

Groton Daily Independent

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Thursday, April 23

Senior Menu: Chicken cordon bleu casserole, broccoli, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Maple French Toast Bake.
School Lunch: Chicken patty, mashed potatoes.
Grades 5 & 8 Science Testing
Track at Redfield, 10 a.m.
Girls Golf at Milbank, 10 a.m.
5th Grade Girls Basketball, 3 p.m., Elementary Gym
Pickleball, 6 p.m., Elementary Gym
Middle School Spring Concert, 7 p.m.

Good Morning



- B – Begin your day with 😊
- L – Love in your heart 💕
- E – Expect blessings 🙏
- S – Share goodness 🌈
- S – Shine like the sun ☀️
- I – Inspire someone 👤
- N – Never forget that... 🌟
- G – God is with you at all times. 🙏

Friday, April 24

Senior Menu: Stuffed pepper soup, ham salad sandwich, fruit, cookie.
School Breakfast: Eggs.
School Lunch: Beef stir fry, rice.
Grades 5 & 8 Science Testing
MS Track at Groton, 2 p.m.
Baseball at Miller, varsity at 5:30 p.m. followed by JV.

Saturday, April 25

MS NEC Girls Golf at Clark, 10 a.m.
Track at Ipswich, 10 a.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
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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.

It's Close to Midnight

The upcoming Michael Jackson biopic, "Michael," has its box office debut this weekend, projecting a \$65M-\$70M US opening. If so, it will mark the top domestic opening for a musical biopic in US history, not accounting for inflation.

The film, backed by the Jackson estate, depicts the late singer's rise to fame from a member of the Jackson 5 in the 1960s to becoming the King of Pop. While earlier screenplays covered child sexual abuse allegations against Jackson, the final cut does not. Parts of the film were reshoot last year after Jackson's estate realized a settlement with accuser Jordan Chandler prohibited any depiction of him in a movie.

Michael Jackson holds the record for the bestselling album of all time, with the 1982 release of "Thriller." The adult version of Jackson is played by his nephew, Jaafar Jackson, son of Jermaine Jackson.

A Smoke-Free Generation

The United Kingdom passed a bill this week to phase out the sale of tobacco nationwide. Anyone born after 2008 will be permanently barred from purchasing cigarettes, vapes, or heated tobacco when the bill becomes law next week, pending royal assent.

Roughly 64,000 people die each year in England alone from tobacco-related causes. The cost to the UK healthcare system of smoking-related illnesses, including cancer and heart disease, amounts to around \$4B annually. In addition to prohibiting vendors from selling tobacco to future generations, the bill requires smoke-free premises—including playgrounds, hospitals, and outside schools—to also become vape-free. A study found the new bill could reduce smoking prevalence in young people to below 5% by the late 2040s.

Smoking is one of the world's leading causes of death, linked to more than 7 million deaths annually.

NFL Draft Countdown

The NFL draft kicks off tonight at 8 pm ET in Pittsburgh, marking the first time the event has been held in Steelers Country since 1947.

The Las Vegas Raiders are anticipated to select Indiana University quarterback Fernando Mendoza as the No. 1 overall pick. Mendoza led the Hoosiers to their first College Football Playoff title earlier this year after winning the 2025 Heisman Trophy. Meanwhile, the Steelers face uncertainty as the team awaits veteran quarterback Aaron Rodgers' decision on a 22nd season, all while holding 12 picks—the most of any team since the seven-round draft format began in 1994. The draft ends Saturday with the Denver Broncos making the final, 257th pick, dubbed "Mr. Irrelevant."

Teams have eight minutes to make their first-round selections this year—a high-pressure process that has led to mix-ups between similarly named players and even missed picks.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Churchill Downs strikes \$85M deal to buy intellectual property rights for Preakness Stakes and Black-Eyed Susan Stakes, bringing the first two legs of the Triple Crown under the same company.

Autopsy report reveals 14-year-old girl allegedly killed by singer D4vd died of multiple stab wounds.

Dave Mason, a founding member of English rock band Traffic and Rock & Roll Hall of Famer, dies at age 79.

Science & Technology

Scientists identify new doorway coronaviruses can use to infect human cells, a discovery that may guide the development of future vaccines and antivirals.

Bees appear greener as humidity rises, possibly because the increased moisture causes their exoskeletons to swell.

Robot ping-pong player created by Sony's AI research team becomes the first to attain expert-level performance in a competitive physical sport, marking major gains in rapid decision making and precision.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.1%, Dow +0.7%, Nasdaq +1.6%), with S&P 500, Nasdaq finishing at record levels.

Lululemon Athletica names former Nike executive Heidi O'Neill its new CEO, will take over Sept. 8; former CEO Calvin McDonald left the company in January.

Microsoft's LinkedIn names veteran executive Dan Shapero its new CEO.

Spirit Airlines reportedly nearing deal for \$500M bailout from the Trump administration as it seeks to emerge from Chapter 11 bankruptcy..

Politics & World Affairs

Iran strikes three ships in the Strait of Hormuz, capturing two of them; President Donald Trump says US-Iran peace talks could begin as soon as tomorrow.

Pentagon announces Navy Secretary John Phelan is leaving his post; no explanation given for the departure as of this writing.

Rep. David Scott (D, GA-13) dies at age 80, the fourth House Democrat to die in Congress since last year.

Nearly half of Americans, 152.3 million people, live in places with unhealthy levels of air pollution, new study finds.



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Tigers Drop Two Close Games to Sisseton-Britton-Webster

BRITTON — The Groton Area Tigers varsity baseball team came up just short twice Wednesday, April 22, falling to Sisseton-Britton-Webster (SBW) in a pair of tightly contested games, including a walk-off loss in the finale.

In the nightcap, Groton Area suffered a 7-6 setback as SBW pushed across the winning run in the bottom of the seventh. With the score tied at six, an error allowed the decisive run to cross the plate.

The Tigers outhit SBW 8-6 in the contest, with TC Schuster leading the way. Batting in the heart of the lineup, Schuster went 3-for-4 with three RBIs, including an RBI single in the first inning to give Groton an early 1-0 lead.

SBW answered with a big third inning, scoring five runs on three hits to take a 5-1 advantage. Colton Chapin delivered the key hit with a two-run double.

Groton Area responded in the seventh, stringing together three singles to tie the game. Jordan Schwan delivered the game-tying hit before SBW answered in the bottom half.

Jarrett Erdmann took the loss on the mound, pitching five innings and allowing five runs (four earned) on four hits while striking out four. SBW's Ben Suther struck out 13 over six and one-third innings, while Kaden Mills earned the win in relief.

Defensively, Groton turned a double play, while SBW played a clean game without committing an error.

Earlier in the day, the Tigers were edged in another close contest despite a dominant pitching performance from Gavin Englund.

Englund struck out 12 batters over six and one-third innings, allowing just four hits and three runs without issuing a walk. SBW, however, broke a late tie in the seventh inning to secure the win.

SBW got on the board in the first inning, but Groton answered quickly as Schwan delivered an RBI single to tie the game at one. The Tigers took a 2-1 lead in the second when Alex Abeln drove in a run on a fielder's choice.

SBW tied the game in the third, and the teams battled evenly the rest of the way before SBW broke through late.

Schwan and Abeln each drove in a run for Groton, while Karsten Fliehs drew two walks as part of a patient approach that saw the Tigers collect seven walks. The Tigers also turned a double play defensively.

Levi Nelson led SBW offensively with two hits and was aggressive on the basepaths, stealing five bases as SBW totaled six steals in the game.

"Groton Area travels Friday to face the Miller/Highmore-Harrold/Wessington-Woonsocket/SC-F/Wolsey-Wessington co-op."

Groton City Council approves hiring of two electrical apprentices

Following an executive session at its Tuesday evening meeting, the Groton City Council approved the hiring of two electrical apprentices to join the city workforce.

The council voted to extend job offers to Korbin Kucker and Teylor Diegel at a starting wage of \$25 per hour. Both individuals are graduates of the Groton area and are completing their training at Mitchell Technical School.

Kucker and Diegel will serve as electrical apprentices, supporting the city's electrical department while continuing to develop their skills in the trade.

City officials noted the value of bringing back local graduates to fill critical roles, emphasizing both the importance of skilled labor and the benefit of having employees with ties to the community.

The hires were approved following discussion in executive session, with formal action taken once the council returned to open session.

Names Released in Douglas County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: SD Highway 44, mile marker 325, six miles southwest of Corsica, SD

When: Sunday, April 19, 5:57 p.m.

Vehicle 1: 2016 Ford Fusion

Driver 1: Carey Jay Utterback, 52-year-old male from Mitchell, SD, fatal injuries

Seat belt Used: Yes

Passenger 1a: Peggy Lynn Iverson, 72-year-old female from Sioux Falls, SD, fatal injuries

Seat belt Used: Under investigation

Passenger 1b: Bethanie Lynn Iverson, 37-year-old female from Sioux Falls, SD, serious, non-life-threatening injuries

Seat belt Used: No

Passenger 1c: Benjamin Lyle Iverson, 36-year-old male from Sioux Falls, SD, serious, non-life-threatening injuries

Seat belt Used: No

Douglas County, S.D. – Two people died in a single-vehicle crash Sunday evening six miles southwest of Corsica, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Carey Jay Utterback, the driver of a 2016 Ford Fusion, was traveling eastbound on SD Highway 44 near mile marker 325 when the vehicle left the roadway and entered the south ditch. The vehicle hit a field approach, vaulted over a fence, then rolled, coming to rest in the field.

Utterback and a passenger, Peggy Lynn Iverson, died at the scene. Two other passengers, Bethanie Lynn Iverson and Benjamin Lyle Iverson, were life-flighted to a Sioux Falls hospital with serious, non-life-threatening injuries.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

Youth Trapping Recruitment Program Closing for 2026

The 2026 Youth Trapping Recruitment Program has reached the 20,000 tail maximum. The program closed Wednesday with the collection of tails at the Yankton site being the final site for submissions.

"The first year of the Youth Trapping Recruitment Program has been a tremendous success," said South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department Secretary, Kevin Robling. "It has been fantastic to see youth across the state participate in wildlife management."

While the Youth Trapping Recruitment Program is closed, the Coyote Bounty Program is still open for participation. This program is open for all South Dakota residents until July 1, or until the maximum payout of \$300,000 is reached, whichever comes first.



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Statewide homeless count lower than previous years

PIERRE, S.D. – On January 27, the South Dakota Housing for the Homeless Consortium (SDHHC), an affiliate of South Dakota Housing, conducted its annual statewide Point-in-Time (PIT) Homeless Count and Housing Inventory Count (HIC), and virtually all participating projects reported lower numbers for 2026 than in the previous two years. Additionally, the 2026 PIT count totaled only 26 homeless veterans, the lowest number recorded in nearly two decades.

The count includes people staying in public and private shelters (including domestic violence shelters), transitional housing or motels paid for by an agency. It also includes people who are unsheltered, such as those staying in vehicles, on the streets or in places not meant for human habitation.

The Point-in-Time Count is an important source of yearly data that can show characteristics of people who are experiencing homelessness. The data is used to measure homelessness at the local, state, and national levels. Results can change each year due to different factors that affect how the count is completed.

The results are influenced by the number of partners available to help conduct surveys in each community. Outside of Rapid City and Sioux Falls, the data may not fully represent homelessness across the state. Rural regions of South Dakota are often undercounted because of a lack of service providers and partners to conduct surveys.

A total of 1,154 people were identified as experiencing homelessness in South Dakota on January 27. The 2026 count indicates South Dakotans experience homelessness at a rate below the national norm, however program gaps in the most rural areas of the state make full accounting challenging. The Consortium and SDH celebrate this shared progress and remain committed to reaching every South Dakotan who needs help.

Of those counted:

- 675 men and boys were counted compared to 479 women and girls. This ratio of men to women (58% to 42%) has been very consistent for the past five years.
- 22% of respondents were unsheltered – a decrease from 25% the year prior.
- 8.6% of respondents were youth between the ages of 18 and 24, down from 8.8% in 2025 and 11% in 2024. Among unsheltered respondents, only 5.4% were youth, tying the lowest rate on record.
- There were 26 veterans experiencing homelessness, the lowest amount recorded since the standardization of PIT counts in 2009.
- 20 Victim Service Providers (VSPs) from across the state counted 210 clients in shelter on the night of the PIT. When compared to 2025, there were 25 VSPs that reported 254 people in shelter.

PIT Reports specific to Sioux Falls and Rapid City can be found at housingforthehomeless.org in addition to a report on project inventory.

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About SD Housing for the Homeless Consortium

In 2001 the South Dakota Housing for the Homeless Consortium was created to help unify the people who provide services to the homeless. Throughout the years this group has been able to identify gaps, create programs and services that make helped communities address homelessness and keep their citizens safe. Since its initiation the Consortium has received federal funding totaling over \$39 million to provide development, operations, and supportive services to a variety of homeless and domestic violence programs across the state.

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Honorary State Degree photo: Front row from L-R: David Preheim, Christi Ryen, Kasey Trocke, Anna Wiederrich. Middle row from L-R: Christina Bakker, Meagan Ekberg, Amie Carter, Deanna Gall, Ashley Gelderman, Jeanette Grady, Cayla Graves, Alison Knutson, Sarah Lambert, Jennifer Roling, Susan Roudabush, Shane Thill. Back row from L-R: (fill in for Andrew Barron), Jason Burma, Tucker Bigge, Joseph Cassady, James Connors, Mike Frey, John Fuerst, Matilyn Kerr, Sarah McClure, Evan Papousek, Clayton Sorum

South Dakota FFA Recognizes Honorary State Degree Recipients

BROOKINGS, S.D. — South Dakota FFA recognized individuals for their outstanding service to agricultural education through the Honorary State FFA Degree during the 98th South Dakota State FFA Convention on Tuesday, April 21 during the third session at First Bank and Trust Arena, sponsored by the U.S. Army.

As part of the convention experience, the Honorary State Degree was awarded to individuals who have made significant contributions to agricultural education and the FFA organization. Recipients include educators, administrators, industry professionals and supporters who have demonstrated a continued commitment to the success of students and FFA programs across South Dakota.

The 2026 Honorary State Degree recipients are: Christina Bakker; Andrew Barron; Tucker Bigge; Jason Burma; Amie Carter; Joseph Cassady; Bradley Cihak; James Connors; Kent Cooley; Roger Currier; Meagan Ekberg; Mike Frey; John Fuerst; Deanna Gall; Ashley Geldermann; Jeanette Grady; Cayla Graves; Marie Jaacks; Matilyn Kerr; Alison Knutson; Sarah Lambert; Sarah McClure; Evan Papousek; David Preheim; Jennifer Roling; Susan Roudabush; Christi Ryen; Clayton Sorum; Shane Thill; Kasey Trocke; Anna Wiederrich



Distinguished Service photo: A1 Al's Pheasant Ranch, Black Hills Embroidery, Bouquets and Brushstrokes, Cattle Resources, Kari Sanders, Lazy J Dairy, Marv Post, Pipestone Communications, Sadie Frey, SD Sheep Growers, SDSU Animal Science Department, Terry Rieckman, The Meathouse, Wendy Sweeter, West Central High School, Wirt Farms

South Dakota FFA Recognizes Distinguished Service Award Recipients

BROOKINGS, S.D. — South Dakota FFA recognized individuals and organizations for their outstanding support of agricultural education at the 98th South Dakota State FFA Convention on Tuesday, April 21 during the third session at First Bank and Trust Arena, sponsored by the U.S. Army.

Distinguished Service Awards were presented to those who have made significant contributions to FFA and agricultural education across the state. These recipients have supported members through mentorship, resources, and opportunities that help students succeed.

The 2026 Distinguished Service Award recipients are: Kari Sanders; Cattle Resources; SD Sheep Growers Association; Bouquets and Brushstrokes; Terry Rieckman; A1 Al's Pheasant Ranch; Wendy Sweeter; Wirt Farms; Marv Post; Sadie Frey; The Meathouse; Black Hills Embroidery; Pipestone Communications & Communities; SDSU Animal Science Department; Lazy J Dairy; West Central High School

These individuals and organizations were recognized for their continued dedication to supporting FFA members and strengthening agricultural education programs throughout South Dakota.

SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

Early voting begins in some South Dakota counties after delay

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

Early and absentee voting for the June 2 primary election is beginning in some South Dakota counties after a delayed start, though others remain in limbo awaiting ballots.

Davison County, which includes Mitchell, was one of the first in the state to open early voting. The county started about an hour after receiving ballots on Wednesday morning, said Auditor Kathy Wingert.

"Despite this rough start to the election season, I'm confident in how the election will run. It should be smooth sailing from here," Wingert said.

Minnehaha, Lincoln and Pennington County auditors said on Wednesday that they received ballots. Minnehaha plans to open early voting at noon on Thursday, while Lincoln and Pennington counties plan to begin early voting as soon as the office opens for the day Thursday.

Early voting was supposed to start last Friday. It was delayed due in part to a quirk of the calendar that created an unusually short window between a legal filing deadline for candidate nominating petitions — the last Tuesday in March, which was March 31 this year, the fifth of five Tuesdays in the month — and the start of ballot printing and early voting. The situation left county auditors waiting for the state to certify candidates, which delayed ballot printing as the intended start of early voting approached.

Earlier this year, state lawmakers declined to apply a fix for the primary election sought by county auditors that would have moved candidate filing deadlines earlier. Some legislators expressed concerns about changing the laws governing a process that was already underway, as prospective candidates were gathering the required number of signatures from registered voters to earn a spot on the ballot. The deadline change was ultimately approved for future elections, but not for the June 2 primary.

The staggered rollout of early voting has left voters with unequal access and has caused widespread confusion.

Jill Jackson said she attempted to vote on Monday in Sioux Falls during her day off of work but was turned away.

"I just hope things aren't getting messed up," she said.

Jackson, who works part-time, plans to vote early on her next day off from work.

Other counties are waiting to receive their ballots. Julie Bartling, auditor for Gregory County, said her office is "waiting patiently" and ready to begin voting when ballots arrive.

State law requires auditors to begin early voting within 48 hours of receiving ballots.

By the end of the first full week of early and absentee voting for South Dakota's 2024 primary election, 1,857 ballots had been cast either in person or through the mail.

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

Report cites 2-degree rise and urges South Dakota leaders to act on climate change, renewable energy

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

SIOUX FALLS — South Dakota's annual average temperatures have risen by about 2 degrees Fahrenheit since 1900, leading to more extreme and costly weather events such as flash flooding, windstorms and prolonged drought, according to a new report from a Sioux Falls-based nonprofit.

Those changes can have significant effects on South Dakota's economy — particularly agriculture — and the health of its residents, said Michael Heisler, chairman of the South Dakota Green Project, during a news conference Wednesday on Earth Day. The critical care physician said he's seen an increase in heat- and air quality-related emergency room visits in recent years, the latter due to increasing levels of wildfire smoke in the air.

"We thought it was time to provide a roadmap for our communities," Heisler said.

The group hopes for a transition from fossil fuels — which emit heat-trapping gases when burned — to a greater reliance on renewable energy. That includes wind energy development and the use of large batteries to make wind energy more reliable and store excess energy.

Vice Chair Jeff Smith added his support for nuclear energy, saying "it's not your grandfather's nuclear power plant anymore."

"It's way safer and if it isn't completely safe, we know natural gas isn't, and we know coal isn't, and we know those things are going to hurt our great-grandchildren," Smith said. "So, bring on nuclear, as far as I'm concerned."

The report features recommendations for individuals, lawmakers and policymakers to address climate change in the state and spur renewable energy-related economic growth. That includes efforts to reduce urban sprawl with zoning reforms, track climate-change indicators in public health, prioritize smaller farmers, and "halt the unchecked expansion" of concentrated animal feeding operations in South Dakota.

Agriculture accounts for 60% of South Dakota's greenhouse gas emissions, according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency. Transportation follows as the second largest emitting industry in the state at 16.4%.

Sixty-four percent of South Dakotans believe that global warming is occurring and another 64% believe global warming will hurt future generations, according to a survey from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication cited in the report. Another 53% support the United States transitioning from fossil fuels to clean energy by 2050.

The same survey found 49% of South Dakotans said they believe the governor should do more to address global warming and 47% said local officials should do more to address global warming.

Numbers like those should convince elected officials or those running for office this year to take climate change more seriously, Heisler said.

He said conversations with Sioux Falls mayoral and city council candidates have been positive.

"If they have vision and courage and political will, they can also become leaders in this area and leave a legacy that they will be remembered for and that profoundly changes our city and our state into perpetuity," Heisler said.

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

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Cost savings and improved outcomes emphasized at men's prison groundbreaking

'We have to do better,' corrections secretary says as construction begins on \$650 million facility

BY: JOHN HULT

SIOUX FALLS — State and local leaders broke ground on the costliest state-funded capital project in South Dakota history on Wednesday, with a prediction to bring it in under budget and pledges to double down on rehabilitation efforts for state prison inmates.

Gov. Larry Rhoden, moments before donning a plastic construction-site-grade cowboy hat for a series of ceremonial groundbreaking photos, spoke to an assembled crowd at the Bahnson Avenue site in northeast Sioux Falls. To mark the start of his speech, construction crews raised a massive South Dakota flag, which flapped violently for a few moments before high winds forced it to be lowered.

Rhoden said the 1,500-bed, \$650 million men's prison represents a generational investment in public safety.

"I've said before that no governor wants to be remembered for building a prison, but I'm proud of the work we did to get here," Rhoden said.

Rhoden's predecessor, former Gov. Kristi Noem, had championed a more expensive option at a different location some 15 miles to the south in rural Lincoln County. That plan met a buzzsaw of community opposition upon site selection in late 2023 and sparked a lawsuit against the state. That opposition helped animate opposition in the state Legislature, which voted down the initial \$825 million prison plan in February 2025 — the month after Rhoden took over for Noem, who'd left her post for a job in the Trump administration.

Rhoden convened a Project Prison Reset task force to formulate a new plan to replace the oldest buildings on the campus of the 145-year-old South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls. That group sifted through multiple site options across the state — some of which sparked significant community opposition — before landing on the plot chosen in Sioux Falls.

Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken had pushed to keep the project out of his city, but relented last year and threw his support behind the site on the city's northeast edge.

"We have honestly become a bit of a NIMBY state," TenHaken told the Wednesday crowd, a reference to the "not in my backyard" acronym associated with public opposition to construction projects, "and this was a NIMBY project."

In offering the city's support for a continued prison presence in Sioux Falls last year, TenHaken pleaded with the prison task force to pledge state support for rehabilitation efforts. A high share of released inmates stay in Sioux Falls, and TenHaken and local law enforcement leaders have frequently publicized the difficulties and dangers associated with misbehaving parolees.

On Wednesday, TenHaken said lawmakers "unfortunately" shot down \$2.7 million in rehabilitation funding earlier this year to support programs like Leaders of Tomorrow, which offers training behind the penitentiary walls.

"When I talk with the guys up there," at the penitentiary, the mayor said, "they talk less about the building — and I know we need the facility — but we talk a lot about the need for programs."

TenHaken said he was encouraged by what he heard from state Corrections Secretary Nick Lamb, who told the crowd that the new facility will lay the groundwork for a modern, rehabilitative approach to public safety.

The old penitentiary, which predates statehood, was designed for an era when inmates were warehoused, not helped to readjust to society.

Lamb didn't mention that South Dakota's repeat offense rates are higher than those of neighboring states, but he and several others in attendance at the groundbreaking took part later Wednesday in the third meeting of a separate task force Rhoden created to address the state's rehabilitation efforts and

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how to improve them.

"We have to do better" in South Dakota, Lamb said. "We have to get better at rehabilitation, and this facility will help us do that."

There were questions last year about how much space the facility might have at a lower price point. The Lincoln County proposal would've cost \$825 million.

Some of the questions came from Vance McMillan of JE Dunn, whose company is the state's co-construction manager at-risk with its partner, Henry Carlson Construction.

Last year, McMillan said it would be possible to trim costs and hit the state's hoped-for \$650 million price point, but said doing so might make it difficult for the state to build enough prison to meet its programming and capacity needs.

The construction managers ultimately offered \$650 million as a guaranteed maximum price. Some colleagues called him "crazy" for that, McMillan said. But on Wednesday, as he told the crowd he expects to be "putting concrete in the ground" by August, McMillan said he plans to be proven correct.

"We're on track to really deliver a great project under budget," McMillan said. "I'm probably a little bit bold making that statement, but that's my statement. That's my statement today, and I'm pretty sure the next time we see you, I'm going to back that up."

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

For the fifth time, a vote in the US Senate to limit Trump's war in Iran falls short

South Dakota's Senators Thune and Rounds vote no

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans, and one Democrat, maintained their support for President Donald Trump's war in Iran, after blocking for the fifth time a resolution that would force the president to seek congressional authorization for further action in the Middle East.

The vote failed 46-51, largely following the same split as previous failed measures. Sen. John Fetterman, D-Pa., opposed the resolution to rein in Trump, and Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., voted in favor, just as they have in the four times prior.

Sens. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, David McCormick, R-Pa., and Mark Warner, D-Va. were absent.

