

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, April 11

PGDCWL High School Baseball Varsity at 3 p.m.; JV vs. Redfield at Redfield, 5 p.m.

Sunday, April 12

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

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

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

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS



Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

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

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

JVT Practice, 6 p.m., Arena

Monday, April 13

Senior Menu: Turkey chow mein, broccoli, fruit, bread sticks.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels

School Lunch: Corn dogs, baked beans

Senior citizens meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

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

Grades 6-8 ELA & Math Testing

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

High School Baseball at Clark. Varsity at 6 p.m., JV to follow.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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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.

Mission Accomplished

Artemis II's four astronauts splashed about 50 miles off the coast of San Diego just after 8 pm ET yesterday, concluding a roughly 10-day trip around the moon.

The Orion capsule reentered Earth's atmosphere at roughly 25,000 miles per hour, enduring temperatures up to 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit—roughly half the heat of the sun's surface. The successful landing was a relief for some experts who questioned whether the spacecraft's heat shield would stand up against such extreme heat. An identical shield used during the uncrewed Artemis I mission in 2022 suffered unexpected damage upon reentry. NASA engineers subsequently revised Artemis II's reentry path to minimize the astronauts' exposure to the heat. Future spacecraft will have different heat shields.

NASA will next turn to Artemis III, a 2027 mission to test lunar landers in Earth's orbit ahead of Artemis IV in 2028, which is expected to land humans on the moon.

Surging gas prices lead to biggest monthly inflation spike in four years.

The annual inflation rate hit 3.3% in March compared with a year earlier, according to a Labor Department report published yesterday. The jump—almost a full percentage point above February's pace—was largely driven by a 10.9% surge in energy costs tied to the Iran war. Excluding food and energy, core prices in March rose 2.6% from a year earlier and 0.2% from February.

Two hundred chimpanzees are waging a civil war in Uganda.

Scientists published evidence this week of a possible civil war within the world's largest known group of wild chimpanzees that has killed at least seven adults and 17 infants. A disease outbreak and a change in social hierarchies triggered by the deaths of key elders likely led the population to split into three distinct groups: the Western, Eastern, and Central chimps. Genetic evidence suggests such intergroup conflicts historically occurred every 500 years, but human activity could disrupt social cohesion and make them more frequent.

Russia and Ukraine agree to 32-hour Orthodox Easter ceasefire.

The pause in hostilities begins at 4 pm local time today and lasts through the end of the day Sunday. It follows a proposal Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sent to the Kremlin via US negotiators. Russian President Vladimir Putin last year declared a 30-hour Easter ceasefire, which both sides accused the other of breaking.

Suspect arrested after Molotov cocktail attack on OpenAI CEO's home.

A 20-year-old man was arrested yesterday for allegedly throwing the incendiary device at Sam Altman's San Francisco home early yesterday morning. It sparked a fire at an exterior gate, but no injuries were reported. The suspect then allegedly went to OpenAI's headquarters, where he made threats to burn down the building. Charges against him are pending as of this writing.

Women's immune systems change with age more than men's.

Women experience an increase in inflammatory immune cells as they age, offering a potential explanation for why nearly 80% of autoimmune diseases occur in women. The finding, published yesterday, comes from the first study of its kind to use equal samples from men and women, who have historically been underrepresented in such research. Scientists say the results could inform more personalized care as the global population skews increasingly older.

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WNBA approves expansion to Cleveland, Detroit, and Philadelphia.

The Cleveland franchise is set to begin play in 2028, followed by Detroit in 2029, and Philadelphia in 2030. These additions, along with expansions to Portland and Toronto this year, will grow the league to 18 teams. The 2026 season is scheduled to tip off May 8, following the signing of a new labor contract last month.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Mel F. in Wyandotte, Michigan.

"I'd been cleaning dead leaves out of my flower beds for a couple of hours when two preteen girls called to me from the sidewalk. They live a block away, but we'd never met. They said they saw me working hard and thought I looked like I could use some lemonade. I was so surprised that I really didn't know what to say besides thank you! I downed [the lemonade in] that red Solo cup, and they skipped off. So observant and generous!"



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Groton Area rallies past Mobridge-Pollock, improves to 2-2

ABERDEEN — Groton Area used timely hitting, aggressive baserunning, and capitalized on Mobridge-Pollock miscues to earn a 14-10 win, improving to 2-2 on the season in a game played at Northern State University.

After a scoreless first inning, Mobridge-Pollock struck first in the top of the second, plating three runs on three hits to take a 3-0 lead. Groton answered with a run in the bottom half, then took control in the third inning.

Groton capitalized on four Mobridge-Pollock errors, along with four walks and a hit batter, to score four runs despite recording just one hit in the inning. That surge gave Groton a lead it would not relinquish.

The Tigers added two more runs in the fourth and broke things open in the fifth with a four-run frame on two hits. Mobridge-Pollock continued to battle, scoring two runs in the fifth and three more in the sixth, but Groton matched the effort with three runs of its own in the sixth to maintain control.

Mobridge-Pollock added two runs in the seventh, aided by Groton's only two errors of the game, but the comeback fell short.

For the game, Mobridge-Pollock finished with 10 runs on seven hits and left five runners on base. Groton Area scored 14 runs on six hits, took advantage of seven Tiger errors, and stranded 10 runners.

Kinsley Rowen earned the win in the circle for Groton, recording four strikeouts while allowing seven hits and six walks.

Mobridge-Pollock pitcher Rue Knudson struck out six batters — all in the first three innings — but was hurt by control issues, issuing nine walks and hitting four batters.

Offensively for Groton Area:

Libby Cole led the way with a double, a single, and two RBIs

Jayden Penning added a single and two RBIs

Kinsley Rowen helped her own cause with a double and two RBIs

Abby Fjeldheim had a single, was hit by a pitch, and drove in a run

Rylen Eckern recorded a single and drew two walks

Hannah Sandness reached base three times via walks

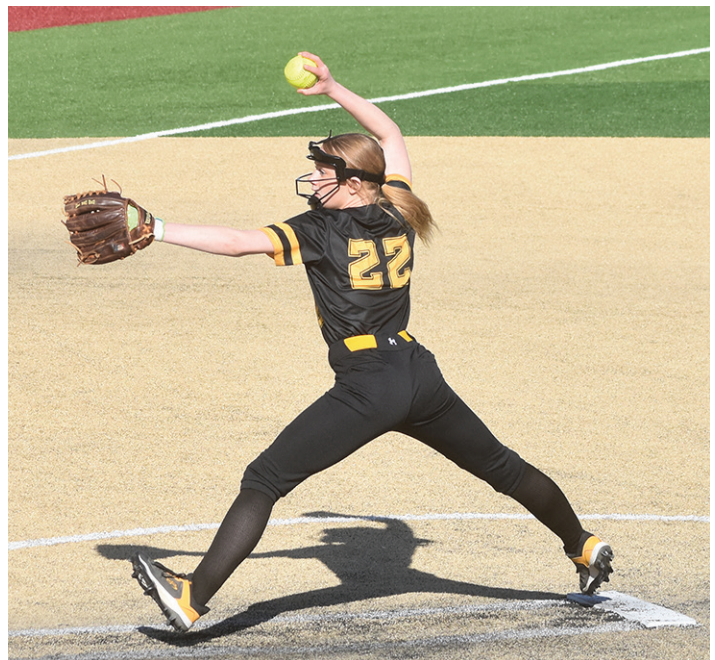
For Mobridge-Pollock:

Jacey Netterville had two doubles and two RBIs



Short stop Abby Fjeldheim

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Pitcher Kinsley Rowen

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Jerica Locke and Coach Amanda Bisbee.

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

Rue Knudson added a two-RBI triple
Brooke Merkel doubled and drove in a run
Sophie Keller, Faith Heil, and Mystic Erickson each contributed hits

Groton Area head coach Amanda Bisbee said the team showed improvement in several areas.

"We did a few more things this game," Bisbee said. "We worked on our baserunning a lot this week, and it showed. Our bats kind of came alive after the first couple innings once we adjusted to the pitching speed."

Bisbee also credited her coaching staff.

"I've got to give credit to Sue," she said of assistant coach Sue Fjeldheim. "She's my right-hand person, and we work really well together. That's a big part of the improvement we're seeing."

Athletic director Alexa Sperry said the game itself was nearly in jeopardy earlier in the day due to weather conditions in Groton.

"We got the call this morning that we couldn't play in Groton," Sperry said. "We reached out, made a few calls, and were able to get this field lined up at Northern. Everybody just wanted to play."

Bisbee echoed that sentiment.

"This was a great softball day," she said. "We've played at the Dome, now here at Northern — it's been a fun experience for the girls."

Groton Area head coach Amanda Bisbee said the team will face an unusual pause in the schedule due to school activities, including the HOSA conference. "We've got a big break coming up, and a lot of that is because of HOSA," Bisbee said. "We're going to be missing a big

portion of our team next week with students attending state, plus we've got prom right after that. It's a busy stretch for the girls, so we'll just keep taking it one day at a time and make the most of our practice opportunities when we can."

A junior varsity game was also played, though due to fading daylight, both teams agreed to allow all remaining Moberidge-Pollock hitters to bat in the fourth inning to ensure participation for all players.

Groton Area is next scheduled to travel to Arlington on April 20 and Hanson on April 21. The game was broadcast on GDILIVE.COM and sponsored by Dacotah Bank.



Catcher Elizabeth Cole

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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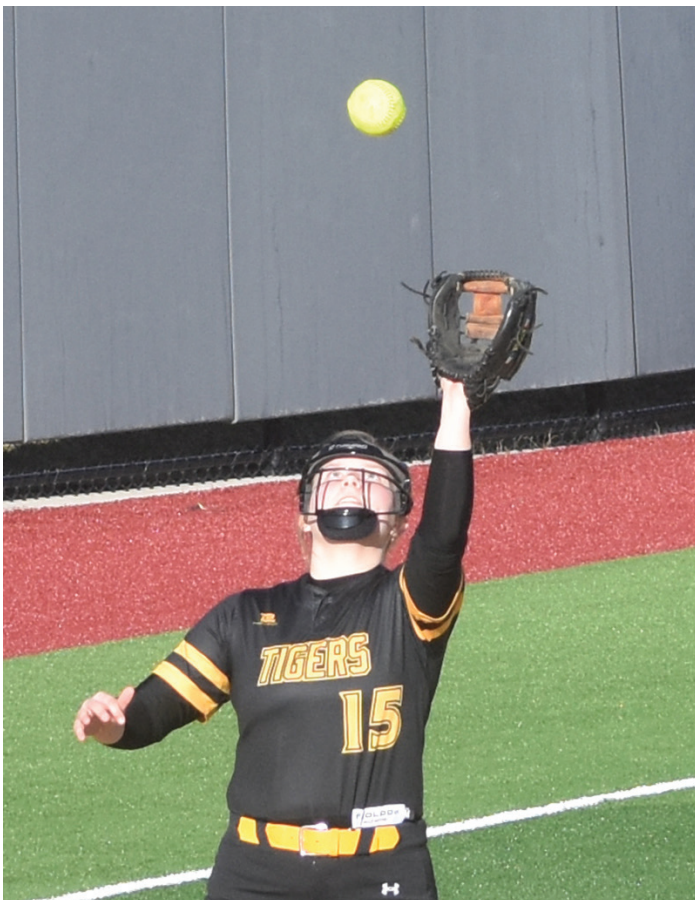
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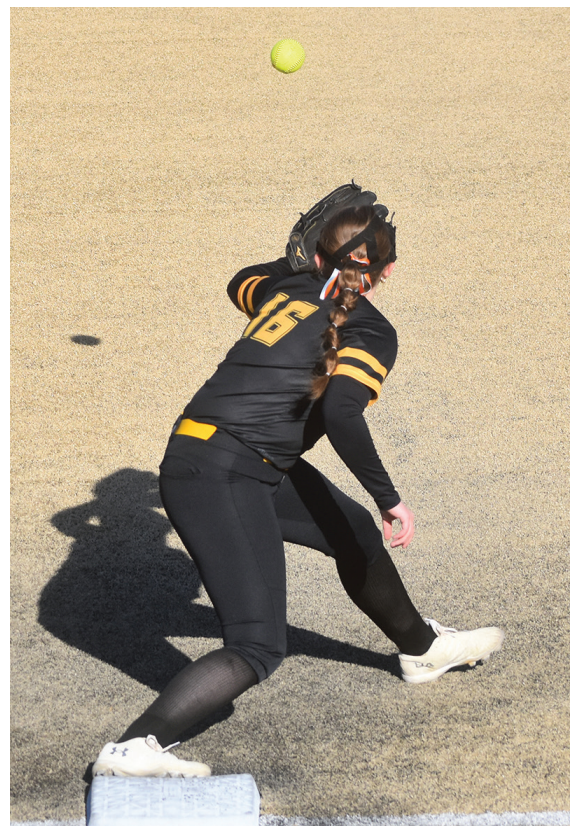
**Arianna Dinger and
Asst. Coach Sue Fjeldheim**
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Pitcher Kinsley Rowen
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Third Baseman Jaedyn Penning
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



First baseman Rylen Ekern
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

ADVERTISEMENT FOR BIDS

City Park Lawn Care

Notice is hereby given that sealed bids will be received by the Columbia City Council at the office of the City Finance Officer, 25 Broadway Street N. Columbia SD 57433, until 7:00 o'clock p.m. local time on the 6th day of May 2026, at which time bids will be publicly opened, read and referred to the Columbia City Council of the City of Columbia, at City Hall 25 Broadway N. for the following services:

Mowing services at the City Ball Park located with an address of 260 Broadway St S. Columbia, SD 57433.

Mowing services at the City Park located with an address of 255 Broadway St S. Columbia, SD 57433.

Specifications shall include the following:

Mowing of all grass areas in both locations once per week. Any extra days that require mowing as ordered by the City Council will be pro-rated. Bid should include prices for standard mowing and a price for bagged mowing. String trimming of areas in which a mower cannot reach is required each time the grass is mowed.

Contractor shall furnish all equipment for such tasks listed above.

This will not include the mowing of the actual Ball Diamond (inside the fence).

This contract would be for the 2026 lawn care season. The Columbia City council will entertain additional one-year contracts for up to 5 years.

Bids shall be submitted in accordance with the specifications. All bids shall be plainly marked on the outside of the envelope with the words "City Park Lawn Care". Bids are to be accompanied by a Certificate of Liability Insurance.

Questions can be directed to Jeremy Dosch 605-380-7529.

The Columbia City Council reserves the right to reject any and all bids, waive irregularities and accept the bid it deems most favorable and in the best interest of the City of Columbia after all bids have been examined.

By Order of the Columbia City Council.

Dated this 1st day of April 2026.

By: /s/ Cara Dennert

Cara Dennert

Finance Officer

Secretary of State announces unsuccessful challenge to U.S. House Petition

(Pierre, S.D.) – Secretary of State Monae L. Johnson has announced that James Bialota's challenge to Attorney General Marty Jackley's candidate petitions was unsuccessful. Attorney General Jackley will remain on the ballot as a Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives at the Primary Election held on June 2, 2026.

A Republican candidate for U.S. House requires 2,171 valid signatures to appear on the ballot. April 1, 2026, the Secretary of State's office completed the random sample of the petition signatures and found 86.7 percent to be valid. Based on the results of the random sample, 3,168 signatures were deemed valid.

Mr. Bialota's challenge resulted in seven additional signatures within the random sample being deemed invalid. This impacted the overall validity rate by a little over one percent leaving Jackley with 3,126 valid signatures.

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Groton Area Varsity Junior hurdlers during NSU Clinic drills. L-R Teagan Hanten, Emerlee Jones, and McKenna Tietz with NSU Renae Taylor. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



NSU track clinic Renae Taylor gives block start pointers to Groton Area hurdlers and sprinters L-R Teagan Hanten, Emerlee Jones, McKenna Tietz, Kella Tracy, Makenna Krause, Lincoln Krause, NSU Renae Taylor and Keegen Tracy. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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A happy group of Groton Area sprinters and hurdlers pose with NSU Track Clinician Renae Taylor. L-R NSU Renae Taylor, Makenna Krause, Teagan Hanten, Emerlee Jones, Kella Tracy, McKenna Tietz, Keegen Tracy and Lincoln Krause. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



Northern State University NCAA Track All-American Renae Taylor instructs during this week's NSU Track Clinic. Groton Area track sprinters listen attentively. L-R Makenna Krause, Kella Tracy, NSU Renae Taylor, Coach Carla Tracy, Keegen Tracy and Lincoln Krause. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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Groton Area boys edge Ipswich for team title at Gettysburg Battler Invitational; girls place third

GETTYSBURG — The Groton Area boys track and field team turned in a strong all-around performance to capture the team title at the Gettysburg Battler Invitational, edging Ipswich by just two points, 85-83. Timber Lake followed in third with 78.

The Tigers were powered by a dominant day from Keegen Tracy, who swept the sprint events. Tracy won the 100 meters in 10.99 seconds, took the 200 in 23.05, and added another victory in the 400 meters with a time of 53.95.

Distance standout Jayden Schwan also delivered a pair of first-place finishes, winning the 1600 meters in 4:50.95 and the 3200 meters in 10:22.65. Riley Shellenberger added depth in the distance events, placing seventh in both the 800 (2:23.86) and 1600 (5:08.83).

Groton Area's relay teams contributed key points throughout the meet. The 4x200 relay team of Lincoln Krause, Ethan Kroll, JJ Muller and Tracy finished second in 1:34.57, while the 4x800 relay (Schwan, Jace Johnson, Shellenberger and Briggs Conn) placed third in 9:26.14. The 4x100 relay team of Krause, Kroll, Jordan Schwan and Muller added a fourth-place finish (47.23), and the sprint medley relay team of Krause, Muller, Jordan Schwan and Johnson was fourth in 4:08.87.

Individually, Krause also placed sixth in the 100 meters (11.57), and Kroll took fifth in the long jump with a leap of 19 feet, 6.5 inches.

In the girls division, Groton Area finished in a tie for third place with South Border at 67 points. Ipswich dominated the meet with 155.5 points, followed by Timber Lake with 75.

The Tigers were led by standout relay performances, sweeping three events. Groton won the 4x100 relay (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Makenna Krause) in 52.38, the 4x200 relay (Tietz, Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Rylee Dunker) in 1:50.46, and the sprint medley relay (Makenna Krause, Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Ruelle Gilbert) in 4:42.52.

McKenna Tietz also claimed an individual title in the 300-meter hurdles, winning in 49.21. In the 100-meter hurdles, Groton placed four athletes in the top 13, led by Ella Kettner in sixth (19.02), followed by Tevan Hanson (8th, 19.52), Emerlee Jones (10th, 19.92) and Teagan Hanten (13th, 20.47).

In distance events, Ruelle Gilbert placed fourth in the 1600 meters (5:53.51), with Ashlynn Warrington finishing eighth (6:13.48).

Other contributors included Makenna Krause, who took fifth in the 100 meters (13.30), Avery Crank, who placed fifth in the discus (85-2), and Emerlee Jones, who finished sixth in the high jump (4-0).

Groton also added a third-place finish in the 4x400 relay, with Tietz, Traphagen, Dunker and Kella Tracy clocking a time of 4:29.84.

Boy's Division

Team Scores: 1. Groton Area 85, 2. Ipswich 83, 3. Timber Lake 78, 4. Aberdeen Christian 69, 5. Fredrick Area 67, 6. Faulkton Area 47, 7. South Border (Wishek/Ashley) 40, 8. Leola 38, 9. Mobridge-Pollock 35, 9. Stanley County 35, 11. Bison 32, 12. Herreid/Selby Area 31, 13. Redfield 26, 14. Gettysburg 25, 15. Sully Buttes 16, 15. Highmore-Harold 16, 17. Hoven 11, 18. Faith 8, 18. McIntosh 8, 20. Zeeland 5

100 Meters: 1. Keegen Tracy, 10.99; 6. Lincoln Krause, 11.57; 56. Sam Crank, 14.22.

200 Meters: 1. Keegen Tracy, 23.05; 53. Sam Crank, 30.25.

400 Meters: 1. Keegen Tracy, 53.95.

800 Meters: 7. Riley Shellenberger, 2:23.86.

1600 Meters: 1. Jayden Schwan, 4:50.95; 7. Riley Shellenberger, 5:08.83.

3200 Meters: 1. Jayden Schwan, 10:22.65.

4x100 Relay: 4. Groton, (Lincoln Krause, Ethan Kroll, Jordan Schwan, JJ Muller), 47.23.

4x200 Relay: 2. Groton, (Lincoln Krause, Ethan Kroll, JJ Muller, Keegen Tracy), 1:34.57.

4x800 Relay: 3. Groton, (Jayden Schwan, Jace Johnson, Riley Shellenberger, Briggs Conn), 9:26.14.

SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800]: 4. (Groton), Lincoln Krause, JJ Muller, Jordan Schwan, Jace

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Johnson), 4:08.87.

Discus - 1.6kg: 42. Jordan Schwan, 70' 2".

Long Jump: 5. Ethan Kroll, 19' 6.5".

