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Saturday, March 15

State A Girls Tournament, Spearfish (BHSU)

Sunday, March 16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Monday, March 17

St. PATRICK'S DAY

Senior Menu: Corned beef cabbage, masehed potatoes, pistachio pudding salad, corn muffin.

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

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Turkey gravy over masehed potatoes.

Groton Senior Citizens Meet, 1 p.m., Groton Community Center

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

Tuesday, March 18

Senior Menu: Parmesan chicken breast, wild rice, italian blend, cinnamon apple sauce, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

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

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

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1440

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

Partial Shutdown Averted

Lawmakers avoided a federal government shutdown over the weekend after the Senate passed a Republican-led six-month stopgap funding bill by a vote of 54-46. The advancement came after Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer (NY) conceded his caucus should support the bill and secured enough Democrats to move it through a procedural vote. The funding measure passed the House on a party-line vote earlier in the week.

The short-term extension, known as a continuing resolution, funds the government at current levels through Sept. 30 (nearly \$1.7T) while adding \$6B to military spending and cutting \$13B in domestic non-defense spending. The bill also requires the District of Columbia to revert to its fiscal year 2024 budget levels, reducing local spending by more than \$1B.

Democrats had pushed for a 30-day stopgap funding bill to give bipartisan negotiators more time to reach a yearlong appropriations agreement to fund the government. Congress has long struggled to pass all its appropriations bills in time, resulting in a series of stopgap funding measures.

In other Capitol Hill news, Dr. Mehmet Oz testified in a Senate confirmation hearing yesterday for his nomination to run the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

More than 50 US universities face probe over alleged racial discrimination.

The Education Department's investigation is part of the Trump administration's claim that certain programs marginalize white and Asian American students. At least 45 cases focus on universities' partnerships with The PhD Project, a nonprofit that helps underrepresented students pursue business degrees. The department says these programs allegedly violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Measles cases reach nearly 300 in Texas and New Mexico.

The measles outbreak in Texas has infected 259 people, while the outbreak in New Mexico has infected 35. Two unvaccinated individuals—a 6-year-old and an adult—succumbed to complications related to the disease. Relatedly, the number of measles cases in 2025, from both active outbreaks and across other jurisdictions, is now the highest since 2019 at 301 confirmed cases.

Former reality TV star Jessie Holmes wins longest-ever Iditarod.

The former reality TV personality from "Life Below Zero" won the longest Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race ever, which spanned 1,129 miles due to route changes caused by lack of snow. Holmes finished the race in 10 days, 14 hours, 55 minutes, and 41 seconds, marking his first Iditarod victory after multiple top 10 finishes.

US consumer sentiment index slumps to lowest level since 2022.

The consumer sentiment index for March dropped to 57.9, marking a 10.5% decline from February and the lowest reading since 2022. Concerns over inflation and economic uncertainty contributed to the drop. On a year-over-year basis, the index is down 27%.

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Gene Hackman estate asks court to block release of autopsy records.

The actor's estate is seeking a court order to prevent the public release of photographs, videos, and police body-camera footage related to the deaths of Hackman and his wife, Betsy Arakawa, citing the family's right to privacy and the potentially distressing nature of the images. The couple were found deceased at their New Mexico home last month.

USPS to shed 10,000 jobs next month as part of deal with DOGE.

The United States Postal Service will lay off 10,000 people over the next month through a voluntary early retirement program and find ways to cut billions of dollars from its budget. The move is part of an agreement that seeks assistance from the Department of Government Efficiency.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Karen J. in Arizona.

"As a very short, very shy 8th grader in a new school, I wasn't making friends quickly. A history teacher decided to produce a class project wherein students would model fashions from the 1800s. She had a few garments and requested donations from students' parents and other family members. All the girls in the class found garments to model, but I was too small and none fit me, so I would not be included in the fashion show."

"The day before the show, a classmate took me home with her, and we found one of her grandmother's dresses in the attic. It was too large, but she stayed up half the night to alter it, and the next day I marched and twirled with classmates in the fashion show. It broke the ice, and after that I began to make friends. The girl who went out of her way to help me became a special needs teacher, and though we are both now in our 80s, she has remained one of my closest friends."

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2025 National Honor Society Inductees

Front row- Hannah Sandness, Rylee Dunker, Mia Crank, Jerica Locke, Carly Gilbert, Jaedyn Penning, Natalia Warrington, and Talli Wright

Back Row- Karter Moody, Ryder Johnson, Logan Warrington, Gage Sippel, and Keegen Tracy (not pictured - Brevin Fliehs)

Induction ceremony will be held Monday, March 24, 2025 @6:00pm in the Library Conference Room.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawmaker assertions about voter fatigue don't stop them from sending four measures to the ballot

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 14, 2025 6:01 PM

After some South Dakota lawmakers complained about fatigue from the number of questions on the ballot, they're sending four of their own measures to voters.

South Dakotans considered seven ballot questions during the 2024 election, including four state constitutional amendments. Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, said that resulted in "millions of dollars in out-of-state money coming for deceptive, emotionally charged ads stating half-truths."

"The voters are weary of that," he said. "They're fatigued."

Hughes was speaking on behalf of his own resolution that will go to voters as a ballot measure. It will ask voters to approve a 60% threshold to pass constitutional ballot questions, rather than a simple majority.

That's one of the four questions lawmakers sent to the 2026 general election ballot this legislative session, which has one day left on March 31 to consider the governor's vetoes. Seven other proposed ballot questions from legislators failed to cross the finish line.

Lawmakers' eagerness to put their own measures on the ballot is "a little ironic" said Samantha Chapman, advocacy manager with the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota.

"The Legislature is contradicting itself and contributing to said 'ballot fatigue,'" Chapman told South Dakota Searchlight.

Another six potential ballot questions from the public are already listed on the Secretary of State's website. None of those questions have been approved for petition circulation yet.

Following are the questions that South Dakota voters will see from legislators — if they don't approve more next session.

Allowing the Legislature to remove South Dakota from expanded Medicaid

South Dakota voters will decide next year whether to continue requiring Medicaid expansion if federal support for the program declines.

Medicaid is government-funded health insurance for people with low incomes, and for adults and children with disabilities. In 2022, South Dakota voters expanded Medicaid eligibility to adults with incomes up to 138% of the poverty level, to capitalize on a 90% federal funding match included in the Obama-era Affordable Care Act. The expansion is part of the state constitution and can only be altered by voters.

The ballot question will ask voters to authorize the termination of Medicaid expansion if federal support falls below 90%. Speculation about a reduction in federal Medicaid expansion funding has been swirling as the Trump administration and a Republican-controlled Congress look for spending cuts.

Last fall, South Dakota voters authorized state officials to consider imposing work requirements on people covered by Medicaid expansion. The state has not yet applied for federal permission to impose those requirements.

Requiring a 60% vote to amend the state constitution

Four years after Constitutional Amendment C and eight years after Constitutional Amendment X failed at the ballot box, voters will once again consider if the threshold for approving certain types of ballot questions should be raised from a simple majority.

Amendment C sought to require a three-fifths vote for the approval of ballot questions that would in-

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crease taxes or fees or require the state to appropriate \$10 million or more in the first five fiscal years after a measure's passage. The measure was defeated by 67% of voters.

South Dakota voters rejected Constitutional Amendment X in 2018, which would have raised the approval requirement for constitutional amendments to 55%. It was defeated with 54% voting against it.

Hughes' new proposal would raise the constitutional amendment approval threshold to 60%. Supporters of the proposal argue that a higher threshold is necessary to protect the state constitution from frequent changes and to ensure that only amendments with broad public support are adopted. They also say the proposal could discourage out-of-state interest groups from trying to amend South Dakota's constitution, and keep the constitution reserved for language dealing with the structure of government rather than policy matters.

Opponents argue that voters have spoken on the matter, and there's no need to ask them again.

Creating an unclaimed property trust fund

Voters will see a ballot question in 2026 asking permission for the state Investment Council to manage a trust fund for unclaimed property.

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

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

The state typically spends much of the revenue, while setting aside only a portion of it for people who come forward to claim their property. Yet rightful owners can claim their assets from the state at any time.

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

The ballot question is part of a legislative package passed this session to bring more predictability to the volatile revenue source, and to protect the state if claims increase. Senate Bill 155, which was signed by Gov. Larry Rhoden on Wednesday, would limit the amount of unclaimed property funds that can be used in the state's general fund budget, and gradually transition all unclaimed property money into the trust fund. Interest from the fund would then be treated as revenue for the state's annual budget.

Clarifying that non-U.S. citizens cannot vote in South Dakota elections

Senate Joint Resolution 503 sends a constitutional amendment to South Dakota voters clarifying a person must be a U.S. citizen to vote in any elections in the state. South Dakota's voter registration form already requires voters to certify they're citizens of the United States.

Sen. Taffy Howard, R-Rapid City, introduced the legislation. She said voters in several states have added similar clarifications in their state constitutions in recent elections. She added that the clarification ensures the "process remains secure" and that the "voices of American citizens aren't diluted."

Howard, who also introduced the unclaimed property ballot measure, told South Dakota Searchlight that ballot fatigue is "a very real concern," but she has "confidence in our citizens."

"They take time to research the issues and I do know no one here is in any way trying to take away or dilute the will of the voter," Howard said. "We want to listen to the voters. It's our intention, if anything, to maybe limit the influence of outside national organizations."

What else might appear on the ballot?

In 1898, South Dakota became the first state to allow citizen-backed initiatives and referendums.

Petitions are filed with the Secretary of State's Office and reviewed by the attorney general and the

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Legislative Research Council before they are approved for circulation. Petition circulators must gain 17,508 signatures from South Dakota registered voters for an initiated measure or referred law, and 35,017 signatures for a constitutional amendment. The deadline to turn in signed petitions is May 3, 2026.

Potential 2026 citizen-sponsored ballot questions include:

An initiated measure requiring South Dakota public school teachers and students to recite a specific non-denominational prayer daily, with an exemption for students and teachers who object.

A constitutional amendment requiring South Dakota voters approve legislative changes to initiative and referendum procedures.

A constitutional amendment requiring that "laws may not be enacted to restrict the power of initiative and referendum."

A constitutional amendment requiring a two-thirds vote by the Legislature to change or repeal initiated measures.

A constitutional amendment requiring a seven-year wait and a three-fourths vote by the Legislature and vote of the people to make changes to voter-approved initiated measures.

An initiated measure rolling back nonagricultural property assessments to 2020 valuations and capping assessment increases to 2.25% annually.

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

COMMENTARY

Funding freezes and staff cuts pull the rug out from under farmers by Travis Entenman

What happens in Washington, D.C., can oftentimes feel far away, disconnected from everyday life in the rest of the country. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's recent efforts to streamline the federal government have, and will continue to have, unintended consequences for farmers' and ranchers' efforts to conserve water, soil and wildlife habitat if cuts continue with a hatchet instead of a scalpel.

Freezing conservation funds promised to farmers, many of whom have already spent the money, and slashing Natural Resources Conservation Service staff are only exacerbating the uncertainty farmers feel every year during planting. Efforts to make government more efficient and responsive to local needs may be pulling the rug out from America's farmers when certainty is what's needed most.

U.S. agriculture is already dealing with record costs, labor concerns and an uneasy global trading market. The freeze on conservation funding, coupled with NRCS staffing cuts, is not just an inconvenience; it's a threat to the economic viability of American farms and ranches, our communities, and the stewardship of land and prairies we depend on.

This funding pause is preventing tens of millions of dollars from being spent in South Dakota. In 2022, Congress invested nearly \$20 billion into USDA's voluntary, incentive-based, private lands conservation programs at NRCS nationwide. The funding began to hit the ground in 2023, and since then, over \$29 million have been promised to South Dakotan producers, allowing farmers and ranchers to adopt conservation practices on over 600,000 acres.

Many of these producers have already spent thousands of dollars of their own money to implement practices like planting cover crops, implementing rotational grazing and installing new irrigation systems — all with the understanding that they would be reimbursed in a timely manner, as usual. USDA's freeze means that many of those farmers are now in limbo, hoping they will receive the reimbursement they are contractually owed.

News is starting to trickle out that some pots of funding are starting to be unfrozen. Although this is a good start, there is still great uncertainty about which funding pots and contracts are being unfrozen. It

goes without saying that existing contracts should be honored, at a minimum, and producers should be provided with certainty about the availability of new funding for this year.

Conservation programs don't just benefit farmers; they have broader economic impacts. When farmers engage in conservation practices, they're not only improving their land for future generations, but they're also investing in their communities. Conservation practices often result in better water quality, enhanced wildlife habitats and improved soil health. These improvements boost local economies by ensuring that farms can operate profitably over the long haul and contribute to the broader rural economy.

Another consequence of the freeze is its impact on conservation easement funds that we, at Northern Prairies Land Trust, use to facilitate land protections for farmers and ranchers in South Dakota and Nebraska. Easement funds are often used to protect and restore prairies and grasslands — the fastest disappearing ecosystem in the world. Grasslands, threatened by urban sprawl, conversion to other uses, and a changing climate, are critical as duck and waterfowl breeding habitat, for water filtration, and as migration corridors for big game and other wildlife. The uncertainty caused by the funding freeze is slowing the conservation of prairies at a time when they need it most.

Beyond the funding freeze, USDA's Farm Service Agency and NRCS have local offices here in South Dakota that are facing significant staffing reductions, which will only exacerbate these challenges. NRCS and FSA have locally based staff who administer USDA programs, execute contracts and help farmers address natural resource concerns on their farms. They help farmers and ranchers apply for financial assistance, provide technical assistance and guide them on best practices for land management and conservation. USDA funding delivered by NRCS and FSA staff provides significant support to farmers in South Dakota and across the country, and many of these staff have built strong, trusted relationships with producers and conservation groups in the state.

Unfortunately, plans to further reduce staff and even close down some of these offices will leave farmers and ranchers unsure about who to turn to when they have questions about a program, natural resource concern, or reimbursement for money they've already spent. Delays will prevent landowners from accessing the technical support they need to implement effective conservation practices now, while they are planning for the whole year.

Farmers are already on the frontlines of extreme weather, which has been increasing in frequency and severity for years. Now, USDA's funding freeze and staffing cuts are making their job even harder. It's time to put political divides aside and follow through for our South Dakota farmers and ranchers.

Travis Entenman is the executive director for Friends of the Big Sioux River, executive director of Northern Prairies Land Trust, and sits on the board of supervisors at the Minnehaha Conservation District. He received his bachelor's degree in journalism from South Dakota State University and his master's in environmental law and policy from Vermont Law School.

Immigration buoyed population in large counties, agricultural Midwest

New census estimates show impact of asylum-seekers, other new immigrants

BY: TIM HENDERSON, STATELINE - MARCH 14, 2025 8:00 AM

Immigration was the biggest factor in population growth for many booming Sun Belt counties as well as for the agricultural Midwest, according to a Stateline analysis of new U.S. Census Bureau county estimates.

The analysis shows the significant impact immigration had between mid-2020 and mid-2024 in fast-growing states such as Arizona, Florida and Texas, as well as how it boosted growth or minimized population loss across the country.

The surge of newcomers to the United States was the primary driver in population changes for 38% of counties nationwide and for most counties in states across a large swath of the Midwest: Illinois, Iowa,

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Kansas, Nebraska and North Dakota. Immigration also was the largest growth factor in most counties in Louisiana and Massachusetts.

In Iowa, immigration more than doubled population growth in the two counties that surround the state capital of Des Moines and Iowa City. Local advocates are planning to bolster services for new arrivals.

The census estimates, to be released Thursday, March 13, are the first at the county level to use a new method that tries to count asylum-seekers and other immigrants based on government data on green cards, visas, international students, refugee admissions and border releases.

Eric Jensen, a senior research scientist for the Census Bureau, said the new immigration estimates will be tweaked next year to better account for where asylum-seekers and refugees may have eventually settled.

In Texas, where Houston's Harris County saw the nation's largest population growth, the immigration of more than 260,000 people accounted for the bulk of the roughly 278,000-person increase. The rest came largely from births.

The new numbers have helped clarify how much of the state's growth has come from immigration, said Texas state Demographer Lloyd Potter.

"We've been saying for a while now, where are all these people coming over the border? They're not showing up in census data," Potter said.

Florida's Miami-Dade County, home of Miami, had the state's largest population growth since 2020. But the county would have shrunk without the immigration of almost 321,000 people to offset more than 205,000 people who moved away.

Florida has complained for many years that new immigration was not reflected accurately enough in population estimates, said Richard Doty, a research demographer for the state's Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida.

"From a Florida perspective, the big news is the dramatic increase in their population estimates driven entirely by the Census Bureau's revised estimates of [immigration]," Doty said. The change increased Florida and U.S. population estimates not just for the current year but also for all years since 2020, he said.

Immigration was the largest factor for five of the nation's top 10 growth counties, which included Arizona's Maricopa County, home of Phoenix; Nevada's Clark County, home of Las Vegas; and Florida's Hillsborough County, where Tampa is located.

Newcomers from around the country were the biggest factor in the other top 10 counties, including Collin, Denton, Fort Bend and Montgomery counties in Texas, as well as Florida's Polk County, south of Orlando.

Those Texas counties are fast-growing exurbs of Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston with a lot of new housing developments, Potter said.

"That creates its own kind of issues. People are moving in, bringing a couple of cars, and they're going to need retail and a whole range of infrastructure and transportation," Potter said.

Nationwide, 278 counties in 42 states and the District of Columbia would have shrunk in population were it not for immigration.

They include: Florida's Orange and Broward counties along with Miami-Dade; Washington state's King County, where Seattle is located; Dallas County in Texas; Middlesex County in Massachusetts, near Boston; Ohio's Franklin County, which includes Columbus; Salt Lake County in Utah; Middlesex County, New Jersey; and Sacramento County, California.

Immigration also helped stem population losses in many counties that ended up shrinking anyway: Los Angeles County in California lost more than 260,000 people since 2020, but the losses would have been much larger without about 257,000 new immigrants.

Louisiana's Jefferson Parish, in the New Orleans metro area, lost almost 14,000 people since 2020, but the loss would have been more than double if not for 16,000 new immigrants. Public schools there have been plagued by absences amid fears of immigration raids under the Trump administration's plans for mass deportation, according to press accounts.

Immigration also minimized population loss in 958 counties in 47 states, including: Chicago's Cook County, Illinois; four New York City boroughs; Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania; suburban Prince George's County in Maryland; Detroit's Wayne County, Michigan.

Polk County, Iowa, which includes Des Moines, saw most of its growth of almost 24,000 people from new immigration. The county plans a welcoming center for immigrants in Des Moines, called Global Neighbors, but the county also has been roiled by mostly false rumors of immigration raids.

Mak Sućeska, who will direct operations for the center, is a refugee from Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia who arrived in the United States in 1993. At an event this week in Iowa City, he described the planned \$4 million center as "a space for refugees and immigrants to call home."

Iowa City in Johnson County, another area where immigration more than doubled population growth since 2020, is also interested in more immigrant services, said Peter Gerlach, executive director of the Iowa City Foreign Relations Council, speaking at the March 12 event.

"It's really important to learn from each other, from like-minded communities, about how we can support and create welcoming communities," Gerlach said, especially given "the ways in which our refugees and immigrants are being targeted."

Tim Henderson covers demographics for Stateline. He has been a reporter at the Miami Herald, the Cincinnati Enquirer and The Journal News in suburban New York. Henderson became fascinated with census data in the early 1990s, when AOL offered the first computerized reports. Since then he has broken stories about population trends in South Florida, including a housing affordability analysis included in the 2007 Pulitzer-winning series "House of Lies" for the Miami Herald, and a prize-winning analysis of public pension irregularities for The Journal News. He has been a member and trainer for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting since its inception 20 years ago, specializing in online data access and visualization along with demographics.

Hours away from shutdown, U.S. Senate clears spending bill for Trump's signature

South Dakota Republicans Thune and Rounds both vote yes

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 14, 2025 6:11 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate cleared a stopgap spending bill Friday that will fund the government through the end of September, sending the legislation to President Donald Trump, who is expected to sign it, avoiding a partial government shutdown.

The 54-46 vote will keep the federal government mostly running on autopilot under spending levels and policy similar to what Congress approved about a year ago when lawmakers passed the full-year appropriations bills for the last fiscal year. But the stopgap bill does slightly boost defense spending while reducing domestic funding authority.

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul was the only Republican to vote against passage. Maine independent Sen. Angus King and New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen voted to approve the bill, the only ones backing it besides Republicans.

Senate approval followed days of debate among Democrats over whether to support moving forward with the GOP-authored bill or see a shutdown begin that Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said would allow Trump to take even more power over the government.

Debate on the House-passed stopgap spending bill was more complex than usual. A majority of Senate Democrats believe the continuing resolution shortchanges important federal programs and doesn't do enough to reinforce Congress' constitutional authority over spending in light of Trump's efforts to remake the size and scope of the federal government.

Many of those actions are on hold as dozens of lawsuits move through the federal court system. But Democrats who opposed the bill felt that lawmakers must make their voices heard as well.

Other Democrats argued a partial government shutdown would give Trump more leeway to make funding decisions and further harm federal workers.

Republicans largely supported the stopgap spending bill. However, many lamented that the House and

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Senate didn't do more to reach agreement on the dozen full-year government funding bills.

'Inherently a failure

Senate Appropriations Chairwoman Susan Collins, R-Maine, said the stopgap spending bill wasn't her first choice for funding the government, but that it was the only option on the table to prevent a funding lapse.

"Government shutdowns are inherently a failure to govern effectively and have negative consequences all across government," Collins said. "They inevitably require certain government employees — such as Border Patrol agents, members of our military and Coast Guard, TSA screeners and air traffic controllers — to report to work with no certainty at all on when they will receive their next paycheck."

Washington state Democratic Sen. Patty Murray, ranking member on the Appropriations panel, rebuked House Republican leaders for drafting the stopgap spending bill on their own and then expecting Democratic votes.

"Let me be clear, in my time in Congress, never, ever has one party written partisan full-year appropriations bills for all of government and expected the other party to go along without any input," Murray said.

The stopgap spending bill, she said, cuts overall spending on domestic programs, a choice Democrats never would have agreed to had GOP leaders tried to negotiate with them.

"We are talking about a nearly 50% cut to life-saving medical research into conditions affecting our service members," Murray said. "It is a giant shortfall in funding for NIH. It is a massive cut in funding for Army Corps projects and \$15 billion less for our domestic priorities."

"This bill will force Social Security to cut staff and close offices and make it harder for our seniors to get the benefits they spent their careers paying into the system to earn," Murray added. "It creates a devastating shortfall that risks tens of thousands of Americans losing their housing. So this bill causes real pain for communities across the country."

Murray also criticized House Republicans for releasing their stopgap spending bill just days before the deadline and then leaving for a recess right after voting to send the measure to the Senate. The move prevented the Senate from amending the CR in any way if Congress wanted to avoid a shutdown.

The Senate voted to reject amendments from Oregon Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley, Illinois Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth, Maryland Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen and Paul before approving the bill.

Schumer's decision

Schumer said he voted to limit debate to avoid giving Trump, Elon Musk and U.S. DOGE Service the authority to determine which federal employees would have been exempt from the effects of a shutdown and which would have essentially been furloughed. Under federal law, both categories of federal workers receive back pay once the shutdown ends.

"In a shutdown, Donald Trump and DOGE will have the power to determine what is considered essential and what is not — and their views on what is not essential would be mean and vicious and would decimate vital services and cause unimaginable harm to the American people," Schumer said.

The Democrats who voted to advance the stopgap spending bill, Schumer said, wanted to keep attention on Trump's actions as president and not divert focus to the wide-reaching repercussions of shutting down the government.

"A shutdown will be a costly distraction from this all important fight," Schumer said.

The stopgap spending bill, he noted, doesn't change the Constitution or the laws that say Congress controls spending and that the president must implement those laws.

"The CR does not change the underlying law, making the Trump administration's impoundments and mass firings illegal," Schumer said. "Nothing in the CR changes the Impoundment Control Act, the foundation of Congress' appropriations authority. And the authorization laws that require USAID and other agencies to exist and to operate the programs Congress has assigned to them. Nothing changes Title 5, governing the civil service, the Administrative Procedures Act and so on."

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Senate rules require at least 60 lawmakers vote to cut off debate on a bill. The GOP holds 53 seats at the moment and needed Democratic buy-in to proceed with regular bills. That procedural vote was 62-38.

Democratic Sens. Catherine Cortez Masto of Nevada, Dick Durbin of Illinois, John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, Gary Peters of Michigan, Brian Schatz of Hawaii, King, Schumer and Shaheen voted to limit debate.

