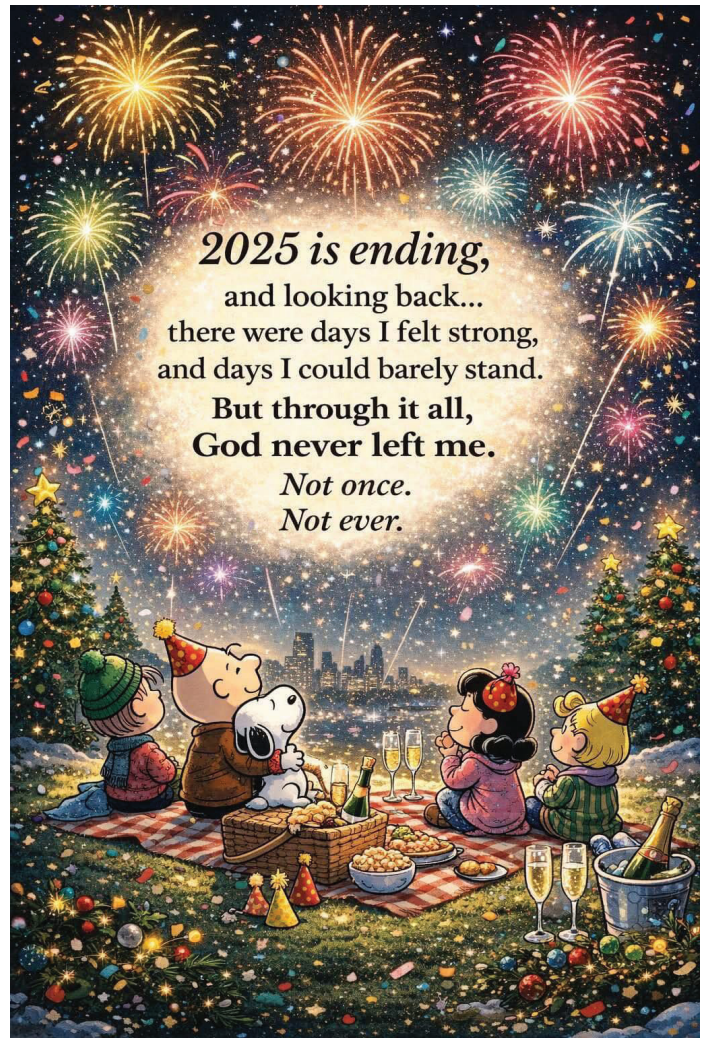


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*2025 is ending,  
and looking back...  
there were days I felt strong,  
and days I could barely stand.  
But through it all,  
God never left me.  
Not once.  
Not ever.*

## Wed., Dec. 31

Senior Menu: Oven fried chicken, sweet potatoes, green beans, fruit, whole wheat bread.

No School

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

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

3rd/4th Volleyball Practice, 6 p.m.

6th Grade Boys Basketball, 7:30 p.m.

**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.**

## The Biggest Headlines

From landmark events to major headlines, a lot happened in 2025. Below is a nonexhaustive list of some of the stories that stood out this year.

### Winter (January-March)

- > Los Angeles wildfires: The Palisades and Eaton fires burned nearly 40,000 acres, destroyed more than 16,000 structures, and displaced thousands, making them the most destructive in Southern California history.
- > Trump sworn in as 47th president: Donald Trump was sworn in as the 47th president of the United States on Jan. 20, beginning a new administration and setting the stage for his agenda, including on trade and immigration.
- > Astronauts return to Earth: On March 18, NASA astronauts Sunita "Sunni" Williams and Barry "Butch" Wilmore returned after over nine months aboard the International Space Station, following delays in their original mission plan.

### Spring (April-June)

- > Tariffs and trade agreements: The US unveiled a broad set of "Liberation Day" tariffs on most imports and higher reciprocal rates on select countries. The measures, along with ongoing trade negotiations, reshaped global trade flows.
- > Pope Francis passes away: Pope Francis passed away April 21 at age 88 of a stroke and irreversible heart failure, leading to a conclave and the election of Pope Leo as the new head of the Catholic Church.

### Summer (July-September)

- > Central Texas floods: In early July, extreme rainfall triggered rapid flash flooding across the Texas Hill Country, killing at least 135 people (including 27 campers and counselors at an all-girls summer camp) and damaging thousands of structures.
- > Nvidia reaches milestones: On July 9, Nvidia became the first company to reach a \$4T market valuation (and later \$5T in October) as demand for its chips surged, cementing Nvidia's role as the backbone supplier of the generative AI boom.
- > Chicago immigration raids: In early September, Chicago authorities carried out immigration raids with ICE, kicking off multicity enforcement efforts and highlighting tensions between federal policy and sanctuary-city policies.
- > Charlie Kirk assassination: On Sept. 10, conservative activist and Turning Point USA cofounder Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while speaking at Utah Valley University, drawing national attention.

### Fall (October-December)

- > Nobel Peace Prize: On Oct. 10, Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado received the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts promoting democratic rights and peaceful political change in Venezuela.
- > Louvre Museum heist: On Oct. 19, thieves stole eight pieces of French crown jewels from the Louvre in Paris, valued at an estimated \$100M, in one of the museum's most significant security breaches in decades.
- > Federal government shutdown: From Oct. 1 to Nov. 12, the US federal government experienced a 43-day shutdown, the longest in its history, after Congress failed to pass spending legislation. About 900,000 federal employees were furloughed.
- > Gene therapy breakthrough: A first-of-its-kind gene therapy appears to have reversed Hunter syndrome in a 3-year-old boy, offering hope for treating the rare, fatal genetic disease that current therapies cannot fully address.

What can \$20 get you?



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*Open 24/7*

**GDI Living Fitness**

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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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## Balanced Tigers roll past Webster, turn focus to Vermillion

The Groton Area Tigers delivered a dominant and disciplined performance Tuesday night, defeating the Webster Area Bearcats 63–42 in boys basketball action.

Groton jumped out to an 18–11 lead after the first quarter and quickly seized control in the second, a stretch head coach Greg Kjellsen felt set the tone for the night.

"I thought we came out with good intensity," Kjellsen said. "I was really pleased with our defensive effort."

The second quarter was highlighted by back-to-back dunks that ignited both the Tigers and the crowd, starting with an alley-oop from Karson Zak to Gage Sippel, followed moments later by Becker Bozma's first career dunk. The highlight sequence sparked a 12-point Groton run, pushing the lead to 38–12 midway through the quarter. The Tigers carried a commanding 43–18 advantage into halftime.

Groton continued to pour it on in the third quarter, extending the lead to 52–22 with 4:22 remaining, triggering the continuous clock. The Tigers led 57–24 at the end of three quarters before coasting to the 21-point win.

Offensively, Groton was highly efficient, shooting 16-of-20 on two-point field goal attempts for 80 percent, while going 8-of-25 from three-point range for 32 percent. Ryder Johnson, Keegen Tracy, and Easton Weber each knocked down two three-pointers, while Becker Bozma and Karson Zak added one apiece. From the free-throw line, the Tigers finished 7-of-12 for 58 percent.

Groton finished the night with 25 total rebounds, nine turnovers, 16 assists, nine steals, 14 team fouls, and four blocked shots.

Ryder Johnson led the Tigers with 13 points while adding two rebounds, two assists, and two steals. Keegen Tracy scored 10 points to go along with four rebounds and a team-high five assists. Karson Zak also finished with 10 points, one assist, and two steals. Gage Sippel contributed eight points, five rebounds, one assist, and two blocks, while Easton Weber added eight points, two rebounds, three assists, and one steal. Becker Bozma recorded seven points, two rebounds, two assists, and two steals. Ethan Crowe chipped in two points, two rebounds, and two assists, while Jayden Schwan added two points, three rebounds, and one steal. Logan Warrington finished with two points, three rebounds, and two blocks, Asher Johnson scored one point with two rebounds, and JJ Muller recorded one steal.

"The kids really shared the ball—almost to a fault," Kjellsen said. "Unless they're fooling me, I don't think they really care who gets the points as long as it's us."

Webster was led by Matthew Mount with 13 points, while Seth Lesnar, Jack Shoemaker, Jerome McGary, and Sheldon Schmig each scored six points, and Gage Wick added five. The Bearcats shot 13-of-34 from the field for 38 percent and went 9-of-21 from the free-throw line for 43 percent, committing 16 turnovers and finishing with 12 team fouls.

Kjellsen said rebounding remains an emphasis, particularly against perimeter-oriented teams. "They shoot a lot of threes, so you're going to get long rebounds," he said. "It's all attitude and effort."

### Sub-Varsity Results

Groton also swept the sub-varsity contests. The Tiger C team earned a 42–14 victory, led by Briggs Conn with nine points, Trey Tietz and Trayce Shelley with eight points each, Major Dolan with six points, Ryder Schwan with five points, Zach Flieds with four points, and Riley Schellenberger with two points.

The Groton junior varsity Tigers followed with a 48–18 win, holding a 16–8 lead after the first quarter, a 25–10 advantage at halftime, and a 40–12 margin after three quarters before the 30-point rule went into effect with 5:36 remaining. Anthony Tracy led the JV scoring with 13 points, while Asher Johnson added nine points. Ryder Shelley and Ethan Crowe each scored seven points, Jordan Schwan chipped in five points, Jace Johnson finished with five points, and JJ Muller added two points.

### Looking Ahead

With the conference win secured, Groton now turns its attention to a key matchup Friday as the Tigers host Vermillion in a doubleheader beginning at 2 p.m.

Kjellsen said preparation for Vermillion is already underway. "Coach Carson, Coach Tracy, and I have watched them quite a bit, and I'll probably watch them again tomorrow morning," he said. "They've got

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a kid who's about 6-4, and he's as good a player as we'll see all year. He's tough to guard offensively, he can shoot it, put it on the floor, and he draws a lot of fouls."

The Tigers' approach, Kjellsen said, will be focused but measured. "We're going to do what we can to limit him," he said, "and then we'll see what the rest of them can do."

## **Dunker has double-double to pace Lady Tigers past Lemmon; Traphagen has season high 16 points**

The Groton Area Lady Tigers picked up a hard-fought 51-47 win over the Lemmon Cowgirls in girls basketball action Tuesday night at the Barnett Center in Aberdeen.

Lemmon held the early momentum, building a 20-14 lead after the first quarter and taking a 25-21 advantage into halftime. Groton responded after the break, outscoring Lemmon 18-12 in the third quarter to take a 39-37 lead heading into the final frame. The Lady Tigers then closed out the contest to secure the four-point victory.

Rylee Dunker recorded a double-double for Groton with 11 points and 11 rebounds, while also leading the team with three assists. Jaedyn Penning added 12 points, seven rebounds, and three assists. Taryn Traphagen led all scorers with 16 points, including two three-pointers, and contributed three rebounds, three assists, three steals, and one block. Jerica Locke also connected on two three-pointers and finished with 10 points, seven rebounds, two assists, and three steals. Mia Crank scored two points and grabbed one rebound, while Sydney Locke pulled down two rebounds.

As a team, Groton shot 16-of-42 from the field for 38 percent, went 4-of-19 from three-point range for 21 percent, and finished 7-of-17 from the free-throw line for 41 percent. The Lady Tigers totaled 37 rebounds, including 17 offensive boards, to go along with 14 turnovers, 14 assists, 10 steals, 10 team fouls, and one block.

Izzy O'Donnell led Lemmon with 17 points, while Jordan Kohn scored nine. Kate Shelley added eight points, Madison Dauen had six, and Chell Odenbach finished with two points.

The Lemmon Cowgirls shot 19-of-44 from the field for 43 percent and went 5-of-6 from the free-throw line for 83 percent. Lemmon finished with 27 rebounds, six assists, 15 turnovers, six blocks, six steals, and 15 team fouls.

Lemmon falls to 4-2 on the season while the Tigers go to 3-2.

Groton Area will return to action Friday when the Lady Tigers host Vermillion as part of a double-header at the Groton Arena.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **Governor hits the road to award more state grants; opponents call it campaigning**

**'I am doing my job,' Rhoden says in response to criticism**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR**

BROOKINGS — South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden announced state economic development grants in two more communities Tuesday, drawing criticism from opponents in the race for governor who equated the announcements to campaigning.

Rhoden awarded \$900,000 to Dakota BioWorx in Brookings, a bioprocessing pilot facility in South Dakota State University's Research Park, and \$500,000 to the city of Watertown for infrastructure improvements at Calvin Industrial Park.

The news comes shortly after Rhoden announced a \$1 million grant to support two new business parks in Aberdeen, the hometown of Toby Doeden, one of Rhoden's opponents for next year's Republican nomination for governor.

Doeden said the timing and tone of the grant announcements make them look more like campaigning than governing. Doeden alleged that Rhoden "uses taxpayer money the same way career politicians have been using taxpayer dollars for decades — largely for his own benefit."

"His latest attempt to buy votes with minuscule handouts to communities he has otherwise entirely ignored will prove to be too little too late in the eyes of the voters," Doeden said.

Rhoden responded to the criticism during the event in Brookings by saying, "I am doing my job."

"We're in a campaign, but life goes on," Rhoden said. "And I continue to be governor through this campaign, so we're going to continue to do our jobs and do public announcements like this. I think we owe it to the public to let them know what we're doing as a state."

The source of the grants is the Future Fund, a pool of money that was created in 1987 at the request of then-Gov. George Mickelson. It was placed under the control of the governor, with the intent of enabling the state's chief executive to respond quickly when economic opportunities arise.

State law mandates only that the fund be used "for purposes related to research and economic development for the state." The money comes from South Dakota employers, who pay a fee to the Future Fund when they submit payroll taxes to the unemployment benefits program.

Rhoden's other two competitors in the June 2026 primary election also criticized his recent Future Fund announcements.

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, said Future Fund grants are an important tool for helping South Dakota's economy; however, he said, "they aren't meant to help someone's campaign."

"Even if these projects have merit, taxpayers are right to worry when the announcements start looking like campaign rallies," Johnson said.

State Speaker of the House Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, said "it's obvious that the Future Fund has been used by governors for political favor."

"At this point, the Future Fund isn't funding South Dakota's future, it's funding the governor's political future," Hansen said.

Rhoden's predecessor, Kristi Noem, sparked controversy and bipartisan lawmaker criticism with several uses of the Future Fund, including a fireworks show at Mount Rushmore, a Rapid City-area shooting range that legislators refused to pay for, a Governor's Cup rodeo in Sioux Falls, and a workforce recruitment campaign that Noem starred in.

Noem resigned as governor in January to run the federal Department of Homeland Security, elevating Rhoden to governor. Publicly available information indicates that Future Fund awards and approvals since then have totaled at least \$21 million, including some commitments made by the Noem administration before she left.

Eight lawmakers recently filed a bill that would take some control of the fund away from the governor. The bill would require each Future Fund grant to be approved by a majority of the Board of Economic Development, which is appointed by the governor and already has oversight of other economic development programs.

The current, unobligated Future Fund cash balance is \$20 million, according to the Governor's Office of Economic Development. The state budget gives Rhoden the authority to spend \$7 million more from the Future Fund this fiscal year, which ends June 30. South Dakota's primary election is June 2.

