on the U.S. monitoring systems for their air quality data.

The WHO's air quality database will also be affected by the closing of U.S. program. Many poor countries don't track air quality because stations are too expensive and complex to maintain, meaning they are entirely reliant on U.S. embassy monitoring data.

Monitors strengthened local efforts

In some places, the U.S. air quality monitors propelled nations to start their own air quality research and raised awareness, Krishna said.

In China, for example, data from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing famously contradicted official government reports, showing worse pollution levels than authorities acknowledged. It led to China improving air quality.

Officials in Pakistan's eastern Punjab province, which struggles with smog, said they were unfazed by the removal of the U.S. monitors. Environment Secretary Raja Jahangir said Punjab authorities have their own and plan to purchase 30 more.

Shweta Narayan, a campaign lead at the Global Climate and Health Alliance, said the shutdown of monitors in India is a "huge setback" but also a "critical opportunity" for the Indian government to step up and fill the gaps.

"By strengthening its own air quality monitoring infrastructure, ensuring data transparency, and building public trust in air quality reporting, India can set a benchmark for accountability and environmental governance," Narayan said.

## Appeals court allows removal of watchdog agency head as legal battle rages over Trump firing

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An appeals court in Washington removed the head of a federal watchdog agency on Wednesday in the latest twist in a legal fight over Republican President Donald Trump's authority to fire the special counsel.

A three-judge panel on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit sided with the Trump administration in allowing the immediate removal of Hampton Dellinger from the Office of Special Counsel while arguments continue over the legality of Dellinger's firing.

The case has become a flashpoint in the debate over how much power the president should have to replace the leaders of independent agencies as he moves to radically reshape and shrink the federal government. The Trump administration has argued that the law protecting the special counsel from removal is unconstitutional and unfairly prevents the president from rightfully installing his preferred agency head.

Dellinger's lawyers say allowing the president to fire the special counsel without cause would have a chilling effect on the important duties of the office to protect whistleblowers from retaliation. Dellinger has also been working in recent days to challenge Trump's firing of thousands of probationary workers, but his sudden removal throws those efforts into doubt.

Dellinger didn't immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday evening. He's likely to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Dellinger sued Trump last month, saying he was illegally fired because special counsels can be fired by



the president "only for inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office." U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson, who was nominated to the bench by Democratic President Barack Obama, quickly reinstated Dellinger in the job while he pursued his case.

Jackson on Saturday ruled that Dellinger's firing was unlawful and ordered that he remain in his post. But the appeals court lifted Jackson's order blocking his removal, allowing the Trump administration to replace him while the judges weigh the legal arguments.

The Office of Special Counsel is responsible for guarding the federal workforce from illegal personnel actions, such as retaliation for whistleblowing. It investigates whistleblower claims of reprisal, can pursue disciplinary action against employees who punish whistleblowers and provides a channel for employees to disclose government wrongdoing.

Dellinger was appointed by Democratic President Joe Biden and confirmed by the Senate to a five-year term in 2024. The independent agency is separate from Justice Department special counsels like Jack Smith, who are appointed by the attorney general for specific investigations.

After a request from Dellinger's office, a government panel that enforces workers' rights ruled Wednesday that more than 5,000 employees fired by the Trump administration should be put back on the job at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

While the order applies only to the USDA workers, Dellinger released a statement "calling on all federal agencies to voluntarily and immediately rescind any unlawful terminations of probationary employees."

## **Steve Carell surprises Southern California high school students with free prom tickets**

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Actor Steve Carell is sending Southern California high school students affected by the devastating wildfires in Los Angeles to the prom for free.

The "Office" actor and comedian said Tuesday in an Instagram video that he was working with the Alice's Kids charity to pay for prom for seniors at six high schools in Pasadena.

"If you have already paid for your prom tickets, they will reimburse you for your prom tickets. It's a pretty good deal," Carell said.

The Los Angeles area fires destroyed more than 16,000 homes, businesses and other structures and killed at least 29 people in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood and Altadena area north of Pasadena. It also scorched school campuses, upending the lives of thousands of students and parents who were left scrambling looking for classrooms for their kids to go to.

Alice's Kids will donate about \$175,000 for more than 800 students to attend the annual right-of-passage dance for graduating students. Tickets typically range from \$100 to \$150 each.

"Going to prom should be a celebration, and we wanted to help make the big night just a little easier for seniors whose lives have been turned upside down by the wildfires," Ron Fitzsimmons, executive director of Alice's Kids, said in a statement. "Hopefully this allows the students to unwind and have some fun after a devastating year."

An Instagram video posted by John Muir High School, one of the recipient schools, show students clapping and cheering as they were surprised with Carell's announcement during a school assembly.

Another recipient includes Aveson Charter School, whose campus for kindergarten through 5th grade students burned down in the fires and building for sixth through 12th graders is damaged and unusable.

Carell also participated in the star-studded "Skate for LA Strong" hockey tournament last week to raise money for fire relief.

In closing, the actor said: "Have fun, enjoy the prom. And remember, this is Steve Carell."

## The Latest: Trump grants monthlong exemption for US automakers from new tariffs on imports

By The Associated Press undefined

President Donald Trump is granting a one-month exemption on his stiff new tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada for U.S. automakers, as worries persist that the newly launched trade war could crush domestic manufacturing.

Mayors from four major cities testified Wednesday in Congress as Republicans take aim at "sanctuary cities," arguing that they impede the Trump administration's mass deportation agenda and protect people who are in the United States illegally.

And a federal judge has blocked the Trump administration from drastically cutting medical research funding that many scientists say will endanger patients and cost jobs.

Here's the latest:

Elon Musk comes to Capitol Hill to meet with Republicans who discuss turning DOGE cuts into law

GOP senators told the billionaire Trump aide about budget rescissions, an obscure legislative tool that could bring legal heft to his federal budget slashing efforts and enshrine the cuts into law.

They explained how the White House could put the billions of dollars of savings Musk has amassed into what's called a budget rescissions package and send it to Congress for a vote to rescind the funding.

The proposal introduced a potential next phase of Musk's Department of Government Efficiency efforts and comes at an important time. The Trump administration is fighting in court — and in the court of public opinion — over the budget cuts tearing through the federal government.

### Trump reached an estimated 36.6 million television viewers for his Congress address

The number beat the 32.2 million people who watched former President Joe Biden's final State of the Union address last year but was smaller than any of Trump's audiences for the annual address during his first term, the Nielsen Company said. The audience data tracker measured viewing on 15 different television networks, including those whose feed was carried on streaming services.

Trump's first speech to Congress as president, in 2017, was seen by 47.7 million people. Television viewing in general has decreased since then.

Fox News Channel, the most popular network for Trump fans, dominated viewing, reaching 10.7 million people. ABC had 6.3 million, CBS had 4 million, NBC had 3.9 million, Fox broadcast had 2.7 million and both CNN and MSNBC had 1.9 million, Nielsen said.

Nielsen said 71% of Trump's television viewers were 55 and older.

### New Zealand's high commissioner to the UK loses his job over Trump remarks

During an event held by the international affairs think tank Chatham House in London this week, Phil Goff said he had been rereading a speech former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave in 1938 after the Munich Agreement.

"He turned to (Neville) Chamberlain, he said, 'You had the choice between war and dishonor. You chose dishonor, yet you will have war,'" Goff said. "President Trump has restored the bust of Churchill to the Oval Office. But do you think he really understands history?"

New Zealand's Foreign Minister Winston Peters said Goff's comments were "disappointing" and made the envoy's position "untenable."

Officials would work on an "upcoming leadership transition" at New Zealand's mission in London, Peters said. Goff has been New Zealand's envoy to the U.K. since January 2023.

### 'Hamilton' pulls out of plans for perform at the Kennedy Center, citing Trump's leadership shakeup

"Our show simply cannot, in good conscience, participate and be a part of this new culture that is being imposed on the Kennedy Center," producer Jeffrey Seller said in a statement.

The megahit Broadway musical played the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., in 2018 during Trump's first administration and again in 2022 when Joe Biden was president. It

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was scheduled to play it again March 3-April 26, 2026. Those plans are off; no tickets had gone on sale. The Kennedy Center has been in upheaval since Trump forced out the center's leadership and was elected chair of the board of trustees. Trump's takeover of the center is part of his broad campaign against "woke" culture.

## **Appeals court allows removal of head of watchdog agency as legal battle rages over Trump firing**

An appeals court has removed the head of a federal watchdog agency in the latest twist in a legal fight over Trump's authority to fire the special counsel.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia sided with the Trump administration in allowing the immediate removal of Hampton Dellinger as head of the Office of Special Counsel while the court battle continues. Dellinger is likely to appeal.

Dellinger sued Trump last month after he was fired, even though the law says special counsels can be removed by the president "only for inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office."

U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson, who was nominated to the bench by Democratic president Barack Obama, quickly reinstated Dellinger in the job while he pursued his case.

## **House Speaker Johnson's top aide was arrested on a DUI charge last night, police say**

The chief of staff to House Speaker Mike Johnson was arrested Tuesday night on a charge of driving under the influence after crashing into a police vehicle following Trump's address to Congress.

U.S. Capitol police said Hayden Haynes "backed into a parked vehicle" shortly before midnight. He was arrested and later released.

Haynes didn't immediately respond to a message seeking comment. It was not immediately clear whether he had an attorney who could comment on his behalf.

In a statement, a spokesperson for Johnson said the speaker was "aware of the encounter that occurred last night involving his Chief of Staff and the Capitol Police."

## **Major retailers temper expectations for 2025**

Some national retailers are beginning to take a more cautious approach with their financial forecasts as they keep a closer eye on signs of a pullback in consumer spending.

U.S. consumer confidence plunged last month, the biggest monthly decline in more than four years, according to the Conference Board. Respondents to the board's survey expressed concern over inflation with a significant increase in mentions of trade and tariffs, the board said.

Trump's tariffs against America's three biggest trading partners have drawn immediate retaliation from Mexico, Canada and China, sending financial markets into a tailspin. The tariffs threaten to rekindle inflation, which in recent weeks appears to have begun to tick higher and has created more uncertainty for families and businesses.

## **Trump meets 8 former Gaza hostages at the White House**

The former captives included Iair Horn, Omer Shem Tov, Eli Sharabi, Keith Siegel, Aviva Siegel, Naama Levy, Doron Steinbrecher and Noa Argamani.

"The President listened intently to their heartbreaking stories," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement. "The hostages thanked President Trump for his steadfast efforts to bring all of the hostages home."

## **Trump issues 'last warning' to Hamas, demanding all remaining hostages be returned to Israel**

Trump issued what he called a "last warning" to Hamas to release all remaining hostages held in Gaza, directing a sharply worded message as the White House confirmed that the president had recently dispatched an envoy for unprecedented direct talks with the militant group.

Trump, in a statement on his Truth Social platform soon after meeting with eight former hostages, added that he was "sending Israel everything it needs to finish the job."

"Release all of the Hostages now, not later, and immediately return all of the dead bodies of the people you murdered, or it is OVER for you," Trump said. "To the People of Gaza: A beautiful Future awaits, but

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not if you hold Hostages. If you do, you are DEAD! Make a SMART decision."

## **Unapologetic Rep. Al Green says, 'I would do it again'**

Republicans are looking to formally rebuke Green, of Texas, for interrupting Trump's joint address to Congress and refusing take his seat.

House Speaker Mike Johnson eventually called on the sergeant at arms to restore order by removing Green.

Republican Rep. Dan Newhouse, the censure resolution's sponsor, said "respect for the institution is paramount" and that Green "performed one of the most shameful acts that I've ever seen on this floor."

Green, before speaking in his own defense, went up to Newhouse and shook his hand.

He explained his actions by saying the president indicated he had a mandate to cut Medicaid. Green said Trump doesn't have a mandate to cut the program that many of his constituents rely on.

"This is a matter of principle. This is a matter of conscience," Green said. "There are people suffering in this country because they don't have health care."

## **Chicago mayor doesn't take committee comments personally**

Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson says his experience as a middle school teacher prepared him for his appearance in front of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

He spoke to reporters after the roughly six-hour-long hearing involving four Democratic mayors of what are known as "sanctuary cities," including Johnson, ended.

He said he doesn't take some of the attacks that were directed at him during the hearing personally.

One committee member said she would be referring the four mayors to the Justice Department over their policies. Johnson said that if that happens, their legal team would review it and proceed accordingly.

House Democrats fail to block an effort to censure Rep. Al Green for heckling Trump during his address

The parliamentary tactic to table the censure resolution failed with 209 Democrats in support and 211 Republicans against. The result means a final vote on whether to censure Green, of Texas, will likely take place Thursday.

Green was escorted out of the chamber for the disruption early in the Tuesday address when Trump boasted of his election victory and Green countered, "You have no mandate."

House Speaker Mike Johnson told Green to take his seat, but he refused. Johnson ordered the sergeant at arms to restore order by removing Green.

## **National Parks Service says it's implementing orders by removing transgender references on agency websites**

Last month, the National Parks Service removed references to transgender people from a website for the Stonewall National monument. The National Parks Conservation Association, a group that advocates for the national park system, said Wednesday that the same thing has since happened on other of the service's websites, which The Associated Press verified.

The National Parks Service said in an email Wednesday afternoon that it's been removing references to transgender people on agency websites to implement Trump's executive order that calls for the federal government to define sex as only male or female and rejects that people can transition from one gender to another.

There was a further order from the acting interior secretary at the time telling the agency's departments to do so.

## **Trump welcomes 13-year-old cancer survivor to the Oval Office after honoring him during address**

D.J. Daniel got an honorary U.S. Secret Service badge and a nationally televised standing ovation during Trump's address to Congress on Tuesday.

But the fun in Washington wasn't over for the Texas teen who dreams of being a police officer. Trump welcomed Daniel and his family to the Oval Office on Wednesday.

White House aide Margo Martin posted a brief clip of their interaction on the social platform X. Daniel approached Trump, who was seated at his desk, and hugged him.

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"There's one more thing I got for you: a big hug," the boy told the president.

"That was a big evening last night, wasn't it?" Trump said to Daniel's father.

## **During border visit, Vance says US forces won't invade Mexico**

Vice President JD Vance says U.S. forces won't invade Mexico despite the president designating drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations, opening the door for potential military action.

Asked about the potential for ground forces during a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border, Vance responded emphatically: "No. Next question."

He declined to offer details on any potential air strikes or other military activity.

"The president has a megaphone, and he'll speak to those issues as he feels necessary," Vance said.

Vance went to Eagle Pass, Texas, along with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard to tout a drop in illegal border crossings.

Vance said the administration is still working to ramp up its capacity to carry out the mass deportations that Trump promised during his campaign. He blamed a need for more funding and alleged that former President Joe Biden "gutted" the immigration enforcement apparatus.

## **Justice Department opens investigation into antisemitism at the University of California**

The U.S. Department of Justice says it has opened a civil rights investigation into claims that the University of California allowed an "antisemitic hostile work environment" for Jewish faculty and staff.

The investigation will determine if the 10-campus University of California system allowed discrimination against Jewish employees after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel and a wave of pro-Palestinian campus protests that followed, the department said in a statement.

The University of California said it had been notified of the decision to open an investigation.

"We want to be clear: the University of California is unwavering in its commitment to combating antisemitism and protecting everyone's civil rights," a UC statement said.

The Trump administration has promised to take a tougher stance against campus antisemitism. The administration has opened federal investigations into five campuses, including Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley.

## **'That's it!' Sanctuary cities hearing ends**

After roughly six hours, a contentious hearing about "sanctuary cities" policies in four Democratic major cities is over.

Republican Chairman James Comer said, "That's it!" in calling an end to the session.

He added: "Believe it or not, this is the best behaved this committee has been all Congress."

