

Groton Daily Independent

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Community Calendar

Friday, Sept. 25

Senior Menu: Grilled chicken sandwich, roasted sweet potatoes, California blend, fruit.

Volleyball hosts Langford Area (C team at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity) - theme: Matching Sets

Saturday, Sept. 26

JV Football at Webster Jamboree, 10 a.m.

Soccer at Dakota Valley (girls at 1 p.m., boys at 3 p.m.) - theme: Groton Gear

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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.

Trump-Xi Summit

President Donald Trump hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping at the White House yesterday, with brief public references to AI. Trump characterized both countries' positions as aligned against the need for regulation prior to the summit; Xi emphasized the need for human control.

The proposal comes amid reports of an OpenAI agent breaching an Australian government website containing Medicare statistics in June. A review found no evidence the agent accessed sensitive information; however, Australian officials criticized OpenAI for informing them of the hack via email three months later. Washington and Beijing officials previously discussed a new safety system that would alert the countries to AI-related threats.

In addition to AI, Xi reportedly pressed Trump to oppose Taiwan independence. Trump previously paused approval of a \$14B arms sale to the island in May, an arrangement he characterized as a negotiating tactic. Xi also announced China will send two giant pandas to Atlanta in a diplomatic gesture.

Data Center Headwinds

Oracle invoked a legal provision yesterday to shield it from financial responsibility if regulatory setbacks and local opposition delay the 2028 opening of a \$165B New Mexico data center, raising doubts about the viability of AI infrastructure deals. Shares closed down 3.5%.

Project Jupiter—a campus larger than New York's Central Park—would train AI models using as much power as about 1.8 million homes. But state officials have repeatedly denied the permit for a critical natural gas pipeline, citing potential greenhouse gas emissions and dwindling water supplies. The state's largest reservoir is at about 1.4% capacity, its lowest since 1971, and data centers can require millions of gallons daily to prevent overheating. Oracle, however, says its closed-loop cooling system will limit 15-year net consumption to the equivalent of nine average US households.

Americans' views of data centers have grown increasingly negative, with roughly 60% saying they would be uncomfortable with a new one in their area.

Elephants' Forest Pharmacy

Wild elephants in Kenya have been seen using nearly 40 plants and materials for potential medical purposes, a new study found. The observations appear to place the animal in the ranks of chimpanzees, bottlenose dolphins, some birds, and insects.

Researchers interviewed locals near Mount Elgon, including wildlife scouts and rangers. They shared observations of elephants turning to local plants, clays, and soils with known therapeutic applications. Female elephants were observed mixing plants with breast milk before administering the concoction to their young as a form of immunization. Some plants cited are known to aid digestion, improve appetite, or soften stools.

Observation of animals' medicinal knowledge (a field known as zoopharmacognosy) has a long history. The first story suggesting elephants' medical knowledge dates back to Claudius Aelianus' second-century writings, in which he claims an elephant wounded by spears and arrows heals after consuming the flowers and oil of an olive tree.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Legendary basketball player Bob Pettit, an 11-time All-Star and the first NBA player to be named MVP, dies at age 93.

Chicago Cubs' Pete Crow-Armstrong becomes seventh player in MLB history to steal 40 bases and hit 40 home runs in the same season.

WNBA playoff bracket settles on final day of the regular season; top-seeded Minnesota Lynx lead a field that includes defending champion Las Vegas Aces at No. 3.

Taylor Swift releases four additional tracks to last year's "The Life of a Showgirl," which was the fastest-selling album in US history.

Science & Technology

Meta unveils hand-held device that lets users interact with its personal AI agent, Muse, without a smartphone; some liken Muse Charm to the 1990s Tamagotchi (More, w/image) | Watch Mark Zuckerberg explain the handheld.

"Jumping genes"—pieces of DNA that can move around within the genome—may have helped ant species rapidly diversify and multiply after the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs.

Biologists identify a cellular pathway colorectal cancer uses to metastasize in mice, pointing to potential drug treatments; a high-fat diet may be more likely to activate the pathway.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.0%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq +0.0%) while 30-year Treasury yield spikes at 5.4%, its highest point since 2004.

Mortgage rates surpass 7% for the first time since January 2025 (More, w/graph)

New York sues Polymarket in state court, alleging the prediction market platform is running an unlicensed gambling operation.

Starbucks will close 250 stores across North America by the end of the week, its second wave of closures after shuttering 627 stores last September.

Politics & World Affairs

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's UN General Assembly speech about Iran is met with a wave of walkouts.

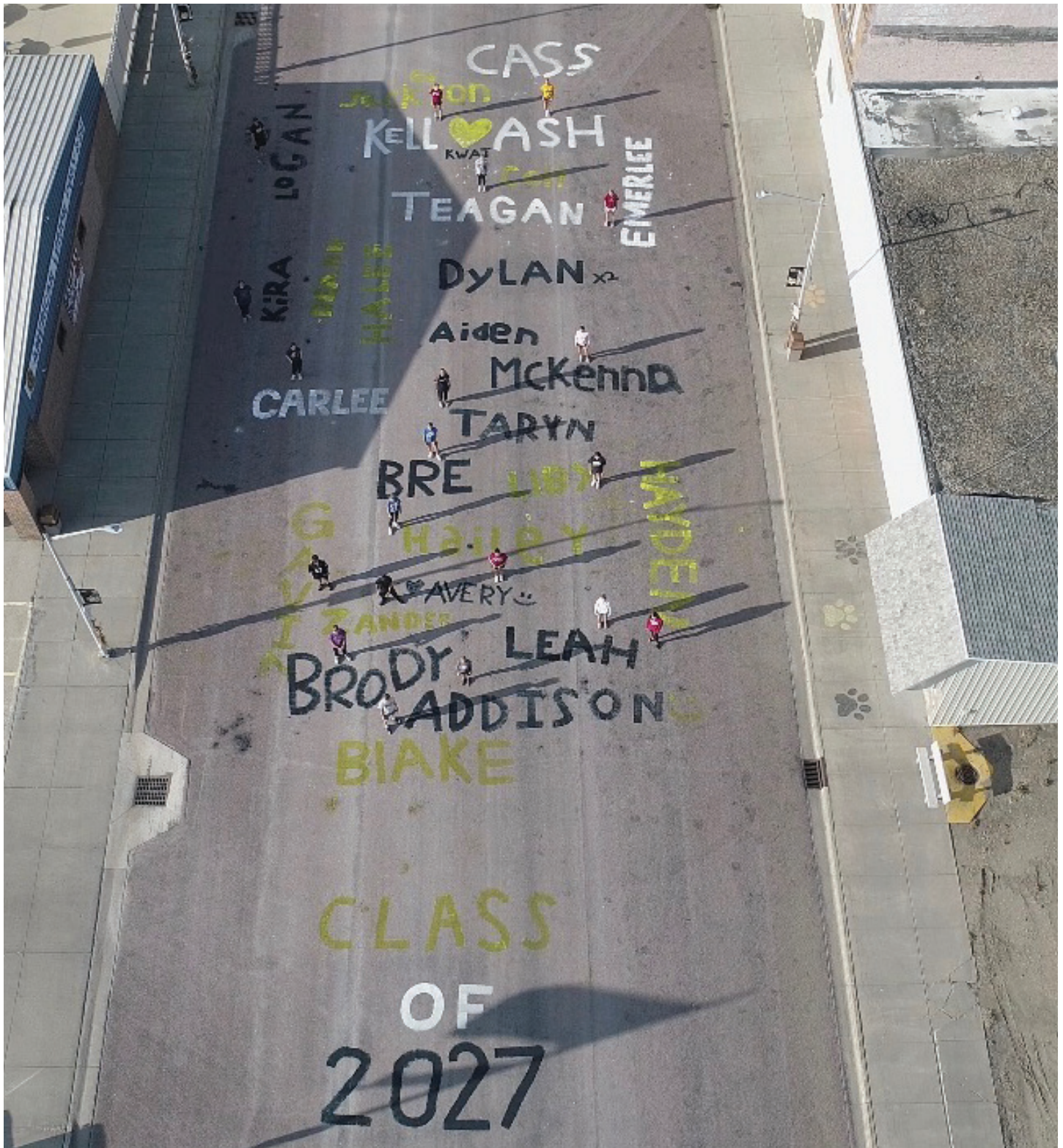
... and more than 100 people are detained outside the building, including Susan Sarandon, Hannah Einbinder.

