

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Mon., Dec. 1

Senior Menu: Hot beef combination, mashed potatoes, carrots, fruit

School Breakfast: Eggs.

School Lunch: Hot dogs, chips.

4th Grade GBB, 4 p.m.

JV/MS Boys BB at Faulkton Invite, 5:30 p.m.

5th Grade BBB, 6 p.m.

MS GBB hosts Clark/Willow Lake, 6:15 p.m.

Wrestling Kick-off Fund-raiser, 6:30 p.m.

## Tues., Dec. 2

Senior Menu: Roast pork, baked potato, Normandy blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, fries.

St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML Christmas Party, noon.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

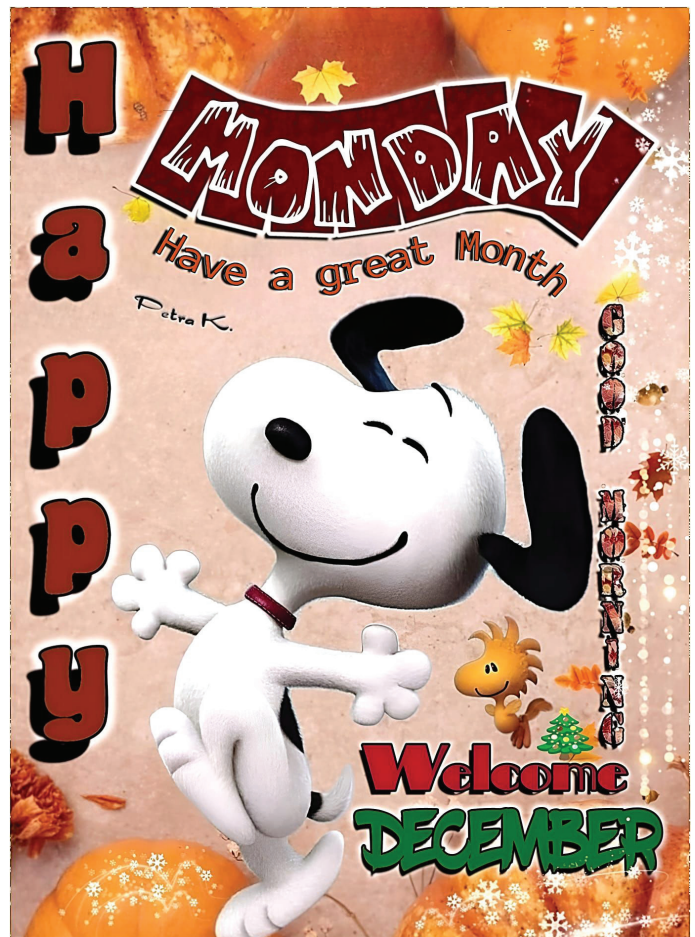
5th Grade GBB, 4:15 p.m.

7th Grade BBB, 6 p.m.

MS GBB at Redfield, 7th at 6:30 p.m., 8th at 7:30 p.m.

Youth wrestling sign up, 6:30 p.m.

Council meeting, 7 p.m.



## Wed., Dec. 3

Senior Menu: Hamburger cabbage soup, chicken salad sandwich, fruit, oatmeal raisin cookie.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; DFC Supper, 6 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.

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

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

Groton Chamber Meeting, noon, at city hall.

6th Grade GBB Practice, 6 p.m.

5th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.

6th Grade BBB Practice, 7:30 p.m.

**Groton Daily Independent**  
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# 1440

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

## Cyber Monday Turns 20

Today marks the 20th annual Cyber Monday—an online retail event that was the largest online shopping day in US history last year, responsible for an estimated \$13.2B in online retail sales.

The shopping holiday dates back to 2005, when the National Retail Federation coined the Monday after Black Friday as “Cyber Monday” to promote traffic to e-commerce platforms like Amazon and eBay. Since then, the holiday has eclipsed Black Friday as in-person traffic has slowed, retail outlets have expanded their online presence, and the two retail events have blended together. Companies today typically launch their sales for several weeks, advertising Cyber Monday as a last chance to save. Last year, the most shopping activity took place between 8 pm and 10 pm on Cyber Monday, during which consumers spent roughly \$15.8M per minute.

Today’s spending is projected to reach \$14.2B, surpassing last year’s record as the largest shopping day in history. Learn more here (w/video).

## Balloon Airport Closures

Lithuania’s Vilnius airport closed yesterday for at least the 10th time since October amid concerns of balloon activity. The closure comes amid a wave of airspace disruptions—primarily drones—in Europe in recent months, including in Copenhagen, Munich, and Brussels.

The government has blamed Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko—an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin—for the balloon incursions, calling them a hybrid attack involving smuggling cigarettes into the country. Lithuania says it recorded over 500 balloons entering its airspace from Belarus this year, and nearly 1,000 last year. It has previously closed its border to Belarus over the issue. The disruption comes as the UK, France, and Germany recently provided military support for Belgium’s anti-drone operations after the country’s main airport was forced to temporarily close due to drone spotting.

Separately, US negotiators met with Ukrainian counterparts yesterday in Florida to discuss a revised peace plan to end the country’s war with Russia.

## Martian Lightning

NASA’s Perseverance rover has captured what is believed to be the first evidence of lightning on Mars, according to data published last week. The red planet joins Earth, Saturn, and Jupiter as planets in the solar system where the phenomenon has been observed.

Unlike lightning on Earth, where massive charge differences within storm clouds cause large-scale electrical discharge, the Martian version is a low-energy type generated by microscopic dust particles. Mars’ fine-grained and loose soil (known as regolith) is continuously whipped up by winds, leading to intense dust devils and planet-spanning dust storms. As the tiny particles rub against each other, electrical charges build up until “mini-lightning” strikes occur. Scientists say the phenomenon can destroy organic molecules and may explain why methane disappears so quickly in the Martian atmosphere.

The dust itself is considered a significant risk to human exploration of the planet.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Ole Miss Rebels coach Lane Kiffin leaves the team to accept position coaching LSU Tigers. | See rivalry week results.

Oscar- and Tony-winning playwright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard dies at age 88; Stoppard wrote "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," "Leopoldstadt," and "Shakespeare in Love," among other works.

Miss Universe Africa cuts ties with the organization amid ongoing allegations of vote rigging, with co-owners investigated for alleged drug ties.

## Science & Technology

Overheated data center forces the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the world's largest derivatives exchange operator, to suspend global trading Friday for roughly 10 hours.

Internal FDA memo claims at least 10 children died from complications due to the COVID-19 vaccine between 2021 and 2024; experts accuse agency of not providing details, misusing data from the unverified VAERS reporting platform.

Genetic analysis suggests domesticated cats originated in North Africa and spread to Europe and East Asia roughly 2,000 years ago, more recently than previously believed.

## Business & Markets

Markets rise Friday (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +0.6%, Nasdaq +0.7%) during shortened holiday trading week; analysts peg possibility of coming Federal Reserve interest rate cut at 80%-85%.

US online sales hit an estimated \$11.8B on Black Friday, up more than 9% from last year; order volume down 1%, with higher average sales prices. | The best resources we found researching Black Friday (1440 Topics)

Switzerland rejects 50% inheritance tax for gifts and assets exceeding about \$62M; wealthy entrepreneurs threatened to leave country.

## Politics & World Affairs

US halts all asylum decisions, pauses visas for Afghan citizens after Afghan who was granted asylum shoots two National Guard members in Washington, DC, one fatally. | See previous write-up.

Hondurans vote in presidential election as US President Donald Trump threatens to cut aid to the country if right-wing candidate Nasry Asfura loses. | The US gave Honduras \$194B in aid in 2023, the last fully reported year.

Twelve young Muslim girls freed after abduction in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state, near hideout used by Islamist militant group Boko Haram.



## Fjeldheim named Junior Snow Queen

Abby Fjeldheim, daughter of Ryan and Susan Fjeldheim, was named the Junior Snow Queen at the Snow Queen event held Sunday afternoon. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Novalea and Natalia Warrington sang a duet entitled, "Wondering" from High School Musical. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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The Junior Snow Queen Contest was held Sunday afternoon. Those helping, along with the court, are pictured above. In back, left to right, are T.C. Schuster, usher; Adeline Kotzer, Arianna Dinger, Brooklyn Spanier, Neely Althoff, Aspen Beto; Jace Johnson, usher; and McKenna Tietz, master of ceremony; in front, left to right, are Price Max Wieseler, Miss Congenielty Novalea Warrington, Junior Snow Queen Abby Fjeldheim, First Runner Up Tevan Hanson and Princesses Hadlee Ronning. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Emily Sternhagen sang, "Silent Night" at the Junior Snow Queen Contest. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

Addison Hoeft sang, "Creep" by Radio Head at the Junior Snow Queen Contest. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



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**Annual Membership Rates**

Student is \$29.82 per month or \$255.60 per year  
Single is \$35.15 per month or \$319.50 per year  
2-Person is \$55.45 per month or \$575.10 per year  
Family is \$67.10 per month or \$702.26 per year

**Month-to-Month Rates**

Student is \$35.15 per month  
Single is \$40.48 per month  
2-Person is \$59.78 per month  
Family is \$72.43 per month

**While many other rates have gone up, ours has not.  
Same rates for several years!**

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The Minnesota Vikings sailed into Seattle, hoping to sack the Seahawks. Instead, they found themselves mired in the muck while the Seahawks were flying high after a 26-0 beatdown. For the first time since 2007, the Vikings didn't put a single point on the scoreboard. And if you count last week's second-half shutout, the Vikings have now gone six straight quarters without scoring, something they haven't done since 1991. The Vikings are 4-8 this season, and have lost four straight and six of their last seven.

There were plenty of story lines to follow heading into this game, but none bigger than each team's quarterback. Sam Darnold signed with the Seahawks this past offseason after leading the Vikings to 14 wins in 2024.

The Vikings, meanwhile, had plenty of options to fill that vacancy. They could have committed to Darnold, who reportedly would've signed had the Vikings offered a similar contract to what Seattle offered. The Vikings could have brought back Daniel Jones, who decided to sign in Indy and helped get them to an 8-4 record. There was also the option to bring in future first-ballot Hall of Famer Aaron Rodgers. Instead, the Vikings decided to roll with J.J. McCarthy, and as a result, are closer to the first overall pick than the playoffs. And, once again, McCarthy is injured, so the Vikings were forced to start undrafted rookie Max Brosmer against a stingy Seattle defense.

Both offenses were stagnant in the first fifteen minutes. The Vikings had three drives in the first quarter, and Seattle had two, and all five drives ended in punts.

The Seahawks finally found the red zone in the second quarter, but the Vikings' defense held them to a field goal. The Vikings punted on their next possession, but a Sam Darnold fumble gave the ball right back to Minnesota with great field position. Unfortunately, on fourth-and-one at the four-yard line, Max Brosmer threw an ugly pass that was intercepted and returned for a Seattle touchdown. With a minute left in the half, the Vikings were forced to punt again, and the Seahawks drove down to kick a field goal to make the score 13-0 heading into halftime.

If you thought things were bad in the first half, the second half somehow got worse. The Vikings had six possessions and they went: fumble, interception, interception, interception, turnover on downs, and finally two mercy-run plays to end the game.

Max Brosmer completed 19 of 30 passes for 126 yards and four interceptions. Jordan Mason, Aaron Jones, and Zavier Scott combined for 67 yards on 15 carries. T.J. Hockenson led the team with six catches for 59 yards, while Justin Jefferson was held to two catches for four yards.

Defensively, the Vikings had four sacks, seven tackles for a loss, six pass deflections, and five QB hits. I have to mention Dallas Turner, as the 2024 first-round pick is becoming a game wrecker. Despite both Andrew Van Ginkel and Jonathan Greenard playing, it was Turner who led the team in sacks (2) and QB hits (3) while also adding three tackles for a loss.

Obviously, this entire season is worrisome, but the thing I'm most worried about is superstar receiver Justin Jefferson. With Kirk Cousins, Sam Darnold, and Carson Wentz, Jefferson averaged over 90 yards per game. With J.J. McCarthy and Max Brosmer, he averaged 46 yards per game. For a player on a trajectory to be one of the greatest receivers to ever play the game, having his production cut in half is a problem. How much longer will he tolerate this level of offensive incompetence?

Looking ahead, the Vikings will try to end their four-game skid when the Washington Commanders come to U.S. Bank Stadium. Kickoff is at noon.

## “Oral Caries Prevention in South Dakota: Challenges and Opportunities”

Dental caries (decay) remains the most common chronic disease in the U.S. and globally, despite decades of research and proven preventive strategies. In South Dakota, 60–65% of adults and over half of children have experienced tooth decay, with higher rates among low-income, rural and tribal populations. These disparities reflect longstanding challenges in accessing preventive care, especially in underserved areas.

Two of the most effective, evidence-based strategies to prevent dental caries are fluoride use and dental sealants. Community water fluoridation (CWF) and topical fluoride treatments help strengthen enamel and repair early damage, while sealants protect the deep grooves of molars, where 90% of cavities occur. Sealants can prevent up to 80% of decay within two years and remain partially effective for several more years. Yet only 49% of South Dakota third graders have sealants on at least one permanent molar, falling far short of the CDC’s Healthy People 2030 goal of 60%. Studies show that children from low-income or rural areas are at higher risk for decay- yet they are less likely to receive sealants.

Although South Dakota Medicaid covers sealants for eligible children, many dental practices do not accept Medicaid primarily due to low reimbursement rates, further limiting access. Meanwhile, over 94% of South Dakotans benefit from systemic fluoride through CWF, thanks to state regulations requiring optimal fluoride levels in public water systems. However, this cornerstone of public health is under threat.

In April 2025, the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services proposed ending CDC recommendations for CWF, citing alleged health risks. Despite continued support from the ADA, CDC and WHO, this shift has fueled a wave of anti-fluoride legislation across the country. Utah and Florida have already enacted statewide bans on water fluoridation, and several other states have introduced bills to restrict or eliminate it. In South Dakota, Senate Bill 133 sought to remove the mandate for maintaining optimal fluoride levels in public water systems. Although the bill was ultimately defeated, it reflects growing skepticism among some lawmakers and constituents. Similar legislation is likely to resurface in 2026, especially as national debates around fluoridation intensify.

The consequences of reduced access to fluoride and sealants are significant. Untreated caries can lead to emergency visits, costly restorative procedures and general anesthesia for children. Dental pain and infection also contribute to missed school and work, financial hardship and diminished quality of life--impacting nutrition, sleep, emotional well-being and social participation.

Sealants and fluoride are complementary, affordable and preventive, costing far less than treating decay. Their combined use is endorsed by the ADA and exemplifies the adage: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Sustained protection depends on consistent access to both, especially for those most vulnerable.

