

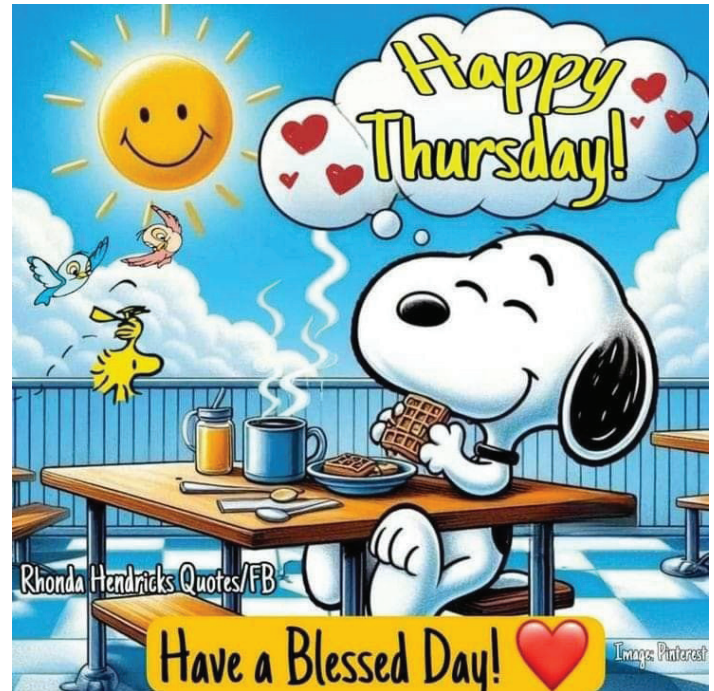
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Thursday, May 15

Senior Menu: Baked turkey crunch with dressing, catalina blend, baked apples, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Cerela.
School Lunch: Sack lunch made by the kitchen.
School dismisses at noon.
End of Fourth Quarter
CANCELLED: Northeast Conference Track at Redfield, 11 a.m.



Friday, May 16

Senior Menu: Bratwurst on bun, creamy coleslaw, corn, peach crisp.
Faculty In-Service

Saturday, May 17

GHS Graduation, 2 p.m.

Sunday, May 18

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.

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1440

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

US-Syria Meeting

President Donald Trump met with Syria's leader, interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa, in Saudi Arabia yesterday. The meeting was the first between a US president and a Syrian leader since former President Bill Clinton met with Hafez al-Assad in 2000.

The encounter comes on the heels of Trump's announcement this week that he will lift all US sanctions on Syria. Those sanctions were enacted following the start of the civil war in 2011, and correspond with a tenfold decrease in Syria's exports by 2021. Al-Sharaa—the former leader of an al-Qaida affiliate—led rebel factions in toppling the Assad regime. Trump indicated yesterday al-Sharaa is open to joining Morocco, Bahrain, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates in normalizing ties with Israel; no deal has been announced.

Trump is approaching the end of his four-day Middle East trip, with a final stop today in the United Arab Emirates. He was in Qatar yesterday, where he signed a defense deal, oversaw a \$96B purchase of up to 210 Boeing planes, and was gifted a \$400M luxury Boeing 747-8 intended to one day serve as Air Force One.

Overdose Deaths Drop

US drug overdose deaths dropped by 30,000 in 2024, a provisional report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed yesterday. The 27% drop—from 110,000 deaths in 2023 to 80,000 last year—is the largest one-year decline on record, bringing annual overdose deaths to their lowest level since before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019.

It is not yet clear what drove the decline. Experts cite the increased availability of the opioid overdose-reversing drug naloxone as a possible factor; the Food and Drug Administration approved naloxone for over-the-counter use in March 2023. Methadone, an opioid treatment, also became more readily available, receiving approval for expanded at-home use last year. Shifts in drug use patterns and preferences may also be driving factors.

All but two states saw a drop in deaths, with Nevada and South Dakota experiencing small increases. Deaths linked to synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, saw the biggest drop.

Earliest Reptile Footprints

Scientists have discovered the oldest recorded reptile-like footprints, a study revealed yesterday. The fossilized claw tracks near Melbourne, Australia, date back 354 million to 358 million years. They suggest animals evolved the ability to walk on land much earlier than previously thought.

Animals emerged from the ocean roughly 400 million years ago. Amniotes—ancestors to modern birds, reptiles, and mammals—emerged at some point afterward, with claws (and later, feet and nails) enabling them to live on hard land.

The Australian discovery hastens the timeline and location of this evolutionary jump; the earliest clawed tracks beforehand were discovered in Canada, dating back 318 million years. This latest discovery suggests the jump to land living happened in the ancient southern continent of Gondwana.

The reptile-like creature likely measured 2.5 feet long, with long toes and hooked claws, resembling a monitor lizard. Trackways suggest the animal scampered in light rainfall before two others ran the opposite way.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 2025 NFL regular season schedule announced, highlighted by seven international games across five countries.

NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs Round Two continues; see latest bracket and schedule.

Warner Bros. Discovery to revert its streaming service Max to its original name, HBO Max, beginning this summer.

Netflix's ad-supported tier tops 94 million active monthly users, up from 70 million in November.

The 2025 PGA Championship tees off today (12 pm ET, ESPN) from Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, North Carolina; see first round schedule and tee times.

Science & Technology

Google's DeepMind unveils AlphaEvolve, an AI-powered model capable of developing algorithms to solve general-purpose problems and reduce hallucinations by chatbots.

Investigation uncovers "rogue" communication devices inside Chinese-made solar panel power inverters; source of threat not fully determined, experts say devices could allow outside control of the systems.

Engineers develop gel to help speed up coral reef recovery times; the substance accelerated new coral seeding by up to 20 times in lab tests.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow -0.2%, Nasdaq +0.7%), with Nvidia shares continuing to drive up the Nasdaq following US-Saudi investment summit earlier this week.

Stock and cryptocurrency trading app eToro shares jump more than 30% in Nasdaq debut; public trading values the company at around \$5.6B, above \$4.2B initial public offering valuation.

Tesla stock closes up on news Tesla is exploring a new pay package for CEO Elon Musk.

Burberry says it will cut 20% of its global workforce, an estimated 1,700 jobs, by 2027; shares jump 18% on the news.

Politics & World Affairs

Direct Ukraine-Russia ceasefire talks begin today in Turkey, reportedly without Russian President Vladimir Putin.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) unveils \$322B state spending plan for 2025 fiscal year; he reveals \$12B state budget deficit, blames higher-than-expected Medicaid costs, and says he plans to end undocumented immigrants' access to state's healthcare program.

Dozens of people reported killed in Israeli airstrikes across Gaza this week, including in hospitals; Israel says it notified civilians of impending strike, targeted Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants.

Groton Area Tigers Varsity Defeats Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats On Back Of Clutch Display From Gavin Englund

By GameChanger Media

Gavin Englund drove in four runs on two hits to lead Groton Area Tigers Varsity past Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats 9-4 on Wednesday. Englund doubled in the first scoring two, doubled in the fourth scoring one, and hit a sacrifice fly in the seventh scoring one.

A double by Englund put Groton Area Tigers Varsity on the board in the top of the first.

Jarrett Erdmann earned the win for Groton Area Tigers Varsity. The southpaw gave up six hits and four runs (two earned) over four and two-thirds innings, striking out nine and walking four. Jackson Rude took the loss for Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats. The starting pitcher went three innings, giving up four runs (three earned) on five hits, striking out two and walking none. Brevin Fliehs pitched two and one-third innings of scoreless ball for Groton Area Tigers Varsity in relief. The righty allowed two hits, striking out three and walking one.

Groton Area Tigers Varsity collected nine hits in the game. TC Schuster and Englund each collected two hits for Groton Area Tigers Varsity.

Tate Neuharth, Micah Zastrow, and Chase Odland each collected two hits for Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats. Rude and Odland each drove in two runs for Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats.

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Groton Area Tigers JV Breeze Past Redfield Area JV

By GameChanger Media

Groton Area Tigers JV won big over Redfield Area JV 9-3 on Wednesday.

Redfield Area JV got on the board in the bottom of the first inning after #4 singled to the left side of the infield, Groton Area Tigers JV committed an error, and #24 grounded into a fielder's choice, each scoring one run.

Groton Area Tigers JV tied the game in the top of the second thanks to a walk by Lincoln Shilhanek, a walk by Braden Fliehs, and a single by John Bisbee.

In the top of the third, Groton Area Tigers JV broke up the tie when Alex Abeln singled, scoring two runs. Then a balk followed to extend the lead to 6-3.

Jordan Schwan earned the win for Groton Area Tigers JV. The starter gave up one hit and three runs (one earned) over three and one-third innings, striking out eight and walking one. #3 took the loss for Redfield Area JV. The starting pitcher went one inning, surrendering three runs on one hit, striking out one and walking five.

Zach Fliehs provided pop in the middle of the lineup, and led Groton Area Tigers JV with two runs batted in. The third baseman went 1-for-1 on the day. Abeln, Bisbee, and Fliehs each collected one hit for Groton Area Tigers JV. Groton Area Tigers JV had a strong eye at the plate, collecting nine walks for the game.

#24 led Redfield Area JV with one run batted in. #4 went 1-for-2 at the plate to lead Redfield Area JV in hits.

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Groton Area Tigers
Varsity

9 - 4

Redfield Varsity Redfield
Area Muskrats

📍 Away 📅 Wednesday May 14, 2025

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	R	H	E
GRTN	2	0	0	2	1	0	4	9	9	2
RDFL	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	4	8	3

BATTING

Groton Area Tigers Varsity	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
L Krause #2 (LF)	4	1	1	0	0
T Schus... #21 (DH)	3	2	2	0	0
J Erdma... #00 (P)	0	1	0	0	1
B Fliehs #6 (CF)	4	2	1	1	0
C Simon #4 (1B)	4	1	1	0	0
G Englund #18 (3B)	3	1	2	4	0
N Morris #17 (SS)	3	0	1	1	0
K Fliehs #10 (C)	4	0	0	0	3
N Groebl... #13 (2B)	3	0	0	0	2
K Antonsen #7 (RF)	2	0	0	0	1
A Abeln #5 (RF)	1	1	1	0	0
Totals	31	9	9	6	7

2B: G Englund 2, **TB:** A Abeln, T Schuster 2, B Fliehs, G Englund 4, L Krause, C Simon, N Morris, **SF:** G Englund, **SB:** T Schuster, B Fliehs, J Erdmann, **LOB:** 4

PITCHING

Groton Area Tigers Varsity	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
J Erdm... #00	4.2	6	4	2	4
B Fliehs #6	2.1	2	0	0	1
Totals	7.0	8	4	2	5

W: J Erdmann, **P-S:** B Fliehs 33-22, J Erdmann 100-62, **WP:** J Erdmann 2, **BF:** B Fliehs 11, J Erdmann 24

Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats	RBI	BB	SO
M Zastrow #7 (1B)	4	1	2
J Rude #6 (P)	4	1	1
N Johnson #5 (CF)	3	1	0
Z Bonin #32 (2B)	3	0	0
C Odland #2 (SS)	3	0	2
T Neuharth #15 (C)	3	0	2
N Salmen #13 (3B)	4	0	1
H Binger #12 (LF)	4	0	0
H Binger #24 (LF)	2	1	0
Totals	30	4	8

TB: N Salmen, T Neuharth 2, J Rude, C Odland 2, M Zastrow 2, **CS:** T Neuharth, **SB:** C Odland, **LOB:** 10

Redfield Varsity Redfield Area Muskrats	RBI	BB	SO	HR
J Rude #6	3.0	5	4	3
C Odland #2	4.0	4	5	3
Totals	7.0	9	9	6

L: J Rude, **P-S:** J Rude 53-33, C Odland 65-40, **WP:** C Odland 2, **BF:** J Rude 15, C Odland 19

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Groton Area Tigers JV 9 - 3 Redfield Area JV

📍 Away 📅 Wednesday May 14, 2025

	1	2	3	4	R	H	E
GRTN	0	3	3	3	9	3	2
RDFL	3	0	0	0	3	1	2

BATTING

Groton Area Tigers JVB	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
A Abeln #5 (2B)	2	1	1	1	0	0
W Borg #12 (2B)	0	0	0	0	0	0
T Schust... #21 (SS)	1	1	0	0	1	0
J Schwan #11 (P)	1	1	0	0	1	1
I Scepan... #25 (3B)	0	1	0	0	1	0
S Crank #20	0	1	0	0	0	0
Z Fliehs #23 (3B)	1	1	1	2	1	0
L Shilha... #22 (RF)	0	1	0	0	1	0
N Scepa... #1 (RF)	0	0	0	0	0	0
B Fliehs #19 (1B)	0	0	0	0	1	0
G Kroll #14 (LF)	0	0	0	0	1	0
X Ellenb... #8 (LF)	0	0	0	0	0	0
J Bisbee #15 (CF)	1	0	1	1	0	0
K Oswald #24 (C)	0	1	0	0	1	0
K Antonsen #3	0	1	0	0	1	0
Totals	6	9	3	4	9	1

TB: Z Fliehs, J Bisbee, A Abeln, **HBP:** S Crank, **SB:** I Scepaniak, J Schwan

PITCHING

Groton Area Tigers JVB	IP	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
J Schwan #11	3.1	1	3	1	1	8
Totals	3.1	1	3	1	1	8

W: J Schwan, **P-S:** J Schwan 58-39, **WP:** J Schwan 2, **HBP:** J Schwan, **BF:** J Schwan 15

Redfield Area JV	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
#10 (CF)	1	1	0	0	0	1
#4 (2B)	2	1	1	0	0	0
#13 (SS)	2	1	0	0	0	1
#32 (1B)	1	0	0	0	0	1
#2	1	0	0	0	0	1
#24 (3B)	1	0	0	1	0	0
#03 (LF)	2	0	0	0	0	1
#8 (3B)	1	0	0	0	1	1
#30	1	0	0	0	0	1
#23 (RF)	1	0	0	0	0	1
Totals	13	3	1	1	1	8

TB: #4, **HBP:** #10, **SB:** #8, **LOB:** 1

Redfield Area JVP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
#3	1.0	1	3	3	5	0
#13	0.0	1	4	3	3	0
#8	0.0	1	2	1	1	0
Totals	1.0	3	9	7	9	0

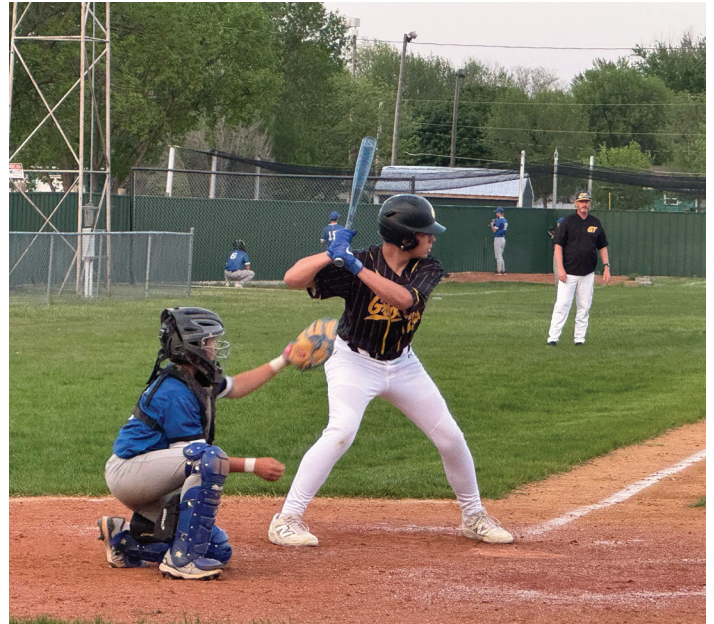
L: #3, **P-S:** #8 16-6, #13 18-4, #3 45-19, **WP:** #8, #13, #3, **HBP:** #8, **BF:** #8 3, #13 4, #3 9

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Starting pitcher Jordan Schwan throws for a win in the Junior Varsity match up at Redfield. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



Groton hitter Zach Fliehs at bat. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



Kason Oswald catching for Groton Area! (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



Junior Varsity Coach Kyle Gerlach has a post game huddle after win over Redfield in the Junior High match up. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



Groton Area Brandon Fliehs leads off at 1st base with Coach Aaron Severson base coaching. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)

Lincoln County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: 282nd Street and 469th Avenue, six miles southwest of Worthing, SD

When: 11:52 a.m., Wednesday, May 14, 2025

Driver 1: 24-year-old female from Lake Andes, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2009 Nissan Maxima

Seat belt Used: No

Passenger 1a: One month old male from Sioux Falls, SD, minor injuries

Seat belt Used: Yes

Lincoln County, S.D.- One woman died and an infant passenger was injured in a single vehicle crash six miles southwest of Worthing, SD today.

The names of the persons involved have not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2009 Nissan Maxima was traveling west on 282nd Street near 469th Avenue when the driver lost control of the vehicle and over-corrected, leaving the south side of the road. The vehicle then rolled and the driver, who was not wearing a seatbelt, was ejected.

An infant passenger who was properly restrained remained in the vehicle and sustained minor injuries. The driver sustained fatal injuries.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

###

Note: Records of state-reportable crashes are now available at <http://www.safesd.gov/> . Records should be available about 10 days after the investigation is complete.

Keeping promises to the arts in SD **By Jim Speirs, Executive Director, Arts South Dakota**

South Dakotans—and all Americans, according to nationwide surveys—believe that the arts are important to our culture and our everyday life. We also believe that the federal government should keep promises made to people and organizations in our state. Both of those principles are being threatened right now—and it's vital that we speak out in support of our ideals.

The recent federal budget proposed by the Trump administration calls for the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and other essential cultural departments and programs that have expanded the arts throughout our nation. Rural states like South Dakota have relied on NEA grants to bring creative programs to communities, schools and Native Nations, serving children and adults. The elimination of NEA would weaken and threaten the very existence of arts programming in every corner of our state.

In fact, current actions by the federal government have cancelled NEA grants already made to South Dakota—breaking promises made a year ago and defunding programs that already have hired artists, secured venues and spent money on promotion and marketing. From the nationally-acclaimed South Dakota Symphony Orchestra to the well-established and proven Cheyenne River Youth Project, money already granted to make creative and cultural impacts in South Dakota has been revoked—promises made and broken to South Dakotans of every demographic.

South Dakota's elected representatives in the Senate and the House have universally and publicly supported the arts and the mission of NEA in the past. But they now need to hear voices of South Dakotans urging them to stand up in support of the NEA to protect cultural programming in our state. If you have ever considered reaching out to our Congressional delegation in support of the arts, now is the time to act. Only by hearing from people like you can Senators Rounds and Thune and Representative Johnson stand firm for what we all believe in—a federal government that keeps its promises.

Please visit www.ArtsSouthDakota.org for links the Congressional delegation and to learn more ways to advocate for the arts in South Dakota. Your voice makes a difference for our state!



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Groton Chamber of Commerce

May 7th, 2025 ~ 12pm City Hall

- Members present: Katelyn Nehlich, Douglas Heinrich, Ashley Bentz, April Abeln and Topper Tastad
 - Minutes from the previous meeting were approved by Tastad and seconded by Nehlich. All members present voted aye.
 - The treasurer's report was given. Dacotah Bank checking account balance is \$24,476.36 in addition to the \$5,000 CD. The bucks account balance is about \$3,344.80. The report was approved by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich. All members present voted aye.
 - Thank you notes were received from Silver Skates, the Groton BB/SB Foundation, and the Yelduz Shrine. A letter was received from Darrell Hillestad asking for a donation to the airport. It was decided to wait until their 501c3 organization was formed.
 - Scholarship meet and greet photos with Gretchen Dinger, Emma Kutter, and Axel Warrington are May 14th at 1:30pm at the GHS library.
 - Sawyer Kappes was the winner of the bike at the Lions Easter Egg Hunt. The receipt has been submitted to Treasurer Nehlich and reimbursement was made.
 - It was mentioned that Abeln donated a black tumbler to Robotics for their booth at the world competition in Dallas, TX.
 - It was decided to finalize plans for the Hwy 12 sign advertising at our September meeting, so we could include info in our notices for 2026 dues.
 - Motion made by Heinrich and seconded by Abeln to organize a Facebook contest for the 2025 shirt design. The winner will receive \$50 in Bucks and Groton/605 promotional items. All members present voted aye. Abeln will send out details via email before posting. Shirts will be ordered through BK Custom T's & More.
 - Motion by Abeln and seconded by Tastad to apply for the POET Community Impact Grant for playground equipment. All members present voted aye.
 - More 605 SD clothing has been received as well as rack card displays. Tastad and Abeln will work on displays and give them to local businesses. Information will be emailed for approval prior.
 - Motion by Heinrich and seconded by Tastad to pay for a \$25 generic ad in the GHS Senior Spotlight section of the GDI. All members present voted aye.
 - Our July/August ad proof was discussed for both the Aberdeen Magazine and SD Magazine. Tastad discussed advertising in the Aberdeen Insider. Abeln mentioned Groton rack cards will be included in the Lit Drop again this year and announced that Brian Dolan will be our new Dakota Broadcasting radio rep.
 - Tastad thanked the Chamber for the donation to the Groton Community Historical Society.
 - Abeln will reach out to Hayley Johnson with Hydrate Haven for a welcome visit and Katelyn will reach out Brittany of BEddy Cookies.
 - Next Meeting: June 4th, 12pm at City Hall
- Upcoming events
- 05/14/2025 GHS Scholarship Meet & Greet 12:30pm GHS Library
 - 05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch 12pm at Legion Post #39 (Memorial Day)
 - 05/29/2025 JVT Annual Mtg 5:30pm Groton HS
 - 05/31/2025 Front Porch 605 Barn Sale 9am-3pm
 - 06/07/2025 Day of Play- Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation
 - 06/13/2025 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Shotgun Start
 - 06/21/2025 Fireman's Triathlon 8am-11pm
 - 06/21/2025 U8 Youth Baseball Tourney
 - 06/28/2025 U10 Youth Baseball Tourney
 - 06/29/2025 U12 Youth Baseball Tourney
 - 06/23/2025 Women's 2 Person Scramble at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Shotgun Start



Fact brief: Has South Dakota set a goal for reducing water pollution in the state's rivers and streams?

**By Julie Bolding
South Dakota News Watch**

No.

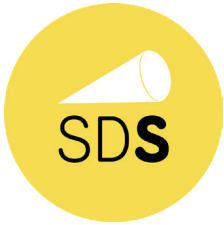
South Dakota's Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources has not set specific targets for reducing water pollution in the state's streams and rivers.

More than three-quarters (78%) of the stream-miles tested in South Dakota were found to be unhealthy for aquatic life, swimming and other beneficial uses, according to the department's 2024 surface water quality report. Surface water is public property in South Dakota, not the property of landowners.

Major pollutants include fertilizer runoff from farm fields, soil erosion from agricultural operations and natural sources, and E. coli bacteria from livestock and wildlife feces.

South Dakota requires a permit to discharge pollutants into surface waters, but issues such as declining inspections and lapsed permits due to staffing issues have contributed to frequent violations.

The DANR has not responded to emails asking about statewide pollution reduction goals. Other states, including Minnesota and Iowa, have set statewide goals for pollution reduction.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem, Democrats tangle over protest at New Jersey immigrant detention center

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MAY 14, 2025 7:10 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem Wednesday harshly criticized three Democrats who were accosted by federal immigration officials while protesting the opening of an immigrant detention center in New Jersey.

Democrats at the hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee in turn said Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials physically assaulted the lawmakers.

Noem, who was appearing to discuss President Donald Trump's fiscal year 2026 budget for the agency, said the Democrats who went to Delaney Hall to oversee the conditions were not conducting proper oversight.

Members of Congress are allowed to conduct oversight visits at any DHS facility that detains immigrants, without prior notice, under provisions in an appropriations law.

"I believe that it was breaking into a federal facility and assaulting law enforcement officers," Noem, the former governor of South Dakota, said.

Newark incident

Last Friday, the three New Jersey Democratic members — Reps. Bonnie Watson Coleman, LaMonica McIver and Rob Menendez — were in Newark protesting the reopening of an immigrant detention center.

The mayor of Newark, Ras Baraka, was arrested. It was a stark escalation of Democratic lawmakers' opposition to the Trump administration's immigration crackdown.

After the incident, Menendez detailed how ICE agents "pushed, physically assaulted two female members of Congress."

Several Republicans on the panel that oversees Homeland Security, including Chair Mark Green of Tennessee, said there should be consequences for the Democrats, such as criminal charges.

Green accused one of three Democrats of assaulting a law enforcement officer.

"This behavior demands a swift and firm response, and I assure you, action will be taken," Green said.

Arizona GOP Rep. Eli Crane suggested there be criminal charges lodged against the Democratic members and Republican Rep. Andy Ogles of Tennessee suggested to Noem that she "look into actions (to) be taken if a member assaulted" law enforcement.

The top Democrat on the panel, Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, slammed Noem for the incident.

"Instead of following the law, masked ICE personnel stopped and assaulted the members," he said. "Then, to make matters worse, instead of launching an investigation into the incident, your department lied to the press about the situation and threatened to arrest members of Congress for doing their job."

One of the Democrats who was at the detention center protest, McIver, sits on the committee, but she did not speak to Noem about the incident.

"This is not about me," McIver said, and instead pressed Noem about international students who had their visas revoked.

Focus on Abrego Garcia

Democrats criticized Noem and the Trump administration's aggressive immigration enforcement that has led to swift deportations and concerns about a lack of due process.

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They especially focused on Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Maryland man who was wrongly deported to a prison in El Salvador.

Rhode Island Democratic Rep. Seth Magaziner called Noem's leadership of DHS "sloppy," and said it has led to immigrants and even U.S. citizen children being wrongly deported.

"Instead of enforcing the laws, you have repeatedly broken them," Magaziner said. "You need to change course immediately before more innocent people are hurt on your watch."

California Democratic Rep. Eric Swalwell asked Noem if Abrego Garcia was given proper due process.

Swalwell said he was defending due process and held up a poster that showed Trump holding a picture of Abrego Garcia's hand that digitally added "MS-13" tattoos to his knuckles.

He asked her several times if the photo was doctored. Noem did not answer the question but said she was unaware of the image.

Instead she said that even if Abrego Garcia were returned to the United States, he would be immediately deported. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled the Trump administration must facilitate the return of Abrego Garcia but he remains in El Salvador.

Crane asked Noem if she supported suspending habeas corpus, something that top Trump officials such as Deputy White House Chief of Staff Stephen Miller have floated.

Habeas corpus allows people who believe they are being unlawfully detained to petition for their release in court, and it's used to challenge immigration detention. It's currently the only avenue that Venezuelans subject to the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 have to challenge their deportation under the wartime law.

