

Groton Daily Independent

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Thursday, Dec. 25

No School

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Day Service at Zion, 9 a.m.

Fri., Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Hamburger cabbage roll hot dish, mixed vegetables, fruit, cornmeal muffin.

No School

Sat., Dec. 27

Sun., Dec. 28

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

4th Grade BB Practice, 2 p.m.

6th Grade Boys Basketball, 6 p.m.



Mon, Dec. 29

Senior Menu: Sweet and sour pork, steamed rice, carrot and broccoli medley, corn, fruit.

No School

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Floyd Farrand Tournament Girls Wrestling at SF Lincoln, 9 a.m.

5th/6th Volleyball Practice, 6 p.m.

Tues., Dec. 30

Senior Menu: Meat loaf, baked potato, mixed vegetables, fruit, whole wheat bread.

No School

GBB NSU Showcase, Groton vs. Lemmon, 3 p.m.

Boys BB hosts Webster (JV at 6 p.m., Varsity to follow)

7th Grade Girls Soccer Practice, 6 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent

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The one issue South Dakota towns agree is holding them back

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

MURDO, S.D. – When a group of two dozen economic development leaders gathered in this central South Dakota city in November, they were asked to list the top challenges to growth and prosperity in their communities.

The concerns were as varied as the cities and towns they represent and ranged from pinpointing local problems to big-picture historical hurdles.

Some worried about how vacant or dilapidated downtown buildings were turning away potential new businesses and residents, while others sought ways to attract younger people who can build a community's future.

But one overarching issue hovered over all the local challenges – a need for more and better housing to accommodate new residents who will create the backbone of any economic development initiative.

"People don't follow jobs as much as jobs follow people," said Brian Blackford, a Ball State University professor of community development, told the group.

One major takeaway of the Thriverr session hosted in Murdo by the nonprofit Dakota Resources community development group was that to attract those people, almost every community in South Dakota needs more housing.

That sentiment was a critical factor that drove a new, coordinated effort in 2025 to highlight successful housing development programs across South Dakota.

Solutions-focused storytelling shares best ideas

The need for more housing, and a desire to share what is working in individual communities, underscored a partnership South Dakota News Watch launched in 2025 with Dakota Resources.

Dakota Resources is a nonprofit Community Development Financial Institution that has provided support to local communities in South Dakota for more than 25 years.

Paula Jensen, vice president of program development at Dakota Resources, told the Murdo gathering that idea sharing both inside and outside of communities is an important part of generating statewide momentum for continuing growth.

"So much of this just comes down to communication," Jensen said.

Throughout 2025, News Watch embraced that concept by telling stories of successful housing development efforts in Redfield, Wall, Chamberlain and Salem.

Known as Engage South Dakota, the ongoing reporting project highlighted a strong spirit of innovation and idea sharing among local housing agencies and nonprofits that seek to generate new housing opportunities in communities across the state.

Driving the project forward were the tenets of solutions journalism, a rising philosophy among some American news outlets to not only report on problems but to also highlight successes and solutions that can hopefully be duplicated in other cities and towns.

The ongoing housing projects across the state are often bolstered by public-private partnerships and investments of money, time and energy by local nonprofit organizations.

The Engage South Dakota effort will continue in 2026 and beyond, fueled in large part by a \$100,000 grant from the South Dakota Community Foundation.

As part of that project, News Watch has developed an online landing page where published articles are posted along with a roster of resources that agencies and nonprofits can tap into to obtain funds, locate resources or get new ideas to spur further housing growth.

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Focus is duplication of ideas that work

At the two-day meeting in Murdo in November, members of the Dakota Resources team provided attendees with a wealth of resources to generate new economic growth and housing opportunities.

Under the banner of "Using of Public Policy for Local Development," the group provided a slate of speakers and statewide experts on hand to share their research but also to answer specific questions posed by local development officials.

A handful of economic officials from rural communities were tapped to share their successes and answer questions on how their efforts can be replicated elsewhere.

For example, Republican state Rep. Mike Weisgram of Fort Pierre shared details of how his community was able to implement a local hotel, motel and campground occupancy tax of only \$2 per night that opened the door to increased tourism promotion and community enhancements in the city of 2,200.

Another presentation provided attendees a road map to enacting an ordinance that uses the threat of fines to urge owners of vacant downtown buildings to either renovate or sell their properties that can become eyesores.

Jared Hybertson, economic development coordinator in Centerville, a Turner County city of 900 located about 40 miles southwest of Sioux Falls, said the city's vacant building ordinance was aimed at preventing potential blight that can deter growth in a downtown district.

In 2014, before Centerville had the ordinance, there were 11 vacant buildings downtown, some of which had become eyesores due to long periods of vacancy.

Hybertson told the Murdo group that generating initial support for the ordinance among elected officials and the community at large is a big first hurdle.

"I know a lot of small towns struggle with this, and getting an ordinance off the ground is probably the hardest part," he said.

Hybertson said the ordinance has created a few tense moments with property owners. But it has ultimately led to redevelopment of several downtown buildings and storefronts that are now used as businesses, community hubs and residences.

"It takes partnerships, it takes patience and it takes a fair amount of capital," he said. "But (revitalizing) one building at a time can make a huge impact in your community."

This story was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit organization. Read more stories and donate at sdnewswatch.org and sign up for an email to get stories when they're published. Contact content director Bart Pfankuch at bart.pfankuch@sdnewswatch.org.

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

State saturation patrols go to Sturgis and Winner, but not Brookings after public notification

BY: JOHN HULT

The South Dakota Highway Patrol didn't visit Brookings for a saturation patrol that had been announced in advance by the city's leadership.

The Department of Public Safety sent troopers to Winner and Sturgis for the ninth set of patrols undertaken as part of Gov. Larry Rhoden's "Operation Prairie Thunder" public safety initiative.

The city of Brookings posted a notice on Dec. 12 saying that troopers would be in the area Dec. 17-19 for a Prairie Thunder saturation patrol. The city would "not be participating" in the operation, the notice said.

Gov. Larry Rhoden, who announced the initiative in July, chastised the city for the announcement, which coincided with a press release from the Highway Patrol on previous efforts in Huron and Belle Fourche.

"It's unfortunate that the city of Brookings would jeopardize an anti-crime operation and put the safety of our officers at risk by publishing this information," Rhoden said in a statement to South Dakota Searchlight.

Operations in Huron had drawn concern from some members of that city's Hispanic community when additional troopers came to town in November for the first of two saturation stops, inspiring several social media posts about what some believed to be federal immigration raids.

The Highway Patrol signed cooperation agreements with U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement in advance of launching Operation Prairie Thunder, which initially targeted the city of Sioux Falls and surrounding areas. In total, troopers have questioned 81 people about their immigration status since the operation's launch, and 57 people have been detained on behalf of federal immigration agents.

Prairie Thunder patrols have led to a total of 419 arrests, according to the Department of Public Safety, and 271 of those arrests involved drug charges.

The state never confirmed or denied plans to visit Brookings. Rhoden's statement last week also said the state could not discuss "operational specifics" on future saturation patrols.

The state routinely announces saturation patrols and sobriety checkpoints in certain areas, but news releases on such patrols only say which month they'll take place.

Tuesday's news release on Operation Prairie Thunder's efforts in Sturgis and Winner said the saturation patrol resulted in 13 arrests and 25 total drug charges across the two cities, but did not mention the city of Brookings.

In response to a question from South Dakota Searchlight, Highway Patrol spokesman Brad Reiners confirmed that the Highway Patrol had not conducted a saturation patrol in Brookings.

Brookings Mayor Ope Niemeyer told South Dakota Searchlight that he was away from town on business last week, but said he hadn't heard anything this week about extra troopers in town while he was away. He wouldn't be able to comment on what impact, if any, the city's announcement had on saturation patrol plans, he said.

The city had posted the notice to let residents know there could be additional officers in town, Brookings City Manager Paul Briseno told South Dakota Searchlight on Wednesday, and to clear up any confusion within the community about where those officers came from. There had been "questions in the community" about Operation Prairie Thunder, he said.

The state gave notice to Brookings that it intended to conduct its Dec. 17-19 saturation patrol, Briseno said, but did not reach out about its change of plans.

In a statement emailed to South Dakota Searchlight on Wednesday, Rhoden did not comment directly on whether the Brookings city announcement influenced last week's saturation patrols. The statement

said only that "criminals in Brookings should not rest easy."

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

Iowa judge pauses Summit opponents' lawsuit while proposed permit changes proceed

BY: CAMI KOONS

The Iowa Utilities Commission will have to decide whether Summit Carbon Solutions can change the ending destination for its carbon sequestration pipeline before a case against the company's permit can proceed, an Iowa court ruled.

The Iowa District Court for Polk County ruled in favor of Summit's motion to pause the case that landowners, counties and the Sierra Club Iowa Chapter filed in 2024.

Opponents of the proposed carbon capture pipeline sued over the IUC decision to issue a conditional permit to Summit in June 2024. The permit allowed the company to use eminent domain to build a pipeline that would connect to biorefineries across the state and transport carbon dioxide to North Dakota for underground storage.

Per the IUC permit decision, Summit was required to obtain permission for its pipeline in North Dakota and South Dakota before it could begin construction in Iowa.