Delays on spending bills

Congress was supposed to draft, debate and approve the dozen annual appropriations bills by the start of this fiscal year on Oct. 1, nearly six months ago.

The bills fund the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, Treasury and Veterans' Affairs.

They also provide funding for Congress, the Supreme Court and numerous smaller agencies, like NASA and the National Science Foundation.

The House Appropriations Committee approved all 12 of its bills on party-line votes and the House was able to pass five of those across the floor last summer without broad Democratic support.

The Senate panel approved 11 of the bills in July and August with broadly bipartisan votes, but none of the measures came up on the floor for debate.

The House and Senate have regularly negotiated final versions of the spending bills, even if they didn't receive floor approval, and could have begun that conference process in September, or even during their August recess.

But congressional leaders opted to focus their attention on the November elections and used a stopgap spending bill to keep the government running through mid-December, an expected and rather predictable move.

After Republicans won unified control of government, Congress used a second continuing resolution to keep the government funded through March 14. GOP leaders and Trump wanted to hold over negotiations on the full-year bills until they were in office.

The leaders of the Appropriations committees spent the last couple months trying to get bipartisan, bicameral agreement on the total spending level for the current fiscal year. But that ended this weekend when House Republicans released a stopgap spending bill to fund the government through September.

The House voted 217-213 on Tuesday to send the continuing resolution to the Senate. Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie was the only GOP lawmaker to vote against it and Maine Rep. Jared Golden was the only Democratic member to support the bill in that chamber.

'Congratulations to Chuck Schumer'

Trump is expected to sign the stopgap spending bill, according to a Statement of Administration Policy.

"H.R. 1968 includes a focused set of critical funding anomalies to ensure the Administration can carry out important programs and fulfill its obligations, including veterans' healthcare and benefits, pay raises for junior enlisted servicemembers, operations of our air traffic control system, along with nutrition and housing programs," the SAP states.

"The bill also provides the Department of Defense with the resources and flexibility necessary to align funding to current priorities in consultation with the Congress and responds to emerging threats by allowing for 'new starts,' including other key provisions."

Trump took to social media ahead of the procedural vote to thank Schumer for announcing he'd vote to limit debate.

"Congratulations to Chuck Schumer for doing the right thing — Took 'guts' and courage! The big Tax Cuts, L.A. fire fix, Debt Ceiling Bill, and so much more, is coming. We should all work together on that very dangerous situation," Trump wrote. "A non pass would be a Country destroyer, approval will lead us to new heights. Again, really good and smart move by Senator Schumer. This could lead to something big

for the USA, a whole new direction and beginning! DJT"

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.

Protesters rally against sweeping cuts to U.S. Education Department

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - MARCH 14, 2025 2:40 PM

WASHINGTON — Dozens gathered Friday outside the U.S. Department of Education to protest the ousting of more than 1,300 employees and President Donald Trump's plans to dismantle the agency.

As the fate of the 45-year-old department hangs in the balance following the cuts this week, demonstrators held signs at a rally outside of the Education Department headquarters with slogans including "Educate Don't Eliminate" and "WWE: We Want Education," a reference to Education Secretary Linda McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment background.

"These cuts — this isn't just about a department and a building — this is about federal streams of money that help students live (up to) their full potential," said Kim Anderson, executive director of the National Education Association, the country's largest labor union.

"This agenda is about cutting funding and shipping it to private schools, it is about vouchers, make no mistake about it," Anderson said. "It is about dismantling public education so that children cannot get what they deserve."

Trump has repeatedly pledged to shutter the agency, and McMahon confirmed this week that the sweeping cuts marked the first step in that process.

The president alone does not have the authority to close the department, and such an effort would need congressional approval.

'Fight back'

Following a "honk-a-thon" on Independence Avenue, Sen. Mazie Hirono told the crowd that Trump and billionaire White House adviser Elon Musk "think that they can take a chain saw to government agencies, and they've been slashing and burning and firing thousands of people for no cause, and just recently, of course, they got to the Department of Education."

Trump and Musk have taken significant steps to reduce federal government spending and go after what they see as waste, with the Education Department marking a major target of those efforts.

"But we are all here to fight back because this is no time to be sitting back thinking that other people are going to fight the battles for us," the Hawaii Democrat said. "No, we are in it together."

The rally came as department leaders announced this week that they would be cutting a substantial number of the agency's staff, prompting concerns over how the department could carry out its responsibilities when roughly halving its workforce.

The layoffs make huge cuts to the Office for Civil Rights, Office of Federal Student Aid and Institute of Education Sciences, among other units, according to the nonprofit Education Reform Now, which advocates for more resources for education.

Fulfilling responsibilities

Some of the department's many responsibilities include administering federal student aid, enforcing civil rights cases, providing Title I funding for low-income school districts and guaranteeing a free public education for children with disabilities via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA.

Through a spokesperson, the department said Thursday its core responsibilities would not be impacted by the cuts.

But protesters Friday worried about the path to dismantling the department.

Molly Cronin, a special education teacher in Virginia, told States Newsroom that "if IDEA is not protected, if Title I is not protected, if Head Start is not funded, our most vulnerable children are going to be failed by the system, and we have a duty as educators to protect all students."

Cronin, a member of the National Education Association who serves on the board of her local union, said one of the biggest misunderstandings about the agency "is that people think that the federal department is in control of the states and states' curriculum and programs and all of that, when, in fact, that's not true."

Trump has vowed to shut down the department in his quest to move education "back to the states," despite much of the funding and oversight of schools already occurring at the state and local levels. Legally, the federal government cannot control the curriculum of schools.

Legal challenges to the sweeping cuts are already taking shape, after 21 Democratic attorneys general sued the Trump administration Thursday over the efforts.

Prior to the mass layoffs, the department already witnessed dramatic downsizing in the weeks since Trump took office, with major contract cuts and staff buyouts.

Cuts make mission harder

Antoinette Flores, who worked for the Education Department during the Biden administration, said she knows many of the people harmed by the layoffs.

"These are colleagues, these are friends, these are dedicated public servants that help students, and it's devastating to see what's happening."

Flores, who focuses on higher education, told States Newsroom the massive cuts are "going to make it much more challenging for students to receive grants and loans that they're entitled to."

Rather than go after inefficiencies in the federal government, as Trump and Musk have said is their goal, Flores said a smaller federal workforce would actually "increase fraud, waste and abuse."

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.

Second federal judge orders reversal of some Trump workforce cuts

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - MARCH 14, 2025 11:16 AM

WASHINGTON — A second federal judge ordered late Thursday that President Donald Trump's administration reinstate probationary federal workers who were fired as part of the president's and billionaire adviser Elon Musk's government downsizing agenda.

District Judge James Bredar for the District of Maryland issued a temporary restraining order mandating nearly 20 federal departments and agencies to reinstate new or recent hires by Monday at 1 p.m. Eastern. The order from Bredar came hours after a similar one from a federal judge in California.

The lawsuit was filed March 6 by Democratic attorneys general in 19 states and the District of Columbia, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wisconsin.

Bredar's order reinstates just more than 23,500 probationary positions across the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor, Transportation, Treasury and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, General Services Administration, Small Business Administration and U.S. Agency for International Development, according to figures in the original complaint.

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A hearing is scheduled for March 26 in Baltimore. The temporary mandate expires the evening of March 27. Bredar's order did not include the nearly 5,500 employees fired from the Department of Defense and National Archives and Records Administration.

The emergency decision out of Maryland followed an earlier ruling Thursday from a California federal judge who extended a previous temporary order immediately reinstating probationary jobs at the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Science Foundation and Small Business Administration, as well as the departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense.

The Trump administration quickly appealed the decision out of the Northern District of California. That suit was brought by more than a dozen plaintiffs, including unions representing hundreds of thousands of federal workers.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt slammed the California decision, saying in a statement Thursday "a single judge is attempting to unconstitutionally seize the power of hiring and firing from the Executive Branch."

Musk, a senior White House adviser, is the face of Trump's rapid-fire workforce downsizing. The top donor to Trump's reelection bid has posted numerous times on his social media platform, X, about the need to slash federal workers.

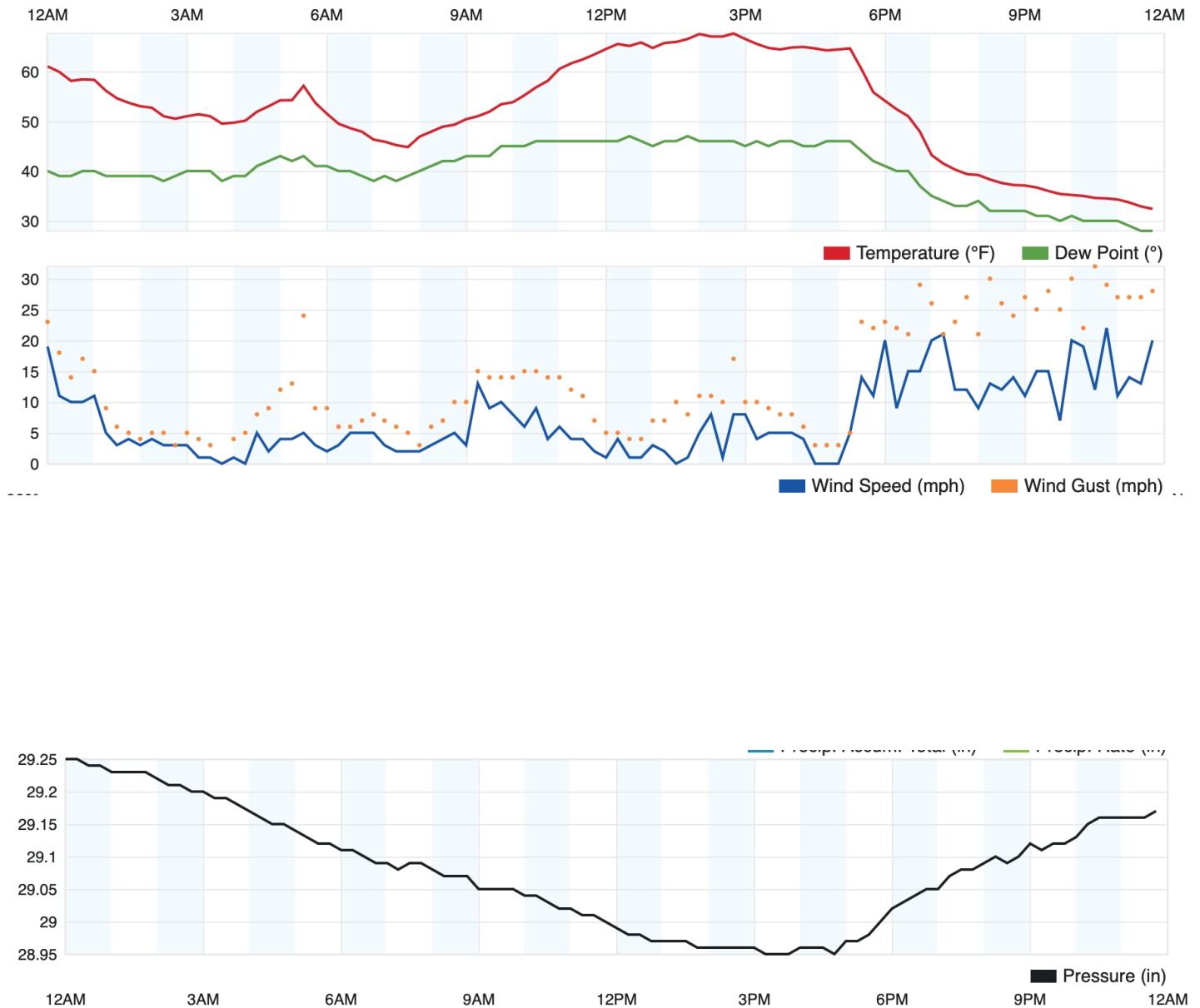
In February at the Conservative Political Action Conference outside Washington, D.C., Musk waved around a chainsaw gifted to him from Argentine President Javier Milei and declared, "This is the chainsaw for bureaucracy."

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Wind Advisory

Today



High: 41 °F

Windy. Slight
Chance Snow
then Mostly
Sunny

Tonight



Low: 16 °F

Mostly Clear
and Blustery
then Mostly
Clear

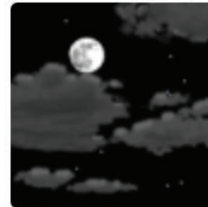
Sunday



High: 48 °F

Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance Snow

Sunday Night



Low: 30 °F

Partly Cloudy

Monday



High: 66 °F

Sunny then
Sunny and
Breezy



Storm System Exiting Today

March 15, 2025
4:56 AM

Please see www.weather.gov/abr for latest hazard map. Changes possible this morning.

Key Messages

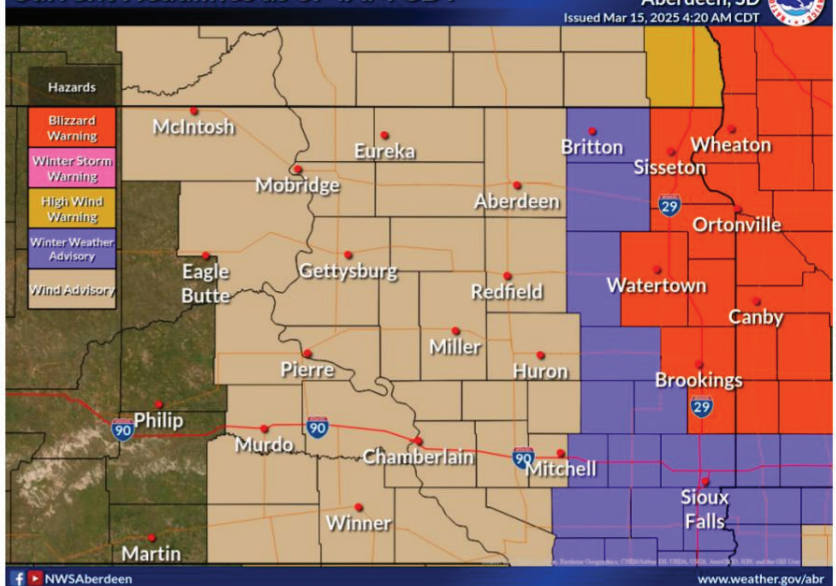
- Snow and strong winds (gusts up to 50 mph) affecting far northeast SD into west central MN through the morning hours.
- Heaviest snow band has shifted east into MN, thus **lowering snow totals** in our area.
- **Hazardous travel conditions** still expected this morning over eastern portions of the region, as strong winds combine with falling snow to produce low visibility. **Icy roads** possible as well.

NEW

Important Updates

- **Lower snow totals now forecast this morning over far northeast SD into west central MN.**

Current Headlines as of 4AM CDT



National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A Blizzard Warning, Winter Weather Advisory, and Wind Advisory are all in effect this morning. Heavy snow and winds will result in blizzard conditions in addition to making roads slippery and hazardous.

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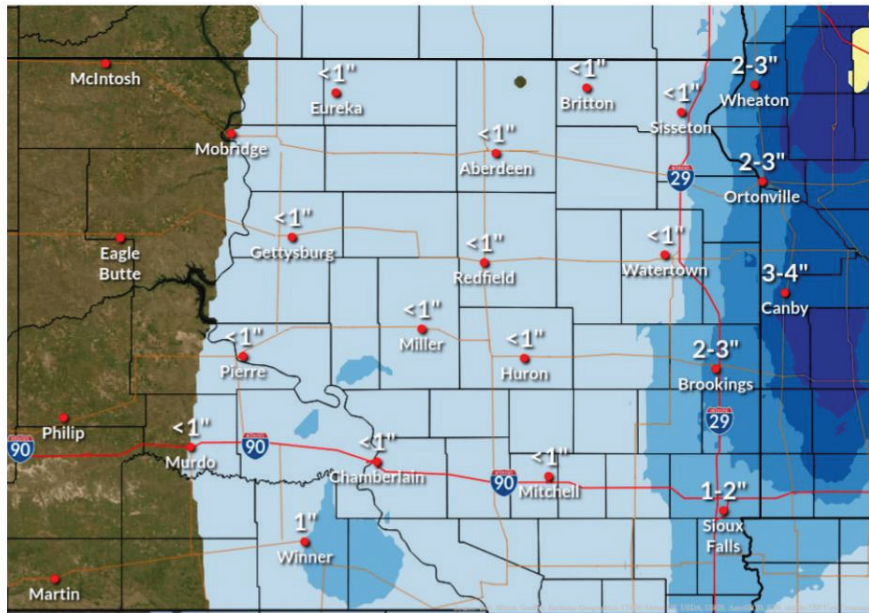
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Additional Snowfall Forecast

March 15, 2025
4:56 AM

Lower totals predicted as a shift in the low track further east developed.



What's Been Happening?

- An **eastern shift** in the track of the storm has been observed, leading more snow to be placed in Minnesota.
- Some snow has been observed so far this morning, but the **transition is still ongoing**, limiting snow totals.
- Up to 4 inches of snow accumulation is still possible through this morning.



National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

The forecast location for the band has shifted further east into western Minnesota. However, areas may still see up to 4 inches of accumulation.



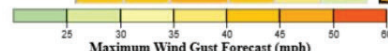
Wind Forecast

March 15, 2025
4:56 AM

- Strong winds will continue **through this afternoon** out of the north.
- Gusts could approach **50 mph** for some locations, especially this morning.
- Best time frame for falling snow over northeast SD into western MN is **this morning**.
- The combination of falling snow and strong winds are expected to generate **Blizzard Conditions**.

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	3/15 Sat						Maximum
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	
Aberdeen	43	44	45	41	36	22	45
Britton	45	45	45	40	36	23	45
Chamberlain	47	48	44	40	31	17	48
Clark	45	44	45	40	36	23	45
Eagle Butte	40	39	40	35	26	14	40
Eureka	45	45	46	41	33	18	46
Gettysburg	40	40	43	38	31	16	43
McIntosh	38	41	43	37	28	14	43
Milbank	44	45	47	41	35	24	47
Miller	39	41	43	37	32	17	43
Mobridge	38	37	38	33	28	14	38
Murdo	37	37	38	33	26	13	38
Pierre	35	37	38	35	28	10	38
Redfield	43	44	45	41	35	21	45
Sisseton	49	47	48	43	38	26	49
Watertown	46	45	47	41	37	24	47
Webster	47	46	47	44	38	26	47
Wheaton	43	44	46	41	36	26	46



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Winter Storm Precipitation Timing

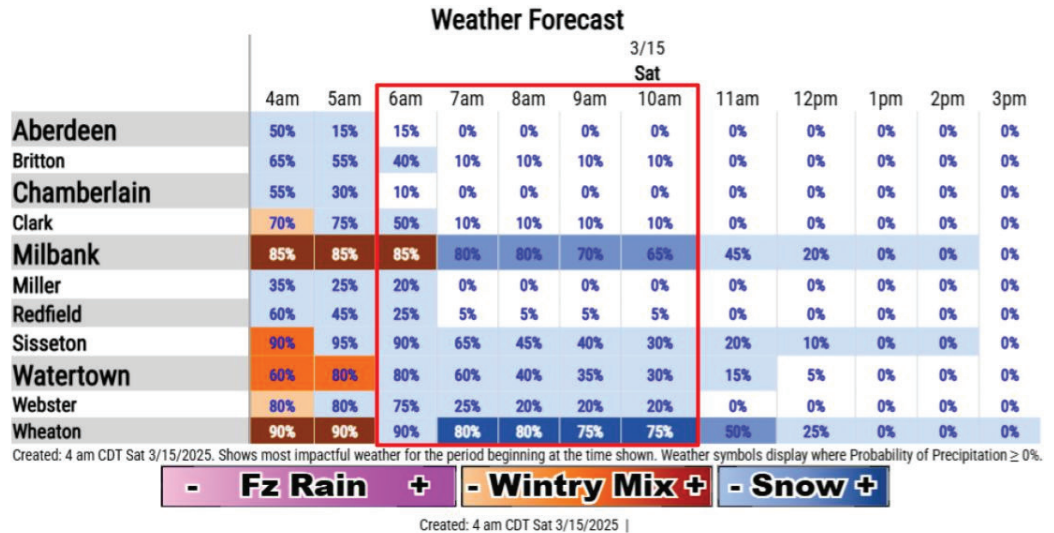
March 15, 2025
4:56 AM

Expect hazardous travel due to falling snow and possible **Blizzard Conditions**.

→ Transition from wintry mix of precipitation to snow continues during the early morning hours.

→ **The heaviest snowfall is expected between 6 AM and 10 AM this morning.**

→ Due to the initial wintry mix this morning, **a glaze of ice may accumulate on roadways** beneath accumulating snow.



The transition from a wintry mix to all snow is ongoing this morning. The heaviest snowfall is expected between 6 AM and 10 AM this morning, but the freezing rain/sleet may create a glaze on roadways underneath the snow.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 68 °F at 2:38 PM

Low Temp: 33 °F at 11:25 PM

Wind: 32 mph at 10:20 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 57 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 79 in 2015

Record Low: -29 in 1897

Average High: 41

Average Low: 19

Average Precip in March.: 0.37

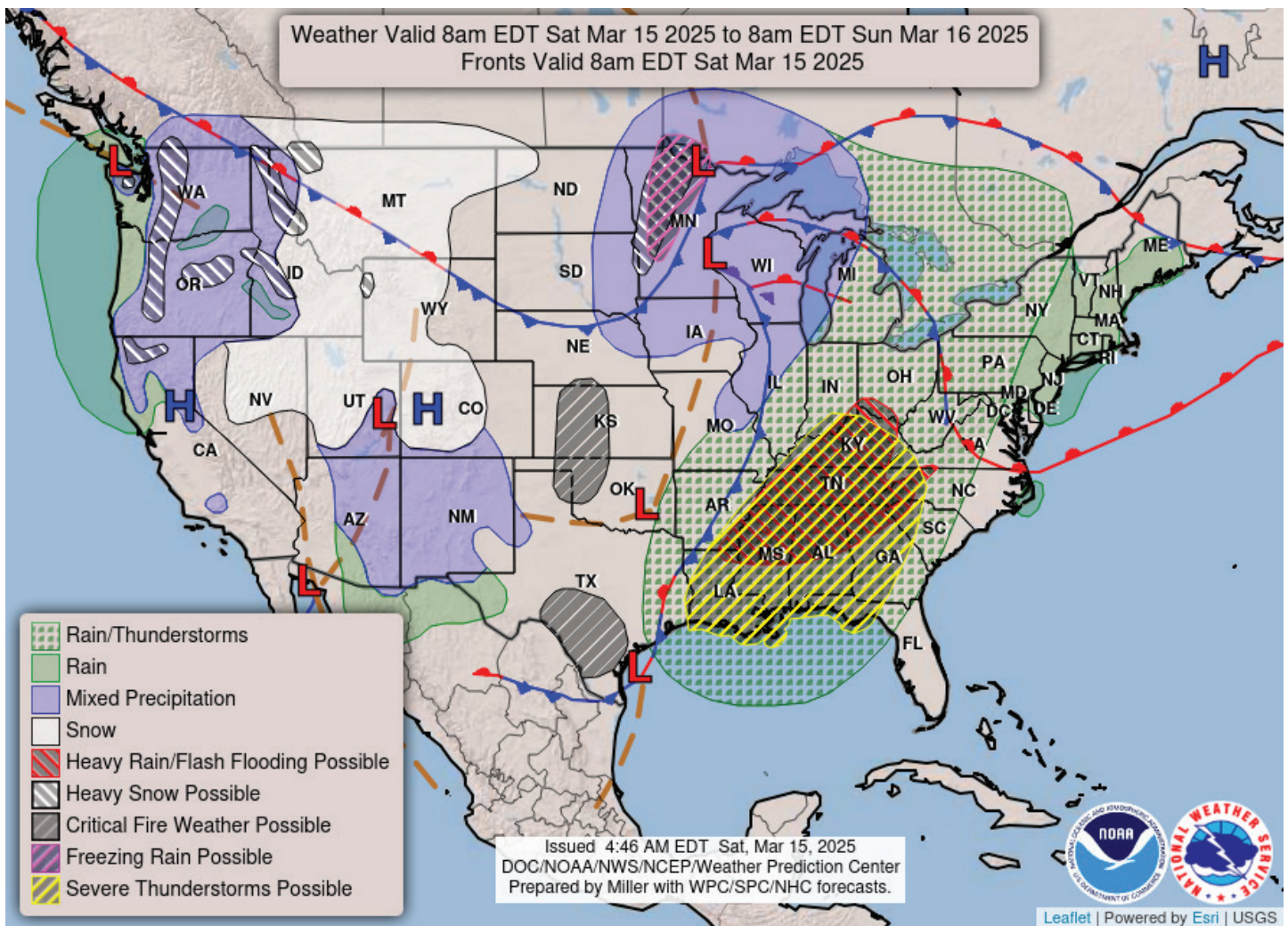
Precip to date in March.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.54

Precip Year to Date: 0.45

Sunset Tonight: 7:40:03 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:40:21 am



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Today in Weather History

March 15, 1941: Beware the Ides of March. The most severe blizzard in modern history strikes North Dakota and Minnesota. The blizzard began on a Saturday night while many are traveling, and thus claims 71 lives. Winds gust to 75 mph at Duluth, Minnesota, and reach 85 mph at Grand Forks, North Dakota. Snow drifts twelve feet high were reported in north-central Minnesota. A cold front traveling 30 mph crosses Minnesota in just seven hours.

