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Friday, May 29

Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, parsley buttered potatoes, California blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.
State Track Meet in Sioux Falls

Saturday, May 30

Pickleball, 9:30 a.m., Elementary Gym
State Track Meet in Sioux Falls

Sunday, May 31

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship 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.; Cody Swanson Piano Recital, 3 p.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.
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**THE WORK CONTINUES.
GO COMPETE.
GO CONQUER.
GO TIGERS!** ❤️

GROTON AREA'S STATE TRACK SCHEDULE

FOR FRIDAY, MAY 29TH:

🕒 9:00am	🏃	BOYS TRIPLE JUMP - (Ethan Kroll - Flight 1)
🕒 10:20am	🏃	BOYS 3200M RUN FINALS - (Jayden Schwan - Heat 1)
🕒 11:00am	🏃	GIRLS 800M RELAY PRELIMS - (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Makenna Krause - Heat 3)
🕒 11:40am	🏃	BOYS 800M RELAY PRELIMS - (Lincoln Krause, Ryder Schwan, Ethan Kroll, Jordan Schwan - Heat 1)
🕒 12:50pm	🏃	BOYS 400M DASH PRELIMS - (Keegen Tracy - Heat 3)
🕒 1:20pm	🏃	GIRLS 300M HURDLES PRELIMS - (McKenna Tietz - Heat 3)
🕒 2:10pm	🏃	GIRLS 800M RUN FINALS - (Ryelle Gilbert - Heat 1)
🕒 2:35pm	🏃	BOYS 800M RUN FINALS - (Jayden Schwan - Heat 2)
🕒 3:20pm	🏃	BOYS 200M DASH - (Keegen Tracy - Heat 1)
🕒 3:35pm	🏃	GIRLS 1600M RELAY PRELIMS - (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Makenna Krause, Kella Tracy - Heat 1)
🕒 4:30pm	🏃	BOYS 1600M RELAY PRELIMS - (Ethan Kroll, Jace Johnson, Jordan Schwan, Kyson Kucker - Heat 3)



Monday, June 1

Senior Menu: BBQ Chicken breast, au gratin potatoes, coleslaw, fruited Jell-O, whole wheat bread.
State Golf Meet in Sioux Falls
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
Jr. Legion hosts Britton, 5:30 p.m.
U12 Baseball hosts Roslyn, DH, 5:30 p.m., Falk Field
T-Ball Practice, 6 p.m., Nelson Field

Groton Daily Independent
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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.

Potential Iranian Deal

US and Iranian negotiators reached a tentative deal yesterday to extend a ceasefire by 60 days, reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and begin nuclear negotiations. The proposal has been sent to President Donald Trump for review.

News of a potential deal comes as the two countries continue to accuse each other of violating the weeklong ceasefire. The US military struck Iranian missile launch sites and mine-laying boats this week, and also shot down several Iranian drones. Kuwait intercepted Iranian missiles late Wednesday that were apparently directed against a US air base on its soil.

Separately, Israel has continued strikes this week targeting what it called Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Lebanon. The country issued an evacuation notice on Wednesday covering 14% of Lebanon's territory—the broadest warning since Israel and Lebanon agreed to a ceasefire last month. The two countries are set to hold security talks today in Washington, DC.

Hepatitis B Breakthrough

An experimental drug for chronic hepatitis B has cleared detectable virus levels in about one in five patients, according to a study released yesterday. The result raises optimism about a potential functional cure for a disease affecting more than 250 million people worldwide.

Hepatitis B is a viral infection spread through blood, semen, and other bodily fluids that can cause liver damage, cancer, and death. A vaccine prevents infection but doesn't treat existing cases. Current therapies are lifelong and only suppress the virus, resulting in functional cures in 1% to 3% of patients. The new drug, bupirovirsen, blocks hepatitis B virus replication. In the study, 1,220 patients received weekly injections for 24 weeks, alongside standard antiviral pills. After six months, 19% of participants had no detectable virus. The drug awaits regulatory approval in the US, Japan, China, and Europe.

Globally, the chronic disease is most often transmitted from mother to child during birth.

Italy Goes to the Mattresses

Italy said it seized about \$232M in assets tied to late mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro and arrested three people in connection with the operation. The assets include more than 26 pounds of gold bars, millions in cash, premium watches, and roughly 20 luxury properties across nine countries.

Messina Denaro, head of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra mafia, spent 30 years on the run before his 2023 arrest. He died in prison months later at age 61 after receiving six life sentences for murder and organized crime and is believed to be responsible for over 50 deaths. Officials said the fortune was amassed through drug trafficking since the 1980s and reinvested in businesses and real estate. The operation is seen as a blow to the Sicilian mafia's efforts to rebuild financially after his death. Cosa Nostra is estimated to include 5,000 affiliates and 20,000 collaborators across Europe and the US.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Carolina Hurricanes and Montreal Canadiens face off tonight in Game 5 of the NHL Eastern Conference finals.

Four-time Stanley Cup winner Claude Lemieux dies at age 60, apparently by suicide, days after carrying the torch for Montreal in Game 3.

World No. 1 Jannik Sinner crashes out of the French Open in the second round, citing dizziness amid Paris' heat wave.

San Antonio Spurs win Game 6 of the NBA Western Conference finals; will face off against Oklahoma City Thunder in Game 7 tomorrow at 8 pm ET.

Science & Technology

IBM to invest \$10B in quantum research and manufacturing with goal of creating the first large-scale, fault-tolerant quantum computer by 2029.

Anthropic releases newest version of its flagship AI model, Claude Opus 4.8.

Engineers develop new method to extract lithium from rocks, with significantly less toxic waste than current approaches; mineral is a key component in everything from smartphones to clean energy.

Nanotube-based sensor detects early-stage bladder cancer with 50,000 times greater sensitivity than standard techniques; disease accounts for 85,000 new cases and 15,000 deaths in the US each year.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq +1.0%).

US personal consumption expenditures index—key inflation metric monitored by the Fed—rose 3.8% year over year in April, the highest since May 2023.

Anthropic tops OpenAI as most valuable AI startup after raising \$65B at \$965B valuation.

Web development company Wix to lay off 20% of its workforce, citing the evolution of AI.

Caesars Entertainment, iconic Las Vegas casino company, to be acquired for nearly \$6B by Fertitta Entertainment, owner of the Golden Nugget and Rainforest Cafe.

... the founder of Fertitta is also the US ambassador to Italy.

Politics & World Affairs

Justice Department investigates whether writer E. Jean Carroll—who accused President Donald Trump of sexual assault—committed perjury in her two civil lawsuits against Trump.

Former CIA officer is accused of potentially stealing \$40M of public funds in the form of 303 gold bars after requesting money for work-related expenses; a raid on his home also revealed \$2M in cash and 35 luxury watches.

Trump Accounts app launches in the US; parents and guardians of US children born between 2025 and 2028 can register their kids for the 530A, tax-preferred investment accounts seeded with \$1K each.

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JVT Annual Meeting



Credit Winners

Over 50 door prizes were handed out during James Valley Telecommunications' 69th Annual Meeting which included these credit winners (left to right): Dale Ringgenberg \$100 credit; Jan Schelle \$100 credit; Sandy Dresbach \$250 credit; Josh Jetto \$250 credit; and Gary Sombke \$500 credit. (Courtesy Photo)



Scholarship Winners

CEO James Groft presented certificates to Drake Peterson (left) of Groton Area HS and Nathan Unzen (right) of Groton Area HS in recognition of winning the Bob Peterson Memorial Telecommunications Scholarship. Noah Felderman of Doland HS was also a scholarship winner, but unable to attend the meeting. (Courtesy Photo)

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James Valley Telecommunications Board of Directors

Pictured left to right are Jim Cremer, Attorney; Wendell Rye, District 2; Bob Wegner, District 3; Rhonda Borchard, District 5; Garrett Rahm, District 7; Bill Ewalt, District 4; Roger Zastrow, District 1; Mark Wattier, District 6; and James Groft, CEO. (Courtesy Photo)



Legion Check presentation (L to R)

Left to right: IT Manager Jason Hill presented a \$250 check to Doug Hamilton and Steve Dresbach of the Groton American Legion, Post 39, in recognition of their many years of Color Guard service at the annual meeting. (Courtesy Photo)

Dunker Earns Eighth Place Medal, Boys Medley Places Fourth, Tracy Advances to Finals as Tigers Open State Track Meet,

SIoux FALLS – Groton Area opened competition Thursday at the South Dakota State Class A Track and Field Meet with a pair of standout performances as Rylee Dunker earned an All-State medal in the girls' javelin and the Tigers' boys' sprint medley relay team turned in a fourth-place finish at Howard Wood Field.

Dunker secured eighth place in the girls' javelin with a throw of 112 feet, 2 inches, earning a spot on the awards podium and becoming Groton Area's first state medalist of the meet.

The Tigers also came away with a near-podium finish in the boys' 1600-meter sprint medley relay. The quartet of Lincoln Krause, Jordan Schwan, Keegen Tracy and Jayden Schwan placed fourth in Class A with a time of 3:37.27. The performance capped a memorable postseason run for the relay team, which broke the school record just last week and entered the state meet among the top contenders.

Groton Area also advanced an athlete to Friday's finals as Tracy qualified for the championship round of the boys' 100-meter dash. Tracy finished sixth in the preliminary heats with a time of 11.09 seconds and will return Friday with an opportunity to compete for a state medal.

The Tigers' boys' 4x100-meter relay team of Krause, Jordan Schwan, J.J. Muller and Ryder Schwan finished 17th in the preliminary round with a time of 45.51 seconds.

In the boys' 4x800-meter relay finals, Kyson Kucker, Jace Johnson, Ethan Kroll and Riley Shellenberger placed 19th with a time of 8:58.48.

On the girls' side, the 4x100-meter relay team of Raquel Tracy, Kella Tracy, Rylee Dunker and Makenna Krause narrowly missed advancing to the finals, placing 10th in the preliminaries with a time of 51.36 seconds.

McKenna Tietz competed in the girls' 100-meter hurdles preliminaries and finished 15th in a time of 16.29 seconds.

The girls' sprint medley relay team of Makenna Krause, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy and Ryelle Gilbert placed 11th in Class A with a time of 4:21.97.

Competition continues Friday and Saturday in Sioux Falls, with Tracy scheduled to compete in the boys' 100-meter finals as Groton Area looks to add to its state medal haul.

Boy's Division

100 Meters Class A - Prelims: 6. Keegen Tracy, 11.09

4x100 Relay Class A - Prelims: 17. Groton: (Lincoln Krause, Jordan Schwan, JJ Muller, Ryder Schwan), 45.51.

4x800 Relay Class A - Finals: 19. Groton: (Kyson Kucker, Jace Johnson, Ethan Kroll, Riley Shellenberger), 8:58.48.

SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800] Class A - Finals: 4. Groton: (Lincoln Krause, Jordan Schwan, Keegen Tracy, Jayden Schwan), 3:37.27.

Girl's Division

100m Hurdles - 33" / 0.838m Class A - Prelims: 15. McKenna Tietz, 16.29

4x100 Relay Class A - Prelims: 10. Groton: (Raquel Tracy, Kella Tracy, Rylee Dunker, Makenna Krause), 51.36.

SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800] Class A - Finals: 11. Groton: (Makenna Krause, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Ryelle Gilbert), 4:21.97.

Javelin - 600g Class A - Finals: 8. Rylee Dunker, 112-02

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Dunker places 8th in Javelin

Senior Rylee Dunker placed 8th in the girls Class A Javelin. (Courtesy Photo

Jodi Schwan)



Boys Medley Relay Takes Fourth At State

The Boys 1600m Sprint Medley Relay team brought home a 4th place finish for the Tigers at the SDHSAA State A Track & Field Meet in Sioux Falls. The team of senior Jayden Schwan, senior Keegen Tracy, freshman Jordan Schwan and senior Lincoln Krause clocked a time of 3:37.27 while competing at a high level on the biggest stage in the state. (Photo from Groton Area Facebook Page)



Rylee Dunker throwing the Javelin at the State Track Meet. (Photo from Groton Area Facebook Page)



Raquel Tracy finishes hand off to Kella Tracy in the first leg of the girls 4x100 relay. (Courtesy

Photo Bruce Babcock)

Dacotah Prairie Museum receives South Dakota Arts Council American 250 Community Arts Grant

PIERRE, S.D. — The South Dakota Arts Council (SDAC) recently awarded six \$5,000 grants to support community-based arts and cultural initiatives celebrating the 250th anniversary of the United States. SDAC's America 250 Community Arts program encouraged organizations across South Dakota to create public programming highlighting local stories, history, culture, and civic engagement through the arts.

The grant opportunity offered \$5,000 awards to eligible South Dakota organizations for projects taking place between May 18 and Sept. 30, 2026. The funded activities will foster community participation, increase public access to arts and culture, and contribute to statewide celebration efforts connected to the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026.

"As we commemorate America's 250th anniversary, these projects help tell the unique stories of South Dakota communities through creativity, history, and community pride," said James Hagen, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Tourism. "We are proud to support programs that bring people together, celebrate our shared heritage, and inspire meaningful community engagement through the arts."

SDAC received 31 applications representing a diverse range of community arts, cultural heritage, educational, and public engagement projects. Six applicants were selected to receive funding awards of \$5,000 each:

- Dacotah Prairie Museum – A free public art competition and community event will be held in Aberdeen during the Brown County Fair. Regional adult and youth artists will create original artwork live on-site while fair attendees observe, interact, and participate in activities focused on American identity, local history, and future generations. The event includes themed competitions, a fast-paced "25-Minute Challenge" inspired by Brown County history, public voting, and an extended exhibit of selected works to encourage community engagement with art, history, and shared cultural traditions.

- Washington Pavilion Management, Inc. – Free public concert performances will be held in July celebrating America's 250th anniversary, presented by the Sioux Falls Municipal Band. The events will feature patriotic musical selections at the Sioux Falls fireworks celebration and the USS South Dakota Battleship Memorial during a nationwide synchronized reading of the Declaration of Independence.

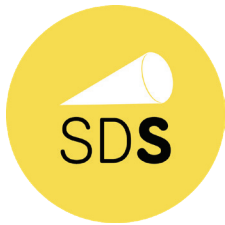
- Yankton Area Arts – A free public celebration will be held June 30 that includes a live patriotic band concert held at Riverside Park Amphitheater and a special exhibit at YAA's gallery space. The event will include a design contest to create a wearable keepsake that will be distributed free of cost to attendees.

- Bison Education Enrichment Foundation – A free public event will take place in July inviting the public to share spoken histories focusing on rural life on the shortgrass prairie. The stories will be shared with a youth theater camp where young artists will help develop an original theatrical production that honoring the voices and stories of agriculture, isolation, and environmental experiences within the region.

- Codington County Historical Society and Heritage Museum – A multiday event will take place in early July and August in downtown Watertown transforming it into a festival space. Streets will close for three evening concerts themed around Red (freedom/democracy), White (civic responsibility), and Blue (community/service), along with storytelling and readings from founding documents. The event will also support a scavenger hunt style passport program that will connect the public to local history and community life.

- City of Yankton Task Force for America Celebrate 250 – Two free events for the public and youth will take place on July 2. Jeff Gould will present an "American Story" through history, music, poetry, and visuals that explain the "great American experience". The events will be held within the theater in downtown Yankton, providing ADA accessibility.

An office of the South Dakota Department of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council's mission is to provide grants and services to artists, arts organizations, and schools across the state, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the State of South Dakota. The South Dakota Department of Tourism is comprised of Travel South Dakota and the South Dakota Arts Council. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

What South Dakotans need to know about new laws and their rights before they vote

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

CHAPMAN: Generally, my biggest concern has been just the amount of scrutiny that's been levied towards voting accessibility and voting rights in general. You know, we're hearing a lot of laws that are being passed under the justification or the guise of free and fair elections, or restoring faith in our elections, and ultimately in South Dakota, we have fair elections. We have free elections. We don't have a huge issue of non-citizens voting in our elections. These are all, from my opinion, just convenient guises for our legislators to try to choose their voters rather than having voters choose their representation

O'BRIEN: Welcome back to Searchlight Report, a podcast from South Dakota Searchlight that brings you up to date on policy and politics in the Mount Rushmore State. I'm your host Meghan O'Brien. The primary election is Tuesday. While Republican voters should anticipate choosing their nominees for governor, the Legislature, and the U-S House and Senate, Democrats and independents should not assume there's nothing on their ballot. Due to new laws combining state and local elections, they may have county, city or school races or local ballot questions to consider. To learn more about what voters can expect Tuesday or if they vote early, I spoke with Samantha Chapman, the advocacy manager for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota.

CHAPMAN INTERVIEW:

O'BRIEN: Just to get started, could you explain to listeners why early and absentee voting were delayed this year, and how you think that's affected voters?

CHAPMAN: Yeah, so early and absentee voting was delayed this year because the statutory deadline for petitions to be filed with the secretary of state landed on the fifth week, essentially, of March, whereas usually there are four weeks in March, and so there is less time between the filing deadline with the Secretary of State's Office, the amount of time that the secretary of state had to spend to certify the petitions that were submitted for candidates, and then the deadline for when county auditors had to have ballots ready to go for absentee voting. Additionally, further complicating things, is that this is the first year that South Dakota has ever combined our federal, state, municipal and school board elections all on the same dates in some communities, like Sioux Falls and Rapid City, for example. Even just in Pennington County alone, there are more than 300 different computations of ballots, and so making sure that every single ballot is



A sign identifies the Pennington County Administration Building as an early voting site on Jan. 19, 2026, for a municipal election in Rapid City, South Dakota. (Photo by Seth Tupper/

South Dakota Searchlight)

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prepared, coming out correctly with all of the candidates who have been thoroughly certified by the Secretary of State's Office, making sure that all challenges have been worked through people's petitions, that all takes time. And there just wasn't enough time to get all that done, and then get that information to the auditors, and then order the ballots to be printed in all of the different computations that were necessary. There was a piece of legislation that was introduced earlier this year during the legislative session that would have allowed for ballots to be printed on demand. Had that bill passed, I think we would not have had the same delay with the absentee ballots being available, but because state law still requires them to be ordered and printed, they couldn't be ready to go on time.

O'BRIEN: Right, and so how did that affect voters who were planning to get out early and cast their ballot then?

CHAPMAN: I think one of the biggest impacts is for people who are living overseas, or like, such as our UOCAVA voters, voters who are serving our country in United States consulates in other countries, who have to plan well in advance to get to submit that absentee ballot application, and then hopefully get their ballot in time, so they can vote and get it sent back in circumstances where mail might take longer. Additionally, folks who have plans to travel and be unavailable, during or outside of election day, essentially, and if maybe perhaps the only window of time that they could exercise their right to vote was right away when absentee ballots were supposed to be ready, they might be really crunched for time with fewer days in that window of absentee voting.

O'BRIEN: OK, and what do people need to bring with them to vote on Tuesday?

CHAPMAN: It's important that people remember that nothing has changed in terms of what is required to vote at the polls. So, when you show up to vote at your polling location on Tuesday, what you need to bring is either a state-issued ID with your picture of your face on it and your name as it appears in the voter registration book. You can also, you can use either a driver's license, like I said, a state issue, like non-drivers identification card, a tribal ID with a photo, any of those forms of ID, they can even be expired, as long as your face matches your face and your name is correctly spelled as it appears in the voter registration book, and if you're a student, you can also use a current student ID issued by a South Dakota state university or college.

O'BRIEN: OK, and so if someone hasn't voted since the November general election, what's something new that they should expect?

CHAPMAN: That's a good question. I think what you'll see on our ballot here in the primary election in June is just a substantial ballot, right? So it's not, it's not just our federal races, it's also going to be like, as I mentioned, our municipal races, our school board elections, county commissions, in some circumstances, and also sometimes there might be city charter questions as well. So, there's going to be a lot on the ballot. It's important that voters are taking the time to research all of the different candidates, their positions on various issues, and what those city charter amendments might look like as well. I would say, like, that's probably one of the biggest differences.

O'BRIEN: The registration deadline for this election is already passed, but a new state law was in effect for voter registration ahead of this election, and that required people to prove their citizenship when registering. How has that affected voting rights?

CHAPMAN: That has been a huge issue already this year. So, the new law that went into effect was Senate Bill 175 that had an emergency clause, which means that as soon as Governor Larry Rhoden signed that bill, it became law immediately. That law requires you to present some sort of documented proof of citizenship when you are registering to vote, and so if you don't provide that documentation, you are registered to vote as a federal-only voter, meaning that people who are registered with Republicans as federal-only will have a Republican primary ballot, but Democrats, independent, no party affiliation voters who are federal-only voters will have no ballot at the polls this election, so we've seen so far some of the numbers coming back. There are roughly, I think, 1,500 or so voters who have been designated as federal-only voters statewide, and at least I think 200 of those voters were people who registered to vote, and just simply did not have that documentary proof of citizenship on them when they submitted their voter registration, meaning that these are otherwise eligible voters who should have a voice in their

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local elections and are not being able to do so because they're not carrying around a passport or a copy of their birth certificate to show their proof of citizenship.

O'BRIEN: And can you explain to listeners what's going on with the new federal only ballot? You kind of touched on folks that are registered Republicans are going to have that U.S. Representative, Congress ballot, but then folks who aren't registered Republicans won't be getting that ballot.

CHAPMAN: Yeah, so people who are designated as federal-only voters, and who don't have a federal primary to vote on will have zero ballot. They will not have anything to cast a ballot on June 2. This is problematic for a lot of reasons, not only because of people who are being denied their full access to the ballot because they don't have documentary proof of citizenship, but also folks who are full-time travelers and who have registered to vote using a P.O. box or using a mail forwarding service and have spent time in our state, they are registering their vehicles here, they're paying taxes here, and yet, because they are using a P.O. box for voter registration, they're being denied their access to having a voice in local decisions as well. And so there might be, there's also no notification process for people who have been redesignated as federal voters, so folks might be traveling back to South Dakota with plans to vote in the primary election, they may have been already redesignated as federal-only voters, and then they're turned away at the polls because they simply don't have a ballot, thereby being entirely disenfranchised.

O'BRIEN: Yeah, and so I kind of want to go a little bit to then what should voters know about a provisional ballot and their ability to request one.

CHAPMAN: Yeah, absolutely. So there should be very few circumstances where if you turn up to vote and let's say you're not on the voter registration list, and you believe that you should be, you can ask for a provisional ballot, and they, the poll workers, should give you that provisional ballot. Important to know about provisional ballots is that those are not counted on Election Day. Those ballots are then kind of set aside, and county auditors will go through and double, triple check to make sure that you weren't somehow inadvertently left off of the voter registration list, and you should have been on there, or figuring out what the situation happened, like why you weren't on the voter registration list. But all voters should be offered either their actual ballot or a provisional ballot, unless they're somehow just at the wrong polling location, in which case, hopefully, poll workers will direct you to the right precinct, or then the other circumstances, if you have been redesignated as a federal only voter, and you don't have a primary election to vote in.

O'BRIEN: What other problems do you kind of see people commonly encountering at the polls?

CHAPMAN: One of my biggest concerns is there was another law that passed earlier this year that allows people to challenge voter registration based on citizenship status. There are not — there is not a clear process that has been outlined for what that challenge should look like, for what should be required from somebody who is challenging another voter to submit with that challenge, and I'm concerned also that people might just be confused about when and where these laws apply, also with the documentary proof of citizenship as well. I'm concerned that people might think that they have to bring a passport or birth certificate with them to the polls to vote. You do not have to bring that if you are already registered to vote when you turn out to vote. I'm concerned that people might think that they can challenge other voters based on their perception of what they think those voters' citizenship status might be. That is not allowed. That is not what that law does. You can, you can't try to kick somebody out of a polling location because you don't think that they're a U.S. citizen. That's not how that law works either, so my biggest concern in general is just there being the overwhelming confusion that both voters and potentially poll workers are experiencing trying to navigate all these new laws that primarily affect voter registration, but that's not necessarily clear to the general public.

O'BRIEN: Right, and at the last election the ACLU sent out election observers to kind of be in those spaces. Are you guys planning to do that again? And what would that plan look like?

CHAPMAN: Yes, we have, I think, roughly between 25 and 30 trained election observers in Minnehaha and Pennington counties to be present at the polls on Election Day on June 2 to be a resource to voters who may have questions, or for folks who are being turned away unlawfully, for people who discover at the polls that they have been redesignated as a federal-only voter. We've got election observers present to keep an eye on all of that, document those things, chat with voters who may have been disenfranchised,

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as well as document the things that are going right, too. Sometimes we hear people try to cast doubt in the fairness of our elections, and we, by having our election observers present at the polls, we can also have an impartial record of things that are done really well, too.

O'BRIEN: OK, and you'd mentioned, too, the ballots are quite stacked this year with not only state and federal elections but also local decisions. What would you say to people who are registered Democrat or an independent and assume that they don't have anything to vote on in the primary?

CHAPMAN: That is a message we've been trying to get out desperately, which is that if you are registered to vote, chances are you have still a lot to vote for, even if you are not a registered Republican. It is so important that you take some time to look up what your sample ballot might be on the secretary of state's website, research all of that and come prepared to the polling location. It's legal for you to fill out a sample ballot and bring that with you into the poll. If you think you might forget some of the information that you've researched, you can bring that as a resource with you when you go to vote.

O'BRIEN: And so then, beyond this election, how do you think that recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions weakening the federal Voting Rights Act will affect South Dakota?

CHAPMAN: I'm concerned that the framework and justification in *Louisiana v. Callais* might be applied in 2031, when our state Legislature looks at redistricting South Dakota. From our state legislative maps, the *Louisiana v. Callais* decision focuses on racial discrimination in drawing congressional maps, but there was an amicus brief that was submitted in that case specifically pointed to a couple of voting rights cases out of North Dakota, as it pertains to tribal lands and the way that their state legislative maps were initially drawn to try to dilute Native voters and Native representation. We want to make sure here in South Dakota that we continue to have fair representation for our Indigenous voters here in South Dakota, that they are not being unfairly diluted and chopped up in their legislative districts, so that they can still have meaningful representation in our state Legislature.

O'BRIEN: And what else do you see affecting South Dakota voting rights recently, or in the future?

CHAPMAN: Generally, my biggest concern has been just the amount of scrutiny that's been levied towards voting accessibility and voting rights in general. You know, we're hearing a lot of laws that are being passed under the justification or the guise of free and fair elections, or restoring faith in our elections, and ultimately in South Dakota, we have fair elections. We have free elections. We don't have a huge issue of non-citizens voting in our elections. These are all, from my opinion, just convenient guises to use to for our legislative legislators to try to choose their voters rather than having voters choose their representation, so I'm concerned about the vast number of elections-related legislation that has passed in the past few years, and I'm hoping that that trend does not continue in the future, but we'll continue to keep an eye on it, and we'll continue to have a voice in those conversations, representing South Dakotans and trying to reduce other attempts at disenfranchisement.

O'BRIEN: I think that's all the questions that I have for you. Do you have anything else that you feel like the voters of South Dakota should know?

