

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, Feb. 27

Senior Menu: Chicken pot pie casserole, mashed potatoes, broccoli, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Cheese bread stick with marinara, cooked carrots.

SDHSAA State B Wrestling, Sioux Falls

3rd Grade Boys Basketball, 3:30 p.m., Elementary Gym

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian (HS Gym: 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.; Arena: JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity)

Saturday, Feb. 28

SDHSAA State B Wrestling, Sioux Falls

Britton-Hecla Boys Basketball JH Jamboree

Pickleball, 9:30 a.m., Elementary Gym

Sunday, March 1

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m. (7th/8th Milestones); Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

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



United Methodist: Worship with communion at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; 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.

Groton Soccer Association Clinics, 11:30 a.m., Arena.

4th grade BB Practice, 2 p.m., Gym

6th grade BB Practice, 6 pm., Arena

Dance Team, 5 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.

Claude Deadline Looms

Anthropic has until this evening to meet the terms of use demands by the Defense Department. If not, the artificial intelligence company risks losing its contract and being labeled a supply chain risk.

Last year, the Pentagon granted Anthropic a \$200M contract to develop tools for the military. Since then, the US reportedly relied on Anthropic's large language model, Claude, in its raid to capture Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. Anthropic has pushed for guarantees that Claude will not be used for autonomous weapons or domestic surveillance. In response, the Pentagon says it will use the tool lawfully and has threatened to invoke the Defense Production Act to compel Anthropic to remove guardrails.

The Pentagon has reached out to Boeing and Lockheed Martin to assess their use of Anthropic. A supply chain risk designation would force those and other companies to choose between doing business with Anthropic and the US military. The designation is typically reserved for foreign entities working with US adversaries.

Speedboat Shootout Suspects

The 10 people who opened fire on Cuban soldiers from a Florida-registered speedboat this week were Cuban nationals living in the US, the Cuban government alleges. Four passengers were killed and six were wounded; one Cuban soldier was also wounded.

Cuban officials claimed most of the seven passengers identified have criminal histories and two were wanted in connection with terrorism. One passenger lived in the US for over two decades and was committed to freeing Cuba from its communist government, according to his brother. Another had called for regime change in an interview with a US-based news outlet last year. As of this writing, the US has confirmed that at least two US citizens and one US visa holder were aboard the boat.

Separately, the US on Wednesday eased an embargo imposed last month, now allowing Venezuelan oil sales to Cuba's private sector. Sales to the government and military remain sanctioned as the US pushes for political reform.

Epstein Fallout Continues

The Justice Department yesterday denied allegations that it intentionally withheld files related to President Donald Trump in the recent release of Jeffrey Epstein records mandated by federal law.

The materials in question include reported FBI memos from 2019 interviews about a woman's alleged claims that she was sexually assaulted decades earlier by Epstein and Trump when she was a minor. An FBI index reportedly shows four interview summaries were created, but only one has been released. DOJ officials say the remaining documents are being withheld under laws protecting victims' identities and ongoing investigations, not for political reasons. Democrats on the House Oversight Committee say the gaps suggest illegal withholding. The woman later joined and withdrew a lawsuit against Epstein's estate and was denied compensation from a victims fund without specified reasons.

Separately, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told lawmakers yesterday she was unaware of crimes committed by Epstein or his associate Ghislaine Maxwell. Former President Bill Clinton is set to appear before the committee today.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Apple strikes deal with Netflix to share coverage of F1 "Drive to Survive" and the Canadian Grand Prix; the docuseries was released on Netflix and Apple TV overnight.

Megan Thee Stallion to make Broadway debut as first female-identifying performer to play Harold Zidler in "Moulin Rouge! The Musical".

Filmmaker Park Chan-wook becomes first South Korean president of Cannes Film Festival.

Singer D4vd, 20, is confirmed as target of grand jury probe into the killing of a 14-year-old girl whose body was found last year in a Tesla registered to him.

Science & Technology

Lunar rock analysis shows the early moon's magnetic field briefly shifted from very weak to stronger than Earth's 3.5 billion to 4 billion years ago.

Google introduces Nano Banana 2, the newest version of its popular AI-powered image generator; tool is part of the Google Gemini app, which has over 750 million monthly active users.

Genetic analysis reveals interbreeding between Neanderthals and ancient humans was primarily between Neanderthal males and human females; findings explain why modern humans have a relatively small genetic contribution from Neanderthals.

Business & Markets

US stock markets mixed (S&P 500 -0.5%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq -1.2%); Nvidia shares fall 5% despite beating Q4 revenue estimates.

Payment processor Block lays off more than 4,000 employees, roughly 50% of its headcount; stock jumps more than 20%.

Netflix won't match offer from Paramount for Warner Bros. Discovery, effectively ending a months long bidding war; WBD had previously agreed to a \$72B deal from Netflix prior to Paramount's counteroffer.

Mortgage rates fall below 6% for the first time since September 2022 for 30-year fixed loans; median price for a new home at the end of 2025 was \$405K.

Politics & World Affairs

The US and Iran tout progress in nuclear negotiations, with another round of talks scheduled for next week.

Talks come against the backdrop of a US military buildup in the Middle East. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrest Columbia University student from Azerbaijan; NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani (D) says she will be released after speaking with President Donald Trump.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen calls snap elections for next month after seeing a surge in public opinion polls amid US President Donald Trump's efforts to acquire Greenland.

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

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

Tigers Outlast Milbank in Double Overtime Classic, Advance to SoDak 16



Jaedyn Penning clutches the SoDak16 ball after the Tigers defeated Milbank in double overtime. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

When the Bulldogs built a 37-28 advantage with about four and a half minutes remaining, Locke gathered his team during a timeout.

"I told them they couldn't panic," Locke said. "You just can't panic. You can't quit. You've got to get good shots and start knocking them down — taking confident strokes instead of hesitant ones. Once the ball leaves your hand, it's gone. The most important shot every time is the next one."

The Tigers responded with a 12-0 run to surge ahead 40-37. But Milbank's Belle Pauli drained a three-pointer at the buzzer to tie the game at 40 and send it into overtime.

"They were positive the whole time," Locke said. "They hit that three at the end of regulation and our girls were like, 'Yeah, I don't care. We'll just keep playing.'"

Milbank scored first in the opening overtime before Groton answered to take a 42-41 lead. The Bulldogs went back in front 44-42, but Rylee Dunker scored with 39 seconds left to tie the game at 44. Dunker was fouled on the play but missed the free throw. Milbank turned the ball over on a 10-second violation with 3.5 seconds remaining, and Groton's last-second shot came after the buzzer, forcing a second overtime.

Before the final extra period, Locke reminded his team what was at stake.

"I told them before the second overtime, you wouldn't want it any other way," he said. "How much fun is it going to be to go to the SoDak 16 in double overtime? Don't let somebody else win it."

Groton made sure it didn't.

The Tigers scored first in the second overtime and, after Milbank tied the game at 48, Groton responded

GROTON — In a game that featured 13 lead changes, seven ties and two overtimes, the Groton Area Tigers earned a trip to the SoDak 16 Thursday night with a thrilling 54-52 victory over Milbank in Region 1A action at the Groton Area Arena.

Milbank struck first and carried a 12-10 lead after the opening quarter. The teams traded momentum throughout the first half, with Groton leaning heavily on senior Jaedyn Penning. Penning scored 13 of the Tigers' 20 first-half points to keep Groton within reach as Milbank took a 23-20 advantage into halftime.

"It's a good thing she showed up in the first half or we'd have gotten run out of the gym," head coach Matt Locke said. "That's senior leadership. She wanted it. The kids listen to her, and she has a great feel for the game."

Scoring slowed in the third quarter, as Milbank edged Groton 7-6 to extend its lead to 30-26 entering the fourth.



The crowd gathers around the Tiger players after the game. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Sisters Natalia and Novalea Warrington sang the National Anthem. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

with back-to-back baskets to build a 52-48 lead with 1:35 to play. Milbank trimmed the deficit to 52-50 with 25 seconds remaining, but the Tigers calmly knocked down two free throws with 23 seconds left to extend the lead to 54-50. Milbank added a late basket, but Groton held on for the 54-52 win.

Penning finished with 20 points, including 13 in the first half, along with six rebounds, one assist and two steals before fouling out. Jerrica Locke added 12 points, six rebounds, five assists and one steal. Kella Tracy recorded her first double-double of the season with 10 points, 12 rebounds and one steal. Rylee Dunker contributed six points, two rebounds and one assist. Taryn Traphagan scored four points and added three rebounds and two assists, while McKenna Tietz chipped in two points and one rebound. Sydney Locke grabbed two rebounds.

Groton shot 16-of-34 from two-point range for 47 percent, 4-of-18 from three-point range for 22 percent and 10-of-20 from the free-throw line for 50 percent. The Tigers finished with 32 rebounds, just seven turnovers, nine assists, four steals and 16 team fouls.

For Milbank, Belle Pauli led the way with 16 points, Anna Neugebauer added 13, Violet Johnson scored eight, Bree Townsend had seven, Susie Schuneman finished with five and Bailey Hendricks added three.

Groton improves to 16-6 on the season and will

face Sioux Falls Christian in the SoDak 16. Milbank closes its season at 17-5.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by BaseKamp Lodge, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Coop, Groton Ag Partners, Groton American Legion, Groton Chamber, Groton Dairy Queen, Groton Ford, Hanlon Brothers, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Cafe, Krueger Brothers, Lori's Pharmacy, Poet, S & S Lumber, Spanier Harvesting & Trucking, Sun & Sea Travel, The MeatHouse, Weismantel Insurance Agency. Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera, Paul Kosel did the stats and technology and Rich Bosma provided the play-by-play commentary.

Krueger, Englund advance in State Wrestling

Liza Krueger (105lb – Fall 1:54 over Maddie Lachman, Marion/Freeman. She then pinned Shaylee Arredondo, Brandon Valley, in 4:41. Her next match today will be against Kadee Frankfurth of Clark/Willow Lake.

Gavin Englund (285lb – scored a Major Dec. 9-0 over Levi Trask, Philip/Kadoka Area/Wall) and he scored a major decision over Matt Ziegler, Mobridge-Pollock, 10-1, in the quarterfinals. His next opponent is Gunnar Swenson of Canton today.

Six Tigers lost their first match and will wrestle again this morning in the 1st Consolation Round beginning at 9:30AM.

- Keegan Kucker, 113lb (Tchida over Kucker – Tech Fall 19-3)
- Wyatt Hagen, 120lb (Glassford over Hagen – Major Dec. 21-11)
- Kyson Kucker, 126lb (Weber over Kucker – Fall 5:35)
- Donovan Block, 157lb (Finn over Block – Major Dec. 14-2)
- Walker Zoellner, 190lb (Crownover over Zoellner – Fall 1:28)
- Layne Johnson, 215lb (Martian over Johnson – Fall 0:57)

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High School Boys' Basketball Aberdeen Christian @ Groton Area Friday, February 27th, 2026

Game Times:

Main Court in Arena

- 4:00 PM CT → 7th Grade
- 5:00 PM CT → 8th Grade
- 6:00 PM CT → Boys JV
 - o *Halftime Entertainment: Sugar Babes and Sweet Sensations, choreographed by Gwen Briscoe*
- 7:15 PM CT → Boys Varsity
 - o *Halftime Entertainment: Groton High School's Dynamics Dance Team, choreographed by Aubray Miller*

Ticket Takers - Report @ 4pm:

- Sue Fjeldheim
- Sarah Hanten
- Kristen Gonsoir

Admin on Duty: Joe Schwan

Prior to the Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

**Split-Pot Fundraiser - Groton Spring Baseball

LOCKER ROOMS: Aberdeen Christian will use the last locker room down the JH hallway.

TEAM BENCHES: South Bench- Groton Area | North Bench- Aberdeen Christian

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site.

AED – one is with the trainer, and one is also located near the ticket booth.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$5.00 Students: \$4.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

JV/Varsity Officials: Jordon Moench, Kris Frericks, Daren Lorenz

JH Officials: Jordan Kjellsen, Shaun Wanner

JH/JV/V Scoreboard: Kristen Swartz

JV/V Official Book: Alexa Sperry

JV/V Shot Clock Operator: Sean Schuring


Announcer: Joe Schwan

National Anthem: Groton Area Freshman, Aspen Beto on Clarinet

Livestream: www.GDlive.com or Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl
(fan.hudl.com/usa/sd/groton/organization/12097/groton-high-school)

A promotional poster for the Varsity Boys Basketball game. It features the GT logo, the text 'Varsity Boys Basketball Aberdeen Christian at Groton Area on Friday, Feb. 27, 2026, 7:15', and 'GDILIVE YouTube A production of the Groton Daily Independent For more info: GDILIVE.COM'. There are also images of a knight and a tiger.

Thank you,
Alexa Sperry, Athletic Director
Alexa.Sperry@k12.sd.us / 605-380-7887



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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Governor launches website estimating property tax relief, but not higher sales tax impact

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

A new page on South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden's website shows how much homeowners would save on property taxes if lawmakers approve his optional half-percent sales tax for counties.

He didn't say, though, how much more the average person would spend on sales taxes.

Bureau of Finance and Management Commissioner Jim Terwilliger took a shot at answering a question about that Thursday from South Dakota Searchlight.

In his personal situation, with a four-person family, Terwilliger figured he would spend an additional \$160 in sales taxes each year. He said the average property tax savings statewide would be about \$660, netting approximately \$500 in savings.

That's if his county decides to enact a sales tax, the proceeds of which would have to be applied to homeowner property tax credits. Rhoden calls his plan a "targeted approach" for areas where property valuations have skyrocketed.

"The home values in a huge percentage of the state were really unaffected," Rhoden said. "We're not corrupting the system to fix a three-county problem or five-county problem. We're giving the system a chance to readjust."

The webpage shows that homeowners in Minnehaha and Pennington, the state's two most populous counties, would save an estimated average of \$927 and \$886 in property taxes, respectively.

Some lawmakers worry about the approach.

"I think the challenge with that bill is that not every county is going to need tax relief for residential purposes," said Rep. Erik Muckey, D-Sioux Falls. "There are certain parts of South Dakota where tax relief might be necessary for other types of property, commercial or agricultural."

The bill says sales tax collections in excess of what's needed to offset owner-occupied property taxes would have to be used to reduce property taxes for agricultural and commercial property.

Muckey was part of a bipartisan effort for property tax relief that failed in the House earlier this week. That bill would have raised the state sales tax rate to pay for property tax relief and funding increases for state employees, schools and Medicaid providers. Muckey tried unsuccessfully to include a provision that would have eliminated state sales taxes on groceries.

House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, has a bill moving through the Legislature that would use the eight-year market average, throwing out the high and low numbers, to set taxable values for individual properties with a goal of moderating spikes in valuations and taxes.

He said the governor's plan might not be the last effort for tax relief, although many other bills have been defeated. Those ideas could come back later as amendments to other bills during the two remaining weeks of the legislative session.

"The ways to cut property taxes really either means you are going to cut spending," Odenbach said, "or you find different sources of revenue to offset. Is it sales tax?"

The state currently has a 4.2% sales tax, the 36th highest sales tax rate in the country. The rate is scheduled to return to 4.5% next year, after the 2023 state Legislature temporarily reduced it.

Counties are not currently allowed to impose a sales tax. They rely on property taxes, as do public schools. Cities receive revenue from property taxes and sales taxes. The state is reliant on sales taxes. In addition to the state sales tax, cities can charge up to 2%, and another 1% on alcohol, restaurants,

lodging and event tickets.

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.

State House declines to make it easier to force an election on excess school taxes

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — South Dakota state representatives rejected a proposal Thursday that would make it easier to force an election after a school board decides to exceed property tax limitations.

School districts can already raise more revenue by "opting out" of property tax limits set by the state, and local residents can petition that decision to a public vote.

Petitioners are required to collect signatures from 5% of registered voters in the school district in 20 days. The bill would change that to require 5% of voters who cast a ballot in the last school board election or 50 voters, whichever is greater, and give petitioners 40 days to collect signatures.

The legislation failed on a 32-34 vote Thursday in the state House, but the close vote means it could be reconsidered later. The Senate had approved the bill 20-14.

Supporters said the bill would function as property tax relief, giving voters more say in whether school boards can decide to collect higher property taxes.

"What is the harm of letting our voters have a say?" said Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls. "We're trying to deliver property tax relief to the citizens of South Dakota, and it's because our schools are predominantly the overwhelming share of our constituents' property taxes."

Opponents to the bill said taxpayers have opportunities to raise concerns to their school board, and budget decisions happen in public meetings. Others said state lawmakers should trust that school boards are making the right decisions about budgets.

"If they have a problem with the opt-out, they need to get involved," said Rep. John Shubeck, R-Beresford. "They can't lower the bar."

There are 79 school district opt-outs across the state, according to the Legislative Research Council.

Sen. Sue Peterson, R-Sioux Falls, is the bill's prime sponsor. She was motivated by a recent Sioux Falls School District decision to opt out for an additional \$2.1 million over 10 years — a total of \$21 million. Petitioners failed to collect the required 5,490 signatures in a little less than three weeks.

A similar bill to require an election every time a school board approves an opt-out was also rejected by House members earlier this month.

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.

COMMENTARY

South Dakota needs a farm bill that protects producers, wetlands and pheasants

by Brad Johnson

South Dakota's farms, ranches, rural communities and wildlife advocates are living with uncertainty, and congressional delay on a full farm bill is inexcusable.

Agriculture is the backbone of this state. So are the grasslands, wetlands and pheasant fields that define it. When Washington stalls, it doesn't just create headlines — it destabilizes operations, weakens conservation and undercuts rural economies.

On Tuesday, the U.S. House Agriculture Committee begins marking up a new farm bill. The process

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is long overdue. Producers are already navigating drought, volatile markets, rising input costs and thin margins. They should not also have to navigate congressional gridlock.

South Dakota's lone House member, Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson, is on the committee and says passing a full farm bill is a priority. His seat at the table gives the state influence — and responsibility — to deliver legislation that strengthens the farm safety net while maintaining robust conservation programs.

Johnson has emphasized stronger crop insurance, improved risk management, rural development and conservation. As chair of the subcommittee overseeing rural development, he says the bill would reinvest in rural communities and cut red tape that slows water, broadband and infrastructure projects.

He also points to a demographic challenge: more than half of South Dakota producers are over 55, according to the 2022 Census of Agriculture.

"Land and equipment costs have risen dramatically in recent years," Johnson said, "so it is harder for beginning and young producers to build an operation. This farm bill increases lending limits and adds flexibility into these programs, making it easier for the next generation to help feed the world."

But the farm bill is more than a farm subsidy package. As conservation groups including the National Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever often note, it is the nation's most important conservation law. It funds wetland protection, grassland stewardship and habitat programs that keep working lands productive and resilient.

South Dakota sits in the Prairie Pothole Region, one of the most critical waterfowl breeding areas in the world. These shallow wetlands filter water, recharge aquifers and reduce flooding. They protect farms and communities alike.

And we are losing them.

South Dakota once had about 2.7 million acres of wetlands. Today, roughly 1.9 million remain — a loss nearing 30%. Grasslands continue to be plowed. Pollinators decline. Habitat fragments.

Conservation Reserve Program enrollment has also dropped sharply from its national peak of nearly 37 million acres in the mid-2000s to the high-20-million-acre range today. In South Dakota, that means fewer grass buffers, fewer nesting acres and fewer protected fields across pheasant country.

The connection is simple. When CRP acres fall, nesting cover shrinks. When nesting cover shrinks, pheasant populations decline. Hunters see it. Rural businesses feel it. Communities across the state depend on fall hunting seasons, and those seasons depend on habitat.

CRP grasslands reduce erosion, improve soil health, store carbon and keep nutrients out of streams and lakes. When acres leave the program, wildlife suffers, and so does water quality.

Conservation groups warn that without strong funding in the farm bill, habitat losses will accelerate and bird numbers will fall. Johnson agrees that CRP remains a key conservation tool and argues Congress increasingly understands the importance of working-lands conservation — helping farmers steward land without taking it out of production.

Johnson agrees with that outlook and said CRP "will always be a huge tool in the conservation toolbox, and this Congress is doing a much better job understanding the importance of working lands conservation. Working with farmers and ranchers so they can manage their land with conservation in mind, without taking land out of production, is a win-win."

This is not a partisan issue. It is a South Dakota issue.

Farm groups, conservation organizations and rural communities agree on the basics: Finish the job. Pass a full farm bill. Strengthen the safety net. Fully fund voluntary conservation programs. Give producers certainty, and protect the wetlands and grasslands that sustain our hunting heritage and rural economy.

The longer Congress waits, the more uncertainty grows — and the more habitat disappears. South Dakota cannot afford either.

Brad Johnson is a certified general real estate appraiser and longtime journalist. He is past president of South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association, president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, a member of the National Wildlife Federation's board of directors, and served 16 years on the South Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources. He lives in Rapid City and Watertown.

Tax exemption efforts for disabled veterans meet varied fates in South Dakota Legislature

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — South Dakota senators recently nixed two proposals that would have increased property tax exemptions for disabled veteran homeowners, while advancing a related bill.

Hot Springs Republican Sen. Amber Hulse said the conversation around the issue has been “vile,” and lawmakers have been too focused on putting limits on relief programs for veterans.

“It’s not enough that they sacrifice their life and their health for our country. Now they also have to be living in poverty too for us to care,” she said. “I don’t really think that that’s the right message to send.”

Under current state law, veterans who are totally and permanently disabled, and their surviving spouses, can apply for and be granted a property tax exemption on the first \$200,000 of taxable value for their owner-occupied home. The recently defeated bills sought to raise that limit to \$225,000 and \$300,000, respectively.

Hulse and five other committee members voted Wednesday to defeat the bill that would have allowed an additional \$25,000 to be exempt, and Hulse’s opposition was due to a provision that would have required veterans to also have an annual income below \$65,000 for a multi-income household or below \$55,000 for single-income households in order to receive the extra exemption.

The state Senate rejected the other bill last week that would have raised the exemption amount to \$300,000, without adding an income threshold. Hulse voted for that bill.

Opponents of the \$300,000 exemption, including U.S. Air Force veteran and Rapid City Republican Sen. Taffy Howard, were concerned that the increase would result in a “tax shift” toward other property owners.

“Our service should never be used as political cover for avoiding real property tax reform,” Howard said during a Senate debate. “South Dakotans are frustrated because the system itself needs structural reform. Carveouts and expanding exemptions do not fix the system. They simply rearrange who pays.”

Other help for disabled veterans

The Senate Taxation Committee approved a bill Wednesday that would refund qualified disabled veterans up to four years’ worth of property tax exemptions if they missed the application deadline due to a delayed decision about a pending claim for a permanent and total disability rating from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Gov. Larry Rhoden signed a similar bill into law earlier this month that alters an existing exemption program for veterans who’ve lost both legs or the use of both legs. The new law lets those veterans or their surviving, unmarried spouses apply for four years’ worth of refunds if they missed prior application deadlines for the program, or missed deadlines to have their home classified as owner-occupied.

The bills are among dozens introduced this winter by lawmakers seeking to lower or slow the increase in homeowner property taxes. One of the leading candidates for major reform is a governor-backed bill that would let counties impose a half-percent sales tax and use the proceeds for homeowner property tax credits.

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.