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

## Trump administration agrees to drop anti-DEI criteria for stalled health research grants

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

The Trump administration will review frozen grants to universities without using its controversial standards that discouraged gender, race and sexual orientation initiatives and vaccine research.

In a settlement agreement filed in Massachusetts federal court Monday, the National Institutes of Health and a group of Democratic attorneys general who'd challenged the new criteria for grant funding said the NIH would consider grant applications made up to Sept. 29, 2025, without judging the efforts related to diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, or vaccines.

The settlement provides an uncontested path for the agency while courts decide whether the administration can use its controversial analysis. The administration did not agree to permanently ditch its campaign to evaluate health research funding decisions based on schools' DEI programs.

NIH officials "will complete their consideration of the Applications in the ordinary course of NIH's scientific review process, without applying the Challenged Directives," the settlement said, adding that the agency would "evaluate each application individually and in good faith."

The settlement was signed by U.S. Department of Justice lawyers and the attorneys general of Massachusetts, California, Maryland, Washington, Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island and Wisconsin.

In a Tuesday statement, Massachusetts Attorney General Andrea Joy Campbell said the agreement commits the Department of Health and Human Services to resume "the usual process for considering NIH grant applications on a prompt, agreed-upon timeline."

The 17 attorneys general sued in April over \$783 million in frozen grants.

A trial court and appeals court in Massachusetts sided with the states, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in August that the trial judge lacked the authority to compel the grants to be paid, especially in light of a similar decision involving the Education Department.

*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.*

## Iowa landowners ask court to reconsider decision to pause pipeline permit lawsuit

South Dakota's anti-eminent domain law figures prominently in litigation

BY: CAMI KOONS

Landowners opposed to a carbon sequestration project in Iowa have asked a state court to reconsider its decision to pause a lawsuit over the permit for the pipeline until state officials rule on a filed amendment.

Landowners argue the Polk County District Court's decision to send the permit back to Iowa Utilities Commission "relied heavily" on the existence of a South Dakota law prohibiting the use of eminent domain for carbon sequestration pipelines.

Landowners, counties and the Sierra Club Iowa Chapter filed a suit in 2024 against the Iowa Utilities Commission decision to grant a permit to Summit Carbon Solutions for the first phase of its proposed carbon sequestration pipeline. The permit stated the Iowa-based company could not begin construction on the pipeline to connect to biorefineries and transport carbon dioxide to underground storage in North Dakota, until it had secured permits from the Dakotas.

In the spring of 2025, however, South Dakota enacted a law that prohibited the use of eminent domain for carbon sequestration pipelines. Eminent domain is used to force unwilling landowners to allow the use of their property for projects considered in the public interest, at a price set by a county commission. South Dakota's law meant Summit would have to obtain 100% of necessary land easements through voluntary contracts.

Summit filed for an amendment to its permit in September with the IUC to replace the Dakotas-specific language and instead require that the company receive permits for adequate sequestration and storage sites, not in a specific location.

The company then requested the court pause proceedings on the case against the permit until the IUC ruled on the proposed amendments. After oral arguments on the request in October, the Iowa District Court for Polk County remanded the permit to the IUC and paused judicial proceedings until the commission decided on the proposed amendments.

The changes in South Dakota, which occurred after the IUC issued the initial permit, were influential to the court's decision.

Polk County District Court Judge Scott Beattie referred to the law as the "S.D. CO2 Pipeline Ban" in the decision and said it "render the IUC's Final Order void" and would require Summit to find a route outside of South Dakota to get to its planned underground storage site in North Dakota.

Landowners requesting the reconsideration of the case said the South Dakota law is "not a ban" on carbon dioxide pipelines in the state and that the law should not be a "relevant or material factor" in the case as Summit could still pass through South Dakota under the law.

"(The South Dakota law) is not a ban on Summit's project in South Dakota and is not a ban on the citing and construction of carbon oxide pipelines in, through, or across South Dakota, that change in law is not material to the IUC's South Dakota condition," the motion for reconsideration said.

The motion from landowners argues that because Summit has not stated that it no longer plans to route the pipeline through South Dakota, the remand to the IUC gives the company a "second bite at the apple" and a "business flexibility" which leaves affected landowners "in the lurch."

"Summit wants the South Dakota condition removed while still maintaining the right to send Iowa carbon dioxide through South Dakota," the motion said. "... unless Summit presented evidence to this court renouncing any South Dakota route through which Iowa generated CO2 would travel via its pipeline, the logic for the IUC condition remains and remand is not necessary because Summit can and may go through South Dakota."

Representation for Summit argued before the court that it made "little sense" to proceed with the case if the permit were to be amended at the IUC level.

Judge Beattie also noted that staying the case until the IUC decided on the permit amendment would

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also prevent the case from potentially being litigated a second time. Beattie wrote in the decision that “adjudicating the merits of a permit that is actively being amended serves no useful purpose.”

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

The landowners, represented by Brian Jorde of Domina Law Group, asked the court to reverse its finding that the South Dakota law renders the IUC order void and to reverse its remand to instead set a briefing schedule for the appeal.

If the court does not reverse its decision, the motion asks the court to “specifically identify” and direct the IUC to “rescind route approval and eminent domain approval for all portions of the Iowa route from the South Dakota border back to the nearest connecting Iowa ethanol plant” in order to avoid “pipelines to nowhere.”

*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.*

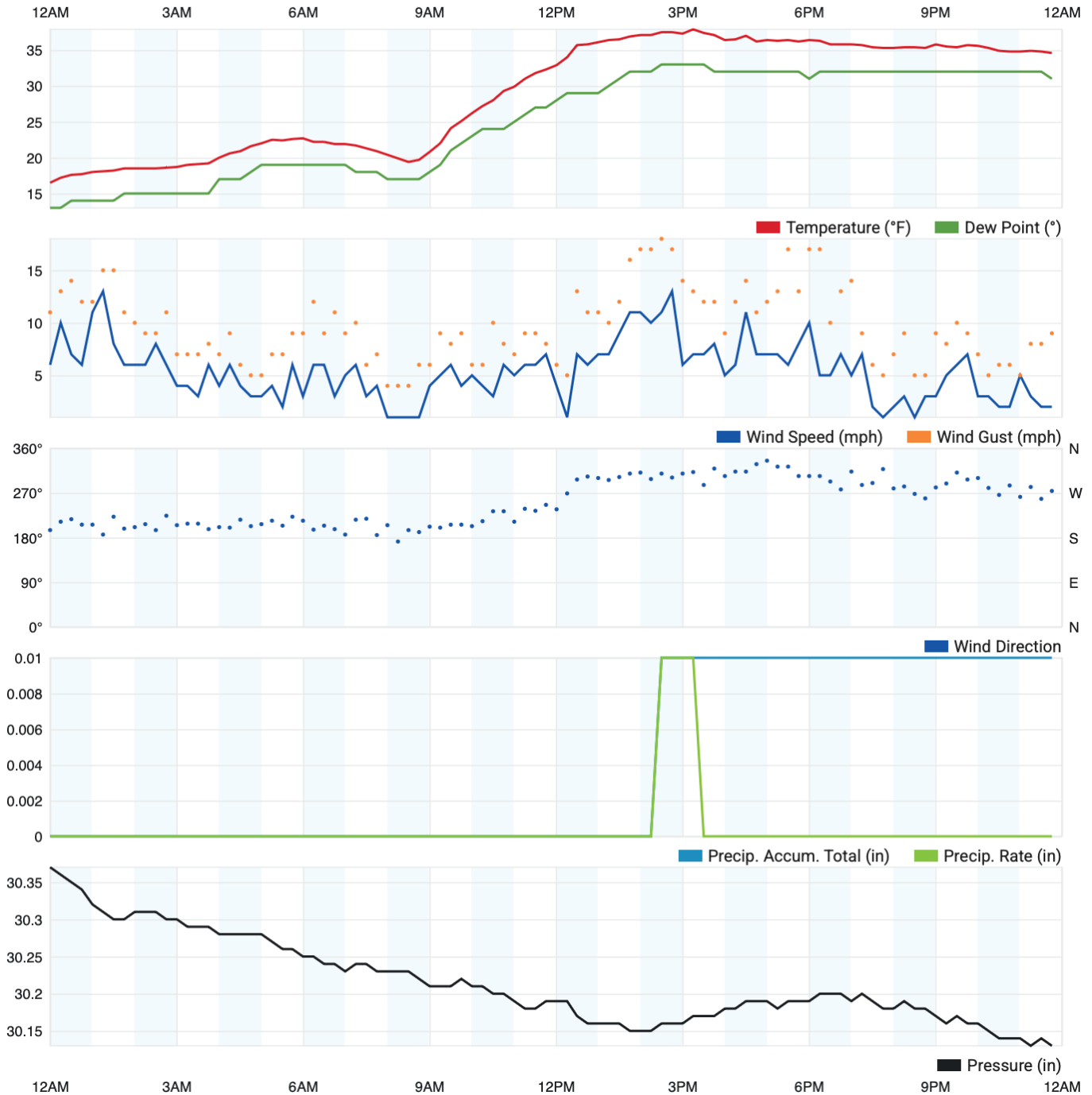
*Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 30, 2025



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Today



High: 25 °F ↓

Chance  
Flurries and  
Patchy Fog  
then Partly  
Sunny

Tonight



Low: 1 °F

Partly Cloudy

New Year's  
Day



High: 16 °F

Mostly Sunny

Thursday  
Night



Low: 9 °F

Mostly Cloudy

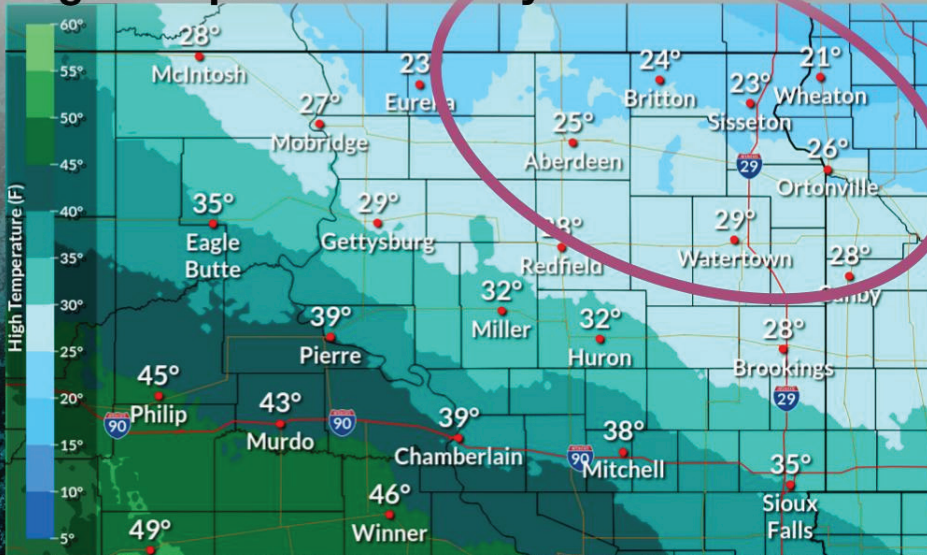
Friday



High: 17 °F

Partly Sunny

## High Temperatures Today



Over northeastern South Dakota & west central Minnesota...

Patchy morning fog with a slight chance (~20%) of light snow or freezing rain/freezing drizzle through around 10 AM. Flurries lingering into early afternoon. Little to no accumulation expected.

Temperatures falling into the teens to single digits by early afternoon.



Check out your hourly forecast at...  
[weather.gov/forecastpoints](https://weather.gov/forecastpoints)

NWS Aberdeen, SD [weather.gov/abr](https://weather.gov/abr)

Over northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota... Expect brief patchy fog with around a 20 percent chance of light snow or freezing rain/freezing drizzle through late morning, with flurries lingering into early afternoon. Little to no accumulation expected. Temperatures will fall into the teens to single digits above zero by early afternoon.

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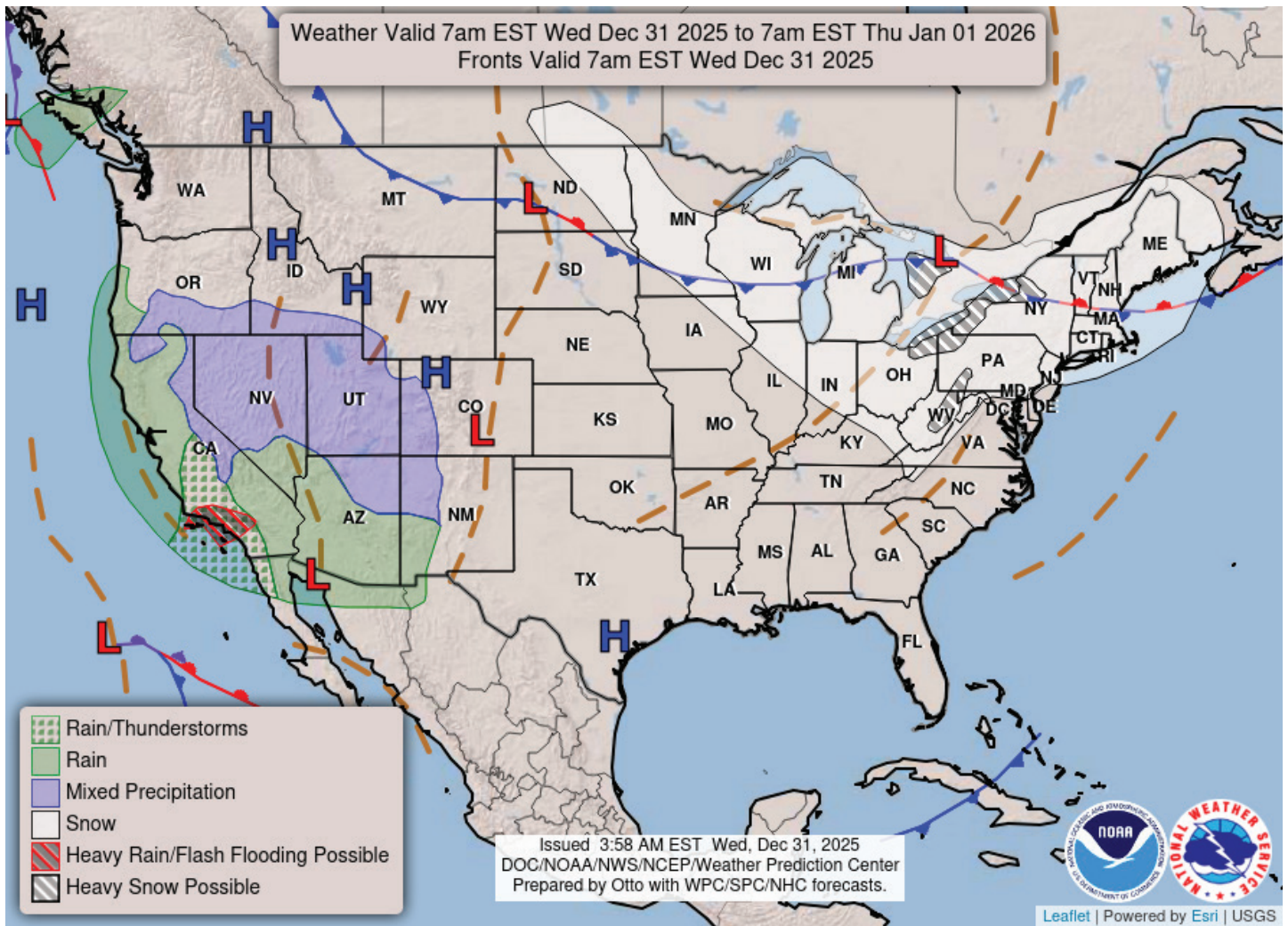
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 38 °F at 3:17 PM**  
**Low Temp: 16 °F at 12:00 AM**  
**Wind: 19 mph at 4:18 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 47 in 1999  
Record Low: -39 in 1967  
Average High: 24  
Average Low: 4  
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.61  
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.70  
Average Precip to date: 21.82  
Precip Year to Date: 25.51  
Sunset Tonight: 4:58 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:12 am



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## Today in Weather History

2010: An area of low pressure moved across the Northern Plains on New Year's Eve bringing widespread heavy snowfall along with blizzard conditions. Bitter cold northwest winds of 25 to 40 mph combined with additional snowfall of 6 to 10 inches brought reduced visibility to near zero across much of the region. This storm was the second blizzard in two days across the area. The blizzard conditions continued into early New Year's Day. Both Interstates 29 and 90 were closed from the 31st until Sunday, January 2nd. There were several stranded motorists along Highway 83 with five people being rescued. The total snowfall amounts from the two storms ranged from 6 to 15 inches across the region.