## **AOC grills Adams about the Department of Justice handling his case**

New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has told NYC Mayor Eric Adams that he should be invoking the right against self-incrimination if he wants to dodge questions about an alleged quid pro quo arrangement with the Trump administration to drop his corruption charges in exchange for immigration enforcement cooperation.

Under questioning, Adams acknowledged that seven career Department of Justice officials resigned after they were ordered to drop his case.

Ocasio-Cortez described the alleged DOJ arrangement they resigned in protest against as a "four-alarm fire" that Americans should pay attention to.

"This is important not just for the city of New York, but for the people of the United States of America," she said. "What other city, what other individual, what other municipality leader can be next?"

## **It's not just the Stonewall website where references to transgender people have disappeared**

Last month, the National Parks Service removed references to transgender people from a website for the Stonewall National monument. The National Parks Conservation Association, a group that advocates for the national park system, says the same thing has since happened on other of the service's websites.

In some cases, whole items have been removed, including an article about Marsha P. Johnson, a transgender woman who was part of the Stonewall history, as well as The Pride Guide, an interactive workbook

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on LGBTQ+ history.

"We're really concerned about the erasure of history relevant to all communities," said Kristen Sykes, the Northeast regional director for NPCA. "We would like the American people to be able to get the full breadth of the story."

The Associated Press verified that the pages are no longer available on Park Service sites.

The National Parks Service did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

## **Social Security Administration says it is correcting records of deceased people**

The agency said it has made "significant progress" in identifying and correcting beneficiary records of people 100 years old or older.

During his address to Congress on Tuesday, Trump repeated the claim that millions of people over 100, some up to 360 years old, are collecting Social Security benefits.

The agency said in a Wednesday statement that "while these people may not be receiving benefits, it is important for the agency to maintain accurate and complete records."

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.

The agency's acting commissioner clarified last month that deceased centenarians were "not necessarily receiving benefits."

## **Federal judge blocks drastic funding cuts to medical research**

A federal judge has blocked the Trump administration from drastically cutting medical research funding that many scientists say will endanger patients and cost jobs.

The new National Institutes of Health policy would strip research groups of hundreds of millions of dollars to cover so-called indirect expenses of studying Alzheimer's, cancer, heart disease and a host of other illnesses — anything from clinical trials of new treatments to basic lab research that is the foundation for discoveries.

Separate lawsuits filed by a group of 22 states plus organizations representing universities, hospitals and research institutions nationwide sued to stop the cuts, saying they would cause "irreparable harm."

U.S. District Judge Angel Kelley in Boston had temporarily blocked the cuts last month. Wednesday, she filed a preliminary injunction that puts the cuts on hold for longer, while the suits proceed.

## **Vance tours US-Mexico border by air and holds roundtable with officials**

Vance participated in an aerial tour of the U.S.-Mexico border by helicopter and is holding a roundtable discussion with law officials.

His trip to Eagle Pass, Texas, is meant to highlight tougher immigration policies that the White House says has led to dramatically fewer arrests for illegal crossings since Trump's second term began.

Vance is being joined by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard. Trump has yet to visit the border himself since returning the White House on Jan. 20.

## **About 180 fired CDC employees are invited back, some to fight outbreaks**

Emails went out Tuesday to some Centers for Disease Control and Prevention probationary employees who got termination notices last month, according to current and former CDC employees.

A message seen by the AP was sent with the subject line, "Read this e-mail immediately." It said their Feb. 15 termination notices have been rescinded. "We apologize for any disruption that this may have caused," it said.

About 180 people received the reinstatement emails, according to two federal health officials who were briefed on the tally but were not authorized to discuss it and spoke on condition of anonymity.

It's not clear how many of them returned to work Wednesday.

## **French president promises nuclear deterrent against Russia**

Emmanuel Macron said he will confer with European allies on using France's nuclear deterrent to protect the continent from Russian threats, now that support from the U.S. is less certain.

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Macron also said he hopes to persuade President Donald Trump to abandon his threat to impose 25% tariffs on European goods.

In a televised address to his nation, Macron described Russia as a "threat to France and Europe," and said he had decided "to open the strategic debate on the protection of our allies on the European continent by our (nuclear) deterrent."

Whether or not to use France's nuclear weapons, he said, is a decision that remains only in the French president's hands.

## **GOP representative: 'Your policies are hurting the American people'**

Republican Rep. Anna Paulina Luna of Florida says she's asking the Justice Department to investigate Democratic mayors of so-called "sanctuary cities."

Luna said she didn't think the mayors of Boston, Chicago, New York and Denver are "bad people" — she said they're just "ideologically misled."

Luna said she'd be making a case to Attorney General Pam Bondi.

## **Texas governor's migrant busing campaign called haphazard and inhumane**

A controversial operation by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott that transported asylum seekers to so-called sanctuary cities has been a sore point for Democrats at a congressional hearing with big city mayors.

Abbott has said paying to move more than 100,000 migrants out of state was a way to relieve pressure on border cities.

But the big-city mayors testifying Wednesday complained that Texas refused to communicate with them.

Several cities filed lawsuits and levied fines against bus companies, which would often drop people off at all hours, far from public transit.

## **White House confirms 'ongoing talks and discussions' with Hamas amid ceasefire uncertainty**

White House press Secretary Karoline Leavitt on Wednesday confirmed that U.S. officials have had "ongoing talks and discussions" with Hamas officials.

The talks come as the Israel-Hamas ceasefire remains in the balance.

Leavitt declined to detail the talks, which were first reported by the news site Axios.

## **GOP representative contradicts Trump's call for mass deportations**

President Donald Trump and members of his team have made no secret of wanting to deport immense numbers of immigrants living illegally in the U.S.

In his Tuesday night address, Trump said: "I have sent Congress a detailed funding request, laying out exactly how we will eliminate these threats to protect our homeland and complete the largest deportation operation in American history."

But on Wednesday, Republican Rep. James Comer indicated otherwise during a congressional hearing on so-called sanctuary policies. "I don't think anyone's calling for mass deportation," he said during one exchange.

## **Trump exempts auto imports from Mexico and Canada from tariffs for one month**

President Donald Trump is granting a one-month exemption on his stiff new tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada for U.S. automakers, amid fears that the trade war could harm U.S. manufacturers.

Wednesday's announcement comes after Trump spoke with leaders of the "Big 3" automakers — Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis.

"We are going to give a one month exemption on any autos coming through USMCA," Trump said in a statement read by his spokesperson, referencing the North American Free Trade Agreement he renegotiated in his first term.

## **Pressley, Comer clash in 'sanctuary cities' hearing**

Democratic Rep. Ayanna Pressley and Republican Chairman James Comer clashed as Pressley was trying to introduce several articles into the record of the proceedings.

Comer repeatedly banged his gavel to get her to stop talking while Pressley continued.

At one point Comer accused Democrats of "trying to get thrown out of committee so you can end up

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on MSNBC.”

“We’re not going to put up with it,” Comer said.

## **Teachers union sues to block anti-DEI ‘Dear Colleague’ memo**

The nation’s largest teachers’ union is challenging a Trump administration memo ordering schools to end “race-based” practices of any kind or lose their federal money.

The National Education Association’s federal lawsuit, filed Wednesday in New Hampshire, argues that the Feb. 14 memo violates teachers’ free speech rights and is unclear on what practices could run afoul of the memo.

It asks a judge to strike down the Education Department’s “Dear Colleague” Letter, which gave schools two weeks to end any practice that treats people differently based on their race, including in admissions, hiring and any aspect of student life.

The administration argues that diversity policies have discriminated against white and Asian American students.

## **Trump and Trudeau speak by phone**

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is unwilling to lift Canada’s retaliatory tariffs if President Donald Trump leaves any U.S. tariffs on Canada, a senior government official told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The official confirmed Trudeau’s stance on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. The official said Trump and Trudeau spoke by phone around midday. A White House official later confirmed the call.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford told the AP that if the tariffs remain, the American and Canadian auto industries will last about 10 days before they start shutting down assembly lines in the U.S. and Ontario.

“People are going to lose their jobs,” Ford said.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said he expected Trump to announce a decision Wednesday afternoon.

— Josh Boak and Rob Gillies

## **Immigration czar defends NYC mayor**

Trump administration immigration czar Tom Homan went on X to defend Eric Adams, who is among a group of Democratic mayors testifying before Congress on so-called sanctuary city policies.

Adams faced sharp questioning from Democratic lawmakers over his willingness to work with the Trump administration on immigration as the Justice Department works to drop corruption charges against him.

“Watching some of the sanctuary city hearing while on a flight,” Homan wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. “One Democrat congressman accuses Mayor Adams of “selling out New Yorkers” while making a deal with Tom Homan. Simply disgusting. Mayor Adams is trying to protect New Yorkers from violent illegal aliens. He is trying.”

## **Clergy: Morality is at stake as Trump administration dismantles government**

A small group of clergy members across denominations and faiths protested on Capitol Hill, calling out the Trump Administration and Congress on issues including cutting funding to aid programs and the targeting of the federal workforce by the Department of Government Efficiency.

Rev. William Barber said the group came to Congress to keep the attention on how lawmakers are spending the people’s money while attention is turned to the president’s executive orders.

“If people’s lives and livelihoods can be dismissed as waste without due process, we forsake our moral commitments to equality,” Barber said.

## **Trump fuels Greenland’s independence fight with his talk of seizing the island**

Many Greenlanders say Trump’s comments have boosted their movement for full independence from Denmark — the key issue in a parliamentary election on March 11.

They’re worried and offended by Trump’s threats to seize control of their homeland, but they’re also hopeful.

“Even though there are strong feelings of sadness, despair, confusion, I think we’re also stronger than ever,” Aka Hansen, an Inuk filmmaker and writer, told The Associated Press in Nuuk, the capital of the



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semi-autonomous territory.

She is suspicious of Trump's intentions but still thanks him for turning the world's attention to her homeland. Like many other Greenlanders, she doesn't want to be ruled by another colonial power. But she feels Trump's rhetoric has increased the momentum for independence.

## **Thousands of USDA workers may get their jobs back**

More than 5,000 employees fired by the Trump administration should be put back on the job at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, according to a government panel that enforces workers' rights.

The order by the Merit Systems Protection Board followed a request by the Office of Special Counsel. And while this order applies only to the USDA workers, Special Counsel Hampton Dellinger issued a statement "calling on all federal agencies to voluntarily and immediately rescind any unlawful terminations of probationary employees."

The employees were in their probationary periods when they lost their jobs last month. They'll be on the job for 45 days as an investigation continues.

## **Mayor strongly defends Chicago's immigrant protections**

Mayor Brandon Johnson says immigrants help prevent and solve crimes, and that threatening to deport them makes American cities more dangerous.

"Scapegoating entire communities is not only misleading, it is unjust and beneath us," the first-term Democrat said.

The city's immigrant protections are decades old, said Johnson, adding that he's the mayor of all people in Chicago, whether they have legal status or not. Chicago has spent more than \$600 million on migrant services and shelter.

More than 50,000 asylum seekers were sent on buses and planes to the nation's fourth-largest city, many by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott.

## **Trump's USAID leader has 'concerns' about Supreme Court ruling against funding freeze**

Pete Marocco, the Trump political appointee overseeing dismantling of USAID, told a closed-door meeting of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Wednesday that he would review the court's ruling reinstating an order to release frozen foreign aid.

That's according to Committee Chairman Brian Mast. Committee members noted that Marocco did not directly answer when asked by Democrats if he would obey the high court and unfreeze the funding.

Trump called the spending wasteful and out of line with his foreign policy goals.

In dissent, Justice Samuel Alito wrote that he's stunned that the ruling "imposes a \$2 billion penalty on American taxpayers."

## **Musk coming to Capitol Hill amid DOGE fallout**

Musk is headed to Capitol Hill to meet privately with Republicans among growing questions about his government-slashing DOGE effort.

The billionaire Trump aide planned a private huddle with Senate Republicans at lunch and a separate meeting with House GOP lawmakers.

The blowback from constituents to government cuts has prompted Speaker Mike Johnson to advise Republicans to skip holding town hall meetings where they are being confronted by protesters.

## **Under oath, Adams denies agreement with Trump to drop corruption charges against him**

New York City Mayor Eric Adams speaks during a press conference at City Hall, Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, in New York. A top official at the U.S. Department of Justice has ordered federal prosecutors to drop charges against New York Mayor Eric Adams and halt the ongoing investigation. (AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura)

Two hours into the hearing, Democratic lawmakers grilled Mayor Eric Adams, a Democrat, over his cooperation with Trump's immigration officials and the subsequent dropping of corruption charges against him.

"Are you selling out New Yorkers to save yourself from prosecution?" asked Rep. Robert Garcia, of California.

Using a giant printout of a document, Garcia pointed out that a prosecutor resigned rather than dropping the charges.

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"There's no deal, no quid pro quo. And I did nothing wrong," Adams said.

## **Democrat Eric Adams gets rare praise from Republican lawmakers**

Republican Rep. James Comer went out of his way to thank Mayor Eric Adams for embracing the idea of working with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, one of the few compliments doled out by Republican lawmakers at the hearing.

Unlike the other panelists, Adams has flown to Florida to meet with Trump, praised him publicly and appeared jointly with his federal immigration officials.

Adams' critics say the collaboration is part of an effort to wriggle out of federal corruption charges. But even before Trump was elected, Adams called on city lawmakers to allow the NYPD to collaborate even more with ICE.

## **10 hackers, 2 Chinese officials charged in cyberespionage targeting US agencies**

Ten Chinese hackers have been charged alongside two Chinese law enforcement officers in a global hacking campaign that targeted dissidents, news organizations and U.S. agencies, the Justice Department announced Wednesday.

The hacking by workers of I-Soon was done in some cases at the direction of China's Ministry of Public Security, which received the stolen information and selected targets for the intrusions as part of what U.S. officials say was a massive intelligence-gathering operation.

Among the targets of the hacking was the U.S. Treasury Department, which disclosed a breach by Chinese actors late last year.

I-Soon is part of a sprawling industry in China, documented in an Associated Press investigation last year, of private hacking contractors are companies that steal data from other countries to sell to the Chinese authorities.

## **Trump administration internal memo: 80,000 employees to be cut from Veterans Affairs**

The Department of Veterans Affairs is planning an "aggressive" reorganization to cut staff across the sprawling agency that provides health care for retired military, according to internal memo obtained by The Associated Press.

The VA's chief of staff, Christopher Syrek, told top agency officials that it's objective is to return to 2019 staffing levels of just under 400,000, before the VA expanded to cover veterans impacted by burn pits under the 2022 PACT Act.

Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal said "It's a shameful betrayal, and veterans will pay the price for their unforgivable corruption, incompetence, and immorality."

Government Executive first reported on the internal memo.

## **US sanctions Houthi members for weapons procurement**

The U.S. sanctioned seven Houthi militants on Wednesday for allegedly procuring weapons from Russia and smuggling military-grade weapons into areas they control in Yemen.

The Office of Foreign Assets Control also sanctioned on a Houthi-affiliated operative and his firm accused of recruiting Yemeni civilians to fight on behalf of Russia in Ukraine.

"Houthi leaders have shown their intent to continue their reckless and destabilizing actions in the Red Sea region," Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in a news release. "The United States will use all available tools to disrupt the Houthis' terrorist activities and degrade their ability to threaten U.S. personnel, our regional partners, and global maritime trade."

## **Wisconsin governor urges congressional Republicans to stand up to Trump**

Gov. Tony Evers' open letter Wednesday urges the state's Republican congressional delegation "to do more than offer vague concern" and to stand up to "reckless, chaotic decisions and disastrous cuts to our federal programs and workforce."

The Democratic governor also called on the state's six GOP House members and one Republican senator to reject cuts to Medicaid and other federal assistance programs, which he said "would almost certainly blow a devastating hole in our state budget."

