

Groton Daily Independent

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Carnival of Silver Skates is rescheduled for Sunday, Feb. 1, 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2026

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.
School Lunch: Soup and (tbd), sandwich.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.
Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.
6th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.
3rd/4th Grade Volleyball Practice, 6 p.m.
5th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.

Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026

School Breakfast: Maple French toast bake.
School Lunch: Chicken tacos, refried beans.
JH BBB at Webster (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.)
GBB at Webster (JV at 6 p.m., Varsity to follow)



2nd Grade BBB Practice, 5 p.m.
4th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 30, 2026

School Breakfast: Breakfast boats.
School Lunch: Garlic Cheese Bread, Cooked carrots.
Girls Wrestling at Aberdeen Central Invitational, 3:30 p.m.
Boys Wrestling hosts Britton-Hecla, 6 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 31, 2026

Groton Invitational Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.
Boys DakXII/NEC Basketball Clash at Madison: Groton area vs. Vermillion at 2:45 p.m. in the Main Gym.

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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.

DC Air Collision Verdict

The National Transportation Safety Board yesterday determined last year's deadly midair collision between an American Airlines jet and an Army helicopter was largely caused by the Federal Aviation Administration's placement of a helicopter route in the approach path of a Ronald Reagan National Airport runway.

Federal investigators detailed how the helicopters' blades severed the jet's wing, sending both aircraft into the Potomac River and killing 67 people. The aircrafts' routes reportedly allowed just 75 feet of vertical separation—below the 1,000 feet usually required. The FAA allegedly failed to vet the paths, despite years of pilot warnings, and ignored air traffic controllers' calls to reduce Reagan's air traffic. The airspace was congested seconds before the crash, with one controller directing five helicopters and six aircraft more than five hours into their shift.

Since the crash—one year ago Thursday—the FAA has revised helicopter routes and reduced arrivals at Reagan. Meanwhile, a spending package with funding for 2,500 more controllers could stall this week over immigration enforcement provisions.

Amazon Retail Pivot

Amazon announced yesterday it will shutter all 72 Amazon Fresh supermarkets and Amazon Go convenience stores nationwide, reflecting a shift toward its grocery delivery business and Whole Foods expansion.

Analysts say the change underscores Amazon's emphasis on shopping experiences that better align with customer preferences. Amazon's online grocery division is a \$150B business, reaching more than 150 million shoppers. Same-day grocery delivery service is available in 2,300 US cities and towns, with longer-term delivery options available in 5,000 locations. The company says it will continue offering Fresh delivery online and open more than 100 Whole Foods stores in the coming years, but did not provide a timeline for the latter. Since Amazon acquired Whole Foods in 2017, the chain has grown to over 550 locations and seen over 40% sales growth.

Separately, Amazon is building a 229,000-square-foot megastore near Chicago that combines in-person and digital shopping. It is also planning to scale up Whole Foods Market Daily Shop, a mini-market in select cities.

EU-India Trade Deal

India and the EU announced a free-trade agreement yesterday, forming one of the largest deals by population that links nearly 2 billion consumers. The 27-member bloc and India concluded the deal after almost 20 years of negotiations.

The partnership represents about 25% of global GDP and one-third of global trade, and will cut tariffs on nearly 97% of EU exports to India. Tariffs on European cars will fall gradually from 110% to 10%, while premium wine duties will drop gradually from 150% to 20%. The EU will phase in similar cuts covering nearly 99% of India's shipments by trade value. India will gain wider access for farm and textile exports, along with cooperation on defense, security, and job creation.

EU-India trade totaled \$136.5B in 2024-25, with both sides targeting \$200B by 2030. The deal follows US tariffs on Indian and European exports, and analysts say it could offset part of Europe's export losses. For India, the agreement offers diversification from its largest trading partner, the US. A formal deal is expected later this year.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"One Battle After Another" leads with 14 British Academy Film Awards nominations, the most of any film this year; "Sinners" follows with 13, the highest for any film by a Black director in BAFTA history; ceremony set for Feb. 22.

Duke University settles lawsuit against quarterback Darian Mensah, clearing the way for his expected transfer to Miami; financial details not disclosed.

ICE agents to join US security detail for Winter Olympics.

Philip Glass pulls symphony premiere from Kennedy Center, citing Trump rebrand.

Neil Young gifts Greenland residents access to his music catalog.

Science & Technology

Google enables users to ask follow-up questions directly from AI Overviews produced during search queries, creating a more conversational experience.

Scientists connect heart attacks to the brain and the nervous and immune systems, upending the traditional view of the heart as an isolated organ and opening doors to new treatment options.

Male cuttlefish attract mates by creating patterns on their skin with polarized light waves—a spectacle invisible to the human eye.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.4%, Dow -0.8%, Nasdaq +1.0%); S&P 500 notches record high.

US consumer confidence in January falls to lowest reading since May 2014 amid concerns over job market, rising prices.

UPS to cut up to 30,000 operational jobs; latest round of cuts comes as the package deliverer expects to handle fewer Amazon shipments.

Pinterest to lay off up to roughly 15% of workforce, or about 700 jobs, as part of AI push.

Shares of UnitedHealth Group (-20%), Humana (-21%), and CVS Health (-14%) drop after Trump administration proposes keeping Medicare Advantage rates flat.

Politics & World Affairs

Two federal officers fired guns during the fatal shooting of protester Alex Pretti, who was resisting arrest, initial review finds.

Man sprays unknown substance on Rep. Ilhan Omar (D, MN-5) before being tackled at Minneapolis town hall.

Families of two men file first wrongful death suit against the US government over recent drug-smuggling strikes in the Caribbean Sea; the men were killed in an Oct. 14 strike while on a vessel traveling from Venezuela to Trinidad.

French lawmakers vote to approve bill banning social media for kids under age 15, aim to sign into law in time for next school year.

TikTok settles youth addiction lawsuit as jury selection begins.

Cavaliers Pull Away Late to Defeat Lady Tigers

The Groton Area girls basketball team saw a tightly contested Northeast Conference battle slip away in the fourth quarter Tuesday night, falling to Aberdeen Roncalli 43-31 at the Cavalier gym.

Roncalli held a 9-7 lead after the first quarter, but Groton briefly grabbed momentum early in the second when the Tigers took a 10-9 advantage. The Cavaliers answered, and the game remained close throughout the half, with Roncalli carrying a 17-15 lead into the locker room.

Groton regained the lead in the third quarter, going ahead 20-19 and later building its largest advantage at 21-19. Roncalli tied the game at 21 and edged in front 27-26 by the end of the third quarter.



Rylee Dunker sets the screen for Jaedyn Penning.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Rylee Dunker is defended by Roncalli's Rylee Voeller.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

The turning point came early in the fourth. The Cavaliers opened the final period with ten straight points to build a 40-26 lead and went on to win 43-31.

"It was uncharacteristic of us — missing assignments and losing discipline on the defensive end," said Groton head coach Matt Locke. "They made shots, but we've got to respond. You can't expect to hold everybody to 30 points."

Groton generated quality looks offensively but struggled to convert down the stretch. "We had some good looks," Locke said. "When we get shots, we've got to make them. It wasn't panic time, but we just didn't respond the way we needed to."

Despite the disappointing finish, Locke emphasized his pride in the team.

"I love these kids," he said. "They'll do anything for me. Sometimes they don't give themselves enough credit for how skilled they are, and they don't always play with confidence. That's tough to see because I want them to have the success they've worked for. But we'll go back to work, learn from this, and get better."

Groton shot 6-of-25 on two-pointers (24%), 5-of-17 from three-point range (29%), and 4-of-11 at the free-throw line (36%). The Lady Tigers recorded 21 rebounds, 9 assists, 7 steals, and 1 block, with 12 turnovers and 13 team fouls.

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Jayden Penning led Groton with 11 points, adding 3 rebounds and 3 assists. Rylee Dunker contributed 9 points and 8 rebounds. Taryn Traphagen finished with 4 points, 3 rebounds, and 2 steals. Jerica Locke added 3 points, 4 rebounds, 3 assists, 3 steals, and a block. Kella Tracy scored 2 points, Talli Wright had 2, and Sydney Locke recorded a steal.

Roncalli was led by Gabby Thomas and Ryelle Voeller with 13 points apiece. Voeller knocked down three three-pointers, while Thomas added one. Claire Crawford scored 6 points on two threes, Elyana Roach had 5, Morgan Helms added 2, and Olivia Dix had 1. The Cavaliers shot 43% from the field.

Groton Area falls to 8-5 on the season, while Roncalli improves to 10-2. The Lady Tigers travel to Webster on Thursday.

JV: Groton 32, Roncalli 21

Groton won the junior varsity contest 32-21. The Tigers led 8-1 after one quarter, 17-11 at halftime, and 21-17 after three before opening the fourth quarter with an 11-0 run.

Makenna Krause led Groton with 14 points. Kella Tracy added 9, Ashlynn Warrington scored 4, Teagan Hatten had 3, and Teven Hansen finished with 2. Kadince Glynn led Roncalli with 5.

C Game: Groton 19, Roncalli 10

Groton also won the C-game 19-10. The Tigers led 6-1 after one quarter, 12-3 at halftime, and 16-10 after three.


Taylynn Traphagen scored 7 points to lead Groton. Kinsley Rowen had 6, while Brynlee Dunker, Teagan Hatten and Avery Crank each scored 2. Harper Kline led the Cavaliers with 5.

The varsity broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy and The MeatHouse in Andover. Rich Bosma did the commentary, Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera and Paul Kosel did the stats and technology. The junior varsity and C games were broadcast as well, sponsored by grandparents.

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Tigers Earn Two Dual Wins in Triple-Dual Wrestling Event

The Groton Area wrestling teams turned in a strong day on the mats, earning dual victories over Garretson and Mount Vernon/Plankinton/Corsica-Stickney (MVPC), while dropping a tough contest to Parkston. The Tigers defeated Garretson 48-35 and MVPC 50-24 before falling to Parkston 57-24 in the final dual of the event.

Groton Area 48, Garretson 35

The Tigers opened the meet with momentum and controlled the dual against Garretson with bonus-point victories throughout the lineup.

At 106 pounds, Bentley Ehresmann started Groton Area off with a forfeit victory. Luke Gauer wrestled at 113 and was pinned by Blake Benson. Wyatt Hagen quickly answered at 120 with a fall over Bence Bonte in 1:19. Kyson Kucker earned a forfeit win at 126. Noah Scepaniak added a fall at 132, pinning Chase Costello in 3:26. Aiden Strom wrestled at 138 and dropped a technical fall to Chase Arend. Grayson Flores was pinned by Talon Miller at 144. Donavon Block collected a forfeit victory at 150. Kason Oswald pinned Beckett Dickey in 1:28 at 157. At 165, Groton Area conceded a forfeit. Isaiah Scepaniak was pinned by Cole Schleuter at 190. Walker Zoellner earned a forfeit at 215. Gavin Englund sealed the dual with a fall over Tanner Baatz in 2:26 at heavyweight.

Groton Area 50, MVPC 24

Groton Area kept rolling in the second dual with a dominant performance against MVPC.

Bentley Ehresmann recorded a technical fall at 106 over Dreyton Hoffman. Luke Gauer followed with a forfeit win at 113. Wyatt Hagen remained undefeated on the day, winning a 6-4 decision over Kale Hofer at 120. Parker Zoellner picked up a forfeit victory at 126. Kyson Kucker added another forfeit at 132. Noah Scepaniak pinned Will Tobin at 138. Aiden Strom wrestled at 144 and was pinned by Daniel Dorsey. Grayson Flores was pinned by Ethan Reimnitz at 150. Kason Oswald was pinned by Preston Nedved at 157. Donavon Block was pinned by Ethan Hoffman at 165. The 175-pound bout resulted in a double forfeit. Walker Zoellner earned a forfeit win at 190. Isaiah Scepaniak collected a forfeit at 215. Gavin Englund closed with a fall over Isaias Arias in 1:25 at 285.

Parkston 57, Groton Area 24

In the final dual, the Tigers ran into a strong Parkston lineup.

Bentley Ehresmann was pinned by Leyton Sudbeck at 106. Luke Gauer was pinned by Radley Konrad at 113. Wyatt Hagen delivered another highlight by pinning Bentley Roth at 120. Kyson Kucker pinned Cooper Sommer at 126. Noah Scepaniak lost by technical fall to Kiptyn Schaefer at 132. Aiden Strom was pinned by Javin Kniffen at 138. Grayson Flores earned a forfeit win at 144. Kason Oswald was pinned by Jack Jodozi at 150. Donavon Block lost by technical fall to Gage Reichert at 157. Groton Area conceded a forfeit at 165. Walker Zoellner was pinned by Wyatt Anderson at 190. Isaiah Scepaniak lost by technical fall to Joaquin Rodriguez at 215. Gavin Englund ended the night with a fall over Isaac Soulek at 285.

Girls Results

Groton Area's girls also competed during the event.

At 105 pounds, Liza Krueger earned two pin victories on the day. She pinned Jerzie Muntefering of Ethan/Parkston in 1:25 and later pinned Stella Frewaldt of Garretson in 2:29. At 115 pounds, Gracelynn Decker wrestled twice and was pinned by Eliotte Kalnbach of Ethan/Parkston in 1:37 and by Macie Miller of Garretson in 40 seconds.

Team Highlights

Wyatt Hagen went undefeated with three victories, including two falls. Kyson Kucker remained unbeaten with two falls and a forfeit. Gavin Englund recorded three straight pins at heavyweight. Noah Scepaniak earned a key pin against Garretson. Bentley Ehresmann opened multiple duals with bonus-point wins. The full Tiger lineup — Ehresmann, Gauer, Hagen, Parker Zoellner, Kucker, Noah Scepaniak, Strom, Flores, Block, Oswald, Walker Zoellner, Isaiah Scepaniak, and Englund — all contributed to the team effort.



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Electricity providers could get limits on wildfire liability in legislation advancing to SD Senate

Supporters say utilities need relief from rising costs; opponents worry about shifting burdens onto fire victims

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

PIERRE — South Dakota lawmakers advanced a bill Tuesday at the Capitol that would give utilities legal protections if a wildfire is blamed on them, in exchange for filing a wildfire mitigation plan.

The Senate Commerce and Energy Committee voted 6-3 to send the bill to the full Senate.

Under the bill, private utilities could submit mitigation plans to the Public Utilities Commission, while electric cooperatives and municipal utilities could submit plans to their boards or city councils. The utilities that do so would have to file annual compliance reports.

The bill includes required elements for plans, such as identifying higher-risk areas, inspection and operating standards, vegetation management strategies, and coordination with the appropriate wildfire agencies.

Liability changes

The bill's most debated section would change the legal playing field after a wildfire. It would bar courts from applying "strict liability" to qualified utilities in wildfire-damage lawsuits. That is a legal standard that makes entities responsible for harm they cause, regardless of whether they were negligent or intended to cause it.

The bill would make the new law a plaintiff's "sole remedy" against a qualified utility for wildfire losses.

The bill is sponsored by Sen. Steve Kolbeck, R-Brandon, who works as a director of business affairs at Xcel Energy, an investor-owned utility with over 100,000 customers in the state.

"We want to make people whole. We just don't want to make them rich," Kolbeck told fellow members of the committee.

The bill says plaintiffs would be able to recover losses only by proving that the utility failed to "substantially comply" with an "essential element" of the plan, and "that failure was the actual and proximate cause of the damages to the plaintiff."

Plaintiffs would have three years to file a lawsuit from the date of ignition.

The bill would also limit noneconomic damages awarded in lawsuits to cases involving death or "visible bodily injury in the form of a burn," and restrict punitive damages to situations proven by clear and convincing evidence of malice or criminal intent.

Property damages would be capped at the lesser of restoration cost or the change in fair market value before and after the wildfire.

Supporters and opponents

Some utility groups, firefighters, business groups and the state Public Utilities Commission argued the bill would reduce both wildfire risk and utilities' financial exposure before a catastrophic event, especially in high-risk areas like the Black Hills.

Supporters also said wildfire-related insurance is becoming harder to obtain and more expensive for utilities, and the threat of massive wildfire liability can drive up costs that ultimately land on customers.

In opposition, insurance industry representatives and trial lawyers argued the bill would give utilities

special legal protections not available to other businesses or individuals and shift the cost of wildfire losses from utilities onto property owners and their insurers.

Opponents said the bill effectively replaces a stricter liability standard with a negligence-based framework with additional protections for utilities, and that victims could be left undercompensated due to limits on noneconomic damages, restrictions on punitive damages, and the cap on property recovery. They also raised concerns that the mitigation plan standards are too general and enforcement is too weak.

"Fire victims may not recover non-economic damages unless the plaintiff suffers death or visible body injury in the form of a burn," said Steve Siegel, representing the South Dakota Trial Lawyers Association. "No smoke inhalation, burned lungs. I'd like to know, what is the definition of 'visible bodily injury'? Is that with the naked eye? Does that include an MRI scan or a CT scan?"

Siegel said the threat of having to pay damages in lawsuits helps incentivize utilities to mitigate the risk of a fire.

Power line-related incidents are sources of ignition in the Black Hills. In 2017, the Legion Lake Fire, a wind-driven wildfire that started in Custer State Park, grew rapidly and burned a mix of over 50,000 public and private acres, prompting evacuations and park closures. Investigators concluded the fire was sparked when a tree fell and broke a power line.

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.

Homeland Security boss Noem in hot water after response to Minneapolis killings

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem is facing mounting criticism, including from some congressional Republicans and moderate Democrats, for her response to a second killing by federal immigration agents in Minneapolis.

President Donald Trump reiterated his confidence in Noem Tuesday, but several Republican senators, a group that overwhelmingly voted last year for Noem to lead the Department of Homeland Security, are pushing for an independent investigation into the Saturday killing of 37-year-old Alex Pretti by Border Patrol agents and calling for her to testify before Congress.

And Democrats who are generally not among their party's most aggressive members in opposing the Trump administration have joined a call to impeach Noem and restrict her department's funding.

Trump told reporters, though, that the former South Dakota governor had done a good job, especially on controlling border crossings.

"No," he said, when asked if she would step down, according to White House pool reports.

He made a similar statement to Fox News' Will Cain during an afternoon appearance in Iowa.

"She was there with the border," he told Cain. "Who closed up the border? She did."

GOP calls for investigation

The calls for an independent investigation signaled something of a loss of confidence in Noem from some Republicans in the wake of missteps following Pretti's killing. No Republican senators voted against her confirmation last year.

Kentucky Republican Rand Paul, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, criticized Noem Tuesday for not placing the agents involved in shooting Pretti on administrative leave.

"That should happen immediately," Paul wrote on social media Tuesday, adding that "for calm to be restored" an independent investigation needs to happen.

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Within hours of Saturday's shooting Noem labeled Pretti, an intensive care unit nurse, as a "domestic terrorist" who intended "to inflict maximum damage on individuals and kill law enforcement."

Noem used similar terminology after federal immigration officer Jonathan Ross shot and killed 37-year-old Renee Good on Jan. 7.

Both Good and Pretti's shootings were widely caught on camera, contradicting claims by Noem that both posed a threat.

Multiple videos show that Good was driving away when Ross fired three shots into her windshield.

Video analysis by the New York Times shows Pretti wrestled to the ground by multiple agents and, while pinned down, two officers fired 10 shots. The analysis also showed that an officer took away a handgun from Pretti, which he had a permit for, while he was pinned down.

The contradictions hurt Noem's standing with some Republicans.

"I can't recall ever hearing a police chief immediately describing the victim as a "domestic terrorist" or a "would-be assassin," Paul said, taking aim at Noem as well as White House senior advisor Stephen Miller, who called Pretti a "would-be assassin."

Hearings

Noem also said that because Pretti had a handgun, he inherently posed a danger to DHS agents, a claim that has divided Republicans.

Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho took issue with Noem's criticism of Pretti's possession of a gun.

"His family, law-abiding citizens exercising their Second Amendment right and the trust of the American people deserve a fair process," he said on social media Monday.

Sen. John Curtis, Republican of Utah, criticized Noem for her handling of Saturday's shooting.

"Officials who rush to judgment before all the facts are known undermine public trust and the law-enforcement mission," he wrote on social media Monday. "I disagree with Secretary Noem's premature DHS response, which came before all the facts were known and weakened confidence."

He also called for an independent investigation.

Paul on Monday called for several leaders of agencies within Homeland Security to testify before his committee – U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Those same agency leaders are scheduled to appear before the House Committee on Homeland Security on Feb. 10.

Dems ramp up impeachment talk

Democrats are calling for Noem's removal, along with pushing for changes to the Homeland Security funding bill, increasing the chances of a partial government shutdown at midnight Friday.

In the House, 162 Democrats had co-sponsored articles of impeachment against Noem by Tuesday afternoon, a number that climbed throughout the day. The articles were first introduced shortly after Good's death.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries and other House Democratic leaders issued a joint statement Monday calling for Noem to be fired. If she's not, Democrats would move forward with impeachment, the leaders said. The effort is unlikely to move in the House-controlled GOP.

"Dramatic changes at the Department of Homeland Security are needed," Jeffries said. "Federal agents who have broken the law must be criminally prosecuted. The paramilitary tactics must cease and desist."

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, called for Chairman Jim Jordan of Ohio to begin impeachment proceedings into Noem, noting that masked agents of her department "brutally killed two American citizens."

"Far from condemning these unlawful and savage killings in cold blood, Secretary Noem immediately labeled Renée and Alex 'domestic terrorists,' blatantly lied about the circumstances of the shootings that took their lives, and attempted to cover-up and blockade any legitimate investigation into their deaths,"

Raskin said.

On Tuesday, Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman, a moderate Democrat who voted to confirm Noem, made a direct appeal to Trump to fire her.

"Americans have died," Fetterman said in a statement. "She is betraying DHS's core mission and trashing your border security legacy."

Nevada Sen. Jacky Rosen, another moderate Democrat, also called for Noem to be impeached.

Trump pivots

Facing mounting pressure, Trump has softened his tone with state and local officials and walked back his administration's aggressive immigration operations in Minnesota that Noem has overseen.

Trump directed border czar Tom Homan to Minnesota to take over ICE operations, effectively sidelining Noem, who in December deployed 3,000 federal immigration officers to the state after right-wing media influencers resurfaced reports of fraud in the state's social service programs.

By Monday evening, top Border Patrol official Gregory Bovino was removed from his position as at-large commander and sent back to California, according to multiple media reports.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt defended the decision to send Homan to Minnesota, arguing that Noem is occupied with managing FEMA operations as a winter storm covers much of the country.

Funding bill

In the wake of Saturday's shooting, Senate Democrats quickly opposed the Homeland Security spending bill the chamber was set to pass this week.

Instead, Democrats argued the measure must be stripped from the government funding package of six bills and renegotiated to include more constraints on federal immigration enforcement.

