

Groton Daily Independent

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Monday, Feb. 9

Senior Menu: Baked hot ham and cheese, tomato soup, fruit.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Pork chop, rice.

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

Senior Citizens meet at 1 p.m. at the Groton Community Center

1st Grade Boys Basketball Practice, 4:30 p.m., elementary gym

Girls basketball hosts Great Plains Lutheran: C at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow.

Kindergarten Boys Basketball, 6 p.m., elementary gym

5th Grade BBB, 6 p.m., HS Gym.

Tuesday, Feb. 10

Senior Menu: Pork loin, roasted potatoes, glazed carrots, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, sweet potato fries.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Council, potluck meal, 6 p.m.

4th Grade Girl's Basketball, 4 p.m., elementary gym

Mobridge MS Wrestling Jamboree, 5 p.m.

Pickleball, 5:30 p.m., elementary gym

4th Grade BBB, 6 p.m., arena

Boys basketball vs. Leola/Frederick at Frederick with JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by varsity.



Wednesday, Feb. 11

Senior Menu: Chicken broccoli bake, mashed potatoes, Mandarin oranges, fruit.

School Breakfast: Omelets.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 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.

Pickleball, 5:30 p.m., elementary gym

6th Grade Boys Basketball, 6 p.m., HS Gym

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

5th Grade BBB, 6 p.m., HS Gym

Groton Daily Independent
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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.

Seahawks Soar

The Seattle Seahawks won Super Bowl LX last night, beating the New England Patriots 29-13 in a smothering defensive performance. The victory marks the second championship in franchise history and avenges a title game loss to the Patriots in 2015.

The title caps a yearslong redemption arc for quarterback Sam Darnold, once considered a potential draft bust. Taken third overall in 2018 by the New York Jets, he spent time in Carolina, San Francisco, and Minnesota before joining the Seahawks this season. Darnold threw for 202 yards and one touchdown, while kicker Jason Myers set a Super Bowl record with five field goals. Running back Kenneth Walker III picked up MVP honors after notching more than 160 total yards.

Darnold had significant help on the other side of the ball, with the regular season's top-ranked scoring defense holding New England to 331 yards, while sacking Patriots quarterback Drake Maye six times and forcing three turnovers.

Lindsey Vonn Crash

Three-time Olympic medalist Lindsey Vonn crashed yesterday during the downhill event, less than 14 seconds into her first race at the 2026 Olympics. The 41-year-old is considered one of the world's most successful skiers.

Vonn had returned to the sport in late 2024 after six years of retirement and a partial knee replacement earlier that year. Despite being the oldest skier in team history, Vonn was a favorite to win gold in downhill after two World Cup victories and three podium finishes this season. Yesterday's crash came days after Vonn ruptured her left anterior cruciate ligament in the final World Cup event; she nonetheless pledged to race in the 2026 Olympics wearing a knee brace. Yesterday's crash occurred when Vonn's right arm tagged the fourth gate in the women's downhill, sending her tumbling. American Breezy Johnson took gold.

The ACL connects the thighbone to the shinbone.

Record Dow Close

The Dow Jones Industrial Average closed above 50,000 for the first time Friday. The surge—1,207 points, or a 2.5% jump from Thursday—was driven by gains in Goldman Sachs and Caterpillar, which jumped 4.3% and 7.1%, respectively.

The Dow was launched in 1896 by Wall Street Journal founding editor Charles Dow and statistician Edward Jones. The index originally tracked 12 companies from industries like cotton, sugar, tobacco, and oil. Since 1928, it has tracked 30 blue-chip stocks—large, established US industry leaders. Unlike the S&P 500, the Dow is price-weighted, as opposed to weighted by market capitalization, with companies selected by a committee including senior representatives from the Journal. The Dow price is calculated by adding stock prices for each company and dividing the number by a Dow divisor.

The Dow skews toward industrial and financial sectors, and has outpaced the tech-heavy Nasdaq and S&P 500 in recent weeks. All three indexes rose Friday (S&P 500 +2.0%, Nasdaq +2.2%).

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Savannah Guthrie and siblings publicly pledge to pay \$6M ransom for safe return of their mother; ransom is reportedly due today.

3 Doors Down lead singer and cofounder, Brad Arnold, dies after being diagnosed with Stage 4 kidney cancer in May.

"One Battle After Another" director Paul Thomas Anderson takes top film prize at Directors Guild of America's awards; see list of winners.

Science & Technology

Self-driving firm Waymo reveals the Waymo World Model; generative AI platform creates hyperrealistic 3D simulations allowing its systems to train without logging real-world miles.

Researchers discover gene markers that predict whether uveal melanoma, an aggressive form of eye cancer, will spread to the liver; allows risk assessment before tumors have metastasized.

The best resources we've found to understand cancer (1440 Topics)

Scientists identify how cells coordinate to build the intricate structures required for eggs, with rigid and flexible components interacting during development.

Business & Markets

President Donald Trump backs Nexstar's \$6.2B acquisition bid for Tegna, reversing earlier stance; deal would give the media giant ownership of 64 local TV stations in more than 50 markets.

Telehealth company Hims & Hers withdraws compounded version of newly released Wegovy GLP-1 weight-loss pill, following probe threat from regulators; stock falls 14%.

China expands near-total ban on cryptocurrency activities to include issuance of stablecoins and tokenization of real-world assets.

Politics & World Affairs

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi wins snap election, with coalition earning lower house supermajority.

Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul wins reelection.

Washington Post publisher Will Lewis announces he is stepping down after newspaper lays off roughly one-third of its staff.

Chief of staff to UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer resigns amid ongoing fallout over appointment of Jeffrey Epstein associate as UK ambassador to the US.

Need a **Babysitter** or **House Cleaner?**

♥ **Babysitting Available!**

House Cleaning Offered!

Text Jeslyn Kosel at (605)-290-7821

I'm in Groton but am willing to drive to nearby towns!

The advertisement features a colorful illustration of a teddy bear, a baby bottle, and a stack of colorful blocks on the left, and a yellow bucket with cleaning supplies on the right. At the bottom, there is a small house and a red car on a road.

"Spring into Seasonal Allergies"

The groundhog may have seen his shadow, but Spring will be here soon. While many of us look forward to warmer days and blooming flowers, those who suffer from seasonal allergies know that the return of grass, budding trees, and blooming flowers can lead to more sneezing than smiles. Welcome to the Spring allergy season.

If your seasonal allergies seem to be getting worse each year, it is not in your head. A Study from the National Academy of Sciences in 2021 found that over the last 30 years the North American pollen allergy season has increased by approximately 20 days. Pollen concentrations have also risen 21%. The Spring tree pollen season has been starting earlier and the Fall ragweed season has been ending later.

Seasonal allergies can develop at any time in one's life. The most common risk factor for developing seasonal allergies is family history. If you have family members with allergies, you have an increased risk of developing them as well. Seasonal allergies are the sign of an overactive immune system that has mistakenly identified harmless substances, like pollen, as dangerous threats to the body. This triggers an inappropriate defense response that leads to the common symptoms of allergies like runny nose, congestion, watery eyes, itching, and sneezing. The immune system is trying to fight pollen like it would fight a cold. This is why it can be difficult to differentiate between allergies and illness.

There are a few ways to help decrease the risk of children developing allergies. Several studies have shown that children who visit a farm in their first year of their life or have furry pets have a lower risk of allergies. In that first year of life, the immune system is busy trying to figure out what things the body needs to defend against and what things are safe to ignore. The environment on the farm has so different allergens, that it allows the immune system to become tolerant of the harmless pollen and animal dander. However, once someone has allergies, and the immune system is sensitive to these substances, further exposure to allergens that are on a farm will not help. It will just make the allergy sufferer more miserable.

The first line over-the-counter treatment for seasonal allergies is intranasal corticosteroids such as Fluticasone (Flonase), Mometasone (Nasonex), and Budesonide (Rhinocort). These nasal sprays have been shown to be more effective than over-the-counter oral antihistamines such as Loratidine (Claritin), Fexofenadine (Allegra), and Cetirizine (Zyrtec). If the spray does not give adequate control, then adding an oral antihistamine can help.

If these medications are not effective, then seeing an Allergist is the next step to enjoying everything that comes with April showers and May flowers. The groundhog says we have six more weeks to prepare for Spring. Regardless of when it comes, everyone can enjoy Spring if they understand seasonal allergies and how to treat them.

Dr. Jill Kruse is a hospitalist at the Brookings Health System in Brookings, SD. She serves as one of the Prairie Doc Volunteer Hosts during its 24th Season providing Health Education Based on Science, Built on Trust. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok. Prairie Doc Programming includes On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show (most Thursdays at 7pm on SDPB, YouTube and streaming on Facebook), 2 podcasts, and a Radio program (on SDPB, Sundays at 6am and 1pm).



Jill Kruse, DO

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The Seattle Seahawks are the new NFL champions after dominating the New England Patriots 29-13 on Sunday. There were a ton of storylines coming into this game, and most analysts believed this would be a tightly contested matchup. Instead, Seattle's run game controlled the clock while its defense suffocated second-year QB Drake Maye.

I could do a deep dive into the game, breaking down every drive, but to be honest, the game was pretty boring through the first three quarters. There were 13 combined punts (eight by New England and five by Seattle). The only points came from four Seattle field goals, giving us a 12-0 score heading into the final fifteen minutes.

Both teams started to wake up in the fourth quarter. Seattle finally found the end zone, extending their lead to 19 points. New England responded quickly, going 65 yards on three plays to put seven points on the board. After the Seahawks punted on their ensuing drive, the Patriots were marching down the field, and it looked like the momentum was finally swinging their way. And then Drake Maye threw interceptions on back-to-back drives, one resulting in a Seahawks' field goal and the other taken to the house for a pick-six. The Patriots did score another touchdown, but it was too little, too late by that point.

Kenneth Walker III was named the Super Bowl MVP after accumulating 161 total yards on 29 touches.

Despite not even playing in the game, the Vikings still lost on Sunday after watching the QB they let leave hoist the Lombardi Trophy. Darnold was just one of several former Vikings playing in the Super Bowl – Cam Akers and Chazz Surratt both won rings, while Stefon Diggs, Garrett Bradbury, Josh Dobbs, Vederian Lowe, and Khyiris Tonga were all playing for New England.

Like most Vikings fans, I'm happy for Darnold. He was a great player during his brief time in Minnesota. But I'm also a little salty, knowing the Vikings let him walk despite winning 14 games for us in 2024. However, like I said last week, hindsight is always 20/20. The decision to let him go was a logical one, considering the Vikings had just drafted a QB in the top 10 the year before. But knowing the decision was logical doesn't make it sting any less watching Darnold hoist the Lombardi Trophy while confetti rained down.

Looking ahead, the Vikings have a huge offseason in front of them. There are question marks up and down the roster, including at quarterback. With the firing of Kwesi Adofo-Mensah, and no GM in place to replace him, head coach Kevin O'Connell and defensive coordinator Brian Flores will have full control of the roster to shape it how they see fit. If the team falters again in 2026, there will be nobody else to blame, and we'll be looking at another overhaul of the coaching staff a year from now. The NFL scouting combine will take place in a couple of weeks, and free agency begins March 9. Before then, we'll be doing a deep dive into the roster to get you prepared for what should be an exciting couple of months.



WATCH LIVE ON GDILIVE.COM

GIRLS BASKETBALL ACTION:

Groton Area TIGERS

GREAT PLAINS LUTHERAN PANTHERS

Monday, Feb. 9

JV at 6 p.m., Varsity to follow

What can **\$20**
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Fitness

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**BEST
RATES
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ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

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

MONTH-TO-MONTH

Student: \$35.15 per month
Single: \$40.48 per month
2-Person: \$59.78 per month
Family: \$72.43 per month
Senior/PT: \$20 per month



Call or Text Paul at 605/397-7460
Call or Text Tina at 605/397-7285

Same rates for several years!

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Tina's Baskets

605-397-7285



Reese's cake with mini Reese's on top
\$35.00



Mix candy cake with mini mix on top with
lights on the bottom
\$20.00



White heart shape with red roses and Fer-
rero chocolate candy with a bear with it
\$25.00



Bear sucker cake with life savers and dum
dum suckers in it
\$15.00

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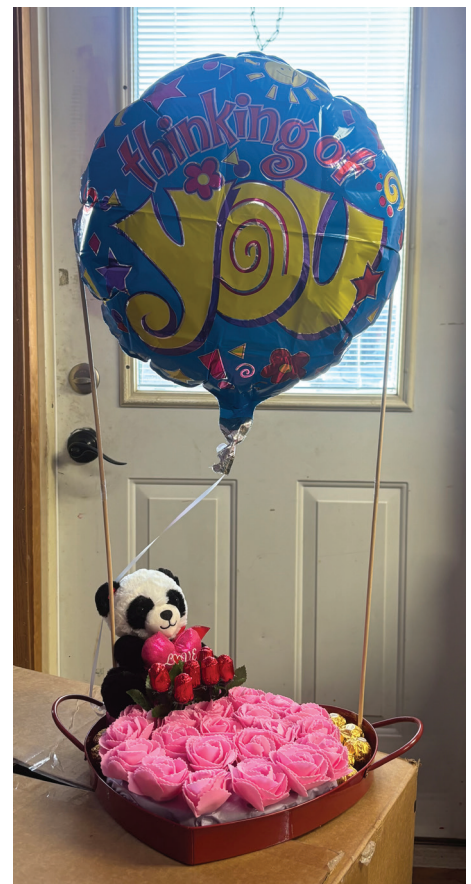
**Hersheys cake with strawberry drops and mini Hersheys on top
\$40.00**



**Laffy Taffy Octopus cake
\$ 15.00**



**Relax and Unwind basket with two wine bottles, blanket, adult coloring books and word finds with crayons and pens and some different chocolates as shown here
\$50.00**



**Thinking of you balloon with bear, red chocolate roses with pink roses and Ferrero Rocher chocolate candy
\$25.00**

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Tonka truck basket \$50.00



Just because or thinking of you Basket \$40.00

EARTHTALK

Exponential Growth In Space Debris Worries Environmentalists by Daniel Choi

Dear EarthTalk: What is space debris, and can we reduce or eliminate it? – H.B., Troy, NY

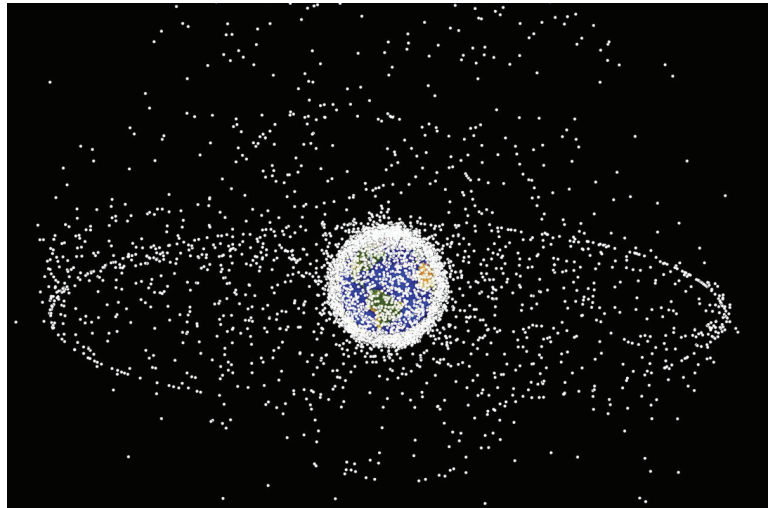
Space debris, also known as space junk, consists of defunct man-made objects that orbit Earth, including satellites, spent rocket stages and other various fragments from collisions. According to the European Space Agency, space surveillance networks are currently tracking approximately 40,000 objects orbiting Earth, only 11,000 of which are active “payloads” (still functioning satellites and other equipment), with the rest classified as space debris.

However, the actual amount of space debris could be over 1.2 million objects more than one centimeter in length and capable of causing catastrophic damage on impact. Lack of proper regulation and surveillance of space debris has exacerbated conversation around the threat posed to life on Earth. In 2021, one of the International Space Station’s (ISS) robotic arms was punctured by a piece of space debris. As space debris is projected to exponentially increase in the next decade, future collisions may cause irreparable damage to satellites, technological systems that support GPS, and weather forecasting.

One major consideration in space debris is the “Kessler Syndrome” risk that describes the cascading effects of the debris as one collision creates multiple fragments that further collide and create more debris. Consider the 2009 collision between the Iridium satellite and Cosmos satellite: some 2,000 fragments created still orbit Earth today and pose significant risks to outer space systems. While most of the 200-400 large pieces of debris that reenter Earth’s atmosphere annually burn up, five to 10 percent survive.

Recently, numerous policies have been established to mitigate the effects of space debris, including the United Nations’ 25-year de-orbit rule, which recommends that spacecraft orbital stages in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) be removed from orbit within 25 years after the end of their operational life. However, the global de-escalation effort is infinitely more convoluted than simply ridding of space debris. Professor of Astronautics and Head of the Astronautics Research Group at the University of Southampton Hugh Lewis stated in an interview that “[Space debris] is not just a technical problem we have to solve, but a social one as well,” in regards to the race between countries, governments and corporations to use space.

Though national competition for space may be inevitable, it is imperative that countries and governments work together for the best interest of our planet and strategize the use of space among one another. Space is a common resource, yet its pollution and befouling risks astronaut safety, climate security, and more. To reduce space debris, we must support stricter regulations and advocate for cleanup technologies from corporations and the private sector.



Space debris, which makes up the majority of objects orbiting around Earth (as depicted here in this NASA-generated image), consists of defunct man-made objects, including satellites, spent rocket stages & other fragments.

Credit: NASA Orbital Debris Program Office, Public Domain.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Prison program that puts moms and babies together shows promise, officials say

No women who've lived in the mother-infant house in Pierre have returned after release

BY: JOHN HULT

PIERRE — For the past five years, conversations about prisons and how to manage them have played out as one tumultuous bout of realignment and soul-searching after another for South Dakota's leaders.

Wardens were expelled. Structural deficiencies were exposed. New wardens and corrections secretaries came and went. Lawmakers fought bitterly over how to spend money they set aside for prisons.

Assaults and overdoses spiked. When the dust settled, the state had endorsed a new women's prison in Rapid City, a new men's prison in Sioux Falls, and a correctional rehabilitation task force.

But something else happened along the way: Prison officials quietly stood up a program they now view as a solid win for some inmates and their families.

Since 2022, qualifying inmate mothers have lived full-time with their children in a house on the campus of the South Dakota Women's Prison in Pierre that looks nothing like a prison.

In the three years since its launch, none of the women who've left prison after participating in South Dakota's Mother-Infant Program have returned to state custody.

It's too early to calculate any long-term impact, but Corrections Secretary Nick Lamb told the Legislature's budget-setting committee recently that he likes the odds for success.

More than 40% of South Dakota parolees return to prison within three years of their release. In states with similar programs, Lamb said, the repeat offense rate for participating moms "is something like 2%."

Through fiscal year 2025, which ended on June 30, 17 women had participated, according to the Department of Corrections Annual Statistical Report. Ten had been released at the time the report was issued, and corrections spokesman Michael Winder said none have returned to prison.

Another mother-infant house is nearing completion at the new women's prison in Rapid City, which is set to open this year. The program in Pierre will continue.

"There's a beautiful new building out there built just for this," Lamb told lawmakers.

A new program for an old building

The program began under former Department of Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko, the first woman to ever serve in the role in South Dakota.

To be eligible, the mothers must be on minimum custody status, have 30 months or less remaining on their sentence and be serving time for a nonviolent offense.

The women and their children live in two fused-together Governor's Houses just outside the main prison complex in Pierre. The homes are prefabricated dwellings, built at Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield and typically sold to low-income families.

The structure had been there for years.

Until around five years ago, it was known as the "PACT" house, a nod to its use for a less-expansive familial bonding program called Parents and Children Together that was launched by former Gov. Bill Janklow to allow female prisoners weekend-long visits with their kids.

Interest in PACT had waned by the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Warden Aaron Miller told South Dakota Searchlight during a recent tour. The pandemic shuttered it altogether.

Wasko moved to reopen its doors as a full-time home for inmate moms and their kids shortly after her

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arrival in March of 2022. Colorado, the state where Wasco had worked in corrections previously, has a mother-baby unit for inmate moms.

'Just learning'

On a recent Friday, the moms were gathered in the shared living area at lunchtime, sitting in a semicircle of couches as an episode of the children's program "Bluey" played on a flat-screen television.

There were seven women living in the house with their kids that day — four boys and three girls, ranging in age from two months to 18 — but the building can hold up to 10. Women typically stay in the program for 30 months.

One of the moms, Sara Bernie, said it can feel "pretty cramped" with 10 families, but "we make it work." Bernie's daughter, Spiryt, turns 1 this month. They've been there since Spiryt's birth.

"We're just learning to walk," Bernie said of her daughter, wearing a fresh-looking pair of Minnie Mouse sneakers and a long-sleeved Minnie Mouse shirt.

Bernie moved from Michigan to Yankton to work at a restaurant. She'd been in South Dakota less than a month when she was charged with drug distribution. She'd been pregnant about a month, too, and spent the start of her sentence in the main women's prison, transitioning to the mother-infant program when Spiryt was born.

"Coming over here, it is a totally different world," said Bernie.

Having Spiryt right there, she said, has served to motivate her. Bernie has completed a kitchen management program. The program, run by food service provider Aramark, earned her early discharge credits and put her in a position to make federal minimum wage working in the prison kitchen and save money for her future. Most inmate jobs pay around 50 cents an hour.

With Spiryt at her side as a motivator, Bernie said, "I am 100% focused on going back out."

Her other two children, ages 6 and 14, are in Michigan. She wants to go back there when her sentence is up in early 2028.

Sometimes, prison staff will clear the adults from the prison's recreation gym so the littles can take over. Aside from those moments, the children don't see the inside of the prison. When it's warm, they play outside.

Sitters fill role for moms, prison system

A babysitter or correctional officer watches Spiryt when Sarah goes to work, leaves for recreation time or goes to church. The babysitters are the only other women in the house most evenings. Overnight, it's often just the moms and babies.

Bernie is CPR certified, as are all the mothers in the house. That's also a qualification for the babysitters, who are minimum security inmates interviewed first by the staff, then by the moms.

"We vote on the babysitters," Bernie said. "They usually work out pretty well."

