

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, Feb. 20

Senior Menu: Breaded fish, rice pilaf, green beans, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast boats.

School Lunch: Fish nuggets, puzzle tots.

3rd Grade Boys Basketball, 3:30 p.m., elementary gym.

Basketball doubleheader vs. Britton-Hecla in Groton: (Gym:BC-4, Arena: JVGBB-4, JVBBS-5, VGBB-6:15, VBBS-7:30)

Saturday, Feb. 21

Pickleball. 9:30 a.m., elementary gym.

Region 1B Boys Wrestling Tournament, 9:30 a.m., Webster

Youth Wrestling Tournament Set-Up, 5 p.m.



Sunday, Feb. 22

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

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

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

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

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

Tuff Tigers Youth Wrestling Tournament, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., HS Gym and Arena

Groton Soccer Association Clinics, 11:30 a.m., elementary gym

4th Grade BB Practice, 2 p.m., HG Gym

Dance Team, 5 p.m., Arena

6th Grade Boys Basketball, 6 p.m., Arena

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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.

US Women's Hockey Gold

The US women's hockey team clinched gold yesterday with a 2-1 overtime victory over Canada. The two nations have met in all but one Olympic women's hockey final since the first tournament in 1998. The US women's hockey team now has three gold medals to Canada's five.

Team USA captain Hilary Knight scored a goal with roughly two minutes left in regulation to push the game into overtime. With that goal, Knight also broke the US Olympic hockey record for all-time points and goals scored. Her teammate Megan Keller scored another goal just over four minutes into sudden-death overtime to secure the win. Throughout the game, goalie Aerin Frankel blocked 30 of 31 shots. Earlier in the tournament, Frankel became the first woman to record three shutouts in a single Olympic appearance.

Meanwhile, Alysa Liu ended Team USA's 24-year gold medal drought in women's figure skating, and ski mountaineering—or skimo—made its Winter Olympic debut.

Mountbatten-Windsor Arrest

The UK's Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor was arrested yesterday in Norfolk on suspicion of misconduct in public office. The 66-year-old former prince was later "released under investigation," meaning he has neither been charged nor cleared.

The arrest stemmed from claims that Andrew shared confidential government information with Jeffrey Epstein while serving as the UK's special representative for international trade and investment from 2001 to 2011. A newly unsealed US Department of Justice email allegedly shows him forwarding sensitive trade material to the convicted sex offender. The investigation is separate from allegations by Virginia Giuffre, who accused Andrew of abusing her at 17 and who died by suicide last year. King Charles III said the law "must take its course" and pledged to continue serving the public.

Misconduct in public office carries a maximum life sentence under UK law. No senior royal has faced such a criminal process since King Charles I, who was arrested and executed in 1649.

Board of Peace Convenes

President Donald Trump's Board of Peace held its inaugural meeting yesterday in Washington, DC. The body is made up of more than 20 countries planning to oversee the reconstruction of Gaza, among other efforts.

The US and nine other countries will contribute \$17B to the board and its Gaza relief plan. The funding falls below the projected \$70B needed to rebuild after an estimated 80% of Gaza's buildings were damaged or destroyed in the war with Israel. Five countries will contribute troops to a stabilization force including 20,000 soldiers and 12,000 police officers. Trump has said he hopes the board will work to solve other conflicts, suggesting it could oversee the United Nations.

Separately, Trump said a decision on whether to attack Iran will come within the next 10-15 days. The US has built up the most air power in the Middle East since the 2003 Iraq War.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Grey's Anatomy" and "Euphoria" star Eric Dane dies at age 53 after announcing he was diagnosed with ALS last year.

Live Nation reports \$25.2B in revenue and record concert attendance last year, reaching 159 million people worldwide; news comes as the live entertainment company faces antitrust trial next month.

Pixar releases trailer for "Toy Story 5," with Tom Hanks and Tim Allen returning as Woody and Buzz; "Toy Story" is Pixar's longest-running franchise.

Science & Technology

New York drops plans to legalize robotaxis beyond New York City following safety concerns and pushback from taxi and rideshare drivers; the decision is a setback for Alphabet's Waymo, which had its sights set on a statewide expansion.

Single blood test is shown to predict the onset of Alzheimer's symptoms within a three- to four-year margin, potentially advising clinical trials and preventive treatments.

Researchers identify period roughly 2.7 million years ago when the climate flipped from warm and stable to cold and variable; the tipping point aligns with the advent of the genus Homo, suggesting climate swings contributed to human evolution.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close down (S&P 500 -0.3%, Dow -0.5%, Nasdaq -0.3%).

Amazon dethrones Walmart for first time as company with largest annual revenue, reports annual revenue of \$716.9B for most recent fiscal year.

OpenAI reportedly nearing record-breaking \$100B funding round, potentially valuing company at up to \$850B.

Etsy sells resale site Depop to eBay for \$1.2B after buying Depop for over \$1.6B in 2021.

US average 30-year fixed mortgage rate falls to 6.01%, lowest in over three years.

US trade deficit hit \$901.5B last year, down \$2B from 2024; imports up roughly 5% year over year from record in 2024 and exports up roughly 6%.

Politics & World Affairs

South Korea court sentences former President Yoon Suk Yeol to life in prison over short-lived attempt to impose martial law in 2024.

Kenyan intelligence report finds 1,000 Kenyan citizens were lured to Russia on false promises of employment, recruited to fight against Ukraine.

Arts commission approves \$400M White House ballroom renovation plans; all six panel members who voted were appointed by Trump.

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

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Basketball Double-header

Britton-Hecla at Groton Area
Fri., Feb. 20, 2026



Groton
Area
Tigers
Groton, SD

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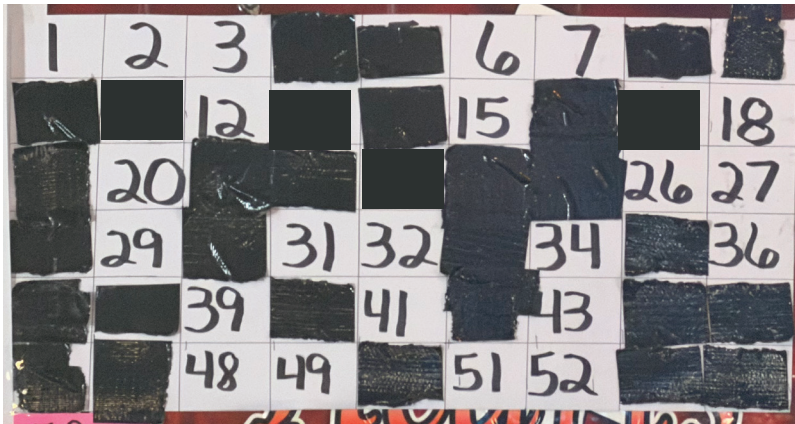
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For more info: GDILIVE.COM

No Girls C Game
Girls JV: 4 p.m.
Varsity Girls: 6:15 p.m.
Varsity Boys: 7:30 p.m.

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Jackpot will be over \$26,000.
Text Paul at 605-397-7460 if you
would like to purchase a ticket.
Tickets are \$5 each or 5 for \$20.
Deadline to purchase from
Paul is 4 p.m. Thursday. Or stop in at
the Groton Legion by
5:30 p.m. Thursday.

Ace of Heart Drawing

The Ace of Heart drawing was held Thursday night at the Groton American Legion. This was the biggest week for ticket sales thus far with ticket sales at \$1,390. The name of Ron Worlie was drawn and he picked Card #11 which was the King of Diamonds. The jackpot was \$25,850. You can purchase your tickets for next week's drawing at the Groton American Legion or from Paper Paul. Tickets are \$5 each of five for \$20.

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Senior/PT: **\$20** per month



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South Dakota's namesake submarine returns from deployment

By Submarine Readiness Squadron 32 Public Affairs

USS South Dakota will return from a scheduled deployment to its homeport at Naval Submarine Base New London in Groton, Connecticut, on Friday, Feb. 20.

The crew of South Dakota executed the chief of naval operations' maritime strategy in supporting national security interests and maritime security operations during their six months at sea.

Fast-attack submarines are multi-mission platforms enabling five of the six Navy maritime strategy core capabilities – sea control, power projection, forward presence, maritime security, and deterrence. They are designed to excel in anti-submarine warfare, anti-ship warfare, strike warfare, special operations, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, irregular warfare and mine warfare. Fast-attack submarines project power ashore with special operations forces and Tomahawk cruise missiles in the prevention or response to regional crises.

South Dakota was the 17th Virginia-class submarine built when it was commissioned on Feb. 2, 2019, and is the third U.S. Navy ship named for the state of South Dakota, most recently following the battleship South Dakota (BB 57) which earned 13 battle stars in World War II. The first ship to bear the name USS South Dakota was a Pennsylvania-class armored cruiser that served during World War I. The submarine South Dakota has a crew of more than 130 personnel, is more than 377 feet long and can displace nearly 7,900 tons.

The event will be livestreamed over multiple intervals at <https://www.facebook.com/grotonsubs> and <https://www.facebook.com/NavalSubmarineBaseNewLondon>

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Wolves split with Marauders: Men win home finale, Women fall in OT

The Northern State University basketball teams closed out their home schedules in dramatically different fashion against the University of Mary, with the Wolves men celebrating Senior Night with a second-half surge and the women battling into overtime before falling to the Marauders.

On Thursday evening at Wachs Arena, the Northern State men used a dominant second half to secure a 71-63 victory over Mary in their regular-season home finale. With the win, the Wolves improved to 11-16 overall and 11-10 in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference, keeping themselves tied for seventh place in the league standings with one game remaining and a chance to host a first-round NSIC tournament contest.

The first half was tightly contested, with the teams entering the locker room knotted at 27-27. Northern found its rhythm after the break, outscoring the Marauders 44-36 while shooting an impressive 57.1 percent from the floor in the second half.

For the game, NSU shot 41.3 percent from the field, 37.5 percent from 3-point range, and 77.8 percent from the free throw line. The Wolves shared the ball effectively, recording 20 assists, and were active defensively with eight steals and three blocks. Northern also knocked down 12 3-pointers, added 34 rebounds, and received a major boost from its bench with 28 points. The Wolves turned 14 Mary turnovers into 17 points and added 22 points in the paint.

Joshua Book sparked the effort with 18 points off the bench, along with a team-high seven assists, six rebounds, and two steals. James Glenn and Simon Akena each scored 13 points, combining to shoot 11-of-22 from the field. Tobi Obiora controlled the glass with a game-high 13 rebounds, adding nine points and two blocks, while Nelson Reynolds chipped in nine points and Benjamin Bowen added eight points and five boards.

Earlier in the week, the Northern State women faced the Marauders in a hard-fought contest that extended into overtime before Mary pulled away for a 79-69 victory. After falling behind 24-9 early in the second quarter, the Wolves mounted an impressive comeback to force the extra period.

Northern finished the game with 69 points, 38 rebounds, 14 assists, six steals, and three blocks, shooting 38.2 percent from the floor, 28.6 percent from beyond the arc, and 73.3 percent from the free throw line.

Carli Kuyper helped spark the rally with 13 points, burying three of her four 3-point attempts, while Izzy Moore delivered a standout senior performance with 21 points, five rebounds, two assists, two steals, and a block. Moore shot 50 percent from the floor and was perfect at the free throw line. Taylor Tool added 11 points and four rebounds, Reagan Rus scored nine, and Megan Counts contributed eight. Morgan Fiedler finished with five points and five assists.

Northern's defense limited one of the NSIC's top 3-point shooting teams to just 1-of-14 (7.1 percent) from long range. However, the Marauders were powered by a dominant effort from Bergen Kinnebrew, who recorded 35 points and 12 rebounds, including a 17-of-18 performance at the free throw line. Allison Undlin added 20 points and eight boards, and Anna Lenzen chipped in 12 points and six rebounds. An 8-0 run to open overtime ultimately sealed the win for Mary.

Both Northern State squads will close out the regular season Saturday at Minot State. The women are scheduled to tip at 3:30 p.m., followed by the men at 5:30 p.m., as the Wolves look to build momentum heading into postseason play.

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Krueger Claims Region 1A Title in De Smet

DE SMET — The Groton Area girls wrestling team was represented Thursday at the Region 1A Tournament in De Smet, highlighted by a championship performance from sophomore standout Liza Krueger.

Competing at 105 pounds, Liza Krueger (42-2) captured the Region 1A title and scored 22 team points for the Tigers. Krueger opened her day with a bye before earning a fall over Citabria Manzanares of Sioux Valley in the semifinals, pinning her opponent at the 1:14 mark.

In the championship match, Krueger squared off against Kadee Frankfurth of Clark/Willow Lake in a tightly contested battle. Krueger secured the 9-6 decision to claim first place and the regional crown, improving her record to 42-2 on the season.

At 110 pounds, Gracelynn Decker (8-15) battled through the bracket and added three team points for Groton Area. After receiving a first-round bye, Decker dropped her quarterfinal match to Kyliegh Schuller of West Central by fall. She responded in the consolation bracket with a pin of Jaycee Stevens of Gettysburg in 2:16. Decker's tournament run came to an end in the next round, where Trinity Kurtenbach of Sioux Valley won by fall.

Krueger's regional championship performance advances her to the next stage of postseason competition, while Decker showed resilience with a hard-fought effort on the regional mat.

Clark/Willow Lake wins boys title; Hamlin wins girls title

Clark/Willow Lake won the boys Northeast Conference title with a 58-50 win over Hamlin. It was Hamlin's second conference loss of the season as the Cyclones win the title outright with a 10-0 record.

Meanwhile in the girls side, Hamlin defeated Clark/Willow Lake, 53-38 to win the Northeast Conference title outright with a 10-0 record. It was Hamlin's first conference loss of the season.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawmakers reject reform for economic board but advance change for governor-controlled fund

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

A lawmaker got split results Thursday with two attempts to reform aspects of state-funded economic development in South Dakota.

A bill from Canton Republican Rep. Karla Lems to tighten conflict-of-interest restrictions on members of the state Board of Economic Development failed in the state House, but she won a committee's endorsement of her bill that would relieve employers of their obligation to pay into the governor-controlled Future Fund for economic development.

The House vote on the Board of Economic Development bill was 29-36. It would have barred board members from holding a direct ownership interest or serving on the board of any entity that receives public funds approved by the board. The governor-appointed board approves an array of loan, grant, bond and tax rebate programs administered by the Governor's Office of Economic Development.

Lems said the bill was meant to "shore up" public trust after recent scrutiny of state economic development operations. She cited South Dakota Searchlight reporting that the board's longtime chairman, Jeff Erickson, also serves on the corporate board of CJ Schwan's and is part of a corporation that rents office space to the company. The company has benefited from \$69 million in state tax rebates, grants and loans in the past several years for the construction of a food production plant in Sioux Falls, though Erickson abstained from related discussions and votes.

Lems said when taxpayer dollars are involved, state officials should avoid not only conflicts but even the appearance of them.

"We cannot make informed decisions with public funds if it is clouded by undisclosed conflicts after decisions are made. Legislative reform is necessary now," Lems said, reading a quote from Rep. Eric Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, in Searchlight's reporting about Erickson. She handed out printed copies of that story prior to the House debate.

Muckey, an opponent of Lems' bill, said that having his quote used on the House floor "in the name of a bill I wasn't asked to support is frankly unprofessional."

Muckey said the state already has a detailed conflict-of-interest section of law that governs when officials must disclose conflicts and recuse themselves. He said the real issue, and what his quote was about, is that disclosures are not consistently clear or timely. That's something he had hoped to address in a bill he ultimately withdrew due to time constraints.

Future Fund bill

Lems' Board of Economic Development bill had reached the House floor after it passed the House State Affairs Committee. Separately on Thursday, that same committee sent another bill introduced by Lems to the full House. That proposal would change how the state collects the "employer's investment in South Dakota's future fee." The fee funds the governor-controlled Future Fund.

The fund was created in 1987 at the request of then-Gov. George Mickelson. It was placed under the governor's exclusive control, enabling quick responses when economic opportunities arise.

Republican former Gov. Kristi Noem incited bipartisan backlash with her uses of the fund, which included paying for a fireworks show at Mount Rushmore, a Rapid City-area shooting range that legislators refused to fund, a Sioux Falls rodeo, and a workforce recruitment campaign in which Noem starred.

South Dakota employers contribute fees to the Future Fund when they remit payroll taxes for unemploy-

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ment benefits.

The bill would shift the fee from automatic collection to a voluntary system by requiring employers to opt in. Employers who do not opt in would be treated as having opted out and would not have to pay the fee. It would also require the Department of Labor and Regulation to create an opt-in/opt-out form and post it online.

Lems told lawmakers the bill is about choice and transparency. She said some small employers don't realize they're paying the fee with their unemployment remittances.

"Employers should knowingly choose where their dollars will go," Lems said. "If a program is valuable, employers will support it voluntarily, and if participation must be compelled to sustain it, that is something we should all examine honestly."

Opponents warned the change could reduce funding for economic development and various programs supported by the Future Fund, such as the Build Dakota Scholarship Fund. That was created for scholars entering high-demand programs at technical colleges in the state.

Department of Labor and Regulation Secretary Marcia Hultman said the department collects the fee using an outdated computer system, and tracking opt-in/opt-out status for more than 35,000 employers would require costly programming work.

The Governor's Office of Economic Development, the South Dakota Economic Development Professionals Association, the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and other business and development organizations also opposed the bill.

The Governor's Office of Economic Development told South Dakota Searchlight that 1,691 grants have been awarded from the Future Fund since its inception in 1987. The grants include awards made across the state and 318 awards allocated to entities or projects serving the entire state. Opponents said supporters are focused on a few anecdotes and are ignoring the bigger picture.

The bill now heads to the House floor for consideration.

Another reform bill pending

Another bill inspired by Searchlight reporting would make state officials involved in a big contract with a company wait longer before accepting a job with that company.

The bill comes in response to the situation of former state economic development commissioner Steve Westra. As reported by Searchlight, Westra took a job with CJ Schwan's a year after he left state government. While working for the state, Westra had signed the first pledge of state aid benefiting the construction of the company's \$550 million, 650-employee food production plant in northern Sioux Falls.

Under current law, state officers and employees involved in awarding or overseeing a contract with a company must wait one year after leaving government before taking a job with the company. The bill would extend the waiting period to two years for contracts worth more than \$5 million.

That bill has passed the Senate and awaits action by a House committee.

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

Legislative committee endorses use of housing infrastructure fund for airport loans

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

A South Dakota Senate committee advanced a pair of bills Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre that would expand a state housing infrastructure fund's definition of infrastructure, and also allow some of the money to go toward large airport projects.

Both plans target the Housing Infrastructure Financing Program, which legislators and Gov. Larry Rhoden's predecessor, Kristi Noem, created in 2023. They used a mix of state and federal money to create a \$200 million fund.

Awards from the program cover up to a third of a developer's cost for things like roads, water and sewer lines, and sidewalks. The fund has supported 85 projects statewide, helping to create 7,421 single-family housing lots and 5,754 apartment or other multi-family units.

Half of the fund went out as grants. About \$65 million remained from the other half of the fund as of late last year, devoted to loans.

In October, Rhoden proposed moving the \$65 million from the housing infrastructure fund to the state's Revolving Economic Development and Initiative Fund, known as the REDI Fund, which offers low-interest loans to startup firms, businesses that are expanding or relocating, and local economic development corporations. He also proposed using \$30 million of that transferred money to offer interest-free loans of up to \$15 million each for expansion projects at the Sioux Falls and Rapid City airports.

Rather than that plan, the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee endorsed an amended version of the legislation proposed by Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison. Instead of transferring the money to the REDI Fund, it would allow the housing infrastructure fund to make loans to airports in metropolitan areas with a population of at least 125,000.

The loans would have to be used to improve or maintain airport infrastructure and would be capped at \$15 million per recipient. They would carry 0% interest and 20-year repayment periods.

Rhoden's commissioner of economic development spoke in favor of the plan, saying the move made sense since airports are infrastructure, and it advanced 8-0.

"Airport and airport development, regardless of where it is, in any community, in any state, is incredibly important, not only for the citizens, but also for the businesses that are operating in our state," Governor's Office of Economic Development Commissioner Bill Even said.

The committee also advanced another housing infrastructure fund bill sponsored by Crabtree on a 7-1 vote. That bill would expand the fund's eligible "public infrastructure" project expenses to include "necessary site work."

"The single greatest barrier to new housing development is not demand, it's infrastructure," said South Dakota Municipal League Director Sara Rankin.

The bill would also increase the maximum loan size from one-third to one-half of a project's total cost.

Supporters from local development and housing groups told lawmakers the changes would help communities close infrastructure funding gaps that can stall housing development, particularly in smaller towns where projects can be harder to finance.

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

COMMENTARY

Lawmakers' hearts in the right place with flawed AED policy

by Dana Hess

It's not every day that a South Dakota legislator gets to save lives. That's what members of the House Education Committee thought they were doing when they unanimously endorsed House Bill 1073.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Mellissa Heermann, a Brookings Republican, and with the full-throated support of the American Heart Association, mandates that each school district create a cardiac emergency plan. That plan would include creating a cardiac emergency response team, placing automated external defibrillators in accessible areas on school grounds, reviewing the plan each year at each school in the district, conducting an annual drill at each school in the district and providing three hours of annual training. The bill includes \$150,000 for grants for AEDs to be distributed by the state Department of Health.

Testimony in favor of the bill noted that the smaller the community, the more likely that a high school is a social center of the town as people gather for football, basketball and volleyball games. Ensuring there is an AED handy will save lives, they said, and they're right.

However, most schools have already recognized that fact by investing in the machines. HB 1073 seeks to formalize what many school districts have already done without any concern for how they will accomplish the bill's many requirements or how many additional AEDs each school will need.

Testimony about the specifics concerning how to implement the bill were suitably vague.

Heermann said that most of the \$150,000 in the bill would likely make its way back to the general fund since there were so many entities offering grants for AEDs. Right.

Put yourself in the place of a harried school district business manager tasked with finding funding for AEDs to comply with the new law. Would you search the internet for likely funding partners or go right to the Department of Health where you know taxpayer money already resides for this purchase?

Asked to list the many sources of grants, Tony Burke, state government relations director for the American Heart Association, said they were available from Firehouse Subs and many others. Lawmakers let him off with that answer.

As for the cost of the machines, Burke said not to worry about that. The cost of AEDs ranges from \$1,200 to \$3,000, according to Burke, but bulk buying opportunities are available from suppliers. There were no questions from legislators about what the bulk price may be or if a school district that needed just two of the machines would qualify for a bulk price.

As for how many schools need more AEDs, Burke didn't know that either. That would work itself out as school districts came to the heart association for help. There are just over 140 public school districts in the state, and who knows how many accredited nonpublic schools. If every one of them needed just one AED, Heermann's \$150,000 would be gone in a heartbeat.

During testimony on the bill, lawmakers heard how important it was, in the event of a heart attack, to have an AED close at hand. An amended version of the bill added the \$150,000 appropriation and limited the scope of the bill, which originally called for AEDs at "each athletic venue where practices and competitions are held." In the version endorsed by the committee, the availability of AEDs is limited to school grounds.

That change made the bill more amenable to school districts, but flies in the face of the heart association's battle cry for a quick response. It's a safe bet to say that there's not a school district in the state that has a golf course on school grounds. The fastest growing high school sport in this state is girls' softball. Of the 68 teams signed up for the sport, it's likely that the vast majority of them play on city fields instead of on school grounds. There's no provision in the bill for how to respond to a heart attack at those venues.

One proponent of the bill said that school districts "have the duty to be community lifesavers." It seems that duty only extends to the edge of school grounds.

The committee passage of HB 1073 was a lesson in how not to mandate more of our school districts. Lawmakers on the committee were too accepting of vague answers to their questions while the proponents of the bill were lacking in their research.

The bill was forwarded on to the Joint Committee on Appropriations, the Legislature's main budgeting

panel. Let's hope that those legislators are more forthright in their quest for answers before handing off \$150,000 for a project that has good intentions but lacks the attention to detail that should be required for spending taxpayer dollars.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

Failed bill to repeal South Dakota's death penalty came from Republican former head of prison system

Representative cites words from Pope Leo XIV as motivation for legislation

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — The latest push to repeal the death penalty in South Dakota came from a Republican lawmaker who formerly led the state prison system and served as a county sheriff.

State Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard, introduced a bill that, in recent years, had been brought by Democrats. The bill failed Wednesday in a legislative committee, with only Reisch voting to support it.

There's one person on South Dakota's death row, Briley Piper, who was sent there for his role in a murder 26 years ago. His sentence would not have been impacted by the bill's passage. South Dakota has executed five people in the past 50 years, according to data from the Death Penalty Information Center.

Reisch led the Department of Corrections when the state carried out its first execution in 60 years in 2007. Elisha Page was executed by lethal injection that year. Prior to that, the state had carried out one death sentence by electrocution and 14 by hanging.

"It was a very somber event," Reisch told a House committee Wednesday.

"Everyone who had a role in carrying out the execution did so because it was the law."

Reisch said he filed the bill as a "direct result" of Pope Leo XIV's opinion that supporting capital punishment was in conflict with pro-life beliefs.

"Those words landed on my heart last fall," Reisch said.

Mary Ihli, who said she served on a jury in a death-penalty case, testified in support of the bill.

"It wasn't just stressful, it was traumatizing. I realized that I was being asked to decide on the life of another human being," she said. "No one, not the court, not the state, not the government, should expect a juror doing their civic duty to end a life."

Denny Davis, who leads South Dakotans Opposed to the Death Penalty, said the cost for prosecuting cases with the death penalty is 10 times higher than when the defendant faces a life sentence.

"I'd ask myself the question," he said, "do we lead with fear, or do we lead with the protection of human beings?"

South Dakota Republican Attorney General Marty Jackley spoke in opposition to the bill. He said the punishment exists only for the highest of crimes.

Jackley prosecuted two people who received the death penalty for the murder of South Dakota Corrections Officer Ronald Johnson. The two men, Rodney Berget and Eric Robert, were both serving lengthy sentences when they murdered Johnson.

"They still chose to kill another individual," Jackley said. "If you don't have the death penalty, there would have been no punishment for their acts."

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

Dems push to revert to earlier immigration policy to rein in Trump's crackdown

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — As they seek to curb President Donald Trump's aggressive approach to immigration enforcement, congressional Democrats are looking to formalize some guidelines previous administrations used.

Of the 10 policy proposals Democratic leaders offered in negotiations to reopen the Department of Homeland Security, which has been in a funding lapse since Feb. 14 in the midst of widespread uproar over the fatal shootings of two U.S. citizens by immigration officers in Minneapolis last month, seven have been employed in at least some form by previous administrations.

