

Groton Daily Independent

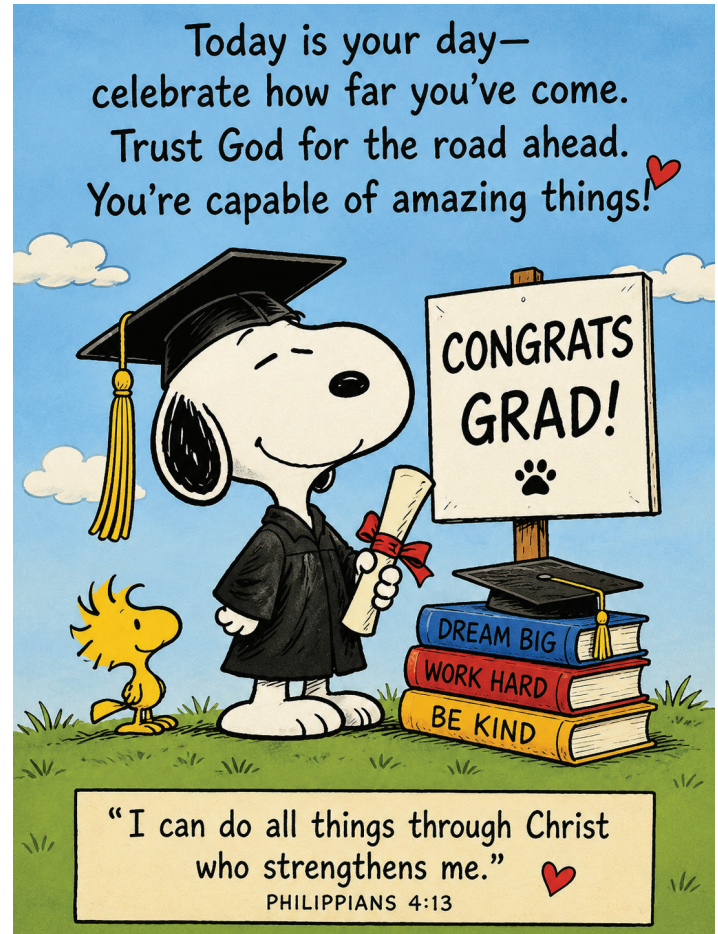
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Saturday, May 16

Pickleball, 9:30 a.m., elementary gym
Graduation, 2 p.m., Arena

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



Sunday, May 17

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m., at Zion, 11 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Groton Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.
Sign up for swimming lessons at the pool, 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
North Super Region High School Baseball Tournament

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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.

Deadly Virus Resurges

Africa's top public health officials yesterday confirmed an Ebola outbreak in a northeastern province of the Democratic Republic of Congo. At least 246 suspected cases and 65 deaths have been reported, with four deaths definitely linked to Ebola via lab testing.

This marks the Congo's 17th recorded outbreak since Ebola was first identified in 1976 in Africa. Believed to be naturally hosted by fruit bats, Ebola can cause severe gastrointestinal distress and unexplained bleeding. The virus spreads between humans through direct contact with bodily fluids, and past outbreaks have carried fatality rates ranging from 25% to 90%.

Initial tests indicate the strain currently in the Congo does not belong to the Zaire species, the only one of four with a licensed vaccine. Officials say early detection, contact tracing, and isolation will be crucial. However, contact tracing may prove challenging, as people frequently cross into Uganda and South Sudan for mining work and to flee violence from insurgent groups.

New York judge declares mistrial in Harvey Weinstein rape retrial.

A Manhattan jury yesterday was unable to agree on whether the disgraced Hollywood mogul raped aspiring actress Jessica Mann. The case has now been tried three times. Prosecutors are expected to announce on June 24 whether they will pursue a fourth trial. Weinstein is currently serving a 16-year prison sentence in California for separate rape and sexual assault charges.

Russia and Ukraine swap 205 prisoners of war.

Yesterday's exchange was the first phase in a planned swap involving 1,000 prisoners from each side. The deal proceeded despite one of the deadliest attacks on Kyiv in the four-year war, with at least 24 people killed by a Russian missile strike on an apartment complex Thursday. Russia yesterday said a Ukrainian strike southeast of Moscow killed four people and wounded another 28.

NASA's Psyche spacecraft slingshots by Mars on its way to a rare metal asteroid.

The spacecraft took thousands of photos as it came within 2,800 miles of the red planet, about the distance between the US' East and West coasts. Psyche is en route to the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter to study an exceptionally metal-rich asteroid, also named Psyche. Scientists think it may be the exposed core of a fledgling planet stripped by cosmic collisions, possibly offering clues into our early solar system.

OpenAI launches ChatGPT for personal finance.

The AI company yesterday announced a new suite of personal finance tools for US-based ChatGPT Pro subscribers. Users can connect accounts from over 12,000 financial institutions—including Schwab, Fidelity, and Robinhood—to the chatbot and receive personalized financial breakdowns. Over 200 million users already ask financial questions to ChatGPT every month, according to OpenAI.

The 151st running of the Preakness Stakes is today. (w/odds)

The second leg of the Triple Crown will begin at approximately 6:50 pm at Maryland's Laurel Park as the event's longtime home, Pimlico Race Course, undergoes major renovations. The \$2M race will feature a full 14-horse field, but Kentucky Derby winner Golden Tempo will not compete. His trainer said he needs additional time to rest; Golden Tempo is expected to return for the Belmont Stakes on June 6.

Twenty-five countries vie for victory in today's Eurovision final.

Finland's Linda Lampenius and Pete Parkkonen are heavy favorites to win the 2026 Eurovision Song

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Contest. Another standout contender is Delta Goodrem, a 41-year-old cancer survivor who could make history as Australia's first Eurovision winner.

Separately, have you heard the Official FIFA World Cup 2026 Song by Shakira and Burna Boy that dropped this week?

Humankind(ness)

Dear readers— In honor of Mother's Day, we're pausing our usual act of kindness stories this month to share a sampling of submissions about mothers.

"My mom passed away over two years ago, on Feb. 2, 2023. It's a day I'll always remember: her 92nd birthday. We were with her in the morning, and the Lord took her home in the afternoon. It was a really tough time, and I think my mom knew I'd need some encouragement to cope with the loss. As I went through her things, I found little notes she'd left for me to discover. These notes were tucked away in books, cookbooks, and even tin cans. I'm so grateful for those loving notes; they've touched and warmed my heart in ways I can't quite put into words."

— Carla B. in Las Vegas, Nevada

"'Which way home?' Mom asked. I set off confidently. Tramping on paths that spread like veins into the woods, I became totally lost. Mom said she was lost, too. I started to cry. Mom didn't rescue me. I learned that moss grows on the north side of the trees, the sun travels east to west, the neighbor's hayfield was west of our property, and so we started in a direction. Half an hour later, I recognized the main path. Many more times in my life, by not telling me the way, Mom gifted me the ability to find my way."

— Patricia C. in Fort Mill, South Carolina

"Motherhood's greatest surprise is how much you learn. One afternoon, my 5-year-old brought me a paper airplane with 'sorry' written all over. He confessed he had broken my phone weeks earlier. We talked about honesty and responsibility, explaining it wasn't okay. Distraught, he returned with a bigger airplane and hugs, but I explained it didn't make up for the loss. Later, he returned with three joined paper airplanes colored with 'sorry, I love you's.' Realizing I am just as lacking when asking forgiveness, I hugged him and let it go. We both were better for it."

— Becky C. in Utah

Humankind(ness) is a reader-built corner of joy. So, what act(s) of kindness did you experience this week? [Tell us here.](#)

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TTT
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WEBER LANDSCAPING
GREENHOUSE

FOOD TRUCK

TTT GRILL & CATERING



20
MAY

10:45_{AM} - 3:00_{PM}



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2026

SDHSBA

NORTH SUPER REGIONAL

RD 1 @ MADISON

SINGLE-ELIMINATION

#1 MADISON/CHESTER/ORR

#8 ELKTON-LAKE BENTON

#4 GROTON AREA

#5 SIOUX VALLEY/ESTELLINE/ARLINGTON

#2 SBW

#7 REDFIELD AREA

#3 MILBANK

#6 CLARK AREA

RD 2 @ MADISON

STATE QUALIFIERS

RD 2 @ SISSETON

RD 1 @ SISSETON

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Don Donley (center) is pictured with school board member Marty Weismantel on the left and Groton Area Superintendent Joe Schwan on the right.

(Photo from Groton Area Facebook Page)

DON DONLEY DAY - MAY 15, 2026

Groton Area School District

May 15, 2026

The end of the 2025-2026 school year marks the end of an incredible tenure from Mr. Don Donley. After 55 years of service to the Groton Area School District, Mr. Donley is retiring.

The impact Mr. Donley has left on all of us - colleagues, students, and friends, has made us all better.

Today, in recognition of an outstanding individual, Governor Larry Rhoden declared May 15, 2026 as Don Donley Day in South Dakota.

The Executive Proclamation reads:

Whereas, Don Donley's dedication to the profession of education has made him invaluable to his students and his community; and,

Whereas, throughout his career, Mr. Donley has created a classroom environment that fosters curiosity, critical thinking, and problem solving; and,

Whereas, Don Donley has devoted 55 years of his life committed to his students and the Groton Area School District as a teacher, mentor, and bus driver; and,

Whereas, his instruction and guidance has left a remarkable impact on hundreds of students and colleagues in the Groton Area School District and across the state of South Dakota; and,

Whereas, the positive influence of Mr. Don Donley extends beyond the classroom, inspiring students to pursue higher education and training, meaningful careers, and active citizenship; and,

Whereas, the dedication and passion exhibited by Mr. Don Donley exemplifies the highest ideals of the teaching profession; and,

Whereas, the lasting impact of Mr. Don Donley is reflected in the achievements, character, and aspirations of the many students whose lives he has touched;

Now, Therefore, I, Larry Rhoden, Governor of the State of South Dakota, do hereby proclaim May 15, 2026 as

Don Donley Day

in South Dakota.

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Northeast Conference Track Meet Photos



McKenna Tietz had a banner day at the Northeast Conference Track meet in Milbank in four first place finishes. Pictured above is her 100m H win. (Photos courtesy Bruce Babcock)

Makenna Krause wins the 100m dash. Raquel Tracy placing 6th. (Photos courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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Winning 4x200m relay and setting the new NE Conference Meet record. L-R Makenna Krause, Rylee Dunker, Taryn Traphagen, and McKenna Tietz. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



Groton Area boys placing 3rd in 4x200m relay. L-R Lincoln Krause, Jordan Schwan, Ethan Kroll, and Ryder Schwan. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

McKenna Tietz broke her own school record in the 300m H again at 45.78. She also broken the Northeast Conference Meet record. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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Senior sprint standout Keegen Tracy wins both the NE Conference 200m and 400m race. He placed 3rd in the 100m sprint. (Photos courtesy Bruce Babcock)



GHS Senior distance ace Jayden Schwan had an outstanding day in the NE Conference Track meet. He broke the 51 year old GHS 3200m school record held set by Rick Cammerer in 1975. Jayden was a double winner in both the 1600m and 3200m run. Pictured 3200m awards stand Jayden Schwan 1st place and Riley Schellenberger 4th place.

(Photos courtesy Bruce Babcock)

Pennington County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash
Where: US Highway 16, mile marker 58, six miles west of Rapid City, SD
When: Thursday, May 14, 2026

Vehicle 1: 1996 Toyota Corolla
Driver 1: 56-year-old female from Rapid City, SD, life-threatening injuries
Seat belt Used: No
Passenger 1a: 76-year-old female from Rapid City, SD, fatal injuries
Seat belt Used: No

Vehicle 2: 2019 GMC Sierra
Driver 2: 58-year-old male from Newcastle, WY, minor injuries
Seat belt Used: Yes

Pennington County, S.D.- A Rapid City woman died from a two-vehicle crash yesterday on US Highway 16, six miles west of Rapid City, SD.

The names of the persons involved have not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 1996 Toyota Corolla had entered the intersection on US 16 from Busted Five Court when a westbound 2019 GMC Sierra on US 16 collided with the Corolla. The Corolla spun onto the north shoulder, ejecting the passenger.

Both the driver and passenger in the Corolla were transported to Monument Health with life-threatening injuries. Neither were wearing seat belts. The passenger later died from her injuries. The driver of the GMC sustained minor injuries.

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

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



GHS

Graduation



Saturday, May 16



2 p.m.



GHS Arena



will be broadcast live on

GDILIVE.COM



\$5 ticket or **GDI** subscription
required to watch the event.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Cutting tribal college funding a threat to learning culture, self-determination, graduates say

BY: MARY STEURER

FORT YATES, N.D. – New graduates of Sitting Bull College said proposed funding cuts to tribal colleges could mean losing schools where tribal citizens are best able to thrive.

At the college, Lakota traditions are part of everyday life, said Deanna Milda, who on Thursday graduated with a bachelor's degree in social work.

Students participate in smudging ceremonies, learn traditional songs and take classes where the Lakota language is integrated into the curriculum, she said.

"We're able to normalize our culture again and not feel othered," said Milda, one of roughly 80 Sitting Bull College students to walk the stage. Many students wore beaded graduation caps.

Milda, who spent most of her childhood living on the Standing Rock Reservation, said attending the college allowed her to stay connected with her family and her community.

Schools like Sitting Bull College depend on federal subsidies for a large part of their budgets. The U.S. government provides this funding as part of its treaty obligations to support tribal nations.

The federal government is considering slashing this support, however.

The Department of Interior has proposed cutting more than \$150 million in funding for tribal higher education for the 2027 budget year.

It's the second year in a row that the federal government has proposed downsizing its support for tribal colleges and universities.

Dallas Goldtooth, a writer, actor and activist, delivered the ceremony's commencement address.

Sitting Bull College isn't just a school, said Goldtooth, who is of Mdewakanton Dakota and Dine heritage. "It is an act of sovereignty."

Sitting Bull College was founded in 1973 by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's council. Leaders wanted tribal citizens to have the opportunity to pursue college degrees in the community.

The establishment of Sitting Bull College and other tribal colleges was an important step in tribes' ongoing pursuit of self-determination, Goldtooth said.

"Sitting Bull College was not supposed to exist — but it exists because this tribal nation decided to invest in it," he said.

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, North Dakota's former governor, was questioned this week by a congressional committee about the proposed cuts to tribal colleges and universities.

Burgum called the amount the federal government is spending per student at some tribal colleges "way out of whack."

"I'm not sure we're giving a high-quality experience," he added.

Burgum said other schools are providing good educations to a large number of Native students without the same kind of subsidies from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He pointed to Arizona State University, which as of 2025 had more than 3,000 Native students, as one example.

During Sitting Bull College's ceremony, student speaker Jalyssa McLaughlin said small tribal colleges offer support that larger schools can't. She graduated with an associate degree in business administration.

At Sitting Bull College, classes are small, so instructors are able to form closer relationships with students, she said. McLaughlin said teachers there notice when students are struggling and need extra help.

"If I was to go to another college, I wouldn't have gotten that," she said.

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This story was originally produced by North Dakota Monitor, 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.

Mary Steurer is a reporter based in Bismarck for the North Dakota Monitor. A native of St. Louis, Steurer previously worked as the local government reporter for the Casper Star-Tribune newspaper in Wyoming.

COMMENTARY

The 'principled' stand that almost cost taxpayers an \$87 million return on their investment

by Dana Hess

During the legislative session, we're often witness to lawmakers taking a stand on principle. This can take many forms.

Some want to make one of the harshest abortion laws in the nation even tougher.

Some want to beat back South Dakota's urge to find more ways to gamble.

Some want to clamp down on access to medical marijuana.

Some want to solve the national debt by returning \$87 million to the federal government.

Wait, what?

That's what came dangerously close to happening in the final weeks of the legislative session. Deficit hawks in the state Senate voted to return \$87 million in federal funds earmarked to help pay for the installation of high-speed broadband in areas of the state underserved by the internet.

This isn't the first time this kind of foolishness has taken hold in the Capitol. During the pandemic, Gov. Kristi Noem told the Legislature that she considered giving back all the money that the federal government was piling on states in its effort to bolster the economy. Surely the federal government couldn't afford this kind of largesse.

Even a tea party darling like Noem knew in her heart of hearts that refusing federal funding didn't mean that the money would be safely squirreled away in a federal savings account or used to whittle away at the national debt. She knew it would just get spent anyway in Nebraska or Iowa or, worse yet, North Dakota.

This year, enough state senators were more concerned about the national debt than they were about their neighbors' inability to get on the internet. They voted 22-12 on whether to accept the federal money, short of the two-thirds majority needed for legislation dealing with appropriations or an emergency clause.

During the debate, Sen. Taffy Howard, a Rapid City Republican, said enough was enough. The state had already spent \$84 million on broadband expansion with another \$88 million from the feds and a like amount invested from private enterprise.

"Government is encroaching on more and more areas of our economy," Howard was quoted in a story from The Dakota Scout. "I mean, heaven help us, how did we survive before the federal government decided to do everything for us from cradle to grave?"

It's hard to see it as government intrusion when it partners with the state on a needed project. If Howard had her way, South Dakota taxpayers who dutifully paid their taxes to the federal government wouldn't get to see a return on their investment.

Sen. John Carley, a Piedmont Republican, called broadband old technology. He said satellite services like Starlink could easily provide internet service at a fraction of the cost.

Carley may be right, but when the next conflict between superpowers comes, the first targets will be the opponents' satellites. Who's more likely to have internet service in the next big war: the guy with the buried cable or the one who relies on an orbiting machine in space that's sporting a bull's-eye?

Sen. Ernie Otten, a Tea Republican, made an apt comparison when he called for the Senate to spend the money. He likened the coming of broadband internet to rural areas to the effort that brought electricity to farms.

"It's because there was a need, and everybody recognized there was a need," Otten said. "And with the

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internet, it's going to be the same thing."

Otten is right. Like the project that lit up farms across the nation, reliable, high-speed internet is a game-changer for rural South Dakota. No longer will our young people need to leave home to seek their fortunes and build their futures in big cities. Remote work on the internet, and the decent salaries that go with it, will keep young people in Kennebec, Freeman and Milbank.

Supplying high-speed internet to rural areas in this state where it's not currently available has what Sen. Carl Perry, an Aberdeen Republican, called "unintended benefits." It will help attract new business and industry, bolster telehealth and help schools offer a more well-rounded education.

Eventually cooler heads prevailed. The Senate reconsidered the bill and it garnered the two-thirds majority needed on a 24-10 vote.

Perhaps the lesson in this episode is that state lawmakers who want to do something about the national deficit should run for Congress. In the meantime, they shouldn't let their principles stand in the way of their constituents reaping the benefits of the federal government's willingness to invest in all of us having access to high-speed internet.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

More than half the inmates Noem released early without parole board review have been re-charged

In governor race, Johnson proposes legally required reviews; Rhoden opposes new law but says he only considers recommendations from board

BY: JOHN HULT

Twelve of the 19 people granted early release from prison by former South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem without a customary review by a state board have since been charged with new crimes.

Nine of them have pleaded guilty to one or more of those charges.

During her time in office, Noem issued 27 total commutations. Those clemency orders, which can release a person from prison or shorten their sentence to make them eligible for parole, are typically reviewed by the state Board of Pardons and Paroles before a governor considers them.

But with 19 of the commutations she signed, Noem did something no governor had done in roughly two decades since former Gov. Bill Janklow: issue them to inmates who lacked an endorsement from the board.

Since then, the 12 people who have been accused of new crimes have largely faced drug charges. Seven of the charges were felonies.

Meanwhile, five of the eight people whose commutations from Noem were screened by the board have since been released. Of those five, one has been charged with a new crime.

Noem process

It's unclear how the 19 people who got commutations without the board's recommendation got their names in front of Noem.

Each of those commutations came around Christmas in 2022 and 2023, and granted immediate freedom to all 19 recipients. The eight commutations issued after the board's recommendation offered shorter sentences and a shot at early release, not immediate freedom.

Noem's administration never responded to questions about her commutations. She left office in early 2025 for a post in the Trump administration.

Noem did not respond to inquiries for comment on this story.

Her office issued a press release in 2022 about the seven commutations she'd issued on Christmas Eve. South Dakota Searchlight soon learned she'd gone around the board, that victims' families were not notified, and that one person who was released early had been denied a recommendation by the board.

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Three of the seven people released that Christmas have since pleaded guilty to new charges: one for drug possession, another for misdemeanor domestic violence, and another for driving under the influence.

South Dakota Searchlight only counted charges for which a person can be jailed or imprisoned in its tally. Some of the people who've been released have picked up traffic citations. A fourth person on the list of early releases in 2022, for example, who'd been imprisoned for vehicular homicide and vehicular battery, was cited for exhibition driving. Another was cited twice for violating weight restrictions in a commercial vehicle.

On Christmas Eve of 2023, Noem issued 12 more instant-release commutations without the board's recommendation, all to people imprisoned for ingestion of a controlled substance. About a year later, lawmakers would vote to reduce ingestion to a misdemeanor for first and second offenses. Gov. Larry Rhoden signed the bill into law.

Noem talked about the commutations in her State of the State address in January 2024, saying the people "qualified" for a commutation, and that "we will continue to evaluate these second-chance opportunities for those who can prove they deserve them."

Nine of the 12 people released in 2023 have since been charged with new offenses. Six were charged with drug possession after release. Two others were charged with drug distribution. One of those two pleaded guilty to drug possession in 2024, was imprisoned and released again before her arrest for the distribution of hydrocodone. On April 2, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison, with five suspended, for that crime.

In total, nine of the 12 people charged with new crimes after being granted no-review early release during Noem's time in office have since pleaded guilty to new charges, and two have pending cases. One of them was charged with domestic violence, but the charge was dismissed.

Standard process

Governors in South Dakota have the exclusive state constitutional authority to issue commutations, and also pardons, which scrub an old conviction from a free person's criminal record entirely. Noem issued 348 pardons.

The commutation process usually starts with an application to the Board of Pardons and Paroles, not the governor, a standard practice Noem pledged to follow with an executive order in 2019, but later strayed from.

Applicants to the board must first clear an initial two-person screening panel, then earn the recommendation of the full board. Both initial and full-board screenings include a review of the person's record in and out of prison, an interview with the inmate, and interviews with the applicant's supporters and opponents.

If five or more members of the nine-person board recommend a commutation, all the materials and a recording of the applicant's full board hearing are sent to the governor's office for review.

Five of the eight people who got reduced sentences from Noem after board recommendations have since been released from prison.

One, Mark Milk, was charged with aggravated eluding of a law enforcement officer, a felony, in March after a short pursuit in central Sioux Falls. Milk remains in custody at the Minnehaha County Jail as he awaits trial.

A message to Milk's attorney with the Minnehaha County Public Defender's Office was not returned.

Milk pleaded guilty to manslaughter in 1994 for killing a man in the aftermath of a fight in Winner and was given a life sentence. Noem commuted his sentence in 2022 after a unanimous recommendation by the board.

High bar for board recommendations

One more person who got a board-reviewed commutation from Noem, John Proctor, will be released soon.

Proctor's parole hearing in April offers a window into the level of personal growth and transformation the board tends to expect before recommending a commutation.

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On April 14, the board voted 6-2 to release Proctor, who killed a Meade County woman's stepson in a 1973 murder-for-hire plot. Proctor was 19 at the time, newly married with a daughter on the way, and recruited for the \$2,000 job from his home in Nevada.

Acting on the board's recommendation, Noem commuted Proctor's sentence in July 2024.

Proctor is now 72, a born-again Christian with a theology degree he earned as a prisoner in Oregon, where he was moved in the 1980s to be closer to his family as he served his life sentence for the South Dakota killing. He works as a licensed supervising electrician and maintenance man at the prison's workshops, and spends many of his evenings sitting with hospice patients to make sure, he told the board, that "they don't die alone."

Call for change from gubernatorial candidate

Gov. Larry Rhoden, who took over for Noem when she left South Dakota for a job in the Trump administration, has issued 90 pardons and two commutations.

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, one of three candidates running against Rhoden in the June 2 Republican primary for governor, brought up commutations at a campaign event last month.

Johnson pledged to create a public safety task force if elected, and mentioned that the group would discuss ways to "reform the clemency process" and "help ensure violent criminals are prevented from repeatedly harming the public."

Johnson, who later told South Dakota Searchlight he was unaware of Noem's decision to release inmates without board approval, said the state ought to consider adjusting its laws to require a board review for all acts of executive clemency.

In a follow-up statement, Johnson clarified that such an adjustment would require a change to the South Dakota Constitution.

"At the federal level, I've seen pardon abuses from presidents of both parties," Johnson said. "It's convinced me that state pardons should require experts at the table, and I support a constitutional amendment making that the case."

Rhoden hasn't issued any pardons or commutations that weren't first reviewed by the board. In a statement to Searchlight, he said "I expect that to continue to be the case," but also said the state constitution "is not broken, and I do not support changing it."

"I respect the review and recommendation of the members of the Board of Pardons and Paroles. They have experience and expertise in this area, but they are not elected or accountable to the people," Rhoden said.

He called clemency "an important check and balance on the judicial branch to give a second chance," and a responsibility he does not "take lightly."

Aberdeen businessman Toby Doeden and Jon Hansen, speaker of the state House of Representatives, are also seeking the Republican nomination for governor. Neither responded to Searchlight questions about clemency.

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.

South Dakota revisits family benefit cuts and hospital payment changes after public backlash

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

SIOUX FALLS — The South Dakota Department of Social Services is taking a second look at two administrative rule changes the department originally proposed last year.

More than a hundred South Dakotans spoke against proposed changes last year to reduce benefits for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and adjust payment methodologies for hospitals.

The new proposals back away from the most controversial elements of the original changes. Department officials held public hearings for both in Sioux Falls on Friday.

Public comment remains open on the proposed changes until May 25, with comments accepted at Rules.SD.Gov. The legislative Rules Review Committee is scheduled to consider the changes at its June 9 meeting.

TANF change is partial restoration of earlier benefit reduction

TANF is a federal-state program used in South Dakota to provide assistance to families with children who need financial support because of the death of a parent, an absent parent, or the unemployment or physical or mental incapacity of a parent. Caregiver participants are required to work, search or train for a job.

Last year, the Legislature's budget committee cut state TANF funding by 30%, authorizing the department to backfill the gap with leftover federal funds. Instead of fully replacing the state cut with those carryover funds, the department reduced benefits by 10% — saving the state about \$1.5 million, department Secretary Matt Althoff said at the time. The cut reduced the average household benefit by \$51 per month.

That decision set off a monthslong dispute between the department and Rep. Erik Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, a budget committee member, over whether the committee understood the department's plan when it approved the cuts.

The South Dakota Legislature partially restored the cuts earlier this year.

The Legislature's approval pairs a \$427,000 increase in state funding with another \$427,000 in authority to spend carryover federal funds — together restoring half of last year's cut through a 5% benefit increase.

The proposed rule changes adopt the 5% increase as well as a 1.4% inflationary increase for beneficiaries. That raises the average monthly TANF payment from \$478.53 to \$509.49 — or an increase of \$30.96, according to a fiscal note.

The program distributed \$15.3 million in benefits in fiscal year 2024, when the average monthly benefit per household was \$518.06. Nearly 5,000 people in the state, most of them children, benefit from the program.

Three people spoke Friday during public comment, including Cathy Brechtelsbauer, who organized a protest last year against the department's cuts. She presented a "shoestring budget" for a parent with two children, totaling \$1,420 per month. The estimate included rent at \$650, utilities, phone and internet, transportation, clothing, and food not covered by other assistance programs.

The average TANF benefit still falls short of those needs, Brechtelsbauer said, adding that her estimates show why the state should "step up the payments."

Medicaid changes attract support after previous concerns

Last year, the department proposed revising how it reimburses hospitals through Medicaid — the joint federal-state program that provides health coverage to low-income residents and people with disabilities.

Officials from LifeScape, the state's primary caretaker for people with complex disabilities, and families who use its services testified last year about the risk the changes posed to the organization. Althoff pulled the proposals after the backlash.

On Friday, Althoff said hospitals "weren't ready" for the original proposal. He called the new changes "a win for South Dakota taxpayers" because they modernize Medicaid reimbursement and help contain costs.

The changes heard on Friday should not negatively impact providers in the state, South Dakota Medicaid Director Heather Petermann added. They align hospital reimbursement methodologies more closely with

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industry standards and ensure more equitable reimbursement among providers, she said.

Petermann said the department "better explained" proposed rule changes to providers and adjusted proposed methodology for critical access hospitals. Critical access hospitals are small, rural hospitals that offer 24/7 emergency services.

"The intent is to make this better for hospitals," Petermann said. "It had to be their buy-in and to make sure everyone was on the same page."

The department received letters of support from LifeScape, Avera Health, Sanford Health, Monument Health and the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations, Petermann said.

SDAHO President and CEO Tim Rave said the new methodology shifts money from out-of-state hospitals back into South Dakota facilities.

"While this does not bring our hospitals to a rate that covers what it costs to care for Medicaid patients in South Dakota, it does provide a much-needed boost to the rates as they are today, for which we are grateful," Rave wrote in a letter to the department.

Critical access hospitals have not had a full review since the designation was established in 1997. Hospitals reimbursed below 100% of their allowable costs will be brought to 100% under the new rules. Hospitals already paid above that threshold will see no change. The changes carry an \$8.6 million price tag, included in the state's fiscal year 2027 budget.

"We want to thank the department for working with our members to come up with a solution that will keep hospital services open in rural South Dakota and not risk losing those services or hospital closures," Rave added.

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.

Parole successes touted even as criticism prompts changes from governor

New supervision practices won't impact re-offense rates for years, parole leaders say

BY: JOHN HULT

The South Dakota Department of Corrections' parole division notched a series of wins in 2025, its leaders said this week, even as public scrutiny of people on parole reached a crescendo late last month loud enough to spark immediate changes from Gov. Larry Rhoden.

Two top parole administrators delivered the message to the state Board of Pardons and Paroles on Wednesday. It was the board's first full-group meeting since Rhoden announced plans to hire five new parole officers to do intensive supervision on high-risk inmates, requested faster decisions on parole violations and said the state would crack down on drug use and other misbehavior by people under state supervision.