"That's not in my purview to weigh in on," Noem said. "This is the president's prerogative to pursue, and he has not indicated to me that he will or will not be taking that action."

The U.S. Constitution allows for habeas corpus to be suspended "in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it."

Crane argued that unauthorized immigration counted as an "invasion," and therefore could be used to suspend habeas corpus.

Habeas corpus has been suspended four times in U.S. history, during the Civil War; in almost a dozen South Carolina counties that were overrun by the Ku Klux Klan during reconstruction; in a 1905 insurrection in U.S. territories in the Philippines; and after the Pearl Harbor bombing in Hawaii.

FEMA dismantling

Thompson grilled Noem about the president's comments wanting to dismantle FEMA.

Noem said that she is supportive of Trump's policy.

"The president has been clear that he wants to empower states to give them the opportunity to build out their response," she said.

She said that while the federal government will be there for support, that local and state governments "know what they need."

Thompson asked Noem if she had a plan for the federal government responding to natural disasters.

Noem said while there is nothing in writing, "the White House is coming forward with a plan...that will be making recommendations."

GOP Rep. Carlos Gimenez of Florida, said that while he supports efforts to "reform FEMA," he stressed to Noem that "we can't leave those who can't fend for themselves."

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Former state employee sentenced in fake vehicle title case

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MAY 14, 2025 12:58 PM

Another former South Dakota state employee has been sentenced for a crime committed while working for state government.

Danielle Degenstein, 52, of Pierre, pleaded guilty Tuesday in Hughes County Circuit Court. A news release from state Attorney General Marty Jackley said she was sentenced to a year of probation and a \$500 fine, plus an amount of court costs that was not disclosed in the release. She'll avoid spending one year in jail if she abides by the conditions of the sentence.

Degenstein's crime was misprision of a felony, which means she failed to report her knowledge of another person's criminal activity.

The chain of events that led to Degenstein's criminal charge started in August, when state Attorney General Marty Jackley said a deceased former three-decade employee of the state Department of Revenue, Sandra O'Day, had allegedly created 13 fake vehicle titles to help her secure \$400,000 in loans. No charges were filed, because O'Day died before her alleged behavior came to light.

In October, Jackley announced charges against two other former Department of Revenue employees, Lynne Hunsley, 64, and Degenstein, both of Pierre.

Hunsley has since pleaded guilty to forgery and grand theft by deception for creating a fake vehicle title that she used as proof of a trade-in to help her avoid excise taxes. She was sentenced to three years of probation and ordered to pay a \$1,000 fine and \$1,200 in restitution to the state.

Court documents said Degenstein concealed her knowledge of a crime committed by a person identified as "S.O." — initials that match O'Day's. A news release Wednesday from Jackley said Degenstein was investigated for knowing, and not reporting, that a Department of Revenue employee forged a power of attorney document for that employee's financial gain.

The Degenstein case is among five criminal prosecutions that Jackley has filed against former state employees since last year for allegations related to their work with state government.

One former employee, Lonna Carroll, used her position at the Department of Social Services to steal nearly \$1.8 million over the course of 13 years. A jury found Carroll guilty of grand theft, and she's scheduled to be sentenced in July. Other criminal allegations against former state employees included falsifying food service inspections and the personal use of foster family food vouchers.

In response to the run of prosecutions, Jackley supported a package of four bills passed during the recent legislative session that will expand the investigatory authority of the state auditor, strengthen the Board of Internal Controls, institute mandatory reporting requirements for state employees and penalties for failing to report, and establish protections for whistleblowers.

Last month, Gov. Larry Rhoden signed an executive order mandating the creation of a "secure standard reporting mechanism" for employees. The portal will deliver whistleblower reports of malfeasance to the state's auditor and attorney general.

Lawmakers also passed legislation this year strengthening the ability of the Legislature's Government Operations and Audit Committee to conduct investigations and issue orders known as subpoenas requiring people to testify or supply information.

Last year, then-Gov. Kristi Noem added an extra internal control officer position to the executive branch and ordered state employees to undergo annual training aimed at preventing criminal activity.

Rapid City-based foundations partner to support nonprofits that have lost federal funding

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MAY 14, 2025 10:24 AM

Two foundations in South Dakota's Black Hills have announced a partnership to support local nonprofits "facing disruptions due to shifts in federal priorities."

The Rapid City-based Black Hills Area Community Foundation and the John T. Vucurevich Foundation have launched a joint fund, the Sustaining Black Hills Nonprofits Fund, to offer short-term bridge funding. The partnership, also supported by the Bush Foundation in Minnesota, is designed to provide flexible support for nonprofits as they work through changes in their federal support, while encouraging additional community support for nonprofits.

Many nonprofits are experiencing funding reductions or eliminations since the Trump administration began making widespread cuts in government programs.

Jacqui Dietrich, John T. Vucurevich Foundation president and CEO, said in a news release that "nonprofits are under intense pressure, facing rising costs, increasing demand for their services, and declining federal support."

"While philanthropy can't fill every gap, our community can stand together to help sustain critical services through this transition," Dietrich said.

Chris Huber, Black Hills Area Community Foundation president and CEO, said that without nonprofit services, "our community's needs don't go away, they go unmet."

The partnership has already provided bridge funding to Seventh Circuit Court Appointed Special Advocates, which recently lost \$15,000 after the federal government terminated grant awards to the National Court Appointed Special Advocates Association. The program advocates for children in the court system.

Funding has also been provided to Feeding South Dakota and to Working Against Violence Inc., which assists survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

States on the hook for billions under U.S. House GOP bill making them help pay for SNAP

SD Rep. Johnson praises legislation for inclusion of his work requirement proposals

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MAY 14, 2025 10:10 PM

The U.S. House Agriculture Committee approved, 29-25, Wednesday evening its portion of Republicans' major legislative package that includes a provision that would shift to states some of the responsibility to pay for a major nutrition assistance program.

The bill would require states, for the first time, to cover part of the cost of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits that provide \$100 billion per year to help 42 million Americans afford groceries. The measure would also shift more of the administrative cost to states and increase work requirements for recipients.

Republicans are planning to combine the measure with legislation from 10 other committees in a budget reconciliation package that allows the Senate to avoid its usual 60-vote threshold.

House Agriculture Chairman Glenn "GT" Thompson said the panel's bill and its estimated \$290 billion deficit savings over a 10-year budget window were necessary for the larger legislative package to extend tax cuts and increase border security and defense spending.

The package would "prevent the largest tax increase in American history on our families, farmers and small businesses, and (would) deliver critical funding necessary for the Trump administration to continue their work keeping Americans safe," the Pennsylvania Republican said in an opening statement.

"Our reconciliation instructions provide the opportunity to restore integrity to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, to make sure that this essential program works for the most vulnerable and functions as Congress has intended."

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Republicans on the panel said throughout a marathon committee meeting, which started Tuesday night and wrapped up more than 26 hours later following an overnight break, that the added work requirements and accountability measures for state governments were overdue reforms.

The panel's GOP majority approved the bill over unified opposition from Democrats, who argued that the measure would unfairly cut benefits to needy families to pay for tax cuts for high earners, undermine the panel's bipartisan tradition of fusing crop subsidies with nutrition assistance and overburden state governments that can't afford to take on the additional cost.

Ranking Democrat Angie Craig of Minnesota called the measure "the largest rollback of an anti-hunger program in our nation's history" which would be felt deeply across a broad swath of recipients.

"We will see children going to bed without dinner, more seniors skipping meals to afford their medicine, more parents sacrificing their own nutrition, so their kids can eat," Craig said. "Every single one of us knows (the cuts) will take food away from families at a time when working folks are struggling with higher costs."

State contributions

The bill would make states pay for up to 25% of SNAP benefits, which are currently entirely covered by the federal government, starting in 2028.

States would be required to pay at least 5%, with the rate rising with a state's payment error rate. The highest state cost-share would be triggered by a state reaching a 10% or higher error rate.

Even at the lowest state cost-share, the provision would add \$4.7 billion overall to annual state obligations, according to an analysis published Wednesday by the center-left think tank Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

But only seven states would have qualified for the lowest cost-share in fiscal 2023, the most recent year for which data is available. The national error rate was 11.7% and more than two dozen states and territories had error rates higher than 10%.

That means in practice the costs to states would be much higher. The three most populous states — California, Texas and Florida — alone would have combined to owe more than \$5.7 billion under their 2023 error rates and 2024 benefit amounts.

Republican members said the requirement would incentivize states to better manage their programs.

"Unlike every other state-administered entitlement program, SNAP benefit is 100% funded by the federal government, resulting in minimal incentives for states to control costs, enhance efficiencies and improve outcomes for recipients," Thompson said.

Impact on state budgets

Democrats said states could ill afford to take on additional costs, meaning the bill would result in cuts to the program or other critical services.

"The massive unfunded mandate this bill forces on states just passes the buck onto state legislatures, forcing them to slash local programs and services, cut benefits, kick vulnerable people off SNAP or raise taxes," Craig said. "We already know states can't afford it."

The change would force difficult decisions for states, several Democrats said.

In Ohio, the state would be on the hook for an additional \$534 million annually, Democrat Shontel Brown said.

"That's not to expand benefits or improve outcomes, that's just to maintain the status quo," she said. "To cover the costs, Ohio, along with every other state, is going to have to make brutal tradeoffs. It's going to mean cutting K-12 education funding, scaling back opioid and mental health treatment programs, reducing Medicaid coverage or putting off critical infrastructure repairs."

Republicans countered that the provision would bring much needed accountability to state administrators, which would make the program fairer overall.

Alaska had an error rate of nearly 60% in fiscal 2023. Without mentioning that state, Derrick Van Orden, a Republican whose home state of Wisconsin was among the few states with error rates under 6%, said

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the costs associated with such numerous errors shouldn't be covered by states with lower rates.

"Overpayments, waste, fraud and abuse have plagued programs like SNAP," he said. "There is a state that has a 59.59% overpayment rate and my Wisconsinites are not going to pick up that slack."

States' error rates include fraud, but it makes up a small share of a category that also includes inadvertent underpayments and overpayments, Michigan Democrat Kristen McDonald Rivet said.

SNAP has a fraud rate of less than 1% and work requirements already exist, McDonald Rivet said. Republicans' efforts to target fraud and add work requirements wouldn't reach the cost savings they sought, she said.

"Are there error rates in the states? Sure," she said. "Should we address it? Absolutely. But the idea that we are going to find \$300 billion of cuts — \$300 billion of cuts — on that small percentage of people who are not working that are already required to or error rates in the states is just a flat-out lie. What we are really doing is cutting food for people."

Administrative costs

The bill would also increase states' share of the cost of administering the food assistance program.

Under current law, states and the federal government evenly split the cost of administering the program. The bill would have states shoulder 75% of administrative costs.

Democrats, including the ranking member of the panel's Nutrition, Foreign Agriculture, and Horticulture Subcommittee, complained that would compound the problems created by the new cost structure for SNAP benefits.

"States will be forced to budget more for SNAP benefits with less for administrators," Rep. Jahana Hayes of Connecticut said. "With fewer administrative staff, it is inevitable that errors will increase."

Work requirements

Another section of the bill would expand the number of participants subject to work requirements to receive SNAP benefits.

The proposal would raise from 54 to 64 the age at which a person no longer has to meet work requirements. It would also lower from 18 to 7 the age at which caring for a child exempts a person from work requirements.

Democrats raised and introduced several amendments meant to address the provision, but were outvoted each time.

Kansas Republican Tracey Mann said the changes were not only about improving SNAP efficiency, but would make the program's rules fairer for those it was meant to serve.

"It is wrong to jeopardize the benefits of the single mom taking care of kids too young to be in school or the disabled or elderly in order to subsidize someone who is perfectly capable of making an honest income but isn't willing to join the workforce," Mann said.

"These changes will ensure that individuals are served by the program as it was intended — not as a couch that you can sit on as long as you want, but as a true safety net that gets you back on the ladder of opportunity and back into a job."

SD Rep. Johnson praises bill

FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, a member of the Ag Committee, praised the bill passed by the committee Wednesday night and said it included several of his priorities.

That includes provisions of his America Works Act, to impose work requirements on participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program who are able-bodied adults without dependents. He said the provision will ensure the program's benefits "aren't just a handout but a hand up."

"The policies included in this package will benefit the fiscal health of our nation, as well as our producers," Johnson said in a news release.

Johnson said his other priorities in the bill include:

Addressing inflation with increased support for farmers facing higher costs for fuel, feed and fertilizer.

Making long-term investments in conservation efforts that protect working lands without tying producers' hands.

Making sure beekeepers are fairly compensated when they face unexpected losses.

Doubling funding for trade programs so American-grown products reach more global markets.

Boosting defenses against foreign animal diseases that threaten livestock and poultry industries.

Provisions of the Secure Rural Schools Act, which Johnson cosponsors, providing funding for rural schools on federal lands.

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U.S. House panel passes GOP plan that cuts Medicaid by \$625B, adds work requirement

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MAY 14, 2025 4:32 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House panel in charge of overhauling Medicaid by cutting hundreds of billions in federal spending wrapped up debate on its bill Wednesday, following a 25-hour session.

The Energy and Commerce Committee voted 30-24 along party lines to sign off on the legislation, sending it to the Budget panel, which is expected to bundle it together with the other 10 measures Friday to create Republicans' "big, beautiful bill."

The full House is set to vote on that package next week, though GOP leaders need to make sure nearly all of the chamber's 220 Republicans support the overall bill in order for it to pass.

The legislation, should it gain that backing, will then head to the Senate, where GOP lawmakers are expected to rewrite or eliminate numerous sections of the bill.

Analysis from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, shared with States Newsroom by Republican staff on the Energy and Commerce Committee, shows the Medicaid changes would cut \$625 billion in federal spending during the next decade.

About 10.3 million people would lose access to Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, with 7.6 million people becoming uninsured during the 10-year budget window, according to the CBO analysis, which has yet to be released publicly.

House committee debate on the bill, which began Tuesday and continued overnight, largely centered around Democrats saying the legislation would lead millions of vulnerable people to lose access to Medicaid, while Republicans contended their overhaul would protect "the integrity" of the health care program for lower income Americans and some people with disabilities.

Democrats proposed dozens of amendments trying to change the bill's various sections, including the Medicaid provisions, but Republicans on the committee blocked their adoption.

'They're going to lose coverage'

Just after the sun rose over Capitol Hill on Wednesday morning, Ohio Democratic Rep. Greg Landsman said Republican claims about people not being kicked off Medicaid due to federal spending cuts were going "off the rails."

"They're going to lose coverage in part because of the red tape and the paperwork. We know that because we've seen it in other states," Landsman said. "And these are people who are eligible or deserving — people who need it."

Washington Democratic Sen. Kim Schrier later in the day raised concerns that people who lose access to Medicaid would put off getting routine care from primary care doctors, only to end up in emergency departments.

"Those kicked off Medicaid will still get care, of course, but they will be sicker, they'll be treated in the

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emergency room, the care will be more complicated, more expensive," Schrier said. "And since they can't pay for it, all of us will make up that difference. So our insurance rates will go up."

Florida Rep. Laurel Lee argued the GOP changes to Medicaid are common sense improvements, like "restoring work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents, modernizing systems to prevent fraud and abuse, and ending misdirected payments to those who are deceased or who are not eligible for the program."

"These reforms are not about taking something away; they are about protecting the integrity of the program so that the people we represent — those who truly need this support — can count on it to be there, now and in the future," Lee said. "Our reforms are about restoring integrity to the system and ensuring that it works for the long haul."

Attempts to ax work requirement

Democrats proposed numerous amendments during debate on the health care section of the bill, including some that would have eliminated the work requirements.

New Jersey Democratic Rep. Frank Pallone, ranking member on the committee, said those requirements often cause people to lose access to Medicaid due to "red tape" and paperwork.

Pallone said when Georgia implemented work requirements, fewer than 7,000 of the 400,000 people eligible for Medicaid were able to prove to the government they met the standards.

"It's not that they weren't eligible, it's that the state of Georgia put too many barriers in the way of them being able to qualify," Pallone said. "And that's what I think is happening here today with this bill."

He further criticized the GOP for including a provision in the bill saying that if people are not eligible for Medicaid then "they're not eligible for any kind of subsidy under the Affordable Care Act."

"So they don't have that option as well, which is, of course, also the basis for the CBO saying so many people get kicked off Medicaid," Pallone said. "They assumed that if you didn't have Medicaid, you would go to the ACA, and that would have probably eliminated most of your savings. But instead, now you say they can't go to the ACA because they still haven't filled out the paperwork for Medicaid, so we're not going to let them go to the ACA and get any kind of subsidized care. And it goes on and on."

'We don't want to repeat the Arkansas law'

Energy and Commerce Chairman Brett Guthrie, R-Ky., said the GOP proposals for work requirements sought to avoid the issues experienced in Arkansas and Georgia, when those states implemented their work requirements for Medicaid.

"We don't want to repeat the Arkansas law," Guthrie said. "We agree that was the wrong way to do it."

Arkansas' experiment with work requirements and monthly checks was "overly cumbersome," but Guthrie said this legislation would "only require a beneficiary to have to verify work at the time of enrollment or during a redetermined position of their eligibility. This allows states and beneficiaries to take advantage of existing processing and paperwork that they already go through."

The GOP bill includes several exceptions to the requirement that people enrolled in Medicaid between the ages of 19 and 65 work, participate in community service, or attend an educational program at least 80 hours a month.

Those exclusions include pregnant people, parents of dependent children, people who have complex medical conditions, tribal community members, people in the foster system, people who were in the foster system who are below the age of 26 and people released from incarceration in the last 90 days, among others.

CBO estimates the work requirements would save the federal government \$300 billion during the next decade. That savings wouldn't begin until after the provision takes effect on Jan. 1, 2029.

GOP lawmakers not on the committee have expressed frustration with the delayed implementation, including South Carolina Republican Rep. Ralph Norman.

"Delaying work requirements for able-bodied adults on Medicaid to 2029 isn't 'progress,'" Norman wrote

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in a social media post. "It's fiscally irresponsible and another sad excuse for the swamp!!"

Texas Republican Rep. Chip Roy, wrote in a four-page letter, that Congress must "significantly amend" several of the bill's Medicaid provisions, including immediately implementing the work requirements.

"Republicans are in control now and should not let out-of-year savings be compromised by a future Democratic trifecta," Roy wrote.

Planned Parenthood debate

Texas Democratic Rep. Lizzie Fletcher sought to remove the provision that would block Medicaid funding from going to Planned Parenthood, though GOP lawmakers ultimately voted to keep the language in the measure.

Federal law for decades has prevented taxpayer dollars from going to abortion services with exceptions for rape, incest, or the life of the pregnant patient. But the provision in the GOP bill would block all Medicaid funding for Planned Parenthood, including for preventive care and regular health check-ups.

Medicaid enrollees who go to Planned Parenthood for wellness checks, birth control, lab work, cancer screenings and other services would have to find a different provider, or go without care.

"To make up the gap, federally qualified health centers would need to increase their capacity by an additional 1 million clients," Fletcher said. "This is just another way people will lose access to health care. Defunding Planned Parenthood is an assault on the health, dignity and freedom of women across this country."

Fletcher later pointed out that Planned Parenthood clinics and their affiliates in states with abortion bans would be cut off from federal funding, even though they don't provide abortions.

She listed the Houston, Texas, Planned Parenthood as one example of a facility that doesn't perform abortions but would lose federal funding.

The Planned Parenthood language would increase federal deficits by about \$300 million during the next decade, according to the Congressional Budget Office. It is the only provision in the health care section of the bill that would not reduce federal spending.

Other organizations said to be affected

Virginia Republican Rep. Morgan Griffith said he was told by CBO that other health organizations in addition to Planned Parenthood would be impacted by the provision, but he was unable to name those health care organizations.

The provision would apply to "providers that are nonprofit organizations, that are essential community providers that are primarily engaged in family planning services or reproductive services, provide for abortions other than for Hyde Amendment exceptions, and which received \$1,000,000 or more (to either the provider or the provider's affiliates) in payments from Medicaid payments in 2024," according to a summary of the GOP bill. It would take effect as soon as the bill becomes law and last for a decade.

Republican staff on the Energy and Commerce Committee did not immediately respond to a request from States Newsroom for the list that Griffith referenced.

Legal staff said the secretary of Health and Human Services would determine what organizations meet that definition and would therefore lose federal Medicaid funding.

Tennessee Republican Rep. Diana Harshbarger opposed the amendment, saying that it was well past time for Congress to cut off all federal funding for Planned Parenthood.

"This bill does not change the availability of funds for women's health. It simply establishes a safeguard so that the nation's largest abortion providers are not the one providing services through Medicaid," Harshbarger said. "Should these entities stop participating in abortion services, they would again be eligible to receive funding."

Republicans also blocked an amendment from Illinois Democratic Rep. Robin Kelly that would have required Medicaid to cover a full year of postpartum coverage for enrollees.

The vast majority of states already cover postpartum care for a year under an expansion Democrats

approved in the American Rescue Plan, the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill they enacted in 2021. That was later made permanent in a 2022 appropriations law.

But Kelly said she was worried that would change if states had to make tough budget choices due to a drop-off in federal funding for the program.

"Medicaid covers almost half of all births in this country and covers more than half of all births in rural communities," Kelly said. "When we talk about cutting funding, you are cutting into the care that supports moms and babies during the most vulnerable time of their lives."

Harshbarger spoke against the amendment, saying it was unnecessary.

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Sweeping private school voucher program tucked inside U.S. House GOP tax bill

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - MAY 14, 2025 4:23 PM

WASHINGTON — A national school voucher program got a step closer to becoming law Wednesday, as school choice continues to take heat across the United States.

The proposal in the U.S. House would allocate \$5 billion a year in tax credits for people donating to organizations that provide private and religious school scholarships and is baked into the Ways and Means Committee's piece of a massive reconciliation package to fund President Donald Trump's priorities.

The tax credit provision largely reflects the Educational Choice for Children Act — a sweeping bill that GOP Reps. Adrian Smith of Nebraska, Burgess Owens of Utah and Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana reintroduced in their respective chambers earlier this year.

The tax-writing committee advanced its measure Wednesday in a party-line vote. Republicans are using the complex reconciliation process to move the package through Congress with simple majority votes in each chamber, avoiding the Senate's 60-vote legislative filibuster, which would otherwise require bipartisanship.

"School choice" is an umbrella term centering on alternative programs to one's assigned public school. While proponents have argued that school choice programs are necessary for parents dissatisfied with their local public schools, opponents say these efforts drain critical funds and resources from school districts.

At a press conference Wednesday, Rep. Elise Stefanik praised the Educational Choice for Children Act, which she cosponsored in the House.

The New York Republican said the bill is "a transformative piece of legislation that will expand educational opportunities for children across our nation."

"For too long, students, especially those from underserved communities, have been trapped in failing school systems," she said, adding that "school choice gives students the opportunity to succeed" and "is the great equalizer."

\$20 billion tax credit over 4 years

The tax panel's proposal includes a \$20 billion total tax credit, which would be made up of a \$5 billion tax credit annually between 2026 and 2029.

The scholarships would be available to students whose household incomes do not exceed 300 percent of the median gross income of their area.

"This is opening the door to the federal government subsidizing a secondary private system of education that gets to pick and choose who it educates and how it educates kids," Sasha Pudelski, director of advocacy at AASA, The School Superintendents Association, told States Newsroom.

The association helps to ensure every child has access to a high quality public education.

"I think it's really important for folks to understand that we are opening this door for the first time to this kind of subsidy," Pudelski said.

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The provision also comes as Trump has made school choice a major part of his education agenda. He signed an executive order in January that gave the U.S. secretary of Education two months to offer guidance on how states can use "federal formula funds to support K-12 educational choice initiatives."

More opposition

Organizations that advocate for students with disabilities, including the National Center for Learning Disabilities, the Council for Exceptional Children, the Center for Learner Equity, and The Arc of the United States, fiercely opposed the bill, highlighting concerns that it is not sufficient in providing enforceable protections for students with disabilities and their families.

In a statement, Jacqueline Rodriguez, CEO of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, said "the guarantee of rights and protections for students with disabilities using these vouchers is disingenuous at best and crooked at worst, without the other critical provisions of IDEA," or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

"It is quite possible that families with disabilities will use a voucher under the pretense that their child will have the same rights when in fact they do not," Rodriguez said.

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No tax on tips, child tax credit and business tax cuts survive in big House GOP bill

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - MAY 14, 2025 3:35 PM

WASHINGTON — House Republicans advanced the tax portion of the "one big, beautiful" reconciliation package early Wednesday, a step forward in permanently extending, and in some cases expanding, the 2017 tax law and temporarily handing President Donald Trump a win on campaign promises like no tax on tips.

The House Committee on Ways and Means voted along party lines to pass the measure, 26-19, after nearly 18 hours of debate that went through the night. Republicans rejected numerous amendments offered by Democrats, including protecting tax credits meant to combat climate change enacted under Democrats' own 2022 budget reconciliation law, the Inflation Reduction Act.

The marathon debate occurred as the House Committee on Energy and Commerce debated overnight and into Wednesday afternoon over deep budget cuts, including some to Medicaid assistance for low-income individuals, to pay for the cost of tax provisions.

As of now, the massive tax package is estimated to add \$3.8 trillion to the budget deficit over 10 years, according to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

If any temporary expansions in the bill are eventually made permanent, it would add roughly \$5.3 trillion to the deficit over the next decade, according to the CRFB. The official congressional budget score has not yet been released.

Overall the bill is "a very, very big tax cut," said Howard Gleckman, senior fellow at the Tax Policy Center, part of the left-leaning Brookings Institution and Urban Institute. "Much of the benefit will go to higher income people."

Tax brackets, business breaks would continue

The bill permanently extends the underlying tax provisions passed in 2017 under the GOP-backed bill titled the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which is set to expire in 2025.

This means:

Individual taxpayers would remain in the same tax brackets that were lowered in 2017, and they would continue to see the doubled standard deduction — two of the most costly measures. Additionally, taxpay-

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ers will receive a boost up to \$2,000 on the standard deduction through 2028.

Individual brackets would remain at 10%, 12%, 22%, 24%, 32%, 35% and 37%, though the proposal would change how inflation adjustments are calculated, meaning income would be taxed less over time, except for those in the 37% bracket.

The \$2,000 child tax credit, per child, would remain permanent but temporarily increase to \$2,500 through 2028. The refundable portion of the credit — meaning how much money taxpayers can get back — would be increased to \$1,400, but the amount remains subject to income thresholds, meaning lower income households would receive less of a refund.

The child tax credit would now only be accessible if the parent submits a Social Security number, as well as a spouse's if legally married, in addition to the already required Social Security number of each qualifying child.

On the business side, the corporate tax rate would stay at 21%.