FEMA shutdown drags on amid stalemate over reforms to immigration enforcement

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — The nation's main agency for handling disaster response and recovery is shuttered for the third time in recent months and its workers are on the verge of missing paychecks, as members of Congress and the White House remain divided in a separate dispute over immigration enforcement.

Lawmakers are raising questions about how the ongoing shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security is affecting the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is housed within DHS. FEMA already lacks a permanent administrator and has been under threat of a major overhaul by President Donald Trump.

The agency is no stranger to shutdowns and keeps much of its workforce going without pay during a funding lapse, though several programs are paused until Congress approves a spending bill.

The longer the shutdown lasts, the more likely it is to have repercussions on FEMA's staff, especially when thousands of its employees miss their first paycheck Friday.

Alabama Republican Sen. Katie Britt, chairwoman of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, said she hopes that missed income will increase pressure on Democrats to strike a deal on the last remaining government funding bill for fiscal 2026.

"You think about the winter storm the South went through. Now you think of the winter storm that we just had. We clearly need this to be functioning and working," Britt said.

Connecticut Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy, ranking member of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, said he doesn't believe the Trump administration is "serious" about finding bipartisan agreement on guardrails for immigration enforcement.

"We've sent them multiple compromises. They barely respond," Murphy said. "I think it feels like they want the shutdown to continue, because they are prioritizing continuing their lawlessness at ICE."

Minneapolis shootings

Democrats held up DHS funding after federal immigration agents shot and killed Alex Pretti in late January during a surge in Minnesota, just weeks after different immigration officers shot and killed Renee Good. Both were U.S. citizens.

Democratic leaders have detailed several changes they want to make to immigration enforcement operations, including a requirement that agents wear body cameras and do not wear masks.

Republicans have said they're willing to negotiate with Democrats on some of those issues, but have requests of their own, including that cities and states that don't cooperate with federal immigration agencies do so.

The two parties were unable to broker an agreement before stopgap funding for the Department of Homeland Security expired, plunging all of its agencies into another shutdown that's dragged on since Feb. 14.

This marks the third funding lapse for DHS this fiscal year. The first, which affected large swaths of the federal government, lasted 43 days and ended in mid-November. The second shutdown was partial since some of the full-year spending bills had become law. It lasted about four days, ending Feb. 3.

DHS's contingency plan says about 20,975 of FEMA's roughly 24,925 employees will keep working during the funding lapse.

In general, any federal employee tasked with the protection of life or property keeps working during a shutdown, while those assigned to other programs are supposed to be sent home. Neither category receives paychecks until Congress and the administration come to some sort of funding deal.

FEMA's disaster relief fund is somewhat unique among federal programs since Congress has granted it the authority to deficit spend; it cannot run out of money, even during a shutdown.

A report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service notes that FEMA's non-disaster grant and training programs tend to halt during a shutdown, possibly leading to "delays in awards, possible delays in grant drawdowns, and deferral or cancellation of training and exercises that support state and local

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preparedness.”

Staffing is also an ongoing issue for FEMA, not just during shutdowns but in general, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office, a congressional watchdog.

“Recent FEMA workforce reductions may reduce how effective a federal response could be in future high-impact disasters,” it states.

FEMA didn’t respond to multiple requests for comment from States Newsroom to share exactly how the shutdown has impacted the agency and provide a list of which programs are running during the funding lapse and which are on hold.

Noem criticism

Senate Appropriations Chairwoman Susan Collins, R-Maine., said she’s apprehensive about how the shutdown has affected several agencies housed within Homeland Security.

“My concerns are that FEMA, the Coast Guard and TSA are all bearing the brunt of this shutdown, which is why it is vital that we get an agreement and get one fast,” Collins said, referring to the Transportation Security Administration, which protects the nation’s transportation systems.

Senate Appropriations ranking member Patty Murray, D-Wash., said there were issues with how DHS Secretary Kristi Noem was managing FEMA before the shutdown began.

“Well, let’s be clear that Noem hasn’t been good about sending out any FEMA emergency grants anyway,” Murray said. “So I’m always concerned about how she operates her agency.”

Trump has spoken repeatedly about overhauling or even doing away with FEMA and established a review council to provide him with suggestions, though they missed their deadline last year and have yet to release their report.

Trump also hasn’t nominated anyone to lead FEMA during his second term in the White House, opting instead to use a series of people to temporarily run the agency who didn’t need to go through the Senate confirmation process.

Cam Hamilton, one of those FEMA leaders, said on a podcast released in mid-February there was “so much political volatility” during his time working at the agency, in part, because of Noem.

“The talking points were not coherent. I will say that my former boss was not as elaborate and sophisticated in team building,” he said. “So there was not an easy time understanding, what is the message, what is the platform.”

Hamilton worked as the senior official performing the duties of the administrator at FEMA until he was ousted in May after he testified before Congress he personally did “not believe it is in the best interest of the American people to eliminate the Federal Emergency Management Agency.”

‘We’ve had all this snow’

West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, a senior appropriator and Republican Policy Committee chair, said she’s not happy with the FEMA shutdown.

“I’m not comfortable with what’s shut down at FEMA, and it should put pressure on the Democrats to push this through,” Capito said. “We’ve had all this snow, we’re going to have other disasters, and we rely on FEMA a lot in our state.”

Michigan Democratic Sen. Gary Peters, ranking member on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said there is money available for disaster relief but that he’s concerned “whether or not people are going to be there to be administering” it.

Peters said he believes leaders at DHS, including Noem, are trying to make the shutdown more problematic than necessary.

“I think she’s trying to create pain,” Peters said. “She’s trying to create pain as opposed to trying to put in safeguards for ICE. It’s really pretty outrageous what she’s doing.”

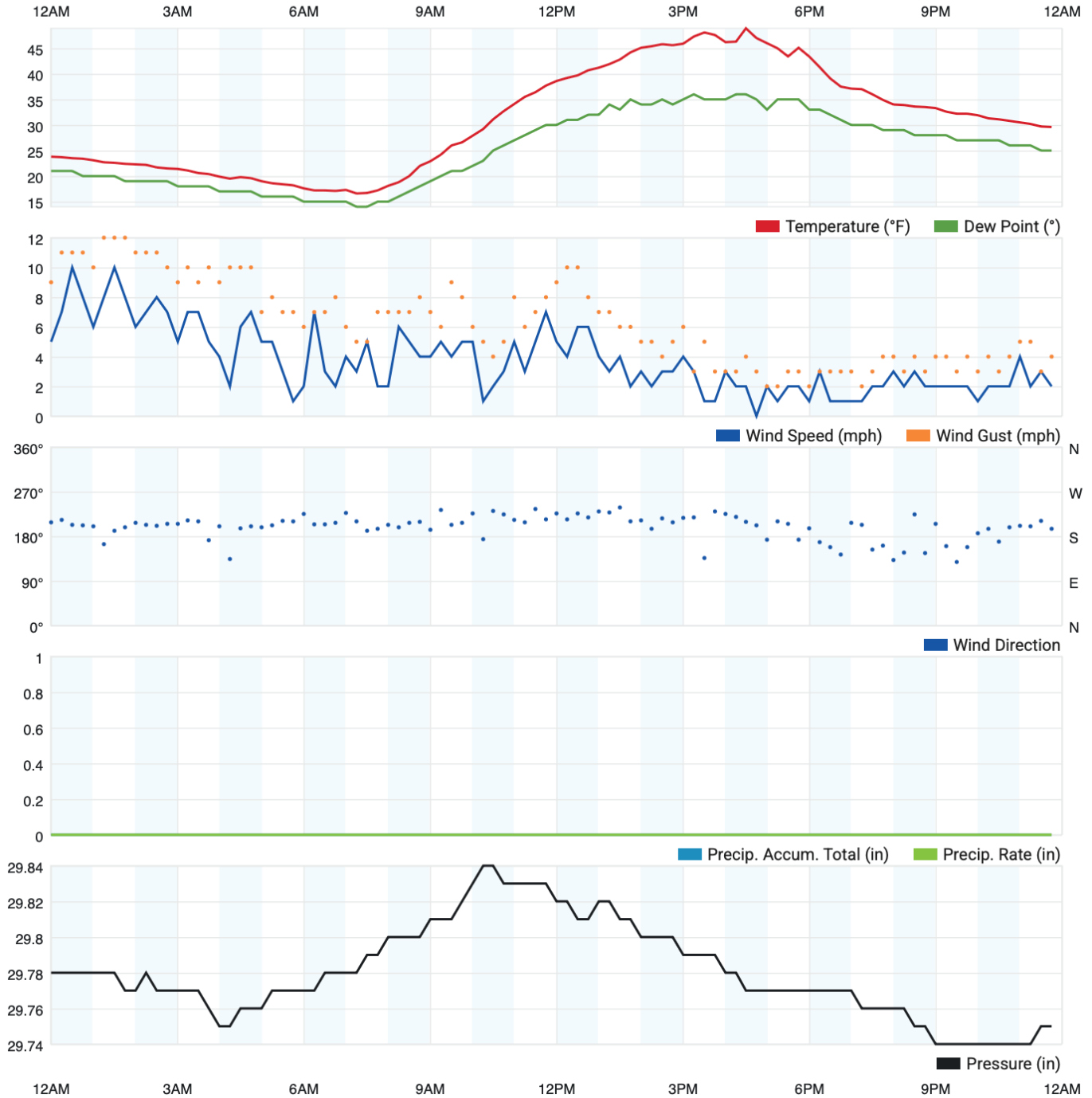
Jennifer covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

February 26, 2026



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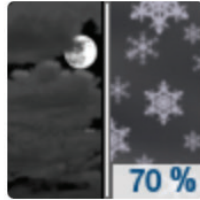
Today

Tonight

Saturday

Saturday Night

Sunday



High: 45 °F

Low: 13 °F

High: 18 °F

Low: 4 °F

High: 26 °F

Mostly Sunny and Breezy

Mostly Cloudy then Snow Likely

Snow Likely then Mostly Cloudy

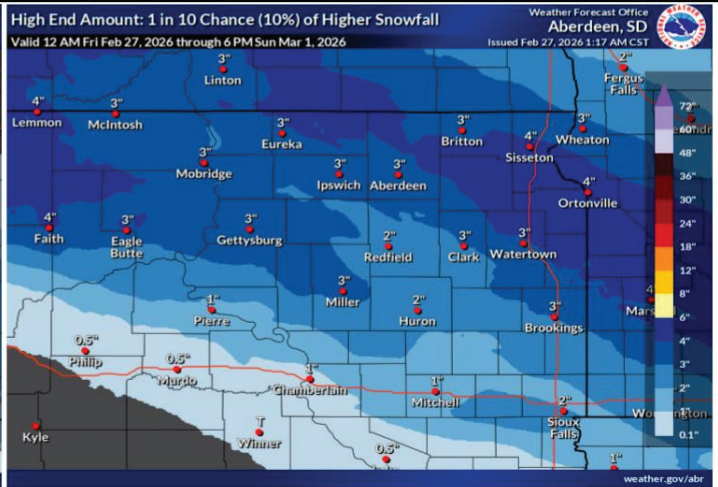
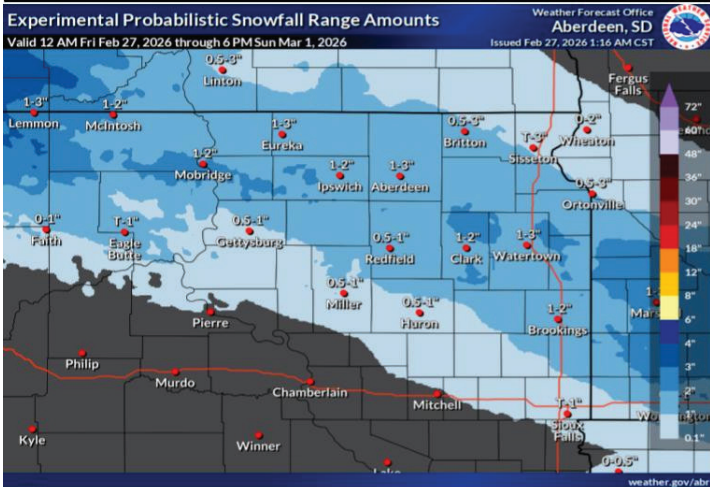
Partly Cloudy

Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy

Snow Tonight into Saturday February 27, 2026 2:31 AM

System tonight through Saturday will bring snow to most of central and northeast SD and west central MN

- Snow will start late this evening across central/north-central SD, then spread into northeast SD/west-central MN overnight through Saturday. *In general, 1 to 2 inches expected, but some higher end scenarios are closer to 4 or 5 inches.*
- Highest chances (50-70%) of snowfall stretch from north-central SD south and east into east-central SD.
- There is still some uncertainty regarding the location of the heaviest band of snow. **Travel will be impacted.** Keep an eye on the forecast, plan ahead, and drive to conditions.



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Snow returns tonight behind a surge of colder air this afternoon and evening. Snow will linger across the east into Saturday afternoon. Sunday remains cool before above average temperatures return Monday.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 49 °F at 4:26 PM

Low Temp: 16 °F at 7:19 AM

Wind: 13 mph at 2:20 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 68 in 2016

Record Low: -23 in 2001

Average High: 33

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.59

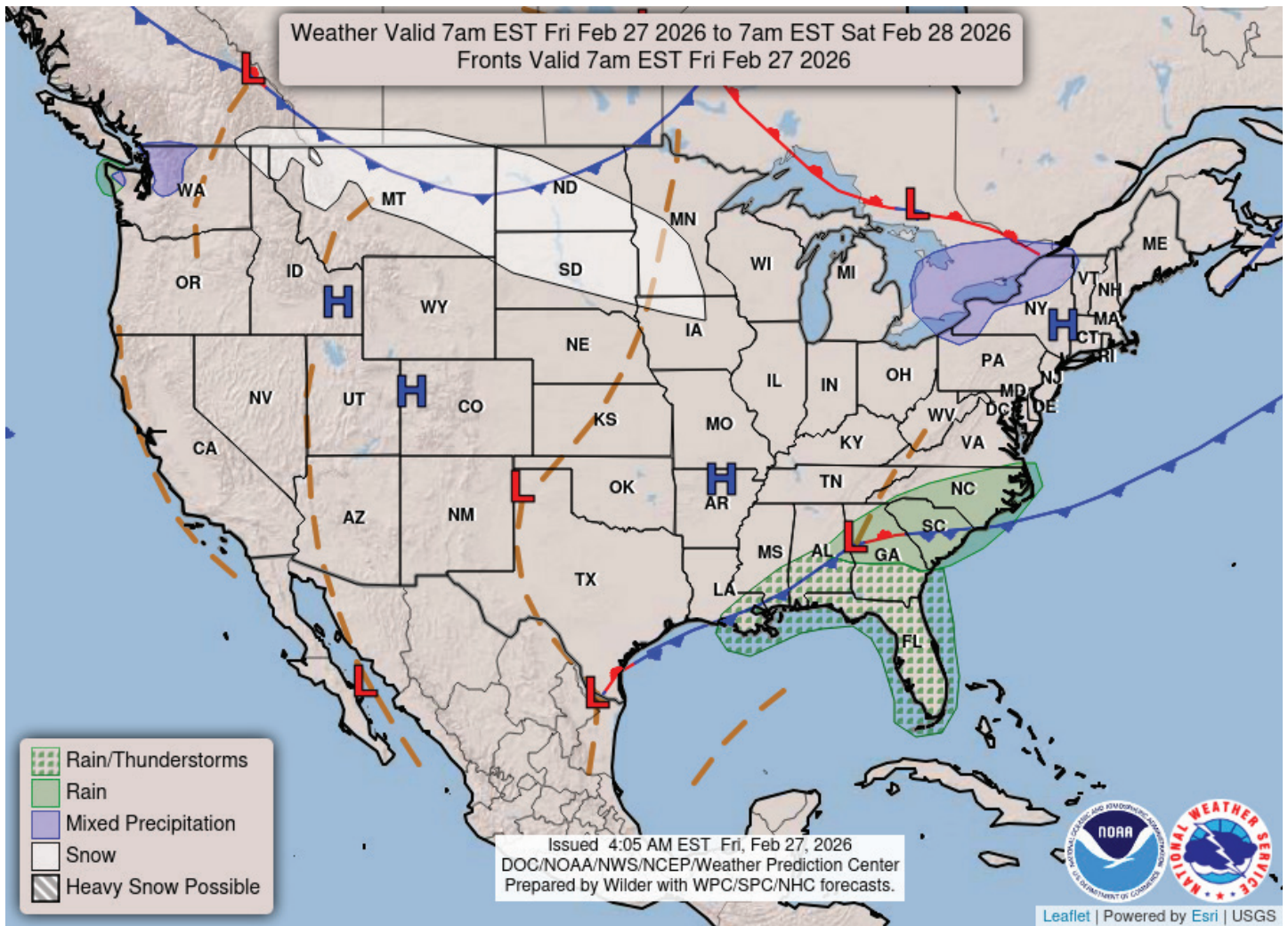
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.96

Average Precip to date: 1.14

Precip Year to Date: 0.96

Sunset Tonight: 6.16 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:12 am



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Today in Weather History

February 27, 1969: Snowfall of up to 15 inches blocked many roads in South Dakota. In addition, freezing rain formed a glaze on many utility lines resulting in extensive damage. The most considerable damage occurred in the north-central part of the state.

February 27, 1996: Across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, a strong area of low pressure brought 4 to 11 inches of snow from the late afternoon of the 26th to the evening of the 27th. Along with the snow came strong north winds of 20 to 40 mph, creating near-blizzard conditions. Wind chills were from 20 below to 60 below. As a result, some schools were closed or started late on the 27th, along with some activities canceled. Snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Sisseton, 5 inches at Aberdeen, Redfield, near Reliance, Wheaton, Browns Valley, Britton, and Gettysburg. Other snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Lebanon, Hoven, Miller, Webster, Eden, Frederick, and Seneca, 7 inches near Chelsea and Mellette, 8 inches at Roscoe and east of Hosmer, Tulare, and near Milbank, 9 inches south of Ree Heights, 8 to 10 inches in the Ortonville area, and 11 inches at Wilmot.

1717 — What was perhaps the greatest snow in New England history commenced on this date. During a ten day period a series of four snowstorms dumped three feet of snow upon Boston, and the city was snowbound for two weeks. Up to six feet of snow was reported farther to the north, and drifts covered many one story homes. (David Ludlum)

1969 — A record snowstorm in Maine came to an end. Two to four feet of snow buried southern and central Maine, with a state record of 57 inches reported at West Forks. Drifts covered many single story homes, and the weight of the snow collapsed many roofs. Two to four feet of snow also buried northeastern Vermont and northeastern Massachusetts. In New Hampshire, Mount Washington NH reported 97.8 inches of snow, a record storm total for New England. (24th-28th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1986: It was 99 degrees in Palm Springs, California, the highest temperature on record for February. Palm Springs also reached 99 degrees on February 26, 1986.

1987 — A storm spread heavy snow into the Central High Plains Region, and produced severe thunderstorms in the Southern Plains. Snowfall totals in western Nebraska ranged up to 19 inches at Sydney. Severe thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced baseball size hail at Stringtown and Atoka. A storm in the eastern U.S. produced heavy rain over the Carolinas and heavy snow in the southern Appalachians and piedmont region. Five inches of rain left four feet of water in the streets of Greenville SC. Snowfall totals in southwestern Virginia ranged up to 20 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Thunderstorms along a cold front produced heavy rain in southern California, with up to 2.52 inches reported in Ventura County. Strong winds accompanying the rain gusted to 55 mph in the Tehachapi Mountains. Rapid City SD established a February record with an afternoon high of 75 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Rain and snow prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Up to eight inches of snow blanketed north central Tennessee, and snowfall totals in western North Carolina ranged up to 14 inches at Mount Mitchell. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — A winter storm produced heavy snow in southeastern Colorado, with 12 inches reported at Lamar. The same storm produced severe thunderstorms over the Southern High Plains, with wind gusts to 93 mph reported at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. Low pressure brought high winds to the Prince William Sound area of Alaska. Big River Lakes reported wind gusts to 92 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010 — A weak EF0 tornado causes no damage as it moved across California's southern San Joaquin Valley. However it is the only tornado reported in the United States during the month. According to the Storm Prediction Center only five months since 1950 have lacked a tornado report. The Weather Doctor

2010: A magnitude 8.8 earthquake occurred off the coast of central Chili at 3:34 local time. The quake triggered a tsunami that devastated several coastal towns in south-central Chile. Tsunami warnings were issued in 53 countries. In addition, waves caused minor damage in the San Diego area and the Tohoku region of Japan.



Daily Devotion

The Foundation of Wisdom

When we know and obey God, the Holy Spirit gives us wisdom that reaches beyond human perception.

Proverbs 9:7-12: 7 He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, And he who reproveth a wicked man gets insults for himself.

8 Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you, Reprove a wise man and he will love you.

9 Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser, Teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning.

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

11 For by me your days will be multiplied, And years of life will be added to you.

12 If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, And if you scoff, you alone will bear it.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). Initially, the connection between these two concepts may be difficult to grasp. How can fearing God make us wise?

First, we need to understand what it means to "fear the Lord." The term describes an awesome reverence for God that moves us to acknowledge Him as the sovereign ruler of heaven and earth, submit to Him, and walk in obedience. The result of such a response will be the acquisition of wisdom.

When we commit ourselves to living for God's purposes rather than our own, we will gain greater understanding of Him. The Holy Spirit will enable us to see circumstances and people from His divine perspective. This kind of wisdom reaches beyond human perception and gives us discernment to follow God's plans for our life. Knowing that He always works for our best interests, we are empowered to walk confidently through both good and bad times.

What is your attitude toward the Lord? If you truly revere Him, you will listen for His directions and heed His warnings. A desire to honor and please Him will motivate you to turn from poor choices and seek to live in obedience. The result will be wisdom beyond human understanding.

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

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.26.26

3 14 22 50 57 4

TOP PRIZE:
\$1,000,000/year

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 9 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.24.26

12 39 43 49 55 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$458,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 54 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

31 32 41 48 51 6

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$16,530,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 9 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

1 6 21 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 24 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

11 24 47 59 63 5

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 53 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

50 52 54 56 64 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$238,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 53 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Harrisburg 49, Watertown 26
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 65, Mitchell 34
SDHSAA Playoffs=
Regional Semifinal=
Class B Region 8=
Harding County 63, Timber Lake 13
McIntosh High School 33, Faith 31
Class B Region 7=
Bennett County 57, Kadoka 40
Jones County 45, Wall 43
Class B Region 6=
Highmore-Harrold 53, North Central 41
Ipswich 63, Herreid-Selby 48
Class B Region 5=
Corsica/Stickney 70, Gregory 46
Lyman 58, Burke 28
Class B Region 4=
Parkston 58, Freeman 48
Class B Region 3=
Colman-Egan 49, Chester 32
Ethan 43, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 36
Class B Region 2=
De Smet 87, Arlington 80, 20T
Deubrook 39, Castlewood 37
Class B Region 1=
Northwestern 36, Warner 34, OT
Waubay/Summit 52, Hitchcock-Tulare 41
Class A Region 8=
Rapid City Christian 54, Belle Fourche 19
St Thomas More 47, Hill City 14
Class A Region 7=
Lakota Tech 71, Winner 42
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 74, St. Francis Indian 28
Class A Region 6=
Miller 57, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 34
Mobridge-Pollock 77, Platte-Geddes 28
Class A Region 5=
McCook Central-Montrose 53, Hanson 39
Wagner 65, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 34
Class A Region 4=
Lennox 68, Canton 29
Sioux Falls Christian 67, Vermillion 39
Class A Region 3=
Dell Rapids 43, Flandreau 35
West Central 57, Tri-Valley 45

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Region 4 Class B=
Centerville 43, Gayville-Volin High School 33
Region 2 Class A=
Hamlin 57, Florence-Henry 17
Sioux Valley 55, Clark-Willow Lake 32
Region 1 Class A=
Groton 54, Milbank 52, 2OT
Sisseton 45, Aberdeen Roncalli 36

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

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Harrisburg 60, Watertown 55
Marshall, Minn. 53, Tea 51
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 59, Mitchell 56

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

South Dakota State defeats Kansas City 73-59

By The Associated Press undefined

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Joe Saylor's 22 points helped South Dakota State defeat Kansas City 73-59 on Thursday night.