The changes came a few days after a police officer in Sioux Falls was shot and injured, allegedly by a man on parole. The April 27 incident was the second time an officer was shot in Sioux Falls in the space of a year. The alleged shooter in a separate incident from April 2025 was on parole.

Earlier in April, Rhoden's office issued a news release on what he branded a "Smarter Supervision Initiative," which noted that the state had asked for an \$890,000 Justice Department grant to improve data collection and parole officer training, and to "strengthen community partnerships."

The state's struggling to get a handle on its 50% recidivism rate, Rhoden wrote in a letter supporting the grant, referencing a term for people who return to prison within three years of release.

Rhoden convened a Correctional Rehabilitation Task Force last year to address efforts to reform individuals inside the prison and address re-entry issues for people being released.

In response to repeated calls for parole reform from leaders in Sioux Falls and Rapid City, however,

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Rhoden, who is in the midst of a campaign to keep his job, has emphasized the public safety value of sending people back to prison.

"The stories I have heard about parolees receiving too many second chances are frustrating and wrong, so we have changed this process," Rhoden wrote in an opinion column released on May 1. "I have directed the DOC to take a tougher stance on DUIs, drug use, simple assault, and weapons violations that are a danger to others."

Extra work anticipated for board

Parole board Chairman Myron Rau said Wednesday that the group's workload could grow considerably, because of "everything that's happened recently in the Department of Corrections."

Rhoden wants the parole board to process violations — which will now include more violations for drug use — more quickly, which Rau said could mean adding a day of work back onto the board's monthly meeting schedule.

Rau leads a part-time, nine-person board with members appointed by the governor, attorney general and chief justice of the state Supreme Court. Parole officers supervise people and submit reports of parole violations, but members of the appointed board must sign off on those recommendations to send someone on parole back to prison.

The board holds in-person and virtual hearings during one week of each month, at which they hear requests for release from current inmates, as well as requests for clemency or early discharge from parole.

In recent years, the board added a one-day "special session" to the end of each month to make decisions on parole violations. During those sessions, two members consider the arguments of parolees who are accused of but deny violating the terms of their release. The two members also sign off on dozens of "paper violations" for people who admit to violating their parole terms.

The new system had worked so efficiently that the board meetings shrank from four days to three, but Rau told the board this week they should be prepared to add that day back onto their calendars in the coming months.

Division leaders see improvement

Leaders from the Department of Corrections' parole division regularly report to the board on issues of open positions and parolees contacted in the previous month, but on Wednesday they offered a series of year-end statistics from 2025.

The division met or exceeded its goals, they said. Just 3% of the people on parole are now classified as "absconders," said Brad Lewandowski, director of parole services, meaning they've lost contact with their parole officer on purpose.

"There's no state in the country that's done that," Lewandowski said. "The average nationally is between 10 to 14% of your population as absconders. For our staff to get it there, they worked really, really hard."

National averages for parole absconding are not readily available, as states have differing systems for defining the term and calculating rates.

In response to follow-up questions about where Lewandowski pulled those national averages, corrections spokesman Michael Winder said the parole director found the figures prior to the meeting "when searching other states who have similar systems and the available information."

The number of parolees ducking supervision now hovers at around 100 on any given day, Lewandowski said. Three years ago, when the state created an absconder apprehension unit, there were four times as many.

The state also has a status known as "attempt to locate," which means parole officers have lost touch with a parolee but are unsure why. An attempt to locate sends notice to law enforcement statewide, signaling that any officer who makes contact with the parolee in question should hold them and reach out to their parole officer.

The man who allegedly shot the officer in Sioux Falls was not an absconder, but was on "attempt to

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locate" status. Per corrections policy, a person who remains out of contact with their parole officer can move into absconder status two weeks after the issuance of an attempt to locate bearing their name.

As of Thursday evening, there were 47 people on "attempt to locate" status in South Dakota, corrections spokesman Michael Winder said in an email sent after Wednesday's meeting.

Kayla Stucky, associate director of parole field operations, pointed to a decrease in the number of people returning to prison on "technical parole violations," a list of violations that includes absconding.

"Our goal was to decrease it by 3%, and we actually decreased it by 25%, so that's pretty exciting for us," Stucky said.

Stucky also pointed to two classes for people on parole, a "newer program" called "Thinking for Change" and another called "Moving On." Seventy-two people on parole completed the latter; 40 completed the former.

In the coming year, Stucky said, the division hopes to work on helping more people on parole find jobs. About one in five parolees is unemployed, she said.

The division has assigned a staff member "to try and make sure our offenders are getting the right help that they need to get that employment," Stucky said, and to find more businesses willing to hire people on parole.

Intensive supervision

The hiring of five new officers and the formation of an "enhanced compliance unit" was welcome and "probably needed," Lewandowski said.

Unlike the typical parole officer, he said, the agents in the new unit will oversee 20 to 30 people, not 65 or more.

Five veteran parole officers volunteered to become part of that unit, he said.

"We'll find the toughest cases for them to supervise," Lewandowski said, and the agents will keep up the intensive monitoring for "about four months" after an inmate is released.

"They'll be your aggravated assaults, your violent offenses, your high-risk sex offenders, and we're going to throw in people that have been in prison for a long time," Lewandowski said. "They generally need a little bit of supervision structure as they come out."

Winder, the corrections spokesman, said the new positions will be funded with the existing corrections budget through the "internal reallocation of vacancies from other areas."

Parole leader points to misconceptions

Recidivism rates are calculated on a three-year timeframe, Lewandowski reminded the parole board. The 50% rate that's animated current discussions, he said, is tied to people the parole division began to interact with in 2023.

That can be frustrating for officers who've improved their methods, he said.

"We're kind of being judged on what we were doing three to six years ago," he said.

He also lamented what he called a lack of understanding from the public about the role of the parole board. Many use the words "presumptive parole" and "presumptive probation" interchangeably, he said, typically in reference to — and criticism of — the criminal justice reforms of 2013 that created the latter.

But probation doesn't apply to prison. It's the system of supervision for people who aren't in prison, and a rebuttable presumption of probation was affixed to some nonviolent felonies in 2013.

The system sometimes referred to as "presumptive parole" came nearly two decades before that. Since 1995, inmates who complete assigned programming and avoid major rule violations are released without parole board review, on a date defined by a judge's sentence. In practice, that's meant that two-thirds of the people released from prison never see the parole board.

The current setup replaced a "good time" system. That former system automatically cut a third of an inmate's sentence the day they arrived in prison, with no expectation they'd participate in educational or rehabilitation programming. That framework incentivized good behavior by threatening inmates with a

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loss of their "good time" for rule violations.

Board member John Brown said he and others on the board get questions about why they chose to release people they had no hand in letting out. The people who ask members questions like that, he said, are often surprised to hear that inmates usually earn their own release.

"I don't think it really matters what we do," Brown said. "People think somebody's locked up and they ought to stay there. That's about as far as they think about it."

Jail numbers change

The recent supervision changes have already begun to ripple through the jail in Sioux Falls, South Dakota's most populous city and home to the state penitentiary.

An undeveloped northeast corner of the city will soon play host to a new, \$650 million prison, meant to replace the oldest penitentiary buildings.

Public safety officials in Sioux Falls, as well as Mayor Paul TenHaken, have called for stricter parolee sanctions for years, often pointing to the high number of parolees arrested on new charges who fill the Minnehaha County Jail.

Penalties for parole violations can range from coursework and more contact with a parole officer to a return to prison. Parolees accused of violating the terms of their supervision may be held in jail until parole agents decide whether to send their recommendations to the board for approval.

Being charged with but not convicted of a new crime doesn't necessarily result in a return to prison for someone on parole. People charged with new crimes typically either stay in jail or are released on bond and return to the community while their case is pending.

On the day the officer was shot, the jail in Sioux Falls held 112 people on parole holds, all but eight of whom had new criminal charges.

The number of parole-only holds increased to 40 in the days immediately following the shooting of the Sioux Falls officer, Minnehaha Sheriff Mike Milstead told South Dakota Searchlight late last month. He called the stricter guidelines for parolee detention a welcome change, although "I wish it would have happened earlier."

As of Wednesday, there were 46 people at the jail on parole-only holds. Another 109 were being held on both parole holds and new criminal charges.

That's led to a space crunch at the jail, but "the state has been responsive to our requests to transfer people out to other facilities," said Mike Mattson, warden of the Minnehaha County Jail.

In the past two weeks, Mattson said in an email, the Department of Corrections took in 20 parolees, moved 27 more to Clay County and five to Union County.

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.

How governor candidate Toby Doeden says he'll phase out property taxes

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

In this special edition of the Searchlight Report podcast, host Meghan O'Brien interviews Toby Doeden, an Aberdeen businessman and one of four people running for the Republican nomination for governor of South Dakota.

In this and three upcoming episodes, O'Brien asked all four candidates the same set of questions on topics including abortion, relationships with tribal nations, climate change, taxes and Medicaid. She also asked each candidate to share a "big idea" for South Dakota.

South Dakota's primary election is June 2.

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DOEDEN: I think phasing out and eliminating property tax is going to be something that the folks talk about in this state 100 years from now. There's been some governors around the country, including Ron DeSantis in Florida and a few others that have also talked about doing something similar. I'm going to be the first one here to get it done.

O'BRIEN: Welcome to a special episode of the Searchlight Report, a podcast from South Dakota Searchlight.

I'm your host, Meghan O'Brien. I sat down for an interview with each of the Republicans seeking their party's nomination for governor in the June 2 primary election. I asked each of them the same set of questions.

Over the next four episodes, you'll hear more from each candidate about their goals for state policy on abortion, data centers and economic development, among other topics. I also asked each candidate to share their big idea for South Dakota.

You just heard from Toby Doeden of Aberdeen. Doeden is a dealer principal at Aberdeen Chrysler and has been involved in a number of other businesses and charities. This is his first run for public office.

O'BRIEN: So to start, this past legislative session, there had been a focus on abortion legislation, including restricting abortion medications from entering the state and defining what an abortion procedure is. As governor, do you see there being further need for abortion regulations and legislation? And what do you think that could look like?

DOEDEN: Well, I mean, first and foremost, I think whenever we talk about the issue of abortion, you know, pro-life, we should establish what my position is, which is, I believe life begins at conception and ends at natural death, and there ought not be any ifs, ands or buts or any exceptions in between those two points. And so, as governor, I will do everything in my power to protect the unborn children.

But I think this conversation also leads us down the path of why do some young women feel that abortion is their only way out of a specific situation, right? And I think some of those situations arise because of a lot of the climate in South Dakota that frankly has been ushered in by some of the career politicians, and I'm talking about affordability, right? I'm talking about law and order.

But from traveling the state exhaustively, Meghan, for two years, I have talked to somebody from every walk of life in this state, including young mothers who have had abortions or are considering having abortions. And many of the young ladies I've talked to have indicated that affordability is a driving force oftentimes, and I think that's very sad. It's why as governor, I'm running to make this state affordable again to bring down costs for everybody, including folks on fixed incomes, young mothers that find themselves in a very precarious position.

And so that's my stance on that. I have compassion for all people, but I am as big of a fighter and supporter in pro-life as any person that you've ever met, and I will continue to be that way as governor.

O'BRIEN: OK, so with abortion already being illegal in the state, except to preserve the life of the mother, do you see there needing to be any further legislation being introduced or kind of in conversation at all in the near future?

DOEDEN: You know, banning the pills from coming in is a good first step. I think it's one of those issues where outside forces are always in perpetuity going to be trying to find a way to move our state further to the progressive left on this issue. And so as governor, my team and I will constantly be monitoring external forces trying to sway and push things into our state, and be very proactive to stop those before they get any traction. I think that's where the legislative side of this comes in.

O'BRIEN: Property tax reduction was obviously a pretty big conversation in the Legislature this year, and while there were a lot of proposals introduced to reduce homeowner property tax, there were also some proposals that were introduced to expand and promote programs that already exist to provide relief to people who are veterans, people who are part of the elderly and disabled populations. Would you as governor want to increase the amount of South Dakotans taking advantage of those programs? And how would you do that? What would that look like if so?

DOEDEN: I'm going to fix, largely, South Dakota's affordability issue for most residents, and I'm going

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to completely fix all of the housing issues when, as governor, I begin the process of completely phasing out all property taxes for South Dakota homeowners.

South Dakota homeowners have seen their property tax double, in some cases way more than double, just in the past six years alone. I've met hundreds of fixed-income seniors that had to sell their homes or are considering selling their homes because they can't afford to live there anymore because of property taxes. Young folks are unable to buy homes at record levels because of property taxes. And so if you live in South Dakota, you are being significantly negatively impacted by property tax.

And what we saw the past two years, Meghan, in the state Legislature was just another glaring example of how ineffective many of these long-term politicians are. I think there was more than 50 property tax bills put forth in two years. I think there was a few decent ones that would have at least gotten the ball rolling in the right direction, so when my administration came into office, we could pick that ball up and continue moving it toward a full phase-out.

But the problem is, Meghan, our current governor Larry Rhoden and Speaker of the House Jon Hansen, because they were in this race for governor, they wanted to put their name at the top of any property tax relief bill. So they systematically killed every other property tax relief bill. Again, some of those were for veterans, some were targeted toward fixed-income folks.

And rather than doing the right thing, they put their own two bills forward. And then when the dust settled, they passed, I think it was Senate Bill 245 and House Bill 96. They got a very small homeowner reduction. I talked to somebody last night in Newell, South Dakota, up in Butte County. His reduction is \$20 per year.

But how are they paying for it? A 19% sales tax increase. The sales tax went from 4.2% to 4.5% on House Bill 96, and then Senate Bill 96, which gives the counties the option, raises the sales tax another 0.5%. So we're going to see a 19% sales tax increase starting in 2027.

Meghan, I don't know if you own a home or not. It doesn't matter, but if you are one of the 40% of South Dakotans that are having to rent today because owning is unaffordable, you're going to pay 19% more at the grocery store every time you buy something starting next year, Meghan. Every resident of this state, including non-property owners, they're going to pay a 19% higher sales tax and get zero relief.

And so, as governor, I'm going there to get real solutions. I'm going to take my 30 years of my real-world experience building companies, managing very complex financial systems, and we're going to actually start getting sales tax cuts, not just shifting the money from one tax to another.

O'BRIEN: You've been on this platform of eliminating property taxes in the state. How exactly do you plan to do that? Do you have kind of a step-by-step process for what that is going to look like for your administration?

DOEDEN: Absolutely. It's actually quite rudimentary and very simple, old-school money management, which the Republican Party used to have as their platform. It seems as though the Republican leadership in the state is now more of a progressive Democratic platform: raise taxes, raise our state's budget, spend more money. I'm going to do the opposite.

Number one, my administration is going to be the first in more than a generation to actually cut spending at the state and county level. Well, how are we going to do that? Well, number one, I'm doing a full financial audit statewide, every single department, every nook, every cranny, line item by line item.

Our state's budget has increased 38% since 2023, Meghan. Three short years, 38% increase in state spending, plus the county has increased almost that much. And what have we gotten for it? Our sales tax revenue is flat. Our economy is on life support, and property taxes have continued to go up and up.

I believe we're going to find hundreds of millions of dollars in waste, inefficiencies and redundancies. So that's number one. I'm going to make South Dakota state government fiscally sound again.

Number two, there are external revenue sources that are just waiting to be harvested and collected by South Dakota. But the career politicians have never even attempted because they like internal revenue. Internal revenue is the money that you pay out of your paycheck. It's the money that you pay in sales tax. It's the money you pay when you register your vehicle. That's internal tax. It comes from a resident

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of South Dakota.

External revenue comes from non-South Dakota residents. We're talking about targeted visitor consumption tax. We're talking about, for the first time in our state's history, charging all the rich billionaires from around the world that are parking their money here in legacy trusts, charging them a small fee like every other state does.

So I am going to bring in some new revenue that's not going to come from the taxpayers. It's called external revenue.

And thirdly, and probably the most important, our economy, as I just mentioned a moment ago, has flatlined. Go back and look at the sales tax revenue our state has collected the last four years. You're going to find it has not increased since 2022, yet our spending is up almost 40%. That's not sustainable.

Why has our economy flatlined, Meghan? Well, 10,000 small businesses have closed permanently since 2020. We have not attracted new small and medium-sized companies to come to South Dakota in years. We get a very small fraction of them. I was told that somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 new businesses left leftist liberal states in the past decade and settled in more conservative areas around the country, mostly the Midwest. Hardly any of them are coming here. Why?

We have no state income tax. We have an amazing, beautiful state. We have low traffic compared to a lot of our neighboring states. Why aren't they coming here? Well, I'll tell you why, because we've had career politicians serving as governor that are only operating out of their own self-interest. As soon as they get elected, Meghan, they start raising more money. They plan their reelection, and then eventually they want to run for a higher office, and we've seen that very clearly in the last decade.

So once the economy starts growing, and it will, once I start collecting external revenue, which we will, and once I cut all of the fat and pork out of our state budget, you are going to see very quickly, within a matter of a couple of years, a significant amount of annual budget surpluses.

And yes, I will use that money to target the phase-out of things like property tax, tax on things like groceries and other household necessities. We will make South Dakota affordable again. It's not that complicated and it won't take near as long as what the politicians are trying to convince people that it's going to take.

O'BRIEN: The State Department of Social Services has reported that more than 1,000 Medicaid enrollees in South Dakota could lose coverage once the federal work requirements take place next year. What do you plan to do about that?

DOEDEN: Well, number one, our Medicaid spending has dramatically increased. Now, I know we extended coverage for more people, but that's not all of it. There's been a 90% increase in Medicaid expense in South Dakota since 2020. Yet the number of residents that live here is virtually the same, right? Well, I think that tells us two things.

I think number one, it tells us that South Dakota, for some people — or for many people, I should say — has systematically become less and less affordable, and that need has increased. But number two, we have to audit our state Medicaid expenses. If you look nationally, and this has been documented many, many times, at a minimum, when other states have looked into Medicaid, they find 10% in fraudulent payments.

So as governor, not just with Medicaid, but with every state program, once we cut out the waste, the fraud, the abuse, then and only then can we have an efficient system where we can start taking care of and helping the people that actually need it, right?

And so our state has never audited our Medicaid ever, not one single time. And so other states have done this and they found a minimum of 10% fraud. Well, Medicaid is now our largest line-item budget. It's over \$2 billion annually that comes through our state in Medicaid payments. Ten percent of that is \$200 million.

Why aren't we auditing our state departments? Why aren't we auditing Medicaid? If we know there's waste in the Medicaid system — and there is — we have to cut out the waste. We have to get efficient, then we can figure out who's supposed to be on, who's not supposed to be on.

But at the end of the day, our system of government in this country and certainly in South Dakota cannot continue double-digit Medicaid increases with no additional new revenue, right?

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Listen, I know times are hard for some people and they're down on their luck. Those people need assistance. My mom and dad were those people when I was a very young child. My father became disabled and we lived off of Social Security for several years and without it, I don't know what we would have done. I think we probably would have been split up, my siblings and I.

And so I understand that all of these programs are a necessity for many people, but I also know that many people abuse these programs. We've got to get the ones that are abusing these programs off the government's payroll, and then we can start actually allocating these funds to the people that need it.

O'BRIEN: OK, what do you think that the state's role in economic development should be, and if elected, how do you plan to establish or continue that role?

DOEDEN: I think the state's role in economic development should be helping our existing second-, third- and fourth-generation small businesses that are struggling in South Dakota. I've talked to many of them the last two years on the road. A lot of them wait months for SBA loans, or they don't qualify because of some weird rule.

Yet the governors keep wanting to spend literally tens of millions of dollars per year on low-interest loans and grants to companies that are making millions of dollars a year. Just Google "GOED payments" for the past five years.

A small third-generation company struggles to get a \$25,000 SBA loan. But if you want to build a new facility and you're an out-of-state company, you can get a \$100 million TIF, you can get a low-interest \$20 million GOED loan.

How in the world does the governor of South Dakota have access to \$100 million per year at his discretion to dole out in return for political favors? It's a very corrupt system.

I think the Governor's Office of Economic Development should be eliminated. I think that money needs to have more oversight, and I think that money needs to go back to the hardworking South Dakotans — the farmers, the ranchers, the small-business owners that built this state. We have to invest back in rural South Dakota, not just Sioux Falls.

O'BRIEN: A lot of recently enacted laws in South Dakota could make it harder to vote, including new requirements for proof of citizenship when registering and a new way for people to challenge another person's ability to vote. What policies would you pursue as governor on voting access?

DOEDEN: Anybody that complains about some of these actions that have been taken to make sure that only citizens of our state are voting are probably liberals that want to cheat in the elections. Like, pure and simple. If you can't provide proof of citizenship, then you shouldn't vote. If you don't have a photo ID, then you shouldn't vote.

When did it become OK, Meghan, to make it easier for people that aren't citizens of this country to vote? Our forefathers would literally be flipping over in their graves at the fact that you and I are even having this conversation.

Of course you should have to prove that you're a citizen to vote in this country. Of course you should have a photo ID. Look at where all the fraudulent elections have happened. It's in leftist liberal states where any kook can walk in with no ID and vote.

I will continue to fight to make it harder and harder for these people to cheat South Dakota elections.

O'BRIEN: Regulations for data centers in South Dakota were also on the table for lawmakers this session. How do you plan to regulate them, if at all?

DOEDEN: I plan to regulate data centers by not allowing them to come here. I mean, it's pretty much as simple as that.

We should not be using massive amounts of taxpayer-subsidized money to help build these multibillion-dollar data centers that are owned by people like Mark Zuckerberg, Google and many other very, very wealthy people in the world.

And the reason they're targeting South Dakota is because we have a lot of open space. There's not a lot of political power here. It's hard to raise money to fight against some of these things.

We found that in a lot of other fights we've had like Summit Carbon Solutions, which thankfully we won that one. There was a big push by out-of-state money to get Amendment G, the radical abortion bill,

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passed a couple of years ago. We defeated that.

And so as a capitalist, if a data center wants to go into a particular state and they can get all the permitting and the local people where they're putting it approve of it, pretty hard to get in the way of that, right? That's what capitalism is.

But capitalism should not be taking money from taxpayers in South Dakota that are already struggling to pay their property taxes. Taking more money from those folks and giving it to the wealthiest people in the world does not sit right with me.

It should not sit right with any leader, any elected leader in the state. Anybody that is fighting to bring data centers to South Dakota using taxpayer subsidies is a very scary person to be leading our state. I'll leave it at that.

O'BRIEN: The western part of the state saw significantly less snow this winter, and multiple wildfires have burned through thousands of acres in western counties. What role does the state play in making positive changes when it comes to climate change and environmental disaster? And how would you, if elected, make those changes?

DOEDEN: Well, number one, I don't believe climate change has anything to do with the details in the question you asked. I mean, anybody that's taken the time to look back at our global weather patterns for the past however many thousands of years, you'll see that it's very cyclical, and they say it's warming now, but there were periods in our past where it was much warmer than it is today.

But wildfires are a real concern, again, not because of climate control, because sometimes we don't get enough moisture and it's dry out here. And the folks I talked to — I'm actually out in West River right now. We have a huge event in Sturgis tonight — and I got asked this question at an event a couple of nights ago. There was somebody there from the state that talked about how whenever they tried to enact new prevention services and prevention policies, these things cost money, and they're constantly told by the representatives in their districts and eventually by people from the executive office in Pierre that our state doesn't have enough money.

Our state's broke, even though our state's budget is increasing double digits every year. They're spending the money faster than they're taking it in.

And so it's not just preventing wildfires, Meghan. It's investing back in our rural healthcare, investing back in our rural infrastructure. Our K-12 test scores are the lowest they have ever been in the history of the state. The rising drug epidemic is the worst it's ever been.

None of these things are having the resources and the money and the energy and the time invested into them that they need to maintain our infrastructure because our state and our leaders like Jon Hansen and Larry Rhoden continue to overspend and overtax, and our state is broke.

We cannot make any meaningful improvements in this state until we fix the broken financial system of our state government. It's as simple as that.

O'BRIEN: Where do you think that the state's relationship stands with tribal nations in the state, and how would you plan to continue or develop that relationship if you're elected?

DOEDEN: Well, that's a really great question. I'm glad you asked it.

I went on a 66-county bus tour starting last summer, and we concluded it last fall, and we're on our second tour right now. On the first bus tour, I went to all nine reservations. We did, I think, almost 20 events combined on the reservations.

No candidate running for governor or any other office in the state's history has ever gone and done as many events on the reservations as I did. I'm very proud of what my team and I did. I was the first Republican gubernatorial candidate to go into the heart of Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 40 years.

Here's what I found out. This isn't secondhand information. This is from tribal leaders and citizens on the ground on the reservations. The nine tribes are not getting along. They haven't for a long time, and they fight all the time. They don't like each other.

That's a big problem. What can the governor of South Dakota do, or what can our state do to help out the reservations when the nine reservations can't even speak amicably together, right? So that's number one. I think the new governor has to bridge a relationship back between the nine reservations.

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Number two, law and order has virtually vanished on all nine reservations. Crime is rampant, there's cartel activity. I have met with people firsthand. They can't even get the FBI to come out and investigate deaths on the reservation that are clearly at the hands of organized groups of people, likely cartel members.

So until the reservations are ready and willing to get serious about helping the state bring back law and order on the reservations, it's going to be difficult, Meghan, sadly. I mean this is such a layered, complicated issue.

I can tell you this: As governor, I intend immediately upon being sworn in, as quickly as possible, to bring leaders from all nine reservations to the state Capitol. I want to meet with them. I want to lay out expectations.

And I want to tell them I will do everything in my power as your governor to help you and to help your folks on the reservations, but we have to have a good relationship — at least a good working relationship — amongst the nine reservations, number one. And number two, you have to help us bring law and order back to keep the reservations safe, and then we can start addressing some of the issues.

And so I do look forward to doing that. I'm also very aware of how incredibly difficult it's going to be. But it's never stopped me from trying to fix problems.

And I get tired of hearing people — I've had state leaders, I'd love to name them, maybe after June 2 I will — I've had people tell me on this issue that it's too big to fix, it's too hard, you're gonna waste time, you're gonna waste state resources.

When, Meghan, when did it become too hard to fix that we're not willing to fight to help 8% of the population? Eight percent of the people that live in South Dakota are on reservations.

And so I don't like those folks too much that say the problem's too hard to fix. I think every problem needs to be worked on until we start to see meaningful improvement, and that's certainly what I intend to do on the reservations.

O'BRIEN: About half of the existing inmates in the state end up returning to prison within three years of their release. How will you as governor work to redirect those inmates?

DOEDEN: Two issues. Number one, the reason our recidivism rate is 50% — I think it's nearly doubled since 2013. Well, what happened in 2013? Dusty Johnson was the chief of staff for then-Governor Daugaard. He pushed legislation for a bill that was called Senate Bill 70, more known today as presumptive probation.

Larry Rhoden was a state senator at the time. He whipped votes, he voted for it on the Senate floor, and Jon Hansen was a whip. He was a member of the House of Representatives and he motioned it out of committee and voted for it as well on the House floor.

So my three opponents, all three career politicians, are the reason that our recidivism rate has jumped to 50%. It's very sad.

We need a governor that's going to be tough on law and order. I'm going to make the state a flyover zone for criminals, illegal immigrants and drug dealers. That's number one. We have to break down and fix our judicial system. Catch and release is not working.

But specifically to answer your question, because I don't want you to think I'm dodging it because I certainly am not, we have to do a lot better job at rehabilitation, treatment and prevention services.

I have talked to experts in the field that I trust, that have had success for decades. That is how we lower the recidivism rate today. That is how we stop this revolving door of drug-related offenses.

Locking people up in prison for long periods of time because of narcotic use is not a good use of public taxpayer money. We have to rehabilitate them as quickly and as well as we possibly can as a state, and then we have to get them off the taxpayers' dime, right?

And if they reoffend again, then let's rehabilitate them again. But those rehabilitation, treatment and prevention services, if done correctly, do work over time.

DOEDEN: Marty Jackley, who's our current Attorney General, went to federal court, Meghan, and sued the big pharma companies in their own backyard and won a \$100 million lawsuit for the state of South Dakota. I think that money gets paid out to us over about a 10- or 12-year period. We've already received a little bit of it.

Marty wants to use that money — and I completely agree with Marty. Marty said that money was sup-

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posed to be earmarked for treatment, rehabilitation and prevention services.

Dusty Johnson, Larry Rhoden and Jon Hansen have all publicly said that they want to start a new government program, which — you know — how many people are we going to hire, how much is that going to cost? They want to put that money essentially in a slush fund that they can use to dole out as they see fit.

That is not where that federal court intended for that money to go. Marty Jackley is on record saying that money was not supposed to go to the government, that it was supposed to go to rehabilitation, treatment and prevention services. As governor, that's exactly what I'm going to do.

O'BRIEN: And so when we look back at the past governors of South Dakota, some have had some pretty defining impacts on the state. Peter Norbeck founded Custer State Park. George Mickelson had his year of reconciliation to strengthen relationships between the state and Native Americans. Bill Janklow used prison inmates to rewire the state's K-12 and university buildings for internet access. What is your big specific idea for South Dakota's future?

DOEDEN: Well, I think phasing out and eliminating property tax is going to be something that folks talk about in this state 100 years from now. There's been some governors around the country, including Ron DeSantis and a few others, that have also talked about doing something similar.

I'm going to be the first one here to get it done. We're going to take the government off the backs of property and landowners for the first time in this country's history, first time in South Dakota history. That is going to be a landmark achievement.

And number two — not to me specifically — but you mentioned it, and it's important enough for me to follow up on. What Governor Janklow did by putting the inmates to work was an effective program. That has largely gone away. We don't do that anymore.

So we're paying to house criminals in our state prison system, many of which are nonviolent criminals, OK? So we're paying to house them, but we're getting nothing in return. Why aren't we putting these folks to work, right?

That's certainly one of the ideas we'll look at as governor and reinstating. I think Governor Janklow got that one right.

O'BRIEN: OK. As a final question, is there anything else that you want the voters of South Dakota to know?