Evers' state budget plan would hold \$500 million in reserve to deal with potential federal cuts, but he

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said that may not be enough.

## **Chicago owes its founding to a Haitian immigrant, mayor says**

Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson said that crime is down in his city as well, and noted that a Haitian immigrant, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, is recognized as a founding settler.

"Chicago is and always has been a proud city of immigrants. Generations of new arrivals, including the descendants of the enslaved during the Great Migration, created a vibrant city where 1 in 5 residents is foreign born," Johnson said.

## **Boston's mayor opens by noting how much safer her city has become**

"Last year, Boston saw the fewest homicides on record in the last 70 years," Michelle Wu told the committee, citing a figure backed up by local reporting that mirrors trends across U.S. cities.

"This federal administration is making hard-working taxpaying, God-fearing residents afraid to live their lives," said Wu, a self-described "daughter of immigrants" and Roman Catholic who testified with an ash cross on her forehead in acknowledgement of Ash Wednesday.

## **Denver mayor scolds Texas governor for dumping immigrants on his city**

Mayor Mike Johnston said Texas forced the city to provide for busloads of immigrants.

"The question Denver faced was, what will you do with a mom and two kids dropped on the streets of our city with no warm clothes, no food, and no place to stay?" Johnston said.

He also noted how Colorado police officer Julian Becerra, a Mexican immigrant, died pursuing a carjacking suspect. "If we want to tell the story of what impact immigrants have in America, we must tell the full story," Johnston said.

## **Big-city mayors are now testifying to the House oversight committee on 'sanctuary' policies**

They're challenging the idea that such policies mean they're protecting criminals.

New York Mayor Eric Adams, a former police officer, said "If an undocumented individual witnesses a crime but is afraid to call 911 for fear of being turned over to federal authorities, criminals will roam free."

Adams described first-hand experience with this dilemma — he and other officers caught the suspect of a crime, but the witness was "an undocumented man from China" who wouldn't file a police report because he feared putting "a target on his back with federal immigration authorities."

Beijing and US Defense Secretary trade talk of war

Trump suggested that eliminating persistent U.S. trade deficits is the goal of the 20% tariffs he's imposed on imports from China.

Beijing immediately responded with 15% tariffs on U.S. farm exports and more export controls on U.S. companies.

"If war is what the U.S. wants, be it a tariff war, a trade war or any other type of war, we're ready to fight till the end," China's embassy posted on X on Tuesday night.

In response Wednesday, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told Fox News Channel's "Fox & Friends" that "those who long for peace must prepare for war."

## **Canadian finance minister: 'We're not interested in meeting in the middle'**

"Canada wants the tariffs removed," Canadian Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is not willing to lift Canada's retaliatory tariffs if Trump leaves any tariffs on Canada, a senior government official told The Associated Press. The official confirmed the stance on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Trudeau said Tuesday that Canada will reluctantly respond by plastering tariffs on over \$100 billion (U.S. dollars) of American goods over the course of 21 days.

Trudeau spoke during a fiery news conference, saying Trump is launching a trade war against the closest friend of the U.S. while "appeasing Vladimir Putin, a lying, murderous dictator. Make that make sense."

Loud protest condemns USAID freeze outside House briefing

Protesters shouted condemnations of Trump's leadership of USAID Wednesday outside a Capitol brief-

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ing on the agency's shutdown.

Deputy USAID head Pete Marocco was giving a closed-door briefing to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on cuts eliminating thousands of U.S. foreign assistance programs and dismantling the agency.

"Marocco has blood on his hands! Unfreeze aid now!" the roughly 20 protesters yelled, sitting cross-legged in front of the room doors. Capitol police carried them away one by one.

Marocco and ally Elon Musk have presided over Trump's foreign assistance funding freeze, terminating 90% of USAID programs and taking all but a fraction of agency workers off the job through firings and forced leaves.

## **Trump administration lists hundreds of federal buildings for potential sale**

The list of more than 440 federal properties to close or sell initially included the FBI headquarters and the main Department of Justice building. The General Services Administration deemed them "not core to government operations."

Hours later on Tuesday, the administration issued a revised list with only 320 entries — none in Washington, D.C. The GSA didn't immediately respond to questions about the change.

In a follow-up meeting, GSA regional managers were told their goal is to terminate as many as 300 leases per day, according to an employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

The canceled office leases raise questions about services provided from these offices. The properties include federal courthouses and Internal Revenue Service centers in West Virginia, Utah, Tennessee, Georgia, Texas, Massachusetts and New York.

By Jill Colvin and Michael R. Sisak

## **Latino leaders disappointed by lack of solutions in Trump's message**

Latino leaders said Trump's address to Congress prioritized division instead.

Trump had the opportunity to address the nation's economic challenges but decided instead to emphasize policies that make life more difficult for working families, said a statement by Voto Latino.

And UnidosUS president Janet Murguía said Trump repeated campaign rhetoric and blamed the previous administration instead of focusing on what is being done to help working class Americans.

"The focus of the Latino community continues to be the economy and inflation, and we heard very little," Murguía said.

## **Veterans speak out on the Trump administration's plans to cut the VA's budget**

Some veterans told The Associated Press they're in favor of Trump's proposed cuts to the Department of Veterans Affairs, while others are strongly opposed.

Stephen Watson is a former Marine who lives in Jesup, Georgia — he says everyone, including veterans, needs to share in the sacrifice to bring the nation's spending under control.

But former Marine Gregg Bafundo, of Tonasket, Washington, disagrees — he says Trump's cuts are only about "hurting people and breaking things."

The Republican administration's plans to cut \$2 billion in VA contracts are currently on pause over concerns that critical health services for veterans would be harmed.

## **A mayor, baby in arms, prepares to be grilled by Republicans**

Mayor Michelle Wu just gave birth in January and now her baby daughter has come to Congress.

Ahead of what's expected to be tough questioning by Republicans over the city's policies limiting cooperation with immigration enforcement, Wu appeared in the committee hearing room with her baby daughter — Mira, wearing a pink onesie — in her arms.

The baby is Wu's third. The mayor returned to work just a few weeks after giving birth.

Democrats meanwhile are showing support. Rep. Delia Ramirez of Illinois spoke ahead of the hearing about the economic contributions of immigrants in Illinois and Chicago. She said it would be illegal to withhold federal funds from cities that limit their cooperation with immigration enforcement.

"Our communities will not be bullied into compliance with their illegal unconstitutional authoritarian agenda," she said.

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## **Trump and first lady offer prayers for holy season Lent**

The president and his wife, Melania, offered best wishes to Roman Catholics and Christians observing Lent, which began with Ash Wednesday.

Christians worldwide spend the next 40 days praying and fasting. On Wednesday, they wear crosses of ash on their foreheads as a reminder of their mortality.

"We offer you our best wishes for a prayerful and enriching Lenten season," the Trumps wrote.

Trump told Religion News Service in 2020 that he considers himself to be a nondenominational Christian and no longer identifies as Presbyterian.

## **Leaders of France and Britain could accompany Zelenskyy for another Trump meeting**

The French government spokesperson said Wednesday that Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer could travel together with Ukraine's leader.

"It is envisaged that President Macron could eventually travel again to Washington with President Zelenskyy and his British counterpart," spokesperson Sophie Primas told reporters. She did not elaborate. No trip is being planned yet, Macron's office later said.

Macron plans a televised address to his nation Wednesday about what he called the "great uncertainty" in global affairs.

## **Supreme Court rejects Trump push to rebuke a judge in foreign aid freeze**

By a 5-4 vote Wednesday, the court told U.S. District Judge Amir Ali to clarify his earlier order that required the Republican administration to release nearly \$2 billion in aid for work that had already been done.

Justice Samuel Alito led four conservative justices in dissent, saying Ali lacks the authority to order the payments. Alito wrote that he is stunned the court is rewarding "an act of judicial hubris."

### **US pauses intelligence sharing with Ukraine**

The U.S. has paused its sharing of intelligence with Ukraine following Trump's decision to withhold military aid for the Ukrainian defense against Russian invaders.

National Security Advisor Mike Waltz said Wednesday that the U.S. has "taken a step back" in its relationship with Ukraine. CIA Director John Ratcliffe called the suspension a "pause" and that American intelligence and military aid could begin flowing again soon once Trump knows that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is serious about peace.

## **Businesses scramble to contain fallout from Trump's tariffs**

A Minnesota farmer worries about the price of fertilizer. A San Diego entrepreneur deals with an unexpected cost increase of remodeling a restaurant. A Midwestern sheet metal fabricator bemoans the prospect of higher aluminum prices.

Many business owners hoped that Trump would avoid actually imposing tariffs on America's biggest trading partners. No such luck. And the longer the tariffs stick, the more damage they can do, forcing companies to decide between eating higher costs and passing them along to inflation-weary consumers.

## **Republicans hammer mayors of Boston, Chicago, Denver and New York over 'sanctuary city' policies**

By REBECCA SANTANA and TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican members of Congress hammered four Democratic mayors Wednesday about their so-called sanctuary city policies, accusing them of endangering Americans and threatening to prosecute local officials. The mayors pushed back, defending their communities as welcoming places — not lawless danger zones — and called on Congress to pass immigration reforms.

The comments came in an often fiery hearing before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, where Republicans said the mayors were undermining President Donald Trump's immigration and mass deportation efforts.

Republicans repeatedly highlighted a handful of brutal crimes committed by immigrants who crossed illegally into the U.S., with Rep. James Comer opening the hearings by saying the policies "only create sanctuary for criminals."

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But the Democratic mayors — Michelle Wu of Boston, Brandon Johnson of Chicago, Mike Johnston of Denver and Eric Adams of New York — defended their policies as legal, even as they seemed to carefully avoid using the term “sanctuary.”

Republicans, they said, were trying to paint their cities as overrun by criminal immigrants even as crime was falling. The mayors said a key to safety is creating cities where residents feel comfortable reporting crimes and working with police.

“We know there are myths about these laws. But we must not let mischaracterizations and fearmongering obscure the reality that Chicago’s crime rates are trending down,” Johnson told the committee in a hearing room packed with reporters and onlookers. “We still have a long way to go, but sensationalizing tragedy in the name of political expediency is not governing. It’s grandstanding.”

There’s no legal definition for sanctuary city policies, but they generally limit cooperation by local law enforcement with federal immigration officers. Courts have repeatedly upheld the legality of sanctuary laws.

Illegal immigration was a key plank of Trump’s presidential campaign, and he has repeatedly pressed on the theme since coming to office, including a Tuesday night speech to Congress where he vowed to “complete the largest deportation operation in American history.”

Republicans have largely echoed Trump.

“We cannot let pro-criminal alien policies and obstructionist sanctuary cities continue to endanger American communities and the safety of federal immigration enforcement officers,” Comer said Wednesday.

But Denver’s Johnston said that crime dropped when the city was faced with an influx of immigrants, many bused from border states by Republican politicians. Like the other mayors, he said the onus should be on Congress to update federal immigration laws.

“If Denver can find a way to put aside our ideological differences long enough to manage a crisis we didn’t choose or create, it seems only fair to ask that the body that is actually charged with solving this national problem — this Congress — can finally commit to do the same,” he said.

Adams got some of the only praise from Republican lawmakers, with Comer thanking him for working with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Adams’ critics say his collaboration is part of an effort to wriggle out of federal corruption charges, though even before Trump was elected, the mayor called on city lawmakers to allow New York police to work more with ICE. The Trump administration ordered prosecutors to drop the case against Adams on the grounds that it was distracting him from helping the immigration crackdown and hindering his reelection campaign.

Democratic lawmakers questioned him sharply over his work with the Trump administration and Justice Department orders to drop the charges.

“Are you selling out New Yorkers to save yourself from prosecution?” asked Rep. Robert Garcia of California.

“There’s no deal, no quid pro quo. And I did nothing wrong,” Adams said.

Immigration law, the mayors said, is a federal responsibility, and the attempt to put that responsibility on local law enforcement makes communities distrust the police and others they may need to call for help. Trump’s crackdown, the mayors said, has terrified immigrants, many of them in the U.S. legally.

“I spoke with pastors whose pews are half-empty on Sundays,” said Wu, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan. “Doctors whose patients are missing appointments, teachers whose students aren’t coming to class, neighbors afraid to report crimes in their communities, and victims of violence who won’t call the police.”

“This federal administration is making hard-working, taxpaying, God-fearing residents afraid to live their lives.”

In communities that don’t cooperate on immigration, ICE agents go in to track down people after their release. ICE argues that this is dangerous and strains resources.

Ohio Republican Rep. Jim Jordan mocked Johnston for insisting his city was safe, referring to a recent arrest in which an ICE team chased a suspect through a jail parking lot after he was released from custody. In video provided by the Denver Department of Public Safety, the suspect and an agent appear to collide, and another trips and falls during the incident.

“That’s a lie because it was not safer for the ICE agents who are part of your community. No way was

it safer," he said.

Republicans also repeatedly raised the possibility that officials in sanctuary cities could face prosecution for breaking federal law, with Rep. Anna Paulina Luna of Florida saying she would be referring the mayors to the Justice Department for investigation.

"Your policies are hurting the American people," she told them.

Legal experts say that while charges could theoretically be filed, it is highly unlikely they would result in convictions.

The mayors were repeatedly asked about when they would cooperate with ICE and often replied that they would under a criminal warrant. That point can be important — the legality of sanctuary laws often hinges on the distinction between two types of warrants.

Sanctuary policies typically require local law enforcement to honor criminal warrants, which are signed by judges and allow agents to forcibly enter homes and make arrests related to alleged crimes.

Immigration agents, though, more often have administrative warrants, which are issued by ICE and not always recognized by local jurisdictions. Those warrants can be used to detain someone for violating immigration law but don't let agents enter homes without permission.

Some six hours after the hearing began, Comer called it to an end.

"Believe it or not, this is the best-behaved this committee has been all Congress," he said.

## **NFL legend Bill Belichick is coaching practices again. Only now he's a college rookie at UNC**

By AARON BEARD AP Sports Writer

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (AP) — Bill Belichick is back on the practice sidelines again, a familiar home for the man who won six Super Bowls as an NFL head coach.

Only now the setting is a small college town. And instead of that familiar hoodie, he was instead decked in a navy blue short-sleeved quarter-zip top and ballcap, along with mesh shorts in that distinctive shade of Carolina blue.

The 72-year-old is a rookie in college coaching, opening his first set of spring practices this week since taking over at North Carolina as part of that school's audacious bet to upgrade its football program.

"That's the great thing about being a head coach — I can coach anybody I want," Belichick quipped at his pre-practice news conference Wednesday. "I can coach the line, I can yell at the tight ends, I can yell at the DBs, I can yell at the kickers.

"I can go to any group I want and coach them. And honestly, that's the fun part."

When the news conference ended, Belichick started to walk away from the podium when he realized he left his whistle behind. He paused, picked it up and blew a short quick chirp — offering a bit of a symbolic start to spring drills for the media, anyway.

Belichick was hired in December and had a signed contract for a five-year deal — though only the first three years are guaranteed with \$10 million annually in base and supplemental salary — a month later. The goal is to build a pro-style model at the college level, creating what amounts to a "33rd" NFL team as general manager and former NFL executive Michael Lombardi put it last month.

He had continued appearances on ESPN's "The Pat McAfee Show" and had been spotted in social media posts from the recruiting trail or attending men's basketball games at the Smith Center, but he hadn't spoken to local reporters since his introductory news conference nearly three months ago.

The Tar Heels opened spring practices Tuesday, then let media members watch about 20 minutes of Wednesday's practice — though Belichick stood behind the end zone roughly 50-plus yards away from where they were allowed to observe.

Throw in the fact that the players aren't wearing numbers, and it was hard to pick up much of anything in that brief window.

