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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

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1440

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

Tariffs (Temporarily) Reversed

A broad tax on imports from Canada and Mexico was reversed yesterday by President Donald Trump, extending until April 2 a 25% tax on goods coming to the US. The decision comes less than 48 hours after levies were placed on goods coming from both countries.

US officials have framed the tariffs as leverage to compel both partners to enforce border security, crack down on the flow of illegal drugs like fentanyl, and more. Critics have argued the rapid changing of taxes on a wide range of goods prevents long-term planning by manufacturers. Total trade between the three countries is roughly \$1.8T, with \$680B in 2022 coming from US goods exported to other countries .

Postpartum Neurology

Women with postpartum depression symptoms exhibited corresponding shifts in the size of certain brain regions, according to a study this week. The study provides the first neurological evidence of the condition's impact, which affects as much as one in seven pregnant women worldwide.

Researchers analyzed a series of brain scans of 88 first-time mothers without a history of depression. They then compared the images to answers given in standard questionnaires used to diagnose postpartum depression. Nearly 30 women who showed moderate to severe symptoms of the condition saw enlargement of the amygdala and hippocampus, key regions of the brain that regulate emotion. Whether the enlarged anatomy causes the depression or vice versa remains unclear.

The condition has been studied for centuries, though data has stemmed from reported experiences rather than anatomical observations. Severe postpartum depression typically manifests as extreme mood swings, extended periods of sadness, and loss of sleep, and its severity distinguishes it from milder, more common "baby blues."

Mother Monster Returns

Lady Gaga released her seventh studio album, "Mayhem," early this morning, marking her return to pop music with her first solo album since "Chromatica" in 2020. The album features 14 tracks and is described as a blend of her signature pop sound with a modern twist.

Leading up to the album's release, Gaga shared teasers with her "Little Monsters" fanbase and released singles like "Disease" and "Abracadabra." The Grammy Award-winning duet with Bruno Mars, "Die with a Smile," became the fastest song in Spotify history to reach 1 billion streams in November. During her hiatus, Gaga focused on acting, starring in "Joker: Folie à Deux" and releasing the soundtrack album "Harlequin" in 2024.

"Mayhem" will serve as the official soundtrack for ESPN's 2025 Formula One season. Gaga is a 14-time Grammy winner and an Oscar winner for best original song. She has sold 28 million albums and 140 million singles globally, with her Monster Ball Tour holding the record for the highest-grossing debut headlining tour.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Olivia Rodrigo, Neil Young, and The 1975 tapped to headline the UK's Glastonbury Festival (June 25-29). South by Southwest 2025 kicks off today in Austin, Texas; see preview of the SXSW film and television festival.

Pamela Bach, actress known for "Baywatch" and ex-wife of David Hasselhoff, dies by suicide at age 62. Roy Ayers, jazz-funk pioneer known for "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," dies at age 84. Netflix sets all-women's boxing card for its second live boxing event, headlined by a rematch of last year's Katie Taylor-Amanda Serrano fight.

Science & Technology

Y Combinator adviser says a quarter of current startup cohort has businesses almost entirely based on AI-written code; organization is the country's most well-known incubator, having spawned Airbnb, DoorDash, and more.

Astronomers discover the closest supermassive black hole to Earth, roughly 160,000 light-years away. Materials scientists develop super sapphire, resistant to dust, scratches, glare, and more.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -1.8%, Dow -1.0%, Nasdaq -2.6%) as latest tariff concessions fail to quell investor concerns; Nasdaq enters correction territory, down over 10% from record high in December.

European Central Bank cuts interest rates for sixth time in nine months.

Walgreens to be taken private by Sycamore Partners in \$10B deal, considered one of the largest leveraged buyouts globally in the past decade; Walgreens shares rise 6% in after-hours trading.

Broadcom shares rise 13% in after-hours trading after earnings top estimates on demand for custom AI chips.

Hewlett Packard Enterprise shares fall 20% in after-hours trading on weak earnings forecast, will lay off 2,500 employees.

Politics & World Affairs

Adnan Syed to remain free after being resentenced for the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee, judge rules; Syed already served more than 20 years in prison and has been free since 2022 after his original conviction was vacated.

US House censures Rep. Al Green (D, TX-9) for disrupting President Donald Trump's joint address to Congress; Green becomes 28th member of the House to receive the congressional rebuke.

At least 15 people wounded in South Korea after two of the country's fighter jets accidentally dropped bombs on a civilian area during a joint live-fire exercise with the US military.

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GDILIVE.COM Region 1A in Groton **GDILIVE.COM**
Groton Area Tigers vs. Britton-Hecla Braves
7 p.m.



Good Luck Tigers from these GDILIVE.COM sponsors!

Bary Keith of Harr Motors
Bierman Farm service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Farmers Union Coop of Ferney and Conde
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Hanlon Brothers
John Sieh Agency
Ken's Food Fair
Lori's Pharmacy
Olive Grove Golf Course
Rix Farms/R&M Farms
S & S Lumber
Spanier Harvesting
The MeatHouse of Andover
Weismantel Agency of Columbia

Free Viewing on www.youtube.com/@GDILIVE

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South Dakota State announces summer, fall 2024 graduation list

BROOKINGS, S.D. (03/06/2025)-- The following students graduated after the summer and fall 2024 semesters at South Dakota State University. Nearly 950 students completed all requirements for a degree and/or certificate program, and those requirements have been verified by the appropriate college.

Overall, students from 36 states and 23 nations graduated following the summer and fall 2024 semesters. Nearly 40 students received two or more degrees or certificates from a college.

Faith Bader of Groton, South Dakota (57445), graduated with a Doctor of Pharmacy from SDSU's College of Pharmacy and Allied Health Professions.

Tessa Erdmann of Groton, South Dakota (57445), graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science from SDSU's College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences.

Chantalle Galbavy of Groton, South Dakota (57445), graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from SDSU's College of Nursing.

Hailey Monson of Groton, South Dakota (57445), graduated Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from SDSU's College of Nursing.

Queen of Hearts

Week Number 20 of The Queen of Hearts drawing was held Thursday with the jackpot at \$17,666. Ticket sales for the week were \$1,265. The name of Alvina Johnson was drawn and she picked card number 49 which was the Jack of Hearts. She won the consolation prize of \$126.

Gov. Rhoden Signs "Baby Gabriel" Bill and Five Other Bills

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Larry Rhoden signed HB 1044, which authorizes the use of a newborn safety device for the voluntary surrender of a newborn. This legislation creates a new option for mothers to surrender infants under South Dakota's "Safe Harbor" law. You can find a picture of Governor Rhoden signing HB 1044 [here](#).

"House Bill 1044 will save lives. These baby boxes have saved lives in other states," said Governor Larry Rhoden.

Under HB 1044, an emergency services provider or a licensed child placement agency may install and maintain a newborn safety device on its premises, if the premises are staffed 24/7, and if the device meets certain safety standards.

"Baby Gabriel" was a full-term baby found abandoned and deceased at a recycling center in Sioux Falls last August. "Hopefully with these baby boxes, there will be fewer 'Baby Gabriels' and more babies in loving homes," continued Governor Rhoden.

Governor Rhoden also signed the following five bills into law:

SB 93 prohibits payment or rebate of insurance deductibles by contractors providing motor vehicle repair services;

SB 111 permits a court to order family therapy or reunification therapy in a custody or visitation dispute;

HB 1099 modifies the community paramedic endorsement;

HB 1144 adopts the dietitian licensure compact; and

HB 1189 extends by two years the date on which moneys appropriated to the Governor's Office of Economic Development in 2021 for marketing, route restoration, business development, and air service marketing will revert to the general fund.

Governor Rhoden has signed 64 bills into law this legislative session.

Rounds Leads Legislation to Ban Foreign Adversaries from Buying American Farmland and Agricultural Businesses

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) and Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.) today reintroduced the Promoting Agriculture Safeguards and Security (PASS) Act, legislation to ban individuals and entities controlled by China, Russia, Iran and North Korea from purchasing agricultural land and businesses located near U.S. military installations or sensitive sites.

“Our near-peer adversaries such as China are looking for any possible opportunity to surveil our nation’s capabilities and resources,” said Rounds. “One example occurred in 2021 when the Fufeng Group purchased 300 acres of land in North Dakota, located near the Grand Forks Air Force Base. We can’t risk this happening again. The PASS Act would prevent entities of foreign adversaries from purchasing agricultural land and businesses near our military bases and sensitive sites. I am hopeful that with President Trump’s recent National Security Presidential Memorandum on this issue, we can finally get it across the finish line.”

“Nevada is home to many sensitive sites that are critical to our national security,” said Senator Cortez Masto. “It is common sense that we should not allow our foreign adversaries to buy agricultural land next to these locations. This bipartisan bill will keep Nevadans safe and protect American national security.”

The PASS Act is cosponsored by Majority Leader John Thune (R-S.D.) and Senators John Hoeven (R-N.D.) and Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.).

“Foreign ownership of American farmland can pose major threats to our national security, especially when that land is close to sensitive military sites,” said Thune. “This legislation would help safeguard our national defense, food supply, and rural economies and ensure farmland across South Dakota and our nation is protected from our foreign adversaries.”

“Foreign adversaries are buying up U.S. farmland which is a threat not only to our food security, but our national security,” said Hoeven. “Our legislation will prevent these bad actors from purchasing farmland and agricultural businesses near our strategic assets to better protect our nation from those with malign intentions.”

“Wyoming’s agricultural land should feed Americans, not provide surveillance platforms for our adversaries,” said Lummis. “This legislation prevents the Chinese Communist Party and other hostile nations from purchasing land near military installations across our state. It’s a straightforward solution to a serious threat.”

This legislation is endorsed by the South Dakota Soybean Association, the South Dakota Corn Growers Association, the South Dakota Dairy Producers and R-CALF USA.

“The South Dakota Soybean Association supports Senator Rounds’ legislation governing foreign ownership of agricultural land and business that protects U.S. farmers, consumers, national security and economic interests,” said Kevin Deinert, President of the South Dakota Soybean Association. “We recognize that national security is a federal responsibility and that this legislation will help to eliminate a patchwork of state interests.”

“The South Dakota Corn Growers Association (SDCGA) strongly supports a federal response on issues with national security implications,” said Taylor Sumption, President of the South Dakota Corn Growers Association. “We greatly appreciate Senator Rounds’ efforts on foreign ownership of agland based upon his unique perspective sitting on both the U.S. Senate Committees on Armed Services as well as Banking,

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Housing, and Urban Affairs. It is important that the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's role be elevated and enhanced and this legislation is a step in the right direction to utilize the U.S. Department of Agriculture's unique knowledge about the needs of production agriculture and rural America."

"South Dakota Dairy Producers (SDDP) recognizes the view that food security is national security and applauds Senator Rounds work to ensure specific foreign adversaries will not be able to purchase farm land near critical sites and thereby gain any competitive advantages surrounding United States agricultural resources," said Marv Post, Board Chairman of the South Dakota Dairy Producers. "SDDP also supports the Secretary of Agriculture being included in the oversight of foreign ag-related transactions as a common sense approach to ensure United States agriculture is represented in these decisions."

"We greatly appreciate Senator Rounds' bill that reaffirms that neither national security nor food sovereignty can exist without the other," said Bill Bullard, CEO of R-CALF USA. "We must protect both our food production capacity and our sites sensitive to national security from known foreign adversaries. This bill does both."

In February 2025, President Trump issued a National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) which specifically calls for new rules that prevent China from "buying up America." The PASS Act would codify parts of that NSPM.

Specifically, the PASS Act would:

- Ban purchases of agricultural land by individuals/entities controlled by North Korea, China, Russia and Iran near military installations and sensitive sites.
- Make the Secretary of Agriculture a voting member of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) for all covered transactions involving the purchase of agricultural land, biotechnology, and any other transaction related to the agriculture industry in the United States.
- Give the U.S. Department of Agriculture the ability to refer cases to CFIUS for review if there is reason to believe an agriculture land transaction may raise a national security concern.

BACKGROUND:

Rounds has been a leader on preventing foreign adversaries, namely China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, from owning land in America. Rounds first introduced the PASS Act to the Senate in August 2022 during the 117th Congress, with Representative Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.) leading companion legislation in the House.

In February 2023, Rounds reintroduced the PASS Act in the 118th Congress. The Senate Armed Services passed an amendment offered by Rounds as part of their committee version of the National Defense Authorization Act which would have banned China, Russia, Iran and North Korea from purchasing farmland or agriculture businesses.

In October 2023, Rounds introduced the Protect Our Bases Act. This legislation would have made certain the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States can review foreign land purchases near sensitive military, intelligence and national laboratory sites by requiring member agencies to annually update and review their lists of these sites.

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
502 North 2nd Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-8453

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
810 North 1st Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-2344

Groton Area School Board

Grant Rix, President
Nick Strom, VP
Debra Gengerke
Martin Weismantel
Tigh Flihs
Travis Harder
Dr. Heather Lerseth-Flihs,
DVM

Superintendent

Joseph J. Schwan
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High School Principal

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Elementary Principal

Brett Schwan
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Business Manager

Becky Hubsch
(605) 397-2351 ext. 1008
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Athletic Director

Alexa Schuring
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Opportunity Coordinator

Jodi Schwan
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K-12 School Counselor

Emily Neely
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Emily.VanGerpen@k12.sd.us

Technology Coordinator

Aaron Helvig
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1025
Aaron.Helvig@k12.sd.us

Region 1A Boys Basketball @ Groton Area

Friday, March 7th, 2025

Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

- 7:00PM → #1 Groton Area (white) vs. #4 Britton-Hecla (dark)
 - *Halftime Entertainment:* Groton Dynamics Dance Team

*Prior to the first game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$4.00.

- No passes will be accepted for regional play.
- AD's- please send me a pass list to leave at the ticket booth for spouses and admin.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM:

- Britton-Hecla – last locker room down the JH hallway

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Britton-Hecla: North Bench

Fan Sections:

- East Side – Groton
- West Side – Britton-Hecla

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: www.GDlive.com or [Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl](#)

Varsity Officials: Justin Deutsch, Dave Planteen, Luke Anderson

Scoreboard: Kristi Zoellner

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Joe Schwan

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Ticket Takers: Todd Peterson & Allison Tvinnereim

National Anthem: TBD

Thank you,
Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

South Dakota governor signs eminent domain ban on carbon pipelines

Affected company says it is unfairly targeted by new law, and 'all options are on the table' for legal action

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 6, 2025 11:13 AM

South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden announced Thursday that he signed a bill banning the use of eminent domain for carbon dioxide pipelines, delivering a victory to property-rights activists who spent several years advocating for the bill.

Eminent domain is the right to access private property for projects that benefit the public, with compensation determined by a court. It's commonly used for projects such as electrical power lines, water pipelines, oil pipelines and highways.

The legislation passed the state Senate on Tuesday after passing the House in late January. It prohibits carbon pipeline developers from using eminent domain to acquire land. The issue has been at the center of a contentious debate over Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions' proposed \$9 billion carbon capture pipeline.

The project would transport carbon dioxide from more than 50 ethanol plants in five states, including eastern South Dakota, to an underground storage site in North Dakota. It would qualify for billions in federal tax credits incentivizing the sequestration of heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions.

In a letter explaining his decision, Rhoden, a western South Dakota rancher and former legislator, emphasized his longstanding commitment to property rights and framed the bill as a way to restore trust between landowners and developers.

"I am no stranger to discussions about eminent domain and property rights," Rhoden wrote. "I've fought for private property rights in this Capitol for over 20 years. When I was a legislator, I was the prime sponsor of legislation that reformed eminent domain to protect property rights. I don't just care about landowners — I am a landowner."

Supporters of the bill have argued that private companies like Summit should not be able to access land against the will of its owners. Opponents, however, contended that the measure could harm the ethanol industry, which is seeking ways to lower its carbon footprint as some states and countries limit sales of carbon-intensive fuels.

Rhoden said voluntary land-access agreements known as easements should be the path forward. He said his signature of the bill "does not kill the proposed project."

"I encourage Summit and others to view it as an opportunity for a needed reset," he wrote. "Voluntary easements for this proposed project will still be able to move forward."

Summit, in a statement, said the ban "changed the rules in the middle of the game."

"This kind of regulatory uncertainty creates real challenges — not just for our project, but for the ethanol plants in South Dakota that now face a competitive disadvantage compared to their counterparts in neighboring states," Summit said. "While this presents obstacles, our project moves forward in states that support investment and innovation, and we will have more news on that soon."

In response to a question from South Dakota Searchlight about whether the company might challenge the new law in court, Summit provided a statement that said "all options are on the table but we remain focused on working with stakeholders to support the long-term success of the ethanol industry and support the president's goals of American energy dominance."

"It's unfortunate that a piece of legislation has been framed around a single company rather than addressing broader infrastructure and economic policy," the company added.

Summit has not yet received a permit from the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission. The company's initial application was denied in 2023, largely due to the route's conflicts with local ordinances that mandate minimum distances between pipelines and existing features. The company has since made some adjustments to its route and reapplied, and that application is pending.

The project has received permits in Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota, while Nebraska does not have a permitting process, and some of the permits have been challenged in court.

The bill's passage follows a shift in the South Dakota's political landscape, with opponents of eminent domain gaining influence in the Legislature. Last year, lawmakers passed a compromise bill that imposed new restrictions on carbon pipelines and implemented new protections for landowners and counties, but did not ban eminent domain. That measure faced fierce opposition. It was referred to the ballot in November and defeated, and 14 Republican incumbents lost their legislative seats in the June primary. This legislative session, some prominent critics of eminent domain were elevated into leadership positions.

Sen. Joy Hohn, R-Hartford, is among the new crop of legislators who supported the eminent domain ban. "The use of power of condemnation by a private company for the benefit of potential future markets is not worth the dangerous precedent it sets for future generations," Hohn said. "On behalf of South Dakota citizens and property owners across our great state, we are so grateful to Governor Rhoden."

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Concealed guns on campus could become reality with South Dakota governor's signature

Representative says bill allows students to protect themselves 'the way God intended'

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 6, 2025 6:34 PM

People with firearms training will be allowed to carry concealed handguns on college campuses in South Dakota if Gov. Larry Rhoden signs a bill passed by the House of Representatives on Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre.

A call for rejection from a representative who formerly served as a Highway Patrol trooper and said he lost sleep over the proposal, along with a plea from another who leads a campus suicide prevention group, weren't enough to keep Senate Bill 100 from a 55-14 win.

It passed even more decisively in the Senate on Feb. 12, with just two senators saying no.

The bill came from Sen. Mykala Voita, R-Bonesteel, who amended it after input from the Board of Regents to allow colleges to ban guns near flammable chemicals and require them to be locked up when in their owners' dorm rooms. The amended bill also requires people to have an enhanced concealed carry permit — which can only be obtained after completing a firearms safety course — to carry on campus.

One senator said it "might be the best bill" he'd ever seen, calling it a boon to self-defense for young people.

The bill's prime sponsor in the House, Glenham Republican Spencer Gosch, added his own superlatives to the self-protection theme as he urged his fellow representatives to give the idea a green light.

"It's a great bill for the citizens of South Dakota to be able to protect themselves the way God intended," Gosch said. "I'd urge you to please vote yes."

Rep. Jim Halverson, R-Winner, was the first to rise in opposition.

"I slept very little last night because I couldn't make peace with my God if I didn't stand up and speak against this bill today," Halverson said.

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He spoke of his time in the state Highway Patrol, firearms-related threats to law enforcement officers at the state Capitol, and "a lot of stuff I don't want to talk about today" involving guns.

Military members and law enforcement go to great lengths to secure their firearms, he said, and he doubts college students are likely to treat their weapons with the same degree of respect.

"A locked box in a dorm room just doesn't seem like a good plan," Halverson said.

Rep. Erik Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, is director of Lost & Found, a nonprofit group that works to prevent suicides on campus. Suicide is the leading cause of death among college-aged students, and he said South Dakota's rate of suicide by firearm is 12 times the national average.

"I hate seeing that statistic, because it hurts my heart, hurts my soul," said Muckey, who said bills like SB 100 carry more risk of contributing to suicide than personal safety.

Rep. Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, rejected that idea. He described himself as a grandpa who worries "more than anyone," but doesn't worry about guns causing suicides. People make their own choices, he said, and adults are empowered to take risks.

The right to bear arms and protect oneself, he said, shouldn't be infringed upon "because I'm worried something bad might happen."

"Those rights are solid," Overweg said. "Those rights belong to every law-abiding citizen, 18 years and older, and I say if they have the right to protect themselves, they should have that right."

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.

Dead dual-credit price increase rises again and wins approval in SD Senate

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 6, 2025 5:17 PM

A bill to reduce South Dakota's subsidy for high school dual-credit courses, which was defeated earlier this week in a legislative committee, was revived Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre and passed the state Senate 23-11.

The dual enrollment program lets high school juniors and seniors earn both high school and college credits through in-person or online courses. The bill would shift the cost-share for the program to a 50-50 split with students. Currently, the state pays two-thirds of the \$150 per credit-hour cost, which is a reduced rate compared to regular university tuition.

Students and families that currently pay about \$50 per credit hour would experience a price hike to \$75 per credit hour, saving the state — and costing families — about \$1.2 million annually.

The Senate Education Committee voted 4-3 to reject the bill Tuesday, but the full Senate forced the bill out of the committee.

Sen. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, framed the bill as necessary given "the current budget situation," referring to declining sales tax revenue and other budget difficulties that have caused proposed cuts in numerous state departments and programs.

Sen. Ernie Otten, R-Tea, the lead co-chair of the Legislature's main budget committee, said the existing subsidy is fiscally irresponsible given those broader budget constraints.

"We've got to align this thing in such a way that we can match that thing up and not cause a fiscal cliff," he said. "That is what is at stake here."

Supporters of the bill also emphasized that the change does not eliminate the program.

Opponents warned that increasing the cost for students would limit access, particularly for low-income families.

"This is a tax increase on families that have kids that are going to higher education," said Sen. Michael Rohl, R-Aberdeen.

The bill now heads to Gov. Larry Rhoden for his consideration.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

New version of bill to aid Ellsworth Air Force Base specifies \$15 million loan for school

BY: SETH TUPPER - MARCH 6, 2025 5:00 PM

The effort to win state financial support for a new elementary school necessitated by growth at Ellsworth Air Force Base won a legislative endorsement Thursday at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre.

The state House of Representatives' 41-28 vote was the latest twist in a multi-year struggle. Legislation to provide \$15 million of state funding for the project failed last year.

Earlier this week, Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, tried a new approach. She convinced the Senate to pass a bill that would transfer \$15 million from a state housing infrastructure fund to a new support and development fund for projects "promoting the development, expansion, and support of the mission" at Ellsworth.

Duhamel's legislation did not mention the need for a new elementary school in the Douglas School District near the base, which neighbors Rapid City and Box Elder.

When the bill came up Thursday for debate in the House, Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, convinced representatives to adopt an amendment. The amended bill, which the House ultimately passed, authorizes the South Dakota Housing Development Authority to make an interest-free, 20-year loan up to \$15 million from the housing infrastructure fund "to a school district adjoining a federal military installation for the purpose of constructing or expanding a school building."

Speaking on behalf of her amendment, Rehfeldt said it "provides both transparency and very forthright intention about what this money is going to be used for."

Growth at the base is driven by an estimated \$2 billion worth of construction to accommodate the future arrival of B-21 stealth bomber planes, which are under development. That activity is expected to expand the population of the base and the surrounding area significantly, putting stress on local governments to respond with new roads, housing, schools, and other infrastructure and services.

The formal name of the housing infrastructure fund is the Housing Infrastructure Financing Program. The Legislature created it two years ago with state dollars and federal pandemic relief money. Half of the \$200 million fund was made available as grants to support infrastructure for housing projects, and all of that money has been awarded. The other half was made available as loans, but demand has been low, leaving more than \$80 million still available as of December.

Debate on the amended bill was long and lively, with some legislators seeming to suggest that the unused housing funds are proof they were duped into putting too much money into the program.

"I guess we can officially declare the workforce housing 'crisis' over now, right?" said Republican House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach with intended sarcasm.

Some said the money is still needed for housing infrastructure — including around the growing base — and should be retained for that purpose. Others said it would set a bad precedent to single out one school for state help, while other schools finance their own construction projects.

Arguments on behalf of Ellsworth's role in national defense and the economy of South Dakota — it's the state's second-largest employer, one lawmaker said — ultimately won out. Several legislators described an ever-escalating competition among communities around the country to keep their military bases from closing.

Ellsworth was temporarily on a closure list 20 years ago, which sparked a successful state and local

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campaign to protect it. That campaign has included clearing land in accident potential zones, adding a drone mission, creating a new training airspace and other initiatives.

Rep. Jack Kolbeck, R-Sioux Falls, said providing money for a school to educate the children of people stationed at Ellsworth is another way to protect the base.

"I think that is something that we can show, that we want that B-21 here, and we want that air base to stay here," Kolbeck said.

According to past information presented to legislators, the school is expected to cost more than \$60 million, with federal and local funding sources providing the rest of the money.

The bill now goes back to the Senate for its consideration of the amended language.

Duhamel said Thursday evening that the Senate could concur with the amendment, or the bill might go to a conference committee for further work. Duhamel said she'd prefer a grant to the school rather than a loan.

"A zero-interest loan for 20 years is an option, and an option is better than nothing," she said.

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

Trump, again, walks back tariffs in trade war with Canada and Mexico

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MARCH 6, 2025 6:12 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump Thursday signed an executive order to delay for a month broad tariffs he levied on Canada and Mexico earlier in the week.

The tariffs sent Wall Street stocks tumbling and heightened fears of an economic fallout.

During the signing at the White House, Trump said most of the 25% tariffs on Mexico and Canada he placed beginning Tuesday would be delayed until April 2. Trump had also placed an additional 10% tariff on China.

"And then we have some temporary ones and small ones, relatively small, although it's a lot of money having to do with Mexico and Canada," Trump said.

It's the second time in his brief tenure in office the president has postponed tariffs he placed, blaming Canada and Mexico for fentanyl trafficking. China still has 20% tariffs.

Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had announced retaliatory tariffs Wednesday and Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum planned to announce retaliatory measures on Sunday. The Chinese embassy in the United States wrote on social media that China was prepared to fight back.

"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," the embassy wrote.

Trump said after talking with Sheinbaum earlier Thursday, he decided on the delay on tariffs against Mexico.

"We had a very good conversation," Trump said of the call with Mexico's president. "Also, we discussed drugs, and they're working much harder."

The one-month delay includes some products covered by Mexico and Canada under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Tariffs are essentially taxes on foreign goods that are paid by those importing the goods.

