

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Saturday, March 21

FIRST DAY OF SPRING

State A Boys Basketball Tournament in Rapid City  
Pickleball, 9:30 a.m., Elementary Gym

## Sunday, March 22

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

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

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

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PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



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

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

6th grade BB Practice, 6 pm., Arena

Puzzle, Popcorn, Pop Challenge at Wage Memorial Library, 1 p.m.

## Monday, March 23

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

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Chicken nachos.

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

Pickleball, 5:30 a.m., Elementary Gym

Winter Sports Awards, 7 p.m. The Welcome home will be held prior to the awards ceremony.

Groton Senior Citizens, potluck at noon, Community Center

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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.**

## Action Hero Gone

Martial arts legend and action star Chuck Norris died at age 86, his family announced yesterday. The news came a day after he was reportedly hospitalized in Hawaii for a medical emergency. The cause of death was not released.

Born Carlos Ray Norris in Oklahoma in 1940, he discovered martial arts while serving in the US Air Force in South Korea, where he studied Tang Soo Do—a Korean martial art akin to karate and known for fast, spinning kicks. Norris became a dominant karate champion, securing multiple black belts and world titles. He also created a blended martial arts style, Chun Kuk Do (“the universal way” or “the way of 1,000 lands”).

His big break came opposite Bruce Lee in 1972’s “The Way of the Dragon,” launching a long career in films like “Missing in Action” and “The Delta Force.” He became a household name as the star of “Walker, Texas Ranger,” which ran for nine seasons and solidified his image as a tough, moral hero.

In the mid-2000s, “Chuck Norris Facts”—one-liners presenting him as an unstoppable force—became internet memes.

## World’s first lab-grown esophagus restores pigs’ ability to swallow.

Scientists grew the working esophagus using donor tissue and stem cells, then transplanted it into pigs. The new esophagus worked like a real one and grew with the pigs, offering hope for human babies born with esophageal defects who currently face complex surgeries.

## CBS News shuts radio news service after nearly a century.

The network is also cutting roughly 6% of its newsroom workforce, or about 60 people, amid a broader restructuring and cost-cutting effort. The layoffs are the second in six months and the first under the new strategy of Editor-in-Chief Bari Weiss.

## K-pop band BTS releases fifth album, “Arirang,” after four-year hiatus.

The album reflects the identity and roots of one of the world’s most popular boy bands. Alongside a new single and upcoming free concert in Seoul (also streaming on Netflix), the release kicks off BTS’s 82-date world tour through 2027.

## Over 300 million worldwide mark Persian New Year, known as Nowruz.

Nowruz (“new day” in Persian) marks life, renewal, and rebirth. Nowruz is a festive holiday tied to the spring equinox; however, celebrations are muted this year amid the ongoing Middle East war. Nowruz dates back over 3,000 years to the Persian Empire.

## Trump administration unveils national AI policy framework.

The framework urges Congress to pass unified federal legislation on AI rather than leaving regulation to individual states. The nonbinding plan outlines key priorities, including online child safety, intellectual property rights, free-speech protections, and workforce training.

## DEA names Colombian president as priority target in narcotics probe.

Federal prosecutors have opened early-stage investigations into President Gustavo Petro to see if he or close associates accepted bribes or illicit campaign funds from drug traffickers in return for blocking their extradition to the US. No charges have been filed.

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## Super Micro shares drop amid Nvidia chip-smuggling charges.

Three individuals associated with Super Micro Computer, including a cofounder, are accused of illegally funneling billions of dollars' worth of US-made AI servers loaded with advanced Nvidia chips into China in violation of export controls.

## Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Michelle M. in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

"I was supposed to be escorting my 80-year-old mother on the way home from a Denver trip. She left her purse as she exited the shuttle bus, but luckily I saw it. Walking to the next terminal, we were laughing about it because it's usually me who forgets things. We stopped to check my phone battery only to find it was not to be found. Frantically, I called it and the driver answered.

"Then, he not only waited (instead of saying, 'Make your way back to the lot's lost and found') but stayed on the phone with me until I made my way down and over, breathlessly (two levels and back over to the west terminal). He saved my bacon.

Then, a man at the gate noticed my phone charger was sagging in the outlet and leaned down to resolve the problem for me. They both made my day much better! Looking out for others is selfless and appreciated!"

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

♥ **Babysitting Available!**

**House Cleaning Offered!**

**Text Jeslyn Kosel at (605)-290-7821**

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

## Double-Overtime Heartbreaker: Tigers Fall 94-92 in Instant Classic

RAPID CITY, S.D. — Groton Area left everything on the floor Friday.

In a wild, high-scoring battle that felt more like an NBA shootout than a State A Tournament consolation game, the Tigers dropped a heartbreaking 94-92 double-overtime decision to St. Thomas More in the consolation championship bracket at Rapid City.

Even in defeat, Groton Area coach Greg Kjellsen said he could not have been prouder of his team's fight.

"I am so proud of those boys. They didn't quit, and they hung in there till the very last second and battled," Kjellsen said afterward. "It hurts, but I told them I couldn't be prouder."

The Tigers looked sharp early, using strong outside shooting and balanced offense to grab a 22-12 lead after one quarter. Ryder Johnson knocked down a pair of early 3-pointers, and Groton got inside baskets from Gage Sippel, Easton Weber and Keegen Tracy during a strong opening stretch.

Groton still held the upper hand through much of the second quarter. Tracy, Johnson and Sippel helped the Tigers keep St. Thomas More at bay, and Groton took a 35-30 lead into halftime.

But the Cavaliers began to solve Groton's defense in the second half.



**Gage Sippel puts up this shot over St. Thomas More's Broeden Sales.** (Photo

by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Becker Bosma sets a screen for Karson Zak.**

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

"I think they made some adjustments against our zone," Kjellsen said. "We played more zone today than we played in the previous 22 games combined."

Even so, Groton continued to answer. The Tigers pushed the lead back to 10 points in the third quarter when Tracy and Karson Zak connected from long range, making it 50-40. Zak continued to attack offensively, while Johnson and Bosma also came up with key baskets.

Still, St. Thomas More kept coming.

The Cavaliers trimmed the gap to 57-51 by the end of the third, then caught fire from the perim-

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eter in the fourth quarter. Big shots from Noah Wald, Wyatt Gylten and Ashton Paulsen helped STM erase the deficit and turn the game into a possession-by-possession thriller.

Kjellsen said the Tigers were hurt by St. Thomas More's ability to create extra scoring chances.

"You can't point your finger at one thing," he said. "Other than they got too many second looks at the basket probably."

Groton also had to battle through foul trouble, including losing Sippel in the fourth quarter.

"We expect whoever comes in to step up, and we did," Kjellsen said. "Give them credit. They hit a lot of tough threes."

Despite the pressure, the Tigers never folded.

Johnson drilled a huge 3-pointer at the end of regulation to tie the game at 73-73 and send it to overtime. In the first extra session, Zak answered again for Groton with another clutch 3 at the buzzer, forcing a second overtime with the score tied at 84-84.

In the second overtime, Johnson buried two more 3-pointers to give the Tigers another lift, but St. Thomas More answered once more. The Cavaliers finally edged in front for good in the closing seconds and escaped with the 2-point win.



**Becker Bosma looks to pass the ball off to a teammate.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Ryder Johnson shoots a long three-pointer at the buzzer and the St. Thomas More players watch as the shot goes in to tie the game sending it into overtime.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Johnson and Zak each poured in 26 points to lead Groton Area. Tracy added 15 points, Sippel had 12, Bosma scored 8, and Weber finished with 5.

Groton shot the ball extremely well, finishing 31 of 59 from the field (52.5 percent), 13 of 23 from 3-point range (56.5 percent) and 17 of 24 at the free-throw line (70.8 percent). The Tigers also got 31 rebounds and 8 assists in one of their best offensive performances of the season.

St. Thomas More finished 33 of 69 from the field (47.8 percent), 13 of 30 from 3-point range (43.3 percent) and 15 of 20 at the free-throw line (75.0 percent). The Cavaliers also controlled the glass with 37 rebounds and dished out 16 assists, using second-chance opportunities and balanced scoring to help secure the win.

St. Thomas More was led by Gylten with 24 points, while Wald added 21, Sales had 16, and Slusarski, Speed and Paulsen all scored 11.

Afterward, Kjellsen told his team the loss was

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**Easton Weber steals the ball and goes the distance to to make the basket to give Groton Area a 10-7 lead with 3:41 left in the first quarter.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

painful, but their effort left no doubt.

"Losing sucks, but I am so proud of the effort we gave," he said. "There was no quit. We played to the final buzzer in overtime and regulation."

Groton Area now turns its attention to one final game of the tournament.

"Our goal is to come home," Kjellsen said. "We've got to win one game, and we'll give it our best shot tomorrow."

Groton Area will play Stanley County in the seventh place game on Saturday at 11 a.m. MT (Noon Central Time).



**Keegen Tracy goes up for this shot past the St. Thomas More defender.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**The team gets ready to enter the court.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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**Colton Zimmerman (the first boy on the left) was one of the junior officials for the State A Tournament.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**The Groton Area cheerleaders were giving out little bags of goodies to tournament workers. Ira Taken Alive said, "I got the coolest thing I have ever gotten from the Groton cheerleaders." He was very impressed with the gesture and the bag of goodies and was very thankful.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Gage Sippel makes this basket with 4:30 left in the first quarter to give Groton Area an 8-6 lead.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The Groton Area crowd was back in full force in the St. Thomas More game. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Coach Greg Kjellsen talks to the team during a time out. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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## Groton Area Full Box Score

#	Player	PTS	FG	3FG	FT	OR	DR	REB	A	PF	TO	BL	ST	MIN
1*	TRACY, KEEGAN	15	6-10	1-2	2-2	1	1	2	1	2	0	0	1	40
3*	ZAK, KARSON	26	6-17	4-5	10-11	2	3	5	4	2	3	0	2	40
4*	JOHNSON, RYDER	26	8-15	6-11	4-10	0	2	2	2	3	2	0	1	40
5*	BOSMA, BECKER	8	3-6	1-4	1-1	1	3	4	0	2	1	0	0	29
30*	SIPPEL, GAGE	12	6-9	0-0	0-0	2	2	4	0	5	0	2	0	25
14	KROLL, ETHAN	0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
22	WEBER, EASTON	5	2-2	1-1	0-0	0	6	6	1	4	0	0	1	26
TM	TEAM	0	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	8	8	0	0	4	0	0	
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>92</b>	<b>31-59</b>	<b>13-23</b>	<b>17-24</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	
<b>GAME PCT</b>			<b>52.5</b>	<b>56.5</b>	<b>70.8</b>									
OVERTIME		19	6-10	5-7	2-3	0	3	3	1	3	3	0	0	
OT PCT			60.0	71.4	66.7									



## St. Thomas More Full Box Score

#	Player	PTS	FG	3FG	FT	OR	DR	REB	A	PF	TO	BL	ST	MIN
10*	GYLTEN, WYATT	24	8-19	6-12	2-2	2	6	8	3	3	2	0	0	40
20*	SLUSARSKI, BARO	11	4-10	1-4	2-3	2	1	3	1	5	0	0	0	19
22*	SPEED, MAX	11	5-7	0-0	1-2	2	5	7	1	4	0	0	2	35
23*	SALES, BROEDEN	16	6-11	0-1	4-4	4	6	10	1	2	1	0	1	38
24*	PAULSEN, ASHTON	11	4-7	2-3	1-4	0	3	3	5	2	3	0	1	31
4	NEUGEBAUER, RYA	0	0-1	0-1	0-0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
5	WALD, NOAH	21	6-13	4-8	5-5	1	2	3	4	2	2	1	2	28
14	HEIG, HAYDEN	0	0-1	0-1	0-0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	5
TM	TEAM	0	0-0	0-0	0-0	1	2	3	0	0	1	0	0	
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>94</b>	<b>33-69</b>	<b>13-30</b>	<b>15-20</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	
<b>GAME PCT</b>			<b>47.8</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>75.0</b>									
OVERTIME		21	7-10	3-5	4-5	0	5	5	2	2	2	0	2	
OT PCT			70.0	60.0	80.0									

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## State A Basketball Tournament Coverage Sponsored by

Avantara - Groton  
Bary Keith at Harr Motors  
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Groton Ag Solutions  
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Kolker Law - Kari Bartling  
Krueger Brothers  
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## 2026 SDHSAA State Boys Basketball, Semifinal and Consolation

### Recap

SDPB | By Nate Wek

The 2026 SDHSAA state boys basketball tournaments continued on Friday, March 20, from Rapid City (AA and A) and Aberdeen (B). Here's a recap of the semifinals and consolation semifinals, along with the schedule for Saturday.

### Class AA

#### Consolation Semifinals

##### #5 Watertown 73 #9 Tea Area 68

Watertown defeated Tea Area 73-68 in the consolation semifinals. Carter Buisker led the Arrows with 34 points. Jack McClemens also had a big game for Watertown. He scored 24 points in the win. Tea Area's top scorer was Gavin Shawd. He finished with 40 points, five rebounds, and a pair of steals.

##### #7 Brandon Valley 57 #6 O'Gorman 52

Brandon Valley defeated O'Gorman 57-52 on Friday afternoon. Brayden Knutson led the Lynx with 17 points, four of eight from beyond the arc. Austin Dowd also contributed 13 points and led the team in rebounds with eight. Mason Clark was the top performer for O'Gorman. He finished with 22 points, four steals, and three assists in the loss.

#### Semifinals

##### #1 Sioux Falls Lincoln 53 #4 Harrisburg 48

Sioux Falls Lincoln defeated Harrisburg 53-48 in the semifinals. Sam DeGroot led the Patriots with 24 points and five rebounds. Brody Schafer also had a nice game that included 11 points, seven assists, and five rebounds. Harrisburg was led by Stellen Larson, who finished with 14 points and eight rebounds.

##### #3 Huron 53 #2 Sioux Falls Roosevelt 44

Huron defeated Sioux Falls Washington 53-44 on Friday night to advance to their first state title game since 2009. Blake Ellwein led the way for the Tigers with 23 points, 13 rebounds, and three blocks – a double-double performance. Anders Porisch also contributed with 13 points in the win. Deondre Painter was the top scorer for Roosevelt. He finished with 14 points in the loss.

### Class A

#### Consolation Semifinals

##### #8 St. Thomas More 94 #5 Groton Area 92 (2OT)

St. Thomas More defeated Groton Area 94-92 in a double-overtime thriller that saw multiple buzzer beaters at the end of regulation, first overtime, and second overtime. Wyatt Gylden led the Cavaliers with 24 points. He also had eight rebounds. Broeden Sales had a double-double in the game too with 16 points and ten rebounds. Karson Zak and Ryder Johnson each scored 26 points in the loss for Groton Area.

##### #7 Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 58 #6 Stanley County 57

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte defeated Stanley County in a back and forth battle, 58-57. Damien Clown led the way for the Braves with 23 points and four steals on defense. Levi Elk Nation also added 16 points in the win. Stanley County's top scorer was Paxton Deal, who finished with 18 points. Teegyn Breitag had a double-double performance for the Buffaloes scoring ten points and recording 14 rebounds.

#### Semifinals

##### #1 Sioux Falls Christian 58 #4 Hamlin 47

Sioux Falls Christian defeated Hamlin 58-47 to advance to their fifth straight state championship game. Brant Wassenaar had a big game scoring 28 points on 12 of 19 from the field. Canyon Prins also contributed with 14 points and nine rebounds in the win. Hamlin's Jackson Wadsworth led the team in points with 15.

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## #2 West Central 56 #3 Clark/Willow Lake 43

West Central defeated Clark/Willow Lake 56-43 to advance to Saturday night's championship game. The Trojans were led by Connor Mebius, who scored 22 points with a perfect 14 of 14 from the free throw line. Will Kuhl also had 16 points and nine rebounds for West Central. Sullivan Felberg led the Cyclones with 13 points and eight rebounds.

## Class B

### Consolation Semifinals

#### #4 Aberdeen Christian 52 #1 Viborg-Hurley 49

Aberdeen Christian defeated Viborg-Hurley 52-49 in the consolation round on Friday. Luke Kaiser had 26 points out of 10 of 18 from the field. He also had 11 rebounds to complete the double-double. For Viborg-Hurley, Jake Austin led the way with 20 points. Brady Schroedermeier also had a double-double performance. He scored 16 points and grabbed ten rebounds.

#### #3 De Smet 50 #7 Sully Buttes 43

De Smet defeated Sully Buttes 50-43 on Friday afternoon in Aberdeen. Grant Wilkinson had a double-double performance for the Bulldogs with 18 points and 16 rebounds. Sully Buttes' Wesley Wittler also had a double-double in the game. He scored 19 points and grabbed 11 rebounds.

### Semifinals

#### #5 Castlewood 56 #8 Lyman 28

Castlewood defeated Lyman 56-28 to return to the state championship game. As a team, the Warriors shot 50% from the field in the contest. Kamden Keszler led Castlewood with 22 points in the game. He also had three steals defensively. Will Aderhold scored 11 points, perfect on every shot he took in the game. For Lyman, it was Cole Kieffer, who led the team with ten points and seven rebounds.

#### #2 Freeman 74 #6 Wall 70

Freeman defeated Wall 74-70 on Friday night in Aberdeen to advance to their first state title game since 1997. David Waltner led the Flyers with a double-double performance; 21 points and ten rebounds. Tayden Kerrigan also had a 14 point, nine rebound performance in the win. Wall's top scorer was Teelan Kjerstad. He had 30 points. Emmet Dinger also had a nice game with 22 points and eight rebounds for the Eagles.

## Saturday Schedule

### Class AA

7/8 | #6 O'Gorman vs #9 Tea Area

5/6 | #5 Watertown vs #7 Brandon Valley

3/4 | #4 Harrisburg vs #2 Sioux Falls Roosevelt – 5 pm MT

Championship | #1 Sioux Falls Lincoln vs #3 Huron – 6:45 pm MT

### Class A

7/8 | #5 Groton Area vs #6 Stanley County – 11 am MT

5/6 | #8 St. Thomas More vs #7 Cheyenne-Eagle Butte – 12:45 pm MT

3/4 | #4 Hamlin vs #3 Clark/Willow Lake – 5 pm MT

Championship | #1 Sioux Falls Christian vs #2 West Central – 6:45 pm MT

### Class B

7/8 | #1 Viborg-Hurley vs #7 Sully Buttes – 11 am CT

5/6 | #4 Aberdeen Christian vs #3 De Smet – 12:45 pm CT

3/4 | #8 Lyman vs #6 Wall – 5 pm CT

Championship | #5 Castlewood vs #2 Freeman – 6:45 pm CT

## Northern State University Announces Dacotah Bank 4-Year Scholarship Recipients for Fall 2026

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Northern State University is pleased to announce the incoming freshmen who have been selected to receive the Dacotah Bank 4-year scholarship for Fall 2026.

The Dacotah Bank scholarship supports students pursuing programs within Northern State University's School of Business. According to Recipients must be full-time students majoring in a School of Business program, and the scholarship is renewable for up to eight semesters if students continue to meet eligibility requirements, including maintaining a cumulative GPA of at least 3.0.

The Fall 2026 incoming freshman recipients are:

Mikah Barfknecht, Underwood, Minnesota  
McKenzie Baruth, Alpena, South Dakota  
Elizabeth Boschee, Woonsocket, South Dakota  
Esther Burkhalter, Prairie City, South Dakota  
Avery Christensen, Willmar, Minnesota  
Abigail Cooper, Aberdeen, South Dakota  
Anthony Davis, Bismarck, North Dakota  
Harrison Dea, Morton, Illinois  
Abbigail Dinger, Aberdeen, South Dakota  
Ashlyn F. Foss, Lemmon, South Dakota  
Holden Gill, Timber Lake, South Dakota  
Ethan Hamlin, San Antonio, Texas  
Annabelle Hedlund, Moorhead, Minnesota  
Jorryn Heilman, Miller, South Dakota  
Clay Kahre, Wolsey, South Dakota  
Isabelle Kallhoff, Onida, South Dakota  
Kane Larson, Preston, Minnesota  
William Mansfield, Waseca, Minnesota  
Kaeden Mattheis, Sioux Falls, South Dakota  
Karter Moody, Groton, South Dakota  
Brady Moon, Green Bay, Wisconsin  
Aubrey Nething, Wood Lake, Minnesota  
Henry Oakes, Perham, Minnesota  
Anaka Ott, Waverly, Iowa  
Addie Ott, Waverly, Iowa  
Nataleigh Rendon, Lower Brule, South Dakota  
Gracie Beth Rohde, Colome, South Dakota  
Colin Ross, Hammond, Wisconsin  
Mason Schreiber, North Mankato, Minnesota  
Brianna Slattery, Rogers, Minnesota  
Sidonia Wattier, Norfolk, Nebraska  
Preston Wipf, Tulare, South Dakota  
Ava Yeske, Athol, South Dakota

These scholarships reflect Northern State University's continued commitment to supporting student success and investing in future business leaders.

## Ringgenberg Earns Midwest Honor, Advances to National Legion Firefighter of the Year



**Dale Ringgenberg**

GROTON, S.D. — A Groton firefighter is now being recognized on a national stage.

Dale Ringgenberg, nominated by Groton American Legion Post #39 and recently named the South Dakota American Legion Firefighter of the Year, has now been selected as the American Legion Firefighter of the Year for the Midwest Region.

With the honor, Ringgenberg advances to the national level, where he is now one of just five regional finalists competing for the American Legion's National Firefighter of the Year Award.

The prestigious award recognizes firefighters who go above and beyond the call of duty, demonstrating outstanding courage, leadership, and service to their communities.

Ringgenberg's selection at the regional level places him among the top firefighters in the nation, highlighting not only his dedication to the fire service, but also his commitment to the Groton community.

The national winner will be announced and honored at the American Legion National Convention scheduled for August in Louisville, Kentucky.

Ringgenberg was originally nominated by members of Groton American Legion Post #39, who cited his exceptional service, professionalism, and ongoing contributions to the community as key reasons for his selection.

Advancing from the state level to a regional title — and now to national consideration — marks a significant achievement and brings recognition to both Ringgenberg and the Groton area.

As one of the nation's top finalists, Ringgenberg will represent South Dakota and the Midwest Region on the national stage later this summer.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **New anti-abortion laws clarify definition, criminalize pills, require prenatal videos in schools**

**Republican South Dakota governor signs bills at pregnancy resource center**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR**

SIOUX FALLS — The Republican governor of South Dakota signed three anti-abortion bills into law Friday making it a felony to dispense or advertise abortion pills and related items, clarifying what constitutes an abortion, and requiring public schools to show students videos about prenatal development.

"My signature today will strengthen South Dakota's pro-life laws," Gov. Larry Rhoden told attendees during a bill signing at the Alpha pregnancy resource center.

Abortion is already prohibited in the state. Lawmakers adopted a trigger ban in 2005 that took effect in 2022, after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. The only exception in the law is when there is "appropriate and reasonable medical judgment" that an abortion is necessary to preserve the life of the mother.

#### **New felony for dispensing, advertising abortion pills and related items**

The existing abortion ban makes it a felony crime to administer, prescribe or procure an abortion for any "pregnant female." One of the new laws makes that ban and crime more expansive by changing "pregnant female" to "person."

The law also creates a new felony for any person who dispenses, distributes, sells or advertises any article or thing designed, adapted or intended to produce an abortion, or any article, instrument, substance, drug, medicine — such as abortion pills — or thing that is advertised or described "in a manner calculated to lead another to use or apply it for producing an abortion."

Additionally, the law authorizes the state attorney general to seek up to \$10,000 in penalties for each violation, and to seek a court order halting violators if the attorney general "has reason to believe that a person is engaging in, has engaged in, or is about to engage in" a violation.

#### **Clarifying abortion definition, requiring prenatal videos in schools**

Another new law specifies that several pregnancy-related treatments are not abortions, including treatment to resolve a miscarriage, treatment or removal of an ectopic pregnancy, removal of a "deceased unborn child," medical treatment that unintentionally results in the loss of the pregnancy, and any medical procedure intended to save the pregnancy or "health of the unborn child."

South Dakota Searchlight asked Rhoden afterward why he and lawmakers tried to define medical treatment that does not constitute an abortion, rather than amending the abortion ban to include a broadly defined exception for the health of the mother.

"Politics is the art of the possible, and I'm guessing, speculating, that, you know, you try to craft legislation that you know you can get across the finish line," Rhoden said. "The bigger the net you throw, the more opposition you draw. So, I'm not saying that's why, that was the case here, but I would guess that would be part of it."

Rhoden also responded to a question about whether requiring schools to show a video of a developing fetus amounts to indoctrination.

"If you believe a life is a life, and I do, it's not indoctrination to let others know that," he said.

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When asked about South Dakota's lack of a rape or incest exception in the abortion ban, Rhoden said it's a difficult issue to address.

"You draw a lot of flies on rape and incest, because, obviously, life is life, and that's a lot tougher issue to frame than many others," he said. "I think the life of the mother is, obviously, a lot easier for a lot more people to wrap their arms around than the rape and incest issue. And it's all, all of it is so emotionally charged that it's hard to really have straight-up conversations on that."

## Critics respond

The American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota argued against the bills throughout this year's legislative session, which ended earlier this month. They said the bills prioritize politics over patients, evidence-based education and civil liberties.

Advocacy manager Samantha Chapman said in a statement that "although abortion is already nearly entirely banned in South Dakota, it seems like every election cycle anti-abortion politicians manufacture new 'abortion crises' rather than seek solutions to issues that threaten women's health and safety."

"The laws signed by Gov. Rhoden diminish young South Dakotans' access to scientifically accurate sex education, interfere with doctors' ability to care for patients and turn pregnancy outcomes into crime scene investigations," she wrote.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists testified against all three bills. Their lobbyist warned that attempting to define what's not an abortion could unintentionally classify some other pregnancy-related procedures — such as long-acting contraceptives — as abortion care, and said the bill still does not define when the "life of the pregnant female" is being saved, rather than treated for things like hemorrhaging and organ damage.

The organization also said its members are already struggling to access drugs that can be used for an abortion but also have other uses, such as inducing labor.