The daytime correctional officer, Karen Boyer, often relies on the babysitters to help manage the chaos of a seven-family house. On some days, Boyer spends a lot of time away from the building, taking babies to doctor visits outside the prison in a Chevrolet Suburban packed with car seats.

"It's kind of like school," she said. "When one gets sick, they all get sick."

The children start to feel like grandkids after a while, she said.

It's a feeling the babysitters get, too.

"When the kids leave, it's like they're losing someone in their family," Boyer said.

Kay Cain has been a sitter since November. On the outside, Cain was a pediatric nurse, so working with kids came naturally. She typically takes care of Dennis, an 18-month-old with a mop of curly hair who gives fist bumps when asked for "knuckles."

"You've kind of grown on me, haven't you?" she said to Dennis when asked about her favorite part of the job.

Like Bernie, Dennis' mother came from out of state, and was living in Yankton when she was arrested.

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Destiny Hogan said she was pregnant and using fentanyl and methamphetamine at the time.

"If I wouldn't have gotten arrested, I don't know if either of us would be here," Hogan said.

Now, having lived side-by-side with Dennis his whole life, she's closer to him than she's been with any of her five other children.

"He's the only one I've been there with from day one," Hogan said.

Birthdays, holidays

Cameras in the corners, khaki prison-issued pants and the supervising correctional officer's uniform are the only outward signs that the house doubles as a prison facility.

There are two bathrooms, one with a Peter Pan theme and another with a unicorn theme, on either side of the building. Each bedroom has a theme, as well, and there are hand-painted cartoon images on every wall outside the bedrooms. Every painting was done by an inmate.

Meals are delivered each day for the women and children. Every month or so, everyone will have what Bernie called a "big meal" together.

The children get birthday parties, and Bernie wrote out a wishlist for Spiryt. A little boy got an electric drum kit at the last birthday party.

Christmas gifts come by way of an angel tree, where community members buy the toys listed on tags hanging from a tree.

A lot of the gifts come in a similar fashion, originating with community members or community partners. Others come from prison staff members.

Wasko, the former corrections secretary, took particular pleasure in playing Santa Claus, Corrections spokesman Michael Winder said.

By policy, kids are allowed one bag of gifts at gift-giving time, Winder said.

"You'd never seen a bag so big," as the ones Wasko would deliver, he said.

Community support

That the PACT house was available at the time of the program's launch was a big help, allowing the state to avoid building space from scratch or retrofitting areas inside the women's prison to make them function more like living spaces appropriate for infants.

As with gifts for the kids, a lot of supplies come through community support, said Miller, the warden at the women's prison.

Churches pitch in for car seats, collapsible cribs, toys or furniture, he said, as do local supporters like the Pierre office of a Canadian nonprofit called Birthright, founded in 1968 to support women with unplanned pregnancies.

Birthright has kept the building stocked with diapers and wipes since the program's launch.

An organization called Right Turn offers educational programming to the mothers, Head Start offers early childhood educational materials and teaches moms how to bake and cook, CPR training comes from the Sanford Frontier and Rural Medicine (FARM) Project, and the group Disability Rights of South Dakota helps mothers connect with the resources they'll need on the outside as they prepare for release.

The program costs the Department of Corrections \$15,000 a year, a figure folded into the \$8.8 million budget for the women's prison in Pierre.

Building bonds

Spiryt got restless as she sat on her mom's lap during her conversation with a reporter and prison administrators. The tot's eye was drawn to the neon cord of the earbuds plugged into Bernie's inmate-issued tablet. Spiryt flopped to her left and grabbed the cord.

Reflexively, Bernie stretched a hand to her window sill, grabbed an identical but non-functioning pair of earbuds and swapped them into Spiryt's tiny hands.

"I hide these up here and give them to her when she does this," Bernie said, smiling down at Spiryt.

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"That way she still thinks she's getting away with something."

That's precisely the kind of attentive understanding the program wants mothers to develop with their children.

"The premise of the program is that they will be able to bond with their child," Miller said. "It's teaching moms how to be moms."

Miller was around in 1997, when the Pierre women's prison first opened. At that point, former Gov. Janklow's move to create a weekend visitation house for inmate mothers was viewed with scrutiny.

The prison houses women at all security levels and has a minimum security unit, but the main building was designed to house maximum-custody inmates.

"At the time, no one could imagine having kids in a maximum security facility," Miller said, even if the overnight visits took place in a conventional house designed for families outside prison walls.

The women who stayed there through the years tended to do better on the outside, Miller noted, but "when they were only there for the weekend, it was totally different."

South Dakota is one of at least nine states with prison nursery programs, Stateline reported last month, the oldest of which is in New York. The programs have expanded as the number of women entering prisons has grown, from around 13,000 in 1980 to nearly 86,000 in 2023.

'Not here to punish inmates'

The program came up as the Legislature's budget committee got an update last month on construction at the new women's prison in Rapid City. The mother-infant program building was nearing completion, Lamb told the committee.

One senator, Piedmont Republican John Carley, asked Lamb how the prison keeps the program from feeling like a prize for the participating moms.

"What's the difference between them truly feeling they're incarcerated and dealing with the crime maybe they committed versus, 'hey, this is a lot of wonderful free stuff,'" Carley said.

Lamb told Carley that his job is not to punish inmates. The incarceration is the punishment, he said.

"The ladies that are back there no longer have their freedom," Lamb said. "So they're serving their punishment by being with us."

The low rate of repeat offenses from women who've gone through similar programs across the U.S. shows its value as a rehabilitation tool, Lamb told Carley as he invited the senator and anyone else on the committee to visit the shared family space on the Pierre prison campus.

Lamb, a father of seven, also said there's a moral component at play. Babies, he said, should not be separated from their mothers for a mother's misdeeds.

"Harming the mother is one thing," Lamb said. "But separating the child from the mother is something totally different."

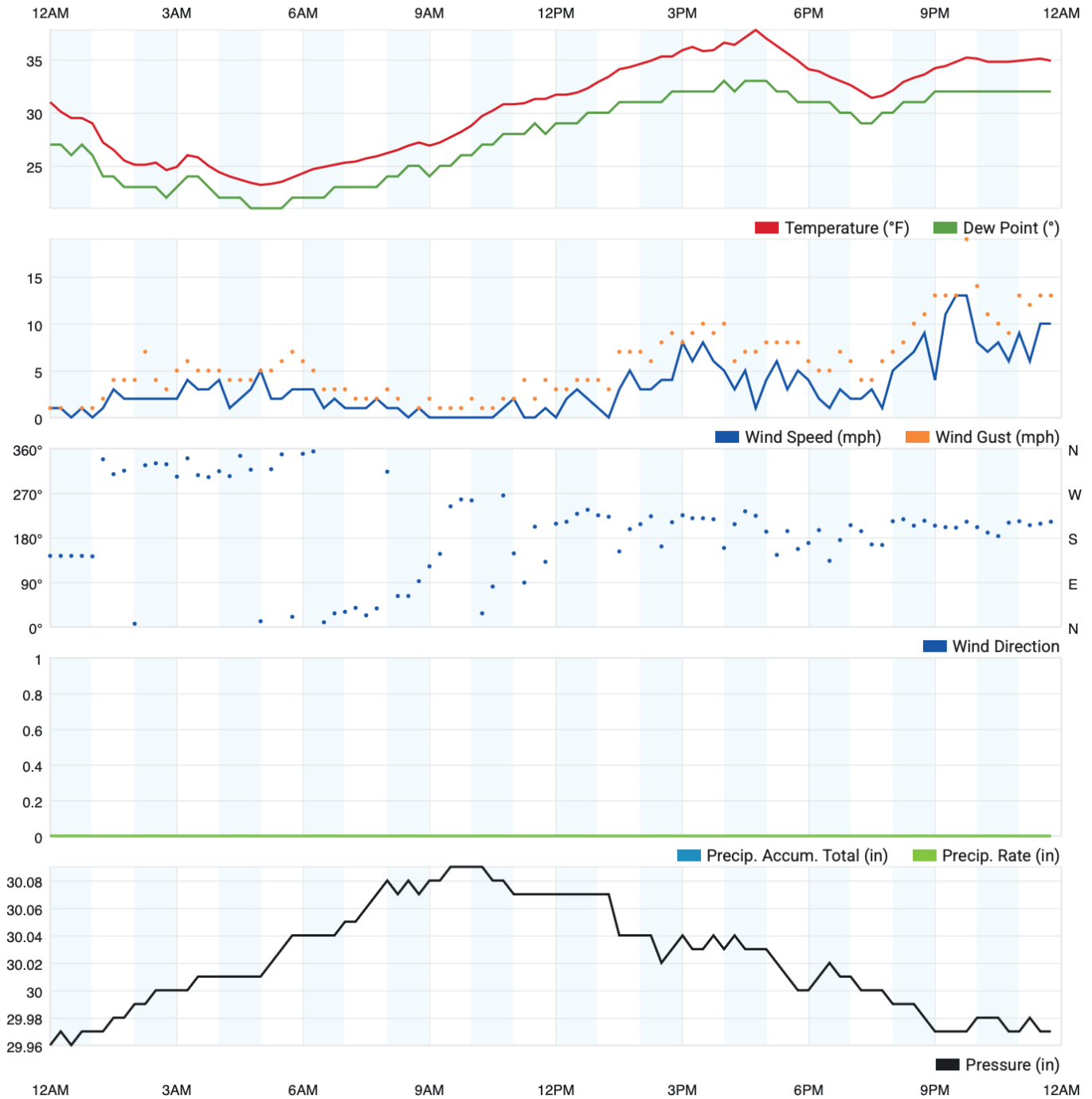
John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

February 8, 2026



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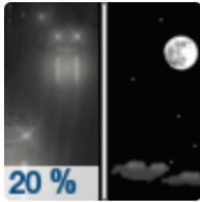
Today



High: 43 °F

Mostly Cloudy
then Chance
Rain

Tonight



Low: 26 °F

Slight Chance
Rain then
Mostly Clear

Tuesday



High: 44 °F

Sunny

Tuesday Night



Low: 23 °F

Mostly Clear

Wednesday



High: 45 °F

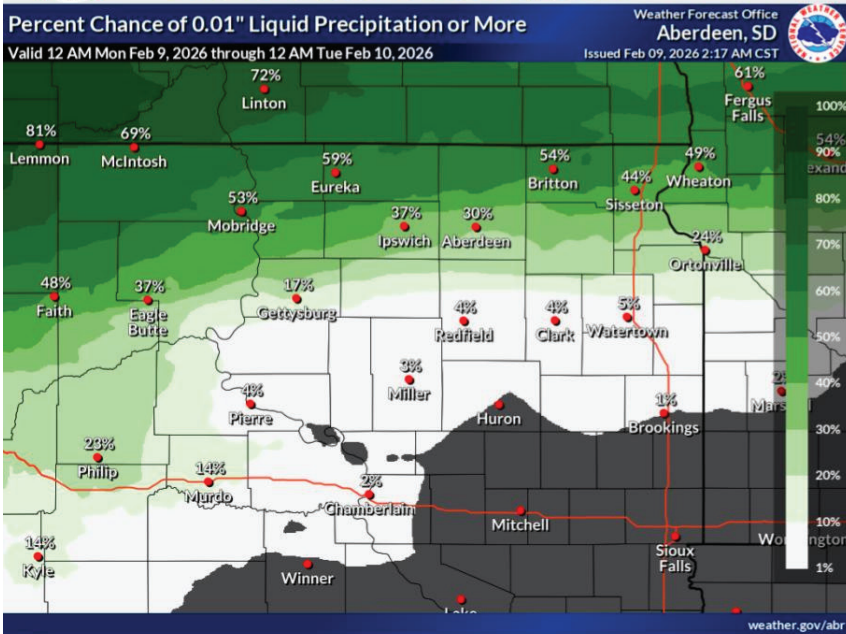
Partly Sunny



Light Rain through the Day

February 9, 2026
2:43 AM CST

Little to no accumulation expected.



- Light rain is expected through the day mainly in north central and north eastern SD and west central MN.
- Rain will be light, with little to no accumulation expected.
- Temperatures are expected to remain above freezing for most of the day.
 - However, some areas may see some flakes of snow occasionally mixed in with the rain as temperatures cool this evening.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Light rain is expected through the day, mainly in north central and north eastern SD and west central MN. The rain will be light sprinkles, with little to no accumulation. With temperatures above freezing, the rain should stay as rain, though some snow flakes might occasionally mix in this evening as temperatures cool.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38 °F at 4:43 PM

Low Temp: 23 °F at 4:56 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 9:38 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1987

Record Low: -45 in 1994

Average High: 27

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.18

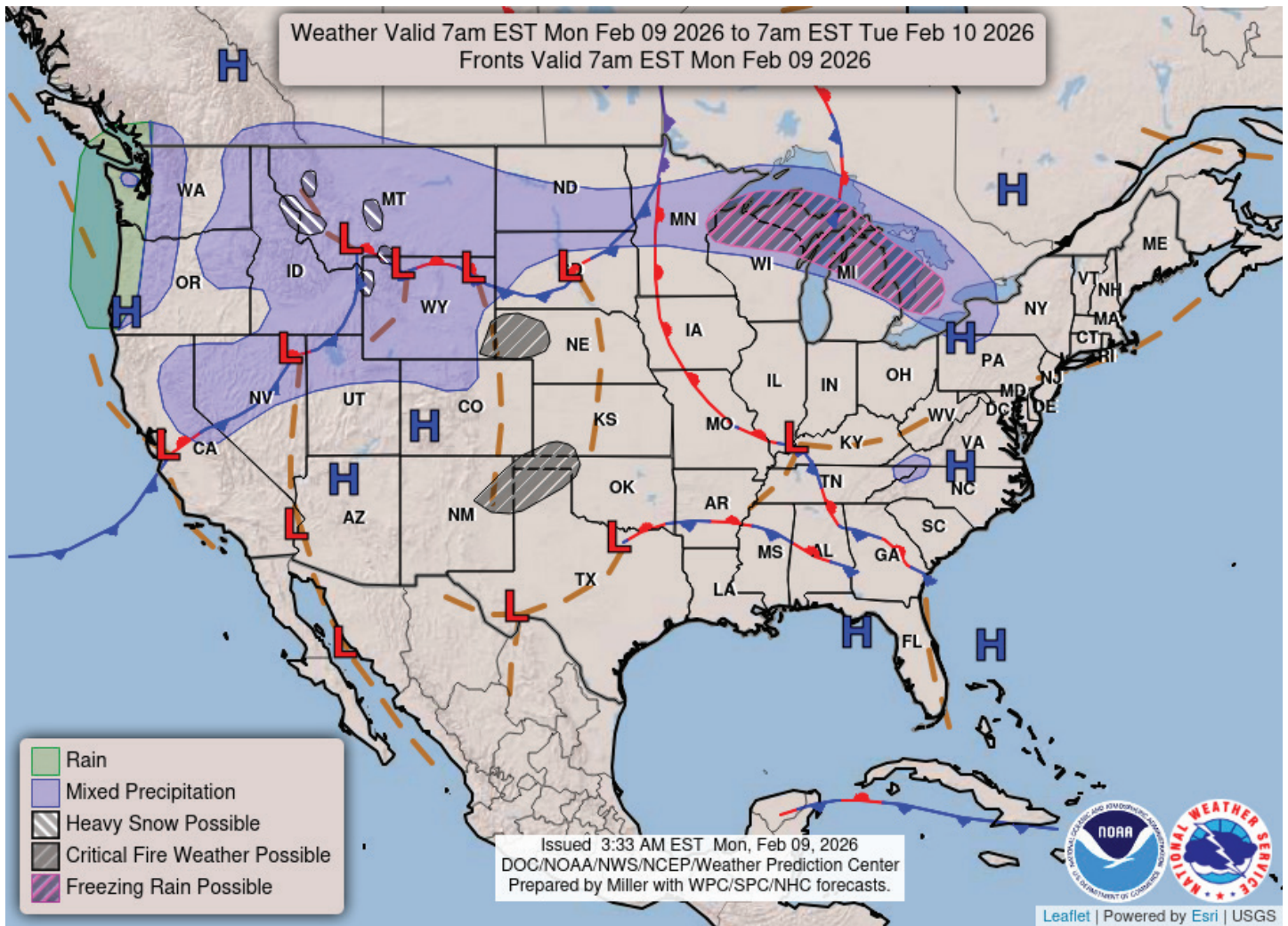
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.73

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:50 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:41 am



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Today in Weather History

February 9, 1899: Extreme cold blanketed most locations east of the Rocky Mountains during the first half of February. For South Dakota, the minimum temperature was the lowest experienced for many years, at least, and probably since its settlement. The week ending the 13th of February, the Weather Bureau stated: "With respect to temperature, this week is probably the most remarkable in the history of the Weather Bureau, over the greater part of the country east of the Rocky Mountains a large number of stations reporting the lowest temperatures recorded since their establishment. Over the whole region, extending from the eastern Rocky Mountain slope to the Atlantic coast and from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, the average daily deficiency exceeded 20 degrees. It ranged from 30 degrees to 35 degrees over an extensive area embracing the central valleys and portions of the Lake Region."

In South Dakota, the cold weather that culminated in the extremes began on January 26th and continued with little abatement over most of the state until February 12th. During the first twelve days of February, the Weather Bureau stations' daily average temperatures ranged from zero to 27 degrees below zero.

Some low-temperature readings from February 8th through the 12th include:

-29 in Spearfish on the 11th	-39 in Mellette on the 11th
-30 in Yankton on the 11th	-39 in Mitchell on the 11th
-34 in Milbank on the 9th	-39 in Pierre on the 12th
-34 in Rapid City on the 11th	-39 in Wessington Springs on the 9th
-35 in Aberdeen on the 8th and 12th	-40 in DeSmet on the 10th
-36 in Chamberlain on the 9th	-40 in Highmore on the 12th
-36 in Waubay on the 8th	-42 in Gann Valley on the 8th
-37 in Ipswich on the 8th	-40 in Redfield on the 9th
-38 in Watertown on the 11th	-42 Sioux Falls on the 9th

February 9, 1994: Widespread record cold occurred across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. Record lows were set at Aberdeen, Mobridge, Pierre, Sisseton, Timber Lake, and Wheaton, with overnight lows in the 30s below to 40s below zero across the entire area. Aberdeen fell to 45 degrees below zero or one degree off the record low of 46 degrees below zero. Mobridge dropped to 38 degrees below zero, and Pierre fell to 35 degrees below zero. Watertown came just one degree short of their daytime record, with 35 degrees below zero.

1870: President Ulysses S. Grant signed a law "to provide for taking meteorological observations at the military stations in the interior of the continent." A petition submitted by Increase A Lapham to Congressman Halbert E Paine in December 1869 began this process.

1899: One of the most significant cold outbreaks to ever impact the United States occurred early to mid-February. From the 8th-11th, the statewide average temperature across Iowa was 14.6 degrees below zero, making it the coldest four-day stretch on record in the state. On the 8th, Sioux City experienced its coldest day on record, with a daily average temperature of 24 degrees below zero. Then on the 11th, they reached their second-coldest temperature on record with a low of minus 31. Overall the coldest readings were obtained on the morning of the 9th when reported low temperatures included -21 at Keokuk, -23 at Des Moines, -33 at New Hampton, -35 at Le Mars, -38 at Estherville, and -40 at Sibley. The cold across the middle of the country was so extreme and persistent that ice floes down the Mississippi River into the deep south, emerging into the Gulf of America near New Orleans on February 17th. This has happened only one other time: February 13, 1784. The temperature dropped to 63 degrees below zero at Norway House, Manitoba, Canada setting the province's low-temperature record.

1994: A devastating ice storm struck Mississippi, Louisiana, and extreme northwest Alabama. Freezing rain began falling over northern Mississippi during the early morning hours and continued until midday on the 10th. Ice accumulated 3 to 6 inches thick on exposed objects in the affected area. Due to the weight of the ice, power lines, trees, and tree limbs were down. Nearly one million people were without power after the storm, some for a month.

God's Plans Will Prevail

Rebellion against God produces heartache.

Jonah 1:1-17: 1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,

2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."

3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

4 The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.

5 Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

6 So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."

7 Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

8 Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

9 He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."

10 Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

11 So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"--for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

12 He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."

13 However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

14 Then they called on the LORD and said, "We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased."

15 So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.

16 Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah fled toward Tarshish to escape God's plan. Perhaps the prophet thought that ignoring a divine command would cause the Lord to withdraw or change it. Instead, God dramatically intervened in Jonah's life until he submitted.

Jonah believed he had good reason to be reluctant. The Ninevites were a brutal civilization determined to conquer Israel. So walking across the city while crying, "Nineveh will be overthrown" was a frightening thought. And, as the prophet later revealed, he worried that God would spare the city if the people repented (Jonah 4:2). Jonah wanted them destroyed for what they had done to his people. His reasons for fleeing seemed right in his own eyes. But God was not deterred.

There's no justification for rebellion. God desires our obedience. He has reasons for asking us to take a specific action, and His purposes are always good.

The Lord doesn't change His plan to suit our purpose. Rather, He'll use events, people, circumstances, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit to move us into the center of His will. For your own benefit, go willingly. You may not particularly like the task God assigns, but if He wants it done, then trust that it must be worthwhile.

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:

02.06.26

13 21 25 52 62 19

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$366,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 22 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.07.26

7 22 26 38 41 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$15,030,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 37 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.08.26

5 14 17 31 44 13

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 52 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.07.26

9 12 18 20 24

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$263,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 52 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.07.26

28 37 38 48 63 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 21 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.07.26

25 36 42 51 58 6

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$113,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 21 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Hong Kong ex-publisher Jimmy Lai's sentence raises international concerns as China defends it

HONG KONG (AP) — The sentencing on Monday of Hong Kong's onetime media magnate Jimmy Lai raised concerns from foreign governments and rights groups, but Chinese and Hong Kong authorities defended it, saying it reflected the spirit of the rule of law.

Lai, a 78-year-old prominent democracy advocate, was sentenced to 20 years in prison after being found guilty in December of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and conspiring with others to publish seditious articles. His co-defendants, who entered guilty pleas to the collusion-related charge, received prison terms ranging between six years and three months, and 10 years.

Some foreign governments and rights groups called for the release of Lai, a British citizen. But China's Foreign Ministry maintained that Lai is a Chinese citizen, and urged other countries to respect its sovereignty and the rule of law in Hong Kong.