Business owners who run sole proprietorships, partnerships and S-corporations would see an increase, to 23% up from 20%, in the amount of business income they can deduct from their federal returns, otherwise referred to as the pass-through income deduction.

Expensing for research and development would be restored through 2029, as well as deductions available to businesses for certain investments, including equipment purchases.

No tax on tips, but only for a few years

Trump promised on the campaign trail to eliminate taxes on tips, Social Security and car loan interest. House Republicans handed him a win in their bill, but only a limited one.

The bill allows individual taxpayers to deduct qualifying tips earned throughout the year, a tax break that would end in 2028. And like the new child tax credit requirement, taxpayers could only take advantage of the deduction by including a Social Security number on their federal tax return as well as their spouse's SSN, if married.

No taxes on car loan interest would also go into effect through 2028, though taxpayers could only claim it for automobiles that received final assembly in the United States.

Senior citizens with incomes of \$75,000 or less, or \$150,000 for a married couple, would receive an extra \$4,000 discount on taxable income, with the amount decreasing as incomes increase. The tax break would also expire in 2028. The bill does not specify an age for "seniors."

Highly taxed states still unhappy

House Republicans raised the cap on the amount of state and local taxes, or SALT, that can be deducted, but not enough to please both GOP and Democratic lawmakers who represent highly taxed states like New York and California.

Under the bill the committee advanced Wednesday morning, taxpayers could deduct up to \$30,000 — three times the \$10,000 ceiling in the 2017 law — from their federal taxable income. The full cap would apply to those making \$400,000 or less in annual income but phases down for higher earners.

Raising the cap is costly and unpopular with lawmakers representing lower tax states.

Republican Reps. Mike Lawler and Nick LaLota of New York, and Rep. Young Kim of California, are threatening to vote no on the House floor if the cap isn't raised. The House GOP cannot lose more than a handful of votes if all Republicans are present.

House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana told reporters Wednesday he didn't want to "handicap" negotiations by sharing details publicly and that he was talking to the SALT caucus until 1:30 a.m.

"But I will tell you I'm absolutely confident we're going to be able to work out a compromise that everybody can live with," he said.

A 'tragic indifference' for poor families

The committee's party-line approval of the bill drew praise and criticism across organizations representing varying interests of Americans.

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Kris Cox, director of federal tax policy for the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, wrote on social media that the temporary child tax credit bump does “zilch” for the roughly 17 million children whose parents do not earn enough money to receive a refund check from the credit.

“But it delivers an additional \$500-per-kid to higher-income families,” Cox wrote.

The organization also slammed the bill for going “out of its way to take eligibility from 4.5 million US citizen kids who have at least one parent without an SSN.”

Kristen Crowell, executive director of the advocacy group Fair Share America, said in a statement Wednesday that the bill “shows a tragic indifference to the very real struggles of normal, working people.

“In order to save face in front of their constituents, Republicans are hiding behind misleading claims that everyone will see reductions in their taxes,” Crowell said.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental protection advocacy organization, estimates that phasing out and altogether eliminating clean energy tax credits would result in higher electricity bills in several states, including Ohio and Pennsylvania, according to an emailed statement.

‘Unshackle the economy’ for businesses

Groups representing businesses across the U.S. praised the House bill as a way to bolster investment and growth opportunities.

Former Republican Ways and Means Chair Kevin Brady of Texas released a statement Wednesday on behalf of the Alliance for Competitive Taxation praising the bill as a path to “unshackle the economy from burdensome taxes and unlock new growth.”

“The bill reported out by the House Ways and Means Committee is an encouraging step in that direction and, if implemented with its major pro-growth proposals intact, will help American businesses and workers compete at home and abroad,” Brady said.

The alliance hailed the extension of the 21% corporate tax rate and urged lawmakers to make permanent the research and development expensing, and capital investment deductions.

Kristen Silverberg, president and chief operating officer of the Business Roundtable, said her organization “applauds Chairman Smith and members of the House Ways and Means Committee for advancing a comprehensive, pro-growth tax bill,” referring to GOP Rep. Jason Smith of Missouri.

“Today’s vote is a critical step forward in securing a more competitive tax system for American businesses and workers,” said Silverberg, whose organization represents 200 CEOs of U.S.-based companies.

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

OPENING MAY 2ND
CLOSING JUNE 2ND

WEBER LANDSCAPING GREENHOUSE

620 WEST THIRD AVENUE

GROTON

HOURS OF OPERATION

M-F 10-6

SAT 10-4

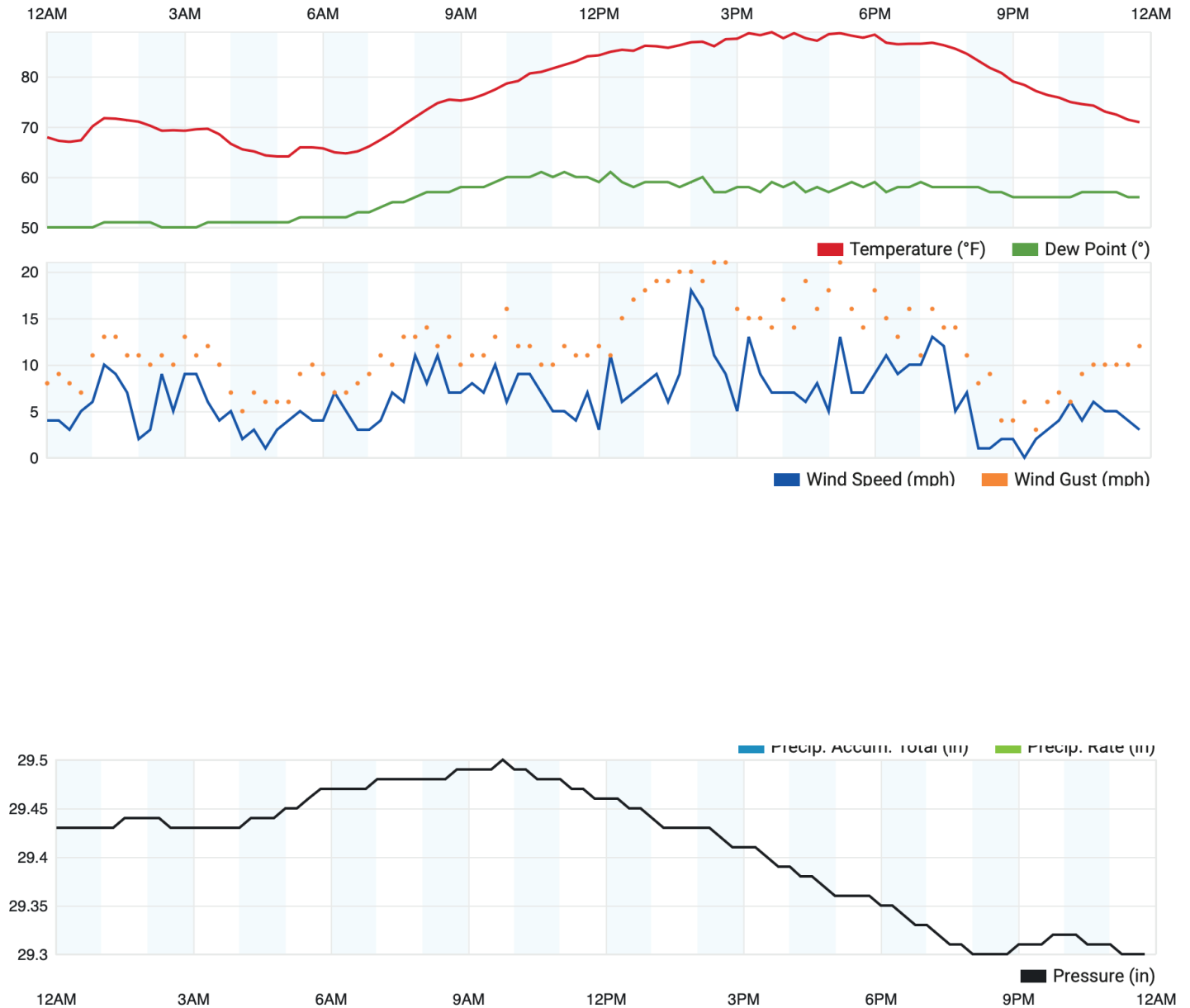
SUN 12-4



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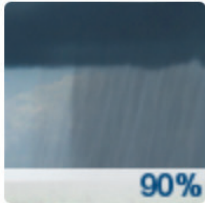
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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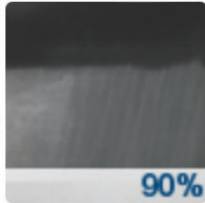
Thursday



High: 66 °F

Showers and
Breezy

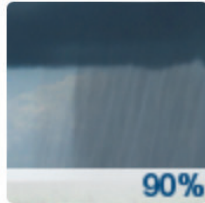
Thursday
Night



Low: 42 °F

Showers and
Breezy

Friday



High: 51 °F

Showers and
Breezy

Friday Night



Low: 37 °F

Chance
Showers and
Breezy

Saturday



High: 56 °F

Partly Sunny



TODAY
THU 05/15
HIGH **63 °F**

[100% Precip. / 0.85 in](#)

Thunderstorms this morning, then windy during the afternoon with still a chance of showers. Morning high of 63F with temps falling to near 50. Winds SW at 25 to 35 mph. Chance of rain 100%. Locally heavy rainfall possible.



TONIGHT
THU 05/15
LOW **40 °F**

[81% Precip. / 0.43 in](#)

Rain and wind. Low around 40F. Winds W at 25 to 35 mph. Chance of rain 80%. Rainfall around a half an inch. Locally heavy rainfall possible.



TOMORROW
FRI 05/16
HIGH **46** | **37 °F**

[79% Precip. / 0.11 in](#)

Windy. A steady rain in the morning, with showers continuing in the afternoon. High 46F. Winds NW at 25 to 35 mph. Chance of rain 80%. Winds could occasionally gust over 40 mph.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 89 °F at 3:43 PM

Low Temp: 64 °F at 5:03 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 2:18 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 14 hours, 58 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 103 in 1931

Record Low: 23 in 2014

Average High: 70

Average Low: 44

Average Precip in May.: 1.65

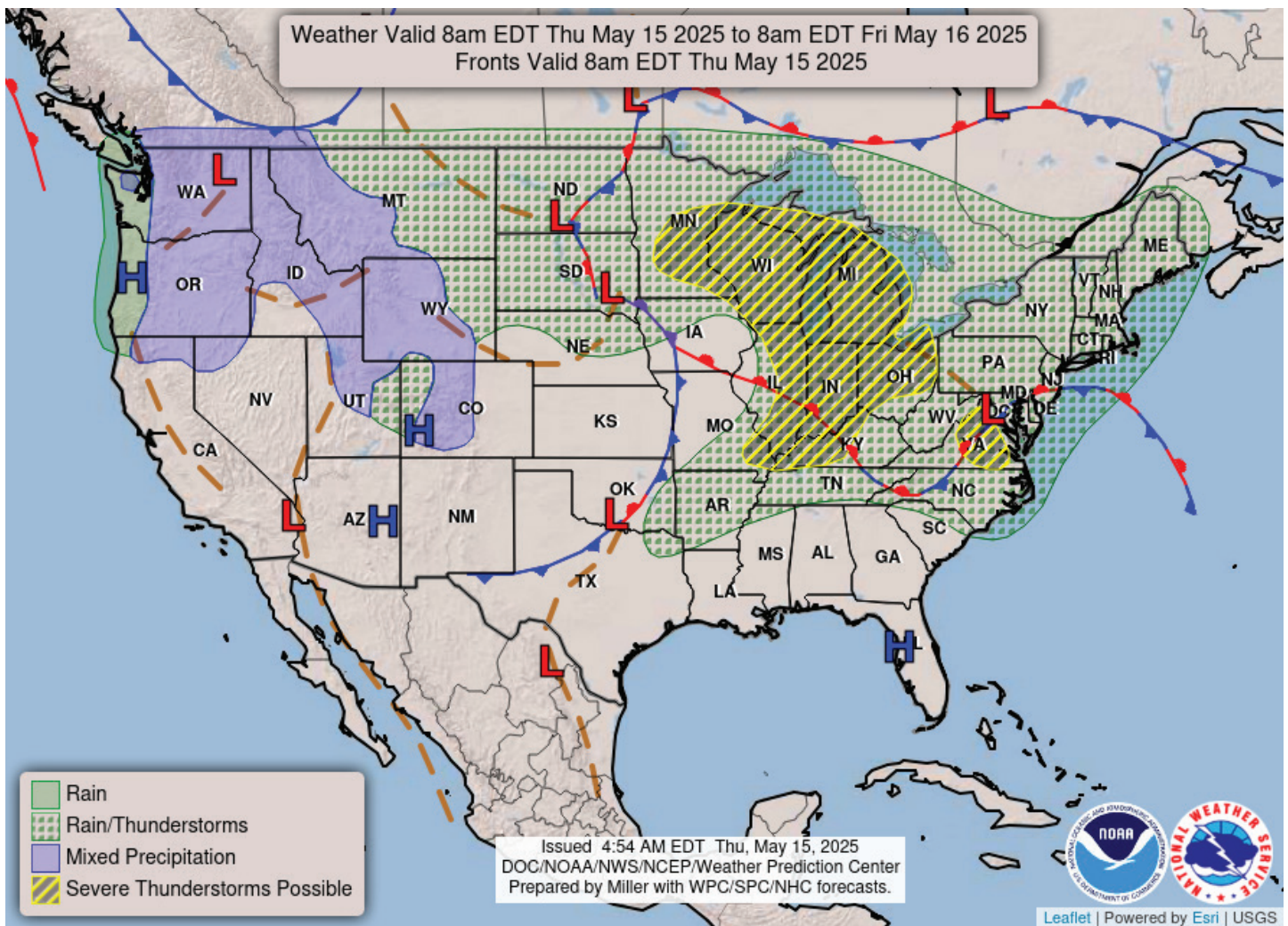
Precip to date in May.: 0.30

Average Precip to date: 5.62

Precip Year to Date: 2.93

Sunset Tonight: 8:58:02 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:58:22 am



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Today in Weather History

May 15th, 1964: A two-day rainfall event ended with 3.57 inches at Rapid City. Damage to roads and bridges was reported in the northern Black Hills.

1834 - The Northern Atlantic Coast States were in the midst of their greatest May snowstorm of record. The hills around Newbury, VT, were covered with two to three feet of snow. (David Ludlum)

1968 - A tornado touched down southwest of Anchorage, AK. It was the second of just three tornadoes reported in Alaska since 1950. (The Weather Channel)

1972 - The worst ice jam flooding of memory for long-time residents took place along the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River in Alaska. It was the first time since 1890 that the two rivers "flowed as one". The towns of Oscarville and Napaskiak were completely inundated. (15th-31st) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Unseasonably warm weather returned to the north central U.S. Seven cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Janestown, ND, with a reading of 96 degrees. Thunderstorms in Utah produced five inches of rain south of Bicknell. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced wind gusts to 80 mph in Oklahoma County, and baseball size hail at Pawnee. Hail piled up to a depth of 18 inches south of Pawnee. Hail damage in Oklahoma was estimated at close to 25 million dollars. Thunderstorms in the Upper Midwest produced golf ball size hail around Cleveland, OH, and wind gusts to 83 mph at Angola, IN. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along and north of a stationary front produced severe weather in the south central U.S. Thunderstorms spawned eleven tornadoes, and there were 145 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Softball size hail caused 2.1 million dollars damage at Sherman, TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from the Central Plains Region and Oklahoma to Indiana and western Kentucky. Thunderstorms spawned fifteen tornadoes, including seven in Oklahoma, and there were 165 reports of large hail or damaging winds. A tornado killed one person, injured a dozen others, and caused four million dollars damage at Stillwater, OK. Another tornado injured eight persons at Foyil, OK. Thunderstorms in Oklahoma also produced wind gusts to 92 mph at Oologah Lake, and softball size hail at Canton and north of Oakwood. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Fifty-eight percent of the foods on the shelves of our grocery stores are "fortified." Researchers claim that they make a significant contribution to the quality and value of the food we eat. Additionally, many of our foods in cans, in boxes, in the meat and dairy isles or in the fruit and vegetable sections of the stores where we shop have been "genetically modified" in one way or another. Biologists claim that it makes the products last longer, tastier, and more nutritious.

"Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you!" Guide your eyes and know where you are going warns Solomon. We are to "fortify" the way we view and live life with God's wisdom, power, and strength, and then be careful where we place our feet.

In other words, stay focused on using God's wisdom and apply it to life!

The fool, the ones who choose not to acknowledge the existence or power of God, is easily distracted. Any image that "springs-up" or appears with no warning is a call to lure the "fool" into a trap.

Jesus said that the "eye is the lamp of the body" and will project on the screen of our minds an image that quickly and without warning leads the "fool" astray. The eyes, once seduced, need more and more entertainment until, rather than being lured or enticed, actually search with determination for images and that are corrupt, vile and destructive to keep their life "exciting."

"Looking straight ahead" and "fixing His gaze" is what Jesus did during His life's journey. He "resolutely" set out for Jerusalem - fortified by God. Can we do less if we love Him?

Today's Prayer: God, grant us the willingness to plant Your wisdom so deeply in our hearts that we will stay focused on Your Word, Your will, Your way, and Your work! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Today's Scripture: "Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you."

-Proverbs 4:25

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: 05.13.25

6 29 33 47 68 20

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$122,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 32 Mins
14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.14.25

8 17 38 42 50 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$34,360,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 47
Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.14.25

14 23 37 41 46 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 2 Mins 14
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.14.25

9 11 18 19 28

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 2 Mins
14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.14.25

2 44 55 56 67 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 31 Mins
14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.14.25

4 10 24 29 53 4

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$123,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 31 Mins
14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
03/29/2025 Men's Singles Bowling Tournament at the Jungle 10am, 1pm & 4pm
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
04/12/2025 Groton Firemens Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
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
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/11-13/25 2025 VFW 12U Class B State Baseball Tournament
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
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
08/14/2025 Family Fun Fest, Downtown Main Street 5:30-7:30pm (2nd Thursday)
08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove
09/05/2025 Homecoming Parade 1pm
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove
10/10/2025 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/11/2025 Pumpkin Fest 10am-3pm City Park
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm
12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Ruling in North Dakota case erases path for people in 7 states to sue under the Voting Rights Act

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A federal appeals court that already has said private individuals and groups cannot sue under a key part of the federal Voting Rights Act went even further Wednesday toward blocking lawsuits over alleged racial bias in voting in seven Midwest states.

But its decisions may not be the last word, because another appeals court has ruled differently, and the U.S. Supreme Court might have to resolve the conflict. The latest ruling reversed a legal victory for two tribal nations in North Dakota that challenged a legislative redistricting plan.

The ruling shuts off a route to Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act through a federal civil rights law known as Section 1983, which allows people to sue state officials to vindicate their federal or constitutional rights, said Jonathan Topaz, staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union Voting Rights Project. Section 1983 provides a legal vehicle to bring a lawsuit, he said.

Private individuals in past decades brought lawsuits under Section 2, but a 2023 8th Circuit ruling in an Arkansas redistricting case held that Section 2 doesn't allow for private claims. That ruling and Wednesday's ruling only apply to the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which encompasses Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

"These decisions together at the moment mean that no one can sue under the Voting Rights Act in the seven states that comprise the 8th Circuit, other than the U.S. Attorney General," said Mark Gaber, senior director for redistricting at Campaign Legal Center and an attorney for the Spirit Lake Tribe and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

The majority opinion Wednesday said that in order to use Section 1983 to file lawsuits over voting rights, including how redistricting affects them, a private person or group must "unambiguously" have the right to sue under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.

Appeals Judge Raymond Gruender, appointed by George W. Bush and writing for the majority, said that while the tribes "are within the general zone of interest" of the Voting Rights Act, it is "without the statute having unambiguously conferred an individual right."

In a dissent, Circuit Chief Judge Steven Colloton, another Bush appointee, said Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act does confer a right to sue and he would have upheld the tribes' legal victory on redistricting.

Wednesday's decision and the Arkansas ruling "create circuit splits" on the Section 2 and Section 1983 issues because the 8th Circuit is the only court to rule in such a way in both instances, Gaber said. The tribes and their attorneys are discussing and considering appeal options, he said.

The 2-1 ruling is a reversal for the two tribes, who had successfully challenged North Dakota's 2021 redistricting map, alleging it dilutes their voting strength.

The tribes wanted to share a single legislative district, electing a state senator and two House members, making it more likely that all three would be Native American. The 2021 plan split them into different districts. The court-ordered plan gave the tribes what they wanted.

Spirit Lake, Turtle Mountain and several tribal citizens alleged that the 2021 map drew the lines so that while Turtle Mountain members still could elect a House member, the Spirit Lake members could not.

In late 2023, U.S. District Court Chief Judge Peter Welte ruled after a trial, saying the Legislature's map "prevents Native American voters from having an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice" in violation of the Voting Rights Act's Section 2.

In early 2024, the judge ordered a new map into place with a joint district for the two tribes. Their reservations near the Canadian border and in northeastern North Dakota, respectively, are about 60 miles (97 kilometers) apart. Later that year, voters elected three Native Americans, all Democrats, to the district's seats.

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Republican Senate Majority Leader David Hogue said the 2021 boundaries the Legislature drew "will be the boundaries." Somehow officials will have to address the seats of incumbents affected by the boundaries at question, potentially by special election, he said.

"I think the Legislature was very comfortable with the fairness of the boundaries that they drew in 2021, and I think we should endeavor to uphold those boundaries," Hogue said.

In a statement, Secretary of State Michael Howe's office said it will now work with the 2021 map in place for the 2026 elections, "pending any further actions."

Republicans control North Dakota's Legislature by 83-11 in the House and 42-5 in the Senate. The state's biennial legislative session concluded earlier this month.

54 people killed in overnight airstrikes on southern Gaza city, hospital says

By MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Multiple airstrikes hit Gaza's southern city of Khan Younis overnight into Thursday, killing more than 50 people in a second consecutive night of heavy bombing.

The strikes come as U.S. President Donald Trump visits the Middle East, visiting Gulf states but not Israel. There had been widespread hope that Trump's regional visit could usher in a ceasefire deal or renewal of humanitarian aid to Gaza. An Israeli blockade of the territory is now in its third month.

An Associated Press cameraman in Khan Younis counted 10 airstrikes on the city overnight into Thursday, and saw numerous bodies taken to the morgue in the city's Nasser Hospital. Some bodies arrived in pieces, with some body bags containing the remains of multiple people. The hospital's morgue confirmed 54 people had been killed.

The dead included a journalist working for Qatari television network Al Araby TV, the network announced on social media, saying Hasan Samour had been killed along with 11 members of his family in one of the strikes in Khan Younis.

The Israeli military had no immediate comment on the strikes.

It was the second night of heavy bombing, after airstrikes Wednesday on northern and southern Gaza killed at least 70 people, including almost two dozen children.

Israel has vowed to escalate the war

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed earlier in the week to push ahead with a promised escalation of force in Israel's war in the Gaza Strip to pursue his aim of destroying the Hamas militant group, which governs Gaza.

In comments released by Netanyahu's office Tuesday, the prime minister said Israeli forces were days away from entering Gaza "with great strength to complete the mission ... It means destroying Hamas."

International rights group Human Rights Watch said Thursday that Israel's stated plan of seizing Gaza and displacing hundreds of thousands of people "inches closer to extermination," and called on the international community to speak out against it.

The war began when Hamas-led militants killed 1,200 people in an Oct. 7, 2023 intrusion into southern Israel. Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed nearly 53,000 Palestinians, many of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants. Almost 3,000 have been killed since Israel broke a ceasefire on March 18, the ministry said.

Hamas still holds 58 of the roughly 250 hostages it took during its Oct. 7 attack on Israel, with 23 believed to still be alive, although Israeli authorities have expressed concern for the status of three of those.

Gaza's only hospital providing cancer treatments out of service due to Israeli strikes

Gaza's Health Ministry said Thursday that Israeli strikes have rendered the European Hospital Khan Younis — the only remaining facility providing cancer treatments in Gaza — out of service due to severe damage to its infrastructure and access roads.

The shutdown halts all specialized treatments, including cardiac surgeries and cancer care, the ministry added.

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The Israeli military conducted two airstrikes against the European Hospital Tuesday, saying it was targeting a Hamas command center beneath the facility. Six people were killed in the strike.

European Hospital director Imad al-Hout told AP there had been 200 patients in the hospital at the time of Tuesday's strikes. They were all gradually evacuated, with the last 90 transferred to other hospitals, including Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, on Wednesday morning. Efforts were now underway to coordinate repairs to the facility, he added.

Israeli blockade of aid into Gaza in its third month

Israel's offensive has obliterated vast swathes of Gaza's urban landscape and displaced 90% of the population, often multiple times. It halted the entry of all aid, including food and medication, into the territory on March 2, and international food security experts have warned that Gaza will likely fall into famine if Israel doesn't lift its blockade and stop its military campaign.

Nearly half a million Palestinians are facing possible starvation while 1 million others can barely get enough food, according to findings by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a leading international authority on the severity of hunger crises.

Human Rights Watch said Israel's plan to seize Gaza and remain there, coupled with the "systematic destruction" of civilian infrastructure and the block on all imports into the territory, were cause for signatories to the Genocide Convention to act to prevent Israel's moves.

Israel vehemently denies accusations that it is committing genocide in Gaza.

The group also called on Hamas to free the hostages it still holds.

Russian delegation arrives in Turkey for Ukraine war talks without Putin but Zelenskyy is on his way

By MEHMET GUZEL Associated Press

ISTANBUL, Turkey (AP) — Russia's delegation arrived in Istanbul for peace talks with Ukraine, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Thursday, and a Ukrainian official said a delegation including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was on its way to the Turkish capital Ankara.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was not part of the delegation from Moscow, however, according to a list released by the Kremlin Wednesday night, prompting criticism from Western officials that the Kremlin isn't serious about the peace effort.

Vladimir Medinsky, an aide to Putin, will lead the Russian delegation that will also include three other senior officials, the Kremlin said. Putin also appointed four lower-level officials as "experts" for the talks.

Earlier this week, Zelenskyy challenged the Russian leader to meet in person in Turkey to talk about ending the more than three-year war. Zelenskyy said he would travel to Ankara to meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and wait for Putin.

A Ukrainian delegation including Zelenskyy was due to arrive in Ankara on Thursday, a senior Ukrainian official familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

Also in the delegation are Defense Minister Rustem Umerov, Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, and the head of the Ukrainian presidential office Andriy Yermak, the official said.

He spoke on condition of anonymity for security reasons as the team had not yet arrived in Ankara.

"Now, after three years of immense suffering, there is finally a window of opportunity," Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said at a NATO meeting taking place separately in Turkey. "The talks in Istanbul hopefully may open a new chapter."