DOEDEN: Well, there's a million things. I'll keep it very simple in under 30 seconds.

I'm the only outsider running to be governor in this race. My three opponents combined have 60 years in state politics. Jon Hansen and Larry Rhoden combined have been in South Dakota politics for 40 years.

I'm self-funding virtually my entire campaign. I think more than 99% of my campaign expense I have personally funded.

I'm going to Pierre not on behalf of the lobbyists or the big donors or the special interests. I'm going to Pierre to fight for the people, the taxpayers of the state. Every decision I make will be on behalf of them.

O'BRIEN: Doeden is one of four Republican candidates running for governor. The Republican primary election for governor is June 2, and early voting is underway. The winner of the Republican primary will advance to the November general election to face Democratic candidate Dan Ahlers.

That's all we have for this episode of Searchlight Report. Audio for this episode of the podcast came from recordings by South Dakota Searchlight.

The podcast is based on reporting by South Dakota Searchlight's staff — editor Seth Tupper, senior reporter John Hult and reporters Joshua Haiar, Makenzie Huber and me.

I write the scripts and produce the audio, with editing by Seth Tupper.

South Dakota Searchlight is part of States Newsroom, the nation's largest nonprofit news organization.

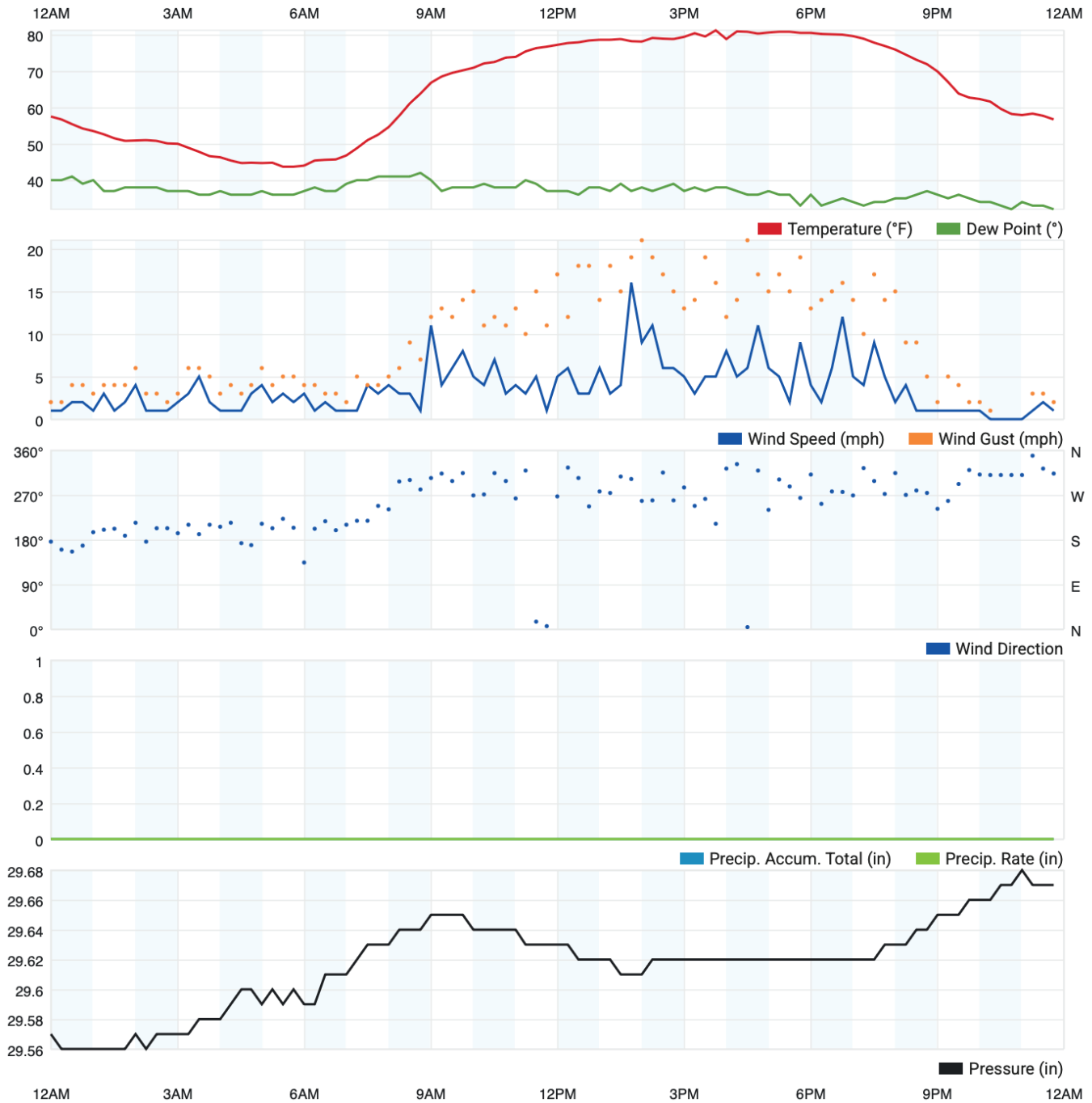
Until next time, I'm South Dakota Searchlight's Meghan O'Brien with the Searchlight Report.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

May 15, 2026



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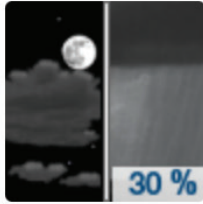
Today



High: 77 °F

Sunny

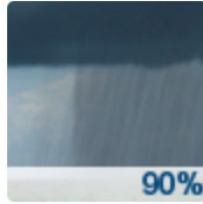
Tonight



Low: 45 °F

Partly Cloudy
then Chance
Showers and
Breezy

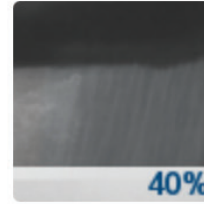
Sunday



High: 65 °F

Showers

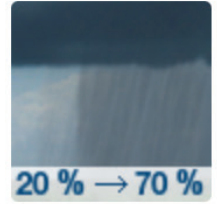
Sunday Night



Low: 39 °F

Chance
Showers and
Breezy

Monday



High: 52 °F

Breezy.
Slight Chance
Showers then
Showers
Likely

What's Ahead



NWS Aberdeen, SD



TODAY

Warm & dry. Elevated fire concerns over central SD. Winds increasing tonight, out of the east with gusts 25-40mph
Highs: 70s



SUNDAY

Rain showers and thunderstorms, **a few strong to severe storms** in the afternoon & evening
Highs: 60s



MONDAY

Rain showers. Isolated afternoon thunderstorms
Highs: 47-55°



TUESDAY

Rain showers ending in the morning

Highs: 48-54°

Warm and dry conditions will continue today, with highs in the 70s and elevated fire concerns for portions of central South Dakota. Winds out of the east will gust 25-40 mph tonight. Sunday brings rain showers and thunderstorms with a few strong to severe storms possible afternoon/evening over mainly eastern SD into western MN. For Monday and Tuesday, expect a cool-down with highs in the upper 40s and 50s with lingering rain showers Monday and Tuesday morning.

THREAT ASSESSMENT

HIGHEST LOCAL RISK

2

WHAT THIS MEANS:
SCATTERED severe storms
possible

TIMING

Sunday 2 to 8 PM

PRIMARY THREATS



LARGE HAIL
1" in diameter

SECONDARY THREATS

DAMAGING
WIND
60 mph

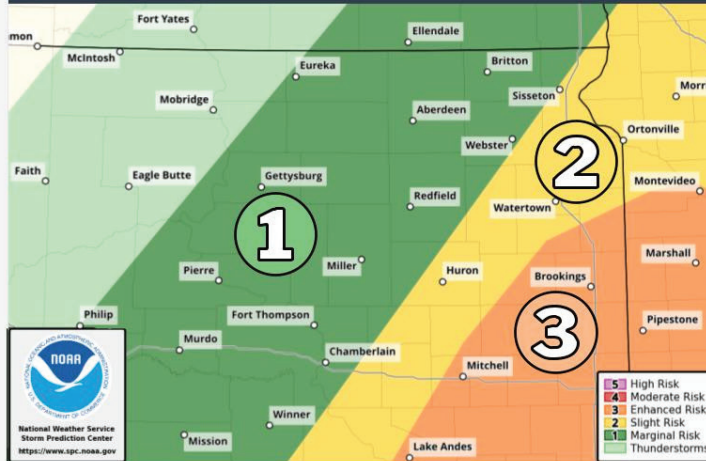


HEAVY
RAIN



ISOLATED
TORNADOES

Scattered SEVERE STORMS Sunday Aft/Evening



What To Expect

- Storms across central SD Sunday morning move into northeastern SD/western MN in the afternoon - **with some storms becoming severe**
- Large Hail to 1" in diameter
- Storms will move east by 9 PM

What To Do?

- **Stay Weather Aware!**
- Be ready to take shelter indoors when storms approach & have multiple ways to receive warnings



INDOOR
SHELTER



OUTDOOR PLANS?
STAY WEATHER
AWARE



MULTIPLE WAYS
TO RECEIVE
WARNINGS

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



SEVERE THUNDERSTORM RISK



Storms across central SD Sunday morning move into northeastern SD/western MN in the afternoon - with some storms becoming severe. There is a Slight Risk (level 2 of 5) of severe storms over portions of eastern SD, including Huron, Watertown, and west central MN. Large Hail to 1" in diameter is the main concern from the strongest storms Sunday afternoon from around 2 to 8 PM. Storms will move into western MN by around 9 PM.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 81 °F at 3:44 PM

Low Temp: 44 °F at 5:35 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 4:19 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 101 in 1934

Record Low: 23 in 2014

Average High: 71

Average Low: 44

Average Precip in May.: 1.77

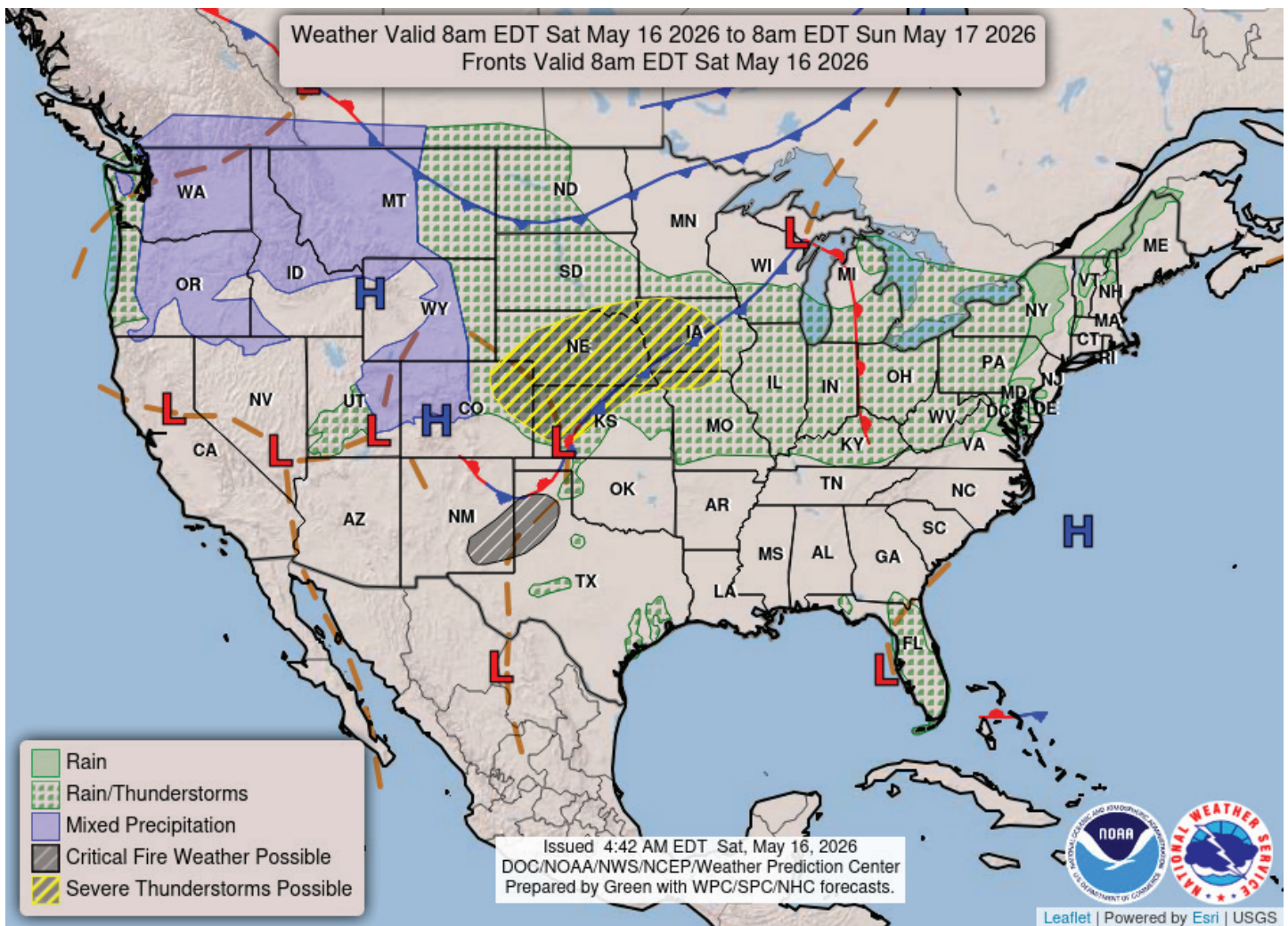
Precip to date in May.: 0.03

Average Precip to date: 5.74

Precip Year to Date: 3.15

Sunset Tonight: 8:56 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:59 am



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Today in Weather History

May 16th, 1883: Benchmark flooding in the Black Hills occurred in 1883, with highly high flows reported throughout the hills that resulted from heavy rainfall on top of snowmelt.

May 16th, 1929: On this day, Aberdeen recorded 3.0 inches of snow, the latest measurable snowfall for the city on record.

May 16th, 1992: It was a wild day across the tri-state region of Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa, with tornadoes and destructive straight-line winds. A tornado damaged three grain bins and two farm wagons in Cedar County of northeast Nebraska before crossing into Dixon County. As it traveled east, it destroyed two barns and a garage and was responsible for killing between 5,000 and 10,000 chickens at a chicken farm. In northwest Iowa, Sioux City reported winds of around 60 miles an hour, causing minor damage. Elsewhere, winds gusted as high as 75 miles an hour in Spencer and 74 miles an hour in Le Mars.

1874 — The Mill Creek disaster occurred west of Northhampton MA. Dam slippage resulted in a flash flood which claimed 143 lives, and caused a million dollars property damage. (David Ludlum)

1924 — The temperature at Blitzen OR soared to 108 degrees to set a state record for the month of May. The record was later tied at Pelton Dam on the 31st of May in 1986. (The Weather Channel)

1952 — High winds in the Wasatch Canyon of Utah struck Ogden and Brigham City. Winds at Hill Air Force Base gusted to 92 mph. (The Weather Channel)

1987 — It was a summer-like day as thunderstorms abounded across the nation. Thunderstorms in Texas drenched Guadalupe County with more than three inches of rain resulting in flash flooding. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Afternoon and evening thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from Florida to New York State. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the north central U.S. Havre, MT, reported a record high of 95 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 — Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather in the south central U.S. Thunderstorms spawned twenty tornadoes, and there were 180 reports of large hail and damaging winds. A tornado at Cleburne, TX, caused 30 million dollars damage. A violent (F-4) tornado touched down near Brackettville, TX, and a strong (F-3) tornado killed one person and injured 28 others at Jarrell, TX. Thunderstorms also produced softball size hail at Shamrock, TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — Thunderstorms produced severe weather from eastern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas to the Upper Ohio Valley. Thunderstorms spawned seventeen tornadoes, including a twister which killed one person and injured another north of Corning, AR. There were 128 reports of large hail or damaging winds. Strong thunderstorm winds killed one person and injured six others at Folsomville, IN, and injured another five persons in southeastern Hardin County KY. In Arkansas, baseball size hail was reported near Fouke and near El Dorado. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotion

The Church: God's Design

Despite our human weaknesses and disagreements, Christ faithfully sustains His church.

Hebrews 10:23-25: 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,

25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

When you hear the word "church," what do you picture? God created the church to be a fellowship of believers who encourage each other and carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

As we saw yesterday, worshipping God, instructing and edifying believers, making disciples of all nations, and serving the needy are some of the things churches should be concerned with. Unless the leadership is careful, however, these purposes can get out of balance. For instance, congregations that overemphasize teaching or prioritize evangelism could easily neglect other needs.

Even within the church, our human weaknesses show themselves. When we make certain aspects of ministry our main concern, disagreements—even over minor matters like music choices or personal preferences—can challenge the unity Christ calls us toward (John 17:20-23). Our struggles with sin remind us how much we need God's grace in community.

Yet Christ remains faithful to His church. As we continually focus on Scripture and the wisdom passed down through the centuries, God shapes us more fully for His purposes. The church, sustained by His presence, continues to be a place where the Lord meets His people and transforms lives.

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

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The Groton Independent

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WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
05.15.26

7 8 27 29 30 2

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

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 18 Mins 21
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
05.15.26

17 23 25 52 61 3

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$277,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
05.13.26

17 18 28 37 42 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$25,750,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 18 Mins 21
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
05.13.26

7 16 29 31 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$90,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 33 Mins 21
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
05.13.26

8 13 39 63 66 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 2 Mins 21
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
05.13.26

22 31 52 56 67 15

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$86,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 2 Mins 21
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Democrats test a new red state strategy: Back independents over their own nominees

By STEVE PEOPLES and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Democratic leaders, desperate to compete in red states where their party brand is toxic, are embracing something new this midterm season: not backing Democrats.

In states like Nebraska and Alaska, Democratic officials are, in some cases, looking past their own party's candidates while subtly encouraging — or even openly promoting — independent candidates they hope can outperform the Democratic label. The Democratic National Committee and some of its allies in Washington are quietly supporting the new strategy.

Meanwhile, some of the independent candidates are chatting in a group text about their approach as they plot a path that could shake up Congress, which is consumed by partisan gridlock.

Nebraska Democrats this week chose a nominee for U.S. Senate, Cindy Burbank, who said a major campaign priority was to ensure a Democrat wouldn't be on the fall ballot to pull support from independent Dan Osborn. Shortly after polls closed, Burbank reiterated her plan to drop out in the coming weeks during a private conversation with a party official, according to state Democratic chair Jane Kleeb.

Democratic leaders believe Osborn, who came within 7 percentage points of winning a Senate seat in 2024, has the best chance to defeat Republican Sen. Pete Ricketts.

Democrats' pivot toward independents is part of an intentional strategy in some places — and something closer to a wink and a nod in others — that covers a handful of high-profile Senate and House and even statehouse contests. Independent Senate candidates are also running in states like Idaho, South Dakota and Montana, where Democratic leadership has so far been unwilling to fully embrace the independents, although many view them as the Democrats' best chance to stop Republicans this fall.

"For some states, and Nebraska is one of them, where Democrats are 32% of the electorate, this is a long-term strategy for us," said Kleeb, who also serves as a vice chair to the Democratic National Committee.

Kleeb said her state party is backing independents in at least four state legislative seats in addition to the U.S. Senate: "We have to build a coalition with independents in order to win elections so we can do good work for the people. Period."

Some of the Democratic Party's national political machine appears to be on board.

The Democrats' fundraising site, ActBlue, serves some of the independent candidates, as do popular Democratic-allied website builders. At the same time, some of the party's campaign committees in Washington quietly provide logistical support in some cases, while avoiding public criticism of the independent candidates even in some races where there is a Democratic nominee.

"The Democratic Party's brand is awful right now," said Democratic strategist Josh Schwerin. "The combination of the brand problem and the existential nature of the threat that our country is facing requires us to have a big tent and look for candidates who can win."

There are risks for the Democratic Party

Some Democratic donors, strategists and party leaders from other states have privately pushed back, insisting Democrats should not look past their own nominees for short-term political gain. They want Democratic officials, in Washington and on the ground in red states, to work harder to make the Democratic brand more attractive — even if it takes several more years to be competitive.

"What's the independent going to do for the Democratic Party if they win?" asked Democratic strategist Mike Ceraso, who sees the shift toward independents as an attempt to disguise Democrats in some cases. "We're the party of truth and honesty and integrity, but we're playing these stupid political games?"

And there is no guarantee that the independent candidates, if elected, would support all of the Democrats' policy priorities or even Democratic leadership in Congress.

In Idaho, independent Senate candidate Todd Achilles, an Army veteran and former Democratic state

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legislator, said he won't be caucusing with either party if elected. He explained his politics as "straight down the middle," and said he believes in individual liberties.

"Idahoans should be able to live how they want," he said. But the Democratic Party was a bad fit because it "has given up on little red states like Idaho."

On his list of problems with Democrats is that the party made a big mistake by initially running Joe Biden again for president in 2024. But he also said "the shine is coming off" Trump, whom Idaho voters backed by 36 points in 2024.

Achilles said he and other military veterans running for Senate as independents chat in the text chain and are "very much on the same page." He says the group wants to see "guardrails," including term and age limits and campaign finance reform.

"The priority is to get Congress functioning again," he said. "We gotta break the grip of the two-party system."

'I'll never vote for a Democrat'

In South Dakota, Navy and Air Force veteran Brian Bengs has launched an independent bid to defeat Republican incumbent Sen. Mike Rounds, who's seeking a third term this fall.

Bengs ran as a Democrat against Senate Majority Leader John Thune four years ago and lost by 43 points.

A lifelong independent, he said he got turned down by the party in 2022 when he sought to run with its organizational support but without the label. Still, he insists he can win without the party's formal backing.

One key lesson from his 2022 campaign, he says, was how hard it was to break through with the Democratic Party label.

Voters would immediately ask, "What are you?" he recalled.

"When you say, 'I'm a lifelong independent running as a Democrat,'" Bengs said, the response was quick. "I'll never vote for a Democrat.' And that was it," he said.

"So that takeaway soured me on running again in any party system, because it was just a soul-sucking experience."

In Alaska, some Democrats believe that commercial fisherman Bill Hill, a retired school superintendent, may represent their best hope in defeating first-term Republican Rep. Nick Begich for the state's only House seat.

Hill, a lifelong independent, raised more than \$780,000 in the first three months of the year, besting Democrat Matt Schultz, a pastor, who raised \$578,000 from last October through March.

The state Democratic Party declined to endorse Schultz at its recent convention, which Hill also attended. The House Democrats' campaign committee in Washington has also declined so far to promote Schultz's candidacy. Hill, meanwhile, is racking up local union endorsements.

Hill's message to voters, he said, is the same for Republicans, Democrats and independents: "You need to be pragmatic about who you choose to support in this election cycle, because at the end of the day, we need a change in the House seat in Alaska."

A spokeswoman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee criticized independents like Osborn, Bengs, Achilles and Seth Bodnar, who is running in Montana, as "fake Independents who would push liberal Democratic policies in the Senate."

Currently, there are two independents in the Senate: Maine Sen. Angus King and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. Both caucus with Democrats.

In an interview, Hill said he's unlikely to caucus with Republicans in Washington if elected, but he's not committing to joining Democrats either. He was reluctant to criticize the Democratic Party or Trump.

Hill acknowledged the challenge of running for Congress as an independent, but said there are benefits, too.

"There's freedom," he said. "I can truly represent the working people of Alaska."

Putin to visit Chinese leader Xi Jinping days after Trump's trip to Beijing

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on a two-day trip to Beijing next week, the Kremlin said Saturday.

The announcement comes less than 24 hours after U.S. President Donald Trump finished his own state visit to China, where he also met Xi to discuss trade and the U.S. and Israel's war in Iran.

In a statement, the Kremlin said that Putin's trip, planned for May 19-20, had been scheduled to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship.

It said that the two leaders would discuss bilateral relations as well as "key international and regional issues" and economic cooperation.

Relations between China and Russia have deepened in recent years, particularly since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 left Moscow shunned on the global stage and heavily reliant on Beijing for trade due to Western sanctions.

When Putin visited China in September 2025, Xi welcomed his counterpart as an "old friend." Putin also addressed Xi as "dear friend."

The Russian leader is also scheduled to visit China for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in the city of Shenzhen in November.

Continued strikes and returned remains

Ukraine repatriated the bodies of fallen soldiers Saturday following an earlier exchange with Moscow involving prisoners of war.

Russia returned 528 bodies that "according to the Russian side, may belong to Ukrainian servicemen," Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War said in a statement.

Experts will now "take all necessary measures aimed at identifying the deceased who have been repatriated," it said.

It comes after Russia and Ukraine swapped 205 prisoners of war on Friday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said it was the first phase of a planned swap of 1,000 POWs from each side. Some of the Ukrainians had been held by Russia since 2022 and fought in some of the war's fiercest battles, he added.

Meanwhile, Russia launched overnight drone attacks against Ukraine's southern Odesa region on Saturday, regional authorities said.

Russian drones struck a five-story apartment block and a one-story residential building, injuring two people, said regional head Oleh Kiper. The city's port was also damaged, he added.

Russia launched 294 drones overnight, Ukraine's Air Force said, adding that 269 of them were shot down.

Russia's Ministry of Defense said that its forces shot down 138 Ukrainian drones overnight over 14 Russian regions, including Moscow. Drones were also destroyed over the annexed Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, as well as the Black and Azov seas, it said.

Ukrainian attacks killed two civilians in Russia's Belgorod region on the western border with Ukraine, local officials said. One man was killed when a Ukrainian drone hit a vehicle in the village of Krasnaya Yaruga, while another died when his home was hit in a strike on the village of Dubovoye. An apartment block in the region was also damaged in a separate attack, officials said.

Trump says Islamic State group leader was killed in a joint US-Nigerian mission

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and OPE ADETAYO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. and Nigerian forces killed a leader of the Islamic State group in Nigeria in a mission carried out Friday, U.S. President Donald Trump said.

Trump announced the joint operation in Africa's most populous country in a late-night social media post.

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He said Abu Bakr al-Mainuki was second-in-command of the Islamic State group globally and “thought he could hide in Africa, but little did he know we had sources who kept us informed on what he was doing.”

Al-Mainuki was viewed as the key figure in IS organizing and finance, and had been plotting attacks against the United States and its interests, according to an official who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to share sensitive information.

Nigerian President Bola Tinubu confirmed the operation and said Al-Mainuki was killed alongside “several of his lieutenants, during a strike on his compound in the Lake Chad Basin.”

The joint operation is the latest by both countries since their new security partnership that kicked off last year after Trump claimed Christians were being targeted in Nigeria’s security crisis and threatened U.S. military intervention. Residents and security analysts have said Nigeria’s security crisis affects both Christians, predominant in the south, and Muslims, who are the majority in the north.

According to the spokesperson for the Nigerian military task force that carried out the Friday operation, the mission was a “highly complex precision air-land operation” and was carried out during three hours of darkness early Saturday without any casualties or loss of assets.

“His elimination represents the single most consequential counterterrorism outcome” in the region since the inception of the operation in 2015, Sani Uba, the spokesperson for the task force, said in a statement.

Born in Nigeria’s Borno province in 1982, al-Mainuki took the helm of the IS branch in West Africa after the group’s previous leader in the region, Mamman Nur, was killed in 2018, according to the Counter Extremism Project, which tracks militant groups.

Al-Mainuki was based in the Sahel area, the monitoring group said, adding that it is believed that he fought in Libya when IS was active in the North African nation more than a decade ago. He was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2023.

Questions over Al-Mainuki’s exact status in IS

Trump, in his social media announcement, said Al-Mainuki was “second in command globally,” hiding in Africa, a claim that some analysts say is off the mark. The Nigerian military, in a statement, also said intelligence shows that earlier this year, Al-Mainuki might have been “elevated to the position of Head of the General Directorate of States, placing him the second most senior leader within the ISIS global hierarchy.”

U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth also said Al-Mainuki was the senior ISIS General Directorate of Provinces Emir — “the number two for ISIS globally — responsible for overseeing the planning of attacks, directing the hostage-taking and managing financial operations.”

There is no way to verify his position within IS independently. Analysts say Al-Mainuki was the deputy to Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the leader of the Islamic State West African Province who was reported to have died in 2021. He is regarded as one of the central proponents of the formation of ISWAP, after its split with Boko Haram in 2016.

“If confirmed, the killing of Al-Mainuki is huge because this is the first time a security agency has killed someone this high in the ranking of ISWAP,” Malik Samuel, a senior researcher at Good Governance Africa who specializes in insurgent groups in Nigeria, said.

“The potential to cause chaos within the group is also there because the operation must have been carried out in the heart of ISWAP’s fortified base, which is very difficult to access.”

Trump in December directed U.S. forces to launch strikes against the Islamic State group in Nigeria, though he released little detail then about the impact.

US and Nigeria step up joint operations

The Nigerian military said the operation was a result of recently formed U.S.-Nigeria partnership and intelligence-sharing efforts. Samalia Uba, the military spokesperson, said in a statement that the operation has also “disrupted a violent terrorist network that endangered Nigeria and the broader West African region.”

Nigeria has been battling multiple armed groups, including at least two affiliated with IS, as it has grappled with a multifaceted security crisis. IS affiliates in Africa have emerged as some of the continent’s most active militant groups following the collapse of the so-called IS caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2017.

The U.S. in February sent troops to the West African nation to help advise its military, and in March,

the U.S. also deployed drones there after Trump's allegations about Christians being targeted in Nigeria. The Friday night operation was the latest instance in a string of covert missions abroad that Trump has announced this year, starting with the stunning overnight raid in January to capture and remove Venezuela's then-leader Nicolás Maduro and whisk him to the U.S., followed nearly two months later by the launch of strikes that kicked off the war with Iran.

A Maldivian military diver has died while searching for the bodies of four Italian divers

By KRISHAN FRANCIS and GIADA ZAMPANO Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — A Maldivian military diver died Saturday while searching for the bodies of four Italian divers believed to be deep inside an underwater cave.

The group of five Italian divers is believed to have died while exploring a cave at a depth of about 50 meters (160 feet) in Vaavu Atoll on Thursday, according to Italy's Foreign Ministry. The recreational diving limit in the Maldives is 30 meters.