Here's what they said:

The European Union

The EU reiterated its call for the immediate and unconditional release of Lai, citing his advanced age and health condition.

"The politically motivated prosecution of Jimmy Lai and the former Apple Daily executives and journalists harms Hong Kong's reputation," it said in a statement. "The EU calls on the Hong Kong authorities to restore confidence in press freedom in Hong Kong, one of the pillars of its historic success as an international financial center, and to stop prosecuting journalists."

Australia

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said her country's government is gravely concerned by the sentences handed down to Lai and his co-defendants, saying its thoughts are with their family members and supporters at this difficult time.

Wong said the prosecutions have had a chilling effect on free speech in Hong Kong. She called on China to stop suppression on freedom of expression, media and civil society, as well as repealing the security law, under which Lai was convicted.

Britain

U.K. Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper said Lai was sentenced for exercising his right to freedom of expression after a "politically motivated prosecution." She was concerned for Lai's health and called on the Hong Kong authorities to release him on humanitarian grounds so that he may be reunited with his family.

"For the 78-year-old, this is tantamount to a life sentence," she said, adding that her government will "rapidly engage further" on the case.

China

In Beijing, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told reporters at a daily briefing that Lai is a Chinese citizen, calling him a major planner and participant in a series of anti-China destabilizing activities in Hong Kong.

Lin said the judicial cases are purely Hong Kong's internal affairs, urging "relevant countries" to avoid interfering in Hong Kong's judicial affairs or China's internal affairs.

Beijing's office in Hong Kong affairs said Lai's sentence reflected Hong Kong's determination in safeguarding national security and demonstrated the spirit of the rule of law.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong leader John Lee said Lai's crimes are heinous and that he had used Apple Daily to "poison" residents and incite hatred. He said Lai deserved the sentence because he openly asked for foreign sanctions against China as well as Hong Kong and harmed their interests.

"His heavy sentence of 20 years in prison demonstrated the rule of law, upheld justice, and brought

great satisfaction to the people," he said in a statement.

Taiwan

Taiwan's mainland affairs council condemned the Chinese and Hong Kong governments for suppressing human rights in the name of national security, urging for Lai's release. It reminded Taiwanese people to take Hong Kong's painful experience as a warning to safeguard its hard-won free way of life.

Rights groups

Amnesty International said the sentence marked "another grim milestone" for Hong Kong.

"Imprisoning a 78-year-old man for doing nothing more than exercising his rights shows a complete disregard for human dignity," Sarah Brooks, Amnesty's deputy regional director, said.

Reporters Without Borders' Director General Thibaut Bruttin said the court decision underscores the complete collapse of press freedom in Hong Kong and the authorities' contempt for independent journalism.

"We have already witnessed press freedom defender Liu Xiaobo die in prison due to insufficient international pressure. We cannot allow Jimmy Lai to suffer a similar fate," he said.

Prince William and Princess Catherine express deep concern for Epstein victims

LONDON (AP) — Prince William and Princess Catherine expressed concern for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein in a statement released Monday, the latest move by the British monarchy to distance itself from revelations about the former Prince Andrew's relationship with the convicted sex offender.

Britain's most popular royals say that they were appalled by the contents of more than 3 million pages of documents released earlier this month by the U.S. Department of Justice.

"I can confirm that the Prince and Princess of Wales have been deeply concerned by the continued revelations," the palace said in a statement. "Their thoughts remain focused on the victims."

The statement released ahead of William's three-day trip to Saudi Arabia, which begins Monday, is part of the monarchy's response to the escalating crisis surrounding the former prince, who was stripped of his royal titles in October after previous revelations about his relationship with Epstein. King Charles III's 65-year-old brother is now known simply as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

The king last week forced Mountbatten-Windsor to leave his longtime home at Royal Lodge near Windsor Castle, accelerating a move that was first announced in October but wasn't expected to be completed until later this year.

Mountbatten-Windsor is now living on the king's Sandringham estate in eastern England. He will live temporarily at Wood Farm Cottage while his permanent home on the estate undergoes repairs.

Mountbatten-Windsor has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in his relationship with Epstein.

UK leader Starmer fights for his job as Mandelson-Epstein revelations spark a leadership crisis

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's position hung by a thread on Monday as he tried to persuade his Labour Party's lawmakers not to kick him out of his job after just a year and a half in office.

Starmer lost his chief of staff on Sunday and is rapidly shedding support from Labour legislators after revelations about the relationship between former British ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson and the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Starmer is due to address Labour lawmakers behind closed doors later Monday in an attempt to rebuild some of his shattered authority.

The political storm stems from Starmer's decision in 2024 to appoint Mandelson to Britain's most important diplomatic post, despite knowing he had ties to Epstein.

Starmer fired Mandelson in September after emails were published showing that he maintained a friendship with Epstein after the late financier's 2008 conviction for sex offenses involving a minor. Critics say

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Starmer should have known better than to appoint Mandelson, 72, a contentious figure whose career has been studded with scandals over money or ethics.

A new trove of Epstein files released in the United States has brought more details about the relationship, and new pressure on Starmer.

Starmer apologized last week for "having believed Mandelson's lies."

He promised to release documentation related to Mandelson's appointment, which the government says will show that Mandelson misled officials about his ties to Epstein.

Police are investigating Mandelson for potential misconduct in public office over documents suggesting he passed sensitive government information to Epstein a decade and a half ago. The offense carries a maximum sentence of life in prison. Mandelson has not been arrested or charged, and does not face any allegations of sexual misconduct.

Starmer's chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, took the fall for the decision by quitting on Sunday, saying that "I advised the prime minister to make that appointment and I take full responsibility for that advice."

McSweeney has been Starmer's most important aide since he became Labour leader in 2020, and is considered a key architect of Labour's landslide July 2024 election victory. But some in the party blame him for a series of missteps since then.

Some Labour officials hope that his departure will buy the prime minister time to rebuild trust with the party and the country. Senior lawmaker Emily Thornberry said McSweeney had become a "divisive figure" and his departure brought the opportunity for a reset.

She said Starmer is "a good leader in that he is strong and clear. I think that he needs to step up a bit more than he has."

Others say McSweeney's departure leaves Starmer weak and isolated.

Opposition Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch said Starmer "has made bad decision after bad decision" and "his position now is untenable."

Since winning office, Starmer has struggled to deliver promised economic growth, repair tattered public services and ease the cost of living. He pledged a return to honest government after 14 years of scandal-tarred Conservative rule, but has been beset by missteps and U-turns over welfare cuts and other unpopular policies.

Labour consistently lags behind the hard-right Reform UK party in opinion polls, and its failure to improve had sparked talk of a leadership challenge, even before the Mandelson revelations.

Under Britain's parliamentary system, prime ministers can change without the need for a national election. If Starmer is challenged or resigns, it would trigger an election for the Labour leadership. The winner would become prime minister.

The Conservatives went through three prime ministers between national elections in 2019 and 2024. One, Liz Truss, lasted just 49 days in office.

Starmer was elected on a promise to end the political chaos that roiled the Conservatives' final years in power. That proved easier said than done.

Labour lawmaker Clive Efford said Starmer's critics should "be careful what you wish for."

"I don't think people took to the changes in prime minister when the Tories were in power," he told the BBC. "It didn't do them any good."

World shares rally and Japan's Nikkei 225 jumps after a big victory for PM Takaichi's ruling party

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — World shares advanced and Tokyo's Nikkei 225 share index jumped as much as 5% to a record on Monday after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's governing party secured a two-thirds supermajority in a parliamentary election.

In early European trading, Germany's DAX gained 0.6% to 24,864.59, while the CAC 40 in Paris edged 0.2% higher, to 8,288.06. Britain's FTSE 100 was up 0.3% at 10,399.61.

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U.S. futures edged higher after the U.S. stock market roared back on Friday as technology stocks recovered much of their losses from earlier in the week and bitcoin halted its plunge. The future for the S&P 500 added 0.1%, while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average was up 0.2%.

On Friday, the S&P 500 rallied 2% for its best day since May. The Dow industrials soared 2.5%, topping the 50,000 level for the first time. The Nasdaq composite leaped 2.2%.

The combination of a rebound in tech shares, Wall Street's rally and other upbeat news lifted shares early Monday.

In Tokyo, the Nikkei 225 closed 3.9% higher at 56,363.94. Earlier in the day the benchmark hit a new intraday record of 57,337.07.

The dollar weakened slightly against the Japanese yen, trading at 156.71 yen, down from 157.10 yen late Friday.

The landslide election victory gives Takaichi a much stronger mandate to pursue market-friendly policies.

NHK, citing results of vote counts, said Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP, alone secured 316 seats by early Monday, comfortably surpassing a 261-seat absolute majority in the 465-member lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two-chamber parliament. That marks a record since the party's foundation in 1955 and surpasses the previous record of 300 seats won in 1986 by late Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone.

"So overall, as the LDP has gone from a very weak government that really couldn't do anything to an extremely strong government now with the supermajority of the lower house, they really could call the shots," said Neil Newman, managing director and head of strategy at Astris Advisory Japan.

Takaichi's first major task when the lower house reconvenes in mid-February is to work on a budget bill, delayed by the election, to fund economic measures to address rising costs and sluggish wages.

"Japan just delivered the kind of election result markets instinctively embrace because it removes the one thing traders price at a premium: political ambiguity," Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said in a commentary.

"Politically, the win hands Prime Minister Takaichi freedom of movement and removes the need to bargain every decision down to the lowest common denominator," he said.

Other markets across Asia also rallied.

In Seoul, the Kospi gained 4.1%, to 5,298.04, buoyed by strong buying of tech shares.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng index climbed 1.8% to 27,027.16 and the Shanghai Composite index rose 1.4% to 4,123.09. Taiwan's Taiex gained 2%.

In Australia, the S&P/ASX 200 surged 1.9% to 8,870.10.

Gains for computer chip companies helped drive Wall Street's widespread rally on Friday. Nvidia jumped 7.8% and Broadcom climbed 7.1%.

The S&P 500 still fell to its third losing week in the last four. Apart from worries about spending by Big Tech companies, which are Wall Street's most influential stocks, concerns about AI potentially stealing customers from software companies also hurt the market. Software stocks were hit particularly hard after AI firm Anthropic released free tools to automate things like legal services.

In other dealings early Monday, bitcoin gained 1% to trade just below \$70,000. A weeklong plunge sent it to close to \$60,000 late Thursday, more than halfway below its record price set in October.

Prices in the metals market have calmed a bit following their own wild swings. Gold rose 1.4% to \$5048.90 per ounce, while silver added 6.2% to \$81.64.

U.S. benchmark crude oil shed 60 cents to \$62.95 per barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, gave up 60 cents to \$67.45 per barrel.

The euro rose to \$1.1866 from \$1.1814.

China critic and former media tycoon Jimmy Lai is sentenced to 20 years in a Hong Kong security case

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Jimmy Lai, the pro-democracy former Hong Kong media tycoon and a fierce critic of Beijing, was sentenced on Monday to 20 years in prison in the longest punishment given so far under a China-imposed national security law that has virtually silenced the city's dissent.

Lai, 78, was convicted in December of conspiring with others to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security, and conspiracy to publish seditious articles. The maximum penalty for his conviction was life imprisonment.

His co-defendants, six former employees of his Apple Daily newspaper and two activists, received prison terms of between 6 years and 3 months, and 10 years on collusion-related charges.

Lai smiled and waved at his supporters when he arrived for the sentence. But before he left the courtroom, he looked serious, as some people in the public gallery cried. When asked about whether they would appeal, his lawyer Robert Pang said no comment.

Lai's daughter says he will die 'a martyr' in prison

The democracy advocate's arrest and trial have raised concerns about the decline of press freedom in what was once an Asian bastion of media independence. The government insists the case has nothing to do with a free press, saying the defendants used news reporting as a pretext for years to commit acts that harmed China and Hong Kong.

Lai was one of the first prominent figures to be arrested under the security law in 2020. Within a year, some of Apple Daily's senior journalists also were arrested and the newspaper shut down in June 2021.

Lai's sentencing could heighten Beijing's diplomatic tensions with foreign governments, which have criticized Lai's conviction and sentencing.

U.S. President Donald Trump, who is expected to visit China in April, said he felt "so badly" after the verdict and noted he spoke to Chinese leader Xi Jinping about Lai and asked him "to consider his release."

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government also has called for the release of Lai, who is a British citizen. U.K. Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper called the prosecution "politically motivated," saying the prison term is tantamount to a life sentence.

In a statement, Lai's son, Sebastien, said the "draconian" prison term was devastating for his family and life-threatening for his father. "It signifies the total destruction of the Hong Kong legal system and the end of justice," he said.

His sister Claire called the sentence "heartbreakingly cruel" in the same statement. "If this sentence is carried out, he will die a martyr behind bars," she said.

Hong Kong leader John Lee said Lai's sentence demonstrated the rule of law, citing his serious crimes. "It's bringing great satisfaction to the people," he said in a statement.

In Beijing, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said Lai is a Chinese citizen and called him a major planner and participant in a series of anti-China destabilizing activities in Hong Kong. He urged "relevant countries" to respect the rule of law in Hong Kong.

Judges ruled Lai was the mastermind

Lai founded Apple Daily, a now-defunct newspaper known for its critical reports against the governments in Hong Kong and Beijing. He was arrested in August 2020 under the security law that was used in a yearslong crackdown on many of Hong Kong's leading activists.

In their ruling, three government-vetted judges wrote that the starting point of Lai's sentence was increased because they found him to be the mastermind of the conspiracies. But they also reduced his penalty because they accepted that Lai's age, health condition and solitary confinement would cause his prison life to be more burdensome than that of other inmates.

"Lai was no doubt the mastermind of all three conspiracies charged and therefore he warrants a heavier sentence," they said "As regards the others, it is difficult to distinguish their relative culpability."

They took into account that Lai is serving a prison term of five years and nine months in a separate

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fraud case and ruled that 18 years of Lai's sentence in the security case should be served consecutively to that prison term.

Urania Chiu, lecturer in law at Oxford Brookes University, said the case is significant for its broad construction of seditious intent and application of the term "collusion with foreign forces" to certain activities by the media. The implication is particularly alarming for journalists and those working in academia, she said.

"Offering and publishing legitimate critiques of the state, which often involves engagement with international platforms and audiences, may now easily be construed as 'collusion,'" Chiu said.

Lai has been in custody for more than five years. In January, Pang said Lai suffered health issues including heart palpitations, high blood pressure and diabetes. The prosecution said a medical report noted Lai's general health condition remained stable. The government said his solitary confinement was at Lai's wish.

Co-defendants get reduced sentences

The former Apple Daily staffers and activists involved in Lai's case entered guilty pleas, which helped reduce their sentences Monday. They earlier admitted to the prosecution charge that said they conspired with Lai to request foreign forces to impose sanctions or blockades, or engage in other hostile activities against Hong Kong or China.

The convicted journalists are publisher Cheung Kim-hung, associate publisher Chan Pui-man, editor-in-chief Ryan Law, executive editor-in-chief Lam Man-chung, executive editor-in-chief responsible for English news Fung Wai-kong and editorial writer Yeung Ching-kee. They received prison terms ranging between six years and nine months, to 10 years.

The two activists, Andy Li and Chan Tsz-wah, were sentenced to six years and three months, and seven years and three months respectively.

The penalties for Cheung, Chan and Yeung, alongside the two activists, were reduced in part because they served as prosecution witnesses and the judges said their evidence had "significantly" contributed to the conviction of Lai.

Before sunrise, dozens of people stood in line outside the court building to secure a seat in the courtroom. One of them was former Apple Daily employee Tammy Cheung.

"Whatever happens, it's an end — at least we'll know the outcome," Cheung said before the sentence was delivered.

Case considered a blow to Hong Kong media

Lai founded Apple Daily in 1995, two years before the former British colony returned to Chinese rule. Its closure in 2021 shocked the local press scene. Hong Kong ranked 140th out of 180 territories in the press-freedom index compiled by media freedom organization Reporters Without Borders in 2025, far from its 18th place in 2002.

Steve Li, chief superintendent of the police force's National Security Department, welcomed the heavy sentence on Lai. "Obviously, he has done nothing good for Hong Kong that could serve as a basis for his mitigation," he told reporters.

The government said it will confiscate assets related to Lai's crime.

Human Rights Watch's Asia Director Elaine Pearson said the harsh 20-year-sentence is effectively a death sentence, calling it cruel and unjust.

Seahawks ride their 'Dark Side' defense to a Super Bowl title, pounding the Patriots 29-13

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

SANTA CLARA, Calif. (AP) — The "Dark Side" defense carried Sam Darnold and the Seattle Seahawks to a Lombardi Trophy.

Devon Witherspoon, Derick Hall, Byron Murphy and the rest of Mike Macdonald's ferocious unit pummeled Drake Maye, and the Seahawks beat the New England Patriots 29-13 on Sunday to win the franchise's second Super Bowl.

"We never waver, man. We believe in each other. We love each other, and now we're world champions,"

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Macdonald said.

Darnold threw a touchdown pass to AJ Barner, Kenneth Walker III ran for 135 yards and Jason Myers set a Super Bowl record by making all five of his field-goal tries.

"To do this with this team, I wouldn't want it any other way," Darnold said. "So proud of our guys, our defense. I mean, I can't say enough great things about our defense, our special teams."

Walker became the first running back to win the Super Bowl MVP award since Hall of Famer Terrell Davis did it with Denver 28 years ago.

Uchenna Nwosu punctuated a punishing defensive performance by snagging Maye's pass in the air after Witherspoon hit his arm and running it back 45 yards for a pick-6.

"We went through a lot, but we believed," Witherspoon said. "All of you all doubters out there who said all that other stuff, you all don't know what's going on in this building. We're one of one over here."

Seattle won its first Super Bowl a dozen years ago behind its "Legion of Boom" defense, then was denied a repeat when New England's Malcolm Butler intercepted Russell Wilson at the goal line. The Seahawks hadn't been back to the Super Bowl since.

Darnold became the first quarterback in the 2018 NFL draft class to win a Super Bowl, ahead of Josh Allen, Baker Mayfield and Lamar Jackson.

Labeled a bust, dumped by two teams and considered expendable by two others, Darnold proved his doubters wrong while helping the Seahawks go 17-3.

After leading the NFL with 20 turnovers in the regular season, Darnold didn't have any in three playoff games. He wasn't particularly sharp against a solid Patriots defense but protected the ball and made enough plays, finishing 19 of 38 for 202 yards.

"I know we won the Super Bowl, but we could have been a little bit better on offense, but I don't care about that right now," Darnold said. "It's an unbelievable feeling, man. I'm just so happy for the guys in the locker room and the coaches that put in so much effort throughout the whole season."

The Seahawks sacked Maye six times, including two apiece by Hall and Murphy. Hall's strip-sack late in the third quarter set up a short field and Darnold connected with Barner on 16-yard scoring toss to make it 19-0.

Julian Love's interception set up another field goal that made it 22-7 with 5:35 left.

The Patriots (17-4) punted on the first eight drives, excluding a kneel-down to end the first half.

"Just reminding them that we're 307 days into what hopefully is a long, successful relationship and program, and it's OK to be disappointed," New England coach Mike Vrabel said.

Down 19-0, Maye and the Patriots' offense finally got going. He hit Mack Hollins over the middle in traffic for 24 yards and then lofted a perfect 35-yard TD pass to Hollins down the left side to cut the deficit to 19-7.

Tom Brady once led Bill Belichick's Patriots to the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history, when New England rallied from a 28-3 deficit against Atlanta for a 34-28 overtime victory.

But Maye, who was runner-up to Matthew Stafford for the AP NFL MVP award in the closest race in two decades, didn't come close. He had a chance to narrow the gap, but his ill-advised pass into triple coverage was picked by Love and the Patriots trailed by 15 when they got the ball back with 5:35 left. Maye said after the game that he had a pain-relieving injection in his right shoulder, which he injured in the AFC championship win at Denver, but said it didn't affect his play.

Then came Nwosu's touchdown, a fitting way to cap an overwhelming effort by the NFL's stingiest defense.

"Definitely hurts. They played better than us tonight," Maye said.

Maye's 7-yard TD pass to Rhamondre Stevenson late in the game only made the margin smaller.

The Seahawks took a 3-0 lead on Myers' 33-yard field goal on the game's opening drive. Myers connected from 39 and 41 yards to extend the lead to 9-0 at halftime. He was good from 41 on Seattle's first drive of the third quarter to make it 12-0.

Patriots player of the game

Cornerback Christian Gonzalez made two outstanding plays to prevent potential touchdowns in the second quarter. He raced back and leaped in the air to slap away a deep pass to Rashid Shaheed that could

have been a 76-yard TD.

On Seattle's last drive in the first half, Gonzalez knocked down a pass to All-Pro wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba that would have been a 23-yard TD.

Mills gets a two-for-one sack

Rylie Mills pushed left guard Jared Wilson into Maye and took both of them down on one of Seattle's sacks.

Bad Bunny shines at halftime

Bad Bunny headlined a visually stunning halftime performance that also featured appearances by Lady Gaga and Ricky Martin. The Grammy-winning Puerto Rican artist entirely in Spanish.

Patriots denied a record 7th title

The Patriots failed to win the franchise's seventh Super Bowl, which would have set an NFL record. They're tied with the Steelers with six championships.

Vrabel, the AP NFL Coach of the Year, was aiming to become the fifth person to win a Super Bowl as a player and head coach and the first to do both with the same team.

The 23-year-old Maye became the second-youngest QB to start a Super Bowl, but couldn't become the youngest to win it. Ben Roethlisberger still holds that mark.

Israeli forces capture a local Sunni Islamist official and Hamas ally in southern Lebanon

BEIRUT (AP) — In an operation in southern Lebanon early on Monday, Israelis forces seized a local official with a Sunni Islamist group and an ally of the Palestinian militant Hamas group and took him to Israel for questioning, the Israeli military and Lebanese state media reported.

Also on Monday, an Israeli drone struck a car in the southern Lebanese village of Yanouh, killing three people, including a child, Lebanon's state-run National News Agency. There was no immediate comment from Israel on the strike.

According to the NNA agency, Atwi Atwi — a local official with the Sunni Islamist group al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group in English — was taken in the southern village of Hebbarieh, in the region of Hasbaya and close to the border with Israel.