Saylor shot 7 of 15 from the field, including 4 for 8 from 3-point range, and went 4 for 4 from the line for the Jackrabbits (14-16, 7-8 Summit League). Damon Wilkinson scored 19 points and added six rebounds. Kalen Garry had 12 points and shot 4 of 8 from the field.

CJ Evans led the way for the Roos (4-25, 1-14) with 20 points, six assists and three steals. Kansas City also got 15 points from Jayson Petty. The Roos prolonged their losing streak to 13 straight.

What to know about Greenpeace and the oil pipeline lawsuit that threatens its future

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Greenpeace is fighting for its life in North Dakota's court system, where a judge has decided to order the environmental group to pay an expected \$345 million to an energy company whose Dakota Access oil pipeline construction drew protests nearly a decade ago.

A jury last year found three Greenpeace entities liable for numerous claims and awarded more than \$660 million to Energy Transfer in damages, which Judge James Gion cut nearly in half. Once the order he promised Tuesday is formally entered, both sides are expected to appeal to the North Dakota Supreme Court.

The \$64 billion, Dallas-based energy conglomerate, which owns and operates thousands of miles (kilometers) of pipelines in 44 states, has objected to the halving of its award. Greenpeace USA has reported cash and assets nowhere near such hefty damages.

"We will be requesting a new trial and, failing that, will appeal the judgment to the Supreme Court of North Dakota, where Greenpeace International and the US Greenpeace entities have solid arguments for the dismissal of all legal claims against us," Greenpeace International General Counsel Kristin Casper said Thursday.

Can Greenpeace survive?

Netherlands-based Greenpeace International, Greenpeace USA and funding arm Greenpeace Fund Inc. have said they will never stop working to protect the planet.

With footprints in more than 55 countries, Greenpeace calls itself "a global network of independent cam-

paigning organizations that use peaceful protest and creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems and promote solutions that are essential to a green, just, and joyful future.”

Founded in 1971 in Canada by environmental activists seeking to stop nuclear weapons testing in Alaska’s Aleutian archipelago, the group sailed a ship to “bear witness” to a test in a Quaker protest tradition.

They were intercepted by the Coast Guard, but it became a win when the U.S. stopped tests on the island. Their name, according to the group’s website, was coined when someone left a meeting holding up two fingers and saying “Peace!” to which Canadian ecologist Bill Darnell said, “Let’s make it a Green Peace.”

What has Greenpeace done?

Greenpeace activists have climbed bridges to hang banners and confronted whaling boats at sea. Three ships sail the world to advance the group’s causes.

Greenpeace members scaled a chemical plant’s smokestack to protest toxic pollution in 1981, and occupied a North Sea oil platform in 1995. They unfurled a banner reading “Resist” from a crane near the White House in 2017, days after President Donald Trump took action to restart Dakota Access construction. And in 2023, they covered the country estate of then-British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in black fabric to protest new oil and gas drilling.

But it was the protests in North Dakota in support of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe that mired the groups in legal trouble.

What is the lawsuit about?

Plans for the multibillion-dollar Dakota Access Pipeline that now moves oil through four Midwestern states drew widespread opposition after complaints from the tribe, whose reservation is downstream from the pipeline’s Missouri River crossing. The tribe has long said the pipeline threatens its water supply.

The tribe’s protest drew thousands of supporters, who camped in the area for months while trying to block construction. Hundreds of arrests resulted from the sometimes-chaotic protests in 2016 and 2017.

An attorney for Energy Transfer, Trey Cox, said Greenpeace exploited a small, disorganized, local issue to promote its agenda. He called the group “master manipulators” and “deceptive to the core.” He accused Greenpeace of paying professional protesters, organizing protester trainings, sharing intelligence of the pipeline route and even sending lockboxes so that demonstrators could attach themselves to equipment.

The Greenpeace groups said there was no evidence to those claims and that they had little or no involvement in the protests. They called the litigation lawfare, intended to silence activists and critics.

But the jury found Greenpeace USA liable on all counts, including defamation, conspiracy, trespass, nuisance and tortious interference. The other two entities were found liable for some of the claims.

Pakistan is in ‘open war’ with Afghanistan after latest strikes, defense minister says

By MUNIR AHMED and ABDUL QAHAR AFGHAN Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan and Afghanistan traded attacks in a dramatic escalation of tensions between the countries that Pakistan’s defense minister said Friday means they are now in “open war.”

Tensions have been high between the neighbors for months, with border clashes in October killing dozens of soldiers, civilians and suspected militants. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan’s Taliban government of harboring militant groups that then stage attacks across the border and also of allying with its archrival India.

A Qatari-mediated ceasefire ended the fighting, although the two sides still occasionally trade fire. Several rounds of peace talks in Istanbul in November failed to produce a formal agreement.

Late Thursday, Afghanistan launched a cross-border attack on Pakistan, saying it was in retaliation for deadly Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan border areas Sunday.

Pakistan then carried out airstrikes in Kabul and two other Afghan provinces early Friday.

After the strikes Friday, Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif said in an X post that Pakistan had hoped for peace in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of NATO forces in 2021 and expected the Taliban, which seized power in the country, to focus on the welfare of the Afghan people and regional stability.

Instead, he said that the Taliban had turned Afghanistan “into a colony of India,” with which Pakistan

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has periodically engaged in wars, clashes and skirmishes since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947. India has had improved ties with Afghanistan recently, offering to enhance bilateral trade, to the annoyance of Islamabad.

"Our patience has now run out. Now it is open war between us," he said. There was no immediate reaction from Afghan officials.

Afghan authorities in the eastern Nangarhar province said that fighting was ongoing in the Torkham border area Friday morning. The province's information directorate said that Pakistani mortar fire hit civilian areas in Torkham, including a refugee camp, which had been evacuated overnight. In response, Afghanistan was targeting Pakistani army posts across the border, it said.

'Exporting terrorism'

Asif, the Pakistani defense minister, accused Afghanistan of "exporting terrorism." Islamabad frequently levies the allegation at its western neighbor as militant violence has surged in Pakistan, accusing Afghanistan of supporting the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP, and outlawed Baloch separatist groups.

Pakistan accuses the TTP — which is separate from but closely allied with Afghanistan's Taliban — of operating from inside Afghanistan. Both the group and Kabul deny that charge.

Pakistan has also frequently accused neighboring India of backing the outlawed Baloch Liberation Army and the Pakistani Taliban, allegations New Delhi denies.

Asif's comments came hours after Pakistan carried out airstrikes in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, as well as in Kandahar in the south and Paktia province in the southeast, according to Pakistani officials and Afghanistan government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid. Pakistan said the strikes were in retaliation for the Afghan cross-border attacks.

Retaliatory strikes

Afghanistan, meanwhile, said that it launched its attack late Thursday also in retaliation — for deadly Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan border areas Sunday.

The governments have issued sharply differing casualty claims. Each said that it inflicted heavy losses of dozens of soldiers on the other, while putting its own casualty figures in the single digits. The claims couldn't be independently verified.

Afghanistan also claimed it had captured an undisclosed number of Pakistani soldiers. Mosharraf Ali Zaidi, a spokesperson for Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, denied any soldiers had been captured.

Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said Pakistan's anti-drone systems shot down several small drones over the northwestern cities of Abbottabad, Swabi, and Nowshera on Friday. He said the drones appeared to be part of a failed attack by the Pakistani Taliban, and that there were no casualties. Tarar claimed the drone attacks "once again exposed direct linkages between the Afghan Taliban regime and terrorism in Pakistan."

International calls for restraint

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan held separate phone calls with his Pakistani, Afghan, Qatari and Saudi counterparts on Friday to discuss the conflict, a Turkish official said, without providing details on the talks. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with government policy.

In October, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had facilitated talks between the sides.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres urged both sides to protect civilians as required under international law and "to continue to seek to resolve any differences through diplomacy," U.N. spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

Russia called for an immediate halt to the fighting and for a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, Russian diplomat Zamir Kabulov told news agency Ria Novosti. Kabulov, who is President Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Afghanistan, said that Moscow would consider mediating between the two countries if asked, according to Ria Novosti.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi urged Pakistan and Afghanistan to resolve their differences through dialogue during the holy month of Ramadan. He also said that Tehran was ready to assist in facilitating dialogue.

Refugees at the border

Pakistani authorities said that dozens of Afghan refugees in the Torkham border area had been relocated to safer places.

Pakistan launched a sweeping crackdown in October 2023 to expel migrants without documents, urging those in the country to leave of their own accord to avoid arrest and forcibly expelling others. Iran also began a crackdown on migrants at around the same time.

Since then, millions have crossed the border into Afghanistan, including people who were born in Pakistan decades ago and had built lives and created businesses there.

Last year alone, 2.9 million people returned to Afghanistan, the U.N. refugee agency has said, with nearly 80,000 having returned so far this year.

Brussels orders probe of Mandelson's Epstein ties while EU trade rep

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union has ordered its anti-fraud office to investigate Peter Mandelson, the disgraced former British ambassador to the United States, over his ties to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein while serving as Brussels' trade representative.

"Given the circumstances, and the significant amount of documents made available publicly, the European Commission also asked OLAF on 18 February to look into the matter," a commission spokesperson who was not authorized to be publicly named said late Thursday.

The European Anti-Fraud Office, known by its French acronym OLAF, is the EU's watchdog agency that has tackled migration authorities and lawmakers for financial fraud and rights violations, among other violations. Its office did not confirm the investigation.

An influential British figure, Mandelson is under investigation for alleged misconduct in public office linked to his relationship with Epstein.

Mandelson's ties to Epstein have threatened the leadership of Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who appointed the veteran statesman to the diplomatic post despite warnings about his friendship with the disgraced financier.

Mandelson has been a major player for decades in the center-left Labour Party, known as a skilled political operative dubbed the "Prince of Darkness" for his cunning and ruthlessness.

He helped the party return to power in 1997 as "New Labour" under Prime Minister Tony Blair and served in senior positions until 2001. He served again, under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, from 2008 to 2010. In between those high-level positions in London, he was in Brussels, serving as the EU's trade commissioner from November 2004 to October 2008 back before Brexit wrenched the U.K out of the bloc.

Mixing professional and private

Mandelson was in contact with Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell before, during and after that time in Brussels, according to documents analyzed by the AP.

"I love disgusting. That's why I am wild and dangerous, and twice shy..." Mandelson wrote to Maxwell in a 2002 email.

"Pete I have warned you about that before" said Maxwell in reply. "Behave or you will be punished like the bad boy you are."

In 2003, he messaged Maxwell about family travel arrangements using the title "Member of Parliament for Hartlepool, House of Commons."

Payment records suggest Epstein gave Mandelson or his husband, Reinaldo Avila da Silva, \$75,000 in 2003 and 2004. Mandelson said he had no recollection of receiving that money, questioned the authenticity of bank statements and believed the allegations were false.

Just after returning to London from Brussels, on Oct. 7, 2008, Epstein counseled Mandelson on how to frame the 2008 financial crisis as an opportunity.

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Epstein offered to host Mandelson in a New York apartment in 2009, about five months before the two discussed by email manipulating then-British premier Gordon Brown to step down.

Possible privileged information shared

Mandelson appears to have sent Epstein, whom he referred to as his "best pal," sensitive government information that could potentially influence markets when he was a senior minister in the British government in 2009 just after leaving the helm of the EU's trade negotiations. The EU probe could be focused on Mandelson's sharing of similar privileged information with Epstein.

Mandelson seems to have tipped Epstein in 2010 about the EU's colossal half-trillion-euro bailout package to save the euro after the 2008 financial crisis. He wrote to Epstein that "sources tell me 500 b euro bailout" and should be "announced tonight" on May 9, 2010 — a day before the package was public. That information could be useful for insider trading.

All European commissioners are bound by ethical obligations and an official code of conduct during and after their time in office. Suspected breaches of those obligations can prompt investigations by OLAF.

Mandelson was released from British custody early Tuesday morning after more than nine hours of questioning. He has previously denied wrongdoing and hasn't been charged, though the investigation is continuing.

Mandelson's lawyers said Tuesday that he had voluntarily agreed to speak with police next month and that his arrest was the result of a "baseless suggestion" that he planned to flee the country.

World shares are mostly higher in a week dominated by AI news

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — World shares were mostly higher on Friday after the worst day for Nvidia's stock since last spring dragged U.S. stocks lower.

U.S. futures fell as investors focused on comments by Block CEO Jack Dorsey on his company's decision to lay off 40% of its workforce because of labor-saving artificial intelligence.

The future for the S&P 500 edged 0.1% lower while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 0.3%.

Germany's DAX rose 0.3% to 25,373.74, while the CAC 40 picked up less than 0.1% to 8,625.54. Britain's FTSE 100 gained 0.5% to 10,904.24.

In Asian trading, Tokyo's Nikkei 225 edged 0.2% higher to 58,850.27.

In Hong Kong, the Hang Seng jumped 1% to 26,630.54, while the Shanghai Composite index advanced 0.4% to 4,162.88.

South Korea's Kospi lost 1% to 6,244.13 as traders sold to lock in profits from recent gains.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 closed 0.3% higher at 9,198.60, while India's Sensex lost 0.8%.

On Thursday, the S&P 500 shed 0.5% and the Dow industrials added less than 0.1%. The Nasdaq composite sank 1.2% to 22,878.38.

U.S. inflation data is due out later Friday. A report showed that the number of U.S. workers applying for unemployment benefits ticked up last week, but not by any more than economists expected. It also remains relatively low compared with history.

Nvidia, whose chips are helping to power the AI boom, reported another stellar quarter of profit growth that breezed past analysts' expectations. Its forecast for revenue in the current quarter again topped Wall Street estimates. But such blowout performances have become so typical for Nvidia that they're losing their oomph. Its stock sank 5.5% for its worst loss since April.

Shares in Block, formerly known as Square, gained 5% on Thursday before it reported better than expected earnings, and then shot up more than 20% after the markets closed following Dorsey's comments on laying off about 4,000 of its 10,000 employees.

"We believe Block will be significantly more valuable as a smaller, faster, intelligence-native company. Everything we do from here is in service of that," Dorsey wrote in a letter to shareholders.

Dorsey "just did what most CEOs have only whispered about in boardrooms," Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management wrote in a commentary.

"For years we've debated whether AI would dent jobs at the margin. Now we have a public case study where the CEO explicitly says intelligence tools have changed what it means to build and run a company," he said.

Elsewhere on Wall Street, shares in streaming giant Netflix jumped 7.9% in pre-market trading after it walked away from its bid to buy Warner Bros. Discovery's studio and streaming business. That put Skydance-owned Paramount in a position to take over its Hollywood rival.

Netflix said the price required to buy Warner after its board announced that Paramount's offer was superior would make it a deal that is "no longer financially attractive."

On Thursday, Warner Bros. shares edged down 0.3% after the entertainment giant reported a \$252 million loss for the fourth quarter.

In other dealings early Friday, U.S. benchmark crude oil gained 89 cents to \$66.10 per barrel. Crude prices have been swinging while the United States and Iran held indirect talks about Iran's nuclear program. A barrel of U.S. crude briefly fell as low as \$63.60 on Thursday before it bounced back.

The two sides walked away from the latest talks without a deal. That left the danger of another Mideast war on the table as the U.S. has gathered a massive fleet of aircraft and warships in the region.

A peaceful solution would lessen the threat of war, which could disrupt the global flow of oil and drive prices higher.

Brent crude, the international standard, gained 79 cents early Friday to \$71.63 per barrel.

The U.S. dollar rose to 156.18 Japanese yen from 156.13 yen. The euro rose to \$1.1805 from \$1.1796.

19 deputies of China's legislature, including 9 military officers, removed before annual meeting

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China's legislature has dismissed 19 members, including nine who are military officers, one week ahead of the start of its annual meeting.

The late Thursday announcement did not say why the deputies had been removed, but such removals are generally tied to corruption investigations.

An anti-corruption campaign launched by Chinese leader Xi Jinping shows no sign of letting up after more than a decade. The military has been targeted in recent years, including the removal of its top general last month, as Xi seeks to reform and modernize the armed forces.

Analysts say the campaign is also a way for Xi, who is in his 14th year in power, to remove potential rivals and ensure loyalty among his subordinates.

The dismissals aren't likely to have a major impact on the meeting of the National People's Congress, which opens next Thursday and is expected to run for a week. The largely ceremonial legislature rubber stamps decisions that have been made by the ruling Communist Party.

The removed officers include two under the Central Military Commission, the military's highest body, as well as others from the army, the navy, the air force and the rocket force. Three are generals. The rocket force, which oversees China's nuclear arsenal, was an early target of the military purges.

The other dismissed deputies were regional representatives from several provinces. The removals leave the National People's Congress with 2,878 members.

The dismissals were announced by the legislature's Standing Committee, a smaller and more powerful group of members who meet periodically throughout the year and can approve legislation.

The Standing Committee, which met ahead of next week's congress, also fired two officials, the president of the military court and Emergency Management Minister Wang Xiangxi. Authorities announced last month that Wang is the subject of a corruption investigation.

Anthropic refuses to bend to Pentagon on AI safeguards as dispute nears deadline

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

A public showdown between the Trump administration and Anthropic is hitting an impasse as military officials demand the artificial intelligence company bend its ethical policies by Friday or risk damaging its business.

Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei drew a sharp red line 24 hours before the deadline, declaring his company "cannot in good conscience accede" to the Pentagon's final demand to allow unrestricted use of its technology.

Anthropic, maker of the chatbot Claude, can afford to lose a defense contract. But the ultimatum this week from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posed broader risks at the peak of the company's meteoric rise from a little-known computer science research lab in San Francisco to one of the world's most valuable startups.

If Amodei doesn't budge, military officials have warned they will not just pull Anthropic's contract but also "deem them a supply chain risk," a designation typically stamped on foreign adversaries that could derail the company's critical partnerships with other businesses.

And if Amodei were to cave, he could lose trust in the booming AI industry, particularly from top talent drawn to the company for its promises of responsibly building better-than-human AI that, without safeguards, could pose catastrophic risks.

Anthropic said it sought narrow assurances from the Pentagon that Claude won't be used for mass surveillance of Americans or in fully autonomous weapons. But after months of private talks exploded into public debate, it said in a Thursday statement that new contract language "framed as compromise was paired with legalese that would allow those safeguards to be disregarded at will."

That was after Sean Parnell, the Pentagon's top spokesman, posted on social media that "we will not let ANY company dictate the terms regarding how we make operational decisions" and added the company has "until 5:01 p.m. ET on Friday to decide" if it would meet the demands or face consequences.

Emil Michael, the defense undersecretary for research and engineering, later lashed out at Amodei, alleging on X that he "has a God-complex" and "wants nothing more than to try to personally control the US Military and is ok putting our nation's safety at risk."

That message hasn't resonated in much of Silicon Valley, where a growing number of tech workers from Anthropic's top rivals, OpenAI and Google, voiced support for Amodei's stand late Thursday in an open letter.

OpenAI and Google, along with Elon Musk's xAI, also have contracts to supply their AI models to the military.

"The Pentagon is negotiating with Google and OpenAI to try to get them to agree to what Anthropic has refused," the open letter says. "They're trying to divide each company with fear that the other will give in."

Also raising concerns about the Pentagon's approach were Republican and Democratic lawmakers and a former leader of the Defense Department's AI initiatives.

"Painting a bullseye on Anthropic garners spicy headlines, but everyone loses in the end," wrote retired Air Force Gen. Jack Shanahan in a social media post.

Shanahan faced a different wave of tech worker opposition during the first Trump administration when he led Maven, a project to use AI technology to analyze drone footage and target weapons. So many Google employees protested its participation in Project Maven at the time that the tech giant declined to renew the contract and then pledged not to use AI in weaponry.

"Since I was square in the middle of Project Maven & Google, it's reasonable to assume I would take the Pentagon's side here," Shanahan wrote Thursday on social media. "Yet I'm sympathetic to Anthropic's position. More so than I was to Google's in 2018."

He said Claude is already being widely used across the government, including in classified settings, and Anthropic's red lines are "reasonable." He said the AI large language models that power chatbots like

Claude are also “not ready for prime time in national security settings,” particularly not for fully autonomous weapons.

“They’re not trying to play cute here,” he wrote.

Parnell asserted Thursday that the Pentagon wants to “use Anthropic’s model for all lawful purposes” and said opening up use of the technology would prevent the company from “jeopardizing critical military operations,” though neither he nor other officials have detailed how they want to use the technology.

The military “has no interest in using AI to conduct mass surveillance of Americans (which is illegal) nor do we want to use AI to develop autonomous weapons that operate without human involvement,” Parnell wrote.

When Hegseth and Amodei met Tuesday, military officials warned that they could designate Anthropic as a supply chain risk, cancel its contract or invoke a Cold War-era law called the Defense Production Act to give the military more sweeping authority to use its products, even if the company doesn’t approve.

Amodei said Thursday that “those latter two threats are inherently contradictory: one labels us a security risk; the other labels Claude as essential to national security.” He said he hopes the Pentagon will reconsider given Claude’s value to the military, but, if not, Anthropic “will work to enable a smooth transition to another provider.”

Iranian agents obstructed care at hospitals packed with wounded protesters

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — As wounded anti-government protesters poured into an Iranian hospital during last month’s crackdown, a young doctor hurried to the emergency room to help treat a man in his 40s who had been shot in the head at close range.

When the doctor and others tried to resuscitate the man, a group of armed, plainclothes security agents blocked their way, pushing some back with their rifles, the doctor told The Associated Press.

“They surrounded him and didn’t allow us to move further,” the doctor in the northern city of Rasht said.

Minutes later, the man was dead. The agents put his body in a black body bag. Later, they piled it and other bodies into the back of a van and drove away.

This wasn’t an isolated incident.

Over the course of a few days in early January, plainclothes agents swarmed hospitals in multiple cities treating the thousands wounded by Iranian security forces who fired on crowds to quash massive protests against the 47-year-old Islamic Republic. These agents monitored and sometimes obstructed care to protesters, intimidated staff, seized protesters and took away the dead in body bags. Dozens of doctors were arrested.