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Carissa Regnerus, RDH, MA, FADHA

*Carissa Regnerus, RDH, MA, FADHA, has been a licensed dental hygienist for over 25 years and a faculty member in the University of South Dakota’s Department of Dental Hygiene since 2001. She has taught courses in dental public health and sealants, and has served on several medical mission trips, reflecting her commitment to prevention and global service. For more information, contact her at [Carissa.Regnerus@usd.edu](mailto:Carissa.Regnerus@usd.edu). Follow The Prairie Doc® at [www.prairiedoc.org](http://www.prairiedoc.org), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok. Prairie Doc Programming includes On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show (most Thursdays at 7pm on YouTube and streaming on Facebook), 2 podcasts, and a Radio program (on SDPB, Sundays at 6am and 1pm).*

## 9th Annual Holiday Party Live and Silent Auctions Olive Grove Golf Clubhouse

Groton, SD

**Sat., Dec. 6**

Holiday Party:  
6 p.m. to close  
A variety of snacks  
served

**Come on out for a fun  
evening and support  
your local golf course**



**Silent  
Auction  
Basket Items**

Bidding closes  
at 9 p.m.  
Live Auction  
begins at  
9 p.m.

**Proceeds raised for maintenance  
of course and clubhouse!**

THIS WEEK IN  
**TIGER SPORTS**  
DECEMBER 1<sup>ST</sup> - 6<sup>TH</sup>



This Week in Tiger Sports:

Monday, the 1st:

- Wrestling Kick-Off (Chili Supper at 6pm, Wrestling at 6:30pm - Old Gym)
- JH GBB vs. Clark/Willow Lake (One 6-quarter game at 6:15pm)

Tuesday, the 2nd:

- JH GBB @ Redfield (6:30pm)

Friday, the 5th:

- Girls Wrestling @ Watertown (4pm)

Saturday, the 6th:

- Girls Wrestling @ Dell Rapids (9am)
- Boys Wrestling @ Clark (9am)



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Five years in, SD's Habitat Stamp praised as one of state's 'smartest investments'

**Mandatory fee has funded 1,300 projects for habitat, wildlife and outdoor recreation**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR**

The first fish that Republican former state Sen. V.J. Smith ever caught was from a dock when he was a young boy.

Today, dozens of new docks are available for kids to share that same thrill, thanks to funding Smith helped create.

South Dakota's Habitat Stamp fee has become a cornerstone in the state's strategy to improve wildlife habitat and expand public access for outdoor recreation since the stamp's inception five years ago.

"It's a small price to pay for the critters that were here long before we were," Smith said.

The stamp is a required extra purchase of \$10 for state residents and \$25 for non-residents when buying a hunting, trapping or fishing license. It was instituted by the state Legislature and sponsored by Smith, of Brookings, who described it as "an insurance policy for the future" of the state's outdoor heritage.

Every dollar of the stamp is required by law to go toward wildlife habitat and public access projects. The stamp has raised \$21.6 million in its first five years, and the state Department of Game, Fish and Parks has so far spent \$14 million on about 1,300 projects. The money is divided roughly equally between water and land-based efforts.

The water projects have included rehabilitating aging dams, constructing and improving boat ramps and fishing piers, dredging and aerating lakes, and restoring habitats such as rock reefs and stream banks.

On land, the department focuses on seeding native grasses and wildflowers, planting trees and shrubs, improving access roads and trails, and supporting programs that compensate private landowners who open their land to public recreation.

#### The stamp's origins

After watching fellow lawmakers debate a one-time, \$1 million transfer to a habitat fund in 2019, Smith said he and others saw the need for a permanent, self-funded solution. Surrounding states already had habitat and conservation fees tied to license sales.

The next year, the stamp bill passed with bipartisan support.

"The legislation would never have passed without the endorsement of the outdoor groups," Smith said.

Smith said one of the key players was the Brookings area chapter of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, including chapter member and retired state waterfowl biologist Spencer Vaa, who inspired Smith to



**The sun sets on Nov. 7, 2025, behind land near Worthing, South Dakota, that has been improved with money from the state's Habitat Stamp program.** (Photo by Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

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introduce the bill.

"He enlightened me on the needs of wildlife and the importance of habitat," Smith said. "A lot of people deserve credit for this. You need a lot of people to get stuff done."

Jeff Olson, of the Black Hills Sportsmen Club and Black Hills Flyfishers, said some hunters and anglers were initially skeptical of the stamp, and worried it might become "just another tax." But five years later, he said the results speak for themselves.

Olson pointed to Pactola Reservoir, a popular man-made lake in the Black Hills, and the stamp-funded work local anglers and the department have been doing to add fish habitat structures and improve shore-line access below the reservoir. He said the projects help to make Rapid Creek, which feeds the lake and runs through Rapid City, a prime fishing spot.

"We wouldn't have been able to do a lot of the recent fisheries projects we've gotten done, like the one below Pactola Reservoir, without those stamp dollars," Olson said.

## Insurance policy for the future

Retired wildlife biologist George Vandel, who now lobbies in Pierre on behalf of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, called the stamp "one of the smartest investments hunters and anglers have ever made."

Vandel said the fee pays for habitat and access improvements that would be "nearly impossible" to secure through South Dakota's Legislature, where "it's a fight" to secure funding.

Nevertheless, a few concerns remain. Vandel mentioned an exemption that allows shooting preserve customers to avoid paying the fee. Those are privately owned and managed lands where pen-raised game birds (and sometimes other animals) are released to be shot by customers. He said that was a compromise made during the bill's passage, with preserves arguing they do not impact wildlife numbers. Vandel wants to apply the fee to preserves and bring in more revenue for Habitat Stamp projects.

Some western South Dakota hunters and anglers, including Olson, say investments have been more concentrated in the eastern part of the state. Of the \$14 million spent so far, \$4.5 million was spent in western counties.

Regardless, for outdoor enthusiasts, the narrative is clear: The annual fee provides a tangible return. As Vandel puts it, "The \$10 you spend is half a box of shells or a six pack of beer. This is a direct return on your investment. There's no administrative overhead, it's just money on the ground."

Vandel praised the stamp's results, from new boat ramps and shoreline access to grassland and food-plot restoration. He also pointed to the public access programs as essential to maintaining hunting opportunities.

"Sportsmen and women have to realize you get what you pay for, and if you want cheap, that's exactly what you'll end up with: less habitat, less access, and fewer game," Vandel said.

## Where the money goes

South Dakota's Habitat Stamp has funded about 1,300 projects since the program began five years ago:

33.6 miles of new trails.

41 dams repaired.

3,000 acres of forest and grassland habitat enhancements.

41 fish-habitat structures built.

956 wildlife food plots created.

36 new docks and piers.

49 new boat ramps and launches.

5,000 acres of native prairie restored.

14.8 miles of wildlife-friendly fencing installed.

212,000 acres enrolled in public access to private land programs.

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

## Competition for Nebraska's 'Carhenge' rises near South Dakota's Badlands

**'Firehenge' attraction uses old fire trucks in a ring, as well as old fire hydrants to create a 'Doghenge'**

BY: PAUL HAMMEL

KADOKA, S.D. — Nebraska's quirky replica of England's prehistoric Stonehenge, "Carhenge," is about to get some new competition in a neighboring state. And a former Nebraskan is behind it.

Rising from a dusty, prairie ridge along Interstate 90 near this Badlands-area town is a collection of firetrucks dubbed "Firehenge."

Its creator, an Omaha Burke High School grad who runs a Rapid City brewery, said the ring of 10-ton firetrucks vertically arranged in a circle is more about promoting his Firehouse Brewing Company than trying to lure away visitors from Alliance, Nebraska's popular Carhenge, about 200 miles to the south.

The new South Dakota version of the roadside attraction, which sits just off I-90, also includes a collection of buried fire hydrants called "Doghenge." By next summer, the new henges will include a gift shop where visitors can purchase brewery souvenirs and canned beer and wine from the Firehouse Brewing Co., South Dakota's first and oldest brewery.

"We are just having a ton of fun out here. Just come out and see it," said Bob Fuchs, the co-owner of the brewery who graduated from Burke in 1981. And, he adds, bring your dog.

A city official in Alliance, which took over ownership of Carhenge in 2013, said she doesn't expect local residents to mount a monumental fuss over a competing "henge" in the general vicinity.

"I think all of these things are fun," said Shana Brown, the director of cultural and leisure services for Alliance.

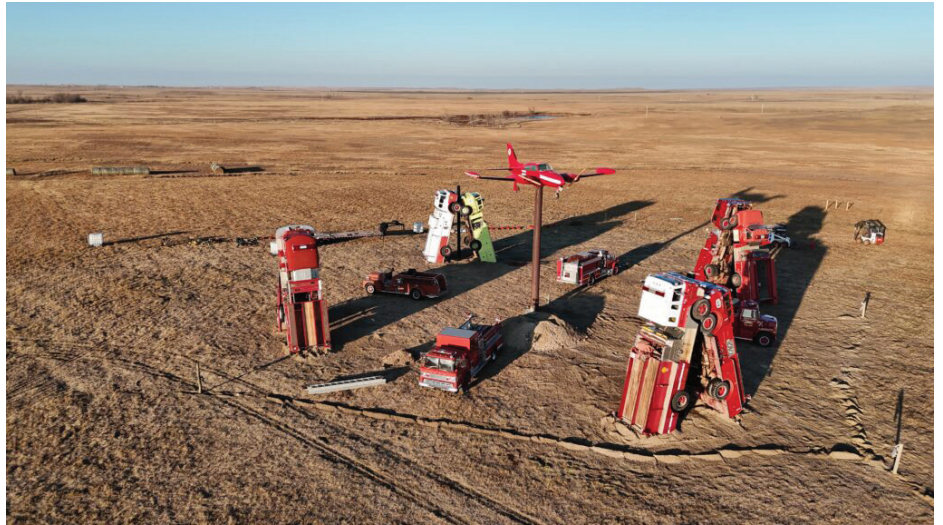
As it turns out, both Carhenge and Firehenge have plenty of competition in tourism's Carhenge-replica category.

There's a "Foamhenge" (made out of foam) in Virginia, a "Truckhenge" near Topeka, Kansas (made out of farm trucks), a "Phonehenge" (made out old telephone booths) in South Carolina, and a "Strawhenge" (made out of bales) in Bavaria, Germany.

Years ago, a "Twinkiehenge" was built during a Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. There was once a "Snowhenge" in Michigan and a "Fridgehenge" (made out of old refrigerators) once graced the plains near Santa Fe before complaints caused its demise.

A couple decades ago, a reporter was summoned to Chadron, where a suspected "Hayhenge" had been built northeast of town. Round hay bales had been arranged in a circle at a local ranch.

In the kinda-old-henge category, there's a full-size concrete replica of Stonehenge in Maryhill, Washington, that was built in 1918 to honor people lost in World War I.



**An aerial view of "Firehenge," the viral marketing effort of a Rapid City brewer with Nebraska ties along Interstate 90 in South Dakota near Kadoka.** (Courtesy of Firehouse Brewing Co.)

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And near Carbury, North Dakota, there's a circle of granite walls that serves as a 21st Century solar calendar, which is the suspected purpose of Stonehenge, a prehistoric circle of stones aligned for ceremonial purposes to indicate the summer and winter solstices, and the spring and fall equinoxes.

Carhenge was built in 1987 by Jim Reinders and his relatives as a memorial to Reinders' father, who had lived on the farm north of Alliance where the collection of 39 American cars – arranged to align with the solar calendar – now sits.

The off-beat attraction draws about 100,000 visitors a year, according to Brown, and features a staffed gift shop from May through September. An estimated 4,000 people gathered there for the solar eclipse in 2017.

Carhenge has appeared in films, commercials, television shows and in song. Last summer, it hosted a group of muralists, who painted murals on the grey-painted cars, providing a new look for the motorcar monument.

Fuchs, the Firehenge creator, said he's not haunted by henges but had visited Carhenge shortly after it was first created.

The inspiration for his firetruck circle came during a recent marketing meeting for his brewery, which was established inside a former Rapid City firehouse built in 1915.

Fuchs has long parked old firetrucks, purchased from all corners of the Midwest, next to his brewery billboards to draw more attention to his business. He says that he often hears that visitors to Rapid City's downtown area ask "where's the Firehouse?"

"It's guerilla marketing," Fuchs said during a recent visit to Firehenge. "It's very effective."

At the marketing meeting, one of Fuchs' aides was playing with a toy firetruck. Once she set it on end, vertically, an idea was born.

He said he has no plans to hoist a firetruck so it sits horizontally across two vertical trucks — like the stones at Stonehenge and cars at Carhenge. Too many liability concerns, Fuchs said. More firetrucks may be planted this spring, though, he said. And a YouTube video, featuring a visit by aliens to Firehenge, is in the works, Fuchs adds.

Over the din of a front-end loader smoothing out a gravel parking lot, he said it's been a lot of fun.

"I get to explore my artistic side by planting fire trucks in the prairie," Fuchs said.

*This story was originally produced by Nebraska Examiner, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network which includes South Dakota Searchlight, and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity.*

*Senior Contributor Paul Hammel covered the Nebraska state government and the state for decades. Previously with the Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln Journal Star and Omaha Sun, he is a member of the Omaha Press Club's Hall of Fame. He grows hops, brews homemade beer, plays bass guitar and basically loves traveling and writing about the state. A native of Ralston, Nebraska, he is vice president of the John G. Neihardt Foundation. Hammel retired in April but continues to contribute to the Nebraska Examiner.*

## COMMENTARY

### South Dakota wetlands are under threat from the EPA's rollback

by Travis Entenman

South Dakota's wetlands aren't just pretty places on a map; they're our lifeline, filtering drinking water, keeping rivers clean, and soaking up floods before they reach our basements.

But here's the deal: The EPA just finalized a rule proposal that slashes federal protections for these vital lands, especially those without a "continuous surface connection" to rivers and streams. This rollback isn't theoretical. It's real, and it's happening right now. If we let these rules fade away, we're risking more than a patch of grass. We're putting our water, wildlife and future growth on the line.

Think about the last heavy rain that flooded our fields or sent muddy water racing through our streets. Without wetlands acting as nature's sponge, those floods hit harder. This new EPA rule invites more tile drainage and agricultural expansion, meaning less water gets filtered and more pollution goes straight into our streams and lakes, risking algal blooms and drinking water problems.

But the story isn't just about water. South Dakota's wetlands are bustling habitats for waterfowl, deer, and the wild things that make our prairie special. Hunters, anglers and birdwatchers feed local businesses and bring millions into our state. Strip away those habitats, and rural economies take a hit. The EPA's recent move exposes nearly 2 million acres of South Dakota's wetlands to new risks, and with no strong state-level protection, we could lose even more.