March 15, 2010: Snowmelt runoff from an extensive snow cover flooded many creeks, roads, along with thousands of acres of pasture and cropland throughout northeast South Dakota. There were numerous road closures. The flooding lasted through the end of the month and for many locations in April. The counties mainly affected were Brown, Marshall, Day, Spink, and Roberts. Numerous communities were affected, including Aberdeen, Claremont, Waubay, Amherst, Kidder, and the Richmond Lake area. The Claremont, Amherst, and Britton areas were the hardest hit with flooded land and roads. Several farms were surrounded by water, with some people stranded. Between Aberdeen and Britton, sixty percent of the area was underwater. Thousands of acres of cropland will not be planted due to too much water, with estimates that 20 to 25 percent of Brown county cropland would not be planted. Many people in northeast South Dakota have had too much water for many years. The road damage was extensive, and repairs will be in the millions of dollars. Many roads across the area will also have to be raised. Many people had extra-long commutes due to flooded streets, with some people having to move out of their homes. Across Day and Marshall Counties, rising lakes threatened many homes and cabins with sandbagging taking place. Most lakes and rivers across northeast South Dakota were at or near record levels.

1938: A tornado hit McPaul, Iowa, while moving from southeast to northwest. Another tornado raced through Batesville, Illinois, at 60 to 65 mph. Another tornado causing F4 damage killed 10 and injured 12 in St. Clair County, Missouri. This tornado was part of an outbreak that produced four different tornadoes and was responsible for 11 deaths and 42 injuries.

1941 - The most severe blizzard in modern history struck North Dakota and Minnesota. The blizzard hit on a Saturday night while many are traveling, and thus claimed 71 lives. Winds gusted to 75 mph at Duluth MN, and reached 85 mph at Grand Forks ND. Snow drifts twelve feet high were reported in north central Minnesota. A cold front traveling 30 mph crossed Minnesota in just seven hours. (15th-16th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1952: On Reunion Island, some 400 miles east of Madagascar 127.56 inches of rain fell in three days in the spring of 1952. This set a world record for the most rainfall in 72 hours. Also, from the 15th to the 16th, 73.62 inches of rain fell in the 24 hours at Cilaos, La Reunion Island in the South Indian Ocean to set a world record.

1987 - A winter storm in the western U.S. produced heavy snow in central Nevada, with 23 inches reported at Austin. High winds raked the desert areas of southern California and southern Arizona. Winds gusted to 59 mph at Douglas AZ. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - More than one hundred hours of continuous snow finally came to an end at Marquette MI, during which time the city was buried under 43 inches of snow. Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S., with forty-one cities reporting record low temperatures for the date. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather from Alabama to the Middle Atlantic Coast. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 at Virginia Beach VA. Low pressure in southeastern Ontario produced high winds in the northeastern U.S. Winds gusted to 70 mph at Saint Albans VT. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Low pressure crossing the Upper Mississippi Valley produced high winds from the Northern and Central Plains to the Great Lakes Region and Ohio Valley. Winds gusted to 73 mph at Iowa City IA, and wind gusts reached 79 mph at Waukesha WI. Winds of 75 mph were reported around Rapid City SD, with gusts to 100 mph. Up to a foot of snow was reported in western Iowa, western Minnesota, and extreme eastern North Dakota. Blizzard conditions were reported in northeastern North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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SELAH!

The word Selah appears seventy-one times in the Psalms and three times in the book of Habakkuk. Its specific meaning is not known but it implies that the reader, or the one listening to one who is reading the psalm, should pause or rest or stop and think of "this" or "that" – or whatever the writer was addressing. It is illuminating and inspiring when we actually apply it.

David was driven from his palace and people by his rebellious son, Absalom. When he saw his army and his advisors turn against him and follow his son, he wrote the third Psalm.

In desperation and despair, he wrote, "O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me. Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" He felt abandoned, betrayed.

Then he paused, thought for a moment, and said "Selah!" Which must have meant, "Wait a minute, David, and think of this." Think of what, we might ask. Being betrayed? Being pursued? Being driven from family and friends? Being driven from your throne?

Of course not. If he is not to think of those things, then, what is he to think of?

And then he answers his own question: "You, Oh Lord, are a shield around me, You are my glory, and the one who lifts my head high!"

David ran away from his son, Absalom. But in so doing he ran into the arms of the Almighty God. He found his protection from persecution and his source of salvation. There is no one like the Lord! He is our comfort in times of conflict and our protector when others pursue us.

Prayer: May we realize, O Lord, Your eternal power and presence over anything that could or would hurt or harm us. Give us courage to trust in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But you, O Lord, are a shield around me; you are my glory, the one who holds my head high. Psalm 3:3

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: 03.14.25

3 17 39 42 70 1

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$301,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.12.25

4 17 21 28 48 4

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$26,180,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 18 Mins 26 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.14.25

7 16 28 40 48 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 33 Mins 26 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.12.25

7 9 11 12 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$64,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 33 Mins 26 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.12.25

30 31 45 56 69 25

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 2 Mins 26 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.12.25

11 13 28 51 58 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$378,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 2 Mins 26 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

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

SDHSAA Class A State Playoffs Consolation Semifinal

Mobridge-Pollock 50, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 40

Sioux Valley 56, Wagner 46

Semifinal

Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 72, Dakota Valley 66

Sioux Falls Christian 44, Hamlin 33

SDHSAA Class AA State Playoffs Consolation Semifinal

Mitchell 48, T F Riggs High School 38

Spearfish 61, Sioux Falls Jefferson 54

Semifinal

Brandon Valley 72, Sioux Falls Washington 56

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 58, Rapid City Stevens 31

SDHSAA Class B State Playoffs Consolation Semifinal

Lyman 57, Harding County 48

Parkston 56, Deubrook 52

Semifinal

Bennett County 44, Centerville 41

Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 45, Dell Rapids St Mary 43

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

Starmer tells global leaders to 'keep the pressure' on Putin over ceasefire in Ukraine

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has told allies to "keep the pressure" on Russian President Vladimir Putin to back a ceasefire in Ukraine, hailing Ukraine as the "party of peace."

In his opening remarks Saturday, Starmer said Putin will "sooner or later" have to "come to the table."

Unlike the first summit on March 2, the meeting of what Starmer has termed the "coalition of the willing" is being conducted virtually. The call is expected to delve into how countries can help Ukraine militarily and financially as well as gauging support for any future possible peacekeeping mission in the event Putin backs a cessation of hostilities.

"My feeling is that sooner or later he's going to have to come to the table and engage in serious discussion, but — this is a big but for us this morning in our meeting — we can't sit back and simply wait for that to happen," Starmer told leaders while sitting in front of a screen in an office in 10, Downing Street.

"I think that means strengthening Ukraine so they can defend themselves, and strengthening, obviously, in terms of military capability, in terms of funding, in terms of the provision of further support from all of us to Ukraine."

Around 25 countries are expected to be involved in the call, including European partners such as France and Italy, and Ukraine. Leaders from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as officials from NATO and the European Union's executive, are also set to take part. The United States is not represented at the meeting.

Saturday's meeting takes place in the wake of a U.S. proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in Ukraine, which

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has backed. Putin has indicated that he supports a truce in principle but has set out a host of details that need to be clarified before agreeing to a ceasefire.

"President Zelensky, who's with us this morning, has shown once again that Ukraine is the party of peace, because he has agreed to and committed to a 30-day unconditional ceasefire," Starmer said. "Now what we see, and this is centerpiece for our discussions today, is that Putin is the one trying to delay."

The United States has shifted its approach on the war since the return of President Donald Trump to the White House. The change of approach relative to that taken by Trump's predecessor, Joe Biden, became particularly notable after Trump clashed with Zelenskyy on Feb. 28 in the Oval Office.

Trump voiced optimism Friday that Putin, who met with U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff earlier in the week, will back a ceasefire.

"I'm getting from the standpoint about a ceasefire and ultimately a deal some pretty good vibes coming out of Russia," he said.

Starmer has taken the lead, along with French President Emmanuel Macron, in assembling the "coalition of the willing," in part to persuade Trump to maintain support for Kyiv. One outcome has already been a growing acceptance from European countries in particular that they need to do more to ensure their own security, including by increasing their defense spending.

Images from the Elysee showed Macron and his aides listening to Starmer's opening statement in a room of the French presidential palace.

Ukraine, under severe military pressure on parts of the front line three years after Russia's full-scale invasion, has already endorsed the truce proposal. Russia's army has gained battlefield momentum, and analysts say Putin likely will be reluctant to rush into a ceasefire while he feels he has an advantage.

Starmer said that if Putin is "serious about peace," he has to "stop his barbaric attacks" on Ukraine and agree to a ceasefire.

"The world is watching," he said.

One year after interpreter's scandal, Shohei Ohtani enters the Tokyo Series with newfound maturity

By DAVID BRANDT AP Baseball Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The Tokyo Series — a.k.a. the celebration of Shohei Ohtani — begins this week in a festive atmosphere. The Japanese two-way star is among the most beloved athletes in the world and coming off one of the best seasons in the history of Major League Baseball while earning his third MVP for the World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers.

It's easy to forget that almost exactly one year ago, his career was briefly on the rocks.

The Dodgers were playing the San Diego Padres in Seoul, South Korea, last March when a bombshell was revealed: Ohtani's interpreter and close friend Ippei Mizuhara was being criminally investigated for ties to an illegal gambling ring and had stolen a huge amount of money from the baseball star.

Eventually, Mizuhara would plead guilty to bank and tax fraud after he stole nearly \$17 million from the Los Angeles Dodgers player's bank account. He was sentenced to nearly five years in federal prison in February. Ohtani was never implicated in the scandal, but it was the first whiff of controversial news for a player with a squeaky-clean reputation.

Looking back, Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said it was a valuable lesson.

"He's really become his own man," Roberts said. "I think his English has gotten considerably better. He's handling a lot of matters by himself and not having any type of conduit. I think he's opened himself up more to staff, the players, his teammates.

"It's just good to see him become his own man, and I say that in an honest and positive way."

Ohtani is no longer a young man by baseball standards — he turned 30 last July — and is in the prime of a one-of-a-kind career. He revealed last spring he was married to Mamiko Tanaka and the couple is expecting a baby later this year. Combined with the Mizuhara situation, the developments have forced Ohtani to mature, becoming a more well-rounded individual.

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That could serve him well as he deals with the reality of his surgically-repaired body.

Ohtani had surgery during the offseason to repair a torn labrum in his left (non-throwing) shoulder that he suffered during the World Series. He's also trying to return to the pitcher's mound after needing major elbow surgery in 2023 for the second time in his career.

Roberts said Ohtani's improved maturity was noticable earlier this month after the manager suggested that the player slow down his throwing program, instead concentrating on hitting for a few weeks to get the shoulder ready for his designated hitter role in 2025.

Last year, Ohtani might have tried to push through without resting. This year, he took Roberts' advice.

"He's smart, he wants to pitch, he wants to hit, but he really understands that he had a major surgery (on his shoulder) and he's coming off another major surgery in his elbow," Roberts said. "So to be as good as he expects to be, I think there's got to be some sacrifices.

"I think as you get older, you have more experiences, you're more likely to listen to stuff like that."

It's fair to wonder if we've already seen the best of Ohtani, considering it's going to be nearly impossible to recreate last season, when he became the first player in MLB history to have at least 50 homers and 50 stolen bases in the same season.

His stolen base attempts in 2025 figure to be down drastically — particularly early in the season — as he tries to protect his left shoulder. His projected return to the mound is in May, which could eat into his plate appearances later in the season. It'll be a delicate balance, but Ohtani and the Dodgers seem to be on the same page.

"I'm going to let the team dictate that," Ohtani said. "I do want to play as much as possible, as many games as possible, but if the team feels like I should get a break, I'll follow that."

If there's anything we've learned about Ohtani over the past seven years, it's that it would be foolish to put limits on what he can accomplish. The three-time MVP and the Dodgers open the season as favorites to capture a second straight World Series title.

Ohtani hasn't lost his flair for the dramatic, either. In his first spring at-bat after shoulder surgery, he hit an opposite-field homer against Yusei Kikuchi.

"He does not cease to amaze," Roberts said. "Every time Shohei gets up to bat, you've got to watch because something special might happen."

Hamas says it will only release American-Israeli hostage if truce agreement is implemented

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Hamas said Saturday it would only release an American-Israeli and the bodies of four other hostages if Israel implements the existing ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip, calling it an "exceptional deal" aimed at getting the truce back on track.

A senior Hamas official said long-delayed talks over the ceasefire's second phase would need to begin the day of the release and last no longer than 50 days. Israel would also need to stop barring the entry of humanitarian aid and withdraw from a strategic corridor along Gaza's border with Egypt.

Hamas would also demand the release of more Palestinian prisoners in exchange for hostages, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks.

Edan Alexander, 21, who grew up in Tenafly, New Jersey, was abducted from his military base during Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that ignited the war, and is the last living American citizen held in Gaza.

A Palestinian official meanwhile said that Israel's ban on the entry of fuel would prevent the operation of dozens of wells across the southern city of Rafah, reducing the supply of drinking water.

Israel has cast doubt on Hamas' offer

There was no immediate comment from Israel, where government offices were closed for the weekly Sabbath. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office on Friday accused Hamas of "manipulation and psychological warfare" when the offer was initially made, before Hamas spelled out the conditions.

The United States said it presented on Wednesday a proposal to extend the ceasefire a few more weeks

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as the sides negotiate a permanent truce. It said Hamas was claiming flexibility in public while privately making "entirely impractical" demands.

Negotiations continued in Egypt after senior Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya arrived in Cairo on Friday. Egypt and Qatar served as key mediators with Hamas in reaching the ceasefire and have continued to host talks aimed at getting it back on track.

There was no immediate comment from the mediators.

Under the ceasefire agreement reached in January, Israel and Hamas were to begin negotiations over a second phase — in which Hamas would release all the remaining hostages in exchange for a lasting truce — in early February, but so far only preparatory talks have been held.

After the first phase ended at the beginning of this month, Israel said it had agreed to a new U.S. proposal in which Hamas would release half the remaining hostages in return for a vague commitment to negotiate a lasting ceasefire. Hamas rejected that offer, accusing Israel of backtracking on the signed agreement and trying to sabotage the truce.

Palestinian official says no fuel left for water wells

Israel has barred the delivery of food, fuel and other supplies to Gaza's roughly 2 million Palestinians, and cut electricity to the territory, to pressure Hamas to accept the new proposal.

The city of Rafah, on the Gaza-Egypt border, said it could no longer provide fuel needed to pump water from dozens of wells across the city.

Ahmed al-Sufi, head of the Rafah municipality, said fuel shortages caused by the Israeli siege have forced the municipality to "suspend essential services, threatening the lives of thousands and exacerbating the health and environmental crisis."

The first phase of the truce, which took hold on Jan. 19, saw the release of 25 Israeli hostages and the bodies of eight more in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. Israeli forces pulled back to a buffer zone along Gaza's border and allowed a surge of humanitarian aid.

An Israeli official said last month that Israel will not withdraw from the so-called Philadelphi corridor, along the Gaza-Egypt border, as called for in the ceasefire agreement. They have cited the need to combat weapons smuggling.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking 251 hostage. The group is still holding 59 hostages, 24 of whom are believed to be alive, after most of the rest were freed in ceasefire agreements.

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 combatants. Israel says it has killed around 20,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The war has destroyed vast areas of Gaza, displaced most of the population and left nearly everyone dependent on international aid to survive.

Pope enters fifth week of hospital treatment for double pneumonia on positive trajectory

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis entered the fifth week of hospital treatment for double pneumonia on Saturday with signs of recovery continuing on a positive trajectory.

The Vatican announced Friday that it would provide medical updates less frequently, in what it called a positive development. It also has ceased issuing brief morning advisories that the pope had slept well and was starting his day.

Doctors this week said the 88-year-old pope was no longer in critical, life-threatening condition, but have continued to emphasize that his condition remained complex due to his age, lack of mobility and the loss of part of a lung as a young man.

Francis was admitted to the hospital on Feb. 14 after a bout of bronchitis that made it difficult for him to speak. Doctors soon added a diagnosis of double pneumonia and a polymicrobial (bacterial, viral and

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fungal) infection.

The first three weeks of his hospitalization were marked by a rollercoaster of setbacks, including respiratory crises, mild kidney failure and a severe coughing fit.

But medical updates this week have focused on his continued physical and respiratory therapy, as well as the rotation from high-flow oxygen through nostril tubes during the day and a non-invasive ventilation mask at night to help ensure his rest. An X-ray this week confirmed that the infection was clearing.

With little more to report, doctors on Friday canceled a planned medical update. The next is to be issued later Saturday. Doctors have not indicated how much longer Francis will be hospitalized.

The pope this week participated in Lenten spiritual exercises from the hospital, which Vatican officials have said implied a lighter workload. He received a cake and hundreds of messages wishing him well on the 12th anniversary of his papacy Thursday.

The only public sign of life from the pope since his hospitalization was a recorded audio message thanking people for their prayers for his recovery in a weak and labored voice. It was played in St. Peter's Square for the faithful gathered for a nightly recitation of the rosary prayer.

For the last four Sundays, the traditional blessing that the pope delivers from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square has been released as a text.

Threat of tornadoes moves to US South after big storm unleashes winds and fans wildfires

By SEAN MURPHY, RUSS BYNUM and HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — The threat of tornadoes moved east into the Mississippi Valley and Deep South on Saturday, a day after a massive storm system moving across the country unleashed winds that damaged buildings, whipped up dust storms that caused deadly crashes and fanned more than 100 wildfires in several central states.

Multiple tornadoes were reported in Missouri on Friday, just some of the extreme weather that was forecast to affect an area home to more than 100 million people. Winds gusting up to 80 mph (130 kph) were predicted from the Canadian border to Texas, threatening blizzard conditions in colder northern areas and wildfire risk in warmer, drier areas to the south.

The National Weather Service issued multiple tornado and severe thunderstorm warnings early Saturday morning for areas in Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Illinois, Indiana and Texas.

Three people were killed Friday in car crashes during a dust storm in Amarillo County in the Texas Panhandle, according to Sgt. Cindy Barkley of the state's department of public safety. One pileup involved an estimated 38 cars.

"It's the worst I've ever seen," Barkley said, calling the near-zero visibility a nightmare. "We couldn't tell that they were all together until the dust kind of settled."

Evacuations were ordered in some Oklahoma communities as more than 130 fires were reported across the state. The State Patrol said winds were so strong that they toppled several tractor-trailers.

"This is terrible out here," said Charles Daniel, a truck driver hauling a 48-foot (14.6-meter) trailer along Interstate 40 in western Oklahoma. "There's a lot of sand and dirt in the air. I'm not pushing it over 55 mph. I'm scared it will blow over if I do."

Forecasters said the severe storm threat would continue into the weekend with a high chance of tornadoes and damaging winds Saturday in Mississippi and Alabama. Heavy rain could bring flash flooding to some parts of the East Coast on Sunday.

Experts say it's not unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

"What's unique about this one is its large size and intensity," said Bill Bunting of the National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma. "And so what that is doing is producing really substantial impacts over a very large area."

Tornadoes hit amid storm outbreak

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The weather service said at least five tornadoes were reported in Missouri on Friday, including one in the Saint Louis area. Several buildings were damaged in the storm, including a strip mall in Rolla, Missouri, where a tornado was reported Friday afternoon.

The Storm Prediction Center said fast-moving storms could spawn twisters and hail as large as baseballs, but the greatest threat would come from straight-line winds near or exceeding hurricane force, with gusts of 100 mph (160 kph) possible.

"Potentially violent" tornadoes were expected Saturday in parts of the central Gulf Coast and Deep South into the Tennessee Valley, according to the National Weather Service.

The Storm Prediction Center said parts of Mississippi including Jackson and Hattiesburg and areas of Alabama including Birmingham and Tuscaloosa would be at a high risk. Severe storms and tornadoes were also possible across eastern Louisiana, western Georgia, central Tennessee and the western Florida Panhandle.

Wildfires break out amid dry, gusty conditions

Wildfires in the Southern Plains threatened to spread rapidly amid warm, dry weather and strong winds, and evacuations were ordered Friday for some communities in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and New Mexico.

A blaze in Roberts County, Texas, northeast of Amarillo, quickly blew up from less than a square mile (about 2 square kilometers) to an estimated 32.8 square miles (85 square kilometers), the Texas A&M University Forest Service said on X. Crews stopped its advance by Friday evening.

About 60 miles (90 kilometers) to the south, another fire grew to about 3.9 square miles (10 square kilometers) before its advance was halted in the afternoon.

The Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management activated its emergency operations center due to several fast-moving fires that prompted evacuations of the town of Leedey in the western part of the state and in a rural area east of Norman.

Firefighters had been prepositioned in certain areas, which helps authorities jump on blazes early, said Andy James, Oklahoma Forestry Services fire management chief. Firefighting aircraft were also deployed in some parts of Oklahoma and Texas but were generally unable to fly due to low visibility from smoke and dust, he added.

Friday evening, the National Weather Service said a "complex of extremely dangerous fires" was located northeast of Oklahoma City, near Stillwater, and urged some people in the city of about 50,000 to evacuate. Officials issued mandatory evacuation orders via social media that included homes, hotels and a Walmart.

Officials urged people in some areas of central Missouri's Camden County to evacuate due to wildfires, and the State Highway Patrol warned via social media that they were nearing homes and businesses.

Roughly 120 miles (190 kilometers) of Interstate 70 in western Kansas were temporarily shut down due to blowing dust and limited visibility.

High winds also knocked out power to more than 216,000 homes and businesses in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri, according the website poweroutage.us.

Blizzard warnings in Northern Plains

The National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for parts of far western Minnesota and far eastern South Dakota starting early Saturday. Snow accumulations of 3 to 6 inches (7.6 to 15.2 centimeters) were expected, with up to a foot (30 centimeters) possible.

Winds gusting to 60 mph (97 kph) were expected to cause whiteout conditions.

Russia and Ukraine launch aerial attacks amid proposed ceasefire talks

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia and Ukraine traded heavy aerial blows overnight Saturday, with both sides reporting more than 100 enemy drones over their respective territories.

The attack comes less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine,

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Volgograd regional Gov. Andrei Bocharov confirmed that falling drone debris had sparked a fire in the Krasnoarmeysky district of the city close to a Lukoil oil refinery, but provided no further details. Nearby airports temporarily halted flights, local media outlets reported. No casualties were reported.

The Volgograd refinery has been targeted by Kyiv's forces on several occasions since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than three years ago, most recently in a drone attack on Feb. 15.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that it had shot down 126 Ukrainian drones, 64 of which were destroyed over the Volgograd region. Drones were also shot down over the Voronezh, Belgorod, Bryansk, Rostov and Kursk regions, officials said.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Russia had launched a barrage of 178 drones and two ballistic missiles over the country overnight. The barrage was a mixture of Shahed-type attack drones and imitation drones designed to confuse air defenses. Some 130 drones were shot down, while 38 more were lost en route to their targets.

Russia attacked energy facilities, causing significant damage, said Ukraine's private energy company DTEK.

Russia struck energy infrastructure in the Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa regions, DTEK said in a statement on Saturday. Some residents were left without electricity.

"The damage is significant. Energy workers are already working on the ground. We are doing everything possible to restore power to homes as soon as possible," the energy firm said.

Cuba suffers another massive power outage leaving millions in the dark

HAVANA (AP) — Cuba suffered a massive power outage Friday night affecting Havana and the country's provinces that left millions in the dark.