This story is based on AP interviews with three doctors in Iran and six Iranian medical professionals living abroad who are in contact with colleagues on the ground; reports from human rights groups; and AP’s verification of more than a dozen videos posted on social media. All of the doctors inside Iran spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

The AP worked with Mnemonic, a Berlin-based organization, to identify online videos, posts and other material relating to violence in hospitals.

The doctors in Iran and abroad said the level of brutality and militarization of health facilities was unprecedented in a country that for decades has experienced crackdowns on dissent and surveillance of public institutions. In at least one instance, snipers on the roof of a hospital in the northern town of Gorgan shot at approaching patients, according to a witness’ account provided by IIPHA, a U.S.-based association of Iranian health care professionals.

The Iran Human Rights Center, based in Oslo, has documented multiple accounts from inside hospitals of security agents preventing medical care, removing patients from ventilators, harassing doctors and detaining protesters.

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"It is systematic," said Amiry-Moghaddam, an Iranian-Norwegian neuroscientist who founded the group. "And we have not experienced this pattern before."

The government has blamed the protests and ensuing violence on armed foreign-backed "terrorists."

Health Ministry spokesman Hossein Kermanpour denied reports of treatment being prevented or protesters being taken from hospitals, calling them "untrue, but also fundamentally impossible." He was quoted in state media as saying all injured were treated "without any discrimination or interference over political opinions." The Iranian mission at the United Nations did not immediately reply to a request for comment on the doctors' accounts.

Doctors tried to protect the wounded

The crackdown, which reached its height on Jan. 8 and 9, was the deadliest since the Islamic Republic took power in 1979. A complete toll of casualties and other details have been slow to emerge because of internet restrictions imposed by authorities.

The Human Rights Activists News Agency says it confirmed more than 7,000 deaths and that it is investigating thousands more. The government has acknowledged more than 3,000 killed, though it has undercounted or not reported fatalities from past unrest.

Once the crackdown began, the doctor in Rasht said he worked through 66 hours of hell, moving each day to a different facility to help with the wounded — first a trauma center, then a hospital and finally a private clinic.

On Jan. 8, "every 15 to 30 minutes, the entire emergency ward would be emptied and then refilled with new patients," the doctor said.

It got worse on Jan. 9, as wounds from live ammunition became more common and security agents became more menacing.

Agents brought in wounded protesters and stood watch over them as staff worked, the doctor said. They burst into wards, armed with automatic rifles, threatening staff and filming patients and checking documents.

When it came time to discharge a patient, he said, "they would take anyone who was confirmed to be a protester."

At one point, security agents brought in the body of a dead man with his hands shackled in front of his body. He had pellet shots to his abdomen and chest and a clear bullet wound to the head, he said.

He recognized the man immediately. Only moments earlier, his family had been showing his photo around the hospital, asking if he had been admitted.

Amnesty International has received credible reports that targeted, close-range shootings of protesters took place, and "at a far greater scale" than in past crackdowns on protests, said the group's Iran researcher Raha Bahareini. Two videos verified by AP show the bodies of protesters with close-range shots and medical equipment connected to their bodies.

The doctor said he and other staff tried to hide wounded protesters by recording false diagnoses in hospital records. Gunshots to the abdomen were identified as abdominal pain; broken bones were recorded as a falling accident. One patient who had been shot in the genitals was identified as a urology patient.

"We knew that no matter what we did for the patients, they wouldn't be safe once they stepped out of the hospital," he said.

The AP could not independently confirm the doctor's account of events at the hospital in Rasht. But it conformed with AP's other reporting.

The AP verified videos posted from four hospitals as a snapshot of the Iranian security forces' activity. Mnemonic gathered dozens of videos, posts and other accounts it says showed forces were present in and around nine hospitals, in some cases firing guns and tear gas. Mnemonic has been preserving digital evidence of human rights violations in Iran since 2022, creating with partners an archive of more than 2 million documents.

One video verified by AP shows security agents breaking through glass entrance doors into Imam Khomeini Hospital in the western city of Ilam. They then barged through the halls with their guns, yelling at people.

The Health Ministry told state media it was investigating the incident, saying it was committed to pro-

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tecting medical centers, staff and patients.

Other videos verified by AP show a heavy presence of security forces surrounding three hospitals in Tehran, firing tear gas and chasing protesters.

Treating the wounded in hiding

Other doctors worked in clandestine centers to treat the wounded away from authorities.

On the night of Jan. 8, a 37-year-old general surgeon was out for dinner in Tehran when he received a call from a professional friend he hadn't heard from in years. The friend, an ophthalmologist, spoke in vague terms, but the fear in her voice made clear she needed his help urgently. She gave him an address.

Just before midnight, he drove to the address, a clinic for cosmetic procedures. Inside, he found the lobby transformed into a trauma ward, with more than 30 wounded men, women, children and elderly on the couches and blood-covered floor, shouting and crying,

The surgeon spent nearly four days there, treating more than 90 people, he estimates, as volunteers brought in more wounded. At first, it was just him, the ophthalmologist, a dentist and two nurses.

He used cardboard boxes and pieces of soft metal as splints for broken bones. With no anesthesia or strong painkillers, he used weaker suppository analgesics. The clinic had no blood supplies or transfusion capabilities, so he administered IV drips to rehydrate them and raise their blood pressure, a process that took hours.

At some point that night, phone lines were cut off and for 12 hours, he couldn't call for more help. They couldn't send patients to hospitals for fear they'd be arrested.

One woman, in her 30s, had been hit by bird shot at close range, destroying the roof of her mouth and the area around her nose and below her eyes, the surgeon recalled.

A young man in his 20s had been shot with live ammunition in his elbow, shattering it. The surgeon sutured the wounds but knew the arm would have to be amputated.

A family of four — a mother, father and their 8- and 10-year-old children — were all riddled with pellets, the surgeon said. The older boy had dozens of pellets in his face, but amazingly none hit his eyes.

On the morning of Jan. 9, the phone lines started working again, and the surgeon reached out to doctors he trusted to refer patients to them. First he had to make sure to remove all bullets and pellets from their bodies so they wouldn't be detained at the hospital. He wrote referral letters saying the patients had been in car accidents.

The surgeon summoned three other doctors to help in the hidden clinic. When new wounded were brought in, the patients who had been stabilized applauded and flashed victory signs to them, he said.

"They started to make the atmosphere happy through their pain. ... I just couldn't believe that moment," the surgeon said, his voice breaking. "It was so human."

None of the wounded died at the clinic, though two dead bodies with gunshot wounds to the head were brought in, he said. The AP could not independently confirm the surgeon's account of events at the clinic.

Doctors targeted for arrest

Since Jan. 9, at least 79 health care professionals have been detained, including a dozen medical students, according to Homa Fathi, an Iranian dentist pursuing a Ph.D. in Canada and member of IIPHA who has been monitoring Iranian government action against health professionals since 2022. Many of those detained were accused of resisting security agents' orders or other charges connected to providing medical care to protesters, said Fathi.

Around 30 have been released, most on bail, but many of them still face charges, including one accused of "waging war against God," a charge that carries a death penalty, Fathi said. Authorities are also keeping some doctors under surveillance at home to ensure they don't receive or visit wounded protesters — an unprecedented level of control, she said.

The surgeon who treated protesters at the secret clinic said he was surprised security forces never stormed that location to make arrests.

But arrests have come since. Two health care workers who volunteered at the clinic were seized from their homes, the surgeon said.

"I am waiting, too."

A new Gallup poll shows how Americans' sympathies have shifted in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

By LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — American sympathies in the Middle East have shifted dramatically toward the Palestinians, according to new Gallup polling, after decades of overwhelming support for the Israelis.

That shift accelerated during the war in Gaza. Three years ago, 54% of Americans sympathized more with the Israelis, compared to 31% for the Palestinians.

Now, their support is about evenly balanced, with 41% saying their sympathies lie more with the Palestinians, and only 36% saying the same about the Israelis.

The numbers reflect how support for Israel has become deeply contentious in the U.S., with profound implications for American politics and foreign policy. The changing sentiment has been largely driven by Democrats, who are now much more likely to sympathize with Palestinians. U.S. assistance to Israel has been a major dividing line in the party's primaries this year.

Gallup's data indicates that the shift was already happening before Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, then increased during Israel's subsequent military operations in Gaza. The polling has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points, meaning sentiment toward Israelis and Palestinians are roughly even.

"It's the first time they have reached parity, which is really quite striking," said Benedict Vigers, a senior global news writer at Gallup. "In not many years, that very significant gap in public opinion has now completely closed."

Democrats and independents

About two-thirds of Democrats now say their concerns lie more with the Palestinians, while only about 2 in 10 sympathize more with the Israelis. As recently as 2016, the picture looked very different: About half of Democrats sympathized more with the Israelis and only about one-quarter sympathized with the Palestinians.

The shift began even before the Israel-Hamas war turned the issue into a flash point within the Democratic Party. Palestinian militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, in the initial attack and took another 251 hostage, but the Israeli response has been widely seen as disproportionate, with Gaza health officials reporting more than 72,000 Palestinians killed, nearly half of them women and children, and wide swaths of the territory reduced to rubble. Many progressive politicians and activists now describe Israel's actions in the war as genocide — a charge Israel vehemently denies.

Democrats have expressed greater sympathy for the Palestinians than the Israelis since 2023 — in a Gallup poll that was conducted before the Oct. 7 attacks — but Gallup's surveys show their support in the conflict has been tilting toward the Palestinians and away from the Israelis since around 2017.

Some of that early decline in sympathy appeared to be tied to disapproval of the right-leaning Israeli leader, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose favorability in the U.S. fell nearly 15 percentage points between 2017 and 2024, according to separate Gallup polling.

Netanyahu clashed with former President Barack Obama in the last year of his administration, then forged a warmer relationship with President Donald Trump, who delivered several victories to Netanyahu in his first term, including recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Trump also persuaded three Arab countries to establish commercial and diplomatic ties with Israel. The closeness between Trump and Netanyahu has continued into Trump's second term.

The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians was a point of tension for Democrats during President Joe Biden's administration, as well as during the 2024 presidential election. An AP-NORC poll conducted toward the end of 2023, just a few months into the war in Gaza, found that Democrats were sharply divided on whether the U.S. was too supportive of Israel, and another AP-NORC poll from 2024 found that Democratic voters were more likely to say the Israeli government held "a lot" of responsibility for the war's escalation.

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Democrats' sympathy for the Palestinians intensified as the war progressed, Gallup's polling shows, and independents' views also shifted. This year, independents expressed more sympathy for the Palestinians than the Israelis for the first time in Gallup's trend. About 4 in 10 independents are more sympathetic toward the Palestinians. That's compared to about 3 in 10 for the Israelis, a new low.

Most Republicans continue to side with Israel — about 7 in 10 say they are more sympathetic to the Israelis — but that is a slight downtick from about 8 in 10 before the start of the war. Some figures in the Republicans' isolationist "America First" wing are also increasingly questioning traditional U.S. support for Israel.

Generational gaps

Younger adults — those 18 to 34 in this poll — are also increasingly sympathetic toward the Palestinians, according to the Gallup survey.

Younger Americans' sympathies have been shifting toward the Palestinians since around 2020, and reached a new high this year. About half of 18 to 34 year olds say they have more sympathy for the Palestinians, compared to about a quarter who say that about the Israelis.

Student protests against the Israel-Hamas war appeared on college campuses around the country during the war, asking colleges to cut investments supporting Israel.

But the shift is only "partly a generational story," according to Vigers.

The new poll also found for the first time that middle-aged Americans, those 35 to 54, expressed more sympathy for the Palestinians than the Israelis — a reversal from last year. And while Americans over 55 are more sympathetic toward Israel, that gap is narrowing, too.

"With adults over 55, they are more sympathetic to Israelis, but it's as low as it's been since 2005," Vigers said.

Palestinian state

About 6 in 10 U.S. adults, 57%, favor the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, according to the new polling. That's not significantly different from recent years, as at least half of U.S. adults have supported an independent Palestinian state since 2020.

Vigers notes that "party polarization is at or near its record high" on this question, even though it hasn't been sharply increasing year over year.

In the last few years, there's been an uptick among Democrats and independents in support for the two-state solution. Now, about three-quarters of Democrats and roughly 6 in 10 independents say they support an independent Palestinian state. Only about one-third of Republicans say the same.

The opinions of the people who would be directly affected by a two-state solution are quite different. Only about 3 in 10 Israelis living in Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank and east Jerusalem said they supported a two-state solution in which an independent Palestinian state existed alongside Israel, according to the Gallup World Poll conducted in 2025.

"On the ground, in the region, far fewer Israelis and Palestinians tell us that they are in favor of the two-state solution than Americans when asked a very similar question," Vigers said. "There is that interesting sort of disconnect between the region itself and Americans' views toward it."

US military used laser to take down Border Protection drone, lawmakers say

By JOSH FUNK and KONSTANTIN TOROPIN Associated Press

The U.S. military used a laser Thursday to shoot down a "seemingly threatening" drone flying near the U.S.-Mexico border. It turned out the drone belonged to Customs and Border Protection, lawmakers said.

The case of mistaken identity prompted the Federal Aviation Administration to close additional airspace around Fort Hancock, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) southeast of El Paso. The military is required to formally notify the FAA when it takes any counter-drone action inside U.S. airspace.

It was the second time in two weeks that a laser was fired in the area. The last time it was CBP that

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used the weapon and nothing was hit. That incident occurred near Fort Bliss and prompted the FAA to shut down air traffic at El Paso airport and the surrounding area. This time, the closure was smaller and commercial flights were not affected.

Washington U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen and two other top Democrats on the House Transportation and Infrastructure and Homeland Security committees said they were stunned when they were officially notified.

"Our heads are exploding over the news," the lawmakers said in a joint statement. They criticized the Trump administration for "sidestepping" a bipartisan bill to train drone operators and improve communication among the Pentagon, FAA and Department of Homeland Security, which includes CBP.

"Now, we're seeing the result of its incompetence," they said.

Government defends use of anti-drone laser

The FAA, CBP and the Pentagon issued a joint statement late Thursday that acknowledged the military "employed counter-unmanned aircraft system authorities to mitigate a seemingly threatening unmanned aerial system operating within military airspace."

The statement said it happened far from populated areas and commercial flights as part of the administration's efforts to strengthen protections at the border.

"At President Trump's direction, the Department of War, FAA, and Customs and Border Patrol are working together in an unprecedented fashion to mitigate drone threats by Mexican cartels and foreign terrorist organizations at the U.S.-Mexico Border," the statement said.

Second time these laser systems shut down Texas airspace this month

The El Paso shutdown two weeks ago lasted only a few hours, but it raised alarm and led to a number of flight cancellations in the city of nearly 700,000 people.

In that case, an anti-drone laser was deployed by CBP without coordinating with the FAA, which then decided to close the El Paso airspace to ensure commercial air safety, according to sources familiar with what happened and weren't authorized to discuss it.

Afterward, members of Congress said it appeared to be another example of different agencies failing to coordinate with each other.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said he was planning to brief members of Congress about the incident. He said at an unrelated news conference last Friday that it wasn't a mistake for the FAA to close the airspace in El Paso and that he doesn't think it was a communication issue that led to the problems.

Lawmaker demands an investigation

Illinois Democratic U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, the ranking member on the Senate's Aviation Subcommittee, called for an independent investigation.

"The Trump administration's incompetence continues to cause chaos in our skies," Duckworth said.

The investigation into last year's midair collision near Washington, D.C., between an airliner and Army helicopter that killed 67 people highlighted how the FAA and Pentagon were not always working well together.

The National Transportation Safety Board said the FAA and the Army did not share safety data with each other about the alarming number of close calls around Reagan National Airport and failed to address the risks.

Concern about drone threats growing

Two months ago, Congress agreed to give more law enforcement agencies — including some state and local departments — the authority to take down rogue drones as long as they are properly trained. Previously, only a select few federal agencies had that power.

Armed drones regularly carry out devastating attacks in Ukraine and have also allowed Ukraine to strike deep within Russia. The U.S. government has handed out more than \$250 million to help the states prepare to respond to drones before hosting World Cup matches and celebrations planned this summer for America's 250th birthday.

Another \$250 million in grants will be awarded later this year to strengthen the nation's drone defenses.

Drones already causing problems

Drones already cause problems along the border. Cartels routinely use drones to deliver drugs across the Mexican border and surveil Border Patrol officers. Officials told Congress last summer that more than 27,000 drones were detected within 1,600 feet (500 meters) of the southern border in the last six months of 2024.

The threat to planes from drones continues to increase along with the number of near misses around airports. Homeland Security estimates there are more than 1.7 million registered drones flying in the United States.

Anti-drone systems can use radio signals to jam drones, or high-powered microwaves or laser beams like the ones that have been used in Texas that are capable of disabling the machines. Some others station small drones to take flight quickly and ram into threatening drones. And there are systems that use bullets, but those are more common on battlefields than in domestic use.

30 years after Pokémon's release, fans are still trying to catch 'em all

By JAIMIE DING and LIAM MCEWAN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Benson Lu's life revolves around Pokémon.

The 26-year-old has played the mobile game Pokémon Go every day for a decade, watches the animated show every week, goes to the local card shop in his Los Angeles suburb to play the brand's trading card game every week, and has a whopping collection of cards worth more than \$70,000.

"I don't remember when was the last day I did not think about Pokémon at all," he said.

In the 30 years since Pokémon debuted in Japan with the 1996 release of Pokémon Red and Pokémon Green for Nintendo Game Boy, the franchise has taken over the globe with its animated shows, mobile games and highly coveted trading cards. Its popularity continues with fans young and old.

Pokémon offers a masterclass in character design, which has helped make it so enduring, said Heather Cole, teaching assistant professor of game design and interactive media at West Virginia University.

"I think the longevity of it has to do with the characters and world-building it does with the characters," she said.

A valuable commodity

It's not just cuteness that has people clamoring for merchandise, particularly trading cards. Today, some are so coveted that social media star Logan Paul sold one for a record \$16.5 million. In Southern California, the fervor around Pokémon cards has led to strings of break-ins in recent months at trading card stores that have amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars of losses and even some collectors robbed at gunpoint.

Adam Corn, owner of card business Overdose Gaming Inc, said he was able to buy a house last year from his Pokémon cards.

"Pokémon almost always appreciates in value over time," Corn said. "So it's just a really good place to put your money in my opinion, better than a a lot of other assets."

Companies like Beckett Grading Services and Professional Sports Authenticator authenticate and grade the quality of Pokémon cards on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being pristine mint condition and fetching the highest prices. Paul bought the PSA Grade 10 Pikachu Illustrator card a few months prior for \$5.3 million and wore the card on a chain around his neck in videos. It features a Pikachu holding a pen and feather sweeper.

Last Tuesday, thieves stole more than \$80,000 of Pokémon cards from Do-We Collectibles in Anaheim — the second time the store has been targeted. Other stores around Los Angeles and in New York have been hit by Pokémon thieves too.

Duy Pham, owner of the Anaheim store, said the financial incentive of trading cards for robbers and scalpers means "the hobby will never be the same."

"It's rougher for collectors and players," Pham said. "It's hard for us to get anything."

Collectors can either pay retail price for a standard pack of randomized Pokémon cards, around \$5 for

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10 cards, or buy the specific card they want secondhand for higher prices. But much like gambling, opening packs doesn't always pan out to profit — Aiden Zeng spent \$1,000 on packs of cards that were only valued at \$60 on the resale market, he said.

Zeng, 17, said his fandom began in elementary school, when he obsessed over character guidebooks. He eventually began trying to collect every single type of card available for his favorite, Black Kyurem.

"I memorized every single Pokémon's specific move set, what region they come from, some of the lore behind it," Zeng said.

Resurgence of popularity

Even beyond dedicated collectors, Zeng said he has seen a resurgence of popularity for Pokémon at his high school in Toronto, where some students decorate their phone cases with cards featuring special artwork or a holographic sheen.

Pokémon creator Satoshi Tajiri has said he enjoyed catching insects and other small critters in the fields and forests outside the Tokyo suburb where he lived as a child. Those creatures inspired him to make the colorful, fantastical Pokémon of which there are thousands of species today.

While his hobby is lucrative, Lu said the draw for him is still nostalgia for the characters he grew up with and the community he has formed around Pokémon. He prefers not to sell his single cards because he worries he will never be able to find them again.

Lu recently spent an entire Saturday walking around the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, looking for Pokémon on his augmented reality phone game at an event attended by thousands.

"I've liked Pokémon ever since I was a kid," he said. "And I still like it the same amount."

Macron to visit top-secret sub base as some Europeans worry about US nuclear guarantees

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — They lurk in the oceans, a last resort to pulverize attackers with nuclear fire should France's commander in chief ever make that terrible call.

French President Emmanuel Macron, the person with the power to unleash France's nuclear arsenal, will on Monday update French thinking on the potential use of warheads carried on submarines and planes, if it ever came to that. This in the context of concerns in Europe that Russian war-making could spread beyond Ukraine, and uncertainty about U.S. President Donald Trump's steadfastness as an ally.

For decades, Europe has lived under a protective umbrella of U.S. nuclear weapons, stationed on the continent since the mid-1950s to deter the former Soviet Union and now Russia. Lately, however, some European politicians and defense analysts are questioning whether Washington can still be relied upon to use such force if needed.

As the only nuclear-armed member of the 27-nation European Union, the questions are particularly pertinent for France.

Possible revisions to France's nuclear deterrence policy, sure to be carefully calibrated and scrutinized by allies and potential enemies alike, could be among the most consequential decisions that Macron makes in his remaining 14 months as president, before elections to choose his successor in 2027.

That Macron feels a need to bare France's nuclear teeth, in what will be the commander in chief's second keynote speech laying out the country's deterrence posture since his election in 2017, speaks to his concerns, voiced multiple times, about geopolitical and defense-technology shifts that threaten the security of France and its allies.

Those voicing doubts about Washington's reliability include Rasmus Jarlov, chair of the Danish parliament's Defense Committee.

"If things got really serious, I very much doubt that Trump would risk American cities to protect European cities," he said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We don't know but it seems very risky to rely on the American protection."

He and others are turning to France for reassurance. In the longer term, Jarlov argues that other Eu-

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European nations also need to arm themselves with nuclear weapons — an almost unfathomable prospect when U.S. protection seemed absolute in European minds.

“The Nordic countries have the capacity. We have uranium, we have nuclear scientists. We can develop nuclear weapons,” he said. “Realistically, it will take a lot of time. So in the short term, we are looking to France.”

Adjusting to geopolitical risks

The world has changed dramatically since Macron’s first policy-making nuclear speech in 2020, with new uncertainties shoving old certainties aside.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, now entering its fifth year, brought war to the EU’s door and repeated threats of possible nuclear use from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

China is expanding its nuclear arsenal. So, too, is North Korea’s nuclear-armed military. In October, Trump spoke about U.S. intentions to resume nuclear tests for the first time since 1992, although U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright later said that such tests would not include nuclear explosions.

Russia revised its deterrence policy in 2024, lowering its bar for possible retaliation with nuclear weapons. The United Kingdom has announced plans to buy nuclear-capable U.S.-made F-35A fighter jets, restoring a capacity to deliver nuclear airstrikes that it phased out in the 1990s, leaving it with just submarine-based nuclear missiles.

The chosen site for Macron’s speech on Monday — the Île Longue base for France’s four nuclear-armed submarines — will drive home that French presidents also have nuclear muscle at their disposal in an increasingly unstable world. They each can carry 16 M51 intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with multiple warheads.

