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Monday, March 17

St. PATRICK'S DAY

Senior Menu: Corned beef cabbage, mashed 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 mashed 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.

Wednesday, March 19

Senior Menu: Hot pork sandwich, sweet potato, green beans, pears.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Cheese stuffed breadstick, Marinara sauce.

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Lenten Supper, 6 p.m. (Host - Sarah Circle), worship 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

Thursday, March 20

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, apple crisp, garlic toast.

State A Boys Basketball Tournament, Sioux Falls: Groton Area vs. Sioux Falls Christian at noon.

Spring Break - No School

Emmanuel Lutheran: WELCA, 1:30 p.m. (Program - Nigeria, Host-Sarah)

Groton Daily Independent
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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.

Alien Enemies Act

President Donald Trump invoked a 1798 law to expedite deportation of Venezuelan gang members Saturday, though a federal judge blocked the plan for two weeks to hear arguments in the case.

The 227-year-old Alien Enemies Act is the only remaining law of four passed as part of the Alien and Sedition Acts amid tensions with France. The law gives the president power to deport non-US citizens without due process if they are natives of a country with which the US is at formal war or during an "invasion or predatory incursion." The statute has been invoked three times—during the War of 1812 and both World Wars—and was the basis for the 1940s internment of more than 100,000 Japanese Americans.

In its invocation, the Trump administration described the recent migration of thousands of members of Venezuela's Tren de Aragua gang—designated a foreign terrorist organization in January—as an invasion. The group is known for human and drug trafficking, and its alleged members are the target of at least 100 criminal investigations across the US.

March Madness Revealed

The 68-team field for the 2025 men's college basketball tournament was revealed yesterday, with Auburn (28-5) grabbing the top overall seed. The Tigers were joined by the Duke Blue Devils (31-3), Houston Cougars (30-4), and Florida Gators (30-4).

The story coming into the tournament is the dominance of the Southeastern Conference, which saw a record 14 teams get bids. (The conference expanded to 16 teams this season, along with the Big Ten). Separately, Rick Pitino became the first person to lead six separate schools to NCAA tournament bids, with St. John's grabbing a No. 2 seed.

The women's field is coming off one of the most-watched tournaments last year, with an average of 18.7 million viewers tuning in to the finals—the first time the women's title game outpaced the men's final. This field this year is led by UCLA, along with defending champion South Carolina, USC, and Texas rounding out the No. 1 seeds.

Not an expert, but have a little basketball knowledge? Your odds of a perfect bracket are roughly one in 120 billion.

Storms Sweep Across US

Hundreds of homes were destroyed and at least 36 people were killed over the weekend as intense early spring storms moved across the central and southern US. As of this writing, 12 people were killed following a tornado outbreak in Missouri, six people died in Mississippi, and three in Arkansas, among other states.

In Kansas, eight people were killed and dozens injured in a 55-vehicle pileup along I-70 after an intense dust storm impaired visibility. More than 200,000 people—largely through the mid-South—were left without power by late Saturday, with the system bringing widespread downpours across the mid-Atlantic by Sunday. To the north, some locations in Indiana and Kentucky reported 2-inch hail and winds nearing 70 mph.

In related news, more than 110 people were injured and one killed as of this writing as high winds and dry conditions spurred wildfires across Oklahoma.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Prince Harry's US immigration files to be made public tomorrow amid questions about whether his prior drug use may have disqualified him from obtaining a visa.

Sean "Diddy" Combs pleads not guilty to new charges related to alleged forced labor of past employees; the new charges are in addition to his racketeering and sex crimes charges he already faces.

Apple TV+ comedy "Ted Lasso" renewed for a fourth season.

Matt Richtman becomes first American male to win the Los Angeles Marathon since 1994.

Science & Technology

Replacement crew for astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams arrives at the International Space Station; the two have been stuck in orbit since June, expected to return as early as Wednesday.

Texas measles outbreak rises to at least 259 cases, with 34 hospitalizations and one death; the US reported 285 total cases across the country in 2024.

New study proposes "microlightning" inside individual droplets of water may have helped start the chemical reactions needed to create life on Earth.

Business & Markets

US stock markets mark big gains Friday following tumultuous week (S&P 500 +2.1%, Dow +1.7%, Nasdaq +2.6%); rise comes a day after S&P fell into correction territory, down more than 10% since recent peak.

Fintech startup Klarna files for initial public offering; firm seeking valuation above \$15B, made \$21M on \$2.8B in revenue last year.

The price of gold briefly passes the \$3K per ounce mark for the first time Friday amid tariff fears, settling near \$2,990 per ounce as of this writing.

The Rockefellers: This week's Business & Finance newsletter dives deep into one of the country's most financially influential families.

Politics & World Affairs

Trump administration issues memo instructing seven smaller agencies to reduce headcount and limit activities to the statutory minimum required by law, including Voice of America.

President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin to hold call this week in attempt to advance Ukraine ceasefire talks.

Russia reportedly retakes nearly all of the Russian border region of Kursk.

The US carries out strikes on Houthi rebel-held positions in Yemen over attacks on commercial vessels using Red Sea shipping lanes.

Nightclub fire in North Macedonia kills at least 59 people, injures more than 150.

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State Robotics Championships – VEX Robotics at SDSU

This year's SD VEX State Robotics Championship was held at the SDSU Campus in Brookings, SD. Twenty Teams across the state competed. Not only was this the first competition held on the college campus, it was the first time our students participated with the fields of play being elevated. Another new feature was instead of the 6-7 rounds of qualifications, State was 10 rounds plus the final rounds to determine the winner. The Team Gladiators made it to the final round, with a rematch of Gladiators and Vexinators from Mitchell fighting for the VEX World Qualifying Spots against Islanders and Phoenix Rising from Harrisburg. Even though they were close matches – Harrisburg did bring home the win. Overall, these 12 Groton Robotics students worked hard this season, and we are excited for the new game to come out for the 2025-2026 season after World's in early May!

9050F – Gladiators: Garrett Schultz, Lead; Jameson Penning, Haden Harder, Rylee Hofer

Qualifier Ranking – 3rd out of 20. (7 Wins/3 Losses) Won Quarter Finals, Semi Finals, Lost in the Championship 23 to 33 and 29 to 34. (Best 2 out of 3)

9050E – Galaxy: Axel Warrington & Corbin Weismantel, Co-Lead; Illyanna Dallaire & Ayce Warrington

Qualifier Ranking – Rank 13th out of 20. (5 Wins/5 Losses), Won Quarter Finals, Loss in Semi Finals 24 to 44.

9050B – Gearheads: Logan & Kira Clocksene, Co-Lead; Peyton Padfield & Emmett Zoellner

Qualifier Ranking – Rank 15th out of 20 (3 Wins/3 Losses) Loss in Quarter Finals 6 to 29.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #17 Results

Team Standings: Jackelopes 9, Coyotes 8, Cheetahs 7, Chipmunks 7, Shihtzus 3, Foxes 2

Men's High Games: Lance Frohling 205, Butch Farmen 194, Dion Bahr 192

Women's High Games: Brenda Waage 187, Sam Bahr 184, Darci Spanier 170

Men's High Series: Butch Farmen 543, Lance Frohling 539, Dion Bahr 532

Women's High Series: Brenda Waage 450, Sam Bahr 447, Sue Stanley 425

Week 17 Fun Game – 8 Spares – Coyotes with 12!

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Weekly Vikings Roundup: Free Agency Recap

By Jordan Wright

The Minnesota Vikings won free agency. There are usually no “winners” and “losers” in free agency, but this year is different. This is the first time in a long time that the Vikings shored up every weakness on the roster, leaving the team in a position to draft the best player available during next month’s draft. It’s entirely possible the free agent signings don’t pan out, but for today, we can all be excited about the new players Vikings’ GM Kwesi Adofo-Mensah brought in.

The two biggest weaknesses on the Vikings’ roster were the offensive and defensive lines, specifically the interior of those lines. So what did Kwesi do? He went out and signed four players who will play in and significantly beef up the trenches.

Jonathan Allen and Javon Hargrave, defensive tackles

Jonathan Allen was the first free agent the team brought in. The former Washington Commander is a former Pro Bowler and team captain who instantly becomes one of the Vikings’ best DTs since the Williams Wall days. Hargrave comes from San Francisco and pairs up with Jonathan Allen and Harrison Phillips to give the Vikings one of the best defensive lines in the NFL.

Ryan Kelly, Will Fries, and Justin Skule, offensive line

Ryan Kelly, the former Indianapolis Colt, is a four-time Pro Bowler who will likely replace Garrett Bradbury at center, giving the Vikings something they haven’t had in a long time: a physical center who can hold up against bigger defensive tackles. Will Fries also comes from the Colts, where he played right guard next to Kelly for many seasons. He was regarded by many as the best guard available in free agency, and his immediate chemistry with Ryan Kelly shouldn’t be overlooked. Justin Skule was brought in to be the team’s top backup offensive tackle. The Vikings now have one of the best offensive lines in the NFL.

Byron Murphy Jr., Isaiah Rodgers, Theo Jackson, and Tavierre Thomas, defensive secondary

The Vikings had a ton of players hitting free agency in their secondary. Cam Bynum signed a huge deal in Indianapolis, so the Vikings re-signed safety Theo Jackson to fill the void. Jackson, along with Joshua Metellus and returning Harrison Smith, give the Vikings a good blend of experience and youth at safety. Byron Murphy had a great season in 2024 and was one of the top cornerbacks in free agency, but the Vikings didn’t let him get away. The team also signed Isaiah Rodgers and Tavierre Thomas to help fill out the CB group. I expect the Vikings will still bring in another CB or two, possibly through free agency or the draft.

Aaron Jones and Jordan Mason, running backs

One of the first moves the Vikings made this offseason was to bring Aaron Jones back on a two-year deal. To complement Jones, the Vikings traded with the 49ers to acquire RB Jordan Mason, who will split carries with Jones to form an excellent one-two punch in the backfield.

The Vikings also added linebacker Eric Wilson, who was drafted by the Vikings and now returns to add some depth at the position. The team also re-signed punter Ryan Wright.

Looking ahead, the Vikings will undoubtedly bring in a few more free agents before shifting gears towards the draft. Check back next week as we break down any new signings while also continuing our roster breakdown as we prepare for the draft. Skol!

“Learning to Perceive: Visual Thinking Strategies in Medical Education”

Effective medical diagnosis depends not just on looking, but on truly perceiving. Recognizing this, many medical training programs have adopted Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) discussions about art to enhance students’ skills in nuanced observation, inference, and communication. In 2004, Harvard Medical School pioneered use of VTS within medical education to refine the diagnostic and interpersonal skills of future healthcare professionals. Now, VTS is embraced in over 30 medical schools.

Through inquiry-based, participant-centered VTS discussions about art, medical students learn to slow down, look carefully, analyze details, and refine their diagnostic reasoning. During the exercise, participants focus on an artwork while discussing their observations. The facilitator begins with: “What’s going on here?” Seeks evidence by asking: “What do you see that makes you say that?”

Then, spurs the participants with: “What more can we find?” The facilitator remains neutral, paraphrases comments, and points to the artwork to guide discussion. Without authoritative guidance, participants explore multiple interpretations freely. The conversation often lasts 20 minutes per artwork. (Conversely, most museum visitors spend 30 seconds or less with a piece.)

A 2020 study at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, along with others, found that students who participated in VTS showed significantly improved observational abilities compared to peers who had not engaged with the program. By examining and discussing artwork through VTS, participants sharpen their ability to notice small but significant details and interpret ambiguous visual information, a process that mirrors patient assessments, where attentiveness and contextual understanding are key. For example, learning to analyze visual cues that might indicate emotions may enhance healthcare professionals’ abilities to interpret patients’ nonverbal cues, leading to more compassionate and attentive interactions.

VTS discussions engage participants in collaborative analysis, fostering both clear articulation of observations and active listening to others’ perspectives. A systematic review of studies regarding VTS in medical education, published in BMC Medical Education (2023), found that engaging in VTS improved medical students’ observation skills and enhanced their abilities to express their findings concisely and confidently. Further, VTS participants also support their interpretations with evidence—a critical skill in patient care, where diagnoses must be explained with clarity and justification. The structured discussion format of VTS also encourages strong communication, as well as cooperative analytical skills, which are essential for collaborative work within healthcare teams.

Attuning to a patient’s needs requires careful observation, but diagnosing complex cases also demands the ability to navigate uncertainty. Patients may present with overlapping or unclear symptoms, and medical professionals must carefully weigh multiple possibilities. VTS trains students to tolerate ambiguity by prompting them to analyze complex images without immediate resolution. Further, the process fosters active listening to alternative interpretations offered by others, often leading participants to refine their own thoughts. This practice fosters adaptability, allowing future medical professionals to confidently refine their assessments rather than defaulting to initial impressions.

By engaging with works of art in VTS discussions, medical students and practitioners develop sharper attention to detail, improved communications, and increased empathy. Ideally, this reflective approach extends into clinical practice, allowing healthcare providers to take a more holistic view of their patients, ask insightful questions, thoroughly evaluate symptoms before reaching a diagnosis, and communicate thoughtfully with patients and families.



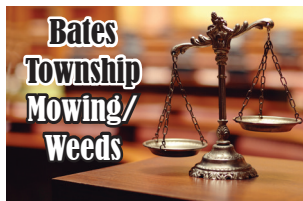
By Donna Merkt, director of the South Dakota Art Museum at South Dakota State University

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If you would like to learn more about Visual Thinking Strategies and potential partnerships, contact your local art museum.

Donna Merkt is a certified VTS facilitator and has practiced VTS for more than 15 years, during which she's led VTS conversations with thousands of students and adults, and trained numerous educators and medical professionals to use the method. She currently serves as director of the South Dakota Art Museum at South Dakota State University. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Threads. Prairie Doc Programming includes On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show (most Thursdays at 7pm on SDPB and streaming on Facebook), 2 podcasts, and a Radio program (on SDPB), providing health information based on science, built on trust.



Bates Township Board of Supervisors reminds all landowners and tenants that the road right-of-way extends 33 feet from the center of the township road. This ditch is to be maintained and mowed. Any crops planted in the road right-of-way will be mowed and expenses charged to the landowner.

Landowner is responsible for spraying all noxious weeds.

Bates Township Board of Supervisors

Betty Geist

Township Clerk

Published March 5 and 12, 2025 at the total approximate cost of \$11.59 and may be viewed free of charge at www.sdpublicnotices.com. 25322



Bates Township Equalization Meeting Notice:

The Bates Township Board of Equalization will meet at the Clerk's home on Tuesday, March 18th, 2025 at 6:30 pm.

All persons disputing their assessments are requested to notify the clerk prior to the meeting.

Betty Geist

Bates Township Clerk

14523 409th Ave

Conde, SD 57434

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Groton Township will be having its equalization meeting on March 19, 2025 at 7 p.m. at Love to Travel, 8 E. US Hwy 12, Groton. Prior notification required.

Layne Howard, Clerk



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Legislature seeks tighter limits on voter qualifications with host of 'election integrity' bills

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 16, 2025 11:35 AM

Lawmakers introduced more than 50 bills during the 2025 legislation session proposing to alter South Dakota's election laws.

Almost half are "election integrity" bills, aimed at election security, technology and voter qualifications. Seven of those bills are on the governor's desk.

Instead of regulating the process, with bills such as those that would have shortened the voter registration deadline and prohibited automatic tabulators, lawmakers this session favored tighter controls on who can participate in South Dakota elections. That includes bills redefining residency for voter registration and creating a federal-only ballot for people such as full-time RVers, whose vehicle registration and use of a mail-forwarding service might be their only connections to the state.



A Sioux Falls resident votes in the general election on Nov. 5, 2024, at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Sen. John Carley, R-Rapid City, introduced a handful of election bills.

"The legislators feel closest to the people, so they see the people-oriented bills as ones they can support more strongly," Carley said. "Some of the election process-related items are more related to auditors and the secretary of state, which have people arguing against these bills more."

Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, said during a press conference that the recounts and post-election audits in recent elections show that elections "are running pretty much as they should."

"We have paper ballots, we have voter ID laws and we have post-election audits in place," Mehlhaff said. "I think our process is pretty good and I think it's proven to be pretty effective."

The changes may seem small with each bill, said Samantha Chapman, advocacy manager with the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, but could lead to voter disenfranchisement.

"Taken as a whole, I think voters should see this as a serious threat to our democracy."

Reacting to residency laws, approving federal-only ballot

People who register under the Uniformed And Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, or list a post

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office box or mail forwarding service as their address because they don't live permanently in the state, will only be able to vote on federal races — not local or state elections — if the governor signs House Bill 1208. The legislation mandates the creation of a separate, federal-only ballot for U.S. presidential and congressional races.

House Bill 1066 changes the definition of a South Dakota resident eligible to vote in state and local elections to someone who lives and "usually" sleeps in the same place for 30 consecutive days.

The legislation would also require voters who register using a mail-forwarding service or other post office box as their address to additionally list "a description of the location of the individual's habitation" to be able to vote in state and local elections. Individuals who leave the state must "intend to return" to qualify as a resident, HB 1208 says.

Hughes County Finance Officer Thomas Oliva said the bills lack the tools and structure for auditors to verify applicants meet residency requirements, so he plans to continue evaluating residency requirements with the "honor system." He added that HB 1208 would allow an applicant to put in whatever description they want for their living situation to get a state and local ballot without requiring the auditor to verify it.

"If there's a description of where they're living, I take it as I'm to accept that. I'm not to investigate and go to the Walmart parking lot and ask for 30 consecutive days of security footage of that RV sitting there," Oliva said.

Or, an auditor could determine the voter doesn't qualify as a resident, and refuse to give the voter a state or local ballot.

Lawmakers who voted against the bills said the changes disenfranchise South Dakotans who choose to travel after living most of their lives in South Dakota, as well as other professionals who don't stay in the state at least 30 consecutive days, such as truckers.

House Minority Leader Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls, attempted to amend HB 1208 to include statewide elections and ballot questions that affect fees or taxes on the separate ballot. Without including those amendments, it would subject South Dakotans living out-of-state to "taxation and governance without representation," she said. Her effort failed.

"These voters will still continue to pay state sales tax, they're going to continue to pay motor vehicle registration fees, they're going to continue to pay driver's license fees, they'll continue to pay county wheel taxes, and there's still the chance they could be summoned and report for jury duty," Healy said.

The ACLU sent Gov. Rhoden a letter asking him to veto HB 1208.

Oliva said he hopes the state can "come up with something better." He added that the bills would add more work for his office to inform voters of the changes as they register to vote or apply for absentee ballots.

Reviewing and challenging SD voter residency

Members of the South Dakota Canvassing Group supported most of the "election integrity" bills introduced this session. The group has reviewed the state's voter rolls in recent years and unsuccessfully challenged the residency of some absentee voters in the June 2024 primary election.

House Bill 1062 designates a county's master registration files as public records. The files include voter registration information and absentee ballot information, such as the address an absentee ballot was mailed to and the dates it was requested and returned. The bill also requires the Secretary of State's Office to update its statewide voter registration file weekly and reduces the cost to access a copy of the state's voter registration list.

It currently costs \$2,500 to purchase a list of South Dakota registered voters, according to the Secretary of State's Office. HB 1062 would create an electronic spreadsheet option for \$225.

In making voter information more public, Chapman said she worries the change will threaten domestic assault survivor safety and will "embolden" targeted misinformation campaigns in South Dakota, inaccurately leading registered voters to believe they can't vote if they no longer reside at their voter registration address.

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The South Dakota Supreme Court denied a request by members of South Dakota Canvassing Group last year to order Secretary of State Monae Johnson and county-level election officials to disqualify 132 primary election ballots cast in Minnehaha County on the grounds that those voters did not meet residency requirements. The boundaries of the two precincts targeted include mail forwarding companies in Sioux Falls.

Senate Bill 185, introduced by Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, would change the challenge process. The bill allows a person to challenge someone's residency status on grounds other than "identity," which is what the group used to challenge the 132 ballots last year, or that a person is a felon or mentally incompetent. Challenges could also be based on residency, voting or being registered in another state, or being deceased. Challenges could only be made in the months ahead of the election, not on Election Day. Oliva and Chapman said they worked with Hulse to reach a sufficient end result.

If a county auditor determines a challenge is credible, the challenged person would have to fill out a "verification request" within 30 days to document their qualifications as a registered voter. The state Board of Elections will establish the process by which an auditor researches voters, establishes validity of a challenge and determines what documentation is needed to prove residency qualifications, Hulse told South Dakota Searchlight.

The auditor must remove the person from the voter list if they don't respond with sufficient evidence and don't vote between the verification request and immediately after the next general election. An auditor can't cancel voter registration for a residency challenge within 90 days before an election.

Limiting voting to U.S. citizens

Other bills passed by both chambers are largely a reaction to 273 non-U.S. citizens being removed from South Dakota's voter roll last year. The noncitizens marked "no" to the citizenship question on their driver's license application, but were added to the voter roll due to human error, the Secretary of State's Elections Director Rachel Soulek said at the time.

Noncitizens can obtain a driver's license or state ID if they are lawful permanent residents or have temporary legal status. There's a part of the driver's license form that allows an applicant to register to vote. That part says voters must be citizens.

Soulek said one of the 273 noncitizens cast a ballot. That was during the 2016 general election.

Rep. Kadya Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, criticized and voted against the bills that arose in response to that situation.

"If we are bringing legislation to try and address something that happened nearly a decade ago by a single individual with this piece of legislation," Wittman told lawmakers, "I cannot think of a larger form of virtue signaling than this."

South Dakota's voter registration form already requires a voter to certify they're a citizen of the United States. Senate Bill 73 would require people be South Dakota residents when they register to vote while applying for a South Dakota driver's license.

Senate Bill 75 would require U.S. citizenship status be placed on a driver's license or nondriver identification card, allowing poll workers to more easily identify if a voter is eligible. Democratic lawmakers argued the bill would lead to discrimination against noncitizens outside of elections.

Senate Bill 68 increases the penalty for voting illegally in the state. Rep. Logan Manhart, R-Aberdeen, carried the bill in the House, calling it an "election integrity" bill and saying it would deter fraudulent voting and keep noncitizens from voting in elections.

Chapman said it intimidates already-registered voters who might not meet new residency requirements approved by the Legislature.

"The goal here is not to protect voters or 'election integrity.' The goal is to intimidate," Chapman said. "The state Legislature should not be using its position to intimidate voters out of participating in our 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 the state.

The resolution doesn't require the governor's approval. All of the other bills await Gov. Larry Rhoden's consideration.

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.