1876: A heavy snowstorm hit southern Arkansas, with amounts well over 20 inches in places. 28 inches was reported near Warren, and 24–28 inches was reported at Arkansas City.

1882: Downtown San Francisco saw 3.5 inches of snow.

1890: According to the National Meteorological Library and Archive from the United Kingdom, during December 1890, Westminster, England saw zero hours of sunshine.

1917 — The temperature at Lewisburg, WV, plunged to 37 degrees below zero to set a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1929 — Greenland Ranch, in Death Valley, California, went the entire year without measurable precipitation. (The Weather Channel)

1933: During the last week of December, a series of winter storms pounded the mountainside with 12 inches of rain near Los Angeles. More rain occurred on New Year's Eve, including 4.86 inches in downtown Los Angeles. The 4.86 inches is currently the fourth most rainfall to occur in one day in downtown Los Angeles since 1877. Around midnight, hillsides in at least three mountain locations collapsed sending millions of tons of mud and debris into the Crescenta Valley neighborhoods below. Crescenta Valley is a few miles north of Los Angeles. This mudslide destroyed more than 400 homes. Following the disaster, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the County of Los Angeles built a flood control system of catch basins, and concrete storm drains, designed to prevent a repeat of the 1934 disaster.

1941 — Snow which began on New Year's Eve became a major blizzard on New Year's Day, burying Des Moines, IA, under 19.8 inches of snow in 24 hours, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1947 — A late afternoon tornado touched down 10 miles north of Shreveport LA, and dissipated south of El Dorado AR. The tornado, as much as 400 yards in width, killed 18 persons. It damaged or destroyed two thirds of the structures at Cotton Valley LA. (The Weather Channel)

1962 — Perhaps the worst blizzard in the history of the state of Maine finally came to an end. The storm produced 40 inches in 24 hours at Orono, and a total of 46 inches at Ripogenus Dam. Gale force winds produced snow drifts twenty feet high around Bangor. A disastrous icestorm was over Georgia and South Carolina. It ravaged the two states for days causing more than seven million dollars damage. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1963 — A snowstorm struck the Deep South. Meridian, MS, received 15 inches of snow, 10.5 inches blanketed Bay St Louis MS, and 4.5 inches fell at New Orleans LA. Freezing temperatures then prevailed for New Year's Day. (David Ludlum)

1967 — The kickoff temperature for the NFL Championship Game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers was -13°F with a wind chill of -36°F. This game is known as the Ice Bowl. □

2000: The "Snow Bowl" was played between Mississippi St and Texas A&M at Independence Stadium in Shreveport, Louisiana. Snow began about a half hour before kickoff and didn't stop until well after the bowl game.

2010 — Unusually warm air fueled strong storms in the midwestern and southern U.S., producing high winds and a preliminary count of 53 tornadoes across five states. At least eight people were killed in Missouri and Arkansas and dozens of others were injured. In Mississippi, about 200 people were evacuated from the Jackson-Evers International Airport, where an EF-2 tornado crossed a runway. (NCDC)

## Ending Well

**Struggles are part of life—so it's important to persevere, remember God's promises, and rely on divine power to overcome.**

Luke 12:15-21: 15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive.

17 "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'

18 "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry."'

20 "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'

21 "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

In today's passage, we read about a rich man who made poor use of his days. Incorrectly assuming that his life would last for many years, he left God out of his plans.

Paul, on the other hand, knew his time was short and made the most of his days. His letters from prison illustrate this—despite knowing he would soon face death, Paul devoted his time and energy to instructing and praying for others.

One thing he taught was to do everything as if for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). Paul knew it was important for Christians to realize kingdom work isn't just for missionaries and pastors; God calls all believers to different fields and assignments.

The apostle also knew that the Christian life encompasses struggles. In addition, he was realistic about acknowledging his own imperfections (Romans 7:5-25). This meant that to make the best use of his time, he needed to persevere, remember God's promises, and rely on divine power for victory. Indeed, at the end of his life, Paul was able to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Life is a gift. Every one of us has a certain number of days on this earth. How will you utilize your time so you can eventually look back and, like Paul, confidently say you finished well?

*We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him*

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.30.25

18 43 49 63 69 6

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$157,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 23

DRAW: Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.29.25

1 5 24 35 51 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$11,130,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 38 Mins 14

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.30.25

3 7 15 24 30 16

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 53 Mins 14

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.27.25

8 14 15 20 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$156,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 53 Mins 14

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.29.25

5 9 38 62 64 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 22 Mins 14

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.29.25

11 19 34 48 53 21

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$45,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 22 Mins 14

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Castlewood 74, Arlington 32  
Centerville 66, Beresford 47  
Chamberlain 43, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 42  
Clark-Willow Lake 72, Wessington Springs 43  
Crow Creek Tribal School 95, Oelrichs 40  
Dakota Valley 83, Platte-Geddes 49  
Emery 62, Timber Lake 48  
Faulkton 72, Mitchell 53  
Gayville-Volin High School 39, Bon Homme 35  
Gettysburg 66, Hitchcock-Tulare 59  
Groton 63, Webster 42  
Harding County def. Edgemont, forfeit  
Howard 54, Lower Brule 42  
Irene-Wakonda 74, Avon 48  
James Valley Christian School 70, Burke 61  
Jones County 66, Langford 65  
Jonesboro, Ga. 58, Mitchell 51  
Kadoka 62, Wolsey-Wessington 44  
Mobridge-Pollock 66, Wagner 63  
New Underwood 60, Belle Fourche 54  
Oakes, N.D. 66, Aberdeen Roncalli 54  
Parkston 64, Sisseton 8  
Sioux Falls Christian 66, Huron 61  
Sioux Falls Lincoln 73, Sioux Falls Jefferson 50  
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 63, Sioux Falls Washington 57  
Sully Buttes 70, Philip 46  
Viborg-Hurley 57, Leola-Frederick High School 42  
Waubay/Summit 56, Tri-State, N.D. 24  
White River 70, Gregory 53  
Winner 77, Parker/Marion 51  
Wolsey-Wessington 65, Bennett County 3  
Zephyrhills Christian, Fla. 68, Brandon Valley 62  
Chadron Tournament=  
Consolation Semifinal=  
Gering, Neb. 55, Custer 53

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

### GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Arlington 48, Castlewood 36  
Avon 51, Irene-Wakonda 42  
Centerville 70, Beresford 59  
Central Cass, N.D. 54, Northwestern 15  
Dakota Valley 62, McCook Central-Montrose 45  
Deubrook 56, Garretson 16

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Estelline-Hendricks 61, Wilmot 28  
Florence-Henry 47, Herried-Selby 45  
Gayville-Volin High School 68, Bon Homme 24  
Groton 51, Lemmon High School 47  
Hamlin 51, Mobridge-Pollock 47  
Harding County 63, Newell 22  
Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 59, Dell Rapids St Mary's 52  
Hitchcock-Tulare 69, White River 43  
Kadoka 54, Gettysburg 40  
Minot, N.D. 54, Aberdeen Central 43  
Parker/Marion 46, Leola-Frederick High School 31  
Parkston 56, Corsica/Stickney 47  
Philip 58, Sully Buttes 47  
Rapid City Christian 64, Hot Springs 20  
Rapid City Stevens 50, Spearfish 39  
Sioux Falls Jefferson 81, Sioux Falls Lincoln 16  
Sioux Falls Washington 55, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 39  
St Thomas More 56, Hill City 39  
Tea 53, Brandon Valley 1  
Viborg-Hurley 28, Platte-Geddes 24  
Wall 66, Pine Ridge 33  
Waubay/Summit 60, Tri-State, N.D. 21  
Wolsey-Wessington 46, Waverly-South Shore 28  
Chadron Tournament=  
Consolation Semifinal=  
Gering, Neb. 51, Custer 46  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
Huron vs. Yankton, ppd. to Dec 30th.

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

## Democrat Renee Hardman wins Iowa state Senate seat, blocking GOP from reclaiming a supermajority

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Democrat Renee Hardman was elected to the Iowa state Senate on Tuesday in a year-end special election, denying Republicans from reclaiming two-thirds control of the chamber.

Hardman bested Republican Lucas Loftin by an overwhelming margin to win a seat representing parts of the Des Moines suburbs. The seat became vacant after the Oct. 6 death of state Sen. Claire Celsi, a Democrat.

Hardman, the CEO of nonprofit Lutheran Services of Iowa and a member of the West Des Moines City Council, becomes the first Black woman elected to the 50-member Senate.

"I want to recognize that while my name was the one on the ballot, this race was never just about me," Hardman told a room of supporters in West Des Moines after declaring victory.

With 99% of votes counted, Hardman led by about 43 percentage points.

Her win is the latest in a string of special election victories for Iowa Democrats, who flipped two Senate seats this year to break up a supermajority that had allowed Republicans to easily confirm GOP Gov. Kim Reynolds' appointments to state agencies and commissions.

Democrat Mike Zimmer first flipped a seat in January, winning a district that had strongly favored Republican President Donald Trump in the 2024 election. In August, Democrat Catelin Drey handily defeated

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her GOP opponent in the Republican stronghold of northwestern Iowa, giving Democrats 17 seats to Republicans' 33. Celsi's death brought that down to 16.

Republicans would have regained two-thirds control with a Loftin victory Tuesday. Without a supermajority, the party will need to get support from at least one Democrat to approve Reynolds' nominees. The GOP still has significant majorities in both legislative chambers.

Ken Martin, chair of the Democratic National Committee, called Hardman's victory "a major check on Republican power."

"With the last special election of the year now decided, one thing is clear: 2025 was the year of Democratic victories and overperformance, and Democrats are on track for big midterm elections," Martin said.

In November the party dominated the first major Election Day since Trump returned to the White House, notably winning governor's races in Virginia and New Jersey. Democrats held onto a Kentucky state Senate seat this month in a special election. And while Republican Matt Van Epps won a Tennessee special election for a U.S. House seat, the relatively slim margin of victory gave Democrats hope for next year's midterms. The party must net three House seats in 2026 to reclaim the majority and impede Trump's agenda.

Loftin, a tree trimmer turned data manager, congratulated Hardman and told The Associated Press he's praying for her as she embarks on this important chapter.

Iowa GOP Chairman Jeff Kaufmann applauded Loftin and his supporters for putting up a fight in what he described as "a very tough district." Democrats outnumber Republicans by about 3,300 voters, or 37% to 30%.

"Although we fell short this time, the Republican Party of Iowa remains laser-focused on expanding our majorities in the Iowa Legislature and keeping Iowa ruby-red," Kaufmann said.

The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee pledged Tuesday to help defend the party's gains in Iowa and prevent the return of a GOP supermajority next year.

## **Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen port city over weapons shipment from UAE for separatists**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia bombed Yemen's port city of Mukalla on Tuesday after a weapons shipment from the United Arab Emirates arrived for separatist forces in the war-torn country, and warned that it viewed Emirati actions as "extremely dangerous."

The bombing followed tensions over the advance of Emirates-backed separatist forces known as the Southern Transitional Council. The council and its allies issued a statement supporting the UAE's presence, even as others allied with Saudi Arabia demanded that Emirati forces withdraw from Yemen in 24 hours' time.

The UAE called for "restraint and wisdom" and disputed Riyadh's allegations. But shortly after that, it said it would withdraw its remaining troops in Yemen. It remained unclear whether the separatists it backs will give up the territory they recently took.

The confrontation threatened to open a new front in Yemen's decade-long war, with forces allied against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels possibly turning their sights on each other in the Arab world's poorest nation.

It also further strained ties between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula that increasingly have competed over economic issues and regional politics, particularly in the Red Sea area. Tuesday's airstrikes and ultimatum appeared to be their most serious confrontation in decades.

"I expect a calibrated escalation from both sides. The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council is likely to respond by consolidating control," said Mohammed al-Basha, a Yemen expert and founder of the Basha Report, a risk advisory firm.

"At the same time, the flow of weapons from the UAE to the STC is set to be curtailed following the port attack, particularly as Saudi Arabia controls the airspace."

Airstrike hits Mukalla

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A military statement carried by the state-run Saudi Press Agency announced the strikes on Mukalla, which it said came after ships arrived there from Fujairah in the UAE.

"The ships' crew had disabled tracking devices aboard the vessels, and unloaded a large amount of weapons and combat vehicles in support of the Southern Transitional Council's forces," the statement said.

"Considering that the aforementioned weapons constitute an imminent threat, and an escalation that threatens peace and stability, the Coalition Air Force has conducted this morning a limited airstrike that targeted weapons and military vehicles offloaded from the two vessels in Mukalla," it added.

It wasn't clear if there were any casualties.

The Emirati Foreign Ministry hours later denied it shipped weapons but acknowledged it sent the vehicles "for use by the UAE forces operating in Yemen." It also claimed Saudi Arabia knew about the shipment ahead of time.

The ministry called for "the highest levels of coordination, restraint and wisdom, taking into account the existing security challenges and threats."

The Emirati Defense Ministry later said it would withdraw its remaining troops from Yemen over "recent developments and their potential repercussions on the safety and effectiveness of counter-terrorism operations." It gave no timeline for the withdrawal. The UAE broadly withdrew its forces from Yemen years earlier.

Yemen's anti-Houthi forces not aligned with the separatists declared a state of emergency Tuesday and ended their cooperation with the UAE. They issued a 72-hour ban on border crossings in territory they hold, as well as entries to airports and seaports, except those allowed by Saudi Arabia. It remained unclear whether that coalition, governed under the umbrella of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, would remain intact.