“There are high expectations from the allies and partners, and maybe also the adversaries, about how the French nuclear doctrine could evolve,” said Héloïse Fayet, a nuclear deterrence specialist at the French Institute of International Relations, a Paris think tank.

Speaking in an AP interview, Fayet said she’s hoping for “real changes.”

“Maybe something about a greater and a clearer French commitment to the protection of allies, thanks to the French nuclear weapons,” she said.

France’s nuclear force

Macron said in 2020 that France has fewer than 300 warheads — a number that has remained stable since former President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a modest reduction to that level in 2008.

Macron said the force is sufficient to inflict “absolutely unacceptable damage” on the “political, economic, military nerve centers” of any country that threatens the “vital interests” of France, “whatever they may be.”

Nuclear specialists will be watching for any hint from Macron that he no longer considers the French stockpile to be sufficient and that it might need to grow.

The language of deterrence is generally shrouded by deliberate ambiguity, to keep potential enemies guessing about the red lines that could trigger a nuclear response. Officials from Macron’s office, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the nuclear policy changes that Macron might make, were extremely guarded in their wording, not least because deterrence is a strictly presidential prerogative.

“There will no doubt be some shifts, fairly substantial developments,” one of the officials said.

Protecting Europe

Again with careful wording, Macron in 2020 said the “vital interests” that France could defend with nuclear force don’t end at its borders but also have “a European dimension.”

Some European nations have taken up an offer Macron made then to discuss France’s nuclear deterrence and even associate European partners in French nuclear exercises.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz says he’s had “initial talks” with Macron about nuclear deterrence and has publicly theorized about German Air Force planes possibly being used to carry French nuclear bombs.

European nations engaging with France are seeking “a second life insurance” against any possibility of U.S. nuclear protection being withdrawn, says Etienne Marcuz, a French nuclear defense specialist at the Paris-based Foundation for Strategic Research think tank.

"The United States are unpredictable — have become unpredictable — because of the Trump 2 administration," he said. "That has legitimately raised the question of whether the United States would truly be prepared to protect Europe, and above all, whether they would be willing to deploy their nuclear forces in defense of Europe."

The Trump administration is detaining and questioning refugees already admitted to the US

By GISELA SALOMON, JACK BROOK and SARAH RAZA Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Their family spent years opposing Venezuela's socialist system.

The government retaliated by sending men to beat the father, a state oil company worker whom it accused of being uncooperative. Other relatives were threatened.

The situation became so untenable that the family fled the country for the United States in 2021 after it obtained refugee status, according to one of the daughters, a 24-year-old clothing salesperson who was interviewed by The Associated Press.

The six siblings and their parents settled in Minnesota in 2023, living peaceful lives until the Trump administration said it was casting new scrutiny on refugees. One priority is those admitted to the U.S. under former President Joe Biden, whom the government accuses of prioritizing quantity over detailed screening and vetting, with an initial focus on 5,600 refugees who settled in Minnesota and are not yet permanent residents, making them particularly vulnerable.

Last month, three masked officers got out of a black SUV with tinted windows outside a St. Paul apartment complex, handcuffed the Venezuelan woman and her mother and told them their legal status was under review, according to the woman, who asked for anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Overturning years of precedent, immigration authorities have arrested or questioned dozens of refugees in Minnesota, attorneys and advocates say, with more detentions likely to come nationwide.

In January, a federal judge ordered a temporary halt to the arrest and detention of refugees in Minnesota while a lawsuit challenging the "re vetting" continues. The judge ordered the immediate release of all refugees detained in Minnesota, and those taken to Texas.

Three refugees told The Associated Press that whatever happens, the rounds of inconclusive interviews with immigration authorities well after they thought their status was safe has them questioning their futures in the U.S. and living in constant fear.

The young woman from Venezuela hasn't returned to her job at a clothing factory. A man who fled persecution in Myanmar won't walk on the streets of Minneapolis without a letter from his church appealing for immigrants to "be treated humanely." A Congolese refugee arrested in St. Paul despite her refugee status says "everything that's happened feels like a movie."

A change in US treatment of refugees

Welcoming refugees has been a source of bipartisan agreement in the U.S. since Congress passed the Refugee Act with overwhelming support in 1980.

The act helped make refugee applications some of the immigration system's most heavily scrutinized. Government decisions that someone was persecuted for who they are or what they believe are rarely second-guessed, and revisiting refugee status that's already been granted is a major blow to legal tradition, advocates say.

"They've been heavily vetted and were admitted by the government with approval," said Beth Oppenheim, chief executive officer of HIAS, a major refugee aid group.

Once a refugee is admitted to the U.S. through the resettlement program, the only way to strip them of their status is to prove that they should never have been admitted, Oppenheim said. That is why the Trump administration is interviewing people again, she said.

Matthew Tragesser, a spokesman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said in a written statement refugees "are REQUIRED to be subject to a full inspection after a year within the United States."

"This is not novel or discretionary; it is a clear requirement in law," he wrote.

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While it is correct that refugees must apply for green cards one year after admission — a change of status that brings a renewed layer of scrutiny — the administration is breaking with decades of tradition by revisiting initial decisions to admit people as refugees, and then detaining them while they are under review.

“Arresting, detaining, and rescreening refugees are all new changes which will inflict grave harm on vulnerable populations,” said Smita Dazzo, deputy director of U.S. programs at HIAS.

Venezuela to Minnesota to Houston and back

In January, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement took the Venezuelan women to Houston on a flight where migrants were shackled at the wrists and ankles and forbidden from talking. The daughter said she was told she was there for green card interviews and isolated in a cold room with no food, water or anything warm to cover her. She said she refused to sign documents without an attorney present.

“They told us, “Your status is worthless. You’re illegal,”” she said. “What we went through is something I wouldn’t wish on anyone ... We were supposed to arrive in this country with refugee status, and we thought we would be protected here. But right now, at this moment, it is quite the opposite.”

The women were released after successfully filing habeas corpus petitions in federal court, part of a flood of last-ditch attempts at freedom under a Trump policy denying bond hearings in immigration court. Friends of their attorney drove them back to Minnesota at their own expense. Since then, the younger woman has been too afraid to leave the house.

The pastor who received a letter and went to the interview

Saw Ba Mya James, a 46-year-old ethnic Karen father of three who fled military persecution in Myanmar, arrived in St. Paul last year after obtaining refugee status with help from a local church.

Despite a pending green card application, the Anglican pastor did not attend church for weeks after friends advised him to avoid going outside.

“I was told to stay at home, so I listened, and I prayed to God with my family,” James said.

James received a letter Feb. 2 ordering a “post-admissions refugee reverification” at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services St. Paul field office, according to a copy reviewed by The Associated Press.

During an interview that lasted several hours, an officer pressed James with questions he said he already addressed extensively before being admitted to the U.S. The officer said the review was needed because an inexperienced employee handled James’ initial vetting.

Within two weeks of the interview, James got another letter asking that he and his family provide fingerprints, which his attorney took as a positive sign.

Still, James remains wary of being detained. He faithfully carries his church sponsors’ letter appealing for him and other immigrants to “be treated humanely as fellow image-bearers of God.”

The Congolese refugee arrested arriving at work

A Congolese woman settled in the Twin Cities area in November 2024 with refugee status, working in the hospitality business as the breadwinner for her husband and four children.

She said an immigration officer approached her parked car when she arrived for work at 7 a.m. on Jan. 14 in St. Paul, saying he knew her name and that she was a refugee. After telling her to exit the vehicle to answer questions, he handcuffed her despite her efforts to show a work authorization document and identification.

The woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity because she fears reprisals, was flown to Houston to be questioned in detail about her experiences in the Congo, Uganda and the United States. She and other refugees refused to sign documents to be sent back to their home countries. She was released Jan. 18 without any ID documents to book a flight to Minneapolis. A manager at her company flew to Houston and drove her 17 hours back home.

“If I told you I’m feeling OK, I’d be lying to you,” she said.

Trump heads to Texas, where 3 friends are battling it out in the Senate Republican primary

By SEUNG MIN KIM and THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump just can't seem to choose among friends in the Texas Senate Republican primary.

So when he travels to the state on Friday for his first post- State of the Union trip, where he plans to promote his energy and economic policies, Trump will have all three candidates in the competitive race join him — just days before his party casts ballots in the primary race.

Sen. John Cornyn is battling for his fifth term and is being challenged by state Attorney General Ken Paxton and Rep. Wesley Hunt in a primary fight that has become viciously personal. And all three men, missing the coveted endorsement from Trump, have been trying to highlight their ties to him as they ramp up their campaigning ahead of Tuesday's vote.

For his part, Trump will be seeking to ride the message of his State of the Union address from Tuesday, where he declared a return to economic prosperity and a more secure America — two centerpiece arguments for Republicans as they campaign to keep their congressional majorities this fall.

Trump's hesitation to endorse in the Texas Senate primary speaks to the tricky dynamics of the race.

Cornyn is unpopular with a segment of Texas' GOP base, in part for his early dismissiveness of Trump's 2024 comeback campaign and for his role in authoring tougher restrictions on guns after the 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. But Senate GOP leadership and allied groups see Cornyn as the stronger general election candidate, in light of a series of troubles that have shadowed Paxton.

Paxton beat impeachment on fraud charges in 2023, and has faced allegations of marital infidelity by his wife, state Sen. Angela Paxton.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune and South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, have urged Trump to endorse Cornyn. They and allied campaign groups argue that the seat would cost the party hundreds of millions more to defend with Paxton as the candidate.

"It is a strong possibility we cannot hold Texas if John Cornyn is not our nominee," Scott told Fox News on Wednesday.

Hunt, a second-term Houston-area representative, was a later entry to the race, but claims a kinship with Trump, having endorsed him early in the 2024 race. Hunt campaigned regularly for Trump and earned a prime-time speaking slot at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee.

If no candidate reaches 50% in Tuesday's primary, the top two finishers will advance to a May 26 runoff.

Cornyn's campaign and a half-dozen allied groups have poured more than \$63 million into the race since last fall, chiefly trying to slow Paxton but recently attacking Hunt in an effort to keep him from making it to the runoff.

Earlier this month, Trump feinted toward weighing in on the race when he said he was taking "a serious look" at endorsing in the Texas primary. He has since reaffirmed his neutrality.

Still, you wouldn't know it from watching TV in Texas. Cornyn has been airing ads since last year touting his support for Trump's agenda, even though his relationship with the president has been cool at times. Paxton and Hunt both have ads airing now featuring them standing with Trump.

"I like all three of them, actually. Those are the toughest races. They've all supported me. They're all good. You're supposed to pick one, so we'll see what happens. But I support all three," Trump said earlier this month.

The GOP battle comes as Democrats have a contested primary of their own in Texas between state Rep. James Talarico, a self-described policy wonk who regularly quotes the Bible, and progressive favorite U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett.

Trump hasn't been shy about wading into other contested Republican primaries in the state. Parts of Corpus Christi fall within Texas' 34th congressional district, where former Rep. Mayra Flores is fighting to reclaim her seat against the Trump-endorsed Eric Flores. (The two are not related.) The winner of the primary will face off against Democratic Rep. Vicente Gonzalez, long a target of the GOP, whose district

was redrawn to make it easier for a Republican to win.

Eric Flores will be at the Trump event at the Port of Corpus Christi, which technically is located in a neighboring district.

Elsewhere in the state, the president has also endorsed Rep. Tony Gonzales, who is fighting calls from his own party to resign from Congress after reports of an alleged affair with a former staffer who later died after she set herself on fire. Gonzales is refusing to step down and has said that there will be "opportunities for all of the details and facts to come out" and that the stories about the situation do not represent "all the facts."

Gonzales is facing a primary challenge from Brandon Herrera, a gun manufacturer and gun rights influencer who Gonzales defeated by fewer than 400 votes in their 2024 runoff. The White House did not return a request for comment on Thursday on whether Trump stands by his endorsement of Gonzales.

Anthropic CEO says it 'cannot in good conscience accede' to Pentagon's demands for AI use

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei said Thursday that the artificial intelligence company "cannot in good conscience accede" to the Pentagon's demands to allow unrestricted use of its technology, deepening a public clash with the Trump administration that is threatening to pull its contract and take other drastic steps by Friday.

The maker of the AI chatbot Claude said in a statement that it's not walking away from negotiations but that new contract language received from the Defense Department "made virtually no progress on preventing Claude's use for mass surveillance of Americans or in fully autonomous weapons."

Sean Parnell, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said earlier on social media that the military "has no interest in using AI to conduct mass surveillance of Americans (which is illegal) nor do we want to use AI to develop autonomous weapons that operate without human involvement."

Anthropic's policies prevent its models from being used for those purposes. It's the last of its peers — the Pentagon also has contracts with Google, OpenAI and Elon Musk's xAI — to not supply its technology to a new U.S. military internal network.

"It is the Department's prerogative to select contractors most aligned with their vision," Amodei wrote in a statement. "But given the substantial value that Anthropic's technology provides to our armed forces, we hope they reconsider."

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth gave Anthropic an ultimatum on Tuesday after meeting with Amodei: Allow the Pentagon to use the company's AI as it sees fit by Friday or risk losing its government contract. Military officials warned that they could go even further and designate the company as a supply chain risk or invoke a Cold War-era law called the Defense Production Act to give the military more sweeping authority to use its products.

Amodei said Thursday that "those latter two threats are inherently contradictory: one labels us a security risk; the other labels Claude as essential to national security."

In a post before Amodei's announcement, Parnell reiterated that the Pentagon wants to "use Anthropic's model for all lawful purposes" but didn't offer details on what that entailed. He said opening up use of the technology would prevent the company from "jeopardizing critical military operations."

"We will not let ANY company dictate the terms regarding how we make operational decisions," he said.

Emil Michael, defense undersecretary for research and engineering, later lashed out at the Anthropic CEO, alleging on X that Amodei "has a God-complex" and "wants nothing more than to try to personally control the US Military and is ok putting our nation's safety at risk."

The talks that escalated this week began months ago. Amodei said that if the Pentagon doesn't reconsider its position, Anthropic "will work to enable a smooth transition to another provider."

Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican who is not seeking reelection, said the Pentagon has been handling the matter unprofessionally while Anthropic is "trying to do their best to help us from ourselves."

"Why in the hell are we having this discussion in public?" Tillis told reporters. "This is not the way you deal with a strategic vendor that has contracts."

He added, "When a company is resisting a market opportunity for fear of negative consequences, you should listen to them and then behind closed doors figure out what they're really trying to solve."

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he was "deeply disturbed" by reports that the Pentagon is "working to bully a leading U.S. company."

"Unfortunately, this is further indication that the Department of Defense seeks to completely ignore AI governance," Warner said in a statement. It "further underscores the need for Congress to enact strong, binding AI governance mechanisms for national security contexts."

While Pentagon officials say they always will follow the law with their use of AI models, the department has taken steps to change the culture among the military legal ranks.

Hegseth told Fox News last February, weeks after becoming defense secretary, that "ultimately, we want lawyers who give sound constitutional advice and don't exist to attempt to be roadblocks to anything."

The same month, Hegseth also fired the top lawyers for the Army and the Air Force without explanation. The Navy's top lawyer had resigned shortly after the election in late 2024.

US and Iran wrap up latest nuclear talks without a deal as the risk of war looms

By FANNY BRODERSEN, JON GAMBRELL and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Iran and the United States held hours of indirect negotiations Thursday over Tehran's nuclear program but walked away without a deal, leaving the danger of another Mideast war on the table as the U.S. has gathered a massive fleet of aircraft and warships in the region.

Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, who mediated the talks in Geneva, said there had been "significant progress in the negotiation" without elaborating.

But just before the talks ended, Iranian state television reported that Tehran was determined to continue enriching uranium, rejected proposals to transfer it abroad and sought the lifting of international sanctions, indicating it was not prepared to meet U.S. President Donald Trump's demands.

Trump wants a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear program, and he sees an opportunity while the country is struggling at home with growing dissent following nationwide protests. Iran also hopes to avert war, but maintains it has the right to enrich uranium and does not want to discuss other issues, like its long-range missile program or support for armed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

Al-Busaidi said technical talks involving lower-level representatives would continue next week in Vienna, the home of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The United Nations' atomic watchdog likely would be critical in any deal.

In an interview with Iranian state television, Iran's foreign minister said the talks with the U.S. were some of the country's "most intense and longest rounds of negotiations."

Abbas Araghchi offered no specifics but said "what needs to happen has been clearly spelled out from our side."

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

'A very terrible scenario'

The stakes could hardly be higher.

If America attacks, Iran has said U.S. military bases in the region would be considered legitimate targets, putting at risk tens of thousands of American service members. Iran has also threatened to attack Israel, meaning a regional war again could erupt across the Middle East.

"There would be no victory for anybody — it would be a devastating war," Araghchi told India Today in an interview recorded Wednesday just before he flew to Geneva.

"Since the Americans' bases are scattered through different places in the region, then unfortunately perhaps the whole region would be engaged and be involved, so it is a very terrible scenario."

Ali Vaez, an Iran expert with the International Crisis Group, said it was a good sign that the Americans

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did not walk away immediately Thursday when Iran presented its latest proposal.

"There might still not be a breakthrough at the end of this day, but the very fact that the U.S. team is returning shows that there is enough common ground between the two sides," he said.

Geneva talks are the third meeting since June war

The two sides held multiple rounds of talks last year that collapsed when Israel launched a 12-day war against Iran in June and the U.S. carried out heavy strikes on its nuclear sites, leaving much of Iran's nuclear program in ruins even as the full extent of the damage remains unclear.

Araghchi represented Iran at the talks. Steve Witkoff, a billionaire real estate developer and friend of Trump who serves as a special Mideast envoy, headed up the U.S. delegation with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. The talks again were mediated by Oman, an Arab Gulf country that's long served as an interlocutor between Iran and the West.

The two sides adjourned after around three hours of talks and resumed the discussions later.

During the break, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei said the Iranians felt there were "constructive proposals" offered on both nuclear issues and sanctions relief.

Trump wants Iran to completely halt its enrichment of uranium and roll back both its long-range missile program and its support for regional armed groups. Iran says it will only discuss nuclear issues, and maintains its atomic program is for entirely peaceful purposes.

US suspects Iran is rebuilding its program

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters Wednesday that Iran is "always trying to rebuild elements" of its nuclear program. He said that Tehran is not enriching uranium right now, "but they're trying to get to the point where they ultimately can."

Iran has said it hasn't enriched since June, but it has blocked IAEA inspectors from visiting the sites America bombed. Satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press have shown activity at two of those sites, suggesting Iran is trying to assess and potentially recover material there.

The West and the IAEA say Iran had a nuclear weapons program until 2003. After Trump scrapped the 2015 nuclear agreement, Iran ramped up its enrichment of uranium to 60% purity — a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to restart a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so." Some Iranian officials have spoken openly about the country's readiness to produce a bomb if that decision is taken.

Threat of military action sparks war fears

If the talks fail, uncertainty hangs over the timing of any possible U.S. attack.

If the aim of potential military action is to pressure Iran to make concessions in nuclear negotiations, it's not clear whether limited strikes would work. If the goal is to remove Iran's leaders, that will likely commit the U.S. to a larger, longer military campaign. There has been no public sign of planning for what would come next, including the potential for chaos in Iran.

There is also uncertainty about what any military action could mean for the wider region. Tehran could retaliate against the American-allied nations of the Persian Gulf or Israel. Oil prices have risen in recent days in part due to those concerns, with benchmark Brent crude now around \$70 a barrel. Iran in the last round of talks said it briefly halted traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all traded oil passes.

Netflix walks away from Warner Bros deal, clearing the path for Paramount

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Netflix is walking away from its offer to buy Warner Bros. Discovery's studio and streaming business, in a stunning move that effectively puts Paramount in a position to take over its storied Hollywood rival.

On Thursday, Warner's board announced that Skydance-owned Paramount's latest offer to buy the entire

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company for \$31 per share was superior to the agreement it had previously struck with Netflix. Warner gave Netflix four business days to come up with a counteroffer — but Netflix instead responded less than two hours later, declining to raise its proposal. It said the new price it would have to pay made the deal “no longer financially attractive.”

“We believe we would have been strong stewards of Warner Bros.’ iconic brands,” Netflix’s co-CEOs Ted Sarandos and Greg Peters said in a joint statement. “But this transaction was always a ‘nice to have’ at the right price, not a ‘must have’ at any price.”

A Paramount buyout of Warner Bros. Discovery would reshape Hollywood and the wider media landscape. And unlike Netflix — which was only eyeing Warner’s studio and streaming business — Paramount wants the entire company. That means HBO Max, cult-favorite titles like “Harry Potter” and even CNN could soon find themselves under the same roof as Paramount’s CBS, “Top Gun” and the Paramount+ streaming service.

The prospect of such a combination, which will still need the green light from both Warner shareholders and regulators, poses both antitrust concerns and questions of political influence.

Netflix’s decision to walk away on Thursday marks the latest development in a monthslong, messy corporate battle over Warner’s future. Sarandos and Peters thanked Warner’s leadership despite the final outcome.

Warner had repeatedly backed the deal it struck with Netflix since December right up until Thursday evening, when its board continued to recommend Netflix even while calling Paramount’s bid valued at about \$111 billion including debt “superior.” Netflix had previously put a \$27.75 per share offer on the table for Warner’s studio and streaming business, totaling nearly \$83 billion including debt.

In a statement Thursday night, CEO David Zaslav said Netflix executives had been “extraordinary partners” and that he wished them “well in the future.”

After months of a heated back and forth amid Paramount’s hostile campaign to take over Warner without the board’s blessing, Warner also changed its tune about the remaining prospective buyer.

Warner’s board hasn’t officially adopted Paramount’s merger agreement yet, but once it does, Zaslav said it “will create tremendous value.” He added that the company was “excited about the potential of a combined Paramount Skydance and Warner Bros. Discovery.”

Paramount did not immediately respond to requests for further comment. But CEO David Ellison earlier applauded Warner’s board affirming “the superior value of our offer.”

A Paramount-Warner combo would combine two of Hollywood’s five legacy studios that remain today, in addition to their theatrical channels. Beyond “Harry Potter,” Warner movies like “Superman,” “Barbie,” and “One Battle After Another” — as well as hit TV series like “The White Lotus” and “Succession” — would join Paramount’s content library.

Paramount’s lineup of titles include “Top Gun,” “Titanic” and “The Godfather.” And beyond CBS, it owns networks like MTV and Nickelodeon, as well as the Paramount+ streaming service.

A merger between the two companies would put CNN under the same roof as CBS, which has already seen significant editorial shifts under new Skydance ownership. Paramount took steps to appeal to more conservative viewers in its news operations, notably with the installation of Free Press founder Bari Weiss as editor-in-chief of CBS News. And if the company’s takeover bid of Warner is successful, critics warn similar shifts could happen CNN, a network that has long attracted ire from Trump.

“Any concerns about Netflix owning Warner Bros. are only heightened by the prospect of Paramount owning all of WBD. But it might not even matter,” Mike Proulx, vice president and research director at Forrester, a market research company, said in an email. “Politics are playing an outsized role in this deal, and they’ve been on Paramount’s side from the get-go.”