The funding package passed the House this month, but a majority of Democrats opposed any funding for ICE, which would maintain a flat funding level of \$10 billion.

Even if there is a partial government shutdown, DHS still has up to \$190 billion it can spend from the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," the president's signature tax and spending cuts package signed into law last summer.

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

Bill to ban paid petitioning fails in South Dakota House of Representatives

BY: JOHN HULT

Constitutional concerns helped tank a bill Tuesday in the South Dakota House of Representatives that aimed to ban payments to petition circulators in ballot measure campaigns.

Rep. Travis Ismay, R-Newell, sponsored House Bill 1087. It sought to bar payments for those who want to put initiated laws, referendums or constitutional amendments on the ballot.

Ismay argued that paying circulators undermines the interests of South Dakotans by allowing out-of-state interests to fund campaigns meant to change the state.

Circulators need 17,508 signatures from registered voters to propose a law or challenge a bill passed by the Legislature. They need 35,017 to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot.

Ismay's bill would allow a court to invalidate a petition if its circulators were found to have been paid.

Rep. Mark Roby, R-Watertown, said South Dakota would be sued over HB 1087 and lose. He pointed to Supreme Court cases that took up the legality of payments for petition circulation and ruled it to be protected First Amendment speech.

Rep. Erik Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, said passing a bill bound to cost taxpayers an untold amount of money

for a losing cause is bad policy.

"That's just fiscally irresponsible use of our state taxpayer dollars," Muckey said.

Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, who was among the members who stood up to back Ismay's bill, said the fight to defend the bill in court would be worth it.

"Sometimes lawsuits like that are essential to preserve our democracy," said Hughes, who described every interaction he's had with paid circulators as "miserable."

"I could tell they were not from around here, and they were there to harvest signatures," Hughes said.

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

Eminent domain restrictions advance to SD Senate for possible inclusion on November ballot

If resolution passes, voters would decide on state constitutional amendment

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — A measure that would ask South Dakota voters to restrict eminent domain in a state constitutional amendment is moving on to be heard by the state Senate.

It passed the House on a 62-5 vote Tuesday.

Eminent domain is the power to take private property for public use, with just compensation to the owner. It's been a divisive issue in South Dakota the last several years because of a proposed multi-state carbon capture pipeline that would pass through the eastern part of the state.

The legislation asks voters to approve a constitutional amendment clarifying that eminent domain "may not be exercised for the purpose of transferring private property to a non-governmental entity solely to promote economic development or increase tax revenue without the provision of a public use."

Rep. Spencer Gosch, R-Glenham, introduced the bill, which passed through the House State Affairs Committee last week. He said the measure would not ban eminent domain completely.

"We are helping property owners in the state of South Dakota maintain their rights on their property by saying, 'No, you cannot take my property for economic development or increased tax revenue purposes,'" Gosch said Tuesday. "If I wanted to bring a bill to get rid of eminent domain, I would have done that."

Supporters of the measure say the amendment would strengthen a law passed last year, which specifically bans eminent domain for carbon capture pipeline projects.

Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, worried that the language of the bill is too vague. He said the "poorly drafted" bill is a "poison pill," because it could unintentionally enshrine a right to eminent domain for economic development or increased tax revenue as long as a public use can be shown.

Down the line, Hughes said, private entities could use things like combating climate change to justify a public use for a carbon pipeline. The proposed pipeline project from Summit Carbon Solutions would capture carbon dioxide emissions from ethanol plants in five states and bury them in North Dakota, to capitalize on federal tax credits incentivizing the prevention of heat-trapping emissions into the atmosphere.

"To now enshrine the ability to take private property for purposes of economic development or increasing tax revenue, so long as that you have a public use, wow, I can't go there," Hughes said.

He also criticized the phrase "economic development" in the legislation.

"I don't even know what that means," he said. "I support economic growth. I don't know what economic development is."

Open-ended language leaves the state vulnerable to lawsuits, he said.

If the Senate also approves the measure, it will go to voters in the Nov. 3 general election.'

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

Inmate accused of providing drugs in prison overdose case unlikely to serve additional time

Case marred by missing evidence ends with no contest plea, unchanged parole date

BY: JOHN HULT

SIOUX FALLS — Unless he misbehaves in the next year and a half, a state prison inmate won't serve any additional time in a case that accused him of providing the drugs that killed a fellow inmate.

The outcome came two months after a court hearing where prosecutors apologized for a failure by the state Department of Corrections to preserve some evidence.

Manarion Fuse, 22, is one of two people charged with drug crimes in the death of Anthony Richards, whose February 2025 death was ruled an overdose.

Eight people died of confirmed or suspected overdoses in South Dakota prisons last year, starting with Richards, a prison overdose tally that was both higher than any surrounding state and higher than South Dakota has seen in modern memory.

As with all but one of the eight cases, Richards' death was linked to a synthetic drug called K2.

Prison officials and Attorney General Marty Jackley's office have pledged to address the crush of drug incidents through security policy changes and prosecutions.

Fuse is the first person to enter a plea for a crime linked to one of the 2025 overdoses.

In a statement Tuesday, Jackley said the sentence for Fuse may not have been ideal, but it does offer some closure in the Richards case.

"Even though there was some evidence not available that likely impacted the sentence — through no fault of investigators or prosecutors — there was both a criminal conviction and sentence."

No contest, no additional time

In court Tuesday, Fuse pleaded no contest to a charge of felony drug possession in exchange for the dismissal of the remaining charges against him and a sentence that won't change his initial parole date, which comes next May. People pleading no contest do not admit guilt, but it allows a judge to impose a sentence as though they had.

Such a plea also sidesteps the legal requirement for a judge to read a factual basis statement into the record that includes the date, time and manner in which the pleading party committed a crime.

Fuse had argued that other inmates and staff members may have been involved in distributing the drugs that reportedly killed Richards at the state penitentiary's Jameson Annex.

At a hearing in November, Assistant Attorney General Ryan McFall apologized for the state's failure to produce some of the evidence Fuse's lawyer Kylie Beck had requested to prepare his defense.

The prosecution had turned over all the evidence delivered to prosecutors by the Department of Corrections, McFall said, but said videos of alleged drug deliveries to Fuse had not been preserved.

Beck, of the Minnehaha County Public Defender's Office, said Tuesday that her client agreed to the plea deal to avoid a trial, at which he'd run the risk of convictions for more than one offense and face sentencing as a habitual offender.

"Mr. Fuse is not admitting any sort of guilt, but understands that this will appear as a conviction on his record," Beck said.

McFall offered no comments aside from encouraging Judge Jon Sogn to follow the terms of the plea agreement, which capped Fuse's sentence at three years, with two suspended, to run concurrent with Fuse's 2024 sentence for discharging a firearm at an occupied structure.

Sogn added two years of suspended time, which could be imposed if Fuse fails to pay a \$65 fee or misbehaves while on probation.

Fuse's co-defendant, Malibu Lynn Ross, is scheduled for a change of plea and sentence hearing on March 4.

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First sentence in spate of overdose deaths

Jackley's office indicted Fuse in June, the first of what became several rounds of overdose-related prison drug indictments. More people were charged in September for the death of Nicholas Skorka, and still more were charged in December in the death of Travis Long Fox.

On Monday, Jackley announced charges for 11 people allegedly involved in the drug distribution ring linked to the November death of Timothy Tyree at Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield.

Three of the people indicted thus far formerly worked at a prison, one as a correctional officer in Sioux Falls, another as a medical aid in Sioux Falls and a third as a contract food service worker in Springfield.

Investigations into the remaining drug deaths are ongoing, Jackley said Monday.

Prairie Crowe, Richards' sister, told South Dakota Searchlight on Tuesday that her family had been informed of the terms of the Fuse plea deal.

The family is disappointed by the outcome, but Crowe said she puts the blame on the Department of Corrections, not prosecutors. The department needs to "step up" its efforts to protect the inmates in its care, she said, react more quickly when inmates are in trouble and do a better job investigating when things go wrong.

"They're responsible for making sure people get home, and they're not doing it," Crowe said.

In a statement Tuesday, corrections spokesman Michael Winder said the department "cannot comment on ongoing investigations, criminal cases, lawsuits, or security sensitive matters."

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

Eminent domain ban advances from Iowa Senate subcommittee but changes are planned

BY: CAMI KOONS

An Iowa House bill banning the use of eminent domain for carbon sequestration pipelines advanced from a Senate subcommittee Tuesday, but senators intend to amend the bill with their own language.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Klimesh, R-Spillville, said he plans to amend the bill with language from his own property rights bill.

Klimesh held a hearing on House File 2104, a bill passed by the House in response to ongoing conflict in the state over property rights and a carbon sequestration pipeline.

"The Senate's approach is to find a way that we can both honor property rights for those folks that want to say no and for those folks that want to say yes, while continuing to build linear infrastructure in the state," Klimesh said, speaking to reporters after the subcommittee hearing.

Sen. Janet Petersen, D-Des Moines, sat on the subcommittee and said she was "surprised" Klimesh had called a subcommittee on the bill, considering his plans to run a different piece of legislation.

"That was the biggest bait and switch I've ever seen," Petersen said at the close of the subcommittee after Klimesh shared his plans to amend the bill.

Klimesh introduced two bills the week prior related to the issue, one that would allow pipeline operators to widen the corridor in their route proposals and to find alternate easement parcels to avoid the use of eminent domain. The other bill would place a severance tax on sequestered carbon dioxide.

Klimesh's bills have been supported by the corn and ethanol industries, who are in favor of the Summit Carbon Solutions proposed carbon sequestration pipeline project that would run through Iowa.

The opportunity to widen the corridor, they argued, would allow the project to move forward in the state, while a CO2 pipeline eminent domain ban would stop the project.

Landowners opposed to the Summit pipeline argue a ban, via HF 2104, is the only way to protect private property rights from a project they believe was wrongly given the power of eminent domain by the

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Iowa Utilities Commission.

"Nothing in this bill prevents or prohibits construction of a carbon capture pipeline," Peg Rasmussen, a Montgomery County affected landowner, said in the subcommittee. "What is in this bill, is private property rights protection from the heavy hand of government."

Several representatives from Iowa Laborers Local 177, spoke at the subcommittee against the eminent domain ban and said the project, which has been unable to start construction, would employ roughly 2,000 construction workers.

"This is the same bill that's being introduced year after year after year," Richie Schmidt, Local 177's president said. "It doesn't go anywhere. Workers are suffering."

House lawmakers passed a similar bill last year, but it did not advance in the Senate. The Senate passed a different House bill restricting the use of eminent domain for carbon sequestration pipelines, but Gov. Kim Reynolds vetoed the legislation.

Cynthia Hansen, a Shelby County landowner, said the bill has "nothing to do" with stopping the creation of labor jobs.

"The pipeline can still be built, it just has to be built on voluntary easements, not on eminent domain," Hansen said.

Fixing the 'confrontation' of the permitting process

Iowa Renewable Fuels Association and Iowa Corn Growers Association have been in favor of the pipeline project, as a carbon sequestration pipeline would enable Iowa ethanol plants to participate in the ultra-low carbon ethanol market, which the groups argue would also give a needed boost to the corn market.

Colin Gorton, on behalf of Iowa Renewable Fuels Association, said the group was in favor of an effort to widen easement corridors, but was also interested in "improving Iowa's permitting process on the front end."

Gorton said the process now requires projects to "throw a dart at the wall" when proposing the route. He suggested amending Iowa's permitting process to allow operators to talk to landowners before suggesting a route, in hope of devising a route with willing landowners.

"It's really designed to create confrontation, and that's not something that we support," Gorton said of the current process.

A lobbyist from Summit echoed Gorton's call for an amendment to the early stages of the process.

Sen. Mike Boussetot, R-Ankeny, who sat on the subcommittee and also chairs the Senate Commerce Committee, where the bill is headed, said he hopes to find a balance between protecting landowners and not impeding on "critical infrastructure and development."

"Let me be abundantly clear, we have to do something this session to protect landowners and landowner rights," Boussetot said. "We have to do that."

Klimesh declined to answer Petersen's comments at the onset of the committee on whether or not he intended to amend the bill. Petersen said she wanted to sign in support of the bill, but "not with an amendment that we didn't discuss."

Klimesh said HF 2104 will be in the full committee Wednesday with an amendment, and said there will be a subcommittee hearing on the bill he filed, Senate File 2067.

Klimesh said the comments he has heard on this issue and the eminent domain ban are of "the utmost importance" to him as he seeks to "find common ground."

"We are all concerned about their property rights, everybody in the Senate is, everybody in both chambers is," Klimesh said. "It's time for us to find a solution, to find a solution that allows us to get ourselves, and dig ourselves, out of the box we currently put ourselves in by the overregulating of this corridor."

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.

As AI-generated fake content mars legal cases, states want guardrails

'Hallucinated' material has made its way into hundreds of court cases

BY: MADYSON FITZGERALD

Last spring, Illinois county judge Jeffrey Goffinet noticed something startling: A legal brief filed in his courtroom cited a case that did not exist.

Goffinet, an associate judge in Williamson County, looked through two legal research systems and then headed to the courthouse library — a place he hadn't visited in years — to consult the book that purportedly listed the case. The case wasn't in it.

The fake case, generated by artificial intelligence, came across Goffinet's desk just a few months after the Illinois Supreme Court's policy on the use of AI in the courts took effect. Goffinet co-chaired a task force that informed that policy, which allows the use of AI as long as it complies with existing legal and ethical standards.

"People are going to use [AI], and the courts are not going to be able to be a dam across a river that's already flowing at flood capacity," Goffinet said. "We have to learn how to coexist with it."

As more false quotes, fake court cases and incorrect information appear in legal documents generated by AI, state bar associations, state court systems and national law organizations are issuing guidance on its use in the legal field. A handful of states are considering or enacting legislation to address the issue, and many courts and professional associations are focused on education for attorneys.

From divorce cases to discrimination lawsuits, AI-generated fake content can cause evidence to be dismissed and motions to be denied.

While some states urge attorneys to lean on existing guidance about accuracy and transparency, the new policies address AI concerns related to confidentiality, competency and costs. Most policies and opinions encourage attorneys to educate themselves and to use proprietary AI tools that prevent sensitive data from being entered into open source systems. Since AI tools could also increase efficiency, several policies advise attorneys to charge less if they spend less time on cases.

Some states, such as Ohio, also ban the use of artificial intelligence for certain legal tasks. In Ohio, courts are prohibited from using AI to translate legal forms, court orders and similar content that may affect the outcome of a case.

Several states have also advised legal professionals to adhere to the American Bar Association's formal opinion of ethical AI use in law.

Artificial intelligence can help attorneys and law firms by automating administrative tasks, analyzing contracts and organizing documents. Generative AI can also be used to draft legal documents, including court briefs. Experts say the use of AI productivity tools can save legal professionals time and reduce the risk of human error in everyday tasks.

But law professionals nationwide have faced fines and license suspensions, among other consequences, for submitting legal documents citing false quotes, cases or information.

Many legal professionals are likely to not notice instances in which an AI system is "hallucinating," or confidently making statements that are not true, said Rabihah Butler, the manager for enterprise content for Risk, Fraud and Government at the Thomson Reuters Institute. The institute is a research subsidiary of the Thomson Reuters company, which sells an AI system meant to help lawyers.

Courts and law organizations will need to consider education, sanctions and punitive actions to ensure law professionals are using AI appropriately, Butler said.

"AI has such confidence, and it can appear so polished, that if you're not paying attention and doing your due diligence, the hallucination is being treated as a factual piece of information," she said.

Since the beginning of 2025, there have been 518 documented cases in which generative AI produced hallucinated content used in U.S. courts, according to a database by Damien Charlotin, a senior research fellow at the HEC Paris business school.

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"So far, if we're looking at the institutional response, there's not a lot because people are not very sure how to handle this kind of issue," Charlotin said. "Everyone is aware that some lawyers are using artificial intelligence in their day-to-day work. Most people are aware that the technology is not very mature. But it's still hard to prevent a mistake."

State guidance

As of Jan. 23, state bar associations or similar entities have issued formal guidance on the use of AI in at least 10 states and the District of Columbia, typically in the form of an ethics opinion. Those aren't enforceable as law, but spell out proper conduct.

In February, for example, the Professional Ethics Committee for the State Bar of Texas issued an ethics opinion that outlines issues that may arise from law professionals using AI. Texas lawyers should have a basic understanding of generative AI tools and guardrails to protect client confidentiality, it said. They should also verify any content generated by AI and refrain from charging clients for the time saved by using AI tools.

Legal professionals must be aware of their own competency with AI tools, said Brad Johnson, the executive director of the Texas Center for Legal Ethics.

"A really important takeaway from the opinion is that if a lawyer is considering using a generative AI tool in the practice of law, the lawyer has to have a reasonable and current understanding of the technology because only then can a lawyer really evaluate the risks that are associated with it," he said.

Court systems in at least 11 states — Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Vermont and Virginia — have established policies or issued rules of conduct regarding AI use by law professionals.

Illinois, for instance, allows lawyers to use artificial intelligence and does not require disclosure. The policy also emphasizes that judges will ultimately be responsible for their decisions, regardless of "technological advancements."

"The task force wanted to emphasize that as judges, what we bring to the table is our humanity," said Goffinet, the associate judge. "And we cannot abdicate our humanity in favor of an AI-generated decision or opinion."

Some state lawmakers have tried to address the issue through legislation. Last year, Louisiana Republican Gov. Jeff Landry signed a measure that requires attorneys to use "reasonable diligence" to verify the authenticity of evidence, including content generated by artificial intelligence. The law also allows parties in civil cases to raise concerns about the admissibility of evidence if they suspect it was generated or altered by artificial intelligence.

California Democratic state Sen. Tom Umberg also introduced legislation last year that would require attorneys to ensure confidential information is not entered into a public generative AI system. The measure, which was approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee last week, also would require attorneys to ensure that reasonable steps are taken to verify the accuracy of generative AI material.

Attorney education

It's also important for state bar associations and law schools to provide education on artificial intelligence, said Michael Hensley, a counsel at FBT Gibbons and an advocate for the safe use of AI in California courts. AI has the ability to reduce research time just like online legal research systems, but it requires training, he said.

"I would hope the state bar would have training for this," Hensley said. "And I think it's absolutely imperative that law schools have a session on AI."

In a Bloomberg Law survey conducted last spring, 51% of the more than 750 respondents said their law firms purchased or invested in generative artificial intelligence tools. Another 21% said they planned to purchase AI tools within the next year. Attorneys reported using generative AI for general legal research, drafting communications, summarizing legal narratives, reviewing legal documents and other work.

Of the law firms that were not using generative AI, attorneys cited incorrect or unreliable output, ethical

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issues, security risks and data privacy as the top reasons.

While attorneys and law firms have become more comfortable with AI tools, courts have been more apprehensive, said Diane Robinson, a principal court research associate at the National Center for State Courts. Robinson is also project director at the Thomson Reuters Institute/NCSC AI Policy Consortium for Law and Courts, an association of legal practitioners and researchers developing guidance and resources for the use of AI in courts.

AI has the potential to improve case processing and can allow people needing legal advice to find information by using AI chatbots, she said. But, she added, courts are still struggling with evidence altered by AI and briefs littered with hallucinations.

"Fake evidence is nothing new," Robinson said. "People have been altering photographs as long as there were photographs. But with AI, the ability to create videos, audio and pictures has become very easy, and courts are really struggling with it."

Charlotin, of HEC Paris, said most courts and professional associations will continue to focus on education right now.

"You cannot prevent a mistake just by telling people, 'Don't make a mistake,'" Charlotin said. "That doesn't work. It's more about setting up processes to make people aware of it, then they can set up processes to work on dealing with it."

Stateline reporter Madyson Fitzgerald can be reached at mfitzgerald@stateline.org.