*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

### Book excerpt: In the Badlands, homesteaders met a 'brutal reality' and 'insuperable obstacle'

by Philip S. Hall

The following excerpt is reprinted with permission from the new book "The White River Badlands: Its History and Characters," by Philip S. Hall and published by the South Dakota Historical Society Press.

When the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad pushed through the Badlands in 1907, the dispossessed, the disappointed, and the deluded came down its tracks, naively believing they could make a living off 160 acres. By 1910, a homesteader's shack could be found on almost every quarter section. As a local wag put it, the government bet 160 acres against the homesteader's fourteen-dollar filing fee that the homesteader would either freeze out or starve to death within five years. It was a safe bet — safe, that is, for the government.

When the Sioux Bill of 1889 became law, the U.S. government granted the Milwaukee Railroad the right to lay rails from Chamberlain through the Badlands and on to Rapid City and to acquire twenty acres of station yard approximately every ten miles along the route. It was not until 1905, however, that the White River Valley Railroad Company, a subsidiary of the Milwaukee, began laying tracks west of the Missouri River.

Wanting freight for its trains and buyers for the town lots platted in its station yards, the railroad printed and distributed pamphlets explaining that the Homestead Act of 1862 enabled them to acquire 160 acres

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of prime farm ground in the White River Valley merely by staking a claim. The only requirement was to pay a fourteen-dollar filing fee, cultivate ten acres, build a twelve-by-fourteen-foot dwelling, and live on the land for five years. Alternatively, they could build their dwelling, cultivate ten acres, live on the land for fourteen months, then file a commutation proof and pay \$1.25 per acre.

At that point, only a few procedural hurdles remained for those desiring patent deeds. The homesteader had to publish notices of intent to take title in the local newspaper for five consecutive weeks, which on average cost \$14.50, and then appear before the local land office commissioner with two witnesses to vouch that the person had met the requirements. No one inspected the homesteaders' dwellings or cultivated acres. Concerning these and other requirements, government officials were inclined to look the other way, and failure to comply was a victimless crime because the government wanted to put public land in the hands of anyone who would pay property taxes.

The siren call of land for the landless brought the third wave of interlopers to the Badlands: hundreds of homesteaders who expected to become prosperous farmers. A brutal reality awaited them, and leading bureaucrats in the Department of the Interior knew it because they had read in Stephen H. Long's account of his expedition of 1820: "In regard to the extensive section of country [the land west of the Missouri River], I do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivating, and of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence ... it will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country."

The bureaucrats were likely also familiar with John Wesley Powell's "Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States." He deemed the land beyond the one hundredth meridian to be an arid region where dry-land farming was unsustainable. The homesteaders were eighty miles west of the meridian, in a land where the median annual precipitation was only sixteen inches. When it did rain, the moisture fell on Badlands gumbo so impervious to water that most of it drained into the Cheyenne or the White Rivers before plants could make much use of it.

Yet, the bureaucrats stayed mum, because at the time the government was intent on knitting the country together with iron rails, and the Milwaukee Railroad would not extend its tracks west of the Missouri River without the prospect of business generated by homesteaders and town-builders.

*Philip S. Hall earned his doctorate from the University of Montana in 1972 and worked for 40 years assisting teachers in Montana, Minnesota, the Dakotas and Wyoming to help children with debilitating learning and behavior problems. As an academic, he helped graduate students become competent school psychologists and wrote or co-authored 10 books, including three on the history of southwestern South Dakota.*

## State's investment manager urges patience with underperformance, waiting for better opportunities

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

The people who manage the investments for the state of South Dakota's retirement system have underperformed for the third year in a row, contributing to a 1.4 percentage-point gap — or a \$2.75 billion shortfall — between their 10-year performance and the benchmark they try to meet over the long term.

The state Investment Council manages nearly \$21 billion worth of total assets that fund the retirement system for public employees and also support the state budget, including health care and education trust funds. The council has eight voting members and a staff of 28.

The recent underperformance is by design, State Investment Officer Matt Clark told the legislative budget committee this session in Pierre.

"We're fine. Just muddling along and being cautious for an extended period if we have to," Clark said.

The council weighs its performance against a Capital Markets Benchmark, which is an index that can be used as a comparison to measure an investment portfolio's results.

The state has been "significantly below" its benchmark as stock prices rose in recent years, largely in-

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flated by artificial intelligence-led investments, Clark said. His "contrarian" approach pulls risk back when markets are high to protect against anticipated market downturns and outperform by buying stocks when they're cheaper.

The state's stock investments are currently set to the "minimum risk position," Clark said. Some other investments in real estate and private equity have not yielded the best results, but are key to a more stable and diverse portfolio, Clark told lawmakers.

Eric Ollila, executive director of the South Dakota State Employees Organization, represents and advocates for current and retired state government employees. He isn't concerned about the investments' performance yet. The council is still beating its benchmark over the longer term of 20 years and beyond.

"You have to look at the long-term trends," Ollila said. "How it has operated has proven itself over the years and deserves the benefit of the doubt."

Ollila added that South Dakotans "vest our faith in our elected officials" and appointed members of the South Dakota Investment Council and the South Dakota Retirement System board.

"We put them in a place to get things done," Ollila said. "If we are unhappy with how they're performing, we can replace them."

## **Market downturn will follow inflated AI investment, state investment officer says**

Clark, who has been with the Investment Council since the 1980s, said South Dakota is "underweight" in the artificial intelligence boom.

Clark compared the current AI-driven stock market to the "dot-com bubble" of the late 1990s. The investment council started pulling back from the market in 1996 and waited until the bubble burst. The stock market has been in a similar position recently with some of the most expensive prices since the 20th century ended, Clark told lawmakers.

Clark told South Dakota Searchlight that investors historically get "overexcited" about technological innovations, including railroads, telephones, automobiles and airplanes.

"In each of those instances, they were overdone in terms of stock market investor enthusiasm," Clark told Searchlight. "You end up overdoing it, at least in the short term."

Many companies struggled or went bankrupt after those bubbles popped, such as fiber optic companies after the dot-com bubble. He expects the same for artificial intelligence.

By minimizing risk ahead of a downturn, that means South Dakota's investors can "sidestep most of the damage" and buy cheap stocks while other investors are recovering from their losses.

"Maybe we'll set a new record and we'll have to suffer another two to three years, but we still believe strongly that staying the course with a long-term oriented, disciplined approach makes sense," Clark told lawmakers. "It has to matter when markets are extremely expensive."

## **'Mediocre' returns sustain system in the long term, officials say**

South Dakota has been on the defensive since 2019, when Clark's team anticipated an economic downturn. The pandemic and subsequent federal involvement prolonged South Dakota's risk-averse approach.

That approach has consequences for members of the state retirement system.

Retirees' cost-of-living adjustment is supposed to equal inflation, up to 3.5%. The annual adjustments are typically decreased to "what we can afford" for all members if retirement investments underperform, the South Dakota Retirement System's senior actuary, Doug Fiddler, said during a December meeting. That annual adjustment depends in part on the system's investments meeting a long-term return assumption of 6.5%. The system's investment return last year was 5.44%.

The adjustment is the main piece of the formula the state can toy with, since the system must use fixed contribution rates, according to state law. The adjustment is also dependent on member demographics, salary trends, retirements, disabilities and mortality, which "often have an equal or greater impact on liabilities" and the annual adjustment, state retirement system Executive Director Travis Almond said in an emailed statement.

Due to less-than-expected investment returns, high inflation, and other factors, the retirement system's annual adjustments fell short of inflation each of the last five years.

Sioux Falls School Board member Marc Murren taught in South Dakota for 42 years before retiring in 2017. His wife taught for 33 years in Canton before retiring a few years later. They're both receiving benefits from the state retirement system.

Murren is familiar with annual benefit and salary increases that don't meet inflation. South Dakota sometimes does not increase state education funding to match inflation.

"It's like I got beat up when I was a teacher and now I'm getting beat up again because the retirement system isn't doing its job," Murren said.

Murren coached wrestling and football during his time at Washington High School, taught summer school and painted homes during the summers to earn more cash. He said he and his wife are "doing fine" in retirement, but he wants the retirement system to be more transparent in its communications about why benefit adjustments are lagging inflation.

Almond said the system is "highly transparent" about how the adjustment is determined and when it falls below inflation. He said members of the public can attend board meetings in person or virtually and that information on the adjustment is sent to benefit recipients in the December newsletter, posted on the system's website, and included in annual reports to the Legislature and governor.

The balance between cost of living adjustments, investment performance and other factors sustains the fund in the long term, Almond said. Without the "flexibility" to change the adjustment amount each year "it would be incredibly difficult to provide adequate retirement income."

"The current structure ensures that retirees receive the largest COLA SDRS can sustainably afford year after year," Almond said. "It prevents sudden funding shortfalls, protects the system's long-term health, and helps ensure retirees receive their earned benefits for life."

Clark prefers "disappointing but moderate" returns around 5-6% compared to risky investments that could lead to "challenging underfunding" of the state's retirement system if the bubble pops.

"It's no fun saying that the markets are high and bad times are coming and you have to be cautious," Clark told South Dakota Searchlight. "We're either going to get mediocre returns or worse, and we're hoping for mediocre. But if there is a crash, hopefully we can take advantage of the volatility like we have in the past."

Clark believes the state could "remain patient for an extended amount of time" until more attractive investment opportunities come along.

"We understand we're investing people's retirement money," Clark said. "We have to be mindful that we invest in assets that are prudent and help us pay benefits people can depend on."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## **Governor approves extra city sales tax, cigar bars, more gambling tax revenue for Deadwood**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER**

South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden signed three bills earlier this week that he said align with his "open for opportunity" economic development policy framework. The legislation includes shifting some gambling tax revenue from the state to a Black Hills city, permitting more cigar bars across the state, and allowing cities to temporarily increase their sales tax rate.

"I am committed to keeping our communities strong and South Dakota Open for Opportunity — and that is exactly what these bills do," Rhoden said in a news release.

All three bills will become law on July 1.

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## Deadwood gambling revenue

Senate Bill 102 revises the distribution of Deadwood gambling tax revenues, shifting some revenue away from the state and to the city of Deadwood — the only place in the state, other than tribal land, where full casino-style gambling is allowed.

A majority of the revenue is distributed among the Deadwood historic preservation fund, state tourism fund, state Gaming Commission, state general fund, Lawrence County, statewide historical grant fund, and state gambling addiction program. Deadwood's share from that portion of the money is capped at \$6.8 million.

After that money is distributed, 70% of the remaining money goes to the state general fund and 30% is split among local governments in Lawrence County and historic preservation efforts in Deadwood.

The new law will remove Deadwood's \$6.8 million cap from the first part of the formula and change the distribution of the remaining money, providing 71% to Deadwood historic preservation, 25% to the state general fund, and the rest to other Lawrence County cities and the Lead-Deadwood School District.

Had the bill been in effect last year, Deadwood's \$7.13 million revenue share would have risen to \$7.29 million.

Deadwood-area leaders worked with the Rhoden administration to change the formula, saying that the increase in funds will help support infrastructure improvements throughout the city. Sen. Randy Deibert, R-Spearfish, said Lawrence County lawmakers have been working to rewrite the formula for more than a decade.

Rhoden said the change will help ensure that Deadwood "can continue to grow, thrive and support" South Dakota's economy.

## Cigar bars, new city sales tax option

House Bill 1215 allows counties and cities to issue licenses for cigar bars. In 2010, South Dakota voters upheld a ban on smoking inside public buildings and places of employment, such as restaurants, casinos and bars. Lawmakers expanded the ban to e-cigarettes and other vaping products in 2019.

The ban allowed the three cigar bars operating at the time in Sioux Falls, Rapid City and Deadwood to continue if they met certain requirements, including for ventilation systems.

The new law allows cities and counties to issue licenses for more cigar bars. Opponents said the legislation erodes the statewide smoking ban and raised concerns about a lack of limitations on how many cigar bar licenses could be approved.

House Bill 1245 allows cities to implement a temporary sales tax up to 1% — in addition to existing city and state sales taxes — to pay for major projects. The increased sales tax rate would need to be cleared with at least a 60% vote of the public.

The tax would automatically sunset once the identified amount for the project is raised or after five years, whichever is earlier, and municipalities would have to wait two years before they propose implementing the tax again.

The news release from Rhoden's office said the sales tax strategy will "encourage local communities to plan responsibly and remain Open for Opportunity."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## War in Middle East causes further stress on US farmers

**Fertilizer prices rise alongside fuel prices from the conflict**

**BY: CAMI KOONS**

Corn farmers in the U.S. are bracing for even higher fertilizer prices as conflict in the Middle East impacts the globally traded commodity, according to leaders with the National Corn Growers Association.

Corn farmers are approaching a fourth year of negative yields, due to low corn prices and high input costs, including fertilizers. The growers association renewed its call on Congress to legalize year-round, nationwide E-15, a higher blend of ethanol fuel, and for the removal of duties on fertilizers from Morocco.

Lesly McNitt, vice president of public policy for National Corn Growers Association, said there is not enough domestically produced fertilizer to meet demand, which means imported fertilizer is vital to farmers.

McNitt, speaking during a press conference Wednesday, said duties on phosphate from Morocco and Russia that were put in place in 2020, have "kept phosphate prices high" and caused "availability issues and lack of competitive options for farmers."

A study from the Agricultural and Food Policy Center at Texas A&M University found that the countervailing duties increased the cost of phosphorus by about \$6.9 billion for the 2021 to 2025 growing seasons.

"Now the conflict in the Middle East has further complicated access to critical fertilizers," McNitt said, noting the U.S. typically imports about 40% of phosphate products from Saudi Arabia.

"When these fertilizers can't be transported through the Strait of Hormuz, there are real implications for availability and price, and there is a global market impact," McNitt said.

Iran blocked the Strait of Hormuz, an approximately 30-mile-wide channel that connects major Middle Eastern oil, natural gas and fertilizer producers to the Arabian Sea, in response to joint attacks on the country from the U.S. and Israel.

The Fertilizer Institute said in a news release that closure of the strait could impact ammonia, urea, sulfur, phosphates and natural gas markets.

"Supply disruptions in one part of the world can ripple across the trade routes and affect availability and price in other regions," The Fertilizer Institute said. "While the United States is both a fertilizer producer and importer, those same global supply dynamics play a role in determining input costs for American farmers."

McNitt said the duties imposed on countries like Morocco further restrict farmers' abilities to search for other options. National Corn Growers Association sent a letter, along with other national and state farm groups, including Iowa Corn Growers Association and Iowa Soybean Association, to domestic fertilizer producers Mosaic and J.R. Simplot, urging them to withdraw their support of countervailing duties on phosphate fertilizers from Morocco.

The duties were imposed by the U.S. Department of Commerce following a petition from Mosaic.

Other fertilizers like nitrogen — which corn farmers on the call said is the fertilizer that is most difficult to go without — have greater domestic production, but are still part of the global fertilizer market. McNitt said the nature of the market means that "a shock anywhere, impacts prices everywhere."

Matt Frostic, first vice president with NCGA and a Michigan farmer, said the cost of nitrogen fertilizer coming into U.S. ports currently would raise his production cost by about \$90 per acre.

U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated 2025 corn production had crop production costs at around \$890 per acre, and the department projects the average cost of production for corn farmers in 2026 will be \$917 per acre.

Frostic said that while farmers have the option to lock in fertilizer rates earlier in the season and prepay for some of those inputs, those decisions are often difficult to make, especially coming off several hard years.

"Many farmers didn't necessarily lock in some of those prices, or they didn't have the finances to do so," Frostic said. "... There will tend to be a lot of producers out there that have not locked in that price, so we're going to be a victim to the high cost of fertilizer."

Blocked passage in the Strait of Hormuz is also responsible for the global jump in fuel prices.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we had year round, nationwide, E-15 right now?" McNitt said during the call with reporters.

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According to the association, the higher blend of ethanol fuel saves consumers between 10 cents and 30 cents per gallon at the pump.

National and state agricultural organizations have urged Congress to allow for the year-round sale of the fuel across the nation, but the measure has not been passed, despite bipartisan support and calls for the legislation from President Donald Trump.

McNitt said that while the association hopes that a “permanent fix” is coming from Congress, the association is also calling on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to issue summertime E-15 waivers that allow the fuel to be sold throughout the summer in states that have not enacted their own year-round sales laws. Iowa and California have year-round E-15 laws.

Mark Mueller, the president of Iowa Corn Growers Association, said the state association will continue to be “extremely outspoken” about the need for the passage of year-round E-15 and legislation that looks at consolidation in the fertilizer industry.

“We have come close to achieving wins on both issues, but we call on Congress for action to officially get them across the finish line,” Mueller said in a news release. “Iowa corn farmers need and deserve the stability that comes with these wins—we cannot afford to slip back into the 1980s.”

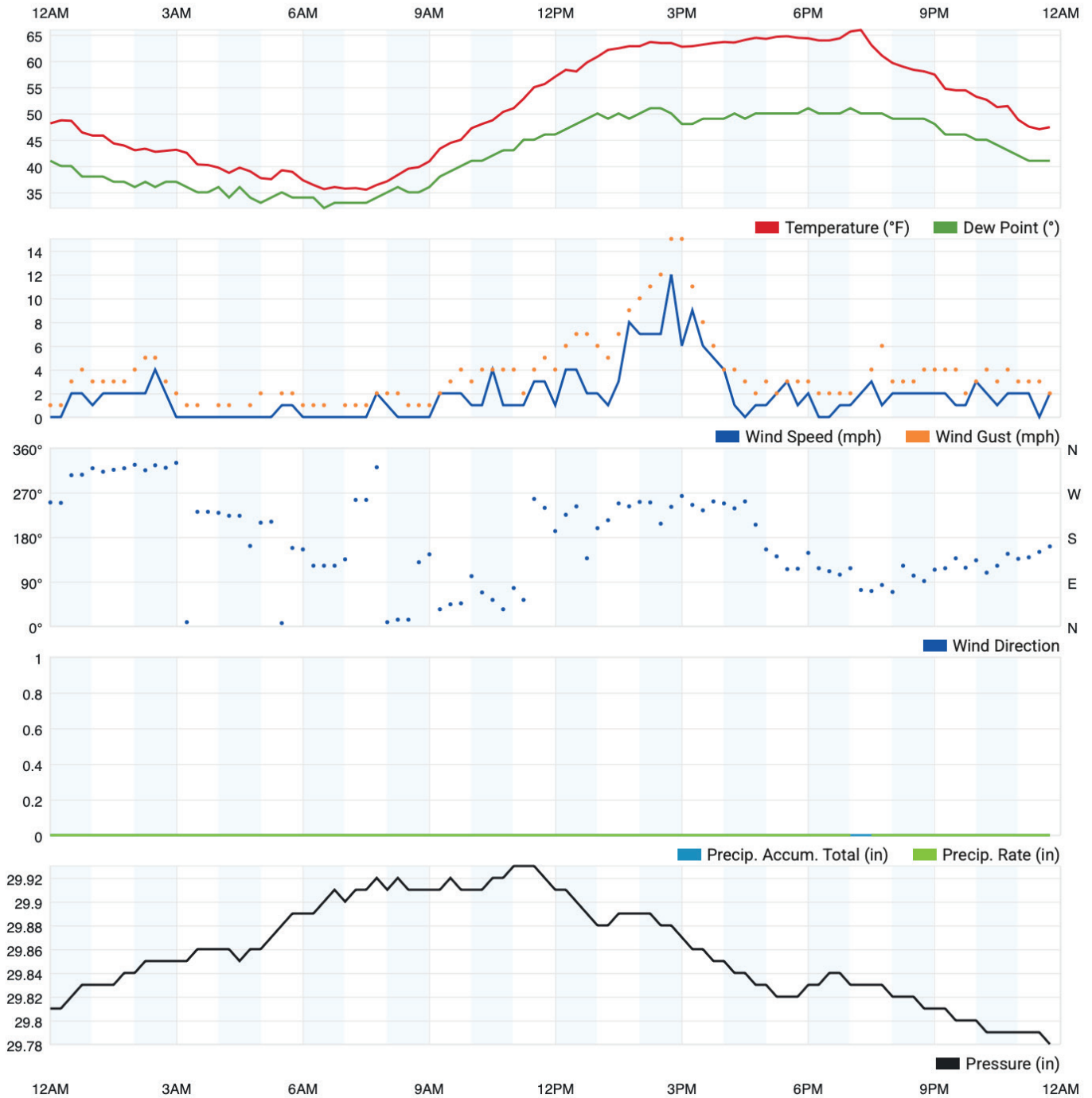
*Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

March 20, 2026



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Today



High: 74 °F

Mostly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 30 °F

Chance Rain and Blustery

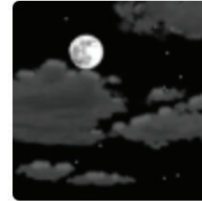
Sunday



High: 44 °F

Partly Sunny

Sunday Night



Low: 26 °F

Partly Cloudy

Monday



High: 55 °F

Partly Sunny then Slight Chance Rain



## Record to Near Record High Temperatures

March 21, 2026  
2:02 AM CDT

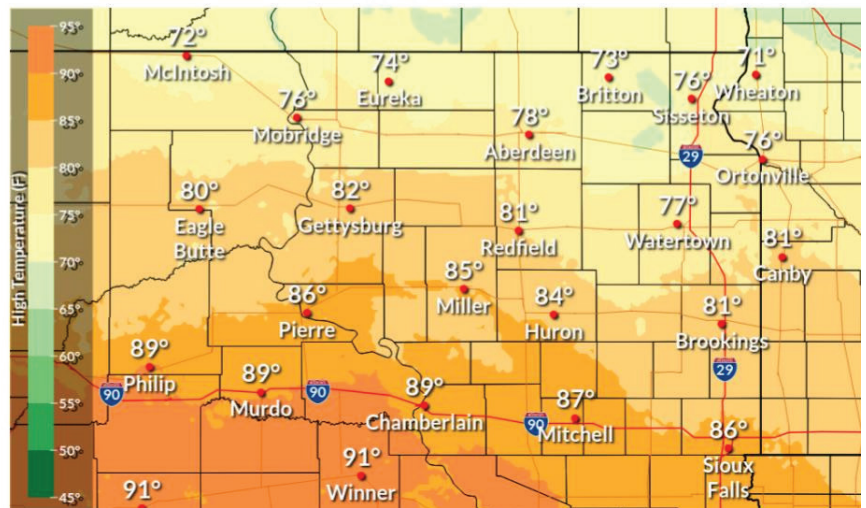
### Highs in the 70s & 80s today

- Dry grasses, warm & dry conditions to combine and create **High to Very High Grassland Fire Danger for areas west of the James River into this evening**
- Caution: Any ongoing fire will experience shifting winds, which may change the direction of the fire



- Winds increasing out of the north with gusts 25 to 40 mph this evening

### Highs Temperatures Today



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will rise into the 70s and 80s today, with several record high temperatures expected to be broken. Dry grasses, along with our warm and our dry weather, will combine to create High to Very High Grassland Fire Danger for areas mainly west of the James River Valley this afternoon through this evening. Any ongoing fire will experience shifting winds, which may change the direction of the fire. Expect winds to increase out of the north with gusts 25 to 40 mph this evening.

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## Shifting Winds increasing Tonight

March 21, 2026  
2:10 AM CDT

### Maximum Wind Gust (mph) Forecast

	3/21 Sat											3/22 Sun							
	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am
McIntosh	15	15	17	18	20	23	28	30	32	32	32	31	28	25	24	23	21	20	18
Wheaton	23	23	22	22	21	22	23	24	25	25	26	25	26	25	24	25	24	24	24
Britton	20	20	20	20	21	22	24	26	29	29	30	29	29	28	28	28	26	25	24
Eureka	18	17	18	17	17	20	23	25	26	28	29	28	26	25	25	23	23	22	21
Sisseton	24	22	22	21	21	22	23	23	25	26	28	28	26	26	26	26	26	26	25
Mobridge	13	13	14	14	15	17	20	22	25	28	29	28	26	24	24	23	22	20	20
Aberdeen	17	16	17	17	17	20	22	24	28	30	32	32	30	29	29	28	28	25	24
Webster	20	20	18	20	17	18	20	21	24	28	29	30	30	29	28	28	28	26	26
Milbank	22	20	20	20	17	18	18	18	21	24	25	25	26	25	25	25	25	24	25
Gettysburg	15	15	15	16	17	18	20	22	25	29	32	32	30	29	28	28	25	24	22
Eagle Butte	15	15	15	16	17	18	22	24	29	32	35	35	33	31	29	28	26	24	23
Watertown	18	18	17	16	16	15	15	16	21	24	29	30	30	30	30	30	28	28	26
Clark	16	15	15	16	15	15	16	17	22	28	31	32	32	32	32	31	30	29	28
Redfield	15	14	14	15	15	16	18	20	25	29	32	33	33	32	32	31	30	29	28
Miller	14	13	14	15	16	16	18	22	28	32	32	32	33	32	32	30	29	28	26
Pierre	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	17	21	24	28	28	26	26	24	23	21	20	18
Murdo	15	16	18	18	20	18	18	18	23	28	30	32	33	33	32	30	28	25	23
Chamberlain	14	15	18	17	16	17	18	13	15	32	39	40	38	35	33	32	30	28	25

Light winds through early afternoon, out of variable wind directions

Shifting winds today, increasing out of the north with gusts 25 to 40 mph this evening

Record warmth and dry conditions to create **High to Very High Grassland Fire Danger** for areas west of the James River into this evening!