CHAPMAN: I just think it's really important for folks to take their right to vote and their responsibility to vote very, very seriously. This election in June will have historic consequences for the state of South Dakota for decades to come. And having a voice in who represents you at every seat of government is critical. We can never take it for granted. It means which schools get funded, which roads get paved. All of these different elected officials hold so much power over our daily lives. We can't sit back and let other people choose who represents us.

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.

Tour dates announced for author of 2026 One Book South Dakota

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

The South Dakota Humanities Council will bring author Matthew Davis to seven communities at the end of June for the 2026 One Book South Dakota tour.

Davis is the author of "A Biography of a Mountain: The Making and Meaning of Mount Rushmore." The book explores the Black Hills, westward expansion, the carving of Mount Rushmore, and debates over land, identity and public monuments.

"By hosting events throughout the state, the tour aims to create space for cultural exchange, reflection, and conversations that honor the histories, traditions, and voices that have long shaped this region," the council wrote in a press release.

The tour schedule includes:

Yankton: June 25, 12 p.m.-1 p.m. Central at the Mead Museum.

Sioux Falls: June 25, 6-8 p.m. Central at the Mosaic Arts & Events Center.

Eagle Butte: June 26, 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Mountain at the C.R.S.T. Lakota Cultural Center.

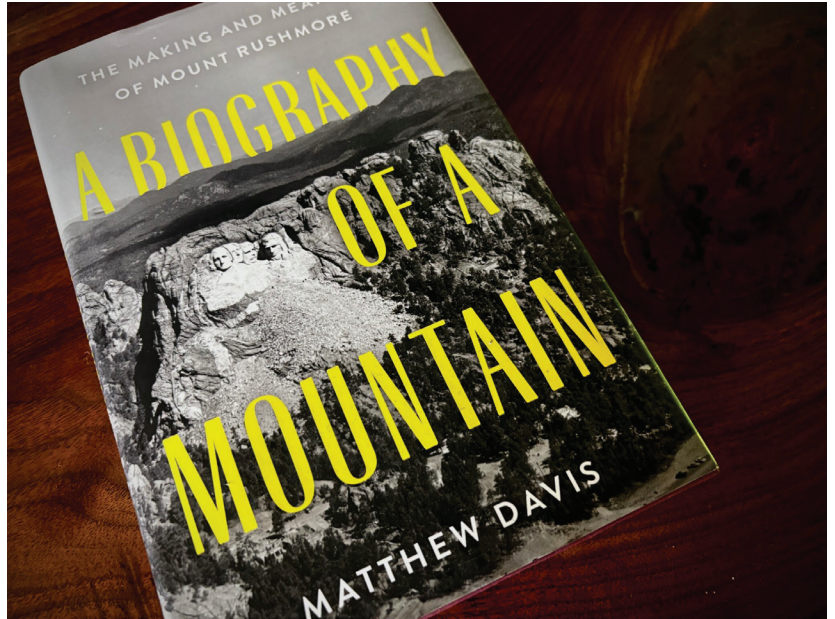
Pierre: June 27, 6-8 p.m. Central at the Capitol Lake Visitors Center.

Custer: June 29, 10:30-11:30 a.m. Mountain at the Custer Senior Center.

Rapid City: June 29, 5:30-7:30 p.m. Mountain at the Dahl Arts Center.

Pine Ridge: June 30, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Mountain at the Oglala Lakota Artspace.

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



A copy of Mathew Davis' "A Biography of a Mountain: The Making and Meaning of Mount Rushmore."

(Photo by Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

COMMENTARY

In Pine Ridge, World Hunger Day arrives in October

by Grace Ann Hansen

Today is World Hunger Day. For Pine Ridge, the relevant calendar is somewhere closer to October. That's when the first compounded effects of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed by President Trump on July 4, 2025, reach the warehouse doors of the Oglala Sioux Tribe's federal food distribution program. Politicians who vote to cut nutrition spending in the spring of an even year face voters again in the fall, six months before the people they cut start showing up at pantries with kids in the back seat.

The lag is the point. The lag is the alibi.

The bill cuts \$186 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program through fiscal year 2034. It expands work requirements to people up to age 64. It restricts immigrant eligibility, with that provision effective last November. And in fiscal year 2028, for the first time in the program's history, it asks states to pay a share of benefit costs they have never had to budget for. By the time those cuts work their way through

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the procurement cycle, the political memory of the vote is a footnote.

South Dakota's Republican governor, Larry Rhoden, said as much in November when Democratic legislators asked him to call a special session and tap state reserves to backstop SNAP during the federal shutdown. "We don't have that kind of coin running around to do that for any extended period of time," he told reporters at a Feeding South Dakota volunteer event in Rapid City. South Dakota's monthly SNAP cost is \$15 million. The state's reserves aren't designed for indefinite substitution of a federal program. Rhoden's right about the math. He's right that this is Washington's job.

Washington isn't doing it.

Feeding South Dakota, which serves all 66 counties from warehouses in Sioux Falls and Rapid City, has already absorbed a 1.5-million-pound reduction in USDA-sourced food resulting from the 2025 cuts to the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance. That's the reduction that has already happened, before the deeper OBBBA cuts take effect. CEO Lori Dykstra asked the state Legislature for \$3 million during the 2026 session. The number grew to \$5 million as demand kept climbing. "We have the infrastructure to do the work," she said. "We don't have the food." The Legislature denied the request.

Pine Ridge sits at the steep end of this curve. The reservation covers about 3,500 square miles. The USDA classifies the entire area as a food desert. Families routinely drive 75 miles one way for fresh produce. Oglala Lakota County's food insecurity rate is 29%, the highest in Feeding America's dataset for either of the Dakotas.

The Oglala Sioux Tribe doesn't wait for the federal pipeline to fix itself. Thunder Valley CDC runs a geothermal greenhouse. The Wakpamni Lake community grows microgreens through the winter. Makoce Agriculture Development used a \$2.5 million Bush Foundation grant to build out a regional food system anchored by a regenerative production farm and a food hub. One Spirit's food program reaches more than 6,000 people every month. This is the deliberate construction of food sovereignty against a federal system that has just announced, in legislative form, how unreliable it intends to be.

What they can't do is replace SNAP. A geothermal greenhouse can't stand in for the federal calculation that determines how much food a Lakota grandmother puts on her table when her grandchild's Wednesday lunch is no longer free.

So the question for World Hunger Day, in South Dakota, isn't whether the federal cuts will hurt. They will. The question is whether the lag will let the people who voted for them avoid being asked about it.



Pine Ridge is located in southwestern South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The town has a population just under 3,000 and is the headquarters of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. (Photo by Makenzie

Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Local reporting will keep counting the shelves. South Dakota Searchlight has been on the SNAP story since the bill passed, and Feeding South Dakota's quarterly numbers track what the federal cuts erase. Whether the rest of the country pays attention before the October trucks come up short is the actual test.

Pine Ridge will keep feeding itself through the lag, as it's been doing for generations. The question is whether Congress will remember by next October what it did last summer.

Grace Ann Hansen is an independent researcher and writer in Sioux Falls who writes about healthcare and policy in South Dakota. She spent six years at Sanford Health leading the technical side of the analytics platforms behind clinical operations across the region, and is completing an MBA in health informatics and artificial intelligence at Dakota State University.

Bipartisan deal floated on college athletes' name, image and likeness legislation

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — A pair of U.S. senators reached a bipartisan agreement on a sweeping bill aimed at tackling many of the biggest issues surrounding how to compensate players in college sports.

GOP Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington state — the top members of the Senate committee with jurisdiction over the matter — unveiled legislation this week that aims to “restore order in college athletics.”

Meanwhile, a separate bill to set a national framework for college athletes' compensation remains stalled in the House after being yanked from the voting schedule earlier in May following unanimous opposition from the Congressional Black Caucus.

The major voting bloc rallied behind the NAACP's call to push back against GOP-led redistricting efforts in Southern

states via college sports, including a boycott of public universities by athletes and supporters.

The senators' proposal marks the latest congressional push to overhaul the college sports world, which continues to grapple with the fallout from the NCAA's 2021 guidelines that allowed student-athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness, or NIL.

Colleges, businesses and marketers are also wrestling with a patchwork of state NIL laws, gender inequity in NIL deals and the NCAA's controversial transfer portal, among other issues.

A federal judge in 2025 also approved the terms of a nearly \$2.8 billion antitrust settlement that paved the way for schools to directly pay athletes.

Cruz, who chairs the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said “student athletes can profit from their name, image, and likeness, but college sports still needs real rules, competitive balance, rivalries, and a true connection to education,” in a statement.

The Texas Republican added that the bill — set to be formally introduced the week of June 1, when Congress is back in session — “protects athletes and fans and keeps college sports from becoming a



Two senators have reached a bipartisan deal on legislation dealing with college athletes' name, image and likeness compensation. (Photo by Getty Images)

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two-conference minor league.”

Cantwell, ranking member of the panel, said the legislation “puts new tools and new rules on the table to rein in runaway costs while still preserving NIL, revenue sharing,” as well as women’s sports and the Olympics.

GOP Sen. Eric Schmitt of Missouri and Democratic Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware both played a part in the legislation and are co-sponsoring the forthcoming bill.

Aspects of the bill

The legislation would create a national NIL standard that preempts the patchwork of state laws, provides certain antitrust protections to the NCAA and college sports conferences and establishes a five-year eligibility timeline for athletes, among other major changes.

The legislation would also prevent football coaches from leaving mid-season to coach another program, per a section-by-section summary of the bill.

Under the bill, athletes would also be guaranteed one transfer without losing eligibility.

The bill also establishes “a targeted antitrust exemption allowing schools and conferences to voluntarily form a covered entity to pool and sell certain college sports media rights.”

Employment status issue

Though the House’s bill seeks to bar college athletes from being recognized as employees, the senators’ proposal is notably neutral as to how the athletes would be classified.

GOP Reps. Tim Walberg of Michigan and Brett Guthrie of Kentucky took aim at the bill’s neutral stance, saying in a statement that “any lasting framework must confront the central issue that continues to cast uncertainty over the future of college sports: whether student-athletes will ultimately be treated as employees.”

Walberg and Guthrie are the respective chairs of the House Education and Workforce and Energy and Commerce committees, which share jurisdiction over the matter.

“Congress cannot deliver real stability, consistency, or certainty to schools, conferences, and student-athletes while leaving that question unresolved,” the chairs said. “Without addressing employment, smaller universities along with women’s and Olympic programs may face massive financial burdens and be forced to cut programs and scholarships across their athletic departments.”

Trump admin ‘reviewing’

President Donald Trump’s administration has also sought to impose solutions at the federal level for the toughest issues facing the college sports world, including through a sweeping executive order signed by Trump in April.

Part of the order also urged Congress to “expeditiously pass legislation that satisfactorily addresses these issues.”

A White House official, speaking on background, told States Newsroom the White House is “reviewing” the senators’ legislation and “soliciting input from important stakeholders.”

“We appreciate Congress’ efforts to move forward on this important issue to save college sports,” the official added.

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

How Trump's giant 'slush fund' sparked lawsuits, roiled Republicans and revived Jan. 6

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration's nearly \$1.8 billion "anti-weaponization" fund has attracted scrutiny for its corruption potential, even splitting congressional Republicans who rarely confront President Donald Trump's decisions and policies.

Among the top concerns: Could pardoned Jan. 6, 2021, riot defendants who assaulted police officers claim a slice of the pie and essentially be rewarded for committing political violence?

Advocates are also legally challenging the fund's structure that will conceal details from the public, including claimants' names and amounts paid out.

Nikhel Sus, chief counsel for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, otherwise known as CREW, which has filed suit against the fund, told States Newsroom the administration's order is a "flagrant power grab of congressional authority."

The fund, established by the Department of Justice to settle Trump's multibillion dollar lawsuit against the IRS, has also complicated Senate Republicans' plans to pass a simple majority immigration enforcement funding package. Some GOP senators are withholding votes unless guardrails for the fund are included in the legislation.

Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche met with Republican senators on Capitol Hill on May 21 to defend the fund, but many GOP lawmakers left unconvinced and with multiple questions remaining.

Retiring Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., told reporters the fund is "stupid on stilts" and resembles "tyranny."

Others were sweating out questions at town halls during the congressional recess.

"I do not think one penny of any fund should ever go to any January 6 insurrectionist that was in the Capitol on January 6, 2021 ... I want to be very clear ... I clearly think Congress needs to have an oversight role in this before I can sign off or support this," U.S. Rep. Mike Flood, R-Neb., said at a town hall in Norfolk, Nebraska, on May 26.

What is the "anti-weaponization" fund?

In exchange for Trump and his family dropping a \$10 billion lawsuit against the IRS for the 2019 leak of tax returns, the DOJ ordered the establishment of a settlement fund in the amount of \$1.776 billion — a nod to the country's founding.

As part of the arrangement, Trump also agreed to drop an administrative claim for damages related to what Blanche described as an "unlawful" FBI raid of the president's Mar-a-Lago residence, part of the Biden administration's case against Trump for allegedly hoarding classified documents after leaving office.

Trump also agreed to drop a claim for damages related to the DOJ's 2019 inquiry into Russian meddling



President Donald Trump looks on during a Cabinet meeting at the White House on May 27, 2026 in Washington, D.C. (Photo by

Win McNamee/Getty Images)

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in Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

Blanche introduced the fund on May 18 as a path to restitution for "victims of lawfare."

"The machinery of government should never be weaponized against any American, and it is this Department's intention to make right the wrongs that were previously done while ensuring this never happens again," Blanche said in a press release.

The fund will be led by five commissioners chosen by the attorney general, one of them in consultation with Congress. The president has the power to remove any member, according to the DOJ.

The department maintains the fund is nonpartisan. In addition to money, the DOJ will also issue formal apologies to eligible claimants, according to officials.

Who is trying to limit or shut down the fund?

House Democrats tried to intervene in the president's IRS case settlement, but U.S. District Judge Kathleen Williams dismissed the case on Trump's terms. Williams was appointed to the bench in the Southern District of Florida in 2010 by President Barack Obama.

On May 27, nearly three dozen former federal judges urged Williams to reopen the case, arguing the Trump administration "deceived" the court by not sharing with the judge details of the "anti-weaponization" fund.

Further, the judges argued, the DOJ also claims the settlement forever absolves Trump and his family from tax audits and any other claims by a federal agency.

"The parties to this case are using this lawsuit as the legal justification for these actions," the judges argued.

Legislative proposals have also popped up in the House and Senate.

A bipartisan bill from Reps. Tom Suozzi, D-N.Y., and Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., both up for re-election in swing districts, proposes to ban the use of federal money to pay claims submitted to the "anti-weaponization" fund.

"The Bipartisan Transparency for American Taxpayers Act ensures federal funds cannot be used for this fund without the transparency, oversight, and legal safeguards the American people deserve. Taxpayer dollars will not become a discretionary payout fund. Transparency is not optional. Accountability is not negotiable," Fitzpatrick said in a press release.

Suozzi characterized the arrangement as a "slush fund to pay off January 6th criminals and other mal-adjusted minions!"

When pressed during a May 19 Senate hearing on whether Jan. 6 defendants who were convicted of assaulting police officers would be eligible for the fund, Blanche said "anybody in this country can apply" and final decisions will be made by the fund's commissioners.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., announced plans to introduce painful amendments when and if the Senate GOP brings its immigration enforcement funding bill to the floor.

Van Hollen said he will call for votes on an amendment to block payment to Jan. 6 defendants who have been convicted of violent crimes and sexual abuse of children.

The Maryland senator also said he will introduce an amendment that would prohibit members of Congress from receiving payouts.

"And as it currently stands, Members of Congress have the chance to benefit from this corrupt scheme. If Republicans won't put an end to this fund entirely, they should at least join with us to bar Members of Congress from cashing in on it," Van Hollen said May 21 in a written statement.

Who is suing?

Multiple lawsuits have been filed against the fund.

U.S. Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn and Washington Metropolitan Police Officer Daniel Hodges, who defended the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, argued in federal court that the pardoned rioters could use payout money to organize.

"In the most brazen act of presidential corruption this century, President Donald J. Trump has created a \$1.776 billion taxpayer-funded slush fund to finance the insurrectionists and paramilitary groups that commit violence in his name," they argued in a complaint filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Legal advocacy groups, including CREW, Democracy Forward and Common Cause have also challenged

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the fund in court.

Through the order, the administration has granted itself "final unreviewable authority to disperse nearly \$1.8 billion in money that Congress did not appropriate for that purpose to people that they subjectively determine are victims of so-called lawfare or weaponization," Sus, of CREW, said in an interview.

The fund's structure also flouts transparency laws, Sus said, not least of which includes moving \$1.776 billion from the government's legal judgment fund in a single transaction to a separate, unaccountable pot of money.

As the law stands now, the Department of Treasury publicly updates a website at least once per month with judgment award amounts paid to claimants by the U.S. government.

By withdrawing one lump sum, "they are wholly circumventing disclosure law that Congress passed specifically for that purpose to require disclosure for each settlement," said Sus, whose organization filed the complaint in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

CREW also argues DOJ's order is arbitrary and capricious.

"I think arbitrarily picking 1776 as the number for their (fund) valuation is the definition of an arbitrary precious action — like they just did it because they thought it was cool," he said.

"And that's not how the government's supposed to operate. They're supposed to actually consider the facts, they're supposed to have a reasoned explanation for why they're doing things."

Another group of plaintiffs are being represented in Virginia by the legal advocacy groups Democracy Forward and Common Cause.

Among the plaintiffs are Andrew Floyd, a former federal Jan. 6 case prosecutor who was fired by the DOJ in June 2025, and Joseph Caravello, a California university professor who was charged with felony assault on a federal officer after protesting an immigration raid last summer. A jury acquitted Caravello in April.

The nine-count lawsuit alleges in part the fund violates the plaintiffs' First and Fifth Amendment rights, and violates the authority of Congress.

The fund "does not offer benefits to victims of ideological targeting by Democrats and Republicans alike; instead, it offers benefits to those who have espoused views that were, or were perceived to be, oppositional to Democratic administrations, but not to those who have espoused views that were, or were perceived to be, oppositional to Republican administrations," according to the complaint filed in the Eastern District of Virginia.

Juan Salinas II of the Nebraska Examiner contributed to this report.

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

Trump order limiting voting by mail will stand for now, federal judge rules

BY: JONATHAN SHORMAN

A federal judge on Thursday declined to block President Donald Trump's executive order restricting voting by mail, finding that it was too early to challenge the directive.

The decision by D.C. District Court Judge Carl Nichols, a Trump appointee, represents a setback for Democratic groups, lawmakers and other groups including the NAACP that have sued to stop the order ahead of the midterm elections in November. The March 31 order faces at least five lawsuits.

The executive order directs the postmaster general, who leads the Postal Service, to propose a rule that would block states from sending ballots through the mail except to voters on lists provided by the state to the Postal Service. Under the order, the proposed rule is due this week.

The order also instructs the Department of Homeland Security to compile lists of voting-age U.S. citizens in each state, with the help of the Social Security Administration. Democrats allege the Trump administration is building an unauthorized national voter list, despite the U.S. Constitution giving states the responsibility of running federal elections.

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The Department of Justice had told the judge that the federal government hadn't yet implemented the directive. The judge's opinion, released just after midnight in Washington, D.C., makes clear that he could arrive at a different decision if the Trump administration moves forward with enforcing the order.

"The Court recognizes that the Postal Service may ultimately issue a final rule that directly affects Plaintiffs or their members, or that the Government may develop State Citizenship Lists that omit specific individuals due to particularized flaws," Nichols wrote in a 26-page opinion.

"Plaintiffs may, of course, renew their motions if and when those future actions occur," he wrote. "Until then, however, Plaintiffs cannot show that preliminary injunctive relief is warranted."

Implications for midterms

Nichols' decision is the first ruling in what is likely to be a protracted legal battle that could eventually reach the U.S. Supreme Court. Thursday's opinion dealt only with whether the executive order should be blocked immediately — the underlying lawsuit to decide if the directive is unconstitutional and illegal will continue.

Whether Trump can successfully implement the order holds major consequences for the midterm elections. If the White House is able to block the Postal Service from sending or receiving mail ballots from voters not on state-provided lists, it could upend elections in states where voting by mail is the norm and disrupt procedures in others.

About 30% of voters cast mail ballots in 2024, according to data gathered by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

Trump has framed the order as a needed measure to combat noncitizen voting, though it's exceedingly rare. The directive marks the White House's latest effort to assert authority over elections as the SAVE America Act, which would require voters to show documents proving their citizenship, stalls in the U.S. Senate.

Democrats and voting rights advocates argue the executive order is unconstitutional. Under the U.S. Constitution, states administer elections and Congress has the power to pass regulations on them, but the president has no power to act unilaterally.

Postal Service targeted

The battle over the executive order also carries ramifications for the future of the Postal Service. While the president used to appoint the postmaster general, since 1970 the Postal Service has operated as an independent corporation — a change intended to shield mail delivery from politics.

Postal law experts say that if Trump is able to enforce an order against the postmaster general, who now is appointed by a Postal Service Board of Governors, it will shatter the agency's independence.

"Today's ruling is a decisive victory for the rule of law and deals a blow against the Democrat strategy of suing first and finding legal arguments later. The Trump Administration will continue fighting for the safety and security of American elections," White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson said in a statement.



A mail ballot drop box is seen at a polling station on Nov. 4, 2025 in Arlington, Virginia. D.C. District Court Judge Carl Nichols on May 28, 2026, declined to block, for now, an executive order by President Donald Trump on mail-in voting.

(Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

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The Democratic groups suing over the order, including the Democratic National Committee, in a joint statement expressed confidence they would eventually prevail. They said the decision doesn't change the principle that the executive branch cannot infringe on Americans' voting rights.

The Democratic groups suing over the order, including the Democratic National Committee, in a joint statement expressed confidence they would eventually prevail. They said the decision doesn't change the principle that the executive branch cannot infringe on Americans' voting rights.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York and one of the plaintiffs, in a statement called mail voting safe and secure. He emphasized that presidents don't get to rewrite election law "by decree."

"Trump's strategy is simple: if he can't win voters, he'll silence them — and now a MAGA judge is enabling him," Schumer said.

A group of Republican state attorneys general has also intervened in the case to defend the order. They argue that Trump has authority to gather and organize information within the executive branch. They say Trump can direct the Postal Service to propose rules.

Missouri Attorney General Catherine Hanaway, who is leading the Republican legal effort, didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on Nichols' decision.

Opponents look to Massachusetts

With Nichols' decision, a federal judge in Massachusetts offers opponents their next opportunity to quickly halt the directive.

Massachusetts District Court Judge Indira Talwani, appointed by President Barack Obama, will hold a hearing on Tuesday in a legal challenge brought by Democratic state attorneys general, led by California, along with the League of Women Voters and other civic groups.

Some legal analysts anticipate states may have an easier time challenging the order because its requirements, such as requiring states to submit lists of voters to send ballots through the mail, directly affect them. David Becker, director of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation & Research, wrote on social media that the states have "much stronger standing claims" heading into the hearing.

After federal agencies begin acting on the order, the challenge in Massachusetts "will be the case to watch," he wrote.

'Maximum amount of confusion'

At a mid-May hearing before Nichols, lawyers for the Democratic National Committee, Democratic leaders Schumer and Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York, and other interest groups had argued that, with the midterm elections less than six months away, there was no time to see how the Trump administration executes the order.

The proposal would result in a "maximum amount of confusion" and be a "nightmare for election officials," Danielle Lang, who argued on behalf of the League of United Latin American Citizens, told Nichols. "Waiting will only erode public confidence in elections."

At the time, Nichols warned Justice Department lawyers to notify him of "anything even approaching a material change" on implementing the order.

Justice Department senior trial counsel Stephen Pezzi told Nichols the plaintiffs have a right to "prepare for the darkest fears," but, he argued, they can't win a preliminary injunction based on speculation about error-prone citizenship lists and a postal rule not yet created.

Ultimately, Nichols agreed.

"In any event, given that the Executive Order does not command Plaintiffs to do anything, and that no agency has yet acted pursuant to the Order in a way that could harm Plaintiffs," Nichols wrote, "they have not suffered any harm at present, much less harm that is 'certain,' 'great,' and imminent."