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

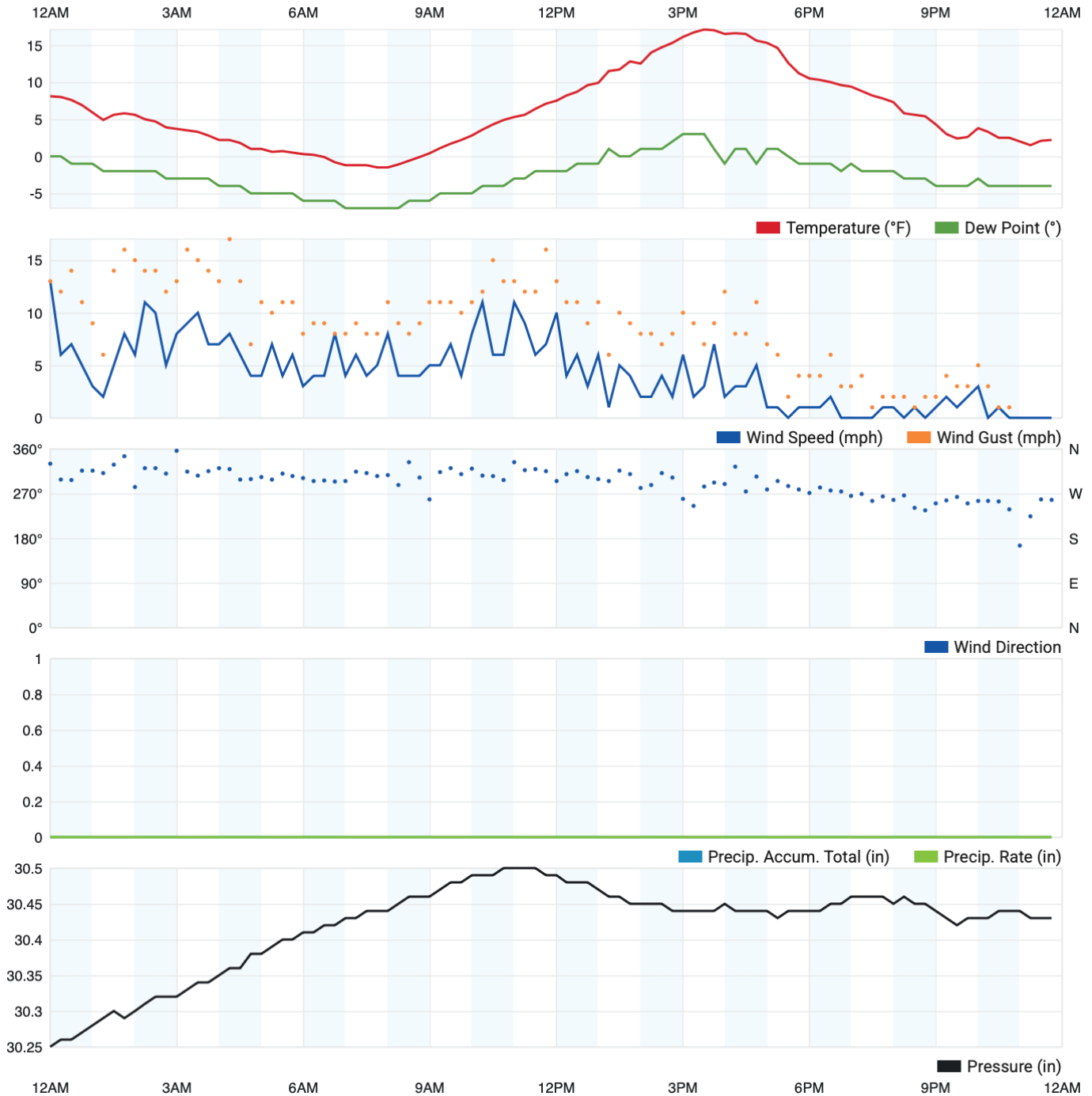
Madyson Fitzgerald is a content producer and staff writer for Stateline.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

January 27, 2026



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Today

Tonight

Thursday

Thursday
Night

Friday



High: 13 °F

Low: -3 °F

High: 13 °F

Low: -10 °F

High: 4 °F

Partly Sunny

Mostly Cloudy

Mostly Sunny

Partly Cloudy

Cold

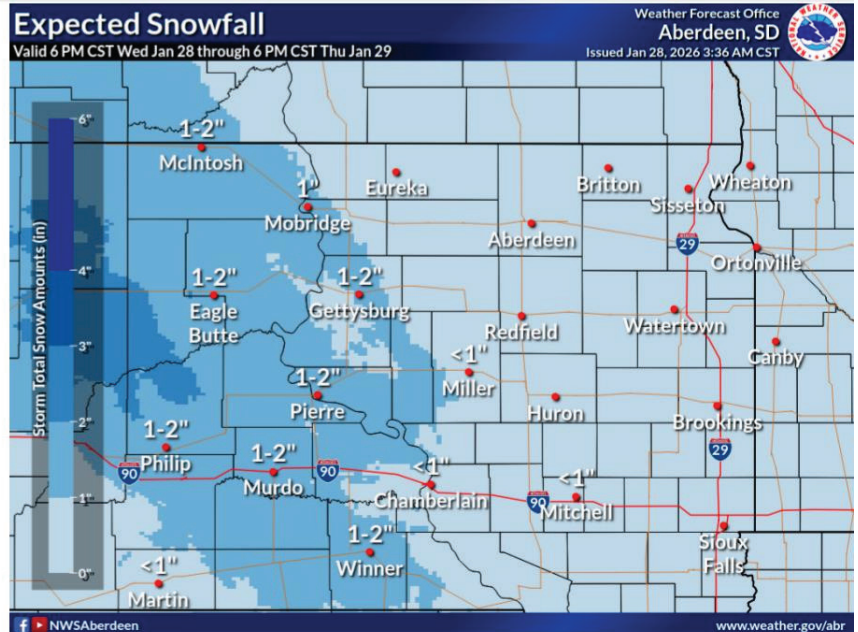


Snow Tonight through Thursday Night

January 28, 2026
3:29 AM CST

Key Messages

- There is a 30-60% chance of light snow over central SD tonight into Thursday night.
- Accumulations **up to 1.5 inches** is expected west of the Missouri River
- Strong winds are not expected so blowing snow is not expected to be an issue.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

There is a 30-60% chance of light show over central SD early tonight into Thursday night. Up to 1.5 inches is expected west of the Missouri River. Strong winds are not expected so blowing snow is not expected to be an issue.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 17 °F at 3:42 PM

Low Temp: -2 °F at 7:52 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 4:07 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1931

Record Low: -31 in 1915

Average High: 24

Average Low: 2

Average Precip in Jan.: .50

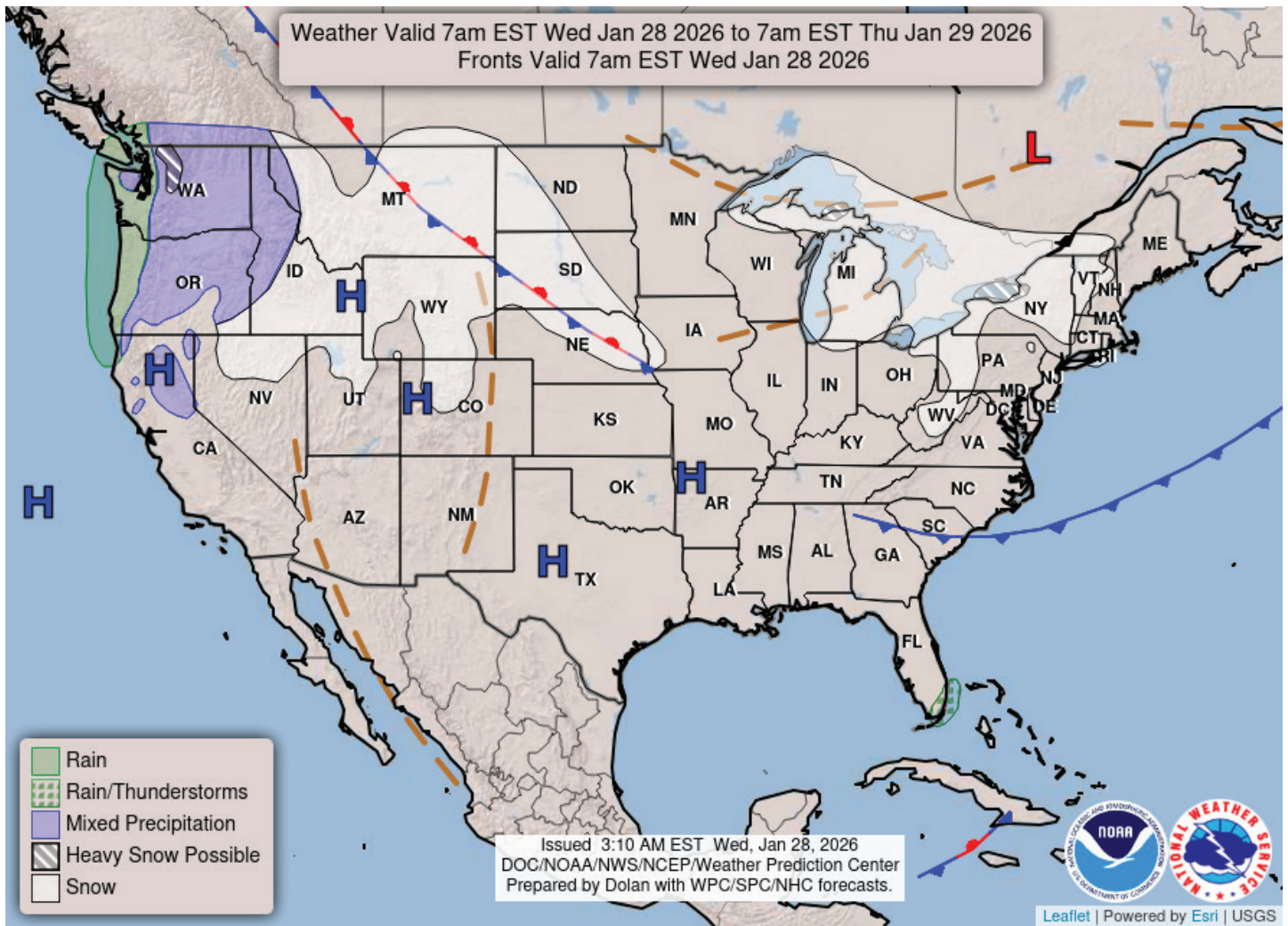
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.50

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:32 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:56 am



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Today in Weather History

January 28, 1983: Freezing rain coated much of eastern South Dakota with up to a half-inch accumulation before it changed over to light snow from the late evening of the 28th to the late evening of the 29th. The combination of ice, light snow, and powerful winds made travel extremely difficult. Numerous accidents and stranded vehicles resulted. Visibilities were near zero at times.

January 28, 1996: Extreme wind chills developed across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota, and west-central Minnesota as cold arctic air moved in behind an area of low pressure. With temperatures falling well below zero and northwest winds increasing to 20 to 35 mph, wind chills dropped to 40 to 70 below throughout the night of the 28th and into the evening of the 29th. Two to five inches of snow had fallen across the area. The strong northwest winds caused areas of blowing snow, significantly reducing visibilities. Big Stone and Traverse counties experienced a blizzard for about six hours on the 29th.

January 28, 2013: A low-pressure system moving slowly across the region produced a moderate to a heavy band of snow across much of central and northeastern South Dakota. Snowfall rates exceeded one inch per hour in some locations. Several area schools and businesses were either closed or opened late on the 29th.

1887: Snowflakes "as large as milk pans" fell at Fort Keogh of Montana. The flakes, which were said to measure 15 inches across and 8 inches thick, hold the unofficial size record!

1922 — The "Knickerbocker" storm immobilized the city of Washington D.C. The storm produced 28 inches of snow in 32 hours, and the heavy snow caused the roof of the Knickerbocker movie theatre to collapse killing 96 persons. (David Ludlum)

1963 — The low of -34 degrees at Cynthiana, KY, equalled the state record established just four days earlier at Bonnieville. (The Weather Channel)

1969: Heavy rains of tropical origin that began on 1/18 ended on this day. As much as 50 inches of rain fell at 7,700 feet. 31 inches of rain fell on the south slopes of Mt. San Geronio, 15.5 inches at San Jacinto Peak, around ten inches at Banning, less than one inch from Indio southeast. 91 were reported dead from flooding and mudslides all over California and state-wide.

1977: The Blizzard of '77 was one of the worst winter storms to hit southern Ontario and upstate New York. With the rapid onset of the storm, about 2,000 students in the Niagara region were stranded overnight in schools.

1986: The Space Shuttle Challenger broke apart at 11:39 am EST, 73 seconds after liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, on a frigid morning. Starting in the 20s, the ground temperature at liftoff was 36 degrees. Morton Thiokol recommended not launching if the liftoff temperature was below 53 degrees. The cold was blamed for causing the O-rings on the Shuttle's external booster to fail, leading to the explosion. Low-level wind shear also played a factor.

1987 — A storm moving out of the Central Rockies into the Northern Plains Region produced up to a foot of snow in the Colorado Rockies, and wind gusts to 99 mph at Boulder CO. High winds in Colorado caused 5.6 million dollars damage. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Barometric pressure readings of 30.55 inches at Miami FL, 30.66 inches at Tampa FL, and 30.72 inches at Apalachicola FL were all-time record high readings for those locations. (National Weather Summary)

1989 — Nome, AK, reported an all-time record low reading of 54 degrees below zero, and the temperature at Fairwell AK dipped to 69 degrees below zero. Deadhorse AK reported a morning low of 49 degrees below zero, and with a wind chill reading of 114 degrees below zero. In the Lower Forty-eight States, a winter storm over Colorado produced up to 15 inches of snow around Denver. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — Strong and gusty winds prevailed across the northwestern U.S., and heavy snow continued over the mountains of Washington State and Oregon. In Idaho, Mullan received seven inches of snow, and winds gusted to 65 mph southeast of Burley. Heavy rain soaked coastal sections of western Oregon. Rainfall totals of 1.20 inches at Portland and 1.57 inches at Eugene were records for the date. Winds in Oregon gusting to 60 mph downed power lines in Umatilla County knocking out power to more than 13,000 homes, just prior to the kick-off of the "Super Bowl" game. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Facing Death Unprepared

God welcomes anyone at any time. Have you accepted His gift of salvation?

Luke 23:32-43: 32 Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. 33 When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.

34 But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

35 And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One."

36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine,

37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"

38 Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS."

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"

40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

41 "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"

43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

God's grace is revealed in His willingness to welcome anyone at any time into His kingdom. The repentant thief who hung on a cross next to Jesus had nothing to offer the Lord—no good works, no faithful service. He couldn't even be baptized. In his utterly helpless condition, the only thing he could do was believe. But that was all it took.

Although both thieves began their crucifixion by hurling verbal abuse at Jesus (Matthew 27:44), as the torturous hours passed, one of them had a change of heart. His railing against the Savior turned into defense of Jesus, admission of his own guilt, and a plea for a place in Christ's kingdom (Luke 23:40-42).

What was it that turned this mocker into a believer? Scornful onlookers accused Jesus of being exactly who He was: the King of Israel, the Savior, and the Son of God (Matthew 27:42-43). As the condemned man watched and listened, he turned in faith to the only One who could save him—the One dying for him.

On the hill that day, one man died in his sin, one Man died for sin, and the other was saved from his sin. The two men crucified with Jesus were faced with a choice, and the same is true today: We can accept or reject Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, and what we choose makes an eternal difference.

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:
01.27.26

4 20 38 56 66 5

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$303,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 31
Mins 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.26.26

2 12 15 27 48 9

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$14,050,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 46 Mins 51
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.27.26

1 10 32 37 48 9

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 1 Mins 51
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.24.26

1 2 4 24 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$222,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 1 Mins 51
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.26.26

8 25 27 46 67 21

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 30 Mins 51
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.26.26

21 31 51 60 63 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$43,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 30 Mins 51
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Arlington 69, Florence-Henry 61
Baltic 62, McCook Central-Montrose 37
Bon Homme 59, Alcester-Hudson 50
Castlewood 61, Colman-Egan 33
Centerville 64, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 51
Chester 67, Canistota 35
Dell Rapids 83, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 62
Dupree 58, Gettysburg 50
Elkton-Lake Benton 68, Deuel 49
Freeman 61, Howard 43
Gayville-Volin High School 47, Scotland/Menno 34
Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 68, Oelrichs 34
Harding County 58, New England, N.D. 38
Harrisburg 61, Brookings 39
Hill City 51, Sturgis Brown High School 48
Hitchcock-Tulare 84, Redfield 50
Hot Springs 62, Lakota Tech 37
Huron 51, Mitchell 36
Ipswich 41, Wakpala 37
Irene-Wakonda 54, Beresford 51
James Valley Christian School 53, Highmore-Harrold 52
Kadoka 70, Timber Lake 58
Leola-Frederick High School 47, Britton-Hecla 33
Madison 61, Sioux Falls Lutheran 55
McLaughlin 65, Tiospa Zina 51
New Underwood 71, Faith 48
North Central 55, South Border, N.D. 40
Northwestern 57, Faulkton 48
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 57, Flandreau Indian 50
Parkston 55, Elk Point-Jefferson 48
Pine Ridge 70, Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 56
Rapid City Christian 63, Custer 40
Sioux Falls Lincoln 70, Sioux Falls Washington 55
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 44, Yankton 42
St Thomas More 61, Spearfish 38
Sully Buttes 69, Stanley County 63
T F Riggs High School 53, Aberdeen Central 31
Tri-Valley 64, Canton 33
WWSSC 62, Hanson 35
Wagner 41, Corsica/Stickney 34
Waubay/Summit 72, Ortonville, Minn. 54
Webster 73, Waverly-South Shore 53
Wessington Springs 78, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 55
White River 72, Philip 41
Winner 48, Todd County 33

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Wolsey-Wessington 63, Sunshine Bible Academy 33

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

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 57, T F Riggs High School 36
Aberdeen Roncalli 43, Groton 31
Alcester-Hudson 64, Bon Homme 36
Arlington 54, Florence-Henry 27
Avon 59, Burke 35
Belle Fourche 57, Hot Springs 25
Bennett County 75, White River 47
Britton-Hecla 44, Leola-Frederick High School 37
Centerville 64, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 46
Colman-Egan 71, Castlewood 37
Dell Rapids 35, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 13
Dell Rapids St Mary's 52, Deubrook 43, OT
Elkton-Lake Benton 55, Deuel 52
Freeman 62, Howard 31
Garretson 56, Estelline-Hendricks 55
Gayville-Volin High School 51, Scotland/Menno 19
Gettysburg 53, Dupree 21
Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 68, Oelrichs 34
Great Plains Lutheran 60, Wilmot 30
Gregory 70, Stanley County 30
Harding County 68, Upton, Wyo. 19
Harrisburg 51, Brookings 37
Hill City 47, Sturgis Brown High School 36
Hitchcock-Tulare 62, Redfield 48
Irene-Wakonda 56, Beresford 43
Kimball-White Lake 57, Marty 39
Lead-Deadwood 54, Bison 43
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 86, Pine Ridge 28
McCook Central-Montrose 44, Baltic 34
Mitchell 56, Huron 37
Northwestern 30, Faulkton 27
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 58, Flandreau Indian 50
Parkston 58, Elk Point-Jefferson 31
Rapid City Christian 66, Custer 13
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 38, Hanson 19
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 76, Yankton 38
Sioux Falls Washington 71, Sioux Falls Lincoln 11
St Thomas More 50, Spearfish 40
Tri-Valley 55, Canton 39
Wagner 59, Corsica/Stickney 29
Warner 52, Langford 43
Wessington Springs 49, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 37
Wolsey-Wessington 55, Sunshine Bible Academy 13

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

A month after Iran protests began, worry and fear pervades Mideast over possible US strike

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranian officials reached out to the wider Middle East on Wednesday over the threat of a possible U.S. military strike on the country, a month since the start of protests in Iran that soon spread nationwide and sparked a bloody crackdown.

Two nations, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have signaled they won't allow their airspace to be used for any attack. But America has moved the USS Abraham Lincoln and several guided missile destroyers into the region, which can be used to launch attacks from the sea.

It remains unclear what U.S. President Donald Trump will decide about using force, though he laid down two red lines — the killing of peaceful demonstrators and the possible mass execution of detainees. The protests saw at least 6,221 people killed as Iran launched a bloody crackdown on the demonstrations, with many others feared dead, activists said Wednesday.

Iran's state-run media, which now only refers to protesters as "terrorists," remains the sole source of news for many as Tehran cut off access to the global internet some three weeks ago. But Iranians have become angry and anxious in the weeks since, seeing footage of protesters shot and killed while worrying about what may happen next as the country's economy sinks further.

"I feel that my generation failed to give a better lesson to younger ones," said Mohammad Heidari, a 59-year-old high school teacher in Tehran. "The result of decades of teaching by my colleagues and me led to death of thousands, and maybe more injured and prisoners."

Rapid diplomacy between Iran, Arab nations

Egypt's Foreign Ministry said its top diplomat, Badr Abdelatty, separately spoke with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff to "work toward achieving calm, in order to avoid the region slipping into new cycles of instability."

The statement offered no details, though Iranian state media quoted Araghchi as saying third-party mediators had been in touch. Witkoff, a billionaire real estate developer and Trump's friend, had earlier negotiated over Iran's nuclear program. There was no immediate acknowledgment from the White House of the call.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, saying the kingdom would "not allow its airspace or territory to be used for any military actions against Iran or for any attacks from any party, regardless of their origin." That follows a similar pledge by the UAE.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE host American air assets and troops. Both also have faced attacks in the last decade. A 2019 assault believed by the West to have been carried out by Iran briefly halved Saudi oil production. The UAE faced several attacks claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels in 2022.

However, America's biggest base in the region is Qatar's vast Al Udeid Air Base, which serves as the forward operating headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command. Both Araghchi and Ali Larjani, a top Iranian security official, held calls with Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. Qatar acknowledged the calls, but offered few specifics on what was discussed.

Iran attacked Al Udeid in June in response to Trump sending American warplanes to bomb Iranian nuclear enrichment sites after Israel launched a 12-day war on the Islamic Republic.

"Our position is exactly this: Applying diplomacy through military threats cannot be effective or constructive," Araghchi told journalists Wednesday outside of a Cabinet meeting. "If they want negotiations to take shape, they must abandon threats, excessive demands, and the raising of illogical issues. Negotiations have their own principles: they must be conducted on an equal footing, based on mutual respect, and for mutual benefit."

Activists offer new death toll

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While the protests have been halted for weeks after the crackdown, information slowly trickling out of Iran via Starlink satellite dishes is reaching activists, who have been trying to tally the carnage.

On Wednesday, the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which has been accurate in multiple rounds of unrest in Iran, said at least 6,221 dead it counted included at least 5,858 protesters, 214 government-affiliated forces, 100 children and 49 civilians who weren't demonstrating. More than 42,300 have been arrested, it added.

The group verifies each death and arrest with a network of activists on the ground in Iran. The Associated Press has been unable to independently assess the death toll given that authorities cut off the internet and disrupted calls into the Islamic Republic.

Iran's government has put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest "terrorists." In the past, Iran's theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

That death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest in Iran in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The protests began on Dec. 28, sparked by the fall of the Iranian currency, the rial, and quickly spread across the country. They were met by a violent crackdown, the scale of which is only starting to become clear as the country has faced more than two weeks of internet blackout — the most comprehensive in its history.

South Korea's former first lady sentenced to 20 months in prison for corruption

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The wife of South Korea's ousted President Yoon Suk Yeol was sentenced to 20 months in prison for corruption Wednesday, as her husband awaits a verdict on a high-stakes rebellion charge that could result in the death penalty or life imprisonment.

The presidential couple, who have been jailed separately for months, suffered a spectacular fall from grace after Yoon's martial law debacle in December 2024 led to his impeachment and eventually his removal from office. Yoon was handed a five-year prison term this month for defying authorities' attempts to detain him and other charges related to the martial law decree.

Investigators say Kim was not involved in Yoon's martial law enforcement.

Kim's opponents say her sentence is too lenient

On Wednesday, Seoul Central District Court sentenced Kim for receiving luxury gifts like a Graff diamond necklace and a Chanel bag from the Unification Church in return for promises of political favors.

"Being closest to a president, a first lady can exert significant influence on him and is a symbolic figure who represents the country together with a president," the court said in a televised verdict. "But the defendant exploited her position to seek personal gains."

Kim said via her lawyers that she would "humbly accept" the court's view and "apologizes again to everyone for causing concerns."

The 20-month sentence was a surprise after independent counsel Min Joong-ki called for a 15-year prison term for Kim on three charges including stock price manipulation, political funding law violations and accepting bribes. The court acquitted Kim of two other charges, citing a lack of evidence and other reasons.

Min's team responded that it cannot accept the ruling and will appeal to a higher court. The governing liberal Democratic Party, which led Yoon's ouster, slammed the verdict as sending a wrong signal that "abuse of power like Kim Keon Hee's can be tolerated."

Kim's lawyer Choi Ji-woo said Min's investigation was politically driven. He said Kim's defense team thanked the court for its verdict but said the 20-month prison term was "relatively high." He said his team will discuss whether to appeal.

Kim's scandals were political burdens for Yoon

Kim has been in jail since August when the Seoul court approved a warrant to arrest her, citing the

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chance she might destroy evidence.

When Yoon was in office, Kim was embroiled in a slew of scandals that severely hurt the conservative leader's approval rating and provided relentless political ammunition to his rivals. The scandals included the three charges the court dealt with Wednesday.