Cuba's Ministry of Energy and Mines said at around 8:15 p.m. local time an outage at the Diezmero substation on the outskirts of Havana had caused "a significant loss of generation in western Cuba and, with it, the failure of the National Electric System."

The ministry said on its account on the social platform X that it is "working on the recovery process."

The streets of Havana were dark and empty, with light coming only from the windows of hotels that had generators. Internet service was affected.

People in provinces as far away as Guantánamo, Artemisa, Santiago de Cuba, and Santa Clara reported experiencing blackouts with just flickers of light.

Earlier, the Electric Union, the state agency that regulates the sector, said in its daily report that peak-hour demand would be around 3,250 megawatts and the deficit would reach around 1,380 megawatts, meaning 42% of the national energy system would be shut down. This figure is not the highest in recent memory.

Cuba suffered three widespread outages in its national energy system at the end of last year, leaving the island in the dark amid a serious economic crisis.

Cuba's power grid has been plagued by frequent outages, with more than half of the country experiencing power cuts during peak hours. The outages are primarily caused by fuel shortages and aging infrastructure. In many parts of the island, electricity is crucial for cooking and water pumping.

Authorities on the island have begun a program to install photovoltaic parks and promised that dozens of them will be ready this year. Blackouts previously prompted anti-government demonstrations in 2021, 2022, and 2024.

Vatican switchboard nuns field growing calls about pope — but no, you can't speak with him directly

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — How's Pope Francis doing? Can you give him my get-well wishes? Can I speak with him directly?

The nuns who operate the Vatican's switchboard are fielding a growing number of calls with questions

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like that as the pope remains hospitalized in Rome.

"They feel like children waiting to know about their father," said Sister Anthony, who runs the operation in a spartan office steps away from St. Peter's. Basilica. "We tell them to pray for him."

The Vatican's central number is public — and the sisters of the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master make sure all who call it get a real person, not the "press 1 for English, 2 for Latin" version of the automation that's become the norm at major institutions and businesses worldwide.

"It's the Vatican's voice — a voice that despite the digitalization of communications, the Vatican wants to preserve as a human voice," said Mother Micaela, the order's mother superior.

The Pious Disciples sisters are part of the 100-year-old Pauline orders, which are focused on communications, including landmark Catholic publishing operations around the world. In spring 1970, they were called to operate the Vatican switchboard and instructed by the then-mother superior to be "a voice that does good because through the phone wire it communicates Christ himself."

Today, often with headsets over their veils, the sisters cover the phones for 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in front of large monitors that show the incoming call's country of origin. Gendarmes, the Vatican's police, take the night shift.

About a dozen sisters hailing from Italy, the Philippines, Poland and elsewhere take calls from around the world, predominantly in Italian, English and Spanish.

Many callers just need to be directed to the right Vatican office or official, and the sisters oblige with the aid of massive yearbooks and directories, as well as a solid knowledge of protocols and a hefty dose of discretion, Sister Anthony said.

Those who call asking for financial help are put through to the Vatican almoner's office, which has provided aid recently to victims of war in Ukraine, floods in Brazil, and homelessness in Naples in southern Italy.

On a recent afternoon, standing by her office chair decorated with a flower-embroidered pillow, Sister Gabriella took a call from a priest inquiring about jointly celebrating a Mass with other priests as part of his jubilee pilgrimage. Since 2025 is a Holy Year for the Catholic Church, with 32 million pilgrims projected to visit Rome, related calls make up a large part of the 50-70 queries the nuns answer daily.

But then there are callers with questions the sisters can't just look up or patch through — those in distress or angry or hopeless.

"We never get a call that's the same as the previous one," said Sister Simona, who's worked the switchboard for 15 years.

Francis has built a reputation for eschewing formalities — from his way of dressing to his personal outreach to the poor and marginalized before his hospitalization — that projects more parish priest than head of state and leader of a global religion with 1.4 billion followers.

So some callers ask the nuns to just put him on the line.

"People of simple faith don't understand that the pope cannot speak with everyone," Sister Gabriella said.

Others need counseling or comfort. The sisters try to provide it within the boundaries of limited time and not being misconstrued as official Vatican spokespeople.

"But if I can give consolation or hope, I think that's OK," said Sister Anthony, who came to the Vatican a year ago from her native Philippines, where she was a provincial superior. "Some calls are very triggering."

Among those calling with concerns about the pope recently was a woman who told Sister Anthony that she is Muslim but likes Francis, and wanted to inquire about his health.

"That's very impressive for me," the sister recalled, while adding that some callers are far less friendly. "Others are angry with the church, so we listen respectfully."

Across the spectrum of callers, the sisters say they're particularly happy to provide a woman's touch.

"Pope Francis often reminds that the church is a mother," Mother Micaela said. "And to be this voice, this sensibility, this feminine approach gives a sense of reliability."

About 1,100 women, religious and lay, work at the Vatican. Francis has recently named a few to top posts, even though the priesthood and diaconate — and thus the majority of the church hierarchy — remain exclusively male.

The switchboard sisters find pride in both their unseen service and the increasing visibility of women at

the Vatican.

"For me it's a blessing to be in one community with the pope and serving the universal church," Sister Anthony said. "Knowing there are more responsibilities for women, we feel very empowered."

Turkey and Israel face mounting tensions over future of post-Assad Syria

By SUZAN FRASER and IBRAHIM HAZBOUN Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — The fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's government has aggravated already tense relations between Turkey and Israel, with their conflicting interests in Syria pushing the relationship toward a possible collision course.

Turkey, which long backed groups opposed to Assad, has emerged as a key player in Syria and is advocating for a stable and united Syria, in which a central government maintains authority over the whole country.

It welcomed a breakthrough agreement that Syria's new interim government signed this week with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, to integrate with the Syrian government and army.

Israel, on the other hand, remains deeply suspicious of Syria's interim president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, pointing to his roots in al-Qaida. It's also wary of Turkey's influence over Damascus and appears to want to see Syria remain fragmented after the country under Assad was turned into a staging ground for its archenemy, Iran, and Tehran's proxies.

"Syria has become a theater for proxy warfare between Turkey and Israel, which clearly see each other as regional competitors," said Asli Aydintasbas, of the Washington-based Brookings Institute.

"This is a very dangerous dynamic because in all different aspects of Syria's transition, there is a clash of Turkish and Israeli positions."

Following Assad's fall, Israel seized territory in southern Syria, which Israeli officials said was aimed at keeping hostile groups away from its border. The new Syrian government and the United Nations have said Israel's incursions violate a 1974 ceasefire agreement between the two countries and have called for Israel to withdraw. Israel has also conducted airstrikes targeting military assets left behind by Assad's forces and has expressed plans to maintain a long-term presence in the region.

Analysts say Israel is concerned over the possibility of Turkey expanding its military presence inside Syria. Since 2016, Turkey has launched operations in northern Syria to push back Syrian Kurdish militias linked to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and maintains influence in the north of the country through military bases and alliances with groups that opposed Assad.

Turkish defense officials have said Turkey and Syria are now cooperating to strengthen the country's defense and security, and that a military delegation will visit Syria next week.

Nimrod Goren, president of the Mitvim Institute, an Israeli foreign policy think tank, said that unlike Turkey, which supports a strong, centralized and stable Syria, Israel at the moment appears to prefer Syria fragmented, with the belief that could better bolster Israel's security.

He said Israel is concerned about al-Sharaa and his Islamist ties, and fears that his consolidated strength could pose what Israel has called a "jihadist threat" along its northern border.

Israeli officials say they will not tolerate a Syrian military presence south of Damascus and have threatened to invade a Damascus suburb in defense of members of the Druze minority sect, who live in both Israel and Syria, after short-lived clashes broke out between the new Syrian security forces and Druze armed factions. The distance from Damascus to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights is about 60 kilometers (37 miles.)

Turkey and Israel once were close allies, but the relationship has been marked by deep tensions under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's more than two-decade rule, despite brief periods of reconciliation. Erdogan is an outspoken critic of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, while Israel has been angered by Erdogan's support for the Hamas militant group, which Israel considers to be a terrorist group.

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Following the war in Gaza, Turkey strongly denounced Israel's military actions, announced it was cutting trade ties with Israel, and joined a genocide case South Africa brought against Israel at the U.N. International Court of Justice.

Aydintasbas said Turkish authorities are now increasingly concerned that Israel is "supportive of autonomy demands from Kurds, the Druze and Alawites."

Erdogan issued a thinly veiled threat against Israel last week, saying: "Those who seek to provoke ethnic and religious (divisions) in Syria to exploit instability in the country should know that they will not be able to achieve their goals."

Last week, factions allied with the new Syrian government — allegedly including some backed by Turkey — launched revenge attacks on members of Assad's Alawite minority sect after pro-Assad groups attacked government security forces on Syria's coast. Monitoring groups said hundreds of civilians were killed.

Erdogan strongly condemned the violence and suggested the attacks were aimed at "Syria's territorial integrity and social stability."

Israel's deputy foreign minister, Sharren Haskel, said the deadly sectarian violence amounted to "ethnic cleansing" by Islamist groups led by "a jihadist Islamist terror group that took Damascus by force and was supported by Turkey."

Israel, Haskel added, was working to prevent a threat along its border from Syria's new "jihadist regime."

Israel's involvement in Syria is deepening, with the country pledging protection and economic aid to the Druze community in southern Syria at a time of heightened sectarian tensions.

The Druze, a small religious sect, are caught between Syria's new Islamist-led government in Damascus and Israel, which many Syrians view as a hostile neighbor leveraging the Druze's plight to justify its intervention in the region. Israel says it sent food aid trucks to the Druze in southern Syria and is allowing some Syrian Druze to cross into the Israeli-controlled part of the Golan Heights to work.

Al-Sharaa was somewhat conciliatory toward Israel in his early statements, saying that he didn't seek a conflict. But his language has become stronger. In a speech at a recent Arab League emergency meeting in Cairo, he said that Israel's "aggressive expansion is not only a violation of Syrian sovereignty, but a direct threat to security and peace in the entire region."

The Brookings Institute's Aydintasbas said the escalating tensions are cause for serious concern.

"Before we used to have Israel and Turkey occasionally engage in spats, but be able to decouple their security relationship from everything else," Aydintasbas said. "But right now, they are actively trying to undermine each other. The question is, do these countries know each other's red lines?"

A report from the Institute for National Security Studies, a think tank led by a former Israeli military intelligence chief, suggested that Israel could benefit from engaging with Turkey, the one regional power with considerable influence over Syria's leadership, to reduce the risk of military conflict between Israel and Syria.

Big March storm fans wildfires and kills 3 as forecasters fear weekend tornado outbreak

By SEAN MURPHY and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A sprawling storm system crossing the U.S. on Friday caused deadly crashes, damaged buildings and fanned more than 100 wildfires in several central states, prompting evacuation orders in some communities. Nearly a half dozen tornadoes were reported in Missouri, and threats of more loomed for the Mississippi Valley into the night and the Deep South on Saturday.

The National Weather Service warned of extreme weather across a vast swath of the country that is home to more than 100 million people. Powerful winds gusting up to 80 mph (130 kph) were forecast from the Canadian border to Texas.

Three people were killed Friday in car crashes caused by a dust storm in the Texas Panhandle, according to Sgt. Cindy Barkley of the state's department of public safety.

"It's been a nightmare out here," Barkley said, adding that it was difficult to assess many of the crashes

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due to the near-zero visibility.

Nearly 150 fires were reported in Oklahoma, Andy James, Oklahoma Forestry Services fire management chief, told KOCO-TV. The State Patrol said on the social platform X that winds toppled several tractor-trailers.

"This is terrible out here," Charles Daniel, a truck driver hauling a 48-foot (14.6-meter) trailer along Interstate 40 in western Oklahoma, said of the high winds. "There's a lot of sand and dirt in the air. I'm not pushing it over 55 mph. I'm scared it will blow over if I do."

Forecasters said the severe storm threat would continue into the weekend with a high chance of tornadoes and damaging winds Saturday in Mississippi and Alabama. Heavy rain could bring flash flooding to some parts of the East Coast on Sunday.

Experts say it's not unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

"What's unique about this one is its large size and intensity," said Bill Bunting of the weather service's Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma. "And so what that is doing is producing really substantial impacts over a very large area."

Tornadoes hit amid storm outbreak

The National Weather Service said at least five tornadoes were reported in Missouri, including one in Saint Louis.

"This is a life threatening situation. Seek shelter now!" the agency warned on X.

The Storm Prediction Center said fast-moving storms could spawn twisters and hail as large as baseballs, but the greatest threat would come from straight-line winds near or exceeding hurricane force, with gusts of 100 mph (160 kph) possible.

A tornado watch was issued until 11 p.m. for central and eastern Missouri, including St. Louis, as well as parts of Illinois and Arkansas.

Other areas at risk included parts of Iowa, Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi.

About 47 million people faced an enhanced to moderate severe storm threat from Madison, Wisconsin, to Birmingham, Alabama.

Forecasters grew increasingly worried that intense thunderstorms farther south will likely bring an even greater tornado threat Saturday.

The Storm Prediction Center said parts of Mississippi including Jackson and Hattiesburg and areas of Alabama including Birmingham and Tuscaloosa will be at a high risk. Severe storms and tornadoes are also possible across eastern Louisiana, western Georgia, central Tennessee and the western Florida Panhandle.

"We have a lot of confidence that we most likely will have a tornado outbreak tomorrow," Storm Prediction Center meteorologist Evan Bentley said in an online briefing.

Several buildings were damaged in the storm, including a strip mall in Rolla, Missouri, where a tornado touched down Friday afternoon.

Wildfires break out amid dry, gusty conditions

Wildfires in the Southern Plains threatened to spread rapidly amid warm, dry weather and strong winds, and evacuations were ordered for some communities in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and New Mexico.

A blaze in Roberts County, Texas, northeast of Amarillo, quickly blew up from less than a square mile (about 2 square kilometers) to an estimated 32.8 square miles (85 square kilometers), the Texas A&M University Forest Service said on X. Crews stopped its advance by the evening.

About 60 miles (90 kilometers) to the south, another fire grew to about 3.9 square miles (10 square kilometers) before its advance was halted in the afternoon.

The Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management activated its emergency operations center due to several fast-moving fires that prompted evacuations of the town of Leedey in the western part of the state and in a rural area east of Norman.

Firefighters had been prepositioned in certain areas, which helps authorities jump on blazes early, James said. Firefighting aircraft were also deployed in some parts of Oklahoma and Texas but were generally unable to fly due to low visibility from smoke and dust, he added.

In the evening, the National Weather Service said a "complex of extremely dangerous fires" was located

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northeast of Oklahoma City, near Stillwater, and urged some people in the city of about 50,000 to evacuate. Officials issued mandatory evacuation orders via social media that included homes, hotels and a Walmart.

Jennifer Thompson, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Norman, described the fire conditions in the central and northern parts of the state as historic and highly anomalous.

Roughly 120 miles (190 kilometers) of Interstate 70 in western Kansas shut down due to blowing dust and limited visibility, and roads in the state's east were closed amid wildfires and smoke.

A dust storm in Amarillo County, Texas, caused a crash involving an estimated 38 cars.

"It's the worst I've ever seen," Barkley said. "We couldn't tell that they were all together until the dust kind of settled."

Officials urged people in some areas of central Missouri's Camden County to evacuate due to wildfires, and the State Highway Patrol warned via social media that they were nearing homes and businesses.

High winds also knocked out power to more than 216,000 homes and businesses in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri, according the website poweroutage.us.

Blizzard warnings in Northern Plains

The National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for parts of far western Minnesota and far eastern South Dakota starting early Saturday. Snow accumulations of 3 to 6 inches (7.6 to 15.2 centimeters) were expected, with up to a foot (30 centimeters) possible.

Winds gusting to 60 mph (97 kph) were expected to cause whiteout conditions. Combined with a light glaze of ice, travel in the area could be treacherous that day, the weather service said.

After Columbia arrests, international college students fall silent

By JOCELYN GECKER AP Education Writer

In the span of a week, a hush has descended on higher education in the United States.

International students and faculty have watched the growing crackdown on pro-Palestinian protesters at Columbia University with apprehension. Some say they are familiar with government crackdowns but never expected them on American college campuses.

The elite New York City university has been the focus of the Trump administration's effort to deport foreigners who took part in pro-Palestinian demonstrations at colleges last year.

Federal immigration agents have arrested two foreigners — one of them a student — who protested last year at Columbia. They've revoked the visa of another student, who fled the U.S. this week. Department of Homeland Security agents also searched the on-campus residences of two Columbia students on Thursday but did not make any arrests there.

GOP officials have warned it's just the beginning, saying more student visas are expected to be revoked in the coming days.

Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism issued a statement reporting "an alarming chill" among its foreign students in the past week.

"Many of our international students have felt afraid to come to classes and to events on campus," said the statement signed by "The Faculty of Columbia Journalism School."

It added: "They are right to be worried."

Alarm at campuses across the country

International students and faculty across the U.S. say they feel afraid to voice opinions or stand out on campus for fear of getting kicked out of the country.

"Green-card-holding faculty members involved in any kind of advocacy that might be construed as not welcome by the Trump administration are absolutely terrified of the implications for their immigration status," said Veena Dubal, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine.

Dubal, who is also general counsel for the American Association of University Professors, says some international faculty are now shying away from discourse, debate, scholarly research and publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals.

"We are literally not hearing their voices. There is a silencing happening that has a huge impact on the

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vibrancy of higher education," Dubal said. "People are very, very scared."

The first arrest

The first publicly known arrest occurred last Saturday, when federal immigration agents arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a prominent Palestinian activist and outspoken graduate student, in the lobby of his apartment building near the Columbia campus.

Khalil has become the face of President Donald Trump's drive to punish what he calls antisemitic and anti-American protests that swept U.S. campuses last year. Khalil, a legal U.S. resident with a green card, is being held in a federal detention complex in Louisiana.

Students and faculty who participated in the protests at Columbia have insisted criticizing Israel and advocating for Palestinian rights isn't antisemitic. Some Jewish students and faculty say the anti-Israel rhetoric made them feel unsafe.

Civil rights advocates say the detention of Khalil is an assault on free speech. But the ongoing arrests send a wider message that disagreeing with the Trump administration could get you kicked out of the country, said Brian Hauss, a senior staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union.

"If the administration can do this to Mr. Khalil because of the speech about Palestine, it can do it to any non-U.S. citizen who takes a position on hot-button global issues, including the war between Russia and Ukraine, the tariffs imposed against U.S. allies or the rise of far-right political parties in Europe," he said.

That worry has spread outside New York.

A Bangladeshi student at Louisiana State University, who agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity for fear of being targeted by authorities, said she has stopped posting about anything political on social media since the first arrest at Columbia. She fears losing her green card.

"I feel like it's not safe for me to share those things anymore because I have a fear that a quote-unquote 'authoritarian regime' is lurking over social media posts," the student said. When she lived in Bangladesh, she said, people could be arrested for posting dissent on social media. "What I fear is a similar situation in the United States."

Advice from colleges and universities

Some schools have been advising international students to be cautious of what they say publicly and to watch what they say online. Several international students on a variety of college campuses said they preferred not to speak with a reporter out of concern for their immigration status.

Administrators at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism have warned students who are not U.S. citizens about their vulnerability to arrest or deportation.

"Nobody can protect you, these are dangerous times," the school's dean, Jelani Cobb, said in a post Thursday on Bluesky explaining the comment. "I went on to say that I would do everything in my power to defend our journalists and their right to report but that none of us had the capacity to stop DHS from jeopardizing their safety."

At the University of California, Davis, the Global Affairs Program has updated its website with guidance on the First Amendment and advice on free speech for non-U.S. citizens.

"While international students and scholars have broad rights to freedom of speech and lawful assembly, please be aware that being arrested or detained by law enforcement may trigger current and/or future immigration consequences," the school says on its website. "Each person should take appropriate care and utilize their best judgment."

Escalations after Khalil's arrest

Immigration authorities' activities at Columbia quickly escalated this week.

Leqaa Kordia, a Palestinian from the West Bank, was arrested by immigration officers for overstaying her student visa, the Department of Homeland Security said Friday. The former student's visa was terminated in January 2022 for "lack of attendance," the department said. She was previously arrested for her involvement in protests at Columbia in April 2024, the agency added.

The Trump administration also revoked the visa of Ranjani Srinivasan, an Indian citizen and doctoral student at Columbia University, for allegedly "advocating for violence and terrorism." Srinivasan opted to

"self-deport" Tuesday, five days after her visa was revoked, the department said.

The president has warned the arrest and attempted deportation of Khalil will be the "first of many." Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters Friday that more student visas were likely to be revoked in the coming days.

A river 'died' overnight in Zambia after an acidic waste spill at a Chinese-owned mine

By RICHARD KILLE and JACOB ZIMBA Associated Press

KITWE, Zambia (AP) — Authorities and environmentalists in Zambia fear the long-term impact of an acid spill at a Chinese-owned mine that contaminated a major river and could potentially affect millions of people after signs of pollution were detected at least 100 kilometers (60 miles) downstream.

The spill happened on Feb. 18 when a tailings dam that holds acidic waste from a copper mine in the north of the country collapsed, according to investigators from the Engineering Institution of Zambia.

The collapse allowed some 50 million liters of waste containing concentrated acid, dissolved solids and heavy metals to flow into a stream that links to the Kafue River, Zambia's most important waterway, the engineering institution said.

"It is an environmental disaster really of catastrophic consequences," said Chilekwa Mumba, an environmental activist who works in Zambia's Copperbelt Province.

China is the dominant player in copper mining in Zambia, a southern African nation which is among the world's top 10 producers of copper, a key component in smartphones and other technology.

Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema called for help from experts and said the leak is a crisis that threatens people and wildlife along the Kafue, which runs for more than 1,500 kilometers (930 miles) through the heart of Zambia.

Authorities are still investigating the extent of the environmental damage.

A river died overnight

An Associated Press reporter visited parts of the Kafue River, where dead fish could be seen washing up on the banks about 100 kilometers (60 miles) downstream from the mine run by Sino-Metals Leach Zambia, which is majority owned by the state-run China Nonferrous Metals Industry Group.

The Ministry of Water Development and Sanitation said the "devastating consequences" also included the destruction of crops along the river's banks. Authorities are concerned that ground water will be contaminated as the mining waste seeps into the earth or is carried to other areas.

"Prior to the 18th of February this was a vibrant and alive river," said Sean Cornelius, who lives near the Kafue and said fish died and birdlife near him disappeared almost immediately. "Now everything is dead, it's like a totally dead river. Unbelievable. Overnight, this river died."

About 60% of Zambia's 20 million people live in the Kafue River basin and depend on it in some way as a source of fishing, irrigation for agriculture and water for industry. The river supplies drinking water to about five million people, including in the capital, Lusaka.

The acid leak at the mine caused a complete shutdown of the water supply to the nearby city of Kitwe, home to an estimated 700,000 people.

Attempts to roll back the damage

The Zambian government has deployed the air force to drop hundreds of tons of lime into the river in an attempt to counteract the acid and roll back the damage. Speed boats have also been used to ride up and down the river, applying lime.

Government spokesperson Cornelius Mweetwa said the situation was very serious and Sino-Metals Leach Zambia would bear the costs of the cleanup operation.

Zhang Peiwen, the chairman of Sino-Metals Leach Zambia, met with government ministers this week and apologized for the acid spill, according to a transcript of his speech at the meeting released by his company.

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"This disaster has rung a big alarm for Sino-Metals Leach and the mining industry," he said. He said it "will go all out to restore the affected environment as quickly as possible."

Discontent with Chinese presence

The environmental impact of China's large mining interests in mineral-rich parts of Africa, which include Zambia's neighbors Congo and Zimbabwe, has often been criticized, even as the minerals are crucial to the countries' economies.

Chinese-owned copper mines have been accused of ignoring safety, labor and other regulations in Zambia as they strive to control its supply of the critical mineral, leading to some discontent with their presence. Zambia is also burdened with more than \$4 billion in debt to China and had to restructure some of its loans from China and other nations after defaulting on repayments in 2020.

A smaller acid waste leak from another Chinese-owned mine in Zambia's copper belt was discovered days after the Sino-Metals accident, and authorities have accused the smaller mine of attempting to hide it.

Local police said a mine worker died at that second mine after falling into acid and alleged that the mine continued to operate after being instructed to stop its operations by authorities. Two Chinese mine managers have been arrested, police said.

Both mines have now halted their operations after orders from Zambian authorities, while many Zambians are angry.