A statement from the Israeli military said Israeli troops apprehended an Islamic Group official in a "targeted intelligence-based operation." It did not release the official's name.

The Islamic Group condemned the seizure, saying it was part of Israel's daily attacks and violations of Lebanon's sovereignty. It called on the Lebanese state to work for the release of Atwi.

The Islamic Group is Lebanon's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamist political group, with an armed wing in Lebanon known as Fajr Forces.

After the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, the Fajr Forces joined forces with the Lebanese Shiite militant Hezbollah group, launching rockets across the border into Israel that it said were in support of Hamas in Gaza.

The Brotherhood has been outlawed in much of the Middle East and labeled a terror group. Last month, the Trump administration designated the Lebanese, Jordanian and Egyptian branches of the Brotherhood as terrorist organizations.

Al-Jamaa al-Islamiya's leader, Mohammed Takkoush, said during the 14-month war between Hezbollah and Israel that his group and Hezbollah put aside their differences on conflicts in Syria and Yemen to join forces against Israel.

Hezbollah started attacking Israel on Oct. 8, 2023, a day after Hamas attacked southern Israel, triggering the latest Israel-Hamas war. Israel later launched a widespread bombardment of Lebanon that severely weakened Hezbollah, followed by a ground invasion.

The conflict ended with a U.S.-brokered ceasefire in 2024, and since then, Israel has carried out almost daily airstrikes and ground incursions into Lebanon. Israel says it's carrying out the operations to remove Hezbollah strongholds and threats against Israel.

The Israel-Hezbollah war killed more than 4,000 people in Lebanon, including hundreds of civilians, and

caused an estimated \$11 billion in damage and destruction, according to the World Bank. In Israel, 127 people died, including 80 soldiers.

Bad Bunny brings Gaga, Martin and Puerto Rican pride to Super Bowl as Green Day, Puth play pregame

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. and ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writers

SANTA CLARA, Calif. (AP) — Stars were front-and-center at Super Bowl 60, with Chris Pratt and Jon Bon Jovi introducing the teams, a series of soaring pre-game performances and Bad Bunny's much-anticipated halftime show featuring a tour of Puerto Rican culture and a real-life marriage.

Before the game at Levi's Stadium, Blue Ivy Carter and her sister Rumi leaped in an end zone and Green Day delivered a tribute to the Super Bowl's 60th anniversary.

Brandi Carlile kept it sincere and simple for "America, the Beautiful," Charlie Puth made "The Star-Spangled Banner" big and soulful and Coco Jones brought a bit of the elements of both to "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Bad Bunny recreates Puerto Rico in Northern California

Bad Bunny brought Lady Gaga, Ricky Martin and a whole lot of his native Puerto Rico to his halftime show. "God bless America!" he shouted toward the end, a rare English phrase in the 13-minute halftime show. Then he gave a roll call of the nations of North, South and Central America, including Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, the United States and Canada.

A parade of flags from those nations marched through the sugar plantation fields that functioned as the show's centerpiece.

After the list of nations, and at the end of the show, he declared, "Mi Patria Puerto Rico, seguimos aquí," or "My homeland Puerto Rico, we are still here."

He also brought out a parade of celebrities, including Cardi B, Jessica Alba and Pedro Pascal.

The 31-year-old began the performance in the furrows of the faux sugar cane crops, walking past unmistakable Puerto Rican imagery including farmers in straw hats, old men playing dominos and a shaved ice stand as he performed his 2022 reggaeton hit "Tití Me Preguntó." He carried a football and wore an all-white football jersey with the number 64 and his real last name, Ocasio.

The opening and closing of the show were not really visible inside the stadium because it was obscured by the sugar cane plants, many of which were people in costumes who ran on to the field to form the maze.

He then stood atop a tiny pink house with dancers in the front yard and performed "Yo Perreo Sola" and stood atop a pickup truck as he did "EEO."

The scene shifted to a wedding, where the marrying couple parted to reveal Lady Gaga as the first surprise guest. She joined Bad Bunny in performing "Baile Inolvidable." Gaga did her own Super Bowl halftime show in 2017.

The couple was actually married during the show, according to a representative for Bad Bunny, who said he served as a witness and signed their marriage certificate.

Bad Bunny then broke into his "NuevaYol" in a faux shopping center parking lot.

Ricky Martin, a Puerto Rican star from a previous generation, joined him for "Lo Que Le Pasó a Hawaii."

The show came a week after the 31-year-old superstar won the Grammy for album of the year for "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," a love letter to his home.

The halftime show included a young boy watching the Grammy telecast on TV with his parents. Bad Bunny appeared and handed the boy a Grammy statuette.

As the show ended, he held up the football to the camera. It had a message that was also on the scoreboard: "The only thing more powerful than hate is love."

On Truth Social, President Donald Trump called the show "absolutely terrible, one of the worst, EVER!"

Green Day brings Bay rock — and an f-bomb — to an MVP parade

San Francisco Bay Area punk-pop vets Green Day took the pre-game stage and performed a snippet of their song "Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)" to a parade of former Super Bowl MVPs.

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Local heroes Steve Young, Joe Montana and Jerry Rice were among those who walked out during the song meant to celebrate 60 years of Super Bowls.

Billie Joe Armstrong, Mike Dirnt and Tre Cool then blasted into the harder and less sentimental stuff, including "Holiday," "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" and "American Idiot."

Armstrong did not censor the f-word in the lyrics of "American Idiot." The word was muted on the NBC telecast but drew loud cheers inside the stadium.

Carlile and Puth deliver patriotic moments ahead of kickoff

Singer-songwriter Charlie Puth delivered a sweeping and soulful rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The 34-year-old from New Jersey stood at a Rhodes electric piano as he sang and was backed by a choir and horn section.

Before that, Brandi Carlile gave an earnest acoustic rendition of "America, the Beautiful."

The 44-year-old folk and country rocker wore a black suit and was backed by a violin and cello on the field at Levi Stadium.

The Grammy winner told the AP this week that she'd use no prerecorded tracks, saying "the people deserve to have you live."

After the song Carlile, who is from Ravensdale, Washington, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) outside Seattle said she was "relieved, and so excited for the Seahawks baby let's go!"

Coco Jones opens Super Bowl 60 performances with 'Lift Every Voice'

Coco Jones, a 28-year-old singer-songwriter and actor from Columbia, South Carolina wore a white gown and was backed by a string octet as she performed "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a song that has become known as the unofficial Black national anthem.

"I feel really amazing, I hope that I did my ancestors proud, and I hope that I inspired the nation to come together," Jones told the AP just after the song.

She FaceTimed with her mom on the sideline after the performance while her fiance, Cleveland Cavaliers player Donovan Mitchell, held the phone.

Written by James Weldon Johnson, the song has been performed at the Super Bowl each year since 2021, the first Super Bowl after the protests surrounding the killing of George Floyd, when Black Lives Matter sentiment, and the song, became especially prominent.

Celebrities spotted at Super Bowl 60

Chris Pratt rocked a Seahawks jersey while attending the Super Bowl and gave a rousing introduction to the team before they ran out onto the field.

On the opposite side of the field, Jon Bon Jovi delivered the Patriots' intro.

Stars including Travis Scott and Jay-Z were on the sidelines ahead of the game. Jay-Z's daughters, Blue Ivy and Rumi Carter, leaped in one of the end zones to take a photo.

Among those sitting in suites watching the game were Justin Bieber, Hailey Bieber and Adam Sandler.

LaRussell and Brad Pitt during the breaks

During game breaks, Bay Area rapper LaRussell jammed alongside a choir, performing everything from rap classics such as his song "I'm From the Bay" and a rendition of Too \$hort's "Blow the Whistle," along with gospel melodies.

LaRussell is the first artist chosen to curate the house band at the Super Bowl.

Among the commercials shown during the game was an unexpected first look at "The Adventures of Cliff Booth," a Netflix sequel to Quentin Tarantino's "Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood" with Brad Pitt reprising his stuntman character and David Fincher directing.

Crackdown on dissent after nationwide protests in Iran widens to ensnare reformist figures

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranian security forces have launched a campaign to arrest figures within the country's reformist movement, reports said Monday.

That widens a crackdown on dissent after authorities earlier put down nationwide protests in violence that killed thousands and saw tens of thousands more detained.

Detained Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi has received another prison sentence of over seven years. It signals a widening effort to silence anyone opposed to the bloody suppression of unrest by Iran's theocracy as it faces new nuclear talks with the United States. President Donald Trump has repeatedly warned he could launch an attack on the country if no deal is reached.

Media reports quoted officials within the reformist movement, which seeks to change Iran's theocracy from inside, as saying at least four of their members had been arrested. They include Azar Mansouri, the head of the Reformist Front, which represents multiple reformist factions; and former diplomat Mohsen Aminzadeh, who served under reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

Also detained was Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, who led students who stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, sparking the 444-day hostage crisis.

Their arrests likely stem from a reformist statement in January that called for Iran's 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to resign from his position and have a transitional governing council oversee the country.

Iran's state-run IRNA news agency quoted a statement from prosecutors in Tehran, the country's capital, saying four people had been arrested and others summoned to meet authorities. It accused those allegedly involved of "organizing and leading ... activities aimed at disrupting the political and social situation in the country amid military threats from the United States and the Zionist regime."

"Having bludgeoned the streets into silence with exemplary cruelty, the regime has shifted its attention inward, fixing its stare on its loyal opposition," wrote Ali Vaez, an Iran expert at the International Crisis Group.

"The reformists, sensing the ground move beneath them, had begun to drift — and power, ever paranoid, is now determined to cauterize dissent before it learns to walk."

However, it remains unclear just how much political support reformists have within Iran. The anger on the streets of Iran during the demonstrations, heard in people shouting "Death to Khamenei!" and in support of the country's exiled crown prince, appeared to lump reformists in with all other politicians now working in the Islamic Republic.

Iran and the U.S. held new nuclear talks last week in Oman. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking Sunday to diplomats at a summit in Tehran, signaled that Iran would stick to its position that it must be able to enrich uranium — a major point of contention with Trump, who bombed Iranian atomic sites in June during the 12-day Iran-Israel war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is to travel to Washington this week, with Iran expected to be the major subject of discussion, his office said.

The U.S. has moved the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, ships and warplanes to the Middle East to pressure Iran into an agreement and have the firepower necessary to strike the Islamic Republic should Trump choose to do so.

Meanwhile, Iran issued a warning to pilots that it planned "rocket launches" Monday into Tuesday in an area over the country's Semnan province, home to the Imam Khomeini Spaceport. Such launches have corresponded in the past with Iran marking the anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Arguments to begin in landmark social media addiction trial set in Los Angeles

By KAITLYN HUAMANI and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The world's biggest social media companies face several landmark trials this year that seek to hold them responsible for harms to children who use their platforms. Opening arguments for the first, in Los Angeles County Superior Court, begin this week.

Instagram's parent company Meta and Google's YouTube will face claims that their platforms deliber-

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ately addict and harm children. TikTok and Snap, which were originally named in the lawsuit, settled for undisclosed sums.

"This was only the first case — there are hundreds of parents and school districts in the social media addiction trials that start today, and sadly, new families every day who are speaking out and bringing Big Tech to court for its deliberately harmful products," said Sacha Haworth, executive director of the nonprofit Tech Oversight Project.

At the core of the case is a 19-year-old identified only by the initials "KGM," whose case could determine how thousands of other, similar lawsuits against social media companies will play out. She and two other plaintiffs have been selected for bellwether trials — essentially test cases for both sides to see how their arguments play out before a jury and what damages, if any, may be awarded, said Clay Calvert, a non-resident senior fellow of technology policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

It's the first time the companies will argue their case before a jury, and the outcome could have profound effects on their businesses and how they will handle children using their platforms.

KGM claims that her use of social media from an early age addicted her to the technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts. Importantly, the lawsuit claims that this was done through deliberate design choices made by companies that sought to make their platforms more addictive to children to boost profits. This argument, if successful, could sidestep the companies' First Amendment shield and Section 230, which protects tech companies from liability for material posted on their platforms.

"Borrowing heavily from the behavioral and neurobiological techniques used by slot machines and exploited by the cigarette industry, Defendants deliberately embedded in their products an array of design features aimed at maximizing youth engagement to drive advertising revenue," the lawsuit says.

Executives, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, are expected to testify at the trial, which will last six to eight weeks. Experts have drawn similarities to the Big Tobacco trials that led to a 1998 settlement requiring cigarette companies to pay billions in health care costs and restrict marketing targeting minors.

"Plaintiffs are not merely the collateral damage of Defendants' products," the lawsuit says. "They are the direct victims of the intentional product design choices made by each Defendant. They are the intended targets of the harmful features that pushed them into self-destructive feedback loops."

The tech companies dispute the claims that their products deliberately harm children, citing a bevy of safeguards they have added over the years and arguing that they are not liable for content posted on their sites by third parties.

"Recently, a number of lawsuits have attempted to place the blame for teen mental health struggles squarely on social media companies," Meta said in a recent blog post. "But this oversimplifies a serious issue. Clinicians and researchers find that mental health is a deeply complex and multifaceted issue, and trends regarding teens' well-being aren't clear-cut or universal. Narrowing the challenges faced by teens to a single factor ignores the scientific research and the many stressors impacting young people today, like academic pressure, school safety, socio-economic challenges and substance abuse."

A Meta spokesperson said in a recent statement that the company strongly disagrees with the allegations outlined in the lawsuit and that it's "confident the evidence will show our longstanding commitment to supporting young people."

José Castañeda, a Google Spokesperson, said that the allegations against YouTube are "simply not true." In a statement, he said, "Providing young people with a safer, healthier experience has always been core to our work."

The case will be the first in a slew of cases beginning this year that seek to hold social media companies responsible for harming children's mental well-being. A federal bellwether trial beginning in June in Oakland, California, will be the first to represent school districts that have sued social media platforms over harms to children.

In addition, more than 40 state attorneys general have filed lawsuits against Meta, claiming it is harming young people and contributing to the youth mental health crisis by deliberately designing features on Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms. The majority of cases filed their lawsuits in federal court, but some sued in their respective states.

TikTok also faces similar lawsuits in more than a dozen states.

In New Mexico, meanwhile, opening arguments begin Monday for trial on allegations that Meta and its social media platforms have failed to protect young users from sexual exploitation, following an undercover online investigation. Attorney General Raúl Torrez in late 2023 sued Meta and Zuckerberg, who was later dropped from the suit.

Prosecutors have said that New Mexico is not seeking to hold Meta accountable for its content but rather its role in pushing out that content through complex algorithms that proliferate material that can be harmful, saying they uncovered internal documents in which Meta employees estimate that about 100,000 children every day are subjected to sexual harassment on the company's platforms.

Meta denies the civil charges while accusing Torrez of cherry-picking select documents and making "sensationalist" arguments. The company says it has consulted with parents and law enforcement to introduce built-in protections to social media accounts, along with settings and tools for parents.

Lindsey Vonn's fall explained: A reverse banked section, an unfortunate bump and an inflated air bag

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Lindsey Vonn knows the Olympic downhill course better than anyone. She's won a record 12 World Cup races on the Olympia delle Tofane track — split evenly between six downhills and six super-Gs — and has a total of 20 podium results there, stretching back to her very first podium on the entire circuit in 2004.

So how did the 41-year-old American standout lose control just 12.5 seconds into her run and crash so spectacularly at the Milan Cortina Winter Games on Sunday?

Here's what happened and why:

Critical early section

The highlight of the downhill course is the Tofana schuss, a narrow chute between two walls of Dolomite rock where the skiers accelerate to 80 mph (130 kph).

But the real key to the Olympia delle Tofane track comes above the schuss, where there's a key right turn that includes an uphill stretch. That's where Vonn went down.

"It's incredibly reverse banked," said Kristian Ghedina, the Cortina native and former racer who grew up in a home just below the finish line. "That's where your speed for the rest of the course gets determined and if you don't take the right trajectory it makes a huge difference because you end up going uphill."

Bumped into the air and clipped a gate

Vonn was fighting that reverse bank and trending slightly uphill when she got rocked into the air by a bump, causing her to clip the fourth gate with her right side.

That's when the real disaster started to unfold.

Vonn tried to twist and regain her balance in mid-air but landed awkwardly with her skis perpendicular to the fall line, ensuring a brutal fall. She tumbled over, got bounced into the air again and landed on her neck area and slid down a ways before coming to a stop in the middle of the course, away from the safety netting but clearly in serious trouble.

Hours later, Vonn underwent surgery for a broken left leg and was in stable condition.

"It's super flat after it so the goal is to be as close to that gate as possible and she really nailed the turn but she was too close to it so she got hooked into it," Norwegian skier Kajsa Vickhoff Lie said of the gate. "But that's how it is with the Olympics, you really want to be on the limit and she was a little bit over the limit."

While it's always bumpy in that section, this year the final bump is "more of a kicker," Lie noted, which is why Vonn got popped up suddenly into the air.

"I watched the video, and probably like anybody else, saw that she went through that panel, that uphill double, and for sure kicked her in the air and there was a pretty significant fall after that," head U.S. ski

coach Paul Kristofic told The Associated Press.

Organizers defend course preparation in section where Vonn crashed

Women's race director Peter Gerdol said the section where Vonn lost control was "not really more different than other years."

"This is the Cortina downhill and this year we're talking about the Olympics," he told AP. "It's awarding Olympic medals so has to be somehow challenging."

Had attention been paid to controlling the size of that bump?

"Not severely," Gerdol said. "Because actually today, all the athletes went through quite easily. Lindsey made a mistake and it happens. It can happen in any section of the course. It happened there but it could have been in another."

Mandatory air bag inflated under Vonn's racing suit

When she came to a stop, Vonn's skis were facing in opposite directions, still attached to her bindings. She then moved her left arm toward her body and was lying there alone and virtually immobile until help arrived after some tense moments. She received care for long minutes before she was airlifted away by helicopter.

The mandatory safety air bag inflated under her racing suit during the crash, supplier Dainese confirmed to the AP. The air bag, which is triggered by a complicated algorithm when racers lose control, may have softened her landing.

It was evident that the air bag had opened, because Vonn's chest appeared puffed out when she was lying on the snow.

Marco Pastore, who works on the safety system for Dainese, said the air bag deflates after about 20 seconds, so that likely happened while Vonn was lying on the snow after her crash. Eventually, Dainese will try to retrieve a sort of "black box" sensor that could reveal data on the fall.

"She was wearing it when they took her away in the helicopter," Pastore said. "So we haven't gotten the data yet."

Venezuelan opposition leader Machado says a close ally was kidnapped hours after prison release

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado on Monday said one of her closest allies was kidnapped hours after being released from prison.

The government had released several prominent opposition members from prison Sunday after lengthy politically motivated detentions. Machado said on social media that Juan Pablo Guanipa was taken around midnight in a residential neighborhood of the capital, Caracas.

"Heavily armed men, dressed in civilian clothes, arrived in four vehicles and violently took him away," she posted on X. "We demand his immediate release."

The releases of the opposition figures came as the government of acting President Delcy Rodríguez has faced mounting pressure to free hundreds of people whose detentions months or years ago have been linked to their political activities. The releases also followed a visit to Venezuela of representatives of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The government's press office did not immediately respond to a request for comment early Monday.

Rodríguez was sworn in as Venezuela's acting president after the Jan. 3 capture of then-President Nicolás Maduro by the U.S. military. Her government began releasing prisoners days later.

Some of those freed Sunday joined families waiting outside prisons for their loved ones to be released. They chanted "We are not afraid! We are not afraid!" and marched a short distance.

"I am convinced that our country has completely changed," Guanipa, a former governor, had told reporters hours after his release. "I am convinced that it is now up to all of us to focus on building a free and democratic country."

Guanipa had spent more than eight months in custody.

Venezuelan-based prisoners' rights group Foro Penal confirmed the release of at least 30 people Sunday. In addition to Guanipa, Machado's political organization said several of its members were among the released, including María Oropeza, who livestreamed her arrest by military intelligence officers as they broke into her home with a crowbar. Machado's attorney, Perkins Rocha, was also freed.

Alfredo Romero, president of Foro Penal, expressed serious concern over Guanipa's disappearance.

"So far, we have no clear information about who took him," he said on X. "We hope he will be released immediately."

Guanipa's son, Ramón, said on social media that his father was "intercepted and kidnapped" by "a group of approximately 10 unidentified people." He also described three vehicles involved in the situation.

"We demand proof of life immediately and his release," Ramón Guanipa wrote on X.

Guanipa was detained in late May and accused by Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello of participating in an alleged "terrorist group" plotting to boycott that month's legislative election. Guanipa's brother Tomás rejected the accusation, and said the arrest was meant to crack down on dissent.

"Thinking differently cannot be criminalized in Venezuela, and today, Juan Pablo Guanipa is a prisoner of conscience of this regime," Tomás Guanipa said after the arrest.

Rodríguez's government announced Jan. 8 it would free a significant number of prisoners — a central demand of the country's opposition and human rights organizations with backing from the United States — but families and rights watchdogs have criticized authorities for the slow pace of the releases.

The ruling party-controlled National Assembly last week began debating an amnesty bill that could lead to the release of hundreds of prisoners. The opposition and nongovernmental organizations have reacted with cautious optimism as well as with suggestions and demands for more information on the contents of the proposal.

National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez on Friday posted a video on Instagram showing him outside a detention center in Caracas and saying that "everyone" would be released no later than next week, once the amnesty bill is approved.

Delcy Rodríguez and Volker Türk, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke by phone in late January. His spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani, in a statement said he sent a team to the country and "offered our support to help Venezuela work on a roadmap for dialogue and reconciliation" in which human rights should be centered.

Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi looks to translate her election gains into a new conservative shift

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's gamble that her personal popularity would lead to big election gains for her struggling party paid off hugely.

On Monday, she began the process of translating that new power, made manifest in a two-thirds supermajority gained in parliamentary elections the day before, into what she hopes will be sweeping conservative legislation that will shift Japanese security, immigration, economic and social policies.

The first steps include reappointing her Cabinet and pushing forward on a delayed budget and the votes next week that will reelect her as prime minister.

Takaichi, in an interview with public television network NHK following her victory, said her efforts will make Japan strong and prosperous.

NHK, citing vote count results, said Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP, alone secured 316 seats by early Monday, comfortably surpassing a 261-seat absolute majority in the 465-member lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two-chamber parliament. That is a record since the party's foundation in 1955. With the 36 seats won by its new ally, Japan Innovation Party, the ruling coalition won 352 seats.