Many observers speculated Yoon opted to place the country under a military rule to protect his wife from possible investigations. But after a six-month probe into Yoon's decree, investigators led by another independent counsel, Cho Eun-suk, in December downplayed conjecture that Kim's troubles drove Yoon to declare martial law.

Yoon plotted for over a year to declare martial law so he could eliminate his political opponents and monopolize power and there was also no evidence of Kim's involvement, Cho's team said.

Yoon awaiting verdict on rebellion charge

The ruling against Kim was made about three weeks before the court delivers its verdict on a rebellion charge against Yoon. Cho's team has demanded the death sentence for Yoon by viewing his martial law imposition as a rebellion.

A rebellion conviction carries the death penalty or life imprisonment. But a court could immediately commute the sentence. Experts say the court likely will sentence him to life or a lengthy imprisonment because South Korea has maintained a de-facto moratorium on executions since late 1997.

After a near-constant collision course with his liberal rivals, Yoon abruptly declared martial law on Dec. 3, 2024, vowing to eliminate "anti-state forces" and "shameless North Korea sympathizers." He has defended his action, calling it a desperate attempt to draw public support for his fight against the Democratic Party which obstructed his agenda.

Yoon sent troops and police officers to encircle the National Assembly. But many failed to aggressively cordon off the area as thousands of people gathered, calling for Yoon's ouster. Lawmakers, including some from Yoon's own ruling party, entered an assembly hall and voted down his decree.

Yoon was later impeached by the National Assembly, arrested by prosecutors and formally thrown out of office after a Constitutional Court ruling.

The EU is seeking new trade partnerships. Here's why

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The ambitious free trade agreement between the European Union and India underscores the EU's efforts to ink new global partnerships at a time when the Trump administration has rattled a continent deeply tied to Washington on trade, defense and diplomacy.

The agreement announced Tuesday reflects a new priority for the 27-nation EU, the world's largest trading bloc, after U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to impose tariffs because of opposition to American control of Greenland, only to back off days later. It follows trade deals struck or pending over the past year with India, Japan, Indonesia, Mexico and the five Mercosur nations of South America.

"The international order we relied upon for decades is no longer a given," said Nikos Christodoulides, president of Cyprus, in a speech last week at the European Parliament. He was outlining Cyprus' priorities as the island nation begins its six-month term at the helm of the EU.

"This moment calls for action, decisive, credible and united action. It calls for a union that is more autonomous and open to the world," said Christodoulides, echoing widespread sentiment across the bloc.

Brussels' deals across the world

After attending a military parade in New Delhi, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen signed the free trade agreement to deepen economic and strategic ties with India. She called it the "mother of all deals."

The pact could affect as many as 2 billion people and slash tariffs on nearly 97% of EU exports to India like cars and wine, and 99% of India's shipments of goods like textiles and medicines to the EU.

"Europe and India need each other today like never before," said Garima Mohan, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund. She said that both Brussels and New Delhi had long sought closer ties as a coun-

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terweight to China's economic rise. But the Trump administration's newly aggressive stance on economic and security issues clinched the deal.

"This movement towards diversification, looking for new partners as well as building self-reliance was precipitated by the tensions with China and really driven home by the fracture of the trans-Atlantic partnership," Mohan said. The deal "only came to pass at this particular geopolitical juncture, and that says something of the world we live in."

The EU struck its first trade deal in July with Indonesia. Two weeks ago, von der Leyen signed a deal with the Mercosur nations of South America that was decades in the making to create a free trade market of more than 700 million people - and she's said she has the authority to implement it despite objections raised by European Parliament.

The EU has also upgraded ties with Japan, South Korea and Australia, Pacific nations wary of Beijing's strategic ambitions and Washington's turbulent politics. Canada is "knocking on our door" to do the same, said Manfred Weber, head of the European People's Party, Europe's largest political bloc.

"There is a hope that things will change given the importance of the U.S. for us ... but there is a realization now that we are a bit more alone in this world," said Ivano di Carlo, a senior policy analyst at the European Policy Centre.

A burgeoning continental defense industry

Russia's invasion of Ukraine drove the EU to create financial tools to boost the bloc's defense industry and infrastructure like trains, roads and ports — but the Trump administration's criticism of the continent's low levels of defense spending kicked those initiatives into overdrive.

Denmark's prime minister has said Russia could pose a credible security threat to the EU by the end of the decade and that defense industries in Europe and Ukraine must be able to thwart that threat.

France has led calls for Europe to build "strategic autonomy," and support for its stance has grown since the Trump administration warned last year that its security priorities lie elsewhere and that the Europeans would have to fend for themselves.

Shortly after Trump began his second term in the White House, EU leaders agreed to increase their own defense budgets. As a priority, 150 billion euros (\$162 billion) in loans are designated for air and missile defense, artillery systems, ammunition, drones and air transport, as well as cyber systems, artificial intelligence and electronic warfare.

Industry leaders and experts across Europe have said truly self-sufficient military power would require overcoming a decades-long reliance on the U.S. as well as the fragmentation along national lines of Europe's own defense industry.

Stocks in Europe's major arms makers like Leonardo (Italy), Rheinmetall (Germany), Thales (France) and Saab (Sweden) have all been on the rise.

An energy dependency

While trying to cut its energy ties with Russia, the EU began buying more U.S. energy, according to the Institute for Energy Economic and Financial Analysis. But that too is risky for the bloc, said Dan Jørgensen, European commissioner for energy and housing, during a North Sea Summit in Hamburg, Germany on Monday.

The EU imports 14.5% of its oil and 60% of its liquefied natural gas from the U.S, according to the EU statistics agency Eurostat.

Jørgensen said the EU should seek further energy independence by investing in energy production and alternate suppliers.

"We do not want to replace one dependency for another — we need to diversify," Jørgensen said.

Brussels is eyeing sources in the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf, where negotiations are underway for a free trade deal with the United Arab Emirates.

"Decoupling is easier said than done," but forging new global relationships gives the EU an edge in dealing with Beijing, Moscow and Washington, Mohan said.

A private plane crashes in western India and kills a deputy chief minister and 4 others

By RAJESH ROY Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — A private plane carrying a deputy chief minister crashed in an open field in western India on Wednesday, killing the official and four other people on board, aviation authorities said. There were no survivors.

The aircraft was en route from India's financial capital of Mumbai to Ajit Pawar's home city Baramati when it crash-landed and burst into flames some 254 kilometers (159 miles) from Mumbai. The reason for the crash was not immediately known. Television footage showed smoke rising from the wreckage.

Pawar, 66, was the deputy chief minister of India's western Maharashtra state. He was traveling to Baramati to campaign in a local election when the privately-operated aircraft went down.

Two of his staffs and two crew members on board the mid-size Learjet 45 also died, the directorate general of civil aviation said in an initial statement.

Pawar was a key figure in state politics and served as the second highest elected official in Maharashtra as part of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling coalition in the state. He wielded considerable influence in the state's sugar belt and was known for his ability to mobilize rural voters.

Modi expressed his condolences, calling Pawar a committed public servant.

"His understanding of administrative matters and passion for empowering the poor and downtrodden were also noteworthy," Modi said on X. "His untimely demise is very shocking and saddening. Condolences to his family and countless admirers."

Israel marks the return of the final hostage's remains after more than 2 years of war and grief

By SAM METZ, WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — For more than two years, Israelis wore yellow ribbons to remember the hostages abducted during the deadliest day in the country's history. On Tuesday, they finally could remove those ribbons and shut down a haunting clock in Tel Aviv's Hostages Square, marking the end of a painful chapter.

The return of Ran Gvili, a 24-year-old police officer killed while fighting Hamas militants during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, fulfilled nationwide hopes to return all the hostages, living or dead.

Forensic teams combed a cemetery in northern Gaza, working to locate, exhume and identify Gvili's remains as part of a broad effort involving search crews, intelligence officers and forensic dentists.

Now, with Gvili's remains back in Israel, attention has turned toward what comes next in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that Israel will reopen Gaza's border crossing with Egypt in both directions, allowing Palestinians to enter and leave the territory after nearly two years of closure.

Netanyahu did not say when the crossing in Gaza's southernmost city, Rafah, would open, but did say it would be limited to foot traffic and not be used for cargo, adding Israel won't "prevent anyone from leaving."

Netanyahu said his focus was now on disarming Hamas and destroying its remaining tunnels, saying there would be no reconstruction in Gaza without demilitarization.

"As I agreed with President Trump, there are only two possibilities: either it will be done the easy way or it will be done the hard way," he said at a news conference. "In any case, it will happen."

Netanyahu reiterated his stance that Turkish and Qatari soldiers will not be allowed to participate in an international security force in Gaza and his opposition to a Palestinian state. He vowed that Israel would retain permanent security control from the Jordan border to the Mediterranean Sea

Cheering in Israel's Hostages Square

Thousands of people in Tel Aviv's Hostages Square watched and some cheered Tuesday as the clock flashing the number of days since the 2023 attack stopped at 843 days, 12 hours, 5 minutes and 59 seconds — a bittersweet ending in a place that became the focal point for the campaign to release the hostages.

"It's like we have been released from this huge rock hanging from our heart," said Ofra Ophir, a retired

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nursery schoolteacher from Ra'anana, north of Tel Aviv.

Sharone Lifschitz, whose parents were kidnapped from their home in Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7, 2023, said while it was "miraculous" all the hostages are now home, there was still a lot of healing ahead.

Her mother, Yocheved, then 83, was released after two weeks, while her father Oded, 85, died in captivity. "I don't feel the hostage saga is over, but the return of the hostages is over," Lifschitz said. "I'm really grateful we have no more hostages, but all of them could have been back much earlier, all of them could have been saved."

Conflicting accounts about what led to officer's remains

A spokesman for the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service, said investigators got a breakthrough in the search for Gvili's body after interrogating a member of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, whose information corroborated intelligence and led them to the cemetery. Shin Bet said the body had been moved several times.

"More than 20 dentists from the unit worked together for over 24 hours, scanning approximately 250 bodies until the identification of Master Sergeant Ran Gvili," a military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity under army protocol.

Militant groups in Gaza contested Israel's narrative, with both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad saying they provided Israel with information to locate the remains.

Saraya al-Quds, Islamic Jihad's military wing, said it shared coordinates with Israel through Arab mediators. Hamas said it also provided information.

Two U.S. officials, who insisted on anonymity per the rules of a call setup by the White House, credited Egypt, Qatar and Turkey with helping to get Hamas to release Gvili's body.

Palestinians living near the cemetery said remains exhumed during the search were left exposed in the cemetery without reburial.

"Our dead are in the open. They left them without burial or after just covering them with soil," said Mohamed Matter, whose relatives are buried in the cemetery. He and others said they attempted to reach the area but were turned away by Israeli forces.

Two people were killed in an Israeli drone strike while attempting to reach the area of the cemetery and taken to Shifa Hospital where they were pronounced dead, according to hospital officials. Israel's military said it was unaware of strikes and cautioned against relying on unverified reports.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassam said Tuesday that Israeli forces had exhumed "hundreds of graves," calling it a pattern of showing disrespect.

Residents waiting for Gaza border crossing to open

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who will deliver a eulogy at Gvili's funeral on Wednesday, said returning the remains has "closed the circle" for Israel." But in Gaza, families living in tents without heat said today felt much like yesterday.

In Khan Younis, they questioned whether their lives would improve as the ceasefire agreement moves toward a second phase and remained eager for Israel to open the Rafah crossing, Gaza's lifeline to the outside world.

"The crossing is supposed to open now after the last soldier's body was found," said Ali Abu Al-Eish, a former resident of Rafah. "Why is it still closed? We have many sick people here."

Gaza's Health Ministry says about 20,000 Palestinians require medical evacuation from Gaza.

"Why are Hamas and Israel stalling?" said Ayda Abu Dheisha. "Let them reach an agreement and resolve this for us. We want to return to our land and our homes."

Both are among roughly one million residents displaced from Rafah, which remains an Israeli military zone.

Netanyahu said Tuesday that Israel will run the crossing when it opens.

"We agreed to open the Rafah crossing back during Trump's 20-point agreement — and by the way, it was a limited opening. I also added that the opening would include our security screenings; it is for people only, the numbers are limited, and anyone entering or exiting undergoes our inspection."

Ceasefire's next steps remain unclear

The second phase of the ceasefire are expected to be more challenging. In addition to reopening Rafah,

the upcoming steps include demilitarizing the strip after nearly two decades of Hamas rule.

President Donald Trump's 20-point plan, published in October, left details vague and major questions unanswered about the ceasefire's next phase, including when Israeli forces might withdraw from areas they currently control, allowing displaced Palestinians to return.

Also unknown is how any new governing arrangement would be enforced, and when large-scale reconstruction in Gaza could begin.

Gaza's Health Ministry has recorded 488 people killed since the start of the ceasefire. The ministry, which is part of the Hamas-led government, maintains casualty records that are viewed as generally reliable by United Nations agencies and independent experts.

Man arrested after spraying unknown substance on Rep. Ilhan Omar at Minneapolis town hall

By LAURA BARGFELD and HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A man sprayed an unknown substance on Democratic U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar and was tackled to the ground Tuesday during a town hall in Minneapolis, where tensions over federal immigration enforcement have come to a head after agents fatally shot an intensive care nurse and a mother of three this month.

The audience cheered as the man was pinned down and his arms were tied behind his back. In video of the incident, someone in the crowd can be heard saying, "Oh my god, he sprayed something on her."

Just before that Omar had called for the abolishment of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to resign or face impeachment. Calls are mounting on Capitol Hill for Noem to step down after the shooting deaths in Minneapolis of two people who protested deportations. Few Republicans have risen to her defense.

"ICE cannot be reformed," Omar said, seconds before the attack.

Minneapolis police said officers saw the man use a syringe to spray an unknown liquid at Omar. They immediately arrested him and booked him at the county jail for third-degree assault, spokesperson Trevor Folke said. Forensic scientists responded to the scene.

Police identified the man as 55-year-old Anthony Kazmierczak. It was not immediately clear if Kazmierczak had an attorney. The county public defenders' office could not immediately be reached.

Omar continued speaking for about 25 more minutes after the man was ushered out by security, saying she would not be intimidated.

There was a strong, vinegarlike smell after the man pushed on the syringe, according to an Associated Press journalist who was there. Photos of the device, which fell to the ground when he was tackled, showed what appeared to be a light-brown liquid inside. There was no immediate word from officials on what it was.

Minneapolis Council Member LaTrisha Vetaw said some of the substance also came into contact with her and state Sen. Bobby Joe Champion. She called it a deeply unsettling experience.

No one in the crowd of about 100 people had a noticeable physical reaction to the substance.

Omar says she is OK and 'a survivor'

Walking out afterward, Omar said she felt a little flustered but was not hurt. She was going to be screened by a medical team.

She later posted on the social platform X: "I'm ok. I'm a survivor so this small agitator isn't going to intimidate me from doing my work. I don't let bullies win."

The White House did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment Tuesday night.

President Donald Trump has frequently criticized the congresswoman and has stepped up verbal attacks on her in recent months as he turned his focus on Minneapolis. During a Cabinet meeting in December, he referred to her as "garbage."

Hours earlier on Tuesday, the president criticized Omar as he spoke to a crowd in Iowa, saying his ad-

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ministration would only let in immigrants who “can show that they love our country.”

“They have to be proud, not like Ilhan Omar,” he said, drawing loud boos at the mention of her name.

He added: “She comes from a country that’s a disaster. So probably, it’s considered, I think — it’s not even a country.”

Omar is a U.S. citizen who fled her birthplace, Somalia, with her family at age 8 as a civil war tore apart the country.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul area is home to about 84,000 people of Somali descent — nearly a third of Somalis living in the U.S.

Officials condemn the attack

Democratic Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz expressed gratitude that Omar was safe, adding in a post on X: “Our state has been shattered by political violence in the last year. The cruel, inflammatory, dehumanizing rhetoric by our nation’s leaders needs to stop immediately.”

U.S. Rep. Nancy Mace, a South Carolina Republican, also denounced the assault.

“I am deeply disturbed to learn that Rep. Ilhan Omar was attacked at a town hall today” Mace said. “Regardless of how vehemently I disagree with her rhetoric — and I do — no elected official should face physical attacks. This is not who we are.”

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, a Democrat, called the attack “unacceptable.” He said he was relieved that Omar “is OK” and thanked police for their quick response, concluding: “This kind of behavior will not be tolerated in our city.”

The city has been reeling from the fatal shootings of two residents by federal immigration agents this month during Trump’s massive immigration enforcement surge. Intensive care unit nurse Alex Pretti was killed Saturday, less than three weeks after Renee Good was fatally shot behind the wheel of her vehicle.

Lawmakers face rising threats

The attack came days after a man was arrested in Utah for allegedly punching U.S. Rep. Maxwell Frost, a Democrat from Florida, in the face during the Sundance Film Festival and saying Trump was going to deport him.

Threats against members of Congress have increased in recent years, peaking in 2021 in the aftermath of that year’s Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, before dipping slightly only to climb again, according to the most recent figures from the U.S. Capitol Police.

Lawmakers have discussed the impact on their ability to hold town halls and public events, with some even citing the threat environment in their decisions not to seek reelection.

Following the assault on Omar, U.S. Capitol Police said in a statement that the agency was “working with our federal partners to see this man faces the most serious charges possible to deter this kind of violence in our society.”

It also released updated numbers detailing threats to members of Congress: 14,938 “concerning statements, behaviors, and communications directed against lawmakers, their families, staff and the Capitol Complex” in 2025.

That is a sharp increase from 2024, when the number of cases was 9,474, according to USCP. It is the third year in a row that the number of threats has increased.

Capitol Police have beefed up security measures across all fronts since Jan. 6, 2021, and the department has seen increased reporting after a new center was launched two years ago to process reports of threats.

What to know about UK-China relations as Prime Minister Keir Starmer visits Beijing

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer arrives in Beijing on Wednesday for a four-day visit to China aimed at repairing ties and expanding opportunities for British businesses in the world’s second-largest economy.

He is the first British leader to come to Beijing since Theresa May in 2018. The relationship has dete-

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riorated in recent years over growing concern about Chinese spying and surveillance, China's support for Russia in the Ukraine war and Beijing's crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong, the former British colony.

Those issues remain, but both sides are emphasizing that they should "seek common ground while managing differences," as Zheng Zeguang, China's Ambassador to the U.K., wrote in a commentary for The Times of London this week.

Selling services to China

Starmer, whose center-left Labour Party government has struggled to deliver the economic growth it promised, is bringing a delegation of more than 60 British business and cultural leaders with him. His agenda includes Shanghai, the nation's financial capital and a major port, as well as meeting Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders in Beijing.

Wang Yiwei, a European affairs expert at Renmin University of China, said that Britain's strengths in finance, consulting and other services dovetail well with a growing appetite in China for services such as health and elderly care. "It's a huge market," he said.

The U.K. had a trade deficit with China in 2025, importing more goods than it exported to the nation of 1.4 billion people, but it had a trade surplus in services.

"With recent Chinese policy directives focused on boosting domestic consumption and further opening the services sector to international businesses, we see significant opportunities for growth for U.K. businesses," the China-Britain Business Council said.

The Trump factor

For many governments, the disruption to global trade under U.S. President Donald Trump has made expanding trade and investment even more imperative.

Both Britain and China have been buffeted by U.S. President Donald Trump's tariffs and are seeking to diversify their overseas markets and the supply chains for their industries. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney made a trip to China earlier this month with the same goals in mind.

The approach is not without risks. Trump has threatened to put a 100% tariff on Canada if it reaches a trade deal with China, prompting a swift response from Carney. Canada and China have cut tariffs on a few sectors where these were recently imposed, but Canada has no intention of pursuing a free trade deal with Beijing, Carney said.

For many countries, the challenge is finding the right balance in an increasingly uncertain world.

Even China, a rising challenger to U.S. dominance in the 21st century, cannot oppose America, Wang said, noting Trump's planned visit in April.

"We are not against but we criticize," he said.

Spying and Hong Kong

Concern about spying or surveillance by China has risen sharply in many countries in recent years, complicating trade and overall relations. The U.K. has barred Chinese investment in sensitive telecoms infrastructure and squeezed China out of investment in new nuclear power plants, souring ties.

Starmer's government has said it will protect national security while keeping up diplomatic dialogue and economic cooperation with the Asian superpower. The U.K. recently approved plans for a huge Chinese Embassy in London, removing a sticking point in relations and overriding claims by critics that the "mega-embassy" would make it easier for China to conduct espionage and intimidate dissidents.

Most Western governments come under pressure to raise human rights issues when they visit China, and the U.K. in particular because of its links to Hong Kong, which was a British colony until 1997.

Starmer's visit comes less than two months after a Hong Kong court convicted Jimmy Lai, a former newspaper publisher and a British citizen, under a national security law that Beijing imposed on the territory after massive pro-democracy protests in 2019.

Chris Patten, who was the British governor of Hong Kong from 1992 to 1997, said Starmer should be firm in raising disagreements over Lai's imprisonment and other human rights issues.

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Bitter cold grips the eastern US as winter storm deaths rise and power outages linger

By SOPHIE BATES, KRISTIN M. HALL and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

Three Texas siblings who perished in an icy pond were among several dozen deaths in U.S. states gripped by frigid cold as crews scrambled Tuesday to repair hundreds of thousands of power outages in the shivering South and forecasters warned the winter weather is expected to get worse.

Brutal cold lingered in the wake of a massive storm that dumped deep snow across more than 1,300 miles (2,100 kilometers) from Arkansas to New England and left parts of the South coated in treacherous ice.

Freezing temperatures hovered Tuesday as far south as Tennessee, Arkansas and North Carolina and were forecast to plunge again overnight. Parts of northern Florida were expected to sink to 25 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 3.9 degrees Celsius) late Tuesday into early Wednesday.

The U.S. aviation system was returning to normal after a brutal weekend that saw more than 17,000 commercial flights canceled. There were about 6,300 cancellations in the U.S. Monday and about 2,500 Tuesday, according to FlightAware, a flight tracking and data company. Less than 500 were anticipated to be canceled Wednesday.

More record lows predicted

The arctic misery over the eastern half of the U.S. was expected to worsen Friday and Saturday. The National Weather Service said another winter storm could hit parts of the East Coast this weekend, and more record lows were forecast as far south as Florida.

"This could be the coldest temperature seen in several years for some places and the longest duration of cold in several decades," the agency's Weather Prediction Center warned Tuesday.

Crews were working feverishly to restore power to the more than 410,000 homes and businesses without electricity Tuesday evening. Over half the outages were in Tennessee and Mississippi, where temperatures could bottom out at the end of the week. In Nashville, the low Friday night is predicted to dip to 4 F (minus 15.6 C), while Oxford, in northern Mississippi, could hit 10 F (minus 12.2 C), according to the National Weather Service.

Several dozen deaths

Officials in states afflicted with severe cold reported at least 50 deaths.

