

Groton Daily Independent

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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.

Pakistan Declares War

Pakistan yesterday proclaimed an "open war" against Afghanistan's Taliban government after the neighboring nations exchanged fire overnight Thursday.

The South Asian nations have been embroiled in conflict since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan after NATO forces withdrew in 2021, with Pakistan accusing the Taliban of harboring anti-Pakistani militants. The Taliban denies the allegation and, in turn, accuses Pakistan of attacking civilians. The Taliban launched the first strikes Thursday in retaliation for Pakistani airstrikes last weekend that it claims killed or wounded dozens of civilians. Pakistan disputes that account, saying its military carried out a targeted operation that killed at least 70 militants. As of this writing, the extent of casualties and damage from Thursday's strikes is unclear.

Pakistan is believed to have the world's sixth-largest nuclear arsenal, with an estimated stockpile of about 170 warheads. Its nuclear program was developed in the 1990s as a deterrent against rival India, which has recently strengthened ties with the Taliban.

US government says staff can leave Israel as threat of Iran strike looms.

The US Embassy in Jerusalem yesterday told nonessential personnel and family that they may leave Israel. Those opting to depart were advised to book an outbound flight immediately, as air travel cannot be guaranteed in the coming days. The directive, which did not mention Iran, was issued as nuclear negotiations between the US and Iran continue; more talks are scheduled next week in Vienna.

Clinton denies knowledge of Epstein crimes in House deposition.

House Oversight Committee members deposed former President Bill Clinton behind closed doors yesterday about his ties to late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Clinton has said he flew on Epstein's plane in the early 2000s but never visited his private island. Files from the Epstein probes include photos of Clinton, but do not suggest wrongdoing. Clinton is the first current or former president deposed by Congress since Gerald Ford testified in 1983 about Constitution bicentennial planning.

Trump orders all federal agencies to phase out Anthropic technology.

The directive follows Anthropic's refusal to grant the Pentagon unrestricted access to its AI models without assurance they would not be used for mass surveillance or autonomous weapons. Military officials have also threatened to label Anthropic a supply chain risk, which could jeopardize several of its nongovernment contracts. Sam Altman, CEO of rival OpenAI, said he agrees with Anthropic's stance and is in talks with the Pentagon to find a compromise that meets the military's needs.

Separately, Scouting America—formerly Boy Scouts of America—agreed to end diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to maintain support from the Department of Defense. A military service badge will replace one focused on DEI and ethical leadership. Kids must also use their sex assigned at birth to apply to programs.

NASA revises Artemis moon landing program in pursuit of 2028 moon landing.

The US space agency yesterday announced an additional mission for 2027, in which astronauts will test new moon landers in low earth orbit. The decision comes days after a report from NASA's independent safety advisory panel said existing plans for a 2028 lunar landing relied on too many untried technologies. NASA has recently struggled to launch astronauts on a trip around the moon, with a planned February launch now delayed until at least April due to a series of mechanical issues.

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Target to stop selling cereals with synthetic colors by end of May.

The change will position Target ahead of other companies adjusting its products in response to the federal "Make America Healthy Again" initiative. Food manufacturer General Mills plans to eliminate artificial colors from its US portfolio by the end of 2027, while rival Walmart has pledged to remove synthetic dyes from US private-label foods by January 2027. Target's announcement yesterday came weeks after installing a new CEO and ahead of an earnings report Tuesday.

Pokémon franchise turns 30, celebrates with new releases.

Originally called Pocket Monsters, Pokémon launched in Japan on Feb. 27, 1996, with games for Nintendo's Game Boy. The brand has since spun off into a TV series, movies, a trading card game, and mobile games, becoming one of the highest-grossing media franchises in history. The Pokémon Company honored its anniversary yesterday by unveiling two new games scheduled for release next year.

Humankind(ness), Love Story Edition

Dear readers— Our final selection of love stories is about commitment. Thank you to the over 100 readers who shared a story. They ranged from heartfelt advice to humorous anecdotes.

"When my mother was 47, she contracted a rare disease called herpes simplex encephalitis—essentially, cold sores on the brain. She spent a week in a coma and lost her taste, smell, and, most devastatingly, her memory. When she woke, she didn't recognize my father, the man who never left her side. Doctors urged him to place her in an institution, saying she would never be functional again. Instead, my dad taught her everything again—from using utensils to naming everyday objects. My parents fell in love twice: in 1963 and again in 1991, by choice."

— Brenda S. in Watertown, South Dakota

"We had a double language barrier. He is from Korea and deaf. I spoke only English. Our first date was all confused nodding and smiling along, not knowing a single thing the other person said but feeling that this was something important and special. After a couple of years and dates to a community ASL class, it all clicked. Our wedding was a hodgepodge of languages, and Google translate still makes regular appearances in our home, but we speak gently and with intention. He is patient and kind and laughs so loud. No one has ever understood me more."

— Savannah A. in Springville, Utah

"When I was 38, I was diagnosed with early menopause. I desperately wanted kids but had only been dating my boyfriend for five months, and he was several years younger. I knew he wanted kids and didn't think he'd want to risk it with me. Bracing for a breakup, I told him about my diagnosis. Two days later, the doorbell rang at 8 am. It was FedEx. My boyfriend told me to open the package; it was his grandmother's wedding ring and he proposed, saying we needed to be engaged if we were going to start trying. We now have two kids and have been married 23 years."

— Star L. in Oakland, California

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

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State Wrestling Update #5: Semifinal Round is complete!

- Liza Krueger, 105lb (Krueger over Frankfurth – Dec. 3-0)
- Gavin Englund, 285lb (Englund over Swenson – Dec 5-0)

With those big semifinal wins last night, Liza and Gavin are both headed to the Championship Matches at 1:00PM today!

State Wrestling Update #3: First Consolation Round is complete!

- Keegan Kucker, 113lb (Kucker over Larson – Dec. SV 9-6)
- Wyatt Hagen, 120lb (Hagen over Bartlett – Tech Fall 17-0)
- Kyson Kucker, 126lb (Kucker over Tuntland – Fall 4:11)
- Donovan Block, 157lb (Christianson over Block – Major Dec. 11-3)
- Walker Zoellner, 190lb (Janek over Zoellner – Fall 3:53)
- Layne Johnson, 215lb (White Mountain over Johnson – Fall 1:55)

Keegan, Wyatt, and Kyson move on to the 2nd Consolation Round with wins in their first wrestlebacks! Donovan, Walker, and Layne battled hard but lost their second match of the State Tournament to end their season.

State Wrestling Update #4: Second Consolation Round is complete!

- Keegan Kucker, 113lb (Odland over Kucker – Major Dec. 10-1)
- Wyatt Hagen, 120lb (Cordes over Hagen – Dec. 8-3)
- Kyson Kucker, 126lb (Holter over Kucker – Dec. 6-2)

Keegan, Wyatt, and Kyson all battled hard but lost their second match of the State Tournament to end their season.



Right at 5 inches of snow has fallen in Groton as of 9:45 a.m. today.

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Tigers Finish Strong, Win Seventh Straight Heading Into Regions



Gage Sippel muscles his way inside and gets in front of Grady Jett to make this basket. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Karson Zak puts up this shot as he made his four points in the second quarter. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

GROTON - The Groton Area boys basketball team closed out the regular season Friday night with a 55-45 victory over Aberdeen Christian, stretching their winning streak to seven games heading into regional play.

With the win, the Tigers improved to 16-4 on the season, while the Knights fell to 17-3 — just their third loss of the year.

Groton wasted little time setting the tone, jumping out to a 7-0 lead and carrying a 17-8 advantage into the second quarter. Aberdeen Christian responded with a nine-point run to tie the game at 19 with 3:22 left in the first half, but the Tigers answered immediately with seven straight points of their own to take a 28-21 lead into the locker room.

Groton continued to build momentum in the third quarter, pushing the margin to 41-30 by the end of the period. Though the Knights stayed within striking distance, the Tigers never relinquished control and secured the 10-point win.

"We've had 19 practice games, and tonight was the 20th because they don't matter anymore," said head coach Greg Kjellsen. "I was just proud of the kids. They played harder tonight than I've seen them play all year. Other than a couple mental lapses defensively and offensively, I was pretty pleased with how we played."

Groton shot 53 percent from two-point range (19-of-36), 24 percent from three (4-of-17), and 83 percent from the free-throw line (5-of-6). The Tigers finished with 23 rebounds, 13 assists, eight steals, eight turnovers, nine team fouls and one block.



Ryder Johnson makes two three pointers and led the Tigers with 15 points.

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

Ryder Johnson led the way with 15 points, five rebounds, three assists and two steals. Gage Sippel delivered an active performance with 13 points, seven rebounds and two assists, battling through double and triple teams in the post.

"He was getting double and triple teamed in the post," Kjellsen said of Sippel. "We're trying to get him to demand the ball in there. When he gives us 12 and 10 or 15 and 10, we're a lot better team. I just thought he had a lot of energy tonight."

Becker Bosma added 11 points, six rebounds, five assists, three steals and a block, while Keegen Tracy and Easton Weber each contributed six points. Karson Zac chipped in four points, three rebounds, three assists and a steal.

Kjellsen noted that perimeter shooting was not at its sharpest, but the Tigers found ways to execute.

"When you shoot the ball well, everything looks good. When you don't, everything doesn't look good," he said. "We just

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Groton Area freshman, Aspen Beto, played the clarinet for the National Anthem.

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

have to execute, value every possession and get after it.”

For Aberdeen Christian, Dylan Hofer and Brooks Jett each scored 15 points. Luke Kaiser added seven points, Loyal Smith-Wade and Charles Eichler scored three apiece, and Grady Jett had two. The Knights shot 55 percent from the floor (20-of-36) but struggled at the line, converting just one of six attempts, and committed 13 turnovers.

Groton sealed the No. 5 seed in the region and will host a regional contest Thursday at 7 p.m., facing either Milbank or Sisseton.

“When you lose games, sometimes you question what you’re doing,” Kjellsen said. “But it’s not the biggest — it’s the fundamentals. You’ve got to execute what you’re doing offensively and defensively. I don’t think what we’re doing is wrong. I just think earlier in the year we didn’t execute. We’re doing a better job of that now.”

With momentum on their side and a seven-game winning streak in hand, the Tigers now turn their full attention to regional play Thursday night at the Groton Area Arena.

Junior Varsity

Groton completed the sweep with a 45-30 win in the junior varsity contest.

The game was tied eight times with three lead changes. Aberdeen Christian led 8-6 after the first quarter before Groton surged ahead 25-19 following a nine-point run. The Tigers led 30-25 after three quarters and extended the lead to 38-25 in the fourth before closing out the 15-point victory.

Anthony Tracy scored 19 points to lead Groton, followed by Jace Johnson with 13, Jordan Schwan with eight and Asher Johnson with five.

Charles Eichler paced the Knights with nine points. Bryan Ekanager added eight, Loyal Smith-Wade scored seven, Asher Keller had four and Liam Voehl finished with two.

8th Grade

Groton’s eighth graders earned a 50-22 win, leading 12-3 after the first quarter, 30-10 at halftime and 44-15 after three.

Major Dolan led the Tigers with 12 points. Trey Tietz and Alex Abeln each scored nine, Trayce Schelle added eight, Jace Hofer had four, Ryder Schwan and Liam Johnson each had three and Liam Lord scored one.

Andrew Schwab led Aberdeen Christian with eight points, going six-of-eight from the free-throw line. Liam Bohl added seven, Noah Sifken had four and Max Dinger scored two.

7th Grade

The Tigers capped the night with a 36-10 seventh-grade victory. Groton led 15-2 after one quarter, 17-6 at halftime and 27-7 after three.

Mason Locke led the way with 11 points, including three three-pointers. Drew Fjeldheim added nine, Ivan Schwan and Carter Boerger each had six, while Quinton Flores and Graydyn Rowan scored two apiece.

Garrett Palmer led Aberdeen Christian with seven points, and Ben Loeb added three.




All games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The varsity game was sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Dan Richardt at Groton Ford, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy and The MeatHouse in Andover. Rich Bosma and Mike Imrie did the commentary, Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera and Paul Kosel did the stats and technology. The junior varsity game was sponsored by Jerry and Becky Johnson, the eighth grade game by S & S Lumber and the seventh grade game by Beauty Brew Boutique.

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Class A - SoDak 16 Girls

#1 - Watertown Civic Arena Watertown Hi...

	1 Hamlin	20-1	3/5 7:00 PM CT
	16 Sisseton	11-10	

STATE QUALIFIER

STATE QUALIFIER

#5 - Madison High School Main Gym

	5 Lennox	18-3	3/5 5:30 PM CT
	12 Miller	17-5	



#6 - Madison High School Main Gym

	6 Sioux Falls Christian	18-4	3/5 7:00 PM CT
	11 Groton Area	16-6	




#7 - Chamberlain School District Competi...

	7 West Central	17-4	3/5 7:00 PM CT
	10 Mobridge-Pollock	17-4	

#8 - Wall High School

	8 Rapid City Christian	17-4	3/5 6:00 PM MT
	9 Lakota Tech	18-4	




#2 - Todd County High School Ben Reifel ...

	2 Mahpiya Luta	20-0	3/5 6:00 PM CT
	15 McCook Central/Montrose	15-7	

STATE QUALIFIER

STATE QUALIFIER

#3 - Irene-Wakonda High School

	3 Wagner	18-2	3/5 7:00 PM CT
	14 Dell Rapids	15-7	

STATE QUALIFIER

STATE QUALIFIER

#4 - Chamberlain School District Competi...

	4 Sioux Valley	20-2	3/5 5:30 PM CT
	13 St. Thomas More	16-5	

STATE QUALIFIER

STATE QUALIFIER

Seed Points Averages (calculated Feb. 20)

#1 Hamlin 46.600 - #2 Mahpiya Luta 46.368 - #3 Wagner 45.211 - #4 Sioux Valley 45.150 - #5 Lennox 44.900 - #6 Sioux Falls Christian 44.650 - #7 West Central 44.650 - #8 Rapid City Christian 44.350 - #9 Lakota Tech 44.200 - #10 Mobridge-Pollock 44.050 - #11 Groton Area 43.400 - #12 Miller 43.350 - #13 St. Thomas More 43.158 - #14 Dell Rapids 42.700 - #15 McCook Central/Montrose 41.500 - #16 Sisseton 40.105

Tiebreakers




#6 Sioux Falls Christian over West Central based on result of head-to-head competition (Jan. 2)

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Class A - Region 1 Boys




#1 - Ben Reifel Gym

 4 Sisseton	11-9	3/3 7:00 PM CT
 5 Milbank	11-9	


#2 - Webster Area High School

 2 Webster Area	12-8	3/3 7:00 PM CT
 7 Redfield	3-17	

#3 - Britton-Hecla School District

 3 Britton-Hecla	12-8	3/3 7:00 PM CT
 6 Aberdeen Roncalli	7-13	

#4 -

 1 Groton Area	16-4	3/6 TBD
#1 WINNER		



SODAK 16 QUALIFIER

#5 -

#2 WINNER		
#3 WINNER		
		3/6 TBD

SODAK 16 QUALIFIER

Seed Points Averages (calculated Feb. 27)

#1 Groton Area 44.800 - #2 Webster Area 41.550 - #3 Britton-Hecla 41.100 - #4 Sisseton 40.850 - #5 Milbank 40.550 - #6 Aberdeen Roncalli 39.700 - #7 Redfield 36.450

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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Some ethics documents meant to reveal state board members' conflicts are missing

Offices trade blame after fielding requests for financial interest statements, while some published documents are not viewable due to a website malfunction

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

When South Dakota's governor makes a board or commission appointment that requires state Senate approval, the appointee is legally obligated to file a financial disclosure document that can be scrutinized for conflicts of interest.

State law on the matter is straightforward and succinct: "Any gubernatorial appointee for whom Senate confirmation is required shall file with the secretary of state a statement of financial interest before confirmation."

But a South Dakota Searchlight review of last year's confirmed appointees found nearly half of the disclosures were not available on the website of the Secretary of State's Office. Searchlight's requests for the missing documents sparked contradictory claims from that office and the Governor's Office about whether the remaining documents had been filed and why they weren't on the website.

When asked about Searchlight's findings, state Rep. Eric Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, said state laws meant to protect against conflicts of interest mean little without the information needed to evaluate potential conflicts.

"Without those disclosures, it creates significant uncertainty and mistrust among South Dakotans," he said.

Recent Searchlight reporting highlighted the importance of financial interest statements. Searchlight found that the longtime chairman of the state's Board of Economic Development, Jeff Erickson, is also on the board of a company, CJ Schwan's, that has benefited from \$69 million in tax rebates, grants and loans from state government, some of it approved by the state Board of Economic Development — although Erickson abstained from those discussions and votes. Erickson is additionally a member of a corporation that rents office space to CJ Schwan's in downtown Sioux Falls.

That reporting by Searchlight was based partly on information in a 2017 financial interest statement that Erickson filed with the Secretary of State's Office. Although he's been reappointed to the Board of Economic Development multiple times since then, his most recent available statement is from 2017.

The state's financial interest form directs appointees to list any source of money that contributed more than 10% or more than \$2,000 to their family's gross income in the preceding calendar year, including any enterprise for which they or their immediate family members control more than 10% of the capital or stock. Many political candidates and elected officials also have to fill out the forms.

Findings from review

To test whether gubernatorial appointees' financial interest statements are being filed, Searchlight examined the 29 Senate confirmations of the governor's appointees in 2025 and found 14 appointees without a 2025 disclosure posted online. There were no disclosures at all for six of those appointees, while there were old disclosures for the other eight but nothing new for their latest appointments or reappointments. There is a box on the form for "no change," indicating that even reappointed officials are supposed to file the form and, at a minimum, check that box.

Additionally, 10 of the financial interest statements that were posted on the secretary of state's website did not display correctly or displayed an error message when clicked. Searchlight was able to obtain copies of those statements via a records request.

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When Searchlight contacted the Governor's Office, spokesperson Ian Fury said the office had received the disclosures for all of the 2025 appointees and had submitted them to the Secretary of State's Office. He said that if any documents were not online, it was because the Secretary of State's Office had not published them.

In an email response, Christine Lehrkamp of the Secretary of State's Office said that's "untrue." She said the office had never received the missing documents.

"When we receive documents to file, we file them," Lehrkamp said.

She said of the six appointees who had no new or old financial interest statements published, "The Governor's Office has tracked them down and provided the document to us and they have been filed." When she provided those six financial interest statements to Searchlight, each document was stamped as having been received by the office on Dec. 31, 2025 — the day Searchlight had contacted the Governor's Office about the issue.

Updated documents for the other eight appointees — for which there are old filings, but no new ones — are still missing from the website.

Lehrkamp said the office is not required to post disclosures online but does so "as a courtesy to the public," and noted the website hosting the images is old, has limitations and "is not in our control." Lehrkamp did not respond to a follow-up question about who is responsible for ensuring the website functions properly.

The Governor's Office did not respond to Searchlight follow-up questions about Lehrkamp's statements. One of Lehrkamp's superiors, Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Deadrick, provided a statement to Searchlight about the office's role.

"We do not enforce, we only file," Deadrick said. "What we have provided is what has been filed with us."

Lawmakers' role

State Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, a Republican from Sioux Falls, told Searchlight it's not the Senate's responsibility to ensure the documents are filed. He referred questions to the Legislative Research Council.

The council said it had the missing documents, but said they should be obtained from the Secretary of State's Office. The council said it retains copies for filing purposes, and the documents are not the council's to share.

Other senators that Searchlight spoke with — including Republicans Tom Pischke of Dell Rapids, Carl Perry of Aberdeen, Kyle Schoenfish of Scotland, and Democrat Liz Larson of Sioux Falls — all said the financial interest statements of proposed appointments are not provided to them.

Schoenfish said reviewing conflict of interest statements as part of the approval process "has never really come up."

However, according to the Legislative Research Council, the disclosures are available to senators serving on the committees that vet the governor's appointments before sending them to the full Senate. Those senators can view the documents via their access to private sections of the Legislative Research Council website, according to the council. The documents are not available on the public version of the site.