Since the permit was issued, however, South Dakota enacted a law prohibiting the use of eminent domain for CO2 pipelines, which complicated Summit's plans to transport the captured CO2 to an underground storage site in North Dakota. Eminent domain forces unwilling property owners to accept easements on their land for projects considered in the public interest, for payment determined by a county commission.

In light of these developments along with ongoing legal battles in North Dakota, Summit filed for an amendment to its permit with the IUC in September 2025 to remove the requirement that the company receive approval from the Dakotas. Instead of specifying a state, Summit asked for the permit to prohibit construction until the company has "secured access to one or more sequestration sites and permits or agreements to allow it to reach such storage."

Summit also requested the court stop proceedings on the lawsuit pertaining to the original permit until the IUC rules on the newly filed amendment. Polk County District Court Judge Scott Beattie sided with the company and remanded the case back to the IUC.

In the decision Beattie, wrote that the South Dakota ban is "influential" to the decision.

"Not only does the S.D. CO2 pipeline ban render the IUC's Final Order void, but it also requires Summit to reroute its pipeline in order to get to North Dakota without going through South Dakota," the decision said.

During oral arguments, opponents said Summit's requested permit amendment did not change the basis of their argument that Summit did not meet the definition of a common carrier and should not be granted eminent domain capabilities.

The groups also argued, as described in Beattie's decision, that it was unfair to pause judicial review based on "the mere possibility that a permit might be amended."

Beattie wrote, however, that a pause in judicial proceedings while the permit amendment is evaluated is "warranted" as the court would otherwise be evaluating "outdated" facts.

"Adjudicating the merits of a permit that is actively being amended serves no useful purpose," the decision reads.

Emma Schmit, an organizing director with the pipeline fighter group Bold Alliance, said in a statement the ruling did "not come as a surprise."

"After years of working to protect property rights from hazardous carbon pipelines, we know not every

judge, regulator, or legislator will stand by us the first time around," Schmit said in the statement. "But, we know the people of Iowa stand with us. So, we'll continue to explore property rights protections through every possible avenue, including through the courts, the Iowa Utilities Commission, and the legislature."

Summit Carbon Solutions did not respond to a request for comment on the decision.

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

Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.

National Guard shooting case moved to federal court as prosecutors weigh death penalty

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — The man accused of shooting two National Guard members near the White House last month, killing one, was charged in federal court Wednesday, moving the case out of the local court system.

United States Attorney for the District of Columbia Jeanine Pirro wrote in a statement the "transfer of this case from Superior Court to District Court ensures that we can undertake the serious, deliberate, and weighty analysis required to determine if the death penalty is appropriate here."

West Virginia National Guard members Army Spc. Sarah Beckstrom and Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe were shot while on patrol in Washington, D.C., the day before Thanksgiving.

"Sarah Beckstrom was just 20 years old when she was killed and her parents are now forced to endure the holiday season without their daughter," Pirro added. "Andrew Wolfe, by the grace of God, survived but has a long road ahead in his recovery."

Rahmanullah Lakanwal, 29, was already charged with first-degree murder while armed, assault with intent to kill while armed and two counts of possession of a firearm during a crime of violence.

The federal charges now also include transporting a firearm in interstate commerce with the intent to commit an offense punishable by imprisonment for more than one year and transporting a stolen firearm in interstate commerce.

New details disclosed

A seven-page document submitted to the court details Lakanwal's movements ahead of the shooting. But it doesn't shed any light on his possible motives.

FBI special agent Ahmad Hassanpoor wrote the .357 Smith & Wesson revolver used in the shooting was legally purchased by another person in Bellevue, Washington, in February 2008. But after that person, identified by the initials J.D., died in February 2023, the weapon was stolen.

The affidavit alleges that Lakanwal obtained it from someone identified as W-1 after originally trying to purchase an AR-15, a compact AK-47-style stockless pistol and a pistol in October of this year.

Lakanwal told this person that he believed he needed a weapon since he was driving for the ride-sharing services Lyft and Uber, according to the affidavit. Hassanpoor, however, wrote that Lakanwal hadn't driven for those services since May 25 and was unemployed when he sought the weapons.

The person identified as W-1 in the affidavit was able to secure the .357 Smith & Wesson revolver and gave it to Lakanwal on Nov. 14.

"W-1 explained that he gave the firearm to (Lakanwal) because he believed (Lakanwal) wanted it for personal protection while working as a rideshare driver. W-1 stated that W-1 was extremely nervous during the exchange and was visibly shaking," Hassanpoor wrote.

"According to W-1, (Lakanwal) observed W-1's nervousness and placed an arm around W-1 in an effort to calm him. W-1 stated that it is common knowledge among his peers that firearms acquired 'on the

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streets' are typically stolen firearms."

The revolver was loaded with five bullets at the time. Lakanwal went to a Big 5 Sporting Goods store the next day to purchase a box of ammunition.

Route to D.C. tracked

The same day, Nov. 15, Lakanwal searched Google Maps for "Washington, D.C." and "The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC 20500," according to the affidavit.

Hassanpoor wrote that Lakanwal's Toyota Prius was in Washington state on Nov. 16, based on "license plate reader data that is made available to law enforcement through Customs and Border Protection."

The car was in Idaho on Nov. 19, Illinois on Nov. 21 and Washington, D.C., on Nov. 23.

Day of shooting

WASHINGTON, DC - NOVEMBER 26: Members of law enforcement and National Guard soldiers respond to a shooting near the White House on November 26, 2025 in Washington, DC. According to reports, two members of the West Virginia National Guard were shot and a suspect is being detained at a local hospital. (Photo by Andrew Leyden/Getty Images).jpeg

Police and National Guard troops respond to a shooting near the White House on Nov. 26, 2025. (Photo by Andrew Leyden/Getty Images)

A few days later, on Nov. 26, Beckstrom and Wolfe were on patrol about two blocks from the White House when shot.

Video footage from different locations near the shooting at 17th and I streets northwest showed Lakanwal "coming around the corner at the intersection with his hands raised in a firing stance." He then "immediately began firing in the direction of Beckstrom and Wolfe, and they are both captured on video collapsing on the ground," according to Hassanpoor's affidavit.

Two majors in the National Guard, identified as NG M-1 and NG M-2 in the affidavit, were talking with Beckstrom and Wolfe when the shooting happened.

"NG M-1 reported that he heard gunshots; as he heard gunshots, he observed Beckstrom and Wolfe fall to the ground," Hassanpoor wrote. "NG M-1 then observed (Lakanwal), who was dressed in a knee-length, dark-colored jacket and armed with a revolver, (fired) additional shots. NG M-1 pulled his issued service weapon and fired shots at (Lakanwal). (Lakanwal) fell to the ground where he was detained by NG M-2."

Hassanpoor wrote that both "Beckstrom and Wolfe were unresponsive and suffering from gunshot wounds to the head."

Beckstrom died as a result of her injuries at 5:58 p.m. the following day, Thanksgiving.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia charged Lakanwal with first-degree murder on Nov. 28, adding it to other criminal charges.

Lakanwal pleaded not guilty in DC Superior Court during an arraignment on Dec. 2 and was denied bond in the case.

West Virginia Gov. Patrick Morrisey has requested Beckstrom and Wolfe both receive the Purple Heart.

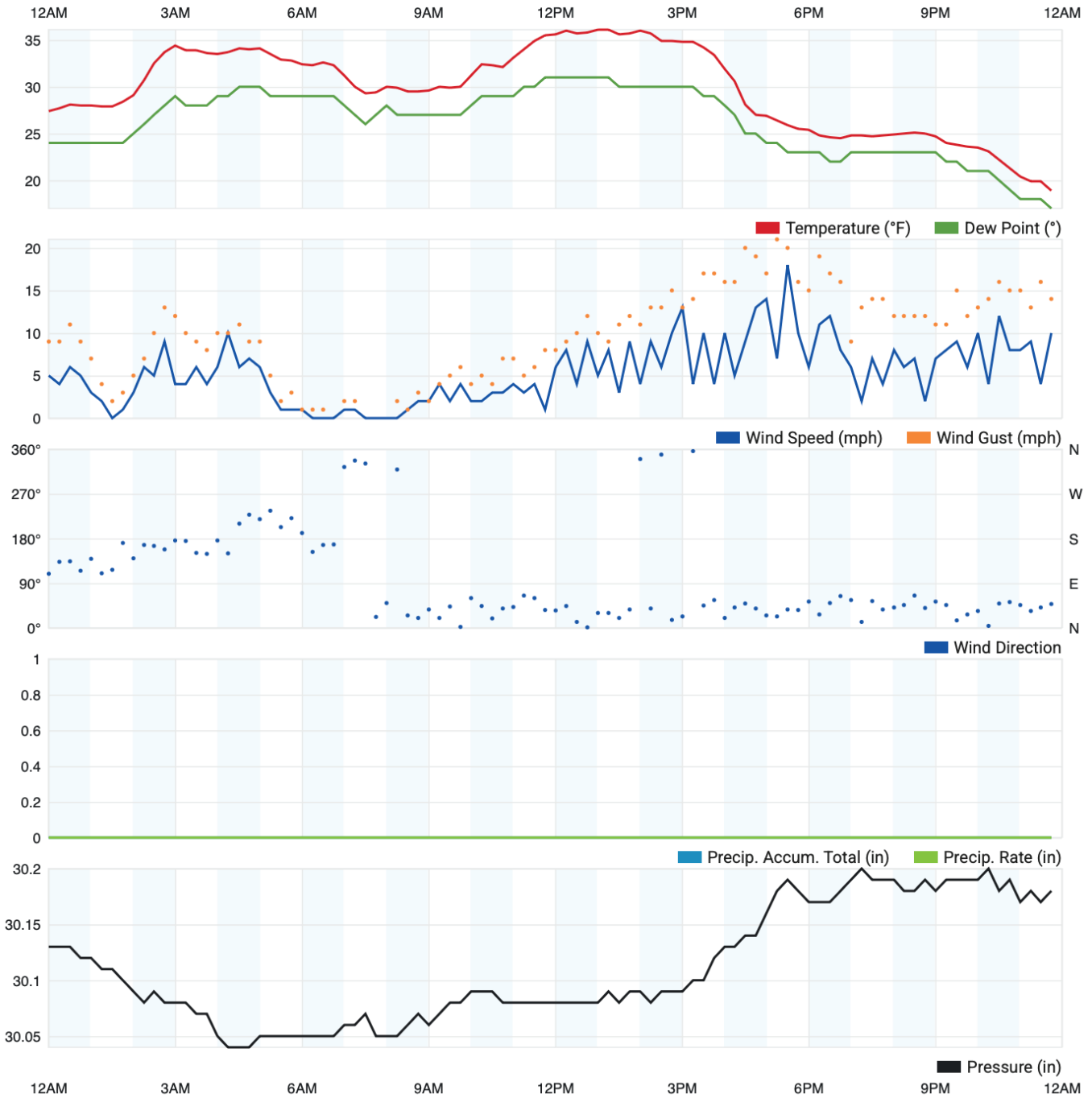
Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 24, 2025