On Monday, Trump had said there would be "no room left for Mexico or Canada" to negotiate on the 25% tariffs he placed.

Fentanyl smuggling cited

During his joint address Tuesday to Congress, Trump said tariffs were needed because of fentanyl smuggling.

"Tariffs are not just about protecting American jobs, they're about protecting the soul of our country,"

Trump said. "Tariffs are about making America rich again and making America great again. And it's happening, and it will happen rather quickly. There will be a little disturbance, but we're okay with that."

Of the fentanyl seized by border officials in fiscal year 2024, roughly 0.2% – or 43 pounds – came from the Canadian border, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data. Compared with Mexico, about 96.6% of fentanyl was seized at the southern border.

Canada reaction

Trudeau said in a Wednesday statement that the tariffs were an "unjustified decision." He also stressed the need for Canada to focus on trading within the country and not rely heavily on being a trading partner with the U.S.

"We must increase our economic resilience, reduce dependence on one market, and strengthen our domestic economy for the benefit of Canadian workers and businesses now and in the future," he said.

Trump, and high-placed White House officials, have publicly joked about annexing Canada — a democratic nation — and referred to the country as the 51st U.S. state.

After the tariffs were announced Tuesday, Trudeau speculated that Trump "wants to see a total collapse of the Canadian economy because that'll make it easier to annex us."

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

Trump insists 'good people' shouldn't lose their federal jobs, despite mass firings

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - MARCH 6, 2025 6:08 PM

WASHINGTON — With thousands of federal workers already laid off, President Donald Trump said Thursday that he wants his Cabinet members to "keep good people" and does not want to "see a big cut where a lot of good people are cut."

Trump, in meeting with his Cabinet members and other officials earlier in the day, also informed them that billionaire Elon Musk could guide departments on what to do but would not make staffing or policy decisions for the agencies, according to reporting by POLITICO.

Trump and Musk's U.S. DOGE Service have taken on massive efforts to try to reduce federal government spending — leading to dizzying cuts across wide swaths of the federal workforce.

Those mass firings have prompted a slew of lawsuits filed in federal court and questions about the extent of Musk's authority within the executive branch.

The president, speaking to reporters Thursday afternoon, said the Cabinet meeting focused on those massive reductions within the federal government.

Asked what Trump told Cabinet members Thursday regarding Musk and his authority to carry out actions, the president said they had "a great meeting" and clarified that "the people that aren't doing a good job, that are unreliable, don't show up to work, etcetera — those people can be cut."

Musk's role

Musk also, according to POLITICO, has reportedly admitted that DOGE has made some mistakes.

Trump, who told the press several times Thursday that he wants the Cabinet members to "keep good people," said "we're going to be watching them, and Elon and the group are going to be watching them, and if they can cut, it's better, and if they don't cut, then Elon will do the cutting."

An 'amazing' job

The president also said he thinks Musk and the DOGE service have done "an amazing job."

DOGE stands for Department of Government Efficiency, although the entity is not a Cabinet department

and is temporary under a Trump executive order.

"We want to get rid of the people that aren't working, that aren't showing up and have a lot of problems, and so they're working together with Elon, and I think we're doing a really great job. We're cutting it down. We have to, for the sake of our country," Trump said.

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

State-by-state report by Dems projects millions of people could lose Medicaid coverage

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 6, 2025 6:05 PM

WASHINGTON — A report released Thursday by Democrats details how many people in each state would lose access to Medicaid if Republicans in Congress were to cut the program by one-third — a scenario some GOP lawmakers have floated as an option to help pay for tax cuts, though one so sweeping it would struggle to get the votes needed to become law.

The Joint Economic Committee – Minority report, shared first with States Newsroom, projects that 25 million people throughout the country would lose access to Medicaid if Republicans were to enact a law cutting funding to the health care program for lower income Americans by one-third.

Among them, 3 million would be rural residents and 10 million would be children. Additionally, 1 in 5 seniors could lose Medicaid coverage of their nursing home care, according to the report.

The state-by-state breakdown in the JEC report shows that California, Florida, Illinois, New York and Texas would have the highest numbers of residents harmed by the potential cuts. Each of those states could have more than 1 million residents potentially kicked off the program.

The Joint Economic Committee includes members of both chambers of Congress and both political parties. It's designed "to review economic conditions and to recommend improvements in economic policy," according to its website.

New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan, ranking member on the Joint Economic Committee, said in a statement that House Republicans' plans "could take health care away from up to 25 million Americans."

"This new Joint Economic Committee analysis sheds light on the number of people who could lose health care coverage because of President Trump and Congressional Republicans — and the devastating impacts that their budget could have specifically on the ability of children, seniors, and people living in rural areas across the country to access health care," Hassan said.

\$880 billion in spending cuts

Republicans in Congress are trying to figure out how to pass several of their core policy goals, including extending the 2017 tax law, through the budget reconciliation process.

The House approved a budget resolution in late February that would clear the way for lawmakers to increase the deficit by as much as \$4.5 trillion to accomplish their tax goals. But that budget resolution also proposes several committees find savings, including the Energy and Commerce Committee.

That panel, tasked with finding at least \$880 billion in spending cuts, oversees several federal programs, including Medicare and Medicaid.

Republicans and President Donald Trump have been clear they will not be touching the Medicare program, which provides health insurance for retired Americans and some people with disabilities.

But GOP lawmakers are debating how exactly to find savings in the Medicaid program, though they could face intense blowback given how many of their own voters rely on the program for health care. Medicaid is a joint federal-state program that helps cover medical costs for some people with limited incomes.

Republicans in Congress cannot actually advance a reconciliation bill until after the House and Senate

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agree to adopt the same budget resolution, which has yet to happen.

Senate two-bill plan

The Senate voted in mid-February to approve its own budget resolution that proposes a two-bill strategy for enacting Republican campaign promises.

Under the Senate budget resolution, which House leaders have vowed not to take up, Congress would first pass a bill to boost defense and border security spending by hundreds of billions of dollars as well as remaking the country's energy policy.

The Senate strategy would then have Congress adopt a second budget resolution later this year, setting up a pathway for Republicans to extend the 2017 tax law.

The Senate is expected to take up the House's budget resolution at some point and make changes to the document, though when exactly they'll do that is an open-ended question. The budget resolution would then have to go back to the House for final approval.

CBO report

The Joint Economic Committee – Minority report made public Thursday came out just one day after the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office released a letter detailing how much federal funding the House Energy and Commerce Committee oversees.

CBO Director Phillip L. Swagel wrote that the letter was in response to a request from House Budget Committee ranking member Brendan F. Boyle, D-Pa., and Energy and Commerce Committee ranking member Frank Pallone, D-N.J.

The Energy and Commerce Committee, Swagel wrote, oversees \$8.8 trillion in spending over the 10-year budget window when Medicare spending is excluded, which is what Boyle and Pallone requested.

Of that total, \$8.2 trillion, or 93%, goes toward Medicaid, Swagel wrote.

The Energy and Commerce Committee, which House Republicans expect to find at least \$880 billion in spending cuts, oversees just \$381 billion over the 10-year budget window that doesn't go toward Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP.

Those CBO numbers would indicate that if Republicans stick to the goals in the House budget resolution, which very well could change in the Senate, they would likely have to cut hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicaid.

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.

SD Senate will consider repealing obscenity prosecution protection for librarians

Opponents of bill say its supporters want to criminalize disagreements over literary virtue

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 6, 2025 4:45 PM

The decision to keep or repeal a clause in South Dakota law that protects librarians from criminal penalties for the knowing distribution of "harmful" material to minors is in the hands of the state Senate.

The Senate Judiciary Committee voted 5-2 on Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre to endorse a bill that would change the law.

Disseminating materials harmful to minors is punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine. Existing law makes being a public librarian an "affirmative defense" against prosecution.

Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Bethany Soye is the prime sponsor of House Bill 1239. It would remove the affirmative defense for librarians for distributing the pornographic content Soye alleges is found on public bookshelves across South Dakota. Schools, universities and museums would also lose the defense.

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She pointed to a book series called "A Court of Thorns and Roses," and included excerpts from it and other materials available in public libraries in a document she distributed to senators. Soye said books in the series are available in public libraries in Brookings, Madison, Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Vermillion and Yankton, among others.

Rapid City Republican Sen. Greg Blanc, a pastor, said he hadn't wanted to "do his homework" by reading the excerpts, and that doing so made him want to "go home and take a shower."

"Most taxpayers don't see the necessity of pornography being available in taxpayer funded institutions," Blanc said.

The bill narrowly cleared the House floor last week after heated debate, during which one opponent decried the proposal as a pathway to "locking up librarians."

On Thursday, Soye called that rhetoric overblown. Parents have asked librarians to remove books, but Soye said they haven't listened and need an incentive to take community concerns more seriously.

Twelve states don't have affirmative defense protections for librarians, Soye said, and librarians haven't been locked up in any of them.

"If it had happened, you'd know about it, because it would have been national news," she said.

Existing state law criminalizes the knowing distribution of obscenity, or possession of obscenity with the intention to distribute it to minors. Soye said librarians would not commit a crime under her bill unless they made an active choice to have obscene material in their collection, keep it on the shelf, and allow kids to check it out.

"No one will accidentally violate this," Soye said.

Opponents weren't so sure.

"The inherent problem with obscenity testing is that you're going to be making subjective calls," said Cash Anderson, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

Obscene material is generally protected for adults by the First Amendment, but the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that governments can regulate its access by minors.

It created a three-part test in the 1973 case of Miller v. California to determine if something is obscene, and therefore legal to regulate. It must appeal to the prurient interest of the average person, depict sexual conduct in a way that is offensive, and lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, said literary value is subjective, and debates about it will likely go to court if Soye's bill passes. Hulse said she'd been inundated with emails on the bill, half for it and half against it. She voted to send the bill to the Senate floor so the full body would have a chance to cast a vote on behalf of their constituents, she said.

Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, went the other way. He agreed with opponents, who alleged that parents who fail to convince librarians to agree with them on a book's lack of literary virtues are essentially weaponizing the justice system to get their way.

Debates on what is or isn't obscene should happen in public, at the local level, Wheeler said.

"We deal with it through the democratic process," Wheeler said. "We don't deal with it through criminal prosecution."

Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, said he'd come to the committee hearing prepared to side with the local government officials in his district who'd urged him to say no.

Reading the passages in Soye's handout on books now available in public libraries and testimony from the bill's supporters changed his mind, he said.

"We keep seeing bills like this because libraries are not responsive to parent concerns," Mehlhaff said.

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

Political pressure led to permit delays for Dakota Access Pipeline, former exec testifies

BY: MARY STEURER - MARCH 6, 2025 9:45 AM

MANDAN, N.D. — A former Energy Transfer executive on Tuesday blamed political pressure for the federal government's decision to delay a key permit for the Dakota Access Pipeline eight years ago.

Joey Mahmoud, who oversaw the pipeline's development, told a Morton County jury that the energy company was on track to get authorization to build the pipeline under Lake Oahe until fall 2016, when he claims protests interfered.

Thousands flocked to rural North Dakota near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation to support the tribe, which is opposed to the project. The tribe considers the Dakota Access Pipeline a pollution threat and an infringement on tribal sovereignty, and claims that the pipeline has disrupted numerous sacred sites. The pipeline crosses underneath Lake Oahe, a reservoir on the Missouri River, less than a half-mile upstream from the reservation.

The Department of the Army on Sept. 9, 2016, announced in a joint statement with the U.S. Department of Justice and the Department of the Interior that it would hold off on granting an easement authorizing the pipeline to cross beneath the river, which is under U.S. Army Corps of Engineers jurisdiction. The agencies said in light of concerns voiced by Standing Rock and other tribes, the Corps would take a deeper look at whether the pipeline complies with federal law.

Mahmoud said that the pipeline has met all federal regulations from the beginning and that the issues raised by the tribe and its allies were based on misinformation.

"When we were first told that the easement was going to be postponed, it was a complete shock," he said.

He speculated that said the Obama administration must have been persuaded by pipeline opponents, but that he did not know by whom.

Mahmoud said that over the course of his career, he's sought approval for thousands of permits. He indicated this is the only time he's seen federal agencies issue a joint statement on a permitting decision of this nature.

Mahmoud testified as part of an anticipated five-week trial between Energy Transfer and Greenpeace.

Energy Transfer alleges the environmental group co-opted a local protest effort led by Standing Rock to serve its own anti-fossil fuel agenda.

The company accuses Greenpeace of funding and training protesters to commit criminal acts to stop construction of the pipeline, as well as of circulating defamatory claims to tarnish Energy Transfer's reputation.

Earlier in the case, Energy Transfer presented depositions and written statements from Greenpeace employees indicating they supported the demonstration with supplies, intel and training.

Greenpeace denies Energy Transfer's claims. It has argued that its role in the protests was minimal, and that the federal government's decision to delay granting the easement was in response to actions by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, not the environmental group.

Standing Rock Chairwoman Janet Alkire in a Monday statement called the lawsuit "frivolous."

"The case is an attempt to silence our Tribe about the truth of what happened at Standing Rock, and the threat posed by DAPL to our land, our water and our people," Alkire said. "The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe will not be silenced."

Attorneys for Greenpeace on Monday showed jurors a January 2016 letter from Standing Rock leaders urging the Army Corps to conduct a more thorough environmental review of the pipeline, months before Greenpeace started supporting the protests.

The jury was also shown part of a memo Energy Transfer sent to the transition team for President Donald Trump after the 2016 election.

Energy Transfer in the memo called on the president elect to reverse the Obama administration's decision to delay the easement, maintaining that complaints about the pipeline circulating in the news media were all false.

"Just like the people coordinating with President Obama, we were coordinating with President Trump,"

Mahmoud said.

The memo also accused the Obama administration of denying repeated requests to send federal law enforcement to help protests.

It also references a "free speech zone" that the Army Corps of Engineers created to allow protesters to demonstrate on federal land adjacent to Lake Oahe.

The state of North Dakota has previously claimed that an alleged lack of federal assistance, coupled with the Army Corps taking actions to accommodate protesters, prolonged and intensified the demonstrations. Both claims were key to its lawsuit against the Army Corps, which went to trial in a North Dakota federal court about a year ago.

North Dakota seeks \$38 million of dollars in damages from the federal government. A judge has yet to issue a final ruling in that case.

Standing Rock also has an active lawsuit against the federal government related to the Dakota Access Pipeline. The tribe filed suit against the Army Corps of Engineers in October, arguing that the pipeline is operating in violation of federal law and must be shut down.

Energy Transfer said Wednesday it expects to finish presenting its case this week.

Mary Steurer is a reporter based in Bismarck for the North Dakota Monitor. A native of St. Louis, Steurer previously worked as the local government reporter for the Casper Star-Tribune newspaper in Wyoming.

COMMENTARY

Taxpayers will pay the price for South Dakota's prison delay **by Brad Johnson**

The South Dakota Legislature's inability to make the hard, forward-thinking decision to build a new prison likely will cost taxpayers dearly in the future.

Gov. Larry Rhoden's decision to take the prison project from legislative action and create a working group to further study it was a disappointment to some House leaders who believed there was a possibility the funding could still pass. Apparently, Rhoden didn't believe there was enough support in the Senate to proceed.

Now, Lt. Gov. Tony Venhuizen will chair a working group this spring and summer that will further delay and likely increase the cost of the prison.

The state has already spent or obligated \$54.1 million on the project. The proposed site covers about 160 acres in Lincoln County and is located at the northwest corner of 477th Avenue and 278th Street. The state owns another 160 acres straight south. All of the land passed into the ownership of the state Office of School and Public Lands years ago when the owners died without heirs or a will. The state Department of Corrections "bought" the land by transferring \$7.9 million to the school trust fund.

The state had a guaranteed maximum price of \$825 million for the prison as of November. That guaranteed maximum expires this month, and historical trends show costs are likely to increase.

South Dakota Searchlight, in a story on Jan. 4, 2024, quoted Venhuizen saying the worst of the pandemic-related disruptions and supply shortages in the construction industry had eased, and that "construction prices have stabilized," leaving the industry with "more of an ability to predict costs."

That's an optimistic attitude.

One thing that could decrease the need for a prison to house 1,512 inmates is a significant overhaul of South Dakota's criminal penalty system. We are a state that has one of the higher incarceration rates.

According to "States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2024," released by the Prison Policy Initiative, South Dakota's incarceration rate would rank 10th in the world if every U.S. state were a country. We are even worse than Cuba. Our state incarcerates 812 people per 100,000 compared to 794 for Cuba and 560 in North Dakota.

Ironically, some of the legislators who opposed building the new prison also opposed decreasing penalties for ingesting drugs such as marijuana from a felony to a misdemeanor. That bill did pass narrowly

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and is awaiting Rhoden's consideration. At the same time, the Legislature also has created several new felonies this year.

As the new prison task force again studies the issue, they'll likely rediscover things already known.

There still is a need for a new men's prison to replace the aging penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

There probably won't be any other available location near Sioux Falls that will be better than the Lincoln County land.

People in Lincoln County won't be any more supportive a year from now if plans go back to a prison there.

Nobody wants a prison in their backyard, and that won't change anywhere across South Dakota.

Finally, given the ultra-conservative makeup and limited visionary leadership ability in the current Legislature, there won't be much appetite to make major sentencing reform changes.

The question then ultimately returns to whether we continue to use an antiquated prison and remain in our backward, vengeance-based justice system of incarceration rather than rehabilitation, or we take the big step and do what is right.

Most likely this Legislature, which calls itself conservative, will have wasted a year or two, and the price tag will be \$40 million or more higher than today.

It's not like South Dakota hasn't taken on big projects before.

In 2022, the Legislature authorized the South Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources to distribute \$600 million in American Rescue Plan Act federal grant funding. Of all the criticism former Gov. Kristi Noem heaped on President Joe Biden, she never criticized this money.

The grant funding enabled our towns, cities and rural water systems to make dramatic improvements to their drinking water, wastewater and sanitary landfill systems.

At one meeting on April 12, 2022, the board awarded almost all \$600 million in grants to pair with nearly \$1 billion in new debt for \$1.6 billion in local projects, many of which are just beginning.

About 70% of the 103 applicants, communities small and large alike, had to create new taxes to be able to pay the bonds back.

In the years since, at least another \$500 million in water-related debt has been placed on our cities, not counting the loans other state agencies have approved.

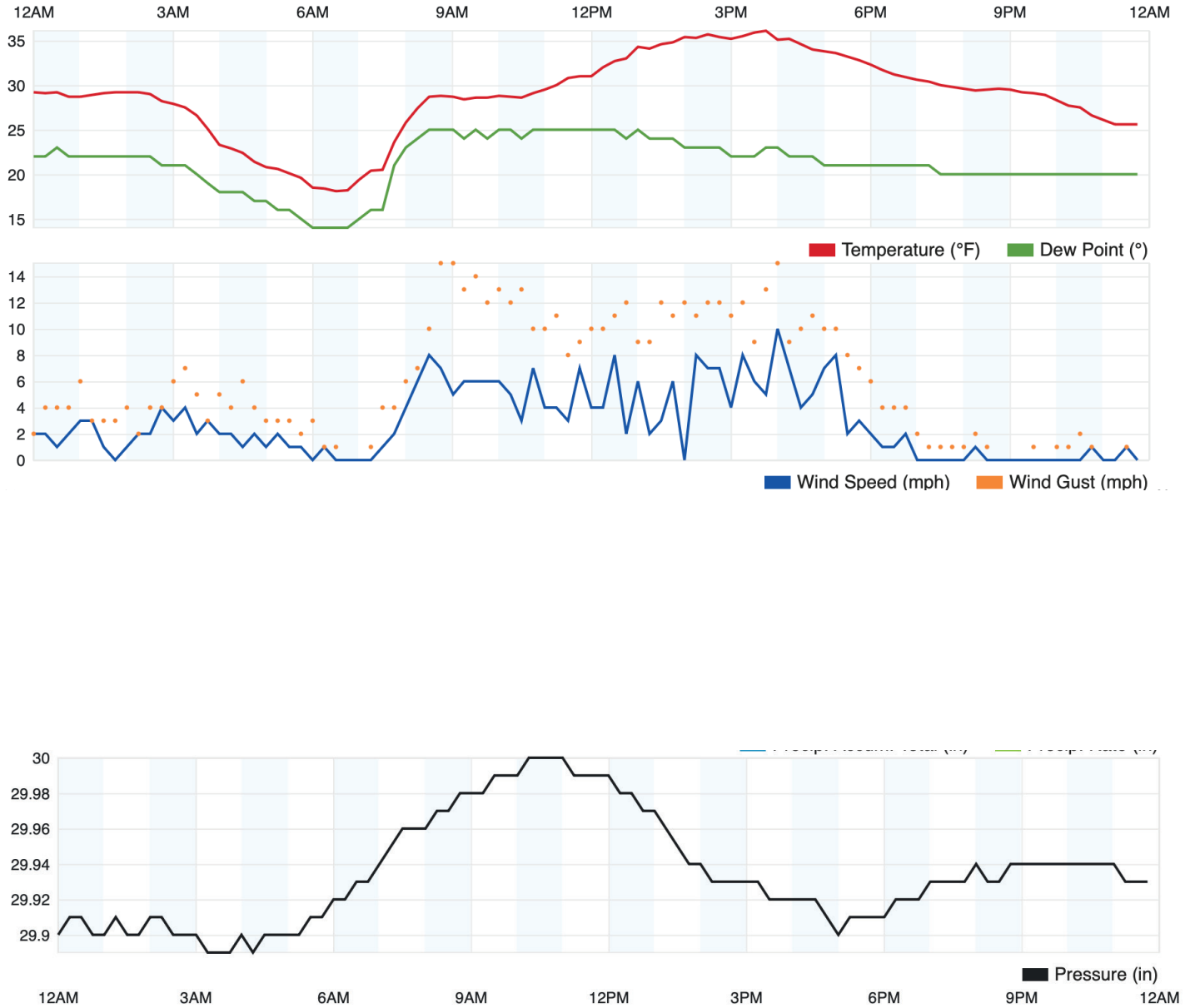
Now, it's time to address another neglected pillar of infrastructure, our men's prison.

Brad Johnson is a certified general real estate appraiser and longtime journalist. He is past president of South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association, president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and served 16 years on the South Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources. He lives in Rapid City and Watertown.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 48 °F

Sunny

Tonight



Low: 27 °F

Mostly Clear

Saturday



High: 57 °F

Mostly Sunny

Saturday Night



Low: 30 °F

Mostly Clear

Sunday



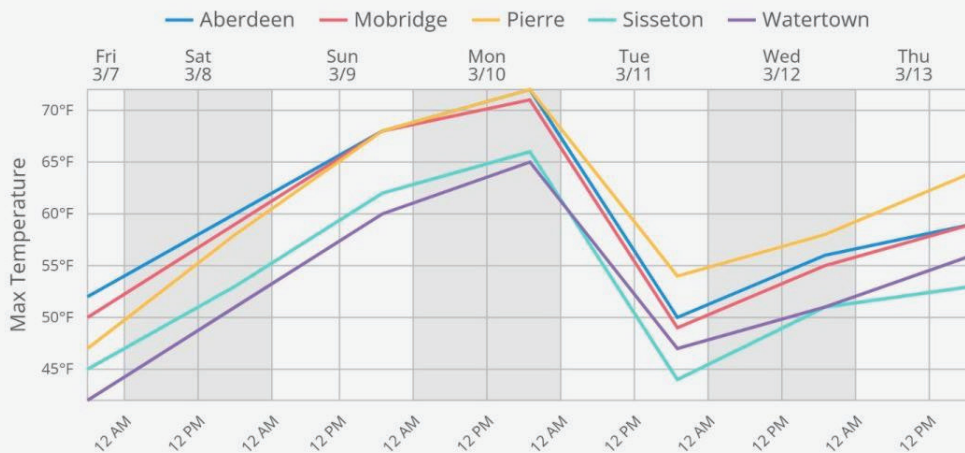
High: 64 °F

Mostly Sunny then Sunny and Breezy



Max Temperatures

Friday, Mar 7 Through Thursday, Mar 13



Information:

The line chart shows the weather element values based on model predictions from the National Blend of Models.

Additional Details

- Markedly Warmer**
 - Warmest Day Appears To Be Monday
- Elevated Fire Danger**
 - Warmer Dry Weather To Lead To Increased Fire Danger
- Strong Wind Gusts**
 - Blustery Wind Gusts Behind A Cold Front Monday Night

Valid: Fri 06 pm CST - Thu 07 pm CDT

Issued: Fri, Mar 7, 2025, 3 am CST



Temperatures are expected to warm for consecutive days through Monday. Then, a strong cold front Monday evening will bring rather blustery winds to the region, and cooler temperatures for Monday night through Tuesday night, before a warming trend picks up again through Thursday. These dry warm days lead to elevated grassland fire danger.