Some say wetland regulations hold us back, but in the long term, that's just not true. Wetlands save us money on water treatment, protect property values, and attract outdoor recreation and tourism. Communities with strong wetland protections bounce back faster from disasters and keep dollars flowing long after a storm rolls through.

Letting wetland protections vanish under the new EPA rule is a short-sighted bet South Dakota can't afford. If we want strong towns, thriving farms, and a future for our kids to hunt, fish and enjoy clean water, we need to defend what's left of our natural infrastructure. This isn't about red tape, it's about resilience. Our wetlands make South Dakota stronger. When they lose, we lose.

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



**The sun sets on a wetland northwest of Hartford, South Dakota.** (Photo by Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

## EARTHTALK

### Nothing Lasts Forever: Except For PFAS by Shriya Surti

Dear EarthTalk: If “forever chemicals” are so bad, why are they allowed in the U.S? – J.T. via email

Perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, better known as PFAS and often referred to as “forever chemicals,” are synthetic chemicals found in thousands of products. Known for their durability and resistance to heat, water and oil, they have been used for decades in items like non-stick cookware, waterproof clothing, food packaging and firefighting foam. Their widespread use has led to severe environmental and health concerns, with contamination now as a global crisis affecting millions of people.

PFAS are called “forever chemicals” because they do not break down easily in the human body or environment. Research links them to a range of health issues, including cancer, liver damage, immune system suppression, and developmental issues in children. These chemicals contaminate soil and water. In fact, studies find them in the blood of nearly all Americans. “Each new study...concerns us more, not just because of what the health effects of these chemicals are, but because of how hard it is to get rid of them once they’re out there.” says Lisa Patel, MD, a clinical associate professor of pediatrics at Stanford.

Given their dangers, many people wonder why PFAS haven’t been banned nationwide. They are regulated through multiple agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), making consistent nationwide action difficult. Also, their industrial importance—particularly their ability to withstand extreme conditions—makes them hard to replace in certain sectors. As a result, the U.S. government has taken a cautious, gradual approach rather than an outright ban.

Still, the tide may be turning. In 2023, the EPA finalized enforceable limits for six types of PFAS in drinking water, marking a major step toward stricter regulation. Meanwhile, several states, such as Maine and California, have implemented their own laws to restrict PFAS in consumer products like cosmetics, textiles and food packaging. These state efforts are building momentum for a broader national policy.

Public awareness and scientific research continue to grow, putting pressure on lawmakers to act. Many believe that with ongoing studies, better alternatives and rising concern, the U.S. could soon see stronger policies to reduce PFAS exposure and hold polluters responsible. “This is an area that needs further research to truly protect public health from the complex chemical exposure we experience throughout our lives,” says Andres Cardenas, an environmental epidemiologist at Stanford. PFAS pose a serious threat to public health and the environment. Their durability once made them a scientific breakthrough, but that same trait now makes them dangerous. Stronger regulation, improved technology and increased public engagement are key to addressing the crisis and protecting future generations from long-term harm.



**A University of Wisconsin researcher studies PFAS chemicals which have caused environmental & health issues around the world. Why are they legal here?** Credit: Bonnie Willison, Wisconsin

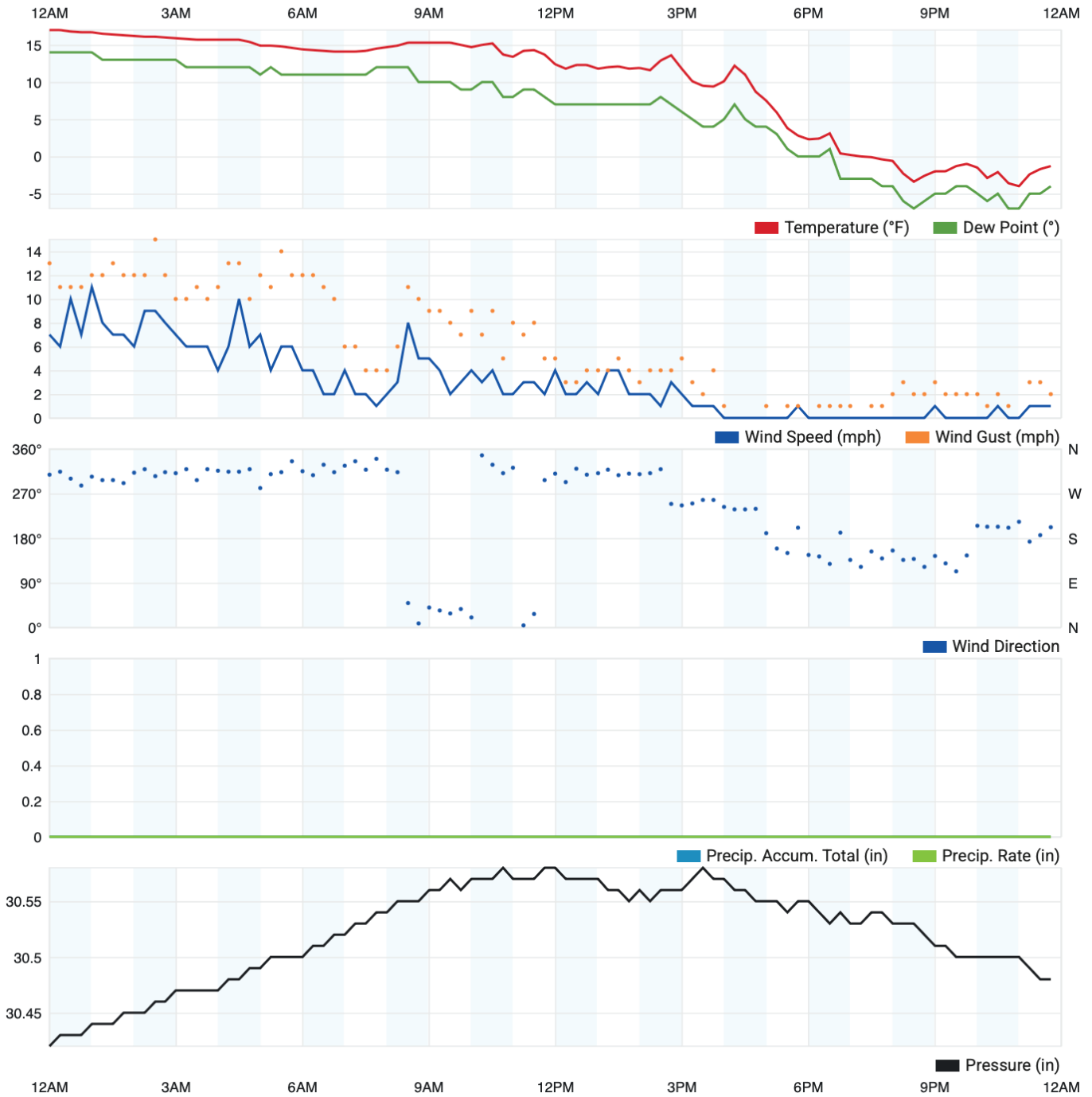
Sea Grant, FlickrCC.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

November 30, 2025



# Broton Daily Independent

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Monday

Monday Night

Tuesday

Tuesday Night

Wednesday



High: 15 °F

Partly Sunny



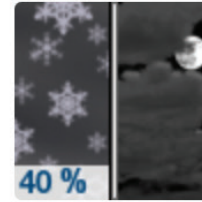
Low: -7 °F

Partly Cloudy



High: 31 °F

Mostly Cloudy  
then Chance  
Snow



Low: 4 °F

Chance Snow  
then Mostly  
Cloudy



High: 12 °F

Mostly Sunny



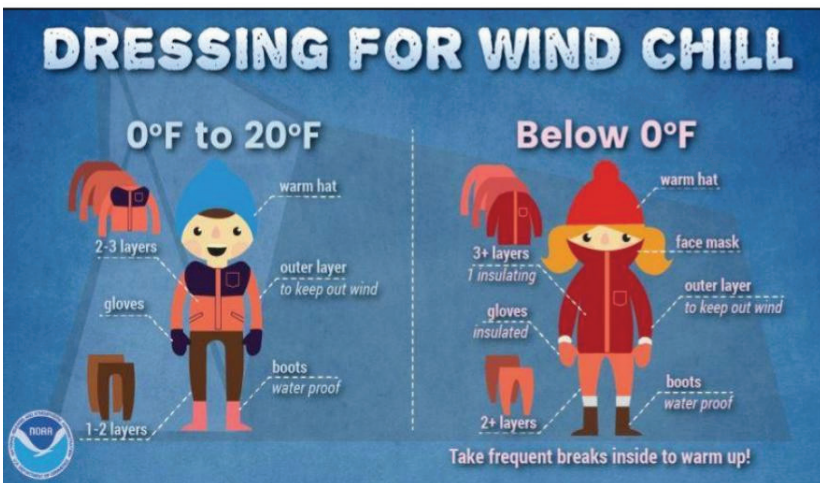
## Cold Air Continues

November 30, 2025  
3:17 PM

- Wind chills ranging in the **single digits to teens below zero** are expected again Monday morning.
- **Frostbite can occur in as little as 30 minutes.** Bundle up, pack your winter survival kit if traveling, and bring your pets inside!

### Minimum Wind Chill Forecast (°F)

	11/30 Sun		12/1 Mon			12/2 Tue		Minimum
	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	
Aberdeen	-14	-17	-12	2	-13	-14	-12	-17
Britton	-15	-17	-10	-1	-13	-13	-12	-17
Brookings	-2	-8	-5	3	-3	-7	-3	-8
Chamberlain	-1	-3	1	13	2	1	2	-3
Clark	-11	-14	-8	-1	-9	-10	-8	-14
Eagle Butte	-14	-16	-11	6	-3	-1	3	-16
Ellendale	-21	-23	-15	-1	-13	-13	-12	-23
Eureka	-18	-20	-16	-4	-13	-13	-7	-20
Gettysburg	-14	-15	-11	3	-6	-6	-4	-15
Huron	-6	-7	-5	9	-4	-6	-4	-7
Kennebec	-8	-10	-4	11	-1	-1	-1	-10
McIntosh	-19	-21	-20	0	-4	-5	1	-21
Milbank	-8	-10	-5	5	-6	-7	-5	-10
Miller	-8	-9	-6	5	-5	-4	-2	-9
Mobridge	-11	-15	-8	3	-3	-3	1	-15
Murdo	-10	-11	-5	11	2	1	4	-11
Pierre	-5	-7	-1	12	5	5	5	-7
Redfield	-11	-14	-8	5	-10	-12	-8	-14
Sisseton	-10	-12	-7	3	-7	-9	-4	-12
Watertown	-8	-9	-6	2	-7	-8	-8	-9
Webster	-10	-12	-7	0	-9	-9	-6	-12
Wheaton	-10	-12	-8	4	-8	-9	-8	-12



Cold air continues over the region as wind chills will range in the single digits to teens below zero through Monday morning. Make sure to bundle up, pack a winter survival kit if traveling, and bring your pets inside!

# Groton Daily Independent

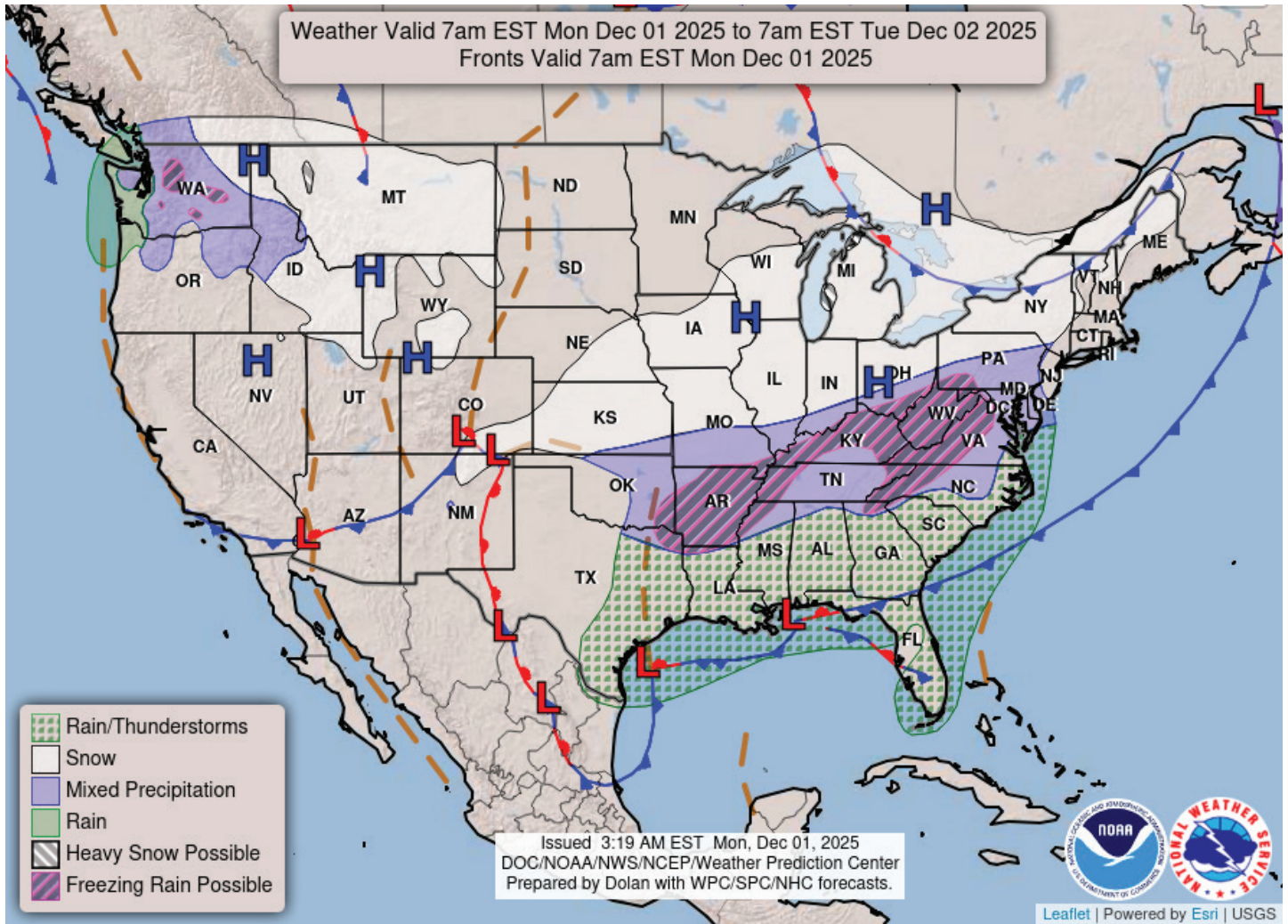
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 17 °F at 12:00 AM**  
**Low Temp: -4 °F at 10:59 PM**  
**Wind: 15 mph at 2:25 AM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 65 in 2021  
Record Low: -24 in 1893  
Average High: 35  
Average Low: 13  
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.02  
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 21.23  
Precip Year to Date: 24.81  
Sunset Tonight: 4:51 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:53 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 1, 1985: A storm system with heavy snow, strong winds, and blizzard conditions visited the region on December 1st through 2nd. Most of the snow fell in Minnesota. Snowfall across Minnesota increased from the south during the early morning of December 1st and had spread across most of the state by late morning. Winds in the west-central and southwest parts of the state increased to 40 to 50 mph, causing blizzard conditions. By late morning, drifts had reached 3 feet, and snowplows were pulled off roads from the southwest into central Minnesota due to restricted visibilities. The winds continued through the evening, gradually diminished during the morning of December 2nd. High winds and cold temperatures broke power lines and caused power outages over portions of southern and west-central Minnesota during the afternoon of December 1st and December 2nd. Many highways were impassable, and numerous businesses and schools were closed on the morning of December 2nd until residents could dig out. There were a few travelers that became stranded for up to 6 hours in their vehicles. Traffic accidents also accounted for some injuries and a few deaths. Further west, in South Dakota, strong winds gusted to around 40 mph and produced ground blizzard conditions over most of the state. The low visibilities, road conditions, and strong winds stranded a family for 25 hours south of Colome in Tripp County and another family for eight hours near Lee's Corner in Brule County. Many roads were blocked in the state's central and western parts, and no travel was advised in the east. The blowing and drifting snow reduced visibilities to near zero, and many accidents were reported. The strong winds, along with the previous day's snowfall, caused some damage, including the collapse of the roof of a large barn south of Bemis in Deuel County. Many church services were canceled on December 1, as were many schools on December 2. Temperatures became frigid during the morning of December 2 in the northwest part of the state. Camp Crook in Harding County reported a low of -36 F. Pierre had 2 inches of snow, Aberdeen, Castlewood, Clark, and Redfield had 3 inches, Bryant had 4 inches, Clear Lake, Milbank, and Wilmot had 8 inches. Timber Lake fell to -24F on the 2nd while McLaughlin fell to -30F.