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Expect mainly light winds through early this afternoon, out of variable wind directions. Winds will shift out of the north behind a cold front shifting in from North Dakota, and increase with gusts of 25 to 40 mph this evening, before slowly decreasing overnight. Shifting winds today, increasing out of the north with gusts 25 to 40 mph this evening

## Fire Concerns this Afternoon into Tonight



Conditions Favor **Quick Starting, Shifting Fires**



- Any fires could quickly shift directions today due to shifting winds
- Winds shifting to out of the north and increasing with gusts 25 to 40 mph this evening
- Lowest relative humidity down to 13 to 20% over central South Dakota

### Timing

Highest threat from  
**4 PM to Midnight**

### What To Do?



AVOID OUTDOOR BURNING  
& BE CAUTIOUS AROUND  
ANYTHING THAT COULD  
SPARK



REPORT FIRES TO  
LOCAL AUTHORITIES

NWS Aberdeen, SD



# Groton Daily Independent

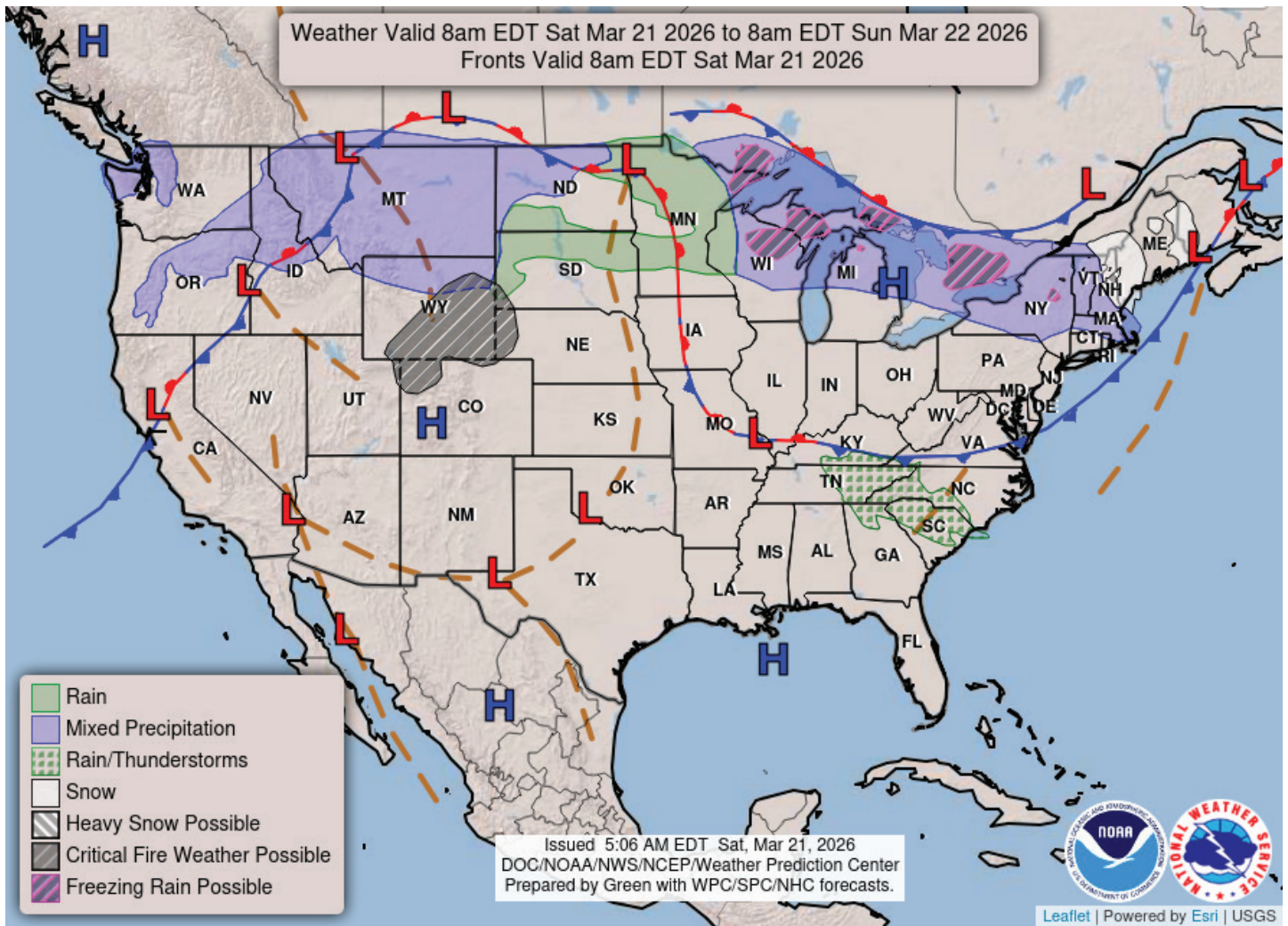
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 66 °F at 7:09 PM**  
**Low Temp: 35 °F at 7:06 AM**  
**Wind: 15 mph at 2:40 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 76 in 1926  
Record Low: -12 in 1965  
Average High: 44  
Average Low: 22  
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.55  
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.29  
Average Precip to date: 1.72  
Precip Year to Date: 1.62  
Sunset Tonight: 7.45 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:31 am



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## Today in Weather History

March 21st, 1997: As temperatures began to warm up towards the end of March, the near-record winter snowpack over central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota started to melt. The resulting runoff filled ditches, lakes, creeks, streams, and low-lying areas. The massive amount of water swamped hundreds of sections of county and township roads as well as several state and federal highways. The inundated parts of roads were either broken up or washed out. Tens of culverts were blown out or damaged, and several bridges were either destroyed or washed out by chunks of ice and the high water flow. Road closures were extensive, with rerouting for school buses, mail carriers, farmers, and ranchers. Many spillways and dams received some damage or were washed out. Also, thousands of acres of farmland and pastureland were underwater. Due to the high groundwater, countless homes receive water in their basements. A few towns were partially flooded, including Twin Brooks in Grant County, Corona in Roberts County, and Raymond in Clark County. The following week, in the early morning of March 27, water flowed into Raymond, filling the basements of several homes. In rural areas, several farms were surrounded by water and were inaccessible, leaving some people stranded and livestock marooned. Many other residences and businesses, mainly across northeast South Dakota, received significant damage or were a total loss. As a result, several people had to be evacuated. At the time, many long-term residents said this was the most significant flooding they had seen. The flooding continued into early to mid-April.

March 21st, 2012: Several record-high temperatures occurred across the region in March.

1932 — A tornado swarm occurred in the Deep South. Between late afternoon and early the next morning severe thunderstorms spawned 31 tornadoes in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Tennessee. The tornadoes killed 334 persons and injured 1784 others. Northern Alabama was hardest hit. Tornadoes in Alabama killed 286 persons and caused five million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1952 — Severe thunderstorms spawned thirty-one tornadoes across Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama and Kentucky. The tornadoes killed 343 persons and caused 15 million dollars damage. Arkansas and Tennessee each reported thirteen tornadoes. The towns of Judsonia AR and Henderson TN were nearly wiped off the map in what proved to be the worst tornado outbreak of record for Arkansas. A tornado, one and a half miles wide at times, left a church the only undamaged building at Judsonia. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 — A winter storm in the Northern High Plains Region produced blizzard conditions in western South Dakota. Winds gusted to 70 mph at Rapid City SD, and snowfall totals ranged up to 20 inches at Lead SD. The high winds produced snow drifts six feet high. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Bitterly cold weather prevailed across the northeastern U.S. Portland ME reported their coldest spring day of record with a morning low of 5 above, and an afternoon high of just 21 degrees. Marquette MI reported a record low of 15 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (The Weather Channel)

1989 — Snow blanketed the northeastern U.S. early in the day, with six inches reported at Rutland VT. Morning and afternoon thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds from southwestern Mississippi to southwest Georgia. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — The first full day of spring was a cold one for the eastern U.S. Freezing temperatures damaged 62 percent of the peach crop in upstate South Carolina, and 72 percent of the peach crop in the ridge area of South Carolina. Elkins WV, which a week earlier reported a record high of 82 degrees, was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 16 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

## Inadequacy as a Barrier

**Do you feel overwhelmed by the task in front of you?**

**Step out in faith—God will help you..**

Ephesians 3:14-21: 14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,  
15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,  
16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,  
17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,  
18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,  
19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.  
20 Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us,  
21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Do you ever feel unequal to the calling God has set in front of you? At times, all of us struggle with such feelings because certain responsibilities appear to be more than one human being is able to accomplish. We sometimes try to convince ourselves that a task is too great or that God expects too much.

When this is the case, we might be tempted to turn away from some tremendous God-given opportunities. For example, sometimes the Lord provides a situation that is just right for sharing the good news of Christ with someone else. But how often do we back off and end up missing such moments because we're afraid we won't know what to say?

Inadequacy grows out of fear. No matter how unqualified we feel, apprehension shouldn't hold us back. The truth is, even if a Christian feels incapable of accomplishing some of the awesome tasks God calls him to do, the Holy Spirit is more than adequate! As believers, we do not have to possess perfect qualifications or skills; we need only be willing.

2 Timothy 1:7 tells us that God has given us a spirit of power, not one of timidity. All the believer has to do is step out in faith; the Holy Spirit's strength and courage will be there to meet us.

*We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him*

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.26

15 19 31 37 55 4

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

NEXT DRAW: 18 Hrs 9 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.26

11 20 51 55 63 4

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$60,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.18.26

16 18 29 31 39 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$19,190,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 9 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.18.26

3 7 20 29 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$28,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 24 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.18.26

9 13 25 26 46 23

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 53 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.18.26

14 18 19 21 69 1

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$120,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 53 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

SDHSAA State Playoffs=

Class AA=

Semifinal=

Huron 53, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 44

Consolation Semifinal=

Class AA=

Brandon Valley 56, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 52

Class AA=

Consolation Semifinal=

Watertown 71, Tea 68

Semifinal=

Sioux Falls Lincoln 53, Harrisburg 48

Class A=

Consolation Semifinal=

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 58, Stanley County 57

St Thomas More 94, Groton 92, 2OT

Semifinal=

Sioux Falls Christian 58, Hamlin 47

West Central 56, Clark-Willow Lake 43

Class B=

Consolation Semifinal=

Aberdeen Christian 52, Viborg-Hurley 49

DeSmet 50, Sully Buttes 43

Semifinal=

Castlewood 56, Lyman 28

Wall 34, Freeman 33

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

### **Washington beats South Dakota State 72-54 for 1st women's NCAA Tournament win since 2017**

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Avery Howell had 30 points and nine rebounds to lead Washington to its first women's NCAA Tournament victory since 2017, beating South Dakota State 72-54 on Friday.

South Dakota State jumped out to a 13-3 lead in the first five minutes, but the game was tied at 15 when Howell made a 3-pointer with 50 seconds left in the first quarter. Howell made another 3 only 55 seconds into the second quarter to break that tie and put Washington (22-10) ahead to stay.

Howell, the transfer from Southern Cal who as a freshman last season was part of the Trojans' run to the Elite Eight, finished with seven 3s.

"That allowed me to have some experience and just feel really comfortable in these type of high-pressure situations," Howell said, referring to her previous NCAA tourney. "That just allows me to hopefully be a calming presence on the court and just be there for my teammates and for my coaches in any way that I can."

Brooklyn Meyer had 29 points and seven rebounds for South Dakota State (27-7), which had its 10-game

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winning streak snapped. Emilee Fox had 14 points.

Brynn McGaughy added 14 points in 18 minutes for the sixth-seeded Huskies, whose last NCAA tourney win came on their way to the Sweet 16 nine years ago. They lost a First Four game to Columbia last season in what had been their only other appearance since then.

"Just really exciting because this is a program that has a lot of great history, a lot of great alumni, so many people that have poured into this university and this women's basketball program," coach Tina Langley said. "These young women, they've come in here and they've done something really hard and I think it says a lot about who they are."

Quick start for Jackrabbits

Meyer had seven points as the Jackrabbits got out to that early 10-point advantage.

"Felt like we were just rebounding well and taking good looks on offense and just being aggressive on both sides," Meyer said.

"Couldn't have asked for a better way to get the game going. So you start having a sense that, OK, there's some things that are working for us," South Dakota State coach Aaron Johnston said. "You know, we just gave up offensive rebounds, way too many offensive rebounds that were not contested ones. ... I think that got them going and then we just started turning it over too much."

Washington finished with a 40-25 rebounding margin, including 14 offensive boards that led to 14 second-chance points.

Ending another 20-win season

The Jackrabbits ended their 15th consecutive 20-win season, matching schools like No. 1 overall seed UConn, Baylor, Louisville and South Carolina with that kind of active streak.

The 11th-seeded Jackrabbits from the Summit League have twice won as a double-digit seed, including over seventh-seeded Oklahoma State last March.

Up next

The Huskies on Sunday play host and third-seeded TCU (30-5), an Elite Eight team last season that has won 43 consecutive home games since February 2023. The Horned Frogs beat UC San Diego 86-40 in their first-round game earlier Friday.

## Olivia Miles gets triple-double as TCU beats UC San Diego in 1st round of March Madness

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Olivia Miles had her 12th career triple-double with 12 points and career highs of 16 rebounds and 14 assists as third-seeded TCU beat UC San Diego 86-40 in a first-round NCAA Tournament game on Friday, giving the Horned Frogs their 43rd consecutive win at home.

Miles has the assists on the first four baskets for the Frogs as they went ahead to stay, going up 11-2 in the first 2:02 of the game. They scored the final 19 points of the game to make the final score the largest margin.

"You saw within the first four minutes of the game the pep, the pop she played with. I mean she was in attack mode," TCU coach Mark Campbell said. "When Olivia's like that, our team feeds off it and we're at a whole different level."

Taylor Bigby added a career-high 27 points on 8-of-10 shooting with seven 3-pointers for TCU (30-5), which also got double-doubles from Clara Silva (13 points, 11 rebounds) and Marta Suarez (11 points, 10 rebounds).

Miles became only the third player to twice have triple-doubles in women's NCAA Tournament games, with her other coming while at Notre Dame in 2022. She came out of the game right after her 3-pointer with 4:50 left for a 74-40 lead. Her 14 assists set TCU's single-game record, matching her best set at Notre Dame.

She already had a double-double at halftime with 10 rebounds and 10 assists, to go along with four points when TCU led 48-25.

"It's a different sense of urgency that I came with and I promised myself that I'd help my team out in any way that I can," Miles said. "I know that it starts with me, and attacking the glass early so I have the ball in my hands and I can control it was favorable for us."

Erin Condron had 12 points to lead UC San Diego (24-9), which under coach Heidi VanDerveer has made the NCAA Tournament in both seasons since gaining full Division I postseason eligibility.

"I don't know if the score indicated how hard that we played, but the basket got big for them, and obviously they're an excellent team," VanDerveer said. "They have a tremendous point guard. They have shooters that spread us out, big inside, very complete team."

At home in March

TCU is hosting NCAA games at home for the second season in a row, after not making the tournament since 2010 before that.

While there were some empty seats at Schollmaier Arena, it was a solid and loud crowd for a Friday game that started at 11 a.m. local time. The place will be certainly be packed Sunday.

Other triple-doubles

The last women's NCAA Tournament triple-double was Caitlin Cark for Iowa against Louisville on March 26, 2023, when she had 41 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists.

Sabrina Ionescu with Oregon in 2018 and 2019, and Nicole Powell for Stanford in back-to-back games in 2002 are the other players with multiple triple-doubles in the NCAA Tournament. Miles' first one came with Notre Dame in 2022, when she had 12 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists in a first-round game against Massachusetts.

Up next

TCU will look to advance to the Sweet 16 for the second year in a row when it plays sixth-seeded Washington, which beat South Dakota State 72-54 in the other first-round game in Fort Worth on Friday.

## **TCU's Olivia Miles becomes 3rd player with multiple triple-doubles in women's NCAA Tournament**

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Olivia Miles had assists on TCU's first four baskets while putting the Horned Frogs ahead to stay, and a double-double by halftime even while scoring only four points.

The playmaking point guard was well in range of another triple-double in the women's NCAA Tournament. "I would be happy with zero points and 20 assists, but once I heard that I had 10 rebounds early on, I was like OK, so I have to go get it now," Miles said.

And Miles did, becoming only the third player with multiple triple-doubles in women's NCAA Tournament games by scoring 12 points along with a career-high 16 rebounds and a single-game school record 14 assists in the Horned Frogs' 86-40 win over UC San Diego in a first-round game on Friday.

It was Miles' 12th career triple-double, and her sixth in what will be the 5-foot-10 graduate transfer's only season with the Horned Frogs to extend the Big 12 single season and career mark. She had four in a five-game stretch earlier this season.

"This is probably the best. I mean, it's March," coach Mark Campbell said when asked to put Miles' game in perspective. "To break our all-time single game assist record while having a triple-double during March Madness, holy cow. ... Again, it's a magnitude of the game, the stage and just everything. Olivia, her ability, you saw within the first four minutes of the game the pep, the pop she played with. I mean she was in attack mode. When Olivia's like that, our team feeds off it and we're at a whole different level."

Sabrina Ionescu with Oregon in 2018 and 2019, and Nicole Powell for Stanford in back-to-back games in 2002 are the other players with multiple triple-doubles in the women's NCAA Tournament. Miles' first one came with Notre Dame in 2022, when she had 12 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists in a first-round game against Massachusetts.

The last women's NCAA Tournament triple-double was Caitlin Cark for Iowa in a reginal final win over Louisville on March 26, 2023, when she had 41 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists. That was the only one

since the previous one by Miles.

Ionescu with 26 and Clark with 17 are the only players with more career triple-doubles than Miles.

After making a 3-pointer with 4:50 left to push her over 10 points, Miles immediately came out of the game. The 14 assists matched her career high, done three times while with Notre Dame.

"I think sometimes the game is a little bit effortless for her and I think that sometimes it's not appreciated of not just the combination of size and skill and instincts that she possesses," said UC San Diego coach Heidi VanDerveer, whose older sister, Hall of Famer and former Stanford coach Tara, was also in attendance. "But all those things combined in one player is pretty special really and I thought that her skill set was really on full display tonight. And you've seen it on film."

Miles had 10 rebounds and 10 assists when TCU led 48-25 at halftime. The assists on TCU's first four baskets, two of them zipped passes to Marta Suarez for 3-pointers, pushed TCU ahead 11-2 just over 2 minutes into the game.

"I was finding people early and I literally told Mark, if I go out there and I have zero points and 20 assists, I would be just as happy," Miles said. "That's just what I love to do and that's what brings me the most joy playing basketball."

## **Iran says a strike hit a key nuclear facility as Mideast war enters week 4 and US sends more troops**

By JON GAMBRELL, SAMY MAGDY and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment facility was hit in an airstrike Saturday, an official Iranian news agency reported, saying there was no radiation leakage. In Israel, fragments from an Iranian missile slammed into an empty kindergarten as the war in the Middle East entered its fourth week.

Overnight and into the morning, Tehran, Iran's capital, saw heavy airstrikes, residents said. In Iraq, a drone struck the intelligence service headquarters in Baghdad, killing an officer. No group immediately claimed responsibility for that attack.

Israeli army spokesman Nadav Shoshani posted on X a video of the kindergarten building, saying it was damaged by the missile fragments. No casualties were reported as the place was empty at the time.

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Friday he was considering "winding down" military operations in the Mideast even as the United States was sending three more amphibious assault ships and roughly 2,500 additional Marines to the region.

Trump's post on social media followed an Iranian threat to attack recreational and tourist sites worldwide.

The mixed messages from the U.S. came after another climb in oil prices plunged the U.S. stock market, and was followed by a Trump administration announcement it was lifting sanctions on Iranian oil already loaded on ships, a move aimed at wrangling soaring fuel prices.

Iran's official news agency Mizan said there was no leakage after Saturday's strike on the Natanz nuclear facility, nearly 220 kilometers (135 miles) southeast of Tehran.

The facility, Iran's main uranium enrichment site, was hit in the first week of the war and several buildings appeared damaged, according to satellite images. The United Nations' nuclear watchdog had said that "no radiological consequence" were expected from that earlier strike. Natanz had also been targeted in the 12-day war last June.

Trump says US near completion of its goals

The U.S. and Israel have offered shifting rationales for the war, from hoping to foment an uprising that topples Iran's leadership to eliminating its nuclear and missile programs. There have been no public signs of any such uprising and no end to the war in sight.

On social media, Trump said, "We are getting very close to meeting our objectives as we consider winding down our great Military efforts in the Middle East."

That seemed at odds with his administration's move to bolster its firepower in the region and request another \$200 billion from Congress to fund the war.

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The U.S. is deploying three more amphibious assault ships and roughly 2,500 additional Marines to the Mideast, an official told The Associated Press. Two other U.S. officials confirmed that ships were deploying, without saying where they were headed. All three spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the military operations.

Days earlier, the U.S. redirected another group of amphibious assault ships carrying another 2,500 Marines from the Pacific to the Middle East. The Marines will join more than 50,000 U.S. troops already in the region.

Trump has said he has no plans to send ground forces into Iran but also has asserted that he retains all options.

#### Iran threatens attacks beyond the Middle East

Iran's top military spokesperson, Gen. Abolfazl Shekarchi, warned Friday that "parks, recreational areas and tourist destinations" worldwide will not be safe for the country's enemies. The threat renewed concerns that Tehran may revert to using militant attacks beyond the Middle East as a pressure tactic.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei praised Iranians' steadfastness in the face of war in a written statement read on Iranian television to mark Nowruz. Khamenei has not been seen in public since he became supreme leader following Israeli strikes that killed his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and reportedly wounded him.

With little information coming out of Iran, it was not clear how much damage its arms, nuclear or energy facilities have sustained in the punishing U.S. and Israeli strikes, which began Feb. 28 — or even who was truly in charge of the country. But Iran's attacks are still choking off oil supplies and raising food and fuel prices far beyond the Middle East.

#### Israel continues wave of strikes against Hezbollah militants

The Israeli military said early Saturday that it began a wave of strikes targeting Iran-backed Hezbollah militants in Beirut's southern suburbs.

Smoke was seen rising, fires broke out and loud explosions were heard across parts of central Beirut, hours after the Israeli army renewed evacuation warnings for seven neighborhoods.

Israeli strikes targeting Hezbollah in Lebanon have killed more than 1,000 people and displaced more than 1 million, according to the Lebanese government.

More than 1,300 people have been killed in Iran during the war. In Israel, 15 people have been killed by Iranian missiles and four others have died in the occupied West Bank. At least 13 U.S. military members have been killed.

#### US pauses sanctions on Iranian oil

Brent crude oil, the international standard, has soared during the fighting and was around \$106 per barrel, up from roughly \$70 before the war.

The newly announced U.S. pause in sanctions applies to Iranian oil loaded on ships as of Friday and is set to end April 19.

The new move does not increase the flow of production, a central factor in the surging prices. Iran has managed to evade U.S. sanctions for years, suggesting that much of what it exports already reaches buyers.

Looking for ways to boost global oil supplies during the Iran war, the Trump administration has previously paused sanctions on certain Russian oil shipments for 30 days, which critics said rewarded Moscow while having only a modest effect on markets.

## **BTS returns with comeback concert in Seoul after 4-year hiatus**

By JUWON PARK, KIM TONG-HYUNG and HYUNG-JIN KIM ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — After a four-year break, K-pop supergroup BTS returns Saturday with a massive, free comeback concert in Seoul, where thousands of police are locking down a central boulevard for the Netflix-exclusive spectacle expected to draw tens of thousands of fans.

The performance at Gwanghwamun Square launches a global tour spanning dozens of shows across the United States, Europe and Asia, which analysts say could generate hundreds of millions of dollars in

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revenue per quarter.

All seven members of the band — RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V and Jung Kook — recently completed South Korea's mandatory military service, and hope to reclaim their status as one of the world's biggest pop acts.

The hourlong concert comes after the group on Friday released its fifth album, "ARIRANG," which sold nearly 4 million copies in its first day, said the band's management company, HYBE.

HYBE said RM injured his ankle during a rehearsal Thursday but will perform with some limitations.

Officials expect the BTS concert, which starts at 8 p.m. (1100 GMT), to draw more than 200,000 people to the Gwanghwamun area, including 22,000 fans who secured free seats in the designated viewing zone and others planning to watch on screens nearby. It will be streamed live on Netflix.

"It will be amazing because it's been so long that BTS (was) not with us," said Dallila Di Tullio, a 32-year old fan from Italy, who called the concert a once-in-a-century event. Marta Corona, a 25-year-old Polish fan, said she would be seeing BTS in person for the first time since a 2019 performance in London. "It's been a while — I'm very excited," she said.

BTS debuted in 2013 and has a legion of global supporters who call themselves the "Army." It became the first K-pop act to top Billboard's Hot 100 chart in 2020 with their first all-English song "Dynamite."

Jung Dukhyun, a pop culture commentator, said that the impact of the BTS returning as a full-group after years of pause would be tremendous at a time when global fandom for K-pop has grown much stronger, as shown by the success of Netflix's animated sensation, "KPop Demon Hunters."

#### Criticism over stringent crowd controls

Police and city officials are imposing stringent crowd-control measures, closing nearby streets, roads and museums, halting the area's subway and bus services, and sealing off dozens of surrounding buildings, in what amounts to a full-day shutdown of the district.

Cars will be barred from the main road between Gwanghwamun and Seoul City Hall for more than 30 hours through Sunday morning. The government has stepped up anti-terror monitoring, citing global tensions and large crowds of international fans, while police deployed surveillance vehicles and jamming equipment to block unauthorized drones. The restrictions have forced nearby shops to close and deliveries to pause.

Fans and curious onlookers streamed into streets around the square Saturday as thousands of police officers maintained a tight perimeter around the performance venue, channeling the crowds with a maze of fences and buses. Though the gates were not set to open until the afternoon, concertgoers began queuing by midday to secure spots along nearby roads, passing through metal detectors at designated entry points.

"I was hoping to do a little research, if we can go through some holes or be around. Apparently we cannot because they will be asking people to move or not be close," said Bernice Sanchez, a 52-year-old fan from Switzerland who was looking for a place to stay before the evening's concert.

While South Korean officials have taken crowd safety more seriously since a deadly 2022 Halloween surge that killed nearly 160 people, critics say the controls are excessive and undercut the symbolism of performing in Gwanghwamun, seen as Seoul's spiritual heart and most prominent gathering space.

Hundreds of thousands have gathered in Gwanghwamun in recent years to mourn, protest and celebrate as the country weathered tragedy and political upheaval. The BTS concert comes about a year after waves of demonstrators filled the area, calling for the ouster of then-President Yoon Suk Yeol over his brief imposition of martial law in December 2024. Those monthslong rallies were marked by a festive atmosphere and a striking blend of politics and pop culture, with protesters singing and waving colorful K-pop light sticks, and ended without major safety accidents.