Attempts to remove technology from SD elections lose in court after losing at the polls

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 16, 2025 11:34 AM

Attempts to ban tabulating machines and other technology from elections have fared no better in South Dakota courts than they did in several county elections.

Activists circulated petitions statewide last year that were meant to force counties to remove technology from elections by public vote. They said only hand-counting and other manual methods could ensure the integrity of elections, while election officials said voting machines and other forms of election technology have been repeatedly proven safe and effective.

Three of the initiated ordinances went to a public vote in Gregory, Tripp and Haakon counties in June. Voters defeated all three.

Commissioners in some other counties rejected the petitions and refused to place them on the ballot. They said the actions proposed by the petitions would violate federal laws, including those requiring assistive technology for disabled voters.

The anti-technology activists responded with lawsuits against at least two of those counties: Charles Mix County in the southeastern part of the state and Lawrence County in the northern Black Hills.

Nichole Braithwait, a petitioner in Lawrence County, filed an appeal that was dismissed by a court in June. Braithwait did not appeal that decision to the state Supreme Court. Instead, Braithwait — who is representing herself — sought an order from the same local court seeking to compel the county commission to accept her petitions and put her proposed ordinance to a public vote. A judge denied and dismissed Braithwait's case in January.

In Charles Mix County, Jeffrey and Jolene Stewart, representing themselves, also requested a court order to compel the county commission to accept their rejected petitions and put their proposed ordinance to a public vote.

"The petitioners make several arguments based on a misunderstanding of the law," the judge wrote.

Rapid City-based lawyer Sara Frankenstein, who specializes in election law, represented Lawrence and Charles Mix counties. Although not written explicitly in state law, Frankenstein said counties are able to reject petitions if they would violate state or federal laws. Clarifying that in state statute could help clear up the assertion from some petitioners that counties aren't legally able to reject petitions, Frankenstein told South Dakota Searchlight.

"They probably didn't read the exceptions in case law, since average people don't have access to case



Election workers run ballots through a tabulator machine for the general election on Nov. 5, 2024, in Minnehaha County. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

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law, let alone read it," Frankenstein said.

She helped craft a failed bill during the 2024 legislative session that would have added language to state law specifying that counties may reject petitions that violate state or federal laws.

An effort by Rapid City Republican Sen. John Carley to require hand counting ballots statewide failed at the committee level during this year's legislative session. A handful of other bills that could change South Dakota voter rights – primarily through restrictions on voter qualifications – passed the Legislature and are awaiting the governor's consideration.

Braithwait said she is not pursuing the issue further. The Stewarts do not plan on carrying "another petition like this," but they are considering "if it's worth" continuing their court case.

Lawrence County is still embroiled in several other legal actions from Kate Crowley-Johnson, challenging her 18 percentage-point loss in a state Senate Republican primary. One against the Lawrence County auditor and board of commissioners is pending and two other appeals have been filed since the cases were dismissed in September. The state Supreme Court rejected her request to review one of her dismissed cases.

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.

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EARTHTALK

Dear EarthTalk: Are prairie dogs threatened or endangered these days? – Joseph P., via email

Prairie dogs play a key role in grassland ecosystems but encounter many threats. These cute 18" tall tan rodents live in small pockets of habitat across 10 western U.S. states: Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming. However, they are now extinct in Arizona. Roughly half of the U.S. population is in South Dakota, Montana and Wyoming. As keystone species—those whose presence is critical for the balance and health of their ecosystems—they support more than 130 other species such as burrowing owls and black-footed ferrets.

Habitat loss is one of the most noteworthy threats. Urban development, agriculture and land conversion have dramatically reduced habitats. This leaves fragmented areas that make it hard for populations to thrive. Climate change further compounds thing by altering grassland ecosystems: Rising temperatures and prolonged droughts reduce food and water availability, further impacting prairie dogs and the species that depend on them. "Everything that was in the southern part of their range is kind of lopped off, and you're really seeing almost Colorado become the central core part of their range and then shifting north," says Sterling Krank, Prairie Dog Coalition Director at The Humane Society of the United States.

Another challenge is sylvatic plague, a disease transmitted by fleas that has wiped out large colonies. Also, prairie dogs are viewed as pests by farmers and ranchers. This leads to poisoning and other eradication efforts. "Prairie dogs, once one of the most abundant animals on the prairie, now occupy two percent of their historic range," reports Christine Peterson in High Country News.

Prairie dogs aren't federally recognized as endangered. But activists are working to conserve them, launching a wide range of initiatives including habitat restoration, vaccination efforts against the plague, and public awareness programs. These initiatives have brought achievements. But difficulties remain.

Anybody can help safeguard prairie dogs and their habitat. Supporting groups such as Defenders of Wildlife and the Prairie Dog Coalition aids in financing habitat restoration and disease prevention initiatives. Promoting sustainable methods that protect grasslands and reduce human-wildlife conflicts is another way to help. Raising awareness about the ecological importance of prairie dogs and taking part in citizen science initiatives to track their populations are additional methods to help in their conservation.

Prairie dogs may not hold endangered status at the moment, but their decreasing populations and the dangers they encounter highlight the necessity for intervention. Assisting conservation efforts and adopting sustainable methods is one approach to help guarantee the survival of these species and uphold the balance of North America's grassland ecosystems.

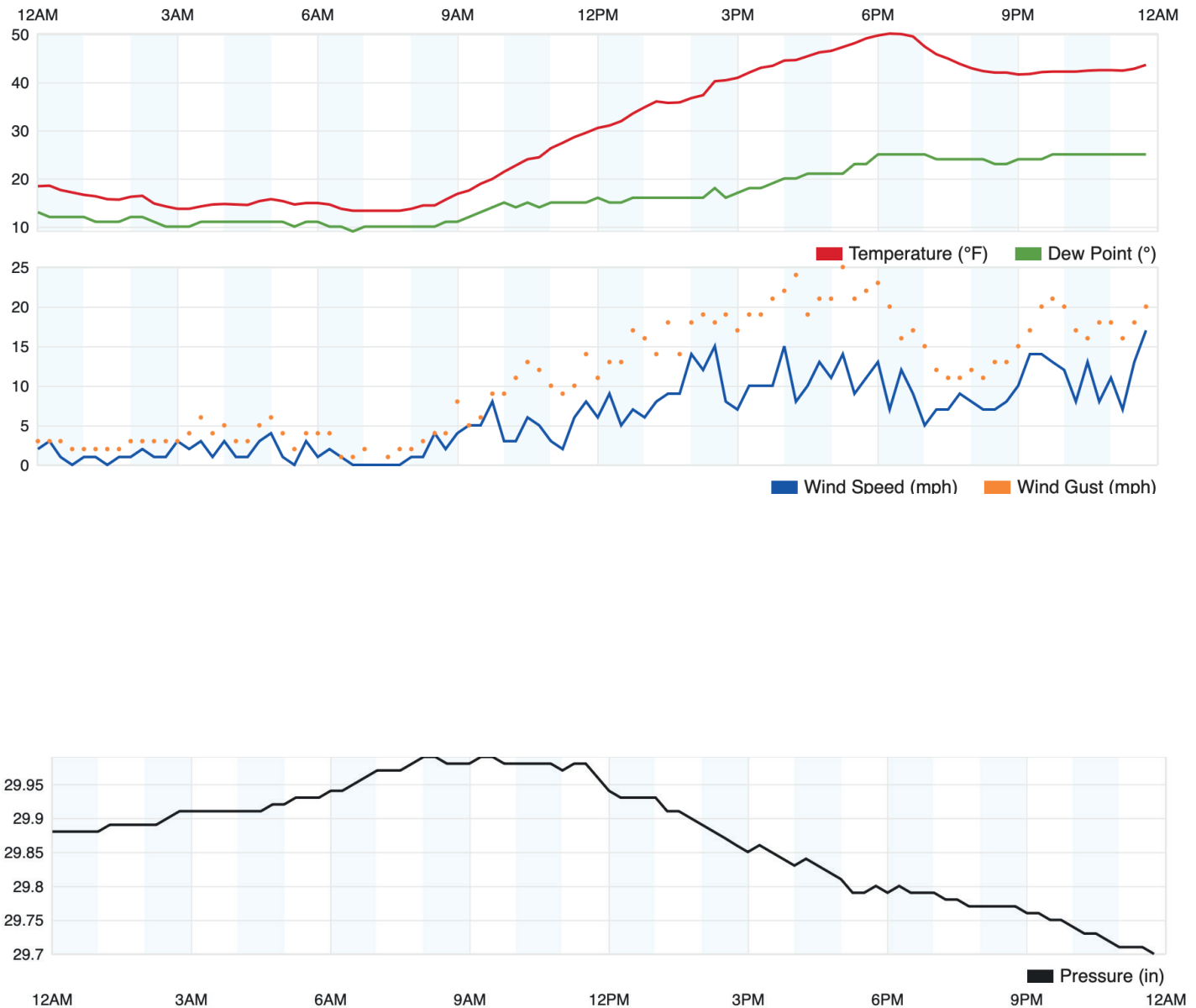


Conservationists would like to see the prairie dog granted at least threatened status under the Endangered Species Act. Credit: pexels.com.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

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Today



High: 62 °F

Sunny

Tonight



Low: 29 °F

Mostly Clear
then Slight
Chance Snow

Tuesday



High: 40 °F

Snow Likely
then Chance
Rain/Snow and
Breezy

Tuesday Night



Low: 23 °F

Blustery.
Chance
Rain/Snow
then Chance
Snow

Wednesday



High: 41 °F

Mostly Sunny
and Breezy



Precipitation on Tuesday

March 17, 2025
4:40 AM

Chances for rain and snow, with less than an inch of snow expected.

- Precipitation will move into the area Tuesday.
 - North central South Dakota will see the precipitation start early in the morning.
 - Central and northeastern South Dakota, as well as western Minnesota, won't see any precipitation until later in the afternoon.
 - The system will move out of the area Tuesday night.
- There are chances for both snow and rain, with snow being the most likely precipitation type.
- Less than an inch of snow accumulation is expected across the area.

	Probability of Precipitation Forecast (%)											
	3/17 Mon			3/18 Tue						3/19 Wed		
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am
Aberdeen	0	5	10	20	25	60	35	50	50	45	45	45
Britton	0	0	5	15	15	50	50	50	45	50	50	50
Chamberlain	0	0	5	10	10	5	5	15	15	70	70	70
Clark	0	0	5	15	15	25	10	30	45	65	65	65
Eagle Butte	0	5	15	35	40	70	75	75	75	35	30	30
Eureka	0	5	10	30	30	60	65	65	55	35	30	5
Gettysburg	0	5	10	20	25	55	60	60	45	45	45	5
McIntosh	0	5	15	30	35	65	65	65	60	20	10	0
Milbank	0	0	5	10	20	25	20	30	45	65	65	65
Miller	0	0	5	15	15	15	15	35	40	65	65	65
Mobridge	0	5	10	30	40	70	75	70	65	30	25	25
Murdo	0	0	5	5	5	25	30	45	55	65	65	65
Pierre	0	0	5	15	15	30	40	50	50	55	55	55
Redfield	0	0	10	15	20	25	15	40	50	60	60	60
Sisseton	0	0	0	10	15	45	45	40	45	55	55	55
Watertown	0	0	5	15	15	15	15	25	40	65	65	65
Webster	0	0	5	15	15	35	30	40	50	60	60	60
Wheaton	0	0	0	5	10	40	30	40	45	55	55	55

Created: 4 am CDT Mon 3/17/2025 | Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Precipitation moves into the area Tuesday, beginning with north central South Dakota in the morning and progressing to the rest of the forecast area in the afternoon. Less than an inch of snow accumulation is expected, and the system will be out of the area Tuesday night.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50 °F at 6:15 PM

Low Temp: 13 °F at 6:42 AM

Wind: 25 mph at 5:11 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 4 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 77 in 2012

Record Low: -10 in 1906

Average High: 42

Average Low: 20

Average Precip in March.: 0.43

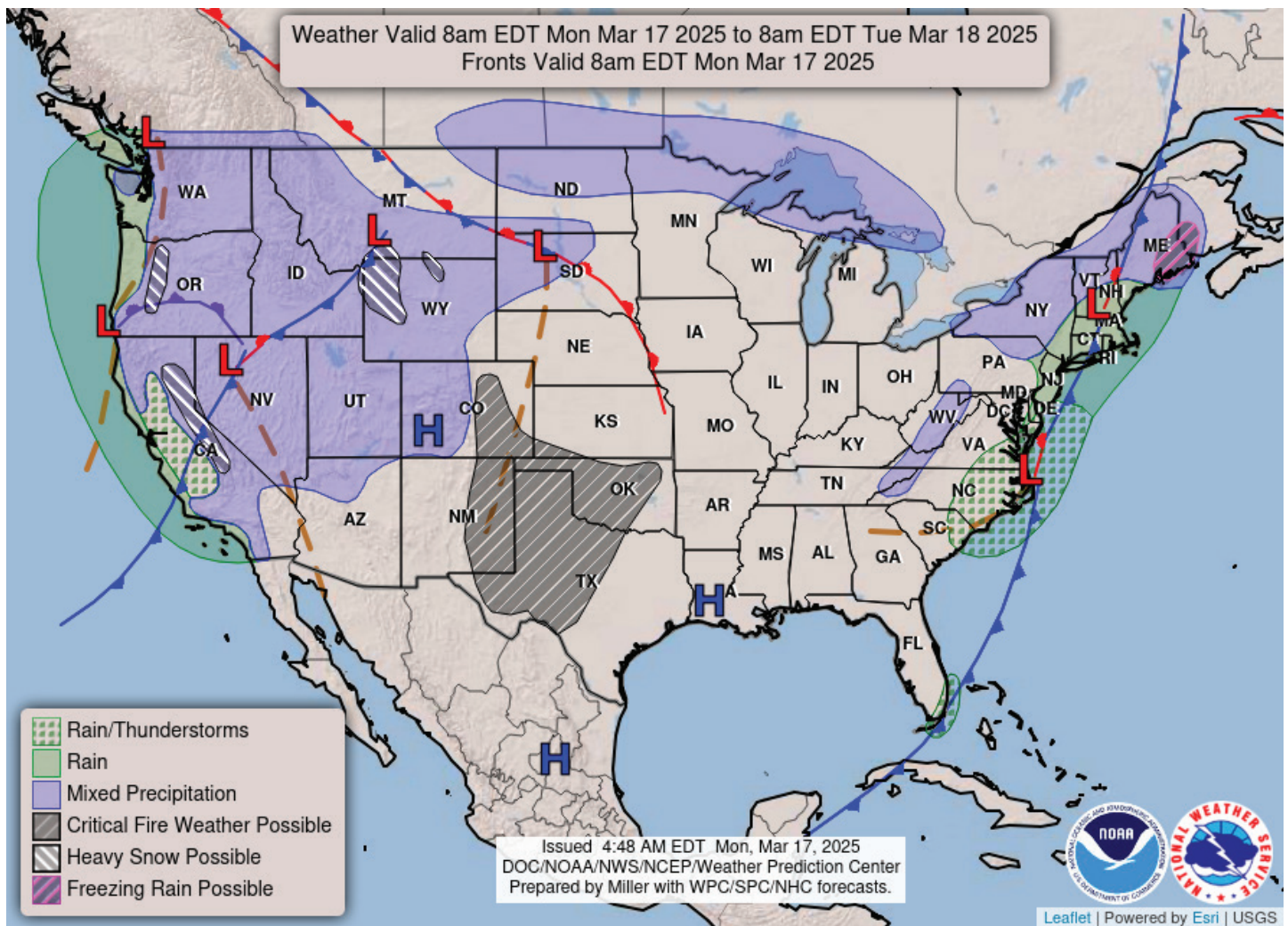
Precip to date in March.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.60

Precip Year to Date: 0.45

Sunset Tonight: 7:42:41 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:36:33 am



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Today in Weather History

March 17, 1997: High winds of 30 to 50 mph, gusting to over 60 mph, occurred over much of northeast South Dakota through the morning and into the early afternoon hours. Several homes and businesses sustained some roof damage. In Aberdeen, the high winds tore a large piece of the roof off the bowling alley and also ripped a part of a roof off an appliance store. The winds damaged some power lines and connections in Aberdeen, including some traffic lights. In Aberdeen, the power was out for 2500 customers for a few hours in the morning. The wind also damaged two old farm buildings west of Aberdeen. One barn lost 75 percent of its roof. The second barn was pushed six inches off of its foundation, suffering minor structural damage. The Edmunds County Highway Department Shop, under construction east of Ipswich, suffered much damage as many rafters came down, and the sidewall frame shifted. Finally, much small to medium-sized branches were brought down by the high winds. Some peak wind gusts across the area included 58 mph in Aberdeen and 63 mph in Watertown.

1892: A winter storm in southwestern and central Tennessee produced 26.3 inches of snow at Riddleton and 18.5 inches at Memphis. It was the deepest snow on record for those areas.

1906: The temperature at Snake River Wyoming dipped to 50 degrees below zero, a record for the U.S. for March.

1906: A magnitude 7.1 earthquake caused significant damage in Taiwan. According to the Central Weather Bureau in China, this earthquake caused 1,258 deaths, 2,385 injuries, and destroyed over 6,000 homes.

1952: The ban on using the word "tornado" issued in 1886 ended on this date. In the 1880s, John P. Finley of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, then handling weather forecasting for the U.S., developed generalized forecasts on days tornadoes were most likely. But in 1886, the Army ended Finley's program and banned the word "tornado" from forecasts because the harm done by a tornado prediction would eventually be greater than that which results from the tornado itself. The thinking was that people would be trampled in the panic if they heard a tornado was possible. The ban stayed in place after the Weather Bureau; now, the National Weather Service took over forecasting from the Army. A tornado that wrecked 52 large aircraft at Tinker Air Force Base, OK, on 3/20/1948, spurred Air Force meteorologists to begin working on ways to forecast tornadoes. The Weather Bureau also began looking for ways to improve tornado forecasting and established the Severe Local Storm Warning Center, which is now the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, OK. The ban on the word "tornado" fell on this date when the new center issued its first Tornado Watch.

1987 - A powerful spring storm produced severe thunderstorms over the Central Gulf Coast States, and heavy snow in the High Plains Region. A tornado caused three million dollars damage at Natchez MS, and six inches of rain in five hours caused five million dollars damage at Vicksburg MS. Cactus TX received 10 inches of snow. Western Kansas reported blizzard conditions. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm produced heavy snow from the northeast Texas panhandle to the Ozark area of Missouri and Arkansas. Up to fifteen inches of snow was reported in Oklahoma and Texas. Snowfall totals in the Ozark area ranged up to 14 inches, with unofficial reports as high as 22 inches around Harrison AR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northerly winds ushered snow and arctic cold into the north central U.S. Winds gusted to 58 mph at Sydney NE and Scottsbluff NE, Cadillac MI received 12 inches of snow, and International Falls MN reported a record low of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Showers and thunderstorms associated with a slow moving cold front produced torrential rains across parts of the southeastern U.S. over a two day period. Flooding claimed the lives of at least 22 persons, including thirteen in Alabama. Up to 16 inches of rain deluged southern Alabama, with 10.63 inches reported at Mobile AL in 24 hours. The town of Elba AL was flooded with 6 to 12 feet of water causing more than 25 million dollars damage, and total flood damage across Alabama exceeded 100 million dollars. Twenty-six counties in the state were declared disaster areas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



WHERE THEY BELONG

Once I asked an appliance repairman to come to church with me. "No," he responded. "The church is full of hypocrites."

"Great!" I responded. The man was startled. Continuing, I said, "That's exactly where they belong. Let's join them. I'm sure they won't mind."

If I understand it correctly, a hypocrite is someone who says one thing and does another. Or as a friend said to me, "A hypocrite is a person who does not walk their talk. They profess what they do not possess."

Many who do not want to attend church say the reason they refuse to do so is because the church is full of hypocrites. For as long as I can remember that has been a frequent excuse of many. As I see it, it is a great reason for them to attend! They already know the difference between the saved and the unsaved. The saved are expected to behave like Jesus, and the person who says he sees hypocrisy in Christians already knows what is expected of the born again. So, the choice becomes easy. I'm in or I'm out. It's my choice.

We need to extend a warm welcome to those who use "the hypocrite factor" as an excuse not to attend church. Jesus said that He came to call sinners to be saved. Those who believe that they are already good enough will have a difficult time to admit they are sinners. But the hypocrite? Well, they already know the truth.

Prayer: Lord, help me to live a life that will be an example, not an excuse, for people to seek to avoid knowing You. May my life be meet Your expectations and goals. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Luke 19:10

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: 1 Days 17 Hrs 32 Mins
58 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.15.25

16 39 41 44 51 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$26,560,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 47 Mins 58
Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.16.25

4 14 16 28 34 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 2 Mins 58
Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.15.25

4 5 15 29 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$67,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 2 Mins
58 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.15.25

35 36 47 50 58 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 31 Mins 58
Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.15.25

12 28 33 36 54 5

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$398,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 31 Mins 58
Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

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Upcoming Groton Events

01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
05/12/2025 High School Girls Golf Meet at Olive Grove
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
06/07/2025 Day of Play
06/13/2025 SDSU 4 Person Scramble at Olive Grove
06/21/2025 Groton Triathlon
06/23/2025 Ladies 2 Person Scramble at Olive Grove
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/16/2025 Men's Pro Am Golf at Olive Grove
07/25/2025 Ferney Open Scramble Golf at Olive Grove
08/01/2025 Wine on Nine Fundraiser at Olive Grove
08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm
12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

News from the Associated Press

March Madness mascots take center stage during NCAA men's and women's tournaments

By JOHN RABY AP Sports Writer

Fans navigating the dozens of schools in the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments might become as attached to the mascots as the athletes themselves.

Furry, animated characters used as rallying points for teams with unique nicknames have been around for decades, and this year's March Madness will have some dandies.

Wearing the costumes of badgers and beavers, gators and griffins, horses and hornets, pilgrims and patriots, among others, here's a look at some of the participating schools and the stories behind their mascots and monikers:

St. Francis Red Flash

Tiny St. Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania, joined the list of two dozen men's teams ever to make the NCAA Tournament with a losing record, earning an automatic berth by winning the Northeast Conference tournament.

With its grinning, bald-domed Frankie the Friar mascot, the Red Flash reached the Big Dance for the first time since 1991. The school of about 2,000 students is sure to gain more fans if it can make some tournament noise.

Habit-wearing Frankie debuted in 1983 and underwent a makeover in 2009. The Catholic-Franciscan school's student newspaper first referred to the football team as "The Red Flashes" in 1927.