Three brothers ages 6, 8 and 9 died Monday after falling through ice on a private pond near Bonham, Texas, Fannin County Sheriff Cody Shook said Tuesday. The boys' mother said she ran into the freezing lake and frantically tried to pull her sons from the water, but the ice kept breaking beneath them.

"They were just screaming, telling me to help them," Cheyenne Hangaman told The Associated Press. "And I watched all of them struggle, struggle to stay above the water. I watched all of them fight."

Dozens of Mississippi counties were in need of bottled water, blankets, tarps, fuel and generators, and the state's National Guard is using aircraft to deliver supplies to hard-hit communities, Gov. Tate Reeves said Tuesday evening.

Three 18-wheeler trucks stalled on an icy Interstate 55 in northern Mississippi, causing a major backup Tuesday night, according to the state's Department of Transportation. The governor said various resources from first responders to drones and tow trucks were being deployed to clear the highway and help stranded drivers.

Jean Kirkland used a lighter and paper Tuesday to ignite her gas stovetop. Her neighborhood in Lexington, Mississippi, lost power Sunday, and Kirkland and her daughter have been relying on the stove and a couple of gas-powered heaters to keep warm.

"When you're used to certain things, you miss them when they're gone," said Kirkland, who's been getting by without hot water and lights at night.

Health officials warn against using gas-powered stoves to heat a home. They can give off fumes that increase the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At least one carbon monoxide death was reported in Louisiana, according to the state Health Department.

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North Carolina's largest public school system closed schools again on Wednesday, with the Wake County school system saying on Facebook that it was "due to the continued threat of black ice."

Thousands without power in Nashville

More than 110,000 outages remained in Nashville, Tennessee, and neighboring communities Tuesday. Nashville Electric Service said on social media it had dispatched more than 740 workers to restore power.

Nashville officials said nearly 440 people spent Monday night at community centers being used as temporary shelters, while 1,400 more stayed at area homeless shelters. Many residents booked rooms at local hotels.

Lisa Patterson had planned to ride out the deep freeze at her family's Nashville home. But she and her husband lost power, trees fell onto their driveway and their wood stove proved no match for the cold. Along with their dog, the couple had to be rescued and taken to a warming shelter.

"I've been snowed in up there for almost three weeks without being able to get up and down my driveway because of the snow. I'm prepared for that. But this was unprecedented," Patterson said.

In Kentucky, Gov. Andy Beshear warned that the temperatures could become so frigid that as little as 10 minutes outside "could result in frostbite or hypothermia."

In New York City, officials said 10 people had been found dead outdoors in the cold. More deaths were reported across a dozen states. They included two people hit by snowplows in Massachusetts and Ohio, two teenagers killed while sledding in Arkansas and Texas and a man found in his home in the Indianapolis area with no heat.

Three months after rapidly scheduled arguments, Supreme Court has yet to decide on Trump's tariffs

By MARK SHERMAN and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When the Supreme Court granted an unusually quick hearing over President Donald Trump's tariffs, a similarly rapid resolution seemed possible.

After all, Trump's lawyers told the court that speed was of the essence on an issue central to the president's economic agenda. They pointed to a statement from Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent warning that the "longer a final ruling is delayed, the greater the risk of economic disruption."

But nearly three months have elapsed since arguments in the closely watched case and the court isn't scheduled to meet in public for more than three weeks.

No one knows for sure what is going on among the nine justices, several of whom expressed skepticism about the tariffs' legality at arguments in November. But the timeline for deciding the case now looks more or less typical and could reflect the normal back-and-forth that occurs not just in the biggest cases, but almost all the disputes the justices hear.

Several Supreme Court practitioners and law professors scoffed at the idea that the justices are dragging their feet on tariffs, putting off a potentially uncomfortable ruling against Trump.

"People suspect this kind of thing from time to time, but I am not aware of instances in which we have more than speculation," said Jonathan Adler, a law professor at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

The timeframe alone also doesn't point to one outcome or the other.

One possible explanation, said Carter Phillips, a lawyer with 91 arguments before the high court, "is that the court is more evenly divided than appeared to be the case at oral argument and the fifth vote is wavering."

Even if the majority opinion has been drafted and more or less agreed to by five or more members of the court, a separate opinion, probably in dissent, could slow things down, Phillips said.

Just last week, the court issued two opinions in cases that were argued in October. All nine justices agreed with the outcome, a situation that typically allows decisions to be issued relatively quickly. But a separate opinion in each case probably delayed the decision.

The court is generally moving more slowly in argued cases, perhaps because of the flood of emergency appeals the administration has brought to the justices. The first argued case wasn't decided until January this year. Typically, that happens in December, if not November.

Over the last 20 years, the average turnaround time for a Supreme Court opinion was just over three months, according to data gathered by Adam Feldman, creator of Empirical SCOTUS. The timeline has increased in recent years, with the court releasing half or more of its cases in June.

Decision times can vary widely. The court can move quickly, especially in cases with hard external deadlines: The landmark Bush v. Gore case that effectively decided the 2000 election took just over a single day. The recent case over TikTok took seven days.

On the higher end, when the justices are on their own timelines, cases can take much longer to resolve. Gundy v. U.S., a case argued in 2018 about how the sex-offender registry is administered, took more than eight months to be decided.

Major decisions on expanding gun rights, overturning Roe v. Wade and ending affirmative action in college admissions were handed down six to eight months after the cases were argued.

Also undecided so far is a second major case in which the court sped up its pace over redistricting in Louisiana and the future of a key provision of the Voting Rights Act.

The tariffs case took on added urgency because the consequences of the Trump administration's policy were playing out in real time, in ways that have been both positive and negative.

"Like many, I had hoped that the Supreme would rush the decision out," said Marc Busch, an expert on international trade policy and law at Georgetown University. "But it's not a surprise in the sense that they have until June and lots of issues to work through."

The separation of powers questions central to the case are complicated. Whatever the majority decides, there will likely be a dissent and both sides will be carefully calibrating their writing.

"It is the language at the end of the day that's going to make this more or less meaningful," he said.

Meanwhile, as the justices weigh the case, Trump continues to invoke the threat of tariffs, extol their virtues and refer to the case as the court's most important.

"I would hope, like a lot of people, the justices have been watching the tariff threats over Greenland and realize the gravity of this moment," Busch said.

Man wounded after exchanging gunfire with Border Patrol agents near US-Mexico border

By MATTHEW BROWN and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

A man who authorities say was involved in a human smuggling operation was shot Tuesday in an exchange of gunfire with the U.S. Border Patrol and after firing at a federal helicopter near the U.S.-Mexico border, authorities said.

Federal agents were attempting to apprehend the 34-year-old Arizona man during a traffic stop near Arivaca, Arizona, when he fled and shot at a Border Patrol helicopter and at agents, authorities said. Agents returned fire, striking the man and wounding him, said Heith Janke, special agent in charge of the FBI in Phoenix.

The suspect, Patrick Gary Schlegel, was transported to a hospital and was recovering from surgery Tuesday evening, authorities said. Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos said during a news conference that he believes the Border Patrol agent involved in the shooting "acted lawfully" based on what is known so far.

"The investigation is still ongoing. There may be other things that show up," Nanos said.

Prior to the shooting, agents had attempted to stop the same vehicle but the occupants drove away, Nanos said. Later in the morning, a Border Patrol agent saw the vehicle in the same area and attempted to stop it, but the driver fled on foot.

Schlegel was in federal custody and expected to be charged with assault on a federal officer, human smuggling and being a felon in possession of a firearm, Janke said.

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"Let me be clear, any assault on law enforcement officers will not be tolerated," said Janke.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said in a statement late Tuesday that it would provide more information when available.

Schlegel has a criminal history that includes a December warrant for escape stemming from a human smuggling and firearms conviction, court records show. On Dec. 15, Schlegel signed out of the institution in Tucson where he had been incarcerated to go to a counseling session but did not return, court records show.

Two years earlier, in 2023, Schlegel was charged with transporting people in the U.S. illegally for financial gain in Arizona after authorities said he loaded more than a dozen people near the border into a truck, hid them under a tarp and drove away, court records show.

Agents followed the truck before Schlegel crashed and fled on foot, then allegedly threw rocks at a government helicopter before he was apprehended, the records show. Two pistols were found in the truck.

The Pima County Sheriff's Department said the FBI asked it to lead a use-of-force investigation of the Border Patrol. It noted that such investigations are standard when a federal agency is involved in a shooting in the county.

The sheriff's department said its involvement in the investigation was the result of "long standing relationships" built over time in the border area to promote transparency.

Nanos, a Democrat, has previously said his agency will not enforce federal immigration law amid President Donald Trump's crackdown and that he will use his limited resources to focus on local crime and other public safety issues.

He said Tuesday there is video from the shooting but wasn't sure if it's police body camera footage or where it originated.

Arivaca is a community about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from the border. Agents regularly patrol the area because it's a common path for drug smugglers and migrants who illegally cross the border.

Border Patrol agents fired weapons in eight incidents during the 12-month period through September 2025, 14 times during the year before that and 13 times the year before that.

The shooting comes in a month that has seen three shootings — two fatal — by immigration officers involved in the massive Homeland Security enforcement operation in Minnesota.

While there were numerous videos of those shootings taken by residents monitoring the enforcement operations in the Minneapolis area, the latest shooting in Arizona happened in a remote desert community of about 500 people without much video surfacing.

Rubio set to warn of future military action if Venezuela's new leaders stray from US goals

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Marco Rubio plans on Wednesday to warn that the Trump administration is ready to take new military action against Venezuela if the country's interim leadership strays from U.S. expectations.

In prepared testimony for a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rubio says the U.S. is not at war with Venezuela and that its interim leaders are cooperating, but he notes that the Trump administration would not rule out using additional force if needed following a raid to capture former President Nicolás Maduro early this month.

"We are prepared to use force to ensure maximum cooperation if other methods fail," Rubio will say, according to his prepared opening statement released Tuesday by the State Department. "It is our hope that this will not prove necessary, but we will never shy away from our duty to the American people and our mission in this hemisphere."

As he often is called to do, Rubio, a former Florida senator, will aim to sell one of President Donald Trump's more contentious priorities to former colleagues in Congress. With the administration's foreign policy gyrating between the Western Hemisphere, Europe and the Middle East, Rubio also may be called

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to smooth alarm that has emerged in his own party lately about efforts like Trump's demand to annex Greenland.

In the hearing focused on Venezuela, Rubio will defend Trump's decisions to remove Maduro to face drug trafficking charges in the U.S., continue deadly military strikes on boats suspected of smuggling drugs and seize sanctioned tankers carrying Venezuelan oil, according to the prepared remarks. He will again reject allegations that Trump is violating the Constitution by taking such actions.

"There is no war against Venezuela, and we did not occupy a country," he will say, according to the prepared remarks. "There are no U.S. troops on the ground. This was an operation to aid law enforcement."

Congress has not curtailed Trump on Venezuela

Congressional Democrats have condemned Trump's moves as exceeding the authority of the executive branch, while most — but not all — Republicans have supported them as a legitimate exercise of presidential power.

The House narrowly defeated a war powers act resolution that would have directed Trump to remove U.S. troops from Venezuela. As Rubio will argue, the administration says there are no U.S. troops on the ground in the South American nation despite a large military buildup in the region.

Democrats had argued that the resolution was necessary after the U.S. raid to capture Maduro and because Trump has stated plans to control the country's oil industry for years to come.

The pushback has begun in the courts, too, as the families of two Trinidadian nationals killed in a Trump administration boat strike filed what is thought to be the first wrongful death case arising from the campaign. Three dozen strikes on boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean have killed at least 126 people since September.

The US takes steps to normalize ties, while still issuing warnings

While keeping pressure on those who the Trump administration dubs "narcotraffickers" without providing evidence, U.S. officials also are working to normalize ties with Venezuelan acting President Delcy Rodríguez. Nonetheless, Rubio will make clear in his testimony that she has little choice but to comply with Trump's demands.

"Rodríguez is well aware of the fate of Maduro; it is our belief that her own self-interest aligns with advancing our key objectives," Rubio will say, noting that they include opening Venezuela's energy sector to U.S. companies, providing preferential access to production, using oil revenue to purchase American goods, and ending subsidized oil exports to Cuba.

Rodríguez, who previously served as Maduro's vice president, on Tuesday said her government and the Trump administration "have established respectful and courteous channels of communication." During televised remarks, Rodríguez said she is working with Trump and Rubio to set "a working agenda."

So far, she has appeared to acquiesce to Trump's demands and to release prisoners jailed by the government under Maduro and his predecessor, the late Hugo Chávez. On Monday, the head of a Venezuelan human rights group said 266 political prisoners had been freed since Jan. 8.

Trump had praised the releases, saying on social media that he would "like to thank the leadership of Venezuela for agreeing to this powerful humanitarian gesture!"

In a key step to the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the State Department notified Congress just this week that it intends to begin sending additional diplomatic and support personnel to Caracas to prepare for the possible reopening of the U.S. Embassy there.

It was the first formal notice of the administration's intent to reopen the embassy, which shuttered in 2019. Fully normalizing ties, however, would require the U.S. to revoke its decision recognizing the Venezuelan parliament elected in 2015 as the country's legitimate government.

Rubio also planned to meet Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado later Wednesday at the State Department.

Machado went into hiding after Maduro was declared the winner of the 2024 presidential election despite ample credible evidence to the contrary. She reemerged in December to pick up her Nobel Peace Prize in Norway. After Maduro was ousted, she came to Washington. In a meeting with Trump, she presented him with her Peace Prize medal, an extraordinary gesture given that Trump has effectively sidelined her.

Investigators say deadly midair collision near DC followed years of ignored warnings about traffic

By GARY FIELDS, JOSH FUNK and ED WHITE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — National Transportation Safety Board members were deeply troubled Tuesday over years of ignored warnings about helicopter traffic dangers and other problems, long before an American Airlines jet and an Army Black Hawk collided a year ago, killing 67 people near Washington, D.C.

A helicopter route in the approach path of a Reagan National Airport runway created a dangerous airspace and irregular safety reviews made it worse, the board said. That was a key factor in the crash along with air traffic overly relying on asking helicopter pilots to avoid aircraft.

The Federal Aviation Administration took steps to address those major concerns not long after the crash, but throughout the daylong hearing, investigators emphasized the history of unaddressed risks. Those include the FAA denying a regional supervisor's 2023 request to reduce air traffic at Reagan and failures to relocate the helicopter route or warn pilots more after an eerily similar near miss in 2013.

NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy made no apology for her occasionally stern tone.

"We should be angry. This was 100% preventable. We've issued recommendations in the past that were applicable to use. We have talked about seeing and avoid for well over five decades. It's shameful. I don't want to be here years from now looking at other families that had to suffer such devastating loss."

Families watch for accountability

Family members listened intently during the hearing. Some were escorted out, including two in tears, as they saw an animation recreating some of final moments of their loved ones' lives. Others wore black shirts bearing the names of first responder units.

"The negligence of not fixing things that needed to be fixed killed my brother and 66 other people," Kristen Miller-Zahn, who watched from the front row, said during a break.

The animations demonstrated how difficult it would have been for the pilots to spot each other amid the lights of Washington. They also showed how the windshields and the helicopter crew's night vision goggles restricted views.

Victims' families say they hope there's meaningful change in response to the long list of recommendations the NTSB adopted Tuesday. The measures seek to improve airport training, staffing and safety, particularly at Reagan, as well as the culture of safety within the FAA and Army.

More than 30 of the recommendations are directed at the FAA. Making sure that controllers and their supervisors are properly trained and understand when visual separation can be used is key. But the NTSB also wants the FAA to reconsider the way it classifies Reagan airport and reevaluate all of its helicopter routes while making better use of data.

Systemic problems caused the crash

Before hearing from investigators, Todd Inman said "systemic issues across multiple organizations," not an error by any individual, caused the tragedy, although the NTSB did also highlight several key mistakes.

Everyone aboard the jet, flying from Wichita, Kansas, and the helicopter died when the two aircraft collided and plummeted into the icy Potomac River. It was the deadliest plane crash on U.S. soil since 2001, and the victims included 28 members of the figure skating community.

The FAA took some action immediately after the crash and last week made some changes permanent to ensure helicopters and planes no longer share the same airspace around the airport.

Missed warnings

Homendy said she couldn't believe the FAA didn't realize this helicopter route provided at most a mere 75 feet (23 meters) of separation between planes landing on Reagan's secondary runway.

"We know over time concerns were raised repeatedly, went unheard, squashed — however you want to put it — stuck in red tape and bureaucracy of a very large organization," Homendy said.

Mary Schiavo, a former Department of Transportation Inspector General, said it's troubling to hear how many times the FAA failed to act.

"It was just a shocking dereliction of duty by the FAA. And they have so much work to be done to fix it.

And just from my background, I don't know if the people there are up to it," Schiavo said.

The board recommended the FAA seek outside advice on improvements from the department's Inspector General rather than create a single office to track concerns and enforce standards. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy had announced the new safety office Monday.

NTSB investigators said the Army and FAA weren't sharing all safety data with each other before the crash, and that Army helicopter pilots often weren't aware when they were involved in a near-miss around Reagan.

Overwhelmed controller

NTSB investigator Katherine Wilson said an air traffic controller felt a "little overwhelmed" when traffic volume increased to 10 aircraft about 10 to 15 minutes before the collision, but then "felt the volume was manageable when one or two helicopters left."

Yet about 90 seconds before the collision, Wilson said, "traffic volume increased to a maximum of 12 aircraft consisting of seven airplanes and five helicopters. Radio communication showed that the local controller was shifting focus between airborne, ground and transiting aircraft."

The workload "reduced his situational awareness," Wilson said. If two controllers had divided up responsibility for helicopters and planes, like they were supposed to at that time of day, the aircraft might have been warned sooner and prevented the collision.

Recommendations for the government

Many changes recommended by the NTSB will depend on how Congress, the Army and the Trump administration respond after the hearing. A bill that Homendy has endorsed would require aircraft to have advanced locator systems to help prevent collisions, which NTSB has recommended for years. The senators who introduced it believe their proposal would address many of the NTSB's concerns, but they are already discussing a hearing in the next few months to dig deeper into the final report and recommendations.

NTSB also recommends adjusting collision avoidance systems to direct pilots to take evasive action closer to the ground. Research by agency investigators shows alerting pilots down to 300 feet (91 meters) rather than 900 feet could eliminate 90% of all near misses.

Before Tuesday, the NTSB had already spelled out many key factors that contributed to the crash. Investigators said controllers in the Reagan tower overly relied on asking pilots to spot aircraft and maintain visual separation.

The night of the crash, the controller approved the Black Hawk's request to do that twice. However, the investigation has shown that the helicopter pilots likely never spotted the American Airlines plane as the jet circled to land on the little-used secondary runway.

In a statement, the FAA said safety remains its top priority. It has reduced hourly plane arrivals at Reagan airport from 36 to 30 and worked to increase tower staff. The agency said it has 22 certified controllers in the tower and eight more in training.

"We will diligently consider any additional recommendations" from the NTSB, the FAA said.

Several high-profile crashes and close calls followed the Washington collision, alarming travelers. But NTSB statistics show the lowest number of crashes since the pandemic hit in 2020, with 1,405 nationwide.

2 federal officers fired shots during encounter that killed Alex Pretti, DHS tells Congress

By SEUNG MIN KIM, MIKE CATALINI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two federal officers fired shots during the encounter that killed ICU nurse Alex Pretti over the weekend in Minneapolis, a Customs and Border Protection official told Congress in a notice sent Tuesday, while Ecuador's minister of foreign affairs filed an objection saying immigration agents tried to enter the country's consulate in the city without permission.

Officers tried to take Pretti into custody and he resisted, leading to a struggle, according to a notification to Congress obtained by The Associated Press. During the struggle, a Border Patrol agent yelled, "He's got a gun!" multiple times, the official said.

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A Border Patrol officer and a CBP officer each fired Glock pistols, the notice said.

Investigators from CBP's Office of Professional Responsibility conducted the analysis based on a review of body-worn camera footage and agency documentation, the notice said. The law requires the agency to inform relevant congressional committees about deaths in CBP custody within 72 hours.

Separately, a man was arrested after he sprayed an unknown liquid at U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar while she was speaking at a town hall meeting in Minneapolis. The Democrat had just called for the abolishment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to resign when she was sprayed.

Trump says 'we're going to de-escalate a little bit'

The developments came a day after President Donald Trump ordered border czar Tom Homan to take over his administration's immigration crackdown in Minnesota in the wake of Pretti's death, which was the second fatal shooting this month of a person at the hands of immigration law enforcement.

By sending Homan to Minnesota, "we're going to de-escalate a little bit," Trump said during an interview on Fox News' "Will Cain Show." That's significant since White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, when questioned repeatedly Monday about Homan's being dispatched to Minnesota, refused to say that doing so was an effort to calm the situation.

The president added of Homan, "Tom, as tough as he is, gets along" with governors and mayors, even in Democratic areas.

As he left the White House on Tuesday, the president was asked whether Pretti's killing was justified. He responded by saying that a "big investigation" was underway. In the hours after Pretti's death, some administration officials sought to blame the shooting on the 37-year-old intensive care nurse.

Stephen Miller, Trump's deputy chief of staff who had initially called Pretti "an assassin," issued a statement suggesting CBP officers in Minneapolis "may not have been following" protocol. He said the Homeland Security Department's initial statements about what transpired on Saturday was "based on reports from CBP on the ground."

Ecuador files a protest with the US Embassy

A video of the Ecuadorian consulate entry attempt posted on social media shows a staffer running to the door to turn the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents away, telling them, "This is the Ecuadorian consulate. You're not allowed to enter." One ICE officer can be heard responding by threatening to "grab" the staffer if he touched the agent before agreeing to leave.

International law generally prohibits law enforcement authorities from entering foreign consulates or embassies without permission, though sometimes permission may be assumed granted for life-threatening emergencies, like fires.

"Consulate officials immediately prevented the ICE officer from entering the consular building, thus ensuring the protection of the Ecuadorians who were present at the time and activating the emergency protocols issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility," the ministry wrote on X.

A "note of protest" was filed with the U.S. Embassy in Ecuador so that similar attempts aren't made at other consulates, the ministry said. The State Department, Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Trump says of sending Bovino to Minneapolis: 'Maybe it wasn't good here'

Immigration enforcement activity witnessed by journalists in Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs on Tuesday appeared comparable with recent weeks. As before, most didn't result in major confrontations with agents. Activists say they continue to monitor enforcement operations through social media and chats on messaging apps.

The White House had tried to blame Democratic leaders for the protests of immigration raids. But after Pretti's killing and videos suggesting he was not an active threat, the administration tapped Homan to take charge of the Minnesota operation from Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino.