"It really just brings out the negligence that some investors actually have when it comes to environmental protection," said Mweene Himwinda, an environmental engineer who attended the meeting involving Zhang, government ministers, and others. "They don't seem to have any concern at all, any regard at all. And I think it's really worrying because at the end of the day, we as Zambian people, (it's) the only land we have."

Critics warn staff cuts at federal agencies overseeing US dams could put public safety at risk

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

COULEE DAM, Wash. (AP) — Trump administration workforce cuts at federal agencies overseeing U.S. dams are threatening their ability to provide reliable electricity, supply farmers with water and protect communities from floods, employees and industry experts warn.

The Bureau of Reclamation provides water and hydropower to the public in 17 western states. Nearly 400 agency workers have been cut through the Trump reduction plan, an administration official said.

"Reductions-in-force" memos have also been sent to current workers, and more layoffs are expected. The cuts included workers at the Grand Coulee Dam, the largest hydropower generator in North America, according to two fired staffers interviewed by The Associated Press.

"Without these dam operators, engineers, hydrologists, geologists, researchers, emergency managers and other experts, there is a serious potential for heightened risk to public safety and economic or environmental damage," Lori Spragens, executive director of the Kentucky-based Association of Dam Safety Officials, told the AP.

White House spokesperson Anna Kelly said federal workforce reductions will ensure disaster responses are not bogged down by bureaucracy and bloat.

"A more efficient workforce means more timely access to resources for all Americans," she said by email.

But a bureau hydrologist said they need people on the job to ensure the dams are working properly.

"These are complex systems," said the worker in the Midwest, who is still employed but spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of possible retaliation.

Workers keep dams safe by monitoring data, identifying weaknesses and doing site exams to check for cracks and seepage.

"As we scramble to get these screenings, as we lose institutional knowledge from people leaving or early retirement, we limit our ability to ensure public safety," the worker added. "Having people available to respond to operational emergencies is critical. Cuts in staff threaten our ability to do this effectively."

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A federal judge on Thursday ordered the administration to rehire fired probationary workers, but a Trump spokesperson said they would fight back, leaving unclear whether any would return.

The heads of 14 California water and power agencies sent a letter to the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of Interior last month warning that eliminating workers with "specialized knowledge" in operating and maintaining aging infrastructure "could negatively impact our water delivery system and threaten public health and safety."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also operates dams nationwide. Matt Rabe, a spokesman, declined to say how many workers left through early buyouts, but said the agency hasn't been told to reduce its workforce.

But Neil Maunu, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, said it learned more than 150 Army Corps workers in Portland, Oregon, were told they would be terminated and they expect to lose about 600 more in the Pacific Northwest.

The firings include "district chiefs down to operators on vessels" and people critical to safe river navigation, he said.

Their last day is not known. The Corps was told to provide a plan to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management by March 14, Maunu said.

Several other federal agencies that help ensure dams run safely also have faced layoffs and closures. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is laying off 10% of its workforce and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Dam Safety Review Board was disbanded in January.

The cuts come at a time when the nation's dams need expert attention.

An AP review of Army Corps data last year showed at least 4,000 dams are in poor or unsatisfactory condition and could kill people or harm the environment if they failed. They require inspections, maintenance and emergency repairs to avoid catastrophes, the AP found.

Heavy rain damaged the spillway at California's Oroville Dam in 2017, forcing nearly 190,000 residents to evacuate, and Michigan's Edenville Dam breached in storms in 2020, the AP found.

Stephanie Duclos, a Bureau of Reclamation probationary worker fired at the Grand Coulee Dam, said she was among a dozen workers initially terminated. The dam across the Columbia River in central Washington state generates electricity for millions of homes and supplies water to a 27-mile-long (43-kilometer) reservoir that irrigates the Columbia Basin Project.

"This is a big infrastructure," she said. "It's going to take a lot of people to run it."

Some fired employees had worked there for decades but were in a probation status due to a position switch. Duclos was an assistant for program managers who organized training and was a liaison with human resources. The only person doing that job, she fears how others will cover the work.

"You're going to get employee burnout" in the workers left behind, she said.

Sen. Alex Padilla, a California Democrat who pushed a bipartisan effort to ensure the National Dam Safety Program was authorized through 2028, said, "the safety and efficacy of our dams is a national security priority."

"Americans deserve better, and I will work to make sure this administration is held accountable for their reckless actions," Padilla said.

Democrats confront limits of their minority power after bruising shutdown vote

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Democrats were grim Friday as they left Washington after a brutal 10-week stretch that consistently showed the limits of their power in the minority — and culminated with a deeply personal rupture over how to best counter President Donald Trump.

"Everyone made hard decisions, right? Really hard decisions," said Sen. John Hickenlooper of Colorado, of the position in which Democrats found themselves over the last week as they had to decide between voting for a Republican spending bill they hated and shutting down the government. "It's like two horrible

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things, and you can't imagine either one."

Internal dissension burst into the open Thursday evening after Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer announced he would vote to move forward on the Trump-backed spending measure, ensuring its eventual passage even though Democrats said it would give Trump broad discretion on decisions that are traditionally left to Congress.

The intraparty backlash was unusually swift as activists and House Democrats who had uniformly opposed the bill heaped criticism on Schumer. House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Schumer's New York colleague, joined other top party members in a statement saying, "We will not be complicit."

The heat on Schumer came after several other Democratic setbacks in the dizzying weeks since Trump's inauguration, and as Republicans have only become more unified under the president's second term.

Republicans confirmed Trump's entire Cabinet swiftly and with little internal disagreement, denying Democrats the needed votes to block nominees they saw as extreme, including Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Democrats were also unable to stop a series of moves by Trump's administration that would normally be left to Congress under the law, including mass firings across the government. Adding to their challenges, the outlook for future Senate elections grew even gloomier after Democrats in three swing states — the latest being Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire — announced their retirement.

The days leading up to Friday's vote on government spending were particularly bleak after several hours-long meetings that became contentious. Senate Democrats repeatedly left the meetings stone-faced and refusing to talk with reporters. The angst was particularly acute among rank-and-file who have spent years messaging about the perils of shutdowns.

"It's a momentous decision," said Shaheen, one of nine Democrats who voted with Schumer to keep the government open.

The tension was unusually high after Senate Democrats had remained solidly unified through Trump's first term and through most of Democrat Joe Biden's presidency, when Democrats passed several major policy bills and held the Senate against perceived odds in the 2022 midterm elections.

Schumer's move to support the spending legislation put him in the rare position of bucking his party's base. He said that of two bad options, a partial government shutdown was worse because it would give Trump even more control to shut down agencies and there would be "no off-ramp" to get out of it. "I think people realize it's a tough choice," he said.

Reaction to Schumer's decision was mixed. Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who voted not to move forward on the spending measure, wouldn't answer when asked by reporters if she still has confidence in the Democratic leader. But Michigan Sen. Gary Peters, who voted to move forward, said Schumer "is showing leadership" by taking a stand.

Schumer and Democrats in his caucus say they believe they will eventually gain more political ground as members of their party become more motivated, and as they continue to criticize Trump on what they predict will be the economic ramifications of his policies.

On Friday, as he walked into the Senate to vote, Schumer said Democrats will "resume pounding away at Donald Trump" and arguing that he's hurting the middle class economically. "It's brought down his numbers some, and we're going to keep at it, keep at it, keep at it."

Sen. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said that spending vote was a "tough political call," but the party would continue to be unified on the economic message.

"All of our base wants us to fight, and I'm with them," said Welch, who voted not to move forward on the spending measure. But he questioned whether the party ever had any leverage, as Trump was preparing to blame them if there was a shutdown.

Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal said Democrats need to "keep their eyes on the ball."

"The stark reality is, we're the minority in the House, we're the minority in the Senate, and we don't control the White House, so we need to use every tool as nimbly and ingeniously as we can," Blumenthal said. "But most importantly, the growing anger."

Compensating people who are wrongfully convicted is a hard sell in some states

By CHARLOTTE KRAMON Associated Press/Report for America

ATLANTA (AP) — Earlier this year, Michael Woolfolk attended a legislative committee in Georgia where lawmakers considered for a third year whether to compensate the 45-year-old for the 19 years he spent behind bars for a 2002 killing before charges against him were dismissed.

Behind him sat Daryl Lee Clark, also 45, who spent 25 years in prison for a 1998 murder conviction that was vacated over a series of legal and police errors. It was his second attempt to obtain compensation.

Georgia is one of 11 states with no law on compensating people found to have been wrongfully convicted. Individuals seeking compensation take their cases to the legislature, where they seek a lawmaker to sponsor a resolution to pay them. Critics say it mires the process in politics.

Lawmakers have been considering legislation to move the decision to judges, but now it's unclear if that will pass this year.

"We need to take care simply of people who have lost so many years of their lives and their ability to make money, have a job, have a family, create stability," Republican Rep. Katie Dempsey, a sponsor of the Georgia bill, told The Associated Press. "Many are at the age where they would be looking at their savings, and instead, there's none."

Missouri lawmakers have sent the governor a bill updating the state's compensation law, and legislatures in Florida and Oregon also are considering updates of their laws. Montana is considering an update of its expired program and Pennsylvania is among those, like Georgia, looking to create one.

A tricky process

Of the 1,739 people who have filed wrongful compensation claims under state laws since 1989, 1,328 received compensation, according to data from George Washington University law professor Jeffrey Gutman.

That doesn't include cases in states like Georgia, which has no law outlining a process.

Since 1995, 12 Georgians have received compensation and at least 11 more have sought it, according to the Georgia Innocence Project. Even some people with strong cases were turned down because they failed to convince lawmakers they were innocent, advocates say.

The latest version of Georgia's proposal would require individuals to prove their innocence to an administrative law judge. They could receive \$75,000 for each year of incarceration and reimbursement for other costs such as fines and fees. There would be an additional \$25,000 for each year of incarceration awaiting a death sentence.

"The way that the state has treated these individuals by taking away their freedom and liberty and effectively ruining their lives, by wrongfully convicting them and then failing to expeditiously compensate them and help them get back on their feet, doesn't sit well with me," said Democratic Rep. Scott Holcomb, a bill sponsor and former prosecutor.

Whether a person was released based on a finding they were not guilty or based on trial or law enforcement error is often a sticking point. Advocates say those wrongfully convicted deserve compensation either way because they are innocent until proven guilty, but some lawmakers are hesitant to pay them.

Senate Majority Whip Randy Robertson, a former sheriff's deputy, was the lead opponent last year of individual requests for compensation and an effort to pass a compensation law. He takes issue with the term "exonerated," which he says is too often used in cases where convictions are overturned based on trial errors.

Robertson this year introduced a different compensation bill with stricter rules that didn't get a hearing.

Other states consider changes

Florida is the only state that prevents exonerees with previous felony convictions from qualifying for compensation, according to an analysis by the advocacy group The Innocence Project.

Florida Republican state Sen. Jennifer Bradley wants to change that. For the third year she is sponsoring a bill to end the rule, arguing that an unrelated charge should not prevent people who were wronged by

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the state from being compensated for their “lost liberty.”

A bill in the Oregon Legislature would update a law passed in 2022 that provides exonerees \$65,000 for each year they were wrongfully imprisoned, on the condition they file a successful petition proving their innocence. The new bill comes amid criticism that few exonerees have received compensation since the law took effect.

Missouri’s legislature recently passed and sent to the governor a measure expanding a restitution program for people wrongly convicted of felonies. The legislation would raise compensation from \$100 to \$179 per day of imprisonment and remove a requirement that innocence is proven by DNA analysis.

Many Georgia lawmakers have said they don’t want to play judge and hope the state process changes. If the legislature doesn’t pass a bill before adjourning April 4, Woolfolk and Clark may not be compensated this year. The House overwhelmingly approved five requests that could fail in the Senate.

Starting a career at 45 is hard, Woolfolk said, and he missed his children’s upbringing. He said he is sick of trying to convince lawmakers to help him.

Clark, who does not have children, got a standing ovation from House lawmakers last year who voted to compensate him.

This year, his “hope and prayers” are that he also gains some help.

Appeals court says Louisiana can carry out the state’s first nitrogen gas execution next week

By SARA CLINE Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Louisiana’s first execution using nitrogen gas is set to move forward as planned next week after a federal appeals court on Friday vacated a preliminary injunction granted by a lower judge.

With a March 18 date hastily nearing, attorneys for Jessie Hoffman Jr. told The Associated Press that they plan on immediately taking the legal matter to the U.S. Supreme Court in the hopes of halting the execution.

State officials, including Attorney General Liz Murrill, applauded the appeals court’s decision saying Louisiana is long overdue in delivering justice promised to the families of victims.

Hoffman’s attorney, Cecelia Kappel, denounced the decision, saying the “new execution method is likely to cause Jessie to suffer psychological terror and a torturous death.”

Under the state’s new procedure, Hoffman will be strapped to a gurney and forced to breathe pure nitrogen gas through a full-face respirator mask. The protocol is nearly identical to that of Alabama, the first state to use nitrogen hypoxia as a method of execution and has carried out four such executions.

If the death penalty is carried out then Hoffman, who was convicted of the 1996 murder of Mary Elliott in New Orleans, would be Louisiana’s first execution in 15 years.

Hoffman’s attorneys say the new execution method is a violation of the Constitution, describing it as cruel and unusual punishment. During a hearing last week, multiple medical experts testified that they believe the method to be torturous, with one expert comparing the method to causing the same sensation and emotional terror as drowning.

Hoffman’s attorneys pointed to nitrogen hypoxia executions in Alabama, where inmates appeared to shake and gasp to varying degrees during their executions, according to media witnesses. Alabama officials said the shaking and gasping are involuntary movements associated with oxygen deprivation.

Attorneys for Louisiana remain adamant that nitrogen hypoxia is seemingly painless.

Following last week’s hearing, U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick issued a preliminary injunction stopping the state from moving forward with the execution. In her ruling, Dick said the court is tasked with answering the ultimate question of whether or not the execution method of nitrogen hypoxia is a cruel and unusual punishment, which would be a violation of the Eighth Amendment. She went on to say that it would not be a matter of whether Hoffman would be executed, but rather how.

During the hearing, Hoffman requested that he be put to death using a “humane” method, specifically

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asking for death by a firing squad or a drug cocktail typically used for physician-assisted death. The only approved execution methods in Louisiana are nitrogen hypoxia, lethal injection and electrocution.

On Friday the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans said the state could move forward with the execution using nitrogen gas. Judge James Ho and Judge Andrew Oldham, both appointees of President Donald Trump, ruled to vacate the lower court's preliminary injunction.

Among the reasons for their decision, the judges pointed to the state's argument that Hoffman's requested execution method of a firing squad would be "more painful" than nitrogen hypoxia.

"Reasonable minds can differ on the proper understanding of the Eighth Amendment in certain cases, but surely we can all agree that it does not require State officials to favor more painful methods of execution over less painful ones," the court wrote.

Judge Catharina Haynes, an appointee of former President George W. Bush, wrote a dissent saying the courts need more time for litigation.

"Obviously that cannot be done once he (Hoffman) is dead," she wrote.

If the execution occurs as scheduled, Louisiana would be the second state to use nitrogen hypoxia.

Alabama first used the method of nitrogen hypoxia to put Kenneth Eugene Smith to death last year, marking the first time a new method had been used in the U.S. since lethal injection was introduced in 1982.

Over recent decades, the number of executions nationally has declined sharply amid legal battles, a shortage of lethal injection drugs and waning public support for capital punishment. That has led a majority of states to either abolish or pause carrying out the death penalty.

Last year, Louisiana lawmakers expanded the state's approved methods to carry out the death penalty to include nitrogen hypoxia, sparking a renewed push to resume executions in the state.

Murrill told the AP in February that she expects at least four people will be executed this year. There are 56 people on Louisiana's death row.

Head of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has been killed, Iraqi prime minister says

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — The head of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has been killed in Iraq in an operation by members of the Iraqi national intelligence service along with U.S.-led coalition forces, the Iraqi prime minister announced Friday.

"The Iraqis continue their impressive victories over the forces of darkness and terrorism," Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said in a statement posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Abdallah Maki Mosleh al-Rifai, or "Abu Khadija," was "deputy caliph" of the militant group and as "one of the most dangerous terrorists in Iraq and the world," the statement said.

On his Truth Social platform Friday night, U.S. President Donald Trump said: "Today the fugitive leader of ISIS in Iraq was killed. He was relentlessly hunted down by our intrepid warfighters" in coordination with the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government.

"PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH!" Trump posted.

A security official said the operation was carried out by an airstrike in Anbar province, in western Iraq. A second official said the operation took place Thursday night but that al-Rifai's death was confirmed Friday. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

The announcement came on the same day as the first visit by Syria's top diplomat to Iraq, during which the two countries pledged to work together to combat IS.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein said at a news conference that "there are common challenges facing Syrian and Iraqi society, and especially the terrorists of IS." He said the officials had spoken "in detail about the movements of ISIS, whether on the Syrian-Iraqi border, inside Syria or inside Iraq" during the visit.

Hussein referred to an operations room formed by Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon at a recent meeting in Amman to confront IS, and said it would soon begin work.

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The relationship between Iraq and Syria is somewhat fraught after the fall of former Syrian President Bashar Assad. Al-Sudani came to power with the support of a coalition of Iran-backed factions, and Tehran was a major backer of Assad. The current interim president of Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa, was previously known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani and fought as an al-Qaida militant in Iraq after the U.S. invasion of 2003, and later fought against Assad's government in Syria.

But Syrian interim Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shibani focused on the historic ties between the two countries.

"Throughout history, Baghdad and Damascus have been the capitals of the Arab and Islamic world, sharing knowledge, culture and economy," he said.

Strengthening the partnership between the two countries "will not only benefit our peoples, but will also contribute to the stability of the region, making us less dependent on external powers and better able to determine our own destiny," he said.

The operation and the visit come at a time when Iraqi officials are anxious about an IS resurgence in the wake of the fall of Assad in Syria.

While Syria's new rulers - led by the Islamist former insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - have pursued IS cells since taking power, some fear a breakdown in overall security that could allow the group to stage a resurgence.

The U.S. and Iraq announced an agreement last year to wind down the military mission in Iraq of an American-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group by September 2025, with U.S. forces departing some bases where they have stationed troops during a two-decade-long military presence in the country.

When the agreement was reached to end the coalition's mission in Iraq, Iraqi political leaders said the threat of IS was under control and they no longer needed Washington's help to beat back the remaining cells.

But the fall of Assad in December led some to reassess that stance, including members of the Coordination Framework, a coalition of mainly Shiite, Iran-allied political parties that brought current Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani to power in late 2022.

Appeals court lifts blocks on Trump's orders restricting diversity, equity and inclusion programs

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An appeals court on Friday lifted a block on executive orders seeking to end government support for diversity, equity and inclusion programs, handing the Trump administration a win after a string of setbacks defending President Donald Trump's agenda from dozens of lawsuits.

The decision from a three-judge panel allows the orders to be enforced as a lawsuit challenging them plays out. The appeals court judges halted a nationwide injunction from U.S. District Judge Adam Abelson in Baltimore.

Two of the judges on the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals wrote that Trump's anti-DEI push could eventually raise concerns about First Amendment rights but said the judge's sweeping block went too far.

"My vote should not be understood as agreement with the orders' attack on efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion," Judge Pamela Harris wrote. Two of the panel's members were appointed by President Barack Obama, while the third was appointed by Trump.

Abelson had found the orders likely violated free-speech rights and are unconstitutionally vague since they don't have a specific definition of DEI.

Trump signed an order his first day in office directing federal agencies to terminate all "equity-related" grants or contracts. He signed a follow-up order requiring federal contractors to certify that they don't promote DEI.

The city of Baltimore and other groups sued the Trump administration, arguing the executive orders are an unconstitutional overreach of presidential authority.

The Justice Department has argued that the president was targeting only DEI programs that violate

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federal civil rights laws. Government attorneys said the administration should be able to align federal spending with the president's priorities.

Abelson, who was nominated by Democratic President Joe Biden, agreed with the plaintiffs that the executive orders discourage businesses, organizations and public entities from openly supporting diversity, equity and inclusion.

Efforts to increase diversity long have been under attack by Republicans who contend the measures threaten merit-based hiring, promotion and educational opportunities for white people. Supporters say the programs help institutions meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations while addressing the lasting impacts of systemic racism.

Their purpose was to foster equitable environments in businesses and schools, especially for historically marginalized communities. Researchers say DEI initiatives date back to the 1960s but they expanded in 2020 during increased calls for racial justice.

In addition to the mayor and the Baltimore City Council, the plaintiffs include the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, the American Association of University Professors and the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, which represents restaurant workers across the country.

'Scum,' 'crooked' elections and 'corrupt' media. What Trump said inside the Justice Department

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

President Donald Trump delivered what sounded like one of his typical meandering, grievance-laden campaign speeches on Friday, but it was where he did it — inside the U.S. Department of Justice — that mattered.

The appearance marked Trump's clearest exertion yet of personal control over the country's federal law enforcement apparatus, which is normally run by appointees who keep at least an arm's length from the president to avoid the appearance that politics are governing prosecutorial decisions. Trump, instead, embraced the notion of the agency as his own personal tool of vengeance.

"As the chief law enforcement officer in our country, I will insist upon and demand full and complete accountability for the wrongs and abuses that have occurred," Trump told the audience, with Attorney General Pam Bondi (who is technically the country's chief law enforcement officer) and FBI Director Kash Patel in the audience.

One of Trump's favorite campaign songs, "YMCA," played after he wrapped up his nearly hourlong address inside the department's ceremonial Great Hall.

Here's a look at what Trump said, what the reality is and the significance of his words.

Enemies

"The same scum you have been dealing with for years. Guys like Andrew Weissman, deranged Jack Smith. There's a guy named Norm Eisen, I don't even know what he looks like. His name is Norm Eisen of CREW; he's been after me for nine years."

Trump named lawyers and a legal nonprofit that he has tangled with over the years, which could serve as a roadmap for people he would like prosecuted by the officials in the room with him.

Trump named lawyer Eisen, but misidentified him as running the nonprofit Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, which unsuccessfully sued to block Trump from running for reelection due to his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Eisen was with the organization during part of Trump's first term but has since left.

Trump rained vitriol on CREW as well as Eisen, who remains staunchly opposed to Trump and co-founded an online publication, The Contrarian, to take on the new administration. Still, Trump claimed Eisen has been "violent," which is laughable. He's a lawyer who's never used physical force toward Trump.

Weissman was lead prosecutor for the investigation into the Trump campaign's dealings with Russia during Trump's first term. One of the people Weissman convicted in that probe, Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn, watched the speech and was warmly introduced by Trump himself.

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Trump also name-checked Smith, who was the special prosecutor who filed charges against Trump for his attempt to overturn the 2020 election and for hoarding classified documents at his Florida resort.

Notably, the president didn't name a single possible crime these lawyers or CREW committed other than opposing him.

Media

"I believe that CNN and MSNBC, who literally write 97.6% bad about me, are political arms of the Democrat Party. And in my opinion, they are really corrupt and they are illegal. What they do is illegal."

This was a remarkable moment — the president of the United States telling his Department of Justice that he believes the media are illegal because they write bad things about him.

Needless to say, CNN and MSNBC (which Trump tweaked by changing its initials) are not actually part of the Democratic Party. No matter if you think their coverage leans in that direction, there's no actual, legal connection.

Even if there was, the First Amendment allows political groups to criticize a rival politician. It certainly allows the media to do so, regardless of any perceived ideological bias.

2020 election

"What a difference a rigged and crooked election had on our country, when you think about it. And the people who did this to us should go to jail. They should go to jail."

This is one of Trump's favorite subjects — how he didn't really lose the 2020 election. He did, though.

Trump has claimed falsely that widespread fraud cost him the 2020 election, but the evidence says otherwise. Trump lost dozens of court challenges, including some before judges he appointed, his own attorney general at the time said there was no evidence of fraud on a scale that could have tipped the election, and reviews, recounts and audits in the battleground states where Trump contested his loss all affirmed Biden's win.

It's unclear who "the people who did this" are in Trump's threat, but when a president says someone should go to jail while addressing the Department of Justice — especially about something that never happened — that's significant.

The FBI

"I pardoned hundreds of political prisoners who had been grossly mistreated. We removed the senior FBI officials who misdirected resources to send SWAT teams after grandmothers and J6 hostages. And it was a great honor for me, a great honor to fire James Comey."

Trump claimed he'd end what he called "weaponization" of the Department of Justice, but then quickly boasted of pardoning those who attacked the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overturn his election loss on Jan. 6.

