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Friday, Dec. 12

Senior Menu: Beef stew, Waldorf salad, buttermilk biscuits.

School Breakfast: Doughnuts.

School Lunch: Chicken Fajitas, black beans.

Girls Wrestling @ Webster

Boys and Girls Wrestling at Rapid City Invitational, 11 a.m.

Basketball hosts Hamlin: (GJV at 4 p.m.; BJV at 5 p.m.; Girls Varsity at 6:15 p.m.; Boys Varsity at 7:30 p.m.)

Saturday, Dec. 13

Boys and Girls Wrestling at Rapid City Invitational, 8 a.m.

Northwestern Middle School Girls Basketball

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

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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.

It's an AI World (After All)

Disney announced yesterday that it will make a \$1B equity investment in OpenAI, becoming the first major studio to license a large slate of its characters and media for use in OpenAI's models, including its video-generation platform, Sora.

The three-year deal covers more than 200 Disney, Marvel, Pixar, and Star Wars characters for user-generated, short, social-style videos within Sora and ChatGPT, with Disney retaining the option to curate select clips for Disney+. No talent likenesses or voices are included, and the agreement restricts portrayals involving drugs, sex, alcohol, or cross-brand interactions. The service is expected to launch in early 2026.

For OpenAI, the partnership broadens its creative reach into Disney's premium intellectual property, while Disney plans to use tools such as ChatGPT across its businesses to develop new products, services, and interactive experiences. The deal comes a day after Disney sent a cease-and-desist letter to Google over alleged AI-related copyright infringement.

Skipper Tanker Revealed

The oil tanker seized by the US military this week had been carrying sanctioned oil from Iran to Cuba and had a history of hiding its location, according to a maritime analytics firm.

The company claims that for at least 80 days over the past two years, the tanker known as "Skipper" engaged in spoofing—a practice of falsifying location data in violation of a UN maritime treaty. Skipper's last known port call was Iran, where it allegedly arrived in July after visits to Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. Analysts say the ship loaded at least 1.1 million barrels of crude oil last month after engaging in rare ship-to-ship transfers.

The vessel is owned by Marshall Islands-based Triton Navigation Corp., which the US says is run by Russian oil magnate Viktor Artemov. It is operated by a Nigeria-based company and flies a Guyana flag, though Guyana maintains it is not registered there.

NASCAR's Power Reckoning

NASCAR yesterday settled with Front Row Motorsports and Michael Jordan-owned 23XI Racing, ending an antitrust lawsuit challenging the power the motorsports organization wields over independently owned racing teams.

Under the deal, NASCAR will offer teams permanent charters that guarantee them spots in races and ensure revenue stability. This marks a departure from the expiring charters teams have operated under since 2016, which Jordan testified teams are pressured into signing and are economically unviable. 23XI, which Jordan co-owns with three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin, and Front Row filed the antitrust suit after NASCAR gave teams six hours last year to sign a contract extension.

Both teams raced most of last season without charters and said losing the lawsuit would have put them out of business. The financial terms of the settlement were not disclosed, but an economist testified that 23XI and Front Row were owed roughly \$364.7M in damages.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Architects of AI" named Time magazine's 2025 Person of the Year; one cover photo features Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang, and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, among others.

Film director Carl Rinsch convicted in \$11M scheme to defraud Netflix.

Sherrone Moore held in jail as police investigate incident that occurred hours after he was fired as the University of Michigan's football coach Wednesday.

Swiss singer Nemo returns their 2024 Eurovision winner's trophy in protest of Israel's participation in 2026 pop music competition.

Science & Technology

OpenAI introduces ChatGPT-5.2, weeks after executives ordered an all-hands-on-deck effort to improve the AI model following rival releases from Anthropic and Google last month.

Scientists discover enzyme responsible for a biological process enabling cancer cells to resist treatment, potentially providing a new intervention point for aggressive cancers.

Marine archaeologists find a 394-foot undersea wall off the coast of France—built around 5,000 BCE and possibly the source of a local sunken city legend.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.2%, Dow +1.3%, Nasdaq -0.3%), with Dow and S&P 500 notching records.

Rivian shares fall roughly 6% after the electric vehicle maker unveils new AI tech, chip, and robotaxi plans.

Lululemon CEO Calvin McDonald to step down from role in January, will also relinquish board seat but remain an adviser through March.

US weekly jobless claims rise to 236,000 for week ending Dec. 6, above economist estimates of 213,000 and the largest increase since March 2020.

Politics & World Affairs

Senate fails to pass competing Republican, Democratic bills to extend enhanced, COVID-era subsidies for healthcare premiums purchased through the Affordable Care Act; subsidies are due to expire Dec. 31.

Indiana's Republican-led Senate votes against redrawing congressional map to favor their party.

MyPillow founder and CEO Mike Lindell announces Republican run for Minnesota governor in 2026.

Federal judge orders the immediate release of Salvadoran migrant Kilmar Abrego Garcia from US detention; Garcia was sent to a prison in El Salvador earlier this year in defiance of a 2019 court order barring his deportation.

2026 DOG LICENSES DUE BY 12/31/2025

Fines start January 1, 2026



Spayed/Neutered dogs are \$5 per dog, otherwise \$10 per dog

Proof of rabies shot information is RE-QUIRED!!

Email proof to city. kellie@nvc.net, fax to

(605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!!

Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422

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**ELDA STANGE'S
102nd BIRTHDAY**
is on **Sunday, Dec. 14, 2025.**
Please join us in helping her celebrate her
special day by sending her a card at:

PO Box 305
405 N. 3rd Street
Groton, SD 57445



Christmas Holiday Show!



**Featuring:
The Shaun Johnson Big
Band Experience:
The Holiday Show**

Sunday, December 14, 2025
4pm at the NSU Johnson Fine
Arts Center

Tickets are on sale now!

- \$35/Adult & \$25/Student for non-members on-line or at IDC.
- \$25 for ACCA members (contact a board member or purchase at IDC Box Office for discount pricing.)

www.AberdeenCommunityConcerts.org



Northern falls to Minnesota Duluth by six

ABERDEEN, S.D. — A dominant third quarter proved to be the difference as Minnesota Duluth rallied past Northern State for a 69-63 women's basketball victory in NSIC action at Aberdeen.

The Wolves held a four-point lead at halftime, but the Bulldogs flipped the momentum coming out of the locker room, erupting for 28 points in the third quarter to secure their fourth league win of the season. Northern finished the night with 63 points, 36 rebounds, 10 assists, four steals, and three blocks, while shooting 46.2 percent from the field, 27.3 percent from 3-point range, and 66.7 percent at the free-throw line.

Izzy Moore led Northern State with 22 points on 56.3 percent shooting, adding three rebounds, two assists, and a block. After scoring a layup midway through the third quarter, Moore was limited to just one point the rest of the way as the Bulldogs tightened defensively.

Megan Counts provided a strong performance at the free-throw line, going a perfect 6-for-6 and finishing with 14 points and four rebounds. Reagan Rus added 12 points for her second-highest scoring game of her career, while Morgan Fiedler contributed three steals to match her career high at Northern State and also led the team with three assists.

Lily Klein paced the Wolves on the glass with five rebounds, while Counts and Taylor Tool added four apiece.

Minnesota Duluth was led by Myra Moorjani, who recorded 14 points and four assists. Maria Counts, Claire Bjorge, and Lexi Karge each scored 11 points for the Bulldogs, who improved to 6-2 overall and 4-0 in the NSIC.

Northern State dropped to 5-4 overall and 1-3 in conference play. The Wolves will return to action Saturday at 6 p.m. when they host Bemidji State, following the men's game. It will be Northern's final home contest until Jan. 16.

Minnesota Duluth pulls away from Northern State

ABERDEEN, S.D. — The Northern State University men's basketball team was unable to overcome a strong first half by (RV) Minnesota Duluth, falling 79-62 in NSIC action Thursday night at Wachs Arena.

The Bulldogs controlled the game early, building a 44-30 halftime advantage and maintaining steady pressure throughout the second half. Northern scored 30 points in the opening period and 32 after the break, while Minnesota Duluth added 35 points in the second half to pull away.

Northern State struggled with shooting efficiency, finishing the game at 28.8 percent from the floor and 24.1 percent from beyond the arc. The Wolves did find success at the free-throw line, knocking down a season-high 25 free throws. NSU totaled 29 rebounds, eight assists, seven made 3-pointers, six steals, and two blocks.

The Wolves received 18 points off the bench, led by Lane Tietz with seven. Northern also scored 12 points in the paint, six second-chance points, and five points off turnovers. On the other end, Minnesota Duluth capitalized with 34 bench points, 30 points in the paint, 22 points off turnovers, and 17 second-chance points.

Joshua Book paced Northern with 12 points, while Ty Rogers added 11 points and knocked down three 3-pointers. James Glenn pulled down a team-high five rebounds, and both Book and Marshawn Smith dished out three assists. Benjamin Bowen finished with eight points, followed by Glenn and Tietz with seven apiece.

Northern State fell to 2-7 overall and 2-2 in the NSIC, while Minnesota Duluth improved to 7-3 on the season and 3-1 in league play. The Wolves return to Wachs Arena on Saturday, Dec. 13, for a 4 p.m. tip-off against Bemidji State. The first 500 fans will receive Northern State Christmas stockings, and Revive Day Spa will be on site offering free massages.

DACOTA BANK

HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE

Cookies &
Calendars

FRIDAY, DEC. 12

9:00 - 4:00 PM

7 East Hwy 12, Groton

*Stop in lobby for
cookies, coffee and a
2026 calendar!*

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Pennington County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: Sheridan Lake Road near Boulder Hill Road, 13 miles west of Rapid City, SD

When: 6:51 a.m., Thursday, December 11, 2025

Driver 1: 52-year-old male from Rapid City, SD, serious, non-life-threatening injuries

Vehicle 1: 2007 Chevrolet Silverado

Seat belt Used: No

Passenger 1: 51-year-old female from Lambert, MT, fatal injuries

Seat belt Used: No

Driver 2: 29-year-old female from Rapid City, SD, minor injuries

Vehicle 2: 2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee

Seat belt Used: Yes

Pennington County, S.D.- Three people were injured, one fatally, in a two-vehicle crash this morning 13 miles west of Rapid City, SD.

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

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2007 Chevrolet Silverado was traveling westbound on Sheridan Lake Road, near the intersection with Boulder Hill Road. While traveling down a long icy hill, the Chevrolet crossed the center line and collided head-on with an eastbound 2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee.

The driver of the Chevrolet sustained serious, non-life-threatening injuries. A passenger received fatal injuries. Neither were wearing seat belts. The driver of the Jeep sustained minor injuries.

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

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

GT on **Basketball DH** **Hc**
Hamlin at Groton Area
Fri. Nov. 12
GV at 6:15, BV to follow

Groton Area Tigers Groton, SD

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or anyone using physical therapy
a gym membership at

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Call/Text Paul at 605/397-7460

Call/Text Tina at 605/397-7285

for details



Annual Membership Rates

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

Month-to-Month Rates

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

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

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MS/HS Christmas Concert



The Middle School Choir sang, "The First Noel," and "All I Want for Christmas is You." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The Middle School Girls Choir sang, "Where are You Christmas?" (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The High School Choir sang, "Carol of the Bells," "In the Bleak Midwinter," "Requiem" and "Brightest and Best." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

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The Chamber Choir sang "Underneath the Tree." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The Middle School Band performed, "Too Much Percussion for Christmas!" (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The High School Band performed, "Mary Did You Know," "Selections from the Polar Express," and "Holiday Sing a-long." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

'We need fundamental changes': SD farmers react to Trump's farm aid payments

President announces payouts from tariff revenues, but some say it's not the solution they wanted

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

HURON — Farmers across the country may soon receive a share of a \$12 billion farm aid package, as promised by President Donald Trump earlier this week. Some South Dakota farmers say it's not the change they want to see.

"I would rather have trade deals than bailouts," said Michael Miller, a farmer from Freeman.

It's a sentiment many other farmers echoed at an annual meeting Wednesday for the South Dakota Farmers Union. Trump's "bridge payments" are meant to help farmers who struggled to sell crops during tariff-related market disruptions, such as China's temporary boycott of U.S. soybean purchases.

Trump announced Monday that farmers who have been impacted by "unfair market disruption" will receive a one-time, per-acre payment, which he said is available from tariff revenues.

The payments are intended for row-crop farmers, with about \$1 billion reserved for specialty crop farmers. Department of Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said funds should be in farmers' hands by the end of February, at a limit of \$155,000 per recipient.

Rob Larew, president of the National Farmers Union, hopes the payout is part of a longer-term solution to improve trade relationships.

"We really need fundamental changes with the way we support agriculture and farmers and ranchers," Larew said, "so that we don't find ourselves in another situation like this."

In his conversations with financial lenders in South Dakota and across the country, Larew said he's heard concern about the deeper economic impact of unstable international trade. Lenders told him they'll be unable to make loans for up to 50% of their farm customers in the next year.

"That's going to have not only devastating impact for those particular families," he said. "But then the succession, the land turnover and what it does to those communities is going to have a lasting impact."

Chad Johnson is a fourth-generation farmer in Brown County, where he raises corn, soybeans and cattle. At the start of the second Trump administration, he noticed the impact of the trade war almost immediately: Prices increased for fertilizer and other inputs, and neighboring farms were either unable to sell their product or forced to sell at a loss.



National Farmers Union President Rob Larew speaks at the annual South Dakota Farmers Union Convention on Dec. 11, 2025, in Huron, South Dakota. (Photo by Meghan O'Brien/South Dakota Searchlight)

Johnson wants people who aren't involved in agriculture to understand that for some farmers, taking the federal payments is a matter of survival.

"We buy retail, we sell wholesale, and we pay the freight both ways," he said. "We're basically price takers, not price makers, and it's hard to do that when prices are suppressed, and our inputs are so high."

He's already had to pay more for nitrous and phosphorus. The federal payouts, he said, will come "into our hands and right back out."

Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.

University system considers housing, meal policy revisions after legislator tried to force changes

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

SIOUX FALLS — The South Dakota Board of Regents introduced proposed changes to the public university system's housing and meal plan policy at its meeting Thursday, in response to failed legislation to remove on-campus living requirements.

The board created a workgroup of students and staff in April to "understand what the issues were," said Heather Forney, vice president of finance and administration for the Board of Regents. The group reviewed existing policy and data, and surveyed students across the university system.

"We heard them last legislative session when they were kind of voicing their concerns," Forney said.

Rep. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, introduced a bill in January to remove what he called the system's "impoverishing" and "unnecessary" housing and meal plan policies requiring students to live on campus and purchase a meal plan for their first two years of enrollment. The bill failed in the House of Representatives.

Forney told lawmakers the legislation, if passed, would have caused the system to lose up to \$87 million annually and default on about \$263 million in building bonds.

The changes presented on Thursday are a result of the 5,000 responses to the survey. Regent Student Representative Griffin Petersen said the work and changes are a "testament" to the effort.

"The policy we have before us is responsive to some of the concerns that we heard but still ensures that we're able to meet our financial obligations," Petersen said.

Levi Taglioli, a University of South Dakota student who testified in support of Jensen's bill, told South Dakota Searchlight that the proposed changes don't address the "freedom that students should have" to decide where to live and eat as legal adults. He said, at minimum, the system could switch to a one-year housing and meal plan requirement.

"I appreciate that they made an effort, but it definitely isn't far enough," Taglioli said.

The proposed policy revisions expand eligibility for housing waivers to military service members, people with disabilities, students approved for off-campus internships or professional development programs, and



The South Dakota Board of Regents meets on Dec. 11, 2025, at the University of South Dakota-Sioux Falls. (Photo by Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

students experiencing “financial hardship.” Financial hardship will be verified through federal and university financial aid information.

Students who are married, live with children, live with their parents near the university, live in Greek housing, use medical marijuana, or aren’t seeking a degree are still eligible for the waiver. Universities can also grant waivers if dorms are overcrowded.

The meal plan policy revisions set a standard that universities will “attempt accommodations” for medical and religious dietary needs before granting waivers. Students can receive a waiver “based on documented need or individual circumstances.”

The change also attempts to better accommodate students who choose to live on campus during school breaks, aside from summer break. Students have been charged a daily fee for staying on campus over break, Forney said. The revised policy would allow them to stay without extra costs if they notify the university by submitting a request.

“We heard through the survey that students didn’t like that,” Forney said. “They felt like they already paid for the service.”

Forney expects to make further “tweaks” to the policy — specifically the staying-over-break policy — before the board’s April meeting, where members will vote to finalize the change.

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.

US Senate hits stalemate on solution to spiraling health insurance costs

SD’s Thune and Rounds each vote yes on Republican bill, no on Democratic bill

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate in long-anticipated votes failed to advance legislation Thursday that would have addressed the rising cost of health insurance, leaving lawmakers deadlocked on how to curb a surge in premiums expected next year.

Senators voted 51-48 on a Republican bill co-sponsored by Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy and Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo that would have provided funding through Health Savings Accounts for some ACA marketplace enrollees during 2026 and 2027.

They then voted 51-48 on a measure from Democrats that would have extended enhanced tax credits for people who purchase their health insurance from the Affordable Care Act Marketplace for three years. A group of Senate Democrats in November agreed to end a government shutdown of historic length in exchange for a commitment by Republicans to hold a vote on extending the enhanced subsidies.

Republican Sens. Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa



Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., center, joined by Senate Majority Whip John Barrasso, R-Wyo., left, and Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., speaks to reporters following a Senate Republican policy luncheon at the U.S. Capitol on Dec. 9, 2025 in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Heather

Diehl/Getty Images)

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Murkowski and Dan Sullivan of Alaska and Rand Paul of Kentucky voted for the Democrats' bill. Paul also voted against the GOP bill.

Neither bill received the 60 votes needed to advance under the Senate's legislative filibuster rule.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., criticized the ACA marketplace and the subsidies for leading to large increases in the costs of health insurance.

"Under Democrats' plan insurance premiums will continue to spiral, American taxpayers will find themselves on the hook for ever-increasing subsidy payments," Thune said. "And don't think that all those payments are going to go to vulnerable Americans."

Thune argued Democrats' bill was only an extension of the "status quo" of a "failed, flawed, fraud program that is increasing costs at three times the rate of inflation.

Thune said the Republican bill from Cassidy and Crapo would "help individuals to meet their out-of-pocket costs and for many individuals who don't use their insurance or who barely use it, it would allow them to save for health care expenses down the road."

Schumer calls GOP plan 'mean and cruel'

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said the three-year extension bill was the only option to avoid a spike in costs for people enrolled in ACA marketplace plans.

"By my last count, Republicans are now at nine different health care proposals and counting. And none of them give the American people the one thing they most want — a clean, simple extension of these health care tax credits," Schumer said. "But our bill does extend these credits cleanly and simply and it's time for Republicans to join us."

Schumer referred to the Cassidy-Crapo proposals as "stingy" as well as "mean and cruel."

"Under the Republican plan, the big idea is essentially to hand people about \$80 a month and wish them good luck," Schumer said. "And even to qualify for that check, listen to how bad this is, Americans would be forced onto bare-bones bronze plans with sky-high deductibles; \$7,000 or \$10,000 for an individual, tens of thousands for a couple."

After the votes failed, Schumer outlined some of the guardrails Democrats would put in place regarding negotiations with GOP colleagues.

"They want to talk about health care in general and how to improve it — we're always open to that, but we do not want what they want — favoring the insurance companies, favoring the drug companies, favoring the special interests and turning their back on the American people," he said.

Health Savings Accounts in GOP plan

The Cassidy-Crapo bill would have the Department of Health and Human Services deposit money into Health Savings Accounts for people enrolled in bronze or catastrophic health insurance plans purchased on the ACA marketplace in 2026 or 2027, according to a summary of the bill.

Health Savings Accounts are tax-advantaged savings accounts that consumers can use to pay for medical expenses that are not otherwise reimbursed. They are not health insurance products.

ACA marketplace enrollees who select a bronze or catastrophic plan and make up to 700% of the federal poverty level would receive \$1,000 annually if they are between the ages of 18 and 49 and \$1,500 per year if they are between the ages of 50 and 64.

That would set a threshold of \$109,550 in annual income for one person, or \$225,050 for a family of four, according to the 2025 federal poverty guidelines. The numbers are somewhat higher for residents of Alaska and Hawaii.

The funding could not go toward abortion access or gender transitions, according to the Republican bill summary.

Members of Congress have introduced several other health care proposals, including two bipartisan bills in the House that would extend the enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits for at least another year with some modifications.

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Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has been reluctant to bring either bipartisan bill up for a floor vote, though he may not have the option if a discharge petition filed earlier this week garners the 218 signatures needed.

Pennsylvania Republican Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick wrote in a statement the legislation represents a “solution that can actually pass—not a political messaging exercise.”

“This bill delivers the urgent help families need now, while giving Congress the runway to keep improving our healthcare system for the long term,” Fitzpatrick wrote. “Responsible governance means securing 80 percent of what families need today, rather than risking 100 percent of nothing tomorrow.”

But Johnson said Wednesday that he will put a package of bills on the House floor next week that he believes “will actually reduce premiums for 100% of Americans who are on health insurance.” Details of those bills have not been disclosed.

Thune told reporters that if “somebody is successful in getting a discharge petition and a bill out of the House, obviously we’ll take a look at it. But at the moment, you know, we’re focused on the action here in the Senate, which is the side-by-side vote we’re going to have later today.”

Alaska’s Murkowski said lawmakers can find a compromise on health care by next week “if we believe it is possible.”

Political costs

The issue of affordability and rising health care costs is likely to be central to the November midterm elections, where Democrats hope to flip the House from red to blue and gain additional seats in the Senate.

The Democratic National Committee isn’t waiting to begin those campaigns, placing digital ads in the hometown newspapers of several Republicans up for reelection next year, including Maine’s Collins and Ohio’s Jon Husted.

“Today’s Senate vote to extend the ACA tax credits could be the difference between life and death for many Americans,” DNC Chair Ken Martin said in a press release. “Over 20 million Americans will see their health care premiums skyrocket next year if Susan Collins, John Cornyn, Jon Husted, and Dan Sullivan do not stand with working families and vote to extend these lifesaving credits.”

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt blasted Senate Democrats’ proposal during Thursday’s press briefing, calling it a “political show vote” meant to provide cover for Democrats, whom she blamed for creating the problem.

Trump and Republicans would “unveil creative ideas and solutions to the health care crisis that was created by Democrats,” she said. “Chuck Schumer is not sincerely interested in lowering health care costs for the American people. He’s putting this vote on the floor knowing that it will fail so he can have another talking point that he can throw around without any real plan or action.”

Shauneen Miranda and Jacob Fischler contributed to this report.

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.

Trump signs order intended to block states from regulating AI

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

President Donald Trump signed an executive order Thursday night that aims to preempt states from enacting rules governing artificial intelligence, a major departure from the typical federalist structure of American government that Trump said was necessary because of the issue’s high stakes.

In an early evening signing ceremony in the Oval Office, Trump said the order would position the United States to win a competition with China to dominate the burgeoning AI industry. Coordinating policy among 50 different states would put the U.S. at a disadvantage, Trump said, adding that Chinese President Xi Jinping did not have similar restraints.

“This will not be successful unless they have one source of approval or disapproval,” he said. “It’s got to be one source. They can’t go to 50 different sources.”

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The order creates a task force to monitor state laws on AI and to challenge them in court, and directs the Commerce secretary to complete a review of state laws within three months.