UC San Diego Tritons

King Triton will be busy. The mascot of UC San Diego is making his debut in both the men's and women's tournaments in the school's first year of eligibility after moving up from Division II in 2020 to join the Big West Conference.

The bearded, beaming King Triton wears a crown and carries a three-pronged trident. While King Triton has legs, a Triton is described in Greek mythology as the son of Poseidon and a sea warrior with the lower body of a fish. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography is part of UC San Diego, whose campus in La Jolla is next to the Pacific Ocean, hence the Triton nickname.

Akron Zips

Akron's nickname originally was the Zippers, named after popular 1925 rubber galoshes with metal fasteners sold by tire manufacturer B.F. Goodrich. The school's athletic director shortened the nickname to the Zips in 1950.

A few years later, a contest was held to create a mascot. The winner was a kangaroo called Mr. Zip with boxing gloves and a zipper. However, since only female kangaroos have pouches, Mr. Zip would eventually become a she, named Zippy.

Grand Canyon Lopes

Thunder the Antelope seemingly can do it all, posing for photos with Grand Canyon University fans, rappelling to the arena floor from the ceiling and jumping off a trampoline to dunk a basketball.

And to think there was a time when it didn't have a name — and wasn't even Grand Canyon's first mascot. Arizona's Grand Canyon, also playing in the men's and women's NCAA tournaments, started its Antelope nickname in 1949, later shortened to the Lopes. A hairy mascot known as the "Purple People Eater" was replaced in 1981 with the antelope mascot, which didn't get its current name until Thunder stuck in 2008.

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

What's not to like about a bunny named Jack?

The only U.S. college known as the Jackrabbits, South Dakota State has had the moniker for so long that it's not exactly clear how the nickname came about.

It either occurred in 1905, after a newspaper cartoon said the South Dakota football team "was as quick

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as Jackrabbits," or in 1907 after a school yearbook poem changed the publication's name to Jackrabbits, and the athletic teams followed suit. It wasn't until 2010 that the mascot's name, Jack, was selected.

The state of South Dakota has two species of jackrabbits, which are actually hares and have longer ears and bigger bodies than rabbits.

Aside from the fictional character from "Alice in Wonderland," the Jackrabbits also will be known as the March Hares if South Dakota State can make a long tournament run. The school is in the women's tournament for the 13th time since 2009.

St. John's Red Storm

Johnny Thunderbird returns as St. John's competes in the men's tournament for the first time since 2019.

The Thunderbird mascot made its debut in 2009, 15 years after the school changed its nickname from Redmen to the Red Storm. According to the school, the Thunderbird was defined during the fan vote as a "mythological spirit of thunder and lightning believed by some Native Americans to take the shape of a great bird."

Lately, the bird has gotten plenty of exposure in its native New York City. The Thunderbird recently had a cameo role in a video alongside coach Rick Pitino and NBC "Tonight Show" host Jimmy Fallon, and it appeared with the school pep band and dance team on NBC's "Today" show.

Behave, young mascot

Mascots are normally well-mannered, though that's not always been the case during March Madness.

In the 2006 men's tournament, Stanford's unofficial tree mascot was ejected for not leaving the court fast enough after halftime.

Tennessee's mascot, Smokey the bluetick coonhound, got tossed from the 1996 women's national championship game against Georgia for destroying a stuffed Bulldog, causing a 15-minute cleanup delay.

And there was a physical altercation at the 1994 men's Final Four between the mascots for Arizona and Arkansas. Arizona's mascot, Wilbur the Wildcat, was tackled from behind and sustained a knee injury.

Bruce Pearl the fill-in

College coaches have to get their start somewhere. In the case of Bruce Pearl, coach of men's No. 1 overall seed Auburn, there was a brief stint as a mascot in the NCAA Tournament.

As a student at Boston College, Pearl was a personal assistant to basketball coach Tom Davis in 1981. When the team's mascot, Eddie the Eagle, became sick, Pearl came off the bench and donned the bird beak and feathers for one game during March Madness. He even borrowed a stepladder and stood behind the opponent's basket, flapping his arms — uh, wings — as a distraction as Ball State players shot free throws.

"They had a meeting after the game and they were going to throw me out," Pearl recalled in 2005. "I broke like five NCAA rules."

Deadly nightclub blaze leaves North Macedonia in grief and desperate for accountability

By KONSTANTIN TESTORIDES and IVANA BZGANOVIC Associated Press

KOCANI, North Macedonia (AP) — North Macedonia is grappling with the loss of dozens of young lives in a nightclub inferno, while trying to hold those responsible to account and prevent another calamity.

Fire tore through the overcrowded Club Pulse early Sunday in the eastern town of Kocani, leaving 59 people dead and 155 injured from burns, smoke inhalation and being trampled in the panicked escape toward the building's single exit.

Although the investigation into the fire's cause is ongoing, videos showed sparkling pyrotechnics on the stage hitting Club Pulse's ceiling and igniting the blaze as a band played.

People as young as 16 were among the casualties, and the nation declared seven days of mourning.

"We are all in shock, and I am shocked myself: as a mother, as a person, as a president," North Macedonian President Gordana Davkova Siljanovska said in an address to the nation Sunday night.

"I still cannot believe that the terrible tragedy in Kocani is a reality. I do not know with what words to express my condolences to the parents and loved ones of the deceased," she said. "No one responsible

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should escape the law, justice and punishment! Let us not allow anyone to endanger the lives of innocent people anymore."

The fire that shook the nation of 2 million — where close-knit extended family bonds made the disaster personal to many — was the latest in a string of deadly nightclub fires around the world.

Allegation of bribery surrounding nightclub

Authorities say they are investigating allegations of bribery surrounding the nightclub that was crammed with young revelers and at double capacity. And North Macedonia's government ordered a sweeping three-day inspection to be carried out at all nightclubs and cabarets across the country, starting Monday.

The country was in mourning as people watched harrowing scenes in the town of 25,000 people, where rescuers for hours carried out their grim task of removing the charred bodies of clubgoers.

The fire caused the roof of the single-story building to partially collapse, revealing the charred remains of wooden beams and debris.

Anxious parents gathered outside hospitals in Kocani and the capital Skopje, some 115 kilometers (72 miles) west, for updates about the injured.

Waiting outside the hospital in Kocani, Dragi Stojanov was among those who received the dreaded news that his 21-year-old son Tomce had perished.

"He was my only child. I don't need my life anymore. ... 150 families have been devastated," he told reporters. "Children burnt beyond recognition. There are corpses, just corpses inside (the club). ... And the bosses (of organized crime), just putting money into their pockets."

Neighboring countries provide help

Flags around the country have been lowered to half-staff, and the death toll may rise further, with 20 of the injured in critical condition, Health Minister Arben Taravari said.

Neighboring and nearby countries — Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Turkey — have already accepted many of those with the most serious injuries, while the government was in talks with several other countries to expand the hospital transfers, officials said.

"All patients who have been transferred abroad are currently in stable condition. We hope it stays that way and that we will receive positive news from abroad," Taravari said Monday, noting that several countries are also sending medical teams to North Macedonia.

Safety code violations in the club

"We even tried to get out through the bathroom, only to find bars (on the windows)," 19-year-old Marija Taseva told The Associated Press. "I somehow managed to get out. I fell down the stairs and they ran over me, trampled me. ... I barely stayed alive and could hardly breathe." She suffered an injury to her face.

A state prosecutor said a preliminary inspection of the nightclub had revealed numerous safety code violations including a lack of emergency exits, an insufficient number of fire extinguishers, and improper access for emergency vehicles, among others.

Interior Minister Panche Toshkovski said 15 people had been detained for questioning after a preliminary inspection revealed the club was operating without a proper license. He said the number of people inside the club was at least double its official capacity of 250.

"We have grounds for suspicion that there is bribery and corruption in this case," he told reporters without elaborating.

Condolences poured in from leaders around Europe as well as from the office of the hospitalized Pope Francis.

"I have had many difficult moments and challenges in my life but today is by far the most difficult day of my life," Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski said in a televised address. "My heart is breaking, and I have no strength to speak today. I am broken and my spirit is broken."

Late Sunday, Kocani's residents held a candlelight vigil in support for mourning families, waiting in long lines to light church candles.

Beti Delovska, an economist from Skopje, said North Macedonia has never experienced a tragedy like this, with dozens of young people vanishing in minutes. And she noted that many young people with bright

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futures had already left the nation, in search of opportunities elsewhere.

"(North) Macedonia is on its death bed," Delovska said. "We have no more credible institutions, the health system is completely dismantled, education is poor, judiciary is partisan and corrupted to the bone. ... I do believe now that only God can save (North) Macedonia."

Canada's Carney to meet with European allies as tensions with the Trump administration persist

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — New Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney arrived in Paris Monday to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron, seeking support from one of Canada's oldest allies as U.S. President Donald Trump continues to attack Canada's sovereignty and economy.

This is Carney's first official foreign trip since he was sworn in on March 14. He will next land in London where he will sit down with U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and King Charles III, the head of state in Canada.

Why Paris and London?

Carney has deliberately chosen the two European capital cities that shaped Canada's early existence. During his swearing-in ceremony, he noted the country was built on the bedrock of three peoples, French, English and Indigenous, and said Canada is fundamentally different from America and will "never, ever, in any way shape or form, be part of the United States."

Since Trump came to office, he has imposed whopping tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum and repeatedly commented on turning Canada into the 51st state, infuriating Canadians and sparking a call to boycott U.S. products across the country. He is threatening to impose tariffs on all Canadian products on April 2.

On Monday, a senior Canadian government official briefed reporters on the plane before picking up Carney in Montreal, saying the purpose of the trip is to double down on partnerships with London and Paris. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he is not allowed to speak publicly, said Canada is a "good friend of the United States but we all know what is going on."

Carney will visit the Notre-Dame Cathedral before meeting with Macron at the Palais de l'Élysée. However, Macron isn't expected to hold a joint news conference with Carney, a sign the French president might not want to upset Trump by siding with Canada.

Before returning to Ottawa on Tuesday, Carney will travel to the edge of Canada's Arctic to "reaffirm Canada's Arctic security and sovereignty."

"The choice of this itinerary for Prime Minister Carney's first official trip emphasizes the strong connection of Canada with the Arctic as well as with the two former colonial powers Canada remains attached to, through the Commonwealth on the U.K. side and La Francophonie on the France side, said Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal.

"The fact that Canada never broke away from the U.K. in a violent fashion is a key historical and institutional difference between the United States and Canada, a constitutional monarchy rather than a republic that has adopted and retained a U.K.-style parliamentary system."

The trip to London will be a bit of a homecoming, as Carney became the first non-British governor in the Bank of England's 319-year history when he took over the top job on July 1, 2013. He served until March 15, 2020.

No Washington trip planned

Carney, a former central banker who turned 60 on Sunday, 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. His government is also reviewing the purchase of U.S.-made F-35 fighter jets in light of Trump's trade war.

Meanwhile, Macron has been ramping up efforts to persuade France's allies to move away from purchases of American military hardware, which dovetails with Canada's rethink on F-35s and also coincides

with mounting questions and concerns in Europe that European defenses are overly dependent on U.S. weaponry, technical support and goodwill.

Carney spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on a call late Sunday and invited him to the G7 summit this summer, which Canada is hosting. Trump said he would speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday as he pushes to end the war in Ukraine.

Carney is expected to call an election by the end of the week, to take place in late April or early May. Canada's governing Liberal Party had appeared poised for a historic election defeat this year until Trump declared economic war. Now, the party and its new leader could come out on top.

Trump administration deports hundreds of immigrants even as a judge orders their removals be stopped

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

The Trump administration has transferred hundreds of immigrants to El Salvador even as a federal judge issued an order temporarily barring the deportations under an 18th century wartime declaration targeting Venezuelan gang members, officials said Sunday. Flights were in the air at the time of the ruling.

U.S. District Judge James E. Boasberg issued an order Saturday temporarily blocking the deportations, but lawyers told him there were already two planes with immigrants in the air — one headed for El Salvador, the other for Honduras. Boasberg verbally ordered the planes be turned around, but they apparently were not and he did not include the directive in his written order.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, in a statement Sunday, responded to speculation about whether the administration was flouting court orders: "The administration did not 'refuse to comply' with a court order. The order, which had no lawful basis, was issued after terrorist TdA aliens had already been removed from U.S. territory."

The acronym refers to the Tren de Aragua gang, which Trump targeted in his unusual proclamation that was released Saturday

In a court filing Sunday, the Department of Justice, which has appealed Boasberg's decision, said it would not use the Trump proclamation he blocked for further deportations if his decision is not overturned.

Trump sidestepped a question over whether his administration violated a court order while speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday evening.

"I don't know. You have to speak to the lawyers about that," he said, although he defended the deportations. "I can tell you this. These were bad people."

Asked about invoking presidential powers used in times of war, Trump said, "This is a time of war," describing the influx of criminal migrants as "an invasion."

Trump's allies were gleeful over the results.

"Oopsie...Too late," Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, who agreed to house about 300 immigrants for a year at a cost of \$6 million in his country's prisons, wrote on the social media site X above an article about Boasberg's ruling. That post was recirculated by White House communications director Steven Cheung.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who negotiated an earlier deal with Bukele to house immigrants, posted on the site: "We sent over 250 alien enemy members of Tren de Aragua which El Salvador has agreed to hold in their very good jails at a fair price that will also save our taxpayer dollars."

Steve Vladeck, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, said that Boasberg's verbal directive to turn around the planes was not technically part of his final order but that the Trump administration clearly violated the "spirit" of it.

"This just incentivizes future courts to be hyper specific in their orders and not give the government any wiggle room," Vladeck said.

The immigrants were deported after Trump's declaration of the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, which has been used only three times in U.S. history.

The law, invoked during the War of 1812 and World Wars I and II, requires a president to declare the

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United States is at war, giving him extraordinary powers to detain or remove foreigners who otherwise would have protections under immigration or criminal laws. It was last used to justify the detention of Japanese-American civilians during World War II.

Venezuela's government in a statement Sunday rejected the use of Trump's declaration of the law, characterizing it as evocative of "the darkest episodes in human history, from slavery to the horror of the Nazi concentration camps."

Tren de Aragua originated in an infamously lawless prison in the central state of Aragua and accompanied an exodus of millions of Venezuelans, the overwhelming majority of whom were seeking better living conditions after their nation's economy came undone during the past decade. Trump seized on the gang during his campaign to paint misleading pictures of communities that he contended were "taken over" by what were actually a handful of lawbreakers.

The Trump administration has not identified the immigrants deported, provided any evidence they are in fact members of Tren de Aragua or that they committed any crimes in the United States. It also sent two top members of the Salvadoran MS-13 gang to El Salvador who had been arrested in the United States.

Video released by El Salvador's government Sunday showed men exiting airplanes onto an airport tarmac lined by officers in riot gear. The men, who had their hands and ankles shackled, struggled to walk as officers pushed their heads down to have them bend down at the waist.

The video also showed the men being transported to prison in a large convoy of buses guarded by police and military vehicles and at least one helicopter. The men were shown kneeling on the ground as their heads were shaved before they changed into the prison's all-white uniform — knee-length shorts, T-shirt, socks and rubber clogs — and placed in cells.

The immigrants were taken to the notorious CECOT facility, the centerpiece of Bukele's push to pacify his once violence-wracked country through tough police measures and limits on basic rights

The Trump administration said the president actually signed the proclamation contending Tren de Aragua was invading the United States on Friday night but didn't announce it until Saturday afternoon. Immigration lawyers said that, late Friday, they noticed Venezuelans who otherwise couldn't be deported under immigration law being moved to Texas for deportation flights. They began to file lawsuits to halt the transfers.

"Basically any Venezuelan citizen in the US may be removed on pretext of belonging to Tren de Aragua, with no chance at defense," Adam Isacson of the Washington Office for Latin America, a human rights group, warned on X.

The litigation that led to the hold on deportations was filed on behalf of five Venezuelans held in Texas who lawyers said were concerned they'd be falsely accused of being members of the gang. Once the act is invoked, they warned, Trump could simply declare anyone a Tren de Aragua member and remove them from the country.

Boasberg barred those Venezuelans' deportations Saturday morning when the suit was filed, but only broadened it to all people in federal custody who could be targeted by the act after his afternoon hearing. He noted that the law has never before been used outside of a congressionally declared war and that plaintiffs may successfully argue Trump exceeded his legal authority in invoking it.

The bar on deportations stands for up to 14 days and the immigrants will remain in federal custody during that time. Boasberg has scheduled a hearing Friday to hear additional arguments in the case.

He said he had to act because the immigrants whose deportations may actually violate the U.S. Constitution deserved a chance to have their pleas heard in court.

"Once they're out of the country," Boasberg said, "there's little I could do."

After a stint in Guantanamo Bay, a Venezuelan deported from the US adjusts to his homeland

By REGINA GARCIA CANO and GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MARACAIBO, Venezuela (AP) — Jhoan Bastidas was deported from the United States and spent 16 days at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, watched by cameras and eating small meals that left

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him hungry.

"I was locked up all day in a little room — I counted the feet: 7 wide and 13 long — without being able to do anything, without a book, looking at the walls," Bastidas, 25, said in his father's middle-class home in the western city of Maracaibo, Venezuela.

Three weeks after he was returned to Venezuela under President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown, Bastidas is just starting to make sense of it all — how he is back in the once-prosperous hometown that he left as a teenager; how tattoos on his chest earned him a reputation as a criminal; and how he became one of the few migrants to set foot on the naval base best known for housing terrorism suspects.

Piecing lives together

Bastidas and roughly 350 other Venezuelans who migrated to the U.S. are trying to piece their lives together after they were deported to their troubled country over the past few weeks. About 180 of them spent up to 16 days at the base in Guantanamo before being flown to Honduras by U.S. authorities and, from there, to Venezuela by the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

It is part of the White House's efforts to deport a record number of immigrants in the U.S. illegally. Trump's government has alleged Venezuelans sent to the naval base are members of the Tren de Aragua gang, which originated in the South American country, but it has offered little evidence to back that up.

"It was all very hard; all those experiences were very hard," Bastidas said. "You have to be strong in the face of all those problems, you know, but I saw so much hate."

More than 7.7 million Venezuelans have left their homeland since 2013, when its oil-dependent economy came undone and Maduro became president. Most settled in Latin America and the Caribbean, but after the COVID-19 pandemic, they increasingly set their sights on the U.S.

Venezuela has refused to take back its own citizens from the U.S. for years, with brief, limited exceptions such as the recent flights.

Over the weekend, the U.S. government transferred hundreds of immigrants to a maximum-security prison in El Salvador after Trump invoked an 18th century wartime law to speed up deportations of alleged Tren de Aragua members. The Trump administration, however, has not provided any evidence to back up the gang-membership claim.

The immigrants were transferred even as a federal judge issued an order temporarily barring deportations under the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, which allows the president broader leeway on policy and executive action to expedite mass deportations.

Leaving Venezuela

Bastidas, his mother and siblings left Maracaibo in 2018, one of the harshest years of the country's protracted crisis. As they tested their luck in Peru and then settled in Colombia, people living in Venezuela lost jobs, formed long lines outside near-empty grocery stores and went hungry.

Their hometown saw businesses shutter and entire families sell their belongings and move away. The hourslong power outages that became everyday occurrences starting in 2019 pushed even more people to abandon Maracaibo.

He set off for Texas in November 2023, bankrolled by a brother whose promise of a car and a food delivery job in Utah convinced him to migrate.

Bastidas turned himself in to U.S. authorities after reaching the border with Mexico and was taken to a detention facility in El Paso, Texas. He remained there until early February, when one morning he was handcuffed, driven to an airport and put in an airplane without being told where it was headed.

After the aircraft landed, fellow passengers thought they were in Venezuela, but when he reached the door and only saw "gringos," Bastidas said, he concluded they were wrong. When he saw "Guantanamo" written on the floor, it did not mean anything to him. He had never heard that word before.

Guantanamo

When inside the cell, Bastidas said, he could never tell the time of day because its only window was a small glass panel at the top of the door looking into the building. He said he only saw sunlight every three days for an hour, which was the recreation time he was allowed to spend in what he described as a "cage."

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Bastidas said his hands and feet were shackled whenever he left his cell, including when he went to shower every three days. At one point, he and other detainees were given small Bibles, and they began praying together, reading Scripture loudly and placing their ears against the door to hear each other.

"We used to say that the one who was going to get us out was God because we didn't see any other solutions. We didn't have anyone to lean on," Bastidas added.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security did not respond to requests for comment.

Trump has said he planned to send "the worst" to the base in Cuba, including members of the Tren de Aragua. Bastidas said he is not part of the gang and believes the U.S. authorities used his tattoos to wrongly catalog him as a member of the criminal organization.

When asked which tattoos he thinks authorities misjudged, his father pulled down the neck of Bastidas' white T-shirt and pointed to two black, eight-pointed stars, each inked on one side of the chest, below the collarbones.

The American Civil Liberties Union has filed a lawsuit attempting to block further transfers to Guantanamo alleging cruelty by the guards and suicide attempts by at least three people held there.

Bastidas and other Venezuelans returned to Venezuela from Guantanamo on Feb. 20. Armed state intelligence service agents dropped them off at their homes.

Bastidas spent the next two weeks resting. He then began working at a hot dog stand.

Back home

Abandoned storefronts and homes are everywhere in Maracaibo, which once was a magnet for immigrants looking for good-paying jobs in and around nearby oil fields. But corruption, mismanagement and eventual U.S. economic sanctions saw production — and population — decline steadily.

Few people might know Bastidas by name in his sweltering hometown, but practically everyone in Maracaibo knows someone who has migrated. So, news of the Venezuelans' transfer to Guantanamo was shared seemingly endlessly on social media and WhatsApp, setting off debates over their living conditions and alleged gang affiliations as well as the complex crisis that drove them to migrate in the first place.

Bastidas is leaning into faith to ignore the noise and move forward.

"I see it as a kind of test that the Lord put me through," he said. "He has another purpose for me. It wasn't for me to be (in the U.S.), and he kept me there (in detention) for some reason."

These dedicated runners have done every LA Marathon for nearly 4 decades

By JAIMIE DING Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — They have run through heartache and grief, battling illnesses and injuries as their bodies have aged. Some are now using wheelchairs, including the oldest who is 87.

Despite it all, the Los Angeles Marathon's Legacy Runners have stuck to their mission: finish the race.

On Sunday, the group of 92 marathoners, including 10 women, marked their 40th LA Marathon, participating in the 26.2-mile (42.2-kilometer) race every year since the city's iconic event began in 1986.