But Zelenskyy will sit at the table only with Putin, Ukraine's presidential adviser, Mykhailo Podolyak, said.

Details about whether, when and where the Ukrainian delegation might meet their Russian counterparts are still unclear but is expected to be clarified after Zelenskyy and Erdogan meet, according to a Ukrainian official who requested anonymity to speak openly about the day's plan.

Tass said that the talks were to take place in a presidential office on the Bosphorus.

Moscow offered talks instead of a ceasefire

Putin on Wednesday evening held a meeting with senior government officials and members of the

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delegation in preparation for the talks, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. Defense Minister Andrei Belousov, General Staff chief Valery Gerasimov, and National Security Council secretary Sergei Shoigu attended the meeting, among others.

Kyiv and its European allies had urged the Kremlin to agree to a full, unconditional 30-day ceasefire as a first step toward peace. Putin effectively rejected the proposal, offering direct talks between Russia and Ukraine instead.

The Kremlin billed Thursday's talks as a "restart" of peace negotiations that were held in Istanbul in the first weeks of the war in 2022 but quickly fell apart. Moscow accused Ukraine and the West of wanting to continue fighting, while Kyiv said Russia's demands amounted to an ultimatum rather than something both sides could agree on.

Russia's delegation then was also headed by Vladimir Medinsky.

Putin's proposal came after more than three months of diplomacy kickstarted by U.S. President Donald Trump, who promised during his campaign to end the devastating war swiftly. The Trump administration in recent weeks indicated that it might walk away from the peace effort if there was no tangible progress soon.

Trump had pressed for Putin and Zelenskyy to meet in Istanbul but said Thursday he wasn't surprised that Putin was a no-show. He brushed off Putin's decision to not take part in the talks.

"I didn't think it was possible for Putin to go if I'm not there," Trump said during a roundtable in Doha, Qatar

The U.S. and Western European leaders have threatened Russia with further sanctions if there is no progress in halting the fighting.

NATO ministers back Ukraine

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha met with U.S. State Secretary Marco Rubio and Senator Lindsey Graham in the Turkish city of Antalya late Wednesday night. Antalya on Thursday is hosting NATO foreign ministers to discuss new defense investment goals as the U.S. shifts its focus to security challenges away from Europe.

Sybiha reaffirmed Ukraine's support for Trump's mediation efforts and thanked the U.S. for its continued involvement, urging Moscow to "reciprocate Ukraine's constructive steps" toward peace. "So far, it has not," Sybiha said.

On Thursday morning, Sybiha also met with other European foreign ministers, including his French counterpart Jean-Noël Barrot, who in a post on X reiterated the call for a ceasefire and the threat of "massive sanctions" if Russia doesn't comply.

"We're in a very difficult spot right now, and we hope that we can find the steps forward that provide for the end of this war in a negotiated way and the prevention of any war in the future," Rubio said Thursday.

Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, also in Antalya for the NATO talks, accused Moscow of not being willing to to engage in a serious peace process.

"We have one chair empty, which is the chair of Vladimir Putin. So now I guess the entire world has realized that there's only one party not willing to engage in serious peace negotiations, and that certainly is Russia," Valtonen said.

Barrot echoed her sentiment: "In front of Ukrainians there is an empty chair, one that should have been occupied by Vladimir Putin," he said. "Vladimir Putin is dragging his feet and in all evidence does not want to enter into these peace discussions."

Live updates: Trump visits main U.S. military base in Middle East as violence flares in Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

President Donald Trump on Thursday visits a U.S. base installation at the center of American involvement in the Middle East as he uses his four-day visit to Gulf states to reject the "interventionism" of America's past in the region.

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In other parts of the Middle East violence flared in the West Bank and Gaza, A hospital in southern Gaza says 54 people have been killed in overnight airstrikes on the city of Khan Younis.

with a pregnant Israeli woman killed even as the international rights group ,Human Rights Watch ,said that Israel's plan to seize Gaza, remain in the territory and displace hundreds of thousands of people "inches closer to extermination."

Trump plans to address troops at Qatar's al-Udeid Air Base, which was a major staging ground during the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and supported the recent U.S. air campaign against Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis. The president has held up Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia and Qatar as models for economic development in a region plagued by conflict as he works to entice Iran to come to terms with his administration on a deal to curb its nuclear program.

The President also meets business leaders in Qatar and heads to Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates.

Gaza's only hospital providing cancer treatment declared out of service

The European Hospital in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis is out of service due to severe damage to its infrastructure and access roads from Israeli strikes, the territory's Health Ministry said Thursday.

The shutdown halts all specialized treatments, including cardiac surgeries and cancer care in the only facility that was providing ongoing medical care to cancer patients in Gaza, the ministry added.

Israeli forces struck the European Hospital twice on Tuesday, saying it was targeting a Hamas command center beneath the facility. Six people were killed in the strike.

European Hospital director Imad al-Hout told The Associated Press there had been 200 patients in the hospital at the time of Tuesday's strikes. They were all gradually evacuated, with the last 90 transferred to other hospitals, including Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, on Wednesday morning. Efforts were now underway to coordinate repairs to the facility, he added.

American comedian jokes about cocaine on a baby before Trump visits base

American comedian Theo Von did a set Thursday before President Donald Trump's visit to a military base in Qatar that included references to snorting cocaine off a baby's back.

The jokes drew laughter and some groans from the service members at Al-Udeid Air Base, home to the forward headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command.

"Somebody put some cocaine on the baby's back, right? I didn't do it," Von said. "And it wasn't a lot of cocaine. ... It didn't weigh the baby down, OK? And it was a mixed baby. So you can see the cocaine. I'm not doing white dust off a white child's back, man."

A key U.S. military base in the Middle East is awaiting a visit by President Donald Trump

Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar is the forward headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command. At the base Thursday, service members listened to a comedy act ahead of Trump's appearance. A Qatari and American flag flanked a large banner reading: "PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH."

A Qatari F-15 and an MQ-9 Reaper drone sat to the side of the stage.

Theo Von, an American comedian, did a stand up set that included making jokes about Qatar's national dress for men, the white thobe, and everyone being named Mohammed.

"It's like a Ku Klux sandsman," he said.

He later made a joke about the U.S. Navy: "I'm not going to fly across the whole world just to be gay. I'm not in the Navy." And another punch line included: "Where do you think the next 9/11 should happen?"

Trump says only two solutions for Iran are 'intelligent' or 'brutal'

President Donald Trump kept up pressure Thursday on Iran, warning Tehran that a deal over its nuclear program or potentially airstrikes are the only two solutions to the diplomatic impasse.

Speaking in Qatar before business leaders, Trump said: "We'd like to see if we could solve the Iran

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problem in an intelligent way, as opposed to a brutal way. There's only two: intelligent and brutal. Those are the two alternatives."

Trump also said that Qatar's ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, had been pushing for diplomatic deal over Iran's nuclear program. Qatar shares a massive offshore oil and gas field that's crucial to its wealth with Iran.

"I said last night that Iran is very lucky to have the emir because he's actually fighting for them. He doesn't want us to do a vicious blow to Iran," Trump said. "He says, 'You can make a deal. You can make a deal.' He's really fighting. And I really mean this: I think that Iran should say a big thank you to the emir."

At another point, Trump mused: "In the case of Iran, they make a good drone."

Trump suggests India offered to drop tariffs to zero on US goods

President Donald Trump has suggested that India has offered to drop tariffs on U.S. goods to zero, something not immediately acknowledged by New Delhi.

Trump made the comments during a business roundtable in Doha, Qatar, on his Mideast tour, first discussing Apple's plans to build manufacturing plants for its iPhone there.

"It's very hard to sell into India and they've offered us a deal with what basically they're willing to literally charge us no tariff," Trump said. India is a close partner of the U.S. and is part of the Quad, which is made up of the U.S., India, Japan and Australia, and is seen as a counterbalance to China's expansion in the region

Trump says he didn't think Putin would go to Turkey talks if he wasn't there

U.S. President Donald Trump said Thursday that he didn't think Russian President Vladimir Putin would go to talks in Turkey with Ukraine if he wasn't there.

Trump made the remarks at a business roundtable in Qatar on his Mideast trip.

"I didn't think it was possible for Putin to go if I'm not there," Trump said.

Trump had suggested he could travel there for the talks if Putin was going. On Thursday, however, Trump said: "I actually said, why would he go if I'm not going? Because I wasn't going to go. I wasn't planning to go. I would go, but I wasn't planning to go. And I said, I don't think he's going to go if I don't go."

President Donald Trump has attended a business forum in Qatar

Trump sat with GE Aerospace's Larry Culp and Boeing Co.'s Kelly Ortberg on either side of him on Thursday. Both praised Trump for his support for the Qatar Airways order for Boeing aircraft. Ortberg called it one of the largest orders Boeing has ever had.

Hospital says 54 killed in overnight strikes in Gaza's Khan Younis

A hospital in southern Gaza says 54 people have been killed in overnight airstrikes on the city of Khan Younis.

An Associated Press cameraman in Khan Younis counted 10 airstrikes on the city overnight into Thursday, and saw numerous bodies taken to the morgue in the city's Nasser Hospital. Some bodies arrived in pieces, with some body bags containing the remains of multiple people. The hospital's morgue confirmed 54 people had been killed.

It was the second night of heavy bombing, after airstrikes Wednesday on northern and southern Gaza killed at least 70 people, including almost two dozen children.

The strikes come as U.S. President Donald Trump visits the Middle East, visiting Gulf states but not Israel. There had been widespread hope that Trump's regional visit could usher in a ceasefire deal or renewal of humanitarian aid to Gaza. An Israeli blockade of the territory is now in its third month.

Al Jazeera mutes critiques of American foreign policy during Trump's visit

Qatar's satellite news channel Al Jazeera long has been a powerful force in the Middle East, often taking editorial positions at odds with America's interests in the region during the wars that followed the Sept.

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11, 2001, attacks by al-Qaida.

But during President Donald Trump's visit to the Gulf Arab nation this week, state-funded Al Jazeera muted its typical critiques of American foreign policy.

The channel, which broadcasts in Arabic and English, broadly covered Trump's visit in a straightforward manner, highlighting it was the first-ever trip to Qatar by a sitting American leader. Mentions of the Israel-Hamas war, which Al Jazeera often has criticized America over for its military support to Israel, did not include any critiques of U.S. policy. Instead, journalists highlighted Qatar's role as a mediator in the war and aired comments by Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, calling for a ceasefire.

President Trump begins his third day in the Middle East

After a morning meeting with top U.S. and Qatari officials and American defense and aerospace business leaders, Trump heads to Al-Udeid Air Base, a U.S. installation at the center of American involvement in the Middle East. There, he will address troops and is expected to view a demonstration of American air capability.

The president then travels to the United Arab Emirates, the final leg of his first major foreign trip. He will head first to the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and then to a state visit hosted at Abu Dhabi's Qasr al-Watan palace.

Human Rights Watch slams Israeli plans to expand Gaza war

The international rights group said that Israel's plan to seize Gaza, remain in the territory and displace hundreds of thousands of people "inches closer to extermination."

It called on the international community to speak out against the plan. It said that the new plans, coupled with the "systematic destruction" of civilian infrastructure and the block on all imports into Gaza, were cause for signatories to the Genocide Convention to act to prevent Israel's moves. It said states should halt weapons transfers to Israel and enforce international arrest warrants against Israel's prime minister and former defense minister, as well as review their bilateral agreements with the country.

Israel vehemently denies accusations that it is committing genocide in Gaza.

The group also called on Hamas to free the 58 hostages it still holds in Gaza, 23 of whom are believed to be alive.

Pregnant Israeli woman killed in West Bank shooting attack, doctors rescue her baby

A pregnant Israeli woman has died after she was shot and critically wounded in a shooting attack in the occupied West Bank, a hospital said Thursday.

Beilinson Hospital said that doctors succeeded in saving her unborn baby, who was in serious but stable condition after being delivered by caesarean section.

The Israeli military said a Palestinian assailant opened fire on a vehicle late Wednesday, wounded two civilians. Soldiers launched a search for the attacker.

It's the latest violence in the Palestinian territory, where the Israeli military has launched a major operation that it says is meant to crack down on militancy. The operation has displaced tens of thousands of people.

Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank in months of violence that surged there after the start of the war in Gaza.

Trump downplays Putin decision to skip Istanbul talks with Zelenskyy

By ZEKE MILLER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — President Donald Trump said Thursday he was not surprised that Russian President Vladimir Putin will be a no-show for anticipated peace talks with Ukraine in Turkey this week.

Trump had pressed for Putin and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to meet in Istanbul this week. He brushed off Putin's decision to not take part in the expected talks.

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"I didn't think it was possible for Putin to go if I'm not there," Trump said in an exchange with reporters as he took part in a business roundtable with executives in Doha on the third day of his visit to the Middle East.

Trump earlier this week floated potentially attending himself. The U.S. president, however, noted on Thursday that Secretary of State Marco Rubio was already in the country for meetings with NATO counterparts. Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, also plans to be in Istanbul on Friday for the anticipated Russia-Ukraine talks.

The push for direct talks between Zelenskyy and Putin comes amid a flurry of negotiations aimed at producing a ceasefire agreement between Russia and Ukraine.

Putin was first to propose restarting direct peace talks Thursday with Ukraine in the Turkish city that straddles Asia and Europe. Zelenskyy challenged the Kremlin leader to meet in Turkey in person.

But the Kremlin has said its delegation at the talks will be led by Putin's aide, Vladimir Medinsky, and include three other officials. Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said Zelenskyy will only sit down with the Russian leader.

Later Thursday, Trump will visit a U.S. installation in Qatar at the center of American involvement in the Middle East. He has used his four-day visit to Gulf states to reject the "interventionism" of America's past in the region.

Trump will address troops at Qatar's al-Udeid Air Base, which was a major staging ground during the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and supported the recent U.S. air campaign against Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis.

The president has held up Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia and Qatar as models for economic development in a region plagued by conflict as he works to entice Iran to come to terms with his administration on a deal to curb its nuclear program.

After his address to U.S. troops, he will travel to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates for the final leg of his Mideast tour. He will visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the country's largest mosque. The UAE's founder, Sheikh Zayed, is buried in the mosque's main courtyard.

Trump will also be hosted for a state visit in the evening by UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan at the Qasr Al Watan palace.

Trump earlier this week met with Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa and announced plans to ease sanctions on the war-torn country. The U.S. has deployed more than 1,000 troops in Syria for years to suppress a return of the Islamic State group.

Trump heaped praise on al-Sharaa — who was tied to al-Qaida and joined insurgents battling U.S. forces in Iraq before entering the Syrian civil war — after the two met in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday. The president called al-Sharaa a "young, attractive guy. Tough guy. Strong past. Very strong past. Fighter."

It was a stark contrast from earlier years, when Al-Sharaa was imprisoned by U.S. troops in Iraq. Until December, there was a \$10 million U.S. bounty for his arrest.

Trump told business executives that the opinions of Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan were big factors in his decision to lift sanctions on Syria.

"President Erdogan called me and said, 'Is there any way you could do that? Because if you don't do that, they don't have a chance,'" Trump said. "So, I did it."

The Qatari base Trump is visiting houses some 8,000 U.S. troops, down from about 10,000 at the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The gas-rich Gulf country has spent some \$8 billion over two decades in developing the base, built on a flat stretch of desert about 20 miles (30 kilometers) southwest of Qatar's capital, Doha. The base was once considered so sensitive that American military officers would say only that it was somewhere "in southwest Asia."

Trump said he and the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, would also see a demonstration of American air capability, as the U.S. leader looks to boost defense exports to the region.

"You're buying a lot of that equipment actually," Trump said Wednesday when he and Sheikh Tamim signed a series of bilateral and business agreements between the two countries. "And I think we're going

to see some of it in action tomorrow at the — we won't call it an air fair, but its going to be sort of an air fair. We're going to be showing a display that's going to be incredible. They have the latest and the greatest of our planes and just about everything else."

Harvard thought it had a cheap copy of the Magna Carta. It turned out to be extremely rare

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Harvard University for decades assumed it had a cheap copy of the Magna Carta in its collection, a stained and faded document it had purchased for less than \$30.

But two researchers have concluded it has something much more valuable — a rare version from 1300 issued by Britain's King Edward I.

The original Magna Carta established in 1215 the principle that the king is subject to law, and it has formed the basis of constitutions globally. There are four copies of the original and, until now, there were believed to be only six copies of the 1300 version.

"My reaction was one of amazement and, in a way, awe that I should have managed to find a previously unknown Magna Carta," said David Carpenter, a professor of medieval history at King's College London. He was searching the Harvard Law School Library website in December 2023 when he found the digitized document.

"First, I'd found one of the most rare documents and most significant documents in world constitutional history," Carpenter said. "But secondly, of course, it was astonishment that Harvard had been sitting on it for all these years without realizing what it was."

Confirming the document's authenticity

Carpenter teamed up with Nicholas Vincent, a professor of medieval history at Britain's University of East Anglia, to confirm the authenticity of Harvard's document.

Comparing it to the other six copies from 1300, Carpenter found the dimensions matched up. He and Vincent then turned to images Harvard librarians created using ultraviolet light and spectral imaging. The technology helps scholars see details on faded documents that are not visible to the human eye.

That allowed them to compare the texts word-for-word, as well as the handwriting, which include a large capital 'E' at the start in 'Edwardus' and elongated letters in the first line.

After the 1215 original printed by King John, five other editions were written in the following decades — until 1300, the last time the full document was set out and authorized by the king's seal.

The 1300 version of Magna Carta is "different from the previous versions in a whole series of small ways and the changes are found in every single one," Carpenter said.

Harvard had to meet a high bar to prove authenticity, Carpenter said, and it did so "with flying colors."

Its tattered and faded copy of the Magna Carta is worth millions of dollars, Carpenter estimated — though Harvard has no plans to sell it. A 1297 version of the Magna Carta sold at auction in 2007 for \$21.3 million.

A document with a colorful history

The other mystery behind the document was the journey it took to Harvard.

That task was left to Vincent, who was able to trace it all the way back to the former parliamentary borough of Appleby in Westmorland, England.

The Harvard Law School library purchased its copy in 1946 from a London book dealer for \$27.50. At the time, it was wrongly dated as being made in 1327.

Vincent determined the document was sent to a British auction house in 1945 by a World War I flying ace who also played a role defending Malta in World War II. The war hero, Forster Maynard, inherited the archives from Thomas and John Clarkson, who were leading campaigners against the slave trade. One of them, Thomas Clarkson, became friends with William Lowther, hereditary lord of the manor of Appleby, and he possibly gave it to Clarkson.

"There's a chain of connection there, as it were, a smoking gun, but there isn't any clear proof as yet

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that this is the Appleby Magna Carta. But it seems to me very likely that it is," Vincent said. He said he would like to find a letter or other documentation showing the Magna Carta was given to Thomas Clarkson.

Making Magna Carta relevant for a new generation

Vincent and Carpenter plan to visit Harvard in June to see its Magna Carta firsthand — and they say the document is as relevant as ever at a time when Harvard is clashing with the Trump administration over how much authority the federal government should have over its leadership, admissions and activism on campus.

"It turns up at Harvard at precisely the moment where Harvard is under attack as a private institution by a state authority that seems to want to tell Harvard what to do," Vincent said.

It also is a chance for a new generation to learn about the Magna Carta, which played a part in the founding of the United States — from the Declaration of Independence to the adoption of the Bill of Rights. Seventeen states have incorporated aspects of it into their laws.

"We think of law libraries as places where people can come and understand the underpinnings of democracy," said Amanda Watson, the assistant dean for library and information services at Harvard Law School. "To think that Magna Carta could inspire new generations of people to think about individual liberty and what that means and what self-governance means is very exciting."

Poland votes for a new president Sunday as worries grow about the future

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — A war next door in Ukraine. Migration pressure at borders. Russian sabotage across the region. Doubts about the U.S. commitment to Europe's security.

In Poland's presidential election Sunday, security looms large. So do questions about the country's strength as a democracy and its place in the European Union. One of the new president's most important tasks will be maintaining strong ties with the United States, widely seen as essential to the survival of a country in an increasingly volatile neighborhood.

A crowded field, a likely runoff

Voters in this Central European nation of 38 million people will cast ballots to replace conservative incumbent Andrzej Duda, whose second and final five-year term ends in August.

With 13 candidates, a decisive first-round victory is unlikely. Some have appeared unserious or extreme, expressing openly pro-Putin or antisemitic views. A televised debate this week dragged on for nearly four hours. There are calls to raise the threshold to qualify for the race.

A runoff on June 1 is widely expected, with polls pointing to a likely showdown between Rafał Trzaskowski, the liberal mayor of Warsaw, and Karol Nawrocki, a conservative historian backed by the Law and Justice party, which governed Poland from 2015 to 2023.

A nation at the front line

Poland's geography gives the election added importance. Bordering Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, Belarus and war-torn Ukraine — as well as several Western allies — Poland occupies a critical position along NATO's eastern flank and serves as a key logistics hub for military aid to Ukraine.

Fears are rising that if Russia prevails in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it could target other countries that freed themselves from Moscow's control some 35 years ago. Against that backdrop, the election will shape Warsaw's foreign policy at a moment of mounting strain on trans-Atlantic unity and European defense.

Both leading candidates support continued U.S. military engagement in Europe. Trzaskowski puts greater emphasis on deepening ties with the European Union, while Nawrocki is more skeptical of Brussels and promotes a nationalist agenda.

When Law and Justice held power, it repeatedly clashed with EU institutions over judicial independence, media freedom and migration.

Why the presidency matters

While Poland is a parliamentary democracy, the presidency wields significant influence. The president

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serves as commander-in-chief, holds veto power, shapes foreign policy and plays a symbolic role in national discourse.

Under Duda, the office largely advanced the conservative agenda of Law and Justice. Since Prime Minister Donald Tusk's centrist coalition came to power in late 2023, Duda has blocked key reforms aimed at restoring judicial independence and repairing relations with the EU.

"The stakes are enormous for the ruling coalition and for those concerned with the future of Polish democracy," said Jacek Kucharczyk, president of the Institute of Public Affairs, a Warsaw think tank. "This is about democratic reform and restoring the rule of law — and that can only happen with cooperation from the next president."

The election is also pivotal for Law and Justice, Kucharczyk noted: "Its future as a dominant political force may hinge on the outcome."

Two visions for Poland

Both Trzaskowski and Nawrocki have pledged to support Ukraine and maintain strong defense ties, but their visions for Poland diverge sharply on the role of the EU and domestic social policy.

Trzaskowski, 52, is a former presidential contender and a senior figure in Civic Platform, the centrist party led by Tusk. He is running on a pro-European platform and has pledged to defend judicial independence and rebuild democratic institutions.

Supporters describe him as a modernizer who represents a cosmopolitan, outward-facing Poland. He speaks foreign languages, has marched in LGBTQ+ parades and appeals to younger, urban voters. Trzaskowski's progressive views highlight an evolution of the once more conservative Civic Platform.

Nawrocki, 42, represents how the party backing him, Law and Justice, is turning further to the right as support for the hard right surges.

Nawrocki, who is not a Law and Justice party member, heads the state-backed Institute of National Remembrance, which investigates Nazi and communist-era crimes. He has drawn praise from conservatives for dismantling Soviet monuments and promoting patriotic education, but he faces criticism for inexperience and playing on anti-German and other resentments. He has also been embroiled in some scandals.

Earlier this month, Nawrocki met with U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House — a symbolic moment welcomed by Law and Justice-friendly media as proof that he would be the best man for keeping the relationship with the United States strong. Critics viewed it as interference by Trump's administration.

This week Nawrocki was joined on the campaign trail by Romanian nationalist George Simion, who faces a runoff vote for the presidency on Sunday. Simion is viewed by critics as pro-Russian, leading Tusk to tweet: "Russia is pleased. Nawrocki and his pro-Russian Romanian counterpart George Simion on the same stage five days before the presidential elections in Poland and Romania. Everything is clear."

Those who've worked with Pope Leo XIV are optimistic he'll elevate women's roles — with limits

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Before becoming Pope Leo XIV, Cardinal Robert Prevost presided over one of the most revolutionary reforms of Pope Francis' pontificate by having women serve on the Vatican board that vets nominations for bishops.

But he also has said decisively that women cannot be ordained as priests, and despite having worked for years in Peru where women often lead church communities, seems noncommittal on whether women could ever serve in any ministerial capacity.

Nevertheless, the women who have worked closely with Prevost in recent years have praised his leadership style, ability to listen and respect for their opinions. In interviews with The Associated Press, they say they expect that as pope, Leo will continue to promote women in church governance positions, albeit with limits.

Maria Lia Zervino was among the three women Francis appointed to the Dicastery for Bishops in 2022

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to review possible appointments. It was a job previously held by cardinals and bishops, an old boy's club that has jealously guarded the secret process behind the appointment of bishops.

Zervino rejoiced when Prevost was elected pope, saying the respect he showed for her and other women on the board and their opinions gave them faith in him as a leader.

"I'm convinced that he doesn't need to learn how to work (with women), how to let them speak, to listen to them, to have them participate in decisions, because that's what he does anyway," said Zervino, the Argentine former head of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations.

Zervino said she expected Leo would continue Francis' reform processes, albeit in his own style.

"He's a simple man, serene, always with that smile that we saw that seems to come from an interior peace," she said in an interview. "So when you see someone who is balanced, peaceful and respectful and who welcomes what you say and is always ready to hear the other, you have faith in him."

A 2023 comment on women as priests

At a 2023 gathering of bishops on the future of the Catholic Church, Prevost was asked at a news conference about women in church leadership positions. He said it was "a work in progress" and that there would be a "continuing recognition of the fact that women can add a great deal to the life of the church on many different levels."

But he drew some very clear lines.

"I think we're all familiar with the very significant and long tradition of the church, and that the apostolic tradition is something that has been spelled out very clearly, especially if you want to talk about the question of women's ordination to the priesthood," he said in the Oct. 25, 2023, briefing.

Catholic women do much of the church's work in schools and hospitals and are usually responsible for passing the faith to the next generation. But they have long complained of second-class status in an institution that reserves the priesthood for men.

Prevost acknowledged Francis had created two commissions to study whether women could be made deacons, who perform many of the same functions as priests. While he said the issue was still open, he warned that turning women into clerics "doesn't necessarily solve a problem, it might make a new problem."

Just because a woman in society can be president doesn't mean there's an "immediate parallel" in the church, he argued.

"It isn't as simple as saying that at this stage we're going to change, if you will, the tradition of the church after 2,000 years on any one of those points," he said.

Deacons are ordained ministers who preside at weddings, baptisms and funerals. They can preach but cannot celebrate Mass. Married men can be ordained as deacons while women cannot, although historians say women served as deacons in the early Christian church.