#### Drawing on culture and heritage

The new BTS album, "ARIRANG," draws on a centuries-old folk song regarded as an unofficial anthem in both North and South Korea while Gwanghwamun and nearby Gyeongbok Palace form a sweeping historic backdrop to Saturday's show.

South Korean officials are counting on the event to promote the country's culture and growing soft power. In a statement Wednesday, President Lee Jae Myung said the BTS performance would provide "a special

moment that people around the world will remember for long.”

“While one pillar of the album is defined by BTS’ identity, the other is shaped by the emotions they feel in the present, specifically universal sentiments such as joy, pleasure, and profound love,” HYBE said in response to questions from The Associated Press.

The 14-track record, with lead single “SWIM,” was recorded in Los Angeles as the group reconvened after years apart.

Group’s comeback coincides with K-pop’s global rise

The group’s comeback follows a nearly four-year hiatus driven by South Korea’s mandatory military service, which requires most able-bodied men to serve 18 to 21 months under a conscription system aimed at deterring aggression from North Korea. BTS members began serving in 2022, with Suga the last to complete his service in June 2025.

Despite their yearslong break, experts say BTS’s outlook remains strong, backed by its massive fandom and the continuous global rise of K-pop. South Korea’s SK Securities said Wednesday the group’s “ARIRANG” world tour is likely to become the biggest K-pop tour ever by scale and revenue, with 82 shows planned globally in stadiums of around 50,000 seats.

“They had a fairly long hiatus but still have a historically powerful fandom. As they come back, they’ll likely immediately enjoy a warm welcome and intense fever around the world,” said Ha Jae-keun, a cultural critic. “I think they’ll likely have a second heyday.”

## **Hawaii suffers its worst flooding in 20 years and forecasters warn more rain is coming**

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Hawaii suffered its worst flooding in more than 20 years as heavy rains fell on soil already saturated by downpours from a winter storm a week ago, officials said Friday while warning that still more rain was expected during the weekend.

Muddy floodwaters smothered vast stretches of Oahu’s North Shore, a community world-renowned for its big-wave surfing. Raging waters lifted homes and cars and prompted evacuation orders for 5,500 people north of Honolulu. Authorities cautioned that a 120-year-old dam could fail.

Gov. Josh Green said the cost of the storm could top \$1 billion, including damage to airports, schools, roads, people’s homes and a Maui hospital in Kula.

“This is going to have a very serious consequence for us as a state,” Green said at a news conference.

Most of the state was under a flood watch, with Haleiwa and Waialua in northern Oahu under a flash flood warning, according to the National Weather Service.

Green said his chief of staff spoke to the White House and received assurances the islands would have federal support.

Most serious flooding since 2004

No deaths were reported and no one was unaccounted for. About 10 people were taken to a hospital with hypothermia, he said.

Crews searched by air and by water for people who had been stranded — efforts that were hampered by people flying personal drones to get images of the flooding, said Ian Scheuring, a spokesperson for Honolulu.

The National Guard and Honolulu Fire Department airlifted 72 children and adults who had been attending a spring break youth camp at a retreat on Oahu’s west coast called Our Lady of Kea’au, according to city and camp officials. The camp is on high ground but authorities didn’t want to leave them there, the mayor said.

Green said the flooding was the state’s most serious since 2004 floods in Manoa inundated homes and a University of Hawaii library.

Dozens — if not hundreds — of homes were damaged Friday but officials haven’t been able to fully assess the destruction, Honolulu Mayor Rick Blangiardi said. Some 5,500 people were under evacuation orders.

"There's no question that the damage done thus far has been catastrophic," he said.

Officials blamed some of the devastation on the sheer amount of rain that fell in a short amount of time on saturated land. Parts of Oahu received 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30 cm) of rain overnight. Kaala, the island's highest peak, got nearly 16 inches (40 cm) in the past day, the National Weather Service said.

More rain was expected: Blangiardi said 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 cm) of rain was forecast to fall on Oahu in the next two to three days.

Winter storm systems known as "Kona lows," which feature southerly or southwesterly winds that bring in moisture-laden air, were responsible for the deluges in the past two weeks. The intensity and frequency of heavy rains in Hawaii have increased amid human-caused global warming, experts say.

Eyes on an aging dam

Officials have been closely watching the Wahiawa dam, which has been vulnerable for decades, saying it was "at risk of imminent failure."

Water levels in the dam receded by late Friday but that could change if more rain falls. Overnight into Friday, the dam went from 79 feet to 84 feet (24 to 25.6 meters) — just 6 feet (1.8 meters) shy of what it can handle, authorities said.

As she prepared to evacuate to a friend's home on higher ground, Waialua resident Kathleen Pahinui told The Associated Press in a phone interview that the aging dam is a concern every time it rains.

"Just pray for us," she said. "We understand there's more rain coming."

The state has said Wahiawa dam has "high hazard potential," and that a failure "will result in probable loss of human life."

The earthen dam was built in 1906 to increase sugar production for the Waialua Agricultural Company, which eventually became a subsidiary of Dole Food Company. It was reconstructed following a collapse in 1921.

The state has sent Dole four notices of deficiency about the dam since 2009 and five years ago fined the company \$20,000 for failing to address safety deficiencies on time, according to records.

Afterward, Dole proposed to donate the dam, reservoir and ditch system to the state in exchange for the state's agreement to repair the spillway to meet and maintain dam safety standards.

The state passed legislation in 2023 authorizing the dam's acquisition. It also provided \$5 million to buy the spillway and \$21 million to repair and expand it to comply with dam safety requirements. But the transfer has not been completed. A state board is due to vote on the acquisition next week.

"The dam continues to operate as designed with no indications of damage," Dole said in an emailed statement.

The state regulates 132 dams across Hawaii, most of them built as part of irrigation systems for the sugar cane industry, according to a 2019 infrastructure report by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

## Russia thwarts protests over the blocking of a popular messaging app, but frustration persists

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

In one Russian city, officials blocked a rally due to a "tree inspection." Elsewhere, they blamed snow removal problems or still-existing COVID-19 restrictions. And in one location, administrators argued that the reason for the protest didn't exist.

Authorities in nearly a dozen Russian regions in recent weeks cited various excuses to prevent demonstrations against internet censorship and the blocking of the popular messaging app Telegram.

In most cases, they succeeded. Mindful of a crackdown on dissent since the 4-year-old invasion of Ukraine, activists decided not to risk holding unauthorized rallies, even if they weren't about the war. Some went to court to challenge government refusals to authorize pickets, while others scaled them back to smaller indoor gatherings.

But the disapproval persists across the political spectrum over moves against Russia's second-most popular messaging app, adding to frustrations over a growing list of various issues that plague the country.

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"Clearly the situation has changed, the laws have become stricter, but the protest hasn't gone anywhere," said Alexander Sustov, a legislator in Russia's far eastern Primorye region where a pro-Telegram rally was blocked last month.

"Discontent remains. And any ban only fuels that discontent," he said.

Online control

Restricting Telegram is Russia's latest move to put the internet under government control. Thousands of websites and platforms are blocked, as are multiple virtual private networks that allow users to circumvent censorship. Widespread cellphone internet shutdowns leave only a handful of government-approved websites available.

Telegram trails only WhatsApp — also severely restricted — in popularity among Russians, and is widely used by government agencies for their official social media presence, as well as by pro-Kremlin commentators and military bloggers with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Authorities encourage users to switch to MAX, a government-backed messaging app that critics say is a state surveillance tool.

Military bloggers criticize the moves against Telegram, arguing it is an indispensable communications tool for Russian troops in Ukraine and for activists running crowdfunding campaigns to help Moscow's forces.

The government initially promised not to restrict Telegram on the battlefield, but a different signal later came from the Kremlin.

At a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin for International Women's Day, a servicewoman called Telegram "an adversarial communications tool" and agreed with him when he said that "the use of communications systems that are not ours, not under our control, poses a danger to personnel" in battle.

Unconfirmed media reports predict the coming weeks will see a complete blocking of the app, which in December 2025 had 93.6 million monthly users in Russia, or 76% of the population, according to monitoring group Mediascope.

Protests stifled from Moscow to Siberia

Blocking Telegram prompted various political forces — including those who support the war or the Kremlin in general — to act.

Widespread dismay and the lack of a black-and-white narrative to justify the restrictions made "people feel like they can afford to protest here," said political analyst Abbas Gallyamov.

Last month, members of Other Russia, an ultranationalist, pro-war group, blocked the entrance to the Moscow office of state media and internet regulator Roskomnadzor with a bicycle cable and displayed a banner saying: "Give us an internet without supervision, (and) Russia without Roskom-disgrace."

In December, the group hung a banner at the agency's St. Petersburg office, saying, "Roskomnadzor, ban this banner."

All were arrested, with the Moscow activists facing criminal charges.

Regional branches of the Communist Party, which generally supports the Kremlin, tried to organize rallies in several places. In Siberia's Altai region, they were turned down after local officials said claims of an internet clampdown were "at odds with reality." In southern Krasnodar, a rally for later in March has been authorized on the outskirts of the city.

In the northern cities of Naryan-Mar and Syktyvkar, Communist Party activists managed to hold pickets, with placards saying, "It is not up to officials to decide what we read," and "The internet is not a prison."

But those were exceptions, with authorities elsewhere refusing to allow rallies or blocking them at the last minute.

Organizers in the Ural Mountains city of Perm secured a permit for a March 15 demonstration, but two hours before its start, activists were told of a "potential emergency situation" at the rally site that made it unsuitable for a gathering.

Some still showed up. Viktor Gilin, 80, unfurled a banner that read, "Vladimir Putin! I demand that you bring back freedom of thought and speech — the internet!" He was swiftly detained and fined.

In the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, 16 people were detained this month at the site of a planned pro-

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Telegram rally. Although authorization for the protest at that square wasn't needed, participants arrived to find the site marked off with tape for a purported "tree inspection," said activist Roman Malozyomov.

Malozyomov and other activists, journalists and some passersby were detained but let go after a few hours. He went straight to the Lenin Square for a one-man picket with a sign proclaiming he wanted to "stay connected," with the Roskomnadzor logo crossed out.

This week, activists in several regions filed for authorization of more rallies on March 29. Some were swiftly rejected.

Protesting other issues — cautiously

Rallies have been rare since anti-war protests were brutally suppressed in 2022, with political prosecutions skyrocketing and laws restricting dissent multiplying.

Smaller demonstrations persisted in spots, including unauthorized ones. Wives of soldiers picketed at the Kremlin and the Defense Ministry in 2024, and over 1,000 people gathered that same year in the Bashkortostan region to protest the jailing of a local activist, resulting in mass arrests.

Farmers in Siberia protested this month over cattle culling they deem unwarranted. In northern Komi, workers at a woodworking plant rallied to demand back pay.

Hundreds joined an authorized rally in October in Vladivostok to protest increased car registration fees, one of the largest gatherings in the Pacific coast city in years.

In Siberia's Tomsk, activist Anton Isakov recently managed to organize an authorized demonstration against the blocking of popular online game platform Roblox and another against animal cruelty.

If authorities allow protests, there are ready participants because of the many issues "that people want to speak out about," he said. His attempts to get a permit for a pro-Telegram rally have been refused so far.

Malozyomov, the Novosibirsk activist, said small, authorized rallies on issues such as high utility costs are often allowed there because "the authorities are trying to give people an opportunity to vent, so that the tension doesn't build up."

Some are trying measures other than rallies.

Konstantin Larionov in Kaluga, southwest of Moscow, and 41 others filed a lawsuit against Roskomnadzor and other government officials last year, arguing that restrictions on Telegram and WhatsApp violate their free speech and privacy rights.

Larionov urged others to join by petitioning the court via email, and the number of plaintiffs swelled to 105. He said it was encouraging to see people "from different parts of the country" willing to take part.

The court sided with the authorities. Larionov appealed and lost but plans to go all the way up to the Supreme Court.

He admits the ability to protest in Russia has shrunk but believes it's important to keep trying.

"We are, maybe, retreating a little bit, but we're not giving up," he said.

Analyst Gallyamov says the Telegram protests are more about signaling popular discontent than "fighting the regime."

But "it is another crack in the foundation" of Putin's rule, he said.

## **A wave of executions is feared in Iran after 3 young men were hanged this week**

By LEE KEATH, JULIA FRANKEL and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A 19-year-old star wrestler and two other young men were hanged in Iran this week, raising alarm among rights groups that a wave of executions may be underway as authorities facing relentless attacks from the U.S. and Israel seek to squelch public dissent.

The three men are the first to be executed from among the tens of thousands who were arrested during a January crackdown on nationwide protests. Rights groups say more than 100 others could face death sentences.

The wrestler, Saleh Mohammadi, was hanged early Thursday morning — along with Mehdi Qasemi and Saeed Davoudi — in Qom, just south of the capital, Tehran, according to state media. They had been

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sentenced on charges of "moharabeh," or "waging war against God," for allegedly killing two police officers during protests in the city.

Amnesty International said the convictions of the three, and of others arrested during the protests, came in "grossly unfair trials" that used confessions extracted by torture.

The executions were "intended to instill fear in society and deter new protests" amid the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, said Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, director of Iran Human Rights, an Oslo-based group that has documented detentions.

Amiry-Moghaddam said he worries many more "executions of protesters and political prisoners may be imminent."

At least 27 arrested during protests face death sentences

Amiry-Moghaddam said his group has documented at least 27 death sentences that have been issued against people arrested during the protests. Another 100 face charges that carry the death penalty, and Iranian state media have aired hundreds of forced confessions to crimes punishable by death, he said.

Nationwide protests that began in late December peaked in the first week of January, prompting the deadliest crackdown by Iranian security forces since the Islamic Republic took power in 1979.

A complete death toll has been hard to gauge because of internet restrictions by authorities. The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists New Agency, which relies on a network of contacts inside Iran, said it confirmed that more than 7,000 were killed and that it was investigating thousands more. It said over 50,000 were arrested in just over six weeks. The government acknowledged more than 3,000 were killed.

At the height of the protests, Iranian authorities signaled that fast trials and executions lay ahead.

At the time, U.S. President Donald Trump suggested military action might be an option to stop the deadly crackdown. But he soon announced that he learned that plans for executions were halted, signaling that a military operation was no longer on the table.

Just a month later, Israel and the U.S. launched an intense airstrike campaign against Iran, pounding military installations and targeting the top political and security leadership of Iran. The security agencies believed to be responsible for the deadly crackdown on protesters are also being targeted.

War has not stopped Iran's crackdown on dissent

Despite the war, Iranian authorities have kept up the crackdown on dissent. Authorities say scores have been detained since the war began on Feb. 28, including some who took part in the January protests.

Because of Iran's internet blackout, there have been scant details about the three men executed Thursday. Amiry-Moghaddam said Davoudi was born on March 20, 2004, meaning he was executed a day before his 22nd birthday. Qasemi's age was not known, he said.

Mohammadi appeared to be a standout in wrestling, a sport that is wildly popular in Iran. In 2024, he won a bronze medal at an international youth freestyle wrestling tournament in the Russian city of Krasnoyarsk.

On his Instagram account, Mohammadi posted photos and videos of his matches and his workouts, along with inspirational "no-pain-no-gain" messages. In his last post in late December, he posted a video of himself in the gym and wrote: "We endured beyond our imagination. Back again #bodybuilding #training #wrestling."

"He was full of energy," said Shiva Amelirad, an Iranian teacher living in Toronto who spoke with Mohammadi in 2022 while he was still in high school.

Amelirad said Mohammadi had participated in anti-government protests that erupted earlier that year when Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being detained for not wearing her headscarf properly. Those demonstrations were also met with a heavy crackdown by authorities.

She said Mohammadi told her that workouts and eating ice cream were his only ways "to forget all this catastrophe that we are facing."

"He always tried to show that he was happy," said Amelirad.

Rights groups say theocracy has forced confessions from protesters

Mohammadi, Qasemi and Davoudi were arrested in Qom on Jan. 15, according to multiple human rights groups. The circumstances of their arrests are not known, and it is not clear if they knew each other

beforehand.

They were charged in the killing of a police officer on Jan. 8 and convicted in early February, according to Amnesty and Iran Human Rights.

During his detention, Mohammadi was beaten and one of his hands broken, Amnesty said in a Feb. 19 open letter to Iran's judiciary criticizing the prosecution of dozens of arrested protesters. Amnesty said Mohammadi denied the charges and retracted his confessions in court, saying they were extracted under torture.

"Authorities have systematically subjected those arrested in connection to the protests to enforced disappearance, incommunicado detention, torture to extract forced 'confessions,'" Amnesty said in the letter.

Mizan, the Iranian judiciary's official news agency, announced the execution of the three on Thursday, showing video of them sitting in prison uniforms in court. It said they had confessed to killing two police officers with "knives and swords," and showed video of them allegedly reenacting the killings for judicial officials.

Amiry-Moghaddam, of Iran Human Rights, said the Islamic Republic is struggling for its survival "and is well aware that the main threat to its existence comes not from external actors, but from the Iranian people demanding fundamental change."

## **230 people are rescued as flash flooding hits Hawaii and officials warn 120-year-old dam could fail**

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Muddy floodwaters from severe rains inundated streets, pushed homes off their foundations, swallowed vehicles and prompted evacuation orders for thousands of residents in towns north of Honolulu on Friday as officials warned of the possible failure of a 120-year-old dam.

Emergency sirens blared along Oahu's North Shore, where rising waters damaged homes in a community world-renowned for its surfing. Honolulu officials told residents Friday morning to leave the area downstream of Wahiawa dam — long known to be vulnerable — saying it was "at risk of imminent failure."

More than 230 people were rescued as heavy rains pummeled the Hawaiian island of Oahu and triggered the worst flooding the island has in 20 years, inflicting what the governor said could top \$1 billion in damage.

Water levels have been receding at the dam that authorities warned could fail but that could change if more rain falls. In less than 24 hours, water at the dam went from 79 feet to 84 feet — just six feet shy of what it can handle, authorities said.

No deaths reported, but some treated for hypothermia

No deaths were reported and no one was unaccounted for Gov. Josh Green said at a news conference. About 10 people were taken to a hospital with hypothermia, he said.

Crew searched by air and by water for people who had been stranded — efforts that were hampered by people flying personal drones to get images of the flooding, he said.

Dozens — if not hundreds — of homes had been damaged but officials have not been able to fully assess the destruction, Honolulu Mayor Rick Blangiardi said in an afternoon news conference. Some 5,500 people were under evacuation orders.

"There's no question that the damage done thus far has been catastrophic," he said.

Blangiardi said officials felt confident in the stability of the dams on the island, but that it was hard to predict how much rain would come and what it might do.

The National Guard and Honolulu Fire Department airlifted 72 children and adults who had been attending a spring break youth camp at a retreat on Oahu's west coast called Our Lady of Kea'au, according to city and camp officials. The camp is on high ground but authorities didn't want to leave them there, the mayor said.

Kimberly R.Y. Vierra, a spokesperson for St. Francis Healthcare System of Hawai'i, which owns the retreat property in west Oahu, said floodwaters had cut off the entrance road to the camp.

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On Maui, officials issued an evacuation advisory for some Lahaina neighborhoods after nearby retention basins neared capacity. Parts of those neighborhoods were burned by the massive wildfire that destroyed much of Lahaina in 2023.

Keeping a close eye on the dam

Officials have been watching dam levels since a storm last week dumped heavy rain across the state, which led to catastrophic flooding that washed away roads and homes. Two people were seriously injured in that event — one in the neck and another in the head. A similar but weaker storm was forecast to bring more rain through this weekend.

“It’s going to be a very touch-and-go day,” Hawaii Gov. Josh Green said in a social media post.

Most of the state was under a flood watch, with Haleiwa and Waialua in northern Oahu under a flash flood warning, according to the National Weather Service.

One shelter at Waialua High and Intermediate School was evacuated because of flooding, said Ian Scheuring, a spokesperson for Honolulu. There were about 185 people and 50 pets there who needed to be bussed to another evacuation center, but by midday 54 people still remained in the shelter.

Parts of Oahu received 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30 cm) of rain overnight, further saturating the ground after the storm last weekend. Kaala, the island’s highest peak, got nearly 16 inches (40 cm) in the past day, NWS said.

‘Kona lows’ play a role in deluges

Winter storm systems known as “Kona lows,” which feature southerly or southwesterly winds that bring in moisture-laden air, were responsible for the deluges. The intensity and frequency of heavy rains in Hawaii of have increased amid human-caused global warming, experts say.

As she prepared to evacuate to a friend’s home on higher ground, Waialua resident Kathleen Pahinui told The Associated Press in a phone interview that the aging Wahiawa dam is a concern every time it rains.

“Just pray for us,” she said. “We understand there’s more rain coming.”

The state has said the dam has “high hazard potential,” and that a failure “will result in probable loss of human life.”

Dam dates back to 1906

The earthen dam was built in 1906 to increase sugar production for the Waialua Agricultural Company, which eventually became a subsidiary of Dole Food Company. It was reconstructed following a collapse in 1921.

The state has sent Dole four notices of deficiency about the dam since 2009 and five years ago fined the company \$20,000 for failing to address safety deficiencies on time, according to records.

Afterward, Dole proposed to donate the dam, reservoir and ditch system to the state in exchange for the state’s agreement to repair the spillway to meet and maintain dam safety standards.

The state passed legislation in 2023 authorizing the dam’s acquisition. It also provided \$5 million to buy the spillway and \$21 million to repair and expand it to comply with dam safety requirements. But the transfer has not been completed. A state board is due to vote on the acquisition next week.

“The dam continues to operate as designed with no indications of damage,” Dole said in an emailed statement.

The state regulates 132 dams across Hawaii, most of them built as part of irrigation systems for the sugar cane industry, according to a 2019 infrastructure report by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

## Israel strikes Hezbollah’s civilian as well as military wings in an attempt to crush the group

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — An Israeli strike on a health center in southern Lebanon instantly killed 12 medical workers, seriously wounded one and left four missing under the rubble for hours.

The March 13 strike in the village of Burj Qalaouiyah, one of the single deadliest strikes in Lebanon since

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the latest Israel-Hezbollah war began on March 2, targeted a center run by Hezbollah's health arm, the Islamic Health Society, which has so far lost 24 members over the past two weeks.

Since the latest war began, Israel's military has not only been targeting the group's military assets but also its civilian institutions in an apparent attempt to weaken the Iran-backed group further and try to push its supporters away from it.

Hezbollah is a political party as well as an armed group, and its health and social service institutions have helped strengthen its base of support over the years.

In addition to health centers, Israel has destroyed more than a dozen branches of Hezbollah's financial arm, al-Qard al-Hasan. Other strikes heavily damaged Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV headquarters and its Al-Nour radio stations.

The strikes also have targeted the group's Amana gas stations and discount shops known as Sajjad, where low-income people can buy highly subsidized products.

On Wednesday, an Israeli airstrike on an apartment in central Beirut killed Mohammed Sherri, the head of political programs at Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV, along with his wife.

Israel has accused Hezbollah of using health facilities for military purposes and has said al-Qard al-Hasan — officially a charitable organization that provides interest-free loans — finances the group's military activities. Lebanon's Health Ministry denies the Israeli claims about Hezbollah's health facilities being used for military purposes.

"This is a different war that will not end with a ceasefire," said Hilal Khashan, a political scientist at American University of Beirut. "This war will not end before Israel achieves its full objective - that is, the elimination of Hezbollah not only as a military movement, but also the ultimate objective is to erase Hezbollah from the Lebanese political picture."

Hezbollah is under internal and external pressure to disarm and knows this latest fight is crucial. Intense clashes along Lebanon's southern border between Hezbollah fighters and advancing Israeli troops have left dozens of Lebanese gunmen dead.

During a visit to the northern front Monday, Israel's army chief Gen. Eyal Zamir said that Hezbollah is now fighting "a war for its very existence and is paying a heavy price for entering this battle." He added that pressures exerted by Israel's military will only "increase more and more."

Hezbollah vows to keep fighting

"This is an existential battle. It is not a limited or simple battle," Hezbollah leader Naim Kassem said in a televised speech over the weekend. Kassem vowed that his group would fight to the end and never surrender.

Israel says that Lebanon has failed to disarm the group in accordance with the Lebanese government's own plans, and that therefore Israel will carry out the mission itself.

Unlike previous conflicts with Israel, the current one comes as the Lebanese government has called Hezbollah's military activities illegal and authorities have detained several members of the group for carrying weapons without a license.

Like previous wars, Hezbollah is being criticized by its opponents in Lebanon who blame the Iran-backed group for triggering this war by firing rockets into Israel. Hezbollah fired the rockets to avenge the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, less than two days after the U.S. and Israel began their attacks on Iran, triggering a war in the Middle East.

Israel retaliated with a campaign of airstrikes on parts of Lebanon that has so far left more than 1,000 people dead and over 1 million displaced from their homes in southern and eastern Lebanon as well as in Beirut's southern suburbs.

"Hezbollah took a suicidal initiative that will not change the equation," said legislator Samy Gemayel, who heads the nationalist Kataeb Party, adding that Tehran is using Lebanon "as a platform to defend Iran."

A previous 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 ended with a draw. A 14-month conflict that started in October 2023 — when Hezbollah fired rockets in support of Palestinians a day after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on southern Israel — killed much of Hezbollah's political and military com-

mand and left the group severely weakened but not destroyed.

Strikes followed by backlash

After airstrikes hit Hezbollah's institutions even in central Beirut, residents protested and forced the group to close a branch of al-Qard al-Hasan in the heart of the capital. Bowing to the pressure, workers removed the financial institution's sign and dismantled ATMs, marking the end of its presence in central Beirut.

Amnesty International has said that the al-Qard al-Hasan branches are not legitimate military targets under international humanitarian law and that the strikes should be investigated as war crimes.

"The Israeli military has appeared to assume that labelling something as Hezbollah-affiliated, be that healthcare workers, homes in border villages, or financial institutions, makes it targetable. That's wrong," said Heba Morayef, regional director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

Mahmoud Karaki of Hezbollah's Islamic Health Society said that during the last war in 2024, his group lost 153 members in Israeli attacks. But he vowed that the group would continue its work as it has done in previous wars.

"By targeting us, they are targeting the safety network for the people and their steadfastness in areas under attack," Karaki said

The Israeli military's Arabic spokesperson alleged that Hezbollah is using ambulances to transport weapons and fighters, a charge that the paramedic group strongly denies.