Girl's Division

Team Scores: 1. Ipswich 155.5, 2. Timber Lake 75, 3. Groton Area 67, 3. South Border (Wishek/Ashley) 67, 5. Herreid/Selby Area 51, 6. Mobridge-Pollock 48, 7. Highmore-Harrold 46, 8. Gettysburg 45, 9. Faulkton Area 44.5, 10. Bison 34.5, 11. Hoven 29.5, 12. Redfield 25, 12. Aberdeen Christian 25, 14. Stanley County 19, 15. Faith 12, 16. McIntosh 7, 17. Leola 1

100 Meters: 5. Makenna Krause, 13.30; 47. Suri Jetto, 16.41.

200 Meters: 39. Suri Jetto, 35.59.

400 Meters: 30. Suri Jetto, 1:25.40.

1600 Meters: 4. Ryelle Gilbert, 5:53.51; 8. Ashlynn Warrington, 6:13.48.

100m Hurdles - 33" / 0.838m: 6. Ella Kettner, 19.02; 8. Tevan Hanson, 19.52; 10. Emerlee Jones, 19.92; 13. Teagan Hanten, 20.47.

300m Hurdles - 30" / 0.762m: 1. McKenna Tietz, 49.21; 9. Ella Kettner, 57.58; 15. Teagan Hanten, 1:01.68.

4x100 Relay: 1. Groton, (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Makenna Krause), 52.38.

4x200 Relay: 1. Groton, (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Rylee Dunker), 1:50.46.

4x400 Relay: 3. Groton, (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Rylee Dunker, Kella Tracy), 4:29.84.

SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800]: 1. Groton, (Makenna Krause, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Ryelle Gilbert), 4:42.52.

Discus - 1kg: 5. Avery Crank, 85' 2".

Javelin - 600g: 17. Avery Crank, 65' 6".

High Jump: 6. Emerlee Jones, 4' 0".

Long Jump: 19. Teagan Hanten, 12' 5.5".

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GFP Commission Holds April Meeting

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission held their April meeting in Pierre at the Matthews Training Center on April 9-10.

Petitions

The Commission accepted a petition to align dates for both cow elk and bull elk tags in Unit 4 of the Black Hills elk season. The petition requested to open cow elk hunting two weeks earlier on October 1 to align with bull elk hunting, with the intent of increasing cow elk harvest. The petition will now become a formal proposal scheduled for a public hearing and finalization at the May meeting.

FINALIZATIONS

Antelope Hunting Seasons

The Commission voted to remove the 4th antelope draw and to allow a hunter to apply for a "Special Antelope" license as a choice in the first drawing for the antelope season. This will eliminate the separate drawing for "Special Antelope" and make it a unit choice in the Prairie antelope season drawing.

Deer Hunting Seasons

The Commission approved several changes to deer seasons for 2026, including:

Removed the license tag type specifications for antelope, deer, and landowner-on-own-land elk. Those tag types will now be designated in administrative actions;

Made "Free antlerless whitetail" landowner-own-land licenses available in deer units where antlerless-only East River or West River Deer Season licenses are available;

Discussed changing archery and muzzleloader "any deer" licenses to "any buck" licenses; and

Discussed license reductions in some East River and West River Deer Hunting units. License types and allocations will be finalized in May.

Elk Hunting Seasons

The Commission made several changes to elk hunting seasons for 2026, including:

Modified the season structure and unit description of the Special Custer State Park Antlerless Elk hunting season and splitting that season to separate hunt dates;

Created a new prairie elk hunting unit (PRE-ERA) to include all counties east of the Missouri River, excluding the interior boundary of the Crow Creek

Reservation, with season dates from Sep. 1 - Dec. 31. This unit will have unlimited "any elk" licenses;

Opened all prairie elk season units to landowner-own-land, resident only, antlerless elk licenses;

Expanded season dates and license types for:

PRE-11B from Sep. 1 - Oct. 15 to Sep. 1 - Dec. 31.

PRE-35A and PRE-35B from Sep. 15 - Dec. 31 to Sep. 1 - Dec. 31.

PRE - 49A from Sep. 15 - Oct. 31 and Dec. 1 - Dec. 31 to Sep. 1 - Dec. 31.

Opened the Special Custer State Park Antlerless Elk Hunting Season, with license numbers to be set at 50 total licenses; and

Set the Black Hill Firearm, Black Hills Archery, Custer State Park Firearm, Custer State Park Early Archery, and Prairie Elk hunting season license types and numbers.

Tag allocations for all elk hunting seasons can be found online.

Waterfowl Hunting Seasons

The Commission reduced the daily limit of Canada geese during the August Management Take and the Early Fall Canada Goose hunting seasons from 15 to 8 geese.

They also removed Brown, Edmunds, Faulk, McPherson, and Spink counties from the August Management Take unit.

Bighorn Sheep Hunting Season

The Commission voted to increase the number of bighorn sheep licenses from seven to eight.

Public Comments Being Accepted

To hear the discussion on these topics, audio from the meeting is available through South Dakota Public Broadcasting and will soon be available on the GFP website as part of the meeting archive.

To see these topics in their entirety, visit gfp.sd.gov/commission/information.

To be included in the public record and to be considered by the Commission, comments must include a full name and city of residence and be submitted by 11:59 p.m. CDT on May 3.

The next GFP Commission meeting will be held at the Custer State Park Event Barn May 7-8.

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

South Dakota's state-owned shooting range exceeds annual visitation estimate in first five months

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

South Dakota's new state-owned West River outdoor shooting range has had as many visits in five months as officials anticipated for its entire first year, according to an update Thursday.

The Pete Lien & Sons Shooting Sports Complex has logged more than 30,000 total visits since opening in early November.

In 2024, officials with Game, Fish and Parks guessed the site would see that many visits annually.

"We're there in 5 months of operation," the agency's John Kanta said during a meeting of the state's Game, Fish and Parks Commission.

Kanta said a rather mild winter helped. He said the complex has also sold 700 memberships and brought in nearly \$100,000 in total sales.

The 400-acre complex is roughly 15 miles north of Rapid City and 25 miles southeast of Sturgis. It includes areas for long-range shooting, clay target shooting and tactical training.

Shooting competitions are filling the calendar, officials said, with some events expected to draw hundreds of shooters, and law enforcement agencies regularly use the site for training.

Rising use will likely require more staffing, according to Wildlife Division Director Tom Kirschenmann.

The strong early turnout comes after years of scrutiny over the project's funding and development. After tribal artifacts were found during initial land surveys, Game, Fish and Parks opted not to use federal money to avoid stricter requirements for studying the site's significance to Native Americans. Former Gov. Kristi Noem directed \$13.5 million in governor-controlled Future Fund money to the project after lawmakers repeatedly declined to fund it.

Gun-industry companies and groups contributed \$2 million toward construction, and some Democrats raised concerns about whether that would give donors leverage over the state.

About \$6 million of the project's total funding has been given or pledged by donors.

The Department of Game, Fish and Parks initially said in 2021 that the project would cost about \$9.9 million. That grew to \$12 million in 2022. The state paused the project when calls for bids drew only one bid. The price tag had ballooned to about \$20 million by the time the state broke ground in December 2023.

The facility's summer hours run from 8:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. from May through August.

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.

Environmental, tribal concerns persist as fireworks bring 'rock concert in phone booth' to Rushmore

Wildfires, pollution, stress on endangered animals, potential protests all in the mix for July 3 event

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

When Cheryl Schreier learned of plans for fireworks this summer at Mount Rushmore, she thought about the behind-the-scenes planning it takes to host thousands of people at the national memorial she formerly oversaw.

"It's like having a rock concert in a phone booth," she said.

The event is scheduled for July 3, the day before the nation's 250th birthday. Assuming weather or drought-induced fire risks don't cause a cancellation, it will be the latest installment in the western South Dakota mountain carving's on-again, off-again relationship with fireworks.

The National Park Service approved fireworks shows at Mount Rushmore during the 1990s and early 2000s. The agency then disallowed the displays for 11 years — including during Schreier's time as the memorial's superintendent — due to concerns about wildfires sparked by embers falling in the surrounding national forest, lingering litter from exploded fireworks packaging, and water pollution from fireworks chemicals.

Then, in 2020, South Dakota Republican Gov. Kristi Noem convinced President Donald Trump to bring the fireworks back and attend the event. Trump said then that "nobody knew why" the fireworks had ended, despite the well-documented concerns.

Those concerns remain, and some new ones have arisen.

Wildfire concerns grow amid drought

The National Park Service mostly relied on a six-year-old environmental assessment, updated with some new information, to justify the fireworks display this year.

Even though the Trump administration used the 2020 report to approve that year's fireworks, the document acknowledged the water pollution and litter, said past fireworks had ignited a total of 21 small fires around the mountain, and cited concerns about disturbing wildlife and overwhelming the nearby city of Keystone with traffic.

A stray spark could turn into more than a small fire. More than half of South Dakota is under drought conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. Some of the most extreme drought conditions are in Pennington County, where Mount Rushmore is located. In neighboring Custer County, a wildfire burned more than 9,000 acres last month.

During fireworks shows at Mount Rushmore, firefighters are stationed around the mountain. It's important to think about their safety in "very rough terrain" at nighttime, Schreier said. She also worries about the safety of event attendees.

"If you place thousands of people in an area like that, and fire starts from fireworks, potentially, you have to evacuate all of those people on limited roadways that are going to be already impacted by a huge number of support staff and vehicles," she said. "It doesn't make a lot of sense."

Effects on endangered species, water pollution

This year's report also reveals the potential for negatively affecting northern long-eared bats, an endangered species, and tricolored bats, which have been proposed for listing as endangered. Both species live near the mountain and have experienced "severe population declines" from a fungal disease known as white-nose syndrome, according to the environmental assessment.

The fireworks will occur during a time of year when many young northern long-eared bats are still dependent on their mothers. The report says "several life stages" of the species "may be affected, with the greatest potential for adverse effects affecting pups."

Impacts of fireworks noise on northern long-eared bats who recently learned to fly may range from "temporary stress to separation from their mothers (upon which they may still be dependent by the date of this event), to mortality," according to the assessment.

There's also a pair of nesting peregrine falcons near the mountain, Schreier said. The birds are a state-

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threatened species. If found to be within a quarter-mile of the fireworks launch site, the assessment says, the finding will prompt the National Park Service to consult with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks for mitigation and safety measures.

Fireworks also leave chemical compounds known as perchlorates in surrounding water, posing a threat to fish, wildlife and people who might drink the water. The fireworks event this year will raise perchlorate levels, according to this year's environmental assessment.

"Over time, it can dissipate, but it's still one of those chemicals that really are not good for human beings," Schreier said. "People say, well, it'll dissipate over time, but the point is, here we are, we're actually placing those chemicals into this particular environment when we really shouldn't be, especially, a National Park Service area."

Tourism impact touted

Costs for fireworks, security, wildfire prevention and other aspects of the event are covered by a mix of local, state and federal funding sources. A Government Accountability Office report estimated that the total cost of the 2020 event was about \$4 million, with the state's share surpassing \$1 million.

Tourism officials estimated the 2020 fireworks brought about \$22 million worth of global advertising to the state, through promotion, live coverage and news stories.

"They were brought back in 2020, during a difficult time in America, in the world, with COVID," said Jim Hagen, the state's secretary of tourism. "It just brought a tremendous spotlight again to South Dakota."

The board learned "a lot of lessons" from the 2020 event, Hagen said. There were questions about how to ticket and promote the event and how to manage traffic flow, among other details.

"As a team, we had never coordinated the fireworks before," Hagen said. "This time around we have a playbook in place."

The environmental assessment anticipates a "maximum of 4,700 attendees" for this year's fireworks. In 2020, 7,500 tickets were awarded.

On a typical summer day, the park staff can see tens of thousands of visitors, Schreier said, "but it's not all at once."

"People come throughout the busiest times of the day, normally from 10 a.m. to 2 in the afternoon, and then there would be a lull of people," Schreier said. "You had a nice flow of people where you could plan it, so you could be there at the first part of the day, and not really experience huge crowds."

This year, the fireworks are an America 250 event, and will return fireworks to Mount Rushmore "in a safe and responsible manner," according to an agreement between Noem's successor, Gov. Larry Rhoden, and the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Rhoden's office said it's "optimistic" Trump will accept an invitation to attend. If he does, it could add extra motivation for protesters.

Indigenous resistance expected

This year's environmental assessment cited opposition from Native American tribes that consider the Black Hills — where Mount Rushmore is located — to be a sacred site in their spiritual traditions. During the 2020 event, a Native American protest turned into a clash with law enforcement.

Nick Tilsen, an Oglala Lakota organizer and executive director of the Indigenous advocacy organization NDN Collective, said many Native American people remain opposed to fireworks at Mount Rushmore.

"My guess is that Lakota people all across the homelands from this area won't sit on the sidelines," he said.

Law enforcement arrested more than a dozen people, including Tilsen, when they blocked the road to Mount Rushmore on the day of the 2020 event. The National Guard helped law enforcement officers break up the protest, using pepper spray and pepper ball projectiles. The charges against the protesters were eventually dropped.

The protest was about more than fireworks, Tilsen said. The 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie designated an area including all of western South Dakota as the Great Sioux Reservation, but the United States broke the treaty during the 1870s Black Hills gold rush and subsequently pushed tribes onto smaller reservations.

Some Native American people and groups, including Tilsen's organization, advocate for the return of the

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Black Hills to Indigenous ownership.

"To think that this is about fireworks at Mount Rushmore is to oversimplify the issue, and I think that we need to be having meaningful conversation about what the return of the land in the Black Hills is back to Indian people," Tilsen said.

After the president of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe delivered the annual State of the Tribes address to South Dakota lawmakers in January, Rhoden told reporters he held an impromptu, closed-door meeting with tribal leaders from across the state. He said some of the leaders asked him to cancel the fireworks.

"I told them very politely, that was not negotiable," Rhoden said during a February press conference. "We're too far down the road."

The memorial will be closed July 3 except for visitors with tickets for the event. Tickets will be awarded by a lottery system, similar to 2020's event. The lottery is open now through Sunday.

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

CDC's 2025 data shows birth rates continuing to slide

BY: KELCIE MOSELEY-MORRIS

New data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows fertility and birth rates continue to fall across the U.S., while cesarean section procedures increased and preterm birth rates remained flat.

The 2025 provisional number of births fell 1% from the previous year to about 3.6 million births, and the general fertility rate also dropped 1% for women between the ages of 15 and 44. The decrease was a difference of 22,534 births. The national fertility rate is calculated as the total number of live births per 1,000 women of reproductive age.

The number of births has continued to slowly decline or remain flat since 2015, according to the CDC, and the fertility and birth rates among teenagers continues to fall by much larger margins. The teenage fertility rate has decreased by 72% since 2007, down another 7% last year for teens aged 15 to 19.

Republicans, including Vice President JD Vance, have focused on the declining birth rate as a problem that should be addressed by national and state policies. Vance campaigned on increasing taxes on people without children and expanding the child tax credit to increase birth rates.

But many sociologists have said low birth rates are a sign of an advanced culture that provides more opportunities for people to pursue career and life goals, and some of the negative factors that drive down rates are related to affordability and uncertainty. Women interviewed by States Newsroom in 2025 said the cost of daycare, state policies around abortion and in vitro fertilization and general political instability were leading them to decide not to have more kids or not to have kids at all.

The CDC also tracks maternal and infant health characteristics, and found that the rate of C-section deliveries is the highest it's been since 2013, continuing to increase as it has nearly every year since 2020. Among those having their first child, the rate increased from 26.6% in 2024 to 26.9% in 2025, making it the highest rate since 2012.

Preterm birth rates were largely unchanged or slightly lower, the data showed, as it has been since 2021. *Stateline reporter Kelcie Moseley-Morris can be reached at kmoseley@stateline.org.*

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

Kelcie Moseley-Morris covers reproductive rights for Stateline. Based in Idaho, she has covered the effects of abortion bans nationwide, as well as reproductive health issues.

Gas prices soar by 21% as government inflation figures reflect Trump's war on Iran

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — Spikes in energy prices caused by the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran drove up inflation for Americans in March, according to the latest consumer price index figures released Friday.

Costs jumped 0.9% in March compared to the previous month — that's up from the 0.3% increase in February.

Prices for all items together, including food, energy, shelter and other commodities like vehicles, rose by 3.3% from a year ago. That's the highest annual jump since May 2024, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics historical data.

Fuel costs drove the spike, with gasoline and fuel oil together rising 10.9% in March compared to the previous month. Singled out, gas prices jumped 21.2% in March. The cost for airfare, largely driven by jet fuel prices, rose 2.7% in March, up from the 1.4% jump in February.

President Donald Trump launched the joint war in Iran with Israel on Feb. 28. In response to the intense bombing campaign that killed the country's supreme leader and numerous senior officials, the Iranian regime effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passage in and out of the Persian Gulf vital to the transport of one-fifth of the world's petroleum.

As of Friday, Americans were paying \$4.15 on average nationwide for a gallon of regular gas, according to AAA. The average for diesel across the U.S. is \$5.68 per gallon.

Prior to the war, a gallon of regular hadn't topped \$3 all year.

Iran's de facto takeover of the Strait of Hormuz by threatening to strike any tankers, other than a handful from friendly countries, has caused the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market, according to the International Energy Agency.

Despite a tenuous ceasefire agreed to Tuesday evening Eastern time, Iran is still controlling the strait. Ten oil tankers transited the waterway Tuesday, and only one on Wednesday, according to the latest figures available from the Joint Maritime Information Center, which tracks tankers and cargo ships worldwide that are transmitting location data.

Prior to the war, roughly 140 vessels daily flowed freely through the Strait of Hormuz.

Dems pounce on affordability issue

Democrats blamed Trump Friday for higher inflation, as affordability is emerging as perhaps the single-most important issue ahead of the 2026 midterm elections in November that will determine control of Congress.

Democratic National Committee Chair Ken Martin said the president is "pushing working families to the brink."

"Trump promised to 'lower prices on Day One,' and instead he waged an unhinged trade war and started an unpopular war with Iran — and what have Americans gotten in return? Nothing except even higher prices. Americans are sick and tired of this president putting his own interests first and using their hard-earned dollars to fund his war instead of making health care more affordable or expanding access to child care," Martin said in a statement Friday morning.

White House senior deputy press secretary Kush Desai responded to the inflation figures, saying the president "has always been clear about short-term disruptions as a result of Operation Epic Fury, disruptions that the Administration has been diligently working to mitigate."

"Although gas and energy prices are seeing volatility, prices of eggs, beef, prescription drugs, dairy, and other household essentials are falling or remain stable thanks to President Trump's policies. As the Administration ensures the free flow of energy through the Strait of Hormuz, the American economy remains on a solid trajectory thanks to the Administration's robust supply-side agenda of tax cuts, deregulation, and energy abundance," Desai wrote in a statement Friday morning posted on social media.

Other costs

The price index for food consumed at home decreased 0.2% compared to the previous month, but increased 1.9% from a year ago.

The costs of fruits and vegetables rose 1% in March compared to the previous month, but prices for meat, poultry, fish and eggs declined 0.6%, according to the latest BLS figures.

The price index for items minus food and energy rose 0.2% in March, matching the increase in February. The cost of all items, less food and energy, rose 2.6% over the past 12 months.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Melania Trump denounces 'baseless lies' connecting her to Epstein

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — First lady Melania Trump said Thursday she was “never involved in any capacity” with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and that “baseless lies” about her are being circulated.

In a rare solo statement livestreamed on the White House website, Melania Trump also called for a congressional hearing featuring the women who have shared stories of abuse by Epstein, who died in jail in 2019 while awaiting federal trial on sex trafficking charges.

“I call on Congress to provide the women who have been victimized by Epstein with a public hearing specifically centered around the survivors, to give these victims their opportunity to testify under oath in front of Congress,” the first lady said in her nearly six-minute remarks.

“With the power of sworn testimony, each and every woman should have her day to tell her story in public, if she wishes, and then her testimony should be permanently entered into the Congressional Record,” she added. “Then and only then, we will have the truth.”

Since returning to office, President Donald Trump has repeatedly dismissed the government’s files related to Epstein as a “hoax.” However, throughout the 2024 campaign, Trump promised to make the investigatory materials public.

The scandal has followed the president through most of his first term. While Trump shared a well-documented friendship with Epstein, who pleaded guilty to soliciting a minor in Florida in 2008, he denies any knowledge of Epstein’s criminal activities.

The first lady also reproached individuals who she said are “devoid of ethical standards” for spreading “completely false” stories that she shared relationships with Epstein and convicted sex trafficker Ghislane Maxwell.

“I was not a participant, was never on Epstein’s plane, and never visited his private island,” she said. “I have never been legally accused or (convicted) of a crime in connection with Epstein sex trafficking, abuse of minors and other repulsive behavior. The false smears about me from meanspirited and politically motivated individuals and entities looking to cause damage to my good name to gain financially and climb politically must stop.”

Free speech suit

It was unclear what spurred the first lady’s statement.

She specifically mentioned the Daily Beast, James Carville and HarperCollins UK. The three are mentioned in exhibits attached to a lawsuit in New York against Melania Trump by journalist Michael Wolff, accusing her of seeking to intimidate him into retracting statements he’d made alleging a connection between her and Epstein.