Maldives Presidential Spokesman Mohammed Hussain Shareef said that Mohamed Mahudhee, a member of the Maldivian National Defense Force, died of underwater decompression sickness after being transferred to a hospital in the capital.

"The death goes to show the difficulty of the mission," he said.

Earlier, Shareef said the searchers had prepared a plan based on their progress exploring the cave on Friday. Mahudhee was part of the group that briefed Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu on the rescue plan when he visited the search site on Friday.

Rough weather has repeatedly hampered rescue efforts.

The Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said everything possible would be done to bring the victims home. His ministry stated it was coordinating with Divers Alert Network, a specialist diving organization, to support recovery operations and the repatriation of the bodies. The cause of the deaths remains under investigation.

The victims have been identified as Monica Montefalcone, an associate professor of ecology at the University of Genoa; her daughter, Giorgia Sommacal; marine biologist Federico Gualtieri; researcher Muriel Oddenino; and diving instructor Gianluca Benedetti, according to the Maldivian government.

Benedetti's body was recovered on Thursday.

Montefalcone and Oddenino were in the Maldives on an official scientific mission to monitor marine environments and study the effects of climate change on tropical biodiversity, the University of Genoa said in a statement Friday. However, the scuba diving activity during which the deadly accident occurred was not part of the planned research and was "undertaken privately," it said.

The statement also said the two other victims — student Sommacal and recent graduate Gualtieri — were not involved in the scientific mission.

Cave diving is a highly technical and dangerous activity that requires specialized training, equipment and strict safety protocols. Risks increase sharply in environments where divers cannot head straight up and at depth, particularly when conditions are poor. Experts say it's easy to become disoriented or lost inside caves, particularly as sediment clouds can sharply reduce visibility.

Diving at 50 meters also exceeds the maximum depth recommended for recreational divers by most major established scuba certifying agencies, with depths beyond 40 meters considered technical diving and requiring specialized training and equipment.

Shareef said Benedetti's body was found near the mouth of the cave and authorities believed the remaining four had entered the cave.

Two Italians, a deep-sea rescue expert and a cave diving expert, are expected to join the recovery effort, Shareef said.

Italian officials said that around 20 other Italians on the same expedition aboard the vessel "Duke of

York" were safe. Italy's embassy in Colombo was providing assistance to those onboard and had contacted the Red Crescent, which offered to deploy volunteers to help provide psychological aid.

The Maldives tourism ministry said it has suspended the operating license of the "Duke of York" pending an investigation.

The Italian foreign ministry said the cave is divided into three large chambers connected by narrow passages. Recovery teams explored two of the three chambers on Friday, but the search was limited due to considerations over oxygen and decompression.

On Saturday, they will explore the third chamber, the ministry added.

Italian officials and the honorary consul are in contact with the victims' families to provide assistance.

When should you get a mammogram? Conflicting advice makes it hard to know

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Deciding when to get routine mammograms is confusing. Some health groups recommend women begin at age 40 or 45 while another recently opted for age 50. They also differ on whether yearly or every other year is best.

The conflicting advice is at least partly because guidelines for breast cancer screening are designed for women at average risk and with no possible cancer symptoms. But breast cancer is so common that it is hard to know who is really "average" and how to balance the pros and cons of screening.

"Breast cancer is not one disease," said Dr. Laura Esserman of the University of California, San Francisco. "So how in the world does it make sense to screen everybody the same when everyone doesn't have the same risk?"

Esserman is leading research to better understand the nuances of who is at low or high risk or somewhere in between and eventually offer more tailored screening advice.

More than 320,000 women in the U.S. will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, according to the American Cancer Society. Death rates have been dropping for decades, thanks largely to better treatments. But it is still the second-most common cause of cancer death in U.S. women -- and diagnoses are inching up.

For now, here are some things to know.

When to get a mammogram

The newest guidance comes from the American College of Physicians, which recommends that average-risk women ages 50 to 74 get an every-other-year mammogram. For those 40 to 49, the guideline says to discuss pros and cons with a doctor and if they choose screening, to go every other year.

That advice, issued last month, was a surprise. Most other U.S. health groups have urged women to start earlier, in their 40s. The influential U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recently switched its guidance to start every-other-year mammograms at age 40 instead of 50.

The American Cancer Society has long recommended yearly mammograms for 45- to 54-year-olds -- but says they can choose to start at 40. For those age 55 and older, the cancer society says women can switch to every other year or choose to keep going for yearly checks.

The new American College of Physicians guidelines also say doctors can ask if women 75 or older wish to stop routine screening. In contrast, the cancer society says there is no reason to stop if they are still healthy.

Why don't experts agree?

The higher a woman's risk of eventually developing breast cancer, the more benefit she will derive from more frequent screenings. But beyond some well-known factors like the cancer-causing BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, it is hard for women to know their true risk. Age has long been a proxy because the risk of breast cancer rises as women get older.

Mammograms aren't perfect. Sometimes they miss cancer or an aggressive tumor pops up after a routine mammogram. But guidelines seek to balance the benefits of catching cancer early with possible harms,

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such as stress and pain from investigating suspicious spots that don't turn out to be cancerous.

"We're not saying there's no benefit" from mammograms in the 40s, cautioned Dr. Carolyn Crandall of the University of California, Los Angeles, who chaired the American College of Physicians report. But "there's a narrower balance between the benefits you could get and the harms in 40- to 49-year-olds."

The American Cancer Society recommends starting yearly mammograms at 45 because it found breast cancer incidence in 45- to 49-year-olds was higher than in the early 40s – more like what 50- to 54-year-olds experience, said public health researcher Robert Smith, the society's expert on early cancer detection.

What is missing is a way to tell if someone is more likely to develop an aggressive breast cancer or a slow-growing one, Smith noted.

How dense breasts affect mammogram advice

Nearly half of women over 40 have dense breast tissue, which can make it harder to spot a tumor on a mammogram and can slightly increase the risk of developing cancer.

After a mammogram, women are notified about their breast density. Many experts say it is not yet clear if women with dense breasts would benefit from adding ultrasounds or MRIs to their screening. But the new American College of Physicians guidance advises considering 3D mammography – what doctors call digital breast tomosynthesis or DBT.

What's next for breast cancer screening

In the future, adding a gene test — one that looks at more than just those well-known BRCA genes — along with broader risk factors may help refine women's optimal mammogram schedule.

A recent study of nearly 46,000 women, called the WISDOM trial, used age, genetic testing, lifestyle, health history and breast density to classify women as low, average, elevated or high risk. That risk level determined if they waited to start mammograms at 50, went every other year or every year – and the highest-risk group was told to screen twice a year, once with a mammogram and again with an MRI scan. Risk-based scans were compared to standard yearly mammograms.

Risk-based screening worked as well as yearly screening, Esserman's team reported in the medical journal JAMA. One surprise: About 30% of women whose gene testing indicated increased risk didn't report relatives with breast cancer. While more research is underway, Esserman hopes the early findings will start influencing guidelines soon.

Also in the pipeline are AI tools being crafted to assess a woman's risk of developing breast cancer in the next few years based on clues in her mammogram, another possible way to identify who might qualify for more or less frequent screening.

For now, women can talk with their doctors about close relatives who have had cancer, their own overall health and other risk factors such as whether they have had children and at what age.

Whatever mammogram age and interval they choose, the best advice is to stick with it, the cancer society's Smith said: "Breast screening works best when it's done regularly."

North America's largest commuter rail system shuts down as workers strike

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — North America's largest commuter rail system was shut down Saturday after unionized workers in the New York City area went on strike.

The Long Island Rail Road that serves the city's eastern suburbs ceased operations early Saturday morning after five unions representing about half its workforce walked off the job.

The two sides have been negotiating for months on a new contract, and President Donald Trump's administration had even interceded to try and broker a deal. But the unions were legally allowed to strike starting at 12:01 a.m. Saturday.

Kevin Sexton of the National Vice President of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen said no new negotiations have been scheduled.

"We're far apart at this point," Sexton said early Saturday. "We are truly sorry that we are in this situation."

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Janno Lieber, the MTA chairman, said the agency "gave the union everything they said they wanted in terms of pay" and that to him it was apparent the unions always intended to walk out.

The walkout, the first for the LIRR since a two-day strike in 1994, promises to cause headaches for some sports fans planning to see the crosstown baseball rivals the New York Yankees and Mets battle this weekend or to watch the NBA's New York Knicks playoff run at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. Both sports venues have dedicated LIRR stops.

If the shutdown continues past the weekend, the roughly 250,000 people who ride the system to and from work each weekday will be forced to find alternative routes into New York City from its Long Island suburbs.

Duane O'Connor, picketer: "I feel terrible. Terrible. This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt the island, this is going to hurt the city, they think they can push us around and we're supposed just fall in line. All we are asking for is fair wages. Record inflation the last few years. Our contract goes back three years, it's not going forward, so we went through those record inflationary years and they're trying to lowball us."

For many, that likely means navigating the region's notoriously congested roads.

"People are still going to commute, but if everybody starts driving now, the traffic is only going to get worse," said Rich Piccola, an accountant who commutes into the city as he waited at Penn Station for a train home Thursday.

Gov. Kathy Hochul is urging Long Islanders to work from home if possible. The MTA has said it will provide limited shuttle buses to New York City subway stations, but that contingency plan wasn't envisioned to handle all the riders the system normally carries on a workday.

And while remote work options greatly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers still need to show up in person, said Lisa Daglian, executive director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, a commuter advocacy group.

"You work in construction, you work in the healthcare industry, you work at a school or you're about to graduate from school, that's not always possible," she said of telecommuting. "People need to get where they need to go."

The most recent contract talks have stalled on the question of worker's salaries and health care premiums.

The MTA has said the unions' initial demands would have led to fare increases and impacted contract negotiations with other unionized workers.

The unions, which represent locomotive engineers, machinists, signalmen and other train workers, have said more substantial raises were warranted to help workers keep up with inflation and rising living costs.

Duane O'Connor, who was picketing on Saturday morning at Penn Station, said that while he regrets the impact on commuters, workers are simply asking for fair wages.

"I feel terrible. Terrible. This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt the island, this is going to hurt the city ... All we are asking for is fair wages. Record inflation the last few years. Our contract goes back three years, it's not going forward, so we went through those record inflationary years and they're trying to lowball us," he said.

Some riders, while sympathetic to the union's affordability concerns, worry they'll bear the brunt of any pay raises.

If the unions get the pay increases they are looking for, "it will come at the expense of our riders who will see next year's 4% fare increase doubled to 8%," Gerard Bringmann, chair of the LIRR Commuter Council, a rider advocacy group, said in a statement. "Like the union workers, we too are burdened by the increase in the cost of living here on Long Island."

With Hochul, a Democrat, facing reelection later this year, the pressure might be on the MTA to strike a deal to end the shutdown, said William Dwyer, a labor relations expert at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where commuter rail workers staged a three-day strike last year.

"She's up for reelection, and Long Island is a critical vote for her," he said. "So if there's a significant fare hike, that does not bode well for her on Election Day."

What to know about joint US-Nigeria operation that killed a senior militant leader

By OPE ADETAYO Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — President Donald Trump said that a joint operation by U.S. and Nigerian forces killed a top leader of the Islamic State group in Nigeria.

Trump wrote in a social media post that the mission in the early hours of Saturday targeted Abu Bakr al-Mainuki, who was part of the top leadership of the local IS chapter in West Africa.

Nigeria's government and military said the operation in the Lake Chad Basin, a stronghold of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), was the result of a recently formed partnership with the U.S. government.

Abu Bakr al-Mainuki was a 'specially designated global terrorist'

Al-Mainuki was born in 1982 in Mainok, or Mainuki, a village in Nigeria's northeastern Borno, the heart of an insurgency crisis following the formation of the Boko Haram militant group around 2009. He became one of the key commanders of ISWAP following its split from Boko Haram, and was a deputy to Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the ISWAP leader who was reported to have died in 2021.

A Nigerian military spokesperson said he was a "key ISIS operational and strategic figure" who was central to the group's media operations, finances and weapons development.

The military also said that recent intelligence indicated he might have been appointed as "Head of the General Directorate of States," making him second-in-command within the global IS hierarchy, a claim also made by Trump but disputed by some analysts.

In 2023, the U.S. Department of State listed him as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist."

US-Nigeria military cooperation has picked up

The Nigerian government acknowledged that U.S. intelligence and cooperation were key to the operation. It was a significant development after the countries' relations reached their nadir last year, when Trump accused the government of the West African nation of "Christian genocide."

The Nigerian government repeatedly denied the persecution of Christians, and engaged the U.S. government, leading to military cooperation. In February, the U.S. sent troops to Nigeria after an airstrike targeted IS last December.

Government officials had previously said U.S. troops were restricted to advisory and training roles, but this weekend's operation marks a new phase, according to analysts.

"It would demonstrate to them (militants) that the American-Nigerian operation has really picked up," Bulama Burkati, a security analyst on sub-Saharan Africa, said. "We know the Nigerian forces lack the basic capacity to fight violent extremist groups, especially in places like the Lake Chad region, which is densely forested."

Several armed groups operate in the resource-rich four-country Lake Chad region, funding their operations by taxing local communities. The region's landscape provides adequate cover for the groups to avoid military strikes.

A significant moment for Nigeria's counterinsurgency

Analysts say Al-Mainuki is the most senior militant to be killed by any security agency in the West African nation. Militant leaders have usually died as a result of internecine rivalry among competing groups or factions.

His death would disrupt ISWAP's operation in the short term, but precision strikes against the group need to be sustained, analysts say.

"This kind of counterterrorism operation can disrupt the group's finance, recruitment, and planning at the provincial level," Burkati said.

Nigeria faces a complex security crisis, battling multiple groups. On one hand are jihadi groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Lakurawa, and on the other are amorphous, criminal groups that specialize in kidnapping for ransom. Tens of thousands have been killed in attacks since 2009 to date, and millions

have been displaced across the country, according to the United Nations.

Walmart and Amazon race to win over rural America with speedier deliveries

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

PEA RIDGE, Ark. (AP) — Walmart and Amazon are racing to speed up online order deliveries in rural areas of the U.S., a rich source of untapped sales that major retailers long wrote off as too sparsely inhabited, too remote or too impoverished to serve profitably.

Walmart has a running start in the contest to build a loyal customer base in rural America. Roughly 90% of U.S. residents live within 10 miles of a Walmart store, and 45% of the company's full-service Supercenters are in places with populations under 20,000, according to a report by investment bank Morgan Stanley.

Competition for the underserved market, which the bank's analysts estimated could be worth up to \$1 trillion in annual sales, has intensified as remote workers swell the populations of small towns and communities on the far fringes of metropolitan areas.

The same technology that makes it possible for more people to do office work from wherever they want is making it easier for the nation's two biggest retail companies to get merchandise to them more efficiently.

Amazon last year invested \$4 billion to bring same-day or next-day deliveries to 4,000 smaller cities, towns and rural communities. They included places like the coastal town of Lewes, Delaware, Milton, Florida, a city that is considered the state's canoe capital, Padre Island, Texas, which is about 37 miles from Corpus Christi, and Abbeville, Louisiana, known for its Cajun food scene.

In a letter to shareholders last month, CEO Andy Jassy said the average monthly number of Amazon customers receiving same-day deliveries doubled in 2025 compared to the year before. Amazon is using artificial intelligence-based tools to better forecast demand, while opening small micro hubs in rural areas.

"While other companies have been backing away from these customers, we've been running to them," Jassy wrote.

The turf battle between the Goliath of e-commerce and Walmart is taking place as FedEx, UPS and the U.S. Postal Service are scaling back or slowing deliveries to some rural areas to cut costs or to concentrate on more profitable businesses.

Here's a look at why and the many ways Walmart and Amazon are cultivating customers in rural America: Changing demographics

The final step of a package's journey from a distribution hub to a shopper's home has always presented challenges in rural areas. Delivery drivers have to travel longer distances between stops and sometimes navigate narrow or unpaved roads in thinly populated areas, adding time that increases per-package labor and fuel costs, experts say.

Rural areas also used to be thought of as less financially well-off and therefore less desirable for retailers. But over the past decade, rural counties have shown steady growth in productivity and income, according to consulting firm McKinsey.

The median household income in rural counties rose 43% between 2010 and 2022, reaching an all-time high of nearly \$60,000 a year, McKinsey said. Since the pandemic, more exurban communities located as far as 60 miles from a major city's downtown have been among the fastest-growing places in the U.S., the U.S. Census Bureau reported.

The \$1 trillion rural shoppers spend annually on electronics, clothing, home furnishings and other merchandise accounts for 20% of all retail purchases in the U.S. except for cars and gasoline, according to Morgan Stanley.

The shifting retail landscape

Amazon and Walmart are not the only companies that see potential demand from former city dwellers who grew accustomed to having groceries, clothes and other products brought to their doors quickly.

In an apparent move to stave them off in the countrysides and small towns where it staked a claim, Dollar General in January extended its same-day delivery service to more than 17,000 of the discount chain's

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20,000 stores. More than 80% of Dollar General's same-day orders arrived in an hour or less, CEO Todd Vasos told investment analysts in March.

Rural lifestyle retailer Tractor Supply is increasing its direct delivery services to shoppers, particularly for bulky items like fence panels and riding lawnmowers. It announced plans in January to add more than 150 delivery hubs this year for a total of 375, covering more than half of its stores and reaching over 15 million customers.

Different approaches

Both Amazon and Walmart are expanding their use of delivery drones to speed up shipments from stores or order fulfillment centers. They also using methods that reflect their own roots and taking pages from each other's playbooks.

Befitting its origins in traditional retail, Walmart is equipping its physical stores with robotic technology that picks and packs online orders from a storage area stocked with the most popular delivery items for each location.

The automated retrieval system helped a Walmart Supercenter in Bentonville, Arkansas, home to Walmart's headquarters, deliver groceries within a 30-mile radius, up from 10 miles just a few years ago, Doug Sanders, Walmart's senior director of e-commerce store fulfillment, said late last year.

The company further credits the adoption of a hexagonal mapping system with making same-day deliveries available to 12 million more households. The system replaced traditional service boundaries like ZIP codes, which can leave out small areas at the edges, executives said.

The switch also gives Walmart an expanded view of which nearby stores might have the items needed to fulfill customers' orders. Instead of shoppers having to place separate orders from multiple locations to get everything they want, drivers now can retrieve packages from more than one store in their service area.

Amazon, which started as an online bookseller and this year closed its Amazon Fresh supermarkets and Amazon Go convenience stores, is putting local infrastructure in place to shorten the distance between its warehouses and rural areas.

The company is setting up small delivery stations to serve a group of nearby communities based on travel drive time, customer demand, and delivery efficiency, the company said. Packages that were assembled at Amazon's massive fulfillment centers are sent to the hubs for sorting before local gig workers and contractors pick the up for delivery.

The goal is to halve the time it takes from when a customer places an order to when it arrives, from as many as five days to less than two days, according to Holly Sullivan, Amazon's vice president of worldwide economic development.

For example, a newly opened station in Roanoke, Virginia, delivers tens of thousands of packages every day that previously weren't getting to the customer nearly as quickly, station manager Patrick Hamilton said. Delivery routes from the facility can reach customers roughly 90 minutes away by road, spanning both the city and surrounding rural communities.

Dalton Klinger is the operations manager of the Chamber of Commerce for St. George, Utah, a city with a population of 100,000 located in the northeastern part of the Mojave Desert. The city's mountainous surroundings are difficult for deliveries, but an Amazon station has helped speed them up.

Klinger, who has lived in St. George since 2021, said his Amazon orders of essentials like canned tuna and jars of tomato sauce that used to take four days now get to him in two.

"People are wanting faster deliveries," he said. "It's all about instant gratification."

Israel says it killed the leader of Hamas' military wing, one of the architects of Oct. 7 attacks

By SAMY MAGDY and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — An Israeli airstrike in Gaza killed the leader of Hamas' military wing, one of the last surviving architects of the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks that triggered the war in Gaza, the Israeli military

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said Saturday.

Izz al-Din al-Haddad was killed on Friday, Israel's army said, describing him as was one of the last senior commanders in Hamas' military who had directed the planning and execution of the Oct. 7. Hamas-led attacks. The attacks killed some 1,200 people in Israel and saw more than 250 taken hostage into Gaza.

Israel's retaliatory strikes have devastated the Palestinian enclave and killed more than 72,700 people, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The ministry is part of Gaza's Hamas-run government, but staffed by medical professionals who maintain and publish detailed records, viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Al-Haddad's killing comes as the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas remains fragile as key issues like the disarmament of Hamas stall the deal's progress. Despite the ceasefire, which went into effect in October, Gaza has seen near-daily Israeli fire with more than 850 people being killed since then, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Al-Haddad was the latest Hamas commander to be killed by Israel. Israel said he had assumed the role after his predecessor, Mohammed Sinwar, was killed. The army said al-Haddad had surrounded himself with Israeli hostages during the war as a shield against an attack.

Al-Haddad's family confirmed to The Associated Press his death in Friday's strike along with six other people, including his wife and daughter. His two sons were killed previously during the war.

His funeral was held Saturday in Gaza City. His body was wrapped in Hamas and Palestinians flags as it was carried by mourners.

He joined Hamas when it was established in the 1980s, and was a member of the Qassam Brigades' Majd section, which was tasked to go after collaborators with Israel. He was also a member of Hamas' Military Council, the highest group of commanders that played a key role in the attacks that sparked the war.

Israel's chief of staff for the army called his killing a significant operation, and said Israel would continue pursuing its enemies to hold them accountable.

Since the shaky ceasefire was reached, both Israel and Hamas have traded accusations of violations. Israel has targeted Hamas members inside the coastal enclave, the last of whom was the son of Hamas' lead negotiator, Khalil al-Hayya.

A Palestinian shot and killed in the West Bank

Violence also flared Saturday in the occupied West Bank, where Israeli troops shot and killed a 34-year-old Palestinian in the Jenin refugee camp, according to the Palestinian Health ministry.

Hassan Fayyad was fatally shot in his thigh, the Palestinian Red Crescent said. Israel's military said troops first fired warning shots at a person trying to infiltrate the Jenin camp and then shot him again when he didn't comply. They later provided him medical treatment as he was transferred to the hospital, it said.

Israeli troops on Thursday shot and killed a 15-year-old boy in Eastern Lubban town in Nablus, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Israel's military said it identified three people hurling rocks toward Israeli vehicles and "endangering lives," and troops fired at them, killing one of them.

Also on Friday, settlers set fire to a mosque and vehicles in the village of Jibiya, northwest of Ramallah, Palestinian religious authorities said. CCTV footage showed people pouring flammable material on the mosque and at least two vehicles, Sabir Shalash, the head of Jibiya's municipal council, said. Spray-painted Hebrew slogans were also found on the mosque's walls, he said.

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs described the attack as "a cowardly terrorist act" and criticized the international community's inaction toward mounting settler attacks against Muslim and Christian sites in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The Israeli military and police said that they were deployed to the area and did not locate any suspects, but they were investigating. The army said it "strongly condemns" attacks on religious institutions.

London police prepare for a busy day with two big rallies planned and a soccer final

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Police are patrolling the streets of London as tens of thousands of protesters descend on the U.K. capital on Saturday for two major demonstrations, and tens of thousands more soccer fans congregate for the final of England's major domestic cup competition at Wembley Stadium.

Armored vehicles, police horses, dogs, drones and helicopters have been deployed along with at least 4,000 officers as the Metropolitan Police aims to avoid clashes.

Police have set up routes to keep apart those marching in support of a protest organized by far-right agitator Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, better known by his pseudonym Tommy Robinson, and the annual demonstration to commemorate Nakba, the Arabic term for "catastrophe" that marks the exodus of some 700,000 Palestinians from what is now Israel in 1948.

Police have estimated about 50,000 people will attend Yaxley-Lennon's "Unite the Kingdom" march, while 30,000 more are expected to go to the Nakba Day rally.

Though the marches have been separated, police will be mindful of splinter groups coming in contact and said they will be proactive in ensuring the public's safety. A woman has already been arrested after she appeared to refuse to remove a fabric face mask at the pro-Palestinian protest.

Prosecutors have been told to consider whether protest placards, banners and chants viewed on social media may amount to offenses of stirring up hatred during the rallies.

"This is not about restricting free speech," said the Crown Prosecution Service's director, Stephen Parkinson. "It is about preventing hate crime and protecting the public, particularly at a time of heightened tensions."

The British government has also blocked 11 foreign nationals from entering the country for the "Unite the Kingdom" rally. Right-wing figures claiming to have been barred include Polish politician Dominik Tarczynski, Belgian politician Filip Dewinter, anti-Islam commentator Valentina Gomez and Dutch activist Eva Vlaardingerbroek.

"We will block those coming into the UK who seek to incite hatred and violence," said Prime Minister Keir Starmer. "For anyone who sets out to wreak havoc on our streets, to intimidate or threaten anyone, you can expect to face the full force of the law."

On Friday, Starmer visited the Met's command center to discuss policing arrangements for the rallies alongside Met Commissioner Mark Rowley and London Mayor Sadiq Khan.

Live facial recognition will be used for the first time in a protest policing operation, with cameras set up in the north London neighborhood of Camden that is not on the route of the "Unite the Kingdom" march, but which is expected to be used by a lot of people attending the event.

Further north in the capital at Wembley, police will be hoping that the FA Cup Final between Chelsea and Manchester City, which kicks off at 3 p.m., passes off without incident.

Congolese report constant burials as deaths in new Ebola outbreak reach 80

By The Associated Press undefined

BUNIA, Congo (AP) — At least 80 deaths have been reported in Congo's new Ebola disease outbreak in the eastern Ituri province, authorities said, as health workers raced Saturday to intensify screening and contact tracing to contain the disease. Officials first announced the outbreak on Friday, with 65 deaths and 246 suspected cases.

Meanwhile, Associated Press journalists in Ituri's capital, Bunia, interviewed locals who recounted their fears and constant burials.

"Every day, people are dying ... and this has been going on for about a week. In a single day, we bury two, three, or even more people," said Jean Marc Asimwe, a resident of Bunia. "At this point, we don't

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really know what kind of disease it is," said Asimwe.

Congolese Health Minister Samuel-Roger Kamba said late Friday that there have been eight laboratory-confirmed cases, among them four deaths.

Test results confirmed the Bundibugyo virus, a variant of the disease that has been less prominent in Congo's past outbreaks. This is Congo's 17th outbreak since Ebola first emerged in the country in 1976.

Ebola is highly contagious and can be contracted through bodily fluids such as vomit, blood, or semen. The disease it causes is rare, but severe and often fatal.

The suspected index case in the latest outbreak is a nurse who died at a hospital in Bunia, Kamba said. He said the case dates back three weeks to April 24.

He did not say whether samples from the nurse were tested, but said the person presented symptoms suggestive of Ebola.

The outbreak has spread to neighboring Uganda

Uganda confirmed Friday an Ebola case that authorities said was "imported" from Congo. The person died at the Kibuli Muslim Hospital in Uganda's capital, Kampala, on May 14.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention had said it is concerned about the risk of further spread due to the proximity of affected areas to Uganda and South Sudan.

The body of the patient who died in Kampala was later taken back to Congo and no other local case has been confirmed, Uganda's Health Ministry said.

On Saturday, people were being screened at the entrance of the Kibuli Muslim Hospital.

Ismail Kigongo, who resides in Kampala, said the new outbreak reminded him of his father, whom he lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. "I really get scared because I remember burying my father without looking at his body," he said.

Kenya, Uganda's neighbor, said Saturday that there is only a "moderate risk of importation" of the Ebola virus due to regional travel. Kenya's government said it has formed an Ebola preparedness team and has strengthened surveillance at all points of entry.

Congo is a large country that often faces logistical challenges

Congo has experience managing Ebola outbreaks but often faces logistical challenges in delivering expertise and supplies to affected regions.

As Africa's second-largest country by land area, Congo's provinces are far from one another and mostly battling conflict. Ituri, for instance, is around 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) from the nation's capital, Kinshasa, and is ravaged by violence from Islamic State-backed militants.

The disease has so far been confirmed in three health zones in Ituri province, including the capital city, Bunia, and the areas of Rwampara and Mongwalu, where the outbreak is concentrated.

Only 13 blood samples have been tested at the National Institute of Biomedical Research; 8 tested positive for the Bundibugyo strain. The remaining five could not be analyzed due to insufficient sample volume, the health minister said.

In Bunia, Ituri's main city, businesses and regular activities in public places appeared normal on Friday.

Resident Adeline Awekonimungu said she hopes the outbreak is quickly contained. "My recommendation is that the government take this matter seriously and that it takes charge of the hospitals so that this matter can be brought under control," she said.

Brass bands in Beijing make way for sticker shock at home as Trump returns to escalating inflation

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump returned from the spectacle of a Chinese state visit to a less than welcoming U.S. economy — with the military band and garden tour in Beijing giving way to pressure over how to fix America's escalating inflation rate.

Consumer inflation in the United States increased to 3.8% annually in April, higher than what he inher-

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ited as the Iran war and the Republican president's own tariffs have pushed up prices. Inflation is now outpacing wage gains and effectively making workers poorer. The Cleveland Federal Reserve estimates that annual inflation could reach 4.2% in May as the war has kept oil and gasoline prices high.

Trump's time with Chinese leader Xi Jinping appears unlikely to help the U.S. economy much, despite Trump's claims of coming trade deals. The trip occurred as many people are voting in primaries leading into the November general election while having to absorb the rising costs of gasoline, groceries, utility bills, jewelry, women's clothing, airplane tickets and delivery services. Democrats see the moment as a political opportunity.

"He's returning to a dumpster fire," said Lindsay Owens, executive director of Groundwork Collaborative, a liberal think tank focused on economic issues. "The president will not have the faith and confidence of the American people — the economy is their top issue and the president is saying, 'You're on your own.'"

The president's trip to Beijing and his recent comments that indicated a tone-deafness to voters' concerns about rising prices have suggested his focus is not on the American public and have undermined Republicans who had intended to campaign on last year's tax cuts as helping families.