David Sacks, the chair of a White House board on technology, said there were more than 1,000 pending AI bills in state legislatures.

White House staff secretary Will Scharf said during the Oval Office event that the order would “ensure that AI can operate within a single national framework in this country, as opposed to being subject to state level regulation that could potentially cripple the industry.”

“The big picture is that we’re taking steps to ensure that AI operates under a single national standard so that we can reap the benefits that will come from it.”

The order, a major assertion of presidential power over state governments and Congress, is likely to see court challenges, including from environmental groups that oppose AI expansion because of the energy resources the technology requires.

“Congress has repeatedly rejected attempts to undermine states’ and local communities’ efforts to protect themselves from the unchecked spread of AI, which is driving a wave of dangerous data center development,” Mitch Jones, the chief of policy and litigation at the advocacy group Food and Water Watch, said in a statement.

“We’ll be following the administration’s attempts to implement this farcical order, and we’ll fight it in Congress, in the states, in the courts, and with communities across this country.”

Jacob covers federal policy and helps direct national coverage as deputy Washington bureau chief for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.



President Donald Trump displays a signed executive order as, left to right, Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and White House artificial intelligence and crypto czar David Sacks look on in the Oval Office of the White House on Dec. 11, 2025 in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

Trump’s Guard deployments to blue cities divide US Senate panel

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — U.S. lawmakers who oversee armed services policy split along party lines Thursday when examining the deployments of the National Guard to cities across the country under what President Donald Trump describes as a crime-fighting strategy.

Members of the Senate Committee on the Armed Services questioned for nearly two-and-a-half hours high-level Department of Defense officials, including the Pentagon’s No. 2 lawyer and the head of U.S. Northern Command who oversees National Guard troops under federal deployment.

The hearing on Capitol Hill came less than one month after a gunman shot two West Virginia National Guard members in broad daylight outside a Washington, D.C., Metro station just blocks from the White House.

U.S. Army Spc. Sarah Beckstrom, 20, died of her injuries the following day, Thanksgiving, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24, is recovering from critical injuries. A 29-year-old Afghan national who

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worked with American troops in Afghanistan has been charged with first-degree murder.

Senators on the panel expressed bipartisan messages of support and gratitude for Beckstrom, Wolfe and their families, but divisions were apparent over why and on what grounds Trump deployed the guard to five U.S. cities since June: Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Portland, Ore.; Chicago and Memphis, Tenn.

Trump also threatened to send the guard to other places, including New York City, Baltimore, St. Louis and New Orleans.

Trump first federalized the California National Guard in early June, deploying them to Los Angeles against the wishes of Mayor Karen Bass and Gov. Gavin Newsom, both Democrats.

A California federal district judge ruled Wednesday the Trump administration must return the troops to Newsom.

A federal judge in the District of Columbia ruled Nov. 20 — six days before Beckstrom and Wolfe were attacked — that Trump's deployment of the guard in the district was illegal. A federal appeals court has allowed the service members to remain in the district while the appeal plays out.

Other cases, including challenges to Trump's deployment of the guard to Oregon and Illinois, have also been tied up in court.



Sen. Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island speaks during a U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Dec. 11, 2025, as Chairman Roger Wicker looks on. The hearing examined the Trump Administration's deployment of the National Guard across the United States. (Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

Countering crime

Sen. Roger Wicker, Armed Services Committee chair, opened the hearing by saying, "In recent years violent crime, rioting, drug trafficking and heinous gang activity have steadily escalated," citing the Department of Justice.

For that reason, he said, Trump "ordered an immediate and coordinated response by deploying the National Guard to some of our nation's most dangerous cities."

"Not surprisingly, Democratic governors and left-wing pundits have decried these deployments," the Mississippi Republican said, dismissing any concerns as "manufactured and misguided."

While capturing accurate crime statistics is challenging — as many crimes go unreported — murder, rape, aggravated assault and robbery all decreased nationwide in 2024, according to the FBI's latest crime statistics.

Data also show U.S. property and violent crime plunged between 1993 and 2022, according to the Pew Research Center.

However, the analysis showed attitudes about crime split according to party affiliation.

Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., argued Thursday that guard deployments to cities across the U.S. are not out of the ordinary.

He asked Charles Young III, principal deputy general counsel at the Department of Defense, to explain how the process works.

Young, pointing to a stack of books on the table, said the examples are "voluminous."

"Rather than bringing in troops from the regular Army or the active component ... the Founding Fathers wanted to resort to utilizing the National Guard because they were citizens and from the communities that

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were involved. And these books that I have here are just books on the role of federal military forces in domestic disorders," he said.

'Is that a legal order?'

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, an Illinois Army National Guard veteran who said she pushed for the hearing, slammed Trump's guard deployments when she delivered the Democrats' opening remarks.

Duckworth said Beckstrom's death and Wolfe's injuries "should never have happened in the first place."

"Military service involves risks, and our service members accept those risks knowingly, selflessly. So we better be damn sure that the mission is the right one," said Duckworth, who lost her legs and partial use of her right arm in Iraq when her Black Hawk helicopter was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade

Duckworth and other Democratic senators on the panel questioned the legality of Trump's guard deployments and alleged the president was using the show of force to curtail public demonstrations and free speech.

Duckworth recalled Trump's Sept. 30 speech to military generals in Quantico, Virginia, when he said the administration should use American cities as "training grounds for our military, National Guard, but military because we're going into Chicago very soon."

In that same speech, Trump said Democratic-run cities are "in bad shape," and "it's a war from within."

Harking back to reports that Trump asked former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper about shooting protesters in 2020, Duckworth asked, "Let's say the president issued such an order. He said so. Is that a legal order?"

"Senator, orders to that effect would depend on the circumstances," Young replied.

"We have a president who doesn't think that the rule of law applies to him, and he wants to show force," Duckworth responded.

Sen. Jack Reed, the committee's ranking member, delivered a similar line of questioning, asking Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, commander of U.S. Northern Command, "If the president declared an organization, a terrorist organization ... and you were ordered to attack them on U.S. soil, would you carry out that order?"

"Sen. Reed, as with any order I get, I would assess the order, consult the legal authorities to ensure that it was a lawful order, and I would, if I had questions, I would elevate that to the chairman and the secretary, as they welcome at all times," Guillot said.

"And if I had no concerns and I was confident in (the) lawful order, I would definitely execute that order."

Reed noted that Guillot was present for Trump's speech in Quantico.

"The president essentially indicated that you should be prepared to conduct military operations in the United States against this enemy within. Are you doing that?" he said.

"Sir, I have not been tasked to do anything that reflects what you just said," Guillot replied.

Sen. Angus King, an independent who caucuses with Democrats, said he didn't believe testimony delivered Thursday by Mark Ditlevson, principal deputy assistant secretary of Defense for homeland defense, that Trump is "clearly doing the right thing" and the guard is working in conjunction with local authorities.

King, of Maine, said the testimony "was borderline humorous."

"That didn't happen in Illinois or in California," King said. "We're talking about a broader issue here that I think is extremely dangerous, and the reason it's particularly dangerous in the present moment is we have a president who has a very low bar as to what constitutes an emergency."

Cities targeted

Trump deployed thousands of guard troops to Los Angeles after local immigration raids sparked protests that city officials said local law enforcement were able to handle without assistance.

In D.C., he based his deployment on a "crime emergency" and the deployment of troops on the district's streets happened as Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents carried out weeks of raids, traffic stops and other actions as part of Trump's mass deportation campaign.

District residents protested the deployment, and opposition posters, stickers, flags and graffiti sprang

up across the city.

Trump justified sending the guard to Portland after falsely claiming the city was “burning down.”

District of Columbia and Tennessee officials have worked with the administration to bring the guard to their cities, which grants the troops power to assist local law enforcement.

Illinois, Oregon and California officials have not agreed to work with the guard, which results in an order restricting members to only duties of protecting federal property.

Trump previously activated the National Guard to the nation’s capital in response to protests during the summer of 2020 following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

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

In Trump rebuke, US House approves bill to overturn collective bargaining limit

South Dakota’s Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson votes no

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House passed a bill Thursday that would overturn an executive order from President Donald Trump that strips collective bargaining rights for roughly 1 million federal employees.

The 231-195 vote was a rare bipartisan push-back against the president. The bill was sponsored by Maine’s Jared Golden, a Democrat, and Pennsylvania’s Brian Fitzpatrick, a Republican. Twenty Republicans joined all Democrats in supporting the bill.

It’s now referred to the Senate, but it’s unclear if it will garner enough support to reach the chamber’s 60-vote threshold — or even be brought to the floor for a vote.

The move also bucked House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, who did not bring the bill to the floor for Wednesday’s vote. Instead, lawmakers were able to vote on it through a legislative maneuver known as a discharge petition.

The procedure allows rank-and-file members to compel the lower chamber to vote on measures that are not brought up by the leadership of the majority party, which is how bills typically reach the floor.

On Wednesday’s vote to advance the discharge petition, 13 Republicans joined all Democrats.

Following Wednesday’s procedural vote, Golden said in a statement that the bill would restore the rights of federal employees.

“President Trump said ending collective bargaining was about protecting our national defense,” he said. “But in my District, many affected workers build our warships and care for our veterans. If the majority we built over the past few months sticks together, we can overturn this union-busting executive order, and we can show America that this body will protect workers’ rights.”

House Oversight and Reform Committee Chairman James Comer, a Kentucky Republican, argued against the bill on the floor Thursday, saying lax accountability among the federal workforce harmed taxpayers.

“Accountability problems in the federal workforce are legendary,” he said. “It takes a Herculean effort



Protesters rally outside of the Theodore Roosevelt Federal Building headquarters of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management on Feb. 5, 2025, in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

to fire a poorly performing federal worker or one who is engaged in misconduct.”

Trump signed an executive order in March that banned collective bargaining agreements for federal agencies dealing with national security.

Those agencies include the departments of Defense, Veteran Affairs, Homeland Security, State and Energy, along with the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Coast Guard, most entities within the Department of Justice and several pandemic response and refugee resettlement agencies within the Health and Human Services Department, among others.

Federal police and firefighters are exempt from the order.

Federal employees have limited bargaining agreements, compared to the private sector. Workers cannot strike or bargain for higher wages or benefits, but they can push for better working conditions, such as protection from retaliation, discrimination, and illegal firings.

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.

Rural health providers could be collateral damage from \$100,000 Trump visa fee

South Dakota among states most reliant on H-1B program

BY: ARIELLE ZIONTS, KFF HEALTH NEWS AND PHILLIP REESE

Bekki Holzkamm has been trying to hire a lab technician at a hospital in rural North Dakota since late summer.

Not one U.S. citizen has applied.

West River Health Services in Hettinger, a town of about 1,000 residents in the southwestern part of the state, has four options, and none is good.

The hospital could fork over \$100,000 for the Trump administration's new H-1B visa fee and hire one of the more than 30 applicants from the Philippines or Nigeria. The fee is the equivalent of what some rural hospitals would pay two lab techs in a year, said Holzkamm, who is West River's lab manager.

West River could ask the Department of Homeland Security to waive the fee. But it's unclear how long the waiver process would take and if the government would grant one. The hospital could continue trying to recruit someone inside the U.S. for the job. Or, Holzkamm said, it could leave the position unfilled, adding to the workload of the current "skeleton crew."

The U.S. health care system depends on foreign-born professionals to fill its ranks of doctors, nurses, technicians, and other health providers, particularly in chronically understaffed facilities in rural America.

But a new presidential proclamation aimed at the tech industry's use of H-1B visas is making it harder for West River and other rural providers to hire those staffers.



Lab technician Kathrine Abelita is one of nine workers — six technicians and three nurses — at West River Health Services in rural North Dakota who are current or former H-1B visa holders. The visa is for highly skilled foreign workers employed in fields in which companies struggle to hire enough workers who already live in the U.S. (Bekki Holzkamm)

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"The health care industry wasn't even considered. They're going to be collateral damage, and to such an extreme degree that it was clearly not thought about at all," said Eram Alam, a Harvard associate professor whose new book examines the history of foreign doctors in the U.S.

Elissa Taub, a Memphis, Tennessee-based attorney who assists hospitals with the H-1B application process, has been hearing concerns from her clients.

"It's not like there's a surplus of American physicians or nurses waiting in the wings to fill in those positions," she said.

Until recently, West River and other employers paid up to \$5,000 each time they applied to sponsor an H-1B worker. The visas are reserved for highly skilled foreign workers.

The new \$100,000 fee — part of a September proclamation by President Donald Trump — applies to workers living outside the U.S. but not those who were already in the U.S. on a visa.

West River lab tech Kathrine Abelita is one of nine employees — six technicians and three nurses — at the hospital who are current or former H-1B visa holders. Abelita is from the Philippines and has worked at West River since 2018. She's now a permanent U.S. resident.

"It's going to be a big problem for rural health care," she said of the new fee. She said most younger American workers want to live in urban areas.

Sixteen percent of registered nurses, 14% of physician assistants, and 14% of nurse practitioners and midwives who work in U.S. hospitals are immigrants, according to a 2023 government survey. Nearly a quarter of physicians in the U.S. went to medical school outside the U.S. or Canada, according to 2024 licensing data.

The American Hospital Association, two national rural health organizations, and more than 50 medical societies have asked the administration to give the health care industry exemptions from the new fee. The new cost will disproportionately harm rural communities that already struggle to afford and recruit enough providers, the groups argue.

"A blanket exception for healthcare providers is the simplest path forward," the National Rural Health Association and National Association of Rural Health Clinics wrote in a joint letter.

The proclamation allows fee exemptions for individuals, workers at specific companies, and those in entire industries when "in the national interest." New guidance says the fee will be waived only in an "extraordinarily rare circumstance." That includes showing that there is "no American worker" available for the position and that requiring a company to spend \$100,000 would "significantly undermine" U.S. interests.

Taub called those standards "exceptionally high."

Representatives of the NRHA and the American Medical Association, which organized a letter from the medical societies, said they've received no response after sending requests to Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem in late September and early October. The AHA declined to say whether it had heard back.

Homeland Security officials directed KFF Health News' inquiries to the White House, which did not answer questions about individual waiver timelines or the possibility of a categorical exemption for the health care industry.

Instead, White House spokesperson Taylor Rogers sent a statement defending the new fee, saying it will "put American workers first." Her comments echo Trump's proclamation, which focuses on accusations that the tech industry is abusing the H-1B program by replacing American workers with lower-paid foreign ones. But the order applies to all trades.

Alam, the Harvard professor, said the U.S.' reliance on international providers does raise legitimate concerns, such as about how it takes professionals away from lower-income countries facing even greater health concerns and staffing shortages than the U.S.

This decades-long dependency, she said, stems from population booms, medical schools' historical exclusion of nonwhite men, and the "much, much cheaper" cost of importing providers trained abroad than expanding health education in the U.S.

Internationally trained doctors tend to work in rural and urban areas that are poor and underserved, according to a survey and research review.

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Nearly 1,000 H-1B providers were employed in rural areas this year, the two rural health organizations wrote in their letter to the Trump administration.

J-1 visas, the most common type held by foreign doctors during their residencies and other postgraduate training in the U.S., require them to return to their home country for two years before applying for an H-1B.

But a government program called the Conrad 30 Waiver Program allows up to 1,500 J-1 holders a year to remain in the U.S. and apply for an H-1B in exchange for working for three years in a provider shortage area, which includes many rural communities.

Trump's proclamation says employers that sponsor H-1B workers already inside the U.S., such as doctors with these waivers, won't have to pay the six-figure fee, a nuance clarified in guidance released about a month later.

But employers will have to pay the new fee when hiring doctors and others who apply while living outside the U.S.

Alyson Kornele, CEO of West River Health Services, said most of the foreign nurses and lab techs it hires are outside the U.S. when they apply.

Ivan Mitchell, CEO of Great Plains Health in North Platte, Nebraska, said most of his hospital's H-1B physicians were inside the U.S. on other visas when they applied. But he said physical therapists, nurses, and lab techs typically apply from abroad.

Holzmann said it took five to eight months to hire H-1B applicants at her lab before the new fee was introduced.

Bobby Mukkamala, a surgeon and the president of the American Medical Association, said Republican and Democratic lawmakers are concerned about the ramifications for rural health care.

They include Senate Majority Leader John Thune, who said he planned to reach out about possible exemptions.

"We want to make it easier, not harder, and less expensive, not more expensive, for people who need the workforce," the Republican told KFF Health News in September.

Thune's office did not respond to questions about whether the senator has heard from the administration regarding potential waivers for health workers.

The Trump administration is facing at least two lawsuits attempting to block the new fee. One group of plaintiffs includes a company that recruits foreign nurses and a union that represents medical graduates. Another lawsuit, by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, mentions concerns about the physician shortage and health systems' ability to afford the new fee.

Kornele said West River won't be able to afford a \$100,000 fee so it's doubling down on local recruiting and retention.

But Holzmann said she hasn't been successful in finding lab techs from North Dakota colleges, even those who intern at the hospital. She said West River can't compete with the salaries offered in bigger cities.

"It's a bad cycle right now. We're in a lot of trouble," she said.

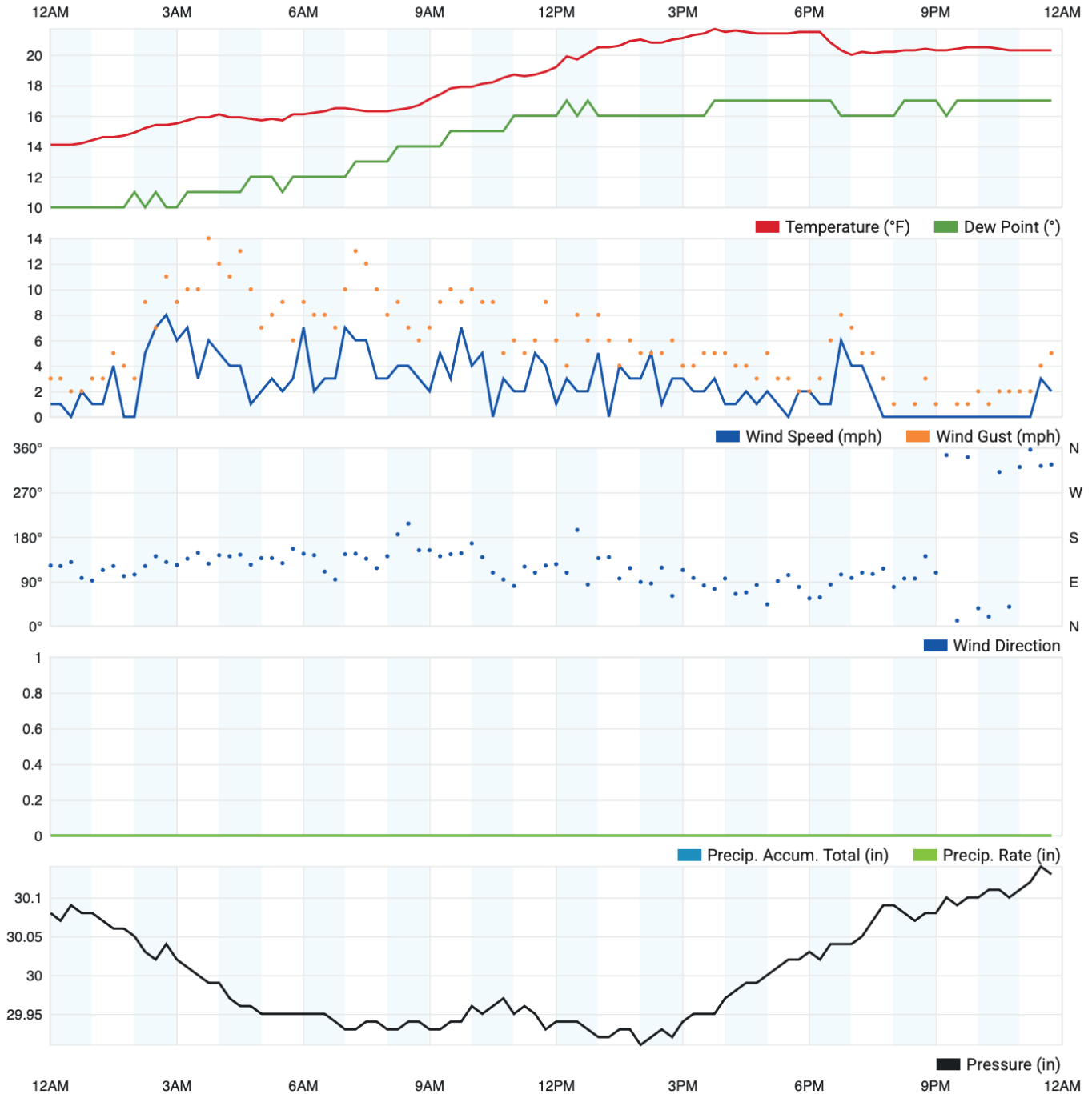
Arielle Zionts is the rural health care correspondent for KFF, primarily covering South Dakota, where she is based, and its neighboring states and tribal nations. Arielle previously worked at South Dakota Public Broadcasting, reporting on business and economic development. Before that, she was the criminal justice reporter at the Rapid City Journal and a general assignment reporter at Nogales International, on the Arizona-Mexico border. She graduated from Pitzer College in Claremont, California.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 11, 2025



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Friday

Friday Night

Saturday

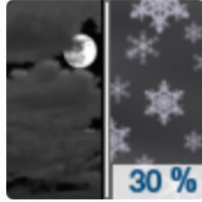
Saturday Night

Sunday



High: 10 °F ↓↓

Cold



Low: -4 °F

Mostly Cloudy
then Chance
Snow



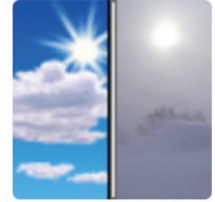
High: 2 °F

Slight Chance
Snow then
Sunny



Low: -19 °F

Mostly Clear



High: 16 °F

Mostly Sunny
then Patchy
Blowing Snow
and Breezy



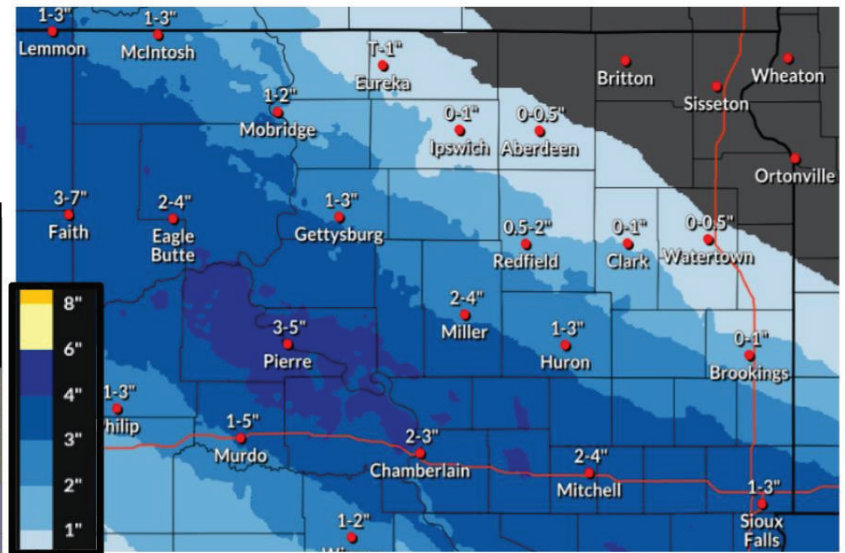
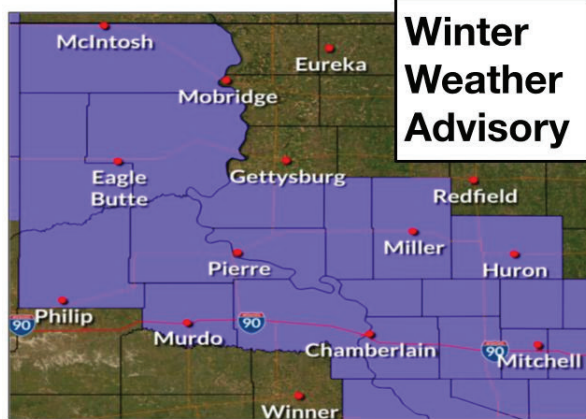
Winter Weather Advisory For 2 - 5" Snow