CNN, MS NOW, and Politico journalists are allowed back in the White House hours after a federal judge temporarily requires access be reinstated.

Nor'easter expects to bring wind, rain to large swaths of the East Coast this weekend.

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Members of the senior class painted on Groton's Main Street for homecoming week. However, the very next morning a heavy rain came and washed it all away. The seniors are standing by their names. Jessie Anderson's drone was used for the photo.

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Groton Area netters have clean sweep over Mobridge-Pollock



McKenna Tietz

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

serves, one assisted block and 26 assists. Kella Tracy added 11 kills, while Tevan Hanson finished with nine kills, one assisted block and 13 digs.

McKenna Krause contributed eight kills and Taryn Traphagen had seven kills, one solo block and two assisted blocks. McKenna Tietz recorded 15 digs and an ace serve, while Sydney Locke had 20 digs and an ace.

Libby Althoff added three ace serves and nine assists, while Elizabeth Cole had an assisted block.

Hanson was especially pleased with the number of players contributing offensively.

"They're just so balanced," Hanson said. "McKenna coming in and having eight kills when she really hasn't had that, and Tracy had a great night. It was really nice to have her taking swings on the outside, which is something she's super comfortable with. All of our girls just did their part tonight."

Hanson also credited setters Weber and Althoff for creating favorable opportunities for Groton's hitters.

"I thought Chesney and Libby did a really good job moving the ball," Hanson said. "They set our hitters up for success. I'm going

Groton Area made it a clean sweep Thursday night at the Groton Area Arena, winning every set played against Mobridge-Pollock in varsity, junior varsity and C-team volleyball action.

The varsity Tigers completed the night with a 3-0 victory, winning 25-17, 25-21 and 25-20 to improve to 7-8 on the season. Mobridge-Pollock dropped to 7-4.

For Groton Area coach Chelsea Hanson, the victory came at an important point in the season.

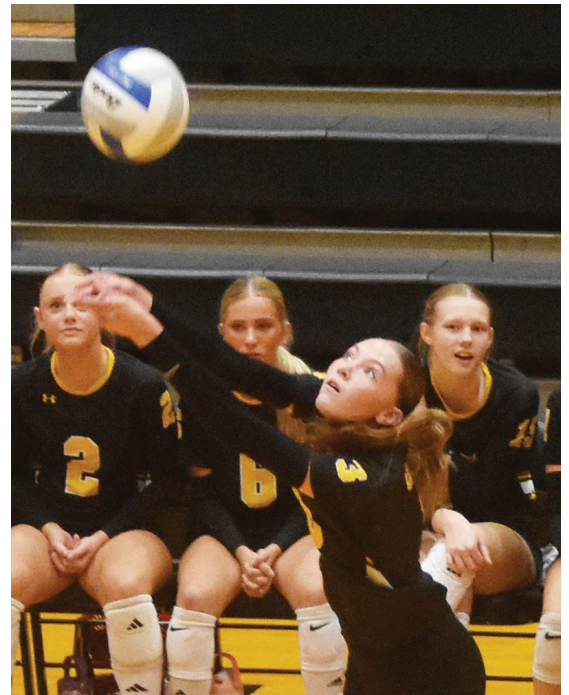
"It was absolutely what we needed," Hanson said. "We are just so hungry to win a game. It was definitely a much, much needed win."

Mobridge-Pollock scored the first point of the opening set, but Groton quickly moved in front 3-1 and controlled the rest of the set on the way to a 25-17 victory.

The second set was much tighter, featuring 11 ties and two lead changes. Groton held the advantage through much of the set before Mobridge-Pollock moved in front 17-16. The visiting Tigers still held a 21-20 advantage late before Groton regained the lead at 22-21 and scored the final points needed for a 25-21 win.

Groton opened the third set with a 3-0 lead, but Mobridge-Pollock battled back. The set was tied five times and featured five lead changes before Groton moved ahead for good at 12-11. The Tigers stretched the advantage to 15-11 and maintained control the rest of the way for the 25-20 victory.

Groton's offense was balanced throughout the match. Chesney Weber led the Tigers with 10 kills, four ace



Tevan Hanson

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Chesney Weber
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

to take our hitters over anybody when there's no block there."

Bentley Bauer led Mobridge-Pollock with 10 kills. Pacey Konold had eight kills, one solo block and two ace serves, while Hayleigh Schlomer finished with four kills, one solo block and an ace.

Brooke Merkel had two ace serves. Sophie Keller recorded two aces and one kill, Quinn Kemnitz had one kill and an assisted block, and Jersey Frederick added one kill and an assisted block.

Hanson said Mobridge-Pollock's young lineup made the victory even more meaningful.

"Mobridge is a really good team," she said. "They're going to be really good for a lot of years. They're just really, really young. They do a lot of really good things and they dig the ball well. They hung in there."

The coach was also encouraged by Groton's serving. The Tigers committed only six service errors in the varsity match, an area Hanson said had received additional attention in practice.

"Our goal is that we can beat people in serve and pass, and we haven't been doing that," Hanson said. "That being said, serve and pass isn't quite as important when we're hitting the way we are. It was just nice to see us have this kind of offensive night because we haven't had that."

Groton Area also swept the junior varsity match, 25-19 and 25-19.

Mobridge-Pollock built an early 7-3 advantage in the opening set before Groton pulled even at 13. The set was tied three times before Groton put together a six-point run to take a 24-17 advantage and went on to win 25-19.