Thirteen U.S. service members and thousands of civilians across the Middle East have died in the war, which the Trump administration has claimed is about regime change and stopping Iran's nuclear program.

As of Wednesday, the Pentagon updated the number of American troops injured in the conflict to 400.

Fetterman and all but one Senate Republican blocked the measure one day after Trump extended a ceasefire with Iran after the prospects of a second round of peace talks fell through. Trump did not specify an end date to the ceasefire extension but announced the United States would not back down on its blockade of ships traveling to and from Iranian ports.

Trump claimed late Tuesday night that Iran is "collapsing financially!"

"They want the Strait of Hormuz opened immediately- Starving for cash! Losing 500 Million Dollars a day. Military and Police complaining that they are not getting paid. SOS!!!" he wrote on his social media platform, Truth Social.

U.S. military forces fired on and seized a sanctioned Iranian cargo ship Sunday.

Iran's foreign minister, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, wrote Tuesday on X that the seizure was "an act of war and thus a violation of the ceasefire."

Early Wednesday, Iran claimed responsibility for attacking two commercial vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, a key narrow maritime passage where a fifth of the world's petroleum flowed prior to the war. Iranian par-

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liament representative Ebrahim Rezaei declared on X, "an eye for an eye, an oil tanker for an oil tanker."

Baldwin leads opposition to war

Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., lead sponsor of Wednesday's War Powers Resolution, said on the floor ahead of the vote that Trump sold Americans "a bad bill of goods" when he campaigned on lowering costs and not starting any new foreign wars.

"This war has taken us backwards and created more problems for the people that I work for," she said, citing increasing fuel and fertilizer costs as a result of a standstill in the Strait of Hormuz.

The latest U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation numbers reflected a 21% increase in the cost of fuel from February to March.

A gallon of regular gas remained on average just north of \$4 across the country, according to AAA.

United Airlines announced Wednesday it plans to raise airfare as much as 20% to offset the cost of jet fuel, according to multiple media reports.

Brent crude oil, the global oil market's standard, spiked above \$100 a barrel Wednesday, as it has numerous times since the beginning of the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran.

"Less than two months ago, oil prices were normal, the Straits of Hormuz was open, commerce was happening," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., ahead of the vote.

"And then President Trump made the decision without a rationale, without a plan, without consulting with allies, without consulting or seeking a vote of Congress to enter the nation into yet another war in the Middle East. And the entire world is suffering," Kaine said.

Trump entered the joint war on Iran alongside Israel on Feb. 28.

Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., said passing the resolution would be "unwise."

"We've been through these votes recently, and nothing has occurred in the makeup of this body or in the situation in Iran or the Middle East to materially change since the last time we voted on this matter," the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee said on the floor ahead of the vote.

Wicker was the only Republican to speak out against the resolution during Wednesday afternoon's debate.

Earlier vote

Senate Democrats last forced a vote to stop Trump's actions in Iran on April 15, just days after the president threatened on social media to wipe out Iran's "whole civilization" and to bomb its power plants and bridges.

Senate Democrats say they have no plans to stop introducing War Powers Resolutions and speaking out against the war.

Several sent a letter Sunday to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth demanding answers about "troubling allegations of civilian harm incidents," including a strike on an elementary school that killed more than 160 children on the war's opening day.

"We are concerned that these were all preventable tragedies. The high human toll of this war reflects the administration's broader disregard for the strategic, legal, and moral imperative to minimize civilian harm," the senators wrote.

The letter, led by Sens. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., was also signed by Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M.; Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii; Tina Smith, D-Minn.; Mark Kelly, D-Ariz.; Raphael Warnock, D-Ga.; Jeff Merkley, D-Ore.; Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y.; Peter Welch, D-Vt. and Bernie Sanders of Vermont, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats.

The 11 senators who joined Baldwin in sponsoring Wednesday's War Powers Resolution, a vestige of Congress' efforts to rein in President Richard Nixon during the Vietnam War, included Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Sens. Gillibrand, Kaine, Merkley and Van Hollen, as well as Adam Schiff, D-Calif.; Chris Murphy, D-Conn.; Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill.; Andy Kim, D-N.J.; Cory Booker, D-N.J.; and Mark Kelly, D-Ariz.

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

US citizens shot by ICE beg Congress to rein in federal immigration agents

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — Nearly all Republicans on the House Homeland Security Committee failed to show up for a Wednesday hearing convened by Democrats to highlight President Donald Trump's aggressive tactics in his mass deportation campaign that have ensnared U.S. citizens.

It marked a rare full committee hearing that Democrats were allowed to conduct because of Minority Day in the House.

Democrats used the opportunity to call witnesses who are U.S. citizens and were harmed, in some cases shot, by federal immigration officers. Lawmakers also focused on two U.S. citizens killed by federal immigration officers in Minneapolis, Renee Good and Alex Pretti.

Following the deadly shootings in January, Democrats refused to approve any more funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection, which has led to a shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security since mid-February.

"Under President Trump, ICE and CBP have killed Renee Good and Alex Pretti in cold blood, and shot, beat, harassed, arrested, or locked up countless more innocent people," the top Democrat on the committee, Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, said. "Congress cannot stand idly by while Americans are hurt and killed by their own government."

Democrats also invited Trump officials tasked with crafting and carrying out the president's immigration agenda: White House Deputy Chief of Staff and Homeland Security advisor Stephen Miller and Tom Homan, the border czar.

Neither Miller nor Homan showed up. The White House did not answer questions from States Newsroom regarding Miller or Homan's absence from the hearing.

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson blamed Democrats for keeping "the Department of Homeland Security shuttered, not caring about vital services – like TSA, FEMA, and ICE – going unfunded."

"Instead of lying about President Trump's extremely successful deportation operations of criminal illegal aliens, House Democrats should fully reopen the Department of Homeland Security and stop putting illegal aliens before American citizens," Jackson said.

The chair of the committee, Andrew Garbarino, called Wednesday's hearing "a distraction from the fact that DHS has been shut down for over 65 days and the security impacts of that (are) real."

Garbarino, a New York Republican, and the other GOP lawmakers on the committee did not ask any of the witnesses any questions.

Americans under fire

The Americans harmed by federal immigration officials include:

Marimar Martinez, a Chicago preschool worker whom Border Patrol officers shot five times.

Rev. David Black, whom ICE officials shot in the face with pepper-ball rounds while he protested outside an Illinois detention facility.

George Retes Jr., an Army veteran in California whom immigration agents apprehended on his way to work, tear-gassed and kept detained for three days.

Ryan Ecklund, a real estate agent in Minnesota whom federal agents detained after he filmed them while at a grocery store.

Martinez has appeared in the past before Congress in unofficial Democratic events to share her story about how on Oct. 4, she was shot five times by Border Patrol agent Charles Exum.

DHS shared her photo online, falsely claimed she rammed into Border Patrol with her car and labeled her a domestic terrorist. The Trump administration tried to indict her on federal charges, but eventually dismissed the case against her.

"On Friday I was teaching the young children at the Montessori school and we were singing and dancing

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and getting ready for spooky season preparing fall activities to do the following week and on Saturday my own government was calling me a 'domestic terrorist' and I was in a federal detention center with bullet holes all over my body," she told the committee. "There were times where I did not believe this was all real and then I would touch my bullet wounds and knew it was certainly real."

She said she was concerned other people would be shot and killed by federal immigration agents, as Pretti and Good were.

"It's bound to happen sooner or later if we don't hold these agents accountable for their actions," she said.

No apologies

Following the two deadly shootings by federal immigration officers in Minneapolis, the leaders of ICE and CBP appeared before the Senate and House committees that have jurisdiction over DHS.

While there, CBP Commissioner Rodney Scott and ICE acting head Todd Lyons refused to apologize to the families of Good and Pretti. Lyons has announced he will resign at the end of May, saying he wants to spend more time with his family.

The aggressive immigration deportation campaign in Minneapolis, which has a high Somali refugee population, also spurred calls from Republicans to push then-Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to resign. She stepped down last month after Senate Republicans grilled her over an ad campaign and slow response to providing disaster relief.

The president tapped former Oklahoma Sen. Markwayne Mullin to steer the department. The Senate last month confirmed Mullin.

One of the witnesses, Retes, said his goal is for Congress to pass legislation in order to hold federal immigration agents accountable.

"Federal officials are basically impossible to sue," Retes said. "Federal agents basically have immunity."

He added that he wants Congress to do something, and expressed his frustration that "change doesn't move fast enough."

Ecklund criticized federal agents within DHS, and pointed out the irony of the department's unofficial slogan of going after "the worst of the worst" in conducting immigration enforcement.

"Your best' and the 'best of DHS' is the least that the American public deserve," he said. "You have not given us your best."

Martinez said agents are not held accountable.

"I've been through hell and back," she said. "These agents — Charles Exum — have not even been held accountable for their actions."

She added that she doesn't even know if Exum is still working for CBP.

Texas Democratic Rep. Al Green asked Martinez if she would feel comfortable showing lawmakers where she was shot. She agreed and rolled up her sleeve, showing a dark scar on her upper arm, and pulled up her pants to show another wound across her upper thigh.

"It's hard to manage all this, to even process what happened," she said. "Being shot for protecting your community. I want the world to see my pain, my trauma. This is not something to joke about. This is my life."

Green thanked her and told her that "you deserve justice."

Minister shot with pepper balls

Black told the committee that he was "horrified by the radical evil being perpetrated by my government."

He said he was outside a detention facility in Chicago and was in the middle of praying when he was shot by federal agents with pepper balls.

"I am outraged by the blasphemy of those who support brutal ICE and CBP tactics yet call themselves Christians," he said. "They make a mockery of the sacrifice of God's love on behalf of the world."

"Yet instead of living into Christ's rich promise of a Kingdom of peace, freedom, and prosperity, many of those calling themselves Christian are blindly supporting institutions like ICE and CBP, even as they

dominate, coerce, and terrorize American communities," he continued.

The only path forward, he argued to lawmakers, is to dismantle ICE and CBP, and redirect that funding to "support programs that feed the hungry, sate the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, and care for the sick — for in the words of Jesus, 'just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'"

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

SD among states where Republican lawmakers want voters to alter or scrap Medicaid expansion

In recent years, Missouri, Oklahoma and South Dakota residents voted to amend their state constitutions to expand Medicaid

BY: SHALINA CHATLANI

In three conservative states — Missouri, Oklahoma and South Dakota — residents in recent years voted to amend their state constitutions to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

Now Republican lawmakers in all three states want voters to alter or scrap those amendments in upcoming elections, setting the stage for legislators to roll back expansion.

The constitutional amendments that Missouri and Oklahoma voters approved in 2020 and South Dakota voters approved in 2022 require their state Medicaid programs to cover all adults below the age of 65 who earn equal to or less than 138% of the federal poverty level, or \$22,024. Forty-one states plus the District of Columbia have expanded Medicaid eligibility.

Supporters of expansion in Missouri, Oklahoma and South Dakota asked voters to amend their state constitutions to circumvent the opposition of GOP-led legislatures. Despite the success of those citizen-led initiatives, Republicans in all three states — the only three that have constitutional amendments expanding Medicaid — have maintained their antipathy toward expansion, and President Donald Trump's return to the White House has emboldened them.

Medicaid is jointly funded by the federal government and the states. Last summer, Trump signed a broad tax and spending measure that is projected to cut federal Medicaid spending by an estimated \$886.8 billion over the next decade, largely because new work requirements will push people off the rolls, according to estimates by the Congressional Budget Office.

Under the ACA, better known as Obamacare, the federal government covers 90% of the cost of covering the expansion population. However, expansion opponents have long cast doubt on the federal government's long-term commitment to that match.

The recent federal changes have only fueled those fears, said Curtis Shelton, policy director for the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, a right-leaning think tank.

"Now that people have seen just how costly the program is going to be, I think it's fair to ask voters whether or not they want to reconsider that initial vote," Shelton said. "We don't really have sustainable options to fund that. So it's either going to come from massive tax increases or from benefits being cut for your traditional Medicaid population."

Amber England, founder and CEO of STRATEGY 77, an Oklahoma-based public affairs firm that pushed for expansion there, said any measure that undermines the constitutional integrity of expansion is tantamount to repealing it, "because the second legislators get their hands on it, they will whittle it away to nothing."

"Most importantly, it's actually taking away voter power, because the voters of Oklahoma have already decided this issue," England said.

In Oklahoma, voters might be asked to consider two Medicaid expansion proposals in the coming months. One would remove Medicaid expansion from the state constitution and put it in state statute, allowing

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lawmakers to alter it. The second would change the amendment so that Oklahoma could end expansion if the federal match falls below 90%.

Oklahoma lawmakers are debating whether to put one ballot measure up for a special election in August, or whether to include both on the regular November ballot.

In South Dakota, voters also will be asked to change the Medicaid amendment so that it no longer applies if federal funding declines below 90%. That measure has been approved for the November ballot.

The situation in Missouri is more complicated.

After Missourians voted in favor of the constitutional amendment, state lawmakers refused to fund Medicaid expansion, prompting a lawsuit from residents. In 2021, the state Supreme Court ruled that the legislature had to pay for expansion.

In its ruling, the state Supreme Court cited a section of the amendment prohibiting the imposition of "greater or additional burdens or restrictions" on people who qualify for Medicaid under expansion.

The measure that Missouri Republicans want to put before voters would add work requirements for people covered under Medicaid expansion. The new work rules would be identical to the ones included in the federal law Trump signed last summer.

Missouri Republican state Rep. Darin Chappell, the sponsor of the Missouri measure, told the Missouri Independent that he wants to ensure that Missouri maintains its Medicaid work requirements even if the federal government someday reverses itself.

But Chappell's proposal also would delete the "greater or additional burdens or restrictions" language the state Supreme Court cited in its 2021 ruling. And it would remove a provision that requires Missouri to "take all actions necessary to maximize federal financial participation in funding" Medicaid expansion.

Taken together, Democrats say, the changes would clear the way for Missouri lawmakers to defund expansion.

Missouri Democratic state Rep. Ashley Aune, the House minority leader, told reporters that defunding Medicaid expansion is "the one reason that Republicans want to put this measure in front of Missouri voters," according to the Missouri Independent.

The Missouri House in February approved the measure for the November ballot on a party-line vote, but the Senate is still considering it.

Kelly Hall, the executive director of the Fairness Project, a nonprofit that helped put the constitutional amendments on the ballot in all three states, said the fact that lawmakers have to go back to voters to make changes "is a testament to the strength of the original strategy."

"But it is still absolutely abhorrent that lawmakers would attempt to take health care away from people and go against the will of their own voters by trying to go back on the ballot measure," Hall said.

Idaho, Maine, Nebraska and Utah also expanded Medicaid via ballot initiative, though none of those states amended its constitution and voters won't see Medicaid on the ballot this fall.

However, Utah is one of nine expansion states (Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina and Virginia are the others) with laws that would automatically roll back Medicaid expansion if the federal contribution dips below 90%.

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.

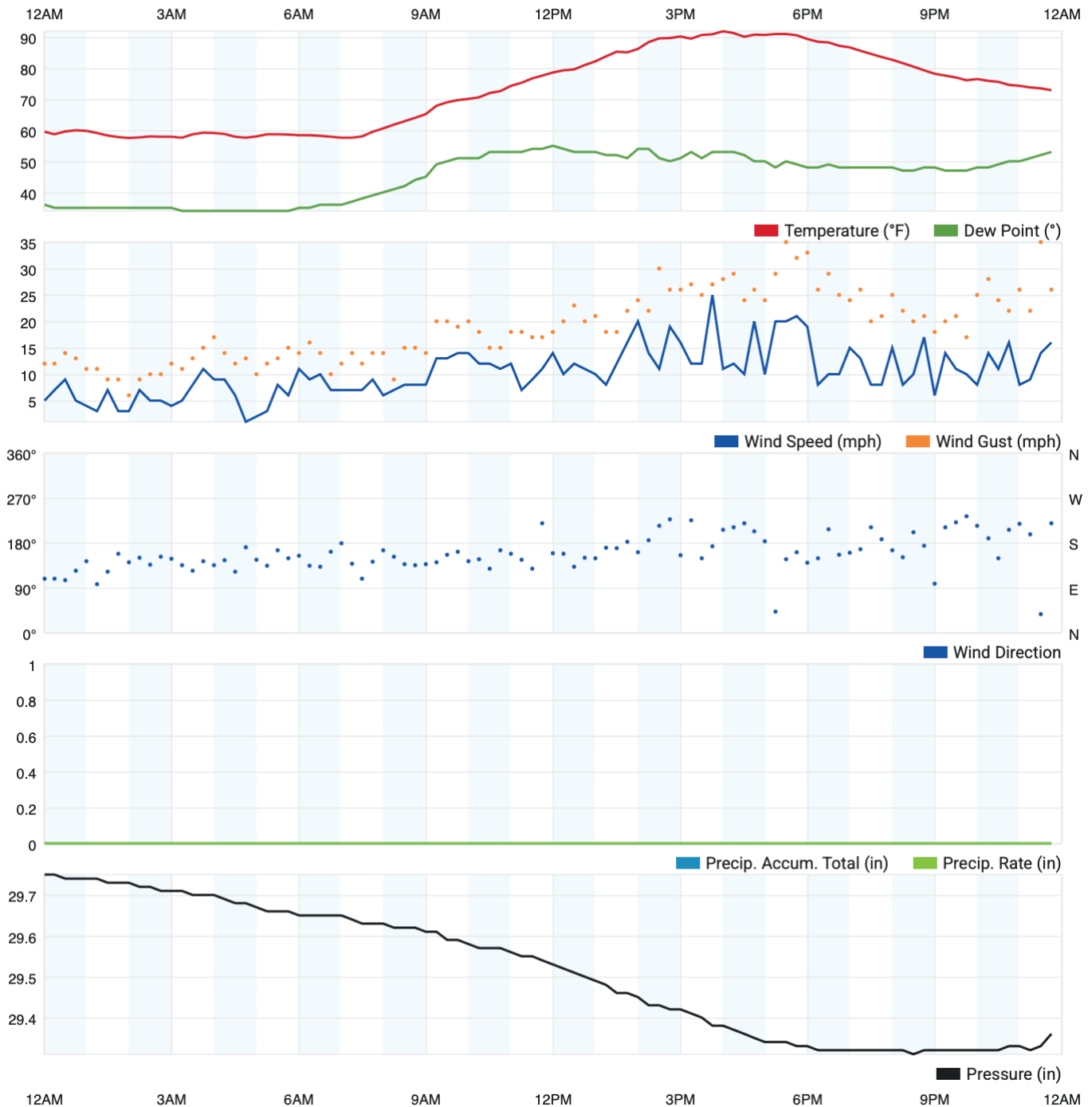
Shalina Chatlani covers health care and environmental justice for Stateline.

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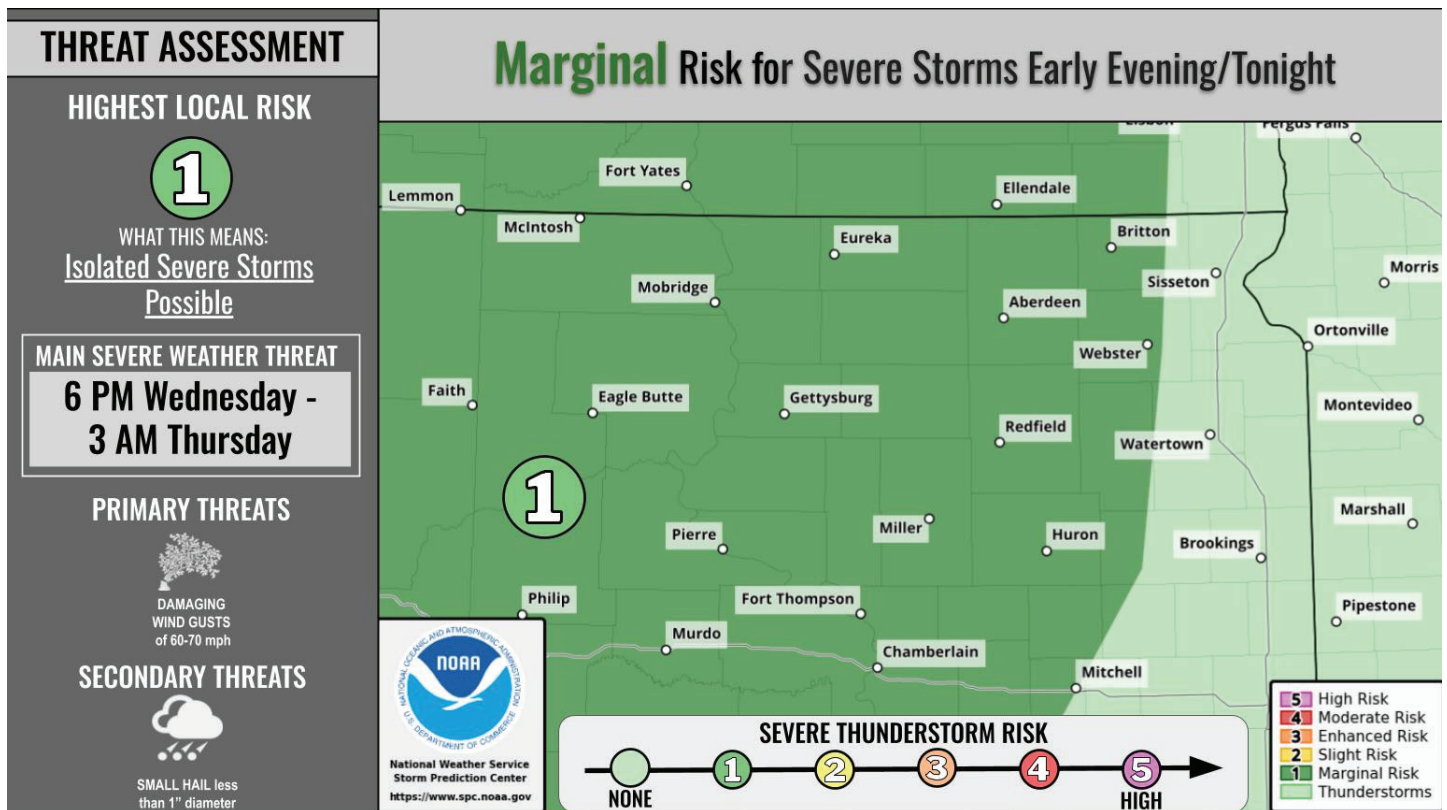
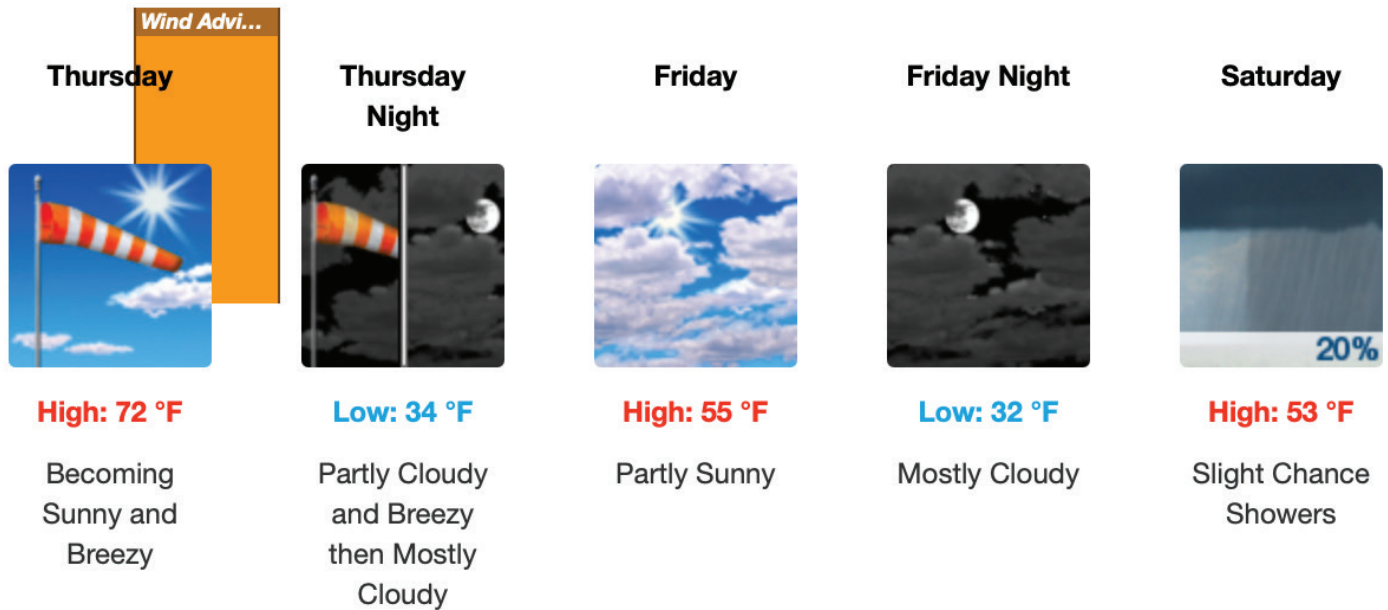
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

April 22, 2026



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There is a Marginal risk (level 1 out of 5) for severe storms over central SD and portions of northeast SD. Not much precipitation is expected with these storms. Expect wind gusts of 60-70 mph and small hail. Storms are expected to start over central SD around 6 PM CDT this evening and move east overnight.