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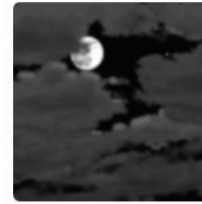
Christmas Day

Tonight

Friday

Friday Night

Saturday



High: 38 °F

Low: 24 °F

High: 33 °F

Low: 28 °F

High: 40 °F

Dense Freezing Fog and Patchy Fog then Mostly Cloudy

Slight Chance Drizzle then Fog

Areas Fog then Partly Sunny

Mostly Cloudy

Mostly Sunny

Today



35-63°F

-Fog and freezing fog sticking around through the morning before starting to clear out in the early afternoon. Could be dense, with visibility down to 1/4 mile at times.
 -15-25% chance in the evening for some light drizzle over far northeastern SD

Weekend Forecast

Friday



31-56°F

-Fog through the overnight into the morning
 -Partly cloudy after fog clears

Saturday



40-53°F

-Mostly Sunny

Sunday



10-20°F

-Windy
 -Mostly cloudy in the afternoon

15-25% chance for snow Saturday night into Sunday morning

There is fog and freezing fog over central and northeastern SD that will be sticking around through the morning, with areas of dense fog causing visibilities to be down to 1/4 mile at times. Temperatures will be warmest today south of Pierre, in the upper 50s into the 60s, with cooler temperatures to the north. There is a 15-25% chance for light drizzle this evening over far northeastern SD. The fog will return tonight into Friday morning.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 36 °F at 12:26 PM

Low Temp: 20 °F at 11:13 PM

Wind: 22 mph at 5:12 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 1907

Record Low: -25 in 1996

Average High: 26

Average Low: 5

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.48

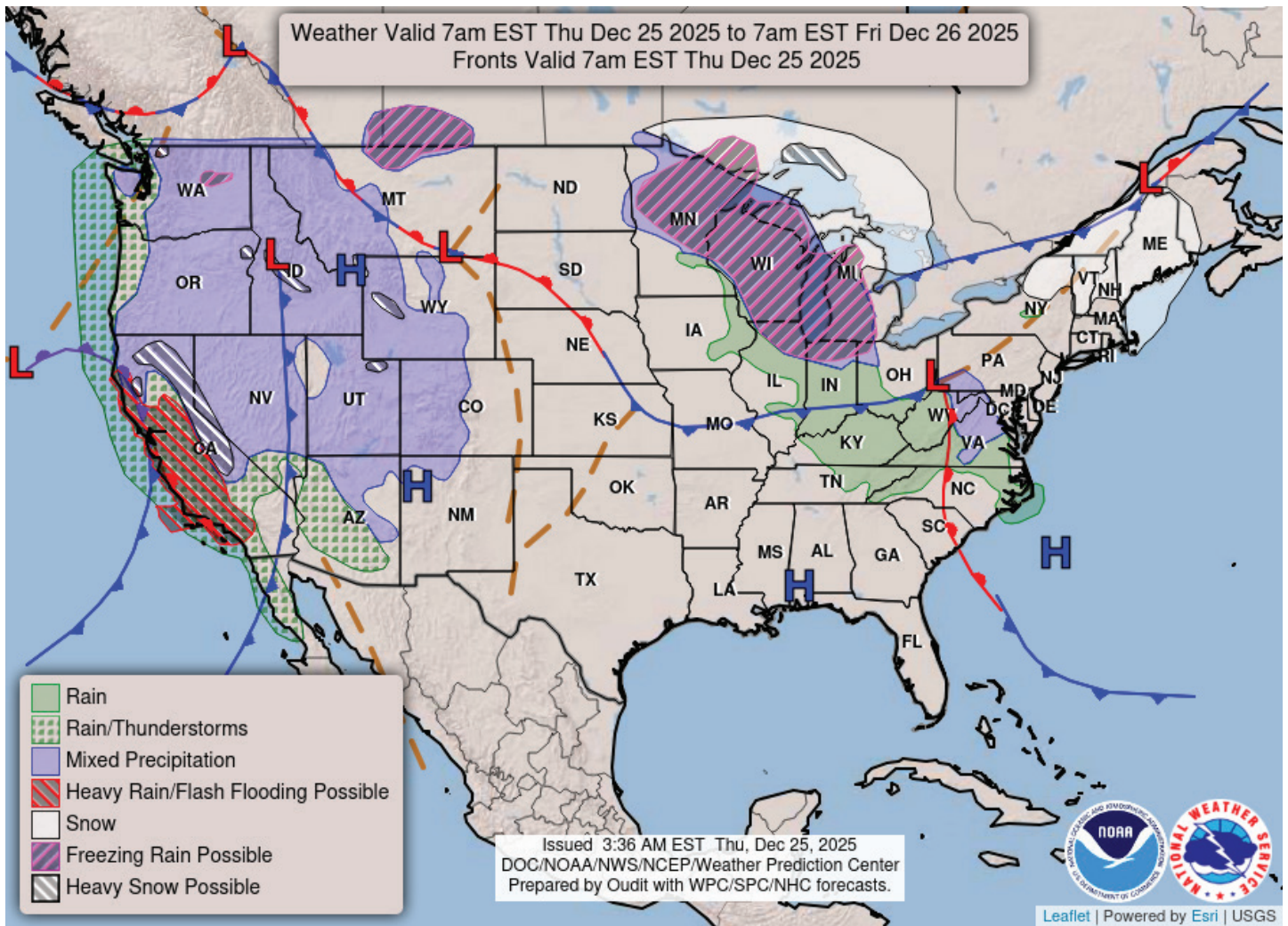
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.67

Average Precip to date: 21.69

Precip Year to Date: 25.48

Sunset Tonight: 4:54 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:11 am



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Today in Weather History

December 25, 1983: Winds of 20 to 30 mph, with occasional higher gusts, combined with very light falling snow and loose surface snow to cause near-blizzard conditions and dangerously low wind chills in most of South Dakota, as well as in southwest and west-central Minnesota, from the early evening of the 23rd into Christmas morning. Visibilities were frequently near zero, and four- to five-foot drifts closed the vast majority of roads, making travel impossible. Hundreds of motorists became stranded during the evenings of December 23rd and 24th. In Minnesota, many holiday travelers heading west from Minneapolis and St. Paul drove to central Minnesota before conditions became too severe to continue. Winds and severe cold in the western part of Minnesota caused several power outages as well as the loss of livestock.

In South Dakota, at least 70 vehicles were stalled at one point over a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 90 between Kennebec and Reliance in Lyman County. The Pierre Airport in Hughes County was closed twice on the 23rd as visibility was reduced to zero. Most flights were canceled at Sioux Falls Airport in Minnehaha County, stranding numerous holiday travelers. Sub-zero temperatures, combined with gusts of over 60 mph, produced wind chill indices in the 60 to 100 below zero range. Several cases of frostbite were reported, propane gas solidified, fuel jelled, and water pipes and tanks froze as a result of the extreme cold. In Minnehaha County at Wall Lake, electrical outages of 12 hours were experienced from power lines snapping as a result of the cold and winds.

1776: Thomas Jefferson noted that the first winter snow fell on December 20th, but did not last on the ground one day. Temperatures dropped to 30 degrees or colder on Christmas Day. That night, 22 inches of snow fell. From the 25th of December until March 6, 10 snow covered the ground, and some of them were deep. The first rain came on the 9th of March. In Frederick County, two feet of snow was recorded.

1872: Since records began back in 1887, Columbia, South Carolina, only a trace of snow has been reported on Christmas Day. Before records, 13-hour sleet, and snowstorm occurred in Columbia and surrounding areas. Credit goes to Cary Mock, a USC geography professor who specializes in historical weather research.