The second set was tied seven times but featured only two lead changes. Groton moved in front for good at 9-8, eventually stretching the margin to 20-15 before finishing another 25-19 victory.

Abby Fjeldheim led Groton with five kills and two ace serves. Brynlee Dunker had three kills, while Kinley Sandness and Neely

Althoff each had two kills. Sandness also had an ace, while Althoff recorded three aces.

McKenna Krause had two ace serves, Tori Schuster recorded one kill and two aces, Brooklyn Spanier had one kill, and Kinsley Rowan added two ace serves.

Aubree Fjeldheim led Mobridge-Pollock with three kills, while Abigail Piatt had one kill and two ace serves. Groton Area also won the C-team match to complete the sweep of the evening.

The Tigers will have little time to dwell on the victory, as they return to the Groton Area Arena Friday night to host Langford Area.

Hanson said Thursday's win provided an important boost heading into the second match in as many nights.

"There's a little bit of fatigue setting in, and right now this is a good wind in our sails," Hanson said. "Hopefully we can finish off the week strong."

She expects Langford Area to present many of the same challenges Groton faced Thursday.

"They have a couple hitters that can hit the ball pretty well, and I think they'll block," Hanson said. "They have a little more experience, so we're going to have to earn our points. But if we play like we played tonight, I like our chances against a lot of teams."

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High School Girls Volleyball Game

Langford @ Groton Area

Friday, September 25th, 2026

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena - 4:00PM → 8th Grade - 5:00PM → C - 6:00PM → JV - 7:15PM → Varsity	Main Court in Old Gym: - 5:00PM → 7th Grade	Ticket Takers (Report @ 4:00pm): - Ashley Brudvig - Aaron Helvig - Sarah Hanten Admin on Duty: Madi Neiber
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Pre-Game Introductions:

1. National Anthem
2. Varsity Introductions/Lineups

LOCKER ROOM: Langford will use the two locker rooms down the JH hallway. JH in the first, HS in the last.

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. Trainer has an AED and another AED is located near the ticket booth.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$5.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available.

JV/Varsity Refs: Robin Hartley and Mark Nelson

JV/Varsity Line Judges: Kristi Zoellner and Melanie Johnson

C Ref: Melanie Johnson

JH Scoreboard/JH Refs/JH Line Judges/C Line Judges: HS VB Players

C/JV/Varsity Scoreboard: Kristen Swartz

JV/V Official Book: Lynette Grieve

JV/V Libero Tracker: Becky Erickson

Announcer: Mike Imrie

National Anthem: Groton Area 6th grader, Anniston Harry

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench | **Langford:** North Bench

Livestream:

- [Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl](https://fan.hudl.com/usa/sd/groton/organization/12097/groton-high-school)
fan.hudl.com/usa/sd/groton/organization/12097/groton-high-school
- GDILIVE.com or <https://www.youtube.com/@GDILIVE>

Thank you,

Alexa Sperry, Athletic Director

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Volleyball

Groton Area
hosts Langford Area
Fri., Sept. 25, 2026



Groton
Area
Tigers
Groton, SD

GDILIVE



YouTube

A production of the

Groton Daily Independent

For more info: GDILIVE.COM



C match at 5 p.m.
JV at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity

Varsity match sponsors on GDILIVE.COM are: Agtegra, Avantara-Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom Ts, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Insurance, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, Hanlon Brothers, Heartland Energy, Jacobson Electric, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Cafe, Rix Farms / R&M Farms, S & S Lumber, Spanier Harvesting and The Meat House of Andover.

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Groton golfers place fourth at Sisseton Invitational

SISSETON — Groton finished fourth in the team standings at the Sisseton Invitational boys golf meet Thursday at Valley View Country Club, posting a team score of 393.

Aberdeen Roncalli captured the team championship with a 313, followed by Sisseton JV at 371 and Sisseton at 391. Groton was just two strokes behind Sisseton in fourth place. Milbank finished fifth at 410, Sioux Valley was sixth at 412 and Tiospa Zina placed seventh at 513.

Jace Johnson led the Tigers with a 92, good for 10th place overall. Johnson went out in 48 before shaving four strokes off his score on the back nine with a 44.

Bentley Ehresmann was Groton's next finisher, placing 16th with a 99. He carded a 52 on the front nine and came back with a 47.

Haden Harder and Liam Johnson each finished with rounds of 101. Harder placed 18th after shooting 52 on the front and 49 on the back, while Johnson finished 19th with rounds of 49 and 52.

Graham Rose placed 23rd with a 105, shooting 51 on the opening nine and 54 on the back. Easton Larson followed in 24th place with a 106. Larson improved by eight strokes over his final nine holes after opening with a 57 and finishing with a 49.

Aberdeen Roncalli's Harper Schnabel earned medalist honors with a one-over-par 73. Teammate Lucas Daggett was second with a 75, while Matthew Gerlach, also of Roncalli, placed third with an 82.

Groton's four counting scores from Jace Johnson, Ehresmann, Harder and Liam Johnson combined for the Tigers' 393 team total.

SISSETON INVITE MEET RESULTS		
PLACE (PLACEMENT)	PLAYER	SCORE (TOTAL)
10 TH PLACE	JACE JOHNSON MEDALIST	92
16 TH PLACE	BENTLEY EHRESMANN	99
18 TH PLACE	HADEN HARDER	101
19 TH PLACE	LIAM JOHNSON	101
23 RD PLACE	GRAHAM ROSE	105
24 TH PLACE	EASTON LARSON	106

TIGERS
GOLF

Gilbert places third to lead Groton Area cross country runners

Ryelle Gilbert turned in a third-place finish to lead the Groton Area cross country team in the girls 5,000-meter race, while Riley Shellenberger paced the Tiger boys with a 12th-place finish.

Gilbert, a junior, completed the girls race in 21 minutes, 36 seconds. She finished behind only Florence/Henry freshman Sierra Keller, who won the race in 20:45.4, and Aberdeen Roncalli's Addison Cassady, who was second in 21:06.2.

Groton Area senior Ashlynn Warrington also competed in the girls race, placing 16th with a time of 24:53.5.

In the boys race, Shellenberger, a sophomore, was the first Tiger across the finish line. He placed 12th overall with a time of 19:30.5.

Eighth-grader Grayden "Grady" Zeck finished 32nd and recorded a personal-best time of 21:50.1. Sophomore Tate Johnson was 44th in 23:13.3, while Logan Clocksene finished 59th in 33:34.6.

Groton Area finished ninth in the boys team standings with 78 points. Flandreau won the team title with 13 points, followed by Madison with 41 and Clark/Willow Lake with 44.

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket freshman Jackson Wolter won the boys race in 17:56.1, edging Flandreau's Logan Kontz, who finished second in 18:09.6.