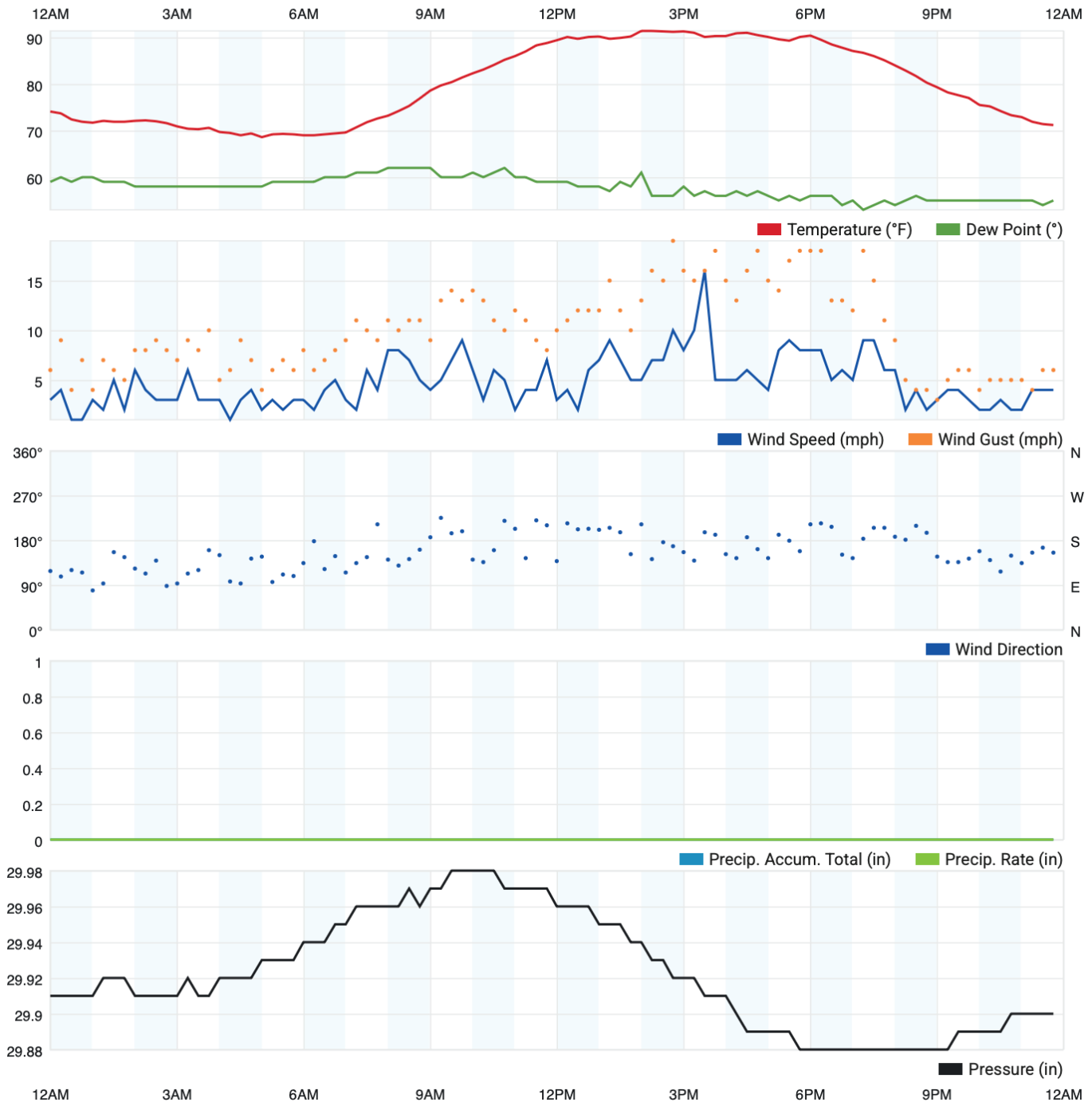
Jonathan Shorman covers democracy for States Newsroom. Based in Kansas City, his coverage area includes elections and voting rights, fights over state and federal power, civil liberties and more. An alumnus of the University of Kansas, he previously covered politics for The Kansas City Star.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

May 28, 2026



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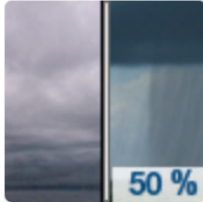
Today

Tonight

Saturday

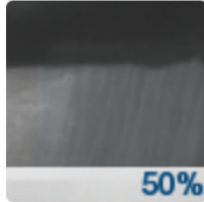
Saturday Night

Sunday



High: 82 °F

Cloudy then
Chance
Showers



Low: 59 °F

Chance
Showers



High: 81 °F

Chance
Showers and
Breezy



Low: 55 °F

Slight Chance
T-storms then
Showers
Likely



High: 80 °F

Chance
Showers then
Chance
T-storms

THREAT ASSESSMENT

HIGHEST LOCAL RISK

2

WHAT THIS MEANS:
Scattered Severe Storms
Possible

**By Early Saturday
Evening Into Early
Overnight**

PRIMARY THREATS



DAMAGING
WIND GUSTS
of 60 mph



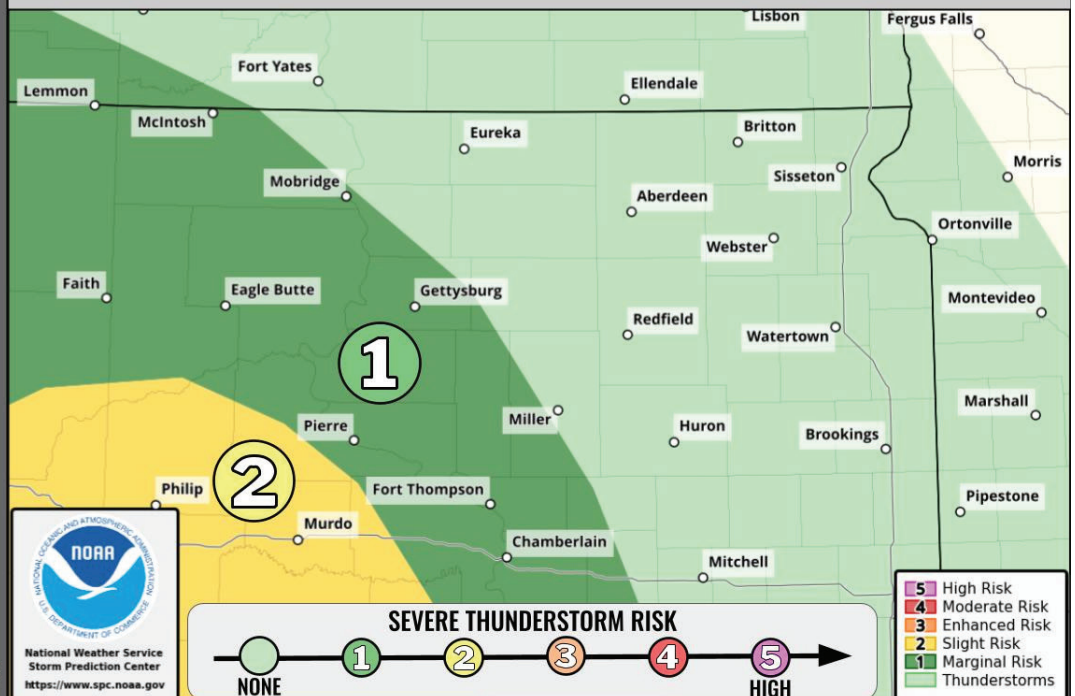
LARGE HAIL of 1"
in diameter

NWS
Aberdeen, SD



National Weather Service
Storm Prediction Center
<https://www.spc.noaa.gov>

Marginal To Slight Risk For Severe Storms Saturday, May 30th



There is a slight risk of severe weather happening over parts of central and south central South Dakota Saturday evening, if thunderstorms develop and move into that area. A marginal risk of severe weather extends further into the forecast area over portions of central and north central South Dakota. The main threats are large hail up to an inch in diameter and strong thunderstorm wind gusts up to 60 mph.

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THREAT ASSESSMENT

HIGHEST LOCAL RISK

1

WHAT THIS MEANS:
Isolated Severe Storms
Possible

Sunday Afternoon
Into Late Sunday
Evening

PRIMARY THREATS



DAMAGING
WIND GUSTS
of 60 mph

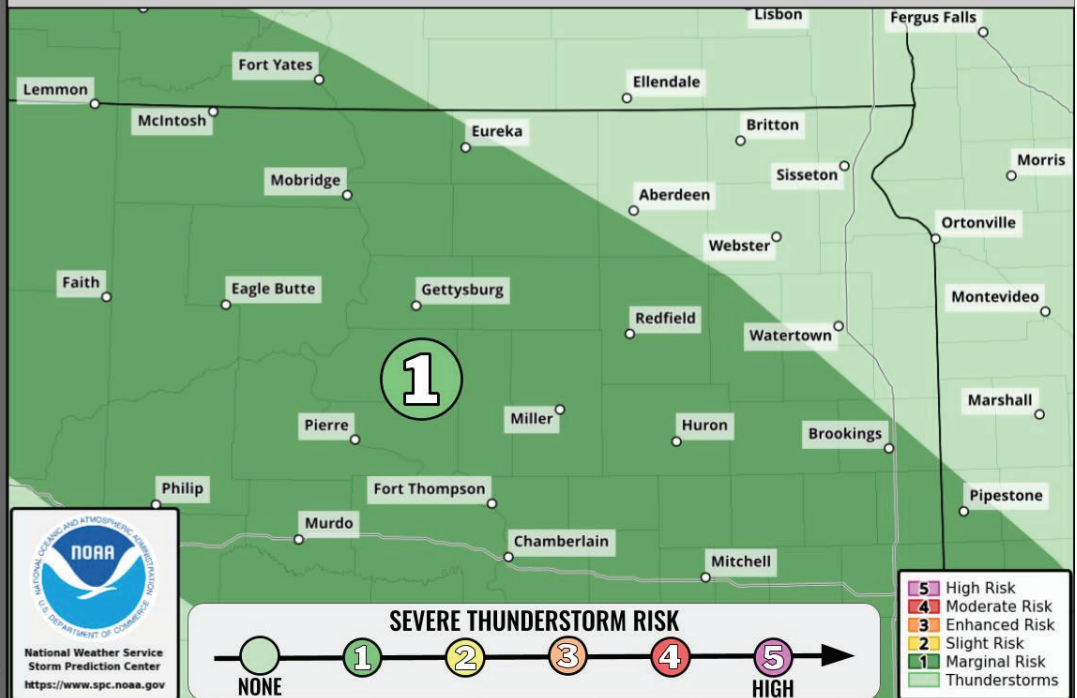


LARGE HAIL of 1"
in diameter

NWS
Aberdeen, SD



Marginal Risk For Severe Storms Sunday, May 31st



Off And On Rain Chances Through Wednesday, June 3rd

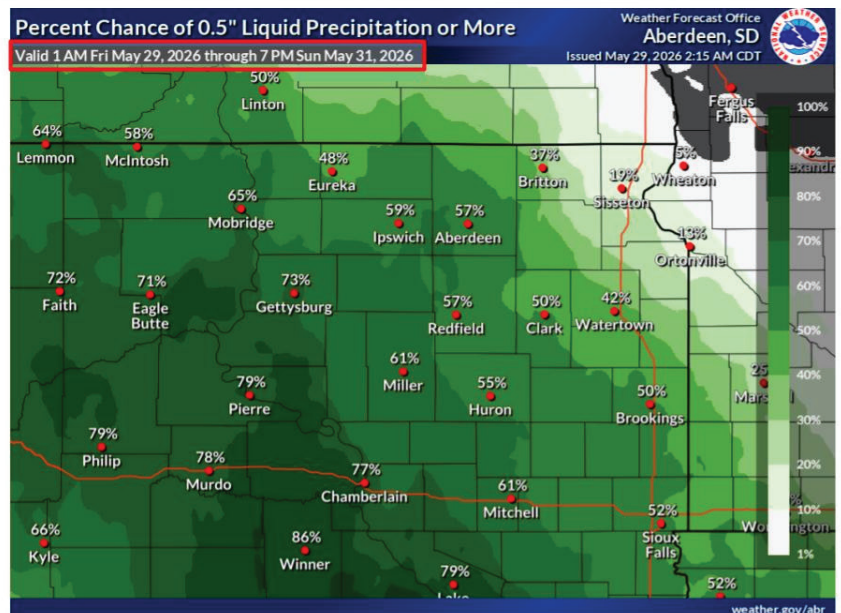
May 29, 2026

3:56 AM

This Map Depicts The Probability Of 0.50in Or More Of Rain through 7 PM CDT Sunday, May 31st

- Isolated light showers this morning to become scattered/numerous by this afternoon with embedded thunderstorms, continuing into tonight.
- There is a **risk of severe thunderstorms Saturday evening into the overnight**, mainly across portions of central and south central South Dakota
- Combining** forecast rainfall amounts for today, Saturday and Sunday, the resulting **likelihood of a half-inch or more of rainfall in 72 hours** is shown in the image on the right.

For specific precipitation probabilities for your area, check out: <https://www.weather.gov/crh/pqpf?sid=abr>



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 92 °F at 2:11 PM

Low Temp: 68 °F at 4:56 AM

Wind: 20 mph at 2:46 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 99 in 1934

Record Low: 23 in 1947

Average High: 75

Average Low: 50

Average Precip in May.: 3.07

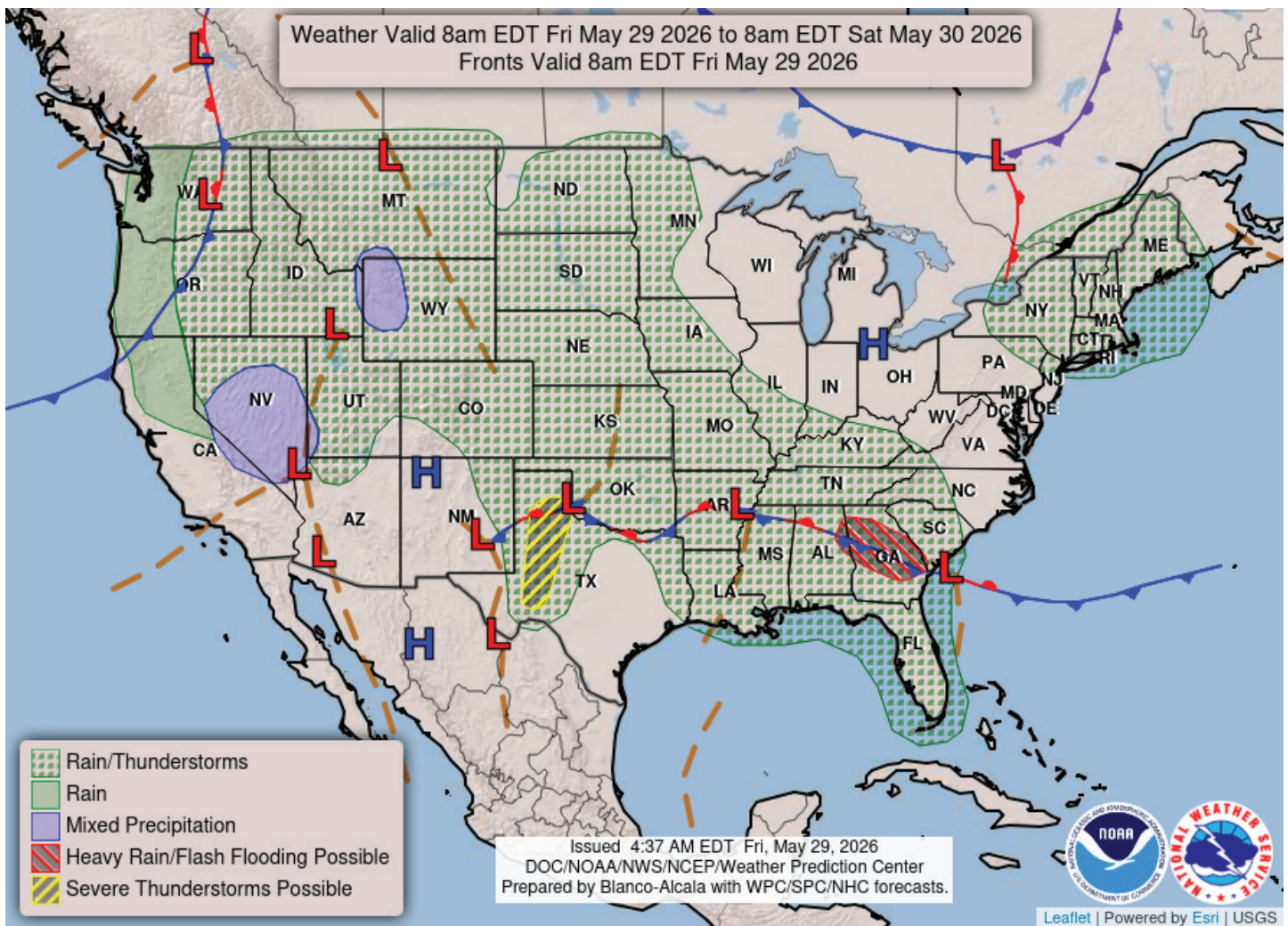
Precip to date in May.: 1.73

Average Precip to date: 7.04

Precip Year to Date: 4.85

Sunset Tonight: 9:10 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:48 am



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Today in Weather History

May 29, 1953: An auditorium was almost entirely unroofed, and barns, along with outbuildings were destroyed in McLaughlin by a tornado. Seven businesses and two homes were also damaged. Estimate of property damage at \$100,000. This tornado was estimated to have F2 strength.

May 29, 2004: Hail, with the largest a quarter sizes, fell in many parts of north-central South Dakota. Lightning struck a house in Veblen and caused some damage. Glass from a broken window hit a man, and some debris from the ceiling hit a woman. They were taken to the hospital and treated for minor injuries. The torrential rains of 3 to 6 inches fell between Westport and Columbia with cropland and many roads flooded. Also, some basements were flooded. Four, weak F0 tornadoes, also were reported. The first two touched down near Bath causing no damage. The other two occurred near Ipswich, also causing no damage.

1947: An unprecedented late-spring snowstorm blasts portions of the Midwest from eastern Wyoming to eastern Upper Michigan. The heavy snow caused severe damage to power and telephone lines and the already-leafed-out vegetation.

1951 — A massive hailstorm, from Wallace to Kearney County in Kansas, caused six million dollars damage to crops. (David Ludlum)

1953 — A tornado, 600 yards wide at times, killed two persons on its 20 mile path from southwest of Fort Rice ND into Emmons County. Nearly every building in Fort Rice was damaged. The Catholic church was leveled, with some pews jammed four feet into the ground. (The Weather Channel)

1982: Two significant tornadoes ripped through southern Illinois. The most severe was an F4 that touched down northeast of Carbondale, Illinois then moved to Marion. The twister had multiple vortices within the main funnel. Extensive damage occurred at the Marion Airport. A total of 10 people were killed, and 181 were injured. 648 homes and 200 cars were damaged or destroyed, with total damages around \$100 million.

1986: Hailstones over 3 inches in diameter pounded South Shore in Montreal, Quebec Canada causing over \$65 million in damage.

1987 — Thunderstorms in West Texas produced softball size hail at Lamesa, and hail up to twelve inches deep east of Dimmitt. Thunderstorms also spawned seven tornadoes in West Texas, including one which injured three persons at Wolfforth. Thunderstorms deluged the Texas Hill Country with up to eleven inches of rain. Severe flooding along the Medino, Hondo, Seco, Sabinal and Frio rivers caused more than fifty million dollars damage. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 — A powerful cold front brought snow and high winds to parts of the western U.S. Austin, NV, was blanketed with ten inches of snow, and winds gusted to 75 mph at the Mojave Airport in California. Strong southerly winds and unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the north central U.S. Glasgow, MT, equalled their record for the month of May with a high of 102 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 — Wintry weather gripped parts of the northwestern U.S. for the second day in a row. Great Falls, MT, was blanketed with 12 inches of snow, which pushed their total for the winter season to a record 117.4 inches. Six inches of snow whitened the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather from north central Colorado to the northern half of Texas. Severe thunderstorms spawned four tornadoes, and there were seventy reports of large hail or damaging winds. Midday thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 90 mph at Hobart, OK, and produced up to three and a half inches of rain in eastern Colorado in four hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



The Stages of Our Christian Life

God is patiently guiding us to release our old life and embrace who we are becoming in Christ.

Philippians 1:5-7: 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.

6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.

Every Christian's journey is unique. Yet certain stages of growth should be common to all of God's children. For example:

The Lord wants to teach new followers basic principles as a foundation on which to build. He expresses these truths through other believers, His Word, and things that happen in our life.

God allows us to serve Him. Christians were created to do good works, and this becomes evident as we glorify Jesus (Ephesians 2:10).

The Lord lets us experience "frustrated inadequacy." In other words, our Father brings us to the place where we realize we can achieve nothing of value without divine guidance and power.

To make freedom a reality, the Father brings His children face-to-face with whatever holds them captive. God allows us to struggle through issues with His help. As we surrender to Him and seek His perspective, He works to liberate us.

The Lord teaches us how to live the "exchanged life" (Galatians 2:20). Our sinful nature has been crucified with Christ, and the Savior's life is expressed through us as we surrender to Him.

By reflecting on these stages, you may recognize where God is currently working in your life. He is patient and faithful in His work of transformation. Surrender to the Holy Spirit today, asking Him to continue shaping you into the likeness of Jesus.

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

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The Groton Independent

Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

05.28.26

9 15 24 30 57 1

TOP PRIZE:

\$1,000,000/year

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 15 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

05.26.26

1 5 49 51 59 7

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$331,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

05.27.26

2 27 32 37 48 8

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$28,170,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 15 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

05.27.26

5 10 22 30 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$109,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 30 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

05.27.26

4 9 43 62 68 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

05.27.26

5 14 21 31 51 13

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$172,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Russian drone launched against Ukraine crashes in Romania, injuring 2

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian drone that was part of an overnight attack on Ukraine crashed into an apartment building in eastern Romania, injuring two people, Romanian authorities said Friday.

In response to the crash in the city of Galati, NATO member Romania asked the alliance for a faster transfer of anti-drone capabilities to its military, the Foreign Ministry said, calling the drone's flight a serious violation of international law.

Gen. Gheorghe Maxim, a stand-in commander for the Romanian armed forces' joint staff, said at a press conference Friday that the incident "is not an attack from Russia against Romania," but "Romanians should understand that Russia is a threat to the security of the countries in the area."

Police and other agencies responded at the scene. Galati is on the Danube River, near the borders of Ukraine and Moldova.

Ukrainian forces shot down 217 drones overnight on Friday according to the country's air force. In total, Russia attacked with 232 drones and one ballistic missile. Hits were recorded in 14 areas, the air force said.

The drone was tracked by radar in Romanian airspace and crashed onto the roof of a building in Galati, Romania's Defense Ministry said in a statement. The impact was followed by a fire. Two people suffered minor injuries, and several others were evacuated.

Romania calls it the worst of many incidents

While Romania has confirmed drone fragments on its territory on multiple occasions since the war started in 2022, including in Galati in April this year, no one has previously been hurt in any of the drone incidents in which many landed in remote areas.

In response to the latest incursion, Romanian President Nicusor Dan convened the NATO member's top defense body for a meeting on Friday to discuss the implications of what he called "the worst incident to hit the national territory" since Russia invaded Ukraine, and blamed Russia directly for the incident.

"We will have proportional measures in relation to the Russian Federation. ... There is no ambiguity about the author and the cause of this assault," he wrote in a post on Facebook.

Dan added that his thoughts are with the injured people, families and residents "who experienced terrible moments in their own homes."

The Romanian military scrambled two F-16 fighter jets and a helicopter that were authorized to engage targets, and alert messages were sent to residents of the affected areas.

In recent years, airspace violations have become so common in Romania that lawmakers adopted legislation last year allowing the army to shoot down drones entering its airspace as a last resort. But Romania has remained cautious in downing errant drones, which can pose risks to populated areas.

Russia has been using long-range ballistic missiles and drones to damage Ukraine's power grid and hammer cities, and Ukraine has braced for further heavy bombardments.

Allies rally to condemn incursion

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said that he had spoken to Romania's president and expressed the organization's "absolute solidarity" with its ally.

In a post on X, Rutte said he "affirmed that NATO stands ready to defend every inch of Allied territory. We will continue to enhance our readiness to deter and defend against any threat, including from drones."

NATO allies are talking informally about the incursion but no official meeting about it was due to take place on Friday. Romania can request formal NATO consultations if it feels that its territory or security is under threat.

Finnish President Alexander Stubb condemned the drone strike in Romania and wrote in a social media post that "Russia is crossing another line in its war of aggression against Ukraine."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also said the incident showed that Russia "has

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crossed yet another line." She said the EU will keep strengthening security along its eastern border and was actively drafting another set of sanctions against Russia, the 21st so far.

"A Russian drone incursion struck a densely populated area in Romania, injuring civilians," she wrote in a social media post. "On EU territory."

Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said the risk of such "serious incidents" was raised by "Putin's increasing nervousness, driven by military setbacks."

"Russia is growing weaker on the battlefield in its war against Ukraine, yet it continues to pursue its objectives through brutal drone and missile attacks," he said in a statement.

Zelenskyy appeals for more Patriot missiles

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday he was pressing the United States to provide more Patriot air defense missiles that can counter the Russian attacks.

He warned that deliveries to Ukraine are falling dangerously short as the Iran war diverts and depletes U.S. stocks. "I believe (the U.S.) must act quicker. We are being very persistent," Zelenskyy told reporters during a visit to Sweden.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres warned the U.N. Security Council that the escalation and intensification of attacks risks getting out of control, with "unknown and unintended consequences." He said that more civilians have been killed in the first four months of this year than in the same period in the past three years.

Guterres called for more diplomacy, immediate de-escalation and "a full and unconditional ceasefire."

WHO chief lands in Congo to address rare Ebola outbreak amid distrust and insecurity

By JEAN-YVES KAMALE AND MARK BANCHEREAU Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — The head of the World Health Organization arrived in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, late Thursday to witness efforts against an outbreak of a rare type of Ebola virus, as medical personnel struggle with a lack of equipment, a distrustful population and armed groups in a volatile region.

"To come here is to really show to the community that they're not alone," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters at the airport.

"Pushing orders from my comfortable office in Geneva is easy, but I'm asking my colleagues to work with the community and I am asking communities to protect themselves," he added.

Medical aid donated by the European Union arrived in Ituri province, the heart of Congo's Ebola outbreak, on Thursday. The United States announced the same day \$80 million in additional aid, bringing its total commitment to more than \$112 million.

Health workers with scant supplies have been struggling to contain an outbreak of the Bundibugyo virus, a kind of Ebola that has no approved treatment or vaccine. In some areas, doctors have resorted to wearing expired medical masks while treating suspected patients.

According to WHO, 1,077 suspected cases and 238 suspected deaths have been recorded as of Tuesday.

Dangers faced by health workers have been heightened by anger among residents over the stringent medical protocols for dealing with the bodies of victims, which clash with local burial rites. Residents have launched at least three attacks against health centers.

Tedros said other challenges are also complicating the containment of the outbreak, including the high number of people displaced by armed conflict in the region, and food insecurity.

On Wednesday, he had called for a ceasefire in a region where armed groups have staged violent attacks for decades.

"We cannot build community trust or isolate the sick while bombs are falling," Tedros said.

Tucked in the northeastern part of Congo close to the Ugandan border, Ituri province has been reeling from attacks by the Allied Democratic Force, a rebel group allied with the Islamic State group, and a coalition of ethnic militias. In early May, the ADF killed at least 40 people and burned several homes in Ituri.

The illness also has been reported in the Congolese provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu, south of

Ituri, where the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group controls many key cities, including Goma and Bukavu. The rebels have reported two cases.

The region's main airport in Goma, which doubles as a staging ground for humanitarian efforts into the region, has been closed since January 2025, when M23 seized the city.

The conflict has precipitated one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with at least 7 million people displaced in eastern Congo.

The WHO chief said Thursday he discourages countries from imposing travel bans against nationals of countries affected by the outbreak.

"There are ways to manage workers and to manage cases without having a strong, restricted travel ban and we don't encourage that as WHO," Tedros said.

The Trump administration last week announced a temporary ban on the entry of people without U.S. passports, as well as U.S. green-card holders, who have visited Congo, Uganda or South Sudan in the past 21 days. It said Wednesday it plans to send Americans who are exposed to Ebola to a new facility in Kenya instead of flying them to the U.S. Congo's neighbors, Uganda and Rwanda, recently closed their borders.

Guatemala's president denies report of US deal on anti-drug trafficking strikes

GUATEMALA CITY (AP) — Guatemalan President Bernardo Arévalo on Thursday denied the existence of an agreement with the United States to conduct anti-drug trafficking operations on Guatemalan soil.

The comments come after The New York Times reported that the Central American nation agreed to carry out joint strikes.

The case is the latest in ongoing tensions between the Trump administration and Latin American governments that seek to strike a balance between bilateral cooperation to fight drug trafficking and maintaining sovereignty.

"There is no agreement. There is a request that falls within the framework of existing agreements in several countries," Arévalo said at a news conference.

"What we are signing are types of collaboration that have been taking place in the past. We conduct maritime interdictions where the United States has been collaborating with training, capacity building and equipment," Arévalo said.

He said the government's actions are in accordance with Guatemalan law and the Constitution.

"The only body that can authorize operations involving soldiers on Guatemalan soil is the Congress of the Republic. The Guatemalan government is not requesting this cooperation and has no plans to do so," the president said.

When asked about the supposed agreement, acting Pentagon press secretary Joel Valdez said he cannot "speculate on future operations or discuss matters of operational security" but emphasized that the Department of War works with partners in the region to fight drug trafficking and other transnational threats.

The Guatemalan government also published a press release and two letters in which its defense minister discusses combined military operations under pre-existing agreements with U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth.