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Camp sites are often full of trees

Large branches can fall during strong wind

Seek shelter in a sturdy structure

A camper is NOT a safe shelter from strong wind



weather.gov/wind



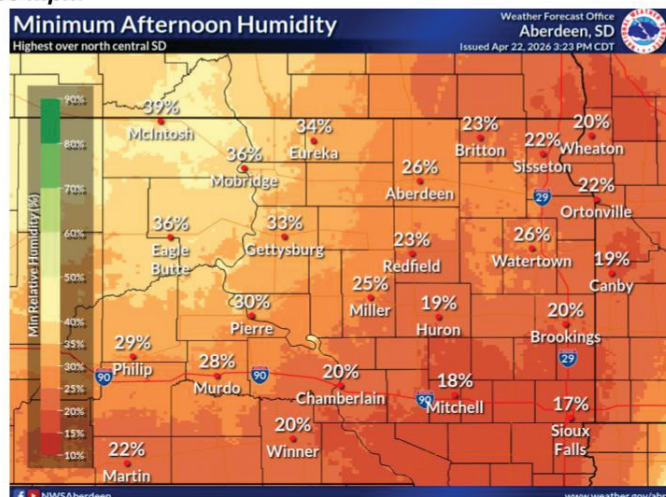
Humidity and Wind Timing Thursday

April 22, 2026

4:13 PM CDT

Dry and windy conditions from late morning to early evening

- Lowest humidity over eastern/south central SD, perhaps **approaching 20%**.
- Strongest winds this evening through tomorrow, generally **ranging from 40 to 50 mph**.



Maximum Wind Gust (mph) Forecast

	4/22 Wed			4/23 Thu			4/24 Fri
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am
McIntosh	31	26	24	24	24	31	44
Eagle Butte	20	24	25	25	25	31	39
Murdo	47	41	35	28	26	31	36
Mobridge	21	26	26	24	21	23	31
Pierre	48	40	30	23	17	23	30
Gettysburg	36	35	32	28	22	24	33
Eureka	37	36	32	31	24	23	33
Chamberlain	47	47	44	32	23	20	28
Miller	39	41	43	38	29	24	31
Redfield	40	44	44	40	31	25	31
Aberdeen	36	39	39	38	32	25	29
Britton	30	39	43	43	38	31	32
Clark	39	41	44	44	38	32	31
Webster	31	38	40	40	37	31	31
Watertown	38	37	40	40	38	33	31
Sisseton	36	35	38	39	37	32	31
Milbank	31	32	36	36	35	31	29
Wheaton	30	30	33	33	32	30	28

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 92 °F at 3:59 PM(Record High)

Low Temp: 57 °F at 2:03 AM

Wind: 35 mph at 5:23 PM

Precip: : 0.00 (.05 this morning)

Today's Info

Record High: 90 in 2009

Record Low: 14 in 1956

Average High: 61

Average Low: 34

Average Precip in April.: 1.27

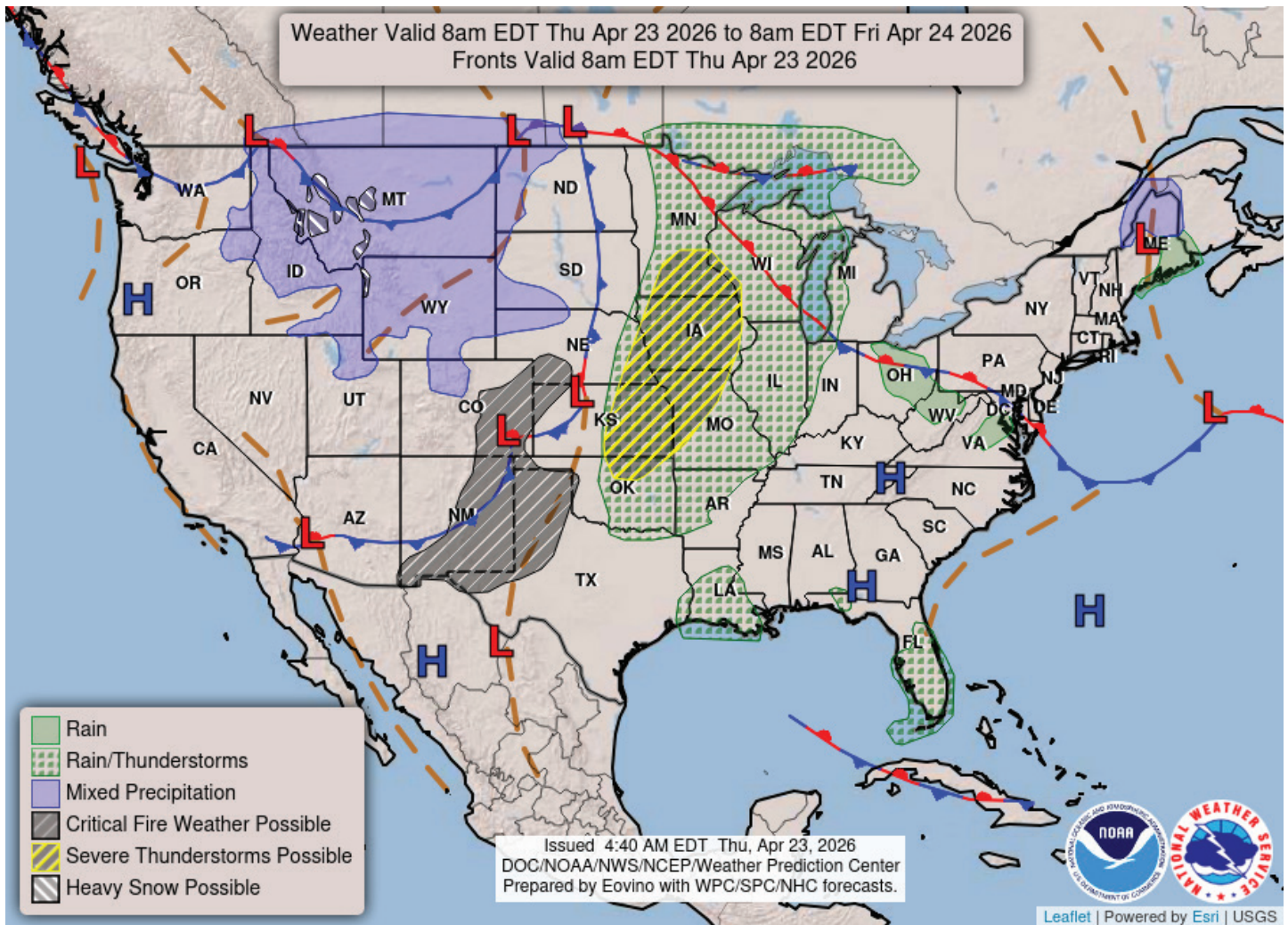
Precip to date in April.: 0.95

Average Precip to date: 3.33

Precip Year to Date: 2.57

Sunset Tonight: 8:27 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:31 am



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Today in Weather History

April 23rd, 2002: High winds of 35 to 50 mph, gusting to over 70 mph, occurred across much of central and northeast South Dakota. The high winds caused some spotty damage to property and trees. With the dry conditions, the winds stirred up dust, reducing visibility at many locations. The highest wind gust was 72 mph at Onida.

1885 — The city of Denver, CO, was in the midst of a storm which produced 23 inches of snow in 24 hours, and at Idaho Springs CO produced 32 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1910 — The temperature at the Civic Center in Los Angeles, CA, hit 100 degrees to establish an April record for the city. (The Weather Channel)

1983 — A mini-blizzard produced sixteen inches of snow at Laramie, WY, including a foot of snow in just eight hours during the night. (The Weather Channel)

1987 — Thunderstorms in the Atlantic Coast Region produced golf ball size hail and wind gusts to 67 mph at Anderson SC. The high winds destroyed two planes at the airport, and the large hail damaged fifty other planes, and severely damaged twenty-three greenhouses. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — An intense winter-like storm brought thunderstorms to southern California, and produced snow in some of the higher elevations. Nine girls at Tustin CA were injured when lightning struck the tree under which their softball team had taken shelter from the rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Salina, KS, was the hot spot in the nation with a high of 105 degrees. The high of 105 degrees established an April record for the state of Kansas. A total of eighteen cities in the central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data) (The Weather Channel)

1990 — Thunderstorms produced severe weather in West Texas and western Oklahoma. Thunderstorms produced tennis ball size hail at Lake McKenzie TX and at Garden City TX, and produced wind gusts to 90 mph at Gage OK. Thunderstorms drenched southeast Minnesota with heavy rain, with 6.6 inches reported northwest of Browndale. High temperatures were mostly in the 80s across the central U.S. The morning low of 67 degrees at Fargo ND and afternoon high of 91 degrees were both records for the date. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotion

What Can You Do for God?

The Lord works powerfully through our small acts of kindness.

Matthew 6:20-21: 20 ``But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;

21 for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What does it mean to serve God? Many of us have a distorted idea of service—to the point that we overlook opportunities right in front of us. For example, we might think joining the mission field or preaching a sermon is the only way to have a real impact. Those things are important, but the truth is, serving the Lord usually involves what's happening in our life on a daily basis.

Don't underestimate what God is doing in your seemingly ordinary day, whether that involves volunteering in your community, loving a new neighbor, caring for someone in need, or offering a listening, compassionate ear. You may not think these are important work, but they most certainly are. What you say to people, how you treat others, and the way you handle adversity are like stored-up treasures—God uses these things to reveal Himself to the world. When you live righteously, love those around you, and demonstrate kindness, compassion, and gentleness, you are bearing witness for Him (Matthew 5:16).

How is God serving His purpose through you? Before starting your day, say this prayer: "Lord, I choose Your way. Accomplish Your will in me, whatever that takes." When you do, things will happen in your life that you never expected—God will bless you beyond all measure (Galatians 6:9).

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.22.26

17 26 43 44 53 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$1,000,000/year

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 9 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.21.26

1 36 43 56 58 7

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$150,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 54 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.22.26

15 20 32 46 48 4

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$22,990,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 9 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.22.26

5 6 9 14 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$64,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 24 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.22.26

3 9 15 35 57 19

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 53 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.22.26

24 29 32 49 63 11

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$118,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 53 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Ex-Philippine president Duterte to face trial on crimes against humanity charges

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Judges at the International Criminal Court on Thursday confirmed crimes against humanity charges against former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte for deadly anti-drugs crackdowns he allegedly oversaw while in office.

A three-judge panel found unanimously there were “substantial grounds” to believe the ex-leader was responsible for dozens of murders, first as mayor of the southern Philippine city of Davao and later as president.

Duterte, 80, was arrested in the Philippines last year and proceedings have been delayed over concerns about his health.

2 trains collide in Denmark, leaving 5 people critically injured

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Two trains collided in Denmark early Thursday, leaving five people critically injured in what police called a major incident.

The collision occurred around 6:30 a.m. near Hillerød, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of Copenhagen. Roughly a dozen other people have minor injuries, according to the Greater Copenhagen Fire Department.

There were 38 people aboard the two trains, according to a spokesperson for the North Zealand police. Officials originally said four people were critically injured but revised that figure hours after the crash. It was not immediately clear whether the train’s drivers were among the victims.

Investigators are looking into what caused the collision, which occurred near a level crossing. Photos from the scene show the front ends of the trains smashed, though both remained upright on the tracks.

The mayor of the nearby town of Gribskov, Trine Egetved, in a post on Facebook, said some of the injured were flown to the hospital.

She said the crash occurred on a local rail line that’s used by many Gribskov residents, employees and schoolchildren.

No other details were available.

Senate passes budget plan for ICE and Border Patrol in bid to reopen Homeland Security Department

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate took the first steps in a new effort to reopen the Department of Homeland Security early Thursday, voting to adopt a budget plan that would fund ICE and Border Patrol over Democratic objections and sending it to the House.

The entire department has been shut down since mid-February as Democrats have demanded policy changes in the wake of fatal shootings of two protesters by federal agents. Republicans are now trying to fund the two immigration enforcement agencies through the complicated, time-consuming process called budget reconciliation, a maneuver that they also used to pass President Donald Trump’s package of tax and spending cuts last year with no Democratic votes.

“We have a multistep process ahead of us, but at the end Republicans will have helped ensure that America’s borders are secure and prevented Democrats from defunding these important agencies,” said Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D.

The budget process only requires a simple majority in the Senate, bypassing filibuster rules that require Republicans to find 60 votes on most bills when they only hold 53 seats. But it also comes with increased scrutiny from the Senate parliamentarian and a long, open-ended series of amendment votes at the be-

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ginning and the end of the process.

The Senate held the first series of votes through the night, starting Wednesday evening and into early Thursday morning, with Democrats proposing amendments to lower health care expenses and other costs in an effort to contrast with Republicans' focus on Trump's campaign of immigration enforcement.

"Instead of pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into ICE and Border Patrol, Republicans should be working with Democrats to lower out-of-pocket costs," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The Senate adopted the final resolution 50-48, just past 3:30 a.m.

A lengthy effort to reopen Homeland Security

Once the House approves the framework and the Senate Parliamentarian approves it, the two chambers can then move to pass the measure.

The Senate has already voted on a bipartisan basis to reopen the rest of the department, but Republican leaders in the House say they won't take that bill up until the Senate shows progress toward funding ICE and Border Patrol, as well.

The \$70 billion budget resolution would fund the two agencies for three years, through the rest of Trump's term. Thune and other GOP leaders say they hope to keep the bill narrowly focused on ICE and Border Patrol and get it to Trump's desk in the coming weeks, along with the rest of Homeland Security Department funding that has already passed the Senate.

But that could prove difficult as many in the party see the budget bill as the last real chance this year to enact their priorities. Republicans in both the Senate and House have pushed to add other items, including money for farmers and Trump's proof of citizenship voting bill, called the SAVE America Act.

Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., briefly held up the vote series late Wednesday, frustrated that the bill would not include parts of the SAVE America Act or other legislation.

"This is the last train leaving the station," Kennedy said, predicting they would not be able to pass any other major bills ahead of November's midterm elections. But he withdrew his objections and allowed the voting to proceed.

Democrats say reform needed at ICE and Border Patrol after shootings

Democrats say any funding bill for the Homeland Security Department should place restraints on federal immigration authorities, including better identification for federal officers and more use of judicial warrants, among other asks.

After federal agents shot Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis in January, Trump agreed to a Democratic request that the Homeland Security bill be separated from a larger spending measure that became law. But bipartisan negotiations went nowhere, and the DHS funding lapsed with no agreement on changes to the Trump administration's immigration enforcement tactics.

In March, the Senate passed the legislation by voice vote that would separate out ICE and Border Patrol and fund the rest of the department, including the Transportation Security Administration as security lines grew long at some airports. But Republicans in the House refused to consider it, saying they wouldn't support any bill that didn't include money for immigration enforcement.

Congress then left town for a two-week recess, leaving the issue unresolved. Trump has used executive orders to pay some department salaries in the meantime, but the future of those paychecks is uncertain.

Potential roadblocks in the House

During the recess, Thune and House Speaker Mike Johnson announced that they would pursue a two-track approach — pass the Senate bill that includes most of the department's funding through regular order and use the party-line bill to pass ICE and CBP funding.

Weeks later, though, Johnson has still not said when the House will take up the Senate's legislation that would fund the rest of the department. And it is unclear if members of his GOP conference will unite behind the narrowed budget bill as some House Republicans have argued, like Sen. Kennedy, that they should add other priorities to the legislation.

Johnson said this week that the sequencing of the two bills is important. House lawmakers don't want to see the rest of the department funded without ICE and Border Patrol, he said.

But Thune warned after the Senate vote that other parts of the Homeland Security Department may

run out of money before they are able to finish the winding budget process and fund those two agencies. He said he hopes the adoption of the budget resolution is a signal to the House that "we're going to be following through."

"We'll see what they can do with it," Thune said. "And if they can't, I guess we will go to the next plan."

Navy Secretary John Phelan is leaving in the latest departure of a top defense leader

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Navy Secretary John Phelan is leaving his job, the Pentagon abruptly announced Wednesday, the first head of a military service to depart during President Donald Trump's second term but just the latest top defense leader to step down or be ousted.

No reason was given for the unexpected departure of the Navy's top civilian official, coming as the sea service has imposed a blockade of Iranian ports and is targeting ships linked to Tehran around the world during a tenuous ceasefire in the war. Another Trump loyalist is taking over as acting head of the Navy: Undersecretary Hung Cao, a 25-year Navy combat veteran who ran unsuccessful campaigns for the U.S. Senate and House in Virginia.

Phelan's departure is the latest in a series of shakeups of top leadership at the Pentagon, coming just weeks after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth fired the Army's top uniformed officer, Gen. Randy George. Hegseth also has fired several other top generals, admirals and defense leaders since taking office last year.

The firings began in February 2025, when Hegseth removed military leaders, including Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the Navy's top uniformed officer, and Gen. Jim Slife, the No. 2 leader at the Air Force. Trump also fired Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown Jr. as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Showing how sudden the latest move was, Phelan had addressed a large crowd of sailors and industry professionals on Tuesday at the Navy's annual conference in Washington and spoke with reporters about his agenda. He also hosted the leaders of the House Armed Services Committee to discuss the Navy's budget request and efforts to build more ships, according to a social media post from his office.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said in a post on X that Phelan was "departing the administration, effective immediately."

Phelan had been a major Trump donor

Phelan had not served in the military or had a civilian leadership role in the service before Trump nominated him for secretary in late 2024. He was seen as an outsider being brought in to shake up the Navy.

Phelan was a major donor to Trump's campaign and had founded the private investment firm Rugger Management LLC. According to his biography, Phelan's primary exposure to the military came from an advisory position he held on the Spirit of America, a nonprofit that supported the defense of Ukraine and the defense of Taiwan.

The Associated Press could not immediately reach Phelan's office for comment. The White House did not answer questions and instead responded by sending a link to Parnell's statement.

Phelan is leaving during a busy time for the Navy. It has three aircraft carriers deployed in or heading to the Middle East, while the Trump administration says all the armed forces are poised to resume combat operations against Iran should the ceasefire expire.

The Navy also has maintained a heavy presence in the Caribbean, where it has been part of a campaign of strikes against alleged drug boats. It also played a major role in the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro in January.

New acting Navy secretary ran unsuccessful bids for Congress

Taking over as acting secretary is Cao, who ran a failed U.S. Senate bid in Virginia to try to unseat Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine in 2024. He had Trump's endorsement in the crowded Republican primary and gave a speech at the 2024 Republican National Convention.

Cao's biography includes fleeing Vietnam with his family as a child in the 1970s. In a campaign video for his Senate bid, he compared Vietnam's communist regime during the Cold War to the administration of

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Democratic President Joe Biden.

During his one debate with Kaine, Cao criticized COVID-19 vaccine mandates for service members as well as the military's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

"When you're using a drag queen to recruit for the Navy, that's not the people we want," Cao said from the debate stage. "What we need is alpha males and alpha females who are going to rip out their own guts, eat them and ask for seconds. Those are the young men and women that are going to win wars."

Trump and Hegseth have railed against DEI in the military, banning the efforts and firing people accused of supporting such programs.

When he ran for Congress in Virginia in 2022, Cao expressed opposition to aid for Ukraine during a debate against his Democratic opponent.

"My heart goes out to the Ukrainian people. ... But right now we're borrowing \$55 billion from China to pay for the war in Ukraine. Not only that, we're depleting our national strategic reserves," Cao said.

Cao graduated from the prestigious Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Virginia, before attending the U.S. Naval Academy.

He was commissioned as a special operations officer and went on to serve with SEAL teams and special forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia before retiring at the rank of captain, according to his Senate campaign biography.

Cao also earned a master's degree in physics and had fellowships at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University.

Since becoming Navy undersecretary, Cao has championed returning to duty service members that refused a Biden-era mandate to take the COVID-19 vaccine.

Residents in rural Sudan say the Iran war has made it harder to get medicines

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

QOZ NAFISA, Sudan (AP) — It's always been challenging for Abbas Awad to find medicines in his village outside Sudan's capital. But since the war in Iran, it's become harder. Prices have spiked and many pharmacies in the area are out of stock.

The latest war in the Middle East has far-reaching effects, including on countries ravaged by conflicts of their own.

After three years of war in Sudan, a public health clinic in Qoz Nafisa village in Khartoum state is struggling to support thousands of people like the 61-year-old Awad.

He said he has been spacing out his medicine for glaucoma, worried he won't be able to find more or afford it when he does. Money was already an issue because of the war at home, he said.

"Now we have the problem of the war in the Middle East. It's just made things worse," he said.

Aid groups say the Iran war has cut off vital shipping routes, upending their ability to get food and medicine to millions of people around the world in need. The standoff between the United States and Iran has essentially shut down the Strait of Hormuz, and other routes from strategic hubs such as Dubai also have been impacted.

Transport costs have spiked with higher fuel and insurance rates, further straining the ability to deliver supplies. The United Nations says there's been up to a 20% cost increase on shipments, along with delays, as goods are rerouted.

The International Rescue Committee, which supports the clinic where Awad gets some of his medicines, said about \$130,000 worth of pharmaceuticals intended for Sudan was stranded in Dubai for weeks and only now is making its way there.

The IRC says medicines and supplies such as antibiotics, painkillers and stethoscopes that were supposed to be flown from the United Arab Emirates to Port Sudan were instead transported by road to neighboring Oman and then flown out.

U.S. President Donald Trump this week extended the fragile ceasefire with Iran, but aid groups worry

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little will change.

"There's still a real lag in the system. Shipments remain blocked or delayed, and that's deeply worrying," said Madiha Raza, associate director for global public affairs and communications for IRC.

Sudan has widely been described as facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and Raza said any delay in delivering food, medicine and fuel has devastating consequences.

For the roughly 5,000 people who rely on the public health clinic that the IRC supports in Qoz Nafisa, some now must search at other clinics and spend their own money, which they often don't have.

During a visit by AP journalists on Wednesday, clinic staff said that since the war with Iran began at the end of February they've been struggling to meet demand.

A member of the military media accompanied The Associated Press during the visit for safety reasons. The AP retains full editorial control of its content.

Dr. Amira Sidig, the center's medical director, said the last shipment from the IRC was in December. Ones expected in February and April have not arrived.

Sudan's health ministry tries to fill the gap, but it only accounts for half of what's needed, Sidig said.

"It's never enough because they also have a shortage, and we're again out of stock quickly," she said.

For several days this month, the clinic had no malaria treatment to give the 50% of patients who come in with the disease, Sidig said.

Ahmed Ibrahim, who works at the clinic, said patients are getting frustrated.

"When people come to the window, they say, 'Why are you here and there is no medicine?'"

California's woes at the center of debate among leading candidates for governor

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A televised debate among six leading candidates for California governor Wednesday underscored sharp partisan divides on issues from homelessness to taxes, while the Democrats sought to distinguish themselves from each other in a chaotic race with no clear leader.

It's the first time in a generation that California has a wide-open contest for the heavily Democratic state's highest office, with more than 50 names on the ballot. Mail ballots are scheduled to go to voters early next month in advance of the June 2 primary election.

It was mostly a mannerly exchange. There were few instances of candidates talking over or interrupting each other, indicating they were eager to make a positive impression with voters who might be seeing them for the first time.

The debate brought together the two leading Republicans, conservative commentator Steve Hilton and Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco, and four Democrats including former U.S. Rep. Katie Porter, billionaire Tom Steyer, San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan and former Biden administration Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra.

Over 90 minutes, candidates fielded questions on housing and wildfire insurance, social media and gas taxes, while bickering over professional experience, individual wealth and the direction of the nation's most populous state. Democrats made clear they would fight President Donald Trump in a state known as the home of the so-called Trump resistance, while Republicans said ruling Democrats are to blame for the state's woes.

"Donald Trump is trying to punish California every way he can," Steyer said.

Homeless policy displays sharp partisan divide

California has more people living on the street than any other state and Democrats generally credited outgoing Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom for his efforts to deal with the long-running crisis. But Republicans said the state has spent billions of taxpayer dollars with little evidence of progress.

"Everything has taken us in the wrong direction," Hilton said.

Bianco called the state's record on homelessness a "dismal failure."

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Social media use for kids at issue

Candidates were asked if the state should ban social media use for children under 16 years old and their answers didn't fall neatly on party lines.

Steyer and Becerra said they support such a ban. Hilton said there should be a social norm to keep smartphones away from children under 16. Porter said she doesn't support a ban at that age but may support a different age ban, noting two of her teenage children use social media in different ways. Bianco and Mahan said it should be left to parents, with Mahan saying he supports parental consent for kids under 16 and cellphones should be banned in schools.

There also were some sharp exchanges and candidates sought to distinguish themselves from rivals.

A billionaire faces questions

References to Steyer's wealth and previous business dealings came up repeatedly.