December 12, 2025
3:52 AM

Light fluffy snowfall for western and central South Dakota late this evening into Sat morning

Key Messages

- Light snow develops late evening
- Expands east overnight
- Ends around mid-morning



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

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

A system will bring light and fluffy snow to northwest, central and southeast South Dakota this evening and overnight with upwards of 5 inches possible in central South Dakota. Not a lot of wind with this system, but temperatures will be downright frigid

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Precipitation Timing

December 12, 2025
4:17 AM

Light fluffy snowfall for western and central South Dakota late this evening into Sat morning

Key Messages

- **Most accumulate takes place 9 pm this evening through 9 am Sat**
- **Northwest winds 15 to 25 mph (only light drifting)**
- **Be prepared for slick roads:** drive to conditions and leave extra space between vehicles

	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am
Aberdeen	0%	5%	0%	0%	5%	0%	5%	10%	10%	30%	35%	40%	35%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Chamberlain	25%	15%	15%	15%	25%	35%	50%	65%	80%	90%	95%	100%	95%	75%	75%	75%	45%	45%	45%
Clark	5%	5%	0%	0%	5%	0%	5%	10%	10%	30%	40%	45%	60%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%
Eagle Butte	30%	20%	20%	20%	55%	55%	55%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	25%	25%	25%	25%	25%	25%
Eureka	0%	5%	5%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	15%	50%	50%	55%	35%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Gettysburg	25%	20%	15%	15%	30%	35%	25%	40%	60%	80%	80%	90%	75%	45%	45%	45%	45%	45%	45%
Huron	10%	5%	5%	5%	5%	10%	15%	25%	30%	45%	70%	80%	90%	70%	70%	70%	45%	45%	45%
Kennebec	40%	25%	20%	25%	45%	50%	50%	80%	85%	85%	85%	90%	85%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%
McIntosh	5%	5%	5%	10%	20%	20%	40%	55%	65%	85%	85%	65%	50%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%
Miller	20%	15%	15%	15%	15%	20%	25%	35%	45%	70%	85%	90%	90%	65%	65%	65%	65%	65%	65%
Mobridge	5%	10%	10%	10%	20%	20%	20%	35%	60%	75%	75%	70%	55%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Murdo	45%	25%	25%	25%	55%	55%	60%	85%	85%	80%	75%	75%	75%	45%	45%	45%	45%	45%	45%
Pierre	50%	25%	20%	25%	40%	50%	50%	70%	90%	90%	90%	95%	90%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%
Redfield	5%	5%	0%	5%	5%	5%	10%	20%	20%	45%	60%	70%	75%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%
Watertown	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	5%	15%	20%	20%	35%	35%	35%	35%	35%	35%	35%

- Rain +
- Fz Rain +
- Wintry Mix +
- Snow +

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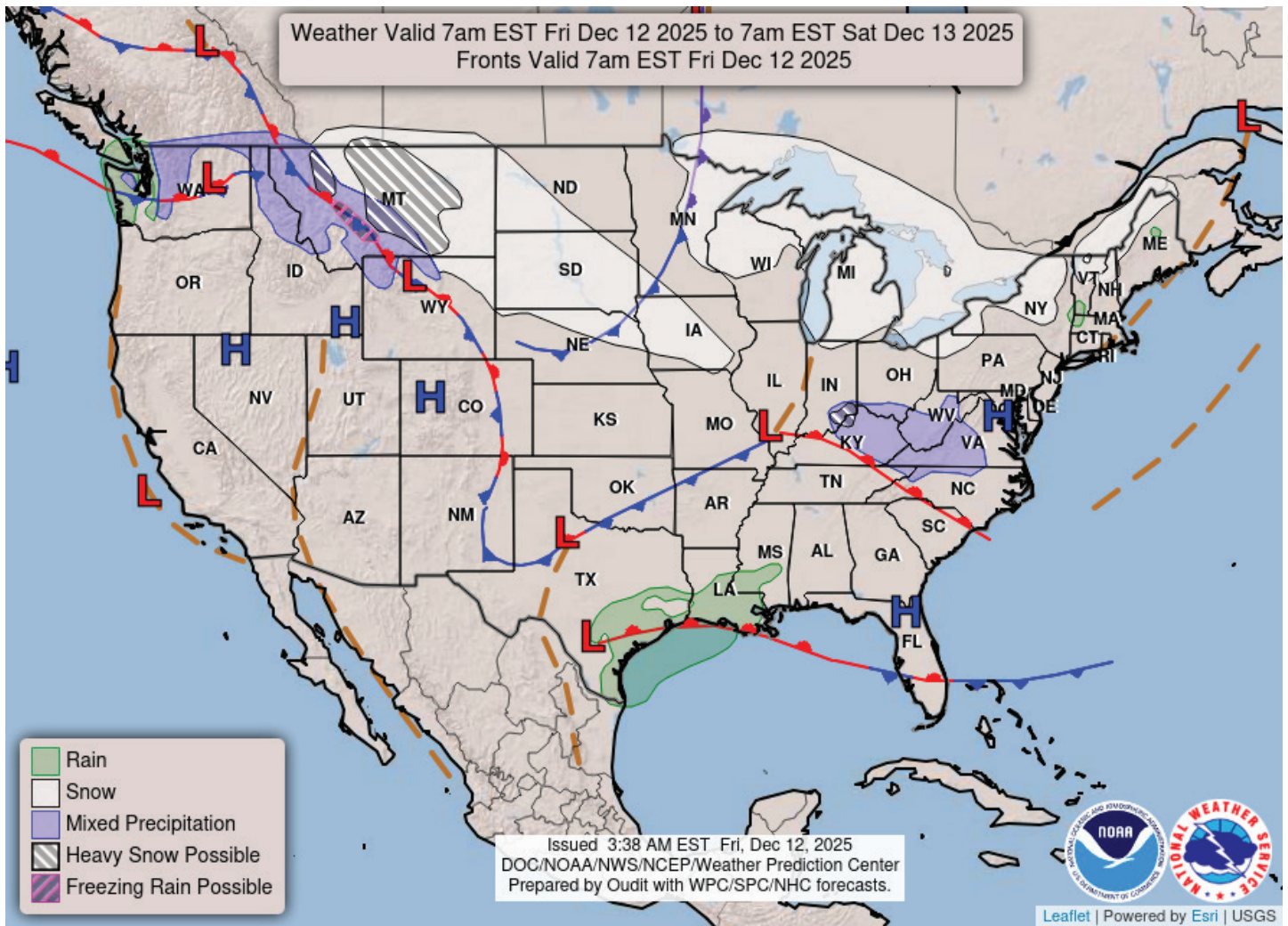
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 22 °F at 3:44 PM
Low Temp: 14 °F at 12:14 AM
Wind: 15 mph at 5:04 AM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 1924
Record Low: -28 in 1893
Average High: 30
Average Low: 9
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.23
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.60
Average Precip to date: 21.44
Precip Year to Date: 25.41
Sunset Tonight: 4:49 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:04 am



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Today in Weather History

December 12, 1968: An intense blizzard visited most of South Dakota and Minnesota on the 12th and 13th of December. The storm began in the western part of South Dakota on the morning of the 12th then spread into the eastern part of the state and west central Minnesota by that afternoon, where it continued into the morning of the 13th. Freezing rain preceded snow, and in west central Minnesota, with thunder and lightning as well. Winds of over 50 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which occasionally reduced visibilities to near zero. Gusts reached 70 mph in many places. Temperatures were falling to near zero during the day also resulted in dangerously low wind chills, particularly in Minnesota. The eastern half of South Dakota into west central Minnesota experienced the most severe blizzard conditions. Many schools were closed, and most other activities were greatly curtailed.

Automobile accidents were numerous across the area. Multiple utility lines were downed, and power and telephone outages were numerous due to the high winds. Power outages from less than an hour up to 12 hours were common across Minnesota. Snowfall ranged from around one inch in western South Dakota, to five inches in eastern South Dakota, to five to ten inches in west central Minnesota. One death in South Dakota was attributed to the storm when a man died of exposure to the cold near Allen in southwest South Dakota. In Minnesota, one man was found frozen to death near his car after it had run into the ditch several miles northwest of Boyd in Lac Qui Parle County. Another man was killed by a train when his vehicle became stalled on a railroad crossing at Hancock. 5 inches of snow fell at Watertown, Sisseton, and Webster with 6 inches at Clear Lake.

1882 — Portland, OR, was drenched with 7.66 inches of rain, a record 24 hour total for that location. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1960 — The first of three Middle Atlantic snowstorms produced a foot of snow at Baltimore MD. A pre-winter blizzard struck the northeastern U.S. producing wind gusts as high as 51 mph, along with 16 inches of snow at Nantucket MA, and 20 inches at Newark NJ. (David Ludlum)

1967 — From December 12th through the 20th a series of snowstorms buries Flagstaff, AZ with nearly 85 inches of snow.

1969 — The worst tornado of record for western Washington State tracked south of Seattle, traveling five miles, from Des Moines to Kent. The tornado, 50 to 200 yards in width, began as a waterspout over Puget Sound. One person was injured and the tornado caused half a million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1987 — While a developing winter storm began to spread snow across New Mexico into Colorado, high winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern states. Winds in California gusted to 60 mph in the Sacramento River Delta, and in the San Bernardino Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 — Cold arctic air spread from the Great Lakes Region to the Appalachian Region. Twenty-five cities, mostly in the northeastern U.S., reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 12 degrees below zero at Albany NY was their coldest reading of record for so early in the season. Saranac Lake NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 28 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 — A winter storm produced snow from northern Mississippi to the Middle Atlantic Coast, with 10.5 inches reported at Powhatan VA. Heavy snow whitened the Black Hills of South Dakota, with 36 inches reported at Deer Mountain. Thirteen cities in the north central U.S., from Minnesota to Texas, reported record low temperatures for the date, including Duluth MN and Yankton SD with morning lows of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995 — A severe coastal storm is blamed for five deaths and loss of power to over one million people in Oregon and Washington. Winds at Sea Lion Caves near Florence topped out at 119 mph before problems developed with the anemometer. In Newport, a gust of 107 mph occurred downtown, while Astoria and Cape Blanco also had gusts of over 100 mph. Astoria's air pressure dropped as low as 28.53 inches, an all-time record (and comparable to the central pressure of a Category 2 hurricane!). Gusts in the Willamette Valley exceeded 60 mph.

2008 — A significant ice storm wreaked havoc across New York and New England on December 12, disrupting electricity and leaving over 1 million homes and businesses without power. New Hampshire alone had as many as 320,000 residents without power, which according to reports it was described as the worst outages in 30 years (Reuters). Four fatalities were reported and parts of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Maine declared a state of emergency (BBC News).

Avoiding Hypocrisy in Prayer

Sincere prayers—whether short or long, eloquent or halting—always delight the Lord.

Matthew 6:5-6: Prayer

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

People who are uncomfortable praying with others might cite Matthew 6:6, the verse where Jesus advocates praying in secret. However, Christ's point was not our location but our attitude.

His admonition wasn't to avoid public prayer; rather, it was a warning not to pray hypocritically by seeking the approval of others. We may be quick to think we'd never do that, but in reality, corporate prayer can be challenging to many of us.

Generally, our problem is less about trying to impress others with our eloquence and spirituality than it is about feeling self-conscious or tongue-tied. However, if our focus is on how we sound, we may still be praying like a hypocrite because all we can think about is ourselves and other people's perception of us.

But the Lord never calls us out for being inarticulate or using bad grammar. He's listening to the motivation of our spirit. How well we speak doesn't matter if we're truly talking to Him instead of merely those around us. When our focus is on God, He hears our prayer, and others are drawn into that sweet communion.

Whether we pray in a closet or in an auditorium filled with people, we must remember that we're speaking to an audience of one, and He delights in hearing from His children.

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:
12.09.25

19 32 41 49 66 6

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$70,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 22 Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

3 13 37 42 44 1

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$9,300,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 37 Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.11.25

7 20 24 30 39 18

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 52 Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

9 17 21 29 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$122,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 52 Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

13 15 51 67 68 8

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 21 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

10 16 29 33 69 22

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$1,000,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 21 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Bennett County 72, Philip 47
Estelline-Hendricks 86, Garretson 56
Iroquois-Lake Preston 55, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 46
Northwestern 75, Wilmot 58
Sioux Valley 67, Sisseton 38
St Mary's, Neb. 57, Gregory 22
Wall 67, Hot Springs 28

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

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 46, Redfield 22
Bennett County 64, Philip 32
Brandon Valley 63, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 54
Dell Rapids 69, Madison 42
Faulkton 41, Hitchcock-Tulare 39
Flandreau 42, Chester 38
Gregory 54, St Mary's, Neb. 47
Northwestern 56, Wilmot 24
Sioux Valley 62, Sisseton 44
Tri-Valley 47, Garretson 17
Waverly-South Shore 51, Tri-State, N.D. 43

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

Farmers will get more money from Trump. They still have more problems

By JOSH FUNK and MARK VANCLEAVE Associated Press

RANDOLPH, Minn. (AP) — When Donald Trump promised new tariffs while running for president, Gene Stehly worried that trade disputes would jeopardize his international sales of corn, soybeans and wheat.

A little more than a year later, Stehly said his fears have become a reality, and Trump's latest promise of federal assistance is insufficient to cover American farmers' losses.

"Maybe this will all come out to be better at the end, but I can tell you right now, it certainly isn't the case at the moment," Stehly said.

Trump announced Monday that his Republican administration would distribute \$12 billion in one-time payments to farmers, who have suffered from persistently low commodity prices, rising costs and declining sales after China cut off all agricultural purchases from America during the trade war.

While rural areas remain conservative bastions, farmers' patience with Washington is wearing thin. Several of them described the government bailout, an echo of similar policies during Trump's first term, as a welcome stopgap but one that will not solve the agricultural industry's problems.

"It's a bridge. It's not the ultimate solution we're looking for," said Charlie Radman, a fourth-generation farmer who grows corn and soybeans on the land his family has owned near Randolph, Minnesota, since 1899. "What we really want to have is a little more certainty and not have to rely on these ad hoc payments."

But farmers support for Trump remains steadfast.

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Kansas sorghum farmer Garrett Love, who was at the White House when the aid was announced, said farmers know that securing fair trade deals is a "hard process," and farmers "appreciate lowering tax burdens, lowering regulations, increasing freedom, and Trump has definitely done that."

Farmers caught up in trade war

American soybean and sorghum farmers typically export at least half their crops. They were hit the hardest by Trump's trade dispute with China, the world's largest buyer of soybeans that has increasingly relied on harvests from Brazil and other South American nations.

Trump and his Cabinet have boasted about the deal he struck with Chinese President Xi Jinping in October. But Liu Pengyu, the spokesperson for the Chinese embassy, said this week that "agriculture trade cooperation between China and the United States is proceeding in an orderly manner" without giving specifics.

So far, China has bought only a little more than one-quarter of the 12 million metric tons of soybeans that U.S. officials said would be purchased before the end of February, raising doubts on whether Beijing would follow through on that pledge or commitments to buy 25 million metric tons annually in the next three years. China has not confirmed those numbers.

"In general, I don't trust their motives and integrity of their promises," said Bryant Kagay, who farms in northwest Missouri.

Even if China does buy the agreed amount of American soybeans, that would only bring U.S. farmers near to the amount they were selling every year before Trump took office.

That is a big part of why Minnesota farmer Glen Groth said he'd "like to see the administration focus more on opening up markets outside of China." In addition to finding other international buyers, agriculture groups are pushing to expand domestic uses like biodiesel, ethanol, aviation fuel and animal feed.

Dan Keitzer, a soybean and corn farmer in southeast Iowa, said recent bumper crops and technological advancements that produce bigger harvests means that the industry needs more customers.

"I think most farmers would tell you that they don't want to go to the mailbox and get a check from the government. That's not why we farm," he said. "We need more demand for our product."

Aid is considered a Band-Aid

Trump has placated farmers with money before. During his first term, he provided \$22 billion in 2019 to help cushion them from trade disputes with China. There was \$46 billion in 2020, an expanded number that reflected financial challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The \$12 billion that he announced this week will not quell farmers' fears about the future. They already are ordering supplies for next year's crops and meeting with their bankers to discuss the loans they will need. But they're trying to stay optimistic that crop prices will improve if they find more buyers. Farmers will find out exactly how much aid they can expect around Christmas.

The aid payments that are due to arrive by the end of February will be capped at \$155,000 per farmer or entity, and only farms that make less than \$900,000 in adjusted gross income will be eligible. During the first Trump administration, a number of large farms found ways around the payment limits and collected millions.

Farmers would like to see Trump aggressively tackle concerns about higher costs that are eating into their bottom line.

Trump signed an executive order over the weekend directing the Justice Department and Federal Trade Commission to investigate anti-competitive practices anywhere in the food supply chain, starting with the fertilizer, seed and equipment that farmers rely on and continuing to deal with meat packing companies and grocers who help determine what price consumers pay.

Tregg Cronin, who farms and ranches with his family in central South Dakota, said he's grateful for the president's acknowledgment that farmers are "caught in the middle" of the trade war.

But he said that any checks that farmers receive from the government will likely "get turned around and sent right out the door."

Thailand's Parliament is dissolved for new elections early next year

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By JINTAMAS SAKSORNCHAI and GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Thailand's Parliament was dissolved Friday for new elections early next year as the country engaged in deadly fighting with Cambodia.

Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul dissolved the House of Representatives after getting approval from King Maha Vajiralongkorn, whose endorsement became effective Friday with its publication in the Royal Gazette.

Anutin had signaled the move with a Facebook post late Thursday saying: "I'd like to return power to the people."

The election must be held 45 to 60 days after the royal endorsement, a period during which Anutin will head a caretaker government with limited powers that cannot approve a new budget.

The move comes at a tricky political moment, as Thailand is engaged in large-scale combat with Cambodia over a longstanding border dispute.

Anutin has only been prime minister since September

Anutin has been prime minister for just three months, succeeding Paetongtarn Shinawatra, who served only a year in office before losing office over a scandal that erupted out of a previous round of border tensions.

Anutin won the September vote in Parliament with support from the main opposition People's Party in exchange for a promise to dissolve Parliament within four months and organize a referendum on the drafting of a new constitution by an elected constituent assembly.

The party, which runs on progressive platforms, has long sought changes to the constitution, imposed during a military government, saying they want to make it more democratic.

The issue of constitutional change appeared to trigger the dissolution, after the People's Party prepared to call a no-confidence vote Thursday. That threat came after lawmakers from Anutin's Bhumjaithai Party voted in favor of a bill to amend the constitution that the opposition party felt ran against the spirit of the agreement they had reached in September.

The People's Party holds the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives and is seen as the main challenger to Bhumjaithai. As news of the pending dissolution circulated late Thursday, its leaders said they hoped Anutin would still honor the agreement to arrange a constitutional referendum.

Anutin served in Paetongtarn's former government but resigned from his positions and withdrew his party from her coalition government as she faced controversy over a phone call with Cambodia's Senate President Hun Sen in June.

Paetongtarn, daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was suspended from office ahead of the July fighting, after being found guilty of ethics violations over the politically compromising call.

Warring parties are waiting for calls with Trump

With Thailand now again engaged in heavy combat against Cambodia, Anutin has embraced an aggressive military posture to appeal to nationalistic public sentiment, and has said Thailand will keep fighting until its sovereignty and safety are guaranteed.

After the five days of border fighting in July, U.S. President Donald Trump pushed the two countries to agree on a ceasefire by threatening to withhold trade privileges from them.

Trump has vowed again to make peace between them after widespread fighting flared up again this week. If he employs the cudgel of high tariffs on Thai exports should Thailand fail to comply with his peacemaking effort, it could cause serious damage to its already sluggish economy.

Trump said twice this week that he expects to speak by phone with the Thai and Cambodian leaders, expressing confidence that he would persuade them to stop the fighting.

Anutin on Friday confirmed that he is scheduled to speak with Trump on Friday night, saying he would brief him on the latest situation along the border.

As of Thursday, about two dozen people had been reported killed in this week's fighting, while hundreds of thousands have been displaced on both sides. The Thai military estimates that 165 Cambodian soldiers have been killed, though no number has been officially announced by Phnom Penh.

Thailand's leader may gain from hawkish posture

"Anutin has capitalized on the renewed border tensions with Cambodia to portray himself as a leader willing to take a nationalist, hard-line stance in defending Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity," commented Napon Jatusripitak, director of the Center for Politics and Geopolitics at Thailand Future, a Bangkok-based think tank.

"This emerging narrative has, at least for now, eclipsed criticisms of his handling of the floods in Southern Thailand and muted scrutiny over lingering questions of his potential involvement with scam networks," said Napon, who is also a visiting fellow at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Purawich Watanasukh, a political scientist at Bangkok's Thammasat University said that the standing of Anutin's Bhumjaithai Party has slipped in recent weeks due to the southern flood crisis, which took more than 160 lives, and his government's mishandling of major scam scandals, which tainted some officials and figures in the Thai business community.

"However, the recent clash between Thailand and Cambodia has provided Anutin with an opportunity to reframe himself as a defender of national sovereignty, potentially boosting his popularity," Purawich told The Associated Press in an email interview. "Dissolving the House at this moment allows Bhumjaithai to capitalize on this shifting sentiment.

A 6.7 magnitude earthquake causes small tsunami waves off northeastern Japan

TOKYO (AP) — A 6.7 magnitude earthquake shook northeastern Japan and caused small tsunami waves but no apparent damage Friday, days after a stronger quake in the same region.

Friday's quake occurred off the east coast of Aomori prefecture, in the north of Honshu, the main Japanese island, at a depth of 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) at 11:44 a.m., according to the Japan Meteorological Agency, which issued a tsunami advisory that was lifted about two hours later.

Small waves were reported in Hokkaido and Aomori prefectures, but no serious damage or injuries were reported.

The quake followed a 7.5 magnitude earthquake Monday that caused injuries, light damage and a small tsunami on Japan's Pacific coast.

At least 34 people were injured in that quake, power was knocked out temporarily in places, and tsunami waves more than 2 feet (0.6 meters) above tide levels were measured in Kuji port in Iwate prefecture.

Authorities had warned of possible aftershocks.

Officials said after Monday's quake there was also a slight increase in the risk of a megaquake, at magnitude 8 or stronger, and a possible tsunami occurring along Japan's northeastern coast from Chiba, just east of Tokyo, to the northernmost main island of Hokkaido. The agency urged residents in the area to monitor their emergency preparedness, reminding them that the caution is not a prediction of such a strong earthquake.