Hezbollah and Iranian officials have said that any halt in U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran should also include a stop to Israeli attacks in Lebanon.

Senior Hezbollah official Mahmoud Qamati told Lebanon's Al-Jadeed TV on Monday that "Iran will not leave Lebanon nor the resistance, nor will it allow that Lebanon remains vulnerable," adding that "Lebanon will be part of this victory and will not be left alone."

When Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi was asked if Tehran could accept a ceasefire to stop strikes on Iran while they continue in Lebanon, he said: "I don't think so."

"We do not believe in a ceasefire; we believe in ending the war. And ending the war means exactly that — ending the war on all fronts," Araghchi told Al Jazeera English, adding that this includes Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and "other countries of the region."

## **Judge orders Voice of America be put back together again. What are the chances that will happen?**

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In a strongly worded decision this week, a federal judge ordered that the Voice of America — its mission to provide news for countries around the world largely shut down for the past year by the Trump administration — come roaring back to life.

Whether or not that actually happens is anybody's guess.

The government filed notice Thursday to appeal U.S. District Court Judge Royce C. Lamberth's order two days earlier to put hundreds of VOA employees who have been on paid leave the past year back to work. Lamberth had ruled on March 7 that Kari Lake, who was President Donald Trump's choice to oversee the bureaucratic parent U.S. Agency for Global Media, didn't have the authority to reduce VOA to a skeleton.

The Voice of America was established as a news source in World War II, beaming reports to many countries that had no tradition of a free press. Before Trump took office again last year, Voice of America was operating in 49 different languages, heard by an estimated 362 million people.

Trump's team contended that government-run news sources, which also include Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, were an example of bloated government and that they wanted news reporting more favorable to the current administration. With a greatly reduced staff, it currently operates in Iran, Afghanistan, China, North Korea and in countries with a large population of Kurds.

Lamberth, in his decision, said Lake had "repeatedly thumbed her nose" at laws mandating VOA's operation.

Time to turn the page at VOA?

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VOA director Michael Abramowitz said legislators in both parties understand the need for a strong operation and have set aside enough funding for the job to be done. "It is time for all parties to come together and work to rebuild and strengthen the agency," he said.

Don't expect that to happen soon. "President Trump was elected to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse across the administration, including the Voice of America — and efforts to improve efficiency at USAGM have been a tremendous success," said White House spokeswoman Anna Kelly. "This will not be the final say on the matter."

Patsy Widakuswara, VOA's White House bureau chief and a plaintiff in the lawsuit to bring it back, said that "restoring the physical infrastructure is going to take a lot of money and some time but it can be done. What is more difficult is recovering from the trauma that our newsroom has gone through."

It's an open question whether the administration wants a real news organization or a mouthpiece, said David Ensor, a former Voice of America director between 2010 and 2014. "We don't know — maybe no one does at the moment — what the future holds," he said.

The administration's efforts over the past year to bolster friendly outlets and fight coverage that displeases them offer a clue, even though Congress has required that Voice of America be an objective and unbiased news source. This week it was announced that Christopher Wallace, an executive at the conservative network Newsmax who had previously spent 15 years at Fox News Channel, will be the new deputy director at VOA. Abramowitz didn't know he was getting a new deputy until it was announced.

Widakuswara wouldn't comment on what Wallace's appointment might mean. "I'm not going to pass judgment before seeing his work," she said.

While Lamberth ordered more than a thousand employees on leave to go back to work, it's not clear how many of them moved on to other jobs or retired in the past year. The judge also said he did not have the authority to bring back hundreds of independent contractors who were terminated.

One employee who left is Steve Herman, a former White House bureau chief and national correspondent at VOA and now executive director of the Jordan Center for Journalism Advocacy and Innovation at the University of Mississippi. Despite the court decisions, he questions whether the Trump administration would oversee a return to what the organization used to be.

"I'm a bit of a pessimist," Herman said. "I think it's going to be very difficult."

An administration loath to admit defeat

Besides fighting to shut it down, Trump is loath to admit defeat. Last week, the White House nominated Sarah Rogers, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, to run the U.S. Agency for Global Media, putting it more firmly within the administration's control. Her nomination requires Senate approval.

"Is Marco Rubio's State Department going to allow objective journalism in 49 languages?" Herman asked. "I don't think so. I would want that to happen, but that's a fairy tale."

In the budget bill passed in February, Congress set aside \$200 million for Voice of America's operation. While that represents about a 25% cut in the agency's previous appropriation, it sent a bipartisan message of support, said Kate Neeper, VOA's director of strategy and performance evaluation. Besides being a plaintiff with Widakuswara in the lawsuit to restore the agency, she has helped some of her colleagues deal with some of their own problems over the past year, including immigration issues.

"There is a lot of enthusiasm for going back to work," she said. "People are eager to show up on Monday."

The hunger for information from Voice of America in Iran when he was director was a clear example of what the organization meant, Ensor said. Surveys showed that between a quarter and a third of Iran's households tuned in to VOA once a week, primarily on satellite television. Occasionally the government would crack down and confiscate satellite dishes, but Iranians could usually quickly find replacements, he said.

"I believe in Voice of America as a news organization and as a voice of America," Ensor said. "It was important, and it can be again."

## DEA names Colombian president 'priority target' as US prosecutors probe ties to drug traffickers

By JIM MUSTIAN, JOSHUA GOODMAN and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Colombian President Gustavo Petro has been designated a "priority target" by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration as federal prosecutors in New York probe his alleged ties to drug traffickers, according to people familiar with the matter and records seen by The Associated Press.

DEA records show Petro has surfaced in multiple investigations dating to 2022, many based on interviews with confidential informants. The alleged crimes the DEA has investigated include his possible dealings with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel and a scheme to leverage his "total peace" plan to benefit prominent traffickers who contributed to his presidential campaign. The records also suggest the use of law enforcement to smuggle cocaine and fentanyl through Colombian ports.

The "priority target" label is reserved for suspects DEA deems to have a "significant impact" on the drug trade. It's unclear when the DEA gave Petro that designation.

Petro denied all ties to drug traffickers and maintained he never accepted their funds during his campaign. Writing on X Friday, he argued that U.S. legal proceedings would ultimately dismantle accusations from the Colombian far right, a group he claims is actually the one involved with traffickers.

Colombia's Embassy in Washington downplayed what it called "unverified" and anonymous reports of preliminary law enforcement investigations against Petro.

"The reported insinuations have no legal or factual basis," the embassy said in a statement.

The inquiry

In recent months, prosecutors in Brooklyn and Manhattan have been questioning drug traffickers about their ties to Petro and specifically about allegations the Colombian president's representatives solicited bribes to block their extradition to the United States, according to one of the people who weren't authorized to discuss the ongoing inquiry and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The person said it wasn't clear whether federal prosecutors have implicated Petro in any crime.

The investigation is focusing at least in part on allegations that representatives of Petro solicited bribes from drug traffickers at the Colombian jail La Picota in exchange for a promise that they not be extradited to the U.S., one of the people said.

Petro has consistently denied allegations of drug trafficking, particularly after Trump labeled him an "illegal drug leader" and the Treasury Department sanctioned him in late 2025 for alleged ties to the trade without offering evidence.

U.S. federal prosecutors declined to comment. The DEA did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The federal inquiry was reported earlier Friday by The New York Times.

The inquiries into Petro are in the early stages, and it is not clear whether they will result in charges, according to another person familiar with the matter, adding the White House has had no role in the investigations.

The DEA records reviewed by the AP are based in part on tips from confidential sources that point to Petro's possible involvement with a range of criminal groups that have dominated the South American drug trade for years. Those include Mexico's Sinaloa cartel as well as the Cartel de los soles, or Cartel of the Suns, a term used to describe a loose network of corrupt, high-ranking military officers in neighboring Venezuela.

The records also cite a 2024 interview with an unnamed source who claimed Petro is utilizing former campaign aides and officials from state-run oil company Ecopetrol to launder presidential funds into foreign countries for Petro's use upon completion of his presidency.

Ecopetrol President Ricardo Roa vehemently denied the allegations in a statement to AP, saying they "lacked all reality or logic."

Family members under scrutiny

Petro, a former rebel leader, soared into office promising to reduce the country's dependence on fossil

fuels and reallocate state resources to addressing entrenched poverty.

A leftist politician known for winding sometimes incoherent speeches, he has regularly criticized the Trump administration over its support for Israel, bombing of drug boats in the Caribbean and likened the White House migration crackdown to "Nazi" tactics.

After one such outburst, at a pro-Palestinian demonstration outside the United Nations headquarters in New York, Trump retaliated by revoking Petro's U.S. visa. He also briefly slapped high tariffs on Colombia over Petro's refusal to accept deportation flights from the United States.

But more recently the two have shown signs of getting along. After a meeting at the White House in February, Trump described Petro as "terrific."

Colombian authorities have for years been investigating members of Petro's family for possible criminal acts.

His son, Nicolás Petro, was charged in 2023 with soliciting illegal campaign contributions from a convicted drug trafficker to fund a lavish lifestyle of expensive cars and homes. The younger Petro has pleaded not guilty and his father has said none of the money was used to fund his campaign.

The president's brother, Juan Fernando Petro, has also been implicated in secret negotiations that allegedly took place with imprisoned drug traffickers to shield them from extradition to the U.S. in exchange for their disarmament.

Politics and cocaine

Politics in Colombia have long been tainted by cocaine, of which it is the world's largest supplier. In the 1980s, drug lord Pablo Escobar was elected to the country's Congress with the support of one of Colombia's most traditional parties. A decade later, his rivals from the Cali cartel flooded the presidential campaign of Ernesto Samper with illegal donations.

The now defunct urban guerrilla group Petro belonged to, the 19th of April Movement, has long been suspected of taking money from Escobar's Medellín cartels as part of its deadly siege of the Supreme Court in 1985. Petro did not participate in the attack, which left several guerrillas and around half the high court's magistrates dead. Leaders of the group have always denied any links to the cartel.

## Police video of Justin Timberlake's 2024 drunken driving arrest released

By PHILIP MARCELO and MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Justin Timberlake struggled to perform field sobriety tests requiring him to walk a straight line and stand on one leg after he was pulled over in New York's Hamptons in 2024 by police officers who suspected him of driving drunk, according to video footage released Friday.

The pop star tells officers at one point, "these are like really hard tests."

The footage, which runs roughly eight hours, includes Timberlake's initial stop after Sag Harbor police said he ran a stop sign in the village center, veered out of his lane and got out of his BMW smelling of alcohol that June.

The NSYNC singer-turned-solo artist and actor tells officers he had consumed one martini and had been following friends home in the former whaling village, which is among the affluent beach towns of the Hamptons, about 100 miles (160 kilometers) east of New York City.

When an officer asks why he is in town, Timberlake says, "I'm on a world tour."

"Doing what?" the officer asks.

"Hard to explain," Timberlake says.

After stammering a bit, he says "World tour. I'm Justin Timberlake."

The officer eventually responds: "You are Justin Timberlake? Do you have a license with you?"

Timberlake, who ultimately pleaded guilty to a lesser charge, is asked by officers to walk heel-to-toe in a straight line on the road and lift one leg. At times he seems flustered listening to the instructions. He apologizes to officers and tells them his heart is racing.

"I'm a little nervous," Timberlake says at one point.

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In the back seat of the police car, he asks: "Why are you arresting me?"

Back at the police station, Timberlake is informed he will be held overnight, to which he says, "I'm going to be here all night? You guys are wild, man."

He asks the officer to keep the light on in the cell as they lock the door.

The release by Sag Harbor Police comes after the village and Timberlake's lawyers agreed to disclose a redacted version of the footage. The Associated Press was among several media outlets that filed a records request seeking the release of the video.

Timberlake's lawyers had sued to block the release of the video, arguing it would "devastate" Timberlake's privacy by revealing "intimate, highly personal, and sensitive details." They also said it would cause "severe and irreparable harm" to his reputation by subjecting him to "public ridicule and harassment."

But in a joint filing with the village Friday, Timberlake's lawyers acknowledged the video "does not constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy under" the state's public information law and agreed to its release.

Timberlake's lawyers and representatives didn't immediately respond to emails seeking comment Friday.

Sag Harbor officials, in a statement provided by the village's lawyer, Vincent Toomey, said they are pleased the matter was resolved and they were able to comply with state public records law.

"From the beginning of this matter, after Mr. Timberlake's arrest, the Village has attempted to comply with the mandates of the Freedom of Information Law," the statement reads. "As would be true in any case involving records or video footage from our Police Department, such material is reviewed and redacted to address public and officer safety concerns as well as personal privacy considerations."

Timberlake pleaded guilty to impaired driving in September 2024.

The Tennessee native agreed to give a public safety announcement against the perils of drunken driving as part of the plea deal that knocked down his initial misdemeanor charge to a noncriminal traffic violation.

He was also sentenced to a \$500 fine, 25 hours of community service and a 90-day suspension of his license.

## Iran threatens tourism sites and US sends more Marines to Middle East as Trump hints at wind-down

By JON GAMBRELL, MICHELLE L. PRICE and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Three weeks into an escalating war in the Middle East, Iran threatened to expand its retaliatory attacks to include recreational and tourist sites worldwide, as the U.S. announced it was sending more warships and Marines to the region.

Following news of the deployments, President Donald Trump said later Friday on social media that his administration in fact was considering "winding down" military operations in the region. The mixed messages came after another climb in oil prices plunged the U.S. stock market, and was followed by a Trump administration announcement that it will lift sanctions on Iranian oil loaded on ships, a move aimed at wrangling soaring fuel prices.

The war, meanwhile, has shown no signs of abating.

Israel said Iran continued to fire missiles at it early Saturday, while Saudi Arabia said it downed 20 drones in just a couple of hours in the country's eastern region, which is home to major oil installations. The defense ministry said there were no injuries or damage.

The attacks came a day after Israeli airstrikes hit in Tehran as Iranians celebrated the Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, a normally festive holiday.

Iran has escalated attacks on its Gulf neighbors since Israel bombed its massive South Pars offshore natural gas field, while keeping a stranglehold on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway through which a fifth of the world's oil and other critical goods are transported.

With little information coming out of Iran, it was not clear how much damage its arms, nuclear or energy facilities have sustained in the punishing U.S. and Israeli strikes, which began Feb. 28 — or even who was truly in charge of the country. But Iran's attacks are still choking off oil supplies and raising food and fuel

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prices far beyond the Middle East.

Trump says US near completion of its goals

The U.S. and Israel have offered shifting rationales for the war, from hoping to foment an uprising that topples Iran's leadership to eliminating its nuclear and missile programs. There have been no public signs of any such uprising and no end to the war in sight.

In his social media post, the president said, "We are getting very close to meeting our objectives as we consider winding down our great Military efforts in the Middle East."

That seemed at odds with his administration's move to bolster its firepower in the region and request another \$200 billion from Congress to fund the war.

The U.S. is deploying three more amphibious assault ships and roughly 2,500 additional Marines to the Middle East, an official told The Associated Press. Two other U.S. officials confirmed that ships were deploying, without saying where they were headed. All three spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military operations.

Days earlier the U.S. redirected another group of amphibious assault ships carrying another 2,500 Marines from the Pacific to the Middle East. The Marines will join more than 50,000 U.S. troops already in the region.

Trump has said he has no plans to send ground forces into Iran but also has asserted that he retains all options.

Gen. Ali Mohammad Naeini, a spokesperson for Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, was quoted by a state-run newspaper Friday as saying Iran continues to manufacture missiles despite Israel's claim that it destroyed Iran's production capabilities. Iranian state television later said Naeini was killed in an airstrike.

Iran threatens attacks beyond the Middle East

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei praised Iranians' steadfastness in the face of war in a written statement read on Iranian television to mark Nowruz. He said the U.S. and Israeli attacks were based on an illusion that killing Iran's top leaders could cause the overthrow of the government.

Khamenei has not been seen in public since he became supreme leader following Israeli strikes that killed his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and reportedly wounded him. Airstrikes have also killed the head of its Supreme National Security Council and a raft of other top-ranking officials.

Iran's top military spokesperson, Gen. Abolfazl Shekarchi, warned that "parks, recreational areas and tourist destinations" worldwide will not be safe for the country's enemies. The threat renewed concerns that Tehran may revert to using militant attacks beyond the Middle East as a pressure tactic.

It remains to be seen if lifting sanctions on Iranian oil will drop prices

Brent crude oil, the international standard, has soared during the fighting and was around \$108 per barrel, up from roughly \$70 before the war.

The newly announced U.S. pause in sanctions applies to Iranian oil loaded on ships as of Friday and is set to end April 19. The license has limits including a restriction on sales involving anyone in North Korea or Cuba.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent previously suggested it as a way to prevent China from being the sole beneficiary of Iranian oil.

The new move does not increase the flow of production, a central factor in the surging prices. Iran has managed to evade U.S. sanctions for years, suggesting that much of what it exports already reaches buyers.

Looking for ways to boost global oil supplies during the Iran war, the Trump administration has previously paused sanctions on certain Russian oil shipments for 30 days, which critics said rewarded Moscow while having only a modest effect on markets.

Israel continues wave of strikes against Hezbollah militants

The Israeli military said early Saturday that it began a wave of strikes targeting Hezbollah militants in Beirut's southern suburbs.

Smoke was seen rising, fires broke out and loud explosions were heard across parts of central Beirut. Hours earlier the army renewed evacuation warnings for seven neighborhoods, prompting some residents

to fire gunshots to alert families to flee. No injuries were reported.

Israeli strikes targeting Iran-backed Hezbollah militants in Lebanon have displaced more than 1 million people, according to the Lebanese government, which says more than 1,000 people have been killed.

More than 1,300 people have been killed in Iran during the war. In Israel, 15 people have been killed by Iranian missiles and four others have died in the occupied West Bank. At least 13 U.S. military members have been killed.

## Records shattered as summer heat hits Southwest in March; 'This is what climate change looks like'

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The dangerous heat wave shattering March records all over the U.S. Southwest is more than just another extreme weather blip. It's the latest next-level weather wildness that is occurring ever more frequently as Earth's warming builds.

Experts said unprecedented and deadly weather extremes that sometimes strike at abnormal times and in unusual places are putting more people in danger. For example, the Southwest is used to coping with deadly heat, but not months ahead of schedule, including a 112 degrees Fahrenheit (44.4 degrees Celsius) reading in two Arizona communities on Friday that smashed the highest March temperature recorded in the U.S. Two places in Southern California also hit that same temperature. All four spots are clustered within about 50 miles (80.5 kilometers) of each other.

"This is what climate change looks like in real time: extremes pushing beyond the bounds we once thought possible," said University of Victoria climate scientist Andrew Weaver. "What used to be unprecedented events are now recurring features of a warming world."

March's heat would have been virtually impossible without human-caused climate change, according to a report Friday by World Weather Attribution, an international group of scientists who study the causes of extreme weather events.

More than a dozen scientists, meteorologists and disaster experts queried by The Associated Press put the March heat wave in a kind of ultra-extreme classification with such events as the 2021 Pacific Northwest heat wave, the 2022 Pakistan floods and killer hurricanes Helene, Harvey and Sandy.

The area of the U.S. being hit by extreme weather in the past five years has doubled from 20 years ago, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Extremes Index, which includes various types of wild weather, such as heat and cold waves, downpours and drought.

The United States is breaking 77% more hot weather records now than in the 1970s and 19% more than the 2010s, according to an AP analysis of NOAA records. In the United States, the number and average cost of inflation-adjusted billion-dollar weather disasters in the last couple years is twice as high as just 10 years ago and nearly four times higher than 30 years ago, according to records kept by NOAA and Climate Central, a nonprofit group of scientists and communicators who research and report on climate change.

Trying to keep up with extremes and failing

"It's really hard to even keep up with how extreme our extremes are becoming," said Climate Central Chief Meteorologist Bernadette Woods Placky. "It's changing our risk, it's change our relationship with weather, it's putting more people in risky situations and at times we're not used to. So yes, we are pushing extremes to new levels across all different types of weather."

For government officials who have to deal with disaster it's been a huge problem.

Craig Fugate, who directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency until 2017, said he saw extremes increasing.

"We were operating outside the historical playbook more and more. Flood maps, surge models, heat records — events kept showing up outside the envelope we built systems around. That's just what we saw," Fugate said via email.

He added: "We built communities on about 100 years of past weather and assumed that was a good guide going forward. That assumption is starting to break. And the clearest signal isn't the science debate.

It's insurers walking away."

'Virtually impossible' without climate change

Climate scientists at World Weather Attribution did a flash analysis — which is not peer-reviewed yet — of whether climate change was a factor in this Southwest heat wave. They compared this week's expected temperatures to what's been observed in the area in March since 1900 and computer models of a world with climate change. They found that "events as warm as in March 2026 would have been virtually impossible without human-induced climate change."

That warming, from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas, added between 4.7 degrees to 7.2 degrees F (2.6 to 4 degrees C) to the temperatures being felt, the report found.

"What we can very confidently say is that human-caused warming has increased the temperatures that we're seeing as a result of this heat dome, and it's going to be pushing those temperatures from what would have been very uncomfortable into potentially dangerous," said report co-author Clair Barnes, an Imperial College of London attribution scientist.

Examples abound of high heat and extreme weather

The Southwest heat wave is solidly in the category of "giant events," with temperatures up to 30 degrees Fahrenheit (16.7 degrees Celsius) above normal, said Stanford University climate scientist Chris Field.

He listed five others in the last six years: a 2020 Siberia heat wave, the 2021 Pacific Northwest heat wave that had British Columbia warmer than Death Valley, the summer of 2022 in North America, China and Europe, a 2023 western Mediterranean heat wave and a 2023 South Asian heat wave with high humidity.

And that doesn't include the East Antarctica heat wave of 2022 when temperatures were 81 degrees (45 degrees Celsius) warmer than normal. That's the biggest anomaly recorded, said weather historian Chris Burt, author of the book "Extreme Weather."

Worsening wild weather influenced by climate change isn't just superhot days, but includes deadly hurricanes, droughts and downpours, scientists told AP.

Devastating floods hit West Africa in 2022 and again in 2024. Iran is in the midst of a six-year drought. And the deadly Typhoon Haiyan hitting the Philippines in 2013 shocked the world.

Superstorm Sandy, which in 2012 flooded New York City and neighbors, had tropical storm-force winds that covered an area nearly one-fifth the area of the contiguous United States. It spawned 12-foot seas over 1.4 million square miles, about half the size of the U.S., with energy equivalent to five Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs, said Yale Climate Connections meteorologist Jeff Masters.

And don't forget wildfires that are worsened by heat and drought, so recent extremes should include 2025's Palisades and Eaton wildfires, which were the costliest weather disaster in the United States last year, said Climate Central meteorologist and economist Adam Smith.

"This is due to climate change, that we see more extreme events, and more intense ones and have so many records being broken," said Friederike Otto, an Imperial College of London climate scientist who coordinates World Weather Attribution.

## Tons of aid flows into Cuba as humanitarian convoy arrives on the struggling island

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Some 650 delegates from 33 countries and 120 organizations began arriving in Cuba on Friday as part of a solidarity caravan transporting some 20 tons of humanitarian aid as the island grapples with a severe energy crisis.

Members of "Our America Convoy to Cuba" arrived by air from Italy, France, Spain, the United States and several Latin American countries, and more are scheduled to arrive by sea on Saturday in a flotilla of three vessels from Mexico, organizers reported.

A group of activists arrived in Havana on Wednesday in advance and delivered donations to hospitals.

The visit comes amid heightened tensions between Cuba and the United States, whose governments have acknowledged holding talks after U.S. President Donald Trump imposed an oil embargo. Earlier this

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week, Trump said he expected to have the "honor" of "taking Cuba in some form," adding: "I can do anything I want."

Solar panels, food and medicine to treat cancer are among the products donated to the island, which has been brought to a near standstill since Trump imposed an energy embargo in January, exacerbating a five-year economic crisis as his administration pressures for a change in the political system.

"In the end, we are dozens and dozens of delegates, and we represent millions of people in this convoy," said David Adler, a U.S. citizen and coordinator of Progressive International, one of the caravan's organizers. "We cannot allow this collective punishment. We cannot normalize it."

Meanwhile, Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Fernández de Cossío on Friday refuted comments about a change in the political system or the potential departure of Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel as part of the ongoing talks between the two sides.

"The Cuban political system is not up for negotiation, nor is the president, nor the position of any official in Cuba, subject to negotiation with the United States or with the government of any other country," said Fernández de Cossío.

He noted there are many areas of common interest on which dialogue with Washington is possible, as has been done in the past.

Manolo de los Santos, of The People's Forum — another of the caravan's organizers — said that going to Cuba at this time is not only "defying the U.S. blockade," but also preventing "another Gaza in the Americas."

Several analysts and regional leaders, including Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, have warned of a possible humanitarian crisis in Cuba.

Adler said that both the flotilla that traveled to Gaza and the one heading to Cuba share several supporters. In the case of Cuba, in addition to social activists, unions, prominent figures and political parties are represented, including Morena from Mexico, the Workers' Party of Brazil and the Broad Front of Uruguay.

Some of the figures include British Parliamentarian Jeremy Corbyn; Colombian Senator Clara López; former Spanish politician Pablo Iglesias; U.S. labor leader Chris Smalls; and Brazilian humanitarian activist Thiago Ávila.

After several weeks in which the only aid received by Cuba came from Mexico, which sent food and hygiene products on three occasions, activists and leaders in other countries began establishing support groups and collecting donations.

Díaz-Canel expressed his gratitude on social media.

"They bring shipments of aid to combat the attempt to suffocate us. Welcome once again to the compassion of the people. Solidarity always returns to those who practice it with no other interest than human well-being," the president stated.

For its part, Brazil announced it would send 20,000 tons of food, primarily rice, beans and powdered milk. A group of Chilean parliamentarians also arrived with aid on Thursday, and China reported through its embassy that a ship carrying 60,000 tons of rice set sail for Cuba.

## Judge sides with New York Times in challenge to policy limiting reporters' access to Pentagon

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge agreed Friday to block the Trump administration from enforcing a policy limiting news reporters' access to the Pentagon, agreeing with The New York Times that key portions of the new rules are unlawful.