"The only housing Tom Steyer's built has been private prisons and ICE detention centers," Mahan said, echoing criticism that Steyer, a hedge fund founder turned liberal activist, invested in private prisons that today house people picked up in federal immigration raids.

Steyer responded that he and his wife have financed thousands of low-income housing units.

Steyer has been vastly outspending his rivals in advertising and was asked about being the only billionaire in the race. He noted major corporations including utility companies are spending millions against him.

"I'm the billionaire who wants to tax other billionaires," Steyer added. "I'm the billionaire who's taking on the electric monopoly and trying to break up their power. I'm the billionaire who wants to tax the oil companies and make polluters pay."

California's unique primary rules fuel uncertainty

The candidates were all on stage together because California puts all candidates on the same ballot regardless of party, and the two with the most votes go to the November general election. Democrats have been fretting their crowded field could result in two Republicans advancing, a result that would be a historic calamity for Democrats.

The campaign has just come through an unstable period, with U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell — one of the leading Democrats — leaving the race and Congress following sexual assault allegations that he denies.

Becerra and Mahan were late additions to the debate lineup after Swalwell exited the race. Both candidates in the reordered contest have been getting fresh attention, and endorsements. Becerra was the only candidate who declined to speak to reporters after the debate.

Porter, who became a social media celebrity by brandishing a whiteboard at congressional hearings while grilling CEOs, could become the state's first woman governor. Steyer, who in 2020 ran an unsuccessful presidential campaign, is known for his involvement in climate issues. Becerra served in the Biden administration and as a state attorney general, a congressman and a state legislator, and would be the state's first Hispanic governor in modern history. Mahan says he has made gains against homelessness and crime while leading Northern California's largest city.

California takes center stage

Democrats have dominated government in the nation's most populous state for years. Republicans haven't won a statewide election in two decades, and Hilton and Bianco faulted Sacramento's one-sided politics for the state's troubles.

Bianco said Democratic policies were driving up the cost of living.

Hilton, while discussing the state's notoriously high tax rates, said, "All the Democrats here are part of this system that obviously isn't working."

Nexstar Media Group hosted the debate that aired on its local channels, as well as NewsNation, and streamed online via The Hill.

Wildfires across Georgia and Florida destroy more than 50 homes and force evacuations

By RUSS BYNUM and JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

NAHUNTA, Ga. (AP) — Huge plumes of smoke blanketed swaths of the Southeast on Wednesday as crews battled rapidly growing wildfires that destroyed more than 50 homes in Georgia and forced hundreds to flee the drought- and wind-fueled flames.

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Some of the biggest blazes were near Georgia's coast, while others were popping up in northern Florida, a state facing one of its worst fire seasons in decades.

It was not yet clear how the wildfires started, but the bottom half of Georgia is perilously dry and the conditions prompted the state's forestry commission to issue a burn ban for the first time in its history. Southeastern Georgia has seen just 11 inches (28 centimeters) of rain since the beginning of September — almost 15 inches (38 centimeters) below normal, the National Weather Service said.

The fires spread so quickly in that area that residents received no warnings or alerts.

"I wish that I had knew something more," said Brianna Elliott, who left home Tuesday only to find her route back blocked by the fires 90 minutes later. "I would have turned around in that moment and gone home and got my animals before anything."

She now fears that her home and her dogs are gone.

Georgia's two biggest wildfires together have burned more than 53 square miles (137.3 square kilometers), and crews responded Wednesday to 34 smaller fires newly burning across the state, the state's forestry commission said.

Dry timber feeds Georgia fires

The fast-moving Brantley County fire threatened roughly 1,000 homes Wednesday after destroying dozens a day earlier.

That fire grew by roughly six times in just a half day Tuesday, said Joey Cason, the county manager. There were fires erupting "in the backyard and people taking off in the front yard," he said Wednesday.

So far no major injuries have been reported, Cason said.

The rural county is roughly midway between Georgia's coastal beaches and the Okefenokee Swamp, dotted with livestock and fruit farms as well as thick stands of planted pines grown for timber.

Crews worked to create fire breaks and stop the flames from reaching populated areas. The biggest concern was gusting winds that could easily spread embers.

Authorities said rain is desperately needed. The area with the worst fires was in exceptional or extreme drought, the most dire levels, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

"If you could start praying for that right now, we'd be grateful," Cason said.

Pine and hardwood forests in the region are helping charge the fires, said Seth Hawkins, a spokesperson for the Georgia Forestry Commission, and swampy lowlands with thick layers of leaves and woody debris are "super flammable" when they dry out.

The commission's 30-day burn ban is for the southern part of the state.

FEMA announced the approval of grants for Georgia and Florida to battle the blazes.

More residents told to evacuate

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency for more than half of the state's counties.

More people were told to evacuate from Brantley County on Wednesday afternoon, on top of the 800 evacuations previously. Another large fire that started in nearby Clinch County also prompted evacuations.

Mike Reardon and his wife packed family photos and their dog, Molly Rose, along with new e-bikes before leaving their Brantley County home.

The fire was about a mile away, and a shift in the wind would put flames "in our backyard in a matter of minutes," he said.

The couple just built the home two years ago.

"It's more than our house. It's land that my dad bought years ago," Liz Reardon said, fighting back tears. "It's the most beautiful place in the world to me."

Florida sees its worst wildfire season in decades

In Florida, firefighters battled more than 130 wildfires that burned 39 square miles (101 square kilometers), mostly in the state's northern half.

"Florida has got one of the worst fire seasons in maybe the last 30 or 40 years, or it's turning out to be that way," state Commissioner of Agriculture Wilton Simpson said. "We've been in drought for 18 months now all across the state."

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Smoke blows into Atlanta and Jacksonville

The National Weather Service said a dangerous combination of low humidity and breezy winds would keep the fire danger elevated Wednesday.

Smoke drifted to Atlanta, Savannah, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida. The air quality in parts of south Georgia declined to the unhealthy category, meaning all people there might feel health effects.

Smoky conditions were expected to linger throughout the Atlanta area, according to the Atlanta-Fulton County Emergency Management Agency. The worst fires were more than 200 miles (322 kilometers) southeast of the city.

Smoke from Georgia fires also spread into South Carolina, according to its forestry commission.

The high fire risk was expected to continue each afternoon through Friday due to the very dry conditions, the weather service said.

Nuclear energy is having a global revival 40 years after Chernobyl

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

The 1986 Chernobyl disaster fueled global fears about nuclear power and slowed its development in Europe and elsewhere. Four decades later, however, there's a revival around the world, a trend that has been given a big boost by war in the Middle East.

Over 400 nuclear reactors are operational in 31 countries, while about 70 more are under construction. Nuclear power accounts for producing about 10% of the world's electricity, equivalent to about a quarter of all sources of low-carbon power.

Nuclear reactors have seen steady improvements, adding more safety features and making them cheaper to build and operate.

While Chernobyl and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan diminished the appetite for such power sources, it was clear years ago that there probably would be a revival, said Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency.

With the war in the Middle East, "I am 100% sure nuclear is coming back," he added.

"It's seen as a secure electricity generation system, and we will see that the comeback of nuclear will be very strong, both in (the) Americas, in Europe and in Asia," Birol told The Associated Press.

Nuclear energy reliance stays strong

The United States is the world's largest producer of nuclear power, with 94 operational reactors accounting for about 30% of global generation of nuclear electricity. And it is increasing efforts to develop nuclear energy capacity with a goal to quadruple it by 2050.

"The world cannot power its industries, meet the demands of artificial intelligence, or secure its energy future without nuclear power," U.S. Undersecretary of State Thomas DiNanno said last month.

China operates 61 nuclear reactors and is leading the world in building new units, with nearly 40 under construction with a goal to surpass the U.S. and become the global leader in nuclear capacity.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has acknowledged that it was Europe's "strategic mistake" to cut nuclear energy and outlined new initiatives to encourage building power plants.

Russia, meanwhile, has taken a strong lead in exporting its nuclear know-how, building 20 reactors worldwide.

Chernobyl's Reactor No. 4 exploded on April 26, 1986, while Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union. The accident contaminated nearby areas and spewed radiation across Europe.

Ukraine still relies heavily on nuclear plants to generate about half of its electricity. Those plants have played a vital role after Russia sent troops into Ukraine in 2022. Moscow's forces have captured Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and Kyiv accused Russia of a drone attack on the protective containment structure covering the damaged Chernobyl reactor.

Japan has restarted 15 reactors after reviewing the lessons of the earthquake and tsunami that damaged the Fukushima plant, and 10 more are in the process of getting approval to restart.

South Africa has the only nuclear power plant on the African continent, although Russia is building one

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in Egypt, and several other African nations are exploring the technology.

"The momentum we are seeing today is the result of a growing recognition that reliable, low-carbon electricity will be essential to meet the world's rising energy demand," said Rafael Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

EU eyes nuclear expansion

Europe sought to wean itself off Russian energy after the Ukraine conflict, but its dependence on hydrocarbons was underlined by the war in the Middle East.

The European Commission has shifted its perception of nuclear energy and views it as part of clean energy, along with wind and solar power, to achieve climate goals.

In 1990, nuclear energy accounted for about a third of Europe's electricity; now it's only about 15%, and von der Leyen has acknowledged that its reliance on imported fossil fuels puts it at a disadvantage.

"I believe that it was a strategic mistake for Europe to turn its back on a reliable, affordable source of low-emissions power," she said recently. "In the last years, we see a global revival of nuclear energy. And Europe wants to be part of it."

The EU is considering the development of Small Modular Reactors. Expected to become operational in the early 2030s, they are seen as cheaper and faster to build and more flexible than traditional reactors.

France and a few other EU members, including Sweden and Finland, have spearheaded nuclear power. On the other hand, Germany, Austria and Italy are among the EU members that outlawed its use.

In a major policy reversal last year, Belgium repealed a law that demanded the closure of its reactors and extended their lifespan. Spain, meanwhile, still plans to phase out its nuclear capacity and shut down its seven operational reactors between 2027 and 2035.

France remains a nuclear powerhouse

With 57 reactors at 19 plants, France relies on nuclear power for nearly 70% of its electricity.

Successive governments have backed nuclear power as central to France's energy independence, undeterred by the Chernobyl disaster. In 2022, President Emmanuel Macron announced plans to build six new pressurized water reactors, aiming to cut greenhouse gas emissions and support the transition to low-carbon energy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the gas supply crunch triggered by the conflict in Ukraine, "revealed the limits of deploying renewable electricity and Europe's dependence on gas," said Nicolas Goldberg, a partner at Paris-based Columbus Consulting.

"France has therefore been reinforced in its strategy of maintaining its existing nuclear plants, which means extending their lifespan as much as possible," he said.

Germany stands firm in phasing it out

Decades of anti-nuclear protests in Germany, stoked by past accidents, had pressured successive governments to end using a technology that critics saw as unsafe and unsustainable. Germany switched off its last three nuclear reactors in 2023, the final step in plans that had been drawn up by governments of various political stripes over two decades.

A significant nuclear revival in Europe's biggest economy still looks far-fetched, despite recent talk among some in Chancellor Friedrich Merz's center-right bloc about being open to a possible future generation of small modular reactors.

"The decision is irreversible — I regret it, but that's how it is," Merz said, noting the plant operators' "consistent answer was: 'We are too far along with demolition.'"

Russian domestic nuclear expansion and exporting reactors

Russia has aggressively expanded its nuclear power capacity both domestically and internationally.

It has 34 operational reactors, including eight Chernobyl-type RBMK reactors, known as the light water graphite reactors, which account for about a quarter of all nuclear power generation. They have seen extensive modernizations, adding safety features to fix the inherent design flaw that, coupled with human error, triggered the Chernobyl disaster.

Key projects under construction include new units at the Kursk, Leningrad and Smolensk sites, a pro-

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spective plant in the Far East, and prospective floating nuclear units.

Russia also is building 20 reactors in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and has signed contracts to launch construction in several other countries.

Russia has built the first nuclear reactor for neighboring ally Belarus, which has seen a third of its territory contaminated from the Chernobyl accident.

"Belarusian authorities are using the changed context and the so-called 'nuclear renaissance' to claim that we are acting like everyone else in the world, rather than solving the problems of Belarusians in the contaminated territories," said Irina Sukhiy, founder of the Belarus ecological group Green Network.

European Union ramps up crisis testing, convinced that Trump's security priorities lie elsewhere

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union is set to ramp up tests on rules that oblige the bloc's 27 member countries to help each other in times of crisis, as the reality sinks in that Washington's commitment to NATO and security in Europe under U.S. President Donald Trump is evaporating.

At a summit in Cyprus starting later Thursday, leaders will work on "an operational plan" to make best use of the EU's military, security, trade policy and other assets in times of need, Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides told The Associated Press.

In mid-May, EU envoys will take part in "table-top exercises" to game out how Article 42.7 of the bloc's treaties could be used to provide collective assistance to a nation in the event of an attack or an invasion by a country like Russia.

EU defense ministers are expected to carry out similar tests a few weeks later. The exercises are focused on political decision-making and don't involve armed forces, government agencies or other assets in the field.

Like NATO's Article 5, but not exactly

Under NATO's Article 5 security guarantee, an attack on one ally is deemed an attack on them all and one that requires a collective response, often, though not exclusively, by military means.

It's only ever been activated once, in support of the United States following the Sept. 11 attacks and led to NATO's failed 18-year security effort in Afghanistan.

The EU's Article 42.7, which was drafted to avoid conflict with Article 5, has also only been used once, at the request of France following terror attacks in Paris in 2015 that left more than 130 people dead and more than 400 others wounded.

The EU article states that if a nation "is the victim of armed aggression on its territory," its partners should provide "aid and assistance by all the means in their power."

It provides that such help should be in accordance with the U.N. charter and not conflict with NATO commitments, and the clause makes allowances for the neutrality of member countries like Austria and Ireland.

When the US is absent

In the case of France, EU nations expressed solidarity and offered support. France appealed to its partners to step up their efforts against international terrorism, which freed up French forces for a major security operation at home.

Similar exercises to test the use of Article 42.7 have been held over the past decade. But growing doubts about the U.S. commitment to NATO and the future EU membership of war-ravaged Ukraine have brought new urgency to the preparations.

Recent reflection about how the Europeans might defend themselves gathered pace after Trump threatened to annex Greenland, which is a semiautonomous part of the kingdom of Denmark, a NATO ally.

Several European countries sent just a few soldiers each to the massive island off the coast of Canada in a highly symbolic display of solidarity with Denmark. Trump railed that he would impose tariffs on countries that took part, but he eventually backed down.

Trump's decision to launch a war against Iran, alongside Israel, seemed to justify the planning. A revenge

attack by Iran in March targeted a U.K. military base on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency.

Options and issues

Unlike NATO, which is purely a security organization, the EU has many more diverse weapons at its disposal. They range from military might to the use of sanctions, border controls, or trade and visa policies.

The extent to which they and other measures might be used in times of crisis are set to be put to the test again in coming weeks as wars fester in the Middle East, absorbing U.S. attention, and in Ukraine.

"We don't know what is going to happen if a member state triggers this article," Christodoulides told the AP. "There are a number of issues."

Lebanese journalist Amal Khalil killed in Israeli strike on a house where she took cover, paper says

By BASSEM MROUE and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A Lebanese journalist was killed Wednesday in an Israeli airstrike on a house in southern Lebanon where she had taken cover while reporting on the Israel-Hezbollah war. Her body was only retrieved from the rubble hours later, rescue workers said.

The daily Al-Akhbar newspaper says its reporter Amal Khalil was killed in the southern village of al-Tiri.

Khalil had been covering the conflict in Lebanon between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah militant group that resumed in early March, in the shadow of the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran. She took cover in the house in al-Tiri after an earlier Israeli airstrike hit near the car she was traveling in with another colleague.

The Lebanese health ministry said the first strike killed two people. A second Israeli strike then hit the house in al-Tiri where Khalil and her colleague Zeinab Faraj had taken cover.

At first, rescue workers were able to get to Faraj, who was seriously wounded, and retrieve the bodies of two killed in the first airstrike. But they were fired on by Israeli forces so they were forced to halt attempts to reach Khalil, the ministry said.

Khalil remained under the rubble for hours before the Lebanese army, civil defense and the Lebanese Red Cross were able to get to the scene hours later. Khalil's body was retrieved shortly before midnight, at least six hours after the strike.

Israel's military said individuals in the village had violated the ceasefire, endangering its troops. Israel denied that it targets journalists or that it prevented rescue teams from reaching the area. It said the incident was under review.

"Killing of journalists is a crime and a flagrant violation of international and humanitarian law," said Lebanon's Information Minister Paul Morcos.

Khalil's death comes on the eve of the second round of direct talks between Israeli and Lebanese officials in Washington on extending the ceasefire that went into effect last Friday.

Khalil, who was from southern Lebanon, had been covering the area since 2006 for al-Akhbar. Her latest reporting was about Israeli demolitions of Lebanese homes in villages where Israeli troops are now positioned inside Lebanon.

Her death brings to nine the number of journalists killed in Lebanon so far this year. At least 2,300 people have been killed in Israeli strikes and more than 1 million displaced since the latest Israel-Hezbollah war erupted on March 2.

Earlier on Wednesday, Reporters Without Borders called for international pressure on the Israeli army to allow Khalil's rescue. Committee to Protect Journalists expressed its "outrage" at the apparent targeting of the two journalists and warned the obstruction of rescue efforts "may amount to a war crime."

Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun asked the Lebanese Red Cross to coordinate with the Lebanese army and U.N. peacekeepers "to carry out the rescue operation" as quickly as possible.

In late March, an Israeli airstrike on southern Lebanon killed three journalists covering the war. Hezbollah's al-Manar TV said its longtime correspondent Ali Shoeib was killed. Israel's military said it had targeted

Shoeib, accusing him of being a Hezbollah intelligence operative, without providing evidence.

Also killed in the same strike was reporter Fatima Ftouni, who worked for the Beirut-based Al-Mayadeen TV along with her brother Mohammed Ftouni, a video journalist.

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

Colombia's leader to visit Venezuela for key talks with acting President Delcy Rodríguez

By ASTRID SUÁREZ and REGINA GARCÍA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Colombian President Gustavo Petro is visiting Venezuela on Friday for key talks on border security and trade with the country's acting president, Delcy Rodríguez. The meeting, their first, comes months after the U.S. military seized former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife from their home in January.

Colombia is lobbying to become a buyer of Venezuelan gas and last month sought an exemption from U.S. sanctions to invest in Venezuelan electricity projects and natural gas ventures, which could include the reopening of a gas pipeline between the neighboring South American countries.

Petro's administration also reached agreements with Venezuela's state-owned oil company PDVSA to replace the pipeline in the Colombian section.

Petro and Rodríguez are also expected to discuss the presence of illegal armed groups and drug trafficking along their shared border.

"The United States has an interest in Colombia becoming the buyer of Venezuelan gas," said Ronal Rodríguez Durán, a researcher at the Venezuela Observatory at the Universidad del Rosario.

"Colombia, by virtue of its geographical nature, would become the client that could quickly bring revenue into Venezuela under U.S. supervision," he added.

The topic was part of the conversation during the nearly two-hour meeting between Petro and U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House in February. Both said the talks were friendly — a dramatic about-face from weeks earlier, when Trump accused Petro of pumping cocaine into the U.S. and threatened his country with military action.

According to Petro, they discussed how to revitalize the Venezuelan economy with Colombia's assistance, as well as the role of the U.S., which the Colombian leader said should "lift sanctions" on Venezuela.

The Trump administration is aiming to revive the Venezuelan economy by drawing foreign investment toward its vast natural resources, particularly oil, following years of decline under the Maduro government, which saw the country crumble and forced at least 7.7 million people to migrate.

Petro's leverage as mediator in Venezuela is limited

Ahead of Friday's meeting, Petro announced that his delegation, which includes top military and police officials, will tackle border security with Rodríguez.

The focus remains on the Catatumbo region, where rival armed groups fight for territorial control and Petro stressed the necessity of "close collaboration on intelligence," warning that without it, "bombs land in the wrong places ... and end up killing civilians."

Colombia-Venezuela ties have long been on the rocks. Petro did not recognize Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president in the wake of the contested July 2024 elections that triggered protests, which sparked widespread repression. Still, he maintained diplomatic ties with Caracas.

Colombia's government has said that the Petro-Rodríguez meeting on Friday aims to "contribute to a resolution of Venezuela's political crisis."

However, it's unclear how this can be achieved.

Rodríguez Durán, the university researcher, said Petro's leverage is limited regarding any potential mediation, given that his term ends in August. Future ties with Venezuela will likely also be influenced by who takes power next in Colombia.

Petro and Rodríguez were expected to meet last month at their shared border, but their respective gov-

ernments abruptly canceled the meeting citing "force majeure," which they did not explain, and simply said it would take place at a later time.

Before that canceled meeting, several Venezuelan nongovernmental organizations had addressed an open letter to Petro, urging Colombia to contribute to the "promotion of democratic principles and human rights," including the release of "all political prisoners" and an end to "persecution."

Iran fires on 3 ships in the Strait of Hormuz as US maintains blockade and diplomacy stalls

By JON GAMBRELL and DAVID RISING Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran fired on three ships in the Strait of Hormuz and seized two of them Wednesday, intensifying its assault on shipping in the key waterway. The attacks came a day after U.S. President Donald Trump extended a ceasefire while maintaining an American blockade of Iranian ports.

The standoff between the U.S. and Iran has effectively choked off nearly all exports through the strait — where 20% of the world's traded oil passes in peacetime — with no end in sight. Iranian media said the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was bringing the two ships to Iran, marking a further escalation, though the White House said the seizures didn't violate ceasefire terms.

The conflict has already sent gas prices skyrocketing far beyond the region and raised the cost of food and a wide array of other products. The price of Brent crude oil, the international standard, nosed over \$100 per barrel, marking a 35% increase from prewar levels, but stock markets still appear to be shrugging it off.

The European Union energy commissioner, Dan Jørgensen, warned of lasting impact for consumers and businesses, likening it to other major energy crises over the last half-century. He said the disruption is costing Europe around 500 million euros (\$600 million) each day.

Iran holds firm in apparent tit-for-tat with US

Iranian media said the MSC Francesca and the Epaminondas were being escorted to Iran. The U.S. had earlier seized two Iranian vessels as the ceasefire talks were due to take place in Pakistan.

Technomar, the management company behind the Liberian-registered Epaminondas, said it was "approached and fired upon by a manned gunboat" off the coast of Oman. It said the ship's bridge was damaged.

A second cargo ship came under fire hours later, with no report of damage, though it was then stopped in the water. No injuries to the crews of either vessel were reported. Panama condemned what it called the "illegal seizure" of the Panama-flagged MSC Francesca, and said it represented a serious attack on maritime security.

The Guard attacked a third ship, identified as the Euphoria, which had become "stranded" on the Iranian coast, Iranian media reported, without elaborating.

Still, Iran's seizure of the ships didn't violate truce terms because "these were not U.S. or Israeli ships, these were two international vessels," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told Fox News Channel.

There have been more than 30 attacks on ships in the Mideast since the U.S. and Israel launched the war on Feb. 28 with a surprise attack on Iran. Before then, the strait was open for all traffic.

Vortexa, an analytics firm focusing on global energy and freight markets, said it has recorded 34 movements of sanctioned and Iranian-linked tankers in and out of the Persian Gulf in the week after the U.S. imposed its blockade on April 13.

The firm identified 19 outbound and 15 inbound movements. Six of the outbound movements were "confirmed laden with Iranian crude, representing about 10.7 million barrels," it said in an email. It was not immediately clear whether all those barrels reached markets overseas.

It's not clear when talks will restart

Iran's ability to restrict traffic through the strait — which leads from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean — has proved a major strategic advantage

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While the ceasefire means American and Israeli airstrikes have stopped in Iran — and Tehran's missiles no longer target Israel and the wider Middle East — the maritime standoff continues and could escalate.

Without any diplomatic agreement, the attacks will likely deter ships from even attempting to pass through the waterway, further squeezing global energy supplies.

Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, Iran's parliament speaker who met with U.S. Vice President JD Vance in Pakistan earlier this month, said a complete ceasefire "only makes sense" if it is not violated by the U.S. blockade of Iranian ports.

"Reopening the Strait of Hormuz is impossible with such flagrant breach of the ceasefire," he wrote on X. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei told state TV that Iran has not decided whether to take part in a new round of negotiations, and accused the U.S. of a "disregard and lack of good faith" in the negotiations.

Mojtaba Ferdousi Pour, the head of the Iranian mission in Egypt, earlier told The Associated Press no delegation would go to Pakistan until the U.S. lifts its blockade.

The U.S. has turned back 31 vessels since its blockade began, U.S. Central Command said Thursday. In the Iranian capital, Tehran, many grappled with the uncertainty.

"We should know where we stand. Is it going to be a ceasefire, peace, or the war is going to continue?" said Mashallah Mohammad Sadegh, 59. "The way things currently are, one doesn't know what to do."

Casualties mount in Lebanon amid plans for new talks

In southern Lebanon, three separate Israeli strikes killed at least six people and wounded others, according to local authorities. Israel denied carrying out one of the strikes and did not immediately comment on the others.