A prudent and private listener

Karlijn Demasure, emeritus professor of practical theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, served on a Vatican commission with Prevost proposing reforms to the authority of bishops and how they are selected. She said Prevost was absolutely convinced of the need to involve lay people and nuns in the selection of bishops, at least at an initial level.

"He listens well," Demasure said. "He hears what has been said, and if he doesn't agree, he says it but in a nice way: 'I wouldn't say it like this, or I wouldn't do it like that.'"

She said Prevost was quiet, "prudent and private." She wonders, though, what will happen with the work of the commission, one of 10 groups that are studying particularly thorny questions, such as the role of women, and were due to report back to the pope by July.

Sister Nathalie Becquart, one of the highest-ranking women at the Vatican, worked with Prevost during Francis' meeting, known as a synod, on the future of the church. She also happens to be his neighbor, living in the same Palazzo Sant'Uffizio inside the Vatican gates, and was among the well-wishers who greeted Leo when he came home the night of his May 8 election.

Becquart posted a joyous selfie with the pope in the courtyard in one of the first private moments after his election. "I had time to greet him, not just as a neighbor," she said.

The women's diaconate

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Becquart recalled that she had been at a conference of the 900 nuns who run the world's female religious orders when the white smoke came out of the Sistine Chapel chimney. It didn't bother her that the nuns had no vote in the conclave, since the cardinals "could see that the church is the people of God."

"Synodality is about feeling we are from the same body, we are interdependent, we have a deep inner connection, and for me that was a deep spiritual experience I could never imagine before," she said.

Also during the conclave, advocates for women's ordination set off pink smoke flares over the Vatican to protest their exclusion from the priesthood and the election process.

"The discrimination and exclusion of women is a sin, and we're here to say the next pope will inherit this question and needs to work quickly to correct it," said Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference.

Hofstra University researcher Phyllis Zagano, who was on Francis' first Vatican commission on women deacons, remains optimistic. She pointed to Prevost's acknowledgement that the deacon issue was still open and that he ministered in Peru, a region that has pushed for years for the church to recognize women as ministerial deacons to help offset the priest shortage.

In a column for Religion News Service, Zagano noted that a recent proposal for a new Amazonian liturgical rite, published last month by the Amazonian bishops conference, contained explicit recommendations for women to be ordained as deacons. When Francis in 2020 considered official requests from Amazonian bishops for female deacons, he dodged the issue.

"Women deserve the ordained diaconal ministry of women," she said in an interview.

Trump's sanctions on ICC prosecutor have halted tribunal's work

By MOLLY QUELL Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor has lost access to his email, and his bank accounts have been frozen.

The Hague-based court's American staffers have been told that if they travel to the U.S. they risk arrest.

Some non-governmental organizations have stopped working with the ICC and the leaders of one won't even reply to emails from court officials.

Those are just some of the hurdles facing court staff since U.S. President Donald Trump in February slapped sanctions on its chief prosecutor, Karim Khan, according to interviews with current and former ICC officials, international lawyers and human rights advocates.

The sanctions will "prevent victims from getting access to justice," said Liz Evenson, international justice director at Human Rights Watch.

Trump sanctioned the court after a panel of ICC judges in November issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defense minister, Yoav Gallant.

Judges found there was reason to believe that the pair may have committed war crimes by restricting humanitarian aid and intentionally targeting civilians in Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza — charges Israeli officials deny.

Staffers and allies of the ICC said the sanctions have made it increasingly difficult for the tribunal to conduct basic tasks, let alone seek justice for victims of war crimes or genocide.

A spokesperson for the ICC and for Khan declined to comment. In February, ICC President Judge Tomoko Akane said that the sanctions "constitute serious attacks against the Court's States Parties, the rule of law based international order and millions of victims."

Order targets chief prosecutor

The February order bans Khan and other non-Americans among the ICC's 900 staff members from entering the United States. It also threatens any person, institution or company with fines and prison time if they provide Khan with "financial, material, or technological support."

The sanctions are hampering work on a broad array of investigations, not just the one into Israel's leaders.

The ICC, for example, had been investigating atrocities in Sudan and had issued arrest warrants for former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on charges that include genocide. That probe has ground to

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a halt even as reports mount of new atrocities in Sudan, according to an attorney representing an ICC prosecutor who is fighting the sanctions in U.S. courts. The prosecutor, Eric Iverson, filed a federal lawsuit against the Trump administration seeking protection from the sanctions.

Her client "cannot do, what I would describe as, basic lawyer functions," said Allison Miller who is representing Iverson in the suit.

American staffers at the organization, like Iverson, have been warned by its attorneys that they risk arrest if they return home to visit family, according to ICC officials. Six senior officials have left the court over concerns about sanctions

One reason the the court has been hamstrung is that it relies heavily on contractors and non-governmental organizations. Those businesses and groups have curtailed work on behalf of the court because they were concerned about being targeted by U.S. authorities, according to current and former ICC staffers.

Microsoft, for example, cancelled the Khan's email address, forcing the prosecutor to move to Proton Mail, a Swiss email provider, ICC staffers said. His bank accounts in his home country of the United Kingdom have been blocked.

Microsoft did not respond to a request for comment.

Staffers at a non-governmental organization that plays an integral role in the court's efforts to gather evidence and find witnesses said the group has transferred money out of U.S. bank accounts because they fear it might be seized by the Trump administration.

Senior leadership at two other U.S.-based human rights organizations told the AP that their groups have stopped working with the ICC. A senior staffer at one told the AP that employees have even stopped replying to emails from court officials out of fear of triggering a response from the Trump administration.

The cumulative effect of such actions has led ICC staffers to openly wonder whether the organization can survive the Trump administration, according to ICC officials who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal.

Said one such official: "It's hard to see how the court makes it through the next four years."

Trump alleged ICC's actions were baseless

Trump, a staunch supporter of Netanyahu, issued his sanctions order shortly after re-taking office, accusing the ICC of "illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel." Washington says the court has no jurisdiction over Israel.

Trump's order said the ICC's "actions against Israel and the United States set a dangerous precedent, directly endangering current and former United States personnel, including active service members of the Armed Forces." He said the court's "malign conduct" threatens "the sovereignty of the United States and undermines the critical national security and foreign policy work of the United States Government."

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

Netanyahu has dismissed the ICC's allegations as "absurd," and Israel's Knesset is considering legislation that would make providing evidence to the court a crime.

Israel launched its offensive after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in October 2023, killing about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting scores of others. Hamas is believed to be holding about two dozen hostages.

Coping with dark humor

Inside the court, staffers have been coping with dark humor, joking about how they cannot even loan Khan a pen or risk appearing on the U.S. radar.

This is not the first time the ICC has drawn Trump's ire. In 2020, the former Trump administration sanctioned Khan's predecessor, Fatou Bensouda, and one of her deputies over the court's investigation into alleged crimes committed in Afghanistan while the United States military was operating in the country.

President Joe Biden rescinded the sanctions when he took office several months later.

Three lawsuits are now pending from U.S. court staff and consultants against the Trump administration arguing that the sanctions infringe on their freedom of expression. Earlier this week Iverson, the lawyer investigating genocide in Sudan, won temporary protection from prosecution but if other U.S. citizens at

the court want a similar assurance, they would have to bring their own complaint.

Meanwhile, the court is facing an increasing lack of cooperation from countries normally considered to be its staunchest supporters.

The ICC has no enforcement apparatus of its own and relies on member states. In the last year, three countries – including two in the European Union – have refused to execute warrants issued by the court.

The renewed assault from the Trump administration comes as the court was already facing internal challenges. Last year, just weeks before Khan announced he was requesting arrest warrants for the Israeli officials, two court staff reported the British barrister had harassed a female aide, according to reporting by the Associated Press.

Khan has categorically denied the accusations that he groped and tried to coerce a female aide into a sexual relationship. A United Nations investigation is underway, and Khan has since been accused of retaliating against staff who supported the woman, including demoting several people he felt were critical of him.

A Wisconsin judge accused of helping a man evade immigration agents is set to enter a plea

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MILWAUKEE (AP) — A Wisconsin judge accused of helping a man evade U.S. immigration authorities was set to appear in federal court Thursday and enter a preliminary plea.

Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Hannah Dugan is charged with concealing an individual to prevent arrest and obstruction. Prosecutors say she escorted Eduardo Flores-Ruiz and his lawyer out of her courtroom through a back jury door on April 18 after learning that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were in the courthouse seeking his arrest for being in the country illegally. She could face up to six years in prison if convicted on both counts.

Dugan was scheduled to appear in federal court Thursday morning for an arraignment, an early step in the criminal justice process. Defendants routinely plead not guilty at this point to give their attorneys time to investigate and to preserve their right to a trial.

The FBI arrested Dugan on April 25 at the courthouse where she works and she was later released from custody. Her arrest escalated a clash between the Trump administration and Democrats over President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown. Her case is similar to one brought during the Trump's first term against a Massachusetts judge, who was accused of helping a man sneak out a courthouse back door to evade a waiting immigration enforcement agent.

Dugan's attorneys filed a motion Wednesday to dismiss the case, saying she was acting in her official capacity as a judge and therefore is immune to prosecution. They also maintain the federal government violated Wisconsin's state sovereignty by disrupting a state courtroom and prosecuting a state judge.

According to court documents, Flores-Ruiz illegally reentered the U.S. after being deported in 2013. Online state court records show he was charged with three counts of misdemeanor domestic abuse in Milwaukee County in March. He was in Dugan's courtroom on April 18 for a hearing.

Court documents say Dugan was alerted to the agents' presence by her clerk, who was informed by an attorney that the agents appeared to be in the hallway. An affidavit says Dugan was visibly angry and called the situation "absurd" before leaving the bench and retreating to her chambers. She and another judge later approached members of the arrest team in the courthouse with what witnesses described as a "confrontational, angry demeanor."

After a back-and-forth with the agents over the warrant for Flores-Ruiz, Dugan demanded they speak with the chief judge and led them from the courtroom, according to the affidavit.

After she returned to the courtroom, witnesses heard her say something to the effect of "wait, come with me" before ushering Flores-Ruiz and his attorney out through a door typically used only by deputies, jurors, court staff and in-custody defendants, according to the affidavit. Flores-Ruiz was free on a signature bond in the abuse case, according to online state court records. Federal agents ultimately captured him outside the courthouse after a foot chase.

The state Supreme Court suspended Dugan last week, saying the move was necessary to preserve public confidence in the judiciary.

A former federal prosecutor in Wisconsin, John Vaudreuil, said the Trump administration wants to make an example out of Dugan. U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi or Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche are likely making the decisions on how to proceed rather than the local U.S. attorney in Milwaukee, making it less likely prosecutors will reduce the charges against Dugan in a deal, he said.

Her attorneys will likely try to push the case to a jury trial, Vaudreuil said, because they know that "people feel very strongly about the way the president and administration is conducting immigration policy."

In India, Indigenous women and their 'dream maps' seek to protect lands from climate change

By SIBI ARASU Associated Press

KORAPUT, India (AP) — At a small stream in India's eastern state of Odisha, Indigenous villagers catch eels and fish for a dinner celebrating an annual harvest festival. The bounty of communal farming, foraging and fishing marks the start of a new season.

But the fish and other resources have been dwindling.

"Nowadays, the rains come late, affecting our farming, leading to a decrease in production," said Sunita Muduli, a Paraja tribeswoman from Putpondi village. She stood on freshly tilled fields that would be sown again with millet before the increasingly unpredictable monsoon rains.

The Indigenous Adivasis have lived in these villages for millennia. They continue traditional practices of farming millet and rice and foraging leaves and fruit from the forest to make plates, the local brew and more.

With those practices under pressure from a changing climate, they are making their most significant effort yet to speak up for their community's needs, advocating for Indian authorities to protect and restore their lands as the nation of more than 1.4 billion people tries to adapt to a warming world.

Women are leading the way. Muduli and others from 10 villages, with help from a local nongovernmental organization, have surveyed and mapped out resources that are dwindling and what needs restoring.

Comparing state government data from the 1960s with their results, they found that common areas in many of their villages had shrunk by up to 25%.

The women have created what are known as dream maps, showing their villages in their ideal states. The most prominent of their bright colors is green.

Muduli and others plan to submit their maps and surveys to local government officials, the first step in requesting village development funds to preserve or restore their common areas. The women estimate that \$2 million might be needed — an ambitious ask when India's poorer regions often struggle to secure and implement government projects.

Still, the women believe they have a 50-50 chance of success.

"We want to make sure these resources are available for our children," Muduli said.

This is the first time that many of the women are formally leading an outward-facing community effort. They say it's giving them more confidence in speaking up about community needs.

"Our forest contains an abundance of diverse resources. Unfortunately, rainfall has reduced, temperatures have risen and our forest cover has dwindled. However, once we acquire the rights we deserve, our priority will be to revitalize and flourish our forest," said Saita Dhangada Majhi of Pangan Pani village.

They seek rights over their common lands that will require outsiders, including authorities, to seek villagers' permission to make any changes to them.

India is among the world's most vulnerable countries to climate impacts. According to the 2025 Climate Risk Index, the country between 1993 and 2022 was subject to 400 extreme events — including floods, heat waves and cyclones — causing 80,000 deaths and economic losses nearing \$180 billion.

Odisha is one of India's poorest states and among the most vulnerable to climate impacts. A study by researchers from Odisha's Fakir Mohan University published in 2023 found that food production there had

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decreased by 40% in the last 50 years due to climate change.

Most Indian farmers rely on rain-fed agriculture, with about half of all farmed land dependent on downpours. As the monsoons become more unpredictable, livelihoods are affected.

India's Indigenous people feel those impacts the most as their traditions depend greatly on forests and natural produce, said Bidyut Bidyut Mohanty of the Odisha-based nonprofit Society for Promotion of Rural Education and Development. The organization helped the Odisha villages with the dream mapping process.

Climate change is affecting "their very existence," Mohanty said, asserting that they have not contributed to the problem but are paying the price.

The forest commons are "not only considered the lungs but are also a hidden kitchen for Indigenous communities," he said.

The women's survey found that resources available a decade earlier had either dwindled or disappeared. In Muduli's village, the number of fruits such as mango, guava, java plum and Indian gooseberry had dropped drastically. Resources used to make traditional instruments and other items had become more rare.

Climate experts said the Odisha project can be a model to be replicated across India and other nations. United Nations reports have said 80% of the world's biodiversity lies in regions controlled by Indigenous peoples.

Women from marginalized and vulnerable communities are affected the most by climate change, and the Indigenous women of Odisha are an inspiration, said Neha Saigal, a gender and climate expert at Bengaluru-based Asar Social Impact Advisors who is familiar with the mapping project.

"They are actually leading from the front," she said.

Their work could be critical in deciding where India's efforts on climate change should be focused, Saigal added, noting that the country is working on a national adaptation plan.

It is not clear whether the dream maps will become part of that plan. The women behind them say their project has given them formal understanding of what they and their communities have long known intuitively.

They want to pass that on for generations to come.

"Forest is our life," said Purnima Sisa of Badakichab village. "We have taken birth in this forest, and one day we will die in the forest. It is our life and livelihood."

Missouri lawmakers approve referendum to repeal abortion-rights amendment

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Six months after Missouri voters approved an abortion-rights amendment, Republican state lawmakers on Wednesday approved a new referendum that would seek the amendment's repeal and instead ban most abortions with exceptions for rape and incest.

The newly proposed constitutional amendment would go back to voters in November 2026, or sooner, if Republican Gov. Mike Kehoe calls a special election before then.

Republican senators used a series of rare procedural moves to cut off discussion by opposing Democrats before passing the proposed abortion-rights revision by a 21-11 vote. The measure passed the Republican-led House last month.

Immediately after the vote, protestors erupted with chants of "Stop the ban!" and were ushered out of the Senate chamber.

The Senate then blocked further Democratic debate and gave final approval to a separate measure repealing provisions of a voter-approved law guaranteeing paid sick leave for workers and cost-of-living increases to the minimum wage. That measure does not go back to the ballot. It will instead become law when signed by Kehoe, who has expressed his support for it.

After taking the sweeping votes, the Senate effectively ended its annual legislative session — two days ahead of a constitutional deadline to wrap up work.

Democrats were outraged by the legislative actions and vowed to retaliate by slowing down any Senate

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work next year.

"Our rights are under attack," Democratic state Sen. Brian Williams said during debate. He accused Republicans of "trying to overturn the will of the voters."

Republicans contend they are simply giving voters a second chance on abortion — and are confident they will change their minds because of the new rape and incest exceptions.

"Abortion is the greatest tragedy in the world right now," Republican state Sen. Mary Elizabeth Coleman said while explaining her efforts to repeal the abortion-rights amendment. If someone's fine with "taking the life of an innocent, then probably you can justify whatever you want."

Some GOP lawmakers said they needed to repeal the paid sick leave requirement, which kicked in May 1, because it's adding costs that threaten the financial viability of small businesses. Republicans had been negotiating with Democrats over an alternative to exempt only the smallest businesses before scrapping that and opting for the full repeal.

Missouri lawmakers have a history of altering voter-approved policies. They previously tried to block funding for a voter-approved Medicaid expansion and authored changes to voter-approved measures regulating dog breeders and legislative redistricting.

Missouri's abortion policies have swung dramatically in recent years.

When the U.S. Supreme Court ended a nationwide right to abortion by overturning *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, it triggered a Missouri law to take effect banning most abortions. But abortion-rights activists gathered initiative petition signatures to reverse that.

Last November, Missouri voters narrowly approved a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a right to abortion until fetal viability, generally considered sometime past 21 weeks of pregnancy. The amendment also allows later abortions to protect the life or health of pregnant women and creates a "fundamental right to reproductive freedom" that includes birth control, prenatal and postpartum care and "respectful birthing conditions."

A limited number of surgical abortions have since occurred in Missouri, but medication abortions remain on hold while Planned Parenthood wrangles with the state over abortion regulations.

The new measure seeks to repeal the abortion-rights amendment and instead allow abortions only for a medical emergency or fetal anomaly, or in cases of rape or incest up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. It also would prohibit gender transition surgeries, hormone treatments and puberty blockers for minors, which already are barred under state law.

Polling indicates "that most voters are opposed to most abortions in Missouri but do want to allow for abortions with limited exceptions," said Sam Lee, director of Campaign Life Missouri.

The ballot title that voters will see doesn't explicitly mention repealing Amendment 3. Instead, it says the new measure would "ensure women's safety during abortions, ensure parental consent for minors" and "allow abortions for medical emergencies, fetal anomalies, rape, and incest." It also states that it will "protect children from gender transition," among other provisions.

Democratic state Sen. Tracy McCreery called the measure "an attempt to mislead and lie to the voters," echoing similar accusations that Republicans had made against the original Amendment 3.

An abortion-rights coalition that includes Planned Parenthood affiliates, the American Civil Liberties Union and others planned a rally Thursday at the Missouri Capitol and vowed a vigorous campaign against the measure.

"Abortion rights won in this state six months ago, and mark my words: Missourians will protect reproductive freedom again," said Emily Wales, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Great Plains Votes.

South African leader and Trump will meet next week after US took in white South Africans as refugees

By GERALD IMRAY and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — President Donald Trump and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa are scheduled to meet at the White House next week following allegations by Trump — and denied by

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South Africa — that “genocide” is being committed against white farmers in the majority Black country.

The meeting, announced Wednesday by the South African government and set for May 21, also comes after the U.S. welcomed 59 white South Africans as refugees this Monday, the start of what the Trump administration said is a larger relocation plan for minority Afrikaner farmers who Trump has claimed are being persecuted in their homeland because of their race. South Africa denies the allegations and says whites in the majority Black country are not being singled out for persecution.

Ramaphosa’s office said he will be in the U.S. from Monday to Thursday of next week, and will meet with Trump on Wednesday at the White House. Ramaphosa’s trip would aim to “reset the strategic relationship between the two countries,” his office said.

The White House had no immediate comment on the meeting, which would be Trump’s first with the leader of a nation in Africa since he returned to office in January.

Trump has criticized South Africa’s Black-led government on multiple fronts and issued an executive order Feb. 7 cutting all U.S. funding to the country as punishment for what he said were its anti-white policies at home and anti-American foreign policy.

The Republican president has singled out South Africa over what the U.S. calls racist laws against whites and has accused the government of “fueling” violence against white farmers. The South African government says the relatively small number of killings of white farmers should be condemned but are part of the country’s problems with violent crime and are not racially motivated.

Trump said Monday — the same day that the first batch of Afrikaner refugees arrived at Dulles International Airport in Virginia — that there was “a genocide taking place” against white farmers that was being ignored by international media.

The U.S. criticism of what it calls South Africa’s racist, anti-white laws appears to refer to South Africa’s affirmative action laws that advance opportunities for Black people, and a new land expropriation law that gives the government power to take private land without compensation. Although the government says the land law is not a confiscation tool and refers to unused land that can be redistributed for the public good, some Afrikaner groups say it could allow their land to be seized and redistributed to some of the country’s Black majority.

Since returning to office in January, Trump has issued orders to end diversity, equity and inclusion programs across the federal government. The administration has also threatened nongovernmental institutions like colleges and universities with the loss of financial aid unless they do the same.

Trump also required government contractors and other recipients of federal funds to certify, under threat of severe financial penalties, that they do not operate DEI programs that violate anti-discrimination laws.

Afrikaners are descendants of mainly Dutch, French and German colonial settlers who first came to South Africa in the 17th century. They were the leaders of the country’s previous apartheid system of racial segregation. There are around 2.7 million Afrikaners among South Africa’s population of 62 million, which is more than 80% Black. There are also nearly 2 million other whites of British and other descent.

Trump has also accused South Africa of taking “aggressive positions towards the U.S. and its allies” in its foreign policy and of being a supporter of Hamas, the Palestinian militant group, and Iran.

Trump’s executive order cited South Africa’s decision to accuse U.S. ally Israel of genocide in Gaza in an ongoing case at the International Court of Justice as an example of its anti-American stance. Israel opened a military offensive in Gaza after Hamas-led militants killed 1,200 people in an October 2023 intrusion into southern Israel.

The Israeli operation has killed over 52,928 Palestinians, many of them women and children, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants. Almost 3,000 have been killed since Israel broke a ceasefire on March 18, the ministry said.

Israel has resumed blocking food, fuel, medicine and all other supplies from entering Gaza for weeks, worsening a humanitarian crisis for 2.3 million Palestinians

Ramaphosa has spoken repeatedly of his desire to engage with Trump diplomatically and improve the relationship. He says Trump’s criticism is based on false information he’s being given about South Africa’s laws and the attacks on farmers.

Trump appeals for Qatar's help in persuading Iran to give up its nuclear program

By ZEKE MILLER, JON GAMBRELL and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — President Donald Trump urged Qatar on Wednesday to use its influence over Iran to persuade the country's leadership to reach an agreement with the U.S. to dial back its rapidly advancing nuclear program.

Trump, who is visiting the Gulf nation as part of a three-country Mideast swing, made the appeal during a state dinner held in his honor by Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

Qatar, over the years, has played the role of intermediary between the U.S. and Iran and its proxies, including during talks with Tehran-backed Hamas as its 19-month war with Israel grinds on.

"I hope you can help me with the Iran situation," Trump said during remarks at the formal dinner. "It's a perilous situation, and we want to do the right thing."

Trump wants Iran to stop backing militant proxy groups

The appeal to Qatar came after Trump told leaders at a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting earlier Wednesday in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that he wants "to make a deal," but Tehran must end its support of proxy groups throughout the Mideast as part of any potential agreement.

The U.S. and Iran brokered a nuclear deal in 2015, during Democrat Barack Obama's administration, in which Iran agreed to drastically reduce its stockpile of uranium and only enrich up to 3.67%. But that deal was scrapped during the first Trump administration.

Today, Iran enriches up to 60%, a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels, and has enough stockpiled for multiple nuclear bombs should it choose to build them.

The Qatari emir told Fox News Channel on Wednesday night that "we agree that we want a nuclear-free region, and we cannot afford a nuclear race in that region."

But, Al Thani said, "Iran has its right to have a nuclear — a civilian nuclear power, while not also representing any challenge or any threat for anyone in the region." He said the issue needs to be resolved diplomatically.

The U.S. and Iran have engaged in four rounds of talks since early last month about the country's nuclear program. Trump has said that he believes brokering a nuclear deal is possible but that the window is closing.

At the state dinner, he called on Iran's leadership to "get moving" or risk the situation spiraling into a head-on conflict.

"Because things like that get started and they get out of control," Trump said. "I've seen it over and over again. They go to war and things get out of control, and we're not going to let that happen."

Trump, in his appearance at the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Riyadh, also said that Tehran "must stop sponsoring terror, halt its bloody proxy wars and permanently and verifiably cease pursuit of nuclear weapons" as conditions for any deal.

The call for Iran to cease support of Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen comes as that proxy network has faced significant setbacks in the 19 months since Hamas launched its Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

In Iran, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi called Trump's remarks "deceitful" but did not directly address his demands.

Trump said that he also believed the moment was ripe "for a future free from the grip of Hezbollah terrorists." Hezbollah is severely weakened after its war last year with Israel, in which much of its top leadership was killed and after losing a key ally with the fall of former Syrian President Bashar Assad, a conduit for Iran to send arms.

Lifting sanctions on Syria

While in Riyadh, Trump also met with Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, a face-to-face engagement with the onetime insurgent leader who spent years imprisoned by U.S. forces after being captured in Iraq.

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Al-Sharaa was named president of Syria in January, a month after a stunning offensive by insurgent groups led by al-Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham stormed Damascus and ended the 54-year rule of the Assad family.

Trump said he decided to meet with al-Sharaa after being encouraged to do so by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He also pledged to lift yearslong sanctions on Syria.

The White House billed the al-Sharaa meeting as a brief "pull aside" that ended up lasting 33 minutes.

Trump told reporters that the meeting went "great" and described him as a "young, attractive guy" with a "very strong past."

"He's got a real shot at holding it together," Trump said.

Formerly known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, al-Sharaa joined the ranks of al-Qaida insurgents battling U.S. forces in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion. He still faces a warrant for his arrest on terrorism charges in Iraq. The U.S. once offered \$10 million for information about his whereabouts because of his links to al-Qaida.

Al-Sharaa returned to his home country of Syria after the conflict began in 2011 and led al-Qaida's branch called the Nusra Front. He changed the name of his group to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and cut links with al-Qaida.

The sanctions go back to the rule of Bashar Assad, who was ousted in December, and were intended to inflict major pain on his economy.

Qatar rolls out the red carpet for Trump

In Qatar, Trump was greeted at the airport by Al Thani. Air Force One was escorted by Qatari F-15 jets as it neared Doha, the capital city.

As he sat down for talks at Amiri Diwan, the administrative office of the emir, Trump told the Qatari leader he was impressed with the "perfecto" marble as well as the camels that took part in the arrival ceremony.