Trump described the trip as a victory, saying on social media that Xi "congratulated me on so many tremendous successes," as the U.S. president has praised their relationship.

Trump told reporters that Boeing would be selling 200 aircraft — and maybe even 750 "if they do a good job" — to the Chinese. He said American farmers would be "very happy" because China would be "buying billions of dollars of soybeans."

"We had an amazing time," Trump said as he flew home on Air Force One, and told Fox News' Bret Baier in an interview that gasoline prices were just some "short-term pain" and would "drop like a rock" once the war ends.

Inflationary pain is not a factor in how Trump handles Iran

Trump departed from the White House for China by saying the negotiations over the Iran war depended on stopping Tehran from developing nuclear weapons. "I don't think about Americans' financial situation. I don't think about anybody. I think about one thing: We cannot let Iran have a nuclear weapon," Trump said.

That remark prompted blowback because it suggested to some that Trump cared more about challenging Iran than fighting inflation at home. Trump defended his words, telling Fox News: "That's a perfect statement. I'd make it again."

The White House has since stressed that Trump is focused on inflation.

Asked later about the president's words, Vice President JD Vance said there had been a "misrepresentation" of the remarks. White House spokesman Kush Desai said the "administration remains laser-focused on delivering growth and affordability on the homefront" while indicating actions would be taken on grocery prices.

But as Trump appeared alongside Xi, new reports back home showed inflation rising for businesses and interest rates climbing on U.S. government debt.

His comments that Boeing would sell 200 jets to China caused the company's stock price to fall because investors had expected a larger number. There was little concrete information offered about any trade agreements reached during the summit, including Chinese purchases of U.S. exports such as liquefied natural gas and beef.

"Foreign policy wins can matter politically, but only if voters feel stability and affordability in their daily lives," said Brittany Martinez, a former Republican congressional aide who is the executive director of Principles First, a center-right advocacy group focused on democracy issues.

"Midterms are almost always a referendum on cost of living and public frustration, and Republicans are not immune from the same inflation and affordability pressures that hurt Democrats in recent cycles," she added.

Democrats see Trump as vulnerable

Democratic lawmakers are seizing on Trump's comments before his trip as proof of his indifference to lowering costs. There is potential staying power of his remarks as Americans head into Memorial Day weekend facing rising prices for the hamburgers and hot dogs to be grilled.

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"What Americans do not see is any sympathy, any support, or any plan from Trump and congressional Republicans to lower costs – in fact, they see the opposite," Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York said Thursday.

Vance faulted the Biden administration for the inflation problem even though the inflation rate is now higher than it was when Trump returned to the White House in January 2025 with a specific mandate to fix it.

"The inflation number last month was not great," Vance said Wednesday, but he then stressed, "We're not seeing anything like what we saw under the Biden administration."

Inflation peaked at 9.1% in June 2022 under Biden, a Democrat. By the time Trump took the oath of office, it was a far more modest 3%.

Trump's inflation challenge could get harder

The data tells a different story as higher inflation is spreading into the cost of servicing the national debt.

Over the past week, the interest rate charged on 10-year U.S. government debt jumped from 4.36% to 4.6%, an increase that implies higher costs for auto loans and mortgages.

"My fear is that the layers of supply shocks that are affecting the U.S. economy will only further feed into inflationary pressures," said Gregory Daco, chief economist at EY-Parthenon.

Daco noted that last year's tariff increases were now translating into higher clothing prices. With the Supreme Court ruling against Trump's ability to impose tariffs by declaring an economic emergency, his administration is preparing a new set of import taxes for this summer.

Daco stressed that there have been a series of supply shocks. First, tariffs cut into the supply of imports. In addition, Trump's immigration crackdown cut into the supply of foreign-born workers. Now, the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has cut off the vital waterway used to ship 20% of global oil supplies.

"We're seeing an erosion of growth," Daco said.

A cargo train hits a public bus at a Bangkok rail crossing, killing at least 8

BANGKOK (AP) — A train crashed into a public bus on Saturday in Thailand's capital, Bangkok, killing at least eight people.

Thai news reported the crash happened in the late afternoon near an airport railway station in the central area. The city's emergency services, Erawan Medical Center, said at least eight people were killed and more than 20 others were injured.

Footage of the moment of the crash shared on social media showed a line of vehicles had stopped at a railway crossing when a cargo train struck an orange bus. The impact also dragged several nearby vehicles along the tracks before the bus was engulfed in flames. Several motorcycles and their riders were also seen being thrown onto the road after the collision.

Later videos showed a group of rescuers entering the charred bus after the flames were brought under control.

Deputy Transport Minister Siripong Angkasakulkiat told reporters at the crash site that all the bodies were found on the bus. He said it was still unclear how many people were on board.

When asked about reports that the bus had stopped on the railway tracks and that the barriers, used to keep motorists away from the tracks when the trains are passing, may not have lowered properly, Siripong said the matter still needs to be investigated.

Kittipong Raksa said he parked his car near the train tracks when he heard the signal indicating the train was about to pass.

"I heard a thud and then another. I heard something hitting my car," said Kittipong. "Then I saw the train pass, dragging the bus with it." He said after the collision, he found someone caught under his car, with a broken leg.

Kittipong said he did not see the barriers being lowered.

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Many see Andy Burnham as UK government's savior. First he needs a seat in Parliament

By BRIAN MELLEY and PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's government is in turmoil and the man many think could save it isn't even eligible for the job of prime minister.

Not yet, at least, though a path is now open for Andy Burnham, the popular mayor of Greater Manchester, to try to unseat beleaguered Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

It's far from a sure thing, as there would be big hurdles to clear.

Burnham would first need to return to Parliament, where he could then try to mount a challenge to Starmer's leadership.

Starmer, who has vowed to lead on, has been on the ropes, facing plummeting approval ratings and questions about his judgment. His unpopularity was undoubtedly one of the key reasons why Labour took a beating in U.K.-wide local elections this month. One key Cabinet member has already resigned, and more than a fifth of the party's lawmakers in the House of Commons are urging him to stand down.

A return home yields a new look and nickname

Burnham, 56, is seen as Starmer's biggest would-be rival, partly because he's perceived to be to the political left of the prime minister.

The mayor is known as the "King of the North," and his Labour backers will hope that moniker reaps rewards.

The allusion to the popular Jon Snow character in "Game of Thrones" is a sign of respect earned for Burnham's fierce backing of northern England, its working class culture and heritage. It projects an image that he's not part of the London political establishment. For many northerners, that counts for a lot.

His three sizable mayoral victories since 2017 show he can win.

But he hasn't always. Burnham, who was in the Cabinet of Gordon Brown's government from 2007 to 2010, ran twice for the leadership of the Labour Party and lost badly — first in 2010 and then in 2015. Looking back on those campaigns, he was pretty stiff.

Ending his 16-year tenure in Parliament yielded a more polished performer and a sleeker look. Suits and ties were largely replaced by a smart-casual look, often paired with sneakers.

That may seem superficial, but it broke down barriers with voters.

More importantly, his stint as mayor made him a more effective operator and, arguably, the best communicator in Labour's ranks.

His standing grew during the COVID-19 pandemic when he became the de facto spokesman for northern England by constantly haranguing Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson over what he called a "London-centric" approach to the crisis.

Burnham is ready to quit his job as mayor if he wins a special parliamentary election in the constituency of Makerfield, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of Manchester.

The road of return to Parliament runs through Reform UK

His route back to the House of Commons opened up Thursday when Labour lawmaker Josh Simons, said he would step down to make way for Burnham. Though Burnham was blocked from running for a seat that came up earlier this year, Labour's executive body said Friday he could do so in the special election expected within weeks.

It will likely be a bruising battle in one of, if not the most, consequential special elections in U.K. history. Burnham acknowledged as much.

"I truly do not take a single vote for granted and will work hard to regain the trust of people in the Makerfield constituency, many of whom have long supported our party but lost faith in recent times," he said when announcing his intention to run.

Simons secured the seat by about 5,400 votes two years ago, but that was in Labour's landslide victory of 2024 that swept Conservatives out after 14 years.

Times have changed dramatically, and Labour's recent battering came at the hands of the ascendant

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anti-immigrant Reform UK party on the right and, to a lesser extent, the eco-populist Greens on the left. All the wards in the Makerfield constituency were won by Reform in the local races.

Reform's leader, Nigel Farage, said the party would "throw absolutely everything at it."

Tim Bale, a professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London, said Burnham can capitalize on his "big name" reputation and as someone who gets things done.

"There will be a lot of people who would like to see him get back into Parliament, not least to take down Keir Starmer," Bale said. "In some ways, it's a useful test for Burnham because if he can't beat Reform in that constituency, then quite frankly, he's not much use to the Labour Party as leader."

One battle after another

Labour has never ousted one of its leaders while in government, but there is a process.

If Burnham wins, he could either have to trigger a leadership contest or join one. To do so, a member of Parliament needs the support of a fifth — or 81 — of Labour's 403 members. Starmer, who has vowed to fight on, would automatically be entitled to defend his position.

Wes Streeting had been expected to announce a bid for the top job Thursday after he resigned as Starmer's health secretary and castigated Starmer for failing to offer effective solutions to the U.K.'s many problems. But he stopped short of that and, in what seemed to be a nod to Burnham, called for a "broad" field of candidates to debate the party's future.

Streeting followed up Friday by endorsing Burnham, saying on X that Labour needs its "best players on the pitch." He did not, however, say he wanted to see Burnham as prime minister.

If there is a leadership battle, both Burnham and Streeting could run. Others said to be considering doing so are former Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, defense minister Al Carns and former party leader Ed Miliband.

For now, all permutations go through Makerfield and that result could have a seismic impact.

"Were Burnham to win the by-election, it's unlikely that Keir Starmer will actually stand in that leadership contest," Bale said. "If Burnham fails, then Starmer might feel he has a chance against Streeting and Rayner."

Iran's top diplomat says a lack of trust is impeding talks to end war with the US

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Iran's foreign minister said a lack of trust is the biggest obstacle in negotiations to end the war with the U.S., saying Friday that Tehran would be open to diplomatic help, particularly from China, to help ease tensions.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said contradictory messages have "made us reluctant about the real intentions of Americans."

"We are in doubt about their seriousness," he told reporters in New Delhi, adding that negotiations would move forward if Washington was ready for a "fair and balanced deal."

U.S. President Donald Trump earlier this week dismissed Iran's latest formal proposal as "garbage." While Iran was said to include some nuclear concessions, Trump has said he wants to remove highly enriched uranium from the country and prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.

In separate negotiations in Washington between Israel and Lebanon, both sides agreed Friday to extend their ceasefire until early June, U.S. officials said.

With talks between Iran and the U.S. at a standstill during the shaky ceasefire, tensions remain high and threaten to tip the Middle East back into open warfare and prolong the worldwide energy crisis sparked by the conflict.

Iran still has a chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway where a fifth of the world's oil passed through before the war, and America is blockading Iranian ports.

Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, who finished talks on Friday, agreed the strait needs to be

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reopened.

China could play a diplomatic role, Iran says

Araghchi said Friday that Iran would welcome diplomatic support from other countries, particularly from China, citing Beijing's previous role in facilitating the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Beijing has shown little public interest in U.S. requests to get more involved, even though Trump told Fox News' Sean Hannity that Xi had in their conversations offered to help.

Pakistan said Thursday it was continuing diplomatic efforts to help ease regional tensions. But it declined to disclose details of the discussions or say whether the U.S. had formally responded.

"The clock on diplomacy has not stopped. The peace process is working," Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tahir Andrabi told reporters in Islamabad.

Iran says uranium is a sticking point

Trump has demanded a major rollback of Iran's nuclear activities while Iran says it has a right to enrich uranium.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who launched the war with Trump on Feb. 28, also wants Iran's highly enriched uranium removed from the country.

Iran's foreign minister said Friday that the issue of its enriched uranium stockpile is one of the most difficult subjects in negotiations with the U.S.

Russia has previously offered to take the stockpile if Iran is willing to give it up. Araghchi said Russia's proposal was not currently under active discussion, but could be revisited.

"When we come to that stage, obviously we will have more consultations with Russia and see if the Russian offer can help or not," he said.

Israel and Lebanon extend ceasefire as strikes continue

Israel and Lebanon agreed to extend the expiring Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire for another 45 days to allow for negotiations on a broader peace agreement, the U.S. State Department said.

After two days of meetings, the department said it would reconvene the two sides for discussions on June 2 and 3, while a military track — between the Israeli and Lebanese armies — by the Pentagon will begin on May 29. Hezbollah opposes Lebanon's direct negotiations with Israel and has not been part of the talks.

Israel's ambassador to the U.S. Yechiel Leiter said the talks were frank and constructive. "There will be ups and downs, but the potential for success is great," he said in a social media post. "What will be paramount throughout negotiations is the security of our citizens and our soldiers."

The ongoing ceasefire hasn't stopped Israel and Hezbollah from trading strikes.

The Israeli military said Friday it hit Hezbollah sites in southern Lebanon after reporting hostile aircraft alerts and launches from across the border. Lebanon's health ministry said three paramedics were killed in a strike near the city of Harouf. Other strikes around the coastal city of Tyre wounded nearly 40 people, destroyed a health center and damaged the neighboring Hiram Hospital, wounding six medical workers, the ministry said.

Chinese-owned ship taken into Iranian waters

A Chinese-owned ship anchored off the United Arab Emirates was seized this week and taken toward Iranian waters.

Chinese private security company Sinoguards said it had "been informed through relevant channels" that the vessel Hui Chuan, which it was operating as an offshore work platform, was taken into Iranian waters for documentation and compliance inspection by the authorities.

The company's emailed statement said there was no indication of any injuries on the ship and that it was cooperating.

Honduras, where the ship was flagged, said the ship had 17 crew including people from Nepal, Myanmar, Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

The seizure happened as a senior Iranian official reiterated his country's claim of control over the Strait of Hormuz and another said it had a right to seize oil tankers connected to the U.S.

The U.S. seized vessels in the Gulf of Oman last month and on Friday the foreign minister of Pakistan

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said it had secured the return of 11 Pakistani nationals and 20 Iranian citizens who were aboard those vessels. "All individuals are in good health and high spirits," said the foreign minister, Ishaq Dar, said.

UAE speeds up construction of oil pipeline

The United Arab Emirates is speeding up the completion of a new pipeline that will allow the Gulf federation to export more oil without routing it through the Strait of Hormuz.

Sheikh Khaled bin Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, directed state oil company ADNOC to accelerate work on the pipeline, the Abu Dhabi Media Office said Friday.

The oil company already runs a pipeline designed to carry 1.5 million barrels a day from its oil fields to the port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman.

The new pipeline, expected to double the company's export capacity through that port, will become operational next year, the media office said.

Spain's Eurovision boycott over Israeli participation leaves contest fans torn

By TERESA MEDRANO Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — No special menu, no themed decorations and no shared suspense over which musician's flamboyant performance proves victorious.

For the first time in seven years, Silvia Díaz won't get together with friends to watch the Eurovision Song Contest finals on Saturday night. Their host called off their annual gathering after Spain's public broadcaster withdrew from the festival, protesting Israel's participation over its war against Hamas in Gaza. Díaz will watch on YouTube, but only if she has no other plans.

"It's not the same watching it alone at home as it is with friends. That's the only thing that upsets me."

The five-day song competition drew 166 million viewers last year — considerably more than Super Bowl viewership in the U.S. Spain hasn't won since 1969; nevertheless, after months of television, radio and newspaper play for Spain's song, friends and families usually watch the final at home and bars, and their contestant's performance dominates the day-after headlines. Spaniards at the event wave the country's flag, wear red clothing, or don the occasional bullfighter costume.

Spain announced its boycott in December, after the European Broadcasting Union said Israel would be allowed to compete, and has been joined by Ireland, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Iceland. Some Spanish fans respect the choice to take a stand by sitting out the cherished event, even if it's bittersweet.

Media blackout in Spain and elsewhere

Spain's broadcaster has repeatedly expressed disapproval over Israel's participation. In last year's semi-finals, RTVE's commentators introduced Israel's singer in the same breath as they mentioned Palestinians killed in the war. Before airing the final, the network transmitted the message "Peace and justice for Palestine" on a black background to hundreds of thousands of Spanish televisions.

As Eurovision finals take place in Vienna, RTVE will air a tribute to the network's musical history. It will feature a performance by Tony Grox and Lucycalys, the musicians who RTVE would have dispatched to represent Spain at Eurovision.

Ireland's public broadcaster will air a film about one couple's life in the Irish countryside. Slovenians will be shown an episode of a 10-part program about Palestinians. People can still watch Eurovision on the European Broadcasting Union's YouTube channel, but the lack of a performer or commentator from their own country renders the vibe decidedly less passionate.

Israel has been competing for 50 years and won four times. Israelis gather in bars to watch and are enthusiastic about the country's participation, which is seen by many as a sign of international acceptance and normalcy. Its contestant each year becomes a national celebrity and a strong showing — even if not an outright victory — is a source of pride.

Fans are divided by the boycott

Among Spain's Eurovision fans, this year's boycott has supporters and detractors.

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For Rebeca Carril, who enjoys replaying performances from the 1960s and 1970s, before she was born, the turning point came a few years ago with the influx of Israeli sponsors. She didn't want to support their marketing efforts by tuning in.

"I have Palestinian friends and I began to understand a little better how things worked," said Carril, a 42-year-old marketing executive in Madrid.

For others, like Guillermina Bastida, music and politics should be separate. She drove 3 1/2 days from northern Spain in a van with her two daughters to last year's competition in Basel, her third time attending. This year, she will settle for YouTube.

"It's a song festival, period," Bastida, a 47-year-old who works in communications, said by phone from Asturias province. "I also have my own stance, which is critical, but not to the point of boycotting the festival."

Eurovision's motto is "United by Music," and organizers strive to keep politics out, vainly, in recent years. Months after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Broadcasting Union disqualified Russia, and it hasn't been allowed to return. Contest rules ban overtly political lyrics or symbols, and organizers stress it is a competition among national broadcasters, not governments.

Spain is one of the so-called "Big Five" countries that contribute the most financially to Eurovision. In addition to missing out on big bucks for broadcasting rights, Eurovision is losing publicity and credibility, said Jose García, co-director of a website that provides news about the competition, whose main social media channels have a combined total of almost 100,000 followers.

That doesn't mean people will tune out completely, he added.

"It has marked the television and personal history of many people, and fans will watch it via international channels or YouTube. But it's one thing to be able to watch it and another to agree with what's happening," García said.

The absence of Spaniards is felt

On the streets of Vienna, the lack of Spaniards is noticeable, said Vicente Rico after attending the first night of the semifinals.

"We're a group that, just like at other events, makes its presence felt — we're among the happiest, the loudest and the most fun," said Rico, 40, who runs a perfumery in Madrid.

This is Rico's 18th Eurovision, and he had been torn before embarking on his annual pilgrimage because he believes the boycott is morally right. Still, it doesn't sit well.

"It bothers me that Eurovision is being used as a scapegoat," he said, noting the lack of action by international organizations and boycotts at other events like the FIFA World Cup, which kicks off in a month.

And who will Rico support, with Spain absent?

"I think Finland is going to win, but the support for Italy is crazy," he said. If Sweden, Serbia or Australia prevails, he would return to Spain happy.

"This year, we're rooting for everyone except Israel."

As Netanyahu spotlights Israel's ties to the UAE, its rulers prefer to be discreet

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The tight relationship between Israel and the United Arab Emirates is typically managed discreetly. But this week, it was thrust into the open, illuminating tensions underlying the alliance as the Iran war embroils the entire region.

The U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, first brought attention to the strengthening ties between Israel and the UAE by revealing that Israel had sent Iron Dome air-defense weapons and personnel to operate them to help protect the UAE from Iranian attacks.

Then, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he had quietly visited the UAE during the war, prompting a hasty public denial from the Gulf nation.

As Netanyahu and the Trump administration ballyhoo their alliances as part of an effort to bolster the

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region's anti-Iran factions, the Gulf states prefer to downplay these partnerships — a sign of how public ties to Israel remain deeply controversial in the region.

Here's what you need to know about the Israel-UAE relationship:

Why would the UAE deny Netanyahu's visit?

Netanyahu's decision to reveal his wartime trip to Abu Dhabi rocked the boat, particularly coming after Huckabee confirmed military cooperation between the two countries. Reports swirled that Israel's security chiefs had also visited.

The UAE's official WAM news agency posted an article denying "reports circulating" about the visit. The agency wrote that the country's relations with Israel "are public and conducted within the framework of the well-known and officially declared Abraham Accords, and are not based on non-transparent or unofficial arrangements."

The report also denied any Israeli military delegation was received in the UAE.

"It complicates Abu Dhabi's wartime-frame posture by forcing it into the open — which is why the denial was issued so quickly and worded so carefully," said Hesham Alghannam, a Saudi Arabia-based scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

Though the UAE normalized relations with Israel in 2020, its rulers like to keep the alliance somewhat quiet.

Antipathy toward the Jewish state runs high in Arab and Muslim countries across the Middle East. The negative feelings were magnified by the war in Gaza, which began after Hamas, a militant group backed by Iran, attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people and taking 251 hostages.

Israel's ensuing offensive in Gaza flattened much of the territory and has killed over 72,700 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilian and militant deaths. That conflict spilled across the region, with Israel waging deadly and damaging campaigns against Iran-backed militants in Lebanon and Yemen, and striking militant targets in Qatar and Syria.

"We are the ugly duckling of the Middle East," said Dan Diker, the president of the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs, a conservative Israeli think tank.

Diker, who has had extensive talks and relationships with Abraham Accord countries in the region, said the regional officials with whom he often negotiated always asked to keep things under the radar.

What is the Israel-UAE alliance based on?

Israel and the UAE collaborated militarily during the war with Iran. Israel benefited from having a defense foothold in a country geographically closer to its archenemy. The UAE, meanwhile, gained access to Israeli military technology, like the Iron Dome air-defense system.

The alliance has also been a boon for both countries' economies, with trade between them rising steadily since 2020.

Israel, long isolated in the Middle East, gains legitimacy by partnering with an Arab country. And the UAE gains power in Washington.

The UAE was the third Arab country, after Egypt and Jordan, to establish full diplomatic ties with Israel.

Why did Netanyahu publicize his visit?

Netanyahu faces fierce domestic opposition headed into an election season in Israel. He believes his image is bolstered if he can show his base that he is a Middle East power broker.

The Iran war did not much help the leader's domestic popularity. One thing that could help it — while strengthening his strained relationship with President Donald Trump — would be more regional powers following the UAE's lead. Israel is currently in talks with Azerbaijan to join the Abraham Accords.

But if Netanyahu was hopeful that broadcasting close Israel-UAE ties could serve as a model for other countries, he may need to temper expectations.

Saudi Arabia, a leader in the region that has resisted joining the Abraham Accords, has taken a different approach throughout the war. It has maintained open lines of communication with Tehran, and has supported Pakistan's mediation between the sides, said Alghannam, the Saudi Arabia-based scholar.

"The aim is not to take a posture on Israel, per se. It is to refuse entanglement in a war whose dynam-

ics Riyadh did not set and cannot control," he said.

"Riyadh discussing the full range of options openly, with partners, without locking into one track, is itself a strategic signal," he said. "The regional security architecture will be designed regionally, not inherited from whatever Washington and Tehran negotiate bilaterally."

Drones are making Sudan's war even deadlier for civilians

By FATMA KHALED Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Drone warfare has become the deadliest threat to civilians in Sudan 's conflict and both the military and the rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces are being supplied by a number of countries in the Middle East and beyond, experts say.

"Armed drones have now become by far and away the leading cause of civilian deaths," or over 80% of conflict-related deaths, United Nations human rights chief Volker Türk said this week, calling for measures to prevent their transfer to Sudan. Drones killed at least 880 civilians between January and April.

The war in Sudan began in April 2023 and has killed at least 59,000 people, displaced some 13 million and pushed parts of the country into famine.

In recent weeks, the RSF has carried out drone attacks on Khartoum International Airport and other areas near the capital, which the army seized control of last year.

Analysts say foreign-supplied advanced drone technology enables the warring parties to expand strikes on densely populated areas, complicating peace efforts and raising fears of a broader proxy conflict.

Drones have targeted hospitals, dams, schools and markets

"On the battlefield, drones have emerged as a force multiplier, enabling ground offensives and weakening enemy defenses," said Jalale Getachew Birru, East Africa senior analyst at the U.S.-based Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project.

Both the army and RSF use drones to secure contested territory, disrupt mobilization efforts and spread insecurity in areas controlled by rivals, he said.

At least 2,670 people, including combatants and civilians, were killed in 2025, marking a 600% increase in drone-related deaths and an 81% increase in drone attacks compared to the previous year, ACLED found.

Drone strikes by the warring parties have targeted civilian infrastructure including hospitals, dams, schools, markets and displacement camps.

Most of the civilian deaths in drone attacks have occurred in the Kordofan region in the central Sudan, according to Türk.

On May 8, drone strikes in South Kordofan and near the city of el-Obeid in North Kordofan reportedly killed 26 civilians. More than 70 people were killed in drone attacks on densely populated areas in Kordofan earlier this year, according to the Sudan Doctors Network.

On Tuesday, a Sudanese rights group, the Emergency Lawyers, said nine drone attacks on civilian vehicles had killed at least 36 people over the past 10 days across seven provinces.

The group blamed both the army and RSF and said some drones use visual monitoring technology capable of distinguishing targets, raising concerns that the attacks may not have been indiscriminate.

Drones played a role in deadly seizure of el-Fasher

The paramilitary RFS began only last year to use drones widely, said Gabriella Tejeda, research associate at The Soufan Center.

The army and RSF are competing to obtain new drone models, particularly from China, but the RSF is modifying drones and "increasingly competing to acquire newer, more sophisticated models, with the UAE likely supplying them," Tejeda said. The United Arab Emirates has denied supplying drones to the RSF.

Nathaniel Raymond, executive director of the Humanitarian Research Lab at the Yale School of Public Health, said the RSF is backed by external technology, particularly from the UAE, with satellite imagery showing its use of Chinese-made CH-95 and FH-95 drones that are roughly the size of small aircraft.

In areas such as el-Fasher city in North Darfur, where at least 6,000 people were killed over three days last year, RSF drones shut down communications of civilians "crying for help" and target them where a

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signal is detected, Raymond said.

The RSF couldn't have seized the city without these capabilities, he added.

"The sophistication of how they use drones in el-Fasher is unique because it's the first time you've seen this layered, hunter-killer concept of operations to kill people, basically in a kill box or trapped inside a wall, in this case to prevent them from crying for help," Raymond said of the city, where U.N. experts said the violence indicated "hallmarks of genocide."

The army's drones have hit civilian infrastructure

The army's drone technology has been blamed for striking civilian infrastructure such as Al Daein Teaching Hospital in East Darfur, where at least 64 people were killed. The army officially denied responsibility. Two military officials at the time, however, said the intended target was a nearby police station.

Raymond said there has been an "alarming increase" in army drone strikes on protected infrastructure such as schools and markets in the past four to six months. The army has maintained that it doesn't target civilian infrastructure.

Last month, ACLED said the army's drone technology is supplied by Turkey, Russia, Iran and Egypt, while the RSF is supplied via networks linked to the UAE through regional transit points including Ethiopia, Chad and Libya.

Earlier this month, the Sudanese government accused neighboring Ethiopia of being behind recent drone attacks on sites including the Khartoum airport. It accused the UAE of supplying the drones. Both countries denied the allegations.

"Ethiopia is a central partner to the UAE, so the allegations are not unfounded and reflects an attempt by the UAE to try to influence the outcome of the war," Tejeda said.

Cross-border drone activity may have contributed to rising civilian deaths, but Birru and Raymond said that is difficult to confirm.

"Both the warring parties' battle tempo only increasing, and their backers actively still investing in the war, makes it clear that neither side is interested in a resolution," Tejeda said.

FDA official who scrutinized COVID shots and antidepressants is out in latest shake-up

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Food and Drug Administration official involved in scrutinizing the safety of antidepressants, COVID-19 vaccines and other widely used therapies has been removed from her role leading the agency's drug program.

Dr. Tracy Beth Hoeg will be replaced as FDA's acting drug center director by Dr. Mike Davis, who has been serving as deputy director, according to an email sent to agency staff Friday that was obtained by The Associated Press.

Hoeg said in a social media post late Friday that she was "fired," from the agency, adding: "I learned so much and leave with no regrets."

Hoeg's departure is the latest in an ongoing shake-up at the powerful regulatory agency. FDA Commissioner Marty Makary resigned earlier in the week, and Dr. Vinay Prasad, the agency's vaccine and biotech chief, stepped down last month following intense criticism from drugmakers, patients and investors.

The agency also announced Friday that Karim Mikhail would take over as acting director of the vaccines center. Mikhail, a longtime pharmaceutical executive, was hired by Makary last spring.

Makary's ouster from his role atop the FDA followed weeks of complaints from President Donald Trump's political allies, including anti-abortion groups and vaping lobbyists, who are frustrated with the direction of the agency.

Hoeg, who is closely aligned with Makary and Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., had been leading FDA's drug program since December, the latest official to briefly hold that position amid a revolving door of FDA leadership changes.

Hoeg's rapid rise through the agency was engineered by Makary, who quickly promoted her from serv-

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ing as his special assistant to overseeing the agency's largest center, responsible for regulating most U.S. prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

FDA center directors are typically career agency scientists with decades of experience. Hoeg had no previous government or management experience.

Since arriving at the FDA last March, Hoeg led investigations into the safety of injectable RSV drugs for children, antidepressants and COVID-19 vaccinations.

Those inquiries reflected Hoeg's longstanding interests and concerns from before joining government.

A sports medicine physician and public health scientist, Hoeg first gained attention during the pandemic as a critic of masking, school closures, vaccine mandates and other government measures. She co-wrote papers with other medical contrarians who would go on to join the Trump administration, including Makary and Prasad.

Like Makary and Prasad, Hoeg also frequently expressed her opinions in blog posts and podcasts, including one titled "Vaccine Curious." The podcast discussed a number of discredited ideas, including that mRNA vaccines may contain harmful DNA contaminants.