1966 — A white Christmas was enjoyed by residents from North Carolina to New England in the wake of a major snowstorm. Even coastal Virginia was white. (David Ludlum)

1974: Cyclone Tracy was a small but powerful tropical storm that devastated the city of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, from December 24-26th, 1974. The storm was the second smallest tropical cyclone on record, in terms of gale-force wind diameter, behind Tropical Storm Marco in 2008.

1980 — It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record in the northeastern U.S. Temperatures as cold as 36 degrees below zero were reported in New York State, and as the sharp cold front swept south-eastward the temperature at Boston MA plunged from 34 degrees to seven degrees below zero during the day. (David Ludlum)

1983 — It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record for the central and eastern U.S. More than 125 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, and thirty-four of those cities reported all-time records for the month of December. The temperature plunged to one degree below zero at Huntsville AL, and dipped to 14 degrees at Galveston TX. Snow covered the ground from the Pacific Northwest through much of the Great Plains Region to the Northern Appalachians. (The National Weather Summary)

1987: Since 1894, Tucson, Arizona, has seen snow on Christmas Day four times. The most recent event occurred in 1987 when Tucson saw 2.6 inches.

2002: A major snowstorm moved up the east coast on Christmas Day, 2002. Widespread snowfalls of a foot or more occurred across much of central New York and northeast Pennsylvania, with amounts as high as 30 inches reported over the northwest slopes of the Catskills.

2010 — Up to 32 inches of snow and blizzard conditions affected parts of the eastern U.S. on December 25th-27th. A state of emergency was declared in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine. In New York City, up to 24.5 inches of snow fell, effectively shutting down rail lines, major airports, and bus services. Thousands of flights were cancelled and stranded subway riders were forced to spend a night in unheated train cars. One person was reported killed in Maine due to the weather conditions. (NCDC)

Worship at Christmas

Today, make time to be thankful for the gifts under the tree—and the Gift placed in a manger for you.

Matthew 2:7-11: 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, ``Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”

9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Of all of the responses we can have toward Christmas, worship most pleases God. We have every reason to rejoice greatly that Jesus came to earth in human flesh. We're truly blessed that His purpose in coming was to rescue us from sin (1 Timothy 1:15) and make possible a relationship with our heavenly Father.

The Magi traveled all the way from the East for the sole purpose of worshipping the King of the Jewish people. Knowing a star signaled His birth, they journeyed hundreds of miles to find Him. The Magi believed God was leading them to the King, and when they finally arrived in Bethlehem, they showed reverence by humbling themselves and celebrating the Christ child with gifts. These were wealthy, wise, and respected men, yet they understood the infant was far greater than they.

Is Jesus the center of our celebrations, or have we let other interests take pride of place? Holding on to the right priorities can be challenging at this season. But we lose when we focus only on the gifts under our trees and miss the gift in the manger.

It's easy to get sidetracked from what is most important. To help prevent that, let's imagine all the inconveniences, setbacks, and risks the Magi endured in their pursuit of the infant King. Like those wise men, may we follow the Savior, whatever it takes.

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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Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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- 6 Months..... \$31.95
- 9 Months..... \$42.60
- 12 Months \$53.25

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City _____

State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail _____

Password _____

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.23.25

15 37 38 41 64 21

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$125,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 29
Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.24.25

1 18 27 41 49 9

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$10,720,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 44
Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.24.25

3 5 7 17 34 9

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 59 Mins 58
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.24.25

1 2 3 7 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$152,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59
Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.24.25

3 15 19 29 35 21

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 28
Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.24.25

4 25 31 52 59 19

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 28
Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

A Powerball player in Arkansas has won a \$1.817 billion lottery jackpot

By OLIVIA DIAZ Associated Press/Report for America

A Powerball player in Arkansas won a \$1.817 billion jackpot in Wednesday's Christmas Eve drawing, ending the lottery game's three-month stretch without a top-prize winner.

The winning numbers were 04, 25, 31, 52 and 59, with the Powerball number being 19.

Final ticket sales pushed the jackpot higher than previous expected, making it the second-largest in U.S. history and the largest Powerball prize of 2025, according to www.powerball.com. The jackpot had a lump sum cash payment option of \$834.9 million.

"Congratulations to the newest Powerball jackpot winner! This is truly an extraordinary, life-changing prize," Matt Strawn, Powerball Product Group Chair and Iowa Lottery CEO, was quoted as saying by the website. "We also want to thank all the players who joined in this jackpot streak — every ticket purchased helps support public programs and services across the country."

The prize followed 46 consecutive drawings in which no one matched all six numbers.

The last drawing with a jackpot winner was Sept. 6, when players in Missouri and Texas won \$1.787 billion.

Organizers said it is the second time the Powerball jackpot has been won by a ticket sold in Arkansas. It first happened in 2010.

The last time someone won a Powerball jackpot on Christmas Eve was in 2011, Powerball said. The company added that the sweepstakes also has been won on Christmas Day four times, most recently in 2013.

Powerball's odds of 1 in 292.2 million are designed to generate big jackpots, with prizes growing as they roll over when no one wins. Lottery officials note that the odds are far better for the game's many smaller prizes.

"With the prize so high, I just bought one kind of impulsively. Why not?" Indianapolis glass artist Chris Winters said Wednesday.

Tickets cost \$2, and the game is offered in 45 states plus Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

After missing deadline, DOJ says it may need a 'few more weeks' to finish releasing Epstein files

By SEUNG MIN KIM, ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department said Wednesday that it may need a "few more weeks" to release all of its records on the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein after suddenly discovering more than a million potentially relevant documents, further delaying compliance with last Friday's congressionally mandated deadline.

The Christmas Eve announcement came hours after a dozen U.S. senators called on the Justice Department's watchdog to examine its failure to meet the deadline. The group, 11 Democrats and a Republican, told Acting Inspector General Don Berthiaume in a letter that victims "deserve full disclosure" and the "peace of mind" of an independent audit.

The Justice Department said in a social media post that federal prosecutors in Manhattan and the FBI "have uncovered over a million more documents" that could be related to the Epstein case — a stunning 11th hour development after department officials suggested months ago that they had undertaken a comprehensive review that accounted for the vast universe of Epstein-related materials.

In March, Attorney General Pam Bondi told Fox News that a "truckload of evidence" had been produced after she ordered the FBI to "deliver the full and complete Epstein files to my office." She issued the directive after saying she learned from an unidentified source that the FBI in New York was "in possession of

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thousands of pages of documents.”

In July, the FBI and Justice Department indicated in an unsigned memo that they had undertaken an “exhaustive review” and had determined that no additional evidence should be released — an extraordinary about face from the Trump administration, which for months had pledged maximum transparency. The memo did not raise the possibility that additional evidence existed that officials were unaware of or had not reviewed.

Wednesday’s post did not say when the Justice Department was informed of the newly uncovered files.

In a letter last week, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche said Manhattan federal prosecutors already had more than 3.6 million records from sex trafficking investigations into Epstein and his longtime confidant Ghislaine Maxwell, though many were copies of material already turned over by the FBI.

The Justice Department said its lawyers are “working around the clock” to review the documents and remove victims names and other identifying information as required by the Epstein Files Transparency Act, the law enacted last month that requires the government to open its files on Epstein and Maxwell.

“We will release the documents as soon as possible,” the department said. “Due to the mass volume of material, this process may take a few more weeks.”

The announcement came amid increasing scrutiny on the Justice Department’s staggered release of Epstein-related records, including from Epstein victims and members of Congress.

Republican Rep. Thomas Massie, of Kentucky, one of the chief authors of the law mandating the document release, posted Wednesday on X: “DOJ did break the law by making illegal redactions and by missing the deadline.” Another architect of the law, Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., said he and Massie will “continue to keep the pressure on” and noted that the Justice Department was releasing more documents after lawmakers threatened contempt.

“A Christmas Eve news dump of ‘a million more files’ only proves what we already know: Trump is engaged in a massive coverup,” Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said after the DOJ’s announcement. “The question Americans deserve answered is simple: WHAT are they hiding — and WHY?”

The White House on Wednesday defended the Justice Department’s handling of the Epstein records.

“President Trump has assembled the greatest cabinet in American history, which includes Attorney General Bondi and her team — like Deputy Attorney General Blanche — who are doing a great job implementing the President’s agenda,” spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said in a statement.

After releasing an initial wave of records on Friday, the Justice Department posted more batches to its website over the weekend and on Tuesday. The Justice Department has not given any notice when more records might arrive.

Records that have been released, including photographs, interview transcripts, call logs, court records and other documents, were either already public or heavily blacked out, and many lacked necessary context. Records that hadn’t been seen before include transcripts of grand jury testimony from FBI agents who described interviews they had with several girls and young women who described being paid to perform sex acts for Epstein.

Other records made public in recent days include a note from a federal prosecutor from January 2020 that said Trump had flown on the financier’s private plane more often than had been previously known and emails between Maxwell and someone who signs off with the initial “A.” They contain other references that suggest the writer was Britain’s former Prince Andrew. In one, “A” writes: “How’s LA? Have you found me some new inappropriate friends?”

The senators’ call Wednesday for an inspector general audit comes days after Schumer introduced a resolution that, if passed, would direct the Senate to file or join lawsuits aimed at forcing the Justice Department to comply with the disclosure and deadline requirements. In a statement, he called the staggered, heavily redacted release “a blatant cover-up.”

Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska joined Sens. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. and Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., in leading the call for an inspector general audit. Others signing the letter were Democratic Sens. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota., Adam Schiff of California, Dick Durbin of Illinois, Cory Booker and Andy Kim, both of New Jersey, Gary Peters of Michigan, Chris Van Hollen, of Maryland, Mazie Hirono, of Hawaii, and

Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island.

"Given the (Trump) Administration's historic hostility to releasing the files, politicization of the Epstein case more broadly, and failure to comply with the Epstein Files Transparency Act, a neutral assessment of its compliance with the statutory disclosure requirements is essential," the senators wrote. Full transparency, they said, "is essential in identifying members of our society who enabled and participated in Epstein's crimes."

Faithful return to Bethlehem and Pope Leo XIV celebrates his first Christmas Eve Mass at St. Peter's

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Thousands of people flocked to Bethlehem's Manger Square on Christmas Eve as families there and at other sites across the Holy Land heralded a much-needed boost of holiday spirit, after two years of subdued celebrations because of the war in Gaza.

At the Vatican, Pope Leo XIV presided over his first Midnight Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. In his homily, he marveled at the "wisdom" of the Christmas story — an infant Jesus born to save mankind.

"In the face of the suffering of the poor, (God) sends one who is defenseless to be the strength to rise again," the first U.S. pope told a packed basilica.

Bethlehem, where Christians believe Jesus was born, had canceled Christmas celebrations during the war. But on Wednesday, the giant Christmas tree returned to Manger Square, temporarily replacing the wartime nativity scene of baby Jesus surrounded by rubble and barbed wire in a homage to Gaza's suffering.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Catholic leader in the Holy Land, kicked off this year's celebrations during the traditional procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, calling for "a Christmas full of light."

Pizzaballa said he came bearing greetings from Gaza's tiny Christian community, where he held a pre-Christmas Mass on Sunday. In the devastation, he saw a desire to rebuild.

"We, all together, we decide to be the light, and the light of Bethlehem is the light of the world," he told thousands of people, Christian and Muslim.

Despite the holiday cheer, the impact of the war in the Israeli-occupied West Bank is acute, especially in Bethlehem, where around 80% of the Muslim-majority city's residents depend upon tourism-related businesses, according to the local government.

There were only a handful of foreigners but some residents said they are starting to see signs of change as tourism slowly returns.

'Hope in very dark situations'

"Today is a day of joy, a day of hope, the beginning of the return of normal life here," said Bethlehem resident Georgette Jackaman, a tour guide. She and her husband, Michael Jackaman, another guide, are from Christian Bethlehem families that stretch back generations.

This is the first real Christmas celebration for their two children, aged 2 1/2 and 10 months.

During the war, the Jackamans pivoted to create a website selling Palestinian handicrafts to support others who lost their livelihoods. The unemployment rate in the city jumped from 14% to 65%, Bethlehem Mayor Maher Nicola Canawati said earlier this month.

A visitor from France, Mona Riewer, said being in Bethlehem helped her appreciate the meaning of the holiday.

"Christmas is like hope in very dark situations," she said.

Despite the Gaza ceasefire that began in October, tensions remain high in the West Bank, with Israeli military raids in what it describes as a crackdown on militants. Attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians have reached their highest level since the United Nations humanitarian office started collecting data in 2006.

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war. The internationally recognized Palestinian Authority has limited autonomy in parts of the territory, including Bethlehem.

As poverty and unemployment have soared, about 4,000 people have left Bethlehem in search of work,

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the mayor said — part of a worrying trend for Christians, who are leaving the region in droves. Christians account for less than 2% of the West Bank's roughly 3 million residents.

The beginning of a return to normal life

Fadi Zoughbi, who previously worked overseeing logistics for tour groups, said his children were ecstatic to see marching bands streaming through Bethlehem's streets, Palestinian flags and tartan draped on their bagpipes. For the past two years, the scouts marched silently as a protest against the war.

Irene Kirmiz, who grew up in Bethlehem and lives in Ramallah, said the scout parade is among her favorite Christmas traditions. Her 15-year-old daughter plays the tenor drum with the Ramallah scouts.

But her family had to wake up at 5 a.m. to arrive for the parade, after waited about three hours at Israeli checkpoints. The drive previously took 40 minutes without the checkpoints that have increasingly made travel difficult for Palestinians, she said.

In the past two years, the heads of churches in Jerusalem urged congregations to forgo "any unnecessarily festive activities." They encouraged priests and the faithful to focus on Christmas' spiritual meaning and called for "fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land."

Other Middle East events mark the faithful's resilience

Santas were everywhere as the traditional parade returned to Nazareth in northern Israel, revered by Christians as the place where the archangel Gabriel announced to Mary she would give birth to Jesus.

The hilltop town filled with children. Some starred in live Nativity scenes, and others lined the route waiting for floats and candy under a bright, warm sun.

Incense wafted over pews packed for Christmas Eve Mass at Gaza's only Catholic church, where festive children's programs had also taken place. The Holy Family compound was hit by fragments from an Israeli shell in July, killing three people. Israel called it an accident and expressed regret.

On the outskirts of Damascus, Syria, hundreds of congregants planned to return for Christmas Masses at a Greek Orthodox church where, in June, 25 people were killed in a suicide attack blamed on Islamic State militants. On Tuesday, they gathered to light a neon image of a Christmas tree in its courtyard.

Festivities around the world

At St. Peter's, an estimated 6,000 people worshipped inside the vast basilica decorated with poinsettias, while another 5,000 watched the Mass on giant screens in the rain-soaked piazza outside.

The celebration, with readings and the homily in a variety of languages, including Latin, started with children from different continents putting flowers by the figure of the baby Jesus.

Leo will return to the basilica for Mass on Christmas Day followed by his traditional blessing from the loggia.

People around the world enjoyed Christmas traditions on Wednesday beyond houses of worship, too, from ice-skating in New York City to charity swimming in cold sea waters off Northern Ireland.

Along Florida's Space Coast, Santas hopped on surfboards, not sleighs. Hundreds of surfers dressed as Santa took to the waves off Cocoa Beach in what has become an annual tradition for the past 17 years.

The Santa-surfing brought to the beach thousands of spectators dressed in Christmas costumes who danced to live music and took part in a holiday costume contest.

The event raises money for the Florida Surf Museum and a nonprofit that helps people with cancer.

'The best gift ever': Baby is born after the rarest of pregnancies, defying all odds

By LAURA UNGAR AP Medical Writer

Suze Lopez holds her baby boy on her lap and marvels at the remarkable way he came into the world. Before little Ryu was born, he developed outside his mom's womb, hidden by a basketball-sized ovarian cyst — a dangerous situation so rare that his doctors plan to write about the case for a medical journal.

Just 1 in 30,000 pregnancies occur in the abdomen instead of the uterus, and those that make it to full term "are essentially unheard of — far, far less than 1 in a million," said Dr. John Ozimek, medical director of labor and delivery at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles, where Ryu was born. "I mean, this is really insane."

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Lopez, a 41-year-old nurse who lives in Bakersfield, California, didn't know she was pregnant with her second child until days before giving birth.

When her belly began to grow earlier this year, she thought it was her ovarian cyst getting bigger. Doctors had been monitoring the mass since her 20s, leaving it in place after removing her right ovary and another cyst.

Lopez experienced none of the usual pregnancy symptoms, such as morning sickness, and never felt kicks. Though she didn't have a period, her cycle is irregular and she sometimes goes years without one.

For months, she and her husband, Andrew Lopez, went about their lives and traveled abroad.

But gradually, the pain and pressure in her abdomen got worse, and Lopez figured it was finally time to get the 22-pound (10-kilogram) cyst removed. She needed a CT scan, which required a pregnancy test first because of the radiation exposure. To her great surprise, the test came back positive.

Lopez shared the news with her husband at a Dodgers baseball game in August, handing him a package with a note and a onesie.

"I just saw her face," he recalled, "and she just looked like she wanted to weep and smile and cry at the same time."

Shortly after the game, Lopez began feeling unwell and sought help at Cedars-Sinai. It turned out she had dangerously high blood pressure, which the medical team stabilized. They also did blood work and gave her an ultrasound and an MRI. The scans found that her uterus was empty, but a nearly full-term fetus in an amniotic sac was hiding in a small space in her abdomen, near her liver.

"It did not look like it was directly invading any organs," Ozimek said. "It looked like it was mostly implanted on the sidewall of the pelvis, which is also very dangerous but more manageable than being implanted in the liver."

Dr. Cara Heuser, a maternal-fetal specialist in Utah not involved with the case, said almost all pregnancies that implant outside the uterus — called ectopic pregnancies — go on to rupture and hemorrhage if not removed. Most commonly, they occur in the fallopian tubes.

A 2023 medical journal article by doctors in Ethiopia described another abdominal pregnancy in which the mother and baby survived, pointing out that fetal mortality can be as high as 90% in such cases and birth defects are seen in about 1 in 5 surviving babies.

But Lopez and her son beat all the odds.

On Aug. 18, a medical team delivered the 8-pound (3.6-kilogram) baby while she was under full anesthesia, removing the cyst during the same surgery. She lost nearly all of her blood, Ozimek said, but the team got the bleeding under control and gave her transfusions.

Doctors continually updated her husband about what was happening.