"We're legacy runners, we just don't know when to quit," 77-year-old Lou Briones said.

Briones even has finished the race on crutches after surgery. Since getting both knees replaced, he walks the race.

"You gotta do it," Briones said. "No matter what the conditions are, you gotta be there at the starting line on race day."

When Briones and others gathered at the starting line for the first LA marathon, President Ronald Reagan had just been reelected and few weeks prior the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded, shocking the country. Tom Bradley was serving as the first Black mayor of Los Angeles and the city was grappling with the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Los Angeles was inspired to start its own marathon after the success of hosting the 1984 Summer Olympic Games, much like the beginning of the Boston Marathon in 1897 after the first marathon competition was held in the 1896 Summer Olympics. Los Angeles is now preparing to host its next Olympics in 2028.

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Five years after the LA Marathon started, event organizers began recognizing runners who had completed every race with a plaque. They continued to hold celebrations for the dedicated runners every five years.

Around the 15th year, Briones decided he wanted to formalize the group. He and a friend printed out stickers with an email address and brought them to the marathon in 2002.

"We went to the race and we just started yelling out," Briones said. "We'd stick it right on their bib, and then after the race, most of them immediately sent an email. That was the beginning."

Some Legacy Runners said they were inspired by U.S. runner Joan Benoit, who won the first Olympic women's marathon at the 1984 Los Angeles Games.

May DuBois, 80, remembers watching the race on TV and seeing Benoit finish far ahead of the rest of the pack of runners. A classical pianist, she had never run in her life.

Two years later, DuBois ran the same path as Benoit — starting and ending at the Memorial Coliseum — since back then, the LA Marathon route was the same as the Olympics. She said it felt just "like running in the Olympics with everybody cheering us on."

Now, she can't imagine going a day without running 3 to 5 miles (4.8 to 8 km).

"I'm healthy, I look good, and I don't get tired. I never get sick, I don't even catch colds," said DuBois, who hosts a brunch to celebrate after each marathon.

Each year, Legacy Runners are given the same bib number. They start meeting monthly for training about six months before the marathon.

Cliff Housego, 76, started running after his father died at 48 from a heart attack. He decided he wanted to live long enough to see his grandchildren and even great-grandchildren.

Over the years, Housego has gone through two divorces and lost his daughter. Through it all, the marathon has been a constant in his life.

"Many, many things could've stopped me from being there," Housego said.

At 83, Sharon Kerson realizes that, too.

After a year of dealing with sickness and vertigo, Kerson completed her training last week at the West Los Angeles College track, the same place she first started running more than 40 years ago. She has run more than 600 marathons.

She wore a rain jacket from the St. George Marathon in Utah, shorts from the San Francisco Marathon and a T-shirt from the 30th LA Marathon.

"I never was fast and I'm not competitive at all," Kerson said, adding that her only goal each time is to finish.

Rick Bingham began racing in a wheelchair a decade ago after injuring his Achilles tendon during a triathlon. At 87, he swims half a mile (0.8 kilometer) every other day and lifts weights. To train, he went 5 miles (8 kilometers) one day around his ranch in a wheelchair.

Bingham has no plans to slow down. He wants to reach his 50th LA Marathon.

"I'll only be 97 when I do that," he said.

Bingham's commitment to remaining in the race has inspired Luis Gallardo to continue.

Gallardo, 71, was planning to quit after his 38th marathon, when his knees gave out. But he began training again when Bingham offered him his extra racing wheelchair.

"We went through too many things over the years, too many hardships," Gallardo said. "To do it with him is just a blessing."

Gallardo's goal is now to reach the 50th LA marathon with Bingham.

After that, Gallardo said, he will find a way to finish the race with his friend, even carrying Bingham across the finish line if he has to.

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Severe weather moves east after tornadoes, winds and wildfires killed at least 39 people

The Associated Press undefined

A dynamic storm that prompted foreboding predictions of dangerous weekend weather spawned tornadoes, dust storms and wildfires that killed at least 39 people and destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses.

The weakening but still volatile weather system was moving Monday into the U.S. Southeast and Mid-Atlantic, bringing thunderstorms, hail, damaging winds and the potential for more tornadoes.

Here's what to know about the unusually erratic and damaging weather.

Monday forecast

Forecasters warned of dangerous winds from Florida all the way north to New Jersey, while heavy rain was likely across New York and New England.

A tornado watch was in effect until early Monday for a large swath of North Carolina and Virginia, with gusts potentially reaching 70 mph and possible hail the size of ping pong balls, according to the National Weather Service office in Blacksburg, Virginia.

The massive storm that began Friday earned an unusual "high risk" designation from meteorologists. Still, experts said it's not unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

Multiple tornadoes in several states

In Tylertown, Mississippi, tornadoes ripped tall trees in half and wiped out entire neighborhoods. Six people were killed and more than 200 were displaced, Gov. Tate Reeves said.

Hailey Hart and her fiancé Steve Romero hunkered down with their three huskies inside their 1994 Toyota Celica as a twister ripped apart their home Saturday. Romero said he prayed out loud and hugged Hart as the car rolled onto its side, windows shattering, before it landed on its wheels again.

"It was a bad dream come true," Romero said. The couple escaped with only scratches.

Wayne County, Missouri, resident Dakota Henderson said he and others rescuing trapped neighbors found five bodies scattered in rubble outside what remained of his aunt's house. Scattered twisters killed at least a dozen people in the state Friday, authorities said.

Coroner Jim Akers of Butler County, Missouri, described the home where one man was killed as "just a debris field."

"The floor was upside down," he said. "We were walking on walls."

Wildfires and dust storms also proved deadly

Wind-driven wildfires caused extensive damage in Texas and Oklahoma and officials warned that parts of both states would again face an increased risk of fire danger in the coming week.

More than 130 fires were reported across Oklahoma and nearly 400 homes were damaged or destroyed, Gov. Kevin Stitt said.

"Nobody has enough resources to fight fires when the wind is blowing 70 mph," said Terry Essary, the fire chief of Stillwater, Oklahoma. "It's an insurmountable task."

Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management spokesperson Keli Cain said Sunday that two people were killed as a result of the wildfires and weather.

Meanwhile, dust storms spurred by high winds claimed almost a dozen lives on Friday. Eight people died in a Kansas highway pileup involving at least 50 vehicles, according to the state highway patrol. Authorities said three people also were killed in car crashes during a dust storm in Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle.

Refuge and recovery efforts

President Donald Trump said the White House was monitoring the storms and would assist state and local officials to help in the recovery. He said National Guard troops were deployed to Arkansas, where officials confirmed three deaths.

"Please join Melania and me in praying for everyone impacted by these terrible storms!" Trump posted on his social media network on Sunday.

At least three people, including an 82-year-old woman, were killed in central Alabama when multiple

tornadoes swept across the state.

In Troy, Alabama, parks officials said the recreation center where many residents had taken refuge had to be closed due to damage from overnight storms. No one was injured.

"We are thankful the Lord provided protection over our community, and over 200 guests at the Recreation Center storm shelter on Saturday night," the parks department said in a statement.

Trump says he will talk to Putin on Tuesday as he pushes for end to Ukraine war

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said he would speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday as he pushes to end the war in Ukraine.

The U.S. leader disclosed the upcoming conversation to reporters while flying from Florida to Washington on Air Force One on Sunday evening.

"We will see if we have something to announce maybe by Tuesday. I will be speaking to President Putin on Tuesday," Trump said. "A lot of work's been done over the weekend. We want to see if we can bring that war to an end."

Any such conversation could be a pivot point in the conflict and an opportunity for Trump to continue reorienting American foreign policy. European allies are wary of Trump's affinity for Putin and his hardline stance toward Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who faced sharp criticism when he visited the Oval Office a little more than two weeks ago.

Although Russia failed in its initial goal to topple Ukraine with its invasion three years ago, it still controls large swaths of the country.

Trump said land and power plants are part of the conversation around bringing the war to a close.

"We will be talking about land. We will be talking about power plants," he said.

Trump described it as "dividing up certain assets."

Trump special envoy Steve Witkoff recently visited Moscow to advance negotiations, and he said earlier Sunday that a call between Trump and Putin could come soon.

During his conversation with reporters on Air Force One, Trump said he was pushing forward with his plans for tariffs on April 2 despite recent disruption in the stock market and nervousness about the economic impact.

"April 2 is a liberating day for our country," he said. "We're getting back some of the wealth that very, very foolish presidents gave away because they had no clue what they were doing."

Trump has occasionally changed course on some tariff plans, such as with Mexico, but he said he had no intention to do so when it comes to reciprocal tariffs.

"They charge us and we charge them," he said. "Then in addition to that, on autos, on steel, on aluminum, we're going to have some additional tariffs."

TikTok becomes a tool of choice in cat-and-mouse game between migrant smugglers and authorities

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The videos roll through TikTok in 30-second flashes.

Migrants trek in camouflage through dry desert terrain. Dune buggies roar up to the United States-Mexico border barrier. Families with young children pass through gaps in the wall. Helicopters, planes, yachts, tunnels and jet skis stand by for potential customers.

Laced with emojis, the videos posted by smugglers offer a simple promise: If you don't have a visa in the U.S., trust us. We'll get you over safely.

At a time when legal pathways to the U.S. have been slashed and criminal groups are raking in money

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from migrant smuggling, social media apps like TikTok have become an essential tool for smugglers and migrants alike. The videos — taken to cartoonish extremes — offer a rare look inside a long elusive industry and the narratives used by trafficking networks to fuel migration north.

"With God's help, we're going to continue working to fulfill the dreams of foreigners. Safe travels without robbing our people," wrote one enterprising smuggler.

As President Donald Trump begins to ramp up a crackdown at the border and migration levels to the U.S. dip, smugglers say new technologies allow networks to be more agile in the face of challenges, and expand their reach to new customers — a far cry from the old days when each village had its trusted smuggler.

"In this line of work, you have to switch tactics," said a woman named Soary, part of a smuggling network bringing migrants from Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, Texas, who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition that her last name would not be shared out of concern that authorities would track her down. "TikTok goes all over the world."

Soary, 24, began working in smuggling when she was 19, living in El Paso, where she was approached by a friend about a job. She would use her truck to pick up migrants who had recently jumped the border. Despite the risks involved with working with trafficking organizations, she said it earned her more as a single mother than her previous job putting in hair extensions.

As she gained more contacts on both sides of the border, she began connecting people from across the Americas with a network of smugglers to sneak them across borders and eventually into the U.S.

Like many smugglers, she would take videos of migrants speaking to the camera after crossing the border to send over WhatsApp as evidence to loved ones that her clients had gotten to their destination safely. Now she posts those clips to TikTok.

TikTok says the platform strictly prohibits human smuggling and reports such content to law enforcement.

The use of social media to facilitate migration took off around 2017 and 2018, when activists built massive WhatsApp groups to coordinate the first major migrant caravans traveling from Central America to the U.S., according to Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, a professor at George Mason University focused on the migrant smuggling industry.

Later, smugglers began to infiltrate those chats and use the choice social media app of the day, expanding to Facebook and Instagram.

Migrants, too, began to document their often perilous voyages north, posting videos trekking through the jungles of the Darien Gap dividing Colombia and Panama, and after being released by extorting cartels.

A 2023 study by the United Nations reported that 64% of the migrants they interviewed had access to a smart phone and the internet during their migration to the U.S.

Around the time of the study's release, as use of the app began to soar, that Correa-Cabrera said she began to see smuggling ads skyrocket on TikTok.

"It's a marketing strategy," Correa-Cabrera said. "Everyone was on TikTok, particularly after the pandemic, and then it began to multiply."

Last year, Soary, the smuggler, said she began to publish videos of migrants and families in the U.S. with their faces covered and photos of the U.S.-Mexico border with messages like: "We'll pass you through Ciudad Juárez, no matter where you are. Fence jumping, treks and by tunnel. Adults, children and the elderly."

Hundreds of videos examined by the AP feature thick wads of cash, people crossing through the border fence by night, helicopters and airplanes supposedly used by coyotes, smugglers cutting open cacti in the desert for migrants to drink from and even crops of lettuce with text reading "The American fields are ready!"

The videos are often layered over heavy northern Mexican music with lyrics waxing romantically about being traffickers. Videos are published by accounts with names alluding to "safe crossing," "USA destinations," "fulfilling dreams" or "polleros," as smugglers are often called.

Narratives shift based on the political environment and immigration policies in the U.S. During the Biden administration, posts would advertise getting migrants access to asylum applications through the administration's CBP One app, which Trump ended.

Amid Trump's crackdown, posts have shifted to dispelling fears that migrants will be captured, promis-

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ing American authorities have been paid off. Smugglers openly taunt U.S. authorities: one shows himself smoking what appears to be marijuana right in front of the border wall; another even takes a jab at Trump, referring to the president as a "high-strung gringo."

Comments are dotted with emojis of flags and baby chickens, a symbol meaning migrant among smugglers, and other users asking for prices and more information.

Cristina, who migrated because she struggled make ends meet in the Mexican state of Zacatecas, was among those scrolling in December after the person she had hired to smuggle her to the U.S. abandoned her and her partner in Ciudad Juárez.

"In a moment of desperation, I started searching on TikTok and, well, with the algorithm videos began to pop up," she said. "It took me a half an hour" to find a smuggler.

After connecting, smugglers and migrants often negotiate on encrypted apps like WhatsApp and Telegram, doing a careful dance to gain each other's trust. Cristina, now living in Phoenix, said she decided to trust Soary because she was a woman and posted videos of families, something the smuggler admitted was a tactic to gain migrants' trust.

Smugglers, migrants and authorities warn that such videos have been used to scam migrants or lure them into traps at a time when cartels are increasingly using kidnapping and extortion as a means to rake in more money.

One smuggler, who asked to only be identified by his TikTok name "The Corporation" due to fear of authorities tracking him down said other accounts would steal his migrant smuggling network's videos of customers saying to camera they arrived safely in the U.S.

"And there's not much we can do legally. I mean, it's not like we can report them," he said with a laugh.

In other cases, migrants say that they were forced by traffickers to take the videos even if they haven't arrived safely to their destinations.

The illicit advertisements have fueled concern among international authorities like the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration, which warned in a report about the use of the technology that "networks are becoming increasingly sophisticated and evasive, thus challenging government authorities to address new, non-traditional forms of this crime."

In February, a Mexican prosecutor also confirmed to the AP that they were investigating a network of accounts advertising crossings through a tunnel running under the border fence between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. But investigators would not provide more details.

In the meantime, hundreds of accounts post videos of trucks crossing border, of stacks of cash and migrants, faces covered with emojis, promising they made it safely across the border.

"We're continuing to cross and we're not scared," one wrote.

Sho-time in Tokyo: Ohtani, Dodgers prepare to open MLB season vs. Cubs on Tuesday

By DAVID BRANDT AP Baseball Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The Major League Baseball season kicks off Tuesday night at the Tokyo Dome when Shohei Ohtani and the defending World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers face the Chicago Cubs.

It's the first of a two-game series and features five Japanese players. Ohtani, Yoshinobu Yamamoto and rookie Roki Sasaki pitch for the Dodgers while the Cubs have outfielder Seiya Suzuki and left-handed pitcher Shota Imanaga.

The two MLB teams have been in Tokyo for several days, playing exhibition games against two Japanese teams — the Hanshin Tigers and Yomiuri Giants.

All four exhibition games had a capacity crowd of roughly 42,000. A similar atmosphere is expected for the two MLB games.

"Everybody's very aware of the series, that's evident for sure, more than I feel like it would be America," Cubs manager Craig Counsell said. "More people are talking about it, absolutely. That's a great feeling."

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The players love big events, that's why we do this, that's why we love to do it."

Here are five things to know heading into the MLB opener:

All-Japanese pitching matchup

The first game will feature the first all-Japanese pitching matchup on opening day in MLB history. Yamamoto will take the mound for the Dodgers against Imanaga of the Cubs.

Yamamoto is entering his second season with Los Angeles. He was 7-2 with a 3.00 ERA last season and was an important part of the team's World Series championship, with a brilliant performance in a Game 2 win over the Yankees.

Imanaga was an All-Star last year in his first season with the Cubs. The lefty finished with a 15-3 record and a 2.91 ERA in 2024.

The Dodgers will start Sasaki in the second game on Wednesday night.

Young Cubs

Third baseman Matt Shaw is expected to make his big league debut for the Cubs on Tuesday. Shaw is one of the team's top prospects and did enough this spring to earn the starting nod.

Shaw was drafted with the No. 13 overall pick in 2020 after playing college baseball at Maryland. He hit .284 with 21 homers and 71 RBIs last season, splitting time between Double-A and Triple-A.

Other young Cubs include third-year outfielder Pete Crow-Armstrong, who hopes to take a big step forward after an encouraging second half of 2024. Rookie second baseman Gage Workman could also make his MLB debut in Tokyo.

Ailing Mookie

Dodgers shortstop Mookie Betts will not play in either game against the Chicago Cubs because of an illness that's lingered for the past week.

Manager Dave Roberts said Monday that Betts is starting to feel better but has lost nearly 15 pounds and is still trying to get rehydrated and gain strength. Roberts added that the eight-time All-Star might fly back to the United States before the team in an effort to rest and prepare for the domestic opener on March 27.

Miguel Rojas will start at shortstop in Betts' place.

Early in the U.S.

Set your alarm if you're planning to view the two Tokyo games in the United States. Both games being at 7:10 p.m. in Tokyo, which means it'll be a 6:10 a.m. wake up call in the Eastern time zone.

Many Cubs and Dodgers fans will really need some coffee. Start time in Chicago is 5:10 a.m. while it's 3:10 a.m. in Los Angeles. The game will air nationally on Fox.

Tokyo history

This marks the 25th anniversary of the first MLB regular season games played in Japan. The New York Mets and Cubs played a two-game set at the Tokyo Dome in 2000.

Since that series, MLB returned in 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2019. The 2019 series featured the Oakland A's and Seattle Mariners, who celebrated the final two games of Ichiro Suzuki's career in his home country. Suzuki will be inducted into the Hall of Fame this summer.

It's the 10th time that MLB has played regular season games in a spot outside the 50 states. The locations include Japan, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Australia and last year's series in South Korea.

St. Patrick's Day brings boisterous parades and celebrations to New York and other cities

NEW YORK (AP) — St. Patrick's Day, the annual celebration of all things Irish, is being marked in cities across the country on Monday with boisterous parades and celebrations.

New York City hosts one of the largest and oldest parades in the United States.

The rolling celebration, now in its 264th year, takes place along Manhattan's famed Fifth Avenue. Some 150,000 take part in the march and 2 million spectators attend each year, according to organizers.

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Major celebrations are also planned on Monday in Savannah, Georgia, and other American communities, though some of the cities most transformed by Irish immigration held festivities over the weekend.

Chicago's St. Patrick's Day celebration, which is punctuated by turning its namesake river bright green with dye, happened Saturday. Boston and Philadelphia marked the occasion Sunday.

Across the pond, the Irish capital of Dublin culminates its three-day festival with a parade Monday. Cities such as Liverpool, England, another city transformed by Irish immigration, also host celebrations on the St. Patrick's feast day.

The parades are meant to commemorate Ireland's patron saint but have become a celebration of Irish heritage globally.

Festivities on March 17 were popularized by Irish immigrant communities, who in the 19th century faced discrimination and opposition in the U.S.

The New York parade dates to 1762 — 14 years before the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

It steps off at 11 a.m., heading north along Fifth Avenue and running from East 44th Street to East 79th Street in Manhattan.

A bevy of local politicians, from the mayor to the governor, are expected to walk the route along with school marching bands and traditional Irish pipe and drum ensembles and delegations from the New York Police Department and other organizations.

The grand marshal of this year's parade in New York City is Michael Benn, the longtime chairman of the Queens County St. Patrick's Parade held in Rockaway Beach.

Accused Texas megachurch pastor to surrender in Oklahoma on child sexual abuse charges

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A former pastor of a Texas megachurch is expected to turn himself into Oklahoma authorities Monday on child sexual abuse charges.

Robert Preston Morris, 63, is expected to surrender to officials in Osage County, where he was charged last week with five counts of lewd or indecent acts with a child, his attorney, Mack Martin, told The Associated Press.

Martin declined to comment on the charges against Morris, but said he anticipated entering a not guilty plea on Morris' behalf.

Court records show an Osage County judge set a \$50,000 bond and ordered Morris to surrender his passport to the local sheriff.

Morris resigned last year as pastor of Gateway Church in the Dallas suburb of Southlake after a woman accused him of sexually abusing her in the 1980s.

The alleged abuse started in 1982 when the victim, referred to in the indictment as C.C., was 12 years old and Morris was a traveling evangelist staying in Hominy, Oklahoma, with her family, according to the attorney general's office. The abuse allegedly continued for four years.

Cindy Clemishire, Morris' accuser, said in a statement that she is very grateful to the authorities who have worked to make the indictment possible and is hopeful "justice will ultimately prevail."

"After almost 43 years, the law has finally caught up with Robert Morris for the horrific crimes he committed against me as a child," said Clemishire, now 55. "Now, it is time for the legal system to hold him accountable."

The AP typically does not name people who say they have been sexually assaulted, but Clemishire said she would like her name included.

Morris was known to be politically active. The church hosted President Donald Trump on its Dallas campus in 2020 for a discussion on race relations and the economy.

Morris could face up to 20 years in prison for each of the five charges, according to the attorney general's office.

At least 39 dead after tornadoes, wildfires and dust storms wreak havoc across multiple US states

By SARA CLINE and REBECCA REYNOLDS Associated Press

TYLERTOWN, Miss. (AP) — Unusually vicious and damaging weather across multiple U.S. states spawned violent tornadoes, blinding dust storms and fast-moving wildfires over the weekend, leaving at least 39 people dead.

In the latest tally of the destruction, the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management said Sunday evening that more than 400 homes were damaged as wildfires swept across the state Friday. At least 74 homes in and around Stillwater were destroyed by wildfires, Mayor Will Joyce said Sunday night on Facebook.

The emergency management department also said the Oklahoma Office of the Chief Medical Examiner confirmed four fatalities related to the fires or high winds.

The National Weather Service said weekend tornado watches had mostly expired, but dangerous winds were still possible in the Carolinas, east Georgia and northern Florida through Sunday.

In Mississippi, Hailey Hart and her fiancé Steve Romero hunkered down with their three huskies inside their 1994 Toyota Celica as a tornado ripped apart their home Saturday in Tylertown.

Romero said he prayed out loud and hugged Hart as the car rolled onto its side, windows shattering, before it landed on its wheels again. After the twister passed, they could hear people nearby screaming for help.