December 1, 1992: A storm system caused numerous traffic accidents and stranded several hundred travelers on December 1st across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota as Interstate 29 was closed between Watertown and Sisseton. Slush on roadways became ice as high wind gusts were up to 60 mph, and snowfall of one to four inches brought blizzard conditions to some areas. Several semi-trucks jackknifed, and many cars ran into ditches, causing minor injuries. Simultaneously, strong northwest winds further west in central and north-central South Dakota gusted up to 67 mph on the 1st. The high winds shattered windows and blew down trees and signs. The wind rolled a van into a car, causing damage to both vehicles. A wind-blown dumpster damaged another vehicle. The wind also blew toppers off several pickup trucks, causing some damage.

December 1, 2007: A strong low-pressure area moving across the central plains brought widespread snowfall of 6 to 12 inches across northeast South Dakota. The snow began between 4 and 8 am and ended between 7 and 9 p.m. on December 1st. The heavy snow mainly affected travel and Saturday activities. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Clark, Conde, Faulkton, Redfield, and Watertown, 7 inches at Groton, Roscoe, and Sisseton, 8 inches at Britton, Summit, Bryant, 9 inches at Aberdeen and Kidder, and 12 inches at Big Stone City.

1962: The 50th Grey Cup was played in Toronto, Ontario, between the Hamilton Tiger-Cats and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. Severe lakefront fog halts the game with 9:22 left to play on December 1st. Winnipeg wins the Fog Bowl the following day by a score of 28-27.

1970: Four tornadoes impacted east-central Wisconsin during the morning hours. The strongest tornado, an F3, formed at 10:15 AM near Medina in Outagamie County. The twister moved northeast at 50 mph and destroyed twenty barns and five houses.

2006: A winter storm produced more than 6 inches of snow along a 1,000-mile-long path from central Oklahoma to northern Michigan from November 30-December 1st. The storm also produced significant freezing rain, which impacted the St. Louis area. An estimated 500 or more homes and businesses were without power in the St. Louis area after this storm.

## David's Devotion

**God wants you to enjoy a close relationship with Him.**

Psalms 3:1-8: A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

1 Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!

2 Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him."

3 But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

4 I call out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain.

5 I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.

6 I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.

7 Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.

8 From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.

Do you want to know who God is and what He cares about most in your life? You may have stored up knowledge about Scripture, volunteered to serve, or given generously to the church—all core habits of believers. But God's highest priority is the depth of your personal relationship with Him.

David understood this, and it strengthened him in times of trouble. When his son tried to take over the throne, David wrote these words: "But You, O Lord, are a shield about me ... I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about" (Ps. 3:3; Ps. 3:6). He knew that even in adversity, he could count on God's unfailing love and protection.

Throughout the psalms, we repeatedly see David's unwavering dependence on God. It was that passion—not his strength, charisma, or anything else—that made him a great man. Even though he had a number of failures, the Bible describes him as a man after God's heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

God wants a close bond with every believer. Tangible expressions of our devotion—like Bible reading, ministry involvement, and support of kingdom work—are important but should flow from love, not obligation. And love grows as our relationship with God matures. When we seek Him first, the rest will follow.

*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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## Upcoming Groton Events

- 11/15/2025 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving 11:30am-1:30pm Community Center (Thanksgiving)
- 11/30/2025 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.28.25

6 7 13 39 48 4

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$90,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 21 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.29.25

1 15 18 21 46 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$8,200,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 36 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.30.25

3 8 13 17 18 17

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 51 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.29.25

11 13 20 21 28

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$105,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 51 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.29.25

16 18 20 23 61 22

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 20 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.29.25

19 22 30 32 59 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$740,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 20 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### What to know about Netanyahu's request for a pardon in corruption trial

By The Associated Press undefined

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has requested a pardon from the president during his trial on corruption charges that has long divided the country. The request was met with indignation Sunday by opposition politicians and government watchdogs, but some Israelis signaled support and indicated it is time to move on.

The president's office called the request "extraordinary," with "significant implications." At stake is the reputation of Israel's justice system as well as Netanyahu's hold on power.

Here's what to know.

The charges

Netanyahu is the only sitting prime minister in Israel's history to stand trial. He is charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate cases accusing him of exchanging favors with wealthy political supporters including a telecom company, a Hollywood producer and a newspaper publisher.

The Justice Ministry announced the indictments in the three cases in 2019, after years of investigations, and the trial began in May 2020.

Netanyahu rejects the allegations and has described the case as a witch hunt orchestrated by the media, police and judiciary.

He has not been convicted of anything. Netanyahu has repeatedly requested postponements of his testimony, citing diplomatic engagements or security issues around Israel's wars in the past two years with Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran.

Earlier delays in the trial were caused in part by years of political crisis that gridlocked Israel, with Netanyahu returning to office in late 2022.

The delays have angered many Israelis, including some parents of hostages long held in Gaza who accused Netanyahu of drawing out the war with Hamas as part of efforts to stay in office.

Netanyahu's argument

The prime minister has portrayed himself in the trial as the victim of a "deep state" conspiracy trying to oust him.

He said his pardon request would help unify Israel at a time of momentous change in the Middle East, and asserted that an "immediate conclusion of the trial would greatly help to lower the flames and promote the broad reconciliation that our country so desperately needs."

Some government ministers, including Defense Minister Israel Katz, expressed support for his request.

Just weeks ago, U.S. President Donald Trump publicly urged Israel to pardon Netanyahu, turning to President Isaac Herzog during his speech to Israel's parliament last month. Earlier this month, Trump also sent a letter to Herzog calling the corruption case "political, unjustified prosecution."

Netanyahu mentioned Trump's request in his statement Sunday.

Herzog is a former political rival of Netanyahu, but the men have a good working relationship. Herzog in the past has said he believes the best way to end this legal chapter would be through a settlement between prosecutors and Netanyahu's lawyers.

Many Israelis are sensitive to issues involving Netanyahu and the law. Shortly after forming his current government in late 2022, the prime minister launched a plan to overhaul the justice system. That sparked huge anti-government protests as opponents accused him of trying to weaken the system of checks and balances and having a conflict of interest at a time when he was on trial.

The plan was revived earlier this year after being put on hold after the outbreak of the war in Gaza.

The criticism

Opponents of the pardon request said it could weaken democratic institutions and send a dangerous

message that some people in Israel are above the law.

"He basically says, 'I'm completely innocent, I'm sure that I can prove this innocence, but not for my own interest, for the country's interest I'm requesting this pardon,'" said Yohanan Plesner, president of The Israel Democracy Institute. "So there is no assumption of responsibility whatsoever, and this might project a problematic message to all public figures and to what our public norms might look like."

Opposition leader Yair Lapid said Netanyahu cannot be granted a pardon "without an admission of guilt, an expression of remorse and an immediate retirement from political life."

Legal experts said the pardon request cannot stop the trial. The only way to stop it is to ask the attorney general to withhold the proceedings, said Emi Palmor, former director general of the Justice Ministry. What's next

The pardon request will be sent to the Justice Ministry for opinions and then transferred to the legal adviser in the Office of the President, which will formulate additional opinions.

Experts said the president has broad discretion to grant one, and oversight is limited.

However, "as a rule, the president reviews a pardon request only after all legal proceedings have ended. The possibility of a pre-conviction pardon ... is extremely rare," The Israel Democracy Institute wrote earlier this month. "A pardon before conviction, while legal proceedings are ongoing, threatens the rule of law and seriously undermines the principle of equality before the law."

## **Pope Leo XIV's visit highlights Christian resilience in Lebanon despite regional turmoil**

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Over the past few decades, hundreds of thousands of Christians have left parts of the Middle East for good, driven by wars and the rise of Muslim extremists.

In Lebanon, it has been different. Despite the many crises that have battered the small nation, Christians continue to enjoy religious freedom and significant political influence.

Pope Leo XIV's visit to Lebanon over the weekend is a recognition of the importance of Lebanon's religious pluralism and a message to Christians not to abandon the region.

In Iraq, large numbers of Christians fled after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and the rise of the Islamic State group that followed. A decade later, in 2014, IS declared a caliphate in large parts of Iraq and Syria leading to an exodus by Christians as well as followers of other religions.

IS blew up churches in areas they once controlled in Syria and Iraq and confiscated many Christians' property.

A recent church bombing in Damascus this year made some Christians who stayed in Syria consider leaving. Many Christians in Syria have been concerned about the direction of the country's new government under interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa, former leader of the Islamist insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

In Lebanon, despite others emigrating, many Christians who remain cling to their ancestral homeland and refuse to leave.

The country's sectarian power-sharing system is prone to deadlock and has been criticized by reformists who want a secular state, but it has also ensured that minorities are not marginalized.

"More than half the advantage comes from Lebanon's political system when it comes to Christians," said Catholic priest Monsignor Abdo Abou Kassm who is the director of the Catholic Center for Information.

"There is a democratic system where people can express their opinions freely without getting killed, oppressed or sent to exile," said Abou Kassm. "You can live freely with dignity in Lebanon."

Synthia Khoury, 25, a business graduate from Syria who joined a delegation heading to Lebanon to see the Pope, said that after the takeover of power in her country by an Islamist-led government last year, Christians in the war-torn country were worried that they would not be able to practice their religious freely, although so far this has not turned out to be the case.

"We know that the conditions of Christians in Lebanon are somewhat better than ours, but we also know

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that they passed through many wars," Khoury said adding that despite the hardships Lebanese Christians had faced, "they did not leave and stayed in their country and preserved their customs and traditions, and this is beautiful."

## A long history

Deeply rooted since the early days of the faith, Christians in present-day Lebanon have survived wars and genocide over the past two millennia. For many years, Christian monastic communities lived in caves in the rugged mountains to protect their faith and avoid persecution. Since the establishment of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920 following World War I, Christians have played an instrumental role in shaping the country's politics and economy.

Today, Christians make up around a third of Lebanon's 5 million people, giving the small nation on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean the largest percentage of Christians in the Middle East.

Lebanon is home to 18 different religious sects, of which more than half are Christians. Maronite Catholics are the largest Christian group, followed by the Greek Orthodox.

Christians have a presence in most parts of Lebanon, from the south in villages bordering Israel to areas along Syria's border in the north and east as well as the coast. Mount Lebanon, which remains the Christian heartland, is mentioned frequently in the Bible.

Since Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943, a power sharing agreement has been in place in which the president is a Maronite, the parliament speaker is a Shiite Muslim and the prime minister is a Sunni Muslim.

This makes Lebanon the only Arab country with a Christian head of state.

"People can practice religion wherever they are, but the Lebanese identity is something that is sacred for us too," says Christian legislator Camille Dory Chamoun, who heads the National Liberal Party. His late grandfather, Camille Chamoun, was the president of Lebanon in the 1950s.

He is allied with the Christian Lebanese Forces Party that has 19 seats in the 128-member legislature.

"Our Lebanese identity is as important as our Christian identity," said Chamoun.

Other senior posts held by Maronites are the army command as well as the head of the central bank. The deputy parliament speaker and deputy prime minister are posts allocated to the Greek Orthodox.

The command of two of the country's four security agencies are also given to Christians, with a Maronite general heading the Army Intelligence while a Greek Orthodox heads State Security.

Toward the end of the 1975-90 civil war in Lebanon that largely pitted Christians against Muslims, an agreement to end the war was reached in the Saudi city of Taif. Since then, seats in parliament and Cabinet have been equally divided between Christians and Muslims.

## Lebanon's ties with the papacy

Charles Hayek, a historian and researcher, says that the ties between Lebanon and the Vatican are old and deep, adding that there is a tradition that states that St. Peter, the first Pope, established churches in Beirut, Byblos, Batroun and Tripoli, along Lebanon's coast.

Hayek added that two men of Phoenician origin from what is now the port city of Tyre in south Lebanon were elected popes in Rome in the 8th century.

"You have also unbroken correspondence especially between the Maronite Church, the local Catholic Church and the papacy since 1215," Hayek said.

Despite the civil war and sectarian strife in Lebanon, Muslims and Christians peacefully coexist today and followers of both religions accept one another as partners.

"Christians in Lebanon and the east are a main part of the region," says Khaldoun Oreimet, a Sunni Muslim cleric who heads the Islamic Center for Studies and Information.

