

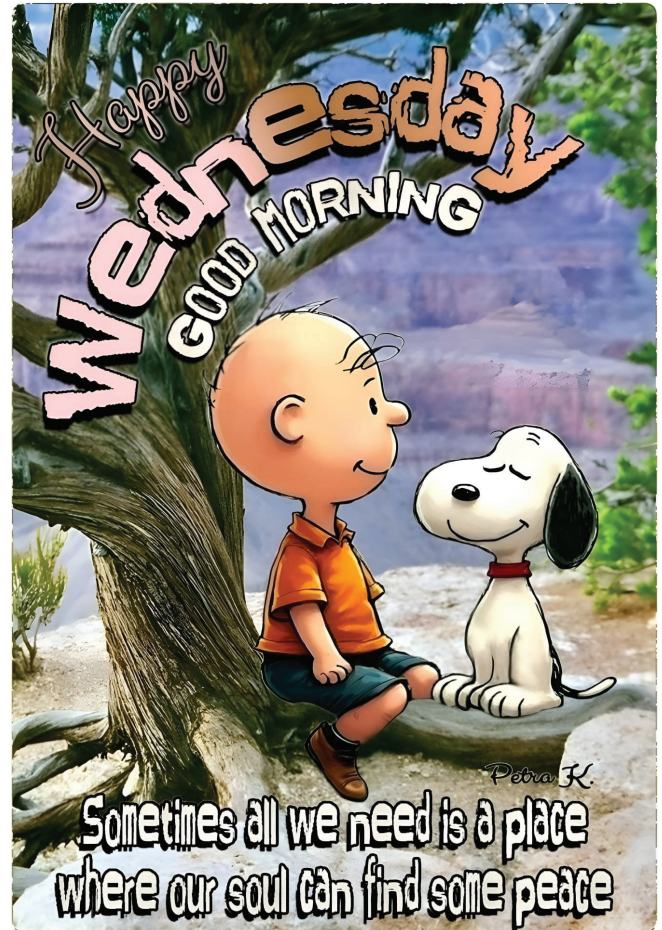
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Wed., Dec. 3

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.

Thurs. Dec. 4

Senior Menu: Goulash, green peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast; Cereal.
School Lunch: Chicken patty, mashed potatoes.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.
3rd Grade GBB Practice, 5 p.m.
3-5 GBB hosts Langford, 6 p.m.
4th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.

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1440

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

Hong Kong Fire Probe

Hong Kong is establishing an independent committee to investigate last week's apartment complex fire that killed 156 people and to initiate reforms in the construction industry.

Over a dozen people affiliated with the complex's renovation have been arrested on suspicion of manslaughter after netting around a high-rise building caught fire last Wednesday. The blaze spread to six other buildings. A preliminary probe found seven of 20 netting samples didn't meet safety codes, prompting authorities to accuse contractors of misleading inspectors to cut costs. The labor department had conducted 16 project inspections since July 2024—including one a week before the fire—and told residents who raised safety concerns that a fire was relatively unlikely.

Authorities declined to comment on reports that civilians were arrested over the weekend after demanding government accountability for the fire. In reaction to 2019 pro-democracy demonstrations, Beijing has passed down national security laws that can effectively criminalize free speech and protests in Hong Kong.

Dell Delivers Donation

Michael and Susan Dell announced yesterday they will donate \$6.3B to 25 million American children—among the largest-ever private donations to Americans.

The donation is designed to fill some gaps from "Trump Accounts," 530A accounts established by Congress earlier this year. Those accounts, similar to 529 plans, will be seeded with \$1K each for all US children born between 2025 and 2028. The money will be invested in tax-deferred index funds; families who max out their \$5K-per-year contributions could expect their child to accumulate \$191K before tax by age 18. The Dell donation will similarly provide seed funding (\$250 per child) for nearly 80% of US children aged 10 and younger—kids born before 2025 whose families live in ZIP codes with a median income of \$150K or less.

The Dells are one of the wealthiest families in the US. Michael Dell, who founded Dell Technologies in 1984, has a reported fortune of nearly \$150B.

Winter Storm Barrels In

A powerful winter storm swept from the Midwest to the Northeast this week, unleashing heavy snow, blizzard conditions, and dangerous winds across a broad strip of the US.

Kicking off meteorological winter, up to 70 million people were affected from the Central Plains to northern Maine, where the Northeast saw its first widespread snow and ice of the season. Interior areas picked up some of the highest totals, with parts of northern New England reporting up to 12 inches as strong winds and pockets of ice made travel dangerous. The storm followed a weekend system that dumped more than 8 inches at Chicago's O'Hare airport, breaking a November snowfall record set in 1951.

Post-storm, Arctic air will deepen the cold through the weekend, with subzero temperatures in the northern Plains and Upper Midwest.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Apple Music unveils year-end charts; Bruno Mars and Rosé's "APT." takes the No. 1 spot across several categories, and Morgan Wallen leads all artists for most entries with 12 top-100 songs.

Cannes-winning director Jafar Panahi sentenced in Iran to one year in prison and a two-year travel ban on propaganda charges while he's in New York City accepting Gotham Awards for "It Was Just an Accident," a film he illegally shot in Iran.

International sports court rules Russian skiers and snowboarders can apply as neutral athletes for qualification events to the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, overturning ban imposed in February 2022 over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Science & Technology

Samsung debuts its first trifold smartphone with 10-inch display, available in South Korea this month and in the US next year; Chinese company Huawei released trifold phones last year, and Apple is expected to debut a foldable iPhone next year.

Researchers find shingles vaccine may slow progression of dementia, building on an earlier study that linked the vaccine to a lower risk of developing dementia.

Terminally ill baby ants emit a chemical signal that prompts adult ants to kill them, helping protect the rest of the colony from infection.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.3%, Dow +0.4%, Nasdaq +0.6%); bitcoin bounces back above \$90K.

Prada Group finalizes purchase of Milan fashion rival Versace in nearly \$1.4B cash deal.

Paramount, Netflix, and Comcast submit second-round bids for Warner Bros. Discovery, with Netflix submitting mostly all-cash offer.

Nearly 203 million US consumers shopped from Thanksgiving Day through Cyber Monday, marking largest five-day turnout since 2017 when tracking began.

Online US shoppers spent record of roughly \$44B across five-day period.

Politics & World Affairs

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth defends follow-up strike on alleged drug boat in September, saying he didn't see survivors in what he called "the fog of war".

Former Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernandez is released from West Virginia prison after being pardoned by President Donald Trump over drug-trafficking charges.

Centrist candidate Salvador Nasralla takes slight lead in Honduras presidential election, as votes are counted by hand.

Tennessee voters select Republican Army veteran Matt Van Epps to replace outgoing Rep. Mark Green (R, TN-7) in special election.

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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #4 Results

Team Standings: Cheetahs 11, Shihtzus 10, Coyotes 9, Jackelopes 7, Foxes 6, Chipmunks 5

Men's High Games: Brad Larson 210, Roger Spanier 191, Tony Madsen 171, 171

Women's High Games: Vicki Jorgensen 177, Suzie Easthouse 161, Darci Spanier 159

Men's High Series: Brad Larson 534, Roger Spanier 509, Tony Madsen 491

Women's High Series: Darci Spanier 424, Vicki Jorgensen 421, Brenda Waage 391

Fun Game: Most 9 Counts w/out Fill – Foxes with 26!

NSU Women Set New Date for Sioux Falls Matchup

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State University women's basketball non-conference contest at Sioux Falls that was postponed from November 29 due to weather will now be played on Monday, January 5. The Wolves and Cougars will tip-off at 7:30 p.m. from the Stewart Center.

Codington County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: S. Broadway Street and 20th Avenue SE, Watertown, SD

When: 6:32 a.m., Tuesday, December 2, 2025

Driver 1: 29-year-old male from Oceanside, CA, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2019 Dodge Ram 1500

Seat belt Used: Yes

Driver 2: 54-year-old male from Watertown, SD, no injuries

Vehicle 2: 2006 Peterbilt Conventional 379

Seat belt Used: Yes

Codington County, S.D.- A California man was fatally injured in a two-vehicle crash early this morning in Watertown, SD.

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

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2019 Dodge Ram 1500 was traveling west on 20th Avenue SE when the vehicle crossed into the eastbound lane and collided with an eastbound Peterbilt semi.

The driver of the Ram was pronounced deceased at the scene. The driver of the Peterbilt was not injured.

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

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

Names Released in Lincoln County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: 294th Street and 488th Avenue, one mile southeast of Hudson, SD

When: 12:30 a.m., Saturday, November 29, 2025

Driver 1: Teague Jacob Rus, 18-year-old male from Rock Valley, IA, no injuries

Vehicle 1: 2011 Ford F-250

Seat belt Used: Yes

Passenger 1a: 14-year-old male from Hudson, SD, fatal injuries

Seat belt Used: No

Passenger 1b: Macey Leann Riggs, 19-year-old female from Sioux Falls, SD, no injuries

Seat belt Used: Yes

Lincoln County, S.D.- One person died in a single vehicle crash early Saturday morning one mile south-east of Hudson, SD.

The names of juveniles involved have not been released.

Preliminary crash information indicates Teague Jacob Rus, the driver of a 2011 Ford F-250, was traveling northbound on 488th Avenue near 294th Street pulling a male on a snowboard. The snowboarder fell and the truck stopped and began to back up. A juvenile male in the bed of the truck fell from the bed and was struck by the truck. The group drove the injured teen to the Haywarden Regional Hospital in Iowa where he died from his injuries. There were no other injuries.

Charges are pending against the driver.

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

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

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2025 Budget Address

By: Gov. Larry Rhoden
December 2, 2025

You can find a copy of the slides that accompanied the Budget Address here.

Introduction

Good afternoon, Lieutenant Governor Venhuizen, Mr. Speaker, members of the House and Senate, and my fellow South Dakotans.

Before I begin, please join me in greeting my wife, Sandy, who is here with us!

Welcome back to Pierre! It's only been a couple of months since we last saw each other. And I know that legislators have been hard at work getting ready for the 2026 legislative session. My team and I have been doing the same. I have my budget ready to present for your consideration.

I've been in this Capitol for over 20 years. I served in this chamber and the one across the way for a combined 16 years – and filled many of the same seats that you're sitting in today. I also served for 6 years as Lieutenant Governor under Governor Noem. For all of those years, I engaged in the budget process – whether as a legislative leader or literally sitting at Kristi's right hand as she put her budget together. But this is the first budget with my name on it, so I'd like to set the table with some core budget principles for how I approached this budget.

First and foremost, this money is the people's money – not ours. So we spend it wisely and return it to the people when we can. We balance our budget. Every year. For 136 years in a row – and this budget will make the 137th. And we don't use any gimmicks to do it – we structurally balance our budget. To achieve that, we don't spend money we don't have. And we don't spend one-time money on ongoing expenses. We use one-time dollars to pay debt, invest in projects that will have a long-term benefit, or endow an ongoing cost to save taxpayer money over the long haul. We don't engage in wishful thinking – we conservatively project revenue and expenses. We maintain at least 10% of our budget in reserves to save for true emergencies. And we fully fund our pension and protect our AAA credit rating.

These are principles we have followed in the past, and I am strongly committed to following them as well. If we do, we'll be in good shape, no matter how tough it gets. My budget achieves that.

Economy and Revenues

But before we get into the specifics, we need to understand the economic situation. Because we depend so heavily on sales tax, the economy drives our revenues, and revenue drives our spending decisions.

There's been a lot of speculation on the economy. I won't sugarcoat it: revenues have been pretty flat – only rising slightly. But we have to keep the context in mind. We're coming off some of the strongest years in our state's history – or in any state's history. Our economic growth may have slowed, but we're comparing that to the fastest growth that South Dakota has ever seen. We still have the lowest unemployment rate of any state in America by a wide margin. We still have labor force participation that is far ahead of the national average. We still have the 2nd most competitive tax system in the nation and the 2nd least regulations of any state. Our overall economic picture is in strong shape.

When Governor Noem declared South Dakota "Open for Business" during COVID, I stood by her side. And our approach paid dividends. South Dakota proved that we are the freest state in a nation that was founded on the principle of freedom. We became a beacon to the nation. Business took off, incomes soared, and we achieved the lowest unemployment rate in the history of the United States of America.

In fact, incomes soared so much that for the first time, our per-capita income became far higher than the nation as a whole. Just look at the growth! For years, people have claimed that South Dakota is a low-income state – not anymore.

South Dakota doesn't have a personal or corporate income tax. We rely pretty heavily on our broad-based sales tax. And historically, in both good times and bad, our sales tax growth has tracked closely to our income growth. So when incomes are growing quickly – like they were over the last few years – sales tax soars. When that growth slows, our sales tax flattens out.

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That doesn't mean our sales tax is weak – far from it. In fact, our growth was so strong that we are still far above our historical trendline. So when folks try to tell you that slower sales tax growth means our economy is weak, don't be fooled. We're in great shape. We just can't spend money we don't have.

Ag is king in South Dakota. When ag does well, the state does well. But when ag struggles, our growth tends to slow down. It's a tough time to be a crop farmer – and not just in South Dakota. Corn, wheat, and soybean prices are off their high points from a couple years ago. On the other hand, beef prices are at record highs, but that alone has not been enough for ag to keep pace overall. Historically, there's been a correlation between our sales tax collections and farm income. So let's pray for rain and for President Trump to be successful in his trade negotiations.

Our overall sales tax growth has been better to start this fiscal year compared to last year. In fact, last year was just the third time in the past 30 years our sales tax is down for the year. Thankfully, we've bounced back somewhat, and we had a very strong October. We'll be getting November numbers any day now. Year-to-date, we're about where we want to be. 4% to 5% growth is pretty typical for South Dakota, but it also means we don't have a ton of headroom.

There's been a lot of chatter about our year-end surpluses. Last year, we had a \$63 million surplus, and historically that would've been a great year. But it was actually our smallest surplus since the pandemic by a decent margin. And it was largely driven by one-time unclaimed property revenues. Without those unclaimed property dollars, we would've actually been a bit short on our revenue at the end of last fiscal year. I want to be clear about this point: last year, the Legislature passed – and I signed – the creation of an Unclaimed Property Trust Fund. That's a fiscally conservative way to handle the unpredictability of those dollars. But it also means that extra Unclaimed Property revenue won't create a surplus anymore. As a result, we'll have smaller surpluses and one-time revenues available in the future.

I've also heard our rainy day fund is too large, and yes, it's grown. Let's remember, we left money on the bottom line to set aside for the prison project, then we spent \$79 million out of the rainy day fund to avoid costly interest and debt. That's exactly the sort of long-term planning that those dollars should be used for when necessary. Historically, we maintain at least 10% of our overall budget for a worst-case scenario. Because of continued slower revenue growth and weakness in the farm sector, I'm advocating we increase that to 12.5% this year. When I met with legislative leadership in October to go over early budget planning, I heard strong support for at least 12% in reserves. My good friend Chairman Ernie Otten wanted to be even more conservative than that. Well, Ernie.... congratulations! All reserves above 12.5% will be available as one-time dollars in this budget – more to come on that.

Historical Spending

Before the pandemic, our general fund budget grew 4% a year on average. After the pandemic craziness, that growth jumped to 10% a year. But a big cause was rising inflation, which meant we had to allocate more to building projects and provide more for the Big Three. That growth has not been equal across the board. If you look back to the start of the Noem-Rhoden Administration, Medicaid has grown far faster than any other area of the budget. In fact, for the first time in state history, Medicaid is a bigger share of the general fund than K-12 education. Well, why is that?

About half of it – \$180 million – is increases in the rates that we pay to providers. Close to 30% of the total increase is in the state share of FMAP – more on that in a second. \$45 million is from Medicaid Expansion, which is actually less than we originally thought. And the rest is Medicaid utilization. Everything on the left side of that pie chart is mandatory – we have zero control over it. Everything on the right was optional – this Legislature has made the decision to increase provider rates, including to groups like CSPs, above and beyond what is required.

Why am I telling you all this? Because I need you to understand, if you want to make dramatic cuts to the budget, like I've heard some legislators in this chamber say, then provider rates are the largest, most obvious cost-cutting option. I don't think that's the right way to go, and I don't think there'll be a lot of appetite for that. In fact, if anything, I think we'll hear some provider groups ask for more money this year.

There is some good news. I talked about the second biggest Medicaid driver being FMAP to the tune

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of \$105 million. This is a ratio where the feds pay at least half and the state pays the rest, and it's based on how strong our economy is. When our economy does well, we pay more. Well, here's the good news – we're almost to 50%! Our share of FMAP has never been this high, and it can't get much higher. If we have one more good year of strong economic growth, this will level off, and these increases will come to an end.

Back to overall growth – everything besides Medicaid has grown at far slower rates. Well, one of the legislative summer studies came back with the recommendation that I propose 5% in budget cuts. Last year, Governor Noem stood at this podium and recommended \$80 million in budget cuts. When I took the reins, I adopted her budget. The final budget included no additional cuts from the Legislature, and in fact you restored \$7 million of the cuts we proposed. So, I ask the legislators who are asking for cuts, where should we cut? Should we cut healthcare, education, or public safety? Folks seem to want to cut the general operations of state government, the "All Other" on the far right.

Put another way, outside of education, taking care of people, and public safety, only 4% of our budget goes to the rest of state government. That's not enough to move the needle. I share the desire to cut property taxes. But slashing healthcare, education, and public safety is not the way to do it. I have a much better, more targeted plan to address property taxes, and I look forward to sharing the specifics with you in the State of the State.

Remember, statute dictates that we provide 3% or inflation – whichever is less – for education. And we apply that to the Big Three: education, healthcare providers, and state employees. Because our revenues haven't grown much, we have to keep them flat this year. But since the start of the Noem-Rhoden Administration, we've prioritized the Big Three. In fact, over that time, the statutory increase would've been 21.7%. And on several occasions, we provided increases above 3% – sometimes far above. That means that, even with 0% this year, funding over the past eight years has been 6.2% ahead of what was required, at 27.9%. So while these priorities aren't getting an increase this year, I'm proud of what we've done for them over the past several years.

For K-12 education, in particular, enrollments are down across the state. And why is that? There are two main reasons. Number one, births are down 9% over the last 10 years. And even though South Dakota still has the highest birth rate in America, it's not high enough to keep up. In the meantime, we've seen a 216% growth in students getting alternative education, such as homeschooling. Those families are choosing the best education option for them, and they should! Our funding formula is largely based on the number of students in public education, and when there are fewer students, this is what happens.

As for the third leg of the Big Three: state employees – my budget makes a modest investment in our State Employee Health Plan without raising premiums for our state employees. We're investing \$3 million out of health plan reserves and implementing plan changes to keep costs from going up on state employees, since we won't be able to give them a raise this year.

Ongoing Picture

Now it's time to get into the nitty gritty details of our ongoing revenue. So far this fiscal year, we're \$8.2 million behind legislative adopted revenues. So while our sales tax revenues are up, we actually have to cut our total estimates by about \$7 million. We're expecting overall sales tax growth at 4.4% over the fiscal year, about where we're at so far. And we're revising other revenues up by more than \$8 million, mostly because our severance tax revenues have been excellent! That's the result of a strong gold market, and we expect that to continue.

If you look at this year and last year, that's two years in a row where we've been behind estimates. Of course, that's after four years where revenues kept going crazy, so it's been very hard to set estimates. I just want to stress the importance of being conservative in setting our revenue estimates this year. There's always points of disagreement, but the Legislature always comes in with a little rosier estimate than the Administration. It's worked out for us so far, but that's mostly a result of high unclaimed property dollars – and again, with the creation of the trust fund, we won't see those in future budgets. As we look forward to next year, we need to be cautious in how we set our revenue projections.

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Next year, we're estimating sales tax growth of \$60.3 million and overall revenue growth of \$58.7 million. That's realistic without being too rosy. Remember, we are far ahead of where we should be when you look back over the last several years. Things are still normalizing.

So between the \$7 million behind projections this year and the \$58.7 million growth next year, our total ongoing revenue available is \$51.6 million. And those dollars will be almost entirely spoken for by mandatory increases, which account for \$47.2 million. We're actually making \$2.7 million in cuts. As I said before, we have \$413 million in reserves, and we're leaving 12.5% of our budget in the rainy day fund. We have the rest available for one-time investments.

My budget keeps the state workforce flat – with the exception of staffing the new women's prison. This budget invests taxpayer dollars conservatively and wisely to keep South Dakota strong, safe, and free. We'll keep South Dakota strong by following the recommendations of the GRIT task force, modernizing our IT, prioritizing the longevity of state buildings, and making mandatory investments in state agencies. We'll keep South Dakota safe by preparing for the opening of the new women's prison in Rapid City, investing in our National Guard and Highway Patrol, and prioritizing security at county courthouses. And we'll keep South Dakota free by improving freedom to travel, investing in the freedom to learn, and prioritizing rural projects that will maintain the freedom to live in the community of your choice.

Strong

My budget keeps South Dakota strong by focusing on what works. We realize that government is best when it is limited. But when it is government's responsibility to do something, we should fulfill that duty with excellence.

A few months back, I started the Governor's Resilient Infrastructure Task force – or GRIT. It serves as a strategic advisory body to assess risks and vulnerabilities and support long-term planning and investment in critical infrastructure. Recently, GRIT made three requests for investments, and those three items are all in my budget. First, \$10 million to the IT Modernization Fund to harden our systems and equipment. This should help protect against service outages like the one that occurred in August. Second, we're investing \$260,000 for a cloud-based backup to the State Radio so that State Radio can continue providing its crucial public safety role, even if there is another outage. Finally, I'm supporting a \$300,000 investment to fund a nuclear energy study. This will help ensure an all-of-the-above energy approach for South Dakota. We're already the national leader in largest share of energy that's produced from renewable sources. More energy flexibility will lead to a more stable energy supply. And this announcement will pair well with GOED's renewed focus on energy policy.