The recent quakes occurred around the area where the magnitude 9.0 quake and tsunami in 2011 killed nearly 20,000 people and destroyed the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Washington state faces historic floods that have washed away homes and stranded families

By CEDAR ATTANASIO and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. (AP) — Days of torrential rain in Washington state has caused historic floods that have stranded families on rooftops, washed over bridges and ripped at least two homes from their foundations, and experts warned that even more flooding expected Friday could be catastrophic.

Washington is under a state of emergency and evacuation orders are in place for tens of thousands of residents. Gov. Bob Ferguson on Thursday urged everyone to follow evacuation instructions as yet another river neared record levels.

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"I understand that many in our state have experienced significant floods in the past," he said on the social platform X. "However, we're looking at a historic situation."

About 78,000 residents of a major agricultural region north of Seattle were ordered to evacuate the floodplain of the Skagit River, which was expected to crest Friday morning.

The floods were impacting large parts of the state, with several bridges flooded and some major roads inundated or washed out. Some roads had no alternate routes and no estimated reopening time, including a large part of state Route 410.

A landslide blocked part of Interstate 90 east of Seattle, with photos showing vehicles trapped by tree trunks, branches, mud and standing water.

In the north near the U.S.-Canada border, the cities of Sumas, Nooksack and Everson were evacuated after being inundated. The border crossing at Sumas was closed and Amtrak suspended trains between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C.

Sumas Mayor Bruce Bosch said much of the city has been "devastated" by the high waters just four years after a similar flood.

Flooding rivers break records

The Snohomish River surged nearly a foot (30 centimeters) higher than its record Thursday in the picturesque city that shares its name, while the Skagit River rose just above its record Thursday night in Mount Vernon, according to the National Water Prediction Service.

Earlier Thursday, the Skagit just missed its previous record as flooding surged through the mountain town of Concrete.

The waters stopped just short of getting inside Mariah Brosa's raised riverfront home in Concrete, but the raging river still slapped debris against her home and totaled her fiancé's work car, she said.

"I didn't think it would come this high," she said.

Flooding from the Skagit has long plagued Mount Vernon, the largest city in Skagit County with some 35,000 residents. Flooding in 2003 displaced hundreds of people.

A floodwall that protects downtown passed a major test in 2021, when the river crested near record levels. Water was at the foot of the floodwall as of late Thursday morning, Mayor Peter Donovan said.

In nearby Burlington, officials hoped dikes and other systems would protect their community from catastrophe, said Michael Lumpkin, with the police department.

Officials respond to flooding

Authorities across Washington state in recent days have rescued people from cars and homes after an atmospheric river soaked the region.

Helicopters rescued two families on Thursday from the roofs of homes in Sumas that had been flooded by about 15 feet (4.6 meters) of water, while the city's fire station had 3 feet (91 centimeters) of water, according Frank Cain JR., battalion chief for Whatcom County Fire District 14.

In nearby Welcome, erosion from the floodwaters caused at least two houses to collapse into the Nooksack River, he said. No one was inside at the time.

In a football field in Snoqualmie, a herd of elk swam and waded through neck-high water.

East of Seattle, residents along Issaquah Creek used water pumps as rushing floodwaters filled yards Thursday morning. Yellow tape blocked off a hazardous area along the creek.

Climate change has been linked to some intense rainfall. Scientists say that without specific study they cannot directly link a single weather event to climate change, but in general it's responsible for more intense and more frequent extreme storms, droughts, floods and wildfires.

Another storm system is expected to bring more rain starting Sunday.

A major strike in Portugal severely disrupts travel and public services

By BARRY HATTON Associated Press

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LISBON, Portugal (AP) — A strike called by Portugal's two main trade union confederations severely disrupted travel Thursday and forced the cancellation of many medical appointments and school classes. Government and municipal services, including trash collection, were also badly hit.

The two labor groups representing close to a million Portuguese workers say it could be the country's biggest walkout in more than 10 years as they contest the center-right government's planned changes to employment laws.

The unions say the changes strip workers of entitlements, while the government argues they are needed to make the economy more supple and spur growth.

The proposed changes include making it easier for companies to fire workers, denying the right to strike in additional sectors of the economy and limiting breastfeeding breaks for mothers to the first two years of a baby's life from the current open-ended dispensation.

Downtown Lisbon was strikingly quiet, with few pedestrians and light traffic compared to a usual weekday in the capital as some people went on strike and others worked from home to avoid the transport disruption.

At Lisbon international airport, dozens of flights were canceled as pilots, flight attendants and baggage handlers walked out. The airport was open but largely deserted.

Flag carrier TAP Air Portugal operated only 63 of its 283 scheduled flights, in line with the minimum level of service required by law. The airline had previously warned passengers about the strike and offered to put them on other flights.

Train and bus services across Portugal also ran a skeleton service. The Lisbon Metro subway said services were suspended at 11 p.m. Wednesday and would resume only on Friday morning.

Private companies were also affected, with manufacturing and distribution companies reporting walkouts. Some Lisbon stores were closed.

It was the first time since 2013 that the umbrella groups — the General Workers' Union and the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers — have joined forces.

The government's Minister for the Cabinet, António Leitão Amaro, said the strike had little impact on the private sector. "Most Portuguese are at work," he said.

But unions, which staged street marches in the afternoon, pronounced the strike a success.

"We are seeing workers demand that the government withdraw this labor (reform) package," Tiago Oliveira, head of the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, said. The strike "says a lot about the government's attack and this is the response of the workers."

Portugal has one of the European Union's smallest economies and its workers are among the lowest paid in the 27-nation bloc. The average monthly wage is around 1,600 euros (\$1,870) before tax, according to the National Statistics Institute. The minimum monthly wage earned by hundreds of thousands of workers is 870 euros (\$1,018) before tax.

The Portuguese are also being pinched by a housing and cost of living crisis, as property prices soar and inflation sticks at just over 2%.

The European Commission expects Portugal to achieve GDP growth of around 2% this year, above the EU average of 1.4%. Unemployment stands at under 6%, roughly the EU average.

Social Democrat Prime Minister Luis Montenegro has described the strike as "senseless" because the country is doing well.

A Chinese whistleblower now living in the US is being hunted by Beijing with help from US tech

By DAKE KANG Associated Press

MIDLAND, Texas (AP) — Retired Chinese official Li Chuanliang was recuperating from cancer on a Korean resort island when he got an urgent call: Don't return to China, a friend warned. You're now a fugitive.

Days later, a stranger snapped a photo of Li in a cafe. Terrified South Korea would send him back, Li fled, flew to the U.S. on a tourist visa and applied for asylum. But even there — in New York, in California, deep in the Texas desert — the Chinese government continued to hunt him down with the help of surveil-

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lance technology.

Li's communications were monitored, his assets seized and his movements followed in police databases. More than 40 friends and relatives — including his pregnant daughter — were identified and detained, even by tracking down their cab drivers through facial recognition software. Three former associates died in detention, and for months shadowy men Li believed to be Chinese operatives stalked him across continents, interviews and documents seen by The Associated Press show.

"They track you 24 hours a day. All your electronics, your phone — they'll use every method to find you, your relatives, your friends, where you live," Li said. "No matter where you are, you're under their control."

The Chinese government is using an increasingly powerful tool to cement its power at home and vastly amplify it abroad: Surveillance technology, much of it originating in the U.S., an AP investigation has found.

Within China, this technology helped identify and punish almost 900,000 officials last year alone, nearly five times more than in 2012, according to state numbers. Beijing says it is cracking down on corruption, but critics charge that such technology is used in China and elsewhere to stifle dissent and exact retribution on perceived enemies.

Outside China, the same technology is being used to threaten wayward officials, along with dissidents and alleged criminals, under what authorities call Operations "Fox Hunt" and "Sky Net." The U.S. has criticized these overseas operations as a "threat" and an "affront to national sovereignty." More than 14,000 people, including some 3,000 officials, have been brought back to China from more than 120 countries through coercion, arrests and pressure on relatives, according to state information.

"They're actively pursuing those people who fled China. ... as a way to demonstrate power, to show there's no way you can escape," said Yaqiu Wang, a fellow at the University of Chicago. "The chilling effect is enormously effective."

The technology used to control officials at home and abroad over the past decade came from Silicon Valley companies such as IBM, Oracle and Microsoft, according to a review of hundreds of leaked emails, government procurements, and internal corporate presentations obtained exclusively by AP. This technology mines texts, payments, flights, calls, and other data to identify the friends and family of officials and their assets.

Among the agencies pursuing Li and his family is China's economic crimes police, which hunts corruption suspects domestically and abroad. IBM said in internal slides that it sold the i2 surveillance software program to this Economic Crime Investigation Bureau, and procurement records show Oracle and Microsoft software was sold to that same division. Leaked emails show i2 software was copied by a former IBM partner, Landasoft, and sold to China's disciplinary commissions, which investigate officials. None of the sales violated U.S. sanctions.

IBM said in a statement that it sold its division making the i2 program in 2022, and has "robust processes" to ensure its technology is used responsibly. Oracle declined comment, and Microsoft did not respond.

China's State Council, Ministry of Public Security, National Supervision Commission, and Supreme People's Court and Prosecutorate did not respond to faxed requests for comment. China's foreign ministry told AP that Chinese authorities protect the rights of suspects, handle cases lawfully and respect foreign sovereignty.

"We urge relevant countries to drop double standards and avoid becoming a safe haven for corrupt officials and their assets," it said.

Li's story is a rare firsthand account from a former Chinese official. Beijing has accused Li of corruption totaling around \$435 million, but Li says he's being targeted for openly criticizing the Chinese government and denies criminal charges of taking bribes and embezzling state funds. A review of thousands of pages of legal, property, and corporate records, interrogation transcripts, and Li's medical and travel files obtained exclusively by AP, as well as interviews with nine lawyers, support key parts of his story, showing distorted charges, blocked access to evidence, coercive confessions, and altered legal records.

Li drew ire because as a former official, he knew well and exposed the inner workings of local politics, including naming names. While in the U.S., he also started what he called the Chinese Tyrannical Officials Whistleblower Center.

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"China places enormous emphasis on the political discipline of even former officials and (Communist) Party members," said Jeremy Daum, Senior Fellow at Yale Law School's Paul Tsai China Center. "So when one becomes a vocal critic of the country's leadership, it doesn't go over well."

At a pro-democracy gathering in California in 2020, Li said, he was tailed and questioned by a stranger who knew his identity. That November, an activist secretly working for Beijing asked Li to a meeting and added him to a dissident group chat monitored by China's police, a 2025 FBI indictment later revealed. In June, an FBI letter identified Li as the possible victim of a crime involving an unregistered Chinese agent.

Both the FBI and the White House did not comment on Li's specific case. But the White House said it pursues any violations of U.S. law, and the FBI told AP it considers China's efforts to retaliate against people in the U.S. who exercise their rights "unacceptable."

Li's future in the U.S. is unclear. The Trump administration has paused all asylum applications. If he doesn't return, he could face trial in absentia; if convicted and deported, he could face life in prison.

"Electronic surveillance is the arteries for China to project power into the world ... each step that every one of your relatives takes is being monitored and analyzed with big data," Li said. "It's absolutely terrifying."

'Bulwark against corruption'

Li, a stocky and well-built man who projects authority, rose through the ranks through the 1990s and 2000s, when China's growing prosperity also brought corruption. Beijing formed a new "economic crime investigation bureau" and established what it called "Golden Tax," "Golden Finance," and "Golden Audit" systems to track businesses and officials across the country, using tech from Silicon Valley companies.

Li worked as a state accountant in his hometown, Jixi, in far northeastern China, where he signed off on contracts to purchase American technology. "Bulwark against corruption," the local media dubbed him.

Li's family prospered, investing in apartment complexes and renting out forklifts and bulldozers, raising questions over whether he used his position to enrich relatives. Li and his lawyers don't deny conflicts of interest or civil violations, but say profits were made from legal, regular business operations and deny criminal charges of embezzlement and bribery.

The same technology to fight corruption was also used for surveillance. Police accessed banking records, financial transactions, "Golden Tax," "Golden Finance," and "Golden Audit" data along with their own digital policing systems to sift through the finances of wide swaths of the population.

Officials began deploying surveillance technology against each other. China's former top security official was found to have wiretapped political opponents. And a former vice state security minister colluded with a businessman to leak tapes of a political competitor having sex with a mistress.

In June 2011, Jixi gained a new leader: Xu Zhaojun, a local party boss.

Months later, Li was named vice mayor of Jixi. He soon heard stories about Xu, his new boss.

In January 2012, Xu splurged on an extravagant family getaway to China's tropical Hainan Island, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars of public money on first-class tickets, lavish seafood dinners, and luxury suites, according to photos and receipts obtained by Li and seen by AP. They brought a maid, bought gold jewelry, and used the VIP airport terminal.

At first Li stayed silent. But Xu kept spending: Luxury cars. Clothes from Louis Vuitton. A high-roller trip to Vegas, with paid escorts and expensive watches.

Xu allegedly colluded with property developers to demolish an apartment complex, a culture center and a thriving shopping plaza for new construction, standing to earn millions in the process, documents show. More than 100 people complained.

But rather than investigate Xu, the Jixi authorities went after the protesters, and police said they were "strictly preventing" residents from complaining to the central government in Beijing, documents show.

The funds Li had earmarked for Jixi's surveillance apparatus was being turned on ordinary people. He was aghast.

"It only became clear after I became vice mayor," Li said. "From top to bottom, it's all corrupt."

Catch 'tigers and flies'

It all changed in 2012, when Xi Jinping became China's top leader.

Gifts of watches, cigarettes and high-end liquor were curbed. Private clubs shuttered, upscale restaurants

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closed. Banquets were canceled, red carpets rolled up, and thousands arrested.

Back in Jixi, Xu ordered more seizures: Investors wanted to privatize a funeral home. When staff discussed making formal complaints, Xu had some arrested.

Li knew the risks of reporting his boss were high. But in early 2013, Xi called on the party to catch "tigers and flies" in corruption — officials high-ranking and low.

Li gathered evidence: photos, memos, and piles of receipts. He typed out a letter about Xu, accusing his boss and his cronies of embezzling more than \$100 million. "They're not just greedy for the money of the living, but they also eat the money of the dead," he wrote.

The daring gambit backfired at first.

The party demoted Xu but didn't arrest him. Furious, Xu sought revenge, and Li found himself and his relatives the target of state scrutiny. Li's family was threatened, and his siblings were fired from their government jobs.

But Li's complaint against Xu had opened the floodgates, with accusations from others mounting. In August 2014, an official from Beijing asked Li for a meeting about Xu. They spoke well into the night.

Within a week, Xu was arrested. He was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Xu is in prison and could not be reached. Chinese authorities did not respond to a request for an interview with Xu.

Party officials asked Li if he wanted a new post. But he had lost faith in the party.

"I saw through the nature of the system," Li said. "So I quit."

Fox Hunt and Sky Net

In 2014 and 2015, the launch of operations Fox Hunt and Sky Net began ensnaring hundreds of former officials and their business partners abroad.

Beijing set up big data centers to track money and relationships and established an online portal to report "fleeing party members and government officials."

A playbook emerged: Trawl through police databases to find transactions or property that could be deemed suspicious. Identify friends and family who could be coerced to confess. Then announce corruption charges.

A leaked photo of the internal police software used to hunt officials suggests the moniker "Sky Net" was inspired by an American movie, "The Terminator," about a cyborg assassin that hunts humans.

At first, the U.S. government was open to cooperating with Beijing's requests for information and extradition, said Holden Triplett, FBI attache in Beijing from 2014 to 2017. But soon, the U.S. realized China's anti-corruption campaign was often about stifling dissent.

"It was such a low level of information, not even really evidence, it was not enough for us to take any action ever," Triplett told AP. "What they tended to focus on were things that frankly were threatening to the state and threatening to the party potentially, or somehow would make the party look bad."

In 2015, Washington complained that Chinese agents were flying to the U.S. and stalking targets without approval, including U.S. permanent residents. Agents brought night goggles from China, snapped photos and taped threatening messages on doors.

Marketing documents and a leaked copy of software used against officials fleeing abroad show how American technology enabled Beijing's playbook.

IBM marketed i2 to Chinese police to allow them to flag officials based on the value of their assets and that of their families, according to a slideshow whose metadata identifies it as being from 2018. They customized financial software to add a function for Chinese officials to "sign off" on orders.

i2 was also copied by an IBM Chinese reseller, Landasoft, which developed its own software that drew connections to flag "suspicious individuals," such as relatives connected to a targeted official. A leaked copy of Landasoft software showed one button was called "associated persons management." Another showed special functions for Valentine's Day and other holidays, when loved ones were more likely to call.

Landasoft systems flagged suspicious transactions and tracked suspected prostitutes or when two people of the opposite gender booked the same hotel room. Landasoft did not respond to a request for comment.

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Monitoring and threatening family was key to getting back anyone who had fled.

"A fugitive is like a kite," said Li Gongjing, a captain in the economic crime investigation division of the Shanghai police, in an interview with state media. "He may be abroad, but the string is in China, and he can always be found through his family."

Fear and loathing in the Communist Party

After Li quit the party, auditors trawled through his finances — usual practice for departing officials. Three years later, in 2017, they declared him clean.

The next year, Xi removed term limits, allowing him to rule for life. He used the anti-corruption campaign to sideline rivals and eliminate opposition.

Soon, even those who were hunting other officials fell victim to the government.

In 2018, Chinese police official Meng Hongwei was detained in Beijing, abruptly ending a two-year term as Interpol president during which the international policing organization issued hundreds of Red Notices requested by China. Red Notices alert global law enforcement to look out for a criminal suspect, upon request of a member country, but Interpol has spent years trying to prevent abuse of the system for hunting down political asylum-seekers.

In February 2020, agents came for Li's friend and former deputy, district chief Kong Lingbao, who had criticized Beijing's censorship of key information in the COVID-19 pandemic. A rival secretly recorded Kong saying during a private dinner that he could no longer work for the party. Kong was summoned to the local discipline inspection office and never came out: he was being investigated for "inappropriate remarks".

Kong's arrest prompted a friend to ring Li in Korea and warn him. That July, Chinese authorities opened an investigation into Li.

A month later, Li told The Epoch Times, a dissident Chinese publication, that he had quit the party, and portrayed himself as a dissident. He says he did not know he was under investigation at the time.

A week after the interview was published, strangers stalked Li at the unveiling of a sculpture dedicated to pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, asking menacing questions and tailing him by car. Agents identified the address of one of his safe houses.

In early September, the party publicly accused Li of embezzling "huge amounts" of state funds, paying money for sex and fleeing abroad. It was "only a matter of time", authorities declared, before Li would be arrested.

"We advise all corrupt officials who have fled abroad, including Li Chuanliang, that no matter how cunning a fox is, it cannot escape the eyes of the hunter," it said.

Official statements and interviews with four people familiar with Li's case show Xi and the central government got directly involved after Li spoke out.

Beijing tapped phones, seized assets and installed cameras outside the homes of friends and family. Some detained were denied surgery or other medical care, even those recovering from heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses. Li's aunt was released from a hospital in a vegetative state with bruises on her head and all over her body. Even the Li family grave was dug up.

Li's friend, Kong, was sentenced to over a decade in prison for allegedly taking bribes. The party claimed he had watched porn and ignored his work, which they blamed for the spread of COVID in his district. Furious, Li kept speaking out.

In December 2020, a man from Shanghai posing as a private investigator approached Zheng Cunzhu, vice chairman of the dissident China Democracy Party. The man offered \$100,000 in bribes for information on Li and promised more if he obstructed Li's bid for asylum, Zheng said in an interview and a letter.

In February 2021, Li learned the Chinese government had asked Interpol to issue a Red Notice declaring to police worldwide that Li was a wanted man. Interpol retracted the Red Notice after Li filed a complaint.

Li began donning masks and hats in public and carrying multiple phones, wary of surveillance. He floated from safe house to safe house with Christians across the United States.

In October 2024, a Chinese court announced that Li was suspected of corruption totaling over 3.1 billion RMB, or roughly \$435 million. The government claimed they seized 1,021 properties, 38 vehicles, and 18 companies belonging to Li and charged his relatives and associates with crimes related to Li. The lawyers

who reviewed the case told AP there were serious anomalies with the charges.

Many of the lawyers Li has tried to hire were rejected, threatened, and put under surveillance. At least three were summoned by Chinese legal authorities. They were told Li's case was "political" and important to leaders from Beijing, and warned against speaking publicly, according to memos viewed by AP.

"Once you get to the point that you're criticizing the party, it's no holds barred," said Ryan Mitchell, a law professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "Resistance is punished."

'They wouldn't even show us the accusations'

In a courthouse in China, Li's friends and family faced legal proceedings tied to his corruption charges. A plainclothes officer outside stopped an AP reporter from taking photos, saying a "sensitive political case" was being heard.

"They didn't show any evidence. Instead, they told a story," one of the lawyers told AP, declining to be named because they were warned against speaking to the press. "They wouldn't even show us the accusations."

Authorities in Heilongjiang, where the proceedings were held, did not respond to a faxed request for comment.

Li is now cut off from friends and family, denied legal assistance and clueless even to the details of the charges against him. So he is once again resorting to speaking out — this time on YouTube.

Li acknowledges the situation seems hopeless. But he's pressing on.

"Why am I speaking up?" he said. "Today, it's me. Tomorrow, it might be you."

Tens of thousands ordered to flee flooding after torrential rain in Pacific Northwest

By CEDAR ATTANASIO and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. (AP) — Surging floodwaters turned farmland into vast pools, washed out bridges and stranded people Thursday, with evacuation orders issued for tens of thousands of Washington state residents and authorities hoping levees prevent far worse damage.

"The flooding levels we're looking at are potentially historic in nature, so we just want to emphasize how serious the situation is," Gov. Bob Ferguson said at a news briefing Thursday, one day after declaring a statewide emergency.

About 78,000 residents of a major agricultural region north of Seattle were ordered to evacuate the Skagit River's floodplain, officials said.

Along the river in Mount Vernon, teams knocked on doors in low-lying areas Thursday to inform them of evacuation notices, city authorities said.

Further north near the U.S.-Canada border, Sumas, Nooksack and Everson were evacuated after being inundated by flood waters, while the border crossing at Sumas was closed, according to Whatcom County. Sumas Mayor Bruce Bosch said much of the city has been "devastated" by the high waters just four years after a similar flood.

Over 12,000 customers in Washington were without electricity Thursday night, according to PowerOutage.us. Dozens of roads were inundated or washed out across the state, some of which had no detour or estimated time for reopening.

A mountainous section of U.S. 2 was closed due to rocks, trees and mud, while a large section of state Route 410 was closed because of water covering the roadway, according to the state transportation department.

Thursday night, California Gov. Gavin Newsom sent 150 fire and rescue crew members to help Washington. Heavy rain and flooding washed out at least three bridges in the mountains of northwestern Montana, where an emergency shelter opened in a church in the small town of Libby.

Flooding river breaks record

The Snohomish River surged nearly a foot (30 centimeters) higher than its record in the picturesque city

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on Thursday, while the Skagit River rose just shy of the previous record in the mountain town of Concrete Thursday morning, according to the National Water Prediction Service.

Water stopped just short of getting inside Mariah Brosa's raised riverfront home in Concrete, but the raging water still slapped debris against the home and totaled her fiancé's work car, she said.