U.S. District Judge Paul Friedman in Washington, D.C., sided with the newspaper and ruled that the Pentagon policy illegally restricts the press credentials of reporters who walked out of the building rather than agree to the new rules.

The Times sued the Pentagon and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in December, claiming the credentialing policy violates the journalists' constitutional rights to free speech and due process.

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The current Pentagon press corps is comprised mostly of conservative outlets that agreed to the policy. Reporters from outlets that refused to consent to the new rules, including from The Associated Press, have continued reporting on the military.

The Defense Department has been letting some of the legacy media reporters that didn't agree to the restrictions back in the Pentagon for some of Hegseth's Iran war briefings. Hegseth rarely calls on them, although he did recently take questions from reporters like Eric Schmitt of The Times and Luis Martinez of ABC.

Friedman, who was nominated to the bench by Democratic President Bill Clinton, said the policy "fails to provide fair notice of what routine, lawful journalistic practices will result in the denial, suspension, or revocation" of Pentagon press credentials. He ruled that it violates the First and Fifth amendment rights to free speech and due process.

"Those who drafted the First Amendment believed that the nation's security requires a free press and an informed people and that such security is endangered by governmental suppression of political speech. That principle has preserved the nation's security for almost 250 years. It must not be abandoned now," the judge wrote.

Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell posted late Friday on X, "We disagree with the decision and are pursuing an immediate appeal."

Times lauds ruling as boon for press freedom

New York Times spokesperson Charlie Stadtlander said the newspaper believes the ruling "enforces the constitutionally protected rights for the free press in this country."

"Americans deserve visibility into how their government is being run, and the actions the military is taking in their name and with their tax dollars," Stadtlander said in a statement. "Today's ruling reaffirms the right of The Times and other independent media to continue to ask questions on the public's behalf."

Theodore Boutros, an attorney who represented The Times at a hearing earlier this month, said in a statement that the court ruling is "a powerful rejection of the Pentagon's effort to impede freedom of the press and the reporting of vital information to the American people during a time of war."

The judge ordered the Pentagon to reinstate the press credentials of seven Times journalists. He also said his decision to vacate the challenged policy terms applies to "all regulated parties."

Noting that part of the ruling, the Pentagon Press Association — which includes AP reporters — called for the immediate reinstatement of the credentials of all its members.

The PPA released a statement saying: "This is a great day for freedom of the press in the United States. It is also hopefully a learning opportunity for Pentagon leadership, which took extreme steps to limit press access to information in wartime."

The Defense Department has argued that the policy imposes "common sense" rules that protect the military from the disclosure of national security information.

"The goal of that process is to prevent those who pose a security risk from having broad access to American military headquarters," government attorneys wrote.

Times attorneys claim the policy is designed to silence unfavorable press coverage of President Donald Trump's administration.

"The First Amendment flatly prohibits the government from granting itself the unbridled power to restrict speech because the mere existence of such arbitrary authority can lead to self-censorship," they wrote.

Judge finds Pentagon tried to weed out 'disfavored' journalists

The judge said he recognizes that "national security must be protected, the security of our troops must be protected, and war plans must be protected."

"But especially in light of the country's recent incursion into Venezuela and its ongoing war with Iran, it is more important than ever that the public have access to information from a variety of perspectives about what its government is doing — so that the public can support government policies, if it wants to support them; protest, if it wants to protest; and decide based on full, complete, and open information who they are going to vote for in the next election," Friedman wrote.

Friedman said the “undisputed evidence” shows that the policy is designed to weed out “disfavored journalists” and replace them with those who are “on board and willing to serve” the government, a clear instance of illegal viewpoint discrimination.

“In sum, the Policy on its face makes any newsgathering and reporting not blessed by the Department a potential basis for the denial, suspension, or revocation of a journalist’s (credentials),” he wrote. “It provides no way for journalists to know how they may do their jobs without losing their credentials.”

Pentagon must update judge in a week

The Pentagon had asked the judge to suspend his ruling for a week for an appeal. Friedman refused. He gave the Pentagon a week to file a written report on its compliance with the order.

The Times argued that the Pentagon has applied its own rules inconsistently. The newspaper noted that Trump ally Laura Loomer, a right-wing personality who agreed to the Pentagon policy, appeared to violate the Pentagon’s prohibition on soliciting unauthorized information by promoting her “tip line.” The government didn’t object to Loomer’s tip line but concluded that a Washington Post tip line does violate its policy because it purportedly “targets” military personnel and department employees.

The judge said he doesn’t see any meaningful difference between the two tip lines.

“But the problem is that nothing in the Policy explicitly prevents the Department from treating these two nearly identical tip lines differently,” Friedman added.

## **TSA officers are quitting as a funding standoff forces them to staff airports without pay**

By RIO YAMAT AP Airlines and Travel Writer

Eviction notices. Vehicle repossessions. Empty refrigerators and overdrawn bank accounts.

Union leaders and federal officials say these are just some of the financial pressures Transportation Security Administration agents are facing during an ongoing government funding lapse — the third shut-down in less than six months that has forced the officers who screen airport passengers and luggage to keep working without pay.

The public is experiencing the consequences in long wait times at some airports as more TSA officers take time off to earn money on the side or cut back on expenses. At least 376 have quit their jobs altogether since the shutdown began on Valentine’s Day, according to the Department of Homeland Security, exacerbating staff turnover at an agency that historically has had some of the U.S. government’s highest attrition and lowest employee morale.

“It’s just exhausting. Every day it just feels like this weight gets heavier and heavier on us,” Cameron Cochems, a local TSA union leader in Boise, Idaho, told The Associated Press.

Airport screeners have spent nearly half of the past 170 days with their paychecks held up by politics — 43 days last fall during the longest government shutdown in history, four days earlier this year during a brief funding lapse, and now 35 days and counting during the current shutdown, which affects only the Department of Homeland Security. They are considered essential so have to keep showing up for work whether they get paid or not.

Cochems, who has worked as a TSA agent for more than four years and is vice president of his regional American Federation of Government Employees chapter, said the number of resignations likely doesn’t fully capture the extent of the agency’s personnel challenges. He thinks many more officers would already have walked away in a stronger job market.

“I think more people are staying with the TSA that don’t want to be here,” Cochems said.

The House Committee on Homeland Security has scheduled a hearing for Wednesday to review the partial shutdown’s impact on the TSA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Coast Guard and other agencies within DHS.

A 2024 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that TSA’s workforce has long struggled with some of the lowest morale in the federal government, driven in part by years of comparatively low pay and persistent workplace frustrations. While recent raises have helped, the report said dissatisfaction

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remained widespread, with officers citing inconsistent management, limited recognition and poor work-life balance.

The starting pay for TSA agents is about \$34,500, and the average salary is \$46,000 to \$55,000, according to the agency's careers website.

The GAO warned that unless those underlying issues were addressed, the risk of officers leaving the workforce was likely to persist.

For Cochems, the recent shutdowns have upended the sense of stability that drew him to federal service in the first place. He said he already works a seasonal side job screening college sports teams at airports to supplement his income. Now, with his TSA paychecks halted, even that isn't enough to keep up with basic expenses.

The financial pressure on his family intensified after his wife was unexpectedly laid off from her job two weeks ago.

"Every day I come to the airport and I look at the food drive, see what things I can get for my family," he said, referring to the donations that his airport, like many others, are soliciting to help TSA workers.

It's unclear how long airport screeners will have to keep working unpaid. Both chambers of Congress are scheduled to be out of Washington the first two weeks of April. And Democrats have said the department won't get funded until new restrictions are placed on federal immigration operations following the fatal shootings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good in Minneapolis earlier this year.

For travelers, the strain in TSA staffing has made airport conditions increasingly unpredictable. Wait times have stretched into multiple hours at some airports, with passengers in cities like Houston, Atlanta and New Orleans reporting delays long enough to miss flights.

TSA officers missed their first full paycheck last weekend, and absences are climbing nationwide, according to Homeland Security. More than half of scheduled staff were absent Sunday at an airport in Houston. At Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, 38% of officers missed work on Wednesday and 32% on Thursday.

"I've heard from officers who cannot afford copayments for cancer treatments or office visits for their sick children," Aaron Barker, a local TSA union leader in Atlanta, said at a news conference outside the airport this week.

Homeland Security has said roughly 50,000 TSA employees would work during the shutdown. Nationwide on Thursday, about 10% of TSA agents missed work, the department reported. The absentee rate was two or three times higher in some places: 33% at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport, 29% at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, 27% at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, and 23% at Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

The staffing shortages have also forced some airports to close checkpoints, with wait times swinging dramatically throughout the day in some cases. Early Friday, Hartsfield-Jackson had two-hour waits before easing to less than five minutes by early afternoon, and then jumping back up to 90 minutes.

Security line wait times at Houston's main airport exceeded two hours on Friday afternoon. Videos posted to social media showed lines snaking around the airport and down an escalator, spilling into the baggage claim area.

In a Fox News interview this week, Acting Deputy TSA Administrator Adam Stahl warned that the latest shutdown could have lasting consequences for staffing, saying attrition and recruitment would likely suffer. Staff departures increased after the record one last fall, Stahl said.

"We saw an uptick of 25% attrition after the last shutdown, and so this is going to continue and worsen — not get better, get worse — if we don't get a resumption of normal operations, DHS funded and money back into our TSA officers' pockets," he said, adding that the agency has exhausted its options, including deploying emergency manpower, to keep airport security checkpoints adequately staffed.

Former TSA Administrator John Pistole has said that about 1,100 officers quit during last year's shutdown that ended in November.

## White House urges Congress to take a light touch on AI regulations in new legislative blueprint

By SEUNG MIN KIM and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House said Friday that Congress should “preempt state AI laws” that it views as too burdensome, laying out a broad framework for how it wants Congress to address concerns about artificial intelligence without curbing growth or innovation in the sector.

The legislative blueprint outlines a half-dozen guiding principles for lawmakers, focusing on protecting children, preventing electricity costs from surging, respecting intellectual property rights, preventing censorship and educating Americans on using the technology.

House Republican leaders swiftly endorsed the framework and said they’re ready to work “across the aisle” to pass legislation, but doing so would be a heavy lift, requiring agreement with Democrats in the Senate as public divisions over AI run deep.

The announcement comes as state governments have forged ahead on their own regulations for AI while civil liberties and consumer rights groups lobby for more regulations on the powerful technology. The industry and the White House have pushed back, arguing that a patchwork of rules would hurt growth. Trump signed an executive order in December to block states from crafting their own regulations.

“This was in response to a growing patchwork of 50 different state regulatory regimes that threaten to stifle innovation and jeopardize America’s lead in the AI race,” said White House AI czar David Sacks in a social media post Friday.

Sacks said the next step is to work with Congress to turn the administration’s principles into federal legislation.

AI legislation could need bipartisan support to pass

While passing sweeping AI legislation will be difficult, especially in a midterm election year, the framework appeared designed to appeal to some AI-wary Republicans and Democrats with a focus on widespread and bipartisan concerns, such as the harms that AI chatbot companionship can pose to children and the electricity costs of AI infrastructure.

“It covers basically all the key sticking points I think that might stop an AI bill from moving through Congress,” said Neil Chilson, a Republican former chief technologist for the Federal Trade Commission who now leads AI policy at the Abundance Institute. “It reads to me as an attempt to build a larger tent, even if it doesn’t give everybody everything that they want.”

But it has already been panned by some Democrats, including U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer of New Jersey, who said in a statement it “fails to address key issues, including strong accountability for AI companies, under the guise of protecting children, communities, and creators. Americans need protection — but this means nothing if we allow the AI industry to be the Wild West.”

Whether AI legislation can pass both chambers of Congress could also rely heavily on the support of Republicans like U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, who has introduced her own AI bill, and last year was instrumental in thwarting Trump’s earlier attempt to deter state governments from regulating AI. Blackburn on Friday called Trump’s framework a roadmap and welcomed the administration to the “important discussion” of getting a bill passed.

States already regulating AI don’t want to be preempted

Several states — including California, Colorado, Texas and Utah — have already passed laws that set some rules for AI across the private sector.

With bipartisan support in the Texas legislature, a new AI law that took effect this year in the Republican-led state requires government agencies and health care providers to disclose when they are using AI to interact with consumers or answer questions. The law also prohibits the development of AI that encourages a person to commit suicide, harm themselves, harm another person or engage in criminal activity.

A federal law following Trump’s framework “could knock out parts of Texas’s AI code while leaving some parts standing,” said Saurabh Vishnubhakat, a professor at Yeshiva University’s Cardozo School of Law. “The fact that it’s a Republican governor I don’t think is going to save Texas’ law from preemption.”

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Also vulnerable is Colorado's law, which is aimed at preventing AI from discriminating against people when making consequential decisions about things like hiring and medical care. It was passed in 2024 but isn't set to take effect until later this year. Lawmakers hope to rework the regulations before then.

Colorado State Rep. Jennifer Bacon, a Democrat, said voters don't want to stifle innovation or fall behind China "but our constituents are interested in not becoming China."

California's Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom has vetoed some AI bills while signing into law others. His office criticized Trump's framework Friday.

"Yet again, Donald Trump is trying to gut laws in California that keep our residents safe and protect consumers — a core state responsibility," Newsom's spokesperson Marissa Saldivar said in a statement.

The Trump administration says it doesn't think Congress should preempt all state regulatory powers over AI, including enforcement of general laws against AI developers, "to protect children, prevent fraud, and protect consumers." It also says Congress shouldn't interfere with local authorities in deciding where to place data centers and other AI infrastructure, or how states procure their own AI tools for law enforcement or education.

However, it says states "should not be permitted to regulate AI development," shouldn't penalize AI developers for a third party's unlawful conduct using their product, and "should not unduly burden Americans' use of AI for activity that would be lawful if performed without AI."

Trump's AI proposal appeals to concerns about data centers, copyright

As backlash against data centers has increased along with rising power prices, the White House had previously stepped up pressure on AI companies and the power sector to do more to address the issue -- including having AI companies sign voluntary pledges earlier this month to build their own power generation plants.

Some AI safety advocates are pushing for Blackburn and other influential Republicans to insist on more protections against AI's most catastrophic risks to national security or the economy, such as out-of-control AI agents or the widespread replacement of human workers.

"We have companies that explicitly are hoping to replace human labor," said Brendan Steinhauser, a former Republican strategist who now leads The Alliance for Secure AI and believes Trump's framework doesn't do enough to address risks. "Tinkering at the edges with upskilling and job training is just not going to make an impact on that. I just don't think we as a country are taking this seriously enough."

The framework aims for a more balanced approach to another controversial topic: AI and copyright.

It recommends against wading into the legal fights between artists and creators and the technology companies that have ingested huge amounts of copyrighted works to build AI systems that can generate new text, images and sound.

The Trump administration "believes that training of AI models on copyrighted material does not violate copyright laws," according to the document, but acknowledges "arguments to the contrary exist and therefore supports allowing the Courts to resolve this issue."

That language was welcomed by trade group AI Progress — a coalition that includes Amazon, Anthropic, Google, Meta, Microsoft, Midjourney and OpenAI.

Tech companies have been fighting dozens of copyright infringement lawsuits from writers and publishers, visual artists, music record labels and others. Judges have largely sided with AI developers in allowing for the "fair use" of copyrighted works to create something new, but some have questioned how the materials were obtained. A federal judge in September approved a \$1.5 billion settlement between Anthropic and authors who allege nearly half a million books had been illegally pirated to train its chatbot.

## Trump administration sues Harvard, saying it violated civil rights law and seeking to recover funds

By MORIAH BALINGIT and MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department filed a new lawsuit Friday against Harvard University, saying its leadership failed to address antisemitism on campus, creating grounds for the government to

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freeze existing grants and seek repayment for grants already paid.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Massachusetts, is another salvo in a protracted battle between the administration of President Donald Trump and the elite university.

"The United States cannot and will not tolerate these failures," the Justice Department wrote in the lawsuit. It asked the court to compel Harvard to comply with federal civil rights law and to help it "recover billions of dollars of taxpayer subsidies awarded to a discriminatory institution."

The lawsuit also asks a judge to require Harvard to call police to arrest protesters blocking parts of campus and to appoint an independent monitor, approved by the government, to ensure the university complies with court orders.

In a statement, Harvard said it "cares deeply about members of our Jewish and Israeli community and remains committed to ensuring they are embraced, respected, and can thrive on our campus."

"Harvard has taken substantive, proactive steps to address the root causes of antisemitism and actively enforces anti-harassment and anti-discrimination rules and policies," the statement read.

In a pair of lawsuits filed last year by the university, Harvard has said it's being illegally penalized for refusing to adopt the administration's views. A federal judge sided with Harvard in September, reversing the funding cuts and calling the antisemitism argument a "smokescreen."

Trump's year-long battle with Harvard

The government's new lawsuit comes after negotiations appear to have bogged down in the year-long battle, which has tested the boundaries of the government's authority over America's universities. What began as an investigation into allegations of campus antisemitism escalated into an all-out feud. The Trump administration slashed more than \$2.6 billion in Harvard's research funding, ended federal contracts and attempted to block Harvard from hosting international students.

Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, a major association of colleges and universities, accused the administration of launching a "full scale, multi-pronged" attack on Harvard. Friday's lawsuit, he said in an email, is just the latest attempt to pressure Harvard to agree to changes favored by the administration.

"When bullies pound on the table and don't get what they want, they pound again," Mitchell said.

The Trump administration's aggressive tactics toward Harvard mark an extraordinary departure from how previous administrations have enforced civil rights law at American colleges. In the past, the government investigated allegations of civil rights violations, produced findings and typically reached an agreement with the college to bring it into compliance. Occasionally, the government levied fines and could threaten to pull federal funding. The process typically took months or years.

In contrast, Trump had been in office fewer than three months before he had frozen billions of dollars in grants to Harvard, including money for medical research. He has since tried to press the school to pay the government to end the standoff.

"The administration appears to have filed this new lawsuit to make an end run around its loss in the district courts and the pending appeal, and its failed settlement negotiations with Harvard," said Anurima Bhargava, former chief of the Educational Opportunities Section at the U.S. Department of Justice and a senior adviser for the group Stand for Campus Freedom.

At issue: Civil rights and First Amendment rights

The Trump administration's case has centered on allegations of discrimination against Harvard's Jewish and Israeli students during and after pro-Palestinian demonstrations related to the Israel-Hamas war.

Officials concluded Harvard did not adequately address concerns about antisemitism that some students said kept them from going to class. During protests of the war, Trump officials said, Harvard permitted students to demonstrate against Israel's actions in the school library and allowed a pro-Palestinian encampment to remain on campus for 20 days, "in violation of university policy."

In its lawsuit Friday, the Justice Department also accused Harvard of failing to discipline staff or students who protested or tacitly endorsed the demonstrations by canceling class or dismissing students early.

"Harvard University has failed to protect its Jewish students from harassment and has allowed discrimi-

nation to wreak havoc on its campus," White House press secretary Liz Huston said Friday on X.

Harvard, in turn, has said the government is violating its First Amendment rights, after it defied federal demands that it limit activism on campus and change some practices for hiring and enrollment.

"The tradeoff put to Harvard and other universities is clear: Allow the Government to micromanage your academic institution or jeopardize the institution's ability to pursue medical breakthroughs, scientific discoveries, and innovative solutions," attorneys for Harvard said in a lawsuit over the funding freeze.

Negotiations with Harvard have frayed

Despite their bitter dispute, Harvard and the Trump administration have held some negotiations, and the two sides have reportedly been close to reaching an agreement on multiple occasions. Last year, they were reportedly approaching a deal requiring Harvard to pay \$500 million to regain access to federal funding and end the investigations. Several months later, Trump upped that figure to \$1 billion, saying Harvard has been "behaving very badly."

At the same time, the administration was taking steps in a civil rights investigation that could jeopardize all Harvard's federal funding.

Last June, a federal task force said its investigation had found the university was a "willful participant" in antisemitic harassment of Jewish students and faculty. The task force threatened to refer the case to the Justice Department to file a civil rights lawsuit "as soon as possible," unless Harvard came into compliance.

When colleges are found in violation of federal civil rights law, they almost always reach compliance through voluntary agreements. Friday's lawsuit by the Justice Department points to an extraordinarily rare impasse.

Harvard has said it strongly disagrees with the government's civil rights finding and is committed to fighting bias.

Harvard President Alan M. Garber says the school formed a task force to combat antisemitism. The university also hired a new provost and new deans and reformed its discipline policies to make them "more consistent, fair and effective," Garber has said.

Since he took office, Trump has targeted elite universities he believes are overrun by left-wing ideology and antisemitism. His administration has frozen billions of dollars in research grants, which colleges have come to rely on for scientific and medical research.

Several universities have reached agreements with the White House to restore funding. Some deals have included direct payments to the government, including \$200 million from Columbia University. Brown University agreed to pay \$50 million toward state workforce development groups.

## **Iranians mark Persian new year with heavy hearts as war cuts contact with loved ones**

By ALEX TURNBULL and CATHERINE GASCHKA Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — When Iran erupted in nationwide protests at the end of 2025, Shayan Ghadimi's mother returned to the country from Paris to see the uprising for herself.

Her absence — and the struggle to stay in touch through the bloody crackdown that followed and now the Iran war — hang over the family. Like many Iranians outside the country, they will mark the normally festive Persian new year, known as Nowruz, with heavy hearts — or not at all.

Ghadimi's 70-year-old mother had watched the early protests on TV. "We could see the market closed, the people in the street. She said, 'I want to be there,'" the 41-year-old Ghadimi said of her mother, as she prepared to serve lunches in the spice-scented restaurant she runs in Paris.

"Now, she is all alone ... with no way to stay in contact, watching the sky. I cannot imagine the state she is in," Ghadimi said.

An Iranian cultural center in Paris that organizes music events for Nowruz says it's in mourning. In the United States, some Iranian American communities also canceled or scaled back festivities.

Nowruz, or "new day" in Farsi, coincides with the spring equinox and is celebrated from Afghanistan to Turkey. Iranians of diverse faiths mark Nowruz — which is rooted in Zoroastrian tradition dating back mil-

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lennia — despite occasional efforts by hard-liners to discourage it.

Celebrating together for comfort

Shakiba Edighoffer, grocery shopping in Paris for Nowruz, said she and Iranian friends are on a “kind of emotional roller coaster” as the war rages. Israel and the United States are attacking Iran’s leaders and military while the Islamic Republic fires missiles and drones at Israel and Gulf Arab states.

“You hear news about this or that leader of the Islamic Republic being eliminated ... about executions or bombings,” the makeup artist said.

With communications largely severed, trying to find out how family and friends are faring under bombardments is stressful.

Celebrating Nowruz “helps us cope, at least a little, with the psychological pressure,” Edighoffer said. “All these oppressors want is for us to be sad, to forget our millennia-old Persian and Iranian traditions.”

“We must not give them that victory.”

In Tehran, little celebration

Too scared to venture far from her Tehran neighborhood, the Iranian woman said she had nearly forgotten it was Nowruz.

There are no decorations in the streets, and the only reminder was when she spotted her friend’s mother holding a hyacinth, a flower associated with spring.

“That’s how distracted I’ve been. I only found out by chance,” said the woman in voice messages to The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The traditional family shopping trip to the market about 9 kilometers (5 1/2 miles) away, was out of the question, she said.

So for the traditional new year spread, Haft-Seen, she had to use what was available at home. A central tradition of new year celebrations, Haft-Seen involves seven items that include garlic, vinegar, sumac, apples and sprouting greens — symbolizing new beginnings and hope.

“Why do you want to set it up, just forget it!” the woman recalled her mother saying. But determined to distract from the grim mood, the family made do.

When it was all over, one tradition remained the same. She and her mother burned espad — aromatic seeds — meant to ward against the evil eye.

Tears of anguish and of joy

Some of the diners who come to Ghadimi’s Paris restaurant for flame-grilled kebabs and spiced rice to celebrate hope the war will bring a new dawn. Other can’t see past the deaths and destruction wrought by Israeli and U.S. strikes.

“I have people in tears. I have people who cry for joy. They say, ‘Did you see? They are coming. We are going to be saved.’ Others say, ‘Our country is being destroyed,’” she said.

Since her mother returned to Iran in January, they’ve only managed to speak to each other twice.

“Quite honestly, I don’t try anymore. Because it stresses me out, if I try calling and can’t get hold of her,” she said. “My sister calls 100 times a day and can’t reach her.”

Her mother had a return ticket and had promised to be back for Nowruz.

But when they last spoke, about a week ago, her mother said those plans had changed. Having lived through the 1979 Islamic Revolution, she wants to see Iran’s next chapter.

“I am staying here until the end,” her mother told her.

## High oil prices knock down stocks and erase Wall Street’s hopes for a cut to interest rates

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Another climb for oil prices shook stock markets on Friday, as hopes collapsed for a possible cut to interest rates this year by the Federal Reserve.

The S&P 500 fell 1.5% to close its fourth straight losing week, its longest such streak in a year. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 443 points, or 1%, and the Nasdaq composite tumbled 2%.

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The market's losses deepened after oil prices erased an early dip and accelerated in the afternoon. Brent crude, the international standard, rose 3.3% to settle at \$112.19 per barrel. Benchmark U.S. crude gained 2.3% to \$98.32 per barrel.

Stocks also bent under the weight of leaping yields in the bond market. Higher yields make mortgage rates and other borrowing more expensive for U.S. households and companies, slowing the economy, and they grind down on prices for all kinds of investments. Treasury yields have been jumping on worries the war with Iran will cause a long-term spike in oil and natural gas prices that drives up inflation.

Worries have gotten so high that traders have canceled nearly all their bets that the Federal Reserve could cut interest rates this year, according to data from CME Group. Some even think the Fed could raise rates in 2026, a nearly unthinkable scenario before the war began.

"I think it would be market shaking," Ann Miletti, head of equity investments at Allspring Global Investments, said about a rate hike. But she also said that if oil prices stay high for a long time, they would likely drag so much on the economy that the Fed would not raise rates.

Lower interest rates would give the economy and investment prices a boost, and they're something President Donald Trump has angrily been calling for. Before the war, traders were betting heavily that the Fed would cut rates at least twice this year.

But lower rates risk worsening inflation. And investors now see little room for central banks worldwide to cut interest rates to help their economies. Besides the Federal Reserve, central banks in Europe, Japan and the United Kingdom also held their interest rates steady this past week.