His news conference proved more revealing in that regard, with Belichick providing fuller answers than the terse and grumpy responses he was known for with the New England Patriots. That included talk-

ing about the new wrinkle for him of having spring practices in pads at the college level, something that wasn't the case in the NFL.

He pointed to his time being around the Washington program as the Huskies prepared to enter the Big Ten before this past season. His son, Steve, worked there as defensive coordinator and Belichick said the progress made during those sessions last spring was "remarkable."

Now he gets to try it with his own program in Chapel Hill.

"The response has been great," Belichick said of connecting with teenagers and college-age players as opposed to NFL veterans in their mid- or late-30s. "It's kind of similar to what a rookie minicamp would be and time with the rookies. Granted, those kids are a little bit older, but they're coming in from all different programs and different situations.

"So it's starting to put everything together: here's how we do things, here's what our expectations are, this is what you need to do to be successful. They've embraced that, they've tried to do it."

Belichick teamed with quarterback Tom Brady during most of his 24-year tenure with the Patriots that included those six titles, most recently coming in the 2018 season. That run in Foxborough ended after the 2023 season, leaving Belichick with 333 career regular-season and postseason wins to trail Don Shula by just 14 for the NFL record.

He had been linked to NFL jobs after his exit from the Patriots, but nothing materialized — and soon, Belichick had made his first jump into college football after the Tar Heels moved on from Mack Brown as the winningest coach in program history.

UNC formally announced his coaching staff earlier this week, featuring a mix of NFL and college experience. The list includes former Cleveland Browns head coach Freddie Kitchens as a holdover from Mack Brown's staff, as well as sons Steve (defensive coordinator/linebackers) and Brian (defensive backs/safeties).

Belichick said it's too early to know how things will go with roster management for the upcoming season, including when it comes to the transfer portal for additions and departures after the 15-practice spring session concludes April 12.

UNC's longer-range target is a college-version of Monday Night Football, with the Tar Heels hosting TCU on Labor Day to open Belichick's tenure.

"We'll go out there and do what we do and see what happens, see how it goes," Belichick said.

"I know we have a good plan. I know we can do the right things to help the players improve, help the team improve and put a good product on the field."

## Things to know about avalanches, what causes them and how to stay safe

By The Associated Press undefined

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Three skiers are believed dead after an avalanche swept them away and buried them under a pile of snow nearly 10 stories deep in the Alaska backcountry.

Each winter about 25 people on average die in avalanches in the U.S., with most occurring in the wilderness, according to the National Avalanche Center. They are rare at ski resorts, which manage their slopes and trigger smaller slides on purpose when no visitors are around.

Here's a look at avalanches, how they occur and some tips on how to stay safe:

What were some recent avalanches?

The heli-skiers are believed to be dead after being swept away and buried Tuesday afternoon near the skiing community of Girdwood, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) south of Anchorage. Heli-skiing is a type of backcountry skiing that involves using a helicopter to access remote areas and slopes of fresh snow.

If the three men's deaths are confirmed, it would be the deadliest in the country since three climbers were killed in Washington's Cascade Mountains in 2023.

Experts said it is highly unlikely the helicopter triggered the avalanche because the vibration or noise from it doesn't release enough force.

Prior to this week, 15 people had been killed across the U.S. by avalanches this winter: 10 backcountry



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skiers and snowboarders, four people on snow machines and a ski patroller, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

The most recent was Feb. 28 in the Harts Pass area of Washington, where three snowmobilers were caught in a slide. One was killed, and one was injured.

One person was killed in central Colorado on Feb. 22 by a skier-triggered avalanche in a steep area above Berthoud Pass. It was the third avalanche death in the state this winter and the second in less than a week, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, after a Crested Butte snowboarder died Feb. 20 west of Silverton.

Elsewhere three people died Feb. 17 in avalanches: one person near Lake Tahoe, which straddles the California-Nevada border, and two backcountry skiers in Oregon's Cascade Mountains. On Feb. 8 a well-known outdoor guide was killed in an avalanche in Utah.

How do avalanches occur?

It generally takes just two ingredients to create dangerous conditions: A slope of 30 degrees or more and layers upon layers of snow.

Extra pressure on top of that snowpack from weight, wind, rain, heavy snow or motion can cause some of the layers to shear off and slide downhill.

Sometimes a slide happens in the form of loose snow, called a sluff. Sluffs account for only a small percentage of deaths and property damage from avalanches, according to the Sierra Avalanche Center.

Other avalanches are made up of slabs, which happen when a large layer of snow breaks away. Those account for most fatalities.

Another kind of avalanche occurs when wind creates a cornice of snow that hangs over a ridge or the edge of a steep slope. The overhang can collapse suddenly, catching anyone underneath or on top of it by surprise, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

What triggers an avalanche?

Movement, rapidly changing weather, wind — any one of these things can set off an avalanche. But experts say 90% of slides that cause an injury or death are triggered by the victim or a companion.

That means people who ski, snowmobile, snowshoe or enjoy other winter backcountry activities should check the avalanche forecast before they head out and make sure they have the right safety gear.

Most ski resorts have avalanche protocols or mitigation systems. Often that means checking snowpack stability. Remote detonations are also used to trigger slides intentionally and remove risky buildup before skiers are allowed on the slopes, said Chris Lundy, an avalanche specialist with the National Avalanche Center.

Lundy said is highly unlikely the helicopter that dropped off the skiers in Alaska's backcountry triggered the avalanche.

"There is a popular misconception that sounds or vibrations trigger avalanches, and that is not correct at all. There needs to be a physical force on the snowpack for an avalanche to occur," he said.

How can one avoid an avalanche?

Don't think for a second that you can outrun one. Dry slab avalanches typically reach speeds up to 80 mph (129 kph) within seconds, according to the Sierra Avalanche Center. Wet avalanches usually travel around 20 mph (32 kph).

By comparison eight-time Olympic gold medalist Usain Bolt set a record of just under 28 mph (45 kph) in the 100-meter dash in 2009 — and that was on a flat track, not a snow-covered slope. Most people caught in avalanches are on the slope when they occur.

The better plan is to make sure you're not in a place where one is at risk of occurring. Outdoor enthusiasts can check forecasts at regional avalanche centers or [www.avalanche.org](http://www.avalanche.org).

If you do venture out, it's a good idea to use the buddy system and be versed in wilderness first aid. Experts say three pieces of gear are essential: an avalanche beacon or transceiver, which sends location signals to others; a shovel to test snowpack or dig out companions; and a thin, folding pole to poke into the snow in search of anyone buried. An avalanche airbag backpack that inflates after the skier pulls the trigger giving the person a chance to stay above or close to the surface during an avalanche.

What if you get caught in an avalanche?

As fast as you can, try to cover or cup your mouth and nose with your hands. If your arms are extended when you're buried, you won't be able to move them.

The cupped hands provide a tiny air pocket. And your breath is warm when you blow out, so it can help melt the snow. If you're lucky you might be able to wiggle a finger or two to slowly dig through otherwise cementlike snow for space, with more air, and eventually escape.

## As many top Democrats stay silent on Cuomo mayoral run, an accuser feels betrayed

BY JAKE OFFENHARTZ and ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Lindsey Boylan helped drive Andrew Cuomo from office in 2021 when the former aide came forward as the first woman to accuse the governor of sexual harassment.

At the time she had allies in high places: Every New York Democrat in Congress, the state's legislative leaders and then-President Joe Biden all condemned Cuomo's behavior and said he should resign.

But now that Cuomo is back as a serious contender in the race to be mayor of New York City, many of those top Democrats have little to say about his candidacy.

To Boylan, that feels like a betrayal — one that can't simply be explained away as an easing of #MeToo outrage.

"If anything has changed, momentarily, it's that across our country, across issues, people who should be speaking up, aren't," Boylan, who served in the Cuomo administration for three years, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

"I don't think anything has specifically changed with women being angry about how our rights are being taken away," she said. "But the fact that most of our leaders are more interested in staying comfortable and staying in their jobs than actually protecting us and defending us. That's gotten much worse."

Cuomo resigned in 2021 after a report released by the state attorney general concluded that he had sexually harassed 11 women, including Boylan.

Now, Cuomo is a frontrunner in the mayoral race, even as state and party leaders, while not warm to his candidacy, haven't condemned it either.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, who as Cuomo's lieutenant governor had called his alleged behavior with women "repulsive and unlawful," said Tuesday she stood by those comments. But, she added, she had to "deal in the reality today."

"I have to go forward in light of where we are today and deal with whatever the voters decide to deal with," she said, adding that she would work with Cuomo if he was elected.

U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand said on the NY1 television station that Cuomo made mistakes, but was also a talented executive who did good things as governor. It was up to New York City voters whether he deserved a second chance, she said, declining to give her own opinion on his candidacy.

U.S. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, the House minority leader, said last week that he would not endorse a candidate until after the city's June primary. The office of U.S. Sen. Chuck Schumer, the Senate minority leader, declined to comment.

Cuomo comeback linked to disorder in New York City Hall

That Cuomo is a credible candidate is likely due to a mix of factors, experts said. These include the former governor's aggressive effort to discredit his accusers and his deep record of accomplishments as governor, as well as a field of mayoral candidates with little name recognition and an ongoing sense of disorder at City Hall.

Mayor Eric Adams, the incumbent, was indicted in September on federal corruption charges and is now dealing with a tempest of criticism after President Donald Trump's newly installed Justice Department leaders asked a court to drop the case so Adams could assist with the federal government's immigration crackdown.

In a statement, a Cuomo spokesperson, Rich Azzopardi, said multiple prosecutors have dug into the

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allegations the former governor sexually harassed women and none have sought to pursue the cases. He accused Boylan of making false accusations during a failed run for a local political office in 2020, and accused her of bullying behavior

"Three years, five district attorney reviews that resulted in zero cases and civil cases that were either dropped or are dying on the vine," Azzopardi said, calling that "a clarifying dose of due process."

New York City "is in crisis and everybody knows that Andrew Cuomo has the experience, the record and the skill to help save it," he added.

Grant Reeher, a political science professor at Syracuse University, said the current mayor's legal and political troubles help place Cuomo at the front of the pack of candidates.

"New York is in such a state of chaos and the government needs someone to come in and take charge and run the show. He is well-matched for that moment," he said.

Not to Boylan, though, who joined a demonstration outside a Cuomo campaign fundraising event on Tuesday.

"His path to victory is to destroy the women he abused," she told the AP. "I'll do everything within my power and my sense of ethics to make sure it doesn't happen."

Boylan, who said she was subjected to an unwanted kiss and inappropriate comments from Cuomo, was disappointed but not surprised that other Democrats in New York had not spoken out more forcefully.

"The most powerful people in New York politics are afraid of him," she said.

Other female ex-aides described fielding kisses — sometimes on the lips — and sexually charged questions and remarks from him about their personal lives and appearance.

A staffer at a state-related agency said he groped her rear while they posed for a photo. A state Health Department doctor was affronted by his comments, such as "you make that gown look good," while she gave him a COVID-19 test at a news conference. Another woman described Cuomo planting an unwanted kiss on her face when she met him at a wedding.

One aide, Brittany Commisso, filed a criminal complaint accusing Cuomo of groping her breast while they were alone in an office at the governor's mansion, but a local district attorney declined to prosecute, citing lack of sufficient evidence.

Cuomo apologized for having "offended" the women with remarks he said were intended to be collegial, and allowed that he sometimes had been "too familiar" with people. But he denied touching anyone inappropriately and said the investigation of his conduct was flawed and politically motivated.

Attorney General Letitia James, the Democrat who commissioned the sexual harassment investigation, herself briefly ran for governor in 2021 after Cuomo resigned, but dropped out after two months.

Trump helps reshape idea of what is acceptable

Cuomo's lawyers and representatives have since fought to vindicate him amid multiple lawsuits from his accusers. Cuomo even has indicated he plans to file a defamation suit against one of the women, former aide Charlotte Bennett.

Despite the accusations, Cuomo has lined up some endorsements from women in politics. City Council Member Kamillah Hanks, a Staten Island Democrat, said in her statement endorsing Cuomo that the "unprecedented times" called for a "strong, unapologetic" leader.

Trump, who has himself been accused of sexual misconduct and was found liable in 2023 by a New York City jury for sexual abuse, charges he denied, has also reshaped the idea of what is acceptable conduct for public officials, said Leigh Gilmore, a professor emeritus at Ohio State University and author of "The #MeToo Effect: What Happens When We Believe Women."

"The political winds have shifted with Trump being in office, where it's not agreed anymore that those are disqualifying allegations," she said.

"What Cuomo is betting on is that New York City will say, 'We need a strong man,'" she said.

## Trump grants one-month exemption for US automakers from new tariffs on imports from Mexico, Canada

By JOSH BOAK and ROB GILLIES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is granting a one-month exemption on his stiff new tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada for U.S. automakers, as worries persist that the newly launched trade war could crush domestic manufacturing.

The pause comes after Trump spoke with leaders of the “big 3” automakers, Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, on Wednesday, according to White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Asked if 30 days was enough for the auto sector to prepare for the new taxes, Leavitt said Trump was blunt with the automakers seeking an exemption: “He told them that they should get on it, start investing, start moving, shift production here to the United States of America where they will pay no tariff.”

Trump had long promised to impose tariffs, but his opening weeks in the White House involved aggressive threats and surprise suspensions, leaving allies unclear at what the U.S. president is actually trying to achieve.

Based off various Trump administration statements, the tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China imposed on Tuesday are about stopping illegal immigration, blocking fentanyl smuggling, closing the trade gap, balancing the federal budget and other nations showing more respect for Trump.

All of that has left Canada, a long-standing ally, determined to stand up against Trump with their own retaliatory tariffs, rejecting a White House overture to possibly reduce some of tariffs imposed on Tuesday.

“We are not going to back down,” Ontario Premier Doug Ford said after speaking with the Canadian prime minister. “We will not budge. Zero tariffs and that is it”

Ford told The Associated Press that the auto sector in the United States and Canada would last approximately 10 days before they start shutting down the assembly lines because of the tariffs.

“People are going to lose their jobs,” he said.

After the White House announced the one month reprieve, shares of big U.S., Asian and European automakers jumped as much as 6%.

But pausing the 25% taxes on autos and auto parts traded through the North American trade pact USMCA would only delay a broader reckoning to take place on April 2, when Trump is set to impose broad “reciprocal” tariffs to match the taxes and subsidies that other countries charge on imports.

The U.S. automaker Ford said in a statement: “We will continue to have a healthy and candid dialogue with the Administration to help achieve a bright future for our industry and U.S. manufacturing.”

GM in a statement thanked Trump “for his approach, which enables American automakers like GM to compete and invest domestically.”

Stellantis also thanked Trump for the one-month exemption, saying it “strongly” supported “his determination to enable the American automotive sector to thrive.”

Other industries are also likely to seek exemptions from the import taxes.

“A number of industries have reached out to us to ask us for exemptions to the tariffs,” Vice President JD Vance said Wednesday.

The White House repeatedly insisted that it would not grant exemptions and the sudden turnaround reflects the economic and political problems being created by Trump’s day-old tariffs. While the Republican president sees them as enriching the United States, his plans to tax imports have alienated allies and caused anxiety about slower economic growth and accelerating inflation.

The U.S. president engaged in a phone call on Wednesday with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, as U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick had suggested that the administration was looking to meet Canada and Mexico “in the middle.”

But Trudeau refused to lift Canada’s retaliatory tariffs so long as Trump continues with his new taxes on imports from Canada, a senior government official told The Associated Press. The official confirmed the stance on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

“Both countries will continue to be in contact today,” Trudeau’s office said.