Democrats are asking the Trump administration to reinstate policies it has rejected in its controversial push to carry out mass deportations. Prior policies Democrats want to formalize include use-of-force standards, allowing unannounced visits by members of Congress to facilities that detain immigrants and obtaining judicial warrants before entering private residences.

"Many of the things the Democrats are asking for are to revert to prior policies," said Theresa Cardinal Brown, a senior DHS official during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. "Some of them are responding to the ways this administration is carrying out its operations that previous administrations did not."

Formalizing the policies in law, as part of a deal to pass a fiscal 2026 funding bill for the department, would make them more permanent.

"Policies and guidance ... apply as the current leadership applies them," Cardinal Brown said. "They're not absolutes, and they can be changed much more frequently."

But an agreement between congressional Democrats and the White House on changes to immigration enforcement appears elusive. The White House's response to the proposals was "incomplete and insufficient," House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a Feb. 9 statement.

No recent movement on negotiations

Democrats late Monday sent over a counterproposal to Republicans and the White House, but did not make public what those changes were, according to a statement from party leaders.

While there is bipartisan support for some of the proposals, like requiring body-worn cameras, others, such as barring immigration agents from wearing face coverings and requiring judicial warrants to enter private property, have been rejected outright by the Trump administration.

A White House official said the "Trump Administration remains interested in having good faith conversations with the Democrats."

"President Trump has been clear – he wants the government open," according to the White House official.

Even with the department shut down, immigration enforcement will continue, due to \$170 billion in funding in the massive tax cuts and spending package Trump signed into law last year.

Democrats' proposals do not include consequences if DHS doesn't comply, which raises an issue of effectiveness, said Heidi Altman, vice president of policy at the National Immigration Law Center, an advocacy group that aims to provide free or low-cost legal services for immigrants.

"When Congress is negotiating policy measures, are they also putting teeth to those policy measures, and are they yanking away the funds that we know ICE and CBP will use to violate guardrails to begin with?" Altman said.

Changes demanded after Minneapolis deaths

After Renee Good was shot and killed by immigration officer Jonathan Ross on Jan. 7, lawmakers amended the Homeland Security funding bill to add guardrails, such as appropriating \$20 million for body cameras

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and adding a requirement for DHS to report how funds from the tax cuts and spending package are being spent.

But a second death in Minnesota, that of intensive care unit nurse Alex Pretti on Jan. 24, spurred Democrats to reject funding for DHS without stronger policy changes to the enforcement tactics used by immigration officers at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection.

Only three of the 10 proposals from Schumer and Jeffries, both of New York, would be entirely new.

They are: prohibiting ICE and other immigration enforcement agents from wearing face coverings, barring racial profiling after the Supreme Court cleared the way for the practice last year, and standardizing uniforms of DHS agents.

The heads of ICE and CBP rejected Democrats' request to have their immigration officers forgo face coverings when asked during an oversight hearing before the House Homeland Security Committee last week.

Acting ICE Director Todd Lyons and CBP Commissioner Rodney Scott, along with congressional Republicans, have argued that masks and face coverings prevent their officers from being doxed.

Local cooperation

Other proposals, including barring of immigration enforcement of so-called sensitive locations such as religious places, child care facilities, hospitals and schools, would expand previous DHS guidance that restricted enforcement in such places.

The Democratic proposal calls for enforcement to be prohibited at those sensitive locations. Prior guidance allowed for the practice on a limited basis.

Then-acting ICE Director Caleb Vitello rescinded the policy shortly after President Donald Trump took office in January last year. There are several lawsuits brought by religious groups challenging the move by the Trump administration.

A requirement that immigration officials gain permission from local and state governments before undertaking large enforcement operations like the one in Minneapolis would build on previous policies of federal-local cooperation.

But that measure would be a long shot, Cardinal Brown said.

"I think that's going to be a hard one," she said. "The federal government has the authority to enforce immigration law anywhere in the country it wishes."

She said a more realistic option would be for the federal government to inform or coordinate with local authorities for large-scale immigration operations.

Another proposed requirement that DHS officials present identification also builds on a previous policy.

Another proposal builds on DHS policy of targeted enforcement by ending "indiscriminate arrests," without warrants.

Under current immigration law, if an officer encounters a person believed to be in the U.S. unlawfully and can escape before a warrant is obtained, a warrantless arrest is lawful.

Democrats want to increase standards on the forms ICE uses to authorize an arrest. These administrative forms are not signed by a judge but instead by an ICE employee.

Judicial warrants

The remaining proposals would revert DHS policies to those in place under prior administrations' guidance. Those include use-of-force standards, use of body cameras when interacting with the public, allowing members of Congress unannounced oversight visits at detention centers that hold immigrants and requiring a judicial warrant to enter private property.

An internal ICE memo, obtained by The Associated Press, showed that Lyons instructed ICE agents to enter private residences without a judicial warrant – a departure from longstanding DHS policy.

"This judicial warrant issue is so disturbing," said Ben Johnson, executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, or AILA.

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He said the question of whether a warrant is needed to enter private property was already decided under the Constitution's Fourth Amendment.

"The fact that it's being discussed now is really frightening," Johnson said.

Body cameras

Providing funds for DHS to acquire body cameras for immigration officers is one proposal Democrats and Republicans seem to have agreed on.

Earlier this month, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem announced that body cameras would be provided to all immigration agents in Minneapolis, and said that as "funding is available, the body camera program will be expanded nationwide."

During an oversight hearing on Capitol Hill, Lyons said about 3,000 ICE officers currently have body cameras with another 6,000 cameras on the way. Scott said roughly 10,000 Border Patrol agents, about half the total force, have body cameras.

But body cameras are not a guarantee against misconduct, Altman said.

CBP officials were wearing body cameras when Pretti was shot and killed. Scott said that footage would be released after the investigation is over.

"We see officers in the field right now wearing body-worn cameras engaging in abuse and violence on the daily," Altman said.

Oversight visits

One of the proposals would also end a DHS policy to require members of Congress to provide seven-day notice of oversight visits at facilities that hold immigrants, despite a 2019 appropriations law that allows for unannounced visits.

Since last summer, several lawmakers have been denied oversight visits at ICE facilities prompting them to sue in federal court.

On the day funding for DHS lapsed, Feb. 14, the Department of Justice submitted a brief, noting that because of the shutdown, unannounced oversight visits by lawmakers can be denied.

The administration argued that during the shutdown, immigration enforcement has been funded by the tax cuts and spending bill, which does not include language allowing unannounced visits, rather than regular appropriations.

"There is no lawful basis for the Court to enjoin Defendants' conduct so long as the restricted funds have lapsed," according to the document.

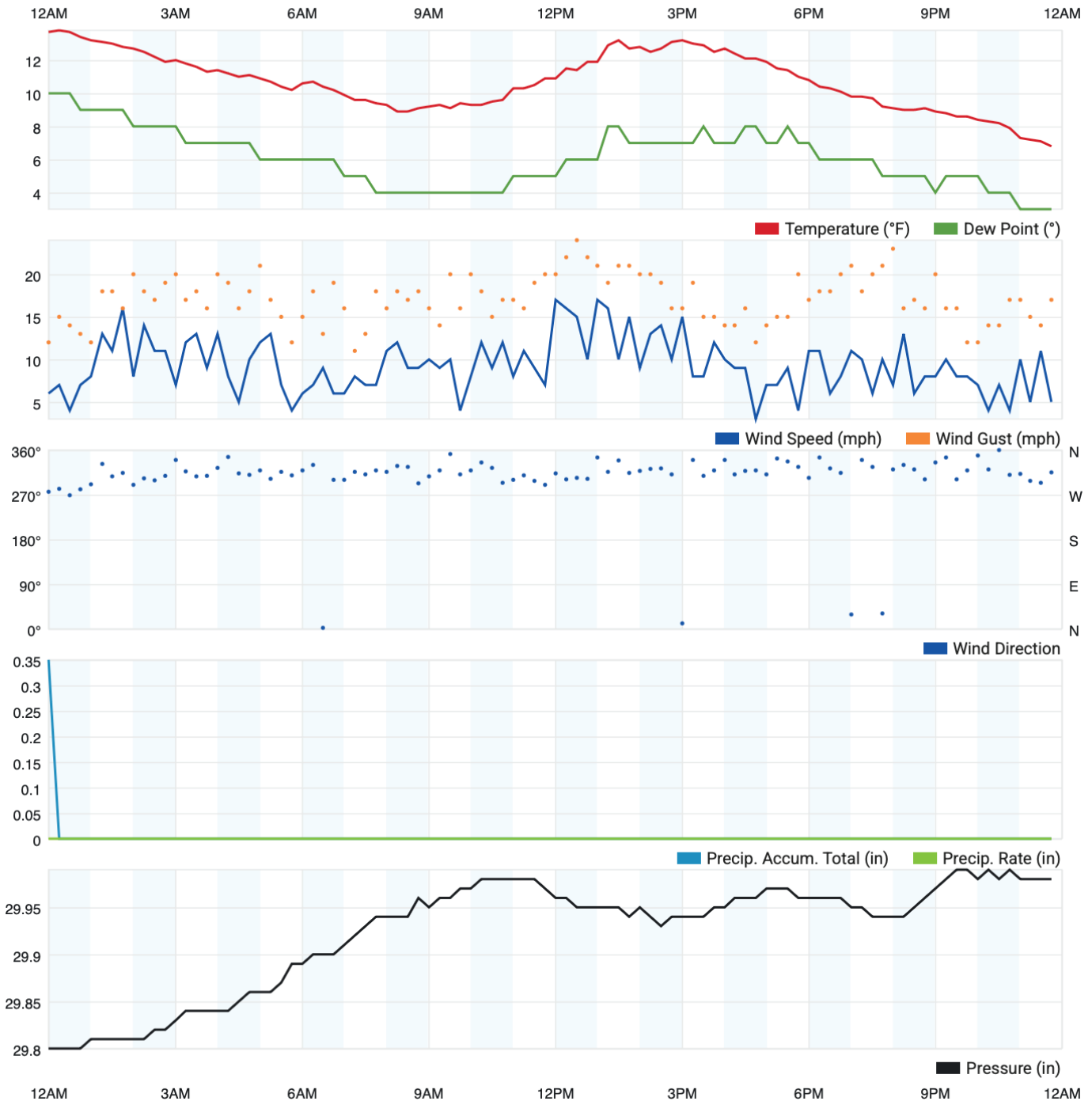
Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include immigration, congressional policy and legal challenges with a focus on how those policies impact the lives of immigrants and migrants coming to the U.S.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

February 19, 2026



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Friday

Friday Night

Saturday

Saturday Night

Sunday



High: 20 °F

Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy



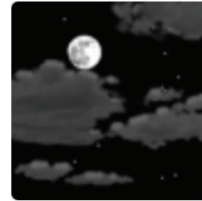
Low: 3 °F

Partly Cloudy



High: 22 °F

Mostly Sunny



Low: 2 °F

Partly Cloudy



High: 16 °F

Sunny

3 Day Outlook

Today

Saturday

Sunday



14 to 26°

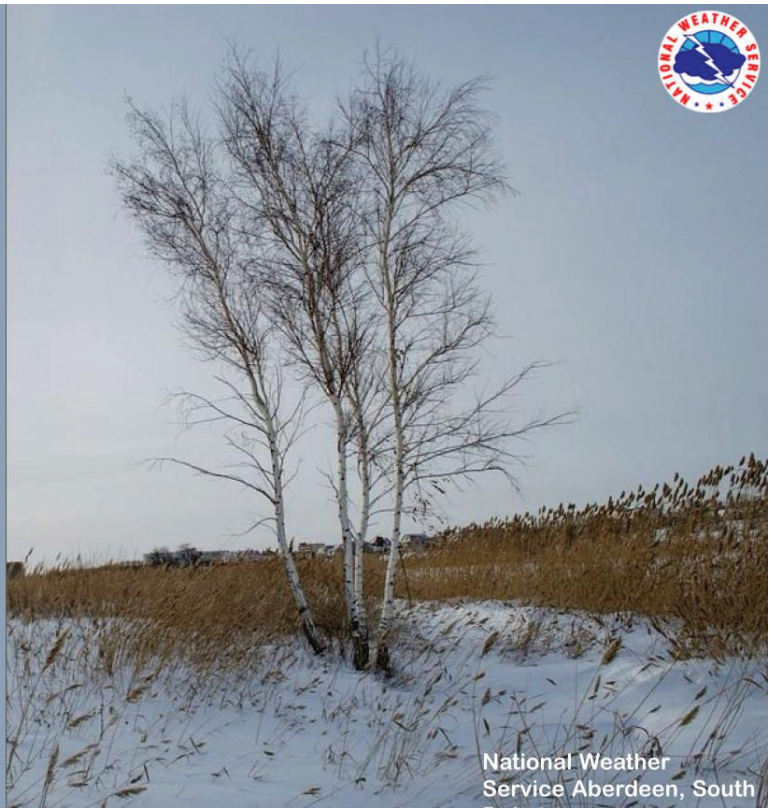


16 to 36°



11 to 28°

- Light snow showers (20%) today across parts of northeastern SD and west central MN. Very light accumulations
- Overnight lows in the single digits above or below zero
- Warmest temperatures across central SD / Coldest temperatures across northeast SD and western MN



National Weather
Service Aberdeen, South
Dakota

Temperatures will continue to remain as much as 10 degrees below normal the next few days. A few flurries or light snow showers will be possible today with very minimal accumulations expected. Overnight lows the next few nights will range from the single digits below zero to the single digits above zero. Coldest temperatures, both overnight and during the day, will be observed in areas that have snow on the ground.

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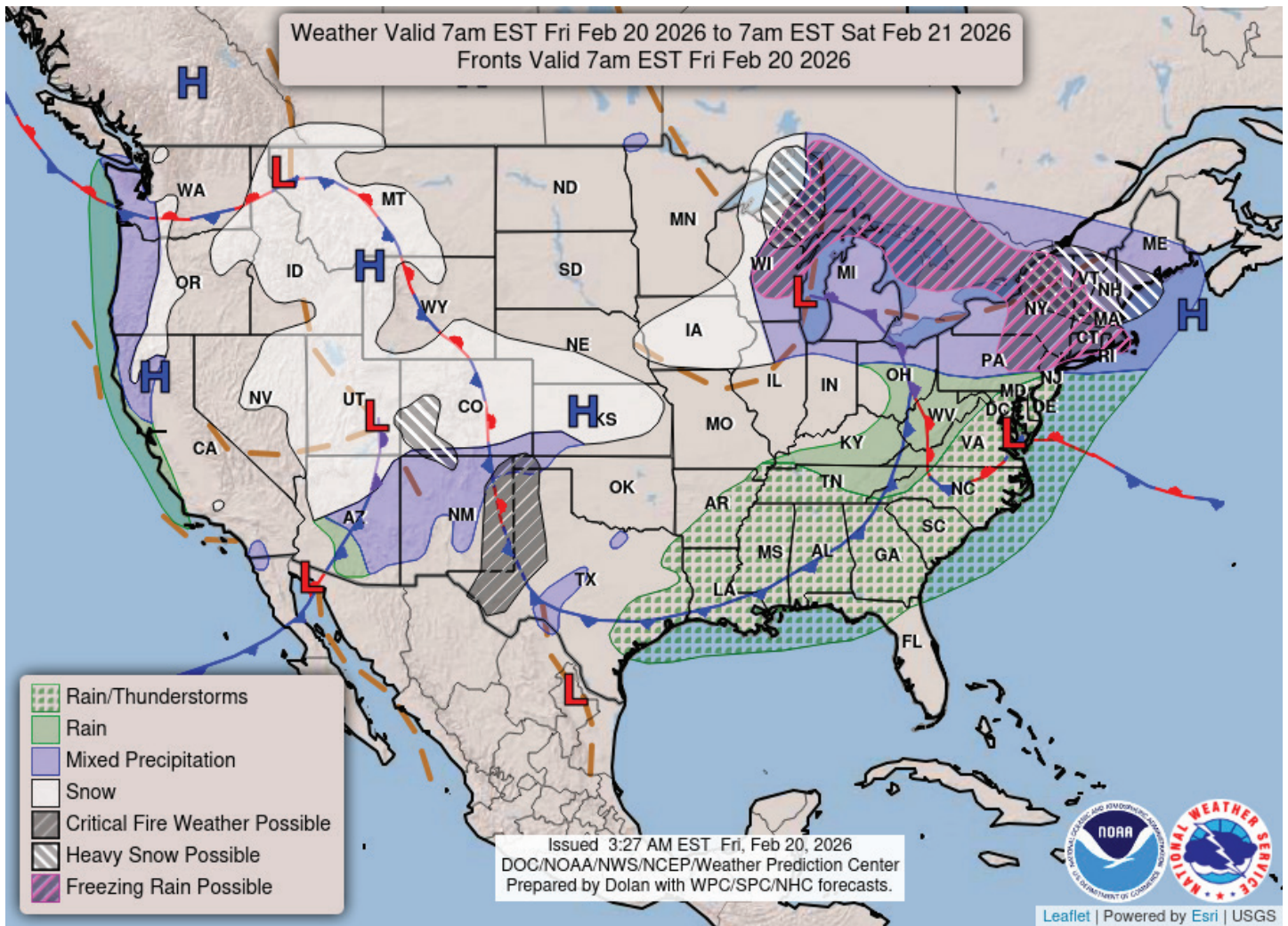
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 14 °F at 12:13 AM
Low Temp: 7 °F at 11:26 PM
Wind: 24 mph at 12:24 PM
Precip: Moisture from last storm: 0.96

Today's Info

Record High: 61 in 1930
Record Low: -30 in 1918
Average High: 30
Average Low: 8
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.42
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.96
Average Precip to date: 0.97
Precip Year to Date: 0.96
Sunset Tonight: 6:06 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:24 am



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Today in Weather History

February 20th, 1962: A round of heavy snow fell across the southeastern half of the state from the 20th through the 22nd, producing 10 inches. Snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Bryant, 6 inches at Kennebec, 7 inches at Redfield, Brookings, Mitchell, and Sioux Falls, 8 inches at Miller, and 10 inches at Huron. Snowfall amounts for the record-setting month of February 1962 ranged from 30 - 50 inches across much of the southeast part of the state.

February 20th, 1997: Warm weather resulted in snowmelt runoff and ice breakup on the Bad River. As a result, the Bad River went above flood stage from Capa to Fort Pierre late in the evening of the 20th. The flood stage at Fort Pierre is 21 feet, and the river rose to around 25 feet on the 21st. The Bad River went below flood stage during the afternoon of the 22nd. Lowlands near the river were flooded along with some county roads, with some of the roads damaged. Late in the evening of the 20th, the trailer court on the southern edge of Fort Pierre was evacuated, where they did some sandbagging. Also, on the west side of Fort Pierre, some roads were flooded.

February 20th, 2011: The snowfall/blizzard event on 20-21 February 2011 produced yet another round of impressive snowfall totals across central and northeastern South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Storm total snowfall amounts ranged from 8" to 12" with locally higher amounts of more than 18" reported in a few locations.

1912: A strong area of low pressure produced snow in Amarillo and high winds to Austin, Texas. In the warm sector of the low, severe storms developed and produced an estimated F3 tornado in Shreveport, Louisiana. The tornado killed nine people and injured 50 others. The tornado passed near Centenary College, where windows were damaged, and the grandstand at the ballpark was partially damaged. In addition, significant damage occurred in the Freewater section, where an estimated 75 to 100 houses were demolished.

1912: During the 20th and 21st, a severe snowstorm attended by high winds lasting from 34 to 30 hours swept over Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. The amount of snow that fell in this storm was not only large, but it drifted severely. In many places, snowbanks 5 feet and higher were formed, railroad cuts were filled, highways in many places were impassable, electric service wires of all kinds were temporarily put out of commission, all trade and traffic generally demoralized. This snowstorm was part of a general disturbance that developed over the southwest on the 20th and moved northeastward over the Central and Eastern States, increasing in strength during the 21st and 22nd, and which proved to be one of the most severe and most extensive general disturbances that have passed over this section of the country for several years past. Besides the heavy snow in the northern part of the storm, heavy rains, gales, and destructive thunderstorms attended over most of the southern and eastern portions. Wind velocities of 50 to 75 miles per hour were reported at many places during the passage of this storm. Some wind blew steadily at high velocities for several hours.

1995: The temperature at the Civic Center in Los Angeles, California, soared to 95 degrees, the highest ever recorded at the location during February.

2004: A nor'easter brought heavy snow and strong winds to Nova Scotia and Prince Edwards Island from February 17th through 20th, 2004. The Maritimers called this storm White Juan, a hurricane disguised as a blizzard. Halifax, Yarmouth, and Charlottetown broke all-time 24-hour snowfall records, receiving about 3 feet of snow. The 34.8 inches of snow on February 19th nearly doubled its previous record for a single day for Halifax. The map below is from "The Great Maritimes Blizzard of February 18-19, 2004" by Chris Fogarty from the Atlantic Storm Prediction Centre, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

Working Out Your Salvation

We don't have to work for salvation; rather, we rely on the Holy Spirit to change us from within.

Philippians 2:12-13: 12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;
13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

In today's passage, what does it mean to "work out your salvation"? Many people mistakenly think Paul was telling us to work for our salvation. But the apostle was saying something completely different—that your salvation experience isn't the end of your spiritual journey. It's the beginning.

Once you have trusted Jesus as Savior, you can start living out what He's given you—His abundant life. If you've given your heart to Him, the Holy Spirit now indwells you forever. It is God's Spirit working in and through you that provides the power to lean into the fullness of your salvation.

As your faith and relationship with the Lord develop, you'll begin to notice Him moving in your life. Then, when you share your faith and blessings with others, it will become evident that God is working through you in new ways. Keep following Him, and the seeds He has planted within you will start to flourish (Isaiah 55:10-11). So "work out your salvation" means reverently acting on the basis of what God has already given you—and allowing the life of Christ within you to come into full flower.

Your salvation should become an expression of Jesus' life wherever you are. As you work it out, God's Spirit will energize you to make a difference and impact others in countless ways.

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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The Groton Independent

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.17.26

3 37 44 52 63 14

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$416,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 3 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

6 14 19 25 44 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$15,800,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 18 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.19.26

6 10 16 27 36 12

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 33 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

2 8 10 24 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 33 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

6 13 14 16 47 26

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 2 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

9 33 52 64 66 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$190,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 2 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 49, Deuel 22
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 46, Kimball-White Lake 14
Bennett County 63, Kadoka 48
Beresford 72, Canton 62
Bridgewater-Emery 52, Hanson 36
Castlewood 52, Estelline-Hendricks 28
Chester 58, Colman-Egan 35
Deubrook 52, Elkton-Lake Benton 38
Ethan 76, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 39
Faulkton 55, Sully Buttes 30
Freeman 59, Gayville-Volin High School 51
Gregory 61, Burke 55
Hamlin 53, Clark-Willow Lake 48
Harding County 69, Philip 37
Hitchcock-Tulare 45, Wolsey-Wessington 39
Ipswich 54, Gettysburg 33
Irene-Wakonda 54, Canistota 28
Langford 69, Tiospa Zina 23
Lennox 66, Tri-Valley 22
Lyman 57, Jones County 34
Marshall, Minn. 70, Tea 42
McCook Central-Montrose 66, Madison 38
McLaughlin 76, Tiospaye Topa 24
Milbank 62, Webster 39
Miller 47, Highmore-Harrold 45
Northwestern 35, Herried-Selby 34
Parkston 44, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 31
Rapid City Central 49, Sturgis Brown High School 38
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 49, Iroquois-Lake Preston 19
Scotland/Menno 33, Parker/Marion 31
Sioux Falls Jefferson 70, Sioux Falls Lincoln 26
Sioux Valley 64, Garretson 28
Sisseton 73, Florence-Henry 46
St. Francis Indian 51, Marty 46
Viborg-Hurley 51, Howard 31
Waubay/Summit 53, Great Plains Lutheran 31
West Central 49, Flandreau 35
Wilmot 49, Aberdeen Christian 43
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Mahpíya Lúta Red Cloud vs. Hot Springs, ccd.

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

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BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 78, Kimball-White Lake 46
Bridgewater-Emery 52, Hanson 39
Canistota 45, Irene-Wakonda 39
Canton 77, Beresford 75
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 74, Timber Lake 66
Clark-Willow Lake 58, Hamlin 50
Deubrook 72, Elkton-Lake Benton 49
Deuel 52, Aberdeen Roncalli 44
Dupree 60, Lower Brule 50
Ethan 76, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 39
Faulkton 55, Sully Buttes 30
Freeman 63, Gayville-Volin High School 46
Ipswich 67, Gettysburg 58
Lead-Deadwood 67, Custer 57
Lemmon High School 47, Bison 22
Lennox 58, Tri-Valley 18
McLaughlin 80, Tiospaye Topa 50
Milbank 64, Webster 54
Parker/Marion 69, Scotland/Menno 53
Parkston 59, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 44
Pine Ridge 75, Todd County 57
Rapid City Central 69, Sturgis Brown High School 56
Sioux Valley 59, Garretson 33
Sisseton 49, Florence-Henry 47
Viborg-Hurley 51, Howard 31
Waubay/Summit 49, Great Plains Lutheran 42
Wilmot 85, Flandreau Indian 74
Wolsey-Wessington 69, Hitchcock-Tulare 46

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

Johnson scores 32 as Denver defeats South Dakota 90-70

By The Associated Press undefined

DENVER (AP) — Carson Johnson scored 32 points as Denver beat South Dakota 90-70 on Thursday.

Johnson shot 11 of 21 from the field, including 5 for 7 from 3-point range, and went 5 for 6 from the line for the Pioneers (14-15, 7-7 Summit League). Logan Kinsey scored 16 points and added five rebounds and three steals. Josh Lee had 10 points, all from a perfect 10 of 10 from the free-throw line to go with three steals.

Cameron Fens finished with 22 points and 10 rebounds for the Coyotes (14-14, 6-7). Vince Buzelis added 19 points for South Dakota. Jordan Crawford finished with 12 points.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

'I lost a lot of hope': Nevada pays \$100K to woman convicted for miscarriage under 1911 law

By KATE REYNOLDS/The Nevada Independent The Nevada Independent

Nevada's ban on taking drugs to end a pregnancy after the 24th week makes it the only state left in the nation that explicitly criminalizes abortions, advocates say, and legislative efforts last year to change that fell flat.

Patience Rousseau was the only person ever charged and convicted under the law, according to Laura FitzSimmons, a Carson City-based lawyer who has represented her since 2020. FitzSimmons helped get Rousseau's conviction vacated in 2021 for ineffective assistance of counsel.