A smiling Takaichi placed a big red ribbon above each winner's name on a signboard at LDP headquarters as accompanying party executives applauded.

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Despite the lack of a majority in the upper house, the huge jump from the preelection share in the more powerful lower house allows Takaichi to make progress on policies that aim to boost Japan's economy and military capabilities as tensions grow with China and she tries to nurture ties with the United States.

Takaichi said she would try to gain support from the opposition while firmly pushing forward with her policy goals.

"I will be flexible," she said.

Takaichi is popular, but the LDP, which has ruled Japan for most of the last seven decades, has been hit with funding and religious scandals in recent years. She called Sunday's early election after only three months in office, hoping to turn that around while her popularity is high.

Popular leader

Takaichi, who took office as Japan's first female leader in October, pledged to "work, work, work," and her style, which is seen as both playful and tough, has resonated with younger fans who say they weren't previously interested in politics.

The opposition, despite the formation of a new centrist alliance and a rising far-right, was too splintered to be a real challenger. The new opposition alliance of LDP's former coalition partner, Buddhist-backed dovish Komeito, and the liberal-leaning Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, is projected to sink to half of their combined preelection share of 167 seats.

Takaichi was betting with this election that her LDP party, together with its new partner, the JIP, would secure a majority.

U.S. President Donald Trump in a post on his Truth Social platform Sunday congratulated Takaichi "on a LANDSLIDE Victory in today's very important Vote. She is a highly respected and very popular Leader. Sanae's bold and wise decision to call for an Election paid off big time."

Akihito Iwatake, a 53-year-old office worker, said he welcomed the big LDP win because he felt the party became too liberal in recent years. "With Takaichi shifting things more toward the conservative side, I think that brought this positive result," he said.

Takaichi's policies

Japan has recently seen far-right populists gain ground, such as the anti-globalist and surging nationalist party Sanseito. Exit polls projected a big gain for Sanseito.

The first major task for Takaichi when the lower house reconvenes in mid-February is to work on a budget bill, delayed by the election, to fund economic measures that address rising costs and sluggish wages.

Takaichi has pledged to revise security and defense policies by December to bolster Japan's offensive military capabilities, lifting a ban on weapons exports and moving further away from the country's postwar pacifist principles.

She has been pushing for tougher policies on foreigners, anti-espionage and other measures that resonate with a far-right audience, but ones that experts say could undermine civil rights.

Takaichi also wants to increase defense spending in response to Trump's pressure for Japan to spend more.

She now has time to work on these policies, without an election until 2028.

Divisive policies

Though Takaichi said she's seeking to win support for policies seen as divisive in Japan, she largely avoided discussing ways to fund soaring military spending, how to fix diplomatic tension with China and other issues.

Despite her rightward shift, Takaichi is expected to maintain good relations with South Korea, given shared concern about threats from North Korea and China. But Seoul would still worry about a Japanese attempt to revise the country's pacifist constitution or to further build up its military because of Japan's wartime past, said Leif-Eric Easley, professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul.

In her campaign speeches, Takaichi enthusiastically talked about the need for government spending to fund "crisis management investment and growth," such as measures to strengthen economic security, technology and other industries. Takaichi also seeks to push tougher measures on immigration, including stricter requirements for foreign property owners and a cap on foreign residents.

Sunday's election "underscores a problematic trend in Japanese politics in which political survival takes priority over substantive policy outcomes," said Masato Kamikubo, a Ritsumeikan University politics professor. "Whenever the government attempts necessary but unpopular reforms ... the next election looms."

Trial against Meta in New Mexico focuses on dangers of child sexual exploitation on social media

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A trial focused on the dangers of child sexual exploitation on social media and whether Meta misrepresented the safety of its platforms is set to start in New Mexico with opening statements Monday.

It's the first stand-alone trial from state prosecutors in a stream of lawsuits against major social media companies, including Meta, over harm to children, and one that is likely to highlight explicit online content and its effects.

New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez sued Meta in 2023. His team built the case by posing as kids through social media accounts, then documenting the arrival of sexual solicitations as well as the response by Meta, the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

Prosecutors say they'll provide evidence and testimony that Meta's algorithms and account features enticed and addicted young people to social media, while also creating a "breeding ground" for predators who target children for sexual exploitation. Prosecutors allege Meta failed to disclose what it knew about those harmful effects, in violation of state consumer protection laws. Meta also is accused of creating a public nuisance.

"Meta knowingly exposes children to the twin dangers of sexual exploitation and mental health harm," the lawsuit states. "Meta's motive for doing so is profit."

Meta denies any legal violations and says prosecutors are cherry-picking evidence to make sensationalist arguments. On Sunday, Meta called the state's investigation "ethically compromised" in its use of child photos on proxy accounts, delays in reporting child sexual abuse material and the disposal of data from devices used in the investigation, in social media posts on X by company spokesperson Andy Stone.

The company says lawsuits are attempting to place the blame for teen mental health struggles on social media companies in a way that oversimplifies matters. Meta says it has a longstanding commitment to supporting young people, highlighting a steady addition of account settings and tools — including safety features that give teens more information about the person they're chatting with and content restrictions based on PG-13 movie ratings.

"For over a decade, we've listened to parents, worked with experts and law enforcement, and conducted in-depth research to understand the issues that matter most," the company said in a statement. "We're proud of the progress we've made."

It's unclear whether Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg will testify at trial. New Mexico limits the ability to compel out-of-state witnesses to testify in person, while prosecutors can present testimony by Zuckerberg from a deposition.

Personal opinions of Zuckerberg and evolving attitudes toward social media loomed over jury selection from a pool of more than 200 residents of Santa Fe County, including several educators, young adults who grew up with social media and others who never signed up.

"Quite frankly, he's the tech bro making money off of all of us," one person said of Zuckerberg.

An attorney for the state warned that there would be "very sensitive and very explicit material discussed in terms of safety to children" during the trial.

More than 40 state attorneys general have filed lawsuits against Meta, claiming it is deliberately designing features that addict children to its platforms. The majority filed their lawsuits in federal court, and New Mexico's case against Meta is the first to reach trial.

Opening statements have been postponed in a bellwether trial underway in California against social video companies, including Meta's Instagram and Google's YouTube, that focuses on a 19-year-old who claims

her use of social media from an early age addicted her to technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts. TikTok and Snapchat parent company Snap Inc. settled claims in the case.

Torrez, a Democrat seeking reelection this year to a second term, has urged Meta to implement more effective age verification and remove bad actors from its platform. He's also seeking changes to algorithms that can serve up harmful material and criticizing end-to-end privacy encryption that can prevent the monitoring of communications with children for safety.

Migrants languish in US detention centers amid dire conditions and prolonged waits

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Felipe Hernandez Espinosa spent 45 days at "Alligator Alcatraz," an immigration holding center in Florida where detainees have reported worms in their food, toilets that don't flush and overflowing sewage. Mosquitoes and other insects are everywhere.

For the past five months, the 34-year-old asylum-seeker has been at an immigration detention camp at the Fort Bliss Army base in El Paso, Texas, where two migrants died in January and which has many of the same conditions, according to human rights groups. Hernandez said he asked to be returned to Nicaragua but was told he has to see a judge. After nearly seven months in detention, his hearing was scheduled for Feb. 26.

Prolonged detention has become more common in President Donald Trump's second term, at least partly because a new policy generally prohibits immigration judges from releasing detainees while their deportation cases wind through backlogged courts. Many, like Hernandez, are prepared to give up any efforts to stay in the United States.

"I came to this country thinking they would help me, and I've been detained for six months without having committed a crime," he said in a phone interview from Fort Bliss. "It is been too long. I am desperate."

The Supreme Court ruled in 2001 that Immigration and Customs Enforcement cannot hold immigrants indefinitely, finding that six months was a reasonable cap.

With the number of people in ICE detention topping 70,000 for the first time, 7,252 people had been in custody at least six months in mid-January, including 79 held for more than two years, according to agency data. That's more than double the 2,849 who were in ICE custody at least six months in December 2024, the last full month of Joe Biden's presidency.

The Trump administration is offering plane fare and \$2,600 for people who leave the country voluntarily. Yet Hernandez and others are told they can't leave detention until seeing a judge.

Legal advisers warn that these are not isolated cases

The first three detainees that attorney Ana Alicia Huerta met on her monthly trip to an ICE detention center in McFarland, California, to offer free legal advice in January said they signed a form agreeing to leave the United States but were still waiting.

"All are telling me: 'I don't understand why I'm here. I'm ready to be deported,'" said Huerta, a senior attorney at the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice. "That's an experience that I've never had before."

A Chinese man has been held for more than a year without seeing an immigration judge, even though he told authorities he was ready to be deported. In the past, Huerta said, she encountered cases like this once every three or four months.

The Department of Homeland Security did not address questions from The Associated Press about why more people are being held longer than six months.

"The conditions are so poor and so bad that people say, 'I'm going to give up,'" said Sui Cheng, executive director at Americans for Immigrant Justice.

The waiting time may depend on the country. Deportations to Mexico are routine but countries including Cuba, Nicaragua, Colombia and Venezuela have at times resisted accepting deportees.

Among those detained for months are people who have won protection under the United Nations Con-

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vention Against Torture, who cannot be deported to their home country but may be sent elsewhere.

In the past, those migrants were released and could get a work permit. Not anymore, said Sarah Houston, managing attorney at Immigrant Defenders Law Center, who has at least three clients with protection under the U.N. torture convention who have been in custody for more than six months. One is from El Salvador, detained for three years. He won his case in October 2025 but is still in custody in California.

"They're just holding these people indefinitely," said Houston, noting that every 90 days, attorneys request the release of these migrants and ICE denies those requests. "We're seeing people who actually win their immigration cases just languishing in jail."

The Nicaraguan who wants to be deported

Hernandez, who doesn't have a lawyer, said he signed documents requesting to be returned to his country or Mexico at least five times. An Oct. 9 hearing was abruptly canceled without explanation. He waited months with no news, until early February, when he learned his new hearing date.

Hernandez, who has allergies and needs a gluten-free diet that he says he hasn't been getting since November, was arrested in July on a lunch break from his job installing power generators in South Florida. His wife was detained with him but a judge allowed her to return to Nicaragua without a formal deportation order on Aug. 28.

Both crossed the Mexican border in 2022 and requested asylum. He said he received death threats after participating in marches against co-presidents and spouses Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

If he returns, they plan to go to Panama or Spain because they fear for their lives in Nicaragua, he said. His files say only that his case is pending.

The Dominican who became a father while in detention

Yshael Almonte Mejia has been detained eight months since the government sought dismissal of his asylum case in May 2025, said his aunt, Judith Mejia Lanfranco.

Since then, he has been transferred from a detention center in Florida to Texas to New Mexico.

In November, Almonte married his pregnant American girlfriend via a video call and became the father of a daughter he hasn't seen in person. He was unable to attend the funeral of his sister who died in November.

"He has gone through depression. He has been very bad," his aunt said. "He is desperate and he doesn't even know what's going to happen."

Almonte, 29, came to the U.S. in 2024 and told authorities he cannot return to the Dominican Republic because he fears for his life. In January, he passed his initial asylum screening interview.

A Mexican man detained for a year

Some detainees are finding relief in federal court.

A Mexican man detained in October 2024 in Florida was held for a year even though he won a protection under the U.N. torture convention in March 2025.

"Time was passing and I was desperate, afraid that they would send me to another country," said the 38-year-old, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of being detained again.

"I didn't know what was going to happen to me," he said, noting that immigration officials weren't giving him any answers.

The man said he had lived illegally in the United States from age 10 until he was deported. In Mexico, he ran his own business, but in 2023 decided to return and illegally crossed the border into the United States. He said he was looking for safety after being threatened by drug cartels who demanded monthly payments.

He was taking antidepressants when he found an attorney who filed a petition in federal court alleging he was being held illegally. He was freed in October 2025, seven months after a judge ordered his release.

But for Hernandez, the Nicaraguan asylum-seeker, desperation led him to request to be returned to the country he had fled.

"I've experienced a lot of trauma. It's very difficult," Hernandez said from Fort Bliss. "I'm always thinking about when I'm going to get out."

Prime Minister Takaichi's party wins a supermajority in Japan's lower house

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's governing party secured a two-thirds supermajority in parliamentary elections, Japanese media reported, citing preliminary results. The landslide victory was due, in large part, to the extraordinary popularity of Japan's first female prime minister, and allows her to pursue a significant conservative shift in Japan's security, immigration and other policies.

Takaichi, in a televised interview with public television network NHK following her victory, said she will emphasize policies meant to make Japan strong and prosperous.

NHK, citing vote count results, said Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP, alone secured 316 seats by early Monday, comfortably surpassing a 261-seat absolute majority in the 465-member lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two-chamber parliament. That marks a record since the party's foundation in 1955 and surpasses the previous record of 300 seats won in 1986 by late Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone.

With 36 seats won by its new ally, Japan Innovation Party, Takaichi's ruling coalition has won 352 seats.

A smiling Takaichi placed a big red ribbon above each winner's name on a signboard at the LDP's headquarters, as accompanying party executives applauded.

Despite the lack of a majority in the upper house, the huge jump from the preelection share in the superior lower house would allow Takaichi to make progress on a right-wing agenda that aims to boost Japan's economy and military capabilities as tensions grow with China and she tries to nurture ties with the United States.

Takaichi said she would try to gain support from the opposition while firmly pushing forward with her policy goals.

"I will be flexible," she said.

Takaichi is popular, but the LDP, which has ruled Japan for most of the last seven decades, has struggled with funding and religious scandals in recent years. She called Sunday's early election after only three months in office, hoping to turn that around while her popularity is high.

Popular leader

The ultraconservative Takaichi, who took office as Japan's first female leader in October, pledged to "work, work, work," and her style, which is seen as both playful and tough, has resonated with younger fans who say they weren't previously interested in politics.

The opposition, despite the formation of a new centrist alliance and a rising far-right, was too splintered to be a real challenger. The new opposition alliance of LDP's former coalition partner, Buddhist-backed dovish Komeito, and the liberal-leaning Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, is projected to sink to half of their combined preelection share of 167 seats.

Takaichi was betting with this election that her LDP party, together with its new partner, the JIP, would secure a majority.

Trump in a post on his Truth Social platform Sunday congratulated Takaichi "on a LANDSLIDE Victory in today's very important Vote. She is a highly respected and very popular Leader. Sanae's bold and wise decision to call for an Election paid off big time."

Akihito Iwatake, a 53-year-old office worker, said he welcomed the big win by the LDP because he felt the party went too liberal in the past few years. "With Takaichi shifting things more toward the conservative side, I think that brought this positive result," he said.

Takaichi's policies

The LDP's right-wing partner, JIP leader Hirofumi Yoshimura, has said his party will serve as an "accelerator" for Takaichi's push to conservative policies.

Japan has recently seen far-right populists gain ground, such as the anti-globalist and surging nationalist party Sanseito. Exit polls projected a big gain for Sanseito.

The first major task for Takaichi when the lower house reconvenes in mid-February is to work on a budget bill, delayed by the election, to fund economic measures that address rising costs and sluggish wages.

Takaichi has pledged to revise security and defense policies by December to bolster Japan's offensive military capabilities, lifting a ban on weapons exports and moving further away from the country's postwar pacifist principles.

She has been pushing for tougher policies on foreigners, anti-espionage and other measures that resonate with a far-right audience, but ones that experts say could undermine civil rights.

Takaichi also wants to increase defense spending in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's pressure for Japan to loosen its purse strings.

She now has time to work on these policies, without an election until 2028.

Divisive policies

Though Takaichi said that she's seeking to win support for policies seen as divisive in Japan, she largely avoided discussing ways to fund soaring military spending, how to fix diplomatic tension with China and other issues.

Despite her rightward shift, Takaichi is expected to maintain good relations with South Korea, given shared worries about threats from North Korea and China. But Seoul would worry about a Japanese attempt to revise the country's pacifist constitution or to further build up its military because of Japan's wartime past, said Leif-Eric Easley, professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul.

In her campaign speeches, Takaichi enthusiastically talked about the need for government spending to fund "crisis management investment and growth," such as measures to strengthen economic security, technology and other industries. Takaichi also seeks to push tougher measures on immigration, including stricter requirements for foreign property owners and a cap on foreign residents.

Sunday's election "underscores a problematic trend in Japanese politics in which political survival takes priority over substantive policy outcomes," said Masato Kamikubo, a Ritsumeikan University politics professor. "Whenever the government attempts necessary but unpopular reforms ... the next election looms."

Venezuela frees several opposition members after lengthy politically motivated detentions

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela's government on Sunday released from prison several prominent opposition members, including one of the closest allies of Nobel Peace Prize laureate María Corina Machado, after lengthy politically motivated detentions.

Their releases come as the government of acting President Delcy Rodríguez faces mounting pressure to free hundreds of people whose detentions months or years ago have been linked to their political activities. They also follow a visit to Venezuela of representatives of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Rodríguez was sworn in as Venezuela's acting president after the Jan. 3 capture of then-President Nicolás Maduro by the U.S. military. Her government began releasing prisoners days later.

Some of those freed Sunday joined families waiting outside prisons for their loved ones to be released. They chanted "We are not afraid! We are not afraid!" and marched a short distance.

"I am convinced that our country has completely changed," Juan Pablo Guanipa, a Machado ally and former governor, told reporters hours after his release. "I am convinced that it is now up to all of us to focus on building a free and democratic country."

Guanipa spent more than eight months in custody.

Venezuelan-based prisoners' rights group Foro Penal confirmed the release of at least 30 people Sunday.

In addition to Guanipa, Machado's political organization said several of its members were among the released, including María Oropeza, who livestreamed her arrest by military intelligence officers as they broke into her home with a crowbar. Machado's attorney, Perkins Rocha, was also freed.

"Let's go for the freedom of Venezuela!" Machado posted on X.

Guanipa was detained in late May and accused by Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello of participating in an alleged "terrorist group" plotting to boycott that month's legislative election. Guanipa's brother Tomás rejected the accusation, and said the arrest was meant to crack down on dissent.

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"Thinking differently cannot be criminalized in Venezuela, and today, Juan Pablo Guanipa is a prisoner of conscience of this regime," Tomás Guanipa said after the arrest.

Rodríguez's government announced Jan. 8 it would free a significant number of prisoners — a central demand of the country's opposition and human rights organizations with backing from the United States — but families and rights watchdogs have criticized authorities for the slow pace of the releases.

The ruling party-controlled National Assembly this week began debating an amnesty bill that could lead to the release of hundreds of prisoners. The opposition and nongovernmental organizations have reacted with cautious optimism as well as with suggestions and demands for more information on the contents of the proposal.

National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez on Friday posted a video on Instagram showing him outside a detention center in Caracas and saying that "everyone" would be released no later than next week, once the amnesty bill is approved.

Delcy Rodríguez and Volker Türk, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke by phone in late January. His spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani, in a statement said he "offered our support to help Venezuela work on a roadmap for dialogue and reconciliation in which human rights should be at the centre" and then "deployed a team" to the South American country.

Machado remains in exile after leaving Venezuela in December. After she was briefly detained in January 2025, she had not been seen in public for 11 months when she appeared in Norway after the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony.

Juan Pablo Guanipa on Sunday said Machado "exercises undeniable leadership" and is needed in Venezuela along with other exiled political leaders to move the country forward. He, Oropeza and others who were released within hours of each other visited detention centers in Caracas, where they called for the release of all prisoners detained for political reasons.

"It is a bittersweet happiness because I know that many are still imprisoned," Oropeza said outside Helicoide, the notorious prison where she was held after her August 2024 detention. "And I want to tell you that one of the reasons we were unjustly imprisoned for more than a year in that place is the same reason we walked out today: To fight for the liberation of our beloved Venezuela and for the liberation of all political prisoners.

"Because there are no bars that can silence us."

Russian airstrike on Ukrainian city kills 1 as US pushes June deadline for peace deal

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian airstrike on a residential area in eastern Ukraine killed one person and wounded two, officials said Sunday, after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the U.S. has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a peace deal.

The attack on the city of Kramatorsk in Ukraine's Donetsk region caused a fire in a nine-story apartment block, according to Ukraine's State Emergency Service.

Russia also struck energy infrastructure in Ukraine's Poltava region overnight into Sunday, Serhii Kortsykyi, chief executive of Ukraine's state-owned gas company Naftogaz said.

Russia has hammered Ukraine's power grid, especially in winter, throughout the nearly 4-year-old war. It aims to weaken the Ukrainian will to resist in a strategy that Kyiv officials call "weaponizing winter."

Zelenskyy told reporters Friday the U.S. has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a deal to end the war. If the June deadline is not met, the Trump administration will likely put pressure on both sides, he added.

"The Americans are proposing the parties end the war by the beginning of this summer and will probably put pressure on the parties precisely according to this schedule," Zelenskyy said. "And they say that they want to do everything by June. And they will do everything to end the war. And they want a clear schedule of all events."

He said the U.S. proposed holding the next round of trilateral talks next week in their country for the

first time, likely in Miami. "We confirmed our participation," he added.

The latest deadline follows U.S.-brokered trilateral talks in Abu Dhabi that produced no breakthrough as the sides cling to mutually exclusive demands. Russia is pressing Ukraine to withdraw from the Donbas, where fighting remains intense — a condition Kyiv says it will never accept.

Iran sentences Nobel laureate Narges Mohammadi to 7 more years in prison

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran sentenced Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi to over seven more years in prison after she began a hunger strike, supporters said Sunday, as Tehran cracks down on all dissent following nationwide protests and the deaths of thousands at the hands of security forces.

The new convictions against Mohammadi come as Iran tries to negotiate with the United States over its nuclear program to avert a threatened military strike by U.S. President Donald Trump. Iran's top diplomat insisted Sunday that Tehran's strength came from its ability to "say no to the great powers," striking a maximalist position just after negotiations in Oman with the U.S.

Mohammadi's supporters cited her lawyer, who spoke to Mohammadi. The lawyer, Mostafa Nili, confirmed the sentence on X, saying it had been handed down Saturday by a Revolutionary Court in the city of Mashhad. Such courts typically issue verdicts with little or no opportunity for defendants to contest their charges.

"She has been sentenced to six years in prison for 'gathering and collusion' and one and a half years for propaganda and two-year travel ban," he wrote. She received another two years of internal exile to the city of Khosf, some 740 kilometers (460 miles) southeast of Tehran, the capital, the lawyer added.