My budget also invests another \$3.1 million in one-time dollars to continue modernizing the employment system at the Department of Labor and Regulation. This system was built in the 1980s and needs to be replaced before all the techs who know how to fix it retire. We started this fix with federal funds. Let's keep working to finish it.

Last year, as part of the ongoing budget cuts, we reduced the ongoing maintenance and repair budget to 1.25% and used one-time dollars to keep M&R at 1.75%. This year, my budget does one better. We don't have the ability to restore ongoing funds, but we'll invest \$30.6 million in one-time dollars to get overall M&R funding up to 2%. This will keep our state assets strong, which is the fiscally responsible thing to do.

We're also keeping our state services strong by making mandatory investments to fulfill their responsibilities. Last year, we cut the Department of Human Services by \$22 million – that was too steep, and utilization numbers have been too high, so we're restoring \$16.4 million of those cuts. The federal government is also requiring us to pay \$14.1 million more in inflationary increases to Medicaid providers. This increase is specifically tied to prescription drugs and Medicare crossover plans. So, we're required to pay it, and we will. I mentioned earlier that we have another FMAP increase to the tune of \$11.8 million in ongoing needs. We're also eliminating a government program: we can rely on the federal hemp program without compromising the industry or public safety.

We're also going to backfill the loss of federal funding in a few programs. The federal government changed their match rate for administration of SNAP, which represented a \$5.5 million cut to the food

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stamp program, which we have to pay. Thankfully, our SNAP error rate is the very lowest in the nation because we do business right in South Dakota – otherwise, the cut would have been about \$10 million more. We're also going to increase funding to South Dakota Public Broadcasting by \$296,000 to support their open government platform – this will replace just a portion of the federal dollars that they lost. This will allow them to continue to broadcast the state government activities. I believe this transparency is a strength of our legislature, and I want to see it continue.

Safe

That's how my budget keeps South Dakota strong. And now for how it keeps South Dakota safe.

The biggest public safety investment is the Rapid City Women's Prison. The prison's construction is almost done, and it will open next year. Now, it's time to staff it up. That represents \$13.2 million to support 133 FTE. It includes a heavy emphasis on programming staff. From the very beginning, the new prison was built with programming in mind.

This facility will include a therapeutic community where the addiction counselors will be there with the inmates on a daily basis. This expansion of drug treatment will reduce recidivism and help alleviate overcrowding long-term. The vast majority of inmates will benefit from this new programming. And because we'll need to ramp up staff before July 1, my budget includes \$2.4 million in one-time dollars this year.

We're also making other investments in our prison system. My budget increases funding for offender healthcare by \$1.1 million to cover increasing costs. It also makes a \$555,000 one-time investment for new cameras to make the Jameson Annex and the Sioux Falls Minimum Center safer.

We're also investing in our South Dakota National Guard. It is my honor to serve as Commander in Chief of our National Guard. In fact, I'm humbled to be the first Governor since the legendary Joe Foss to be a former guardsman myself. We have extra reason to be proud of our Guard in South Dakota! Everywhere our soldiers go, they are recognized for their excellence. We have a contingent of South Dakota National Guard here with us today – would you please stand? And would everyone please join me in honoring them.

The National Guard Readiness Center in Sturgis is too small and extremely outdated. I am proposing \$2.4 million in state funds, which will leverage \$8 million in federal dollars, to increase the size of this facility to over 26,000 square feet. Additional classrooms will improve training and readiness. I'm also recommending \$30 million in federal funding authority to build a new 37,000 square foot vehicle maintenance shop in Sturgis – this will move the facility from its current location to the area just east of the high school, with our other Guard facilities. The existing facilities are inadequate for today's larger military vehicles and do not meet our soldiers' operational needs. When I served in the Guard, I served in the 842nd Engineer Company. That unit is based throughout Sturgis, Spearfish, and Belle Fourche, and I'm proud that it will benefit from both these investments.

My budget also supports a key investment in our South Dakota Highway Patrol. Throughout Operation: Prairie Thunder, the Highway Patrol has used aerial assets like their Highway Patrol airplane in support of that mission. This plane contributes in all kinds of ways: it helps us find missing people, track suspects who flee law enforcement, and investigate drug activity. But our current plane is coming up short far too often. Earlier this year, when a dignitary was in South Dakota, the camera system failed three times. And engine issues have kept the plane grounded at times. My budget recommends \$5 million to purchase a newer – though still used – Highway Patrol plane, including equipment upgrades. We'd also sell the current aircraft. This option is the right mix of effectiveness and affordability – and it will support public safety in South Dakota.

My budget also provides \$9 million in expenditure authority to the Department of Social Services to grant opioid settlement dollars. DSS is working with the Opioid Advisory Committee on this, and they just announced a new framework to expand access to these funds. They're focusing on reaching communities across the state to strengthen prevention, treatment, and recovery efforts.

A few years back, the Noem-Rhoden Administration invested \$5 million to improve security in county courthouses. Since then, we've modernized courthouses in 36 counties. My budget recommends \$1.5 million to keep that ball rolling. We also recommend \$4.2 million to replenish the Emergency and Disaster Fund;

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\$2.7 million to refill the Fire Fund; and another \$435,000 to backfill the loss of some federal fire assistance.

Free

In all those ways, my budget keeps South Dakota safe. But we'll also keep South Dakota free – free to pursue opportunities and happiness.

A little over a month ago, I announced that my administration will support the continued expansion of the Sioux Falls and Rapid City airports. Since the start of the Noem-Rhoden Administration, travelers through the Rapid City airport are up 30%, and they're up 25% in Sioux Falls. I'm proposing that we provide up to \$15 million in 0% interest loans to both airports. This is the exact same approach we took last year to support the investment in the Douglas School District. But instead of making these loans out of the Housing loan fund, I recommend moving the remaining \$65 million to the REDI Fund. The original \$100 million in housing grants has been fully utilized, but only \$20 million in loans were ever leveraged. We've made a huge positive impact on housing. Now, we need to focus on other important investments. By supporting these airports, South Dakota will see more gates, more flights, and more destinations. We'll be able to draw more visitors and keep our state Open for Opportunity!

My budget also strengthens education by supporting continued growth at our tech colleges. Ultimately, education is about the freedom to learn – to pursue the life and career of your dreams. Truth be told, I never graduated from college. I did take a year of ranch management at Western Dakota Tech. I thought I'd spend my whole life running the ranch, but God had other plans. South Dakota's tech colleges continue to prove themselves some of the best in the nation, and they're creating all kinds of opportunities for our kids to get into the careers of their dreams.

My budget invests \$6 million one-time in a new Advanced Manufacturing center at Southeast Technical College in Sioux Falls. This facility will increase student capacity by 130 in several programs. The state will support one quarter of the project, and the rest will come from a mix of federal, local, and private funds.

My budget also supports \$4.3 million one-time for equipment upgrades at all four of our tech colleges. This will provide two-thirds of the investment as we have done in recent years. Our tech schools will be able to make sure their students meet industry expectations, provide higher safety standards for students and instructors, and grow overall student capacity. My budget also increases ongoing aid to our tech colleges by \$1.7 million because of rising enrollment – which is great news!

I grew up on a ranch near Union Center. I was born 45 miles from there in Sturgis. That's how life is for many folks in our rural communities – they get their healthcare miles from home. And over the years since then, we've seen rural healthcare face more challenges. President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill prioritized Rural Health Transformation, and South Dakota stands to benefit from that investment with at least \$500 million over the next 5 years. We reached out to folks across South Dakota to get their ideas on how we could make an innovative, long-lasting impact on rural healthcare. We have a good plan; we're just waiting for the Trump Administration's green light, which we hope to have by the end of December. My budget proposes \$500 million in federal funding authority to support this plan, and if we get approved for more than that, then we'll adjust the number accordingly. That's not an increase in state spending – it's just authority to spend those federal dollars allocated to South Dakota.

Speaking of our rural communities, the Noem-Rhoden Administration made it a top priority to expand high-speed broadband access in every South Dakota community. To-date, we've invested over \$300 million between state, federal, and private funds. My budget requests another \$87 million in federal funding authority to leverage more federal dollars to keep the ball rolling.

Conclusion

Before I close, there's one more thing I want to cover. My budget maintains reserves at 12.5%, but we have \$14 million unallocated. I'm leaving that funding on the bottom line for legislative priorities. I'm eager to work with you and to see how you choose to invest those dollars to keep South Dakota strong, safe, and free.

There you have it, ladies and gentlemen: my first budget as Governor! I couldn't have put it together on my own. I owe an incredible debt of gratitude to BFM Commissioner Jim Terwilliger and his entire team.

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They're sitting behind me – would you all please stand? Everyone, please join me in thanking them for their hard work!

This budget invests in our people. It keeps our home state strong, safe, and free by making targeted investments where we should, saving extra money for the future, and still paving the way for property tax relief. We recognize these dollars aren't ours. They belong to the good people of South Dakota. As our state motto says: "Under God, the People Rule."

This limited budget might seem like a challenge, but as I often say, I encourage you all to view that as an opportunity. It's an opportunity to make sure we're investing only in the things that we should be. To look with fresh eyes on our budget principles and make sure that we're living up to them. That's what I did when putting this budget together, and I think we hit the mark.

Thank you for your time and your consideration. I look forward to seeing you next month for the State of the State and working through this budget during legislative session. Until then, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! God bless you all, and may God continue to bless the great state of South Dakota.



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FACT  **BRIEF**
SOUTH DAKOTA NEWS WATCH G I G A F A C T

FACT BRIEF

Fact brief: Did a SD city register the fastest temperature change in recorded history?

December 02, 2025

Yes

On Jan. 22, 1943, Spearfish recorded a temperature increase of 49 degrees Fahrenheit in 2 minutes and a temperature drop of 58 degrees in 27 minutes. Both still stand as records more than 80 years later.

At 7:30 a.m. on that day, it was minus 4 degrees. Two minutes later, thermometers shot up to 45 degrees. Then at 9:30 a.m., the temp crashed back downward from 54 degrees to minus 4.

The geographic nature of the Black Hills makes the region prone to these frontal conditions. The National Weather Service described the event as "warmer Pacific air (rolling) like an ocean tide along the northern and eastern slopes of the Black Hills" before the cold returned. Windows fogged up and some glass cracked.

The greatest temperature change in a 24-hour period was in Loma, Montana, on Jan. 14-15, 1972, when mercury rose 103 degrees from minus 54 to 49.

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Groton, SD

Sat., Dec. 6

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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Governor proposes 'limited budget' for SD that avoids big cuts but keeps school funding flat

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR



South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden presents his 2025 budget address to lawmakers at the Capitol in Pierre on Dec. 2, 2025. (Photo by Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

PIERRE — Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden proposed a \$7.44 billion state government budget Tuesday that would avoid big cuts but also hold South Dakota's funding for schools, Medicaid providers and state employees flat next year.

"This limited budget might seem like a challenge, but as I often say, I encourage you all to view that as an opportunity," Rhoden told lawmakers during his annual budget address at the Capitol.

The news comes as state spending on Medicaid — the federal-state health program for poor and disabled people — has overtaken spending on K-12 public education for the first time, Rhoden said. Sales tax revenue was down 0.6% during the fiscal year that ended in June, which was only the third time in 30 years that the state experienced a negative sales tax trend. So far during the current fiscal year, sales tax revenue is up 4.7%.

Rhoden said it all adds up to a tight budget situation.

"I won't sugarcoat it: Revenues have been very flat — only rising slightly," he said.

He framed his budget as a return to normality after several years of rapid revenue gains fueled by federal pandemic aid and strong sales tax collections.

Rhoden's plan for the fiscal year beginning July 1 includes about \$2.5 billion in state general funds, with much of the rest coming from federal funding. The total proposed budget would be a 1.6% increase from the budget legislators adopted last winter.

Rhoden said the state's economy remains strong, with the lowest unemployment rate in the country, high labor-force participation and a competitive tax climate.

Yet, partly due to uncertainty in the national economy and low crop prices affecting South Dakota's farm economy, Rhoden wants to reserve 12.5% of the general fund budget — about \$315 million — in rainy-day funds, up from the traditional 10%.

'Big three' held flat

One of the major discussion points among legislators could be Rhoden's lack of a proposed funding increase for the so-called "big three": schools, state employees and health care providers.

"Because our revenues haven't grown much, we have to keep them flat this year," Rhoden said.

That means no across-the-board inflationary increase for teacher salaries, Medicaid reimbursement rates or state worker pay. To soften the blow for state employees, Rhoden said his budget puts \$3 million into the state health plan to avoid premium hikes.

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On education, Rhoden took a long-term view, saying that since 2019, the state has delivered a 27.9% increase in funding for schools.

"So while these priorities aren't getting an increase this year, I'm proud of what we've done for them over the past several years," Rhoden said.

Rhoden also tied flat education funding to declining public school enrollment. Births are down 9% over the past decade in the state, he said, and there's been a 216% surge since 2015 in "alternative instruction," including homeschooling, private schools and other forms of non-public education.

No state cuts for local property tax relief

The governor did not propose using any savings from state government cuts to provide relief for local property taxpayers. Legislators made several proposals to that effect during summer study meetings.

Rhoden reminded lawmakers that the proposed budget last year included \$80 million in cuts, and legislators restored \$7 million. He suggested it will be challenging for legislators to find cuts this year.

"So, I ask the legislators who are asking for cuts, where should we cut?" he said. "Should we cut health care, education or public safety?"

There will be some room for legislators to maneuver. Rhoden said his budget leaves \$14 million unallocated for legislative priorities.

New investments

Rhoden made several new spending proposals, including:

Staffing the new women's prison under construction in Rapid City, including 133 full-time positions and \$13.2 million in new annual expenses.

\$10 million in one-time funding for information technology modernization to prevent state system outages like one that struck in August.

A newer Highway Patrol airplane for \$5 million.

Reallocating \$65 million in unused loan money from a \$200 million housing infrastructure fund to an economic development fund, and giving \$30 million of that as interest-free loans for airport expansion projects in Sioux Falls and Rapid City.

Increasing funding to South Dakota Public Broadcasting by \$296,000 to support transparency and open government initiatives, including livestreaming of legislative proceedings.

Lawmakers react

Republican Speaker of the House Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, is running for governor in 2026 against Rhoden and other candidates. He wants to cut the budget and reallocate the savings as property tax relief for homeowners. He said the first place he would look is at the governor's "slush funds," referring to various funds managed by the Governor's Office of Economic Development.

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said "Governor Rhoden's budget was pretty bleak."

"I think there's real cause for concern for our state," Mortenson said, pointing to sales tax revenues and Medicaid costs surpassing the cost of education.

"It seems like we've economically gotten stuck in the mud," he said.

Democratic Rep. Erik Muckey, of Sioux Falls, who serves on the budget committee, said the state could free up \$70 million for the budget by reducing the rainy day fund allocation from 12.5% to 10%.

"We can be fiscally responsible with our budgets while also actually taking care of our people," Muckey said.

Legislators will begin debating the budget proposals when they convene in January for their annual lawmaking session.

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.

No 'clear path forward' in US Senate on health care costs, Thune says, with deadline near

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — Republicans and Democrats in the Senate agree that health care costs are rising too quickly and expect to vote next week on legislation that could help Americans.

The only catch is that party leaders hadn't decided as of Tuesday what to include in the bills.

Senators also seemed to accept that neither proposal will garner the bipartisan support needed to advance, leaving the tens of millions of Americans who purchase their health insurance from the Affordable Care Act marketplace with complicated decisions to make before open enrollment ends Dec. 15.

ACA marketplace plans are expected to increase by 26% on average next year, though a failure by Congress to extend enhanced tax credits would lead monthly payments for subsidized enrollees to increase by 114% on average, according to analysis from the nonpartisan health organization KFF.

"I don't think at this point we have a clear path forward," Senate Majority Leader John Thune said. "I don't think the Democrats have a clear path forward."



Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., speaks to reporters while walking to his office on Nov. 10, 2025 on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Tom Brenner/Getty Images)

Vote on Democratic bill expected

Thune guaranteed a small group of Democratic senators a floor vote on a health care proposal of their choosing in exchange for their votes on the spending package that ended the government shutdown.

Democrats are widely expected to put forward a bill to extend enhanced tax credits for people who buy their health insurance from the Affordable Care Act Marketplace. Those subsidies are set to expire at the end of the year without congressional action.

But it isn't clear if the Democratic bill would extend the credits for one year or a longer period.

GOP leaders are trying to rally support around a health care proposal of their own, while acknowledging it won't get the 60 votes needed to advance under the Senate's legislative filibuster rules.

Thune said Republican senators had a "robust discussion" about health care issues during their closed-door lunch, where Finance Committee Chairman Mike Crapo of Idaho and Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Bill Cassidy of Louisiana presented some ideas. But no final agreements were reached.

Thune, R-S.D., said conversations will continue ahead of the vote next week and likely afterward.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said Democrats "have a plan" but declined to say exactly what it entails.

"Stay tuned," Schumer said. "We had a great discussion and I will tell you this: We will be focused like a laser on lowering people's costs."

Looking for a solution

West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito said Republican talks on health care have been “vigorous” but that they hadn’t yet “decided on the clear path.”

Capito said her “expectation” is that GOP senators will put a bill on the floor next week to bring down the costs of health insurance premiums and health care as quickly as possible, though that hadn’t been finalized.

“I like the idea of people having control of the money as opposed to insurance companies, where they take a 20% profit,” Capito said, echoing comments by President Donald Trump. “I think that has merit.”

Capito said senators didn’t discuss during their lunch whether to extend open enrollment past Dec. 15 or possibly reopen it next year, should Congress pass a health care bill that addresses the ACA marketplace tax credits in some way.

New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen said there is no indication there will be bipartisan agreement to extend the enhanced ACA subsidies or any other health care proposal by next week’s vote, though bipartisan conversations continue.

As for Democrats’ plan, Shaheen said it wasn’t “clear” what legislation party leaders will put on the floor for a vote or when they’d make that announcement.

‘Mindful of the timeline’

North Dakota Republican Sen. John Hoeven said there is “strong support” among GOP lawmakers for making changes to how the enhanced ACA tax credits work before extending them for any length of time.

But he said those negotiations will take more time.

“In my opinion, if we have (the vote) next week, we probably won’t be at a point where we can get a big bipartisan agreement,” Hoeven said. “It’s more likely they’ll put something up that fails. We put something up that fails. And we keep working towards, hopefully, something that can work and that is bipartisan.”

There is a “good chance,” he said, that will happen in December or January, a timeline that would likely put a solution after open enrollment closes.

Hoeven declined to say if a deal would extend open enrollment or include a second window for Americans to select insurance, but said Republicans are aware of the deadlines.

“We’re very mindful of the timeline,” Hoeven said. “So all the things we’re talking about recognize that it needs to be able to take effect next year or this year.”

Jennifer covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

‘Not increasing is a cut’: Governor’s flat funding plan for education, health care worries advocates

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

PIERRE — South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden’s plan to keep state funding flat for Medicaid providers, state employees and schools could hurt the same areas Rhoden said he’s helped “prioritize” in recent years, advocates say.

Rhoden announced at his budget address on Tuesday at the Capitol that he wants to keep state support for the “big three” flat this year, due to “pretty flat” sales tax revenues. The last 0% increase proposed by a governor for the big three was by Gov. Kristi Noem for the 2019 budget, according to the state Bureau of Finance and Management.

School districts and health care providers across the state say they’re treading water after years of high inflation, despite relatively high funding increases attributable to an influx in federal pandemic aid and higher sales tax revenue coming out of the pandemic. Lawmakers approved a 1.25% increase for the big

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three last year, which was below inflation.

Rapid City Democratic Rep. Nicole Uhre-Balk said inflation will eat away at flat funding if legislators approve Rhoden's plan.

"Not increasing is a cut," she said.

Rapid City Republican Rep. Mike Derby, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said projections and revenues could change after the New Year, which could allow for an increase in state support. When Noem last recommended a 0% increase in state aid to education, lawmakers bumped it up to a 1% increase that year.

"We'll see how the next four months' revenues come in," Derby said.



South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden presents his 2025 budget address to lawmakers at the Capitol in Pierre on Dec. 2, 2025.

(Photo by Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Teacher pay: 'My fear is that 0% is going to move us backwards'

But Rep. Mellissa Heermann, R-Brookings, worries efforts to "drag ourselves up" in teacher pay rankings will be erased without more state support to education. South Dakota moved up the national ranks from 50th in teacher pay in 2021 to 46th this year.

"It's been difficult for us to even maintain the gains we've had," said Heermann, who served on the Brookings School Board for six years. "All other states around us are also increasing their teacher pay, so my fear is that 0% is going to move us backwards."

That could lead to school districts cutting other programs or positions, which could impact student success, said South Dakota Education Association Director of Government Relations and Communications Sandra Waltman.

"Up until about last year, schools were doing OK keeping up with inflation. They weren't getting ahead," Waltman said. "But when you start to receive funding that's less than inflationary, that's when you start to fall behind and see school districts cut positions and budgets."

Heermann suggested splitting the big three up to give a targeted increase in state aid to education. Lawmakers traditionally group funding increases for Medicaid providers, education and state employees together.

Rhoden cautioned against using one-time funding, such as money from the state's reserve funds, to boost big three funding.

Derby echoed Rhoden, calling any ideas to use one-time funding for ongoing expenses a "recipe for disaster."

The stagnant state aid proposal comes at the same time enrollment in public schools is down, due to low birth rates and increases in alternative instruction such as homeschooling and private schools, Rhoden said. Alternative instruction enrollment has increased 216% since 2015.

Medicaid: Lower reimbursement rates create 'disruption' in health care

Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, advocated for significant increases in Medicaid reimbursements for health care providers in recent years. The gains helped support a core obligation of state government and ensure health care providers were adequately reimbursed for their services, he said, but he doesn't "see an option" to offer more than a flat rate this year with a lean budget overall.