Senators on the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee on Thursday, including Perry and Larson, voted on the appointment of three people and the reappointment of five, including the commissioner of economic development and members of the Lottery Commission, Building Authority, and Board of Economic Development.

Supporters of the proposed appointments told senators about the appointees' backgrounds and qualifications. No senators asked for financial interest statements.

"The information that we received for this appointment tells us that we have a great person for this position," said Sen. Perry of one appointment.

"Sounds like a fine man for the job," said Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, of another.

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

COMMENTARY

Whatever lawmakers do about property taxes, it's too late to save us from the price of 'Freedom'

by Seth Tupper

A state senator recently offered an insightful opinion on South Dakota's property tax conundrum. He was arguing, unsuccessfully, for a bill incentivizing data center construction. But his comments made a broader point.

"What's happened in South Dakota is we get people moving here for freedom, and that's great," said Sen. Steve Kolbeck, R-Sioux Falls. "But then they work from home. And there is no large commercial building paying property tax."

In other words, people need public services such as schools, roads and law enforcement. Remote-working homeowners pay property taxes to the local South Dakota governments that provide those services, but their employers often do not, because they're in a different state or don't have a physical location.

It's partly a product of the in-migration surge that South Dakota experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The governor back then was Kristi Noem. She infamously flouted public health precautions and invited the world to relocate here for our "Freedom" (she always capitalized the "F," apparently to inflate the word with her expanding sense of self-importance).

Noem's overtures worked for a while. The number of people moving to South Dakota briefly surged during the pandemic.

One of the consequences was out-of-control home prices in parts of the state. Some Freedom-lovers came from states with higher incomes and housing costs. When they brought their bigger incomes to South Dakota and saw the lower home prices, they salivated. Some were eager to bid more than the asking price to get the house they wanted.

Counties in South Dakota assign a taxable value to every home based on its market value, so when prices go up sharply, it affects property taxes.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the median listing price in the state exploded upward by 65% from \$242,000 to a peak of nearly \$400,000, while property taxes paid by homeowners have increased by 43%.

When those increases took off, complaints followed. Not knowing how to solve such a big and complex problem with property taxes, but desperate to appear to be doing something, lawmakers and Noem temporarily lowered the statewide sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%. They did that three years ago and scheduled a return to 4.5% next year.

Voila, tax relief!

South Dakotans weren't buying it. The sales tax reduction saved them a penny for every \$3.33 they spent. Property taxes were hundreds or even thousands of dollars higher for some people than they had been a few years earlier. They kept complaining.

Noem moved on to lead the federal Department of Homeland Security, leaving her successor and lawmakers to respond to lingering calls for property tax relief. They did so last year, with multifaceted legislation. It temporarily caps the countywide growth of taxable home values, and also temporarily limits the value from new construction and growth that can be used to increase property tax collections. It prevents some home improvements from causing higher home valuations, and expands eligibility among disabled and elderly people for property tax relief programs.

With elections looming, legislators have filed dozens of bills this winter to show they're doing even more to bring property taxes down. The leading contender, due to a lack of consensus around other ideas, is Gov. Larry Rhoden's proposal to let counties impose a half-percent sales tax and devote the proceeds to property tax credits for homeowners.

Kolbeck, the senator from Sioux Falls, thinks data centers could be part of the property tax solution. It's true that a large data center would pay a lot of property taxes, but that would only ease the burden for taxpayers in the local jurisdiction where the data center is located. And questions remain about how the

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extreme electrical needs of large data centers might affect the rates paid by other electrical customers.

Meanwhile, the housing market continues to normalize as the effects of the pandemic fade.

Whatever lawmakers do now in response to an eruption of property tax anger that peaked several years ago will be too late for relief that was needed back then. They could've quelled property tax complaints at that time by using the state's run of budget surpluses — buoyed by several years of federal COVID relief and stimulus programs — to provide property tax credits or other forms of temporary assistance.

Instead, it appears the trade-off we're about to get for lower taxes on our homes is higher taxes on the things we buy.

I guess that's the price of Freedom.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

Madison state senator drops out of Republican primary for U.S. House

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF

A state senator from Madison has suspended his campaign for U.S. House of Representatives.

Republican Casey Crabtree had been seeking the nomination of his party to appear on the general election ballot.

Other announced Republican candidates include South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley and a Piedmont man named James Bialota. In a poll commissioned by South Dakota News Watch and the Chiesman Center for Democracy in October, Jackley had the support of 57% of likely voters.

On Friday, Crabtree sent a press release to announce he's suspending his campaign "to focus on policy issues at home in South Dakota" and giving his "full support" to Jackley.

"I'll keep carrying that torch to make South Dakota a better place for all of us, but especially the next generation," Crabtree's press release says.

There's no incumbent in the race for South Dakota's lone U.S. House seat this year, as Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson has opted to seek the Republican nomination for governor.

Former U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Director Nikki Groni is running for the Democratic spot on the ballot. Another Democrat, Bill Mawhiney, dropped out of the race earlier this month.

This year's primary election is June 2, and the general election is Nov. 3.

Trump in post-State of the Union trip again rips Dems, muses on Cuba 'friendly takeover'

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

President Donald Trump promoted his second-term record in a wide-ranging speech at the Port of Corpus Christi in Texas on Friday, building on themes from his State of the Union address earlier in the week.

But he did not issue a highly anticipated endorsement just days before a heated U.S. Senate primary that's pitted incumbent John Cornyn against two challengers, state Attorney General Ken Paxton and U.S. Rep. Wesley Hunt.

Before the event, Trump told reporters he had "pretty much" decided on who he would endorse in the midterm election contest, but wouldn't do so Friday, according to a White House pool report.

While leaving the White House en route to Texas earlier in the day, Trump also suggested he might direct a "friendly takeover" of Cuba, saying the Cuban American community would appreciate such action.

"We could very well end up having a friendly takeover of Cuba after many, many years," he told reporters. "They're in big trouble, and we could very well (do) something good, I think, very positive for the people

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that were expelled or worse, from Cuba that live here.”

Tensions are high between the United States and Cuba. The Cuban government said Thursday its border patrol killed four Cuban expatriates living in the United States who sought to infiltrate the country in a speedboat.

Little discussion of energy policy

The Texas speech was advertised as an address on energy, and Trump spoke in front of signs reading “American Energy Dominance” and against a backdrop of oil tankers.

But he hardly mentioned the issue apart from short sections at the start and end of his remarks in which he claimed credit for lowering gas prices.

Instead, the president jumped from topic to topic, defending his administration’s controversial record on immigration enforcement and a military operation in Venezuela while attacking Democrats as out of touch and ramping up calls for election administration changes he said would keep the party from winning future elections.

Among them are the House-passed SAVE America Act, which would require the public to produce a passport or birth certificate in most cases to register to vote. While it has little chance of Senate passage, Trump has continued to advocate for it.

He claimed, without evidence, that Democrats can only win elections by cheating. If Congress makes changes to national elections laws, the party would be shut out, he said.

“They will never win because their policy is no good,” he said. “They want men playing in women’s sports. They want transgender for everyone. They want open borders so that the world’s criminals can pour into our country, which we’ve done a good job. I’ll tell you what: ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) has done such a great job.”

Midterm stakes

Trump joked early in the appearance that he was advised to not make political statements.

But several of his digressions were focused on elections this year and beyond.

After exulting, in sometimes exaggerated language, his record through one year of unified GOP control, he said it was crucial for Republicans to maintain their majorities in the U.S. House and Senate.

Noting that Democratic members did not stand and applaud at several points of his State of the Union address, a point that Republicans have seized upon repeatedly as a campaign issue in the days since the speech, Trump said the Democrats were “crazy.”

“They’re crazy,” he said. “We got to win midterms. We brought this country back. We don’t want to lose the midterms. We got to win the midterms.”

Election forecasters project the most likely outcome of November’s midterms is for Democrats to gain control of the House while Republicans keep the Senate. Very few seats are seen as toss-ups.

Trump also teased a potential third presidential term, which would violate the Constitution’s prohibition of more than two terms. He said he was entitled to another term because an election was “stolen” from him, a reference to the 2020 election that he lost to Joe Biden and ever since has claimed, without evidence, wrongly decided.

“Maybe we do one more term. Should we do one more?” he asked the crowd. “Well, we’re entitled to it because they cheated like hell in the second.”

Texas Senate GOP battle

In the Senate contest, Trump shouted out Cornyn, Paxton and Hunt, without indicating which he might favor.

Election Day is Tuesday, though with three major candidates, it is likely headed for a May runoff between Cornyn and Paxton.

Trump wore a version of his signature red hat with the phrase “Gulf of America” across the front instead

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of the usual "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan.

Trump signed an executive order to rename the Gulf of Mexico early in his second term. Corpus Christi's port is on the gulf.

Venezuela

At the open and close of the roughly hourlong speech, Trump promoted his energy policy and criticized Biden for regulations that Trump said slowed energy production.

By boosting production and bringing in oil from Venezuela after deposing leftist President Nicolás Maduro in January, Trump said he has brought down the price of gas and consumer products across the board.

Biden and congressional Democrats "waged a radical-left war on American oil and natural gas like you've never seen before," he said. "They were killing our country.... All of that changed my first day back in office."

The latest government statistics, though, show that energy costs in January were about the same as they were when Trump took office, dropping only .1%, while inflation in the economy as a whole stubbornly continues at about 2.4%.

U.S. involvement in Venezuela, following Maduro's capture, would also help spur the energy sector, Trump said.

The new government, led by Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, has been receptive to selling crude oil to the United States, where it will be refined, Trump said Friday. The arrangement would benefit both countries, he said.

Jacob covers federal policy and helps direct national coverage as deputy Washington bureau chief for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

US Senate Democrats demand Trump administration refund tariff payments to businesses

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats sent a letter to Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent on Friday demanding the administration refund businesses that paid tariffs to import goods into the United States under authority the Supreme Court has ruled the president never held.

"The American people — small business owners, importers, manufacturers, and the consumers who ultimately bore the cost of these illegal taxes — deserve better than this stonewalling," the group wrote. "This money does not belong to the federal government. It belongs to the businesses and individuals you illegally taxed."

The Supreme Court ruled on Feb. 20 that President Donald Trump wrongly instituted tariffs under the International Economic Emergency Powers Act, writing "that IEEPA does not authorize the President to impose tariffs."

Trump held a press conference later that day declaring he would institute tariffs under other authorities that he and members of his administration believe Congress has granted the president. But he didn't give a clear answer about whether the federal government would refund the businesses that paid IEEPA tariffs.

"They take months and months to write an opinion, and they don't even discuss that point," Trump said at the time. "I guess it has to get litigated for the next two years."

Senate Democrats' letter says the Trump administration "collected over \$130 billion in illegal taxes and then refused — with a smile and a shrug — to give it back."

Democrats wrote in the letter the administration must tell U.S. Customs and Border Protection "to begin processing automatic refunds for all tariffs and customs duties unlawfully collected under IEEPA since January 20, 2025."

The Trump administration, they wrote, should release a timeline within 90 days for when it would begin

those refunds.

The letter was signed by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, Whip Dick Durbin, Maryland Sen. Angela Alsobrooks, Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal, Delaware Sens. Chris Coons and Lisa Blunt Rochester, Illinois Sen. Tammy Duckworth, New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, Colorado Sens. Michael Bennet and John Hickenlooper, Hawaii Sen. Mazie Hirono, Virginia Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, New Jersey Sen. Andy Kim, Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, New Mexico Sen. Ben Ray Lujan, Oregon Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, Rhode Island Sens. Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse, Nevada Sen. Jacky Rosen, California Sens. Adam Schiff and Alex Padilla and Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock.

The Treasury Department did not respond to a request for comment.

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.

Education Department data shows foreign contracts, gifts to US colleges topped \$5B in 2025

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — American colleges and universities received gifts and contracts worth more than \$5.2 billion from foreign entities in 2025, according to the U.S. Department of Education, which also recently published summaries of foreign investment in U.S. higher education dating back to 1986.

Qatar, the United Kingdom, China, Switzerland, Japan, Germany and Saudi Arabia marked the largest sources of reportable gifts and contracts to U.S. institutions in 2025, according to the agency, which released the latest funding disclosures this month.

The department also made public roughly 40 years of data on a transparency dashboard that offers a snapshot of the foreign funding disclosures submitted by colleges and universities. The administration described the move as a transparency effort, but critics say it lacks key context.

The dashboard shows cumulative data since 1986, when Congress amended the Higher Education Act of 1965 to mandate colleges and universities receiving federal financial assistance disclose any foreign gifts or contracts valued at or above \$250,000 annually.

The provision, known as Section 117, "came about due to concerns about malign actors trying to either use educational platforms to promote agendas that were not in the national interest or about getting access to American youth or about exerting influence on institutions," said Rick Hess, senior fellow and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning think tank.

And while the Education Department this month heralded the dashboard as a major step toward transparency in foreign influence in U.S. education, the tool does not separate gifts and contracts by year, limiting its use to help the public spot trends or identify major gifts.

Details about the gifts and contracts, such as what was given or what work was contracted, are not displayed on the dashboard.

Trump priority

President Donald Trump and his administration have sought to increase transparency requirements when it comes to foreign funds entering U.S. colleges and universities.

Part of the administration's effort includes an April 2025 executive order that sought to "end the secrecy surrounding foreign funds in American educational institutions" and to "safeguard America's students and research from foreign exploitation."

The public transparency dashboard is housed on a portal, launched in January, where colleges and universities are responsible for disclosing foreign gifts and contracts.

The Education Department announced Feb. 23 that it would partner with the State Department on foreign gift and contract reporting under Section 117.

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The move — one of several interagency agreements announced so far by the administration — is part of the administration's ongoing efforts to dismantle the 46-year-old agency.

State will help the Education Department manage its foreign funding reporting portal and "use its national security and foreign national academic admissions expertise to review and assess the industry's compliance with the law, share data with the public and federal stakeholders, and identify potential threats," the Education Department said.

Nearly \$70 billion disclosed

At least 555 institutions have disclosed \$67.6 billion in foreign gifts and contracts between 1986 and mid-December 2025, according to the dashboard.

The institutions that have received the most funding in foreign gifts and contracts since Section 117 was enacted are Harvard University in Massachusetts, at \$4.2 billion; Carnegie Mellon University, in Pennsylvania, at \$3.9 billion; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, at \$3.5 billion; Cornell University in New York, at \$3.1 billion and the University of Pennsylvania, at \$2.8 billion.

The dashboard also includes a separate section on the total value of transactions in foreign gifts and contracts with "counterparties located in countries of concern," such as China, Russia and Venezuela.

The universities that received the most money from counterparties in these "countries of concern" are Harvard, at \$610.8 million; MIT, at \$490.1 million; New York University, at \$462.5 million; Stanford University in California, at \$418.5 million; and Yale University in Connecticut, at \$400.2 million.

Concerns from higher ed groups

Some higher education groups expressed concerns over the dashboard, including limitations they see with how the data is portrayed.

The cumulative nature of the dashboard does not allow the public to see how the amount of money in foreign gifts and contracts received by schools fluctuated throughout the years.

"There's no way to kind of break out what the funding is by the year, or perhaps by the funding cycle, so you can't really see any funding trends," Sarah Spreitzer, vice president and chief of staff for government relations at the American Council on Education, told States Newsroom.

The association serves as the major coordinating body for the country's colleges and universities, representing roughly 1,600 institutions.

Spreitzer emphasized a lack of context throughout the dashboard, including on the list of foreign entities of concern and whether such funding is active or reflects past funding.

For instance, the U.S. Department of Commerce designated the Chinese tech company Huawei as an entity of concern in 2019.

Huawei has provided roughly \$22.7 million in funding to American universities, overall, according to the dashboard. But the dashboard doesn't show the gifts and contracts all came prior to the entity-of-concern designation, Spreitzer said.

"None of our institutions have taken funding from Huawei since 2019, if not earlier, when we were informed of the concerns around Huawei," Spreitzer said. "However, the way that the information is presented, it seems to imply that our institutions are still taking funding from Huawei."

Spreitzer said that the dashboard "demonstrates that our schools are complying with Section 117 and they are meeting their reporting obligations."

"I hope that people are not making broad assumptions based on how the data is presented right now," added Spreitzer, who hopes the administration will continue making improvements to the dashboard, such as separating the disclosures by year and adding additional context.

Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom's Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.

E-Verify requirements draw business pushback in some Republican states

Sweeping legal work verification bills have fared poorly in many places

BY: TIM HENDERSON

Pressured by businesses on the importance of immigrant labor, some Republican states are backing off plans to require all employers to check for legal employment status before hiring workers.

State and federal legislation to require that employers use E-Verify, a federal system to check legal status, has been limited this year as a push grows from business interests that say checking status could hurt state economies. Business groups have cited the cost of complying with the laws and the potential loss of crucial immigrant workers who don't have legal work authorization.

Millions of worksites around the country use E-Verify to ensure new hires are legal to work in the United States, but it isn't required in all states or for every industry. Going after employers has not been as popular with Republicans as immigration enforcement aimed at detaining and deporting people living here illegally.

In Idaho, for instance, legislation that would require all employers to use E-Verify, crafted with help from the conservative Heritage Foundation, is awaiting state House consideration — while a more limited mandate for large state and local government contractors passed the state Senate Feb. 19.

"I think we should tread lightly, and private businesses should not be enforcement agencies," said state Sen. Mark Harris, a Republican and rancher who sponsored the less-stringent bill, on the Senate floor before the vote.

Idaho Republican state Sen. Brian Lenney, who voted for the bill, spoke resentfully of business leaders who came to the state Capitol to lobby against the broader mandate for all employers to use E-Verify.

"There were men in suits holding a press conference downstairs to let the world know and tell Idaho which industries cannot survive without illegal labor," Lenney said before the vote. "They're trying to protect a system that keeps human beings cheap, compliant and silent. ... Is this bill making a dent, like it should? Not really."

An industry-funded report said a sharp drop in unauthorized labor from deportations could cost the state economy billions of dollars and reduce state tax revenue by almost \$400 million. The report, funded by the Idaho Alliance for a Legal Workforce and prepared by regional economists, emphasized the importance of immigrants to certain industries: As much as 90% of the workforce in dairy production is foreign-born, for example, and half of those individuals might not be authorized to work in the U.S.

There were 21 states with E-Verify requirements for contracts or business licenses as of 2024, federal data showed. Seventeen states had pending legislation to begin or expand E-Verify mandates as of Feb. 5, said Mick Bullock, a spokesperson for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Some bills have not progressed after business opposition, such as an E-Verify mandate in Kansas opposed by the Kansas Chamber and the League of Kansas Municipalities. The chamber said the bill "would create an aggressive, invasive, and costly system of employment verification on all Kansas businesses" in 2025 testimony.

"The goal of this bill is to prevent illegal immigration, however with the bill's broad definitions and severe penalties this legislation would suppress business operations," the chamber wrote in submitted testimony.

Another example of a limited E-Verify mandate is a recent Ohio law. It applies only to nonresidential construction, despite testimony about illegal labor in residential construction. After Republican Gov. Mike DeWine signed the measure in December, it takes effect March 20.

An earlier version of the same Ohio bill passed the state House in 2024 but did not pass the state Senate. In a hearing at the time, Richard Ochocki, an organizer for the state plumbers and pipefitters union, said he spent three hours at an apartment and condo construction site in Columbus without finding even one person with the legal work status required to join the union.

"The flow of undocumented workers to Ohio has been steadily increasing over my five and a half years as an organizer. I have personally encountered undocumented workers in Cleveland, Canton, Ashland,

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Lima, Cincinnati, Dayton, and Columbus," said Ochocki, speaking in favor of E-Verify, in prepared remarks.

Madeline Zavodny, a professor at the University of North Florida who has researched the effects of E-Verify on the labor market, said exemptions for short-term work such as agriculture or small business is common, but limiting it to part of one industry such as nonresidential construction is unusual.

"The more limited the law is, the less impact it would have," Zavodny said. "And nonresidential construction may be heavily unionized in Ohio such that there's not a lot of unauthorized workers anyway. Unauthorized workers are often day laborers who work primarily in residential construction, not nonresidential."