President Donald Trump has a close relationship with the billionaire Oracle founder Larry Ellison, the father of Paramount’s CEO David Ellison who is heavily backing Paramount’s bid to buy Warner. And Paramount’s aggressive push to acquire Warner arrived just months after Skydance closed its own buyout of Paramount in a contentious merger approved just weeks after the company agreed to pay the president

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\$16 million to settle a lawsuit over editing at Paramount's "60 Minutes" program on CBS.

Still, Trump has continued to publicly lash out at Paramount over editorial decisions at CBS' "60 Minutes." And while the president previously made unprecedented suggestions about his involvement in seeing a Warner deal through, he's since walked back those statements and maintained that regulatory approval will be up to the Justice Department.

Still, top Democratic lawmakers have sounded the alarm about the Republican president's ties to companies like Paramount and potential consequences of growing corporate power.

"A handful of Trump-aligned billionaires are trying to seize control of what you watch and charge you whatever price they want," Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a longtime antitrust hawk, said in a statement Thursday night. She also called a potential Paramount-Warner combo an "antitrust disaster."

Executives at Paramount have argued that merging with Warner will allow it to compete with bigger rivals particularly in the streaming space, and bring larger content libraries for its customers. But Warren and other critics say such a merger threatens higher prices, and that a Warner takeover would only further consolidate power in an industry already run by just a few major players. Some trade groups also warn that could mean job losses and less diversity in filmmaking.

When Netflix was still in the running, one of its key arguments against a Warner-Paramount tie-up was that it would combine two very similar companies: two legacy studios, two theatrical channels and two major news networks. The streaming giant said that posed a higher risk for job losses and other competition concerns.

In contrast, executives from both Netflix and Warner argued at a Senate antitrust hearing earlier this month that Netflix doesn't have the same studios and film distribution that Warner does. That was "one of the reasons that the Netflix offer appeals to us so much," Bruce Campbell, Warner's chief revenue and strategy officer, told senators on Feb. 3 — noting that the company believed Netflix would not only keep Warner's operations intact, but "invest in continued production."

How regulators will respond to a Warner-Paramount deal remains to be seen. The U.S. Department of Justice has already initiated reviews, and other countries are expected to do so, too.

Warner shareholders will have to be convinced, too. Beyond a higher price, Paramount has also tried to entice them by pledging to move up a previously-promised "ticking fee." The company initially said it would pay 25 cents per share for every quarter the deal drags on past the end of the year. Now it's agreed to pay that amount if the deal doesn't go through by the end of September. It also agreed to a regulatory termination fee of \$7 billion.

But Paramount is taking on billions of dollars in debt to finance its offer — something critics have warned could only increase to the likelihood of potential job losses and other restructuring down the road. Foreign sovereign wealth funds have also provided equity for the offer, drawing added scrutiny.

Airstrikes hit Afghan capital of Kabul, hours after Afghanistan attacks Pakistan

By ABDUL QA HAR AFGHAN and MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Pakistan carried out airstrikes in Kabul and two other Afghan provinces early Friday, Afghanistan's government spokesperson said, hours after Afghanistan launched a cross-border attack on Pakistan in the latest escalation of violence between the neighboring countries that made a Qatar-mediated ceasefire appear increasingly shaky.

At least three explosions were heard in Kabul, but there was no immediate information on the exact location of the strikes in the Afghan capital, or of any potential casualties. Government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said Pakistan also carried out airstrikes in Kandahar to the south and in the southeastern province of Paktia.

Two senior Pakistani security officials told The Associated Press that Pakistan's military carried out airstrikes targeting what they described as Afghan military facilities in Kabul, Kandahar and Paktia provinces, allegedly destroying two brigade bases, but they didn't mention any potential casualties. The officials spoke

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on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to media on the record.

Afghanistan said its military launched its attack across the border into Pakistan late Thursday in retaliation for deadly Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan border areas Sunday, and claimed to have captured more than a dozen Pakistani army posts.

Pakistan's government, which had described last Sunday's airstrikes as an attack on militants harbored in the area, described Thursday's Afghan attack as unprovoked, and dismissed claims that army posts had been captured.

The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to media on the record.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres urges both sides to protect civilians as required under international law and "to continue to seek to resolve any differences through diplomacy," U.N. spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

Afghan strikes were retaliatory

"In response to the repeated rebellions and insurrections of the Pakistani military, large-scale offensive operations were launched against Pakistani military bases and military installations along the Durand Line," Mujahid said in a post on X Thursday night. Afghanistan's Defense Ministry said the retaliatory attacks occurred along the border in six provinces.

The two countries' 2,611-kilometer (1,622-mile) long border is known as the Durand Line, which Afghanistan has not formally recognized.

Differing casualty figures

The two sides reported widely differing casualty figures.

Afghanistan's Defense Ministry said 55 Pakistani soldiers had been killed, including some whose bodies had been taken into Afghanistan, while "several others were captured alive." It put its own casualties at eight killed and another 11 wounded. The ministry said it had destroyed 19 Pakistani army posts and two bases, and that the fighting had ended at midnight, about four hours after the start of the attack.

Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar, however, said the number of Pakistani soldiers killed stood at two, with three others wounded. He said 36 Afghan fighters had been reported killed. In a post on X, he said Pakistan was giving a "strong and effective response" to what he called unprovoked firing from Afghanistan.

Mosharraf Ali Zaidi, spokesperson for Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, denied that any Pakistani soldiers had been captured. Later, in a post on X, he added that at least 133 Afghan fighters were killed and more than 200 wounded, saying that 27 Afghan posts were also destroyed and nine fighters were captured. He didn't specify where the victims died, and just added that there would be "many more casualties estimated in strikes in Kabul, Paktia and Kandahar military targets."

Refugee camp hit

Both sides also reported exchanges of fire in the Torkham border area.

Afghan authorities were evacuating a refugee camp near the Torkham border crossing after several refugees were wounded, said Qureshi Badlon, head of Torkham's Information and Public Awareness Board. The Defense Ministry said 13 civilians were wounded in a missile strike on the camp, including women and children.

On the Pakistani side of the border, police said residents were also evacuating to safer areas, while some Afghan refugees who had been waiting to cross back into Afghanistan were also moved to secure locations. Pakistan launched a sweeping crackdown on migrants in October 2023 and has expelled hundreds of thousands of people.

Pakistani police said mortars fired from Afghanistan had landed in nearby villages, but there were no reports of civilian casualties.

"Pakistan will take all necessary measures to ensure its territorial integrity and the safety and security of its citizens," Pakistan's Information Ministry said in a post on X.

Afghanistan's military released video footage of military vehicles moving at night, and the sound of heavy gunfire. The video could not be independently verified.

Months of tension

Tension has been high between the two neighbors for months, with deadly border clashes in October killing dozens of soldiers, civilians and suspected militants. The violence followed explosions in Kabul that Afghan officials blamed on Pakistan. Islamabad, at the time, conducted strikes deep inside Afghanistan to target militant hideouts.

A Qatari-mediated ceasefire between the two countries has largely held, but the two sides have still occasionally traded fire across the border. Several rounds of peace talks in November failed to produce a formal agreement.

On Sunday, Pakistan's military carried out strikes along the border with Afghanistan, saying it had killed at least 70 militants.

Afghanistan rejected the claim, saying dozens of civilians had been killed, including women and children. The Defense Ministry said "various civilian areas" in eastern Afghanistan had been hit, including a religious madrassa and several homes. The ministry said the strikes were a violation of Afghanistan's airspace and sovereignty.

Militant violence has surged in Pakistan in recent years, much of which Pakistan blames on the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP, and outlawed Baloch separatist groups. The TTP is separate from but closely allied with Afghanistan's Taliban. Islamabad accuses the TTP of operating from inside Afghanistan, a charge both the group and Kabul deny.

Columbia student detained by ICE is abruptly released after Mamdani meets with Trump

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal immigration authorities arrested a Columbia University student early Thursday, triggering protests on campus and allegations that agents gained entry to the university-owned residence by posing as police officers searching for a missing child.

Just hours after detaining student Ellie Aghayeva, though, the federal government abruptly reversed course, permitting her to walk free after an apparent intervention by President Donald Trump.

In a social media post Thursday afternoon, Mayor Zohran Mamdani said he expressed concerns about the arrest during an unrelated meeting with Trump, who then agreed to release her immediately.

"I am safe and okay," Aghayeva wrote on Instagram, minutes after Mamdani's post, adding she was in "complete shock" from the experience.

The head-spinning series of events marked the latest consequence of the unlikely relationship between the Republican president and Mamdani, a democratic socialist who Trump once threatened to have deported.

On Thursday, while pitching Trump on a massive housing project, Mamdani also called on the president to drop cases against several other current and former students facing deportation for their roles in protests against Israel.

Aghayeva, a senior from Azerbaijan studying neuroscience and politics, hasn't been publicly linked to any of the pro-Palestinian demonstrations that roiled Columbia's campus. A self-described content creator, she has amassed a large social media following by sharing day-in-the-life videos and tips for navigating college as an immigrant.

Early Thursday, five federal agents gained entry to her apartment at 6 a.m. by claiming they were searching for a missing child, according to a petition from her lawyers and a statement released by Columbia's acting president, Claire Shipman.

"The agents gained entry by stating they were police searching for a missing child," Shipman said in a video released Thursday night. "Security cameras captured agents in a hallway showing pictures of the alleged missing child."

Aghayeva then dashed off a message to her more than 100,000 followers on Instagram: "DHS illegally arrested me. Please help." A photo accompanying the post appeared to show her legs in the back seat of a vehicle.

A Department of Homeland Security spokesperson said Aghayeva's student visa had been terminated in 2016 for failing to attend classes. Inquiries to Columbia about her visa status and how long she had been enrolled in the university were not returned.

In their petition, attorneys for Aghayeva said she had entered the country on a visa in or around 2016. They declined to provide additional comment, including details about her immigration status.

A spokesperson for DHS, Tricia McLaughlin, said Aghayeva had been placed in removal proceedings and "released while she waits for her hearing." She disputed allegations that agents had posed as New York City police officers but didn't respond to questions about whether they had claimed to be seeking a missing child.

The use of disguises or other misrepresentations by immigration authorities has drawn attention in recent months, after federal agents were seen posing as utility workers and other service employees in Minneapolis and elsewhere.

The practice is legal, in most cases. But immigration attorneys say such ruses are becoming increasingly common, adding to concerns about the Trump administration's dramatic reshaping of immigration enforcement tactics nationwide.

In recent weeks, Trump has once again intensified his attacks on several universities, including Harvard and UCLA. The arrest would seem to mark the first federal enforcement action at Columbia since the university agreed to pay more than \$220 million to the administration over the summer.

"It's a horrifying sign that the roving eye of the administration is turning back to Columbia," said Michael Thaddeus, a mathematics professor at Columbia and vice president of the university's chapter of the American Association of University Professors, which has sued Trump. "The idea that secret police would abduct and imprison students in our midst is something we'd expect from an authoritarian regime."

Many students and faculty called on Columbia to increase protections for international students following the arrest last March of Mahmoud Khalil, a former graduate student and pro-Palestinian activist, whose deportation case remains ongoing.

In an email to the Columbia community Thursday, Shipman said that residential staff had been reminded not to allow federal law enforcement into university buildings without a subpoena or warrant.

"If you encounter or observe DHS/ICE agents conducting enforcement activities on or near campus, immediately contact Public Safety," the acting president wrote. "Do not allow them to enter non-public areas or accept service of a warrant or subpoena."

Hillary Clinton testifies she has no information on Epstein's crimes and doesn't recall meeting him

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told members of Congress on Thursday that she had no knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein's or Ghislaine Maxwell's crimes, starting off two days of depositions that will also include former President Bill Clinton.

"I had no idea about their criminal activities. I do not recall ever encountering Mr. Epstein," Hillary Clinton said in an opening statement she shared on social media. The closed-door deposition concluded Thursday after over six hours of Hillary Clinton giving an answer to every question.

The depositions in the Clintons' hometown of Chappaqua, a typically quiet hamlet north of New York City, come after months of tense back-and-forth between the former high-powered Democratic couple and the Republican-controlled House Oversight Committee as it investigates Epstein, who killed himself in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial. It will be the first time that a former president has been forced to testify before Congress.

Yet the demand for a reckoning over Epstein's abuse of underage girls has become a near-unstoppable force on Capitol Hill and beyond.

President Donald Trump, a Republican who has expressed regret that the Clintons are being forced to testify, bowed last year to pressure to release case files on Epstein. The Clintons, too, agreed to testify

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after their offers of sworn statements were rebuffed by the Oversight panel and its chairman, Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., threatened criminal contempt of Congress charges against them.

"Like every decent person," Hillary Clinton added in her opening statement, "I have been horrified by what we have learned about their crimes."

She has previously said that her husband flew with Epstein for charitable trips but that she did not recall ever meeting Epstein. She had also interacted with Maxwell, Epstein's former girlfriend and confidant, at conferences hosted by the Clinton Foundation.

Maxwell, a British socialite, also attended the 2010 wedding of their daughter, Chelsea Clinton.

As she exited the event center where the deposition was held, Hillary Clinton told reporters that Maxwell had come to the wedding as a guest of someone else and that she had told the committee she only knew Maxwell "as an acquaintance."

Republicans relish chance to question Clintons

Bill Clinton, however, has emerged as a top target for Republicans amid the political struggle over who receives the most scrutiny for their ties to Epstein. Several photos of the former president were included in the first tranche of Epstein files released by the Department of Justice in January, including a number of him with women whose faces were redacted. Clinton has not been accused of wrongdoing in his relationship with Epstein.

Comer has also pointed to Hillary Clinton's work as secretary of state to address sex trafficking as another reason to insist on her deposition. Clinton defended her work to address sex trafficking around the world, saying that it remained important to help the millions of survivors of sex trafficking.

The committee's investigation has also sought to understand why the Department of Justice under previous presidential administrations did not seek further charges against Epstein following a 2008 arrangement in which he pleaded guilty to state charges in Florida for soliciting prostitution from an underage girl but avoided federal charges.

Hillary Clinton accused Comer of running a one-sided investigation that has failed to hold Trump and other Republican officials to account. "This institutional failure is designed to protect one political party and one public official," she said.

Yet conspiracy theories, especially on the right, have swirled for years around the Clintons and their connections to Epstein and Maxwell, who argues she was wrongfully convicted. Republicans have long wanted to press the Clintons for answers.

Hillary Clinton said that one Republican lawmaker asked her a line of questions about "vile, bogus conspiracy theories."

The deposition was also paused after Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., sent a photo of Hillary Clinton in the private proceeding to a conservative influencer who posted it on social media, violating the committee's rules for depositions.

Democrats said that the incident underscored how important it was for there to be a clear public record of the deposition. Rep. Robert Garcia, the top Democrat on the Oversight panel, said that Hillary Clinton, after the incident, repeated her longstanding demand that the deposition be made public, and Democrats called for a video and transcript of the complete proceedings to be released quickly.

Comer said that he would work quickly to release a video and transcript of the deposition.

"The purpose of the whole investigation is to try to understand many things about Epstein," he told reporters outside the convention center where the depositions were being held. "How did he accumulate so much wealth? How was he able to surround himself with some of the most powerful men in the world?"

Democrats call for Trump to testify

Democrats, now being led by a new generation of politicians, have prioritized transparency around Epstein over defending the former leaders of their party. Several Democratic lawmakers joined with Republicans on the Oversight panel to advance the contempt of Congress charges against the Clintons last month. Several said they had no relationship with the Clintons and owed no loyalty to them.

Garcia also called on Trump to testify in the investigation. He argued that Bill Clinton's appearance sets

a precedent that should apply to Trump as well.

"Let's get President Trump in front of our committee to answer the questions that are being asked across this country from survivors," Garcia said.

Comer previously said that the committee can't depose Trump because he is a sitting president.

Still, Democrats are also coming off an effort this week to confront Trump about his administration's handling of the Epstein files by taking women who survived Epstein's abuse as their guests to Trump's State of the Union address.

Garcia and others are also challenging the Department of Justice's assertion that it has met the requirements of a law passed by Congress last year that mandates the release of many of the case files on Epstein.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York said his caucus in the coming days would also review unredacted versions of the Epstein case files at a Department of Justice office. Schumer, who demanded that the department release all of the files and preserve all materials, said they will "pull on every thread" until they "reveal this massive cover-up."

Deadly shooting in Cuban waters highlights obsessions with counter-revolution as US pressure mounts

By DÁNICA COTO and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Word from the Cuban government of a deadly encounter between its troops and a boat carrying armed expatriates is casting a spotlight on Cubans living in the U.S. who still harbor aspirations of a counter-revolution 67 years after a guerrilla uprising ushered in communism.

Cuban soldiers confronted a speedboat carrying 10 people as the vessel approached the island and opened fire on the troops, who fired back, killing four and wounding six, Cuba's government says. Cuba's deputy foreign minister on Thursday said communication about the firefight is underway with U.S. officials, who say at least one American was killed and another wounded.

One of the four killed was Michel Ortega Casanova — a man on an "obsessive and diabolical" quest for Cuba's freedom from current circumstances, his brother in Florida said.

Misael Ortega Casanova said his brother Michel is an American citizen who has lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years and still agonizes over the suffering that Cubans endure.

"They became so obsessed that they didn't think about the consequences nor their own lives," Misael told The Associated Press of the passions harbored by his brother.

At the same time, Misael said that he did not recognize any of the names that the Cuban government released in connection with the boat incursion and that the shootings had caught his family by surprise.

"No one knew," Misael said of his brother's plans. "My mother is devastated."

He said that while he doesn't believe in heroes — "because that is ignorance" — he hopes that his brother's death might be a worthwhile sacrifice.

"Maybe it will justify that some day Cuba will be free."

Competing narratives of stolen speedboat and guns

Cuban authorities, meanwhile, say Ortega Casanova was accompanied on the boat by two men who are wanted "based on their involvement in the promotion, planning, organization, financing, support or commission" of terrorism, speaking of Amijail Sánchez González and Leordan Enrique Cruz Gómez. They released a list of alleged suspects accused of planning to invade Cuba.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio was wary of initial reports by Cuba and asserted that the U.S. would gather its own information about the people involved. His words also evoked a seemingly dormant history of subterfuge and armed provocations between the U.S. and Cuba.

"It is highly unusual to see shootouts in open sea like that," said Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants. "It's something that hasn't happened with Cuba in a very long time."

Conrado Galindo Sariol, another passenger, was identified as a former political prisoner in a 2025 interview with Martí Noticias, a U.S.-based news site that has long called for a change of government in Cuba.

The Cuban government said the watercraft was a Florida-registered speedboat, and officials who

searched it found assault rifles, handguns, homemade explosives, bulletproof vests, telescopic sights and camouflage uniforms.

Adding to intrigue, the boat was reported stolen from an island in the Florida Keys archipelago 140 miles (225 kilometers) southwest of Miami, according to a report from the Monroe County Sheriffs' Office.

Heightened tensions after attack on Venezuela

The shooting took place amid heightened tensions between the two countries as President Donald Trump's administration tightens the U.S. embargo and threatens tariffs against countries providing Cuba with oil.

Crucial oil shipments to Cuba from Venezuela were halted when the U.S. arrested Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro in a Jan. 3 stealth nighttime raid by U.S. military forces.

Guns and boats of mysterious provenance are hallmarks of both the guerrilla landing that spawned Cuba's 1959 revolution, the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion by CIA-trained exiles in an attempt to topple its leader, Fidel Castro, and assorted skirmishes since then.

Any new incursion into Cuban waters is likely to have been prompted by U.S. pressure, which has decimated the economy and spurred wishful thinking of regime change in policy circles, said William LeoGrande, a professor at American University who has studied Cuba for decades.

An academic conference taking place this week at Florida International University in Miami, titled "Cuba: The Day After Tomorrow," is focused on the "possibilities of a national refoundation following a political transition," according to a news release about the event.

"The atmosphere now is that the Cuban government is on the verge of collapse," he said. "I don't think that's true, but that's what the president of the United States is saying, that's what Secretary of State Marco Rubio is saying."

Skepticism among Cuban exiles

Emilio Izquierdo, a prominent exile in Miami who spent two years jailed in Cuba before arriving in the U.S. in 1980, cast doubt on Cuba's initial reports of an armed incursion.

He said that it was far more believable that foreign agents might have infiltrated Miami's massive Cuban exile community and tricked government opponents into risking their lives on a suicide mission to overthrow the communist government in Havana.

"Nobody with a 25-foot speedboat tries to overthrow a government," he said.

The timing of the incident — with tensions between the U.S. and Cuba running at their highest in decades — was similarly suspicious, he said.

Ramón Saul Sanchez, an exiled Cuban activist and leader of the nonprofit group Movimiento Democracia, suspects that the Cuban government knew in advance that the speedboat was planning to approach.

Young woman says she was on social media 'all day long' as a child in landmark addiction trial

By KAITLYN HUAMANI and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A young woman who is battling against social media giants took the stand Thursday to testify about her experience using the platforms as she was growing up, saying she was on social media "all day long" as a child.

The now 20-year-old, who has been identified in court documents as KGM, says her early use of social media addicted her to the technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts. Meta and YouTube are the two remaining defendants in the case, which TikTok and Snap have settled.

The case, along with two others, has been selected as a bellwether trial, meaning its outcome could impact how thousands of similar lawsuits against social media companies are likely to play out.

KGM, or Kaley, as her lawyers have called her during the trial, started using YouTube at age 6 and Instagram at age 9.

A turbulent home life

Kaley took the stand wearing a pink floral dress and a beige cardigan and said she was "very nervous" after her attorney, Mark Lanier, asked how she was doing Thursday morning.

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Lanier displayed childhood photos of Kaley and her family and asked about positive memories from her upbringing in a quiet cul-de-sac in Chico, California. She spoke of themed birthday parties, trips to Six Flags and her mom's consistent efforts to make her childhood special.

Still, Kaley's relationship with her mother was challenging at times. Kaley said most of their arguments were over the use of her phone.

Both the defendants and the plaintiff have pointed to a turbulent home life for Kaley. Her attorneys say she was preyed upon as a vulnerable user, but attorneys representing Meta and Google-owned YouTube have argued Kaley turned to their platforms as a coping mechanism or a means of escaping her mental health struggles.

When asked about claims that her mother had hit her, abused her and neglected her, Kaley said "she wasn't perfect, but she was trying her best," and clarified that she doesn't think she would label her mother's past actions as abuse or neglect today.

But later Thursday, during her cross-examination, Kaley did agree that her mother was being physically and emotionally abusive during the time that she was self-harming around when she was in the 6th grade.

Kaley, who works as a personal shopper at Walmart, lives with her mother in the home she grew up in. Notifications gave her a 'rush'

As a child, Kaley set up multiple accounts on both Instagram and YouTube so she could like and comment on her posts. She said she would also "buy" likes through a platform where she could like other people's photos and get a slew of likes in return. "It made me look popular," she said.

Kaley was asked specifically about the features the plaintiffs argue are deliberately designed to be addictive, including notifications. Those notifications on both Instagram and YouTube gave her a "rush," she said. She would receive them throughout the day and would go to the bathroom during school to check them — something she still does.

Kaley said while she uses YouTube less often now, she believes she was previously addicted to it. "Anytime I tried to set limits for myself, it wouldn't work and I just couldn't get off," she said.