The Southern Transitional Council's AIC satellite news channel aired footage of the strike's aftermath but avoided showing damage to the armored vehicles.

"This unjustified escalation against ports and civilian infrastructure will only strengthen popular demands for decisive action and the declaration of a South Arabian state," the channel said.

The attack likely targeted a ship identified as the Greenland, a vessel flagged out of St. Kitts. Tracking data analyzed by the AP showed the vessel had been in Fujairah on Dec. 22 and arrived in Mukalla on Sunday. The second vessel could not be immediately identified.

Jens Laerke, a spokesperson for the U.N. humanitarian office, urged combatants to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, like the port, saying any disruption to its operations "risks affecting the already dire humanitarian situation and humanitarian supply chains."

Strike comes as separatists advance

Mukalla is in Yemen's Hadramout governorate, which the council seized in recent days. The port city is some 480 kilometers (300 miles) northeast of Aden, which has been the seat of power for anti-Houthi forces after the rebels seized the capital, Sanaa, in 2014.

Yemen, on the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula off East Africa, borders the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The war there has killed more than 150,000 people, including fighters and civilians, and created one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters.

The Houthis, meanwhile, have launched attacks on hundreds of ships in the Red Sea corridor over the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, disrupting regional shipping. The U.S., which earlier praised Saudi-Emirati efforts to end the crisis over the separatists, has launched airstrikes against the rebels under both Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio called his Emirati and Saudi counterparts over the crisis.

Tuesday's strike in Mukalla comes after Saudi Arabia targeted the council in airstrikes Friday that analysts described as a warning for the separatists to halt their advance and leave the governorates of Hadramout and Mahra.

The council had pushed out forces there affiliated with the Saudi-backed National Shield Forces, another group in the anti-Houthi coalition.

Those aligned with the council have increasingly flown the flag of South Yemen, which was a separate

country from 1967-1990. Demonstrators have been rallying to support political forces calling for South Yemen to secede again.

A statement Tuesday from Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry directly linked the council's advance to the Emiratis for the first time.

"The kingdom notes that the steps taken by the sisterly United Arab Emirates are extremely dangerous," it said.

Allies of the council later issued a statement in which they showed no sign of backing down.

## China flexes blockade capabilities near Taiwan on second day of military drills

By JOHNSON LAI and KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China's People's Liberation Army staged a second day of large-scale military drills around Taiwan on Tuesday, unleashing a live-fire show of force as part of what it called "Justice Mission 2025" to demonstrate its ability to deter any external support for the island it claims as part of its sovereign territory.

Taiwanese officials said some of China's live rounds landed closer to the island than before.

The maneuvers increased tension around the Taiwan Strait as 2025 drew to a close, but the impact extended beyond military pressure into everyday life. Taiwan's Civil Aviation Administration was notified that seven temporary "dangerous zones" had been set up around the strait. The schedules of Taiwan's four international airports on Tuesday afternoon showed over 150 international and domestic flights had revised times, delays or cancellations.

Xinhua, China's official news agency, posted a commentary late Monday saying the drills sent an unequivocal message: That Beijing is always ready to prevent anything that tries to split Taiwan from China. Each escalation, it said, would be met with stronger countermeasures.

"By currying favor with the United States through obsequious loyalty gestures and promoting arms purchases, the DPP is binding the entire island of Taiwan to its catastrophic secessionist chariot, disregarding public opinion," it wrote, referring to Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party.

The PLA's Eastern Theater Command sent destroyers, frigates, fighters and bombers to the waters to the north and south of the island to test its ability in sea-air coordination and blockading. Its ground forces carried out long-range, live-fire drills in the waters to the island's north. They also organized live-fire training alongside simulated long-range joint strike with air, navy and missiles units, in the waters to Taiwan's south, achieving what command spokesperson Li Xi called "desired effects."

Hsieh Jih-sheng, deputy chief of the general staff for intelligence at the Taiwanese Defense Ministry, said some of the 27 rockets detected in the waters near Taiwan fell within its 24-nautical-mile (44-kilometer) line. "The landing points of rounds definitely were closer to Taiwan compared to the past," he said. "This is a message it deliberately wants to convey."

Aircraft, vessels and a Chinese balloon detected

Taiwan President Lai Ching-te said Tuesday his territory would act responsibly by neither escalating conflict nor provoking disputes. He condemned the drills.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said it had detected 130 aircraft, including fighters and bombers, 14 military ships and eight other official ships around the island between 6 a.m. Monday and 6 a.m. Tuesday. Its forces kept monitoring and deployed aircraft, navy ships and coastal missile systems in response. Ninety of the Chinese aircraft crossed the median line of the strait. A Chinese military balloon was also spotted, it said.

It also detected 77 aircraft, 17 military ships and eight official ships around Taiwan between 6 a.m. Tuesday and 6 a.m. Wednesday. Thirty-five of the aircraft crossed the median line. A total of 941 flights were affected by Tuesday's drills, it said.

"The military power is not necessarily the strongest, but the scale of the drills has become larger each time compared to the last," Hsieh said. He accused Chinese forces of trying to influence public morale and

undermine trust in the Taiwanese military and government.

China has vowed to seize the island, by force if necessary. Beijing sends warplanes and navy vessels toward the island on a near-daily basis.

Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang said the drills served as a stern warning to "Taiwan independence" separatist forces and external forces, without naming any countries.

He criticized Lai's administration for what it called pandering to external forces and pursuing independence, saying that was the root cause of disrupting the status quo in the strait and escalating tensions.

Last week, Beijing imposed sanctions against 20 defense-related U.S. companies and 10 executives, following a Washington announcement of large-scale arms sales to Taiwan valued at more than \$10 billion.

Under U.S. law, Washington is obligated to assist Taipei with its defense, a point that has become increasingly contentious with China over the years.

Beijing slams Japan

On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump said that while he was not informed of the military exercise in advance, neither was he particularly worried about it. He touted his "great relationship" with Chinese President Xi Jinping and suggested he didn't think Xi was going to attack Taiwan.

The Taiwan issue also heightened China-Japan tensions. Beijing has expressed anger at a statement by Japan's prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, saying its military could get involved if China takes action against the democratically ruled island. There remains widespread overall suspicion in China about Japan that goes back generations to when imperial Japan brutally took over parts of China in the years before World War II.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi slammed both Japan and Taiwan's "pro-independence forces."

"Japan, which launched the war of aggression against China, not only fails to deeply reflect on the numerous crimes it committed, but its current leaders also openly challenge China's territorial sovereignty, the historical conclusions of World War II, and the post-war international order," he said Tuesday during an event in Beijing. China, Wang added, "must be highly vigilant against the resurgence of Japanese militarism."

China and Taiwan have been governed separately since 1949, when the Communist Party rose to power in Beijing following a civil war. Defeated Nationalist Party forces fled to Taiwan, which later transitioned from martial law to multiparty democracy.

Stoking the tensions, China's Eastern Theater Command posted a series of online images and videos carrying provocative language throughout the exercises. It posted a video of live rounds being fired from ships and a ground-based launcher on Tuesday.

Chen Wen-chin, chairman of the Keelung District Fishermen's Association in Taiwan, said the group started radio broadcasting every hour from Monday to inform fishermen about where China's exercises took place, urging them to avoid danger.

"The Chinese military exercises have prevented fishermen from fishing, which is their livelihood," Chen said. "The inability to fish has had a significant impact on them and caused economic losses."

## ICE doesn't plan to detain Kilmar Abrego Garcia again as long as judge's order banning it stands

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — U.S. immigration officials do not plan to detain Kilmar Abrego Garcia again as long as a judge's order banning it stands, according to a Tuesday court filing.

The plans by President Donald Trump's administration are the latest in the saga over the Salvadoran citizen's case that has become a lightning rod for both sides of the immigration debate as he fights to remain in the U.S. after a mistaken deportation to his home country, where he was imprisoned.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement did make clear they would detain Abrego Garcia if the order was lifted, Liana J. Castano, assistant director for field operations, wrote in the filing.

Trump officials have accused Abrego Garcia of being a member of the MS-13 gang, but he has vehemently denied the accusations and has no criminal record. The administration brought him back to the U.S. in June under a court order, but only after issuing an arrest warrant on human smuggling charges in Tennessee.

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U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis earlier this month questioned whether government officials could be trusted to follow orders barring them from taking Abrego Garcia back into immigration custody or deporting him.

A Justice Department push to indict

Earlier Tuesday, a newly unsealed order in the criminal case against Abrego Garcia revealed that high-level Justice Department officials pushed for his indictment, calling it a "top priority," only after he was mistakenly deported and then ordered returned to the U.S.

Abrego Garcia has pleaded not guilty in federal court to the human smuggling charges. He is seeking to have the case dismissed on the grounds that the prosecution is vindictive, arguing the Trump administration is targeting him as punishment for the embarrassment of his mistaken deportation.

To support that argument, he has asked the government to turn over documents that reveal how the decision was made to prosecute him in 2025 for an incident that occurred in 2022.

Abrego Garcia had recently been in immigration custody for three months before Xinis ordered his release on Dec. 11. In that time, the government said it planned to deport him to Uganda, Eswatini, Ghana and, most recently, Liberia.

In her Dec. 11 order, Xinis found that immigration officials had no viable plan to remove Abrego Garcia from the U.S. and said he could not be held indefinitely. She issued a separate order barring ICE from re-detaining him, at least for the time being. After a hearing on the issue, Xinis ordered the government to file the brief they released Tuesday outlining whether they planned to detain Abrego Garcia again.

Abrego Garcia's human smuggling case stems from a 2022 traffic stop in Tennessee where he was pulled over for speeding with nine passengers in the car. State troopers discussed the possibility of human smuggling among themselves. However, he was ultimately allowed to leave with only a warning. The case was turned over to Homeland Security Investigations, but there is no record of any effort to charge him until April 2025, according to court records.

The newly unsealed Dec. 3 order from U.S. District Judge Waverly Crenshaw compelled the government to provide some documents to Abrego Garcia and his attorneys, although it does not give a lot of detail on their contents.

Claims of a 'vindictive' prosecution

Earlier, Crenshaw found that there was "some evidence" that the prosecution of Abrego Garcia could be vindictive. He specifically cited a statement by Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche on a Fox News program that seemed to suggest that the Department of Justice charged Abrego Garcia because he had won his wrongful deportation case.

Rob McGuire, who was the Acting U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee until late December, argued that those statements were irrelevant because he alone made the decision to prosecute, and he has no animus against Abrego Garcia.

In the unsealed order, Crenshaw writes, "Some of the documents suggest not only that McGuire was not a solitary decision-maker, but he in fact reported to others in DOJ and the decision to prosecute Abrego may have been a joint decision."

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Tennessee released a statement saying: "The emails cited in Judge Crenshaw's order, specifically Mr. McGuire's email on May 15, 2025, confirm that the ultimate decision on whether to prosecute was made by career prosecutors based on the facts, evidence, and established DOJ practice. Communications with the Deputy Attorney General's Office about a high-profile case are both required and routine."

The email referenced was from McGuire to his staff saying Blanche "would like Garcia charged sooner rather than later," according to Crenshaw's order.

The order also shows that Aakash Singh, who works under Blanche in the Office of the Deputy Attorney General, contacted McGuire about Abrego Garcia's case on April 27, the same day that McGuire received a file on the case from Homeland Security Investigations. That was several days after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Abrego Garcia's favor on April 10.

On April 30, Singh said in an email to McGuire that the prosecution was a "top priority" for the Deputy

Attorney General's Office, according to the order. Singh and McGuire continued to communicate about the prosecution. On May 18, Singh wrote to McGuire and others to hold the draft indictment until they got "clearance" to file it. "The implication is that 'clearance' would come from the Office of the Deputy Attorney General," Crenshaw writes.

A hearing on the motion to dismiss the human smuggling case on the basis of vindictive prosecution is scheduled for Jan. 28.

## **Tatiana Schlossberg, a grandchild of the late President John F. Kennedy, has died at 35**

By MARC LEVY and SARAH BRUMFIELD Associated Press

Environmental journalist Tatiana Schlossberg, one of three grandchildren of the late President John F. Kennedy, has died after she was diagnosed with leukemia last year. She was 35.

Schlossberg, daughter of Kennedy's daughter, Caroline Kennedy, and Edwin Schlossberg, revealed she had terminal cancer in a November 2025 essay in *The New Yorker*. A family statement disclosing her death was posted on social media Tuesday by the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation.

"Our beautiful Tatiana passed away this morning. She will always be in our hearts," the statement said. It did not disclose a cause of death or say where she had died.

Maria Shriver, a niece of John F. Kennedy and a former award-winning TV journalist, grieved for Schlossberg on social media and called her "the light, the humor, the joy" and a great journalist who "used her words to educate others about the earth and how to save it."

"She loved her life, and she fought like hell to try to save it," Shriver wrote.

Schlossberg told of being diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia in May 2024 at 34. While in the hospital for the birth of her second child, her doctor noticed her white blood cell count was high. It turned out to be acute myeloid leukemia with a rare mutation, mostly seen in older people.

In the November essay, "A Battle With My Blood," Schlossberg recounted going through rounds of chemotherapy and two stem cell transplants and participating in clinical trials. During the most recent trial, she wrote, her doctor told her "he could keep me alive for a year, maybe."

Schlossberg also criticized policies pushed by her mother's cousin, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., in the essay, saying policies he backed could hurt cancer patients like her. Her mother had urged senators to reject his confirmation.

"As I spent more and more of my life under the care of doctors, nurses, and researchers striving to improve the lives of others, I watched as Bobby cut nearly a half billion dollars for research into mRNA vaccines, technology that could be used against certain cancers," the essay reads.

Schlossberg had worked as a reporter covering climate change and the environment for *The New York Times*' Science section. Her 2019 book "Inconspicuous Consumption: The Environmental Impact You Don't Know You Have" won the Society of Environmental Journalists' Rachel Carson Environment Book Award in 2020.

Schlossberg wrote in *The New Yorker* essay that she feared her daughter and son wouldn't remember her. She felt cheated and sad that she wouldn't get to keep living "the wonderful life" she had with her husband, George Moran.

While her parents and two siblings tried to hide their pain from her, she said she felt it every day. Her siblings, Rose and Jack Schlossberg, are JFK's other grandchildren.

"For my whole life, I have tried to be good, to be a good student and a good sister and a good daughter, and to protect my mother and never make her upset or angry," she said. "Now I have added a new tragedy to her life, to our family's life, and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

Schlossberg's mother Caroline was 5 years old when her father, President Kennedy, was assassinated in Dallas in 1963. She was 10 when her uncle, Robert F. Kennedy, was assassinated in Los Angeles in 1968 while he was running for president.

Caroline's brother, John F. Kennedy Jr., died in 1999 when the single-engine plane he was piloting plunged

into the Atlantic Ocean, near Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. His wife, Carolyn, and her sister, Lauren Bessette, also died in the crash.

Shriver called Schlossberg valiant, strong and courageous.