Trump said Bovino, the go-to architect for the president's large-scale city-by-city immigration crackdowns, was "very good" but added "he's a pretty out-there kind of a guy" and "maybe it wasn't good here."

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, along with the city's police chief, met with

Homan on Tuesday and agreed to keep talking. Homan posted on social media that the discussions "were a productive starting point."

Courts weigh in on detained immigrants

In Texas, a federal judge issued a temporary order prohibiting the removal of a 5-year-old Ecuadorian boy and his father who were detained last week in Minnesota in an incident that further inflamed divisions on immigration. U.S. Judge Fred Biery ruled Monday that any removal or transfer of 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos and his father, Adrian Alexander Conejo Arias, is on hold while a court case proceeds.

Also in Texas, federal immigration authorities released an Ecuadorian man whose detention led the chief federal judge in Minnesota to order the head of ICE to appear in his courtroom, the man's attorney said.

Attorney Graham Ojala-Barbour said the man was released in Texas. The lawyer said in an email to The Associated Press that he was notified in an email from the U.S. attorneys office in Minneapolis that his client had been freed.

In an order dated Monday, Chief Judge Patrick J. Schiltz expressed frustration with the Trump administration's handling of immigration cases. He took the extraordinary step of ordering Todd Lyons, the acting director of ICE, to personally appear in his courtroom Friday.

Schiltz had said in his order that he would cancel Lyons' appearance if the man was released from custody. "This Court has been extremely patient with respondents, even though respondents decided to send thousands of agents to Minnesota to detain aliens without making any provision for dealing with the hundreds of habeas petitions and other lawsuits that were sure to result," he wrote.

Schiltz's order followed a federal court hearing Monday on a request by the state and the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul for a judge to halt the immigration enforcement surge. The judge in that case said she would prioritize the ruling but did not give a timeline for a decision.

Schiltz wrote that he recognizes ordering the head of a federal agency to appear personally is extraordinary. "But the extent of ICE's violation of court orders is likewise extraordinary, and lesser measures have been tried and failed," he said.

The Associated Press left messages Tuesday with ICE and a DHS spokesperson seeking a response.

Trump warns Iraq against returning former PM al-Maliki to power amid worries about Iran influence

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump warned Iraq on Tuesday that the U.S. would no longer support the country if its former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, returns to power.

Trump made the threat days after the dominant political bloc known as the Coordination Framework, a collection of Shiite parties, announced it was backing the nomination of al-Maliki, who the U.S. administration views as too close to Iran.

"Last time Maliki was in power, the Country descended into poverty and total chaos. That should not be allowed to happen again," Trump said in a social media post announcing his opposition to al-Maliki. "Because of his insane policies and ideologies, if elected, the United States of America will no longer help Iraq and, if we are not there to help, Iraq has ZERO chance of Success, Prosperity, or Freedom."

Trump's intervention into Iraqi politics comes at a fraught moment for Trump in the Middle East as he weighs carrying out new strikes on Iraq's neighbor Iran, which has maintained deep influence in Iraq's government since the U.S. ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Trump has left open the possibility of military action in response to Tehran's deadly crackdown on recent protests against the Islamic government.

Al-Maliki's troubled relationship with Washington

Caretaker Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's bloc won the largest share of seats in November's parliamentary elections. But he stepped aside earlier this month after he was unable to form a government. That cleared the field for al-Maliki after the two had competed for the backing of the Coordination

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Framework.

Al-Maliki, who first served as prime minister in 2006, is the only Iraqi prime minister to serve two terms since the U.S. toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003. Al-Maliki's bid for a third term failed after he was accused of monopolizing power and alienating the country's sizable Sunni and Kurdish populations.

When he came to power in May 2006, al-Maliki was initially embraced by President George W. Bush. Al-Maliki took over as prime minister months after the bombing of the al-Askari shrine, a significant Shiite mosque. It was a moment that deepened sectarian tension in Iraq and sparked a period of intense violence in the country.

But within months, U.S. officials soured on al-Maliki. They saw his government as too often favoring Shiite factions and alienating Sunni populations, which exacerbated the security crisis.

For years, concerns were frequently raised in Washington about al-Maliki's closeness to Iran and his ability to govern independently of Tehran's influence.

By 2014, the Obama administration had lost confidence in al-Maliki's ability to manage the security situation, particularly the rise of the Islamic State group, which had seized large swaths of the country.

'This is Iraq, so never say never'

The Trump administration began publicly signaling its concerns about the political situation in Iraq in recent days, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio telling caretaker Prime Minister al-Sudani in a phone call Sunday that the U.S. was concerned about a pro-Iran government taking root in Iraq.

"The Secretary emphasized that a government controlled by Iran cannot successfully put Iraq's own interests first, keep Iraq out of regional conflicts, or advance the mutually beneficial partnership between the United States and Iraq," said State Department principal deputy spokesperson Tommy Pigott in a statement.

Hussain Abdul-Hussain, a research fellow focused on the Middle East at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a hawkish Washington think tank, said that Trump's public opposition creates a difficult hurdle for al-Maliki to overcome.

"But this is Iraq, so never say never," said Abdul-Hussein. "And this was a guy whose political life was supposed to have expired many, many years ago, and yet Maliki is still here."

The U.S. also has been pushing Baghdad to disarm Iran-backed groups operating inside Iraq — a difficult proposition, given the political power that many of them hold.

Trump's intervention comes at a fraught moment with Iran

It's not the first time that Trump has intervened in another country's politics since returning to office. He also offered strong backing last year for right-wing candidates in Argentina, Honduras, and Poland.

The long-frayed relationship between the U.S. and Iran remains tense after Trump earlier this month repeatedly threatened Tehran with military action if his administration found the Islamic Republic was using deadly force against anti-government protesters.

He then said he was holding off on strikes after claiming that Iran had halted the execution of some 800 people detained in the protests — something Iran's top prosecutor, Mohammad Movahedi, has strongly denied.

Trump may have been at least temporarily dissuaded from carrying out a strike because of a shift in the U.S. naval presence from the Middle East to South America.

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford was redirected from the Mediterranean Sea in November to support operations targeting drug smugglers in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific as well as this month's capture of former Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro.

But the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and three accompanying warships have arrived in the Middle East, U.S. Central Command confirmed Monday. That's raised anew speculation that Trump could soon opt to order airstrikes on Iran for its crackdown on protesters.

Judge finds Virginia Democrats' redistricting resolution illegal; new Maryland map advances

By OLIVIA DIAZ and BRIAN WITTE Associated Press/Report for America

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Democrats ran into a setback on Tuesday in Virginia to fight back against President Donald Trump's congressional redistricting efforts, but they took a step forward in Maryland, though obstacles remain for enacting a new congressional map there.

A Virginia judge ruled that a proposed constitutional amendment letting Democrats redraw the state's Congressional maps was illegal, setting back the party's efforts to pick up seats in the U.S. House in November. In Maryland, a state House committee advanced a new map that could enable Democrats to defeat the state's only House Republican, after Gov. Wes Moore, a Democrat, urged them in person to do so.

The latest developments are part of a national battle over unusual mid-decade redistricting attempts, launched last summer by Trump who urged Republican officials in Texas to redraw maps to help the GOP win more seats. He did so in hopes of holding on to a narrow House majority in the face of political headwinds that typically favor the party out of power in midterms.

Tazewell Circuit Court Judge Jack Hurley Jr. struck down the Virginia legislature's actions on three grounds, including finding that lawmakers failed to follow their own rules for adding the redistricting amendment to a special session.

His order also said Democrats failed to approve the amendment before the public began voting in last year's general election and failed to publish the amendment three months before the election, as required by law. As a result, he said, the amendment was invalid and void.

Plans for appeal

Virginia House Speaker Don Scott, who was listed in Republicans' lawsuit over the resolution, said Democrats would appeal the ruling.

"Nothing that happened today will dissuade us from continuing to move forward and put this matter directly to the voters," Scott said in a joint statement with other Democratic leaders.

Virginians for Fair Elections, a campaign that supports the redistricting resolution, accused conservatives of filing their lawsuit in a known GOP-friendly jurisdiction, saying, "Republicans court-shopped for a ruling because litigation and misinformation are the only tools they have left."

Hurley's ruling came after lawmakers said they would unveil their proposed new districts to voters by the end of this week.

The state is currently represented in the House by six Democrats and five Republicans from districts whose boundaries were imposed by a court after a bipartisan redistricting commission failed to agree on a map after the 2020 census.

Because the commission was established by a voter-approved constitutional amendment, lawmakers have to revise the constitution in order to be able to redraw maps this year. That requires the pass a resolution in two separate legislative sessions, with a state election sandwiched in between.

Virginians would have to vote in favor in a referendum.

Maryland

Moore, a Democrat who is the nation's only serving Black governor, said the state needed to act to counter what he called "political redlining" by Trump in other states at the cost of Black representation in Congress.

He compared Trump's push for GOP-friendly redistricting to discriminatory housing practices, saying the president and his allies "are doing everything in their power to silence the voices and trying to eliminate Black leadership — elected leadership — all over this country."

"So no, I will not sit quiet," Moore testified. "And the audacity of those who are telling me to do so shows that they have no understanding of the journey of so many who came before us."

Democrats outnumber Republicans 2-1 in Maryland and already hold a 7-1 advantage in the state's U.S. House delegation, with Rep. Andy Harris the lone GOP representative.

Moore's push for mid-decade redistricting has run into opposition by a key fellow Democrat: state Senate

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President Bill Ferguson, of Baltimore, who says it could backfire and potentially cost a Democratic seat. Ferguson pointed out that a map adopted in 2021 that would have made it easier to flip Harris' seat was ruled unconstitutional by a judge who called it "a product of extreme partisan gerrymandering." Maryland passed another map in 2022, and a legal fight was dropped.

Redrawing districts again could prompt a new legal challenge and lead a court to impose districts, Ferguson contends.

On Tuesday he told reporters that his position has not changed and a majority of Democratic state senators also oppose redistricting now.

"I understand that people have differences of opinion, but I don't see that shifting here," Ferguson said.

A Maryland House committee advanced legislation containing the map to the House, after several hours of testimony from residents.

Julie Quick, who lives on Maryland's Eastern Shore in Harris' district, testified that the map "takes a sledgehammer to rural voting rights."

Ben Vaughan, who testified in favor of the map, told lawmakers "our democracy is a house on fire," and the state needs to "turn on the fire hoses."

Other states

At the national level, the redistricting battle has resulted so far in nine more seats that Republicans believe they can win in Texas, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio, and six that Democrats think they can win in California and Utah. Democrats hope to fully or partially make up that three-seat margin in Virginia.

As in Virginia, redistricting is still being litigated in several states, and there is no guarantee that the parties will win the seats they have redrawn.

Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis plans to call a special session on redistricting in April.

Trump visits Iowa trying to focus on affordability during fallout over shooting in Minneapolis

By SEUNG MIN KIM, HANNAH FINGERHUT and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

CLIVE, Iowa (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday made his first big pitch ahead of this year's midterm elections on his administration's economic performance, even as his White House remains mired in the fallout in Minneapolis over a second fatal shooting by federal immigration officers this month.

Trump gave a speech in a suburb of Des Moines where he talked up the tax cuts he signed into law last year and took credit for the soaring performance of the stock market, saying he "made a lot of people rich," including some "that I don't even like."

"If we lose the midterms, you'll lose so many of the things that we're talking about," Trump told Iowans, who are expected to reflect their feelings on his presidency when they vote in two highly competitive congressional races this year.

The trip for the Republican president was part of a White House push to focus more on affordability ahead of elections in November that will determine control of Congress.

But the president once again suggested that concerns about prices were exaggerated by his political opponents, saying, "They come up with this word 'affordability.'"

"First time you heard about it was like a few months ago," he said.

He went on and added: "You're not hearing it so much anymore. You know why? Because the prices are coming down so much."

The visit was part of the White House's strategy to have Trump travel out of Washington once a week ahead of the midterm elections to focus on economic issues facing everyday Americans — an effort that keeps getting diverted by crisis.

On the ground in Iowa, Trump first made a stop at a local restaurant, where he met some locals and sat for an interview with Fox News Channel — in which he said he was attempting to "de-escalate a little bit" in Minnesota.

The latest effort comes as the Trump administration is grappling with the weekend shooting death of

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Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse killed by federal agents in Iowa's northern neighbor. Pretti had participated in protests following the Jan. 7 killing of Renee Good by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer. Even as some top administration officials moved quickly to malign Pretti, Trump said he was waiting until an investigation into the shooting was complete.

Trump calls Pretti killing 'sad situation'

As Trump left the White House on Tuesday to head to Iowa, he was repeatedly questioned by reporters about Pretti's killing. Trump disputed language used by his own deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, who on social media described Pretti as an "assassin" who "tried to murder federal agents." Vice President JD Vance shared the post.

Trump, when asked Tuesday if he believed Pretti was an assassin, said, "No."

When asked if he thought Pretti's killing was justified, Trump called it "a very sad situation" and said a "big investigation" was underway.

"I'm going to be watching over it, and I want a very honorable and honest investigation. I have to see it myself," he said.

He also said Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, who was quick to cast Pretti as a violent instigator, would not be resigning.

Later, as he greeted diners at an Iowa restaurant, Trump weighed in further with comments that were likely to exacerbate frustration among some of his backers who are also strong Second Amendment proponents.

"He certainly shouldn't have been carrying a gun," Trump said of Pretti.

He called it a "very, very unfortunate incident" but said: "I don't like that he had a gun. I don't like that he had two fully loaded magazines. That's a lot of bad stuff."

Republicans want to switch the subject to affordability

Trump was last in Iowa ahead of the July 4 holiday to kick off the United States' upcoming 250th anniversary, which morphed largely into a celebration of his major spending and tax cut package hours after Congress had approved it.

Trump, speaking Tuesday in Clive, a suburb of Des Moines, talked up the wide-ranging tariffs he imposed on nearly all U.S. trading partners. He also promoted the deals he's struck with drugmakers to get them to lower costs on some prescription drugs.

Republicans are hoping that Trump's visit to the state Tuesday draws focus back to that tax bill, which will be a key part of their pitch as they ask voters to keep them in power in November.

Some attending Tuesday's event said they didn't think immigration enforcement officers in Minnesota were being given a chance to do their job, even as they expressed sympathy over the two shooting deaths that have occurred in Minneapolis.

"You can't interfere with these people when they're trying to enforce the law," said 68-year-old Jerry Greif from Vinton, Iowa.

Greif, a Trump supporter, said he's glad there are three more years of Trump's second term. He said there's still room for some prices to go down but he finds the economy is "definitely improving" from what it was during the Biden administration.

Iowa Democratic Party chair Rita Hart emphasized Tuesday that Trump's tariff policies have hurt Iowa farmers and criticized Iowa's Republican leaders for cheering Trump on "as he has taken a wrecking ball to our economy."

"It's laughable that Trump is coming here today to talk about affordability of all things when Iowans are literally paying more because of his disastrous policies," Hart said.

Trump last year made stops in Michigan, Pennsylvania and North Carolina to try to talk about affordability as the White House tried to marshal the president's political power to appeal to voters in key swing states.

But Trump's penchant for going off-script has sometimes taken the focus off cost-of-living issues and his administration's plans for how to combat it. In Mount Pocono, Pennsylvania, Trump insisted that inflation was no longer a problem and that Democrats were using the term affordability as a "hoax" to hurt him.

At that event, Trump also griped that immigrants arriving to the U.S. from “filthy” countries got more attention than his pledges to fight inflation.

Competitive races in Iowa

Although it was a swing state just a little more than a decade ago, Iowa in recent years has been reliably Republican in national and statewide elections. Trump won Iowa by 13 percentage points in 2024 against Democrat Kamala Harris.

Still, two of Iowa’s four congressional districts have been among the most competitive in the country and are expected to be again in this year’s midterm elections. Trump already has endorsed Republican Reps. Zach Nunn and Mariannette Miller-Meeks. Democrats, who landed three of Iowa’s four House seats in the 2018 midterm elections during Trump’s first term, see a prime opportunity to unseat Iowa incumbents.

This election will be the first since 1968 with open seats for both governor and U.S. senator at the top of the ticket after Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds and Republican U.S. Sen. Joni Ernst opted out of reelection bids. The political shake-ups have rippled throughout the state, with Republican Reps. Randy Feenstra and Ashley Hinson seeking new offices for governor and for U.S. senator, respectively.

Democrats hope Rob Sand, the lone Democrat in statewide office who is running for governor, will make the entire state more competitive with his appeal to moderate and conservative voters and his \$13 million in cash on hand.

Activists say Iran’s crackdown has killed at least 6,221 people, as the country’s currency plunges

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran’s bloody crackdown on nationwide protests has killed at least 6,221 people while many others still are feared dead, activists said Wednesday, as a U.S. aircraft carrier group arrived in the Middle East to lead any American military response to the crisis. Iran’s currency, the rial, meanwhile fell to a record low of 1.5 million to \$1.

The arrival of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier and guided missile destroyers accompanying it provide the U.S. the ability to strike Iran, particularly as Gulf Arab states have signaled they want to stay out of any attack despite hosting American military personnel.

Two Iranian-backed militias in the Mideast have signaled their willingness to launch new attacks, likely trying to back Iran after U.S. President Donald Trump threatened military action over the killing of peaceful protesters or Tehran launching mass executions in the wake of the demonstrations.

Iran has repeatedly threatened to drag the entire Mideast into a war, though its air defenses and military are still reeling after the June war launched by Israel against the country. But the pressure on its economy may spark new unrest as everyday goods slowly go out of reach of its people — particularly if Trump chooses to attack.

Ambrey, a private security firm, issued a notice Tuesday saying it assessed that the U.S. “has positioned sufficient military capability to conduct kinetic operations against Iran while maintaining the ability to defend itself and regional allies from reciprocal action.”

“Supporting or avenging Iranian protesters in punitive strikes is assessed as insufficient justification for sustained military conflict,” Ambrey wrote. “However, alternative objectives, such as the degradation of Iranian military capabilities, may increase the likelihood of limited U.S. intervention.”

Activists offer new death toll

Wednesday’s new figures came from the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which has been accurate in multiple rounds of unrest in Iran. The group verifies each death with a network of activists on the ground in Iran.

It said the 6,221 dead included at least 5,858 protesters, 214 government-affiliated forces, 100 children and 49 civilians who weren’t demonstrating. The crackdown has seen over 42,300 arrests, it added.

The Associated Press has been unable to independently assess the death toll given authorities cutting off the internet and disrupting calls into the Islamic Republic.

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Iran's government has put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest "terrorists." In the past, Iran's theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

That death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest there in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The protests in Iran began on Dec. 28, sparked by the fall of the Iranian currency, the rial, and quickly spread across the country. They were met by a violent crackdown by Iran's theocracy, the scale of which is only starting to become clear as the country has faced more than two weeks of internet blackout — the most comprehensive in its history.

Iran's U.N. ambassador told a U.N. Security Council meeting late Monday that Trump's repeated threats to use military force against the country "are neither ambiguous nor misinterpreted." Amir Saeid Iravani also repeated allegations that the U.S. leader incited violence by "armed terrorist groups" supported by the United States and Israel, but gave no evidence to support his claims.

Iranian state media has tried to accuse forces abroad for the protests as the theocracy remains broadly unable to address the country's ailing economy, which is still squeezed by international sanctions, particularly over its nuclear program.

On Tuesday, exchange shops offered the record-low rial-to-dollar rate in Tehran. Traders declined to speak publicly on the matter, with several responding angrily to the situation.

Already, Iran has vastly limited its subsidized currency rates to cut down on corruption. It also has offered the equivalent of \$7 a month to most people in the country to cover rising costs. However, Iran's people have seen the rial fall from a rate of 32,000 to \$1 just a decade ago — which has devoured the value of their savings.

Some Iranian-backed militias suggest willingness to fight

Iran projected its power across the Mideast through the "Axis of Resistance," a network of proxy militant groups in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, and other places. It was also seen as a defensive buffer, intended to keep conflict away from Iranian borders. But it has collapsed after Israel targeted Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon and others during the Gaza war. Meanwhile, rebels in 2024 overthrew Syria's Bashar Assad after a yearslong, bloody war in which Iran backed his rule.

Yemen's Houthi rebels, backed by Iran, have repeatedly warned they could resume fire if needed on shipping in the Red Sea, releasing old footage of a previous attack Monday. Ahmad "Abu Hussein" al-Hamidawi, the leader of Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah militia, warned "the enemies that the war on the (Islamic) Republic will not be a picnic; rather, you will taste the bitterest forms of death, and nothing will remain of you in our region."

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, one of Iran's staunchest allies, refused to say how it planned to react in the case of a possible attack.

"During the past two months, several parties have asked me a clear and frank question: If Israel and America go to war against Iran, will Hezbollah intervene or not?" Hezbollah leader Sheikh Naim Kassem said in a video address.

He said the group is preparing for "possible aggression and is determined to defend" against it. But as to how it would act, he said, "these details will be determined by the battle and we will determine them according to the interests that are present."

UPS retires fleet of MD-11 aircraft involved in deadly Kentucky crash

By DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — UPS announced Tuesday that it has retired its fleet of McDonnell Douglas MD-11 cargo planes just months after one crashed during takeoff, causing 15 deaths in Louisville.

CEO Carol Tome said during a fourth-quarter earnings call that UPS decided to "accelerate our plans and retire all MD-11 aircraft in our fleet."

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The Nov. 4 Louisville crash killed the plane's three-person crew and 12 others on the ground just outside the Muhammad Ali International Airport. The plane's left engine had fallen off the wing, and the plane was able to climb only about 30 feet (9 meters) before crashing.

The Federal Aviation Administration grounded all MD-11s after the crash. An agency statement Tuesday said the FAA continues to review "all the facts and circumstances" in deciding whether MD-11s would be allowed to fly again.

FedEx and Florida-based Western Global Airlines also had their fleets of MD-11s grounded by the FAA in November. FedEx officials said in December that they expect to return their MD-11 fleet to service by the company's fourth quarter, which ends May 31.

A call left to Western Global's headquarters was not returned on Tuesday.

MD-11s made up about 9% of the UPS fleet, and the company incurred an after-tax charge of \$137 million in writing them off, Tome said Tuesday.

Tome said the company would be receiving 18 new Boeing 767s in the next 15 months to rebuild. She said during the peak holiday season, UPS had to bring in aircraft from other parts of the world, increase ground transportation volume and lease additional planes.

"I am incredibly proud of our team at Worldport and how they responded to this accident," Tome said. "And I would like to thank the Louisville community as well as our business and industry partners for their outpouring of support."

The National Transportation Safety Board said investigators found cracks in some of the parts that held the engine to the wing of the UPS plane. Those cracks hadn't been caught in regular maintenance. The last inspection on those key engine mount parts was 2021.