Filters on Instagram, specifically those that could change a person's cosmetic appearance, have also loomed large in the case and were also a constant fixture of Kaley's use. Lanier and his colleagues unfurled a nearly 35-foot-long canvas banner with photos Kaley has posted on Instagram. She said "almost all" of the photos had a filter on them.

The jury was also shown Instagram posts and YouTube videos Kaley posted as a child and young teen. One video showed her saying she was "crying tears of joy" after surpassing 100 YouTube subscribers — but then she quickly turned to her looks, apologizing for her "ugly appearance."

"I look so fat in this shirt," the young Kaley says in the video.

Kaley said she did not experience the negative feelings associated with her body dysmorphia diagnosis before she began using social media and filters.

Meta focuses on plaintiff's home life, contradicting statements

Meta has argued that Kaley faced significant challenges before she ever used social media. The company's lawyer, Paul Schmidt, said earlier this month that the core question in the case is whether the platforms were a substantial factor in Kaley's mental health struggles.

Meta attorney Phyllis Jones took a polite, respectful tone in her cross-examination Thursday, acknowledging that it could be uncomfortable for her to speak about her private life in front of a room of strangers. Jones proceeded to zero in on Kaley's home life.

Jones pulled up text exchanges and posts Kaley had made on Instagram about her mental health and her relationship with her mother and played videos Kaley took of her mother yelling at her.

On nearly 20 occasions during the Meta cross-examination, Jones asked Kaley to look at the transcript from her 2025 deposition, which contradicted some of the responses she gave during her testimony. Many of those questions were about how a specific action by her family members or a specific experience impacted her mental health, with Kaley saying on Thursday they either didn't have an impact or didn't significantly contribute to anxiety and depression. Her deposition from about a year ago often said the opposite.

"I tried to answer the questions to the best of my ability, but I may have misspoke at times," Kaley said of her deposition.

This time, Kaley did agree that her mother was being physically and emotionally abusive during the time that she was self-harming around when she was in the 6th grade. She testified earlier in the day that she doesn't think she would label her mother's past actions as abuse or neglect today.

Jones confirmed with Kaley that she had never had a doctor or mental health care provider diagnose her with a social media addiction, nor had she been treated for an addiction to Instagram or told by a provider to limit her Instagram use. Kaley said she never raised concerns about overuse or addiction with providers because she said she felt they would tell to get off the platforms entirely, which she didn't want.

Therapist: Social media and sense of self 'were closely related'

Victoria Burke, a former therapist Kaley worked with in 2019, testified on Wednesday, and Burke said her social media and her sense of self "were closely related," adding that what was happening on the platforms could "make or break her mood."

An attorney for Meta parsed through Burke's notes from her sessions with Kaley extensively in a cross examination that lasted about three hours. He highlighted Kaley's negative experiences with in-person bullying, other school-based sources of stress and anxiety and issues with her family. Mentions of social media in the notes were mostly limited to Kaley saying she didn't feel she had a place at home, at school or among her peers, but did feel she had a place to be seen on social media.

Burke's treatment of Kaley lasted about six months and that period took place seven years ago.

The case is expected to continue for several weeks, and the outcome the jury reaches could shape the outcome of a slew of similar lawsuits against social media companies. Meta is also facing a separate trial in New Mexico.

Prosecutor claims that delayed charges against Abrego Garcia were 'extraordinary' but justified

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A representative of the U.S. Attorney's office testified in federal court on Thursday that the human smuggling case against Kilmar Abrego Garcia was justified while acknowledging that the charges, coming two years after a traffic stop in question was "extraordinary."

Abrego Garcia, whose mistaken deportation has galvanized both sides of the immigration debate, claims that the criminal prosecution is vindictive and pushed by officials from President Donald Trump's administration to punish him after they were forced to bring him back to the United States. He wants the charges dismissed.

While Abrego Garcia is a Salvadoran citizen, a court order from 2019 prevents him from being deported to that country. That's because an immigration judge determined he faced danger in El Salvador from a gang that had threatened his family. Abrego Garcia, 30, immigrated to the U.S. illegally as a teenager but has an American wife and child. He has lived and worked in Maryland for years under the supervision of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

After he was deported to El Salvador last year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the Trump administration had to work to bring him back. He was eventually returned to the U.S. only to face criminal charges of human smuggling based on a 2022 traffic stop in Tennessee. He has pleaded not guilty.

Body camera footage from a Tennessee Highway Patrol officer shows a calm exchange with Abrego Garcia after he was pulled over for speeding. There were nine passengers in the car, and the officers discussed among themselves their suspicions of smuggling. However, Abrego Garcia was eventually allowed to continue driving with only a warning.

First Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee Rob McGuire, who was acting U.S. attorney in April 2025, testified that it was his decision to charge Abrego Garcia, and he did so based on the evidence.

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"I had previously prosecuted several human smuggling cases," McGuire testified. When he saw video of the traffic stop, "I was immediately struck by how similar what was being depicted in the body cam was to those investigations."

Abrego Garcia was carrying nine people in a car without luggage, the car belonged to someone with "a human smuggling background," and the route was suspicious, among other things, McGuire said.

He said he was in close contact with the deputy attorney general's office about the investigation's progress but said that was common with high-profile cases.

On cross-examination, McGuire admitted that the timing of the charges, more than two years after the traffic stop, was "extraordinary." McGuire said he had not previously been aware of the stop.

Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent in Charge Rana Saoud, who ran the Nashville region at the time of Abrego Garcia's deportation, testified Thursday that she first heard of the 2022 traffic stop in April 2025, when someone forwarded her a news article in the Tennessee Star, a conservative online publication. Saoud said she was aware of the publicity around Abrego Garcia, who at that point was still in El Salvador.

Saoud testified that she initiated the investigation and was under no pressure from higher-ups.

"If the facts did not add up, we would have ceased to move forward," she said. "The case just kept getting stronger."

On cross-examination, Saoud agreed that the case was not high profile because of the nature of the criminal allegations but because of who the defendant was. "Mr. Abrego was in the news all the time at that point," she said.

Defense attorney David Patton said that a different HSI office in Baltimore knew of the traffic stop two years earlier but had never charged Abrego Garcia and closed the investigation after his March 2025 deportation. The case was reopened in Baltimore a month later, after the Supreme Court decision on Abrego Garcia's deportation. By the time McGuire was aware of the traffic stop, federal agents with the Baltimore office had already interviewed the owner of the car Abrego Garcia had been driving.

Jose Hernandez Reyes, then incarcerated, told agents he had run a smuggling operation with Abrego Garcia as a driver for him, McGuire said. The same day McGuire learned about the traffic stop from Saoud, Associate Deputy Attorney General Aakash Singh emailed him asking to meet about Hernandez Reyes' testimony.

McGuire emailed Singh regularly with updates on the indictment's progress. He said he did not know if Singh was sharing those updates with Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche or Attorney General Pam Bondi.

"I can tell you they never came back to say, 'Put this in there,' or 'Say this,' or 'Don't say that,'" he testified.

Pressed about whether he might have felt pressure to prosecute the case, McGuire said, "I'm not going to do something that I think is wrong to keep my job."

U.S. District Judge Waverly Crenshaw previously found some evidence that the prosecution against Abrego Garcia, who arrived at the courthouse with his wife Thursday morning, "may be vindictive." The judge said many statements by Trump administration officials "raise cause for concern." He cited a statement by Blanche that seemed to suggest the Department of Justice charged Abrego Garcia because he won his wrongful-deportation case.

Abrego Garcia's attorneys have been sparring with prosecutors for months over whether officials like Blanche would be required to testify at Thursday's hearing and what emails Department of Justice officials would have to turn over to them. McGuire has argued that he alone made the decision to prosecute, so the motives of other officials were irrelevant.

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

Ancient coupling may have happened more between human females and Neanderthal males

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Humans and Neanderthals cozied up from time to time when they lived in the same areas tens of thousands of years ago. But we don't know much about who got with whom, or why.

A new genetic analysis offers some ancient gossip: The pairings were more often female humans with male Neanderthals.

How exactly this happened remains a huge question mark. Did human women venture into Neanderthal populations, or were the Neanderthal males drawn to larger human enclaves? Were these interactions peaceful, confusing, secretive or even violent?

"I don't know if we'll ever get a definitive answer to how this happened, since we can't travel back in time," said population genetics expert Xinjun Zhang with the University of Michigan, commenting on the new analysis.

But the study, published Thursday in the journal *Science*, shows "that whenever Neanderthals and modern humans have mated, there has been a preference for male Neanderthals and female modern humans, as opposed to the other way around," said author Alexander Platt, who studies genetics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Scientists know that Neanderthals and humans mated because there is a small but important percentage of Neanderthal DNA in most modern humans outside of sub-Saharan Africa — including genes that can help us fight some diseases and make us more susceptible to others.

But they have also known that the Neanderthal DNA is not distributed evenly throughout the human genome.

In particular, there is a surprising lack of Neanderthal DNA in the human X chromosome, one of the bundles of genes in each cell known as a sex chromosome, compared with the amount of Neanderthal DNA in the other, non-sex chromosomes in the cell.

Scientists thought that maybe the genes in those locations were simply not beneficial — or even harmful. Perhaps people with those gene patterns didn't survive as well so those genes were filtered out by evolution over time.

Or, they thought, maybe the difference could be explained by how the two species intermingled.

To try to solve the riddle, Platt and colleagues looked instead at the Neanderthal genome and the human DNA that got interspersed during a "mating event" 250,000 years ago.

When comparing these genes, they found more of a human fingerprint on the Neanderthal X chromosome — the same chromosome that, in humans, has less Neanderthal DNA than would be expected.

The most likely explanation for this mirror image pattern is mating behavior. That's because of the way sex chromosomes are passed from parents to children, explained Platt. Because genetic females have two X chromosomes and genetic males have one X and one Y chromosomes, two out of every three X chromosomes in a population, on average, are inherited from people's mothers.

If more human females mated with Neanderthal males than the other way around, over thousands of years you would expect to see just what they found: more human DNA in Neanderthal X chromosomes and less Neanderthal DNA in human X chromosomes.

"I think that they've taken some really important steps in filling missing pieces to the puzzle," said Joshua Akey, who studies evolutionary genomics at Princeton University and wasn't involved with the new study.

The study can't totally rule out other explanations. For example, Zhang said, it's possible that the offspring of human males and Neanderthal females just didn't survive as well.

But the simplest and most likely, explanation, the study found, is also the most interesting: "It's not the result of a strictly Darwinian survival of the fittest," Platt said. "It's really the result of how we interact with each other, and what our culture and society and behavior is like."

Walz unveils anti-fraud package after Trump administration threatens to halt Medicaid funds

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn., (AP) — Gov. Tim Walz denounced the Trump administration's latest threat to withhold federal funds from Minnesota as another step in a "retribution" campaign as he unveiled a package of legislation Thursday intended to fight fraud in public programs, a persistent problem that provided an impetus for the federal government's immigration crackdown in Minnesota.

The Democratic governor made the announcement a day after Vice President JD Vance said the administration would "temporarily halt" some Medicaid funding to Minnesota over fraud concerns, as part of what he described as an aggressive drive against the misuse of public funds. Walz's proposals were in the works well before Vance's announcement. They followed other initiatives Walz launched previously to try to come to grips with a problem that eventually helped lead him to drop his bid for a third term.

"This is a targeted retribution against a state that the president doesn't like," Walz said at a news conference, where he said the administration is using the same kind of "false information" on fraud as a "pretext" the way it did to justify Operation Metro Surge, in which the Department of Homeland Security sent over 3,000 federal officers into Minnesota.

The Trump administration's move to freeze the Medicaid funds was part of a larger effort to spotlight fraud around the country. The administration had previously cited allegations of fraud involving day care centers run by Minneapolis-area Somali residents as a reason for a massive enforcement surge there.

One Minnesota federal prosecutor last December estimated that the total fraud across several programs could exceed \$9 billion. But John Connolly, the state's Medicaid director, told reporters Thursday the state has no evidence to substantiate such a high figure.

Other fraud cases in Minnesota have included a \$300 million pandemic food fraud scheme revolving around the nonprofit Feeding Our Future, in which 78 defendants have been charged, with at least 57 convictions so far, in what prosecutors call the largest COVID-19-related fraud scheme in the country.

The governor's long list of proposals is aimed at better detection and oversight, strengthened investigative and enforcement authority and increased criminal penalties. One of them is the creation of a centralized Office of the Inspector General to lead fraud prevention efforts. The state Senate passed a bipartisan inspector general bill last year. But it remains stalled in the House amid disagreements over whether it should have law enforcement authority or, as the Walz administration prefers, just focus on investigations and leave enforcement up to the existing state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension.

Dr. Mehmet Oz, the administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said at a news conference Wednesday with Vance that the government would hold off on paying \$259.5 million to Minnesota for Medicaid, the health care safety net for low-income Americans. Oz said the money would be delivered only after Minnesota implements "a comprehensive corrective action plan to solve the problem." And he gave Walz 60 days to respond.

"How does taking and punishing children and elderly have anything to do with fighting fraud?" Walz countered. He added that the Trump administration has given his team no guidance for how to address its concerns, nor any opportunity to show the work that Minnesota has already done over the years to fight fraud. His administration estimates that 1.2 million Minnesotans could be hurt.

Officials at the Minnesota Department of Human Services, which administers Medicaid, noted that withholding \$259.5 million — retroactive to the fourth quarter of 2025 — follows earlier federal action to withhold more than \$2 billion in annual Medicaid funding to the state. The agency said the state submitted a corrective action plan earlier, and is still in the process of appealing that decision.

The state agency said it has implemented several new processes and reforms to prevent and detect Medicaid fraud since 2024. The changes included identifying areas at high risk of fraud, imposing stricter controls such as criminal background checks on providers, and more unannounced site visits.

Walz and Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison are both scheduled to appear before the U.S. House Oversight Committee next Wednesday for a hearing on misuse of federal funds in Minnesota's social ser-

vice programs.

What to know about the boat shooting in Cuban waters that killed 4

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAN JOSÉ, Costa Rica (AP) — Cuban soldiers confronted a speedboat carrying 10 people as the vessel approached the island and opened fire on the troops, who fired back, killing four and wounding six, according to the Cuban government.

The Cuban Ministry of the Interior said the people aboard the boat Wednesday were Cubans living in the U.S. and accused them of trying to infiltrate the country to engage in terrorism. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said it was not a U.S. government operation.

Here's what to know about the confrontation that has resulted in investigations in both Cuba and the United States and could add to tensions between the two countries.

Cuban president says island will defend itself

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said Thursday that Cuba "does not attack or threaten."

"We have stated this repeatedly, and we reiterate it today: Cuba will defend itself with determination and firmness against any terrorist or mercenary aggression that seeks to undermine its sovereignty and national stability," he wrote on X.

Cuban authorities launched an investigation, the foreign minister said.

Rubio said the American government was gathering its own information, including whether the people were U.S. citizens or permanent residents.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida said it was pursuing answers "through every legal and diplomatic channel available."

One man was obsessed with Cuban freedom

The wounded people were detained, Cuban officials said, and the government identified seven of the 10 passengers.

Two of them, Amijail Sánchez González and Leordan Enrique Cruz Gómez, are wanted by Cuban authorities "based on their involvement in the promotion, planning, organization, financing, support or commission" of terrorism, the government said.

The others were identified as Conrado Galindo Sariol, José Manuel Rodríguez Castelló, Cristian Ernesto Acosta Guevara and Roberto Álvarez Ávila.

The Cuban government erroneously identified one of the boat passengers late Wednesday as Roberto Azcorra Consuegra, the deputy foreign minister said Thursday.

The government said one of the four killed was Michel Ortega Casanova. His brother Misael Ortega Casanova told The Associated Press that his sibling had developed an "obsessive and diabolical" quest for Cuba's freedom given the suffering they endured on the island before moving to the U.S. He said his brother was an American citizen who lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years.

Meanwhile, Galindo Sariol, another passenger, was identified as a former political prisoner in a 2025 interview with Martí Noticias, a U.S.-based news site that has long called for a change of government in Cuba.

The Cuban government said it was a Florida-registered speedboat and that officials who searched it found assault rifles, handguns, homemade explosives, bulletproof vests, telescopic sights and camouflage uniforms.

The AP was unable to verify details because boat registrations are not public in Florida.

Confrontations with US are not unusual, but deaths are rare

The island's foreign minister wrote Thursday on X that Cuba has faced "numerous terrorist and aggressive infiltrations" from the U.S. since 1959, "with a high cost in lives, injuries and material damage."

The most famous attempt involving Cuban exiles was the Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961.

The CIA had trained a group of exiles under the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower that was led by José Miró Cardona, a former member of Fidel Castro's government and head of the Cuban Revolutionary Council in the U.S.

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The failed invasion that occurred under former President John F. Kennedy led to the surrender of some 1,200 exiles, while more than 100 others were killed.

Another high-profile encounter occurred on Feb. 24, 1996, when Cuba's air force shot down two unarmed civilian airplanes operated by Brothers to the Rescue, a Miami-based organization. Four men were killed following the attack that the International Civil Aviation Organization said occurred over international waters.

According to the radio communications between the MiG-29 and a military control tower published by the Organization of American States, the MiG-29 celebrated upon striking the second plane: "Homeland or death, you bastards!" in a reference to the famed Cuban revolutionary cry.

In 2022, several incidents were reported in Cuban waters involving an exchange of gunfire and arrests but no apparent casualties.

It's not unusual for skirmishes to erupt between Cuba's Coast Guard and U.S.-flagged speedboats in Cuban waters, although deaths are rare. In past years, some of those U.S.-flagged boats were laden with unidentified cargo headed toward the island, or they were going to pick up Cubans to smuggle them into the U.S.

The potential effects on US-Cuba relations

The shooting threatens to increase tensions between the two countries after President Donald Trump's administration has already having taken an increasingly aggressive stance toward Cuba.

When the U.S. attacked Venezuela and arrested its leader on Jan. 3, oil shipments to Cuba that were largely keeping the island afloat were halted.

Then Trump signed an executive order on Jan. 29 that would impose a tariff on any country that sells or provides oil to Cuba, which recently implemented austere fuel-saving measures.

William LeoGrande, an American University expert on Cuba, said there's a risk that the Trump administration "uses this incident as some kind of an excuse to come up with even more sanctions."

"But if the Cuban government lays out all the guns that they captured and has some of these people confessing to what they were up to, that might put the issue to rest," he told journalists Thursday in an online briefing.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Treasury Department slightly eased restrictions on the sale of Venezuelan oil to Cuba, but the island's energy and economic crisis is expected to persist.

LeoGrande said Cuba's private sector would not import enough oil "to really make a significant dent in the humanitarian crisis."

Crowds of Chicago mourners pay respects to Jesse Jackson at start of cross-country memorial services

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A line of mourners streamed through a Chicago auditorium Thursday to pay final respects to the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. as cross-country memorial services began in the city the late civil rights leader called home.

The protege of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and two-time presidential candidate will lie in repose for two days at the headquarters of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition before events in Washington, D.C., and South Carolina, where he was born.

Family members wiped away tears as the casket was brought into the stately brick building. Flowers lined the sidewalks where people waiting to enter watched a large screen playing video excerpts of Jackson's notable speeches. Some raised their fists in solidarity.

Inside, Jackson's children, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and the Rev. Al Sharpton were among those who stood by the open casket to shake hands and hug those coming to view the body of Jackson, dressed in a suit and blue shirt and tie.

"The challenge for us is that we've got to make sure that all he lived for was not in vain," Sharpton told reporters. "Dr. King's dream and Jesse Jackson's mission now falls on our shoulders. We've got to stand up and keep it going."

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Jackson died last week at age 84 after battling a rare neurological disorder that affected his mobility and ability to speak in his later years.

Remembrances have already poured in from around the globe, and several U.S. states, including Minnesota, Iowa and North Carolina, are flying flags at half-staff in his honor.

But perhaps nowhere has his death been felt as strongly as in the nation's third-largest city, where Jackson lived for decades and raised his six children, including a son who is a congressman.

Bouquets have been left outside the family's Tudor-style home on the city's South Side for days. Public schools have offered condolences, and city trains have used digital screens to display Jackson's portrait and his well-known mantra, "I am Somebody!"

His causes, both in the United States and abroad, were countless: Advocating for the poor and under-represented on issues including voting rights, job opportunities, education and health care. He scored diplomatic victories with world leaders, and through his Rainbow PUSH Coalition, he channeled cries for Black pride and self-determination into corporate boardrooms, pressuring executives to make America a more open and equitable society.

"We honor him, and his hard-earned legacy as a freedom fighter, philosopher, and faithful shepherd of his family and community here in Chicago," the mayor said in a statement.

Next week, Jackson will lie in honor at the South Carolina Statehouse, followed by public services. According to Rainbow PUSH's agenda, Gov. Henry McMaster is expected to deliver remarks; however, the governor's office said Thursday that his participation wasn't yet confirmed. Jackson spent his childhood and started his activism in South Carolina.

Details on services in Washington have not yet been made public. However, he will not lie in honor at the United States Capitol rotunda after a request for the commemoration was denied by the House Speaker Mike Johnson's office.

The two weeks of events will wrap up next week with a large celebration of life gathering at a Chicago megachurch and finally, homegoing services at the headquarters of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition.

Family members said the services will be open to all.

"Our family is overwhelmed and overjoyed by the amazing amount of support being offered by common, ordinary people who our father's life has come into contact with," his eldest son, Jesse Jackson Jr., said before the services began. "This is a unique opportunity to lay down some of the political rhetoric and to lay down some of the division that deeply divides our country and to reflect upon a man who brought people together."

The services included prayers from some of the city's most well-known religious leaders, including Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich. Mourners of all ages — from toddlers in strollers to elderly people in wheelchairs — came to pay respects.

Video clips of his appearances at news conferences, the campaign trail and even "Sesame Street" also played inside the auditorium.

Claudette Redic, a retiree who lives in Chicago, said her family has respected Jackson, from backing his presidential ambitions to her son getting a scholarship from a program Jackson championed.

"We have generations of support," she said. "I'm hoping we continue."

Judge rejects request to block Trump White House from building its \$400 million ballroom project

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday rejected a preservationist group's request to block the Trump administration from continuing construction of a \$400 million ballroom where it demolished the East Wing of the White House.

U.S. District Judge Richard Leon ruled that the National Trust for Historic Preservation was unlikely to succeed on the merits of its bid to temporarily halt President Donald Trump's project. He said the privately funded group based its challenge on a "ragtag group of theories" under the Administrative Procedure Act

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and the Constitution, and would have a better chance of success if it amended the lawsuit.

"Unfortunately, because both sides initially focused on the President's constitutional authority to deconstruct and reconstruct the East Wing of the White House, Plaintiff didn't bring the necessary cause of action to test the statutory authority the President claims is the basis to do this construction project without the blessing of Congress and with private funds," the judge wrote.

The preservationists sought an order pausing the ballroom project until it undergoes multiple independent reviews and wins approval from Congress.

Trump used his social media account to hail the ruling as "Great news for America." The Republican president said the project was ahead of schedule and under budget and "will stand long into the future as a symbol to the Greatness of America."

Carol Quillen, president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation said the group was "disappointed" that no injunction was issued but "pleased that Judge Leon ruled that the National Trust has standing to bring this lawsuit, as we have asserted from the start."