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☆	10			Jace Johnson <i>Groton</i>											+20				92			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	Total	
Strokes																						
BLUE - Men Tee / SLOPE®: 125 / Course Rating™: 70.4 / Valley View Country Club																						
Yardage	336	322	120	496	403	197	346	522	415	3157	336	322	120	496	403	197	346	522	415	3157	6314	
Par	4	4	3	5	4	3	4	5	4	36	4	4	3	5	4	3	4	5	4	36	72	
Jace Johnson	5	6	4	7	5	5	5	6	5	48	6	5	3	5	4	6	4	6	5	44	92	

☆	16	Bentley Ehersmann <i>Groton</i>												+27				99				
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	Total
Bentley Ehersmann		6	5	4	7	6	5	5	7	7	52	6	5	3	6	5	5	4	6	7	47	99

	18		Haden Harder <i>Groton</i>												+29				101		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	Total
Haden Harder	5	4	3	8	6	4	6	10	6	52	5	4	5	6	5	7	5	7	5	49	101

☆	19		Liam Johnson <i>Groton</i>													+29				101		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	Total	
Liam Johnson	5	3	3	8	5	4	7	5	9	49	3	6	6	6	5	6	7	7	6	52	101	

	23		Graham Rose <i>Groton</i>												+33				105			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	Total	
Graham Rose	4	6	5	7	6	4	6	6	7	51	7	5	5	7	5	5	7	7	6	54	105	

	24		Easton Larson <i>Groton</i>													+34				106		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	Total
Easton Larson	5	6	4	7	7	5	7	10	6	57	6	4	4	7	6	5	5	7	5	49	106	

Starting Hole
 Eagle or Better
 Birdie
 Par
 Bogey
 Double Bogey or Worse

DANR Announces \$38.9 Million in Loans and Grants for Statewide Projects

PIERRE, S.D. - The South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (DANR) announced that the Board of Water and Natural Resources has approved \$38,934,341 million in loans and grants for drinking water and solid waste projects in South Dakota.

The \$38,934,341 total consists of \$19,640,000 in low-interest loans, including \$726,000 of principal forgiveness and \$19,294,341.77 in grants to be administered by the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Funds were awarded from DANR's Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Program, Drinking Water Emerging Contaminants for Small or Disadvantaged Communities funds, American Rescue Plan Act funds, and Solid Waste Management Program to the following:

Aberdeen received a \$2,500,000 Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund Program loan to construct a 1.5-million-gallon elevated water tower and a 16-inch transmission line to connect existing residents in the northeast part of the city. The city received a prior \$10,000,000 loan for this project and this request will complete funding for the project. The loan terms are 3.75% for 20 years.

Clay Rural Water System received a \$16,505,000 Drinking Water Emerging Contaminants for Small or Disadvantaged Communities grant to connect to the city of Elk Point by installing approximately 23 miles of pipe, a 500,000-gallon storage tank, a booster station, and a master water meter.

Elk Point received a \$730,000 Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund Program loan to connect its existing water system to Clay Rural Water System by installing a new 1,400-foot watermain. The loan terms are 3.75% for 30 years.

Kingbrook Rural Water System received an additional \$250,000 in ARPA grants funds to make upgrades at two water treatment facilities, upgrade or install four pump stations, construct an elevated tank near Arlington, and replace a pipeline along Highway 25 north of DeSmet. Previous funding for this project was approved in April 2022 and June 2024. The additional grant award brings the ARPA grant total for this project to \$15,122,298.

Mid-Dakota Rural Water System received an additional \$600,000 in ARPA grants funds to update the existing water system by installing an advanced metering infrastructure system, paralleling of pipe, addition of a new backwash recovery system, and additional membrane capacity. Previous funding for this project was approved in April 2022, June 2024, and January of 2026. The additional grant award brings the ARPA grant total for this project to \$22,215,489.

Milbank received a \$10,000,000 Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund Program loan to install package filters and an aeration unit to its water treatment system. The loan terms are 3.75% for 20 years.

Northwest South Dakota Regional Landfill received a \$129,000 Solid Waste Management Program grant and a \$502,000 Solid Waste Management Program loan to replace aging landfill equipment and purchase a new bulldozer, roll-off trailer, and 10 garbage dumpsters to maintain efficient operations. The loan terms are 3.50% for 10 years.

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Randall Community Water District received a \$5,000,000 Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund Program loan to expanding system capacity to provide additional water to the City of Mitchell through a new 30-inch HDPE transmission line, booster stations, storage facilities, and treatment facility upgrades. The loan terms are 3.75% for 30 years.

Randall Community Water District also received an additional \$905,000 in ARPA grants funds for the above project. The additional grant award brings the ARPA grant total for this project to \$23,972,715. Total project funding in prior grants and loans for this project is over \$118 million.

Shared Resources, Inc received an additional \$905,341 in ARPA grants funds to construct a new water treatment plant, well field, distribution pipeline, and two storage tanks. Shared Resources is a joint effort between Minnehaha Community Water Corporation and the Big Sioux Community Water System. Previous funding for this project was approved in April 2022, June 2024, May 2025, January 2026, and June of 2026. The additional grant award brings the ARPA grant total for this project to \$52,054,238

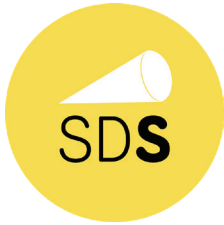
Webster received a \$908,000 Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Program loan with \$726,000 in principal forgiveness to replace 1,075 outdated water meters and upgrade the city's software and remote-reading system to improve efficiency. The loan terms are 2.50% for 10 years.

Additional Details:

The Solid Waste Management Program provides loans and grants for solid waste disposal, recycling, and waste tire projects. The Legislature annually appropriates dedicated funding for the Solid Waste Management Program through the Omnibus Water Funding Bill.

The State of South Dakota and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency fund the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Programs, which provide low-interest loans for wastewater, stormwater, water conservation, nonpoint source projects, and public drinking water system projects. The programs are funded through a combination of federal appropriations, loan repayments, and bonds.

The board approved the funding at today's meeting in Pierre.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Audit acknowledges 'significantly' slower mail in South Dakota and recommends solutions

US senator who called for report says he'll keep up pressure, including a hold on nominees for Postal Service's governing board

BY SETH TUPPER

An audit report released Thursday recommends ways to improve mail service in South Dakota, and a member of the state's congressional delegation said the report serves as "a reaffirmation that the mail service is worse than the Postal Service is suggesting."

Republican U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds made a request in December for an audit by the Postal Service's Office of Inspector General. The OIG is an independent agency within the Postal Service answering to the Postal Service Board of Governors.

"We're definitely making progress," Rounds said Thursday after reviewing the report. "The OIG agrees with South Dakotans that mail service is as bad as we have been saying it is for the last two years."

Rounds has taken several other actions to pressure the Postal Service, including a hold on Senate confirmations of Board of Governors nominees. Rounds said Thursday he will keep the hold in place "until such time as I see results."