The April deaths of two CIA agents in northern Mexico after an operation to destroy a drug lab highlighted the presence of U.S. agents in Latin America and raised questions about heightened U.S. involvement throughout the region. In the days following, Mexican officials offered contradictory accounts on how much information the country had regarding the CIA agents' involvement.

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

Rescuers work to drain flooded Laos cave to free 5 villagers and search for 2 still missing

By JINTAMAS SAKSORNCHAI Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Rescuers working at a flooded cave in Laos said Friday that they were trying to drain water out to help extricate five villagers who have been trapped for more than a week.

An overnight rainstorm has complicated their efforts, they said. Meanwhile, searching continues for two more people who still haven't been located. The villagers had reportedly entered the cave to look for valuable minerals.

Rescue experts from Laos and neighboring Thailand have been working together for the past week, making their way through twisting, narrow passages with jagged walls and flooded sections of the cave located in a rugged area in the central province of Xaisomboun, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) north of the capital, Vientiane.

Those helping out included several divers who took part in the complicated 2018 rescue in northern Thailand of 12 schoolboys and their soccer coach who were trapped for more than two weeks in a cave.

The Lao organization Rescue Volunteer for People says that another diver from Malaysia is assisting in the operation. Kengkaj Bongkawong, head of Thai rescue group Metta Tham Rescue Kalasin, said that divers from Indonesia, Japan and France were also on their way.

The discovery on Wednesday of five trapped villagers triggered celebrations among the rescue teams. They said the search for the other missing two will continue.

A video filmed by Thai cave diver Norrased Palasing showed the emotional moment he and Finnish diving instructor Miiko Paasi emerged from the water and discovered the trapped men. In the footage, the men are wearing headlamps and sitting on a rock surrounded by floodwater.

The five men were identified by their first names as Khamla, Mued, Ee, Ing, and Laen, according to the Lao rescue group. They were reportedly in good health but exhausted from dehydration and lack of food. Divers have since delivered soft food and water to them.

The men could be heard wailing as they saw their rescuers, and Norrased inquired about their health and conditions.

Along with introducing themselves on camera, they delivered messages to their families telling them not to worry.

"Don't worry mom, dad. I'm still strong, I'm still healthy. Tomorrow I will be home. I love you mom and dad," said the man, who introduced himself as Mued.

Lao officials say the villagers normally forage in the mountainous, heavily wooded surroundings for a living.

The villagers had been reported to have entered the cave to look for gold deposits. Bounphong Khammanyong, a local official in Longcheng, the district where the cave is located, said that they had noticed rocks or sand with unusual colors in the cave, so they entered it in the hope of digging them out to see if they were valuable.

Bounphong, in an interview on Thursday with local media outlet Xaisomboun Province Television, said the villagers were trapped when heavy rain caused flooding that blocked them from leaving. An eighth person who managed to escape alerted the authorities.

He said that the group went in on May 20, contradicting rescuers who put the date at May 19.

Rescue Volunteer for People posted on its Facebook page that Friday's operation plan included pumping water out of the cave in an attempt to get the five villagers out later in the day, but that heavy early morning rain had complicated their efforts.

"The front of the cave is in a low-lying area. When it rains, all water will flow down to this area and into the cave," Bounphong said in his interview.

Kenya court suspends US plan for Ebola quarantine facility for Americans

By EVELYNE MUSAMBI Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — A court in Kenya on Friday suspended a U.S. plan to establish a quarantine facility for Americans exposed to a rare type of Ebola virus spreading in northeastern Congo, following a backlash by medical workers and activists.

A U.S. administration official said on Wednesday that the U.S. was planning to send Americans who are exposed to Ebola while abroad to a new facility in Kenya instead of flying them home. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to share the administration's plans. It was unclear where in Kenya the new facility will be built or whether the Kenyan government has signed off on the plan.

The Kenyan government only revealed discussions with the U.S. on support for Ebola preparedness but did not address the facility. The U.S. government intends to commit \$13.5 million toward Kenya's Ebola preparedness efforts, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in a statement.

The High Court in Nairobi on Friday put a stop to any deal on the Ebola facility until petitions against it are heard on Tuesday.

An organization formed to defend Kenya's Constitution, Katiba Institute, and the Kenya Law Society separately challenged any presence of Ebola-related facilities. The Kenya Law Society asked the court to nullify any agreements signed between the U.S. and Kenya on the project, citing public health risks and a lack of public participation.

It also said that Kenya lacks "the high-containment infrastructure required to safely manage such a facility, exposing the public to serious health risks."

A Kenyan doctors' union on Thursday issued a 48-hour strike notice should the country proceed with the deal. It said the U.S. was clear that they would not allow Ebola on their soil and therefore Kenya should not become another "dumping ground."

"As the vanguard of Kenya's healthcare system, we are utterly disgusted by the government's apparent willingness to trade national biosecurity and the lives of its citizens for foreign aid," the union's chairperson, Davji Atallah, said in a statement.

In northeastern Congo, health workers with scant supplies have been struggling to contain an outbreak of the Bundibugyo virus, a kind of Ebola that has no approved treatment or vaccine.

The Congolese government has confirmed more than 1,000 suspected cases, with at least 220 deaths, since it declared an outbreak on May 15. But the virus had been spreading undetected for weeks and the WHO suspects it is much larger than what has been reported.

The virus also has reached neighboring Uganda, which has confirmed seven cases and one death.

US and Iranian negotiators reach tentative deal to extend ceasefire and start new nuclear talks

By AAMER MADHANI, JON GAMBRELL, MICHELLE L. PRICE and SAM METZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. and Iranian negotiators reached a tentative agreement Thursday to extend the ceasefire in the 3-month-old war by 60 days and start a new round of talks on Iran's nuclear program, according to a U.S. official familiar with the matter.

Iran did not immediately confirm any deal. Vice President JD Vance on Thursday evening confirmed there was a tentative agreement, but said it was unclear if President Donald Trump would approve it.

"It's hard to say exactly when or if the president's going to sign," Vance told reporters.

He added: "We're going back and forth on a couple of language points."

The emerging memorandum of understanding came as the fragile ceasefire in the war between the U.S. and Iran appeared to be wavering. The latest flare-up in fighting happened less than a day earlier, when Kuwait intercepted missiles fired from Iran, according to U.S. Central Command.

Proposal addresses Strait of Hormuz

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The memorandum makes clear that Iran will not be able to impose tolls on the Strait of Hormuz and that Iran will have to remove all mines from the vital waterway within 30 days, according to the official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

During the war, Iran has effectively closed the strait, which had been the conduit for about a fifth of the world's traded oil and natural gas. Its closure has sent oil prices skyrocketing around the world. U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent predicted Thursday at a news briefing that the cost of oil could "come down very quickly" once a deal is finalized.

Iran has said it's letting some commercial vessels pass — about two dozen daily in recent days, compared with more than 100 a day before the war — but the Islamic Republic also has charged tolls for at least some ships. It set up a formal gatekeeper agency earlier this month, spurring a new round of U.S. sanctions this week.

Under the tentative agreement, the U.S. would gradually lift its naval blockade on Iranian ports and would also agree to relax sanctions, allowing Iran to sell more of its oil.

Yet even as word of the potential deal emerged, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed additional sanctions on the Iranian military's oil sales arm. The new penalties, first reported by The Associated Press, extend the Trump administration's economic pressure campaign on the Islamic Republic.

Details of the tentative pact were first reported by the news outlet Axios.

Nuclear issue remains unresolved

Among the first issues to be negotiated during the 60-day ceasefire is what will happen to Iran's highly enriched uranium, the first official said. The Islamic Republic has 440.9 kilograms (972 pounds) of uranium that is enriched up to 60% purity, a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Vance suggested on Thursday evening that negotiators were trying to strike general terms on the highly enriched uranium settled in the tentative agreement, with the specifics to be hammered out in the ensuing talks.

Vance said the continued back and forth involved "a couple of issues on the nuclear stuff, the highly enriched stockpile, and also the question of enrichment."

Iran has not publicly committed to giving up the stockpile. It is believed to be buried under a trio of nuclear sites that were badly damaged by U.S. airstrikes last year.

Nuclear analysts have said that Iran might consider China or Russia, which have close relations with Tehran, to be a potential acceptable third party to take possession of the enriched uranium. But Trump said Wednesday that he "wouldn't be comfortable" with such a plan.

Though Trump and his team said from the start of the conflict that one of their prime objectives was to ensure that Iran can never have a nuclear weapon, Vance framed the war's accomplishments as something far less definitive.

"We're in a position where we could substantially set back their nuclear program, not just during the term of this president but over the long term," Vance said. "That's a very very good thing for the American people."

Iran, which has long maintained its program is peaceful, has insisted that any deal must include an end to Israel's military operations in Lebanon against the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. Tensions deepened Thursday in Lebanon as Israel conducted an airstrike on a southern suburb of the capital, Beirut, and other strikes in the southern coastal city of Tyre. At least 14 people were killed across the country's south.

Kuwait reports an attack

Kuwait announced that its air-defense systems intercepted incoming missiles and drones on Thursday, without detailing what had been targeted. Iran said it had retaliated for strikes earlier in the week by firing on a U.S. base in a Gulf state it did not name.

The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry condemned Iran for what it called "blatant aggression," and U.S. Central Command called the attack on one of America's top allies in the Persian Gulf an "egregious ceasefire violation." Kuwait repeatedly came under fire from Iran and Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq before the

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April ceasefire began.

The exchange took place after U.S. officials said late Wednesday that American forces launched more strikes on Iran, shooting down four one-way attack drones that posed a threat around the strait and hitting an Iranian ground-control station in Bandar Abbas that was about to launch a fifth drone.

Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard acknowledged the attack around Bandar Abbas International Airport and said via the state-run IRNA news agency that it launched a retaliatory attack on the air base that launched the assaults. The Revolutionary Guard did not specify whether the response targeted Kuwait, which houses U.S. Army Central's forward headquarters, air bases and a naval base.

On Monday, the U.S. said it conducted what the Pentagon called "self-defense" strikes on missile launch sites and minelaying boats in southern Iran.

Although they have traded strikes and accusations of ceasefire violations, Washington and Tehran have not returned to full-scale hostilities and keep negotiating.

Vance said that, "Ceasefires are always a little messy" but it's "very much holding."

Later Thursday, Iran's defenses destroyed "a hostile aircraft" around the southern city of Jam, the area's governor, Masood Tangestani, told state broadcaster IRIB. No other information was immediately available.

With a stalemate in Ukraine and discontent at home, Putin seems ready to escalate his war

By The Associated Press undefined

Facing a battlefield stalemate in Ukraine and growing war fatigue among Russians, President Vladimir Putin appears ready to try to change the narrative around the conflict.

He looks likely to sharply escalate the Russian aerial attacks on the Ukrainian capital in the hope it will shore up his sagging domestic approval ratings and persuade an increasingly pessimistic audience at home that Moscow is winning the war, now in its fifth year.

Russia's warning to carry out "consistent and systematic" missile strikes on Kyiv, accompanied by a call for evacuating foreign embassies from the capital, signals Putin's intention to expand Russia's barrage despite the heavy costs and potential international outrage.

Massive drills of Russia's nuclear forces earlier this month and a series of belligerent statements from Moscow warning Kyiv's European allies about possible retaliation for what the Kremlin cast as their involvement in Ukrainian drone attacks have underlined Putin's intention to up the ante.

As Russia's advance stalls, Ukraine boosts long-range strikes

After a series of gains last year, Russia's advances along the over 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line have ground to a near halt recently, and Ukraine's armed forces have launched successful counterstrikes and reclaimed some ground.

"The character of the war is shifting in favor of Ukrainian forces, at least for now," the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War said in a recent analysis. "Russian forces' rates of advances are stagnating while Ukrainian forces are employing novel tactics and operational concepts in efforts to break out of positional warfare."

The battlefield gridlock undermines Putin's declared goal of quickly capturing the eastern Donetsk region still under Ukrainian control. Kyiv has rejected his demands to withdraw from the region as a condition for a ceasefire.

At the same time, Ukraine has significantly expanded its long-range strikes on Russian energy facilities and arms factories, inflicting increasing damage.

Putin scaled down the annual May 9 Victory Day parade, fearing Ukrainian drone strikes. Days later, a massive drone attack on Moscow's suburbs killed three and showed that even the densely protected capital isn't fully immune from assault, shattering Kremlin efforts to cast the conflict as something distant that doesn't affect ordinary Russians.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the attacks were "significantly changing the situation — and, more broadly, the world's perception of Russia's war."

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Acknowledging the growing threat of Ukraine's deep strikes, Russian lawmakers this week approved a bill that says the country's banks should bear the cost of installing drone-jamming systems on their premises, rather than rely on the military.

"From Russia's perspective, these attacks are just going to get worse," said Thomas Withington of the Royal United Services Institute in London. He added that Ukraine's increasingly audacious drone attacks were "exacting not only a political but an economic cost in Russia."

The war is taking a toll on the Russian economy and morale

Russia's economy has stagnated as the initial boost from massive military spending has petered out. The government has raised taxes and increased domestic borrowing to keep the budget deficit under control. And even though the U.S. war in Iran has meant windfall oil revenues for Russia, fundamental economic challenges remain.

Putin is expected to play down the negative dynamics at next week's international economic forum in St. Petersburg, an annual event intended to showcase Russia's achievements.

Nigel Gould-Davies of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies said in an analysis that "war-fueled high prices of capital, labor and goods, as well as rising taxes, have begun to depress the civilian sectors," resulting in "a dual economy of overheated military output and civilian stagnation."

While Russia has relied on volunteer soldiers to fight the war, offering them comparatively high wages and other benefits, Gould-Davies argued that "there are signs that this incentive may no longer be working effectively, and that Russia has begun to lose more troops than it can recruit."

To sustain the war, the Kremlin will have to forcibly mobilize human and material resources, requiring it to "curtail the last remaining post-Soviet market freedoms, labor freedom, and freedom of movement," he said.

In a sign of brewing discontent, some social media influencers previously loyal to the Kremlin have started to openly criticize government policies.

A move by authorities to restrict cellphone internet and block popular messaging apps has upset daily routines for millions, causing open grumbling. Natalya Kasperskaya, a prominent IT entrepreneur and a staunch Kremlin supporter, harshly criticized the shutdowns and attempts to block virtual private networks, warning that they cause massive damage to the tech sector.

Tatyana Stanovaya, a Russia expert who founded the R.Politik newsletter focused on Kremlin politics, noted the spreading Ukrainian drone attacks along with mobile internet shutdowns and rising taxes have eroded Putin's standing. While he faces no immediate threats to his rule, "the gradual fading of Putin's credibility is real," she said.

In early spring, Russian opinion polls, including one by a government-run pollster, recorded a dip in Putin's approval ratings, although they rose slightly in May in the state-controlled poll after the organization changed its methodology to include face-to-face interviews. Many observers believe the numbers may be inflated amid a widespread crackdown on dissent.

"Putin is losing his magic," Alexander Baunov of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center wrote in a commentary. "Power remains undivided in his hands, but its spell is fading. Even loyalists complain about the mounting restrictions and repression, and once-upbeat businesspeople are now despondent."

Russia's new threats to Ukraine and the West

Citing a May 22 Ukrainian drone attack on a college dormitory in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine that Moscow said killed 21 people, Putin ordered a massive missile strike on Kyiv and its surrounding region. Sunday's barrage that involved Russia's new hypersonic Oreshnik missile killed two, injured scores of others and destroyed or damaged many buildings.

On Monday, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Moscow will launch "consistent and systematic" strikes on Kyiv to target drone-making facilities and "decision-making centers." It urged foreign diplomats to leave the capital — a demand rejected by Ukraine's allies.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio to warn him of the coming strikes and push for the evacuation of its diplomats.

"The danger in all of these wars as they continue and then they go on is that they always have the threat

of escalation, of spreading into something new," Rubio told reporters after the call.

The Iran war has effectively put U.S. mediation efforts in Ukraine on hold and drained American missile arsenals, delaying the delivery of U.S.-made Patriot missiles that Ukraine desperately needs to fend off Russian attacks.

Moscow-based military analyst Sergei Poletaev said Russia sees the shortage of air defense assets in Kyiv as an opportunity.

"Kyiv's air defenses have been exhausted enough to make a massive attack efficient," he said in a recent commentary.

Accompanying the declared blitz on Kyiv, Russia issued a barrage of threats aimed at Ukraine's European allies.

The Defense Ministry published a list of facilities in Europe that it said were involved in manufacturing drones and their components for Ukraine. And Moscow's Foreign Intelligence Service warned the Baltic nations that their NATO membership won't protect them from Moscow's retaliation if they allow Ukraine to launch attacks from their territory. Those allies have denounced Moscow's claims.

"We are actually very, very close to direct military confrontation," said Dmitry Polyansky, Russia's envoy to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Blue Origin rocket explodes on the launch pad during an engine-firing test

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A rocket belonging to Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin exploded during a test at the launch pad Thursday night, shaking nearby homes and briefly painting the sky orange.

Blue Origin said its New Glenn rocket exploded during an engine-firing test being conducted ahead of a satellite launch planned for next week. No one was hurt, according to officials at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station.

"It's too early to know the root cause but we're already working to find it," Bezos said via X. "Very rough day, but we'll rebuild whatever needs rebuilding and get back to flying. It's worth it."

The massive New Glenn was grounded in April after it left a satellite in the wrong orbit because of engine failure. It was only the third flight of the rocket that Blue Origin intends to use to launch landers to the moon for NASA, including the landers that will take astronauts to the lunar surface.

The company had been on track to launch a prototype lunar lander to the moon on a flight test this fall. Earlier this week, the space agency awarded Blue Origin a contract worth hundreds of millions of dollars to launch a pair of moon buggies in the next few years as part of the Artemis program.

"Spaceflight is unforgiving, and developing new heavy-lift launch capability is extraordinarily difficult," NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman said via X. He promised to provide information on any impacts to the Artemis program, including the moon base that he recently outlined.

Homes shook in nearby Cape Canaveral and Cocoa Beach around 9 p.m., with residents turning to social media to wonder what happened. Launch Complex 36 is visible from the beach, and the internet quickly filled with photos of an orange fireball.

The rocket was supposed to blast off next week with internet satellites that are part of the Amazon Leo constellation in orbit.

Emergency crews remained more than an hour after the explosion. Officials stressed there was no threat due to fumes or other potential hazards.

Space Force officials said the explosion would not affect upcoming launches by other companies from other pads. United Launch Alliance's Atlas V rocket is due to blast off Friday night with a batch of Amazon Leo satellites, the same kind that this rocket was supposed to take up.

SpaceX's Elon Musk, who's had his own share of rocket explosions, offered his condolences. "Sorry to see this, I hope you recover quickly," he told Blue Origin via X.

Towering at 321 feet (98 meters), New Glenn made its debut in 2025. It is named after John Glenn, the first American to orbit Earth, and is much bigger and more powerful than the New Shepard rockets that have carried tourists to the fringes of space from Texas.

Aid supplies reach heart of Congo's Ebola outbreak as WHO head travels to Kinshasa

By JUSTIN KABUMBA and OPE ADETAYO Associated Press

BUNIA, Congo (AP) — Aid workers rushed supplies Thursday to the center of Congo's outbreak of a rare type of Ebola virus while beleaguered medical personnel struggled with a lack of equipment, a distrustful population and armed groups in a volatile region.

A white cargo plane with aid donated by the European Union delivered masks, gloves, boots and medications, which all are in short supply, to the northeastern town of Bunia at the heart of the outbreak in Congo's Ituri province. U.N.-branded forklifts lifted several cases into trucks.

Health workers with scant supplies have been struggling to contain an outbreak of the Bundibugyo virus, a kind of Ebola that has no approved treatment or vaccine. In some areas, doctors have resorted to wearing expired medical masks while treating suspected patients.

Dangers faced by health workers have been heightened by anger among residents over the stringent medical protocols for dealing with the bodies of victims, which clash with local burial rites. Residents have launched at least three attacks against health centers in Ituri province.

Congolese Health Minister Samuel Roger Kamba said that during outbreaks people in remote communities can feel overwhelmed by an incoming flood of information and people.

"We've seen in every epidemic that there's always resistance," Kamba said. "Communities always ask themselves, 'What's going on?' And in epidemics like this one, it is really risk communication and community engagement that ultimately change perceptions."

Aid donated by the EU is expected to arrive in batches over the next eight days, said Jérôme Kouachi, head of emergency operations at UNICEF in Congo.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was on his way to Congo to witness the efforts. The WHO has declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, in the hope of ramping up aid.

The United States on Thursday said it is increasing aid to Congo and Uganda by \$80 million, bringing its commitment to more than \$112 million since the outbreak.

The additional money would pay for personal protective equipment for health care workers, Ebola test kits, support for health screening at airports and contact tracing, the U.S. State Department said.

Dr. Jean Kaseya, the Africa Centres for Disease Control director-general, said the organization on Monday believed it had secured funding pledges of nearly \$500 million toward Africa's emergency response, but as of Thursday afternoon the amount had dwindled to \$290 million as partners withdrew or reduced pledges.

He also said the Africa CDC hoped to have treatments and a vaccine for the Bundibugyo virus by the end of the year and there were some vaccine candidates already in the works.

The Congolese government has confirmed more than 1,000 suspected cases, with at least 220 deaths, since it declared an outbreak on May 15. But the virus had been spreading undetected for weeks and the WHO suspects it is much larger than what has been reported.

The virus also has reached neighboring Uganda, which has confirmed seven cases and one death.

On Wednesday, the Congolese government said the first survivor to recover from the virus had left a health center.

"We are trying to catch up," Congo Foreign Minister Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner said earlier this week. "It is a race against the clock."

The ground response has been hampered by multiple challenges including customs' red tape, insufficient storage facilities, bad roads and weak telecommunications, humanitarian agencies said in a report Thursday.

Tedros on Wednesday called for a ceasefire in a region where armed groups have staged violent attacks

for decades.

"We cannot build community trust or isolate the sick while bombs are falling," he said.

Tucked in the northeastern part of Congo close to the Ugandan border, Ituri province has been reeling from attacks by the Allied Democratic Force, a rebel group allied with the Islamic State group, and a coalition of ethnic militias. In early May, the ADF killed at least 40 people and burned several homes in Ituri.

The illness also has been reported in the Congolese provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu, south of Ituri, where the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group controls many key cities including Goma and Bukavu. The rebels have reported two cases.

The region's main airport in Goma, which doubles as a staging ground for humanitarian efforts into the region, has been closed since January 2025, when M23 seized the city.

The conflict has precipitated one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with at least 7 million people displaced in eastern Congo.

Pam Bondi to face closed-door questioning from House lawmakers over Epstein files

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Attorney General Pam Bondi is testifying before House lawmakers investigating Jeffrey Epstein's sexual abuse cases, a long-awaited appearance that brings fresh scrutiny of the administration's botched release of the Epstein case files.

Bondi was defiant in previous public testimony when she was confronted by lawmakers about the Epstein investigation. It's unclear whether she'll bring the same approach Friday, now that she is no longer in charge of the Justice Department. The session will be held behind closed doors.

The transcribed interview will give lawmakers a chance to dig for information on the Trump administration's handling of the Epstein files and other related matters, including the prison sentence of his former girlfriend and confidant, Ghislaine Maxwell. The Justice Department moved Maxwell to a prison camp in Texas last August.

"I think she absolutely could clear up many missing pieces if she wanted to," said Rep. Yassamin Ansari, an Arizona Democrat on the House Oversight Committee. "Now it's a question of whether or not she is willing to be transparent."

Lawmakers are trying to find out what decisions prosecutors have made about investigating Epstein associates, how the Justice Department handled the congressional mandate to release the Epstein case files and whether President Donald Trump was involved in the process.

Bondi, who revealed this week that she is being treated for thyroid cancer, has stayed within Trump's orbit even after being ousted from her job in early April.

Trump appointed her to a White House panel on artificial intelligence this week, and Bondi will be accompanied Friday by Justice Department officials, including Harmeet Dhillon, who heads the department's Civil Rights Division, acting as her counsel.

Democrats say that arrangement is a conflict of interest.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department said the officials were there to help lawmakers understand the department's process for releasing the case files.

Bondi was central to the Epstein saga

Bondi has been central to the political firestorm over Epstein, initially raising expectations for the full release of what's known as the Epstein files, only to later backtrack. That reversal prompted Congress to step in and pass a law requiring the release.

Bondi faced even more backlash when the Justice Department's release of the files was delayed and then included personal information of several potential victims. She has insisted in congressional hearings that she was trying to follow the law.

The House Oversight Committee, meanwhile, has been conducting a wide-ranging investigation into

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Epstein that spans multiple presidential administrations.

The interview format is already contentious

Bondi was subpoenaed by the committee in March in a bipartisan vote, but she tried to head off that demand by holding a closed-door meeting with lawmakers that same month. The maneuver only added to the enmity between Bondi and Democrats on the committee.

Bondi's departure from the Justice Department also raised doubts about the enforcement of the congressional subpoena. After the committee's Democrats maneuvered to press for a civil contempt of Congress resolution against Bondi, she agreed to sit for a transcribed interview rather than a sworn deposition.

Democrats on the Oversight panel have criticized that arrangement, saying that it allows Bondi to decline to answer questions. They have also pressed the Republican chair of the committee, Rep. James Comer, to record the interview on video.

"A failure to film and release a video of Ms. Bondi's testimony would present a grave injustice to the American people and survivors of Epstein's crimes," the committee's top Democrat, Rep. Robert Garcia, wrote to Comer.

Comer has said he is allowing Bondi to sit for a transcribed interview rather than a deposition as an incentive to cooperate. Previously, he had enforced a subpoena on former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton after they resisted the demand. Both of their depositions were video-recorded.

Still, Comer said Bondi could face prosecution if she lies to Congress. He said the committee would also release a transcript of the interview.

"Hopefully that will be good enough," he said.

Martina McBride, Morris Day among wave of cancellations at Trump-linked Freedom 250 concerts

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A day after the President Donald Trump -affiliated Freedom 250 announced the "first wave" of performers for "The Great American State Fair" shows on Washington's National Mall in June and July, the lineup has been hit with a wave of cancellations. Young MC, Morris Day, the Commodores and Martina McBride are among the scheduled acts who have said they will not be appearing.

Scheduled performers also include Milli Vanilli, the pop duo from the 1980s who were discredited after it was revealed that their frontmen, Rob Pilatus and Fab Morvan, were only lip-syncing.

Milli Vanilli won a Grammy in 1990 for Best New Artist, but the award was rescinded after the scandal broke. Pilatus died in 1998, while Morvan has attempted a solo career and published a memoir, "You Know It's True: The Real Story of Milli Vanilli."

Morvan recently told The Guardian newspaper that he owns the Milli Vanilli name, and he said in a statement Thursday that he would be performing at the Great American State Fair.

"I am here to entertain and unite people, not divide them," Morvan said. "Let's celebrate life & music and take a trip down memory lane. I feel honored to be a part of as it will celebrate the 250 Year Anniversary of America with so many other accomplished artists."