"We've been working really hard to get them dollars, so not getting them an increase is concerning," Karr said. "We don't want anybody to get too far behind because it creates so much disruption in hiring people and providing the services needed, whether education or Medicaid providers."

One year at 0% is manageable, Karr added, but he wants to see a return to increases that correlate with inflationary pressures to avoid "digging huge holes" for Medicaid providers.

Tim Rave, CEO of the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations, said he is grateful there aren't any cuts to state Medicaid reimbursement rates, saying cuts would risk health care access to South Dakotans.

"In light of increased inflationary costs," Rave said, "especially in our case for hospitals and supplies where you're looking at 10% or 12% inflationary increases, this certainly doesn't help."

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

Hegseth denies he was present for deadly second strike on alleged Caribbean drug boat

Thune defends Defense secretary, saying he's part of 'making our country safer'

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY



U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, right, looks on as U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a meeting of his Cabinet in the Cabinet Room of the White House on Dec. 2, 2025 in Washington, D.C.

(Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

WASHINGTON — Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said Tuesday he did not witness a controversial — and potentially illegal — second strike in early September that killed two survivors clinging to a burning alleged drug-running boat off the Venezuelan coast.

The secretary's exact order in the Sept. 2 strike has been under scrutiny after The Washington Post reported Friday that Hegseth gave a verbal directive to "kill everybody" that in turn led the commanding admiral to order a follow-on strike to kill two alleged drug smugglers who survived an initial attack.

Hegseth's comments responded to a reporter's question at the end of President Donald Trump's livestreamed two-hour Cabinet meeting.

"I watched that first strike live. As you can imagine, at the Department of War we got a lot of things to do, so ... I moved on to my next meeting," Hegseth told reporters.

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The secretary said he learned a "couple of hours later" that Adm. Frank M. "Mitch" Bradley "made the correct decision to ultimately sink the boat and eliminate the threat."

When pressed by the reporter if he saw any survivors after the initial strike, Hegseth said "I did not personally see survivors ... the thing was on fire."

"This is called the fog of war. This is what you in the press don't understand," he replied.

Hegseth said he didn't know the exact amount of time between the first and second strikes. He declined to answer follow-up questions.

Bipartisan lawmakers on the Senate and House Armed Services committees announced probes over the weekend into the follow-on strike that killed the survivors. Numerous military law experts argue killing survivors of a shipwreck is in clear violation of the Pentagon's laws of war.

Hegseth authorized strike

Hegseth initially called The Washington Post investigative report "fabricated, inflammatory, and derogatory," in a post on social media Friday.

On Monday, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters during the daily briefing that Hegseth had "authorized Admiral Bradley to conduct these kinetic strikes."

"Admiral Bradley worked well within his authority and the law directing the engagement to ensure the boat was destroyed and the threat to the United States of America was eliminated," Leavitt said at the briefing.

On social media Monday night, Hegseth wrote: "Admiral Mitch Bradley is an American hero, a true professional, and has my 100% support. I stand by him and the combat decisions he has made — on the September 2 mission and all others since."

A New York Times article Monday, citing five U.S. officials who spoke separately on the condition of anonymity, reported that Hegseth gave an initial written order for an operation to kill the alleged drug smugglers on the boat and destroy the entire vessel.

The officials said Hegseth did not address additional steps if the first missile did not accomplish both goals, and that he did not give Bradley additional orders in response to video surveillance of the boat, according to the Times, which wrote that Bradley ordered "several" follow-on shots.

The strike in question was the first of nearly two dozen U.S. attacks on boats in the Caribbean Sea, which the administration alleges are smuggling narcotics. The operations, over several months, have killed 83 individuals, according to a CNN timeline.

'I rely on Pete'

Trump defended Hegseth at Tuesday's Cabinet meeting, saying "Pete's done an amazing job."

Regarding the attack, Trump downplayed the importance of a follow-on strike.

"I still haven't gotten a lot of information, because I rely on Pete, but to me, it was an attack. It wasn't one strike, two strikes, three strikes," he said.

"Pete didn't know about a second attack having to do with two people. And I guess Pete would have to speak to it. I can say this, I want those boats taken out, and if we have to, we'll attack on land also, just like we attack on sea," Trump said.

Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday that he "wouldn't have wanted that," referring to the killing of two men clinging to the wreckage.

"Pete said he did not order the death of those two men," Trump continued.

Trump posted Sept. 2 on his Truth Social platform a 29-second edited video of the attack.

On Sept. 3, Fox News' "Fox & Friends" played the video from Trump's post on repeat while interviewing Hegseth, who told the hosts that 11 alleged "narco-terrorists" were killed in the attack.

"I watched it live. We knew exactly what they were doing and we knew exactly who they represented," Hegseth said on the network's talk show, which he hosted on weekends prior to being appointed and confirmed as secretary of Defense.

The Intercept first reported on Sept. 10 that survivors of the initial Sept. 2 strike were killed in follow-up

blasts.

Congressional inquiries

Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle are now inquiring to learn if what happened on Sept. 2 amounts to a war crime.

U.S. Sen. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., issued a statement Tuesday, criticizing Hegseth and calling on Trump to fire him if he violated the laws of war.

"At the Pentagon, the buck stops with the Secretary of Defense, period," Slotkin said.

The first-term Democrat and former CIA official recently participated in a video, now targeted by a Pentagon investigation, reminding service members that they have a right to refuse "illegal orders."

"True leaders own the calls they make and take responsibility for their actions. Secretary Hegseth should release the full video of the strike and lay out publicly what happened, without throwing the uniformed military under the bus," Slotkin said.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune defended the administration Tuesday when asked by reporters about the Sept. 2 event and Hegseth's other controversies, including discussing real-time bombing of targets in Yemen in March on the publicly available app Signal.

"I think the Trump administration and the peace-through-strength policies that they are employing around the world are making our country safer, and so Secretary Hegseth is a part of that," the South Dakota Republican said.

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

Suspect in West Virginia National Guard shooting pleads not guilty in D.C. court

BY: RIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — The man accused in the shooting of two West Virginia National Guard members in the District of Columbia pleaded not guilty in his Tuesday arraignment hearing, during which he appeared virtually from a hospital bed.

U.S. Army Spc. Sarah Beckstrom, 20, died as a result of her injuries, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24, remains in the hospital with severe wounds.

D.C. Superior Court Magistrate Judge Renee Raymond denied bond for 29-year-old Rahmanullah Lakanwal, an Afghan national who officials allege drove across the United States to the district from his residence in Washington state. The guard members were attacked while on duty in a downtown neighborhood blocks from the White House.

"He came across the country 3,000 miles, armed with a specific purpose in mind," Judge Raymond said in her reasoning for denying him bond. "The government's case



Members of the U.S. Secret Service and other law enforcement agencies respond to the shooting of two members of the West Virginia National Guard near the White House on Nov. 26, 2025. (Photo by Anna

MoneyMaker/Getty Images)

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is exceedingly strong.”

The U.S. Attorney’s Office filed charges Tuesday for first-degree murder while armed; possession of a firearm; and assault with the intent to kill.

Lakanwal’s next court date is Jan. 14.

“The nature and circumstances of the instant offense, the strength of the government’s case, and the sheer terror that resulted, that continues to animate because of his actions, leads me to conclude that no conditions or combination of conditions, will reasonably ensure the safety of the community,” Raymond said.

West Virginia Gov. Patrick Morrisey wrote on social media Tuesday that Wolfe “remains in critical condition but is stable.”

“Doctors and the family are optimistic about his current progress and note that he has responded to some basic requests such as a thumbs up sign and wiggling his toes,” Morrisey said.

Troops in the district

The West Virginia National Guard members shot last week are among the 2,000 troops stationed in the district since August, after President Donald Trump declared a “crime emergency.”

Republican governors have offered to send their states’ reserves of National Guard members to the nation’s capital. A federal judge last month found the president’s deployment of troops to the district illegal.

Lakanwal was granted asylum this year after he came to the United States through a special humanitarian program for Afghanistan allies who served along American forces and had to flee the country after the Taliban took it over following the chaotic U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

The shooting that took place on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday has resulted in Trump expanding his immigration crackdown to include a halt to asylum applications, as well as increased scrutiny on visa applications from Afghan nationals.

“In the wake of last week’s atrocity, it is more important than ever to finish carrying out the president’s mass deportation operation,” White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said at Monday’s press briefing. “They must go back to their home countries.”

Translator appears for Lakanwal

During Tuesday’s arraignment, Lakanwal seemed to thrash around in pain in his hospital bed. A translator also appeared virtually for Lakanwal.

Lakanwal’s lawyer raised concerns about U.S. Attorney Jeanine Ferris Pirro, a former Fox News host, holding future press conferences, warning that could harm a “free and fair trial” for Lakanwal. Pirro held a press conference on Thanksgiving morning to discuss the shooting.

“The government at their own peril ... continue to taint a potential jury pool against Mr. Lakanwal as a result of their press conferences,” he said.

Department of Defense press secretary Kingsley Wilson said during a Tuesday briefing at the Pentagon that all National Guard members in the district would be armed.

Following last week’s shooting, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he would request an additional 500 National Guard members be deployed in the district.

It’s unclear if that directive would violate a federal judge’s order that found the August deployment unlawful. The federal judge stayed her Nov. 20 order for three weeks to give the administration time to either appeal or remove the troops. The Trump administration filed an emergency appeal after the shooting in the district.

Ashley Murray contributed to this report.

Ariana covers the nation’s capital for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include immigration, congressional policy and legal challenges with a focus on how those policies impact the lives of immigrants and migrants coming to the U.S.

Cabinet secretary: \$3 million for state Capitol repairs only a start for building's needs

BY: JOHN HULT



Plaster is under repair on Dec. 2, 2025, in the Senate gallery at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre.

(Photo by Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

The third phase won't repair a thing, at least not right away. Seeley told the committee that his agency plans to spend about \$780,000 to hire a consultant for a comprehensive needs analysis meant to identify issues across the whole of the Capitol complex.

The building's communications infrastructure needs an upgrade, Seeley said, as part of a "multi-year, multi-phase restoration of this building."

"There is a lot of work that needs to be done for two reasons," Seeley said. "One, to make the Capitol as beautiful as it can be, but more importantly, to bring it up to modern standards in relationship to electrical codes, plumbing and then usability of the space."

When a committee of legislators asked Seeley in August to guess what a full Capitol restoration might cost, he said "we're talking probably between \$150 million and \$200 million." The building hasn't undergone a full restoration in about four decades. Its construction was completed in 1910.

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

Repairs to water-damaged, cracking plaster at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre will be complete by the time lawmakers convene in the building for the 2026 legislative session in January.

Darin Seeley, commissioner of the Bureau of Human Resources and Administration, told lawmakers Tuesday on the Joint Appropriations Committee that the fixes are the first phase of a three-phase restoration effort.

The money for the current work came from a \$3 million pool of funds approved by legislators earlier this year.

Once the plaster repairs are complete in the hallways and the galleries of the Senate and House of Representatives, second phase work can begin with repairs to the Rotunda. That work is set to begin after the 2026 session's March conclusion, and is expected to be complete by November.

Four-day school weeks are growing in popularity, despite a lack of data on the effects

Some districts see a shorter school week as a way to attract teaching talent, but many remain skeptical

BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA

Northeast of the capital city of Des Moines in central Iowa, the 400-student Collins-Maxwell Community School District is one of many across the state shifting to a four-day school week.

Like many rural K-12 schools, the district has struggled to find teachers, and it sees the four-day week as a useful recruiting tool. It also wants to curb student absences, which tend to spike on Mondays and Fridays.

The district maintained its traditional five-day calendar in August and September. But from now on, with scattered exceptions, the middle school and high school in the Collins-Maxwell district will be closed on Mondays. To meet Iowa's minimum number of instructional hours, the district will lengthen the other days during four-day weeks.

Superintendent Marc Snavely said he watched nearby schools transition to shorter weeks and was intrigued by the reports he got from his counterparts in other districts. Snavely hopes the shorter week will boost teacher morale, reduce burnout, and make the rural district more competitive with nearby districts that are larger and can offer teachers better pay.

"Ultimately, the 'why' behind the four-day school week came down to staff recruitment and retention," Snavely said in an interview. "We felt being a small school district, the four-day week would allow us to better compete."

He added that surrounding schools with four-day weeks said they experienced fewer discipline problems and improved attendance. And rural school districts across the country tout the four-day work week as a way to stretch tight school budgets amid K-12 funding uncertainties at the federal and state levels.

But despite the reports of higher attendance and calmer classrooms, education researchers say the evidence tells a more complicated story.

Emily Morton, lead researcher for the Northwest Evaluation Association, which creates standardized testing for K-12 schools, cautioned that the promised benefits have not shown up in the data. Moreover, longer school days can harm academic performance, Morton said.

But such concerns might not matter as four-day school weeks become more popular nationwide.

"One thing that does show up clearly is that there is an extremely high approval rating for these policies,"



Students arrive for the first day of school at a Minnesota elementary school. Four-day school weeks are gaining in popularity, especially in rural districts. But researchers say the evidence on four-day weeks is unclear. (Photo by Stephen Maturen/Getty Images)

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Morton said. "Parents and students overwhelmingly want to stay on a four-day week once they have it."

A rural trend

There are more than 2,100 schools in 26 states using four-day weeks, according to researchers at Oregon State University. In Iowa, the number of districts on a four-day schedule has grown from six in 2023-24 to more than two dozen in 2025. In Colorado, two-thirds of districts are on the altered schedule.

But so far, it's almost entirely a rural phenomenon.

"To my knowledge, there's not a single urban district using a four-day week," Morton said. "What a four-day week looks like in a rural community is very different from what people in suburban or urban areas imagine."

Dr. Shanon Taylor, an education professor at the University of Nevada, Reno who studies school scheduling, said districts typically adopt the model for economic and staffing reasons, not academic ones. Rural districts often save money on transportation, utilities and building operations, she said, and the promise of permanent three-day weekends helps recruitment efforts.

However, the burden of accommodating this transition may fall heavily on parents who work five days a week, and especially on the parents of younger students who must find a child care alternative on the selected day off.

"The research is still mixed," Taylor said. "We don't yet have decisive evidence showing academic benefits or drawbacks."

In June, researchers at the University of Oregon published a review of 11 studies on four-day school weeks, which included data on academic achievement, attendance, discipline and criminal activity. The impact of a four-day week varied based on grade level and on location, the Oregon researchers found, but overall "there was no evidence of large positive effects."

They also noted that "maintaining activities that foster healthy youth development on the fifth day is important for minimizing other negative impacts."

State vs. local clashes

In some states, the policy has sparked conflict between state and local officials.

"There's a lot of tension between state leaders and rural districts over whether the four-day week is something the state should allow," said Morton. "In Oklahoma, when the state tried to take it away, districts simply shifted to 'virtual Fridays' — and instruction mostly didn't happen."

The Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, a conservative think tank, found through a public records request that more than 100 Oklahoma districts had at least one school where students had at least two full weeks' worth of "virtual days" in the 2022-23 school year. More than 60 districts had at least one school that went online for three weeks or more. During many of those days, there was minimal live instruction.

In response, Oklahoma this year enacted a law that restricts public schools' ability to shift to virtual learning. The measure limits districts to two days of virtual instruction each school year, and only allows them under certain circumstances, such as a state of emergency declared by the governor.

Missouri enacted a law in 2024 requiring that certain big city, charter and county districts obtain voter approval before adopting or continuing a four-day week. The Independence School District, a 14,000-student suburban system on the edge of Kansas City that switched to the shorter week in 2023-24, has since sued the state, alleging the law unconstitutionally targets certain districts based on arbitrary criteria such as county size.

Last year, a New Mexico mandate for districts to adopt calendars with more school days was halted in court. And Arkansas legislators considered a bill that would allow for range of instructional times from 160 to 190 days, which would be contingent on a school's rating. A large number of rural districts there have moved to four-day schedules.

Meanwhile, uncertainty over the costs and benefits of the approach are likely to persist.

Morton, the education assessment researcher, said that small rural districts might not be equipped to de-

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termine whether a four-day week produces benefits until further studies are conducted across the country.

“Even if your test scores stay flat, nearby districts might be rising, so your ‘flat’ could actually be a negative effect,” she said. “States need to equip districts with what national research shows, because local data will never be able to answer these questions alone.”

Stateline reporter Robbie Sequeira can be reached at rsequeira@stateline.org.

This story was originally produced by Stateline, 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.

Four-day school weeks in South Dakota FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

According to the South Dakota Department of Education, the following 44 of the approximately 150 school districts in the state use a four-day week:

Andes Central, Belle Fourche, Bennett County, Bison, Bon Homme, Bowdle, Burke, Colome, Custer, Deuel, Doland, Edgemont, Edmunds Central, Elk Mountain, Faith, Frederick Area, Haakon, Harding County, Henry, Herreid, Hitchcock-Tulare, Hot Springs, Irene-Wakonda, Iroquois, Kadoka Area, Lemmon, Marion, McIntosh, McLaughlin, New Underwood, Newell, Oldham-Ramona-Rutlan, Parker, South Central, Stanley County, Summit, Todd County, Tri-Valley, Viborg-Hurley, Wakpala, Wall, White River, Winner, Wolsey-Wessington,

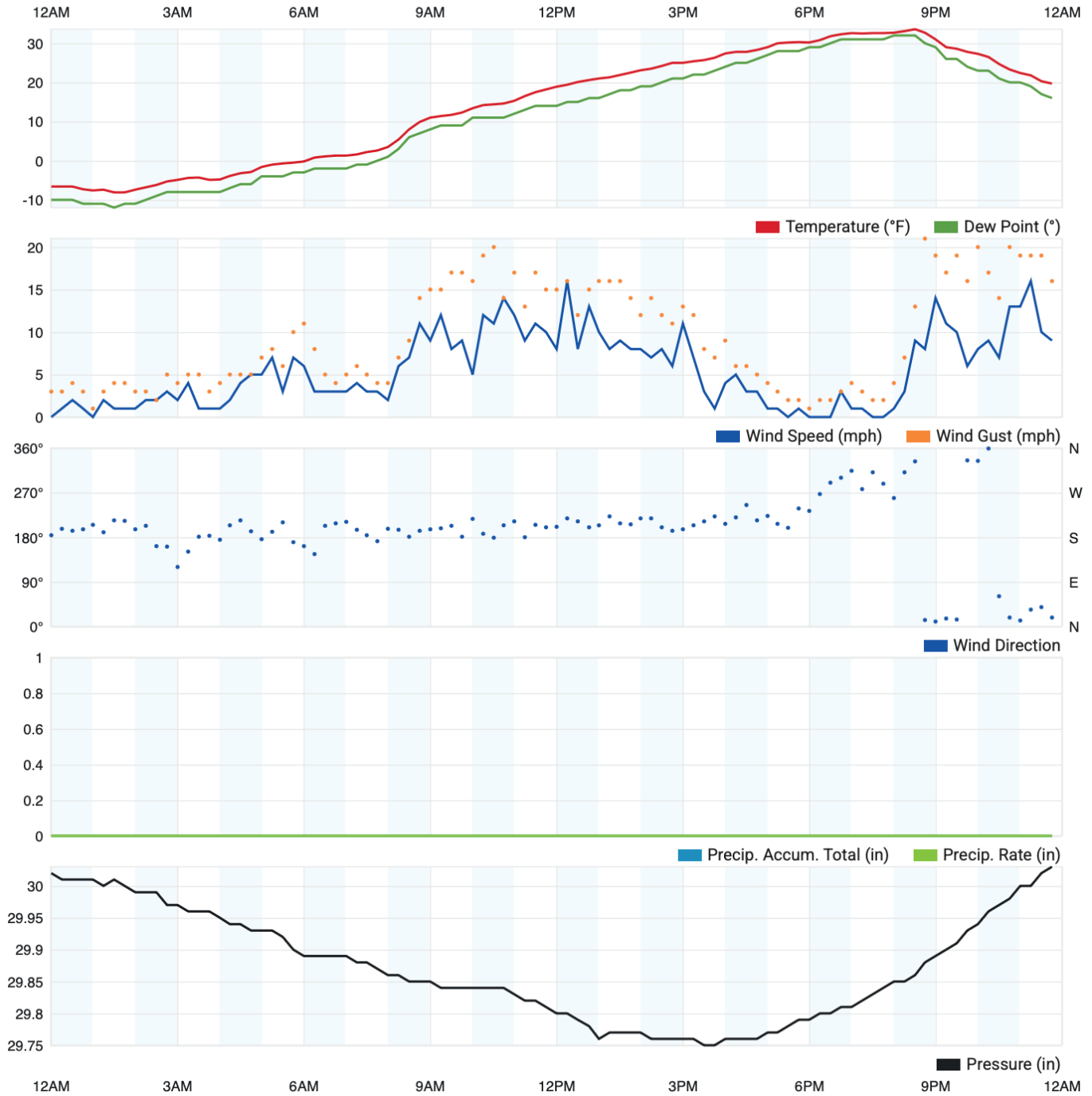
Robbie Sequeira is a staff writer covering housing and social services for Stateline.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 2, 2025



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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 8:32 PM

Low Temp: -8 °F at 1:38 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 11:18 PM

Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 63 in 1941

Record Low: -18 in 1905

Average High: 34

Average Low: 12

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.06

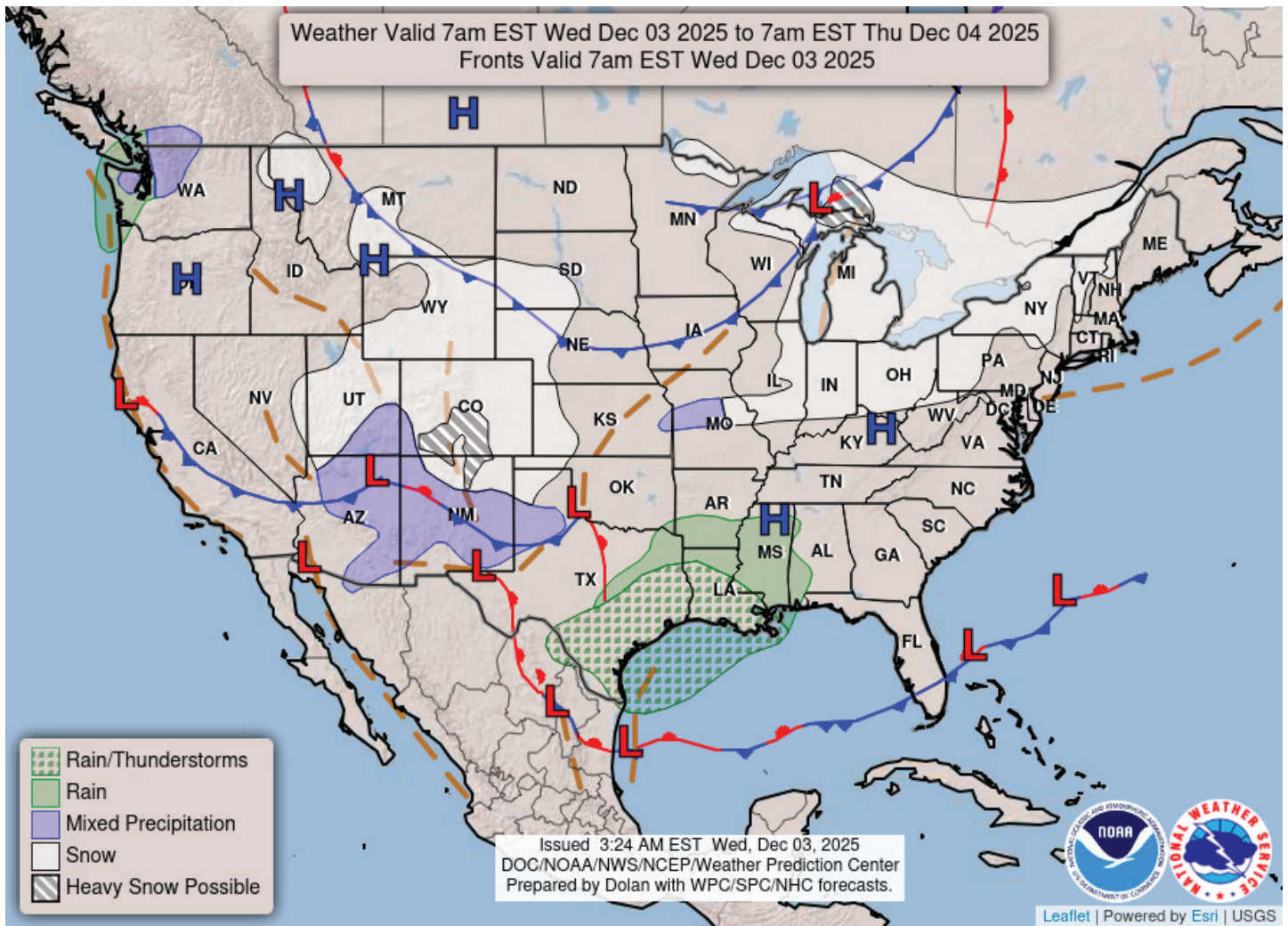
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.27

Precip Year to Date: 24.81

Sunset Tonight: 4:50 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:55 am



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Today in Weather History

December 3, 1991: Strong northwesterly winds behind a departing surface low brought blizzard conditions and dangerously cold wind chill readings across west central and southwest Minnesota on the 3rd. A general 1 to 3-inch snowfall occurred across the area and combined with winds gusting to 50 mph at times to generate whiteout conditions from the morning into the evening. Air temperatures coupled with the strong wind produced wind chill values ranging from 30 to 50 below zero. Some schools and businesses were closed during the morning as the storm intensified. Several car accidents and jackknifed tractor-semitrailers littered roadways. Many roads were closed at the height of the storm. Power outages occurred over a small portion of the area due to the strong winds downing ice-covered power lines.

December 3, 1838: Cleveland Abbe, an American meteorologist and advocate of time zones, was born on this day. He was trained as an astronomer and appointed the director of the Cincinnati Observatory in 1868. He eventually turned to meteorology and inaugurated a public weather service that served as a model for today's National Weather Service.

1856 - A severe blizzard began to rage across Iowa and Kansas. It produced as much as 16 inches of snow in Iowa. (David Ludlum)

1926 - Yuma, AZ, was soaked with 1.10 inch of rain, and by the 10th of the month had received 4.43 inches, making it the wettest December of record. The average annual rainfall for Yuma is 3.38 inches. (3rd-10th) (The Weather Channel)

1983 - Birmingham, AL, was drenched with 9.22 inches of rain in 24 hours. The rains caused severe flash flooding which literally submerged traffic. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Stormy weather in the northwestern U.S. finally began to abate, but not before Gold Beach OR was drenched with 7.94 inches of rain in 24 hours. Low pressure spread snow from the Upper Mississippi Valley to the Central Appalachians. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Gale force winds ushered cold air into the northeastern U.S., and produced snow squalls in the Lower Great Lakes Region. Winds gusted to 48 mph at Buffalo NY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Heavy snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in northern New England. Snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to 31 inches, at Limestone. Presque Isle ME reported a record 30 inches of snow in 24 hours, along with wind gusts to 46 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

In What Should We Boast?

God's instructions and actions don't always appear reasonable from a human perspective.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31:

Christ Crucified Is God's Power and Wisdom

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

The first challenge to humanity's faith in God took place in the garden of Eden. Spurred on by the serpent's lies, Eve looked at her situation from a different perspective and began to doubt the Lord. Her faith faltered as she considered all she had to gain from eating the fruit God had forbidden (Genesis 3:4-6).

God has blessed human beings with the ability to reason, but this skill should take a back seat when the Lord speaks. In fact, His instructions and actions don't always seem logical from our perspective. Why? Because His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Paul takes this truth a step further by pointing out that God's choices can even seem foolish by the world's standards (1 Cor. 1:18-20). Those who recognize their helplessness against sin understand their great need for Christ, the One who saves and raises them to stand with Him in righteousness.

That day in Eden, sin and disobedience entered the human heart. But to God, all the worldly wisdom that fuels our pride amounts to nothing. He's not looking for great and impressive people; instead, He wants meek, humble servants who can boast only in Christ. The Savior alone is all they need.

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:

12.02.25

17 25 26 53 60 16

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$50,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 19 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.01.25

5 27 37 43 47 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$8,370,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 34 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.02.25

1 15 17 24 29 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

11.29.25

11 13 20 21 28

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$105,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.01.25

14 25 38 47 55 19

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.01.25

5 18 26 47 59 1

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$775,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Israel says it will start letting Palestinians leave Gaza through reopened border crossing

By JULIA FRANKEL and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel on Wednesday said it will start letting Palestinians leave Gaza through a reopened border crossing, complying with a U.S.-backed ceasefire deal even though it also said that partial remains returned by militants did not match the hostages still in Gaza.

The missing remains of the two hostages threaten to stall a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in its first phase. But by promising to open the Rafah crossing, Israel showed it was moving ahead with parts of the plan.

The first phase of the plan is supposed to wind down with the return of the two remaining hostages. Palestinian militants, who appear to be struggling to find the remains amid the rubble of war-torn Gaza, said they were searching again on Wednesday.

Following the exchanges, the 20-point plan calls for creating an international stabilization force, forming a technocratic Palestinian government and disarming Hamas.

The World Health Organization says there are more than 16,500 sick and wounded people who need to leave Gaza for medical care.

Searching for remains

Two hostage bodies are still in Gaza: Israeli Ran Gvili and Thai national Sudthisak Rinthalak. In a statement Wednesday, the Prime Minister's Office said forensic testing showed that remains returned Tuesday did not match either.

Saraya al-Quds, the military arm of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, said its militants were moving to northern Gaza Wednesday morning to search for the remains.

The group said on its Telegram channel that the militants were accompanied by workers from the Red Cross.

Gvili was an Israeli police officer who helped people escape from the Nova music festival on Oct. 7, 2023, and was killed fighting at another location.

Sudthisak Rinthalak was an agricultural worker from Thailand who had been employed at Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the hardest-hit communities in the attack.

A total of 31 workers from Thailand were abducted, the largest group of foreigners to be held in captivity. Most of them were released in the first and second ceasefires. The Thai Foreign Ministry has said in addition to the hostages, 46 Thais have been killed during the war.

Hamas has yet to comment on the latest handover or the news about the missing remains.

Twenty living hostages and the remains of 26 others have been returned to Israel since the ceasefire began in early October. Both Hamas and Israel have accused the other of breaking the ceasefire multiple times.

Rafah to open in 'coming days'

The statement about opening Rafah came from COGAT, the Israeli military body charged with facilitating aid to Gaza.

It said Israel would coordinate with Egypt on the exit of Palestinians, under the supervision of a mission from the European Union. Those wishing to leave Gaza will require "Israeli security approval," COGAT said.

The ceasefire deal calls for the crossing to be opened for medical evacuations and for travel to and from the strip.

But an Israeli official, who spoke anonymously to discuss operational plans, said that all Palestinians who want to exit Gaza will be able to exit through Rafah as long as Egypt agrees to receive them, but the crossing won't be open for people wishing to return to Gaza. The official said the EU still had to make some adjustments to logistics before the crossing could open.

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The crossing was sealed off in May 2024 when Israel's military invaded the area. It was briefly opened in February this year for the evacuation of sick and wounded Palestinians for treatment, as part of the previous ceasefire deal.

Israel sends envoy to meet with Lebanese officials

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday he appointed an envoy to join talks with Lebanese diplomatic and economic officials.

Netanyahu's office called the appointment "the initial attempt to create a basis for relations and economic cooperation" between the two countries. It did not say when or where the talks would be held.

Netanyahu's office said the appointment would come from the office of his national security adviser. Israeli media identified the envoy as Uri Resnick, a former diplomat and the council's deputy director for foreign policy.

Israel and the Lebanon have been in a state of war since 1948. Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah fought a months-long war that ended in a shaky ceasefire one year ago.

Palestinian hospital says Israel killed a man in Gaza

A Palestinian man was killed by Israeli fire on Wednesday in Gaza Strip, a hospital said, marking the latest reported Palestinian fatality in Gaza.

Israeli forces shot the 46-year-old man in Gaza City's eastern Zeitoun neighborhood, according to the Al-Ahli hospital, which received the body. Israel's military did not immediately respond to request for comment.

The hospital said the man was shot while in the "safe zone," which, under the terms of the ceasefire, is not controlled by the Israeli military.

The Gaza Health Ministry says more than 360 Palestinians have been killed across Gaza since the ceasefire took effect on Oct. 11. The ministry sets the total Palestinian death toll from the war over 70,100. The ministry does not distinguish between militants and civilians, though it says roughly half of those killed have been women and children. The ministry operates under the Hamas-run government. It is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Return of Palestinian bodies in flux

The exchanges of the dead have been the central component of the initial phase of the U.S.-brokered agreement, which requires Hamas to return all hostages' remains as quickly as possible. Without the return of hostage remains, it seemed unlikely that Israel would release more Palestinian bodies on Wednesday.

Israel has been releasing 15 Palestinian bodies for the remains of each hostage as part of the ceasefire agreement. The Gaza Health Ministry said the total number of remains received so far is 330. Health officials in Gaza have said they have only been able to identify a fraction of the bodies handed over by Israel, and the process is complicated by a lack of DNA testing kits.

The exchanges have gone ahead even as Israel and Hamas have accused each other of violating other terms of the deal. Israeli officials have accused Hamas of handing over partial remains in some instances and staging the discovery of bodies in others.

Hamas has accused Israel of opening fire on civilians and restricting the flow of humanitarian aid into the territory. The number of casualties has dropped since the ceasefire took effect, but officials in Gaza have continued to report deaths from strikes, while Israel has said that soldiers have also been killed in militant attacks.

The ceasefire aims to wind down the war that was triggered by the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel, which killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage.

Pope Leo XIV shares his thoughts on the conclave, reflects on spirituality and future travels

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE (AP) — Pope Leo XIV on Tuesday shared for the first time what he was thinking when the votes started going his way during the conclave that elected him, saying he resigned

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himself to the inevitable and put the rest in God's hands.

"I took a deep breath. I said 'Here we go Lord. You're in charge and you lead the way,'" Leo told reporters during a wide-ranging airborne press conference coming home from his inaugural trip to Turkey and Lebanon.

Leo fielded questions for a half-hour, responding easily in English, Spanish and Italian about a variety of church and international news. He hinted at behind-the-scenes discussions about Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon, urged dialogue rather than U.S. military threats on Venezuela and discussed his hoped-for future travels in Africa and South America, among other topics.

But it was his remarks about the conclave and his papal learning curve that shed new light on Leo the man and what makes him tick. His responses, after seeming timid with the media early in his pontificate, showed he is much more comfortable now, is paying close attention to what is being reported about him, and that he has a good sense of humor about it.

Leo was asked what he was thinking when he saw a huge crowd of people at one of his events in Lebanon, where it seemed as if the size had taken him by surprise. Leo suggested that wasn't necessarily the case.

"My face is very expressive but I'm oftentimes amused by how the journalists interpret my face," he said. "It's interesting. Sometimes I get really great ideas from all of you because you think you can read my mind or my face."

"You're not always correct," he added, to laughs.

A spirituality that leaves everything up to God

More instructive to understanding what he's thinking, Leo said, would be to read up about his spirituality. Beyond St. Augustine, the fifth-century theologian who inspired his religious order and is Leo's most-frequently cited church father, Leo recommended a book "The Practice of the Presence of God," by a 17th-century Carmelite friar, Brother Lawrence.

"It describes, if you will, a type of prayer and spirituality where one simply gives his life to the Lord and allows the Lord to lead. If you want to know something about me, that's been my spirituality for many years," he said.

"In midst of great challenges -- living in Peru during years of terrorism, being called to service in places where I never thought I'd be called to serve -- I trust in God," he said.

That held true in the May conclave, he said, when the former Cardinal Robert Prevost was elected in a remarkably fast four ballots on the second day of voting. According to cardinals who participated, it was clear already by the third ballot that morning that the votes were going his way and that Prevost would be elected history's first American pope.

"I resigned myself to the fact when I saw how things were going and I said 'This could be a reality,'" Leo said.

Speaking to a reporter who is about to retire, Leo said he had had different plans for his future.

"Just a year or two ago, I too thought about retiring some day," he said. "You've received that gift apparently. Some of us will continue to work."

In Lebanon, Leo had a taste of what it's like to be a pope on the road, and he said the enthusiasm of young Catholics was "awe-inspiring."

"I think to myself, 'These people are here because they want to see the pope.' But I say to myself, 'They're here because they want to see Jesus Christ and they want to see a messenger of peace,'" he said. "Just to listen to their enthusiasm and to hear their response to that message is something that I think is -- that enthusiasm -- is awe-inspiring."

"I just hope I never get tired of appreciating everything that all these young people are showing," he said.

On pressing international issues

— Leo urged the United States to pursue dialogue and even exert economic pressure on Venezuela's leaders to achieve its goals, rather than threats of military action.

"The voices coming from the United States change, with a certain frequency at times," he said. "I believe it's better to look for ways of dialogue, perhaps pressure -- including economic pressure -- but looking for

other ways to change, if that's what the United States wants to do."

— Leo said he hopes to make his second trip as pope to Africa next year, visiting several countries but especially Algeria because of its important role in Christian-Muslim relations and its significance to St. Augustine, who inspired his religious order.

— Leo also said he hoped to visit three countries in Latin America in either 2026 or 2027: Argentina, Uruguay and Peru, where he lived for two decades as a missionary. Argentina especially has been waiting for a papal visit after Pope Francis never went home after his 2013 election.

Hong Kong leader says fire investigation 'must uncover the truth' and promises construction reforms

By CHAN HO-HIM and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong will set up an independent committee headed by a judge to determine the cause of a deadly high-rise fire that shocked the city and to recommend changes to prevent a future tragedy, its leader said Tuesday.

John Lee, the chief executive of the southern Chinese territory, pledged to overcome vested interests and bring about systemic change in the construction industry. Police said Tuesday afternoon that more bodies had been found, raising the death toll to at least 156 with about 30 people still missing a week after the fire.

"We must uncover the truth, ensure that justice is served, let the deceased rest in peace and provide comfort to the living," Lee told reporters at a weekly press conference. "We want to ensure that we will prevent such a tragedy from happening again."

The fire started last Wednesday around scaffolding on a building at the Wang Fuk Court complex and spread to seven of its eight towers. They were home to more than 4,600 people and many have been left homeless. Forty injured people remain hospitalized, Lee said.

A survivor of the fire welcomed the creation of the independent committee. "Everyone, every Hong Kong citizen, every person affected by this accident, all of them want to know the truth of this fire," said May Liang, who was out to lunch with her husband when the fire started. They lost all their belongings, she said.

At least 15 people have been arrested by anti-corruption investigators and police, including scaffolding contractors, company directors and an engineering consultant, as authorities investigate suspected corruption and negligence in a renovation project at the housing complex.

The initial investigation has focused on why the fire expanded so rapidly, overwhelming firefighting efforts. Authorities have cited both high winds and substandard materials used for the maintenance work.

Contractors were found to be using substandard netting, authorities said Monday. Among the 20 samples of netting investigators collected at the complex, seven were found to have failed safety standards.

Lee said that those responsible had mixed substandard netting with qualified materials to trick inspectors.

The entire building renovation system in Hong Kong will be reformed, he vowed.

Lee refused to comment on media reports that people were arrested last weekend in what some saw as an attempt to snuff out criticism of the government, including one person who was reportedly involved in a petition calling for government accountability and arrested on suspicion of inciting sedition. Lee said only that "I will not tolerate any crimes, particularly crimes that exploit the tragedy that we are facing now."

John Burns, an honorary professor of politics and public administration at the University of Hong Kong, said the investigation results will likely be credible as the government seeks to reassure the public.

"It's in everyone's interest that the process and results of the investigations be credible," Burns said. "Transparency is crucial for restoring trust."

Lee said 2,500 residents of the towers have been moved into transitional housing units, some in government housing and others in hostels and hotels. About 20 people remain in shelters that housed hundreds on the first night.

Deadly Asian floods are no fluke.

They're a climate warning, scientists say

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and ANTON L. DELGADO Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — Southeast Asia is being pummeled by unusually severe floods this year, as late-arriving storms and relentless rains wreak havoc that has caught many places off guard.

Deaths have topped 1,400 across Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, with more than 1,000 still missing in floods and landslides. In Indonesia, entire villages remain cut off after bridges and roads were swept away. Thousands in Sri Lanka lack clean water, while Thailand's prime minister acknowledged shortcomings in his government's response.

Malaysia is still reeling from one its worst floods, which killed three and displaced thousands. Meanwhile, Vietnam and the Philippines have faced a year of punishing storms and floods that have left hundreds dead.

What feels unprecedented is exactly what climate scientists expect: A new normal of punishing storms, floods and devastation.

"Southeast Asia should brace for a likely continuation and potential worsening of extreme weather in 2026 and for many years immediately following that," said Jemilah Mahmood, who leads the think tank Sunway Centre for Planetary Health in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Asia is facing the full force of the climate crisis

Climate patterns last year helped set the stage for 2025's extreme weather.

Atmospheric levels of heat-trapping carbon dioxide jumped by the most on record in 2024. That "turbocharged" the climate, the United Nation's World Meteorological Organization says, resulting in more extreme weather.

Asia is bearing the brunt of such changes, warming nearly twice as fast as the global average. Scientists agree that the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events are increasing.

Warmer ocean temperatures provide more energy for storms, making them stronger and wetter, while rising sea levels amplify storm surges, said Benjamin Horton, a professor of earth science at the City University of Hong Kong.

Storms are arriving later in the year, one after another as climate change affects air and ocean currents, including systems like El Nino, which keeps ocean waters warmer for longer and extends the typhoon season. With more moisture in the air and changes in wind patterns, storms can form quickly.

"While the total number of storms may not dramatically increase, their severity and unpredictability will," Horton said.

Governments were unprepared

The unpredictability, intensity, and frequency of recent extreme weather events are overwhelming Southeast Asian governments, said Aslam Perwaiz of the Bangkok-based intergovernmental Asian Disaster Preparedness Center. He attributes that to a tendency to focus on responding to disasters rather than preparing for them.

"Future disasters will give us even less lead time to prepare," Perwaiz warned.

In Sri Lanka's hardest-hit provinces, little has changed since 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, said Sarala Emmanuel, a human-rights researcher in Batticaloa. It killed 230,000 people.

"When a disaster like this happens, the poor and marginalized communities are the worst affected," Emmanuel said. That includes poor tea plantation workers living in areas prone to landslides.

Unregulated development that damages local ecosystems has worsened flood damage, said Sandun Thudugala of the Colombo-based non-profit Law and Society Trust. Sri Lanka needs to rethink how it builds and plans, he said, taking into account a future where extreme weather is the norm.

Videos of logs swept downstream in Indonesia suggested deforestation may have made the floods worse. Since 2000, the flood-inundated Indonesian provinces of Aceh, North Sumatra and West Sumatra have lost 19,600 square kilometers (7,569 square miles) of forest, an area larger than the state of New Jersey, according to Global Forest Watch.

Officials rejected claims of illegal logging, saying the timber looked old and probably came from land-

holders.

Billions are lost, while climate finance is limited

Countries are losing billions of dollars a year because of climate change.

Vietnam estimates that it lost over \$3 billion in the first 11 months of this year because of floods, landslides and storms.

Thailand's government data is fragmented, but its agriculture ministry estimates about \$47 million in agricultural losses since August. The Kasikorn Research Center estimates the November floods in southern Thailand alone caused about \$781 million in losses, potentially shaving off 0.1% of GDP.