Agnes Callamard, the secretary-general of Amnesty International, wrote on X that Mohammadi's sentence was "a reflection of the skyrocketing lethal repression against dissent and protests waged by the authorities."

Iran did not acknowledge the sentence. Supporters say Mohammadi has been on a hunger strike since Feb. 2 and ended it Sunday after her sentencing over her worsening health. She had been arrested in December at a ceremony honoring Khosrow Alikordi, a 46-year-old Iranian lawyer and human rights advocate who had been based in Mashhad. Footage from the demonstration showed her shouting, demanding justice for Alikordi and others.

Mohammadi a symbol for Iranian activists

Supporters had warned for months before her December arrest that Mohammadi, 53, was at risk of being put back into prison after she received a furlough in December 2024 over medical concerns.

While that was to be only three weeks, Mohammadi's time out of prison lengthened, possibly as activists and Western powers pushed Iran to keep her free. She remained out even during the 12-day war in June between Iran and Israel.

Mohammadi still kept up her activism with public protests and international media appearances, including even demonstrating at one point in front of Tehran's notorious Evin prison, where she had been held.

Mohammadi had been serving 13 years and nine months on charges of collusion against state security and propaganda against Iran's government. She also had backed the nationwide protests sparked by the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, which have seen women openly defy the government by not wearing the hijab.

Mohammadi suffered multiple heart attacks while imprisoned before undergoing emergency surgery in 2022, her supporters say. Her lawyer in late 2024 revealed doctors had found a bone lesion that they feared could be cancerous that later was removed.

"Considering her illnesses, it is expected that she will be temporarily released on bail so that she can receive treatment," Nili wrote.

However, Iranian officials have been signaling a harder line against all dissent since the demonstrations. Speaking on Sunday, Iranian judiciary chief Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei made comments suggesting harsh

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prison sentences awaited many.

"Look at some individuals who once were with the revolution and accompanied the revolution," he said. "Today, what they are saying, what they are writing, what statements they issue, they are unfortunate, they are forlorn (and) they will face damage."

Foreign minister strikes hard-line tone

The news about Mohammadi came as Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking to diplomats at a summit in Tehran, signaled that Iran would stick to its position that it must be able to enrich uranium — a major point of contention with Trump, who bombed Iranian atomic sites in June during the 12-day Iran-Israel war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to travel to Washington this week, with Iran expected to be the major subject of discussion, his office said.

While Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian praised the talks Friday in Oman with the Americans as "a step forward," Araghchi's remarks show the challenge ahead. Already, the U.S. moved the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, ships and warplanes to the Middle East to pressure Iran into an agreement and have the firepower necessary to strike the Islamic Republic should Trump choose to do so.

"I believe the secret of the Islamic Republic of Iran's power lies in its ability to stand against bullying, domination and pressures from others," Araghchi said. "They fear our atomic bomb, while we are not pursuing an atomic bomb. Our atomic bomb is the power to say no to the great powers. The secret of the Islamic Republic's power is in the power to say no to the powers."

'Atomic bomb' as rhetorical device

Araghchi's choice to explicitly use an "atomic bomb" as a rhetorical device likely wasn't accidental. While Iran has long maintained its nuclear program is peaceful, the West and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Tehran had an organized military program to seek the bomb up until 2003.

Iran had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a short, technical step to weapons-grade levels of 90%, the only nonweapons state to do so. Iranian officials in recent years had also been increasingly threatening that the Islamic Republic could seek the bomb, even while its diplomats have pointed to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's preachings as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran wouldn't build one.

It remains unclear when and where, or if, there will be a second round of nuclear talks. Trump, after the talks Friday, offered few details but said: "Iran looks like they want to make a deal very badly — as they should."

Meanwhile, Iran issued a warning to pilots it planned "rocket launches" Monday into Tuesday in an area over the country's Semnan province, home to the Imam Khomeini Spaceport. Such launches have corresponded in the past with Iran marking the anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Lindsey Vonn breaks leg in downhill crash at Winter Olympics, in stable condition at hospital

By ANDREW DAMPF and PAT GRAHAM AP Sports Writers

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Lindsey Vonn's defiant bid to win the Winter Olympic downhill at the age of 41, on a rebuilt right knee and a badly injured left knee, ended Sunday in a frightening crash that left her with a broken leg and saw her taken to safety by a rescue helicopter for the second time in nine days.

Vonn lost control within moments of leaving the start house, clipping a gate with her right shoulder and pinwheeling down the slope before ending up awkwardly on her back, her skis crisscrossed below her and her screams ringing out soon after medical personnel arrived. She was treated for long, anguished minutes as a hush fell over the crowd waiting far below at the finish line.

She was strapped to a gurney and flown away, possibly ending the skier's storied career. She was taken to a clinic in Cortina, then transferred to a larger hospital in Treviso, a two-hour drive to the south.

She was being "treated by a multidisciplinary team" and "underwent an orthopedic operation to stabilize a fracture reported in her left leg," the Ca' Foncello hospital said in a statement. The U.S. Ski Team said

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Vonn was "in stable condition and in good hands with a team of American and Italian physicians."

"She'll be OK, but it's going to be a bit of a process," said Anouk Patty, chief of sport for U.S. Ski and Snowboard. "This sport's brutal and people need to remember when they're watching (that) these athletes are throwing themselves down a mountain and going really, really fast."

Breezy Johnson, Vonn's teammate, became only the second American woman to win the Olympic downhill after Vonn did it 16 years ago. The 30-year-old Johnson held off Emma Aicher of Germany and Italy's Sofia Goggia on a bittersweet day for the team.

"I don't claim to know what she's going through, but I do know what it is to be here, to be fighting for the Olympics, and to have this course burn you and to watch those dreams die," said Johnson, whose injury in Cortina in 2022 ruined her hopes of skiing in the Beijing Olympics. "I can't imagine the pain that she's going through and it's not the physical pain — we can deal with physical pain — but the emotional pain is something else."

Vonn had family in the stands, including her father, Alan Kildow, who stared down at the ground while his daughter was being treated after just 13 seconds on the course where she holds a record 12 World Cup titles. Others in the crowd, including rapper Snoop Dogg, watched quietly as the star skier was finally taken off the course. Fellow American star Mikaela Shiffrin posted a broken heart emoji on social media.

Vonn's crash was "tragic, but it's ski racing," said Johan Eliasch, president of the International Ski and Snowboard Federation.

"I can only say thank you for what she has done for our sport," he said, "because this race has been the talk of the Games and it's put our sport in the best possible light."

All eyes had been on Vonn, the feel-good story heading into the Olympics. She returned to elite ski racing last season after nearly six years, a remarkable decision given her age but she also had a partial titanium knee replacement in her right knee, too. Many wondered how she would fare as she sought a gold medal to join the one she won in the downhill at the 2010 Vancouver Games.

The four-time overall World Cup champion stunned everyone by being a contender almost immediately. She came to the Olympics as the leader in the World Cup downhill standings and was a gold-medal favorite before her crash in Switzerland nine days ago, when she suffered her latest knee injury. In addition to a ruptured ACL, she also had a bone bruise and meniscus damage.

Still, no one counted her out even then. In truth, she has skied through injuries for three decades at the top of the sport. In 2006, ahead of the Turin Olympics, Vonn took a bad fall during downhill training and went to the hospital. She competed less than 48 hours later, racing in all four events she'd planned, with a top result of seventh in the super-G.

Cortina has had many treasured memories for Vonn beyond the record wins. She is called the queen of Cortina, and the Olympia delle Tofana is a course that had always suited Vonn. She tested out the knee twice in downhill training runs over the past three days before the awful crash on Sunday in clear, sunny conditions.

"This would be the best comeback I've done so far," Vonn said before the race. "Definitely the most dramatic."

The drama was of a different sort this time. Not since perhaps Hermann Maier's cartwheeling crash at the 1998 Nagano Games had there been such a high-profile and spectacular fall in Alpine skiing at the Olympics.

"Dear Lindsey, we're all thinking of you. You are an incredible inspiration, and will always be an Olympic champion," International Olympic Committee president Kirsty Coventry said.

News of the crash spread quickly, including to the fan zone down the mountain in Cortina.

"It's such a huge loss and bummer," American Megan Gunyou said. "I feel like hearing her story and just like the redemption of her first fall and like fighting to come back to the Olympics this year, I mean, I feel so sad for her."

Dan Wilton of Vancouver, Canada, watched the race from the stands.

"It was frightening," he said. "Really, your heart goes out for such a champion who is coming to the end

of her career. Everyone wanted a successful finish.”

Investigation continues a week after Savannah Guthrie mother was reported missing

By TY O'NEIL Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — The urgent investigation into the apparent kidnapping of 84-year-old Nancy Guthrie continued Sunday, a week after the mother of “Today” show host Savannah Guthrie was reported missing in Arizona.

Savannah Guthrie solemnly told the potential kidnapers in a social media video released Saturday that the family was prepared to pay for her safe return. Flanked by her siblings, Guthrie said “we received your message” and that: “This is the only way we will have peace. This is very valuable to us, and we will pay.”

An FBI spokesman said Savannah Guthrie was referring to a message that was sent to the Tucson-based television station KOLD on Friday. The station declined to share details about the message’s contents as the FBI conducted its review.

Detectives and agents continued to perform follow-up work at multiple locations as part of the investigation, according to an email Sunday from the Pima County Sheriff’s Department. The agency said in the email to media that it would not yet provide details about that work.

“Investigators have not identified any suspects, persons of interest, or vehicles connected to this case,” read the email.

Two marked sheriff’s cars and another vehicle arrived at Nancy Guthrie’s house around midday Sunday and at least two people went to the back of the home for more than 20 minutes before leaving without comment.

Investigators believe Nancy Guthrie was taken against her will last weekend from her home just outside Tucson. DNA tests showed blood on Guthrie’s front porch was a match to her, Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos has said.

Multiple press outlets have received alleged ransom letters during the past week. At least one letter made monetary demands and established Thursday evening and Monday evening as deadlines. Law enforcement officials declined to affirm that the letters were credible but said all tips were being investigated seriously.

The disappearance of the well-known TV host’s mother has fixated Americans over the past week. Candles remained lit early Sunday near Nancy Guthrie’s home, next to a sign expressing support for the family.

The White House said President Donald Trump called and spoke with Savannah Guthrie last week. The president told reporters on Friday that there are clues in the case “that I think are very strong.”

Authorities say they have growing concerns about Nancy Guthrie’s health because she needs daily medication. She is said to have a pacemaker and has dealt with high blood pressure and heart issues, according to sheriff’s dispatcher audio on broadcastify.com.

The video released Saturday was the third this week that pleaded with potential kidnapers.

Breezy Johnson and Ilia Malinin star for US at Milan Cortina Olympics as Lindsey Vonn crashes

By KEN MAGUIRE AP Sports Writer

MILAN (AP) — The crash. The gasps. The helicopter.

Lindsey Vonn’s frightening fall in the women’s downhill at the Milan Cortina Olympics couldn’t help but overshadow U.S. teammate Breezy Johnson’s feat — winning her country’s first gold medal at these Games.

Johnson’s victory Sunday in Cortina wasn’t the Olympic comeback story everyone expected, as the focus was on Vonn going for gold despite a torn ACL. Even as Johnson sat in the leader’s box on the verge of securing her first Olympic gold medal, her emotions swung from anticipation to anguish when Vonn went down.

“It was one of the most heartbreaking moments of my life,” Johnson said.

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Still, the 30-year-old Johnson became only the second American woman to win the Olympic downhill — Vonn won it in 2010 — and it came after her own injury concerns as well as a 14-month ban for violating “whereabouts” rules when it comes to testing for doping.

Sometimes, she said, “you just have to keep going because that’s the only option.”

Ilia Malinin the ‘Quad God’ delivers for US

No delays this time.

The U.S. defended its team figure skating gold medal by edging Japan on Sunday.

Ilia Malinin beat rival Shun Sato in a head-to-head showdown to break a deadlock in the final session of the competition. The U.S. ended up with 69 points while Japan finished with 68.

Malinin, nicknamed the “Quad God,” landed five quadruple jumps and scored 200.03 points for his free skate. Sato followed him with three quads in his program, but he could only manage 194.86 points, leaving the Japanese with a second straight silver medal in the team event.

Four years ago, the Americans — and Japanese — were denied a medal ceremony in Beijing because of a lengthy investigation into Russian doping, which kept them from receiving their medals until the 2024 Summer Games in Paris.

Italy celebrates big haul of medals

Must be the home cooking.

Host nation Italy won six medals Sunday — five bronze and one silver — the most Italy has ever won in a single day at the Winter Olympics.

The Italy team delivered the silver medal in the mixed relay biathlon race.

Downhill skier Sofia Goggia won Italy’s first bronze medal of the day, followed by Lucia Dalmasso’s third place in snowboarding’s parallel giant slalom. Riccardo Lorello claimed bronze in the men’s speedskating 5,000 meters.

Dominik Fischnaller took bronze in men’s singles luge before Italy rallied for third place in the figure skating team event.

That followed Italy’s Day 1 total of three medals, led by speedskater Francesca Lollobrigida’s gold in the 3,000 meters.

NHL players arrive in Milan

Five charter planes carrying NHL players — including Canada’s Sidney Crosby — arrived in Milan on Sunday morning from New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport. This is the first Olympics with NHL players since the Sochi Games in 2014.

Sweden was the first of the teams comprised of almost exclusively NHL players to take the ice for practice at Milano Santagiulia Arena, followed by the U.S., Czechia, Canada and Finland.

The 12-team men’s tournament starts Wednesday. The U.S. and Canada are the heavy favorites, and both teams begin their campaigns Thursday. The Americans face Latvia. Canada plays Czechia.

Finland is the defending champion, but Canada has won each of the past two Olympics with NHL players.

Big favorite Ledecka stunned in snowboarding

No surprise that a Czech racer won snowboarding’s parallel giant slalom Sunday in Livigno. The shocker was that it wasn’t Ester Ledecka.

Ledecka, who was trying to become the first snowboarder to win gold medals at three straight Olympics, lost her quarterfinal race by 0.06 seconds to Austria’s Sabine Payer.

The gold medal went to Ledecka’s teammate, 22-year-old Zuzana Maderova. It was her first victory in a major event. Payer took the silver medal. Italy’s Lucia Dalmasso won bronze.

Ledecka hadn’t lost a PGS World Cup race in almost two years.

Early hours in Italy for Super Bowl

There’s plenty of interest here in the Super Bowl, even if the game kicks off Monday at 12:30 a.m. in Italy. A couple of sports pubs in Milan said on Sunday that they’re fully booked and will turn away walk-ups. The New England Patriots face the Seattle Seahawks in Santa Clara, California.

A few days before competing in Sunday’s women’s downhill, American skier Jacqueline Wiles noted that

she's a "big, big fan" of the Seahawks. A native of Portland, Oregon, Wiles finished tied for fourth on Sunday, just missing out on a bronze medal.

US Olympians speaking up about politics at home face online backlash — including from Trump

By FERNANDA FIGUEROA The Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump on Sunday said that it is hard to cheer for American Olympians who are speaking out against administration policies, calling one such critic "a real Loser" who perhaps should have stayed home.

It was the latest and most prominent example of U.S. Olympians at the Milan Cortina Games inviting online backlash with their words.

Reporters on Friday asked U.S. athletes at a news conference how they feel representing the country during the Trump administration's heightened immigration enforcement actions. Freestyle skier Hunter Hess replied that he had mixed emotions since he doesn't agree with the situation, and that he is in Milan competing on behalf of everyone who helped get him to The Games.

"If it aligns with my moral values, I feel like I'm representing it," Hess said. "Just because I'm wearing the flag doesn't mean I represent everything that's going on in the U.S."

Among those who piled on Hess were YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul.

"From all true Americans if you don't want to represent this country go live somewhere else," he wrote on X, where he has 4.4 million followers. Minutes later, he was photographed sitting beside U.S. Vice President JD Vance at the U.S. women's hockey game in Olympic host city Milan.

Trump said the next day that Hess' comments make it hard to root for him.

"Hess, a real Loser, says he doesn't represent his Country in the current Winter Olympics. If that's the case, he shouldn't have tried out for the Team, and it's too bad he's on it," he wrote on his Truth Social account.

Hess wasn't the only athlete voicing discontent — or facing blowback

At Friday's news conference with the athletes, freestyle skier Chris Lillis referenced Immigration and Customs Enforcement, saying he's "heartbroken" about what is happening in the U.S.

"I think that, as a country, we need to focus on respecting everybody's rights and making sure that we're treating our citizens as well as anybody, with love and respect," Lillis said. "I hope that when people look at athletes compete in the Olympics, they realize that that's the America that we're trying to represent."

And U.S. figure skater Amber Glenn said the LGBTQ+ community has had a hard time during the Trump administration.

In addition to Paul, conservative figures criticizing the athletes on social media include former NFL quarterback Brett Favre, actor Rob Schneider and U.S. Rep. Byron Donalds — who Trump has endorsed for the Florida gubernatorial race in November. And there was a flood of vitriol directed at them from ordinary Americans.

Glenn posted on Instagram that she had received "a scary amount of hate / threats for simply using my voice WHEN ASKED about how I feel." She added that she will start limiting her social media use for her well-being.

In response to questions from The Associated Press, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee said in a statement Sunday that it is aware of an increasing amount of abusive and harmful messages directed toward the athletes and was doing its best to remove content and report credible threats to law enforcement.

"The USOPC stands firmly behind Team USA athletes and remains committed to their well-being and safety, both on and off the field of play," it said.

Anti-ICE protests in Italy

Support for the U.S. abroad has eroded as the Trump administration has pursued an aggressive posture on foreign policy, including punishing tariffs, military action in Venezuela and threats to invade Greenland.

During the opening ceremony, Team USA athletes were cheered on, but jeers and whistles could be heard as Vance and his wife, second lady Usha Vance, were shown on the stadium screens, waving American flags from the tribune.

In Milan, several demonstrations have broken out against the local deployment of ICE agents — even after clarification that they are from an investigations unit that is completely separate from the enforcement unit at the forefront of the immigration crackdown in the U.S.

Homeland Security Investigations, an ICE unit that focuses on cross-border crimes, frequently sends its officers to overseas events like the Olympics to assist with security. The ICE arm seen in the streets of the U.S. is known as Enforcement and Removal Operations, and there is no indication its officers were sent to Italy.

A demonstration on Saturday featured thousands of protesters. Toward its end, a small number of them clashed with police, who fired tear gas and a water cannon. That followed another one last week, when hundreds protested the deployment of ICE agents.

'Take the vaccine, please,' a top US health official says in an appeal as measles cases rise

By MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A leading U.S. health official on Sunday urged people to get inoculated against the measles at a time of outbreaks across several states and as the United States is at risk of losing its measles elimination status.

"Take the vaccine, please," said Dr. Mehmet Oz, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services administrator whose boss has raised suspicion about the safety and importance of vaccines. "We have a solution for our problem."

Oz, a heart surgeon, defended some recently revised federal vaccine recommendations as well as past comments from President Donald Trump and the nation's health chief, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., about the efficacy of vaccines. From Oz, there was a clear message on the measles.

"Not all illnesses are equally dangerous and not all people are equally susceptible to those illnesses," he told CNN's "State of the Union." "But measles is one you should get your vaccine."

An outbreak in South Carolina in the hundreds has surpassed the recorded case count in Texas' 2025 outbreak, and there is also one on the Utah-Arizona border. Multiple other states have had confirmed cases this year. The outbreaks have mostly impacted children and have come as infectious disease experts warn that rising public distrust of vaccines generally may be contributing to the spread of a disease once declared eradicated by public health officials.

Asked in the television interview whether people should fear the measles, Oz replied, "Oh, for sure." He said Medicare and Medicaid will continue to cover the measles vaccine as part of the insurance programs.

"There will never be a barrier to Americans get access to the measles vaccine. And it is part of the core schedule," Oz said.

But Oz also said "we have advocated for measles vaccines all along" and that Kennedy "has been on the very front of this."

Questions about vaccines did not come up later in a Kennedy interview on Fox News Channel's "The Sunday Briefing," where he was asked about what kind of Super Bowl snack he might have (probably yogurt). He also he eats steak with sauerkraut in the mornings.

Critics of Kennedy have argued that the health secretary's longtime skepticism of U.S. vaccine recommendations and past sympathy for the unfounded claim that vaccines may cause autism may influence official public health guidance in ways contrary to the medical consensus.

Oz argued that Kennedy's stance was supportive of the measles vaccine despite Kennedy's general comments about the recommended vaccine schedule.

"When the first outbreak happened in Texas, he said, get your vaccines for measles, because that's an example of an ailment that you should get vaccinated against," Oz said.

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The Republican administration last month dropped some vaccine recommendations for children, an overhaul of the traditional vaccine schedule that the Department of Health and Human Services said was in response to a request from Trump.

Trump asked the agency to review how peer nations approach vaccine recommendations and consider revising U.S. guidance accordingly.

States, not the federal government, have the authority to require vaccinations for schoolchildren. While federal requirements often influence those state regulations, some states have begun creating their own alliances to counter the administration's guidance on vaccines.

U.S. vaccination rates have dropped and the share of children with exemptions has reached an all-time high, according to federal data. At the same time, rates of diseases that can be protected against with vaccines, such as measles and whooping cough, are rising across the country.

Kennedy's past anti-vaccine activism

Kennedy's past skepticism of vaccines has come under scrutiny since Trump first nominated him to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

During his Senate confirmation testimony last year, Kennedy told lawmakers that a closely scrutinized 2019 trip he took to Samoa, which came before a devastating measles outbreak, had "nothing to do with vaccines."

But documents obtained by The Guardian and The Associated Press undermine that testimony. Emails sent by staffers at the U.S. Embassy and the United Nations said that Kennedy sought to meet with top Samoan officials during his trip to the Pacific island nation.

Samoa officials later said Kennedy's trip bolstered the credibility of anti-vaccine activists before the measles outbreak, which sickened thousands of people and killed 83, mostly children under age 5.

Mixed messaging on autism, vaccines

Oz's comments mark a broader pattern among administration officials of voicing discordant and at times contradictory statements about the efficacy of vaccines amid an overhaul of U.S. public health policy.