She also mentioned a 2002 email exchange between her and Maxwell that was revealed among the hundreds of thousands of records from the federal Epstein investigation that the Justice Department released beginning in December, as required by law. The first lady defended the email exchange as “casual correspondence.”

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All but one member of Congress supported legislation compelling the Justice Department to release the Epstein files.

The effort gained steam after the department, then under Attorney General Pam Bondi, said in July it would not release anything further related to the case. Bondi had previously claimed she had Epstein's client list sitting on her desk.

Trump removed Bondi this month.

Dem endorses call for hearing

Rep. Robert Garcia, D-Calif., the top Democrat on the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, lauded the first lady's call for a hearing.

"We agree with First Lady Melania Trump's call for a public hearing with the survivors of Jeffrey Epstein. We encourage Chairman Comer to respond to the First Lady's request and schedule a public hearing immediately," Garcia wrote on X.

The Oversight Committee, led by Kentucky Republican James Comer, is conducting its own investigation into the files and has subpoenaed high-profile figures to testify, including former President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as well as Bondi.

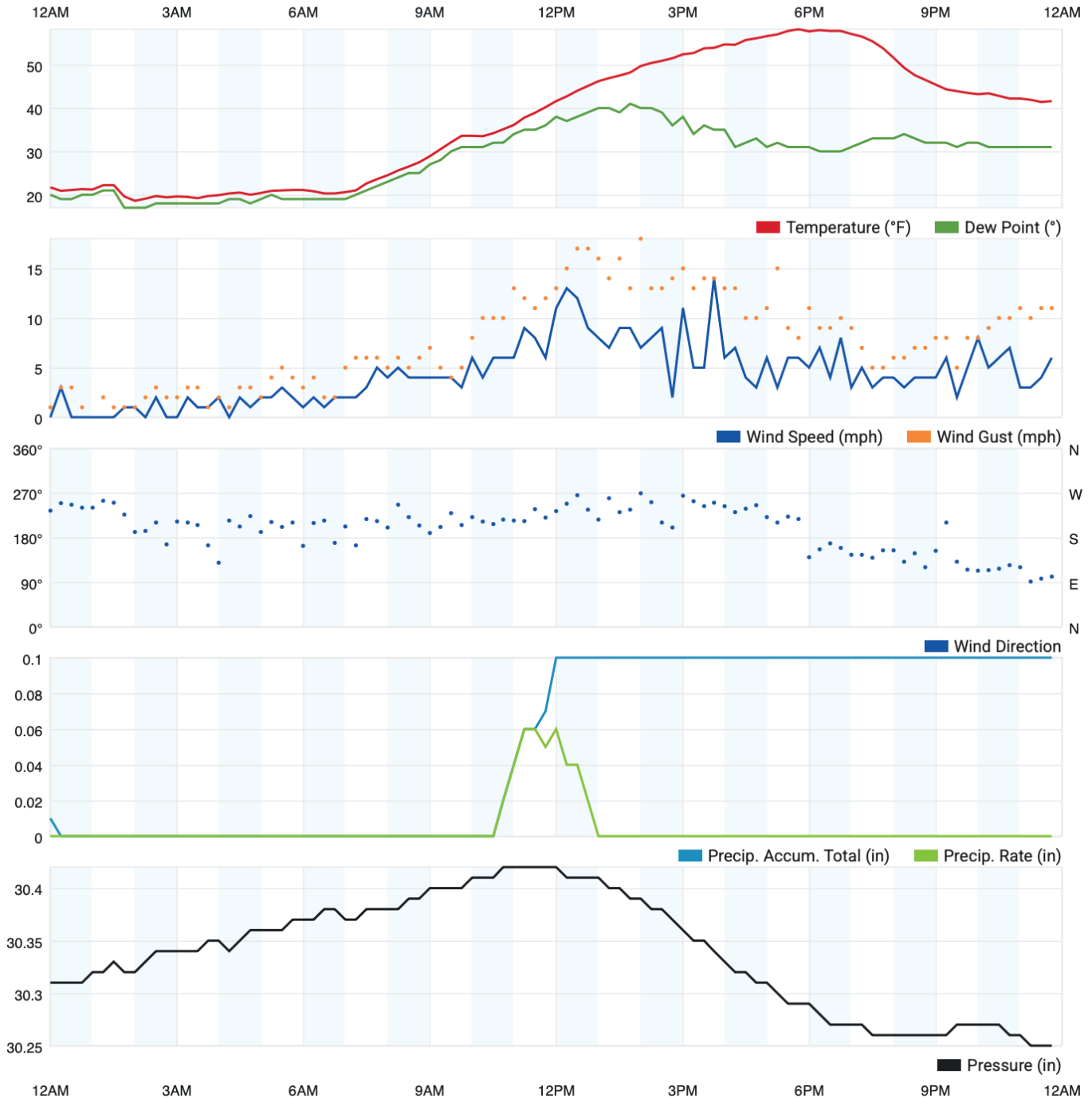
Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

April 10, 2026



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Breezy through Sunday

April 11, 2026
3:07 AM CDT

Wind Gust (mph) Forecast

	4/11 Sat					4/12 Sun							
	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
McIntosh	35	36	30	22	18	17	20	23	29	33	32	25	18
Eagle Butte	35	35	30	23	22	23	24	28	30	32	31	23	17
Murdo	33	36	33	29	26	25	26	28	30	30	26	20	14
Mobridge	31	32	30	25	22	21	20	20	22	26	28	23	16
Pierre	30	32	32	26	25	21	20	20	23	26	25	17	10
Gettysburg	36	39	37	29	28	28	24	23	25	30	31	24	16
Eureka	35	36	35	29	25	24	21	20	23	29	31	25	17
Chamberlain	29	33	35	30	28	25	23	20	22	26	26	20	10
Miller	35	39	38	33	31	32	30	28	29	32	31	24	15
Redfield	36	40	40	35	32	31	28	24	26	31	32	25	16
Aberdeen	31	36	33	29	26	25	24	22	24	29	31	25	17
Britton	29	32	32	29	26	26	26	25	26	30	30	24	17
Clark	35	36	36	33	35	36	33	30	29	30	31	25	17
Webster	30	32	32	30	30	32	31	28	28	29	31	25	17
Watertown	29	31	32	30	30	32	31	29	29	31	31	25	16
Sisseton	26	31	32	29	25	25	26	26	28	29	31	25	17
Milbank	24	28	29	26	25	25	28	28	28	28	28	23	17
Wheaton	26	31	32	29	26	25	23	22	23	26	26	24	18

Today:

Winds out of the south to southeast **gusting 30 to 40 mph**

Sunday:

Winds out of the west **gusting 25 to 35 mph**

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Winds today will be out of the south to southeast gusting 30 to 40 mph. Winds Sunday will be out of the west gusting 25 to 35 mph.



Warm & Windy Sunday

April 11, 2026
3:12 AM CDT

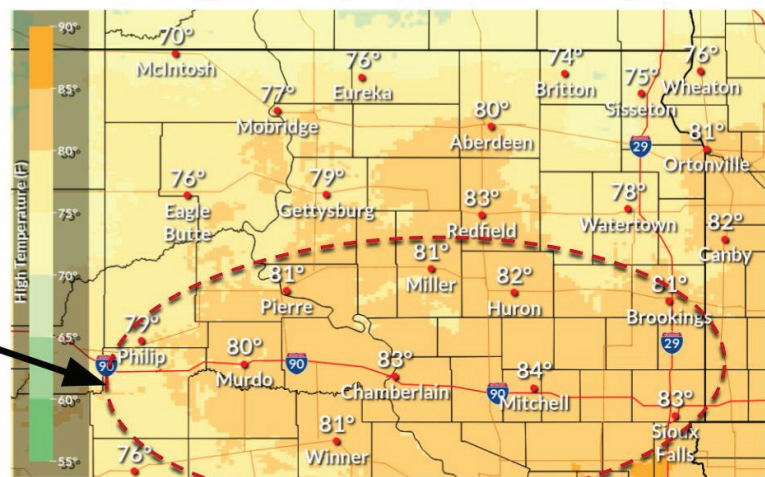
Highs in the 70s & 80s

- Winds out of the west **gusting 25 to 35 mph**
- Dry grasses, warm & dry conditions to combine and create **High to Very High Grassland Fire Danger**

Warmest & driest conditions across south central to southeastern South Dakota



Highs Temperatures Sunday



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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

Temperatures will top out in the 70s and 80s Sunday, with winds out of the west gusting 25 to 35 mph. This will lead to high to very high Grassland Fire Danger index values. The warmest and driest conditions will be over south central to southeastern South Dakota.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 58 °F at 5:46 PM

Low Temp: 19 °F at 1:59 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 1:55 PM

Precip: : 0.20

Today's Info

Record High: 86 in 1910

Record Low: 8 in 1939

Average High: 56

Average Low: 30

Average Precip in April.: 0.51

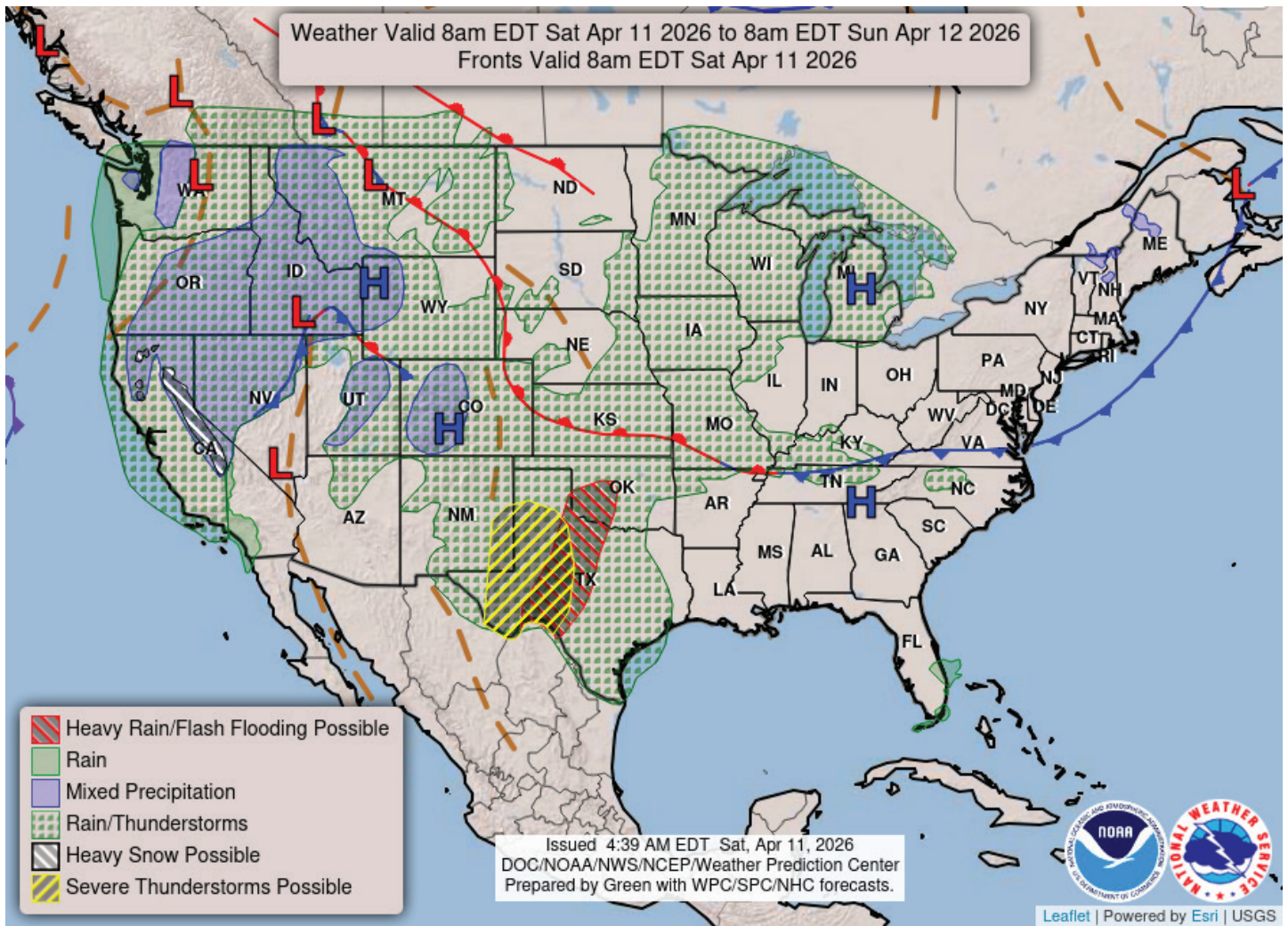
Precip to date in April.: 0.95

Average Precip to date: 2.57

Precip Year to Date: 2.57

Sunset Tonight: 8:12 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:52 am



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Today in Weather History

April 11, 1993: Heavy wet snow fell over northeast South Dakota, mainly east of Aberdeen and north of Watertown. The snowfall began on the 10th and carried into the 11th. 2 to 6 inches were reported across the area. However, 8 inches were reported near Summit and 7 inches near Sisseton.

April 11, 2007: A large upper-level low-pressure area wrapped snow into far northeast South Dakota. The heavy, wet snow made travel tough, resulting in snow-covered and slushy roads. Some schools and events were postponed or canceled. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Sisseton and Milbank, 7 inches at Castlewood, 8 inches at Bryant, 9 inches at Toronto and Clear Lake, and 12 inches at Summit.

April 11, 2008: An intense area of low pressure moving northeast across the Central Plains brought widespread heavy snow and strong winds to parts of central and northeast South Dakota. Snowfall from 3 to 16 inches combined with north winds of 30 to 45 mph brought widespread blowing and drifting snow with blizzard conditions and heavy drifting affecting much of the area. A few thunderstorms also occurred, bringing rapid snowfall rates to some areas. Many vehicles went into the ditch, and many other accidents occurred. Most roads became nearly impassable, and no travel was advised for parts of central and much of northeast South Dakota. There were many people stranded to wait out the storm. Also, many schools and businesses were closed on Friday the 11th. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Faulkton, Ree Heights, Kidder, and Hayti, 7 inches at Garden City, Castlewood, Miller, Britton, and near Stephan, 9 inches at Waubay, Bryant, and Roy Lake, 10 inches at Big Stone City and Milbank, 11 inches at Wilmot, Watertown, and Victor, 15 inches at Summit, and 16 inches at Clear Lake.

1965 — Severe thunderstorms in the Upper Midwest spawned fifty-one tornadoes killing 256 persons and causing more than 200 million dollars damage. Indiana, Ohio and Michigan were hardest hit in the "Palm Sunday Tornado Outbreak". (David Ludlum)

1987 — Ten days of flooding in the northeastern U.S. finally came to an end. Damage from flooding due to rain and snow melt ran into the billions of dollars. The collapse of the New York State Thruway Bridge over Schoharie Creek claimed ten lives. (Storm Data)

1988 — Sixteen cities in the western U.S., nine in California, reported new record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 95 degrees at Sacramento CA and 96 degrees at Bakersfield CA were the warmest of record for so early in the season. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 — Forty-four cities in the south central and eastern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. Lows of 25 degrees at Conway AR, 29 degrees at Dallas/Fort Worth TX, and 22 degrees at Ozark AR, were April records. Lows of 26 degrees at Hot Springs AR and 31 degrees at Shreveport LA equalled April records. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 — While showers produced heavy rain over much of the northeastern U.S., heavy snow blanketed northern Maine, with 13 inches reported at Telos Lake. Strong southwesterly winds accompanying the rain and snow gusted to 68 mph at the Blue Hill Observatory in Massachusetts. Rainfall totals of 1.04 inch at Pittsburgh PA and 1.52 inch at Buffalo NY on the 10th were records for the date. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Through Troubled Waters

When trials cloud our thinking, God's Word and His Spirit illuminate the path forward.

Psalms 25:1-7: 1 To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in You I trust, Do not let me be ashamed; Do not let my enemies exult over me.

3 Indeed, none of those who wait for You will be ashamed; Those who deal treacherously without cause will be ashamed.

4 Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths.

5 Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; For You I wait all the day.

6 Remember, O LORD, Your compassion and Your lovingkindnesses, For they have been from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; According to Your lovingkindness remember me, For Your goodness' sake, O LORD.

In a blizzard, the familiar disappears because swirling snow obscures our vision. Difficulties in life bring about the same effect in our mind. They create strong emotions that cloud our ability to think. Let's look at three promises God has given us to help us find our way through trials.

The Lord has committed Himself to instructing us. When we wait on Him, He will give us insight into our situation—since He sees all things, He knows what steps we are to take. We may be surprised at the instruction, though, since His ways are not like our human ones (Isaiah 55:8-9).

God has promised to teach us how to apply the truth we've received from Him. As we meditate on the Word of God, His Spirit will reveal the wisdom relevant to our problem.

The Lord provides guidance as He keeps watch over us. When company is present, a parent may use a series of looks to quietly guide a child's behavior. In a similar way, the Holy Spirit gives us spiritual promptings to guide our actions and decisions.

What troubled waters are you trying to navigate? Know that you can find your way by using these promises as guiding lights through dark circumstances.

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

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The Groton Independent

Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.10.26

13 20 26 32 54 1

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

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 20 Mins 43 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.10.26

3 18 36 42 49 6

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$120,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.08.26

14 27 40 46 47 2

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$21,520,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 20 Mins 43 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.08.26

2 15 19 27 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$46,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 35 Mins 43 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.08.26

4 15 36 45 56 18

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 4 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.08.26

3 16 17 42 52 3

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$35,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 4 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

What declining vaccination rates mean for families in Allegheny County – where 1 in 3 kindergarten classrooms lack herd immunity for measles

Kar-Hai Chu Associate Professor of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh
(The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.)

Kar-Hai Chu, University of Pittsburgh and Maggie Slavin, University of Pittsburgh
(THE CONVERSATION) As the risk of measles remains an ongoing concern, herd immunity in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, is already slipping. According to data obtained via The Washington Post in January 2026, 1 in 3 Allegheny County kindergartners were in a classroom too far below adequate vaccination coverage to stop a measles outbreak during the 2023-24 school year.

A professor from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Public Health, Kar-Hai Chu, and a research program supervisor, Maggie Slavin, answered our questions about declining measles, mumps and rubella vaccination rates and what it means for the future of public health.

Private and parochial/religious schools in Allegheny County fall below the herd immunity threshold, while public schools tend not to. What explains that gap, and should it concern us?

Research shows the disparity between vaccination coverage in private and parochial/religious versus public schools is that private and parochial/religious schools tend to have higher rates of exemptions to vaccinations for moral and religious beliefs.

Local vaccination rates in Allegheny County schools are declining and are below the necessary level of vaccination coverage to stop the spread of measles: 95%. Between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, public schools displayed an overall decline in coverage, whereas private and parochial/religious increased coverage between the two years, yet have greater variation in coverage across schools. Regardless of school type, children should have complete and updated vaccinations to protect themselves and the community. Even small dips in vaccination rates can lead to the spread of disease.

What are combination vaccines and how long have they been used?

Combination vaccines are single injections that protect against multiple, preventable diseases and have been used since the 1940s. They represent one of public health's most successful interventions. Common examples include DTaP – for diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis – and MMR, for measles, mumps and rubella. The MMR vaccine has been licensed since 1971 and helped eliminate measles from the U.S. by 2000. It reduced cases by 80% within a decade of its introduction to society.

Why are some government officials calling to split these vaccines?

The U.S. officials calling to split combination vaccines cite unsubstantiated claims linking them to autism and concerns about too many vaccinations administered at once.

These claims contradict decades of scientific evidence that demonstrates the safety and efficacy of combination vaccines.

Who determines vaccination recommendations in the US?

Since 1964, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has provided evidence-based vaccination recommendations. The committee consists of volunteer medical and public health experts appointed by the secretary of Health and Human Services for staggered, four-year terms. These experts review scientific evidence throughout the year and update recommendations accordingly. States maintain authority to implement these recommendations as they see fit. Vaccination recommendations have been politicized under the current administration and are currently in a sort of limbo.

In June 2025, HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has a history of promoting anti-vaccination disinformation, took the unprecedented step of firing all 17 committee members and appointing 12 new members with questionable qualifications and conflicts of interest. This could be considered a fundamental disruption to the evidence-based process that has protected public health for over 60 years.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health and Gov. Josh Shapiro have stated that they continue to endorse evidence-based vaccination guidelines from leading national medical associations, such as the American

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Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

What are the real-world consequences of vaccine misinformation and disinformation?

An example consequence is now visible: Measles is spreading again in the U.S. In 2025, there were 2,255 confirmed cases, which is nearly double the 2019 peak of 1,274 cases.

While there haven't been any confirmed cases of measles in Allegheny County in 2026, there were confirmed measles cases in Lancaster County on Feb. 3, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health, which determined the individuals were not vaccinated.

Another visible consequence of vaccination misinformation and disinformation is that unvaccinated people face 140 times higher risk of contracting measles. Over 90% of 2025 cases in the U.S. occurred in people who were unvaccinated or had unknown vaccine status.

When government officials become sources of misinformation, the threat multiplies exponentially. The World Health Organization identifies vaccine hesitancy as one of the biggest threats to global health.

What can be done to protect evidence-based vaccination policy?