Indonesia doesn't have data for losses for this year but its annual average losses from natural disasters are \$1.37 billion, its finance ministry says.

Costs from disasters are an added burden for Sri Lanka, which contributes a tiny fraction of global carbon emissions but is at the frontline of climate impacts, while it spends most of its wealth to repay foreign loans, said Thudugala.

"There is also an urgent need for vulnerable countries like ours to get compensated for loss and damages we suffer because of global warming," Thudugala said.

"My request ... is support to recover some of the losses we have suffered," said Rohan Wickramarachchi, owner of a commercial building in the central Sri Lankan town of Peradeniya that was flooded to its second floor. He and dozens of other families he knows must now start over.

Responding to increasingly desperate calls for help, at the COP30 global climate conference last month in Brazil, countries pledged to triple funding for climate adaptation and make \$1.3 trillion in annual climate financing available by 2035. That's still woefully short of what developing nations requested, and it's unclear if those funds will actually materialize.

Southeast Asia is at a crossroads for climate action, said Thomas Houlie of the science and policy institute, Climate Analytics. The region is expanding use of renewable energy but still reliant on fossil fuels.

"What we're seeing in the region is dramatic and it's unfortunately a stark reminder of the consequences of the climate crisis," Houlie said.

Former Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández freed after Trump pardon

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Former Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández, sentenced last year to 45 years in prison for his role in a drug trafficking operation that moved hundreds of tons of cocaine to the United States, was released from prison following a pardon from President Donald Trump, officials confirmed Tuesday.

Hernández was released Monday from U.S. Penitentiary Hazelton in West Virginia, a spokesperson for the Federal Bureau of Prisons told The Associated Press. The bureau's online inmate records also reflected his release.

The release of Hernández — a former U.S. ally whose conviction prosecutors said exposed the depth of cartel influence in Honduras — comes just days after the country's presidential election. Trump defended the decision aboard Air Force One on Sunday, saying Hondurans believed Hernández had been "set up," even as prosecutors argued he protected drug traffickers who moved hundreds of tons of cocaine through the country.

The pardon also unfolds against the backdrop of Trump's aggressive counter-narcotics push that has triggered intense controversy across Latin America. In recent months, U.S. forces have repeatedly struck vessels they say were ferrying drugs north, a series of lethal maritime attacks that the administration argues are lawful acts of war against drug cartels — and that critics say test the limits of international law and amount to a pressure campaign on Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro.

The Trump administration has carried out 21 known strikes on vessels accused of carrying drugs, killing at least 83 people. The administration has justified the attacks as a necessary escalation to stem the flow

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of drugs into the United States and asserted the U.S. is engaged in an "armed conflict" with drug cartels, similar to the war against al-Qaida following the Sept. 11 attacks.

Hernández's wife applauds his release

Ana García thanked Trump for pardoning her husband via the social platform X early Tuesday.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday outside her home in Tegucigalpa, she thanked Trump for pardoning her husband and drew a parallel between the two men.

"Today the whole world realizes that, like they did with President Donald Trump, the same Southern District, the same prosecutor created a political case," García said.

She said Hernández called her Monday evening to say he was in the office of the prison head and had been told he will be released. García said Hernández is in an undisclosed location for his safety, but that he plans to address the Honduran people on Wednesday.

Hernández's attorney Renato Stabile said in an emailed statement he also would not share the former president's current location.

García said the process to seek a pardon began several months ago with a petition to the office of pardons. Then on Oct. 28, Hernández's birthday, he wrote a letter to Trump. He announced he was pardoning Hernández last Friday.

"My husband is the president who has done the most for Honduras in the fight against organized crime," García said.

Trump's rationale for the pardon

Trump was asked Sunday why he pardoned Hernández.

"I was asked by Honduras, many of the people of Honduras," Trump told reporters traveling with him on Air Force One.

"The people of Honduras really thought he was set up, and it was a terrible thing," he said.

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

Stabile, the attorney, said Hernández is glad the "ordeal" is over.

"On behalf of President Hernández and his family I would like to thank President Trump for correcting this injustice," Stabile said.

Democratic lawmakers expressed condemnation and disbelief that Trump issued the pardon.

"They prosecute him, find him guilty of selling narcotics through these cartels into the United States. Can you think of anyone more reprehensible than that? Selling drugs to this country, finding more victims by the day," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois in a speech on the Senate floor.

"This is not an action by a President trying to keep America safe from narcotics," Durbin added.

The Trump administration has declared drug cartels to be unlawful combatants and has carried out strikes in the Caribbean against boats the White House says were carrying drugs.

The case against the former president

Hernández was arrested at the request of the United States in February 2022, weeks after current President Xiomara Castro took office.

Two years later, Hernández was sentenced to 45 years in prison in a New York federal courtroom for taking bribes from drug traffickers so they could safely move some 400 tons (360 metric tons) of cocaine north through Honduras to the United States.

Hernández maintained throughout that he was innocent and the victim of revenge by drug traffickers he had helped extradite to the United States.

During his sentencing, federal Judge P. Kevin Castel said the punishment should serve as a warning to "well educated, well dressed" individuals who gain power and think their status insulates them from justice when they do wrong.

Hernández portrayed himself as a hero of the anti-drug trafficking movement who teamed up with American authorities under three U.S. presidential administrations to reduce drug imports.

But the judge said trial evidence proved the opposite and that Hernández employed "considerable acting

skills" to make it seem that he strongly opposed drug trafficking while he deployed his nation's police and military to protect the drug trade.

Hernández is not guaranteed a quick return to Honduras.

Immediately after Trump announced his intention to pardon Hernández, Honduras Attorney General Johel Zelaya said via X that his office was obligated to seek justice and put an end to impunity.

He did not specify what charges Hernández could face in Honduras. There were various corruption-related investigations of his administration across two terms in office that did not lead to charges against him. Castro, who oversaw Hernández's arrest and extradition to the U.S., will remain in office until January.

The pardon promised by Trump days before Honduras' presidential election injected a new element into the contest that some said helped the candidate from his National Party Nasry Asfura as the vote count proceeded Tuesday.

Trump-backed Republican Matt Van Epps wins US House special election in Tennessee

By JONATHAN MATTISE and KRISTIN M. HALL Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Republican Matt Van Epps won a nationally watched special election in Tennessee for a U.S. House seat Tuesday, maintaining his party's grip on the conservative district with help from President Donald Trump. But the comparatively slim margin of victory fueled Democratic hopes for next year's midterms as the party grasps for a path back to power in Washington.

A military veteran and former state general services commissioner from Nashville, Van Epps defeated Democratic state Rep. Aftyn Behn to represent the 7th Congressional District.

With 99% of votes counted, Van Epps' lead was around 9 percentage points. The previous Republican who held the seat won by 21 points last year, and Trump carried the district by 22 points.

Behn, who ran as an unapologetic progressive, ran up a huge margin in Davidson County, which is the most Democratic county in the district and home to Nashville. But Van Epps carried the rest of the district, including many deep-red counties throughout central Tennessee, as he tied himself tightly to Trump.

"Politicians who run from the president or abandon the common-sense policies that the American people gave us a resounding mandate on do so at their own peril," Van Epps said at his victory party. "No matter what the D.C. insiders or liberal media say, this is President Trump's party. I'm proud to be a part of it and can't wait to get to work."

Trump congratulated Van Epps in a social media post, saying he won even though "the Radical Left Democrats threw everything at him."

Democrats say Republicans are 'on the ropes'

At her own campaign gathering, Behn took the stage with a burst of energy, singing Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" in a western-style rhinestoned suit. Despite falling short, Behn said the result was "the beginning of something" powerful.

She noted that Republicans redrew the district three years ago to make it harder for Democrats to win, and "nobody in Washington believed we could get even this close."

"Tonight isn't the end. It is the beginning of a next chapter of Tennessee and American politics — one of possibility, one of power and one of progress for the people that we love," Behn said.

Democratic National Committee Chair Ken Martin said Republicans should be "shaking in their boots" ahead of the midterms, which will determine control of Congress.

"What happened tonight in Tennessee makes it clear: Democrats are on offense and Republicans are on the ropes," Martin said in a statement.

The special election drew big money

Van Epps benefited from nearly \$1.7 million in spending from MAGA Inc., according to a memo from the Trump-aligned group, with nearly half going toward digital advertising targeting people streaming video online. It was the first time the organization spent money on a campaign since last year's presidential race, a reflection of the special election's outsize importance.

House Speaker Mike Johnson and national Republican chair Joe Gruters rallied supporters in Tennessee on Monday. Trump addressed a crowd at a rally in the state by phone and later in the day held a tele-rally for Van Epps, his second of the general election.

Chip Saltsman, a political strategist and former Tennessee state party chair, said Republicans were slow to organize after a competitive primary.

"In Tennessee, it's been a long time since we thought about beating Democrats," Saltsman said. "It's been a lot more important to beat Republicans in a primary."

"This time," he added, "we had to pay attention."

Republican leaders had hoped for a convincing victory to scuttle Democratic claims that even red districts are now in play as Trump struggles with low approval ratings and persistent economic dissatisfaction. In addition, Democrats recently won by wide margins in New Jersey, Virginia and elsewhere.

Behn had national support of her own, and the House Majority PAC put \$1 million behind her. Party chair Ken Martin visited to campaign for Behn, and former Vice President Kamala Harris participated in a canvassing kickoff while in Nashville on a book tour. Former Vice President Al Gore and U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez headlined a virtual rally for her Monday night.

Van Epps stuck with Trump

Republican state lawmakers redrew the 7th District and two others in 2022 to help prevent liberal-voting Nashville from electing another Democrat to Congress. Only about 1 in 5 voters in the district, which spans 14 counties, are in the city.

The seat was vacated when Republican former Rep. Mark Green, retired this summer. The single-race election came at an odd time to be casting ballots, with early voting ending the day before Thanksgiving and Election Day the following Tuesday.

Van Epps aligned with the president as closely as possible, telling him during the November tele-rally, "I will have your back 100%." He won a crowded primary by a wide margin in October with a late endorsement from Trump.

Behn focused her campaign on fiery criticisms of economic policies that she said prioritize wealthy people and corporations, including Trump's tariffs and budget and spending law, both of which Van Epps supports.

But Republicans created a steady drumbeat of Behn's own words used against her in television advertising, such as when she described herself as a "radical" and made harsh remarks about Nashville and its tourist draws.

Trump supporter Anthony Bordonaro, 37, said Tuesday that he wants the president's policies to move forward but pointed to those anti-Nashville comments as extra motivation to vote for Van Epps.

"I just didn't really like what I was hearing about the other candidate not liking Nashville," he said.

James Solomon is elected Jersey City mayor, turning away ex-NJ Gov. Jim McGreevey's comeback bid

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP) — James Solomon was elected mayor of Jersey City on Tuesday, thwarting former New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey's bid for a political comeback more than two decades after a scandalous resignation.

Addressing supporters who had gathered to watch returns and cheer him on, Solomon said: "Now the mission is clear, and the work begins tonight. And the work we have to do is making Jersey City affordable. So I say tonight, an affordable Jersey City starts now."

Solomon, a city council member since 2017, defeated McGreevey in a runoff after they finished first and second in an initial round of voting Nov. 4. with seven candidates on the ballot. The city's election is nonpartisan, but both men are Democrats.

At a gathering less than a mile away, McGreevey thanked supporters and congratulated Solomon on his victory.

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"There's nothing I would change in this campaign," McGreevey said, adding that he'd walked every block in the small city and visited every one of its churches, mosques and temples while getting to know its people. "Thank you for your trust. Thank you for your welcome. And thank you for your hospitality."

Solomon ran on platform of affordability

Solomon, 41, said he ran for mayor to make New Jersey's second-largest city more affordable, echoing national concerns about the cost of living. New development catering to affluent New York City commuters is driving overall prices higher, and the city is struggling with a budget shortfall that threatens to hike property taxes.

His victory comes a month after New York City's mayor-elect, democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani, won on an affordability platform over another ex-governor looking to make a comeback, Andrew Cuomo.

No second chance for McGreevey

The Jersey City race gained national attention because of McGreevey's candidacy.

It was the first time he was running for public office since resigning as governor in 2004 — a stunning announcement remembered mostly for the spectacle of him declaring: "I am a gay American."

McGreevey's exit was driven in part by controversy over his decision to hire a man he said was his lover, former Israeli naval officer Golan Cipel, as the state's homeland security adviser in 2002 despite Cipel's lack of qualifications and inability to obtain necessary security clearances.

In his victory remarks, Solomon thanked McGreevey for his candidacy, but on the campaign trail he'd said that the former governor represented the "politics of the past."

"There were just scandal after scandal after scandal," Solomon said in a recent interview. "That, to me, is disqualifying."

Jersey City's rising costs

Jersey City, a swath of high-rises and immigrant neighborhoods, has about 303,000 residents and a municipal budget of about \$700 million. Across the Hudson River from Manhattan, it's in an area sometimes referred to as the Sixth Borough.

The current mayor, Steven Fulop, made an unsuccessful bid for governor and declined to seek a fourth term.

Solomon has vowed to take on developers and special interests, invest in public safety and work with the independent board of education to improve the city's schools. He said he plans to build on legislation he passed as a council member, including banning rent-hiking algorithms and ensuring that tenants have a right to legal counsel.

Solomon and McGreevey both vowed to stand up to President Donald Trump, whose administration is suing to end Jersey City's so-called sanctuary city protections for immigrants.

Solomon grew up in nearby Millburn, has a master's degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and was an aide to former Boston Mayor Thomas Menino.

He moved to Jersey City in 2013, is married and has three daughters.

In 2015, about a month after his wedding, he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Now in full remission, he told The AP in an interview that that challenge inspired him to run for public office.

"I had one of these life-is-short moments, Solomon said. "I was like, 'you know, I think I can do something I can give back to Jersey City, because Jersey City really had my back during my toughest time.'"

Solomon's pledges

Solomon said he plans to hire 100 new police officers and supports creating a civilian complaint review board for Jersey City, akin to the police oversight agency in New York City, which would give residents an hand in investigating police misconduct.

He said he'll appoint a deputy mayor for education to coordinate between the city and the school district, which is independent of the municipal government.

After the race narrowed to a runoff, Solomon received endorsements from three of the other candidates. He was also backed by U.S. Sen. Andy Kim and Newark Mayor Ras Baraka.

Even McGreevey got in on the act, saying at a recent debate: "James Solomon is an incredibly likable young guy. And in four years, he'll be a great mayor."

On Tuesday, voters declared that Solomon's time is now.

Judge issues injunction restricting immigration arrests in nation's capital

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

A federal judge late Tuesday blocked the Trump administration from making widespread immigration arrests in the nation's capital without warrants or probable cause that the person is an imminent flight risk.

U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell in Washington granted a preliminary injunction sought by civil liberties and immigrants rights groups in a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

An email to the department after hours Tuesday was not immediately returned.

Officers making civil immigration arrests generally have to have an administrative warrant. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, they may make arrests without a warrant only if they have probable cause to believe the person is in the U.S. illegally and is likely to escape before a warrant can be obtained, according to Howell's ruling.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other plaintiffs' attorneys argued federal officers were frequently patrolling and setting up checkpoints in Washington, D.C., neighborhoods with large numbers of Latino immigrants and then stopping and arresting people indiscriminately.

They provided sworn declarations from people they say were arrested without warrants or a required assessment of flight risk and cited public statements by administration officials that they said showed the administration was not using the probable cause standard.

Attorneys for the administration denied it had a policy allowing such arrests.

Howell, who was nominated to the bench by President Barack Obama, a Democrat, said the plaintiffs had "established a substantial likelihood of an unlawful policy and practice by defendants of conducting warrantless civil immigration arrests without probable cause."

"Defendants' systemic failure to apply the probable cause standard, including the failure to consider escape risk, directly violates" immigration law and the Department of Homeland Security's implementing regulations, she said.

In addition to blocking the policy, she ordered any agent who conducts a warrantless civil immigration arrest in Washington to document "the specific, particularized facts that supported the agent's pre-arrest probable cause to believe that the person is likely to escape before a warrant can be obtained."

Howell also required the government to submit that documentation to plaintiffs' attorneys.

The ruling is similar to two others in federal lawsuits that also involved the ACLU, one in Colorado and another in California.

Another judge had issued a restraining order barring federal agents from stopping people based solely on their race, language, job or location in the Los Angeles area after finding that they were conducting indiscriminate stops, but the Supreme Court lifted that order in September.

Ole Miss loses coach, but moves up a spot in College Football Playoff rankings; Ohio St still No. 1

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

Ole Miss lost a coach and moved up a spot anyway. Notre Dame didn't lose a thing but the Irish fell.

The release Tuesday of the latest College Football Playoff rankings produced its fair share of eye-openers and head-scratchers — plenty to talk about before the final rankings and the actual pairings for the 12-team playoff come out this weekend after a slate of conference title games.

Undefeated Ohio State and Indiana remained at 1 and 2 in the rankings, while Georgia moved to third and Texas Tech rose to No. 4.

The rest of the top 12: Oregon, Mississippi, Texas A&M, Oklahoma, Alabama, Notre Dame, BYU and Miami.

Even though Mississippi coach Lane Kiffin left the school for LSU last weekend, the selection committee moved the Rebels up one spot to No. 6. Committee chairman Hunter Yurachek explained the panel talked

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about the upheaval in Oxford but didn't quite know what to make of it.

"We don't have any way to evaluate what Ole Miss looks like, plays like, without its head coach," Yurachek said. "We can only evaluate what we know, and what we know now is Ole Miss is an 11-1 football team."

Notre Dame is a 10-2 football team, same as Alabama, but those two flip-flopped spots after wins last week.

The Tide is now ranked No. 9 — in a much better position to grab an at-large berth if they lose to Georgia in the SEC title game — while Notre Dame is No. 10, a little more on the bubble despite a 10-game winning streak.

Yurachek described the debate pitting two of the nation's most storied programs as one "that has really split our committee room."

"We all think highly of both teams," he said. "There are some in the Alabama camp, some in the Notre Dame camp..

In the end, he said, it came down to Alabama's 27-20 win over Auburn (5-7) in a rivalry game on the road getting more run than Notre Dame's 49-20 romp at 4-8 Stanford.

In another move that could have a major impact, the committee put James Madison of the Sun Belt Conference at No. 25 — higher than unranked Duke, which plays No. 17 Virginia for the Atlantic Coast Conference title.

If Duke and James Madison win, then James Madison could deny the ACC an automatic bid.

Those go to the five best-ranked conference titlists, with no guarantee to the Power 4 leagues. The SEC, Big Ten and Big 12 will earn spots, while the American from the Group of 5 seems to have a hold on one of those, with No. 20 Tulane and No. 24 North Texas slated for that title game Friday.

It means the fifth and final will either go to the ACC or the Sun Belt, where James Madison plays Troy on Friday for the championship.

The final rankings come out Sunday, the day after the title games determine the five automatic qualifiers for the 12-team bracket. The playoffs start Dec. 19 and end a month later with the title game outside Miami.

Conference watch

ACC: Any lingering notion that the expanded playoff was designed to get the 12 best teams playing for a title has been obliterated by what's going on in this league. No. 17 Virginia's in if it wins the league, but the ACC's best team, No. 12 Miami, is not in the title game and needs help. ... Yurachek left some glimmer of hope when he said even teams that don't play this week will be reevaluated. So, maybe No. 11 BYU loses and maybe Miami moves up a spot? And maybe that move puts Miami and Notre Dame next to each other in the ranking, which leads the committee to reconsider Miami's opening-week win over the Irish? ... That's an awful lot of maybes for a system that was supposed to make this easy.

Big 12: This one seems simple. BYU's only loss this season was 29-7 to Texas Tech. A similar result would seem to give the committee a reason to drop the Cougars. ... A BYU win is bad for Notre Dame.

Big Ten: This is a three-team league — Ohio State, Indiana, Oregon, with the only question being whether the Buckeyes-Hoosiers loser in the league title game will stay in the top four and get a first-round bye.

SEC: Vanderbilt, which destroyed Tennessee and knocked the Vols out of the rankings, stayed at 14. Texas, with its impressive win over Texas A&M, moved up three to No. 13. Yurachek explained the Commodores don't have a signature win against a team that's currently ranked. They must be loving that reasoning in Nashville. ... Either way, Alabama's move to No. 9 makes things all but impossible for the 'Dores and not much better for the 'Horns, whose loss at Florida was a killer, Yurachek explained. ... The conference will still have more teams than anyone (four or more) in the bracket and commissioner Greg Sankey will probably be angling for more.

Projected first-round matchups

No. 12 Tulane at No. 5 Oregon: Ducks losing offensive coordinator Will Stein (Kentucky) and Tulane losing its coach Jon Sumrall (to Florida, though Sumrall is staying with the Green Wave until the season ends.)

No. 11 Virginia at No. 6 Ole Miss: Now that Lane is gone, will all the Rebels players and coaches stick around for this one?

No. 10 Notre Dame at No. 7 Texas A&M: And to think, Irish coach Marcus Freeman was posturing for

home-field advantage a week ago and some in Aggieland were crying about not being ranked No. 1.

No. 9 Alabama at No. 8 Oklahoma: OU's win over the Tide three weeks ago changed the season for both programs.

US-Russia talks on Ukraine were 'constructive' but work remains, Putin adviser says

By The Associated Press undefined

Talks between Russia and the U.S. on ending the nearly four-year war in Ukraine were constructive, but much work remains, Yuri Ushakov, a senior adviser to President Vladimir Putin, told reporters on Wednesday.

Putin met U.S. President Donald Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner in the Kremlin in talks that began late Tuesday as part of a renewed push by the Trump administration to broker a peace deal. Both sides agreed not to disclose the substance of the talks.

Ushakov called the five-hour conversation "rather useful, constructive, rather substantive," but added that the framework of the U.S. peace proposal was discussed rather than "specific wording." Asked whether peace was closer or further away after these talks, Ushakov said: "Not further, that's for sure."