"Christians are not (only) a community but an integral part of this land," Oreimet said.

The pope's visit to Lebanon comes a year after a U.S.-brokered ceasefire ended the Israel-Hezbollah war that killed about 4,000 people and caused destruction worth billions of dollars. Despite the ceasefire, the country still faces almost daily Israeli airstrikes, including one in Beirut on Nov. 23 that killed five members of the militant Hezbollah group and wounded 28 others.

Many Christian politicians criticized Hezbollah for starting the war a day after the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. The Iran-backed group had said for years that its weapons were only intended to defend Lebanon.

Many Christians in Lebanon, including the head of the Maronite Church, Cardinal Bechara Rai, have called for Lebanon to be a neutral state, rather than an arena where regional and world powers settle their accounts.

"God willing, Lebanon will begin to feel safer in the days ahead," Chamoun said. "The most important thing is to stop these conflicts that are extremely harmful."

"We have seen their consequences, and we have seen that we are paying a very high price for other people's wars on our land," he added.

## Investigators urge witnesses of the deadly shooting at a child's party in California to come forward

By SOPHIE AUSTIN and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

STOCKTON, Calif. (AP) — Authorities in California urged witnesses of a deadly shooting at a child's birthday party to come forward as the search for a suspect stretched into another day.

Three children ages 8, 9 and 14 and a 21-year-old were killed Saturday when gunfire broke out at a banquet hall in Stockton where at least 100 people were gathered, San Joaquin County Sheriff Patrick Withrow said. Detectives believe the gunfire continued outside and there may have been multiple shooters.

Eleven people were also wounded, with at least one in critical condition, he said. No one was in custody by Sunday evening, and the sheriff urged anyone with information to contact his office with tips, cellphone video or witness accounts.

"This is a time for our community to show that we will not put up with this type of behavior, when people will just walk in and kill children," Withrow said. "And so if you know anything about this, you have to come forward and tell us what you know. If not, you just become complacent and think this is acceptable behavior."

Sheriff's spokesperson Heather Brent said earlier that investigators believe it was a "targeted incident." Officials did not elaborate on why authorities believe it was intentional or who might have been targeted. She said investigators would welcome any information, "even rumors."

Roscoe Brown said the party was in honor of his brother's granddaughter, who turned 2 and was uninjured. Brown, who works for the city of Stockton's Office of Violence Prevention, was in Arizona when he learned about the shooting and drove straight to the scene. He said a niece and nephew of his were shot, and he knows several other victims. He didn't have information about their conditions.

"Who would come and do that to some kids, you know?" Brown told The Associated Press following a vigil organized by faith leaders to honor the dead and pray for the wounded. "You can't shoot up a party. That's senseless. A kid's party, at that."

Emmanuel Lopez told the Los Angeles Times his brother, 21-year-old Susano Archuleta, was shot in the neck and died at the scene. Lopez said his 9-year-old daughter was shot in the head but survived. He didn't share details about what led up to the shooting.

Stockton is a city of 320,000 residents about 80 miles (130 kilometers) east of San Francisco. With 54 homicides in 2024, Stockton's homicide rate was significantly higher than the state average. As of October, there had been 34 this year, according to city data.

Hours after the shooting, the Stockton Police Department arrested five people, including a juvenile, on weapons and gang-related charges. There was no indication that the arrests were connected to the killings at the banquet hall, the sheriff said.

Mayor Christina Fugazi told reporters that the 8-year-old victim attended a local school and had a parent who worked for the Stockton Unified School District. The mayor said counselors would be available this week at city schools.

She expressed anguish over the loss of victims so young.

"They should be writing their Christmas lists right now. Their parents should be out shopping for them for Christmas. And to think that their lives are over. I can't even begin to imagine what these families are going through. Breaks my heart," Fugazi said on Sunday.

## Vote count under way in Honduras to elect new president in a close race after Trump's intervention

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN and MARLON GONZÁLEZ Associated Press

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Poll workers began tallying Hondurans' votes Sunday evening as the country moved to elect a new president only days after U.S. President Donald Trump intervened in a close race by endorsing a candidate and announcing that he would pardon a former president.

Voting was extended an hour beyond the original closing time in many locations to accommodate remaining voters. No major voting problems were initially reported by electoral authorities.

In addition to a new president, voters were casting ballots for a new Congress, as well as hundreds of local positions.

Three main candidates are in a close race

Among the five presidential candidates on the ballot, polls indicated three had a chance to win and were finishing in close competition. They are:

1. Rixi Moncada, who served as finance and later as defense secretary in the current administration of President Xiomara Castro and is running for the social democrat LIBRE or Liberty and Re-foundation party. Moncada is promising to "democratize" an economy still defined by extreme wealth and poverty.

2. Salvador Nasralla, who is making his fourth bid for the presidency, this time as the candidate for the conservative Liberal Party. He casts himself as an outsider who can clean up the country's endemic corruption.

3. Former Tegucigalpa Mayor Nasry "Tito" Asfura, who is trying to restore the conservative National Party as a pro-business force after former presidents from the party were embroiled in corruption scandals, with one sent to prison in the U.S.

Hondurans say security and jobs remain their top priorities, despite an economy that has strengthened during Castro's administration. Honduras' security situation has improved in recent years as homicides across the region continue to fall, but it still has Central America's highest homicide rate.

Trump intervenes in favor of National Party

The presidential contest mostly focused on candidates trading accusations of plans to manipulate the vote until this past week, when Trump endorsed Asfura while attacking his opponents, the latest signal of the United States' renewed interest in Latin America.

Trump shocked Hondurans Friday by announcing that he would pardon ex-President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was serving a 45-year sentence in a U.S. prison for helping drug traffickers move cocaine to the United States.

It was unclear what impact Trump would have on the election, but it was the latest show of the U.S. government's willingness to directly involve itself in the region and came at a time of already heightened tensions because of the U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean and Trump's threats against Venezuela President Nicolás Maduro.

When asked why he pardoned Hernández, Trump argued that he was answering the calls of Hondurans who believed the case was politically motivated.

"The people of Honduras really thought he was set up, and it was a terrible thing," Trump told reporters traveling with him on Air Force One later Sunday.

"They basically said (Hernández) was a drug dealer because he was the president of the country. And they said it was a Biden administration set-up. And I looked at the facts and I agreed with them."

But in Honduras, many were left unnerved by the sudden U.S. attention, and hoping at a minimum for a peaceful election.

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Voters express divergent views

Cristian Zelaya, a 42-year-old systems engineer, said that his priority in the voting booth was "to try to rescue the country from a future like Venezuela." He said that he wanted to get the "Communists" out, in reference to the governing social democrat LIBRE party, which he said made big promises, but didn't deliver.

He praised Trump's decision to pardon Hernández, who he considered a good president, but said it had no impact on his decision.

In another part of the capital, Carlos Alberto Figueroa, a 71-year-old retiree, said that he wanted Moncada to continue President Castro's work, which he said had already resulted in "development, a better economy and security."

But he too discounted Trump's impact, saying the Honduran people would decide.

Nancy Serrano, 20, was voting for the first time and top of mind for her was "enough with corruption."

Serrano is studying to be a teacher and she worries that the high prevalence of corruption limits opportunities for the youth and eats away at the economy.

Preliminary results expected Sunday evening

In announcing the start of voting Sunday, National Electoral Council President Ana Paola Hall called on the candidates to respect rules barring candidates from declaring victory before the council confirms a winner.

There were reports of some polling places opening late, but apparently voting was relatively smooth. The council planned to provide preliminary results at 9 p.m., but has up to 30 days to officially announce the final result.

More than 4,000 Honduran and foreign election observers had fanned out to the nearly 6,000 polling places across the country.

## Post-Thanksgiving travelers in Chicago see hundreds of flights canceled and delayed after snowstorm

By ADAM SCHRECK and NAM Y. HUH Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Don Herrian was among the crowds of travelers at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport on Sunday hoping to make it back home after Thanksgiving as hundreds of flights were delayed and canceled following a winter storm in the Great Lakes region.

"It is what it is," Herrian said. "It's congested but that's expected due to the snow, the delays and the holidays."

The 76-year-old retiree from Ardmore, Oklahoma, had visited his daughter and her family in Indianapolis. He said his first flight was three hours late, and his connecting flight to Oklahoma City from Chicago was already running another two hours behind.

"I just hope I get home tonight," he said.

On Saturday, 8.4 inches (21.34 centimeters) of snow fell at O'Hare, setting a record for the highest single calendar day snowfall in November at the airport, according to the National Weather Service. That broke the previous record of 8 inches (20.32 centimeters) on Nov. 6, 1951.

Roads leading to the airport were packed Sunday with slow-moving vehicles even after the roads had been cleared of snow. Inside, delayed travelers crowded into gate seating areas, restaurants and sports bars to pass the time. Others grabbed spots on the floors of the terminals, snacking, knitting or scrolling their phones.

About 300 flights into and out of O'Hare had been canceled by early evening, while about 1,600 had been delayed, according to the tracking site FlightAware.

Planes were being de-iced at several airports across the country on Sunday, including at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport, according to the FAA.

Over 12 inches (about 30 centimeters) of snow had fallen since Saturday in areas close to Lake Michigan. Hundreds of churches in western Michigan told worshippers to stay home or watch services online.

In Wisconsin, utility crews worked to restore power to thousands of people. We Energies reported more than 6,000 power outages, with more than half in Milwaukee and South Milwaukee. The airport in Des

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Moines, Iowa, reopened on the critical travel day after a Delta Connection flight landing from Detroit slid off an icy runway. No injuries were reported, and passengers were transported to the terminal by bus.

By early Sunday evening there were over 400 flights into and out of Detroit Metro Airport that were delayed and over 45 canceled, according to FlightAware.

Elsewhere in Iowa, gusty winds Sunday were blowing snow back onto roads, extending hazardous travel conditions, the National Weather Service said.

"We did have areas of Iowa and Illinois that saw over one foot of snow," said meteorologist Andrew Orrison.

Over 16 inches (40 centimeters) of snow fell in Fort Dodge, Iowa, according to the National Weather Service.

Orrison said snow in the Great Lakes region was tapering off, but a new storm was heading to the mid-Atlantic and Northeast, with up to a foot (30 centimeters) of snow by Tuesday.

"It's going to be the first snowfall of the season for many of these areas, and it's going to be rather significant," Orrison said. "The good news is that it does not look like the major cities at this point are going to be looking at any significant snowfall."

At O'Hare on Sunday, Will Barney, 25, was trying to get home to Charlotte, North Carolina.

"I think I'm on my third delay," Barney, a data governance analyst, said while sitting in a corridor between concourses. "I just kept walking until I could find somewhere to sit down so I'm not elbow-to-elbow," he said.

Traffic was so bad getting into the airport that his father dropped him off at the car rental entrance, and he took the internal airport train in.

"You had Thanksgiving. Then you add the snow on top of that," Barney said. "Thank God the government's not shut down too."

## Trump issues White House invitation to families of the two National Guard members who were shot

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

President Donald Trump on Sunday said he's invited the family of a National Guard member fatally shot last week to the White House, saying he spoke to her parents and they were "devastated."

U.S. Army Spc. Sarah Beckstrom died after the Wednesday shooting in Washington, D.C., while her seriously injured colleague, U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, remained in critical condition.

The president said he's discussed a White House visit for the parents of both members of the West Virginia National Guard.

"I said, 'When you're ready, because that's a tough thing, come to the White House. We're going to honor Sarah,'" Trump told reporters. "And likewise with Andrew, recover or not."

In recent days, local vigils in West Virginia have honored the soldiers, including one Saturday evening at Webster County High School, where Beckstrom attended classes.

"Sarah was the kind of student that teachers hoped for, she carried herself with quiet strength, a contagious smile and a positive energy that lifted people around her," said Gabriel Markle, the school's principal. "She was sweet, caring and always willing to help others."

Beckstrom, 20, and Wolfe, 24 were deployed with the West Virginia National Guard as part of Trump's aggressive crime-fighting plan that federalized the D.C. police force.

A 29-year-old Afghan national faces one count of first-degree murder and two counts of assault with intent to kill while armed in the shooting, which prompted the Trump administration to halt all asylum decisions and pause issuing visas for people traveling on Afghan passports.

Funeral arrangements had not been finalized for Beckstrom, according to Cathy Pettry, the owner of Dodd & Reed Funeral Home in Webster Springs. Pettry said Saturday the home has been in contact with Beckstrom's family about services.

The hometown crowd, seated in bleachers and folding chairs, lit candles as they heard from clergy and

Gov. Patrick Morrisey, who said he had visited Wolfe's family earlier in the day.

Wolfe, of Martinsburg, entered service in February 2019. He had graduated from Musselman High School in 2019, according to Berkeley County Schools.

He remained hospitalized and "fighting for his life," Morrisey said the following day during an interview with Fox News Channel's "The Sunday Briefing."

U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi told "Fox News Sunday" that she also planned to meet with Wolfe's family.

Morrisey called it a challenging time for the state.

Calling Beckstrom a "favorite daughter of Webster County," he said he quickly learned about her reputation as someone with a big heart who loved to serve others. Beckstrom, of Summersville, graduated in June 2023 and enlisted that month. She served with distinction as a military police officer, according to the West Virginia National Guard.

"She had a lot of kindness and she certainly had courage," Morrisey told the crowd during Saturday's vigil. "Though her life lasted far too short, she has left a mark that's going to last forever."

## Lawmakers voice support for congressional reviews of Trump's military strikes on boats

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers from both parties said Sunday they support congressional reviews of U.S. military strikes against vessels suspected of smuggling drugs in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean, citing a published report that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a verbal order for all crew members to be killed as part of a Sept. 2 attack.

The lawmakers said they did not know whether last week's Washington Post report was true, and some Republicans were skeptical, but they said attacking survivors of an initial missile strike poses serious legal concerns.

"This rises to the level of a war crime if it's true," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va.

Rep. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, when asked about a follow-up strike aimed at people no longer able to fight, said Congress does not have information that happened. He noted that leaders of the Armed Services Committee in both the House and Senate have opened investigations.

"Obviously, if that occurred, that would be very serious and I agree that that would be an illegal act," Turner said.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump on Sunday evening while flying back to Washington from Florida, where he celebrated Thanksgiving, confirmed that he had recently spoken with Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

The U.S. administration says the strikes in the Caribbean are aimed at cartels, some of which it claims are controlled by Maduro. Trump also is weighing whether to carry out strikes on the Venezuelan mainland.

Trump declined to comment on details of the call, which was first reported by The New York Times.

"I wouldn't say it went well or badly," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One, when asked about the call.

The Venezuelan communications ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the call with Trump.