A Danish American citizen, Hoeg was instrumental in the Trump administration's recent effort to drop a number of federally recommended shots for children, including those for the flu and hepatitis B at birth. Those changes have been temporarily blocked by a federal judge in Boston, though the administration plans to appeal the decision.

At the FDA, Hoeg led an "initial analysis" of vaccine injuries that linked COVID-19 shots to 10 reported deaths in children — without providing the supporting evidence. The findings were discussed in an internal memo Prasad sent to staffers last November, though the FDA has not formally announced the findings or explained how they were developed.

Officials from the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have previously concluded that serious side effects from the vaccines are extremely rare.

More recently, Hoeg was involved in the agency's review of a formal petition to add bold new warnings to antidepressant drugs about unproven pregnancy risks, including fetal abnormalities that could lead to autism and other disorders.

In March, she attempted to hire the author of the petition to serve as a senior adviser at the FDA, according to people familiar with the situation. The matter raised concerns among some agency staff because Hoeg had repeatedly referred to the person as a friend, according to the people who spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential FDA matters.

In the birthplace of Civil Rights Movement, groups rally to defend Black political representation

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Thousands of people are rallying Saturday in the cradle of the modern Civil Rights Movement to mobilize a new voting rights era as conservative states dismantle congressional districts that helped secure Black political representation.

"The bottom line is we are seeing a full-fledged, coordinated attack on Black political power that can actually reshape the entire political landscape, not just on the South but throughout the nation," said LaTosha Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter.

The rally will begin in Selma, where a violent clash between law enforcement and voting rights activists in 1965 galvanized support for passage of the Voting Rights Act. It will then move to the state Capitol, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "How Long, Not Long" speech that same year.

"We're picking up where it was left because we still have unfinished business," Brown said. "There will not be a new Jim Crow."

A recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling involving Louisiana hollowed out voting rights law that was already weakened by a separate decision in 2013 and then narrowed further over the years. That helped clear the way for stricter voter ID laws, registration restrictions, and limits on early voting and polling place

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changes, including in states that once needed federal preclearance before they could change voting laws because of their historical discrimination against Black voters.

Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement are alarmed by the speed of the rollbacks, noting that protections won through generations of sacrifice have been weakened in little more than a decade.

Kirk Carrington, 75, was a teen in 1965 when law enforcement officers attacked marchers in Selma on what became known as "Bloody Sunday." A white man on a horse wielding a stick chased Carrington through the streets.

"It's really just appalling to me and all the young people that marched during the '60s, fought hard to get voting rights, equal rights and civil rights," Carrington said. "It's sad that it's continuing after 60-plus-odd years that we are still fighting for the same thing we fought for back then."

Montgomery is home to one of the congressional districts that is being altered in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling.

A federal court in 2023 redrew Alabama's 2nd Congressional District after ruling that the state intentionally diluted the voting power of Black residents, who make up about 27% of its population. The court said there should be a district where Black people are a majority or near-majority and have an opportunity to elect their candidate of choice.

But the Supreme Court cleared the way for a different map that could let the GOP reclaim the seat. While the matter remains under litigation, the state plans special primaries Aug. 11 under the new map.

Democratic Rep. Shomari Figures, who won election in the district in 2024, said the dispute is not about him but rather people's opportunity to have representation.

"When Republicans are literally turning back the clock on what representation, what the faces of representation, look like, what the opportunities, legitimate opportunities for representation look like across this country, then I think it starts to resonate with people in a little bit of a different way," Figures said.

Alabama House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter, a Republican, said the Louisiana ruling provided an opportunity to revisit a map that was forced on the state by the federal court.

"People tend to forget what happened. When this thing went to court, the Republican Party had that seat, congressional seat two," Ledbetter said last week. "There's been a push through the courts to try to overtake some of these red state seats, and that's certainly what happened in that one."

Evan Milligan, the lead plaintiff in the Alabama redistricting case, said there is grief over the implosion of the Voting Rights Act but it is crucial that people recommit to the fight.

"We have to accept that this is the new reality, whether we like it or not," Milligan said. "We don't have to accept that this will be the reality for the next 10 years or two years or forever."

Supreme Court rejects Virginia's bid to restore congressional map favoring Democrats

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Friday rejected Virginia's bid to restore a congressional map that would have given Democrats a chance to pick up four seats in the closely divided House of Representatives.

The court's order, issued without any noted dissent, is the latest twist in the nation's mid-decade redistricting competition. It was kicked off last year by President Donald Trump urging Republican-controlled states to redraw their lines and was supercharged by a recent Supreme Court ruling severely weakening the Voting Rights Act that opened up even more winnable seats for the GOP.

In recent days, the justices have sided with Republicans in Alabama and Louisiana who hope to redo their congressional maps to produce more GOP-leaning seats following the court's voting rights decision.

But the Virginia situation was different, stemming from a 4-3 ruling by the Virginia Supreme Court that struck down a constitutional amendment that voters narrowly passed just last month.

The state court found that the Democratic-controlled legislature improperly began the process of placing the amendment on the ballot after early voting had begun in Virginia's general election last fall.

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The Supreme Court typically doesn't intervene in state court proceedings unless they present an issue of federal law. Virginia Democrats had hoped to persuade the justices that the Virginia court misread federal law and Supreme Court precedent that hold that, even if early voting is underway, an election does not happen until Election Day itself.

Virginia's amendment had been intended as a response to Republican gains in Texas, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio, and to blunt a new map in Florida that just became law. Once the Virginia amendment passed, it briefly turned the nationwide redistricting scramble into a draw between the two parties.

That was unraveled by the Virginia Supreme Court's decision.

The state's attorney general, Democrat Jay Jones, slammed the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, saying it was another example of what he described as a national attack on voting rights and the rule of law.

"Let's be clear about what is happening. Donald Trump, Republican state legislatures, and conservative courts are systematically and unabashedly tilting power away from the people for Trump's political gain," Jones said in a statement issued late Friday night.

The state's top Democrats had disagreed about whether it was even too late for help from the Supreme Court. "Time grows short, but it is not yet too late," lawyers for the Democratic leaders of the legislature as well as the state told the justices in a brief filed Friday.

A day earlier, the office of Democratic Gov. Abigail Spanberger already had confirmed that the state will hold this year's elections under the current districts established in 2021. Last month, Virginia Commissioner of Elections Steve Koski said a court order was needed by this past Tuesday to set the district lines for primary elections on Aug. 4.

Spanberger reacted to Friday's decision by saying both courts had nullified the votes of the more than 3 million Virginians who cast ballots in the April 21 special election.

"These Virginians made their voices heard — casting their ballots in good faith to push back against a President who said he's 'entitled' to more seats in Congress before voters go to the polls," she posted on her X account.

The leader of the state Republican Party said the justices made the right call.

"Wisely, the Supreme Court of the United States has confirmed the judgment of the Supreme Court of Virginia," state party chairman Jeff Ryer said. "This should once and for all put to rest the Democrats' effort to disenfranchise half of Virginia."

Ex-Sinaloa security chief is first of 10 indicted Mexican officials to surrender to US authorities

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The former secretary of public security for Mexico's Sinaloa state appeared in a U.S. court Friday, days after his arrest in Arizona on charges he and other officials took bribes to help the Sinaloa Cartel smuggle vast quantities of drugs into the U.S.

Gerardo Mérida Sánchez, 66, was not required to enter a plea during his initial appearance in federal court in Manhattan. He was ordered jailed but could request bail at a later date. He is due back in court on June 1. A message seeking comment was left for his lawyer.

Mérida Sánchez is one of 10 current or former Sinaloa government or law enforcement officials charged by the U.S. last month and the first to appear in court. He is charged with narcotics importation conspiracy, possession of machine guns and destructive devices and conspiracy to possess machine guns and destructive devices and faces 40 years to life in prison if convicted.

Other defendants include Gov. Rubén Rocha Moya and Mayor Juan de Dios Gámez Mendívil of the Sinaloa state capital of Culiacán, both of whom said they were taking temporary leaves of absence to deal with the charges. They have yet to be apprehended.

Mexico's Security Cabinet stated on social media that Mérida Sánchez entered the U.S. from Hermosillo, Sonora, on Monday, and was taken into custody by the U.S. Marshals Service at the Nogales border crossing into Arizona. He appeared in court in Arizona before being moved to New York, court records show.

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Mérida Sánchez was Secretary of Public Security, an appointed cabinet-level position in Moya's Sinaloa government, from September 2023 until his resignation in December 2024. He was responsible for overseeing the Sinaloa State Police and appointing its director.

Mérida Sánchez is accused of taking at least \$100,000 in monthly cash bribes from "Los Chapitos," a Sinaloa Cartel faction run by the sons of incarcerated ex-cartel leader Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, in exchange for arresting rivals and providing information about ongoing investigations and planned drug raids.

In 2023 alone, Mérida Sánchez warned the Chapitos about at least 10 upcoming raids on labs and safe houses where they stored drugs, weapons, and money, allowing them to remove personnel and evidence of criminal activity before they happened, according to an indictment unsealed last month.

Some of the indicted officials are members of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum's progressive Morena party.

After the indictment was announced, Sheinbaum said she wouldn't defend anyone found to have committed a crime but argued that, if authorities uncovered "irrefutable" evidence linking the officials to cartel crime, they should be tried in Mexico, not the U.S.

"We will never subordinate ourselves because this is a matter of the dignity of the Mexican people," she said, risking backlash from U.S. President Donald Trump, who has threatened military action against cartels on Mexican soil.

Mexico's Foreign Ministry and Security Cabinet have been maintaining institutional communication with U.S. authorities within the framework of international cooperation mechanisms.

"El Chapo" was convicted in 2019 and sentenced to life in prison.

Another Sinaloa kingpin, Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, pleaded guilty last year to U.S. drug trafficking charges and apologized for helping flood the country with cocaine, heroin and other illicit substances and for fueling deadly violence in Mexico. He is scheduled to be sentenced in July to life in prison.

Under Zambada and Guzmán's leadership, prosecutors say, the Sinaloa cartel evolved from a regional player into the largest drug trafficking organization in the world.

Takeaways from Trump's trip to China: Taiwan, a new framework for relationship and flattery for Xi

By WILL WEISSERT, AAMER MADHANI, KANIS LEUNG, SIMINA MISTREANU, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — For three days in China, President Donald Trump was unusually quiet, not speaking to reporters much and even mostly staying off social media. Then he got on his plane home and unloaded.

Trump's trip was unexpectedly dominated by discussions about Taiwan and the notion that Washington and Beijing could adopt a new framework for managing their complicated relationship.

Chinese President Xi Jinping kicked off the whirlwind visit with a warning: If Washington mishandles its relations with the self-governing island of Taiwan, the U.S. and China could end up clashing or even in open conflict.

Trump did not respond publicly, refraining from mentioning Taiwan while in Beijing. But he suggested aboard Air Force One on his way home that Xi's staunch opposition might make him rethink a planned U.S. arms sale to Taipei.

Among the other topics of discussion were trade and the U.S. and Israel's war in Iran, which had been expected to take up most of the attention. Trump spent the trip overtly flattering China's leader, despite Xi not reciprocating.

And the president did not push back publicly on China's characterization that he and Xi had agreed to a "constructive" new vision for dealing with their relationship issues.

Here are key takeaways from Trump's trip:

Trump held his tongue on Taiwan — until he was headed home

Before the trip, Trump demonstrated greater ambivalence toward Taiwan in his second term, raising questions about whether he might be open to dialing back support for the island democracy that Beijing

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views as its breakaway province.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio insisted there was no change in the U.S. approach to Taiwan. But there was always a risk that Trump — not known for diplomatic nuance — might make an off-the-cuff remark that could have mammoth ramifications for Taiwan.

In the end, Trump said nothing publicly about Taiwan, even as his Chinese counterpart suggested the island was the most important aspect of U.S.-China relations.

But then, pressed by reporters after leaving China, Trump said he had not yet made a decision on whether to carry through with a major arms package sale he previously approved for Taiwan after hearing Xi's objections.

Trump's Republican administration in December authorized an \$11 billion weapons package for Taipei, but it has yet to move forward. Lawmakers also approved a \$14 billion arms sale to Taiwan in January, but the sale cannot advance until Trump formally sends it to Congress.

"President Xi and I talked a lot about Taiwan," Trump told reporters on the presidential plane. He said China's leader "does not want to see a fight for independence because that would be a very strong confrontation."

"I heard him out," Trump said. But "I didn't make a comment."

Trump appeared to struggle to recall the name of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te and noted of Washington's policy toward the island, "The last thing we need right now is a war that's 9,500 miles away."

Asked if he would consider intervening militarily if China were to attack Taiwan, Trump said he did not want to say — a nonanswer that is consistent with long-standing U.S. policy that has become known as strategic ambiguity.

The policy says the U.S. has agreed to ensure Taiwan has the resources to defend itself if China attempts to force a unilateral change, but it does not expressly say how far Washington will go militarily to counter Beijing, should it come to that.

Trump and Xi still talked about Iran

It appears the leaders had substantive talks about the U.S.-spurred conflict in Iran that has led to a surge in global oil prices and that — if extended — could push the world toward recession.

Trump said Xi agrees with him that a nuclear-armed Iran is a bad idea and that the Strait of Hormuz must be reopened. He said Xi even offered to help find an endgame to the war.

Xi and Chinese officials have not confirmed that such an offer was made. China has publicly said the solution should "take into account the concerns of all parties on the Iran nuclear issue."

In Trump's view, China should be more involved in the resolution to the conflict, given its dependence on oil and liquefied natural gas coming from the Middle East.

If Trump successfully persuaded Xi to get more engaged, that could be significant for the U.S. effort to find a credible exit from the Iran war.

Xi hailed a new relationship status: strategic stability

China, meanwhile, said the two leaders agreed to a new vision for "a constructive China-U.S. relationship of strategic stability."

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said the framework would shape ties for at least three years — the rest of Trump's term — and focus on cooperation, competition within limits and managing differences.

The idea is "to keep the relationship on an even keel," said Helena Legarda of the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin.

George Chen, a partner at The Asia Group consultancy, said the approach can be seen as progress following the era of Trump's Democratic predecessor, Joe Biden, when the relationship was framed as a strategic competition.

Trump says big trade deals are coming but offers few details

Trump brought a large group of top CEOs with him to China, including the head of aircraft maker Boeing; Jensen Huang, chief of semiconductor giant Nvidia; and Elon Musk, the SpaceX boss who once led Trump's effort to slash the federal workforce.

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Trump said major deals had been struck and that China could buy some 200 planes from Boeing, but he left Beijing without announcing anything concrete. Previous suggestions that Xi would commit to big orders of U.S. soybeans and beef were also pending.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One, Trump suggested that China could eventually buy as many as 750 planes from Boeing if the initial order goes well, and that 450 engines produced by General Electric would be included in such a future purchase if it happens.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the two sides had agreed to establish boards on trade and on investments, to address each other's concerns on agricultural goods' market access and to promote expanded trade under a framework of reciprocal tariff reductions.

More details on trade agreements might emerge eventually, but as with all major bilateral accords, the fine print is what matters.

During his first term, Trump used an elaborate signing ceremony before leaving Beijing to cement dozens of deals worth around \$250 billion. But not all of what was pledged came to fruition.

Trump repeatedly praised Xi

From the moment Trump opened his mouth in Beijing, he offered nothing but praise for Xi. And it sometimes felt a bit over the top, considering that Xi said nothing similar in return.

Trump called Xi a "great leader" and said they were going to have a "fantastic future together."

It was an "honor" to be with Xi and to be his friend, Trump said, describing his counterpart as "warm."

China's president isn't known for effusiveness. Trump himself said in a Fox News interview that Xi is "all business."

Xi did say Trump's "landmark visit" had deepened mutual trust. But he found more subtle ways to charm Trump. He promised to send seeds to grow roses at the White House like the ones in the garden at Xi's residence where Trump had tea on Friday.

Xi said he hosted Trump there to reciprocate the hospitality Trump showed him when he visited Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida in 2017.

Colorado's Democratic governor commutes ex-election clerk Tina Peters' sentence after Trump pressure

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Colorado Gov. Jared Polis on Friday commuted the sentence of election conspiracy theorist Tina Peters following pressure from President Donald Trump, the latest instance of the president using his powers to reward those who echoed his baseless claims of mass fraud as the cause of his 2020 loss.

Trump has championed the case of Peters, a 70-year-old former county clerk who was sentenced to nine years behind bars after being convicted in a scheme to make a copy of her county's election computer system. She gets released June 1.

In April, a Colorado appeals court upheld her conviction but ordered Peters to be resentenced because it said the judge who sent her to prison wrongly punished her for speaking out about election fraud, a decision that Polis praised.

In a letter to Peters, Polis wrote that Peters was convicted of serious crimes and deserved to spend time in prison. "However, this is an extremely unusual and lengthy sentence for a first time offender who committed nonviolent crimes," the governor wrote.

He added Peters' application "demonstrates taking responsibility for your crimes, and a commitment to follow the law going forward."

President Donald Trump posted around the time of the announcement on his Truth Social platform: "FREE TINA!"

'Affront to the rule of law'

Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold, a Democrat, said "it was a dark day for democracy" and "selling out our state's justice system for Trump is an affront to the rule of law."

"A clear message is being sent to those willing to break the law and attack democracy for the president

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— they will likely not face consequences for their actions,” Griswold said at a news conference.

Peters has been serving her sentence at a prison in Pueblo after being convicted in 2024 by jurors in Mesa County, a Republican stronghold that supported Trump.

Peters snuck in an outside computer expert, an associate of MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell, to make a copy of her county’s Dominion Voting Systems election computer server as state officials updated it in 2021. After Peters joined Lindell onstage at a “cybersymposium” that promised to reveal proof of election rigging, video and photos of the upgrade, including passwords, were posted online.

After the commutation, Peters issued a statement through her attorney thanking Polis and apologizing.

“Five years ago I misled the Secretary of State when allowing a person to gain access to county voting equipment. That was wrong,” Peters said. “I have learned and grown during my time in prison and going forward I will make sure that my actions always follow the law, and I will avoid the mistakes of the past.”

She also condemned threats and violence against voters, county clerks and election workers.

Gubernatorial candidates weigh in

Sen Michael Bennet, a Democrat who is running for Colorado governor, said he vehemently disagreed with the commutation and that Peters knowingly broke the law, undermined elections and was convicted by a jury.

“Lawlessness only breeds more lawlessness,” Bennet said. “With President Trump continuing to attack Colorado, we must do everything we can to stand strong for our institutions and the rule of law.”

A Republican candidate for governor, state Sen. Barbara Kirkmeyer, said she would have preferred that the trial judge revisit Peters’ sentence as ordered by the appeals court before the governor considered any commutation.

“A commutation or pardon by a governor should be reserved for truly extraordinary circumstances,” Kirkmeyer wrote in a statement. “The governor has a responsibility to apply justice fairly, consistently, and without bias.”

Trump championed her cause

Peters was convicted of state, not federal, crimes, which put her beyond the reach of Trump’s pardon power that he used to free those convicted of crimes for the Jan. 6, 2021, attacks on the U.S. Capitol. But the president still championed her cause.

Trump has lambasted both Polis, calling him a “Scumbag Governor,” and the Republican district attorney who prosecuted her, Daniel Rubinstein, for keeping Peters in prison. He has referred to Peters, as “elderly” and “sick.” Earlier this year, Trump uninvited Polis from a White House meeting with governors over the case.

The president said Colorado was “suffering a big price” for refusing to release her. His administration has been choking off funds, ending federal programs and denying disaster aid. It also announced the dismantling of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado and relocated the U.S. Space Command to Alabama.

Matt Crane, executive director of the Colorado County Clerks Association, said the commutation “signals that it is open season on our election and election officials.”

“Gov. Polis is bending the knee to the same political voices and conspiracy theories that are undermining belief in our democratic institutions,” Crane said. “This is now Gov. Polis’ legacy. He will not be able to run from it.”

Tina Peters’ declining health in prison

Peters’ lawyers have said her health has declined in prison. Peters, who had part of her right lung removed in 2017, started coughing frequently after the prison’s heating system was turned on for the winter and has had trouble sleeping on her mattress because of chronic pain from fibromyalgia, her lawyers said.

In January, Peters was involved in a scuffle with another inmate but was found not guilty of assault following a prison disciplinary hearing, Colorado Department of Corrections spokesperson Alondra Gonzalez-Garcia said. Peters was found guilty of being in a location without authorization.

The federal Bureau of Prisons tried but failed to get Peters moved to a federal prison. But in January, Polis said he was considering granting clemency for Peters, calling her sentence “unusual and harsh” for

a first-time, nonviolent offender. In March he repeated those arguments in a lengthy post on the social media platform X.

Polis defended his decision on Friday in a social media post.

"I'll always stand for free speech and to make sure that we live in a country that no matter what your viewpoints are, you are not incarcerated longer because of them," Polis said.

In contrast to some other Democratic governors, Polis, who prides himself on being a political iconoclast, has taken a sometimes accommodating stance toward Trump. While he criticized Trump's stance on tariffs and immigration, Polis praised earlier moves by the president such as the Department of Government Efficiency, run by billionaire Elon Musk, and the nomination of vaccine critic Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to run the Department of Health and Human Service.

Trump and Boeing say China agreed to buy 200 aircraft, reopening a key market for the US planemaker

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

Aircraft manufacturer Boeing will make its first major sale to China in nearly a decade under an agreement for 200 planes announced Friday after President Donald Trump's summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The deal represents a breakthrough in the U.S. aerospace company's efforts to reenter a market once central to its long-term growth.

Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One as he returned from Beijing, Trump said China also reserved the right to buy as many as 750 Boeing aircraft as part of the deal. Boeing confirmed the 200-plane order later Friday but did not specify the types of planes or provide any other details.

"We had a very successful trip to China and accomplished our major goal of reopening the China market to orders for Boeing aircraft," the company said in a statement, adding that looked forward to "continually addressing China's aircraft demand."

Boeing CEO Kelly Ortberg was among a large group of American CEOs who joined Trump during the president's trip to Beijing, seeking to sell products and services to China.

Trump said the potential aircraft deal also would benefit General Electric, which he said would supply 400 to 450 engines to China. GE Aerospace Chairman and CEO H. Lawrence Culp also joined the president on his trip. The company did not immediately comment on the agreement.

Last month, Ortberg expressed confidence that any broad U.S.-China trade agreement to emerge when Trump and Xi met would be a "meaningful opportunity" for Boeing.

"President Trump has been very focused on supporting us in international campaigns, and he's been very successful in doing that," Ortberg told investors.

Since Trump began serving his second term, his administration has made Boeing a focus of its plans to revive U.S. manufacturing.

A visit to the Middle East a year ago culminated in major aircraft agreements, including a Qatar Airways order for up to 210 Boeing jets in what the planemaker described at the time as its largest-ever widebody aircraft order. Saudi Arabia also placed commercial jetliner orders during the trip.

Other major Boeing agreements have followed meetings between Trump and foreign leaders. In August, Korean Air formalized a roughly \$50 billion deal to buy more than 100 Boeing aircraft, spare engines and long-term maintenance services during South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's visit to Washington.

The following month, a day after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with Trump in Washington, Turkish Airlines said it planned to add 225 Boeing aircraft to its fleet.

In another win for Boeing, the biennial Dubai Air Show opened in November with hometown airline Emirates ordering 65 of Boeing's upcoming 777-9 aircraft. Days later, FlyDubai, the lower-cost sister carrier of Emirates, announced it had ordered 75 additional Boeing 737 MAX aircraft.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, roughly a third of the narrowbody airliners Boeing delivered went to China. But the company's business there plummeted as U.S.-China relations soured.

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China also was the first country to ground the 737 Max in 2019 after two of the then-new models crashed less than five months apart in Indonesia and Ethiopia, killing 346 people. Chinese airlines did not resume Max flights until January 2023, much later than carriers in many other countries.

Ortberg took over as Boeing's CEO in 2024, a calamitous year for the company. In January of that year, a panel known as a door plug blew off a 737 Max shortly after takeoff from Portland, Oregon. Boeing faced mounting financial pressure as it came under intensifying scrutiny over alleged production and quality failures.

While there were some hopes this week's U.S.-China summit would result in concrete trade deal announcements, the president's trip ended with a lot of uncertainty about what the two sides agreed on, said Bonnie Glaser, managing director of the Indo-Pacific program at the German Marshall Fund.

Glaser told a media briefing Friday that there had been little concrete information about trade agreements from the summit, including on Chinese purchases of U.S. exports such as soybeans, liquefied natural gas and beef.

"All that we have is really what the president has told the world that China has agreed to," Glaser said.

Gaza airstrike targeted Hamas military wing leader, Israel says

By WAFAA SHURAF and TOQA EZZIDIN Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — An Israeli airstrike in Gaza on Friday targeted the leader of Hamas' military wing, Israeli officials said, but it wasn't immediately clear if Izz al-Din al-Haddad was killed or injured. Hamas did not immediately acknowledge or comment on the strike.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz said an airstrike carried out by the military Friday evening targeted al-Haddad, the leader of Hamas' Qassam brigades.

There were at least two Israeli strikes Friday evening in Gaza City, one of which Israel said targeted al-Haddad. One strike targeted a residential building and another a vehicle. Seven people were killed and dozens of others wounded, according to health officials in the Palestine Red Crescent Society's Saraya Field Hospital and Shifa hospital, where the casualties were taken.

In a statement, Netanyahu and Katz said that al-Haddad was "one of the architects" of the Oct. 7 attack.

Gaza has seen near-daily Israeli fire despite a fragile ceasefire agreement reached in October. More than 850 people have been killed since then, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The Health Ministry is part of Gaza's Hamas-run government, but staffed by medical professionals who maintain and publish detailed records, viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Netanyahu and Katz threatened that Israel will continue to work against all those who took part in the Oct. 7 attack, in which militants killed some 1,200 people and took 251 hostages. Over 72,700 people have been killed in Gaza since Israel launched its offensive in response to Hamas' 2023 attack.

"Sooner or later, Israel will reach you," the statement read.

Palestinian citizens reported more airstrikes that followed the one that targeted al-Haddad. It was not immediately clear what the Israeli military was targeting.

Since the shaky ceasefire was reached, both Israel and Hamas have traded accusations of violations. Israel has targeted Hamas members inside the coastal enclave, the last of whom was the son of Hamas' lead negotiator, Khalil al-Hayya.

Trump administration prepares to seek Raúl Castro indictment as it pressures Cuba, AP sources say

By JOSHUA GOODMAN, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The Justice Department is preparing to seek an indictment against former Cuban President Raúl Castro, three people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Friday, as President Donald Trump threatens possible military action against the communist-run island.

One of the people told the AP that the potential indictment is connected to Castro's alleged role in the

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1996 shutdown of four planes operated by the Miami-based exile group Brothers to the Rescue. Castro was defense minister at the time.

All three people spoke on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation. The Cuban government did not respond to a request for comment on the potential indictment, which was reported earlier by CBS.

Any criminal charge against Castro, which would need to be approved by a grand jury, would dramatically escalate tensions with Havana and ramp up expectations of U.S. military action in Cuba like the one carried out in January in Venezuela to bring President Nicolás Maduro to New York on drug trafficking charges.

Following Maduro's ouster, the Trump administration quickly turned its attention to his ally Cuba and ordered an economic blockade that choked off fuel shipments to Cuba, leading to severe blackouts, food shortages and a collapse in economic activity across the island.

Iran war gave Cuba a breather

The U.S. war in Iran appeared to have given Cuban leaders something of a reprieve from U.S. talk of regime change.

As Trump seeks to wind down that conflict, speculation has been growing that he may soon turn his attention back to Cuba after pledging earlier this year a "friendly takeover" of the country if its leadership didn't open up its economy to American investment and kick out U.S. adversaries.

Richard Feinberg, a professor emeritus specializing in Latin America at the University of California-San Diego, said that any indictment of Castro will play well with voters in south Florida but is unlikely to persuade career war planners in the Pentagon to pursue a second war of choice — this time just 90 miles from Florida.

"There's no easy Venezuela copy," said Feinberg. "There's no clear line of succession and it's hard to imagine regime change without U.S. boots on the ground."

The AP reported in March that the U.S. Attorney in Miami had created a special working group of prosecutors and federal law enforcement to build cases against top Cuban officials amid calls by several south Florida Republicans to reopen its investigation into Castro's alleged role in the 1996 shutdown.

Trump calls Cuba 'a declining country'

Trump declined to discuss a potential indictment on Friday, deferring to the Justice Department.

"But they need help, as you know, and you talk about a declining country — they are really a nation or a country in decline, so we're going to see," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One. "We have a lot to talk about on Cuba, but not maybe for today."

CIA Director John Ratcliffe met with Cuban officials, including Castro's grandson, during a high-level visit to the island on Thursday.

Castro, 94, took over as president from his ailing brother, Fidel Castro, in 2011, and then handed power to a handpicked loyalist, Miguel Díaz-Canel, in 2019.

While he largely has avoided the spotlight since retiring in 2021 as head of the Cuban Communist Party, he is widely believed to wield power behind the scenes, a fact underscored by the prominence of his grandson, Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro, who previously met secretly with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Florida straits shutdown a watershed moment in Cuba-U.S. relations

Cuba's shutdown in 1996 of two Cessna aircraft operated by the Brothers to the Rescue was a watershed moment in decades of hostilities between the two countries.

At the time, President Bill Clinton had been cautiously exploring ways to reduce tensions with a Cold War adversary but faced stiff opposition from exiles who organized publicity-seeking flyovers of Havana, dropping anti-Castro leaflets, and aiding Cuban rafters fleeing economic deprivation and single-party rule.

The Cubans had warned the U.S. government for months that it was prepared to defend against what it considered deliberate provocations. But those calls went unheeded and on Feb. 26, 1996, missiles fired by Russian-made MiG-29 fighter jets downed two unarmed civilian Cessna planes just beyond Cuba's airspace, according to an investigation conducted by the International Civil Aviation Organization. A third plane, carrying the organization's leader, narrowly escaped.