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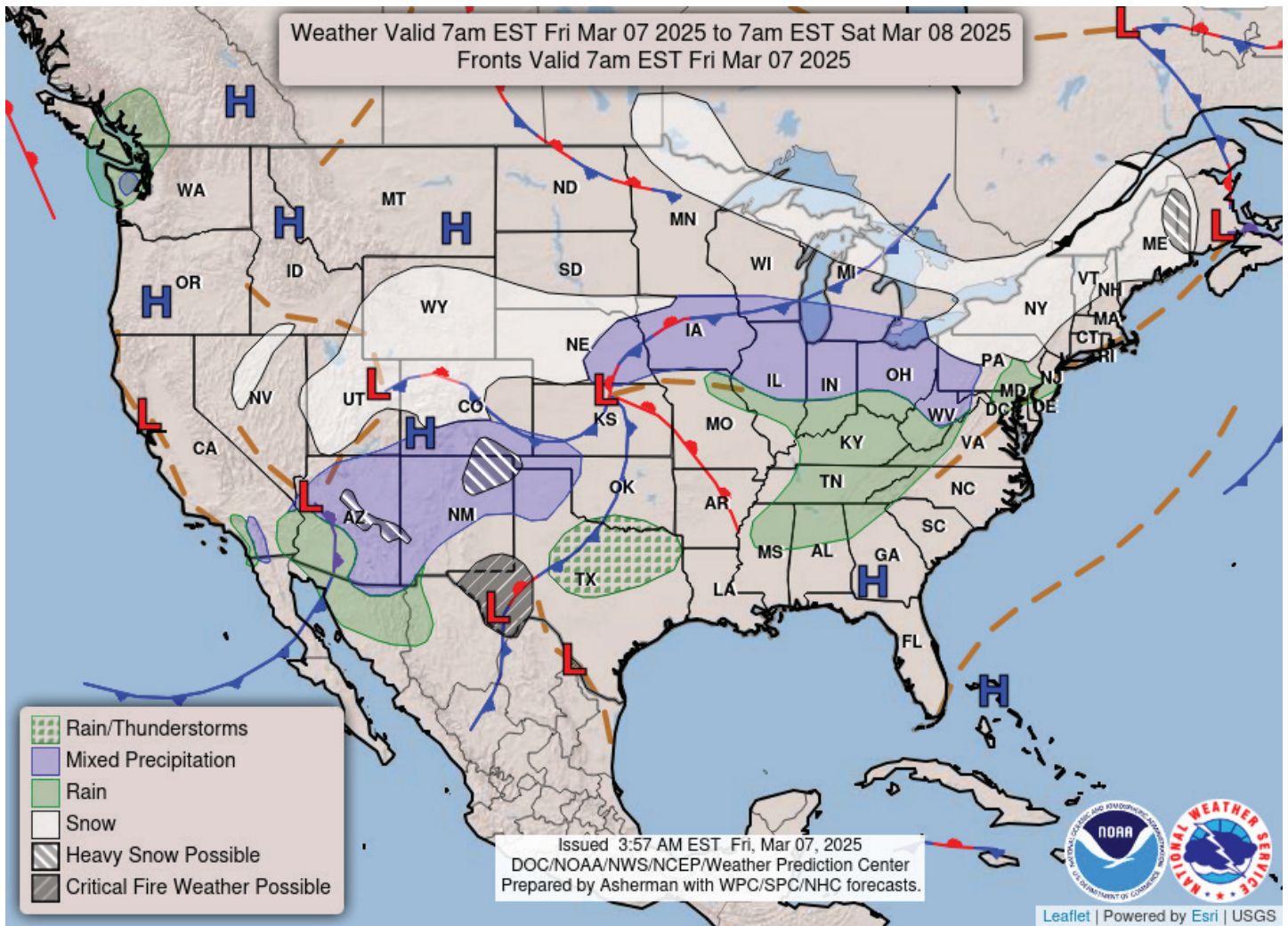
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 36 °F at 3:23 PM
Low Temp: 18 °F at 6:39 AM
Wind: 16 mph at 8:50 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 32 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 70 in 2016
Record Low: -24 in 1995
Average High: 37
Average Low: 15
Average Precip in March.: 0.17
Precip to date in March.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.34
Precip Year to Date: 0.45
Sunset Tonight: 6:29:21 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:55:19 am



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Today in Weather History

March 7, 1998: A winter storm tracked across South Dakota, resulting in heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches across most of central South Dakota from the evening of the 6th into the afternoon of the 7th. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Fort Pierre and near Stephan, 7 inches at Blunt, Pierre, and Murdo, and 8 inches across southern Jones and Lyman counties. As a result, many activities were canceled, and travel was significantly disrupted, especially on Interstate 90.

1717 - The Great Snow, a composite of four winter storms to hit the eastern U.S. in nine days, finally came to an end. Snow depths averaged 60 inches following the storm. Up to four feet of snow fell around Boston MA, and snow drifts 25 feet high were reported around Dorchester MA. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1932 - A severe coastal storm set barometric pressure records from Virginia to New England. Block Island RI reported a barometric pressure reading of 28.20 inches. (David Ludlum)

1947: On March 7, 1947, not long after the end of World War II and years before Sputnik ushered in the space age, a group of soldiers and scientists in the New Mexico desert saw something new and wonderful in this grainy black-and-white-photos - the first pictures of Earth as seen from an altitude greater than 100 miles in space.

1970: Last near-total eclipse of the sun in Washington, DC, in this century. Sun was 95% eclipsed. A total eclipse passed over NASA's Wallops Station (now Wallops Flight Facility) on the coast of Virginia.

1987 - Forty-five cities in the north central and northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Huron SD hit 80 degrees, and Pickstown SD reached 81 degrees. Rochester MN and Rockford IL smashed their previous record for the date by sixteen degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - High winds along a sharp cold front ushered snow and arctic cold into the Central Rocky Mountain Region and the Northern Plains. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to sixteen inches at Brighton. Winds gusted to 66 mph at Rapid City SD. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Blustery northwest winds ushered arctic cold into eastern U.S. Burlington VT reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero. Snow and ice over the Carolinas replaced the 80 degree weather of the previous day. High winds and heavy surf caused five million dollars damage along the North Carolina coast. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A major ice storm left much of Iowa under a thick coat of ice. It was the worst ice storm in at least twenty-five years for Iowa, perhaps the worst of the century. Up to two inches of ice coated much of western and central Iowa, with three inches reported in Crawford County and Carroll County. As much as five inches of ice was reported on some electrical lines. The ice downed 78 towers in a 17-mile stretch of a high voltage feeder near Boone costing three electric utilities fifteen million dollars. Damage to trees was incredible, and clean-up costs alone ran into the millions. Total damage from the storm was more than fifty million dollars. (Storm Data)

1997: The worst was finally over for states hit hard by the flooding Ohio River. The river crested on the 6th at Louisville, Kentucky, 15 feet above flood stage, after topping out at nearly 13 feet at Cincinnati, Ohio, and more than 7 feet at Huntington, West Virginia.

2018: A teacher was struck by lightning outside an Ocean County, New Jersey middle school during a rare weather phenomenon known as thundersnow.



ALMOST DOES NOT COUNT

There was a small huddle going on at home plate. Lucy and Linus of the Peanuts comic strip were having an intense discussion with their coach, Charlie Brown.

"Our team," said Charlie, "has lost every game this season. There's nothing good about our team!"

"But," protested Lucy, "Schroeder almost hit a home run. We almost won a couple of games. Once we almost made a double play."

Linus interrupted Lucy and added, "If it's any consolation to you, Charlie Brown, we led the league in 'almosts.'"

But there is no column in record books listed as "almosts." There are wins and losses and records set and records that have been broken. But never an "almost!"

"Almost" carries with it the idea that if we had more time, more energy, more opportunities, more money or "more of something" our lives would be completely different. While life may impose limits on us, God does not! Whatever He has He freely gives.

The Psalmist said, "No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who do what is right." He did not say that God will almost bless us or almost answer our prayers or almost provide for our needs or almost give us good things. Not at all.

When we do "what is right," God will give us "good things!" Not almost give but will give if we do right.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to follow the example of Your Son and "do what is right" at all times and in all places as He did. May we do what is right, not almost right! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For the LORD God is our sun and our shield. He gives us grace and glory. The LORD will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right. Psalm 84:11

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.04.25

14 19 47 52 70 6

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$233,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 35 Mins 13 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: 1 Days 15 Hrs 50 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.06.25

20 28 30 31 38 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 5 Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

5 20 22 28 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$56,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 5 Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.05.25

22 36 39 45 50 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 34 Mins 13 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: 1 Days 16 Hrs 34 Mins 13 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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

SDHSAA Class A SoDak 16=

State Qualifier=

Dakota Valley 53, West Central 52

Hamlin 55, Sisseton 47

Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 62, Flandreau 27

Mobridge-Pollock 49, St Thomas More 48

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 58, Aberdeen Roncalli 51

Sioux Falls Christian 60, Rapid City Christian 44

Sioux Valley 60, Miller 34

Wagner 66, Lakota Tech 58

SDHSAA Class B SoDak 16=

State Qualifier=

Bennett County 63, Warner 44

Centerville 63, Faulkton 38

Dell Rapids St Mary 34, Northwestern 29

Deubrook 53, Kadoka 50

Harding County 65, DeSmet 32

Lyman 56, Lemmon High School 44

Parkston 52, Highmore-Harrold 31

Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 45, Corsica/Stickney 43

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

SDHSAA Class A Region 3=

First Round=

Baltic 46, Garretson 39

Dell Rapids 58, Tri-Valley 30

SDHSAA Class A Region 4=

First Round=

Dakota Valley 84, Beresford 77

Lennox 66, Canton 28

Vermillion 54, Elk Point-Jefferson 44

SDHSAA Class A Region 5=

First Round=

McCook Central-Montrose 62, Parker 52

SDHSAA Class B Region 3=

Semifinal=

Bridgewater-Emery 65, Ethan 61

Howard 62, Chester 48

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

St. Thomas-Minnesota cruises past Denver 80-62 in Summit League Championship quarterfinals

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Miles Barnstable had 17 points to lead St. Thomas-Minnesota to an 80-62 victory over Denver on Thursday night in the quarterfinals of the Summit League Championship.

Barnstable added six rebounds for the Tommies (23-9). Kendall Blue went 5 of 10 from the field (3 for 5 from 3-point range) to add 15 points. Carter Bjerke went 4 of 6 from the field (3 for 4 from 3-point range) to finish with 13 points.

DeAndre Craig finished with 15 points for the Pioneers (11-20, 0-1). Josh Pickett added 14 points and Sebastian Akins scored nine.

St. Thomas-Minnesota took the lead with 14:59 remaining in the first half and never looked back. Blue led their team in scoring with 13 points in the first half to help put them up 48-32 at the break.

Sutton puts up 28 as Omaha downs Kansas City 70-61 in Summit League Tournament

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Marquel Sutton had 28 points in Omaha's 70-61 win over Kansas City on Thursday in the Summit League Tournament quarterfinals.

Sutton added 11 rebounds and four steals for the Mavericks (20-12). JJ White added 14 points while going 4 of 11 from the floor, including 2 for 5 from 3-point range, and 4 for 4 from the line while he also had five rebounds and seven assists. Isaac Ondekane shot 4 of 7 from the field and 2 of 4 from the free-throw line to finish with 10 points.

Jamar Brown led the way for the Roos (13-20) with 27 points. Jayson Petty added 15 points, seven rebounds and two steals.

Omaha took the lead with 19:43 to go in the first half and never looked back. The score was 40-26 at halftime, with Sutton racking up 16 points. Sutton led the way with a team-high 12 second-half points.

No. 25 South Dakota State women top Omaha 87-67 in Summit League opener

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Brooklyn Meyer scored 16 points and No. 25 South Dakota State cruised to an 87-67 win over Omaha on Thursday in the Summit League Tournament, giving the Jackrabbits 57-straight wins over conference opponents.

South Dakota State, which beat the Mavericks by 38 and 30 points in the regular season, plays in Saturday's semifinal against the winner of Friday's quarterfinal between No. 4 seed St. Thomas and No. 5 North Dakota.

The Jackrabbits have gone through three regular seasons unbeaten in league games and have won the past two tournaments.

Paige Meyer and reserve Madysen Vlastuin scored 12 points for South Dakota State (27-3), the No. 1 seed for the fifth-straight season. Madison Mathiowetz and Haleigh Timmer both added 11 to help the Jackrabbits win their 17th straight overall. Their three losses were to Duke, Georgia Tech and now-No. 1 Texas.

Grace Cave scored 20 points for the eighth-seeded Mavericks (14-17). Ja Harvey added 17 and Aaliyah Moore had 12.

The Jackrabbits led 21-16 after one quarter and used a 10-0 run in the middle of the second to build a 39-24 halftime lead. The lead stayed in double figures the rest of the way.

New South Dakota law threatens massive carbon dioxide pipeline proposed for Midwest

By JACK DURA Associated Press

South Dakota's governor signed a bill into law Thursday that bans the taking of private property for building carbon dioxide pipelines, a blow to a sprawling Midwest pipeline network that ethanol producers see as key for their future.

The new law muddies the waters for Summit Carbon Solutions and its planned \$8.9 billion, 2,500-mile (4,023-kilometer) pipeline that already has approvals in three other states.

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden said the measure restricting eminent domain "does not kill" Summit's project, and he encouraged the company to view the law as "an opportunity to reset."

"I made my decision based on my own consideration of the facts, the policy arguments, legislative history, my own opinions and experience and my judgment about what is best for South Dakota," Rhoden said.

In a statement, Summit said South Dakota has "changed the rules in the middle of the game." The company is seeking approval from South Dakota regulators for its proposed route in the state.

"This kind of regulatory uncertainty creates real challenges — not just for our project, but for the ethanol plants in South Dakota that now face a competitive disadvantage compared to their counterparts in neighboring states," the company said. "While this presents obstacles, our project moves forward in states that support investment and innovation, and we will have more news on that soon."

The company's pipeline would transport planet-warming emissions from dozens of ethanol plants in five states for burial deep underground in North Dakota.

The project has drawn intense opposition from landowners who fear a taking of their land for the pipeline and the dangers of a potential pipeline leak.

Property rights are a passionate issue in South Dakota, where voters last year rejected a suite of regulations that opponents said would deny local control over such projects and consolidate authority with state regulators. Supporters called it a "landowner bill of rights."

The new law states: "Notwithstanding the provisions of any other law, a person may not exercise the right of eminent domain to acquire right-of-way for, construct, or operate a pipeline for the preponderant purpose of transporting carbon oxide."

Eminent domain is the taking of private property with compensation to the owner.

Summit has approvals for routes in Iowa and North Dakota, a leg in Minnesota and the underground storage. In 2023, South Dakota regulators rejected Summit's permit application. New proceedings are underway.

It isn't clear how Summit would move forward with its project if it could not build in South Dakota.

Supporters see carbon capture projects such as Summit's pipeline as a way to fight climate change and to help the ethanol industry. Opponents question carbon capture's effectiveness at large scale and say it allows the fossil fuels industry to continue unchanged.

Carbon capture projects are eligible for lucrative federal tax credits intended to encourage cleaner-burning ethanol and potentially result in corn-based ethanol being refined into jet fuel.

Bill sponsor Republican Rep. Karla Lems, a Summit opponent, welcomed the signing and criticized Summit's "heavy hand" toward landowners. She said its project is all about tax credits.

South Dakota's action is unfortunate for neighboring states and "an unnecessary roadblock" between "Midwest corn farmers and much needed new markets," said Iowa Renewable Fuels Association Executive Director Monte Shaw.

"The demand for ultra-low carbon ethanol around the globe is so massive that, at the end of the day, no one state will be able to stop the ethanol industry from accessing that market," Shaw said in a statement.

Some opponents argue the amount of greenhouse gases sequestered through the process would make little difference and could lead farmers to grow more corn despite environmental concerns about the crop.

Unexploded WWII bomb halts Eurostar travel connecting Paris to London and Brussels

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The discovery of a huge unexploded World War II-era bomb near the tracks severed Paris' high-speed rail links with London and Brussels on Friday, dashing travelers' weekend getaway plans and causing cascading disruptions to scores of other intercity and commuter trains in and out of the French capital's Gare du Nord, the busiest railway station in France.

Eurostar, operator of sleek high-speed trains between the U.K. and the continent, announced the cancellation of all its services to and from Gare du Nord, its Paris hub, and the British and Belgian capitals.

The repercussions were immediate, throwing travel plans into disarray.

"There's no solution, we're going to call the hotel and stay one more day. And change our train ticket," said Michel Garrot, a retired Parisian who found himself stranded in Brussels, which he'd been visiting with his wife.

At London's St. Pancras station, Eurostar's London hub, travelers scrambled for alternatives. Fridays are invariably busy there with thousands of people leaving and arriving for weekend breaks. Passengers were advised to try taking trains to Lille in northern France, or fly to Paris.

"We're looking up flights, but our options are limited," said Lauren Romeo-Smith, part of a group that had a birthday weekend in Paris planned.

Another St. Pancras traveler, Lee Bailey, said Eurostar offered him free rebooking or a refund, and an apology, but no compensation.

"I'd like to go to a Michelin (starred) restaurant in Paris on their dime, but that's not happening, apparently," he told Sky News.

Eurostar, which runs its trains through the Channel Tunnel between Britain and the continent, said it "sincerely apologizes for the disruption and understands the inconvenience this may cause."

At Paris' usually humming Gare du Nord station, bright red signs warning of disruptions greeted commuters. French national rail operator SNCF says the station habitually sees 700,000 travelers per day, making it the busiest rail hub in both France and Europe. As well as towns and cities across northern France and the Paris suburbs, the station also serves Paris' main airport and international destinations including London, Brussels and cities in the Netherlands.

French Transport Minister Philippe Tabarot said the huge disruptions were caused by the discovery of a bomb that weighed half a ton. Workers found it overnight while doing earth-moving near the tracks in the Seine-Saint-Denis region that borders Paris to the north. Bomb disposal experts were called.

Tabarot said a "a quite large" security perimeter was set up around the bomb-disposal operation and people were evacuated. He urged commuters to postpone rail trips.

Bombs left over from World War I or World War II are regularly discovered around France but it is very rare to find them in such a people-packed location. The SNCF said rail traffic was stopped at the request of police.

Clashes in Syria's coastal region between government forces and Assad loyalists kill more than 70

BY OMAR ALBAM Associated Press

LATAKIA, Syria (AP) — Clashes between Syrian security forces and gunmen loyal to former President Bashar Assad in the country's coastal region have left more than 70 people dead and an area outside government control, a war monitor said Friday.

Government forces sent major reinforcements overnight to the cities of Latakia and Tartus as well as nearby towns and villages that are the heartland of the minority Alawite sect and a base of support for Assad, to try to get the situation under control, state media reported.

The clashes are the worst since Assad was removed from power in early December by insurgent groups

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led by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. Since Assad's fall, there have been some sectarian attacks against members of the minority Alawite sect, despite the fact that officially the new authorities have said they are against collective punishment or sectarian vengeance. Members of Assad's Alawite sect had held top posts in the country, mainly in the army and security agencies, until Assad's fall.

The government in Damascus has blamed Assad loyalists for carrying out attacks over the past weeks against security forces. Thursday witnessed the most serious escalation as the attacks appeared to be more coordinated.

On Friday morning, large numbers of troops were deployed in Latakia and no civilians were seen in the street as a curfew that was imposed in the city and other coastal areas remains in force. Members of the security force said there were some clashes in one of the city's neighborhoods but most of the city was calm and under government control.

Monitors say dozens have died and several areas are under the control of Assad loyalists

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor, said that since the clashes began on Thursday afternoon, 35 members of government forces, 32 fighters loyal to Assad and four civilians have been killed.

The Observatory's chief Rami Abdurrahman said the outskirts of the coastal towns of Baniyas and Jableh are still under the control of Assad loyalists. He added that Assad's hometown of Qardaha and many Alawite villages nearby are also outside government control.

A Qardaha resident told The Associated Press via text messages that The situation "is very bad." The resident, who asked that his name not be made public for safety reasons, said government forces are firing with heavy machine guns on residential areas in Qardaha.

Another resident said that they have not been able to leave their homes since Thursday afternoon because of the intensity of the shooting.

Concerns the fighting could stoke more sectarian tensions

Gregory Waters, an associate fellow with the Middle East Institute who has conducted research in Syria's coastal areas, said he does not necessarily expect the flareup in violence along the coast to escalate into major sustained fighting between the two sides. But Waters said he is concerned that it could stoke sectarian tensions and cycles of violence between different civilian communities living along the coast.

Any violations by security forces during the crackdown on the armed groups "will also leave young Alawite men more fearful of the new government authorities and more prone to being recruited to bear arms," Waters said.

Abdurrahman said the clashes began when a security force tried to detain a wanted person near Jableh and was ambushed by Assad loyalists.

People ask Russia for help

On Friday, scores of people gathered outside the main Russian air base in Syria near Jableh asking for protection from Moscow. Russia joined Syria's conflict in 2015, siding with Assad, although it has opened links with the new authorities after his fall. Assad has been living in Moscow since leaving Syria in December.

Asked about the outbreak of fighting in the coastal region and possible threats to Russian troops, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded that "security of our military is ensured on a proper level."

"I wouldn't comment on the operational situation as we don't know details," Peskov said during a conference call with reporters.

Syria's conflict that began in March 2011 has left more than half a million people dead and millions displaced.

Paul Skenes could be MLB's ticket to Gen Z. The Pirates ace will face it on his terms

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

BRADENTON, Fla. (AP) — There are times when Paul Skenes, the 22-year-old, can't escape Paul Skenes, baseball's Next Big Thing.

It happens randomly and without warning. The reigning National League Rookie of the Year ran into former New England Patriots wide receiver Julian Edelman at the Super Bowl last month. The now-retired three-time Super Bowl champion told Skenes he was a fan. Eyebrows raised and caught maybe more than a little off guard, Skenes quickly replied "same."

A few days later, Skenes was minding his own business in the Bradenton-Sarasota airport after arriving for his second spring training with the Pittsburgh Pirates when he caught a glimpse of his mustachioed face staring back at him.

It wasn't a mirror. It was one of the countless ads in the area featuring the flame-throwing right-hander who turned every one of his first 23 major league appearances (24 if you count the 2024 All-Star Game, which he started) into appointment viewing.

Throw in his upcoming cover appearance on the popular video game franchise MLB The Show and his recent guest spot on Late Night with Seth Meyers, and at times it can seem like he's everywhere even if he believes he's not.

If Skenes is being honest — and the former Air Force cadet is nothing if not pathologically sincere — he's still getting used to the outsized attention he's commanded since making his debut last May. Yet, it also beats the alternative. If his now fully-bearded mug isn't plastered throughout Florida's Sunshine Coast this time next year, he'll know why.

"If I start sucking, my photo is not going to be (there)," he told The Associated Press recently.

A fresh 'Face'?

Skenes understands in a way that belies his age that none of the trappings of his already remarkable success — the top overall pick in the 2023 draft finished third in last year's NL Cy Young voting too even though he didn't play a full season — will stick if he doesn't find a way to build on one of the most remarkable rookie years in a generation.

Sure, the hype is nice. And yes, he's learned to lean into it a little bit. It's kind of hard not to when a baseball card featuring a patch of your jersey becomes arguably the hottest collectible in recent memory, your girlfriend happens to be one of the most followed athlete/influencers in the country and the stands are filled with little kids sporting No. 30 T-shirts and donning plastic mustaches of their own whenever you go to work.

Skenes finds himself at the confluence of the game and the culture at large. From a fastball that regularly hits triple digits to a "splinker" borne out of experimentation, he has the kind of "stuff" that sends baseball purists scrambling for superlatives. He couples it with a mix of swagger and savvy that could — in theory — make him Major League Baseball's first Gen Z crossover star.

It's a lot to take in for someone who was a late-bloomer by baseball standards, not truly coming into his own until his sophomore year at Air Force, where the former catcher developed so rapidly on the mound he made the difficult but necessary decision to transfer to LSU.

Ask Skenes if he wants to be the "face" of the game and he deflects. He's been doing this as a pro less than two years. That kind of honorific, for the moment anyway, is reserved for the Shohei Ohtanis, Aaron Judge and Mike Trouts of the world, childhood idols quickly becoming peers.

Those guys have earned the right. He hasn't. Not yet anyway.

Besides, "that stuff takes energy frankly," Skenes said flatly.

Leading from the front

Energy that at this stage of his career he feels would be better spent refining his repertoire and trying to lead the Pirates out of a near-decade of malaise. While Skenes became an instant box office sensation from the moment he was called up, Pittsburgh faded in late summer to a 76-86 finish.

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There is a sense of urgency pulsing throughout Pirates City this spring. Perhaps because the clock is already ticking on the Skenes Era. Technically he is under team control through 2029. If Skenes sticks around that long — hardly a given considering Pittsburgh has traded franchise cornerstones like Gerrit Cole and Andrew McCutchen when they became too expensive — he ultimately seems destined for a megadeal from deeper-pocketed franchises like the Dodgers or Yankees.

Skenes would prefer not to talk about his future. There's too much at stake in the present. He thinks the 2024 Pirates were "an underperforming team," not unlike the one he was on as a freshman at Air Force.

The following season, he was named a co-captain, and the Falcons improved, though he stressed he needed a lot of "grace" from his teammates as he found his way. He's drawing on that experience to try and take a more visible, vocal role on a mostly young team that's still learning how to win.

What that leadership looks like is still a little unclear. He doesn't plan to force things, optimistic that it will happen organically, though he was quick to add he's "not going to be the guy who is (cursing) other guys."

He's focused on example setting. This is the same player, after all, who wears suits to the ballpark on the days he pitches. Who firmly but gently reminds Pirates prospect and good friend/workout partner Bubba Chandler that a given rep doesn't count if Chandler didn't execute it perfectly.

"That's what elite people do," the 22-year-old Chandler said.

'A big old donkey'

It's why Skenes' more established teammates aren't worried about the buzz that could consume others overwhelming him. Skenes is simply not wired that way. He is, as veteran left-handed starter Bailey Falter put it, "a big old donkey," a testament to both Skenes' size and what Falter called his "insane" work ethic.

Skenes is aware he is supremely gifted. He does not take those gifts for granted. There isn't a meal, a drill or a decision that isn't considered and thought out. He spent the offseason studying video trying to figure out how to become more efficient. He also is trying to add a true sinker to his repertoire. The early returns from spring training have been promising.

It's the game at large that matters to Skenes. Everything else that comes from his unique ability to manipulate a baseball to his will is secondary, even his future.

'The Biggest Freaking Name in Sports'

The spotlight only figures to get brighter, both in Pittsburgh and beyond for someone Chandler called "the biggest freaking name in sports right now."

Skenes just shook his head when that moniker was passed along.

"I really try as much as I can to try and insulate myself from all that," he said. "You can't completely avoid it. But I try to insulate myself as much as I can from it to where I don't have that perception."

He is willing to do what he can to promote the game up to a point. Yet there's a line he is intent on holding. The kid who grew up an Angels fan in Southern California learned about more than just baseball while watching Trout and Ohtani. Both are all-time greats who have also fiercely guarded their privacy, lending them an air of mystique.

Baseball appears to be in the midst of a resurgence. Skenes understands his popularity is a small part of it. Just don't expect him to start flooding social media — he doesn't even have an active TikTok account, although he's easy to find on MLB's feed — or popping up on your favorite podcast regularly.

Baseball's Next Big Thing is more intent on chasing greatness instead. Yes, fame is "cool." It's also not the point.

"All we want to do is play the same game we've played since we were 3 or 4 years old," he said. "And all this other stuff comes with it, you kind of have to be built up to do that. Everybody chooses how to do it in their own way. That's very much how I am."

Russia bombards Ukraine's energy grid after Zelenskyy says his team will hold talks with the US

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia targeted Ukraine's energy infrastructure in a large-scale missile and drone bombardment during the night, officials said Friday, hours after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said talks with the U.S. on ending the 3-year war will take place next week.

Ukraine came under a "massive missile and drone" attack, Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko wrote on Facebook. At least 10 people, including a child, were injured, authorities said.

"Russia is trying to hurt ordinary Ukrainians by striking energy and gas production facilities, without abandoning its goal of leaving us without light and heat, and causing the greatest harm to ordinary citizens," Halushchenko wrote.