The price of Brent crude has zigzagged sharply on its way from roughly \$70 per barrel before the war began to as high as \$119.50 this week. Big swings have struck hour to hour as financial markets try to handicap how long the war will last and how much damage it will do to oil and gas production in the Persian Gulf.

The U.S. stock market has a history of bouncing back relatively quickly from past conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, as long as oil prices don't stay too high for too long. Oil prices aren't at a red-flag point yet, Miletti said, but "we're getting close if the duration is long enough."

"If three months from now, we're in a similar situation, not only myself but a lot of other investors will be much more cautious," she said. While companies can adjust to gradual rises in oil prices, Miletti said they're less able to quickly change their business models after a sudden spike becomes a new normal.

On Wall Street, Super Micro Computer lost a third of its value and tumbled 33.3% to help drag the U.S. stock market lower. The U.S. government accused a senior vice president of the company and two others affiliated with it of conspiring to smuggle billions of dollars of computer servers containing advanced Nvidia chips to China.

The company said it has been cooperating with the investigation and is not a defendant in the indictment. It placed its two accused employees on administrative leave and terminated its relationship with an accused contractor.

Roughly three out of every four stocks in the S&P 500 fell. Stocks of smaller companies, which can feel the pinch of higher interest rates more than their bigger rivals, led the way lower. The Russell 2000 index of smaller stocks fell a market-leading 2.3%.

Among the few winners was FedEx, which rose 0.8% after delivering a much stronger profit for the latest quarter than analysts expected.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 100.01 points to 6,506.48. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 443.96 to 45,577.47, and the Nasdaq composite sank 443.08 to 21,647.61.

In the bond market, the yield on the 10-year Treasury jumped to 4.38% from 4.25% late Thursday and from just 3.97% before the war started. That's a significant move for the bond market.

The two-year Treasury yield, which more closely tracks expectations for what the Fed will do, leaped to 3.88% from 3.79% late Thursday and is near its highest level since the summer.

When bonds are paying more in interest, they make other investments less attractive in comparison. That's particularly the case for things like gold, which pay their investors nothing at all. Gold's price finished

the week at \$4,574.90 per ounce, hurting its reputation as a safe place for money during uncertain times. Earlier this year, gold was setting records and briefly topped \$5,400 per ounce.

Outside of Wall Street, stock indexes fell sharply in Europe following their wipeouts on Thursday. Indexes also sank in China, though South Korea's Kospi added 0.3%.

## Feds move to dismiss charges against officers accused of falsifying warrant in Breonna Taylor raid

By DYLAN LOVAN and JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Federal prosecutors asked a judge Friday to dismiss the charges against two Louisville officers accused of falsifying the warrant that led police to raid Breonna Taylor's apartment the night she was killed six years ago.

Prosecutors said in a court filing that their review of the case showed the charges against former Detective Joshua Jaynes and former Sgt. Kyle Meany should be "dismissed in the interest of justice."

It's unclear when the judge might rule on the request. A hearing is scheduled for April 3.

Judges have twice reduced a felony charge against each officer to a misdemeanor, saying there wasn't a direct link between the false information in the warrant and Taylor's death. Prosecutors said after the second ruling that they had decided to drop the cases.

"We are elated with this development," said Travis Lock, an attorney for Jaynes.

Meany's lawyer, Michael Denbow, said he is "incredibly grateful for today's filing."

Meany "is looking forward to putting this matter behind him and moving forward with his life," he said.

Taylor, 26, was shot to death by police when they broke down the door of her apartment while serving a no-knock drug warrant looking for a former boyfriend who was no longer there.

Taylor's boyfriend at the time fired at the officers, and Taylor was killed as police fired back.

The March 13, 2020, death of Taylor, who was Black, and local anger over Louisville's handling of the case gained widespread attention during the wave of racial justice protests sparked by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis that May. Six years on, activists continue to point to Taylor's killing as an example of the systemic injustice Black women face.

Federal prosecutors under former President Joe Biden pressed charges against the officers. Under President Donald Trump, though, the Department of Justice asked that Brett Hankison, the only officer serving prison time related to Taylor's killing, be let out of prison while he appeals his conviction.

Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, said in a Facebook post that she is extremely disappointed in Trump's Justice Department.

"Their phone call today informing me that charges against the police are being dropped while implying they have helped me is utterly disrespectful," Palmer wrote. "This is the first time I've heard from them since they took over and it's clear they have not served me or Breonna well."

Friday's decision was an insult to everyone who fought for Taylor and shows her life is not valued by the current administration, said Democratic U.S. Rep. Morgan McGarvey, who represents much of Louisville.

"My heart is heavy for Breonna's loved ones — this is not justice," McGarvey posted on social media.

A federal judge sentenced Hankison to 2 years and nine months in prison and 3 years of supervised release for blindly firing 10 shots into Taylor's windows on the night she was killed. None of the shots hit anyone.

Neither of the two officers who did shoot Taylor was charged, after prosecutors deemed they were justified in returning fire into the apartment.

Police found no drugs or cash inside Taylor's apartment. The city paid a \$12 million wrongful death settlement to Taylor's family.

Lawyers for Taylor's family said the warrant needs heavy legal scrutiny because without it police never go to her door and the shooting never happens. They remain angry and heartbroken almost no one faced punishment in the shootings, attorneys Ben Crump and Lonita Baker said in a statement.

"Breonna Taylor always deserved more than the scraps of justice she got. Now, even those may be further stripped away," they said.

## **Chuck Norris, martial arts master and actor whose toughness became internet lore, dies at 86**

By JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

Chuck Norris, the martial arts grandmaster and action star whose roles in "Walker, Texas Ranger" and other television shows and movies made him an iconic tough guy — sparking internet parodies and adoration from presidents — has died at 86.

Norris died Thursday, in what his family described as a "sudden passing."

"While we would like to keep the circumstances private, please know that he was surrounded by his family and was at peace," the family said in a statement posted to social media.

Before he would become a star in movies and on TV, Norris was wildly successful in competitive martial arts. He was a six-time undefeated World Professional Middleweight Karate champion. He also founded his own Korean-based American hard style of karate, known sometimes as Chun Kuk Do, and the United Fighting Arts Federation, which has awarded more than 3,300 Chuck Norris System black belts worldwide. Black Belt magazine ultimately credited Norris in its hall of fame with holding a 10th degree black belt, the highest possible honor.

Born Carlos Ray Norris in Ryan, Oklahoma, on March 10, 1940, he grew up poor. At age 12, he moved with his family to Torrance, California, and joined the U.S. Air Force after high school, in 1958. It was during a deployment to Korea that he started training in martial arts, including judo and Tang Soo Do.

"I went out for gymnastics and football at North Torrance high," he told The Associated Press in 1982. "I played some football, but I also spent a lot of time on the bench. I was never really athletic until I was in the service in Korea."

After he was honorably discharged in 1962, he worked as a file clerk for Northrop Aircraft and applied to be a police officer, but was put on a waitlist. Meanwhile, he opened a martial arts studio, which expanded to a chain, with students including such stars as Bob Barker, Priscilla Presley, Donny and Marie Osmond, and Steve McQueen, whom he later credited with encouraging him to get into acting.

From one studio to another

Norris made his film debut as an uncredited bodyguard in the 1968 movie "The Wrecking Crew," which included a fight with Dean Martin. He had also crossed paths with Bruce Lee in martial arts circles. Their friendship — sometimes, as sparring partners — led to an iconic faceoff in the 1972 movie "Return of the Dragon," in which Lee fights and kills Norris' character in Rome's Colosseum.

He went on to act in more than 20 movies, such as "Missing in Action," "The Delta Force" and "Sidekicks."

"I wanted to project a certain image on the screen of a hero. I had seen a lot of anti-hero movies in which the lead was neither good nor bad. There was no one to root for," Norris said in 1982.

In 1993, he took on his most famed role, as a crime-fighting lawman in TV's "Walker, Texas Ranger." The show ran for nine seasons, and in 2010, then-Gov. Rick Perry awarded him the title of honorary Texas Ranger. The Texas Senate later named him an honorary Texan.

"It's not violence for violence's sake, with no moral structure," Norris told the AP in 1996, speaking about the show. "You try to portray the proper meaning of what it's about — fighting injustice with justice, good vs. bad. ... It's entertaining for the whole family."

Norris also made a surprise comedic appearance as a decisive judge in the final match of the 2004 movie "Dodgeball." He only on occasion had taken acting roles in recent years, including 2012's "The Expendables 2" and the 2024 sci-fi action movie "Agent Recon." He's due to appear in "Zombie Plane," an upcoming film starring Vanilla Ice.

Chuck Norris: the man, the meme, the legend

It was around the time of "Dodgeball" that his toughman image became the stuff of legend, literally: "Chuck Norris Facts" went viral online with such wildly hyperbolic statements as, "Chuck Norris had a

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staring contest with the sun — and won,” and, “They wanted to put Chuck Norris on Mt. Rushmore, but the granite wasn’t tough enough for his beard.”

Norris ultimately embraced the absurdity of the meme craze, putting together “The Official Chuck Norris Fact Book,” which combined his favorites with supposedly true stories and the codes he aimed to live by. He would also write books on martial arts instruction, a memoir, political takes, Civil War-era historical fiction and more.

“To some who know little of my martial arts or film careers but perhaps grew up with ‘Walker, Texas Ranger,’ it seems that I have become a somewhat mythical superhero icon,” Norris wrote in the forward to the “Fact Book.” “I am flattered and humbled.”

That book raised money for a nonprofit he founded with President George H.W. Bush that promoted martial arts instruction for kids.

The intentionally outlandish statements featured in the 2008 Republican presidential primary, when Norris endorsed Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and shot an ad playing on the “Chuck Norris facts.”

“Chuck Norris doesn’t endorse. He tells America how it’s going to be,” Huckabee said in the campaign ad.

President Donald Trump’s supporters later promoted “Trump Facts” in the same vein, and political pundits tried it as well, describing the commander-in-chief’s decision to seize Venezuela’s sitting president, Nicolas Maduro, as a “Chuck Norris Moment,” and its initial effect on oil prices a “Chuck Norris Premium.”

Norris was outspoken about his Christian beliefs and his support for gun rights, and backed political candidates for years — he even went skydiving with Bush for the former president’s 80th birthday. As for Trump, Norris endorsed him in the 2016 general election and wrote guest columns praising him without explicitly endorsing him in the days before the 2020 and 2024 elections.

Norris is survived by five children: stunt performers Mike and Eric with his late ex-wife Dianne Holechek, twins Dakota and Danilee with his wife Gena Norris, and Dina, the result of an early 1960s “one-night stand” revealed in his autobiography.

Norris celebrated his birthday just over a week before his death, posting a sparring video on Instagram. “I don’t age. I level up,” he wrote.

## **CBS News shutter its storied radio news service after nearly a century, ending an era**

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CBS News said Friday it will shut down its storied radio news service after nearly 100 years of operation, ending an era and blaming challenging economic times as the world moves on to digital sources and podcasts. Said longtime CBS News anchor Dan Rather: “It’s another piece of America that is gone.”

When it went on the air in September 1927, the service was the precursor to the entire network, giving a youthful William S. Paley a start in the business. Famed broadcaster Edward R. Murrow’s rooftop reports during the Nazi bombing of London during World War II kept Americans listening anxiously.

Today, CBS News Radio provides material to an estimated 700 stations across the country and is known best for its top-of-the-hour news roundups. The service will end on May 22, the network said Friday.

“Radio is woven into the fabric of CBS News and that’s always going to be part of our history,” CBS News editor-in-chief Bari Weiss said in delivering the news to the staff. “I want you to know that we did everything we could, including before I joined the company, to try and find a viable solution to sustain the radio operation.”

But with the radical changes in the media industry, she said, “we just could not find a way to make that possible.”

Not the first radio cuts at CBS

CBS News cut some of its radio programming late last year, including its “Weekend Roundup” and “World News Roundup Late Edition,” in an attempt to keep the service going.

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It was unclear how many people will lose their jobs because of the radio shutdown. CBS News was cutting about 6% of its workforce, or more than 60 people, on Friday. It's not the end of turmoil at the network, as parent company Paramount Global is likely to absorb CNN as part of its announced purchase of Warner Bros. Discovery.

"Given the way things are going, I was saddened but I wasn't surprised by it," said Rather, who succeeded network legend Walter Cronkite in 1981 and anchored for 25 years.

When Rather covered the civil rights era for CBS News during the 1960s, he said he would file reports as frequently as a dozen times a day. Cronkite told America on television that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated; Rather relayed the news for radio.

"Radio was considered an equal responsibility to television," Rather, now 94, said in an interview.

Along with newspapers, radio was the dominant medium in how Americans got their news from shortly after the dawn of commercial radio in 1920 through the 1940s, with people in their living rooms listening to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" during the Depression. CBS News Radio's broadcast about Germany's invasion of Austria in 1938, the first time Murrow was heard on the air, was an historic marker for the service.

Broadcasters like Douglas Edwards, Dallas Townsend and Christopher Glenn were familiar voices on CBS News Radio. The beginning of the television era in the 1950s began a long slide for radio, often an afterthought today with the world online and on phones. Those seeking audio often turn to podcasts before radio.

"This is another part of the landscape that has fallen off into the sea," said Michael Harrison, publisher of Talkers, a trade publication for radio talk shows. "It's a shame. It's a loss for the country and for the industry."

A major radio player for many decades

CBS News Radio was a major force for generations of Americans. "Its heyday spanned decades," Harrison said. "It was quality on every level. It sounded good. Its coverage was as objective as possible within the realm of human nature. Its resources were extensive. It had a very high trust factor that was considered the standard of the day."

The front page of CBS News' website did not immediately carry news of the demise.

Weiss, founder of the Free Press website and without broadcast news experience before being hired by CBS parent Paramount's new management, has quickly become a headline-maker and polarizing figure in journalism. She held a "60 Minutes" story critical of President Donald Trump's deportation policy from being broadcast for a month and has critics watching to see if she's moving the network in a Trump-friendly direction.

Addressing her staff in January, three months into her job as CBS News boss, she invoked Cronkite's name as a symbol of old thinking and said that if the network continues with its current strategy, "we're toast." She announced the hiring of 18 new contributors and said CBS News needs to do stories that will "surprise and provoke — including inside our own newsroom."

## Many states count mail ballots that arrive after Election Day. Those grace periods could go away

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

There will be just one Election Day for this fall's midterm elections — Nov. 3. But voters in 14 states who cast their votes by mail have been given a grace period ranging from a day later to several weeks in which their ballots can be received and counted.

Whether that extra time should be allowed is at the heart of a case that will be argued Monday before the U.S. Supreme Court. If the court strikes down those grace periods, it will leave those states — and their voters — scrambling to adjust with only a few months before absentee ballots are sent out for this fall's midterm elections.

The implications could extend well beyond the 14 states that give a grace period for regular ballots,

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depending on how the court ultimately rules. A total of 29 states allow extra time for at least some mail voters, including those who cast military and overseas ballots, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Voting Rights Lab.

In a filing with the court, a group of state and big-city election officials cited "the risks of confusion and disenfranchisement" if mail ballot grace periods were ended suddenly in states where voters have counted on them for years.

Stuart Holmes, director of elections for the Washington Secretary of State's office, said 127,000 ballots were received after Election Day in 2024, so voters should expect about that many ballots to be rejected if Mississippi loses the case. Washington has the longest grace period of any state, 21 days after Election Day.

If the ruling is that a ballot is invalid even if it's postmarked by Election Day, "it might as well have never been received," he said.

"There's no way to resolve that issue," Holmes said. "There's no second chance."

'Election Day is Election Day'

The practice of counting ballots after Election Day has been a target of President Donald Trump since he sought to "STOP THE COUNT" after the 2020 election. He and his allies argue it delays results and leads to suspicions about the vote tallies. It's part of Trump's broader attack on most mail balloting, which he has said breeds fraud despite findings to the contrary and years of experience in numerous states.

The Republican National Committee and the Libertarian Party of Mississippi brought the lawsuit against Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson, a Republican, arguing that federal Election Day statutes envision a single day for casting ballots. Grace periods for receiving mail ballots — also in place in the District of Columbia and three U.S. territories — violate federal law, they argue.

"Election Day is Election Day for a reason," Ohio state Sen. Theresa Gavarone, a Republican, said during debate over her state's ban on the practice last year. "Allowing ballots to be delivered days after the election does nothing but hurt the integrity and credibility of our elections."

In briefs supporting Mississippi, voting rights groups, local election officials and organizations representing military and overseas voters defend the right of states to write their own voting rules. The Constitution gives states the authority to set the "times, places and manner" of elections.

Supporters of ballot grace periods told the court that upholding the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals' decision to strike down Mississippi's law would threaten to create chaos and confusion in this year's mid-term elections.

"State legislatures have recognized this issue and set election deadlines that balance the interests of canvassing speed and ballot security depending on the specific needs of each individual state," a group of local election officials and local governments told the court.

The groups said eliminating grace periods could affect ballot verification activities, provisional ballot processing, and the processing of military and overseas ballots that often happens after Election Day.

Some states already are modifying their laws

All 50 states require ballots to be cast or postmarked on or before Election Day. The 14 states with grace periods for regular ballots accept and count mailed ballots for periods ranging from a single day after the election in Texas to 21 days afterward in Washington state. Mississippi's disputed grace period is five days.

A November 2025 Brookings Institution study found that mail voting was a practical, secure way to expand voter access, with about four cases of fraud out of every 10 million mail ballots. It was an option used by about 30% of voters across the U.S. during the 2024 presidential election.

With the Mississippi case looming, some states have begun to act on their own.

Four states — Ohio, Kansas, North Dakota and Utah — eliminated grace periods last year, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures and Voting Rights Lab. A fifth, Minnesota, shortened its ballot deadline from the close of polls on Election Day to 5 p.m.

In signing Ohio's law, Republican Gov. Mike DeWine — who had vowed he wouldn't sign any more election restrictions championed by fellow Republicans — said the Mississippi lawsuit forced his hand.

"I believe that this four-day grace period is reasonable, and I think for many reasons it makes a lot of sense," he said at the time, noting that he would prefer to veto the legislation.

But DeWine said a ruling against Mississippi would jeopardize similar laws in other states, including Ohio, and leave inadequate time to adjust.

For Adriane Mohlenkamp, Ohio's previous grace period provided extra comfort over concerns that circumstances outside her control would prevent her ballot from counting.

"I live in a rural part of the state and sometimes our mail has to go to a larger city and then come back," said Mohlenkamp, 48, a stay-at-home mom and volunteer in Athens who is not affiliated with either major party. "It gave me a safe feeling, because, even if I do my due diligence and return it in enough time, I can't always anticipate what it does when it leaves my hands."

States grapple with postmark uncertainty

Katy Owens Hubler, elections program director at the National Conference of State Legislatures, said that in some large states, it can be difficult to distribute all mailed ballots and have them returned within the allotted timeframe.

She said the postmark issue has become trickier for states after recent changes to mail processing at the U.S. Postal Service.

An updated agency policy, enacted in December, said postmarks might not indicate the first day the Postal Service receives the mail, but rather the day it was handled at one of its processing centers. Those centers can be farther away from some communities because of consolidations, a group of U.S. senators told the postmaster earlier this year.

In response to potential Postal Service processing delays, some states have proposed extending their ballot deadlines — California by three days, Virginia by five hours and Kansas by an hour, depending on the county, according to the NCSL.

Owens Hubler said informing voters of any changes resulting from the Supreme Court's ruling in the Mississippi case will need to happen quickly.

"It's not ideal to do it in a big election year like this year," she said. "Voters do adapt, but if there is a change from a postmarked-by to a received-by date, that needs to be communicated and signaled well in advance."

## Ukraine is using its drone expertise to help 5 countries against Iran attacks, Zelenskyy says

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian officials are helping five countries in the Middle East and Gulf region counter attacks on their territory by Iranian drones, while the United States and European countries are among others who have requested support, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Friday.

Ukraine is also looking into whether it can have a role in restoring security in the Strait of Hormuz amid the Iran war, he said.

Ukraine has become one of the world's leading producers of cutting-edge, battle-tested drone interceptors that are cheap and effective. They play a key part in its defense against Russia's more than 4-year-old full-scale invasion.

"Our teams are already working with five countries on countering (Iran's) 'Shahed' drones — we have provided expert assessments and are helping build a defense system," Zelenskyy said on X.

Iran is an ally in Russia's invasion. Tehran signed a broad cooperation pact with Moscow last year.

Zelenskyy has previously said he hoped to provide expertise to Arab Gulf countries targeted by Iranian Shahed drones, versions of which are heavily used by Moscow's invading forces, in exchange for advanced air defense missiles that Ukraine needs to counter devastating Russian aerial attacks. Kyiv fears it will get fewer of the sophisticated missiles it needs to fend off the Russian strikes as the Iran war burns through stockpiles.

Ukrainian expertise helps protect civilian and critical infrastructure

Rustem Umerov, the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council who led a delegation to the Middle East and Gulf this week, said that Ukraine has deployed interceptor units there to help protect

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civilian and critical infrastructure and is working to expand that protection.

He said on the Telegram messaging app that Ukrainian military specialists are operating in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Jordan.

Ukraine is assessing further steps for long-term security cooperation with each of those countries, Umerov said.

Zelenskyy said in audio messages sent via WhatsApp in response to journalists' questions that 228 Ukrainian experts are currently deployed in the region.

The U.S. has asked for expert support for their military personnel in two areas of the region, Zelenskyy said, adding that Kyiv is also reviewing requests from European partners whose forces are based in the region.

Ukraine proposed to the U.S. about a year ago a deal that includes interceptor drones, naval drones and long-range drones, Zelenskyy said.

The relationship between Washington and Kyiv on drone cooperation has been unclear.

Zelenskyy said last week that Ukraine was awaiting White House approval for an agreement on drone production. But a day later Trump spurned Ukraine's offer of assistance, telling the "Brian Kilmeade Show" on Fox News Radio: "No, we don't need their help on drone defense."

Ukraine looks to resume talks with US, Russia

Zelenskyy said late Thursday he has sent an official delegation to the United States in a bid to move forward suspended U.S.-brokered talks on ending Russia's invasion.

The trilateral talks, which have yet to produce any breakthrough on key issues, have been on ice while the Iran war has dominated international attention.

The White House did not confirm any meeting with the Ukrainian delegation.

Zelenskyy said the main tasks in the U.S. will be to ensure that the trilateral talks resume and that Washington continues to allow other NATO countries to purchase American weapons to send to Ukraine.

A senior Kremlin official indicated Friday that a new round of U.S.-mediated negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv will likely take place soon.

"The pause is temporary, we hope it's temporary regarding the continuation of the trilateral format," he said.

Western European officials have over the past year repeatedly accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of dragging his feet in negotiations while he tries to press his bigger army's battlefield initiative and capture more Ukrainian land. Russian forces hold nearly 20% of Ukraine.

Middle East conflict impacts Russia-Ukraine war

The latest conflict in the Middle East that began Feb. 28 with Israeli and U.S. strikes on Iran has diverted international attention from Ukraine's plight.

At the same time, Russia is getting a financial windfall from a temporary U.S. waiver on oil sanctions while Ukraine is desperately short of cash and still waiting for a 90-billion-euro (\$103 billion) loan promised by the European Union.

Putin is widely expected to launch new offensives as the weather in Ukraine improves, piling further pressure on Kyiv.

Zelenskyy claimed that Ukrainian counterattacks have disrupted a planned Russian offensive expected in early spring.

## Ukraine faces growing pressure because of the war in Iran as Russia readies a new offensive

By The Associated Press undefined

With U.S.-brokered Ukraine peace talks on hold due to the war in the Middle East, Russian President Vladimir Putin is expected to try to expand his military gains via new offensives against his neighbor that could put even more pressure on Kyiv.

Windfall revenues from surging global oil prices are filling Moscow's war coffers and U.S. air defense

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assets are being drained quickly by Iranian attacks across the Gulf, raising concerns that little will be left available for Ukraine in the fifth year of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Ukraine's European allies have promised to maintain their steadfast support, but continuous bickering over a major 90 billion-euro (\$106 billion) European Union loan to cover Kyiv's military and economic needs for two years has reflected the mounting challenges.

The refusal by NATO allies to commit naval assets to help restore tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has drawn an angry rebuke from President Donald Trump, highlighting another emerging fault line that is fraught with potential repercussions for Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has sought to hold Washington's attention by offering its expertise in defending against Iranian Shahed drones, sending over 200 military experts to the Gulf. Trump, however, has shrugged off Zelenskyy's offer of help, saying the U.S. doesn't need Kyiv's assistance.

As new signs of a rift emerge in Western alliances, Putin and his generals are pondering plans for the spring and summer campaign across more than the 1,200-kilometer (about 750-mile) front line.

A possible new push from Russia

Russia's military appears to be readying for a renewed push to claim the part of the eastern Donetsk region that remains under Ukraine's control, as well as possible offensives in several other sectors.

Analysts have observed that Moscow has been building up reserves and its operations are expected to gain tempo as the spring warmth dries the terrain.

The Washington-based Institute for the Study of War, or ISW, has noted that Russian troops have stepped up artillery barrage and drone strikes, seeking to weaken Ukrainian defenses before ground attacks.

Ukraine has sought to derail the Kremlin's plans by launching counterattacks in the Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia regions, where Russian forces have sought to carve out bridgeheads with an aim to advance toward the regional capitals, which are key industrial hubs.

The ISW said in a recent battlefield assessment that Ukraine's successful retaliation in the Dnipropetrovsk region will likely continue to force Russia to "choose between defending against the Ukrainian counterattacks and allocating manpower and materiel for offensive operations elsewhere" on the front, possibly spoiling the anticipated Russian offensive.

It also noted that Ukrainian forces have stepped up their midrange strikes against Russian logistics, military equipment and manpower to try to derail the expected offensive

Russian war bloggers warn that Moscow would need to bolster its forces drastically to conduct any major offensive, something that raises challenges for the Kremlin.

After the widely unpopular "partial mobilization" of 300,000 reservists early in the war that prompted hundreds of thousands to flee the country to avoid being drafted, the Russian military has changed tactics, relying on volunteers and recruiting foreign fighters attracted by reasonably high wages and other benefits.