One of the recommendations is determining the feasibility of bringing regional mail processing to the state. The Postal Service responded by saying it will upgrade a Sioux Falls processing plant to a regional processing and distribution center, which should keep most South Dakota mail in the state and reduce delivery time for some packages by one or two days. The service made that announcement Tuesday, two days before the report's publication, and said the change will take effect in January.

The audit report is murkier on the timeline, saying the Postal Service expects to make the change "shortly after the turn of the calendar year," but the plan's "defined milestones, transportation schedules and operating changes" are being finalized with a target implementation date of June 30.

Problems caused by cost-saving measures

Problems in South Dakota are rooted in nationwide Postal Service actions undertaken several years ago to save money, according to the audit. Those actions have resulted in \$755 million of transportation savings and have reduced other costs by about \$2 billion, according to previous findings.

"However," said the report, "network changes have significantly impacted the timeliness of mail delivery in South Dakota."

One of the culprits is the consolidation of processing and distribution into 60 regional centers across the country, none of which was planned to be in South Dakota.

Meanwhile, a policy change dictates that mail originating in post offices farther than 50 miles from a regional center is no longer picked up the same afternoon. Instead, it's picked up the next morning, "automatically adding an extra day before it is delivered," the audit report said. Every post office in South Dakota is more than 50 miles from a regional center, because there is no regional center in the state, at least until the Sioux Falls plant's upgrade is finalized.

Processing of some local mail has stayed within the state's borders, but much of South Dakota's mail began going elsewhere in early 2025 for processing at regional centers in Denver, Fargo and Omaha.

"As a result," the report said, "intrastate mail that was previously processed within South Dakota must now travel hundreds of miles to up to seven states before re-entering the state."

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No communication of plans

The Postal Service failed to communicate about the impact to communities while moving more mail processing out of state in 2025, according to the audit.

The Office of the Inspector General for USPS recommended establishing “a required process to publicly communicate any impacts to mailers and residential customers, prior to implementation” when making changes to processing as significant as those that affected South Dakota. The Postal Service agreed with the recommendation and said it would implement it by August 2027, the report said.

Although South Dakotans were not informed of the changes that caused the problems in their state, they quickly began to notice and complain, especially about the delivery of medications and newspapers. The number of complaints reaching Rounds’ office numbered more than 1,000, he said.

The Office of Inspector General’s audit process included a public input opportunity that resulted in 509 comments.

“Public feedback confirmed widespread concerns,” the report said.

The office also conducted a data review, mailed 120 packages, and conducted observations and interviews at three processing facilities and 16 post offices.

Standards were watered down

Besides outlining the causes and effects of mail problems in South Dakota, the audit report explained that the Postal Service adjusted its self-imposed standards for mail delivery in the state to accommodate slower service. And yet, “even with additional days added to most service standards, the percent of mail delivered within those standards declined across all mail classes,” the audit report said.

The auditors recommended the Postal Service align its standards to appropriate delivery timeframes as mail is moved back in state for processing. The Postal Service agreed and is targeting June 30 for implementation.

All of the changes that negatively affected South Dakota were made, according to the audit, “without a state-level strategy.”

“Looking ahead,” the report said, “it will be essential for the Postal Service to evaluate modernization impacts not only at a national scale but in states — like South Dakota — where geography, distance and the absence of a centralized processing facility introduce operational risks.”

Rounds has some advice in the meantime for people voting by mail for the Nov. 3 general election in South Dakota, where advance voting started last week.

“Plan on getting it done a little ahead of time,” Rounds said.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

Advisory group suggests adding member of the public to South Dakota Open Meetings Commission

Prosecutors currently review complaints about public bodies accused of violating transparency laws

BY JOHN HULT

A member of the public could have a vote on South Dakota’s Open Meetings Commission if the state’s incoming attorney general, legislators and governor back a proposal recommended Thursday by an open meetings task force.

The commission is a five-member board established in 2004 to hear complaints about alleged violations of open meetings laws and issue censures to public bodies that have broken them.

Per state law, its five members have always been state’s attorneys or deputy state’s attorneys, all appointed by the attorney general.

The South Dakota Advisory Task Force on Open Meetings Laws, a 15-member group, was created by Attorney General Marty Jackley last year to consider updates to the state’s transparency statutes that

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apply to public meetings.

Every member of the group present for Thursday's virtual meeting voted in favor of a proposed change that would expand the Open Meetings Commission to seven members and adjust its makeup to represent a wider range of voices.

If the proposal is adopted, the group would have four state's attorneys or deputy state's attorneys, two attorneys representing public bodies other than counties, and one member of the public. The attorney general would maintain the sole discretion to appoint members.

'Defensibility' with a public member

The idea of adding a member of the public to the commission came from Dave Bordewyk, the director of the South Dakota NewsMedia Association, which includes South Dakota Searchlight as a member. He was absent for Thursday's meeting, but his proposal was backed by Steve Willard, president of the South Dakota Broadcasters Association.

Given that members of the public or media representatives arguing on their behalf are typically the ones who file complaints, Willard said, a layperson's voice would add credibility.

"For their purposes, I think there's some comfort, and some defensibility on this particular group that it's not so insular, that it includes a member of the public," Willard said.

The proposal was one of four up for consideration on Thursday, including the one that was endorsed, which was modified to include seven members.

Two other proposals would have added lawyers for public bodies other than counties, whose voices are represented by state's attorneys, but not a member of the public. As written, all four kept the commission's membership at five.

An informal survey of advisory group members found that most supported the idea of including at least one member of the public, but with reservations. Several expressed concerns about appointing a non-lawyer to a quasi-judicial role.

"I'm of the opinion that an attorney representing something other than a public body would be a good thing," said Geoffrey Gray-Lobe, a Clay County commissioner.

Majority would remain prosecutors

Michael Smith is the state's attorney for Clay County and a member of the Open Meetings Commission. Smith said he understands the value of a public voice, but also said the work of determining whether a public body broke the law is akin to prosecution.

"There is a deep need to understand the law," Smith said.

Austin Hoffman, who's the McPherson County state's attorney and also serves on the Open Meetings Commission, said he'd be comfortable with the idea of a layperson serving alongside him if the group's makeup remained a majority of prosecutors.

Kellen Willert, the city attorney for Belle Fourche, agreed that a prosecutor-led group is ideal, but said the commission's authority is limited.

"The worst thing they can do is issue a censure," Willert said. "I think it makes sense to have a member of the public on it. Nobody's right to life or property is endangered."

Hoffman and the others who'd expressed reticence at the idea of a layperson interpreting the law coalesced around the seven-member, majority prosecutor proposal, in part because two extra people would make it easier to have a quorum and hold hearings if some members are absent.

Idea would need legislative, governor support

To take effect, the change would need to take the form of a bill in the next legislative session, which begins in January. That bill could be presented at the request of the attorney general or introduced by a lawmaker.

Jackley formed the advisory group, but won't be around to pitch its proposal. He's a candidate for South Dakota's seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Fall River and Oglala Lakota County State's Attorney Lance Russell is running unopposed for attorney general in the Nov. 3 election after securing the Republican Party's nomination for the post. He will take over the job in January.