Meg Rietschlin, majority owner of a construction firm that bids on schools, roads, culverts and other nonresidential construction projects in rural Crawford County, Ohio, said she requires her workers to have a valid driver's license, which should be enough to show they have legal status. An E-Verify mandate would drive her out of business because of the additional paperwork, she wrote in 2024 testimony.

"If you inundate me with the requirement to collect so much information, I will cease to be," Rietschlin wrote. "This proposed law is meant to drive the small contractor out of public works opportunities."

A report Zavodny co-authored in 2015 found E-Verify mandates appeared to help some workers who compete with unauthorized workers, such as Mexican immigrants who became citizens and U.S.-born Hispanic people, but did not measurably help U.S.-born non-Hispanic white people.

A 2020 working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found no evidence that E-Verify mandates improve the native-born labor market in general, and no evidence that people without work authorization moved away because of the mandates. Unauthorized workers may move from large businesses to small businesses that are less likely to comply with the mandates, the paper concluded.

As the Trump administration's immigration crackdown ramped up last year, restaurants and construction lost the largest number of immigrant laborers compared with 2024, according to a Stateline analysis of federal data. Landscaping, building services and warehousing industries also lost tens of thousands of laborers.

Rick Naerebout, who represents about 350 Idaho dairy farmers as CEO of the Idaho Dairymen's Association, said his members depend on unauthorized labor to run their farms that together produce more than 18 billion pounds of milk in 2025, behind only California and Wisconsin.

Idaho farms have not seen large-scale raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, Naerebout said, though there was one last year in South Dakota and one in New Mexico in June, among others. Naerebout said he believes President Donald Trump has paused most ICE raids on agriculture and tourism, as has been reported by The New York Times and Stateline.

Idaho should limit E-Verify mandates to government as the state Senate bill would do, and shouldn't pass more stringent mandates as the other bills would do, Naerebout added.

"The president couldn't be more clear that he wants there to be space for critical industries like agriculture to try and get to where we find the solution," Naerebout said. "The irony is Idaho voted overwhelmingly for President Trump, and you've got Idaho Republicans now saying what the president's doing isn't good enough."

Among other states, Tennessee has a broad E-Verify mandate for all businesses with at least 35 employees, though the exact number of employees has shifted over the years. Republican Gov. Bill Lee signed a law effective in 2023 that lowered the threshold from 50 to 35, and one proposed bill this year could shift it back to 50 employees.

The mandate has faced business opposition but "other than a brief period of adjustment implementation has gone very smoothly," Republican Lt. Gov. Randy McNally said in a statement to Stateline. McNally and other state officials have collaborated with the Trump administration on a package of proposed state legislation this year, including making E-Verify mandatory for state and local government hires.

Florida also has an E-Verify mandate for employers with 25 or more employees, with a bill under consideration to expand it to all employers. It passed the state House in January and is now in a state Senate committee.

In Democratic-led California, employers starting this month must notify employees about their rights

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under state law, including a prohibition on using E-Verify in a discriminatory way to screen only some employees. A bill in Democratic-led New York, with 12 Democratic sponsors, would prohibit use of E-Verify to screen job applicants or check on existing employees, which is already prohibited by federal law. E-Verify can only be used legally after a job offer and before an employee has started work.

Meanwhile, some conservative-leaning states are moving to tighten rules. An Indiana bill would hold public works subcontractors accountable as part of an E-Verify mandate for public agency contracts and a West Virginia bill would require all employers to use E-Verify.

Federal legislation to mandate E-Verify for all employers has bogged down in recent years. A Senate bill last year did not progress beyond a committee, and a similar House bill bogged down in 2018.

Last year, Pennsylvania Republican U.S. Rep. Ryan Mackenzie introduced a bill that would require E-Verify for federal contractors only, saying it was "an area where mandatory E-Verify makes clear sense" in prepared testimony.

Mackenzie said he had sponsored an E-Verify law as a state lawmaker in 2019, and that it "has ensured there is a lawful workforce in the construction industry in my home state of Pennsylvania, protecting American workers from unfair competition, providing a level playing field for businesses, and helping to confirm all appropriate taxes are paid."

Mackenzie's bill on federal contractors had a committee hearing in January, during which California Democratic U.S. Rep. Zoe Lofgren said the bill would need an exemption for agriculture, since the government buys food and milk produced by undocumented workers for the military and schools on military bases.

"If we don't exempt ag, we will have a very serious problem throughout the federal government, especially in our military that relies on ag products in feeding our soldiers," Lofgren said. Her request to amend the bill was voted down.

Stateline reporter Tim Henderson can be reached at thenderson@stateline.org.

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

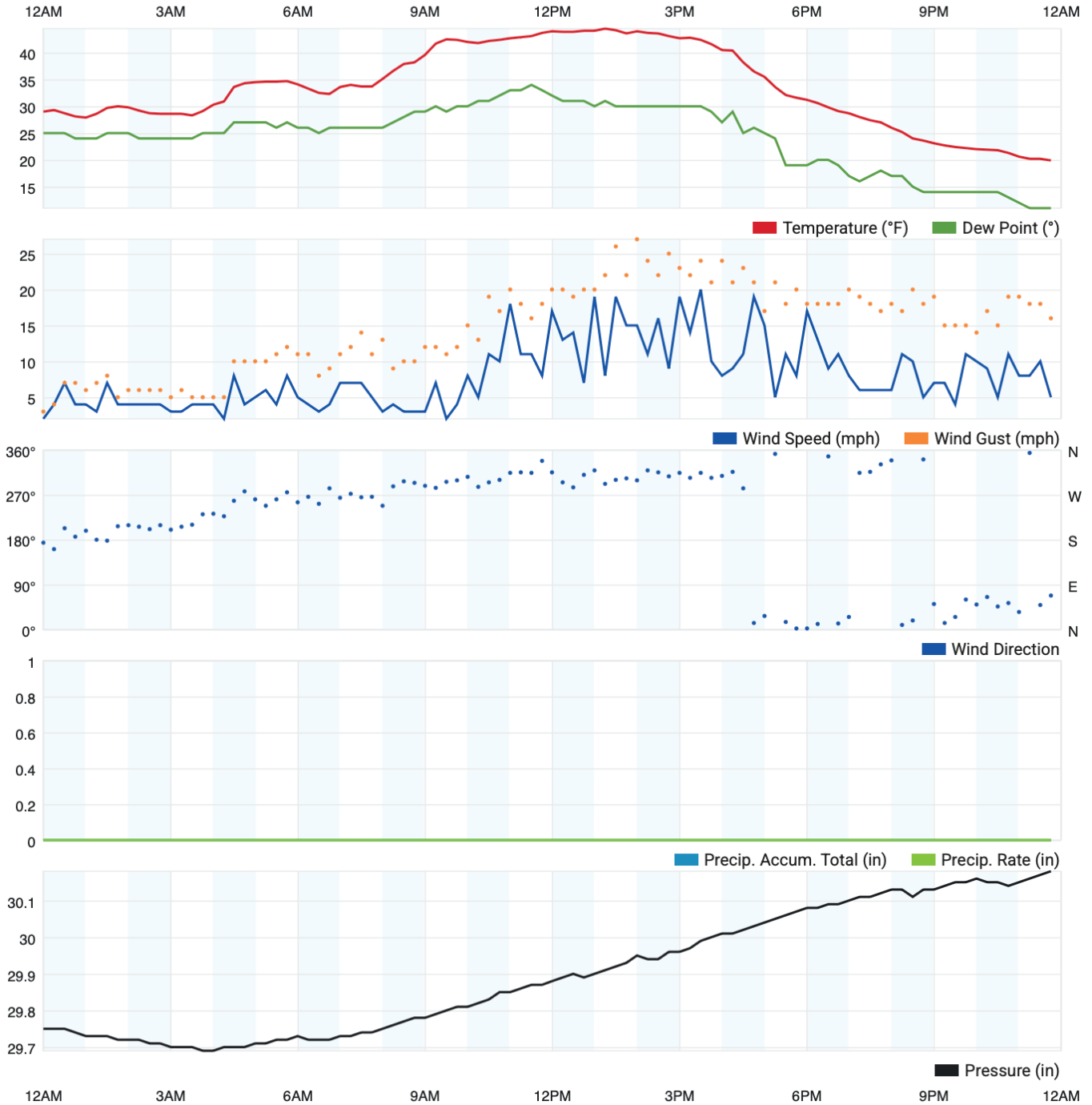
Tim Henderson covers demographics for Stateline. He has been a reporter at the Miami Herald, the Cincinnati Enquirer and the Journal News.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

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Winter Weath...

Today

Tonight

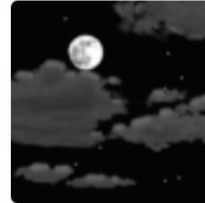
Sunday

Sunday Night

Monday



100% → 60%



High: 16 °F

Low: -4 °F

High: 21 °F

Low: 13 °F

High: 39 °F

Snow then
Snow Likely

Decreasing
Clouds

Mostly Cloudy

Partly Cloudy

Partly Sunny



Winter Weather Advisory

February 28, 2026
3:55 AM

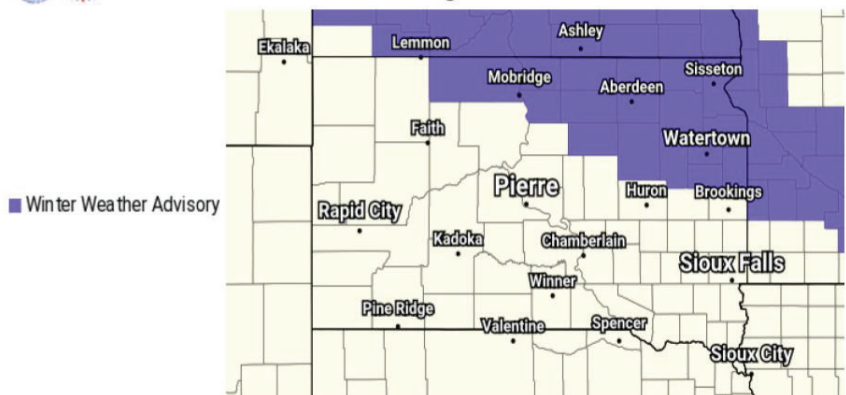
Expanded the areal coverage because of snow banding

Key Messages:

- A Winter Weather Advisory is in effect through this afternoon.
- Snow accumulations of 2-5 inches.
 - **Localized amounts up to 6 inches possible.**
- Winds have the potential to gust 20 to 30 mph. Could **cause some patchy areas of drifting and blowing snow, but nothing widespread.**
- Roads, especially bridges and overpasses, will become slick. Slow down and use caution when traveling!



Winter Watches Warnings and Advisories



Generated: 2026-02-28 03:20 CST



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A winter weather advisory is in effect today for portions of the area northeast of Pierre. This system will exit from northwest to southeast this afternoon. Northeast winds gusting to around 25 mph may lead to patchy blowing snow and reduced visibility to half a mile in open areas.

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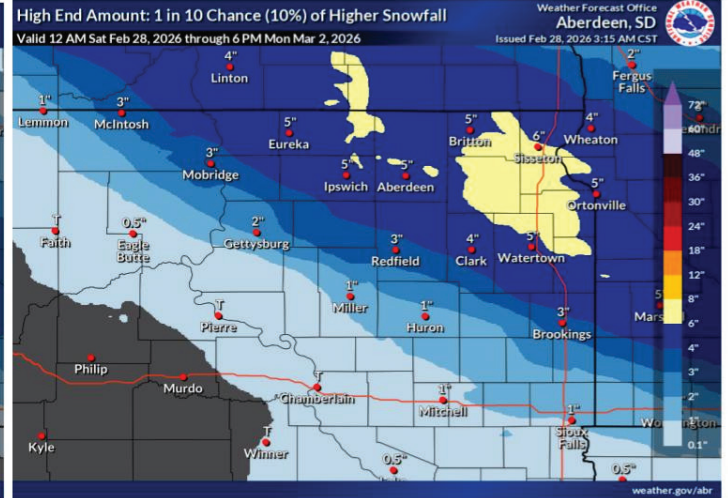
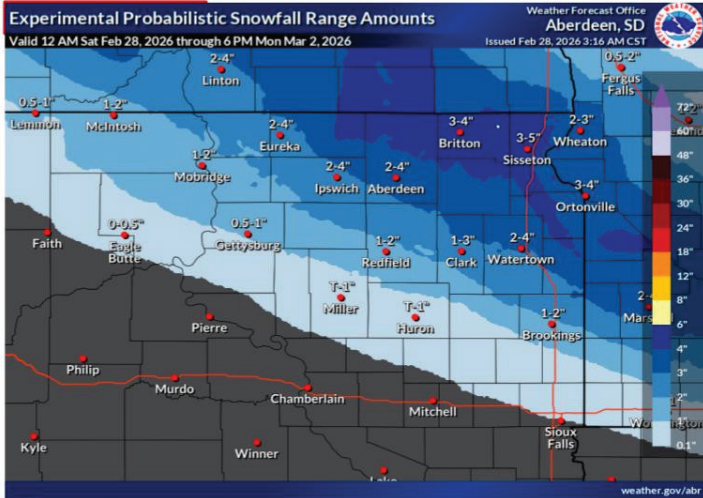


Snow Accumulations Today

February 28, 2026
3:50 AM

System today will bring snow to most of central and northeast SD and west central MN

- Snow ends northwest to southeast this afternoon. **In general, 2 to 4 inches expected, but localized amounts near 6 inches possible.**
- Moderate to heavy bands of snow will develop within the lighter snow. **Travel will be impacted.** Keep an eye on the forecast, plan ahead, and drive to conditions.



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Generally, 2 to 4 inches is expected northeast of Pierre. Localized, higher end amounts could approach 6 inches if a heavier band of snow develops. Snow will exit from northwest to southeast this afternoon.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 12:53 PM

Low Temp: 20 °F at 11:12 PM

Wind: 27 mph at 1:54 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1934

Record Low: -27 in 1962

Average High: 33

Average Low: 12

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.62

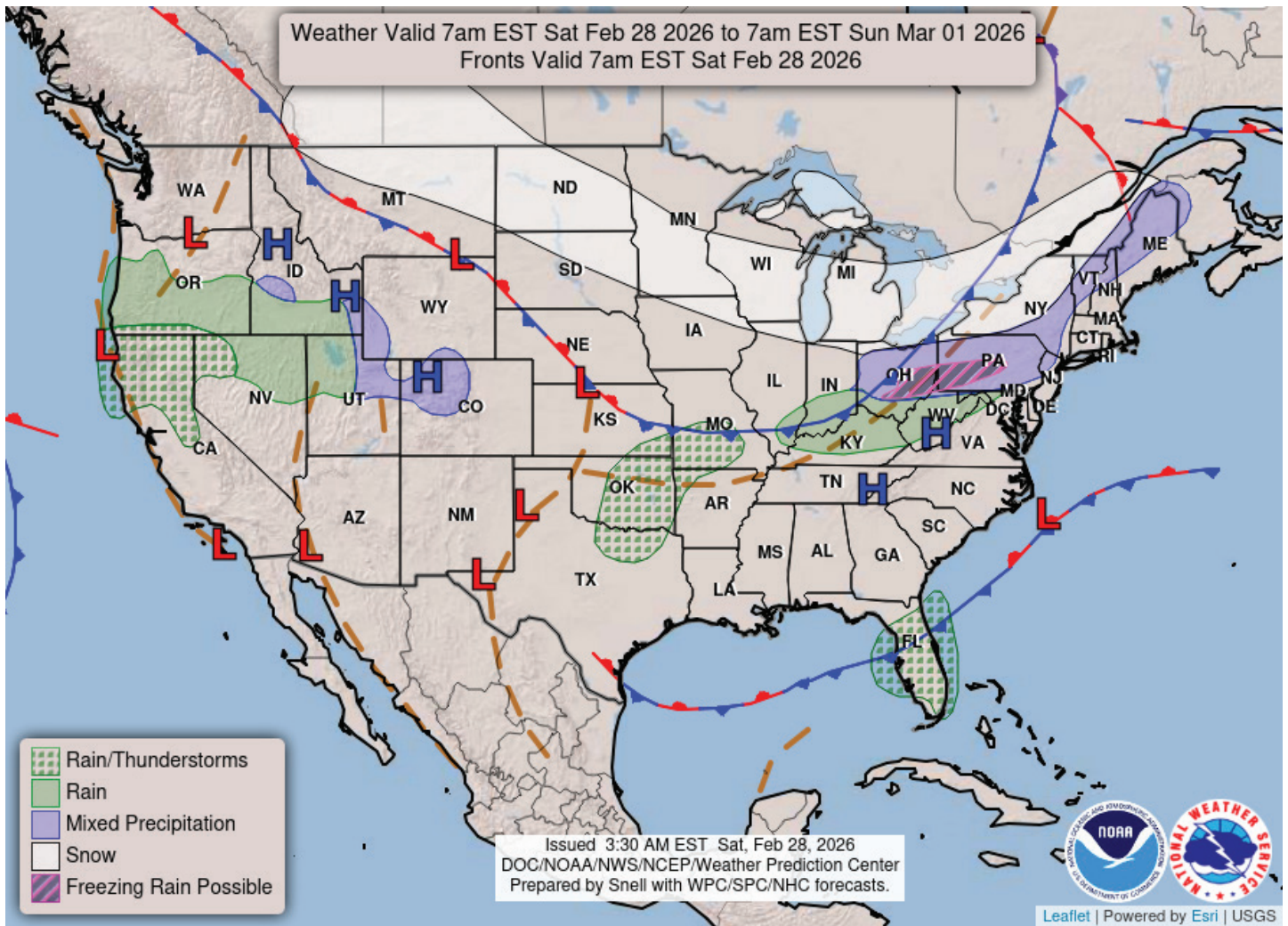
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.96

Average Precip to date: 1.17

Precip Year to Date: 0.96

Sunset Tonight: 6.17 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:10 am



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Today in Weather History

February 28, 2007: Another late February low-pressure system crossed the central plains and spread heavy snow 6 to 11 inches across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. As a result, many schools and college classes were canceled, and many events were postponed. In addition, road conditions became deplorable, with some accidents occurring along with ditched vehicles. The snow continued into the first day of March and ended in the morning. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Aberdeen, 7 inches at Wilmot and Artichoke Lake, 8 inches at Conde, Watertown, Milbank, 9 inches at Browns Valley and Wheaton, and 11 inches at Clark. This heavy snow event was followed by more snowfall and blizzard conditions that developed across the area during the afternoon and evening of March 01.

1846: William S. Forrest, in "Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity" in 1853, recorded the Great Gust of 1846. The Great Gust was a severe coastal storm that produced 5 feet waves in Norfolk.

1900: A massive storm produced record snow from Kansas to northwest Ohio and southern Michigan from February 27 to March 01. The observation at the University of Kansas in Lawrence reported 15 inches of snow on the 27th was "phenomenal; only one heavier snowfall has been recorded for any month, a depth of 16 inches on February 11th and 12th, 1894." (CD). The Coop near Wamego, KS, in the northeast part of Kansas, a record-breaking 24 inches fell in just 12 hours! Other snowfall amounts in Kansas include 19.0" in Abilene, 18.7" in Topeka, 18.0" in McPherson, and 18.0" in Ellinwood. Topeka saw 17.3" on February 27, the most recorded in 24 hours.

In Missouri, heavy snow fell over a considerable portion of the state on the 27th and 28th. From Bates, Cass, Jackson, and Platte counties in the west, to St. Charles, Lincoln, Pike, Ralls, Marion, Lewis, and Clark counties to the east, snowfall ranged from 10 to over 20 inches. The snow drifted severely in many places, and where the fall of snow exceeded 10 inches, railroads were blocked, and county roads rendered impassable for several days. A Coop in Darksville, in northern Randolph County, reported drifts from 6 to 8 feet deep in many places. Houstonia Pettis County's drifts were the worst for more than 30 years. Snowfall amounts in Missouri include 22" in Miami, 20" in Richmond, 13.9" in Columbia, and 13" in Kansas City and Jefferson City.