Trump also boasted of firing Comey, who was the FBI director in his first term. It was one of Trump's most controversial acts then, but seems almost quaint now. The man whom Trump nominated to replace Comey, Christopher Wray, stepped aside in December after years of being targeted by Trump, who has now replaced him with Patel, a loyalist who never worked in the bureau.

The president boasting of firing top FBI officials is a clear signal to those inside the Department of Justice.

Judges

"They wanted to scare the hell out of the judges. And they do it. How do you stop it? ... What do you do to get rid of it? You convict Trump."

Trump has personally singled out judges who ruled against him for attack since he first ran for president in 2016. But, remarkably, Trump implied that the adverse legal decisions against him have been because his opponents are threatening judges.

In reality, the judge who presided over Trump's criminal in New York, Juan Merchan, received threats after Trump repeatedly attacked him and his family. Judicial organizations have reported a sharp rise in threats as Trump increasingly complained the legal system was "rigged" against him as he fought four separate prosecutions during his campaign.

Trump did accurately note negative coverage that conservative justices on the nation's highest court have received over some of their rulings and conduct. He has reason to want those justices to be sympathetic

to him because several of his administration's initiatives are tangled up in litigation headed straight to the Supreme Court.

Senate approves funding bill hours before shutdown deadline, sending to Trump for signature

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate passed a Republican-led spending bill Friday hours before a government shutdown, overcoming sharp Democratic opposition to the measure and sending it to President Donald Trump to be signed into law.

The essentially party-line vote, 54-46, didn't give the full picture of gnawing Democratic angst over how to confront the Trump administration as its Department of Government Efficiency fires federal workers and dismantles operations. Democrats argued over whether to fight even risking a shutdown and fumed that Republicans drafted a measure that included little of their input, shortchanging health care, housing and other priorities.

But in the end, enough of the Democratic senators decided a government shutdown would be even worse, and backed Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer's strategy to allow the bill to come forward.

"A shutdown will allow DOGE to shift into overdrive," Schumer said. "Donald Trump and Elon Musk would be free to destroy vital government services at a much faster rate."

Democrats were confronted with two painful options: allowing passage of a bill they believe gives President Donald Trump vast discretion on spending decisions or voting no and letting funding lapse. All told, 10 Democrats voted to break the party's filibuster to advance the bill to a final vote. On final passage, two Democrats supported the bill, and one Republican, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, opposed it. It funds the government for another six months.

Schumer gave members of his caucus days to vent their frustration about the options before them, but abruptly switched course and made clear on the eve of voting that he would not allow a government shutdown. His move outraged many in the party who want to fight the Trump agenda, but gave senators room to side with Republicans and allow the continuing resolution, often described as a CR, to advance.

Democrats from all corners looked to pressure senators to kill the bill. House members wrote letters, posted on social media and held press conferences in the hours before the vote.

"The American people sent Democrats to Congress to fight against Republican dysfunction and chaos," said a letter from 66 House Democrats to Schumer.

House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries and his team dashed back to the Capitol urging senators to block the bill and negotiate a true compromise with Republicans. Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi called the bill "unacceptable."

Some Democrats also argued that Republicans would take the blame for a shutdown, given they controlled all the levers of power in Congress and the White House.

"If you refuse to put forward an offer that includes any Democratic input and you don't get Democratic votes, that's on Republicans," said Sen. Patty Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

In contrast, Schumer picked up one unexpected nod of support — from Trump himself, who just a day earlier was gearing up to blame Democrats for any shutdown.

"Congratulations to Chuck Schumer for doing the right thing — Took 'guts' and courage!" the president posted on his social media account.

Congress has been unable to pass the annual appropriations bills designed to fund the government, so they've resorted to passing short-term extensions instead. The legislation before the Senate is the third such continuing resolution for the current fiscal year, now nearly half over.

The legislation would fund the federal government through the end of September. It would trim non-defense spending by about \$13 billion from the previous year and increase defense spending by about \$6 billion, which are marginal changes when talking about a topline spending level of nearly \$1.7 trillion.

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The Republican-led House passed the spending bill Tuesday and then adjourned. The move left senators with a decision to either take it or leave it. And while Democrats pushed for a vote on a fourth short-term extension, GOP leadership made clear that option was a non-starter.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., and others made the case that any blame for a shutdown would fall squarely on Democrats. And House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Republicans stood together to get the job done.

Meanwhile, some House Democrats lashed out at their colleagues across the Capitol after the vote. "The constituents I represent need Democrats to stand up to this rogue administration," said Rep. Steven Horsford, D-Nev. "What they got from Senate Democrats today was capitulation instead."

But Schumer said Trump would seize more power during a shutdown, because it would give the administration the ability to deem whole agencies, programs and personnel non-essential, furloughing staff with no promise they would ever be rehired.

Democrats were critical of the funding levels in the bill. But they are more worried about the discretion the bill gives the Trump administration on spending decisions. Many Democrats are referring to the measure as a "blank check" for Trump.

Spending bills typically come with specific funding directives for key programs, but hundreds of those directives fall away under the continuing resolution passed by the House. So the administration will have more leeway to decide where the money goes.

For example, a Democratic memo said the bill would allow the administration to steer money away from combating fentanyl and instead use it on mass deportation initiatives.

Several amendments to the bill failed, but one to eliminate funding for DOGE drew support from a Republican, Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska.

The spending bill before the Senate is separate from the GOP effort to extend tax cuts for individuals passed in Trump's first term and to partially pay for them with spending cuts elsewhere in government.

That second package will be developed in the months ahead, but it was clearly part of the political calculus. "You're looking at a one-two punch, a very bad CR, then a reconciliation bill coming down, which will be the final kick in the teeth for the American people," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., said the Democratic arguments for voting against the bill were hypocritical because they were essentially calling for shutting down the government to protect the government.

"Democrats are fighting to withhold the paychecks of air traffic controllers, our troops, federal custodial staff," Cotton said. "They can't be serious."

Senators also unanimously approved a separate bill to fix an unexpected provision in the package that would require the District of Columbia to revert to 2024 budget levels, a cut of some \$1.1 billion, even though the district raises most of its own money. That bill, which now goes to House, would allow spending at 2025 levels.

SpaceX launches a new crew to the space station to replace NASA's stuck astronauts

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The replacements for NASA's two stuck astronauts launched to the International Space Station on Friday night, paving the way for the pair's return after nine long months.

Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams need SpaceX to get this relief team to the space station before they can check out. Arrival is set for late Saturday night.

NASA wants overlap between the two crews so Wilmore and Williams can fill in the newcomers on happenings aboard the orbiting lab. That would put them on course for an undocking next week and a splashdown off the Florida coast, weather permitting.

The duo will be escorted back by astronauts who flew up on a rescue mission on SpaceX last September alongside two empty seats reserved for Wilmore and Williams on the return leg.

Reaching orbit from NASA's Kennedy Space Center, the newest crew includes NASA's Anne McClain

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and Nichole Ayers, both military pilots; and Japan's Takuya Onishi and Russia's Kirill Peskov, both former airline pilots. They will spend the next six months at the space station, considered the normal stint, after springing Wilmore and Williams free.

"Spaceflight is tough, but humans are tougher," McClain said minutes into the flight.

As test pilots for Boeing's new Starliner capsule, Wilmore and Williams expected to be gone just a week or so when they launched from Cape Canaveral on June 5. A series of helium leaks and thruster failures marred their trip to the space station, setting off months of investigation by NASA and Boeing on how best to proceed.

Eventually ruling it unsafe, NASA ordered Starliner to fly back empty last September and moved Wilmore and Williams to a SpaceX flight due back in February. Their return was further delayed when SpaceX's brand new capsule needed extensive battery repairs before launching their replacements. To save a few weeks, SpaceX switched to a used capsule, moving up Wilmore and Williams' homecoming to mid-March.

Already capturing the world's attention, their unexpectedly long mission took a political twist when President Donald Trump and SpaceX's Elon Musk vowed earlier this year to accelerate the astronauts' return and blamed the former administration for stalling it.

Retired Navy captains who have lived at the space station before, Wilmore and Williams have repeatedly stressed that they support the decisions made by their NASA bosses since last summer. The two helped keep the station running — fixing a broken toilet, watering plants and conducting experiments — and even went out on a spacewalk together. With nine spacewalks, Williams set a new record for women: the most time spent spacewalking over a career.

A last-minute hydraulics issue delayed Wednesday's initial launch attempt. Concern arose over one of the two clamp arms on the Falcon rocket's support structure that needs to tilt away right before liftoff. SpaceX later flushed out the arm's hydraulics system, removing trapped air.

The duo's extended stay has been hardest, they said, on their families — Wilmore's wife and two daughters, and Williams' husband and mother. Besides reuniting with them, Wilmore, a church elder, is looking forward to getting back to face-to-face ministering and Williams can't wait to walk her two Labrador retrievers.

"We appreciate all the love and support from everybody," Williams said in an interview earlier this week. "This mission has brought a little attention. There's goods and bads to that. But I think the good part is more and more people have been interested in what we're doing" with space exploration.

Jessie Holmes says his dogs deserve all the credit for his 'magical' first Iditarod win

By BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Bundled-up well wishers lined a street along the Bering Sea coastline in the early morning darkness Friday, cheering musher Jessie Holmes as he won Alaska's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

Holmes pumped his fist as he ran alongside his sled with a headlamp beaming from his forehead, as he and his 10-dog team finished the 1,128-mile (1,815-kilometer) race across the Alaska wilderness in the Gold Rush town of Nome. The distance for this year's running was the longest in the Iditarod's 53-year history.

He said his win felt "magical" and he gave credit — and hugs — to his dogs, whom he described as family. Who is Jessie Holmes?

Holmes lives in the Interior Alaska community of Nenana, about 300 miles (480 kilometers) north of Anchorage, where he is a carpenter and lives a subsistence lifestyle. He found reality TV fame as a yearslong cast member of "Life Below Zero," a National Geographic program that documents the struggles of people living in remote parts of Alaska.

Originally from Alabama, Holmes has lived since 2004 in Alaska, where he found a passion for the wilderness and competing in sled dog races.

This year was Holmes' eighth Iditarod, and he has now finished in the top 10 six times, including third last year and in 2022. In 2018, his first Iditarod, he won Rookie of the Year honors with his seventh-place finish.

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His win this year comes on the heels of adversity. He was helping repair buildings in the remote community of Golovin after the region was walloped by the remnants of Typhoon Merbok in 2022 when part of a house fell on him. He suffered several broken ribs and a broken wrist and was forced to train that winter with one arm, the Anchorage Daily News reported.

His dog team

Holmes said he bred the 10 dogs that took him to victory, adding that he had held each of them in his hands as puppies.

"I'm really proud of these dogs and I love them. And they did it. They deserve all the credit," he said.

He lavished particular praise on his lead dogs, Hercules and Polar, who were adorned at the finish with floral wreaths.

"These are the best in the world, right here," he said, smiling, his arms draped around them.

The trail

A lack of snow this year forced changes to the route and starting point of what is typically a 1,000-mile (1,609-kilometer) race.

There are checkpoints along the route for rest or refueling. Mushers feed their dogs and put out straw for them to lay down, and catch some sleep themselves if they can. Mushers' sleds must be able to carry and provide cover to injured or tired dogs, in addition to equipment and food. They must carry adequate emergency food for their dogs when leaving a checkpoint, as well as routine meals and snacks.

The temperature in Nome when Holmes finished was -6 degrees Fahrenheit (-21 Celsius). He crossed the finish line after 10 days, 14 hours, 55 minutes and 41 seconds of racing. He came in about three hours ahead of the second place finisher, Matt Hall. Paige Drobny finished third.

"I'll tell you one thing: I damn sure ain't tired," Holmes said to a chorus of cheering fans. "It's hard to put into words, but it's a magical feeling, and it's not about this moment now. It's about all those moments along the trail."

He described witnessing a beautiful sunset, the moon shimmering on the snow and the northern lights, and said he had time to ponder his mentors and race winners who had died, "looking down on me and telling me I could do it. I just wanted to join that club with them. I've wanted that for a long time."

What does Holmes win?

Holmes is taking home \$57,200 for his victory, in addition to awards including \$4,500 worth of gold nuggets and 25 pounds of fresh salmon for finishing first in earlier stages.

He described the race as "10 quality days. I got my money's worth."

Thousands converging on Serbia's capital for a major rally that tests Vucic's populist government

By JOVANA GEC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Tens of thousands of people swarmed the streets in Serbia's capital Belgrade on Friday, staging a joyful prelude to a major anti-government rally on the weekend and dealing a blow to populist President Aleksandar Vucic.

The citizens of Belgrade came out to welcome thousands of university students who converged on Belgrade from across the country for the rally planned for Saturday that is expected to draw even more people.

Saturday's protest is seen as a culmination of months of anti-graft demonstrations in the Balkan country that have posed the biggest challenge so far for Vucic's decade-long firm grip on power in Serbia.

Flares, fireworks and flag-waving crowds filled the downtown streets in stark contrast to weeks of fear-mongering spread by Vucic's populists with an aim to dissuade people from attending the rally Saturday.

The autocratic leader has repeatedly warned that violence is planned at the rally and threatened arrests over any incidents. Vucic's supporters have been camping in the city center, fueling fears of clashes with the protesters.

At a news conference on Friday evening, a defiant Vucic again said that authorities have received multiple reports of alleged planned unrest and described Saturday's rally as "illegal."

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Vucic reiterated claims that Western intelligence services were behind the protests with an aim to oust him from power.

"I do not accept blackmail, I will not agree to pressure, I am the president of Serbia and I won't allow the street to set the rules," Vucic said.

Students have led the nationwide anti-graft movement, which started after a concrete canopy collapsed at a train station and killed 15 people in Serbia's north more than four months ago.

Earlier, police detained six opposition activists on suspicion of "preparing actions against the constitutional order and security" a day after an alleged recording of their meeting was broadcast on pro-government television stations on Thursday.

"The Serbian state will do everything to secure peace," Vucic said. "Those disrupting peace will be arrested and severely punished."

The protesters didn't seem to care. Marko Vukovic, a student from Belgrade said he came to "support my friends, colleagues and all the citizens who think for themselves, to fight for a more just Serbia."

Many people cried, laughed and screamed with joy. Protesting students have struck a cord among the citizens who are disillusioned with politicians and have lost faith in the state institutions.

Previous student-led rallies in other Serbian cities have been peaceful while drawing huge crowds.

In Belgrade, tensions soared after Vucic's supporters, including former paramilitary fighters, set up a camp in a park outside the presidency building. Tractors were parked around the camp on Friday.

Authorities said that the parliament building across the street would be locked for the next three days because of security reasons. Railway traffic was suspended, along with many bus links to Belgrade.

Responding to tensions, the European Union's mission in Serbia said on Friday that "freedom of assembly is a fundamental right" and the safety of participants and institutions must be ensured.

"Violence must be avoided," the EU said.

Serbia is formally seeking EU membership, but the governing populists have been accused of stifling democratic freedoms while strengthening relations with Russia and China.

Gene Hackman and Betsy Arakawa's dog likely died of dehydration and starvation, report says

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and SUSAN MONTTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — An examination of the dog found dead along with actor Gene Hackman and his wife in their Santa Fe home shows dehydration and starvation were likely what led to the animal's demise.

A report obtained by The Associated Press from the state Department of Agriculture's veterinary lab details partial mummification and noted that while the severe decomposition could have obscured changes in the organs, there was no evidence of infectious disease, trauma or poisoning that could have resulted in death.

The report noted that the dog's stomach was mostly empty except for small amounts of hair and bile.

The kelpie mix named Zinna was one of the couple's three dogs. It was found dead in a crate in a bathroom closet near Betsy Arakawa's body, while two other dogs survived.

Authorities confirmed last week that Hackman died of heart disease with complications from Alzheimer's disease about a week after a rare, rodent-borne disease — hantavirus pulmonary syndrome — took the life of his wife. Hackman, in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's, apparently was unaware that his wife was dead.

Hackman was found in the home's entryway, and Arakawa was found in a bathroom. Like the dog, their 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).

While both deaths were ruled to be from natural causes, the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office is finishing up the investigation by tying up the timeline with any information gleaned from the cellphones collected at the home and last contacts that were made.

"The case is considered active until we have that information to tie up the timeline," said Denise Womack Avila, a spokesperson for the sheriff.

Zinnia went from being a returned shelter dog to an incredible companion that was always at Arakawa's side, said Joey Padilla, owner of the Santa Fe Tails pet care facility that was involved in the surviving dogs' care.

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.

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.

The pair led a private life after moving to Santa Fe decades ago. A representative for the couple's estate has cited that privacy in seeking to block the public release of autopsy and investigative reports related to their deaths, especially photographs and video. It will be up to a state district judge to consider that request.

Federal agents are seen arresting Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil in a newly released video

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A video released Friday shows the moment federal immigration agents arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian activist and Columbia University graduate student whose detention alarmed free-speech advocates.

The clip begins with at least three agents confronting Khalil in the lobby of his apartment building near the Columbia campus Saturday night. The agents inform him that he is "going to be under arrest," then order him to "turn around" and "stop resisting."

"There's no need for this," Khalil replies calmly as they place him in handcuffs. "I'm going with you. No worries."

As his wife, Noor Abdalla, cries out in protest, asking in Arabic: "My love, how can I call you?" Khalil assures her that he will be fine and instructs her to call his lawyer.

Abdalla, an American citizen who is eight months pregnant, then asks the agents to identify themselves. "We don't give our names," one replies.

The video was released by Khalil's attorneys the same day the Justice Department announced it was investigating whether the university concealed "illegal aliens" on its campus.

Khalil is a lawful U.S. resident with no criminal history. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said he revoked Khalil's permission to be in the U.S. because of his role in pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia, saying they had riled up "anti-Jewish" sentiment and amounted to support for Hamas, the militant group that controls Gaza and attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

President Donald Trump, meanwhile, has warned that the attempted deportation will be the "first of many" of people who joined protests against Israel's military action in Gaza.

Federal officials announced Friday that they had arrested another woman tied to protests outside Columbia University and revoked the visa of a Columbia University doctoral student, who then left the country.

Khalil's wife, Abdalla, described his arrest as "the most terrifying moment of my life" in a statement accompanying the video. She said the arrest happened as the couple were returning home from an Iftar celebration.

"They threatened to take me too," she said.

The arrests have triggered fear among international students at Columbia and been condemned by free speech groups, which accuse the Trump administration of seeking to criminalize political dissent.

Khalil's lawyers have challenged his detention in court.

In court documents, they described how he was rushed from New York to Louisiana last weekend after his arrest.

The experience reminded Khalil of when he left Syria, where he was born, shortly after the forced disap-

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pearance of his friends there during a period of arbitrary detention in 2013, the lawyers wrote.

According to the lawsuit, federal agents denied Khalil's request to speak to a lawyer. When he was taken to a federal office building in lower Manhattan, Khalil saw an agent approach another agent and say, "the White House is requesting an update," the lawyers wrote.

At some point early Sunday, Khalil was taken, handcuffed and shackled, to a detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where he spent the night in a cold waiting room. His request for a blanket was denied, the lawsuit said.

Then he was sent back to New York by van.

At 2:45 p.m. Sunday, he was put on an American Airlines flight from to Dallas, where he was placed on a second flight to Alexandria, Louisiana, arriving at 1 a.m. Monday.

Khalil is now being held in an isolated, low-slung ICE detention complex ringed by two rows of tall, barbed wire fences and surrounded by the endless pine forests. The complex, with a capacity of 1,160, is outside the small town of Jena, roughly 150 miles (240 kilometers) north of Baton Rouge.

He now worries about his pregnant wife and is "also very concerned about missing the birth of his first child," the lawsuit said.

In April, Khalil was to begin a job and receive health benefits that the couple was counting on, it added.

"It is very important to Mr. Khalil to be able to continue his protected political speech, advocating and protesting for the rights of Palestinians — both domestically and abroad," the lawsuit said.

Mark Carney is sworn in as Canada's new prime minister as country deals with Trump's trade war

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Former central banker Mark Carney was sworn in as Canada's new prime minister on Friday, and will now try to steer his country through a trade war brought by U.S. President Donald Trump, annexation threats and an expected federal election.

Carney, 59, replaces Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who announced his resignation in January but remained in power until the Liberal Party elected a new leader. Carney is widely expected to trigger a general election in the coming days or weeks.

"We will never, ever, in any way shape or form, be part of the United States. America is not Canada," Carney said. "We are very fundamentally a different country."

The governing Liberal Party had appeared poised for a historic election defeat this year until Trump declared economic war and repeatedly has said Canada should become the 51st state. Now the party and its new leader could come out on top.

Carney has said he's ready to meet with Trump if he shows respect for Canadian sovereignty. He said he doesn't plan to visit Washington at the moment but hopes to have a phone call with the president soon.

"The president is a successful businessman and deal maker. We're his largest client in so many industries," Carney said. "Clients expect respect and working together in a proper commercial way."

Carney navigated crises when he was the head of the Bank of Canada during the 2008 financial crisis, and then in 2013 when he became the first noncitizen to run the Bank of England — helping to manage the worst impacts of Brexit in the U.K.

Carney, a former Goldman Sachs executive with no experience in politics, becomes Canada's 24th prime minister. He said protecting Canadian workers and their families in the face of unjustified trade actions and growing the economy will be his top priorities.

Carney said he will travel to Europe to visit French President Emmanuel Macron and U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer in the coming days. He received invitations from both.

"We must diversify our trade partners and strengthen our security in so doing," Carney said.

Trump put 25% tariffs on Canada's steel and aluminum and is threatening sweeping tariffs on all Canadian products April 2. He has threatened economic coercion in his annexation threats and suggested the border is a fictional line.

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Carney called the idea "crazy."

The U.S. trade war and Trump's talk of making Canada the 51st U.S. state have infuriated Canadians, who are booing the American anthem at NHL and NBA games. Some are canceling trips south of the border, and many are avoiding buying American goods when they can.

Carney said he's worked with Trump before at G7 and G20 summits during Trump's first presidency.

"We share some experiences. I have been in the private sector. I have worked in the real estate sector. I have done large transactions," Carney said. "We will both be looking out for our countries but he knows, and I know from long experience, that we can find mutual solutions that win for both."

The opposition Conservatives hoped to make the election about Trudeau, whose popularity declined as food and housing prices rose and immigration surge.

But after decades of bilateral stability, the vote on Canada's next leader now is expected to focus on who is best equipped to deal with the U.S.

"He will do very well. He's respected internationally," former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien told reporters Friday. But, he added: "There is no magic solution. This is not a normal situation. We've never seen someone who changes his mind every five minutes as president of the United States."

A new Cabinet of 13 men and 11 women was sworn in, smaller than Trudeau's 37-member team. François-Philippe Champagne becomes Canada's new finance minister, the government's second most powerful position. Champagne has said a new prime minister offers a chance of a reset with Trump.

Dominic LeBlanc goes from finance to to intergovernmental affairs. Mélanie Joly remains foreign minister. Chrystia Freeland, a former deputy prime minister and finance minister who lost to Carney in the Liberal Party leadership race, becomes minister of transport and internal trade.

Carney met his Cabinet and eliminated a consumer carbon price on his first day, undoing Trudeau's signature climate policy. He called his government "Canada's new government" in an effort to distance himself from Trudeau.

Carney also took aim at opposition Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, a career politician who Carney said is always negative.

"Negativity won't pay the rent or the mortgage. Negativity won't bring down the price of groceries. Negativity won't win a trade war," he said.

Poillievre urged Canadians not to give the Liberals a fourth mandate, saying it's the same Liberal government and that Carney is "just like Justin."

Trump pledges to 'expose' his enemies in political speech at Justice Department

By ERIC TUCKER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump pledged to "expose" his enemies during a norm-breaking political speech Friday at the Justice Department in which he aired a litany of grievances about the criminal cases he faced and vowed retribution for what he described as the "lies and abuses that have occurred within these walls."

The speech was meant to rally support for Trump administration policies on violent crime, drugs and illegal immigration. But it also functioned as a triumphant forum for the president to boast about having emerged legally and politically unscathed from two federal prosecutions that one year ago had threatened to torpedo his presidential prospects but were dismissed after his election win last fall.

Though other presidents have spoken from the Justice Department's ceremonial Great Hall, Trump's address amounted to an extraordinary display of partisan politics and personal grievance inside an institution that is meant to be blind to both. Casting himself as the country's "chief law enforcement officer," a title ordinarily reserved for the attorney general, he promised to target his perceived enemies even as he claimed to be ending what he called the weaponization of the department.