"With hindsight, it appears the Castros' motive was to slow down the Clinton outreach because they

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needed the U.S. as an external enemy to justify their national security posture," said Richard Fienberg, who worked on Cuban issues at the National Security Council at the time.

They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, said Feinberg.

Shortly after the shutdown, Congress passed what became known as the Helms-Burton Act, which codified a U.S. trade embargo enacted in 1962 and made it far more complicated for successive U.S. presidents to engage with Cuba.

To date, the U.S. has convicted only a single person of conspiracy to commit murder in connection with the Brothers to the Rescue shutdown. Gerardo Hernández, the leader of a Cuban espionage ring dismantled by the FBI in the 1990s, was sentenced to life in prison but was released by President Barack Obama during a prisoner swap in 2014 as part of an attempt to normalize relations with Cuba.

Two fighter jet pilots and their commanding officer have also been indicted but are outside the reach of U.S. law enforcement while living in Cuba.

Castro previously investigated for drug trafficking

Castro has been under U.S. criminal investigation before. In 1993, federal prosecutors in Miami considered charging him and several other senior Cuban military officials with cocaine trafficking based on testimony from Colombian traffickers that emerged in the drug trial of former Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega, the AP reported in 2006.

But an indictment never followed amid concerns about the witness' credibility as well as fears that it could risk U.S. intelligence operations and derail Clinton's tentative outreach.

AP finishes US restructuring with round of 20 layoffs, part of strategic pivot from print journalism

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

The Associated Press laid off 20 U.S.-based journalists on Friday, the union representing them said, part of a restructuring announced last month that is turning the news organization's focus away from print journalism and toward visual journalism and other revenue sources.

"This is part of the restructuring we announced last month to align our operations with what our top customers need from us today," an AP spokesman, Patrick Maks, said in an email.

"It's never easy to part ways with valued colleagues — we are appreciative of their contributions to the AP and wish them all the best," wrote Maks, the news outlet's director of media relations and corporate communications.

AP declined to give numbers, but the News Media Guild, the union that represents AP journalists, said 20 guild-covered staffers had been laid off. The layoffs had been completed by the end of the business day Friday.

The layoffs, which had been expected, come about a month after AP, one of the world's oldest and most influential news organizations, offered buyouts to more than 120 journalists based in the United States. About 40 subsequently volunteered and were accepted, according to the guild.

Tony Winton, the guild's administrator, said the union had received an email just before 10 a.m. Friday from an AP human resources official saying the company was planning to implement layoffs, and the last day of work was Friday. He said no other information was provided.

"Today's cuts show just how directionless AP's leadership has become," said a statement from Kimberlee Kruesi, an AP reporter and the guild's acting president. "The company touts that it is prioritizing visual journalism, yet among the 20 employees sacked today are experienced photographers."

Julie Pace, executive editor and senior vice president of the AP, said in an interview last month that AP's goal was to reduce its global staff by less than 5%. The company does not say how many journalists it employs.

Pace said at the time that the AP "is not in trouble."

"We're making these changes from a position of strength, but we're doing so now to recognize our

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changing customer base," she said.

Over the past four years, the AP's revenue from newspapers has declined by 25%. Gannett and McClatchy, two of the largest traditional newspaper publishers, dropped AP in 2024.

AP customers now are dominated by broadcast, digital and technology companies. Kristin Heitmann, senior vice president and chief revenue officer, said last month that the company had seen a 200% growth in revenue from technology companies over the same period.

Stock markets worldwide drop from records as worries about oil prices rattle the bond market

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market fell from its records Friday and joined a worldwide drop for stocks after higher oil prices sent a shiver through the bond market. Stocks that had been caught up in the euphoria around artificial-intelligence technology led the way lower.

The S&P 500 fell 1.2% from its all-time high set the day before. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 537 points, or 1.1%, and the Nasdaq composite sank 1.5% from its own record.

Technology stocks tumbled in a sharp turnaround from their meteoric rises for much of the year, which had carried markets worldwide to records but also raised criticism that they had gone too far.

Nvidia, the stock that quickly became the face of the AI revolution, dropped 4.4% and was the heaviest weight on the S&P 500. It had come into the day with a gain of more than 26% for the year so far.

Micron Technology was another one of the heaviest weights on the market after falling 6.6%. It's nevertheless still up nearly 154% for the year so far.

"To us, it looks like markets have pushed into overbought territory," according to Brian Jacobsen, chief economic strategist at Annex Wealth Management. He said the strong corporate profits and durable U.S. economy that launched U.S. stocks to records remain intact, but "the path is unlikely to be smooth. Periods like this call for discipline more than hope."

In the meantime, rising oil prices are raising the pressure after already worsening inflation by more than economists had feared. The war with Iran is continuing, and the Strait of Hormuz remains shut to oil tankers, which is preventing them from delivering crude to customers worldwide and driving up oil's price.

The price for a barrel of Brent crude oil, the international standard, rose 3.3% to settle at \$109.26 and is well above its level of roughly \$70 from before the war.

Many big U.S. companies have been saying their customers have been able to keep spending on their products and services despite having to pay higher prices for gasoline. But U.S. households have also been telling surveys they're feeling discouraged about the economy and the pressures building on them because of the war and tariffs.

The worries were most clear Friday in the bond market, where Treasury yields climbed. The yield on the 10-year Treasury rose to 4.59% from 4.47% late Thursday. That's a notable move for the bond market, and it's well above its 3.97% level from before the war.

The yield on the 30-year Treasury reached 5.13% and is back to where it was in 2007, before the financial crisis sent yields crashing toward zero in the ensuing year.

Higher yields can make mortgages and other kinds of loans going to U.S. households and businesses more expensive, which slows the economy. They also tend to push downward on prices for stocks and all kinds of other investments.

Stocks of smaller companies had some of Friday's sharpest drops. Many of them need to borrow cash to grow, which means higher borrowing costs can hurt them more than their big rivals. The Russell 2000 index of the smallest U.S. stocks fell 2.4%, double the S&P 500's loss.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 92.74 points to 7,408.50. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 537.29 to 49,526.17, and the Nasdaq composite sank 410.08 to 26,225.14.

Yields have been climbing since the war on worries about higher inflation and how it may tie the Federal Reserve's hands when it comes to short-term interest rates. Not only have traders abandoned virtually all

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expectations that the Fed will resume its cuts to interest rates this year, they've been building some bets that it may even hike rates in 2026, according to data from CME Group.

A couple of reports on the U.S. economy that came in better than expected also helped to lift yields. One said U.S. industrial production improved by more last month than economists expected, while another said manufacturing in New York state is expanding at a faster rate.

In stock markets abroad, indexes fell by more than 1.5% across much of Europe and Asia.

South Korea's Kospi dropped 6.1% for one of the biggest moves. It's set records this year because of the influence of AI beneficiaries like SK Hynix. But it quickly reversed momentum Friday after briefly topping the 8,000 level for the first time.

Some on Wall Street have been warning about a possible break in momentum for tech stocks in general and AI winners in particular.

"If nothing else this should be a 'shot across the bow' for how volatility works both ways," according to Jonathan Krinsky, chief market technician at BTIG.

Judge declares a mistrial in Harvey Weinstein's rape retrial after jury deadlocks

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Jurors deadlocked in Harvey Weinstein's rape retrial Friday, forcing another mistrial in a #MeToo-era case that has gone to trial three times so far.

While the former Hollywood mogul has been convicted of other sex crimes on two U.S. coasts and remains behind bars, the mistrial leaves the New York rape charge in limbo. Prosecutors were pondering whether to try the case a fourth time, after some jurors said outside court that nine out of 12 wanted to acquit Weinstein.

Weinstein, 74, showed little reaction as he was ushered from court, but his attorneys said later that he was pleased with the outcome.

"Maybe it's not the win that he wanted, but it's a win, and we're going to keep fighting," attorney Marc Agnifilo said, adding that the defense believed it has "outstanding" prospects if the case is retried.

The majority-male Manhattan jury weighed whether Weinstein raped Jessica Mann, a hairstylist and actor. Weinstein's lawyers argued that the encounter was consensual. It happened in 2013 during a fraught relationship between the then-married Weinstein and the decades-younger Mann.

Deliberations began Wednesday. On Friday, after the jury sent two notes in 90 minutes saying it was stuck, Judge Curtis Farber declared a mistrial.

What stood out to jurors

Some jurors said they were struck by gaps in what Mann recalled, particularly when defense lawyers were questioning her.

"The prevailing thought was that the witness had a lot of inconsistencies in her story," said juror Josh Hadar, 57. He favored acquittal: "I don't come to that easily, but it just seemed that there was enough reasonable doubt."

Another juror, Sarae Perez, 25, noted that she studied feminism and is well versed in #MeToo, but she also couldn't overcome uncertainties about Mann's account.

"There were places where we couldn't trust her word for it," she said.

Accuser's reaction: 'I deserve justice'

Mann said in a statement that the mistrial "doesn't in any way detract from the truth I told."

"I deserve justice, which is why I stand up and face unbearable public scrutiny in the name of a greater good," she said.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg hailed Mann's "perseverance and bravery" and said in a statement that prosecutors will consult her about next steps. They're due to say next month whether they will retry the case.

How the case returned for a third trial

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As an Oscar-winning movie producer and studio boss, Weinstein was one of Hollywood's most powerful figures and a significant Democratic donor before the long-suppressed sexual harassment and sexual assault allegations against him cascaded into public view in 2017. The revelations galvanized the #MeToo movement's demands for accountability for sexual misconduct, made Weinstein a pariah, bankrupted the studio and ultimately led to criminal charges against him in New York and Los Angeles.

He was convicted of some and acquitted of others. Yet Mann's allegation lingered. Weinstein was convicted of the charge in 2020. Then an appeals court overturned that verdict, and jury deliberations broke down at a 2025 retrial. That paved the way for this year's retrial.

Weinstein has said he was unfaithful to his then-wife and "acted wrongly, but I never assaulted anyone."

The accuser's account

Mann, now 40, met Weinstein at a Los Angeles party in early 2013, when she hoped to build a handful of acting credits into a big career. She said his pushy intimate overtures discomfited her at first, but she acceded to them and decided to develop a relationship with him.

However, she said she made it clear she didn't want sex on March 18, 2013, when he unexpectedly got a room at a Manhattan hotel where she was staying with a friend.

"I said 'no,' over and over, and I tried to leave," she told jurors during five days of intense testimony. She said Weinstein slammed the door, grabbed her arms and ordered her to undress. Scared, she gave up protesting, she said and alleged that he ultimately raped her.

Weinstein's lawyers highlighted an introspective, private note that Mann wrote herself two days later. While saying nothing about the alleged rape, the note discussed her conflicted feelings about becoming "emotionally attached" in a nonexclusive relationship with a man she didn't name. She testified that she hadn't needed to write down the alleged rape.

The Associated Press does not identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted, unless they choose to make their names public, as Mann has done.

Weinstein's defense

Weinstein didn't testify. In his lawyers' telling, Mann was a willing partner in a close, supportive relationship with a show-business insider who opened doors for her, but she turned on him once he became an outcast.

In the months and years after the New York encounter, Mann kept seeing and communicating with Weinstein, emails and testimony showed. At times, she pulled away to pursue another relationship; at others, she turned back to Weinstein, who validated her acting dreams and comforted her when her father was terminally ill.

"I love u. Anything u need," Weinstein wrote.

He helped Mann land a movie audition — it went nowhere — and a hairstyling job. She asked him for help with such things as a car problem, though she declined cash that he tried to send when she couldn't make rent.

In one of her last emails to Weinstein, in February 2017, she wrote: "I love you, always do. But I hate feeling like a booty call." When he responded by suggesting she was "joking" and should stop using his company email, she said it was a joke and apologized.

Eight months later, news reports about other women's allegations prompted her to go to the police.

Mann never sued Weinstein, but after his 2020 conviction, she filed for and got about \$500,000 from a sexual misconduct settlement fund set up during his company's bankruptcy. His lawyers didn't mention the payout at this trial.

Democrat Rep. Steve Cohen ending campaign after redraw of his Memphis district

By STEPHEN GROVES and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic Rep. Steve Cohen of Tennessee announced Friday that he is ending his bid for reelection, his career upended by the redistricting battles that are sweeping the country after

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last month's Supreme Court decision.

Republicans in Tennessee this month enacted a new U.S. House map that carves up a Cohen's majority-Black district, reshaping it to the GOP's advantage as part of President Donald Trump's strategy to hold on to a slim majority in the November midterm elections.

"I don't want to quit. I'm not a quitter. But these districts were drawn to beat me," Cohen told reporters in his Washington, D.C., office.

Cohen is challenging the state's redistricting effort in court and said he would reenter the race if that lawsuit succeeded in restoring his old congressional district.

He lamented that Tennessee would likely shift to an entirely Republican congressional delegation after the next election, warning that it could also leave the state out of the loop once Democrats are able to regain the White House.

Redistricting targeted Cohen's district

Tennessee was the first state to pass new congressional districts after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that significantly weakened federal Voting Rights Act protections for minorities. But more Southern states could follow. Republicans in Louisiana, Alabama and South Carolina also have taken steps toward redistricting.

Cohen has represented his Memphis-based district for about two decades, among the last of the white Democrats representing the South. He has been a longtime member of the House Judiciary Committee and has focused on strengthening voting access and civil rights.

"It's unique in America that an African-American majority district has elected a white guy, and that we've got a great relationship, great amount of support," said Cohen, who is also the first Jewish person to represent Tennessee in Congress.

He was facing a primary challenge from state lawmaker Justin Pearson, a Black progressive who represents much of Memphis in the state's General Assembly.

"The status quo is failing us," Pearson told The Associated Press Friday. "It's time for new energy, new voices, and new ideas to meet this present moment, and that's why I started to run in the first place."

Pearson said he still intends to run in Tennessee's redrawn 9th Congressional District, which now includes multiple rural counties that backed Trump by double-digit margins.

"We're going to win. It's going to be harder, but as an ancestor once said, if the mountain was smooth, you couldn't climb it," said Pearson. He said his message would not change, but argued his agenda had some appeal to rural, working-class, white conservatives.

But Cohen predicted it would be nearly impossible for Tennessee Democrats to win a seat in Congress with the new districts. He added there was a chance the redistricting effort could "backfire on the Republicans" but that would require an "unbelievable registration effort among Democrats" and a massive vote turnout.

Cohen vows to oppose Trump

Sitting in his congressional office with staff looking on, Cohen pointed to photos of Memphis and local projects that he had championed during his career and expressed worry that Memphis voters would no longer have a voice in Washington. He also recounted how he had worked with the state's Republican leaders to win funding during the Biden administration for a larger bridge to cross the Mississippi River into Memphis.

House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a statement that Cohen was "a powerful champion for civil rights" and that "the City of Memphis, the Congress and the nation are better because of Steve's commitment to making a difference."

Cohen said the Republican's redistricting effort was being done "for Donald Trump to get one more vote, he thinks, to stop him from being impeached."

Still, he vowed to use his remaining time in Congress to try to mount opposition to Trump, calling the president "the greatest threat to democracy and to decorum and grace that we've ever seen."

Like many lawmakers, Cohen has often attracted attention with colorful outbursts during congressional debates and hearings. During Trump's first term, in 2019, Cohen brought a bucket of fried chicken to a House Judiciary Committee hearing at which then-Attorney General William P. Barr was a no-show.

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"The message is Attorney General Bill Barr is not brave enough to answer questions from a staff attorney and members of the Judiciary Committee," he said in a statement at the time.

While Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, as Congress tried to certify the results of the presidential election, Cohen screamed angrily at his Republican colleagues to "Call Trump. Call your friend. Tell him to do something."

Cohen was among the first Democrats to join impeachment efforts for Trump in his first term, and he has signed on to articles of impeachment against Trump this year as well.

Memphis activists respond to new map

Meanwhile, Memphis activists grappled with the new political realities after the Republican-led legislature's decision to divide the city's longtime congressional district into three neighboring districts.

Advocates said they believed they could work with — and pressure — any lawmaker who will represent the city.

"Things are going to change. We're aware of that," said Tierney Macon, an activist with The Equity Alliance, a local civil rights group.

Macon, who protested at the Tennessee statehouse for days following the unveiling of the redrawn maps, said activists aimed to hold the city's new representatives in Congress accountable no matter their party.

"We just have to be engaged," Macon said.

Demonstrations in the statehouse included chants accusing lawmakers of resurrecting Jim Crow, a system of state and local laws that for decades enforced racial segregation and disenfranchisement across the South.

Pentagon halts deployments to Poland and Germany to cut troop numbers in Europe, AP sources say

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN, EMMA BURROWS, BEN FINLEY and CLAUDIA CIOBANU Associated Press WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon is drawing down thousands of troops in Europe by canceling deployments to Poland and Germany as opposed to yanking forces already stationed there, U.S. officials say, as President Donald Trump has tussled with allies over the Iran war and called for changes.

Several U.S. officials confirmed that 4,000 troops from the Army's 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division were no longer en route to Poland this week. The Trump administration had previously said it was cutting U.S. forces only in Germany, and the decision spurred questions and criticism in both Warsaw and Washington.

Two officials told The Associated Press the Poland deployment was canceled after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth signed a memo directing the Joint Chiefs of Staff to move a brigade combat team out of Europe. One of them said the choice of which unit was left to military leaders.

Besides the Army combat team based in Fort Hood, Texas, the memo also led to the cancellation of an upcoming deployment to Germany of a battalion trained in firing long-range rockets and missiles, according to the two officials, who like the others spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military operations.

Three U.S. officials said the canceled deployments were part of an effort to comply with a presidential order issued at the beginning of May to reduce the number of troops in Europe by about 5,000. The reasoning does not appear to have been well communicated because others based in Europe said they did not know if the halted deployment to Poland was part of the previously announced reduction in troops.

Trump and the Pentagon have said in recent weeks that they were drawing down at least 5,000 troops in Germany after Chancellor Friedrich Merz said the U.S. was being "humiliated" by the Iranian leadership and criticized what he called a lack of strategy in the war.

The drawdown reflects a growing rift between the administration and traditional European allies, with the U.S. leader repeatedly criticizing fellow NATO members for a lack of support for the Iran conflict.

Polish officials on Friday insisted that the canceled U.S. deployment to Poland, which was reported earlier by The Military Times and other outlets, was not targeted directly at their country but was a consequence

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of Trump's decision to reduce the number of troops in Germany.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said he "received assurances" that the decision was of a logistical nature and said it does not directly impact deterrence capabilities and Poland's security.

Military says the decision to cancel a unit heading to Poland was made recently

Joel Valdez, a Pentagon spokesman, said "the decision to withdraw troops follows a comprehensive, multilayered process" and he argued that it was "not an unexpected, last-minute decision."

Speaking to Congress in a hearing Friday, Army Secretary Dan Driscoll and Gen. Christopher LaNeve, the Army's chief of staff, said discussions around the halted deployment to Poland occurred over the past two weeks but that the decision itself was made in the past couple days.

Republican Rep. Don Bacon of Nebraska said he spoke with Polish officials Thursday and they were "blindsided."

The move also left some U.S. military personnel in Europe in the dark about how the Trump administration was reducing forces. A U.S. official based in Europe said a meeting was called with 20 minutes' notice on Monday to discuss the cancellation of the deployment to Poland.

At that time, troops had already been sent to Poland and some still in the U.S. were told shortly before departure not to travel to the airport, that official said. Another official said most of the Army unit's equipment had already made it to Europe and was sitting in ports.

The change to troop deployment to Poland draws bipartisan criticism

Democratic and Republican lawmakers criticized the reductions as sending the wrong signal both to allies and Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose forces this week have launched one of the deadliest attacks on the Ukrainian capital in the 4-year-old war.

At the House Armed Services Committee hearing Friday, LaNeve said he worked with U.S. Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, commander in Europe of both American and NATO forces, after Grynkeiwich received the instructions for the force reduction.

"I've worked with him in close consultation of what that force unit would be, and it made the most sense for that brigade to not do its deployment in theater," LaNeve said.

Bacon called the decision "reprehensible" and said it was "an embarrassment to our country what we just did to Poland."

Republican Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, who chairs the committee, said the military is required to consult with lawmakers and that did not happen.

"So we don't know what's going on here," Rogers said. "But I can just tell you we're not happy with what's being talked about."

A State Department official said Friday at a security conference in Tallinn, Estonia, that the U.S. reductions in Europe were "right there in black and white" but also noted that "the U.S. isn't going anywhere."

"We'll continue to work with the Pentagon and work with our partners to make sure we get the right fit and right mix of what's happening here on the ground," said Thomas G. DiNanno, U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control and international security.

NATO says the change in Poland won't affect defense

With the halted deployments, the U.S. military presence in Europe will now be at pre-2022 levels, before Russia commenced its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, one U.S. official said.

Europe has been bracing for a reduction since Trump returned to the White House, with the administration warning that Europe would have to look after its own security, including Ukraine's, in the future.

A NATO official said the U.S. decision to cancel its rotational deployment to Poland would not impact NATO's deterrence and defense plans. Canada and Germany have increased their presence on the alliance's eastern flank, which contributes to NATO's overall strength, the official said, insisting on anonymity in line with NATO regulations.

Ben Hodges, former commanding general of U.S. Army Europe, said the move "reinforces the perception that the United States just does things without consultation with allies," which ultimately "damages cohesion inside the alliance." The decision would in the long run harm the U.S. defense industry as it reduces the trust of partners, he said.

Around 10,000 U.S. troops are typically stationed in Poland, the majority of them present in the country on a rotational basis. Only about 300 troops are permanently stationed in the country, according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service.

Polish officials had hoped they would be spared from any cuts as Poland spends the most in NATO on defense as a proportion of its economy — around 4.7% in 2025. Hegseth has called it a “model ally” in NATO for spending so much on defense.

When Poland’s conservative president, Karol Nawrocki, visited the White House in September, Trump said he didn’t intend to pull U.S. troops out of Poland. “We’ll put more there if they want,” Trump said at the time.

A new Ebola outbreak is confirmed in a remote Congo province, with 65 deaths recorded

By The Associated Press undefined

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — Africa’s top public health body on Friday confirmed a new Ebola outbreak in Congo’s remote Ituri province, with 246 suspected cases and 65 deaths recorded so far.

Neighboring Uganda later confirmed one death in an Ebola case it said was imported from Congo.

The deaths and suspected cases have been recorded mainly in the Mongwalu and Rwampara health zones, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said in a statement. The agency said 65 deaths have been attributed to the outbreak and that four of those have so far been confirmed in a laboratory.

Ebola is highly contagious and can be contracted through bodily fluids such as vomit, blood or semen. The disease it causes is rare, but severe and often fatal.

Scientists were trying to determine exactly what virus was driving the current outbreak in Congo. The Ebola virus — also known as the Ebola Zaire strain — has been prominent in Congo’s past outbreaks. Results so far suggest some variant other than the Ebola Zaire strain, with sequencing continuing to give more clarity, the Africa CDC said.

The World Health Organization says the Ebola disease is caused by a group of viruses, and that three of them are known to cause large outbreaks: Ebola virus, Sudan virus and Bundibugyo virus.

Uganda on Friday reported one Ebola case involving a Congolese man admitted to a hospital in Kampala three days before he died. Officials said the case was “imported” from Congo, and that Uganda has not yet confirmed any local cases.

Uganda’s Health Ministry said the patient was tested posthumously on Friday after neighboring Congo confirmed its Ebola outbreak. All contacts linked to the man have been quarantined, the agency said. The deceased’s body has been taken back to Congo.

The ministry said the person was infected with the Bundibugyo virus, a variant of the illness that has been endemic in Uganda.

The WHO said last year that Congo has a stockpile of treatments and some 2,000 doses of the Ervebo Ebola vaccine. The Ervedo vaccine is effective against the Ebola Zaire strain — considered the most severe one — but not against the Sudan virus or Bundibugyo virus, according to health authorities.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, World Health Organization director-general, told reporters Friday that the WHO last week sent a team to help Congo investigate the outbreak and collect samples. While initial results did not confirm Ebola, a new analysis on Thursday did, he said.

Congo has “a strong track record in Ebola response and control,” Tedros said, adding that the WHO is releasing \$500,000 to aid Congo’s response.

Affected areas are close to Uganda, South Sudan borders

The latest outbreak comes around five months after Congo’s last Ebola outbreak was declared over after 43 deaths.

Ituri is in a remote eastern part of Congo characterized by poor road networks, more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) from the nation’s capital of Kinshasa.

Africa CDC said it is concerned about the risk of further spread due to intense population movement,

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mining-related mobility in Mongwalu, insecurity in affected areas, gaps in contact listing and control challenges.

The proximity of affected areas to Uganda and South Sudan also raises concerns, it said.

The agency said it was convening an urgent coordination meeting Friday with health authorities from Congo, Uganda and South Sudan, together with key partners including U.N. agencies and other countries.

The acting head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Jay Bhattacharya, said Friday that U.S. health officials are in contact with officials in Congo and Uganda and are "going to provide whatever they need and that we are capable of providing them."

Congo has seen more than a dozen Ebola outbreaks

This is the 17th outbreak in Congo since the disease first emerged in the country in 1976. An Ebola outbreak from 2018 to 2020 in eastern Congo killed more than 1,000 people. The WHO said that outbreak was characterized by the main Ebola Zaire strain.

An earlier outbreak that swept across West Africa from 2014 to 2016 also killed more than 11,000 people.

The new outbreak creates more worry for the Central African country, which has been battling various armed groups in the east. The second-largest African country in land mass, Congo also faces logistical challenges. During last year's outbreak, which lasted three months, the WHO initially faced significant challenges in delivering vaccines due to limited access.

Dr. Gabriel Nsakala, a professor of public health who has been involved in past Ebola outbreak responses in Congo, said the country and health workers on the ground have a high level of experience, in addition to existing infrastructure such as laboratories.

"In terms of training, people already know what they can do. Now, the expertise and equipment need to be delivered quickly," Nsakala added.

Trump weighs Taiwan arms package after summit aimed at steadying US-China ties

By AAMER MADHANI, WILL WEISSERT and SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump said Friday that he has not made a decision on whether to move forward with a major arms package for Taiwan after hearing concerns about it from Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Trump's comments on Taiwan — a self-ruled island that China claims as its own territory — came as he flew back to Washington after wrapping up critical talks in which both leaders said important progress was made in stabilizing U.S.-China relations even as deep differences persist between the world's two biggest powers on Iran and Taiwan.

"I'll be making decisions," Trump said. "But, you know, I think the last thing we need right now is a war that's 9,500 miles away."

Trump's Republican administration in December authorized a record-setting \$11 billion weapons package for Taipei, but it has yet to move forward. Lawmakers also approved a \$14 billion arms sale to Taiwan in January, but the sale cannot advance until Trump formally sends it to Congress. China opposes such sales and has suggested that Washington's relationship with the self-governing island is the key factor in U.S.-China relations.

Trump said Xi also reiterated China's strong opposition to Taiwan's independence. "I heard him out," Trump said. "I didn't make a comment."

Trump's consultation with Xi about arms sales to Taiwan may violate the so-called Six Assurances, a set of nonbinding U.S. policy principles formulated in 1982 under President Ronald Reagan that have helped guide the U.S. relationship with Taipei, according to analysts.

The second of the Six Assurances states that the U.S. "did not agree to consult with the People's Republic of China on arms sales to Taiwan."

Trump said the issue of the 1982 assurances came up in the talks with Xi.

Trump says Xi is 'very positive' about a potential nuclear deal

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Trump also said he raised a potential three-way nuclear deal that would involve the U.S., Russia and China. He wants each of the three countries to sign a pact that would cap the number of nuclear warheads in their arsenals. China has previously been cool to entering such a pact.

Beijing's arsenal, according to Pentagon estimates, exceeds 600 warheads and is far from parity with the U.S. and Russia, which are each estimated to have more than 5,000 warheads. But Trump suggested Xi was receptive to the idea.

"I got a very a positive response," Trump said. "This is the beginning."

The last nuclear arms pact, known as the New START treaty, between Russia and the United States expired in February, removing any caps on the two largest atomic arsenals for the first time in more than a half-century. As the treaty was set to expire, Trump rejected a call by Russia to extend the two-country deal for another year and called for "a new, improved and modernized" deal that includes China.

The Pentagon estimates China will have more than 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030.

Trump was impressed by Chinese presidential residence

Xi welcomed Trump at his official residence, Zhongnanhai, on Friday for their final engagement of the summit before the U.S. leader's return to Washington. The leaders took a short walk through the grounds that feature ancient trees and Chinese roses, and they strolled through a covered passageway with green columns and archways painted with birds and traditional Chinese mountain scenes.

Over tea and lunch, Trump and Xi — with top aides and translators in tow — huddled for nearly three hours of talks before the U.S. leader completed his three-day visit to China.

Trump appeared impressed by the bucolic grounds, remarking that the roses were the most beautiful he had ever seen. Xi promised to send him some rose seeds.

"It's been really a great couple of days," Trump told reporters.

Xi, for his part, called it a "milestone" visit. "We have established a new bilateral relationship, or rather a constructive, strategic, stable relationship," he said.

But the optimistic outlook collides with some difficult truths about the thorniest issues between the two superpowers.

Beijing has shown little public interest in U.S. entreaties to get more involved in solving the conflict in Iran, even though Trump said in an interview with Fox News' Sean Hannity that Xi had in their conversations offered to help.

In recent weeks, the U.S. State Department has accused Chinese firms of providing satellite imagery to the Iranian government, and the Treasury Department has moved to target Chinese oil refineries accused of buying oil from Tehran, as well as shippers of the oil.

Xi on Thursday warned Trump during private talks that their differences on Taiwan, if handled poorly, could hurtle the world's dominant powers toward "clashes and even conflicts," according to Chinese government officials.

But Trump, as he made his way home, said he was not concerned that the U.S.-China relationship was in danger. "I think we will be fine," he said.

Taiwan remains the most important issue for China

Xi's sharp language on Taiwan loomed large over the visit, with Chinese government officials amplifying his view that differences on the island pose the biggest risk to U.S.-Chinese relations.

But Secretary of State Marco Rubio told NBC News that U.S. policy toward Taiwan was "unchanged" and cautioned that it would be "a terrible mistake" for China to try to take Taiwan by force. He also framed Xi's comments as standard practice.