"It was a bad dream come true," Romero said.

Next door, Hart's grandparents crawled out from the rubble of their destroyed house after they sought shelter in a bathroom as falling trees collapsed the roof.

"Everything was coming down on us," said Donna Blansett, Hart's grandmother. "All I could do was pray to God to save us."

They escaped with just a few scratches and aches. Family members, friends and volunteers spent Sunday removing debris and salvaging anything they could find, including some damp clothes, a photo album and a few toiletries.

"I'm so happy you're alive," Hart said through tears, as she embraced her grandmother on Sunday.

Forecasters warned of dangerous conditions that turned deadly

The dynamic storm that began Friday earned an unusual "high risk" designation from weather forecasters. Still, experts said it's not unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

President Donald Trump said in a post on his social media network that his administration is ready to assist affected communities.

"Please join Melania and me in praying for everyone impacted by these terrible storms!" he posted Sunday.

At least three people, including an 82-year-old woman, were killed in central Alabama when multiple tornados swept across the state.

In Troy, Alabama, parks officials said the recreation center where many residents had taken refuge had to be closed due to damage from overnight storms. No one was injured.

"We are thankful the Lord provided protection over our community, and over 200 guests at the Recreation Center storm shelter on Saturday night," the parks department said in a statement.

Fatalities from twisters in battered Missouri reach 12

Missouri resident Dakota Henderson said he and others rescuing trapped neighbors found five bodies scattered in rubble Friday night outside what remained of his aunt's house in hard-hit Wayne County. Scattered twisters killed at least a dozen people in the state, authorities said.

"It's really disturbing for what happened to the people, the casualties last night," Henderson said Saturday, not far from the splintered home he said they rescued his aunt through a window of the only room left standing.

Coroner Jim Akers of Butler County, Missouri, described the home where one man was killed as "just a debris field."

"The floor was upside down," he said. "We were walking on walls."

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Deaths in Mississippi and Arkansas

In Mississippi, Gov. Tate Reeves announced that six people died and more than 200 were displaced after tornadoes sowed devastation across three counties. And in the northern part of the state, roads were inundated and some people were stranded by flood waters.

One of the deaths occurred in Covington County, where Seminary resident Traci Ladner said she watched a tornado knock down trees and power lines and destroy a house Saturday as she drove home from Ward's Restaurant.

The twister touched down briefly, traveled over Highway 49 and then went back up before making another quick descent, she said.

"I was crying. My legs were shaking. It was pretty scary," she said.

In Arkansas, officials confirmed three deaths.

Wildfires and dust storms drive up the death toll

Wind-driven wildfires caused extensive damage in Texas and Oklahoma and officials warned Sunday that parts of both states would again face an increased risk of fire danger in the coming week.

More than 130 fires were reported across Oklahoma, Gov. Kevin Stitt said.

"Nobody has enough resources to fight fires when the wind is blowing 70 mph," said Terry Essary, the fire chief of Stillwater, Oklahoma. "It's an insurmountable task."

Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management spokesperson Keli Cain said Sunday that two people were killed as a result of the wildfires and weather.

Meanwhile, dust storms spurred by high winds claimed almost a dozen lives on Friday. Eight people died in a Kansas highway pileup involving at least 50 vehicles, according to the state highway patrol. Authorities said three people also were killed in car crashes during a dust storm in Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle.

March Madness: UCLA, South Carolina, USC, Texas are No. 1 seeds in women's NCAA Tournament

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

UCLA had one of the best seasons in school history and was rewarded with the top overall seed in the women's NCAA Tournament.

The Bruins were joined by South Carolina, Southern California and Texas as the No. 1 seeds that the NCAA revealed Sunday night.

It's the first time in school history that the Bruins are the top team in the tournament. They had two losses on the season, both of which came to the Trojans.

"It's a testament to how hard everyone in this program has worked. An overall No. 1 seed doesn't get us to the Final Four, doesn't get us to a national championship," UCLA guard Kiki Rice said. "We have to go out there and earn it."

One of UCLA's wins this season came over South Carolina. The Gamecocks' coach, Dawn Staley, felt her team should have gotten the top seed and with it the extra day of rest if they advance to the Final Four.

"I mean I'm a little bit surprised because we manufactured our schedule and put ourselves in position to be the No. 1 overall seed," she said. "Do the blind test and put our resume against any other team in the field, you'd pick us. It's plain and simple."

Unlike last year, when the Gamecocks finished off an undefeated season with a national title, this team has three losses heading into March Madness.

"Two key factors between UCLA and South Carolina. One was the head-to-head matchup," NCAA selection committee chair Derita Dawkins said. "The other was one of our criteria is competitive in losses and South Carolina suffered a 29-point loss to UConn. Those were the two key differences in those resumes."

Staley's team is looking to be the first team to repeat as champion since UConn won four straight from 2013-16. The Huskies, who are a two-seed, are looking to end that drought with star Paige Bueckers. They'll have to go out west if they reach the Sweet 16 and a potential rematch with JuJu Watkins and the Trojans could be waiting in the Elite Eight.

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The path won't be easy for anyone: This year there's more parity in the sport. This NCAA Tournament will be only the second one in the past 19 years to have no teams entering March Madness with zero or one loss. The other time was in 2022.

The Trojans and Bruins, newcomers in the Big Ten this season, will try to win the first national championship for the conference since 1999, when Purdue won the lone one. A record 12 teams from the Big Ten are in the field. The SEC has 10 and the ACC eight. The Big 12 has seven.

The Ivy League received three bids to the tournament for the first time in conference history. Last season, Columbia earned the second at-large bid in league history. The Lions are back again as well as Princeton. Both are 11 seeds and will be competing in play-in games. Harvard, which won the conference tournament, is a 10 seed.

Duke, TCU and N.C. State joined the Huskies on the 2-seed line. Notre Dame boasts wins over Texas, USC and UConn but slumped the last few weeks of the regular season and fell to a three-seed.

William & Mary is one of six teams set to make its first appearance in the women's NCAA Tournament. The others are Arkansas State, Fairleigh Dickinson, George Mason, Grand Canyon and UC San Diego. Four teams are headed to the men's tournament for the first time: High Point, Omaha, SIU Edwardsville and UC San Diego.

The Tribe (15-18) are the first sub-.500 team since Incarnate Word in 2022 to make the tournament.

Virginia Tech, James Madison, Saint Joseph's and Colorado were the first four teams left out of the field. Payout time

For the first time in NCAA history, there will be a financial incentive for women's teams. They will finally be paid for playing games in the NCAA Tournament just like the men have for years.

So-called performance units, which represent revenue, will be given to women's teams for each win they get. A team that reaches the Final Four could bring its conference roughly \$1.26 million over the next three years in financial performance rewards.

This comes a year after the women's championship game that saw South Carolina beat Caitlin Clark and Iowa do better TV ratings than the men's title game.

Tournament sites

The top 16 seeds in the 68-team field will host first- and second-round games, with the regional rounds being played at two neutral sites for the third straight year. Spokane, Washington, will host half of the Sweet 16 and Birmingham, Alabama, will host the other eight teams.

The Final Four will be played in Tampa, Florida, on April 4, and the championship game is two days later.

Tournament tidbits

One team that didn't make the field was Stanford, which ended the Cardinal's 36-year streak of playing in the NCAA Tournament. It's the first time since 1987 that Stanford won't play in the NAAs. While that streak is over, Tennessee continued its NCAA Tournament run of appearing every year in the field since the first NCAA Tournament in 1982. The Lady Vols are a five-seed.

The Latest: NCAA Tournament brackets have been revealed

By The Associated Press undefined

March Madness brackets have been revealed.

The men's No. 1 seeds are Auburn, Houston, Duke and Florida. The women's are UCLA, South Carolina, Southern California and Texas.

The men's First Four will be played in Dayton, Ohio, beginning on Tuesday. The women's First Four will begin Wednesday.

Here's the latest on this Selection Sunday:

Betting favorites for men's, women's NCAA titles

Florida (+350) is the favorite to win the men's title at BetMGM Sportsbook, but only slightly over Duke (+360), Auburn (4-1) and Houston (6-1). Alabama is 15-1.

In the women's tournament, South Carolina (+270) is a slim favorite over UConn (+275), with UCLA (5-1), USC (+550), Texas (6-1) and Notre Dame (6-1) in the mix. Then it's a big gap before N.C. State and LSU

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at 40-1.

Big Ten gets record entries

The Big Ten put a record 12 teams into the women's field, including top seeds UCLA and Southern California.

The SEC has 10 teams and the ACC eight. The Big 12 has seven. The Ivy League (three) received more bids than the Big East (two).

Monumental matchups could await in Elite 8

No. 1 seed Texas could face No. 2 seed TCU in an Elite Eight clash of in-state rivals in Regional 3.

In Regional 4, the top two seeds are Southern California and UConn, who met in December in one of the season's best games.

JuJu Watkins and USC beat Paige Bueckers and the Huskies 72-70.

Notre Dame women get a surprising seed

Notre Dame lost three of its last five games, dropping from a potential top seed to a third seed.

The Fighting Irish will play 14th-seeded Stephen F. Austin in the opening round.

They will host the first and second rounds before potentially traveling to Birmingham, Alabama, for Sweet 16 and Elite Eight games.

The Irish are 26-5 this season and earned a share of the Atlantic Coast Conference regular-season title.

Kentucky, Ohio State, Maryland and Baylor secure hosting seeds

The top-four seeds in each region get to host the first two rounds in the women's tournament.

That means No. 4 seeds Kentucky, Ohio State, Maryland and Baylor were the last few teams to receive home court. They did it at the expense of the No. 5 seeds: Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Kansas State.

Women's Regional 4 bracket

1. No. 1 USC vs. No. 16 UNC Greensboro
2. No. 8 California vs. No. 9 Mississippi State
3. No. 5 Kansas State vs. No. 12 Fairfield
4. No. 4 Kentucky vs. No. 13 Liberty
5. No. 6 Iowa vs. No. 11 Murray State
6. No. 3 Oklahoma vs. No. 14 Florida Gulf Coast
7. No. 7 Oklahoma State vs. No. 10 South Dakota State
8. No. 2 UConn vs. No. 15 Arkansas State

Women's Regional 3 bracket

9. No. 1 Texas vs. No. 16 High Point/William & Mary
10. No. 8 Illinois vs. No. 9 Creighton
11. No. 5 Tennessee vs. No. 12 South Florida
12. No. 4 Ohio State vs. No. 13 Montana State
13. No. 6 Michigan vs. No. 11 Iowa State/Princeton
14. No. 3 Notre Dame vs. No. 14 Stephen F. Austin
15. No. 7 Louisville vs. No. 10 Nebraska
16. No. 2 TCU vs. No. 15 Fairleigh Dickinson

Women's Regional 2 bracket

17. No. 1 South Carolina vs. No. 16 Tennessee Tech
18. No. 8 Utah vs. No. 9 Indiana
19. No. 5 Alabama vs. No. 12 Green Bay
20. No. 4 Maryland vs. No. 13 Norfolk State
21. No. 6 West Virginia vs. No. 11 Columbia/Washington
22. No. 3 North Carolina vs. No. 14 Oregon State
23. No. 7 Vanderbilt vs. No. 10 Oregon
24. No. 2 Duke vs. No. 15 Lehigh

Women's Regional 1 bracket

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25. No. 1 UCLA vs. No. 16 UC San Diego/Southern

26. No. 8 Richmond vs. No. 9 Georgia Tech

27. No. 5 Mississippi vs. No. 12 Ball State

28. No. 4 Baylor vs. No. 13 Grand Canyon

29. No. 6 Florida State vs. No. 11 George Mason

30. No. 3 LSU vs. No. 14 San Diego State

31. No. 7 Michigan State vs. No. 10 Harvard

32. No. 2 N.C. State vs. No. 15 Vermont

Women's tournament bracket to be revealed soon

The women's tournament bracket will be unveiled at the top of the hour on ESPN.

Who is on the bubble for the women's tournament?

One of the big questions heading into the women's bracket reveal is whether the Ivy League will put three teams in.

Harvard won the automatic bid, leaving Columbia and Princeton on the bubble. In addition to those two teams, the rest of the bubble includes teams like Iowa State, Washington, Virginia Tech, Colorado, James Madison, Saint Joseph's and Minnesota.

West Virginia, Boise State, Indiana left out of men's tourney

Boise State and Indiana are on the outside looking in after Texas and North Carolina squeaked into the men's NCAA Tournament.

And West Virginia may be an even more surprising omission. The Mountaineers were not even one of the last four in when ESPN, Sports Illustrated and the Washington Post made their projections. They were expected to make it more comfortably than that.

SEC shatters record

The Southeastern Conference shattered the previous record for getting the most teams into the NCAA Tournament. The previous mark was 11 set by the Big East in 2011.

The SEC topped it by three, with Auburn, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Texas A&M, Kentucky, Ole Miss, Missouri, Mississippi State, Georgia, Vanderbilt, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas all getting in. Only LSU and South Carolina were left out from the league best known as a football powerhouse.

Men's West Region

33. No. 1 Florida vs. No. 16 Norfolk State

34. No. 8 UConn vs. No. 9 Oklahoma

35. No. 5 Memphis vs. No. 12 Colorado State

36. No. 4 Maryland vs. No. 13 Grand Canyon

37. No. 6 Missouri vs. No. 11 Drake

38. No. 3 Texas Tech vs. No. 14 UNC-Wilmington

39. No. 7 Kansas vs. No. 10 Arkansas

40. No. 2 St. John's vs. No. 15 Omaha

Men's Midwest Region

41. No. 1 Houston vs. No. 16 SIU Edwardsville

42. No. 8 Gonzaga vs. No. 9 Georgia

43. No. 5 Clemson vs. No. 12 McNeese State

44. No. 4 Purdue vs. No. 13 High Point

45. No. 6 Illinois vs. No. 11 Texas/ Xavier

46. No. 3 Kentucky vs. No. 14 Troy

47. No. 7 UCLA vs. No. 10 Utah State

48. No. 2 Tennessee vs. No. 15 Wofford

Men's East Region

49. No. 1 Duke vs. No. 16 American/Mount St. Mary's

50. No. 8 Mississippi State vs. No. 9 Baylor

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- 51. No. 5 Oregon vs. No. 12 Liberty
- 52. No. 4 Arizona vs. No. 13 Akron
- 53. No. 6 BYU vs. No. 11 Virginia Commonwealth
- 54. No. 3 Wisconsin vs. No. 14 Montana
- 55. No. 7 Saint Mary's vs. No. 10 Vanderbilt
- 56. No. 2 Alabama vs. No. 15 Robert Morris
- Men's South Region
- 57. No. 1 Auburn vs. No. 16 Alabama State/Saint Francis
- 58. No. 8 Louisville vs. No. 9 Crieghton
- 59. No. 5 Michigan vs. No. 12 UC San Diego
- 60. No. 4 Texas A&M vs. No. 13 Yale
- 61. No. 6 Ole Miss vs. No. 11 San Diego St/North Carolina
- 62. No. 3 Iowa State vs. No. 14 Lipscomb
- 63. No. 7 Marquette vs. No. 10 New Mexico
- 64. No. 2 Michigan State vs. No. 15 Bryant

Conference realignment slightly alters bids

Each conference receives an automatic bid to both the men's and women's tournaments, and then the rest of those fields are filled by the committee's at-large selections.

The recent demise of the Pac-12 lowered the number of automatic qualifiers to 31, leaving room for 37 at-large teams.

Hey football fans, the SEC is a basketball power, too

The Southeastern Conference, normally a football power, has been unusually strong this season in basketball.

Its two newest members — Oklahoma and Texas — are both on the bubble, but if they get in, the SEC could have as many as 14 of its 16 teams in the men's tournament.

March Madness is ready for its 'Cinderella'

A high seed that makes a run to the Sweet 16 or beyond is affectionately called "Cinderella."

Five No. 11 seeds have advanced to the men's Final Four: LSU (1986), George Mason (2006), VCU (2011), Loyola Chicago (2018) and N.C. State (2024).

Villanova is considered the ultimate Cinderella — the Wildcats won the 1985 NCAA Tournament by up-setting top-seeded Georgetown as a No. 8 seed, the lowest to ever win the title.

Finding a Cinderella is tougher on the women's side. No teams lower than a No. 3 seed have won the women's event. It happened three times: 1994 North Carolina, 1997 Tennessee and 2023 LSU.

Men's NCAA Tournament schedule

- 65. First Four: March 18-19
- 66. First round: March 20-21
- 67. Second round: March 22-23
- 68. Sweet 16: March 27-28
- 69. Elite Eight: March 29-30
- 70. Final Four: April 5
- 71. Championship game: April 7
- Women's NCAA Tournament schedule
- 72. First Four: March 19-20
- 73. First round: March 21-22
- 74. Second round: March 23-24
- 75. Sweet 16: March 28-29
- 76. Elite Eight: March 30-31
- 77. Final Four: April 4
- 78. Championship game: April 6

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Men's tournament locations

The First Four will be played in Dayton, Ohio. The first and second rounds are in Cleveland; Denver; Lexington, Kentucky; Milwaukee; Providence, Rhode Island; Raleigh, North Carolina; Seattle; and Wichita, Kansas.

The regional semifinals (Sweet 16) and finals (Elite Eight) will take place in Newark, New Jersey (East Region); Atlanta (South); Indianapolis (Midwest); and San Francisco (West). The tournament ends with the Final Four and championship game at the Alamodome in San Antonio.

Women's tournament locations

The women's First Four is played at campus sites, which also will host first- and second-round games.

The Sweet 16 and Elite Eight games will be held at two venues — one in Birmingham, Alabama, and the other in Spokane, Washington.

The Final Four and championship game will be at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida.

US and Iran-backed Houthis both vow escalation after US airstrikes target rebels in Yemen

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The United States and Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen are both vowing escalation after the U.S. launched airstrikes to deter the rebels from attacking military and commercial vessels on one of the world's busiest shipping corridors.

The Houthi-run Health Ministry said the U.S. strikes killed at least 53 people, including five women and two children, and wounded almost 100 in the capital of Sanaa and other provinces, including Saada, the rebels' stronghold on the border with Saudi Arabia.

"We're not going to have these people controlling which ships can go through and which ones cannot. And so your question is, how long will this go on? It will go on until they no longer have the capability to do that," U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told CBS on Sunday.

President Donald Trump on Saturday vowed to use "overwhelming lethal force" until the Houthis cease their attacks, and warned that Tehran would be held "fully accountable" for their actions.

The Houthis have repeatedly targeted shipping in the Red Sea, sinking two vessels, in what they call acts of solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, where Israel has been at war with Hamas, another Iranian ally. The attacks stopped when a Israel-Hamas ceasefire took hold in January — a day before Trump took office — but last week the Houthis said they would renew attacks against Israeli vessels after Israel cut off the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza this month.

There have been no Houthi attacks reported since then.

The U.S. airstrikes were one of the most extensive attacks against the Houthis since the war in Gaza began in October 2023.

Trump's national security adviser, Mike Waltz, on Sunday told ABC that the strikes "actually targeted multiple Houthi leaders and took them out." He didn't identify them or give evidence. Rubio said some Houthi facilities had been destroyed.

In a speech aired Sunday night, the rebels' secretive leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, warned: "We will confront escalation with escalation."

"We will respond to the American enemy in its raids, in its attacks, with missile strikes, by targeting its aircraft carrier, its warships, its ships," al-Houthi said. "However, we also still have escalation options. If it continues its aggression, we will move to additional escalation options."

He did not elaborate. The Houthis have targeted U.S. warships and shot down American drones flying over Yemen.

The rebels on Sunday claimed to have targeted the USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group with missiles and a drone.

According to a U.S. official, the Houthis did fire drones and at least one missile in response to the U.S. attack. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to provide updated information on operations,

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said that beginning at about midnight local time in Yemen, the Houthis fired 11 drones and at least one missile over about 12 hours. Ten of the drones were intercepted by U.S. Air Force fighter jets and one was intercepted by a Navy F/A-18 fighter jet. The missile fell into the water far from the ship, and nothing came close to hitting either the carrier or the warships in its strike group.

The spokesperson for U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a statement called for "utmost restraint and a cessation of all military activities," while warning of the "grave risks" to the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen, the Arab world's poorest nation.

Rubio said that over the past 18 months the Houthis had attacked the U.S. Navy "directly" 174 times and targeted commercial shipping 145 times using "guided precision anti-ship weaponry."

The attacks sparked the most serious combat the U.S. Navy had seen since World War II.

On Sunday, the head of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, Gen. Hossein Salami, denied his country was involved in the Houthis' attacks, saying it "plays no role in setting the national or operational policies" of the militant groups it is allied with across the region, according to state-run TV.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, writing on X, urged the U.S. to halt its airstrikes and said Washington cannot dictate Iran's foreign policy.

The U.S. and others have long accused Iran of providing military aid to the rebels. The U.S. Navy has seized Iranian-made missile parts and other weaponry it said was bound for the Houthis.

The United States, Israel and Britain previously hit Houthi-held areas in Yemen, but the new operation was conducted solely by the U.S. It was the first strike on the Houthis under the second Trump administration.

The USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group, which includes the carrier, three Navy destroyers and one cruiser, is in the Red Sea and was part of the mission. The USS Georgia cruise missile submarine has also been operating in the region.

Crocodile attacks in Indonesia are on the rise. It's left residents on edge

By EDNA TARIGAN and DITA ALANGKARA Associated Press

BUDONG-BUDONG, Indonesia (AP) — Nearly seven months after a crocodile attack almost took her life, Munirpa walked to the estuary outside her home with her husband and her children, ready to brave a reenactment.

Munirpa, who like many Indonesians only uses one name, recounted how one early morning in August, she threw her household garbage into a creek about 50 meters (164 feet) away from her house, as she normally would.

She didn't see what was coming next.

By the time she realized a crocodile had attacked her, the four-meter-long (13-foot) beast had already sunk its teeth into most of her body, sparing only her head. She fought hard, trying to jab its eyes. Her husband, hearing her screams, ran over and tried to pull her by the thigh out of the crocodile's jaws. A tug-of-war ensued; the reptile whipped him with its tail. Fortunately, he saved Munirpa in time, eventually dragging her out of the crocodile's grip.

People have long feared the ancient predators in the Central Mamuju district of Indonesia's West Sulawesi, where the Budong-Budong River meets the sea. For Munirpa, 48, that fear turned into a brutal reality when she became one of nearly 180 recorded crocodile attack victims in Indonesia last year. Residents like her are learning to coexist with the crocodiles, a legally protected species in Indonesia, as they balance conservation with looking out for their safety. But as attacks rise, several residents and experts have called for better government interventions to stop the problem from getting even worse.