The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes that state-level policies may offer greater responsiveness to local needs while maintaining evidence-based standards.

Stronger state policies play a key role in ensuring vaccine access. In Louisiana, for example, framing vaccination as a way to keep your neighbors safe has been used as an effective way to appeal to local communities. In South Dakota, advocates are reaching business owners by emphasizing the economic benefits of immunization. The state of Oregon created a financing model that allows providers and clinics to access vaccines with no upfront costs, then they reimburse the state once they have been paid by insurers.

People can support organizations that prioritize scientific evidence over anecdotes, demand transparency in policymaking and understand the difference between legitimate scientific debate and coordinated misinformation. These are crucial steps in protecting vaccine policies. The 2026 American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines have been deemed trustworthy by 12 health care organizations that represent over a million pediatric medical professionals.

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US and Iranian officials meet with mediators in Pakistan as talks kick off despite disagreements

By MUNIR AHMED, SAM METZ, E. EDUARDO CASTILLO and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press ISLAMABAD (AP) — U.S. and Iranian officials held separate talks with Pakistan's prime minister on Saturday amid a ceasefire made fragile by deep disagreements and unabated fighting in Lebanon.

A U.S. delegation led by Vice President JD Vance and an Iranian delegation led by Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf each met with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, according to his office. No direct U.S.-Iran talks had been announced as of mid-afternoon.

Iran doubled down on parts of its earlier proposal, with its delegation telling Iranian state television it had presented some of the plan's ideas as red lines in meetings with Sharif.

Meanwhile, Israel pressed ahead with strikes in Lebanon even as Iran conditioned ceasefire talks on a pause in fighting there. The Lebanese state-run news agency reported that Israeli strikes on Saturday killed at least three people.

The war has killed at least 3,000 people in Iran, 1,953 in Lebanon, 23 in Israel and more than a dozen in Gulf Arab states. It has largely cut off the Persian Gulf from the global economy, sending energy prices soaring and inflicting lasting damage on infrastructure in half a dozen countries in the region.

In Tehran, residents told The Associated Press they were skeptical yet hopeful about the talks after weeks of airstrikes carved a path of destruction across their country. Some said even if one is reached, the path to recovery will be long.

"Peace alone is not enough for our country, because we've been hit very hard, there have been huge costs, and the people have to pay for that," 62-year-old Amir Razzai Far said in downtown Tehran.

Officials posture over key issues ahead of talks

U.S. and Iranian officials claimed leverage and issued new demands and preconditions as talks approached.

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President Donald Trump posted repeatedly on social media leading up to Saturday, saying Iranian officials "have no cards" to negotiate with.

"The only reason they are alive today is to negotiate!" he wrote.

He accused Iran of using the Strait of Hormuz, a key artery for global energy supplies, for extortion, and told reporters on Friday it would be opened "with or without them."

Islamabad was deserted Saturday as security forces sealed roads and authorities urged residents to stay inside, leading the normally bustling Pakistani capital to look like it was under curfew.

Vance said on Friday the U.S. was optimistic about the talks, but warned: "If they're going to try and play us, then they're going to find that the negotiating team is not that receptive."

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Tehran was entering negotiations with "deep distrust" stemming from prior strikes on Iran during previous rounds of talks. Araghchi, who is part of Iran's delegation in Pakistan, said on Saturday that his country was prepared to retaliate if it was attacked again.

Iran and the United States outlined competing proposals ahead of the weekend talks reflecting the wide gulf between the two sides on key issues.

Iran published a 10-point proposal. It called for a guaranteed end to the war and no future attacks. It demanded an end to economic sanctions and sought control over the Strait of Hormuz. It also included ending fighting against Iran's "regional allies," explicitly calling for a halt to Israeli strikes on Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Lebanese militant group.

The United States submitted a 15-point proposal that includes restricting Iran's nuclear program and reopening the strait.

Israel and Lebanon will have direct negotiations

Negotiations between Israel and Lebanon are expected to begin Tuesday in Washington, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun's office said Friday.

Israel wants the Lebanese government to assume responsibility for disarming Hezbollah, much like was envisaged in a November 2024 ceasefire. But it is unclear whether Lebanon's army can establish a monopoly on arms or confiscate weapons from the militant group, which has survived efforts to curb its strength for decades.

Israel's insistence that the ceasefire in Iran does not include a pause in its fighting with Hezbollah has threatened to sink the deal. The militant group joined the war in support of its backer, Iran, in the opening days of the war.

The day the truce was announced, Israel pounded Beirut with airstrikes, killing more than 300 people in the deadliest day in the country since the war began Feb. 28, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry.

Strait of Hormuz remains a sticking point

Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz has proved its biggest strategic advantage in the war. Commercial vessels have avoided the strait, effectively blocking the passage of oil, natural gas and fertilizer.

The spot price of Brent crude, the international standard for oil prices, was above \$94 on Saturday, up more than 30% since the war started.

Before the conflict, around a fifth of the world's traded oil typically passed through the strait on more than 100 ships a day. With the ceasefire in place, only 12 have been recorded traversing the strait.

Iran has floated charging ships passing through the strait as part of a peace deal, though the idea has been widely rejected by countries including the United States and Iran's neighbor Oman.

Russian strikes on Odesa kill 2 ahead of Orthodox Easter ceasefire

By DEREK GATOPOULOS, DMYTRO ZHYHINAS and ELISE MORTON Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian drone strikes killed at least two people in the Ukrainian city of Odesa overnight into Saturday, local authorities reported, ahead of a proposed ceasefire for Orthodox Easter.

A further two people were wounded in the attack on the Black Sea port city, when drones hit a residential area, damaging apartment buildings, houses and a kindergarten.

According to the Ukrainian Air Force, Russia targeted Ukraine with 160 drones overnight, of which 133 were shot down or intercepted, hours before a proposed Easter ceasefire was due to come into force.

Russia's Defense Ministry said 99 Ukrainian drones were shot down overnight across Russia and occupied

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Crimea.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday declared a 32-hour ceasefire over the Orthodox Easter weekend, ordering Russian forces to halt hostilities from 4 p.m. Saturday until the end of Sunday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy promised Saturday to abide by the ceasefire, describing it as an opportunity to build on peace initiatives. But he warned there would be a swift military response to any violations.

"Easter should be a time of silence and safety. A ceasefire (at) Easter could also become the beginning of real movement toward peace," Zelenskyy wrote in an online post on Saturday.

But he added: "We all understand who we are dealing with. Ukraine will adhere to the ceasefire and respond strictly in kind."

Ukraine earlier proposed to Russia a pause in attacks on each other's energy infrastructure over the Orthodox Easter holiday.

Previous ceasefire attempts have had little impact, with both sides accusing each other of violations.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Friday described Putin's move as a "humanitarian" gesture, but said Moscow remains focused on a comprehensive settlement based on its longstanding demands — a key sticking point that has prevented the two sides from reaching an agreement.

Prisoners exchanged

Russia's Defense Ministry said that a prisoner swap Saturday brought home 175 of its soldiers.

Zelenskyy confirmed Saturday's exchange, saying that 175 service members and seven civilians were returned.

"Most had been held in captivity since 2022. And finally, they are home," he wrote on X.

At the exchange site in northern Ukraine, Svitlana Pohosyan waited for her son's return. Asked about the ceasefire, she said: "I want to believe it. God willing, may it be so. We will believe and hope that everything will be fine, that a ceasefire will come on such a holy day, and that there will be peace — peace in Ukraine and peace in the whole world."

"My celebration will come when my son returns," she added. "I will hold him in my arms — and that will be the greatest celebration for me. And for every mother, every family."

Periodic prisoner exchanges have been one of the few positive outcomes of otherwise fruitless monthslong U.S.-brokered negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv. The talks have delivered no progress on key issues preventing an end to Russia's invasion of its neighbor, now in its fifth year.

Separately, seven residents of Russia's Kursk region returned from Ukraine Saturday after they were captured by the Ukrainian army, Russian state media reported. They were greeted at the Belarusian-Ukrainian border by Russia's human rights ombudswoman, Tatyana Moskalkova.

According to Moskalkova, the returnees were the last of those who were taken to Ukraine from the Kursk region after the Ukrainian army took control of parts of the region in 2024.

Ukrainian forces made a surprise incursion into Kursk in August 2024 in one of their biggest battlefield successes in the war. The incursion was the first time Russian territory was occupied by an invader since World War II and dealt a humiliating blow to the Kremlin.

Artemis II's record-breaking journey around the moon ends with dramatic splashdown

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Artemis II's astronauts closed out humanity's first lunar voyage in more than half a century with a Pacific splashdown on Friday, blazing new records near the moon with grace and joy.

It was a dramatic grand finale to a mission that revealed not only swaths of the lunar far side never seen before by human eyes, but a total solar eclipse and a parade of planets, most notably our own shimmering Earth against the endless black void of space.

With their flight now complete, the four astronauts have set NASA up for a moon landing by another crew in just two years and a full-blown moon base within the decade.

The triumphant moon-farers — commander Reid Wiseman, pilot Victor Glover, Christina Koch and Canada's

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Jeremy Hansen — emerged from their bobbing capsule into the sunlight off the coast of San Diego.

In a scene reminiscent of NASA's Apollo moonshots of yesteryear, military helicopters hoisted the astronauts one by one from an inflatable raft docked to the capsule, hauling them aboard for the short trip to the Navy's awaiting recovery ship, the USS John P. Murtha.

"These were the ambassadors from humanity to the stars that we sent out there right now, and I can't imagine a better crew," NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman said from the recovery ship.

NASA's Mission Control erupted in celebration, with hundreds pouring in from the back support rooms. "We did it," NASA's Lori Glaze rejoiced at a news conference. "Welcome to our moonshot."

Their Orion capsule, dubbed Integrity, made the entire plunge on automatic pilot. The lunar cruiser hit the atmosphere traveling Mach 33 — or 33 times the speed of sound — a blistering blur not seen since the 1960s and 1970s Apollo.

The tension in Mission Control mounted as the capsule became engulfed in red-hot plasma during peak heating and entered a planned communication blackout. All eyes were on the capsule's life-protecting heat shield that had to withstand thousands of degrees during reentry.

Watching the drama unfold nearly 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers) away, the astronauts' families huddled in Mission Control's viewing room, cheering when the capsule emerged from its six-minute blackout and again at splashdown.

The last time NASA and the Defense Department teamed up for a lunar crew's reentry was Apollo 17 in 1972. Artemis II came screaming back at 36,174 feet (11,026 meters) per second — or 24,664 mph (39,693 kph) — just shy of the record before slowing to a 19 mph (30 kph) splashdown.

Until Artemis II, NASA's fresh-from-the-moon homecomings starred only white male pilots. Intent on reflecting changes in society, NASA chose a diverse, multinational crew for its lunar comeback.

Koch became the first woman to fly to the moon, Glover the first Black astronaut and Hansen the first non-U.S. citizen, bursting Canada with pride. They laughed, cried and hugged all the way there and back, striving to take the entire world along with them.

Artemis II's record flyby and views of the moon

Launched from Florida on April 1, the astronauts racked up one win after another as they deftly navigated NASA's long-awaited lunar comeback, the first major step in establishing a sustainable moon base.

Artemis II didn't land on the moon or even orbit it. But it broke Apollo 13's distance record and marked the farthest that humans have ever journeyed from Earth when the crew reached 252,756 miles (406,771 kilometers). Then in the mission's most heart-tugging scene, the teary astronauts asked permission to name a pair of craters after their moonship and Wiseman's late wife, Carroll.

During Monday's record-breaking flyby, they documented scenes of the moon's far side never seen before by the human eye along with a total solar eclipse. The eclipse, in particular, "just blew all of us away," Glover said.

Their sense of wonder and love awed everyone, as did their breathtaking pictures of the moon and Earth. The Artemis II crew channeled Apollo 8's first lunar explorers with Earthset, showing our Blue Marble setting behind the gray moon. It was reminiscent of Apollo 8's famous Earthrise shot from 1968.

Born a decade after Apollo, Isaacman greeted the astronauts with hugs as they headed from the helicopters to the ship's medical bay for routine checks. They walked by themselves, refusing the wheelchairs offered them.

"We are back in the business of sending astronauts to the moon, bringing them back safely and to set up for a series more," Isaacman said. "This is just the beginning."

Their moonshot drew global attention as well as star power, earning props from President Donald Trump; Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney; Britain's King Charles III; Ryan Gosling, star of the latest space flick "Project Hail Mary"; Scarlett Johansson of the Marvel Cinematic Universe; and even Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner of TV's original "Star Trek."

Artemis II was a test flight for future moon missions

Despite its rich scientific yield, the nearly 10-day flight was not without technical issues. Both the capsule's drinking water and propellant systems were hit with valve problems. In perhaps the most high-profile predicament, the toilet kept malfunctioning, but the astronauts shrugged it all off.

As for the heat shield, military aircraft crews photographed it from afar during reentry, and divers checked it from underneath as the capsule floated in the Pacific. More detailed examinations are planned.

"We can't explore deeper unless we are doing a few things that are inconvenient," Koch said, "unless we're making a few sacrifices, unless we're taking a few risks, and those things are all worth it."

Added Hansen: "You do a lot of testing on the ground, but your final test is when you get this hardware to space and it's a doozy."

Under the revamped Artemis program, next year's Artemis III will see astronauts practice docking their capsule with a lunar lander or two in orbit around Earth. Artemis IV will attempt to land a crew of two near the moon's south pole in 2028.

The Artemis II astronauts' allegiance was to those future crews, Wiseman said.

"But we really hoped in our soul is that we could for just for a moment have the world pause and remember that this is a beautiful planet and a very special place in our universe, and we should all cherish what we have been gifted," he said.

UK puts Chagos Islands handover deal on hold after Trump withdraws support

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's agreement to hand Mauritius the Chagos Islands that are home to a strategic U.K.-American military base is on indefinite hold because U.S. President Donald Trump's administration has withdrawn its support for the deal.

The British government acknowledged Saturday that legislation to ratify the agreement for the islands in the Indian Ocean has run out of time in Parliament.

It's the latest fallout from souring relations between Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government and the Trump administration.

Trump initially backed the deal, but changed his mind in January, calling a deal to transfer sovereignty of the islands, home to the joint military base on Diego Garcia, "an act of GREAT STUPIDITY" in a social media post.

The U.K. put the bill's progress on hold, and the government now concedes it will run out of time to become law before the current session of Parliament ends in the next few weeks. It is not expected to be included in the list of bills announced by King Charles III for the next session of Parliament, which begins May 13.

Despite British frustration with the U.S. change of stance, officials still hope the deal can be revived.

"Diego Garcia is a key strategic military asset for both the U.K. and the U.S.," the British government said in a statement. "Ensuring its long-term operational security is and will continue to be our priority — it is the entire reason for the deal.

"We continue to believe the agreement is the best way to protect the long-term future of the base, but we have always said we would only proceed with the deal if it has U.S. support. We are continuing to engage with the U.S. and Mauritius."

Simon McDonald, who was head of Britain's Foreign Office until 2020, said the government "had no other choice" except to put the deal on ice.

"When the president of the United States is openly hostile, the government has to rethink. So this agreement, this treaty will go into the deep freeze for the time being," he told the BBC.

The strategic military base in focus

The remote chain of more than 60 islands off the tip of India, south of the Maldives, has been under British control since 1814.

A military base on Diego Garcia, one of the islands, has supported U.S. military operations from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan and as a base for American bombers in the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran.

Starmer initially blocked American planes from using British air bases for attacks on Iran. He later agreed to let the United States use bases in England and on Diego Garcia to strike Iran's missile sites, but not other targets.

Trump has disparaged the United States' NATO allies for their reluctance to join the war. He derided

Starmer last month as “not Winston Churchill” and mocked the Royal Navy.

Under the agreement struck between the U.K. and Mauritius after years of negotiation, Britain would lease back the Diego Garcia base for at least 99 years.

Starmer’s government says the deal protects the base from international legal challenge. In recent years, the United Nations and its top court have urged Britain to return the islands to Mauritius.

Britain’s opposition Conservative Party and Reform U.K. opposed the agreement, saying giving up the islands puts them at risk of interference by China and Russia. They have pushed the Trump administration to rescind its support.

Islanders who were displaced from Diego Garcia in the 1960s and 1970s to make way for the base say they weren’t consulted and worry the deal will make it harder for them to go home.

An estimated 10,000 displaced Chagossians and their descendants now live primarily in Britain, Mauritius and the Seychelles. Some have fought unsuccessfully in U.K. courts for many years for the right to go home.

Rory McIlroy has a 6-shot lead entering the 3rd round of the Masters. Can anyone make it close?

By NOAH TRISTER AP Sports Writer

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — Rory McIlroy planned to keep his mind off golf as much as possible while awaiting the third round of the Masters.

“There’s actually two really good semifinals at Monte Carlo in the tennis. So I’ll watch that,” he said. “We’ve been watching the tennis early in the mornings.”

The tennis matches might be more competitive than what’s taken place so far at Augusta National, where McIlroy led by a record six strokes after 36 holes. He birdied six of the last seven in a second-round 65 on Friday that left him at 12 under par for the tournament.

Now this could go a few different ways. McIlroy could cruise to victory and become the fourth player to win back-to-back Masters. He could maintain this level of domination and challenge Tiger Woods’ record for margin of victory (12) or Dustin Johnson’s for lowest score (20 under).

Or he could blow the lead and make history that way — 36 holes is a lot of golf still to play.

“Look, I’ve built up a nice cushion at this point,” McIlroy said. “I guess my mindset is just trying to keep playing well and keeping my foot on the gas.”

McIlroy nearly was paired in Saturday’s final group with Patrick Reed, his foil during a memorable Ryder Cup match in 2016 and in the final group of the 2018 Masters, won by Reed. But a bogey on the 18th hole Friday left Reed tied for second with Sam Burns, who will play with McIlroy on Saturday.

“Just have to wait and see what the weekend entails,” Reed said. “Hopefully I can go out and have a good day tomorrow and have a good shot going into Sunday.”

Justin Rose, Shane Lowry and Tommy Fleetwood were another stroke back at 5 under.

Bryson DeChambeau won’t be playing this weekend after finishing at 6 over and missing the cut. He owed his exit to a pair of triple bogeys in which he needed multiple shots to get out of bunkers. The first was on No. 11 on Thursday. The second was on the 18th hole Friday, when he only needed a bogey to play on.

Before McIlroy finished his run of six birdies in the last seven holes Friday, the best round of the tournament was Tyrrell Hatton’s second-round 66. He was at 4 under along with Wyndham Clark, Haotong Li, Jason Day, Cameron Young and unheralded Norwegian Kristoffer Reitan.

The rest of the field shouldn’t give up. McIlroy, after all, shot 80 in the final round in 2011 after leading the Masters following the first three rounds.

He’s a different player now, though.

“Becoming a wily old veteran,” McIlroy said. “Even go back to the final round in 2011, hitting it in that bunker off the tee at the second hole and, like, not panicking, but thinking, ‘oh, this isn’t good.’ I can’t go for this in two. How am I — and I walk up there today, and it’s like, no, I lay it up to a good number, and I’ll have a good chance to make a birdie.”

Djibouti President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh is reelected for a sixth term

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — Djibouti President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh was reelected for a sixth term after official results showed him winning 97.81% of the vote in Friday's election.

Guelleh, 78, has ruled the small Horn of Africa nation of about 1 million for more than two decades. Last year, the country's lawmakers scrapped presidential age limits.

Election officials said the vote was peaceful. At the presidential palace, supporters on Saturday celebrated and offered congratulations.

Guelleh faced a single challenger, Mohamed Farah Samatar, a former ruling party member, in a race analysts say offered little genuine competition. Opposition groups frequently boycott elections, citing restrictions on political freedoms.

Guelleh succeeded his uncle, former President Hassan Gouled Aptidon, in 1999, extending a family-led system that has shaped the country's politics for decades.

Djibouti hosts multiple foreign military bases, including those of the U.S., China, France and Japan, underscoring its strategic importance along a key global shipping route linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Revenues from these arrangements, along with port services for neighboring Ethiopia, underpin the economy.

Female rickshaw drivers in Sierra Leone rise above stigma to earn a living and empower women

By KEMO CHAM Associated Press

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone (AP) — As the late afternoon sun settles over Freetown's main transit park, Hawa Mansaray pulls up her motorized three-wheeled vehicle and steps away for a break and to pray.

Mansaray is one of a small but growing number of women entering a male-dominated commercial transport sector in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown. The auto-rickshaws, known locally as kekeh, are an essential means of transport and until recently were almost exclusively driven by men.

"I have done different jobs since I came to Freetown but kekeh has done more for me," said the 27-year-old single mother of one.

The rickshaws have become increasingly popular in Sierra Leone, filling the gaps in a strained public transport system as the West African country struggles to recover from its 1991-2002 civil war.

Freetown's population has grown to more than 1.5 million, according to city estimates — roughly three times the size it was when much of its infrastructure was planned and built. Public transport systems have struggled to keep up, creating demand for commercial motorcycles and auto-rickshaws.

Although the rickshaws are usually rickety, run at minimal speed, and are considered less safe due to the maximum exposure that comes with how they're built, commuters still prefer them because they're easily accessible and offer maximum ventilation and relative comfort.