"I didn't think it would come this high," she said.

While updated projections are lower than previous estimates, the river was still expected to crest above the record in Mount Vernon on Friday.

Flooding from the river has long plagued Mount Vernon, the largest city in the county with some 35,000 residents. Flooding in 2003 displaced hundreds of people.

A floodwall that protects downtown passed a major test in 2021, when the river crested near record levels. Water was at the foot of the floodwall as of late Thursday morning, Donovan said.

In nearby Burlington, officials hoped dikes and other systems would protect the community from catastrophic flooding, said Michael Lumpkin, with the police department.

Some are worried that older levees could fail.

Officials respond to flooding

Authorities across Washington state in recent days have rescued people from cars and homes after an atmospheric river soaked the region.

Helicopters rescued two families from the roofs of homes in Sumas on Thursday that had been flooded by about 15 feet (4.6 meters) of water, while the city's fire station had 3 feet (0.91 meters) of water, according to Frank Cain JR., battalion chief for Whatcom County Fire District 14.

In nearby Welcome, erosion from the floodwaters caused at least two houses to collapse into the Nooksack River, he said. No one was inside at the time.

Crews in Snohomish had rescued 33 people and several pets since Wednesday night, according to the Snohomish Regional Fire & Rescue.

In a football field in Snoqualmie, a herd of elk swam and waded through neck-high water.

East of Seattle, residents along Issaquah Creek used water pumps as rushing floodwaters filled yards Thursday morning. Yellow tape blocked off a hazardous area along the creek.

Issaquah resident Katy Bliss said her home's foundation was safe for now but that a pond had formed in her backyard. "It's still scary walking around," she said.

Amtrak suspended trains between Seattle and Vancouver.

A landslide blocked part of Interstate 90 east of Seattle, with photos showing vehicles trapped by tree trunks, branches, mud and standing water.

Climate change has been linked to some intense rainfall. Scientists say that without specific study they cannot directly link a single weather event to climate change, but in general it's responsible for more intense and more frequent extreme storms, droughts, floods and wildfires.

Another storm system is expected to bring more rain starting Sunday.

Kilmar Abrego Garcia freed from federal immigration detention on judge's order and returns home

By TRAVIS LOLLER, JOHN SEEWER and MARC LEVY Associated Press

PHILIPSBURG, Pa. (AP) — Kilmar Abrego Garcia was freed from immigration detention on a judge's order Thursday while he fights to stay in the U.S., handing a major victory to the immigrant whose wrongful deportation to a notorious prison in El Salvador made him a flashpoint of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown.

U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis in Maryland ordered Immigration and Customs Enforcement to let Abrego Garcia go immediately, writing that federal authorities had detained him again after his return to the United States without any legal basis.

Abrego Garcia returned to his home in Maryland wearing a white shirt and orange hat hours after his release at 5 p.m., the deadline the judge gave the government for an update on Abrego Garcia's release.

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He's lived for years in Maryland, where he has an American wife and child, since originally immigrating to the U.S. illegally as a teenager.

Abrego Garcia had been held at Moshannon Valley Processing Center about 115 miles (185 kilometers) northeast of Pittsburgh.

His attorney, Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg, said he's not sure what comes next, but he's prepared to defend his client against further deportation efforts.

"The government still has plenty of tools in their toolbox, plenty of tricks up their sleeve," Sandoval-Moshenberg said, adding he fully expects the government to again take steps to deport his client. "We're going to be there to fight to make sure there is a fair trial."

The Department of Homeland Security sharply criticized the judge's decision and vowed to appeal, calling the ruling "naked judicial activism" by a judge appointed during the Obama administration.

"This order lacks any valid legal basis, and we will continue to fight this tooth and nail in the courts," said Tricia McLaughlin, the department's assistant secretary.

Sandoval-Moshenberg said the judge made it clear that the government can't detain someone indefinitely without legal authority and that his client "has endured more than anyone should ever have to."

An immigration judge ruled in 2019 that Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran national, could not be deported to El Salvador because he faced danger from a gang that targeted his family. When he was mistakenly sent there in March, his case became a rallying point for those who oppose President Donald Trump's immigration enforcement actions.

A court later ordered his return to the United States. Since he cannot be removed to El Salvador, ICE has been seeking to deport him to a series of African countries. His federal suit claims the Trump administration is illegally using the removal process to punish Abrego Garcia for the public embarrassment caused by his deportation.

In her order releasing Abrego Garcia, Xinis wrote that federal authorities "did not just stonewall" the court, "They affirmatively misled the tribunal." The judge was referencing the successive list of four African countries that officials had sought to remove Abrego Garcia to, seemingly without commitments from those countries, as well as officials' affirmations that Costa Rica withdrew its offer to accept him, a claim later proven untrue.

"But Costa Rica had never wavered in its commitment to receive Abrego Garcia, just as Abrego Garcia never wavered in his commitment to resettle there," the judge wrote.

Xinis also rejected the government's argument that she lacked jurisdiction to intervene on a final removal order for Abrego Garcia, because she found no final order had been filed.

Separately, Abrego Garcia is asking an immigration court to reopen his case so he can seek asylum in the United States.

He is also criminally charged in Tennessee, where he has pleaded not guilty to human smuggling. He has asked the federal court to dismiss the case, arguing the prosecution is vindictive. His defense attorney in Tennessee, Sean Hecker, declined to comment.

A judge in that case has ordered an evidentiary hearing after previously finding some evidence that the charges "may be vindictive." The judge also noted several statements by Trump administration officials that "raise cause for concern," including a statement by Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche that seemed to suggest the Justice Department charged Abrego Garcia because he won his wrongful deportation case.

Loller reported from Nashville and Seewer reported from Toledo, Ohio. Associated Press reporters Alanna Durkin Richer in Washington and Claudia Lauer in Philadelphia contributed to this report.

Gas explosion in San Francisco Bay Area damages homes, 6 taken to hospitals

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A gas explosion set off a major fire in a San Francisco Bay Area neighborhood on Thursday after obliterating at least one home, blowing out windows and shaking nearby houses. Six people were taken to hospitals for injuries, fire officials said.

Dramatic video footage showed a home in the Hayward area sitting under a blue sky when it suddenly exploded, spewing jagged wood and other debris into the air as smoke billowed.

Brittany Maldonado, who lives across the street from the home, was in her bedroom with her husband when she heard the blast.

"Boxes fell over and everything shook. We thought someone had just flown off the freeway and their car was in our living room," she said. "It was like someone had just launched a bomb."

Then they looked at the Nest doorbell cam footage and saw their neighbor's home blowing up.

Alameda County Deputy Fire Chief Ryan Nishimoto said he did not know if those injured were workers or residents, but he said three people were immediately sent to a hospital due to their injuries and three others who were sent had more minor injuries.

Three structures on two separate lots were severely damaged, said Alameda County Deputy Fire Chief Ryan Nishimoto. Some of the 75 firefighters who responded had to back off momentarily when they felt electric shocks from power lines that had fallen on the site.

The neighborhood of single-level homes with tidy small lawns and some businesses near two freeways had been undergoing construction work for wider sidewalks and bike lanes.

The explosion occurred in the unincorporated community of Ashland, near the city of Hayward. The city is home to about 160,000 residents in the East Bay, 15 miles (24 km) south of Oakland.

The National Transportation Safety Board said Thursday it is sending a team to investigate.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. was alerted around 7:35 a.m. that a construction crew — not with the utility — had damaged an underground gas line. Utility workers arrived to isolate the damaged line, but gas was leaking from various locations.

Workers stopped the flow of gas at 9:25 a.m., and the explosion followed shortly afterward.

Gas was flowing for two hours but the explosion happened 10 minutes after the line was shut off, PG&E spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian confirmed. She said it took time to isolate the line and stop the flow of gas.

The doorbell video showed a large excavator being used to dig in front of the home that exploded as a worker stood nearby.

Within moments, an explosion and flames blew out the walls and the roof of the home. People nearby appeared to be dazed for a few seconds, before running toward the home to search for any victims. Several workers lifted a large piece of debris from where it landed near the excavator.

Sirens could be heard in the distance as police arrived at the scene as flames began to spread at the site of the demolished building.

Trump signs executive order to block state AI regulations

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

President Donald Trump signed an executive order Thursday aimed at blocking states from crafting their own regulations for artificial intelligence, saying the burgeoning industry is at risk of being stifled by a patchwork of onerous rules while in a battle with Chinese competitors for supremacy.

Members of Congress from both parties, as well as civil liberties and consumer rights groups, have pushed for more regulations on AI, saying there is not enough oversight for the powerful technology.

But Trump told reporters in the Oval Office that "there's only going to be one winner" as nations race to dominate artificial intelligence, and China's central government gives its companies a single place to go for government approvals.

"We have the big investment coming, but if they had to get 50 different approvals from 50 different states, you can forget it because it's impossible to do," Trump said.

The executive order directs the Attorney General to create a new task force to challenge state laws, and directs the Commerce Department to draw up a list of problematic regulations.

It also threatens to restrict funding from a broadband deployment program and other grant programs to states with AI laws.

David Sacks, a venture capitalist with extensive AI investments who is leading Trump's policies on cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence, said the Trump administration would only push back on "the most onerous examples of state regulation" but would not oppose "kid safety" measures.

What states have proposed

Four states — Colorado, California, Utah and Texas — have passed laws that set some rules for AI across the private sector, according to the International Association of Privacy Professionals.

Those laws include limiting the collection of certain personal information and requiring more transparency from companies.

The laws are in response to AI that already pervades everyday life. The technology helps make consequential decisions for Americans, including who gets a job interview, an apartment lease, a home loan and even certain medical care. But research has shown that it can make mistakes in those decisions, including by prioritizing a particular gender or race.

States' more ambitious AI regulation proposals require private companies to provide transparency and assess the possible risks of discrimination from their AI programs.

Beyond those more sweeping rules, many states have regulated parts of AI: barring the use of deep-fakes in elections and to create nonconsensual porn, for example, or putting rules in place around the government's own use of AI.

A winter storm chills Gaza and floods tent camps, exposing aid failures

By WAFAA SHURAF, BASSEM MROUE, and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Rains drenched Gaza's tent camps and dropping temperatures chilled Palestinians huddling inside them Thursday as winter storm Byron descended on the war-battered territory, showing how two months of a ceasefire have failed to sufficiently address the spiraling humanitarian crisis there.

Families found their possessions and food supplies soaked inside their tents. Children's sandaled feet disappeared under opaque brown water that flooded the camps, running knee deep in some places. Dirt roads turned to mud. Piles of garbage and sewage cascaded like waterfalls.

"We have been drowned. I don't have clothes to wear and we have no mattresses left," said Um Salman Abu Qenas, a displaced mother in a Khan Younis tent camp. She said that her family couldn't sleep the night before, because of the water in the tent.

Aid groups say not enough shelter materials are getting into Gaza during the truce. Figures recently released by Israel's military suggest it hasn't met the ceasefire stipulation of allowing 600 trucks of aid into Gaza a day, though Israel disputes that finding.

"Cold, overcrowded, and unsanitary environments heighten the risk of illness and infection," the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said on X. "This suffering could be prevented by unhindered humanitarian aid, including medical support and proper shelter."

Rains wreak havoc

Sabreen Qudeeh, also in the Khan Younis camp, in a squalid area known as Muwasi, said that her family woke up to rain leaking from their tent's ceiling and water from the street soaking their mattresses.

"My little daughters were screaming," she said.

Ahmad Abu Taha, also living in the camp, said there wasn't a tent that escaped the flooding. "Conditions are very bad, we have old people, displaced, and sick people inside this camp," he said.

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Floods in south-central Israel trapped more than a dozen people in their cars, according to Hebrew media. Israel's rescue services, MDA, said that two young girls were slightly injured when a tree fell on their school.

The contrasting scenes with Gaza made clear how profoundly the Israel-Hamas war had damaged the territory, destroying the majority of homes. Gaza's population of around 2 million is almost entirely displaced, and most people live in vast tent camps stretching along the coast, or set up among the shells of damaged buildings without adequate flooding infrastructure and with cesspits dug near tents as toilets.

At least three buildings in Gaza City already damaged by Israeli bombardment during the war partially collapsed under the rain, Palestinian Civil Defense said. It warned people not to stay inside damaged buildings, saying they too could fall down on top of them.

The agency also said that since the storm began, they have received more than 2,500 distress calls from people across Gaza whose tents and shelters were damaged.

With buckets and mops, Palestinians laboriously scooped water out of their tents.

Aliaa Bahtiti said her 8-year-old son "was soaked overnight, and in the morning he had turned blue, sleeping on water." Her tent floor had an inch of water on it "We cannot buy food, covers, towels, or sheets to sleep on."

Baraka Bhar was caring for her 3-month-old twins inside her tent as the rain poured outside. One of the twins has hydrocephalus, a build-up of fluids in the brain.

"Our tents are worn out ... and they leak rain water," she said. "We should not lose our children this winter."

Not enough aid

Aid groups say that Israel isn't allowing enough aid into Gaza to begin rebuilding the territory after years of war.

Under the agreement, Israel agreed to comply with aid stipulations from an earlier January truce, which specified that it allow 600 trucks of aid each day into Gaza, It maintains it's doing so, but The Associated Press found that some of its own figures call that into question.

The January truce also specified that Israel let in a number of caravans and tents. No caravans have yet entered Gaza during the ceasefire, said Tania Hary, executive director of Gisha, an Israeli group advocating for Palestinians' right to freedom of movement.

The Israeli military body in charge of coordinating aid to Gaza, called COGAT, said on Dec. 9 it had "lately" let 260,000 tents and tarpaulins into Gaza and more than 1,500 trucks of blankets and warm clothing.

Shelter Cluster, an international coalition of aid providers led by the Norwegian Refugee Council, sets the number lower. It says the U.N. and international nongovernmental organizations have gotten 15,590 tents into Gaza since the truce began, and other countries have sent about 48,000. Many of the tents aren't properly insulated, it says.

Amjad al-Shawa, Gaza chief of the Palestinian NGO Network, told Al Jazeera on Thursday that only a fraction of the 300,000 tents needed had entered Gaza. He said that Palestinians were in dire need of warmer winter clothes and accused Israel of blocking the entry of water pumps to help clear flooded shelters..

"All international sides should take the responsibility regarding conditions in Gaza," he said. "There is real danger for people in Gaza at all levels."

Khaled Mashaal, a Hamas leader, said in an interview with Al Jazeera that Gaza needs the rehabilitation of hospitals, the entry of heavy machinery to remove rubble, and the opening of the Rafah crossing — which remains closed after Israel said last week it would shortly open.

COGAT didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on the claims that Israel wasn't allowing water pumps or heavy machinery into Gaza

Amnesty accuses Hamas of crimes against humanity

Amnesty International said in a report released Thursday that Hamas and other militant groups committed crimes against humanity in the Oct. 7, 2023 attack on southern Israel that triggered the war in Gaza.

In the 173-page report, Amnesty pointed to what it found to be widespread and systematic killing of civilians in the attack, as well as torture, hostage-taking and sexual abuse.

In the attack, Hamas fighters and other militants rampaged through southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking around 250 others hostage. Israel's campaign in Gaza has since killed more than 70,300 Palestinians, roughly half of them women and children, according to the territory's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between militants and civilians in its count. Last year, Amnesty accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, a charge Israel denied.

Amnesty said it conducted interviews with 70 people, including 17 survivors of the attack and family members of some of those killed. It also reviewed hundreds of open-source videos and photos from the day of the attack.

Contrary to Hamas claims it was targeting the military, it said, the attack was intentionally "directed against a civilian population" and met international law standards for crimes against humanity.

It said sexual assaults were also committed, though it said it could not reach a conclusion on their "scope or scale." It interviewed one man who testified he was raped by armed men at the Nova music festival, as well as a therapist who said she provided intensive treatment to three other survivors of rape.

Hamas condemned the report, saying it "echoed false claims" by Israel.

Israeli Foreign Minister spokesperson Oren Marmorstein derided the report in a posting on X, saying it took more than two years for Amnesty to address the attack "and even now its report falls far short of reflecting the full scope of Hamas's horrific atrocities."

Indiana Republicans defy Trump and reject his House redistricting push in the state

By ISABELLA VOLMERT, OBED LAMY and TOM BEAUMONT Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Indiana's Republican-led Senate decisively rejected a redrawn congressional map Thursday that would have favored their party, defying months of pressure from President Donald Trump and delivering a stark setback to the White House ahead of next year's midterm elections.

The vote was overwhelmingly against the proposed redistricting, with more Republicans opposing than supporting the measure, signaling the limits of Trump's influence even in one of the country's most conservative states.

Trump has been urging Republicans nationwide to redraw their congressional maps in an unusual campaign to help the party maintain its thin majority in the House of Representatives. Although Texas, Missouri, Ohio and North Carolina went along, Indiana did not — despite cajoling and insults from the president and the possibility of primary challenges.

"The federal government should not dictate by threat or other means what should happen in our states," said Spencer Deery, one of the Republican senators who voted no on Thursday.

When the proposal failed 31-19, cheers could be heard inside the chamber as well as shouts of "thank you!" The debate had been shadowed by the possibility of violence, and some lawmakers have received threats.

Trump tried to brush off the defeat, telling reporters in the Oval Office that he "wasn't working on it very hard" despite his personal involvement in the pressure campaign.

Republicans could have erased two Democratic districts

The proposed map was designed to give Republicans control of all nine of Indiana's congressional seats, up from the seven they currently hold. It would have effectively erased Indiana's two Democrat-held districts by splitting Indianapolis among four districts that extend into rural areas, reshaping U.S. Rep. André Carson's safe district in the city. It would have also eliminated the northwest Indiana district held by U.S. Rep. Frank Mrvan.

District boundaries are usually adjusted once a decade after a new census. But Trump has described redistricting as an existential issue for the party as Democrats push to regain power in Washington.

"If Republicans will not do what is necessary to save our Country, they will eventually lose everything to the Democrats," Trump wrote on social media the night before the vote.

The president said anyone who voted against the plan should lose their seats. Half of Indiana senators

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are up for reelection next year, and the conservative organization Turning Point Action had pledged to fund campaigns against them.

David McIntosh, president of Club for Growth, which had backed redistricting, said the vote allowed disloyal Republicans to "stick their finger in the eye of the president of the United States."

Former Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels praised senators for "courageous principled leadership" in rejecting the new map.

A Republican who has vocally criticized Trump, Daniels said the outcome was "a major black eye for him and all the Washington groups that piled in, spent money, blustered and threatened." He added that "this thing rubbed our state the wrong way and Republicans in our state very wrong from the jump."

Redistricting fails despite White House pressure

Inside the state Senate chamber, Democratic lawmakers spoke out against redistricting ahead of the vote.

"Competition is healthy my friends," Sen. Fady Qaddoura said. "Any political party on earth that cannot run and win based on the merits of its ideas is unworthy of governing."

In the hallways outside, redistricting opponents chanted "Vote no!" and "Fair maps!" while holding signs with slogans like "Losers cheat."

Three times over the fall, Vice President JD Vance met with Republican senators — twice in Indianapolis and once in the White House — to urge their support. Trump joined a conference call with senators on Oct. 17 to make his own 15-minute pitch.

Behind the scenes, James Blair, Trump's deputy White House chief of staff for political affairs, was in regular touch with members, as were other groups supporting the effort such as the Heritage Foundation and Turning Point USA.

"The administration made a full-court press," said Republican Sen. Andy Zay, who was on the phone with White House aides sometimes multiple times per week, despite his commitment as a yes vote.

Across the country, mid-cycle redistricting so far has resulted in nine more congressional seats that Republicans believe they can win and six more congressional seats that Democrats think they can win. However, some of the new maps are facing litigation.

In Utah, a judge imposed new districts that could allow Democrats to win a seat, saying Republican lawmakers violated voter-backed standards against gerrymandering.

Republicans were split over plan

Despite Trump's push, support for gerrymandering in Indiana's Senate was uncertain. A dozen of the 50 senators had not publicly committed to a stance ahead of the vote.

Republican Sen. Greg Goode signaled his displeasure with the redistricting plan before voting no. He said some of his constituents objected to seeing their county split up or paired with Indianapolis. He expressed "love" for Trump but criticized what he called "over-the-top pressure" from inside and outside the state.

Sen. Michael Young, another Republican, said the stakes in Washington justify redistricting, as Democrats are only a few seats away from flipping control of the U.S. House in 2026. "I know this election is going to be very close," he said.

Republican Sen. Mike Gaskill, the redistricting legislation's sponsor, showed Senators maps of congressional districts around the country, including several focused on Democratic-held seats in New England and Illinois. He argued other states gerrymander and Indiana Republicans should play by the same rules.

The bill cleared its first hurdle Monday with a 6-3 Senate committee vote, although one Republican joined Democrats in opposing it and a few others signaled they might vote against the final version. The state House passed the proposal last week, with 12 Republicans siding with Democrats in opposition.

Among them was state Rep. Ed Clere, who said state troopers responded to a hoax message claiming a pipe bomb outside his home Wednesday evening. Indiana state police said "numerous others" received threats but wouldn't offer details about an ongoing investigation.

In an interview, Clere said these threats were the inevitable result of Trump's pressure campaign and a "winner-take-all mentality."

"Words have consequences," Clere said.

The man accused of killing Charlie Kirk appears in court for 1st time as a judge weighs media access

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

PROVO, Utah (AP) — The Utah man charged with killing Charlie Kirk made his first in-person court appearance Thursday as his attorneys pushed to further limit media access in the high-profile criminal case.

Prosecutors have charged Tyler Robinson with aggravated murder in the Sept. 10 shooting of the conservative activist on the Utah Valley University campus in Orem, just a few miles north of the Provo courthouse. They plan to seek the death penalty.

Robinson, 22, arrived amid heavy security, shackled at the waist, wrists and ankles and wearing a dress shirt, tie and slacks.

He smiled at his parents and brother sitting in the front row. His mother teared up after he walked in and clutched a tissue throughout the hearing while his father took notes. Robinson had previously appeared before the court via video or audio feed from jail.

Early in the proceedings, state District Court Judge Tony Graf briefly stopped a media livestream of the hearing and ordered the camera be moved after Robinson's attorneys said the stream showed the defendant's shackles in violation of a courtroom order.

Graf said he would terminate future broadcasts if there were further violations of the order issued in October, which bars media from showing images of Robinson in restraints or anywhere in the courtroom except sitting at the defense table.

"This court takes this very seriously," Graf said. "While the court believes in openness and transparency, it needs to be balanced with the constitutional rights of all parties in this case."

The warning comes as Graf has been weighing the public's right to know details about the case against concerns by Robinson's attorneys that the swarm of media attention could interfere with a fair trial.

Robinson's legal team and the Utah County Sheriff's Office have asked to ban cameras in the courtroom, but Graf has not yet ruled on the request.

Coalitions of national and local news organizations, including The Associated Press, are fighting to preserve media access in the case.

Graf held a closed hearing on Oct. 24 in which attorneys discussed Robinson's courtroom attire and security protocols. Under a subsequent ruling by the judge, Robinson is allowed to wear street clothes during pretrial hearings but must be physically restrained due to security concerns. Graf also prohibited filming or photographing Robinson's restraints after his attorneys argued widespread images of him shackled and in jail clothing could prejudice potential jurors.