Russia has repeatedly targeted Ukraine's power grid during the war. The attacks have depleted electricity generation capacity and disrupted critical heating and water supplies. Ukrainian officials have accused Russia of "weaponizing winter" in an effort to erode civilian morale.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday that the energy supply is a legitimate target in the war because it is "linked with Ukraine's military industrial complex and weapons production."

Russian air defenses downed 39 Ukrainian drones overnight, according to the Russian Defense Ministry.

Ukraine's largest private gas producer, DTEK, said the overnight bombardment was Russia's sixth attack in the past two and a half weeks on its facilities.

Russia fired 67 missiles from air, land and sea and launched 194 strike and decoy drones, Ukraine's air force said. Their primary target was Ukraine's natural gas extraction facilities, it said.

For the first time, Ukraine deployed French Mirage-2000 warplanes delivered a month ago to help repel the attack, according to the air force. Ukraine also has Western-supplied F-16 fighter jets to shoot down Russian missiles.

Ukrainian defenses downed 34 missiles and 100 drones, the air force said, while up to 10 missiles didn't reach their targets and 86 drones were lost from radars, presumably jammed by electronic warfare.

Western-supplied air defense systems are crucial for Ukraine's fight but further U.S. help is uncertain under U.S. President Donald Trump, who says he is determined to end the war and has paused American military aid for Kyiv as a way of pressuring Zelenskyy to negotiate.

In his nightly address, Zelenskyy said Thursday he would travel to Saudi Arabia on Monday to meet the country's crown prince, and his team would stay on to hold talks with U.S. officials.

Zelenskyy welcomed a European Union plan to bolster the continent's defenses. He expressed hope that some of the new spending could be used to strengthen Ukraine's own defense industry.

Court orders South Korean President Yoon released from jail for his criminal trial over martial law

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A South Korean court on Friday ordered impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol to be released from jail, a move that could allow Yoon to stand trial for his rebellion charge without being physically detained.

Yoon was arrested and indicted in January over the Dec. 3 martial law decree that plunged the country into political turmoil. The opposition-controlled parliament separately voted to impeach him, leading to his suspension from office.

The hearings in his impeachment trial at the Constitutional Court concluded in late February, and that court is expected to rule soon on whether to formally remove him from office or reinstate him.

The Seoul Central District Court said it accepted Yoon's request to be released from jail because the legal period of his formal arrest expired before he was indicted.

The court also cited the need to resolve questions over the legality of the investigations on Yoon. Yoon's

lawyers have accused the investigative agency that detained him before his formal arrest of lacking legal authority to probe rebellion charges.

Investigators have alleged that the martial-law decree amounted to rebellion. If he's convicted of that offense, he would face the death penalty or life imprisonment.

Yoon's defense team welcomed the court's decision and urged prosecutors to release him immediately. The presidential office also welcomed the court's decision, saying it hopes Yoon will swiftly return to work.

However, South Korea law allows prosecutors to continue to hold a suspect whose arrest has been suspended by a court temporarily while pursuing an appeal.

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party, which led Yoon's Dec. 14 impeachment, called on prosecutors to immediately appeal the court's ruling.

Yoon's martial law decree, which involved the dispatch of troops and police forces to the National Assembly, evoked traumatic memories of past military rules among many South Koreans. The decree lasted only six hours, as enough lawmakers managed to get into an assembly hall and voted to overturn it unanimously.

Yoon later argued his decree was only meant to inform the people of the danger of the opposition Democratic Party, which undermined his agenda and impeached top officials, and said he dispatched troops to the assembly only in order to maintain order. But some top military and police officers sent to the assembly have told Constitutional Court hearings or investigators that Yoon ordered them to drag out lawmakers to obstruct a vote on his decree or detain politicians.

If the Constitutional Court upholds Yoon's impeachment, he will be officially thrown out of office and a national election will be held to choose his successor within two months. If the court rejects his impeachment but he is still in jail, it's unclear whether and how soon he will be able to exercise his presidential powers.

Massive rallies by opponents and supporters of Yoon have filled the streets of Seoul and other major South Korean cities. Whatever the Constitutional Court decides, experts say it will likely further polarize the country and intensify its conservative-liberal divide.

Yoon is the first South Korean president to be arrested while in office. South Korean law gives a president immunity from most criminal prosecution, but not for grave charges like rebellion or treason.

By law, a president in South Korea has the power to put the country under martial law in wartime and similar emergency situations, but many experts say South Korea wasn't in such a state when Yoon declared martial law.

A boy with a loaded shotgun boarded a plane in Australia but was tackled by a former boxer

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — A 17-year-old boy with a loaded shotgun boarded a plane at an Australian airport before being restrained by a pilot and two passengers, police said Friday.

The boy was disarmed and detained before police arrived on the scene Thursday at Avalon Airport in Victoria state.

Barry Clark, a passenger who tackled the suspect, said the boy had posed as a maintenance worker and became agitated when questioned by a flight attendant at the plane's entrance.

"I looked up and then within a second I saw the barrel of a shotgun and I thought to myself that ain't a tool that should be on a plane," Clark told Network 10 television.

"When I saw the complete gun I said: we're in trouble here," Clark said.

"Then I saw it (move) towards her chest and so I thought, well, I've got to do something — this is all happening in a matter of seconds," Clark added.

Passenger takes on suspect

Clark, a former professional boxer and sheep shearer, said he snuck up behind the boy then pushed the gun and the flight attendant away in different directions so that she would not be hit if the gun discharged.

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"I then proceeded to do what I had to do and just put him in a bit of a lock, got his hand and twisted it and put it up in his back, threw him to the floor and then put my knee in his back and held him in a position where he couldn't get out," Clark said.

Victoria Police Superintendent Michael Reid told reporters the boy from Ballarat in regional Victoria had climbed through a hole in the airport's security fence before making his way to the plane's stairs.

Reid credited Clark, the pilot and another passenger with restraining the boy.

"This would have been a very terrifying incident for the passengers of that plane and Victoria Police really commend the bravery of those passengers who were able to overpower that male," Reid said.

Sydney-bound Jetstar Airways Flight 610 was carrying about 150 people and no one was hurt, police said. The flight was cancelled.

Counterterrorism police not involved in the investigation

An investigation was being carried out by crime squad detectives with no involvement from the police force's counterterrorism unit.

The boy has been charged with multiple offenses including unlawfully taking control of an aircraft, orchestrating a bomb hoax and possessing a firearm, a police statement said. He was remanded in custody to appear in a children's court on a date to be determined.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Australian airports had robust security.

"This incident is concerning for members of the public. I commend the work of police and aviation officials in responding to it quickly," Albanese told reporters.

Avalon Airport's chief executive Ari Suss said his organization was working with Victoria Police in response to the emergency.

"As part of our ongoing commitment to security, we have implemented further measures across the airport, including within the terminal and surrounding areas," Suss said in a statement.

"We continue to work closely with authorities to maintain a safe and secure environment for all travelers," he added.

Jetstar, a budget subsidiary of Sydney-based Qantas Airways, said it was working with police and the airport to understand what happened.

China's foreign minister criticizes US tariffs and accuses the country of 'meeting good with evil'

By SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said China will continue to retaliate for the United States' "arbitrary tariffs" and accused Washington of "meeting good with evil" in a press conference Friday on the sidelines of the country's annual parliamentary session.

Wang said China's efforts to help the U.S. contain its fentanyl crisis have been met with punitive tariffs, which are straining their ties.

"No country should fantasize that it can suppress China and maintain a good relationship with China at the same time," Wang said. "Such two-faced acts are not good for the stability of bilateral relations or for building mutual trust."

The U.S. this week levied duties against China as well as Canada and Mexico over accusations of fentanyl smuggling, which the countries have called unjustified. China maintains it's done a lot to curb the exports of industrial chemicals used to make fentanyl over the past few years, and that illegal drug use in the U.S. is a domestic problem.

The duties were the latest in a series of retaliatory tariffs Washington and Beijing have imposed against one another since U.S. President Donald Trump's return to office in January. The U.S. raised flat tariffs on all Chinese imports to 20%, while Beijing countered with additional 15% duties on U.S. imports including chicken, pork, soy and beef, and expanded controls on doing business with key U.S. companies.

The foreign minister's annual press conference is the one occasion on which Wang speaks to Chinese and foreign media on a range of topics. Friday's event was dominated by questions about China's ties

with the US, along with other topics such as regional conflicts and collaborations within the Global South.

Regarding the Trump administration's policy of safeguarding U.S. interests above international cooperation, Wang said such an approach, if adopted by every country in the world, would result in the "law of the jungle."

"Small and weak countries will get burnt first, and the international order and rules will be under severe shock," Wang said. "Major countries should undertake their international obligations ... and not seek to profit from and bully the weak."

On the Ukraine war, Wang reiterated China's stance of supporting conflict resolution through political negotiations. Wang said that in hindsight, the Ukraine conflict "could have been avoided."

"All parties should learn something from the crisis," he said. "Among many other things, security should be mutual and equal, and no country should build its security on the insecurity of another."

Wang stressed that China-Russia relations are as strong as ever despite recent consultations between the U.S. and Russia on ending the Ukraine war. He said Beijing and Moscow are planning joint celebrations this year marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II.

On Taiwan, the island democracy China claims as its own, Wang said "Taiwan has never been a country and will never be a country in the future."

"Advocating for Taiwan independence is splitting the country, supporting Taiwan independence is interfering in China's internal affairs, and conniving for Taiwan independence is undermining the stability of the Taiwan Strait," he said.

Those who support Taiwan's independence are "only playing with fire and will burn themselves," Wang said.

Asked about Trump's plan to take control of Gaza and resettle Palestinians in neighboring countries, Wang said Gaza belongs to the Palestinians and any forced change of the territory's status would trigger new turbulence. He said China backs the peace plan put forth by Egypt and other Arab countries and reiterated Beijing's support for a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel.

"The Israeli-Palestinian conflict takes place again and again simply because the two-state solution is only half-achieved," Wang said. "The state of Israel has long been a reality, but the state of Palestine is still far beyond reach."

Pope Francis hits 3-week mark of hospitalization after giving world a sign of his frailty

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis hit the three-week mark Friday in his hospitalization for double pneumonia, after giving the world a tangible indication of just how frail he is.

The Vatican said the 88-year-old pope had a good night's rest and woke up Friday morning just after 8 a.m. Doctors said they didn't expect to give another medical update until Saturday, given his continued stability and absence of respiratory crises or other setbacks for several days now.

But Francis offered a first public sign of just how weak he is on Thursday by recording an audio message that was broadcast to the faithful in St. Peter's Square who had gathered for the nightly recitation of the rosary prayer.

In it, Francis thanked the people for their prayers. But his voice was barely discernible through his labored breaths and he spoke in his native Spanish, perhaps because it came more easily to him than Italian.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers for my health from the square, I accompany you from here," he said to the hushed square. "May God bless you and the Virgin protect you. Thank you."

The message served many purposes. It was the first public sign of life from the pope since he entered Gemelli hospital on Feb. 14, and put to rest right-wing conspiracy theories and rumors calling into question his true medical status.

But the audio also underscored just how weak Francis is. For anyone used to hearing his voice, which is

often so soft it sounds like a whisper, the audio was an emotional punch to the gut that hammered home just how hard it is for him to even breathe.

The cardinal presiding over the prayer, Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, had told the crowd at the start of the service that he had "beautiful news, a beautiful gift" to share.

"Oh che bello," marveled one nun in the crowd. "Oh how beautiful."

The clearly surprised crowd broke into applause and then applauded again after Francis' final "Gracias." Fernández Artime, for his part, bowed his head as he listened.

The 88-year-old pope has chronic lung disease and had part of one lung removed as a young man.

The Vatican has given twice-daily updates on Francis' condition, but has distributed no photos or video of him since the morning of Feb. 14, when he held a handful of audiences at the Vatican before being admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital for what was then just a bad case of bronchitis.

The infection progressed into a complex respiratory tract infection and double pneumonia that has sidelined Francis for the longest period of his 12-year papacy and raised questions about the future of his papacy.

The absence of any images of Francis in a country where the image and voice of the pontiff is a part of everyday life helped fuel dire conspiracy theories, primarily among right-wing critics of the pope, about Francis' true fate.

Francis has issued written messages from the Gemelli, including some that seemed very much like him. But even Vatican officials had been clamoring to hear his voice, saying the pope's calls for peace are particularly needed at a time of such global conflict and war.

More than any pope before him, Francis has mastered the art of informal and direct communication, often recording cell phone videos for visitors, anything from a "Happy Birthday" for someone's mother to a religious prayer for a particular church group. For the considerable effort it must have taken, the audio message made clear that he understood the power of his voice, even in its weakened state.

Doctors on Thursday reported that Francis was in stable condition, with no new respiratory crises or fever. He continued his respiratory and other physical therapy Thursday, worked, rested and prayed from the 10th floor papal suite at Rome's Gemelli hospital. His prognosis remains guarded, meaning he is not out of danger.

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 high-flow oxygen with a nasal tube during the day.

Aid operations in Gaza imperiled as millions of promised USAID dollars do not arrive

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Trump administration's cuts to USAID have frozen hundreds of millions of dollars in contractual payments to aid groups, leaving them paying out of pocket to preserve a fragile ceasefire, according to officials from the U.S. humanitarian agency.

The cutbacks threaten to halt the small gains aid workers have made combatting Gaza's humanitarian crisis during the Israel-Hamas ceasefire. They also could endanger the tenuous truce, which the Trump administration helped cement.

USAID was supposed to fund much of the aid to Gaza as the ceasefire progressed, and the Trump administration approved over \$383 million on Jan. 31 to that end, according to three USAID officials.

But since then, there have been no confirmed payments to any partners in the Middle East, they said. The officials, who have survived multiple rounds of furloughs, spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

Two senior officials at aid organizations confirmed they have not received any of the promised funds, after spending millions of dollars on supplies and services. They said they could not afford to continue aid operations indefinitely.

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Some organizations have already reported laying off workers and scaling down operations, according to internal USAID information shared with the AP.

That could imperil the ceasefire, under which Hamas is supposed to release hostages held in Gaza in exchange for Israel releasing Palestinian prisoners and ramping up the entry of humanitarian assistance.

"The U.S. established very specific, concrete commitments for aid delivery under the ceasefire, and there is no way ... to fulfill those as long as the funding freeze is in place," said Jeremy Konyndyk, president of Refugees International and a former USAID official.

USAID has been one of the biggest targets of a broad campaign by President Donald Trump and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, to slash the size of the federal government.

USAID payments frozen, some NGOs scale down Gaza response

Before Trump took office, USAID had roughly \$446 million to disperse to partner organizations in Gaza in 2025, the USAID officials said.

But after Trump froze global foreign assistance, USAID's Gaza team had to submit a waiver to ensure the funds for Gaza aid could continue to flow. They received approval Jan. 31 to secure over \$383 million in funding, less than two weeks after the U.S.-brokered ceasefire was reached.

Some \$40 million was subsequently cut under a measure that no money be provided for aid in the form of direct cash assistance.

USAID then signed contracts with eight partner organizations, including prominent NGOs and U.N. agencies, awarding them money to flood supplies and services into Gaza. Then, the officials said, they began hearing that organizations were not receiving the promised payments — even as they had already spent millions, expecting USAID reimbursement.

Some of those organizations are now spending less and scaling back programs.

The International Medical Corps, a global nonprofit that provides medical and development assistance, was awarded \$12 million to continue operations at two hospitals in Gaza. These include the largest field hospital in Gaza, whose construction was funded by USAID at the request of the Israeli government, according to internal USAID information.

It has now requested payback of over \$1 million, said one USAID official, adding that the freeze has forced the organization to lay off some 700 staff members and offer only basic services at the hospitals, with a skeletal crew.

A former IMC staffer, who quit citing lack of stability, said the program providing life-saving treatment for malnutrition was almost frozen for lack of funds. The former staffer, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the organization's details, said the current nutrition services were at a minimum level.

Meanwhile, termination letters severing the contracts between USAID and Gaza partners were also sent out to organizations that were major providers of shelter, child protection and logistical support in the Gaza aid operation, a USAID official said.

Some of the termination letters seen by the AP were signed by new USAID deputy chief Peter Marocco — a returning political appointee from Trump's first term. They instruct organizations to "immediately cease" all activities and "avoid additional spending chargeable to the award," citing a directive from Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

USAID Gaza response in crisis as truce is tenuous

In addition to the spending freeze, officials say USAID has been wracked by internal chaos and the introduction of arbitrary regulations since the new administration took office.

During the first 42-day phase of the ceasefire, Israel had to allow at least 600 trucks of aid into Gaza a day, as well as 60,000 temporary homes and 200,000 tents.

Two USAID officials said the agency was originally supposed to buy 400 temporary homes that would make it into Gaza by the end of Phase 1 of the deal, and over 5,200 more during the next phase. That figure has since been slashed to just over 1,000.

USAID was never able to purchase the mobile homes because of newly-imposed policies requiring extra approvals for procurements.

On Feb. 2, some 40% of the Gaza team was locked out of their email accounts and software necessary to track awards, move payments and communicate with the organizations. An email sent immediately following the lockout came from Gavin Kliger, a DOGE staffer.

Access to the servers has now been restored, the officials said, but the team is smaller after waves of layoffs. From an original team of about 30 people, only six or seven remain.

Very few mobile homes entered Gaza during Phase 1 of the ceasefire, which ended last week, prompting Hamas to accuse Israel of violating the truce.

Israel has cut off all aid shipments into Gaza in a bid to pressure Hamas to accept an extension of the ceasefire. That has sent aid groups scrambling to distribute reserves of food and shelter to the most needy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he is considering cutting off electricity to raise the pressure on Hamas.

With USAID in flux, the U.S. risks losing its influence, said Dave Harden, the former USAID assistant administrator of Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Aid and a longtime director of the agency's work in the Palestinian territories.

"U.S. aid assistance to Palestinians ... never, ever equated to U.S. assistance to Israel, never quite balanced, but always gave us a seat at the table, always helped us to have real discussions with both the Palestinians and the Israelis about what the future might hold," Harden said.

Now, he said, "We're just simply not at the table in a meaningful way, and so I think the ceasefire is fragile."

EU leaders commit to working together after Trump signals that Europe must defend itself

By RAF CASERT and LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders on Thursday committed to working together to bolster the continent's defenses and to free up hundreds of billions of euros for security after U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated warnings that he would cut them adrift to face the threat of Russia alone.

With the growing conviction that they will now have to fend for themselves, countries that have faltered on defense spending for decades held emergency talks in Brussels to explore new ways to beef up their security and ensure future protection for Ukraine.

"Today history is being written," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told reporters after the summit ended.

She said the 27 EU leaders are "determined to ensure Europe's security and to act with the scale, the speed and the resolve that this situation demands. We are determined to invest more, to invest better and to invest faster together."

The pledge underscored a sea change in geopolitics spurred on by Trump, who has undermined 80 years of cooperation based on the understanding that the U.S. would help protect European nations following World War II.

The leaders signed off on a move to loosen budget restrictions so that willing EU countries can increase their military spending. They also urged the European Commission to seek new ways "to facilitate significant defense spending" in all member states, a statement said.

The EU's executive branch estimates that around 650 billion euros (\$702 billion) could be freed up that way.

The leaders also took note of a commission offer of loans worth 150 billion euros (\$162 billion) to buy new military equipment and invited EU headquarters staff "to examine this proposal as a matter of urgency."

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a staunch supporter of Trump and considered to be Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally in Europe, refused to endorse part of the summit statement in favor of Ukraine.

But the 26 other EU leaders approved the bloc's stance that there can be no negotiations on Ukraine

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without Ukraine and that the Europeans must be involved in any talks involving their security. The Europeans have so far been sidelined in the U.S.-led negotiations with Russia.

In other developments, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said talks between Ukraine and the U.S. on ending the war will take place in Saudi Arabia next week. In his nightly address, Zelenskyy said he would travel to Saudi Arabia on Monday to meet the country's crown prince, and his team would stay on to hold talks with U.S. officials.

In recent weeks, Trump has overturned old certainties about the reliability of the U.S. as a security partner as he embraces Russia, withdraws American support for Ukraine and upends the tradition of cooperation with Europe that has been the bedrock of Western security for generations.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency, said that three years of war in Ukraine and a shift in attitudes in Washington "pose entirely new challenges for us, and Europe must take up this challenge ... and it must win."

"We will arm ourselves faster, smarter and more efficiently than Russia," Tusk said.

Spending plans win early support

Zelenskyy welcomed the plan to loosen budget rules and expressed hopes that some of the new spending could be used to strengthen Ukraine's own defense industry, which can produce weapons more cheaply than elsewhere in Europe and closer to the battlefields where they are needed.

"We are very thankful that we are not alone, and these are not just words. We feel it. It's very important," Zelenskyy said, looking far more relaxed among Europe's leaders in Brussels than almost a week ago when he received a verbal lashing from Trump in Washington.

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

Others too appeared ready to do more.

"Spend, spend, spend on defense and deterrence. That's the most important message," Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told reporters.

The call is a sharp departure from decades of decline in military spending in Europe, where defense often ranked low in many budgetary considerations after the Cold War.

In an address to his country Wednesday evening, French President Emmanuel Macron said the bloc would "take decisive steps."

"Member states will be able to increase their military spending," he said, noting that "massive joint funding will be provided to buy and produce some of the most innovative munitions, tanks, weapons and equipment in Europe."

Macron conferred with his EU counterparts about the possibility of using France's nuclear deterrent to protect the continent from Russian threats.

Helping EU countries find more money

The short-term benefits of the budget plan offered by von der Leyen were not obvious. Most of the increased defense spending would have to come from national budgets at a time when many countries are already overburdened with debt.

Part of the proposal includes measures to ensure struggling member states will not be punished for going too deep into the red if additional spending is earmarked for defense.

"Europe faces a clear and present danger, and therefore Europe has to be able to protect itself, to defend itself," she said.

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 in Ukraine

Part of any security plan would be to help Ukraine defend itself from Russian attacks such as the one that hit Zelenskyy's hometown overnight.

A Russian missile killed four people staying at a hotel in Kryvyi Rih, in central Ukraine, shortly after volunteers from a humanitarian organization moved in. The volunteers included Ukrainian, American and British nationals, but it wasn't clear whether those people were among the 31 who were wounded.

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

But the meeting in Brussels did not address Ukraine's most pressing needs. It was not aimed at 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.

Investigation advances into Gene Hackman's mysterious death, with update by New Mexico authorities

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Authorities are set to reveal more information about an investigation into the deaths of actor Gene Hackman and wife Betsy Arakawa, whose partially mummified bodies were discovered last month at their home in New Mexico.

The Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office has said it does not suspect foul play, and tests for carbon monoxide poisoning were negative.

Sheriff Adan Mendoza and state fire, health and forensics officials scheduled an afternoon news conference Friday to provide updates on the case.

Mendoza has said the couple may have died up to two weeks before they were discovered on Feb. 26. Hackman's pacemaker last showed activity Feb. 17, nine days before maintenance and security workers showed up at the home and alerted police.

Arakawa was found with an open prescription bottle and pills scattered on the bathroom counter, while Hackman was found in the home's entryway.

One of the couple's three dogs also was found dead in a crate in a bathroom closet near Arakawa, while two other dogs survived. Authorities initially misidentified the breed of the dead animal.

Authorities retrieved personal items from the home including a monthly planner and two cellphones that will be analyzed. Medical investigators have been working to establish the cause of their deaths, but toxicology reports often take weeks to complete.

When they were found, the bodies were decomposing with some mummification, a consequence of body type and climate in Santa Fe's especially dry air at an elevation of nearly 7,200 feet (2,200 meters).

Hackman, a Hollywood icon, won two Oscars during a storied career in films including "The French Connection," "Hoosiers" and "Superman" from the 1960s until his retirement in the early 2000s.

Arakawa, born in Hawaii, studied as a concert pianist, attended the University of Southern California and met Hackman in the mid-1980s while working at a California gym.

The couple's stucco, Pueblo-revival style home sits on a hill in a gated community at the southern tip of the Rocky Mountains. Santa Fe is known as a refuge for celebrities, artists and authors.

Hackman dedicated much of his time in retirement to painting and writing novels far from Hollywood's social circuit. He served for several years on the board of trustees at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, and he and his wife were investors in local businesses.

American Jews who fled Syria ask White House to lift sanctions so they can rebuild in Damascus

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — American Jews who fled their Syrian homeland decades ago went to the White House this week to appeal to the Trump administration to lift sanctions on Syria that they say are blocking them from restoring some of the world's oldest synagogues and rebuilding the country's decimated Jewish community.

For Henry Hamra, who fled Damascus as a teenager with his family in the 1990s, the 30 years since have been shadowed by worry for what they left behind.

"I was just on the lookout the whole time. The old synagogues, the old cemetery, what's going on, who's taking care of it?" said Hamra, whose family has settled in New York.

His family fled the Syrian capital to escape the repressive government of Hafez Assad. With the toppling of his son, Bashar Assad, in December and the end of Assad family rule, Hamra, his 77-year-old father, Rabbi Yusuf Hamra, and a small group of other Jews and non-Jews returned to Syria last month for the first time.

They briefed State Department officials for the region last week and officials at the White House on Wednesday. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

They were accompanied by Mouaz Moustafa, executive director of a group called the Syrian American Task Force, who was influential in the past in moving U.S. officials to sanction the Assad government over its institutionalized torture and killings.

With Assad gone and the country trying to move out of poverty, Moustafa has been urging U.S. policymakers to lift sweeping sanctions that block most investment and business dealings in Syria.

"If you want a stable and safe Syria ... even if it's as simple as rebuilding the oldest synagogue in the world, the only person that's able to make that a reality today is, frankly, Donald Trump," Moustafa said.

Syria's Jewish community is one of the world's oldest, dating its history back to the prophet Elijah's time in Damascus nearly 3,000 years ago. It once had been one of the world's largest, and was still estimated at 100,000 at the start of the 20th century.

Increased restrictions, surveillance and tensions after the creation of Israel and under the authoritarian Assad family sent tens of thousands fleeing in the 1990s. Today, only seven Jews are known to remain in Damascus, most of them elderly.

What began as a largely peaceful uprising against the Assad family in 2011 grew into a vicious civil war, with a half-million dying as Russia and Iranian-backed militias fought to keep the Assads in power, and the Islamic State group imposing its rule on a wide swath of the country.

A U.S.-led military coalition routed the Islamic State by 2019. Successive U.S. administrations piled sanctions on Syria over the Assad government's torture, imprisonment and killing of perceived opponents.