Turner said there are concerns in Congress about the attacks on vessels that the Trump administration says are transporting drugs, but the allegation regarding the Sept. 2 attack "is completely outside anything that has been discussed with Congress and there is an ongoing investigation."

The comments from lawmakers during news show appearances come as the administration escalates a campaign to combat drug trafficking into the U.S. On Saturday, Trump said the airspace "above and surrounding" Venezuela should be considered as "closed in its entirety," an assertion that raised more questions about the U.S. pressure on Maduro. Maduro's government accused Trump of making a "colonial threat" and seeking to undermine the South American country's sovereignty.

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After the Post's report, Hegseth said Friday on X that "fake news is delivering more fabricated, inflammatory, and derogatory reporting to discredit our incredible warriors fighting to protect the homeland."

"Our current operations in the Caribbean are lawful under both U.S. and international law, with all actions in compliance with the law of armed conflict—and approved by the best military and civilian lawyers, up and down the chain of command," Hegseth wrote.

Trump said on Sunday the administration "will look into" the matter but added, "I wouldn't have wanted that — not a second strike." The president also defended Hegseth.

"Pete said he did not order the death of those two men," Trump said. He added, "And I believe him."

Republican Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and its top Democrat, Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, said in a joint statement late Friday that the committee "will be conducting vigorous oversight to determine the facts related to these circumstances."

That was followed Saturday with the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Republican Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, and the ranking Democratic member, Washington Rep. Adam Smith, issuing a joint statement saying the panel was committed to "providing rigorous oversight of the Department of Defense's military operations in the Caribbean."

"We take seriously the reports of follow-on strikes on boats alleged to be ferrying narcotics in the SOUTHCOM region and are taking bipartisan action to gather a full accounting of the operation in question," Rogers and Smith said, referring to U.S. Southern Command.

Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., asked about the Sept. 2 attack, said Hegseth deserves a chance to present his side.

"We should get to the truth. I don't think he would be foolish enough to make this decision to say, kill everybody, kill the survivors because that's a clear violation of the law of war," Bacon said. "So, I'm very suspicious that he would've done something like that because it would go against common sense."

Kaine and Turner appeared on CBS' "Face the Nation," and Bacon was on ABC's "This Week."

## Rubio says US-Ukraine talks on Russia war were productive but much work remains in search of a deal

By JOSH BOAK and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

HALLANDALE BEACH, Fla. (AP) — U.S. and Ukrainian officials completed roughly four hours of talks Sunday aimed at finding an endgame to the war between Russia and Ukraine, just days before a U.S. envoy is due in Moscow for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters afterward that the session with the Ukrainian team in Florida was productive but work remains in the search for a peace deal.

"It's not just about the terms that ends fighting," Rubio said. "It's about also the terms that set up Ukraine for long-term prosperity. ... I think we built on that today, but there's more work to be done."

President Donald Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, is scheduled to meet with Putin in Moscow in the next few days.

Rubio, Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, represented the American side in the high-level talks, held at a sensitive time as Ukraine continues to push back against Russian forces that invaded in 2022 while dealing with a corruption scandal.

Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One that he was briefed by them and that "Ukraine's got some difficult little problems," referring to the corruption scandal, which he said was "not helpful." The president added that "there's a good chance we can make a deal."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government has been roiled by fallout from a scandal over \$100 million embezzled from the energy sector through kickbacks paid by contractors, causing newfound domestic pressures for Zelenskyy.

Diplomats have focused on revisions to a proposed U.S.-authored plan that was developed in negotiations between Washington and Moscow. That plan has been criticized as being too weighted toward Russian

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demands. As the meeting began Sunday, Rubio focused on reassuring Ukraine.

As the teams sat down at the Shell Bay Club, a golf and racket club developed by Witkoff in Hallandale Beach, Rubio said the goal goes beyond peace to "securing an end to the war that leaves Ukraine sovereign and independent and with an opportunity at real prosperity."

Rustem Umerov, head of Ukraine's security council, responded to Rubio by expressing his country's appreciation for U.S. efforts, a message geared toward Trump, who has at times claimed that Ukraine has not been sufficiently grateful for U.S. assistance during the war.

"U.S. is hearing us," Umerov said before the meeting. "U.S. is supporting us. U.S. is working beside us."

Umerov, who appeared with Rubio to deliver a brief statement to reporters after the talks, underscored Ukraine's gratitude for U.S. support during nearly four-year war. But he offered no hints about what, if any, progress was made during the talks.

Rubio said the talks were comprehensive and went beyond finding agreement on ending the fighting. Trump has repeatedly said that if Ukraine builds deeper commercial ties to the United States it can help deter Russian aggression in the future.

To that end, the U.S. and Ukraine this spring signed an agreement granting American access to Ukraine's vast mineral resources.

Among measures included in Trump's draft peace proposal is the creation of a Ukraine Development Fund to invest in fast-growing industries, including technology, data centers and artificial intelligence. The proposal also calls for Washington to cooperate with Kyiv to jointly rebuild, develop, modernize and operate Ukraine's natural gas infrastructure, including pipelines and storage facilities. Russia has repeatedly bombarded Ukraine's energy infrastructure during the war.

"We also want to help Ukraine be safe forever, so never again will they face another invasion. And equally importantly, we want them to enter an age of true prosperity," Rubio said. "We want the Ukrainian people to emerge from this war not just to rebuild their country, but to build it back in a way that will be stronger and more prosperous than it's ever been."

Umerov has been involved in the talks. But until now, Ukraine's head negotiator had been Andrii Yermak, the powerful chief of staff for Zelenskyy. On Friday, Zelenskyy announced the resignation of Yermak, after his home was searched by anti-corruption investigators.

It was only a week ago that Rubio had met with Yermak in Geneva, with each side saying the talks had been positive in putting together a revised peace plan.

Among the other members of the Ukrainian delegation were Andrii Hnatov, the head of Ukraine's armed forces, and presidential adviser Oleksandr Bevez.

The earlier 28-point plan, which Trump has since played down as a "concept" or a "map" to be "fine-tuned," would have imposed limits on the size of Ukraine's military, blocked the country from joining NATO and required Ukraine to hold elections in 100 days. Negotiators have indicated the framework has changed, but it's not clear how its provisions have been altered.

It had initially envisioned Ukraine ceding the entire eastern region of the Donbas to Russia — a sticking point for Kyiv.

Trump said on Tuesday that he would send Witkoff and perhaps Kushner to Moscow this week to meet with Putin about the plan. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, in comments published Sunday on Russian state television, said Putin would see Witkoff before Thursday, when Putin departs for India.

Both Witkoff and Kushner, like Trump, hail from the world of real estate that values dealmaking over the conventions of diplomacy. The pair also were behind a 20-point proposal that led to a ceasefire in Gaza.

In his nightly address on Saturday, Zelenskyy said the American side was "demonstrating a constructive approach."

"In the coming days it is feasible to flesh out the steps to determine how to bring the war to a dignified end," he said.

Attacks continue despite diplomatic efforts to end the war

On Saturday, Russian drone and missile attacks in and around Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, killed at least three people and wounded dozens more, officials said. Fresh attacks overnight into Sunday killed one person

and wounded 19 others, including four children, local officials said, when a drone hit a nine-story apartment block in the city of Vyshhorod in the Kyiv region.

In a post on Telegram Sunday, Zelenskyy said Russia had attacked Ukraine with 122 strike drones and ballistic missiles.

"Such attacks occur daily. This week alone, Russians have used nearly 1,400 strike drones, 1,100 guided aerial bombs and 66 missiles against our people. That is why we must strengthen Ukraine's resilience every day. Missiles and air defense systems are necessary, and we must also actively work with our partners for peace," Zelenskyy said.

"We need real, reliable solutions that will help end the war," he added.

After Ukraine claimed responsibility for damaging a major oil terminal on Saturday near the Russian port of Novorossiysk, owned by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, Kazakhstan told Ukraine on Sunday to stop attacking the Black Sea terminal. The CPC pipeline, which starts in Kazakhstan and ends at the Novorossiysk terminal, handles a large proportion of Kazakhstan's oil exports.

"We view what has occurred as an action harming the bilateral relations of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and we expect the Ukrainian side to take effective measures to prevent similar incidents in the future," Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

## **Pope Leo XIV calls on Lebanese leaders to be true peacemakers as he seeks to bring message of hope**

By NICOLE WINFIELD and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Pope Leo XIV challenged Lebanon's political leaders on Sunday to be true peacemakers and put their differences aside, as he sought to give Lebanon's long-suffering people a message of hope and bolster a crucial Christian community in the Middle East.

Leo arrived in Beirut from Istanbul on the second leg of his maiden voyage as pope. He came to encourage the Lebanese people to persevere at a precarious moment for the small Mediterranean country as it faces economic uncertainty, deep political divisions and fears of a new war with Israel.

Leo is fulfilling a promise of his predecessor, Pope Francis, who had wanted to visit Lebanon for years but was unable to because of its many crises and as his health worsened.

Lebanon's political system, based on sectarian power-sharing, has been prone to deadlock with lengthy power vacuums and regular stalemates over controversial issues, including the investigation into the deadly 2020 Beirut port explosion.

Most recently, the country has been deeply split over calls for Hezbollah, a Lebanese militant group and political party, to disarm after fighting a war with Israel last year that left the country deeply damaged.

Leo didn't directly reference the recent war or the debate over weapons in his speech at the presidential palace. But he acknowledged the hardships the Lebanese people have endured.

"You have suffered greatly from the consequences of an economy that kills, from global instability that has devastating repercussions also in the Levant, and from the radicalization of identities and conflicts," Leo said. "But you have always wanted, and known how, to start again."

He told Lebanese leaders to seek the truth and engage in a process of reconciliation with "those who have suffered wrongs and injustice" if they truly want to be considered peacemakers.

A culture of reconciliation, he said, must come from the top with leaders willing to put their personal interests aside and "recognize the common good as superior to the particular."

The highlight of Leo's Lebanese visit will come on Tuesday, his last day, when he spends time in silent prayer at the site of the Aug. 4, 2020, port blast, which killed more than 200 people and did billions of dollars in damage.

For many people, Leo's mere presence was a message.

"It shows that Lebanon is not forgotten," said Bishop George, archbishop of the Melkite Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Beirut.

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Heavy security for pope's arrival

At the Beirut airport, where his plane landed with a Lebanese military jet escort, Leo was greeted first by President Joseph Aoun, then by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam.

He moved through the streets of the Lebanese capital in a closed popemobile, a return to the past after Pope Francis eschewed closed popemobiles. Lebanese troops deployed on both sides of the road and a helicopter flew overhead.

The Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni, had declined to discuss the types of vehicles Leo would use in Lebanon, and whether they would be bulletproofed. The visit came just a week after an Israeli strike in Beirut killed five people, including a top Hezbollah official.

As the convoy reached the entrance of the presidential palace, a dance troupe performed dabke, a traditional Arab folk dance, under heavy rain.

A visit meant to give hope

In Turkey, Leo marked an important Christian anniversary. In Lebanon, Leo was seeking to encourage Lebanese who believe their leaders have failed them, and to call on Lebanese Christians to stay or, if they have already moved abroad, to come home.

A Muslim-majority country where about a third of the population is Christian, Lebanon has always been a priority for the Vatican, a bulwark for Christians throughout the region. After years of conflict, Christian communities that date from the time of the Apostles have shrunk as families have moved abroad for safety and better lives.

In his welcome speech, Leo said "much good can come" from the Lebanese diaspora. "However, we must not forget that remaining in our homeland and working day by day to develop a civilization of love and peace remains something very valuable," he said.

Aoun, Lebanon's Maronite Christian president, vowed that Christians will remain.

"Lebanon is a homeland of freedom for every human being," Aoun said. "Your Holiness, tell the world that we will not die. We will not leave, we will not despair, and we will not surrender."

Lebanon's ongoing conflict with Israel

Despite a U.S.-brokered ceasefire last year that nominally ended a two-month war between Israel and Hezbollah, Israel continues to launch near-daily airstrikes that it says aim to stop the militant group from rebuilding. The war killed more than 4,000 people in Lebanon and caused widespread destruction.

The pope "is coming to bless us and for the sake of peace," said Farah Saadeh, a Beirut resident walking on the city's seaside promenade. "We hope nothing is going to happen after his departure."

Before Leo's arrival, Hezbollah urged the pope to express his "rejection to injustice and aggression" that the country is being subjected to, referring to the Israeli strikes.

The group also urged its supporters to line up along the papal convoy route. Hundreds of them did so, waving the flags of Lebanon and the Vatican.

Mounir Younes, the leader of a Hezbollah-affiliated scout troupe, said they aimed to send a message about "the importance of coexistence and national unity."

"Muslim-Christian coexistence is a great wealth that we must hold onto," he said.

Hezbollah — a primarily Shiite group — has allied with several Christian political groups in the country, including the Free Patriotic Movement and Marada Movement. However, the Christian party with the largest parliamentary bloc, the Lebanese Forces, is an opponent of Hezbollah and has criticized the group for pulling the country into a war with Israel. The country is now deeply divided over calls for the group to disarm.

Syrian Christians coming

In neighboring Syria, hundreds of thousands of Christians fled during the country's 14 years of civil war. A delegation of some 300 Syrian Christians traveled to Lebanon to join a meeting between Leo and youth groups and pray in a public Mass on Beirut's waterfront.

"We are in need of someone like the pope to come and give us hope as Christians" at a time of "fear of an unknown future," said 24-year-old Dima Awwad, one of the delegation members. "We wish that the pope would come to visit Syria as he visited Lebanon, to reassure the people and to feel that we are present as eastern Christians and that we need to be in this place."

## Georgia up to No. 3 behind Ohio State, Indiana in Top 25 shuffle as Oregon, Texas Tech also climb

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Texas A&M fell out of the top five of The Associated Press college football poll for the first time in two months Sunday, Texas Tech notched its highest ranking in 17 years and a season-high four teams from Group of Five conferences are ranked as the top five got a shuffle with a week to go before the postseason bracket is set.

No. 1 Ohio State and No. 2 Indiana, the only remaining unbeaten, are the top two teams for a seventh straight poll heading into their Big Ten title game clash on Saturday. No. 3 Georgia and No. 4 Oregon each moved up a spot, and Texas Tech's No. 5 ranking is its best since it spent three weeks at No. 2 in November 2008.

Mississippi remained No. 6 and was followed by Texas A&M, which slipped four spots after its 10-point loss at Texas. Oklahoma, Notre Dame and Alabama rounded out the top 10 for the third straight week.