The crash had a devastating impact in Louisville, striking and causing smaller explosions at a nearby Kentucky Petroleum Recycling plant and hitting an auto salvage yard, Grade A Auto Parts, where many of the victims were visiting or working.

Wall Street sets a record while the US dollar's value slides again

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Wall Street ticked to a record on Tuesday, as stocks zigzagged following mixed profit reports from UnitedHealth, General Motors and other big companies.

The S&P 500 rose 0.4% and edged past its prior all-time high set a couple weeks ago. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 408 points, or 0.8%, and the Nasdaq composite climbed 0.9% as the stock market cleaved between winners and losers.

The swings were even bigger in foreign-currency markets, where the U.S. dollar's value slid against its peers again. Shortly after U.S. stocks finished Tuesday's trading, the dollar was down more than 1% against the euro, the Japanese yen and the Australian dollar, among others. An index measuring the U.S. dollar's strength against several of its competitors dropped to its lowest point since 2022.

The slide continues a sharp drop for the U.S. dollar since President Donald Trump threatened tariffs against several European countries that he said opposed his taking control of Greenland. Such threats, along with worries about risks like the U.S. government's heavy debt, have periodically pushed global investors to step back from U.S. markets, a move that's come to be called "Sell America."

On Wall Street, Corning helped lead the market higher and climbed 15.6% after announcing a deal with Meta Platforms worth up to \$6 billion. Corning will supply optical fiber and cable to help build out data centers for Meta, enough that Corning is expanding its optical-fiber manufacturing facility in Hickory, North Carolina.

Also supporting the U.S. stock market were gains for General Motors, which rose 8.7%, and hospital-operator HCA Healthcare, which rallied 7.1%. Both delivered profits for the end of 2025 that topped Wall Street's expectations. Each also approved programs to send billions of dollars to their investors by buying back their own stock.

They helped offset a tumble for UnitedHealth Group, which sank 19.6% despite reporting a profit for the

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latest quarter that was a bit better than analysts expected. More attention was on the company's forecast for revenue in the upcoming year, which fell short of Wall Street's expectations and could be weaker than it was in 2025.

Health care stocks also felt tremendous pressure from a projected rate increase for Medicare Advantage by the U.S. government, which fell well short of what investors had hoped. Humana skidded by 21.1%, Elevance Health dropped 14.3% and CVS Health sank 14.2%.

Profit reports elsewhere on Wall Street were mixed. UPS added 0.2% after reporting a stronger profit and forecasting better revenue for 2026 than analysts expected, while announcing the elimination of 30,000 jobs. American Airlines lost 7% after delivering a profit for the end of 2025 that fell well short of analysts' expectations.

The pressure is on companies to deliver strong growth in profits following record-setting runs for their stock prices. Stock prices tend to follow the path of corporate profits over the long term, and earnings need to rise to quiet criticism that stock prices have grown too expensive.

Several of Wall Street's most influential stocks will deliver their latest earnings reports later this week. They include Meta Platforms, Microsoft and Tesla on Wednesday and Apple on Thursday.

Several of those Big Tech stocks were among the strongest forces lifting the S&P 500 Tuesday, including gains of 2.2% for Microsoft and 1.1% for Apple.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 28.37 points to 6,978.60. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 408.99 to 49,003.41, and the Nasdaq composite rallied 215.74 to 23,817.10.

Another way stock prices can look less expensive to investors is if interest rates fall. The Federal Reserve will announce its next move on interest rates Wednesday, but the widespread expectation is that it will hold its main interest rate steady for now.

Inflation remains stubbornly above the Fed's 2% target, and lower interest rates could worsen increases in prices for U.S. consumers at the same time that they give the economy a boost. Traders expect the Fed to resume its cuts to interest rates later this year.

In the bond market, Treasury yields were relatively steady ahead of the Fed's decision. The yield on the 10-year Treasury ticked up to 4.24% from 4.22% late Monday.

It had edged lower earlier in the day, after a report from the Conference Board said confidence weakened among U.S. consumers last month. Economists had expected to see a slight improvement, but confidence dropped to its lowest level since 2014, even lower than it was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

India's Sensex index added 0.4% after Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the country had reached agreement on a free trade deal with the European Union.

The accord, which touches 2 billion people, followed nearly two decades of negotiations. It's one of the biggest bilateral engagements on commerce. The timing comes as Washington targets both India and the EU with steep import tariffs.

South Korea's Kospi jumped 2.7%, and Hong Kong's Hang Seng rallied 1.4% for two of the world's bigger moves.

Minneapolis shooting scrambles Second Amendment politics for Trump

By BILL BARROW and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

Prominent Republicans and gun rights advocates helped elicit a White House turnabout this week after bristling over the administration's characterization of Alex Pretti, the second person killed this month by a federal officer in Minneapolis, as responsible for his own death because he lawfully possessed a weapon.

The death produced no clear shifts in U.S. gun politics or policies, even as President Donald Trump shuffles the lieutenants in charge of his militarized immigration crackdown. But important voices in Trump's coalition have called for a thorough investigation of Pretti's death while also criticizing inconsistencies in some Republicans' Second Amendment stances.

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If the dynamic persists, it could give Republicans problems as Trump heads into a midterm election year with voters already growing skeptical of his overall immigration approach. The concern is acute enough that Trump's top spokeswoman sought Monday to reassert his brand as a staunch gun rights supporter.

"The president supports the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding American citizens, absolutely," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters.

Leavitt qualified that "when you are bearing arms and confronted by law enforcement, you are raising ... the risk of force being used against you."

Videos contradict early statements from administration

That still marked a retreat from the administration's previous messages about the shooting of Pretti. It came the same day the president dispatched border czar Tom Homan to Minnesota, seemingly elevating him over Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and Border Patrol chief Greg Bovino, who had been in charge in Minneapolis.

Within hours of Pretti's death on Saturday, Bovino suggested Pretti "wanted to ... massacre law enforcement," and Noem said Pretti was "brandishing" a weapon and acted "violently" toward officers.

"I don't know of any peaceful protester that shows up with a gun and ammunition rather than a sign," Noem said.

White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, an architect of Trump's mass deportation effort, went further on X, declaring Pretti "an assassin."

Bystander videos contradicted each claim, instead showing Pretti holding a cellphone and helping a woman who had been pepper sprayed by a federal officer. Within seconds, Pretti was sprayed, too, and taken to the ground by multiple officers. No video disclosed thus far has shown him unholstering his concealed weapon -- which he had a Minnesota permit to carry. It appeared that one officer took Pretti's gun and walked away with it just before shots began.

As multiple videos went viral online and on television, Vice President JD Vance reposted Miller's assessment, while Trump shared an alleged photo of "the gunman's gun, loaded (with two additional full magazines!)."

On Tuesday, Trump weighed in anew on Pretti having a firearm, which he was legally allowed to carry. Before leaving for a trip to Iowa, the president told reporters he wanted to see an investigation into the death but also said protesters "can't have guns."

Later, as he greeted diners in a Des Moines-area restaurant, he called the shooting "a very unfortunate incident" while also making comments that were likely to further irritate supporters who also are strong Second Amendment advocates.

"I don't like that he had a gun," Trump said. "I don't like that he had two fully loaded magazines. That's a lot of bad stuff."

Swift reactions from gun rights advocates

The National Rifle Association, which has backed Trump three times, released a statement that began by casting blame on Minnesota Democrats it accused of stoking protests. But the group lashed out after a federal prosecutor in California said on X that, "If you approach law enforcement with a gun, there is a high likelihood they will be legally justified in shooting you."

That analysis, the NRA said, is "dangerous and wrong."

FBI Director Kash Patel magnified the blowback Sunday on Fox News' "Sunday Morning Futures With Maria Bartiromo." No one, Patel said, can "bring a firearm, loaded, with multiple magazines to any sort of protest that you want. It's that simple."

Erich Pratt, vice president of Gun Owners of America, was incredulous.

"I have attended protest rallies while armed, and no one got injured," he said on CNN.

Conservative officials around the country made the same connection between the First and Second amendments.

"Showing up at a protest is very American. Showing up with a weapon is very American," state Rep. Jeremy Faison, who leads the GOP caucus in Tennessee, said on X.

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Trump's first-term vice president, Mike Pence, called for "full and transparent investigation of this officer involved shooting."

A different response from the past

Liberals, conservatives and nonpartisan experts noted how the administration's response differed from past conservative positions involving protests and weapons.

Multiple Trump supporters were found to have weapons during the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Trump issued blanket pardons to all of them.

Republicans were critical in 2020 when Mark and Patricia McCloskey had to pay fines after pointing guns at protesters who marched through their St. Louis neighborhood after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. And then there's Kyle Rittenhouse, a counter-protester acquitted after fatally shooting two men and injuring another in Kenosha, Wisconsin, during the post-Floyd protests.

"You remember Kyle Rittenhouse and how he was made a hero on the right," Trey Gowdy, a Republican former congressman and attorney for Trump during one of his first-term impeachments. "Alex Pretti's firearm was being lawfully carried. ... He never brandished it."

Adam Winkler, a UCLA law professor who has studied the history of the gun debate, said the fallout "shows how tribal we've become." Republicans spent years talking about the Second Amendment as a means to fight government tyranny, he said.

"The moment someone who's thought to be from the left, they abandon that principled stance," Winkler said.

Meanwhile, Democrats who have criticized open and concealed carry laws for years, Winkler added, are not amplifying that position after Pretti's death.

Uncertain effects in an election year

The blowback against the administration from core Trump supporters comes as Republicans are trying to protect their threadbare majority in the U.S. House and face several competitive Senate races.

Perhaps reflecting the stakes, GOP staff and campaign aides were reticent Monday to talk about the issue at all.

The House Republican campaign chairman, Rep. Richard Hudson of North Carolina, is sponsoring the GOP's most significant gun legislation of this congressional term, a proposal to make state concealed-carry permits reciprocal across all states.

The bill cleared the House Judiciary Committee last fall. Asked Monday whether Pretti's death and the Minneapolis protests might affect debate, an aide to Speaker Mike Johnson did not offer any update on the bill's prospects.

Gun rights advocates have notched many legislative victories in Republican-controlled statehouses in recent decades, from rolling back gun-free zones around schools and churches to expanding gun possession rights in schools, on university campuses and in other public spaces.

William Sack, legal director of the Second Amendment Foundation, said he was surprised and disappointed by the administration's initial statements following the Pretti shooting. Trump's vacillating, he said, is "very likely to cost them dearly with the core of a constituency they count on."

Families of 2 men killed in boat strike sue Trump administration over attack they call 'unlawful'

By ERIC TUCKER and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Families of two Trinidadian nationals killed in a Trump administration boat strike last October sued the federal government on Tuesday, calling the attack a war crime and part of an "unprecedented and manifestly unlawful U.S. military campaign."

The lawsuit is thought to be the first wrongful death case arising from the three dozen strikes that the administration has launched since September on boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean. The complaint will test the legal justification of the Trump administration attacks; government officials have defended them as necessary to stem the flow of drugs into the United States, but many legal experts say

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they amount to a brazen violation of the laws of armed conflict.

The complaint echoes many of the frequently articulated concerns about the boat strikes, noting for instance that they have been carried out without congressional authorization and at a time when there is no military conflict between the United States and drug cartels that under the laws of war could justify the lethal attacks.

"These premeditated and intentional killings lack any plausible legal justification. Thus, they were simply murders, ordered by individuals at the highest levels of government and obeyed by military officers in the chain of command," the lawsuit says.

White House deputy press secretary Anna Kelly said in a statement that the strike "was conducted against designated narcoterrorists bringing deadly poison to our shores."

"President Trump used his lawful authority to take decisive action against the scourge of illicit narcotics that has resulted in the needless deaths of innocent Americans," Kelly stated.

The lawsuit was filed by the mother of Chad Joseph and the sister of Rishi Samaroo, two Trinidadian nationals who were among six people killed in the Oct. 14 missile strike on a boat traveling from Venezuela to Trinidad. The men were not members of any drug cartel, the lawsuit says, but had instead been fishing in the waters off the Venezuelan coast and were returning to their homes in Trinidad and Tobago.

The two had caught a ride home to Las Cuevas, a fishing community where they were from, on a small boat targeted in a strike announced on Truth Social by President Donald Trump.

"These killings were wrongful because they took place outside of armed conflict and in circumstances in which Mr. Joseph and Mr. Samaroo were not engaged in activities that presented a concrete, specific, and imminent threat of death or serious physical injury, and where there were means other than lethal force that could have reasonably been employed to neutralize any such threat," the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit is the first to challenge the legality of the boat strikes in court, according to Jen Nessel, a spokesperson for the Center for Constitutional Rights, whose lawyers are part of a team of attorneys that filed the case. Nessel said in an email that the center also has a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit seeking the release of the legal justification for the strikes.

Jeffrey Stein, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, which also filed the lawsuit, told reporters Tuesday that the lawsuit seeks compensatory and punitive damages that can be determined after a trial.

"We don't think that it's something that we could put a precise dollar amount on," Stein said. "But we're seeking damages that can go some way towards bringing justice for these really heinous abuses of power."

The lawsuit also aims to prevent more boat strikes, Stein said, with the hope that a U.S. court rejects the Trump administration's "frankly absurd claims about its authority to engage in these illegal strikes."

The lawsuit was filed in federal court in Massachusetts. It cites the Death on the High Seas Act, which the lawyers say permits wrongful death cases in situations like this, as well as the Alien Tort Statute, which permits foreign nationals to sue in federal court for alleged human rights violations.

The death toll from the boat strikes is now up to at least 126 people, with the inclusion of those presumed dead after being lost at sea, the U.S. military confirmed Monday. The figure includes 116 people who were killed immediately in at least 36 attacks carried out since early September, with 10 others believed dead because searchers did not locate them following a strike.

'One Battle After Another' leads the pack in nominations for UK's BAFTA film awards

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Paul Thomas Anderson's politically charged action thriller "One Battle After Another" leads the race for the British Academy Film Awards, securing 14 nominations Tuesday including acting nods for five of its cast.

Ryan Coogler's blues-steeped vampire epic "Sinners" is close behind with 13 nominations for Britain's equivalent of the Oscars, while Chloé Zhao's Shakespearean family tragedy "Hamnet" and Josh Safdie's ping-pong odyssey "Marty Supreme" have 11 apiece.

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Guillermo del Toro's reimagining of "Frankenstein" and Norwegian family drama "Sentimental Value" each got eight nominations, rounding out a six-pack of leading contenders for both the British and Hollywood Academy Awards.

The best film nominees are "One Battle After Another," "Hamnet," "Marty Supreme," "Sinners" and "Sentimental Value."

BAFTA Chief Executive Jane Millichip said the nominations recognized "films like 'One Battle After Another,' 'Sinners,' tackling really big societal issues — the moral ambiguity of activism, Black identity," alongside films exploring "the most intimate side of family relationships."

"They're all doing it in quite different ways: Strong flavors, really bold storytelling," she said.

Hollywood heavyweights and rising stars

Best leading actor contenders are Timothée Chalamet for "Marty Supreme," Leonardo DiCaprio for "One Battle After Another," Ethan Hawke for Broadway biopic "Blue Moon," Michael B. Jordan for "Sinners" and Jesse Plemons for "Bugonia" and British actor Robert Aramayo for playing a man with Tourette's syndrome in biographical drama "I Swear."

Aramayo said it was "really crazy" to be nominated alongside Hollywood heavyweights.

"It's absolutely amazing," he said. "I admire each and every one of them so much."

The leading actress category includes awards-season favorite Jessie Buckley for her performance as Agnes Hathaway, wife of William Shakespeare, in "Hamnet." She's up against Rose Byrne for "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You," Kate Hudson for "Song Sung Blue," Chase Infiniti for "One Battle After Another," Renate Reinsve for "Sentimental Value" and Emma Stone for dystopian tragicomedy "Bugonia."

"One Battle" actors Teyana Taylor, Benicio del Toro and Sean Penn are all nominated for supporting performances.

The Associated Press was recognized in the best documentary category with a nomination for Mstyslav Chernov's harrowing Ukraine war portrait "2000 Meters to Andriivka," co-produced by the AP and PBS Frontline.

The winners will be announced at a Feb. 22 ceremony in London hosted by actor Alan Cumming. The U.K. prizes — officially called the EE BAFTA Film Awards — often provide clues about who will triumph at Hollywood's Academy Awards, held this year on March 15.

This year, unusually, Oscar nominations were announced first, with "Sinners" securing a record 16 nominations, followed by 13 for "One Battle After Another."

The British academy has recognized several performers overlooked by the Oscars, including supporting actor nominees Paul Mescal for "Hamnet" and Odessa A'zion for "Marty Supreme."

The BAFTAs also have a distinctly British accent, with a separate category of best British film. Its 10 nominees include "The Ballad of Wallis Island," "Pillion," "I Swear" and "Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy."

Tom Basden, co-writer and star of "The Ballad of Wallis Island," the story of a musical duo reluctantly reunited by a superfan, said it was gratifying to receive three nominations for a movie filmed on a tiny budget in 18 days. Carey Mulligan, who spent 10 days on set, is nominated for best supporting actress.

"Sort of against the odds, we managed to create something in those conditions that we're really proud of and that's really hit home with people," Basden said. "So it's a lovely kind of underdog story in many ways."

In search of diversity

Most BAFTA winners are chosen by 8,500 members of the U.K. academy of industry professionals, with one — the Rising Star Award — selected by public vote from a shortlist of nominees. This year's rising star contenders are Infiniti, Aramayo, "Sinners" star Miles Caton and British actors Archie Madekwe and Posy Sterling.

Like other major movie awards, Britain's film academy has introduced changes in recent years to increase diversity, including the addition of a longlist round before the final nominees are selected. Diversity has improved since 2020, when no women were nominated as best director for the seventh year running, and all 20 of the main acting nominees were white.

Still, Zhao is the only female nominee in the best director category, alongside Anderson, Safdie, Cooger,

Yorgos Lanthimos for "Bugonia" and Joachim Trier for "Sentimental Value." Across all categories including documentaries and shorts, 25% of the directing nominees are women.

Trump's immigration crackdown led to drop in US growth rate last year as population hit 342 million

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigration contributed to a year-to-year drop in the nation's growth rate as the U.S. population reached nearly 342 million people in 2025, according to population estimates released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The 0.5% growth rate for 2025 was a sharp drop from 2024's almost 1% growth rate, which was the highest in two decades and was fueled by immigration. The 2024 estimates put the U.S. population at 340 million people.

Immigration increased by almost 1.3 million people last year, compared with 2024's increase of almost 2.8 million people. If trends continue, the annual gain from immigrants by mid-2026 will drop to only 321,000 people, according to the Census Bureau, whose estimates do not distinguish between legal and illegal immigration.

In the past 125 years, the lowest growth rate was in 2021, during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, when the U.S. population grew by just 0.16%, or 522,000 people and immigration increased by just 376,000 people because of travel restrictions into the U.S. Before that, the lowest growth rate was just under 0.5% in 1919 at the height of the Spanish flu.

Births outnumbered deaths last year by 519,000 people. While higher than the pandemic-era low at the beginning of the decade, the natural increase was dramatically smaller than in the 2000s, when it ranged between 1.6 million and 1.9 million people.

Lower immigration stunts growth in many states

The immigration drop dented growth in several states that traditionally have been immigrant magnets. California had a net population loss of 9,500 people in 2025, a stark change from the previous year, when it gained 232,000 residents, even though roughly the same number of Californians already living in the state moved out in both years. The difference was immigration since the number of net immigrants who moved into the state dropped from 361,000 people in 2024 to 109,000 in 2025.

Florida had year-to-year drops in both immigrants and people moving in from other states. The Sunshine State, which has become more expensive in recent years from surging property values and higher home insurance costs, had only 22,000 domestic migrants in 2025, compared with 64,000 people in 2024, and the net number of immigrants dropped from more than 411,000 people to 178,000 people.

New York added only 1,008 people in 2025, mostly because the state's net migration from immigrants dropped from 207,000 people to 95,600 people.

South Carolina, Idaho and North Carolina had the highest year-over-year growth rates, ranging from 1.3% to 1.5%. Texas, Florida and North Carolina added the most people in pure numbers. California, Hawaii, New Mexico, Vermont and West Virginia had population declines.

The South, which has been the powerhouse of growth in the 2020s, continued to add more people than any other region, but the numbers dropped from 1.7 million people in 2024 to 1.1 million in 2025.

"Many of these states are going to show even smaller growth when we get to next year," Brookings demographer William Frey said Tuesday.

The effects of Trump's immigration crackdown

Tuesday's data release comes as researchers have been trying to determine the effects of the second Trump administration's immigration crackdown after the Republican president returned to the White House in January 2025. Trump made a surge of migrants at the southern border a central issue in his winning 2024 presidential campaign.

The numbers made public Tuesday reflect change from July 2024 to July 2025, covering the end of

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President Joe Biden's Democratic administration and the first half of Trump's first year back in office.

The figures capture a period that reflects the beginning of enforcement surges in Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon, but do not capture the impact on immigration after the Trump administration's crackdowns began in Chicago; New Orleans; Memphis, Tennessee; and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The 2025 numbers were a jarring divergence from 2024, when net international migration accounted for 84% of the nation's 3.3 million-person increase from the year before. The jump in immigration two years ago was partly because of a new method of counting that added people who were admitted for humanitarian reasons.

"They do reflect recent trends we have seen in out-migration, where the numbers of people coming in is down and the numbers going out is up," Eric Jensen, a senior research scientist at the Census Bureau, said last week.

How the population estimates are calculated

Unlike the once-a-decade census, which determines how many congressional seats and Electoral College votes each state gets, as well as the distribution of \$2.8 trillion in annual government funding, the population estimates are calculated from government records and internal Census Bureau data.

The release of the 2025 population estimates was delayed by the federal government shutdown last fall and comes at a challenging time for the Census Bureau and other U.S. statistical agencies. The bureau, which is the largest statistical agency in the U.S., lost about 15% of its workforce last year due to buyouts and layoffs that were part of cost-cutting efforts by the White House and its Department of Government Efficiency.

Other recent actions by the Trump administration, such as the firing of Erika McEntarfer as Bureau of Labor Statistics commissioner, have raised concerns about political meddling at U.S. statistical agencies. But Frey said the bureau's staffers appear to have been "doing this work as usual without interference."

"So I have no reason to doubt the numbers that come out," Frey said.

UK's Starmer heads to China seeking a thaw in relations but risking a rift with Trump

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer is heading to China, seeking a thaw in relations with Beijing at a time of strained ties with the United States.

He's hoping for an economic boost to Britain, but risks the wrath of China hawks at home — and of U.S. President Donald Trump, who's already heaping tariffs and criticism on America's closest allies.