"She was smart, wicked smart, as they say, and sassy. She was fun, funny loving, caring, a perfect daughter, sister, mother, cousin, niece, friend, all of it," Shriver wrote.

## Judge temporarily halts Trump's move to end protected status for South Sudanese immigrants

By SAFIYAH RIDDLE and CHARLOTTE KRAMON undefined

Hundreds of people from South Sudan may be able to live and work in the United States legally, while a federal judge on Tuesday weighs whether President Donald Trump's move to revoke temporary protected status for immigrants from the East African country was illegal.

The termination was set to take effect on January 6, 2026, at which point the roughly 300 South Sudanese nationals living and working in the U.S. under the program — or who otherwise have pending applications — would be eligible for deportation.

Civil rights groups sued the Department of Homeland Security in late December, writing in a complaint that the change violated administrative procedure and was unconstitutional because it aimed to "significantly reduce the number of non-white and non-European immigrants in the United States" on the basis of race.

The court order written by U.S. District Judge Angel Kelley in Massachusetts temporarily bars the federal government from initiating deportation while the final decision is pending.

"These significant and far-reaching consequences not only deserve, but require, a full and careful consideration of the merits by the Court," Kelley wrote, adding that the changes could potentially cause irreversible harm to the East African migrants.

DHS blasted the decision in a statement on Tuesday.

"Yet another lawless and activist order from the federal judiciary who continues to usurp the President's constitutional authority. Under the previous administration Temporary Protected Status was abused to allow violent terrorists, criminals, and national security threats into our nation," DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin wrote.

Temporary protected status is granted to foreign nationals from countries devastated by war or natural disaster. Successful applicants must already reside in the U.S. and pass extensive background checks and vetting through DHS.

Without providing evidence, McLaughlin claimed there is "renewed peace in South Sudan" and pointed to "their demonstrated commitment to ensuring the safe reintegration of returning nationals, and improved diplomatic relations."

"Now is the right time to conclude what was always intended to be a temporary designation," McLaughlin wrote.

According to U.N. experts, "Years of neglect have fragmented government and opposition forces alike," the panel said, "resulting in a patchwork of uniformed soldiers, defectors and armed community defense groups."

South Sudanese people were made eligible for temporary protected status in 2011. The East African's embattled government still struggles to deliver many of the basic services of a state. Years of conflict have left the country heavily reliant on aid, which has been hit hard by the Trump administration's sweeping cuts in foreign assistance. Many South Sudanese people face hunger, and this year a hunger monitor said parts of conflict-hit South Sudan were heading toward famine conditions.

"I don't know how DHS can say with a straight face that it's safe for South South Sudanese TPS holders to return to South Sudan when their own State Department, albeit another government agency, says is not safe to travel there," said Dorian Spence, litigation coordinator Communities United for Status and Protection, one of the groups that filed the December 22 lawsuit.

"This is only one prong in their multi-pronged attack into making America whiter," Spence added, noting Trump's willingness to accept white South Africans as refugees.

Critics of the Trump administration in South Sudan said that the move was political retaliation for South Sudan's decision to stop accepting deportees from the U.S. as part of a program to deport migrants to third countries. At least eight men were deported to South Sudan from the U.S. earlier in the year.

"This has angered the Trump administration (and) the Trump administration has reached this decision now, where it is ending protections available for South Sudanese who fled the war," he said.

The Trump administration has attempted to withdraw various protections that have allowed immigrants to remain in the U.S. and work legally, including ending temporary status for hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans and Haitians who were granted protection under President Joe Biden.

Protected status for immigrants from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Afghanistan, Nepal, Burma, Syria, Nicaragua and Honduras is also in jeopardy.

## Kennedy Center renaming prompts a new round of cancellations

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

The Kennedy Center is ending the year with a new round of artists saying they are canceling scheduled performances after President Donald Trump's name was added to the facility, prompting the institution's president to accuse the performers of making their decisions because of politics.

The Cookers, a jazz supergroup that has performed together for nearly two decades, announced their withdrawal from "A Jazz New Year's Eve" on their website, saying the "decision has come together very quickly" and acknowledging frustration from those who may have planned to attend.

Doug Varone and Dancers, a dance group based in New York, said in an Instagram post late Monday they would pull out of a performance slated for April, saying they "can no longer permit ourselves nor ask our audiences to step inside this once great institution."

Those moves come after musician Chuck Redd canceled a Christmas Eve performance last week. They also come amid declining sales for tickets to the venue, as well as news that viewership for the Dec. 23 broadcast of the Kennedy Center Honors — which Trump had predicted would soar — was down by about 35% compared to the 2024 show.

The announcements amount to a volatile calendar for one of the most prominent performing arts venues in the U.S. and cap a year of tension in which Trump ousted the Kennedy Center board and named himself the institution's chairman. That led to an earlier round of artist pushback, with performer Issa Rae and the producers of "Hamilton" canceling scheduled engagements while musicians Ben Folds and Renee Fleming stepped down from advisory roles.

The Cookers didn't mention the building's renaming or the Trump administration but did say that, when they return to performing, they wanted to ensure that "the room is able to celebrate the full presence of the music and everyone in it," reiterating a commitment "to playing music that reaches across divisions rather than deepening them."

The group may not have addressed the Kennedy Center situation directly, but one of its members has. On Saturday, saxophone player Billy Harper said in comments posted on the Jazz Stage Facebook page that he "would never even consider performing in a venue bearing a name (and being controlled by the kind of board) that represents overt racism and deliberate destruction of African American music and culture. The same music I devoted my life to creating and advancing."

According to the White House, Trump's handpicked board approved the renaming. Harper said both the board "as well as the name displayed on the building itself represents a mentality and practices I always stood against. And still do, today more than ever."

Richard Grenell, a Trump ally whom the president chose to head the Kennedy Center after he forced out the previous leadership, posted Monday night on X, "The artists who are now canceling shows were booked by the previous far left leadership," intimating the bookings were made under the Biden administration.

In a statement Tuesday to The Associated Press, Grenell said the "last minute cancellations prove that

they were always unwilling to perform for everyone — even those they disagree with politically,” adding that the Kennedy Center had been “flooded with inquiries from real artists willing to perform for everyone and who reject political statements in their artistry.”

There was no immediate word from Kennedy Center officials about whether the entity would pursue legal action against the latest round of artists to cancel performances. Following Redd’s cancellation last week, Grenell said he would seek \$1 million in damages for what he called a “political stunt.”

Not all artists are calling off their shows. Bluegrass banjoist Randy Barrett, scheduled to perform at the Kennedy Center next month, told the AP he was “deeply troubled by the politicization” of the venue and respected those who had canceled but feels that “our tribalized country needs more music and art, not less. It’s one of the few things that can bring us together.”

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, and Congress passed a law the following year naming the center as a living memorial to him. Scholars have said any changes to the building’s name would need congressional approval; the law explicitly prohibits the board of trustees from making the center into a memorial to anyone else, and from putting another person’s name on the building’s exterior.

## Unleash the hounds! And terriers and lapdogs. The American Kennel Club adds 3 breeds

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — They’re ready to embark on 2026.

Three more dog breeds joined the American Kennel Club’s roster of recognized breeds on Tuesday, making them eligible for many U.S. dog shows and likely increasing their visibility to the pet-loving public.

One of the newcomers is a terrier named for a U.S. president. Another is a toy dog from Cold War-era Russia. The third is a centuries-old French hunting hound. Here’s a closer look:

The basset fauve de Bretagne

The stats: 12.5 to 15.5 inches (32 to 40 centimeters) at the base of the neck; 23 to 39 pounds (10.5 to 17.5 kilograms)

The topline: A hardy, sociable, compact hound that can hunt all day — and needs mental and physical activity.

The pronunciation: bah-SAY’ fove deh breh-TAHN’yeh

The translation: Fawn-colored, low-set dog from Brittany

The history: Versions of these coarse-coated, tan-hued hounds go back at least as far as 16th-century French aristocratic circles. The breed has been championed in the U.S. in recent years by Cindy Hartman, a South Carolina service dog trainer who brought a pair of fauve puppies back from France in 2001. She has since trained and placed about 20 fauves as medical alert dogs for people with diabetes, she said.

The quote: “They’re wicked smart, and so if you’re wanting a dog that’s just going to lay around all day long, a fauve is not for you,” Hartman said. “But yet, when challenged mentally and physically, they’re happy to come in with you and curl up on the sofa for the evening.”

The Teddy Roosevelt terrier

The stats: 8 to 14 inches (20 to 36 centimeters) at the base of the neck; 8 to 25 pounds (3.5 to 11 kilograms)

The topline: A solid, energetic small canine that will rid your barn of rodents, alert you to strangers, do dog sports — or just entertain you with its antics.

The history: Originally seen as a short-legged variant of the rat terrier, these dogs were deemed a breed of their own in 1999. The breed was named for President Theodore Roosevelt because of his fondness for dogs, including terriers.

The quote: “They know how to get you to laugh,” says Cindy Rickey of Waynesville, North Carolina, the secretary of the American Teddy Roosevelt Terrier Club. While many terrier breeds are known for being independent-minded, her Teddy competes in obedience. “They’re terriers, no doubt about it, but they also

have this tremendous desire to please," she explains.

The Russian tsvetnaya bolonka

The stats: Up to 10¼ inches (26 centimeters) at the base of the neck; 7 to 9 pounds (3 to 4 kilograms)

The topline: A sweet but clever little companion that wants playful interaction, not just snuggling (though it likes that, too).

The pronunciation: zvit-NEYE'-ah boh-LON'-kah

The translation: Russian colored lapdog

The history: The breed was developed in Soviet-era Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) after World War II as a pet for apartment dwellers. American fans have been working to establish bolonki (the proper plural) in the U.S. since the early 2000s.

The quote: "Having a bolonka is like having a 3-year-old kid running around your house. ... They can enjoy their time lying on the couch with you, but you've got to be prepared to play with them and keep them entertained," says Denise Dang of Oklahoma City, the secretary of the Russian Tsvetnaya Bolonka Club of America. Owners also need to care for a thick, wavy coat that's low-shedding but can get matted. Even if it's cut fairly short, a bath every couple of weeks is wise, Dang says.

The big picture

The AKC recognizes 205 breeds, including these three newcomers. Fanciers of many others — though, as yet, no "doodles" or other popular poodle hybrids — have voluntarily entered a pipeline that takes years of breeding, documentation and consensus-building.

The club doesn't limit the number of breeds it might eventually recognize. Spokesperson Brandi Hunter Munden says it's not "adding dogs indiscriminately," but rather providing "an established framework for growth, breed standards, competition and education in the U.S."

The controversy

Animal-rights activists have long deplored dog breeding and the AKC for supporting it, and the criticism hardened this year into a lawsuit over the health of French bulldogs, pugs, dachshunds and Chinese sharpeis. The group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is seeking a court order to stop the AKC from continuing to promulgate the current "standards," or ideal characteristics, for those breeds.

PETA accused the kennel club of providing "blueprints for the breeding of deformed, unhealthy dogs."

The AKC denies the allegations and has asked a court to dismiss the case, calling the suit frivolous. The club said it "has been — and remains — firmly committed to the health, well-being and proper treatment of all dogs."

## Israel says it will halt operations of several humanitarian organizations in Gaza starting in 2026

By MELANIE LIDMAN and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel on Tuesday said it had suspended more than two dozen humanitarian organizations, including Doctors Without Borders and CARE, from operating in the Gaza Strip for failing to comply with new registration rules.

Israel says the rules are aimed at preventing Hamas and other militant groups from infiltrating the aid organizations. But the organizations say the rules are arbitrary and warned that the new ban would harm a civilian population desperately in need of humanitarian aid.

Israel has claimed throughout the war that Hamas was siphoning off aid supplies, a charge the U.N. and aid groups have denied. The new rules, announced by Israel early this year, require aid organizations to register the names of their workers and provide details about funding and operations in order to continue working in Gaza.

The new regulations included ideological requirements — including disqualifying organizations that have called for boycotts against Israel, denied the Oct. 7 attack or expressed support for any of the international court cases against Israeli soldiers or leaders.

Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs said more than 30 groups — about 15% of the organizations operat-

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ing in Gaza — had failed to comply and that their operations would be suspended. It also said that Doctors Without Borders, one of the biggest and best-known groups in Gaza, had failed to respond to Israeli claims that some of its workers were affiliated with Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

"The message is clear: humanitarian assistance is welcome — the exploitation of humanitarian frameworks for terrorism is not," Diaspora Affairs Minister Amichai Chikli said.

Doctors Without Borders, also known by its French acronym MSF, said Israel's decision would have a catastrophic impact on their work in Gaza, where they support around 20% of the hospital beds and a third of births. The organization also denied Israel's accusations about their staff.

"MSF would never knowingly employ people engaging in military activity," it said.

'Exhausted local staff'

While Israel claimed the decision would have limited impact on the ground, the affected organizations said the timing — less than three months into a fragile ceasefire — was devastating.

"Despite the ceasefire, the needs in Gaza are enormous and yet we and dozens of other organizations are and will continue to be blocked from bringing in essential life-saving assistance," said Shaina Low, communications adviser for the Norwegian Refugee Council, which has also been suspended.

"Not being able to send staff into Gaza means all of the workload falls on our exhausted local staff," Low said.

Some aid groups say they didn't submit the list of Palestinian staff, as Israel demanded, for fear they'd be targeted by Israel, and because of data protection laws in Europe.

"It comes from a legal and safety perspective. In Gaza, we saw hundreds of aid workers get killed," Low explained.

The decision not to renew aid groups' licenses means offices in Israel and East Jerusalem will close, and organizations won't be able to send international staff or aid into Gaza.

Israel says militants exploiting aid groups

According to the ministry, the decision means the aid groups will have their license revoked on Jan. 1, and if they are located in Israel, they will need to leave by March 1. They can appeal the decision.

The Israeli defense body that oversees humanitarian aid to Gaza, COGAT, said that the organizations on the list contribute less than 1% of the total aid going into the Gaza Strip, and that aid will continue to enter from more than 20 organizations that did receive permits to continue operating.

"The registration process is intended to prevent the exploitation of aid by Hamas, which in the past operated under the cover of certain international aid organizations, knowingly or unknowingly," COGAT said in a statement.

This isn't the first time Israel has tried to crack down on international humanitarian organizations. Throughout the war, Israel accused the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, of being infiltrated by Hamas, using its facilities and taking aid. The United Nations has denied it. UNRWA, the top U.N. agency working with Palestinians, has denied knowingly aiding armed groups and says it acts quickly to purge any suspected militants..

After months of criticism from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his far-right allies, Israel banned UNRWA from operating on its territory in January. The U.S., formerly the largest donor to UNRWA, halted funding to the agency in early 2024.

NGOs say Israel vague over data use

Israel failed to confirm that the data collected from the new regulations wouldn't be used for military or intelligence purposes, raising serious security concerns, said Athena Rayburn, the executive director of AIDA, an umbrella organization representing over 100 organizations that operate in the Palestinian territories. She noted that more than 500 aid workers have been killed in Gaza during the war.

"Agreeing for a party to the conflict to vet our staff, especially under the conditions of occupation, is a violation of humanitarian principles, specifically neutrality and independence," she said.