Media attorney David Reymann urged Graf on Thursday to let the news organizations weigh in on any future requests for closed hearings or other limitations. He said media organizations want "limited party status" in the case.

Staci Visser, one of Robinson's lawyers, pushed back: "We don't want the chaos that is out in the media in this courtroom."

Several college students who said they witnessed Kirk's assassination attended Thursday's hearing.

Zack Reese, a Utah Valley University student and "big Charlie Kirk fan," said he had skepticism about Robinson's arrest and was seeking answers. Reese has family in southwestern Utah, where the Robinsons are from, and said he believes they're a good family.

Brigham Young University student William Brown, who said he was about 10 feet from Kirk when he was shot, said he felt overwhelmed seeing Robinson walk into the courtroom.

"I witnessed a huge event, and my brain is still trying to make sense of it," Brown said. "I feel like being here helps it feel more real than surreal."

Lawyers for the media wrote in recent filings that an open court "safeguards the integrity of the fact-finding process" while fostering public confidence in judicial proceedings. Criminal cases in the U.S. have long been open to the public, which the attorneys argued is proof that trials can be conducted fairly without restricting reporters.

Kirk's widow, Erika Kirk, has called for full transparency, saying, "We deserve to have cameras in there." Her husband was an ally of President Donald Trump who worked to steer young voters toward conservatism.

Robinson's legal team says pretrial publicity reaches as far as the White House, with Trump announcing soon after Robinson's arrest, "With a high degree of certainty, we have him," and "I hope he gets the death penalty."

Defense attorney Kathy Nester has raised concerns that digitally altered versions of Robinson's initial court photo have spread widely, creating misinformation. Some altered images show Robinson crying or having an outburst in court, which did not happen.

Robinson is due in court again in January. A preliminary hearing, where prosecutors will lay out their case against him, is tentatively scheduled for the week of May 18.

NASCAR settles federal antitrust case, gives all teams the permanent charters they wanted

By JENNA FRYER AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Michael Jordan and NASCAR chairman Jim France stood side-by-side on the steps of a federal courthouse as if they were old friends following a stunning settlement Thursday of a bruising antitrust case in which the Basketball Hall of Famer was the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit accusing the top racing series in the United States of being a monopolistic bully.

The duo was flanked by three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin and Curtis Polk, the co-owners of 23XI Racing with Jordan, Front Row Motorsports owner Bob Jenkins and over a dozen lawyers as they celebrated the end to an eight-day trial that ultimately led NASCAR to cave and grant all its teams the permanent charters they wanted.

"Like two competitors, obviously we tried to get as much done in each other's favor," Jordan said, towering over the 81-year-old France. "I've said this from Day 1: The only way this sport is going to grow is we have to find some synergy between the two entities. I think we've gotten to that point, unfortunately it took 16 months to get here, but I think level heads have gotten us to this point where we can actually work together and grow this sport. I am very proud about that and I think Jim feels the same."

France concurred.

"I do feel the same and we can get back to focusing on what we really love, and that's racing, and we spent a lot of time not really focused on that so much as we needed to be," France said. "I feel like we made a very good decision here together and we have a big opportunity to continue growing the sport."

A charter is the equivalent of the franchise model used in other sports and in NASCAR it guarantees 36 teams a spot in every top-level Cup Series race and a fixed portion of the revenue stream. The system was implemented in 2016 and teams have argued for over two years that the charters needed to be made permanent — they had been revokable by NASCAR — and the revenue sharing had to change.

NASCAR, founded and privately owned by the Florida-based France family, never considered making the charters permanent. Instead, after two-plus years of bitter negotiations, NASCAR in September 2024 presented a "take-it-or leave-it" final offer that gave teams until end of that day to sign the 112-page document.

23XI and Front Row refused and sued, while 13 other organizations signed but testimony in court revealed many did so "with a gun to our head" because the threat of losing the charters would have put them out of business.

Jordan testified early in the trial that as a new team owner to NASCAR — 23XI launched in 2021 — he felt he had the strength to challenge NASCAR. Eight days of testimony went badly for NASCAR, which when it began to present its case seemed focused more on mitigating damages than it did on proving it did not violate antitrust laws.

Although terms of the settlement were not released — NASCAR was in the process of scheduling a Thursday afternoon call with all teams to discuss the revenue-sharing model moving forward — both Jor-

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dan and NASCAR said that charters will now be permanent for all teams. 23XI and Front Row will receive their combined six charters back for 2026.

An economist previously testified that NASCAR owes 23XI and Front Row \$364.7 million in damages, and that NASCAR shorted 36 chartered teams \$1.06 billion from 2021-24.

"Today's a good day," Jordan said from the front-row seat he's occupied since the trial began Dec. 1 as he waited for the settlement announcement.

U.S. District Judge Kenneth Bell, who had presided over two days of failed settlement talks before the trial began, echoed the sentiment. Bell told the jury that sometimes parties at trial have to see how the evidence unfolds to come to the wisdom of a settlement.

"I wish we could've done this a few months ago," Bell said in court. "I believe this is great for NASCAR. Great for the future of NASCAR. Great for the entity of NASCAR. Great for the teams and ultimately great for the fans."

The settlement came after two days of testimony by France and the Wednesday night public release of a letter from Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris calling for NASCAR Commissioner Steve Phelps to be removed.

The discovery process revealed internal NASCAR communications in which Phelps called Hall of Fame team owner Richard Childress a "redneck" and other derogatory names; Bass Pro sponsors Childress' teams, as well as some others, and Morris is an ardent NASCAR supporter.

Childress gave fiery testimony earlier this week over his reluctance to sign the charter agreement because it was unfair to the teams, which have been bleeding money and begged NASCAR for concessions. Letters from Hall of Fame team owners Joe Gibbs, Rick Hendrick, Jack Roush and Roger Penske were introduced in which they pleaded with France for charters to become permanent; France testified he was not moved by the men he considers good friends.

Hendrick and Penske, who were both scheduled to testify Friday, expressed gratitude that a settlement had been reached. Penske called it "tremendous news" and said it cleared the way to continue growing the series.

"Millions of loyal NASCAR fans and thousands of hardworking people rely on our industry, and today's resolution allows all of us to focus on what truly matters — the future of our sport," Hendrick said. "This moment presents an important opportunity to strengthen our relationships and recommit ourselves to building a collaborative and prosperous future for all stakeholders. I'm incredibly optimistic about what's ahead."

The settlement came abruptly on the ninth day of the trial. Bell opened expecting to hear motions but both sides asked for a private conference in chambers. When they emerged, Bell ordered an hourlong break for the two sides to confer. That turned into two hours, all parties returned to the courtroom and Kessler announced an agreement had been reached.

"What all parties have always agreed on is a deep love for the sport and a desire to see it fulfill its full potential," NASCAR and the plaintiffs said in a joint statement. "This is a landmark moment, one that ensures NASCAR's foundation is stronger, its future is brighter and its possibilities are greater."

Justice Department again fails to re-indict New York Attorney General Letitia James, AP sources say

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP) — A grand jury declined for a second time in a week to re-indict New York Attorney General Letitia James on Thursday in another major blow to the Justice Department's efforts to prosecute the president's political opponents.

The repeated failures amounted to a stunning rebuke of prosecutors' bid to resurrect a criminal case President Donald Trump pressured them to bring, and hinted at a growing public leering of the administration's retribution campaign.

A grand jury rejection is an unusual circumstance in any case, but is especially stinging for a Justice

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Department that has been steadfast in its determination to seek revenge against Trump foes like James and former FBI Director James Comey. On separate occasions, citizens have heard the government's evidence against James and have come away underwhelmed, unwilling to rubber-stamp what prosecutors have attempted to portray as a clear-cut criminal case.

A judge threw out the original indictments against James and Comey in November, ruling that the prosecutor who presented to the grand jury, Lindsey Halligan, was illegally appointed U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia.

The Justice Department asked a grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia, to return an indictment Thursday after a different grand jury in Norfolk last week refused to do so. The failure to secure an indictment was confirmed by two people familiar with the matter who were not authorized to publicly discuss the case and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

It was not immediately clear Thursday whether prosecutors would try for a third time to seek a new indictment. One of the people familiar with the matter said prosecutors were still evaluating next steps and stood behind the charges.

A lawyer for James, who has denied any wrongdoing, said the "unprecedented rejection makes even clearer that this case should never have seen the light of day."

"This case already has been a stain on this Department's reputation and raises troubling questions about its integrity," defense attorney Abbe Lowell said in a statement. "Any further attempt to revive these discredited charges would be a mockery of our system of justice."

James, a Democrat who infuriated Trump after his first term with a lawsuit alleging that he built his business empire on lies about his wealth, was initially charged with bank fraud and making false statements to a financial institution in connection with a home purchase in 2020.

During the sale, she signed a standard document called a "second home rider" in which she agreed to keep the property primarily for her "personal use and enjoyment for at least one year," unless the lender agreed otherwise. Rather than using the home as a second residence, prosecutors say James rented it out to a family of three, allowing her to obtain favorable loan terms not available for investment properties.

Both the James and Comey cases were brought shortly after the administration installed Halligan, a former Trump lawyer with no prior prosecutorial experience, as U.S. attorney amid public calls from the president to take action against his political opponents.

But U.S. District Judge Cameron McGowan Currie threw out the cases last month over the unconventional mechanism that the Trump administration employed to appoint Halligan. The judge dismissed them without prejudice, allowing the Justice Department to try to file the charges again.

Halligan had been named as a replacement for Erik Siebert, a veteran prosecutor in the office and interim U.S. attorney who resigned in September amid Trump administration pressure to file charges against both Comey and James. He stepped aside after Trump told reporters he wanted Siebert "out."

The White House is moving forward with the formal confirmation process for Halligan, and she recently returned her nominee questionnaire to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which vets all U.S. attorney picks. But her nomination faces significant procedural obstacles.

James' lawyers separately argued the case was a vindictive prosecution brought to punish the Trump critic who spent years investigating and suing the Republican president and won a staggering judgment in a lawsuit alleging he defrauded banks by overstating the value of his real estate holdings on financial statements. The fine was later tossed out by a higher court, but both sides are appealing.

Comey was separately charged with lying to Congress in 2020. Another federal judge has complicated the Justice Department's efforts to seek a new indictment against Comey, temporarily barring prosecutors from accessing computer files belonging to Daniel Richman, a close Comey friend and Columbia University law professor whom prosecutors see as a central player in any potential case against the former FBI director.

Prosecutors moved Tuesday to quash that order, calling Richman's request for the return of his files a "strategic tool to obstruct the investigation and potential prosecution." They said the judge had overstepped her bounds by ordering Richman's property returned to him and said the ruling had impeded their ability

to proceed with a case against Comey.

Crypto mogul Do Kwon sentenced to 15 years in prison for \$40 billion stablecoin fraud

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Onetime cryptocurrency mogul Do Kwon was sentenced Thursday to 15 years in prison after a \$40 billion crash revealed his crypto ecosystem to be a fraud. Victims said the 34-year-old financial technology whiz weaponized their trust to convince them that the investment — secretly propped up by cash infusions — was safe.

Kwon, a Stanford graduate known by some as “the cryptocurrency king,” apologized after listening as victims — one in court and others by telephone — described the scam’s toll: wiping out nest eggs, depleting charities and wrecking lives. One told the judge in a letter that he contemplated suicide after his father lost his retirement money in the scheme.

Judge Paul A. Engelmayer said at a daylong sentencing hearing in Manhattan federal court that the government’s recommendation of 12 years in prison was “unreasonably lenient” and that the defense’s request for five years was “utterly unthinkable and wildly unreasonable.” Kwon faced a maximum sentence of 25 years in prison.

“Your offense caused real people to lose \$40 billion in real money, not some paper loss,” Engelmayer told Kwon, who sat at the defense table in a yellow jail suit. The judge called it “a fraud on an epic, generational scale” and said Kwon had an “almost mystical hold” on investors and caused incalculable “human wreckage.”

More than the combined losses in FTX and OneCoin cases

Kwon pleaded guilty in August to fraud charges stemming from the collapse of Terraform Labs, the Singapore-based firm he co-founded in 2018. The loss exceeded the combined losses from FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried and OneCoin co-founder Karl Sebastian Greenwood’s frauds, prosecutors said. Engelmayer estimated there may have been a million victims.

Terraform Labs had touted its TerraUSD as a reliable “stablecoin” — a kind of currency typically pegged to stable assets to prevent drastic fluctuations in prices. But prosecutors say it was an illusion backed by outside cash infusions that came crumbling down after it plunged far below its \$1 peg. The crash devastated investors in TerraUSD and its floating sister currency, Luna, triggering “a cascade of crises that swept through cryptocurrency markets.”

Kwon tried to rebuild Terraform Labs in Singapore before fleeing to the Balkans on a false passport, prosecutors said. He’s been locked up since his March 2023 arrest in Montenegro. He was credited for 17 months he spent in jail there before being extradited to the U.S.

Kwon agreed to forfeit over \$19 million as part of his plea deal. His lawyers argued his conduct stemmed not from greed, but hubris and desperation. Engelmayer rejected his request to serve his sentence in his native South Korea, where he also faces prosecution and where his wife and 4-year-old daughter live.

“I have spent almost every waking moment of the last few years thinking of what I could have done different and what I can do now to make things right,” Kwon told Engelmayer. Hearing from victims, he said, was “harrowing and reminded me again of the great losses that I have caused.”

Victims say losses ruined their lives, harmed charities

One victim, speaking by telephone, said his wife divorced him, his sons had to skip college, and he had to move back to Croatia to live with his parents after TerraUSD’s crash evaporated his family’s life savings. Another said he has to “live with the guilt” of persuading his in-laws and hundreds of nonprofit organizations to invest.

Stanislav Trofimchuk said his family’s investment plummeted from \$190,000 to \$13,000 — “17 years of our life, gone” during what he described as “two weeks of sheer terror.”

Chauncey St. John, speaking in court, said some nonprofits he worked with lost more than \$2 million and a church group lost about \$900,000. He and his wife are saddled with debt and his in-laws have been

forced to work well past their planned retirement, he said.

Nevertheless, St. John said, he forgives Kwon and "I pray to God to have mercy on his soul."

A prosecutor read excerpts from some of more than 300 letters submitted by victims, including a person identified only by initials who lost nearly \$11,400 while juggling bills and trying to complete college. Kwon had made Terra seem like a safe place to stash savings, the person said.

"To some that is just a number on a page, but to me it was years of effort," the person wrote. "Watching it evaporate, literally overnight, was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life."

"What happened was not an accident. It was not a market event. It was deception," the person added, imploring the judge to "consider the human cost of this tragedy."

Kwon created an "illusion of resilience while covering up systemic failure," Assistant U.S. Attorney Sarah Mortazavi told Engelmayer. "This was fraud executed with arrogance, manipulation and total disregard for people."

Senate rejects extension of health care subsidies as costs are set to rise for millions of Americans

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Thursday rejected legislation to extend Affordable Care Act tax credits, essentially guaranteeing that millions of Americans will see a steep rise in costs at the beginning of the year.

As Republicans and Democrats have failed to find compromise, senators voted on two partisan bills instead that they knew would fail — the Democratic bill to extend the subsidies, and a Republican alternative that would have created new health savings accounts.

It was an unceremonious end to a monthslong effort by Democrats to prevent the COVID-19-era subsidies from expiring on Jan. 1, including a 43-day government shutdown that they forced over the issue.

Ahead of the votes, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York warned Republicans that if they did not vote to extend the tax credits, "there won't be another chance to act," before premiums rise for many people who buy insurance off the ACA marketplaces.

"Let's avert a disaster," Schumer said. "The American people are watching."

Republicans and Democrats never engaged in meaningful or high-level negotiations on a solution, even after a small group of centrist Democrats struck a deal with Republicans last month to end the shutdown in exchange for a vote. Most Democratic lawmakers opposed the move as many Republicans made clear that they wanted the tax credits to expire.

The deal raised hopes for a compromise on health care. But that quickly faded with a lack of any real bipartisan talks.

"We failed," said Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, one of four Republicans who voted for the Democratic bill, after the vote. "We've got to do better. We can't just say 'happy holidays, brace for next year.'"

A Republican alternative

The dueling Senate votes were the latest political messaging exercise in a Congress that has operated almost entirely on partisan terms, as Republicans pushed through a massive tax and spending cuts bill this summer using budget maneuvers that eliminated the need for Democratic votes. In September, Republicans tweaked Senate rules to push past a Democratic blockade of all of Trump's nominees.

On health care, Republicans similarly negotiated among themselves, without Democrats. The health savings accounts in the GOP bill that they eventually settled on would give money directly to consumers instead of to insurance companies, an idea that has been echoed by President Donald Trump.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said ahead of the vote that the Democrats' simple extension of the subsidies is "an attempt to disguise the real impact of Obamacare's spiraling health care costs."

But Democrats immediately rejected the GOP plan, saying that the accounts wouldn't be enough to cover costs for most consumers.

The Senate voted 51-48 not to move forward on the Democratic bill, with four Republicans -- Maine

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Sen. Susan Collins, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley and Alaska Sens. Murkowski and Dan Sullivan -- voting with Democrats. The legislation needed 60 votes to proceed, as did the Republican bill, which was also blocked on a 51-48 vote.

An intractable issue

The votes were the latest failed salvo in the debate over the Affordable Care Act, former President Barack Obama's signature law that Democrats passed along party lines in 2010 to expand access to insurance coverage.

Republicans have tried unsuccessfully since then to repeal or overhaul the law, arguing that health care is still too expensive. But they have struggled to find an alternative. In the meantime, Democrats have made the policy a central political issue in several elections, betting that the millions of people who buy health care on the government marketplaces want to keep their coverage.

"When people's monthly payments spike next year, they'll know it was Republicans that made it happen," Schumer said in November, while making clear that Democrats would not seek a compromise.

Even if they view it as a political win, the failed votes are a loss for Democrats who demanded an extension of the benefits during the shutdown — and for the millions of people facing premium increases on Jan. 1.

Maine Sen. Angus King, an independent who caucuses with Democrats, said the group tried to negotiate with Republicans after the shutdown ended. But, he said, the talks became unproductive when Republicans demanded language adding new limits for abortion coverage that were a "red line" for Democrats. He said Republicans were going to "own these increases."

House to try again

Republicans have used the looming expiration of the subsidies to renew their longstanding criticisms of the ACA, also called Obamacare, and to try, once more, to agree on what should be done.

In the House, Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has promised a vote next week on some type of health care legislation. Republicans weighed different options in a conference meeting on Wednesday, with no apparent consensus.

Murkowski and other Senate Republicans who want to extend the subsidies expressed hope that the House could find a way to do it. GOP leaders were considering bills that would not extend the tax credits, but some Republicans have launched longshot efforts to try to go around Johnson and force a vote.

"Hopefully some ideas emerge" before the new year, said Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who has been pushing his colleagues for a short-term extension.

"Real Americans are paying the price for this body not working together in the way it should," said Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, a Republican.

Republican moderates in the House who could have competitive reelection bids next year are pushing Johnson to find a way to extend the subsidies. But more conservative members want to see the law overhauled.

Rep. Kevin Kiley, R-Calif., has also been pushing for a short extension.

If they fail to act and health care costs go up, the approval rating for Congress "will get even lower," Kiley said.

Disney invests \$1B in OpenAI in deal to bring characters like Mickey Mouse to Sora AI video tool

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

Disney is investing \$1 billion in OpenAI and will bring characters such as Mickey Mouse, Cinderella and Luke Skywalker to the AI company's Sora video generation tool, in a licensing deal that the two companies announced on Thursday.

At the same time, Disney went after Google, demanding the tech company stop exploiting its copyrighted characters to train its AI systems.

The OpenAI agreement makes the Walt Disney Co. the first major content licensing partner for Sora, which uses generative artificial intelligence to create short videos.

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Under the three-year licensing deal, fans will be able to use Sora to generate and share videos based on more than 200 Disney, Marvel, Pixar and Star Wars characters.

AI video generators like Sora have wowed with their ability to quickly create realistic clips based merely on text prompts. But a flood of such videos on social media, including clips depicting celebrities and deceased public figures, has raised worries about "AI slop" crowding out human-created work alongside concerns about misinformation, deepfakes and copyright.

Disney and OpenAI said they are committed to responsible use of AI that protects the safety of users and the rights of creators.

"This agreement shows how AI companies and creative leaders can work together responsibly to promote innovation that benefits society, respect the importance of creativity, and help works reach vast new audiences," OpenAI CEO Sam Altman said.

Disney CEO Robert Iger said the deal will "extend the reach of our storytelling through generative AI, while respecting and protecting creators and their works."

As part of the deal, some user-generated Sora videos will be made available on the Disney+ streaming service.

Disney will also become a "major customer" of OpenAI and use its technology to build new products, tools, and services. It will also roll out ChatGPT for employees.

Children's advocates, however criticized the move. Josh Golin, executive director of Fairplay, said Disney's decision to partner with OpenAI "is a betrayal of countless children around the world who adore Mickey Mouse, Frozen, and Toy Story. OpenAI claims children are prohibited from using Sora, yet here they are luring young kids to their platform using some of their favorite characters." Disney, he added, is "aiding and abetting OpenAI's efforts to addict young children to its unsafe platform and products."

Also Thursday, Disney sent Google a cease and desist letter, demanding that the tech company stop using Disney content without permission to feed and train its AI models, including its Veo video generator and Imagen and Nano Banana image generators.

It has previously issued similar cease and desist letters to Meta and Character.AI and has filed litigation with NBCUniversal and Warner Bros. Discovery against AI image generator Midjourney and AI company Minimax.

"Well, we have been aggressive at protecting our IP, and we have gone after other companies that have not honored our IP, not respected our IP, not valued it. And this is another example of us doing just that," Iger said in an interview on CNBC's "Squawk on the Street." "We have been in conversation with Google, basically expressing our concerns about this. And, ultimately, because we didn't really make any progress, the conversations didn't bear fruit, we felt we had no choice but to send them a cease-and-desist."

Disney accused Google of "infringing Disney's copyrights on a massive scale," according to a copy of the letter dated Dec. 10 seen by The Associated Press. The letter included examples that it says Google's AI systems easily generated, such as characters from Star Wars, The Simpsons, Deadpool and The Lion King.

Google has also been "intentionally amplifying" the problem by making the infringing content available across its many channels including YouTube, Disney said.

Disney said Google hasn't taken any measures to mitigate the problem even though it has been raising the concerns for months. "Google's mass infringement of Disney's copyrighted works must stop," the letter said.

Google did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

Noem links the seizure of an oil tanker off Venezuela to US antidrug efforts

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem on Thursday linked the seizure of an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela to the Trump administration's counterdrug efforts in Latin America as tensions escalate with the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

Noem's assertion, which came during her testimony to the House Homeland Security Committee, provided the Republican administration's most thorough assessment so far of why it took control of the vessel on Wednesday. Incredibly unusual, the use of U.S. forces to seize a merchant ship was a sharp escalation in the administration's pressure campaign on Maduro, who has been charged with narcoterrorism in the United States.

Trump officials added to it Thursday by imposing sanctions on three of Maduro's nephews. The Venezuelan leader discussed the rising tensions with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday. The Kremlin said in a statement that Putin reaffirmed his support for Maduro's policy of "protecting national interests and sovereignty in the face of growing external pressure."

Asked to delineate the U.S. Coast Guard's role in the tanker seizure, Noem called it "a successful operation directed by the president to ensure that we're pushing back on a regime that is systematically covering and flooding our country with deadly drugs and killing our next generation of Americans."