The emir said he had high hopes for Trump's efforts with Iran and at ending the war in Gaza.

"I know that you are a man of peace," he said. "I know that you want to bring peace to this region."

Qatar, like the other Gulf Arab states, is an autocratic nation where political parties are banned and speech is tightly controlled.

But Qatar has also served as a valuable partner to the U.S. The country is also home to Al-Udeid Air Base, a sprawling facility that hosts the forward headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command.

The oil-and-gas-rich country is also in the center of a controversy over its offer to provide Trump with the gift of a luxury Boeing 747-8 that the U.S. could use as Air Force One while new versions of the plane are under construction by Boeing.

The Qatari government has said a final decision hasn't been made. Trump has defended the idea even as critics argue it would amount to a president accepting an astonishingly valuable gift from a foreign government.

Trump has indicated he would refurbish the aircraft and it would later be donated to his post-White House presidential library. He says he would not use the plane once he leaves office.

Trump will head to the United Arab Emirates on Thursday for the final stop of his Mideast tour.

Weinstein accuser rips defense lawyer: 'You should be ashamed of yourself'

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A former model reproached one of Harvey Weinstein's lawyers for suggesting that her sexual abuse allegations against the ex-studio boss are lies.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Kaja Sokola retorted. In her fifth and final day of testimony at Weinstein's sex crimes retrial, she maintained that she was telling the truth and that Weinstein's alleged conduct in her teens had changed the course of her life.

"It changed the course of your life in that you got \$3.5 million from false accusations?" defense lawyer Mike Cibella pressed, referring to compensation she was awarded through civil proceedings in recent years.

"No. That's very unfair," Sokola said softly. "That's not true."

During her days on the witness stand, she said Weinstein repeatedly offered to foster her acting ambitions but then made unwanted physical advances, beginning when she was 16 in 2002.

Weinstein, 73, faces a sexual assault charge related solely to her allegation that he forced oral sex on her when she was 19. He also faces charges based on two other women's claims. He has pleaded not guilty to all the charges, and his attorneys assert that his accusers had consensual sexual encounters with the Oscar-winning producer because they wanted movie and TV work.

Weinstein's lawyers grilled Sokola about her requests for career help from him after the alleged assault, her motives for her civil lawsuits and criminal trial testimony, as well as her personal struggles, and even a private journal she kept for an alcohol-abuse program in her native Poland.

After apparently getting the decade-old writings via the witness' sister, the defense was allowed to bring up portions in which Sokola said two other men had sexually assaulted her over the years but didn't say the same about Weinstein. Instead, she wrote that he promised her help but didn't deliver.

Sokola testified Wednesday that she had left out Weinstein's alleged sexual abuse partly because she couldn't come to terms with it at the time. Also, she said, her sponsor was in the film business in Poland and knew who Weinstein was.

Cibella questioned that explanation, noting that the text mentioned only "Harvey W" and nothing about his profession. Sokola said her sponsor nonetheless knew his identity because they talked about it.

Tearing up as she spoke, she said she hadn't seen the black notebook for 10 years, never gave anyone permission to share it and was stunned and appalled to be confronted with it in court.

"I felt very violated," said Sokola, now 39 and a psychotherapist.

She was the second of Weinstein's accusers to testify at the retrial, and the only one who wasn't involved in his first trial in 2020. That proceeding led to a landmark #MeToo-era conviction that was subsequently overturned, setting up the retrial. Prosecutors decided to add Sokola's allegations to it.

Another woman, Miriam Haley, already has told jurors at the retrial that Weinstein forcibly performed oral sex on her in 2006. The third accuser, Jessica Mann, is expected to testify in the coming days or weeks. She alleges that Weinstein raped her in 2013.

The Associated Press generally does not name people who allege they have been sexually assaulted unless they give permission to be identified. Haley, Mann and Sokola have done so.

The Menendez brothers case reflects a shifting culture across decades

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The trials of Lyle and Erik Menendez came at a time of cultural obsession with courts, crime and murder, when live televised trials captivated a national audience.

Their resentencing — and the now very real possibility of their freedom — came at another, when true crime documentaries and docudramas have proliferated and brought renewed attention to the family.

A judge made the Menendez brothers eligible for parole Tuesday when he reduced their sentences from life without parole to 50 years to life for the 1989 murder of their father Jose Menendez and mother Kitty Menendez in their Beverly Hills home. The state parole board will now determine whether they can be released.

Their two trials bookended the O.J. Simpson trial, creating a mid-1990s phenomenon where courts subsumed soap operas as riveting daytime television.

"People were not used to having cameras in the courtroom. For the first time we were seeing the drama of justice in real time," said Vinnie Politan, a Court TV anchor who hosts the nightly "Closing Arguments" on the network. "Everyone was watching cable and everyone had that common experience. Today there's a true crime bonanza happening, but it's splintered off into so many different places."

The brothers became an immediate sensation with their 1990 arrest. They represented a pre-tech-boom image of young wealthy men as portrayed in many a 1980s movie: the tennis-playing, Princeton-bound prep.

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For many viewers, this image was confirmed by the spending spree they went on after the killings. Their case continued a fascination with the dark, private lives of the young and wealthy that goes back at least to the Leopold and Loeb murder case of the 1930s, but had been in the air in cases like the Billionaire Boys Club, a 1980s Ponzi scheme that spurred a murder.

The first Menendez trial becomes compelling live TV

Their first trials in 1993 and 1994 became a landmark for then-new Court TV, which aired it nearly in its entirety. Defense lawyers conceded that they had shot their parents. The jury, and the public, then had to consider whether the brothers' testimony about sexual and other abuse from their father was plausible, and should mean conviction on a lesser charge.

The lasting image from the trial was Lyle Menendez crying on the stand as he described the abuse.

At the time there had been some public reckoning with the effects of sex abuse, but not nearly to the extent of today.

The two juries — one for each brother — deadlocked, largely along gender lines. It reflected the broader cultural reaction — with women supporting a manslaughter conviction and men a guilty verdict for first-degree murder.

A tough-on-crime era, and a Menendez trial sequel

The trials came at a time when crime in the U.S. was at an all-time high, a tough-on-crime stance was a prerequisite for holding major political office, and a wave of legislation mandating harsher sentences was passed.

That attitude appeared to prevail when, at their second trial, the brothers were both convicted of first-degree murder.

As Associated Press trial reporter Linda Deutsch, who covered both trials along with Simpson's and countless others, wrote in 1996:

"This time, the jury rejected the defense claim that the brothers murdered their parents after years of sexual abuse. Instead, it embraced the prosecution theory that the killings were planned and that the brothers were greedy, spoiled brats who murdered to get their parents' \$14 million fortune."

The second trial was not televised and got less attention.

"There were no cameras, it was in the shadow of O.J. so it didn't have the same spark and pop as the first one," Politan said.

The Menendez brothers become a distant memory

They had become too well-known to be forgotten, but for decades, the Menendez brothers faded into the background. Occasional stories emerged about the brothers losing their appeals, as did mugshots of them aging in prison.

"The public's memory of them was, 'Yeah, I remember that trial, the guys with the sweaters in court,'" Politan said.

That would change in the era of true-crime TV, podcasts and streamers.

True crime goes big

The 2017 NBC drama series "Law & Order True Crime: The Menendez Murders," wasn't widely watched, but still brought the case new attention. The next decade would prove more important.

The 2022 Max docuseries "Menudo: Forever Young" included a former member saying he was raped by Jose Menendez when he was 14. At about the same time, the brothers submitted a letter that Erik wrote to his cousin about his father's abuse before the killings.

The new true-crime wave would continue to promote them, even if the portrayal wasn't always flattering.

"Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story," a drama created by Ryan Murphy on Netflix, made them beautiful and vain buffoons, and the actors were shown shirtless on provocative billboards. Javier Bardem as Jose Menendez brought Oscar-winning star power to the project that dropped in September of last year.

That was followed a month later by a documentary on Netflix, "The Menendez Brothers."

Together, the shows had the public paying more attention to the case than it had since the trials. Almost simultaneously came a real-life turning point, when then- Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascón said he was reviewing new evidence in the case.

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The office of Gascón's successor, Nathan Hochman, opposed the resentencing.

Deputy District Attorney Habib Balian constantly sought at hearings to make sure the "carnage" caused by the brothers wasn't forgotten, and repeatedly emphasized that they "shotgunned, brutally, their parents to death."

But the shifts in public perception and legal actions were already in motion. The judge's decision to reduce their charges came not with the drama of the televised trial, but in a short hearing in a courtroom that wouldn't allow cameras. The broader public never saw.

Despite his opposition, Hochman was reflective in a statement after the resentencing.

"The case of the Menendez brothers has long been a window for the public to better understand the judicial system," Hochman said. "This case, like all cases — especially those that captivate the public — must be viewed with a critical eye. Our opposition and analysis ensured that the Court received a complete and accurate record of the facts. Justice should never be swayed by spectacle."

Georgetown University student released from immigration detention after federal judge's ruling

By OLIVIA DIAZ, KENDRIA LaFLEUR and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

ALVARADO, Texas (AP) — A Georgetown University scholar from India who was arrested in the Trump administration's crackdown on foreign college students was released from immigration detention Wednesday after a federal judge's ruling.

Badar Khan Suri will go home to his family in Virginia while he awaits the outcome of his petition against the Trump administration for wrongful arrest and detention in violation of the First Amendment and other constitutional rights. He is also facing deportation proceedings in an immigration court in Texas.

"Justice delayed is justice denied," Khan Suri told reporters after his release from a detention facility in Alvarado, near Dallas. "It took two months, but I'm extremely thankful that finally I'm free."

Immigration authorities have detained college students from across the country — many of whom participated in campus protests over the Israel-Hamas war — since the first days of the Trump administration. Khan Suri is the latest to win release from custody, along with Rumeysa Ozturk, a Tufts University student from Turkey, and Mohsen Mahdawi, a Palestinian student at Columbia University.

U.S. District Judge Patricia Tolliver Giles in Alexandria, Virginia, said she was releasing Khan Suri because she felt he had substantial constitutional claims against the Trump administration. She also considered the needs of his family and said she didn't believe he was a danger to the community.

"Speech regarding the conflict there and opposing Israel's military campaign is likely protected political speech," Giles said. "And thus he was likely engaging in protected speech."

The judge added: "The First Amendment does not distinguish between citizens and noncitizens."

March arrest in Virginia

Khan Suri was arrested by masked, plain-clothed officers on the evening of March 17 outside his apartment complex in Arlington, Virginia. He was then put on a plane to Louisiana and later to a detention center in Texas.

The Trump administration has said that it revoked Khan Suri's visa because of his social media posts and his wife's connection to Gaza as a Palestinian American. They accused him of supporting Hamas, which the U.S. has designated as a terrorist organization.

Khan Suri and his wife, Mapheze Saleh, have been targeted because Saleh's father worked with the Hamas-backed Gazan government for more than a decade, but before Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, Khan Suri's attorneys say.

According to the U.S. government, Khan Suri has undisputed family ties to the terrorist organization, which he "euphemistically refers to as 'the government of Gaza.'" But the American Civil Liberties Union has said that Khan Suri hardly knew the father, Ahmed Yousef.

Giles acknowledged the Trump administration's need to prioritize national security but said that "whatever deference may be appropriate, concerns of national security" do not supersede the judiciary.

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David Byerley, a Justice Department attorney, had argued against Khan Suri's release. He told the judge that Khan Suri's First Amendment case is inextricably intertwined with the deportation case in Texas, so he should stay there.

After the court hearing, Khan Suri's lawyers declared victory and criticized the Trump administration for "disappearing" people over their ideas.

"He should have never had his First Amendment rights, which protect all of us regardless of citizenship, trampled on because ideas are not illegal," said Sophia Gregg, an ACLU attorney. "Americans don't want to live in a country where the federal government disappears people whose views it doesn't like. If they can do this to Dr. Suri, they can do this to anyone."

'Extremely happy' to be released

Khan Suri, an Indian citizen, came to the U.S. in 2022 through a J-1 visa, working at Georgetown as a visiting scholar and postdoctoral fellow. He and his wife have three children: a 9-year-old son and 5-year-old twins.

Before his arrest, he taught a course on majority and minority human rights in South Asia, according to court records. The filings said he hoped to become a professor and embark on a career in academia.

After his release, Khan Suri told reporters that he has studied conflict around the world and has sympathies for Jews and Arabs. He also thanked Jewish people and rabbis who came out in support of him.

He described his arrest as "Kafkaesque."

"They said, 'Hey, are you, Badar? You're under arrest.' I said, 'For what?' They said, 'We will tell you later,' " he recalled. "And that thing never happened. They never said what wrong I did. My only wrong maybe is that I married a Palestinian girl, who is an American citizen, by the way."

"They made a subhuman out of me," he added. "They took me from one center to another, not letting my family know, not letting me know that I have attorneys."

He said he's "extremely happy" to be out, but "I feel bad for the students who are still inside."

Cassie testifies that Sean 'Diddy' Combs raped her and threatened to release sex videos

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The R&B singer Cassie testified Wednesday that Sean "Diddy" Combs raped her when she ended their decade-long relationship, after he locked her in a life of physical abuse by threatening to release degrading sexual videos of her.

Addressing the Manhattan courtroom for a second day in Combs' federal sex trafficking trial, Cassie said Combs forced his way into her Los Angeles apartment and raped her on the living room floor after she said she was breaking up with him.

Cassie also said she didn't feel she could refuse Combs' demands for her to have "hundreds" of encounters with male sex workers — which he watched and controlled for hours and even days — because he would make her "look like a slut" if he made the videos public.

"I feared for my career. I feared for my family. It's just embarrassing. It's horrible and disgusting. No one should do that to anyone," said Cassie, whose legal name is Casandra Ventura.

Prosecutors showed the jury five still images from the sex videos on Wednesday. Cassie said the images depicted her at various stages of the encounters Combs called "freak-offs." One juror's eyes widened. Another shook his head from side to side.

She sued Combs in 2023, accusing him of years of physical and sexual abuse. Within hours, the suit was settled for \$20 million — a figure Cassie disclosed for the first time Wednesday — but dozens of similar legal claims followed from other women.

Prosecutors accuse Combs of exploiting his status as a powerful music executive to violently force Cassie and other women to take part in sexual encounters. He is charged with crimes including racketeering and sex trafficking by force, fraud or coercion. Several other accusers are set to testify.

Combs denies all of the allegations. His attorneys acknowledge he could be violent, but say the sex he

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and others engaged in was consensual and that nothing he did amounted to a criminal enterprise.

Combs' lawyers were expected to begin cross-examining Cassie on Thursday, when they will get the chance to challenge her credibility or poke holes in her account of what happened.

Combs, 55, has been jailed since September. He faces at least 15 years in prison if convicted. The trial is expected to last about two months.

Cassie exposes the dark side of a celebrity relationship

Cassie's testimony is exposing the dark underside of a relationship that, for years, played out publicly in pictures of the couple smiling on red carpets and celebrity events. She said she met Combs in 2005, when she was 19 and he was 37. Combs signed her to a 10-year contract with his Bad Boy Records label. Within a few years, they started dating, Cassie said.

They were photographed in 2016 attending the premiere of the film "The Perfect Match," only two days after Combs beat and kicked Cassie at a Los Angeles hotel — an attack captured on security camera footage. After the footage was leaked last year, Combs apologized. Jurors were shown that footage as well as photos of the couple at the premier.

Cassie, now 38, calm and poised after an emotional first day of testimony, said she used makeup to cover bruises and wore sunglasses to hide a black eye for the premiere. She said she sneaked into a popcorn closet at the movie theater to switch dresses for an after-party so bruises on her legs wouldn't be visible.

On another occasion in 2013, while she was packing to go to Drake's music festival in Canada, Cassie said Combs scuffled with her friends and threw her into a bed frame. She sustained a "pretty significant gash" above her left eye. Combs' security personnel brought her to a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills to get the wound stitched up, she said.

Afterward, she said she texted Combs a photo of her injured face and wrote: "So you can remember." Combs replied: "You don't know when to stop. You pushed it too far. And continued to push. Sad."

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they have been sexually abused unless they come forward publicly, as Cassie has.

Combs accused of a history of violence

Cassie testified about several other violent episodes. Early in their relationship in 2007, she said he repeatedly hit her and knocked her to the floor of a vehicle with a blow to her head. In 2011, when he learned she started dating rapper Kid Cudi, she said Combs lunged at her with a corkscrew and kicked her in the back.

After the 2011 attack, she said she lied to her mother at Christmas that it was the first time Combs hit her.

"I couldn't hurt her like that," Cassie testified. "And it was terrifying. It's not normal, constantly being bruised up by the person you love — who says they love you."

Cassie also testified that she saw Combs pull one of her friends back over the railing of a balcony in Los Angeles. She said she saw him hit a different friend of hers in the head with a hammer.

Cassie said she was experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder before ending her relationship with Combs in 2018, and was blacking out and sleepwalking.

Cassie says she had a breakdown in 2023

Cassie testified that her life reached a climatic moment in early 2023 when she had "horrible flashbacks" as she was shooting a music video. She said she went home after the video shoot and her two kids were asleep but her husband was there. Cassie said she remembered "telling him you can do this without me. You don't need me here anymore."

With that, Cassie said she couldn't take the pain anymore and "tried to walk out the front door into traffic and my husband would not let me." Weeks later, she was undergoing rehab and trauma therapy.

Asked why she's testifying at Combs' criminal trial, she said: "I can't carry this anymore. I can't carry the shame, the guilt."

Lawmakers question Kennedy on staffing cuts, funding freezes and policy changes at health department

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats and Republicans alike raised concerns on Wednesday about deep staffing cuts, funding freezes and far-reaching policy changes overseen by U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers questioned Kennedy's approach to the job, some saying that he has jeopardized vaccine uptake, cancer research and dental health in just a few short months.

In combative and at times highly personal rejoinders, Kennedy defended the Trump administration's dramatic effort to reshape the sprawling, \$1.7 trillion-a-year agency, saying it would deliver a more efficient department focused on promoting healthier lifestyles among Americans.

"There's so much chaos and disorganization in this department," Kennedy said on Wednesday during the Senate hearing. "What we're saying is let's organize in a way that we can quickly adopt and deploy all these opportunities we have to really deliver high-quality health care to the American people."

During tense exchanges, lawmakers — in back to back House and Senate hearings — sometimes questioned whether Kennedy was aware of his actions and the structure of his own department after he struggled to provide more details about staffing cuts.

"I have noted you've been unable, in most instances, to answer any specific questions related to your agency," said Sen. Angela Alsobrooks, a Maryland Democrat.

The secretary, in turn, pushed back — saying he had not had time to answer specific questions — and at points questioning lawmakers' own grasp of health policy.

Kennedy testified to explain his downsizing of the department — from 82,000 to 62,000 staffers — and argue on behalf of the White House's requested budget, which includes a \$500 million boost for Kennedy's "Make America Healthy Again" initiative to promote nutrition and healthier lifestyles while making deep cuts to infectious disease prevention, medical research and maternal health programs.

He revealed that he persuaded the White House to back down from one major cut: Head Start, a federally-funded preschool program for low-income families across the country.

But lawmakers described how thousands of job losses at the health department and funding freezes have impacted their districts.

One Washington state mother, Natalie, has faced delays in treatment for stage 4 cancer at the National Institutes of Health's Clinical Center, said Democratic Sen. Patty Murray. The clinical center is the research-only hospital commonly known as the "House of Hope," but when Murray asked Kennedy to explain how many jobs have been lost there, he could not answer. The president's budget proposes a nearly \$20 billion slash from the NIH.

"You are here to defend cutting the NIH by half," Murray said. "Do you genuinely believe that won't result in more stories like Natalie's?" Kennedy disputed Murray's account.

Democrat Rep. Bonnie Watson-Coleman of New Jersey asked "why, why, why?" Kennedy would lay off nearly all the staff who oversee the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which provides \$4.1 billion in heating assistance to needy families. The program is slated to be eliminated from the agency's budget.

Kennedy said that advocates warned him those cuts "will end up killing people," but that President Donald Trump believes his energy policy will lower costs. If that doesn't work, Kennedy said, he would restore funding for the program.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican of Alaska, said those savings would be realized too late for people in her state.

"Right now, folks in Alaska still need those ugly generators to keep warm," she said.

Murkowski was one of several Republicans who expressed concerns about Kennedy's approach to the job throughout the hearings.

Like several Republicans, Rep. Chuck Fleischmann of Tennessee praised Kennedy for his work promoting

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healthy foods. But he raised concerns about whether the secretary has provided adequate evidence that artificial food dyes are bad for diets. Removing those food dyes would hurt the “many snack manufacturers” in his district, including the makers of M&M’s candy, he said.

Rep. Mike Simpson, a dentist from Idaho, said Kennedy’s plan to remove fluoride recommendations for drinking water alarms him. The department’s press release on Tuesday, which announced the Food and Drug Administration plans to remove fluoride supplements for children from the market, wrongly claimed that fluoride “kills bacteria from the teeth,” Simpson noted. He explained to Kennedy that fluoride doesn’t kill bacteria in the mouth but instead makes tooth enamel more resistant to decay.

“I will tell you that if you are successful in banning fluoride ... we better put a lot more money into dental education because we’re going to need a lot more dentists,” Simpson added.

Kennedy was pressed repeatedly on the mixed message he’s delivered on vaccines, which public health experts have said are hampering efforts to contain a growing measles outbreak now in at least 11 states.

Responding to Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democrat of Connecticut, Kennedy refused to recommend that parents follow the nation’s childhood vaccination schedule, which includes shots for measles, polio and whooping cough. He, instead, wrongly claimed that the vaccines have not been safety tested against a placebo.

Sen. Bill Cassidy, a Republican of Louisiana and chairman of the health committee, had extracted a number of guarantees from Kennedy that he would not alter existing vaccine guidance and work at the nation’s health department. Cassidy, correcting Kennedy, pointed out that rotavirus, measles and HPV vaccines recommended for children have all been tested in a placebo study.

As health secretary, Kennedy has called the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine — a shot given to children to provide immunity from all three diseases — “leaky,” although it offers lifetime protection from the measles for most people. He’s also said they cause deaths, although none has been documented among healthy people.

“You have undermined the vital role vaccines play in preventing disease during the single, largest measles outbreak in 25 years,” Democratic Sen. Bernie Sanders said.

Brazil’s Lula says he would try to urge Putin to ‘go to Istanbul and negotiate’ with Zelenskyy

By The Associated Press undefined

Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said Wednesday he would try to urge Russian President Vladimir Putin to attend possible peace talks this week with Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelenskyy, amid suspense over whether Putin would take part in the proposed meeting in Turkey.

Putin proposed restarting direct talks “without preconditions” on Thursday in Istanbul about the more than three-year war. Zelenskyy then challenged the Kremlin leader to meet in Turkey in person.

Lula has maintained close ties with Putin despite Russia’s invasion of Ukraine — a position that has caused tensions with the Kyiv government and raised eyebrows in the West.

Lula on Wednesday stopped over in Moscow on his return from a state visit in China, where he told journalists: “When I get to Moscow, I’m going to try to talk to Putin. It won’t cost me anything to say, ‘Hey, comrade Putin, go to Istanbul and negotiate.’”

They did not meet, but the Kremlin said he and Putin spoke by phone. The Kremlin said Lula referenced the peace talks and “intends to do everything in his power to ensure their success.” It said Putin expressed gratitude for efforts to find ways to resolve the conflict.

The Kremlin did not mention any discussions of Putin’s possible travel to Istanbul.

Lula’s communications department said the Brazilian leader encouraged Putin to attend the talks, acknowledging, however, that it’s the Russian leader’s prerogative to select the delegation for the meeting.

The Kremlin on Wednesday said Putin’s aide Vladimir Medinsky will head the Russian delegation, which will also include Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin and Igor Kostyukov, chief of the General Staff’s main directorate.

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Medinsky led the Russian delegation at peace talks that took place in Belarus and Turkey in the first weeks of the war in 2022.

The list did not include Putin himself.

Ukraine's presidential adviser, Mykhailo Podolyak, said Zelenskyy will sit at the table only with the Russian leader.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio is among U.S. officials due to be in Turkey for the talks.

In May 2024, China and Brazil issued a joint peace plan that called for a peace conference with Russia and Ukraine and no expansion of the battlefield, but Zelenskyy dismissed it.

On Tuesday, Brazil and China released a joint statement hoping that "a direct dialogue between the parties can begin as soon as possible."

The U.S. and Western European leaders have threatened Russia with further sanctions if there is no progress in halting the fighting in Ukraine.

France's foreign minister said he is working with U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a leading ally of U.S. President Donald Trump, on a potential new package of what he called "devastating" sanctions.

The measures would aim to "asphyxiate once and for all the Russian economy" and squeeze Russia "by the throat," with possible 500% import tariffs on Russian oil and countries that buy it, French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot said. He told French broadcaster BFMTV he would see Graham on Thursday in Turkey.

Sanctions already adopted by Ukraine's allies have failed to stop Putin.

Russian forces have been readying a fresh military offensive to maximize pressure on Ukraine and strengthen the Kremlin's negotiating position, Ukrainian government and military analysts say.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank, said Tuesday that Russia is "attempting to prolong negotiations to extract additional concessions from the United States and while making additional battlefield advances."

What the EPA's partial rollback of the 'forever chemical' drinking water rule means

By MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

On Wednesday, the Environmental Protection Agency announced plans to weaken limits on some harmful "forever chemicals" in drinking water roughly a year after the Biden administration finalized the first-ever national standards.

The Biden administration said last year the rules could reduce PFAS exposure for millions of people. It was part of a broader push by officials then to address drinking water quality by writing rules to require the removal of toxic lead pipes and, after years of activist concern, address the threat of forever chemicals.

President Donald Trump has sought fewer environmental rules and more oil and gas development. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin has carried out that agenda by announcing massive regulatory rollbacks.

Now, we know the EPA plans to rescind limits for certain PFAS and lengthen deadlines for two of the most common types. Here are some of the essential things to know about PFAS chemicals and what the EPA decided to do:

Please explain what PFAS are to me

PFAS, or perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are a group of chemicals that have been around for decades and have now spread into the nation's air, water and soil.

They were manufactured by companies such as 3M, Chemours and others because they were incredibly useful. They helped eggs slide across nonstick frying pans, ensured that firefighting foam suffocates flames and helped clothes withstand the rain and keep people dry.

The chemicals resist breaking down, however, which means they stay around in the environment.

And why are they bad for humans?

Environmental activists say that PFAS manufacturers knew about the health harms of PFAS long before they were made public. The same attributes that make the chemicals so valuable – resistance to break-down – make them hazardous to people.

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PFAS accumulates in the body, which is why the Biden administration set limits for two common types, often called PFOA and PFOS, at 4 parts per trillion that are phased out of manufacturing but still present in the environment.