A Freedom 250 spokesperson did not immediately respond Thursday to a request for comment. Freedom 250, which Trump launched late last year, describes itself as a "national, non-partisan organization leading the celebration of our Nation's 250th birthday." Trump appointed Keith Krach, who served as an under secretary of state during his first term, as the organization's CEO.

Trump and his supporters have long had a contentious relationship with the music community. Celine Dion, Elton John and Guns 'N Roses are among the many artists who have objected to their music being played at Trump rallies.

Country singer McBride wrote Thursday on social media that she had agreed to perform after she "was assured this was a nonpartisan event."

"Yesterday things started changing and what we were told is, in fact, not what is happening," she said.

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In an Instagram post, Young MC questioned whether the National Mall shows would be nonpartisan. "The artists were never told about any political involvement with the event," he wrote, adding that he hoped to "perform in D.C. in the near future at an event that is not so politically charged."

Day posted on Instagram, "Contrary to rumor, Morris Day & The Time will not be performing at the 'GREAT AMERICAN STATE FAIR.'"

McBride was scheduled for June 25. Young MC and Milli Vanilli were among those on the roster for an "I Love the '90s" concert on June 26. Day was listed for June 27. Other performers announced include Flo Rida and Bret Michaels. The Great American State Fair is scheduled to run June 25-July 10.

At least one "I Love the 90s" act will be there: Vanilla Ice.

"He is proud to help celebrate America's 250th Anniversary!" a representative for the "Ice Ice Baby" rapper wrote in an email to the AP. "Everyone is welcome to attend and celebrate USA's Birthday and our Freedom!"

A history of E. Jean Carroll's legal battle with President Donald Trump

NEW YORK (AP) — The former advice columnist E. Jean Carroll has been battling President Donald Trump in court for nearly seven years over her allegation that he sexually assaulted her in the dressing room of a fancy Manhattan department store in 1996.

The fight has gone mostly in Carroll's favor, with one jury finding Trump liable for attacking her and a second awarding her tens of millions of dollars in damages for Trump's public attacks on her credibility.

But numerous news organizations, citing anonymous sources, have reported that Trump's Justice Department has opened an investigation into whether Carroll lied under oath during the civil litigation. A person familiar with the matter, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss an ongoing inquiry, said the perjury investigation is being led by the federal prosecutors' office in Chicago. That person later clarified that the actual focus was on a nonprofit that had helped fund Carroll's case.

Late Thursday, Andrew Boutros, the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, denied the reports. He issued a statement saying his office "has not opened — and has never opened — a criminal investigation into E. Jean Carroll."

Here's a look at the history of the legal fight between Carroll and Trump.

Carroll's allegations and Trump's denials

Carroll first went public with her story about being sexually assaulted by Trump in June 2019, when an excerpt from her soon-to-be-released memoir "What Do We Need Men For?" was published in New York magazine.

In the book, she described bumping into Trump while shopping at Bergdorf Goodman, flirting with him, then physically fighting him off after he sexually assaulted her in a dressing room.

The claims drew angry denials from Trump.

"I've never met this person in my life. She is trying to sell a new book — that should be sold in the fiction section," he said in a statement.

"Number one, she's not my type. Number two, it never happened," he said in another statement.

Carroll sues Trump for defamation

In 2019, Carroll filed a libel lawsuit against Trump, saying his claims that she made the story up had "smeared her integrity, honesty and dignity — all in the national press."

That legal claim wound up being bogged down for years over the legal question of whether, in denying the allegations, Trump had been fulfilling his duties as president. Trump claimed that as a federal employee carrying out his job, he was shielded from the defamation lawsuit.

At the time Carroll filed the legal claim, she was barred by law from suing him over the alleged sexual assault because so many years had passed.

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New York changes the law

In 2022, New York changed its laws to give sexual abuse survivors a fresh chance to sue over attacks that happened in the distant past. Carroll was one of the first people to take advantage, filing a new legal claim against Trump alleging that he had raped her. She also sued over things he had said about her after leaving the White House.

That lawsuit moved more quickly through the courts. It went to trial in New York City in 2023.

Trump chose not to attend, leaving his lawyers to argue the case on his behalf.

The jury found that while Carroll had not proved she had been raped, under New York's definition of that crime, Trump had sexually abused her. It also found that he had made some false statements about her that had damaged her reputation. Jurors awarded Carroll \$5 million.

A second trial

Months later, in January 2024, a federal judge held a second trial to determine whether other things Trump had said about Carroll were defamatory.

Its purpose was narrow. Since a jury had already found that Trump had sexually assaulted Carroll, the testimony was limited to how badly Carroll's reputation had been damaged by his comments assailing her credibility and denying the alleged attack.

This time, Trump attended the proceedings and testified for about three minutes.

"She said something that I considered to be a false accusation," he told the jury, later adding, "I just wanted to defend myself, my family and, frankly, the presidency."

Carroll testified that she faced a stream of death threats after Trump repeatedly attacked her story.

The new jury sided with Carroll again, awarding her more than \$83 million in damages.

Appeals continue

Carroll has yet to receive any of the money while Trump's appeals of the two verdicts have moved through the courts.

Ruling in one of those appeals, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals also addressed the issue of whether Carroll had been honest about who was paying for her legal representation.

Trump's lawyers had accused Carroll of hiding the fact that her lawyers had received money from an organization backed by Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn. The judges ruled that there was no evidence to suggest that Carroll was involved in that funding arrangement or had purposely lied about it when she was asked during a deposition in 2020 whether anyone was paying her legal fees.

"It showed that Ms. Carroll simply was not involved in the matter of who was or was not funding her litigation costs," the appeals court said.

A lawyer for Carroll declined to comment through a spokesperson on Thursday.

Explosion and fire at a Dallas apartment building kills at least 3 people, including a child

By JAMIE STENGLE and KENDRIA LaFLEUR Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — An explosion and massive fire at a Dallas apartment building Thursday killed a child and at least two other people following a blast that shook nearby homes and happened while firefighters were rushing to a reported gas leak, officials said.

At least five people also went to hospitals with injuries, Dallas Fire-Rescue spokesperson Jason Evans said. It was unclear how many residents lived in the two-story complex in the Oak Cliff neighborhood south of downtown Dallas, where a towering plume of black smoke was visible for miles.

Evans did not rule out that more victims could be found as crews continued to sift through the charred remains of the building. By late Thursday, Evans said firefighters had searched less than half of the scene by hand and that some areas would require excavation.

"This was enormous," Evans said of the fire.

As dozens of firefighters swarmed to the neighborhood, some residents' friends and relatives worried as

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they tried unsuccessfully to reach each loved ones. Dozens of firefighters searched through the smoldering rubble of the building even as colleagues continued to drench the blackened debris.

Berry said firefighters were responding to a call of a gas leak when an explosion happened.

"We had the cavalry coming," Dallas Fire-Rescue Deputy Chief Mark Berry said. "But the explosion had already taken place."

Atmos Energy, a natural gas provider, said in a statement they were told by fire officials that a construction crew unrelated to the company had damaged a pipeline near the site of the fire.

Kacee Proctor, a resident of the apartment building, said her mother had smelled gas inside a day earlier, but Proctor didn't think much of it at the time.

She wasn't home during the blast and was devastated that her cat, Shirley, was stuck inside.

"I've been sitting over there crying for several hours. I don't know what to do. This is all I have right here," Proctor said, gesturing to the clothes she was wearing.

She spent the afternoon chatting with neighbors who had evacuated, including a girl who was home babysitting her little sister and carried both the child and their dog to safety.

Natural gas service to the area remained shut off, and company officials were working with investigators on-site, the company said.

Authorities set up a family reunification center at a nearby high school. Several hours after the blaze, Frances Rizo was still trying to find her friend who lived in the building.

"She's not answering her phone," Rizo said.

Firefighters rushed to the scene as flames and black smoke billowed into the sky. Some trained their hoses on piles of smoking debris while others removed lumber and other burned wreckage to look for anyone trapped underneath. Little more than a blackened shell of the original building remained.

"The fire is contained, but our members are still working on the scene to do primary searches," said Dallas Fire-Rescue Assistant Chief James Russ.

Julie Jensen said she was at home less than a block from the burning building when she heard a noise like an explosion that left her ears ringing.

"I was sitting on my couch watching TV — stuff flew off our walls," Jensen said.

Jensen said she saw rising smoke and neighbors running when she looked out the window. She grabbed her family's cat and left, finding a nearby parking lot to wait until she knew it was safe to return.

Sal De La Rosa was at work at a nearby auto repair shop when "all of a sudden we just heard and felt this huge boom."

"We felt where the building kind of shook a little bit," De La Rosa said.

He said a co-worker went outside and saw thick, black smoke rising into the air.

Top federal prosecutor in Chicago denies investigation into E. Jean Carroll, disputing media reports

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The top federal prosecutor in Chicago denied Thursday evening that his office had opened an investigation into E. Jean Carroll, the longtime advice columnist who has said Donald Trump sexually assaulted her in a New York department store 30 years ago, hours after multiple news organizations reported that the Justice Department was investigating whether she had lied during the course of civil litigation against Trump.

The Associated Press and other news organizations, citing anonymous sources, reported that the federal prosecutors' office in Chicago had opened an investigation into Carroll examining possible perjury allegations.

But Andrew Boutros, the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, issued a statement roughly 24 hours after the first report was published saying that his office "has not opened — and has never opened — a criminal investigation into E. Jean Carroll."

A person familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investiga-

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tion, initially told the AP on Thursday morning that investigators were focused on Carroll but later clarified that the actual focus was on a nonprofit that had helped fund her case.

A lawyer for Carroll declined to comment through a spokesperson on Thursday.

The Justice Department investigation into Carroll was first reported by CNN on Wednesday evening.

Reports of the investigation added to the perception from Democrats and other former officials that a Justice Department meant to make prosecutorial decisions independent of the White House is being weaponized against the president's political enemies. Trump's Justice Department has opened multiple investigations into perceived adversaries of the Republican president, including securing an indictment last month against former FBI Director James Comey.

Carroll has said a flirtatious, chance encounter with Trump in 1996 at Bergdorf Goodman's Fifth Avenue store in Manhattan ended violently. She said Trump slammed her against a dressing room wall, pulled down her tights and forced himself on her. Trump has called the allegations a "made-up scam," and he has attacked her motivations, saying they were politically driven or arose from a desire to promote her memoir.

A jury in 2023 found Trump liable for sexually abusing Carroll and defaming her, and she was awarded \$5 million. The following year, another jury awarded Carroll \$83.3 million in a defamation case related to Trump's social media posts about her.

The reports this week said the Justice Department was scrutinizing a statement Carroll made in the course of the civil litigation that no one else was paying her legal fees. It later became public that a Chicago-based organization backed by Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn, had helped fund Carroll's case. Trump's lawyers in the civil case accused Carroll of concealing that information, which they said called into question whether the case was politically motivated.

Multiple news organizations, including The Washington Post and NBC News, cited unnamed sources in reporting Thursday that the investigation was actually centered on Hoffman's nonprofit, which the person familiar with the matter confirmed to AP.

A month before the first trial in 2023, then-Trump lawyer Alina Habba sought to delay it, saying in court papers that new revelations about Hoffman partially funding Carroll's case "raises significant questions as to Plaintiff's credibility, as well as her motive for commencing and/or continuing the instant action."

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in a Dec. 30, 2024, ruling, upheld the \$5 million jury award from 2023. The court addressed Carroll's credibility after Trump accused her of lying, during a deposition, about how her case was funded.

The court cited Carroll's explanation that when the question about Hoffman's contributions was first posed to her in 2022, she had forgotten about "the limited outside funding" received in September 2020.

"It showed that Ms. Carroll simply was not involved in the matter of who was or was not funding her litigation costs," the appeals court said.

Hoffman has defended the financial assistance, saying in a social media post that "supporting women's fight for progress and justice in philanthropy, politics and business has been a longstanding priority of mine, as is supporting America against the threat of Trump."

A court entry earlier this month said Trump will not have to pay the award until the U.S. Supreme Court gets a chance to review the case or reject an appeal. The appeals court agreed to a request by one of Trump's lawyers that it let Trump delay the payment to Carroll, though he was required to post a \$7.4 million bond to cover any additional interest costs, a request Carroll's attorney had made.

Crews recover the remains of 6 of the 9 workers missing after Washington chemical tank rupture

By CLAIRE RUSH and GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

LONGVIEW, Wash. (AP) — Crews have recovered the remains of six of nine workers who were missing after a massive chemical tank ruptured at a paper mill in Washington state, releasing a flood of caustic liquid capable of causing severe burns and lung injuries, officials said Thursday.

In all, 11 people were killed in the disaster, including the three yet to be recovered, and eight injured.

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It's one of the deadliest U.S. workplace accidents in recent decades.

A tank containing more than 500,000 gallons (1.9 million liters) of a chemical mixture used to break down wood for making paper collapsed Tuesday morning at the Nippon Dynawave Packaging Co. in Longview, a city along the Columbia River.

The collapse occurred during a shift change, and the six workers whose remains were recovered had been in an area where they would congregate in the morning as they awaited their assignments for the day, said Matt Amos, Longview fire battalion chief.

Among the victims were a grandfather who was always willing to help anyone and a young husband described as selfless and caring, according to friends who organized fundraisers for the victims' families.

The recovery of the victims has been slow and deliberate, complicated by the dangers posed by the remaining chemicals and other industrial hazards, Amos said. Crews were steering clear of a zone closest to the tank, in case of further collapse. They have been working with engineers to determine whether damaged buildings around the tank are safe to enter.

As they collect the remains, crews must decontaminate them before turning them over to the coroner's office for identification. The searchers also must decontaminate themselves.

Authorities said the cause of the disaster is still under investigation. They have not released the names of those who were killed, but friends and relatives had begun confirming their names and posting online fundraisers to support their families.

Gilbert Bernal, a grandfather who was an electrician at the plant, was the first confirmed death, said his friend Todd Cornwell.

"He was one of the most genuinely good people that you've ever met. He would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it. He was always there willing to help in whatever needed to be done," Cornwell said.

CJ Doran, who was 26, was among those presumed dead, according to a GoFundMe post verified by the crowdfunding site.

He was a husband who was "the spiritual leader of their family, the joy of their home, and the family provider," the post said.

Other victims included John Forsberg, a father to two young children; Jared Ammons, who had two children and another on the way; and Braydon Finkas, an electrician at the plant who, along with his long-time partner, Kaitlyn Kincaid, took in exchange students and others in need at their home in Cathlamet, according to their friend Rex Czuba.

Finkas was always willing to help someone cut hay or to buy a beer for a new face in their small town, he said.

"He was a really big part of the town," Czuba said. "He really jumped in and became a part of the community so quickly."

The tank failure also injured eight people, including a firefighter. Some suffered burns or inhalation injuries, authorities said.

The mill's Japanese parent company, Nippon Paper Group, said in a statement Wednesday that it was offering its "deepest condolences and heartfelt sympathies to the bereaved families."

Authorities said Thursday the spill hadn't contaminated the air and drinking water in and around Longview, a city of about 40,000 people along Washington's border with Oregon.

The community, which was founded at the confluence of the Cowlitz and Columbia rivers by a Kansas City timber baron in the 1920s, has deep ties to paper and lumber industries.

Generations of families have worked in the mills, and many residents who spoke with The Associated Press had family members or friends connected to the Nippon Dynawave plant. The sprawling facility, which employs about 1,000 people, makes material for tissues, printing paper, cups, plates, and cartons. It sits along the Columbia next to other timber, paper and chemical businesses.

Crews were working to flush water from ditches near the plant and dilute it before pumping it into the river.

Some contamination has reached the river, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said it has had no noticeable effect.

Venue gets mixed reviews as National Spelling Bee returns to DC ahead of White House UFC event

By BEN NUCKOLS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After 15 years at a convention center in suburban Maryland, the Scripps National Spelling Bee moved this year to a grand stage befitting the stakes of the competition: Constitution Hall, Washington's largest dedicated concert venue.

Not everyone at this week's competition appreciates the change.

"I feel like they should not have moved it. The old venue was better. Because it's a bit of a hassle, getting on the bus and going there and then coming back," said 14-year-old Yahya Mohammed, a three-time speller from Hoffman Estates, Illinois. "The old venue was more spacious, and it feels kind of isolated in the hotel."

As the National Spelling Bee began with Tuesday's preliminary rounds, spellers and their families marveled at the historical significance of their new venue and the nearby cultural opportunities while also dealing with logistical hurdles: crowded hallways, limited dining options and shuttle bus rides to and from their hotel.

Built in 1929 by the Daughters of the American Revolution, Constitution Hall sits a few blocks from the Washington Monument and the White House. Spellers and their families are staying at the nearby J.W. Marriott, a favored haunt of lobbyists and interest groups, and the quickest route to the competition venue would normally be a stroll across the Ellipse, the grassy expanse south of the Executive Mansion.

However, the Ellipse is surrounded by temporary fencing and security checkpoints as crews construct an outdoor octagon on the South Lawn of the White House for UFC Freedom 250, a June 14 event timed for President Donald Trump's 80th birthday and marking the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding.

"Two very disparate forms of entertainment," said Rajeew Malhotra of Boston, the father of speller Sanjay Malhotra, describing the bee and the mixed martial arts extravaganza.

Venue change brings heavy security but plenty of history and culture

Security was beefed up at the hall, with guards and metal detectors stationed at every entrance and explosive-sniffing dogs patrolling the hallways. Three blocks away and three days earlier, a man opened fire at a White House security checkpoint, injuring a bystander before he was fatally shot by Secret Service officers.

At the prior venue, the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center in Oxon Hill, Maryland, spellers moved freely throughout the building, roaming between their hotel rooms, the ballroom that housed the competition stage and a massive food court where they grabbed quick meals between last-minute study sessions.

"Last year was better," said Arpit Aggarwal of Columbia, Missouri, whose daughter, Ananya, is competing for the second time. "Everything was in one place."

"It's an adjustment," Ananya's mom, Deepti Bahl, said diplomatically.

Other spellers appreciated the buzz of gathering downtown, saying it was more appropriate for a national competition. The bee began in 1925 and was held at a series of Washington hotels before it moved to the suburbs in 2011.

"I just love being here, right next to the National Mall. You can see the Smithsonian, you can see the Jefferson Memorial. It's such a lively and unique city and I love being in the heart of it," said three-time speller Oliver Halkett, a 14-year-old from Los Angeles. "There's so much history, there's so much culture. The memorials and the museums are fascinating to go to."

Speller Andie Seavey of Fairbanks, Alaska, and her mom, Kristin, went to see the musical "The Great Gatsby" at the National Theater next door to the hotel.

After 80 spellers were eliminated Tuesday during onstage spelling and vocabulary rounds, the remaining 167 competitors reconvened at the hotel for a high-stakes written test that determined the 100 or so who would move on to Wednesday morning's quarterfinals. The competition concludes Thursday night.

At the spelling bee, the bell is not necessarily the end

Last year, Faizan Zaki won the National Spelling Bee even though he misspelled a word and heard the

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dreaded bell rung by head judge Mary Brooks. In fact, he knew it after a few letters. He stopped spelling and told Brooks, "Just ring the bell."

Faizan's flub let his two remaining competitors back in, since all three misspelled during the round.

Kushi Gottimukkala of Morrisville, North Carolina, is one of a few spellers competing this year who know what that feels like.

At her regional bee, sponsored by the NFL's Carolina Panthers, it was down to Kushi and two other spellers for the final spot at nationals. She misspelled "anchialine," and she thought it was over, only to see the other two spellers mess up.

Kushi rode the emotional roller coaster and ultimately got through.

"I was still thinking about the mistake, but I was also really grateful that I got a second chance, and so I took that into consideration and decided to focus on my next word," she said.

Spellers have to prepare for the possibility that missing a word isn't necessarily the end.

Oliver Halkett, too, has competed in a bee where he got a word wrong but wasn't eliminated. He battled through the disappointment by focusing only on the word in front of him.

"It's a peculiar situation, but I think, above all, mental clarity is so important, especially in those latter rounds," he said. "I close my eyes and do some deep breathing and I visualize the word, and it's just me and the word. That's how you have to approach every single word."

"Treat every word as if it's your first and last word."

Palestinians mourn 10 killed in Eid strikes as Netanyahu vows wider control of the strip

By WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Dozens of Palestinians in Gaza City gathered on Thursday for funeral prayers for 10 people killed in Israeli strikes the night before, including five children and an elderly person, as well as a Hamas militant.

More than 20 people were injured in the strikes, according to Shifa Hospital. Video from the scene showed flames pouring from an upper-floor window of a building, while bystanders rushed to carry wounded people, including children, to ambulances.

Mohammed Shawish, who was wounded and lost his wife in the strikes, broke down in tears as he held her body at the hospital morgue, saying, "I married my wife for love. For God's sake, I chose her because of love."

The strikes took place on the first day of Eid al-Adha, or the "Feast of Sacrifice," an Islamic holiday celebrated by millions of Muslims worldwide. The Israeli military said Wednesday evening it had launched strikes in the northern Gaza Strip targeting two Hamas militants.

Among those killed was Hamas fighter Imad Isleim. On Thursday, mourners carried his body wrapped in a white shroud with a Hamas flag draped over it. His death came as a "shock" to the family, even though they knew it could happen at any time, his cousin Nidal Isleim said.

The strikes came as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel was expanding its control in Gaza.

"Right now we are tightening the grip on Hamas," Netanyahu said Thursday at the Jordan Valley Conference in the occupied West Bank. "We are now in 60% of the territory of the Gaza Strip. You know that? We were at 50%, we moved to 60%."

He said the next step was to move to 70% control, with Israel "tightening the grip" on Hamas "from every direction."

"We will deal with the remnants," Netanyahu said. "But the most important thing is to continue leveraging our power, to increase it."

The conference was part of a broader discussion on the war, Iran, Hezbollah, Gaza and regional strategy.

"There is still more work. What is happening right now is truly a global change. There is no doubt about that," Netanyahu added.

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Earlier this week, an Israeli strike killed Mohammed Odeh, the newly appointed leader of Hamas' military wing, the Qassam Brigades, less than two weeks after his predecessor was also killed.

Across the Gaza Strip, 16 people were killed and 39 others wounded over the past 48 hours, Gaza's health ministry said in an update on Thursday. The ministry is part of Gaza's Hamas-run government, but is staffed by medical professionals who maintain and publish detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Since a fragile ceasefire came into effect last October, 922 people have been killed in Gaza and 2,786 others injured, according to the ministry.

Federal judge upholds constitutionality of nitrogen gas executions

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday ruled that execution by nitrogen gas does not violate the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment, rejecting an Alabama inmate's claim that it causes excessive suffering.

The ruling came after the first bench trial in the country to examine the constitutionality of the execution method that has now been used to put eight people to death, seven in Alabama and one in Louisiana. The ruling clears the way for Alabama and other states to continue with the method and is a setback for critics who hoped a fuller examination of Alabama's protocol would halt its use.

The execution method, first used in 2024, involves strapping a respirator to the person's face and replacing breathable air with pure nitrogen gas, causing death from lack of oxygen. The lawsuit challenging the method was filed last year by death row inmate Jeffery Lee. Lee, 58, is scheduled to be executed with nitrogen gas on June 11 at a south Alabama prison.

"While Lee establishes that death by nitrogen hypoxia involves some suffering, he fails to show that the protocol is cruel and unusual in violation of the Eighth Amendment," U.S. District Judge Emily C. Marks wrote.

Attorneys for the state and Lee disputed how long inmates are awake during a nitrogen gas execution. Marks wrote the evidence shows Alabama's protocol "likely causes severe air hunger —the most severe form of breathing discomfort — for one to three minutes" but did not arise to a constitutional violation.

Lee's attorneys indicated in court filings that they are appealing the decision.

The Alabama attorney general praised the judge's decision.

"After the first full trial on nitrogen hypoxia in the entire country, the district court found it to be constitutional. The district court considered all the evidence and concluded that nitrogen hypoxia is not cruel and unusual, affirming that the question of capital punishment belongs to the people and their representatives, not the courts, to resolve," Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall said.

Inmates executed by nitrogen gas have displayed various levels of shaking during the executions, and lawyers for the state and inmates have disagreed on whether those are involuntary or a sign of suffering. Alabama's last nitrogen gas execution took more than 30 minutes to complete.

Marks noted that Lee faced a high legal bar because the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to find a state's method of execution qualifies as cruel and unusual.

Five states have authorized nitrogen gas as an execution method, according to the Death Penalty Information Center, although only two states have used it.

Lee was convicted of capital murder for killing Ellis and Thompson on Dec. 12, 1998, near the small town of Orrville, Alabama. Prosecutors said Lee entered a pawn shop with a sawed-off shotgun and fatally shot Jimmy Ellis, the owner of the store, and Elaine Thompson, a store employee.

A jury voted 7-5 that Lee should receive a sentence of life imprisonment. However, a judge overrode that recommendation and sentenced Lee to death. Alabama in 2017 ended the practice of judicial override and no longer allows a judge to disregard a jury's sentencing decision in death penalty cases.

Lee's legal team did not issue an immediate comment on the decision.

"The real torture of the death penalty is in the decades of waiting. With what we know about each of

the available methods of being killed in Alabama or in the U.S., I can't imagine anyone choosing conscious suffocation," said Abraham Bonowitz, executive director of Death Penalty Action, a group that opposes the death penalty.

He added that Lee would not face the death penalty if sentenced today because judicial override has been abolished.

Conditions of 4 climbers who fell on Mount McKinley unknown as rescuers try to reach them

By BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Rescuers are trying to reach four climbers who fell on Alaska's Mount McKinley, North America's tallest peak, the National Park Service said Thursday.

The climbers' conditions weren't immediately known following the fall, which was reported to Denali National Park and Preserve rangers overnight, and rangers were seeking a weather window to allow them to reach the area by helicopter, a statement from the agency said. The four climbers were part of a seven-person team.

The three others climbing attended to those who fell, and then returned to camp, the statement says. The fall occurred near Denali Pass, at about 18,200 feet (5,547 meters). The climbers returned to an area known as high camp around 17,000 feet (5,181 meters), the statement says. McKinley stands at about 20,310 feet (6,190 meters).

Park officials have been in contact with the three climbers, said Scott Carr, a park service spokesperson. He said additional information would be released "if and when it becomes appropriate."

Over the years, many climbing injuries and deaths have occurred on the traverse between the high camp and Denali Pass, mainly resulting from unprotected falls, according to the park.

Park rangers and mountain guides install and maintain snow pickets — which are used to help build anchors for extra protection on areas like steep slopes — between the high camp and Denali Pass, the park says. Climbers are urged to have their own pickets in case the protection placed by rangers and guides is missing.

Weather conditions didn't improve the way rescuers had hoped. Carr said late Thursday that conditions throughout the day had been variable, with low cloud ceilings and limited visibility, and that authorities were still awaiting an opportunity to safely fly.

"Helicopter operations will start when a weather window opens up," he said.

A typical climbing season for Mount McKinley begins in late April and continues into mid-July, according to the park. There were 516 climbers on the mountain as of Thursday, Carr said by email.