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The prospect of a trade war appears to be an ongoing feature of the Trump administration. In addition to his upcoming reciprocal tariffs that could strike the European Union, India, Brazil, South Korea, Canada and Mexico, Trump wants to tax imports of computer chips, pharmaceutical drugs and autos. He also closed exemptions on his 2018 steel and aluminum tariffs and is investigating tariffs on copper as well.

Tariffs are taxes paid by importers in the countries receiving the goods, so the cost could largely be passed along to U.S. consumers and businesses in the form of higher prices. In his Tuesday night speech to a joint session of Congress, Trump tried to minimize the financial pain as a "little disturbance."

"It may be a little bit of an adjustment period," he said after claiming that farmers would benefit from reciprocal tariffs on countries that have tariffs on U.S. exports. "You have to bear with me again and this will be even better."

Trump has predicted that tariffs will lead to greater investment inside the U.S., creating factory jobs and boosting growth in the long term.

On Tuesday, Trump put 25% taxes on imports from Mexico and Canada, taxing Canadian energy products such as oil and electricity at a lower 10% rate. The president also doubled the 10% tariff he placed on China to 20%.

The administration has claimed that the tariffs are about stopping the smuggling of drugs such as fentanyl, with aides asserting that this is about a "drug war" rather than a "trade war." U.S. customs agents seized just 43 pounds (19.5 kilograms) of fentanyl at the northern border the last fiscal year.

Trudeau said on Tuesday that his country would plaster tariffs on over \$100 billion (U.S. dollars) of American goods over the course of 21 days, stressing that the United States had abandoned a long-standing friendship.

"Today, the United States launched a trade war against Canada, their closest partner and ally, their closest friend. At the same time, they are talking about working positively with Russia, appeasing Vladimir Putin, a lying, murderous dictator. Make that make sense," Trudeau said on Tuesday.

Mexico indicated it would announce its own countermeasures on Sunday.

Beijing responded with tariffs of up to 15% on a wide array of U.S. farm exports. It also expanded the number of U.S. companies subject to export controls and other restrictions by about two dozen.

"If war is what the U.S. wants, be it a tariff war, a trade war or any other type of war, we're ready to fight till the end," China's embassy to the United States posted on X on Tuesday night.

In response to China, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told Fox News Channel's "Fox & Friends" that the United States is "prepared" for war against the world's second largest economy.

"Those who long for peace must prepare for war," Hegseth said Wednesday morning. "If we want to deter war with the Chinese or others, we have to be strong."

Leavitt is one of three administration officials who face a lawsuit from The Associated Press on First- and Fifth-amendment grounds. The AP says the three are punishing the news agency for editorial decisions they oppose. The White House says the AP is not following an executive order to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America.

## Divided Supreme Court rejects Trump bid to freeze nearly \$2 billion in foreign aid

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A sharply divided Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected the Trump administration's bid to freeze nearly \$2 billion in foreign aid, but it was not clear how quickly money might start flowing.

By a 5-4 vote, the court rejected an emergency appeal from the Republican administration, while also telling U.S. District Judge Amir Ali to clarify his earlier order that required the quick release of nearly \$2 billion in aid for work that had already been done.

It was the second time the new administration had sought and failed to persuade the conservative-led court with three appointees of President Donald Trump to rein in a federal judge who put the brakes on

executive action taken by Trump.

Although the outcome is a short-term loss for the administration, the nonprofit groups and businesses that sued are still waiting for the money they say they are owed. Organizations in the U.S. and around the world have cut services and laid off thousands of workers as a result.

HIAS, one of the nonprofit groups in the case, said it was encouraged to see the Trump administration held accountable, but said it regretted "the irreparable damage that the Trump administration has already inflicted on our staff, the people we serve, and the reputation of the United States as a leader and a reliable partner."

The Maryland-based group has worked on refugee issues for more than a century, including giving potential refugees support to stay in their home countries.

Justice Samuel Alito led four conservative justices in dissent, saying Ali lacks the authority to order the payments. Alito wrote that he is stunned the court is rewarding "an act of judicial hubris and imposes a \$2 billion penalty on American taxpayers."

The court's action leaves in place Ali's temporary restraining order that had paused the spending freeze. Ali is holding a hearing Thursday to consider a more lasting pause.

The majority noted that the administration had not challenged Ali's initial order, only the deadline, which in any event passed last week.

The court told Ali to "clarify what obligations the government must fulfill to ensure compliance with the temporary restraining order, with due regard for the feasibility of any compliance timelines."

Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Amy Coney Barrett, two conservatives, joined the three liberal justices to form a majority.

Justices Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh joined Alito's dissent.

The Trump administration has argued that the situation has changed because it has replaced a blanket spending freeze with individualized determinations that led to the cancellation of 5,800 U.S. Agency for International Development contracts and another 4,100 State Department grants totaling nearly \$60 billion in aid.

The federal government froze foreign aid after an executive order from Trump targeting what he called wasteful programs that do not correspond to his foreign policy goals.

The lawsuit that followed claimed that the pause breaks federal law and has shut down funding for even the most urgent life-saving programs abroad.

Ali ordered the funding temporarily restored on Feb. 13, but nearly two weeks later he found the government was giving no sign of complying and set a deadline to release payment for work already completed.

The administration appealed, calling Ali's order "incredibly intrusive and profoundly erroneous" and protesting the timeline to release the money.

Pete Marocco, the Trump political appointee overseeing the dismantling of USAID, detailed "concerns" he had about the Supreme Court ruling to lawmakers Wednesday during an already scheduled closed-door briefing to the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Committee Chairman Brian Mast, a Florida Republican, described the exchange to reporters afterward. Mast and Democrats on the panel said that Marocco did not directly answer when asked by Democrats if he would obey the Supreme Court ruling on the funding freeze.

## **Vance promotes Trump's 'whole government' immigration crackdown during visit to US-Mexico border**

By WILL WEISSERT and VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas (AP) — Vice President JD Vance visited the U.S.-Mexico border on Wednesday and said that arrests for illegal crossings had fallen sharply because President Donald Trump is demanding that all of government prioritize the issue in ways his Democratic predecessor, Joe Biden, never did.

Vance was joined by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gab-

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bard, as he took a helicopter tour of the area around Eagle Pass, Texas, around 150 miles southwest of San Antonio. They also visited a Border Patrol facility and sat for a roundtable with Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and national, state and local officials.

Vance pointed to arrests for illegal border crossings plummeting 39% in January from a month earlier. The numbers have actually been falling sharply since well before Republican Trump took office for his second term on Jan. 20, coming down from an all-time high of 250,000 in December 2023. After that, Mexican authorities increased enforcement within their own borders and Biden introduced severe asylum restrictions early last summer.

"President Trump has empowered — and in fact demanded — that his whole government take the task of border control seriously," Vance said.

In an effort to impose harder-line immigration policies, the Trump administration has put shackled immigrants on U.S. military planes for deportation flights and sent some to the U.S. lockup at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. It has also expanded federal agents' arrests of people in the U.S. illegally and abandoned programs that gave some permission to stay.

The presence of Hegseth and Gabbard on the visit underscores how Trump is tasking agencies across the federal government with working to overhaul border and immigration policy, moving well beyond the Department of Homeland Security, the traditional home of most such functions.

"The border crisis has become a matter of national intelligence and it's also become something that requires the Department of Defense to engage," Vance said.

Gabbard blamed the Biden administration for the presence in the U.S. of people who crossed the border illegally and had possible ties to terrorists but were released into the country while they await immigration court proceedings.

"Who are they? What may they be plotting?" Gabbard asked. "This is just the beginning."

As part of his visit, Vance went to Shelby Park, a municipal park along the Rio Grande that Abbot seized from federal authorities last year in a feud with the Biden administration, after the governor accused the Biden White House of not doing enough to curb illegal crossings.

A group of friends and neighbors gathered two blocks from the park ahead of Vance's arrival. Dennis Charlton, a veteran and Eagle Pass resident with property along the border, wore two hats, one to commemorate his service and the other a red "Make America Great Again" cap.

He said he's witnessed human and drug smuggling activity on his border property that scared his wife and neighbors, but said such crossings have diminished significantly of late.

"I love it," Charlton said of the visit. "I just wish we could talk to him to thank him for everything that he and Trump have done."

Vance came to South Texas after Trump imposed 25% tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada, saying neither country is doing enough to stem illegal immigration and address drug trafficking, especially the flow of fentanyl across the U.S. border.

Asked about Trump's tariffs, Vance responded, "I actually think he's doing a huge favor to the people of Mexico because, if they don't get control of these cartels, the people of Mexico are going to wake up in a narco state, where the cartels have more power than their own government."

When asked about the potential for the U.S. to send troops to Mexico to battle drug cartels, Vance said he was "not going to make any announcements about any invasions of Mexico here today. The president has a megaphone and he'll of course speak to these issues as he feels necessary."

When pressed by reporters on if an invasion was really coming, Vance was more direct: "No," he said. "Next question."

Vance was also asked why more large-scale operations haven't been started to deport people who are in the U.S. illegally.

"Rome wasn't built in a day," Vance said. "We have seen pretty significant increases in deportations and apprehensive and arrests," he added. "But we have to remember, President Biden gutted the entire immigration enforcement regime of this country."

Since Trump's second term began, about 6,500 new active duty forces have been ordered to deploy to the southern border. Before that, there were about 2,500 troops already there, largely National Guard troops on active duty orders, along with a couple of hundred active duty aviation forces.

Troops are responsible for detection and monitoring along the border but don't interact with migrants attempting to illegally cross. Instead, they alert border agents, who then take the migrants into custody.

Biden tasked Vice President Kamala Harris with tackling the root causes of immigration during his administration, seeking to zero in on why so many migrants, particularly from Central America, were leaving their homelands and coming to the U.S. seeking asylum or trying to make it into the country illegally.

Harris made her first visit to the border in June 2021, about 3 1/2 months deeper into Biden's term than Vance's trip in the opening weeks of Trump's second term.

## **Ancient humans made tools from animal bones 1.5 million years ago**

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Early humans were regularly using animal bones to make cutting tools 1.5 million years ago.

A newly discovered cache of 27 carved and sharpened bones from elephants and hippos found in Tanzania's Olduvai Gorge site pushes back the date for ancient bone tool use by around 1 million years. Researchers know that early people made simple tools from stones as early as 3.3 million years ago.

The new discovery, published Wednesday in *Nature*, reveals that ancient humans "had rather more complex tool kits than previously we thought," incorporating a variety of materials, said William Harcourt-Smith, a paleoanthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History, who was not involved in the research.

The well-preserved bone tools, measuring up to around 16 inches (40 centimeters), were likely made by breaking off the thick ends of leg bones and using a stone to knock off flakes from the remaining bone shaft. This technique was used to create one sharpened edge and one pointed tip, said study co-author Ignacio de la Torre, a researcher at the Spanish National Research Council.

The bone tools were "probably used as a hand axe" — a handheld blade that's not mounted on a stick — for butchering dead animals, he said.

Such a blade would be handy for removing meat from elephant and hippo carcasses, but not used as a spear or projectile point. "We don't believe they were hunting these animals. They were probably scavenging," he said.

Some of the artifacts show signs of having been struck to remove flakes more than a dozen times, revealing persistent craftsmanship.

The uniform selection of the bones — large and heavy leg bones from specific animals — and the consistent pattern of alteration makes it clear that early humans deliberately chose and carved these bones, said Mírian Pacheco, a paleobiologist at the Federal University of Sao Carlos in Brazil, who was not involved in the study.

The bones show minimal signs of erosion, trampling or gnawing by other animals — ruling out the possibility that natural causes resulted in the tool shapes, she added.

The bone tools date from more than a million years before our species, *Homo sapiens*, arose around 300,000 years ago.

At the time the tools were made, three different species of human ancestors lived in the same region of East Africa, said Briana Pobiner, a paleoanthropologist at the Smithsonian's Human Origins Program, who was not involved in the study.

The tools may have been made and used by *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis* or *Paranthropus boisei*. "It could have been any of these three, but it's almost impossible to know which one," said Pobiner.



## The pope has increased his physical therapy and marked the start of Lent in the hospital

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis increased his physical therapy with his condition remaining stable on Wednesday, marking the start of Lent by receiving ashes on his forehead and calling the parish priest in Gaza, the Vatican said.

The Holy Father suffered no respiratory crises during the day, receiving oxygen through a nasal tube as has been the case in recent days. He will resume the use of a non-invasive mechanical mask for the night.

Doctors treating the pope for double pneumonia underlined that his prognosis remained guarded due to the complex picture. The 88-year-old pope, who has chronic lung disease and had part of one lung removed as a young man, had two respiratory crises on Monday in a setback to recovery.

During the morning he participated in an Ash Wednesday celebration, receiving ashes and Holy Communion. He later set to work, which included a call to the Rev. Gabriel Romanelli, the Argentine priest who is the parish priest of the Holy Family church in Gaza. It was the third time they have spoken since the pope was hospitalized Feb. 14.

The evening health bulletin carried the first mention of physical therapy for the pope, in addition to respiratory therapy, and the Vatican said it was to ensure no other negative impacts from the longest hospitalization of his papacy.

### Vatican opens Lent

The Catholic Church opened the solemn Lenten season leading to Easter on Wednesday without the participation of Pope Francis, who is in the third week of hospital treatment for double pneumonia.

A cardinal took the pope's place leading a short penitential procession between two churches on the Aventine Hill, and opened an Ash Wednesday homily prepared for the pontiff with words of solidarity and thanks for Francis.

"We feel deeply united with him in this moment," Cardinal Angelo De Donatis said. "And we thank him for the offering of his prayer and his suffering for the good of the entire church in all the world."

### Ash Wednesday

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and leads up to Easter on April 20. A cardinal has been designated to take Francis' place at Vatican celebrations.

On Ash Wednesday, observant Catholics receive a sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads, a gesture that underscores human mortality. It is an obligatory day of fasting and abstinence for Catholics that signals the start of Christianity's most penitent season.

"The condition of fragility reminds us of the tragedy of death," De Donatis said in his homily. "In many ways, we try to banish death from our societies, so dependent on appearances, and even remove it from our language. Death, however, imposes itself as a reality with which we have to reckon, a sign of the precariousness and brevity of our lives."

The pope was supposed to attend a spiritual retreat this weekend with the rest of the Holy See hierarchy. On Tuesday, the Vatican said the retreat would go ahead without Francis but in "spiritual communion" with him. The theme, selected before Francis got sick, was "Hope in eternal life."

### Prayers of support

Yuris Asis, visiting from Colombia, said he prayed for the pope "because his current condition, which is serious. All of the Catholic community around the world is praying for him."

Italian Emanuele Di Martino said the pope was utmost in his mind as he experienced the pilgrimage to the Vatican.

"We hope that the pope's health issues can be resolved because unfortunately the condition is not the best, but we hope and we trust that he will get well, if possible," Di Martino said.

## South Carolina Supreme Court rejects man's final appeal, clearing way for firing squad execution

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — The South Carolina Supreme Court has rejected what is likely the final appeal of condemned man Brad Sigmon, clearing the way for Friday's firing squad execution.

Sigmon's lawyers wanted to delay his death so they could get a fuller hearing in court to learn more information about the drug South Carolina uses in lethal injections. Sigmon said that lack of information forced him to choose to be shot to death. The state also has an electric chair, but Sigmon said he didn't want to suffer being cooked alive by electricity.

Sigmon's attorneys also argued that his lawyers in the original 2002 trial did a poor job of trying to save his life after he pleaded guilty by not submitting enough evidence of his mental problems.

Sigmon, 67, beat his ex-girlfriend's parents to death with a baseball bat in their Greenville County home. His plan was to kidnap his ex-girlfriend, spend a romantic weekend together and then kill her and himself. She escaped from his car as he drove away.

"If I couldn't have her, I wasn't going to let anybody else have her. And I knew it got to the point where I couldn't have her," Sigmon said in a confession typed out by a detective after his arrest.