There is a wide range of health harms now associated with exposure to certain PFAS. Cases of kidney disease, low-birth weight and high cholesterol in addition to certain cancers can be prevented by removing PFAS from water, according to the EPA.

The guidance on PFOA and PFOS has changed dramatically in recent years as scientific understanding has advanced. The EPA in 2016, for example, said the combined amount of the two substances should not exceed 70 parts per trillion. The Biden administration later said no amount is safe.

There is nuance in what the EPA did

The EPA plans to scrap limits on three types of PFAS, some of which are less well known. They include GenX substances commonly found in North Carolina as well as substances called PFHxS and PFNA. There is also a limit on a mixture of PFAS, which the agency is also planning to rescind.

It appears few utilities will be impacted by the withdrawal of limits for these types of PFAS. So far, sampling has found nearly 12% of U.S. water utilities are above the Biden administration's limits. But most utilities face problems with PFOA or PFOS.

For the two commonly found types, PFOA and PFOS, the EPA will keep the current limits in place but give utilities two more years — until 2031 — to meet them.

Announcement is met with mixed reaction

Some environmental groups argue that the EPA can't legally weaken the regulations. The Safe Water Drinking Act gives the EPA authority to limit water contaminants, and it includes a provision meant to prevent new rules from being looser than previous ones.

"The law is very clear that the EPA can't repeal or weaken the drinking water standard," said Erik Olson, a senior strategist at the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council.

Environmental activists have generally slammed the EPA for not keeping the Biden-era rules in place, saying it will worsen public health.

Industry had mixed reactions. The American Chemistry Council questioned the Biden administration's underlying science that supported the tight rules and said the Trump administration had considered the concerns about cost and the underlying science.

"However, EPA's actions only partially address this issue, and more is needed to prevent significant impacts on local communities and other unintended consequences," the industry group said.

Leaders of two major utility industry groups, the American Water Works Association and Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies, said they supported the EPA's decision to rescind a novel approach to limit a mix of chemicals. But they also said the changes do not substantially reduce the cost of the PFAS rule.

Some utilities wanted a higher limit on PFOA and PFOS, according to Mark White, drinking water leader at the engineering firm CDM Smith.

They did, however, get an extension.

"This gives water pros more time to deal with the ones we know are bad, and we are going to need more time. Some utilities are just finding out now where they stand," said Mike McGill, president of WaterPIO, a water industry communications firm.

How ancient reptile footprints are rewriting the history of when animals evolved to live on land

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scientists in Australia have identified the oldest known fossil footprints of a reptile-like animal, dated to around 350 million years ago.

The discovery suggests that after the first animals emerged from the ocean around 400 million years ago, they evolved the ability to live exclusively on land much faster than previously assumed.

"We had thought the transition from fin to limb took much longer," said California State University pale-

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ontologist Stuart Sumida, who was not involved in the new research.

Previously the earliest known reptile footprints, found in Canada, were dated to 318 million years ago.

The ancient footprints from Australia were found on a slab of sandstone recovered near Melbourne and show reptile-like feet with long toes and hooked claws.

Scientists estimate the animal was about 2 1/2 feet (80 centimeters) long and may have resembled a modern monitor lizard. The findings were published Wednesday in *Nature*.

The hooked claws are a crucial identification clue, said study co-author and paleontologist Per Ahlberg at Uppsala University in Sweden.

"It's a walking animal," he said.

Only animals that evolved to live solely on land ever developed claws. The earliest vertebrates -- fish and amphibians -- never developed hard nails and remained dependent on watery environments to lay eggs and reproduce.

But the branch of the evolutionary tree that led to modern reptiles, birds and mammals -- known as amniotes -- developed feet with nails or claws fit for walking on hard ground.

"This is the earliest evidence we've ever seen of an animal with claws," said Sumida.

At the time the ancient reptile lived, the region was hot and steamy and vast forests began to cover the planet. Australia was part of the supercontinent Gondwana.

The fossil footprints record a series of events in one day, Ahlberg said. One reptile scampered across the ground before a light rain fell. Some raindrop dimples partially obscured its trackways. Then two more reptiles ran by in the opposite direction before the ground hardened and was covered in sediment.

Fossil "trackways are beautiful because they tell you how something lived, not just what something looked like," said co-author John Long, a paleontologist at Flinders University in Australia.

Tom Cruise brings 'Final Reckoning' to Cannes, but won't bid 'Mission: Impossible' adieu yet

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

CANNES, France (AP) — Three years after flying into the Cannes Film Festival with "Top Gun: Maverick," Tom Cruise again kicked up a storm on the Croisette with Wednesday's premiere of "Mission: Impossible — Final Reckoning."

Christopher McQuarrie's latest "Mission: Impossible" installment was the biggest Hollywood tentpole wading ashore in Cannes this year. It, and Cruise, stirred a frenzy at the French Riviera festival, which again played eager host to the American movie star.

Just his arrival outside the premiere, beamed onto the screen in the Grand Théâtre Lumière, drew a response. When Cruise stepped out his car, oohs and applause reverberated through the theater. Cruise spent several minutes signing autographs for fans lined up on the Croisette.

Some had wondered whether Cruise might make a more daring arrival. When Cruise received an honorary Palme d'Or from the festival in 2022, the "Top Gun: Maverick" premiere included an impressively timed jet flyover. Instead, on Day 2 of the festival, he and the film's cast walked the red carpet accompanied by an orchestra performing Lalo Schiffrin's "Mission: Impossible" theme on the Palais steps. "Bravo!" cheered Cruise.

Though selfies are frowned upon on the Cannes red carpet, McQuarrie took several of the group, which included Hayley Atwell, Simon Pegg, Angela Bassett and Hannah Waddingham.

"Final Reckoning," the eighth "Mission: Impossible" movie and a follow-up to 2023's "Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One," is again a heaping serving of outlandish stunts in a globe-trotting, world-saving plot that greatly relies on Cruise's sheer force of will to propel it.

The film, which draws to a close McQuarrie's extended AI apocalypse tale, drew mostly good reviews following its screening and garnered a five-minute standing ovation.

"To be here in Cannes and have these moments, as a kid when we were growing up, I really can't even dream about something like this happening," Cruise said, addressing the audience. "I'm very grateful for

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30 years to be able to entertain you with this franchise."

Throughout much of the "Mission: Impossible" parade in Cannes, Cruise and McQuarrie lavished praise upon one another. Cruise told McQuarrie, who took over directing the franchise with 2015's "Rogue Nation" that he looked forward to making "a bunch of other kind of movies with you."

"When I was a kid growing up, I was one of those kids who didn't quite fit in. A lot of my life was imaginative play," said McQuarrie. "And I got to grow up and have my very own action figure, who was actually willing to do just about every crazy thing I could think of."

Earlier in the day, Cruise joined McQuarrie midway through the director's masterclass talk. There was no press conference for the film, which meant Cruise and company faced no questions from reporters. But Cruise's surprise appearance allowed the 62-year-old star a moment to reflect on his 30 years with "Mission: Impossible." As to whether "Final Reckoning" is a last hurrah for him, he demurred, calling it "the culmination of three decades of work."

"I'd rather just people see it and enjoy," Cruise said.

Cruise, to no one's surprise, said he relishes the stunt work in "Mission: Impossible."

"I don't mind encountering the unknown. I like the feeling. It's just an emotion for me. It's something that is not paralyzing," Cruise said.

Cruise, McQuarrie and Paramount Pictures, which will release "Final Reckoning" in North American theaters on May 23, are hoping the installment returns the franchise to box-office heights.

"Dead Reckoning Part One" was considered a box-office disappointment, though it ultimately grossed \$571.1 million worldwide. Still, with production budgets close to \$300 million for these films, a lot is riding on "Final Reckoning." Cruise has been traversing the world — with stops in Japan, South Korea and England in the run-up to Cannes — to drum up excitement. Paramount chief executive Brian Robbins also attended the Cannes premiere.

Cruise and McQuarrie, as they did around the release of "Top Gun: Maverick" (which McQuarrie co-wrote and produced), have made themselves passionate pitchmen for the big-screen experience. McQuarrie on Wednesday granted: "I worry for the fate and survival of cinema."

"Streaming is in danger of driving the industry into extinction," said McQuarrie. "The advantage a filmmaker has entering the world is that he doesn't have the pressure of an opening weekend."

Virginia boy swept away as heavy rains and flooding hit several states

By GENE PUSKAR and SARAH BRUMFIELD Associated Press

WESTERNPORT, Md. (AP) — Officials found the body of a 12-year-old boy who was swept away by rushing water on a Virginia roadway during a storm system that also forced a dozen students to stay overnight at a Maryland high school due to heavy rains that led to flooding in several states.

A 911 caller reported Tuesday night that the boy was walking outside when he was swept away by water that overtook the roadway from a nearby creek, Albemarle County Fire Rescue said in a social media post.

What is believed to be the body of Jordan Sims was found by crews searching for him about 8:45 a.m. Wednesday, the county agency stated. He will be taken a medical examiner's office in Richmond for positive identification.

"This is a heartbreaking outcome, and our hearts are with the Sims' family and loved ones," Albemarle County Fire Rescue Chief Dan Eggleston said in a statement. "We are incredibly grateful to our local and regional partners who supported this search effort with urgency, professionalism, and care."

In far western Maryland's Allegany County, officials said about 150 students and 50 adults were evacuated Tuesday afternoon from Westernport Elementary School as floodwaters breached the second floor. Crews used rescue boats to transport the children to higher ground.

The small rural community of Westernport saw its downtown completely inundated for the first time in decades. Rapidly rising waters caught residents by surprise when a rainy day suddenly turned into an

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emergency situation.

"We went from just kind of puddles on the street to the whole town underwater in at most an hour," said Chris Lafferty, deputy chief of Tri-Towns EMS in Westernport. "It turned basically all of downtown into a river."

With a population under 2,000 people, Westernport is located in the far corner of western Maryland. Its modest downtown took shape in a valley where Georges Creek flows into the North Branch Potomac River.

People were also forced to relocate at two other county schools on Tuesday. Allegany County Public Schools said 12 students stayed overnight at Mountain Ridge High School before being picked up Wednesday morning. County schools were closed Wednesday.

Emergency officials said no one had been reported missing or injured, but residents were urged to stay home anyway because several secondary roads had been washed out.

The Potomac River remained within its banks, with only minor flooding reported and conditions generally improving, officials said. Crews were assessing damage after water receded in the Georges Creek area.

By Wednesday afternoon, the sun was shining and many residents had already spent hours scraping, shoveling and hauling massive quantities of mud. Crews used heavy equipment to clear mud from the streets and carted it away by dump truck.

They started cleaning out the town's library and a fire station, where receding floodwaters left behind a thick layer of sludge. From backhoes to mops, people grabbed whatever they could find and pitched in.

"Everybody's coming together just trying to clean up," Lafferty said.

Much of Allegany County received about 3 to 5 inches (8 to 13 centimeters) of rain Tuesday. Rainfall records were broken in some spots of the region, said Anna Stuck, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. Baltimore/Washington International Airport broke a rainfall record for the day, as did the city of Martinsburg, West Virginia.

More rain was on the way Wednesday, and while not as much was expected as on Tuesday, people should tune in for warnings, watches and advisories, Stuck said.

"Because of the rain yesterday, it won't take much," she said. "It will take less precipitation for it to flood because the ground is so saturated."

Maryland's Department of Emergency Management activated its emergency operations center to coordinate the state's response. Roads in both Allegany and Garrett counties were closed because of flooding, according to state officials. Allegany County officials reported that floodwaters have caused washouts and gas line leaks.

"We remain in close contact with local officials and continue to coordinate resources as the rain continues to fall," Gov. Wes Moore said in a press release. "I urge all Marylanders to remain vigilant, heed warnings from local officials, and prioritize safety during this time."

In West Virginia, Gov. Patrick Morrisey declared a state of emergency Tuesday night in Mineral County, near Maryland, because of heavy rains and flash flooding, allowing the state to send resources.

Trump meets with Syria's interim president, a first between the nations' leaders in 25 years

By ZEKE MILLER, JON GAMBRELL and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump met with interim Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, the first encounter between the two nations' leaders in 25 years and one that could serve as a turning point for Syria as it struggles to emerge from decades of international isolation.

The meeting, on the sidelines of Trump's get-together with the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, marks a major turn of events for a Syria still adjusting to life after the over 50-year, iron-gripped rule of the Assad family, and for its new leader, who once had a \$10 million U.S. bounty for his arrest.

Trump praised al-Sharaa to reporters after the meeting, saying he was a "young, attractive guy. Tough

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guy. Strong past. Very strong past. Fighter.”

Under the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, al-Sharaa had ties to al-Qaida and joined insurgents battling U.S. forces in Iraq before entering the Syrian war. He was even imprisoned by U.S. troops there for several years.

“He’s got a real shot at holding it together,” Trump said. “He’s a real leader. He led a charge, and he’s pretty amazing.”

Trump had announced the day before as he kicked off his three-nation Middle East tour in Riyadh that he would also move to lift U.S. sanctions imposed on Syria under the deposed autocrat Bashar Assad.

People across Syria cheered in the streets and set off fireworks on Tuesday night to celebrate, hopeful their nation — locked out of credit cards and global finance — might rejoin the world’s economy when they need investments the most.

The meeting came even after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had earlier asked Trump not to lift sanctions on Syria, again underscoring a growing discontent between the White House and the Israeli government as its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip rages on.

Trump told the Gulf Cooperation Council after his meeting with al-Sharaa that he was ending sanctions on Syria in order to give the country “a fresh start.”

“It gives them a chance for greatness. The sanctions were really crippling, very powerful,” Trump said.

Trump said al-Sharaa had agreed to join the Abraham Accords and eventually recognize Israel, but Syria hasn’t confirmed that. Trump told reporters, “I think they have to get themselves straightened up. I told him, ‘I hope you’re going to join when it’s straightened out.’ He said, ‘Yes.’ But they have a lot of work to do.”

A historic closed-door meeting

Trump said on Tuesday that he would meet al-Sharaa, who flew in to the Saudi capital for the face-to-face.

Even before its ruinous civil war that began in 2011, Syria struggled under a tightly controlled socialist economy and under sanctions by the U.S. as a state sponsor of terror since 1979.

Al-Sharaa is the first Syrian leader to meet an American president since Hafez Assad met Bill Clinton in Geneva in 2000. The Trump-al-Sharaa meeting took place behind closed doors, and the White House later said it ran for just over 30 minutes.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan joined the meeting with Trump, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and al-Sharaa via phone. Turkey was a main backer to al-Sharaa and his rebel faction.

“I felt very strongly that this would give them a chance,” Trump said of Syria. “It’s not going to be easy anyway, so gives them a good strong chance. And it was my honor to do so.”

What happened in the meeting?

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement that Trump urged al-Sharaa to diplomatically recognize Israel, “tell all foreign terrorists to leave Syria” and help the U.S. stop any resurgence of the Islamic State group.

Trump, a Republican, also asked for the Syrian government to “assume responsibility” for over a dozen detention centers holding some 9,000 suspected members of the Islamic State group, Leavitt added. The prisons are run by the U.S.-backed and Kurdish-led forces that spearheaded the military campaign against the extremists and controlled the last sliver of land they once held in March 2019.

As part of a deal reached in March between the Syrian government and the Kurdish-led forces, all border crossings with Iraq and Turkey, airports and oil fields in the Northeast would be brought under the central government’s control by the end of the year.

Trump’s desire for Syria to take over the prisons also signals the potential of a full American military withdrawal from Syria.

Syria’s Foreign Ministry said Trump and al-Sharaa discussed the Syrian-U.S. partnership in fighting terror and armed groups such as IS standing in the way of stability.

Al-Sharaa’s militant past sparks Israeli concern

Al-Sharaa was named interim president of Syria in January, a month after a stunning offensive by insurgent groups led by al-Sharaa’s Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, that stormed Damascus, ending the 54-year rule of the Assad family.

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Many Gulf Arab leaders have rallied behind the new government in Damascus and want Trump to follow, believing it is a bulwark against Iran's return to influence in Syria, where it had helped prop up Assad's government during a decadelong civil war.

But longtime U.S. ally Israel has been deeply skeptical of al-Sharaa's extremist past and cautioned against swift recognition of the new government. The request came during Netanyahu's visit to Washington last month, according to an Israeli official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the subject.

Israel was concerned a cross-border attack similar to Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, assault could come from Syria. Israel also fears al-Sharaa and his Islamist past could pose a threat on its northern border.

Trump's move draws cheers from Syrians

Syrians cheered the announcement by Trump that the U.S. will move to lift sanctions on the beleaguered Middle Eastern nation.

The state-run SANA news agency published video and photographs of Syrians cheering in Umayyad Square, the largest in the country's capital, Damascus. Others honked their car horns or waved the new Syrian flag in celebration.

People whistled and cheered as fireworks lit the night sky.

A statement from Syria's Foreign Ministry called the announcement "a pivotal turning point for the Syrian people as we seek to emerge from a long and painful chapter of war."

"The removal of these sanctions offers a vital opportunity for Syria to pursue stability, self-sufficiency and meaningful national reconstruction, led by and for the Syrian people," the statement added.

Ford recalls nearly 274,000 Navigator and Expedition SUVs due to risk of loss of brake function

NEW YORK (AP) — Ford is recalling nearly 274,000 of its Expedition and Lincoln-branded Navigator SUVs across the U.S. due to an issue that may cause a loss of brake function while driving, increasing crash risks.

According to documents published by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the front brake lines in these now-recalled cars "may be in contact" with their engine air cleaner outlet pipe due to a potential installation defect. That can result in a brake fluid leak and/or a loss of brake function.

The recall covers 223,315 Expeditions and 50,474 Navigators between model years 2022 and 2024. Ford expects that just 1% of these vehicles have the defect, per a recall report dated Friday.

Ford is not aware of any accidents or injuries related to this recall — but the Michigan-based auto giant had received 45 warranty reports of front brake line leaks as of April 17, NHTSA documents note.

As a remedy, Ford and Lincoln dealers will inspect the front brake line of impacted vehicles and replace it or the air cleaner outlet pipe if necessary, free of charge. Dealer notifications were planned to begin Wednesday, the recall report notes, with owner letters set to be mailed out between May 26 and May 30.

In the meantime, drivers can also confirm if their specific vehicle is included in this recall and find more information using the NHTSA site or Ford's recall lookup. The company's number for this recall is 25S47.

Impacted drivers may experience an increase in pedal travel, NHTSA documents warn, meaning the pedal would need to be pressed harder to apply the brakes. And if there's a leaking brake line, the fluid level will decrease over time — potentially causing the red brake warning indicator to light up.

A spokesperson for Ford had no additional comments when reached by The Associated Press on Wednesday.

US overdose deaths fell 27% last year, the largest one-year decline ever seen

By MIKE STOBBE and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

There were 30,000 fewer U.S. drug overdose deaths in 2024 than the year before — the largest one-year decline ever recorded.

An estimated 80,000 people died from overdoses last year, according to provisional Centers for Disease

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Control and Prevention data released Wednesday. That's down 27% from the 110,000 in 2023.

The CDC has been collecting comparable data for 45 years. The previous largest one-year drop was 4% in 2018, according to the agency's National Center for Health Statistics.

All but two states saw declines last year, with Nevada and South Dakota experiencing small increases. Some of the biggest drops were in Ohio, West Virginia and other states that have been hard-hit in the nation's decades-long overdose epidemic.

Experts say more research needs to be done to understand what drove the reduction, but they mention several possible factors. Among the most cited:

- Increased availability of the overdose-reversing drug naloxone.
- Expanded addiction treatment.
- Shifts in how people use drugs.
- The growing impact of billions of dollars in opioid lawsuit settlement money.
- The number of at-risk Americans is shrinking, after waves of deaths in older adults and a shift in teens and younger adults away from the drugs that cause most deaths.

Still, annual overdose deaths are higher than they were before the COVID-19 pandemic. In a statement, the CDC noted that overdoses are still the leading cause of death for people 18-44 years old, "underscoring the need for ongoing efforts to maintain this progress."

Some experts worry that the recent decline could be slowed or stopped by reductions in federal funding and the public health workforce, or a shift away from the strategies that seem to be working.

"Now is not the time to take the foot off the gas pedal," said Dr. Daniel Ciccarone, a drug policy expert at the University of California, San Francisco.

The provisional numbers are estimates of everyone who died of overdoses in the U.S., including non-citizens. That data is still being processed, and the final numbers can sometimes differ a bit. But it's clear that there was a huge drop last year.

Experts note that there have been past moments when U.S. overdose deaths seemed to have plateaued or even started to go down, only to rise again. That happened in 2018.

But there are reasons to be optimistic.

Naloxone has become more widely available, in part because of the introduction of over-the-counter versions that don't require prescriptions.

Meanwhile, drug manufacturers, distributors, pharmacy chains and other businesses have settled lawsuits with state and local governments over the painkillers that were a main driver of overdose deaths in the past. The deals over the last decade or so have promised about \$50 billion over time, with most of it required to be used to fight addiction.

Another settlement that would be among the largest, with members of the Sackler family who own OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma agreeing to pay up to \$7 billion, could be approved this year.

The money, along with federal taxpayer funding, is going to a variety of programs, including supportive housing and harm reduction efforts, such as providing materials to test drugs for fentanyl, the biggest driver of overdoses now.

But what each state will do with that money is currently at issue. "States can either say, 'We won, we can walk away'" in the wake of the declines or they can use the lawsuit money on naloxone and other efforts, said Regina LaBelle, a former acting director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. She now heads an addiction and public policy program at Georgetown University.

President Donald Trump's administration views opioids as largely a law enforcement issue and as a reason to step up border security. It also has been reorganizing and downsizing federal health agencies.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said overdose prevention efforts will continue, but some public health experts say cuts mean the work will not go on at the same level.

U.S. Rep. Madeleine Dean, a Pennsylvania Democrat, asked Kennedy at a Wednesday hearing "why the hell" those changes are being made when the steep drop in deaths showed "we were getting somewhere." Some advocates made a similar point in a call with reporters last week.

"We believe that taking a public health approach that seeks to support — not punish — people who use

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drugs is crucial to ending the overdose crisis," said Dr. Tamara Olt, an Illinois woman whose 16-year-old son died of a heroin overdose in 2012. She is now executive director of Broken No Moore, an advocacy organization focused on substance use disorder.

Olt attributes recent declines to the growing availability of naloxone, work to make treatment available, and wider awareness of the problem.

Kimberly Douglas, an Illinois woman whose 17-year-old son died of an overdose in 2023, credited the growing chorus of grieving mothers.

"Eventually people are going to start listening," she said. "Unfortunately, it's taken 10-plus years."

NASA rover spies the first aurora at Mars that's visible to the human eye

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

NASA's Perseverance rover has detected the first aurora at Mars that's visible to the human eye, good news for future astronauts who can savor the view on the red planet.

European and U.S. scientists reported that the green aurora in the dusty Martian sky was generated by a solar storm last year and had three days' advance notice to set aside viewing time with the rover's cameras.

Previous auroras observed at Mars appeared only in the ultraviolet, but this one was in the visible wavelength. It resulted from a solar flare in March 2024 that was followed by a coronal mass ejection of plasma from the sun that was directed toward Mars.

These latest observations show that forecasting of northern and southern lights is now possible at Mars, allowing scientists to study space weather, said University of Oslo's Elise Wright Knutsen, whose research appeared Wednesday in the journal *Science Advances*.

"While the brightness of this event was dimmed by dust, events under better viewing conditions or more intense particle precipitation might be above the threshold for human vision and visible to future astronauts," the researchers wrote.

This was the first time an aurora had been reported from the surface of a planet other than Earth, the researchers noted. Earlier observations were made from orbit.

Launched in 2020, Perseverance has been exploring Mars' Jezero Crater since 2021, collecting dust and rock samples for eventual return to Earth. The region, now dry but once believed to be a flowing lake and river delta, could hold evidence of ancient microbial life.

Trump handshake caps Syrian leader's journey from anti-U.S. insurgent to nascent Mideast partner

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — As an al-Qaida fighter in Iraq, he was detained by the American military. As the leader of a U.S.-designated terror group fighting in Syria's civil war, he had a \$10 million bounty on his head.

As the leader of a fast-changing Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa shook hands Wednesday with U.S. President Donald Trump, who later described him as a "young, attractive guy" with a "very strong past."

The handshake, at a meeting orchestrated by the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, captured al-Sharaa's long journey from hardened jihadi to the leader of a country that is gradually shedding its pariah status as it cements ties with America's top allies in the Middle East.

Trump said he would lift crippling sanctions that were imposed on the government of deposed Syrian President Bashar Assad, who was overthrown in December, expressing hope that al-Sharaa, who led the insurgency, can move Syria in a new direction.

"He's got a real shot at holding it together," Trump said. "He's a real leader. He led a charge, and he's pretty amazing."

The news sparked celebrations across Syria, where the economy has been ravaged by 14 years of civil

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war and international isolation. But al-Sharaa still faces daunting challenges to building the kind of peaceful, tolerant Syria he has promised.

From al-Qaida extremist to statesman

Before toppling Assad, al-Sharaa was known by the jihadi nickname he adopted, Abu Mohammed al-Golani. His ties to al-Qaida stretch back to 2003, when he joined the insurgency after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

He helped al-Qaida form an offshoot in Iraq that attacked both U.S. forces and the country's Shiite majority, often using car and truck bombs. He was detained by the U.S. and held for over five years without being charged.

The group's Iraqi leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent al-Sharaa to his native Syria in 2011 after a popular uprising led to a brutal crackdown and eventually a full-blown civil war. There, al-Sharaa established an al-Qaida branch known as the Nusra Front.

The two insurgent leaders had a brutal falling out when al-Sharaa refused to join al-Baghdadi's Islamic State group and remained loyal to al-Qaida's central leadership. The Nusra Front later battled the Islamic State group.

In his first interview in 2014 on Qatari network Al Jazeera, he kept his face covered and said Syria should be governed by Islamic law, an alarming prospect for the country's Christian, Alawite and Druze minorities. Al-Sharaa also said he couldn't trust Gulf and other Arab leaders who he said had sold themselves to Washington to stay in power.

"They paid a tax, these Arab rulers, to the United States," he said.

But in the following years, he began rebranding himself and the armed group he led. In 2016, he announced that he had severed ties with al-Qaida. He began appearing in public unmasked and in military garb, and changed his group's name to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — the Organization for Liberating Syria — as it consolidated control over a swath of northwestern Syria.

His transformation — both political and sartorial — continued in 2021, when he gave an interview to an American network. This time he appeared in a shirt and trousers, with his short hair gelled back, and said his group posed no threat to the West. He also called for the lifting of sanctions on Syria.

A promise of change, but many obstacles

After leading the lightning insurgency that toppled Assad, al-Sharaa promised a new Syria.