The speech marked the latest manifestation of Trump's unparalleled takeover of the department and came amid a brazen campaign of retribution already undertaken under his watch, including the firing of

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prosecutors who investigated him during the Biden administration and the scrutiny of thousands of FBI agents who investigated the president's supporters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

"Our predecessors turned this Department of Justice into the Department of Injustice. But I stand before you today to declare that those days are over, and they are never going to come back and never coming back," Trump said to cheers from a crowd that included local law enforcement officials, political allies and FBI Director Kash Patel. "So now, as the chief law enforcement officer in our country, I will insist upon and demand full and complete accountability for the wrongs and abuses that have occurred."

The visit to the Justice Department, the first by Trump and the first by any president in a decade, brought him into the belly of an institution he has disparaged in searing terms for years but one that he has sought to reshape by installing loyalists and members of his personal defense team in top leadership positions.

The event was reminiscent of a campaign rally, with upbeat music blaring from loudspeakers before Trump entered the Great Hall. Justice Department and White House officials mingled while members of the crowd posed for selfies. The podium was flanked by large signs that read "Fighting Fentanyl in America." Also on the stage was a cardboard box that read "DEA evidence."

Trump's unique status as a onetime criminal defendant indicted by the department he was now addressing hung over the speech as he vented, in profane and personal terms, about investigations as far back as the Russian election interference investigation to the more recent inquiries into his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and the hoarding of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate.

He mentioned by name prosecutors who investigated him, calling them "scum," and called the classified documents case against him "bulls---." He claimed that "a corrupt group of hacks and radicals within the ranks of the American government obliterated the trust and goodwill built up over generations," and said that before the department could turn the page, "we must be honest about the lies and abuses that have occurred within these walls,"

"We will expel the rogue actors and corrupt forces from our government. We will expose, very much expose their egregious crimes and severe misconduct," Trump said in a wide-ranging speech that touched on everything from Russia's war against Ukraine, the 2020 election to the price of eggs.

"It's going to be legendary. And going to also be legendary for the people that are able to seek it out and bring justice. We will restore the scales of justice in America, and we will ensure that such abuses never happen again in our country."

His claim that the Justice Department had been weaponized during the Biden administration overlooked that there were investigations during that time into Biden's mishandling of classified information and into the firearms and tax affairs of his son Hunter. And his recounting of the recent investigations into him did not mention that prosecutors had amassed what they said was substantial evidence, including that he had sought to obstruct the classified documents inquiry.

When it comes to setting its agenda, the Justice Department historically takes a cue from the White House but looks to maintain its independence on individual criminal investigations.

Trump has upended such norms.

He encouraged specific investigations during his first term and tried to engineer the firing of Robert Mueller, the special counsel assigned to investigate ties between Russia and Trump's 2016 campaign. He also endured difficult relationships with his first two handpicked attorneys general — Jeff Sessions was fired immediately after the 2018 midterm election, and William Barr resigned weeks after publicly disputing Trump's bogus claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 election.

Arriving for a second term in January fresh off a landmark Supreme Court opinion that reaffirmed a president's unshakable control of the Justice Department, Trump has appeared determined to clear from his path any potential obstacles, including by appointing Pam Bondi — a former Florida attorney general who was part of Trump's defense team at his first impeachment trial — and Patel, another close ally, to serve as FBI director.

"We all work for the greatest president in the history of our country," Bondi said Friday in introducing Trump. "We are so proud to work at the directive of Donald Trump. He will never stop fighting for us and

we will never stop fighting for him and for our country.”

Even before Bondi had been confirmed, the Justice Department fired department employees who served on special counsel Jack Smith’s team, which brought the election interference and classified documents cases against Trump. Both cases were dismissed last November in line with longstanding Justice Department policy against indicting sitting presidents.

Senior Justice Department officials also demanded from the FBI lists of thousands of employees who worked on investigations into the Jan 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, when a mob of Trump’s supporters stormed the building in an effort to halt the certification of the electoral vote, and fired prosecutors who had participated in the cases. And they’ve ordered the dismissal of a criminal case against New York Mayor Eric Adams by saying the charges had handicapped the Democrat’s ability to partner in the Republican administration’s fight against illegal immigration.

More than 50 universities face federal investigations as part of Trump’s anti-DEI campaign

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 50 universities are being investigated for alleged racial discrimination as part of President Donald Trump’s campaign to end diversity, equity and inclusion programs that his officials say exclude white and Asian American students.

The Education Department announced the new investigations Friday, one month after issuing a memo warning America’s schools and colleges that they could lose federal money over “race-based preferences” in admissions, scholarships or any aspect of student life.

“Students must be assessed according to merit and accomplishment, not prejudged by the color of their skin,” Education Secretary Linda McMahon said in a statement. “We will not yield on this commitment.”

Most of the new inquiries are focused on colleges’ partnerships with the PhD Project, a nonprofit that helps students from underrepresented groups get degrees in business with the goal of diversifying the business world.

Department officials said that the group limits eligibility based on race and that colleges that partner with it are “engaging in race-exclusionary practices in their graduate programs.”

The group of 45 colleges facing scrutiny over ties to the PhD Project include major public universities such as Arizona State, Ohio State and Rutgers, along with prestigious private schools like Yale, Cornell, Duke and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In a statement, the PhD Project said it aims to “create a broader talent pipeline of current and future business leaders who are committed to excellence and to each other.”

“This year, we have opened our membership application to anyone who shares that vision,” it said.

Arizona State said the business school is not financially supporting the PhD Project this year, and on Feb. 20, told faculty that the school would not support travel to the nonprofit’s conference.

A statement from Ohio State said the university “does not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity or any other protected class, and our PhD programs are open to all qualified applicants.”

Six other colleges are being investigated for awarding “impermissible race-based scholarships,” the department said. Those schools are: Grand Valley State University, Ithaca College, the New England College of Optometry, the University of Alabama, the University of South Florida and the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa.

An initial press release from the Education Department erroneously identified the University of Tulsa as one of the schools under investigation.

Additionally, the University of Minnesota is being investigated for allegedly operating a program that segregates students on the basis of race, the department said.

The Feb. 14 memo from Trump’s Republican administration was a sweeping expansion of a 2023 Supreme Court decision that barred colleges from using race as a factor in admissions.

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That decision focused on admissions policies at Harvard and the University of North Carolina, but the Education Department said it will interpret the decision to forbid race-based policies in any aspect of education, both in K-12 schools and higher education.

In the memo, Craig Trainor, acting assistant secretary for civil rights, had said schools' and colleges' diversity, equity and inclusion efforts have been "smuggling racial stereotypes and explicit race-consciousness into everyday training, programming and discipline."

The memo is being challenged in federal lawsuits from the nation's two largest teachers' unions. The suits say the memo is too vague and violates the free speech rights of educators.

Hip-hop artist Sean 'Diddy' Combs pleads not guilty ahead of May sex trafficking trial

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Sean 'Diddy' Combs returned to federal court in New York City on Friday, pleading not guilty to the latest version of an indictment charging him with two decades of sex trafficking crimes.

The 55-year-old Combs, his beard noticeably grayer than even weeks ago, stood with his hands folded before him as he told Judge Arun Subramanian that he had read the indictment and understood the charges against him.

Combs, who has been held without bail since his September arrest, hugged two of his lawyers as he entered the courtroom and he blew kisses to family members and waved as he was led out by U.S. marshals afterward.

Subramanian told lawyers that questionnaires will be distributed to hundreds of prospective jurors at the end of April so that questioning of would-be jurors can begin on May 5, with opening statements expected to occur on May 12.

According to the indictment, Combs used the "power and prestige" he wielded as a music mogul to intimidate, threaten and lure women into his orbit, often under the pretense of a romantic relationship.

The indictment said he then used force, threats and coercion to cause victims, including three women specified in the court papers, to engage in commercial sex acts.

It said he subjected his victims to violence, threats of violence, threats of financial and reputational harm and verbal abuse.

"On multiple occasions, Combs threw both objects and people, as well as hit, dragged, choked and shoved others," it said. "On one occasion, Combs dangled a victim over an apartment balcony."

Defense lawyers have argued that prosecutors used the charges to try to demonize sex acts between consenting adults.

Part of the discussion in court Friday revolved around what will be allowed at the trial regarding a video that aired on CNN last year that showed Combs punching his former protege and girlfriend, the R&B singer Cassie, and throwing her on the floor in a hotel hallway.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mitzi Steiner said the video was "critical to the case."

Defense attorney Marc Agnifilo said the video was "deceptive and not in accordance with the actions that took place."

He said certain actions were speeded up in the video by as much as 50 percent and others were taken out of order.

"From the defense standpoint, it's a misleading piece of evidence, a deceptive piece of evidence, a piece of evidence that has been changed," he said.

Steiner also said the government was reluctant to share information about accusers who may testify in the case with defense lawyers until deadlines arrive that require the information to be turned over.

She said many of the "individuals are incredibly frightened" not only at having their names revealed publicly but having them disclosed to defense attorneys.

Wall Street rallies to its best day in months, but that's not enough to salvage its losing week

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. stocks rallied to their best day in months on Friday as Wall Street's roller coaster suddenly shot back upward. That still wasn't enough to keep the U.S. market from a fourth straight losing week, its longest such streak since August.

The S&P 500 jumped 2.1% a day after closing more than 10% below its record for its first "correction" since 2023. The last time the index shot up that much was the day after President Donald Trump's election, when Wall Street was focusing on the upsides of Trump's return to the White House.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average climbed 674 points, or 1.7%, and the Nasdaq composite jumped 2.6%.

A multi-day "relief rally could be coming" after so much negativity built among investors, said Yung-Yu Ma, chief investment officer at BMO Wealth Management. Swings in sentiment don't go full-tilt in just one direction forever, and the U.S. stock market has been tumbling quickly since setting a record less than a month ago.

One piece of uncertainty hanging over Wall Street may be clearing after the Senate made moves to prevent a possible partial shutdown of the U.S. government.

Past shutdowns have not been a huge deal for financial markets. But any reduction of uncertainty can be helpful when so much of it has been sending the U.S. stock market on big, scary swings not just day to day but also hour to hour.

To be sure, the heaviest uncertainty remains with Trump's escalating trade war. There, the question is how much pain Trump will let the economy endure through tariffs and other policies in order to reshape the country and world as he wants. The president has said he wants manufacturing jobs back in the United States, along with a smaller U.S. government workforce and other fundamental changes.

While stock prices may be close to finishing their reset to account for tariffs set to hit in April, Ma said concerns about how big an impact cutbacks in federal spending will have on the economy are "likely to remain for some time."

U.S. households and businesses have already reported drops in confidence because of all the uncertainties created by Trump's barrage of on-again, off-again tariff announcements and other policies. That's raised fears about a pullback in spending that could sap energy from the economy.

Worries look to be only worsening among U.S. households, according to a preliminary survey released Friday by the University of Michigan. Its measure of consumer sentiment sank for a third straight month, mostly because of concerns about the future rather than complaints about the present. The job market and overall economy look relatively solid at the moment.

"Many consumers cited the high level of uncertainty around policy and other economic factors," according to Joanne Hsu, director of the survey, and "frequent gyrations in economic policies make it very difficult for consumers to plan for the future, regardless of one's policy preferences."

Such fears have Wall Street focused on whether companies are seeing the souring mood of consumers translating into real pain for their businesses.

Ulta Beauty jumped 13.7% after the beauty products retailer reported stronger profit for the latest quarter than analysts expected.

The company's forecasts for upcoming revenue and profit fell short of analysts' targets, but Chief Financial Officer Paula Oyibo said it wanted to be cautious "as we navigate ongoing consumer uncertainty." Analysts said the forecasts appeared better than feared.

Gains for Big Tech stocks and companies in the artificial-intelligence industry also helped support the market. Such stocks have been under the most pressure in the recent sell-off after critics said their prices shot too high in the frenzy around AI.

Nvidia rose 5.3% to trim its loss for 2025 so far below 10%. Apple climbed 1.8% to pare its loss for the week, which at one point had been on pace to be its worst since the 2020 COVID crash.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 117.42 points to 5,638.94. The Dow Jones Industrial Average climbed 674.62

to 41,488.19, and the Nasdaq composite rallied 451.07 to 17,754.09.

In stock markets abroad, indexes rose across much of Europe and Asia.

Stocks jumped 2.1% in Hong Kong and 1.8% in Shanghai after China's National Financial Regulatory Administration issued a notice ordering financial institutions to help develop consumer finance and encourage use of credit cards, do more to aid borrowers who run into trouble and be more transparent in their lending practices.

Economists say China needs consumers to spend more to get the economy out of its doldrums, although most have advocated broader, more fundamental reforms.

In the bond market, Treasury yields rose to recover some of their sharp recent losses. The yield on the 10-year Treasury climbed to 4.31% from 4.27% late Thursday and from 4.16% at the start of last week.

Yields have been swinging since January, when the 10-year yield was approaching 4.80%. When worries worsen about the U.S. economy's strength, yields have fallen. When those worries lessen, or when concerns about inflation rise, yields have climbed.

US envoy is taking Putin's comments on Ukraine ceasefire proposal to Trump, Kremlin official says

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine, asking him to convey Moscow's thoughts to Washington, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday.

Putin asked Witkoff late Thursday to give additional messages to U.S. President Donald Trump, Peskov told reporters, after the Russian leader said at a news conference that he supported a truce in principle but set out a host of details that need to be clarified before it is agreed.

Trump said the U.S. held "very good and productive" discussions with Putin the day before. In a post on his Truth Social site Friday morning, Trump said "that there is a very good chance that this horrible, bloody war can finally come to an end."

Ukraine, under severe military pressure on parts of the front line three years after Russia's full-scale invasion, has already endorsed the truce proposal. Russia's army has gained battlefield momentum, and analysts say Putin likely will be reluctant to rush into a ceasefire while he feels he has an advantage. The Russian army, backed by North Korean troops, are now close to completely driving Ukrainian forces from their foothold in Russia's Kursk border region in what would be a major setback for Kyiv.

Trump said Friday that "thousands" of Ukrainian troops are surrounded by the Russian military, adding that he has "strongly requested" Putin to spare their lives. Hours later, Putin told the National Security Council that Moscow is willing to do that if Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region lay down arms and surrender.

Ukraine's General Staff, however, denied Friday that its forces in Kursk are encircled by Moscow's troops and said that any reports to that effect were "fabricated by the Russians for political manipulation and to exert pressure on Ukraine and its partners."

A possible phone call between Putin and Trump to settle outstanding ceasefire issues could be arranged after Witkoff delivers the messages in Washington, Peskov said. "There is an understanding on both sides that such a call is needed," Peskov said.

"There are certainly some grounds for cautious optimism," Peskov said of the ceasefire proposal. "A lot still needs to be done, but the president has shown solidarity with President Trump's position."

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Friday he was "cautiously optimistic," too. Speaking to reporters at the end of a Group of Seven meeting in Canada, Rubio said Trump administration officials plan to spend the weekend debriefing Witkoff on his session with Putin and on next steps.

The talks with Putin did not appear to secure the immediate agreement for a ceasefire that Rubio had said Americans would press Putin for. But, "we certainly feel like we're at least some steps closer to ending this war," Rubio said.

U.S. officials have said Washington was set to discuss technical issues related to a possible ceasefire

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next week. Given the range of issues on the table, and the sharp differences between what Moscow and Kyiv want, it could potentially take weeks or months for the guns to fall silent.

Trump vowed during his election campaign to settle the war in 24 hours, but in January he changed that timeframe, voicing hope that peace could be negotiated in six months.

Putin's apparently amicable tone toward the White House reflects the remarkable shift in U.S. relations with Russia and Ukraine since Trump returned to office in January. Former President Joe Biden had sought to isolate Putin.

During a speech Friday at the U.S. Department of Justice, Trump said a ceasefire that could halt fighting in Russia's war with Ukraine could be close at hand. He also praised his relationship with Putin and seemed to suggest that Ukraine was to blame for Russia's 2022 invasion, saying, "You don't want to pick on somebody that's a lot larger than you."

Trump has threatened both Russia and Ukraine with punitive measures if they don't engage with his peace efforts.

Trump briefly cut off critical military aid and intelligence sharing in an apparent effort to push Kyiv to enter talks on ending the war. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had a tense meeting at the White House on Feb. 28 in which Trump questioned whether Ukraine wanted to halt the war.

Trump has raised the possibility of tightening sanctions on Russia, though his administration has also repeatedly embraced Kremlin positions on the conflict, including indicating that Ukraine's hopes of joining NATO are unlikely to be realized and that it probably will not get back the land that Russia's army occupies, which amounts to nearly 20% of the country.

Meanwhile, Russian air defenses downed four Ukrainian drones attacking the Russian capital early Friday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said. One damaged the roof of an apartment building a few kilometers (miles) from the Kremlin.

Several other buildings were lightly damaged by drone fragments, but there were no injuries, according to emergency officials.

Federal judge considers blocking DOGE from accessing Social Security data of millions of Americans

By LEA SKENE and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — A federal judge is considering whether to temporarily block Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency from accessing Social Security Administration systems that hold sensitive data on millions of Americans.

A group of labor unions and retirees sued the Trump administration and asked the court to issue an emergency order limiting DOGE's access to the agency and its data.

DOGE's "nearly unlimited" access violates privacy laws and presents massive information security risks, they said. A recently departed Social Security official who saw the DOGE team sweep into the agency said she is deeply worried about sensitive information being exposed.

The administration has said DOGE is targeting waste and fraud in the federal government.

During a Friday hearing on the issue in federal court in Baltimore, U.S. District Judge Ellen Hollander repeatedly questioned attorneys for the government about why the DOGE team needed such a large quantity of sensitive personal information about Social Security recipients, including health records for disability applicants. She questioned whether a more targeted approach would allow DOGE to uncover improper payments without accessing so much data.

"This is like hitting a fly with a sledgehammer," she said of the Trump administration's approach.

While alluding to technical issues that could affect her ruling, the judge said she was struggling to understand why DOGE's actions were necessary, calling them "extremely worrisome and surprising."

"What's the excuse for that — or the justification?" she asked.

The Trump administration says DOGE has a 10-person team of federal employees at the Social Security Administration, seven of whom have been granted read-only access to agency systems or personally

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identifiable information. They have received privacy training, and eight had passed background checks as of Wednesday, government lawyers said in court documents.

They argued in court that the DOGE access doesn't deviate significantly from normal practices inside the agency, where employees and auditors are routinely allowed to search its databases.

But attorneys for the plaintiffs called it unprecedented.

"This is, in fact, a sea change" in terms of how the agency protects personal information, said Alethea Anne Swift, an attorney with the legal services group Democracy Forward, which is behind the lawsuit.

Outside the courthouse ahead of the hearing, dozens of union workers and retirees rallied in support of the plaintiffs and expressed concern over whether their Social Security benefits are at risk.

"We want Elon Musk and the DOGE group to take their hands off Social Security," said Ronnie Bailey, 75, a retired Maryland corrections officer and Vietnam veteran. "When you talk about people's lifelines, Social Security is not waste."

Agnes Watkins, a retired nurse, said she relies on Social Security checks to pay her mortgage and cover other basic necessities. She said she's disturbed at the thought that "anybody can just come in and gain access to private information."

"It doesn't feel secure," she said.

The group held signs calling for the protection of Social Security benefits and shouted "Down with DOGE" and other chants.

DOGE has also accessed other government databases, including at the Treasury and IRS.

At Social Security, DOGE staffers swept into the agency days after Trump's inauguration and pressed for a software engineer to quickly get access to data systems that are normally carefully restricted even within the government, a former official said in court documents.

The team appeared to be searching for fraud based on inaccuracies and misunderstandings, according to Tiffany Flick, the former acting chief of staff to the acting commissioner.

"I am deeply concerned about DOGE's access to SSA systems and the potential to inappropriately and inaccurately disclose this information, especially given the rushed nature in which we were required to onboard," she said.

Hollander, who is based in Baltimore and was appointed by President Barack Obama, is the latest judge to consider a DOGE related case. The team has drawn nearly two dozen lawsuits, some of which have shed light on staffing and operations that have largely been kept under wraps.

Several judges have raised questions about DOGE's sweeping cost-cutting efforts, but they have not always agreed that the risks are imminent enough to block the team from government systems.

Gold rises to new heights as anxiety grips markets. Here's what you need to know

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Amid widespread economic turmoil, the price of gold has soared to levels never seen before.

Gold futures surpassed the \$3,000 per troy ounce for the first time this week. The price to buy gold on the spot market in New York is following closely behind.

Interest in buying gold can rise sharply in times of uncertainty, as anxious investors seek safe havens for their money. Gold prices are spiking higher now as U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff policies have kicked off an international trade war that has roiled financial markets and threatened to reignite inflation for families and businesses alike.

If trends continue, analysts say gold's price could continue to climb in the months ahead. But precious metals are also volatile assets — and so the future is never promised.

Here's what to know.

What's the price of gold today?

The going price for New York spot gold closed Thursday at record \$2,988 per troy ounce — the standard

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for measuring precious metals, which is equivalent to 31 grams — per FactSet. That's over \$825 higher than gold's spot price one year ago.

Gold futures surpassed the \$3,000 mark Thursday. But as of Friday afternoon, fell to just over \$2,994.

The price of spot gold is up nearly 14% since the start of 2025, per FactSet. By contrast, the stock market has tumbled. The benchmark S&P 500 has tumbled more than 5% this year with even blue chip stocks fading. Apple, for instance, just had its worst week in five years.

Why is the price of gold going up?

A lot of it boils down to uncertainty. Interest in buying gold typically spikes when investors become anxious — and there's been a lot of economic turmoil in recent months.

Today, the heaviest uncertainty lies with Trump's escalating trade war. The president's on-again, off-again new levy announcements and retaliatory tariffs from some of the nation's closest traditional allies have created a sense of whiplash for both businesses and consumers — who economists say will foot the bill through higher prices.

Confidence began to slide at the start of the year for both U.S. households and businesses due to fears of inflation and tariffs. Those worries seem to only be worsening, according to a preliminary survey released Friday by the University of Michigan. Its measure of consumer sentiment sank for a third straight month due mostly to concerns about the future.

"We still view gold's price patterns as tied to tariffs," analysts at RBC Capital Markets wrote in a Thursday research note — adding that, while inflation has recently cooled some, tariffs threaten to send prices higher. "General uncertainty and chaos are also very supportive factors of gold."

Joe Cavatoni, chief market strategist at the World Gold Council, added Friday that he and others have been anticipating gold's latest milestone for months — noting in an email that the "global challenges and risks that come with managing money today" have heightened concern and caused more and more to turn to the asset as a "safe haven."

Over the last year, analysts have also pointed to strong gold demand from central banks around the world amid geopolitical tension, including wars in Gaza and Ukraine.

Is gold worth the investment?

Advocates of investing in gold call it a "safe haven" — arguing the commodity can serve to diversify and balance your investment portfolio, as well as mitigate possible risks down the road. Some also take comfort in buying something tangible that has the potential to increase in value over time.

Still, experts caution against putting all your eggs in one basket. And not everyone agrees gold is a good investment. Critics say gold isn't always the inflation hedge many say it is — and that there are more efficient ways to protect against potential loss of capital, such as derivative-based investments.

The Commodity Futures Trade Commission has also previously warned people to be wary of investing in gold. Precious metals can be highly volatile, the commission said, and prices rise as demand goes up — meaning "when economic anxiety or instability is high, the people who typically profit from precious metals are the sellers."

If you do choose to invest in gold, the commission adds, it's important to educate yourself on safe trading practices and be cautious of potential scams and counterfeits on the market.

USPS agrees to work with DOGE on reform, planning to cut 10,000 workers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Postmaster General Louis DeJoy plans to cut 10,000 workers and billions of dollars from the U.S. Postal Service budget and he'll do that working with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, according to a letter sent to members of Congress on Thursday.

DOGE will assist USPS with addressing "big problems" at the \$78 billion-a-year agency, which has sometimes struggled in recent years to stay afloat. The agreement also includes the General Services Administration in an effort to help the Postal Service identify and achieve "further efficiencies."

USPS listed such issues as mismanagement of the agency's retirement assets and Workers' Comp-

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sation Program, as well as an array of regulatory requirements that the letter described as "restricting normal business practice."

"This is an effort aligned with our efforts, as while we have accomplished a great deal, there is much more to be done," DeJoy wrote.

Critics of the agreement fear negative effects of the cuts will be felt across America. Democratic U.S. Rep. Gerald Connolly of Virginia, who was sent the letter, said turning over the Postal Service to DOGE would result in it being undermined and privatized.

"This capitulation will have catastrophic consequences for all Americans — especially those in rural and hard to reach areas — who rely on the Postal Service every day to deliver mail, medications, ballots, and more," he said in a statement.