The storm probably gave central and northern parts of Illinois some of the highest snowfall totals since 1830-1831. (CD) The Coop in Astoria measured an astonishing 37.8 inches with this storm! Coatsburg saw 26 inches. Other snowfall amounts include 21" near Normal, 17.5" in Springfield, and 13" near Jacksonville.

Heavy snow, freezing rain, and sleet occurred in Indiana from February 28 to March 01. In South Bend, 16" of snow fell, prompting street-car employees to work all night to keep the tracks open. As a result, railroad traffic was delayed on all lines. Fairmount and Greensburg reported ice and sleet covered the ground on the 28th. Marion, in Grant County, observed the heaviest sleet storm in many years. Some snowfall amounts include 21" at Valparaiso Waterworks, 18" in Syracuse, Angola, and Fort Wayne, and 16" in South Bend and Huntington.

Northwestern Ohio and southern Michigan saw heavy snowfall from February 27 to March 01. The Coop in Wauseon Water Plant recorded 20.5" of snow. Toledo received 20.2 inches. Grape, Michigan, west-northwest of Monroe, said the heavy snow made all roads impassable. Mail could not be delivered from Grape to Monroe due to badly drifted snow. Some snowfall amounts from southern Michigan include 18" in Hillsdale, Grape, and Somerset, 14" in Detroit, 13" in Lansing, and 12" in Kalamazoo.

1952: A powerful Nor'easter hit Cape Cod with winds of 70-80 mph and snowfall amounts of 12-20 inches. These conditions created 12 feet drifts.

1959: In early December 1958, temperatures fell below freezing and remained there until late February. Over 49 inches of snow fell in that time, with very little in the way of melting. The snow absorbed some rain in February and added to the weight on the roof of the Listowel Arena in Ontario, Canada. As a result, the roof collapsed on February 28, 1959, during a hockey game. Seven young players, a referee, and a recreation director (Reginald Kenneth McLeod) were killed in the tragic collapse.

1962: Wilmington, North Carolina, reached a high temperature of 85 degrees. This is the warmest temperature on record during February.

2018: A waterspout was seen off the coast of Brixham, in southwestern England.



Daily Devotion

Walking Wisely

The Lord wants us to walk wisely so we can enjoy the blessings He longs to give us.

Ephesians 5:15-17: 15 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise,
16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil.
17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

In today's passage, the apostle Paul is teaching how to develop a lifestyle of righteousness. He gives three instructions about making godly choices. He says to ...

"Be careful how you walk" (Eph. 5:15). Unless we deliberately choose to guard ourselves, we will simply do what comes naturally without thinking through our actions.

"Make the most of your time" (v. 16). God has entrusted each of us with the time and opportunities to participate in His plans for us. But we are tempted to squander our time and energy on other pursuits without considering what our heavenly Father may have in mind for us.

"Understand what the will of the Lord is" (v. 17). In its broadest sense, God's will for us is that we would each become the person He created us to be and that we'd do the work He has planned specifically for us to carry out (Ephesians 2:10). Knowing this, we should evaluate our choices through a spiritual "filter" and ask ourselves if they'll further our Father's purposes.

The Lord wants us to walk wisely so we can enjoy all the marvelous benefits that He's promised in His Word and longs to give us. Let's commit to make each and every day count for Jesus Christ instead of merely living for ourselves.

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:
02.27.26

3 4 13 28 42 2

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

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 3 Mins 53
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.26

11 18 39 43 67 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$473,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[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: 13 Hrs 3 Mins 53
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

1 6 21 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 18 Mins 53
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

11 24 47 59 63 5

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 47 Mins 53
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: 13 Hrs 47 Mins 53
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 62, Herried-Selby 50
Avon 79, Burke 66
Belle Fourche 83, Faith 56
Beresford 57, Gayville-Volin High School 56
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 51, Lower Brule 48
Corsica/Stickney 46, Chamberlain 45
Crazy Horse 53, Wakpala 51
DeSmet 69, Iroquois-Lake Preston 56
Douglas 61, Brookings 56
Dupree 95, Tiospaye Topa 33
Emery 54, Dell Rapids St Mary's 35
Gettysburg 76, Timber Lake 50
Gregory 68, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 37
Groton 55, Aberdeen Christian 45
Hanson 61, Mitchell Christian 43
Harding County 57, Bison 33
Hitchcock-Tulare 52, Northwestern 33
Huron 60, Brandon Valley 45
Kadoka 71, Philip 51
Langford 75, Waverly-South Shore 50
Lennox 72, Dakota Valley 57
Leola-Frederick High School 61, Ipswich 35
Little Wound 79, White River 66
Lyman 90, Kimball-White Lake 31
Madison 56, Baltic 53
Marty 90, Lakota Tech 46
McLaughlin 84, St. Francis Indian 76
Milbank 62, Tiospa Zina 31
Miller 63, Highmore-Harrold 38
Mobridge-Pollock 59, Lemmon High School 34
New Underwood 56, Jones County 46
Rapid City Central 66, Sioux Falls Jefferson 50
Rapid City Christian 52, Hot Springs 28
Sioux Falls Lincoln 81, Aberdeen Central 41
Sioux Falls Lutheran 56, Colman-Egan 38
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 62, T F Riggs High School 60
Sioux Falls Washington 91, Rapid City Stevens 75
Sisseton 64, Great Plains Lutheran 62, OT
Sully Buttes 62, North Central 28
Tri-Valley 86, Sioux Falls Christian 51
Webster 66, Florence-Henry 59
Wessington Springs 63, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 54
Yankton 65, Spearfish 59

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

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 60, Sioux Falls Lincoln 22
Brandon Valley 54, Huron 35
Brookings 62, Douglas 33
Rapid City Stevens 52, Sioux Falls Washington 36
Sioux Falls Jefferson 67, Rapid City Central 57
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 56, T F Riggs High School 51
Spearfish 32, Yankton 29

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

Racial slur at BAFTA awards stirs complex feelings for Black people with Tourette syndrome

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

For Black people living with Tourette syndrome, the British Academy Film and Television Arts Awards incident earlier this week where a vocal tic manifested as a racial slur while two Black stars of the movie "Sinners" were onstage has left them with complicated feelings.

"It's been pretty difficult because I feel like there's such a clash between both sides," said Chloe Winston, 24, who experiences coprolalia, the same verbal tic as John Davidson, the BAFTA nominee and Tourette syndrome advocate who yelled the slur. "A tic is not intentional, but it still causes harm. And I think that does require accountability."

Davidson's utterance just as Michael B. Jordan and Delroy Lindo were presenting the first award of that night's ceremony ignited a firestorm that overshadowed Sunday's BAFTAs. There was immediate outrage that the actors and other Black attendees were subjected to the slur. Then there was frustration from the disability community at a lack of understanding about Tourette syndrome. But anger has been loud and widespread for broadcaster BBC because of its decision to allow the racial slur to air uncensored two hours after the live event. Most live awards shows like the Oscars operate on a seconds-long tape delay.

The BAFTA and BBC apologies also were criticized as insufficient. The BBC plans to edit it out of its iPlayer streaming service.

The ordeal has compelled Black people with Tourette syndrome, from politicians to content creators, to speak out. They assert that showing empathy for those dealing with the disorder doesn't minimize the pain felt by the Black community. There needs to be acknowledgment of the harm, some have said. Others also worry that misinformation or stereotypes about Tourette syndrome could exacerbate racial profiling or discrimination for Black people who live with it.

Now, advocacy groups are using the BAFTA moment to try to grow existing support networks focused on Black people who feel isolated by Tourette syndrome.

What is Tourette syndrome and coprolalia?

Tourette syndrome is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by sudden, involuntary movements and/or sounds called tics, according to the Tourette Association of America. These can be motor and vocal tics. Tics can range from mild and inconsequential to moderate and severe and can even be disabling in some cases.

"We know that there's this sort of sensory and motor loop happening. And again, similarly in the vocalizations, they typically start with things like coughing, sniffing, or other just non-specific sounds, said Dr. Jeremiah Scharf, a tic disorder specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital.

In a majority of people, the symptoms begin to emerge during elementary school age and peak between ages 10 and 14, according to Scharf. Roughly 1.4 million people in the U.S. live with Tourette syndrome or a persistent tic disorder, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Coprolalia is "the involuntary utterance of obscene and socially unacceptable words and phrases." The Tourette Association of America estimates between 10%-15% of people with Tourette syndrome live with

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it. The organization has cautioned against making assumptions about the person based on the content of the tic.

These vocal outbursts — typically vulgarities and insults — are a biological condition that can sometimes be triggered by stress such as not enough sleep or being upset, Scharf said. The tics are hard to stop and involuntary — almost like a sneeze.

“Unfortunately, for this subset of people, it is incredibly disabling because they don’t want to say those things. It’s very distressing to them,” said Scharf, who was talking in general terms and not about the BAFTA awards incident specifically. “They feel significant remorse about it.”

Treatment for severe tic disorders can range from medication to behavioral therapies. Retraining the brain to handle tics is “takes an enormous amount of practice in terms of recognizing when the tics are coming,” Scharf said. But, there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Incident stirs up struggles against racism and ableism

Jhónelle Bean, an American Sign Language interpreter who is Black and has Tourette syndrome, took to TikTok after seeing so much “all-or-nothing” discourse around the BAFTA awards. Her video about the “complexity and duality of the situation” has garnered over 3 million views.

“Two things can be true at the same time,” Bean said. “Just because he ticced that does not mean it was intentional. But then also that still caused hurt or harm for people that heard it, which again is why I’m mad at the BAFTAs and the BBC for keeping it in the broadcast in the first place because they had the power to take it out.”

The incident also brought up “ableism” comments that were flat-out discriminatory. They included that Davidson, the man who shouted the racial slur, “should have been locked away, he should’ve had a muzzle, things like that,” Bean said.

At the same time, Bean disagreed with some engaged in the social media discourse who said those who took offense over the N-word needed to “get over it.”

Jumaane Williams, New York City’s public advocate who is Black and has Tourette syndrome, said it can be “painful both physically and mentally” to hold in a tic. As someone who has coprolalia too, Williams gives Davidson some credit for removing himself from the situation though “maybe he could have moved a little sooner.”

“For me, it was all about making sure we’re practicing care. And I don’t think that happened for the two actors that were there or the Black folks who were there or people who didn’t want to hear the word,” Williams said.

A demand for support groups for Black people with Tourette syndrome

There’s always going to be inherent concern if you are Black with Tourette syndrome or any tic disorder, said Reice Griffin, 20, who is a Tourette Association of America rising leader and ambassador. She has had people witness her tics and assume she uses drugs or is typically belligerent. And interacting with police can be even more stressful.

“Law enforcement is not well equipped to deal with Tourette syndrome, but also historically, as a Black person, you never really want to be around law enforcement,” Griffin said.

The association, which offers printable “I Have TS” cards, is actively trying to offer more support for people of color.

Griffin recently attended a virtual support group meeting for Black young adults, and she has been speaking at schools and to groups to become more comfortable with herself.

“I thought that because I had Tourette syndrome that, like, public speaking was out the window,” Griffin said. “If I could help another young Black girl with Tourette syndrome not feel as alone or help people get diagnosed — that’s the dream.”

Williams, the New York City public advocate, agrees there is not enough support for Black people with Tourette syndrome. He tries to help by speaking about his own life. That has led to him hearing directly from New Yorkers.

“Sometimes in the street or an event people will bring their family member up which is always a pretty

emotional space for me because when I see the kid, I know what they're going through," Williams said.

US and Israel launch a major attack on Iran and Trump urges Iranians to 'take over your government'

By JON GAMBRELL, KONSTANTIN TOROPIN, JOSH BOAK and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press
DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The U.S. and Israel launched a major attack on Iran on Saturday, and President Donald Trump called on the Iranian public to "seize control of your destiny" by rising up against the Islamic leadership that has ruled the nation since 1979.

Some of the first strikes appeared to hit areas around the offices of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, and Iranian media reported strikes nationwide. Smoke could be seen rising from the capital. It wasn't immediately clear whether the 86-year-old leader was in his offices at the time of the strike.

"When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be probably your only chance for generations," Trump said in a video announcing "major combat operations" were underway. "For many years, you have asked for America's help, but you never got it."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu echoed that sweeping goal. "Our joint operation will create the conditions for the brave Iranian people to take their fate into their own hands," Netanyahu said.

The strikes opened a stunning new chapter in U.S. intervention in Iran and marked the second time in eight months that the Trump administration has used military force against the Islamic Republic. They also came just weeks after Trump ordered a military operation to capture Venezuela's president, Nicolás Maduro, and bring him and his wife to New York to face federal drug conspiracy charges.

The targets included members of Iran's leadership, according to a U.S. official and another person briefed on the attacks who both spoke on condition of anonymity because they were discussing classified information on an ongoing operation. There was no immediate information on whether top officials had been killed.

Tensions have soared in recent weeks as American warships moved into the region. Trump said he wanted a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear program at a moment when the country is struggling at home with growing dissent following nationwide protests.

The immediate trigger for Saturday's strikes appears to be the unsuccessful latest round of nuclear talks. But they also reflect the dramatic changes across the region that have left Iran's leadership in its weakest position since the Islamic Revolution nearly half a century ago.

Israeli and American strikes last June greatly weakened Iran's air defenses, military leadership and nuclear program. A regionwide war, sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, has left Iran's network of proxies across the Middle East greatly weakened. U.S. sanctions and global isolation, meanwhile, have decimated Iran's economy.

Iran responded to the latest strikes as it had been threatening to do for months — first launching a wave of missiles and drones targeting Israel. It followed with strikes targeting U.S. military installations in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. The United Arab Emirates and Iraq shut down their airspace.

Iran's Foreign Ministry issued a defiant statement, saying the country "will not hesitate" in its response. In a statement posted on X, the ministry said: "The time has come to defend the homeland and confront the enemy's military assault."

At least 57 people were reported killed at a girls' school in southern Iran in the Israeli-U.S. strikes, according to Iran's state-run IRNA news agency. At least 45 others were wounded in the attack in Minab in Iran's Hormozgan province. The White House and the Israeli military did not immediately respond to a request for comment on reported strike on the school.

In an indication of the scope of the conflict, flights across the Middle East were disrupted and air defense fire thudded over Dubai, the commercial capital of the United Arab Emirates, Saturday afternoon. Associated Press journalists saw the aftereffects of the blast from an interceptor.

Shrapnel from an Iranian missile attack on the capital of the UAE killed one person, state media said.

Attack was coordinated between Israel and US

The U.S. military has for weeks amassed forces in the region, even as U.S. and Iranian envoys held talks

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in Switzerland and Oman aimed at finding a diplomatic solution.

"Active and serious negotiations have yet again been undermined," Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi said in a post on X. Al-Busaidi, a key mediator in the nuclear talks, traveled to Washington on Friday to meet with Vice President JD Vance.

"Neither the interests of the United States nor the cause of global peace are well served by this," al-Busaidi said. "And I pray for the innocents who will suffer. I urge the United States not to get sucked in further."

Israel said the operation has been planned for months between the Israeli and U.S. militaries.

Trump, in justifying the military action, claimed that Iran has continued to develop its nuclear program and plans to develop missiles to reach the U.S.

He also acknowledged that there could be American casualties, saying "that often happens in war."

It was a notable call on Americans to brace themselves from a U.S. leader who swept into office on an "America First" platform and vowed to keep out of "forever wars" that had bogged down his recent predecessors.

Trump's statement indicated the U.S. was striking for reasons far beyond the nuclear program, listing grievances stretching back to the beginning of the Islamic Republic following a revolution in 1979 that turned Iran from one of America's closest allies in the Middle East into a fierce foe.

The U.S. president said he was aiming to "annihilate" the Iranian navy and destroy regional proxies supported by Tehran.

He also called on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to lay down its arms, pledging that members would be given immunity, while warning they would face "certain death" if they didn't.

Trump had threatened military action — but held off — following Iran's recent crackdown on protests spurred by economic grievances and evolved into a nationwide, anti-government push against the ruling clerics.

The Human Rights Activists News Agency says it confirmed more than 7,000 deaths in the crackdown 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.

Iran has said it hasn't enriched since June, but it has blocked international inspectors from visiting the sites America bombed during a 12-day war then. Satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press have shown new activity at two of those sites, suggesting Iran is trying to assess and potentially recover material there.

Iran currently has a self-imposed limit on its ballistic missile program, limiting their range to 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles). That puts all the Mideast and some of Eastern Europe in their range.

Iran had hoped to avert a 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.

The strikes could rattle global markets, particularly if Iran is able to make the Strait of Hormuz unsafe for commercial traffic. More than 14 million barrels per day of oil passed through the strait in 2025, about a third of total worldwide oil exports transported by sea.

Strikes hit targets across Iran

Iranian media reported strikes nationwide. Roads to Khamenei's compound in downtown Tehran had been shut down by authorities as other blasts rang out across the capital.

Khamenei has not made a public appearance in recent days and wasn't immediately seen after. During the 12-day war in June, he was believed to have been taken to a secure location away from his Tehran compound.

Targets in the Israeli campaign included Iran's military, symbols of government and intelligence targets, according to an official briefed on the operation, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss nonpublic information on the attack.

Iran retaliates

Hours after the strikes, Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard said it launched a "first wave" of drones

and missiles targeting Israel, where a nationwide warning was issued as the military said it was working to intercept incoming Iranian missiles. There was no immediate word on any damage or casualties from the ongoing attack.

Meanwhile, Bahrain said that a missile attack targeted the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet headquarters in the island kingdom. Witnesses heard sirens and explosions in Kuwait, home to U.S. Army Central. Explosions could be also be heard in Qatar.

The Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen vowed to resume attacks on Red Sea shipping routes and on Israel, according to two senior Houthi officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity because there was no official announcement from the Houthi leadership.

U.S. embassies or consulates in Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Israel posted on social media that they told staffers to shelter in place and recommended all Americans "do the same until further notice."

Warren Buffett's successor Greg Abel publishes his first letter to Berkshire Hathaway shareholders

By JOSH FUNK AP Business Writer

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Warren Buffett's successor released his first letter to Berkshire Hathaway shareholders on Saturday as the company took a \$4.5 billion write-down on the value of its Kraft Heinz and Occidental Petroleum stakes.

Greg Abel took over as CEO in January, so this is his chance to set the tone for his leadership. Investors are watching closely for any changes he might make, but Abel and Buffett have said there won't be significant changes in the way Berkshire operates.

The letter opens with a tribute to Buffett and a promise to maintain Berkshire's culture that's based on trust and integrity and continue operating the same way that has worked so well for six decades.

"I am honored by our board's decision to appoint me CEO of Berkshire and humbled to succeed Warren as I write my first annual letter to you. Warren is obviously a very hard act to follow," Abel said as he laid out his background and approach.

And Buffett remains chairman and the largest shareholder, so he's still helping guide the Omaha, Nebraska-based conglomerate he built. But Abel is now writing the annual letters that were always known as one of the most-read business reports out there because so many investors admired and followed Buffett because of his remarkable track record and homespun wit and advice.

Abel announced a few changes to the lineup for the shareholder meeting in May. The first question-and-answer period will feature Abel alongside Berkshire's Vice Chairman for insurance, Ajit Jain. Then a second panel will have Abel answering questions with BNSF CEO Katie Farmer and NetJets CEO Adam Johnson, who now helps oversee all of Berkshire's consumer, service and retail businesses.

The only initial changes so far are some administrative moves Abel made as he took over, and a filing in January suggesting Berkshire is considering sell off some or all of its 325 million Kraft Heinz shares. But Buffett may have supported that move because he had made comments about how Berkshire overpaid when it helped Heinz merge with Kraft, and he had been critical of packaged food giant's plan to split into two companies. Many investors have tried to copy the moves Buffett made in Berkshire's massive portfolio of stocks.

But Berkshire is powered by the dozens of companies it owns including major insurers like Geico, the BNSF railroad, a number of major utilities and an assortment of manufacturing and retail firms. Berkshire owns well-known brands like Dairy Queen and See's Candy along with some of the companies that supply what other industries need like Precision Castparts, Lubrizol and Iscar Metalworking.

Abel already knows many of Berkshire's companies well because he has been managing all of the non-insurance companies since 2018, and the executives who report to him have praised his insights into their different businesses.