He vowed to rid the country of Iranian influence and Iran-backed armed groups such as the Lebanese militia Hezbollah. He promised an inclusive, representative government that would allow the country's many ethnic and religious groups to live in peace.

Washington lifted the terror designation weeks after he took power, and he was embraced by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, whose de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, hosted Wednesday's meeting with Trump.

But the difficulties have been daunting.

Fourteen years of war left large areas in ruins and, along with the sanctions, devastated the economy. An estimated 90% of the population lives in poverty. Assad's rule and the civil war also left deep fissures between the country's Sunni minority and the Alawite minority from which Assad hailed, and which benefited from his rule. Those rifts have proven tough to heal.

Al-Sharaa formed a transitional government that gave some positions to minorities but was dominated by his inner circle.

A constitutional declaration later broadened al-Sharaa's powers and said Islamic law would remain at the heart of legislation for a five-year interim period. Al-Sharaa argued that the measures were needed to stabilize the country, while many critics viewed it as a power grab.

"It appears that many of the steps taken have been rushed and performative rather than offering genuine meaningful change in Syria," said Lara Nelson, policy director at the Syrian research and policy group Etana. "There are concerns about authoritarian consolidation."

Sectarian clashes as civil war tensions linger

The biggest test for al-Sharaa came in early March, when the country witnessed its worst sectarian clashes since Assad's downfall.

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After security forces crushed an armed rebellion, apparently led by Assad loyalists, on the mostly Alawite Mediterranean coast, fighters loyal to the new government carried out a wave of revenge killings.

More than 1,000 people were killed over two days, mostly Alawite civilians. Videos surfaced online showing houses set ablaze and bodies in the streets. Others showed Alawites being rounded up, mocked and beaten.

Weeks later, clashes broke out between fighters loyal to the government and minority Druze living in the Damascus suburbs. Smaller such incidents have occurred elsewhere in the country.

Meanwhile, Israel has invaded southern Syria and carried out a wave of airstrikes that it says are aimed at destroying the country's military capabilities and any armed groups that could pose a threat. A strike hit near the presidential palace earlier this month.

Al-Sharaa has opened an investigation into the sectarian violence on the coast and has reached a settlement with the Druze. Those steps have calmed things down for now. But the internecine violence and Israel's incursions have fed a sense among many Syrians that there is a security vacuum.

Even as he praised al-Sharaa, Trump acknowledged the huge challenges he faces.

"I think they have to get themselves straightened up," Trump said. "They have a lot of work to do."

What's happened at the Cannes Film Festival so far — and what's still to come

CANNES, France (AP) — This year's Cannes Film Festival has barely started, but it's already been an attention-grabbing affair, from new rules for its red carpets, nerves about potential U.S. tariffs and the return of Tom Cruise.

And that says nothing about the films, expected to be a strong slate as Cannes is seen as increasingly important to the Oscars' best picture hopefuls.

Even in a normal year, Cannes is a lot to keep up with. Here's a handy guide of what's happened so far, what to expect and what it may mean.

What's happened so far at Cannes

Cannes opened Tuesday with a starry tribute to Robert De Niro, 49 years after "Taxi Driver" won the festival's top prize, the Palme d'Or. De Niro used the platform to assail U.S. President Donald Trump, a frequent target of his criticism.

He also basked in the adoration of some of film's elite, including Leonardo DiCaprio and Quentin Tarantino.

Cannes debuted a complex 4K restoration of "The Gold Rush," one of Charlie Chaplin's most beloved silent masterpieces, timed to the film's 100th anniversary. "Our grandfather would be really proud to see this, a hundred years later, to see all you here and interested in seeing the film," said Kiera Chaplin to a packed screening Tuesday.

Tom Cruise took the spotlight on Day 2 with the latest "Mission: Impossible" installment, "Final Reckoning." For such a high-flying franchise, Cruise kept his feet on the ground (so far) ahead of the film's premiere.

What to expect from the 2025 Cannes Film Festival

AP Film Writer Jake Coyle broke down some of the key things about the festival in a thorough primer. Among the things to watch out for: any effects of Trump's talk about tariffs on foreign-made films at the world's largest film market. The festival serves as the start of Oscar season and there's a packed field vying for this year's Palme d'Or.

Outside of competition, there's some starry first-time directors: Scarlett Johansson with "Eleanor the Great," Kristen Stewart with "The Chronology of Water" and Harris Dickinson with "Urchin."

Their films are not in the main competition, but as Brazilian director Kleber Mendonça Filho told Coyle about debuting a film at Cannes: "You release a film into that Colosseum-like situation." He noted premiering a movie at the festival is akin to "a potential invitation to a beheading."

New red carpet rules, and how stars are responding

One of the buzziest moves by Cannes this year so far has been its proclamation that nudity is banned by festivalgoers and so too are "voluminous" outfits, in particular those with a large train.

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The move to ban nude looks comes amid the “naked dress” trend on red carpets, including Bianca Censori’s Grammys look and many of the outfits worn by Vanity Fair party attendees after the Oscars.

Cannes press officers said earlier this week the festival “made explicit in its charter certain rules that have long been in effect.”

So how did stars at Cannes respond?

Halle Berry, who is on the festival jury headed by Juliette Binoche, told reporters she would abide by it and had changed her opening night look.

While risqué looks were in short supply Monday, there were certainly some “voluminous outfits,” including dresses worn by Heidi Klum, Chinese actor Wan QianHui and others.

Trump’s Middle East visit comes as his family deepens its business, crypto ties in the region

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It’s not just the “gesture” of a \$400 million luxury plane that President Donald Trump says he’s smart to accept from Qatar. Or that he effectively auctioned off the first destination on his first major foreign trip, heading to Saudi Arabia because the kingdom was ready to make big investments in U.S. companies.

It’s not even that the Trump family has fast-growing business ties in the Middle East that run deep and offer the potential of vast profits.

Instead, it’s the idea that the combination of these things and more — deals that show the close ties between a family whose patriarch oversees the U.S. government and a region whose leaders are fond of currying favor through money and lavish gifts — could cause the United States to show preferential treatment to Middle Eastern leaders when it comes to American affairs of state.

Before Trump began his visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, his sons Eric and Donald Jr. had already traveled the Middle East extensively in recent weeks. They were drumming up business for The Trump Organization, which they are running in their father’s stead while he’s in the White House.

Eric Trump announced plans for an 80-story Trump Tower in Dubai, the UAE’s largest city. He also attended a recent cryptocurrency conference there with Zach Witkoff, a founder of the Trump family crypto company, World Liberty Financial, and son of Trump’s do-everything envoy to the Mideast, Steve Witkoff.

“We are proud to expand our presence in the region,” Eric Trump said last month in announcing that Trump Tower Dubai was set to start construction this fall.

The presidential visit to the region, as his children work the same part of the world for the family’s moneymaking opportunities, puts a spotlight on Trump’s willingness to embrace foreign dealmaking while in the White House, even in the face of growing concerns that doing so could tempt him to shape U.S. foreign policy in ways that benefit his family’s bottom line.

Nowhere is the potential overlap more prevalent than in the Middle East

The Trump family’s business interests in the region include a new deal to build a luxury golf resort in Qatar, partnering with Qatari Diar, a real estate company backed by that country’s sovereign wealth fund. The family is also leasing its brand to two new real estate projects in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia’s capital, in partnership with Dar Global, a London-based luxury real estate developer and subsidiary of private Saudi real estate firm Al Arkan.

The Trump Organization has similarly partnered with Dar Global on a Trump Tower set to be built in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and an upcoming Trump International Hotel and luxury golf development in neighboring Oman.

During the crypto conference, a state-backed investment company in Abu Dhabi announced it had chosen USD, World Liberty Financial’s stablecoin, to back a \$2 billion investment in Binance, the world’s largest cryptocurrency exchange. Critics say that allows Trump family-aligned interests to essentially take a cut of each dollar invested.

“I don’t know anything about it,” Trump said when asked by reporters about the transaction on Wednes-

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day.

Then there's the Saudi government-backed LIV Golf, which has forged close business relationships with the president and hosted tournaments at Trump's Doral resort in South Florida.

"Given the extensive ties between LIV Golf and the PIF, or between Trump enterprises more generally and the Gulf, I'd say there's a pretty glaring conflict of interest here," said Jon Hoffman, a research fellow in defense and foreign policy at the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute. He was referring to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, which has invested heavily in everything from global sports giants to video game maker Nintendo with the aim of diversifying the kingdom's economy beyond oil.

Trump said he did not talk about LIV Golf during his visit in Saudi Arabia.

The president announced in January a \$20 billion investment for U.S. data centers promised by DAMAC Properties, an Emirati company led by billionaire Dubai developer Hussain Sajwani. Trump bills that as benefiting the country's technological and economic standing rather than his family business. But Sajwani was a close business partner of Trump and his family since long before the 2016 election.

White House bristles at conflict of interest concerns

Asked before he left for the Middle East if Trump might use the trip to meet with people tied to his family's business, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said it was "ridiculous" to "suggest that President Trump is doing anything for his own benefit."

"The president is abiding by all conflict of interest laws," she said.

Administration officials have brushed off such concerns about the president's policy decisions bleeding into the business interests of his family by noting that Trump's assets are in a trust managed by his children. A voluntary ethics agreement released by The Trump Organization also bars the firm from striking deals directly with foreign governments.

But that same agreement still allows deals with private companies abroad. In Trump's first term, the organization released an ethics pact prohibiting deals with both foreign governments and foreign companies.

The president, according to the second-term ethics agreement, isn't involved in any day-to-day decision-making for the family business. But his political and corporate brands remain inextricably linked.

"The president is a successful businessman," Leavitt said, "and I think, frankly, that it's one of the many reasons that people reelected him back to this office."

Timothy P. Carney, senior fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said he doesn't want to see U.S. foreign policy being affected by Trump's feelings about how other countries have treated his family's business.

"Even if he's not running the company, he profits when the company does well," Carney said. "When he leaves the White House, the company is worth more, his personal wealth goes up."

Promises of US investment shaped Trump's trip

His family business aside, the president wasn't shy about saying he'd shape the itinerary of his first extended overseas trip on quid pro quo.

Trump's first stop was Saudi Arabia, just as during his first term. He picked the destination after he said the kingdom had pledged to spend \$1 trillion on U.S. companies over four years. The White House has since announced that the actual figure is \$600 billion. How much of that will actually be new investment — or come to fruition — remains to be seen.

The president is also headed to the UAE, which has pledged \$1.4 trillion in U.S. investments over the next 10 years, and Boeing and GE Aerospace announced a \$96 billion deal while he was in Qatar on Wednesday that will see that country's state-owned airline acquire up to 210 American-made Boeing aircraft.

Trump, meanwhile, says accepting the gift of a Boeing 747 from the ruling family is a no-brainer, dismissing security and ethical concerns raised by Democrats and even some conservatives.

Trump's Middle East business ties predate his presidencies

Trump's first commercial foray in the Middle East came in 2005, during just his second year of starring on "The Apprentice." A Trump Tower Dubai project was envisioned as a tulip-shaped hotel to be perched on the city's manmade island shaped like a palm tree.

It never materialized.

Instead, February 2017 saw the announced opening of Trump International Golf Club Dubai, with Sajwani's DAMAC Properties. Just a month earlier, Trump had said that Sajwani had tried to make a \$2 billion deal with him, "And I turned it down."

"I didn't have to turn it down, because as you know, I have a no-conflict situation because I'm president," Trump said then.

This January, there was a beaming Sajwani standing triumphantly by Trump's side at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, to announce DAMAC's investment in U.S. data centers.

"It's been amazing news for me and my family when he was elected in November," Sajwani said. "For the last four years, we've been waiting for this moment."

EPA announces rollback for some Biden-era limits on 'forever chemicals' in drinking water

By MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

The Environmental Protection Agency said Wednesday that it plans to weaken limits on some "forever chemicals" in drinking water that were finalized last year, while maintaining standards for two common ones.

The Biden administration set the first federal drinking water limits for PFAS, or perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, finding they increased the risk of cardiovascular disease, certain cancers and babies being born with low birth weight. Those limits on PFAS, which are human-made and don't easily break down in nature, were expected to reduce their levels for millions of people.

Limits on three types of PFAS, including what are known as GenX substances found in North Carolina, will be scrapped and reconsidered by the agency, as will a limit on a mixture of several types of PFAS.

The Biden administration's rule also set standards for the two common types of PFAS, referred to as PFOA and PFOS, at 4 parts per trillion, effectively the lowest level at which they can be reliably detected. The EPA will keep those standards, but give utilities two extra years — until 2031 — to comply.

"We are on a path to uphold the agency's nationwide standards to protect Americans from PFOA and PFOS in their water. At the same time, we will work to provide common-sense flexibility in the form of additional time for compliance," said EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin.

The development was first reported by The Washington Post.

Large scale changes and utility pushback

It appears few utilities will be impacted by the withdrawal of limits for certain, newer types of PFAS. So far, sampling has found nearly 12% of U.S. water utilities are above the Biden administration's limits. But most utilities face problems with PFOA or PFOS.

Health advocates praised Biden's administration for the limits. But water utilities complained, saying treatment systems are expensive and that customers will end up paying more. The utilities sued the EPA.

The EPA's actions align with some arguments in the utilities' lawsuit. They argued the EPA lacked authority to regulate a mixture of PFAS and said the agency didn't properly support limits on several newer types of PFAS that the EPA now plans to rescind. They also sought the two-year extension.

Erik Olson, a senior strategist at the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council, said the move is illegal. The Safe Water Drinking Act gives the EPA authority to limit water contaminants, and it includes a provision meant to prevent new rules from being looser than previous ones.

"With a stroke of the pen, EPA is making a mockery of the Trump administration's promise to deliver clean water for Americans," Olson said.

President Donald Trump has sought fewer environmental rules and more oil and gas development. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin has carried out that agenda by announcing massive regulatory rollbacks. The EPA plans to loosen regulations for greenhouse gas emissions, cleanup standards for coal plant waste and car emission limits, among many other clean air and water rules.

Zeldin's history with PFAS is more nuanced; during his time as a New York congressman, he supported legislation to regulate forever chemicals.

Evidence of harm builds and so does the cost

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Manufactured by companies like Chemours and 3M, PFAS were incredibly useful in many applications — among them, helping clothes to withstand rain and ensuring that firefighting foam snuffed out flames. But the chemicals also accumulate in the body. As science advanced in recent years, evidence of harm at far lower levels became clearer.

The Biden-era EPA estimated the rule will cost about \$1.5 billion to implement each year. Water utility associations say the costs, combined with recent mandates to replace lead pipes, will raise residents' bills and fall hardest on small communities with few resources.

The Biden administration did work to address cost concerns. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided \$9 billion for chemicals like PFAS, utilities have won multibillion-dollar settlements against PFAS polluters.

Utilities see partial relief, activists see a backslide

Some utilities have been surprised to find out they are over limits. And small water providers might struggle with compliance costs and expertise.

"This gives water pros more time to deal with the ones we know are bad, and we are going to need more time. Some utilities are just finding out now where they stand," said Mike McGill, president of WaterPIO, a water industry communications firm.

Some utilities wanted a higher limit on PFOA and PFOS, according to Mark White, drinking water leader at the engineering firm CDM Smith. He suspects the utility industry will continue to sue over those limits. Environmental groups will likely file challenges, too.

Melanie Benesh, vice president of government affairs at the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, said utilities may not have to install treatment that's as broadly effective if they just have to focus on two types of older PFAS.

"You really reduce what utilities have to do to make sure that the other, newer generation PFAS are captured" she said.

When the Biden administration announced its rule, the head of the EPA traveled to North Carolina and was introduced by activist Emily Donovan, who said she was grateful for the first federal standards. She had long campaigned for tougher rules for GenX substances that had contaminated a local river.

Now the EPA says it will roll back those GenX limits.

"This current administration promised voters it would 'Make America Healthy Again' but rescinding part of the PFAS drinking water standards does no such thing," she said.

Rose and Jackson get posthumous reprieve, but gambling on baseball is still MLB's biggest sin

By DAVID BRANDT AP Baseball Writer

It was more than 100 years ago that Shoeless Joe Jackson was among eight Black Sox banned from baseball for throwing the 1919 World Series. It's been more than 35 years since Pete Rose suffered the same fate after betting on the sport as a player and manager of the Cincinnati Reds in the mid-1980s.

So when baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred reinstated both players on Tuesday — making them eligible for the sport's Hall of Fame — it might feel like a sport that's softening its stance in the modern era of ubiquitous sports gambling. After all, a huge chunk of Americans can make legal wagers at gleaming sportsbooks or even while sitting on their couch using their cell phone.

That would be a misread of the situation.

If anything, the game's integrity is even more important — and more tightly policed — than ever. Gambling on baseball is still as taboo as it was in 1919.

Rose and Jackson may get some posthumous honors after their careers were tarnished by their respective gambling scandals, but the damage to their reputations is done. Manfred changed the league's policy on permanent ineligibility, saying any bans would expire at death — a shift that impacts 17 former players, coaches and owners.

Under the Hall of Fame's current rules, the earliest Rose or Jackson could be inducted into the Hall of Fame would be 2028.

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"Obviously, a person no longer with us cannot represent a threat to the integrity of the game," Manfred said in his statement on Tuesday. "Moreover, it is hard to conceive of a penalty that has more deterrent effect than one that lasts a lifetime with no reprieve."

Manfred's office is still coming down hard on current players caught gambling on baseball. San Diego Padres infielder Tucupita Marcano was banned permanently in 2024 for betting on the sport while four others were suspended for one year, even though the four others — who all placed their bets as minor leaguers — had wagered less than \$1,000.

Marcano was the first active player in a century banned for life because of gambling.

If anything, the ease of sports gambling has raised the level of vigilance, with MLB partnering with betting companies to spot suspicious wagers.

Umpire Pat Hoberg was fired for sharing sports gambling accounts with a friend who bet on baseball. Ippai Mizuhara — the former interpreter for Japanese superstar Shohei Ohtani — was sentenced to nearly five years in prison after he stole almost \$17 million from the Los Angeles Dodgers player's bank account, partly to cover illegal gambling debts.

"The strict enforcement of Major League Baseball's rules and policies governing gambling conduct is a critical component of upholding our most important priority: protecting the integrity of our games for the fans," Manfred said when suspending Marcano. "The longstanding prohibition against betting on Major League Baseball games by those in the sport has been a bedrock principle for over a century."

Some are concerned this resolution for Rose and Jackson imperils the integrity of the sport. Rose's ban was signed by then-commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti, and his son, Marcus, said Tuesday that he was "incredibly disappointed" by Manfred's ruling. He called it "a very dark day for baseball, the country and the fans."

"Without integrity, the game of baseball will cease to exist," he said. "Without integrity, how will fans ever trust the purity of the game itself ever again? A purity built on the principle of fair play."

For others, the juxtaposition of Manfred's posthumous leniency for Rose and Jackson and the harshness of Marcano's punishment seemed to strike the correct balance.

"I've always maintained I think he should have been in the Hall of Fame a long time ago," New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone said of Rose. "Again, not discounting what went on and how serious that I think that is, and maybe how that should have affected being with the club and all those things."

"But when it came to the Hall of Fame, it felt pretty simple to me that he always should have been in there."

It's a stance that has found increasing popularity over the years. Rose had one of the most productive careers in MLB history, and his nickname "Charlie Hustle" embodied so much of what made him a popular and successful player. He was a 17-time All-Star and holds records for hits (4,256), games (3,562), at-bats (14,053), plate appearances (15,890) and singles (3,215).

He was the 1963 NL Rookie of the Year, 1973 MVP and 1975 World Series MVP, and a three-time NL batting champion.

"Congratulations to Pete's family, his teammates, as well as his supporters who have waited many years for this opportunity for consideration," Philadelphia Phillies Hall of Fame third baseman Mike Schmidt said. Schmidt wrote a column for the AP in 2013 advocating for Rose's reinstatement.

Jackson was a .356 career hitter and one of the game's early superstars. He died in 1951, but remains one of baseball's most recognizable names in part for his depiction by Ray Liotta in the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*.

Now both players could be honored in Cooperstown by the end of the decade.

The olive branch is welcome news for many baseball fans, but gambling on the sport remains one of its cardinal sins, even if placing a bet is easier than ever.

"To work your whole life to get to the major leagues in whatever role and then lose that over sports betting or gambling, that's a huge penalty," Manfred said last year. "I really, truly believe that we are in a better position to know what's going on today than we were in the old days where it was all illegal."

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Democrats are deeply pessimistic about the future of their party, an AP-NORC poll finds

By STEVE PEOPLES and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Six months after Donald Trump's presidential victory, Democrats remain deeply pessimistic about the future of their party, although neither the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party is viewed favorably by a majority of U.S. adults.

A new poll conducted earlier this month by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that only about one-third of Democrats are "very optimistic" or even "somewhat optimistic" about their party's future. That's down sharply from July 2024, when about 6 in 10 Democrats said they had a positive outlook.

"I'm not real high on Democrats right now," said poll respondent Damien Williams, a 48-year-old Democrat from Cahokia Heights, Illinois. "To me, they're not doing enough to push back against Trump."

The poll comes at a critical moment for the Democratic Party, which is desperately seeking momentum after losing the White House and both chambers of Congress in last fall's general election. In the survey, Democrats offer mixed reviews for some of their party's best-known elected officials — including Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, both of New York — while reporting significant concerns about how leaders are chosen in the U.S. political system.

Williams, a member of the Teamsters union, said he likely won't feel good about his party again "until somebody steps up in terms of being a leader that can bring positive change — an Obama-like figure."

Republicans, meanwhile, are slightly more optimistic about the future of the GOP than they were last year.

The poll finds that about half of Republicans, 55%, are very or somewhat optimistic about their party's future, up from 47% last summer. Still, only about 3 in 10 Republicans are optimistic about the state of U.S. politics, up from about 1 in 10 last summer.

Patrick Reynolds, a 50-year-old Republican community activist and pastor from Fort Worth, Texas, says he has conflicting feelings about Trump's leadership and the future of his party.

He worries that too many Republicans in Congress are falling in line behind the Republican president and his chief ally and adviser, Elon Musk, who has led Trump's push to slash the size of the federal government. Reynolds also says he's concerned that Trump's aggressive moves to combat illegal immigration may be violating the Constitution.

"How can we be the party of the rule of law when we're violating constitutional principles?" Reynolds said. "I think there could be a (political) backlash."

Neither political party is especially popular right now.

Overall, about 4 in 10 U.S. adults have a favorable view of the Republican Party while about one-third have a positive view of the Democratic Party.

This relatively weak support extends to some of each party's most prominent officials.

Roughly 4 in 10 Americans have a favorable view of Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent who has twice run for the Democratic presidential nomination and has toured the nation in recent months rallying anti-Trump resistance. Among self-described Democrats, about three-quarters view Sanders favorably.

About half of Democrats have a favorable view of Ocasio-Cortez, who has joined Sanders on the "Fighting Oligarchy" tour. She is less popular among U.S. adults overall — about 3 in 10 have a favorable opinion of the 35-year-old representative, who is sometimes mentioned as a potential presidential candidate in 2028.

Schumer, the top Senate Democrat, is less popular than Sanders or Ocasio-Cortez.

Just about one-third of Democrats have a somewhat or very favorable view of the 74-year-old senator, who took a hit from many liberals for acceding to a Republican-led funding bill that kept the government open. The share of Democrats who view Schumer positively has fallen since December 2024, when about half had a somewhat or very favorable view. Among all adults, his favorability stands at 21%.

"I just feel like the majority of the old Democratic Party needs to go," said Democrat Monica Brown, a 61-year-old social worker from Knoxville, Tennessee. "They're not in tune with the new generation. They're not in tune with the new world. We've got such division within the party."

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On the GOP side, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a former Florida senator, is more popular than several other high-profile Republicans.

About 6 in 10 Republicans view Rubio favorably, although that number falls to about one-third among all adults. About half of Republicans have a positive opinion of House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana, while around one-quarter of U.S. adults feel the same. That's roughly the same level of support for Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, a former Fox News Channel host who earns favorable ratings from 44% of Republicans and about one-quarter of Americans overall.

Beyond their negative outlook on the future of their party, 55% of Democrats are also pessimistic about the way leaders are chosen in the U.S. The figure is up slightly from 46% last summer, when President Joe Biden was still in the White House.

Linda Sleet, a 69-year-old retiree who lives in Venice, Florida, raised specific concerns about the way congressional districts are drawn and the Electoral College that is used to determine presidential contests instead of the popular vote.

"I don't have confidence in the system," Sleet said. "I think it served a purpose way back when. It does not now."

Williams, the Teamster from Illinois, said he's unhappy with just about everything to do with U.S. politics.

"I'm going to need to see some wins for America, for humanity, before I can be optimistic right now," he said. "Every day is just a constant barrage of negative feelings and news politically. It's all screwed up right now."

Today in History: May 15

Police kill two students during Jackson State protests

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, May 15, the 135th day of 2025. There are 230 days left in the year.

On May 15, 1970, less than two weeks after the shooting at Kent State University, two Black students at Jackson State College in Mississippi were killed and 12 were injured when police opened fire during student demonstrations.

In 1800, President John Adams ordered government offices to relocate from Philadelphia to the newly-constructed city of Washington, in the federal District of Columbia.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed an act establishing the Department of Agriculture.

In 1928, the Walt Disney cartoon character Mickey Mouse appeared for the first time in front of a public audience in a test screening of the short "Plane Crazy." (Mickey made his formal screen debut with the release of "Steamboat Willie" six months later.)

In 1940, brothers Richard and Maurice McDonald opened the first McDonald's fast-food restaurant, in San Bernardino, California.

In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its *In re Gault* decision, ruled that juveniles accused of crimes were entitled to the same due process afforded adults.

In 1972, Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace was shot and left paralyzed while campaigning for president in Laurel, Maryland, by Arthur H. Bremer, who would serve 35 years in prison for the attempted murder.

In 2015, a jury sentenced Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (joh-HAHR' tsahr-NEYE'-ehv) to death for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing that killed three and left more than 260 wounded.

In 2020, President Donald Trump formally unveiled a coronavirus vaccine program called "Operation Warp Speed," to speed development of COVID-19 vaccines and quickly distribute them around the country.

Today's Birthdays: Artist Jasper Johns is 95. Counterculture icon Wavy Gravy is 89. Actor-singer Lainie Kazan is 85. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Don Nelson is 85. Musician Brian Eno is 77. Actor Chazz Palminteri is 73. Baseball Hall of Famer George Brett is 72. Rapper Melle Mel is 64. Baseball Hall of Famer John Smoltz is 58. Football Hall of Famer Emmitt Smith is 56. Football Hall of Famer Ray Lewis is 50. Actor Jamie-Lynn Sigler is 44. Tennis player Andy Murray is 38.