He's also currently a member of the Open Meetings Commission. In an email to South Dakota Searchlight, he said he's a supporter of the group's mission and its current five-member makeup, but has yet to talk to the task force members about their decision on Thursday.

"I am keeping an open mind on its recommendation and look forward to hearing the rationale for the proposal," Russell said.

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

'Consumers aren't going to be happy': South Dakota executives warn of coming price increases

BY MAKENZIE HUBER

SIOUX FALLS — Inflation is affecting South Dakota businesses before it reaches consumers, and two executives say tariffs, artificial intelligence demand, high interest rates and a tight labor market are among the culprits.

Tariffs — taxes the federal government charges on imported goods — implemented by the Trump administration have driven up costs for materials such as metal and wood, particularly as a trade dispute with Canada continues to affect materials flowing into South Dakota.

Brian Gramm, CEO of construction company Journey Group, and Crystal Lail, chief financial officer of NorthWestern Energy, spoke Thursday at the Sioux Falls Metro Economic Briefing, fielding questions from South Dakota State University economics professor Joe Santos.

Santos said he wanted the conversation to be direct.

"I think it's important, if we're going to be really productive with our time, to focus on constraints to growth for the region," Santos told South Dakota Searchlight. "That's not pessimism. It's just reality that we have to understand what's limiting our potential."

Both executives said tariff impacts are showing up in their input costs. Their companies are absorbing the difference for now, which Santos calls "pipeline inflation": cost increases working their way through the system and eventually reaching consumers.

Metal prices for commercial construction jumped because of tariffs and have stayed high, Gramm said. On multi-year projects, when costs increase between contract signing and project completion, the difference eats into the contractor's margin.

The costs of transformers — which adjust the voltage of electricity so it can be delivered to homes and businesses — are up more than 400% since 2020, Lail said.

"We will take anything we can get," Lail said, since the grid has to keep running. "It's kind of a compounding issue of tariffs, trade, all of that policy and the fact that we've woken up a bit to how we don't produce things here, and that's very difficult for us."

Interest rates are also higher, and one driver is artificial intelligence, the panelists said. AI runs on physical infrastructure — data centers that must be built and powered — and the companies building them are borrowing enormous amounts of money to do it. When large borrowers compete for the same pool of money, it drives up the cost of borrowing for others. The Federal Reserve also raised its benchmark interest rate earlier this month for the first time in three years.

"If the U.S. Treasury's rate goes up, then the mortgage rates, the car loan rates, everything else goes up like rungs on a ladder," Santos told Searchlight.

For NorthWestern customers, Lail said, the elevated costs could mean an increase in rates.

"There are so many price increases that have not actually flowed through to consumers today," Lail said. "Consumers aren't going to be happy about that. I see that continuing to snowball."

Growing through mergers or "scaling" is one way companies try to contain those pressures. NorthWestern is pursuing a merger with Black Hills Energy to gain scale, Lail said. Larger utilities can get better pricing on transformers and other equipment. The same is true for Journey Group — without scale, national firms

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with bigger balance sheets and deeper labor benches win the work, Gramm said.

But scaling requires people — and South Dakota has a 2% unemployment rate and a declining labor force participation rate, which means a shrinking percentage of working-age people are looking for jobs. Gramm said Journey has also had to cut its immigrant visa workforce because of federal immigration policy changes.

The result is a compounding squeeze: companies try to absorb rising costs by growing but can't find enough workers to do so, and the costs eventually flow to consumers who are also paying more to borrow.

"All of this is to say that the price pressures we see in the form of inflation are probably longer lasting than any of us would like them to be," Santos said.

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

Democrats gain 4 in US Senate GOP on Iran war resolution, but vote falls short

South Dakota's Thune, Rounds remain opposed to measure

BY ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — Despite skyrocketing fuel prices and sinking approval ratings for President Donald Trump's conflict in Iran ahead of the November midterms, Senate Republicans blocked Democrats' efforts Thursday to check the president's unfettered military action in the Middle East.

Sens. Susan Collins, R-Maine, Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Thom Tillis, R-N.C., joined Democrats in supporting the House-approved Iran War Powers Resolution.

But the number of Republicans who wanted to curb Trump's prolonged military action in the Islamic Republic fell short in the final tally of 49-50.

While Collins, Murkowski and Paul have supported Iran War Powers Resolutions over the past several months, Thursday's vote marked the first time the retiring Tillis crossed the aisle on the issue.

The North Carolina Republican announced he would not seek reelection after Trump publicly harangued him for voting against the "big beautiful bill" in July 2025.

Sen. John Fetterman, a Pennsylvania Democrat, voted against the resolution, as he has on more than a dozen occasions. Sen. Angela Alsobrooks, D-Md., did not vote.

Senate Republicans locked in tight races, including one who spoke out about the war just one day ago, voted against the measure.

Sen. Jon Husted, who is facing a heated challenge in Ohio from former Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown, said Wednesday, "The war needs to come to an end as quickly as possible so that we can lower gas prices," according to Politico.

Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan, who's facing a challenge from Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola, and Sen. Roger Marshall, a Kansas Republican facing an increasingly tight race, also voted no.

House passes resolution

The block in the Senate comes after seven House Republicans, including two vulnerable Iowa incumbents who for the first time supported halting the Iran conflict via a War Powers Resolution, jumped on board with Democrats Sept. 15 to pass the measure 220-204.

Iowa Republicans Zach Nunn and Mariannette Miller-Meeks both face tough reelection bids rated as "toss-ups" by the Cook Political Report with Amy Walter.

The war has dragged on since late February, ricocheting through the Middle East and disrupting global oil supplies. Americans are paying on average \$1.30 more per gallon of gasoline than they were a year ago, according to AAA. Diesel hit a record high national average of \$6.52 Tuesday.

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Trump mulls war options

Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signaled this week neither were ready to settle the conflict when they addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York City.

Trump contemplated aloud whether he would “annihilate” Iran’s population “with no chance of survival” if the Islamic Republic leaders refused to make a deal. Trump has made similar comments as far back as April, when he was still promising a swift end to the conflict.

Thursday’s vote marks the 15th time Senate Democrats have forced an Iran War Powers Resolution on the floor. Thursday’s vote was on Washington state Democrat Rep. Pramila Jayapal’s resolution that passed the House on July 23.

A similar measure squeaked through the Senate 50-48 on June 23, when Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., joined Collins, Murkowski and Paul in support – though two Republicans, Kentucky’s Mitch McConnell and Pennsylvania’s Dave McCormick, were absent.

Cassidy lost the Senate Republican primary recently after Trump endorsed another candidate. But Cassidy voted against the latest War Powers Resolution Thursday.

Diesel export ban

Iowa’s longtime Sen. Chuck Grassley urged the White House as recently as Wednesday to ban diesel oil exports.