"They always raise it on their side. We always make clear our position, and we move on to the other topics," said Rubio, who was among senior aides to join Trump for the talks.

Some Republicans in Congress expressed displeasure at Trump's pronouncement that he has not decided whether to move forward with the arms package for Taiwan.

"We have to support Taiwan, just like we have to support Ukraine," said Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a Pennsylvania Republican. "These are the fortresses of democracy, and they're on the front lines, and we have to protect and defend them."

Republican Rep. Michael McCaul said he was not surprised that Xi came out with an aggressive posture on Taiwan.

"We've got to arm Taiwan so they can defend themselves for deterrence," McCaul said.

China wants the Strait of Hormuz opened

Trump said he and Xi also spoke at length about Iran.

The leaders agreed that the critical Strait of Hormuz — effectively closed since the start of the Iran conflict — needs to be reopened to support global energy demands. About 20% of the world's oil flowed through the strait before the war started on Feb. 28.

"We feel very similar about (how) we want it to end," the president said. "We don't want them to have a nuclear weapon."

White House officials said Xi was also opposed to any implementation of tolls on vessels crossing the strait and expressed interest in China potentially purchasing U.S. oil to reduce Chinese dependence on Gulf oil in the future.

Trump earlier this week downplayed the importance of talks with Xi on the 11-week-old Iran war that has led to surging energy prices and threatens to plunge the global economy into recession if the conflict does not conclude soon.

Justice Department to seek death penalty for man charged with killing 2 Israeli Embassy staffers

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department will seek the death penalty for the man accused of fatally shooting two staff members of the Israeli Embassy in Washington outside a Jewish museum, prosecutors said in a court filing Friday.

Elias Rodriguez faces federal hate crime and murder charges in the killings of Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Milgrim as they left an event at the museum last May. Rodriguez shouted "Free Palestine" during the shooting and later told police, "I did it for Palestine, I did it for Gaza," according to his indictment.

The charges against Rodriguez include a hate crime resulting in death. The indictment also includes notice of special findings, which allows prosecutors to pursue the death penalty.

"My message to anyone who seeks to commit political violence in this district -- D.C. is not the place. You will be held accountable and you will face the full wrath of the law," Jeanine Pirro, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, said at an unrelated news conference Friday in which she revealed the Justice Department's death penalty decision.

The hate crimes charges mean prosecutors will have to prove that Rodriguez was motivated by antisemitism when he opened fire on Lischinsky and Milgrim, a young couple who were about to become engaged. Milgrim, 26, was a U.S. citizen and Lischinsky, 30, was an Israeli citizen working in the U.S.

Prosecutors have described the killing as calculated and planned, saying Rodriguez flew to the Washington region from Chicago ahead of the May 21 event at the Capital Jewish Museum with a handgun in his checked luggage.

Witnesses described him pacing outside before approaching a group of four people and opening fire. Surveillance video showed Rodriguez advancing closer to Lischinsky and Milgrim as they fell to the ground, leaning over them and firing additional shots. He appeared to reload before jogging off, officials have said.

After the shooting, authorities say Rodriguez went inside the museum and said, "I did it for Palestine, I did it for Gaza, I am unarmed," according to court documents. He also told detectives that he admired an active-duty Air Force member who set himself on fire outside the Israeli Embassy in February 2024, describing the man as "courageous" and a "martyr."

In Friday's court filing, prosecutors said Rodriguez's actions were "motivated by political, ideological, national, and religious bias, contempt, and hatred." He "targeted individuals whom he perceived to have attended an event for young Jewish professionals ... to amplify the effect of his crimes," they wrote.

Attorneys for Rodriguez didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment. Several weeks before Friday's announcement, defense attorneys had a meeting with Justice Department officials where they could present evidence that they believe would weigh against seeking the death penalty in the case.

The next court appearance for Rodriguez is set for June 30. A trial date hasn't been scheduled yet.

Kyiv mourns as death toll from Russian attack in the Ukrainian capital rises to 24

By SAMYA KULLAB, HANNA ARHIROVA and BARRY HATTON Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The death toll from a Russian missile attack that flattened a Kyiv apartment building rose Friday to 24, including three teenagers, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said as he led the mourning for one of the deadliest attacks on the capital in the 4-year-old war.

The cruise missile hit the nine-story corner apartment block Thursday during what the Ukrainian air force said was Russia's biggest barrage on the country of the full-scale invasion. Emergency workers finished digging through the rubble searching for victims after more than a day, Zelenskyy said on X.

Crowds of grieving people — many of them children — streamed toward a makeshift memorial beneath a tree near the destroyed building.

Teenagers clutching bouquets arrived in groups and broke into tears as they approached the growing mound of flowers and stuffed toys beside photographs of the dead. A portrait of a girl in a school uniform, posed against a bright yellow backdrop, was among the photos.

Zelenskyy and other top government officials visited the site to pay tribute to the dead, as did Kyiv-based foreign diplomats.

Russia has hammered Ukraine with large-scale aerial attacks in the days since a May 9-11 ceasefire that U.S. President Donald Trump said he asked Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin to observe. Fighting continued over those 72 hours, although reportedly on a lesser scale.

This week's attacks ran counter to recent suggestions from Trump and Putin that the war is close to ending.

The assault mostly targeted the Ukrainian capital, where 48 people were wounded, including two children, Zelenskyy said.

He said Moscow had launched more than 1,560 drones against Ukrainian population centers since Wednesday, adding that about 180 sites across the country were damaged, including more than 50 residential buildings.

Previously, the biggest Russian drone attack was on March 23-24 when Moscow's forces fired nearly 1,000 drones and missiles at Ukraine. Thursday's death toll in Kyiv approached one from July 2024 that killed 32 civilians and injured another 85.

Russia reports a Ukrainian attack on Ryazan

Ukraine has also built up significant long-range capabilities, and Russia's Defense Ministry said Friday that its air defenses downed 355 Ukrainian drones overnight in one of the largest barrages of the war. Several airports suspended flights overnight because of the attacks.

A Ukrainian drone struck Ryazan, a city about 100 kilometers (60 miles) southeast of Moscow, killed four people, including a child, regional Gov. Pavel Malkov said. Massive plumes of black smoke rose from a fire at an oil refinery. Ukraine has targeted Russian oil facilities to try to deny vital revenue for Moscow and rattle the Kremlin.

Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment on the Ryazan strike.

The cruise missile that hit the Kyiv apartment building was built in the second quarter of this year, Zelenskyy said, apparently after Ukrainian experts analyzed the wreckage.

"This means Russia is still importing the components, resources and equipment necessary for missile production in circumvention of global sanctions," he said in another post on X late Thursday. "Stopping Russia's sanctions evasion schemes must be a genuine priority for all our partners."

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Also on Friday, Russia and Ukraine swapped 205 prisoners of war, one of an occasional exchange. Zelenskyy said it was the first phase of a planned swap of 1,000 POWs from each side. Some of the Ukrainians have been held by Russia since 2022 and fought in some of the war's fiercest battles, he added. Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed the exchange and thanked the United Arab Emirates for helping to broker it.

Texas high court rejects removal of Democratic lawmakers who led quorum break over redistricting

By JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The Texas Supreme Court on Friday refused to declare that Democratic lawmakers who briefly fled the state in 2025 to block a vote on new congressional maps pushed by President Donald Trump had vacated their office.

The all-Republican court dealt a blow to Gov. Greg Abbott and state Republicans in their efforts to severely punish the more than 50 Democrats who bolted for New York, Illinois and Massachusetts in a bid to stop a vote on the maps during a special session.

The Texas redistricting effort kick-started cascading efforts by both parties across the country to redraw voting maps ahead of this year's midterm elections: Republicans, pushed by Trump, seek to hold their slim majority in Congress as Democrats try to counter them.

Those efforts have gained new intensity after the U.S. Supreme Court further weakened the Voting Rights Act by no longer allowing race to be considered in how congressional and other districts are drawn.

In Texas, Abbott had argued in a lawsuit filed directly to the state's highest civil court that state Rep. Gene Wu, the leader of the House Democratic caucus, and others had effectively abandoned their office.

If successful, they hoped to wield a new hammer to threaten lawmakers considering any future quorum breaks.

Wu had argued that he was not abandoning his office, but was exercising a right to dissent.

In denying Abbott's request, the court opinion written by Justice James Blacklock noted that the Republican-majority Legislature had adequately resolved the problem itself through measures such as fines against the missing lawmakers, and it noted they eventually returned on their own within a few weeks.

"In the end, a quorum was restored in two weeks' time, without judicial intervention, by the interplay of political and practical forces," Blacklock wrote.

"Courts have uniformly recognized that it is not their role to resolve disputes between the other two branches that those branches can resolve for themselves," the opinion said.

If the issue rises again and the Legislature cannot effectively compel lawmakers to return, the court may someday consider whether the courts should step in, the opinion said.

"When Greg Abbott threatened to arrest and expel us for denying him a quorum, we told him he should 'come and take it.' He tried!" Wu said in a statement Friday. "Abbott was wrong, weak, and after all his bluster, he couldn't come and take a damn thing."

Wu and the other lawmakers eventually returned to Texas, and the new map was passed and signed into law by Abbott.

Wu had argued that because he had returned to the Capitol and the map was eventually signed into law, there was no longer any reason for the court to weigh in.

If lawmakers leave again, the governor will bring the same issue back to the court, Abbott spokesman Andrew Mahaleris said Friday.

"No elected official has the right to abandon their duties, flee the state and shut down the people's business," Mahaleris said. "Governor Abbott's legal action is what brought derelict Democrats back to Texas to do their jobs and pass the Big Beautiful Map."

The state constitution requires that at least 100 of the 150 House members be present to conduct business, and the quorum break effectively shut down a special legislative session Abbott had called to

address redistricting and other issues.

And Texas has a history of walkouts.

In 2021, the court ruled that the Texas Constitution enables the possibility of a quorum break but also allows for consequences to bring members back.

Last year's Democratic walkout was the third since 2003, when lawmakers bolted to stop a vote on a redistricting bill. They did it again in 2021 over an elections bill. In both cases, they were temporary victories as Democrats eventually returned and the Republican majority in the Legislature ultimately passed both measures into law.

Takeaways from AP's interview with Colombian woman deported to Congo by US

By MARK BANCHEREAU Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — The Trump administration has deported 15 Latin Americans to the Democratic Republic of Congo, sending them to an unfamiliar country thousands of miles from home — many despite U.S. court orders protecting them from deportation to their homelands.

The Associated Press spoke by phone with a 29-year-old Colombian woman about her experience. She spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

Here are takeaways from AP's story.

Deported despite court protections

All the deportees had received legal orders from U.S. judges shielding them from removal to their home countries, according to U.S. attorney Alma David, one of their lawyers. The Colombian woman was granted protection under the U.N. Convention Against Torture in May 2025, after a federal judge ruled she could not safely be returned to Colombia, where she had faced threats from armed groups and abuse by a former partner in government.

She was nonetheless detained at a routine U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement check-in earlier this year and told a third country had been found for her. Less than three weeks later, she was on a plane — hands and feet restrained during a nearly 24-hour charter flight. She learned she was going to Congo the day before departure.

A recent U.S. court ruling found the government likely broke the law by deporting a fellow Colombian to Congo. What that means for the others remains unclear.

Several African nations take third-country deportees

The Trump administration has struck deals with at least eight African countries to accept deportees who are not their own nationals — people whose home countries won't take them back or who have court protections preventing their return. Legal experts say the arrangements function as an effective loophole in U.S. immigration law.

The terms of Congo's deal are unclear. Unlike other participating countries, which have received millions of dollars, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi has called it an "act of goodwill," with no financial compensation. The deal comes as Washington has pressured neighboring Rwanda over its support for the M23 rebel group in eastern Congo — a dynamic analysts say may help explain Kinshasa's cooperation.

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to questions about the Colombian woman's case but has asserted the agreements "ensure due process under the U.S. Constitution." The Trump administration says they are needed to "remove criminal illegal aliens."

UN-affiliated body controls much of daily life

The International Organization for Migration, a U.N.-affiliated body, plays a central role in managing the deportees' lives in Kinshasa. They stay in bungalows at a hotel near the airport, with costs covered by Congo's government, according to the IOM. The gates are locked and security does not let them leave alone, the Colombian woman said.

Deportees may go out roughly once a week, accompanied by IOM staff, with about 30 minutes to shop

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or withdraw money. "They choose where we go and what we buy," the woman said.

The IOM has also presented deportees with their options: return to their home countries — where many face the persecution they fled — with IOM assistance, or remain in Congo with no support. Her attorney, Alma David, called them "impossible choices," saying the deportations violated due process rights, U.S. immigration law, and international treaty obligations.

Legal status in Congo is precarious

The deportees arrived on three-month Congolese visas. What happens when those expire is unclear. They have been told they can apply for asylum in Congo — an option none have taken.

The woman says she doesn't feel safe there. The food has made several of them sick. French and Lingala are as foreign as the surroundings. She spends most of her time in her room, making late-night calls to her 10-year-old daughter back in Colombia.

Congolese human rights groups have called the arrangement a violation of international refugee law. The Congo-based Institute for Human Rights Research described it as "arbitrary detention by proxy for the United States."

The woman, who managed a dessert shop in Colombia before fleeing, says she committed no crime, and just fled to the United States for safety. Instead she is stranded in a country she had never heard of, with no timeline and no plan.

Trump says Xi is considering a detained pastor's case, but freeing activist Jimmy Lai is 'tough'

By KANIS LEUNG and DIDI TANG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump said Friday he raised the issue with Chinese President Xi Jinping of releasing a prominent detained pastor and imprisoned Hong Kong activist Jimmy Lai, and quoted Xi as saying he'd consider the pastor but that Lai's case is a "tough one."

Speaking to reporters as he flew back from a trip to China, Trump said Xi told him he would give serious consideration to the case of Ezra Jin Mingri, pastor of an underground church detained in China in October in what observers have called an escalating crackdown on religious freedom.

"He said he's gonna strongly consider the pastor," Trump said.

Trump said that the case of Lai, founder of the now-defunct pro-democracy Apple Daily who was accused of anti-China activities, was much more difficult for the Chinese president. "He told me that would be a tough one," Trump said.

The families of both Jin and Lai said they appreciated Trump for raising their cases with Xi.

Jin's Zion Church is among the largest so-called underground or house churches that are unregistered with the Chinese authorities. They defy Chinese government restrictions requiring believers to worship only in registered congregations.

His daughter, Grace Jin Drexel, said Friday that the family and supporters are "overjoyed" to hear what Trump had said about her father.

"It's truly nothing short of miraculous!" she wrote to The Associated Press in a message. "We could not be more grateful to President Trump and his skillful administration for pressing the case!"

Despite Trump's far less optimistic tone on Lai, the former media mogul's daughter, Claire Lai, said she also was grateful to Trump and his administration for the commitment shown to her father's release.

"He has earned his reputation as liberating the unjustly detained and I am confident he and his administration will be the ones to free my father," she said in a message to the AP.

She called this moment an opportunity for Xi to do "the only just and honorable thing" for Lai and to show a gesture of good will to the world by releasing a man she said had dedicated himself to Hong Kong.

Activists say Beijing is becoming less willing to release prisoners who have confronted the government over human rights under Xi's rule. In 2017, the Chinese Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo died at a hospital in northeast China even after foreign governments urged China to release him for cancer treatment abroad.

Before his arrest, Lai, 78, was critical of Xi and the ruling Communist Party. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison in February under a national security law imposed by Beijing in 2020 that has virtually silenced dissent in Hong Kong.

Lai was found guilty of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and conspiring with others to publish seditious articles. His pro-democracy Apple Daily was shut down during a crackdown following massive anti-government protests that rocked the city in 2019.

Observers said Lai's plight symbolizes a decline in freedoms that Beijing had promised when the former British colony returned to Chinese rule in 1997. Foreign governments, including the U.S. and U.K., have raised concerns about Lai for years. But the Hong Kong government insists his case had nothing to do with press freedom.

On Tuesday, China's foreign ministry said Lai had been a key planner of anti-China activities that aimed at destabilizing Hong Kong, and said that the city's affairs are China's internal affairs.

Latin American nationals deported by the US to Congo face an uncertain future

By MARK BANCHEREAU Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — It's an existence that Congo's president has described as "living the Congolese dream." For the 15 Latin Americans deported to the African nation under the Trump administration's widely criticized crackdown on migrants, it feels more like a nightmare.

The Associated Press spoke with one, a 29-year old Colombian woman who confirmed what people deported to other African nations have described: A shackled deportation despite a U.S. immigration judge's protection order. Confinement in a hotel with supervised outings.

And an impossible choice: Return to a home country with the risk of persecution or stay in Congo, a country the Colombian woman had never heard of before she arrived.

"They treat us like we're children," she said as their three-month Congolese visas near an end, with no plan in sight.

"What would one do in a completely unknown place, without a place to live and without knowing what to do?" she added, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

It was not immediately clear what a new U.S. court ruling, saying the U.S. likely broke the law by deporting a fellow Colombian to Congo, will mean for her.

A United Nations-affiliated group plays a central role

In her interview from the hotel in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, where she and other deportees are held, the woman gave new details about the central role that a United Nations-affiliated body, the International Organization for Migration, is playing.

She said deportees are allowed to leave the hotel about once a week and only accompanied by IOM staff. When they shop at a supermarket or withdraw money they are quickly ushered back to their vehicle, with IOM staff never out of sight.

"They choose where we go and what we buy," she said.

At the hotel, she said, IOM staff have organized activities like painting, music and volleyball but many deportees have stopped participating, bored with the routine. She goes for meals and remains in her room otherwise, making late-night calls to her 10-year-old daughter in Colombia and worrying when she will see her again.

Most striking is the role IOM staff are playing in presenting deportees with their possible fates.

They have offered the woman two paths: Return to Colombia, where a U.S. judge has ruled she cannot safely be sent back, while receiving IOM "protection and assistance," or remain in Congo with no support.

"They are given impossible choices," said Alma David, the woman's U.S.-based attorney. "By deporting them to a third country with no opportunity to contest being sent there, the U.S. not only violated their due process rights but our own immigration laws and our obligations under international treaties."

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Congo is one of at least eight African countries that have made deals with the Trump administration to facilitate deportations of third-country nationals, which legal experts say are effectively a legal loophole for the U.S. Most deportees had received legal orders of protection from U.S. judges shielding them against being returned to their home countries, lawyers said.

The AP has interviewed others sent to African nations who were forced to make risky decisions, such as a gay Moroccan asylum-seeker deported to Cameroon, a country where homosexuality is illegal.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security did not respond to questions about the Colombian woman's case, but it has asserted that third-country deportation agreements "ensure due process under the U.S. Constitution." The Trump administration says the agreements are needed to "remove criminal illegal aliens" whose country of origin will not take them back.

Details of Congo's deal with US are unclear

The details of Congo's deal with the Trump administration are not clear. Other countries have received millions of dollars to participate.

Earlier this month, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi called the agreement an "act of goodwill between partners," with no financial compensation. It comes as Washington has ramped up pressure on neighboring Rwanda over its support for the M23 rebel group that has seized cities in eastern Congo — a dynamic some analysts say may explain Kinshasa's willingness to take deportees.

"We agreed to do so as a friendly gesture, simply because it was what the Americans wanted," Tshisekedi said, adding that the migrants are free to leave Congo at any time.

"We understand that psychologically they must be unsettled because, at first, they dreamed of living the American dream, and now they are living the Congolese dream — in a country they probably did not know and may never even have noticed on a map of the world," Tshisekedi said.

Congolese human rights groups have called it a violation of international refugee law. The Congo-based Institute for Human Rights Research described the situation as "arbitrary detention by proxy for the United States."

The current U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement policy says if a government has made blanket diplomatic assurances that it won't persecute people who are deported, no further process is required for deportation, not even giving deportees notice where they are being sent, said David, the attorney.

"When they told me they were going to deport me, I almost fainted," the Colombian woman said. She was told about Congo the day before the flight.

She was detained at a routine check-in with ICE

She said she left Colombia in 2024, following threats from armed groups and abuse by a former partner who worked for the government.

She went to Mexico, where she waited for a border appointment booked with the U.S. government. When she presented herself at an Arizona port of entry in September 2024, immigration officials determined she had a credible fear of persecution, clearing her to apply for asylum, but kept her in ICE detention.

"You spend a year and a half locked up, living the same day over and over again. You see fights, punishments where people are locked in cells for many hours. You lose your privacy even to use the bathroom," she said.

Some officers made racist remarks. "They made derogatory comments toward us as migrants, shouted at us all the time and sometimes denied basic things like showers as punishment," she said.

In May 2025, a federal judge granted her protection under the U.N. Convention Against Torture, ruling she could not be safely returned to Colombia, according to court documents seen by the AP.

She filed a habeas corpus petition and won her release in February. She moved to Texas and was required to wear a GPS monitoring device, but at her first check-in appointment with ICE, she was detained again.

"All they told me was that I was under detention, as they had found a third country for me," she said.

Less than three weeks later, she was put on a plane to Congo. She and the other deportees arrived on April 17 after a nearly 24-hour charter flight during which their hands and feet were restrained.

She doesn't feel safe in Congo

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Now they stay at a hotel near Kinshasa's airport, in tidy white bungalows. Congo's government covers the cost, the IOM said. It was not clear whether that would last after the deportees' visas run out.

The hotel gates are locked according to one of the deportees lawyers. The Colombian woman also said security personnel do not let them leave on their own.

They were told they could apply for asylum, an option no one has chosen. "I don't feel safe in Congo," the woman said.

An IOM spokesperson said the organization has provided her with humanitarian assistance based on an assessment of her vulnerability. It includes "protection interventions, referrals, rights safeguarding and promotion of migrants' overall well-being," with no details.

The IOM also may offer "assisted voluntary return" — covering documents, flights, transit and temporary housing on arrival — with migrants' consent.

The IOM said it plays no role in determining who is deported and reserves the right to withdraw its assistance for deportees if "minimum protection standards" aren't met.

The Colombian woman remains in limbo, anxious. She said the food "has made us very sick," with stomach ailments ongoing.

Local languages, like French and Lingala, are as foreign as her surroundings.

"The worst part is having to go through all of that without having committed any crime, simply for going to another country to ask for safety and protection."

War worsens Lebanon's economic crisis with job losses, price gouging and slow business

By MALAK HARB and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

CHIIAH, Lebanon (AP) — Ayman al-Zain watched on a recent afternoon as a bulldozer cleared the rubble of what used to be his sports clothing store, which was one of dozens of buildings destroyed in Israeli strikes against the Hezbollah militant group.

With a nominal truce in place that has reduced but not halted the fighting, Al-Zain tried to assess whether to rebuild the shop in Beirut's southern suburbs that he once hoped to pass down to his kids. But it's unlikely he will be able to do so anytime soon, and not only because of the fear of more airstrikes.

"Everything is expensive," he told The Associated Press. "If I want to open a new store and get mannequins, hangers and some accessories, the prices are very different than before."

The U.S.-Israeli war with Iran, and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, have sent economic shock waves across the Mideast. In Lebanon, those woes have been compounded by the country's existing economic problems and by largely unregulated markets that are vulnerable to price gouging.

"This continues to be a major economic shock, one of honestly an existential nature," said Economy Minister Amer Bisat, who is part of the Lebanese Cabinet that came into office over a year ago on a reformist agenda.

Problems have piled up for years

Since 2019, the tiny Mediterranean country has been in the throes of an economic crisis that pulverized the value of its local currency and its banking system.

That's when Lebanese banks collapsed, which evaporated depositors' savings and plunged about half of the population of 6.5 million into poverty, after decades of rampant corruption, waste and mismanagement. The country suffered some \$70 billion in losses in its financial sector, further compounded by about \$11 billion in the 2024 war between Israel and Hezbollah, according to the World Bank. The Lebanese pound has since lost over 90% of its value against the U.S. dollar.

The cash-strapped state electricity company provides only a few hours of power a day, and most Lebanese rely on diesel generators to make up the difference. That makes the economy particularly vulnerable to fuel price increases.

Lebanon was already "grappling with multiple rounds of crises," said Mohamad Faour, professor of finance at the American University of Beirut. "So this round of war only made an already fragile situation

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more fragile.”

With this new war, 1.2 million Lebanese have been displaced, largely from southern Lebanon and Beirut’s southern suburbs. Many are sheltering in schools with no work or draining whatever money they have renting out apartments or hotel rooms.

Economy suffers job losses and crippling inflation

In an interview with the AP from his office, Bisat estimated that the country faces an economic loss of around 7% of its gross domestic product due to the war because “companies are closing, people are losing their jobs, tourists are not showing up.”

Evidence of inflation abounds.

In the usually bustling produce market in Sabra, south of Beirut, vendor Ahmad al-Farra looked dejected as an elderly woman shopping for watermelon, tomatoes and potatoes walked away without buying anything after checking the price tags.

Prices have spiked since the U.S. and Israel launched a war against Iran on Feb. 28, followed quickly by a resurgence of war between Israel and Hezbollah.

“We’re keeping our prices low so we can sell, and even then we’re not selling,” al-Farra said as the sound of an Israeli drone whizzed overhead.

Even consumers who can afford to spend are anxious and cutting back on nonessential purchases, leaving many businesses empty.

Riad Aboulteif, who runs several restaurants and bars in the capital, said his revenue has dropped by some 90% since the war began, as Lebanon’s shrinking middle class cuts costs.

People are saving more money for their survival and not making plans to celebrate birthdays or other special occasions, he said at one of his bars in the bustling Hamra district of Beirut, where the loud chatter of customers once overpowered the jazz music coming through the sound system.

That night, only a few tables were occupied. He’s had to downsize his staff and restructure his menus to offer more affordable items.

War fuels price gouging

Meanwhile, the country’s bankrupt government has struggled to crack down on unfair and illicit profiteering and the hoarding of fuel and other essential items.

Many agricultural areas in southern and eastern Lebanon are no longer accessible because of airstrikes and clashes, but al-Faraa believes suppliers have raised prices beyond what is necessary to cover cost increases.

Some of the starkest increases have been in generator bills.

Families and businesses for years have paid multiple utility bills to cover privately supplied electricity and water in the absence of government services. Neighborhood generator owners charge a monthly fee, and some landlords have their own generators and charge the cost to tenants.

Frustrated business owners have said that generator bills have doubled at times, forcing them to shorten their hours of operation or even close on some days to cut costs.

“If we didn’t take these measures, we cannot continue,” Aboulteif said.

Bisat said his ministry has conducted over 4,000 inspections of private generators, gas stations and shops across the country since the start of the war in March and lodged dozens of complaints to the courts. But the issue will not be quickly resolved.

In the meantime, the government has little ability to crack down on the handful of companies that import and distribute fuel and other goods.

No sign of relief on the horizon

With no end to the war in sight, the economic situation shows no sign of easing.

A tenuous ceasefire is in place between the U.S. and Iran, but talks between Washington and Tehran are gridlocked. A nominal truce between Israel and Hezbollah has reduced but not stopped the fighting in Lebanon.

For now, Lebanese families and business owners are confronting the challenges day by day and hoping for the best.

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"Only God knows how we've been trying to manage ourselves," al-Farra said.

Today in History: May 16, China's Cultural Revolution begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, May 16, the 136th day of 2026. There are 229 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On May 16, 1966, the Chinese Communist Party issued the May 16 Notification, a document that criticized "counterrevolutionary revisionists" within the party and marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Also on this date:

In 1770, Marie Antoinette, age 14, married the future King Louis XVI of France, who was 15.

In 1868, having already been impeached by the House of Representatives, President Andrew Johnson narrowly avoided impeachment by the Senate, which voted 35-19 in favor of impeachment — one vote shy of the required two-thirds majority.

In 1929, the first Academy Awards were presented. "Wings" won the award for Outstanding Picture, while Emil Jannings and Janet Gaynor were named Best Actor and Best Actress.

In 1943, the nearly monthlong Warsaw Ghetto Uprising came to an end as German forces crushed the Jewish resistance and blew up the city's Great Synagogue.

In 1960, the first working laser was demonstrated at Hughes Research Laboratories in Malibu, California, by physicist Theodore Maiman.

In 1975, Japanese climber Junko Tabei became the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

In 1988, U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop declared that nicotine is as addictive as heroin or cocaine as part of his campaign to warn against the health hazards of smoking and make America smoke-free by 2000.

In 1991, Queen Elizabeth II became the first British monarch to address the U.S. Congress, speaking to a joint meeting of both chambers during her state visit to the United States.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton publicly apologized for the notorious 40-year Tuskegee Experiment, in which government scientists deliberately allowed Black men to weaken and die of treatable syphilis.

In 2011, Space Shuttle Endeavour launched on its 25th and final flight into space, bound for the International Space Station. The launch came as NASA was winding down the 30-year shuttle program that would end with a final flight by the orbiter Atlantis in July of the same year.

In 2018, officials at Michigan State University said they had agreed to pay \$500 million to settle claims from more than 300 women and girls who said they were assaulted by sports doctor Larry Nassar.

In 2022, the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 reached 1 million.

In 2025, a devastating tornado claimed several lives and damaged hundreds of homes in Somerset, Kentucky, during a severe weather outbreak in the South and Midwest that killed at least 19 people.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Danny Trejo is 82. Actor Pierce Brosnan is 73. Olympic gymnastics gold medalist Olga Korbut is 71. Baseball Hall of Famer Jack Morris is 71. Actor Debra Winger is 71. Olympic marathon gold medalist Joan Benoit Samuelson is 69. Actor Mare Winningham is 67. Rock musician Krist Novoselic (Nirvana) is 61. Singer Janet Jackson is 60. Football Hall of Famer Thurman Thomas is 60. Singer Ralph Tresvant (New Edition) is 58. Actor David Boreanaz is 57. Tennis Hall of Famer Gabriela Sabatini is 56. Actor Tori Spelling is 53. Actor Megan Fox is 40. Actor Thomas Brodie-Sangster is 36. Rapper Travis Bennett is 32. Model Lani Randol is 27. Basketball player Kamoreia 'KK' Arnold is 21.