A Supreme Court case over whether marijuana users can own guns is creating unusual alliances

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Gun rights and cannabis legalization are usually on opposite ends of the political spectrum, but both movements have brought about seismic shifts in the United States in recent decades. Now those forces are lining up for a rare overlap in a case coming before the Supreme Court on Monday, and it is not the only unusual alliance.

The Republican Trump administration will be defending a firearm restriction, with backing from gun-control groups typically more aligned with Democrats.

On the other side is a pairing of the National Rifle Association and the American Civil Liberties Union.

At stake is a federal law that bars people who regularly use marijuana from legally owning guns. It is an issue that has divided lower courts since a landmark 2022 Supreme Court decision expanded gun rights.

Cecillia Wang, legal director at the ACLU, said the law violates the Second Amendment and is unconstitutionally vague about what it means to be a drug user.

"We're deeply concerned with the potential of this statute to basically give federal prosecutors a blank check," she said. "Millions of Americans use marijuana and there is no way for them to know based on words of this statute whether they could be charged or convicted of this crime because they own a firearm."

Cannabis is legal for medicinal use in most states and for recreational use in about half the country.

But the law also applies more widely against all illegal substances, meaning the case could allow broader legal gun use by other drug users. The group Everytown for Gun Safety said the law meets the Supreme Court's requirement that gun laws must have a strong grounding in the nation's history and tradition.

"Restricting firearm use by illegal drug users is 'as old as legislative recognition of the drug problem itself,'" attorneys wrote.

Cannabis remains illegal on a federal level, though President Donald Trump has signed an order to fast-track its reclassification as a less dangerous drug.

His Justice Department is also asking the justices to revive a criminal case against Ali Danial Hemani, a Texas man who was charged with a felony because he had a gun in his house and acknowledged smoking marijuana every other day. FBI agents also found a small amount of cocaine when they searched his home as part of a broader investigation, but the gun charge was the only one filed against him.

The conservative-leaning 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the case, finding that only people who are intoxicated while armed can be charged with a crime.

The administration has argued in favor of gun rights in other cases, but government lawyers say this law is a justifiable restriction. "Habitual illegal drug users with firearms present unique dangers to society — especially because they pose a grave risk of armed, hostile encounters with police officers while impaired," they wrote in court documents. The law fits within the nation's history of restrictions on people who were frequently drunk, they argued.

While the conservative-majority Supreme Court has expanded gun rights, it also has upheld a federal law disarming people who are subject to domestic violence restraining orders. The Department of Justice argues that drug users are similarly risky. The law it is asking the court to uphold was also used in the case of Hunter Biden, who was convicted of buying a gun when he was addicted to cocaine.

But the NRA and other gun-rights groups, typically aligned with the GOP, are arrayed against the administration in Hemani's case.

"Americans have traditionally chosen which substances are acceptable for responsible recreational use, and the fundamental right to keep and bear arms was never denied to people who occasionally partook in such drugs — unless they were carrying arms while actively intoxicated," lawyers for the Second Amendment Foundation wrote in court documents.

The cannabis group NORML agrees, saying one of the fastest-growing groups of users are baby boomers trying products such as marijuana gummies to relieve arthritis and sleep problems.

"It's laughable to think that by outlawing cannabis users possessing firearms you'll minimize the problem

with gun violence," said Joe A. Bondy, chair of the board of directors for NORML, one of the country's oldest and largest groups advocating for the legalization of marijuana.

Pakistan carries out airstrikes inside Afghanistan with no letup in border fighting

By MUNIR AHMED and ABDUL QAHAR AFGHAN Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan's military, backed by artillery and air power, struck more military installations deep inside Afghanistan overnight and into early Saturday, after Pakistan said it was in "open war" with its eastern neighbor.

Pakistan claimed more than 300 Afghan forces had been killed since fighting erupted Thursday night during a broad Afghan cross-border attack into Pakistan. Afghanistan rejected the figures as false. The casualty figures provided by either side could not be independently confirmed.

The fighting was in response to Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan last Sunday. Pakistan said it was targeting the outlawed Pakistani Taliban, or TTP. The group is separate but closely allied with Afghanistan's ruling Taliban. Afghanistan, however, said only civilians were killed in Sunday's airstrike.

After the Afghan attack, Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif declared Friday: "Our patience has now run out. Now it is open war between us."

Continued fighting

Pakistani Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said Saturday that more than 331 Afghan forces had been killed and over 500 others wounded during the ongoing military strikes in Afghanistan. Pakistan destroyed 102 Afghan posts, captured 22 others and destroyed 163 tanks and armored vehicles at 37 locations, he said.

The Afghan government's deputy spokesman, Hamdullah Fitrat, said the claim of hundreds of Afghan forces killed and wounded "is untrue and we reject it." He accused Pakistan of targeting civilian areas in the provinces of Paktika, Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar and Kandahar, as well as refugee camps in Torkham and Kandahar. Fitrat said 52 people had been killed, most of them women and children, and 66 others wounded.

Meanwhile, the United Nations wrote on X that major cities in Afghanistan were reportedly bombed by the Pakistani military on Friday, marking a new escalation and raising fears for civilians already struggling under the harsh rule of the Taliban authorities.

On Friday, Afghan government spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said 13 Afghan forces were killed and 22 wounded. He also said 55 Pakistani soldiers were killed. Pakistan put its own military figures at 12 killed, 27 wounded and one soldier missing in action.

Pakistan's state-run media reported the country's air force carried out strikes targeting key military installations in various areas of eastern Afghanistan.

According to Pakistani authorities, hundreds of residents living near the northwestern Torkham border crossing had fled. In recent days, Pakistan has also deported dozens of Afghan refugees to Torkham.

Ejaz Ul Haq, an Afghan refugee stranded near the Torkham border with his family, said he could not return to Afghanistan because of the fighting. Many others were struggling to obtain food during the fast-month of Ramadan, he said.

Afghanistan's Defense Ministry on Saturday said Afghanistan attacked Pakistani military bases in Miran-shah and Spin Wam overnight, destroying military installations and causing heavy casualties in response to the ongoing airstrikes by Pakistan.

Afghanistan says Pakistan targeting civilian areas

In eastern Afghanistan, the Department of Information and Culture accused Pakistan of targeting civilian areas, destroying homes and killing at least 11 people. There was no immediate response from Pakistan, which has said it is targeting only military installations.

Mullah Taj Mohammad Naqshbandi, a commissioner on the Afghan side of the Torkham border, said in a statement Saturday that the "brave forces of the Islamic Emirate destroyed the Pakistani military regime's

commissariat, military units, and three important security towers.”

On Friday, the Afghan government said 55 Pakistani soldiers were killed during its strikes and Afghan losses were far lower than Pakistan claimed.

Mujahid, the Afghan government spokesman, said Friday that the country’s attacks on Pakistani military targets were meant as “a message that our hands can reach their throats and that we will respond to every evil act of Pakistan.” He added that “Pakistan has never sought to resolve problems through dialogue.”

Pakistan has frequently accused Kabul of sheltering the TTP, allegations the group and Afghanistan’s Taliban government deny.

Pakistan’s army spokesman Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry said Friday the Afghan government had to choose “TTP or Pakistan.”

Tension high for months

Tensions have been high since October, when dozens of soldiers, civilians and suspected militants were killed in border clashes. A Qatari-mediated ceasefire ended the intense fighting that month, but several rounds of peace talks in Turkey in November failed to produce a lasting agreement. The two sides have occasionally traded fire since then, though the ceasefire had largely held until last week, when Pakistan struck what it described as TTP hideouts.

Since then, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, China and several other countries are again attempting to defuse tensions by offering mediation.

Qatar’s minister of state, Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, spoke Friday with the foreign ministers of Afghanistan and Pakistan in an effort to de-escalate tensions, Qatar’s Foreign Ministry said in a post on X.

Vatican removes salty white film coating Michelangelo’s ‘The Last Judgment’

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Michelangelo’s “The Last Judgement” is getting a facial, with restorers removing a chalky white film of salt that has accumulated over the Renaissance masterpiece since its last major renovation three decades ago.

The Vatican on Saturday gave the media a sneak peak to the cleaning operation, which is taking place on a floor-to-ceiling scaffolding that has obscured the imposing fresco of heaven and hell that dominates the front of the chapel.

The cleaning operation is expected to be completed by Easter, in the first week of April. The public can continue to visit in the meantime, but will have to settle for a reproduction of “The Last Judgment” superimposed on a screen that covers the scaffolding.

Vatican Museum officials on Saturday described a simple but important cleaning operation to remove the white film of salt that has accumulated on the fresco thanks to the nearly 25,000 people who pass through the Vatican Museums each day.

“This salt is created because, above all, when we sweat, we emit lactic acid, and unfortunately lactic acid reacts with the calcium carbonate present on the wall,” said Fabio Moresi, in charge of the scientific research team at the Vatican Museums that is overseeing the cleaning.

Climate change also has a role to play, since the visitors who do come tend to sweat more, creating even more humidity that reacts with the fresco, he said.

Vatican Museums chief Barbara Jatta described the film as a “cataract” that is easy enough to remove: Restorers dip sheets of Japanese rice paper into distilled water and apply them to the fresco, and carefully wipe away the salt film.

Viewed up close on Saturday on the scaffolding, the difference between before and after is remarkable: Sections of the fresco that haven’t been cleaned look as if they are coated in a chalky dust; the cleaned sections show the vibrant colors and detail of the original. On the figure of Jesus, for example, at the center of the fresco, a privileged visitor can see how Michelangelo painted his hair and the wounds of his

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crucifixion.

The Sistine Chapel is named after Pope Sixtus IV, an art patron who oversaw the construction of the main papal chapel in the 15th century.

But it was a later pontiff, Pope Julius II, who commissioned Michelangelo to paint the famous ceiling, the "Creation of Adam" showing God's outstretched hand, between 1508 and 1512. A later pontiff, Pope Clement VII, commissioned Michelangelo in 1533 to return to paint "The Last Judgment."

The other frescos of the Sistine Chapel, where Pope Leo XIV was elected in May, undergo yearly cleaning with restorers working at night on cherry-pickers that can be removed each morning before the public arrives.

But such machines can't access all of "The Last Judgement," since the fresco is located behind the altar, which is itself raised up marble steps. That logistical impediment required the mounting of a fixed scaffolding to access the full fresco to clean it.

The Sistine Chapel underwent a complete restoration between 1979 and 1999, when centuries of smoke, grime and wax buildup was removed. The Vatican has left small patches of the pre-restored fresco intact to show the difference, which are now visible on the upper floors of the scaffolding and show a nearly blackened wall.

Rather than radically reduce the number of visitors who can access the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican is studying ways to address humidity levels, through filtration systems and other technologies, so that the salty film doesn't form again.

Read President Trump's statement on Iran in full

By The Associated Press undefined

U.S. President Donald Trump said in an 8-minute video posted on his Truth Social that the U.S. has begun "major combat operations in Iran." He claimed Iran has continued to develop its nuclear program and plans to develop missiles to reach U.S. and appealed to the Iranian people to "take over your government."

Here's Trump's address in full:

A short time ago, the United States military began major combat operations in Iran. Our objective is to defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime. A vicious group of very hard, terrible people. Its menacing activities directly endanger the United States, our troops, our bases overseas, and our allies throughout the world.

For 47 years, the Iranian regime has chanted Death to America and waged an unending campaign of bloodshed and mass murder, targeting the United States, our troops and the innocent people in many, many countries. Among the regime's very first acts was to back a violent takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, holding dozens of American hostages for 444 days. In 1983, Iran's proxies carried out the marine barracks bombing in Beirut that killed 241 American military personnel.

In 2000, they knew and were probably involved with the attack on the USS Cole. Many died. Iranian forces killed and maimed hundreds of American service members in Iraq. The regime's proxies have continued to launch countless attacks against American forces stationed in the Middle East in recent years, as well as U.S. naval and commercial vessels and international shipping lines. It's been mass terror, and we're not going to put up with it any longer.

From Lebanon to Yemen and Syria to Iraq, the regime has armed, trained and funded terrorist militias that have soaked the earth with blood and guts. And it was Iran's proxy, Hamas, that launched the monstrous Oct. 7 attacks on Israel, slaughtering more than 1,000 innocent people, including 46 Americans, while taking 12 of our citizens hostage. It was brutal, something like the world has never seen before.

Iran is the world's number one state sponsor of terror, and just recently killed tens of thousands of its own citizens on the street as they protested. It has always been the policy of the United States, in particular my administration, that this terrorist regime can never have a nuclear weapon. I'll say it again, they can never have a nuclear weapon. That is why in Operation Midnight Hammer last June, we obliterated the regime's nuclear program at Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan. After that attack, we warned them never to

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resume their malicious pursuit of nuclear weapons, and we sought repeatedly to make a deal. We tried. They wanted to do it. They didn't want to do it. Again they wanted to do it. They didn't want to do it. They didn't know what was happening. They just wanted to practice evil. But Iran refused, just as it has for decades and decades.

They've rejected every opportunity to renounce their nuclear ambitions, and we can't take it anymore. Instead, they attempted to rebuild their nuclear program and to continue developing the long range missiles that can now threaten our very good friends and allies in Europe, our troops stationed overseas, and could soon reach the American homeland. Just imagine how emboldened this regime would be if they ever had, and actually were armed with nuclear weapons as a means to deliver their message.

For these reasons, the United States military is undertaking a massive and ongoing operation to prevent this very wicked, radical dictatorship from threatening America and our core national security interests. We're going to destroy their missiles and raze their missile industry to the ground. It will be totally again obliterated. We're going to annihilate their navy. We're going to ensure that the region's terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the region or the world and attack our forces, and no longer use their IEDs, or roadside bombs as they are sometimes called, to so gravely wound and kill thousands and thousands of people, including many Americans. And we will ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon. It's a very simple message. They will never have a nuclear weapon.

This regime will soon learn that no one should challenge the strength and might of the United States Armed Forces. I built and rebuilt our military in my first administration and there is no military on earth even close to its power, strength or sophistication. My administration is taking every possible step to minimize the risk to U.S. personnel in the region. Even so, and I do not make this statement lightly, the Iranian regime seeks to kill. The lives of courageous American heroes may be lost, and we may have casualties. That often happens in war. But we're doing this not for now. We're doing this for the future. And it is a noble mission. We pray for every service member as they selflessly risk their lives to ensure that Americans and our children will never be threatened by a nuclear-armed Iran. We ask God to protect all of our heroes in harm's way. And we trust that with his help, the men and women of the armed forces will prevail. We have the greatest in the world, and they will prevail.

To the members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, the armed forces and all of the police, I say tonight that you must lay down your weapons and have complete immunity. Or in the alternative, face certain death. So, lay down your arms. You will be treated fairly with total immunity, or you will face certain death. Finally, to the great proud people of Iran, I say tonight that the hour of your freedom is at hand. Stay sheltered. Don't leave your home. It's very dangerous outside. Bombs will be dropping everywhere. When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be probably your only chance for generations.

For many years, you have asked for America's help. But you never got it. No president was willing to do what I am willing to do tonight. Now you have a president who is giving you what you want. So let's see how you respond. America is backing you with overwhelming strength and devastating force. Now is the time to seize control of your destiny, and to unleash the prosperous and glorious future that is close within your reach. This is the moment for action. Do not let it pass.

May God bless the brave men and women of America's armed forces. May God bless the United States of America. May God bless you all. Thank you.

Russia condemns US-Israel strikes on Iran as 'unprovoked act of armed aggression'

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia on Saturday condemned the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran as "a pre-planned and unprovoked act of armed aggression against a sovereign and independent U.N. member state," demanding an immediate halt to the military campaign and a return to diplomacy.

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In a statement posted to Telegram, the Foreign Ministry accused Washington and Tel Aviv of "hiding behind" concerns about Iran's nuclear program while actually pursuing regime change.

It warned the attacks risked triggering a "humanitarian, economic and possibly radiological catastrophe" in the region and accused the U.S. and Israel of "plunging the Middle East into an abyss of uncontrolled escalation."

The ministry also said Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke phone with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

Araghchi briefed Lavrov on Iran's attempts to repel the attacks and said Iran would seek to convene an urgent U.N. Security Council session, it said. Lavrov reiterated Russia's condemnation of the U.S.-Israeli strikes and Moscow's readiness to help broker peace.

Moscow called the bombing of nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards "unacceptable" and said it stood ready to help broker a peaceful resolution, while placing full responsibility for the escalation on the United States and Israel.

"Responsibility for the negative consequences of this manmade crisis, including an unpredictable chain reaction and spiraling violence, lies entirely with them," the statement said.

Russia's Foreign Ministry also condemned what it called "the serial nature of destabilizing attacks carried out by the U.S. administration," accusing the U.S. of attacking "the international legal pillars of the world order."

Russia has maintained a delicate balancing act in the Middle East for decades, trying to navigate its warm relations with Israel even as it has developed strong economic and military ties with Iran.

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

Some observers in Moscow argue that the focus on the confrontation between Israel and Iran could distract global attention from the war in Ukraine and play into Russia's hands by potentially weakening Western support for Kyiv.

What to know about U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

The U.S. and Israel attacked Iran on Saturday in what President Donald Trump said was a massive operation to destroy the country's military capabilities and eliminate the threat of it creating a nuclear weapon.

Iran's Foreign Ministry said it would defend its homeland and its Revolutionary Guard said it launched counterattacks, firing drones and missiles at Israel and strikes aimed at U.S. military installations in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar.

The strikes came after Trump has pressured Tehran for a deal to constrain its nuclear program, building up a fleet of American warships in the region as the country struggles with growing dissent following nationwide protests.

At least 40 people were reported killed at girls' school in southern Iran in the Israeli-U.S. strikes, according to Iran's state-run IRNA news agency. Shrapnel from an Iranian missile attack on the capital of the United Arab Emirates killed one person, state media said.

Explosions in Tehran are the first signs of an attack

Israel announced it had launched an attack on Iran shortly after explosions were heard in Tehran on Saturday morning. One of the first strikes hit near the offices of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It wasn't immediately clear where Khamenei was at the time; he hasn't been seen for days.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz described the attack as being done "to remove threats." Iran's military, symbols of government and intelligence sites were targeted, according to an official briefed on the operation, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss nonpublic information.

Sirens wailed across Israel to warn the public about possible incoming missile strikes.

Iran strikes back

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Bahrain said a missile attack targeted the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet headquarters in the island kingdom. Witnesses heard sirens and explosions in Kuwait, home to U.S. Army Central. Explosions could be also be heard in Qatar, where Al Udeid Air Base hosts thousands of service members.

Iraq and the United Arab Emirates closed their airspace, and sirens sounded in Jordan.

An apartment building in northern Israel was damaged and shrapnel fell in multiple sites, according to media and police. But Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani said there had been no significant hits in Israel and rescue services said there were no injuries reported from missile barrages across the country.

Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, meanwhile, have vowed to resume attacks on Red Sea shipping routes and on Israel, according to two senior Houthi officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because there was no official announcement from leadership.

Trump urges Iranians to rise up

It took over an hour for Trump to make an official announcement on the U.S. involvement in what he termed "major combat operations."

In an 8-minute video on social media, Trump indicated the U.S. was striking for reasons far beyond the nuclear program, listing grievances stretching back to the beginning of the Islamic Republic following a revolution in 1979 that turned Iran from one of America's closest allies in the Middle East into a fierce foe.

Trump told Iranians to take cover but urged them to later rise up and topple the Islamic leadership.

"When we are finished, take over your government," Trump said. "It will be yours to take. This will be probably your only chance for generations."

The attacks came a day after Trump voiced frustration over lack of progress in negotiations to stop Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons.

Building up forces

Israel said it had worked with the U.S. for months to plan the attacks.

Before U.S.-Iran negotiations were underway in Geneva, the U.S. had assembled a vast fleet of fighter jets and warships in the region to try to pressure Iran into a deal over its nuclear program.

The aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and three guided-missile destroyers arrived in January to bolster the number of warships in the region. The world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, and four accompanying destroyers later were dispatched from the Caribbean to head to the Middle East and are now in the Mediterranean.

The fleet has added more than 10,000 U.S. troops to the region.