On Wednesday, two climbers as part of a separate incident were evacuated from the mountain by helicopter around 11 p.m., but the park service said it did not have additional information to share.

Israeli and Russian forces added to UN blacklist for sexual violence in conflict zones

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — An annual United Nations report documenting sexual violence in conflicts worldwide has included Israeli forces for the first time since the review began more than 15 years ago for their treatment of Palestinian detainees. Israel denies the accusations.

The 35-page report — shared by the Israeli mission to the U.N. late Thursday ahead of its expected release Friday — blacklists 77 government and non-government parties in a dozen countries suspected of committing or being responsible for sexual violence in conflicts around the world. It says the number of cases rose sharply in 2025 from 2024.

Russian armed and security forces were also blacklisted for the first time this year for sexual violence against prisoners of war and civilians detained during the war in Ukraine.

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The list for 2025 includes Israel's armed and security forces as well as Hamas militants, who were previously blacklisted after their attack in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, which sparked the war in Gaza.

Both Israel and Russia were warned in last year's report by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that they could be put on the list.

The ambassadors of both countries expressed outrage at their inclusion and lashed out at Guterres.

"We will write a letter to the secretary-general saying that these are unsubstantiated lies and alleged things which again portray Russia as a villain, like they do all the time," Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said. He said Russia is documenting and preparing a report on how the Ukrainians are treating Russian prisoners of war.

"We are done with this UN Secretary-General," Danny Danon, the Israeli ambassador to the U.N., said in a statement on social media. "Guterres has put Israel on the same blacklist along with Hamas, ISIS and the most depraved terrorist organizations in the world." Guterres' second five-year term ends Dec. 31.

Danon said Israel had provided documents, data and detailed responses to the allegations that are raised in the report.

The report said in 2025 the U.N. was able to document "patterns of sexual violence" against Palestinians detained in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, and verified multiple incidents of conflict-related sexual violence, including as a form of torture, inflicted on 14 men, seven women, nine boys and one girl from Gaza and the West Bank. It said 13 cases occurred in 2025 and 18 in 2023 and 2024.

"Violations consisted of rape, including with objects, gang rape, attempted rape, physical violence to the genitals, instances of targeted shooting of the genitals, touching of breasts and genitals, strip and cavity searches conducted without apparent security justification, forced nudity and threats of rape," the report stated.

It detailed at least nine victims, mostly from Gaza, who were raped or gang raped, in some cases repeatedly, by perpetrators from the Israel Defense Forces and Israel's prison service, its special forces and police units.

Israel's foreign ministry said Thursday it has "comprehensively, thoroughly, and unequivocally refuted these allegations."

"This decision is yet another example of the UN's long-standing, institutionalized hostility toward Israel," the foreign ministry wrote on X.

The report again includes accusations of sexual violence by Hamas, but says many of the details could not be independently confirmed because the Israeli government continues to deny the U.N. the access it needs to carry out investigations.

Russian authorities also consistently deny access to U.N. human rights investigators, the report said, but they still were able to verify 310 cases of conflict-related sexual violence in Russia and Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine against prisoners of war and civilian detainees. The vast majority of the victims were men, the report said.

Human rights monitors in Ukraine documented 31 cases of conflict-related sexual violence against prisoners of war and civilian detainees, the majority of which occurred prior to 2025, the report said. Ukraine has not been put on the U.N. blacklist.

Suspect in Taylor Swift Vienna concert attack plot convicted and sentenced to 15 years

By PHILIPP JENNE Associated Press

WIENER NEUSTADT, Austria (AP) — An Austrian court on Thursday convicted a man of planning to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna nearly two years ago. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The state court in Wiener Neustadt, south of the capital, found the 21-year-old defendant, an Austrian citizen known only as Beran A. in line with Austrian privacy rules, guilty on multiple charges including those related to the concert.

The concert plot was thwarted, but Austrian authorities still canceled Swift's three performances in

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August 2024.

His defense attorney said Beran A. admitted to the charges related to the concert plot during the opening day of the trial last month.

In brief final words to the court before it adjourned to consider a verdict on Thursday, Beran A. said: "I would just like to say that I am sorry."

Beran A. allegedly planned to target people outside the Ernst Happel Stadium with knives or homemade explosives. Tens of thousands of Taylor Swift fans, known as Swifties, had traveled to Austria to attend the performances of the American singer's record-setting Eras Tour. Devastated by the cancellations, many gathered in central Vienna to trade friendship bracelets and commiserate.

Beran A. also allegedly networked with members of the Islamic State group ahead of the planned attack. Prosecutors have said they discussed purchasing weapons and making bombs, and that the defendant also sought to illegally buy weapons in the days ahead of the performance, as well as swearing allegiance to the militant group.

Authorities searched his apartment on Aug. 7, 2024, and found bomb-making materials. The concerts were scheduled to begin the next day.

"Having our Vienna shows canceled was devastating," Swift wrote in a statement posted to Instagram two weeks later. "The reason for the cancellations filled me with a new sense of fear, and a tremendous amount of guilt because so many people had planned on coming to those shows."

He was tried alongside Arda K., another 21-year-old whose full name also has not been made public. They, along with a third man, Hasan E., who was arrested and remains in pretrial detention in Saudi Arabia, allegedly planned to carry out simultaneous attacks in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates during Ramadan 2024 in the name of IS.

Only Beran A. was charged in connection with the concert plot. The two defendants were found guilty of charges including traveling and training for terrorist purposes, and being part of a terrorist organization, the Austria Press Agency reported.

The court also found the pair guilty of contributing to attempted murder, a charge linked to Hasan E.'s alleged stabbing of a security officer in Mecca in March 2024. Hasan E. also attacked and wounded three other officers and a woman before he was arrested, according to prosecutors.

Beran A. and Arda K. did not carry out their alleged plans in the UAE and Turkey. Beran A. returned to Vienna and later allegedly began plotting to attack the Swift concert there.

Arda K. was given a 12-year sentence. The two men listened stoically to the verdict and the sentencing, APA reported.

Beran A.'s lawyer, Anna Mair, said after the verdict that she would discuss with her client in the coming days whether to accept the verdict.

Scripps National Spelling Bee guide: How to watch, who the notable spellers are, rules and prizes

By BEN NUCKOLS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The best young spellers in the English language are competing Thursday night in the finals of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, continuing a more than century-old tradition. The three-day competition began Tuesday.

The first bee was held in 1925, when the Louisville Courier-Journal invited other newspapers to host spelling bees and send their champions to Washington. After a long run at a convention center in suburban Maryland, the bee returns to the nation's capital this year at Constitution Hall, a few blocks from the White House.

Another change for this year: ESPN NFL analyst and recent "Celebrity Jeopardy!" champion Mina Kimes joined the bee as its television host.

This is the 98th bee; it was canceled from 1943 to 1945 because of World War II and again in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year's champion will be the 111th, because the bee ended in a

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two-way tie several times and an eight-way tie in 2019.

Thirty of the past 36 champions have been of Indian heritage, including last year's winner, Faizan Zaki. How can I watch the Scripps National Spelling Bee?

The bee is broadcast and streamed on channels and platforms owned by Scripps, a Cincinnati-based media company.

The finals will be broadcast Thursday on ION from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. They will also air or be streamed on these Scripps-owned channels or services: ION Plus, Bounce, Grit, Laff, The Spot, Bounce XL, Grit Xtra, Laff More, Scripps News and Scripps Sports Network.

What are the rules of the Scripps National Spelling Bee?

Spellers qualify by advancing through regional bees hosted by sponsors around the country. In order to compete, spellers must not have advanced beyond the eighth grade or be older than 15.

Competitors must get through two preliminary rounds, where they are quizzed on words from a list provided in advance. There is one spelling round and one multiple-choice vocabulary round.

Those who make it through the preliminaries sit for a written spelling and vocabulary test, with the top 100 or so finishers advancing to the quarterfinals. The words for the test, and for all subsequent rounds, are taken from the Merriam-Webster Unabridged dictionary.

Throughout the quarterfinals and semifinals, spellers are eliminated at the microphone through oral spelling or vocabulary questions.

About a dozen spellers typically make it to the finals, although this year only nine made it. When only two remain, Scripps has the option to use a lightning-round tiebreaker known as a "spell-off" to determine the champion.

Who is competing in the Scripps National Spelling Bee?

This year's bee had 247 spellers representing all 50 states, the District of Columbia, three U.S. territories and five other countries: The Bahamas, Canada, Ghana, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates. After the preliminary rounds, 167 were left, and that field was cut to 95 quarterfinalists after the written spelling and vocabulary test.

The top returning finisher from 2025 is Sarv Dharavane of Dunwoody, Georgia, who finished third last year as an 11-year-old fifth-grader. This year he got a perfect score on the written test, and he's one of the spellers to qualify for Thursday's finals.

Here are the other finalists:

— Shrey Parikh, a 14-year-old eighth-grader from Rancho Cucamonga, California, who finished third in 2024. He lost at the school level in 2025 but has dominated the bee circuit since, winning the South Asian Spelling Bee, the SpellPundit National Spelling Bee and the Words of Wisdom Spelling Bee.

— Oliver Halkett, a 14-year-old eighth-grader from Los Angeles who finished in a tie for seventh last year.

— Zwe Spacetime, a 14-year-old eighth-grader from Fort Washington, Maryland, and the younger brother of 2021 champion Zaila Avant-garde.

— Aiden Meng, a 13-year-old seventh-grader from Orinda, California, who bowed out in the quarterfinals last year.

— Ishaan Gupta, a 12-year-old seventh-grader from Jersey City, New Jersey, who was a semifinalist last year.

— Kushi Gottimukkala, a 13-year-old seventh-grader from Morrisville, North Carolina, and a semifinalist last year.

— Avishka Dudala, a 13-year-old eighth-grader from Prosper, Texas, and a semifinalist last year.

— Logan Bailey, a 12-year-old sixth-grader from Houston. The winner of the North South Foundation spelling bee, he is making his debut on the national stage.

What are the prizes for the Scripps National Spelling Bee champion?

— First place: \$52,500 in cash, reference works from Encyclopaedia Britannica and Merriam-Webster, a custom trophy and commemorative medal, and \$1,000 in flight credits from Delta Air Lines.

— Second place: \$25,000.

- Third place: \$15,000.
- Fourth place: \$10,000.
- Fifth place: \$5,000.
- Sixth place: \$2,500.
- All other finalists: \$2,000.

French Open stunner: No. 1 Jannik Sinner struggles with dizziness during heat wave in 2nd-round loss

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

PARIS (AP) — Not since Rafael Nadal was winning his record 14 French Opens had a player come to Roland Garros as such an overwhelming favorite to win the clay-court Grand Slam.

Jannik Sinner had won everything there was to win in tennis over the past three months: five straight Masters 1000 titles — three of them on clay — and 30 straight matches.

And with Carlos Alcaraz, his biggest rival, out due to an injured right wrist, it seemed almost a foregone conclusion that Sinner would raise the Coupe des Mousquetaires trophy and complete a career Grand Slam.

That's why Sinner's meltdown amid the Paris heat wave was so stunning Thursday — especially after he came within just one game of concluding his second-round match in straight sets when he led 5-1 in the third.

The top-ranked Sinner struggled with dizziness and was beaten by 56th-ranked Juan Manuel Cerundolo 3-6, 2-6, 7-5, 6-1, 6-1 after wasting two chances to serve for the match.

"I didn't feel very well on court," Sinner said. "I struggled, starting to feel very dizzy, very low on energy. ... In the beginning, I was hitting very clean, very good, and then I just kind of hit the wall.

"I didn't have energy, really. I was very, very flat. The whole body. I don't remember last time I felt this weak," Sinner added.

Sinner said that when he woke up on Thursday he "didn't feel very well."

Sinner bent over on the clay court in apparent exhaustion multiple times and was hardly even running for shots as the match wore on, resorting to drop shots and serve-and-volley tactics to try and shorten the points.

He attempted to cool himself with a hand-held fan on changeovers and put bags of ice around his neck.

The temperature at the start of the match was 29 degrees C (84 F) and rose to 32 C (90 F).

"It was warm but not crazy warm," Sinner said. "I feel like it was quite OK to play. Really it was nothing against the heat, nothing against the weather. It was just me today, but it happens."

Cerundolo didn't celebrate too much when it was over, just producing a little wave to the crowd.

"It's tough for him," Cerundolo said. "I couldn't win more than three games by set. So I think I was a little bit lucky. ... He was deserving to win in this match. But then I don't know what happened. ... I feel sorry for him and hope he recovers."

When Sinner served for the match a second time at 5-4 in the third set, he bent over at 0-40 and then walked to his chair. He asked for assistance and left the court. His entire light blue outfit was soaked through with sweat.

After losing the set 7-5, Sinner received medical attention and left the court. Minerals were added to his drink when he returned but Sinner wasn't able to recuperate.

Sinner lost 18 of the last 20 games. Asked if he considered retiring before the match ended, Sinner said that in the "fifth set we all know everything can happen. I was in a tough spot."

Sinner's previous loss came Feb. 19 in the Qatar Open quarterfinals. He had won five straight Masters titles while dropping just three sets.

"We'll definitely do some tests to be sure of what happened today," he said.

"Let's hope we're ready for Wimbledon," Sinner added. "To be ready there, we need to recuperate well and do things right now."

But Sinner has a history of struggling in the heat. He admitted he was lucky at the Australian Open in

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January against Eliot Spizzirri when the roof was closed and the third-round match swung his way. And he had to retire from a match in Shanghai in October that was contested amid extreme humidity.

"Shanghai was very tough. Humidity very high. Australia was very, very warm," Sinner said. "Here, I mean it was warm, but it was OK. It was not like I was dying because of the heat. I think today was completely different scenario.

"It's tough to accept, of course, because of the position where I've been in and everything considered," added Sinner, who sportsbooks had listed at around -300 to win the tournament.

On the same Court Philippe Chatrier last year, Sinner wasted three match points against Alcaraz and lost an epic final.

French teenager advances, Shelton loses

In other matches, 17-year-old Frenchman Moise Kouame became the youngest man to reach the third round of a Grand Slam since Rafael Nadal was also 17 at 2003 Wimbledon. Kouame beat Adolfo Daniel Vallejo 6-3, 7-5, 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (8).

Felix Auger-Aliassime — at No. 4 the highest-seeded player left in the top half of the draw after Sinner's exit — beat Roman Andres Burruchaga 4-6, 6-0, 7-5, 6-1.

Fifth-seeded Ben Shelton was upset by 62nd-ranked Belgian opponent Raphael Collignon 6-4, 7-5, 6-4; and Frances Tiafoe required nearly five hours to overcome Hubert Hurkacz 6-7 (5), 7-6 (5), 6-4, 6-7 (1), 6-4.

Also, Cerundolo's older brother, Francisco, beat Hugo Gaston 2-6, 6-4, 6-2, 6-1.

In women's action, Naomi Osaka put on another fashion show for her walk-on before beating Donna Vekic 7-6 (1), 6-4.

Defending champion Coco Gauff beat Mayar Sherif 6-3, 6-2; and top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka — the runner-up last year — defeated Elsa Jacquemot 7-5, 6-2.

NBA's board of governors passes anti-tanking changes to draft lottery

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

The NBA approved sweeping changes to the draft lottery on Thursday that will strip the teams with the worst records from receiving the best odds of winning the No. 1 pick, something the league hopes will prevent tanking.

A vote by the league's Board of Governors made the plan official for the next three seasons. The "3-2-1 Lottery" proposal expands the event to 16 teams, flattens odds of winning the No. 1 pick and will try to deter teams from tanking by lowering lottery chances for teams that have the worst records.

They can still win the lottery, but they'll have to buck odds to do so. The three worst teams will have 5.4% odds of winning, while teams that finish with the fourth- through 10th-worst records will all have 8.1% chances of winning.

"Since October, the league office has met with key stakeholders to discuss current competitive incentives and solicit ideas aimed at discouraging tanking," the league said Thursday in announcing the move. "That process led to the creation of the 3-2-1 Lottery."

ESPN reported the vote was 29-1, with Memphis casting the lone dissenting ballot.

The vote on Thursday fulfilled a promise from Commissioner Adam Silver, who vowed that the league — which has changed the lottery system about a half-dozen times in the last 40 or so years — would strongly address the tanking issue before next season.

Starting with next year's lottery, the 16 participating teams will all get somewhere between one and three lottery balls — the 3-2-1 part — awarded in this manner:

- The losers of the No. 7 vs. No. 8 play-in games in both conferences will get one lottery ball each.
- The No. 9 and No. 10 seeds going into the play-in tournament will get two lottery balls each.
- The remaining 10 teams that miss the playoffs and the play-in will all get three lottery balls — with the exception of the three worst teams in the standings. They will enter "draft relegation" and have one of their lottery balls taken away, which is the anti-tanking part of the plan.

Tanking was a huge — and from the league standpoint, regrettable — talking point this season. The Utah Jazz were fined \$500,000 "for conduct detrimental to the league" over the way two top players were held

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out of the fourth quarter of a pair of games, one of which the Jazz actually won. The Jazz had reason to limit their win total this season; too many victories would have meant risking a chance to have a top-eight pick in next month's draft, a pick that Utah wound up securing.

Utah was among five teams — draft lottery winner Washington, Indiana, Memphis and Brooklyn were the others — that had winning percentages below .180 after the All-Star break. There had never been a season where so many teams lost so regularly after the break, until now.

Under the new plan, the teams that finish with the three worst records cannot fall below the No. 12 pick. But the best odds of winning No. 1 would go to the other seven teams that miss the play-in and the playoffs.

The No. 9 and No. 10 play-in seeds would also have a 5.4% chance of winning the lottery, and the losers of the No. 7 vs. No. 8 play-in games would both have a 2.7% chance.

There are other caveats within the new plan, including that no team can win back-to-back No. 1 picks and that the NBA will now have "expanded disciplinary authority" to address tanking — with potential moves including lowering teams' lottery odds or even changing draft positions.

The new rules will be in effect through 2029. The Board of Governors will have to vote again, at some point, to either extend the new plan or come up with a different one before the 2030 lottery.

What to know about the heat policy at the French Open

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

PARIS (AP) — Despite an unprecedented heat wave at the French Open, the tournament's extreme weather policy has not been activated this week.

And even if it had been, it's unlikely that the retractable roof on Court Philippe-Chatrier would have been closed before or during top-ranked Jannik Sinner's loss.

According to the policy, if the Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) — which takes into account temperature, humidity, sun, wind and other factors — reaches 30.1 degrees Celsius (86 Fahrenheit) or higher, 10-minute cooling breaks can be added between the second and third sets for women's matches and between the third and fourth sets for men's matches.

"If the WBGT hits 32.2 C (90 F), play is suspended... this activates around 100 F," the policy states.

The conditions during Sinner's defeat to Juan Manuel Cerundolo on Thursday didn't hit those levels.

The temperature at the start of the match was 29 degrees C (84 F) and rose to 32 C (90 F).

The Roland Garros extreme weather policy makes no mention of closing the roofs. There is also a retractable roof on the tournament's second-biggest stadium: Court Suzanne-Lenglen.

That differs from the policy at the Australian Open, where if matches on the outdoor courts have been suspended, the referee may make the decision to close the roof — or to keep the roof closed — for any upcoming matches on the arena courts.

Sinner has a history of struggling in the heat. He admitted he was lucky at the Australian Open in January against Eliot Spizzirri when the roof was closed midway through and the third-round match swung his way.

The French Open does not usually have so many consecutive days of extreme heat as experienced this year: It has reached 32 C (90 F) all five days of the tournament so far.

The heat policy has never been activated for the French Open.

Djokovic suggests holding more night matches

Novak Djokovic was asked after a grueling four-set victory on Wednesday, if the French Open should consider changing its policy.

"It's always a discussion," he said. "But then if you close one roof, then all of the others are playing, it's not fair, also. Why would you close center court and then everyone else has to be playing on the heat? I wouldn't agree with that."

Djokovic suggested that the Paris organizers should consider moving more matches later in the day and night on days with extreme heat.

"With Grand Slams it shouldn't be an issue, because we have so many courts," Djokovic said. "If you have certain days that you have extreme heat and conditions, then maybe that's something to consider."

Israeli military strikes southern suburb of Beirut before crucial Lebanon-Israel talks in Washington

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Israel's air force carried out an airstrike on a southern suburb of Lebanon's capital on Thursday afternoon, the Israeli military said, further straining a fragile ceasefire a day before crucial negotiations in Washington.

The strike hit an apartment building, but the target of the attack wasn't immediately clear. White smoke billowed from a residential neighborhood in the suburb of Choueifat, close to Beirut's international airport.

Tensions have been increasing in southern Lebanon, where Israeli troops recently crossed the strategic Litani River, which the Israeli military has used as a de facto boundary. Large areas to the south are under Israeli military control, despite the Washington-brokered ceasefire from April 17.

This was the first attack close to Beirut since May 6, when an Israeli strike killed a military official with Hezbollah militant group's elite Radwan Forces in another southern suburb.

Overnight, Israeli forces pounded Tyre, Lebanon's fourth-largest city, and killed at least 14 people across the south of the country in their ongoing military escalation against Hezbollah before the Lebanon-Israel talks in Washington.

Five women and children and a Lebanese soldier were among those killed in the strikes. Dozens of others were wounded, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry and the state-run National News Agency, or NNA.

The Israeli military said, meanwhile, that one of its soldiers was killed in a Hezbollah drone attack in northern Israel.

Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam condemned the widespread attacks on Tyre and Nabatiyeh, describing them as "onslaughts" and calling the ongoing displacement "collective punishment."

"This only strengthens our resolve for the necessity of an immediate ceasefire, working toward a complete Israeli withdrawal from our land," Salam said in a social media post.

Lebanese minister seeks end to Tyre attacks

On Thursday afternoon, the Israeli military issued another evacuation warning for Tyre and its suburbs. Considered one of the oldest metropolises of the world, Tyre has several archaeological sites, some of them submerged. The city was officially declared a UNESCO World heritage site in 1984.

Foreign Minister Youssef Raggi said in a statement Thursday that he's been following "with deep pain and profound concern" the ongoing Israeli attacks on Tyre.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday announced an expansion of the Israeli military's attacks in Lebanon, apparently sparked by Hezbollah's use of fiber-optic exploding drones that have struck Israeli troops in Lebanon and reached some of Israel's northern border towns. The Israeli military said that it has launched hundreds of attacks targeting what it said were Hezbollah military assets.

Lebanese and Israeli military officials will hold their first security talks on Friday in Washington. Despite the nominal ceasefire, Israeli attacks have recently intensified, while largely sparing Beirut.

Hezbollah has dismissed the talks, and has repeatedly called on Lebanon's leadership to withdraw from them. The militant group believes that Beirut doesn't have the leverage to stop the war and have Israel withdraw its troops.

"The ruling authority persists in pursuing a downward trajectory, compromising both sovereignty and rights under the pretext that it is compelled to continue direct negotiations with the enemy," Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc said in a statement Thursday.

The group instead endorsed its key ally Iran, which has made ending the war in Lebanon a condition for its own talks with Washington brokered by Pakistan.

"Yet, instead of seizing this opportunity, the Lebanese authorities are attempting to undermine it — actively working to obstruct it, even at the cost of their own people's blood," the statement said.

Israeli government spokesman David Mencer said that Netanyahu instructed the military "to deepen our operation in Lebanon" to protect the communities of Israel's north.

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Mencer said that Israel would continue U.S.-mediated negotiations with Lebanon in Washington, saying that the talks aim to disarm Hezbollah and reach "a peace agreement that will strengthen security and stability in our region and promote prosperity and peace."

Further north in the city of Sidon, an Israeli drone struck an apartment building where some displaced families lived, killing five people and wounding 21 others, among them five children.

Mohammad Al-Gharbi, who lived across the street from the building in Sidon, woke to the sound of the explosion.

"I was in my room when part of the wall and shattered glass fell on me, and everything was thrown into chaos," he said. "This building that was hit had six apartments occupied by poor families who had fled from the south to escape the attacks there, only to be hit here."

In the nearby coastal town of Adloun, an Israeli drone struck a car with a family that was fleeing, killing six people, of which four were two children and their parents, the Lebanese Health Ministry said. Another drone strike that came without warning killed two people on a motorcycle near Tyre. The target of the attack wasn't immediately clear, NNA reported.

Elsewhere near the city of Nabatiyeh, the Lebanese military said that a soldier was killed in an Israeli drone strike while he was riding his motorcycle.

Hezbollah attacks target Israeli forces

The Israeli military said Thursday that a soldier in northern Israel was killed in a Hezbollah drone attack and two reservists were wounded.

Hezbollah says it has carried out dozens of drone and rocket attacks targeting Israeli troops in southern Lebanon and northern Israel. The group said Thursday that it launched several attacks on Israeli troops and tanks that have crossed the Litani River into the town of Zawtar al-Sharqieh near Nabatiyeh, as close-range fighting continues.

More than 1 million people in Lebanon have been displaced by the Israel-Hezbollah war, which was sparked when Hezbollah fired rockets into northern Israel on March 2 in solidarity with Iran, two days after the Iran war began.

At least 3,269 people have been killed in Israeli strikes since the start of the war, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry, with more than 9,800 wounded.

According to Netanyahu's office, at least 23 Israeli soldiers and a defense contractor have been killed in or near southern Lebanon and two civilians have been killed in northern Israel, the vast majority by drones.

Judge refuses to block Trump order to limit mail voting. There's no immediate effect on the midterms

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

A federal judge has declined to halt President Donald Trump's executive order creating a federal voter list and limiting mail voting, clearing the way for potential sweeping changes in how American elections are run shortly before this year's midterm elections.

U.S. District Judge Carl Nichols, a Trump appointee in Washington, late Wednesday rejected the request by Democrats and civil rights groups that had argued Trump's order would likely be found unconstitutional because the states and Congress, not the president, have the power to set election rules. Nichols agreed with the Republican Trump administration's contention that it was too early to block the order because it has yet to be implemented.

Nichols' ruling leaves the door open for further challenges when the Trump administration moves to implement the president's directive. A separate lawsuit seeking to block the executive order is underway in Boston. No matter how rapidly the administration acts, no voting changes are expected during primary elections, which continue into next month.

"The Court recognizes that the Postal Service may ultimately issue a final rule that directly affects Plaintiffs or their members, or that the Government may develop State Citizenship Lists that omit specific individuals due to particularized flaws," Nichols wrote. "Plaintiffs may, of course, renew their motions if

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and when those future actions occur. Until then, however, Plaintiffs cannot show that preliminary injunctive relief is warranted.”

The Trump administration has yet to formally issue lists of eligible voters, and those who filed the initial request for a temporary halt said they’d be back if the administration moves in that direction.

“We are ready to resume the fight if and when the administration takes those next steps,” said Juan Proaño, chief executive officer of the League of United Latin American Citizens, one of the organizations that sought the stay from Nichols.