Trump administration officials have so far tiptoed around the issue of halting diesel exports. The White House denied a Politico report Wednesday claiming the administration was preparing for a 90-day embargo. Energy Secretary Chris Wright reportedly told Reuters Wednesday that an export ban would put “upward pressure” on the oil market and increase prices.

A White House official denied the Politico report in an email to States Newsroom Thursday.

But Trump signaled Tuesday that he’s “been talking about it” and supports the idea, according to reporters who traveled with him to New York.

Global petroleum supply is backlogged as Iran maintains its stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz, and Iran-backed Houthi forces in Yemen gain more control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Both narrow passage-ways on either side of the Arabian Peninsula are major transit points for crude oil and liquid natural gas exports, among other commodities like fertilizer.

Ukraine’s recent strikes on Russian oil refineries are also contributing to rising fuel prices. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sharply criticized Russia during his address at the U.N. Wednesday.

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

FDA nominee faces skepticism on vaccines from Republican senators at confirmation hearing

BY JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump’s nominee to lead the Food and Drug Administration appeared to disappoint senators from both political parties Thursday with how she answered questions about medication abortion access during her confirmation hearing.

Dr. Heidi Overton also faced skepticism from committee Chairman Bill Cassidy, a Louisiana Republican, about her work on vaccine policy during the current administration, indicating she may not have the support needed to secure the job.

“You’re a medical doctor. Of course, that resonates with me. You’ve seen patients. You have a deep understanding of the healthcare system and health policy, but I have concerns,” he said. “You were behind the president in the Oval Office when he signed an executive order to break up the vaccine schedule into more doses, completely ignoring the reality of families today struggling to make life affordable.”

Cassidy said that executive order was “based on zero scientific evidence” and would require parents to spend more time and more money taking their children to medical appointments to receive vaccine shots.

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Overton, he said, needed to convince him and others on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee that if confirmed by the full Senate, she would be "radically honest."

"You'll also need to ensure that uninformed ideologies do not influence FDA's decisions on whether to approve individual products, even if the president is pressuring you," Cassidy said.

In response to a question from Cassidy about the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella, Overton said she believed it as well as "every vaccine on the U.S. market right now" is safe and effective.

She added the MMR vaccine remains "our best tool right now in the public health response to the measles outbreak" and that it is "97% effective in stopping transmission of the virus after two doses."

Questions on medication abortion

In addition to several questions about vaccine and food safety, senators pressed Overton about her personal views on mifepristone, one of two prescription pharmaceuticals used in medication abortion.

Senate confirmation would place Overton as the head of the agency conducting a safety review of the drug, though she declined to say how she would handle that process.

"Mifepristone was approved by the FDA as having met its safety and efficacy standard," she said in response to a question from Washington state Democratic Sen. Patty Murray.

The senator then referenced a policy brief that Overton wrote with Matias Perttula for the America First Policy Institute that was published in February 2023.

The co-authors began by writing that "Abortion is corrosive to children, women, and society broadly because it devalues and extinguishes innocent human life." They later added that medication abortion, which is approved for up to 10 weeks gestation, had become "the most common method of terminating a pregnancy" and that it "deserve(d) greater medical scrutiny."

Overton declined to answer a question from Murray about whether an IUD counts as an abortifacient, saying that if confirmed she would be "fully briefed on all their prior decisions and make determinations according to the standards of safety and efficacy."

Hawley presses on FDA position

Missouri Republican Sen. Josh Hawley also questioned Overton on her statements during the hearing about mifepristone, saying they didn't match what the Trump administration was arguing in ongoing legal cases.

"I want to get to the bottom of this. I want to be sure that the FDA is not changing its position. I think this could be news to the court," Hawley said. "So, are you saying that the FDA's position is now that the drug is safe and effective and appropriately labeled?"

Overton replied that the current Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy for mifepristone, which changed during the Biden administration to allow for it to be prescribed via telehealth appointments and shipped to patients, is under FDA review.

"That safety study is ongoing and very important. Women's health and women's safety is a critical piece of this. So there is no change in position," she said. "The FDA does need to do that safety study to look at the internal data that has not been looked at since a REMS change was made."

The FDA wrote in a statement to States Newsroom that "Due to active litigation, the FDA and HHS cannot comment" on the safety review.

Murkowski sees 'political pressure'

Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski didn't ask Overton any questions about mifepristone, but said she believes there was "political pressure" on FDA officials to "revisit the approval status of certain products."

"We're going to be in a very challenging position in a very rural state like Alaska if in fact the move to require in-person dispensing of the medication as opposed to telehealth appointments is the direction," Murkowski said. "You have effectively taken about ... 80% of the communities in the state, and put them in a very challenging position in terms of access to providers, access to this FDA-approved drug."

Murkowski added that she didn't ask Overton a specific question on the issue since it appeared she would "go down this same rabbit trail and probably get the exact same very specific technical responses that you have provided the committee."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

Millions of dollars of waste found in Trump administration push for immigration detention

BY ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — Government investigators Thursday released a report that found the Department of Homeland Security wasted more than \$20 million in federal funding in its rapid expansion of immigration detention, including warehouse purchases strongly opposed in numerous U.S. communities.

The nonpartisan Government Accountability Office found that millions were wasted because DHS began expanding detention operations without putting a plan in place to meet U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's goal of detaining up to 100,000 immigrants.

As the second Trump administration aims to deport 1 million immigrants a year, DHS has rapidly increased the numbers of people in immigration detention after congressional Republicans last year approved roughly \$175 billion for immigration enforcement.

"As ICE spends the unprecedented multi-year detention funding provided by (the One Big Beautiful Act) and the Secure America Act, it is critical that the agency uses these taxpayer dollars efficiently and effectively," according to the report by the watchdog agency. "In the absence of a comprehensive strategic plan to guide detention expansion, ICE has wasted funds on unsuccessful detention initiatives and lacks important information about the long-term affordability of its investments."

Tents assembled, never used

In the report, GAO found those detention expansion efforts wasted millions by using facilities that were high in cost or impractical, such as Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, which is so remote that water needs to be imported to the base, making it a costly operation.

Inspectors with the Department of Defense and Department of State estimated that DOD spent \$2.85 million to assemble tents that were never used and that ICE obligated \$43 million from the start of fiscal year 2025 to June 30, 2026 for a small population at the base. GAO found that 16 noncitizens were held on average daily at Guantanamo in fiscal year 2026.

Other efforts that lacked proper planning also included domestic military operations, such as the soft-sided facility, Camp East Montana, built on a military base in El Paso, Texas.

GAO previously reported that ICE wasted more than \$11 million in taxpayer funds in operating Camp East Montana, such as paying for meals when detainees had not yet arrived at the facility. Investigators noted that ICE had awarded another contract in March for Camp East Montana and "as of August 2026 had not yet incorporated these cost saving measures into the contract and continued to pay for services that it did not need."

Warehouses cost more than \$1B

Investigators also examined the purchase of 11 warehouses at \$1.07 billion for the purpose of immigration detention.