Rayburn said organizations expressed their concerns and offered alternatives to submitting staff lists, such as third-party vetting, but that Israel refused to engage in any dialogue.

## Palestinian girl killed in Gaza

A 10-year-old girl was killed and another person was wounded by Israeli fire in Gaza City near the Yellow Line that delineates areas under Israeli control, the territory's Shifa Hospital said Tuesday.

The Israeli military did not immediately comment on the incident but have said troops operating near the Yellow Line will target anyone who approaches or threatens soldiers.

The Gaza Health Ministry, part of the Hamas-run government, said on Monday that 71,266 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, not including the girl. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count. The United Nations and independent experts consider the Health Ministry the most reliable source on war casualties. Israel disputes its figures but has not provided its own.

## Channel Tunnel disruption affects Eurostar and vehicle shuttle between France and England

By ALEX TURNBULL and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Power problems and a stuck train interrupted rail services through the undersea Channel Tunnel connecting the United Kingdom and continental Europe on Tuesday, operators said, stranding passengers during the busy end-of-year holidays.

At Paris' Gare du Nord station, Jamie and Issy Gill scrambled to find a flight back to the U.K. after their Eurostar train to London was canceled, desperate to be reunited with their baby boy after a getaway in the French capital.

"We came for my 30th birthday," Issy Gill said, wiping away tears.

Jamie Gill said they'd take a roundabout route back, with a flight via Birmingham on Wednesday.

Eurostar — which runs passenger trains between London and Paris and other European destinations — blamed "overhead power supply issues in the Channel Tunnel" and a failure aboard a train operated by LeShuttle, which transports vehicles and their passengers between the ports of Calais, France, and Folkestone, England.

On Tuesday afternoon, Eurostar said the tunnel was partially reopening but with only one of its two train lines, allowing Eurostar services to resume in the evening — although with expected continued delays and longer journey times than usual. It advised passengers to rebook their journeys on other days.

The 50-kilometer (32-mile) Channel Tunnel, more than half of it undersea, has revolutionized U.K.-Europe rail travel since its inauguration in 1994. But because it's the only fixed cross-English Channel rail link, train services tend to be vulnerable to severe disruptions.

The Gare du Nord station heaved with frustrated passengers trying to book plane or bus tickets.

"I'm disgusted, disheartened," said Sarah Omouri, a French traveler whose plans to celebrate the New Year in London were dashed.

"It's been maybe a year since we've had a vacation," she said. "We were made to get on the train, to get off, get on again, and get off again. Now we're told that everything is fully booked for several days. It's ruined."

In London, would-be traveler John Paul had expected to enjoy a romantic river cruise in Paris and a trip to the Eiffel Tower with his partner, Lucy, but their Eurostar got turned back before reaching the continent.

"We got probably about an hour down the track, maybe 40 minutes, and then they basically said the train's got to stop, because the train ahead got a braking issue," the 46-year-old Paul said.

"They kept telling us that the driver was trying to fix the brakes on this other train and that the other trains were then backed up," he said. "There's no clear information and, obviously, we've lost a lot of money, haven't we?"

The Channel Tunnel's operator, Eurotunnel, said that the power supply problem started overnight Monday in part of the tunnel, impacting passenger and vehicle travel by rail in both directions.

## Arctic blast brings snow and wind to the Great Lakes and Northeast

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

A surge of Arctic air brought strong winds, heavy snow and frigid temperatures to the Great Lakes and Northeast on Tuesday, a day after a bomb cyclone barreling across the Midwest left tens of thousands of customers without power.

Blustery winds were expected to add to the chill, with low temperatures dipping below freezing as far south as the Florida panhandle, the National Weather Service said.

The wild storm hit parts of the Plains and Great Lakes this week with sharply colder air, strong winds and a mix of snow, ice and rain, leading to treacherous travel. Forecasters said it intensified quickly enough to meet the criteria of a bomb cyclone, a system that strengthens rapidly as pressure drops.

Kristen Schultz, who was heading home to Alaska, said it took her four hours to get to the Minneapolis airport on Tuesday.

"Just give yourself plenty of extra time and that way, even if things go smoothly, you don't have to be stressed out," she said, "and you're ready in case things don't go so smoothly."

Nationwide, more than 115,000 customers were without power Tuesday morning, around a third of them in Michigan, according to Poweroutage.us.

As the storm moves into Canada, the frigid air trailing behind it will spread across much of the eastern two-thirds of the country, the National Weather Service said, powering the lake-effect "snow machine" in areas downwind of the Great Lakes.

Some areas in western and upstate New York saw a foot or more of snow Monday and their totals could reach up to 3 feet (91 centimeters) this week, forecasters said. Strong winds on Monday, including an 81 mph (130 kph) gust in Buffalo, New York, knocked down trees and wires across the region, the weather service said.

"At this point, the worst does seem to be over, and we are expecting conditions to improve especially by later today," said Andrew Orrison, a weather service meteorologist.

Videos on social media show people struggling to walk in the windy conditions and a waterway in downtown Buffalo clogged with tree branches and other debris stemming from a windblown surge from Lake Erie.

Just south of Buffalo in Lackawanna, Diane Miller was caught on video being blown off the front steps of her daughter's house and landing in some bushes. She wasn't seriously hurt.

"I opened her door and the wind caught me, and I went flying," Miller told WKBW-TV.

Whiteout conditions were still possible in some areas, forecasters said, and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul warned people in impacted areas to avoid unnecessary travel.

The fierce winds on Lake Erie had sent water surging toward the basin's eastern end near Buffalo while lowering water on the western side in Michigan to expose normally submerged lakebed — even the wreck of a car and a snowmobile.

Kevin Aldrich, 33, a maintenance worker from Monroe, Michigan, said he has never seen the lake recede so much and was surprised Monday to spot remnants of piers dating back to the 1830s. He posted photos on social media of wooden pilings sticking up several feet from the muck.

"Where those are at would typically be probably 12 feet deep," or 3.6 meters, he said. "We can usually drive our boat over them."

Dangerous wind chills across parts of North Dakota and Minnesota plunged as low as minus 30 F (minus 34 C) on Monday. And in northeast West Virginia, rare nearly hurricane-force winds were recorded on a mountain near Dolly Sods, according to the National Weather Service.

On the West Coast, strong Santa Ana winds with isolated gusts topping 70 mph (112 kph) brought down trees in parts of Southern California where recent storms had saturated the soil. Downed powerlines forced the shutdown of a freeway north of Los Angeles for several hours on Monday. Wind advisories had expired by evening, but blustery conditions were expected through Saturday, along with thunderstorms.

Rain on New Year's Day could potentially soak the Rose Parade in Pasadena for the first time in about two decades.

## Escalation in Yemen threatens to reignite civil war and create wider tensions in Gulf region

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Saudi Arabia bombed Yemen's port city of Mukalla on Tuesday, targeting a shipment of weapons from the United Arab Emirates for separatist forces — a significant move in a country located along a key international trade route that threatens to bring new risks to the Persian Gulf region. The UAE later said it would withdraw its forces from Yemen.

The secessionist Southern Transitional Council, STC, a group backed by the United Arab Emirates, this month seized most of the the provinces of Hadramout and Mahra, including oil facilities.

Yemen has been mired for more than a decade in a civil war that involves a complex interplay of sectarian grievances and the involvement of regional powers.

The Iran-aligned Houthis control the most populous regions of the country, including the capital Sanaa. Meanwhile, a loose regional coalition of powers — including Saudi Arabia and the UAE — has backed the internationally recognized government in the south.

The war has created a humanitarian crisis and shattered the economy. Still, since 2022, violence had gradually declined as the sides reached something of a stalemate in the war.

The move by the UAE-backed separatists upends the political arrangement among the anti-Houthi partners.

The origins of the crisis

The war in Yemen began in 2014, when the Houthis marched from their northern stronghold of Saada. They took the capital, Sanaa, and forced the internationally recognized government into exile. Saudi Arabia and the UAE entered the war the following year in an attempt to restore the government.

The new fighting pits the STC against the forces of the internationally recognized government and its allied tribes, even as they are both members of the camp fighting against the Houthi rebels in the country's broader civil war.

The STC is the most powerful group in southern Yemen, with crucial financial and military support from the UAE. It was established in April 2017 as an umbrella organization for groups that seek to restore South Yemen as an independent state, as it was between 1967 and 1990.

The latest moves reinforced the STC positions across southern Yemen, which could give them leverage in any future talks to settle the Yemen conflict. The STC has long demanded that any settlement should give southern Yemen the right of self-determination.

The STC enjoys loyalty through much of southern Yemen. It is chaired by Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who is also vice president of the country's Presidential Leadership Council, the ruling organ of the internationally recognized government.

The STC and other UAE-supported groups now control most of the southern half of Yemen, including crucial port cities and islands.

The other party in the latest fighting includes the Yemeni military, which reports to the internationally recognized government. They are allied with the Hadramout Tribal Alliance, a local tribal coalition supported by Saudi Arabia.

These forces are centered in Yemen's largest province of Hadramout, which stretches from the Gulf of Aden in the south to the border with Saudi Arabia in the north. The oil-rich province is a major source of fuel for the southern areas of Yemen.

Secessionists advance this month

Earlier this month, STC forces marched to Hadramout and took control of the province's major facilities, including PetroMasila, Yemen's largest oil company, after brief clashes with government forces and their tribal allies.

This took place after the Saudi-backed Hadramout Tribal Alliance seized the PetroMasila oil facility in late November to pressure the government to agree to its demands for a bigger share of oil revenues and the improvement of services for Hadramout's residents.

The STC apparently seized on this move as a pretext for wresting control of Hadramout and its oil facilities for itself and expanding areas under its control in Yemen.

STC forces then marched to the province of Mahra on the borders with Oman and took control of a border crossing between the two countries. In Aden, the UAE-backed force also seized the presidential palace, which serves as the seat of the ruling Presidential Council.

Saudi troops also withdrew earlier this month from bases in Aden, a Yemeni government official said. The withdrawal was part of a Saudi "repositioning strategy," said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter.

On Friday, Saudi Arabia targeted the Hadramout region in airstrikes that analysts described as a warning for the separatists to halt their advance and leave the governorates of Hadramout and Mahra.

A fragile situation has been shattered

The escalation shattered the relative quiet in Yemen's war, which has been stalemated in recent years after the Houthis reached a deal with Saudi Arabia that stopped their attacks on the kingdom in return for ceasing the Saudi-led strikes on their territories.

The escalation highlights strained ties between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which had been backing competing sides in Yemen's decade long war against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels amid a moment of unease across the wider Red Sea region. The two nations, while closely aligned on many issues in the wider Mideast, increasingly have competed with each other over economic issues and the region's politics.

The United Arab Emirates said earlier this month that Yemen's governance and territorial integrity is "an issue that must be determined by the Yemeni parties themselves."

## After quiet off-year elections, Democrats renew worries about Trump interfering in the midterms

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

If history is a guide, Republicans stand a good chance of losing control of the House of Representatives in 2026. They have just a slim majority in the chamber, and the incumbent party usually gives up seats in midterm elections.

President Donald Trump, whose loss of the House halfway through his first term led to two impeachments, is trying to keep history from repeating — and doing so in ways his opponents say are intended to manipulate next year's election landscape.

He has rallied his party to remake congressional maps across the country to create more conservative-leaning House seats, an effort that could end up backfiring on him. He's directed his administration to target Democratic politicians, activists and donors. And, Democrats worry, he's flexing his muscles to intervene in the midterms like no administration ever has.

Democrats and other critics point to how Trump has sent the military into Democratic cities over the objections of Democratic mayors and governors. They note that he's pushed the Department of Homeland Security to be so aggressive that at one point its agents handcuffed a Democratic U.S. senator. And some warn that a Republican-controlled Congress could fail to seat winning candidates if Democrats reclaim the House majority, recalling Trump's efforts to stay in power even after voters rejected him in 2020, leading to the violent attack by his supporters on the U.S. Capitol.

Regarding potential military deployments, Ken Martin, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, told The Associated Press: "What he is going to do is send those troops there, and keep them there all the way through the next election, because guess what? If people are afraid of leaving their house, they're probably not going to leave their house to go vote on Election Day. That's how he stays in power."

Military to the polls, or fearmongering?

Democrats sounded similar alarms just before November's elections, and yet there were no significant incidents. California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a frequent Trump antagonist who also warns about a federal crackdown on voting in 2026, predicted that masked immigration agents would show up at the polls in his state, where voters were considering a ballot measure to counter Trump's redistricting push.

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There were no such incidents in November, and the measure to redraw California's congressional lines in response to Trump's efforts elsewhere won in a landslide.

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said the concerns about the midterms come from Democratic politicians who are "fearmongering to score political points with the radical left flank of the Democrat party that they are courting ahead of their doomed-to-fail presidential campaigns."

She described their concerns as "baseless conspiracy theories."

Susie Wiles, Trump's chief of staff, denied that Trump was planning to use the military to try to suppress votes.

"I say it is categorically false, will not happen. It's just wrongheaded," she told Vanity Fair for an interview that was published earlier in December.

DNC litigation director Dan Freeman said he hasn't seen an indication that Trump will send immigration enforcement agents to polling places during the midterms, but is wary.

He said the DNC filed public records requests in an attempt to learn more about any such plans and is drafting legal pleadings it could file if Trump sends armed federal agents to the polls or otherwise intervenes in the elections.

"We're not taking their word for it," Freeman said in an interview.

States, not presidents, run elections

November's off-year elections may not be the best indicator of what could lie ahead. They were scattered in a handful of states, and Trump showed only modest interest until late in the fall when his Department of Justice announced it was sending federal monitors to California and New Jersey to observe voting in a handful of counties. It was a bureaucratic step that had no impact on voting, even as it triggered alarm from Democrats.

Alexandra Chandler, the legal director of Protect Democracy, a group that has clashed with Trump over his role in elections, said she was heartened by the lack of drama during the 2025 voting.

"We have so many positive signs we can look to," Chandler said, citing not only a quiet election but GOP senators' resistance to Trump's demands to eliminate the filibuster and the widespread resistance to Trump's demand that television host Jimmy Kimmel lose his job because of his criticism of the president. "There are limits" on Trump's power, she noted.

"We will have elections in 2026," Chandler said. "People don't have to worry about that."

Under the Constitution, a president has limited tools to intervene in elections, which are run by the states. Congress can help set rules for federal elections, but states administer their own election operations and oversee the counting of ballots.

When Trump tried to singlehandedly revise election rules with a sweeping executive order shortly after returning to office, the courts stepped in and stopped him, citing the lack of a constitutional role for the president. Trump later promised another order, possibly targeting mail ballots and voting machines, but it has yet to materialize.

DOJ voter data request 'should frighten everybody'

Still, there's plenty of ways a president can cause problems, said Rick Hasen, a UCLA law professor.

Trump unsuccessfully pushed Georgia's top election official to "find" him enough votes to be declared the winner there in 2020 and could try similar tactics in Republican-dominated states in November. Likewise, Hasen said, Trump could spread misinformation to undermine confidence in vote tallies, as he has done routinely ahead of elections.