Flights canceled or rerouted

The fighting disrupted air travel in the region.

Israel and the United Arab Emirates, home to both the long-haul carriers Emirates and Etihad, closed their airspace Saturday. Qatar Airways Group said it has temporarily canceled flights to and from Doha because Qatari airspace also was closed.

Planes en route to Israel were rerouted to other airports.

Virgin Atlantic canceled its flight from London's Heathrow Airport to Dubai and said it would avoid flying over Iraq, meaning flights to and from India, the Maldives, Dubai and Riyadh could take slightly longer. Virgin Atlantic said all flights would carry appropriate fuel in case they need to reroute on short notice.

Turkish Airlines said on X that flights to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Jordan will be suspended until Monday and flights to Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman would be suspended on Saturday.

Dutch airline KLM previously said it was suspending Tel Aviv flights starting Sunday.

Cargo plane carrying money crashes near Bolivia's capital, killing at least 15 people, official says

LA PAZ, Bolivia (AP) — A cargo plane carrying money crashed Friday near Bolivia's capital, damaging about a dozen vehicles on highway, scattering bills on the ground and leaving at least 15 people dead and others injured, an official said.

Defense Minister Marcelo Salinas said the Hercules C-130 plane was transporting newly printed Bolivian currency when it "landed and veered off the runway" at an airport in El Alto, a city adjacent to the capital of La Paz, before ending up in a nearby field. Firefighters managed to put out the flames that engulfed the aircraft.

Fire chief Pavel Tovar said at least 15 people died but he did not clarify if the dead were in the plane or in the cars on the nearby highway.

Salinas did not specify how many people had been killed in the crash and said the cause was being investigated.

Bolivian Air Force Gen. Sergio Lora said two of the plane's six crew members had not been found as of late Friday, adding that the aircraft was arriving from the eastern city of Santa Cruz.

Images on social media showed debris from the aircraft, destroyed cars and bodies scattered on the road. According to Tovar, at least 15 vehicles were damaged.

The plane, belonging to the Bolivian air force, was transporting money to La Paz and images on social media showed people rushing to collect the bills scattered at the crash site, while police in riot gear tried to disperse them.

Tovar said the hundreds of people trying to collect the spilled bills were hindering rescue efforts.

More than 500 soldiers and 100 police officers took control of the area to disperse the mob, according to official reports. Police and military personnel burned the cash boxes in the presence of Central Bank President David Espinoza, who said the bills "have no legal value because they never entered circulation," without clarifying what that meant.

Espinoza did not specify the amount of money being transported but he said the banknotes had arrived in Santa Cruz from abroad.

Authorities temporarily suspended all flights to and from the terminal.

Cuba unveils new details in fatal US boat shooting and says a 2nd boat on mission failed

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Top officials with Cuba's Ministry of the Interior unveiled for the first time late Friday the items they said were aboard a Florida-flagged speedboat that opened fire against troops in waters off the island's north coast this week, with soldiers responding and killing four suspects.

Officials also revealed to The Associated Press that authorities were able to establish that the 10 Cuban suspects left the U.S. in two boats, but one failed, so they transferred all the supplies to the remaining one and left the other adrift.

The government said the detained suspects revealed those details and stressed that they immediately contacted the U.S. Coast Guard.

Among the items Cuban officials said were aboard the boat: a dozen high-powered weapons, including one with a scope; a big cooler filled with more than 12,800 pieces of ammunition; 11 pistols; heavy-duty boots, helmets with cameras; and camouflage backpacks.

"We were clearly able to assess that we were facing a terrorist action from a boat coming from the United States," 1st Col. Ivey Daniel Carballo of the Cuban Border Guard Troops told the AP.

According to Carballo, the 30-foot (nine meter) border patrol boat detected an intruder on Wednesday morning and approached to within about 600 feet (185 meters) to investigate, but it was met with high-

caliber gunfire.

He said that three of the attackers were immediately killed and that a fourth was wounded and later died. Caraballo said the speedboat was located about one mile (1.6 kilometers) northeast of Cayo Falcones off the island's north coast. The border guard commander was injured, he added.

Victor Eduardo Álvarez Valle, one of the heads of Criminal Investigation for State Security at the Ministry of the Interior, told the AP that authorities were surprised by the resistance they encountered.

"We didn't expect it, especially with that many people and weapons," he said.

"The military equipment found on board has been identified by the assailants, including where and how they acquired it, and the training they received. They also revealed who financed it," Álvarez added.

He noted that officials detected 13 bullet holes on the border guard boat and 21 others on the suspect's vessel, "meaning that there was combat."

The Cuban government had reported Wednesday that a person had been captured on land, but Álvarez said that so far, there is no information that the suspects had any support network on the island.

Cuba's chief prosecutor of the directorate at the Attorney General's Office, Edward Robert Campbell, told the AP that the six arrested, all of Cuban origin, could face terrorism charges, which carries a possible sentence of 30 years in prison, life imprisonment or even the death penalty, although the latter has been on moratorium for more than a decade.

The Associated Press was given access to Cuban military officials and shown the items displayed at the headquarters of the former Cuban Institute of Radio and Television ahead of a program that showed them to the public for the first time.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said it was not a U.S. government operation and that the American government was gathering its own information.

Federal judge extends order protecting refugees in Minnesota from being arrested and deported

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and ED WHITE Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A federal judge on Friday extended an order protecting refugees in Minnesota who are lawfully in the U.S. from being arrested and deported, saying a Trump administration policy turns the "American Dream into a dystopian nightmare."

U.S. District Judge John Tunheim granted a motion by advocates for refugees to convert a temporary restraining order that he issued in January into a more permanent preliminary injunction while the case develops further.

The order applies only in Minnesota. But the implications of a new national policy on refugees that the Department of Homeland Security announced Feb. 18 were a major part of the discussion at a hearing held by the judge the next day.

"Minnesota refugees can now live their lives without fear that their own government will snatch them off the street and imprison them far from loved ones," Kimberly Grano, an attorney with the International Refugee Assistance Project, told The Associated Press.

The Trump administration asserts it has the right to arrest potentially tens of thousands of refugees across the U.S. who entered the country legally but don't yet have green cards. A new Homeland Security memo interprets immigration law to say that refugees applying for green cards must return to federal custody one year after they were admitted to the U.S. so that their applications can be reviewed.

The judge, however, expressed disbelief in a 66-page opinion.

"This Court will not allow federal authorities to use a new and erroneous statutory interpretation to terrorize refugees who immigrated to this country under the promise that they would be welcomed and allowed to live in peace, far from the persecution they fled," Tunheim said.

He said the U.S. decades ago promised refugees fleeing persecution that they could build a new life after rigorous background checks.

"We promised them the hope that one day they could achieve the American Dream," Tunheim said. "The

Government's new policy breaks that promise — without congressional authorization — and raises serious constitutional concerns. The new policy turns the refugees' American Dream into a dystopian nightmare."

Homeland Security and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said in a statement Friday night that the ruling was "yet another lawless and activist order from a federal judge" and that the Trump administration expected to be "vindicated in court."

"USCIS is committed to rooting out fraud and protecting the public safety and national security interests of the American people by screening and vetting aliens," the statement said.

Justice Department attorney Brantley Mayers said during a court hearing last week that the government should have the right to arrest refugees one year after entering the U.S., but he also indicated that would not always happen.

The judge noted that one refugee in the case, identified as D. Doe, was arrested in January after being told that someone had struck his car.

"He was immediately flown to Texas, where he was interrogated about his refugee status. He was kept in 'shackles and handcuffs' for sixteen hours. D. Doe was ultimately released on the streets of Texas, left to find his way back to Minnesota," Tunheim said.

ICE agents said to have posed as police, a tactic some fear could erode trust in real cops

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The 911 call came in at 6:32 a.m. on Thursday: Two "suspicious" men wearing dark clothing were lingering inside a Columbia University residential building.

But when New York Police Department officers were dispatched to the scene, they came across U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agents in the midst of an unusually elaborate operation.

According to a statement later released by Columbia, the agents had gained access to the building by posing as police in search of a 5-year-old — going so far as to present a flyer of the "missing child" to a campus safety officer.

The ruse allowed them to make their way to the apartment of Ellie Aghayeva, an international student from Azerbaijan who immigration officials claim overstayed her visa. The NYPD officers arrived after the men had entered her apartment, a department spokesperson said. They confirmed the men were federal agents, then quickly left the building.

The arrest has prompted widespread censure and calls for investigation by Democrats, as well as a surprising intervention by President Donald Trump. The Republican informed New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani that Aghayeva was being released shortly after meeting with the Democratic mayor Thursday.

As new details emerge, the operation has also threatened to open a rift between the city's police department and ICE, whose agents have increasingly donned the disguises of utility workers, delivery drivers and other uniformed professionals to carry out Trump's sweeping deportation campaign.

While such tactics are not illegal, former police officers said the apparent misrepresentation at Columbia represented a startling escalation, one that could gravely undermine public trust during the next emergency.

"If the police are actually looking for a child in danger, people are now going to be more hesitant to help," said Michael Alcazar, a retired hostage negotiator with the NYPD. "Almost immediately, this sort of ICE subterfuge is going to make the job of police officers more difficult."

A spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, Tricia McLaughlin, has disputed portions of the university's narrative, claiming the federal agents "verbally identified themselves and visibly wore badges around their necks" and were allowed into the building by a property manager.

McLaughlin did not respond to repeated questions about whether the agents had used the guise of a missing child to enter the apartment.

Claire Shipman, the university's acting president, said on Thursday that security cameras had "captured the agents in the hallway showing pictures of the alleged missing child," adding that the situation was "utterly unacceptable."

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Columbia has so far declined to release that footage.

The NYPD also declined to share body camera footage of their response. A department spokesperson said the officers had followed the law by not interfering in an active federal investigation.

Aghayeva's arrest has prompted protests at Columbia, along with fear and confusion.

Her friends said that she was in her final semester on an international student visa, studying neuroscience and politics. In an emergency petition filed Thursday, her attorneys wrote she was not given a reason for the arrest.

A spokesperson for DHS said Aghayeva's visa had been terminated in 2016 for failing to attend classes. She remains in removal proceedings despite her release, the spokesperson said.

Jeffrey Fagan, a law professor at Columbia who studies policing, said research has shown that deceptive tactics by police are especially likely to hurt law enforcement legitimacy when they resulted in an arrest "perceived to be unjustified."

"Anybody looking at this is going to immediately think it's unjustified," he said. "So that will erode trust in a relevant community the next time officers need cooperation."

Peter Moskos, a professor of criminal justice at John Jay University and former Baltimore City police officer, agreed. He noted that sanctuary policies were originally meant to enhance public safety by building trust between immigrant communities and police.

"The idea is that you would trust the cops and call the cops when you need them and know you wouldn't be deported," he said. "But ICE seems to be doing everything they can to break down trust."

Trump's 'pretty much' decided whom to endorse in Texas' Senate primary but isn't yet saying a name

By SEUNG MIN KIM and THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump — who has long seemed like he just can't seem to choose among friends in the Texas Senate Republican primary — says he's "pretty much" decided whom to endorse in the critical March 3 contest.

But as the showman president is wont to do, he left the public — and the candidates themselves — hanging, as he declined on Friday to name who he'll actually support. Instead, during his remarks in Corpus Christi, Texas, Trump made sure to acknowledge each of the three Republicans fighting for the nomination.

"We have a great attorney general, Ken Paxton. Where's Ken? Hi, Ken," Trump said. He continued, "And we have a great senator, John Cornyn. Hi, John."

Noting that they're in a "little bit of a race," Trump added: "It's going to be an interesting one, right? They're both great people."

Trump mentioned the third candidate, Rep. Wesley Hunt, after running through the long list of Texas lawmakers present: "Another friend of mine who is doing very well, Wesley Hunt. Wesley Hunt, what a good job."

During his visit Friday, which marked his first out-of-Washington trip since Tuesday's State of the Union, Trump reiterated the highlights from that address about America's economic prosperity and bolstered national security. He boasted of increased oil production and lowered gas prices at the Port of Corpus Christi while diverging into asides about GLP-1s, mockery of Democrats and unsubstantiated claims about voting.

Ahead of Trump's visit, Energy Secretary Chris Wright authorized a 12% expansion in liquefied natural gas exports at Cheniere Energy's Corpus Christi terminal — making it the second largest LNG export project in the U.S.

"We brought the country back. We don't want to lose the midterm. We've got to win the midterms," Trump implored the crowd, saying his tenure in office marked a return to the "golden age" for the U.S. "We've got to get out. You've got to get out, and we've got to vote. And we'll keep it all going better even than it is now, as good as it is."

As affordability and the economy remain top priorities for the broader electorate, Democrats are seizing on the cost of things like electricity, housing and food to attack Republicans for failing to adequately

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address voters' concerns.

"As Donald Trump calls affordability a 'fake word' and 'hoax' and spends his time building gilded ballrooms, Texas families are seeing costs rise, health care get more expensive, and jobs disappear at one of the highest rates in the country," Ken Martin, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said after Trump's Corpus Christi remarks.

Cornyn is battling for his fifth term and is being challenged by Paxton and Hunt in a primary fight that has become viciously personal. All three men have been trying to highlight their ties to Trump as they ramp up their campaigning ahead of Tuesday's vote. Cornyn got a head start on Friday, when he flew on Air Force One for the Texas trip and posted multiple photos of his ride on social media.

Trump's hesitation to publicly wade into 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 late 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.

The veteran senator 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, who has repeatedly said he likes all three men and is friends with them.

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 attended Friday's 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."

"Congressman Tony Gonzales is here," Trump said, noting his presence at his Corpus Christi remarks. "Tony, congratulations."

It was unclear what Trump was congratulating him for. Gonzales is facing a primary challenge from Brandon Herrera, a gun manufacturer and gun rights influencer, whom Gonzales defeated by fewer than 400 votes in their 2024 runoff.

After the speech, Trump made a stop by a local Whataburger, where he picked up food for Air Force One and insinuated to the gathered patrons that he would buy food for everyone in the restaurant. "Can you handle it? Hamburgers for all!" he announced.

Trump says he is 'not happy' with the Iran nuclear talks but indicates he'll give them more time

By SAM MEDNICK, MICHELLE L. PRICE and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump said Friday he's "not happy" with the latest talks over Iran's nuclear program but indicated he would give negotiators more time to reach a deal to avert another war in the Middle East.

He spoke a day after U.S. envoys held another inconclusive round of indirect talks with Iran in Geneva. As American forces gather in the region, Trump has threatened military action if Iran does not agree to a far-reaching deal on its nuclear program, while Iran insists it has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes and denies seeking a nuclear weapon.

"I'm not happy with the fact that they're not willing to give us what we have to have. I'm not thrilled with that. We'll see what happens. We're talking later," Trump told reporters as he left the White House on Friday. "We're not exactly happy with the way they're negotiating. They cannot have nuclear weapons."

Despite Trump's negative assessment, one of the mediators of the talks later Friday appeared to issue a public plea to let the negotiations continue. Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, who has been mediating the talks, said on CBS's Face the Nation that he felt a deal was within reach if the process could play out.

"If I was President Trump, my only advice is just to give those negotiators enough room, enough space to really close these remaining areas that we need to discuss and agree upon," he said.

Trump sounded more pessimistic, telling reporters as he visited Texas on Friday that Iranian negotiators "don't want to quite go far enough. It's too bad."

He reiterated that he did not want to see Iran allowed to enrich any amount of uranium and said the oil-rich nation should not need to enrich uranium for an energy program.

When asked by a reporter how close he was to deciding on whether to launch a military strike, he said, "I'd rather not tell you."

Earlier in the day, he was asked at the White House about the risks of the U.S. getting involved in a drawn-out conflict if it strikes Iran.

"I guess you could say there's always a risk," Trump replied. "You know, when there's war, there's a risk of anything, both good and bad."

Rubio heads to Israel

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio plans to make a quick trip to Israel early next week, the State Department said. The U.S. Embassy in Israel had earlier urged staff who want to leave to depart, joining other nations in encouraging people to leave the region and signaling that U.S. military action might be imminent.

The announcement of Rubio's visit and Trump's latest remarks could indicate a longer timeline for any potential strike.

The State Department said Rubio would visit Israel on Monday and Tuesday to "discuss a range of regional priorities, including Iran, Lebanon, and ongoing efforts to implement President Trump's 20-Point Peace Plan for Gaza." It offered no other details.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long urged tougher U.S. action against Iran, and has warned that Israel will respond to any Iranian attack.

Before his trip, Rubio declared Iran to be a "state sponsor of wrongful detention," and the State Department may invalidate U.S. passports for travel to Iran.

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He said the move was due to the country's continued arrests and imprisonment of "innocent Americans" and citizens of other countries for use as political leverage. The move does not automatically carry any penalties, but Rubio said that if Iran doesn't stop, he could make it illegal to use a U.S. passport for travel to or from Iran. That restriction currently only applies to North Korea.

A confidential report from the U.N. nuclear watchdog meanwhile confirmed that Iran has not offered inspectors access to sensitive nuclear sites since they were heavily bombed during the 12-day war launched by Israel last June. As a result, it said it could not confirm Iran's claims that it stopped uranium enrichment after the U.S. and Israeli strikes.

The report was circulated to member countries and seen by The Associated Press.

Those wishing to leave 'should do so TODAY'

The announcement of Rubio's visit came just hours after the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem implemented "authorized departure" status for nonessential personnel and family members, which means that eligible staffers can leave the country voluntarily at government expense.

In an email, U.S. Ambassador Mike Huckabee urged staff considering departure to do so quickly, advising them to focus on getting any flight out of Israel and to then make their way to Washington.

"Those wishing to take AD should do so TODAY," Huckabee wrote, using an acronym for "authorized departure."

"While there may be outbound flights over the coming days, there may not be," he added. The email was recounted to the AP by someone involved with the U.S. mission who wasn't authorized to share details.

On a town-hall meeting Friday after the email was sent, Huckabee told staff that he was encouraging airlines to keep flying.

Vance meets with mediator

Iran and the United States on Thursday walked away from another round of nuclear negotiations in Geneva without a deal. Technical discussions are scheduled to take place in Vienna next week.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Thursday said "what needs to happen has been clearly spelled out from our side," without offering specifics. Iran has long demanded relief from heavy international sanctions in return for taking steps to limit but not end its nuclear program.

Before his interview on CBS News, al-Busaidi met Friday with U.S. Vice President JD Vance to discuss the negotiations.

"I am grateful for their engagement and look forward to further and decisive progress in the coming days," al-Busaidi posted on X. "Peace is within our reach."

In his interview after briefing Vance, al-Busaidi, said there had been significant breakthroughs in the talks, that Iran had expressed that it was willing to give up its enriched uranium, not accumulate more and allow for comprehensive outside inspections.

The White House, Vance's office and the Iranian mission to the U.N. did not immediately response to a request for comment.

Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, meanwhile met with Christopher Yeaw, a U.S. arms control official. Grossi posted on X that the two men had a "timely exchange on current non-proliferation issues, including in Iran and other areas of common interest."

The U.N. chief urged Iran and the U.S. "to focus on the diplomatic track."

"We're seeing both positive messages coming out of the diplomatic tracks, which we're continuing to encourage," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said, according to his spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric.

"We're also seeing very worrying military movements throughout the region, which is extremely concerning as well."

Flights suspended as people are urged to leave

The U.S. has gathered a massive fleet of aircraft and warships in the Middle East, with one aircraft carrier already in place and another heading to the region. Iran says it will respond to any U.S. attack by targeting American forces in the region, potentially including those stationed in U.S. bases in allied Arab countries.

Airlines such as Netherlands-based KLM have already announced plans to suspend flights out of Tel Aviv's

Ben-Gurion International Airport, and other embassies have also made plans for authorized departures from Israel and neighboring countries.

Britain's Foreign Office said that "due to the security situation, U.K. staff have been temporarily withdrawn from Iran." It said the embassy was operating remotely.

In Israel, the U.K. said Friday it moved some diplomatic staff and their families from Tel Aviv to another, unspecified location in Israel "as a precautionary measure." In an update to its travel advice, the Foreign Office advises against "all but essential travel" to Israel.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said Thursday the U.K. was focused on "supporting the political process" between Washington and Tehran.