Now Nevada will pay Rousseau \$100,000 for her ordeal, a settlement approved without comment during last Tuesday's meeting of the Board of Examiners — a panel consisting of the governor, the attorney general and the secretary of state.

The compensation marks the conclusion of an eight-year fight that upended Rousseau's life and brought national attention to a Nevada law that abortion advocates describe as uniquely punitive toward women who want to end their pregnancy.

"Even in the states with the most draconian abortion bans, there is language explicitly saying that a person who has an abortion has not committed a crime," said lawyer and abortion rights advocate Farah Diaz-Tello. "Not Nevada."

In 2018, 26-year-old Rousseau, then going by the name Patience Frazier, was living in Winnemucca when she delivered a stillborn baby, whom she named Abel and whose remains she buried in her backyard.

Forty days later, Rousseau was arrested and charged with felony manslaughter. Her charges stemmed from a law on the books in Nevada since 1911, stating that a woman who ingests drugs with the intent to terminate a pregnancy past 24 weeks has committed manslaughter.

Rousseau told The Indy last Tuesday she was grateful for the money but had "lost a lot of hope that I'm still struggling to get back." She said she struggles with trauma from the case and faces community stigma.

When she learned she was pregnant in 2018, Rousseau was not sure how far along she was. She scheduled an abortion in Reno, but a broken-down car prevented her from reaching the appointment. Searching the internet for advice on how to naturally end an unwanted pregnancy, she began to consume copious amounts of cinnamon and lift heavy objects.

Prosecutors could not prove that those actions, which are not scientifically linked to pregnancy issues, caused Rousseau's miscarriage.

But Rousseau struggled with substance use disorder and had ingested methamphetamines and marijuana during her pregnancy. Prosecutors argued she took those drugs to induce a miscarriage, thus violating the state's law.

At the encouragement of her public defender, Rousseau pleaded guilty to the manslaughter charges and went to prison in 2019. Her conviction was vacated in 2021 for ineffective assistance of counsel and her case was officially dismissed in 2025.

Nevada's unique law

Nevada's ban on inducing a miscarriage makes it "the only state where it is a felony to have an abortion," said Diaz-Tello. She said other states criminalize women's behavior during and after pregnancy in less explicit ways.

In last year's legislative session, bill SB139 would have overturned the statute but died without receiving a hearing in the Democrat-controlled Legislature.

The New Republic reported that Senate Democratic leadership, along with some of the state's pro-choice groups, opted against lobbying for the bill because they wanted to focus efforts on a ballot measure to enshrine abortion rights up to 24 weeks in the state Constitution.

Voters approved the measure, Question 6, by nearly a two-thirds majority in November 2024 but must approve it again this November before it is amended to the state Constitution.

Sen. Rochelle Nguyen (D-Las Vegas), who introduced SB139, wrote in a statement to The Indy that she

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supported the change "because I believe Nevada's legal system shouldn't punish women for their medical situations or pregnancy outcomes."

Nguyen also wrote that "making laws can be complicated, and not every bill passes."

Abortions are legal in Nevada for any reason through 24 weeks of gestation, after which they are only permitted if the life or health of the pregnant person is endangered. The state is one of 28 states where abortion restrictions depend on how far along the pregnancy is.

But most states that ban abortions after a certain date penalize doctors for performing late-term procedures, rather than the women seeking them.

Some states find other ways to punish women for abortions, through laws banning child abuse, concealing a birth or taking drugs during pregnancy.

Diaz-Tello said that in those other states, punishing women for getting abortions means prosecutors must invoke unrelated or adjacent statutes or charge women with separate offenses.

"Nevada is now the only state with a law on its books explicitly criminalizing ending one's pregnancy," she said.

A September 2025 report by the reproductive health care advocacy group Pregnancy Justice counted 412 pregnancy-related prosecutions in the two years after Roe v. Wade fell. Of these cases, only nine involved allegations related to obtaining an abortion or abortion medication.

The state's abortion rights advocates have long hailed the 1911 statute as outdated and unjust, arguing it punishes women who cannot access reproductive health care because of geographic restrictions, income barriers or social pressure.

"In these rural counties where we do not have abortion medical care ... if a woman has a drug problem, she's not going to go get help if she's pregnant," said FitzSimmons. She also said the law could theoretically be used to charge women who take legal abortion pills past 24 weeks.

Vulnerable pregnant women need "someone that's willing to help"

Rousseau told The Indy that her manslaughter conviction was a devastating punishment for a period in her life when she needed help most of all.

Many young women want abortions because "they don't feel like they can care for another child," Rousseau said, "whether it's their living situation, their financial situation, they're struggling or barely making it by with what they have."

She said the state should invest more in affordable housing, mental and physical health care, and in demonstrating to young moms that "there's someone out there that's willing to help, that's not judging you."

After serving more than two years in prison, a Nevada district judge vacated Rousseau's conviction in 2021, deeming her original counsel ineffective.

Her lawyer by then was FitzSimmons, an attorney for indigent clients who helped secure Nevadans' reproductive rights in a 1990 referendum.

FitzSimmons successfully argued that the prosecution could not prove Rousseau's drug use caused her miscarriage or that she took the drugs to induce miscarriage. The lawyer also argued that Rousseau, who was unsure when she got pregnant, could not have known she passed the 24-week threshold for legal abortion.

After a judge vacated her conviction in 2021, Rousseau moved to South Dakota. Soon she had another child, a boy turning 4 this year.

Rousseau told The Indy that she has a stable job but as a single mom, still struggles with paying rent and juggling her three sons' schedules for school. Her neighbors know about her past, she said, and many of them still think of her as the woman who killed her child.

Last Tuesday's settlement was a relief, Rousseau said, but only a temporary one.

"What does it really mean for me? How long is it going to last? I can cushion everything, but it's not going to fix my problems," she said.

Police continue to search Mountbatten-Windsor's former stately home, a day after his arrest

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Police continued on Friday to search the former home of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, a day after the former prince was held in custody for the best part of 11 hours on suspicion of misconduct in public office linked to his friendship with the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Following one of the most tumultuous days in the modern history of Britain's royal family, the former Prince Andrew is back at his new home on the Sandringham estate, King Charles III's private retreat, which is around 115 miles (185 kilometers) north of London.

Police have concluded their search there but are still searching Royal Lodge, his 30-room former home in the grounds of Windsor Castle, just west of the capital.

Mountbatten-Windsor, who was pictured slouched in the back of his chauffeur-driven car following his release Thursday evening, remains under investigation, which means he has neither been charged nor exonerated by Thames Valley Police, the force responsible for areas west of London.

Arrest was years in the making

His arrest follows years of allegations over his links with Epstein, who took his own life in a New York prison in 2019. The accusation at the heart of his arrest is that Mountbatten-Windsor — who was known as Prince Andrew until October when his brother stripped him of his titles and honors — shared confidential trade information with the disgraced financier when he was a trade envoy for the U.K.

Specifically, emails released last month by the U.S. Department of Justice appeared to show Mountbatten-Windsor sharing reports of official visits to Hong Kong, Vietnam and Singapore.

One, dated November 2010, appeared to be forwarded by Andrew five minutes after he had received it. Another a few weeks later appeared to show him sending Epstein a confidential brief on investment opportunities in the reconstruction of Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

Other police forces in the U.K. are also conducting their own investigations into Mountbatten-Windsor's Epstein-related links.

Mountbatten-Windsor has consistently denied any wrongdoing in his association with Epstein but has not commented on the most recent allegations that have emerged with the release of the so-called Epstein files.

Arrest was sudden, investigation will take time

Police swept into the grounds of Mountbatten-Windsor's home to arrest him at 8 a.m. Thursday — his 66th birthday — before taking him to a nearby police station for questioning.

It's not known what he told them. He may have said nothing, or "no comment," as is his right.

Experts said that misconduct in a public office is notoriously difficult to prove.

"Firstly, it must be determined if Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor was in a role within government that constitutes the title of public officer," said Sean Caulfield, a criminal defense lawyer at Hodge Jones & Allen. "There is no standard definition to clearly draw on."

The Crown Prosecution Service will ultimately make a decision about charging him.

Andrew Gilmore, a partner at Grosvenor Law, said that prosecutors will apply the two-stage test known as the "Code for Crown Prosecutors."

"That test is to determine whether there is a more realistic prospect of a conviction than not based on the evidence and whether the matter is in the public interest," he said. "If these two tests are met, then the matter will be charged and proceed to court."

Arrest is not just unusual, it's historic

Mountbatten-Windsor was the first royal since King Charles I nearly four centuries ago to be placed under arrest. That turned into a seismic moment in British history, leading to civil war, Charles' beheading and the temporary abolition of the monarchy.

His arrest is undoubtedly one of the gravest crises to affect the House of Windsor since its establishment more than 100 years ago. Arguably, only the abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936 and the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 have been as grave for the institution of the British monarchy in modern times.

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For the king, it's business as usual

Though the king and the royal family will carry out their normal duties as normal, the questions surrounding Mountbatten-Windsor will continue, not least because the investigations are likely to take time.

In a statement Thursday, the king said the "law must take its course," but that as "this process continues, it would not be right for me to comment further on this matter."

The allegations are not related to Epstein's sex trafficking

The allegations being investigated Thursday are separate from those made by Virginia Giuffre, who claimed she was trafficked to Britain to have sex with the prince in 2001, when she was just 17. Giuffre died by suicide last year.

Still, Giuffre's sister-in-law Amanda Roberts said that she was overjoyed when she got a phone call at 3 a.m. telling her the news of the arrest. But those feelings of elation were quickly complicated by the realization that she couldn't share the feelings of "vindication" with Giuffre.

"We can't tell her how much we love her, and that everything that she was doing is not in vain," Roberts added tearfully.

World shares, US futures advance after AI fears drag Wall Street lower

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — European shares were higher Friday after a mixed day of trading in Asia, as worries over risks linked to massive investments in artificial intelligence and a potential U.S.-Iran conflict weighed on major benchmarks.

Germany's DAX rose 0.2% to 25,103.32 and the CAC 40 in Paris was up 0.7% at 8,460.35. Britain's FTSE 100 picked up 0.4% to 10,672.75.

The future for the S&P 500 was up 0.3% while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 0.2%.

Tokyo's Nikkei 225 fell 1.1% to 56,825.70 as shares in major banks and other financial institutions skidded on worries over the potential impact of weakening private credit companies that have lent to companies exposed to the risk that AI will steal away their businesses.

That includes market heavyweights like Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group, which has a partnership with Blue Owl Capital, one such private-credit company. MUFJ's shares dropped 2.2% in Tokyo after Blue Owl lost 5.9% on Thursday.

Toyota Motor Corp. fell 3.7% and Sony shed 3.2%.

In Hong Kong, the Hang Seng lost 1.1% to 26,413.35 as the market reopened following Lunar New Year holidays. Markets in mainland China and Taiwan remain closed until next week.

South Korea's Kospi jumped 2.3% to a new record of 5,808.53, however, led by major defense contractors like Hanwha Aerospace, whose shares soared 6.4%. The company is one of many benefiting from a ramp up in military spending in many countries.

Elsewhere in the region, Australia's S&P/ASX 200 edged 0.1% lower to 9,081.40.

India's Sensex added 0.7%, and the SET in Bangkok lost 1.1%.

On Thursday, the S&P 500 slipped 0.3%. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 0.5% and the Nasdaq composite lost 0.3% to 22,682.73.

Booking Holdings dropped 6.1% for one of the market's sharper losses, even though the company behind the Booking.com, Priceline and OpenTable brands reported a profit for the latest quarter that edged past analysts' expectations.

It is one of many companies under pressure because of worries that competitors powered by artificial-intelligence technology could upend their industries and take away customers. Booking's stock has lost roughly a quarter of its value so far this year already.

Walmart, meanwhile, pushed and pulled on the market after jumping to an early gain of 2.7% and then flipping to a loss of 1.4%. The retail giant delivered stronger results for the latest quarter than analysts expected, but it gave a profit forecast for the upcoming year that fell short of estimates.

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Some of the bigger gains in the S&P 500 came from stocks of oil companies, which climbed with the price of crude. A barrel of benchmark U.S. crude rose 1.9%, while Brent added 1.9%. Crude prices have climbed to their highest level since early August as both the United States and Iran have signaled they are prepared for war if talks on Tehran's nuclear program fizzle out.

Early Friday, U.S. benchmark crude shed early gains, falling 20 cents to \$66.20 per barrel. Brent, the international standard, shed 17 cents to \$71.49 per barrel.

Higher oil prices could lead the Federal Reserve to hold off on cuts to interest rates. Fed officials said at their last meeting that they want to see inflation fall further before they would support cutting rates further this year.

On the other hand, a report saying the number of U.S. workers applying for unemployment benefits eased could signal the pace of layoffs is slowing.

Other U.S. economic reports said that growth for manufacturing in the mid-Atlantic region is accelerating, but potential The U.S. trade deficit also widened in December by more than economists expected.

In other dealings early Friday, the dollar rose to 155.59 Japanese yen from 154.99 yen. The euro slipped to \$1.1763 from \$1.1775.

The price of gold rose 1% and the price of silver was up 2.7%.
Bitcoin's price rose 1.9% to \$68,135.

Saudi Arabia may have uranium enrichment under proposed deal with US, arms control experts warn

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia could have some form of uranium enrichment within the kingdom under a proposed nuclear deal with the United States, congressional documents and an arms control group suggest, raising proliferation concerns as an atomic standoff between Iran and America continues.

U.S. Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden both tried to reach a nuclear deal with the kingdom to share American technology. Nonproliferation experts warn any spinning centrifuges within Saudi Arabia could open the door to a possible weapons program for the kingdom, something its assertive crown prince has suggested he could pursue if Tehran obtains an atomic bomb.

Already, Saudi Arabia and nuclear-armed Pakistan signed a mutual defense pact last year after Israel launched an attack on Qatar targeting Hamas officials. Pakistan's defense minister then said his nation's nuclear program "will be made available" to Saudi Arabia if needed, something seen as a warning for Israel, long believed to be the Middle East's only nuclear-armed state.

"Nuclear cooperation can be a positive mechanism for upholding nonproliferation norms and increasing transparency, but the devil is in the details," wrote Kelsey Davenport, the director for nonproliferation policy at the Washington-based Arms Control Association.

The documents raise "concerns that the Trump administration has not carefully considered the proliferation risks posed by its proposed nuclear cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia or the precedent this agreement may set."

Saudi Arabia did not immediately respond to questions Friday from The Associated Press
Congressional report outlines possible deal

The congressional document, also seen by the AP, shows the Trump administration aims to reach 20 nuclear business deals with nations around the world, including Saudi Arabia. The deal with Saudi Arabia could be worth billions of dollars, it adds.

The document contends that reaching a deal with the kingdom "will advance the national security interests of the United States, breaking with the failed policies of inaction and indecision that our competitors have capitalized on to disadvantage American industry and diminish the United States standing globally in this critical sector." China, France, Russia and South Korea are among the leading nations that sell nuclear power plant technology abroad.

The draft deal would see America and Saudi Arabia enter safeguard deals with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog. That would include oversight of the "most proliferation-sensitive areas of potential nuclear cooperation," it added. It listed enrichment, fuel fabrication and reprocessing as potential areas.

The IAEA, based in Vienna, did not immediately respond to questions. Saudi Arabia is a member state to the IAEA, which promotes peaceful nuclear work but also inspects nations to ensure they don't have clandestine atomic weapons programs.

"This suggests that once the bilateral safeguards agreement is in place, it will open the door for Saudi Arabia to acquire uranium enrichment technology or capabilities — possibly even from the United States," Davenport wrote. "Even with restrictions and limits, it seems likely that Saudi Arabia will have a path to some type of uranium enrichment or access to knowledge about enrichment."

Enrichment isn't an automatic path to a nuclear weapon — a nation also must master other steps including the use of synchronized high explosives, for instance. But it does open the door to weaponization, which has fueled the concerns of the West over Iran's program.

The United Arab Emirates, a neighbor to Saudi Arabia, signed what is referred to as a "123 agreement" with the U.S. to build its Barakah nuclear power plant with South Korean assistance. But the UAE did so without seeking enrichment, something nonproliferation experts have held up as the "gold standard" for nations wanting atomic power.

Saudi-US proposal comes amid Iran tensions

The push for a Saudi-U.S. deal comes as Trump threatens military action against Iran if it doesn't reach a deal over its nuclear program. The Trump military push follows nationwide protests in Iran that saw its theocratic government launch a bloody crackdown on dissent that killed thousands and saw tens of thousands more reportedly detained.

In Iran's case, it long has insisted its nuclear enrichment program is peaceful. However, the West and the IAEA say Iran had an organized military nuclear program up until 2003. Tehran also had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90% — making it the only country in the world to do so without a weapons program.

Iranian diplomats long have pointed to 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's comments as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran won't build an atomic bomb. However, Iranian officials increasingly have made the threat they could seek the bomb as tensions have risen with the U.S.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's day-to-day ruler, has said if Iran obtains the bomb, "we will have to get one."

Life is harsh and dangerous in Russian-run parts of Ukraine, activists and former residents say

By YURAS KARMAU Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Even now, safely in her new home of Estonia, Inna Vnukova says she can't purge the terrifying memory of living under Russian occupation in eastern Ukraine early in the war and her family's harrowing escape.

They hid in a damp basement for days in their village of Kudriashivka after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. In the streets, soldiers waving machine guns bullied residents, set up checkpoints and looted homes. There was constant shelling.

"Everyone was very scared and afraid to go outside," Vnukova told The Associated Press, with troops seeking out Ukrainian sympathizers and civil servants like her and her husband, Oleksii Vnukov.

In mid-March, she decided that she and her 16-year-old son, Zhenya, would flee the village with her brother's family, even though it meant leaving her husband behind temporarily. They took a risky trip by car to nearby Starobilsk, waving a white sheet amid mortar fire.

"We had already said our goodbyes to life, cursing this Russian world," said Vnukova, 42. "I've been trying to forget this nightmare for four years, but I can't."

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Many Ukrainians like Vnukova fled the invading forces. Those who stayed risked being detained — or worse — as Russian forces eventually took control of about 20% of the country and its estimated 3 million to 5 million people.

A new, Russian life in the seized regions

After four years of war, life in shattered cities like Mariupol and villages like Kudriashivka remains difficult, with residents facing problems with housing, water, power, heat and health care. Even President Vladimir Putin has acknowledged they have “many truly pressing, urgent problems.”

In the illegally annexed regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, Russian citizenship, language and culture is forced on residents, including in school lessons and textbooks. By spring 2025, some 3.5 million people in the four regions had been given Russian passports — a requirement to receive vital services like health care.

Some in the regions say they live in fear of being accused of sympathizing with Ukraine. Many have been imprisoned, beaten and killed, according to human rights activists.

Oleksii Vnukov, a court security officer, stayed behind in the village for nearly two weeks. Russian soldiers twice threatened to kill him, including an instance where he and a friend were dragged off the street by soldiers. But he survived and soon also escaped the village.

The family traveled through Russia before making it to Estonia, where Inna works in a printing house and Oleksii, 43, is an electrician.

“All life is leaving the occupied territories,” Vnukov said. “The people there aren’t living, they’re just surviving.”

Mykhailo Savva of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine said the Russian military’s practice of wielding “systemic and total control” in the regions continues today.

“Even though a significant number of socially active people have already been detained, Russian special services continue to identify disloyal Ukrainians, extract confessions, and continue to detain people,” Savva said. “Residents face such practices as document checks, mass searches, and denunciations on a daily basis.”

Human rights groups say Russian authorities used “filtration camps” to identify potentially disloyal individuals, as well as anyone who worked for the government, helped the Ukrainian army or had relatives in the military, along with journalists, teachers, scientists and politicians.

Stanislav Shkuta, 25, who lived in occupied Nova Kakhovka in the Kherson region, said he narrowly escaped arrest several times before reaching Ukrainian-controlled territory in 2023. He recalled being on a bus that was stopped by Russian soldiers.

“It was horrific. Men and women were asked to strip to the waist to see if they had Ukrainian tattoos,” said Shkuta, who now lives in Estonia. “I turned white with fear, wondering if I’d cleared everything on my phone.”

He said his friends who stayed in Nova Kakhovka say life has worsened, with suspected Ukrainian sympathizers stopped on the street or in surprise door-to-door inspections.

“Today, my friends complain that life there has become impossible,” he said.

Russia established a “vast network of secret and official detention centers where tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians” are held indefinitely without charge, said Oleksandra Matviichuk, head of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Center for Civil Liberties.

“Everyone knows that if you end up in the basement, your life is worth nothing,” she said.

Russian officials have refused to comment on past allegations by U.N. human rights officials that it tortures civilians and prisoners of war.

About 16,000 civilians have been detained illegally, but that number could be much higher because many are held incommunicado, said Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets.

A U.N. report released last summer said that between July 2024 and June 2025, it spoke to 57 civilians who were detained in the occupied regions, and that 52 of them told of severe beatings, electric shocks, sexual violence, degradation and threats of violence.

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One particularly famous case is that of Ukrainian journalist Victoria Roshchyna, 27, who disappeared in 2023 while reporting near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and died in Russian custody. When her body was handed over to Ukraine in 2025, it bore signs of torture, with some of her organs removed, a prosecutor said.

"Russia uses terror in the occupied territories to physically eliminate active people working in certain fields: teachers, children's writers, musicians, mayors, journalists, environmentalists. It also intimidates the passive majority," Matviichuk says.

Destruction in Mariupol

At the start of the war, Russian forces besieged Mariupol before the port city fell in May 2022. The Russian bombing of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater on March 16 of that year killed close to 600 people in and around the building, an AP investigation found, in the single deadliest known attack against civilians in the war.

Most of the city's population of about a half-million fled but many hid in basements, said a former actor who huddled for months with his parents, saying they were nearly killed by the Russian bombing.

The former actor, now in Estonia, spoke on condition of anonymity to not endanger his 76-year-old parents, still in Mariupol. They had to take Russian citizenship to get medical care, as well as a one-time payment equivalent to \$1,300 per person as compensation for their destroyed home, he said.

As in other occupied cities, Russification is taking place in Mariupol, changing street names, teaching Moscow-approved curriculum in schools, using Russian phone and TV networks and putting the city in Moscow's time zone.

"But even today, the threat of death has not gone away. Only those who have Russian passports can survive," the former actor said, adding that his parents have asked him not to send postcards in Ukrainian because "it could be dangerous."

Putin "openly states that there is no Ukrainian language, no Ukrainian culture, no Ukrainian nation. And in the occupied territories, these words are turning into terrible practice," Matviichuk said.

But not everyone opposes the Russian takeover in Mariupol. The former actor says half of the members of his old troupe now support the Kremlin and believe Kyiv "provoked the war."

Housing is a sore point in Mariupol, where the population is about half of what it was before 2022. New apartment blocks rose from the ruins, but rather than going to those who lost their homes, they are sold to Russian newcomers.

Some who lost their homes have made video appeals to Putin. "You said we 'don't abandon our own.' Do we not count as your own?" said one resident at a mass rally.

At least 12,191 apartments in Mariupol were added to a list of purportedly "ownerless" and abandoned flats to be expropriated in the first half of 2025. Thousands more are being seized elsewhere.

Moscow is encouraging Russian citizens to move to the occupied regions, offering a range of benefits. Teachers, doctors and cultural workers are promised salary supplements if they commit to living there for five years.

Crumbling infrastructure and a shortage of doctors

Years of war and neglect have saddled many occupied cities in eastern Ukraine with serious problems in supplying heat, electricity and water.

The northeastern city of Sievierodonetsk suffered significant destruction before falling to Russia in June 2022. Once home to 140,000 people, only 45,000 remain, mostly elderly or disabled.

Only one ambulance crew serves the whole city, and doctors and other health workers rotate in from Russian regions like Perm to work at its hospital, said a 67-year-old former engineer who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

But she still supports "the great work Putin is doing," because she was born and raised in the former Soviet Union.

In Alchevsk, a city in the Luhansk region, over half the homes have been without heat for two bitterly cold months. Five warming stations have been set up and utility companies said over 60% of municipal heating networks are in poor shape, without funds for repairs.

Even a pro-Moscow politician, Oleg Tsaryov, has accused authorities of freezing “an entire city.” When the heating system failed in 2006, he noted on social media that Ukrainian authorities “and the entire country stepped in to help and completely replaced the faulty equipment.” But after the Russian takeover, officials had “contrived to repeat this Armageddon scenario all over again,” he added.

In the Donetsk region, water trucks fill barrels outside apartment blocks — but they freeze solid in winter, said a resident who spoke on condition of anonymity because she feared repercussions.

“There’s constant squabbling over water,” she said, adding that lines to get the precious resource are “insane,” and people who are away at work often miss the trucks’ arrival.

Donetsk residents wrote an appeal for Putin to intervene in what has become “a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe.”

Putin last year acknowledged the plight in the four regions.

“I know how difficult it is now for the residents of the liberated cities and towns. There are many truly pressing, urgent problems,” he said, marking the third anniversary of incorporating those areas into Russia. He cited the need for reliable water supplies and access to health care, among other issues, and said he has launched a “large-scale socioeconomic development program” for the regions.

Meanwhile, Inna Vnukova is building a new life in Estonia: She and Oleksii now have a 1-year-old daughter, Alisa. Their son is now 20.

Only about 150 people — including the couple’s parents — remain in the village that once was home to 800, Vnukova said, adding that she would like to show her daughter the family’s native Luhansk region someday.

“We’ve been dreaming of returning for four years, but we increasingly wonder — what will we see there?” she asked.

India joins US-led initiative to build secure technology supply chains

By RAJESH ROY Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India joined a U.S.-led initiative to strengthen technology cooperation among strategic allies in a move Friday that underscores the nations’ warming ties after a brief strain over New Delhi’s unabated purchase of discounted Russian oil.

The decision aligns India closely with Washington’s efforts to build secure supply chains for semiconductors, advanced manufacturing and critical technologies at a time geopolitical competition with China is intensifying. It also signals a reset in relations following friction over energy trade and tariffs.

Nations that have joined the Pax Silica framework include Japan, South Korea, the U.K. and Israel.

“Pax Silica will be a group of nations that believe technology should empower free people and free markets. India’s entry into Pax Silica isn’t just symbolic. Its strategic, its essential,” U.S. Ambassador Sergio Gor said in a speech preceding the agreement signing.

Pax Silica is aimed at strengthening cooperation among partner countries on semiconductor design, fabrication, research and supply chain resilience. The initiative seeks to reduce dependence on China-dominated manufacturing hubs while promoting trusted production networks across democracies and strategic allies.