"The whole time, I might have seemed calm on the outside, but I was doing nothing but praying on the inside," Andrew Lopez said. "It was just something that scared me half to death, knowing that at any point I could lose my wife or my child."

Instead, they both recovered well.

"It was really, really remarkable," Ozimek said.

Since then, Ryu — named after a baseball player and a character in the Street Fighter video game series — has been healthy and thriving. His parents love watching him interact with his 18-year-old sister, Kaila, and say he completes their family.

With Ryu's first Christmas approaching, Lopez describes feeling blessed beyond measure.

"I do believe in miracles," she said, looking down at her baby. "God gave us this gift — the best gift ever."

Rescuers rushed into flames to save nursing home residents after deadly explosion

By MINGSON LAU, MARC LEVY AND MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

BRISTOL, Pa. (AP) — Rescuers braved shooting flames, falling debris and the threat of more explosions to evacuate dozens of nursing home residents after a blast ripped through a Pennsylvania facility, killing a resident and an employee, and setting off a frantic search of the wreckage.

Officials said Wednesday they'd located everybody after hours of looking.

The police chief of Bristol Township said he'd "never seen such heroism," and a speech therapist working there described feeling the building shake in Tuesday's blast and hurriedly wheeling out a bed-bound resident, bed and all.

"They were running into a building that I could — from 50 feet away — could still smell gas, and walls that looked like they were going to fall down," Police Chief Charles Winik told reporters Wednesday.

Responders spent hours digging through the badly damaged building and checking with hospitals into the night Tuesday to locate the missing. But officials said they didn't yet know the cause of the explosion, even though a utility crew had been on site investigating a reported gas leak.

The blast sent 20 others to hospitals, including one person in critical condition. The rest of the 120 residents were transferred to nearby nursing homes, officials said.

The Bucks County coroner's office said the employee who died was 52-year-old Muthoni Nduthu. Authorities didn't immediately identify the resident who died at a Philadelphia hospital. Both victims were women.

Nduthu's sister said she was a great mother to her sons, a great wife, a devout Catholic and very involved in the community. A Kenyan immigrant, she went to nursing school, loved to cook and was a hard worker, her sister, Rose Muema, said.

"She was an immigrant who came to make a difference in this country, and she did that," Muema said.

Nineteen people were still hospitalized Wednesday, Winik said.

The explosion was so powerful that it shook nearby houses for blocks in Bristol, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) northeast of Philadelphia.

A wing of the facility with the kitchen and cafeteria was almost entirely destroyed, leaving the roof caved in, sections of walls completely missing and windows on adjoining walls blown out. Debris littered the grounds.

Winik said the scale of the casualties could have been much worse. Police and firefighters flooded in from the area, as staff from a hospital next door, nursing home employees and neighbors rushed to help evacuate people. One person was resuscitated at a hospital, officials said.

They found people trapped in stairways and elevator shafts and under rubble, authorities said. Some residents couldn't walk, and some were in wheelchairs or bed-bound. A second explosion happened as rescues were underway.

Speech therapist Julia Szewczyk described the experience as terrifying and devastating.

She was in a group therapy session in another part of the building when it began to shake. She and other staff rushed to evacuate residents across a street to safety.

"And then the next thing was, to go inside and grab more people," Szewczyk, 25, said.

They dragged out a bed-bound resident into the cold, then Szewczyk ran back into the burning building twice to grab blankets from a supply closet. One coworker got trapped inside an elevator when the power went out, she said.

Outside, during the rescue, employees had been looking for Nduthu, Szewczyk recalled.

Federal agencies were set to assist in the investigation, but the collapsed walls and roof needed to be cleared first, Winik said.

A utility crew was responding to reports of a gas odor when the explosion happened, authorities have said. The local gas utility, PECO, said the crew shut off natural gas and electric service to the facility, but didn't know if utility equipment or gas was involved in the blast.

Musuline Watson, who said she was a certified nursing assistant at the facility, told WPVI-TV that staff

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smelled gas over the weekend, but did not initially suspect a serious problem because there was no heat in that room. Other employees told Szewczyk they smelled gas earlier in the day Tuesday, Szewczyk said.

The nursing home recently became affiliated with Ohio-based Saber Healthcare Group, which called the explosion "devastating" and said in a statement that facility personnel promptly reported the gas odor to the local gas utility before the blast.

Willie Tye, who lives about a block away, said he was watching a basketball game when he heard a loud boom.

"I thought an airplane or something came and fell on my house," he said.

US stocks drift to more records on a holiday-shortened day of trading

NEW YORK (AP) — Wall Street closed higher and reached more records Wednesday on a holiday-shortened trading day.

The S&P 500 index rose 22.26 points, or 0.3%, to 6,932.05. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 288.75, or 0.6%, to close at 48,731.16, and the Nasdaq composite added 51.46, or 0.2%, to 23,613.31

Trading was extremely light as markets closed early for Christmas Eve and will be closed for Christmas Thursday. Roughly 1.8 billion shares traded on the New York Stock Exchange on Wednesday, which is roughly a third of the average trading day.

Markets will reopen for a full day of trading on Friday; however volumes are expected to remain light this week with most investors having closed out their positions for the year.

The S&P 500 is up more than 17% this year, as investors have embraced the deregulatory policies of the Trump administration and been optimistic about the future of artificial intelligence in helping boost profits for not only technology companies but also for Corporate America. Some of the strongest performers this year include Nvidia and Micron Technologies, both companies that make chips or other components that power the proliferation of data centers across the country.

Much of the focus for investors for the next few weeks will be on where the U.S. economy is heading and where the Federal Reserve will move interest rates. Investors are betting the Fed will hold steady on interest rates at its January meeting.

The U.S. economy grew at a surprisingly strong 4.3% annual rate in the third quarter, the most rapid expansion in two years, driven by consumers who continue to spend in the face of ongoing inflation. There have also been recent reports showing shaky confidence among consumers worried about high prices. The labor market has been slowing and retail sales have weakened.

The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell last week and remain at historically healthy levels despite some signs that the labor market is weakening.

U.S. applications for jobless claims for the week ending Dec. 20 fell by 10,000 to 214,000 from the previous week's 224,000, the Labor Department reported Wednesday. That's below the 232,000 new applications forecast of analysts surveyed by the data firm FactSet.

Dynavax Technologies soared 38.2% after Sanofi said it was acquiring the California-based vaccine maker in a deal worth \$2.2 billion. The French drugmaker will add Dynavax's hepatitis B vaccines to its portfolio, as well as a shingles vaccine that is still in development.

Novo Nordisk's shares rose 1.8% after the weight-loss drug company got approval from U.S. regulators for a pill version of its blockbuster drug Wegovy. However, Novo Nordisk shares are still down almost 40% this year as the company has faced increased competition for weight-loss medications, particularly from Eli Lilly. Shares of Eli Lilly are up 40% this year.

European markets moved between slight gains and losses. Asian markets were also quiet, with Hong Kong moving up 0.2% while Japan's Nikkei 225 fell 0.1%

Gold prices were flat at \$4,502 an ounce, and silver rose 0.8% to \$71.69. U.S. crude oil was flat at \$58.38 a barrel.

Zelenskyy says he's open to creating demilitarized zone in Ukraine's industrial heartland

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he would be willing to withdraw troops from the country's eastern industrial heartland as part of a plan to end Russia's war, if Moscow also pulls back and the area becomes a demilitarized zone monitored by international forces.

The proposal offered another potential compromise on control of the Donbas region, which has been a major sticking point in peace negotiations.

Zelenskyy said the U.S. proposed the creation of a "free economic zone," which he said should be demilitarized. But it was unclear what that idea would mean for governance or development of the region.

A similar arrangement could be possible for the area around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is currently under Russian control, Zelenskyy said. He said any peace plan would need to be put to a referendum.

Zelenskyy spoke to reporters Tuesday to describe an overarching 20-point plan that negotiators from Ukraine and the U.S. hammered out in Florida in recent days, though he said many details are still being discussed.

Russia offers no hint it will agree to withdrawal

Russia has given no indication that it will agree to any kind of withdrawal from land it has seized. In fact, Moscow has insisted that Ukraine relinquish the remaining territory it still holds in the Donbas — an ultimatum that Ukraine has rejected. Russia has captured most of Luhansk and about 70% of Donetsk — the two areas that make up the Donbas.

Asked about the plan, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that Moscow would decide its position based on information received by Russian presidential envoy Kirill Dmitriev, who met with U.S. envoys in Florida over the weekend. Peskov declined to share further details.

American negotiators have engaged in a series of talks with Ukraine and Russia separately since U.S. President Donald Trump presented a plan to end the war last month — a proposal widely seen as favoring Moscow, which invaded its neighbor nearly four years ago. Since then, Ukraine and its allies in Europe have worked to pull the plan closer to Kyiv's position.

Zelenskyy said figuring out control of the Donbas region is "the most difficult point."

Meanwhile, on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the U.S. has proposed creating a consortium with Ukraine and Russia, in which each party would have an equal stake.

Zelenskyy countered with a proposal for a joint venture between the U.S. and Ukraine, in which the Americans would be able to decide how to distribute their share, including giving some of it to Russia.

Zelenskyy acknowledged that the U.S. has not yet accepted Ukraine's counter-proposals.

"But we have significantly brought most of the positions closer together," Zelenskyy said. "In principle, all other consensus in this agreement has been found between us and them."