The weekend results created two top-10 matchups in conference championship games this Saturday. Besides the Big Ten showdown, Georgia and Alabama will play for the Southeastern Conference crown. The other Top 25 matchup pits Texas Tech against No. 11 BYU in the Big 12. The Atlantic Coast Conference game matches No. 16 Virginia against a Duke team that is 7-5 and received no votes in Sunday's poll.

No. 12 Miami and No. 13 Vanderbilt traded places in the rankings. The Hurricanes, who finished the regular season with a 31-point road win over Pittsburgh, are the highest-ranked ACC team and hope to receive a College Football Playoff at-large bid. Vanderbilt slipped despite beating Tennessee by 21 points on the road.

James Madison, which will host Troy for the Sun Belt championship game Friday, moved up one spot to No. 19 and is the highest-ranked Group of Five team. Three teams from the American Conference are behind the Dukes: No. 20 North Texas, No. 21 Tulane and No. 24 Navy.

North Texas visits Tulane for the American championship game Friday. Tulane, at No. 24, was the only G5 team in last week's CFP rankings.

In and out

— No. 22 Arizona is ranked for the first time since September 2024. The Wildcats won 23-7 at Arizona State in the battle for the Territorial Cup and are on a five-game winning streak.

— No. 23 Navy, which won 28-17 at Memphis, is in the Top 25 for the first time this season and will take its highest ranking since 2019 into the annual showcase game against Army on Dec. 13.

— No. 25 Missouri beat Arkansas by two touchdowns and returned to the poll after a one-week absence. Tennessee (No. 18), Pittsburgh (No. 24) and SMU (No. 25) dropped out.

Poll points

— Seven straight weeks with the same Nos. 1 and 2 teams is the longest since Georgia and Michigan went 11 weeks in a row as the top two in 2023.

— The American Conference's three Top 25 teams are its most since Nov. 20, 2022, when the same number were ranked. The league record for ranked teams is four, in 2015 and 2019.

— The last time there were four Group of Five teams ranked was the final poll of the 2024 season.

— Tennessee's streak of 33 straight poll appearances ended after it dropped to 8-4 with its loss to Vanderbilt.

Conference call

SEC (8 ranked teams): Nos. 3 Georgia, 6 Mississippi, 7 Texas A&M, 8 Oklahoma, 10 Alabama, 13 Vanderbilt, 14 Texas, 25 Missouri.

Big Ten (5): Nos. 1 Ohio State, 2 Indiana, 4 Oregon, 17 Southern California, 18 Michigan.

Big 12 (4): Nos. 5 Texas Tech, 11 BYU, 15 Utah, 22 Arizona.

ACC (3): Nos. 12 Miami, 16 Virginia, 24 Georgia Tech.

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American (3): Nos. 20 North Texas, 21 Tulane, 23 Navy.

Independent (1): No. 9 Notre Dame.

Sun Belt (1): No. 19 James Madison.

Ranked vs. ranked

No. 2 Indiana (12-0, 9-0 Big Ten) vs. No. 1 Ohio State (12-0, 9-0), Saturday, at Indianapolis: It's a matchup of Heisman Trophy front-runners in QBs Fernando Mendoza of Indiana and Julian Sayin of Ohio State. Hoosiers are one of two teams to score more than 530 points this season (532). Buckeyes are only team to give up fewer than 100 points (93).

No. 4 Georgia (11-1, 7-1 SEC) vs. No. 10 Alabama (10-2, 7-1), Saturday, at Atlanta: This will be the fourth meeting of these teams in a SEC championship game since 2018. Crimson Tide handed Georgia its only loss this season, 24-21 on Sept. 27. Bulldogs have rolled off eight straight wins since.

No. 11 BYU (11-1, 8-1 Big 12) vs. No. 5 Texas Tech (11-1, 8-1), Saturday, at Arlington, Texas: Each team will be playing in the Big 12 championship game for the first time. Red Raiders dominated the regular-season meeting in Lubbock, winning 29-7.

## Netanyahu requests a pardon to end his ongoing corruption trial in Israel

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

TEL AVIV (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday asked the country's president to grant him a pardon from corruption charges, seeking to end a long-running trial that has bitterly divided the nation.

Netanyahu, who has been at war against Israel's legal system over the charges, said the request would help unify the country at a time of momentous change in the region. But it immediately triggered denunciations from opponents, who said a pardon would weaken democratic institutions and send a dangerous message that he's above the rule of law.

Netanyahu had submitted a request for a pardon to the legal department of the Office of the President, the prime minister's office said in a statement. The president's office called it an "extraordinary request," carrying with it "significant implications."

Netanyahu is the only sitting prime minister in Israeli history to stand trial, after being charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate cases accusing him of exchanging favors with wealthy political supporters. He hasn't been convicted of anything.

Netanyahu rejects the allegations and has described the case as a witch hunt orchestrated by the media, police and judiciary.

Trump's request

His request comes weeks after U.S. President Donald Trump publicly urged Israel to pardon Netanyahu, turning to President Isaac Herzog during his speech to Israel's parliament last month. Earlier this month, Trump also sent a letter to Herzog calling the corruption case "political, unjustified prosecution."

Herzog is a former political rival of Netanyahu, but the men have a good working relationship. Later Sunday, Israeli media reported a small protest outside Herzog's home, including a pile of bananas with a sign saying a pardon equals a banana republic.

In a videotaped statement, Netanyahu said the trial has divided the country. He also said the requirement that he appear in court three times a week is a distraction that makes it difficult for him to lead.

"The continuation of the trial tears us apart from within, stirs up this division, and deepens rifts. I am sure, like many others in the nation, that an immediate conclusion of the trial would greatly help to lower the flames and promote the broad reconciliation that our country so desperately needs," he said.

Case delays

Netanyahu has taken the stand multiple times over the past year. But the case has been repeatedly delayed as he has dealt with wars and unrest stemming from the Hamas-led militant attacks on southern

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Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

Netanyahu's pardon request consisted of two documents: a detailed letter signed by his lawyer and a letter signed by Netanyahu. They'll be sent to the Justice Ministry for opinions and will then be transferred to the legal adviser at the president's office, which will formulate additional opinions for the president.

Legal experts say the pardon request isn't able to stop the trial.

"It's impossible," said Emi Palmor, former director-general of the Justice Ministry.

"You cannot claim that you're innocent while the trial is going on and come to the president and ask him to intervene," she said. The only way to stop the trial is to ask the attorney general to withhold the proceedings, she said.

In rare cases, the system could pardon Netanyahu. Experts say the president has broad discretion to grant one, and oversight is limited.

However, "as a rule, the president reviews a pardon request only after all legal proceedings have ended. The possibility of a preconviction pardon ... is extremely rare," the Israel Democracy Institute wrote earlier this month. "A pardon before conviction, while legal proceedings are ongoing, threatens the rule of law and seriously undermines the principle of equality before the law."

Netanyahu portrays himself as victim

In 2008, as opposition leader, Netanyahu called on then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to step down as he faced a growing corruption scandal. At the time, Netanyahu said that a prime minister "up to his neck" in scandal did not have a mandate to lead the country, and there was a risk that Olmert would make decisions that served his personal interests and not those of the nation.

Olmert resigned even before he was indicted that year and would later serve 16 months in prison.

Netanyahu has struck a different, defiant tone since his own legal problems began. He has portrayed himself as the victim of a "deep state" conspiracy trying to oust him from office.

Shortly after forming his current government in late 2022, Netanyahu launched a plan to overhaul Israel's justice system.

Netanyahu presented the plan as a much-needed reform. But his opponents accused him of trying to weaken the justice system, damaging the country's system of checks and balances and having a conflict of interest at a time when he was on trial.

The plan triggered large street protests against the government, and critics have said the deep divisions sent a message of weakness to Israel's enemies that encouraged Hamas to launch its 2023 attacks.

Netanyahu's request also sparked backlash on Sunday, with an immediate response from the opposition and advocacy groups urging the president not to give in to his request.

"You cannot grant him a pardon without an admission of guilt, an expression of remorse and an immediate retirement from political life," opposition leader Yair Lapid said.

The Movement for Quality Government in Israel said that granting a pardon to a prime minister accused of serious offenses of fraud and breach of trust would send a clear message that there are citizens who are above the law.

But some Israelis expressed support for Netanyahu's request.

"Bibi Netanyahu did totally the right thing requesting the pardon," said Lior Gal, a Jerusalem resident, referring to the prime minister by his nickname. "He deserves to be pardoned. This chapter should be over and to remain united people and carry on."

## **A Border Patrol-led immigration crackdown is coming to southeast Louisiana. Here's what to know**

By JACK BROOK, REBECCA SANTANA and SARA CLINE Associated Press/Report for America

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Around 250 federal border agents are expected to launch a monthslong immigration crackdown on Monday in southeast Louisiana and into Mississippi dubbed "Swamp Sweep."

The deployment, which aims to arrest 5,000 people, is centered in liberal New Orleans and is the latest federal immigration enforcement operation to target a Democratic-run city as President Donald Trump's

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administration pursues its mass deportation agenda.

Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino, who has led aggressive operations in Chicago, Los Angeles and Charlotte, North Carolina, is expected to helm the campaign.

Many in the greater New Orleans area, particularly in Latino communities, have been on edge since the planned operations were reported earlier this month, even as Republican Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry said he welcomes the federal agents.

Here's what to know about "Swamp Sweep."

Border Patrol accused of aggressive tactics in blue cities

Bovino has become the Trump administration's go-to operative for leading large-scale, high-profile immigration enforcement campaigns. During his operation in Chicago, federal agents rappelled from a helicopter into a residential apartment complex and fired pepper balls and tear gas at protesters.

Federal agents arrested more than 3,200 immigrants during a surge in the Chicago area in recent months, but have not provided many details. Court documents on roughly 600 recent arrests showed that only a handful had criminal records representing a "high public safety risk," according to federal government data.

Border Patrol, which does not typically operate in dense urban areas or in situations with protesters, has been accused of heavy-handed tactics, prompting several lawsuits. Earlier this month, a federal judge in Chicago accused Bovino of lying and rebuked him for deploying chemical irritants against protesters.

Bovino has doubled down on the efficacy of his agency's operations.

"We're finding and arresting illegal aliens, making these communities safer for the Americans who live there," he said in a post on X.

Louisiana has strict immigration enforcement laws

The Department of Justice has accused New Orleans of undermining federal immigration enforcement and included it on a list of 18 so-called sanctuary cities. The city's jail, which has been under longstanding oversight from a federal judge, does not cooperate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement under most circumstances, and its police department views immigration enforcement as a civil matter outside its jurisdiction.

However, Louisiana's Republican-dominated Legislature has passed laws to compel New Orleans agencies to align with the Trump administration's hard-line immigration stance.

One such law makes it a crime to "knowingly" do something intended to "hinder, delay, prevent, or otherwise interfere with or thwart" federal immigration enforcement efforts. Anyone who violates the law could face fines and up to a year of jail time.

Additionally, lawmakers expanded the crime of malfeasance in office, which is punishable by up to 10 years in jail, for government officials who refuse to comply with requests from agencies like ICE. It also prohibits police and judges from releasing from their custody anyone who "illegally entered or unlawfully remained" in the U.S. without providing advance notice to ICE.

New Orleans awaits federal agents

In and around New Orleans, some immigration lawyers say they have been inundated with calls from people trying to prepare for the upcoming operation. One immigration lawyer, Miguel Elias, says his firm is conducting many consultations virtually or by telephone because people are too afraid to come in person.

He likens the steps many in the immigrant community are taking to what people do to prepare for a hurricane — hunker down or evacuate. Families are stocking up on groceries and making arrangements for friends to take their children to school to limit how frequently they leave the house, he said.

In the days leading up to Border Patrol's planned operations, businesses have posted signs barring federal agents from entry and grassroots advocacy groups have offered rights-related trainings and workshops on documenting the planned crackdown.

While New Orleans is famous for its blend of cultures, only around 6.7% of its population of nearly 400,000 is foreign-born, though that rises to almost 10% in neighboring metro areas. That's still well below the national average of 14.3%, according to U.S. census data.

The city's Hispanic population ballooned during rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and now makes up around 14% of the population, according to census data compiled by New Orleans-

based Data Center.

The Pew Research Center estimates 110,000 immigrants who lack permanent legal status were living in Louisiana as of 2023, comprising approximately 2.4% of the state's population. Most of them are from Honduras.

Amanda Toups, who owns local restaurant Toups Meatery and runs a nonprofit to help feed neighbors in need, said she expects the federal operations to negatively impact the city's tourism-dependent economy, which supports the rest of Louisiana.

"If you're scaring off even 5% of tourism, that's devastating," she said. "You're brown and walking around in town somewhere and you could get tackled by ICE and you're an American citizen? Does that make you want to travel to New Orleans?"

## AI-assisted shopping is the talk of the holiday shopping season

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Major retail chains and tech companies are offering new or updated artificial intelligence tools in time for the holiday shopping season, hoping to give consumers an easier gift-buying experience and themselves an augmented share of online spending.

Although AI-powered purchases are in early stages, the shopping assistants and agents rolled out by the likes of Walmart, Amazon and Google can do more than the chatbots of holidays past. The latest versions were designed to provide personalized product recommendations, track prices and to place some orders through unscripted "conversations" with customers.

Those features are on top of shopping updates from AI platforms like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google Gemini. In one of the season's most talked-about launches, Google this month introduced an AI agent that can be instructed to call local stores to ask if a desired product is in stock.

San Francisco software company Salesforce estimated that AI would influence \$73 billion, or 22%, of all global sales in one way or another from the Tuesday before Thanksgiving through Monday after the holiday, according to Caila Schwartz, Salesforce's director of consumer insights.

The figure, which stood at \$60 billion a year ago, encompasses everything from a ChatGPT query to AI-supplied gift suggestions on a retailer's website, Schwartz said.

Despite the advancements, AI's impact on holiday shopping will be "relatively limited" this year since not every shopping site has useful tools and not every shopper is willing to try them, said Brad Jashinsky, a senior retail industry analyst at information technology research and consulting firm Gartner.

"The more retailers that launch these tools, the better they get, and the more that consumers get comfortable and start to seek them out," Jashinsky said. "But customer behavior takes a long time to change."

Here are three ways the technology is poised to influence holiday shopping habits in 2025:

Bypassing the search bar

AI's potential to simplify the search for the perfect present is most apparent so far in tools that promise to give shoppers faster and more detailed results than a web browser with a lot fewer clicks.

OpenAI upgraded ChatGPT with a shopping research feature that provides personalized buyers' guides. The information comes from product pages, reviews, prices and a user's previous interactions with the chatbot. The tool works best for complicated products like electronics and appliances, or for "detail-heavy" items like beauty or sporting goods, OpenAI said.