The development at the artificial intelligence summit in New Delhi comes weeks after India and the U.S. reached an interim trade framework to reduce tariffs and grant greater access to each other’s markets, easing tensions that had threatened to slow bilateral momentum.

President Donald Trump announced earlier this month that the U.S. would lower reciprocal import tariffs on India from 25% to 18% and also remove the additional 25% levy imposed earlier for buying Russian crude after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed to stop it.

India had ramped up Russian oil imports after Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, drawing criticism from western partners even as New Delhi defended the purchases as necessary to manage inflation and protect its consumers.

India's entry into Pax Silica, combined with trade concessions, marks a strategic convergence that extends beyond commerce into long-term technology and security cooperation, reinforcing India's role as a key U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific.

"From the trade deal to Pax Silica to defense cooperation, the potential for our two nations to work together is truly limitless," Gor said.

Trump climate health rollback likely to hit poor, minority areas hardest, experts say

By DORANY PINEDA and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

In a stretch of Louisiana with about 170 fossil fuel and petrochemical plants, premature death is a fact of life for people living nearby. The air is so polluted and the cancer rates so high it is known as Cancer Alley.

"Most adults in the area are attending two to three funerals per month," said Gary C. Watson Jr., who was born and raised in St. John the Baptist Parish, a majority Black community in Cancer Alley about 30 miles outside of New Orleans. His father survived cancer, but in recent years, at least five relatives have died from it.

Cancer Alley is one of many patches of America — mostly minority and poor — that suffer higher levels of air pollution from fossil fuel facilities that emit tiny particles connected to higher death rates. When the federal government in 2009 targeted carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases as a public health danger because of climate change, it led to tighter regulation of pollution and cleaner air in some communities. But this month, the Trump administration's Environmental Protection Agency overturned that "endangerment finding."

Public health experts say the change will likely mean more illness and death for Americans, with communities like Watson's hit hardest. On Wednesday, a coalition of health and environmental groups sued the EPA over the revocation, calling it unlawful and harmful.

"Not having these protections, it's only going to make things worse," said Watson, with the environmental justice group Rise St. James Louisiana. He also worries that revoking the endangerment finding will increase emissions that will worsen the state's hurricanes.

The Trump administration said the finding — a cornerstone for many regulations aimed at fighting climate change — hurts industry and the economy. President Donald Trump has called the idea "a scam" despite repeated studies showing the opposite.

Growing evidence shows that poor and Black, Latino and other racial and ethnic groups are typically more vulnerable than white people to pollution and climate-driven floods, hurricanes, extreme heat and more because they tend to have less resources to protect against and recover from them. The EPA, in a 2021 report no longer on its website, concluded the same.

The finding's reversal will affect everyone, but "overburdened communities, which are typically communities of color, Indigenous communities and low-income communities, they will, again, suffer most from these actions," said Matthew Tejada, senior vice president for environmental health at the Natural Resources Defense Council and a former deputy with the EPA's office for environmental justice.

Hilda Berganza, climate program manager with the Hispanic Access Foundation, said: "Communities that are the front lines are going to feel it the most. And we can see that the Latino population is one of those communities that is going to feel it even more than others because of where we live, where we work."

Research shows the unequal harms of pollution, climate change

A study published in November found more than 46 million people in the U.S. live within a mile of at least one type of energy supply infrastructure, such as an oil well, a power plant or an oil refinery. But the study found that "persistently marginalized" racial and ethnic groups were more likely to live near multiple such sites. Latinos had the highest exposure.

The EPA, in that 2021 report, estimated that with a 2-degree Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) rise in global warming, Black people were 40% more likely to live in places with the highest projected rise in deaths because of extreme heat. Latinos, who are overrepresented in outdoor industries such as agriculture and construction,

were 43% more likely to live where labor hour losses were expected to be the highest because of heat. Julia Silver, a senior research analyst at the University of California, Los Angeles' Latino Policy and Politics Institute, found in her own research that California Latino communities had 23 more days of extreme heat annually than non-Latino white neighborhoods. Her team also found those areas have poor air quality at about double the rate, with twice as many asthma-related emergency room visits. Other research shows that Latino children are 40% more likely to die from asthma than white children in part because many lack consistent health care access.

"What we're risking with a rollback like this at the federal level is really human health and well-being in these marginalized groups," Silver said.

Experts say the disparate impacts will be significant

Armando Carpio, a longtime pastor in Los Angeles, has seen firsthand how vulnerable his mostly Latino parishioners are. Many are construction workers and gardeners who work outside, often in extreme heat. Others live and work near polluting freeways. He sees children with asthma and elders with dementia, both linked to exposure to air pollution.

"We're regressing," he said. "I don't know how many years back, but all of this really affects us."

It is difficult to quantify how much more communities of color could be impacted by the finding's revocation, but experts who spoke with The Associated Press all said it would be significant.

"You will see statistically significant increases in excess morbidity and mortality when it comes to climate impacts and health impacts associated with co-pollutants" in communities of color, said Sacoby Wilson, a University of Maryland professor and executive director of the nonprofit Center for Engagement, Environmental Justice and Health INpowering Communities.

Beverly Wright, founding director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in New Orleans, said at least four Black communities in Cancer Alley no longer exist because of the expansion of industrial facilities. The repeal will bring more pollution, higher cancer rates, more extreme weather and the disappearance of more historic communities, she said.

"It has us going in the wrong direction, and our communities are now at greater risk," she said.

Ex-South Korean president remains defiant following life sentence for rebellion

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Ousted South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Friday remained defiant in his first reaction to a life sentence for rebellion handed down by a Seoul court the previous day.

In a statement released by his lawyers, Yoon maintained that his abrupt and short-lived declaration of martial law in December 2024 was done "solely for the sake of the nation and our people," and dismissed the Seoul Central District Court as biased against him.

Yoon, who was removed from office amid a political crisis set off by his unsuccessful power grab, has long rejected the eight criminal cases brought against him for what prosecutors described as a coup attempt and other allegations.

He barricaded himself in the presidential residence for weeks, stonewalled investigators following his arrest, and skipped court dates, while clashing with witnesses when he did appear.

In handing down his verdict on rebellion charges on Thursday, Judge Jee Kui-youn of the Seoul court said that Yoon has shown "no sign of apology for the staggering social costs incurred by the emergency martial law" and that he "refused to appear in court without any justifiable reason" several times.

Conservative supporters of the former president, who rallied near the court for hours ahead of the verdict, expressed disappointment and anger after it was announced, while his opponents cheered in nearby streets, the two groups separated by hundreds of police officers. There were no major clashes.

Yoon's statement rejected the verdict as illegitimate.

"In a situation where the independence of the judiciary cannot be guaranteed and a verdict based on law

and conscience is difficult to expect, I feel deep skepticism whether it would be meaningful to continue a legal battle through an appeal," said Yoon, 65, who has been jailed since last July.

Yoo Jeong-hwa, one of Yoon's lawyers, said Yoon was "merely expressing his current state of mind" and was not indicating an intention to waive his right to appeal. Yoon has seven days to appeal Thursday's sentence.

In his statement, Yoon expressed sympathy to the families of soldiers, police officials and public servants facing investigations or indictment in connection with his martial law decree, saying he feels responsible for their suffering. But he also assured his supporters "our fight is not over."

The court found Yoon guilty of orchestrating a rebellion by mobilizing military and police forces in an illegal bid to seize the liberal-led legislature, arrest political opponents and establish unchecked rule for an indefinite period. Yoon has described his authoritarian push as necessary to counter the opposition-controlled legislature, which he portrayed as made up of "anti-state" forces.

Yoon could also face an appeal brought by an independent counsel, who asked the court to sentence him to death and have the right to ask a higher court to change the sentence. Jang Woo-sung, a member of the investigation team, told reporters after the ruling that the team has "reservations" regarding the court's factual findings and the severity of the sentence.

The Seoul court also convicted and sentenced five former military and police officials involved in enforcing Yoon's martial law decree. They included ex-Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun, who received a 30-year jail term for his central role in planning the measure, mobilizing the military and instructing military counterintelligence officials to arrest key politicians, including current liberal President Lee Jae Myung. Kim has appealed.

Jang Dong-hyuk, leader of the conservative People Power Party, said at a news conference Friday that the court failed to present a convincing case that Yoon's martial law amounted to rebellion and, referring to a possible appeal, stressed that "the right to be presumed innocent applies to everyone without exception."

Yoon's martial law decree, announced late at night on Dec. 3, 2024, lasted about six hours, after a quorum of lawmakers broke through a military blockade and unanimously voted to overturn it, forcing his Cabinet to lift the measure.

Yoon was suspended from office on Dec. 14, 2024, after being impeached by lawmakers and was formally removed by the Constitutional Court in April 2025. He has been facing multiple criminal trials under arrest, with the rebellion charge carrying the most severe punishment.

While brief, Yoon's martial law decree set off the country's most severe political crisis in decades, paralyzing politics and high-level diplomacy and rattling financial markets. The power vacuum was resolved after Lee won an early election in June last year.

Israeli settlers kill 19-year-old Palestinian American, officials and witnesses say

By IMAD ISSEID and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

MUKHMAS, West Bank (AP) — Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank shot and killed a Palestinian American man during an attack on a village, the Palestinian Health Ministry and a witness said Thursday.

Raed Abu Ali, a resident of Mukhmas, said a group of settlers came to the village Wednesday afternoon where they attacked a farmer, prompting clashes after residents intervened. Israeli forces later arrived, and during the violence armed settlers killed 19-year-old Nasrallah Abu Siyam and injured several others.

Abu Ali said that the army shot tear gas, sound grenades and live ammunition. Israel's military acknowledged using what it called "riot dispersal methods" after receiving reports of Palestinians throwing rocks but denied that its forces fired during the clashes.

"When the settlers saw the army, they were encouraged and started shooting live bullets," Abu Ali said. He added that they clubbed those injured with sticks after they had fallen to the ground.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health confirmed Abu Siyam's death from critical wounds sustained Wednes-

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day afternoon near the village east of Ramallah.

Abu Siyam's killing is the latest in a surge in violence in the occupied West Bank. Israeli forces and settlers killed 240 Palestinians last year, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Palestinians killed 17 Israelis over the same period, six of whom were soldiers. The Palestinian Authority's Wall and Settlement Resistance Commission said Abu Siyam was the first Palestinian killed by settlers in 2026.

Mukhmas and its surrounding area — most of which lies under Israeli civil and military administration — have become a hot spot for settler attacks, including arson and assaults, as well as the construction of outposts that Israeli law considers illegal.

The Israeli military said late Wednesday that unnamed suspects shot at Palestinians, who were later evacuated for medical treatment. It did not say whether any were arrested.

Abu Siyam's mother told The Associated Press that he was an American citizen, making him the second Palestinian American person to be killed by Israeli settlers in less than a year.

A U.S. embassy spokesperson said they "condemn this violence."

Palestinians and rights groups say authorities routinely fail to prosecute settlers or hold them accountable for violence.

UN says Israel's acts in West Bank may be ethnic cleansing

The U.N. human rights office on Thursday accused Israel of war crimes and said practices that displace Palestinians and alter the demographic composition of the occupied West Bank "raise concerns over ethnic cleansing."

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, citing findings collected November 2024 to October 2025, said Israel was engaged in "concerted and accelerating effort to consolidate annexation" while maintaining a system "to maintain oppression and domination of Palestinians."

Residents of Palestinian villages and herding communities have been increasingly displaced as Israeli settlements and outposts expand. Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, the Israeli rights group B'Tselem says about 45 Palestinian communities have been emptied out completely amid Israeli demolition orders and settler attacks.

Additionally, the office said Israeli military operations in the northern West Bank "employed means and methods designed for warfare" including lethal airstrikes and forcibly transferring civilians from their homes. It also said Israel "forbade" residents from returning to their homes in northern West Bank refugee camps. The operation, which Israel said was aimed against militants, displaced tens of thousands of Palestinians.

The report also accused Palestinian security forces of using unnecessary lethal force in the same areas, killing at least eight people, and noted that the Palestinian Authority had engaged in "intimidation, detention and ill-treatment of journalists, human rights defenders and other individuals deemed critical of its rule."

Neither Israel's Foreign Ministry nor the Palestinian Authority responded to requests for comment. Israel has repeatedly accused the U.N. rights office of anti-Israel bias.

Last year, the U.N. human rights monitor warned of what it called "an unfolding genocide in Gaza" with "conditions of life increasingly incompatible with (Palestinians') continued existence." Their report on Thursday also warned of demographic shifts in Gaza raising concerns of ethnic cleansing.

Report finds imprisoned Palestinian journalists were tortured

The Committee to Protect Journalists said that dozens of Palestinian journalists who were detained in Israel during the war in Gaza experienced conditions including physical assaults, forced stress positions, sensory deprivation, sexual violence and medical neglect.

CPJ documented the detention of at least 94 Palestinian journalists and one media worker during the war, from the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. Thirty are still in custody, CPJ said.

Half of the journalists, the report found, were never charged with a crime and were held under Israel's administrative detention system, which allows for suspects deemed security risks to be held for six months and can be renewed indefinitely.

Israel's prison services did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the report, but rejected a similar report in January about conditions for Palestinian prisoners as "false allegations," con-

tending it operates lawfully, is subject to oversight and reviews complaints.

UN development chief says removing Gaza rubble will take 7 years

The vast destruction across Gaza will take at least seven years just to remove the rubble, according to the United Nations Development Program.

Alexander De Croo, the former Belgian prime minister who just returned from Gaza, said that the UNDP had removed just 0.5% of the rubble and people in Gaza are experiencing "the worst living conditions that I have ever seen."

De Croo said 90% of Gaza's 2.2 million people live in "very, very rudimentary tents" in the middle of the rubble, which poses health dangers and a danger from exploding weapons.

He said UNDP has been able to build 500 improved housing units, and has 4,000 more that are ready, but estimates the true need is 200,000 to 300,000 units. The units are meant to be used temporarily while reconstruction takes place. He called on Israel to expand access for goods and items needed for reconstruction and the private sector to begin development.

Russian-run areas of Ukraine face water, heat and housing woes

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Nearly four years into its full-scale invasion, Russia controls about 20% of Ukrainian territory. Many of the estimated 3 million to 5 million people who remain in regions under Moscow's control face housing, water, power, heat and health care woes.

Even President Vladimir Putin has acknowledged "many truly pressing, urgent problems" in the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, which were illegally annexed by Moscow months after the all-out war began on Feb. 24, 2022.

Russian citizenship, language and culture is forced upon residents, including in school lesson plans and textbooks.

Some residents live in fear of being accused of sympathizing with Kyiv, according to Ukrainians who have left. Many have been imprisoned, beaten and killed, according to human rights activists.

Russia established a "vast network of secret and official detention centers where tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians" are held indefinitely without charge, said Oleksandra Matviichuk, head of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Center for Civil Liberties.

Russian officials have refused to comment on past allegations by U.N. human rights officials that it tortures civilians and prisoners of war.

One family's plight

Inna Vnukova spent the first days of the Russian occupation in the Luhansk region hiding in a damp basement with her family. Outside in her village of Kudriashivka, soldiers bullied residents, set up checkpoints and looted homes. There was constant shelling.

"Everyone was very scared and afraid to go outside," Vnukova told The Associated Press in Estonia, where she now lives. The troops sought out officials and civil servants like her and her husband, Oleksii Vnukov.

In mid-March 2022, she and her 16-year-old son, Zhenya, fled the village with her brother's family, even though it meant leaving her husband behind temporarily. They risked a trip by car to nearby Starobilsk, waving a white sheet amid mortar fire.

Oleksii Vnukov, a court security officer, stayed for nearly two weeks. Russian soldiers twice threatened to kill him before he escaped.

"The people there aren't living, they're just surviving," he said of the 150 people — including the couple's parents — who still live in the village that once was home to 800.

Vnukova and her husband have a new life in Estonia, where she works in a printing house and he is an electrician. Their son is now 20, and they have a 1-year-old daughter, Alisa.

Life in shattered Mariupol

Russian forces besieged Mariupol for weeks before the port city fell in May 2022. The bombing of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater on March 16 of that year killed nearly 600 people in and

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around the building, an AP investigation found — the war's single deadliest known attack against civilians. Most of the population of about a half-million fled but many hid in basements, said a former actor who huddled for months with his parents.

The former actor, now in Estonia, spoke on condition of anonymity to not endanger his 76-year-old parents, still in Mariupol. They took Russian citizenship to get medical care and a one-time payment equivalent to \$1,300 per person as compensation for their destroyed home, he said.

Housing remains a problem even though the population is about half of what it was before the war. New apartments are sold to Russian newcomers — not those who lost their homes, according to complaints sent by video to Putin.

Not everyone opposes the Russian takeover. The former actor says half of the members of his old troupe support the Kremlin. Still, he said his parents asked him not to send postcards in Ukrainian because "it could be dangerous."

Crumbling infrastructure

Years of war and neglect have saddled many cities with crumbling municipal services.

In Alchevsk, a city in the Luhansk region, over half the homes are without heat in this bitterly cold winter. Five warming stations have been set up.

In the Donetsk region, water trucks fill barrels outside apartment blocks — but they freeze solid in winter, said a resident who spoke on condition of anonymity because she feared repercussions. "There's constant squabbling over water," she said.

Moscow encourages Russians to move to the occupied regions, offering various benefits. Teachers, doctors and cultural workers are promised salary supplements if they live there for five years.

The northeastern city of Sievierodonetsk, once home to 140,000 people, suffered significant damage and now has only 45,000 mostly elderly or disabled residents. Only one ambulance crew serves the city, and Russian medical workers rotate in to staff its hospital, said a 67-year-old former engineer who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

"I know how difficult it is now for the residents of the liberated cities and towns. There are many truly pressing, urgent problems," Putin said in September. He cited the need for reliable water supplies and access to health care, and said he has launched a "large-scale socioeconomic development program" for the regions.

Living in fear

Stanislav Shkuta, 25, from Nova Kakhovka in the Kherson region, said he narrowly escaped arrest several times before reaching Ukrainian-controlled territory in 2023. He recalled being on a bus that was stopped by Russian soldiers, and "men and women were asked to strip to the waist to see if they had Ukrainian tattoos."

Shkuta, now in Estonia, said he "turned white with fear, wondering if I'd cleared everything on my phone."

Friends who stayed in Nova Kakhovka say life has worsened, with suspected Ukrainian sympathizers stopped on the street or in surprise door-to-door inspections, he added.

Mykhailo Savva of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine said "Russian special services continue to identify disloyal Ukrainians, extract confessions, and continue to detain people," with residents facing document checks and mass searches.

Human rights groups say Russia used "filtration camps" early in the war to identify potentially disloyal individuals, as well as anyone who worked for the government, helped the Ukrainian army or had relatives in the military, along with journalists, teachers, scientists and politicians.

About 16,000 civilians have been detained illegally, but that number could be much higher because many are held incommunicado, said Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets.

Eric Dane, 'Grey's Anatomy' star and ALS awareness advocate, dies at 53

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Entertainment Writer

Eric Dane, the celebrated actor best known for his roles on "Grey's Anatomy" and "Euphoria" and who later in life became an advocate for ALS awareness, died Thursday. He was 53.

His representatives said Dane died from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known also as Lou Gehrig's disease, less than a year after he announced his diagnosis.

"He spent his final days surrounded by dear friends, his devoted wife, and his two beautiful daughters, Billie and Georgia, who were the center of his world," said a statement that requested privacy for his family. "Throughout his journey with ALS, Eric became a passionate advocate for awareness and research, determined to make a difference for others facing the same fight. He will be deeply missed, and lovingly remembered always. Eric adored his fans and is forever grateful for the outpouring of love and support he's received."

Dane developed a devoted fanbase when his big break arrived in the mid-2000s: He was cast as Dr. Mark Sloan, aka McSteamy, on the ABC medical drama "Grey's Anatomy," a role he would play from 2006 until 2012 and reprise in 2021.

Although his character was killed off on the show after a plane crash, Dane's character left an indelible mark on the still-running show: Seattle Grace Hospital became Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital.

In 2019, he did a complete 180 from the charming McSteamy and became the troubled Cal Jacobs in HBO's provocative drama "Euphoria," a role he continued in up until his death.

Dane also starred as Tom Chandler, the captain of a U.S. Navy destroyer at sea after a global catastrophe wiped out most of the world's population, in the TNT drama "The Last Ship." In 2017, production was halted as Dane battled depression.

In April 2025, Dane announced he had been diagnosed with ALS, a progressive disease that attacks nerve cells controlling muscles throughout the body.

ALS gradually destroys the nerve cells and connections needed to walk, talk, speak and breathe. Most patients die within three to five years of a diagnosis.

Dane became an advocate for ALS awareness, speaking a news conference in Washington on health insurance prior authorization. "Some of you may know me from TV shows, such as 'Grey's Anatomy,' which I play a doctor. But I am here today to speak briefly as a patient battling ALS," he said in June 2025. In September of that year, the ALS Network named Dane the recipient of their advocate of the year award, recognizing his commitment to raising awareness and support for people living with ALS.

Dane was born on Nov. 9, 1972, and raised in Northern California. His father, who the actor said was a Navy veteran and an architect, died of a gunshot wound when Dane was 7. After high school, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue acting, landing guest roles on shows like "Saved by the Bell," "Married...With Children," "Charmed" and "X-Men: the Last Stand," and one season of the short-lived medical drama "Gideon's Crossing."

A memoir by Dane is scheduled to be published in late 2026. "Book of Days: A Memoir in Moments" will be released by Maria Shriver's The Open Field, a Penguin Random House imprint. According to Open Field, Dane's memoir covers key moments in his life, from his first day at work on "Grey's Anatomy" to the births of his two daughters and learning that he had ALS.

"I want to capture the moments that shaped me — the beautiful days, the hard ones, the ones I never took for granted — so that if nothing else, people who read it will remember what it means to live with heart," Dane said in a statement about the book. "If sharing this helps someone find meaning in their own days, then my story is worth telling."

Dane is survived by his wife, actor Rebecca Gayheart, and their two teen daughters, Billie Beatrice and Georgia Geraldine. Gayheart and Dane wed in 2004 and separated in September 2017. Gayheart filed for divorce in 2018, but later filed to dismiss the petition. In a December essay for New York magazine's The Cut reflecting on Dane's diagnosis, Gayheart called their dynamic "a very complicated relationship, one

that's confusing for people." She said they never got a divorce, but dated other people and lived separately. "Our love may not be romantic, but it's a familial love," she said. "Eric knows that I am always going to want the best for him. That I'm going to do my best to do right by him. And I know he would do the same for me. So whatever I can do or however I can show up to make this journey better for him or easier for him, I want to do that."

Kim lauds North Korea's economy and regional standing as major party meeting opens

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un lauded his nation's improving economy and regional standing as he opened the country's most important political event, where he is expected to set his domestic and foreign policy agenda for the next five years and further entrench his family's authoritarian rule.

The Workers' Party congress, which will likely run for days in Pyongyang, comes as Kim carves out a more forceful regional presence, leveraging an advancing nuclear arsenal and a growing alignment with Moscow that have deepened his standoffs with Washington and Seoul.

The meeting will likely provide the stage for Kim to unveil his key political and military objectives and further consolidate his authoritarian grip before thousands of ruling party delegates. Some analysts say Kim could also use the congress to position his teenage daughter — believed to be named Kim Ju Ae and about 13 — as a potential successor, formalizing the regime's fourth-generation succession.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency reported Friday the meeting began the previous day. It did not immediately report any direct comments from Kim on his standoffs with the United States and South Korea or his nuclear weapons program.

Brimming with confidence

Entering his 15th year in power, Kim is in a much stronger position than when he last convened the congress in 2021, when North Korea was experiencing a crippled economy worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the wreckage of his failed diplomacy with U.S. President Donald Trump.

Kim then made a rare admission of economic failures and issued a five-year development plan through 2025, urging economic self-reliance through mass mobilization. He doubled down on his nuclear ambitions and issued a long wish list of sophisticated weapons systems.

Kim now appears less isolated and more confident, buoyed by stronger ties with Russia and China, an extensive nuclear arsenal and what the outside world sees as a gradually improving economy.

In Thursday's speech, Kim claimed the North has made significant progress since 2021, citing economic gains and a firmer regional footing that he said marked an "irreversible" strengthening of the state's status.

Kim has capitalized on geopolitical turmoil, using Russia's war in Ukraine as a window to accelerate weapons development and deepen ties with Moscow, providing thousands of troops and large munitions shipments to support President Vladimir Putin's war effort, possibly in exchange for aid and military technology.

He's cozying up to China, joining Putin at a World War II ceremony in Beijing last September and holding his first summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in six years — events that backed his efforts to portray the North as part of a united front against Washington.

Kim's strict information blockade obscures the full picture of North Korea's economy, which remains in a largely impoverished state after decades of policy failures and sanctions.

Still, Lee Jong-kyu, an analyst at South Korea's Korea Development Institute, estimates the North's economy grew roughly 10% over the last five years, benefiting from a post-pandemic rebound in trade with China and arms exports to Russia.

"The past five years might be the most productive period for North Korean leadership since the 1950s and 1960s," said Koh Yu-hwan, former president of Seoul's Institute for National Unification. Reflecting Kim's confidence, the new congress is unlikely to introduce major shifts in domestic policy and will continue to stress internal unity and self-reliance under another five-year economic plan, Koh said.

Bolstering both nuclear and conventional forces

North Korea has developed or tested much of the weapons Kim demanded in 2021, including solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles and tactical nuclear systems. The country launched its first military satellite in 2023 and has recently claimed progress in building a nuclear-propelled submarine.

After prioritizing nuclear weapons and missiles, Kim is now putting more focus on conventional systems, launching new warships, anti-air weapons and attack drones, while outlining broader plans to integrate nuclear and conventional forces. Kim's recent comments suggest he will use the congress to emphasize the parallel development of nuclear and conventional systems under a separate five-year plan for military development.

Kim could be drawing lessons from North Korea's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, now a conventional war of attrition in which Russia has avoided nuclear weapons. Conventional forces could become a key area of cooperation with Russia, such as improving the North's aging air-defense systems, experts say.

North Korea has already adopted an escalatory nuclear doctrine that authorizes preemptive strikes if the leadership is deemed under threat. By pushing for the integration of conventional and nuclear forces, Kim aims to blur the distinction between them and signal a lower threshold for nuclear use, heightening the threat to South Korea, analysts say.