Putin said Russia has about 700,000 troops fighting in Ukraine, about the same number that Ukraine reportedly has.

'Slow war of attrition'

After quick maneuvers by large numbers of tanks and mechanized infantry early in Russia's 2022 invasion, the fighting has morphed into a war of attrition in which small groups of soldiers fight grinding, house-to-house battles in the ruined towns and villages of eastern Ukraine. The ubiquitous drones have restricted the concentration of troops for any big moves.

Russia also has relied on long-range missiles and drones to pummel Ukraine's energy facilities and other vital infrastructure.

For the past year, Russia has been able to infiltrate and undermine Ukrainian defensive positions due to the "growing lethality" of Moscow's attacks and Kyiv's dwindling troop strength, said analyst Jack Watling of the Royal United Services Institute.

"Russia is likely able to maintain its current rate of recruitment, despite the punishing rate of casualties" inflicted by Ukraine, he added.

As part of preparing for new offensives, Russia increasingly has sought to enlist students into its newly formed Drone Forces, offering relatively high pay and deployment at a safe distance from the front.

Tulsi Gabbard, the U.S. director of national intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee on Wednesday that "Russia has maintained the upper hand in the war against Ukraine."

She said the U.S.-led talks between Ukraine and Russia "are ongoing. Until such an agreement is met, Moscow is likely to continue fighting a slow war of attrition until they view their objectives have been achieved."

Entrenched positions

Several rounds of negotiations have produced no visible breakthrough as the parties remain sharply divided on key issues.

Putin wants Ukraine to withdraw its forces from the four regions that Russia has illegally annexed but never fully captured, renounce its bid to join NATO, sharply cut its army and drop restrictions against Russian language and the Moscow-affiliated Orthodox Church — demands Zelenskyy has rejected.

Zelenskyy has called for a ceasefire, U.S.-backed security guarantees to prevent Moscow invading again and has rejected claims over Ukrainian territory.

Kyiv's European allies accuse Moscow of dragging out the talks in hopes of making more gains and insisted that Europe must be present at the negotiations. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected their participation, saying "we don't consider it necessary or expedient."

Moscow says it won't allow any European troops to monitor a prospective ceasefire and will view them as legitimate targets.

Zelenskyy said he sent a team of negotiators for talks in the U.S. on Saturday, but Peskov said Russia won't join them, adding that the time and venue for another round of trilateral negotiations haven't been set yet.

Sam Greene, a professor at King's College London, said in a commentary that Moscow's strategy was obvious — "engaging with Washington just enough to prevent Ukraine from getting what it needed to shift the balance on the ground, and just enough to keep the Europeans at bay, but not enough to make real progress."

Trump takes aim at Zelenskyy

The U.S. has granted Moscow a temporary waiver from oil sanctions, allowing sales of Russian crude already at sea — to the dismay of Kyiv and the Europeans.

In addition, Trump has cast Zelenskyy as an obstacle to peace. "He has to get on the ball, and he has to get a deal done," Trump said of the Ukrainian leader earlier this month.

He said in an interview with NBC News that while Putin was ready for a deal, "it's much harder to reach a deal with Zelenskyy."

Trump also rebuffed Zelenskyy's proposal to help protect the U.S. forces and their allies in the Gulf from Iranian drones. "No, we don't need their help on drone defense," Trump told Fox News Radio.

Zelenskyy, who has taken a more practical public stance with Trump after their contentious White House meeting in February 2025, has expressed a growing concern that the Iran war could hurt Ukraine.

He told the BBC this week that he had a "very bad feeling" about the impact of the Middle East conflict on the war in Ukraine, noting that peace negotiations are being "constantly postponed" while Russia was profiting from high oil prices and Ukraine could face a deficit of U.S.-made Patriot missiles.

## **Jehovah's Witnesses ease policy on transfusions, allowing storage and use of one's own blood**

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses are modifying their prohibition on receiving blood transfusions on religious grounds, now allowing members to decide whether to allow their own blood to be drawn and stored in advance for such things as a scheduled surgery with a risk of significant blood loss.

But the organization is retaining its wider prohibition against receiving transfusions of others' blood — a procedure routinely used with patients after accidents, violence or other blood loss. This long-held prohibition is one of the most distinctive and controversial teachings of the movement, which is headquartered

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in New York state and well-known for its assertive public proselytizing.

The Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses announced what it called a "clarification" of its teaching on Friday, saying it came after extensive prayer and consideration.

"Each Christian must decide for himself how his own blood will be used in all medical and surgical care," Governing Body member Gerrit Lösch said in a video statement posted Friday on the denomination's website. "This includes whether to allow his own blood to be removed, stored, and then given back to him. What does this mean? Some Christians may decide that they would allow their blood to be stored and then be given back to them, others may object."

Jehovah's Witnesses, who emerged in 19th century America, share many Christian beliefs but diverge from most other churches on key theological issues, such as the nature of Jesus and biblical prophecy. They are almost alone in their beliefs about blood transfusions. Jehovah's Witnesses reported a U.S. membership of 1.3 million in 2025, with a worldwide membership of 9.2 million in more than 200 countries and territories.

### Ex-members react to policy shift

News of the imminent policy change leaked out in recent days on Reddit and other social media forums for former Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some ex-members — who are critical of the religious organization's policies and assert it is insular and authoritarian — say the policy shift has some value but is inadequate. Many commenters questioned why the ban on transfusions wasn't lifted entirely for one of the same reasons cited by Lösch regarding the use of one's own blood, that the Bible doesn't comment on it.

"I don't think it goes far enough, but it's a significant change," said Mitch Melin of Washington state, a former member who has worked to bring awareness to what he calls the "darker side" of the organization. The longstanding blood policy has led to "senseless loss of life," he said.

Melin said those who defy such a policy "could be shunned" by the church.

"They're softening this to a conscience matter when it involves your own blood," he said in an email. "From my perspective, it doesn't go far enough. If one of Jehovah's Witnesses faces a medical emergency with significant blood loss, or if a child requires multiple transfusions to treat certain types of cancers, this policy change does not grant them complete freedom of conscience to accept potentially life-saving interventions involving donated blood."

He also noted that in a worldwide church, many members live in countries that lack access to providers who could store their own blood.

### Using a patient's own blood for medical treatment

Autologous blood is blood donated by a patient who can receive it back if a transfusion is needed during or after surgery. Medical experts say the blood can be taken from 6 weeks to 5 days before surgery. It's thrown away if it's not needed during or after surgery. It can be done at some hospitals or blood banks.

Donating one's own blood can make a person anemic or have a lower blood count, experts warn. But there's a lower risk of having a reaction because your body recognizes your own blood, and there's no risk of contracting infectious disease from a different donor.

Jehovah's Witnesses' historic teachings on blood transfusions stem from biblical passages requiring believers to "abstain ... from blood," which they interpret as applying not just to food but to transfusions. While they teach that many detailed dietary laws in the Old Testament portion of the Bible no longer apply, they say this prohibition on partaking of blood is upheld as a universal principle for believers in other Bible passages.

The organization has parsed the implications of this teaching in the past. It has previously determined, for example, that medical procedures that temporarily remove blood but quickly return it to the body — such as kidney dialysis, in which blood is filtered of impurities — are acceptable. But they had distinguished that from removing blood and storing it for an extended period before returning it.

In 2000, an official publication, *The Watchtower*, stated: "Hence, we do not donate blood, nor do we store for transfusion our blood. That practice conflicts with God's law."

Lösch did not detail what prompted the change in the organization's stance. He did refer to the increasing types of medical interventions available, although blood transfusions have long been used. He said that

"the Bible does not comment on the use of a person's own blood in medical and surgical care."

In a press statement, the Jehovah's Witnesses emphasized that their "core belief regarding the sanctity of blood remains unchanged." They said many medical providers have been respecting members' health-care directives.

## **They were under siege by a Mexican cartel. Now these civilians fight back with AK-47s and grenades**

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

GUAJES DE AYALA, Mexico (AP) — Jesús Domínguez pushes through thick brush lining a rugged mountainside with an AK-47 slung over his shoulder and a grenade fastened to his leather belt.

He marches alongside a pack of camouflage-clad men patrolling the rural stretches of Mexico against one of the country's most powerful drug cartels.

Armed with military-grade weapons smuggled from the U.S., the 50-man force is one of dozens of "auto-defensa," or "self-defense," groups that have emerged over the past decade in Mexico to fight increasingly sophisticated cartels in areas far out of the reach of security forces.

"The government doesn't care about us, and it's impossible for our arms to compete with (the cartel's)," said Domínguez, 34, from a watch post overlooking the mountains of Guerrero state. "They come at you with a ton of force, so you need to respond with force...If you don't, they'll overwhelm you."

The vigilantes in Guajes de Ayala join a volatile landscape of warring armed groups – from cartels with tentacles across Latin America to local mafias – in regions like Guerrero ravaged by splintering cartels for decades. It's a tangle Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum will have to unravel under pressure from the Trump administration and fears of more violence following the killing of Mexico's most powerful drug lord.

'We don't want to be slaves'

The vigilante group was formed in 2020 when the cartel La Nueva Familia Michoacana tried to take control of seven communities buried deep in the mountains along a strategic throughway connecting cartels to the port city of Acapulco, where drugs and other illegal goods flow.

Residents said the cartel, designated a foreign terrorist organization last year by the Trump administration, started illegally logging in their lands and tried to force residents to join fights against rival gangs.

In the absence of Mexican military and police forces, locals armed themselves. Sporadic fire fights stretched on for nearly a year. Residents fled on foot, walking hours through far-off mountains with little more than the clothes on their backs. Communities of 1,600 people dwindled to just 400.

After a pause in the conflict, the vigilantes rearmed in October when the Nueva Familia Michoacana began to again push into their territory, setting up fentanyl labs and monitoring them with drones, said the group's leader, Javier Hernández.

Now, the men guard their towns from mountain watch posts and surveil 100 cartel gunmen camped out a few miles (kilometers) away using their own drones.

"We don't want to be part of their ranks and we don't want to leave our lands," Hernández said. "We don't want to be slaves to any cartel."

'They corner you'

Conflict is more entrenched in Guerrero than in most Mexican states, with a history of militancy dating back to guerrilla movements in the 1960s. The landscape has grown increasingly complex as cartels have fractured into rival factions creating a much different situation than in the past when one cartel held monolithic control over a region. According to a 2025 DEA report, five cartels operate here. So do various local gangs and vigilante groups, many of which are allied with the larger cartels.

"You have a kaleidoscope of armed groups," said Mónica Serrano, a professor at the Colegio de Mexico studying violence in Guerrero. "It's one of the most vexing challenges facing the country and is at the root of the violence."

Self-defense forces took off in Michoacan and Guerrero around 2013. Like the group in Guajes de Ayala, they were formed as a desperate attempt to avoid being caught in the crossfire of warring cartels.

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But in places where criminal groups are more present than law enforcement, nearly every vigilante movement that has emerged in recent history has either been coopted by rival cartels or massacred. Mexico's government has been split about whether it should talk to vigilantes or treat them as criminals.

In some cases, groups became cartel paramilitary forces themselves, flush with money and terrorizing the communities they claimed to protect. In others, cartels armed local citizens to help fight off rival gangs.

"They corner you and you can't do anything," Domínguez said. "That's how what's been created – which began as autonomy – is corrupted. People end up joining criminal groups just to survive."

Made in USA

The Guajes de Ayala community said it remains independent, but forces wield equipment far beyond the means of local farmers, including drone detection systems and tapped radio frequencies, and DJI drones worth thousands of dollars to spy on cartel gunmen.

They carry AK-47s and AR-15s stamped with "MADE IN USA" and names of gun makers in Florida, South Carolina and even Poland. Because Mexico has strict gun control laws, the vast majority of arms in Mexico are smuggled from the U.S. by cartels.

One gunman confirmed the vigilantes purchase guns from cartels, but would not say from which group.

Another said he was once part of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, or CJNG, and was paid to join the vigilantes. Another wore a hat reading "El Señor de los Gallos," a nickname for Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, the powerful CJNG leader slain by Mexico's military in February.

Two local criminal gangs fighting with the Nueva Familia Michoacana allow Guajes de Ayala residents to transit their territories to not be closed in on all sides like in the past.

At the same time, Hernández said he feeds intelligence of the rival cartel to law enforcement, and that his group turned down alliance offers from other vigilante groups known for preying on civilians.

The proliferation of armed groups across Mexico is a test for Sheinbaum as she seeks to offset Trump administration threats of U.S. military intervention.

Under Sheinbaum, security forces have come down on criminal groups with a heavier hand than her predecessors. Homicides sharply dipped since she took office to the lowest levels in a decade, government figures show.

But Hernández said, for them, things are worse than before.

"It's a lie. They say the government is doing wonders, but it's nothing but propaganda," he said.

The killing of Oseguera Cervantes, or "El Mencho" was a major blow to Mexico's most powerful criminal enterprise. But experts and some in communities like Guajes de Ayala worry it could fuel more violence if other criminal groups make violent power grabs or if rival factions of CJNG war for control.

One Marine captain in Guerrero, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of security concerns, said his forces were "preparing for a possible reorganization of these groups." He added Mexican forces haven't abandoned communities like Guajes de Ayala, and respond to calls for help from rural areas.

'A place of silence'

The villages in Guajes de Ayala have become ghost towns filled with vacant homes of people too scared to return.

Marisela Mojica, Domínguez's mother, sent six of her children and grandchildren away after her daughter was kidnapped by people claiming to be the Nueva Familia Michoacana.

"If they come to kill us all, I want one of us to still be alive," she said.

Mojica said she hasn't seen her family in six years or met two grandchildren born after the family fled. She doesn't know if she ever will.

Teachers too scared to cross from one criminal group's territory to another stopped coming to classes in October, leaving schools abandoned. Government medical clinics have shuttered.

Hernández counts the abandoned homes left in ruins as he and his gunmen drive out to patrol the rolling peaks and valleys enveloping them.

"These mountains are a place of silence," he said. "You have no voice, and no one hears you."

## Pete Hegseth's Christian rhetoric draws renewed scrutiny after the US goes to war with Iran

By TIFFANY STANLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Since becoming defense secretary, Pete Hegseth has found no shortage of ways to bring his strand of conservative evangelicalism into the Pentagon.

He hosts monthly Christian worship services for employees. His department's promotional videos have displayed Bible verses alongside military footage. In speeches and interviews, he often argues the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and troops should embrace God, potentially risking the military's secular mission and hard-won pluralism.

Now the defense secretary's Christian rhetoric has taken on new meaning after the U.S. and Israel went to war with Iran, an Islamic theocracy.

"The mullahs are desperate and scrambling," he said at a recent Pentagon press briefing, referring to Iran's Shiite Muslim clerics. He later recited Psalm 144, a passage of Scripture that Jews and Christians share: "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle."

Hegseth has a history of defending the Crusades, the brutal medieval wars that pitted Christians against Muslims. In his 2020 book "American Crusade," he wrote that those who enjoy Western civilization should "thank a crusader." Two of his tattoos draw from crusader imagery: the Jerusalem Cross and the phrase "Deus Vult," or "God wills it," which Hegseth has called "the rallying cry of Christian knights as they marched to Jerusalem."

Matthew D. Taylor, a visiting scholar at Georgetown who studies religious extremism and has been a frequent Hegseth critic, said, "The U.S. voluntarily going to war against a Muslim country with the military under the leadership of Pete Hegseth is exactly the kind of scenario that people like me were warning about before the election and throughout his appointment process."

Taylor said Hegseth's rhetoric and leadership "can only inflame and reinforce the fears and deep animosity that the regime in Iran has towards the U.S."

When asked whether Hegseth views the war in Iran in religious terms, a Defense Department spokesperson pointed to a recent CBS interview in which Hegseth seemed to confirm as much.

"We're fighting religious fanatics who seek a nuclear capability in order for some religious Armageddon," Hegseth said of Iranian leaders. "But from my perspective, I mean, obviously I'm a man of faith who encourages our troops to lean into their faith, rely on God."

Allegations US military commanders cited biblical prophecies remain unverified

Generations of evangelicals have been influenced by their own version of Armageddon and the end of the world, circulated by books like the "Left Behind" series and "The Late Great Planet Earth," or the horror film "A Thief in the Night." Some evangelicals espouse prophecies in which warfare involving Israel is key to bringing about the return of Jesus.

Christian Zionist pastor John Hagee, head of Christians United for Israel, said of the Iran war, "Prophetically, we're right on cue."

The co-founder of Hegseth's denomination, however, does not teach this theology. Pastor Doug Wilson of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches identifies as a postmillennialist, meaning he believes most of the apocalyptic events of the Bible have already happened, paving the way for the gradual Christianization of the world before Christ's return.

Hegseth has not said the Iran war is part of Christian prophecy. Yet days after the conflict began, claims went viral that U.S. military commanders were telling troops the war fulfilled biblical prophecies around Armageddon and the return of Christ.

The Associated Press has not been able to verify these claims, which stem from one source: Mikey Weinstein, the head of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a watchdog group. Based on allegations Weinstein said he received from hundreds of troops, 30 Democratic members of Congress asked the Pentagon inspector general to investigate.

In an interview with the AP, Weinstein declined to provide documentation or the original emails he re-

ceived from service members. He said troops were afraid of retaliation, so they would not speak to the media, even if their identities remained protected.

Three major religion watchdog groups — the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Anti-Defamation League and the Council on American-Islamic Relations — said they have not received similar complaints. The Pentagon declined to comment on the allegations.

Hegseth wants to reform the military chaplain corps

Hegseth's church network, the CREC, preaches a patriarchal form of Christianity, where women cannot serve in leadership, and pastors argue that homosexuality should be criminalized. Hegseth last year re-posted a video in which a CREC pastor opposed women's right to vote. Wilson, its most prominent leader, identifies as a Christian nationalist and preached at the Pentagon in February at Hegseth's invitation.

Both Wilson and Hegseth have questioned Muslim immigration to the United States. Wilson argues the country should restrict Muslim immigration in order to remain predominantly Christian. In "American Crusade," Hegseth lamented growing Muslim birth rates and that Muhammad was a popular boys' name in the U.S.

As head of the armed forces, Hegseth has overseen changes that are in line with his conservative Christian worldview, including banning transgender troops, curtailing diversity initiatives and reviewing women in combat roles.

Youssef Chouhoud, a political scientist at Christopher Newport University, said, "The intrusion of Christian nationalist policy, not just Christian nationalist rhetoric ... that is what's troubling."

Hegseth has pledged to reform the military's chaplain corps, which provides spiritual care to troops of any faith and no faith at all. He scrapped the 2025 U.S. Army Spiritual Fitness Guide and wants to renew chaplains' religious focus, which he said in a December video message has been minimized "in an atmosphere of political correctness and secular humanism."

Rabbi Laurence Bazer, a retired U.S. Army colonel and chaplain, said it risks making service members feel like outsiders when the language of military leadership draws exclusively from one faith tradition.

"The U.S. military reflects the full diversity of this country — people of every faith step forward to serve," Bazer said in a statement. "That diversity is a strength worth protecting."

## Exiled Iranian Kurds in Iraq say they will return only if Iran's theocracy falls

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

QUSHTAPA, Iraq (AP) — They fled Iran as children and now, living in Iraq as adults, they express guarded hope that the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran will weaken the theocracy that forced them into exile decades ago.

Behind that hope is the longing of Iranian Kurds in Iraq that they can someday return to homes they only remember through paintings on their walls and faded photographs.

But the thousands of Kurds know their aspirations for political autonomy and their historical opposition to Iran's clerical rule have made that unlikely. They say they will only go back if a new Iranian government is installed, guarantees their safety and supports their goals.

Among them are more than 300 families of Kawa Camp in Irbil's Qushtapa district in northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. They were displaced after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which sparked a decades-long conflict with Kurdish separatists.

Many are descendants of those fighters. They fled as children with their families from the northern Iranian province of Kermanshah. Some joined the resistance in exile, carrying out attacks against security forces inside Iran. Most eke out a living on the margins of the Iraqi Kurdish society, where they lack citizenship and don't have full civil rights, access to services or the ability to own property.

In Kawa Camp, their hope of returning is tempered by deep mistrust of foreign powers that have long exploited their cause for geopolitical ends. Many viewed recent reports that the Trump administration considered calling on them to support ground operations in Iran as the latest example.

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"From 1979 until now, this has been our only hope — that the regime will fall. I'm watching the clock; if it falls now, I'll return home the next second," said a 57-year-old member of the Iranian Kurdish opposition party living in Kawa, who fled Iran at age 11.

The person, like most of those interviewed for this article, spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fear of reprisal from Iran-backed Iraqi militias that have stepped up attacks on Iranian Kurdish bases. They also cite surveillance by Iranian intelligence, since many still have relatives in Iran.

A life of displacement for Iranian Kurds in Iraq

Iraqi Kurds govern a semiautonomous area in northern Iraq. Many have waged insurgency campaigns seeking to establish their own state, which they call Kurdistan. Iranian Kurds have a long history of grievances against the Islamic Republic and also the monarchy that preceded it.

In the Kawa home of community leader Jehangir Ahmadi hangs a painting of an alley in his native village in Iran's Kurdish-majority Kermanshah province, which borders Iraq. He hasn't seen the alley in nearly 50 years, and his childhood reels like an old film: He played among those sandy walls while village elders would chat beneath the poplars.

Ahmadi remembers the mad dash to leave home and the days spent waiting to cross the border. The family first lived in a camp close to the border before being moved to another, in the deserts of western Anbar province. Security rapidly deteriorated after the fall of Saddam Hussein following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, prompting the United Nations to rehouse them.

Over the years, tents gave way to permanent homes, markets sprang up, and the Iranian Kurds obtained the right to work, many as merchants, taxi drivers and factory workers. But buying a house or a car requires finding an Iraqi sponsor who must assume legal responsibility for them, effectively tying their fate to that sponsor, Ahmadi said.

"For all our lives in Iraq we were paying the price of leaving. Until now people look at us like we are slaves," Ahmadi said. "Until now we don't have good work, no good place to live."

In his view, Kurds, and especially Iran's Kurds, have historically been victims. There was the short-lived self-governing Republic of Mahabad in northwestern Iran, backed briefly by the Soviet Union before its fall in 1976; Iran withdrawing support in 1975 for a failed Kurdish uprising against Iraq; Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds in 1988; territorial losses in northeast Syria after the fall of President Bashar Assad in December 2024.

So Ahmadi says he was skeptical of the reported U.S. request to back an Iranian Kurdish force in the current war.

"We didn't trust that they will support us because we are wounded nation, we have been betrayed many times," he said.

Kurdish groups have come under attack from Iran's proxies

Armed Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in Iraq have come under attack from Iran's proxies in Iraq since the Iran war started.

Commanders and Iraqi Kurdish political leaders say they lack the capacity to mount a genuine ground offensive without U.S. air cover, and that the idea floated by the United States was never seriously discussed with Washington.

A senior Iraqi Kurdish official said that some Iranian Kurdish groups initially hoped for a swift collapse of Iran's theocracy and envisioned storming into Iranian Kurdish territory to declare victory. Other Iraqi Kurdish leaders, seeing the administration in Tehran as more resilient, warned them bluntly: "You will be massacred," according to the official.

Unit commander Rebaz Sharifi hid in a mountainside crevice when a drone launched by Iran-backed militias struck a base of the Kurdistan Freedom Party, waiting for further strikes to pass. The party is an Iranian-Kurdish nationalist separatist group known by the local abbreviation PAK.

Sharifi said there are roughly 8,000 to 10,000 Iranian Kurdish fighters — a figure corroborated by two other Iraqi Kurdish officials. Beyond basic assault rifles, they lack sophisticated modern weaponry and do not possess drones, a crucial capability in modern warfare.

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He said Iranian-Kurdish groups are asking for security guarantees, especially air cover, to counter Iranian missiles and drones.

"We don't want to go now because we know we will die because of (Iranian) airstrikes and missiles," he said. "It's not the right time for this because Iranian forces still have power to control the skies."

At the mere possibility that the groups might be mobilizing for deployment, Iran-backed groups in Iraq launched a near-daily volley of air attacks.

"So, imagine what they will do if we move there now," Sharifi said.

Kawa Camp residents face threats from all sides

The threat of continued attacks drove Kurdish fighters to move their families out of military camps and into nearby communities seeking safety.

In Kawa, a local resident affiliated with the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan is sheltering the wife and children of a fighter from the party's armed wing. They moved from the party's camp in Koya, near the border, because of constant attacks in the first days of the war.

The militia drone attacks haven't targeted civilian communities so far, but the party member fears that might change as the war progresses.

"Every day we are afraid of the militias," he said. "We are nervous at night because we think they might hit here also."

And he fears Iran's intelligence working in the area.

"My relatives in Iran told me that they know where I work, what I do, and where I live," he said.

## Today in History: March 21, civil rights activists begin march from Selma to Montgomery

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, March 21, the 80th day of 2026. There are 285 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On March 21, 1965, civil rights demonstrators led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. began their third attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama — this time under the escort of U.S. Army and National Guard troops assigned by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Also on this date:

In 1873, the Spanish National Assembly abolished slavery in Puerto Rico, then a Spanish colony; enslaved people were required to work for three more years for their former owners.

In 1933, Germany's Nazi government established its first concentration camp in the town of Dachau, ostensibly for political prisoners; Dachau held more than 200,000 prisoners and more than 40,000 died there before American forces liberated the camp in April 1945.

In 1952, the Moondog Coronation Ball, considered the first rock 'n' roll concert, took place at Cleveland Arena.

In 1960, police in Sharpeville, South Africa, opened fire and killed at least 69 people at a demonstration against apartheid laws.

In 1963, the United States closed Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary; over 1,500 inmates had been jailed at the island prison off the coast of San Francisco, California, over its three decades of use.

In 1972, Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to the states for ratification by March 1979 (later extended to 1982); 35 of the required 38 states met the ratification deadline. With 38 states having since ratified, its status is in legal limbo

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter announced that the United States would boycott the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow because of the Soviet Union's failure to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.

In 1990, Namibia became an independent nation as the former colony marked the end of 75 years of South African rule.

In 2012, meting out unprecedented punishment for a bounty system that targeted key opposing players,