It's harder to do that in more lopsided contests, as many in 2025 turned into, Hasen noted.

"Concerns about Trump interfering in 2026 are real; they're not frivolous," Hasen said. "They're also not likely, but these are things people need to be on guard for."

One administration move that has alarmed election officials is a federal demand from his Department of Justice for detailed voter data from the states. The administration has sued the District of Columbia and at least 21 states, most of them controlled by Democrats, after they refused to turn over all the information the DOJ sought.

"What the DOJ is trying to do is something that should frighten everybody across the political spectrum,"

said David Becker, a former Justice Department voting rights attorney and executive director of the Center for Election Innovation & Research. "They're trying to use the power of the executive to bully states into turning over highly sensitive data — date of birth, Social Security numbers, driver's license, the Holy Trinity of identity theft — hand it over to the DOJ for who knows what use."

'Voter protection' vs 'election integrity'

Voting rights lawyers and election officials have been preparing for months for the midterms, trying to ensure there are ways to counter misinformation and ensure state election systems are easy to explain. Both major parties are expected to stand up significant campaigns around the mechanics of voting: Democrats mounting what they call a "voter protection" effort to monitor for problems while Republicans focus on what they call "election integrity."

Freeman, the DNC litigation director who previously worked in the DOJ's voting section, said his hiring this year was part of a larger effort by the DNC to beef up its in-house legal efforts ahead of the midterms. He said the committee has been filling gaps in voting rights law enforcement that the DOJ has typically covered, including informing states that they can't illegally purge citizens from their voter rolls.

Tina Barton, co-chair of the Committee on Safe and Secure Elections, a coalition of law enforcement and election officials who advise jurisdictions on de-escalation and how to respond to emergencies at polling places, says interest in the group's trainings has "exploded" in recent weeks.

"There's a lot at stake, and that's going to cause a lot of emotions," Barton said.

## Concerns over roads in Nigeria after crash that injured Anthony Joshua and killed 2 associates

By OPE ADETAYO Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Tributes have been paid after the crash that injured British former heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua and killed two close associates on Monday, amid growing concern over Nigeria's roads following the deadly incident near Lagos.

Joshua, a two-time heavyweight champion and an Olympic gold medalist, was under "observation" while recovering from minor injuries, his promoter said Monday.

Nigeria's Federal Road Safety Corps said the accident along a major highway connecting Lagos, the country's economic hub, and Ogun state was a result of "excessive speed and wrongful overtaking," which had caused the car to collide with a stationary truck by the roadside. Eyewitnesses say the vehicle's tire had burst at high speed.

Joshua had recently won a bout against Youtuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul on Dec. 19, a fight he used to improve fitness in a bid to contest future top-flight boxing titles.

The former world heavyweight champion, who also holds Nigerian nationality, is in "stable condition" and would remain in hospital for further "observation" according to his promoter, Matchroom Boxing. Joshua's long-term friends and team members, Sina Ghami and Latif Ayodele, were killed in the crash, the promoter said in a statement posted on X.

Ghami was Joshua's strength and conditioning coach while Ayodele was a trainer. Just hours before the crash, Joshua and Ayodele posted clips on social media playing table tennis together.

Mustafa Briggs, a friend of Ayodele, described him as pure-hearted and sincere. "He had not a bad intention or a bad bone in his body," Briggs told U.K. broadcaster Sky News. "He loved life, he enjoyed life," he said.

Outside a gym owned by Ghami in London, bouquets of flowers have been left at the entrance. Evolve Gyms was temporarily closed on Tuesday to mourn the loss of its "beloved owner," according to a statement posted on the building.

Concerns over frequent road crashes in Nigeria

The high-profile accident has prompted serious concerns about road safety on Nigerian highways, where accidents are common.

The West African nation recorded 5,421 deaths in 9,570 road accidents in 2024, according to data by

the country's Federal Road Safety Corps. Its data showed 340 more people were killed in road accidents last year compared to 2023.

Experts say a combination of factors including a network of dilapidated roads, lax enforcement of traffic laws, and indiscipline by drivers, produces the grim statistics.

The stationary truck that Joshua's vehicle hit is a fixture of Nigeria's thoroughfares, often causing massive gridlocks. Goods and food are transported across Nigeria's vast geographical reach via these trucks, which experts say tend to be in poor condition and are responsible for many accidents.

"The prevalence of accidents in Nigeria is a serious issue," Ache Ogu, the CEO of the Road Accident Prevention Network Centre, an Abuja-based nongovernmental organization, told The Associated Press. "Most of the trucks are not in order, and the law enforcement agency needs to step up its efforts."

Monisola Aboosedo, a 27-year-old marketer who lives in Lagos and commutes several kilometers every weekday for work, has been involved in two accidents in December alone.

"In Lagos, everyone is in a rush to get somewhere; people are always on the move," she told The AP, blaming crashes on the city's heavy traffic combined with the bad state of its road network.

The boxing world reacts

British heavyweight star Tyson Fury has led the tributes from the boxing community in the aftermath of the crash. "This is so sad. May god give them a good bed in heaven," he posted on Instagram.

Boxer Chris Eubank Jr, who last month fought a high-profile middleweight bout, expressed his support and condolences. "Thank god our heavyweight champ survived that horrible car crash. And pray for the two fallen soldiers Latz & Sina & their families," Eubank Jr posted on X. "I knew both ... they were genuinely good men. Rest in Peace boys." British boxer Shannon Courtenay, a women's bantamweight fighter who fought earlier this month in the build-up to the Joshua-Paul fight in Miami, Florida, posted a photo of her with Joshua on Instagram. "As well as Sina and Latz please keep the big man (Joshua) in your prayers," she wrote, adding. "No man should have to go through and witness what he went through today losing his two best friends."

Former world champion Wladimir Klitschko, who was stopped in the 11th round by Joshua at Wembley Stadium in 2017, wrote on X: "I'm deeply saddened to hear about AJ and his close-knit group of friends.

"Having had the pleasure of engaging in an unforgettable battle with AJ, I've always regarded him as a true class act who commands my utmost respect.

"My heart goes out to him, and I wish him and his loved ones all the best during this difficult time."

## Takeaways from AP report on what sources say was Olympic watchdog's failure to close abuse case

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

DENVER (AP) — There was an eight-year gap between the time young gymnasts and their parents started sounding warnings about a coach in 2017 and when he was arrested earlier this year on federal child pornography charges.

It took the U.S. Center for SafeSport — the agency formed by Congress to combat this type of abuse — until 2022 to sanction that coach, Sean Gardner.

Now, an Associated Press investigation has found that months before Gardner's arrest in August on allegations of installing cameras in a girls gym bathroom in Purvis, Mississippi, he was willing to accept a lifetime ban from coaching gymnastics as part of a deal where he would admit to the abuse, according to three people involved with SafeSport and its handling of the case.

The people spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation by SafeSport.

There was never a clear reason given for why the center did not finalize a permanent ban in a case one person called "Nassar 2.0" — a reference to the abuse scandal involving Larry Nassar that nearly destroyed USA Gymnastics and brought about the need for the SafeSport Center.

Meanwhile, Gardner has pleaded not guilty to federal child pornography charges and remains jailed

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pending trial, set for March 2.

Here are some of the key takeaways from the latest AP investigation.

Experts see significant difference between temporary and lifetime bans

Critics see SafeSport's inability to lock down a permanent ban as a failure that undermines one of its missions — securing permanent sanctions against the most dangerous abusers.

Asked why SafeSport didn't follow through, center spokesperson Hilary Nemchik said in a statement she could not comment about those details.

But, she said, SafeSport "took swift action to protect athletes from harm upon receiving the first allegations of sexual misconduct. The restrictions in place during a temporary suspension and a permanent ban are the same."

Regarding SafeSport's handling of cases in general, the statement said, "even if a respondent agrees to a significant sanction, center staff are still required to ensure the respondent receives a fair process."

The center placed Gardner on a temporary suspension in July 2022 and posted his sanction on its disciplinary database.

But the permanent ban Gardner indicated he was ready to sign in early 2025 would have changed his status on the database and closed the investigation, the people familiar with the case told the AP.

Among the differences a permanent ban would have made, they said, were eliminating the possibility of the case going to arbitration and any need to reinterview and potentially retraumatize athletes. It also would have removed the risk of any ban on Gardner being lifted if he were acquitted in his criminal case.

Just as importantly, it would send a clear message to parents, people in sports and possible employers, said attorney Michelle Simpson Tuegel, who represented gymnasts in the Nassar case.

"It communicates something that's a final determination," she said. "That means something. It's not like it's something that's being adjudicated and maybe this guy is falsely accused."

Despite being under temporary suspension from coaching gymnastics for two years, Gardner was able to land a job in May 2024 at MercyOne West Des Moines Medical Center as a surgical technologist, responsible for positioning patients on the operating room table and assisting with procedures and post-surgery care. A hospital spokesperson did not respond to a voicemail and email from the AP seeking comment.

Gardner's attorney, Omodare Jupiter, also did not respond to an email and phone message from the AP asking questions about SafeSport's handling of his client's case.

Some allegations went under the radar for years

Since his arrest, Gardner's sanction on SafeSport's disciplinary database has been upgraded from "temporary suspension" to "ineligible" due to "criminal disposition involving a minor" and "sexual misconduct."

A conviction would change Gardner's sanction to permanently ineligible to coach gymnastics. That's a move the center could have made in early 2025, those familiar with the case said.

Meanwhile, SafeSport, USA Gymnastics and coaches at the Iowa gym where Gardner worked are named as defendants in civil lawsuits filed by two gymnasts who say they didn't do enough to protect them.

The lawsuits say that in December 2017, USA Gymnastics and SafeSport were notified by one girl's parents of Gardner's inappropriate behavior while coaching at Jump'In Gymnastics in Purvis, Mississippi.

Both SafeSport and USA Gymnastics declined to comment on the litigation.

The SafeSport center has said USA Gymnastics notified it in January 2018 that one of its affiliated gyms had resolved a report involving Gardner. But, the center said, it didn't investigate further because the report was not related to sexual misconduct and it did not receive detailed information.

Meanwhile, Gardner was able to land a job at Chow's Gymnastics and Dance Institute in West Des Moines, Iowa, in 2018 — a gym owned by renowned coach Liang "Chow" Qiao that produced Olympians, including gold medalist Shawn Johnson.

Not until 2022, when new allegations of abuse were reported to SafeSport, did the Iowa gym fire Gardner and the center place him on temporary suspension. The gym and Qiao, which are both named in the lawsuits, did not return phone and email messages left by the AP.

It took another three years and an investigation by the AP to expose the depths of the allegations against

Gardner — and the shortcomings of the watchdog agency created to protect athletes in the wake of the Nassar case.

Simpson Tuegel said it's no surprise this case is being compared to Nassar's.

"You look at the timeline and how many people knew and failed to protect children and allowed this person to keep having contact," she said.

"And there really is a point that you see, in some of these cases, where it absolutely could have been stopped and it wasn't."

## Where are the wackiest New Year's Eve drops in the US?

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

Why let New York City have all the fun with its Times Square ball drop on New Year's Eve?

Dozens of places across the U.S. will ring in 2026 by dropping a quirky assortment of fruits, vegetables, sea creatures and balls of all shapes and sizes.

Many have a hometown flair.

There's the giant cheese wedge in Plymouth, Wisconsin, a chile pepper in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a pinecone in Flagstaff, Arizona, and a conch shell in Key West, Florida.

Pennsylvania is home to a bonanza of bizarre New Year's Eve events — the bologna drop in Lebanon, the pickle drop in Dillsburg and the potato chip drop in Lewistown.

It's a New Year's tradition that goes back to 1907 when a 700-pound (318-kilogram) ball measuring five feet (1.5 meters) in diameter debuted in Times Square. Copycat celebrations have surged coast to coast over the past few decades and around the beginning of the new millennium.

Here's a look at some of those events around the nation:

Fruity traditions on New Year's Eve

It's said in some cultures that eating fruit on New Year's Eve brings luck and wealth. Perhaps that's why many cities mix fruit into their celebrations. Miami has its "Big Orange" drop, while Sarasota, Florida, features a pineapple. There are cherry drops in Milwaukie, Oregon, and Traverse City, Michigan. Brightly lit grapes plunge from above in Temecula, California. Atlanta this year is replacing its peach drop with a "digital drone peach in the sky."

Beach balls and flip-flops

It's tough to beat ringing in the year while watching a pair of sparkly flip-flops diving into Folly Beach, South Carolina. In Panama City Beach, Florida, there's an evening-long bash where 15,000 beach balls are dropped above revelers just hours before a giant beach ball descends a tower at midnight.

MoonPies and a giant Peep

What could be better than seeing a 600-pound (272 kilograms) MoonPie make a 60-second descent in Mobile, Alabama? How about getting a slice of MoonPie cake at the city's biggest event of the year? Not sweet enough? Check out the 400-pound (181 kilograms) yellow Peep chick that drops into Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Seafood smorgasbord

Waterfront cities celebrate the sea on New Year's Eve. Brunswick, Georgia, has the shrimp drop, while Easton, Maryland, serves up its annual crab drop. The oyster drop is the main event in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The biggest catch might be in Port Clinton, Ohio, along Lake Erie, home to a 600-pound (272-kilogram) walleye named Wylie. The original papier-mache version debuted 30 years ago and has given way to a menacing fiberglass fish.

Potatoes and pierogies

There's definitely a food theme to these New Year's drops. Just outside Chicago, watch out for a 10-foot (3 meters) pierogi in Whiting, Indiana. The Idaho Potato Drop in Boise has been going for more than a decade, and Mt. Olive, North Carolina, celebrates its hometown pickle brand by dropping a glittery green pickle that's close to 6 feet (1.8 meters) long.

Possum drop lives on

All of these events are meant to be fun, boost civic pride and attract tourists. But one created such a stir that it ended up in court. Residents in western North Carolina no longer lower a live possum inside a glass box at midnight, calling off the event in 2019 after years of protests and legal challenges. There is still a possum drop in Tallapoosa, Georgia, which was long ago known as Possum Snout. That one, though, stars a stuffed possum named Spencer.

## AP sources: In 'Nassar 2.0,' Olympics watchdog failed to close abuse case against gymnastics coach

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

DENVER (AP) — Young gymnasts and their parents started raising red flags about a coach as far back as 2017 — the same year a watchdog agency was created in the wake of the Larry Nassar sexual-abuse scandal that nearly eviscerated USA Gymnastics and damaged the country's entire Olympic movement.

But it took until 2022 for Sean Gardner to face any sanction from the U.S. Center for SafeSport, the independent agency created by Congress to investigate misconduct in Olympic sports. And it wasn't until an Associated Press investigation this year that details emerged about the coach, whose arrest on child pornography charges in August was a turning point in a case one person involved called "Nassar 2.0."

Now, a new AP investigation has found that months before Gardner's arrest on allegations of installing cameras in a girls gym bathroom in Purvis, Mississippi, he was willing to accept a lifetime ban from coaching gymnastics as part of a deal where he would admit to the abuse, according to three people involved with SafeSport and its handling of the case.