Sigmon will be strapped into a chair at 6 p.m. Friday in the death chamber used for all South Carolina executions at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia. A target will be placed over his heart and a hood over his head. Three shooters, all with live ammunition, will fire from 15 feet (4.6 meters) away.

Sigmon would be the first inmate killed by firing squad in the U.S. in 15 years.

Lawyers for Sigmon said in court papers that he chose a violent death by firing squad because, without more information, he thought he would die a tortuous death if he picked lethal injection.

Autopsies from two inmates executed in the months since South Carolina changed its method of lethal injection to massive amounts of pentobarbital showed a considerable amount of fluid in their lungs. A defense expert testified the inmates could have suffered struggling to breathe.

But lawyers for the state have said fluid is often found in the lungs of prisoners killed by lethal injections and other courts have not ruled it was cruel and unusual punishment. They also said witnesses at the executions, including the inmates' attorneys, did not report any breathing or signs of consciousness after about a minute.

Prison officials also told the doctor conducting the autopsy that both Marion Bowman, who was executed on Jan. 31, and Richard Moore, executed on Nov. 1, needed twice the dose of the lethal injection drug typically used in other states and by the federal government.

In Moore's case, two doses were given 11 minutes apart. In Bowman's execution, it wasn't clear the time range, although a witness heard talking 10 minutes after the execution began.

"There is no justice here. Everything about this barbaric, state-sanctioned atrocity — from the choice to the method itself — is abjectly cruel. We should not just be horrified — we should be furious," defense attorney Gerald "Bo" King said in a statement.

South Carolina has a shield law that keeps the suppliers of its lethal injection drugs, the members of the execution team and the procedure used to kill an inmate secret, so it isn't known if South Carolina's new protocol requires two doses of pentobarbital.

Sigmon also plans to ask Republican Gov. Henry McMaster to commute his death sentence to life in prison. His lawyers said he is a model prisoner trusted by guards and works every day to atone for the killings he committed after succumbing to severe mental illness.

McMaster will make his decision moments before the execution starts. No South Carolina governor has granted clemency in the 49 years since the death penalty restarted.

## Greenland's prime minister says island isn't for sale as Trump seeks control 'one way or the other'

By DANICA KIRKA and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

NUUK, Greenland (AP) — Greenland's prime minister has a message for President Donald Trump: "Greenland is ours."

Múte Bourup Egede made the statement on Facebook Wednesday, just hours after Trump declared in his speech to a joint session of Congress that he intends to gain control of Greenland "one way or the other."

"Kalaallit Nunaat is ours," Egede said in the post, using the Greenlandic name for his country.

"We don't want to be Americans, nor Danes; We are Kalaallit. The Americans and their leader must understand that. We are not for sale and cannot simply be taken. Our future will be decided by us in Greenland," he said. The post ended with a clenched fist emoji and a Greenlandic flag.

On the streets of Nuuk, Greenland's capital, where the temperature was 4 degrees below zero (minus 20 Celsius) at midday Wednesday and the bright sunshine reflected blindingly off a layer of fresh-fallen snow, people are taking Trump's designs on their country seriously.

Since taking office six weeks ago, Trump has repeatedly expressed his interest in Greenland, a huge mineral-rich island that sits along strategic sea lanes in the North Atlantic. Greenland, a self-governing territory of Denmark with a population of about 56,000 people, lies off the northeastern coast of Canada, closer to Washington, D.C., than to Copenhagen.

Trump made a direct appeal to Greenlanders in his speech to Congress, just a week before the country's voters cast their ballots in parliamentary elections.

"We strongly support your right to determine your own future, and if you choose, we welcome you into the United States of America," Trump said.

"We will keep you safe. We will make you rich. And together we will take Greenland to heights like you have never thought possible before," he added.

But Trump's message came with undertones of the great power politics that have marked the early days of his second administration. Since taking office, Trump has suggested moving Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip and turning it into a "Riviera of the Middle East;" announced his intention to regain control of the Panama Canal; and stopped arms deliveries to Ukraine after the country's president was slow to endorse Washington's roadmap for a peace deal with Russia.

Trump said his administration was "working with everybody involved to try to get" Greenland.

"We need it really for international world security. And I think we're going to get it. One way or the other, we're going to get it," Trump said.

Lisa Aardestrup, an 18-year-old language student, wasn't interested in Trump's sales pitch as she stepped carefully off a bus and onto an icy street on her way to class Wednesday morning.

She's concerned that becoming part of the United States would damage Greenland's environment and the fishing industry, which accounts for about 90% of the country's exports, while fueling inflation and higher taxes.

"We feel like it's a bad idea, and we just more want to be like our little island that's more independent than anything else," Aardestrup said.

"Greenland is very independent," she added.

Aardestrup is also worried about importing the school shootings, angry politics and homelessness that dominate the news from the U.S. She fears that would threaten Greenland's culture, which she learned about from the stories her parents told her.

"There's a lot of great people here," she said. "Like, you create very lovely and longstanding friendships. And I think that's what I love about Greenland so much."

Greenlanders voted overwhelmingly in favor of self-government in a 2009 referendum that also established a pathway to independence whenever the people of the island support such a move. Under the terms of that referendum, Denmark remains responsible for Greenland's defense and foreign affairs, with the local government controlling other matters.

Asked about Trump's comments, Denmark's foreign minister said he didn't think Greenlanders wanted to separate from Denmark only to become "an integrated part of America."

Lars Løkke Rasmussen said he believed Trump's reference to respecting Greenlanders' right to self-determination was the most important part of his speech.

"I'm very optimistic about what will be a Greenlandic decision about this," he said during a trip to Finland. "They want to loosen their ties to Denmark. We're working on that, to have a more equal relationship."

Løkke added that it was important for next week's elections to be free and fair "without any kind of international intervention."

While opinion polls suggest most Greenlanders don't want to become part of the U.S., not everyone agrees.

Yulao Sandkreen is thrilled with the notion that Trump might offer Greenlanders a chance to be part of the United States.

Standing outside a supermarket with a coffee and cigarette in hand, Sandkreen, who had a relative who worked with the U.S. Coast Guard, focused on the advantages that could come with tighter bonds with the United States.

"We need McDonald's," he said. "We need everything."

## Gene Hackman's dog was misidentified as other mysteries swirl around actor's death

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Authorities misidentified a deceased dog while investigating the deaths of actor Gene Hackman and his wife, pianist Betsy Arakawa, according to a pet care specialist.

The couple's German shepherd, named Bear, survived along with a second dog named Nikita, but their kelpie mix, Zinna, died, according to Joey Padilla, owner of the Santa Fe Tails pet care facility that is involved in the surviving dogs' care.

The dog that died "was always attached to Betsy at the hip and it was a beautiful relationship," Padilla said in an email statement Tuesday. "Zinna went from being a returned shelter dog to this incredible companion under Betsy's hand."

Authorities have been searching for answers after the deaths of Hackman and Arakawa, whose partially mummified bodies were discovered on Feb. 26 at their Santa Fe home. Hackman and Arakawa may have died up to two weeks earlier, Santa Fe County Sheriff Adan Mendoza said.

Authorities did not perform a necropsy on Zinna, who was found in a kennel in a bathroom closet near Arakawa, a sheriff's office spokesperson said. Investigators initially noted the discovery of a "deceased brown in color German-Shepard canine."

Spokesperson Denise Avila acknowledged that sheriff's deputies initially misidentified the breed of the deceased dog.

"Our deputies, they don't work with canines on a daily basis," she said.

USA Today first reported on the mistaken identification of the dead dog.

Arakawa's body was found with an open prescription bottle and pills scattered on the bathroom countertop, while Hackman's remains were found in the home's entryway.

The two bodies both have tested negative for carbon monoxide, a colorless and odorless gas that is a byproduct of fuel burned in some home appliances and can be fatal in poorly ventilated homes. No gas leaks were discovered in or around the home.

On Tuesday, the sheriff's office also said that a more extensive utility company inspection found that one burner on a stove in the house had a miniscule leak that could not be lethal.

Authorities retrieved personal items from the home, including a monthly planner and two cellphones that will be analyzed. Medical investigators are still working to clarify the cause of deaths but the results of toxicology reports aren't expected for weeks. \_\_\_\_

This story has been updated to correct the definition of carbon monoxide.

## **Kremlin says a 2022 Ukrainian decree bans Zelenskyy from talks with Putin**

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia on Wednesday asked how Ukraine could attend potential talks on ending their three-year war when a Ukrainian decree from 2022 rules out negotiations with President Vladimir Putin.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "is still legally prohibited from negotiating with the Russian side," Dmitry Peskov noted during a daily call with reporters.

Zelenskyy expressed readiness Tuesday to negotiate peace with Russia as soon as possible, and Peskov called that "positive." However, "the details have not changed yet," the Russian spokesman added, apparently referring to the decree.

Ukraine's government did not immediately comment.

Neither Ukrainian nor Western officials have mentioned the presidential decree, signed seven months after Russia's full-scale invasion, in the context of U.S. President Donald Trump's latest efforts to stop the fighting in a war of attrition that has killed tens of thousands of soldiers and over 12,000 Ukrainian civilians.

The United States seeks to pressure Zelenskyy into negotiating an end to the war. The Trump administration on Monday suspended its crucial military aid to Ukraine.

On Wednesday, U.S. officials said Washington has also paused intelligence sharing with Kyiv. However, Trump administration officials said that positive talks between Washington and Kyiv mean the suspension may not last long.

In the war's early months, Zelenskyy repeatedly called for a personal meeting with Putin but was rebuffed. After the Kremlin's decision in September 2022 to illegally annex four regions of Ukraine — Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — Zelenskyy enacted a decree declaring that holding negotiations with Putin had become impossible.

The Kremlin at the time said it would wait for Ukraine to sit down for talks on ending the conflict, noting it may not happen until a new Ukrainian president took office.

Ukrainian forces are now toiling to slow advances by the bigger Russian army along the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line, especially in the eastern Donetsk region. The Russian onslaught, costly for its troops, hasn't brought a strategically significant breakthrough for the Kremlin.

As European leaders scramble to adapt to the sharply changing U.S. position on Ukraine under Trump, the French government on Wednesday said Zelenskyy, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer could travel together to Washington "eventually."

Spokesperson Sophie Primas did not elaborate. Macron's office later said no trip to Washington was being planned. The reason for the discrepancy between the statements was not immediately clear.

The three leaders traveled separately to Washington last week for meetings with Trump. Zelenskyy's turned into the extraordinary scene of an open dispute with Trump in the Oval Office.

The U.K.'s Starmer didn't comment on the possibility of a joint trip when he appeared in Parliament on Wednesday. His spokesman, Dave Pares, would not confirm such a trip.

Meanwhile, a Russian court on Wednesday convicted and sentenced a British national captured last year while fighting for Ukraine in the Kursk border region of Russia, according to court officials.

James Scott Rhys Anderson was found guilty of terrorism and mercenary activities during an armed conflict and sentenced to 19 years in prison. The case was heard behind closed doors.

According to media reports at the time of his capture in November, the 22-year-old Anderson said he had served as a signaller in the British army for four years and then joined the International Legion of Ukraine, formed shortly after Russia's invasion.

Ukrainian forces captured parts of Kursk in a shock offensive in August 2024.

## Variety is the spice that has Alex Ovechkin fast approaching Wayne Gretzky's NHL career goals record

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — Wayne Gretzky was so able to control hockey games from behind the net that the area became known as "Gretzky's office," as he put up more assists than anyone else in NHL history has points.

Alex Ovechkin has scored so many goals with his patented one-timer from the left faceoff circle on the power play that it became known as his spot. Retired goaltender Eddie Lack referred to it as the "Ovizoid."

Just like with Gretzky, whose record of 894 goals he is closing in on breaking, Ovechkin's brilliance comes not from one shot but rather the variety with which he has scored over his two-decade-long career. He has the most career power-play goals and the most empty-netters and soon will pass Gretzky for tops on the overall list thanks to an evolution of his game that has seen him score from more places on the ice in his 20th season than previous years.

"Everyone talks about his spot, but he scores goals from everywhere," said St. Louis coach Jim Montgomery, who played against Gretzky in North America and then briefly faced a young Ovechkin in Russia. "The true test to his intelligence and creativity is the fact that he's done it for so many years as the league has continued to change."

According to NHL Edge puck and player tracking data, Ovechkin has put a shot on net from 15 of the 16 quadrants in the offensive zone and scored from 11 of them.

That is a testament to Ovechkin, now 39 and scoring at a rate almost never seen at this age, adjusting to how opponents defend him and fooling goaltenders in different ways. He has scored on a league-record 181 goalies, adding six new ones to that list this season.

"He shoots hard, he can shoot through you, so it makes it more difficult, especially when it's coming from a bunch of different angles," said Logan Thompson, in his first season as a teammate of Ovechkin's with the Washington Capitals after being the 160th netminder he beat along the way. "He's always finding a way to get it through and he makes it really tricky on goalies. There's really no method on how to stop him."

For the defenders tasked with trying to contain Ovechkin, the approach changes with the situation. From his spot, everyone knows what is coming because he has scored 320 times on the power play — 46 more than the next closest.

At even strength, where Ovechkin has scored 495 of his 884 goals and counting, the challenge is keeping an eye on him knowing he has what Blues goalie Jordan Binnington called an "on-off release" and can fling the puck at the net unexpectedly at times.

"I'm not really sure where he shoots it from, and it just finds a way to go in the net," said Ottawa defenseman Nick Jensen, who played parts of six seasons with Ovechkin on the Capitals. "He's been doing it for so long that I can't really explain it. It's kind of a phenomenon a little bit — or an anomaly. But he's been doing it for so long, and he continues to do this year."

Ovechkin reached the 30-goal mark again this season, the record 19th time he has done that, one of the biggest reasons the Capitals are among the top teams in the league. He has thrived alongside 20-something linemates Dylan Strome and Aliaksei Protas, who have embraced the role of getting Ovechkin the puck as much as reasonably possible.

"He can pretty much get his shot off anywhere," said Strome, who assisted on 17 of Ovechkin's first 31 goals. "He's been scoring in front of the net or even some wrist shots from the other side. I think the more shot volume the better. It's good when you come out of a game and see like 12 or 13 shot attempts and seven or eight on net. Usually good things happen when there's that many chances."

Ovechkin has put more shots on net than any player in league history, and the only reason he's not again in the top 10 this season is that he missed 16 games with a broken left leg. Quality over quantity, perhaps, as he is scoring at a career-best shooting rate of 18.1 percent.

According to NHL statistics, Ovechkin has gotten seven different types of shots on net: 62 snap, 50 wrist, 36 slap, 10 backhand, 10 tips, two deflections and one between the legs. Fourteen goals have come on

snap shots, eight on wrist shots, five on slap shots, three on backhanders and one on a tip.

"Any time there's unpredictability, it makes it hard," said retired defenseman Karl Alzner, who played nine seasons with Ovechkin and three more against him with Montreal.

"As long as he continues to be unpredictable and do things a little bit different than we've seen from his whatever it is 18 years of resume, it's going to be hard for teams to shut him down."

Ovechkin is tied for the league lead with seven empty-netters and has the most all time with 64. Gretzky scored 56 of them, too, and coach Spencer Carbery is quick to point out that it's not as easy as it looks.

"There's a lot of skilled players that play around the league 5 on 6 that aren't your quote-unquote defensive specialists or your penalty-kill guys that have a ton of value playing 5 on 6 because they are so intelligent with what the offensive players want to do," Carbery said. "They know where the next play is and where the puck's going, and that's what you see from 'O' constantly is he's reading where the next puck is going."

Ovechkin is on pace to break Gretzky's record sometime in April before the end of this regular season, and No. 895 could come from any number of different ways. Even his teammates don't know what to expect.