Noem went on to lay out the "lethal doses of cocaine" she said had been kept from entering the U.S. as a result.

Asked Thursday whether U.S. operations in the region were about drugs or oil, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt also gave a bifurcated answer, saying the administration was "focused on doing many things in the Western Hemisphere." She noted that such seizures could continue, arguing that the commodities being transported were used to fund the illegal drug trade.

"We're not going to stand by and watch sanctioned vessels sail the seas with black market oil, the proceeds of which will fuel narcoterrorism of rogue and illegitimate regimes around the world," she said.

The Justice Department had obtained a warrant for the vessel because it had been known for "carrying black market, sanctioned oil," Leavitt said, adding that "the United States does intend to get the oil" that was onboard the tanker.

Trump told reporters a day earlier at the White House that the tanker "was seized for a very good reason." Asked what would happen to the oil aboard the tanker, Trump said, "Well, we keep it, I guess."

The U.S. has built up the largest military presence in the region in decades and launched a series of deadly strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean, a campaign that is facing growing scrutiny from Congress.

Trump, who has said land attacks are coming soon but has not offered more details, has broadly justified the moves as necessary to stem the flow of fentanyl and other illegal drugs into the U.S.

Venezuela's government said in a statement that the tanker seizure "constitutes a blatant theft and an act of international piracy." Maduro has insisted the real purpose of the U.S. military operations is to force him from office.

Zelenskyy says US-led peace talks wrestling with Russian demands for Ukrainian territory

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and SUSIE BLANN Associated Press
KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday that negotiators are wrestling with the question of territorial possession in U.S.-led peace talks on ending the war with Russia, including the future of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region and the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, one of the world's 10 biggest atomic plants.

Zelenskyy revealed details of the ongoing discussions before he headed into urgent talks with leaders and officials from about 30 countries that support Kyiv's efforts to obtain fair terms in any settlement to halt nearly four years of fighting.

In Washington, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said President Donald Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, continued to be in discussions with both sides. She said that "if there is a real chance of signing a peace agreement," then the U.S. could send a representative to the talks as soon as this weekend.

But Leavitt added that it's "still up in the air whether we believe real peace can be achieved."

Trump long boasted about being able to solve Russia's war in Ukraine in a day, but in recent months has

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complained bitterly about a lack of progress. Leavitt echoed that during her briefing with reporters on Thursday, saying the president is "extremely frustrated with both sides of this war."

She said the administration had spent 30-plus hours just in recent weeks meeting with officials from Russia and Ukraine as well as Europe, and that Trump is "sick of meetings just for the sake of meeting."

"He doesn't want any more talk," Leavitt said. "He wants action."

Ukraine has submitted a 20-point plan to the U.S., with each point possibly accompanied by a separate document detailing the settlement terms.

"We are grateful that the U.S. is working with us and trying to take a balanced position," Zelenskyy told reporters in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. "But at this moment it is still difficult to say what the final documents will look like."

Russia has in recent months made a determined push to gain control of all parts of Donetsk and neighboring Luhansk, which together make up Ukraine's valuable Donbas industrial region.

Ukraine doesn't accept the surrender of Donbas, Zelenskyy said, saying that both sides remaining where they currently stand along the line of contact would be "a fair outcome."

American negotiators have put forward the possibility of a "free economic zone" in the Donbas, with the Russians terming it a "demilitarized zone," according to Zelenskyy.

Russian officials have not publicly disclosed their proposals.

U.S. negotiators foresee Ukrainian forces withdrawing from the Donetsk region, with the compromise being that Russian forces do not enter that territory, Zelenskyy said.

But he said that if Ukraine must withdraw its forces, the Russians should also withdraw by the same distance. There are many unanswered questions, including who would oversee the Donbas, he added.

The Russians want to retain control of the Zaporizhzhia plant in southern Ukraine, which is not currently operating, but Ukraine opposes that.

The Americans have suggested a joint format to manage the plant, and negotiators are discussing how that might work, Zelenskyy said.

Ukraine's allies discuss peace plan with Zelenskyy

The leaders of Germany, Britain and France were among those taking part in the meeting of Ukraine's allies, dubbed the Coalition of the Willing, via video link.

Zelenskyy indicated the talks were hastily arranged as Kyiv officials scramble to avoid getting boxed in by U.S. President Donald Trump, who has disparaged the Ukrainian leader, painted European leaders as weak, and set a strategy of improving Washington's relationship with Moscow.

In the face of Trump's demands for a swift settlement, European governments are trying to help steer the peace negotiations because they say their own security is at stake.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said Thursday that he, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron suggested to Trump that they finalize the peace proposals together with U.S. officials over the weekend. There may also be talks in Berlin early next week, with or without American officials, he said.

The talks are at "a critical moment," European leaders said Wednesday.

Next week, Ukraine will coordinate with European countries on a bilateral level, Zelenskyy said late Wednesday, and European Union countries are due to hold a regular summit in Brussels at the end of next week.

Russia has new proposals on security

Trump's latest effort to broker a settlement is taking longer than he wanted. He initially set a deadline for Kyiv to accept his peace plan before Thanksgiving. Previous Washington deadlines for reaching a peace deal also have passed without a breakthrough.

Russia is also keen to show Trump it is engaging with his peace efforts, hoping to avoid further U.S. sanctions. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Thursday that Russia has relayed to Washington "additional proposals ... concerning collective security guarantees" that Ukraine and Europe say are needed to deter future aggression.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said Thursday that so far this year Russia has launched over 46,000

drones and missiles against Ukraine.

He warned his European audience at a speech in Berlin: "We are Russia's next target."

He also described China as "Russia's lifeline" for its war effort in Ukraine by providing most of the critical electronic components Moscow needs for its weapons. "China wants to prevent its ally from losing in Ukraine," Rutte said.

Russia claims battlefield progress

Putin claimed Thursday in a call with military leaders that Russian armed forces are "fully holding the strategic initiative" on the battlefield.

Russian troops have taken the city of Siversk, in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine where fighting has been fierce in recent months, Lt. Gen. Sergei Medvedev told Putin.

Ukrainian officials denied Siversk had been captured.

Putin wants to portray himself as negotiating from a position of strength, analysts say, although Russia occupies only about 20% of Ukraine. That includes Moscow's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the seizure of territory in the east by Russia-backed separatists later that year, as well as land taken after the full-blown invasion in 2022.

Ukrainian drones hit Russian oil rig, disrupt Moscow flights

Meanwhile, Ukrainian long-range drones hit a Russian oil rig in the Caspian Sea for the first time, according to an official in the Security Service of Ukraine who was not authorized to talk publicly about the attack and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The oil rig in the northern part of the Caspian Sea, about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) from Ukraine, belongs to Russia's second-biggest oil company, Lukoil, the official told The Associated Press. The rig took four hits, halting the extraction of oil and gas from over 20 wells, he said.

Russian officials and Lukoil made no immediate comment on the claim.

Ukraine also launched one of its biggest drone attacks of the war overnight, halting flights in and out of all four Moscow airports for seven hours. Airports in eight other cities also faced restrictions, Russian civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia said.

MyPillow founder and Trump supporter Mike Lindell says he's running for Minnesota governor in 2026

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

SHAKOPEE, Minn. (AP) — Mike Lindell, the fervent supporter of President Donald Trump known to TV viewers as the "MyPillow Guy," officially entered the race for Minnesota governor Thursday in hopes of winning the Republican nomination to challenge Democratic Gov. Tim Walz in 2026.

Lindell made the announcement at a news conference at his MyPillow factory in the Minneapolis suburb of Shakopee that he streamed live on his Lindell TV conservative news platform. He said his political opponents had tried to shut him and his company down because of his support for Trump's claim that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

"Well, it didn't work. I'm still standing. MyPillow is still standing," Lindell said. "And now I want you to know that I will stand for you as governor of the state of Minnesota."

Machinery banged and hissed loudly in the background as workers packaged MyPillows. He went straight from his announcement into a live interview with another Trump ally, conservative strategist Steve Bannon, on his "War Room" podcast.

The energetic Lindell then took the interview with Bannon outside, where his new red-white-and-blue bus was running. He said he intends to take his campaign to every town in Minnesota.

Afterward, Lindell told reporters that he told Trump back in August he was considering running for governor. But he declined to predict whether he will get the president's endorsement, which could carry a lot of weight with the grassroots Republicans who will attend the state party's convention next year. He also acknowledged that he gets advice from Trump's former personal lawyer and former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who has a show on Lindell TV.

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A TV pitchman and election denier

Lindell, 64, founded his pillow company in Minnesota in 2009 and became its public face through commercials that became ubiquitous on late-night television. But he and his company faced a string of legal and financial setbacks after he became a leading amplifier of Trump's false claims that he really won the 2020 election. He said he has overcome them.

"Not only have I built businesses, you look at problem solution," Lindell said in an interview with The Associated Press ahead of his announcement, in his trademark rapid-fire style. "I was able to make it through the biggest attack on a company, and a person, probably other than Donald Trump, in the history of our media ... lawfare and everything."

Lindell said he has a record of solving problems and personal experiences that will help businesses and fight addiction and homelessness as well as fraud in government programs. The fraud issue has particularly dogged Walz, the 2024 Democratic Party vice presidential candidate, who announced in September that he's seeking a third term.

Democrats quick to criticize Lindell's entry into the race

"Lindell has made a name for himself kissing up to Donald Trump and pushing far-right conspiracy theories, especially around the 2020 presidential election results — not to mention selling subpar pillows," the Walz campaign said in a statement. "He's a snake oil salesman caught up in multiple legal fights who wants to bring Trump extremism to Minnesota."

While no Republican has won statewide office in Minnesota since 2006, the state's voters have a history of making unconventional choices. They shocked the world by electing former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura as governor in 1998. And they picked a veteran TV pitchman in 1978 when they elected home improvement company owner Rudy Boschwitz as a U.S. senator.

Lindell has frequently talked about how he overcame a crack cocaine addiction with a religious conversion in 2009 as MyPillow was getting going. His life took another turn in 2016 when he met the future president during Trump's first campaign. He served as a warm-up speaker at dozens of Trump rallies and co-chaired Trump's campaign in Minnesota.

His Lindell TV platform was in the news in November when it became one of several conservative outlets that became credentialed to cover the Pentagon after agreeing to a restrictive new press policy rejected by virtually all legacy media organizations.

Lindell has weathered a series of storms

Lindell's outspoken support for Trump's election denials triggered a backlash as major retailers discontinued MyPillow products. By his own admission, revenue slumped and lines of credit dried up, costing him millions. Several vendors sued MyPillow over billing disputes. Fox News stopped running his commercials. Lawyers quit on him.

Lindell has been sued twice for defamation over his claims that voting machines were manipulated to deprive Trump of a victory.

A federal judge in Minnesota ruled in September that Lindell defamed Smartmatic with 51 false statements. But the judge deferred the question of whether Lindell acted with the "actual malice" that Smartmatic must prove to collect. Smartmatic says it's seeking "nine-figure damages."

A Colorado jury in June found that Lindell defamed a former Dominion Voting Systems executive by calling him a traitor, and awarded \$2.3 million in damages.

But Lindell won a victory in July when a federal appeals court overturned a judge's decision that affirmed a \$5 million arbitration award to a software engineer who disputed data that Lindell claimed proved Chinese interference in the 2020 election. The engineer had accepted Lindell's "Prove Mike Wrong Challenge," which he launched as part of his 2021 "Cyber Symposium" in South Dakota, where he promised to expose election fraud.

The campaign ahead

Lindell told the AP his crusade against electronic voting machines will just be part of his platform. While Minnesota uses paper ballots, it also uses electronic tabulators to count them. Lindell wants them hand-counted, even though many election officials say machine counting is more accurate.

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Some Republicans in the race include Minnesota House Speaker Lisa Demuth, of Cold Spring; Dr. Scott Jensen, a former state senator from Chaska who was the party's 2022 candidate; state Rep. Kristin Robbins, of Maple Grove; defense lawyer and former federal prosecutor Chris Madel; and former executive Kendall Qualls.

"These guys haven't lived what I live," Lindell said.

Lindell wouldn't commit to abiding by the Minnesota GOP endorsement and forgoing the primary if he loses it, expressing confidence that he'll win. He also said he'll rely on his supporters to finance his campaign because his own finances are drained. "I don't have the money," he acknowledged.

But he added that ever since word got out last week that he had filed the paperwork to run, "I've had thousands upon thousands of people text and call, saying from all around the country ... 'Hey, I'll donate.'"

Fernando Mendoza is AP player of the year after leading Indiana to 13-0 record and top seed in CFP

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Fernando Mendoza was named Associated Press player of the year on Thursday after leading unbeaten and top-ranked Indiana to its first Big Ten championship since 1967 and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff.

The redshirt junior quarterback was the overwhelming choice over fellow Heisman Trophy finalists Diego Pavia of Vanderbilt, Jeremiah Love of Notre Dame and Julian Sayin of Ohio State. Mendoza received 32 of 51 first-place votes from a nationwide panel of media members who cover college football. Pavia got nine to lead the rest of the group, which also included Jacob Rodriguez of Texas Tech.

"I'm shining now but only because there are so many stars around me," Mendoza said, describing his rise from lightly recruited high school prospect in 2021 to a candidate for the sport's most prestigious awards. "There's an analogy that the only reason we're able to see stars in the sky is because the light reflects from all different types of stars. I have so many stars around myself — whether it's my teammates, my coaches, my family, support staff — that I'm able to shine now in this light, and I'm so happy for everyone to be a part of this."

Mendoza, the Hoosiers' first-year starter after transferring from California, is the triggerman for an offense that has surpassed program records for touchdowns and points set during last season's surprise run to the CFP.

Mendoza has thrown for a Bowl Subdivision-leading 33 touchdowns and run for six, giving him a school-record 39 TDs accounted for.

He was the first Big Ten quarterback since 2000 with three straight games with at least four TD passes and no interceptions. His 21-of-23, 267-yard, five-touchdown passing day in a 63-10 win at Illinois in the conference opener established him as a serious contender for national honors.

Mendoza is among 10 FBS quarterbacks who have completed better than 70% of their passes. He ranks among the most accurate passers on attempts of at least 20 yards, hitting on 23 of 43 (53.5%), and when under pressure (52.1%), according to Pro Football Focus.

Ranked the No. 72 quarterback prospect by ESPN when he was a senior at Christopher Columbus High School in Miami, Mendoza was pledged to Yale for almost six months before he decommitted and signed with California.

He sat out as a redshirt in 2022 and won the starting job for the final eight games in 2023. He was 10th in the nation in passing in 2024 and ranked among the top transfer prospects after the season. He landed at Indiana, where his brother Alberto Mendoza was the No. 3 quarterback last year. This year Alberto is the top backup to his big brother.

Time magazine names 'Architects of AI' as its person of the year for 2025

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

The "Architects of AI" were named Time's person of the year Thursday, with the magazine citing 2025 as when the potential of artificial intelligence "roared into view" with no turning back.

"For delivering the age of thinking machines, for wowing and worrying humanity, for transforming the present and transcending the possible, the Architects of AI are TIME's 2025 Person of the Year," Time said in a social media post.

The magazine was deliberate in selecting people — the "individuals who imagined, designed, and built AI" — rather than the technology itself, though there would have been some precedent for that.

"We've named not just individuals but also groups, more women than our founders could have imagined (though still not enough), and, on rare occasions, a concept: the endangered Earth, in 1988, or the personal computer, in 1982," wrote Sam Jacobs, the editor-in-chief, in an explanation of the choice. "The drama surrounding the selection of the PC over Apple's Steve Jobs later became the stuff of books and a movie."

One of the cover images resembling the "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper" photograph from the 1930s shows eight tech leaders sitting on the beam: Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, AMD CEO Lisa Su, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, the CEO of Google's DeepMind division Demis Hassabis, Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei and AI pioneer Fei-Fei Li, who launched her own startup World Labs last year.

Another cover image shows scaffolding surrounding the giant letters "AI" made to look like computer componentry.

Five of the eight people selected — Musk, Zuckerberg, Huang, Altman and Su — are already billionaires with a collective fortune of \$870 billion, based on the latest estimates compiled by Forbes magazine. Much of the wealth has been accumulated during the past three years of AI fever.

It made sense for Time to anoint AI because 2025 was the year that it shifted from "a novel technology explored by early adopters to one where a critical mass of consumers see it as part of their mainstream lives," Thomas Husson, principal analyst at research firm Forrester, said by email.

The magazine noted AI company CEOs' attendance at President Donald Trump's inauguration this year at the Capitol as a herald for the prominence of the sector.

"This was the year when artificial intelligence's full potential roared into view, and when it became clear that there will be no turning back or opting out," Jacobs wrote.

Some experts expressed caution over the AI boom and the race to develop increasingly powerful systems.

"Leading AI companies are working feverishly to replace humans in every facet of life, and they're not being shy about it," said Anthony Aguirre, executive director of the nonprofit Future of Life Institute, which works on AI safety issues. "The impact on our society could be catastrophic if there are no guardrails protecting what's human, and most important to us."

AI was a leading contender for the top slot, according to prediction markets, along with Huang and Altman. Pope Leo XIV, the first American pope whose election this year followed the death of Pope Francis, was also considered a contender, with Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and New York Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani topping lists as well.

After winning his second bid for the White House, Trump was named 2024's person of the year by the magazine, succeeding Taylor Swift, who was the 2023 person of the year.

The magazine was bought by Marc Benioff in 2018. Benioff, one of the co-founders of cloud-computing firm Salesforce, has called AI "probably the most important" technological wave of his lifetime. He has repeatedly said he doesn't get involved in Time's editorial decisions.

The magazine's selection dates from 1927, when its editors have picked the person they say most shaped headlines over the previous 12 months.

Venezuelan Nobel laureate credits Trump for pressuring Maduro with 'decisive' actions

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado said Thursday that “decisive” actions by the United States, including the seizure of an oil tanker, have left the repressive government of President Nicolás Maduro at its weakest point, and she vowed to return to the country to keep fighting for democracy.

Machado’s statements to reporters came hours after she appeared in public for the first time in 11 months, following her arrival in Norway’s capital, Oslo, where her daughter received the Nobel Peace Prize award on her behalf on Wednesday.

The actions of President Donald Trump “have been decisive to reach where we are now, where the regime is significantly weaker,” she said. “Because before, the regime thought it had impunity Now they start to understand that this is serious, and that the world is watching.”

Machado sidestepped questions on whether a U.S. military intervention is necessary to remove Maduro from power. She told reporters that she would return to Venezuela “when we believe the security conditions are right, and it won’t depend on whether or not the regime leaves.”

Machado arrived in Oslo hours after Wednesday’s prize ceremony and made her first public appearance early Thursday, emerging from a hotel balcony and waving to an emotional crowd of supporters. She had been in hiding since Jan. 9, when she was briefly detained after joining supporters during a protest in Caracas.

Machado left Venezuela at a critical point in the country’s protracted crisis, with the Trump administration carrying out deadly military operations in the Caribbean and threatening repeatedly to strike Venezuelan soil. The White House has said the operations, which have killed more than 80 people, are meant to stop the flow of drugs into the U.S.

But many, including analysts, U.S. members of Congress and Maduro himself, see the operations as an effort to end his hold on power. The opposition led by Machado has only added to this perception by reigniting its promise to soon govern the country.

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump said the U.S. had seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela. On Thursday, Machado called on governments to expand their support for Venezuela’s opposition beyond words.

“We, the Venezuelan people that have tried every single, you know, institutional mean, ask support from the democratic nations in the world to cut those resources that come from illegal activities and support repressive approaches,” she said. “And that’s why we are certainly asking the world to act. It’s not a matter of statements, as you say, it’s a matter of action.”

Machado, 58, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October after mounting the most serious peaceful challenge in years to Maduro’s authoritarian government. Her daughter, Ana Corina Sosa, accepted the prize at a ceremony in Oslo.

Machado was received Thursday by Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, who said that his country is ready to support a democratic Venezuela in “building new and sound institutions.”

Asked whether the Venezuelan government might have known her whereabouts since January, Machado told reporters: “I don’t think they have known where I have been, and certainly they would have done everything to stop me from coming here.”

She declined to give details of her journey from Venezuela to Norway. But she thanked “all those men and women that risked their lives so that I could be here today” and later acknowledged that the U.S. government helped her.

Flight tracking data show that the plane Machado arrived on flew to Oslo from Bangor, Maine.

Machado won an opposition primary election and intended to challenge Maduro in last year’s presidential election, but the government barred her from running for office. Retired diplomat Edmundo González took her place.

The lead-up to the election on July 28, 2024, saw widespread repression, including disqualifications, arrests and human rights violations. That increased after the country's National Electoral Council, which is stacked with Maduro loyalists, declared the incumbent the winner.

González sought asylum in Spain last year after a Venezuelan court issued a warrant for his arrest.

It's unclear how Machado and González could return to Venezuela. An opposition plan to get González back before the Jan. 10 ceremony that gave Maduro another term didn't materialize.

Machado, alongside the Norwegian prime minister, said that "we decided to fight until the end and Venezuela will be free." If Maduro's government is still in place when she returns, she added, "I will be with my people and they will not know where I am. We have ways to do that and take care of us."

From hiding to Nobel laureate: María Corina Machado's continues fight for Venezuela's democracy

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — María Corina Machado has long been the face of resistance to Venezuela's 26-year ruling party. Now, she is also a Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Machado, the Venezuelan opposition leader who prompted millions of Venezuelans to reject President Nicolás Maduro in last year's election, appeared in public for the first time in 11 months on Thursday, following her arrival in Norway, where her daughter received the award on her behalf the previous day.

Machado had been in hiding since Jan. 9, when she was briefly detained after joining supporters during an anti-government protest in Venezuela's capital, Caracas.

Her Nobel win for her struggle to achieve a democratic transition in her South American nation was announced on Oct. 10. Hours after waving from the balcony of a hotel to a cheering crowd gathered outside on Thursday, Machado told reporters that she would continue the fight for her homeland's democracy and promised to return soon.

"My return will be when we believe the security conditions are right, and it won't depend on whether or not the regime leaves," she said. "It will be as soon as possible."

Engineer-turned-politician

Machado, an industrial engineer and daughter of a steel magnate, began challenging the ruling party in 2004, when the nongovernmental organization she co-founded, Súmate, promoted a referendum to recall then President Hugo Chávez. The initiative failed, and Machado and other Súmate executives were charged with conspiracy.

She drew the anger of Chávez and his allies the following year for her Oval Office meeting with then U.S. President George W. Bush. Chávez considered Bush an adversary.

Her full transformation into a politician would come in 2010, when she was elected to a seat in the National Assembly, receiving more votes than any aspiring lawmaker ever. It was from this position that she boldly interrupted Chávez as he addressed the legislature and called his expropriation of businesses theft.

"An eagle does not hunt a fly," he responded. The exchange is seared in voters' memories.

Presidential aspirations

Machado, 58, sought Venezuela's presidency for the first time in 2012, but she finished third in the primary race to be the presidential candidate for the Democratic Unity Roundtable.

The ruling party-controlled National Assembly ousted Machado in 2014 and, months later, the Comptroller General's Office barred her from public office for a year, citing an alleged omission on her asset declaration form. That same year, the government accused her of being involved in an alleged plot to kill Maduro, who succeeded Chávez after his 2013 death.