Then there's Rufus, the shopping assistant that Amazon rolled out last year. It now remembers information customers previously fed it, like having four children that all like board games, for example. A user's browsing and purchase history and reviews are used to personalize recommendations.

Google upgraded its AI Mode search tool to provide answers to detailed questions composed in natural language. For example, users can tell the agent they want to buy a casual sweater to wear with skirt or jeans in New York in January that goes with a skirt or jeans,

Responses are pulled from Google's 50 billion product listings. The tool can also produce charts with side-by-side comparisons of prices, features, reviews and other factors. Previously, shoppers had to use

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keywords, filters and product links to find the information they needed.

"This is an expansionary moment, I think, for all of technology and for commerce," Lilian Rincon, vice president of product, consumer shopping at Google, recently told The Associated Press.

Meanwhile, Walmart's AI shopping assistant, Sparky, offers occasion-based recommendations and synthesizes reviews. An AI-powered gift finder on Target's app exclusively for the holidays responds to prompts such as the age and special hobbies of the recipient.

### New pricing tools and alerts

Tools for tracking online prices have been around for years, including CamelCamelCamel, a third-party service for Amazon prices, as well as Paypal's Honey browser extension for monitoring thousands of online shops.

This holiday season, shoppers have new options.

Amazon launched a 90-day pricing history tracker this month for virtually everything it sells. Shoppers also now can set up alerts to receive notifications when prices on specific items fall within their budgets.

Google, which for years had a basic price tracker, launched a more advanced version that lets users refine their requests with details like a garment's size and color. Microsoft's Copilot also launched a price tracker this year.

Jason Goldberg, chief commerce strategy officer at Publicis Groupe, said he thinks the new pricing tools will add more pressure on retailers to make sure their prices are competitive.

"A lot of consumers that weren't even looking for price alerts are going to discover price alerts for the first time," Goldberg predicted.

### New ways to buy

Amazon, OpenAI and Google are racing to create tools that would allow for seamless AI-powered shopping by taking consumers from browsing to buying within the same program instead of having to go to a retailer's website to complete a purchase.

OpenAI launched a new instant checkout feature that lets users buy products suggested by ChatGPT without leaving the app. Users can order merchandise from Etsy sellers and from some brands that use Shopify, including Glossier, Skims and Spanx.

OpenAI and Walmart announced a similar deal in October, saying the partnership would allow ChatGPT members to use the instant checkout feature to shop for nearly everything available on Walmart's website except for fresh food. For now, however, the feature only supports buying one item at a time.

A different deal Target struck with OpenAI lets shoppers put multiple items in a cart on ChatGPT, including fresh food products. But when customers are ready to pay for their orders, they are directed away from the chatbot to the Target app.

New tools from Amazon and Google will give shoppers a taste of having autonomous AI assistants do the buying for them. While the services still are limited, "agentic AI" is intended to be more independent and advanced than the generative AI chatbots that excel at research and writing, experts say.

Amazon is now letting Rufus automatically purchase items for customers who click an "auto buy" button while setting up price alerts. Once a product's price drops to the desired level, customers receive notice of their completed orders and have a limited window to cancel, the company said.

The e-commerce giant also started allowing shoppers to use Rufus searches for brand-name products on the Amazon app as a gateway to other retailers. If Amazon doesn't carry a desired item in its store, a "Shop Direct" button will take them to the website of a place that does.

Google's AI Mode price tracker also includes a "buy for me" option that automatically makes a customer's purchase through Google Pay when the price is right. The feature is available for products sold by Wayfair, Chewy, Quince and some Shopify merchants, and Google expects to keep adding more stores, the company said.

Google also expanded its web browser with an automated AI call feature that phones local businesses on behalf of customers looking for information or specific products. Google's program discloses to the store that it's an AI caller, and stores can choose not to participate, the company said.

Google said it's applying the feature initially to specific product categories: toys, health and beauty, and

electronics. Target and Walmart declined to comment on whether this type of service would be part of their future plans.

## Suspect in National Guard attack struggled with 'dark isolation' as community raised concerns

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

The Afghan man accused of shooting two National Guard members blocks from the White House had been unraveling for years, unable to hold a job and flipping between long, lightless stretches of isolation and taking sudden weeklong cross-country drives. Rahmanullah Lakanwal's behavior deteriorated so sharply that a community advocate reached out to a refugee organization for help, fearing he was becoming suicidal.

Emails obtained by The Associated Press reveal mounting warnings about the asylum-seeker whose erratic conduct raised alarms long before the attack that jolted the nation's capital on Wednesday, the eve of Thanksgiving. The previously unreported concerns offer the clearest picture yet of how he was struggling in his new life in the United States.

Even so, when the community member who works with Afghan families in Washington state saw on the news that Lakanwal was named as the suspect in the attack, they said they were stunned, unable to square the violence with the memory of seeing Lakanwal play with his young sons. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity to share undisclosed details while cooperating with the FBI in its investigation.

West Virginia National Guard Specialist Sarah Beckstrom, 20, was killed in the shooting, and Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24, was critically wounded. Lakanwal, 29, has been charged with first-degree murder.

In Afghanistan, Lakanwal worked in a special Afghan Army unit known as a Zero Unit. The units were backed by the CIA. He entered the United States in 2021 through Operation Allies Welcome, a program that evacuated and resettled tens of thousands of Afghans after the American withdrawal. Many had worked alongside U.S. troops and diplomats.

As investigators work to determine a motive, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" that officials "believe he was radicalized since he's been here in this country. We do believe it was through connections in his home community and state and we're going to continue to talk to those who interacted with him, who were his family members." She offered no additional information to support her statement.

Lakanwal resettled with his wife and their five sons, all under the age of 12, in Bellingham, Washington, but struggled, according to the community member, who shared emails that had been sent to the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a nonprofit group that provides services to refugees.

"Rahmanullah has not been functional as a person, father and provider since March of last year, 03/2023. He quit his job that month, and his behavior has changed greatly," the person wrote in a January 2024 email.

The emails described a man who was struggling to assimilate, unable to hold a steady job or commit to his English courses while he alternated between "periods of dark isolation and reckless travel." Sometimes, he spent weeks in his "darkened room, not speaking to anyone, not even his wife or older kids." At one point in 2023, the family faced eviction after months of not paying rent.

The community member, in an interview, spoke of becoming worried that Lakanwal was so depressed that he would end up harming himself. But the community member did not see any indication that Lakanwal would commit violence against another person.

Lakanwal's family members often resorted to sending his toddler sons into his room to bring him the phone or messages because he would not respond to anyone else, one email stated. A couple of times, when his wife left him with the kids for a week to travel to visit relatives, the children would not be bathed, their clothes would not be changed, and they would not eat well. Their school raised concerns about the situation.

But then, there were "interim" weeks where Lakanwal would try to make amends and "do the right things," according to the email, reengaging with the Washington State Department of Social and Health

Services as was mandated by the terms of his entry into the U.S.

"But that has quickly evolved into 'manic' episodes for one or two weeks at a time, where he will take off in the family car, and drive nonstop," the email outlined. Once, he went to Chicago, and another time, to Arizona.

Jeanine Pirro, the U.S. attorney in the District of Columbia, said this past week that Lakanwal drove across the country from Bellingham, which is about 80 miles (130 kilometers) north of Seattle, to the nation's capital.

In response to the two emails, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants or USCRI, visited Bellingham a few weeks later in March 2024 and attempted to make contact with Lakanwal and his family, according to the community member, who, after not receiving any updates, was left with the impression that Lakanwal refused their assistance.

A request for comment and clarification from USCRI was not immediately returned.

## Death toll in Hong Kong apartment complex blaze rises to 146 as the city mourns

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — The death toll in Hong Kong's apartment complex blaze rose to 146 on Sunday as investigators discovered more bodies in the burned-out buildings. A steady stream of people placed bouquets of flowers at an ever-growing makeshift memorial at the scene of the disaster, among the worst in the city's history.

The Hong Kong police Disaster Victim Identification Unit has been going through the buildings of the Wang Fuk Court complex meticulously and has found bodies both in apartment units and on the roofs, said the officer in charge, Cheng Ka-chun.

The buildings remain structurally sound, but the search has been slow, he told reporters, still wearing his white coveralls with his hard hat and respiratory mask at his side. "It is so dark inside, and because of the low light, it is very difficult to do the work, especially in places away from the windows."

So far the team has examined four of the seven blocks, Cheng said.

The latest searches turned up another 30 bodies, including 12 that had already been discovered by firefighters but hadn't been recovered, said Tsang Shuk-yin, the head of the Hong Kong police casualty unit.

A further 100 people are unaccounted for and 79 have been injured, Tsang said.

At the scene, well-wishers bowed and said short prayers, or left handwritten notes among the flowers. "This really serves as a wake-up call for everyone, especially with these super high-rise buildings," said Lian Shuzheng, who waited in a line of hundreds of people to add her flowers to the growing cluster.

People have also donated supplies to those who lost everything in the blaze, which started Wednesday and took until Friday to fully extinguish.

The eight buildings of the Wang Fuk Court complex in the suburb of Tai Po had all been clad in bamboo scaffolding draped with nylon netting for renovations, with windows covered by polystyrene panels. Authorities were investigating whether fire codes were violated.

Other constructions by the same builder are halted

Hong Kong officials announced late Saturday they had ordered the immediate suspension of work on 28 building projects undertaken by the same contractor, the Prestige Construction & Engineering Company, for safety audits.

"The five alarm fire at Wang Fuk Court, Tai Po, exposed serious deficiencies of PC&E in site safety management, including the extensive use of foam boards to block up windows during building repairs," the government said in a statement.

The company did not answer calls for comment Sunday.

Three men — the directors and an engineering consultant of a construction company — were arrested the day after the fire broke out on suspicion of manslaughter, and police said company leaders were sus-

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pected of gross negligence. Police did not identify the firm by name.

Those three were released on bail but then rearrested by Hong Kong's anti-corruption authorities, who have also arrested a further eight suspects including scaffolding subcontractors, directors of an engineering consulting company and the renovation project managers.

In recent days, multiple petitions have been started online calling for a proper investigation of what went wrong at the apartment complex. But China's national security authority also issued a warning Saturday, saying it would support Hong Kong in "taking a hard stance" against any "disruptive" actions linked to the disaster.

"We warn those anti-China elements ... no matter what methods they use, they'll be held accountable by the Hong Kong National Security Law and National Security Ordinance."

Faulty fire alarms and foam panels under investigation

The apartment complex of eight, 31-story buildings in Tai Po, a suburb near Hong Kong's border with mainland China, was built in the 1980s. It had almost 2,000 apartments and more than 4,600 residents.

Many are now housed in short-term emergency shelters or city hotels, and authorities are working on longer-term solutions.

"It's heartbreaking," said Jeffery Chan, a civil servant who came to pay his respects on Sunday.

"As a Hong Konger, seeing people in the place where we live lose their families, lose everything in just one night — if you put yourself in their shoes, it is unbearable. They need encouragement, support and help from the people of Hong Kong," he said.

Preliminary investigations showed the fire started Wednesday afternoon on a lower-level scaffolding net of one of the buildings, and then spread rapidly inside as the foam panels caught fire and blew out windows, according to Chris Tang, Hong Kong's secretary for security. Winds helped the flames jump from building to building and soon seven of the eight were engulfed.

First responders found that some fire alarms in the complex, which housed many older people, did not sound when tested, according to Andy Yeung, the director of Hong Kong Fire Services.

The dead included seven Indonesian migrant workers, and several dozen are still unaccounted for, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry said. One Filipina domestic helper was also killed and 12 others remain unaccounted for, according to the Philippines Consulate General in Hong Kong.

On Sunday afternoon, several hundred Filipinos packed a pedestrian street in central Hong Kong, saying prayers and singing hymns in tribute to the fire victims.

In Beijing, the Ministry of Emergency Management announced a nationwide inspection of high-rise buildings to identify and remove fire hazards.

"Bamboo scaffolding, non-flame-retardant safety nets ... and firefighting facilities and equipment such as fire hydrant systems, automatic sprinkler systems and automatic fire alarm systems, will be among the main items to be inspected," the ministry said.

The Wang Fuk Court fire is the worst on record since a warehouse blaze in 1948 killed 176 people.

The deadliest fire in Hong Kong's recorded history was the 1918 Race Course Fire, in which more than 600 people were killed, according to the city's Antiquities and Monuments Office.

## Today in History: November 30 WTO protesters and police clash in Seattle

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Sunday, Nov. 30, the 334th day of 2025. There are 31 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Nov. 30, 1999, an estimated 40,000 demonstrators clashed with police as they protested against the World Trade Organization as the WTO convened in Seattle.

Also on this date:

In 1782, the United States and Britain signed preliminary peace articles in Paris for ending the Revolutionary War; the Treaty of Paris was signed in September 1783.

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In 1936, London's Crystal Palace exhibition hall was destroyed by a massive fire.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the Brady Bill, which required a five-day waiting period for handgun purchases and background checks of prospective buyers.

In 2004, "Jeopardy!" fans saw Ken Jennings end his 74-game winning streak as he lost to real estate agent Nancy Zerg. Years later, Jennings became the host of "Jeopardy!"

In 2012, Israel approved the construction of 3,000 homes in Jewish settlements on occupied lands, drawing swift condemnation from Palestinians a day after their successful bid for recognition by the United Nations.

In 2013, actor Paul Walker, star of the "Fast & Furious" movie series, was killed in a single-car accident north of Los Angeles; Walker's friend Roger Rodas, who was driving the car, also died. Walker was 40 years old.

In 2018, former President George H.W. Bush, a World War II hero who rose through the political ranks to the nation's highest office, died at his Houston home at the age of 94; his wife of more than 70 years, Barbara Bush, had died in April.

In 2024, Syrian insurgents took over most of Aleppo, the country's largest city, facing little or no resistance from government troops. The insurgents would capture the capital of Damascus days later in December as President Bashar al-Assad fled the country, ending his family's decades-long rule of Syria.

Today's Birthdays: Filmmaker Woody Allen is 90. Filmmaker Ridley Scott is 88. Historian and screenwriter Geoffrey C. Ward is 85. Filmmaker Terrence Malick is 82. Playwright David Mamet (MA'-meht) is 78. Actor Mandy Patinkin is 73. Singer Billy Idol is 70. Historian Michael Beschloss is 70. Comedian Colin Mochrie is 68. Actor-filmmaker Ben Stiller is 60. U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem is 54. Singer Clay Aiken is 47. Actor-filmmaker Gael García Bernal is 47. Actor Elisha Cuthbert is 43. Actor Kaley Cuoco (KWOH'-koh) is 40. Model Chrissy Teigen is 40. Chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen is 35.