As more people turn to the rickshaws to earn a living, it's also become a symbol of what women are capable of.

In the city, however, women are still "seen as people not adequate to do certain types of jobs," said Marfoh Mariama Samai, a women's rights advocate with Plan International Sierra Leone.

"So when a young woman ventures into a certain type of job, they are stigmatized," she says of the female drivers.

A ticket to financial independence for many

Sierra Leone has one of the lowest levels of access to and availability of financial services in Africa, making it harder for groups such as women and rural residents to recover from economic shocks.

As a result, many women are confined to petty trading that offers little stability and makes them rely heavily on their husbands, said Samai.

"When the man gives you the money, he makes all the decisions," she said of the patriarchal norms still in place in parts of Sierra Leone. "More young women should be encouraged to get into the transport sector."

Mansaray knows the challenges of financial dependence firsthand. Originally from Kailahun District,

where Sierra Leone's civil war began, she was born at the height of the conflict, and had to drop out of school at the primary level.

As an adult, she turned to running small businesses to make ends meet for herself and her baby, after separating from her husband.

Learning to drive rickshaws for a living was initially not in her plans, but she took interest in it and paid to be trained after seeing women like her excelling in the business.

Mansaray now works under a company that requires her to make daily returns of 350 leones (\$14), earning an average daily wage of 175 leones (\$7), enough to cater to her family and considered high income for many in the country.

"I will advise my fellow women who aren't employed to come into the game," she adds.

Alimatu Kamara, another female rickshaw driver, can relate to Mansaray's experience. She had been unemployed for years before deciding to venture into the business.

It's been a great ride ever since, Kamara said, but added that a major challenge for her remains aggressive behavior from male riders, a common complaint among female drivers alongside safety concerns at night.

"Some women can panic," she said. "It takes mind and determination to continue."

Despite the difficulties, she plans to expand and purchase more rickshaws.

"We can't just sit, waiting for office jobs. With jobs like kekeh, you can even make more money," Kamara said.

'Whatever men can do, women can do better'

The Sierra Leone Kekeh Riders Union has more than 1,000 registered members in western Freetown, but only about 20 are women, a number the union's district chairman, Mustapha Thoronka, said has improved.

Thoronka said he supports efforts to train and assist female drivers, including advocating for loans for them.

"Whatever men can do, women can do better," Thoronka said, hoping that through the business "they can support themselves and their families without relying on men."

Thoronka is urging the government to provide more support, noting that it's capital intensive, making it more difficult for women to get involved.

Mariama Barrie, a commuter, said she prefers female drivers.

"They are more careful than the men," she said. For her, the growing presence of women in the kekeh sector sends a message particularly "to women who sit and wait to be spoon fed."

"If you know how to ride, take kekeh ... rather than sitting and waiting for handouts," she said.

Allies yank support for Swalwell's California governor run after sexual assault allegations

By TRÂN NGUYỄN and MICHAEL R. BLOOD Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — In a stunning political reversal, prominent supporters of Rep. Eric Swalwell's campaign for California governor withdrew their support Friday after the congressman denied allegations that he sexually assaulted a woman twice, including when she worked for him.

Swalwell did not immediately heed those calls, saying on social media that he would spend the weekend with family and friends and share an update "very soon."

"These allegations of sexual assault are flat false. They're absolutely false. They did not happen, they have never happened, and I will fight them with everything that I have," he said.

Swalwell was among the leading Democrats in the race to replace outgoing Gov. Gavin Newsom. But in just hours, he saw his most prominent supporters — including U.S. Sen. Adam Schiff and powerful labor unions — drop their endorsements and call for his exit from the race.

Newsom, a likely 2028 presidential candidate who has avoided engaging in the contest to replace him, said in a statement: "As we continue to learn more, these allegations from multiple sources are deeply troubling and must be taken seriously."

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who hasn't endorsed in the race, said the "serious allegations" must be investigated and that she spoke to Swalwell and suggested that be done "outside of a gubernatorial

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campaign.”

The allegations surfaced at a critical stage of the wide-open campaign to lead the nation’s most populous state. Voters will receive mail ballots next month in advance of the June 2 election.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported Friday that a woman said Swalwell sexually assaulted her in 2019 and 2024. The newspaper reviewed text messages about the alleged 2024 assault and spoke to people whom she had told about it. She told the newspaper she did not go to police because she was afraid she would not be believed.

The woman worked for Swalwell in 2019, when the first alleged assault occurred, and the 2024 assault allegedly occurred after a charity gala, the newspaper reported. She said in both cases she was too intoxicated to consent to sex.

The paper didn’t name the woman, and The Associated Press has not been able to independently verify her account and identity. Her lawyer declined to comment.

Swift backlash from prominent Democrats

Schiff said in a social media post he’s “deeply distressed” by the allegations, calling for Swalwell to end his gubernatorial bid.

Democratic Rep. Jimmy Gomez, who helped run Swalwell’s campaign, said he’s immediately ending his role.

“The congressman should leave the race now so there can be full accountability without doubt, distraction, or delay,” Gomez said on social media.

Powerful labor unions, including the California Service Employees International Union and the California Teachers Association, said they’re suspending their support. The California Federation of Labor Unions said it’s “acting urgently” on next steps.

A spokesperson for House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said the allegations require a “serious and thorough investigation.”

Growing calls for Swalwell to drop out

Swalwell is among a handful of prominent candidates in the crowded race to succeed Newsom, and he immediately came under pressure from all other Democratic rivals to withdraw from the race. The party has been mired in a messy primary season with some leaders fearing the crowded field could cost them spot in the November general election. The state’s top-two primary system sends the two highest vote getters onto the general election regardless of party.

Swalwell on Tuesday kicked off a planned series of campaign events in Sacramento, where he told reporters he’s never had a sexual relationship with a staff member or intern. He canceled the next scheduled event in Palm Springs on Thursday.

Uncorroborated and nonspecific rumors that Swalwell behaved inappropriately with female staffers have circulated on social media for weeks, but the Chronicle’s story is the first reported account of someone making a direct accusation. CNN also reported that several women accused Swalwell of sending them inappropriate sexual messages.

He’s suggested the allegations were part of an attack due to his campaign’s momentum.

Swalwell was elected in 2012 and represents a House district east of San Francisco. He launched a presidential run in April 2019 but shuttered it a few months later after failing to catch on with voters. Swalwell, who is married and has three children, is perhaps best known nationally as a House manager in President Donald Trump’s second impeachment trial during his first term in early 2021.

Buyers fret as the average cost of a new car nears \$50K

By ALEXA ST. JOHN Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — After a few years of sharing a 2019 Chevrolet Trax, Dana Eble and Tyler Marcus are finally looking for a second car. But as they jump into the market, the young married couple isn’t sure what they can afford.

“I just keep seeing a lot of different aspects of life getting more expensive, and it’s harder,” said Eble, an account manager for a public relations agency.

Car ownership has long been integral to the American dream. But as automakers slash the production

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of inexpensive models to cater to customers who can afford oversized pickups and sport utility vehicles, buyers find themselves facing sticker shock at the same time they are already frustrated by the lingering effects of high inflation.

Consumer prices rose 3.3% in March, the biggest yearly increase since May 2024, while new car prices were up 12.6% from a year ago, the Labor Department reported Friday.

New vehicles now sell for an average of nearly \$50,000, up 30% in six years, and average monthly payments — based on 10% down and a 6-year note — recently hit \$775. Looking for something on the cheap end? The share of vehicles listing for less than \$30,000 is about 13% — down from 40% five years ago, per the car review site CarGurus.

To cope, buyers are spreading their payments out longer. Consumers choosing 7-year loans make up more than 12% of all sales, up from nearly 8% a year ago, according to auto buying resource J.D. Power. Such contracts wind up costing more in the long run because of interest payments.

“The ability to buy transportation is still out there. The question is just, what do you get for your money?” Charlie Chesbrough, a senior economist at Cox Automotive, said.

The rising cost of cars is contributing to increased concerns about affordability throughout American life. Consumers, especially young people, say they feel like everyday needs like housing, food, utilities and child care are getting costlier and wages aren’t keeping up.

It is a vulnerable position for Republicans ahead of this year’s midterm elections, especially as the Iran war has pumped up gas prices that makes getting behind the wheel even more expensive.

Size, technology and ‘must-have’ features add to costs

Sticker prices have been rising since automakers discovered Americans are willing to pay more for bigger, more expensive SUVs and pickup trucks that bring the companies more profit from each sale. They have largely phased out smaller, cheaper sedans.

That is especially true for domestic carmakers; the average selling prices for many vehicles from Ford Motor Co., General Motors and Jeep-maker Stellantis have generally trended higher than those for Asian companies Honda, Hyundai, Mazda and Subaru.

Car companies are also savvy about placing desired options in more expensive trim levels that can lure consumers into a vehicle that costs more than they planned, said David Undercoffler, the head of consumer insights at CarGurus.

Advanced safety technology — lane-keep assist, automatic emergency braking, blind-spot monitoring, collision warnings and more — all add to the cost of a vehicle. Automakers are required by federal industry rules to add some features, such as rear-view cameras.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed up auto prices because production fell, affecting both the new and used markets. Though production recovered, other supply chain disruptions and tariffs have affected prices. Meanwhile, government data shows that car insurance prices have soared 55% compared with six years ago, or just before the pandemic, driving up the number of Americans going without. Car repairs, on average, are 48% more expensive.

The share of new car buyers earning below \$100,000 fell to 37% last year, down from 50% in 2020, according to Cox Automotive.

Some carmakers have acknowledged affordability concerns. In February, Ford said it would have several vehicles prices under \$40,000 by the end of the decade. GM has pointed to vehicles from Buick and Chevrolet, including the Trax, as cheaper options.

Looking to used market for relief

Chesbrough thinks consumers are sometimes unrealistic in their wants.

“There are vehicles out there for less than \$30,000. What everybody wants is the mid-sized SUV with leather seats and the sunroof for \$25,000, and that’s not available,” Chesbrough said.

Those buyers, he said, are being pushed into the used market.

But as those buyers shift to used, they are finding fewer affordable options there, too. The share of used vehicles priced less than \$30,000 fell from 78% in 2021 to 69% in February, according to CarGurus. The average used vehicle sold for about \$25,000 in February, and the average used monthly payments hit \$560.

The inventory of used cars is being hit by a couple of trends. One is that consumers keen to avoid a big

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expense are hanging on to their cars longer — nearly 13 years on average now, 18 months longer than a decade ago, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. And a downturn in the popularity of leasing means fewer two- and three-year-old cars hitting the market after leases expire.

J.D. Power estimates that consumers might spend up to \$140 less on a lease payment than the average finance commitment, a good option especially for drivers whose annual mileage is predictable. But experts say there is still an affordability challenge.

What buyers can do

Sam Dykhuis, 27, of Chicago, needed to buy her first car recently when she started a new job as a scheduler for United Airlines. She searched for something used under \$20,000, and eventually paid a little more than that for a 2021 Mazda CX-5. To hold down the cost, she tapped savings to buy the car outright. She pays insurance six months at a time to save a few bucks, too.

Still, "My paycheck went down and my expenses went up," Dykhuis said. "Certainly, I have to be more just on top of it than I was previously."

Eble, 30, and Marcus, 31, say they appreciate cool vehicles but don't consider themselves "car people" and are hoping their search is easier as a result. Still, finding something in their \$20,000 to \$30,000 budget might not be as easy as it once was.

They are considering cars such as a newer Trax, a Mazda or maybe an electric vehicle. New EVs generally cost more upfront, but consumers can save in the long run. The used EV market will also soon be flooded with two- or three-year-old EVs that were leased at the time federal credits were generous.

Like Dykhuis, they say they also might buy their new ride outright to avoid a new monthly payment.

"It feels like if anything happens out of our control ... it just seems so much more difficult to figure out how to orient our finances," Eble said.

Trump likes to back winners in foreign elections. The upcoming vote in Hungary will test his clout

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In Hungary, President Donald Trump and his top officials used social media and an election-eve trip to Budapest to promote the country's far-right prime minister in his reelection campaign.

In Argentina, the U.S. administration worked to prop up the country's financial markets to the tune of \$20 billion -- then Trump threatened to pull the assistance if its elections didn't go his preferred way.

And in Honduras, he backed a conservative former mayor for president — and pardoned a predecessor from the same political party as Hondurans were preparing to vote.

In his second term, Trump has made a public flex of his political influence abroad on a scale that few if any U.S. presidents have exerted, trying to marshal power that he's used domestically to sway races in Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Using endorsements to reward loyal and like-minded leaders, he has shattered a U.S. tradition of avoiding overt involvement in the internal politics of other countries, and made the use of some foreign policy tools more about politics than about advancing U.S. interests, according to his critics.

"The impact of that is to really cheapen a relationship," said David Pressman, who served as the U.S. ambassador to Hungary during the Biden administration. Pressman, who was on the ground in Budapest as Orban publicly backed Trump in 2024, said Hungarian positions on key issues such as Ukraine felt "infused through a political U.S. rubric," rather than articulated as sovereign foreign policy.

The most significant test yet of Trump's political power abroad may come Sunday, when voters in Hungary render a verdict on Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's bid for a fifth term. Orbán was the first European leader to back Trump during his 2016 run and remained a close ally even during Trump's period of political exile, making sojourns to see him in south Florida and again endorsing the Republican in his 2024 comeback race.

"I love Hungary and I love that Viktor," Trump said this week as Vice President JD Vance, visiting Budapest, put him on speakerphone at a rally with more than 1,000 Orbán supporters.

Trump says he loves to pick winners

Trump has long reveled in his status as kingmaker in the Republican Party. Now, he boasts that foreign

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leaders come to him seeking his approval.

"I love it when I give endorsements and people win," Trump said last month at a summit with several Latin American leaders whom he had backed.

Often, his picks share his policy views, like fellow immigration hard-liners Orbán and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, or the chainsaw-wielding Argentine President Javier Milei, who used the tool to illustrate his zeal to slash spending.

Trump and his officials have often used the Conservative Political Action Conference as a stage for promoting their foreign political friends.

At a CPAC gathering in Warsaw last year, then-Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem urged Poles to vote for conservative Karol Nawrocki, and implied that the future of the U.S. military presence in Poland could hinge on the election's outcome. Nawrocki would go on to win.

In Hungary last month, Trump greeted CPAC attendees with a video message from behind the Resolute Desk, urging support for Orbán.

"The prime minister has been a strong leader who's shown the entire world what's possible when you defend your borders, your culture, your heritage, your sovereignty and your values," Trump said. He later added, "I hope he wins, and I hope he wins big."

The White House defended Trump's approach as a sign of transparency.

"President Trump is a great American statesman who will speak or work with anyone, and he makes no secret about those he likes or supports," spokeswoman Anna Kelly said. "Many individuals who align with President Trump's ideology are getting elected to top offices around the world because everyone wants to replicate his immeasurable success on behalf of the American people," she said.

Sunday's election is a big test of Trump's foreign political clout

Few foreign leaders have amassed as much political support from the Trump administration as Orbán. The U.S. president has fired off multiple Truth Social posts promoting the prime minister, whose hard-right authoritarian approach to governance has endeared him to Trump, as did his fealty to the U.S. president even when Trump was out of power.

"Hungary: GET OUT AND VOTE FOR VIKTOR ORBÁN," Trump posted Thursday night. On Friday, he said his administration "stands ready to use the full Economic Might of the United States" to help Hungary's economy, if Orbán and Hungarians need it.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, as a senator, once aired concerns about "democratic erosion" under Orbán. Nonetheless, Rubio endorsed him in February and promoted the "very, very close personal relationship and working relationship" between Trump and the prime minister.

During Vance's two-day swing to Budapest this week, he made the administration's endorsement of Orbán explicit even as he decried foreign election interference from the European Union.

"Of course we're going to work with whoever wins the Hungarian election because we love the people of Hungary and it's an important relationship," Vance told reporters. "But Viktor Orbán is going to win the next election in Hungary, so I feel very confident about that and about our continued positive relationship."

But Orbán had been trailing in independent polls ahead of the April 12 election and Trump — whose push to acquire Greenland and war in Iran have made him unpopular throughout Europe — may have less sway than he once had.

Past presidents have been more subtle

Past administrations have used different methods to influence power abroad. For instance, the Central Intelligence Agency under President Dwight D. Eisenhower helped engineer a 1954 coup that forced out Guatemala's president, Jacobo Arbenz.

There have been rare cases when past presidents made their support explicit, such as when former President Bill Clinton backed Russian President Boris Yeltsin's 1993 move to dissolve parliament and set up new legislative and presidential elections.

But Trump's political engagement abroad is without precedent, said James Lindsay, a distinguished senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"Trump is just different than other presidents, and he's viewed differently than other presidents, and that is a strength you can take advantage of," Lindsay said.

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Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said Trump's blatant involvement in elections abroad should be viewed as part of the what the administration called the "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine" in its national security strategy released in December. The 1823 Monroe Doctrine, named for President James Monroe, has been used to justify U.S. military interventions in Latin America.

Kaine, who was a missionary in Honduras at a time of deep covert U.S. involvement in Latin America, called the doctrine "poison language" for the region. "It's violating best practice," he said. "America has been deeply involved in regime support, opposition and regime change in the Americas for centuries, and it is not a legacy that we should be proud of."

Trump has offered carrots — and sticks — during foreign races

Sometimes Trump's support for foreign candidates has come with more than an endorsement.

In October, Trump was particularly blunt about his intent to withhold assistance for Argentina if Milei's political coalition didn't prevail in legislative elections that month. Shortly before Milei's visit, the administration had finalized a \$20 billion currency swap line, aid that had drawn fierce criticism from U.S. farmers and Democratic lawmakers.

"If he loses, we are not going to be generous with Argentina. OK?" Trump told a reporter as he hosted Milei at a White House lunch.

In the final days of last year's Honduran elections, Trump not only made his preference for Nasry Asfura clear, but also emphasized that "the United States will not be throwing good money after bad" if Asfura lost. Both Milei and Asfura were successful in their respective elections.

Trump also announced a pardon for former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez for U.S. drug trafficking and weapons convictions. "This cannot be allowed to happen, especially now, after Tito Asfura wins the Election, when Honduras will be on its way to Great Political and Financial Success," Trump wrote on social media.

Trump has repeatedly floated a pardon for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, including in a formal letter and during a speech to the country's parliament. Netanyahu is enmeshed in a far-reaching corruption case that includes allegations of fraud, breach of trust and bribery. He faces what could be a tough reelection campaign this year.

A fiery Vance speech in the early weeks of the Trump administration strained ties with Germany when, at the Munich Security Conference, he criticized mainstream German parties for refusing to work with a far-right party.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz later said it was not the place for a U.S. leader to "say something like that to us in Germany."

"I wouldn't do it in America, either," Merz said.

Unsettled and uncertain: What the Iran war means around the world as US and Iran enter talks

By The Associated Press undefined

The long-term fallout of the war in Iran is only beginning to take shape, but this much is clear: The conflict has left the Middle East unsettled, alliances strained and the world facing uncertain shifts in the balance of economic and military power.

Iran's theocracy is tattered but alive, with new economic leverage. The U.S. and Israel will hold elections this year, their leaders potentially facing voters having fallen short of their war aims. The NATO alliance, already strained, is under even more pressure. The Gulf Arab states face an emboldened Iran in their backyard.

At this inflection point, as the U.S. and Iran prepare for talks this weekend in Pakistan, AP journalists in the Middle East and Washington share their assessments on how the war is still reverberating across the world during the tenuous ceasefire:

Israel

If Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were to be graded for the war, he would get an "incomplete."

Netanyahu set some ambitious goals at the outset of the fighting on Feb. 28, saying he wanted to re-

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move the threats posed by Iran's missile and nuclear programs and its support for hostile proxy groups. He also vowed to create the conditions for a popular uprising against the Iranian government. None of these goals were fully achieved.

In a televised address after the ceasefire, Netanyahu acknowledged "we still have goals to complete." But he nonetheless claimed "immense achievements."

"Iran is weaker than ever, and Israel is stronger than ever. This is the bottom line of this campaign," he said.

With elections looming later this year, the question for Netanyahu is whether the Israeli public agrees with his assessment.

Israelis overwhelmingly supported the war against archenemy Iran, especially in the early days of the campaign. But as the war dragged on, Israelis also grew tired as nonstop air-raid sirens disrupted daily life and sent people scrambling into bomb shelters around the clock.

Netanyahu is now hoping that in the coming ceasefire talks the U.S. will shore up the battlefield gains into a permanent agreement that guards Israel's interests. He also must ensure that his relationship with President Donald Trump remains strong after an inconclusive war that was deeply unpopular in the U.S.

Otherwise, Netanyahu could find himself struggling for his job when his war-weary nation heads to the polls.

— Josef Federman, deputy news director for the Middle East

Depleted Iran finds leverage

Iran, battered by nationwide protests in January and heavy airstrikes in the war, suddenly finds itself in a position of power.

Just the threat of sea mines and possible attacks from Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard has ships staying away from the Strait of Hormuz, in effect keeping the waterway crucial for international energy shipments closed.

Even hard-liners have spun the killing of 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei into the idea of replacing him with a younger, more hard-line version of himself in his son, Mojtaba.