Germany's Foreign Ministry meanwhile advised urgently against travel to Israel.

Australia on Wednesday "directed the departure of all dependents of Australian officials posted to Israel in response to the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East." China, India and several European countries with missions in Iran have advised citizens to avoid travel to the country.

China's Foreign Ministry also advised its citizens already in Iran to leave, according to a statement reported by Chinese state media.

Video shows nearly blind refugee being released by Border Patrol, 5 days before his death

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — In the moments after Border Patrol agents dropped him off at a Buffalo doughnut shop, surveillance video recorded Nurul Amin Shah Alam stepping gingerly through the empty parking lot in his county-issued jail booties. He pulls up his hood against the cold as he walks past a drive-thru window, then paces away into the night.

Five nights later, the nearly blind refugee from Myanmar was found dead in the street, raising questions about whether federal agents could have done more to ensure his safety when they released him from custody, miles from his home, without informing his family or lawyer.

The video obtained by the Investigative Post shows Shah Alam, 56, after agents dropped him off at a Tim Hortons on the night of Feb. 19, the day he was released from a county jail where he had been held for a year. Buffalo Mayor Sean Ryan has said the restaurant was closed at that time.

The nonprofit news site says the footage it obtained shows Shah Alam being let out of the Border Patrol van, which can be seen driving away, then walking by the restaurant's locked front door.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said this week that agents chose "a warm, safe location" for the drop off.

Shah Alam was found dead Tuesday outside the arena where the NHL's Buffalo Sabres play. A woman called 911 to report his body lying in the sidewalk. It was unclear how he got to that downtown spot from the restaurant several miles away. Buffalo police were reviewing footage throughout the city in an attempt to identify his movements.

The county medical examiner was investigating the cause of death.

Customs and Border Protection said agents offered Shah Alam "a courtesy ride" to a location near where his family had once lived, and that he had accepted the ride and showed no signs of distress or disability. The agency did not respond to an email seeking comment Friday.

A Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo lawyer, Benjamin Macaluso, reported Shah Alam missing Sunday.

By then, Shah Alam's family knew he had been released from jail but had no idea of his whereabouts. Macaluso went to an area immigration detention center, where he assumed Shah Alam had been taken, but he was told he wasn't there. He visited hospitals and homeless shelters, searched the neighborhood where the family lived previously, and distributed missing persons posters around the area.

It wasn't until Monday that he learned, the Legal Aid Bureau said, that Shah Alam had been dropped off at the Tim Hortons.

Buffalo Police had no updates Friday, but on Thursday released body-camera footage of the 2025 incident that led to Shah Alam being jailed for a year.

At the time, Shah Alam was newly arrived in Buffalo, the legal Aid Bureau said. He hardly knew the neighborhood where the family lived, spoke practically no English, was blind in one eye and had very limited vision in the other.

In the videos, police approach Shah Alam in a snowy backyard as he holds what appear to be two curtain rods. An approaching officer shouts "What are you doing?" and "Put it down" multiple times. Shah Alam, dressed in a hoodie, walks toward the officers, occasionally holding out his hand.

Advocates for the family say Shah Alam wandered into the wrong property when the police were called and did not understand the officers' commands because he did not speak English.

In the body camera videos, one officer says "I'm going to shoot you, dude" before firing Tasers and then taking him to the ground in a struggle and cuffing his hands behind his back. Police say Shah Alam bit two officers.

Shah Alam was initially charged with felony assault, burglary and criminal mischief. A federal immigration detainer was issued after his arrest.

The Legal Aid Bureau said "a strategic decision" was made not to post bail after his arrest over fears he would be taken into custody by immigration officials. But lawyers advised Shah Alam's family it was safe to post bail after he pleaded guilty Feb. 9 to two lesser, misdemeanor charges.

He was released from the Erie County Holding Center Feb. 19 after posting bond. The county sheriff's office informed the U.S. Border Patrol about his pending release because of the immigration detainer.

He was dropped off at the Tim Hortons that night after federal authorities determined he wasn't eligible for deportation.

Pentagon and Scouting America reach deal to keep ties after Hegseth's anti-DEI push

By BEN FINLEY and JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon has made a deal with Scouting America that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Friday would maintain their century-old partnership but refocus the organization away from diversity initiatives and other "woke" policies he accused it of embracing in recent years.

Hegseth put heavy emphasis on Scouting America's acceptance of transgender youth, saying the organization will require members to use their "biological sex at birth and not gender identity." But Scouting America, formerly known as the Boy Scouts of America, said the agreement does not change existing policies regarding transgender youth and that they are welcome.

"We have transgender people in our program and we'll have transgender people in our program going forward," Scouting America President and CEO Roger Krone told The Associated Press.

Several of the negotiated changes mirror what the organization suggested to the Pentagon in January, including discontinuing its Citizenship in Society merit badge, introducing a Military Service merit badge and waiving registration fees for the children of military personnel.

Under Hegseth, the Pentagon has taken aim at the military's partnership with Scouting America, decrying its historic rebrand in 2024 and other changes in recent years that he sees as part of "woke culture" efforts that he wants to root out.

What Hegseth and Scouting America say about transgender scouts

Hegseth said in a video posted on X that Scouting America's applications will list only options for male and female and the one checked must match the applicant's birth certificate. He didn't say how that would be enforced. The group would clarify that youths of opposite genders assigned at birth cannot share bathrooms, tents or other similar spaces, he said.

Krone said the group's application already has only two boxes — one for boy and one for girl — and that they were already asking about sex assigned at birth. He didn't offer clarity on how that was reviewed or enforced.

"We do not put boys and girls together in intimate spaces and in order to do that we need to have some knowledge of who they are," he said.

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Krone said "structures" in the organization accommodate transgender youth, noting that there are family troops that include both genders but offering no more details. He said there was nothing in discussions with the Pentagon that changes the way the programs are run.

Hegseth, meanwhile, said in his video that the Pentagon will "vigorously review" the changes Scouting America has made in six months and cease its support of the organization if it fails to comply.

"We hope that doesn't happen, but it could," Hegseth said. "Ideally, I believe the Boy Scouts should go back to being the Boy Scouts as originally founded, a group that develops boys into men. Maybe someday." Scouts keep new name and female membership

In a statement Friday, Scouting America noted its need to comply with an executive order from President Donald Trump targeting DEI programs.

The Irving, Texas-based organization also pointed out that it maintained its new name and "preserved our service to the more than 200,000 girls who participate in our programs."

The organization began allowing gay youths in 2013, ended a blanket ban on gay adult leaders in 2015 and announced in 2017 that it would accept transgender students. It began accepting girls as Cub Scouts as of 2018 and into the flagship Boy Scout program, renamed Scouts BSA, in 2019.

Scouting America said the policy changes deepen the organization's partnership with the military, which has included Scouts meeting on or near military installations in the U.S. and abroad.

"Scouting America is one of the most reliable pipelines to the United States Armed Forces our country has ever known," the organization added. "Scouts are significantly more likely to serve in uniform than the general population. Eagle Scouts are heavily represented in ROTC programs, service academies and military leadership tracks."

Pentagon threatened to pull support

Hegseth's other anti-DEI efforts have ranged from ending all military training at "woke" Harvard and other Ivy League schools to claiming that the independent military newspaper Stars and Stripes will no longer include "woke distractions." He rolled out the move with Scouting America on Friday as tensions have escalated with Iran and the Trump administration considers possible military action after massing the largest force of U.S. warships and aircraft in the Middle East in decades.

The Pentagon said earlier this month that it was reviewing its relationship with Scouting America, claiming it had "lost its way" in many ways and calling the organization's DEI efforts "unacceptable."

"Scouting America's leadership has made decisions that run counter to the values of this administration," the Feb. 6 statement said, "including an embrace of DEI and other social justice, gender-fluid ideological stances."

The U.S. military and the Boy Scouts have had longtime ties, including the military providing logistical support for the National Boy Scout Jamboree since its inception in 1937. The military also has maintained a strong relationship with the Eagle Scouts, whose members often enlist.

In a statement last year, Scouting America raised concerns following a report from NPR that the Pentagon planned to cut support for Scouting programs on military bases as well as for the National Jamboree and would eliminate increases in pay grade for Eagle Scouts who enlist.

The group told Hegseth last month that after hearing his suggestions, it had come up with a plan, which, besides the badge changes, included holding a ceremony to rededicate itself to leadership, duty to God, duty to country and service, as well as dissolving its DEI board committee.

Krone said there are about 900,000 youths participating in scouting programs, down from just over 1 million a year ago.

Cultural forces and significant changes

Founded in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America achieved a vaunted status in the U.S. over the decades, with pinewood derbies, the Scout Oath and Eagle Scouts becoming part of the lexicon.

Since then, the organization has faced controversies and significant changes.

Its ban on gay scouts ended in 2013. Two years later, it ended its blanket ban on gay adult leaders while allowing church-sponsored Scout units to maintain the exclusion for religious reasons. In 2017, the Boy Scouts announced that they would allow transgender children who identify as boys to enroll in their

boys-only programs.

The Boy Scouts also faced a flood of sexual abuse claims and sought bankruptcy protection in the 2020s. In 2023, a judge upheld the \$2.4 billion bankruptcy plan, allowing the organization to keep operating while compensating more than 80,000 men who filed claims saying they were sexually abused while in scouting.

US stocks sink and oil prices rise as worries about AI, inflation and possible war hit Wall Street

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. stocks sank Friday as Wall Street kept punishing companies that could become losers in the artificial-intelligence revolution. A surprisingly discouraging update on inflation also hurt the market, while oil prices climbed with worries about tensions between the United States and Iran.

The S&P 500 fell 0.4% and staggered to the finish of just its second losing month in the last 10. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 521 points, or 1.1%, the Nasdaq composite sank 0.9%.

The losses came as investors returned to knocking down software companies and other businesses they suspect could get supplanted by AI-powered competitors.

Block, the company behind Cash App, Square and other businesses, gave a potential signal of what AI could do after Chair Jack Dorsey said it's cutting its workforce by nearly half. That's even though he said 2025 was a strong year for the company, which is sending more cash to shareholders through stock buybacks.

"Intelligence tools have changed what it means to build and run a company," Dorsey said in a letter to investors while announcing Block's latest profit results. "We're already seeing it internally. A significantly smaller team, using the tools we're building, can do more and do it better."

The co-founder of Twitter also said, "I don't think we're early to this realization. I think most companies are late. Within the next year, I believe the majority of companies will reach the same conclusion and make similar structural changes."

Block is cutting more than 4,000 jobs from its workforce of over 10,000. Its stock jumped 16.8% after making the announcement, while announcing its latest quarterly results.

Capable AI tools that can replace humans could perhaps replace entire companies, or at least eat away at their profit margins. Fears about AI disruption have caused sudden and swift sell-offs for stocks seen as potentially under threat, and they've rolled through industries as different as trucking logistics and legal services.

Salesforce, whose platform helps customers manage their relationships with clients, fell 2.3%. It gave back much of its 4% gain from the day before after reporting a better profit than analysts expected.

The pain has also hit private-equity companies that have bought or lent money to software companies, which need to withstand the AI threat to keep repaying those loans. Apollo Global Management dropped 8.6% for the one of the sharpest losses in the S&P 500. Blue Owl Capital, which has been a target for investors because of the loans to it's made to the software industry, fell 6%.

Even the companies currently seeing their revenue and profit soar because of AI-related demand are under pressure. Nvidia fell 4.2% and was the heaviest weight on the U.S. stock market. A day earlier, it dropped to its worst loss since last spring even though it reported a better profit than analysts expected and forecast more in revenue for the current quarter.

Rival chip companies also fell. Worries are hurting such companies not only about whether their stock prices rose too high in recent years but also whether the huge spending driving their growth can continue. Can big spenders like Amazon and Alphabet make back all their billions of dollars in AI investments through higher productivity and profits in the future?

On the winning side of Wall Street was Netflix, which climbed 13.8% after walking 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.

Paramount Skydance shares jumped 20.8%, while Warner Bros. Discovery fell 2.2%.

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All told, the S&P 500 fell 29.98 points to 6,878.88. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 521.28 to 48,977.92, and the Nasdaq composite sank 210.17 to 22,668.21.

Some of the strongest action in financial markets was for oil, where the price for a barrel of benchmark U.S. crude rose 2.8% to settle at \$67.02. It's the latest swing in a market unsettled by tensions between the United States and Iran over Iran's nuclear program.

The U.S. military has already gathered a massive fleet of aircraft and warships in the Middle East, and a conflict could disrupt the global flow of oil and drive prices higher.

Brent crude, the international standard, rose 2.4% to \$72.48 per barrel.

Also hurting the broad market was a report showing that inflation at the U.S. wholesale level was at 2.9% last month, much higher than the 1.6% that economists expected.

That could pressure the Federal Reserve to hold off longer on its cuts to interest rates. Lower rates would give the economy and prices for investments a boost, but they risk worsening inflation at the same time.

In the bond market, the yield on the 10-year Treasury sank to 3.96%. It briefly swiveled higher following the inflation report, but it's down from its 4.02% level late Thursday. Treasury yields often fall when nervousness is high and investors are moving into investments that are considered safer.

In stock markets abroad, indexes were mixed in Europe and Asia. South Korea's Kospi fell 1% from its latest record, and Hong Kong's Hang Seng rose 0.9% for two of the world's larger moves.

Attorney general announces indictment against 30 more people who protested at a Minnesota church

By SARAH RAZA Associated Press

Attorney General Pam Bondi announced federal charges Friday against 30 more people who are accused of civil rights violations in a January protest inside a Minnesota church where a pastor works for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Bondi said on social media that 25 people were in custody and more arrests would follow. The new indictment comes a month after independent journalists Don Lemon and Georgia Fort and prominent local activist Nekima Levy Armstrong were charged for their alleged roles in a protest at Cities Church in St. Paul.

Bondi accused the group of attacking a house of worship.

"If you do so, you cannot hide from us — we will find you, arrest you, and prosecute you," she wrote on social media.

A livestreamed video posted on Facebook shows people interrupting services at Cities Church on Jan. 18 by chanting "ICE out" and "Justice for Renee Good," a reference to the woman who was fatally shot by an ICE officer in Minneapolis on Jan. 7.

Protesters targeted church over its pastor

Protesters descended on Cities Church after learning that one of the church's pastors also serves as an ICE official. The protest drew swift condemnation from Trump administration officials and conservative leaders for disrupting a Sunday service.

In total, 39 people now face charges of conspiracy against religious freedom and interfering with the right of religious freedom. The new defendants had initial court appearances and were released.

Lemon and Fort said they were at the church as journalists covering news. Levy Armstrong was the subject of a doctored photo posted by the White House showing her crying during her arrest. The three have pleaded not guilty.

The indictment says the "agitators" entered the church in a "coordinated takeover-style attack" and engaged in acts of intimidation and obstruction.

"Young children were left to wonder, as one child put it, if their parents were going to die," the indictment says.

Church welcomes more arrests

A lawyer for the church praised the Justice Department for charging more people.

"The First Amendment does not give anyone — regardless of profession, prominence, or politics — li-

cense to storm a church and intimidate, threaten, and terrorize families and children worshipping inside," Doug Wardlow said in a statement.

The revised indictment adds new allegations when compared to the original filed in January.

It says two people "conducted reconnaissance" outside the church a day before the protest and recorded their visit on video, with one saying, "My thoughts are to be able to close up this whole alleyway right here."

The court filing quotes one protester as chanting in the church, "This ain't God's house. This is the house of the devil."

Trahern Crews, who was charged in January and is lead organizer of Black Lives Matter Minnesota, said the latest arrests were a "waste of time."

"It's a shame that the people who have killed Alex Pretti and Renee Good or Keith Porter have not been arrested but peaceful protesters have," Crews said. Porter was fatally shot in Los Angeles by an off-duty ICE officer.

Minnesota was hotbed for immigration blitz

Levy Armstrong defended the protest shortly after it occurred. She said critics needed to "check their hearts" if they were more concerned about a disruption than the "atrocities that we are experiencing in our community."

The protest came at a tense time in Minnesota, where the Trump administration sent thousands of federal officers for Operation Metro Surge after a series of public fraud cases where the majority of defendants had Somali roots. Officers frequently deployed tear gas for crowd control in neighborhood clashes with residents, often detaining them along with immigrants.

Good, 37, was shot in Minneapolis. In another fatal shooting a week after the church protest, a federal officer killed Pretti, a 37-year-old nurse, in the same city.

Nationwide demonstrations erupted in response, followed by a change in Operation Metro Surge's leadership and the eventual wind-down of the immigration enforcement operation. Roughly 400 ICE officers and Homeland Security agents were expected to remain in Minneapolis by early March, down from roughly 3,000 at the peak, according to a court filing.

Since then, the Twin Cities have grappled with the impact to communities and the local economy. Minneapolis said it suffered an impact of \$203 million due to the operation, with tens of thousands of residents in need of urgent relief assistance.

Separately, a woman who was at the church service has filed a lawsuit against some people who were charged, alleging emotional trauma and an inability to exercise her religion that day.

Trump raises the possibility of a 'friendly takeover of Cuba' coming out of talks with Havana

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Friday that the U.S. is in talks with Havana and raised the possibility of a "friendly takeover of Cuba" without offering any details on what he meant.

Speaking to reporters outside the White House as he left for a trip to Texas, Trump said Secretary of State Marco Rubio was in discussions with Cuban leaders "at a very high level."

"The Cuban government is talking with us," the president said. "They have no money. They have no anything right now. But they're talking to us, and maybe we'll have a friendly takeover of Cuba."

He added: "We could very well end up having a friendly takeover of Cuba."

Trump didn't clarify his comments but seemed to indicate that the situation with Cuba, a communist-run island that has been among Washington's bitterest adversaries for decades, was coming to a critical point. The White House did not respond to requests for more information Friday.

The president also said that Cuba "is, to put it mildly, a failed nation" and "they want our help."

His remarks came two days after the Cuban government reported that a Florida-registered speedboat carrying 10 armed Cubans from the U.S. opened fire on soldiers off the island's north coast. Four of the armed Cubans were killed, and six were injured in responding gunfire, according to Cuba's government.

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One Cuban official also was injured.

Cuba has been on Trump's mind since at least early January, after U.S. forces ousted one of Havana's closest allies, Venezuela's socialist President Nicolás Maduro. Trump suggested in the aftermath of that raid that military action in Cuba might not be necessary because the island's economy was weak enough — particularly in the absence of oil shipments from Venezuela that stopped after Maduro was taken into custody — to soon collapse on its own.

"We've had a lot of years of dealing with Cuba. I've been hearing about Cuba since I'm a little boy. But they're in big trouble," he said Friday.

Then, noting the exile community from the island living in the U.S., Trump said there could be something coming that "I think (is) very positive for the people that were expelled, or worse, from Cuba and live here." He did not elaborate.

The U.S. has maintained a strict trade embargo on Cuba since 1962, the year after a failed, CIA-sponsored invasion of the island at the Bay of Pigs. Trump nonetheless indicated earlier this month that talks with Cuban officials were underway.

Cuba's government confirmed earlier this week that it was communicating with U.S. officials following the shooting of the American boat. Rubio has said the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Coast Guard are investigating what happened.

An executive order that Trump signed in late January pledged to impose tariffs on countries providing oil to Cuba, threatening to further cripple a country already plagued by a deepening energy crisis, though U.S. authorities have since indicated that oil from Venezuela can be sold to Cuban interests in some cases.

Carlos Fernández de Cossío, Cuba's deputy foreign minister, posted, then later deleted on Friday that "the US maintains its fuel embargo against Cuba in full force, and its impact as a form of collective punishment is unwavering."

"Nothing announced in recent days changes this reality," he wrote on X before the post was removed. "The possibility of conditional sales to the private sector already existed and does not alleviate the impact on the Cuban population."

Meanwhile, 40-plus U.S. civil society organizations sent a letter to Congress on Friday asking that it "press the Trump administration to reverse its aggressive policy towards Cuba" and saying that efforts to cut oil shipments to the Caribbean island would spark a humanitarian collapse.