Officials have walked a fine line in criticizing past U.S. vaccine policy, often at times appearing to express sympathy for unfounded conspiracy theories from anti-vaccine activists, while also not straying too far from established science.

During a Senate hearing Tuesday, Jay Bhattacharya, the director of the National Institutes of Health, said no single vaccine causes autism, but he did not rule out the possibility that research may find some combination of vaccines could have negative health side effects.

But Kennedy, in Senate testimony, has argued that a link between vaccines and autism has not been disproved.

He has previously claimed that some components of vaccines, like the mercury-containing preservative thimerosal, may cause childhood neurological disorders such as autism. Most vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella do not contain thimerosal. A federal vaccine advisory board overhauled by Kennedy last year voted to no longer recommend thimerosal-containing vaccines.

Administration public health officials often cite the need to restore trust in public health systems after the coronavirus pandemic, when vaccine policy and the general public health response to the deadly pandemic became a highly polarizing topic in American politics.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories about the public health system also spread during the pandemic, and longtime anti-vaccine activist groups saw a swell in interest from the wider public.

Kennedy, who for years led the anti-vaccine activist group Children's Health Defense, has been criticized for ordering reviews of vaccines and public health guidelines that leading medical research groups have deemed settled science.

Public health experts also criticized the president for making unfounded claims about highly politicized health issues. During a September Oval Office event, Trump asserted without evidence that Tylenol and vaccines are linked to a rise in the incidence of autism in the United States.

'Melania' falls steeply and 'Send Help' holds steady at No. 1 on a quiet weekend in theaters

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Hollywood largely ceded attention to football over a slow box-office weekend, with the survival thriller "Send Help" repeating as No. 1 in ticket sales and the Melania Trump documentary "Melania" falling sharply in its second weekend.

Super Bowl weekend is typically one of the lowest attended moviegoing times of the year. It was the second slowest weekend last year and in 2024 it ranked dead last for moviegoing.

Studios instead put their focus on advertising movies for the massive television audience. Among the trailers expected to hit the NFL broadcast Sunday were The Walt Disney Co.'s "Mandalorian and Grogu," Lionsgate's Michael Jackson biopic, "Michael" and Universal Pictures' "The Super Mario Galaxy Movie."

In North American theaters, the Disney-20th Century Studios release "Send Help," directed by Sam Raimi, lead all films with \$10 million in its second weekend, according to studio estimates Sunday. With \$53.7 million globally thus far, the R-rated survival thriller has proved a solid midbudget success. Disney meanwhile watched its remarkably long-lasting "Zootopia 2" cross \$1.8 billion worldwide in its 11th week of release.

"Melania," from Amazon MGM, added 300 theaters in its second weekend but dropped steeply with to \$2.4 million in ticket sales, down 67% from its much-discussed debut. The rapid downturn means the Brett Ratner-directed documentary is likely heading toward flop territory given its high price tag. Amazon MGM paid \$40 million for film rights, plus some \$35 million to market it.

The North American total for "Melania" stands at \$13.4 million. Amazon MGM has not released international figures, though they're expected to be paltry.

Kevin Wilson, head of domestic distribution for the studio, said the movie's box-office performance "is a critical first moment that validates our wholistic distribution strategy, building awareness, engagement, and provides momentum ahead of the film's eventual debut on Prime Video."

The film's ticket sales — which would be very good for a less expensive documentary — were a talking point throughout the week. Late-night hosts Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel hammered the movie's sales. Kimmel called them a "rigged outcome." Elsewhere in theaters, the Italy-set Kevin James romantic comedy "Solo Mio" debuted with a robust \$7.2 million, a major win for Angel Studios, best known for its faith-based releases. "Stray Kids: The Dominate Experience," a K-pop concert film released by Bleecker Street, launched with \$5.6 million, and an additional \$13.2 million overseas. The Luc Besson-directed Bram Stoker adaptation "Dracula" opened with \$4.5 million, a studio-best debut for the indie distributor Vertical.

One of the most unusual releases in theaters, however, remains the low-budget indie "Iron Lung." The YouTube filmmaker Markiplier, whose real name is Mark Fischbach, self-financed and self-distributed the R-rated video game adaptation, along with writing, directing and starring in it. In its second weekend, "Iron Lung" collected \$6.2 million, bringing its two-week total to \$31.2 million. It cost \$3 million to make.

Top 10 movies by domestic box office

With final domestic figures being released Monday, this list factors in the estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore:

1. "Send Help," \$10 million.
2. "Solo Mio," \$7.2 million.
3. "Iron Lung," \$6 million.
4. "Stray Kids: The Dominate Experience," \$5.6 million.
5. "Dracula," \$4.5 million.
6. "Zootopia 2," \$4 million.
7. "Avatar: Fire and Ash," \$3.5 million.
8. "The Strangers: Chapter 3," \$3.5 million.
9. "Shelter," \$2.4 million.
10. "Melania," \$2.4 million.

The US said a Marine could not adopt an Afghan girl. Records show officials helped him get her

By CLAIRE GALOFARO and JULIET LINDERMAN Associated Press

The judge wanted everyone in the courtroom to know that when he'd signed a war orphan over to an American Marine he thought it was an emergency — that the child injured on the battlefield in Afghanistan was on death's door, with neither a family nor a country to claim her.

A lawyer for the federal government stood up.

"That is not what happened," she told the judge: almost everything he'd believed about the baby was untrue.

This group had gathered 15 times by then, in secret proceedings in this small-town Virginia courtroom to try to fix what had become an international incident. Fluvanna County Circuit Judge Richard Moore had granted an adoption of the orphan to U.S. Marine Joshua Mast and his wife, Stephanie, while the baby was in Afghanistan, 7,000 miles away.

Now the U.S. government insisted the baby's fate had never been the judge's to decide; officials in President Donald Trump's first administration had chosen to unite her with relatives months before Moore gave her away, according to once-secret transcripts of the November 2022 hearing.

Thousands of pages of those transcripts and court documents were recently released as a result of The Associated Press' three-year fight for access after a 2022 AP report about the adoption raised alarms at the highest levels of government, from the Taliban to the White House. The newly released records reveal how America's fractured bureaucracy allowed the Masts to adopt the child who was halfway around the globe, being raised by a couple the Afghan government at that time decided were her family, in a country that does not allow non-Muslims to take custody of its children. The documents show the judge skipped critical safeguards and legal requirements.

Mast, who cited a judge's orders not to speak publicly about the case in declining requests to comment, has said he believed — and still does — the story he told Moore about the girl, and insists he acted nobly and in the best interest of a child stuck in a war zone with an uncertain future.

Along the way, high-ranking military and government officials took extraordinary steps to help him, seemingly unaware that others in their own agencies were trying to stop him.

"The left hand of the United States is doing one thing," another judge later said, describing the dysfunction, "and the right hand of the United States is doing something else."

The documents reveal that the court and federal government have blamed each other for the legal predicament. The Justice Department has said what happened in this rural courthouse threatens the nation's standing in the world and appears as an endorsement of child abduction.

"I'll probably think about this the rest of my life whether I should have said, sorry, that child is in Afghanistan. We're just going to stand down," Moore said at the hearing three years ago. "I don't know whether that's what I should have done."

A remarkably quick adoption

The baby was orphaned in September 2019 when U.S. Army Rangers, along with Afghan forces, raided a rural compound. The baby's parents were killed. She was found in the rubble, about two months old, burned and with a fractured skull and broken leg. U.S. troops scooped her up and took her to the hospital at Bagram Air Base in Kabul.

American servicemembers fell in love with her there, as she recovered. She was a symbol of hope in a long, grinding war.

The raid that killed the baby's parents targeted transient terrorists who came into Afghanistan from a neighboring country, the records show. Some soldiers believed she might not be Afghan and tried to make a case for bringing her to the U.S.

The State Department attempted to make its position clear: The embassy convened a meeting that

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October with members of the military and the Afghan government to explain that under international law the U.S. was obligated to reunite her with her family, according to documents. State Department officials wrote that Mast, a military lawyer on a short assignment in Afghanistan, attended that meeting.

He'd met the baby for the first time days before and remained determined the child should go to the U.S., according to emails filed as exhibits.

Mast called home, where his wife was with their three sons.

"With us having children of our own, we see how vulnerable and precious children are," Stephanie Mast testified. "And we wanted to help in whatever way we could."

The Masts, Evangelical Christians, decided to try to bring her to their home in Palmyra, Virginia.

Mast's brother, Richard Mast, a lawyer with the conservative Christian law firm Liberty Counsel, filed a petition for custody in early November, and a Fluvanna County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court judge quickly approved it. The judge declared that the child was "stateless," echoing Mast's assertion that her parents were nomadic terrorists, and the Afghan government would issue a waiver of jurisdiction over her within days.

Afghanistan never waived jurisdiction.

Still the Masts decided custody wasn't enough. Several days later, Moore, the Fluvanna County Circuit Court judge, got an unusual weekend call from his clerk's office about a request for an emergency adoption, according to comments the judge made on the bench and records obtained from the Virginia Attorney General's Office. Custody orders like the one the Masts were granted are temporary, but adoption grants a child an entirely new birth certificate, assigning them new legal parents. Moore said he was told that the girl desperately needed medical care and adoption would help get her on a plane to America.

Though the baby was being cared for by the Defense Department, the federal government insisted it received no notice of Mast's bid for adoption, the recently released records show. Had it been notified, government lawyers said, they would have told the judge that the child was not stateless, the government was at that time searching for her family and would soon decide she was Afghan and not the child of foreigners. She was also not in a medical crisis: A month before, exhibits show, her doctor described her as "a healthy healing infant who needs normal infant care."

The Masts have said in court records that they did not mislead the court; they believed that the girl was the stateless daughter of transient terrorists and Afghanistan was neither interested nor capable of caring for her.

Moore did not respond to requests for comment.

On Sunday, Nov. 10, 2019, Moore granted the Masts a temporary adoption. Moore ordered the Virginia Department of Vital Statistics to issue a new birth certificate, making her the Masts' daughter.

Adoption cases usually creep through the court system. Moore granted the Masts the temporary adoption in a weekend.

"Attempting to interfere inappropriately"

Two days later, an email arrived overnight at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul from State Department headquarters. The office had heard that Mast had been granted custody of the orphan, and wanted to know if that was true, the documents show.

Officials who had been working on uniting the girl with her family seemed stunned by the email. An Army colonel later wrote in a declaration that he believed Mast was "attempting to interfere inappropriately."

Around that time, U.S. officials learned that a man came forward to claim the baby, records show. He told authorities he was the child's uncle. He said the girl's father was a local farmer, not a terrorist. His wife and five of their children were also killed. He said it was his family's duty to take her in.

The Afghan government vetted his story. U.S. officials signed off.

Meanwhile, Mast's tour ended. He returned home to Virginia, and set up a crib for the baby he was certain would soon be theirs, according to court testimony. The couple quickly found an ally in an aide for Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas. The aide pressed Assistant Secretary of Defense Derek Maurer to ask immigration officials to rush documents the child needed to get to the U.S. An attached memo writ-

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ten by another military official pointed to proof of Mast's claim to the baby: Mast had enrolled her in the military's health care system as his dependent.

On the application for those benefits, Mast claimed the girl had lived with him in Virginia since Sept. 4, 2019, but she had never been on American soil, a government official wrote in a declaration. Mast also wrote that her injuries were a result of child abuse.

The situation worked its way to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He signed a cable, dated Feb. 25, 2020, records show, dismissing the Fluvanna custody orders as "flawed."

The cable said that any further delay in transferring the child could be perceived as the "U.S. government holding an Afghan child against the will of her extended family and the Afghan government."

The next day, Mast filed a federal lawsuit to stop the reunification. The judge rejected his claims.

The U.S. put her on a plane to meet her relatives. They wept when they saw her, bundled in pink. The child's uncle decided his son should raise the baby with his new wife and they quickly came to love this girl like their own daughter, they testified.

The Masts have insisted that this family is not biologically related to the baby and have questioned the process through which the Afghan government vetted them. The Afghan couple had celebrated the first step in a traditional Afghan marriage, a religious bond, but had not yet had a wedding reception, and the Masts argue they were unmarried at the time the child was given to them.

The AP agreed not to name the Afghan couple because they fear their families in Afghanistan might face retaliation from the Taliban. The court issued a protective order shielding their identities.

The Taliban, which now controls Afghanistan, was not in power when that country was making decisions about the child. Since taking over, the Taliban has been critical of what happened to the girl, calling it "worrying, far from human dignity and an inhumane act," and urged the U.S. to return her to her relatives.

The Afghan couple testified they had no idea that on the other side of the globe an American judge still believed the girl was available for adoption.

Mast told Moore the child was given to an unmarried girl whose relationship to her was unclear. He testified that he maintained the child was the daughter of foreign fighters and suspected the family had ties to terrorism.

Moore said he did not learn that a federal judge had already rejected Mast's claims to the baby. He would later say he vaguely remembered hearing that something happened in federal court but it didn't register as important.

"I guess I assumed it was an administrative thing," Moore said.

Mast continued to ask Moore to grant a final, permanent adoption.

Lawyers representing the government, the Afghan family and the child would note many defects in these proceedings; the attorney representing the child described the flaws as "glaring." There is no Virginia law that allows a judge to adopt out a foreign child without her home country's consent. A child must be put up for adoption by a parent or agency, and this child had never been. The court waived the requirement that the child be present when social services visited the adoptive parents' home, that someone investigate her history, that whoever had custody be told this was happening.

In December of 2020, Moore granted a final adoption, deeming the Masts the baby's permanent parents.

"She is an undocumented, orphan, stateless minor," he wrote, "subject to this court's jurisdiction."

'Is it even lawful for us to take her?'

In Afghanistan, the couple raising the girl received calls from strangers. Mast was working with Kimberley Motley, an American lawyer based in Afghanistan. Motley told the couple that a family wanted to help the girl get medical care in the U.S. But the couple refused to send the girl alone. Motley kept in touch with them for months, according to messages entered as court exhibits. Motley, through her attorney, declined to comment.

In the summer of 2021, the American military withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took over. Mast contacted the couple directly, enlisting the help of a translator named Ahmad Osmani, an Afghan Christian who'd moved to the U.S. Osmani considered it his Christian duty to help the Masts, testifying that he believed it would be "a great picture to see a terrorist's daughter become a believer and glorify

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God's name."

Mast and Osmani told the couple that they could get all three out of Afghanistan.

At the time, servicemembers were frantically evacuating Afghans, mostly those who helped the U.S. and would likely be targeted by the Taliban.

Amid the confusion, Mast asked colleagues in the Marines to add a baby and her caretakers to an evacuation list, the records show, claiming the State Department had sent her to an orphanage. She was living with the Afghan couple, and had never been to an orphanage.

A lieutenant colonel emailed other military officials to start the process of getting the family on a flight out. He didn't learn that the military had worked to keep Mast away from this baby.

"Is it even lawful for us to take her?" asked a major in the Marines, according to a copy of the email.

Mast, who was copied on the chain, replied: "To clarify, she is completely clear on the Afghan side," he wrote. "I am very familiar with the requirements after the last 18 months working the legal issues."

Military officials asked no further questions, and soon the family was on a plane to Germany, where the Masts met them for the first time. The Afghans testified they had no idea the Masts planned to take her. The Masts have said they had tried to explain that they would.

Stephanie Mast testified that when she and her husband arrived in Germany, they "knew we had to speak to them and just tell them the truth." She tried to explain "sacrificial love." If the baby came with them, she told the Afghan woman, "she can have the best life possible."

The Afghan man ripped off the wristband refugees wore and threatened to return to Afghanistan if the Americans tried to take the child.

The Afghan woman later said they convinced her that she'd misunderstood and persuaded them to continue to the U.S., and keep the baby with them.

The Afghans boarded a plane bound for Dulles International Airport, then a bus to Fort Pickett, a military base in Virginia turned makeshift refugee center. Meanwhile, the records show, Mast asked a State Department official he'd met in Germany to help connect him with other government contacts so he could track the family's arrival.

Emails show employees with multiple government agencies sprung into action, including the State Department. The federal government would later say that these employees, like the military officials who evacuated the family, didn't know that the very agency they worked for had tried to prevent Mast from taking the girl.

'It's like you are kidnapping her'

Rhonda Slusher, a State Department official, answered the phone at Fort Pickett. On the line was Joshua Mast.

He said he was going to come pick up his adoptive daughter, according to a declaration Slusher submitted in court. Slusher said she was told "there was no U.S. jurisdiction to hold the child," and she should be given to Mast "at the earliest point possible." Her supervisor instructed her to assist with "the transfer of the child," she wrote in the declaration.

Mast told Slusher he was concerned the family she was being taken from "were going to be sad," she wrote.

On Sept. 3, 2021, uniformed officers drove the Afghan family to a nondescript building near the camp's front gate.

Slusher picked the baby up out of the car seat and insisted she hold her as the family went inside.

There, the Afghan woman later testified, another official, this one from the Department of Health and Human Services, told them: "you are not the parents of this child."

"It's like you are kidnapping her," the Afghan man said.

The Afghan woman came toward Slusher.

"Please give me my daughter," she said "She is my daughter."

The baby cried and squirmed to get back to her, but Slusher wouldn't let her go. The woman tried to grab the child, but Slusher pulled her hands away. The woman "crumpled to the floor crying." She lay

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there for at least five minutes.

Slusher wrote in a declaration that she carried the baby outside, where Stephanie Mast was waiting in the car. Stephanie Mast fed the girl Goldfish crackers before they drove away with her husband.

"It is worth reiterating that this prolonged tragedy was entirely avoidable. The Trump administration blocked an attempt to unlawfully seize the child from her Afghan family in early 2020," the Afghan couple's attorneys wrote in a statement, adding that the Masts were able to take the child only because of America's messy exit from Afghanistan. "The child and her relatives are victims of a crime and a tragedy no family should ever endure — a stark reminder that this withdrawal continues to have far-reaching and devastating consequences."

'A possibly errant adoption'

More than a year after the Masts took the baby home, her fate was before Judge Richard Moore again.

The Afghan couple found a team of lawyers willing to represent them for free, and filed a petition in Moore's court to challenge the adoption he'd granted. Moore could undo the adoption and give the child back to the Afghan family, or uphold it, and leave her with the Masts.

"I've never had a case where I was so uncomfortable with either decision," he said at the November 2022 hearing, which would be his last hearing in the case before retiring.

The judge listened for five hours as the lawyers for the Afghan couple and the government said that the adoption he'd granted was so riddled with errors it shouldn't be called an adoption at all.

Moore blamed the federal government — it had known as early as 2020 that the Masts were trying to get the girl and a court in Fluvanna County was involved, and they did not try to stop him from issuing a "possibly errant adoption," he said.

"Clearly, there were procedural irregularities and deficiencies in this case. There's no question about that," the judge said from the bench.

Yet for a year, in hearing after hearing, the primary question became whether the Afghan couple had a right to challenge that adoption at all; whether they were truly her family and if the Afghan government's decision to give her to them was valid once they arrived in the U.S.

The judge and the Masts' attorneys questioned them about their origin and upbringing, their relationship to each other and to the child.

Moore repeatedly said he did not believe they were related to the girl, nor was he inclined to consider them parents. He said no court in Afghanistan was involved in determining who should get custody of the child there. The Afghan couple's lawyers had resisted DNA testing, saying it couldn't conclusively find a relationship between opposite-gender half-cousins. It was also irrelevant, they argued: After the Afghan government gave the child to them, an American court should not relitigate that choice.

At the last hearing he held in November 2022, Moore said there were many things he wished Mast had told him before he signed the adoption. But he still trusted the Marine.

"There's no question in my mind. Their total involvement was to save this child," Moore said.

A week later, Moore published his thoughts on the case in a written document, and reiterated his opinion that "anything they did improper grew" out of the Masts' desire to help the child.

He was less sympathetic to the Afghans. The Afghan woman testified that she had two Afghan government identifications, one that included her real age and a second she obtained intentionally making herself younger to enable her to enroll in school. They "misrepresented certain facts and lied ... for their own purposes," Moore wrote.

The Masts, too, have described the Afghans as untrustworthy, even threatening. They submitted court records alleging the Afghan man was flagged in a database of suspected terrorists upon entry to the U.S., which they reported to law enforcement. Attorneys for the Afghans responded that the government said in a sealed letter to the court that the man was not the subject of the database entry. The man remains in the U.S. and frequently flies from Texas to Virginia for court hearings.

With Moore's retirement, the Masts and the Afghans found themselves before a new judge, Claude Worrell.

Worrell rebuked the federal government for its "inconsistent" approach, noting it was arguing the baby should be immediately returned to the Afghans, while its own employees had repeatedly assisted the

Masts along the way.

It did not take Worrell long to come to a wholly different conclusion than Moore. Worrell wasn't concerned about biological relationships. What mattered, he said, was Afghanistan claimed her as its citizen, so got to decide her fate.

In March 2023, Worrell voided the adoption.

The Afghan couple went outside to a patch of grass in the parking lot and prayed. They thought they would soon bring the baby to their home in Texas, where they've kept a bedroom ready for her, decorated with butterfly decals.

The Virginia Court of Appeals has since upheld Worrell's decision voiding the adoption, and the case went before the Virginia Supreme Court in February 2025. It has yet to issue a ruling. As the years dragged on, the child remained with the Marine and his family.

The Marine Corps held an administrative hearing in October 2024 to determine whether Mast violated military rules. A three-member panel found that he acted in a way that was "unbecoming" of an officer, but that didn't warrant suspension or other formal punishment.

The federal government has indicated in court in recent months that it is reconsidering its role in the case, and Trump's second administration could reverse his first administration's opinion that Mast had no right to the child. The Justice Department did not respond to repeated requests to clarify its current position on the child's fate.

It has been four years since the Afghan couple has seen her.

In July, she turned 6.

FBI concluded Jeffrey Epstein wasn't running a sex trafficking ring for powerful men, files show

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, DAVID B. CARUSO and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The FBI pored over Jeffrey Epstein's bank records and emails. It searched his homes. It spent years interviewing his victims and examining his connections to some of the world's most influential people.

But while investigators collected ample proof that Epstein sexually abused underage girls, they found scant evidence the well-connected financier led a sex trafficking ring serving powerful men, an Associated Press review of internal Justice Department records shows.

Videos and photos seized from Epstein's homes in New York, Florida and the Virgin Islands didn't depict victims being abused or implicate anyone else in his crimes, a prosecutor wrote in one 2025 memo.