"But there's still a lot of work to be done, both in Washington and in Moscow. That's what's been agreed upon. And contacts will continue," the official said.

Putin's aide also said that "so far, a compromise hasn't been found" on the issue of territories, without which, he said, the Kremlin sees "no resolution to the crisis."

"Some of the American proposals seem more or less acceptable, but they need to be discussed. Some of the wording that was proposed to us doesn't suit us. So, the work will continue," Ushakov said.

There were other points of disagreement, although Ushakov did not provide further details. "We could agree on some things, and the president confirmed this to his interlocutors. Other things provoked criticism, and the president also didn't hide our critical and even negative attitude toward a number of proposals," he said.

Trump peace plan is center of effort to end the war

The meeting came days after U.S. officials held talks with a Ukrainian team in Florida and which U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio described in cautiously optimistic terms.

At the center of the effort is Trump's peace plan that became public last month and raised concerns about being tilted heavily toward Moscow. The proposal granted some of the Kremlin's core demands that Kyiv has rejected as nonstarters, such as Ukraine ceding the entire eastern region of the Donbas to Russia and renouncing its bid to join NATO.

Negotiators have indicated the framework has changed, but it's not clear how. Ushakov said several iterations of a peace plan were being discussed at the talks. The official refused to go into details, saying only: "At first there was one version, then this version was revised, and instead of one document, a few more appeared."

On Tuesday, Putin accused Kyiv's European allies of sabotaging the U.S.-led efforts to end the war.

"They don't have a peace agenda, they're on the side of the war," Putin said of the Europeans.

Putin's accusations appeared to be his latest attempt to sow dissension between Trump and European countries and set the stage for exempting Moscow from blame for any lack of progress.

He accused Europe of amending peace proposals with "demands that are absolutely unacceptable to Russia," thus "blocking the entire peace process" and blaming Moscow for it. He also reiterated his long-held position that Russia has no plans to attack Europe -- a concern regularly voiced by some European countries.

"But if Europe suddenly wants to wage a war with us and starts it, we are ready right away. There can be no doubt about that," Putin said.

Russia started the war in 2022 with its full-scale invasion of a sovereign European country, and European governments have since spent billions of dollars to support Ukraine financially and militarily, to wear

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themselves from energy dependence on Russia, and to strengthen their own militaries to deter Moscow from seizing more territory by force.

They worry that if Russia gets what it wants in Ukraine, it will have free rein to threaten or disrupt other European countries, which already have faced incursions from Russian drones and fighter jets, and an alleged widespread Russian sabotage campaign.

Trump's peace plan relies on Europe to provide the bulk of the financing and security guarantees for a postwar Ukraine, even though no Europeans appear to have been consulted on the original plan. That's why European governments have pushed to ensure that peace efforts address their concerns, too.

Coinciding with Witkoff's trip, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy went to Ireland, continuing his visits to European countries that have helped sustain his country's fight against Russia's invasion.

High-stakes negotiations

Zelenskyy said Tuesday he was expecting swift reports from the U.S. envoys in Moscow on whether talks could move forward, after Trump's initial 28-point plan was whittled down to 20 items in Sunday's talks between U.S. and Ukrainian officials in Florida.

"The future and the next steps depend on these signals. Such steps will change throughout today, even hour by hour, I believe," Zelenskyy said at a news conference in Dublin with Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin.

"If the signals show fair play with our partners, we then might meet very soon, meet with the American delegation," he said.

"There is a lot of dialogue, but we need results. Our people are dying every day," Zelenskyy said. "I am ready ... to meet with President Trump. It all depends on today's talks."

Building on progress in Florida

After months of frustration in trying to stop the fighting, Trump deployed officials to get traction for his peace proposals. Asked about a possible meeting between Putin and Trump, presidential aide Ushakov said it would depend on the progress of the peace effort.

The talks have followed parallel lines so far, with Rubio sitting down with Ukrainian officials. Zelenskyy said he met Tuesday with the Ukrainian delegation that returned from the negotiations with U.S. representatives in Florida. Rubio said those talks made progress.

Zelenskyy said the Florida talks took as their cue a document that both sides drafted at an earlier meeting in Geneva. The Ukrainian leader said that document was now "finalized," although he didn't explain what that meant.

Ukrainian diplomats are working to ensure that European partners are "substantially involved" in decision-making, Zelenskyy said on the Telegram messaging app, and warned about what he said were Russian disinformation campaigns aimed at steering the negotiations.

European leaders want a say

Zelenskyy met with political leaders and lawmakers in Dublin on his first official visit. Ireland is officially neutral and isn't a member of NATO but has sent nonlethal military support to Ukraine. More than 100,000 Ukrainians have moved to Ireland since Russia launched its war on Feb. 24, 2022.

It remains unclear how envoys are going to bridge the gap between the two sides on such basic differences as who keeps what territory. European officials say the road to peace will be long.

European leaders want to make their voices heard after being largely sidelined by Washington. They are also working on future security guarantees for Ukraine.

Zelenskyy under pressure

Zelenskyy is under severe pressure in one of the darkest periods of the war for his country. As well as managing diplomatic pressure, he must find money to keep Ukraine afloat, address a corruption scandal that has reached the top echelons of his government, and keep Russia at bay on the battlefield.

The Kremlin late Monday claimed that Russian forces have captured the key city of Pokrovsk in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. Zelenskyy, however, said in Paris that fighting was still ongoing in Pokrovsk on Monday.

Ukraine's general staff on Tuesday also denied Russia's claims to have captured Pokrovsk, saying it was a propaganda stunt. The Ukrainian army is readying additional logistic routes to deliver supplies to troops in the area, the Facebook post said.

Trump administration threatens to withhold SNAP management funds from states that don't share data

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's administration warned on Tuesday that it will withhold money for administering SNAP food aid in most Democratic-controlled states starting next week unless those states provide information about people receiving the assistance.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said at a Cabinet meeting Tuesday that the action is looming because those states are refusing to provide data the department requested such as the names and immigration status of aid recipients. She said the cooperation is needed to root out fraud in the program. Democratic states have sued to block the requirement, saying they verify eligibility for SNAP beneficiaries and that they never share large swaths of sensitive program data with the federal government.

States and the federal government split the cost of running SNAP, with the federal government paying the full cost of benefits. After Rollins' remarks, a USDA spokesperson later explained that the agency is targeting the administrative funds — not the benefits people receive.

Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia previously sued over the request for information, which was initially made in February. A San Francisco-based federal judge has barred the administration, at least for now, from collecting the information from those states.

The federal government last week sent the states a letter urging compliance, but the parties all agreed to give the states until Dec. 8 to respond.

"We have sent Democrat States yet another request for data, and if they fail to comply, they will be provided with formal warning that USDA will pull their administrative funds," the USDA said in a statement Tuesday.

Federal law allows the USDA to withhold some of the money states receive for administering SNAP if there's a pattern of noncompliance with certain federal regulations.

But "there's never authority to withhold the SNAP benefits and, in this case, there's also no authority to withhold the administrative funding," said David Super, a law professor at Georgetown University who has studied the food aid program for several decades.

Administration says data is needed to spot fraud

About 42 million lower-income Americans, or 1 in 8, rely on SNAP to help buy groceries. The average monthly benefit is about \$190 per person, or a little over \$6 a day.

Rollins has cited information provided by states that have complied, saying it shows that 186,000 deceased people are receiving SNAP benefits and that 500,000 are getting benefits more than once.

"We asked for all the states for the first time to turn over their data to the federal government to let the USDA partner with them to root out this fraud, to make sure that those who really need food stamps are getting them," Rollins said, "but also to ensure that the American taxpayer is protected."

Her office has not released detailed data, including on how much in benefits obtained by error or fraud are being used.

The USDA said Tuesday evening that 28 states and Guam have complied with the request for information. That list consists primarily of states with Republican governors, though North Carolina — which has a Democratic governor — also has complied.

Twenty-two states have sued to block the request.

Experts say that while there is certainly fraud in a \$100 billion-a-year program, the far bigger problems are organized crime efforts to steal the benefit cards or get them in the name of made-up people — not wrongdoing by beneficiaries.

SNAP has been in the spotlight recently

U.S. Rep. Jahana Hayes, a Connecticut Democrat who is a co-sponsor of legislation to undo recent SNAP changes, said Rollins is trying to make changes without transparency — or without a role for Congress — and that she is mischaracterizing the program.

“Individuals who are just trying to buy food, those aren’t the ones who are gaming the system in the way that the administration is trying to portray,” Hayes said in an interview on Tuesday before Rollins announced her intention.

The impact of states losing administrative funds for SNAP isn’t clear. But some advocates have warned that other policies that would shift more administrative costs to states could be so costly that some could drop out of SNAP entirely rather than absorb the extra costs. States cannot tap the money used for benefits to cover administrative costs.

The program is not normally in the political spotlight, but it has been this year.

As part of Trump’s big tax and policy bill earlier in the year, work requirements are expanding to include people between the ages of 55 and 64, homeless people and others.

And amid the recent federal government shutdown, the administration planned not to fund the benefits for November. There was a back-and-forth in the courts about whether they could do so, but then the government reopened and benefits resumed before the final word.

In the meantime, some states scrambled to fund benefits on their own and most increased or accelerated money for food banks.

Police bodycam footage played in court shows the minutes leading up to Luigi Mangione’s arrest

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Video shown in court Tuesday documented how police approached, arrested and searched Luigi Mangione at a Pennsylvania McDonald’s — moments that underlie key questions about what evidence can and can’t be used in the case surrounding the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson.

The footage was taken on Dec. 9, 2024, five days after Thompson was gunned down on a New York City sidewalk. Officers’ body cameras captured the roughly 20 minutes between police approaching Mangione at the restaurant and telling him he had the right to remain silent.

During that time, they asked his name, whether he’d been in New York recently and other questions, including: “Why are you nervous?”

The minutes before Mangione’s arrest

The Altoona, Pennsylvania, officers were initially skeptical about a 911 call reporting that the much-publicized suspect in Thompson’s killing might be at the McDonald’s — so dubious that a supervisor offered to buy Officer Joseph Detwiler a hoagie at a local eatery if the tip panned out.

Yet once he met Mangione and saw his face, Detwiler was convinced, all the more so after the man gave what police soon realized was a fake name and phony New Jersey driver’s license. But police suggested they were simply responding to loitering concerns at the eatery, they made conversation about a steak sandwich, and Detwiler even whistled along as “Jingle Bell Rock” played in the background.

“Just trying to keep things normal and calm, make him think that nothing was different about this call than any other call,” Detwiler explained in court.

But however casual the tone at times, officers also patted Mangione down and pushed his backpack away from him — out of “a safety concern” about what might be in it and what he might do, according to Detwiler.

After about 15 minutes, with over a half-dozen officers in the restaurant, Detwiler warned Mangione that he was being investigated, was believed to have given a false name and would be arrested if he repeated it. Mangione then disclosed his true identity. Officers asked why he had lied.

“I clearly shouldn’t have,” he responded, explaining that “that was the ID I had in my wallet.”

Minutes later, an officer read Mangione his rights, while adding that he was “not in custody at this point.”

A compliant Mangione was frisked again and then handcuffed as "I'll Be Home for Christmas" wafted from the restaurant's speakers.

Detwiler testified Mangione was in investigative "detention" at that point, then was arrested a few minutes later on a forgery charge related to his false ID.

Defense wants certain evidence excluded

Mangione, 27, the Ivy League-educated scion of a wealthy Maryland family, has pleaded not guilty to state and federal murder charges. The state charges carry the possibility of life in prison, while federal prosecutors are seeking the death penalty. Neither trial has been scheduled.

Mangione's lawyers want to keep jurors at both eventual trials from hearing about his alleged statements to law enforcement and about items authorities said they seized from his backpack. The objects include a 9 mm handgun that prosecutors say matches the one used in the killing and a notebook in which they say Mangione described his intent to "wack" a health insurance executive.

The ongoing hearing, which could extend to next week, pertains only to the state case. If the defense gets its way, prosecutors' case would take a major hit.

The defense contends that the statements should be suppressed because officers started asking questions before telling Mangione that he had a right to remain silent. Mangione's attorneys argue the backpack items should be excluded because police didn't get a warrant before searching his bag.

The laws concerning how police interact with potential suspects before reading their rights or obtaining search warrants are complex and often disputed in criminal cases.

In Mangione's case, crucial questions will include whether he believed he was free to leave at the point when he spoke to the arresting officers, and whether there were "exigent circumstances" that merited searching his backpack before getting a warrant.

Detwiler testified that he neither told Mangione he couldn't leave nor mentioned the New York shooting. Defense lawyers, however, have argued that officers "strategically" stood in a way that prevented him from leaving even before he was told he was being arrested.

As for the backpack search, Detwiler said Altoona police policy calls for searching anyone who is being arrested, including their bags. But while questioning the officer, defense attorney Karen Friedman Agnifilo pointed out that an officer was heard on body-camera video saying, "At this point, we'll probably need a search warrant for it," after colleagues already had rifled through the bag.

Mangione watched the videos and testimony attentively, at times thumbing his chin in seeming concentration.

A key hearing

Manhattan prosecutors haven't yet laid out their arguments for allowing the disputed evidence. Their federal counterparts have said in court filings that police were justified in searching the backpack to ensure there were no dangerous items and that Mangione's statements to officers were voluntary and made before he was under arrest.

Surveillance video showed a masked gunman shooting Thompson from behind as the executive walked to a midtown Manhattan hotel for his company's annual investor conference. Prosecutors say "delay," "deny" and "depose" were written on the ammunition, mimicking a phrase critics use to describe insurance industry practices.

Thompson, 50, worked at the giant UnitedHealth Group for 20 years and became CEO of its insurance arm in 2021.

Crackdown on trucking schools shouldn't disrupt industry. But scrutiny on immigrant drivers might

By JOSH FUNK AP Transportation Writer

The Trump administration's latest move to enforce standards for commercial truck drivers, by flagging nearly half of the driving schools as noncompliant, doesn't figure to disrupt the industry, experts say. But the heavy scrutiny on immigrant drivers might.

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The bigger, more reputable schools were not included in the list and many of the schools that were appear to have already been idle, leading trucking industry officials to predict minimal turmoil. The self-certification process that has been in place since 2022 allowed questionable schools to gain recognition. Plus, these efforts to enforce training standards — and the previous moves to strengthen licensing particularly for immigrants — will take effect gradually over time as licenses come up for renewal and new drivers graduate from schools.

The fact that there are probably more drivers than needed right now in the midst of a 10% drop in shipments since 2022 because of the economic uncertainty also helps, although trucking companies still struggle to find enough well-qualified drivers with clean records.

Even before a truck driver that Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy says was not authorized to be in the U.S. made an illegal U-turn and caused a crash in Florida that killed three people, the administration focused on making sure truck drivers meet English proficiency standards. The focus on immigrant drivers, who account for about 20% of all truckers, intensified after that August crash as the Transportation Department audited commercial driver's license programs and Duffy proposed new restrictions that would severely limit which noncitizens could get a license to drive a semi or a bus.

A court put the new rules on hold. But Duffy threatened to withhold millions from California, Pennsylvania and Minnesota after the audits found significant problems under the existing rules like commercial licenses being valid long after an immigrant truck driver's work permit expired. That pressure prompted California to revoke 17,000 licenses.

Some immigrant drivers are afraid to go on the road

Trucking company owner Dave Atwal said that as a result many of his drivers at Diamond Transportation in Lodi, California, are "just afraid to go to some of these other states where they might get harassed." Atwal has been able to assign some drivers to in-state routes, but he has lost more than 40 drivers who either walked away from the job or were unable to renew their licenses even though they have several years of safe driving on their records.

Dave Laut said he has had a hard time finding all the drivers he wants to have behind the wheels of his 300 or so trucks at FBT Inc. Immigrant drivers are bearing the brunt of the government enforcement, according to Laut who is Sikh like the driver in the Florida crash and the driver of another fatal crash in California this fall.

"A lot of (Sikhs) are quitting truck driving," he said. "They feel people target them, and they feel insulted and they are quitting jobs. They are hardworking guys. They stand out more."

Laut said his company underwent a Homeland Security audit of his drivers' immigration statuses about two weeks ago. It passed that review, which many trucking firms in California are undergoing.

But Duffy's announcement Monday that as many as 7,500 trucking programs could soon be decertified will threaten the ongoing effort to attract and train new drivers — particularly if any schools doing things the right way get caught up with schools not playing by the rules.

But many of the schools that would be forced out of business were already idle before the Transportation Department took action, so decertifying them may not have a dramatic impact. The vast majority of the schools at risk either failed to submit a required biannual report or hadn't submitted any certificates verifying that a student had completed their course in the past year.

Trucking industry can likely absorb the changes

Logan Cooper, who arranges for trucks to deliver containers of imported goods from ports and rail yards for OEC Group, said "there's some room to absorb this in the industry" but there will likely be some impact over time.

But Blair Robbins, who advises companies about their transportation needs as a partner with EisnerAmper, said that even if all these efforts do lead to higher rates, they would be increasing off the current lower shipping rates that are depressed because of the decline in the number of shipments in recent years. Robbins said he has seen estimates that only about 5% to 10% of the workforce might be affected, and that will happen gradually over time.

Tougher standards should mean safer drivers

Dane Rogers, CEO of Western Pacific Truck School in California and the national Commercial Vehicle Training Association, supports the federal government's efforts to enforce the 2022 driver training standards. Rogers' school, which trains hundreds of drivers every year, was not found out of compliance.

"We've been highlighting this for years," Rogers said. "There's so many truck schools that just pop up, and they don't adhere to the rigorous standards set forth by either California or the FMCSA – Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration."

Jeffery Burkhardt, who is chair of the national trucking schools group, said established schools don't have any problem complying with the standards. Burkhardt is also senior director of operations at Ancora, which provides CDL training at colleges, community colleges and companies.

"For the legitimate schools it's not a problem. We welcome it. For the illegitimate schools, it's a bad thing for them," Burkhardt said.

Decertifying nearly half of all trucking schools could limit the number of new drivers and create monthslong waiting lists at the remaining schools. But Rogers and major trucking groups, including the American Trucking Association and the Owner Operator Independent Drivers Association, think it is a good idea to ensure schools are meeting the standards to prepare drivers to handle 80,000-pound trucks on highways across the country.

"Do you want more truck drivers that are dangerous, or do you want less truck drivers that are more competent?" Rogers said. "I would go with the latter."

But this may extend wait lists at trucking schools

Antonio Yates said classes at the 100 Placement Truck Driving School he works at in Detroit are already full for the next two to three months, and he expects the wait time will get worse if all these schools close. He said the number of immigrants willing to pay \$5,000 to learn how to operate a semitrailer truck or \$3,000 to learn to drive a bus has increased over the past year or so.

"They're from all over, South America, Africa. They're from everywhere," said Yates, who added that most are paying for the training themselves.

Yates acknowledged that understanding the English language can be tough for some.

"If I can't communicate with you, I can't even train you properly," he said. "We turn people away all of the time."

Man charged in National Guard shooting pleads not guilty during court appearance from hospital bed

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A man accused of shooting two National Guard troops near the White House pleaded not guilty Tuesday to murder and assault charges during his first hearing before a judge, appearing remotely by video from a hospital bed.

Rahmanullah Lakanwal, a 29-year-old Afghan national who was also shot during last Wednesday's confrontation, said through an interpreter that he was in pain and couldn't open his eyes. A court-appointed defense attorney entered Lakanwal's plea on his behalf during a brief hearing in Washington, D.C.

Lakanwal is charged with first-degree murder, assault with intent to kill and illegal possession of a firearm in the shooting that killed Specialist Sarah Beckstrom, 20, and wounded Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24.

Another National Guard member heard gunshots and saw Beckstrom and Wolfe fall to the ground as Lakanwal fired a gun and screamed, "Allahu Akbar!" according to a police report filed in court Tuesday. Lakanwal chased after and shot at another Guard member before troops detained him as he tried to reload his gun, the report says.

D.C. Superior Court Judge Renee Raymond ordered Lakanwal held without bond. His case is due back in court Jan. 14.

Beckstrom and Wolfe were deployed with the West Virginia National Guard for President Donald Trump's law-enforcement surge in the nation's capital, which has flooded the city with federal agents and troops since August.

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Authorities were investigating a possible motive for what they described as an ambush-style attack.

A prosecutor, Ariel Dean, described the shooting as a "shocking crime" and said it appears that Lakanwal "traversed the city to some extent" before approaching the troops and shooting them.

Raymond ordered him detained, citing the "sheer terror that resulted" from Lakanwal's actions. The magistrate said it appears that Lakanwal, a resident of Washington state, travelled across the country "with a specific purpose in mind." She described the government's case against him as "exceedingly strong."

Defense attorney Terrence Austin noted that Lakanwal doesn't have any prior criminal record.

After the hearing, U.S. Attorney Jeanine Pirro said Lakanwal will be taken to a correctional facility that can address his "medical concerns" once he is well enough to leave the hospital. Pirro said Lakanwal could face additional charges in federal court as the investigation continues. Attorney General Pam Bondi ultimately will decide whether to seek the death penalty in the case, according to Pirro.

"That is a very weighty decision. That is a decision that comes later in time," she said.

The rare shooting of National Guard members on American soil came amid court fights and a broader public policy debate about the Trump administration's use of the military to combat what officials cast as an out-of-control crime problem.

Lakanwal entered the U.S. in 2021 through Operation Allies Welcome, a Biden administration program that resettled Afghans after the U.S. withdrawal from the country, officials said. Lakanwal applied for asylum during the Biden administration, but his asylum was approved under the Trump administration, #AfghanEvac said in a statement.

"This is an individual about whom we don't know a lot. But we will, trust me, before it's over," Pirro said.

Trump called the shooting a "terrorist attack" and criticized the Biden administration for enabling Afghans who worked with U.S. forces during the Afghanistan War to enter the U.S. The president has said he wants to "permanently pause migration" from poorer nations and expel millions of immigrants from the country.