The government has put forward its own maximalist demands ahead of the Islamabad talks — including continuing to enrich uranium in its nuclear program, one of the chief reasons Trump gave for going to war.

Yet Iran's military sites now sit in ruins, its missile arsenal broadly depleted, and the threat of more protests by its people still looms in the future. That unrest could be spurred on by the sheer level of destruction in Iran's oil and gas industry, as well as attacks targeting steel mills and other economic sites.

— Jon Gambrell, news director for the Gulf and Iran

Gulf Arab states in the middle

After insisting and pleading with Iran to leave them out of the conflict, the Gulf Arab states still found themselves targeted by Iran, which rained down drone and missile fire on airports, energy sites, military bases and civilian targets across the region.

Many had to close refineries or declare themselves unable to meet their promised oil output due to the war. Even with a ceasefire in place, Iran's new control of the Strait of Hormuz through threats alone means Gulf states still aren't able to get their energy shipments out to market.

They aren't a monolith though, with opinions ranging from Oman's efforts at diplomacy to the United Arab Emirates denouncing Iranian aggression and insisting the status quo cannot stand.

— Jon Gambrell, news director for the Gulf and Iran

Ceasefire uncertainty in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the regional war has taken a devastating toll and the prospect of a ceasefire now leaves more questions than answers.

The U.S. and Israel are at odds with Iran over whether or not their ceasefire extends to the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran says it does; the U.S. and Israel say it does not.

In the meantime, Lebanese and Israeli officials have agreed to enter into direct negotiations, which Lebanon hopes will lead to a ceasefire and Israel hopes will lead to disarmament of Hezbollah. Netanyahu said the negotiations would also include talks about a potential peace agreement between the two countries, which do not have diplomatic relations.

While the talks represent a significant step, reaching an agreement will not be easy. Lebanon wants a

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halt to Israeli strikes before the talks start, a condition that Israel is unlikely to agree to.

In practice, most analysts say Lebanon does not have the capacity to disarm Hezbollah by force or to enforce any ceasefire agreement that Hezbollah does not agree to.

For now, the Israel-Hezbollah war that has displaced more than a million people and killed nearly 1,900 continues.

— Abby Sewell, news director for Lebanon, Syria and Iraq

Strained NATO relations pushed to the brink

Trump has repeatedly tested the 32-member alliance.

He cut off direct U.S. military assistance to Ukraine, threatened to take the Arctic territory of Greenland from NATO ally Denmark, and cajoled members to spend more on defense.

Now, his differences with NATO allies over Iran are raising new questions about whether the alliance, created as a curative to post World War II instability, can survive.

Since launching the war, Trump has derided allies as “cowards,” slammed NATO as “a paper tiger” and compared U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer to Neville Chamberlain, the former premier known for a policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany.

Trump is angry at member countries ignoring his call to help as Iran effectively shut the the Strait of Hormuz, and at alliance members Spain and France restricting the use of their airspace or joint military facilities by U.S. forces supporting the operations in Iran.

Trump says the moment is “a mark on NATO that will never disappear.”

— Amer Madhani, White House reporter, Washington

The United States faces economic woes

Trump won back the White House promising to curb inflation, bring down prices many Americans saw as too high and trigger a jobs boom. The war in Iran has done exactly the opposite, raising gas prices, leaving stock markets reeling and sending shockwaves through the rest of the economy as the labor market weakens and inflation begins rising anew.

With November’s midterms looming, none of that is good for Republicans trying to keep control of Congress. Trump initially tried to calm economic fears by visiting swing states. But he first scoffed at affordability worries as a hoax, then stopped those trips altogether as the war consumed his administration.

Making a ceasefire stick might eventually stabilize oil prices and financial markets, but reversing economic pain around the globe may take far longer, potentially affecting voters closer to Election Day.

Polling also shows that most Americans believe U.S. military action in Iran went too far. And the war has even caused a rift within Trump’s once seemingly unflappable MAGA base.

— Will Weissert, White House reporter, Washington

Energy prices and markets

The conflict has largely shut down the flow of ships through the Strait of Hormuz, through which about one-fifth of the world’s oil travels, and has damaged oil and gas production facilities across the Middle East.

In response, oil prices have shot higher all over the world. Brent crude oil, the international standard, has gone from roughly \$70 per barrel before the war in late February to more than \$119 at times. Brent rose 0.7% to \$96.58 Friday.

Prices at the pump have jumped as well, reaching about \$4.15 a gallon in the U.S., up from just under \$3 before the conflict began. Higher gas costs can sap Americans’ ability to spend on other goods and services, slowing the economy and threatening to worsen unemployment.

U.S. consumer prices rose 3.3% in March from a year earlier, up sharply from just 2.4% in February and the biggest yearly increase since May 2024. The surge in gas prices will stretch the budgets of lower- and middle-income households.

The myrrh tree that’s key to luxury perfumes and African incomes is threatened by drought

By JULIANNE GUARON Associated Press

AFCADDE, Ethiopia (AP) — The critical note in some of the world’s most well-known perfumes is myrrh, a tree resin from the Horn of Africa that is under pressure from what experts call a historic drought.

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Threatened by the lack of water and nibbled by starving livestock, the trees that once formed a dense forest in the Somali region of Ethiopia are in danger, locals say.

Earlier this year, researchers supported by the American Herbal Products Association visited a source of the prized resin that makes its way to global markets from some of the most vulnerable places on earth.

The goal: To ensure that those who harvest the resin get more of the direct profits instead of middlemen along the opaque supply chain.

Ethiopia is a major source of myrrh, which has been used in beauty, health and religious practices since at least ancient Egypt. Traditional harvesting in the region has not changed, which helps to protect the trees and produces the highest quality resin.

Myrrh's hand-harvested nature raises its price, but those doing the work see little of the profit. Collecting a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of the resin brings as little as \$3.50 and as much as \$10.

That's far from the prices for the perfumes it helps to create, which are marketed by well-known fashion brands like Tom Ford, Comme des Garçons and Jo Malone and sold at prices as high as \$500 a bottle.

Meanwhile, curiosity about myrrh's other potential uses is growing with increased global interest in natural remedies.

For now, most myrrh from this part of eastern Ethiopia is purchased by traders from neighboring Somalia. Ethiopia collects no taxes on the goods.

Locals hope more visibility will help them as the climate crisis threatens their ways of life.

"They expressed hope that a direct market would enable them to secure better prices, ensuring sustainable livelihoods," said Abdinasir Abdikadir Aweys, senior researcher with the Somali Regional Pastoral and Agro-Pastoral Research Institute and a member of the research team.

The researchers were led by Anjanette DeCarlo, an expert in sustainable supply chains and resins at the University of Vermont, and Stephen Johnson, resin expert and owner of FairSource Botanicals. They found that communities practice traditional harvesting by collecting resin from trees' naturally occurring wounds instead of by making intentional cuts, which makes trees more vulnerable to pests and disease.

"Traditional practice is in balance and protects trees. It should be celebrated," DeCarlo said.

But the drought worried the team. The annual rains have been failing over the past several years, interrupted in 2023 by devastating flooding.

The arid region has long seen droughts, but this one has been historic. Experts have blamed the changing climate.

Myrrh harvesting is threatened. While adult trees are generally healthy, they are producing less resin. And fewer young trees are surviving.

"Unfortunately, many seedlings are uprooted by children who graze their livestock nearby, and the animals often eat the buds of the young trees," said a local elder, Mohamed Osman Miyir, adding: "We are deeply worried about the declining population of myrrh trees."

Without proper rain, other young trees are likely to fail. DeCarlo worried that eventually even the adult trees will die.

Villagers' days are spent hauling water for themselves and their livestock. Herders travel over the parched, cracked earth as far as 200 kilometers to Sanqotor village, which has a rare well with water.

"Guests water animals first, then the villagers," said local headman Ali Mohamed, watching hundreds of livestock crowd around the well.

But not everyone has livestock to survive. The poorest residents rely solely on tree resin like myrrh for their survival.

Michigan couple at center of Bahamas disappearance chronicled sailing adventures on social media

By COREY WILLIAMS Associated Press

Lynette Hooker bounced around the deck of the docked Soul Mate, smiled into the camera and proclaimed: "We're finally leaving Kemah," referring to a Texas port town.

"It's only been four months," she said as her husband, Brian, tugged on some rigging as they got ready

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to set sail.

The "Gulf Crossing" video more than three years ago marked the start of a sailing adventure — chronicled on Facebook — for a couple who are now at the center of criminal investigations after Lynette went missing in the Bahamas.

A few days after Lynette disappeared, police in the Atlantic Ocean island nation arrested Brian. He denies causing his wife's death and has been cooperating with law enforcement, his attorney, Terrel Butler, said.

On Friday, Brian's attorney reiterated his innocence and said his wife has not been found. She said police had just finished an intensive 4-hour interview with him in which she described him as continuously asking about his wife.

"He was a bit puzzled because he was uncertain as to why they were questioning him about causing harm or possible murder when they had not given him any information in terms of where she is, if they had recovered her," she said.

Brian Hooker had told police that his wife of more than 20 years fell overboard Saturday night from a small motorboat that was carrying the couple from Hope Town to Elbow Cay, small islands on the eastern end of the Bahamas. He said Lynette, 55, had the keys and the boat's engine shut off.

"Strong currents subsequently carried her away, and he lost sight of her," police said in a statement Saturday.

He paddled to shore and alerted others early Sunday, said authorities, who arrested and questioned him Wednesday.

The U.S. Coast Guard has opened an investigation separate from the one by Bahamas authorities.

Karli Aylesworth, Lynette's daughter, has said it's unlikely her mother would "just fall" from a boat.

And while the couple is seen smiling, laughing and joking in social media videos of their voyage, they have a history of contention.

Brian and Lynette Hooker accused each other of assault in 2015, according to a Kentwood, Michigan, police report obtained by NBC News.

Brian Hooker, who was intoxicated and bleeding from the nose, told police his wife had struck him multiple times in the face, the report said. He told officers Lynette also was drunk. She was arrested for assault and spent the night in jail. A warrant was denied because it wasn't clear "who started the assault."

Aylesworth also told NBC that the couple's relationship was volatile and that they have a "history of not getting along, especially when they drink."

The couple's home is in Onsted, about 72 miles (117 kilometers) southwest of Detroit. The closest big body of water is Lake Erie, about 60 miles (72 kilometers) southeast of Onsted.

Lynette Hooker's mother, Darlene Hamlett, said Wednesday that the family "grew up on water" and that her daughter's life has been "near lakes, on boats, sailing and swimming."

The couple posted videos of their years sailing around the Caribbean on their "Sailing Hookers" Facebook page.

Lynette, in the March 2023 video, describes the start of the couple's voyage aboard the Soul Mate as the sailboat slips through the Kemah, Texas, fog and into the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

"Pretty cool," Lynette said as Brian blared the Soul Mate's foghorn. Later, while changing an engine alternator belt, he looks up at his wife and says, "Hi sexy."

In an earlier video, the couple explains how they bought the Soul Mate in the coastal town of Rockport, Texas, and fixed it up.

"After several years of driving around the country, looking for our perfect sailboat, we finally found her in Texas," Lynette said in that eight-minute video, posted in January 2023. "She was a little rough on the edges. The decks needed to be redone, but we knew we were up for the task."

That video shows them working together, scraping, priming and painting. "The decks are done! we're still married! party time!" is printed in a message on the video.

A video posted two years ago shows them using their smaller motorboat to buy food on land. The video doesn't give the couple's location.

"We got the grub," Brian says into the camera, which shifts to a case of beer at his feet and bags of groceries in the bow. "Delivery ... the way of life, man."

Trump's Washington arch plan includes golden-winged figure, eagles, lions and 'One Nation Under God'

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's plans for a new triumphal arch in the capital, unveiled on Friday, include a towering winged figure with a Lady Liberty-like torch and crown, flanked by two eagles and guarded by four lions — all gilded.

The 12-page plan released by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts shows the arch will stand 250 feet tall (76.2 meters) from its base to the tip of the winged figure's torch, with "One Nation Under God" and "Liberty and Justice for All" inscribed in gold atop either side of the monument.

The plan indicates the structure would stand between the Lincoln Memorial in the east and Arlington National Cemetery toward the west and within a traffic circle connecting Washington with northern Virginia. The arch would dwarf the Lincoln Memorial, which stands at 99 feet tall (30.2 meters).

Trump wrote on social media that it "will be the GREATEST and MOST BEAUTIFUL Triumphal Arch, anywhere in the World. This will be a wonderful addition to the Washington D.C. area for all Americans to enjoy for many decades to come!"

Trump has said he wants to build the arch near the Lincoln Memorial and argued that the nation's capital first sought such a monument 200 years ago.

"It was interrupted by a thing called the Civil War, and so it never got built," Trump said in February. "Then, they almost built something in 1902, but it never happened."

Trump has said that major cities around the world have such monuments, and Washington is the only one without one.

The arch is one of several architectural changes Trump is making in his second term. In addition to building a large ballroom at the White House, he's also made changes to the Oval Office and converted the Rose Garden into a stone-covered patio.

The arch goes beyond the White House, giving Trump a chance to leave another lasting monument in a city known for them. It would expand on his earlier talk of sprucing up the city by replacing its "tired" grasses, and broken signage and street medians.

From 'BuddhaBot' to \$1.99 chats with AI Jesus, the faith-based tech boom is here

By KRYSTA FAURIA and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

CAMARILLO, Calif. (AP) — For some evangelical Christians, faith is about having a personal relationship with Jesus. At \$1.99 per minute, the tech company Just Like Me is taking that concept to a new level.

Users of the platform can join video calls with an avatar of Jesus generated by artificial intelligence. Like other religious AI tools on the market, it offers words of prayer and encouragement in various languages. With the occasional glitch, it remembers previous conversations and speaks through not-quite-synced lips.

"You do feel a little accountable to the AI," CEO Chris Breed said. "They're your friend. You've made an attachment."

The rush to create faith-based generative AI is unsurprising, given the popularity of chatbots for everything from therapy and medical advice to companionship and romance. They range from alleged Hindu gurus and Buddhist priests to AI Jesuses and chatbots akin to OpenAI's ChatGPT for Catholics.

As religious AI tools become increasingly common, many people are reckoning with how these technologies shape their relationship to faith, authority and spiritual guidance.

A faith-based AI gold rush

Christian software engineer Cameron Pak developed criteria to help believers interrogate apps designed for Christians — like that it must clearly identify itself as AI and "must not fabricate or misrepresent Scripture."

There are other deal-breakers: "AI cannot pray for you, because the AI is not alive."

Pak also developed a website featuring curated Christian apps that he believes meet the criteria, including a sermon translator and an AI coach designed to help users overcome lust. "AI, especially if you give it all the tools that it needs, it can be so helpful. But it also can be so dangerous," Pak said.

Some models have been shut down or overhauled because they generated misinformation or raised wor-

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ries about data privacy, said Beth Singler, an anthropologist who studies religion and AI at the University of Zurich. Aside from practical concerns, people from many faiths are grappling with larger philosophical questions about what sort of role, if any, AI should play in religion.

Islam, for example, has "prohibitions against representations of humanoids," prompting discussions among some Muslims about whether AI in general should be "forbidden," Singler said.

For some companies, faith-based apps are proselytization tools, while others help digitize and sift through ancient texts.

Breed, who runs his tech company with co-founder and investor Jeff Tinsley from a Southern California mansion, said he seeks to share a message of hope with young people.

He said their model was trained on the King James Bible and sermons — though they haven't identified the preachers — and was visually inspired by actor Jonathan Roumie of "The Chosen." A package deal at \$49.99 gets users 45 minutes per month.

With warm golden light accenting its shoulder-length hair, the avatar blinks slowly from a vertical screen, pausing before it answers a question about the relationship between AI and religion.

"I see AI as a tool that can help people explore Scripture," the AI Jesus said to The Associated Press. "Like a lamp that lights a path while we walk with God."

Integrating religion and AI comes with hope and fear

The extent to which people are using religious AI tools is unclear, Singler said. But as AI becomes more integrated into society, concerns mount over its impact on mental health and the need for guardrails and regulation. Recent lawsuits have alleged suicides linked to AI chatbot use.

Some developers fear religion will be exploited in this new frontier of tech. "There's a lot of opportunism, I think, in the religious space. People see it's a big market," said Matthew Sanders, the Rome-based founder of Longbeard, a tech company helping to digitize ancient Catholic teachings.

Sanders warns against what he calls "AI wrappers," where companies put an interface catered to religious users on top of an existing AI model that hasn't been trained on specific religious texts. "You call it a Catholic or Christian AI without any other scaffolding or grounding," he said.

One of the company's endeavors is Magisterium AI, a chatbot trained on 2,000 years of Catholic information, made in response to Christians using ChatGPT for religious guidance.

While Pope Leo XIV has acknowledged the "human genius" behind AI, he also deemed it one of the most critical matters facing humanity. Last year he warned artificial intelligence could negatively impact people's intellectual, neurological and spiritual development.

Ethical questions surrounding the creation of religious AI platforms are among the reasons beingAI's founder Jeanne Lim has not released its AI named Emi Jido — a nonhuman Buddhist priest — after years of training and development.

"She's kind of like a little child," Lim said. "If you give birth to a child, you don't just throw them out to the world and then hope that they become good people. You have to train them and give them values."

The bot was ordained in a 2024 ceremony performed by Roshi Jundo Cohen, a Zen Buddhist priest who continues to train it from his home in Japan. He envisions the bot eventually becoming a hologram.

"She's just meant to be a Zen teacher in your pocket," Cohen said. "It's not meant to replace human interactions."

Lim, who hopes to make Emi Jido publicly available for free, wants to help create more humane AI systems. She'd like to see more diversity, with AI's future determined not just by a few companies informed by "Western values."

Seiji Kumagai, a Kyoto University professor and Buddhist theologian, believed AI and religion were incompatible. But he put aside his doubts when challenged by a monk in 2014 to help combat a decline in the faith.

His team developed BuddhaBot, which was trained solely on early Buddhist scriptures, such as Suttanipāta. Its most recent iteration, BuddhaBot Plus, also incorporates OpenAI's ChatGPT.

When talking to the bot, a simple Buddha icon appears, hovering over an image of a flowing river.

But chatbots lack the physicality crucial for Buddhist ritual. So in February, the university, collaborating with tech ventures Teraverse and XNOVA, unveiled Buddharoid, a humanoid robot monk meant to even-

tually assist clergy.

Like Emi Jido, these chatbots are functioning but not yet publicly available. Kumagai says the product is available by request, and the reason why one group has access to it in Bhutan.

Concerns surrounding religious AI

Peter Hershock of the Humane AI Initiative at the East-West Center in Honolulu sees vast potential for these tools. But the practicing Buddhist also finds the relationship between spirituality and AI to be fraught.

"The perfection of effort is crucial to Buddhist spirituality. An AI is saying, 'We can take some of the effort out,'" he said. "You can get anywhere you want, including your spiritual summit." That's dangerous."

Some also worry about AI's ability to manipulate or prey upon people, especially as the technology improves.

Graham Martin, a podcast host and atheist, said he's played around with some apps, including one called Text With Jesus. "It came up with very good answers," he said.

But Martin was alarmed when AI-powered Jesus started encouraging him to upgrade to a premium version. Though not a person of faith, he's concerned some people will be duped by religious AI.

"I grew up with Southern U.S. televangelism ... Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and all that crowd. And all they had to do was get on TV once a week and tell you to send money," he said. "We've seen people around the world getting into emotional relationships with AIs. Now imagine that that's your lord and savior, Jesus Christ."

Five people charged with murder in deadly Northern California fireworks warehouse explosion

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

Five people have been charged with murder in a deadly Northern California explosion at an illegal fireworks warehouse that killed seven people and shook a tiny farming community, authorities said Friday.

The charges stem from a grand jury indictment related to the July 1 explosion that injured two others, Yolo County Deputy District Attorney Clara Nabity said. One of the people charged with murder is Samuel Machado, who was a Yolo County Sheriff's Department lieutenant at the time of the explosion. He illegally stored more than 1 million pounds (453,000 kilograms) of fireworks at his property and used his position at the sheriff's office to evade scrutiny as the operation grew, she said.

The explosion near the community of Esparto, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) northwest of Sacramento, sparked a massive fire and led to nearby Fourth of July celebrations being called off.

"Samuel Machado's participation included using his role as a trusted lieutenant to help shield the conspiracy as it expanded, and the expansion was significant," Nabity said, adding that the warehouse went from having 13 fireworks storage containers in 2015 to 50 last year.

It was not immediately clear if Machado has an attorney who can speak on his behalf. A telephone number listed for him went unanswered Friday.

Machado's sprawling 5,000-square-foot (465-square-meters) warehouse property was used to store and sell fireworks by other men indicted in the case.

Nabity said a total of eight people face 30 charges in the case, including murder, conspiracy to commit a crime, possession of illegal assault weapons, illegal explosives possession, insurance fraud, child endangerment and animal cruelty.

All those charged are scheduled to be arraigned in Yolo County on Monday.