The attacks came as Israeli and Lebanese ambassadors prepared for a new meeting in Washington on Thursday toward extending a fragile 10-day ceasefire that began last week and provided an opening for Iran and the United States to move toward ending the wider war.

An Israeli drone struck the village of Jabbour, killing one person and wounding two others, according to Lebanon's state-run National News Agency. Israel's military denied it attacked the area.

Lebanon's health ministry said two Israeli strikes on al-Tiri village killed three people, including a newspaper correspondent, and injured one other journalist.

Authorities said the body of Lebanese reporter Amal Khalil, who worked for the daily Al-Akhbar, was pulled from the rubble hours later. Lebanon's health ministry said a team searching for her was unable to reach her while Israeli forces fired at an ambulance. Khalil had been covering Israel-Hezbollah hostilities since October 2023 and was reporting during the latest war, the newspaper said.

Israel's military alleged people in al-Tiri violated the ceasefire and posed a risk to its troops safety. It denied it prevented rescue teams from reaching the area or that it targets journalists.

The Lebanese Health Ministry said a separate Israeli strike on the village of Yohmor killed two people and injured two others.

Hezbollah launched rockets at Israel from Lebanon days after the war's outbreak, sparking retaliatory strikes and an Israeli ground invasion. The ceasefire that started Friday has been marred by several Israeli strikes and Hezbollah claimed its first attack Tuesday.

French President Emmanuel Macron said a French peacekeeper wounded in a weekend attack in Lebanon died of his wounds. Another French peacekeeper was killed in the attack Saturday when the force came under small-arms fire in southern Lebanon.

Macron blamed the attack on Hezbollah, which denied involvement.

Since the war started, at least 3,375 people have been killed in Iran, according to authorities. More than 2,290 people have been killed in Lebanon, 23 people have died in Israel and more than a dozen have died in Gulf Arab states. Fifteen Israeli soldiers in Lebanon and 13 U.S. service members have been killed.

Vaccines, budget cuts and affordability: Takeaways from RFK Jr.'s gauntlet of congressional hearings

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on Wednesday concluded a marathon series of hearings with federal lawmakers, during which he deflected blame for measles outbreaks and dwindling vaccination rates across the country and touted several initiatives he says are making health care more affordable.

In his testimony to various committees in both the Senate and the House over multiple days this week and last, Kennedy was tasked with defending President Donald Trump's proposed 2027 budget, which would boost defense spending while cutting more than 12% of funding from Kennedy's Department of Health and Human Services.

With lawmakers of both parties raising concerns about programs and research funding being reduced or eliminated, Kennedy acknowledged the cuts were "painful" but said they were necessary to address the federal government's record \$39 trillion deficit.

When Democrats came out swinging, Kennedy became more defiant, even at times screaming his rebuttals — though some of them didn't align with the facts. He accused multiple Democratic lawmakers of grandstanding, making things up and seeking sound bites over meaningful responses.

Here are takeaways from Kennedy's gauntlet of budget hearings:

Kennedy deflects blame for Americans not vaccinating

One of the central fights shaping Kennedy's interactions with Democratic lawmakers was over who bears responsibility for the decline in childhood vaccination rates and measles outbreaks that have ripped across the country over the past year, threatening the country's measles elimination status. Kennedy's refrain was consistent: It's not my fault.

"It has nothing to do with me," Kennedy said Tuesday of the uptick in measles across the country over the past year. He noted there is a global rise in measles cases, including in other countries like Canada, Mexico and the United Kingdom.

Kennedy, who spent years as an anti-vaccine crusader before entering politics and in 2021 said he urged people to "resist" CDC guidelines on when kids should get vaccines, disputed accusations that he is anti-vaccine, saying he is "pro-science."

Throughout the hearings, he sought to focus on HHS's initiatives unrelated to vaccines — part of a broader administration pivot toward less controversial health topics like nutritious eating.

Kennedy argued that fewer Americans are vaccinating because they lost trust in government recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic. He said he was working to restore that trust. In fact, surveys show trust in federal health agencies has continued to decline during Kennedy's tenure.

Rep. Kim Schrier, a Democrat from Washington, argued Kennedy's vaccine views have caused a "spillover effect" that has led to mothers not giving their babies vitamin K injections common at birth to prevent brain bleeding.

"I've never said anything about vitamin K," Kennedy said.

"That's exactly the point," Schrier replied.

Kennedy did get credit, however, from Republican Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, who said his work was crucial in helping the state manage a troubling measles outbreak over the past year.

"We would not be on the right side of this outbreak without your leadership," Scott told Kennedy.

Kennedy forcefully denies there are Medicaid cuts — a claim experts call political spin

Nearly every time Democrats brought up the nearly \$1 trillion in Medicaid cuts over the next decade largely being created through new work requirements for enrollees, Kennedy lashed back to argue there are no cuts to Medicaid.

"Only in Washington is it considered a cut," Kennedy told New Mexico Sen. Ben Ray Lujan, a Democrat, on Wednesday.

Kennedy cited a Congressional Budget Office report showing that Medicaid outlays are estimated to increase by about 47% over the next decade. But experts say his analysis of that report is disingenuous,

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politicized framing and that the increased spending reflects factors like inflation and a growing population.

"This is an old, sort of tired argument that's been used by conservatives to justify spending cuts by saying, well, if spending is still growing in nominal terms, somehow there wasn't a cut," said Edwin Park, a research professor at Georgetown University. "The federal government is spending nearly a trillion dollars less than it otherwise would have in the absence of the legislation."

Lawmakers of both parties are concerned about affordability

A major concern for voters in the 2026 midterm elections is affordability — including skyrocketing costs for health care and health insurance. That wasn't lost on those questioning Kennedy, as lawmakers from both parties raised the issue.

On Tuesday, Rep. Cliff Bentz, a Republican from Oregon, shared the story of his brother who pays \$26,000 per year for his health coverage.

"What in the world can I go back to him and say? 'Hey, the administration is working on trying to drive these prices down?'" he asked Kennedy.

Kennedy, for his part, cited several Trump administration initiatives to lower prices, including the White House's TrumpRx website for discounted drugs and Trump's so-called most favored nations deals with pharmaceutical companies.

Pressed by senators, Kennedy pledged to provide details of those deals that didn't include proprietary information or trade secrets. Some Democrats wanted him to do more.

"Why don't you do an agreement yourself? he said in a jab to Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat. "You've had power to do that for 20 years and haven't done it."

Kennedy acknowledges some HHS cuts are 'painful'

To achieve a more than 12% cut of the more than \$100 billion HHS budget, the Trump administration is proposing slashing some \$5 billion from the National Institutes of Health and cutting a bevy of other programs and initiatives, including a low-income home energy assistance program.

Several senators asked Kennedy why different areas were being cut. NIH cuts, in particular, raised bipartisan outcry.

"There's an argument to be made that we're handing China our lunch," said Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina.

Kennedy was candid that neither he nor others at his agency wanted to see the cuts, which he called "painful."

"There's a lot of cuts to the agency that nobody wants," he said.

Celeste Rivas Hernandez, girl who singer D4vd is charged with killing, died from penetrating wounds

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Celeste Rivas Hernandez, the 14-year-old girl singer D4vd is charged with killing, died from penetrating wounds to her upper body, according to an autopsy report released Wednesday.

Her death was ruled a homicide in the report from the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner's Office that had been blocked from release for months.

The autopsy was limited by "extensive postmortem changes" to the body that was dismembered and decomposing when it was found in two bags in the trunk of a Tesla parked in the Hollywood Hills in September.

The examination revealed "two penetrating wounds of the torso with smooth edges that may represent sharp force injuries." One wound on the upper abdomen penetrated the liver. Another, on the left chest, damaged her ribs. A tube top she was wearing appeared to be cut in three places.

A judge had ordered the report sealed late last year at the request of law enforcement, but prosecutors agreed this week to allow its release.

The 21-year-old alt-pop singer D4vd, whose legal name is David Burke, was charged in the killing Monday. He pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder, lewd and lascivious acts with a person under 14 and

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mutilitating a dead body. Burke's attorneys said he did not cause Rivas Hernandez's death and they will vigorously defend his innocence.

The girl's parents made their first public comments on Tuesday night, thanking investigators for their work and the people of their hometown of Lake Elsinore, California, for their support. Lake Elsinore is about 70 miles (112 kilometers) southeast of Los Angeles.

"Celeste was a beautiful, strong girl who loved to sing and dance. Every Friday night was movie night and we spent wonderful times together," Jesus Rivas and Mercedes Martinez said. "We love her very much and she always told us that she loved us. We miss her deeply. All we want is justice for Celeste."

Prosecutors allege Burke killed Rivas Hernandez because she threatened to report they had a sexual relationship that began when she was 13 years old and he feared it would ruin his rising career.

A criminal complaint alleges he killed her with a sharp object and dismembered the body about two weeks later.

Medical Examiner's investigators called to the scene where the body was found discovered her torso and head in a black, zippered body bag in the Tesla's trunk, with arms and legs in a separate trash bag.

Her body had so degraded that examiners couldn't even determine her eye color. She had braces at the time of her death, and a tattoo that read "Shhh...." on the inside of a finger, according to the report. Two other fingers were missing — as were parts of her arms and legs.

Toxicology tests on the liver showed a low level of alcohol, but it may have been due to postmortem chemical changes and didn't appear to be a factor, the report said.

LA County's Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Odey C. Ukpo has sought to emphasize his agency's independence from law enforcement and to make its work as public as possible since he took over the job three years ago. He has said he does not believe sealing reports of his office's work helps investigations and has said he would only put holds on releasing the reports if compelled by a court order.

"After several months, I am grateful this information can now be released, not only to the public, but also to the grieving family enduring loss," Ukpo said in a statement Wednesday. "It is unfathomable they have had to wait this long to learn what happened to their daughter."

D4vd, pronounced "David," gained popularity among young fans for his blend of indie rock, R&B and lo-fi pop. He went viral on TikTok in 2022 with the hit "Romantic Homicide," which peaked at No. 4 on Billboard's Hot Rock & Alternative Songs chart. He released his debut EP "Petals to Thorns" and a follow-up, "The Lost Petals," in 2023.

His debut full-length album, "Withered," was released one year ago, two days after the date prosecutors estimate that Rivas Hernandez was killed.

Mexico's government keeps contradicting itself over role of CIA agents in Chihuahua operation

By MARÍA VERZA and MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexican authorities on Wednesday continued to muddle the official account over the role of two CIA agents in a counternarcotics operation in northern Mexico and the extent to which Mexico's federal government was aware of the U.S. involvement in the incident, which has started to ignite tensions with the White House.

The incident has increasingly fueled speculation in the Latin American nation as Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum for more than a year has repeatedly underscored her country's sovereignty and publicly turned down offers by U.S. President Donald Trump of intervention on cartels.

The Mexican government acknowledges the presence of U.S. agencies on Mexican territory but says that they cannot participate in on-the-ground operations.

Mexican and U.S. officials have been offering contradictory accounts for days. After the Mexican government originally said it had no knowledge of any sort operation or U.S. involvement, the president admitted Wednesday that federal forces were involved and another high-level official acknowledged that the government at least discussed the matter with the U.S.

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The collaboration came to light this week after two local investigators in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua and two CIA agents — originally identified as U.S. Embassy officials — reportedly died in a car crash in the early morning on Sunday while driving back from an operation to destroy cartel laboratories in a rugged area of Mexico. The local government said the convoy drove off the side of a ravine and the car exploded.

The Americans killed were from the CIA, The Associated Press confirmed on Tuesday with a U.S. official and two other people familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence matters.

Sheinbaum on Wednesday maintained that she had no knowledge of the operation between the U.S. and local Chihuahua authorities, and that it could constitute a violation of Mexico's law, because any such action should be approved by the federal government.

In her press briefing she said she was considering possible sanctions on Chihuahua's government, and emphasized that the operation didn't constitute a new security strategy by Trump in her country. She added that she sent a letter to the U.S. ambassador requesting that he provide all available information regarding the incident and that she planned to speak to Chihuahua's governor.

"There cannot be agents from any U.S. government institution operating in the Mexican field," Sheinbaum said Wednesday. "It is very important that something like this not be allowed to go unaddressed."

The CIA particularly has a tainted legacy in Latin America, associated in decades past with orchestrating coups and backing military dictatorships in a number of countries. Despite that, the agency has maintained a presence in Mexico for many years, which has also been the subject of contention in Mexican politics.

On Wednesday afternoon, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt pushed back on Sheinbaum's comments, saying that U.S. efforts to counter cartels in Mexico "is not only a benefit to the American people, but to her people as well."

"I think the president would agree that some sympathy from Claudia Sheinbaum would be well worth it for the two American lives that were lost, considering all that the United States of America is doing currently under this president to stop the scourge of drug trafficking through Mexico to the United States," Leavitt said in an appearance on Fox News.

The Trump administration has provided very few comments on the incident since the Sunday crash. The CIA declined to comment on Wednesday.

The back-and-forth comes after days of contradictions in accounts, which have raised eyebrows and have prompted experts to say it underscores heightened U.S. involvement in security operations in Mexico and across the region.

Those only continued on Wednesday when Sheinbaum acknowledged that Mexico's army participated in the operation, but didn't know that the U.S. agents were present. Days before, Chihuahua's Attorney General César Jáuregui said the investigation came following months of investigation by state prosecutors and Mexico's military.

Later on Wednesday, Security Secretary Omar García Harfuch said at a news conference that the Defense Ministry had previously "received a petition for security support" by the U.S. But, he added, that "going to support an operation is different from actually being part of the planning of a operation."

"Agents have never been in the field with us," he added.

Police seek 17-year-old for attempted murder in shooting near University of Iowa, authorities say

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — Police are seeking a 17-year-old on attempted murder charges following a shooting early Sunday in a nightlife district near the University of Iowa campus, authorities said Wednesday.

Five people were treated for gunshot wounds, including three University of Iowa students. One woman remained in critical condition Wednesday after sustaining a life-threatening injury to her head, Iowa City Police Chief Dustin Liston said.

Officials said an arrest warrant was issued for the 17-year-old who was allegedly engaged in the fight,

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adding that reports indicate as many as 40 people may have been involved. Officers had been dispatched to the fight and arrived within 45 seconds, Liston said.

After walking away from the other participants, the suspect allegedly fired six times into the crowded pedestrian area, Liston said. Iowa City's downtown pedestrian mall is lined with shops, bars and restaurants.

The minor from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, will initially be charged as an adult, as is required by Iowa law for forcible felony charges against an individual aged 16 or older, said Rachel Zimmermann Smith, Johnson County attorney.

The charges, which include five counts of attempted murder, will be brought when the suspect is apprehended, she said.

Liston said the investigation is ongoing and additional charges are expected. About three dozen search warrants have already been executed.

"We will continue to work tirelessly to hold those responsible fully accountable," he said, adding that anyone with information on the incident or the suspect are encouraged to come forward.

The five victims were not "targets of the shooting," Liston said. "We have no reason to believe they were otherwise affiliated with the fight that preceded the shooting."

Liston also provided details about the other four victims' injuries, including one struck in the arm and chest, two struck in one or both legs and one in the side of their stomach. One is still hospitalized in stable condition and three have been released, he said.

RFK Jr. faced the Senate. One lawmaker's competing loyalties were on display

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

A Republican senator juggling three roles — lawmaker, doctor and political candidate seeking reelection — walked a fine line on Wednesday as he questioned Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a longtime anti-vaccine activist who has moved to dramatically roll back the nation's childhood vaccine recommendations.

Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who chairs one committee that oversees Kennedy's department and sits on another, took a tough but measured posture in two high-stakes hearings Wednesday, where he asked the health secretary about affordability, fraud, abortion drugs and the rise of vaccine-preventable diseases like measles.

A liver doctor, Cassidy has clashed with Kennedy's vaccine agenda even though he provided crucial support for the health secretary's nomination last year.

At the same time, Cassidy is fighting for his political future in next month's primary in Louisiana, where President Donald Trump has endorsed one of his opponents in an unusual attempt to oust a sitting senator from his own party.

Ahead of Wednesday's hearings, experts said his handling of them could affect his chances at a pivotal moment of his reelection campaign and set the tone for how Congress oversees the nation's health agenda at a time of rampant distrust and misinformation.

"He's taken a risk showing any sort of resistance to RFK," said Claire Leavitt, an assistant professor at Smith College who studies congressional oversight. "He may pay an electoral price for that."

Cassidy took that chance on Wednesday, noting that trust in vaccines has declined in the U.S. over the past year and asking Kennedy how he would address expected outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases with the upcoming World Cup and America 250 events.

"I am a doctor who has seen people die from vaccine preventable diseases," Cassidy said. "And when I see outbreaks numbering in the thousands and people dying once more from vaccine preventable diseases, particularly children, it seems more than tragic."

Louisiana political consultant Mary-Patricia Wray said the senator's approach was like a "polite 'I told you so.'"

"Cassidy reinforced the real-world consequences of declining vaccine confidence while subtly signaling

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that the administration's posture is moving closer to where he has been as a physician," Wray said.

Cassidy has long advocated for vaccines

Cassidy has spent years walking a political tightrope. He's one of the few Republican senators who voted to convict Trump during an impeachment trial after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

As a liver doctor, he advocated for babies to receive hepatitis B vaccines shortly after birth, a step that could have prevented the disease in his patients. But when Trump nominated Kennedy, a longtime anti-vaccine activist, Cassidy supported him. He did so after securing various commitments, including that Kennedy would work within the current vaccine approval and safety monitoring system and support the childhood vaccine schedule.

The vote for Kennedy did not appear to mollify Trump. The president endorsed U.S. Rep. Julia Letlow, one of Cassidy's two primary opponents.

Cassidy also faces opposition from Kennedy's allies in the "Make America Healthy Again" movement, a group that includes both anti-vaccine activists and a wide variety of other crusaders for health and the environment. The MAHA PAC, aligned with Kennedy, has pledged \$1 million to Letlow's campaign. While the organization hasn't publicly said so, some have questioned whether the support is partly in retaliation against Cassidy for criticizing Kennedy's vaccine policy agenda.

"I'm not really sure what MAHA's beef is," Cassidy told reporters earlier this month. "Let me point out that I am the reason that Robert F. Kennedy is now the secretary of HHS. He would not have gotten there otherwise."

Cassidy argues that he has "strongly supported" the MAHA agenda, especially when it comes to the fight against ultraprocessed foods. However, the physician-turned-senator acknowledged that he and MAHA have "disagreed on vaccines."

"We've seen, frankly, that I am right," Cassidy added, pointing to recent measles-related deaths of children who were not vaccinated.

At a hearing in September, he slammed Kennedy's decision to slash funding for mRNA vaccine development. He interrogated Kennedy over his attempt to replace members of a vaccine committee, suggesting the new members could have conflicts of interest. He also raised concerns that Kennedy's vaccine policy decisions could be making it harder for Americans to get COVID-19 shots.

Later that month, Cassidy convened a hearing featuring former CDC Director Susan Monarez, who was ousted by Kennedy less than a month into her tenure after they clashed over vaccine policy, and former CDC Chief Medical Officer Debra Houry, who resigned in August citing an erosion of science at the agency.

"I want to work with the president to fulfill his campaign promise to reform the CDC and Make America Healthy Again. The president says radical transparency is the way to do that," Cassidy said at the time.

Experts say Cassidy's vaccine stance might not hurt him

Political consultants said they expect Cassidy's primary opponents, Letlow and Louisiana Treasurer John Fleming, to seize on any sound bites from Wednesday's hearings that can make Cassidy seem at odds with the Trump administration.

But Dorit Reiss, a vaccine law expert at UC Law San Francisco, said the political risk of his vaccine advocacy may not be as strong among Republicans as some people assume. That's in part because Kennedy and the Trump administration have recently pivoted away from discussing vaccines, focusing instead on less controversial topics like healthy eating.

"He's probably not alienating voters by focusing on the issue and calling it out," she said.

Cassidy also showed during Wednesday's hearings a willingness to be tough on Kennedy from the political right. He asked Kennedy why HHS hasn't reinstated an in-person dispensing requirement for chemical abortion drugs.

Through that line of questioning, Wray said, he's courting non-MAHA Republican voters who want to see the Trump administration do more on their priorities.

He's proving that "working with this administration doesn't mean he works for this administration," Wray said.

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Election outcome will shape future oversight of HHS

Also at stake if Cassidy doesn't make it to November's general election is what will happen to his responsibility to oversee the massive U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as the chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committee.

Leavitt, the Smith College professor, said seniority typically plays the most important role in who chairs Senate committees. She said another Republican in today's increasingly hyperpartisan Congress may not be as willing as Cassidy to check Kennedy's power.

Reiss, the vaccine law expert, said she wishes Cassidy had done more hearings or introduced legislation to rein in Kennedy. And she said the senator bears the blame for allowing Kennedy to bring unfounded vaccine fears into the government in the first place.

"His original sin, of course, was voting for Kennedy at all," Reiss said.

US stocks rally to records, but Brent oil also tops \$100 on worries about the Iran war

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market rallied to more records Wednesday after GE Vernova, Boston Scientific and other big companies joined the parade reporting fatter profits for the start of the year than analysts expected. But caution still hung over Wall Street, and oil prices rose on uncertainty about what will happen in the war with Iran.

The S&P 500 jumped 1% and topped its prior all-time high set on Friday. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 340 points, or 0.7%, and the Nasdaq composite set its own record after jumping 1.6%.

GE Vernova flew 13.7% higher after the company, whose products help generate about a quarter of the world's electricity, reported profit for the first three months of the year that blew past analysts' expectations.

Like the broader stock market, GE Vernova is benefiting from the rise of artificial-intelligence technology, and its electrification business booked more equipment orders for data centers during the quarter, \$2.4 billion, than it did during all of last year. The company also raised its forecasts for revenue and other financial measures over the full year.

The vast majority of companies in the S&P 500 have so far been delivering results for the start of 2026 that have topped analysts' expectations, even with the war in Iran driving up oil prices and uncertainty for the global economy. Such strong performances have helped the S&P 500 power higher, and the index recorded its 13th gain in its last 16 days.

Boston Scientific rallied 9%, Boeing climbed 5.5%, and Philip Morris International rose 7% after all likewise delivered results for the latest quarter that were stronger than analysts expected.

Still, another rise in oil prices helped keep enthusiasm in check on Wall Street. The price for a barrel of Brent crude oil, the international standard, climbed 3.5% to \$101.91 on uncertainty about when the war with Iran could let up and allow petroleum to flow freely to customers from the Persian Gulf again.

The war has restricted traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway off Iran's coast that oil tankers typically use to exit the Persian Gulf. Iran fired on three ships in the strait and seized two of them on Wednesday.

A day earlier, U.S. President Donald Trump extended a ceasefire but also said he was maintaining an American blockade of Iranian ports. The blockade keeps Iran from making money by selling its own crude oil.

The standoff over Iran's closure of the strait and the U.S. blockade raised doubts about when or if talks would resume to end the crisis.

Brent crude has shot up from roughly \$70 per barrel since before the war on worries about a long-term disruption to the flow of oil. But moves in both the oil and stock markets have become more modest in recent weeks, following vicious swings where Brent's price briefly topped \$119 and the S&P 500 dropped nearly 10% below its prior all-time high.

On the losing end of Wall Street Wednesday was Best Buy, which fell 4.6% after the electronics retailer announced the departure of CEO Corie Barry. She will be replaced by longtime insider Jason Bonfig, the

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company's chief customer, product and fulfillment officer.

Stocks of cannabis companies rose amid reports that the Trump administration is preparing to reclassify marijuana as a less dangerous drug. Trump signed an executive order in December meant to speed up the Drug Enforcement Administration's process for reclassifying the drug, a move that would not make it legal for recreational use by adults nationwide, but could change how the drug is regulated and reduce a hefty tax burden on the cannabis industry.

Tilray Brands jumped 14.2%, and Canopy Growth soared 20.2%.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 73.89 points to 7,137.90. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 340.65 to 49,490.03, and the Nasdaq composite climbed 397.60 to 24,657.57.

In stock markets abroad, indexes fell in Europe following a mixed finish in Asia. Japan's Nikkei 225 rose 0.4%, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng sank 1.2%.

In the bond market, Treasury yields held relatively steady despite the gain in oil prices. The yield on the 10-year Treasury remained at 4.30%, where it was late Thursday.

A day before, it had climbed after Trump's nominee to chair the Federal Reserve, Kevin Warsh, said he never promised Trump he would cut interest rates even though Trump has been angrily calling for lower rates.

Democrats win in Virginia but it won't be the final say in a national redistricting competition

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

Democrats on Wednesday celebrated an election win in Virginia that could put them slightly ahead in the national redistricting competition that President Donald Trump triggered in an attempt to preserve his party's House majority in this year's midterms, but it will not be the final round.

Now that it's been approved by voters, the new Virginia map will have to clear additional legal hurdles. On Wednesday, the state attorney general's office said it would immediately appeal a ruling earlier in the day from a judge in rural southern Virginia who ordered that the results of Tuesday's vote not be certified.