Winter's first big snowstorm hits the Northeast as schools close and traffic slows

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The first major storm of the winter covered parts of the Northeast and mid-Atlantic with snow and ice Tuesday, making roads hazardous, disrupting travel and closing schools as some areas braced for several inches of heavy snowfall.

The storm could deliver up to a foot of snow (30 centimeters) as well as wind and heavy rain to states including Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Maine, although parts of the region were spared the predicted high totals. Storm warnings and weather advisories were in place throughout the day.

"It looks like winter wonderland at the moment," said John Marino in New York's Catskill Mountains, which could get up to 8 inches (20 centimeters) of snow. As co-owner of a ski shop, he said he's grateful that several inches had already accumulated by Tuesday afternoon, a welcome bonus as the season gets into gear.

Hundreds of flights were delayed and roads turned hazardous before sunrise, slowing commutes. In West Virginia, a tractor-trailer driver was rescued unhurt when his cab dangled off a bridge for several hours after losing control in snowy conditions early Tuesday, news outlets reported.

The storm came just as the Midwest began to escape the snow and ice that snarled travel after the Thanksgiving holiday. Chicago O'Hare International Airport set a record for its highest single calendar day snowfall in November, with more than 8 inches (20 centimeters), according to the weather service. The previous record was set in 1951.

Winter weather arrives in the Northeast

"It's going to be the first snowfall of the season for many of these areas, and it's going to be rather significant," said Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service.

Meteorological winter, which covers December through February, is used by climate scientists for con-

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sistent recordkeeping and differs from the astronomical seasons found on most calendars.

The National Weather Service warned that snow and ice would make travel dangerous in coastal Maine from Tuesday morning until Wednesday morning and urged residents to delay trips if possible. Several Northeast states also shut schools and as the snow began falling before dawn, making roads slippery during the morning commute. Numerous highway crashes were reported.

The first wallop of December snow brought back a new tradition in New Hampshire, where residents were invited to submit names for the state's second annual name-a-plow competition.

"We have orange snowplows just waiting for the perfect name," the Department of Transportation said on social media. Last year's top name was Ctrl-Salt-Delete. This season's winners will be announced in January.

The storm's path

The snowstorm sweeping the mid-Atlantic and Northeast began as a weaker system over the central U.S. but strengthened as it neared the coast, said Ashton Robinson Cook at the NWS's Weather Prediction Center.

These kinds of storms are uncommon but not "too far out of the realm of possibility," he said. The next system could also bring winter weather to the mid-Atlantic through Friday and Saturday.

Schools closed, roads jammed, crashes reported

Winter weather advisories remained across Ohio on Tuesday, as the icy conditions snarled traffic and shuttered schools. Snowfall overnight left accumulations of 3 to 5 inches (7 to 12 centimeters) in some southern parts of the state, according to the National Weather Service.

A portion of I-70 West through Cleveland had to be closed as a crash was cleared, while highways around Columbus saw dangerous slowdowns. Troopers in New York also reported multiple weather-related crashes and vehicles off the road along Interstate 87 north of Albany.

Vehicle restrictions were imposed on many interstates in the eastern half of Pennsylvania, including on the turnpike system's Northeast Extension, from the Lehigh Valley to Clarks Summit. Snow was falling steadily in the Lehigh Valley by Tuesday morning.

"We really prepare for snow all year long," the Pennsylvania Turnpike's press secretary, Marissa Orbanek, said.

Costco becomes biggest company yet to demand refund of Trump tariffs

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Costco is joining other companies that aren't waiting to see whether the Supreme Court strikes down President Donald Trump's most sweeping import taxes. They're going to court to demand refunds on the tariffs they've paid.

The specialized U.S. Court of International Trade in New York and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit in Washington ruled earlier this year that Trump's biggest and boldest import taxes are illegal. The case is now before the Supreme Court. In a Nov. 5 hearing, several of the high court's justices expressed doubts that the president had sweeping power to declare national emergencies to slap tariffs on goods from almost every country on earth.

If the court strikes down the tariffs, importers may be entitled to refunds on the levies they've paid. "It's uncertain whether refunds will be granted and, if so, how much," said Brent Skorup, a legal fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. "But the possibility has prompted many companies — including Costco — to file actions in the U.S. Court of International Trade to get in line, so to speak, for potential refunds."

Trump claims that he has an almost unlimited right to impose tariffs — a power the Constitution gives to Congress, under the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) — but has now lost twice in court. Trade lawyer Joyce Adetutu, a partner at the Vinson & Elkins law firm, said that Costco is trying to "make sure that if and when the Supreme Court overturns the IEEPA tariffs, which could come as late as the summertime, they have the judgment in place" and can collect a refund.

In a complaint filed last week with the trade court in New York, Costco said it is demanding the money back now "to ensure that its right to a complete refund is not jeopardized."

The operator of warehouse-sized stores expressed concern that it might struggle to get a refund once its tariff bills have been finalized — a process called "liquidation" — by the Customs and Border Protection agency, a process Costco says will start Dec. 15. Importers have 180 days after liquidation to protest the tariff bills. Costco worries that "their timeline might be whittled away depending on how long it takes to get a Supreme Court decision," Adetutu said.

Revlon and canned seafood and chicken producer Bumble Bee Foods have made similar arguments in the trade court.

The tariffs facing the court challenge have raised around \$90 billion so far.

It's unclear how a refund process would work. As import tax bills are finalized and sometimes appealed, Customs and Border Protection "refunds tariffs every day, but not to this extent," Adetutu said. "This is a substantial amount of tariff income that has been collected. And really there hasn't been a case where there's been an influx of refund requests."

Trump warned back in August that the loss of his tariffs would destroy that American economy and lead to "1929 all over again, a GREAT DEPRESSION!"

Federal authorities plan operation in Minnesota focusing on Somali immigrants, AP source says

By MIKE BALSAMO and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Federal authorities are preparing a targeted immigration enforcement operation in Minnesota that would primarily focus on Somali immigrants living unlawfully in the U.S., according to a person familiar with the planning.

The move comes as President Donald Trump again on Tuesday escalated rhetoric about Minnesota's sizable Somali community, saying he did not want immigrants from the east African country in the U.S. because "they contribute nothing."

The enforcement operation could begin in the coming days and is expected to focus on the Minneapolis–St. Paul area and people with final orders of deportation, the person said. Teams of immigration agents would spread across the Twin Cities in what the person described as a directed, high-priority sweep, though the plans remain subject to change.

The prospect of a crackdown is likely to deepen tensions in Minnesota — home to the nation's largest Somali community. They've been coming since the 1990s, fleeing their country's long civil war and drawn by Minnesota's generous social programs.

An estimated 260,000 people of Somalian descent were living in the U.S. in 2024, according to the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey. The largest population is in the Minneapolis area, home to about 84,000 residents, most of whom are American citizens. Ohio, Washington and California also have significant populations.

Trump has become increasingly focused on Somalis living in the U.S., saying they "have caused a lot of trouble." Community leaders say Trump has inflamed tensions and revived fears of profiling.

The president said during a Cabinet meeting on Tuesday that Somali immigrants are too reliant on the U.S. social safety net and add little.

"I don't want them in our country," he said. "Their country is no good for a reason."

Minneapolis police won't help with immigration enforcement

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey pushed back against Trump's depiction of Somalis, saying it "violates the moral fabric of what we stand by in this country as Americans."

"They have started businesses and created jobs. They have added to the cultural fabric of what Minneapolis is," Frey said Tuesday.

The mayor vowed that the city's police officers, many of whom are Somali, will not work with any federal agents doing immigration enforcement, saying "it's not their job."

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"Targeting Somali people means that due process will be violated, mistakes will be made, and let's be clear, it means that American citizens will be detained for no other reason than the fact that they look like they are Somali," he said. "That is not now and will never be a legitimate reason."

Hundreds of people are expected to be targeted in the operation, the person said. As with previous immigration operations, so-called incidental arrests are possible, meaning people who aren't targeted but lack legal status could also be detained, the person said.

The person spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations that have not been publicly disclosed. The operation was first reported by The New York Times.

Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said the agency would not discuss "future or potential operations."

"What makes someone a target of ICE is not their race or ethnicity, but the fact that they are in the country illegally," McLaughlin said.

Trump ramps up criticism of Somalis

Trump and other officials in his administration have used increasingly harsh language in recent days against Somalis living in the U.S., after a conservative news outlet, City Journal, claimed that taxpayer dollars from defrauded government programs have flowed to the Somali militant group al-Shabab, an affiliate of al-Qaida that holds parts of rural Somalia and often has targeted the capital, Mogadishu.

Last month, Trump said he was terminating Temporary Protected Status for Somali migrants in Minnesota, a legal safeguard against deportation for immigrants from certain countries. A report produced for Congress in August put the number of Somalis covered by the program at just 705 nationwide.

Minnesota Democratic Gov. Tim Walz said Tuesday that anyone committing fraud should go to prison, but he criticized the Trump administration's actions.

"Sitting on the sidelines and throwing out accusations — and let's be very clear, demonizing an entire population and lying to people about the safety and security of this state — is beneath that," said the 2024 Democratic vice presidential candidate.

Trump has claimed immigrants from Somalia were "completely taking over the once great State of Minnesota."

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in a social media post Monday that his agency was investigating allegations that tax dollars may have been diverted Al-Shabaab.

Nearly all Somalis in Minnesota are citizens

Jaylani Hussein, a Somali American who is executive director of the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said his group has heard of "less than a dozen" immigration arrests within the Somali community in recent days.

But Hussein said around 95% of Somalis in Minnesota are U.S. citizens, so the numbers of those at earlier stages of the immigration process are a "pretty small" proportion of the community. He said they estimate that 50% of the community was born in the U.S.

"We believe this is political rhetoric and an attack against our community," Hussein said. "But additional ICE agents means additional pressure on the wider immigrant community," he said.

Hussein said the reported crackdown plan is yet another example of the Trump administration "demonizing the Muslim community." And he said it's not new that when somebody in the community commits a crime, the entire community will get accused. He said that's been true of other ethnic groups through American history.

Minneapolis City Council member Jamal Osman, who is Somali American, promised that the city will stand up for its immigrants.

"Our community has lived through fear in the past," he said. "And we are not going to let us divide that."

Wall Street holds steadier as bond yields and bitcoin stabilize

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market held steady on Tuesday as both bond yields and bitcoin stabilized.

The S&P 500 rose 0.2% following its first loss in six days. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 185 points, or 0.4%, and the Nasdaq composite gained 0.6%.

Boeing soared 10.1% and was one of the strongest forces lifting the S&P 500. Chief Financial Officer Jay Malave said the plane maker expects growth next year in an underlying measure of how much cash it produces.

MongoDB also helped lead the market and jumped 22.2% after the database company delivered stronger results for the latest quarter than analysts expected. United Natural Foods climbed 4.6% after reporting a stronger profit than expected.

They helped offset a 6.8% drop for Signet Jewelers, which gave a forecast for revenue in the holiday shopping season that fell short of analysts' expectations. The jeweler said it's expecting "a measured consumer environment."

Another potential warning about U.S. shoppers' strength came from the chief financial officer of Procter & Gamble, the giant behind Tide detergent and Ivory soap. Andre Schulten said the landscape for U.S. consumers is "volatile" at the moment, though still within the company's expectations. Procter & Gamble slipped 1.1%.

The U.S. economy has been holding up overall, but that's masking sharp divisions beneath the surface. Lower-income households are struggling with inflation that's still higher than anyone would like. Richer households, meanwhile, are benefiting from a stock market that's within 1% of its all-time high set in late October.

In the bond market, Treasury yields calmed following their jumps the day before. The 10-year yield edged down to 4.08% from 4.09% late Monday, while the two-year yield eased to 3.51% from 3.54%.

Higher yields can drag prices lower for all kinds of investments, and those seen as the most expensive can take the biggest hit.

Bitcoin, which tumbled below \$85,000 on Monday as bond yields worldwide marched higher, pulled back above \$91,000. That helped stocks of several crypto-related companies bounce back from sharp slides on Monday.

Strategy climbed 5.8% and more than made up for Monday's loss. Coinbase Global gained 1.3%, and Robinhood Markets rose 2.2% to recover some of their drops from the day before.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 16.74 points to 6,829.37. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 185.13 points to 47,474.46, and the Nasdaq composite gained 137.75 to 23,413.67.

Monday's climb in Treasury yields came after the Bank of Japan hinted that it may raise interest rates there soon. But hopes are still high that the Federal Reserve will cut its main interest rate when it meets in Washington next week.

What comes after that for the Fed, though, is uncertain. The Fed has already cut its overnight interest rate twice this year in hopes of shoring up a slowing job market. But lower rates can fan inflation higher, and inflation has stubbornly remained above the Fed's 2% target.

Complicating things is the U.S. government's earlier shutdown, which delayed reports on the job market and other areas of the economy.

Investment giant Vanguard said its data suggest the U.S. labor market "remains stable but is still soft compared with last year."

Overall hiring numbers are slower on a month-to-month basis. But fewer workers are going after job openings because of weaker immigration and an uptick in retirements, according to Adam Schickling, a senior U.S. economist at Vanguard. That in turn means hiring doesn't need to be as strong as in the past to keep the unemployment rate steady.

In stock markets abroad, indexes moved modestly across much of Europe and Asia.

South Korea's Kospi was an outlier and jumped 1.9% for one of the world's bigger moves. Tech stocks helped lead the way, including rises of 2.6% for Samsung Electronics and 3.7% for chip company SK Hynix.

Some friendly, some on-the-news questions at first briefing for new Pentagon press corps

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

The new journalism guard is officially in at the Pentagon. And the questions being asked of those running the world's most powerful military range from softballs to pointed queries to performances.

On Tuesday, Defense Department press secretary Kingsley Wilson — focused on her talking points and jabbing at old-guard reporters along the way — held her first briefing since most nonpartisan news outlets were replaced by friendly media representatives willing to accept new rules imposed by department chief Pete Hegseth.

Even before the new rules were in place, Hegseth's Pentagon struggled to hold televised briefings. Wilson's boss, Pentagon top spokesman Sean Parnell, held only two, one in March and another in July. By contrast, Pentagon officials under the Biden administration typically held two public briefings per week by the end of their time in office.

Among the topics that interested the latest crop of reporters: the National Guard in American cities, military action in Iran and Somalia, an investigation into former President Joe Biden, potential legal action against The Washington Post and efforts to root out disloyal employees.

With Hegseth's role in U.S. military strikes on boats carrying suspected drug couriers off South America under scrutiny, Wilson was asked what say Adm. Frank Bradley had in a second strike on one boat, which a report in the Post on Friday said killed two survivors from the initial attack.

"At the end of the day, the president and the (defense) secretary are the ones directing these strikes, and any follow-up strikes that were directed by Admiral Bradley, the secretary 100% agrees with," she said.

She was asked whether the department was contemplating legal action against the newspaper, which reported that Hegseth issued a verbal order to "kill everybody" on the boat in the early September strike. That opened the door for her to attack the newspaper.

"The Washington Post readership," she said, "should think twice about reading that outlet again."

Former congressman, now part of press, asks a direct question

Former U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, a Republican credentialed to cover the Pentagon for One America News, asked about Pentagon plans for running Venezuela if President Donald Trump ousts the country's leader, Nicolás Maduro, and whether the U.S. would consider anyone who worked for the Venezuelan government or military a narco-terrorist.

Wilson replied that "if anything happens, we have a response ready," and said the future of Venezuelan government employees would be "a determination for the president to make."

Gaetz "experienced being on the other side" in not getting his questions answered, said Barbara Starr, retired Pentagon correspondent for CNN, who viewed the briefing online.

"I actually thought several of the questions the audience asked were very good, pointed, on-the-news questions," Starr said. "I don't think they got good answers."

All administrations look to emphasize their points of view in such briefings, the veteran correspondent said, but Trump's team is especially intent on not making actual news. Starr said it was not a journalistically sound event because of the reporters that were excluded.

Wilson was asked why Americans were still fighting in Somalia (protecting Americans from terrorists, she said), whether the U.S. should reevaluate its relationship with Israel if the country had helped fund Hamas in the past (call the State Department, she suggested) and about reports that Iran was rebuilding its nuclear capabilities (she didn't answer, except to praise Trump's initial attack order). She also didn't address a question about any evidence of criminal activity found on boats that were attacked.

The Pentagon spokeswoman got assists from some reporters

Some briefing attendees looked to help her advance the administration's point of view. Conservative

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provocateur James O'Keefe, who has made a name for himself taping political opponents in unguarded moments, asked what steps were being taken to root out disloyal Pentagon employees.

"Thank you for the question," Wilson said. "That's why the work you all do is so important."

When asked, she promised an administration report next summer on the Biden-ordered withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. She was about asked potential military honors or a burial in Arlington National Cemetery for a National Guard member killed in Washington last week.

Storm Paglia, a representative from the RedState and TownHall conservative blogs, expressed his happiness at being at the briefing. "Dawning of a new day with patriots reporting the truth," Paglia wrote on X. "Not media liars."

Before taking any questions, Wilson criticized media outlets that chose to "self-deport" from the Pentagon rather than accept Hegseth's new rules for working there. Hegseth characterizes them as common sense rules designed to protect national security; most mainstream news outlets worried they limited their ability to report anything Hegseth didn't want to see.

They're continuing coverage off-site, and non-credentialed reporters weren't allowed in for Tuesday's briefing. The Pentagon made clear that attendance, and thus the chance to ask questions, was for "invited press only."

"We're not going to beg these gatekeepers to come back and we're not going to rebuild a broken model just to appease them," Wilson said. "The public has moved on from the old model, and so has the Pentagon."

The new reporters are expected to meet with Hegseth in person on Wednesday.

A look at the Thanksgiving shopping weekend and what's next

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The nation's shoppers may feel gloomy about the economy, but they certainly were in the mood to shop over the five-day Thanksgiving weekend that wrapped up on Cyber Monday.

As Wall Street analysts and retailers sift through the data from the weekend — the unofficial start to the season and a good barometer of shoppers' financial health and the strength of the economy — the figures show that shoppers went online and in stores to scour for deals on everything from TVs to clothing. But all that economic uncertainty did affect spending. Shoppers were very focused and selective, some malls reported.

Of course, the weekend looks a lot different from 15 years ago, when shoppers camped out in the wee hours of the morning and fought in store aisles for doorbusters like TVs. Shoppers are still heading to stores, but the biggest growth is online, which now accounts for 30% of total holiday sales. That's up from 15% in 2012, according to the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group.

Adobe Analytics reported Tuesday that so-called Cyber Week — the five-day period from Thanksgiving to Cyber Monday — brought in \$44.2 billion online overall, up 7.7% year-over-year, bolstered by record spending online during Black Friday.

On Cyber Monday, consumers spent \$14.25 billion, up 7.1% and making it again the year's biggest online shopping day.

National Retail Federation's CEO Matt Shay said Tuesday that shoppers wall off the winter holidays from all the economic noise, building a moat around the season.

"The holidays is really very much an emotional purchase," Shay said. "Families plan for it. They invest in it. And as a component of the holidays, the five-day Thanksgiving weekend is really the psychological kickoff of the holidays."

Based on the group's survey of shoppers from the weekend, Shay called the period a "very solid beginning" to the holiday season.

The group still expects sales over November and December of between \$1.01 trillion and \$1.02 trillion. That would be up 3.7% to 4.2% more than last year.

Here's a look at the data, the discounts, and what's next for retailers among other issues:

The latest data shows record traffic

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Software company Salesforce reported that for Cyber Week — it measures from Nov. 25 through Monday — global online sales increased to \$336.6 billion, up 7% compared with the year-ago period. U.S. online sales increased to \$79.6 billion, up 5% year for that week, compared with the year-ago period.

The Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, reported on Tuesday that more than 235,000 people visited the iconic center on Black Friday, making it the busiest Black Friday on record in the mall's history. The traffic number was up 8.5% compared with the same day on 2024 and nearly 2% above pre-pandemic 2019, the mall said.

Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks in-person and online spending, reported Saturday that overall Black Friday sales excluding automotive rose 4.1% from a year ago. The retail sales indicator, not adjusted for inflation, showed online sales jumped by double digits — 10.4% — while in-store purchases inched up 1.7%.

Still, shoppers were laser-focused.

William Lewis, marketing director of Westfield Garden State Plaza in Paramus, New Jersey, noted on Black Friday that, "People are definitely buying." But Lewis noted that shoppers are more targeted and have done their homework ahead of time on social media or store sites.

"They know exactly where they are going," he added.

Discounts were generous, but don't expect them to get better

Ahead of the Thanksgiving weekend, promotions didn't come as early as last year or were more muted, according to some malls and analysts. But for the big weekend, retailers ramped up discounting to be in line with last year's sales event, according to Adobe and big malls like Mall of America.

But if shoppers were dilly dallying about buying a specific sweater and waiting for the prices to go down after this weekend, that may not be the best strategy. Discounts won't improve on many items, and stores came into the season with leaner inventory amid an uncertain economy, analysts said.

Vivek Pandya, Adobe's director of Adobe Digital Insights, noted that prior to the Thanksgiving weekend kickoff, discounts on average ranged from 10% to 17% and then accelerated to an average range of 18% to 30% for the holiday kickoff.

But he expects that retailers will likely pull back from those discounts and will hover a little above what shoppers saw to the run-up of Black Friday. The exception would be poor-selling seasonal items, which need to be sold before Dec. 25, Pandya said.

As for inventory, there were fears of empty shelves when tariff rates ballooned in April, but analysts said stores were able to navigate the vacillating tariff policy, bringing in goods at lower rates.

Nikki Baird, vice president of strategy at Aptos, a retail technology firm which works with fashion clients, noted that, "I think consumers will continue to find the things that they're looking for, but there will be fewer choices."