A tangle of internal politics that included allegations of retaliation against employees inside SafeSport kept it from levying its harshest sanction, the people — who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation by SafeSport — told the AP.

With multiple alleged victims, new witnesses coming forward and Gardner's history at three gyms in different states, the case became one of the most troubling of the 8-year-old agency's investigations.

"It was like, 'Well, this is 'Nassar 2.0,' so let's figure out what we can figure out and wrap it up,'" one person said.

That person said there was never a clear reason given for why the center did not finalize the permanent ban.

Meanwhile, Gardner has pleaded not guilty to federal child pornography charges and remains jailed pending trial, set for March 2.

Experts point out key differences between temporary and lifetime bans

SafeSport's inability to lock down a permanent ban is seen by critics as a fundamental failure that undermines one of its key missions — securing permanent sanctions against the most dangerous abusers.

Asked why SafeSport didn't follow through, center spokesperson Hilary Nemchik said in a statement that she could not comment about those details.

But, she said, SafeSport "took swift action to protect athletes from harm upon receiving the first allegations of sexual misconduct. The restrictions in place during a temporary suspension and a permanent ban are the same."

Regarding SafeSport's handling of cases in general, the statement said, "even if a respondent agrees to a significant sanction, center staff are still required to ensure the respondent receives a fair process."

While not specifically addressing the Gardner case, Nemchik added that the center is careful not to close cases "with inaccuracies or make findings that a respondent was not properly noticed on, because it could jeopardize the case and require the matter to be reopened."

Gardner's temporary suspension in July 2022 was put on SafeSport's disciplinary database — a searchable list of those banned by the center, which updates the list but does not announce new or notable sanctions. The database requires users to know the name of a person they want to check on.

The permanent ban Gardner indicated he was ready to sign in early 2025 would have changed his status on the database and closed the investigation, the people familiar with the case told the AP.

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It would have limited his ability to do more damage in a number of ways, experts familiar with SafeSport told AP. These include:

— Eliminating the possibility of the case going to arbitration and any need to reinterview and potentially retraumatize athletes.

— Removing the risk of any ban on Gardner being lifted if he were acquitted in his criminal case.

Just as importantly, it would have sent a clear message to parents, people in sports and possible employers, said attorney Michelle Simpson Tuegel, who represented gymnasts in the Nassar case.

"It communicates something that's a final determination," she said. "That means something. It's not like it's something that's being adjudicated and maybe this guy is falsely accused."

Gardner admitting potentially illegal activity to the SafeSport Center in early 2025 could also have provided law enforcement with more information in a case that didn't result in his arrest until August, said attorney Steve Silvey, a longtime critic of the center.

"Did he abuse any people in the months that SafeSport was sitting on that information?" Silvey said. "And where did that fit into what the FBI knew" before it arrested him?"

Despite being under temporary suspension from coaching gymnastics for two years, Gardner was able to land a job in May 2024 at MercyOne West Des Moines Medical Center as a surgical technologist, responsible for positioning patients on the operating room table and assisting with procedures and post-surgery care. A hospital spokesperson did not respond to a voicemail and email from the AP seeking comment.

Gardner's attorney, Omodare Jupiter, also did not respond to an email and phone message from the AP asking questions about SafeSport's handling of his client's case.

A web of office politics and staffers fearful of retaliation

The people familiar with Gardner's case told AP it got stuck in a web of internal SafeSport politics that led to HR complaints alleging retaliation and other concerns — and eventually to no lifetime ban being imposed.

They described a dysfunctional culture in which employees were afraid to speak up to their bosses about problems they encountered, including frustration over the center's failure to close out the Gardner case.

They said SafeSport took a survey of employees earlier this year that produced troubling results. A slideshow presentation to employees, shared with the AP, cited: "Significant concerns about retaliation, perceived favoritism and unqualified promotions" within the center's investigation and legal departments.

"If I say something, I may get punished without being told why," read a quote from an employee.

Nemchik did not respond to a question from AP about what SafeSport did in reaction to the survey, which came shortly after CEO Ju'Riese Colon's ouster in April, but acknowledged "short-term cultural challenges" that came after Colon's departure.

Nemchik said in a statement that the center expects a new CEO to focus on "organizational excellence as the center evolves under new leadership to best fulfill our mission."

Some allegations went under the radar for years

Since his arrest, Gardner's sanction on SafeSport's disciplinary database has been upgraded from "temporary suspension" to "ineligible" due to "criminal disposition involving a minor" and "sexual misconduct."

A conviction would change Gardner's sanction to permanently ineligible to coach gymnastics. That's the status Gardner had agreed to in early 2025, according to notes on the case file from April, one person told the AP.

"People know what Larry Nassar did and how it happened, and you let it happen again?" said John Manly, an attorney for gymnasts in the Nassar and Gardner cases, when asked to compare the two. "This center's one job is to protect child athletes from predators. And they are failing."

Meanwhile, SafeSport, USA Gymnastics and coaches at the Iowa gym where Gardner worked are named as defendants in civil lawsuits filed by two gymnasts who say they didn't do enough to protect them.

The lawsuits say that in December 2017, USA Gymnastics and SafeSport were notified by one girl's parents of Gardner's inappropriate behavior while coaching at Jump'In Gymnastics in Purvis, Mississippi.

Among the lawsuits' allegations:

— “Gardner requiring minor gymnasts to hug him after every practice, including long, front-facing, two-armed hugs.”

— “Gardner disciplining and intimidating a minor gymnast by taking her into his office for a 25-minute closed-door meeting without parental consent, verbally abusing her, and then hugging and kissing her without consent.”

Both SafeSport and USA Gymnastics declined to comment on the litigation.

The criminal complaint that led to Gardner’s arrest says the FBI found files of videos on his computer that Gardner made with a hidden camera in a girls lavatory as young gymnasts undressed and went to the bathroom at the Mississippi gym. The videos date to at least December 2017 through mid-2018.

The SafeSport center has said USA Gymnastics notified it in January 2018 that one of its affiliated gyms had resolved a report involving Gardner. But, the center said, it didn’t investigate further because the report was not related to sexual misconduct and it did not receive detailed information.

Meanwhile, Gardner was able to land a job at Chow’s Gymnastics and Dance Institute in West Des Moines, Iowa, in 2018 — a gym owned by renowned coach Liang “Chow” Qiao that produced Olympians, including gold medalist Shawn Johnson.

Not until 2022, when new allegations of abuse were reported to SafeSport, did the Iowa gym fire Gardner and the center place him on temporary suspension. The gym and Qiao, which are both named in the lawsuits, did not return phone and email messages left by the AP.

It took another three years and an investigation by the AP to expose the depths of the allegations against Gardner — and the shortcomings of the watchdog agency created to protect athletes in the wake of the Nassar case.

Simpson Tuegel said it’s no surprise this case is being compared to Nassar’s.

“You look at the timeline and how many people knew and failed to protect children and allowed this person to keep having contact,” she said.

“And there really is a point that you see, in some of these cases, where it absolutely could have been stopped and it wasn’t.”

## **In escalating tensions with Venezuela, Trump says the US ‘hit’ a coastal drug loading facility**

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump has indicated that the U.S. has “hit” a dock facility along a shore as he wages a pressure campaign on Venezuela, but the U.S. offered few details.

Trump initially seemed to confirm a strike in what appeared to be an impromptu radio interview Friday, and when questioned Monday by reporters about “an explosion in Venezuela,” he said the U.S. struck a facility where boats accused of carrying drugs “load up.”

“There was a major explosion in the dock area where they load the boats up with drugs,” Trump said as he met in Florida with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “They load the boats up with drugs, so we hit all the boats and now we hit the area. It’s the implementation area. There’s where they implement. And that is no longer around.”

It is part of an escalating effort to target what the Trump administration says are boats smuggling drugs bound for the United States. It moves closer to shore strikes that so far have been carried out by the military in international waters in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean.

The U.S. military said it conducted another strike on Monday against a boat accused of smuggling drugs in the eastern Pacific Ocean, killing two people. The attacks have killed at least 107 people in 30 strikes since early September, according to numbers announced by the Trump administration.

Trump declined to say if the U.S. military or the CIA carried out the strike on the dock or where it occurred. He did not confirm it happened in Venezuela.

“I know exactly who it was, but I don’t want to say who it was. But you know it was along the shore,” Trump said.

Trump first referenced the strike on Friday, when he called radio host John Catsimatidis during a program on WABC radio and discussed the U.S. strikes on alleged drug-carrying boats.

"I don't know if you read or saw, they have a big plant or a big facility where they send the, you know, where the ships come from," Trump said. "Two nights ago, we knocked that out. So, we hit them very hard."

Trump did not offer any additional details in the interview.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth or one of the U.S. military's social media accounts has in the past typically announced every boat strike in a post on X, but there has been no post of any strike on a facility.

The Pentagon on Monday referred questions to the White House, which did not immediately respond to a message seeking more details. The press office of Venezuela's government did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Trump's statement.

Trump for months has suggested he may conduct land strikes in South America, in Venezuela or possibly another country, and in recent weeks has been saying the U.S. would move beyond striking boats and would strike on land "soon."

In October, Trump confirmed he had authorized the CIA to conduct covert operations in Venezuela. The agency did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment Monday.

Along with the strikes, the U.S. has sent warships, built up military forces in the region, seized two oil tankers and pursued a third.

The Trump administration has said it is in "armed conflict" with drug cartels and seeking to stop the flow of narcotics into the United States.

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has insisted the real purpose of the U.S. military operations is to force him from power.

White House chief of staff Susie Wiles said in an interview with Vanity Fair published this month that Trump "wants to keep on blowing boats up until Maduro 'cries uncle.'"

## **Russia's nuclear-capable Oreshnik missiles have entered active service, Moscow says**

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia's nuclear-capable Oreshnik missile system has entered active service in Belarus, Russia's Defense Ministry said Tuesday, as the U.S. efforts to broker a deal to end the nearly four-year war in Ukraine have entered a pivotal stage.

The ministry released a video showing combat vehicles that are part of the mobile intermediate range ballistic missile system driving across a forest as part of combat training. The ministry's announcement followed a statement from Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who said earlier this month that the Oreshnik had arrived in the country. Lukashenko said that up to 10 such missile systems will be stationed in Belarus.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier this month that the Oreshnik would enter combat duty before the year's end. He made the statement at a meeting with top Russian military officers, where he warned that Moscow will seek to extend its gains in Ukraine if Kyiv and its Western allies reject the Kremlin's demands in peace talks.

The announcement comes at a critical time for Russia-Ukraine peace talks. U.S. President Donald Trump hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at his Florida resort Sunday and insisted that Kyiv and Moscow were "closer than ever before" to a peace settlement.

However, Moscow and Kyiv remain deeply divided on key issues, including whose forces withdraw from where in Ukraine and the fate of Ukraine's Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, one of the 10 biggest in the world. Trump noted that the monthslong U.S.-led negotiations could still collapse.

Putin has sought to portray himself as negotiating from a position of strength as Ukrainian forces strain to keep back the bigger Russian army.

Russia first tested a conventionally armed version of the Oreshnik — Russian for hazelnut tree — to strike a Ukrainian factory in November 2024. Putin has bragged that Oreshnik's multiple warheads plunge at

speeds of up to Mach 10 and can't be intercepted, and that several of them used in a conventional strike could be as devastating as a nuclear attack.

The Russian leader has warned the West that Russia could use the Oreshnik next against allies of Kyiv that allowed it to strike inside Russia with their longer-range missiles.

The Belarusian Defense Ministry said Tuesday that the Oreshnik has a range of up to 5,000 kilometers (3,100 miles).

Russian state media boasted that it would take the missile only 11 minutes to reach an air base in Poland and 17 minutes to reach NATO headquarters in Brussels. There's no way to know whether it's carrying a nuclear or a conventional warhead before it hits the target.

Intermediate-range missiles can fly between 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,400 miles). Such weapons were banned under a Soviet-era treaty that Washington and Moscow abandoned in 2019.

Russia previously has deployed tactical nuclear weapons to the territory of its Belarus, whose territory it used to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Lukashenko has said that his country has several dozen Russian tactical nuclear weapons.

While signing a security pact with Lukashenko in December 2024, Putin said that even with Russia controlling the Oreshniks, Moscow would allow Minsk to select the targets. He noted that if the missiles are used against targets closer to Belarus, they could carry a significantly heavier payload.

In 2024, the Kremlin released a revised nuclear doctrine, noting that any nation's conventional attack on Russia that is supported by a nuclear power will be considered a joint attack on his country. The threat was clearly aimed at discouraging the West from allowing Ukraine to strike Russia with longer-range weapons and appears to significantly lower the threshold for the possible use of Russia's nuclear arsenal.

The revised Russian doctrine also placed Belarus under the Russian nuclear umbrella.

Lukashenko has ruled the nation of 9.5 million with an iron fist for more than three decades. His government has been repeatedly sanctioned by the West for its crackdown on human rights and for allowing Moscow to use its territory for the invasion of Ukraine. Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has said that the deployment of Oreshnik to Belarus deepens the country's military and political dependence on Russia.

## Today in History: December 31, Edison demonstrates incandescent lights in Menlo Park

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 31, the 366th and final day of 2025. This is New Year's Eve.

Today in history:

On Dec. 31, 1879, Thomas Edison first demonstrated his electric incandescent lights for the public by illuminating some 100 bulbs in and around his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

Also on this date:

In 1904, New York's Times Square saw its first New Year's Eve celebration, with an estimated 200,000 people in attendance.

In 1972, baseball player Roberto Clemente, 38, was killed when a plane he chartered and was traveling on crashed shortly after takeoff from Puerto Rico while carrying relief supplies for earthquake-devastated Nicaragua.

In 1985, singer Rick Nelson, 45, and six others were killed when fire broke out aboard a plane that was taking the group to a New Year's Eve performance in Dallas.

In 1995, the syndicated comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," created by Bill Watterson, came to an end after a 10-year run.

In 1999, Russian President Boris Yeltsin resigned, making Prime Minister Vladimir Putin acting president.

In 2019, the health commission in the central Chinese city of Wuhan announced that experts were investigating an outbreak of respiratory illness and that most of the victims had visited a seafood market in the city; the statement said 27 people had become ill with a strain of viral pneumonia, which would

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eventually be known as COVID-19.

In 2022, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who had become the first pontiff in 600 years to resign as pope, died at age 95.

In 2024, a power blackout hit nearly all of Puerto Rico as the U.S. territory prepared to celebrate New Year's, leaving more than 1.3 million people in the dark. A private utility company said more than 700,000 clients had their lights back on by later that night.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Anthony Hopkins is 88. Rock musician Andy Summers (The Police) is 83. Actor Ben Kingsley is 82. Filmmaker Taylor Hackford is 81. Fashion designer Diane von Fürstenberg is 79. Actor Tim Matheson is 78. Actor Bebe Neuwirth is 67. Actor Gong Li is 60. Author Nicholas Sparks is 60. Businessman Donald Trump Jr. is 48. Singer-rapper PSY is 48. Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri is 46. Olympic gymnastics gold medalist Gabby Douglas is 30. Actor Hunter Schafer is 27.