Keeping distance with Seoul and Washington

Kim has shunned talks with rival South Korea since 2019, when his diplomacy with Trump collapsed over U.S.-led sanctions. Ties worsened after Kim in 2024 discarded North Korea's long-standing goal of a peaceful unification and declared Seoul a permanent enemy.

Kim is likely to entrench his hard-line view of the South at the congress, possibly by instructing changes to party rules to codify inter-Korean relations as between "two hostile states." While South Korean President Lee Jae Myung desires engagement, it's highly unlikely that Kim's stance on Seoul would change anytime soon, Koh said.

It's clear Kim no longer views Seoul as a useful middleman with Washington, but rather as an obstacle to his efforts to carve out a more assertive role in global affairs. He has also shown sensitivity to South Korean soft power, intensifying a campaign to stamp out the influence of South Korean culture at home to reinforce his family's dynastic rule.

Kim may take a more measured approach toward Washington to preserve the possibility of future dialogue, with the long-term aim of securing U.S. sanctions relief and tacit recognition as a nuclear state. While Kim has been prioritizing Russia, it would make sense to keep his options open as Putin's war in Ukraine could wind down, potentially making North Korea less valuable to Moscow, some analysts say.

6 women killed in California avalanche were among 8 close friends and experienced skiers on trip

By GODOFREDO VASQUEZ, JULIE WATSON and HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

SODA SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Six women killed in the deadliest avalanche in the U.S. in decades were part of a close-knit group of friends who were experienced backcountry skiers and knew how to navigate the wilderness of California's Sierra Nevada, their families said Thursday.

Two of the friends got out alive and were rescued along with four others, including one guide, after Tuesday's avalanche. The three others who are dead or presumed dead were guides.

"We are devastated beyond words," the families said in a statement released through a spokesperson. "Our focus right now is supporting our children through this incredible tragedy and honoring the lives of these extraordinary women. They were all mothers, wives and friends, all of whom connected through the love of the outdoors."

The six killed lived in the Bay Area, Idaho and near Lake Tahoe. They are Carrie Atkin, Liz Clabaugh, Danielle Keatley, Kate Morse, Caroline Sekar and Kate Vitt, the families said, asking for privacy as they grieve. They added that they "have many unanswered questions."

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The families said the trip was well organized in advance and the women were equipped with avalanche safety equipment.

"They were experienced backcountry skiers who deeply respected the mountains," the statement said. "They were trained and prepared for backcountry travel and trusted their professional guides on this trip."

What the guides and their tour company knew about the warnings and risks from a powerful winter storm that blasted the mountains during the trip and why they pressed on is now part of investigations.

It will be at least another day before crews can attempt to recover the bodies and continue the search for the ninth person, said Ashley Quadros, a spokesperson for the Nevada County Sheriff's Office.

"We are on the mountain, but they are not going to be able to safely reach them," she said Thursday. "The weather conditions are really dangerous."

Several more feet of snow could fall around Lake Tahoe on Thursday and continue to destabilize the fragile snowpack, according to the Sierra Avalanche Center. It said that wind gusts along the ridgetops could reach 60 mph (100 kph) and warned there's a high risk of large avalanches through at least Friday morning. Tahoe National Forest lands in the Castle Peak area were also closed to the public until March 15.

The names of the other victims have not been released.

Avalanche victims were from a 'connected community'

The 15 skiers began their three-day trip on Sunday just as warnings about the storm were intensifying. They spent the weekend staying along Frog Lake in high country huts accessible only by challenging trails.

Sekar and Clabaugh were sisters, their brother, McAlister Clabaugh, told The New York Times. Sekar was a mother of two who lived in San Francisco, and Liz Clabaugh worked as a new graduate nurse residency program coordinator for St. Luke's Health System in Boise, Idaho, according to her LinkedIn page.

Vitt lived in San Francisco and had previously worked at SiriusXM and Pandora, according to her LinkedIn page. The Kentfield School District sent an email to families Wednesday saying that her two sons "are safe and are with their father, Geoff, as they navigate this profound loss," according to The New York Times.

Atkin lived in Lake Tahoe with her husband and two children and was a former corporate executive and Division I Track & Field athlete, according to her leadership coaching website.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who lives in Marin County with his family, said some of his "wife's old family friends" were on the trip.

"These were some experienced guides that were out there and that's what's even more concerning and disturbing," he said at a news conference Thursday. His office didn't immediately provide more details.

Some members of the group had ties with the elite Sugar Bowl Academy.

Perched on Donner Summit, the academy is a private boarding and day school for competitive skiers and snowboarders. Its former students include multiple Olympians.

"This tragedy has affected each and every one of us," Sugar Bowl Academy executive director Stephen McMahon said in the statement.

Mayor Max Perrey of Marin County's Mill Valley, a city just north of San Francisco, confirmed that some in the group were women from his city.

One of the victims was married to a member of a backcountry search and rescue team in the area, said Placer County Sheriff Wayne Woo.

Sarah Reynaud, an owner of Tahoe Mountain School, had planned to take a trip with her family last weekend to Frog Lake but canceled it due to illness, The Mercury News reported. She described the region's ski community as extremely tight knit and said the avalanche was devastating.

Tour company says guides were highly experienced

The four guides were employed by Blackbird Mountain Guides, which offers mountaineering and backcountry ski trips as well as safety courses. The company said in a statement that it launched an investigation and was mourning the loss of three of its guides.

Blackbird's website says the tour was intended for intermediate to expert skiers.

The guides with the group were trained or certified in backcountry skiing, and were instructors with the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education. While in the field, they "are in communication

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with senior guides at our base, to discuss conditions and routing based upon conditions," founder Zeb Blais said in the statement.

"We don't have all the answers yet, and it may be some time before we do," the company said.

"This was an enormous tragedy, and the saddest event our team has ever experienced. In addition to mourning the loss of six clients, we also mourn the loss of three highly experienced members of our guide team," Blais said.

Questions linger about why the trip continued

Nevada County Sheriff Shannan Moon said authorities will investigate why the guides proceeded with the tour despite the forecast.

California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health, a state agency that regulates workplace safety, is also investigating to determine if the company violated California law.

The Sierra Avalanche Center had issued an avalanche watch Sunday morning, the first day of the trip, indicating a high risk of large avalanches.

It's not uncommon for backcountry skiers to go out when there is an avalanche watch or even a warning, avalanche safety experts say. In avalanche terrain that covers many backcountry areas, slides occur regularly but often go unnoticed. Even if people have signals to keep up with the forecast and changing conditions, there is no single way to react.

Leaving could set off an avalanche, while staying put could keep people in its path. It wasn't clear if the guides on the trip were aware of the avalanche warning, but they are trained to test the snow and assess conditions on the ground.

At least one guide was able to send text messages. Two of those rescued were taken to a hospital but both have since been released.

The avalanche is the deadliest in the U.S. since 1981, when 11 climbers were killed on Mount Rainier in Washington state.

Another deadly avalanche on Wednesday killed a man riding a snowmobile in Utah despite the "courageous efforts" of his young son who dug him out of the snow, the Wasatch County sheriff's office said. Another avalanche, also in Utah, killed a girl in Salt Lake County, police told local news.

Trump warns of 'bad things' if Iran doesn't make a deal, as second US carrier nears Mideast

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran held annual military drills with Russia on Thursday as a second American aircraft carrier drew closer to the Middle East, with both the United States and Iran signaling they are prepared for war if talks on Tehran's nuclear program fizzle out.

President Donald Trump said Thursday he believes 10 to 15 days is "enough time" for Iran to reach a deal. But the talks have been deadlocked for years, and Iran has refused to discuss wider U.S. and Israeli demands that it scale back its missile program and sever ties to armed groups. Indirect talks held in recent weeks made little visible progress, and one or both sides could be buying time for final war preparations.

Iran's theocracy is more vulnerable than ever following 12 days of Israeli and U.S. strikes on its nuclear sites and military last year, as well as mass protests in January that were violently suppressed.

In a letter to the U.N. Security Council on Thursday, Amir Saeid Iravani, the Iranian ambassador to the U.N., said that while Iran does not seek "tension or war and will not initiate a war," any U.S. aggression will be responded to "decisively and proportionately."

"In such circumstances, all bases, facilities, and assets of the hostile force in the region would constitute legitimate targets in the context of Iran's defensive response," Iravani said.

Earlier this week, Iran conducted a drill that involved live-fire in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow opening of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of the world's traded oil passes.

Tensions are also rising inside Iran, as mourners hold ceremonies honoring slain protesters 40 days after their killing by security forces. Some gatherings have seen anti-government chants despite threats

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from authorities.

Trump again threatens Iran

The movements of additional American warships and airplanes, with the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier near the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea, don't guarantee a U.S. strike on Iran — but they bolster Trump's ability to carry out one should he choose to do so.

He has so far held off on striking Iran after setting red lines over the killing of peaceful protesters and mass executions, while reengaging in nuclear talks that were disrupted by the war in June.

Iran has agreed to draw up a written proposal to address U.S. concerns raised during this week's indirect nuclear talks in Geneva, according to a senior U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The official said top national security officials gathered Wednesday to discuss Iran, and were briefed that the "full forces" needed to carry out potential military action are expected to be in place by mid-March. The official did not provide a timeline for when Iran is expected to deliver its written response.

"It's proven to be, over the years, not easy to make a meaningful deal with Iran, and we have to make a meaningful deal. Otherwise, bad things happen," Trump said Thursday.

With the U.S. military presence in the region mounting, one senior regional government official said he has stressed to Iranian officials in private conversations that Trump has proven that his rhetoric should be taken at face value and that he's serious about his threat to carry out a strike if Iran doesn't offer adequate concessions.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss delicate diplomatic conversations, said he has advised the Iranians to look to how Trump has dealt with other international issues and draw lessons on how it should move forward.

The official added that he's made it clear to the Trump administration it could draw concessions from Iran in the near-term if it focuses on nuclear issues and leaves the push on Tehran to scale back its ballistic missile program and support for proxy group for later.

The official also said that Trump ordering a limited strike aimed at pressuring Iran could backfire and lead to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei withdrawing Iran from the talks.

Growing international concern

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk urged his nation's citizens to immediately leave Iran as "within a few, a dozen, or even a few dozen hours, the possibility of evacuation will be out of the question." He did not elaborate, and the Polish Embassy in Tehran did not appear to be drawing down its staff.

The German military said that it had moved "a mid-two digit number of non-mission critical personnel" out of a base in northern Iraq because of the current situation in the region and in line with its partners' actions. It said that some troops remain to help keep the multinational camp running in Irbil, where they train Iraqi forces.

"This week, another 50 U.S. combat aircraft — F-35s, F-22s, and F-16s — were ordered to the region, supplementing the hundreds deployed to bases in the Arab Gulf states," the New York-based Soufan Center think tank wrote. "The deployments reinforce Trump's threat — restated on a nearly daily basis — to proceed with a major air and missile campaign on the regime if talks fail."

Iran holds drill with Russia

Iranian forces and Russian sailors conducted the annual drills in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean aimed at "upgrading operational coordination as well as exchange of military experiences," Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported.

Footage released by Iran showed members of the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard's naval special forces board a vessel in the exercise. Those forces are believed to have been used in the past to seize vessels in key international waterways.

Iran also issued a rocket-fire warning to pilots in the region, suggesting it planned to launch anti-ship missiles in the exercise.

Meanwhile, tracking data showed the Ford off the coast of Morocco in the Atlantic Ocean midday Wednesday, meaning the carrier could transit through Gibraltar and potentially station in the eastern Mediterranean

with its supporting guided-missile destroyers.

It would likely take more than a week for the Ford to be off the coast of Iran.

Netanyahu warns Iran

Israel is making its own preparations for possible Iranian missile strikes in response to any U.S. action. "We are prepared for any scenario," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday, adding that if Iran attacks Israel, "they will experience a response they cannot even imagine."

Netanyahu, who met with Trump last week, has long pushed for tougher U.S. action against Iran and says any deal should not only end its nuclear program but curb its missile arsenal and force it to cut ties with militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

Iran has said the current talks should only focus on its nuclear program, and that it hasn't been enriching uranium since the U.S. and Israeli strikes last summer. Trump said at the time that the strikes had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear sites, but the exact damage is unknown as Tehran has barred international inspectors.

Iran has always insisted its nuclear program is peaceful. The U.S. and others suspect it is aimed at eventually developing weapons. Israel is widely believed to have nuclear weapons but has neither confirmed nor denied that.

Trump's refusal to invite all governors to a White House meeting prompts group to back out

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI and STEVEN SLOAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The National Governors Association is pulling out of an annual meeting at the White House after President Donald Trump declined to invite two Democratic governors, undercutting one of Washington's few remaining bipartisan gatherings.

Trump is still expected to meet with governors at the White House on Friday but the event will not be facilitated by an organization founded more than a century ago to help state leaders from both parties advocate for their interests in Washington. The Republican president had refused to include Democratic Govs. Jared Polis of Colorado and Wes Moore of Maryland and recently blasted them on social media as "not worthy of being there."

In a brief interview Thursday, Polis said he does not have "any ability to get in (Trump's) head." Polis said he was nonetheless meeting with governors from both parties while he is in the nation's capital.

"I've spent quality time with my colleagues this morning and really learning from one another and taking best practices that Republican or Democratic governors have launched in their state," he said. "It's really what these meetings are about."

The episode underscores the confrontational approach Trump has taken during his second term toward state leaders he does not like. He has at times threatened to withhold federal money or send in troops over the objections of local leaders. Now, even a ceremonial White House dinner has become a flashpoint and fellow Republicans openly acknowledge that Trump's aim as president is not to unify the country.

"He's not putting his mind to it," Gov. Spencer Cox, R-Utah, said at an event sponsored by Politico. "He's said very clearly that that's not who he is."

In an interview Wednesday, Moore said he has "no desire to have beef with the president of the United States."

"I didn't run for governor like, man, I can't wait so me and the president can go toe to toe," said Moore, the NGA's vice chair. "But the fact that he is waking up in the middle of the night and tweeting about me, I just, I pray for him and I just feel bad for him because that has just got to be a really, really hard existence."

Governors try to stay above the partisan fighting

The dynamics are a far cry from the air of bipartisanship that Moore and Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, a Republican who chairs the NGA, sought to portray as governors began to assemble in Washington. Moore and Stitt shared a stage several times this week swapping jokes and praise.

"I have gotten, through the National Governors Association, a really good chance to know the heart of

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this man and how much he is a great American, loves his country, loves his citizens and is just trying to do the best he can for Maryland," Stitt said Thursday at the Politico event.

After Stitt tried to resolve the standoff between the White House and the Democratic governors last week, Trump blasted him as a "RINO," short for Republican In Name Only, and accused him of misrepresenting his position. Stitt struck a conciliatory tone Thursday, noting he would participate in White House events.

"Politics has a way of just beating you down over time so I can't imagine being president of the United States," Stitt said. "He's got a tough job to do."

Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican who occasionally disagreed with Trump, said it was a "mistake" for the White House not to include all governors.

"There never was a huge amount of real work that got accomplished but it was a nice thing annually to bring all the governors — Republicans and Democrats — together," he said in an interview. "I know there's a lot of friction but it just seems in everybody's best interest even if you passionately disagree and you don't like the other person or you're mad about whatever, it can't hurt to be in the same room together."

Beyond the White House meeting, some governors also shared pointed criticisms of the administration's ever-expanding power. They bemoaned the unwillingness of the Republican-controlled Congress to limit Trump's ambitions and they cast themselves as counterweights to the executive.

"Presidents aren't supposed to do this stuff," Cox said. "Congress needs to get their act together. And stop performing for TikTok and actually start doing stuff. That's the flaw we're dealing with right now."

Cox added that "it is up to the states to hold the line."

Presidential buzz runs alongside the conference

As governors cycled through panels and interviews, one question hovered: Who among them might seek the presidency in 2028?

Moore and Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania were among the potential Democratic presidential contenders in Washington this week. Other Democrats, including Govs. Gavin Newsom of California and JB Pritzker of Illinois, were not in town.

Stitt and Moore, during a panel discussion, both declined to rule out a future bid and emphasized their focus on their home states.

Gov. Andy Beshear, D-Ky., took a more open approach. He arrived in Washington days after announcing he would release a book this fall and fielded questions at a Center for American Progress event about how he might campaign for president if he enters the race.

Asked afterward about his timeline for a decision, Beshear said his focus this year remains on Kentucky and "then after that, I'll sit down with my family and we'll consider it."

Alysa Liu dazzles to win figure skating gold, ending a 24-year Olympic drought for US women

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

MILAN (AP) — Alysa Liu had just delivered a near-flawless Olympic free skate on Thursday night, one that left a packed crowd inside the Milano Ice Skating Arena standing and roaring, when a television camera zoomed in on the American star as she was heading off the ice.

"That's what I'm f———— talking about!" Liu shouted into the lens.

Oh, they'll be talking about her for quite a while.

The 20-year-old from the San Francisco Bay Area, who walked away from the sport before finding her way back again — and finding herself in the process — delivered the U.S. its first women's figure skating gold medal in 24 years. She finished with 226.79 points to upstage Japanese teammates Kaori Sakamoto and Ami Nakai, who took silver and bronze at the Milan Cortina Games.

"I think my story is more important than anything to me," Liu said, her frenulum piercing glinting in the light as she smiled, "and that's what I will hold dear, and this journey has been incredible, and my life has just been — I have no complaints."

The moment Nakai's score was read after the final program of the night, U.S. teammate Amber Glenn

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jumped into the kiss-and-cry and raised Liu's hand in triumph. Liu sheepishly turned and applauded the 17-year-old Nakai, who raced over and hugged her.

It was the first individual gold medal for an American woman since 2002, when Sarah Hughes stood atop the podium in Salt Lake City, and it was the second gold for Liu at the Milan Cortina Games. She and Glenn helped the Americans win team gold.

"Her story of taking a step back, mental health, I think it really attests to you never know what the journey to success is going to be," said Glenn, who finished fifth. "I really hope that can reach the skating community, that it's OK to take time."

It was a bittersweet silver medal for Sakamoto, the three-time world champion, who intends to retire after this season. One of the most popular figure skaters of her generation earned a bronze medal four years ago in Beijing and had her heart set on gold.

"I'm really regretful," said Sakamoto, who finished with 224.90 points. "I feel like I'm so disappointed, to be honest."

Liu's latest gold medal, meanwhile, blended right into her glittering gold-sequined dress, only the blue ribbon standing out. And it seemed the perfect complement to the golden stripes running through her dark brown hair, which are meant to resemble the growth rings on a tree.

Liu has done a whole lot of growing up over the years.

She was the youngest U.S. champion ever when she won the first of back-to-back titles at 13 years old. But after finishing sixth at the Beijing Games, Liu was so burned out that she abruptly retired. She spent the next two years doing bucket-list things like climbing up to the base camp of Mount Everest and enrolling at UCLA, where she is studying psychology.

It was on a skiing trip a couple of years ago, when Liu felt the same familiar adrenaline rush she once felt while skating, that she began to think about a comeback. But this time, Liu would be skating on her terms, more carefree and self-assured than she'd been as a child prodigy, when her life revolved around the practice rink.

"I mean, it's just how my life has gone," Liu said, shrugging. "Everything in general has led me to this point."

Even during warmups Thursday night, Liu skated with a grin on her face, never showing any outward signs of pressure. She took the time to wave at friends and family in the stands who had been keeping her out late for dinners, which she called "super fun."

"What I was feeling," Liu said, "was happy and confident."

Glenn must have felt the same way a couple of hours earlier. She had to perform long before her friend and teammate following a disappointing short program two nights prior. But Glenn rebounded in spectacular fashion, and her season-best free skate not only gave her a score of 214.91 points but it nearly put her on the podium, too.

Glenn pumped her fist and fought back tears when her score was read, then she took a seat in the new "leader's chair."

"It was nice to watch some great figure skating up close," Glenn said, "but it's also conflicting, because you want to stay there but you don't want to wish mistakes on anybody else."

She wound up staying there for quite a while.

Adeliia Petrosian, an 18-year-old Russian competing as a neutral athlete, tried the only quadruple jump during the women's competition but fell on the quad toe loop. She was clean the rest of the way, but the points Petrosian lost on that fall ended up leaving her less than a half-point behind Glenn sitting in the leader's chair.

"I feel a little ashamed," Petrosian said, after taking a few minutes to compose herself, "for myself, for the federation, for my coaches and for the spectators that it went this way. I understand that it's my own fault."

It wasn't until Mone Chiba — the ninth skater to follow Glenn to the ice — that the three-time U.S. champ was bumped from her spot.

Chiba's stint in the leader's chair didn't last nearly as long.

Liu, who last year captured the first world title by an American woman since 2006, was perfect from her opening triple flip to her closing combination sequence. As the last bits of Donna Summer's version of "MacArthur Park" faded away, and the roar of the fans filled the void, Liu gave a casual flip of her ponytail as if to say, "So what?"

Her coaches, Phillip DiGuglielmo and Massimo Scali, were a little more rambunctious. They punched the air, gave each other a big hug, then headed over to greet their star pupil when she stepped off the ice to await her score.

The score that ultimately would give her an Olympic title and end a long drought for U.S. women.

"I don't need this," Liu said of the gold medal hanging around her neck, "but what I needed was the stage, and I got that. So it was all good, no matter what happened. I mean, if I fell on every jump, I would still be wearing this dress. So it's all good."

New Mexico reopens investigation into alleged illegal activity at Epstein's former Zorro Ranch

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — New Mexico's attorney general has reopened an investigation into Jeffrey Epstein's former Zorro Ranch, as allegations swirl about what role the secluded spot played in sexual abuse or sex trafficking of underage girls and young women.

Attorney General Raúl Torrez's office said Thursday that the decision was made after reviewing information recently released by the U.S. Justice Department.

Although New Mexico's initial case was closed in 2019 at the request of federal prosecutors in New York, state prosecutors say now that "revelations outlined in the previously sealed FBI files warrant further examination."

The New Mexico Department of Justice said special agents and prosecutors at the agency will be seeking immediate access to the complete, unredacted federal case file and intend to work with other law enforcement partners as well as a new truth commission established by state lawmakers to look into activities at the ranch.

"As with any potential criminal matter, we will follow the facts wherever they lead, carefully evaluate jurisdictional considerations, and take appropriate investigative action, including the collection and preservation of any relevant evidence that remains available," the New Mexico Department of Justice said in a statement.

The investigation was one of several major developments in the continuing fallout from the release of the federal government's so-called Epstein files. Earlier Thursday, British police arrested the former Prince Andrew on suspicion of misconduct in public office related to his links to the late sex offender.

Renewed efforts to investigate the sex trafficking allegations

In Washington, D.C., members of Congress are still working to lift the veil with more testimony from powerful people.

On Thursday, video was released of a six-hour deposition of billionaire retail mogul Les Wexner. In it, Wexner remains defiant that he didn't know of or participate in Epstein's crimes, and he doubles down on the fact that the two "weren't friends."

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is scheduled to appear before the same House Oversight Committee next week, with former President Bill Clinton following the next day.

In New Mexico, the state's truth commission had its first meeting Tuesday. Aside from looking into the abuse and trafficking allegations, New Mexico lawmakers want to know why Epstein was not registered as a sex offender in the state after pleading guilty in 2008 in Florida to soliciting prostitution from an underage girl and whether there was corruption among public officials.

Epstein never faced charges in New Mexico, but state prosecutors confirmed in 2019 that they had interviewed possible victims who visited the ranch south of Santa Fe. They never elaborated on how many accusers were interviewed or what they say took place at the ranch.

Also Thursday, lawyers for Epstein accusers said they've reached a proposed settlement in a class action lawsuit against his estate — the latest effort to compensate his victims. Pending a judge's approval, Epstein's estate would pay between \$25 million and \$35 million, depending on how many victims qualify for the settlement.

The estate previously paid 136 claimants a total of \$121 million via its Epstein Victims Compensation Program and paid more than \$48 million to settle claims from 59 other victims, court records show.

Property is under new ownership

Epstein purchased the sprawling Zorro Ranch in New Mexico in 1993 from former Democratic Gov. Bruce King and built a hilltop mansion. Nearby was a private airstrip with a hangar and helipad. The property also included a ranch office, a firehouse and a seven-bay heated garage.

The property was sold by Epstein's estate in 2023 — with proceeds going toward creditors — to the family of Don Huffines, a Republican running for state comptroller in Texas. In a social media post on X, Huffines said the property has been renamed San Rafael Ranch after a saint associated with healing and that his family plans to operate a Christian retreat there.

A spokesperson for Huffines has said that the owners have never been approached by local, state or federal law enforcement requesting access to the ranch and if they do, full cooperation will be granted.

Ranch appears many times in released documents

There are thousands of references to the ranch in the documents released by federal authorities.

Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat, was among the guests to have visited the ranch. Following one of the early investigations into the disgraced financier, Richardson donated \$50,000 in 2006 gubernatorial campaign contributions from Epstein to charity.

Emails and schedules recently released by federal authorities also show a long list of entrepreneurs, actors and scientists were invited to the ranch over the years, including Woody Allen, Robert Redford, Reid Hoffman, Joi Ito and Peter Thiel.

New Mexico Land Commissioner Stephanie Garcia Richard canceled grazing leases held by the ranch in 2019 after her office was denied access to inspect the nearly 2 square miles (5 square kilometers) of leased state land.

Garcia Richard in a letter sent last week called on federal authorities and state prosecutors to ensure a thorough criminal investigation into allegations related to the ranch. She called the allegations "deeply disturbing."

In 2019 after Epstein's death, a woman identified as Jane Doe said in court that he had molested her at Zorro Ranch in 2004, when she was 15. The woman recalled feeling small and powerless, describing how he laid her on the floor so she was confronted by all the framed photographs on his dresser of him smiling with wealthy celebrities and politicians.

"People deserve to know the truth about what happened on Epstein's ranch and are looking to leaders for answers," Garcia Richard said in a statement.

Former Prince Andrew arrested and held for hours on suspicion of misconduct over ties to Epstein

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The former Prince Andrew was arrested and held for hours by British police Thursday on suspicion of misconduct in public office related to his links to Jeffrey Epstein, an extraordinary move in a country where authorities once sought to shield the royal family from embarrassment.

It was the first time in nearly four centuries that a senior British royal was placed under arrest, and it underscored how deference to the monarchy has eroded in recent years.

King Charles III, whose late mother lived by the motto "never complain, never explain," took the unusual step of issuing a statement on the arrest of his brother, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

"Let me state clearly: the law must take its course," the king said. "As this process continues, it would not be right for me to comment further on this matter."