Machado's wife, Tammy Machado, was also arrested Thursday but was released after posting bail. She was a non-sworn administrative employee at the Yolo County Sheriff's Office at the time of the explosion. Both Samuel and Tammy Machado were put on leave after the incident. She faces charges of mortgage fraud, filing a willfully wrong tax return and endangering a child by storing illegal explosives next to a family pool, according to the indictment.

Others indicted include Kenneth Chee, owner of Devastating Pyrotechnics, whose illegal fireworks were being stored at Machado's warehouse, has also been charged with murder and was arrested in Florida. He appeared in a Florida courtroom Friday and was told he will be extradited to California within the week,

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KCRA-TV reported.

Authorities also arrested Jack Lee, the operations manager for Devastating Pyrotechnic, and Gary Chan Jr., whose name is on the company's federal license. Both also face murder charges. The fifth person charged with murder is Douglas Tollefsen, who was arrested in Northern California but has yet to be taken to a Yolo County jail, Yolo County District Attorney Jeff Reisig said. Tollefsen stored and sold fireworks at Machado's warehouse, according to the indictment.

"This is not a case just about fireworks," Nabity said. "They are devices that have so much more explosive fireworks than the law allows that they can't be considered fireworks."

Machado, Chee, Lee, Chan and Tollefsen were arrested Thursday along with Craig Cutright, the owner of Blackstar Fireworks, which operated at the Esparto property. Cutright, was a volunteer firefighter for the Esparto Fire District and was also listed as an employee of Devastating Pyrotechnics.

One of Cutright's employees, Ronald Botelho III, has been in custody since December. More than a dozen new charges were filed against him Thursday, jail records show.

The grand jury concluded that the initial blast caused the death of seven people, Nabity said. Those killed included four workers: 18-year-old Jesus Ramos and his 22-year-old Jhony Ramos, of San Pablo, California; 28-year-old Joel Melendez, of Sacramento, and 43-year-old Carlos Javier Rodriguez-Mora, of San Andreas, California. Christopher Goltiao Bocog and Neil Li of San Francisco and Angel Mathew Voller, of Stockton, California, were also killed.

People living nearby described the blast being so strong that it blew open the doors of homes.

Nisa Gutierrez told the Sacramento CBS affiliate KQVR-TV that she and her daughter were in their yard and were nearly knocked over as their pony and goats scattered.

"We hear like a big boom, and feel the wave," Gutierrez said. "I thought it was a bomb."

After the explosion, officials in nearby Sutter and Yuba counties announced they would find alternatives for Fourth of July celebrations after their fireworks were destroyed in the blast.

Israeli strike kills Lebanese security forces as Israel and Hezbollah trade fire ahead of talks

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Attacks intensified Friday between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah ahead of direct talks between the Lebanese government and Israel set to begin next week.

The talks are set to begin Tuesday in Washington and will be mediated by U.S. diplomats, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun's office said in a statement, citing the outcome of a call Friday among Israeli, Lebanese and U.S. ambassadors. The statement reiterated Beirut's position that the talks be held under a ceasefire or truce.

Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Yechiel Leiter later issued a statement describing next Tuesday's talks as "formal peace negotiations," but said a ceasefire was not on the agenda, in a stark contradiction to Aoun's remarks.

"Israel refused to discuss a ceasefire with the Hezbollah terrorist organization, which continues to attack Israel and is the main obstacle to peace between the two countries," the statement read.

At least 13 members of Lebanon's State Security forces were killed in an Israeli strike in southern Lebanon on Friday, while Hezbollah claimed an attack targeting a naval base in the Israeli port city of Ashdod some 145 kilometers (90 miles) from the border.

Israel launched strikes across several towns in southern Lebanon, including one on a government building in the southern city of Nabatieh that killed the government security personnel. Hezbollah claimed 31 other attacks on northern Israel and on Israeli ground troops that have invaded southern Lebanon.

Israel launched its latest aerial campaign and a ground invasion of southern Lebanon after Hezbollah fired rockets toward northern Israel in solidarity with Iran, its key ally and patron, on March 2.

At least 1,953 people in Lebanon have been killed in Israeli strikes, according to the Health Ministry. At least 303 were killed in a rapid series of 100 strikes that hit the country — including multiple areas in dense residential and commercial areas in central Beirut — in 10 minutes on Wednesday, the bloodiest

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day in the latest war between the two sides. Civil Defense first responders are still searching for bodies trapped under the rubble in the Lebanese capital.

Meanwhile, officials at Beirut's main government-run hospital on the southern edge of the capital fear it could be in the line of fire after the Israeli military issued an evacuation warning for the surrounding suburbs, including the busy neighborhood of Jnah where the hospital is located. Israel has launched attacks in Jnah, both with and without warning.

The World Health Organization has since called for the Rafik Hariri University Hospital to be spared from attacks and not to evacuate, and WHO officials said Friday that they received assurances that it would not be struck. The hospital has not evacuated, though staff are fearful, as getting to work now requires them to drive on roads that can be struck at any time says Dr. Mohammad Cheaito, who heads the emergency department.

"The entire zone around the hospital was threatened and deemed dangerous," he told The Associated Press. "But at the end of the day, we have a humanitarian duty."

Lebanon hopes for truce while Hezbollah supporters reject talks

Lebanon's authorities have not yet commented on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announcement on Thursday of the decision to go ahead with talks. Netanyahu said the talks would revolve around disarming Hezbollah and establishing "peaceful relations" between the two countries.

A Lebanese official in government familiar with the developments said that a halt in the fighting is a critical condition for the country to engage in direct talks with Israel, similar to the one between the U.S. and Iran. It has yet to appoint a representative for negotiations. They spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Aoun had initially proposed the direct talks early on in the war on similar terms, at the time hoping for Israel to stop an escalation in airstrikes and to not invade the country. At the time, with only the backing of France, that failed.

On Wednesday, the U.S. and Iran announced a temporary ceasefire in the war that began on Feb. 28. It included Lebanon and other countries impacted in the wider regional conflict, mediator Pakistan announced. However, Israel — and later the United States — denied this. They want to separate the diplomatic tracks of the two wars.

Hezbollah considers Israel's attacks on Lebanon to be a violation of the ceasefire, while Beirut, in a bid to disarm Hezbollah and assert its full sovereignty over the country, says it wants to be included in talks related to Lebanon.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Naim Kassem in a statement broadcast Thursday did not directly mention the prospect of Israel-Lebanon talks, but called on the Lebanese government to "stop giving free concessions" to Israel.

Dozens of supporters of the Iran-backed group protested outside of the Lebanese prime minister's office in central Beirut. They see the scheduled direct talks as a surrender to Israel, which says its troops will stay in the country indefinitely.

"Our blood has been spilled on this land, and our state is conspiring against us," said protester Hassan Shuaib. "Our state wants to kill us; our state wants to strip us of our weapons."

Melania Trump denied ties to Jeffrey Epstein. The question remains: Why now?

By The Associated Press undefined

WASHINGTON (AP) — First lady Melania Trump's seemingly out-of-the-blue statement Thursday denying affiliation with disgraced sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein left people still wondering Friday what prompted the public declaration at a time when the case had receded from the spotlight.

Reading prepared remarks at the White House on Thursday, Melania Trump said she and her attorneys were fighting back against "unfounded and baseless lies" in regards to her connections to the late financier, a convicted sex offender who leveraged connections to the rich, powerful and famous to recruit his victims and cover up his crimes.

"The lies linking me with the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end today," she said. "The individuals

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lying about me are devoid of ethical standards, humility and respect. I do not object to their ignorance, but rather I reject their mean-spirited attempts to defame my reputation."

The first lady didn't take questions from the press after her statement, leaving many with questions:

Why now?

It's unclear.

The message came as her husband, President Donald Trump, and his administration had finally seemed to move past more than a year of controversy surrounding Epstein, especially as the Iran war had become all-consuming in Washington.

The first lady's comments almost assuredly will serve to push the story back into the political spotlight even as the president urged the public and media to move on from the case.

Who was Melania Trump responding to?

Melania Trump seemingly referenced a brief email from 2002 with the sender and recipient blacked out. It begins, "Dear G!" and ends "Love, Melania," and compliments the recipient on a magazine article about "JE."

"I know you are very busy flying all over the world," it says. "How was Palm Beach? I cannot wait to go down. Give me a call when you are back in NY."

That email was sent the same month that a New York Magazine article was published about Epstein in which Trump called him a "terrific guy."

Melania Trump said Thursday that she was not friends with Epstein or his confidant and onetime girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell, but was in overlapping social circles in New York and Florida. She described an email reply she sent to Maxwell as "casual correspondence" without elaborating.

"My polite reply to her email doesn't amount to anything more than a trivial note," she said.

Among other documents released was an image from Epstein's home showing a series of photographs along a credenza and in drawers. In that image, inside a drawer among other photos, was a photograph of Donald Trump alongside Epstein, Melania Trump and Maxwell.

Melania Trump noted Thursday that several individuals and organizations have had to apologize for their "lies about me." Of the examples she cited, the most recent was in October. In that case, book publisher HarperCollins UK apologized to the first lady and retracted passages from a book suggesting Epstein played a role in introducing her and Donald Trump.

What did President Trump say about his wife's comments?

MS NOW reporter Jacqueline Alemany said on social media Thursday that President Trump told her he did not "know anything about" Melania Trump's statement about Epstein.

The White House press office did not respond to requests for comment.

Nick Clemens, a spokesperson for the first lady, said the West Wing was aware beforehand that she was making a statement. But he deferred to the West Wing on whether the content of what Melania Trump planned to say was known.

In recent weeks President Trump's public appearances have largely centered around the war in Iran.

What is the status of the release of the Epstein files?

The first lady brought Epstein back to the forefront months after federal authorities released millions of pages of documents under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, the law enacted after months of public and political pressure. It requires the government to open its files on the late financier and Maxwell.

Lawmakers initially complained when the Justice Department made only a limited release, but officials said more time was needed to review additional documents that were discovered and to ensure no sensitive information about victims was released.

Did anyone get punished after the files were made public?

Several key leaders in Europe have been punished for their affiliation with Epstein but there have been no comparable prosecutions in the U.S.

Most notably, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor — Britain's former Prince Andrew — was arrested in February following the most recent trove of files that were released. Mountbatten-Windsor's name frequently appeared in the files, depicting a close relationship with Epstein.

But his arrest didn't have anything to do with sexual impropriety. Instead, he was arrested for allegedly

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sharing confidential trade information with Epstein.

Melania Trump called on Congress to hold a public hearing centered on survivors of Epstein's crimes, with a chance to testify before lawmakers and have their stories entered into the congressional record.

"Each and every woman should have her day to tell her story in public if she wishes," she said. "Then, and only then, we will have the truth."

Stocks drift lower and oil prices ease ahead of planned US-Iran talks

By DAMIAN J. TROISE and ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writers

Stocks drifted mostly lower on Wall Street and oil prices slipped Friday ahead of planned U.S.-Iran talks following a shaky ceasefire agreement.

The S&P 500 inched 0.1% lower after a day of choppy trading. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 0.6% and the Nasdaq composite rose 0.4%.

The major indexes each notched a weekly gain for the second week in a row. They have been gaining ground this month amid optimism that the war with Iran could be heading toward a resolution. High-level talks between negotiators from Iran and the U.S. are planned for Saturday in Pakistan.

The benchmark S&P 500 has erased most of its losses from March and is just 2.3% short of its all-time high set in January. The market is still prone to big swings on developments around the war.

Oil prices have been behind many of the stock market's sharp movements. They've risen sharply as shipping through the vital Strait of Hormuz essentially stalled since the war began.

Brent crude oil, the international standard, has gone from roughly \$70 per barrel before the war in late February to more than \$119 at times. Brent for June delivery fell 0.8% to \$95.20 per barrel Friday.

A barrel of U.S. crude oil for May delivery dropped 1.3% to \$96.57.

The situation leading into the peace talks over the weekend remains uncertain. Iran's semiofficial Tasnim news agency claimed that talks wouldn't happen unless Israel stopped its attacks in Lebanon.

The conflict is behind surging inflation in the U.S. in March. The government reported the biggest spike in inflation in four years as prices at the gas pump jumped. The inflation increase was just short of what economists expected.

Bond yields rose a bit following the latest inflation update. The yield on the 10-year Treasury climbed to 4.32% from 4.29% late Thursday.

Inflation has been a lingering concern for economists. Prices on a range of consumer goods and services are already stubbornly high, in part from the impact of extensive global tariffs. Higher gas prices are immediately felt by drivers at the pump, but they could eventually raise prices on everything from food to airfare as companies pass along higher costs for shipping and fuel.

Analysts are warning that there might be a drawn out impact from the oil supply shock in the months ahead.

"While I'm glad to see the effects to be less than expected in March, the effects in April are now more likely to be worse," Jamie Cox, managing partner for Harris Financial Group, wrote in a research note.

Consumer sentiment slumped 10.7% percent in April, according to a closely watched monthly survey from the University of Michigan. It also shows that consumers are growing more worried about inflation, with year-ahead expectations surging to 4.8% in April from 3.8% in March.

Inflation remains a major concern for the Federal Reserve, which has signaled more caution amid worries about inflation reheating. The rate of inflation remains above the central bank's 2% target. The threat of rising inflation will likely mean the central bank continues to hold interest rates steady. Several Fed officials have also said a rate hike may be needed if inflation doesn't cool.

Lower interest rates help boost stocks and other investments by lowering borrowing costs. Interest rate cuts also risk worsening inflation.

Most companies in the S&P 500 lost ground Friday, with health care and financial company stocks driving much of the decline. Eli Lilly and Co. fell 1.6% and Charles Schwab closed 2.5% lower.

Technology stocks with hefty values helped offset losses elsewhere. Nvidia rose 2.6% and Broadcom

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rose 4.7%.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 7.77 points to 6,816.89. The Dow dropped 269.23 points to 47,916.57, and the Nasdaq gained 80.48 points to close at 22,902.89.

Markets in Asia gained ground while markets in Europe were mixed.

US and Iran prepare for high-level talks as Israel and Hezbollah trade more fire

By JON GAMBRELL, SAM MEDNICK and MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — With the ceasefire in Iran still shaky, U.S. Vice President JD Vance headed Friday to Pakistan for high-level talks with Iranian officials, as Israel and Hezbollah militants traded fire and Tehran maintained its stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz.

Many issues could derail the truce and the negotiations aimed at making a broader deal to stop the fighting permanently.

Iran's semiofficial Tasnim news agency, close to the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, claimed that the talks set for Saturday would not happen unless Israel stopped its attacks in Lebanon. And U.S. President Donald Trump said on his social media platform that Iran has no leverage except to restrict ship traffic in the strait, through which 20% of the world's traded oil once passed.

Kuwait, meanwhile, said it was targeted by seven drone attacks since Thursday that it blamed on Iran and its militia allies in the region. Though the Guard denied launching any assault, it has carried out attacks across the Mideast in the past that it did not claim.

Preparations for the talks between Iran and the U.S. appeared to be moving forward, with Vance boarding Air Force Two for the long flight to Islamabad.

Elsewhere, negotiations between Israel and Lebanon were expected to begin Tuesday in the U.S. capital, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun's office said Friday. Beirut is keen to hold direct talks to end the war between Israel and Hezbollah, but under a ceasefire similar to the one with Iran.

Before his departure, Vance said he believed the negotiations with Iran will be "positive."

But he added, "If they're going to try and play us, then they're going to find that the negotiating team is not that receptive."

In Islamabad, security forces locked down key parts of the Pakistani capital, erecting barricades along routes from the airport to the city.

Hours later, the Iranian delegation led by Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf arrived in Islamabad, Iranian state TV reported. The delegation included security, political, military, economic and legal teams. The report said negotiations will begin only if the other side accepts Iran's preconditions.

Earlier in the day, Qalibaf posted on social media that two points he said had been mutually agreed on — a ceasefire in Lebanon and the release of blocked Iranian assets — have yet to be implemented.

"These two matters must be fulfilled before negotiations begin," he wrote.

Israel and Lebanon will have direct negotiations

Israel's insistence that the ceasefire in Iran does not include a pause in its fighting with Hezbollah has threatened to sink the deal. The militant group joined the war in support of its backer, Iran.

The day the truce was announced, Israel pounded Beirut with airstrikes, killing more than 300 people, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry. It was the deadliest day in the country since the war began Feb. 28.

Trump said Thursday that he had asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to dial back the strikes.

Then on Friday, Israeli warplanes struck near a state security office in the southern town of Nabatieh, killing 13 officers, according to the Lebanese president's office. Israeli forces said they also hit about 10 rocket launchers in Lebanon that had fired toward northern Israel.

A day earlier, Netanyahu said he authorized the negotiations with Lebanon with the aim of disarming Hezbollah militants and establishing relations between the neighbors, which have technically been at war since Israel was established in 1948.

Aoun's office confirmed that the two sides were set to negotiate after Lebanon and Israel's ambassadors to the U.S. held a call with Washington's ambassador to Lebanon to discuss terms. The U.S. State

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Department will mediate.

In a first statement since Israel announced direct negotiations with Lebanon, Hezbollah chief Naim Kassem urged Lebanese officials to stop offering "free concessions," but he did not take a clear stance on the talks.

Two days after Israel's barrage, people sifted through the wreckage of their homes, trying to salvage furniture and personal mementos. Some expressed gratitude that they did not lose loved ones.

"There is no substitute for family," said Wissam Tabila, 35. "Everything else can be replaced."

Strait of Hormuz remains a sticking point

Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz has sent oil prices skyrocketing, driven stocks down and roiled the world economy. Tehran's control over the waterway has proved its biggest strategic advantage in the war.

The spot price of Brent crude, the international standard, was around \$97 Friday, up more than 30% since the war started.

Before the conflict, over 100 ships passed through the strait each day — many carrying oil to Asia. With the ceasefire in place, only 12 have been recorded passing through.

Trump said Iran has little clout in the negotiations.

"The Iranians don't seem to realize they have no cards, other than a short term extortion of the World by using International Waterways," Trump posted Friday. "The only reason they are alive today is to negotiate!"

Questions linger about missile and nuclear programs

Questions also remain over the fate of Iran's missile and nuclear programs, which the U.S. and Israel sought to eliminate in going to war.

The U.S. insists Iran must never be able to build nuclear weapons and wants to remove Tehran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium, which could be used to make them. Iran insists its program is peaceful.

Trump has said that the U.S. would work with Iran to remove the uranium, though Tehran has not confirmed that.

More than 3,000 people have been killed in Iran, a top Iranian officer told the state-run Iran newspaper. Iran's government has not provided any definitive death toll from the war.

In Lebanon, at least 1,953 people have been killed and 1 million have been displaced. Over a dozen people have died in Gulf Arab states and the occupied West Bank, while 23 civilians were killed in Israel. Thirteen U.S. service members have been killed.

In other developments, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukrainian forces shot down Iranian-designed Shahed drones in several Middle Eastern countries during the Iran war. The missions, carried out with domestically produced interceptor drones, were part of efforts to help partners counter the same weapons Russia uses in Ukraine, he said.

Prince Harry sued for defamation by charity he set up in Africa to honor his mother Princess Diana

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A charity co-founded by Prince Harry in Africa to honor his late mother, Princess Diana, has sued him for defamation after he stepped down as a patron last year.

Sentebale, which supports young people living with HIV in Botswana and Lesotho, filed suit last month in London's High Court, according to court records viewed Friday. Online filings show Harry and his friend, Mark Dyer, a former trustee at the charity, are being sued for either libel or slander. No documents were available.

"The charity seeks the court's intervention, protection, and restitution following a coordinated adverse media campaign conducted since 25 March 2025 that has caused operational disruption and reputational harm to the charity, its leadership, and its strategic partners," Sentebale said Friday in a statement on its website.

A spokesperson for Harry and Dyer said the pair "categorically reject these offensive and damaging claims."

The lawsuit puts the Duke of Sussex in an unaccustomed position as a defendant in the High Court. Over the past three years, he has repeatedly been on the other side of litigation as the leading claimant in invasion of privacy suits against Britain's most prominent tabloids over allegations of phone hacking and

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unlawful snooping by journalists and the private eyes they hired.

Harry co-founded Sentebale, which means "forget me not" in the language of Lesotho, about 20 years ago in memory of his mother, who was a prominent advocate for treatment of HIV and AIDS and helped reduce stigma around the disease. Prince Seeiso of Lesotho was the co-founder.

Disagreements at the charity surfaced in 2023 over a new fundraising strategy, and the two founders stepped down as patrons in March 2025 in support of trustees who had quit.

At the time, they said the relationship between the board and its chair, Sophie Chandauka, was beyond repair. Chandauka later accused Harry of orchestrating a campaign of bullying and harassment to try to force her out.

As the dispute unfolded, Chandauka told Sky News that filming for one of Harry's Netflix programs had interfered with a scheduled fundraiser for Sentebale and that an incident with his wife, Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, became a source of friction.

The Charity Commission for England and Wales investigated and criticized both sides for allowing the issue to become public and damaging the organization's reputation, but found no evidence of widespread bullying or misogyny at Sentebale.

"Sentebale's problems played out in the public eye, enabling a damaging dispute to harm the charity's reputation, risk overshadowing its many achievements, and jeopardizing the charity's ability to deliver for the very beneficiaries it was created to serve," commission CEO David Holdsworth said in a statement in August 2025.