An examination of Epstein's financial records, including payments he made to entities linked to influential figures in academia, finance and global diplomacy, found no connection to criminal activity, said another internal memo in 2019.

While one Epstein victim made highly public claims that he "lent her" to his rich friends, agents couldn't confirm that and found no other victims telling a similar story, the records said.

Summarizing the investigation in an email last July, agents said "four or five" Epstein accusers claimed other men or women had sexually abused them. But, the agents said, there "was not enough evidence to federally charge these individuals, so the cases were referred to local law enforcement."

The AP and other media organizations are still reviewing millions of pages of documents, many of them previously confidential, that the Justice Department released under the Epstein Files Transparency Act and it is possible those records contain evidence overlooked by investigators.

But the documents, which include police reports, FBI interview notes and prosecutor emails, provide the clearest picture to date of the investigation — and why U.S. authorities ultimately decided to close it without additional charges.

Dozens of victims come forward

The Epstein investigation began in 2005, when the parents of a 14-year-old girl reported she had been molested at the millionaire's home in Palm Beach, Florida.

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Police would identify at least 35 girls with similar stories: Epstein was paying high school age students \$200 or \$300 to give him sexualized massages.

After the FBI joined the probe, federal prosecutors drafted indictments to charge Epstein and some personal assistants who had arranged the girls' visits and payments. But instead, then-Miami U.S. attorney Alexander Acosta struck a deal letting Epstein plead guilty to state charges of soliciting prostitution from an underage girl. Sentenced to 18 months in jail, Epstein was free by mid-2009.

In 2018, a series of Miami Herald stories about the plea deal prompted New York federal prosecutors to take a fresh look at the accusations.

Epstein was arrested in July 2019. One month later, he killed himself in his jail cell.

A year later, prosecutors charged Epstein's longtime confidant, Ghislaine Maxwell, saying she'd recruited several of his victims and sometimes joined the sexual abuse. Convicted in 2021, Maxwell is serving a 20-year prison term.

Prosecutors fail to find evidence backing most sensational claims

Prosecution memos, case summaries and other documents made public in the department's latest release of Epstein-related records show that FBI agents and federal prosecutors diligently pursued potential coconspirators. Even seemingly outlandish and incomprehensible claims, called in to tip lines, were examined.

Some allegations couldn't be verified, investigators wrote.

In 2011 and again in 2019, investigators interviewed Virginia Roberts Giuffre, who in lawsuits and news interviews had accused Epstein of arranging for her to have sexual encounters with numerous men, including Britain's former Prince Andrew.

Investigators said they confirmed that Giuffre had been sexually abused by Epstein. But other parts of her story were problematic.

Two other Epstein victims who Giuffre had claimed were also "lent out" to powerful men told investigators they had no such experience, prosecutors wrote in a 2019 internal memo.

"No other victim has described being expressly directed by either Maxwell or Epstein to engage in sexual activity with other men," the memo said.

Giuffre acknowledged writing a partly fictionalized memoir of her time with Epstein containing descriptions of things that didn't take place. She had also offered shifting accounts in interviews with investigators, they wrote, and had "engaged in a continuous stream of public interviews about her allegations, many of which have included sensationalized if not demonstrably inaccurate characterizations of her experiences." Those inaccuracies included false accounts of her interactions with the FBI, they said.

Still, U.S. prosecutors attempted to arrange an interview with Andrew, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor. He refused to make himself available. Giuffre settled a lawsuit with Mountbatten-Windsor in which she had accused him of sexual misconduct.

In a memoir published after she killed herself last year, Giuffre wrote that prosecutors told her they didn't include her in the case against Maxwell because they didn't want her allegations to distract the jury. She insisted her accounts of being trafficked to elite men were true.

Prosecutors say photos and videos don't implicate others

Investigators seized a multitude of videos and photos from Epstein's electronic devices and homes in New York, Florida and the U.S. Virgin Islands. They found CDs, hard copy photographs and at least one videotape containing nude images of females, some of whom seemed as if they might be minors. One device contained 15 to 20 images depicting commercial child sex abuse material — pictures investigators said Epstein obtained on the internet.

No videos or photos showed Epstein victims being sexually abused, none showed any males with any of the nude females, and none contained evidence implicating anyone other than Epstein and Maxwell, then-Assistant U.S. Attorney Maurene Comey wrote in an email for FBI officials last year.

Had they existed, the government "would have pursued any leads they generated," Comey wrote. "We did not, however, locate any such videos."

Investigators who scoured Epstein's bank records found payments to more than 25 women who appeared to be models — but no evidence that he was engaged in prostituting women to other men, prosecutors

wrote.

Epstein's close associates go uncharged

In 2019, prosecutors weighed the possibility of charging one of Epstein's longtime assistants but decided against it.

Prosecutors concluded that while the assistant was involved in helping Epstein pay girls for sex and may have been aware that some were underage, she herself was a victim of his sexual abuse and manipulation.

Investigators examined Epstein's relationship with the French modeling agent Jean-Luc Brunel, who once was involved in an agency with Epstein in the U.S., and who was accused in a separate case of sexually assaulting women in Europe. Brunel killed himself in jail while awaiting trial on a rape charge in France.

Prosecutors also weighed whether to charge one of Epstein's girlfriends who had participated in sexual acts with some of his victims. Investigators interviewed the girlfriend, who was 18 to 20 years old at the time, "but it was determined there was not enough evidence," according to a summary given to FBI Director Kash Patel last July.

Days before Epstein's July 2019 arrest, the FBI strategized about sending agents to serve grand jury subpoenas on people close to Epstein, including his pilots and longtime business client, retail mogul Les Wexner.

Wexner's lawyers told investigators that neither he nor his wife had knowledge of Epstein's sexual misconduct. Epstein had managed Wexner's finances, but the couple's lawyers said they cut him off in 2007 after learning he'd stolen from them.

"There is limited evidence regarding his involvement," an FBI agent wrote of Wexner in an Aug. 16, 2019, email.

In a statement to the AP, a legal representative for Wexner said prosecutors had informed him that he was "neither a coconspirator nor target in any respect," and that Wexner had cooperated with investigators.

Prosecutors also examined accounts from women who said they'd given massages at Epstein's home to guests who'd tried to make the encounters sexual. One woman accused private equity investor Leon Black of initiating sexual contact during a massage in 2011 or 2012, causing her to flee the room.

The Manhattan district attorney's office subsequently investigated, but no charges were filed.

Black's lawyer, Susan Estrich, said he had paid Epstein for estate planning and tax advice. She said in a statement that Black didn't engage in misconduct and had no awareness of Epstein's criminal activities. Lawsuits by two women who accused Black of sexual misconduct were dismissed or withdrawn. One is pending.

No client list

Attorney General Pam Bondi told Fox News in February 2025 that Epstein's never-before-seen "client list" was "sitting on my desk right now." A few months later, she claimed the FBI was reviewing "tens of thousands of videos" of Epstein "with children or child porn."

But FBI agents wrote superiors saying the client list didn't exist.

On Dec. 30, 2024, about three weeks before President Joe Biden left office, then-FBI Deputy Director Paul Abbate reached out through subordinates to ask "whether our investigation to date indicates the 'client list,' often referred to in the media, does or does not exist," according to an email summarizing his query.

A day later, an FBI official replied that the case agent had confirmed no client list existed.

On Feb. 19, 2025, two days before Bondi's Fox News appearance, an FBI supervisory special agent wrote: "While media coverage of the Jeffrey Epstein case references a 'client list,' investigators did not locate such a list during the course of the investigation."

Takeaways from what the Epstein files show about the FBI investigation of possible sex trafficking

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, DAVID B. CARUSO and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The FBI collected ample proof that Jeffrey Epstein sexually abused underage girls but found scant evidence the well-connected financier led a sex trafficking ring serving powerful men, an

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Associated Press review of internal Justice Department records shows.

Videos and photos seized from Epstein's homes in New York, Florida and the Virgin Islands didn't depict victims being abused or implicate anyone else in his crimes, a prosecutor wrote in one 2025 memo.

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Summarizing the investigation in an email last July, agents said "four or five" Epstein accusers claimed other men or women had sexually abused them. But, the agents said, there "was not enough evidence to federally charge these individuals."

The AP and other media organizations are still reviewing millions of pages of documents, many of them previously confidential, that the Justice Department released under the Epstein Files Transparency Act and it is possible those records contain evidence overlooked by investigators.

Here are takeaways from what the documents show about the FBI investigation and why U.S. authorities ultimately decided to close it without additional charges.

Origins of the investigation

The Epstein investigation began in 2005, when the parents of a 14-year-old girl reported that she had been molested at the millionaire's home in Palm Beach, Florida. Then-Miami U.S. attorney Alexander Acosta struck a deal letting Epstein plead guilty to state charges of soliciting prostitution from an underage girl. Sentenced to 18 months in jail, Epstein was free by mid-2009.

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A year later, prosecutors charged Epstein's longtime confidant, Ghislaine Maxwell, saying she'd recruited several of his victims and sometimes joined the sexual abuse. Convicted in 2021, Maxwell is serving a 20-year prison term.

Lack of evidence for coconspirators

Prosecution memos, case summaries and other documents made public in the department's latest release of Epstein-related records show that FBI agents and federal prosecutors diligently pursued potential coconspirators. Even seemingly outlandish and incomprehensible claims, called in to tip lines, were examined.

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Photos and video don't implicate others

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Investigators who scoured Epstein's bank records found payments to more than 25 women who appeared

to be models — but no evidence that he was engaged in prostituting women to other men, prosecutors wrote.

Prosecutors weighed the possibility of charging some of Epstein's close associates, including an assistant and business clients, but ultimately decided against it because of lack of evidence.

No client list found

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Gaza's Rafah crossing opens after 2-day closure as Palestinians claim delays and mistreatment

By SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A limited number of Palestinians traveled between Gaza and Egypt on Sunday as the Rafah crossing reopened after a two-day closure, Egyptian state media reported.

The vital border point opened last week for the first time since mid-2024, one of the main requirements for the U.S.-backed ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. The crossing was closed Friday and Saturday because of confusion around operations.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 17 medical evacuees and 27 companions had begun the crossing into Egypt. The same number was expected to head into Gaza. Israel didn't immediately confirm it.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington on Wednesday, though the major subject of discussion will be Iran, his office said.

Delays and mistreatment accusations

Over the first four days of the crossing's opening, just 36 Palestinians requiring medical care were allowed to leave for Egypt, plus 62 companions, according to U.N. data. Rafah's reopening came after Israel retrieved the remains of the last hostage in Gaza and U.S. officials visited Israel to apply pressure.

Palestinian officials say nearly 20,000 people in Gaza seek to leave for medical care that isn't available in the war-shattered territory.

A group of Palestinian patients gathered Sunday in the courtyard of a Red Crescent hospital in Gaza's southern city of Khan Younis before making their way to the crossing for treatment abroad, family members told The Associated Press.

Amjad Abu Jedian, injured in the war, had been scheduled to leave for medical treatment on the first day of the crossing's reopening, but only five patients were allowed to travel, said his mother, Raja Abu Jedian. He was shot by an Israeli sniper while doing building work in the central Bureij refugee camp in July 2024, she said.

On Saturday, his family received a call from the World Health Organization about traveling on Sunday, she said.

"We want them to take care of the patients (during their evacuation)," she said. "We want the Israeli military not to burden them."

Returning to Gaza

A group of Palestinians arrived Sunday at the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing to return to Gaza, Egypt's state-run Al-Qahera News satellite television reported.

Palestinians who returned to Gaza in the first few days of the crossing's operation described hours of delays and invasive searches by Israeli authorities and an Israeli-backed Palestinian armed group, Abu

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Shabab. Israel has denied mistreatment.

A European Union mission and Palestinian officials run the border crossing, and Israel has its screening facility some distance away.

The Rafah crossing, a lifeline for Gaza, was the only one not controlled by Israel before the war. Israel seized the Palestinian side in May 2024, though traffic through the crossing was heavily restricted even before that.

Restrictions negotiated by Israeli, Egyptian, Palestinian and international officials mean that only 50 people will be allowed to return to Gaza each day and 50 medical patients — with two companions for each — will be allowed to leave, but far fewer people have crossed so far.

Hamas negotiations

A senior Hamas official, Khaled Mashaal, said the militant group is open to discuss the future of its weapons as part of a “balanced approach” that includes the reconstruction of Gaza and protecting the Palestinian enclave from Israel. Such issues are central in the ceasefire’s second phase.

Mashaal said the group has offered multiple options, including a long-term truce, as part of ongoing negotiations with Egyptian, Qatari and Turkish mediators.

Hamas plans to agree to a number of “guarantees,” including a 10-year period of disarmament and an international peacekeeping force on Gaza’s borders, “to maintain peace and prevent any clashes” between the militants and Israel, Mashaal said at a forum in Qatar.

Israel has repeatedly demanded the complete disarmament and dismantling of Hamas and its infrastructure, both military and civil.

Mashaal accused Israel of financing and arming militias, like the Abu Shabab group which operates in Israeli military-controlled areas in Gaza, “to create chaos.”

Mashaal was asked about Hamas’ position on the new Board of Peace, a Trump-led group of world leaders that is expected to meet for the first time Feb. 19 to raise money for Gaza’s reconstruction. He didn’t offer a specific answer but said the group won’t accept “foreign intervention” in Palestinian affairs.

“Gaza is for the people of Gaza. Palestinians are for the people of Palestine,” he said. “We will not accept foreign rule.”

Paul Thomas Anderson wins at 78th Directors Guild Awards for ‘One Battle After Another’

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Paul Thomas Anderson won the top prize at the 78th Directors Guild Awards, putting the “One Battle After Another” filmmaker on course to potentially win his first Oscar.

The DGA Awards, held Saturday night at the Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills, California, is among the most reliable Academy Awards precursors. In the last 10 years, nine DGA winners have gone on to win best director at the Oscars. In the guild’s nearly eight-decade history, only eight times has the guild not predicted the Oscar winner.

The award adds to a virtual awards-season sweep for “One Battle After Another,” which has won with critics groups, the Gotham Awards and the Golden Globes. It’s considered the favorite for best picture at the March 15 Oscars. Academy voting begins Feb. 26.

The other nominees were Ryan Coogler (“Sinners”), Guillermo Del Toro (“Frankenstein”), Josh Safdie (“Marty Supreme”) and Chloé Zhao (“Hamnet”).

As he’s often done through awards season, Anderson in his brief speech paid tribute to late assistant director Adam Somner, who died in 2024. “Obviously,” he said, “we are up here minus one.”

The awards, hosted by Kumail Nanjiani, were the first presided over by new Directors Guild of America president Christopher Nolan. He began the ceremony acknowledging “very hard times” for filmmakers.

“In 2024, our employment in our guild was down about 40%, and that was followed by another decline in ‘25,” said Nolan. “The amount of money that people spend on our work, on entertainment, is very, very stable. Audiences are invested in us, we have to be sure that we’re able to repay that investment.”

Other winners Saturday included "The Plague" filmmaker Charlie Polinger for first-time director; "2000 Meters to Andriivka" director Mstyslav Chernov for best documentary filmmaking; and "The Studio" directors Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg for comedy series.

Voters are worried about the cost of housing. But Trump wants home prices to keep climbing

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump wants to keep home prices high, bypassing calls to ramp up construction so people can afford what has been a ticket to the middle class.

Trump has instead argued for protecting existing owners who have watched the values of their homes climb. It's a position that flies in the face of what many economists, the real estate industry, local officials and apartment dwellers say is needed to fix a big chunk of America's affordability problem.

"I don't want to drive housing prices down. I want to drive housing prices up for people that own their homes, and they can be assured that's what's going to happen," Trump told his Cabinet on Jan. 29.

That approach could bolster the Republican president's standing with older voters, a group that over time has been more likely to vote in midterm elections. Those races in November will determine whether Trump's party can retain control of the House and Senate.

"You have a lot of people that have become wealthy in the last year because their house value has gone up," Trump said. "And you know, when you get the housing — when you make it too easy and too cheap to buy houses — those values come down."

But by catering to older baby boomers on housing, Trump risks alienating the younger voters who expanded his coalition in 2024 and helped him win a second term, and he could wade into a "generational war" in the midterms, said Brent Buchanan, whose polling firm Cygnal advises Republicans.

"The under-40 group is the most important right now — they are the ones who put Trump in the White House," Buchanan said. "Their desire to show up in an election or not is going to make the difference in this election. If they feel that Donald Trump is taking care of the boomers at their expense, that is going to hurt Republicans."

The logic in appealing to older voters

In the 2024 presidential election, 81% of Trump's voters were homeowners, according to AP VoteCast data. This means many of his supporters already have mortgages with low rates or own their homes outright, possibly blunting the importance of housing as an issue.

Older voters tend to show up to vote more than do younger people, said Oscar Pocasangre, a senior data analyst at liberal think tank New America who has studied the age divide in U.S. politics. "However, appealing to older voters may prove to be a misguided policy if what's needed to win is to expand the voting base," Pocasangre said.

Before the 2026 elections, voters have consistently rated affordability as a top concern, and that is especially true for younger voters with regard to housing.

Booker Lightman, 30, a software engineer in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, who identifies politically as a libertarian Republican, said the shortage of housing has been a leading problem in his state.

Lightman just closed on a home last month, and while he and his wife, Alice, were able to manage the cost, he said that the lack of construction is pushing people out of Colorado. "There's just not enough housing supply," he said.

Shay Hata, a real estate agent in the Chicago and Denver areas, said she handles about 100 to 150 transactions a year. But she sees the potential for a lot more. "We have a lack of inventory to the point where most properties, particularly in the suburbs, are getting between five and 20 offers," she said, describing what she sees in the Chicago area.

New construction could help more people afford homes because in some cases, buyers qualify for discounted mortgage rates from the builders' preferred lenders, Hata said. She called the current situation "very discouraging for buyers because they're getting priced out of the market."

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But pending construction has fallen under Trump. Permits to build single-family homes have plunged 9.4% over the past 12 months in October, the most recent month available, to an annual rate of 876,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Trump's other ideas to help people buy houses

Trump has not always been against increasing housing supply.

During the 2024 campaign, Trump's team said he would create tax breaks for homebuyers, trim regulations on construction, open up federal land for housing developments and make monthly payments more manageable by cutting mortgage rates. Advisers also claimed that housing stock would open up because of Trump's push for mass deportations of people who were in the United States illegally.

As recently as October, Trump urged builders to ramp up construction. "They're sitting on 2 Million empty lots, A RECORD. I'm asking Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to get Big Homebuilders going and, by so doing, help restore the American Dream!" Trump posted on social media, referring to the government-backed lenders.

But more recently, he has been unequivocal on not wanting to pursue policies that would boost supply and lower prices.

In office, Trump has so far focused his housing policy on lobbying the Federal Reserve to cut its benchmark interest rates. He believes that would make mortgages more affordable, although critics say it could spur higher inflation. Trump announced that the two mortgage companies, which are under government conservatorship, would buy at least \$200 billion in home loan securities in a bid to reduce rates.

Trump also wants Congress to ban large financial institutions from buying homes. But he has rejected suggestions for expanding rules to let buyers use 401(k) retirement accounts for down payments, telling reporters that he did not want people to take their money out of the stock market because it was doing so well.

There are signs that lawmakers in both parties see the benefits of taking steps to add houses before this year's elections. There are efforts in the Senate and House to jump-start construction through the use of incentives to change zoning restrictions, among other policies.

One of the underlying challenges on affordability is that home prices have been generally rising faster than incomes for several years.

This makes it harder to save for down payments or upgrade to a nicer home. It also means that the places where people live increasingly double as their key financial asset, one that leaves many families looking moneyed on paper even if they are struggling with monthly bills.

There is another risk for Trump. If the economy grows this year, as he has promised, that could push up demand for houses — as well as their prices — making the affordability problem more pronounced, said Edward Pinto, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a center-right think tank.

Pinto said construction of single-family homes would have to rise by 50% to 100% during the next three years for average home price gains to be flat — a sign, he said, that Trump's fears about falling home prices were probably unwarranted.

"It's very hard to crater home prices," Pinto said.

Today in History: February 9, the Beatles first performance on 'The Ed Sullivan Show'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Monday, Feb. 9, the 40th day of 2026. There are 325 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 9, 1964, the Beatles made their first live American television appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," broadcast from New York on CBS. The quartet played five songs, including "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand," to a crowd of screaming teenagers in person and more than 70 million viewers across the country.

Also on this date:

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In 1825, the House of Representatives elected John Quincy Adams president after no candidate received a majority of electoral votes.

In 1943, the World War II Battle of Guadalcanal in the southwest Pacific ended with an Allied victory over Japanese forces.

In 1950, in a speech to the Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, Republican Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin charged that the State Department was riddled with Communists.

In 1971, a magnitude 6.6 earthquake in California's San Fernando Valley claimed 65 lives.

In 1984, Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, 69, died 15 months after succeeding Leonid Brezhnev; he was followed by Konstantin Chernenko (chehr-NYEN'-koh), who would only be in power for 13 months before his own death in office.

In 1986, Halley's Comet made its closest pass by Earth at 39 million miles in its first return to the solar system since 1910. (The comet's next appearance will be in 2061).

In 2009, New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez admitted to taking performance-enhancing drugs, telling ESPN he'd used banned substances while with the Texas Rangers for three years.

In 2020, "Parasite," a film from South Korea, won the Academy Award for Best Picture, becoming the first non-English language film to do so.

In 2021, the Senate moved ahead with a second impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, rejecting arguments that the chamber could not proceed because Trump was no longer in office. (The Senate would vote to acquit him on Feb. 13.)

Today's birthdays: Artist Gerhard Richter is 94. Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee is 86. Singer-songwriter Carole King is 84. Actor Joe Pesci is 83. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz is 83. Author Alice Walker is 82. Actor Mia Farrow is 81. Actor Judith Light is 77. Golf Hall of Famer Sandy Lyle is 68. Writer-producer David Simon (TV: "The Wire") is 66. Country singer Travis Tritt is 63. Baseball Hall of Famer Vladimir Guerrero is 51. Actor Charlie Day is 50. Actor Zhang Ziyi is 47. Actor Tom Hiddleston is 45. Actor Michael B. Jordan is 39. Actor Rose Leslie is 39. NFL running back Saquon Barkley is 29. Actor Isabella Gomez is 28.