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The Thames Valley Police force said Mountbatten-Windsor was released Thursday evening, about 11 hours after he was detained at his home in eastern England. He was photographed in a car leaving the police station near the royal Sandringham estate.

Police said he was released under investigation, meaning he has neither been charged nor exonerated.

The police force, which covers areas west of London, including Mountbatten-Windsor's former home, said Thursday that a man in his 60s from Norfolk had been arrested and was in custody. Police did not identify the suspect, in line with standard procedures in Britain.

Mountbatten-Windsor, 66, moved to the king's private estate in Norfolk after he was evicted from his longtime home near Windsor Castle earlier this month.

Police previously said they were "assessing" reports that Mountbatten-Windsor sent trade information to Epstein, a wealthy investor and convicted sex offender, in 2010, when the former prince was Britain's special envoy for international trade. Correspondence between the two men was released by the U.S. Justice Department late last month along with millions of pages of documents from the American investigation into Epstein.

"Following a thorough assessment, we have now opened an investigation into this allegation of misconduct in public office," Assistant Chief Constable Oliver Wright said in a statement.

Survivors push for more accountability

Police searched Mountbatten-Windsor's Sandringham home and his former residence at Royal Lodge in Windsor.

Earlier in the day, pictures circulated online that appeared to show unmarked police cars at Wood Farm, Mountbatten-Windsor's home at Sandringham, with plainclothes officers gathering outside.

Mountbatten-Windsor has consistently denied any wrongdoing in his association with Epstein.

The allegations being investigated Thursday are separate from those made by Virginia Giuffre, who claimed she was trafficked to Britain to have sex with the prince in 2001, when she was just 17. Giuffre died by suicide last year.

Still, Giuffre's sister-in-law Amanda Roberts said that she was overjoyed when she got a phone call at 3 a.m. telling her the news of the arrest. But those feelings of elation were quickly complicated by the realization that she couldn't share the feelings of "vindication" with Giuffre.

"We can't tell her how much we love her, and that everything that she was doing is not in vain," Roberts added tearfully.

Sky Roberts, Giuffre's brother, added that he thinks his sister would be celebrating the small victory along with them if she was still alive, but would be pushing for more accountability in both the United Kingdom and the United States based on the files.

"We need to unmask the the co-conspirators and potential perpetrators. And then we need to see indictments," Amanda Roberts said.

A 'spectacular fall from grace'

"This is the most spectacular fall from grace for a member of the royal family in modern times," said Craig Prescott, a royal expert at Royal Holloway, University of London, who compared it in severity to the crisis sparked by Edward VIII's abdication to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson.

"And it may not be over yet," Prescott added.

Thursday's arrest came a day after the National Police Chiefs' Council said it had created a group to assist forces across the U.K. that are assessing whether Epstein and his associates committed crimes in Britain. In addition to the concerns about Mountbatten-Windsor's correspondence, documents released by the U.S. suggest Epstein may have used his private jet to traffic women to and from Britain.

U.S. President Donald Trump said the arrest was "a shame" and "very sad."

"I think it's so bad for the royal family," he told reporters in Washington.

The documents also rocked British politics. Prime Minister Keir Starmer had to fight off questions about his judgment after the papers revealed that Peter Mandelson, the man he appointed ambassador to the U.S., had a longer and closer relationship with Epstein than was previously disclosed.

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London's Metropolitan Police Service has said it is investigating allegations of misconduct in public office related to Mandelson's own correspondence with Epstein. Mandelson was fired as ambassador to the U.S. in September.

But it is Mountbatten-Windsor's relationship with Epstein that brought the scandal to the doors of Buckingham Palace and threatened to undermine support for the monarchy.

Last royal arrest was in the 1640s

The last time a senior British royal was arrested was almost 400 years ago during the reign of King Charles I that saw a growing power struggle between the crown and Parliament.

After the king attempted to arrest lawmakers in the House of Commons in 1642, hostilities erupted into the English Civil War, which ended with victory for the parliamentary forces of Oliver Cromwell.

Charles I was arrested, tried, convicted of high treason and beheaded in 1649.

Concerns about Mountbatten-Windsor's links to Epstein have dogged the royal family for more than a decade.

The late Queen Elizabeth II forced her second son to give up royal duties and end his charitable work in 2019 after he tried to explain away his friendship with Epstein during a catastrophic interview with the BBC.

But as concern mounted about what the Epstein files might reveal, the king moved aggressively to insulate the royal family from the fallout.

Since October, Charles has stripped his younger brother of the right to be called prince, forced him to move out of the royal estate he occupied for more than 20 years and issued a public statement supporting the women and girls abused by Epstein.

Last week, the palace said it was ready to cooperate with police investigating Mountbatten-Windsor.

Charles was forced to act after Mountbatten-Windsor's correspondence with Epstein torpedoed the former prince's claims that he severed ties with the financier after Epstein's 2008 conviction for soliciting a minor for prostitution.

Instead, emails between the two men show Epstein offering to arrange a date between Mountbatten-Windsor and a young Russian woman in 2010, and the then-prince inviting Epstein to dinner at Buckingham Palace.

Additional correspondence appears to show Mountbatten-Windsor sending Epstein reports from a two-week tour of Southeast Asia that he undertook in 2010 as Britain's trade envoy.

Police did not release details of Mountbatten-Windsor's questioning at a small-town police station in Aylsham, near Sandringham.

Danny Shaw, an expert on law enforcement in the U.K., told the BBC that the former prince would likely be placed in "a cell in a custody suite" with just "a bed and a toilet," where he will wait until his police interview.

"There'll be no special treatment for him," Shaw said.

Tariffs paid by midsize US companies tripled last year, a JPMorganChase Institute study shows

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tariffs paid by midsize U.S. businesses tripled over the course of past year, new research tied to one of America's leading banks showed on Thursday — more evidence that President Donald Trump's push to charge higher taxes on imports is causing economic disruption.

The additional taxes have meant that companies that employ a combined 48 million people in the U.S. — the kinds of businesses that Trump had promised to revive — have had to find ways to absorb the new expense, by passing it along to customers in the form of higher prices, employing fewer workers or accepting lower profits.

"That's a big change in their cost of doing business," said Chi Mac, business research director of the JPMorganChase Institute, which published the analysis Thursday. "We also see some indications that they may be shifting away from transacting with China and maybe toward some other regions in Asia."

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The research does not say how the additional costs are flowing through the economy, but it indicates that tariffs are being paid by U.S. companies. The study is part of a growing body of economic analyses that counter the administration's claims that foreigners pay the tariffs.

The JPMorganChase Institute report used payments data to look at businesses that might lack the pricing power of large multinational companies to offset tariffs, but may be small enough to quickly change supply chains to minimize exposure to the tax increases. The companies tended to have revenues between \$10 million and \$1 billion with fewer than 500 employees, a category known as "middle market."

The analysis suggests that the Trump administration's goal of becoming less directly reliant on Chinese manufacturers has been occurring. Payments to China by these companies were 20% below their October 2024 levels, but it's unclear whether that means China is simply routing its goods through other countries or if supply chains have moved.

The authors of the analysis emphasized in an interview that companies are still adjusting to the tariffs and said they plan to continue studying the issue.

White House spokesman Kush Desai called the analysis "pointless" and said it didn't "change the fact that President Trump was right." The study showed that U.S. companies are paying tariffs that the president had previously claimed would be paid by foreign entities.

Trump defended his tariffs during a trip to Georgia on Thursday while touring Coosa Steel, a company involved in steel processing and distribution. The president said he couldn't believe the Supreme Court would soon decide on the legality of some of his tariffs, given his belief that the taxes were helping U.S. manufacturers.

"The tariffs are the greatest thing to happen to this country," Trump said.

The president imposed a series of tariffs last year for the ostensible goal of reducing the U.S. trade imbalance with other countries, so that America was not longer importing more than it exports. But trade data published Thursday by the Census Bureau showed that the trade deficit climbed last year by \$25.5 billion to \$1.24 trillion. The president on Wednesday posted on social media that he expected there would be a trade surplus "during this year."

The Trump administration has been adamant that the tariffs are a boon for the economy, businesses, and workers. Kevin Hassett, director of the White House National Economic Council, lashed out on Wednesday at research by the New York Federal Reserve showing that nearly 90% of the burden for Trump's tariffs fell on U.S. companies and consumers.

"The paper is an embarrassment," Hassett told CNBC. "It's, I think, the worst paper I've ever seen in the history of the Federal Reserve system. The people associated with this paper should presumably be disciplined."

Trump increased the average tariff rate to 13% from 2.6% last year, according to the New York Fed researchers. He declared that tariffs on some items such as steel, kitchen cabinets and bathroom vanities were in the national security interest of the country. He also declared an economic emergency to bypass Congress and impose a baseline tax on goods from much of the world in April 2025 at an event he called "Liberation Day."

The high rates provoked a financial market panic, prompting Trump to walk back his rates and then engage in talks with multiple countries that led to a set of new trade frameworks. The Supreme Court is expected to rule soon on whether Trump surpassed his legal authority by declaring an economic emergency.

Trump was elected in 2024 on his promise to tame inflation, but his tariffs have contributed to voter frustration over affordability. While inflation has not spiked during Trump's term thus far, hiring slowed sharply and a team of academic economists estimate that consumer prices were roughly 0.8 percentage points higher than they would otherwise be.

Trump visits Georgia, a target of his election falsehoods, as Republicans look for midterm boost

By JEFF AMY and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

ROME, Ga. (AP) — The White House insisted that President Donald Trump was visiting Georgia to promote the economy.

But in the opening minutes of his first stop at a local restaurant before touring a steel company, the president raised debunked claims of voter fraud, talked up his plan to require voters to show identification before casting ballots, and discussed the recent FBI raid of election offices in the state's most populous county.

"They came in, they took all those ballots; all those crooked ballots were taken," Trump said. "And the Democrats are fighting like hell. They don't want anyone to see those ballots. Let's see what happens."

Later at Coosa Steel Corporation, the president charged that Democrats "cheated like dogs" in the 2020 election.

The White House has long said Trump would focus more on the economy, and he frequently complains that he doesn't get enough credit for it. But recent months have been dominated by other issues, including deadly clashes during deportation efforts in Minneapolis, potential military action in Iran, and his false claims that the 2020 election was stolen.

Trump's destination in Georgia suggests he has something else on his mind, too. He was appearing in the congressional district previously represented by Marjorie Taylor Greene, a former supporter who resigned in January after feuding with Trump.

There's a special election to replace her on March 10.

After his early focus on the state's voting system, Trump refocused his comments on the economy as he toured a steel company whose owner said it had benefited from the president's tariffs.

The president, who was especially fiery at times during his public remarks, also railed against the Supreme Court, which is weighing the legality of his novel use of an emergency powers law to impose worldwide tariffs.

"I've been waiting forever, forever, and the language is clear that I have the right to do it as president," Trump shouted. He added, "The tariff is the greatest thing that has happened to this country."

Trump also claimed that inflation is no longer a problem in the U.S., blaming Democrats for rising costs: "They caused the affordability problem. And we solved it."

Meanwhile, new research tied to one of America's leading banks showed on Thursday that tariffs paid by midsize U.S. businesses tripled over the course of the past year.

The additional taxes have meant that companies that employ a combined 48 million people in the U.S. — the kinds of businesses that Trump had promised to revive — have had to find ways to absorb the new expense, by passing it along to customers in the form of higher prices, employing fewer workers or accepting lower profits.

False claims of voter fraud

The Georgia visit comes less than a month after federal agents seized voting records and ballots from Fulton County, home to the state's largest collection of Democrats.

Trump has long seen Georgia as central to his false claim that the 2020 election was stolen by Democrats and President Joe Biden, a fabrication that he reiterated repeatedly this week, including during a White House reception on Black History Month.

Trump praised the FBI raid during his speech at the steel company.

"The FBI came in and raided. They found plenty of your stuff, and now they have the ballots," Trump said. "And the Democrats are fighting like hell. ... Now they're trying to stop anybody from looking. You know why? Because they cheated like dogs."

Audits, state officials, courts and Trump's own former attorney general have all rejected the idea of widespread problems that could have altered the election.

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Some Republicans are now pushing for Georgia's State Election Board, which has a Trump-aligned majority, to take control of elections in Fulton County — a step enabled by a controversial state law passed in 2021.

Board member and conservative commentator Janelle King said she was aware of calls for a takeover, but said Wednesday that "it's just not something that we're looking to do without having all of the information." She said she expects to have a clearer picture once the FBI is done with its investigation.

At the same time, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said that Trump was "exploring his options" when it comes to a potential executive order he teased on social media over the weekend designed to address voter fraud.

Trump described Democrats as "horrible, disingenuous CHEATERS" in the post, which is pinned to the top of his social media account. He also said that Republicans should feature such claims "at the top of every speech."

Scott Johnson of Marietta, a longtime GOP leader in Georgia who attended the president's speech, said "the economy is a winning issue for us."

He's not so sure that boosting claims of election fraud from 2020 is a good idea.

"I'm not concerned about relitigating the past. I'm concerned about moving forward in the future," he said. Greene has not gone quiet

Trump on Thursday did not address fresh attacks from Greene, once among the president's most vocal allies in Congress and now one of his loudest conservative critics.

In a social media post ahead of Trump's visit, Greene noted that the White House and Republican leaders met earlier in the week to develop an effective midterm message. She suggested they were "on the struggle bus" and blamed them for health insurance costs that ballooned this year.

"Approximately 75,000 households in my former district had their health insurance double or more on January 1st of this year because the ACA tax credits expired and Republicans have absolutely failed to fix our health insurance system that was destroyed by Obamacare," she said. "And you can call me all the petty names you want, I don't worship a man. I'm not in a cult."

Early voting has already begun in the special election to replace Greene, and the leading Republican candidates have fully embraced Trump.

Trump was traveling on Thursday with his preferred candidate, Clay Fuller, a district attorney who prosecutes crimes in four counties and described himself as "a MAGA warrior" before Trump took the stage.

Other candidates in the race include Republican former state Sen. Colton Moore, who made a name for himself with a vociferous attack on Trump's prosecution in Georgia. Moore, the favorite of many far-right activists, said he's been in communication with Trump even after Trump endorsed Fuller, calling the choice "unfortunate."

"I think he's the greatest president of our lifetimes," Moore said.

Deadly California avalanche highlights inherent risks in the backcountry

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

The recovery of skiers killed in the deadliest U.S. avalanche in almost 45 years is dragging out because of what experts say is a prime rule for rescuers: Don't make yourself a victim.

A storm that continued lashing California's remote Sierra Nevada wilderness Thursday meant more avalanches were possible in the backcountry area where authorities said eight people died and one was still missing two days after their group was caught in the deadly slide. Six people survived.

Rescuers faced the same potential perils that killed the backcountry skiers and professional guides, as they pursued a sport with inherent risks that were compounded by several feet of new snow. Recovery efforts were set to resume Friday.

Last day of the trip

Backcountry winter travelers from skiers and snowboarders to snowmobilers and mountaineers lean

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on avalanche forecasts to help them gauge the danger. Yet conditions quickly shift because of turbulent mountain weather.

To supplement forecasts or if none is available, experienced skiers and guides will dig a pit in the snow to test how stable it is. They can also search out less-hazardous terrain, such as slopes that are not as steep or that are sheltered from known avalanche routes.

As the snow from the storm system hitting the Sierras this week piled up, the group of 15 skiers caught in Tuesday's avalanche were on the last day of a multiday trip and heading for the trailhead.

"It was, quite likely, very necessary for them to leave the backcountry so their hazard wasn't increased further," said Anthony Pavlantos of Utah-based Prival USA, who makes avalanche safety equipment and runs mountain safety programs.

"What's really hard to say is like 'why were they moving?' You can't ever start placing blame on events like this because we can all be there."

'Luck runs out'

It's not uncommon for people to venture into the backcountry to ski or snowboard during times of heightened danger: A dangerous storm also means lots of fresh snow that many skiers crave.

And because fatal accidents are rare, the risk takers most often survive, said Dale Atkins, who has been involved in mountain rescues and avalanche forecasting and research in Colorado for five decades.

"It's not about not going; it's about where and when you go," Atkins said.

But Atkins added that coming out of the backcountry unscathed can create a false sense of security in a pursuit where luck – or not enough of it – also plays a role.

"It's really easy to be fooled by the snow and avalanches," he said. "We keep going out even in the worst of storms because that's what we did last time, and then our luck runs out."

Typically the best hope for someone to survive burial in an avalanche is to dig themselves out or be rescued by a companion. That is because slides often occur in remote areas.

It took rescuers six hours to reach the victims of Tuesday's avalanche after the first report came in. By comparison, the chances of survival for someone buried for an hour is only about one in 10, Atkins said.

The surviving skiers in California found three of the victims while they awaited rescue. Authorities haven't given a detailed account about how they located the other victims.

The probe line

A debris field from a major avalanche like the fatal one in California will stretch over a huge area, making it difficult to figure out where someone ends up if they are caught and dragged beneath the surface.

The first thing to look for is clues such as a glove or ski pole that could reveal a victim's location, said Anthony Stevens, chief adviser for the search and rescue team in Teton County, Wyoming, home to Grand Teton National Park.

Skiers in guided groups typically carry transceivers, known as avalanche beacons, that send out signals showing where they are. The devices can also receive other signals, displaying the direction and approximate distance to a victim.

If that doesn't work, rescuers can line up and use long, slender poles to probe into the snow in hopes of finding someone, said Ethan Greene, director of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

Time is of the essence throughout a rescue, and once someone is found they have to be dug out. The average depth of burial is roughly a meter, or just over 3 feet, Atkins said. And because snow and ice in an avalanche get heavily compacted, digging out someone from that depth requires moving at least a ton of material, he said.

Rarely will people survive being buried for long. Atkins said he knew of two people who survived being buried 22 and 24 hours respectively following an avalanche in the 1990s in Washington state. A third member of their party did not survive.

"It's very unusual for a rescue team to find a buried person alive. But it happens, and that gives us hope," he said.

Memorial services for Rev. Jesse Jackson expanded to include South Carolina and Washington, DC

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Memorial services honoring the life of the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. will be expanded beyond Chicago with events in Washington, D.C., and South Carolina, the late civil rights leader's organization announced Thursday.

Jackson, a protégé of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and two-time presidential candidate, died earlier this week at age 84 after battling a rare neurological disorder that affected his ability to move and talk.

Jackson will still lie in repose next week at the Chicago headquarters of his Rainbow PUSH Coalition with a public celebration of life and homegoing services to follow, though dates for Chicago events have been changed. Formal services were added, scheduled from March 1 to March 4 in Washington, D.C., and South Carolina, where Jackson was born and raised.

Rainbow PUSH did not offer further details.

Jackson's adult children gathered outside the family home in Chicago on Wednesday, saying the funeral services would be large gatherings where everyone would be welcomed. They also vowed to continue his decades of advocacy.

"Although his body is absent from us, his spirit suffuses and infuses us, and it charges us to continue with the work," said Santita Jackson, his eldest child.

In Chicago, a public celebration of life will be held at House of Hope, a 10,000-seat church, on March 6, followed by private homegoing services the next day at Rainbow PUSH, which will be livestreamed.

Jackson rose to prominence six decades ago as a protégé of King, joining the voting rights march King led from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. King later dispatched Jackson to Chicago to launch Operation Breadbasket, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference effort to pressure companies to hire Black workers. Jackson was with King on April 4, 1968, when the civil rights leader was killed.

Virginia judge blocks Democrats' referendum, a blow to redistricting effort over 4 U.S. House seats

By OLIVIA DIAZ Associated Press/Report for America

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — A Virginia court on Thursday effectively blocked Democrats' planned April voter referendum to redraw the state's congressional maps, another potentially devastating blow to the party's effort to pick up four more U.S. House seats in the national redistricting battle.

Virginia Democratic Attorney General Jay Jones has already vowed to appeal the ruling by a Tazewell Circuit Court, which granted a temporary restraining order requested by the Republican National Committee and the National Republican Congressional Committee. The plaintiffs argue that the ballot referendum's timing and phrasing are illegal.

The court's decision on Thursday, while temporary, could kill the referendum for this year if it withstands appeal. The restraining order is in effect until March 18 and early voting is slated to start March 6.

The Republican request for a restraining order — also signed by Republican U.S. Reps. Ben Cline and Morgan Griffith — argued that Democrats were ramming redistricting-related bills through the legislature despite legal hurdles that prevent such a rushed process.

In a statement, the GOP national committee said the latest ruling was "a massive win in defending honest representation for every Virginian."

It's the second time Tazewell Circuit Court Judge Jack Hurley Jr. has ruled against Democrats' redistricting agenda. In January, he ruled that a resolution for a constitutional amendment was illegally passed in a special legislative session and taken up too close to an intervening election.

That case has been appealed to the state Supreme Court, and justices had said they would allow the referendum to proceed while they review the appeal.

President Donald Trump launched an unusual mid-decade redistricting battle last year by pushing Re-

publican officials in Texas to redraw districts to help his party win more seats. The goal was for the GOP to hold on to a narrow House majority in the face of political headwinds that typically favor the party out of power in midterms.

Instead, it created a national redistricting battle. So far, Republicans believe they can win nine more House seats in Texas, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio. Democrats think they can win six more seats in California and Utah, and are hoping to fully or partially make up the remaining three-seat margin in Virginia.

Before Thursday's ruling, Democrats had been bullish in pressing ahead with their effort, releasing a proposed map that could give their party four more seats in the U.S. House. The redistricting plan has since been introduced in the legislature.

Virginia House Speaker Don Scott, a Democrat, said Thursday he was confident the latest court order would be overturned.

"The Supreme Court of Virginia has already made clear that this matter will go to the voters, but Republicans unhappy with that ruling went back to their friendly judge," Scott said in a statement that pointed out Hurley's earlier decision.

Democrats have also tried to limit which court venues can take up such cases. After Republicans filed their first suit in Tazewell, a conservative area in Southwest Virginia, Democratic lawmakers passed legislation saying legal actions related to constitutional amendments or their elections only have one proper court venue: the Circuit Court of the City of Richmond.

Virginia Democratic Gov. Abigail Spanberger signed the bill into law and set the date for the redistricting referendum for April 21.

In their court filings, Republicans have said Tazewell is still the correct venue despite the new law. Hurley agreed.

New Trump administration order could lead to the detention of thousands of legal refugees

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Trump administration has issued a sweeping new order that could lead to the arrest of tens of thousands of refugees who are lawfully in the United States but do not yet have permanent residency, overturning years of legal and immigration safeguards.

A memo filed by the Department of Homeland Security ahead of a Thursday federal court hearing in Minnesota says refugees applying for green cards must return to federal custody one year after they were admitted to the U.S. for review of their applications.

DHS "may maintain custody for the duration of the inspection and examination process," said the memo, which was filed Wednesday.

Advocacy and resettlement groups slammed the order, which will likely face legal challenges and could sow confusion and fear among the nearly 200,000 refugees who came to the United States during the Biden administration.

The order is the latest in a series of immigration restrictions by the Trump administration, which has upended longstanding policies toward refugees, including dramatically reducing the number admitted into the country. A memo obtained by The Associated Press late last year said the administration was planning a review of all refugees admitted to the U.S. during the Biden administration, and immediately suspended green card approvals for refugees who arrived during those years.

The administration has cited national security and economic concerns for its changed policies. Experts say refugees let into the country already undergo extensive vetting.

The new order came hours before U.S. District Judge John Tunheim heard arguments Thursday on whether he should extend a temporary order that protects Minnesota refugees lawfully in the U.S. from being arrested and deported. Tunheim's order applies only in Minnesota, but the implications of the new national policy was a major part of the discussion anyway.

How many people could be arrested under the new order was unclear.

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Justice Department attorney Brantley Mayers said during Thursday's hearing that the government should have the right to arrest refugees one year after entering the U.S., but indicated that would not always happen.

"That's a discretion call for DHS to make," he said, a comment met with skepticism by attorneys for the Minnesota refugees.

Tunheim did not rule Thursday, saying he'd issue a written decision on whether the temporary order would be extended.

After the hearing, Democratic U.S. Sen. Tina Smith of Minnesota said at a news conference outside the courthouse that the government "failed to offer any coherent argument for their policy in either law or fact." She wasn't in court for the hearing, but said she'd been briefed about it.

"And so we will continue the fight for justice in the courts," Smith said, flanked by attorneys and refugee rights supporters, including U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar.

Advocacy groups decry the new order

Immigration advocates quickly pushed back against the new policy, with HIAS, an international Jewish nonprofit serving refugees and asylum-seekers, calling it "a transparent effort to detain and potentially deport thousands of people who are legally present in this country, people the U.S. government itself welcomed."

"They were promised safety and the chance to rebuild their lives. Instead, DHS is now threatening them with arrest and indefinite detention," Beth Oppenheim, the group's CEO, said in a statement.

Tunheim blocked the government from targeting the Minnesota refugees last month, saying the plaintiffs in the case were likely to prevail on their claims "that their arrest and detention, and the policy that purports to justify them, are unlawful." His Jan. 28 temporary restraining order will expire Feb. 25 unless he grants a more permanent preliminary injunction.

The judge previously rejected the government's claim that it had the legal right to arrest and detain refugees who haven't obtained their green cards within a year of arriving in the U.S.

"Mandating detention would lead to an illogical result," Tunheim wrote, since refugees can't even apply for green cards until they've been in the U.S. for a year. The government's interpretation, he said, means nearly all refugees would face detention unless immigration officials conducted their review at exactly the one-year mark, which he called "nonsensical."

Refugee rights groups sued the federal government in January after the government launched Operation PARRIS, an acronym for Post-Admission Refugee Reverification and Integrity Strengthening.

It was billed as a "sweeping initiative" to reexamine the cases of 5,600 Minnesota refugees who had not yet been granted permanent resident status, or green cards. The agencies cited fraud in public programs in Minnesota as justification.

Operation PARRIS was part of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown targeting Minnesota, including a surge of thousands of federal officers. Homeland Security called it the largest immigration enforcement operation ever. It sparked mass protests after federal agents shot and killed two U.S. citizens. White House border czar Tom Homan announced last week the surge was ending, though a small federal presence would remain.

Judge notes that refugees are extensively vetted

The lawsuit alleges that ICE officers went door to door under Operation PARRIS arresting refugees and sending them to detention centers in Texas, without access to attorneys. Some were later released in Texas and left to find their own way back to Minnesota, they said.

Tunheim noted in his order that refugees are extensively vetted by multiple agencies before being resettled in the U.S. He wrote that none arrested in the operation had been deemed a danger to the community or a flight risk, nor had any been charged with crimes that could be grounds for deportation.