Starmer is due to meet China's President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang during the visit to Beijing and Shanghai that starts Wednesday, the first by a U.K. leader since 2018. He is expected to be accompanied by Business Secretary Peter Kyle and dozens of corporate chiefs as Britain seeks Chinese technology and investment, alongside greater access to the world's second-largest economy for U.K. financial services, cars and Scotch whisky.

The key word stressed by both sides is pragmatism. As Trump roils the world order, both London and Beijing are looking for a more stable relationship centered on trade and cooperation on big issues like climate change.

Starmer told his Cabinet on Tuesday before flying to Beijing that Britain had veered from "the golden age to the ice age" in relations with China, but he would follow "a strategic and consistent strategy."

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said the visit is an opportunity to enhance political trust and deepen "pragmatic cooperation" amid "the current complex and volatile international situation."

From golden era to big chill

Kerry Brown, director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London, said the trip comes as dramatic shifts in geopolitics create new opportunities for U.K.-Chinese relations.

But he said "Starmer is going to be talking to a very skeptical audience.

"Britain has not been very consistent in its relations with China. We have been very hot and cold," Brown

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said.

The relationship has soured since the short-lived "golden era" proclaimed in 2015 by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who took Xi to a traditional English pub during a state visit. Beijing's crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong, China's support for Russia in the Ukraine war and growing concern about espionage and economic interference have widened the gap between London and Beijing.

Cameron's Conservative successors barred Chinese investment in sensitive telecoms infrastructure and squeezed China out of investment in new U.K. nuclear power plants.

Starmer's center-left Labour Party government carried out a review of relations with Beijing after it was elected 18 months ago. It says it will protect U.K. national security from Chinese espionage and interference while keeping up diplomatic dialogue and economic cooperation with the Asian superpower.

Both Britain's economy, the world's sixth largest, and Starmer's popularity could use a boost.

His government has struggled to deliver the economic growth it promised and ease a cost-of-living crisis for millions of households. Labour lags behind hard-right Reform UK in opinion polls, and nervous Labour lawmakers openly mull whether it would be better to ditch Starmer for a more charismatic leader, such as Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham.

America's allies look to China

Starmer's visit to China comes as cracks are starting to appear in his attempt to strike up a warm relationship with Trump — efforts rewarded with a trade deal that reduced U.S. tariffs on Britain's key auto and aerospace industries.

For months Starmer refrained from public criticism as Trump attacked the mayor of London, slammed British immigration policy and sued the BBC for \$10 billion.

But in recent days, Starmer has called Trump's desire to take over Greenland "completely wrong" and condemned the president's disparaging comments about the role of U.K. and other NATO troops in Afghanistan, which Starmer called "insulting" and "appalling."

Starmer says Britain does not need to choose between the U.S. and China. But he travels to Beijing days after Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. Next month it's the turn of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, as some of America's strongest allies hedge their bets against the unpredictable Trump.

Zhao Minghao, a professor in the Institute of International Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University, said growing unease among U.S. allies over Washington's recent policy moves, including on tariffs, Greenland and the war in Ukraine, "have triggered a wave among allies to recalibrate their policies to 'de-risk' from the United States."

But rapprochement with Beijing brings the risk of a rift with Washington. Trump has threatened to slap a 100% tariff on all Canadian goods after Carney struck a trade deal with China on his trip this month.

Espionage and human rights concerns

Starmer's critics say the government is being naive about China's threat to Britain's security and weak in the face of pressure from Beijing.

The trip follows U.K. approval of a 20,000 square-meter (around 215,000 square-foot) Chinese Embassy near the Tower of London despite claims by critics that the "mega-embassy" will make it easier for China to conduct espionage and intimidate dissidents.

Starmer also faces criticism over an agreement to hand over the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean to Mauritius. The government says the move will secure the future of a key U.K.-U.S. military base against legal challenge, but critics argue it opens the door to Chinese influence. Last week Trump spoke out against the deal, reversing his previous support.

Human rights are another tricky area. Chris Patten, who was governor of Hong Kong from 1992 until the British colony was handed back to China in 1997, said Starmer should be firm in raising disagreements over issues including the treatment of China's Uyghur minority and the imprisonment of Jimmy Lai, a Hong Kong pro-democracy campaigner and British citizen.

"You have to say with them, without being impolite, exactly what you think," Patten said. "They know we're different, but they want to have a reasonable relationship with us and, particularly given the state

of the world with Trump, we should want to have a reasonable relationship with them.”

Brown, from King’s College, said Starmer will likely consider his trip a success if it secures significant investment and avoids major political pitfalls.

“What they’re going to do is basically commit to consistency, a bit more predictability,” he said. “Friends where we can be friends, otherwise agree to disagree.”

Trump’s use of AI images pushes new boundaries, further eroding public trust, experts say

By KAITLYN HUAMANI AP Technology Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The Trump administration has not shied away from sharing AI-generated imagery online, embracing cartoonlike visuals and memes and promoting them on official White House channels.

But an edited — and realistic — image of civil rights attorney Nekima Levy Armstrong in tears after being arrested is raising new alarms about how the administration is blurring the lines between what is real and what is fake.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem’s account posted the original image from Levy Armstrong’s arrest before the official White House account posted an altered image that showed her crying. The doctored picture is part of a deluge of AI-edited imagery that has been shared across the political spectrum since the fatal shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by U.S. Border Patrol officers in Minneapolis.

However, the White House’s use of artificial intelligence has troubled misinformation experts who fear the spreading of AI-generated or edited images erodes public perception of the truth and sows distrust.

In response to criticism of the edited image of Levy Armstrong, White House officials doubled down on the post, with deputy communications director Kaelan Dorr writing on X that the “memes will continue.” White House Deputy Press Secretary Abigail Jackson also shared a post mocking the criticism.

David Rand, a professor of information science at Cornell University, says calling the altered image a meme “certainly seems like an attempt to cast it as a joke or humorous post, like their prior cartoons. This presumably aims to shield them from criticism for posting manipulated media.” He said the purpose of sharing the altered arrest image seems “much more ambiguous” than the cartoonish images the administration has shared in the past.

Memes have always carried layered messages that are funny or informative to people who understand them, but indecipherable to outsiders. AI-enhanced or edited imagery is just the latest tool the White House uses to engage the segment of Trump’s base that spends a lot of time online, said Zach Henry, a Republican communications consultant who founded Total Virality, an influencer marketing firm.

“People who are terminally online will see it and instantly recognize it as a meme,” he said. “Your grandparents may see it and not understand the meme, but because it looks real, it leads them to ask their kids or grandkids about it.”

All the better if it prompts a fierce reaction, which helps it go viral, said Henry, who generally praised the work of the White House’s social media team.

The creation and dissemination of altered images, especially when they are shared by credible sources, “crystallizes an idea of what’s happening, instead of showing what is actually happening,” said Michael A. Spikes, a professor at Northwestern University and news media literacy researcher.

“The government should be a place where you can trust the information, where you can say it’s accurate, because they have a responsibility to do so,” he said. “By sharing this kind of content, and creating this kind of content ... it is eroding the trust — even though I’m always kind of skeptical of the term trust — but the trust we should have in our federal government to give us accurate, verified information. It’s a real loss, and it really worries me a lot.”

Spikes said he already sees the “institutional crises” around distrust in news organizations and higher education, and feels this behavior from official channels inflames those issues.

Ramesh Srinivasan, a professor at UCLA and the host of the Utopias podcast, said many people are now questioning where they can turn to for “trustable information.” “AI systems are only going to exacerbate,

amplify and accelerate these problems of an absence of trust, an absence of even understanding what might be considered reality or truth or evidence," he said.

Srinivasan said he feels the White House and other officials sharing AI-generated content not only invites everyday people to continue to post similar content but also grants permission to others who are in positions of credibility and power, like policymakers, to share unlabeled synthetic content. He added that given that social media platforms tend to "algorithmically privilege" extreme and conspiratorial content — which AI generation tools can create with ease — "we've got a big, big set of challenges on our hands."

An influx of AI-generated videos related to Immigration and Customs Enforcement action, protests and interactions with citizens has already been proliferating on social media. After Renee Good was shot by an ICE officer while she was in her car, several AI-generated videos began circulating of women driving away from ICE officers who told them to stop. There are also many fabricated videos circulating of immigration raids and of people confronting ICE officers, often yelling at them or throwing food in their faces.

Jeremy Carrasco, a content creator who specializes in media literacy and debunking viral AI videos, said the bulk of these videos are likely coming from accounts that are "engagement farming," or looking to capitalize on clicks by generating content with popular keywords and search terms like ICE. But he also said the videos are getting views from people who oppose ICE and DHS and could be watching them as "fan fiction," or engaging in "wishful thinking," hoping that they're seeing real pushback against the organizations and their officers.

Still, Carrasco also believes that most viewers can't tell if what they're watching is fake, and questions whether they would know "what's real or not when it actually matters, like when the stakes are a lot higher."

Even when there are blatant signs of AI generation, like street signs with gibberish on them or other obvious errors, only in the "best-case scenario" would a viewer be savvy enough or be paying enough attention to register the use of AI.

This issue is, of course, not limited to news surrounding immigration enforcement and protests. Fabricated and misrepresented images following the capture of deposed Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro exploded online earlier this month. Experts, including Carrasco, think the spread of AI-generated political content will only become more commonplace.

Carrasco believes that the widespread implementation of a watermarking system that embeds information about the origin of a piece of media into its metadata layer could be a step toward a solution. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity has developed such a system, but Carrasco doesn't think that will become extensively adopted for at least another year.

"It's going to be an issue forever now," he said. I don't think people understand how bad this is."

Not ready for robots in homes? The maker of a friendly new humanoid thinks it might change your mind

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As the new robot called Sprout walks around a Manhattan office, nodding its rectangular head, lifting its windshield wiper-like "eyebrows" and offering to shake your hand with its grippers, it looks nothing like the sleek and intimidating humanoids built by companies like Tesla.

Sprout's charm is the point. A 5-year-old child could comfortably talk at eye level with this humanoid, which stands 3.5 feet (1 meter) tall and wears a soft, padded exterior of sage-green foam.

Forged by stealth startup Fauna Robotics over two years of secret research and development, Sprout's public debut on Tuesday aims to jump-start a whole new industry of building "approachable" robots for homes, schools and social spaces.

The robot is in many ways the first of its kind, at least in the United States, even as rapid advances in artificial intelligence and robot engineering have finally made it possible to start building such machines. If its emotive expressions and blinking lights seem vaguely familiar, it might be from generations of Star Wars droids and other endearingly clunky robotic sidekicks dreamed up in animation studios and children's literature.

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"Most people in this industry take inspiration from the science fiction that we grew up with," said Fauna Robotics co-founder and CEO Rob Cochran. "I think some do so from 'Westworld' and 'Terminator.' We do from WALL-E and Baymax and Rosie Jetson."

Making a business case for robots that won't work in car assembly lines

The usual hypothesis for the commercialization of humanoid robots is that they will get their first jobs in warehouses or factories long before they are ready for homes. That's the path proposed for two of today's best-known prototypes: Tesla's Optimus, which CEO Elon Musk sees as the carmaker's future, and Boston Dynamics' Atlas, which parent company Hyundai plans to deploy in car manufacturing by 2028.

Fauna looks to skip that step for an entirely different clientele: other robot tinkerers. Much as early personal computers and, later, smartphones sparked a culture of developers designing new games and applications, Sprout is a software developer platform more than just a robot. It's also a mechanically complex one that will cost buyers \$50,000.

That's a price some university research labs and technology entrepreneurs are already spending on China's Unitree, which sells a lightweight humanoid often seen at robotics conferences and competitions. Others have avoided Chinese hardware due to tariffs and broader security concerns.

Cochran believes Fauna is "the first American company to be actively shipping robots as a developer platform" and has been hand-delivering the first models. Early customers include Disney and Boston Dynamics.

"You take it out of the box and you can start walking it around immediately," said Marc Theermann, chief strategy officer at Boston Dynamics, in a recent interview. "Seeing their robot for the first time really lets you see the future a little bit. And if you squint, you can see how a robot like that would be welcomed into people's homes."

Inside the testing grounds for a 'friendly humanoid' robot

Sprout can't lift heavy objects, but it can dance the Twist or the Floss, grab a toy block or teddy bear, or hoist itself from a chair to take a long stroll along the wood floors of Fauna's headquarters in New York City's Flatiron District.

Cochran and co-founder Josh Merel, the company's chief technology officer, demonstrated the robot to The Associated Press in mid-January ahead of its public launch. Fauna employees and an AP reporter piloted the robot, using a video game controller, a phone application and a virtual-reality headset. Sprout also knows the office layout enough to be sent on a planned mission, such as to check out the inventory of the break room refrigerator.

It walks slowly but steadily on uneven ground. Only once it came close to tripping, taking a sharp turn to avoid a person and instead hitting its foot on a protruding table wheel too low to the ground to be seen by Sprout's camera eyes. But the robot, built to handle what engineers call perturbation, quickly recovered its balance and kept walking, much like a clumsy person might.

"If you step in front of it, it won't crash into you, it'll plan a new path around you," said Ana Pervan, a Fauna research scientist who works on the robot's mapping and navigation. Among the first batch of Fauna's 50 employees, and a fan of science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, she previously worked on self-driving cars but was excited about joining a startup building something that might one day serve as a robot butler.

"It's cute, and it's not too humanoid, and I think that actually makes it a lot more fun," Pervan said. "It's not verging on creepy or trying to be too human. It's like your buddy, your pal, that's a different thing than you."

Why Fauna's founders believe now's the time to bet on humanoids

Starting a robot company can be unforgiving, especially one designing personal robots. One of the few successes, Roomba vacuum maker iRobot, had a decades-long run before filing for bankruptcy protection last month.

Most others didn't last that long, like Anki, maker of the playful toy robot Cozmo, or Jibo, which went out of business less than a year after its dynamic talking speaker made the cover of Time Magazine's 2017 "best inventions" edition.

"There were a lot of really brilliant attempts. I think the technology wasn't quite there," Cochran said. "I

do think we're right on the precipice now where you could build a companion that is present, engaging, delightful to be around, and can also move around a space in a way that nothing ever has before."

Merel, an expert in robot locomotion, previously worked for Google's DeepMind, where he focused on teaching robots using AI learning techniques in simulated environments, a controversial approach but now increasingly how robots are built. The science journal Nature published his study on an AI-powered virtual rat, co-authored with another of Fauna's research scientists, Diego Aldarondo.

Cochran and Merel later worked together at CTRL-labs, a wearable neurotech company sold to Facebook in 2019. Cochran jokes that he then "spent a misguided four years at Goldman Sachs" before they decided to team up again.

Improvements in AI, motors and batteries have accelerated humanoid development. But Fauna's founders agreed that the dystopian aesthetic of many prototypes — what Cochran calls "industrial automotive machismo" — conveyed strength and confidence but wouldn't work for intimate human spaces.

"They were generally quite big and physically dangerous to be around," Cochran said. "Strong, heavy. If they fell on you, it'd be a real problem."

The duo brought in Anthony Moschella, who helped design Peloton's exercise bikes, treadmills and rowers and is an admirer of the abstract designs of Star Wars robots like R2-D2 and BB-8.

"Let's build a system that human beings actually want to be around," said Moschella, now Fauna's vice president of hardware. "I think it's incredible that so many robotics companies are not versed in the cultural context of what it means to be around a robot."

Moschella said what happens next with Sprout will depend on how developers play around with it and what they learn. For Cochran, some of the most important judges have already approved. In a home video he keeps on his phone, his 2-year-old twins excitedly jump up and down as Sprout greets them.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Yemen threaten new attacks as US aircraft carrier arrives

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Two Iranian-backed militias in the Mideast are signaling their willingness to launch new attacks, likely trying to back Iran, as officials acknowledged the arrival of a U.S. aircraft carrier to the region Monday. President Donald Trump ordered the carriers to move to the Middle East as he threatened military action over its crackdown on nationwide protests.

Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels on Monday hinted they were ready to resume attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. That came just after Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah paramilitary group, long supported by Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, issued a direct threat late Sunday toward any attack targeting Iran, warning a "total war" in the region would be a result.

The statements came as the entire region is mired in a tense waiting game to see if Trump will strike. Kataib Hezbollah sat out from Israel's 12-day war on Iran in June that saw the United States bomb Iranian nuclear sites, while the Houthis fired missiles at Israel during that period.

The hesitancy to get fully involved shows the disarray still affecting Iran's self-described "Axis of Resistance" after facing attacks from Israel during its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

US carrier arrives in region

The threats came as the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other guided missile destroyers in its strike group arrived in the region to "promote regional security and stability," U.S. Central Command said Monday on social media.

Trump has said the ships are being moved "just in case" he decides to take action against Iran. He has already laid out two red lines for attack — the killing of peaceful protesters and Tehran conducting mass executions of those it has arrested in a massive crackdown over the demonstrations.

A senior Iranian military official who spoke anonymously on Iran's state TV dismissed the American threat as "an exaggeration" and noted that Iran had increased its military presence in response. The official added that the Lincoln's presence was not a deterrent but an accessible target.

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Threats from Iraq, Yemen, while Hezbollah stays mum

Iran projected its power across the Mideast through the "Axis of Resistance," a network of proxy militant groups in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, and other places. It was also seen as a defensive buffer, intended to keep conflict away from Iranian borders. But it has collapsed after Israel targeted Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon and others during the Gaza war. Meanwhile, rebels in 2024 overthrew Syria's Bashar Assad after a yearslong, bloody war in which Iran backed his rule.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, one of Iran's staunchest allies, refused to say how it planned to react in the case of a possible attack.

"During the past two months, several parties have asked me a clear and frank question: If Israel and America go to war against Iran, will Hezbollah intervene or not?" Hezbollah leader Sheikh Naim Kassem said via a video address to thousands of supporters gathered in Beirut's southern suburbs for a rally backing Iran.

He said the group is preparing for "possible aggression and is determined to defend" against it. But as to how it would act, he said, "these details will be determined by the battle and we will determine them according to the interests that are present."

Iraqi and Yemeni militant groups were much more forthright in their threats, which were interpreted as support for Iran. A short video by the Houthis included images of a ship on fire, with the caption: "Soon." It later aired footage Monday from its January 2024 attack in the Gulf of Aden on the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker Marlin Luanda, one of over 100 ships attacked as part of a campaign the Houthis said pressured Israel over its war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis halted their fire after a ceasefire in Gaza, though they've repeatedly warned they could resume fire if needed.

Meanwhile, Ahmad "Abu Hussein" al-Hamidawi of Kataib Hezbollah issued his own threat in a statement.

"We affirm to the enemies that the war on the (Islamic) Republic will not be a picnic; rather, you will taste the bitterest forms of death, and nothing will remain of you in our region," he said.

The United Arab Emirates announced on Monday that it would not allow its airspace, territory or territorial waters to be used for military action against Iran. The UAE said it would stress dialogue and diplomatic resolutions.

Iran warns America not to attack

Iranian Defense Ministry spokesperson Gen. Reza Talaei-Nik renewed warnings Monday to both Israel and the U.S., saying any attack would "be met with a response that is more painful and more decisive than in the past." Iranian state TV quoted Talaei-Nik as saying that threats required Iran "to maintain full and comprehensive preparedness."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei separately told journalists: "Regional countries fully know that any security breach in the region will not affect Iran only. The lack of security is contagious."

Iran over the weekend unveiled a new banner in Tehran's Enghelab Square threatening the Lincoln, showing an aircraft carrier strewn with bodies and streaked with blood with the warning: "If you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind." However, Iran is still reeling from the 12-day war in June in which its air defense systems were broadly destroyed, top military leaders killed, and its nuclear enrichment sites bombed by the U.S.

As a sign of concern over its airspace, Iran issued a notice to pilots Sunday that banned small private aircraft from flying in the country, with carve-outs for the oil industry and emergency medical flights.

Many Western airlines have started to avoid Iranian airspace entirely due to the tensions, though Gulf Arab carriers flying to Moscow still rely on the route. Iranian air defense troops in 2020 shot down a Ukrainian commercial airliner, killing 176 people on board.

Death toll rises from protest crackdown

The protests in Iran began on Dec. 28, sparked by the fall of the Iranian currency, the rial, and quickly spread across the country. They were met by a violent crackdown by Iran's theocracy, the scale of which is only starting to become clear as the country has faced more than two-week internet blackout — the most comprehensive in its history.

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The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency on Monday put the death toll at 5,973, with the number expected to increase. It says more than 41,813 people have been arrested.

The group's figures have been accurate in previous unrest and rely on a network of activists in Iran to verify deaths. That death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest there in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Associated Press has not been able to independently verify the toll.

Iran's government has put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest "terrorists." In the past, Iran's theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

Today in History: January 28 Explosion of the space shuttle Challenger

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 28, the 28th day of 2026. There are 337 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff from Cape Canaveral, Florida, killing all seven crew members including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe.

Also on this date:

In 1547, England's King Henry VIII died at age 55; he was succeeded by his 9-year-old son, Edward VI.

In 1813, the novel "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen was first published, anonymously, in London.

In 1922, 98 people were killed when the roof of the Knickerbocker Theatre in Washington, D.C., collapsed under the weight of nearly 2 feet of snow.

In 1956, Elvis Presley made his first national TV appearance on "Stage Show," a CBS program hosted by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey.

In 1980, six U.S. diplomats who had avoided being taken hostage at their embassy in Tehran flew out of Iran with the help of Canadian diplomats; the events were later dramatized in the film "Argo."

In 1985, to raise funds in support of famine relief in Ethiopia, the supergroup USA For Africa recorded the song "We Are the World."

In 2011, protesters opposed to Hosni Mubarak's nearly 30-year rule of Egypt seized the streets of Cairo, battling police, burning down ruling party headquarters and defying a military curfew. Hundreds of protesters would be killed in ensuing days in attempts to crush the uprising before Mubarak stepped down as president that February.

In 2017, Serena Williams won her record 23rd Open Era Grand Slam singles title, defeating her sister Venus at the Australian Open for what would be her final major championship.

In 2024, three American troops were killed and 25 were injured in a drone strike in Jordan near the border with Syria. President Joe Biden blamed Iran-backed militias for the first U.S. fatalities after months of strikes by the groups against American forces across the Middle East amid the Israel-Hamas war.

Today's birthdays: Actor Alan Alda is 90. Former NBA coach Gregg Popovich is 77. Golf Hall of Famer Nick Price is 69. Film director Frank Darabont is 67. Singer Sarah McLachlan is 58. Rapper Rakim is 58. Humorist Mo Rocca is 57. R&B singer Anthony Hamilton is 55. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett is 54. Rapper Rick Ross is 50. Singer Joey Fatone Jr. ('N Sync) is 49. Singer Nick Carter (Backstreet Boys) is 46. Actor Elijah Wood is 45. Rapper J. Cole is 41. Actor Ariel Winter is 28.