Communities near the crocodiles are on edge

Following the attack, Munirpa was hospitalized for a month and has had two surgeries. By February this year, her fear was still clearly visible, as were the scars on her legs and thighs.

"I am so scared. I don't want to go to the beach. Even to the back of the house, I don't dare to go," said Munirpa. "I am traumatized. I asked my children not to go to the river, or to the backyard, or go fishing."

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In the villages surrounding the Budong-Budong River, like Munirpa's, crocodiles have become a daily topic of conversation. Their presence has become so common that warning signs now mark the areas where they lurk, from the river mouth to the waterways which were once a popular swimming spot for children.

In 2024, there were 179 crocodile attacks in Indonesia, the highest number of crocodile attacks in the world, with 92 fatalities, according to CrocAttack, an independent database. Social media videos showing crocodile appearances and attacks in Sulawesi and other regions in Indonesia are also on the rise.

The increase in attacks began about 12 years ago with the rise of palm oil plantations around the river mouth, said 39-year-old crocodile handler Rusli Paraili. Some companies carved artificial waterways, linking them to the larger part of the Budong-Budong River. That was when the crocodiles started straying, leaving the river and creeping to nearby residential areas, such as fish and shrimp ponds, he explained.

Palm oil plantations now dominate the landscape in West Sulawesi, from the mountains to the coast, and patrolling for crocodiles has become part of people's daily routine. When residents check the water pumps in their ponds, they have no choice but to keep out an eye for the beasts — flashlights in hand, scouring up, down and across canals and waterways — resigned to the uneasy reality of sharing their home with a predator.

Balancing conservation and safety

The saltwater crocodile has been a legally protected species in Indonesia since 1999, making it an animal that cannot be hunted freely. As a top predator, there is also no population control in nature.

Paraili, the crocodile handler, said that while the law protects crocodiles from being killed, the rise in attacks is a major concern. In response, he's taken care of some of the crocs in a specially-designed farm away from human populations. He's received some financial support from the government and community donations, as well as support from palm oil companies for the last five years.

The farm has four ponds and around 50 reptiles. Some have names: Tanker, the largest, shaped like a ship, or Karossa, named after the sub-district the animal was caught after fatally attacking someone.

When funds run low, he uses his own money to ensure they're fed, at least once every four days.

Amir Hamidy, who studies reptiles at the National Research and Innovation Agency, worries the rise in attacks indicates that crocodile numbers are becoming far too dangerous. Hamidy supports better population control.

Being a protected species "does not necessarily mean that the population cannot be reduced when it is at a level that is indeed unsafe," he said.

Improving protection for residents

Around a year ago in Tumbu village, Suardi, who goes by one name, was harvesting coconuts when they fell into the river. When he went to retrieve them, he was attacked by a crocodile he initially didn't notice. He's since made a full recovery.

Still, the experience has made him more cautious. "Yes, I am worried. But what else can we do," Suardi said. "The important thing is that we are careful enough."

Along with Munirpa, Suardi is one of 10 people in the region who was attacked by a crocodile last year. Three of those attacked were killed.

Suyuti Marzuki, who's head of West Sulawesi Marine and Fisheries Agency, said the crocodile habitat shift is making people's everyday activities — like harvesting coconuts, fishing or even disposing of garbage like Munirpa — very risky.

Marzuki said the government is looking at possible options that can provide both safety and economic alternatives for residents.

While he acknowledged that crocodile population numbers and ecosystems need to be protected, Marzuki also raised the possibility of bolstering the local economy through the crocodile skin trade. That industry is controversial because of conservation and animal welfare issues.

Paraili, the crocodile handler, also urged serious government interventions.

"This is a matter of human lives. So when the government is not serious, then our brothers and sisters in the future — in 5 or 15 years — there will be even more who will die from being attacked by crocodiles,"

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he said.

Residents like Munirpa and Suardi are waiting for more immediate and realistic steps from the authorities to ensure their community's and families' safety.

"It is enough that I've been bitten by a crocodile," Munirpa said. "I won't let it happen to my children."

March Madness bracket anything but sleepy as Auburn, Tar Heels picks highlight wild Selection Sunday

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

A sleepy Selection Sunday this was not.

North Carolina barely slid into this year's version of March Madness, a development that led its athletic director to remind everyone that he had nothing to do with that choice even though he's the head of the group that sets the bracket.

Texas also made it in -- barely -- giving the Southeastern Conference a record 14 teams in the tournament, including overall top seed Auburn. The Tigers received higher billing than Duke even though they've lost three of their last four games.

And coach Rick Pitino's reward for leading St. John's back to prominence: a journey back to where his coaching career took off with his first Final Four -- Providence -- and a juicy potential second-round matchup against another coaching firebrand, John Calipari of Arkansas.

"There were," North Carolina AD Bubba Cunningham said, "a number of challenges" in putting together a bracket that hoops fans can only hope provides as many thrills on the court as it did during the 60-minute bracket show.

Auburn beat out Duke to receive top billing in the tournament despite those three losses over the past two weeks, and despite also dropping a game to the Blue Devils back in December.

"We've got to get our mojo back a little bit," Auburn coach Bruce Pearl said.

No. 1 seed Florida, which captured the SEC tournament by winning three games with an average margin of 15 points, opens as a slight favorite to win it all at the Final Four in San Antonio on April 5 and 7, according to BetMGM Sportsbook.

Clearly, one deciding factor in choosing Auburn over Duke was the Tigers' schedule, which was second toughest in the country, largely on the strength of playing a conference that put so many teams in the field.

"The SEC had such an outstanding year, winning 88% of their nonconference games," Cunningham explained.

Houston was the remaining top seed and could face a second-round matchup against No. 8 Gonzaga, making its 26th straight trip to the tournament.

North Carolina makes it and triggers some awkward explaining

On a more "normal" Selection Sunday, Texas making the field with 15 losses might have been the biggest talking point.

Instead, it was North Carolina's inclusion that drew the most attention.

CBS analyst Seth Davis acknowledged it right away when he opened his interview with Cunningham by wondering "whether North Carolina may have gotten a little bit of an advantage with its AD as the chair."

Cunningham's vice-chair, Keith Gill, who, in an unusual move was also brought in for the interview, insisted it had not.

"As vice-chair, I managed all the conversations we had about North Carolina, and we had quite a few," Gill said. He confirmed that Cunningham was not allowed to participate in any vote about his own school.

The Tar Heels were the last team in, based not on its 1-12 record against Quad 1 teams, but on its 8-0 mark against Quad 2, along with other favorable metrics, Gill said.

"You take all those things in consideration, and the committee felt they should earn that last spot," Gill said.

Both North Carolina (vs. San Diego State) and Texas (vs. Xavier) are playing in the First Four, which kicks off the action Tuesday. The tournament gets into full swing Thursday and Friday with 32 games at

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eight sites around the country.

Bubble teams that did not make it include West Virginia, Indiana and Boise State.

Bracket gives Pitino and St. John's a long and interesting road

Elsewhere in the bracket, Pitino leads his unprecedented sixth program into the tournament, and what a road he would have to take to get back to the Final Four.

First, he will travel to Providence, the same building where the coach led the Friars to a surprise Final Four trip back in 1987, to lead second-seeded St. John's in a first-round game against Omaha. Pitino's second game could come against Arkansas and Calipari in what would be a titanic matchup between two of the game's biggest coaching names. Calipari's first game in Providence is against none other than Bill Self and seventh-seeded Kansas.

Another coaching icon, Tom Izzo, leads Michigan State to its 27th straight tournament. The Spartans are seeded second and will face America East champion Bryant in its opener.

There's also UConn, seeking the sport's first threepeat since the early '70s but seeded eighth with a potential second-round game against Florida next weekend.

SEC regular season repeat in store?

The biggest quirks in this year's bracket all involved the SEC:

-- There are three potential second-round games between SEC teams -- the sort of matchups the committee is asked to avoid, but that became inevitable with 14 teams in the bracket.

-- The SEC, Big Ten (eight spots) and Big 12 (seven) captured 42.5% of the tournament's 68 spots, which leads to questions about whether March Madness really needs to expand to bring even more big-school teams into the mix. Then again, had this been a 76-team tournament, West Virginia, Indiana and Ohio State would have made the cut, according to the committee's list of "first teams out."

-- Now that the SEC has established itself as a hoops conference comes the question of whether the league can capture its first national title since 2012, when Kentucky won it all.

Netanyahu seeks to dismiss Israel's internal security chief as power struggle boils over

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday he will seek to dismiss the head of the internal security service this week, deepening a power struggle focused largely on who bears responsibility for the Hamas attack that sparked the war in Gaza.

Netanyahu's effort to remove Ronen Bar as director of the Shin Bet comes as the security service investigates close aides of the prime minister. Netanyahu said he has had "ongoing distrust" with Bar, and "this distrust has grown over time."

Bar responded by saying he planned to continue in the post for the near future, citing "personal obligations" to finish "sensitive investigations," free the remaining hostages in Gaza and prepare potential successors.

Bar also criticized Netanyahu's expectation of a personal loyalty that contradicts the public interest. But he emphasized that he would respect any legal decision regarding his tenure.

Attorney general says Netanyahu must explain legal basis for his decision

Israel's attorney general said Netanyahu must clarify the legal basis for his decision before taking any action.

The Shin Bet is responsible for monitoring Palestinian militant groups, and recently issued a report accepting responsibility for its failures around the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack. It also criticized Netanyahu, saying failed government policies helped create the climate that led to it.

While the army concluded in a recent report that it underestimated Hamas' capabilities, Shin Bet said it had a "deep understanding of the threat." In veiled criticism of the government, the agency said its attempts to thwart the threat were not implemented.

"The investigation reveals a long and deliberate disregard from the political leadership from the organi-

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zation's warnings," Bar's statement said.

Deflecting blame for the Oct. 7 attack

Netanyahu has resisted calls for an official state commission of inquiry into the Oct. 7 attack and has tried to blame the failures on the army and security agencies. In recent months, a number of senior security officials, including a defense minister and army chief, have been fired or forced to step down.

Bar has been one of the few senior security officials since the Oct. 7 attack to remain in office.

If successful in removing him, Netanyahu would be expected to appoint a loyalist in his place, slowing any momentum for the commission of inquiry. The prime minister said removing him would help Israel "achieve its war goals and prevent the next disaster."

Netanyahu's proposed resolution for Bar's dismissal would need the approval of parliament, the Knesset, and it is likely he has support to pass it.

However, a personnel decision of this magnitude must get the attorney general's approval, said Amichai Cohen, a senior research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute think tank.

In her letter to Netanyahu warning he could not go ahead without clarification, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara added that he should "pay attention to the fact that the role of the Shin Bet is not to serve the personal trust of the prime minister," according to a statement from her office.

The two have a combative relationship, with the prime minister accusing Baharav-Miara of meddling in government decisions. Earlier this month, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, one of Netanyahu's biggest supporters, initiated the process of firing her.

Cohen also called Netanyahu's decision "very problematic." He said it illustrates the conflict of interest regarding the Shin Bet findings around the Oct. 7 attack and the agency's investigations into connections between the prime minister's office and Qatar, a mediator in talks on the war in Gaza.

Netanyahu is angry that the Shin Bet is investigating members of his staff for their dealings with Qatar.

Eli Feldstein, Netanyahu's former spokesperson, was reported by Israel's Channel 12 to have worked for a Doha-based firm that recruited Israeli journalists to write pro-Qatar stories. Israel's left-leaning daily, Haaretz, has reported that two other Netanyahu staffers, Jonatan Urich and Yisrael Einhorn, allegedly built a campaign to bolster Qatar's image ahead of the 2022 World Cup there.

The Shin Bet, and Bar, have been closely involved with the Gaza hostage negotiations. Netanyahu recently removed Bar from the negotiating team and replaced him with a loyalist, Cabinet minister Ron Dermer. Israeli media have reported on policy differences between the negotiators, who have pushed for a hostage deal, and Netanyahu, who threatens to resume the war.

The Movement for Quality Government in Israel, a good-governance civil society group, called Netanyahu's announcement a "declaration of war on the rule of law" and claimed that he does not have the authority to take the step against Bar because of the investigations into his office.

The group's chair, Eliad Shraga, called the announcement unlawful and "an extreme example of conflict of interest."

Opposition leader calls plans to dismiss Bar 'shameful'

Opposition leader Yair Lapid said he would appeal Bar's dismissal, calling the resolution "shameful" and politically motivated.

Since Netanyahu was indicted on corruption charges in 2019, he has claimed to be the victim of a "deep state" conspiracy by the media, judiciary and other unelected civil servants.

He launched a plan to overhaul the country's judicial system in early 2023, sparking months of street protests by demonstrators who accused him of trying to weaken the country's system of checks and balances.

Israeli media have said Bar was among top security officials warning ahead of the Oct. 7 attack that the strife was sending an image of weakness to Israel's enemies.

NASA's stuck astronauts welcome their newly arrived replacements to the space station

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Just over a day after blasting off, a SpaceX crew capsule arrived at the International Space Station on Sunday, delivering the replacements for NASA's two stuck astronauts.

The four newcomers — representing the U.S., Japan and Russia — will spend some time learning the station's ins and outs from Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams. Then the two will strap into their own SpaceX capsule later this week, one that has been up there since last year, to close out an unexpected extended mission that began last June.

Wilmore and Williams expected to be gone just a week when they launched on Boeing's first astronaut flight. They hit the nine-month mark earlier this month.

The Boeing Starliner capsule encountered so many problems that NASA insisted it come back empty, leaving its test pilots behind to wait for a SpaceX lift.

While the seven space station residents prepared for the new arrivals, one of the Russians — Ivan Vagner — briefly put on an alien mask in a lighthearted moment. Wilmore swung open the space station's hatch and rang the ship's bell as the new crew floated in one by one and were greeted with hugs and handshakes..

"It was a wonderful day. Great to see our friends arrive," Williams told Mission Control.

Wilmore's and Williams' ride arrived back in late September with a downsized crew of two and two empty seats reserved for the leg back. But more delays resulted when their replacements' brand new capsule needed extensive battery repairs. An older capsule took its place, pushing up their return by a couple weeks to mid-March.

Weather permitting, the SpaceX capsule carrying Wilmore, Williams and two other astronauts will undock from the space station early Tuesday and splash down off Florida's coast later that evening.

Until then, there will be 11 aboard the orbiting lab, representing the U.S., Russia and Japan.

New Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney seeks alliances in Europe as he deals with Trump

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

MONTREAL (AP) — New Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney is heading to Paris and London on Monday to seek alliances as he deals with U.S. President Donald Trump's attacks on Canada's sovereignty and economy.

Carney is purposely making his first foreign trip to the capital cities of the two countries that shaped Canada's early existence.

At his swearing-in ceremony on Friday, Carney noted the country was built on the bedrock of three peoples, French, English and Indigenous, and said Canada is fundamentally different from America and will "never, ever, in any way shape or form, be part of the United States."

A senior government official briefed reporters on the plane before picking up Carney in Montreal and said the purpose of the trip is to double down on partnerships with Canada's two founding countries. The official said Canada is a "good friend of the United States but we all know what is going on."

"The Trump factor is the reason for the trip. The Trump factor towers over everything else Carney must deal with," said Nelson Wiseman, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto.

Carney, a former central banker who turned 60 on Sunday, will meet with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Monday and later travel to London to sit down with U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer in an effort to diversify trade and perhaps coordinate a response to Trump's tariffs.

He will also meet with King Charles III, the head of state in Canada. The trip to England is a bit a homecoming, as Carney is a former governor of the Bank of England, the first noncitizen to be named to the role in the bank's 300-plus-year history.

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Carney then travels to the edge of Canada's Arctic to "reaffirm Canada's Arctic security and sovereignty" before returning to Ottawa where he's expected to call an election within days.

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.

Sweeping tariffs of 25% and Trump's talk of making Canada the 51st U.S. state have infuriated Canadians, and many are avoiding buying American goods when they can.

Carney's government is reviewing the purchase of U.S.-made F-35 fighter jets in light of Trump's trade war.

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.

Robert Bothwell, a professor of Canadian history and international relations at the University of Toronto, said Carney is wise not to visit Trump.

"There's no point in going to Washington," Bothwell said. "As (former Prime Minister Justin) Trudeau's treatment shows, all that results in is a crude attempt by Trump to humiliate his guests."

Bothwell said that Trump demands respect, "but it's often a one-way street, asking others to set aside their self-respect to bend to his will."

Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal, said it is absolutely essential that Canada diversify trade amidst the ongoing trade war with the United States. More than 75% of Canada's exports go to the U.S.

Béland said Arctic sovereignty is also a key issue for Canada.

"President Trump's aggressive talk about both Canada and Greenland and the apparent rapprochement between Russia, a strong Arctic power, and the United States under Trump have increased anxieties about our control over this remote yet highly strategic region," Béland said.

Vatican releases first photograph of the pope in a month as he celebrates Mass in hospital chapel

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Vatican on Sunday released the first photograph of Pope Francis in more than a month, showing the pontiff in a three-quarter view from behind wearing a purple stole typical of Lenten liturgical vestments and sitting in a wheelchair before the altar of his personal hospital chapel.

The Vatican said he was participating in the celebration of the Mass with other priests in the 10th-floor papal apartment in the Gemelli hospital. No one else is visible in the photo and it is the first mention the Vatican has made of the pope's participation in celebrating Mass since his Feb. 14 hospitalization for a bout with chronic bronchitis that quickly turned into double pneumonia.

There was no obvious sign that he was receiving supplemental oxygen mentioned in medical bulletins.

Doctors this week said the pontiff was no longer in critical, life-threatening condition, but they 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. In an audio recording released March 6, the pope spoke in a feeble and labored voice as he thanked the faithful in St. Peter's Square for their prayers.

His condition has been gradually improving over the last week, leading the Vatican to suspend morning updates and to issue less frequent medical bulletins. An X-ray this week confirmed that the infection was clearing.

In the most recent bulletin on Saturday, doctors said they were working to reduce the pope's reliance on a non-invasive ventilation mask at night, which will allow his lungs to work more. He was continuing to receive high-flow supplemental oxygen, delivered by a nasal tube, during the day — although no such apparatus was evident in the photograph.

'Pope of the children'

Earlier Sunday, dozens of children — many from war-torn countries, and toting yellow and white balloons — gathered outside Rome's Gemelli hospital to greet Francis on his fifth Sunday hospitalized. While

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the pope did not appear from the 10th-floor suite of windows, he thanked them and acknowledged their presence in the traditional Sunday blessing.

"I know that many children are praying for me; some of them came here today to Gemelli as a sign of closeness," the pontiff said in the Angelus text prepared for the traditional prayer but not delivered live again. "Thank you, dearest children! The pope loves you and is always waiting to meet you," Francis said.

The Rev. Enzo Fortunato, president of the pontifical committee for World Children's Day who organized the event, said that the gathering of children with their parents was a form of spiritual medicine for the 88-year-old pontiff. He called it "the most beautiful caress."

"The children represent a symbolic medicine for Pope Francis," Fortunato said. "Letting him know that so many children are here for him cheers the heart."

A small group of children, whose balloons represented the colors of the Vatican flag, briefly entered the hospital to leave behind their drawings, messages and flowers for Francis. Many of the children came from poorer Italian districts or from countries impacted by war, some having arrived in Italy from Afghanistan and Syria via humanitarian corridors set up by the Sant'Egidio charity in agreement with the Italian government; others were from Ukraine, Gaza, South America and Africa.

One of them was 12-year-old Anastasia, who got up at 5 a.m. to make the trip from Naples with the hopes of delivering the message directly to the pope. "I wrote, 'Pope Francis, get well and return home soon,'" she said. "We love you, all of the children are praying for you."

Andrea Iacomini, the spokesman for UNICEF in Italy, said besides demonstrating affection for the pope, the group also wanted to say "enough" to conflicts that are impacting 500 million children in 59 countries.

"This pope is not just a religious leader, he is a great global leader. A man of peace. This pope is pope of the children," Iacomini said.

Not seen publicly since being admitted to hospital

Francis typically delivers the Angelus from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square to the gathered faithful, who have grown more numerous due to the Jubilee year that Francis inaugurated in December.

In the written text, Francis said he was thinking of others, who like him, are in a fragile state. "Our bodies are weak, but even like this, nothing can prevent us from loving, praying, giving ourselves, being for each other, in faith, shining signs of hope," the pope said.

Along with a stop at St. Peter's to seek indulgences by walking through the basilica's Holy Door, pilgrims are now also adding a stop at Gemelli, a 15-minute train ride from the Vatican.

Francis has not been seen publicly since he was admitted to the hospital 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 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. Over the the last week, his condition has stabilized.

The next medical update won't be issued until mid-week, the Vatican said.

As AI nurses reshape hospital care, human nurses are pushing back

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

The next time you're due for a medical exam you may get a call from someone like Ana: a friendly voice that can help you prepare for your appointment and answer any pressing questions you might have.

With her calm, warm demeanor, Ana has been trained to put patients at ease — like many nurses across the U.S. But unlike them, she is also available to chat 24-7, in multiple languages, from Hindi to Haitian Creole.

That's because Ana isn't human, but an artificial intelligence program created by Hippocratic AI, one of a number of new companies offering ways to automate time-consuming tasks usually performed by nurses and medical assistants.

It's the most visible sign of AI's inroads into health care, where hundreds of hospitals are using increas-

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ingly sophisticated computer programs to monitor patients' vital signs, flag emergency situations and trigger step-by-step action plans for care — jobs that were all previously handled by nurses and other health professionals.

Hospitals say AI is helping their nurses work more efficiently while addressing burnout and understaffing. But nursing unions argue that this poorly understood technology is overriding nurses' expertise and degrading the quality of care patients receive.

"Hospitals have been waiting for the moment when they have something that appears to have enough legitimacy to replace nurses," said Michelle Mahon of National Nurses United. "The entire ecosystem is designed to automate, de-skill and ultimately replace caregivers."

Mahon's group, the largest nursing union in the U.S., has helped organize more than 20 demonstrations at hospitals across the country, pushing for the right to have say in how AI can be used — and protection from discipline if nurses decide to disregard automated advice. The group raised new alarms in January when Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the incoming health secretary, suggested AI nurses "as good as any doctor" could help deliver care in rural areas. On Friday, Dr. Mehmet Oz, who's been nominated to oversee Medicare and Medicaid, said he believes AI can "liberate doctors and nurses from all the paperwork."