"One-timer would be a nice thing to see, but obviously any goal would be," Protas said. "Any way, no matter how, it's going to be a special moment."

## **China sticks to an economic growth target of 'around 5%' despite a looming trade war with US**

By SIMINA MISTREANU and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The Chinese government unveiled an annual economic growth target of "around 5%" on Wednesday, despite the possible negative impact of a looming trade war with the United States, and pledged to address what it called "sluggish" consumer spending at home.

The target was announced at the opening session of the annual meeting of China's legislature. It's the same as for the last two years but will likely be more difficult to achieve because of the new, higher U.S. tariffs on Chinese products and other economic headwinds. The use of "around" gives the government some room if growth falls short.

The target signals the government's intention to try to stabilize growth in challenging economic times but hold back on more dramatic action that some economists say is needed to supercharge it.

The government also said in a draft budget released Wednesday that defense spending would rise 7.2% this year to 1.78 trillion yuan (\$245 billion), second only to the United States.

It released the growth target in a separate report, parts of which were presented to the nearly 3,000 members of the National People's Congress by Premier Li Qiang. It acknowledged both international and domestic challenges.

"An increasingly complex and severe external environment may exert a greater impact on China in areas such as trade, science, and technology," the report said, without specifics. "Unilateralism and protectionism are on the rise."

It added: "Domestically, the foundation for China's sustained economic recovery and growth is not strong enough. Effective demand is weak, and consumption, in particular, is sluggish."

The International Monetary Fund has projected that China's economy will grow 4.6% this year, down from 5% in 2024, according to Chinese government statistics.

The new report placed more emphasis on reviving domestic demand and consumption than last year's, echoing a shift by the ruling Communist Party at meetings in December. It said the government should "make domestic demand the main engine and anchor of economic growth."

The report added that "achieving this year's targets will not be easy, and we must make arduous efforts to meet them."

Across-the-board 20% tariffs imposed this week on Chinese products by U.S. President Donald Trump pose the latest threat to an economy already weighed down by a prolonged real estate slump and slug-

gish consumer spending and private business investment. The tariffs could crimp sales to one of China's major export markets, making the need to boost domestic demand more urgent.

The new report offered some details on the party's plans for a "more proactive fiscal policy," including a rise in the government budget deficit from 3% to 4% of GDP, or the size of the overall economy. It also reiterated the party's announcement in December that the central bank would shift its monetary policy from "prudent" to "moderately loose" for the first time in more than a decade.

The government will issue 1.3 trillion yuan (\$180 billion) in ultra-long term bonds, up from 1 trillion yuan last year, the report said. Of that, 300 billion yuan would go toward a program launched last year that offers rebates to consumers who trade in automobiles or appliances for new ones, doubling central government support for the program.

Economists expressed doubts over whether the policies will do enough, noting that the government reduced its inflation target to 2% from 3% last year, and suggesting leaders have accepted that the economy is still mired in deflation, or a cycle of weakening prices.

The degree of support is "more modest than it may appear," Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics said in a report. "We remain skeptical that it will be sufficient to prevent growth from slowing this year, especially given the headwinds on the external front and the lack of a more pronounced shift in government spending toward support for consumption."

Chinese leader Xi Jinping also wants to wean the economy off its long-running dependence on the highly indebted real estate market.

He is directing economic resources into developing a more innovative, high-tech economy — and with growing restrictions on U.S. technology exports to China, one that isn't beholden to other countries for the most powerful semiconductors and other electronic components.

Xi told delegates from Jiangsu province, one of China's wealthier coastal provinces known for exports, on Wednesday that "technological innovation and industrial innovation are the basic paths to developing new quality productivity."

He also referred to a meeting in February with the heads of China's top private companies, and said the province should "treat all types of enterprises equally, and continuously optimize the business environment."

The push towards developing a high-tech economy has been a long-term economic goal of the Communist Party, though it has enacted measures since September that suggest a shift in emphasis toward shoring up growth in the short term.

The new report highlighted artificial intelligence in a section on fostering "industries of the future," saying the government would support the application of large-scale AI models, smart manufacturing equipment, connected vehicles and intelligent robots.

## Do you need fluoride treatment after a teeth cleaning?

### Dental experts weigh in

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

When Tristen Boyer recently had a couple of cavities filled, her dentist suggested she get fluoride treatment afterward. She has Crohn's disease, which puts her at increased risk for tooth decay.

"It's something I felt like I should get done," the 22-year-old University of Kentucky student said. "It's something I'm going to keep doing."

Dentists and hygienists often propose fluoride treatments to patients in the dental chair to prevent cavities and strengthen teeth. But the relatively simple procedure — which involves applying a varnish, gel or foam directly to the teeth — isn't always covered by insurance, especially for adults.

So when is it worth getting? Here are some ways to figure that out.

Who needs in-office fluoride treatment?

If there's a high risk of tooth decay, then professional fluoride treatments can help.

But if "you haven't seen any decay in years, you're probably OK. What you're doing at home is probably enough," said Dr. Robert Weyant at the University of Pittsburgh.



Besides looking at cavity history, your dentist may also ask about risky behaviors, such as drinking lots of soft drinks, and your oral health regimen.

Patients “who don’t have access to fluoridated water, don’t use fluoridated toothpaste or don’t floss regularly” may be good candidates for fluoride treatments, said Dr. Alex Daniel of Johns Hopkins University.

Treatments may also benefit certain groups more than others. Women in menopause, for example, experience hormonal changes that can lead to oral health problems. And people taking certain medications can get dry mouth, which means fewer bacteria-killing enzymes and potentially more decay.

For patients deemed to be at risk, dentists generally recommend treatments every three, six or 12 months.

What are the pros and cons of fluoride treatment?

Dental fluoride prevents decay by helping tooth enamel – the hard outer layer of the tooth – better resist acid caused by bacteria in the mouth.

“Acid dissolves away tooth enamel, which weakens it – which is what makes cavities,” said Ohio dentist Dr. Matthew Messina, a spokesman for the American Dental Association.

Fluoride, a mineral, strengthens the enamel, making it harder.

The scientific evidence behind fluoride treatments is stronger for children than adults. But whether the benefit is stronger for kids is uncertain, Weyant said, because there hasn’t been as much research in adults.

Dentists said there are no safety concerns about the treatment. The only real side effect is an uncommon one called fluorosis, a cosmetic discoloration of the teeth if someone gets a little too much fluoride.

Dental experts acknowledged that recent opposition to fluoride in drinking water by some — including Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the nation’s new health and human services secretary — may give some people pause. But even if you use fluoride toothpaste, drink fluoridated water and get occasional in-office fluoride treatments, dentists said you’re getting a relatively small amount of the mineral that poses no danger.

Is fluoride treatment worth it?

Fluoride treatments cost anywhere from around \$25 to \$55. Though many insurers cover the cost for kids, adults generally pay out of pocket.

Boyer, who used to get the treatments as a child, paid \$30 for her first adult treatment. Though she wishes it was covered by insurance, she said that’s a small price to pay to prevent decay, expensive dental procedures and possible tooth loss.

“We only have one set of teeth,” she said. “The longer you can keep them, the longer you should.”

## **LeBron James becomes first to score 50,000 combined points in NBA regular season and playoffs**

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — LeBron James is well on his way to rewriting every previous definition of basketball longevity, and the 40-year-old star is now racking up numbers the NBA has never seen before.

James became the first player to score 50,000 combined points in the regular season and postseason on Tuesday night, surpassing the mark with a 3-pointer early in the first quarter of the Los Angeles Lakers’ 136-115 win over New Orleans.

James finished with 34 points against the Pelicans after toppling another milestone in his unprecedented career.

“I mean, that’s a lot of points,” James said afterward, rubbing his beard in wonder. “Obviously, the first thing that comes to mind is where I’m from. Picking up the game when I was a little kid and having a love for the sport, and hoping that someday I’d be able to play at the highest level. I’ve been able to do that and really enjoy my career. So it’s definitely an honor. It’s pretty cool to see that.”

James already is the top scorer in NBA history in both the regular season and the playoffs. Maintaining a spectacular level of play midway through his record-tying 22nd season, he is pulling away from the other greats of the game: Lakers great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who played 20 seasons, is a now-distant second with 44,149 combined points.

James got his milestone 3-pointer off an assist by Luka Doncic, a trivia tidbit that pleased both superstars.

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Doncic's arrival in last month's seismic trade with the Dallas Mavericks has invigorated both James and the Lakers, who look like championship contenders with a seven-game winning streak and 17 victories in their last 20 games.

"It's amazing, watching him do this stuff at this age," said Doncic, who had 30 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds against New Orleans. "It's just unbelievable, that 50K points. I can't even explain how insane that is. He might get to 70K. You never know."

The Lakers recognized the milestone at the next timeout, with public address announcer Lawrence Tanter saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, we all have just witnessed history." James acknowledged the standing ovation with several waves from the bench.

James is tied with Vince Carter for the most seasons played in NBA history. But while nearly every other NBA player who lasted to his late 30s finished at a fraction of his peak powers, James shows no signs of decline in his 40s.

He was named the NBA's Western Conference player of the month earlier Tuesday after he averaged 29.3 points, 10.5 rebounds, 6.9 assists and 1.2 steals in February while playing more than 35 minutes per game for the Lakers, who went 9-2 to surge into second place in the West.

With their victory over the Pelicans, the Lakers improved to 11-2 since acquiring Doncic.

James has played in 1,548 regular-season games, trailing only Robert Parish (1,611) and Abdul-Jabbar (1,560). If he stays healthy and elects to return for a record 23rd season, he will likely surpass Parish next winter.

James has also played in 287 postseason games, the most in NBA history. He became the league's career playoff scoring leader on May 25, 2017, when he surpassed Michael Jordan's total of 5,987 during the Cleveland Cavaliers' Eastern Conference finals game at Boston.

James then became the top scorer in regular-season history on Feb. 7, 2023, when he topped Abdul-Jabbar's record of 38,387 points during the Lakers' game against Oklahoma City.

James' prolific scoring is due in large part to his metronomic consistency. With his performance against the Pelicans, he has scored at least 10 points in 1,278 consecutive games since Jan. 6, 2007 — by far the longest such streak in NBA history.

James' player of the month award for February was his 41st, extending his own league record. He is also the oldest player to win the award, surpassing a 37-year-old Karl Malone in November 2000.

## **A South African play about Winnie Madikizela-Mandela explores Black women's long wait for absent men**

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — A new play about anti-apartheid icon Winnie Madikizela-Mandela seeks to highlight the struggles of Black women in South Africa who had to wait years for their husbands' return from exile, prison or faraway work during decades of white minority rule.

The play about the late former wife of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first Black president, is adapted from the novel "The Cry of Winnie Mandela" by Njabulo Ndebele. It explores themes of loneliness, infidelity and betrayal.

At the height of apartheid, Madikizela-Mandela was one of the most recognizable faces of South Africa's liberation struggle while her husband and other freedom fighters spent decades in prison. That meant constant harassment by police.

At one point, she was banished from her home in Soweto on the outskirts of Johannesburg and forcefully relocated to Brandfort, a small rural town she had never visited nearly 350 kilometers (217 miles) away.

Even after she walked hand-in-hand with her newly freed husband in 1990 and raised her clenched fist, post-apartheid South Africa was tumultuous for her.

Madikizela-Mandela, who died in 2018 aged 81, was accused of kidnapping and murdering people she allegedly suspected of being police informants under apartheid. She also faced allegations of being unfaithful to Mandela during his 27 years in prison.

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Those controversies ultimately led to her divorce from Mandela, while their African National Congress political party distanced itself from her.

The isolation and humiliation inspired Ndebele to write about Madikizela-Mandela for South Africa's post-apartheid generations.

"How can they implicate Winnie in such horrendous events? She is the face of our struggle," Ndebele's character, played by South African actor Les Nkosi, wonders as he describes his thoughts upon hearing the news of the ANC distancing itself. "The announcement invokes in me a moral anguish from which I'm unable to escape. Is she a savior or a betrayer to us?"

A key scene addresses Madikizela-Mandela's appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a body formed to investigate human rights abuses during apartheid. She denied murder and kidnapping allegations and declined a request to apologize to families of alleged victims.

"I will not be the instrument that validates the politics of reconciliation, because the politics of reconciliation demands my annihilation. All of you have to reconcile not with me, but the meaning of me. The meaning of me is the constant search for the right thing to do," she says in a fictional monologue in the novel.

The play also reflects how the Mandelas' divorce proceedings played out in public, with intimate details of their marriage and rumors of her extramarital affair.

For the play's director, Momo Matsunyane, it was important to reflect the role of Black women in the struggle against apartheid who also had to run their households and raise children, often in their husbands' long absence.

"It's also where we are seeing Black women be open, vulnerable, sexual and proud of it, not shying away. I think apartheid managed to dismantle the Black family home in a very terrible way. How can you raise other Black men and women when our household is not complete?" Matsunyane said.

In the play, one Black woman tells a group of friends how her husband ended their marriage when he returned home after 14 years abroad studying to be a doctor and found she had given birth to a child who was now 4 years old.

Another woman tells the same group — who call themselves "Ibandla Labafazi Abalindileyo" (Organization of Women in Waiting in the isiXhosa language) — that her husband returned from many years in prison but left her to start a new family with a white woman.

Madikizela-Mandela, played by Thembisa Mdoda, gets to answer questions about her life and the decisions she made during an encounter with the women.

The play, which also draws on the protest music of that period, opened at The Market Theatre in Johannesburg and will run until March 15.

## Israel's cutoff of supplies to Gaza sends prices soaring as aid stockpiles dwindle

By JULIA FRANKEL and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's cutoff of food, fuel, medicine and other supplies to Gaza's 2 million people has sent prices soaring and humanitarian groups into overdrive trying to distribute dwindling stocks to the most vulnerable.

The aid freeze has imperiled the progress aid workers say they have made to stave off famine over the past six weeks during Phase 1 of the ceasefire deal Israel and Hamas agreed to in January.

After more than 16 months of war, Gaza's population is entirely dependent on trucked-in food and other aid. Most are displaced from their homes, and many need shelter. Fuel is needed to keep hospitals, water pumps, bakeries and telecommunications — as well as trucks delivering the aid — operating.

Israel says the siege aims at pressuring Hamas to accept its ceasefire proposal. Israel has delayed moving to the second phase of the deal it reached with Hamas, during which the flow of aid was supposed to continue. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that he is prepared to increase the pressure and would not rule out cutting off all electricity to Gaza if Hamas doesn't budge.

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Rights groups have called the cutoff a "starvation policy."

Four days in, how is the cutoff affecting Gaza?

Food, fuel and shelter supplies are threatened

The World Food Program, the U.N.'s main food agency, says it has no major stockpile of food in Gaza because it focused on distributing all incoming food to hungry people during Phase 1 of the deal. In a statement to AP, it said existing stocks are enough to keep bakeries and kitchens running for under two weeks.

WFP said it may be forced to reduce ration sizes to serve as many people as possible. It said its fuel reserves, necessary to run bakeries and transport food, will last for a few weeks if not replenished soon.

There's also no major stockpile of tents in Gaza, said Shaina Low, communications adviser for the Norwegian Refugee Council. The shelter materials that came in during the ceasefire's first phase were "nowhere near enough to address all of the needs," she said.

"If it was enough, we wouldn't have had infants dying from exposure because of lack of shelter materials and warm clothes and proper medical equipment to treat them," she said.

At least seven infants in Gaza died from hypothermia during Phase 1.

Urgently checking reserves

"We're trying to figure out, what do we have? What would be the best use of our supply?" said Jonathan Crickx, chief of communication for UNICEF. "We never sat on supplies, so it's not like there's a huge amount left to distribute."

He predicted a "catastrophic result" if the aid freeze continues.