USPS currently employs about 640,000 workers tasked with making deliveries from inner cities to rural areas and even far-flung islands.

The service plans to cut 10,000 employees in the next 30 days through a voluntary early retirement program, according to the letter. The USPS announced the plan during the final days of the Biden administration in January but at the time didn't include the number of workers expected to leave.

Neither the USPS nor the Trump administration immediately responded to emails from The Associated Press requesting comment.

The agency previously announced plans to cut its operating costs by more than \$3.5 billion annually. And this isn't the first time thousands of employees have been cut. In 2021, the agency cut 30,000 workers.

As the service that has operated as an independent entity since 1970 has struggled to balance the books with the decline of first-class mail, it has fought calls from President Donald Trump and others that it be privatized. Last month, Trump said he may put USPS under the control of the Commerce Department in what would be an executive branch takeover.

The National Association of Letter Carriers President Brian L. Renfroe said in a statement in response to Thursday's letter that they welcome anyone's help with addressing some of the agency's biggest problems but stood firmly against any move to privatize the Postal Service.

"Common sense solutions are what the Postal Service needs, not privatization efforts that will threaten 640,000 postal employees' jobs, 7.9 million jobs tied to our work, and the universal service every American relies on daily," he said.

DeJoy, a Republican donor who owned a logistics business, was appointed to lead USPS during Trump's first term in 2020. He has faced repeated challenges during his tenure, including the COVID-19 pandemic, surges in mail-in election ballots and efforts to stem losses through cost and service cuts.

Philippine ex-President Duterte appears by video link at International Criminal Court hearing

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Jailed former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte appeared Friday by videoconference before judges at the International Criminal Court, days after his arrest in Manila on murder charges linked to the deadly "war on drugs" that he oversaw while in office.

The 79-year-old Duterte didn't show up at the court in The Hague, but appeared on a video screen from the detention center where he is being held, about a mile (1½ kilometers) away.

For families of victims of the drugs crackdown, Duterte's appearance in court was a long-awaited sign of hope. Duterte's vocal supporters call the arrest illegal.

His lawyer, Salvador Medialdea, used the hearing to slam his arrest in Manila as a "pure and simple kidnapping." He said Duterte "was denied all access to the legal recourse in the country of his citizenship, and this all in the nature of political score-settling."

Presiding Judge Iulia Antoanella Motoc set a pretrial hearing date of Sept. 23 to establish if prosecution evidence is strong enough to merit sending the case to trial. If a trial does go ahead, it could take years, and if Duterte is convicted, he faces a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

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Estimates of the death toll during Duterte's presidential term vary, from the more than 6,000 that the national police have reported and up to 30,000, according to numbers from human rights groups.

The ICC judge said that Duterte had been allowed to participate in his first hearing by videoconference because he had just come off a long flight.

Duterte, wearing a jacket and tie, listened to the hearing through headphones, often with his eyes closed. He spoke in English to confirm his name, and his date and place of birth. He was not required to enter a plea. The hearing, which started about a half-hour late, lasted around 30 minutes.

Medialdea said that Duterte had been under observation at a hospital because of health issues.

The judge, addressing Duterte, said: "The court doctor was of the opinion that you were fully mentally aware and fit."

Duterte's daughter greets supporters outside court

Duterte was arrested Tuesday amid chaotic scenes in the Philippine capital after returning from a visit to Hong Kong. He was swiftly put on a chartered jet and flown to the Netherlands.

His daughter, Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte, visited him in the court's detention center Friday and met with supporters outside the court. Duterte is a political rival of the current president.

She said her father is "in good spirits" and "well taken care of," and his only complaint about his conditions is that he misses Filipino food.

She too decried what she called a political arrest. "There will be a day of reckoning for all," she said, as excited crowds around her chanted "Duterte!" and "yes, yes!"

Meanwhile, activists marched in the Philippine capital region, demanding justice for the thousands of suspects killed in Duterte's brutal crackdowns. Families of those killed watched the ICC proceedings on screens set up around the country, some holding portraits of their slain loved ones, as they listened to charges read out against Duterte in a courtroom across the world.

What is Duterte accused of?

Prosecutors accuse Duterte of involvement as an "indirect co-perpetrator" in multiple murders, amounting to a crime against humanity for allegedly overseeing killings from November 2011 until March 2019, first while he was mayor of the southern city of Davao and later as president of the Philippines.

According to the prosecution request for his arrest, Duterte, as Davao mayor, issued orders to police and other "hitmen" who formed so-called Davao Death Squads, or DDS.

He told them "that their mission was to kill criminals, including drug dealers, and provided clearance for specific DDS killings," prosecutors allege, adding that he recruited, paid and rewarded the killers and "provided them with the necessary weapons and resources, and promised to shield them from prosecution."

The document seeking an ICC warrant for Duterte said that prosecutors built their case using evidence including witness testimony, speeches by Duterte himself, government documents and video footage.

The reaction of rights groups

Human rights groups and victims' families have hailed Duterte's arrest as a historic triumph against state impunity, while the former president's supporters have slammed what they call the government's surrender of a political rival to a court whose jurisdiction they dispute.

"We are happy and we feel relieved," said 55-year-old Melinda Abion Lafuente, mother of 22-year-old Angelo Lafuente, who she said was tortured and killed in 2016.

"Duterte's appearance before the ICC is a testament to the courage and determination of the victims, their families, and Filipino activists and journalists to pursue justice no matter how long it takes," said Bryony Lau, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Other leaders facing ICC arrest warrants, like (Russian President) Vladimir Putin and (Israeli Prime Minister) Benjamin Netanyahu, should take note that even those who seem untouchable today can end up in The Hague."

Duterte's defense

Duterte's legal team said that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration shouldn't have allowed the global court to take custody of the former leader because the Philippines is no longer a party to the ICC.

Medialdea said that "two troubled entities struck an unlikely alliance. An incumbent president who wishes

to neutralize and choke the legacy of my client and his daughter,” and “a troubled legal institution subject to delegitimization.”

Judges who approved Duterte’s arrest warrant said that the court has jurisdiction because the crimes alleged in the warrant were committed before Duterte withdrew the Philippines from the court in 2019.

Hamas says it will release a US-Israeli hostage and 4 bodies, but Israel expresses immediate doubt

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Palestinian militant group Hamas said Friday that it has accepted a proposal from mediators to release one living American-Israeli hostage and the bodies of four dual nationals who had died in captivity. The Israeli prime minister’s office cast doubt on the offer, accusing Hamas of trying to manipulate talks underway in Qatar on the next stage of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire.

Hamas, which rules over what remains of the Gaza Strip, didn’t immediately specify when the release of soldier Edan Alexander and the four bodies would take place — or what it expected to get in return.

Alexander was 19 when he was abducted from his base on the border with Gaza in southern Israel during Hamas’ attack on Oct. 7, 2023 that sparked the war, which has been the deadliest and most destructive fighting ever between Israel and Hamas.

It wasn’t clear which mediators proposed what Hamas was discussing. Egypt, Qatar and the U.S. have been guiding negotiations, and none had confirmed making the suggestion as of Friday night.

U.S. officials, including envoy Steve Witkoff, said Friday that they had presented a proposal Wednesday to extend the ceasefire a few more weeks as the sides negotiate a permanent truce. The officials said in a statement that Hamas was claiming flexibility in public while privately making “entirely impractical” demands.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said that Israel had “accepted the Witkoff outline and showed flexibility,” but that Hamas was refusing to do so.

“At the same time, it continues to use manipulation and psychological warfare — the reports about Hamas’ willingness to release American hostages are intended to sabotage the negotiations,” read a letter from the government to hostage families.

Israel’s negotiators return home

It added that Israel’s negotiating team would return Friday from Qatar’s capital, Doha. Netanyahu said that he plans to convene his ministerial team Saturday night to hear from the negotiators and decide on the next steps.

Hamas, meanwhile, sent a delegation to Cairo to discuss the ceasefire negotiations with Egyptian officials.

Hamas official Husam Badran reaffirmed Friday what he said was the group’s commitment to fully implementing the ceasefire agreement in all its phases. He warned that any Israeli deviation from the terms would return negotiations to square one.

The White House announced last week that American officials had engaged in “ongoing talks and discussions” with Hamas, stepping away from a long-held U.S. policy of not directly engaging with the militant group. That prompted a terse response from Netanyahu’s office.

The U.S. said Friday that under its proposal, Hamas would release Alexander and other living hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners and increased humanitarian aid to Gaza. The militants were told that the proposal would have to be accepted soon, the U.S. statement said, adding that delay would not pay off for Hamas.

The first phase of the ceasefire ended two weeks ago, but the pause in fighting has held — if tensely — for now. The initial phase allowed the return of 25 living hostages and the remains of eight others in exchange for the release of nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Israeli forces have withdrawn to buffer zones inside Gaza, hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians have returned to northern Gaza and hundreds of trucks of aid entered daily until Israel cut off supplies to the territory’s 2 million people two weeks ago.

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Hamas is believed to be holding 24 living hostages and the bodies of 35 others.

Hostages' families press for 'comprehensive deal'

The Hostage Families Forum, which represents most captives' families, said Friday it welcomed plans for any releases, but "without a comprehensive deal, we risk sealing the fate of all remaining hostages."

Israel has been urging Hamas to release half of the remaining hostages in return for an extension of the first phase, and a promise to negotiate a lasting truce. The supply cutoff came as Israel pressed the militants to agree. About 80% of Gaza's residents have lost access to food sources, and 90% can't access clean drinking water, according to the Hamas-run government media office in Gaza.

Hamas wants to start negotiations on the ceasefire's more difficult second phase, which would entail the release of the remaining hostages, the withdrawal of Israeli forces and a lasting peace.

Muslims pray during restrictions at Al-Aqsa mosque

The developments came as Jews began celebrating the Purim holiday, and Muslims continued marking the holy month of Ramadan. Around 80,000 Muslim worshippers prayed Friday at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, according to the Islamic Trust, which monitors the site. Israel is allowing only men over age 55 and women over 50 to enter from the occupied territory.

"The conditions are extremely difficult," said Yousef Badreen, a Palestinian who left the southern West Bank city of Hebron at dawn to make it to Jerusalem. "We wish they will open it for good."

Hamas accused Israel of escalating a "religious war" against Palestinians, casting the Al-Aqsa restrictions as "systematic targeting of Muslim religious practices." The Israeli government didn't immediately respond.

Millions of people celebrate Holi, the Hindu festival of colors

NEW DELHI (AP) — Millions of people in South Asia celebrated Holi, the Hindu festival of colors, on Friday by smearing each other with brightly colored powder, dancing to festive music and feasting on traditional sweets prepared for the occasion.

The raucous spring festival sees Hindus take part in a kaleidoscopic celebration of the end of winter and the triumph of good over evil. The festival is a national holiday in India, while in Nepal it's a two-day event that began Thursday. It's also observed in other South Asian countries as well as among the Indian diaspora.

Holi has its origins in Hindu mythology and lore and celebrates the divine love between the Hindu god Krishna and his consort Radha, and signifies a time of rebirth and rejuvenation.

Across the country, people, mostly dressed in all white clothes, celebrated the festival by hurling colored powder at each other. Children, perched on rooftops and balconies, flung water balloons filled with colored pigments at passers by.

Groups of young men also used water guns to chase people down in public parks and on the roads, while others danced on the streets to music blaring from speakers.

In New Delhi, a rainbow haze hung in the air around a park where the group of friends splashed one another with pigmented powder and colored water.

"It's time for fun and frolic," said Krisha Bedi, a lawyer, whose face was covered with red, green and blue colors.

In some places, people hurled marigolds, roses and jasmine petals instead of colored powder.

Amid massive celebrations in the west Indian city of Ahmedabad, thousands of people gathered at temple were sprayed with colored water from huge pipes as they swayed to traditional Gujarati music, clapping over their heads.

Food and drink are a big part of the festivities. Vendors in parts of India sold thandai, a traditional light green beverage prepared with milk, cardamom and dried fruit, and gujia, a flaky, deep-fried sweet pastry stuffed with milk curds, nuts and dried fruit.

Another tradition that marks Holi is bhang, a local drink prepared with cannabis and consumed with milk or water. The drink is connected to Hinduism, particularly to Lord Shiva, and is also enjoyed during other religious festivals in the region. Its consumption is permissible under Indian law and it is also sold

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at government licensed shops.

In many parts of India, people also light large bonfires the night before the festival to signify the destruction of evil and victory of good. Families gather around the flames to sing, dance and pray to Hindu gods.

In two northern towns, hundreds of women celebrated last week by playfully hitting men who teased them as a part of ritual with wooden sticks. The festival is called "Lathmar Hol," or Stick Holi.

How much sleep do you really need? Experts say it depends

By DEVNA BOSE AP Health Writer

Chances are, if you're reading this, you got some sleep last night. But are you feeling rested?

Experts say it's an important question to consider.

Most of us spend a third of our lives sleeping, but you may need more or less than eight hours a night. The number of hours needed changes throughout your life, with babies and kids needing more sleep and people 65 and older able to function on slightly less than seven to nine hours.

Here's what sleep scientists and doctors say about how much you really need — and whether your gender plays a role.

Sleep quality over quantity

Sleep is still a mystery, despite how critical it is for our health.

"The reasons aren't entirely clear, but it's an essential thing that we all do," said Dr. Rafael Pelayo, a sleep specialist at Stanford University. "Something remarkable happens when you sleep. It's the most natural form of self-care that we have."

Most of the population gets between seven to nine hours — and that particular category has the lowest association with health problems, said Molly Atwood, a behavioral sleep medicine clinician at Johns Hopkins.

Once people either dip into less than six hours of sleep or get more than nine hours on average, the risk of health problems inches up, Atwood said, but everybody is different.

When you're trying to figure out how much sleep you need, it's important to think about the quality of it, Pelayo said: "What you really want to do is wake up feeling refreshed — that's what it's about."

"If somebody tells me that they sleep many hours but they wake up tired, something is wrong," Pelayo said. "You shouldn't leave your favorite restaurant feeling hungry."

How much sleep we need changes

The amount of sleep we need changes throughout our lives. Newborns need the most — somewhere between 14 to 17 hours.

"Definitely when we're babies and children, because we are growing so rapidly, we do need a lot more sleep," Atwood said.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends most adults between 26 and 64 get between seven to nine hours of sleep. People who are 65 and older can get slightly less, and young adults between ages 16 and 25 can get slightly more.

Humans cycle through sleep stages roughly every 90 minutes. In the first portion of the night, Atwood said that more of the cycle is slow wave sleep, or deep sleep, which is essential to repairing and restoring the body. It's also when "growth hormone" is released.

In the latter hours of the night, more of the sleep cycle is spent in rapid-eye movement sleep, or dream sleep, which is important for learning and memory consolidation, or the process in which short-term memory gets turned into long-term memory.

Kids get more "deep sleep," with about 50% of the night in that realm, she said. That drops at adolescence, Atwood said, because our body doesn't need the same kind of repair and restoration.

Something else interesting happens around puberty: Gender-based differences in sleep start to crop up.

Do women need more sleep than men?

Research doesn't show that women need more sleep — but women do get slightly more sleep on average than men, Atwood said.

It starts at a young age. Though they have the same sleep needs, teenage girls seem to get less sleep

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than teenage boys, Pelayo said. Additionally, teenage girls tend to complain of insomnia more frequently.

When women become first-time mothers, they often care for newborns throughout the night more frequently, which means less sleep, said Allison Harvey, a clinical psychologist and professor who studies sleep at UC Berkeley.

Hormones may also impact women's sleep quantity and quality during pregnancy and menopause.

"With menopause in particular, women can develop deterioration in their sleep with an increased number and duration of nighttime awakenings," said Dr. Mithri Junna, a Mayo Clinic neurologist who specializes in sleep.

Atwood said women may also need more sleep right before their menstrual cycle.

"There are definitely times that your body's telling you that you need more sleep," she said. "It's important to listen."

When to seek help sleeping

You'll know if you're not getting enough sleep if you're feeling grumpy, irritable and inattentive. Long-term, those minor symptoms can become serious problems — even deadly.

"If you're not getting enough sleep or you have untreated insomnia or sleep apnea, your risk of depression increases," Atwood said. "Your risk of cardiovascular issues like high blood pressure, risk of heart attack and stroke increases. Your immune system is compromised. You're at greater risk for Alzheimer's."

If you're getting the recommended amount of sleep every night but still waking up feeling tired, you might consider going to your primary care physician. They can rule out other health conditions that may affect your sleep, Atwood said. But if problems persist, seeking out a sleep specialist could be helpful.

Hundreds of federal offices could begin closing this summer at DOGE's behest, AP reveals

By RYAN J. FOLEY, JOSHUA GOODMAN and CHRISTOPHER L. KELLER Associated Press

Federal agencies will begin to vacate hundreds of offices across the country this summer under a frenetic and error-riddled push by Elon Musk's budget-cutting advisers to terminate leases that they say waste money.

Musk's Department of Government Efficiency maintains a list of canceled real estate leases on its website, but internal documents obtained by The Associated Press contain a crucial detail: when those cancellations are expected to take effect. The documents from inside the General Services Administration, the U.S. government's real estate manager, list dozens of federal office and building leases expected to end by June 30, with hundreds more slated over the coming months.

The rapid pace of cancellations has raised alarms, with some agencies and lawmakers appealing to DOGE to exempt specific buildings. Several agencies are facing 20 or more lease cancellations in all, including the IRS, the Social Security Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Geological Survey.

Many of the terminations would affect agencies that aren't as well-known but oversee services critical to many Americans.

They span from a Boise, Idaho, office of the Bureau of Reclamation — which oversees water supply and deals with disputes across the often-parched American West — to a Joliet, Illinois, outpost of the Railroad Retirement Board, which provides benefits for railroad workers and their survivors.

The lease terminations do not mean all the locations will close. In some cases, agencies may negotiate new leases to stay in place, downsize their existing space or relocate elsewhere.

"Some agencies are saying: 'I'm not leaving. We can't leave,'" said Chad Becker, a former GSA real estate official who now represents building owners with government leases at Arco Real Estate Solutions. "I think there's going to be a period of pushback, a period of disbelief. And then, if necessary, they may start working on the actual execution of a move."

Errors add to confusion

DOGE says GSA has notified landlords in recent weeks that it plans to terminate 793 leases, focusing mostly on those that can be ended within months without penalty. The group estimates those moves will

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save roughly \$500 million over the terms of the leases, which in some cases were slated to continue into the 2030s. The Bureau of Reclamation cancellation in Boise, for instance, would take effect Aug. 31 and is expected to save a total of \$18.7 million through 2035.

But DOGE's savings estimates — a fraction of Musk's \$1 trillion cost-cutting goal — have not been verified and do not take into account the costs of moves and closures. The group has released no information about what they will mean for agencies.

"My initial reaction is this is just going to cause more chaos," said Jim Simpson, an accountant in Arizona who helps low-income people file taxes and serves on an IRS panel that advocates for taxpayers. "There's a lot of room to help with government efficiency, but it should be done surgically and not with a chainsaw."

Simpson said he was surprised to learn that dozens of IRS offices, including local taxpayer assistance centers, were facing upcoming lease cancellations. He refers clients there to get paperwork to file returns and answer IRS inquiries, and he said losing services would "cause a lot of anxiety" and delay refunds.

Plans to cancel the leases at several of the IRS centers and other sites were in error and have been rescinded, according to a person with direct knowledge of the changes who spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity in order to avoid retaliation. Those changes are not yet reflected on DOGE's list, which only removed one and added dozens more in its latest update published Thursday.

The GSA walked back the cancellation of a Geological Survey office in Anchorage, Alaska, for instance, after learning it did not have termination rights, according to the person familiar with the matter.

Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., said Monday that he'd convinced DOGE to back off lease terminations planned for the National Weather Center in Norman, a Social Security office in Lawton and the Indian Health Services office in Oklahoma City. But all three leases remained on DOGE's list of cancellations as of Thursday.

GSA's press office didn't respond to inquiries.

The real estate market is blindsided

While there was already a bipartisan push to reduce the government's real estate footprint, the mass cancellations blindsided an industry known for its stability.

Landlords who had been expecting government agencies to remain tenants, for several more years in some cases under their existing leases, were stunned. Some agencies learned from building managers, not their federal partners, that their leases were being canceled, according to real estate managers.

Becker, whose firm is tracking the DOGE lease cancellations, and other observers said they expect some agencies will be unable to move their personnel and property out of their spaces within such tight timelines. That may force some agencies to pay additional rent during what's known as a holdover period, undermining DOGE's stated goal of saving taxpayer money.

The Building Owners and Managers Association, which represents the commercial real estate industry, told landlords in a recent advocacy alert to be prepared to seek payment from any federal government tenants who stay beyond their leases.

Many affected agencies aren't speaking up

Asked about plans for buildings with leases that will soon expire, the IRS did not respond. A Social Security Administration spokesperson downplayed the impact of its offices losing leases, saying many were "small remote hearing sites," did not serve the public, were already being consolidated elsewhere or planned for closure.

Several other agencies provided little clarity — saying they were working with GSA to consider their options, in statements that were nearly identical in some cases.

But a spokesperson for the Railroad Retirement Board expressed concern over the upcoming lease cancellations of its offices in Joliet, Illinois, and eight other states, saying it was working to "maintain a public-facing office presence for the local railroad community."

Government Accountability Office official David Marroni told a congressional hearing last week that the push to unload unnecessary federal real estate was "long overdue," saying agencies have for too long held on to unnecessary space. But he warned the downsizing must be deliberate and carefully planned to "generate substantial savings and mitigate the risk of mistakes and unexpected mission impacts."

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That process had already started before Musk's team arrived, with the federal government's real estate portfolio steadily declining over the last decade. Indeed, critics of DOGE say if it were truly interested in cost-cutting it could learn from GSA, whose mission even before Trump took office was to deliver "effective and efficient" services to the American public.

A law signed by former President Joe Biden before he left office in January directed agencies to measure the true occupancy rates of leased spaces by this summer. Those that did not meet a target of 60% use rate over time would be directed to dispose of their excess space.

"There is a logical and orderly way to do this," Rep. Greg Stanton, an Arizona Democrat, said at last week's hearing. Instead, he said, DOGE is pursuing a reckless approach that threatens to harm the delivery of public services.

Industry observers cautioned that each situation is different, and it will take months or years to understand the full impact of the lease cancellations.

"It really depends on the terms. But it is a shock, there is no question, that all of a sudden, boom, in six weeks all these things have happened," said J. Reid Cummings, a professor of finance and real estate at the University of South Alabama. "It's like a blitzkrieg."

Today in History: March 15

Julius Caesar assassinated on 'ides of March'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, March 15, the 74th day of 2025. There are 291 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On March 15, 44 B.C., on the "ides of March," Roman dictator Julius Caesar was assassinated by Roman senators, including Brutus and Cassius, who feared Caesar was working to establish a monarchy.

Also on this date:

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson, addressing a joint session of Congress, called for new legislation to guarantee every American's right to vote. The result was passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In 1972, "The Godfather," Francis Ford Coppola's film based on the Mario Puzo novel and starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino, premiered in New York.

In 2012, convicted former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich entered a federal prison in Colorado, where the 55-year-old Democrat began serving a 14-year sentence for corruption. (He was released in February 2020 after President Donald Trump commuted his sentence; Trump pardoned Blagojevich in February 2025.)

In 2018, a pedestrian bridge under construction over a busy Miami highway collapsed, crushing vehicles beneath it; six people died and 10 were injured.

In 2019, a gunman killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, streaming the massacre live on Facebook. (Brenton Tarrant, an Australian white supremacist, was sentenced to life in prison without parole after pleading guilty to 51 counts of murder and other charges.)

In 2022, Russia stepped up its bombardment of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, while an estimated 20,000 civilians fled the desperately encircled port city of Mariupol by way of a humanitarian corridor.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Judd Hirsch is 90. Singer Mike Love (The Beach Boys) is 84. Filmmaker David Cronenberg is 82. Musician Sly Stone is 82. Musician Ry Cooder is 78. Actor Frances Conroy is 72. Rock singer Dee Snider (Twisted Sister) is 70. Baseball Hall of Famer Harold Baines is 66. Filmmaker Renny Harlin is 66. Rock singer Bret Michaels (Poison) is 62. Singer-TV host Mark McGrath (Sugar Ray) is 57. Actor Kim Raver is 56. Actor Eva Longoria is 50. Musician will.i.am (Black Eyed Peas) is 50. Actor Kellan Lutz is 40.