Tunheim stressed that the refugees impacted by his order were admitted into the U.S. because of persecution in their home countries. He prohibited further arrests under Operation PARRIS and ordered that detainees still in custody from it be released and returned to Minnesota.

"They are not committing crimes on our streets, nor did they illegally cross the border. Refugees have

a legal right to be in the United States, a right to work, a right to live peacefully," he wrote.

Arts panel made up of Trump appointees approves his White House ballroom proposal

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, a panel made up of President Donald Trump's appointees, on Thursday approved his proposal to build a ballroom larger than the White House itself where the East Wing once stood.

The seven-member panel is one of two federal agencies that must approve Trump's plans for the ballroom. The National Capital Planning Commission, which has jurisdiction over construction and major renovation to government buildings in the region, is also reviewing the project.

Members of the fine arts commission originally had been scheduled to discuss and vote on the design concept after a follow-up presentation by the architect, and had planned to vote on final approval at next month's meeting. But after the vote to approve the design, the panel's chairman, Rodney Mims Cook Jr., unexpectedly made another motion to vote on final approval.

Five of the seven commissioners — all appointed by the Republican president in January — voted once more in favor. Commissioner James McCrery did not participate in the discussion or the votes because he was the initial architect on the project before Trump replaced him. Commissioner Roger Kimball left the meeting early for another commitment, the panel's secretary said.

The ballroom will be built on the site of the former East Wing, which Trump had demolished in October with little public notice. That drew an outcry from some lawmakers, historians and preservationists who argued that the president should not have taken that step until the two federal agencies and Congress had reviewed and approved the project, and the public had a chance to provide comment.

The 90,000-square-foot (8,361 square meters) ballroom would be nearly twice the size of the White House, which is 55,000-square-feet (5,110 square meters), and Trump has said it would accommodate about 1,000 people. The East Room, the largest room in the White House, can fit just over 200 people at most.

Commissioners offered mostly complimentary comments before the votes.

Cook echoed one of Trump's main arguments for adding a larger entertaining space to the White House: It would end the long-standing practice of erecting temporary structures on the South Lawn that Trump describes as tents to host visiting dignitaries for state dinners and other functions.

"Our sitting president has actually designed a very beautiful structure and, as was said, in the comments earlier, the United States just should not be entertaining the world in tents," Cook said.

The panel received mainly negative comments from the public

Members of the public were asked to submit written comment by a Wednesday afternoon deadline. Thomas Luebke, the panel's secretary, said "over 99%" of the more than 2,000 messages it received in the past week from around the country were in opposition to the project.

Luebke tried to summarize the comments for the commissioners.

Some comments cited concerns about Trump's decision to unilaterally tear down the East Wing, as well as the lack of transparency about who is paying for the ballroom or how contracts were awarded, Luebke said. Comments in support referenced concerns for the U.S. image on the world stage and the need for a larger entertaining space at the White House.

Trump has defended the ballroom in a recent series of social media posts that included drawings of the building. He said in one January post that most of the material needed to build it had been ordered "and there is no practical or reasonable way to go back. IT IS TOO LATE!"

The commission met Thursday over Zoom and heard from Shalom Baranes, the lead architect, and Rick Parisi, the landscape architect. Both described a series of images and sketches of the ballroom and the grounds as they would appear after the project is completed.

Trump has said the ballroom would cost about \$400 million and be paid for with private donations. To date, the White House has only released an incomplete list of donors.

A lawsuit against the project is still pending

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has sued in federal court to halt construction. A ruling in the case is pending.

Carol Quillen, president and CEO of the privately funded nonprofit organization, said the group was "puzzled" by both votes because the final plans had not been presented or reviewed. But with the votes, she said the commission had "bypassed its obligation to provide serious design review and consider the views of the American people," including all of the negative public comments.

Quillen said that while her organization has always acknowledged the usefulness of a larger White House meeting space, "we remain deeply concerned that the size, location, and massing of this proposal will overwhelm the carefully balanced classical design of the White House, a symbol of our democratic republic."

At the commission's January meeting, some members had questioned Baranes, Trump's architect, about the "immense" design and scale of the project even as they broadly endorsed Trump's vision.

On Thursday, Cook and other commissioners complimented Baranes for updating the building's design to remove a large pediment, a triangular structure above the south portico, that they had objected to because of its size.

"I think taking the pediment off the south side was a really good move," said commissioner Mary Anne Carter, who also is head of the National Endowment for the Arts. "I think that really helps to restore some balance and make it look, just more aligned" with the White House.

Baranes said it was the biggest design change and that Trump had "agreed to do that."

Trump quietly named his final two commissioners to the panel in late January. Pamela Hughes Patenaude has a background in housing policy and disaster recovery, and was as a deputy secretary at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Trump's first term. Chamberlain Harris is a special assistant to the president and deputy director of Oval Office operations.

The ballroom project is scheduled for additional discussion at a March 5 meeting of the National Capital Planning Commission, which is led by a top White House aide. This panel heard an initial presentation about the project in January.

At that meeting, the White House defended tearing down the East Wing, saying that preserving it was not an option due to structural issues, past decay and other concerns. Josh Fisher, director of the White House Office of Administration, cited an unstable colonnade, water leakage, mold contamination and other problems.

Winter Olympics recap: Alysia Liu wins figure skating gold, US tops Canada in women's hockey final

MILAN (AP) — On a night of American comebacks at the Milan Cortina Games, Alysia Liu delivered the U.S. its first women's figure skating Olympic gold medal in 24 years.

The 20-year-old Liu performed a near-flawless free skate Thursday to upstage Japanese rivals Kaori Sakamoto and Ami Nakai. She finished with a career-best 226.79 points. Nakai and Sakamoto each made a mistake on a combination sequence.

Liu had walked away from the sport after the 2022 Beijing Games only to launch a remarkable comeback.

It was the first individual gold medal for an American woman figure skater since 2002, when Sarah Hughes won in Salt Lake City, and it was the second gold for Liu at these Games. She helped the Americans win team gold.

Sakamoto scored 224.90 points to earn a silver. Nakai finished third with 219.16 points.

Liu was third after the short program two nights earlier, though within range of gold.

US beats Canada in OT for women's hockey gold

The U.S. women's hockey team delivered an Olympic comeback for the ages by beating Canada 2-1 in overtime to win the gold medal.

With her team trailing 1-0, American captain Hilary Knight forced overtime by tipping in Laila Edwards' shot with 2:04 remaining in regulation.

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Megan Keller then scored 4:07 into overtime to hand the U.S. its third Olympic gold medal in women's hockey.

It was the seventh time the two powerhouses faced off for Olympic gold since women's hockey debuted at the 1998 Nagano Games. In the 2022 Beijing final, Canada beat the Americans in the final.

With the sides playing 3-on-3 in overtime, Keller broke up the left wing and pushed past Claire Thompson. Driving to the net, Keller got off a backhand that beat Ann-Renee Desbiens.

Kristin O'Neill scored a short-handed goal for Canada in the second period.

Earlier Thursday, Alina Muller scored the bronze medal-winning goal in overtime in Switzerland's 2-1 victory over Sweden. It came 12 years after Muller scored the clinching goal to deliver the Swiss their first Olympic medal in women's hockey — a bronze at the 2014 Sochi Games.

Jordan Stolz stunned in 1,500 meters

U.S. speedskater Jordan Stolz's late push wasn't enough.

The American star settled for silver in the 1,500 meters, missing a chance to secure a third gold medal at the Milan Cortina Games.

China's Ning Zhongyan won Thursday's race in an Olympic-record time of 1 minute, 41.98 seconds. The 21-year-old Stolz, who won gold medals in the 500 and 1,000 at these Games, crossed 0.77 seconds later.

As Stolz glided by, hands on his knees, Ning raised his country's flag aloft with both hands and started a victory lap.

Stolz, a Wisconsin native, will participate in the mass start on Saturday.

Dutch skater Kjeld Nuis, who won the 1,500 at the past two Olympics, took bronze.

Eileen Gu advances to halfpipe final despite fall

Defending Olympic champion Eileen Gu shook off a fall during her opening run to advance to Saturday's final in freeski halfpipe. The 22-year-old Gu was born in the United States and competes for China.

She clipped the lip of the halfpipe on the third trick of her first run, knocking her left ski off and sending her skittering to the bottom of the course.

That set up a pressure-packed second attempt that run earned 86.50 points, good enough to place fifth among the 12 skiers who advanced to the final.

US and Canada reach women's curling semifinals

The United States and Canada advanced to the women's curling semifinals.

The Americans, skipped by Tabitha Peterson, beat Switzerland 7-6 in a match that went to an extra end. The teams will square off again in Friday's semifinals.

Peterson threw the decisive rock and her teammates swept it into position, just a hair closer to the button than the Swiss' nearest stone.

Canada beat South Korea 10-7 and will play Sweden on Friday.

Judge declares 4 men wrongly accused of 1991 Austin yogurt shop murders innocent

By JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — For more than three decades, the four men and their families had insisted they were innocent of one of Austin's most gruesome and notorious crimes: the 1991 rape and murder of four teenage girls at a yogurt shop that was set on fire.

No one listened. Not when Robert Springsteen was sent to death row. Not when Michael Scott was sentenced to life in prison. Or when Forrest Welborn and Maurice Pierce, though never convicted, struggled through life under dark clouds of suspicion that they were murderers.

Their pleas were finally heard Thursday. A judge formally declared the men innocent after an emotional court hearing where prosecutors apologized and admitted they were wrongly accused of a crime that haunted the city for decades. Investigators determined last year that the murders were committed by a previously unknown culprit who died in 1999.

Scott and Welborn sat in the crowded courtroom packed with family members to hear state District

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Judge Dayna Blazey formally tell them "you are innocent." She called her order "an obligation to the rule of law and the obligation to the dignity of the individual."

The hearing included lengthy statements from the men and their families about the struggles of incarceration, broken relationships, constant harassment by investigators and homelessness.

Springsteen did not attend. Through tears, Marisa Pierce addressed her father, who died in 2010 in a confrontation with police after a traffic stop.

"Daddy, you have your name back," she said. "The world knows what you were trying to say all along."

Killings shocked Austin and confounded investigators

Amy Ayers, 13; Eliza Thomas, 17; and sisters Jennifer and Sarah Harbison, ages 17 and 15, were bound, gagged and shot in the head at the "I Can't Believe It's Yogurt" store where two of them worked. The building was set on fire.

Investigators chased thousands of leads and several false confessions before the four men, who were teenagers when the girls were killed, were arrested in late 1999.

Springsteen and Scott were convicted based largely on confessions they insisted were coerced by police. Both convictions were overturned in the mid-2000s.

Welborn was charged but never tried after two grand juries refused to indict him. Pierce spent three years in jail before the charges were dismissed and he was released.

Prosecutors wanted to try Springsteen and Scott again, but a judge ordered the charges dismissed in 2009 when new DNA tests that were unavailable in 1991 and the previous trials revealed another male suspect.

"Let us not forgot that Robert Springsteen could be dead right now, executed at the hands of the state of Texas," Springsteen attorney Amber Farrelly said.

In a statement his attorney read in court, Welborn said he lost friends, struggled to keep jobs and was at one time homeless. Scott testified that his arrest, conviction and prison sentence ultimately broke up his family.

"I lost my family. I lost my youth. My daughter was 3 years old when I was arrested. We had just celebrated our first wedding anniversary. I lost the chance to build a family," Scott said. "Every day I have carried the weight of a crime I did not commit."

The formal declaration of innocence could also be a key step for the men and their families if they seek financial compensation for years they spent incarcerated or struggled to live under a cloud of suspicion.

"My son's name has finally been cleared after more than 25 years of being called the monster, the murderer and everything else," said Phil Scott, Michael Scott's father. "Son, be proud."

Connection to a new suspect revealed

After Scott and Springsteen were released, the case effectively went cold until 2025, when an HBO documentary series attracted new public attention to the unsolved crime.

Then investigators made a stunning announcement last September: New DNA science and reviews of old ballistics evidence pointed to Robert Eugene Brashers as the sole killer.

Since 2018, authorities had used advanced DNA evidence to link Brashers to the strangulation death of a South Carolina woman in 1990, the 1997 rape of a 14-year-old girl in Tennessee and the shooting of a mother and daughter in Missouri in 1998.

The link to the Austin case came when a DNA sample taken from under Ayers' fingernail came back as a match to Brashers from the 1990 killing.

Austin investigators also found that Brashers had been arrested at a border checkpoint near El Paso two days after the yogurt shop killings. In his stolen car was a pistol that matched the caliber used to kill one of the girls in Austin.

Police also noted similarities in the yogurt shop case to Brashers' other crimes: The victims were tied up with their own clothing, sexually assaulted and some crime scenes were set on fire.

Brashers died in 1999 when he shot himself during an hourslong standoff with police at a motel in Kennett, Missouri.

"Over 25 years ago, the state prosecuted four innocent men ... (for) one of the worst crimes Austin has ever seen," Travis County First Assistant District Attorney Trudy Strassburger said. "We could not have

been more wrong.”

Trump gets pledges for Gaza reconstruction and troop commitments at inaugural Board of Peace talks

By AAMER MADHANI and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump announced Thursday at the inaugural Board of Peace meeting that nine members have agreed to pledge \$7 billion toward a Gaza relief package and five countries have agreed to deploy troops as part of an international stabilization force for the war-battered Palestinian territory.

While lauding the pledges, Trump faces the unresolved challenge of disarming Hamas, a sticking point that threatens to delay or even derail the Gaza ceasefire plan that his administration notched as a major foreign policy win.

The dollars promised, while significant, represent a small fraction of the estimated \$70 billion needed to rebuild the territory decimated after two years of war between Israel and Hamas. While Trump praised allies for making the commitments of funding and troops, he offered no detail on when the pledges would be implemented.

“Every dollar spent is an investment in stability and the hope of new and harmonious (region),” Trump said. He added, “The Board of Peace is showing how a better future can be built right here in this room.”

Trump also announced the U.S. was pledging \$10 billion for the board but didn’t specify what the money will be used for. It also was not clear where the U.S. money would come from — a sizable pledge that would need to be authorized by Congress.

Trump touches on Iran and the United Nations

The board was initiated as part of Trump’s 20-point plan to end the conflict in Gaza. But since the October ceasefire, Trump’s vision for the board has morphed and he wants it to have an even more ambitious remit — one that will not only complete the Herculean task of bringing lasting peace between Israel and Hamas but also help resolve conflicts around the globe.

But the Gaza ceasefire deal remains fragile, and Trump’s expanded vision for the board has triggered fears the U.S. president is looking to create a rival to the United Nations.

Trump, pushing back against the criticism, said the creation of his board would help make the U.N. viable in the future.

“Someday I won’t be here. The United Nations will be,” Trump said. “I think it is going to be much stronger, and the Board of Peace is going to almost be looking over the United Nations and making sure it runs properly.”

Even as Trump spoke of the gathering as a triumph that would help bring a more persistent peace to the Middle East, he sent new warnings to Iran.

Tensions are high between the United States and Iran as Trump has ordered one of the largest U.S. military buildups in the region in decades.

One aircraft carrier group is already in the region and another is on the way. Trump has warned Tehran it will face American military action if it does not denuclearize, give up ballistic missiles and halt funding to extremist proxy groups, such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

“We have to make a meaningful deal. Otherwise bad things happen,” Trump said.

Which countries pledged troops and funding

Indonesia, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Kosovo and Albania made pledges to send troops for a Gaza stabilization force, while Egypt and Jordan committed to train police.

Troops will initially be deployed to Rafah, a largely destroyed and mostly depopulated city under full Israeli control, where the U.S. administration hopes to first focus reconstruction efforts.

The countries making pledges to fund reconstruction are Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and Kuwait, Trump said.

Maj. Gen. Jasper Jeffers, leader of the newly created international stabilization force, said plans call for

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12,000 police and 20,000 soldiers for Gaza.

"With these first steps, we help bring the security that Gaza needs for a future of prosperity and enduring peace," Jeffers said.

Some US allies remain skeptical

Nearly 50 countries and the European Union sent officials to Thursday's meeting. Germany, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom are among more than a dozen countries that have not joined the board but took part as observers.

Most countries sent high-level officials, but a few leaders — including Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, Argentine President Javier Milei and Hungarian President Viktor Orbán — traveled to Washington.

"Almost everybody's accepted, and the ones that haven't, will be," Trump offered. "And some are playing a little cute — it doesn't work. You can't play cute with me."

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin told reporters this week that "at the international level, it should above all be the U.N. that manages these crisis situations." French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot said in a post on X that the European Commission should never have attended the meeting as it had no mandate to do so.

More countries are "going through the process of getting on," in some cases, by getting approval from their legislatures, Trump told reporters later Thursday.

"I would love to have China and Russia. They've been invited," Trump said. "You need both."

Official after official used their speaking turns at the gathering to heap praise on Trump for his ability to end conflicts. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called him the "savior of South Asia," while others said that years of foreign policy efforts by his predecessor failed to do what Trump has done in the past year.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Trump and others there deserved thanks for their collective efforts on Gaza. But Fidan, who said Turkey also was prepared to contribute troops to the stabilization force, cautioned that the situation remains precarious.

"The humanitarian situation remains fragile and ceasefire violations continue to occur," Fidan said. "A prompt, coordinated and effective response is therefore essential."

Questions about disarming Hamas

Central to Thursday's discussions was assembling an international stabilization force to keep security and ensure the disarming of the militant Hamas group, a key demand of Israel and a cornerstone of the ceasefire deal.

Hamas has provided little confidence that it is willing to move forward on disarmament. The administration is "under no illusions on the challenges regarding demilitarization" but has been encouraged by what mediators have reported back, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking at a dusty army base in southern Israel, repeated his pledge that "there will be no reconstruction" of Gaza before demilitarization. His foreign minister, Gideon Saar, said during Thursday's gathering that "there must be a fundamental deradicalization process."

Trump said Hamas has promised to disarm and would be met "very harshly" if it fails to do so. But he gave few details on how the difficult task would be carried out.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio acknowledged that there is a "long ways to go" in Gaza.

"There's a lot of work that remains that will require the contribution of every nation state represented here today," Rubio said.

When Rhode Island shooter started firing, bystanders jumped into action to end the carnage

By MICHAEL CASEY and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Sitting in the stands at a hockey game, Michael Black heard what he thought was popping balloons before quickly realizing it was gunfire. As dozens of people rushed out of the Rhode Island arena, Black told his wife to "run, run" and then lunged toward the shooter's handgun.

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Black managed to get his left hand caught in the chamber of Robert Dorgan's gun, jamming it and then briefly attempted to hold Dorgan down. But Dorgan, a former bodybuilder, hoisted Black into the air before at least two other bystanders rushed over to subdue the shooter. One of them could be seen on video putting Dorgan into a choke hold.

Dorgan fell to the ground, with the 58-year-old Black on top of him. The shooter died from a self-inflicted gunshot after pulling out a second gun as the two locked eyes. Black never heard Dorgan say a word.

"The first thought was the safety of my wife. And the second thought was, because the bullets were coming out, was to focus in on the gun," said Black, who ran a printing company until he retired in 2021 and has no specialized emergency response training. "Get the gun and then subdue the shooter."

Pawtucket police have said the shooter behind the deadly ice rink tragedy on Monday was Robert Dorgan, who also went by Roberta Esposito and Roberta Dorgano.

Dorgan's ex-wife Rhonda Dorgan and adult son Aidan Dorgan were killed in the shooting, and three others were injured: Rhonda Dorgan's parents, Linda and Gerald Dorgan; and a family friend, Thomas Geruso, all of whom remained in critical condition Wednesday.

'Courageous citizens' help stop tragedy

Along with Black, Robert Rattenni and Ryan Cordeiro are being credited as subduing the suspect. Separately, Chris Librizzi and Glenn Narodowy, both retired Rhode Island firefighters and EMTs, and nurse Maryann Rattenni provided first aid in the immediate aftermath.

Pawtucket police say this group of "courageous citizens" who rushed to intervene in the attack "undoubtedly prevented further injury and increased the chances of survival for the injured."

"I look at it as being fortunate, saddened tremendously in the loss, but fortunate that a small group of people could make a difference," Black said in a Zoom interview Thursday from South Carolina where he was on a college visit with his son.

One of the more puzzling unsolved questions surrounding the ice rink shooting is over why Dorgan chose the Dennis M. Lynch arena. It was a familiar spot for Dorgan's family, with Aidan Dorgan, 23, playing hockey and had once hoped to be recruited by a college hockey team. He'd shown up Monday to watch his little brother's hockey match with his mom, grandparents and other family. Dorgan had also been known to frequent the arena to watch family matches.

On Monday, Amanda Wallace-Hubbard, Aidan Dorgan's sister and stepdaughter to Rhonda Dorgan, was in the stands. She has since credited Black as the reason she's still alive since she was likely next in line to have been shot.

Black also said a detective reached out to him Tuesday to say that one of Dorgan's daughters wanted to thank him for his efforts.

Survivors grapple with hero title

Authorities have not directly said that Dorgan was transgender and have said questions around Dorgan's gender identity are not relevant to their investigation surrounding the case.

However, court records from Dorgan's past show that gender identity was at least one of the contributing factors to Dorgan's wife filing for divorce in 2020 after nearly 30 years of marriage. Dorgan's X account mentions being transgender and sharing far-right ideologies.

With Dorgan dead, other bystanders rushed to provide treatment for the five people who had been shot and were lying between the bleachers. Blood was everywhere. Police arrived within minutes, and Black with his injured hand was escorted outside in the parking lot where he reunited with his wife.

"My wife saw me and she ran underneath the yellow tape, kind of grabbed me from behind, and we gave a big hug," Black said. "She said, 'I heard you helped with the shooter. And she says, what's all the blood? I said, 'I got my hand caught in the gun.' And then she said, 'Honey, I don't know whether I should be proud of you, but I'm pissed off at you for putting yourself in that situation.'"

As he was sitting in the hospital getting treatment on his injured hand, Black recalled a nurse calling him a hero — a label that has repeatedly been applied to all three bystanders in recent days.

"I said I don't feel like I'm a hero right now," Black said. "I looked up and I was feeling for the family. So I started getting some tears in my eyes. And then she got tears in her eyes, too. It was just a moment

of decompression at that point.”

Black said after the shooting he initially canceled plans to take his son on a college visit to South Carolina before reconsidering and going ahead with the trip.

“About an hour and a half later, as I was decompressing a little bit, I was on my couch, the TV, and I had my chocolate Lab next to me, and I started thinking that I’m not going to allow this shooter to change my life,” he said. “I’m not going to allow him to start, you know, dictating or making me afraid.”

The former Prince Andrew went from helicopter pilot to trade envoy to royal pariah

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — He was reportedly his mother Queen Elizabeth II’s favorite, but the former Prince Andrew has long been a headache for Britain’s royal family.

Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor was arrested Thursday, his 66th birthday, on suspicion of misconduct in public office in an inquiry stemming from his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. He is the first senior British royal to be arrested since King Charles I, almost 400 years ago.

Born a prince in 1960, Andrew is the third child and second son of the queen and her husband Prince Philip. His elder brother Charles was destined for the throne. Andrew took a tried-and-tested route for younger royal sons: military service.

After 22 years in the Royal Navy, including combat operations as a helicopter pilot during the 1982 Falklands War, Andrew was named Britain’s special representative for international trade and investment in 2001. His frequent taxpayer-funded travel saw him dubbed “Air Miles Andy” by the press.

The current police investigation stems from that period. It follows documents in recently released Epstein files that suggest Andrew passed on official government documents to the late financier when he was a trade envoy. The former prince has not been charged with a crime. He has long denied any wrongdoing over his Epstein links.

Links to questionable characters

Once a subject of media fascination for his love life, the man the tabloids dubbed “Randy Andy” became a regular source of headlines because of his money woes and links to questionable characters, including Epstein, the American financier and convicted sex offender.

The then-prince’s business associations were the subject of tabloid stories stretching back to at least 2007, when he sold his house near Windsor Castle for 20% over the 15 million pound asking price. The buyer was reported to be Timur Kulibayev, son-in-law of then-Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, raising concerns that the deal was an attempt to buy influence in Britain.

Mountbatten-Windsor was forced to step down from the trade role in 2011 amid growing concern about his friendship with Epstein, who had been sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2008 after pleading guilty to soliciting a minor for prostitution.

In 2015, U.S. court documents contained allegations that Andrew had sex with a woman three times between 1999 and 2002 in London, New York and on Epstein’s private Caribbean island, including when she was a minor under U.S. law. He denied having ever met the woman, later identified as Virginia Roberts Giuffre.

After Epstein was arrested again in 2019, Andrew gave a disastrous interview to the BBC’s Newsnight program, in which he tried to explain away his contacts with Epstein. It backfired — he was widely criticized for giving unbelievable explanations and failing to show empathy for Epstein’s victims.

Royal exile

Amid the backlash, Andrew announced on Nov. 20, 2019, that he was giving up public duties and charity roles “for the foreseeable future.”

In August 2021, Giuffre sued Andrew in a New York court, alleging that the prince had sex with her when she was 17. Andrew continued to deny the allegations, but he was stripped of all military affiliations and

royal charity work.

Andrew ultimately settled the case for an undisclosed sum. While he didn't admit wrongdoing, Andrew did acknowledge Giuffre's suffering as a victim of sex trafficking. Giuffre died by suicide in April 2025, aged 41.

In 2024, a court case revealed Andrew's relationship with a businessman and suspected Chinese spy who was barred from the United Kingdom as a threat to national security. Authorities were concerned that the man could have misused his influence over Andrew, according to court documents.

After emails emerged showing Andrew remained in contact with Epstein longer than he previously claimed and Giuffre's posthumous memoir brought new allegations, King Charles III in October stripped his brother of his titles of prince and Duke of York and evicted him from his Royal Lodge mansion in Windsor.

The release of millions of pages of Epstein files by the U.S. Department of Justice last month sparked new scrutiny.

Andrew spent about 11 hours in police custody on Thursday before being released under investigation, meaning he has neither been charged nor exonerated.

Despite being stripped of his title, he remains eighth in line to the British throne. A law would have to be passed to remove him from the line of succession.

He married Sarah Ferguson in 1986 and they had two daughters, Princess Beatrice and Princess Eugenie, before divorcing a decade later. Ferguson also is facing questions about her friendship with Epstein.

US trade deficit declined in 2025, but gap for goods hits a record despite Trump tariffs

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. trade deficit slipped modestly in 2025, a year in which President Donald Trump upended global commerce by slapping double digit tariffs on imports from most countries. But the gap in the trade of goods such as machinery and aircraft — the main focus of Trump's protectionist policies — hit a record last year despite sweeping import taxes.