Democratic party organizations that sought the order issued a joint statement with similar promises. “We are confident we will prevail in the end when this illegal and completely unworkable executive order is fully adjudicated,” the statement said.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

Trump issued the order in March after a bill he supported to overhaul voting stalled in Congress. The order would have had the federal government create a list of eligible voters and then directed the U.S. Postal Service to deliver mail ballots only to those on the list. Election officials argued it was ripe for abuse and could cause chaos, and the postal union has objected to the idea of mail carriers policing ballots.

Since his 2020 presidential election loss to Democrat Joe Biden, Trump has groundlessly claimed mail voting is rife with fraud and has launched a federal investigation into that year’s vote, even though repeated audits and investigations, including ones run by Republicans, found it was free of widespread fraud. Trump also has said he wants to “take over” election administration in Democratic areas.

Democrats and civil rights groups argued it was urgent that Nichols issue a restraining order in the midst of primary season and with states already gearing up for the fall midterm elections.

This was Trump’s second executive order seeking to overhaul elections and voting. His initial election executive order, issued just months after he took office in his second term, has been blocked by multiple federal judges. That order sought to require documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote, among other changes.

Supreme Court rules for Black death row inmate from Mississippi over racial bias in makeup of jury

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Thursday ruled for a Black death row inmate from Mississippi who claims there was racial bias in the makeup of the jury that convicted him.

By a 5-4 vote, the justices sided with Terry Pitchford, who was sentenced to death for his role in the killing of a grocery store owner.

“In this case, whether due to confusion, oversight, an overly hurried jury selection process, or some other cause, things broke down,” Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote for the court. Chief Justice John Roberts and the court’s three liberal justices joined with Kavanaugh.

There were 11 white jurors and one Black juror in a trial with similarities to that of another Black man on Mississippi’s death row, whose conviction the high court overturned seven years ago.

It’s unclear what happens next in Pitchford’s case. Justice Neil Gorsuch, who dissented, suggested the state still could argue Pitchford’s conviction should be sustained. If his conviction is overturned, the state could seek to retry him.

“Mr. Pitchford is now entitled to a fair trial in the state court,” Joseph Perkovich, who argued the case for Pitchford at the Supreme Court, wrote in an email.

Doug Evans, a now-retired prosecutor with a history of dismissing Black jurors for discriminatory reasons, had excused four other Black people at Pitchford’s trial. Black people make up more than 37% of Mississippi’s population.

The Supreme Court ruled 40 years ago in *Batson v. Kentucky* that jurors could not be excused from service because of their race and set up a system by which trial judges could evaluate claims of discrimination and the race-neutral explanations by prosecutors.

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Pitchford's case focused on whether his lawyers did enough to object to Judge Joseph Loper's rulings and whether the state Supreme Court acted reasonably in ruling they had not.

Pitchford's lawyers made the necessary arguments and the state high court acted unreasonably, Kavanaugh wrote.

In dissent, Gorsuch wrote that Pitchford had to show that no fair-minded judge could rule as the Mississippi court did and that the record in the case was crystal-clear in his favor.

"As I see things, Mr. Pitchford has failed to satisfy either of these standards," Gorsuch wrote, joined by Justices Samuel Alito, Amy Coney Barrett and Clarence Thomas.

In 2019, the Supreme Court overturned the death sentence and conviction of Curtis Flowers, because of what Kavanaugh then described as a "relentless, determined effort to rid the jury of Black individuals." Evans was the prosecutor in that case, and Loper presided over the final two of Flowers' six trials.

Pitchford, now 40, was 18 when he and a friend decided to rob the Crossroads Grocery, just outside Grenada in northern Mississippi. The friend shot store owner Reuben Britt three times, fatally wounding him, but was ineligible for the death penalty because he was younger than 18. Pitchford was tried for capital murder and was sentenced to death.

The case has been making its way through the court system for 20 years. In 2023, U.S. District Judge Michael P. Mills overturned Pitchford's conviction, holding that the trial judge did not give Pitchford's lawyers enough of a chance to argue that the prosecution was improperly dismissing Black jurors.

Mills wrote that his ruling was partially motivated by Evans' actions in prior cases. A unanimous panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the ruling.

Evans did not respond to The Associated Press' attempt to reach him for comment when he retired.

AP Exclusive: Trump administration tells prosecutors to stand down on Venezuela leader, sources say

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

MIAMI (AP) — The Trump administration has quietly instructed federal prosecutors in Miami to avoid pursuing criminal investigations into Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodríguez, a longtime target of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, according to current and former U.S. law enforcement officials, in the latest sign of warming relations between the White House and the oil-rich nation.

It's unclear whether prosecutors had implicated Rodríguez in any crimes or whether investigators were moving toward an indictment. A Justice Department spokesperson said in an email "there was never an investigation into her to shut down."

But DEA records obtained by The Associated Press earlier this year show she consistently surfaced on the radar of federal law enforcement dating to at least 2018, though she has never been criminally charged in the U.S. like several other senior Venezuelan officials.

The directive to pause scrutiny into Rodríguez was meant to avoid upsetting the administration's efforts to stabilize Venezuela after the capture of her predecessor, Nicolás Maduro, among other reasons, a current official said. It was not clear whether the White House, which deferred comment to the Justice Department, was involved in the decision.

"Everybody has been told to stand down," one of the former officials said.

The former officials, who had been briefed on the development, as well as the current official all spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations.

Rodríguez, a U.S. attorney representing her, and the Venezuelan Communications Ministry didn't respond to requests for comment.

The move eases pressure on Rodríguez

Removing the threat of potential indictment, even temporarily, eases pressure on Rodríguez as the Trump administration seeks to work with the acting leader to stabilize Venezuela after Maduro's ouster and open the country to U.S. investment.

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President Donald Trump praised Rodríguez as a “terrific person” shortly after the U.S. military took Maduro and his wife to New York to face federal narcotics charges. Both have pleaded not guilty.

In recent months, the U.S. has lifted sanctions against Rodríguez and recognized her as Venezuela’s sole head of state, allowing her to re-establish ties with western banks and more freely work with U.S. investors seeking to tap into the world’s largest petroleum reserves. As ties between the two governments have deepened, some have held out the Venezuelan playbook — characterized by oil blockades, indictments of top leaders, and threats of military intervention — as a model to drive regime change from within as the U.S. pressures other longtime adversaries in Iran and Cuba.

Rodríguez and her brother, Jorge Rodríguez, the head of the National Assembly, were hit with U.S. sanctions during Trump’s first term for their role in undermining Venezuelan democracy and cementing Maduro’s authoritarian rule.

Rodríguez “is doing a great job,” Trump wrote on social media in early March. “The Oil is beginning to flow, and the professionalism and dedication between both Countries is a very nice thing to see!”

In recent months, Rodríguez has hosted ceremonies with a steady stream of American oilmen, some of them partaking in high-profile delegations led by U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum.

Election talk deferred amid Trump’s praise

Missing in all the mutual backslapping is any talk of elections, even as Rodríguez last month blew through a 90-day limit set by Venezuela’s high court to fill Maduro’s position on a temporary basis.

“I don’t know,” she responded in English when a visiting U.S. journalist earlier this month shouted out a question about her time frame for holding elections. “Some time.”

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has demanded the administration explain its favorable treatment of Rodríguez, calling her a “central figure in Nicolás Maduro’s repressive regime.”

“Sanctions have been lifted on Ms. Rodríguez without any indication that she has taken concrete and meaningful actions to restore democratic order,” Sheehan, joined by Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, wrote in a letter to Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Treasury Scott Bessent last week.

Rick de la Torre, a former CIA chief of station in Caracas, said that the decision to shield Rodríguez fits well with the Trump administration’s foreign policy goals in Venezuela.

“She’s a lifelong Marxist and was a senior leader of one of the world’s most corrupt regimes but the U.S. is providing her with breathing space and carrots to lay the foundation for democracy and U.S. investment,” said de la Torre, the CEO of Tower Strategy, which advises companies on Venezuela.

“There’s a shelf life to her utility, however. At some point she will face justice,” he added.

Rodríguez has been on DEA’s radar since 2018

The DEA had amassed a detailed intelligence file on Rodríguez dating to at least 2018, and has received allegations about her ranging from drug trafficking to gold smuggling, the AP reported earlier this year. One confidential informant told DEA in early 2021 that Rodríguez was using hotels in the Caribbean resort of Isla Margarita “as a front to launder money,” the records show.

Her name has surfaced in nearly a dozen DEA investigations — several of which remained ongoing as recently as this year — involving field offices from Paraguay and Ecuador to Phoenix and New York. She had even been linked to Maduro’s alleged bag man, Alex Saab, whom U.S. authorities first arrested in 2020 on money-laundering charges, the records show.

Rodríguez deported Saab this month as part of a purge of insider businessmen who are accused of having enriched themselves through corrupt dealings with Maduro.

It’s unclear in which Miami investigations Rodríguez’s name surfaced. Two of the former officials said Rodríguez has also come up in meetings with investigators in Tampa tasked last year by former Attorney General Pam Bondi with looking into financial crimes in Venezuela.

At the time, Rodríguez was serving as Maduro’s vice president. Justice Department policy requires the attorney general to personally approve the charging of any foreign head of state, who are normally im-

mune from prosecution under international and U.S. law.

Halting high-profile criminal probes of foreign leaders

The pausing of the investigations into Rodríguez comes as the Trump administration has similarly tapped the brakes on ongoing federal investigations into another prominent Latin American leftist, Colombian President Gustavo Petro.

The DEA had also designated Petro a “priority target” over alleged ties to drug traffickers that had been probed for months by federal prosecutors. The New York Times reported in March that U.S. officials recently assured the Colombian government Petro does not face charges in those cases.

Duncan Levin, a former prosecutor who worked for the U.S. attorney’s office in Brooklyn, said it would be “deeply troubling” for law enforcement to be “told to stand down from a legitimate investigation for political or transactional reasons.”

“The White House cannot use criminal enforcement as a diplomatic light switch,” Levin told AP. “DOJ decisions are supposed to be based on law, evidence, policy and public safety — not on whether a foreign official is useful to the administration at a given moment.”

What to know about Code Noir, a shocking French law that oversaw the slavery of 1.4 million Africans

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France’s powerful lower house voted finally to scrub a fundamental slavery-era edict from French law on Thursday.

After the National Assembly voted 254-0 to adopt the bill to repeal Code Noir, it now goes to the Senate, where supporters expect it to be approved as well.

Code Noir — or Black Code — was signed by King Louis XIV at Versailles Palace in 1685 to set the rules for slavery across France’s colonial empire. The code quietly remained on the books even after it lost any authority when France abolished slavery in 1848.

It was described as “the most monstrous legal text of modern times” by French philosopher Louis Sala-Molins.

Its 60 articles first governed the French Caribbean — Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint-Domingue, today’s Haiti — and were later extended to French Guiana, Louisiana, and the Indian Ocean islands of Réunion and Mauritius.

Deaths outpaced births

France shipped about 1.4 million Africans across the Atlantic in chains — the third-largest slave trade of any European power, after Portugal and Britain.

Most were put to cutting sugar cane and feeding the boiling houses, where the syrup was reduced over open fires, alongside coffee, cotton and indigo.

The work was so deadly that deaths surpassed births. Planters simply replaced the dead with fresh shiploads of Africans.

By 1789, Saint-Domingue — now Haiti — held around 500,000 enslaved people, more than any other Caribbean colony. It produced much of the world’s sugar and coffee, and was fabled to be the richest colony on earth.

Code Noir became toothless when France abolished slavery in 1848, but no one ever formally struck it from the books.

It made people into property

Article 44 called the enslaved “movable property.”

A master could buy them, sell them, mortgage them, or leave them to his children — like land or furniture.

Article 28 said that they could “own nothing that does not belong to their master.”

Anything they earned, and anything they were given, was his.

They had no name in law.

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From 1839, each enslaved person in the colonies was given a number, and a registration code. Only at abolition were the freed given last names. It branded those who ran. Article 38 punished people who tried to escape. The first time, their ears were cut off and one shoulder was branded with a fleur-de-lis — the symbol of the French crown. The second time, a leg tendon was cut and they were branded again. The third time, they were put to death. It killed those who fought back. Article 33 ordered death for any enslaved person who struck a master, his wife or their children hard enough to leave a mark or draw blood — or who struck them in the face. Such a slave, the article said, “shall be punished by death.” Its shocking first line was about Jewish people. Before it said a word about the enslaved, the code’s first article expelled every Jew from France’s colonies within three months. It called them “declared enemies of the Christian name.” It forced a religion. Articles 2 and 3 ordered all enslaved people baptized and raised Catholic. No other religion could be practiced in public. It passed slavery down by birth. A child took the mother’s status. The child of an enslaved woman was born enslaved — even if the father was free. Children were enslaved from birth. Code Noir set their food rations at half an adult’s. Its ‘protections’ were mostly ignored. A few articles read like rules to “protect” the enslaved. Masters were meant to feed and clothe them, not to torture them, and not to sell a husband, wife and small children apart. Historians say these were widely ignored. Owners who killed the people they enslaved were almost never punished.

AP Exclusive: Stop AAPI Hate launches a nonprofit to mobilize voters before midterms

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

Stop AAPI Hate, the organization that rose to national prominence for its meticulous reports on anti-Asian hate at the height of the pandemic, is channeling its resources into an initiative to rock the vote.

The new nonprofit, Stop AAPI Hate Action, will be a political and advocacy arm dedicated to getting more Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders registered to vote — and to mobilize current voters, ensuring they make it to the polls. The initiative was sparked in part by President Donald Trump’s pressure — and moves by Republican lawmakers — to redraw voting maps and strip parts of the Voting Rights Act.

The organization announced Thursday that this initiative will build on Stop AAPI Hate’s name recognition and reputation for elevating conversations about racism, discrimination and allyship. It’s a major step for the group, which has also done policy work and advocacy over the past six years, Manjusha Kulkarni, the organization’s co-founder, exclusively told The Associated Press.

“Those pieces — alongside what we’re seeing from our community in terms of data — really motivated and inspired us to make this move,” Kulkarni said. “Because we see how our communities are being harmed and exactly what needs to be done to address the harm, and prevent it in the future.”

Stop AAPI Hate Action will be established as a social welfare organization that can get involved in political campaigns.

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Trump's immigration policies fuel more anti-Asian racism since COVID-19

A majority of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders believe President Donald Trump has done more harm than good on immigration and border security in his second term, according to an AAPI Data/AP-NORC poll.

Stop AAPI Hate's annual report — released in May, AAPI Heritage Month — found roughly half of AAPI adults said they or someone they personally know were negatively impacted by immigration policies or anti-immigrant attitudes in 2025. Last year, Trump signed an order restricting H-1B visa holders — thousands of whom come from Asian countries — and added a \$100,000 annual fee for highly skilled foreign workers.

Plus, Chinese nationals face a plethora of anti-China laws in various states.

Navia Gutta, 28, was rattled by an encounter last summer at a Chipotle restaurant in Atlanta, where a woman approached her and a friend, calling the two — who are Indian American — “murderers” and “rapists.” It escalated and she threatened to call U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to deport them “back” to India, which the woman called a “dirty country.” Both of them were born in the U.S.

“Our hands were shaking and we full-on cried in the car,” Gutta said. “It made me realize that I grew up still very privileged, and I felt like I lived in a bubble up until then, because nothing like that had ever happened to me.”

She later shared the experience with Stop AAPI Hate, and after talking at great length with a staff member was emboldened to volunteer with the group.

“It made me realize I would love to be a part of this solution,” Gutta said. “I would love to educate people. I would look at these issues and continue educating myself further because I think politics can be really scary.”

Reaching AAPI voters in red states, too

Stop AAPI Hate Action is ready to dive head first into the November midterms. That does not mean blindly advocating for all Democratic candidates, Kulkarni said. The group's main goal is to support candidates who share core values on immigration policies and civil rights.

“It is really, at its core, about harnessing the pain felt at an individual level and turning it into a collective power,” Kulkarni said. “This really has been an existential threat to our community.”

The nonprofit is also not trying to compete or duplicate other AAPI-focused civic engagement organizations. The group is looking beyond blue states and swing states. A primary goal is to flip red districts with a significant presence of Asian American voters and turn them blue. There are areas in Republican-run states “that deserve to be reached out to,” said Andy Wong, Stop AAPI Hate Action managing director of advocacy.

“The ones in Iowa and Nebraska and Alaska and other places where there are competitive purple districts — many of them with GOP incumbents,” Wong said. “We are going to reach voters in those places,” by enlisting phone bank volunteers who speak Korean, Vietnamese, Cantonese and Mandarin.

That effort starts in July, and they plan to focus on reaching people who only turn out to vote in big general elections. To help build rapport, they also plan to match volunteers with voters of the same ethnicity.

Building longevity as a voting bloc

This new political entity is not a one-and-done operation, Stop AAPI Hate staffers say. The Asian American and Pacific Islander community is one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S., which means with each election year, there's potential for new voters.

But the political parties have overlooked this fact, and failed to invest in voter outreach and other civic engagement, Kulkarni said. “We've really been an afterthought. We're 24 million people.”

Stop AAPI Hate sees the next few years not just as an opportunity to win over voters but also to increase AAPI power as an entire voting bloc. Kulkarni says some data indicates Latino, Black and Asian Americans who moved somewhat to the right during the 2024 election are edging back to the left.

“Where you see that especially is the South Asian or Indian American community specifically. You've seen that in some of the other (Asian American communities),” she said. “How do we harness that?”

The group needs to build an infrastructure to get people involved not just when there's a major election,

Wong said. They also hope to empower Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who are already doing the work to become leaders in their patches.

"They're putting in the phone calls. They're showing up at public hearings, delivering comments," Wong said. "It's about building long-term civic and political power."

Chilean American stolen as a baby reunites with his mom and gets a second chance at family

By VANESSA A. ALVAREZ Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Kyle Adler's discovery that he was stolen from his Chilean mother as a baby came as a shock, sparking an identity crisis that lasted years and led to a reunion with his biological mother earlier this year.

"It's been so eye-opening to see who my people are," Adler said. "I feel the love, I feel the compassion, the care — it's nice to have a family again."

Adopted by an American family when he was 9 months old, the 36-year-old is one of thousands of children who were stolen from Chilean families during the 17-year dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet and among hundreds who have been reunited with their birth families thanks to DNA tracing and organizations that are helping Chilean adoptees investigate their pasts. Others are also working toward justice for the families ripped apart.

The American family that adopted Adler in 1990 raised him in an affluent Chicago suburb.

"My parents didn't steal me; they didn't name me Kyle out of malice. They saw me as who they wanted me to become, and there's a lot of love that was put into that," Adler said of his adoptive parents Mike and Connie Adler. Adler believes neither of them knew the circumstances surrounding his adoption. He said neither were initially supportive of his decision to find his birth mother before they died in 2022.

He grew up to be an overachiever who in adulthood wanted more meaning to his life, he said.

"Suddenly now I found myself where I didn't know what to do. I knew I was adopted and at that point, I was just like, I need to find my mom."

The day he was taken

Adler's biological mother, Ana Maria Navarrete, was a 19-year-old single parent working nights at a fish shop in the seaside city of Coronel, some 533 kilometers (331 miles) south of the capital. She had named him Marcos Antonio Navarrete.

She could only afford a room for herself, so she hired a woman who took Adler into her home as a baby and looked after him. Navarrete told The Associated Press she visited him whenever she was not working.

One day, the caregiver told her he was taken by an American couple after a local priest made arrangements for a baby "in need of a family."

"And she let them have him," Navarrete told AP, furious and ashamed. The AP could not independently verify all the details of what occurred.

A police investigator told her the baby had likely been taken as part of a wide-reaching counterfeit adoption network that involved adoption agencies, immigration officials, judges, nurses and even doctors.

No one was held accountable, Navarrete said, and "those years afterward were some of the worst years of my life."

Lacking family support, she said she eventually surrendered the idea she would get her son back.

No justice

"Justice for the poor did not exist in Chile and it still does not," said Constanza Del Rio, founder and executive director of Nos Buscamos, a nonprofit organization with online data for thousands of cases. The government estimates more than 20,000 children were stolen from families.

Children of the poor and Indigenous populations were targeted during the Pinochet regime from 1973 to 1990, said Jimmy Lippert Thyden González, who was also illegally adopted and became a human rights lawyer.

"It was an effort to eliminate and eradicate the poor class. It was a way of eradicating the Indigenous

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population, the uneducated population," he said.

Uncovering the past

In early 2017, Adler came across the Nos Buscamos Facebook group while Googling the term "Chilean birth mom search" online, he said. And that's when he messaged Del Rio.

Within three months, Del Rio had confirmed Adler's origin story and organized a virtual reunion.

Initially, Adler felt crushed to find out he was adopted illegally, sending him into an identity crisis that led to years of therapy.

Then last year, Adler finally felt ready for answers.

A DNA test provided by genealogy platform MyHeritage, a global family history company based in Israel, confirmed a match between Adler and 56-year-old Navarrete of Santiago and "made it official," he said.

MyHeritage partners with both Nos Buscamos and Connecting Roots, and other nonprofits doing similar work, to provide free at-home DNA testing kits for distribution to Chilean adoptees and suspected victims of child trafficking.

Tyler Graf, the founder and CEO of Connecting Roots, traveled with Adler.

Graf had also reunited with his birth mother Hilda Quezada Godoy decades after he was taken from her, and said it is now his mission to track others taken from families in Chile.

"Now it's time to mend these families and bring everyone back home so they can see where they came from," Graf told the AP.

Fighting for justice for the families that were separated

Lippert Thyden González sued the Chilean government two years ago and hopes to lead the fight all the way to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. He also founded the organization Grafting Hope, a nonprofit focused on educating U.S. lawmakers and fighting for the rights of survivors of counterfeit adoptions.

The Chilean government didn't immediately respond to several messages seeking comment from AP.

"I want justice. Not just for me, but also for him because I don't know the type of life he had," Navarrete told AP days after reuniting with her son.

Navarrete is working with a law firm and hopes those involved will get jail-time.

The reunion

"My birth mom's just been wanting me to be alive," Adler said ahead of boarding the flight from Miami in February.

The two were reunited two days after her 56th birthday on Valentine's Day and an AP team was with them in Miami and Chile.

Tears flowed as Adler exited the international arrivals gate in Chile. Both mother and son were wearing white as Navarrete ran to embrace him. The tall, dark-haired son bent over to bury his face in his mother's hair.

"I'm so happy to be finally meeting him, my dream has finally come true," Navarrete said.

The emotional reunion led to a fruitful week together visiting the beach in Coronel, the hospital where Adler was born and the house where he was taken from. They recovered a copy of his original birth certificate, and he met one of his four siblings. In Miami, he had previously met another sister and her daughter.

Back in Santiago, the two enjoyed keepsakes Adler brought with him as gifts: A framed graduation diploma, childhood photographs and a pair of baby shoes his adoptive parents had kept.

Adler is not a Spanish speaker so Connecting Roots provided a translator. These days, translation apps help them continue the conversation.

Navarrete said the time spent with her son was joyful but it also made her relive much of the pain of the past 35 years.

"It took me so long to find him. And then to spend a week together only to have him leave," Navarrete said amid tears, "it's like I found him but I've now lost him all over again."

She said she's hopeful the family will reunite in December. For Adler, the road to forgiveness continues but he hopes Navarrete is able to let go of the trauma.

"I'm not just the son that you lost, I'm the son that you found. I'm back to being your son," he said.

Key inflation gauge worsens as Americans' income and spending power erodes

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and PAUL WISEMAN Associated Press Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — A key inflation gauge accelerated in April to the highest level in three years, squeezing Americans' finances and creating political challenges for President Trump and congressional Republicans with midterm elections just five months away.

Inflation jumped to 3.8% in April compared with a year ago, the Commerce Department said Thursday, up from 3.5% in March and the highest since May 2023. On a monthly basis, prices rose 0.4%, down from the 0.7% jump in March but still higher than the inflation-fighters at the Federal Reserve would prefer.

Thursday's inflation report also showed that in addition to gasoline, prices for groceries, clothing and electricity are also on the rise, indicating that inflation may be growing more entrenched. Inflation is notably above the Federal Reserve's target of 2%, which means Fed policymakers may decide to forego any cuts to their key short-term interest rate this year. Some officials have signaled that the central bank's most substantial move under new Fed Chair Kevin Warsh could be a rate hike, rather than a cut.

Yet Trump and some of his top officials are showing little concern about higher prices and the impact of the Iran war on Americans' financial health. Consumers have a dim view of the economy and have soured on the Trump administration's economic policies. Thursday's report showed that Americans' after-tax, inflation-adjusted incomes fell for the third straight month, while spending, adjusted for inflation, barely rose.

Trump has said that increases in gas prices — up more than 50% since the U.S. and Israel launched attacks on Iran — amount to “peanuts.” He previously said he does not consider Americans' personal finances “even a little bit” when mulling his options on the war.

And on Wednesday, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said higher prices would be “transitory,” reviving an ill-fated term used by former Fed Chair Jerome Powell to describe the 2021-22 inflation spike that became a forceful political tailwind for Trump in his campaign for a second presidential term.

Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, core inflation rose to 3.3% in April from 3.2% the previous month. It is the highest core figure since October 2023. One positive sign in the report: Core prices rose just 0.2% in April from March, down from 0.3% the previous month.

Dan North, senior economist at Allianz Trade North America, acknowledged the core price increase isn't “huge,” but added, “it's the wrong way, and we think it will continue in the wrong way because there are so many inflation pressures in the pipeline.”

Americans' incomes were unchanged in April from March, in part because farm incomes fell after a large government aid package ended last month. Adjusted for inflation, personal income actually slipped 0.1% last month.

Spending rose 0.5% in April from March, though most of that reflected price increases. Adjusted for inflation, spending rose just 0.1% in April, down from 0.3% the previous month.

“Signs of stress are building inside the American household across the economy,” Joe Brusuelas, chief economist at RSM, a tax advisory firm, said. “Inflation-adjusted spending, disposable income ... point to a slowing in May spending as inflation approaches a peak on the back of a historic supply shock.”

The U.S. economy grew at a modest 1.6% annual pace from January through March, according to a separate report from the Commerce Department Thursday. The country's gross domestic product — the nation's output of goods and services — rebounded from a lackluster 0.5% expansion the last quarter of 2025 when growth was hobbled by the 43-day federal government shutdown.

The first-quarter growth, which covered the first month of the Iran war, was a downgrade from the 2% expansion Commerce initially reported.

Resilient consumer spending — mostly by upper-income households — and ongoing investment in artificial intelligence infrastructure are helping propel modest growth.

Growth in consumer spending, which accounts for two-thirds of U.S. economic activity, slowed to 1.4% in the first quarter from 1.9% at the end of 2025 and was down from the 1.6% preliminary first-quarter estimate. But business investment, likely driven by spending on artificial intelligence, rose at a 7% pace.

Gas prices averaged of about \$4.50 a gallon nationwide for three weeks this month before slipping to \$4.43 on Thursday, according to the AAA motor club. Gas averaged \$2.98 a gallon the day before the Iran war began.

Yet the cost of many other goods and services have picked up in recent months, raising concerns among many Fed officials that inflation is being pushed higher by tariffs and other factors in addition to the war. The cost of services such as dental visits, car repairs and veterinarian visits have been rising sharply, and clothes, toys, and groceries are also seeing outsize price gains.