Bashar Assad was ousted in December by a coalition of rebel groups led by an Islamist insurgent, Ahmad al-Sharaa, who today leads what he says is a transition government. He and his supporters have taken pains to safeguard members of Syria's many minority religious groups and pledged peaceful coexistence as they ask a skeptical international community to lift the crippling sanctions.

Although incidents of revenge and collective punishment have been far less widespread than expected, many in Syria's minority communities — including Kurds, Christians, Druze and members of Assad's Alawite sect — are concerned and not convinced by promises of inclusive government.

After the decades away, Yusuf Hamra's former Christian neighbors in the old city of Damascus recognized him on his trip back last month and stopped to embrace him, and share gossip on old acquaintances. The Hamras prayed in the long-neglected al-Franj synagogue, where he used to serve as a rabbi.

His son, Henry Hamra, said he was shocked to see tiny children begging in the streets — a result, he said, of the sanctions.

Visiting the site of what had been Syria's oldest synagogue of all, in the Jobar area of Damascus, Hamra found it in ruins from the war, with an ordnance shell still among the rubble.

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Hamra had become acquainted with Moustafa, then a U.S.-based opposition activist, when he reached out to him during the war to see if he could do anything to rescue precious artifacts inside the Jobar synagogue as fighting raged around it.

A member of Moustafa's group suffered a shrapnel wound trying, and a member of a Jobar neighborhood council was killed. Both men were Muslim. Despite their effort, fighting later destroyed most of the structure.

Hamra said Jews abroad want to be allowed to help restore their synagogues, their family homes and their schools in the capital's old city. Someday, he says, Syria's Jewish community could be like Morocco's, thriving in a Muslim country again.

"My main goal is not to see my Jewish quarter, and my school, and my synagogue and everything fall apart," Hamra said.

Why should America worry about Trump? Try the price of eggs, say some Democrats

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As their party struggles to navigate the early days of Donald Trump's second presidency, some Democrats are convinced that their road to recovery lies in the price of eggs.

Instead of leaning into Trump's teardown of the federal government or his alliance with billionaire lieutenant Elon Musk, they're steering to what they perceive as the everyday concerns of Americans — none more important than grocery prices and eggs in particular.

U.S. egg prices hit a record average of \$4.95 per dozen in January, surpassing a previous record set in January 2023, according to federal data. In some parts of the country, they're much higher. A Safeway supermarket in San Francisco was selling a dozen eggs for \$10.99 this week.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture expects egg prices to rise 41% this year. Already, some restaurants are adding temporary surcharges when customers order eggs. Denny's said its surcharge varies by region and even by restaurant, while Waffle House added a 50-cent surcharge per egg at all its restaurants.

The Democratic establishment's focus on blaming Trump for those price spikes represents a stark break from its activists, who have launched a protest movement arguing that Trump is a budding dictator with no regard for the Constitution.

Such concerns may be valid, some Democratic members of Congress say, but they don't resonate with working-class Americans trying to feed their families.

"When that is your day-to-day worry, the philosophical conversations about a constitutional crisis or the democracy is simply not a luxury you can afford," Rep. Kristen McDonald Rivet, D-Mich. "I'm not saying we shouldn't worry about those things, because we should and they are important, but they are not primary in the minds of the people in Saginaw, Michigan."

The message underscores the Democratic ecosystem's broad acknowledgment that the party must make changes to win back the hearts and minds of voters worried about the economy, who shifted toward Trump's GOP last fall and gave Republicans control of the White House and both chambers of Congress.

It's unclear, however, whether the Democrats' newfound focus will do much in the short term to stop Trump's sweeping campaign to consolidate power in Washington or if it can harness the energy of the party's progressive base, which wants new and creative solutions to address what they view as an existential threat.

Indivisible co-founder Ezra Levin, whose organization helped coordinate a nationwide protest movement that put House Republicans on defense, called the Democrats' focus on eggs "a communications strategy built for a 1990s policy fight."

"They're looking at polls that say inflation is unpopular, and they think Dems can win people with boring, tired talking points," Levin said. "But it's 2025 — this isn't how politics works anymore. And their failure to update their approach to creeping authoritarianism is a simple failure of leadership."

Moving from billionaires to eggs

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The Democratic establishment's new approach echoed across Washington this week after Trump delivered a 99-minute speech to a joint session of Congress. Trump defended the tariffs he has threatened to impose on America's trading partners. A trade war could boost prices further on everything from fruits and vegetables to cellphones, lumber and cars.

In the opening hours of Trump's presidency, the Democratic National Committee issued talking points encouraging allies to talk about "Trump's plans to screw over America" and highlight Trump's alliances with Musk and other tech billionaires.

The DNC's talking points sounded different after Tuesday's speech.

"We saw Trump ramble on about invading Greenland and planting the American flag on Mars, but what we didn't hear was a plan to lower costs and address Americans' anxiety about the looming economic disaster he's driving us toward," read the DNC talking points. "Consumer confidence has fallen sharply, everyday costs are skyrocketing, and congressional Republicans are pushing deeply unpopular tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy."

At the same time, Democratic officials shared new internal data Thursday that they say indicates inflation and the cost of living are voters' top priority. Democracy, by contrast, ranked No. 12.

Public polling goes further.

A Washington Post/Ipsos poll found that one month into the new administration, U.S. adults remain almost universally unhappy about the cost of groceries. According to the survey, about 9 in 10 Americans say that food prices are "not so good" or "poor," including about half who say they're "poor." And a CNN/SSRS poll conducted in mid-February found that about 6 in 10 Americans said Trump had "not gone far enough" in trying to reduce the price of everyday goods.

But the party is hardly united on the new approach.

Rep. Al Green, D-Texas, was ejected from the House chamber during Trump's speech and eventually censured for refusing to stop shouting his concerns about potential Medicaid cuts. Other Democrats silently waved small signs that read "Musk steals," "Save Medicaid" and "Lies." Still others skipped the speech altogether in protest.

Why are egg prices so high?

In this week's speech, Trump blamed the surge on his Democratic predecessor.

"Joe Biden especially let the price of eggs get out of control — the egg prices out of control. We're working hard to get it back down," Trump charged as Democrats in the chamber booed.

The industry and most experts agree that the ongoing bird flu outbreak is the main reason egg prices are setting records, although some question whether egg producers are inflating prices to boost profits.

As further evidence that Trump's team is aware that the situation is becoming a political liability, Musk used his social media platform on Thursday to cast more blame on Biden.

"There was an insane slaughter of 150 million egg-laying chickens ordered by the Biden administration," Musk wrote on X, neglecting to mention the millions of egg-laying chickens killed since Trump took office.

Indeed, as of Thursday afternoon, 27,116,857 birds have been killed since Trump returned to the White House to limit the spread of bird flu. That's because the federal government's longstanding policy requires farmers to kill their entire flocks anytime a bird gets sick to help limit the spread of the virus.

Overall, more than 166 million birds — most of them egg-laying chickens — have been slaughtered since the outbreak began in 2022.

The Trump administration did unveil a plan to combat bird flu to help ease egg prices. But the impact is hard to predict given that the \$1 billion plan isn't a drastic departure from the previous policy.

Specifically, Trump's plan doesn't change the USDA's longstanding policy of slaughtering flocks when a sick bird is found. Instead, the plan focuses on helping farmers adopt the most effective biosecurity measures to keep the virus out and explores the prospects for a bird flu vaccine, among other moves.

Rep. Josh Riley, D-N.Y., who recently confronted a bird flu outbreak in his upstate district, said almost every conversation he has with constituents centers on rising prices, especially eggs. He made a direct link between concerns about the economy and democracy.

"If you're worried about our democracy ... that's more of a reason to be worried about the price of eggs,"

Riley said. "The reason our democracy is in the situation is in, the reason our country is in the situation it's in, is because for decades, politicians have neglected the needs of everyday working people."

He continued: "Is it any wonder, after 40 years of shipping jobs overseas just to make Wall Street rich, after three years of egg prices skyrocketing and nobody around this place doing a goddamn thing about it, that people are really, really frustrated and believe that our democracy does not work for them? Can you blame them?"

U.S. economy likely generated a solid 160,000 jobs last month, but Trump's trade wars cloud outlook

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. labor market likely kept on churning out jobs last month, economists say, but the outlook is cloudy and getting cloudier as the Trump administration wages trade wars, purges federal employees and seeks to deport millions of immigrants.

When the Labor Department releases February jobs numbers Friday, they're expected to show that employers added 160,000 jobs. That's far from spectacular but it's solid, and it's up from 143,000 in January. The unemployment rate is forecast to stay at a low 4%, according to economists surveyed by the data firm FactSet.

"Despite rising concerns about the health of the economy, momentum remains positive," Lydia Boussour, senior economist at the tax and consulting firm EY, wrote in a commentary.

Billionaire Elon Musk's purge of federal workers is not expected to have much impact on the February jobs numbers. The Labor Department conducted its survey of employers too early in the month for the Department of Government Efficiency layoffs to show up.

"We expect to see a more visible dent to federal payrolls in March and subsequent months," Boussour said.

Diane Swonk, chief economist at accounting giant KPMG, expects that hiring at leisure and hospitality companies — which include hotels, restaurants, theaters — bounced back last month after falling during January's wildfires in Los Angeles.

"The key issue will be who shows up for the jobs," she wrote in a commentary. Swonk noted that the Trump administration has revoked asylum for nearly 1 million Venezuelan and Haitian refugees, "which may keep them from showing up to work or filling vacancies that native-born workers tend to shun."

The American job market has remained remarkably resilient, but it has cooled from the red-hot hiring of 2021-2023. Employers added a decent average of 166,000 jobs a month last year, down from 216,000 in 2023, 380,000 in 2022 and a record 603,000 in 2021 as the economy rebounded from COVID-19 lockdowns.

Hiring continued despite high interest rates that had been expected to tip the United States into recession. The economy's unexpectedly strong recovery from the pandemic recession of 2020 set loose an inflationary surge that peaked in June 2022 when prices came in 9.1% higher than they'd been a year earlier.

In response, the Federal Reserve raised its benchmark interest rate 11 times in 2022 and 2023, taking it to the highest level in more than two decades. The economy remained sturdy despite the higher borrowing costs, thanks to strong consumer spending, big productivity gains at businesses and an influx of immigrants who eased labor shortages.

Inflation came down — dropping to 2.4% in September — allowing the Fed to reverse course and cut rates three times in 2024. The rate-cutting was expected to continue this year, but progress on inflation has stalled since summer, and the Fed has held off.

Economists expect that workers' average hourly earnings rose 0.3% last month, down from a 0.5% increase in January, a drop likely to be welcomed by the Fed — but not enough to get the central bank to cut rates at its next meeting March 18-19. In fact, Wall Street traders aren't expecting another cut until May, and they're not especially confident about that one, according to the CME Group's FedWatch tool.

Economists say the economic outlook is growing more uncertain as Trump imposes — or threatens to

impose — a series of taxes on imported goods.

“Steep tariff increases could cause adjustments in business decisions with knock-on effects on hiring and wages as business leaders navigate higher input costs and retaliatory measures,” Boussour said. “This could lead to a more severe job slowdown, weaker income and restrained consumer spending amidst much higher inflation.”

Judge orders Trump administration to speed payment of USAID and State Dept. debts

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday ordered the Trump administration to speed up its payment on some of nearly \$2 billion in debts to partners of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department, giving it a Monday deadline to repay the nonprofit groups and businesses in a lawsuit over the administration’s abrupt shutdown of foreign assistance funding.

U.S. District Judge Amir Ali described the partial payment as a “concrete” first step he wanted to see from the administration, which is fighting multiple lawsuits seeking to roll back the administration’s dismantling of USAID and a six-week freeze on USAID funding, which has forced U.S.-funded organizations to halt aid and development work around the world and lay off workers.

Ali’s line of questioning in a four-hour hearing Thursday suggested skepticism of the Trump administration’s argument that presidents have wide authority to override congressional decisions on spending when it comes to foreign policy.

It would be an “earth-shaking, country-shaking proposition to say that appropriations are optional,” Ali said. “The question I have for you is, where are you getting this from in the constitutional document?” he asked a government lawyer, Indraneel Sur.

Thursday’s order is in an ongoing case with more decisions coming on the administration’s termination of more than 90% of USAID contracts worldwide this month.

Ali’s ruling came a day after a divided Supreme Court rejected the Trump administration’s bid to freeze funding that flowed through USAID. The high court instructed Ali to clarify what the government must do to comply with his earlier order requiring the quick release of funds for work that had already been done.

The funding freeze stemmed from an executive order signed by President Donald Trump on Jan. 20. The administration appealed after Ali issued a temporary restraining order and set a deadline to release payment for work already done.

The administration said it has replaced a blanket spending freeze with individualized determinations, which led to the cancellation of 5,800 USAID contracts — more than 90% of the agency’s contracts for projects — and 4,100 State Department grants totaling nearly \$60 billion in aid.

“The funding freeze, it’s not continuing. It’s over,” Sur told the judge Thursday.

With thousands of the form-letter contract terminations going out within days earlier this month, nonprofits and businesses charge that no actual individual contract reviews were possible, and that the contract cancellations only made permanent most of the across-the-board program shutdowns from the funding freeze.

The AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition, the Global Health Council and other plaintiffs in the lawsuit are seeking back payment for their share of the nearly \$2 billion they and other USAID partners were already owed at the time of the Jan. 20 funding freeze.

Lawyers for the organizations told the court Thursday they also wanted to see all of the contract terminations reversed, and future terminations follow regulations.

The Trump administration said it recently resumed payment for USAID debts after the funding freeze. But it told the court that its processing of payments was being slowed because it had pulled most USAID workers off their jobs, through forced leaves and firing, as part of the agency shutdown.

Ali noted Thursday that USAID had said it routinely made thousands of payments before the agency shutdown, and that it said it had recently called 100 staffers off leave to process payments.

The administration could continue bringing idled workers off leave to make Monday's deadline, he said.

A weak Pope Francis thanks people for their prayers 'from the bottom of my heart' in audio message

By COLLEEN BARRY and NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — A weak and breathless Pope Francis thanked people for their prayers for his recovery in a remarkable audio message broadcast Thursday, the first public sign of life from the 88-year-old pope since he was hospitalized three weeks ago with double pneumonia.

Francis' feeble voice, discernible through his labored breaths and in his native Spanish, was recorded Thursday from the hospital and broadcast to the faithful in St. Peter's Square who had gathered for the nightly recitation of the rosary prayer.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers for my health from the square, I accompany you from here," he said, his soft voice piercing the hushed square. "May God bless you and the Virgin protect you. Thank you."

For anyone used to hearing Francis' voice, which is often so soft it sounds like a whisper, the audio was an emotional punch to the gut that hammered home just how sick he is.

The cardinal presiding over the prayer, Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, had told the crowd at the start of the service that he had "beautiful news, a beautiful gift" to share. The clearly surprised crowd broke into applause and then applauded again after Francis' final "Gracias." Fernández Artime, for his part, bowed his head as he listened.

The 88-year-old pope has chronic lung disease and had part of one lung removed as a young man.

The Vatican has given twice-daily updates on Francis' medical condition, but has distributed no photos or video of him since the morning of Feb. 14, when he held a handful of audiences at the Vatican before being admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital for what was then just a bad case of bronchitis.

The infection progressed into a complex respiratory tract infection and double pneumonia that has sidelined Francis for the longest period of his 12-year papacy and raised questions about the future of his papacy.

Francis has issued written messages from the Gemelli, including some that sounded very much like him. But even Vatican officials had been clamouring to hear his voice, saying the pope's calls for peace are particularly needed at a time of such global conflict and war.

More than any pope before him, Francis has mastered the art of informal and direct communication, often recording cell phone videos for visitors to bring home to their communities. For the considerable effort it must have taken, the audio message made clear that he understood the power of his voice, even in its weakened state.

Doctors on Thursday reported that Francis was in stable condition, with no new respiratory crises or fever. He continued his respiratory and other physical therapy Thursday, worked, rested and prayed from the 10th floor papal suite at Rome's Gemelli hospital.

Given the continued stability of Francis' condition, doctors said they didn't expect to provide a new medical update until Saturday. His prognosis remains guarded, meaning he is not out of danger.

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 high-flow oxygen with a nasal tube during the day. His routine now includes physical therapy, along with treatment for double pneumonia and respiratory therapy, Vatican officials said.

The 88-year-old pope has been stable for three full days after suffering a pair of respiratory crises Monday.

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."

SpaceX's latest Starship test flight ends with another explosion

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

Nearly two months after an explosion sent flaming debris raining down on the Turks and Caicos, SpaceX launched another mammoth Starship rocket on Thursday, but lost contact minutes into the test flight as the spacecraft came tumbling down and broke apart.

This time, wreckage from the latest explosion was seen streaming from the skies over Florida. It was not immediately known whether the spacecraft's self-destruct system had kicked in to blow it up.

The 403-foot (123-meter) rocket blasted off from Texas. SpaceX caught the first-stage booster back at the pad with giant mechanical arms, but engines on the spacecraft on top started shutting down as it streaked eastward for what was supposed to be a controlled entry over the Indian Ocean, half a world away. Contact was lost less than 10 minutes into the flight as the spacecraft went into an out-of-control spin.

Starship reached nearly 90 miles (150 kilometers) in altitude before trouble struck and before four mock satellites could be deployed. It was not immediately clear where it came down, but images of flaming debris were captured from Florida, including near Cape Canaveral, and posted online.

The space-skimming flight was supposed to last an hour. The Federal Aviation Administration said it would require SpaceX to investigate the accident.

"Unfortunately this happened last time too, so we have some practice at this now," SpaceX flight commentator Dan Huot said from the launch site.

SpaceX later confirmed that the spacecraft experienced "a rapid unscheduled disassembly" during the ascent engine firing and said it alerted safety officials.

Flights were briefly grounded at Orlando International Airport "due to space launch debris in the area," the airport posted on X.

Starship didn't make it quite as high or as far as last time.

NASA has booked Starship to land its astronauts on the moon later this decade. SpaceX's Elon Musk is aiming for Mars with Starship, the world's biggest and most powerful rocket.

Like last time, Starship had mock satellites to release once the craft reached space on this eighth test flight as a practice for future missions. They resembled SpaceX's Starlink internet satellites, thousands of which currently orbit Earth, and were meant to fall back down following their brief taste of space.

Starship's flaps, computers and fuel system were redesigned in preparation for the next big step: returning the spacecraft to the launch site just like the booster.

During the last demo, SpaceX captured the booster at the launch pad, but the spacecraft blew up several minutes later over the Atlantic. No injuries or major damage were reported.

According to an investigation that remains ongoing, leaking fuel triggered a series of fires that shut down the spacecraft's engines. The on-board self-destruct system kicked in as planned.

SpaceX said it made several improvements to the spacecraft following the accident, and the Federal Aviation Administration recently cleared Starship once more for launch.

Starships soar out of the southernmost tip of Texas near the Mexican border. SpaceX is building another Starship complex at Cape Canaveral, home to the company's smaller Falcon rockets that ferry astronauts and satellites to orbit.

Women's tennis players now are eligible for paid maternity leave financed by Saudi fund

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Pregnant players on the women's tennis tour now can receive 12 months of paid maternity leave, and those who become parents via partner pregnancy, surrogacy or adoption can get two months off with pay, under a program sponsored by the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia and announced Thursday by the WTA.

"Independent contractors and self-employed individuals don't typically have these kinds of maternity benefits provided and available to them. They have to go out and sort of figure out those benefits for

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themselves," WTA CEO Portia Archer said. "This is really sort of novel and groundbreaking."

More than 300 players are eligible for the fund, which is retroactive to Jan. 1. The WTA would not disclose how much money is involved.

The program — which the WTA touted as "the first time in women's sports history that comprehensive maternity benefits are available to independent, self-employed athletes" — also provides grants for fertility treatments, including egg freezing and IVF.

It's part of a wider trend: As women's sports rise, there is an emphasis on meeting maternity and parental needs.

How many mothers are on the women's tennis tour now?

The WTA says 25 moms are active on tour; one, Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic, won a title last month after returning from maternity leave in October.

More and more pros in tennis have returned to action after having children, including past No. 1-ranked players and Grand Slam title winners such as Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka, Kim Clijsters, Caroline Wozniacki and Victoria Azarenka.

Azarenka — a member of the WTA Players' Council, which Archer acknowledged played a key role in pushing for this fund — thinks these benefits will encourage lower-ranked or lower-earning athletes to take as much time off as they feel they need after becoming a parent, rather than worrying about losing out on income while not entering tournaments.

"That's certainly one of the aims of the program: to provide the financial resources, the flexibility, the support, so that these athletes, regardless of where they're ranked, but particularly those who earn less, will have that agency ... to decide when and how they want to start their families," Archer said.

And, Azarenka said, this could lead some players to decide to become parents before retiring from the sport for good.

"Every feedback we've heard from players who are mothers — or who are not mothers — is like, 'Wow, this is an incredible opportunity for us,'" said 2012 and '13 Australian Open champion Azarenka, whose son, Leo, is 8. "I believe it's really going to change the conversation in sports. But going beyond sports, it's a global conversation, and I'm happy that we're (part of it)."

Other steps the WTA has taken in recent years to benefit players include steering more women into coaching, implementing safeguarding, attempting to stem cyberbullying, and increasing prize money with an eye to pay that equals what men receive in the sport.

What role does Saudi Arabia have in tennis?

The Public Investment Fund, or PIF, became the WTA's global partner last year, after much public debate — Hall of Famers Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova were among the critics — over questions about LGBTQ+ and women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

The kingdom now hosts the season-ending WTA Finals and an ATP event for rising stars of men's tennis. The PIF sponsors the WTA and ATP rankings.

"We wouldn't have been able to provide the benefits were it not for this relationship and the funding that PIF provides," Archer said.

What are maternity leave policies in golf, soccer and basketball?

In golf, which like tennis is an individual sport without guaranteed salaries, the LPGA introduced an updated maternity leave policy in 2019 that lets athletes have the same playing status when they return.

In soccer, both the NWSL and the U.S. women's national team have collective bargaining agreements that allow for pregnancy leave and parental leave; the NWSL pays the full base salary while an athlete is pregnant.

In basketball, the WNBA's CBA guarantees full pay during maternity leave.

For tennis, Azarenka said, the PIF WTA Maternity Fund Program is "just the beginning."

"It's an incredible beginning. Monumental change," she said. "But I think we can look into how we can expand this fund for bigger, better things."

Judge says plans to release a woman in Slender Man case can go forward

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

WAUKESHA, Wis. (AP) — A Wisconsin woman who nearly killed her classmate years ago to please horror character Slender Man can be released from a psychiatric hospital as planned, a judge decided Thursday, rejecting state health officials' last-minute attempt to keep her committed.

Morgan Geysler has spent the last seven years at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute. Waukesha County Circuit Judge Michael Bohren in January ordered her released after state and county health officials completed a community supervision and housing plan.

State Department of Health Services officials were approaching a 60-day deadline to present the plan to the judge when they abruptly asked him last week to keep her committed.

Agency officials argued that Geysler didn't volunteer to her therapy team that she had read "Rent Boy," a novel about murder and selling organs on the black market. They also alleged that she has been communicating with a man who collects murder memorabilia, and has sent him her own sketch of a decapitated body and a postcard saying she wants to be intimate with him.

Waukesha County Deputy District Attorney Abbey Nickolie said during a hearing Thursday that Geysler only told her treatment team about the book and the collector when she was asked.

"The state has real concerns these things are, frankly, just red flags at this point," Nickolie said.

Geysler's attorney, Tony Cotton, argued Geysler hasn't done anything wrong and blasted the state's request to keep her in the hospital as a "hit job."

He told the judge that Geysler only reads what Winnebago staff allow, adding that she has a wide range of reading interests, including biographies.

As for the collector, Winnebago staff knew that he had visited her three times in June 2023 and that Geysler cut off communications with him last year after she realized he was selling things she sent him, Cotton said.

"Morgan is not more dangerous today," Cotton said.

Bohren heard testimony from the same three psychologists who recommended her release in January. All of them said that they don't see how she presents any more of a risk now.

The judge found that the state's request lacked substance. He said that he didn't think Geysler was trying to hide anything from her treatment team and was simply responding to questions she was asked.

"I don't see the risk to the public," Bohren said. He set a new hearing on a release plan for March 21.

Geysler and her friend, Anissa Weier, lured Payton Leutner to a Waukesha park after a sleepover in 2014. Geysler stabbed Leutner 19 times while Weier egged her on. All three girls were 12 years old.

Leutner barely survived her wounds. Geysler and Weier told investigators that they attacked her to earn the right to be Slender Man's servants and to ensure Slender Man didn't hurt them or their families.

Geysler pleaded guilty to being a party to attempted first-degree intentional homicide in 2017 but claimed she wasn't responsible because she was mentally ill. Bohren committed her to the psychiatric hospital for 40 years in 2018.

Weier pleaded guilty to being a party to attempted second-degree intentional homicide with a dangerous weapon in 2017, but like Geysler claimed she wasn't deemed responsible because of her mental illness. She was committed to 25 years in a mental hospital but was granted release in 2021 if she agreed to live with her father and to wear a GPS monitor.

War heroes and military firsts are among 26,000 images flagged for removal in Pentagon's DEI purge

By TARA COPP, LOLITA C. BALDOR and KEVIN VINEYS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — References to a World War II Medal of Honor recipient, the Enola Gay aircraft that dropped an atomic bomb on Japan and the first women to pass Marine infantry training are among the

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tens of thousands of photos and online posts marked for deletion as the Defense Department works to purge diversity, equity and inclusion content, according to a database obtained by The Associated Press.

The database, which was confirmed by U.S. officials and published by AP, includes more than 26,000 images that have been flagged for removal across every military branch. But the eventual total could be much higher.

One official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details that have not been made public, said the purge could delete as many as 100,000 images or posts in total, when considering social media pages and other websites that are also being culled for DEI content. The official said it's not clear if the database has been finalized.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had given the military until Wednesday to remove content that highlights diversity efforts in its ranks following President Donald Trump's executive order ending those programs across the federal government.

The vast majority of the Pentagon purge targets women and minorities, including notable milestones made in the military. And it also removes a large number of posts that mention various commemorative months — such as those for Black and Hispanic people and women.

But a review of the database also underscores the confusion that has swirled among agencies about what to remove following Trump's order.

Aircraft and fish projects are flagged

In some cases, photos seemed to be flagged for removal simply because their file included the word "gay," including service members with that last name and an image of the B-29 aircraft Enola Gay, which dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, during World War II.