Harry's spokesperson had criticized the commission's report while Chandauka welcomed it.

War in Iran sends inflation soaring and the mood of American consumers plunging

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The largest monthly jump in gas prices in six decades caused a sharp spike in inflation last month, creating major challenges for the inflation-fighters at the Federal Reserve and heightening already substantial political hurdles for the White House.

Consumer prices rose 3.3% in March from a year earlier, the Labor Department said Friday, up sharply from just 2.4% in February and the biggest yearly increase since May 2024. On a monthly basis, prices rose 0.9% in March from February, the largest such increase in nearly four years.

It's the first read on inflation to capture the effects of the Iran war. The surge in gas prices will stretch the budgets of lower- and middle-income households as it erodes their incomes, making it harder to afford other necessities such as food and rent.

Excluding volatile food and energy, core prices rose 2.6% in March from a year earlier, up from 2.5% in February. And last month core prices rose a modest 0.2%, suggesting that rising gas prices haven't yet spread to many other categories.

A big question for now is how long the oil and gas price shock lasts and whether it will lead to a broader, long-lasting inflation boost, similar to what occurred in the spring of 2022 after Russia invaded Ukraine. For now, economists say that it is unlikely the U.S. will see a widespread increase similar to a few years ago, when inflation topped 9%.

Still, how the war and its impact on inflation will play out in the coming months remains highly uncertain. Despite a tenuous cease fire, little has changed in the Strait of Hormuz, a bottle neck where millions of barrels of oil typically pass daily.

"It's painful in the near term," said Michael Pearce, chief U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. "It's going to get more painful in April," when further gas price increases will lift inflation higher.

But Pearce said the impact may be shorter-lived than after the pandemic: "I think the conditions are much more like a short, sharp shock than what we saw in 2022."

Industries that depend on oil and gas are paying more, particularly airlines, which have passed on those higher costs to travelers. Fares jumped 2.7% just last month and are 14.9% higher than a year ago. Many delivery services, including UPS and FedEx, have already announced fuel surcharges that have raised shipping costs for businesses and households.

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Grocery prices slipped 0.2% last month and are up just 1.9% from a year earlier, yet economists believe they will move higher in the coming months as diesel fuel prices surge. Most food is shipped by truck.

More expensive fuel is "contributing to rising production costs across the food supply chain and could put upward pressure on grocery prices going forward," said Andy Harig, a vice president at the grocery trade group FMI-The Food Industry Association. "As energy prices increase, the costs associated with producing and delivering food also rise."

Clothing costs rose 1% in March from the previous month and are up 3.4% from a year earlier. Used car prices, however, fell 0.4% last month and down 3.2% from a year earlier.

The gas price shock stemming from the Iran war has shifted inflation's trajectory, from a slow, gradual decline to a sharp increase further away from the Fed's 2% target. As a result, the central bank will almost certainly postpone any cut in interest rates for months. Many Fed officials will look past the increase in headline inflation, however, and focus on core prices, which are likely to rise more slowly.

If Americans cut back on spending elsewhere in response to more expensive gas, the economy could slow and unemployment may rise.

Consumer sentiment plunged to a record low in April, according to a survey released Friday by the University of Michigan, largely because of the Iran war and concerns over higher gas prices. Their Index of Consumer Sentiment fell to 47.6, from 53.3 in March.

"Many consumers blame the Iran conflict for unfavorable changes to the economy," said Joanne Hsu, the university's director of consumer surveys.

High prices had angered American voters before the war and the spike in prices for oil and everything that entails, from the pump to the grocery store, could make it more difficult for the president's party to hold on to seats in both the House and the Senate in this year's midterms.

Polling by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research last month found that about six in 10 Republicans are at least "somewhat" concerned about affording gas in the next few months.

Kyle LaFond, the founder of American Provenance, a small manufacturer of personal care products near Madison, Wisconsin, said his shipping costs have already risen between 30% and 40%.

The increases follow tariffs that were also a significant expense, because the company imports coconut oil, shea butter, cocoa butter, and other ingredients. LaFond said he absorbed tariff costs for months, but finally threw in the towel last September and raised prices by 20% to 30% across the board, the first price hike from the company since 2021.

Now, LaFond feels like it's a repeat of the tariff experience. He is trying to avoid raising prices again, but it depends on how long the fuel price spike lasts. If it continues until early summer, he may have to raise prices again.

"I'd really hate to do that because that would be two years of consecutive price increases, which for us, we've never done that before," he said "But for the business to survive, then that might be necessary."

Gas prices averaged \$4.15 a gallon nationwide Friday, up from \$2.98 on the day before the war began and a hike of nearly 40%, according to motor club AAA.

Inflation reached a peak of 9.1% in June 2022, as COVID-19 snarled supply chains and several rounds of stimulus checks pushed up consumer demand. Prices soared for groceries, furniture, restaurant meals and many other goods and services.

This time, economists say the job market and consumer spending are weaker, and there are no large government stimulus checks being issued to spur demand.

"That's where this really differs, is that we aren't seeing anywhere near the strength of demand," Alan Detmeister, an economist at UBS, said. In 2021 and 2022, income growth "was increasing really strongly. We aren't seeing that now," he added.

Federal court hears new case against Trump's latest global tariffs

By MAE ANDERSON and PAUL WISEMAN AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — The centerpiece of President Donald Trump's economic policy — sweeping taxes on global imports — is under legal assault again.

The U.S. Court of International Trade, a specialized court in New York, heard oral arguments Friday in

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an attempt to overturn the temporary tariffs Trump turned to after the Supreme Court in February struck down his preferred choice — even bigger, even more sweeping tariffs.

In his first attempt to impose global tariffs, the president last year invoked the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), using the law to declare America's longstanding trade deficit a national emergency and to impose double-digit worldwide taxes on imports to combat it. He interpreted the law broadly to justify tariffs of whatever size he wanted, whenever he wanted to impose them, on whatever country he wanted to target.

The Supreme Court struck those tariffs down on Feb. 20, saying IEEPA did not authorize the use of tariffs to counter national emergencies.

But Trump had alternatives to IEEPA. The quickest option was Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974, which allows the president to impose global tariffs of up to 15% for 150 days, after which congressional approval is needed to extend them. After his defeat at the Supreme Court, Trump quickly announced 10% Section 122 tariffs. He said he'd raise them to the maximum 15% but hasn't yet done so. The tariffs are scheduled to expire July 24.

Two dozen states and some businesses quickly challenged the new tariffs in court. Friday's hearing lasted more than three hours as a three-judge panel tried to assess a provision that had never been used before to impose tariffs and to analyze congressional decisionmaking from more than a half century ago.

The judges intensely questioned lawyers for both the plaintiffs and the government about what certain terms mean including what precisely the term "balance-of-payments deficits" meant when it was used in the Trade Act of 1974 and what it means today.

"I think the judges asked tough questions of all sides and were genuinely trying to find out what Congress meant when it passed section 122," said Jeffrey Schwab, senior counsel and director of litigation for Liberty Justice Center, which represents some of the plaintiffs.

"I would be stunned if the challengers prevail," said trade lawyer Ryan Majerus, a partner at King & Spalding law firm and a former U.S. trade official.

The trade court's judges, he said, are likely to defer to the president and allow the Section 122 tariffs to stay, considering that they will expire in three and a half months anyway. "I just don't see them sticking their neck out on this one, given how temporarily it's in place and how much discretion these courts give to the president," he said.

Section 122 is aimed at what it calls "fundamental international payments problems." At issue is whether that wording covers trade deficits, the gap between what the U.S. sells other countries and what it buys from them.

The provision arose from the financial crises that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s when the U.S. dollar was tied to gold. Other countries were dumping dollars in exchange for gold at a set rate, risking a collapse of the U.S. currency and chaos in financial markets. But the dollar is no longer linked to gold, so critics say Section 122 is obsolete.

Awkwardly for Trump, his own Justice Department argued in a court filing last year that the president had needed to invoke IEEPA because Section 122 did "not have any obvious application" in fighting trade deficits, which it called "conceptually distinct" from payments problems.

Awkwardly for the plaintiffs challenging his use of the temporary tariffs, the trade court itself wrote last year in its own decision striking down IEEPA tariffs that Trump didn't need them because Section 122 was available to counter trade deficits.

Last May, the trade court issued a decision striking down Trump's IEEPA tariffs about two weeks after hearing oral arguments in the case. Attorney General Dan Rayfield of Oregon, one of the states challenging Trump's latest tariffs, is eager for another speedy ruling. "We are hopeful to get a result sooner than later," he said. "When the president continues to do an unlawful action and take money out of the pockets of Americans, we want a response as quickly as we can from the courts."

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'I am thinking about it,' Kamala Harris says of 2028 presidential bid

By STEVE PEOPLES and MATT BROWN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After chants of "run again!" filled the room, former Vice President Kamala Harris told African American activists on Friday that she's actively considering another presidential bid.

"I might. I am thinking about it," Harris told Rev. Al Sharpton after he asked directly whether she was going to run for president in 2028.

Harris' comments came during the National Action Network's annual convention, where more than a half-dozen potential candidates appeared this week, hoping to make inroads among Black voters — who comprise one of Democrats' most powerful blocs.

The Democrats' next presidential primary season won't begin in earnest until after November's midterm elections, but this week's conference showcased a collection of Democrats already jockeying for position in what promises to be a crowded competition.

For now, at least, there is no clear early favorite. But there did appear to be a favorite at Sharpton's conference.

Harris, the nation's first Black female vice president and the Democrats' presidential nominee in 2024, earned the only standing ovation and the largest crowd of any other 2028 prospect this week.

Sharpton noted that Harris earned more votes in her losing 2024 campaign than even former Democratic Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

"Whatever she decides to do, she made a point in history," Sharpton said.

Harris has raised the possibility of another presidential bid before in the 15 months since she left office. She also recently launched a political action committee and began to travel across the United States to support Democrats, especially across the South.

Still, some in the party have shifted their focus to a new generation of Democratic leaders given Harris' struggle in the last presidential contest.

The convention lineup this week featured Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, Rep. Ro Khanna of California, and Arizona Sens. Mark Kelly and Ruben Gallego.

Buttigieg, speaking shortly after Harris left the stage, received soft applause from a room that was about half-empty. Some cheered when he mentioned supporting federal workers and minority businesses, but many attendees had streamed out of the packed auditorium after Harris' speech in an effort to grab a selfie with the former vice president.

Buttigieg, like many other 2028 prospects this week, laughed off a question about whether he would seek the presidency again.

Harris was more explicit.

Three times she repeated, "I'm thinking about it," when Sharpton asked her about a 2028 White House run.

"I served for four years being a heartbeat away from the presidency of the United States. I spent countless hours in my West Wing office footsteps away from the Oval Office. I spent countless hours in the Oval Office and the situation room. I know what the job is, and I know what it requires," Harris said.

She continued: "I am thinking about it in the context of who and where and how can the best job be done for the American people. That's how I'm thinking about it. I'll keep you posted."

Bible stories would be part of a new Texas public schools reading list drawing attention

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Biblical stories like Jonah and the whale would be required reading for Texas public schools students under proposals that are putting the state at the center of another contentious wrangling over the role of religion in classrooms.

Religious leaders, teachers, parents and students spent hours Tuesday before the state education board arguing about the reading list for the state's 5.4 million kindergartners to 12th-graders. The debate is part

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of widening efforts in the U.S. to incorporate religion in schools, mostly in Republican-led states, driving legislation and legal action.

Nationally, President Donald Trump has pledged to protect and expand religious expression in public schools. And Texas, a red state that is home to about one in 10 of the nation's public school students, often helps set the agenda.

Texas became the first state to allow chaplains, in 2023. And just last year, a Republican-led mandate that the Ten Commandments be displayed in public schools took effect in the state, although around two dozen districts took them down because of a lawsuit.

But while the debate over Texas' reading list could have national implications, to the speakers the issue boiled down to whether the passages are essential to understanding the nation's history and morals — or unconstitutional.

"Our children need truth," said Nathan Irving, a pastor and father of eight from Myrtle Springs, Texas. "Truth is the only currency that never devalues. Investing truth into our children is the most loving thing that we can do for them. This is the truth. This country and this state were founded upon a Christian worldview. Like it or not, it is true."

Final vote on the changes still ahead

A final vote on the list is expected in June, and if approved by the Texas State Board of Education, the changes would take effect in 2030.

Several speakers cited the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

"This list is a tool of proselytization that has no place in our public schools," Rabbi Josh Fixler, of Congregation Emanu El, a reform synagogue in Houston, told the board. "There is a difference between teaching about religion and teaching religion, and this list will force teachers to cross that line."

Megan Boyden, a mother of three from Denton, Texas, described it as a direct attack on her private faith.

"As a Christian mother, it is my right and responsibility to teach our family's religion," she said. "It is not the state's job to shed through the lens of a teacher who may not share the same beliefs I do. Will Bible passages be taught in conflict with my beliefs?"

"What," she asked, "of non-Christian students?"

The list stems from a state law passed in 2023, which called for the creation of a state-approved list of high-quality materials.

Third graders would learn about the Road to Damascus, which tells the story of Paul's transformation from an early persecutor of Christians into a follower. Seniors, meanwhile, would learn about the Book of Job, a story about a man whose faith is tested when he loses everything.

The list also includes classics like Dr. Seuss' "The Cat in the Hat," stories about the national folk hero Daniel Boone. And there are also works by famous African Americans like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. and a book about Harriet Tubman of the Underground Railroad fame.

Texas has already approved optional curriculum that incorporates the Bible

The GOP-leaning board previously approved a new Bible-infused curriculum that is optional for schools to incorporate in kindergarten through fifth grades.

The board also is considering social studies standards that have been criticized as too state-centric, not focused enough on world events and rife with an undercurrent of American exceptionalism. They call for students to "identify the Texas flag as a symbol of Texas pride," and recognize the state song "Texas, Our Texas."

Students also are supposed to be able to understand stories about Texas Independence.

Curriculum debates crop up occasionally. Over the years, state boards in places such as Kansas have debated whether the teaching of evolution should reflect doubt about the well-established scientific theory — and leave room for arguments that the universe's complexity points to an intelligent design.

Allison Cardwell, a mother of a fourth grader and a fifth grade social studies teacher, urged the board to rethink the standards. She said fifth grade would be the only time most Texas students would receive instruction in U.S. history until high school.

"We have to ask ourselves, How can we expect to create citizens who value liberty, responsibility, and

the principles this country was founded on, if we don't ensure that they truly understand those foundations?" she said.

Gaza marks 6 months of a ceasefire that may offer lessons for the Iran war

By WAFAA SHURAFI and CARA ANNA Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Friday marks six months since Gaza's ceasefire deal took effect, a milestone largely lost in the confusion over the new and even more fragile ceasefire in the Iran war.

The ravaged Palestinian territory of 2 million people has seen the most intense fighting stop between Israeli forces and Hamas-led militants. But most of the ceasefire work remains to be done, from disarming Hamas and ending its two-decade rule to deploying an international stabilization force and beginning vast reconstruction. Gaza residents are in limbo, with limited aid entering through a single, Israeli-controlled border post.

Such challenges could represent what's to come in the latest war, as U.S. President Donald Trump's approach to peacemaking appears to be stopping bombardment and leaving the bigger picture for others to work out.

Whether Trump can force through that kind of deal on Iran, with more actors in play and global markets quivering at every statement, is yet to be seen.

The Board of Peace goes quiet

Focusing on a deal's details is crucial. Already the Iran war's two-week ceasefire has created deadly confusion over Lebanon as Israel insists the deal doesn't apply there and continues to attack the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, while Iran insists it does and threatens to upend the agreement. Israel made a surprise announcement Thursday authorizing direct negotiations with Lebanon, despite the lack of diplomatic ties.

Not long ago, the U.S.-created and Trump-led Board of Peace kicked off with \$7 billion in pledges and sweeping intentions of resolving not only Gaza but other conflicts that emerge around the world.

Nine days after the board's initial meeting, the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran.

The Board of Peace has not met again, and it's still waiting for Hamas to respond to its proposal on disarming, a major concession and perhaps the hardest step. Hamas' charter calls for destroying Israel.

A U.S. official said Hamas has not been given a definite deadline to respond to the proposal but added that "patience is not unlimited." The official was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The lack of a deadline can weaken pressure to act. Meanwhile, diplomacy is busy putting out different flames.

Board of Peace director Nickolay Mladenov told the U.N. Security Council last month that the world should not lose sight of Gaza as a new war flared. The choice in Gaza is between "a renewed war, or a new beginning; the status quo, or a better future," he added. "There is no third option."

'It's as if there's no ceasefire at all'

Palestinians might suggest a third option: neglect.

Six months into the Gaza ceasefire that took effect on Oct. 10, little beyond the largely silenced explosions has changed.

Vast tent camps house most of the territory's population. Other residents shelter in damaged apartment buildings. Health workers and other humanitarian workers say there has been little progress in the expected surge of medical supplies and other aid.

The U.S. 20-point ceasefire plan for Gaza is largely failing on the humanitarian front, five international aid groups said in a scorecard released Thursday. They said conditions have deteriorated further in Gaza since the Iran war began.

"During the first two weeks of March 2026, trucks entering Gaza declined by 80%, and the price of basic goods increased dramatically," they said. Medical evacuations have stalled.

Palestinians expressed fading hopes for any immediate improvement in their lives.

"There is pollution and disease. It's as if there's no ceasefire at all," said Maysa Abu Jedian, a displaced

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woman from Beit Lahiya.

"The war is still ongoing and life is still terrible as it is," said Eyad Abu Dagga, also sheltering in a camp in Khan Younis.

Tents rippled in the breeze, and children played on the sand against a backdrop of shattered buildings. While the heaviest fighting has subsided, Israeli forces have carried out airstrikes and fired on Palestinians near military-held zones. Militants have carried out shooting attacks on troops, and Israel has said its strikes are in response to that and other ceasefire violations.

As of Thursday, Israeli attacks have killed 738 people in the six months since the ceasefire, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The ministry, part of the Hamas-led government, maintains detailed casualty records that are seen as generally reliable by U.N. agencies and independent experts. It does not give a breakdown of civilians and militants.

Funerals for two cousins were held Friday in Gaza City, a day after they were killed. "We were standing idly, drinking coffee, next to each other. We suddenly saw a (projectile) hitting the men," said Anwar Saleh, an eyewitness. Israel's military said it had struck a "terrorist" in northern Gaza.

Overall, the health ministry says 72,317 Palestinians had been killed since the war in Gaza began with the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel.

'Sustained diplomatic pressure at the highest levels'

Unwavering focus on Gaza, once at the heart of a passionate international outcry, has been lost with the rise of a new regional war. That, too, has decreased pressure for progress on the ceasefire.

The humanitarian groups' scorecard notes that any forward movement on aid issues in the Palestinian territory has "generally required sustained diplomatic pressure at the highest levels, particularly from the United States. That pressure, however, has not been applied consistently or at the scale needed to secure full implementation."

The Trump administration is not the only player to be distracted. The entire Middle East, including key Gaza mediators Egypt and Qatar, now focuses on Iran and that war's effects on their economies.

With the added uncertainty over Israel's renewed war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, there could be even less interest from countries to contribute troops to a Gaza stabilization force. One of the few confirmed troop contributors, Indonesia, already has seen three of its peacekeepers in southern Lebanon killed in recent days.

Today in History: April 11, the liberation of Buchenwald

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, April 11, the 101st day of 2026. There are 264 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On April 11, 1945, during World War II, U.S. Army troops liberated the Buchenwald Nazi concentration camp near Weimar, Germany.

Also on this date:

In 1814, Napoleon Bonaparte abdicated as emperor of the French and was banished to the island of Elba. (Napoleon later escaped from Elba and returned to power in March 1815, until his downfall in the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815.)

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln spoke to a crowd outside the White House, saying, "We meet this evening, not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart." (It was the last public address Lincoln would deliver; he would die four days later after being shot by John Wilkes Booth.)

In 1951, President Harry S. Truman relieved Gen. Douglas MacArthur of his command leading U.S. troops in the Korean War following multiple public statements by MacArthur that contradicted official U.S. policy.

In 1961, former Nazi SS officer Adolf Eichmann went on trial in Israel, charged with crimes against humanity for his role in the Holocaust. (Eichmann was later convicted and executed.)

In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act, which included the Indian Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act, one week after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1970, Apollo 13, with astronauts James A. Lovell, Fred W. Haise and Jack Swigert, blasted off on its ill-fated mission to the moon. (The mission was aborted following an oxygen tank explosion two days after

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liftoff, and the crew splashed down safely in the Pacific Ocean on April 17.)

In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission published guidelines saying sexual harassment in the workplace amounted to unlawful sex discrimination in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 2012, George Zimmerman, the Florida neighborhood watch volunteer who fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, was arrested and charged with second-degree murder. (He was acquitted at trial.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Joel Grey is 94. Actor Louise Lasser is 87. Actor Peter Riegert is 79. Actor Bill Irwin is 76. Former MLB catcher Jason Varitek is 54. Actor Jennifer Esposito is 53. Rapper David Banner is 52. Model Alessandra Ambrosio is 45. Singer Joss Stone is 39. Singer Summer Walker is 30. Rapper Ken Carson is 26. Actor Milly Alcock is 26.