Hippocratic AI initially promoted a rate of \$9 an hour for its AI assistants, compared with about \$40 an hour for a registered nurse. It has since dropped that language, instead touting its services and seeking to assure customers that they have been carefully tested. The company did not grant requests for an interview.

AI in the hospital can generate false alarms and dangerous advice

Hospitals have been experimenting for years with technology designed to improve care and streamline costs, including sensors, microphones and motion-sensing cameras. Now that data is being linked with electronic medical records and analyzed in an effort to predict medical problems and direct nurses' care — sometimes before they've evaluated the patient themselves.

Adam Hart was working in the emergency room at Dignity Health in Henderson, Nevada, when the hospital's computer system flagged a newly arrived patient for sepsis, a life-threatening reaction to infection. Under the hospital's protocol, he was supposed to immediately administer a large dose of IV fluids. But after further examination, Hart determined that he was treating a dialysis patient, or someone with kidney failure. Such patients have to be carefully managed to avoid overloading their kidneys with fluid.

Hart raised his concern with the supervising nurse but was told to just follow the standard protocol. Only after a nearby physician intervened did the patient instead begin to receive a slow infusion of IV fluids.

"You need to keep your thinking cap on— that's why you're being paid as a nurse," Hart said. "Turning over our thought processes to these devices is reckless and dangerous."

Hart and other nurses say they understand the goal of AI: to make it easier for nurses to monitor multiple patients and quickly respond to problems. But the reality is often a barrage of false alarms, sometimes erroneously flagging basic bodily functions — such as a patient having a bowel movement — as an emergency.

"You're trying to focus on your work but then you're getting all these distracting alerts that may or may not mean something," said Melissa Beebe, a cancer nurse at UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. "It's hard to even tell when it's accurate and when it's not because there are so many false alarms."

Can AI help in the hospital?

Even the most sophisticated technology will miss signs that nurses routinely pick up on, such as facial expressions and odors, notes Michelle Collins, dean of Loyola University's College of Nursing. But people aren't perfect either.

"It would be foolish to turn our back on this completely," Collins said. "We should embrace what it can do to augment our care, but we should also be careful it doesn't replace the human element."

More than 100,000 nurses left the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to one estimate, the biggest staffing drop in 40 years. As the U.S. population ages and nurses retire, the U.S. government estimates there will be more than 190,000 new openings for nurses every year through 2032.

Faced with this trend, hospital administrators see AI filling a vital role: not taking over care, but helping

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nurses and doctors gather information and communicate with patients.

'Sometimes they are talking to a human and sometimes they're not'

At the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences in Little Rock, staffers need to make hundreds of calls every week to prepare patients for surgery. Nurses confirm information about prescriptions, heart conditions and other issues — like sleep apnea — that must be carefully reviewed before anesthesia.

The problem: many patients only answer their phones in the evening, usually between dinner and their children's bedtime.

"So what we need to do is find a way to call several hundred people in a 120-minute window -- but I really don't want to pay my staff overtime to do so," said Dr. Joseph Sanford, who oversees the center's health IT.

Since January, the hospital has used an AI assistant from Qventus to contact patients and health providers, send and receive medical records and summarize their contents for human staffers. Qventus says 115 hospitals are using its technology, which aims to boost hospital earnings through quicker surgical turnarounds, fewer cancellations and reduced burnout.

Each call begins with the program identifying itself as an AI assistant.

"We always want to be fully transparent with our patients that sometimes they are talking to a human and sometimes they're not," Sanford said.

While companies like Qventus are providing an administrative service, other AI developers see a bigger role for their technology.

Israeli startup Xoltar specializes in humanlike avatars that conduct video calls with patients. The company is working with the Mayo Clinic on an AI assistant that teaches patients cognitive techniques for managing chronic pain. The company is also developing an avatar to help smokers quit. In early testing, patients spend about 14 minutes talking to the program, which can pickup on facial expressions, body language and other cues, according to Xoltar.

Nursing experts who study AI say such programs may work for people who are relatively healthy and proactive about their care. But that's not most people in the health system.

"It's the very sick who are taking up the bulk of health care in the U.S. and whether or not chatbots are positioned for those folks is something we really have to consider," said Roschelle Fritz of the University of California Davis School of Nursing.

Fire rips through overcrowded nightclub in North Macedonia, leaving dozens dead in panicked escape

By KONSTANTIN TESTORIDES and BORIS GRDANOSKI Associated Press

KOCANI, North Macedonia (AP) — A massive fire tore through an overcrowded nightclub in North Macedonia on Sunday, killing 59 people and injuring 155 in a chaotic escape during a live concert. The tragedy focused national attention on corruption in the small Balkan country as authorities detained 15 people.

The death toll may rise further, with 20 of the injured remain in critical condition, according to Health Minister Arben Taravari. The government has declared seven days of national mourning.

The pre-dawn blaze in the eastern town of Kocani left mostly young people dead and injured due to burns, smoke inhalation and a stampede in the desperate effort to reach the building's single exit, officials said. People as young as 16 were among the casualties, they said.

Videos showed sparkling pyrotechnics on the stage hitting the ceiling followed by scenes of chaos inside the club, with young people running through the smoke as the musicians urged them to escape as quickly as possible.

"We even tried to get out through the bathroom, only to find bars (on the windows)," Marija Taseva, 19, told The Associated Press, describing the fire that erupted after watching a local pop group at Club Pulse. "I somehow managed to get out. I fell down the stairs and they ran over me, trampled me. ... I barely stayed alive and could hardly breathe." She suffered an injury to her face.

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The fire caused the roof of the single-story building to partially collapse, revealing the charred remains of wooden beams and debris. Police cordoned off the site and sent in evidence gathering teams in an operation also involving state prosecutors.

Interior Minister Panche Toshkovski said 15 people were detained for questioning after a preliminary inspection revealed the club was operating without a proper license. He said the number of people inside the club was at least double its official capacity of 250.

"We have grounds for suspicion that there is bribery and corruption in this case," he told reporters without elaborating.

Neighbors offer condolences and assistance

The fire is the worst tragedy in recent memory to befall the landlocked nation, whose population is less than 2 million, and the latest in a slew of deadly nightclub fires around the world.

Condolences poured in from leaders around Europe as well as from the office of Pope Francis, who has been hospitalized for a month for double pneumonia.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also sent messages of support. "I wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. Ukraine mourns alongside our (North) Macedonian friends on this sad day," Zelenskyy wrote in a post on X.

Health Ministry officials said the government had accepted offers of assistance from several neighboring countries, including Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Turkey, where preparations were being made to receive patients with life-threatening injuries.

In the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, three people with severe burns aged 25, 25 and 19 were being treated at a civilian hospital, with one undergoing surgery, health authorities said. Their conditions are critical.

'The most difficult day of my life' - PM

Throughout Sunday, relatives gathered in front of hospitals and city offices in Kocani, some 115 kilometers (72 miles) east of the capital, Skopje, begging authorities for more information. Resident Dragi Stojanov was informed that his 21-year-old son Tomce had died in the fire.

"He was my only child. I don't need my life anymore. ... 150 families have been devastated," he said. "Children burnt beyond recognition. There are corpses, just corpses inside (the club). ... And the bosses (of organized crime), just putting money into their pockets."

President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova visited burn victims at a hospital in Skopje and spoke to parents waiting outside.

"It's terrible ... hard to believe how this happened," she said, her voice halting with emotion. "We must give these young people courage to continue."

Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski said late Sunday it had been "the most difficult day of my life," adding that the country must defeat corruption.

"I entered politics to change something. I encountered a deeply corrupt system that has been created and nurtured for decades, which includes people from all parties, from all profiles. If that system does not collapse, this country will never exist," he said in a statement.

North Macedonia's government ordered a sweeping inspection to be carried out at all nightclubs and cabarets across the country over the next three days.

Pyrotechnics have often been the cause of deadly fires in nightclubs, including the one at the Colectiv club in Bucharest, Romania, in 2015 in which 64 people died.

What to know about El Salvador's mega-prison after Trump sent hundreds of immigrants there

By MARCOS ALEMÁN and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador (AP) — The crown jewel of El Salvador's aggressive anti-crime strategy — a mega-prison where visitation, recreation and education are not allowed — became the latest tool in U.S.

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President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigration on Sunday, when hundreds of immigrants facing deportation were transferred there.

The arrival of the immigrants, alleged by the U.S. to be members of the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua gang, took place under an agreement for which the Trump administration will pay the government of President Nayib Bukele \$6 million for one year of services.

Bukele has made the Central American country's stark, harsh prisons a trademark of his fight against crime. In 2023, he opened the Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT, where the immigrants were sent over the weekend even as a federal judge issued an order temporarily barring their deportations under an 18th century wartime declaration targeting Venezuelan gang members.

What is the CECOT?

Bukele ordered the mega-prison built as he began his campaign against El Salvador's gangs in March 2022. It opened a year later in the town of Tecoluca, about 72 kilometers (45 miles) east of the capital.

The facility has eight sprawling pavilions and can hold up to 40,000 inmates. Each cell can fit 65 to 70 prisoners.

CECOT prisoners do not receive visits and are never allowed outdoors. The prison does not offer workshops or educational programs to prepare them to return to society after their sentences.

Occasionally, prisoners who have gained a level of trust from prison officials give motivational talks. Prisoners sit in rows in the corridor outside their cells for the talks or are led through exercise regimens under the supervision of guards.

Bukele's justice minister has said that those held at CECOT would never return to their communities.

The prison's dining halls, break rooms, gym and board games are for guards.

How many prisoners does El Salvador hold?

The government doesn't regularly update the figure, but the human rights organization Cristosal reported that in March 2024 El Salvador had 110,000 people behind bars, including those sentenced to prison and those still awaiting trial. That's more than double the 36,000 inmates that the government reported in April 2021, a year before Bukele ramped up his fight against crime.

Cristosal and other advocates have accused authorities of human rights violations.

Cristosal reported last year that at least 261 people had died in El Salvador's prisons during the gang crackdown. The group and others have cited cases of abuse, torture and lack of medical attention.

In slickly produced videos, the government has shown CECOT prisoners in boxer shorts marching into common areas and made to sit nearly atop each other. Cells lack enough bunks for everyone.

Why were immigrants sent to CECOT?

The migrants were deported after Trump's declaration of the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, which has been used only three times in U.S. history.

The law requires a president to declare the U.S. is at war, giving him extraordinary powers to detain or remove foreigners who otherwise would have protections under immigration or criminal laws. Trump claimed the Tren de Aragua gang was invading the U.S. in invoking the wartime authority.

Tren de Aragua originated in an infamously lawless prison in Venezuela and accompanied an exodus of millions of Venezuelans, the overwhelming majority of whom were seeking better living conditions after their nation's economy came undone last decade.

The Trump administration has not identified the migrants deported, provided any evidence they are in fact members of Tren de Aragua or that they committed any crimes in the U.S.

Video released by El Salvador's government Sunday showed men exiting airplanes into an airport tarmac lined by officers in riot gear. The men, who had their hands and ankles shackled, struggled to walk as officers pushed their heads down to have them bend at the waist.

The video also showed the men being transported to CECOT in a large convoy of buses guarded by police and military vehicles and at least one helicopter. The men were shown kneeling on the ground as their heads were shaved before they changed into the prison's all-white uniform – knee-length shorts, T-shirt, socks and rubber clogs – and placed in cells.

Trump administration ramps up rhetoric targeting the courts amid mounting legal setbacks

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

The new populist president railed against the judiciary as they blocked his aggressive moves to restructure his country's government and economy.

This was in Mexico, where former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador eventually pushed through changes that required every judge in his country to be elected rather than appointed. The reforms, and the promise of more by his successor, caused markets to lose confidence in his country's reliability as a place to invest, which led its currency to weaken.

It was one in a series of assaults that populists around the globe have launched on the courts in recent years, and legal observers now wonder if the United States could be next.

As the courts deliver a series of setbacks to his dramatic attempt to change the federal government without congressional approval, President Donald Trump's supporters are echoing some of the rhetoric and actions that elsewhere have preceded attacks on the judiciary.

Trump's deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, posted last week on X: "Under the precedents now being established by radical rogue judges, a district court in Hawaii could enjoin troop movements in Iraq. Judges have no authority to administer the executive branch. Or to nullify the results of a national election."

"We either have democracy," said Miller, who once ran a legal group that sued to get judges to block former President Joe Biden's initiatives, "or not."

Trump's supporters in Congress have raised the specter of impeaching judges who have ruled against the administration. Elon Musk, the billionaire Trump backer whose Department of Government Efficiency has ended up in the crosshairs of much of the litigation, has regularly called for removing judges on his social media site, X.

On Sunday, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Republican Chuck Grassley, reacted furiously to a Washington judge's order briefly halting deportations under an 18th century wartime law that Trump invoked hours earlier.

"Another day, another judge unilaterally deciding policy for the whole country. This time to benefit foreign gang members," Grassley wrote. "If the Supreme Court or Congress doesn't fix, we're headed towards a constitutional crisis."

Activists contend it's the administration that's increasing the odds of a crisis.

"They don't like what they're seeing in the courts, and this is setting up what may very well be a constitutional crisis about the independence of the judiciary," said Heidi Beirich, founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism.

'Threats against constitutional government'

Despite the rhetoric, the Trump administration has so far not openly defied a court order, and the dozens of cases filed against its actions have followed a regular legal course. His administration has made no moves to seek removal of justices or push judicial reforms through the Republican-controlled Congress.

Justin Levitt, a law professor at Loyola Marymount University and voting rights expert who previously served in the Justice Department's civil rights division, said he's no fan of Trump's moves. But he said the administration has been following legal norms by appealing decisions it doesn't like.

"I think most of this is bluster," said Levitt, noting courts can imprison those who don't obey orders or levy crippling fines that double daily. "If this is the approach the executive wants to take, it's going to provoke a fight. Not everybody is going to be content to be a doormat the way Congress is."

Even if no firm moves are underway to remove judges or blatantly ignore their rulings, the rhetoric has not gone unnoticed within the judiciary. Two Republican-appointed senior judges last week warned about the rising danger of the judiciary being targeted.

"Threats against judges are threats against constitutional government. Everyone should be taking this seriously," said Judge Richard Sullivan, whom Trump in his first term appointed to the federal appeals court in New York.

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Targeting judges an 'authoritarian instinct'

In Mexico, López Obrador was termed out of office last year. But several other populist Trump allies who have shown no inclination to leave power have made their judiciaries a central target.

Hungary's Viktor Orbán lowered the mandatory retirement age for judges to force out some who might have blocked his agenda. In Brazil, former President Jair Bolsonaro's supporters have feuded with that country's high court. After Bolsonaro was charged with trying to overturn his 2022 election loss, his party is hoping to win enough seats in next year's elections to impeach at least one of the justices. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele's party removed supreme court justices with whom he had clashed.

Bukele has even egged Trump on to take on the judiciary: "If you don't impeach the corrupt judges, you CANNOT fix the country," Bukele wrote on X, following a post by Musk urging Trump to follow the Salvadoran president's lead.

"This is a basic authoritarian instinct," said Steven Levitsky, coauthor of "How Democracies Die" and a Harvard political scientist. "You cannot have a democracy where the elected government can do whatever it wants."

It would take two-thirds of the U.S. Senate to remove an impeached judge. With only 53 Republicans in the chamber, it's highly unlikely that supermajority could be reached. The Trump administration, though, has expressed exasperation at the frequency with which lower courts are ruling against it.

U.S. presidents have long clashed with the courts

Saturday night, the judge blocked a round of deportations of people Trump officials claimed were gang members, though the administration ended up deporting more than 200 anyway. Another judge in San Francisco required the administration to rehire tens of thousands of federal workers he ruled had likely been improperly fired. The administration appealed several rulings putting on hold its effort to end the constitutional guarantee of birthright citizenship to the Supreme Court.

And the administration is still fighting with aid organizations that contend the government has not complied with a federal judge's order to pay them for work performed under contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"You have these lower-level judges who are trying to block the president's agenda. It's very clear," Trump spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said on Friday, adding that judges have issued 16 orders blocking Trump initiatives compared to 14 against Biden during the previous four years.

Presidents have grouched about being checked by courts for decades. Biden complained when the courts blocked his efforts to forgive student loan debt. Former President Barack Obama warned the conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court not to overturn his landmark health care expansion.

In the 1930s, then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried to expand the number of seats on the Supreme Court to get rid of its conservative majority, an idea some Democrats wanted to revisit during Biden's presidency.

Respecting the courts a foundation of the rule of law

But the anti-judicial rhetoric has not for decades reached the pitch that it's at now, experts say. One reason for that is that Trump has issued more orders than any other new president. Many of them rely on novel legal theories about presidential power that go against longstanding judicial precedent or have never been tested in court.

Anne Marie Slaughter, a former State Department official in the Obama administration, compared judges to referees in sports who enforce the rules. She said the U.S. has long advocated for the importance of the rule of law in young democracies and helped set up legal systems in countries ranging from India to South Africa to ensure they stayed free.

"At this point, I think many of our allies and peer countries are deeply worried and essentially no longer see us as a beacon of democracy and the rule of law," Slaughter said.

Rafal Pankowski, a Polish activist, recalled mass protests that followed new requirements that country's populist Law and Justice party placed on judges in 2019. They also drew sanctions from the European Union for interfering with judicial independence.

Those demonstrations, Pankowski said, contributed to the party losing power in the following elections.

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"Over time, it became difficult for people to follow technicalities of the legislation," Pankowski said, "but the instinct to defend the independence of the judiciary has been one of the main things behind the democratic movement."

Trump and Putin will speak this week on Russia-Ukraine war, US envoy says

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin are expected to speak this week as the U.S. tries to broker a ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine war, according to Trump special envoy Steve Witkoff.

It would be the second publicized call between the two leaders since Trump began his second term in January. Trump and Putin spoke in February and agreed to start high-level talks over ending the war in Ukraine.

"I think the two presidents are going to have a really good and positive discussion this week," Witkoff said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union."

Witkoff this week met with Putin in Russia for talks aimed at ending the country's invasion of Ukraine and said he expects to see a deal soon.

"The president uses the timeframe weeks and I don't disagree with him. I am really hopeful that we are going to see some real progress here," Witkoff said.

When Witkoff appeared later Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation," he again spoke about a prospective Putin-Trump call but did not offer specifics on what decisions might be made coming out of the discussion.

Witkoff said they forged a relationship in Trump's first term and that he expects the call this week to be "very positive and constructive."

Trump's first call to Putin came after Witkoff traveled to Russia to bring home Marc Fogel, an American history teacher the U.S. had deemed wrongfully detained.

One day after the prisoner swap, Trump announced that he spoke to Putin and said their call was "lengthy and highly productive."

Witkoff demurred on whether Putin and Trump will decide in the call to move forward with a U.S.-proposed 30-day ceasefire. Ukraine has agreed to the deal. Putin has said he agrees in principle with the proposal but there are details to be worked out.

"President Trump is the ultimate decision maker, our decision maker, and President Putin, for the country of Russia, is their decision maker," Witkoff said. "I think it's a very positive sign that the two of them will be talking at some point. I think that's showing that there's positive momentum."

Witkoff also brushed aside a recent assessment from French President Emmanuel Macron, who said in a statement that Russia "does not seem to be sincerely seeking peace" and that Putin was intensifying the fighting before negotiating.

Witkoff said he was not aware of Macron's comments but said, "it's unfortunate when people make those sort of assessments" when "they don't have necessarily firsthand knowledge."

"I know what I heard, the body language I witnessed," Witkoff said of his meeting with Putin. "I saw a constructive effort, over a long period of time to to discuss the specifics of what's going on in the field."

Angst pervades a pair of Republican town halls — one in Trump country, the other in a swing state

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM, MAKIYA SEMINERA and THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

EVANSTON, Wyo. (AP) — In two congressional districts and vastly different political environments, two Republicans in the U.S. House were met with far different reactions at public meetings they held late last week.

Against the suggestion of their leader, House Speaker Mike Johnson, to refrain from holding public meet-

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ings with constituents, second-term Reps. Chuck Edwards and Harriet Hageman went ahead with their evening sessions.

In Asheville, North Carolina, chants of opposition greeted Edwards on Thursday as opponents hooted at almost every answer he gave and chanted outside. In Evanston, Wyoming, at the southwestern corner of a sparsely populated and heavily Republican state, it was mostly Republicans who asked probing questions of Hageman in a quieter setting.

In both cases, voters were curious about the scope and pace of action in Washington since President Donald Trump took office, if less boisterously in Wyoming than the event 1,800 miles (2,900 kilometers) to the southeast.

Evanston, Wyoming

Joy Walton, a 76-year-old Republican from Evanston, had come to the meeting confused about tech billionaire Elon Musk's role in the executive branch. Trump has charged Musk with leading a broad effort to shrink the size and cost of government.

Hageman — Liz Cheney's successor — worked to clarify Musk's place in the Trump administration, describing him as "a special government employee" with "a top-secret security clearance." She praised him for his work targeting foreign aid contracts at the U.S. Agency for International Development, calling the department a "monstrosity and waste of money."

The meeting was tamer than some constituent meetings held by Republicans, who hold majorities in the House and the Senate. Sen. Roger Marshall, a Kansas Republican, adjourned such a meeting this month in northwest Kansas early when constituents became vocally angry about government personnel cuts.

Still, Hageman's meeting Friday, with about 250 filling to capacity the meeting room in the restored Union Pacific Railroad roundhouse, was the liveliest event that evening in the train depot town of about 11,800 people.

Some in the audience blurted comments to Hageman, though this was not unfriendly territory for Trump. The president received 80% of the vote in Uinta County, along the Utah border, en route to carrying Wyoming with nearly 72% of voters last year.

Yet even some devout Republicans gave voice to concern about Musk's recommendations as the head of the administration's Department of Government Efficiency.

Former Wyoming Secretary of State Karl Allred, 60, said he was happy to see Trump slash "wasteful spending," but noted that any serious reduction in federal spending needed to include the defense budget. "I guarantee we waste a lot of money there, and in every department," Allred said regarding the military.

Even Hageman suggested Musk was going too far in targeting the U.S. Postal Service, which has agreed to assist Musk's group in its plan to cut 10,000 of the service's 640,000 workers over the next month. Wyoming would be among the states hit hardest by cuts to the country's mail service because of its small population, Hageman said.

Asheville, North Carolina

Edwards was walking into a far different environment. Asheville, a mid-sized urban hub surrounded by the rural hills of western North Carolina, is the seat of Buncombe County, where Trump received 36.9% of the vote last year.