Signees included the Alliance of Baptists, ActionAid USA and the Presbyterian Church.

"Policies that deliberately impose hunger and mass hardship on millions of civilians constitute a form of collective punishment, and as such are a grave violation of international humanitarian law," the letter reads.

The end of Hollywood or a brighter future?

What a Paramount-owned Warner Bros. means for the movies

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Two of Hollywood's oldest studios may be consolidating into one. In a shocking twist after a months long bidding war, Paramount has emerged as the apparent victor in the fight to acquire Warner Bros.

Netflix, who backed away from the deal Thursday, had hoped to win the movie studio and its vast film library. Paramount wants it all: Movies, cable networks and news.

Almost 10 years ago, Hollywood's big six became the big five when Disney bought most of 20th Century Fox. Now the big five looks like it's destined to become the big four, including Universal and Sony, and the business of Hollywood movie making is one again in a time of profound transition.

Here's what we know, what we don't and some burning questions.

Why did Netflix bow out of the fight?

Simply put, it was no longer "financially attractive," the company said.

In December, Netflix had reached a deal to acquire some of Warner Bros. Discovery's assets: Their library, movie studio and HBO. Almost immediately Paramount, who months earlier had expressed interest in purchasing Warner Bros., initiated a hostile takeover bid for the whole company, which culminated in

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a \$31 per share offer this week. Netflix, whose previous offer was \$27.75 per share, declined to counter.

"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."

Warner had repeatedly backed the deal it struck with Netflix 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."

David Zaslav, the chief executive of Warner Bros. Discovery, said in a statement that they're excited about, "the potential of a combined Paramount Skydance and Warner Bros. Discovery and can't wait to get started working together telling the stories that move the world."

What are Paramount's plans with Warner Bros.?

Paramount Skydance chairman and CEO David Ellison has said that he would like to grow their combined slate to more than 30 movies a year, keeping Paramount and Warner Bros. as stand-alone operations.

In documents filed to the Securities and Exchange Commission last month, Paramount said, "Our priority is to build a vibrant, healthy business and industry — one that supports Hollywood and creative, benefits consumers, encourages competition, and strengthens the overall job market."

They've also said they would look for ways to save some \$6 billion through job cuts in "duplicative operations."

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.

How is Hollywood responding?

Reminiscent of the hours after the Netflix deal was announced in December, there isn't much public chatter from those inside the industry yet, but with several awards shows in the near future, including the Actor Awards Sunday, the relative silence is poised to break soon.

The Paramount news broke as promotion is happening for Warner Bros.' latest movie, "The Bride!" Filmmaker Maggie Gyllenhaal told The Associated Press Friday that she didn't feel prepared to speak to the deal specifically, but she did offer praise for the studio that supported her film.

"I was reading tweets about it as I woke up this morning," Gyllenhaal said. "I don't have a position but I do feel really deeply supported by (Warner Bros. Motion Pictures Chairs) Pam (Abdy) and Mike (DeLuca) and I feel that they have been taking a slightly different route than most of the other people around them. They've been supporting films that are actually about something while at the same time, I think, encouraging the filmmakers who are making them to reach as big of an audience as possible. That combination is very specific and very precious."

The current state of Paramount movies vs. Warner Bros.

Warner Bros., among the most filmmaker friendly studios operating, has had a banner year with major blockbusters and critical successes. This year they collected 30 Oscar nominations thanks to "Sinners," "One Battle After Another" and "Weapons." Paramount films received zero.

In 2025, Warner Bros. movies (including "A Minecraft Movie," "Superman" and "Sinners") also accounted for 21% of the domestic box office; Paramount's market share was only 6%, driven largely by "Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning," which didn't even place in the top 10 (it was 11th).

In November, Paramount pledged to up its 2026 theatrical output to at least 15 movies. Before the Skydance merger, the studio was more regularly releasing eight movies a year.

Though Paramount's less than stellar 2025 has been attributed to the previous regime, Skydance has also not had the smoothest run at the box office, and its biggest hits have centered around Tom Cruise, with "Top Gun: Maverick," its only billion-dollar film, and five "Mission: Impossible." Its attempts to restart the "Terminator" franchise were less successful.

While Warner Bros. has succeeded with a combination of original and franchise films, Paramount's slate is decidedly more franchise heavy with intellectual property like "Transformers," "Scream," "Sonic the Hedgehog," and "Paw Patrol" in their arsenal.

Is this a better outcome for movie theaters?

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Cinema United, the trade organization representing movie theaters, was vehemently opposed to a Netflix-owned Warner Bros. for fear of what it might mean for movie theaters. Exhibition and box office has not fully recovered since the pandemic — previously the annual domestic box office would regularly surpass \$11 billion. Since 2020, it's only exceeded \$9 billion once.

But consolidation is also a concern. Although Paramount has an established background in theatrical distribution, Cinema United worried about that outcome as well, which they explained in a statement to the Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing in early February, noting that a combination of Paramount and Warner Bros. would consolidate as much as 40% of each year's domestic box office in a single studio.

"We have been clear from the outset about our concerns around consolidation, and nothing that has occurred within the past 36 hours has changed that," said Cinema United's president and CEO Michael O'Leary, in a statement Friday. "Studio consolidation historically leads to fewer movies being made, and at this juncture, there is no reason to believe the outcome here will be any different. We continue to urge regulators to heed the lessons of the past."

In theory, a guaranteed 30 films a year would be a good thing for movie theaters, assuming they all go to theaters and it's not a combination of theatrical and streaming titles as has happened with a Disney-owned 20th Century Studios. But some are skeptical that will pan out.

Hollywood historian and author Mark Harris wrote on Bluesky that "the idea of a Paramount-WB merger producing 30-40 movies a year is an absurd fiction." He predicted that first Warner Bros. will become the "classy" label within Paramount, "then it will become the specialty or streaming label. Then it will die."

Will HBO Max and Paramount+ combine?

This remains unclear. It's possible there will be a bundling situation as with Disney+ and Hulu.

What will happen to the studio lots?

With Paramount taking on billions in debt and equity for this deal to go through, many are wondering what will happen to the two California studio lots, especially in a moment where productions are rarer and rarer in California.

The storied Paramount lot on Melrose in Los Angeles has 30 stages on 65 acres, hosting productions from "Sunset Boulevard" to "Forrest Gump." Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank sits on a 110-acre lot with 31 soundstages and 11 exterior sets, where productions have included "My Fair Lady," "Gilmore Girls" and "Friends." Both are historic sites in their own right. Warner Bros. also has a massive studio in the U.K., in Leavesden.

Will regulators approve the deal?

That remains to be seen. The U.S. Department of Justice has already initiated reviews, and other countries are expected to do so, too.

In Minnesota, US cardinals and pope's ambassador decry mass deportations and call for reconciliation

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

ST PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Two American cardinals and the Vatican's ambassador to the U.S. denounced the mass deportations in Minnesota under the federal government's immigration crackdown, but they urged everyone to repair strained relations and work together toward humane solutions.

In St. Paul on Friday, Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington addressed growing concerns with immigration enforcement while highlighting the need to be peacemakers on the polarizing issue after a Mass for migrants he celebrated with his fellow prelates and the Twin Cities' archbishop.

McElroy depicted this winter's enforcement surge as "almost a siege" that unfolded in "literally the heartland of our country."

"Catholic teaching supports the nation's right to control its border and, in these cases, to deport those who've been convicted of serious crimes," he said. "Seeking to deport millions of men and women and children — families who often lived here for decades, many children who don't know other countries — is contrary to Catholic faith and, more fundamentally, contrary to basic human dignity."

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McElroy joined Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey; Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio to the United States; Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis, and more than two dozen other Catholic bishops for the Mass. A part of their show of solidarity with migrants, the morning service was held in the chapel of the University of St. Thomas, where they were attending a conference.

"I'm very proud, personally, to see our church, you know, be on the side of those who suffer," Pierre said, adding that Pope Leo XIV agreed with the U.S. bishops' support of migrants.

In his homily, Hebda spoke of his anger when migrant communities were too fearful to come to church while "masked men" — a reference to federal law enforcement — roamed the streets and violence erupted during this winter's immigration crackdown in the Twin Cities.

But he encouraged the faithful — including seminarians, members of the college community and school principals packing the pews — to cultivate kindness and focus on peace.

"That ministry of reconciliation has to be ours, in the Twin Cities and around the world," Hebda preached.

How immigration enforcement unfolded in Minnesota

Minnesota became a global flashpoint of tensions over arrests and deportations. An immigration enforcement surge saw thousands of federal officers in daily confrontations with activists and protesters, two of whom — Renee Good and Alex Pretti, both U.S. citizens — were killed in Minneapolis earlier this year.

Many faith leaders across denominations joined the protests, including about 100 clergy who were arrested after refusing orders to disperse at Minnesota's largest airport during one of the biggest days of mobilization last month.

The local Catholic leadership, however, struck a more conciliatory tone.

In the immediate aftermath of both fatal shootings, Hebda highlighted the need "to lower the temperature of rhetoric" and "to rid our hearts of the hatreds and prejudices that prevent us from seeing each other as brothers and sisters." He pointedly noted that held true "for our undocumented neighbors" as much as "for the men and women who have the unenviable responsibility of enforcing our laws."

Similarly, on Friday, the prelates spoke of praying for everyone who has been affected — from the families of those killed to migrants and those assisting them to "the ICE men and women, too," in McElroy's words referring to Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

"We all need to engage in healing and reconciliation," he added. "It will take a long time."

Politics, faith and immigration views mix in America

Asked whether Catholics — the majority of whom voted for President Donald Trump in 2024 — might see advocacy for migrants as involving the church in politics, the cardinals said religion and politics both should be about the good of society.

The first allegiance is to God alone, Tobin added, but Scriptures exhort more often to do no harm to the foreigner and welcome the stranger than to love one's neighbor.

"The Creator figured that there was a better chance we'd love people who we thought looked like us. We had to be reminded frequently about everybody else," Tobin said.

Advocacy for migrants was a priority for the late Pope Francis, who had sparred over U.S. border policies with Trump ever since the latter was first a candidate for the White House a decade ago.

Under Leo, the first U.S. pontiff, the Catholic Church has continued to call for the humane treatment of immigrants around the world and for immigration reform in the United States specifically — something that has eluded Congress for decades.

"The longer we refuse to grapple with this issue in the political arena, the more divisive and violent it becomes," Hebda had remarked in January.

McElroy and Tobin, alongside Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, recently took to task the Trump administration over morality in foreign policy. In a January statement, they said U.S. military action in Venezuela, threats over Greenland and cuts in foreign aid risked bringing vast suffering instead of peace.

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

By MUNIR AHMED and ABDUL QAHAH AFGHAN Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan and Afghanistan exchanged cross-border attacks overnight in a dramatic escalation of tensions that led Pakistan's defense minister to say on Friday that the two countries are in a state of "open war."

Afghanistan launched an attack on Pakistan late Thursday, 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, saying it targeted military installations.

Tensions have been high for months. Border clashes in October killed dozens of soldiers, civilians and suspected militants. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan's Taliban government of harboring militant groups that stage attacks against it and also of allying with its archrival India.

A Qatari-mediated ceasefire ended the intense fighting in October, but several rounds of peace talks in Turkey in November failed to produce a lasting agreement. The two sides have occasionally traded fire since then.

Qatar once again appears to be mediating. Its minister of state, Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi, spoke Friday with the foreign ministers of Afghanistan and Pakistan in an effort to de-escalate tensions, Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted on X.

Cross-border attack

Afghanistan's attacks against Pakistani military targets was meant as "a message that our hands can reach their throats and that we will respond to every evil act of Pakistan," Afghan government spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said. "Pakistan has never sought to resolve problems through dialogue," he said.

After the Afghan strikes, Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif posted on X: "Our patience has now run out. Now it is open war between us."

Asif said 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 the Taliban had turned Afghanistan "into a colony of India" — a reference to recently improving ties between India and Afghanistan, including offers of enhanced bilateral trade. Pakistan and neighboring India, both nuclear armed powers, have periodically engaged in wars, clashes and skirmishes since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947.

'Exporting terrorism'

Asif also accused Afghanistan of "exporting terrorism," an allegation Pakistan frequently levies at its neighbor as militant violence in the country surges. Specifically, Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of supporting the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP, as well as 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's internal conflict is a purely domestic issue and is not a new one," Mujahid said Friday, noting the TTP had been active for nearly two decades.

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

Retaliatory strikes

Afghanistan said its attack Thursday was in retaliation for deadly Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan border areas Sunday.

The governments have issued sharply differing casualty claims.

Pakistan's army spokesperson Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry said Pakistani air and ground operations killed at least 274 members of Afghan forces and affiliated militants and wounded more than 400, while 12 Pakistani soldiers were killed and 27 others were wounded. One Pakistani soldier was missing in action.

Mujahid rejected the claims of the high number of Afghan casualties as "false." He said that 55 Pakistani

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soldiers were killed with the bodies of 23 of them taken to Afghanistan. He also said "many" Pakistani soldiers were captured. Thirteen Afghan soldiers had been killed, he said, and another 22 wounded, while 13 civilians were also wounded.

Later on Friday, the Afghan government said that 19 civilians were killed and 26 others injured when Pakistan struck the provinces of Khost and Paktika in southeastern Afghanistan. Deputy spokesman Hamdullah Fitrat accused Pakistan of having "deliberately targeted the residences of ordinary civilians" and said most of the dead and wounded were women and children.

The Afghan government had reported earlier that a religious school in Paktika province was bombed without providing details of casualties.

The claims of either side could not be independently verified.

Pakistan's air force carried out airstrikes Friday night targeting military installations in Afghanistan's Laghman province, two senior Pakistani security officials said. They said an arms depot and two key military installations were destroyed. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to the media on the record.

Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said Pakistan's anti-drone systems shot down several small drones over the northwestern cities of Abbottabad, Swabi, and Nowshera Friday. He said they appeared to be part of a failed attack by the Pakistani Taliban, and 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

Turkey's 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.

On Friday, Mujahid said Afghanistan had "always emphasized a peaceful solution, and we still want to resolve the problem through dialogue."

In a statement, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres urged both sides to try to resolve their differences through diplomacy, and to protect civilians.

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.

In 2025, 2.9 million people returned to Afghanistan, the U.N. refugee agency has said, with nearly 80,000 having returned so far this year.

NASA revamps Artemis moon landing program by modeling it after speedy Apollo

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

NASA said Friday it's revamping its Artemis moon exploration program to make it more like the fast-paced Apollo program half a century ago, adding an extra practice flight before attempting a high-risk lunar landing with a crew in two years.

The overhaul in the flight lineup came just two days after NASA's new moon rocket returned to its hangar for more repairs, and a safety panel warned the space agency to scale back its overly ambitious goals for humanity's first lunar landing since 1972.

Artemis II, a lunar fly-around by four astronauts, is off until at least April because of rocket problems.

The follow-up mission, Artemis III, had been targeting a landing near the moon's south pole by another pair of astronauts in about three years. But with long gaps between flights and concern growing over the readiness of a lunar lander and moonwalking suits, NASA's new administrator Jared Isaacman announced that mission would instead focus on launching a lunar lander into orbit around Earth in 2027 for docking practice by astronauts flying in an Orion capsule.

The new plan calls for a moon landing — potentially even two moon landings — by astronauts in 2028.

"Everybody agrees. This is the only way forward," Isaacman said.

The hydrogen fuel leaks and helium flow problems that struck the Space Launch System rocket on the pad at NASA's Kennedy Space Center earlier this month had also plagued the first Artemis test flight without a crew in 2022.

Another three-year gap was looming between Artemis II and the moon landing by astronauts as originally envisioned, Isaacman said.

Isaacman stressed that "it should be incredibly obvious" that three years between flights is unacceptable. He'd like to get it down to one year or even less.

Isaacman, a tech billionaire who bought his own trips to orbit and performed the world's first private spacewalk, took the helm at NASA in December.

During NASA's storied Apollo program, he said, astronauts' first flight to the moon was followed by two more missions before Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon. What's more, he added, the Apollo moonshots followed one another in quick succession, just as the earlier Projects Mercury and Gemini had rapid flight rates, sometimes coming just a few months apart.

Twenty-four Apollo astronauts flew to the moon from 1968 through 1972, with 12 of them landing.

"No one at NASA forgot their history books. They knew how to do this," Isaacman said. "Now we're putting it in action."

To pick up the pace and reduce risk, NASA will standardize its Space Launch System rockets moving forward, Isaacman said. These are the massive rockets that will launch astronauts to the moon aboard Orion capsules. At the same time, Elon Musk's SpaceX and Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin are speeding up their work on the landers needed to get the astronauts from lunar orbit down to the surface.

Isaacman said next year will see an Orion crew rendezvousing in orbit around Earth with SpaceX's Starship, Blue Origin's Blue Moon or both landers. It's similar to the methodical approach that worked so well during Apollo in the late 1960s, he noted. Apollo 8, astronauts' first flight to the moon, was followed by two more missions before Armstrong and Aldrin aimed for the lunar surface.

"We should be getting back to basics and doing what we know works," he said.

The Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel recommended this week that NASA revise its objectives for Artemis III "given the demanding mission goals." It's urgent the space agency do that, the panel said, if the United States hopes to safely return astronauts to the moon. Isaacman said the revised Artemis flight plan addresses the panel's concerns and is supported by industry and the Trump administration.

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 with 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.

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

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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 is 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 recent years, Americans' have also grown less likely to say they have a favorable view of Israel, while their positive views of the Palestinian territories have improved. Still, Americans remain more positive toward Israel: Some 46% of Americans have a favorable opinion of Israel, compared with 37% who say that about the Palestinian territories.

In the past 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."

Today in History: February 28, the Waco siege begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Feb. 28, the 59th day of 2026. There are 306 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 28, 1993, a gunbattle erupted at a religious compound near Waco, Texas, when Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents tried to arrest Branch Davidian leader David Koresh for stockpiling illegal weapons; four agents and six Davidians were killed as a 51-day standoff began. (On April 19 of that year, FBI agents stormed the compound with tear gas and armored vehicles, with dozens dead before the

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standoff was over).

Also on this date:

In 1844, a massive 12-inch gun aboard the USS Princeton exploded as the ship was sailing on the Potomac River, killing Secretary of State Abel P. Upshur, Navy Secretary Thomas W. Gilmer and several others; President John Tyler, who also was aboard the ship, was uninjured.

In 1953, Francis H.C. Crick announced that he and fellow scientist James D. Watson had discovered the double-helix structure of DNA.

In 1975, 43 people were killed in London's Underground when a train failed to stop at Moorgate station, smashing into the end of a tunnel.

In 1983, the final episode of the television series "M(asterisk)A(asterisk)S(asterisk)H" aired; nearly 106 million viewers saw the finale, which remains the most-watched episode of any U.S. television series to date.

In 1986, Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated while walking on a Stockholm street with his wife; his assailant was never captured and remains unidentified.

In 2013, Benedict XVI became the first pope in 600 years to resign, ending an eight-year pontificate. (Benedict was succeeded the following month by Pope Francis.)

In 2014, President Barack Obama delivered a blunt warning to Moscow about reports of military activity inside Ukraine by Russia and said "there will be costs" for any intervention.

In 2023, a passenger train collided head-on with a freight train more than 200 miles (320 kilometers) north of Athens, Greece, killing 57 people in that country's deadliest rail disaster.

In 2024, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the longest-serving U.S. Senate leader in history, announced he would step down from the leadership role the following November. (Twelve months later, the octogenarian senator said his term ending in January 2027 would be his last).

Today's birthdays: Rock singer Sam the Sham (aka Domingo Samudio) is 89. Actor-director-choreographer Tommy Tune is 87. Hall of Fame auto racer Mario Andretti is 86. Actor Mercedes Ruehl is 79. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is 73. Basketball Hall of Famer Adrian Dantley is 71. Actor John Turturro is 69. Actor Robert Sean Leonard is 57. Musician Pat Monahan (Train) is 57. Actor Tasha Smith is 55. Hockey Hall of Famer Eric Lindros is 53. Actor Ali Larter is 50. Country musician Jason Aldean is 49. NBA guard Luka Dončić is 27.