"We are also pleased that he encouraged us to amend our complaint — specifically, to assert that the president has acted beyond his statutory authority — and we plan to do so promptly," Quillen said in a statement. "The judge indicated he will rule expeditiously once we do so, and we will await his decision."

The White House announced the ballroom project over the summer. By late October, the Republican president had demolished the East Wing to make way for a ballroom that he said will fit 999 people. The White House said private donations, including from Trump himself, would pay for the planned construction of a 90,000-square-foot (8,400-square-meter) ballroom.

Trump proceeded with the project before seeking input from a pair of federal review panels, the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts. Trump has stocked both commission with allies.

The arts panel approved the project at a meeting last week. The planning commission is set to discuss it further at a March 5 meeting.

During a preliminary hearing in December, Leon warned the administration to refrain from making decisions on underground work, such as the routing of plumbing and gas lines, that would dictate the scope of future ballroom construction above ground.

The group challenging the project argued that Trump could be emboldened to go further — and possibly demolish the White House's West Wing or Executive Mansion — if the court did not intervene.

"The losers will be (the) American public, who will be left with a massive ballroom that not only overwhelms what is perhaps the nation's most historically important building, but will have been built in violation of an astonishingly wide range of laws," plaintiffs' attorneys wrote.

The administration said in a court filing that above-ground construction on the ballroom would not begin until April. In the meantime, government lawyers argued, the preservationist group's challenge was premature because the building plans were not final.

The administration also argued that other presidents did not need congressional approval for previous White House renovation projects, large and small.

"Many of those projects were highly controversial in their time yet have since become accepted—even beloved—parts of the White House," government lawyers wrote.

Leon, who was nominated to the bench by Republican President George W. Bush, said the White House office behind the project is not an agency covered under the jurisdiction of the Administrative Procedure Act. The judge also said the preservationists, who argued that the ballroom usurped the authority of Congress, did not have the basis to invoke the power of the courts.

As a result, "I cannot reach the merits of the National Trust's novel and weighty statutory arguments" at this time, Leon said.

US hockey player Brady Tkachuk slams White House TikTok as 'clearly fake' after anti-Canada slur

OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — American hockey player Brady Tkachuk said Thursday that he did not appreciate a doctored TikTok video shared by the White House that made it look like he was disparaging Canadians after winning Olympic gold, calling it fake and something he would never say.

The video includes fabricated audio of Tkachuk referring to Canadians as "maple syrup eating (expletive)," with the expletive bleeped out. The video carries a note saying it "contains AI-generated media."

"It's clearly fake because it's not my voice and not my lips moving," Tkachuk said. "I'm not in control of any of those accounts. ... I know that those words would never come out of my mouth."

Asked if he liked the video, Tkachuk said he did not: "I would never say that. That's not who I am."

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Tkachuk also denied being the voice heard shouting "close the northern border" during Team USA's celebratory phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump after Sunday's 2-1 overtime win over Canada to win the gold medal at the Winter Olympics.

"I've been seeing stuff that people think it's me, but if you watch the video, that's not my voice and something that I never say," Tkachuk said. "I don't really know how that kind of took a storm on its own when I play here and give everything I have here."

Tkachuk, a 26-year-old Arizona native, is the captain of the NHL's Ottawa Senators and has played his entire career in the Canadian capital. He and other members of the U.S. team returned from Italy this week and are resuming the NHL season. Some attended Trump's State of the Union speech in Washington on Tuesday night and were cheered by those in attendance.

The U.S. women also beat Canada 2-1 in overtime, the first time the Americans swept both Olympic hockey tournaments. The celebration of the twin victories has been shadowed by U.S. politics almost since the final horn of the men's game.

Talking on a speakerphone in the postgame locker room, Trump extended an invitation to the White House to the men's team, then added, "We're going to have to bring the women's team, you do know that." The president also joked that if he didn't extend the invitation, he would probably be impeached. Some of the men's players chuckled, something at least one said they regretted later. Tkachuk said he understood how the moment on the phone call could have been viewed by the women's players.

"I mean, I get it," he said. "We supported them, they supported us. You can't control what other people say."

A number of the men's players traveled to Washington on Tuesday and visited Trump in the White House before being guests at the State of the Union. Many of the women's players, meanwhile, were on the way back to their professional or college clubs. They didn't learn they had also had been invited until late Sunday, making it difficult to change travel plans already disrupted by bad weather on the East Coast.

In his address, Trump said plans were in the works to have the women's team visit the White House, though it was unclear when that could happen. The earliest the team could travel to Washington would be in late spring after the conclusion of the PWHL season.

In the meantime, rapper Flavor Flav scheduled a July celebration for the women's team in Las Vegas for those who can make it.

Hilary Knight earlier this week said she doesn't want to let what she called a "distasteful" joke by Trump get in the way of a historic performance by American women at the Winter Games. Players for both U.S. teams have been uniform in saying how much they bonded in the athletes' village in Milan and supported each other on their runs to gold.

"Our two teams were so close. We watched other events together. We went and supported them. We loved the women's team. The women's team loved us and we're so proud that we had a clean sweep of gold medals and just so much respect for them and the other athletes," said Florida Panthers star Matthew Tkachuk, Brady's brother.

Brady Tkachuk was asked about being a proud American while being the Senators captain at a moment of heightened tension between the countries.

"First and foremost, I've given absolutely everything I have as an Ottawa Senator — blood, sweat and tears," Tkachuk said. "When you represent the U.S., being an American, it's an honor. There are only three teams that have won the gold medal for the U.S., so to be part of that is special."

What to know about Defense Protection Act and the Pentagon's Anthropic ultimatum

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth gave Anthropic an ultimatum this week: Open its artificial intelligence technology for unrestricted military use by Friday, or risk losing its government contract.

Defense officials in the Trump administration also warned they could designate Anthropic, which makes the AI chatbot Claude, as a supply chain risk — or invoke a Cold War-era law called the Defense Production Act to give the military more sweeping authority to use its products, even if the company doesn't approve.

Some experts say that using the law this way would be unprecedented, and could bring future legal challenges. The government's efforts to essentially force Anthropic's hand also underscore a wider, contentious debate over AI's role in national security.

Here's what we know.

What is the Defense Production Act?

The Defense Production Act gives the federal government broad authority to direct private companies to meet the needs of national defense.

The act was signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1950 amid supply concerns during the Korean War. But over its now decades-long history, the law's powers have been invoked not only in times of war but also for domestic emergency preparedness, as well as recovery from terrorist attacks and natural disasters.

One of the act's provisions allows the president to require companies to prioritize government contracts and orders deemed necessary for national defense, with the goal of ensuring the private sector is producing enough goods needed during war or other emergencies. Other provisions give the president the ability to use loans and additional incentives to increase production of critical goods, and authorize the government to establish voluntary agreements with private industry.

The DPA is "one of the government's most powerful and adaptable industrial policy tools," said Joel Dodge, an attorney and the director of industrial policy and economic security at the Vanderbilt Policy Accelerator.

Anthropic is the last of its AI peers to not supply its technology to a new U.S. military internal network. CEO Dario Amodei repeatedly has made clear his ethical concerns about unchecked government use of AI, including the dangers of fully autonomous armed drones and of AI-assisted mass surveillance that could track dissent.

The Pentagon has maintained that it has no interest in using AI for mass surveillance or to develop autonomous weapons to operate without human involvement.

If the Defense Department does invoke the DPA to give the military more authority to use Anthropic's products without its approval, that could mean forcing the company to adapt its model to the Pentagon's needs without built-in safety limits, or remove certain ethical restrictions from the company's contract language.

Experts like Dodge say both would be "without precedent under the history of the DPA."

"It's a powerful law," he said. "(But) it has never been used to compel a company to produce a product that it's deemed unsafe, or to dictate its terms of service."

How has this law been used in the past?

Trump in his first term and former President Joe Biden invoked the DPA to boost supplies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. And during 2022's nationwide baby formula shortage, Biden used the law to speed production of formula and authorize flights to import supply from overseas.

Biden also invoked the DPA in a 2023 executive order on AI, notably in efforts to require that companies share safety test results and other information with the government. Trump repealed the order at the start of his second term.

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Decades ago, the administrations of both President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush used the DPA to ensure that electricity and natural gas shippers continued supplying California utilities amid an energy crisis. And the law was used after Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017 to prioritize contracts for food, bottled water, manufactured housing units and the restoration of electrical systems.

The DPA requires periodic reauthorization to remain in effect, which can expand or refine the scope of the law. According to congressional documents, its next expiration date is slated for Sept. 30 of this year. Depending on how the Defense Department's reported demands unfold, Anthropic could be at the top of lawmakers' minds.

Possible next steps for Anthropic

If the Defense Department uses the DPA provision aimed at prioritizing government contracts and ordering production of certain goods — which the Anthropic case suggests it would — a company can push back if the requested product isn't something it already produces, Dodge and others say, or if it deems the terms to be unreasonable. But the government may try and overrule that, notes Charlie Bullock, senior research fellow at the Institute for Law & AI.

"If neither side backs down, it seems realistic that there would be litigation between Anthropic and the government," Bullock said.

Some have also noted tension between the Pentagon's warning that it could designate Anthropic as a supply chain risk while also indicating its products are so important to national defense that it needs to invoke the DPA — two assertions that seem at odds with each other.

Defense officials appeared to be backing away from the DPA option on Thursday, when Chief Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell wrote on social media that if Anthropic didn't agree to cooperate by 5:01 p.m. ET on Friday, "we will terminate our partnership with Anthropic and deem them a supply chain risk."

"We will not let ANY company dictate the terms regarding how we make operational decisions," Parnell added.

Dodge thinks the administration is counting on "a lot of forces" as it aims to get Anthropic to bend on Friday.

If Anthropic agrees to new terms in the face of such threats, that could open up "a Pandora's box of what the government could do to assert power and control over private companies," Dodge said.

After tense US-Greenland standoff, Denmark calls an early election

By JAMES BROOKS and KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on Thursday called an early general election for March 24 as the country digests the recent standoff with U.S. President Donald Trump over his designs on the semiautonomous Danish territory of Greenland.

Frederiksen likely hopes that her handling of the Greenland crisis, in which she appeared straight-talking and tough, will give her a boost with Danish voters.

"It is now up to you, the voters, to decide what direction Denmark will take over the next four years. And I am looking forward to it," Frederiksen, 48, said as she made her announcement in parliament.

Voters in the NATO and European Union member will determine who sits in 179-member parliament, which includes two seats apiece for lawmakers representing Greenland and the kingdom's other semiautonomous territory, the Faroe Islands.

US-Greenland issue remains a challenge

Trump's push for U.S. control of Greenland, which culminated in his short-lived threat last month to impose new tariffs on Denmark and several other European countries, was a major challenge for the Danish government over the past year.

Last month, Frederiksen warned that an American takeover of Greenland would amount to the end of the NATO military alliance.

Polls also show a bump in the popularity of the prime minister's Social Democrats during recent weeks which were dominated by the looming Greenland crisis.

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Some Danish citizens have been so upset with the U.S. president's frequent talks about seizing Greenland that they participated in protests and even boycotted American goods in supermarkets.

As she announced the election on Thursday, Frederiksen said in parliament: "This will be a crucial election for us, because in the next four years, we as Danes and as Europeans will really have to stand on our own two feet."

"We must define our relationship with the U.S. We must arm ourselves to ensure peace on our continent. We must keep Europe together," she added referring to Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine, which is now in its fifth year.

Frederiksen's strict immigration policies

After Trump backed down on his Greenland threats last month, the U.S., Denmark and Greenland started technical talks on an Arctic security deal.

Still, Frederiksen made clear earlier this month that she remains wary about the Greenland issue. Asked at the Munich Security Conference whether the crisis had passed, she replied: "No, unfortunately not. I think the desire from the U.S. president is exactly the same. He is very serious about this theme."

Frederik Hjørth, an associate professor for political science at the University of Copenhagen, said: "The Greenland crisis has played a major part in the noticeable bump that the government parties have received over the last couple of months."

While Trump would likely not feature in a major way in the election campaign, "he will be a sort of a background theme in the campaign because that speaks to the government message of the importance of having, competent people in charge."

Frederiksen, a center-left Social Democrat, has become known for her strict immigration policies, which are among the toughest in Europe.

Last month, her government unveiled a legal reform allowing the deportation of foreigners who have been sentenced to at least one year of unconditional imprisonment for serious crimes. Years before other countries on the continent tried to outsource asylum request procedures to third countries or set up so-called "return hubs" for rejected asylum seekers outside the European Union, Frederiksen pitched such ideas.

Beyond that, the cost of living in Denmark will probably also become a prominent campaign topic, Hjørth said.

A general election must be held at least every four years but the prime minister can call one at any time. The last election was held on Nov. 1, 2022, and resulted in a three-party coalition that crosses the left-right divide.

Frederiksen has led Denmark since mid-2019. She currently heads a government with the Liberal Party of Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen and the centrist Moderate party of Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, a former prime minister. If she gets reelected, it would be her third term.

'She's done the best that she could'

Campaigning began almost immediately after the announcement, with major commercial news outlets showing political advertising for the Social Democrats, while supporters of the populist anti-immigration Danish People's party began leafleting in parliament in Copenhagen.

The call for early elections by Frederiksen came as little surprise to some people.

"I can see the support for her. It's up. So I mean, strategically, I think it's a smart choice," Laura Beyer, 33, who works in social media marketing, said in Copenhagen.

Referring to the Greenland situation, Beyer applauded the prime minister for how she handled the crisis and said she herself could have not withheld under the immense American pressure.

"I think if I was in that situation I would have just passed out from stress," Beyer said, adding: "I think she's done the best that she could. And from my perspective, I don't think how anyone could do differently."

Instagram says it will notify parents if teens 'repeatedly' search for terms related to suicide

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Instagram said Thursday it will start alerting parents if their kids repeatedly search for terms clearly associated with suicide or self-harm. The alerts will only go to parents who are enrolled in Instagram's parental supervision program.

Instagram says it already blocks such content from showing up in teen accounts' search results and directs people to helplines instead.

The announcement comes as Meta is in the midst of two trials over harms to children. A trial underway in Los Angeles questions whether Meta's platforms deliberately addict and harm minors. Another, in New Mexico, seeks to determine whether Meta failed to protect kids from sexual exploitation on its platforms. Thousands of families — along with school districts and government entities — have sued Meta and other social media companies claiming they deliberately design their platforms to be addictive and fail to protect kids from content that can lead to depression, eating disorders and suicide.

Meta executives including CEO Mark Zuckerberg have disputed that the platforms cause addiction. During questioning by the plaintiff's lawyer, in Los Angeles, Zuckerberg said he still agrees with a previous statement he made that the existing body of scientific work has not proved that social media causes mental health harms.

The alerts will be sent via email, text or WhatsApp, depending on the parent's contact information available, as well as a notification through the parent's Instagram account.

"Our goal is to empower parents to step in if their teen's searches suggest they may need support. We also want to avoid sending these notifications unnecessarily, which, if done too much, could make the notifications less useful overall," Meta said in a blog post.

Josh Golin, executive director of the nonprofit Fairplay, was skeptical of the new tool, saying Instagram "is clearly making this move now because the company is currently on trial in two different states for advertising and harming kids."

"Once again, Meta is shifting the burden to parents rather than fixing the dangerous flaws in how it designs its algorithms and platforms," Golin said. "And all children deserve to be protected, regardless of whether their parents have enrolled in and utilize Meta's supervision tools. If a product is not safe for teens to use without parental intervention, it shouldn't be marketed to teens at all."

Meta said it is also working on similar notifications to parents about their kids' interactions with artificial intelligence.

"These will notify parents if a teen attempts to engage in certain types of conversations related to suicide or self-harm with our AI," Meta said. "This is important work and we'll have more to share in the coming months."

Ukraine says Russia launched a major aerial attack before Kyiv's talks with US

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched a barrage of 420 drones and 39 missiles at Ukraine overnight, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday, hours before U.S. and Ukrainian envoys held more talks in Geneva on ending the war that is now in its fifth year.

The bombardment, which included 11 ballistic missiles, targeted critical infrastructure and residential areas across eight regions of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said. Dozens of people, including children, were injured, officials said, though authorities did not immediately publish a confirmed total.

Zelenskyy said late Wednesday he had spoken by phone with U.S. President Donald Trump and thanked him for his "efforts and engagement" in pursuing peace negotiations.

The U.S.-brokered talks between Moscow and Kyiv are continuing but are deadlocked on the issue of

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Ukrainian territory that Russia claims as its own.

Zelenskyy has pushed for a summit with Russia's President Vladimir Putin, saying a face-to-face meeting could be decisive in unlocking an agreement, but the Kremlin has rebuffed that proposal beyond inviting the Ukrainian president to Moscow, which Zelenskyy refused.

Witkoff and Kushner attend talks

Trump representatives Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, who were also discussing nuclear negotiations with Iran in Geneva before turning to the war in Europe, met with Rustem Umerov, the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council. They also joined Trump's call with Zelenskyy.

The envoys were to discuss economic support and the recovery of Ukraine, ways of attracting investment to the country and frameworks for long-term cooperation, Umerov said on X.

Also, the meeting would look at preparations for the next round of trilateral negotiations involving Russia and consider possible further exchanges of prisoners, according to Umerov.

Washington is looking to keep momentum in its yearlong push to stop the fighting and overcome deep enmity between the warring countries.

Ukrainian and European officials have accused Putin of feigning interest in peace negotiations, hoping to avoid punitive U.S. measures such as additional sanctions while pressing forward with the invasion.

Ukrainians skeptical about peace

On the streets of Kyiv, people expressed some skepticism about the negotiations and how far Ukrainian concessions should go in return for a peace deal.

"Of course we want peace, we really want it," said Vitalina Yefimenko, 55, who lives in the southern Ukraine city of Mykolaiv, voicing concern that Russia would invade again in the future.

"But I think that even if something is given up, we will be next — the south. It's very frightening. Should I leave for another country? I don't want to," she said.

Kyiv resident Roman Cheremisienov, 56, said he didn't trust the Trump administration's motives, alleging that "current U.S. policy is aimed not so much at achieving peace in Ukraine as at business interests" close to the American president.

Dariia Kuzmenko, a 33-year-old psychology consultant, said Ukraine must hold its nerve because Russia's economy is suffering under international sanctions over its invasion.

"We need to keep up the pressure, keep defending our position, and our politicians must not give up or be afraid," Kuzmenko said.

Russia and Ukraine exchange fallen soldiers

Russia returned 1,000 bodies of fallen soldiers to Ukraine, and got back 35 bodies of its fallen troops, Vladimir Medinsky, the head of the Russian delegation at previous talks with Ukraine, said Thursday. He did not say when the exchange happened.

Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War later confirmed the return, though it referred to "bodies which, according to preliminary information provided by the Russian side, may belong to Ukrainian defenders."

Russia struck gas infrastructure in the Poltava region and electrical substations in the Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions, Zelenskyy said. Emergency crews responded in five other regions, as well as in the capital.

Ukraine's air defenses shot down most of the Russian missiles, Zelenskyy said, crediting Western partners for timely delivery of additional air defense interceptors. Ukraine needs foreign help to sustain its fight against Russia's bigger forces.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha urged allied countries to provide more military aid.

"When the whole world demands Moscow to finally stop this senseless war, Putin bets on more terror, attacks and aggression," Sybiha said in a post on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

The Russian Defense Ministry said its air defenses shot down 17 Ukrainian drones overnight over a number of Russian regions, as well as the Black and Azov Seas.

Ukraine's domestically developed long-range drones have struck oil refineries, fuel depots and military logistics hubs deep inside Russia.

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Russia repeats atomic bomb claims

Meanwhile, Russia continued to push allegations of a purported plot by European nations to provide Kyiv with a nuclear bomb, without providing any evidence.

The Kremlin-controlled lower house of the Russian parliament on Thursday unanimously approved an address urging the United Nations and European lawmakers to prevent the alleged plan.

It followed a statement by the Russian foreign intelligence service on Tuesday alleging that France and the U.K. were planning to covertly transfer nuclear weapons or components of a "dirty bomb" device.

British and French officials said the claim was a lie.

Third victim dies from wounds suffered in Rhode Island ice rink attack, police say

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — A deadly shooting during a youth hockey game in Rhode Island last week has claimed a third victim, a grandfather whose daughter and grandson were also killed in the attack, authorities said.

Gerald Dorgan, who had been in critical condition, has died from his injuries, Pawtucket police said Wednesday.

Pawtucket Mayor Donald Grebien said he was heartbroken that another person has died because of the shooting.

"Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victim's family, friends, and all those impacted by this tragic act of violence," he said in a statement.

Dorgan's daughter, Rhonda Dorgan, and grandson, Aidan Dorgan, were also killed in the shooting.

Police identified the shooter as Robert Dorgan, 56, who died from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. Dorgan also went by the names Roberta Esposito and Roberta Dorgano, authorities said. Robert Dorgan's ex-wife was Rhonda Dorgan and adult son was Aidan Dorgan.

Officials have said the shooter was specifically targeting family members.

Rhonda Dorgan's mom, Linda Dorgan, and a family friend, Thomas Geruso, were wounded.

Law enforcement have credited several people who intervened and quickly stopped the attack. At least three bystanders were able to contain the shooter in the middle of the stands as the crowd fled and ran around them.

Today in History: February 27, the German Reichstag fire

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Feb. 27, the 58th day of 2026. There are 307 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 27, 1933, Germany's parliament building, the Reichstag, was gutted by fire; Chancellor Adolf Hitler, blaming communists, used the fire to justify suspending civil liberties.

Also on this date:

In 1942, the Battle of the Java Sea began during World War II; Imperial Japanese naval forces scored a decisive victory over the Allies.

In 1951, the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, limiting a president to two terms in office, was ratified.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai issued the Shanghai Communique, a historic joint statement that called for normalizing relations between their countries, at the conclusion of Nixon's historic visit to China.

In 1973, members of the American Indian Movement occupied the hamlet of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, the site of the 1890 massacre of Sioux men, women and children; the occupation would last for over two months.

In 1991, Operation Desert Storm came to a conclusion as President George H.W. Bush declared in a White House address that "Kuwait is liberated, Iraq's army is defeated," and announced that the allies

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would suspend combat operations at midnight, Eastern time.

In 1997, Ireland became one of the last countries in the world to legalize divorce. Divorce remains illegal in just two countries: the Philippines and Vatican City.

In 2010, in Chile, an 8.8 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami killed 525 people and caused up to \$30 billion in damage and a major power blackout.

In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin dramatically escalated East-West tensions by ordering nuclear forces put on high alert while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy agreed to talks with Moscow as Russia's troops and tanks drove deeper into the country.

Today's birthdays: Actor Joanne Woodward is 96. Football Hall of Famer Raymond Barry is 93. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader is 92. Broadcast journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault is 84. Rock musician Neal Schon (Journey) is 72. Actor Timothy Spall is 69. Democratic U.S. Sen. Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire is 68. Basketball Hall of Famer James Worthy is 65. Actor Noah Emmerich is 61. Jockey Kent Desormeaux is 56. Singer Chilli (TLC) is 55. Football Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez is 50. Author Chelsea Clinton is 46. Singer Josh Groban is 45. Actor Kate Mara is 43. Pop singer Ten is 30.