Ultimately, the Virginia Supreme Court will decide whether Democratic lawmakers violated procedural rules when they referred a constitutional amendment to the ballot authorizing the new U.S. House districts that could help Democrats win as many as four additional seats in the state. If so, that could invalidate the map voters narrowly approved Tuesday.

What happens next in Florida also will matter.

The state's Republican-controlled Legislature is to meet in a special session next week that GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis called in part to draw a new map to expand the party's congressional majority there. The U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to issue an opinion by the end of June in a Louisiana case that could overturn a key provision of the Voting Rights Act and lead to redrawn political maps across the South, though almost all of those could not happen until 2028.

After voters passed the Virginia amendment, Democrats could tentatively claim that they netted 10 seats nationally from the mid-decade redistricting, compared with the nine that Republicans claim. Even if things swing again in the GOP's favor, the net result of Trump's campaign would be at best an incremental increase in the number of GOP-leaning House seats at a time when his approval rating is dropping and Republican anxiety over losing control of Congress in November is rising.

"We have successfully blunted Trump's attempt to completely hijack the midterms," said John Bisognano, president of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee.

Many Republicans agreed.

"The GOP will now lose net seats across the country. If you're going to pick a fight, at least win it," Ari Fleischer, who was a spokesman for President George W. Bush, posted on the social media site X after the Virginia vote. "All this was foreseeable and avoidable. We should not have started this fight."

Adam Kincaid, executive director of the National Republican Redistricting Trust, argued that it is too soon to declare one party a victor.

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"It's an ongoing process with many legal challenges pending, and it's far too early for sweeping statements on the final outcome," he said.

Trump on Wednesday tried to undermine the Virginia result by leveling groundless accusations of fraud similar to ones he made after losing the 2020 presidential election. He called the Virginia vote "RIGGED" and "Crooked" in a post on his social media site and added, "Let's see if the Courts will fix this travesty of 'Justice.'"

Redistricting spread from Texas to other states

Redistricting is typically done every 10 years after each census, unless ordered by a court. But last summer, Trump pushed a redrawing in Texas, prodding the state's Republican-controlled Legislature to add up to five winnable House seats for his party. Trump then began pressuring other Republican-run states to follow. Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio have since created more GOP-leaning seats in addition to Texas.

Democrats began to fight back, even though they were more constrained because several Democratic-controlled states had maps drawn by independent commissions rather than lawmakers and governors.

To counter Texas, California's Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, pushed the Democratic-controlled Legislature to place a redistricting initiative on last fall's ballot. After voters overwhelmingly approved it, the measure will replace a commission-approved map with one that could gain Democrats five seats.

Democrats reclaimed the Legislature and governor's office in November in Virginia and swiftly moved to replicate California's move with an even more aggressive redistricting plan. It replaces a congressional map imposed by a court after the last census that had resulted in a 6-5 edge for Democrats with one that could allow Democrats to win as many as 10 seats.

"We are not going to let anyone tilt the system without a response," state Senate President L. Louise Lucas said at a news conference Wednesday.

Courts could still have a say on redistricting

In Washington, U.S. House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York warned Florida Republicans, who have been openly nervous about redrawing their district boundaries and potentially spreading their core voters too thin before an election that appears to be trending against them.

"Our message to Florida Republicans right now is, 'F around and find out,'" Jeffries said.

House Majority Forward, the nonprofit arm of the super political action committee aligned with House Democrats, has spent nearly \$60 million to push back against Republicans' redistricting efforts. Some \$40 million of that was on the Virginia campaign.

Another obstacle in Florida is an anti-gerrymandering constitutional amendment that was approved by state voters in 2010. It is likely that any new Florida map would trigger significant litigation, although six of the state Supreme Court's seven justices were appointed by Republicans.

Nicholas Stephanopolous, a Harvard law professor, said a challenge for DeSantis is that the Florida amendment forbids drawing lines for purely partisan purposes, so he has to find some other excuse for revising the map. "Even with that sort of acquiescent state supreme court, I don't think it's a done deal," Stephanopolous said.

The Virginia move comes with its own legal issues. Republicans have challenged the process that Democrats used to place the measure on the ballot and the state Supreme Court opted to wait for the vote before even scheduling arguments in the case. It is unclear when a ruling could come.

Wednesday's ruling stopping certification came from a separate case that Republicans filed with the same lower court judge, whose initial ruling against the initiative was put on hold by the state supreme court.

"The ballot box was never the final word here," Terry Kilgore, the Virginia House Republican leader, said in a statement after Tuesday's vote. "Serious legal questions remain about both the wording of this referendum and the process used to put it before voters."

The biggest legal wild card is held by the U.S. Supreme Court. Its conservative majority could throw out a requirement under the Voting Rights Act that in areas with a large minority population, mapmakers draw districts that are more favorable to the election of minority candidates.

That provision has led to the creation of several majority-minority congressional seats, especially in the South. Without it, Republicans in conservative states could shrink the number of U.S. House seats win-

nable by Democrats even further.

But it's unlikely that any state other than Louisiana, which brought the lawsuit the high court will rule on, would be able to adjust its congressional lines in time for November even if the court eliminates that provision, known as Section Two. That's because the November election is already officially underway in most states and candidate filing deadlines — and, in some cases, primary elections — have already passed.

US health officials nix publication of a study on COVID vaccine effectiveness

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. health officials stopped the publication of a study on whether the COVID-19 vaccine was keeping adults from becoming sick enough to have to go to the hospital.

A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spokesman on Wednesday confirmed the decision to halt publication, citing a dispute about the study's methodology.

The research paper was to appear in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's flagship publication.

One way scientists have studied COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness is by focusing on sick people who were admitted to hospitals or visited emergency rooms. The researchers check whether patients were vaccinated and then calculate the odds of a positive COVID-19 test among vaccinated patients vs. those who were unvaccinated.

Papers using that methodology have been published — after review by experts in the field — in a number of esteemed journals, including Pediatrics and the New England Journal of Medicine.

Following the same approach, the new study concluded that the vaccine cut ER visits and hospitalizations among otherwise healthy adults by about half this past winter, according to The Washington Post, which first reported the cancellation.

HHS officials did not say exactly why that methodology was a problem in this instance but argued that prior infection, behavior and differences in who seeks care can affect results.

The wider scientific community does not have those concerns and many researchers have used the approach, said Dr. Fiona Havers, an Atlanta-based doctor who previously worked at CDC. The methodology is built to address differences related to who seeks care, and prior infection shouldn't be much of an issue because so many Americans have been infected by the coronavirus, she added.

No study design is perfect, but HHS officials haven't proposed an alternative "that's realistic and ethical for getting real-time estimates of how well vaccines are working each year," said Havers, who once led a CDC hospital network surveillance team that focused on COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses.

During President Donald Trump's first administration, public health advocates worried that political appointees were trying to control what was being published in the MMWR.

Those concerns returned last year, when Trump returned to office and publication of the MMWR was temporarily suspended. It returned, but has remained a thinner version of its former self.

"Health care professionals rely on the MMWR for timely, objective and fact-based information about the nation's public health," said U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat who voiced concern when CDC communications were halted last year.

"Muzzling scientists and doctors on how to prevent Americans from being hospitalized can have deadly consequences. The CDC must abandon plans to place a political gag order on this critical research," Durbin said in a statement Wednesday.

How Wall Street is setting records even with the Iran war still going on

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It seems so illogical. How can the U.S. stock market be setting records when gasoline prices are still expensive, U.S. households are feeling less confident about the economy and the war with Iran is still going?

But for Wall Street, everything eventually comes back to a different, basic question: How much money are companies making? And at the moment, they're earning so much that investors are willing to pay higher prices than ever for a piece of ownership of U.S. companies.

It's been a jarring ride for investors, many of whom may have felt the urge to dump their stock investments last month when the S&P 500 fell nearly 10% below its prior record. But as it has every time so far in its history, the index at the heart of many 401(k) accounts rewarded investors who remained patient by not only recovering all its losses but also forging to new heights. On Wednesday, the index closed at a record 7,137.90.

Here's a look at what's been behind the market's surprising strength:

What sets a stock's price

Stock prices flutter up and down every second for myriad reasons, many of which no one can explain. But at its heart, and over the long term, a stock's price depends on two things: how much money a company is making and how much an investor is willing to pay for each \$1 of that.

More fear

The latter part of that formula tends to swing up and down with interest rates and how much greed investors are feeling versus fear.

When fear prevailed in the early days of the war, stock prices dove. The worry was that a long-term surge for oil prices because of the war could send a debilitating wave of inflation crashing into the global economy.

Interest rates also rose, further undercutting stock prices, as investors worried the threat of high inflation would prevent the Federal Reserve and other central banks worldwide from cutting the short-term interest rates they control. While lower interest rates can give the economy a boost, they can also worsen inflation.

Less fear

Since late March, expectations have built that the United States and Iran will avoid a worst-case scenario for the global economy. It would be in both countries' economic interests to do so, and for Iran's leadership, an end to the war would also likely mean survival.

The ceasefire that the two sides agreed to earlier this month is still holding, though it's tenuous.

The market's shift away from abject fear has also shown itself in oil prices. The price for a barrel of Brent crude oil, the international standard, went from roughly \$70 before the war to \$119 when worries reached their heights. It has since pulled back and was bouncing around \$100 on Wednesday.

Much of the focus has been on the Strait of Hormuz, which oil tankers use to exit the Persian Gulf. If Iran keeps the strait closed, and if the U.S. Navy continues to blockade Iranian ships, everyone will get hurt. Customers worldwide will not get oil, and Iran will not get revenue from selling its own crude.

"By denying Iran its oil-related revenue, traders may be thinking that the economic war may be more effective in getting concessions from Iran's regime than was the kinetic war only, and that this will end the war sooner, rather than later," according to Thierry Wizman, a strategist at Macquarie Group.

Traders on Wall Street are also betting again on a chance that the Fed could resume its cuts to interest rates later this year. They see a much lower probability than they did before the war, according to data from CME Group. But they're no longer worried about the possibility of hikes to rates.

Profit strength

As fear has eased, investors have been able to turn their focus more to the first part of the equation making up stock prices: profits. And those have been coming in strong.

A little more than 15% of S&P 500 companies have already reported how much profit they made during

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the first three months of 2026, and the vast majority have topped analysts' expectations. That includes everyone from Citigroup to J.B. Hunt Transport Services to UnitedHealth Group.

If the rest of the companies in the index just match analysts' estimates, earnings for S&P 500 companies will end up being roughly 14% higher than a year earlier, according to FactSet.

Those results include a month of wartime, and while companies say they're still wary about potential risks because of the fighting, they're not showing many signs of it hurting their earnings.

Bank of America's chief executive officer, Brian Moynihan, said last week that "we saw healthy client activity, including solid consumer spending and stable asset quality, indicating a resilient American economy."

That's even though many U.S. households are feeling nervous about more expensive gasoline and higher prices broadly due to tariffs, as shown in recent surveys.

Expectations for more

Analysts have actually raised their expectations for upcoming profits for S&P 500 companies since the war began. They're forecasting growth for S&P 500 profits to accelerate to 20% in the second quarter, and companies aren't giving them many reasons to reconsider.

Delta Air Lines said earlier this month that it's seeing strong demand from people flying both for business and for vacations. PepsiCo last week stuck by its forecast for profit over 2026, which it initially gave before the Iran war began, and CEO Ramon Laguarta said he's encouraged by how resilient its international business has been. GE Vernova on Wednesday said demand is soaring for power from AI data centers, and it raised its revenue forecast for the year.

All is still not clear

Of course, the U.S. stock market can easily return to falling. Wall Street's mood could swing quickly back to fear if U.S.-Iran talks break down and the oil market looks to be facing shortages.

And if oil prices stay high for long enough, it would erode some of those profits for companies. Not only would it raise costs for businesses, it would also weaken the spending power for U.S. households and other customers.

Rep. David Scott, a Georgia Democrat seeking his 13th term in Congress, dies at age 80

By BILL BARROW, MATT BROWN and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — U.S. Rep. David Scott, a Georgia Democrat and the first Black chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, has died. He was 80.

Scott, who was seeking his 13th term in Congress despite challenges from within his party, was once a leading voice for Democrats on issues related to farm aid policy and food aid for consumers and a prominent Black member of the party's moderate Blue Dog caucus. But he faced criticism and concerns in recent years because of declining health, enduring a primary challenge in 2024 and facing another one at the time of his death.

Democrats on Capitol Hill praised the longtime lawmaker.

"The news of Congressman Scott's passing is deeply sad," House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries told reporters on Wednesday.

"David Scott was a trailblazer who served the district that he represented admirably, rose up from humble beginnings to become the first African American ever to chair the House Ag Committee," Jeffries said. "He cared about the people that he represented. He was fiercely committed to getting things done for the people of the great state of Georgia, and he'll be deeply missed."

News of Scott's death came during the Congressional Black Caucus' weekly luncheon on Capitol Hill. The Black Caucus' chair, Rep. Yvette Clarke, told lawmakers at the outset of the meeting.

The White House lowered its flags to half-staff after Scott's death.

Death creates another vacancy

Scott's death slightly widens Republicans' narrow House majority going into the thick of this midterm election year. The GOP began the current Congress with a 220-215 advantage, but the margin has fluctu-

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ated. Scott is the fourth House Democrat to die in office during this Congress.

Scott had been mostly absent from the campaign trail in 2024 and 2026 and had become a noted example of Democrats' aging leadership targeted by younger generations of the left. He dodged questions from reporters when he qualified for another term in March, but he earlier dismissed pressure to retire.

"Thank God I'm in good health, moving and doing the people's work," the congressman said in 2024.

His wife and campaign adviser Alfredia Scott was even more direct. "When the congressman decides to leave, he won't be pushed out," she said in 2024. "He will bow out."

State officials will have to schedule a special election to fill out the rest of Scott's term, which could overlap with elections to choose a representative for the next two-year term. Early in-person voting starts Monday for May 19 party primaries for the next full term.

Scott was a pioneering Black lawmaker

David Albert Scott was born in rural Aynor, South Carolina, on June 27, 1945, in the era of Jim Crow segregation. He spent part of his childhood in Scranton, Pennsylvania, along with stints New York and Florida. Scott graduated from Florida A&M University, one of the nation's largest historically Black college campuses — and in office he was an outspoken advocate for federal support of HBCUs. Scott also earned an MBA from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in 1969.

He settled in Atlanta, opened his own advertising business and got his start in politics as a staffer on Andrew Young's 1972 congressional campaign. Young would go on to be Atlanta mayor and United Nations ambassador under President Jimmy Carter, another Georgian.

The support of Young and baseball legend Henry "Hank" Aaron, who was the older brother of Scott's wife, helped launch Scott into Congress in 2002, said Democratic state Sen. Emanuel Jones. He was opposing Scott in the May 19 primary, although he called Scott "a good friend."

Scott was one of a pioneering generation of Black state lawmakers in Georgia, winning election to the state House in 1974 and the state Senate in 1982 before being elected to Congress. Once identifying as a moderate "Blue Dog" — Scott had sponsored a law mandating a moment of silent school prayer in the state Senate — he evolved into a more mainstream liberal.

An advocate for historically Black schools

Scott served decades in Congress while living outside his district after maps were redrawn. He maintained support, focusing intently on constituent service including hosting job and health fairs.

Among his notable achievements on Capitol Hill, Scott secured \$80 million for historically Black land-grant schools as part of the 2018 Farm Bill. The money was steered to agriculture-related scholarships at 19 campuses. He helped author various housing and mortgage aid measures, and he pushed for better health care and other benefits for veterans and their families. On foreign policy, Scott was an outspoken advocate for NATO and post-World War II American alliances.

Scott's fellow Democrats ousted him from his post as ranking minority member on the Agriculture Committee in 2024 amid concerns about his age and health.

Scott is survived by Alfredia Scott, the couple's two adult daughters and grandchildren.

Supreme Court revives wounded veteran's lawsuit against a contractor over suicide bombing

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday cleared the way for a veteran wounded by a suicide bomb in Afghanistan to sue the government contractor for whom the attacker was working when he built the explosive.

The court ruled 6-3 in favor of former Army Spc. Winston Hencely, who was wounded when he stopped a man on his way to detonate an explosive vest at a Veterans Day weekend 5K race at Bagram Airfield in 2016.

Ahmad Nayeb instead blew himself up when he was confronted, killing five people and wounding more than a dozen, according to court documents.

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The projectiles fractured Hencely's skull and tore through his brain, leaving him without the full use of much of the left side of his body. He also has abnormal brainwaves, seizures and traumatic brain injury, his lawyers wrote.

An Army investigation faulted the company's failure to supervise Nayeb, an Afghan employee who built the vest on the job site inside the base, court documents say.

Hencely sued Fluor Corporation in South Carolina, where two of its subsidiaries are based, and made claims under the state's law for negligent supervision, negligent entrustment of tools and negligent retention of an employee.

The Irving, Texas-based engineering construction company argued that it could not be sued because it was working during wartime for the federal government, which is generally immune to lawsuits.

The high court disagreed. The majority said companies are protected when they are fulfilling government contracts, but that Fluor allegedly failed to carry out its duties in supervising Nayeb.

Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the opinion, joined by Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Neil Gorsuch, Amy Coney Barrett and Ketanji Brown Jackson.

Justices Samuel Alito, John Roberts and Brett Kavanaugh dissented. Alito wrote that Hencely's lawsuit may intrude on the government's wartime powers and decisions, including a policy requiring contractors to maximize employment of Afghans.

Perfect homework, blank stares: Why colleges are turning to oral exams to combat AI

By JOCELYN GECKER AP Education Writer

The assignment involves no laptop, no chatbot and no technology of any kind. In fact, there's no pen or paper, either.

Instead, students in Chris Schaffer's biomedical engineering class at Cornell University are required to speak directly to an instructor in what he calls an "oral defense."

It's a testing method as old as Socrates and making a comeback in the AI age. A growing number of college professors say they are turning to oral exams, and combining a variety of old-fashioned and cutting-edge techniques, to help address a crisis in higher education.

"You won't be able to AI your way through an oral exam," says Schaffer, who introduced the oral defense last semester.

Educators are no longer naively wondering if students will use generative AI to do their homework for them. A big question now is how to determine what students are actually learning.

College instructors across the U.S. are noticing troubling new trends as generative artificial intelligence becomes more sophisticated. Take-home essays and other written assignments are coming back perfect. But when students are asked to explain their work, they can't. The long-term impact of AI use on critical thinking remains to be seen, but educators worry students increasingly see the hard work of thinking as optional.

Some colleges shift toward in-person tests

At the University of Pennsylvania, Emily Hammer, an associate professor of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, now pairs oral exams with written papers in her seminar classes.

"It comes across as if we're trying to prevent cheating," Hammer says. "That's not why we're doing this. We're doing this because students are actually losing skills, losing cognitive capacity and creativity."

Hammer forbids AI use on all writing assignments but tells her class she knows she can't enforce that. However, if they haven't written their papers themselves, defending the material face-to-face will likely be "a very stressful situation."

Hammer's class is part of "a massive shift toward in-person assessments," both written and oral, at Penn, says Bruce Lenthall, executive director of the school's Center for Teaching and Learning. The Ivy League school is one of a small but growing number of universities that have started running faculty workshops on oral exams.

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Oral exams are not traditionally part of the modern American undergraduate system, unlike certain European universities. For instance, in the Oxbridge tutorial system in England, students meet faculty for weekly discussions. Some U.S. colleges saw a move toward oral exams during the COVID-19 pandemic to address concerns about online cheating, and interest has intensified since the launch of ChatGPT in 2022.

During the pandemic, engineering professor Huihui Qi launched a three-year study at the University of California, San Diego on how to scale oral exams. Several universities have since invited her to provide faculty workshops or discuss her research.

Harnessing AI to fight 'fire with fire'

At New York University, several types of oral assessments are on the rise. More faculty are requiring office hours, assigning presentations and cold-calling on students in class. Instructors are saying, "I need to look my students in the eye and ask, 'Do you know this material?'" says Clay Shirky, vice provost for AI and technology in education.

One NYU professor has put a modern spin on the traditional oral test.

Panos Ipeirotis, a professor at NYU's Stern School of Business, unveiled an AI-powered oral exam last semester for the final exam in a class on AI product management. He calls it "fighting fire with fire."

Students log in from home, at any time that fits their schedule. A voice cloned from a business school professor greets them.

"Hi there," says the voice on their screen. It asks for the student's name and school ID number and then says, "I'm ready to conduct your exam today."

The chatbot starts with questions about a final group project and drills into details based on each student's answers. If the student stumbles, the AI agent gives them clues, along with criticism and positive feedback. Ipeirotis grades the exams separately, also with the help of AI.

"We wanted to check: Do you know what your team did? Were you a free rider? Did you outsource everything to AI?" says Ipeirotis, who designed the tool with ElevenLabs, a company that develops generative AI voice agents to conduct job interviews.

Students in the class this semester are redesigning the AI agent to smooth out some kinks, and Ipeirotis plans to use it in all his future classes.

"I want oral exams everywhere now. I want to pair it with every single written assignment," says Ipeirotis. "I don't trust written assignments anymore to be the result of actual thinking."

Feedback from students last semester was mixed.

Business major Andrea Lui found the chatbot's voice to be surprisingly human, but the conversation felt choppy with odd pauses. It asked multiple questions at once, which was confusing. And it was jarring to hear a voice but not see a person.

"It felt kind of awkward to be talking to what was pretty much a blank screen," says Lui, 21.

But, she agreed with worried educators: "There is no perfect world where AI exists and kids are not abusing it."

Schools see benefits even for shy students

Across the humanities and STEM disciplines, like computer science, educators worry that students who skip the mental struggle that is necessary for problem solving won't develop the skills they need to advance in upper-level classes and careers.

That's why Schaffer, the Cornell professor, introduced the oral defense in his biomedical engineering class. He requires students to sign up for 20-minute sessions of Socratic-style questioning after submitting written problem sets, which are assigned several times each semester.

With a class of 70 students, Schaffer splits the job with his teaching assistants. They no longer grade the written problem sets, just the oral defenses. He calls it "incentivizing" his students to do the work, or at least understand it enough to explain.

Schaffer's class is highlighted in a new "Oral Assessment Workshop" offered by Cornell's Center for Teaching Innovation.

Other examples at Cornell: a religious studies professor who now holds 30-minute "final conversations"

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with students instead of a final exam; and another engineering course where the professor gives four-minute mock interviews to each student in a 180-person class.

Skeptics point out oral exams can be unsettling for students who are shy or have serious anxiety, but clarifying the format ahead of time and starting with softball questions can help, says Carolyn Aslan, who leads Cornell's oral exam training.

"Sometimes it's actually good to get that quiet student one-on-one, and you finally get to hear from them. Sometimes that is the breakthrough," Aslan says.

Several of Schaffer's students say they felt nervous at first but ended up preferring the oral exam.

"I honestly liked it a lot," says Cornell junior Olivia Piserchia, a biomedical engineering major. She initially found the oral defense nerve-racking but came to value the one-on-one time with instructors. It kept her from feeling lost in a large class and helped her build the skill of articulating her technical knowledge, as she would need to in a job.

"Having that live check-in holds you accountable," says Piserchia. "It's a lot harder to look people in the eyes and say out loud, 'I don't know this.' And, that makes you realize, 'I should study this.'"

New study finds 'alarming' high flood risk for 17 million Americans on Atlantic and Gulf coasts

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 17 million people along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts are at the highest risk of being affected by flooding, with New York and New Orleans standing out, according to one of the most comprehensive studies ever of flood risk.

Researchers at the University of Alabama used 16 different factors including the geographic hazards, the population and infrastructure exposed and the vulnerability of people living there. They then brought in past damages from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's database and applied three different artificial intelligence tools to figure out flood risks from Texas to Maine, calculating that 17.5 million people were at "very high" risk and an additional 17 million were at "high" risk, the next level.

The authors looked at all sizes of flooding and examined separately what FEMA considers the most extreme, which are the top 1% of events. The study found 4.3 million people along the coasts to be at the highest level of risk of extreme flooding, but 20.5 million to be at high risk, the second highest level.

They found a lot of vulnerability, highlighting eight different cities from Houston, which flooded in 2017's Hurricane Harvey, to New York, which was inundated in 2012's Superstorm Sandy.

Wednesday's study in the journal *Science Advances* found that New York City has 4.75 million people at the two highest risk levels for all flooding, with more than 200,000 buildings likely to be damaged.

And while the number of people at risk in New Orleans is far lower, about 380,000, it involves 99% of the city's population. That doesn't mean 99% of the people will be affected in the next hurricane or nontropical flood, but that they might be depending on the storm's individual path and rain pattern, said study co-author Wanyun Shao, a climate scientist at the University of Alabama.

"Just look at the magnitude," Shao said. "Those numbers are shocking, are alarming."

The elderly and poor are most at risk

"When the next big storm hits New York City, when the next Hurricane Katrina -like hurricane makes landfall in New Orleans, people will get hurt, especially those socially vulnerable populations," Shao said referring to the poor, the elderly, children and the uneducated.

Shao and outside experts said the numbers stunned them even though they were familiar with the worsening effects of climate change.