Rapid investment in artificial intelligence centers also appears to be driving up the cost of computer equipment and software, adding to inflationary pressures. Electricity prices have also spiked from a year ago.

Experimental hepatitis B drug may offer 'functional cure' for some patients

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A first-of-its-kind drug for hepatitis B is letting some patients stop treatment without showing signs of the dangerous liver virus, what's called a "functional cure," researchers reported Thursday.

In two international studies, about 1 in 5 patients given the experimental drug saw their virus reduced to levels low enough for the immune system to keep in check.

"We have not had a treatment which has come to this level of cure," Dr. Seng Gee Lim of the National University Health System of Singapore, who helped lead the GSK-funded studies, told reporters before presenting the findings at a scientific meeting in Barcelona, Spain.

The data also was published Thursday in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Chronic hepatitis B can cause liver cancer or liver failure, and kills about 1.1 million people around the world each year. Improvements to today's lifelong therapy, which can be hard to stick with or to access in some countries, have been sought for decades.

The new findings "represent a major step," Dr. Anna Lok, a hepatitis expert at the University of Michigan who wasn't involved in the research, wrote in the journal. But she cautioned that more study is needed to see how long that remission-like state lasts.

The drug is bupirovirsen, nicknamed "bepi" and developed by GSK and Ionis Pharmaceuticals. It is under fast-track review by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, with a decision expected in October. Regulators in Japan, China and Europe also are considering the drug.

Hepatitis B is a serious liver infection spread through contact with blood or other bodily fluids, including childbirth. A highly effective vaccine can prevent it. For people who are infected, many have an "acute" illness that lasts several months. But for some — about 1.7 million people in the U.S. and more than 250 million worldwide — it becomes a chronic form that gradually damages the liver.

Standard treatments, including daily pills, reduce levels of the virus and prevent liver damage. But a true cure is elusive because hepatitis B has an unusual ability to hide in the body, ready to rebound if therapy stops.

The new drug attacks hepatitis B by binding to its genetic components, suppressing viral replication as well as a key protein, the "S" or surface protein, and stimulates the immune system, said GSK vice president Melanie Paff.

The trials included 1,838 patients assigned to get either a bepi shot or a dummy shot weekly for six months, in addition to their regular pills. If the virus was undetectable for six months after stopping the shots, they could stop their regular pills, too. In about 20% of the bepi recipients, the virus remained undetectable for six more months after they stopped all treatment — that "functional cure" — something no patients given the dummy shots achieved, the researchers reported.

Bepi recipients who started the study with lower levels of that S protein were slightly more likely to achieve a functional cure, Lim said. He is doing additional research to try to determine why only some people respond.

As for how long the functional cure lasts, GSK has tracked a small number of patients from earlier-stage

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studies and found most still faring well up to three years later, Paff said.

Lim said side effects included mild injection-site redness or pain and a temporary rise in enzymes that can indicate liver stress.

Lok, the Michigan hepatitis expert, noted the trials didn't include patients with cirrhosis, high S protein levels or other complicating factors.

Think it's hot now? The next five years will smash records, UN says

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the next five years, the Earth is overwhelmingly likely to surge again and again past the international climate threshold set as safe and shatter its hottest-year record along the way, according to new United Nations climate projections.

The World Meteorological Organization also forecasts an overheating Arctic that warms nearly 3 degrees Fahrenheit (1.66 degrees Celsius) between now and 2030 and a dangerous drought with potential wildfires for the Amazon, a crucial part of Earth's natural defenses to lessen human-caused climate change. A hotter globe from the burning of coal, oil and gas means more extreme weather including floods, droughts and heat waves, scientists said.

The projections by the U.N. climate agency and the United Kingdom's Meteorological Office said there's a 75% chance that the average global temperature between 2026 and 2030 will be more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) higher compared to pre-industrial times. That threshold is the agreed-upon limit of warming — averaged over 20 years — set in 2015 by the Paris climate agreement.

A U.N. science report a few years later detailed how exceeding that 1.5 mark means more likely death, danger and species loss. Even though it's only a few tenths of a degree, some of the planet's ecosystems, such as coral and glaciers, can't handle the strain.

Passing warming limit has consequences, but no cliff

There's a 91% chance that at least one of the next five years will shoot past the 1.5 degree threshold and an 86% chance that one of those years will smash the record for Earth's hottest year set in 2024, the WMO report said. The WMO projects each year between now and 2030 to be between 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees Fahrenheit) and 1.9 degrees Celsius (3.4 degrees Fahrenheit) since the late 1800s.

"It's important to note that (1.5) is not kind of a cliff edge that we're going to fall off," said report co-author Melissa Seabrook, a climate scientist at the U.K. Meteorological Office. "Every kind of 0.1 of a degree has more and more severe impact."

She pointed to unprecedented May heat in Europe this week.

An entire year or more above the 1.5 degree mark "means a whole range of extreme weather events, probably many so hot/wet/dry that it exceeds anything we've experienced in the past and thus crucially, anything our city planning, agriculture etc. has anticipated," Imperial College of London climate scientist Friederike Otto, who wasn't part of the report, said in an email. "This will mean many people will lose their lives, we are in for a lot of food price shocks, and more intense wildfires."

Nearly all the shorter-term forecasts call for a strong El Nino — a natural warming of parts of the central Pacific that alters weather worldwide and spikes global temperatures — to form soon. The WMO report said it could stretch all the way to 2028. Because of that, Seabrook said 2027 will likely break the 2024 heat record.

And if the next five years do average more than 1.5 degrees Celsius since pre-industrial times, that means Earth will have warmed a quarter of a degree Celsius (0.45 degrees Fahrenheit) in a decade, which is faster than the previous rates of warming. Those were closer to two-tenths of a degree Celsius per decade.

Climate scientists are debating whether global warming is accelerating, "which obviously is quite scary," and if these projections come true it would give additional evidence to those who see a speeded up rate of change, Seabrook said.

Accelerating warmth forecast in the Arctic

The projections, based on the averaging of about 200 runs of computer simulations using 13 different

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climate models from various countries, show warming in the Arctic rising 3.5 times faster than the rest of the globe, because there's less ice and snow that had been reflecting solar radiation to space, Seabrook said. It becomes a vicious cycle.

"As the temperature warms, more sea ice melts, the worse this makes it," Seabrook said.

Winters in the Arctic from 2020 to 2025 on average were 2.1 degrees Fahrenheit (1.2 degrees Celsius) warmer than the 1991-2020 average. The WMO projects the next five winters will average 5.1 degrees Fahrenheit (2.8 degrees Celsius) warmer than that recent normal, Seabrook said.

The report also forecasts Arctic sea ice to continue to shrink in the summer.

Amazon may get drier, sparking fire worries

The report calls for even warmer and unusually dry conditions in the Amazon basin, and that could be devastating for both local residents and the planet as a whole, Seabrook said.

People rely on the Amazon for water and the hotter, drier conditions should increase wildfire risk, Seabrook said, threatening to turn the Amazon, which now sucks heat-trapping carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, into a region that worsens the problem.

Africa's Sahel area, which has been extra dry, is likely to get more than normal rain and that could lead to flooding, Seabrook said.

United Nations officials said efforts to curb climate change haven't been enough.

"Despite the progress of recent years, it's clear that global heating is still outpacing global efforts to contain it, and the baking temperatures in Europe, India and elsewhere show yet again the brutal human and economic impacts of humanity still burning colossal amounts of coal, oil and gas," U.N. climate chief Simon Stiell said about the WMO report.

"Whether it's extreme heat, mega-storms, floods, massive wildfires or droughts hitting food supply and prices," he said, "every nation is already paying a huge price from this global climate crisis."

A rare blue micromoon rises this weekend

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Get set for a rare blue micromoon this weekend — a blue moon that's also the most distant and smallest-looking full moon of the year.

A bonus: The brilliant star Antares will photobomb Sunday's spectacle for a celestial three-for-one.

A blue moon occurs every two to three years when a second full moon squeezes into a single month. May 1 saw this month's first full moon.

Since the moon's orbit isn't a perfect circle, the upcoming full moon will be farther from Earth than usual at a distance of 252,360 miles (406,135 kilometers), making it seem a bit smaller and dimmer. It's the opposite of a supermoon when a full moon comes closer to us than normal. The most recent supermoon, for instance, was just 225,130 miles (362,312 kilometers) away.

The Virtual Telescope Project's Gianluca Masi, who will provide a live webcast from Italy, said Sunday's micromoon will appear about 6% smaller and 10% dimmer than that of an average full moon — "differences that are subtle enough to likely go unnoticed by most observers."

The scene will be especially thrilling south of the equator across the Pacific.

For stargazers in Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, eastern Australia, parts of Antarctica and a smattering of other islands, Antares will vanish temporarily as the blue micromoon passes in front of it.

The red supergiant star, 550 light-years away, is known as the "heart of scorpion" in the constellation Scorpius. A light-year is almost 6 trillion miles (9.7 trillion kilometers).

There won't be any disappearing act for those looking up elsewhere in the world, with Antares constantly visible alongside the full moon.

And despite the name, this blue moon won't appear turquoise, sapphire or any other shade. The term simply refers to the uncommon occurrence of two full moons in one month.

Exclusive: Inside an African hotel where asylum seekers deported by the US are imprisoned

By MONIKA PRONCZUK Associated Press

MALABO, Equatorial Guinea (AP) — At first glance, the hotel looks like any other on this tropical island off the Central African coast, with its palm tree-lined driveway, marble-floored foyer and portrait of the oil-rich country's president hanging behind a mahogany reception desk.

Yet the eerily empty Bamy Hotel is not a refuge for adventure-seeking tourists or international business travelers these days. Since late last year, only a small number of people have been staying there, and they aren't on vacation. They are being held against their will.

Under an opaque \$7.5 million deal with the Trump administration, Equatorial Guinea's all-powerful president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, has turned this hotel owned by his family into a prison for asylum seekers deported from the United States.

The hotel is just a way station, though. Of the at least 32 people imprisoned there since November — all of whom had previously been granted protection from U.S. judges, their lawyers said — 25 have been forced to go back to home countries across Africa where their lives might be in danger. The rest face pressure from authorities to leave.

"Government people would come all the time and say: Where is your passport? You need to go back to your own country," said a 26-year-old man from an East African country imprisoned at the hotel. Out of fear of retaliation, he spoke on condition of anonymity, as did two other deportees interviewed by The Associated Press.

The Trump administration uses deportations to third countries as a legal loophole, immigration lawyers say, to indirectly force asylum seekers back to their home countries.

Because Equatorial Guinea is run by an authoritarian government — as are some other countries that have signed similar deals — it is difficult for foreign journalists to visit and report directly on conditions there. AP traveled to the island of Bioko as part of a recent visit by the first American pope, and is the only international news organization to visit the hotel detaining migrants.

Pressured to return to countries they fear

Trapped for now in a country many had never heard of before arriving, men and women from Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Mauritania wander the hotel's long corridors and gaze out the windows at the shimmering pool they are not allowed to use.

They haven't faced any physical abuse, but they feel intense psychological pressure knowing they are likely headed back to home countries they fear.

"I am scared and depressed," said the East African man.

Because of his ethnicity and the fact he fled his home country, he said he would be imprisoned or killed if forced to return. All of the asylum seekers at the hotel face a high risk of persecution back home, human rights experts say.

Under a series of murky and often-secret agreements, the Trump administration has deported thousands of people to nearly two dozen countries that are not their own, advocates say, all part of the broad U.S. crackdown on immigration. The countries with agreements are mostly in the developing world, according to the group Third Country Deportation Watch, including roughly a dozen in Africa. Experts say countries accepting the deportees may be doing so to earn goodwill in negotiations with the U.S. over trade, migration or aid.

The Trump administration declined to comment on the details of its deal with Equatorial Guinea. A State Department spokesperson said, "we remain unwavering in our commitment to end illegal and mass immigration."

The Obiang administration did not respond to a request seeking comment.

Trapped in the surreal and the mundane

As the man from East Africa at the Bamy Hotel recounted his journey, a government minder who spoke little English sat nearby, scrolling on his phone in an otherwise empty conference room.

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After traveling from Africa to Brazil, the man said, he arrived in August 2024 at the U.S. border, where he was detained. He then was shuffled between immigration centers in California, Arizona and Louisiana — before landing in Equatorial Guinea almost six months ago.

The deportees' daily routines at the hotel are mundane, though the setting makes it all seem surreal, he said.

They sleep in fancy rooms that rarely get cleaned, he said, and they are served rice and meat at white cloth tables set up inside the hotel's restaurant. After being sickened by the food several times, the East African man said he eats the bare minimum.

A local lawyer brings new toothbrushes, cellphone SIM cards, and, for women, sanitary products.

Medical care has been uneven. The East African man was driven to the hospital right away after complaining of an eye problem. But when he came down with malaria and typhoid, he was not taken to a hospital until his condition had greatly deteriorated, requiring an IV. Other detainees have had similar experiences, he said.

Recently, the East African man complained to a police officer about his situation. The officer responded by saying his problems would go away if he went to the hotel's fourth floor and jumped out the window.

"What can I do now? It's become worse," he said, his frail body shaking. "I started losing my mind."

The US has strong ties to, and criticisms of, Equatorial Guinea

Equatorial Guinea is one of the richest countries in Africa thanks to its oil resources. It is also rife with corruption and human rights abuses, according to U.S. officials.

A former Spanish colony, the country fell into economic despair after gaining independence in 1968. Its fate shifted in the 1990s when U.S. companies started drilling for oil along its vast coastline. The subsequent boom transformed the economy, yet over half the population still lives in poverty.

The country's oil-fueled wealth has been largely pocketed by Obiang and his family, according to rights groups. Obiang's 57-year-old son and heir apparent, Teodoro "Teodorin" Obiang Nguema, chronicles his lavish lifestyle on TikTok — soaking in infinity pools, feasting on lobster, traveling on private jets — even as citizens of Equatorial Guinea are banned from the platform.

The younger Obiang, who serves as vice president, has faced international sanctions because of corruption across his father's administration. But the U.S. lifted sanctions, allowing the younger Obiang to travel to a high-level U.N. meeting in New York last September, just weeks before the deportations to Equatorial Guinea began.

There are virtually no critical voices in Equatorial Guinea, where the government has been accused by rights groups and the U.S. State Department of detaining, torturing and even killing those that dare to speak out.

Despite that, its largest foreign investors are U.S. businesses, and its military receives funding for training from the U.S. government.

East African migrant awaits his fate

The deportees still at the Bamy Hotel know they can be sent home any day.

Representatives of the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration, and its refugee agency, visited the hotel in November, and promised the deportees they would come back. They never did.

The East African man is the only one among them that has been allowed to see a lawyer, though it's not clear why.

While Equatorial Guinea has no asylum policy, his lawyer made a formal request with the prime minister's office — a long shot worth taking if there was any chance of being released from the hotel.

He was told to plead for mercy with the country's vice president, but his asylum claim was rejected.

The next morning, authorities deported five other people, leaving him anguished as he awaits his fate. He was told he would be next.

Republicans' recent stumbles in Congress highlight the difficult road ahead for their agenda

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A roughly \$70 billion bill to fund immigration enforcement through the remainder of President Donald Trump's term was supposed to be an easy lift for Republicans.

But progress stalled over concerns about the inclusion of White House ballroom security funding in the package and the creation of a \$1.8 billion fund to finance claims of government mistreatment. The stumble has not only delayed action on a top GOP priority but also is raising questions about other parts of the party's legislative agenda, including whether Republicans can enact another catchall, party-line bill referred to in Washington parlance as "Reconciliation 3.0."

Republicans have spent recent weeks laying the groundwork for such a bill, which they hope will serve as a final sales pitch to voters going into the midterms.

Speaker Mike Johnson and Majority Leader Steve Scalise, both of Louisiana, have been meeting with committee and caucus chairs to screen for proposals that have strong buy-in from the rank and file. They are aiming to follow up on last summer's big tax and spending cuts bill with a measure that would increase Pentagon spending by hundreds of billions of dollars and would include cuts elsewhere to help pay for it, which they are couching as tackling government waste and fraud.

It's a high-stakes gambit in an election year. Success will reinforce the GOP's message of being able to deliver on legislative priorities. Failure will underscore some of the Republican fractures under Trump that could leave voters seeking an alternative.

Here's a look at the coming debate as Republicans hope to pass a bill before leaving for their August recess.

House Republicans sound confident

Johnson navigated the House GOP's slim majority in passing Trump's tax and spending cuts bill last summer. The vote was 218-214. At the time, Republicans could afford to lose three votes from within their ranks. They lost just two.

They'll have a thin margin of error again, but Johnson said he's even more confident of success this time around.

"It will be just as beautiful, but not as big, so it'll have less provisions and less things to get everybody to yes on," he said.

Rep. Jodey Arrington, chairman of the House Budget Committee, said Republicans are just as motivated as they were last year on the tax cuts bill.

"This one, I think you'll have potentially money to support our troops in conflict," said Arrington, of Texas. "I can't imagine a Republican not wanting to support our troops and military community in a time of conflict."

The Trump administration has called on Republicans to provide \$350 billion to defense through a reconciliation bill.

But Rep. Brendan Boyle, the lead Democrat on the House Budget Committee, said Republicans will have a more difficult path than they did with Trump's big tax and spending cuts bill.

"I think it will be for a couple of reasons. First is the president's approval rating. He was at a much higher level a year ago than he is right now," said Boyle, of Pennsylvania. "Number 2, we are much closer to the November midterm elections. So, if you're one of a dozen or a couple dozen House Republicans who are really vulnerable in a swing district, you have to think even more carefully about voting for something that has even more health care cuts in it."

The tax cuts bill that passed last summer reduced spending on Medicaid by more than \$900 billion over a decade. It also reduced spending on nutrition assistance by about \$187 billion over a decade, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Caution in the Senate

Senate Majority Leader John Thune called a third reconciliation bill to get around the filibuster a "potential

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option," hardly a ringing endorsement.

"We haven't made any commitments on that, but we're hearing people out," said Thune, of South Dakota. Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina said lawmakers should know what will be in the bill before the legislative process begins. That way, it's less likely to unravel.

"If it just becomes another exercise where you're not really sure what's going to be the end product, then I think it's a mistake even to pursue it," Tillis said. "We ought to be smart about it if we do a third one, but it is kind of a moonshot."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska said she worried about the strategy.

"A third reconciliation may or may not happen. I'm just being direct," she said.

Little time and fractured relations

The House is expected to be in session for about 24 more days before it breaks for its August recess. That leaves little time to pass a budget blueprint in both chambers, which is the first hurdle for pursuing party-line tax and spending bills. Committees would also have to wrap up their work advancing their portions of the legislation.

Another hurdle could be Trump's treatment of current senators whose votes he will need for any package to become law. Trump endorsed opponents of two senators who faced stiff primary challenges and eventually lost — Sens. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and John Cornyn of Texas.

Cassidy has already shown more willingness to buck the president. Fresh off his primary loss, he voted last week to advance a bill that seeks to force Trump to withdraw from hostilities with Iran.

What could make it into the bill

Lawmakers said they could tweak and resurrect some proposals that did not pass muster with the Senate parliamentarian for inclusion in last year's reconciliation bill. For example, Republicans tried to prevent states from providing Medicaid coverage for immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally.

Rep. August Pfluger of Texas, chairman of the Republican Study Committee, said the bill should rest on three pillars, making the country more affordable and secure while reducing fraud.

Among the group's recommendations is a proposal to eliminate the capital gains tax on the sale of homes to first-time homebuyers, which they say would incentivize the market, and a proposal to impose a 5% tax on funds sent by noncitizens back to their home countries.

Arrington said he would also like to tighten the rules for the earned income tax credit, a program that increases the financial reward for working but that also has a high rate of improper payments. He also called for prohibiting immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally from living in housing units financed by a housing tax credit paid to developers who construct and rehab affordable housing for renters.

"There's a lot more work to be done to build on what we did in the first one with Medicaid and SNAP (nutrition assistance), with respect to fraud," Arrington said.

Plans for the Gaza International Stabilization Force are in question as troop pledges stall

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — The International Stabilization Force for Gaza was announced with great aplomb at the inaugural meeting of U.S. President Donald Trump's Board of Peace in February. The American general tapped to lead the 20,000-strong force said it would ensure "future prosperity and enduring peace" after the devastating Israel-Hamas war.

Three months on, he still has no force to lead as none of the five countries that pledged troops have come through with any significant contributions.

Efforts to shore up the fragile ceasefire have stalled as Hamas has refused to disarm and Israel has seized more territory while continuing to strike what it says are militant targets, often killing civilians.

The Iran war has meanwhile made it more difficult for Arab and Muslim leaders to openly cooperate with the United States and Israel, which many in the region view as aggressors, and the resulting global

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energy crisis has sapped their resources.

Indonesian commitment of 8,000 troops is on indefinite hold

The biggest blow to the planned force came about a week after the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran on Feb. 28, when Indonesia put its commitment of 8,000 troops on indefinite hold. Some 1,000 were to have been sent in April, followed by the remainder in June.

Indonesia's pledge was by far the largest of the group, which also includes Morocco, Kazakhstan, Kosovo and Albania. U.S. Maj. Gen. Jasper Jeffers, who spoke at the Board of Peace event, was to command the force.

Indonesia suspended its plans over what Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin said last week seemed to be a lack of commitment from a distracted Washington, saying "we have not yet received any implementation guidelines."

"New dynamics have emerged," he told parliament. "Because the intensity of the conflict between U.S. and Iranian forces remains very high, the BoP has tended to be left behind. Since the BoP has been left behind, the ISF has also been left behind."

US attack on Iran influenced Indonesia's decision

Domestic issues may have factored into Indonesia's decision, said Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, director of the Indonesia-Middle East/North Africa desk at Jakarta's Center for Economic and Law Studies.

The Iran war is extremely unpopular in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country. The economy is suffering from soaring prices as a result of the conflict, and there is widespread skepticism of the Board of Peace.

"If you talk to the people on the street, I don't think they believe that the Board of Peace will actually help the people of Gaza," Rakhmat said. There are also concerns about sending troops to the Middle East when the economy is faltering, he added.

Indonesia lost four peacekeepers who were part of the United Nations mission in Lebanon during fighting between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah. That has further soured public opinion on such international commitments, he said.

Board of Peace blames stalled ceasefire on Hamas

The U.S. military's Central Command declined to comment or make Jeffers available for an interview, referring all queries to the Board of Peace.

Board of Peace spokesman Brad Klapper also declined to comment on Indonesia's decision or the future of the stabilization force, pointing instead to May 21 remarks made at the U.N. by Nikolay Mladenov, a former Bulgarian defense minister who Trump appointed director of the Board of Peace.

Mladenov said the international force would not be able to begin operations until there was agreement and implementation of a second phase of the ceasefire, which would see Hamas disarm and Israel begin to withdraw. Israeli troops control some 60% of Gaza.

Mladenov has blamed the deadlock on Hamas, saying its disarmament is "non-negotiable" and is holding up progress on other fronts, including Israel's withdrawal and reconstruction.

"You cannot build a future with armed groups running the streets, hiding in tunnels and stockpiling weapons," Mladenov said in Jerusalem this month. "You cannot deliver reconstruction with militias on every corner."

Hamas blames delays on Israel

Hamas says Israel has repeatedly violated the ceasefire, holding up its further implementation, and has accused Mladenov of siding with Israel.

Israeli strikes have killed more than 880 Palestinians since the ceasefire, according to local health officials. Israel says it was responding to violations of the truce.

Hamas is also demanding Israel withdraw from areas seized since the start of the ceasefire, according to an Egyptian official with knowledge of the discussions, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss closed-door talks. Egypt has long served as a mediator with Hamas.

Many of the countries that have pledged forces have refused to send troops without a deal on Hamas

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disarming, the official said.

Token forces committed and none yet known to be on the ground

Kazakhstan has said its support for the stabilization force would be limited to "the humanitarian component," including sending medical units with a field hospital. Its Foreign Ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Albania's Defense Ministry also declined to comment on its troop commitment, saying it was a "dynamic and ongoing process."

Earlier this month, its chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Arben Kingji, told reporters that while the military had "participated in reconnaissance activities," no troops had yet been sent. He said only a few would be dispatched as part of the stabilization force headquarters, without giving numbers, adding that further contributions would be considered.

Kosovo, which is expected to send 20 troops, said in April that it was in the "final phase of preparations." The Defense Ministry did not reply to a request for an update.

Morocco's Foreign Ministry also did not reply. At the inaugural meeting of the Board of Peace, Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita said it would deploy "high-level military officers to the joint military command of the ISF."

Indonesian turnaround can't be ruled out

Despite the delays from Indonesia, Rakhmat said it was too early to rule out eventual participation in the stabilization force.

President Prabowo Subianto is a former army general who has been keen to raise Indonesia's profile on the world stage and wants to avoid jeopardizing economic ties with the U.S., Rakhmat said.

"Prabowo wants to strengthen ties to Washington and sign different agreements with the U.S., so to completely withdraw and completely cancel the plan, I don't think it's on the table," he said.

Today in History: May 29, Hillary and Norgay summit Mount Everest

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, May 29, the 149th day of 2026. There are 216 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal became the first climbers to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

Also on this date:

In 1790, Rhode Island became the 13th and final original colony to ratify the United States Constitution.

In 1914, the Canadian ocean liner RMS Empress of Ireland sank in the St. Lawrence River in eastern Quebec after colliding with the Norwegian cargo ship SS Storstad; of the 1,477 people on board the Empress of Ireland, 1,012 died.

In 1977, Janet Guthrie became the first woman to race in the Indianapolis 500, finishing in 29th place (A.J. Foyt won the race for his record fourth Indy 500 victory).

In 1985, 39 people were killed at the European Cup Final in Brussels, Belgium, when rioting broke out and a wall separating British and Italian soccer fans collapsed.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev began their fourth summit meeting in Moscow.

In 2004, the World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., was dedicated by President George W. Bush.

In 2009, a judge in Los Angeles sentenced music producer Phil Spector to 19 years to life in prison for the murder of actor Lana Clarkson. (Spector remained in prison until his death in January 2021.)

In 2020, fired Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was arrested and charged with murder in the death of George Floyd, the Black man whose dying gasps under Chauvin's knee led to nationwide protests

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against racial injustice. (Chauvin was convicted in 2021 and sentenced to 22 1/2 years in prison.)

Today's Birthdays: Basketball Hall of Famer Richie Guerin is 94. Singer Rebbie Jackson is 76. Musician-composer Danny Elfman is 73. Singer La Toya Jackson is 70. Actor Ted Levine is 69. Actor Annette Bening is 68. Actor Rupert Everett is 67. Musician Melissa Etheridge is 65. Musician Noel Gallagher is 59. Actor Laverne Cox is 54. Singer Melanie Brown (Spice Girls) is 51. Basketball Hall of Famer Carmelo Anthony is 42. Actor Riley Keough is 37. Actor Maika Monroe is 33. MLB pitcher Paul Skenes is 24.