Several photos of an Army Corps of Engineers dredging project in California were marked for deletion, apparently because a local engineer in the photo had the last name Gay. And a photo of Army Corps biologists was on the list, seemingly because it mentioned they were recording data about fish — including their weight, size, hatchery and gender.

In addition, some photos of the Tuskegee Airmen, the nation's first Black military pilots who served in a segregated WWII unit, were listed on the database, but those may likely be protected due to historical content.

The Air Force briefly removed new recruit training courses that included videos of the Tuskegee Airmen soon after Trump's order. That drew the White House's ire over "malicious compliance," and the Air Force quickly reversed the removal.

Many of the images listed in the database already have been removed. Others were still visible Thursday, and it's not clear if they will be taken down at some point or be allowed to stay, including images with historical significance such as those of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Asked about the database, Pentagon spokesman John Ulyot said in a statement, "We are pleased by the rapid compliance across the Department with the directive removing DEI content from all platforms. In the rare cases that content is removed that is out of the clearly outlined scope of the directive, we instruct components accordingly."

He noted that Hegseth has declared that "DEI is dead" and that efforts to put one group ahead of another through DEI programs erodes camaraderie and threatens mission execution.

Some images aren't gone

In some cases, the removal was partial. The main page in a post titled "Women's History Month: All-female crew supports warfighters" was removed. But at least one of the photos in that collection about an all-female C-17 crew could still be accessed. A shot from the Army Corps of Engineers titled "Engineering pioneer remembered during Black History Month" was deleted.

Other photos flagged in the database but still visible Thursday included images of the World War II Women Air Service Pilots and one of U.S. Air Force Col. Jeannie Leavitt, the country's first female fighter pilot.

Also still visible was an image of then-Pfc. Christina Fuentes Montenegro becoming one of the first three women to graduate from the Marine Corps' Infantry Training Battalion and an image of Marine Corps World War II Medal of Honor recipient Pfc. Harold Gonsalves.

It was unclear why some other images were removed, such as a Marine Corps photo titled "Deadlift contenders raise the bar pound by pound" or a National Guard website image called "Minnesota brothers reunite in Kuwait."

Why the database?

The database of the 26,000 images was created to conform with federal archival laws, so if the services are queried in the future, they can show how they are complying with the law, the U.S. official said. But it may be difficult to ensure the content was archived because the responsibility to ensure each image was preserved was the responsibility of each individual unit.

In many cases, workers are taking screenshots of the pages marked for removal, but it would be difficult to restore them if that decision was made, according to another official, who like the others spoke on the condition of anonymity to provide additional details that were not public.

A Marine Corps official said every one of its images in the database "either has been taken down or will be taken down." The Marines are moving on the directive as fast as possible, but as with the rest of the military, very few civilian or contractor employees at the Pentagon can perform content removal, the official said.

In the Marine Corps, just one defense civilian is available to do the work. The Marine Corps estimates that person has identified at least 10,000 images for removal — and that does not count more than 1,600 social media sites that have not yet been addressed.

Many of those social media sites were military base or unit support groups created years ago and left idle. No one still has the administrative privileges to go in and change the content.

The Marine official said the service is going through each site and getting new administrative privileges so it can make the changes.

On Feb. 26, the Pentagon ordered all the military services to spend countless hours poring over years of website postings, photos, news articles and videos to remove any mentions that "promote diversity, equity and inclusion."

If they couldn't do that by Wednesday, they were told to "temporarily remove from public display" all content published during the Biden administration's four years in office.

Trump casts doubt on NATO solidarity, despite it aiding the US after Sept. 11

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Thursday expressed uncertainty that NATO would come to the United States' defense if the country were attacked, though the alliance did just that after Sept. 11 — the only time in its history that the defense guarantee has been invoked.

Trump also suggested that the U.S. might abandon its commitments to the alliance if member countries don't meet defense spending targets, a day after his pick for NATO ambassador assured senators that the administration's commitment to the military alliance was "ironclad."

Trump's comments denigrating NATO, which was formed to counter Soviet aggression during the Cold War, are largely in line with his yearslong criticism of the alliance, which he has accused of not paying its fair share toward the cost of defense. But they come at a time of heightened concern in the Western world over Trump's cozy relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has long seen NATO as a threat, and as the U.S. president seeks to pressure Ukraine into agreeing to a peace deal with the country that invaded it three years ago.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth sent the alliance into upheaval last month when he said in a speech that the U.S. would not participate in any peacekeeping force in Ukraine, which is not a NATO member, and would not defend any country that participated in it if attacked by Russia.

Trump said Thursday in the Oval Office that other countries would not come to the defense of the U.S. — though they have done exactly that, in the only instance that the Article 5 defense guarantee was invoked.

"You know the biggest problem I have with NATO? I really, I mean, I know the guys very well. They're

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friends of mine. But if the United States was in trouble, and we called them, we said, 'We got a problem, France. We got a problem, couple of others I won't mention.' Do you think they're going to come and protect us? They're supposed to. I'm not so sure."

Article 5 was invoked after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, leading to NATO's largest operation in Afghanistan. France's military participated in the operation.

"We are loyal and faithful allies," French President Emmanuel Macron responded Thursday, expressing "respect and friendship" towards U.S. leaders.

"I think we're entitled to expect the same," he said.

Macron invoked "centuries-old history," namechecking the Marquis de Lafayette, a 19-year-old French nobleman, who was a major-general in the American Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and Gen. John Pershing, commander of the American army in France during World War I. Macron added that a few days ago, he met American World War II veterans who landed on Omaha Beach as part of the D-Day invasion of Nazi-occupied France.

France and the U.S. "have always been there for each other," Macron said.

Trump, when asked Thursday if it he was making it U.S. policy that the U.S. would not defend NATO countries that don't meet military spending targets, said: "Well, I think it's common sense, right? If they don't pay, I'm not going to defend them. No, I'm not going to defend them."

Trump has suggested since his 2016 presidential campaign that the U.S. under his leadership might not comply with the alliance's mutual defense guarantees and would only defend countries that met targets to commit 2% of their gross domestic products on military spending.

The U.S. is the most powerful nation of the seven-decade alliance, has the largest economy among members and spends more on defense than any other member.

The U.S. was one of 12 nations that formed NATO following World War II to counter the threat posed by the Soviet Union to Western Europe during the Cold War. Its membership has since grown to 32 countries, and its bedrock mutual defense guarantee, known as Article 5, states that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all.

Trump on Thursday also seemed to suggest the U.S. commitment to NATO might be leveraged in his trade war as he seeks to target what he says are unfair trade policies with other nations, including the European Union.

"I view NATO as potentially good, but you've got to get, you've got to get some good thinking in NATO. It's very unfair, what's been happening," Trump said. "Until I came along, we were paying close to 100% of NATO. So think of it, we're paying 100% of their military, and they're screwing us on trade."

On Wednesday, Trump's choice for NATO ambassador, Matt Whitaker, said at his confirmation hearing that in regards to the U.S. commitment to the NATO alliance and specifically Article 5, "it will be ironclad."

Last year, NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said a record 23 of NATO's 32 member nations had hit the military alliance's defense spending target.

Trump has taken credit for countries meeting those targets because of his threats, and Stoltenberg himself has said Trump was responsible for getting other nations to increase their spending.

Europe Ukraine latest: EU leaders back new military spending plans at Ukraine summit

By The Associated Press undefined

European Union leaders on Thursday committed to a massive step in defense cooperation following decades of hesitation, spurred by U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated warnings that he would cut them adrift to face the threat of Russia without America's overwhelming military might.

The 27 leaders signed off on a move to loosen budget restrictions so willing EU countries can increase military spending. They also urged the European Commission, the EU's executive branch, to explore new ways to facilitate significant defense spending in all member states, a statement said.

That comes as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says his country will hold talks with the U.S.

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next week about ending the war against Russia. In his nightly address, Zelenskyy said he would travel to Saudi Arabia on Monday and his team would stay there for talks with U.S. officials.

Here's the latest:

Spanish prime minister announces accelerated hike in defense spending

Pedro Sánchez said his country would raise defense spending to reach NATO's target faster than previously committed. The eurozone's fourth-largest economy, Spain ranked last in the 32-nation military alliance last year for the share of GDP that it contributed to the military, estimated at 1.28%.

NATO members pledged in 2014 to spend at least 2% of GDP on defense, a target that 23 countries were expected to meet last year amid concerns about the war in Ukraine. Spain previously said it would reach the target by 2029.

"We all have to make an effort and an expedited effort with respect to what we had previously set for the year 2029," Sánchez told reporters.

European army chiefs of staff to start Ukraine talks Tuesday in Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron said "exploratory" talks will start Tuesday about possible deployment of European forces in Ukraine once a peace deal is signed.

Discussions will include "a whole range of options" and will be held in Paris by army chiefs of staff of European nations that wish to be involved, he said in a news conference.

All European Union member states have been invited, Macron said, adding that talks will be held in "close coordination" with NATO's military command.

European-led forces in Ukraine would not fight on the front lines but would make sure a potential peace deal is fully respected, Macron said.

Macron also said he spoke with U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer following Thursday's emergency meeting on Ukraine in Brussels.

Ukraine and the US will hold talks next week on ending the war

The talks are set to take place in Saudi Arabia.

In his nightly address, Zelenskyy said he would travel to Saudi Arabia on Monday. He said his team would stay on to hold talks with U.S. officials about ending the war between Ukraine and Russia.

"Ukraine is most interested in peace," Zelenskyy said. "As we told President Trump, Ukraine is working and will work exclusively constructively for a quick and reliable peace."

EU leaders back new defense spending plans after Trump signals that Europe must fend for itself

European Union leaders on Thursday backed new defense spending plans aimed at freeing up billions of euros for the continent's security after the Trump administration signaled that Europe would have to fend for itself in future.

The 27 leaders signed off on a move to loosen budget restrictions so that willing EU countries can increase their military spending. They also urged the European Commission to explore new ways "to facilitate significant defense spending at national level in all Member States," a statement said.

The EU's executive branch estimates that around 650 billion euros (\$702 billion) could be freed up in this way.

The leaders also took note of a European Commission offer of a loan package worth 150 billion euros (\$162 billion) to buy new military equipment and invited EU headquarters staff "to examine this proposal as a matter of urgency."

Once again, the EU can't reach consensus on backing Ukraine

European Union leaders have failed to reach a full consensus on a common stance in defense of Ukraine and its war against Russia.

That's according to an official with knowledge of the vote at Thursday's close-door meeting.

A statement was signed off among 26 EU members with a lone member state out, the official said.

Hungary has long been a holdout in previous attempts to reach consensus.

The official declined to elaborate on which country did not back the statement. The official spoke on

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condition of anonymity because the summit was still ongoing.

The EU says it wants to back Ukraine with funds and military material so it can negotiate from a position of strength. Hungary says such measures would only extend the war.

Associated Press writer Raf Casert in Brussels contributed to this report.

Zelenskyy says US and Ukraine teams have resumed working together, and hints at another meeting

The Ukrainian leader didn't give details about what kind of cooperation has restarted, and said the two countries hoped to have "a meaningful meeting" next week.

In his speech Thursday to a meeting of European Council members, Zelenskyy said Ukraine "is not only ready to take the necessary steps for peace, but we are also proposing what those steps are."

Russia can demonstrate that it's serious about peace, he said, by ceasing attacks on Ukraine's energy and civilian infrastructure as well as halting military operations in the Black Sea, and it could also release prisoners of war.

Still, he said "any truce and any form of trust building measures can only be a prologue to a full and fair settlement, to a comprehensive agreement on security guarantees and an end to the war."

Russia casts Macron's speech as 'nuclear blackmail'

Moscow said its military planning will take into account the latest statements by French President Emmanuel Macron.

Russia's Foreign Ministry on Thursday denounced Macron's address a day earlier, in which he suggested starting talks about using France's nuclear deterrent to protect Europe from Russian threats.

Russia said the speech contained "notes of nuclear blackmail" and reflected Paris' ambitions to "become the nuclear 'patron' of all of Europe," even though France's nuclear forces are dwarfed by U.S. arsenals.

Still, the ministry warned that Macron's statement "will be taken into account by Russia in its defense planning." It claimed that Macron's speech reflects a "real panic" in Europe over emerging signs of normalization of Russia-U.S. ties."

Russia defends its vetoes on UN resolution mentioning Ukraine invasion

Moscow vetoed European amendments last month that would have added Russia's responsibility for invading its smaller neighbor. The U.N. Security Council resolution was adopted on Feb. 24 with its five European members abstaining.

Russia's deputy ambassador Dmitry Polyansky told the General Assembly on Thursday that Moscow highly values the Trump administration's peace initiative.

Polyansky called the U.S. resolution "a step in the right direction and grounds for further efforts for a peaceful solution to the Ukraine crisis."

Many European countries followed Polyansky to the assembly's podium to denounce Russia's invasion as a violation of the U.N. Charter which requires every U.N. member to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, and to demand Russian troops withdraw from Ukraine.

U.S. deputy ambassador Dorothy Shea told the assembly the resolution "does not end the war, but it has put us on a path to peace" which must be lasting, not temporary.

And about those billions in frozen Russian assets...

Most of the assets frozen in Europe are in Belgium at the securities depository Euroclear.

Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever said at the summit Thursday: "I advocate great caution when it comes to those frozen assets."

He called the frozen assets "a chicken that also lays golden eggs" because of the accumulating interest on the principal. So far, \$50 billion in interest has been used to help Ukraine.

"Countries that are already calling for the confiscation of those funds, they should be well aware of the economic risks they are taking," he said. "That is something that can really shock the world financial order. You should not take that lightly."

European leaders hesitate to seize Russia's frozen billions

That's despite urging from Ukraine and front-line governments in the Baltic states and Poland, who want to seize some 210 billion euros (\$227 billion) in Russian central bank reserves that have been frozen in the

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European financial system since the start of the war.

Officials in France and Germany have resisted due to concerns about legal obstacles and potentially undermining confidence in the euro and its associated financial system. So far the Group of Seven countries have used only the accumulating interest on the money to fund \$50 billion in assistance for Ukraine.

The G-7 say the money will stay frozen "until Russia ceases its aggression and pays for the damage it has caused." Countries bordering Russia want to use it to pay for Ukraine's reconstruction.

Bulgarian PM: 'Europe is weak without the United States'

"Europe is weak without the United States," Bulgarian Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov told reporters in Brussels on Thursday. He voiced hope that "the U.S. remains committed to our collective security, which is based on shared values."

Zhelyazkov said that no decisions regarding peace in Ukraine should be made without Ukraine's involvement and that "negotiations about Europe's security must be conducted by Europe and for Europe." Asked about the kind of peace being pursued, he said, "When the rule of law is confronted by the law of force, Europe must be prepared."

Bulgaria insists that funding for rearmament should not come at the expense of EU cohesion funds, but by redirecting unspent money from EU's COVID-19 recovery fund toward the country's defense industry.

How big is the French nuclear arsenal?

The talk about possibly "sharing" France's nuclear arsenal around Europe raises many questions, among them: How big is it?

The Federation of American Scientists, or FAS, estimates that all together, the United States and Russia possess approximately 88% of the world's total inventory of nuclear weapons — more than 5,000 each.

They are followed at a distance by China, and France is in fourth position with an estimated 290 nuclear warheads. The U.K. has an estimated 225, according to the federation. The FAS notes that the exact number of weapons in each country's possession is unknown because it's a closely held national secret.

EU leaders finish working lunch with Zelenskyy

The EU's 27 leaders have finished a working lunch with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Meal-time discussions are unscripted, and the heads of state and government can freely speak, often in English, but also in their own languages without any obvious time constraints.

Early Thursday morning, EU envoys finished drafting a summit statement for the leaders to endorse. The text, seen by The Associated Press, insists there can be no negotiations on Ukraine without Ukraine and that the Europeans must be involved in any talks involving their security.

The text could still change before the summit concludes. It also says that a ceasefire can only happen as part of a process leading to a full peace agreement. Any agreement, the leaders would say, must be accompanied by "robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine."

Hungary has threatened to veto parts of the statement relating to Ukraine, but Prime Minister Viktor Orbán entered the European Council building in Brussels via an alternate entrance, avoiding the waiting media.

Starmer says US remains an essential ally

U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has rejected suggestions that Europe and the United States are at odds over Ukraine and that Britain must pick a side.

Starmer says the U.S. remains an essential ally, and he's working "to get the U.S., Ukraine and European allies onto the same page so that we can all focus on what matters most, which is lasting peace in Ukraine."

Speaking on a visit Thursday to a shipyard in northwest England, the British leader repeated his call for a ceasefire to be backed up by robust security guarantees for Ukraine.

He said: "That guarantee needs a European element, and of course the United Kingdom will step up, we always step up in the cause of peace. But we also need the U.S. to be working with us on that, and that is what I am focusing all my attention on."

Scholz expresses reservations over French nuclear deterrent

Scholz has expressed his reservations about the idea of using French nuclear weapons to protect other European countries.

In response to questions from journalists, the German chancellor referred to the existing NATO system

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of nuclear deterrence, which is based on U.S. nuclear weapons and in which Germany participates.

He says he believes "that this should not be abandoned — that is the common view of all centrist parties in Germany."

Lavrov says statements about Russia being a threat to Europe are 'stupid'

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Thursday harshly criticized French President Emmanuel Macron's claim that Russia threatens Europe.

"This is a threat to Russia," Lavrov said at a briefing in Moscow, noting Macron's plan to convene a meeting of top European military officers to discuss purported aggressive plans by Moscow.

Lavrov dismissed the allegations that Russia was hatching plans to attack European nations as "stupid" and "delirious nonsense."

"For any more or less sane person it is completely clear that Russia does not need this," he said.

Russia rejects Franco-British peace proposal for Ukraine

Russia's Foreign Ministry on Thursday rejected a peace proposal from France and Britain, describing it as an attempt by Kyiv's European allies to offer a break to the embattled Ukrainian army.

The ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, said that the proposed break in air and naval attacks is an attempt to "secure a pause for the agonizing Kyiv regime, the Ukrainian armed forces and prevent the front from collapsing."

She said that Ukraine would use any pause in fighting to strengthen its military, which would lead to prolonged conflict.

Germany's likely next chancellor Merz isn't part of EU summit

Friedrich Merz, who will most likely become Germany's next chancellor in a few weeks, won't be participating in Thursday's EU summit.

But the center-right politician who won the country's election last month did meet several top European leaders ahead of the summit in Brussels, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the bloc's foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas.

On X, Merz writes that he agrees with both on sharply increasing Europe's defense capabilities. He stresses that "we must be able to defend ourselves so that we don't have to defend ourselves." He adds, "there can only be peace in Europe if we are strong."

UK says about 20 nations involved in talks about protecting peace in Ukraine

The British government says plans are advancing for a multinational military force to help protect peace in Ukraine, with about 20 countries involved in talks.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's office says officials from some 20 nations attended a planning meeting organized by the U.K. on Wednesday. Spokesman Tom Wells said the "interested countries" came largely from Europe and the Commonwealth. He did not identify any of the countries.

Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron have proposed a "coalition of the willing" to defend Ukraine and guarantee the peace after a ceasefire. Only the U.K. and France have so far said they are willing to send troops.

Lavrov warns Russia won't accept NATO troops as peacekeepers in Ukraine

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that Moscow wouldn't accept any troops from NATO members as peacekeepers to monitor a possible peace deal in Ukraine.

Lavrov assailed French President Emmanuel Macron and U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer for pushing the proposal for European peacekeepers' deployment to Ukraine and reaffirmed that Russia won't accept it.

"We aren't seeing any room for compromise here," Lavrov said.

He emphasized that Russia would see the move as a "direct, official and unveiled involvement of NATO members in the war against Russia," adding that "it can't be allowed."

Scholz calls for bigger defense spending in Europe

Germany's Scholz says just as his country is getting ready to massively boost its defense capabilities, all of Europe should plan to make much bigger investments in the military so that the continent is capable of defending itself.

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He welcomed the EU initiative to loosen its regulations in order to offer additional borrowing options for member states.

Scholz says he is "in favor of not just having that discussion now for the next one or two years, but that we ensure in the long term that states can spend as much on defense as they themselves and with their friends and allies see fit."

In addition, he says, the summit is about "strengthening our European arms industry by giving us more freedom to cooperate with each other and making procurement easier."

Spanish prime minister says Europe should be part of Ukraine peace talks

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told reporters in Brussels that it was too early to speculate what role Europe should play in a possible ceasefire in Ukraine but reiterated that Ukraine and Europe should be present in any negotiations.

He added that Europe shouldn't "underestimate itself" amid uncertainty about the future of U.S. participation in Ukraine's defense.

EU chief executive says Europe has to be able to defend itself

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen says "Europe faces a clear and present danger, and therefore Europe has to be able to protect itself, to defend itself."

Arriving at the EU summit alongside Zelenskyy, von der Leyen said: "This is a watershed moment for Europe and Ukraine as part of our European family. It's also a watershed moment for Ukraine."

Scholz calls on EU to jointly respond to Trump's tariffs

Ahead of the EU summit in Brussels, Scholz called on the European leaders to act jointly in responding to tariffs threatened by U.S. President Donald Trump.

He said that "Europe is the strongest economic area in the world with its own opportunities. And that is why it is very important that, especially when it comes to tariffs, we are also clear about how we act in this matter — namely united and determined."

Ukraine's ambassador to UK says US is destroying rules-based order

Ukraine's ambassador to the United Kingdom says the United States is destroying the rules-based international order by cozying up to Russia.

Valerii Zaluzhnyi told a conference hosted by the Chatham House think tank that "it's not just the axis of evil and Russia" disrupting the global system, "but the U.S. is finally destroying this order."

Speaking through an interpreter, Zaluzhnyi said talks between Washington and Moscow over the Ukraine war showed the White House "makes steps toward the Kremlin, trying to meet them halfway." He also warned that Russia's next target "could be Europe."

The ambassador, a former commander of Ukraine's armed forces, said NATO might cease to exist in the next few years if the current course continues.

Scholz says EU must ensure US support for Ukraine

Scholz says Europe must continue to support Ukraine financially and militarily.

At the same time, he says, "we must ensure, with a cool and intelligent head, that the support of the USA is also guaranteed in the coming months and years, because Ukraine is also dependent on their support for its defense."

Outgoing German chancellor throws support behind Ukraine

Outgoing German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told reporters upon arrival at the EU summit in Brussels that "it is very important that we ensure that Ukraine does not have to accept a dictated peace, but that there will be a fair and just peace that ensures the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine."

He says he supports concrete proposals such as silencing weapons in the air and sea, no further threats to Ukraine's infrastructure and a prisoner exchange, which "can lay the foundation for a ceasefire."

Baltic nations welcome Macron's idea of nuclear deterrent

Baltic nations welcomed French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal for talks about using France's nuclear deterrent to protect the continent from Russian threats.

Lithuania's President Gitanas Nausėda praised a "very interesting idea" at his arrival at an emergency

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EU summit on defense and Ukraine in Brussels. "We have high expectations because nuclear umbrella would serve as really very serious deterrence towards Russia," Nauséda said.

Latvia Prime Minister Evika Siliņa said she sees the French proposal "as an opportunity to discuss," stressing that more time is needed for talks with European allies and at home.

Macron said he has decided to open a "strategic debate" on the protection of European allies by France's nuclear deterrent. Macron said the use of France's nuclear weapons would remain only in the hands of the French president.

Kremlin criticizes Macron's speech as confrontational

The Kremlin on Thursday dismissed as "extremely confrontational" a speech by Emmanuel Macron, in which the French president called Moscow a "threat" to Europe.

In an address to the nation on Wednesday, Macron also said that he's ready to start discussions on nuclear deterrence with European allies.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov during a regular call with journalists said the speech was "extremely confrontational" and said that it was clear that France wasn't thinking about peace.

"One can conclude that France thinks more about war, about continuing the war," Peskov added.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov echoed Peskov, saying during a news conference in Moscow that Macron's speech and his comments on discussing nuclear deterrence with European allies were a "threat" against Russia.

Zelenskyy arrives at EU summit

Zelenskyy arrived at the emergency EU summit on Thursday and thanked European Union leaders for their unwavering support for Ukraine.

"During all this period, and last week, you stayed with us. ... Big appreciation. We are very thankful that we are not alone. And these are not just words — we feel it," Zelenskyy said.

He said EU support for Ukraine "signals to increase our production, and signals to a new program to increase European security."

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. 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.

France steps in to provide military intelligence to Ukraine

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

He added that following the U.S. 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.

Russian ballistic missile kills 4 in Zelenskyy's hometown

In Ukraine, a Russian ballistic missile killed four people staying at a hotel in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown during the night.

Zelenskyy said a humanitarian organization's volunteers had moved into the hotel in Kryvyi Rih, in central Ukraine, just before the strike, including Ukrainian, American and British nationals. He didn't say whether those people were among the 31 injured.

Russia fired 112 Shahed and decoy drones, as well as two ballistic Iskander missiles, at Ukraine overnight, the Ukrainian air force said.

Flurry of early morning meetings in Brussels

Friedrich Merz, the likely next chancellor of Germany, conferred in Brussels with summit chairman Antonio Costa over breakfast on how to fortify Europe's defenses on a short deadline. Merz only days ago pushed plans to loosen the nation's rules on running up debt to allow for higher defense spending.

At the same time, the 27-nation bloc was waking up to the 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.

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.

Adnan Syed to stay free after judge decides on time served for his murder sentence in 'Serial' case

By LEA SKENE and BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — Adnan Syed, whose case amassed a worldwide following of "Serial" podcast listeners, will remain free — even though his murder conviction still stands, a Baltimore judge ruled on Thursday.

Judge Jennifer Schiffer agreed to reduce Syed's sentence to time served under a relatively new state law that provides a pathway to release for people convicted of crimes committed when they were minors. The judge ruled that he will be on supervised probation for five years.

"After considering the entire record, the court concludes that the Defendant is not a danger to the public and that the interests of justice will be better served by a reduced sentence," Schiffer wrote in the decision.

The judge's ruling followed a hearing last week that included emotional testimony from Syed and relatives of the victim, Hae Min Lee, who was strangled and buried in a shallow grave in a Baltimore park in 1999.

Both prosecutors and defense attorneys told Schiffer that Syed, now 43, doesn't pose a risk to public safety. Lee's brother and mother urged the judge to uphold his life sentence.

Syed, who has maintained his innocence, was released from prison in 2022 after Baltimore prosecutors said they had uncovered problems with the case and moved to vacate his conviction, which was later reinstated on appeal. Since his release, he's been working at Georgetown University's Prisons and Justice Initiative and caring for aging family members.