Overall, the gap between the goods and services the U.S. sells other countries and what it buys from them narrowed to just over \$901 billion, from \$904 billion in 2024, but it was still the third-highest on record, the Commerce Department reported Thursday.

Exports rose 6% last year, and imports rose nearly 5%.

And the U.S. deficit in the trade of goods widened 2% to a record \$1.24 trillion last year as American companies boosted imports of computer chips and other tech goods from Taiwan to support massive investments in artificial intelligence.

Amid continuing tensions with Beijing, the deficit in the goods trade with China plunged nearly 32% to \$202 billion in 2025 on a sharp drop in both exports to and imports from the world's second-biggest economy. But trade was diverted away from China. The goods gap with Taiwan doubled to \$147 billion and shot up 44%, to \$178 billion, with Vietnam.

Economist Chad Bown, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said the widening gaps with Taiwan and Vietnam might put a "bulls eye" on them this year if Trump focuses more on the lopsided trade numbers and less on the U.S. rivalry with China.

In 2025, U.S. goods imports from Mexico outpaced exports by nearly \$197 billion, up from a 2024 gap of \$172 billion. But the goods deficit with Canada shrank by 26% to \$46 billion. The United States this year is negotiating a renewal of a pact Trump reached with those two countries in his first term.

The U.S. ran a bigger surplus in the trade of services such as banking and tourism last year — \$339 billion, up from \$312 billion in 2024.

The trade gap surged from January-March as U.S. companies tried to import foreign goods ahead of Trump's taxes, then narrowed most of the rest of the year.

Trump's tariffs are a tax paid by U.S. importers and often passed along to their customers as higher prices. But they haven't had as much impact on inflation as economists originally expected. Trump argues

that the tariffs will protect U.S. industries, bringing manufacturing back to America and raise money for the U.S. Treasury.

Oscars will bring back last year's acting winners — Saldaña, Culkin, Madison and Brody — to present

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The Oscars are reuniting last year's acting winners for next month's ceremony. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced Thursday that best actor winners Adrien Brody and Mikey Madison and supporting actor winners Kieran Culkin and Zoe Saldaña will present trophies at the 98th annual Academy Awards.

The actors are the first presenters announced for the March 15 ceremony, which will be hosted by Conan O'Brien. The show will air live on ABC beginning at 7 p.m. Eastern/4 p.m. Pacific.

Last year's show saw Saldaña, Madison and Culkin become first-time Oscar winners. Brody won his second best actor trophy, for his role in "The Brutalist."

"Sinners" is this year's leading nominee, breaking the record for most nominations by a single film with 16.

The Oscars frequently have the previous year's winners present Oscar trophies in the acting categories. Who's nominated for an Oscar this year?

This year's nominees for best actress are Jessie Buckley for "Hamnet," Rose Byrne for "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You," Renate Reinsve for "Sentimental Value," Emma Stone for "Bugonia" and Kate Hudson for "Song Sung Blue."

The best actor nominees are Timothée Chalamet for "Marty Supreme," Leonardo DiCaprio for "One Battle After Another," Ethan Hawke for "Blue Moon," Michael B. Jordan for "Sinners" and Wagner Moura for "The Secret Agent."

In the supporting actor categories, the nominees are Jacob Elordi for "Frankenstein," Sean Penn and Benicio del Toro for "One Battle After Another," Stellan Skarsgård for "Sentimental Value" and Delroy Lindo for "Sinners."

The supporting actress nominees are Elle Fanning and Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas for "Sentimental Value," Amy Madigan for "Weapons," Wunmi Mosaku for "Sinners" and Teyana Taylor for "One Battle After Another."

Iranians grieve defiantly for thousands killed in last month's crackdown

By AMIR-HUSSEIN RADJY and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Standing on her balcony in the Iranian capital, Tehran, the teacher shouted out into the darkness, "Death to the dictator!" and "Death to the murderer, Khamenei!" on a recent night, joining the slogans coming from windows and rooftops around her relatively affluent neighborhood.

A few voices in the darkness responded with slogans in support of Iran's 47-year-old Islamic Republic.

"Shut up! Choke on it!" her neighbors shouted back, drowning out the pro-government voices, the teacher recounted to The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity for her safety.

Iranians across the country are still reeling with shock, grief and fear after massive nationwide protests were crushed by the deadliest crackdown ever seen under the rule of the 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Thousands were killed and tens of thousands are believed to have been arrested.

But a vein of defiance persists. A seething anger at Iran's rulers is evident in videos shared on social media and in conversations with protesters. At the same time, three protesters reached by the AP also expressed futility over what can be done after hundreds of thousands braved taking to the streets only to be met with overwhelming violence. The protesters all spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing retribution or arrest.

Adding to the uncertainty is the United States' threat to strike Iran. The U.S. has positioned warships and fighter jets nearby even as it holds negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.

The defiance appears in the shouting of slogans from windows and rooftops at night, a ritual displayed

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in past waves of protests.

It is also evident at memorial gatherings for those killed 40 days earlier. Such commemorations -- known as the "chehelom," Persian for "the 40th" -- are traditionally held by families for anyone who has died. But in times of unrest, chehelom can have a political dimension.

Commemorations turn to protests

This week marks 40 days since Jan. 8 and 9, the deadliest days of the crackdown, and multiple videos circulating online show 40-day ceremonies in towns and cities around Iran. Some appear to have drawn hundreds of people, who often break into anti-government chants.

Often they are festive, with friends and loved ones of the slain protester singing and throwing flowers -- a rejection of the solemn atmosphere encouraged by the state at official ceremonies. Most avoid calling the dead "shaheed," or "martyr," a term with Islamic religious connotations. Instead, they use the term, "javid nam," a Persian phrase meaning, "Long live the name."

Videos posted this week and verified by the AP showed a crowd of hundreds at the main cemetery in the small western Iranian town of Abdanan, chanting, "Death to Khamenei" and pumping their fists at the chehelom of Alireza Seydi, a 16-year-old boy killed on Jan. 8. The videos show security forces firing from an armored vehicle, raising clouds of what appeared to be tear gas, sending men and women running.

During the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the shah and brought the Islamic Republic to power, 40-day memorials for slain protesters often turned into rallies that security forces tried to crush, causing new deaths -- which then would be marked 40 days later with new protests.

Postings on social media have reported security forces trying to restrict people from attending some chehelom ceremonies.

"For every person killed, a thousand more stand behind him," a crowd of several hundred chanted Tuesday while gathered in the eastern city of Mashhad for the chehelom of Hamid Mahdavi, according to a video verified by the AP. When a few police officers harassed some people commemorating Mahdavi, a fireman shot to death in January protests, the crowd shouted, "Shameless! Shameless!"

The government held its own chehelom for those killed, whom the Revolutionary Guard in a statement depicted as victims of violence caused by foreign-backed armed "terrorist" groups that exploited "legitimate public demands." It said the 40-day commemoration was "a chance to renew commitment to national unity."

'Mass depression' and anger

"More than sad, people are angry. Everyone is so angry. Everyone is waiting for some kind of explosion," said a resident of Karaj, a city just outside of Tehran.

He joined street marches on Jan. 8 and Jan. 9 and said five of his relatives and family friends were killed when security forces opened fire on protesters.

The Human Rights Activists News Agency has so far counted more than 7,000 dead and believes the death toll is far higher. Iran's government offered its only death toll on Jan. 21, saying 3,117 people were killed; it has depicted many of the protesters as "terrorists."

"I don't know anyone around me who doesn't know someone who was killed, or someone who was arrested or wounded," the 26-year-old teacher in Tehran said. Two of her acquaintances were killed and the husband of one of her co-workers arrested, she said.

Iranians are also struggling with a rapidly worsening economy, as the value of their currency plummets.

Every day, prices rise, said the Karaj resident. "We are getting near an economic collapse," he said. "Buying fruit has become a luxury."

A resident of north Tehran who works in tourism and joined last month's protests said that with the Persian New Year approaching in March, the bazaar would usually be full of shoppers, but not now.

"It's a combination of grieving, lack of money and inflation," he said, describing people in the capital as being in a state of "mass depression."

The mood has dampened Iran's normally vibrant cultural sphere. One prominent actor posted that she would no longer accept new roles "in this land that smells of blood."

Alireza Ostad Haji, who referees a popular television strongman competition, offered condolences to "all

mourning families" in an Instagram post and resigned from two national athletic committees. He broke down in tears as he spoke of a former bodybuilding champion, Masoud Zatparvar, who was killed. "He was not a terrorist, he was a protester," he said.

'They see no alternative'

There is also a fear that street protests can't bring change in the face of the state's overwhelming use of violence.

The Karaj resident and the Tehran protester who works in tourism both expressed support for the son of the ousted shah, Reza Pahlavi, who from exile has put himself forward as a leader of the fragmented Iranian opposition. Pahlavi has encouraged protests and called for the U.S. to strike Iran.

The depth of support for Pahlavi around Iran is impossible to gauge. But during January's wave of protests, chants in support of him were common, a notable change from the past, when the shah's son drew scant attention within the country or was seen as out of touch.

Some are even taking what was a previously unimaginable step for many -- expressing hopes for an American attack.

"Every night, every hour, I wish I could hear (U.S.) strikes," the protester who works in tourism said. "We cannot fight anymore with our fists against machine guns." He said many of his friends who took to the streets alongside him in January say they won't do so again because of the state's violence.

The teacher said that, while she joined past protests, she didn't in January because she didn't like the expressions of Pahlavi support.

But she said some of her friends who also oppose the shah's son joined the January protests and even repeated the slogan, "Long live the shah!"

"People have become very tired, and they see no alternative," she said.

She worried a U.S. attack will bring war, civil strife and even more bloodshed.

"I am afraid there will be more massacres," she said.

Genealogy sites have helped solve major crimes. Police in Nancy Guthrie's case might turn to them

By ED WHITE Associated Press

Authorities trying to solve the disappearance of Nancy Guthrie say they might tap DNA genealogy databases, the same step that police took to unravel a decades-old series of murders in California and the fatal stabbings of four college students in Idaho.

The strategy could be fruitful: If unidentified DNA evidence can be connected to someone — even a distant relative — in a common genealogy database, it would give investigators more information and possibly lead to a suspect in Guthrie's kidnapping in Arizona.

"It's a fantastic tool," said Ruth Ballard, a geneticist in California who specializes in DNA and has testified in hundreds of court cases. "If it's a good quality sample and they're able to get a profile, they could find a hit on that fairly quickly."

The sheriff's department in Pima County, Arizona, said DNA collected so far in the investigation has not turned up any matches in a national criminal justice database known as CODIS, which has DNA profiles from convicted criminals and, in some states, people arrested for certain crimes.

"Investigators are currently looking into additional investigative genetic genealogy options for DNA evidence to check for matches. CODIS is one option of many databases that are available," the sheriff's department said Tuesday.

The department said Wednesday that biological evidence from Guthrie's Tucson-area home was being examined and that DNA profiles were at a lab for analysis.

Guthrie, the mother of NBC "Today" co-anchor Savannah Guthrie, has been missing from her home since Feb. 1. The FBI said gloves found about 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) away appeared to match those worn by a masked suspect who was recorded on a porch camera.

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Genealogy sites Ancestry, 23andMe and MyHeritage say they can be asked to comply with court orders seeking information. Another site, GEDmatch, said its policy is to ask users if they want to opt in to allow police to look at their data. The Associated Press e-mailed the companies, asking if they have a role in the Guthrie investigation.

GEDmatch has been credited with helping solve the case of the so-called Golden State Killer. Police used DNA from crime scenes to find a distant relative and build a family tree that led to Joseph DeAngelo Jr. In 2020, he pleaded guilty to 13 killings and dozens of rapes in California in the 1970s and '80s. He is serving life in prison without possibility of parole.

Barbara Rae-Venter, an expert genealogist who worked on the DeAngelo case, said patience often is needed in high-tech sleuthing.

"I've solved cases in less than eight hours where people shared a lot of DNA with the suspect. Other cases, you're still working on them two years later. This could take awhile," Rae-Venter told CNN, referring to the Guthrie effort.

In Idaho, DNA from a knife sheath helped point to Bryan Kohberger in the killings of four University of Idaho students in 2022. Investigators used genealogy sites to build a family tree and pulled trash from the Pennsylvania home of Kohberger's parents to make a connection. Kohberger pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.

Ballard said the source and quality of the DNA evidence held by police can be factors when trying to find matches on genealogy sites.

"It does require a much better sample than CODIS searching does," she said.

And there can be other hurdles.

"There are a lot of unknowns when you go into these databases," Ballard said. "The databases are not equal in terms of ethnic distribution. It's comparatively easier to find a Caucasian because more have uploaded their data and there are more family trees to mine."

HUD proposes rule that would force noncitizens from public housing

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on Thursday proposed a rule that would limit public housing mostly to citizens, which advocates fear could lead to tens of thousands of people being evicted.

The rule, published in the Federal Register, calls for limiting funding for those in public housing and other HUD-related housing to citizens and eligible noncitizens. The rule would require every resident in HUD-funded housing to show proof of citizenship or eligible status, including those 62 years and older who previously only had to show proof of age.

The measure would effectively bar mixed status families — where some household members are eligible for help — from housing and is part of the government's immigration crackdown. A similar rule was proposed but never finalized during the first Trump administration and is mentioned as a policy priority in the conservative blueprint Project 2025,

"Under President Trump's leadership, the days of illegal aliens, ineligible, and fraudsters gaming the system and riding the coattails of American taxpayers are over," HUD Secretary Scott Turner said in a statement. "HUD's proposed rule will guarantee that all residents in HUD-funded housing are eligible tenants. We have zero tolerance for pushing aside hardworking U.S. citizens while enabling others to exploit decades-old loopholes."

The proposed rule will be made official when it's published in the Federal Register on Friday. HUD did not answer how long it may take before the rule takes effect.

Housing advocates were quick to criticize the move.

"Our country can ensure that every one of us, no matter where we come from or what language we

speak, has a safe home," Shamus Roller, the executive director of the National Housing Law Project said in a statement. "Instead, Trump is trying to evict immigrant families, citizen and non-citizen, from HUD housing.

In December, the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimated that up to 20,000 families or as many as 80,000 people could lose assistance due to changes in eligibility that would overturn a rule that has been in place for decades.

The impact of the rule could affect many more people who struggle to provide proper documentation. About 3.8 million adults with citizenship lack any form of documentation proving their citizenship, and another 17.5 million cannot easily get the documents.

"Everyone deserves an affordable home, including our neighbors, friends, and coworkers who are immigrants," said Sonya Acosta, a senior policy analyst with the Center. "This rule would force 20,000 families with mixed immigration statuses to make the agonizing choice between losing the assistance that helps them pay rent every month or separating their family. People without a documented immigration status have never been eligible for rental assistance."

8 backcountry skiers found dead and 1 still missing after California avalanche

By BROOKE HESS-HOMEIER, JULIE WATSON and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

TRUCKEE, Calif. (AP) — Crews found the bodies of eight backcountry skiers near California's Lake Tahoe and were searching for one more after they were caught in an avalanche, the nation's deadliest in nearly half a century, authorities said Wednesday.

Authorities said the skiers had little time to react.

"Someone saw the avalanche, yelled 'Avalanche!' and it overtook them rather quickly," said Capt. Russell "Rusty" Greene, of the Nevada County sheriff's office.

Six were rescued six hours after the avalanche hit Tuesday morning as they were concluding a three-day trek in Northern California's Sierra Nevada during a monster winter storm. The tour included four guides, three of whom are presumed dead, authorities said.

The group was a mix of women and men between the ages of 30 and 55, authorities said. Some of the people killed were members of the Sugar Bowl Academy community, a private boarding school and ski and snowboard club on Donner Summit, according to the academy. School officials did not release the names of those killed or describe their connection to the academy.

Nevada County Sheriff Shannan Moon said investigators would look into the decision to proceed with the trip on Sunday despite the forecast. That morning at 6:49 a.m., the Sierra Avalanche Center issued an avalanche watch, indicating that large avalanches were likely in the next 24 to 48 hours.

Hours before the avalanche hit, the center increased the watch to a warning, which means avalanches are expected. It's unclear if the guides would have known about the change before they began their trek out of the wilderness.

With one person unaccounted for, authorities' mission moved from rescuing people to recovering bodies, Moon said.

Authorities were waiting to release the victims' names to give the families time.

"They're still reeling," Moon said. "I could not imagine what they're going through."

The victims were found fairly close together, Greene said. The crews have not yet been able to remove the victims from the mountain because of the extreme conditions.

Three to 6 feet (91 centimeters to 1.8 meters) of snow has fallen since Sunday. The area was also hit by subfreezing temperatures and gale force winds. The Sierra Avalanche Center said the threat of more avalanches remained Wednesday and left the snowpack unstable and unpredictable in an area known for its steep, craggy cliffs.

Rescuers were guided by beacons and a cellphone in dangerous conditions

Rescuers reached the survivors just before sunset on Tuesday.

The skiers all had beacons that can send signals to rescuers and at least one of the guides was able to send text messages, but it wasn't clear if they were wearing avalanche bags, which are inflatable devices that can keep skiers near the surface, Greene said.

While they waited to be rescued, the survivors used equipment to shelter themselves and fend off temperatures dipping below freezing. They found three others who had died while they waited, Moon said.

Rescuers used a snowcat to get within 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) of the survivors, then skied in carefully so they didn't set off another avalanche, the sheriff said.

One of those rescued remained hospitalized Wednesday, Moon said.

The area near Donner Summit is one of the snowiest places in the Western Hemisphere and until just a few years ago was closed to the public. It sees an average of nearly 35 feet (10.6 meters) of snow a year, according to the Truckee Donner Land Trust, which owns a cluster of huts where the group was staying near Frog Lake.

The avalanche is the deadliest in the U.S. since 1981, when 11 climbers were killed on Mount Rainier in Washington state. Each winter, 25 to 30 people die in avalanches in the U.S., according to the National Avalanche Center.

It was the second deadly avalanche near California's Castle Peak this year, after a snowmobiler was buried by one in January.

Skiers were heading for the trailhead when the avalanche struck

Greene said authorities were notified about the avalanche by Blackbird Mountain Guides, which was leading the expedition, and the skiers' emergency beacons. The sheriff's office said Tuesday night that 15 backcountry skiers had been on the trip, not 16 as initially believed. One skier had pulled out at the last minute, Moon said.

The skiers were on the last day of the backcountry trip and had spent two nights in huts, said Steve Reynaud, an avalanche forecaster with the Sierra Avalanche Center.

Reaching the huts in winter takes several hours and requires backcountry skills, avalanche training and safety equipment. Blackbird said the tour was for intermediate-to-expert skiers.

The area near Donner Summit was closed for nearly a century before it was reopened by the Truckee Donner Land Trust and its partners in 2020. Donner Summit is named for the infamous Donner Party, a group of pioneers who resorted to cannibalism after getting trapped there in the winter of 1846-1847.

When asked what went through her mind as her staff and volunteers responded to the scene, Moon said she was hoping they would be able to make it there safely. Once they did, she said she was "immediately thinking of the folks that didn't make it, and knowing our mission now is to get them home."

What to know as US moves military assets to Mideast and Iran nuclear talks have yet to reach a deal

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran and the United States are waging gunboat diplomacy as talks over Tehran's nuclear program hang in the balance following Israel's 12-day war on the country in June and the Islamic Republic carrying out a bloody crackdown on nationwide protests.

U.S. President Donald Trump has kept up pressure on Iran, moving an aircraft carrier and other military assets to the Persian Gulf and suggesting the U.S. could attack Iran over the killing of peaceful demonstrators or if Tehran launches mass executions over the protests. A second aircraft carrier now is off the coast of Morocco, potentially heading to the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Trump has pushed Iran's nuclear program back into the frame as well after the June war disrupted five rounds of talks held in Rome and Muscat, Oman, last year. Two rounds of talks so far have yet to reach a deal, though.

It remains unclear how — or if — more talks will happen, though Mideast nations fear a collapse in diplomacy could spark a new regional war. U.S. concerns also have gone beyond Iran's nuclear program to

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its ballistic missiles, support for proxy networks across the region and other issues.

Iran has said it wants talks to focus solely on the nuclear program. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has insisted that his nation was "not seeking nuclear weapons. ... and are ready for any kind of verification." However, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog — the International Atomic Energy Agency — has been unable for months to inspect and verify Iran's nuclear stockpile.

Trump began the diplomacy initially by writing a letter last year to Iran's 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to jump start these talks. Khamenei has warned Iran would respond to any attack with an attack of its own, particularly as the theocracy he commands reels following the protests.

Here's what to know about Iran's nuclear program and the tensions that have stalked relations between Tehran and Washington since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Trump writes letter to Khamenei

Trump dispatched the letter to Khamenei on March 5, 2025, then gave a television interview the next day in which he acknowledged sending it. He said: "I've written them a letter saying, 'I hope you're going to negotiate because if we have to go in militarily, it's going to be a terrible thing.'"

Since returning to the White House, the president has been pushing for talks while ratcheting up sanctions and suggesting a military strike by Israel or the U.S. could target Iranian nuclear sites.

A previous letter from Trump during his first term drew an angry retort from the supreme leader.

But Trump's letters to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in his first term led to face-to-face meetings, though no deals to limit Pyongyang's atomic bombs and a missile program capable of reaching the continental U.S.

Oman mediated previous talks

Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, has mediated talks between Araghchi and U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff. The two men have met face to face after indirect talks, a rare occurrence due to the decades of tensions between the countries.

It hasn't been all smooth, however. Witkoff at one point made a television appearance in which he suggested 3.67% enrichment for Iran could be something the countries could agree on. But that's exactly the terms set by the 2015 nuclear deal struck under former U.S. President Barack Obama, from which Trump unilaterally withdrew America. Witkoff, Trump and other American officials in the time since have maintained Iran can have no enrichment under any deal, something to which Tehran insists it won't agree.

Those negotiations ended, however, with Israel launching the war in June on Iran. There since have been two new rounds of talks in Oman and Geneva.

The 12-day war and nationwide protests

Israel launched what became a 12-day war on Iran in June that included the U.S. bombing Iranian nuclear sites. Iran later acknowledged in November that the attacks saw it halt all uranium enrichment in the country, though inspectors from the IAEA, the U.N. nuclear watchdog, have been unable to visit the bombed sites.

Half a year later, Iran saw protests that began in late December over the collapse of the country's rial currency. Those demonstrations soon became nationwide, sparking Tehran to launch a bloody crackdown that killed thousands and saw tens of thousands detained by authorities.

Iran's nuclear program worries the West

Iran has insisted for decades that its nuclear program is peaceful. However, its officials increasingly threaten to pursue a nuclear weapon. Iran now enriches uranium to near weapons-grade levels of 60%, the only country in the world without a nuclear weapons program to do so.

Under the original 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium up to 3.67% purity and to maintain a uranium stockpile of 300 kilograms (661 pounds). The last report by the IAEA on Iran's program put its stockpile at some 9,870 kilograms (21,760 pounds), with a fraction of it enriched to 60%. The agency for months has been unable to assess Iran's program, raising nonproliferation concerns.

U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to begin a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so." Iranian officials have threatened to pursue the bomb.

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Israel, a close American ally, believes Iran is pursuing a weapon. It wants to see the nuclear program scrapped, as well as a halt in its ballistic missile program and support for anti-Israel militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas.

Decades of tense relations between Iran and the US

Iran was once one of the U.S.'s top allies in the Mideast under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who purchased American military weapons and allowed CIA technicians to run secret listening posts monitoring the neighboring Soviet Union. The CIA had fomented a 1953 coup that cemented the shah's rule.

But in January 1979, the shah, fatally ill with cancer, fled Iran as mass demonstrations swelled against his rule. The Islamic Revolution followed, led by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and created Iran's theocratic government.

Later that year, university students overran the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, seeking the shah's extradition and sparking the 444-day hostage crisis that saw diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S. severed. The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s saw the U.S. back Saddam Hussein. The "Tanker War" during that conflict saw the U.S. launch a one-day assault that crippled Iran at sea, while the U.S. later shot down an Iranian commercial airliner that the U.S. military said it mistook for a warplane.

Iran and the U.S. have seesawed between enmity and grudging diplomacy in the years since, with relations peaking when Tehran made the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. But Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the accord in 2018, sparking tensions in the Mideast that persist today.

Today in History: February 20, John Glenn becomes first American to orbit the Earth

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Feb. 20, the 51st day of 2026. There are 314 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 20, 1962, astronaut John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth, circling the globe three times aboard Project Mercury's Friendship 7 spacecraft in a flight lasting 4 hours and 55 minutes before splashing down safely in the Atlantic Ocean.

Also on this date:

In 1792, President George Washington signed an act creating the United States Post Office Department, the predecessor of the U.S. Postal Service.

In 1862, William Wallace Lincoln, the 11-year-old son of President Abraham Lincoln and first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, died at the White House from what was believed to be typhoid fever.

In 1905, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, upheld, 7-2, compulsory vaccination laws intended to protect the public's health.

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt signed an immigration act which excluded "idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons," among others, from being admitted to the United States.

In 1939, more than 20,000 people attended a rally held by the German American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization, at New York's Madison Square Garden.

In 1965, America's Ranger 8 spacecraft crashed into the moon's surface, as planned, after sending back thousands of pictures of the lunar surface.

In 1998, American Tara Lipinski, age 15, became the youngest-ever Olympic figure skating gold medalist when she won the ladies' title at the Nagano (NAH'-guh-noh) Olympic Winter Games; American teammate Michelle Kwan took silver.

In 2003, a fire sparked by pyrotechnics broke out during a concert by the rock group Great White at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, killing 100 people and injuring over 200 others.

In 2016, a Michigan man shot and killed six strangers and wounded two others over several hours in the Kalamazoo area in between picking up passengers for a ride service. (Jason Dalton pleaded guilty in 2019 and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.)

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Today's birthdays: Racing Hall of Famer Roger Penske is 89. Hockey Hall of Famer Phil Esposito is 84. Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky is 84. Film director Mike Leigh is 83. Actor Brenda Blethyn is 80. Actor Sandy Duncan is 80. Basketball Hall of Famer Charles Barkley is 63. Model Cindy Crawford is 60. Actor Andrew Shue is 59. Actor Lili Taylor is 59. Singer Brian Littrell (Backstreet Boys) is 51. Actor Lauren Ambrose is 48. Actor Jay Hernandez is 48. MLB pitcher Justin Verlander is 43. Comedian-TV host Trevor Noah is 42. Actor Miles Teller is 39. Singer Rihanna is 38. Singer-actor Olivia Rodrigo is 23.