"New York is known to be susceptible to floods and it has the largest population. But the fact that New York has nearly an order of magnitude more flood-exposed population than any other city is surprising," said Alex de Sherbinin, a geographer who directs Columbia University's Center for Integrated Earth System Information. He wasn't part of the study.

Flood problems are becoming more frequent in New York and New Orleans because of human-caused

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climate change, the study said.

Other cities are also threatened

Jacksonville has 679,000 people at high or very high risk of flooding, while Houston is just behind at just under 600,000. Other cities highlighted include Miami, Norfolk, Virginia, Charleston, South Carolina, Mobile, Alabama.

Shao and outside experts said what separates her study from others is the sheer comprehensiveness of all the factors it considers, including sinking land and pavement that doesn't allow water to seep into the ground, as well as incorporating human social vulnerability such as poverty and age.

"This could be applied to other places in the world, such as Manila," said University of Virginia engineering professor Venkataraman Lakshmi, who heads the hydrology section of the American Geophysical Union, referring to the capital of the Philippines. He wasn't part of the study, but said the flooding problems it highlights will get more frequent and intense due to human-caused climate change.

Columbia University's Marco Tedesco, who wasn't part of the study, said "it reinforces the crucial concept that future flood disasters are not just about water—they are about where people live, how cities are built, and who is least protected."

Actions can lessen the risk

De Sherbinin said, "the analysis of the flood risk factors is important for local planners, emergency managers, and even highway crews and utility providers. We all know that low lying areas are more flood prone, but the data they have assembled provide more insights into flood risk, particularly for flash floods."

Study lead author Hemal Dey, a geospatial scientist, said he hopes local officials look at not just building more dams and levees, but more natural infrastructure such as wetlands, grasslands, rain gardens and estuaries.

"The research is solid confirmation of what emergency managers have been saying for years. Realtors will hate it," said Craig Fugate, a former FEMA director who wasn't part of the study. "The harder question is what we're actually going to do about it."

Searchers find the body of 1 of 6 missing crew from a ship that overturned during a typhoon

SAIPAN, Northern Mariana Islands (AP) — Searchers found the body of one of the six missing crew members from a cargo ship that overturned near the Northern Mariana Islands during a typhoon and were looking for the rest, hoping they might have made it to a life raft.

U.S. Air Force divers used an underwater drone on Tuesday to search inside the overturned ship, the U.S. Coast Guard said in a news release. Divers from Japan's coast guard further examined the ship, called the Mariana, but didn't find the other five, it said.

"Coast Guard aircrews continue to search for the five missing crewmen and an orange 12-person life raft in the vicinity of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands," the news release said.

The National Weather Service said Super Typhoon Sinlaku, the strongest tropical cyclone this year, was packing sustained winds of up to 150 mph (241 kph) when it made landfall last week in the Northern Mariana Islands, which, like Guam to the south, are a U.S. territory.

The Coast Guard and agencies from Guam, Japan and New Zealand have covered more than 99,000 square miles (256,000 square kilometers) in their search for the crew, the guard said this week. That's an area roughly the size of Oregon.

The ship notified the U.S. Coast Guard on April 15 that the U.S.-registered vessel lost its starboard engine during the typhoon and needed assistance. The guard said it lost contact with the ship the next day.

"Our hearts are with the families of the Mariana crew members and the communities impacted by this tragic incident," Cmdr. Preston Hieb, the search and rescue mission coordinator for the Coast Guard Oceania District, said in the statement.

Heavy wind hindered initial search efforts, but the overturned ship was eventually spotted Saturday about 40 miles (64 kilometers) northeast of Pagan, one of the Northern Mariana Islands.

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The Coast Guard said Monday that debris including a partially submerged inflatable life raft was spotted about 110 miles (177 kilometers) from the ship.

While specific safety requirements for the 145-foot (44-meter) ship were not known, federal and international codes call for cargo ships to have life rafts stocked with food and water. The rafts have to be able to withstand exposure for 30 days, according to a code put out by the International Maritime Organization.

Aaron Davenport, a retired Coast Guard officer with search and rescue experience who isn't involved in the current operation, said it would have been very difficult to deploy a raft during the typhoon.

"If they didn't hook it somewhere and they just deployed it into the water, it would probably blow away," he said.

Davenport wondered if searchers spotted any more safety equipment aboard the overturned ship.

"That would determine how long they need to search. Because if they have safety gear, if they're in another life raft or if they're in a survival suit or if they even have a life jacket — that tells me that they're going to survive longer, probably," he said.

Davenport also questioned whether the partially submerged raft that was found came from the Mariana.

"So if there's another ship that was affected by the weather there, they could have a life raft get washed off the top," Davenport said.

Sinlaku battered the Northern Mariana Islands, causing wind damage and flooding. Island ports reopened to commercial traffic this week, and the Coast Guard delivered pallets of water and supplies to areas that had been cut off.

Navy veteran charged in series of Atlanta-area shootings dies in jail

By JOHN HANNA and HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

A man charged in a string of shootings near Atlanta that left three people dead, including a Department of Homeland Security employee who was walking her dog, died in jail Tuesday night, authorities said.

Olaolukitan Adon Abel, 26, was found unresponsive in his cell, according to a statement from the DeKalb County Sheriff's Office. Officials provided medical treatment to the U.S. Navy veteran, but he was later pronounced dead.

The official cause of death has not been determined, but officials don't suspect foul play, according to the office. Officials are conducting an internal review.

Adon Abel was accused of killing Prianna Weathers, 31, and DHS auditor Lauren Bullis, 40, in last week's attack. Authorities also had been seeking an additional murder charge for Tony Mathews, 49, who was injured in the attack and died Sunday.

Authorities haven't offered a potential motive for the shootings. It's unclear if Adon Abel knew any of the victims. Police have said they believe at least one was targeted at random.

Adon Abel was represented by a public defender, and the state council overseeing defenders' work said Wednesday in a statement that his death denies him "the opportunity to contest the charges in court."

"We also regret that the families, friends, and colleagues of the victims may now be left without the fuller answers a public legal process might have provided about how these deaths occurred," the statement said. "That is a painful and sobering reality for everyone affected."

Adon Abel faced state malice murder, aggravated assault and gun charges over last week's attacks, court records show. He also faced a federal charge of illegally possessing the gun as a person previously convicted of a felony, which was filed Friday.

His roommates told The Associated Press that shortly before the shootings, he got in an intense argument over the air conditioning in their home and stormed out. He lived with six others in separate units of the home.

The United Kingdom native was granted U.S. citizenship in 2022 while serving in the U.S. Navy and stationed in the San Diego area.

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The attacks in Georgia quickly drew the Trump administration's attention, with Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin raising concern that Adon Abel was granted U.S. citizenship when Democrat Joe Biden was president. Mullin cataloged a litany of Adon Abel's previous alleged crimes, but it is unclear whether any of them occurred before he became a citizen.

Military records show the Adon Abel enlisted in the Navy in 2020, last serving in the Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron in Coronado, California, and as a petty officer received a Navy "E" Ribbon for superior performance for battle readiness.

Adon Abel pleaded guilty in October 2024 to assaulting two police officers with a deadly weapon and attacking another person when he was stationed in Coronado, near San Diego, according to California court records.

The attorney who represented him in that case, Brandon Naidu, has described him as polite, calm and soft-spoken in their interactions. He said Wednesday that his obligation to protect the confidentiality of their conversations limits what he can say publicly but, "Mental health was absolutely at the center of his San Diego case." "It was fueled by suicidal ideation as a result of mental health that he was self-treating with substances," he said.

He added: "Nobody wins in this. We'll never know the motives, what could have been done beforehand or even afterward. Nobody gets proper closure on this."

Trump media company replaces ex-congressman Nunes as CEO after stock plunge that wiped out billions

By BERNARD CONDON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Trump business behind Truth Social is replacing a former congressman and big supporter of the U.S. president as the leader of the social media platform after a stock collapse that wiped out billions in investor wealth.

Devin Nunes, a former California congressmen in Donald Trump's first term, is being replaced temporarily by digital media executive Kevin McGurn as chief executive officer. The company, Trump Media & Technology, didn't give a reason for Nunes leaving or provide a timeline for his permanent replacement.

After soaring shortly before Trump's re-election in November 2024, stock in the company plunged 67%, wiping out more than \$6 billion in investor wealth.

Trump Media was formed by the Trump family as an alternative to social media giants that had barred him from posting on their platforms after the January 6, 2021 Capitol riots. It said it would not only take on Facebook and Twitter as a "free speech" alternative, but eventually could become a media giant competing with streaming services such as Netflix.

The stock soared, but it never gained traction with a wide audience despite the president's frequent use of it for major political announcements, slammed by government ethics experts as a conflict of interest with the presidency.

Since it went public two years ago, Trump Media has lost more than \$1.1 billion. Nunes got total compensation of \$47 million in 2024, the last year for which figures are available.

The new CEO McGurn said in statement that the company was "poised to take off."

"In carrying President Trump's unique, singular vision and message, Truth Social stands for the most powerful brand and voice in history of social media and beyond," he said.

The Trump Organization didn't immediately responded to a request for comment.

The company has recently branched into cryptocurrency and another hot business, prediction markets. The latter are online betting venues where people can wager on sports, entertainment and political events.

Both cryptocurrencies and prediction markets have gotten boosts from the Trump administration, in terms of lighter regulation and outright promotion. Last year, for instance, the Trump established a national bitcoin reserve, pushing up the value of that currency.

McGurn, has worked at NBC Universal, Hulu and DoubleClick, among other companies, according to his

LinkedIn profile. He is also the CEO of a new shell company that Trump's two oldest sons, Donald Jr. and Eric, joined last year to buy U.S. manufacturers. That company originally stated in regulatory filings that it would be targeting businesses hoping to tap federal contracts, which would be awarded by the same government run by their father.

The Trump Organization and the White House have repeatedly denied that there are conflicts of interest between Trump's role as president and the family business.

AP Exclusive: Cyprus president says the EU needs a clear playbook on helping members under attack

By MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS Associated Press

NICOSIA, Cyprus (AP) — European Union leaders meeting in Cyprus need to start preparing a playbook on what should happen if a member country facing attack puts out a call for help from bloc partners, the president of Cyprus said.

In an exclusive interview on Tuesday, President Nikos Christodoulides said EU leaders will discuss "giving substance" to Article 42.7 of the bloc's treaties, which oblige all 27 member states to assist each other in times of crisis.

The article states that if a nation is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, its partners should provide "aid and assistance by all the means in their power." It has never been used before so there's no hard and fast rules on how EU members should respond to any call for assistance.

"We have Article 42.7 and we don't know what is going to happen if a member state triggers this article," Christodoulides told The Associated Press ahead of an EU-Mideast summit he is hosting later this week, expected to focus on the Iran war and its fallout. "So we're going to have a discussion and prepare, let's say, an operational plan of what is going to happen in case a member state triggers this article, and there are a number of issues."

The issue resonates particularly with Christodoulides, who appealed for help from fellow EU countries last month when a Shahed drone struck a British air base on the island's southern coastline. Cypriot officials said the drone was launched from Lebanon whose capital is just 207 kilometers (129 miles) away from Cyprus' southern coast. Greece, France, Spain, The Netherlands and Portugal dispatched ships with anti-drone capabilities to help defend the island.

Clarification needed on countries that are also NATO members

Christodoulides said since many EU countries are also members of NATO, the playbook should clarify how those countries would respond to a call for help from an EU partner without conflicting with their obligations under the military alliance.

NATO's own security guarantee, Article 5, states an attack on one ally is deemed an attack on them all, requiring a collective response.

"So what is going to happen in this situation if a member state is both NATO member state and an EU member state? What is going happen?" Christodoulides said.

Another issue that needs to be addressed under the Article 47.2 is whether a response would be a collective one in the NATO mold or just one for states neighboring the country in distress. There's also the issue of what means would need to be used to deal with varying types of crises.

Christodoulides said he's pleased to see that fellow EU leaders now "understand the importance" of bringing the bloc closer to the Middle East with such initiatives as the Mediterranean Pact that implements specific projects on a range of issues including health, education and energy in Middle Eastern countries.

Closer EU ties to the Middle East has been a key priority for Cyprus' EU presidency, which Christodoulides said offers a "very good opportunity...to give substance" to that objective. Attending the informal EU leaders' summit later this week will be the leaders of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, affording the opportunity "not just to exchange ideas but to see in action how we elevate our cooperation in a strategic level."

"We can represent the interest of the countries of the Greater Middle East to Brussels, but at the same time, and this is very, very important, the countries in the region, they trust Cyprus to represent them in

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the European Union," he said.

'A win-win situation'

Christodoulides is a strong proponent of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a trade, energy and digital connectivity corridor that would link the continent with the world's largest democracy and is hoped to usher peace and stability in the Middle East.

Christodoulides said under the Cypriot EU presidency, a "Friends of IMEC" group has been set up to promote the initiative, which still lacks what he said are more specific projects. One such project is the Great Seas Interconnector, an electricity cable connecting the power grids of Greece and Cyprus and eventually Israel that has been plagued by delays.

"We can work together with the Americans, with the U.S. Government, with President Trump in order to give substance because it will be a win-win situation for both the European Union and the United States" with additional concrete projects, Christodoulides said.

New energy sources

The Iran war again brought the need for the EU to diversify its energy source into sharp relief. Christodoulides said he's in talks with the EU's executive arm on how Cyprus' own offshore natural gas deposits can help the bloc find alternative energy sources and routes.

He said Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will unveil on Friday "very specific proposals" regarding energy costs and how the bloc can become more energy independent.

Christodoulides said the EU has made significant strides in hastening its decision on making mechanisms but has failed to deliver on its pledge to add new members in the last two years, diminishing the trust that prospective member nations have in the union.

"So we have a strong geopolitical tool that we are losing mainly because of our mistakes. The situation today is much better. We are deciding in a much faster, let's say, pace," said Christodoulides. "And enlargement is one of the geopolitical tools that, as a European Union, we need pretty soon to have specific decisions."

A robot is beating human pros at table tennis. Its maker calls it a milestone for machines

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

A paddle-wielding robot is so adept at playing table tennis that it is posing a tough challenge to elite human players and sometimes defeating them, according to a new study that shows how advances in artificial intelligence are making robots more agile.

Japanese electronics giant Sony built the robotic arm it calls Ace and pitted it against professional athletes. Ace proved a worthy adversary, though one with some non-human attributes: nine camera eyes positioned around the court and an uncanny ability to follow the ball's logo to measure its spin.

The robot learned how to play the sport using the AI method known as reinforcement learning.

"There's no way to program a robot by hand to play table tennis. You have to learn how to play from experience," said Sony AI researcher Peter Dür, co-author of the study published Wednesday in the science journal Nature.

To conduct the experiments, Sony built an Olympic-sized table tennis court at its headquarters in Tokyo to give professional and other highly skilled athletes a "level playing field" with the robot, Dür said in an interview with The Associated Press. Some of the athletes said they were surprised by Ace's prowess.

Sony calls it a first for a common competitive sport

Sony says it is the "first time a robot has achieved human, expert-level play in a commonly played competitive sport in the physical world — a longstanding milestone for AI and robotics research."

The custom-built robot has eight joints that direct its movements, or degrees of freedom, enabling it to position the racket, execute shots and swiftly respond to its opponent's rallies.

"Speed is really one of the fundamental issues in robotics today, especially in scenarios or environments

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that are not fixed," said Michael Spranger, president of Sony AI, in an interview.

"We see a lot of robots that are in factories that are very, very fast," Spranger said. "But they're doing the same trajectory over and over again. With this technology, we show that it's actually possible to train robots to be very adaptive and competitive and fast in uncertain environments that constantly change."

Spranger said such technology could play a role in manufacturing and other industries. It's also not hard to imagine how such high-speed and highly perceptive hardware could be used in war.

Building parity with humans is a challenge

A humanoid robot ran faster than the human world record in a half-marathon race for robots in Beijing on Sunday, but getting a machine to interact and compete at split-second speeds with skilled human athletes is in some ways a more difficult challenge.

Spranger said it was important for researchers to not give the robot too unfair of an advantage and make its speed, arm's reach and performance comparable to a skilled athlete who trains at least 20 hours a week. It plays by official table tennis rules on a typically sized court.

"It's very easy to build a superhuman table tennis robot," Spranger said. "You build a machine that sucks in the ball and shoots it out much faster than a human can return it. But that's not the goal here. The goal is to have some level of comparability, some level of fairness to the human, and win really at the level of AI and the level of decision-making and tactics and, to some extent, skill."

That means, he said, that "the robot cannot just win by hitting the ball faster than any human ever could, but it has to win by actually playing the game."

AI researchers have long used board games like chess as benchmarks for a computer's capabilities. They later moved into more open-ended video game worlds. But moving AI from simulated environments to the physical world has long been the gold standard for robot makers.

The past year has marked a "kind of ChatGPT moment for robotics," Spranger said, with new, AI-driven approaches to teach robots about their real-world environments and task them with physically demanding activities, like backflips.

'Ace' pulled off shots pros thought were impossible

Sony is hardly the first to tackle robots in table tennis. John Billingsley helped pioneer such contests in 1983 in a paper titled "Robot Ping-Pong." More recently, Google's AI research division DeepMind has also tackled the sport.

And while impressive, Billingsley said Sony's all-seeing computer vision and motion detection capabilities make it hard for a two-eyed human to stand a chance.

"I would not want to belittle the achievement, but they have gone at the task mob-handed, and used sledgehammer techniques," Billingsley, a retired mechatronics professor at the University of Southern Queensland in Australia, said in an email to the AP.

He added, however, that it adds to the lesson that "true progress comes out of contests, whether they involve hitting a ball or setting foot on Mars."

Japanese professional players Minami Ando and Kakeru Sone were among those who competed against Sony's robot. Two umpires from the Japanese Table Tennis Association judged the games.

After submitting the paper to peer review ahead of its publication in Nature, Sony researchers kept experimenting and said Ace accelerated its shot speeds and rallies and played even more aggressively and closer to the table edge. Competing against four high-skill players, Sony said Ace defeated all but one of them in December.

Another expert player, Kinjiro Nakamura, who competed in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, told researchers after observing Ace play a shot that "no one else would have been able to do that. I didn't think it was possible."

But the robot now having done it "means that there is a possibility that a human could do it too," he said, in remarks published in the Nature paper.

Dave Mason, co-founder of Traffic known for 'We Just Disagree' and 'Feelin' Alright,' dies at 79

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Dave Mason — the co-founder of the psychedelic British band Traffic, songwriter behind classic rock hits "Feelin' Alright" and "Hole in My Shoe," and Rock & Roll Hall of Famer — died Sunday at his home in Gardnerville, Nevada. He was 79.

His death was confirmed by Mason's publicist Melissa Dragich. A cause was not immediately revealed. He had canceled his remaining tour dates last summer and announced his retirement months later, citing health issues stemming from an infection for "closing the curtain on 60 remarkable years of rock n' roll."

Mason was born May 10, 1946, in Worcester, England, and founded Traffic in 1967 with singer/multi-instrumentalist Steve Winwood, drummer Jim Capaldi and keyboardist/saxophonist Chris Wood. The psychedelic band became celebrated for its pioneering and inventive spirit, along with Mason's songwriting and intricate guitar solos.

Mason wrote and performed many of Traffic's biggest singles. And even though "Feelin' Alright?" was not an immediate hit, it became one thereafter, covered by the likes of Joe Cocker, the Jackson 5, Gladys Knight, Paul Weller and Grand Funk Railroad.

Mason's relationship with the band was tenuous; he left and returned multiple times. In 1969, he launched a solo career that resulted in three albums certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America (1970's "Alone Together," which produced his hit "Only You Know and I Know," 1974's "Dave Mason" and 1978's "Mariposa de Oro") as well as one platinum title: 1977's "Let It Flow."

In addition, Mason played on a number of all-star sessions, The Rolling Stones' "Beggars Banquet," George Harrison's "All Things Must Pass," Paul McCartney and Wings' "Venus and Mars" and Jimi Hendrix's "Electric Ladyland" among them.

Mason was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2004 for his work with Traffic. His old bandmate shared a tribute to him Wednesday.

"Dave was part of Traffic during its earliest chapter, and played an important role in shaping the band's sound and identity during that time," Winwood wrote on Instagram. "His songwriting, musicianship and distinctive spirit helped create music that has lasted far beyond its era, and continues to mean so much to listeners around the world."

"Those years remain a special part of the band's story, and Dave's contribution to them is not forgotten. His place in that history will always be remembered, and through the music, his presence endures. At this sad time, our thoughts are with his family, his friends, and all those who loved him and his music," Winwood wrote.

Survivors include his wife Winifred Wilson, daughter Danielle, nephew John Leonard, niece Michelle Leonard and his brothers in law, Sloan Wilson and Walton Wilson.

EU close to approving a \$106B loan for Ukraine after months of deadlock

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union on Wednesday was on the cusp of approving a massive loan for Ukraine as oil began flowing again through a key pipeline toward Hungary and Slovakia, lifting a major obstacle to approving the funds.

The operator of the Druzhba pipeline in Ukraine, Ukrtransnaft, told the two countries that Russian oil was on its way and should arrive early on Thursday. Unlike most of the rest of the EU, Hungary and Slovakia still depend on Russia for their energy needs.

EU envoys, meanwhile, launched a political procedure to endorse the loan. National governments have 24 hours to raise objections in writing, and if none of the 27 member nations do, the loan could be approved by Thursday afternoon, just as EU leaders are gathering for a summit in Cyprus.

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A new raft of sanctions against Russia could also be approved on Thursday.

Money runs short in Ukraine

Ukraine desperately needs the 90 billion euro (\$106 billion) loan package, originally agreed in December, to prop up its war-ravaged economy and help keep Russian forces at bay for the next two years.

Hungary has insisted that it must start receiving the oil again before it will unblock the funds, while Slovakia refused to endorse new sanctions.

For months, the two countries have accused Ukraine of failing to repair the pipeline. Ukraine and most of its European backers oppose imports of Russian oil which have helped to fund President Vladimir Putin's war, now in its fifth year.

In a post on social media on Wednesday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that "Ukraine is fulfilling its obligations" and that "we expect that the European side will also deliver."

He welcomed movement on the loan, saying that "the unblocking is the right signal under the current circumstances. Russia must end its war. And the incentives for that can arise only when both support for Ukraine and pressure on Russia are sufficient."

Cautious optimism after months of delay

The 27-nation EU had originally intended to use frozen Russian assets as collateral for the loan. But that option was blocked by Belgium, where the bulk of the frozen assets are held.

In December, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia agreed not to stop their EU partners from borrowing the money on international markets as long as the three countries did not have to take part in the scheme.

But Hungary's outgoing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has repeatedly blocked EU aid to Ukraine, angered the other 24 countries by later reneging on that deal over the pipeline dispute and as campaigning heated up ahead of an April 12 election that he lost in a landslide.

New sanctions on Russia

The EU has also been trying since February to push through a new raft of sanctions against Russia, which Hungary and Slovakia have blocked. The EU envoys also set in train a procedure to have them approved on Thursday.

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico repeated on Wednesday that his government would not approve the new EU measures "unless the Druzhba oil pipeline is really reopened." Fico said that "trust between Slovakia and Ukraine has been badly damaged" by the dispute.

But Economy Minister Denisa Saková confirmed that Slovakia expects oil supplies to resume early on Thursday. Saková said Ukrtransnaft had informed the government that oil began entering the Druzhba pipeline again on Wednesday.

Warsh says he got no pressure from Trump to cut rates even as president publicly pushes for them

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's nominee to chair the Federal Reserve said Tuesday that he never promised the White House that he would cut interest rates, even as the president renewed his calls for the central bank to do so.

"The president never once asked me to commit to any particular interest rate decision, period," Kevin Warsh, a former top Fed official, said under questioning by the Senate Banking Committee. "Nor would I ever agree to do so if he had. ... I will be an independent actor if confirmed as chair of the Federal Reserve."

Warsh's comments came just hours after Trump, in an interview on CNBC, was asked if he would be disappointed if Warsh didn't immediately cut rates and responded, "I would."

The comments underscore the challenge faced by Warsh, 56, a financier and former member of the Fed's board of governors whom Trump named in January to replace the current Fed chair, Jerome Powell. Democrats on the committee accused Warsh of flip-flopping on interest rates over the years, supporting higher interest rates under Democratic presidents and advocating rate cuts during Trump's time in office.

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Investors are watching the hearing closely to see how Warsh balances Trump's demands with worsening inflation, as the war in Iran pushes up the price of gasoline.

Higher inflation typically leads the Fed to raise rates, or at least keep them unchanged, rather than cut them. When the Fed changes its key rate, it can affect mortgages, auto loans, and business borrowing.

Yet Warsh's account was challenged by Sen. Ruben Gallego, an Arizona Democrat, who said that Wall Street Journal reporting last year found that Trump had urged Warsh to reduce borrowing costs.

"Who's lying here? Is it you or the president?" Gallego asked.

"I think those reporters need better sources," Warsh responded.

For all the back and forth, the hearing didn't appear to advance Warsh's nomination, which has been delayed by a Justice Department investigation into the Fed and Powell, over brief testimony Powell gave last June before the same panel about a building renovation.

Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican on the committee, reiterated Tuesday he wouldn't vote for Warsh until the investigation is dropped. With the committee closely divided and all Democrats opposed to his nomination, Tillis' opposition is enough to bottle it up in committee.

"We have got to get rid of this investigation," Tillis said, "so I can support your nomination."

Tillis has previously said that all seven Republicans on the committee have signed a letter stating that Powell did not commit a crime when he testified before the panel last June. Federal prosecutors, led by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeannine Pirro, are investigating his testimony for potential perjury, though a judge said last month they offered no evidence to support the charge when he threw out subpoenas Pirro had issued.

Prosecutors from her office as recently as last week sought access to the Fed's building project but were turned away, revealing that the Trump administration has not reversed course despite opposition from members of his own party that are essential to Warsh's confirmation.

In his opening remarks, Warsh told the Senate Banking Committee that one of his top goals would be to fight inflation, which remains elevated at 3.3% annually.

"Congress tasked the Fed with the mission to ensure price stability, without excuse or equivocation, argument or anguish," Warsh said. "Inflation is a choice, and the Fed must take responsibility for it."

Warsh would be in a tough spot if confirmed. Inflation is worsening, making it much harder for the Fed to implement the interest rate cuts Trump so desperately seeks. The conflict could also slow the economy, as well as hiring. And if Warsh ultimately becomes chair, he may very well find his predecessor, Powell, still sitting on the Fed's governing board, an uncomfortable arrangement that hasn't occurred since the late 1940s.

Warsh said the Fed's political independence is "essential," and that the central bank wasn't threatened when "elected officials — presidents, senators, or members of the House — state their views on interest rates." Trump has repeatedly urged Powell to cut the Fed's key rate from its current level of about 3.6% to as low as 1%, a view almost no economist shares.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts Democrat, said that Trump has not just stated his opinions on rates, but has sought to fire a Fed governor and is investigating Powell.

"The Senate should not be aiding and abetting Donald Trump's illegal takeover of the Fed by installing his chosen sock puppet as chair," she said Tuesday.

Warren also noted that Warsh has not disclosed all of his financial holdings, which include investments in start-ups and private companies, or the size of those financial stakes. For example, Warsh has said he has holdings in SpaceX and Polymarket, but has not said how large those investments are.

Warren charged that Warsh is not in compliance with ethics requirements. Warsh argued that the Office of Government Ethics has signed off on his plan to sell all his assets within 90 days of his confirmation.

The turmoil could make a potential transition from Powell to Warsh an unusually turbulent one for the world's most pivotal central bank, which has historically experienced smooth transfers of power. Should the change in leadership prove particularly bumpy, it could unnerve markets and lift longer-term interest rates.

Powell's term as chair ends May 15. He said last month that he would remain as chair until a successor is named. Powell also is serving a separate term as a member of the Fed's governing board that lasts

until January 2028. Fed chairs typically leave the board when their terms as chair end, but Powell said last month he would remain on the board, even if a new chair is approved, until the investigation is dropped.

Trump said he would fire Powell if he attempted to remain at the Fed. Yet Trump's previous attempt to remove a Fed governor, Lisa Cook, has been tied up in court. During oral arguments in January, a majority of justices on the Supreme Court appeared to lean toward leaving Cook at the Fed.

Beneath Trump's ballroom legal case: A brief history of the White House bunker

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

Secrecy surrounding White House security makes details hard to come by, but President Donald Trump's court fight over his \$400 million ballroom casts some light on an underground bunker at the site that has had a role in history.

The bunker emerged in the Trump administration's court fight against the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which is challenging the 90,000-square-foot (8,400-square-meter) ballroom project in Washington. A federal appeals court last week permitted the president to continue with construction of the project at the site of the former East Wing, which was demolished last fall.

That ruling put on hold a lower-court judge's order blocking aboveground construction but exempted work to ensure the safety and security of the White House. The Republican administration's appeal cited materials that would be installed to make a "heavily fortified" facility, including adding bomb shelters, military installations and a medical facility underneath the ballroom.

The bunker's role in presidential history

The history of a bunker beneath the East Wing dates to Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, when an underground bomb shelter was installed in 1942 after the United States had entered World War II. Beyond that, detail is obscured by secrecy resulting from concerns about presidential safety.

Garrett Graff, a historian and national security author, said the Presidential Emergency Operations Center beneath the East Wing was always intended to be for short-term use.

"The whole point of the sort of presidential evacuation and continuity of the presidency is you want to get the president out of the place where everyone knows that he is and get him into a place where people don't know where he is," Graff said.

High-profile flights to an underground bunker at the White House include Vice President Dick Cheney being taken there because of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

A Secret Service agent burst into the West Wing room, grabbed Cheney by the belt and shoulder and led him to a bunker underneath the White House. "He didn't say, 'Shall we go?'" Cheney told NBC News years later. "He wasn't polite about it."

More recently, Trump was rushed to a White House bunker in 2020 amid protests stemming from the death of George Floyd. At the time, there were chants from protesters at Lafayette Park that could be heard in the building, and Secret Service and law enforcement officers struggled to control the crowds.

Why a ballroom matters to a bunker

Matthew Quinn, deputy director of the Secret Service, wrote in court filings that it's important for the ballroom project to go forward for security at the White House.

"An above-ground slab and topping structure is needed to ensure that key underground structures with a security purpose are properly protected and strengthened," Quinn wrote.

He added: "Leaving the project site unfinished imperils the ability of the Secret Service to meet its statutory mission to protect the President."

Trump last month offered a list of what's being done to enhance security while the ballroom is built.

"The roof is droneproof. We have secure air-handling systems. You know, bad things happen in the air if you have bad people," the president said. "We have biodefense all over. We have secure telecommunications and communications all over. We have bomb shelters that we're building. We have a hospital and very major medical facilities that we're building."

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The president took to social media to criticize the lower-court ruling and said the underground portion wouldn't work without the aboveground facility as well.

What's next in the legal battle over the ballroom

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has argued that Trump overstepped his authority by moving forward with the project without getting approval from key federal agencies and Congress.

U.S. District Judge Richard Leon ruled in favor of the nonprofit group at the end of March but put his decision on hold briefly while allowing underground work to continue. The administration appealed.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has a hearing for June 5 to review the case.

Taxpayer dollars will pay for the security aspects of the project, though Trump has said the ballroom costs will be covered by donations from wealthy people and corporations. He's said it's a long-overdue addition to the White House complex.

"The underground portion is wedded to, and serves, the upper portion," the president said in a social media post.

What that means in practice is unclear and hinges in part on the outcome of litigation.

Researchers have spent decades breeding better potatoes for chips, and their work isn't done

By DEE-ANN DURBIN and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

EAST LANSING, Mich. (AP) — There's a surprising amount of science in a bag of potato chips.

Researchers have spent decades developing potatoes for chip makers that can grow in all kinds of climates, avoid diseases and pests, sit in storage for months and still deliver a satisfying crunch. They've also kept an eye on consumer trends; a shift to snack-size portions has increased the demand for smaller chipping potatoes, for example.

"The potato industry is dynamic," said David Douches, a Michigan State University professor who leads the school's Potato Breeding and Genetics Program. "The needs change, the costs, the pressures that they have, and the markets change. So we have to adapt to that with our varieties."

Douches has developed five new potato varieties for chips in the the last 15 years. His latest breakthrough is a bioengineered potato that can maintain a proper sugar balance when stored at colder temperatures, which can help keep potatoes from rotting. He is currently growing seeds for commercial testing of the potato, which is not yet on the market.

Douches' work helps fight world hunger; he has developed disease-resistant varieties for farmers in Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda and Bangladesh. But he's also helping U.S. chip makers, grateful snackers and Michigan's \$2.5 billion potato industry. While Idaho leads the U.S. in potato production, Michigan is the top producer of potatoes for chips.

There are around 50 unique potato varieties grown for chips in the U.S. right now, according to the National Chip Program, a cooperative that brings together Michigan State and 11 other university breeding programs with growers, companies that make chips, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Efforts to improve those varieties are constant. The National Chip Program evaluates around 225 new potato varieties each year and selects 100 for further trials, said Tim Rendall, the director of production research at Potatoes USA, a trade group that oversees the chip program.

The close partnership between researchers, farmers and potato chip companies is unusual in the food industry, said Phil Gusmano, the vice president of purchasing at Better Made Snack Foods, which has produced potato chips in Detroit since 1930. Better Made worked closely with Douches when he was developing two of the varieties the company uses now, Gusmano said.

"We were able talk about size profile and different needs that make a really good chip," Gusmano said. "And the great thing is, they're willing to listen to what we have to say, because if they put together a potato that doesn't really meet the needs for the end processor, it doesn't do them any good."

Breeding a new type of potato can take up to 15 years, Douches said. The simple potato has a surprisingly complicated genetic structure, with four chromosomes in each cell compared to two in most species,

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including humans. That makes it harder to predict which traits that cross-bred plants will inherit, he said. "We're never able to fix a trait and carry that over to the next generation, so it's very difficult to find a potato that has all the traits that we want," Douches said.

Douches became fascinated with potato breeding and genetics while in graduate school. At Michigan State, he focuses on chipping potatoes, since Michigan is a leading producer. Around 70% of the state's potato crop is destined for chip processing, according to the Michigan Ag Council. The trade group estimates that one of every four bags of potato chips produced in the U.S. contains Michigan potatoes.

Breeding potatoes that can sit in storage for nearly a year has been one of the biggest challenges in Douches' 40-year career. Historically, farmers harvested potatoes and then stored them in huge piles at around 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius). Temperatures any colder cause sugar levels to rise in the root vegetables, and higher sugar content leads to darker potato chips. But warmer storage conditions can lead to rot.

"You think they're just these inanimate objects, but they actually are respiring and breathing," Douches said. "When you do that to them, you've got, like, a two- to three-day window where they're happy."

His Manistee variety, which was released in 2013, can be safely stored until July at 45 F (7.2 C) degrees. His new bioengineered potato can be stored at 40 F (4.4 C).

Gusmano said Better Made used to source potatoes from outside of Michigan for half the year because the Michigan potatoes it harvested in the fall only could be stored until February. The company now uses newer varieties, like Douches' Mackinaw potato, which can be stored until July and is resistant to several common diseases.

"We're not shipping potatoes from all over the country to be fried here in Michigan," Gusmano said. "Instead, they're being shipped from an hour and a half away all year long."

Iranians have long sought work and relative stability in Turkey. The war could force some to return

By SERRA YEDIKARDES Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Sadri Haghshenas spends her days selling borek — a layered, savory pastry — at a shop in Istanbul, but her mind is on her daughter in Tehran.

The family had to send her home to Iran after they ran into difficulties renewing her visa, despite fears that a shaky ceasefire could soon collapse.

For years, short-term residency permits have allowed tens of thousands of Iranians to pursue economic opportunities and enjoy relative stability in neighboring Turkey. But it's a precarious situation, and the war has raised the stakes.

"I swear, I cry every day," Haghshenas said, raising her hands from behind the counter of the pastry shop. "There is no life in my country, there is no life here, what shall I do?"

A daughter sent back

Haghshenas and her husband moved to Turkey five years ago with their then-teenage daughters and have been living on tourist visas renewable every six months to two years.

They could not afford a lawyer this year, because her husband is out of work due to health problems. As a result, they missed the deadline to apply for a new visa for their 20-year-old daughter, Asal, who is still in her final year of high school.

Asal was detained at a checkpoint earlier this month and spent a night at an immigration facility. Her mother found a friend to take her back to Tehran rather than face deportation proceedings that could complicate her ability to return to Turkey. They hope she can come back on a student visa.

Haghshenas has been unable to talk to her daughter since she left because of a monthslong internet blackout in Iran.

Many Iranians have temporary status

Turkey has not seen an influx of refugees, as most Iranians have sought safety within their country. Many who have crossed the land border were transiting to other countries where they have citizenship

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or residency.

Nearly 100,000 Iranians lived in Turkey in 2025, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute. Around 89,000 have entered Turkey since the start of the war, while around 72,000 have departed, according to the United Nations' refugee agency.

Some Iranians have used short-term visa-free stays to wait out the war, but there are few options for those who want to stay longer.

Sedat Albayrak, of the Istanbul Bar Association's Refugee and Migrant Rights Center, said that getting international protection status can be difficult, and the system encourages Iranians to apply for short-term permits instead.

"There are people who have lived on them for over 10 years," he said.

If the war continues, more may have to return

Nadr Rahim came to Turkey for his children's education 11 years ago. Now, the war may force him to go home.

Because of the difficulty of getting a permit to start a business or work legally in Turkey, he lived off the profits of his motorcycle salesroom in Iran. But there have been no sales since the war started, and international sanctions — and the internet outage — make it extremely difficult to transfer funds.

His family only has enough money to stay in Turkey a few more months. His children grew up in Turkey and don't read Farsi or speak it fluently. He worries about how they would adapt to living in Iran, but said "if the war continues, we will have no choice but to return."

In the meantime, he spends most of his days scrolling on his phone, waiting for news from his parents in Tehran or discussing the war over waterpipes with Iranian friends.

'A bad life' in Turkey and Iran

A 42-year-old Iranian woman came to Turkey eight months ago, hoping to make money to support her family. She and her daughter registered as university students to get study visas. She attends classes in the morning to keep her legal status before rushing to service jobs, sometimes working until 3 a.m.

They share a room with six other people at a women's boarding house, she said, speaking on condition of anonymity out of fear for her security should she return to Iran.

"I truly love Iran. If necessary, I would even go and defend it in war," she says. But she sees no future there, while in Turkey, she's barely scraping by and only able to send small amounts of money to her parents.

"I have a bad life in Turkey, and my parents have a bad life in Iran," she said. "I came to Turkey with so much hope, to support my parents and build a future. But now I feel hopeless."

From one temporary refuge to another

A 33-year-old freelance architect from Tehran traveled to Turkey during Iran's violent crackdown on mass protests in January. She had planned to return after the situation calmed down, but then the United States and Israel went to war with Iran at the end of February.

"I started to believe that it's a very bad situation, worse than I expected," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of persecution if she returns to Iran.

She has been unable to work for her usual clients back in Iran because of the internet blackout. With the end of her 90-day visa-free window approaching, she can't afford to apply for a longer stay in Turkey.

Instead, she has decided to go to Malaysia, where she will get free accommodation in return for building shelters during a month of visa-free stay.

She has no plan for what comes next.

The Iran war could drive up costs for petroleum-derived products like clothes and crayons

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It might be hard to imagine the Iran war weighing on stuffed toys with names like Snuggle Glove, Bizzikins and Wobblies, but even plush playthings are not immune when oil shipments from the Middle East are constrained.

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Like many soft toys, the creatures developed by a manufacturer in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, are made with polyester and acrylic, synthetic fibers derived from petroleum. Three weeks after the war started, suppliers in China notified Aleni Brands that getting the materials already was costing them 10% to 15% more, CEO Ricardo Venegas said.

"I think this situation demonstrates how much oil permeates throughout our system, and we can't get away from it," said Venegas, who founded Aleni Brands last year and is in the process of adding product lines. "Who would have thought that the price of a toy would have a direct relationship with oil?"

It's not just toys. Petrochemicals derived from oil and natural gas go into making more than 6,000 consumer products, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Computer keyboards, lipstick, tennis rackets, pajamas, soft contact lenses, detergent, chewing gum, shoes, crayons, shaving cream, pillows, aspirin, dentures, tape, umbrellas and nylon guitar strings are just a few of them.

So far, the war's most tangible and immediate effect for many people outside the conflict zone has been spiking gasoline prices. Travelers also are seeing higher fares and flight fees as airlines respond to the rising cost of jet fuel. Consumers may find themselves paying more for food, furniture or any of the myriad of goods transported by trucks that run on diesel.

But crude oil isn't just refined as fuel. It gets turned into chemicals, waxes, oils and other mixtures that appear in a vast array of everyday items, including most made with plastic and rubber. Petroleum derivatives also are used in a lot of packaging. With disruptions to global oil supplies now in their eighth week, higher production costs also could make things more expensive for shoppers, according to trade groups and some companies.

Venegas, a 30-year toy industry veteran, said he would absorb higher material costs for now but expects to increase prices for customers by early 2027, if the war goes on another three to six months.

From crude oil to T-shirts and rugs

While 85% of global oil consumption is in the form of fuel, the rest goes into a wide range of consumer products, according to Gernot Wagner, a climate economist at Columbia University's School of Business.

Crude oil is mostly a complex mixture of hydrocarbons, which are compounds made of carbon and hydrogen atoms. Refineries and chemical plants separate and break them down to convert them into smaller chemical building blocks known as petrochemicals.

Six petrochemicals — ethylene, propylene, butylene, benzene, toluene and xylenes — are the major foundations of plastics and synthetic materials like nylon and polyesters, which manufacturers in turn use to design and deliver products. More from the Department of Energy: Automobile parts, ballpoint pens, curtains, dice, eyeglasses, fertilizer, golf balls, hearing aids, insect repellent, kayaks, luggage, mops and nail polish.

Materials account for a big share of production costs for many manufacturers, including those that supply carpets, clothing and tires, according to Andrew Walberer, partner and global lead in the chemicals practice of global strategy and management consultancy Kearney.

Take a button-down shirt, for example. Walberer estimated that materials account for 27%-30% of how much it costs a manufacturer to make one. Labor costs contribute 10% to 30%. Business expenses tied to marketing, distribution and administration comprises the rest, he said.

The ripple effect

Experts say if oil holds above \$90 per barrel for the next several months, cost pressures will accelerate throughout the supply network.

Footwear Distributors and Retailers of America CEO Matt Priest said most of the trade organization's members keep a two- to three-month inventory of finished products, providing a temporary cushion against higher materials costs.

Roughly 70% of the materials in synthetic shoes are petrochemical-based, and 30% of the costs for those materials are directly tied to oil price rate swings, according to a report the organization published last month on the U.S. footwear industry's "exposure to oil prices & the impact on shoe costs."

The FDRA analysis estimated that between materials, factory energy and transportation, companies paying more for petroleum could translate into a 1.5% to 3% increase in the price shoppers pay for a pair

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of shoes by late summer and the fall.

By the end of April, U.S. shoe and clothing manufacturers need to start signing contracts with suppliers, mostly outside the U.S., for orders of polyester staple fiber and polyester filament yarn to get their designs on retail shelves and online for the holiday shopping season, according to Nate Herman, executive vice president of the American Apparel & Footwear Association.

One kilogram, or a little over two pounds, of the materials used in polyester textiles, has increased in price from an average of 90 cents before the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran to \$1.33 per kilogram, Herman said. He estimated that each garment will cost 10 cents to 15 cents more to produce as a result.

Another cost for importers

Some businesses are looking for ways to offset rising costs.

Lisa Lane is the founder of Rinseroo, which sells portable shower head, bathtub and sink attachments for cleaning, pet grooming, and bathing. She recently tripled the number of the slip-on hoses she procures from China each month after her manufacturer said the cost would be 30% higher in another 30 days. She had a few days to decide whether to place a three-month advance order.

The components of Rinseroo's products include petroleum derivatives like polyvinyl chloride, Lane said. After purchasing 240,000 units instead of her usual 80,000, she is also evaluating cost-cutting options.

Lane said she wants to hold off on increasing prices for retailers that sell the attachments since Rinseroo did that last year to offset higher U.S. tariffs on imports from China. For example, a hose for washing pets in a bathtub went up to \$33.95 from \$29.95 on retail websites, she said.

"We want to stay at that sweet spot where people want to continue to buy from us and feel like they're getting a good value," Lane said.

Another company, which sells wound care products like bandages, dressings, pads and sponges to nursing homes and other medical facilities, plans to raise its prices by 15% in a matter of weeks. Gentell CEO David Navazio noted that adhesives in the products rely on several petrochemicals.

Including energy for production and materials, Navazio estimated the company's costs are going up by 20%.

Gentell, which is based in Yardley, Pennsylvania but has its main manufacturing location in Toronto, also makes private label products for other companies, including a medical technology firm that supplies retail stores like CVS.

Because bandages and dressings are necessities, Navazio said he doesn't think his business will suffer if it raises customer prices. Less certain is whether prices will come down once the war ends and oil shipments stabilize.

"In the past, I've seen transportation costs come down, but I've never seen prices of raw material come down," he said.

Ukraine wants a Zelenskyy-Putin summit to jolt stalled US-led peace efforts

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine is pushing for face-to-face talks between President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kyiv's top diplomat said, presenting a potential summit as a way of injecting new momentum into U.S.-led efforts to end Russia's more than four-year invasion of its neighbor.

Meanwhile, a Ukrainian drone attack deep inside Russia struck a residential building, killing a woman and a child, Russian officials said Wednesday.

Kyiv has asked Turkey to help facilitate top-level talks and has reached out to other capitals as potential hosts, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said, adding that Ukraine would consider any venue outside Russia and Belarus.

"We are ... advocating for a (summit) meeting now to bring new momentum to diplomacy," Sybiha told reporters on Tuesday. His remarks were embargoed until Wednesday.

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U.S.-mediated talks over the past year between delegations from Moscow and Kyiv have made little or no headway on key issues, such as the future of four Ukrainian regions Moscow is trying to capture but doesn't fully control. With Washington's attention now gripped by the Iran war, the talks are on ice.

Zelenskyy has accepted an unconditional ceasefire demanded by U.S. President Donald Trump but Putin has refused. Putin thinks that time is on his side, that Western military and financial support will fade and that Ukraine's resistance will eventually collapse, analysts say.

Meanwhile, a grim war of attrition continues along the about 1,250-kilometer (800-mile) front line that snakes along eastern and southern areas of Ukraine. Western officials and analysts claim Russia is suffering several tens of thousands of battlefield casualties each month, drawing comparisons to the carnage of World War I.

Independent verification of battlefield casualties and which side has the upper hand is not possible.

Ukraine has developed a domestic arms industry which is increasingly producing long-range drones and missiles capable of striking deep inside Russia. It has taken aim at Russia's oil production and manufacturing plants that supply the Russian military.

In Syzran, a city in Russia's Samara region that is about 800 kilometers (500 miles) east of the border with Ukraine, a drone attack caused the collapse of a section of a residential building, local authorities said.

The bodies of a woman and a child were pulled out from under the rubble and 12 others were injured, local officials said.

Images from the scene showed a part of a four-story building reduced to a massive pile of rubble, with emergency workers on top of it.

Russian media reports said a Rosneft oil refinery — a frequent target of Ukrainian drone attacks — is located on the same street as the damaged building.

Ukraine's aerial attacks on Russia increased by nearly four times last year, from 6,200 in 2024 to more than 23,000 in 2025, Sergei Shoigu, the secretary of Russia's Security Council, said last month.

Today in History: April 23

Vietnam veterans stage protest at U.S. Capitol

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, April 23, the 113th day of 2026. There are 252 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On April 23, 1971, hundreds of Vietnam War veterans opposed to the conflict protested by tossing their medals and ribbons over a wire fence constructed in front of the U.S. Capitol.

Also on this date:

In 1635, the Boston Latin School, the first public school in what would become the United States, was established.

In 1898, Spain declared war on the United States, which responded in kind two days later. (Spain's declaration followed months of tensions with the U.S. government, which supported Cuban independence in a conflict between revolutionaries on the island and Spain.)

In 1940, over 200 people trapped inside a dance hall died in the Rhythm Club Fire in Natchez, Mississippi, one of the deadliest nightclub fires in U.S. history.

In 1988, a federal ban on smoking during domestic airline flights of two hours or less (accounting for 80% of all U.S. flights) went into effect.

In 1993, labor leader Cesar Chavez died in San Luis, Arizona, at age 66. (In March 2026, labor rights activist Dolores Huerta revealed she was among women and girls who say they were sexually abused by Chavez, the widely admired Latino icon who brought to light the struggles of farmhands while leading the United Farm Workers union.)

In 2005, the recently created video-sharing website YouTube uploaded its first clip, "Me at the Zoo," which showed YouTube co-founder Jawed Karim standing in front of an elephant enclosure at the San Diego Zoo.

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In 2007, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first popularly elected president, died in Moscow at age 76.

In 2018, a man plowed a rental van into pedestrians in Toronto, killing 10 people and leaving 16 others hurt. (Alek Minassian was later convicted of 10 counts of murder and sentenced to life in prison.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Lee Majors is 87. Actor Blair Brown is 80. Actor Joyce DeWitt is 77. Filmmaker-author Michael Moore is 72. Actor Judy Davis is 71. Actor Valerie Bertinelli is 66. Actor-comedian George Lopez is 65. Actor Melina Kanakaredes (kah-nah-kah-REE'-deez) is 59. Actor-wrestler John Cena is 49. Retired MLB All-Star Andruw Jones is 49. Comedian-TV host John Oliver is 49. Actor Kal Penn is 49. Actor-model Jaime King is 47. Singer Taio Cruz is 46. Actor Dev Patel is 36. Model Gigi Hadid is 31. Singer-songwriter Laufey is 27. Olympic snowboarding gold medalist Chloe Kim is 26. Prince Louis of Wales is 8.