The judge noted in her ruling that Syed's behavior after his release gave her confidence he has achieved "the maturity and fitness required for a crime-free life outside of prison," Schiffer wrote.

Erica Suter, an attorney who represented Syed, said his legal counsel was "focused on the joy and relief of this decision," adding that Syed was grateful the judge reduced his sentence.

"Given his accomplishments in prison and his work in the community since release, he was a model candidate for a sentence reduction," Suter said. "Adnan is committed to continuing to be a productive member of his community and living a life centered around his family."

David Sanford, an attorney for Lee's family, said in a statement after the ruling that the state last week acknowledged it had previously presented false and misleading information during former Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby's tenure to the court in support of releasing Syed.

"We now know there was never any new information that called into question Adnan Syed's guilty verdict," Sanford said. "Absolutely nothing changes the fact that Mr. Syed remains convicted of first-degree premeditated murder due to overwhelming direct and circumstantial evidence. We hope that one day Mr. Syed can summon the courage to take responsibility for his crime and express sincere remorse."

At Syed's trial, prosecutors painted him as Lee's jealous ex-boyfriend and built their case around a key witness whose credibility has been heavily questioned. But all these years later, arguments about whether to reduce Syed's sentence notably sidestepped the issue of guilt or innocence.

The current Baltimore state's attorney, Ivan Bates, who publicly raised doubts about the integrity of the conviction before becoming the city's top prosecutor, said last week that his office believes in the jury's

verdict and has no plans to continue investigating the case.

Recent court testimony reviewed the lasting impacts of Lee's gruesome death and Syed's 23-year incarceration.

Lee's family and their attorney said old wounds were ripped open when Syed's conviction was vacated. The family later succeeded in getting the conviction reinstated after challenging the ruling on procedural grounds, arguing they didn't receive proper notice to attend the hearing that freed Syed from prison, where they participated only through a video connection.

Hours before the hearing, Bates withdrew Mosby's earlier motion to vacate the conviction even as he supported a reduced sentence.

On Thursday, Bates said his office's decision to withdraw the effort to vacate the sentence and the judge's decision marked "a just outcome for a tragedy that took the life of a young woman whose family is forever altered."

"I hope the Lee family can find peace and healing in the aftermath of this challenging experience," Bates said in a statement. "My office is here to support them whenever they may need it."

While the judge acknowledged Syed's accomplishments in her remarks to the court last week, she focused on what the Lee family has endured, including witnessing Syed's "rise to celebrity" following the release of "Serial" in 2014 and a television documentary about the case.

"I hope that everyone understands that Hae Min Lee and her family are the true victims in this case," she said. "Their suffering cannot be overstated."

Walgreens agrees to be acquired by private equity firm for almost \$10 billion

Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Walgreens Boots Alliance says it has agreed to be acquired by private equity firm Sycamore Partners as the struggling retailer looks to turn itself around after years of losing money.

Walgreens said Thursday that Sycamore will pay \$11.45 per share, giving the deal an equity value just under \$10 billion. Shareholders could eventually receive up to another \$3 per share under certain conditions.

A buyout to take the drugstore chain private would give it more flexibility to make changes to improve its business without worrying about Wall Street's reaction. The company has already been making some big changes as it seeks to turn around its business. Walgreens has been a public company since 1927.

Walgreens, founded in 1901, has been dealing with thin prescription reimbursement, rising costs, persistent theft and inflation-sensitive shoppers who are looking for bargains elsewhere. Walgreens is in the early stages of a plan to close 1,200 of its roughly 8,500 U.S. locations.

The Deerfield, Illinois, company had already shed about a thousand U.S. stores since it grew to nearly 9,500 after buying some Rite Aid locations in 2018.

The company also said last August that it was reviewing a U.S. health care operation it had expanded aggressively, and it might sell all or part of its VillageMD clinic business. That announcement came less than two years after the company said it would spend billions to expand it.

Shares of Walgreens shed nearly two thirds of their value last year. Walgreens said the transaction price represents a nearly 30% premium to the share price in December when reports of a deal first surfaced. Walgreens CEO Tim Wentworth confirmed in January that a sale process for the business was underway. Including debt, the value of the deal is just under \$24 billion, the company said.

Walgreens said earlier this year it was making progress improving prescription reimbursement.

Walgreens has also taken steps to preserve cash. It said in January that it was suspending a quarterly dividend it has offered for more than 90 years, and it's been reducing its stake in the drug distributor Cencora this year to get cash in part to pay down debt.

Ultimately, the company has to improve its cash flow, whether it remains publicly traded or goes private, Leerink Partners analyst Michael Cherny said in a Feb. 23 research note.

"Management has not been shy about its push to improve the cash flow generation profile as part of the

turnaround plan," the analyst wrote. "Without cash flow, none of the value cases work."

Walgreens Boots Alliance Inc. also runs nearly 3,700 international stores, with locations in the United Kingdom, Mexico, Thailand and Ireland.

The Walgreens buyout comes after competitor Rite Aid emerged last September as a private company from a Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization. Remaining publicly traded drugstore operators include the nation's largest, CVS Health Corp., and retailers like Walmart and the grocer Kroger that run pharmacies at many of their locations.

Private lunar lander may have fallen over while touching down near the moon's south pole

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A privately owned lunar lander touched down on the moon with a drill, drone and rovers for NASA and other customers Thursday, but quickly ran into trouble and may have fallen over.

Intuitive Machines said it was uncertain whether its Athena lander was upright near the moon's south pole — standing 15 feet (4.7 meters) tall — or lying sideways like its first spacecraft from a year ago. Controllers rushed to turn off some of the lander's equipment to conserve power while trying to determine what went wrong.

It was the second moon landing this week by a Texas company under NASA's commercial lunar delivery program. Sunday's touchdown was a complete success.

Intuitive Machines' newest Athena lander dropped out of lunar orbit as planned. The hourlong descent appeared to go well until the final approach when the laser navigation system began acting up. It took a while for Mission Control to confirm touchdown.

"We're on the surface," reported mission director and co-founder Tim Crain. A few minutes later, he repeated, "It looks like we're down ... We are working to evaluate exactly what our orientation is on the surface."

Hours after the landing, Intuitive Machines CEO Steve Altemus there was conflicting data about how Athena landed and whether it was on its side. The lander was near the intended target site, but a sweep by NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter in the coming days will confirm its position and orientation, he said.

Launched last week, Athena was communicating with controllers more than 230,000 miles (375,000 kilometers) away and generating solar power, officials said. Mission managers worked to salvage the mission to see whether the drill can be turned on and the drone can be deployed to hop into a crater.

"Obviously, without knowing the exact orientation of the lander, it's hard to say exactly what science we will and will not be able to do," said NASA's top science officer Nicky Fox.

Intuitive Machines last year put the U.S. back on the moon despite its lander tipping on its side.

On Sunday, Firefly Aerospace became the first private entity to achieve complete success with its Blue Ghost lunar lander, on the northeastern edge of the near side of the moon. A vacuum already has collected lunar dirt for analysis and a dust shield has shaken off the abrasive particles that cling to everything.

Intuitive Machines was aiming this time for a mountain plateau just 100 miles (160 kilometers) from the south pole, much closer than before. It reached the plateau, but Intuitive Machines was not sure how near it was to the precise targeted spot.

This week's back-to-back moon landings are part of NASA's commercial lunar delivery program meant to get the space agency's experiments to the gray, dusty surface and jumpstart business. The commercial landers are also seen as scouts for the astronauts who will follow later this decade under NASA's Artemis program, the successor to Apollo.

NASA officials said before the landing that they knew going in that some of the low-cost missions would fail. But with more private missions to the moon, that increased the number of experiments getting there.

NASA spent tens of millions of dollars on the ice drill and two other instruments riding on Athena, and paid an additional \$62 million for the lift. Most of the experiments were from private companies, includ-

ing the two rovers. The rocket-powered drone came from Intuitive Machines — it's meant to hop into a permanently shadowed crater near the landing site in search of frozen water.

To lower costs even more, Intuitive Machines shared its SpaceX rocket launch with three spacecraft that went their separate ways. Two of them — NASA's Lunar Trailblazer and AstroForge's asteroid-chasing Odin — are in jeopardy.

NASA said this week that Lunar Trailblazer is spinning without radio contact and won't reach its intended orbit around the moon for science observations. Odin is also silent, with its planned asteroid flyby unlikely.

As for Athena, Intuitive Machines made dozens of repairs and upgrades following the company's sideways touchdown by its first lander. It still managed to operate briefly, ending America's moon-landing drought of more than 50 years.

Until then, the U.S. had not landed on the moon since Apollo 17 in 1972. No one else has sent astronauts to the moon, the overriding goal of NASA's Artemis program. And only four other countries have successfully landed robotic spacecraft on the moon: Russia, China, India and Japan.

Wall Street tumbles as tariff whiplash and falling AI stocks drag Nasdaq 10% below its record

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Wall Street's sell-off kicked back into gear on Thursday, and a U.S. stock market rattled by the whiplash created by President Donald Trump's tariffs and uncertainty about the economy fell sharply.

The S&P 500 tumbled 1.8% to resume its slide after a mini-recovery from the prior day clawed back some of its sharp drop over recent weeks. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 427 points, or 1%, and the Nasdaq composite sank 2.6% to finish more than 10% below its record set in December.

Stocks fell even though President Trump offered a one-month reprieve from his 25% tariffs on many goods imported from Mexico and Canada. That's unlike the bounce stocks got the prior day from his giving a one-month exemption specifically for automakers.

All the moves keep hope alive that Trump may be using tariffs as just a tool for negotiations rather than as a permanent policy and that he may ultimately avoid a worst-case trade war that grinds down economies and sends inflation higher.

But Trump is still pressing ahead with other tariffs scheduled to take effect April 2. And the growing pile of dizzying back-and-forth moves on tariffs is only amping up the uncertainty. It was just on Monday that Trump said there was "no room" left for negotiations to avert the tariffs on Mexico and Canada that took effect Tuesday.

"These exemptions don't do much to resolve the general air of uncertainty," said Yung-Yu Ma, chief investment officer at BMO Wealth Management. "Businesses will still be cautious in the current environment until a lot more of the tariff picture is clear."

U.S. businesses are already saying they're confronting "chaos" because of all the uncertainty coming out of Washington. While U.S. households are bracing for higher inflation because of the tariffs, which is sapping their confidence.

"Much will depend on whether these new tariffs prove temporary or are toned down," according to strategists at BNP Paribas. "But even if they are ultimately removed, we anticipate lasting damage to global economic activity."

When asked whether his delays on tariffs reflected the slump for the stock market, Trump said Thursday, "I'm not even looking at the market." He earlier in the Oval Office blamed the falling prices on "globalist countries and companies that won't be doing as well because we're taking back things that have been taken from us many years ago."

Next up for Wall Street is a report coming Friday from the U.S. Labor Department on how many workers U.S. employers hired last month. A solid job market so far, along with the solid spending by U.S. households that it's allowed, have been linchpins in preventing a recession. Economists are expecting to see an

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acceleration in hiring for February.

Some big retailers have been offering warning signals recently about how much U.S. consumers can keep spending.

Macy's on Thursday reported slightly weaker revenue for the end of 2024 than analysts expected, though its profit topped expectations. It also gave a forecast for profit in 2025 that fell short of analysts'. Its shares fell 0.7%.

It was a similar story for Victoria's Secret, which beat Wall Street's fourth-quarter sales and profit forecasts but gave a revenue forecast for the upcoming year that fell short of analysts' expectations. Its stock fell 8.2%.

Making things worse for the U.S. stock market, some of its biggest stars are seeing their glow dim.

Semiconductor companies and their suppliers were particularly heavy weights, after soaring to staggering heights because of the frenzy around artificial-intelligence technology.

Marvell Technology lost nearly a fifth of its value and dropped 19.8% even though it reported results for the latest quarter that edged past analysts' forecasts. It also said it expects revenue growth in the current quarter of more than 60% from the prior year, give or take a bit.

But that wasn't enough for investors, who have grown used to AI-related companies trouncing expectations.

The poster child of the AI boom, Nvidia, fell 5.7%, while Broadcom lost 6.3% ahead of the release of its earnings report.

AI superstars had been dominating Wall Street for years and helped it run to record after record. But those soaring performances, including a nearly 820% surge for Nvidia from 2023 into 2024, had critics saying prices had grown too expensive. They're also facing threats as Chinese companies develop their own AI offerings, with DeepSeek famously saying it didn't need to use the industry's most expensive chips.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 104.11 points to 5,738.52. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 427.51 to 42,579.08. The Nasdaq composite tumbled 483.48 to 18,069.26.

In stock markets abroad, indexes were mixed in Europe after the European Central Bank cut interest rates, as was widely expected.

German stocks rallied 1.5% as the market continues to feel reverberations from an agreement by the two parties that will form the country's next government to loosen constitutional limits on borrowing. It's a major turnaround in German budget policy and opens the way for new borrowing and spending over the next decade.

Stocks also rose in Asia, including jumps of 3.3% in Hong Kong and 1.2% in Shanghai.

China's commerce minister said Thursday that his country will not yield to bullying and that its economy can weather higher tariffs imposed by Trump, though he added that there are "no winners in a trade war."

In the bond market, the 10-year Treasury yield edged up to 4.29% from 4.28% late Wednesday.

A South Carolina man is set to become the first executed by firing squad in 15 years

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — When the clock strikes 6 Friday evening, a South Carolina man will walk into the death chamber, be strapped into a chair and have a target placed over his heart. He may utter last words before a hood is placed over his head, a curtain shielding him from spectators is swept aside and three volunteers armed with rifles simultaneously fire bullets designed to shatter on impact with his chest.

Unless the governor or the U.S. Supreme Court grants him a last-minute reprieve, Brad Sigmon, 67, will be the first person to die by firing squad in the U.S. since 2010 — and just the fourth since the death penalty resumed in the U.S. 49 years ago.

Sigmon, who admitted to killing his ex-girlfriend's parents with a baseball bat after she refused to come back to him, said he chose to die by bullets because he considered the other choices offered by the state to be worse.

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His lawyers said he didn't want to pick the electric chair, which would "cook him alive," or a lethal injection, whose details are kept secret in South Carolina. He also feared an injection of pentobarbital into his veins would send a rush of fluid into his lungs and drown him. On Thursday, Sigmon asked the U.S. Supreme Court to delay his execution because the state doesn't release enough information about the lethal injection drug.

The firing squad has a long and violent history

The death row inmate's only remaining choice was a firing squad, an execution method with a long and violent history in the U.S. and around the world. Death in a hail of bullets has been used to punish mutinies and desertion in armies, as frontier justice in America's Old West and as a tool of terror and political repression in the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

In recent years, however, some death penalty proponents have started to see the firing squad as a more humane option: If the shooters' aim is true, death is nearly instant, whereas lethal injections require getting an IV into a vein. Electrocutation appears to burn and disfigure. And inmates have been seen to writhe and struggle when the latest method, nitrogen gas, is used to suffocate them as it is pushed through a mask.

Ronnie Gardner was the last prisoner to be executed by firing squad, in Utah in 2010. His brother doesn't agree the method is more humane.

"This will be gruesome and barbaric," Randy Gardner said. He said he didn't witness his brother's death but carries his autopsy photos in an envelope. He pulled several out to show an Associated Press reporter who will witness Friday's execution.

"With the ammunition they are using here (in Sigmon's execution) it is going to be so much worse," Gardner said.

Inside the execution chamber

The chamber inside which Sigmon will die is just a short walk from South Carolina's death row, where the prisoner has lived for the past 23 years.

When the curtain opens Friday evening, Sigmon's lawyer, family members of the victims and three members of the news media will watch from behind glass recently upgraded to be bullet resistant.

The shooters will be 15 feet (4.6 meters) away — the length from the backboard to the free-throw line on a basketball court.

Moments after the hood is placed over Sigmon's head, three trained volunteers will shoot at the same time.

Each will be armed with .308-caliber, Winchester 110-grain TAP Urban ammunition often used by police marksmen. The bullet is designed to shatter on impact with something hard, like an inmate's chest bones, sending fragments meant to destroy the heart and cause death almost immediately.

A short time later, a doctor will confirm Sigmon is dead. At most, the process will take five minutes — a quarter of the time needed for a lethal injection.

Why does South Carolina have a firing squad?

South Carolina turned to the firing squad as it struggled to find alternate methods to execute condemned inmates. By the beginning of this decade, the state's supply of lethal injection drugs was gone and no company would sell more except anonymously, which was not allowed at the time. Judges would not set execution dates if the electric chair was the only method. Thirteen years elapsed between executions, and cases of death row inmates started to pile up.

A Democratic lawmaker in South Carolina suggested a firing squad if the state was going to keep capital punishment. Supporters cited U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who wrote in a 2017 dissent that "in addition to being near instant, death by shooting may also be comparatively painless."

Sigmon has been close to death before. He had execution dates set three times, but each time it was when the state didn't have lethal injection drugs and judges halted his death warrant because he couldn't choose that method.

What crime did Sigmon commit?

Sigmon beat to death his ex-girlfriend's parents with a baseball bat because he was angry that they had him evicted from a trailer they owned. They were in separate rooms of their Greenville County home and

Sigmon went back and forth attacking them until they were dead, investigators said.

Sigmon then kidnapped his ex-girlfriend at gunpoint, but she escaped from his car. He shot at her as she ran, but missed, prosecutors said.

"My intention was to kill her and then myself," Sigmon said in a confession typed out by a detective after his arrest. "That was my intention all along. 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."

One last chance to live

If the U.S. Supreme Court doesn't intervene, Sigmon has one last chance at survival: His lawyers asked Republican Gov. Henry McMaster to commute his death sentence to life in prison. They said Sigmon is a model prisoner trusted by guards and works every day to atone for the killings he committed after succumbing to severe mental illness.

Sigmon will share his final meal with some fellow prisoners on death row and plans to give away the money in his commissary accounts, his supporters said.

The prison warden will be on a call with McMaster and the South Carolina Attorney General's Office just before the execution starts. If the lawyers report no outstanding appeals and the governor refuses clemency, Sigmon will be brought into the death chamber.

No South Carolina governor has granted clemency to a prisoner scheduled for execution since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. Since then, 46 men have been put to death in the state.

The state Supreme Court has been issuing death warrants every five weeks. Two more inmates are currently out of appeals; they will also get to choose between lethal injection, firing squad or the electric chair.

Ukraine will struggle to strike targets inside Russia without US intelligence

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The U.S. decision to stop sharing military intelligence with Ukraine hobbles its ability to strike and defend against the Russian army, and increases the pressure on it to accept a peace deal being pushed by the Trump administration.

Earlier in the week, the U.S. suspended weapons shipments – a severe blow, but one that experts said Ukraine could withstand for at least a few months. The suspension of intelligence has a more immediate impact by disrupting Ukraine's ability to track and target Russian troops, tanks and ships; its other allies lack the same resources to fill the gap.

Here are things to know about the U.S. decision and its likely effects:

Why did the U.S. stop sharing intelligence with Ukraine?

The decision to withhold intelligence – and military aid – came on the heels of a tempestuous White House visit last week by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

U.S. President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance want Zelenskyy to quickly accept a truce with Russia – which now controls one-fifth of his country – and to give up significant mineral rights to the U.S. to help fund any future support for Ukraine.

The Trump administration says Ukraine hasn't demonstrated sufficient willingness to seek peace with Russia, with whom the U.S. has held separate talks to try to bring an end to the war.

U.S. officials suggested Wednesday that the withdrawal of intelligence-sharing might only be a temporary measure to expedite truce negotiations, citing more positive talks since the White House blowup.

"We have taken a step back and are pausing and reviewing all aspects of this relationship," U.S. national security adviser Mike Waltz said Wednesday. CIA Director John Ratcliffe called the suspension a "pause."

Zelenskyy has repeatedly said he is ready to discuss peace, but that any deal must offer his country sufficient security guarantees to deter future Russian aggression. He has also publicly stated his regrets about the contentious, and televised, White House meeting.

Trump administration officials have said the deal for mineral rights would more closely bind the U.S. and Ukraine, giving Russian President Vladimir Putin pause before considering future malign action against

Ukraine.

How will the lack of U.S. intelligence affect Ukraine?

The White House hasn't specified what aspects of intelligence-sharing have been suspended. But without help from the U.S. – which includes vital data captured by Elon Musk's Starlink satellites – Ukraine's ability to strike weapons and other targets inside Russia will be severely degraded.

Its attacks inside Russian territory – which rely on U.S.-provided longer-range weapons -- have been key in deterring Russia's capabilities and advances. Ukraine relies on U.S. intelligence when operating U.S.-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS, and the U.S. Army Tactical Missile System, known as ATACMS.

Ukraine also relies on U.S. intelligence as an early warning system to help it defend against Russian long-range missiles and drone strikes. Such intelligence in the war's early days allowed Ukraine to thwart Putin's hopes for a quick victory.

Before the recent restrictions imposed by the U.S., a rising tempo of Ukrainian strikes inside Russia – such as those targeting stores of ammunition -- relieved pressure on Ukrainian troops on the front lines. It is one of the reasons Russia's advances in eastern Ukraine have slowed in recent weeks, analysts say.

Will the U.S. ever share intelligence again with Ukraine?

Waltz, Trump's national security adviser, said in a Fox News television interview that the suspension of intelligence-sharing could be reversed once Zelenskyy demonstrates to President Trump that he is sufficiently willing to discuss peace with Russia on Trump's terms.

Zelenskyy has said he would like to "make things right" with Trump, but that does not yet appear to have assuaged the U.S. -- Ukraine's biggest military backer since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Officials from Ukraine and the U.S. will hold talks next week in Saudi Arabia next week, Zelenskyy said late Thursday.

In the meantime, Zelenskyy has been leaning into support from Europe, most of whose leaders are dismayed by the Trump administration's decision to deprive a key American ally of assistance needed to fight Russia.

On Thursday, European Union leaders launched a day of emergency talks to beef up their own security and ensure that Ukraine will still be protected.

It's unclear whether the American suspension affects the intelligence-sharing ties between Ukraine and other Western powers, including four of the Five Eyes, an intelligence sharing coalition of the U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia and New Zealand.

French defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said in a radio interview Thursday that his country would continue providing military intelligence to Ukraine. And French President Emmanuel Macron said he would talk with EU leaders about the possibility of using France's nuclear deterrent to protect the continent from Russian threats.

Trump envoy says Ukrainians 'brought it on themselves' after US pauses aid and intelligence sharing

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ukraine was given "fair warning" by the White House before President Donald Trump this week ordered a pause on U.S. military assistance and intelligence sharing with Kyiv, a senior administration official said Thursday.

The Republican administration announced the pauses this week after Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Oval Office meeting devolved into a shouting match, with the U.S. president and Vice President JD Vance excoriating the Ukrainian leader for being insufficiently grateful for the tens of billions of dollars in U.S. assistance sent to Ukraine since Russia invaded three years ago.

Retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, said the pause is already having an impact on Kyiv, adding that the Ukrainians "brought it on themselves."

"The best way I can describe it is sort of like hitting a mule with a two-by-four across the nose," Kellogg

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said at an event Thursday at the Council on Foreign Relations. "You got their attention."

Kellogg said it was made clear to the Ukrainians before last week's Oval Office meeting that the talks would focus on signing a critical minerals deal. The agreement, which the two sides still have not signed, would give the U.S. access to Ukraine's rare earth deposits and could be of value to U.S. aerospace, electric vehicle and medical manufacturing.

Trump administration officials have said the economic pact would bind the U.S. and Ukraine closer together and would give Russian President Vladimir Putin pause before considering malign action against Ukraine in the future. Zelenskyy had been pressing the White House for explicit security guarantees, to no avail.

Kellogg said last week's talks went sideways because Zelenskyy pressed Trump — who is trying to play the role of intermediary to broker peace between Ukraine and Russia — to side with Kyiv.

Zelenskyy later called the heated words "regrettable" and said he's ready to sign an agreement.

Trump in an exchange with reporters on Thursday said he believed his administration had made "a lot of progress" in recent days with both Ukraine and Russia, but did not specify how.

"I think what's going to happen is Ukraine wants to make a deal, because I don't think they have a choice," Trump said. "I also think that Russia wants to make a deal because in a certain different way — a different way that only I know, only I know — they have no choice either."

In his nightly address Zelenskyy confirmed that talks between Ukraine and the U.S. are scheduled to take place in Saudi Arabia next week.

"I am scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia to meet with the crown prince," said Zelenskyy, referring to Mohammed bin Salman, the heir to the throne of the oil-rich kingdom. "After that, my team will stay in Saudi Arabia to work with American partners. Ukraine is most interested in peace."

Another Trump special envoy, Steve Witkoff, confirmed that senior administration officials are arranging to hold talks with top Ukrainian officials in Saudi Arabia. Witkoff noted that Zelenskyy has been apologetic in recent days about the White House blowup and expressed gratitude. He was circumspect about whether the minerals deal would be signed during the expected meeting in Saudi Arabia. "We'll see if he follows through," Witkoff said.

But Kellogg said he couldn't guarantee a resumption of weapons deliveries even if Zelenskyy accepts the deal.

"That's up to the president," Kellogg said. He added, "You don't negotiate peace discussions in public. You don't try to challenge the president of the United States in the Oval Office."

Trump said in a speech before Congress on Tuesday that Zelenskyy had written to him to say he appreciates U.S. support for his country in its war with Russia. Trump said Zelenskyy told him that Ukraine is ready to negotiate a peace deal with Russia as soon as possible and would accept the minerals agreement with the U.S. to facilitate that.

Although Trump said he "appreciated" getting the letter, he did not say if it would affect his policy toward Ukraine.

The suspension of U.S. intelligence sharing with Ukraine will damage Ukraine's ability to defend itself against ongoing Russian attacks against military and civilian targets, according to an assessment by the Institute for the Study of War. The research group said suspension of all U.S. intelligence sharing with Ukraine would also allow Russian forces to intensify their drone and missile strikes against the Ukrainian rear, affecting millions of Ukrainian civilians and the growth of Ukraine's defense industrial base.

Toys are expected to cost more by fall due to new US tariffs on Chinese imports

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As toy inventors, toy manufacturers and buyers for stores that sell toys met for a four-day annual trade show in New York last weekend, a topic besides which items were destined for holiday wish lists permeated the displays.

President Donald Trump had announced days before that he planned to increase the extra tariff he put

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on Chinese imports in February to 20%. Would he? By Tuesday, the last day of the Toy Fair, attendees had their answer, and the talk about how it would affect the prices of playthings grew more urgent.