Jay Carey, a 54-year-old Democrat, had said before the Thursday night constituent meeting at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, "My plan is to call him out."

About 20 minutes into Edwards' meeting, Carey, a retired military veteran, started to yell at the representative to "Do your job." Carey then stood, accused Edwards of lying and used a string of expletives until police escorted him out of the auditorium.

For about 90 minutes, Edwards faced jeers, boos and pointed questions from many in the audience of 300, while another 1,000 echoed them from outside the building.

Certainly, Carey, from the Asheville area, was part of a group of Democrats who attended the meeting, though not paid protesters as Johnson suggested were behind some of the more raucous gatherings.

Carey's home flooded with six feet of water during Hurricane Helene in September. He lost his small business and his family had to relocate from a house to a smaller apartment.

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Much of Edwards' district was ravaged by the hurricane and remains in the early rebuilding phase, even as Trump has suggested eliminating the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Edwards seemed unruffled by the often hostile reception, telling reporters afterward, "I appreciate the chance to talk about those things, even though there were some differences and some different opinions."

Still, as protesters continued to chant outside, Edwards said, "We're doing exactly what the American people sent us to Washington, D.C., to do."

Trump has ordered airstrikes against rebels in Yemen. Here's why

The Associated Press undefined

U.S. President Donald Trump says he has ordered airstrikes against Iran-backed rebels in Yemen, and issued a warning to Tehran.

Here's why.

Threat to global shipping

The Houthi rebels started attacking military and commercial ships on one of the world's busiest shipping corridors shortly after the war in Gaza began between Hamas and Israel in October 2023.

The Houthis said they were targeting vessels on the Red Sea with links to Israel or its allies — the United States and the U.K. — in solidarity with Palestinians, but some vessels had little or no link to the war.

The Houthis targeted over 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two vessels and killing four sailors, until the current ceasefire in Gaza took effect in mid-January. Other missiles and drones were intercepted or failed to reach their targets, which included Western military ones.

The attacks paused during the ceasefire, but the Houthis on Wednesday said they would resume against "any Israeli vessel" after Israel cut off all aid supplies to Gaza to pressure Hamas during talks on extending their truce. The rebels said the warning also affects the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Arabian Sea.

No Houthi attacks have been reported since then.

"These relentless assaults have cost the U.S. and World Economy many BILLIONS of Dollars while, at the same time, putting innocent lives at risk," Trump said Saturday while announcing the airstrikes in a social media post.

Threat to the U.S.

The earlier Houthi campaign saw U.S. and other Western warships repeatedly targeted, sparking the most serious combat the U.S. Navy had seen since World War II.

The United States under the Biden administration, as well as Israel and Britain, previously struck Houthi-held areas in Yemen. But a U.S. official said Saturday's operation was conducted solely by the U.S.

The USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group, which includes the carrier, three Navy destroyers and one cruiser, are in the Red Sea and were part of Saturday's mission. The USS Georgia cruise missile submarine has also been operating in the region.

Trump said the strikes were to "protect American shipping, air, and naval assets, and to restore Navigational Freedom."

The focus on the Houthis and their attacks have raised their profile as they face economic and other pressures at home amid Yemen's decadelong stalemated war, which has torn apart the Arab world's poorest nation.

Pressure on Iran

Saturday's strikes also were meant to pressure Iran, which has backed the Houthis just as it has supported Hamas and other proxies in the Middle East.

Trump vowed to hold Iran "fully accountable" for the Houthis' actions.

The State Department earlier this month reinstated the "foreign terrorist organization" designation for the Houthis, which carries sanctions and penalties for anyone providing "material support" for the group.

The Trump administration also has been pressing Iran to restart bilateral talks on Iran's advancing nuclear program, with Trump writing a letter to the country's supreme leader. Trump, who unilaterally withdrew America from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, has said he will not allow the program

to become operational.

Trump has also levied new sanctions on Iran as part of his "maximum pressure" campaign against the country and has suggested that military action remains a possibility, while emphasizing he still believes a new nuclear deal can be reached.

Trump invokes 18th century law to speed deportations, judge stalls it hours later

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge barred the Trump administration Saturday from carrying out deportations under a sweeping 18th century law that the president invoked hours earlier to speed removal of Venezuelan gang members from the United States.

U.S. District Judge James E. Boasberg said he needed to issue his order immediately because the government already was flying migrants it claimed were newly deportable under President Donald Trump's proclamation to be incarcerated in El Salvador and Honduras. El Salvador already agreed this week to take up to 300 migrants that the Trump administration designated as gang members.

"I do not believe I can wait any longer and am required to act," Boasberg said during a Saturday evening hearing in a lawsuit brought by the ACLU and Democracy Forward. "A brief delay in their removal does not cause the government any harm," he added, noting they remain in government custody but ordering that any planes in the air be turned around.

The ruling came hours after Trump claimed the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua was invading the United States and invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, a wartime authority that allows the president broader leeway on policy and executive action to speed up mass deportations.

The act has only ever been used three times before, all during wars. Its most recent application was during World War II, when it was used to incarcerate Germans and Italians as well as for the mass internment of Japanese-American civilians.

In a proclamation released just over an hour before Boasberg's hearing, Trump contended that Tren de Aragua was effectively at war with the United States.

"Over the years, Venezuelan national and local authorities have ceded ever-greater control over their territories to transnational criminal organizations, including TdA," Trump's statement reads. "The result is a hybrid criminal state that is perpetrating an invasion of and predatory incursion into the United States, and which poses a substantial danger to the United States."

The order could let the administration deport any migrant it identifies as a member of the gang without going through regular immigration proceedings, and also could remove other protections under criminal law for people the government targeted.

In a statement Saturday night, Attorney General Pam Bondi slammed Boasberg's stay on deportations. "This order disregards well-established authority regarding President Trump's power, and it puts the public and law enforcement at risk," Bondi said.

The Tren de Aragua gang originated in a prison in the South American country and accompanied an exodus of millions of Venezuelans, the overwhelming majority of whom were seeking better living conditions after their nation's economy came undone last decade. Trump and his allies have turned the gang into the face of the alleged threat posed by immigrants living in the U.S. illegally and formally designated it a "foreign terrorist organization" last month.

Authorities in several countries have reported arrests of Tren de Aragua members, even as Venezuela's government claims to have eliminated the criminal organization.

The government said Trump actually signed the proclamation on Friday night. Immigration lawyers noticed the federal government suddenly moving to deport Venezuelans who they would not otherwise have the legal right to expel from the country, and scrambled to file lawsuits to block what they believed was a pending proclamation.

Boasberg issued an initial order at 9:20 a.m. Saturday blocking the Trump administration from deporting

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five Venezuelans named as plaintiffs in the ACLU suit who were being detained by the government and believed they were about to be deported. The Trump administration appealed that order, contending that halting a presidential act before it has been announced would cripple the executive branch.

If the order were allowed to stand, "district courts would have license to enjoin virtually any urgent national-security action just upon receipt of a complaint," the Justice Department wrote in its appeal.

Boasberg then scheduled the afternoon hearing on whether to expand his order to all people who could be targeted under Trump's declaration.

Deputy Assistant Attorney General Drew Ensign contended that the president had broad latitude to identify threats to the country and act under the 1798 law. He noted the U.S. Supreme Court allowed President Harry Truman to continue to hold a German citizen in 1948, three years after World War II ended, under the measure.

"This would cut very deeply into the prerogatives of the president," Ensign said of an injunction.

But Lee Gelernt of the ACLU contended that Trump didn't have the authority to use the law against a criminal gang rather than a recognized state. Boasberg said precedent on that question seemed tricky but that the ACLU had a reasonable chance of success on those arguments, and so the order was merited.

Boasberg halted deportations for those in custody for up to 14 days, and scheduled a Friday hearing in the case.

The flurry of litigation shows the significance of Trump's declaration, the latest step by the administration to expand presidential power. Ensign argued that, as part of its reaction to the Sept. 11, 2001 attack, Congress had given the president power to delegate "transnational" organizations threats on the level of recognized states. And Gelernt warned that the Trump administration could simply issue a new proclamation to use the Alien Enemies Act against another migrant gang, like MS-13, which has long been one of Trump's favorite targets.

Ivory Coast is losing US aid as al-Qaida and other extremist groups are approaching

By MONIKA PRONCZUK and MISPER APAWU Associated Press

KIMBIRILA-NORD, Ivory Coast (AP) — With its tomato patches and grazing cattle, the Ivory Coast village of Kimbirila-Nord hardly looks like a front line of the global fight against extremism. But after jihadis attacked a nearby community in Mali five years ago and set up a base in a forest straddling the border, the U.S. committed to spending \$20 million to counter the spread of al-Qaida and the Islamic State group here and in dozens of other villages.

The Trump administration's sweeping foreign aid cuts mean that support is now gone, even as violence in Mali and other countries in the Sahel region south of the Sahara has reached record levels and sent tens of thousands of refugees streaming into northern Ivory Coast.

Locals worry they have been abandoned. Diplomats and aid officials said the termination of aid jeopardizes counterterrorism efforts and weakens U.S. influence in a part of the world where some countries have turned to Russian mercenaries for help.

In Kimbirila-Nord, U.S. funding, among other things, helped young people get job training, built parks for cattle to graze so they are no longer stolen by jihadis on Malian territory, and helped establish an information-sharing system so residents can flag violent encounters to each other and state services.

"What attracts young people to extremists is poverty and hunger," said Yacouba Doumbia, 78-year-old chief of Kimbirila-Nord. "There was a very dangerous moment in 2020. The project came at the right time, and allowed us to protect ourselves."

"Seize a narrow prevention window"

Over the last decade, West Africa has been shaken by extremist uprisings and military coups. Groups linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group have conquered large areas and killed thousands in the Sahel and have been spreading into wealthier West African coastal states, such as Ivory Coast, Benin and Togo.

In 2019, President Donald Trump signed the Global Fragility Act that led to the initiatives in northern

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Ivory Coast. The U.S. goal in this area was to "seize a narrowing prevention window," according to this year's congressional report about the implementation of the bipartisan legislation.

Experts say local concerns help drive the popularity of extremist groups: competition for land and resources, exclusion, marginalization and lack of economic opportunities. Across the region, Islamic extremists have recruited among groups marginalized and neglected by central governments.

"Ivory Coast is one of the few countries that still resist the terrorist threat in the Sahel," said a U.N. official working in the country who was not authorized to speak on the matter publicly. "If we do not continue to support border communities, a minor issue could send them into the arms of extremists."

Trump issued an executive order in January directing a freeze on foreign assistance and a review of all U.S. aid and development work abroad. He charged that much of foreign aid was wasteful and advanced a liberal agenda.

"Everyone was just looking out for themselves"

In 2020, when the jihadis struck a Malian village 10 kilometers (6 miles) away, Kimbirila-Nord in many ways fit the description of a community susceptible to extremism.

The lives of Malians and Ivorians were intertwined. People crossed the border freely, making it easy for extremists, who like residents spoke Bambara, to access Kimbirila-Nord. Many residents did not have identity cards and few spoke French, leaving them with no access to state services or official information. Different ethnic groups lived next to each other but were divided by conflicts over scarce natural resources and suspicions toward the state. And young people did not have opportunities to make money.

"We were very scared" when the extremists attacked, said Aminata Doumbia, the head of the village's female farmers cooperative. "Everyone was just looking out for themselves."

The Ivorian government runs a program that provides professional training, grants and microloans. But access is difficult in villages such as Kimbirila-Nord.

Kimbirila-Nord is home to refugees from Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. Sifata Berte, 23, fled there with his family two years ago from Mali. He is not eligible for the government-run program, but got training through the project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and now works as an apprentice in an iron workshop.

Other things the USAID-funded project set up included a network of community radios in local languages, so people could get access to information. It also used mobile government trucks to help tens of thousands of people across the region get their identity documents. And it brought people together with microcredit cooperatives and with a special committee of ranchers and farmers that helps resolve tensions over land.

"It's thanks to the project that we can sleep at night," Doumbia, the village chief, said. "We learned how to be together."

Equal Access International, an international nonprofit, designed and implemented the U.S.-funded project.

The USAID project also has been the only direct source of information on the ground in northern Ivory Coast on violent events for the U.S.-based Armed Conflict and Location & Event Data Project, the main provider of data on violence in the Sahel.

The village had big plans

Ivory Coast became known as a target for extremists in 2016, when an attack on the seaside resort of Grand Bassam killed tourists. In 2021, a string of attacks occurred near the country's northern border, but the violence has been largely contained after Ivorian authorities, Western governments and aid groups rushed into this impoverished and isolated part of the country with military build up and development projects.

In 2024, the U.S. Africa Command provided over \$65 million to projects in Ivory Coast, most of which "focused on counterterrorism and border security" in the northern part of the country, according to the group's website. The Pentagon said in a statement that it was "not aware of any budget cuts that have undermined counterterrorism training or partnership programs in Africa."

Ivory Coast has the second-highest GDP per capita in West Africa, but according to the U.N. it remains one of the world's least developed countries. Many in remote villages like Kimbirila-Nord do not have access to running water.

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"At first we thought that we only had to solve these problems with a military solution," Famy Rene, the prefect of Korhogo, the region's capital, said. "But we saw that this was not enough. We had to put in place programs that strengthen the resilience of the population."

Residents of Kimbirila-Nord had big plans before the U.S. froze aid. The U.S. was supposed to finance the first well in the village, help create a collective farm, and expand vocational training,

Now they fear they have been left alone to deal with extremists.

"If you forget, they will come back," said Doumbia, the village chief. "As long as there is war on the other side of the border, we must remain on a high alert."

From Nomo to Ichiro to Ohtani: Japan's baseball rise in MLB hits high point in Dodgers-Cubs series

By DAVID BRANDT AP Baseball Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Ichiro Suzuki was having his typical day on a baseball field in 2000, putting on a power display during batting practice before ripping line drives all over the field for the Orix BlueWave during a preseason doubleheader.

American infielder Torey Lovullo — who was in the other dugout playing the final year of his career in Japan with the Yakult Swallows — couldn't believe his eyes.

The 26-year-old's combination of speed, power and skill was off the charts. How did he not know about this guy?

"I told my translator, get me three baseballs," the current Arizona Diamondbacks manager said. "He needs to sign them. That's the best hitter I've ever seen."

Lovullo was ahead of the curve in identifying a future Major League Baseball legend. Suzuki came to the United States the following year, signing with the Seattle Mariners, and embarked on a Hall of Fame career that included 3,089 MLB hits and a lasting legacy.

Nearly 25 years after Suzuki's MLB debut, the defending World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers will face the Chicago Cubs in two regular-season games in Tokyo, and Japanese players will be the centerpiece of the experience. Two-way Dodgers star Shohei Ohtani is widely considered the best player in the world while teammates Yoshinobu Yamamoto and Roki Sasaki are important parts of the pitching staff.

Over on the Cubs, Seiya Suzuki is one of the best hitters in the lineup, while Shota Imanaga is the ace pitcher. He'll face Yamamoto on Tuesday in the first all-Japanese starting pitcher duel in MLB history.

It's quite a moment for Japan, Japanese baseball and the dozens of players who slowly paved the road for today's generation to be such a big part of the American baseball scene.

"Very excited — my family's very excited," Seiya Suzuki said. "I think it's a great opportunity to make memories over there."

Japan's rise in the big leagues

The first Japanese-born player in the big leagues was Masanori Murakami, who pitched for the San Francisco Giants during the 1964 and 1965 seasons.

But it was thirty years later when pitcher Hideo Nomo came to the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1995 that Japan's presence in the big leagues really started to be felt. His unorthodox delivery — turning his back toward home plate during his windup — helped make him an immediate sensation and he won National League Rookie of the Year and made the All-Star team after finishing with a 13-6 record and 2.54 ERA.

"It was on TV, so as a kid growing up, you'd see him pitch in the major leagues and that became a thing in Japan," said Atsuya Furuta, who was a star catcher in Japan from 1990-2007. "Baseball kids wanted to play in the major leagues."

At first, it was mostly pitchers who came from Japan to play in the U.S. Shigetoshi Hasegawa was a quality reliever for the Angels and Mariners starting in the late 1990s, and Kazuhiro Sasaki was an All-Star closer for the Mariners in the early 2000s.

But Suzuki was the one who opened the door for Japanese hitters, signing with the Mariners in 2001.

"When Ichiro finally came over and began his rise in this game, it showed the way for other young

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Japanese players to see it was possible to come here," Lovullo said. "There was always an insecurity that they weren't big enough or strong enough and couldn't compete at this level.

"But that's certainly never been the case in my opinion."

After Suzuki's arrival, several Japanese hitters found success in the big leagues. Outfielder Hideki Matsui was an integral part of the New York Yankees from 2003-12, making two All-Star teams, hitting 175 homers and helping the franchise win the 2009 World Series.

Outfielder So Taguchi helped the Cardinals win the World Series in 2006 and the Phillies earn the title in 2008. Kosuke Fukudome was an All-Star for the Chicago Cubs in 2008.

That paved the way for the current generation that includes Ohtani, Seiya Suzuki and Boston's Masataka Yoshida, who has hit 25 homers over the past two seasons. Once a curiosity, players who come over from Japan are no longer a curiosity for American fans, instead becoming part of the game's landscape.

Dodgers lead the way

It's no accident that the Dodgers are at the forefront of showcasing Japanese baseball excellence.

The franchise has a long history of seeking out racially and ethnically diverse talent. Jackie Robinson — baseball's first Black player — debuted with the franchise in 1947 when they were located in Brooklyn. In 1981, Mexican pitcher Fernando Valenzuela turned into a sensation and ended up having a stellar 17-year career. Then in 1994, pitcher Chan Ho Park was the first Korean in the big leagues.

Nomo's arrival in 1995 was an extension of the franchise's ethos. Grace McNamee — who worked for the Dodgers in the mid-1990s — was one of Nomo's translators during his first few seasons and said former owner Peter O'Malley was always a champion for the sport's worldwide growth.

"With the O'Malley family, they were all about globalizing the game," McNamee said. "It was really important for Peter to make sure that everyone — including the Japanese media — was able to be accommodated."

Current Dodgers manager Dave Roberts has been a good caretaker of that legacy. His father was Black, his mother Japanese and the former MLB outfielder was born in Okinawa, Japan, on a U.S. military base. That background didn't hurt when recruiting the likes of Ohtani, Yamamoto and Sasaki.

The Dodgers manager visited Japan over the winter, dining with legendary slugger Sadaharu Oh, and takes pride in knowing the franchise is a destination for Japanese players.

"Their experiences here playing in the states with the Dodgers has been truly a good one, and I think it's a responsibility for the Dodgers because I do think we're the epicenter globally for baseball," Roberts said.

Today's generation

The current generation of Japanese baseball players in America might be the deepest ever.

Even outside of the Dodgers and Cubs, there are plenty of other players making their mark. Yu Darvish is a five-time All-Star who is still an important part of the San Diego Padres pitching rotation, while Yoshida is a key cog of the Red Sox lineup.

Veteran Kenta Maeda is trying to have a bounce back season with the Detroit Tigers and finished second in the AL Cy Young award voting in 2020 when he was with the Minnesota Twins. The New York Mets are hoping Kodai Senga can regain his 2023 form, when the right-hander was an All-Star at the top of the rotation.

Lefty Yusei Kikuchi — a 2021 All-Star — signed a \$63 million, three-year deal with the Los Angeles Angels during the offseason. Kikuchi actually made his MLB debut in Japan with the Seattle Mariners when they played against the Oakland Athletics in the first two games of the 2019 season. He said the trip was a great chance to build camaraderie with teammates as they traveled the country.

That trip was defined by the last two games of Ichiro Suzuki's career — a retirement party celebrating a baseball legend. This week, Ohtani will be the centerpiece.

"It's a chance to showcase some Japanese talent over there and I think all of Japan is pretty excited about that," Kikuchi said.

Even in American baseball's lower levels, Japanese players are making their presence felt. Two young stars — 19-year-old Rintaro Sasaki and 18-year-old Shotaro Morii — have made an early move to the U.S.

Sasaki's a slugging first baseman who plays at Stanford while Morii is a potential two-way player who

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signed a \$1.5 million minor-league deal in January with the Athletics.

Lovullo — who was so in awe of Suzuki 25 years ago — can rightfully say he saw the revolution coming. “I felt like it was just a matter of time before more started to emerge,” Lovullo said. “We want to have the greatest players in the world playing here in America and they come and represent themselves very well and make our game better.”

Today in History: March 17 White South Africans vote to end apartheid

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Monday, March 17, the 76th day of 2025. There are 289 days left in the year. This is St. Patrick's Day.

Today in history:

On March 17, 1992, white South Africans voted 68.7% to 31.3% to end over 40 years of apartheid in a national referendum. (Voters of all races were allowed to vote two years later in the general election that resulted in Nelson Mandela becoming president.)

Also on this date:

In 1762, New York held its first St. Patrick's Day parade.

In 1776, the Revolutionary War Siege of Boston ended as British forces evacuated the city.

In 1950, scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, announced that they had created a new radioactive element they named “californium.”

In 1969, Golda Meir took office as prime minister in Israel, beginning a term that would last through five crucial years in the nation's history.

In 2003, edging to the brink of war, U.S. President George W. Bush gave Iraqi President Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave his country. Iraq rejected Bush's ultimatum, saying a U.S. attack to force Saddam from power would be “a grave mistake.”

In 2010, Michael Jordan became the first ex-player to become a majority owner in the NBA as the league's Board of Governors unanimously approved his \$275 million bid to buy the Charlotte Bobcats from Bob Johnson.

In 2016, finally bowing to years of public pressure, SeaWorld Entertainment said it would stop breeding killer whales and making them perform crowd-pleasing tricks.

In 2023, the International Criminal Court said it had issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin for war crimes because of his alleged involvement in abductions of children from Ukraine.

Today's Birthdays: Civil rights activist Myrlie Evers-Williams is 92. Singer-songwriter John Sebastian (The Lovin' Spoonful) is 81. Author William Gibson is 77. Actor Patrick Duffy is 76. Actor Kurt Russell is 74. Actor Gary Sinise is 70. NBA executive Danny Ainge is 66. Actor Rob Lowe is 61. Rock musician Billy Corgan (Smashing Pumpkins) is 58. Olympic soccer gold medalist Mia Hamm is 53. Singer-TV personality Tamar Braxton is 48. TV personality Rob Kardashian is 38. Singer-songwriter Hozier is 35. Actor John Boyega is 33. Olympic boxing gold medalist Claressa Shields is 30. Olympic swimming gold medalist Katie Ledecky is 28.