During the ceasefire's first phase, humanitarian agencies rushed in supplies, with about 600 trucks entering per day on average. Aid workers set up more food kitchens, health centers and water distribution points. With more fuel coming in, they could double the amount of water drawn from wells, according to the U.N. humanitarian agency.

Around 100,000 tents also arrived as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians tried to return to their homes, only to find them destroyed or too damaged to live in.

But the progress relied on the flow of aid continuing.

Oxfam has 26 trucks with thousands of food packages and hygiene kits and 12 trucks of water tanks waiting outside Gaza, said Bushra Khalidi, Oxfam's policy lead in the West Bank.

"This is not just about hundreds of trucks of food, it's about the total collapse of systems that sustain life," she said.

The International Organization for Migration has 22,500 tents in its warehouses in Jordan after trucks brought back their undelivered cargo once entry was barred, said Karl Baker, the agency's regional crisis coordinator.

The International Rescue Committee has 6.7 tons of medicines and medical supplies waiting to enter Gaza and its delivery is "highly uncertain," said Bob Kitchen, vice president of its emergencies and humanitarian action department.

Medical Aid for Palestinians said it has trucks stuck at Gaza's border carrying medicine, mattresses and assistive devices for people with disabilities. The organization has some medicine and materials in reserve, said spokesperson Tess Pope, but "we don't have stock that we can use during a long closure of Gaza."

Prices up sharply

Prices of vegetables and flour are now climbing in Gaza after easing during the ceasefire.

Sayed Mohamed al-Dairi walked through a bustling market in Gaza City just after the aid cutoff was announced. Already, sellers were increasing the prices of dwindling wares.

"The traders are massacring us, the traders are not merciful to us," he said. "In the morning, the price of sugar was 5 shekels. Ask him now, the price has become 10 shekels."

In the central Gaza city of Deir Al-Balah, one cigarette priced at 5 shekels (\$1.37) before the cutoff now stands at 20 shekels (\$5.49). One kilo of chicken (2.2 pounds) that was 21 shekels (\$5.76) is now 50 shekels (\$13.72). Cooking gas has soared from 90 shekels (\$24.70) for 12 kilos (26.4 pounds) to 1,480

shekels (\$406.24).

Following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, Israel cut off all aid to Gaza for two weeks — a measure central to South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza at the International Court of Justice. That took place as Israel launched the most intense phase of its aerial bombardment of Gaza, one of the most aggressive campaigns in modern history.

Palestinians fear a repeat of that period.

"We are afraid that Netanyahu or Trump will launch a war more severe than the previous war," said Abeer Obeid, a Palestinian woman from northern Gaza. "For the extension of the truce, they must find any other solution."

## **The Mets have spent more in Steve Cohen's 4 years than Marlins, Pirates and Rays over the past 21**

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The New York Mets led the major leagues in spending for the third straight season in 2024 and have totaled \$1.36 billion in payroll and luxury tax over four years under owner Steve Cohen, exceeding what the Marlins, Pirates and Rays each have spent on players in the past 21 seasons.

The Mets established a \$333.3 million regular payroll record, according to figures finalized by Major League Baseball this week and obtained by The Associated Press. That topped the previous mark of \$319.5 million set by the Mets in 2023, when they became the first team to exceed \$300 million.

New York totaled \$430.4 million last year in payroll and luxury tax (\$97.1 million) to set a cost record. The Mets paid \$420 million the year before, including a \$100.8 million tax.

Since Cohen bought the team from the Fred Wilpon and Saul Katz families in November 2020, the Mets have totaled \$1.13 billion in payroll and \$228.7 million in tax. And that was even before he lavished a record \$765 million, 15-year contract on outfielder Juan Soto that starts this season.

"One thing I've learned a long time ago, if you want something that's amazing, it's going to be uncomfortable," Cohen said in December.

New York's spending on major league players for 2021-24 was just above what the payrolls from 2004-24 totaled for the Marlins (\$1.34 billion), Pirates (\$1.32 billion) and Rays (\$1.32 billion).

By comparison, Oakland has spent a low of \$269 million over the past four seasons and Pittsburgh \$271 million.

Total spending, based on regular payrolls, rose 1.8% to \$5.158 billion from \$5.065 billion last year and has increased 27.3% in three seasons under the current labor contract from \$4.051 billion in 2021.

The Mets became the first team to lead in payrolls in three straight seasons since the Los Angeles Dodgers from 2014-17.

The Yankees were second among regular payrolls at a team record \$310.9 million. The World Series champion Dodgers were third at \$270.8 million and Philadelphia fourth at \$249.1 million.

Ten teams topped \$200 million, down from a record 11 in 2023. A record-low four teams were below \$100 million, a decrease from six in 2023.

Because \$68 million of his \$70 million salary is deferred until from 2034-43, Shohei Ohtani totals \$28.2 million in salary toward payroll plus \$1.03 million in non-cash compensation.

Oakland had the lowest payroll at \$66.5 million in its final season before moving to Sacramento for at least three seasons before a planned shift to Las Vegas. Pittsburgh was 29th at \$87.3 million.

Oakland, Pittsburgh and Tampa are the only teams never to finish with a \$100 million payroll.

The 12 teams that reached the postseason combined to spend \$2.37 billion, 46% of payrolls, including \$1.02 billion (19.9%) for the four teams in the League Championship Series. The Dodgers and AL champion Yankees combined for \$644.2 million (12.5%).

Adding payroll and luxury tax, the four LCS teams combined for 23.5% of total spending (\$1.29 billion of \$5.47 billion) and the Yankees and Dodgers for 13.7% (\$747.3 million).

Arizona raised payroll the most, by \$48 million to \$177 million after winning the NL pennant, and the Chicago Cubs were the second-most, by \$34 million to \$230 million.

San Diego cut payroll by \$85 million to \$172 million in 2024 following the death of owner Peter Seidler. The Los Angeles Angels dropped \$51 million to \$179 million and Minnesota by \$34 million to \$133 million.

Regular payrolls are based on 2024 salaries, earned bonuses and prorated shares of signing bonuses and non-cash compensation for 40-man rosters. Deferred salaries and bonus payments are discounted to present-day values, and termination pay, option buyouts and cash transactions among clubs are accounted for.

MLB calculated the average salary at \$4,592,147, while the players' association, using a slightly different methodology, pegged it at \$4,655,366.

Luxury tax is based on payrolls with average annual values that include benefits and the pre-arbitration bonus pool.

## Army surrounds South Sudan vice president's home as his allies are arrested

By DENG MACHOL Associated Press

JUBA, South Sudan (AP) — South Sudanese soldiers surrounded Vice President Riek Machar's home in the capital on Wednesday and several of his allies were arrested after an armed group allied to him overran an army base in the country's north.

Machar, whose political rivalry with President Salva Kiir has in the past exploded into civil war, said last month that the firing of several of his allies from posts in the government threatened the 2018 peace deal between him and Kiir that ended a five-year civil war in which more than 400,000 people were killed.

Deputy army chief Gen. Gabriel Duop Lam, also loyal to Machar, was detained Tuesday over the fighting in the north, while Machar ally and Petroleum Minister Puot Kang Chol was arrested Wednesday alongside his bodyguards and family. No reason was given for the arrests.

Neither Machar nor his SPLM-IO party have commented about the fighting, but Water Minister Pal Mai Deng, who is also the party's spokesperson, said Lam's detention "puts the entire peace agreement at risk."

Western envoys last week urged leaders to de-escalate the tension.

Ter Manyang Gatwich, Executive Director of the Center for Peace and Advocacy, has called for the immediate release of those detained to avert further escalation of violence and further bloodshed from degenerating into what he called a "full-scale war."

South Sudan is yet to fully implement the 2018 peace agreement and elections that were scheduled for last year were postponed by two years due to a lack of funds.

## Trump vows to press ahead on reshaping America in speech to Congress as Democrats register dissent

By ZEKE MILLER and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump vowed to keep up his campaign of "swift and unrelenting action" in reorienting the nation's economy, immigration and foreign policy in an unyielding address before Congress that left Democratic legislators to register their dissent with stone faces, placards calling out "lies," and one legislator's ejection.

Trump's prime-time speech Tuesday was the latest marker in his takeover of the nation's capital, where the Republican-led House and Senate have done little to restrain the president as he and his allies work to slash the size of the federal government and remake America's place in the world.

The president's address, clocking in at a record 99 minutes, added up to a defiant sales pitch for the policies that Trump promised during his campaign and leaned into during his first weeks back in office. Trump pledged to keep delivering sweeping change to rescue the nation from what he described as destruction

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and mistakes left by his predecessor. He seldom addressed his comments directly to the American people, who are trying to keep up with the recent upheaval, while repeatedly needling the Democratic lawmakers seated before him.

Michigan Sen. Elissa Slotkin, who delivered the Democratic response following Trump's speech, allowed that "America wants change, but there's a responsible way to make change and a reckless way, and we can make that change without forgetting who we are as a country and as a democracy."

Emboldened after overcoming impeachments in his first term, outlasting criminal prosecutions in between his two administrations and getting a tight grip on the GOP-led Congress, Trump has embarked on a mission to dismantle parts of the federal government, remake the relationship with America's allies and slap on tariffs that have sparked a North American trade war.

"It has been nothing but swift and unrelenting action," Trump said of his opening weeks in office. "The people elected me to do the job, and I am doing it."

Trump, who has billionaire adviser Elon Musk orchestrating his efforts to slash the size and scope of the federal government, said he is working to "reclaim democracy from this unaccountable bureaucracy" and threatened federal workers anew with firings if they resist his agenda.

Musk, who was seated in the House gallery, received a pair of standing ovations from Republicans in the chamber, as Trump exaggerated and shared false claims about alleged government abuse uncovered by the Tesla and SpaceX founder and his team of disrupters.

Trump repeated false claims that tens of millions of dead people over 100 years old are receiving Social Security payments, prompting some Democrats to shout, "Not true!" and "Those are lies!"

Trump spoke at a critical juncture in his presidency, as voters who returned him to the White House on his promise to fix inflation are instead finding economic chaos. All the gains the S&P 500 have made since Election Day are now gone, while consumer sentiment surveys show the public sees inflation as worsening.

Trump seemed prepared to double down on his trade policies, which experts have warned will raise prices for consumers.

"Whatever they tariff us, we tariff them. Whatever they tax us, we tax them," Trump said. At the same time, he tried to ease concerns about the resulting price increases, saying, "There'll be a little disturbance, but we're okay with that. It won't be much."

Trump said one of his "very highest priorities" was to rescue the economy and offer relief to working families. He promised to organize the federal government to lower costs on eggs and energy, blaming his Democratic predecessor Joe Biden for the situation and offering scant details of his own plans.

Trump also called for the extension of his first-term tax cuts and additional federal funding for his border crackdown, including for his promised efforts at "mass deportation" of people in the U.S. illegally.

He celebrated his crackdown on migration, saying, "But it turned out that all we really needed was a new president."

Speaking about his promised tax cuts, Trump seemed to goad Democrats, saying: "I'm sure you're going to vote for those tax cuts. Because otherwise I don't believe the people will ever vote you into office."

The backdrop was the new economic uncertainty unleashed after the president opened the day by placing stiff tariffs on imports from the country's neighbors and closest trading partners. A 25% tax on goods from Canada and Mexico went into effect early Tuesday — ostensibly to secure greater cooperation to tackle fentanyl trafficking and illegal immigration — triggering immediate retaliation and sparking fears of a wider trade war. Trump also raised tariffs on goods from China to 20%.

Republicans were boisterous as Trump stepped to the lectern in the House, chanting "USA! USA!" as the president basked in the cheers. The GOP lawmakers were jubilant, having won a trifecta of the White House, Senate and House in the elections. However, they face the challenging task of delivering on Trump's agenda as well as avoiding a government shutdown later this month.

Across the aisle, out-of-power Democrats set the tone early, with most remaining seated without applauding or making eye contact with Trump as he was introduced in the chamber.

After several interruptions, House Speaker Mike Johnson jumped in and called for decorum to be restored in the chamber as Republicans shouted "USA" to drown out the cries from the other side of the

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aisle. Johnson then ordered Texas Rep. Al Green removed from the chamber.

"It's worth it to let people know that there are some people who are going to stand up" to Trump, Green told reporters after being thrown out of the chamber.

Other Democrats held up signs criticizing like "Save Medicaid" and "Protect Veterans" during Trump's remarks, seeking to drive public awareness to elements of Trump's agenda they believed might offer them a pathway back to the majority.

Some Democrats chose to highlight the impact of Trump's actions by inviting fired federal workers as guests, including a disabled veteran from Arizona, a health worker from Maryland and a forestry employee who worked on wildfire prevention in California.

Trump also used his speech to address his proposals for fostering peace in Ukraine and the Middle East, where he has unceremoniously upended the policies of the Biden administration in a matter of just weeks. On Monday, Trump ordered a freeze to U.S. military assistance to Ukraine, ending years of staunch American support for the country in fending off Russia's invasion.

Trump recited a letter he received earlier Tuesday from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, saying that the wartime president wants to come back to the table after a explosive Oval Office meeting last week broke down negotiations for a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine. "We've had serious discussions with Russia and have received strong signals that they are ready for peace," Trump said. "Wouldn't that be beautiful?"

He also announced the arrest of a suspect in the 2021 suicide bombing at the Kabul airport that killed U.S. troops during the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Trump's 1 hour and 39 minute speech was the longest annual address a president has ever delivered to Congress, breaking Bill Clinton's record of 1 hour and 28 minutes.

Watching from the gallery with first lady Melania Trump were guests including 15-year-old Elliston Berry, of Aledo, Texas, who was the victim of an explicit deepfake image sent to classmates.

Other White House guests included relatives of Corey Comperatore, the former Pennsylvania fire chief who was killed as he protected his family during an assassination attempt on Trump last summer.

Republican lawmakers cheered the conclusion of Trump's address with chants that echoed his words after he was struck in the ear by a bullet: "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

## Today in History: March 6 Supreme Court issues Dred Scott decision

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, March 6, the 65th day of 2025. There are 300 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On March 6, 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court, in the Dred Scott v. Sandford decision, ruled 7-2 that Scott, an enslaved person, was not an American citizen and therefore could not sue for his freedom in Federal court; it also ruled that slavery could not be banned from any Federal territory. The decision deepened the national divide over slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Also on this date:

In 1820, President James Monroe signed the Missouri Compromise, which allowed Missouri to join the Union as a slave state and Maine to join as a free state, while banning slavery in the northern portion of the Louisiana Territory.

In 1836, the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, fell as Mexican forces led by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna stormed the fortress after a 13-day siege; the battle claimed the lives of all the Texian defenders, including William Travis, James Bowie and Davy Crockett.

In 1869, chemist Dmitri Mendeleev introduced his concept of a periodic table of elements at a meeting of the Russian Chemical Society in St. Petersburg.

In 1912, Oreo cookies were first introduced by the National Biscuit Company (later known as Nabisco).

In 1951, the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on federal espionage charges began in New York.



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In 1964, heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay took a new name given to him by Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammed: Muhammad Ali.

In 1970, a bomb being built inside a Greenwich Village townhouse in New York by members of the Weather Underground militant leftist group accidentally exploded, destroying the house and killing three group members.

In 1981, Walter Cronkite signed off for the last time after nearly two decades as the anchor of "The CBS Evening News."

Today's birthdays: Former FBI and CIA director William Webster is 101. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan is 99. Former Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova is 88. Opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa is 81. Rock musician David Gilmour (Pink Floyd) is 79. Filmmaker-actor Rob Reiner is 78. Actor-comedian Tom Arnold is 66. Actor-comedian D.L. Hughley is 62. Actor Connie Britton is 58. Basketball Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal is 53. Rapper-producer Tyler, the Creator is 34. Actor Millicent Simmonds is 22.