Nearly 80% of the toys sold in the U.S. are sourced from China, according to The Toy Association, a national industry group that sponsors the show formerly known as the North American International Toy Fair. Many toy makers are now renegotiating prices with retailers and taking a hard look at their products to see if they can cut costs.

Greg Ahearn, president and CEO of The Toy Association, said price increases of 15% to 20% are expected on games, dolls, cars and other toys by the back-to-school shopping season. The price range that U.S. consumers are willing to pay is anywhere from \$4.99 to \$19.99, leaving little wiggle room to raise prices, he said.

"It's untenable," Ahearn said, noting that small businesses make up roughly 96% of the American toy industry.

Trump also moved forward this week with 25% tariffs on products imported from Canada and Mexico. Some companies have moved some of their manufacturing to Mexico to be closer to the U.S. On Wednesday, though, the president granted U.S. automakers a one-month exemption from the tariffs on the neighboring North American nations.

And on Thursday, Trump postponed 25% tariffs on most goods from Mexico for a month amid widespread fears of the impact of a broader trade war.

Trump's changing statements and policies on tariffs have made it challenging for toy companies to plan accordingly.

Basic Fun CEO Jay Foreman said he didn't rush late last year to get shipments of Tonka trucks, Care Bears and other toys his Boca Raton, Florida-based company produces in China because he wasn't sure if the 60% tariff on Chinese goods that Trump discussed on the campaign trail would come to pass.

"If you plan in a chaotic environment, you have a much greater chance of being wrong than being right," Foreman said when interviewed Sunday at his Toy Fair booth. All of Basic Fun's toy products are made in China except for K'Nex, a construction set made in the U.S., he said.

After Trump instead imposed an additional 10% tariff on Chinese goods last month, Foreman said he worked hard to persuade retailers to share some of the cost so he didn't have to pass it on to consumers. Now that the import duty has doubled, he said he will have to raise prices for many of his items.

For example, a Tonka Classic Steel Mighty Dump Truck, which now retails for \$29.99, will likely go up to \$39.99 as early as the fall, Foreman said.

The Toy Association lobbied hard to exempt the toy industry from the 10-25% tariffs Trump levied on Chinese goods during his first term. The group lobbied again this time around, trying to educate members of Congress that toy companies can't replicate the expertise found in Chinese factories.

Ahearn noted there's a lot of sophistication of manufacturing and craftsmanship that has been built up over time over generations in China.

The high skilled and lower cost labor force that is available in China is not available currently, and it will take this same amount of time to build that up.

Some toy companies are looking at ways to avoid raising prices.

Steve Rad, CEO of toy maker Abacus Brands Inc., said the company based in Austin, Texas, considered switching to factories in countries like Cambodia or Vietnam, but concluded they don't have the same level of skills.

However, Rad plans to start having one of its China-made products manufactured in the U.S. Abacus Brands found a Texas factory that said it could produce Pixicade, which converts doodles and drawings into playable video games, at no additional cost. The U.S.-made version is expected to be in stores by August, he said.

His other toys are more complex, Rad said, and he doesn't see making them in the U.S. as feasible. Instead, he's exploring whether he can lower costs by cutting some product features.

Foreman, of Basic Fun, said he plans to offer new spins on his existing toys to make them look new. Take Mash'ems, which are soft, water-filled collectibles that feature different licensed characters packaged

in small cardboard boxes.

"Maybe I'll change the color of the box," he said. "Or maybe I'll put it in a plastic container."

Some retailers already have received letters from toy suppliers announcing immediate price increases.

Richard Derr is the owner of the Learning Express franchise in Lake Zurich, Illinois, and president of the 85-member Learning Express franchise council. He questions if those suppliers are acting in good faith since many of them had sped up deliveries from China ahead of the tariffs.

He and other Learning Express franchisees are studying alternatives to suppliers that suddenly want to raise prices, Derr said.

He said he isn't too worried about customers comparing what a toy costs compared with the year before since 65% of his products are new to the market.

"We are in the era of one day, one thing, one day, two things, and it changes ups and down," Derr said. "So to put out something now, I think, is just preparing the stew when in fact the stew may not even be cooked."

Trump wants to dismantle the Education Department. Here's what it does

By ANNIE MA and COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has said he wants his new education chief, Linda McMahon, to "put herself out of a job" and close the Education Department.

McMahon was confirmed by the Senate on Monday, and an executive order to shutter the department could come as soon as this week. McMahon told employees it was the department's "final mission" to eliminate bureaucratic bloat and turn over the agency's authority to states.

Eliminating the department altogether would be a cumbersome task, which likely would require an act of Congress.

Already, the Trump administration has started overhauling much of the department's work.

Trump adviser Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency has cut dozens of contracts it dismissed as "woke" and wasteful. It gutted the Institute of Education Sciences, which gathers data on the nation's academic progress, and the administration has fired or suspended scores of employees.

The agency's main role is financial. Annually, it distributes billions in federal money to colleges and schools and manages the federal student loan portfolio. Closing the department would mean redistributing each of those duties to another agency. The Education Department also plays an important regulatory role in services for students, ranging from those with disabilities to low-income and homeless kids.

Indeed, federal education money is central to Trump's plans for colleges and schools. Trump has vowed to cut off federal money for schools and colleges that push "critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual or political content" and to reward states and schools that end teacher tenure and support universal school choice programs.

Federal funding makes up a relatively small portion of public school budgets — roughly 14%. Colleges and universities are more reliant on it, through research grants along with federal financial aid that helps students pay their tuition.

Here is a look at some of the department's key functions, and how Trump has said he might approach them.

Student loans and financial aid

The Education Department manages approximately \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt for over 40 million borrowers. It also oversees the Pell Grant, which provides aid to students below a certain income threshold, and administers the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which universities use to allocate financial aid.

President Joe Biden's administration made cancellation of student loans a signature effort of the department's work. Even though Biden's initial attempt to cancel student loans was overturned by the Supreme

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Court, the administration forgave over \$175 billion for more than 4.8 million borrowers through a range of changes to programs it administers, such as Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

The loan forgiveness efforts have faced Republican pushback, including litigation from several GOP-led states.

Trump has criticized Biden's efforts to cancel debt as illegal and unfair, calling it a "total catastrophe" that "taunted young people." Trump's plan for student debt is uncertain: He has not put out detailed plans.

Civil rights enforcement

Through its Office for Civil Rights, the Education Department conducts investigations and issues guidance on how civil rights laws should be applied, such as for LGBTQ+ students and students of color. The office also oversees a large data collection project that tracks disparities in resources, course access and discipline for students of different racial and socioeconomic groups.

Trump has suggested a different interpretation of the office's civil rights role. Under his administration, the department has instructed the office to prioritize complaints of antisemitism above all else and has opened investigations into colleges and school sports leagues for allowing transgender athletes to compete on women's teams.

In his campaign platform, Trump said he would pursue civil rights cases to "stop schools from discriminating on the basis of race." He has described diversity and equity policies in education as "explicit unlawful discrimination" and said colleges that use them will pay fines and have their endowments taxed.

Trump also has pledged to exclude transgender students from Title IX protections, which affect school policies on students' use of pronouns, bathrooms and locker rooms. Originally passed in 1972, Title IX was first used as a women's rights law. Last year, Biden's administration said the law forbids discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, but a federal judge undid those protections.

College accreditation

While the Education Department does not directly accredit colleges and universities, it oversees the system by reviewing all federally recognized accrediting agencies. Institutions of higher education must be accredited to gain access to federal money for student financial aid.

Accreditation came under scrutiny from conservatives in 2022, when the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools questioned political interference at Florida public colleges and universities. Trump has said he would fire "radical left accreditors" and take applications for new accreditors that would uphold standards including "defending the American tradition" and removing "Marxist" diversity administrators.

Although the education secretary has the authority to terminate its relationship with individual accrediting agencies, it is an arduous process that has rarely been pursued. Under President Barack Obama, the department took steps to cancel accreditors for a now-defunct for-profit college chain, but the Trump administration blocked the move. The group, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, was terminated by the Biden administration in 2022.

Money for schools

Much of the Education Department's money for K-12 schools goes through large federal programs, such as Title I for low-income schools and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Those programs support services for students with disabilities, lower class sizes with additional teaching positions, and pay for social workers and other non-teaching roles in schools.

During his campaign, Trump called for shifting those functions to the states. He has not offered details on how the agency's core functions of sending federal money to local districts and schools would be handled.

The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a sweeping proposal outlining a far-right vision for the country, offered a blueprint. It suggested sending oversight of programs for kids with disabilities and low-income children first to the Department of Health and Human Services, before eventually phasing out the funding and converting it to no-strings-attached grants to states.

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) — Hamas 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.

The militant group 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.

U.S. plan for the second phase

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 is 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.

Direct talks between the U.S. and Hamas could make it difficult for Israel to resume the war, according to Mkhaimar Abusada, a political science professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University who is currently in Egypt. "The current U.S. administration is trying to avoid a return to war in Gaza in all possible ways," he said.

Gaza reconstruction plan

Egypt said Thursday it will host an international conference to raise money for a Gaza reconstruction plan proposed this week at the Arab Summit in Cairo. A date was not announced.

The conference, in cooperation with the United Nations, would secure financial pledges for the \$53 billion five-year plan, Egyptian foreign ministry spokesperson Tamim Khallaf said.

Egyptian and Arab officials also will tour key capitals, including Washington, to promote further details, Khallaf said, adding that Egypt believes it's a "workable and realistic plan" in the interest of all partners.

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.

UN chief says aid cuts are a 'perfect storm'

The United Nation's humanitarian chief issued a dire warning Thursday about how U.S. funding cuts to foreign aid have issued a "body blow to our work to save lives."

Tom Fletcher briefed the U.N. Security Council on the various challenges humanitarian workers face on the ground in Yemen and other areas around the world.

"It is of course for individual countries to decide how to spend their money. But it is the pace at which so much vital work has been shut down that adds to the perfect storm that we face," Fletcher said, adding that he has asked partners to provide lists of areas where they have to cut back.

Second federal judge extends block preventing the Trump administration from freezing funding

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — A second federal judge on Thursday extended a block barring the Trump administration from freezing grants and loans potentially totaling trillions of dollars.

U.S. District Court Judge John McConnell in Rhode Island granted the preliminary injunction in the lawsuit filed by nearly two dozen Democratic states after a Trump administration plan for a sweeping pause on federal spending stirred up a wave of confusion and anxiety across the United States.

In his ruling, McConnell said the executive branch was trying to put itself above Congress and by doing so "undermines the distinct constitutional roles of each branch of our government."

"The Executive has not pointed to any constitutional or statutory authority that would allow them to impose this type of categorical freeze," McConnell wrote. "The Court is not limiting the Executive's discretion or micromanaging the administration of federal funds. Rather, consistent with the Constitution, statutes, and caselaw, the Court is simply holding that the Executive's discretion to impose its own policy preferences on appropriated funds can be exercised only if it is authorized by the congressionally approved appropriations statutes."

The states say a litany of programs are still waiting for federal funds or some clarity on whether the money is going to be delivered. McConnell also said the states had demonstrated standing in this case.

"The States have introduced dozens of uncontested declarations illustrating the effects of the indiscriminate and unpredictable freezing of federal funds, which implicate nearly all aspects of the States' governmental operations and inhibit their ability to administer vital services to their residents," he wrote. "These declarations reflect at least one particularized, concrete, and imminent harm that flows from the federal funding pause — a significant, indefinite loss of obligated federal funding."

Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha said President Donald Trump, a Republican, has "attempted to subvert the rule of law in favor of illegal executive power" through his executive orders.

"We don't have kings in this country, and today's preliminary injunction reaffirms that," Neronha, a Democrat, said in a statement.

"Americans pay taxes to the federal government knowing that the Congress will allocate their dollars towards agencies and programs that will support them in their daily lives," he continued. "The President's federal funding freeze would be laughable if it wasn't so utterly destructive. It flies in the face of everything we know to be true about our government, namely our separation of powers, by attempting to render the Congress as irrelevant."

Among the funding impacted is billions of dollars that would fund rooftop solar power in low-income neighborhoods, subsidizes low- and moderate-income households' purchase and installation of electric

heat pump water heaters and grants to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other harmful pollutants. "The Trump administration's illegal funding freeze jeopardized law enforcement funding, essential health care and childcare services, and other critical programs that millions of Americans rely on," New York Attorney General Letitia James, a Democrat, said in a statement.

The White House previously said the temporary funding halt would ensure that the payments complied with Trump's agenda, which includes increasing fossil fuel production, removing protections for transgender people and ending diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

The Republican administration has since rescinded a memo outlining the funding freeze. Still, many state government, universities and nonprofits have argued federal agencies continue to block funding for a range of programs.

U.S. District Judge Loren AliKhan in Washington has also extended an order blocking the funding freeze. AliKhan granted a preliminary injunction requested by groups representing thousands of nonprofits and small businesses.

More than hot flashes: Women raise awareness about menopause symptoms and work

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It took five years for Crystal Burke to put a name to the symptoms that haunted her. Heart palpitations. Insomnia so severe she slept only two to four hours a night. A newfound struggle to make decisions in her job as a nurse. Confusion when dealing with statistics, which she used to handle with ease.

"It affected my work, it affected my relationships, it affected everything," Burke said. "I felt lost. I didn't talk to anybody about it."

Then Burke saw an advertisement about a face cream which contained estrogen, one of the two hormones ovaries produce less and less of with aging. She began talking with friends about her symptoms. And she connected the dots: menopause.

At just 38, Burke had thought she was too young to be going through the life stage when menstrual periods stop and women no longer can become pregnant. But menopause is more than the pop culture stereotype featuring women in their 50s having hot flashes. Symptoms can start much earlier — during perimenopause, the time leading up to menopause — and go well beyond hot flashes.

The many manifestations include insomnia, migraines, brain fog, loss of concentration, memory problems, mood swings, depression, anxiety, heart palpitations, hair loss and weight gain. If that wasn't enough, some people experience heavy, painful periods or recurring urinary tract infections.

Chronic insomnia can make it difficult to concentrate. Brain fog leaves the afflicted struggling to find words during meetings. But social stigma and a lack of information have left menopausal people dealing alone with severe symptoms that may impact their work. Many stay silent, fearing they'll be viewed as underperformers or weak.

Some women in senior leadership positions leave their jobs or reduce their hours as a result of debilitating side effects from menopause, said Lauren Redfern, executive director of Hormonally, a nonprofit that provides workplace training and education about women's health. But those who feel supported by employers during the transition are more likely to remain at work, she said.

"When you open up a space to talk about these things, people are desperate to have a conversation," Redfern said. "The symptoms are so diverse and so far-reaching and so prolific they impact every area of someone's life."

Promoting changes around 'the change'

Menopause affects about half the world's population at some point in life. Yet due to the epidemic of silence around it, women, nonbinary people and transgender individuals often don't recognize the onset of unpleasant physical and emotional changes as side effects of declining hormone levels.

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Finding health care providers who are trained to identify and treat their symptoms can be challenging. Some startups have sought to change that by providing access to referrals or telehealth appointments with doctors or therapists who specialize in treating menopausal patients.

"When you don't know that something can get fixed, it's very scary," said Midi Health founder Joanna Strober, whose company connects women with professionals who understand menopause. "If you think, 'For the rest of my life I'm going to have brain fog and not remember anyone's name, and I'm going to keep losing my car in the parking lot and I'm going to keep gaining weight,' then it's very demoralizing."

Burke found relief when she began hormone replacement therapy. Inspired to help others, she co-founded The Menopause Clinic in Louisiana to offer telehealth services focused on menopause.

"The biggest thing is for women to know what perimenopause is, what menopause is, and that there are options," Burke said. "The suffering isn't necessary."

Hormone replacement therapy is not an option for those with certain medical histories, and some doctors are unwilling to prescribe it. Some experts recommend acupuncture, dietary changes and exercise to help manage symptoms.

The Mayo Clinic estimates that menopause symptoms lead to \$1.8 billion in lost work time per year in the U.S. About 5% of employers offer menopause benefits or accommodations such as the ability to work from home or a cool room, according to benefit consulting company NFP.

Here are some steps you or your employer can take to make the workplace more hospitable for people experiencing menopause.

Start a support group

Finding supportive colleagues can help bridge knowledge gaps. If your organization doesn't have a menopause support group, you can start one. Once established, the group or human resources department can bring in facilitators to teach the entire workforce — not just women — about menopause.

Sarah Daniels, a communications manager, started a support group called "Menopause Matters" at Arriva Group, a U.K.-based public transportation company. The male-dominated company already had a gender inclusion group, so Daniels joined and organized the menopause group as an offshoot.

The group's monthly meetings are held online during business hours. Participants swap notes on supplements, teas, treatments and beauty products. Daniels believes the group improves productivity because it gives members a sense of belonging within the organization.

"I know how lonely it is when you are going through these things, because you think, 'Is this just happening to me?'" she said. "I had a UTI (urinary tract infection) that was so severe that I fainted on a train. My periods were so heavy that I couldn't leave the house."

Arriva has a policy that says bosses must listen to and make reasonable adjustments for employees struggling with menopause. That could mean more restroom breaks, uniform adaptations to help with hot flashes or flexible working hours, Daniels said.

Push for benefits

People working for employers who do not subsidize menopause-related care and programs can model requests for similar benefits after the small percentage of companies that do.

When Shevonya Noble joined biotechnology firm Genentech as a principal quality and compliance leader, she was connected with a care advocate who helped her find a nutritionist, wellness coach, career coach, mental health provider and physical support coach to address her menopause symptoms.

Appointment costs were covered through a benefit provided by Maven, which partners with employers and health plans to deliver care targeted to women. Genentech's benefits also include menopause-specific classes and support groups.

At a former employer, Noble felt she had to hide the hot flashes that interrupted her sleep and disrupted her concentration while giving presentations because she didn't see anyone else furiously fanning themselves at their desks.

"The conversation about menopause needs to be broadened to include men, not just men in our lives but in the workplace as well," Noble said. "It's important that we not shy away from the topic but include it in

our conversations and to just take the mystique away from what goes on with women at this stage in life.”

Take ownership

Speaking up about symptoms also may help. When women experience hot flashes and brain fog at work, they're often seen as less competent, but if they say, "It's menopausal, I'm getting treated for it," the discrimination goes away and they're seen as powerful leaders again, according to Midi founder Strober.

"You have to call it out. You have to say, 'Oh, that's a hot flash,' not just look sweaty in a meeting, because then they just discount you," she said. "But if you call it out, you can take your power back."

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 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

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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

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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, 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."

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 tradi-

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tions 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."

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 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.

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 on Thursday, injuring eight people, officials said.

The MK-82 bombs released by the KF-16 fighter jets fell outside a firing range, the air force said in a statement. It apologized and expressed hopes for a speedy recovery of the injured and said it would offer compensation and take other necessary steps.

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The air force said the fighter jets were taking part in the one-day firing drill with the U.S. military in Pocheon, a city close to the heavily armed border with North Korea.

The air force also said a committee would investigate the accident and examine the scale of the damage inflicted.

An unidentified air force official told local reporters that a pilot of one of the KF-16s had entered wrong coordinates for a bombing site. An unidentified Defense Ministry official told reporters that further investigation was needed to determine why the second KF-16 also dropped bombs on a civilian area.

In a televised briefing, Pocheon Mayor Paek Young Hyeun 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.

Park Seong-sook, a 70-year-old eyewitness who was not hurt in the bombing, said she thought "a war has broken out."

"It was such a loud sound," she said, adding that it left her trembling with fear.

The military said later Thursday it has decided to suspend all live-fire drills across South Korea.

The accident came just before the South Korean and U.S. militaries announced they will begin large-scale annual military drills next Monday.

It's unclear how long the suspension of the live-fire training would last, but observers said it would likely be until the military determines the cause of Thursday's accident and maps out preventative steps.

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 department.

France will keep providing military intelligence to Ukraine as the US freezes vital information

PARIS (AP) — France will keep 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's office later said the sharing of intelligence with Ukraine is not a novelty but "a continuity of service."

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."

How Trump justifies his tariffs — from budget balancing to protecting 'the soul' of America

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — To President Donald Trump, "tariff" is more than "the most beautiful word in the dictionary," something he says often.

Tariffs, in Trump's view, are also a cure for a number of the nation's ills and the tool to reach new heights.

Most economists see taxes paid on imports as capable of addressing unfair trade practices, but they're skeptical of the quasi-miraculous properties that Trump claims they possess.

As the Republican president has touched off a trade war with America's trading partners, he has offered an array of reasons to justify the steep tariffs he's imposing or considering on goods coming from Mexico, Canada, China and beyond, despite warnings from experts that adding taxes to imported goods leads to higher prices for U.S. businesses and consumers.

A look at Trump's assortment of justifications for the tariffs he's imposing:

To balance trade and spur U.S. manufacturing

Trump, in his address to a joint session of Congress on Tuesday, said his threats of tariffs had spurred more U.S. manufacturing in the auto industry.

"Plants are opening up all over the place," Trump said.

In comments directed at manufacturers, the president added: "If you don't make your product in America, however, under the Trump administration, you will pay a tariff and in some cases a rather large one."

Trump, however, 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, the White House press secretary said.

To stop illegal immigration and human trafficking

Stopping illegal immigration has been one of Trump's top priorities, and he's used it as part of the rationale behind steep tariffs he's imposing on America's border nations, Canada and Mexico.

Trump last month gave both countries a temporary reprieve from his tariff threats after they took steps to appease his concerns about border security, including Canada's move to list Mexican cartels as terrorist groups and Mexico's announcement it would send 10,000 troops from its National Guard to its northern border.

On Sunday, Trump posted on his social media network: "ILLEGAL BORDER CROSSINGS LAST MONTH WERE THE LOWEST EVER RECORDED. THANK YOU!!!"

The next day, Trump announced he was imposing the tariffs anyway and said there was "no room left" for those countries to avoid the taxes.

To stop the flow of fentanyl

Trump has also cited the illicit flow of fentanyl into America as a reason for his tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China, though a much smaller amount comes across America's northern border than its southern border.

U.S. customs agents seized 43 pounds (19.5 kilograms) of fentanyl at the Canadian border during the last fiscal year, compared with 21,100 pounds (9,570 kilograms) at the Mexican border.

Trump, in a post on his Truth social media network on Wednesday, said that when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asked what could be done about the tariffs, "I told him that many people have died from Fentanyl that came through the Borders of Canada and Mexico, and nothing has convinced me that it has stopped."

Trump's order imposing tariffs on China says that country's government provides a "safe haven" for criminal organizations to "launder the revenues from the production, shipment, and sale of illicit synthetic opioids."

To balance the budget

Last month, when Trump spoke at an investment summit in Miami, he said tariffs will help balance the federal budget.

"We're trying to balance the budget immediately, and because of the tariff income, which is really go-

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— it's — it's already turned out to be amazing, actually," Trump said. "It's really meant more for bringing countries and companies into our country, but it's — the numbers are rather staggering, because we're the big piggy bank that everybody wants to be."

To impose 'fairness'

"I've decided for purposes of fairness that I will charge a reciprocal tariff," Trump said last month as he signed a proclamation laying out his plan for reciprocal tariffs. "It's fair to all. No other country can complain."

To retaliate against other countries

In his address to Congress, Trump explained his push for reciprocal tariffs on all countries, which he said will start April 2, as a tit for tat.

"Whatever they tariff us, other countries, we will tariff them. That's reciprocal back and forth," Trump said. "Whatever they tax us, we will tax them."

To bolster national security

Trump signed executive orders in February and March instructing the Commerce Department to consider whether tariffs on imported copper, lumber and timber were needed to protect national security.

The order Trump signed in February said copper plays a vital role in U.S. defense, infrastructure and emerging technologies, and it ordered Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick to investigate "actions to mitigate such threats, including potential tariffs."

Wooden products are used by the construction industry and the military, and they depend upon a strong lumber industry in the U.S. to meet those needs, according to the order Trump signed in March.

To make child care more affordable

Last year, as Trump campaigned again for the presidency, he frequently proselytized his tariff plans and in one appearance suggested tariffs could help solve rising child care costs.

In response to a question about how he'd tackle child care costs so more women could join the workforce, Trump brought up his plan to hike taxes on imports and said, "We're going to be taking in trillions of dollars, and as much as child care is talked about as being expensive, it's — relatively speaking — not very expensive, compared to the kind of numbers we'll be taking in."

To make America rich

Trump has several times said the revenue collected from tariffs will make the country wealthy.

In his speech to Congress, Trump said: "Tariffs are about making America rich again and making America great again."

To protect the soul of the country

Also during his Tuesday address before Congress, Trump spotlighted an Alabama steelworker who attended the speech.

"Stories like Jeff's remind us that tariffs are not just about protecting American jobs," Trump said. "They're about protecting the soul of our country."

Today in History: March 7

'Bloody Sunday' in Selma for civil rights movement

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, March 7, the 66th day of 2025. There are 299 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On March 7, 1965, a march by over 500 civil rights demonstrators was violently broken up at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama; state troopers and a sheriff's posse fired tear gas and beat marchers with batons in what became known as "Bloody Sunday."

Also on this date:

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received a U.S. patent for his telephone.

In 1936, Adolf Hitler ordered his troops to march into the Rhineland, thereby breaking the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Treaties.

In 1975, the U.S. Senate revised its filibuster rule, allowing 60 senators to limit debate in most cases,

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instead of the previously required two-thirds of senators present.

In 1994, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that a parody that pokes fun at an original work can be considered "fair use." (The ruling concerned a parody of the Roy Orbison song "Oh, Pretty Woman" by the rap group 2 Live Crew.)

In 2010, filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win the Academy Award for Best Director, taking the prize for directing the film "The Hurt Locker."

In 2024, armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in connection with the shooting incident on the set of the film "Rust" in 2021, which killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. (Gutierrez-Reed was later sentenced to 18 months in prison.)

Today's birthdays: Hall of Fame auto racer Janet Guthrie is 87. Actor Daniel J. Travanti is 85. Entertainment executive Michael Eisner is 83. Football Hall of Famer Lynn Swann is 73. R&B musician Ernie Isley (The Isley Brothers) is 73. Actor Bryan Cranston is 69. Tennis Hall of Famer Ivan Lendl is 65. Singer Taylor Dayne is 63. Author E.L. James is 62. Author Bret Easton Ellis is 61. Comedian Wanda Sykes is 61. Actor Rachel Weisz is 55. Actor Peter Sarsgaard is 54. Actor Jenna Fischer is 51. Actor Tobias Menzies is 51. Actor Laura Prepon is 45. Poet Amanda Gorman is 27.