Some shoppers relied on artificial intelligence tools

Shoppers are using AI tools to track prices or get gift recommendations, though the usage is still modest. On Cyber Monday, AI traffic to U.S. retail sites — measured by shoppers clicking on a link — increased by nearly eightfold, according to Adobe. From Nov. 1 through Dec. 1, AI traffic is up nearly ninefold, it said.

The services were used most in categories including video games, appliances, electronics, toys, and personal care products, according to Adobe.

Salesforce reported that across Cyber Week, AI and agents influenced 20% of all orders, accounting for \$67 billion in global sales. In the U.S., AI and agents drove 17% of orders, or \$13.5 billion in sales. The figure encompasses everything from a ChatGPT query to AI-supplied gift suggestions on a retailer's website.

What's next

The Thanksgiving weekend is a key barometer of spending for the season. But with worries of rising prices, will shoppers taper their spending as the season progresses? And what about next year?

Baird said she will be looking at the period between the post-Thanksgiving weekend and the last week before Christmas to see whether spending keeps up.

"I think that will help us answer the question of whether this was a concentration of spending or a trend

of spending," she said.

Tiffany Yeh, a managing director and partner at Boston Consulting Group, believes there will be strong spending throughout the rest of the holiday season. Her concern is what's in store for 2026. Yeh cited the consultancy's shopper surveys pointing to consumers delaying purchases in order to spend during the holidays. She wonders if shoppers will mute their spending or instead steady their buying.

Israeli forensics experts examine remains handed over by militants in Gaza

By WAFAA SHURAF, MEGAN JANETSKY and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel on Tuesday said it had received remains handed over by Palestinian militants in Gaza to the Red Cross. They were believed to be one of the two hostages still in the territory: an Israeli and a Thai national.

Israel's government said the "findings" were taken for forensics testing. Palestinian media said they were discovered in Gaza's northern town of Beit Lahiya.

The remains of 26 hostages taken in the Hamas-led Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war have already been returned since a U.S.-brokered ceasefire began on Oct. 10.

Palestinians killed in Gaza

Israeli fire killed at least four Palestinians in Gaza on Tuesday, according to local hospitals.

An Israeli drone strike killed a videographer in the south, said officials at Nasser Hospital, which received the body.

Mahmoud Wadi was killed in Khan Younis, the hospital said. Wadi owned a drone photography company that once specialized in filming occasions like weddings. More recently, it posted footage of Gaza's destruction.

Another man was shot dead near the Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza, according to Al-Awda Hospital. A third was killed by Israeli fire in the Gaza City neighborhood of Zeitoun, and a boy was killed by an artillery strike on a house east of Gaza City that also wounded 10 others, according to Al-Ahli Hospital.

The Israeli military said in a statement that troops operating in Gaza had killed three people it said posed a threat when they crossed into areas Israel controls there. It said troops fired on two people in southern Gaza and one in northern Gaza. It was not immediately clear if they were the same casualties reported by hospitals.

The army had no immediate comment on the report of an artillery strike east of Gaza City.

Gaza's Health Ministry said more than 350 Palestinians have been killed across the territory since the ceasefire. Both Hamas and Israel have accused the other of breaking the terms of the truce.

The initial 2023 Hamas-led attack on southern Israel killed around 1,200 people while 251 were taken hostage. Almost all of the hostages or their remains have been returned in ceasefires or other deals.

Gaza's Health Ministry says the Palestinian toll has topped 70,100. Its count does not distinguish between militants and civilians, but the ministry says roughly half of those killed have been women and children. The ministry operates under the Hamas-run government. It is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Violence in the West Bank

Israel's military also pushed forward operations in the occupied West Bank, shooting and killing two Palestinians on Tuesday it accused of attacking soldiers.

The military said troops shot and killed a suspect who stabbed and lightly wounded two soldiers as they confronted him near an Israeli settlement in the central West Bank. It said the incident was under review. In the southern West Bank, the army said it fatally shot a Palestinian who had carried out a car-ramming attack that wounded a soldier. The army said the man attempted to flee as they tried to arrest him.

The Palestinian Health Ministry identified the suspects as an 18-year-old from north of Ramallah and a 17-year-old resident of Hebron.

Israel's military has stepped up its activities in the West Bank since the war in Gaza began. Israel says

the offensive is aimed at rooting out militants. Palestinians say scores of stone-throwers, protesters and uninvolved civilians have been killed.

In recent weeks, Israeli settlers have increased attacks on Palestinian civilians.

Israel demolishes family homes in West Bank

Israeli forces on Tuesday demolished the family home of Abdul Karim Sanoubar, a suspected Palestinian militant in detention on accusations of planting bombs on buses in central Israel in February. The military said the explosives in the planned attack didn't detonate.

Israeli troops later traveled to Aqabah town in the West Bank to demolish the house of a man accused of carrying out a shooting attack in which one person was killed, the military said.

Israel says home demolitions are meant to deter future attackers, but critics say they amount to collective punishment against the families of assailants and only exacerbate tensions with Palestinians.

Hegseth cites 'fog of war' in defending follow-on strike on alleged drug boat

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Tuesday cited the "fog of war" in defending a follow-up strike on an alleged drug-carrying boat in the Caribbean Sea in early September.

During a Cabinet meeting at the White House, Hegseth said he did not see any survivors in the water, saying the vessel "exploded in fire, smoke, you can't see anything. ... This is called the fog of war."

Hegseth also said he "didn't stick around" for the remainder of the Sept. 2 mission following the initial strike and the admiral in charge "made the right call" in ordering the second hit, which he "had complete authority to do."

Lawmakers have opened investigations following a Washington Post report that Hegseth issued a verbal order to "kill everybody" on the boat, the first vessel hit in the Trump administration's counterdrug campaign in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean that has grown to over 20 known strikes and more than 80 dead.

The U.S. also has built up its largest military presence in the region in generations, and many see the actions as a tactic to pressure Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to resign.

While several legal experts have told The Associated Press they believed the second strike violated peacetime laws and those governing armed conflict, the Pentagon's own manual on the laws of armed conflict also specifically cites striking survivors of a sunken ship as being patently illegal.

"Orders to fire upon the shipwrecked would be clearly illegal," the manual says.

President Donald Trump on Tuesday distanced himself from the secondary strike, which the news report said killed two survivors who were clinging to the wreckage.

Trump said he "didn't know anything" and that he "still hasn't gotten a lot of information because I rely on Pete," referencing Hegseth, when asked if he supported the second strike.

"I didn't know anything about people. I wasn't involved in it," he added.

Hegseth, sitting next to Trump at the Cabinet meeting, said Trump has empowered "commanders to do what is necessary, which is dark and difficult things in the dead of night on behalf of the American people."

Pentagon press secretary Kingsley Wilson said earlier in the day that all of the strikes have been "presidentially directed and the chain of command functions as it should."

"At the end of the day, the secretary and the president are the ones directing these strikes," Wilson said while speaking to handpicked outlets at an event at the Pentagon.

The Trump administration has suggested that the admiral overseeing the operation made the actual decision to conduct a second strike. Trump called him an "extraordinary person" on Tuesday and said "I want those boats taken out, and if we have to, will attack on land also, just like we attack on sea."

The White House said Monday that Navy Vice Adm. Frank "Mitch" Bradley acted "within his authority and the law" when he ordered the second strike, while Hegseth said on social media that he stood by Bradley "and the combat decisions he has made."

Bradley is expected to provide a classified briefing Thursday to lawmakers overseeing the military.

Key negotiators in the talks to end the war in Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

U.S. President Donald Trump's push for a peace deal to end the war in Ukraine is intensifying.

Officials from the U.S., Ukraine and Russia have crisscrossed the globe in recent weeks in a flurry of meetings aimed at negotiating a deal. Here's a look at the key negotiators in those talks.

Steve Witkoff

Witkoff is a real estate magnate turned White House foreign policy fixer for the Trump administration. He has been at the forefront of complex negotiations to end the world's two biggest wars in Gaza and Ukraine from a perch that did not require Senate confirmation. The 68-year-old is a longtime friend and golf partner of Trump. He has visited Moscow multiple times in recent months.

Marco Rubio

Rubio, the U.S. secretary of state, has been leading talks with the Ukrainian side and recently headed the U.S. delegation in Geneva, where amendments were introduced to the U.S.-Russia brokered peace plan that heavily favored Russia.

Jared Kushner

Kushner is Trump's son-in-law and former White House adviser during the president's first term. He is a businessman and investor who worked on a wide range of policies in the Trump administration, including brokering a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas earlier this year. He has also been involved in the negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, meeting in Florida with the Ukrainian side over the weekend and in Moscow with the Russians.

Dan Driscoll

Driscoll, the U.S. army secretary, is an Iraq War veteran and friend of U.S. Vice President JD Vance. He recently emerged as an unlikely interlocutor in the push to end the war in Ukraine. Driscoll, 38, presented Trump's plan to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv and later sat down with Russian officials in the United Arab Emirates to discuss the proposals.

Rustem Umerov

Umerov was appointed to lead Ukraine's delegation in peace talks with U.S. officials in Florida following last week's resignation of Zelenskyy's chief of staff, Andrii Yermak. He served as defense minister from October 2023 until July 2025, when he was appointed to lead Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council after a government shake-up. Since the full-scale war broke out, Umerov has been heavily involved in all key rounds of negotiations.

Yuri Ushakov

Ushakov, a longtime Russian diplomat, has served as a presidential aide since 2012. In 1998-2008, he served as Russia's ambassador to the United States. He speaks English and Danish, according to the Kremlin. Ushakov has been prominently involved in Russia's talks with the U.S. this year on ending the war in Ukraine, a role highlighted by a report last month that Witkoff coached Ushakov on how Putin should pitch the peace plan to Trump.

Kirill Dmitriev

Dmitriev, a former investment banker who is now head of Russia's sovereign wealth, has emerged as a key player in the U.S.-led effort to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine. Dmitriev, 50, lacks diplomatic credentials but has increasingly served as a back-channel communicator between the Kremlin and Trump allies, despite being on the U.S. sanctions list.

Sergey Lavrov

Lavrov has served as Russia's foreign minister since 2004. He is known for firmly defending Russian policy in appearances worldwide and regarded as a formidable interlocutor, fluent in English, well-briefed on all affairs and unwaveringly determined to press Russian demands. Lavrov has been involved in Russia's talks with the U.S. this year on ending the war in Ukraine. He attended the first meeting with a U.S. delegation in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in February and has held phone conversations with Rubio.

Minimalist Prada buys maximalist Versace for \$1.4 billion, in bid to relaunch sexier Milan rival

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — The Prada Group closed the purchase of Milan fashion rival Versace in a \$1.375 billion cash deal that puts the fashion house known for its sexy silhouettes under the same roof as Prada's "ugly chic" aesthetic and Miu Miu 's youth-driven appeal.

The highly anticipated deal is expected to relaunch Versace's fortunes, after middling post-pandemic performance as part of the U.S. luxury group Capri Holdings.

Prada said in a one-line statement that the acquisition had been completed after receiving all regulatory clearances. Capri Holdings, which owns Michael Kors and Jimmy Choo, said the money would be used to pay down debt.

Donatella Versace welcomed the deal in an Instagram post, which also marked the birthday of the brand's late founder, her brother, Gianni Versace.

"Today is your day and the day Versace joins the Prada family. I am thinking of the smile you would have had on your face," she wrote in a post that also featured a 1996 photo of Gianni Versace with Miuccia Prada.

Versace's future

Prada heir Lorenzo Bertelli is set to steer Versace's next phase as executive chairman, in addition to his roles as group marketing director and sustainability chief.

The son of co-creative director Miuccia Prada and longtime Prada Group chairman Patrizio Bertelli has said he doesn't expect to make any swift executive changes at Versace, although he also noted that the company, which is among the top 10 most recognized brands in the world, has long been underperforming in the market.

Prada has underlined that the 47-year-old Versace brand offered "significant untapped growth potential."

The appeal of the deal is that it combines "the minimalist Prada (with) a maximalist Versace," said Luca Solca, managing director for the luxury sector at the Sanford C. Bernstein research firm, meaning that the brands don't compete for the same customers.

Versace is "long past its heyday," Solca said. "The challenge and the opportunity is to make it relevant again.. .. They are going to have to invent something which is going to make the brand attractive, desirable and interesting again."

Versace already has begun a creative relaunch under a new designer, Dario Vitale, who previewed his first collection during Milan Fashion Week in September. He was previously head of design at Miu Miu, but his move to Versace was unrelated to the Prada deal, executives have said.

The runway show received mixed reviews, but the collection itself — a colorful, revealing riff on the 1980s — got good feedback from buyers. "I think that this seems to be a promising first step," Solca said.

Breaking from the past

Capri Holdings paid \$2 billion for Versace in 2018, but had been struggling to position the brands' bold profile in the recent era of "quiet luxury."

Capri Holdings chairman John D. Idol said in a statement that "Prada is the ideal partner to guide this celebrated luxury house into its next era of growth."

Versace represented 20% of Capri Holdings' 2024 revenue of 5.2 billion euros.

Prada said when the deal was announced in April that Versace would represent 13% of the Prada Group's pro-forma revenues, with Miu Miu coming in at 22% and Prada at 64%. The Prada Group, which also includes Church's footwear, reported a 17% boost in revenues to 5.4 billion euros last year.

Prada's in-house manufacturing

The Prada Group has already begun preparations to incorporate crosstown rival Versace into its Italian manufacturing system, a point of pride for the group.

"Making a bag for one brand or another, the know-how is the same," Bertelli told reporters last week at the group's Scandicci leather goods factory, which already makes bags for the Prada and Miu Miu brands and will soon add Versace.

Artisans stitched handles onto leather bags, and cut leather with laser machines inside the leather goods factory, where trainees were learning the trade as part of Prada's 25-year-old academy. It has trained some 570 new artisans in an in-house training program in the Tuscany, Marche, Veneto and Umbria regions.

Last year, Prada hired 70% of the 120 artisans who trained in the academy. The number of trainees rose by 28% to 152 this year.

The Prada Group has invested 60 million euros in its supply chain this year, including a new leather goods factory near Siena, a new knitwear factory near Perugia, as well as increasing production at its Church's footwear factory in Britain and expanding another Tuscan factory. That's on top of 200 million euros in investments from 2019-24.

Pope Leo XIV sends message of support to southern Lebanon as he ends 1st foreign trip

By NICOLE WINFIELD, KAREEM CHEHAYEB and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Pope Leo XIV prayed Tuesday at the site of a deadly 2020 Beirut port explosion that has become a symbol of dysfunction and official impunity and called for justice to prevail, as he offered words of consolation to Lebanon's people — including in the war-battered south — on the final day of his first overseas trip.

Relatives of some of the 218 people killed by the blast held up photos of their loved ones as Leo arrived at the scorched site. They stood side by side as Leo prayed silently first at a monument to the dead, then greeted each one, grasping their hands.

The emotional encounter took place next to the shell of the last grain silo standing at the site destroyed by the Aug. 4, 2020, blast and the piles of burned cars torched in its wake. The explosion did billions of dollars in damage as hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate detonated in a port warehouse.

Five years on, the families of those killed are still seeking justice. No official has been convicted in a judicial investigation that has been repeatedly obstructed, angering Lebanese for whom the blast was just the latest evidence of impunity after decades of corruption and financial crimes.

"The visit clearly sends the message that the explosion was a crime," said Cecile Roukoz, whose brother, Joseph Roukoz, was killed and who was on hand to meet the pope. "There should be a message, the country should end impunity and ensure justice is served."

When he arrived in Lebanon on Sunday, Leo urged the country's political leaders to pursue the truth as a means of peace and reconciliation. In a homily Sunday after praying at the site, Leo referred explicitly to the blast and called for Lebanon to be a place of justice.

Pope calls for justice at Mass

An estimated 150,000 worshippers packed the Beirut waterfront for Leo's final Mass, which he celebrated immediately after praying at the nearby blast site.

In his homily, Leo named the many problems the Lebanese people have faced, from economic crises to the blast and renewed fears of war. He said it's natural to feel "paralyzed by powerlessness in the face of evil and oppressed by so many difficult situations."

But he urged them not to be resigned, and to find ways to remain hopeful and grateful. He insisted, though, that justice was part of the equation.

"Let us cast off the armor of our ethnic and political divisions, open our religious confessions to mutual encounter and reawaken in our hearts the dream of a united Lebanon," he said. "A Lebanon where peace and justice reign, where all recognize each other as brothers and sisters."

"Lebanon, stand up! Be a home of justice and fraternity! Be a prophetic sign of peace for the whole of the Levant!"

An emotional visit to the hospital

The American pope opened his final day in Lebanon with an emotional visit to the De La Croix hospital, which specializes in care for people with psychological problems. Awaiting him were some familiar-looking

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faces: young boys dressed up as Swiss Guards and cardinals, and even one dressed as the pope himself in all white.

The mother superior of the congregation that runs the hospital, Mother Marie Makhlouf, was overcome as she welcomed the pope, telling him that her hospital cares for the "forgotten souls, burdened by their loneliness."

Leo said the facility stands as a reminder to all of humanity. "We cannot forget those who are most fragile. We cannot conceive of a society that races ahead at full speed clinging to the false myths of well-being, while at the same time ignoring so many situations of poverty and vulnerability," he said.

"For Lebanon, (the visit) means a lot," said pilgrim Maggie Claudine, who was waiting for Leo at the hospital. "We hope that peace will prevail, and that is what we wish for. We want to live in comfort."

Families of blast dead seek justice

Leo has sought to bring a message of peace to Lebanon as it copes with the economic crises, the aftermath of last year's devastating war between Hezbollah and Israel and the fallout from the port blast.

Among those on hand to welcome Leo at the blast site was Lebanon Social Affairs Minister Haneen Sayed, whose mother was killed. Another was Mireille Khoury, whose 15-year-old son, Elias, was killed.

When Leo approached her, Khoury pointed to the building where they lived across the port, where Elias died as he was hanging out in his room.

Khoury said Lebanon cannot heal from its wounds without justice and accountability. She has been among the relatives who have called for finalizing the stalled investigation that implicated a long list of political, security and judicial officials. The probe has been obstructed by officials who have largely refused to cooperate.

"Justice is the basis of building any country," she told The Associated Press in an interview before the pope arrived in Lebanon. "Our children were killed in their homes. They were killed because someone kept (ammonium) nitrate in the main port of the city near a residential area."

Khoury said the pope's prayer and support would bring some relief, but said she would not give up on her pursuit for justice.

"I will not say that this anger will fully just disappear," Khoury said. "But I think it will give some sort of relaxation of this anger that is in my heart until justice is served."

The fate of the port's massive grain silos, which absorbed much of the shock of the explosion, has also been a matter of debate.

The Lebanese government at one point planned to demolish the damaged silos but decided against it after families of the blast's victims and survivors, who want them preserved, protested.

The port, meanwhile, is largely functional again but still hasn't been fully rebuilt.

Calls for peace in the south

Pope Leo XIV referenced the ongoing conflict in southern Lebanon in his farewell speech at the Beirut airport and sent a message of support to people of the south.

Christians in the south had been disappointed that his trip did not include a visit to their areas, which were battered by last year's war between Israel and Hezbollah and are still the target of regular airstrikes that Israel says aim to stop Hezbollah from rebuilding.

"I greet all the regions of Lebanon that I was unable to visit: Tripoli and the north, the Beqaa and the south of the country, which is currently experiencing a state of conflict and uncertainty," Leo said. He also referred to the cities of Sidon and Tyre, which are mentioned in the New Testament, as "biblical places."

"May the attacks and hostilities cease," he said. "We must recognize that armed struggle brings no benefit. While weapons are lethal, negotiation, mediation and dialogue are constructive."

Soon after the pope's plane departed, an Israeli drone appeared in the sky over Beirut.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun urged Leo to keep Lebanon in his prayers.

The Lebanese are "a faithful people who deserve life," he said. "As we bid you farewell, we do not only part with an honored guest, but with a father who brought us comfort, and reminded us that the world has not forgotten Lebanon."

Today in History: December 3 Toxic gas leak kills thousands in Bhopal

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 3, the 337th day of 2025. There are 28 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 3, 1984, a cloud of methyl isocyanate gas escaped from a pesticide plant operated by a Union Carbide subsidiary in Bhopal, India, causing an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 deaths and more than 500,000 injuries.

Also on this date:

In 1947, the Tennessee Williams play "A Streetcar Named Desire" opened on Broadway.

In 1967, a surgical team in Cape Town, South Africa, led by Dr. Christiaan Barnard, performed the first human heart transplant on Louis Washkansky, who lived 18 days with the donated organ from a 25-year-old woman who had died in a traffic accident.

In 1979, 11 people were killed in a crush of fans at Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum, where the British rock group The Who was performing.

In 1989, U.S. President George H.W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev concluded two days of positive bilateral discussions in Malta in a symbolic end to the Cold War.

In 1991, American hostage Alann Steen was freed by Shiite Muslim extremists in Lebanon. Steen was kidnapped from Beirut University College in January 1987. (He died in 2018.)

In 2015, Defense Secretary Ash Carter ordered the armed services to open all military jobs to women, removing the final barriers that had kept women from serving in combat.

In 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, trying to overcome an opposition-dominated legislature that blocked his agenda. Yoon was later impeached, removed from office and rearrested in July 2025 after his conservative party lost a special election to choose his successor.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Jaye P. Morgan is 94. Rock singer Mickey Thomas is 76. Actor Daryl Hannah is 65. Actor Julianne Moore is 65. Olympic figure skating gold medalist xKatarina Witt is 60. Actor Brendan Fraser is 57. Singer Montell Jordan is 57. Actor Holly Marie Combs is 52. Actor/comedian Tiffany Haddish is 46. Actor Anna Chlumsky (KLUHM'-skee) is 45. Actor Liza Lapira is 44. Actor Dascha Polanco is 43. Actor Amanda Seyfried is 40. Rapper Lil Baby is 31. Actor Jake T. Austin is 31.