Zone would require difficult discussions

Creating the demilitarized economic zone in the Donbas would require difficult discussions on how far troops would be required to move back and where international forces would be stationed, Zelenskyy said, adding that it should be discussed at the leaders level.

The working U.S.-Ukraine draft also proposes that Russian forces withdraw from the Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Sumy and Kharkiv regions. Zelenskyy envisions that international forces could be located along certain points of the contact line within the zone to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

Ukraine also proposes that the occupied city of Enerhodar, which is the closest city to the Zaporizhzhia power plant, become a demilitarized free economic zone, Zelenskyy said.

This point required 15 hours of discussions with the U.S., he said, and no agreement was reached.

For now, the U.S. proposes that the plant be jointly operated by Ukraine, the U.S. and Russia, with each side controlling a 33% stake in the enterprise — a plan Zelenskyy called "not entirely realistic."

"How can you have joint commerce with the Russians after everything?" he asked.

Ukraine instead suggested that the plant be operated by a joint venture with the U.S. in which the Americans can determine independently how to distribute the energy from their 50% share.

Zelenskyy said billions in investments are needed to make the plant run again, including restoring the adjacent dam.

Details on security guarantees

The working draft ensures that Ukraine will receive "strong" security guarantees that would require Ukraine's partners to act in the event of renewed Russian aggression. That would mirror NATO's Article 5, which says an armed attack on one member of the alliance is an attack on all.

Zelenskyy said a separate document with the U.S. will outline these guarantees. It will detail the conditions under which security will be provided, particularly in the event of another Russian assault, and it will establish a mechanism to monitor any ceasefire. The document will be signed with the main agreement to end the war, Zelenskyy said.

"The mood of the United States of America is that this is an unprecedented step towards Ukraine on their part. They believe that they are giving strong security guarantees," he said.

The draft contains other elements, including keeping Ukraine's army at 800,000 during peacetime and making Ukraine a member of the European Union by a specific date. Limiting the size of Ukraine's military is a key Russian demand.

Elections and economic incentives

The document also proposes accelerating a free-trade agreement between Ukraine and the U.S. The U.S. wants the same deal with Russia, Zelenskyy said.

Ukraine would like to receive short-term privileged access to the European market and a robust global development package that would include the creation of a development fund to solicit outside investment in Ukraine's industries.

Other points include raising funds for Ukraine's reconstruction, with the goal of attracting \$800 billion through equity, grants, loans and private-sector contributions.

The draft proposal also requires Ukraine to hold elections after the signing of the agreement. Zelenskyy's five-year term was scheduled to end in May 2024, but elections were put off due to Russia's invasion.

Ukraine is also asking that all prisoners taken since 2014 be released at once, and that civilian detainees, political prisoners and children be returned to Ukraine.

In other developments, an explosion in Moscow on Wednesday killed three people, including two police officers, Russian investigators said, days after a car bomb killed a high-ranking general not far away.

An official from Ukraine's military intelligence agency, known as GUR, told The Associated Press that the attack had been carried out as part of an agency operation. Another official from the agency said the police officers had taken part in Russia's war in Ukraine, without providing details. Both spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Explosion in Moscow kills 3 people. Official says Ukrainian intelligence was behind it

By The Associated Press undefined

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Russian authorities did not comment on who may be behind the attack. Since Moscow invaded nearly four years ago, Russian authorities have blamed Kyiv for several assassinations of military officers and public figures in Russia. Ukraine has claimed responsibility for some of them.

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On Wednesday, two traffic police officers were approaching a suspicious individual when a device detonated, Russia's Investigative Committee spokesperson Svetlana Petrenko said in a statement. The officers and another person standing nearby died from their injuries.

The Interior Ministry named the officers as Lt. Ilya Klimanov, 24, who joined the Moscow police in October 2023, and Lt. Maxim Gorbunov, 25. Gorbunov had a wife and a 9-month-old daughter, the statement said.

The blast took place in the same area of the Russian capital where Lt. Gen. Fanil Sarvarov was killed by a car bomb on Monday. Sarvarov was the head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff.

Investigators have said they are looking into whether Ukraine was behind that attack, which was the third such killing of a senior military officer in just over a year. Ukraine has not commented on it.

Ukraine — which is outnumbered by Russia's larger, better equipped military — has frequently tried to change the course of the war by attacking in unexpected ways.

In August last year, Ukrainian forces staged a surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region even as they struggled to stem Russian offensives elsewhere. Moscow's troops eventually drove them out, but the incursion diverted Russian military resources and raised Ukrainian morale.

In June, swarms of drones launched from trucks targeted bomber bases across Russia.

Moscow has also blamed assassinations on Ukraine. Just over a year ago, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security service claimed responsibility for the attack.

In April, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, a deputy head of the main operational department in the General Staff, was killed by an explosive device placed in his car parked near his apartment building just outside Moscow.

Days after Moskalik's killing, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he received a report from the head of Ukraine's foreign intelligence agency on the "liquidation" of top Russian military figures, adding that "justice inevitably comes" although he didn't mention Moskalik's name.

Meanwhile, Western officials have accused Russia of staging a campaign of disruption and sabotage across Europe as part of an effort to sap support for Ukraine. Moscow has denied the claims.

Turkey recovers black boxes from jet crash that killed top Libyan military officials

By SUZAN FRASER and FAY ABUELGASIM Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Search teams in Turkey on Wednesday recovered the cockpit voice and flight data recorders from a jet crash that killed eight people, including western Libya's military chief, while efforts to retrieve the victims' remains were still underway, Turkey's interior minister said.

The private jet carrying Gen. Muhammad Ali Ahmad al-Haddad, four other military officials and three crew members crashed on Tuesday, after taking off from Turkey's capital, Ankara, killing everyone on board. Libyan officials said that the cause of the crash was a technical malfunction on the plane.

The high-level Libyan delegation was on its way back to Tripoli after holding defense talks in Ankara aimed at boosting military cooperation between the two countries.

Turkish Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya told journalists at the site of the crash that wreckage was scattered across an area covering 3 square kilometers (more than a square mile), complicating recovery efforts. Authorities from the Turkish forensic medicine authority were working to recover and identify the remains, he said.

Libyan officials arrive to assist

A 22-person delegation — including five family members — arrived from Libya early on Wednesday to assist in the investigation, he said.

Tripoli-based Libyan Prime Minister Abdul-Hamid Dbeibah confirmed the deaths on Tuesday, describing the crash on Facebook as a "tragic accident" and a "great loss" for Libya.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a telephone call with Dbeibah, during which he conveyed his condolences and expressed his sorrow over the deaths, his office said.

"An investigation has been launched into this tragic incident that has deeply saddened us, and our ministries will provide information about its progress," Erdogan said.

General was pivotal in efforts to bring Libyans together

Al-Hadad was the top military commander in western Libya and played a crucial role in the ongoing, U.N.-brokered efforts to unify Libya's military, which has split, much like the nation's other institutions.

The other military officials who died in the crash were Gen. Al-Fitouri Ghraibil, the head of Libya's ground forces, Brig. Gen. Mahmoud Al-Qatawi, who led the military manufacturing authority, Mohammed Al-Asawi Diab, adviser to the chief of staff, and Mohammed Omar Ahmed Mahjoub, a military photographer with the chief of staff's office.

The identities of the three crew members weren't immediately released.

Turkish officials said that the Falcon 50-type business jet took off from Ankara's Esenboga airport at 8:30 p.m. and that contact was lost around 40 minutes later. The plane notified air traffic control of an electrical fault and requested an emergency landing. The aircraft was redirected back to Esenboga, where preparations for its landing began.

The plane, however, disappeared from radar while descending for the emergency landing, the Turkish presidential communications office said.

Libya observes three-day national mourning

The Libyan government declared a three-day national mourning with flags flown half-staff at all state institutions, according to an announcement on Facebook.

The wreckage was found near the village of Kesikkavak, in Haymana, a district about 70 kilometers (45 miles) south of Ankara.

Search and recovery teams intensified their operations on Wednesday after a night of heavy rain and fog, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported. Gendarmerie police sealed off the area while the Turkish disaster management agency, AFAD, set up a mobile coordination center. Specialized vehicles, such as tracked ambulances, were deployed because of the muddy terrain.

Turkey has assigned four prosecutors to lead the investigation, and Yerlikaya that said the Turkish search and recovery teams included 408 personnel.

'Neutral' country to examine flight recorders

Turkey's Transportation Minister Abdulkadir Uraloglu said the cockpit voice and flight data recorders would be sent to a neutral third country for examination, in order to ensure impartial findings on the cause of the crash.

While in Ankara, al-Haddad had met with Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler and other officials.

Libya plunged into chaos after the country's 2011 uprising toppled and killed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi. The country split, with rival administrations in the east and west, backed by an array of rogue militias and foreign governments.

Turkey has been the main backer of Libya's government in the west, but has recently taken steps to improve ties with the eastern-based government as well.

Tuesday's visit by the Libyan delegation came a day after Turkey's parliament approved a two-year extension of the mandate of Turkish troops serving in Libya. Turkey deployed troops following a 2019 security and military cooperation agreement that was reached between Ankara and the Tripoli-based government.

How Christian artists are winning over listeners and entering pop's mainstream

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It is one of the most surprising music stories of the year. While streams of new music — releases from the last 18 months — were down from last year, one genre is on the rise: Christian and

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gospel music, according to industry data and analytics company Luminate's 2025 Midyear Report.