Machado, a free-market firebrand, denied the charge, calling it an attempt to silence her and opposition members who had called tens of thousands of people to the streets in anti-government protests that at times turned violent.

She kept a low profile for the next nine years, supporting some anti-Maduro initiatives and election boycotts and criticizing opposition efforts to negotiate with the government. By the time she announced a

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new bid for the presidency in 2023, her careful messaging had softened her image as an elitist hard-liner, allowing her to connect with skeptics on both sides.

She won the opposition's presidential primary with more than 90% of the vote, unifying the faction — as noted by the Nobel Prize committee. But ruling party loyalists who control the country's judiciary kept her from appearing on the ballot, which forced her to throw her support behind former diplomat Edmundo González.

She hiked on overpasses, walked highways, rode motorcycles, sought shelter in supporters' homes and saw her closest collaborators be arrested as she kept campaigning across Venezuela. She repeatedly joined thousands of supporters chanting in unison "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" in rallies and asked them to vote for González, a virtual unknown who had never run for office.

Brutal repression

González crushed Maduro by a more than a two-to-one margin, according to voting machine records collected by the opposition and validated by international observers. Still, Venezuela's National Electoral Council, loyal to the ruling party, declared Maduro the winner of the July 28, 2024, contest.

People protested the results across the country, and the government responded with full force, arresting more than 2,000 people and accusing them of plotting to oust Maduro and sow chaos. Most were released over the following months, but the government simultaneously arrested dozens of people who actively participated in Machado's efforts last year.

Some of Machado's closest collaborators, including her campaign manager, avoided prison by sheltering for more than a year at a diplomatic compound in Caracas, where they remained until May, when they fled to the U.S. She reunited with them, her family and González on Thursday.

González went into exile in Spain last year after he became the subject of an arrest warrant, and Machado hadn't been seen in public since January, when she joined people protesting Maduro's planned swearing-in ceremony. Her and González's inability to stop Maduro from taking the oath of office led to a decline in support.

People's trust has diminished since then, primarily over Machado's unquestionable support for Trump, including the large U.S. maritime deployment in the Caribbean that has carried out deadly strikes off the coast of Venezuela. This has led to new divisions within the opposition, but she remains undeterred in her efforts to oust Maduro.

Machado told reporters Thursday that Venezuelans have "given everything for an orderly and peaceful transition to democracy" and now need "action," not just statements, from other governments to meet their goal.

"The one who has declared war on Venezuelans is the Maduro regime," she said. "In criminal systems, we need the world's democracies to support our citizens."

Trump administration separates thousands of migrant families in the US

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — President Donald Trump's zero-tolerance immigration policy split more than 5,000 children from their families at the Mexico border during his first term, when images of babies and toddlers taken from the arms of mothers sparked global condemnation.

Seven years later, families are being separated but in a much different way. With illegal border crossings at their lowest levels in seven decades, a push for mass deportations is dividing families of mixed legal status inside the U.S.

Federal officials and their local law enforcement partners are detaining tens of thousands of asylum-seekers and migrants. Detainees are moved repeatedly, then deported, or held in poor conditions for weeks or months before asking to go home.

The federal government was holding an average of more than 66,000 people in November, the highest

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on record.

During the first Trump administration, families were forcibly separated at the border and authorities struggled to find children in a vast shelter system because government computer systems weren't linked. Now parents inside the United States are being arrested by immigration authorities and separated from their families during prolonged detention. Or, they choose to have their children remain in the U.S. after an adult is deported, many after years or decades here.

The Trump administration and its anti-immigration backers see "unprecedented success" and Trump's top border adviser Tom Homan told reporters in April that "we're going to keep doing it, full speed ahead."

Three families separated by migration enforcement in recent months told The Associated Press that their dreams of better, freer lives had clashed with Washington's new immigration policy and their existence is anguished without knowing if they will see their loved ones again.

For them, migration marked the possible start of permanent separation between parents and children, the source of deep pain and uncertainty.

A family divided between Florida and Venezuela

Antonio Laverde left Venezuela for the U.S. in 2022 and crossed the border illegally, then requested asylum.

He got a work permit and a driver's license and worked as an Uber driver in Miami, sharing homes with other immigrants so he could send money to relatives in Venezuela and Florida.

Laverde's wife Jakelin Pasedo and their sons followed him from Venezuela to Miami in December 2024. Pasedo focused on caring for her sons while her husband earned enough to support the family. Pasedo and the kids got refugee status but Laverde, 39, never obtained it and as he left for work one early June morning, he was arrested by federal agents.

Pasedo says it was a case of mistaken identity by agents hunting for a suspect in their shared housing. In the end, she and her children, then 3 and 5, remember the agents cuffing Laverde at gunpoint.

"They got sick with fever, crying for their father, asking for him," Pasedo said.

Laverde was held at Broward Transitional Center, a detention facility in Pompano Beach, Florida. In September, after three months detention, he asked to return to Venezuela.

Pasedo, 39, however, has no plans to go back. She fears she could be arrested or kidnapped for criticizing the socialist government and belonging to the political opposition.

She works cleaning offices and, despite all the obstacles, hopes to reunify with her husband someday in the U.S.

They followed the law

Yaoska's husband was a political activist in Nicaragua, a country tight in the grasp of autocratic married co-presidents Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

She remembers her husband getting death threats and being beaten by police when he refused to participate in a pro-government march.

Yaoska only used her first name and requested anonymity for her husband to protect him from the Nicaraguan government.

The couple fled Nicaragua for the U.S. with their 10-year-old son in 2022, crossing the border and getting immigration parole. Settling down in Miami, they applied for asylum and had a second son, who has U.S. citizenship. Yaoska is now five months pregnant with their third child.

In late August, Yaoska, 32, went to an appointment at the South Florida office of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Her family accompanied her. Her husband, 35, was detained and failed his credible fear interview, according to a court document.

Yaoska was released under 24-hour supervision by a GPS watch that she cannot remove. Her husband was deported to Nicaragua after three months at the Krome Detention Center, the United States' oldest immigration detention facility and one with a long history of abuse.

Yaoska now shares family news with her husband by phone. The children are struggling without their father, she said.

"It's so hard to see my children like this. They arrested him right in front of them," Yaoska said, her voice trembling.

They don't want to eat and are often sick. The youngest wakes up at night asking for him.

"I'm afraid in Nicaragua," she said. "But I'm scared here too."

Yaoska said her work authorization is valid until 2028 but the future is frightening and uncertain.

"I've applied to several job agencies, but nobody calls me back," she said. "I don't know what's going to happen to me."

He was detained by local police, then deported

Edgar left Guatemala more than two decades ago. Working construction, he started a family in South Florida with Amavilia, a fellow undocumented Guatemalan migrant.

The arrival of their son brought them joy.

"He was so happy with the baby — he loved him," said Amavilia, 31. "He told me he was going to see him grow up and walk."

But within a few days, Edgar was detained on a 2016 warrant for driving without a license in Homestead, the small agricultural city where he lived in South Florida.

She and her husband declined to provide their last names because they are worried about repercussion from U.S. immigration officials.

Amavilia expected his release within 48 hours. Instead, Edgar, who declined to be interviewed, was turned over to immigration officials and moved to Krome.

"I fell into despair. I didn't know what to do," Amavilia said. "I can't go."

Edgar, 45, was deported to Guatemala on June 8.

After Edgar's detention, Amavilia couldn't pay the \$950 rent for the two-bedroom apartment she shares with another immigrant. For the first three months, she received donations from immigration advocates.

Today, breastfeeding and caring for two children, she wakes up at 3 a.m. to cook lunches she sells for \$10 each.

She walks with her son in a stroller to take her daughter to school, then spends afternoons selling homemade ice cream and chocolate-covered bananas door to door with her two children.

Amavilia crossed the border in September 2023 and did not seek asylum or any type of legal status. She said her daughter grows anxious around police. She urges her to stay calm, smile and walk with confidence.

"I'm afraid to go out, but I always go out entrusting myself to God," she said. "Every time I return home, I feel happy and grateful."

'They said they'd shoot us': Nigerian child recalls how he was taken in mass school abduction

By OPE ADETAYO and AFOLABI SOTUNDE Associated Press

PAPIRI, Nigeria (AP) — The children at St. Mary Catholic School in Nigeria's Papiri community were jolted from their sleep with a loud crash at the school gate. Half asleep and confused, they dashed out of their dorms, some landing in the hands of gunmen.

Onyeka Chieme, an elementary school student, waited with bated breath as the loud thuds got nearer. Upon seeing men armed with guns, he recalled jumping through the window with some friends. The gunmen gave chase on motorbikes, shooting into the air and startling him and the others to a halt.

"They said if we ran, they would shoot us," Chieme told The Associated Press during a visit to his family in Papiri in the north-central Niger State. They watched in horror as the gunmen set fire to a statue of Mary and a Nigerian flag before carting the children away on motorbikes and in buses.

Chieme is one of the 303 schoolchildren — many of them between 10 and 17 years old — and 12 teachers abducted from the school on Nov. 21 in one of the country's biggest mass school abductions. The attack came days after 25 students were abducted in similar circumstances in the neighboring Kebbi state.

Fifty of the Niger State students escaped in the hours that followed the attack and more than two weeks after, Chieme was freed on Sunday together with 99 others. However, 153 are still held with the teachers, among them Chieme's brother.

The Nigerian government did not say how they were released or whether any suspect had been arrested.

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Arrests are rare and ransom payments common in such cases, and authorities have provided vague information about rescue efforts.

"On the first night we got there, I thought they were going to kill us," Chieme said from his home as his parents watched. "But their leader said we should not fear, it is just money that they wanted. If they paid the money, they would release everyone to go home."

Separated and some were blindfolded

Chieme described harrowing experiences during the more than two weeks in the bush, where the abducted students and staff were forced to sleep in the open. They were separated, he said, with the older ones blindfolded and their hands tied.

Every day, they woke up on the stubby grass with food and water from a nearby river. Those who did not keep quiet were often beaten, and guns were never out of sight, he said.

Occasionally, aircraft would fly above them, and the gunmen would instruct them to hide beneath trees to avoid being discovered.

"They don't want the airplanes to see us," Chieme said, referring to Nigerian military jets that officials said were searching forests for the children. Analysts say the gangs use captives as shields to avoid being bombarded.

Nigeria fights multiple armed groups operating across the country. They include deadly religious sects, including Boko Haram and its splinter group, Islamic State West Africa Province, as well as amorphous groups popularly called bandits who ride en masse on motorbikes to attack communities and kidnap people for ransom.

After attacks, communities and families pay ransoms to the bandits, sometimes millions of naira (thousands of dollars). No group has claimed responsibility for the Papiri abduction.

On the day of their release, Chieme said the students were asked to form a queue. Some of them, terrified that it meant a punishment, ran to the back of the line. The gunmen counted the first 100 students, took them out of the bush, before transferring them onto military buses.

The other 153 and the teachers were left behind, including his brother, he said. Their fates are not known. AP could not independently verify his account.

Families are increasingly worried about their children's safety

School abductions have defined the security crises in Nigeria, where armed groups have targeted schools to attract more ransom and attention.

Nearly 1,800 schoolchildren have been abducted in almost a dozen school attacks since 2014, when Boko Haram extremists made global headlines after kidnapping 276 girls from their school in the northeastern Chibok village.

Analysts say the Nigerian government negotiates with armed groups and pays ransom for the release of the children to temper outrage. Officials have not admitted to ransom payments.

"When you do that (pay ransoms), it encourages the abductions to continue," Aisha Yesufu, an activist and co-convenor of the Bring Back Our Girls movement. The group is still seeking the release of nearly 100 Chibok girls held since the 2014 attack.

The abductions have added another layer of worry to Nigeria's underfunded education sector. The country has the world's highest out-of-school children population. One in every five out-of-school children is in Nigeria, according to UNICEF.

In Papiri and other parts of Nigeria affected by insecurity, families are becoming reluctant to send their children to school.

Mixed feelings of joy and anguish

Chieme's return has left his family with mixed feelings. The parents are happy he is back, but continue to worry about his brother still in the bush.

"If he dies, I don't think I can survive it," said Anthony Chieme, his father.

"It is better my child dies in my room where I see his corpse and his grave than die in the hands of bandits in the bush where you see nothing."

Precious Njikonye, another parent, said she often visited the school since last month's attack, hoping

to see her son one day. This week, her hope materialized when he was among the 100 freed on Sunday and they were reunited.

"Everyone who has a child ... knows how painful it is to not be able to account for where the child is," she said, overwhelmed with relief. "I never thought I would see him again."

Takeaways from AP's report on potential impacts of Alaska's proposed Ambler Access Road

By ANNIKA HAMMERSCHLAG Associated Press

AMBLER, Alaska (AP) — In Northwest Alaska, a proposed mining road has become a flashpoint in a region already stressed by climate change. The 211-mile (340-kilometer) Ambler Access Road would cut through Gates of the Arctic National Park and cross 11 major rivers and thousands of streams relied on for salmon and caribou. The Trump administration approved the project this fall, setting off concerns over how the Inupiaq subsistence way of life can survive amid rapid environmental change. Many fear the road could push the ecosystem past a breaking point yet also recognize the need for jobs.

A strategically important mineral deposit

The Ambler Mining District holds one of the largest undeveloped sources of copper, zinc, lead, silver and gold in North America. Demand for minerals used in renewable energy is expected to grow, though most copper mined in the U.S. currently goes to construction — not green technologies. Critics say the road raises broader questions about who gets to decide the terms of mineral extraction on Indigenous lands.

Climate change has already devastated subsistence resources

Northwest Alaska is warming about four times faster than the global average — a shift that has already upended daily life. The Western Arctic Caribou Herd, once nearly half a million strong, has fallen 66% in two decades to around 164,000 animals. Warmer temperatures delay cold and snow, disrupting migration routes and keeping caribou high in the Brooks Range where hunters can't easily reach them.

Salmon runs have suffered repeated collapses as record rainfall, warmer rivers and thawing permafrost transform once-clear streams. In some areas, permafrost thaw has released metals into waterways, adding to the stress on already fragile fish populations.

"Elders who've lived here their entire lives have never seen environmental conditions like this," one local environmental official said.

The road threatens what remains

The Ambler road would cross a vast, largely undisturbed region to reach major deposits of copper, zinc and other minerals. Building it would require nearly 50 bridges, thousands of culverts and more than 100 truck trips a day during peak operations. Federal biologists warn naturally occurring asbestos could be kicked up by passing trucks and settle onto waterways and vegetation that caribou rely on. The Bureau of Land Management designated some 1.2 million acres of nearby salmon spawning and caribou calving habitat as "critical environmental concern."

Mining would draw large volumes of water from lakes and rivers, disturb permafrost and rely on a tailings facility to hold toxic slurry. With record rainfall becoming more common, downstream communities fear contamination of drinking water and traditional foods.

Locals also worry the road could eventually open to the public, inviting outside hunters into an already stressed ecosystem. Many point to Alaska's Dalton Highway, which opened to public use despite earlier promises it would remain private.

Ambler Metals, the company behind the mining project, says it uses proven controls for work in permafrost and will treat all water the mine has contact with to strict standards. The company says it tracks precipitation to size facilities for heavier rainfall.

A potential economic lifeline

For some, the mine represents opportunity in a region where gasoline can cost nearly \$18 a gallon and basic travel for hunting has become prohibitively expensive. Supporters argue mining jobs could help people stay in their villages, which face some of the highest living costs in the country.

Ambler mayor Conrad Douglas summed up the tension: "I don't really know how much the state of Alaska is willing to jeopardize our way of life, but the people do need jobs."

Tariffs have cost U.S. households \$1,200 each since Trump returned to the White House, Democrats say

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sweeping taxes on imports have cost the average American household nearly \$1,200 since Donald Trump returned to the White House this year, according to calculations by Democrats on Congress' Joint Economic Committee.

Using Treasury Department numbers on revenue from tariffs and Goldman Sachs estimates of who ends up paying for them, the Democrats' report Thursday found that American consumers' share of the bill came to nearly \$159 billion — or \$1,198 per household — from February through November.

"This report shows that (Trump's) tariffs have done nothing but drive prices even higher for families," said Sen. Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, the top Democrat on the economic committee. "At a time when both parties should be working together to lower costs, the president's tax on American families is simply making things more expensive."

In his second term, Trump has reversed decades of U.S. policy that favored free trade. He's imposed double-digit tariffs on almost every country on earth. According to Yale University's Budget Lab, the average U.S. tariff has shot up from 2.4% at the beginning of the year to 16.8%, the highest since 1935.

The president argues that the import taxes will protect U.S. industries from unfair foreign competition, bring factories to the United States and raise money for the Treasury.

"President Trump's tariffs have actually secured trillions in investments to make and hire in America as well as historic trade deals that finally level the playing field for American workers and industries," said White House Spokesman Kush Desai. "Democrats spent decades complaining about lopsided trade deals undermining the American working class, and now they're complaining about the one president who has done something about it."

The taxes are paid by importers who typically attempt to pass along the higher costs to their customers.

Democrats did well in elections last month in Virginia, New Jersey and elsewhere largely because voters blame Trump and the Republicans for the high cost of living, just as they'd blamed Trump's predecessor, Democrat Joe Biden, for the same thing a year earlier.

Economist Kimberly Clausing of the UCLA School of Law and the Peterson Institute for International Economics, last week told a House subcommittee that Trump's tariffs amount to "the largest tax increase on American consumers in a generation, lowering standards of living for all Americans." Clausing, a Treasury Department tax official in the Biden administration, has calculated that Trump's import taxes "amount to an annual tax increase of about \$1,700 for an average household."

Denmark plans to severely restrict social media use for young people

By JAMES BROOKS Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — As Australia began enforcing a world-first social media ban for children under 16 years old this week, Denmark is planning to follow its lead and severely restrict social media access for young people.

The Danish government announced last month that it had secured an agreement by three governing coalition and two opposition parties in parliament to ban access to social media for anyone under the age of 15. Such a measure would be the most sweeping step yet by a European Union nation to limit use of social media among teens and children.

The Danish government's plans could become law as soon as mid-2026. The proposed measure would give some parents the right to let their children access social media from age 13, local media reported,

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but the ministry has not yet fully shared the plans.

Many social media platforms already ban children younger than 13 from signing up, and a EU law requires Big Tech to put measures in place to protect young people from online risks and inappropriate content. But officials and experts say such restrictions don't always work.

Danish authorities have said that despite the restrictions, around 98% of Danish children under age 13 have profiles on at least one social media platform, and almost half of those under 10 years old do.

The minister for digital affairs, Caroline Stage, who announced the proposed ban last month, said there is still a consultation process for the measure and several readings in parliament before it becomes law, perhaps by "mid to end of next year."

"In far too many years, we have given the social media platforms free play in the playing rooms of our children. There's been no limits," Stage said in an interview with The Associated Press last month.

"When we go into the city at night, there are bouncers who are checking the age of young people to make sure that no one underage gets into a party that they're not supposed to be in," she added. "In the digital world, we don't have any bouncers, and we definitely need that."

Mixed reactions

Under the new Australian law, Facebook, Instagram, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X and YouTube face fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars (\$33 million) if they fail to take reasonable steps to remove accounts of Australian children younger than 16.

Some students say they are worried that similar strict laws in Denmark would mean they will lose touch with their virtual communities.

"I myself have some friends that I only know from online, and if I wasn't fifteen yet, I wouldn't be able to talk with those friends," 15-year-old student Ronja Zander, who uses Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, told the AP.

Copenhagen high school student Chloé Courage Fjelstrup-Matthisen, 14, said she is aware of the negative impact social media can have, from cyberbullying to seeing graphic content. She said she saw video of a man being shot several months ago.

"The video was on social media everywhere and I just went to school and then I saw it," she said.

Line Pedersen, a mother from Nykøbing in Denmark, said she believed the plans were a good idea.

"I think that we didn't really realize what we were doing when we gave our children the telephone and social media from when they were eight, 10 years old," she said. "I don't quite think that the young people know what's normal, what's not normal."

Age certificate likely part of the plan

Danish officials are yet to share how exactly the proposed ban would be enforced and which social media platforms would be affected.

However, a new "digital evidence" app, announced by the Digital Affairs Ministry last month and expected to launch next spring, will likely form the backbone of the Danish plans. The app will display an age certificate to ensure users comply with social media age limits, the ministry said.

"One thing is what they're saying and another thing is what they're doing or not doing," Stage said, referring to social media platforms. "And that's why we have to do something politically."

Some experts say restrictions, such as the ban planned by Denmark, don't always work and they may also infringe on the rights of children and teenagers.

"To me, the greatest challenge is actually the democratic rights of these children. I think it's sad that it's not taken more into consideration," said Anne Mette Thorhauge, an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen.

"Social media, to many children, is what broadcast media was to my generation," she added. "It was a way of connecting to society."

Currently, the EU's Digital Services Act, which took effect two years ago, requires social media platforms to ensure there are measures including parental controls and age verification tools before young users can access the apps.

EU officials have acknowledged that enforcing the regulations aiming at protecting children online has

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proven challenging because it requires cooperation between member states and many resources.

Denmark is among several countries that have indicated they plan to follow in Australia's steps. The Southeast Asian country of Malaysia is expected to ban social media accounts for people under the age of 16 starting at the beginning of next year, and Norway is also taking steps to restrict social media access for children and teens.

China — which manufactures many of the world's digital devices — has set limits on online gaming time and smartphone time for kids.

Today in History: December 12 Supreme Court issues Bush v. Gore decision

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Dec. 12, the 346th day of 2025. There are 19 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 12, 2000, George W. Bush became president-elect as a divided U.S. Supreme Court reversed a state court recount decision in Florida's tightly contested presidential election.

Also on this date:

In 1870, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina became the first Black lawmaker sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1963, the east African nation of Kenya declared independence from Britain; it became a republic exactly a year later.

In 1985, 248 American soldiers and eight crew members were killed when an Arrow Air charter crashed after takeoff from Gander, Newfoundland.

In 2010, the inflatable roof of the Minneapolis Metrodome collapsed in the early morning hours after a snowstorm dumped 17 inches (43 centimeters) on the city. (There were no injuries, but the NFL had to shift an already rescheduled game between the Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants to Detroit's Ford Field.)

In 2015, nearly 200 nations meeting in Paris adopted the first global pact to fight climate change, calling on the world to collectively cut greenhouse gas emissions but imposing no sanctions on countries that didn't do so.

In 2020, thousands of supporters of President Donald Trump gathered in Washington for rallies to back his efforts to subvert the election he lost to Joe Biden.

In 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, capping a whirlwind two-day visit to Washington, D.C., urged Congress to approve more assistance to fight Russia's invasion of his country.

Today's Birthdays: Basketball Hall of Famer Bob Pettit is 93. Singer Dionne Warwick is 85. Hall of Fame race car driver Emerson Fittipaldi is 79. Actor Bill Nighy is 76. Gymnast-actor Cathy Rigby is 73. Singer-musician Sheila E. is 68. Actor Sheree J. Wilson is 67. Tennis Hall of Famer Tracy Austin is 63. Football Hall of Famer John Randle is 58. Actor Jennifer Connelly is 55. Actor Regina Hall is 55. Actor Mayim Bialik is 50. Model-actor Bridget Hall is 48. Actor Lucas Hedges is 29. Actor and rapper Sky Katz is 21.

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The burning of the tree pile at the Groton Rubble Site was started on Thursday.