Jaime Marconette, Luminate's vice president of music insights and industry relations, said the shift is led by acts like Forrest Frank, Brandon Lake and Elevation Worship, who are connecting with a "younger, streaming-forward fan base" that's 60% female and 30% millennial. In fact, for the first time in 11 years, two contemporary Christian music songs — Frank's "Your Way's Better" and Lake's "Hard Fought Hallelujah" with Jelly Roll — broke through the Billboard Hot 100's all-genre Top 40, placing them in direct competition with mainstream artists.

It's also why traditionally secular artists like Jelly Roll, Killer Mike and T.I. are nominated in Christian music categories at the forthcoming 2026 Grammys — the lines are blurring.

An evolving Christian music sound

"Christian music (is) unlike any other genre that's defined by a sonic component. Christian music is defined by its lyrical component," says Holly Zabka, the president of Provident Entertainment, a Sony Christian music subsidiary. "It's not limited to a narrow definition. It's a lyrical component that can appeal to anyone's musical preference."

From a label perspective, she's interested in pursuing artists that "don't have to fit within that narrow lane of Christian bookstore and Christian radio. It can be rap, hip-hop, it can be rock, it can be country, and that's appealing to a broader audience because it's what they're already listening to," she says. "Very few people listen in a vacuum and only listen to one genre."

But for many years, CCM has held a reputation for being unimaginative — what writer John Jeremiah Sullivan infamously referred to as "excellence-proof" — for its tendency to mimic and water down popular, contemporary mainstream sounds for a religious audience.

"Absolutely there's been an improvement in quality," says Zabka. "When all the music has to live side by side on these streaming platforms, we can't just be the cheap alternative. 'Oh, you like Taylor Swift? You will like this lesser version offering in the Christian genre.' We want to be the greatest art."

"You have to imitate before you innovate," Chris Brown, singer and worship leader at Elevation Worship, jokes. "There's not as many rigid lines stylistically within Christian music as maybe there was 10 years ago or certainly like 20, 30 years ago."

"There was a period of time where people idealized Christian music as like, 'OK, we're going to have this look, we're going to sound like this,'" says two-time Grammy-winning Christian and pop musician Lauren Daigle. "There's so much more artistry now. People are very expressive. They're able to share their creativity. And that also comes with different types of people represented."

Why Christian music is connecting now

Zabka says her genre is experiencing "a special moment and ... a perfect storm." Streaming and the ability to connect on social media have democratized music discovery, she says, allowing CCM to compete with secular music. That, partnered with what she views as "a resurgence of faith" in young people, is responsible for the interest.

The number of Americans who identify as Christian has declined steadily for years, but that drop shows signs of slowing, according to a 2025 survey from the Pew Research Center. A new class of millennial and Gen Z Christian influencers, too, are aiming to connect with young people.

"Christian music has also shifted in its authenticity of the lyrics," Zabka adds, making the music more relatable than previous iterations of the genre, which often featured a neat message of "everything is going to be OK, just follow Jesus" in 3 ½ minutes. Now, she says, "their songs are much more authentic and real and honest. 'Life is hard. Breakups are hard. Bad things happen,' and that provides a level of hope that other music doesn't provide for the listener."

Daigle points out that artists like Lake are performing in huge stadiums — categorical proof that Christian artists are growing in popularity.

"I think a lot of people are looking at the world and ... they find fortitude in this music, and they find a sense of strength in this music, and they find truth in this music," she says.

Daigle also theorizes that because "Christian music points to something else" — to God — instead of focusing on individual issues or the ego of the performer on stage, it evens the playing field between

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listener and artist, while giving both a sense of purpose.

"In a world that has become so self-focused and self-centered, the freedom of saying 'Wow, I can actually lean on someone else for a while,' or 'There's something that is actually greater than me,'" she says. "And the purpose of Christian music, for me, is to bring hope to people."

Brown theorizes that people relate to his Charlotte, North Carolina-based CCM collective because of "how fundamentally we're rooted" in their local church.

"It's easy to connect because we're just church people," he says.

A crossover moment

Lake, who is nominated for three Grammys in 2026, including "Hard Fought Hallelujah," believes people are connecting with Christian music now because that's simply the purpose of religious music.

"The reason why people are turning their ear toward those kinds of songs right now is because that's what they were made for," Lake says. "People are finding in these songs — they're finding themselves, their spirit, connecting with the spirit of God. ... Those songs aren't just entertainment; they tee up an encounter."

"I love all kinds of music," he continues, "but if you have a song that carries that kind of message, it's just super charged, you know? It does something deeper."

He also believes this may be the start of a crossover moment, where more Christian artists will be welcomed into other genres and mainstream spaces. "I pray it's just the beginning," he says. "And I pray that it takes over."

Jelly Roll agrees. "I think there really is a revival happening in America right now where people are being re-presented the Gospel in a digestible way. And it doesn't seem as finger-waggy and 'You're all going to hell,' you know?" he says.

"I really don't care when the organized religions wave their finger at me," he continues. "I'm just glad to see the message, the Gospel getting presented."

What are the 10 largest US lottery jackpots ever won?

By The Associated Press undefined

The Powerball jackpot has grown to an estimated \$1.7 billion for Wednesday night's drawing after lottery officials said no ticket matched all six numbers drawn Monday night.

The U.S. has seen more than a dozen lottery jackpot prizes exceed \$1 billion since 2016. Here is a look at the largest U.S. jackpots won and the places where the winning tickets were sold:

1. \$2.04 billion, Powerball, Nov. 7, 2022. The winning ticket was sold at a Los Angeles-area gas station.
2. \$1.787 billion, Powerball, Sept. 6, 2025. The winning tickets were sold in Missouri and Texas.
3. \$1.765 billion, Powerball, Oct. 11, 2023. The winning ticket was sold at a liquor store in a tiny California mountain town.
4. \$1.602 billion, Mega Millions, Aug. 8, 2023. The winning ticket was sold at a supermarket in Neptune Beach, Florida.
5. \$1.586 billion, Powerball, Jan. 13, 2016. The winning tickets were sold at a Los Angeles-area convenience store, a Florida supermarket and a Tennessee grocery store.
6. \$1.537 billion, Mega Millions, Oct. 23, 2018. The winning ticket was sold at a South Carolina convenience store.
7. \$1.348 billion, Mega Millions, Jan. 13, 2023. The winning ticket was sold at a Maine gas station.
8. \$1.337 billion, Mega Millions, July 29, 2022. The winning ticket was sold at a Chicago-area gas station.
9. \$1.326 billion, Powerball, April 7, 2024. The winning ticket was sold at an Oregon convenience store.
10. \$1.269 billion, Mega Millions, Dec. 27, 2024. The winning ticket was sold at a gas station in Northern California.

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Pro-Russian hackers claim cyberattack on French postal service

PARIS (AP) — A pro-Russian hacking group claimed responsibility for a major cyberattack that halted package deliveries by France's national postal service just days before Christmas, prosecutors said Wednesday.

After the claim by the cybercrime group known as Noname057, French intelligence agency DGSI took over the investigation into the hacking attack, the Paris prosecutor's office said in a statement to The Associated Press.

The group has been accused of other cyberattacks in Europe, including around a NATO summit in the Netherlands and French government sites. It was the target of a big European police operation earlier this year.

Central computer systems at French national postal service La Poste were knocked offline Monday in a distributed denial of service, or DDoS, cyberattack that still wasn't fully resolved by Wednesday morning, the company said.

Postal workers couldn't track package deliveries, and online payments at the company's banking arm were also disrupted. It was a major blow to La Poste, which delivered 2.6 billion packages last year and employs more than 200,000 people, during the busiest season of the year.

France and other European allies of Ukraine allege that Russia is waging a campaign of "hybrid warfare" to sow division in Western societies and undermine their support for Ukraine. The AP has tracked more than 145 incidents including sabotage, assassinations, cyberattacks, disinformation and other hostile acts that are increasingly draining police resources.

Today in History: December 25 George Washington crosses the Delaware

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Dec. 25, the 359th day of 2025. There are six days left in the year. This is Christmas Day.

Today in history:

On Dec. 25, 1776, Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, New Jersey, during the American Revolutionary War.

Also on this date:

In 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned King of England.

In 1818, "Silent Night (Stille Nacht)" was publicly performed for the first time during the Christmas Mid-night Mass at the Church of St. Nikolaus in Oberndorf, Austria.

In 1868, President Andrew Johnson granted unconditional pardons to "every person who directly or indirectly" supported the Confederacy in the Civil War.

In 1926, Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito.

In 1989, ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo) and his wife Elena were executed following a populist uprising.

In 2009, passengers aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 foiled an attempt to blow up the plane as it was landing in Detroit by seizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahb-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), who tried to set off explosives in his underwear. (Abdulmutallab later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2021, NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, the world's largest and most powerful space telescope, was rocketed aloft from French Guiana in South America on a quest to see light from the first stars and galaxies and search the universe for signs of life.

Today's Birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Larry Csonka is 79. Country singer Barbara Mandrell is 77. Actor Sissy Spacek is 76. Former White House adviser Karl Rove is 75. Actor CCH Pounder is 73. Singer Annie Lennox is 71. Country singer Steve Wariner is 71. Model and businesswoman Helena Christensen is 57. Former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is 54. Actor Jeremy Strong is 47.