The initiative was initially undertaken by former Homeland Secretary Kristi Noem, but she stepped down following the deaths of two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis who were shot by immigration officials. Her replacement, former Oklahoma Sen. Markwayne Mullin, paused the warehouse effort.

DHS now plans to sell seven of the sites that were purchased. Investigators said the department's change of course has led to nonrecoverable costs, such as \$7.7 million spent in zoning assessments and title insurance.

Additionally, ICE is still paying for utilities, security and other services at the warehouses it intends to sell, costing approximately \$12.8 million as of last month.

Investigators also warned that ICE's separate move to purchase \$1.5 billion in existing detention facilities has the potential to waste money because the agency has not assessed any long-term costs of operating

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the facilities.

And GAO notes that while ICE did not have an agreement with the state of Florida to reimburse funds for its soft-sided facility, the now shuttered "Alligator Alcatraz," DHS used funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to award \$608.4 million to the state.

No idea of long-term cost

Investigators also raised concerns that ICE has not made an assessment for the long-term cost of operating the expanded detention facilities.

"ICE has not projected the costs of these facilities beyond the first 3 years of operation, after which ICE will no longer have OBBBA and Secure America Act funds available for obligation because these funds are only available through fiscal year 2029," according to the report.

Investigators made a recommendation that the Director of ICE "should develop a comprehensive strategic plan to guide its detention expansion efforts that includes goals, activities, and resource needs."

GAO reported that the department agreed and that ICE would develop a strategic plan for its detention expansion, but that plan will not be completed until Aug. 31, 2027.

"Given ICE's unprecedented multi-year detention funding and the potential for continued waste of taxpayer dollars, more timely completion may be warranted," according to the report.

Congressional Democrats requested that GAO do the study.

Those lawmakers include Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, ranking member of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Michigan Sen. Gary Peters, ranking member on the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Dick Durbin of Illinois, ranking member on the Senate Committee on the Judiciary and Mississippi Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, ranking member on the House Committee on Homeland Security.

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

More Americans lose food assistance as Congress weighs program's future

Participation has declined in all but one state following last summer's major federal law

BY KEVIN HARDY

Tens of thousands of Americans continue to lose access to food assistance each month, even as Congress debates slowing down major cuts to federal food stamps.

New data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows more than 330,000 Americans lost access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, between May and June, the latest numbers available.

More than 5 million people have lost food stamps since the enactment last July of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which cut taxes and federal safety net programs. The law changed SNAP eligibility rules, ended certain work requirement exemptions and shifted new costs to states that administer the federal program.

An analysis by the anti-hunger nonprofit Food Research and Action Center shows SNAP participation has decreased since the new law in every state except Alaska. State leaders there cited unique geographic and economic conditions, including higher food prices and high seasonal unemployment specific to Alaska.

South Dakota enrollment down 6%

FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

South Dakota participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program has declined about 6% since the July 2025 enactment of the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which changed SNAP eligibility rules, ended certain work requirement exemptions and shifted new costs to states that administer the federal program.

There were 75,056 South Dakotans enrolled in the program in July 2025. The latest numbers from the state Department of Social Services showed 70,368 South Dakotans enrolled last month.

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In Arizona, SNAP participation dropped by more than half since July 2025, with about 421,000 people receiving assistance this June, the center's data shows. Louisiana's enrollment dropped by more than 173,000 — a decrease of about 22%. Participation in Illinois dropped by more than 368,000 — a drop of about 20%.

Those numbers come as advocates pressure Congress to reverse the SNAP cuts they say will exacerbate growing hunger across the country as grocery prices continue to soar.

While nonprofits and many local, state and federal political leaders have pushed for a complete rescission of those cuts, Republicans in control of Congress have so far only signed off on delaying some of their impact.

For months, the Senate has been debating details of the farm bill, a major piece of legislation that funds SNAP, farm subsidies and rural development programs. Earlier this month, the Republican-led Senate Agriculture Committee approved on party lines a farm bill proposal that would delay for one year impending SNAP cost shifts to states. Democrats had pushed for a two-year extension.

That legislation awaits debate by the full Senate before the current legislation's Sept. 30 expiration.

Last year's tax and spending law requires states to cover more of SNAP's administrative costs, and beginning in fall 2027, states for the first time will fund some benefits themselves. The new law will penalize states depending on their payment error rates — a technical calculation by the feds of SNAP overpayments and underpayments, not fraud. That change could cost states billions of dollars, raising fears about the future of the program.

If the version of the farm bill that advanced this month is passed, states would have until October 2028 to lower their error rates before they are required to shoulder part of the costs.

Aside from coming up with the funds, states will likely need to implement new IT and budgeting processes. Historically, SNAP benefits were not a budget line item for states because federal funds flowed directly to recipients' benefit cards, Lauren Kallins, a senior legislative director for the National Conference of State Legislatures, told lawmakers in July.

"There are lots of questions about how and when the cost share will be paid," Kallins said. "Will this be in real time as benefits are issued? Will it be reconciled at a later date? We don't know."

Republicans, including Arkansas U.S. Sen. John Boozman who leads the agriculture committee, have argued that error rates are evidence that improvements are needed in state administration of the program.

Anti-hunger advocacy groups say the one-year delay is insufficient to protect states and people relying on SNAP.

"We urge Senators to speak out against this flawed Farm Bill and to stop it from advancing to the floor for a vote," Crystal FitzSimons, president of the Food Research and Action Center, said in a statement last week. "Congress must use any other legislative vehicle to reverse the SNAP cuts and address the cost shifts to states to provide meaningful assistance to both families and farmers."

Stateline reporter Kevin Hardy can be reached at khardy@stateline.org.

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

Kevin Hardy covers business, labor and rural issues for Stateline from the Midwest.

Federal judge orders White House must restore press passes to 3 banned news outlets

BY JANE NORMAN

WASHINGTON — U.S. District Court Judge Timothy Kelly early Thursday issued an order that temporarily blocks President Donald Trump's ban of three news organizations from the White House.

Kelly, in the eight-page order, said that the White House must "immediately return, reinstate, and restore the White House 'hard pass' press credentials held by employees of CNN, MS NOW, and POLITICO that were revoked" Friday and over the weekend.

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The White House, however, didn't appear to be following the ruling as of 10 a.m. Eastern on Thursday, when attorneys representing the news organizations filed a brief asking the court to hold a videoconference meeting as soon as possible.

"This morning journalists from each of CNN, MS NOW, and POLITICO attempted to enter the White House and were turned away. A Secret Service agent confiscated the hard pass of journalists from all three organizations," they wrote.

Micah Stopperich, director of White House press operations, declared in a court filing just before 12:30 p.m. Eastern that his team delivered the press badges to the entry gate at 9:55 a.m. Eastern to be distributed to members of the media who had them confiscated.

Kelly's order will continue for 14 days while the case continues to be fought in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Trump is scheduled to welcome Chinese President Xi Jinping to the White House Thursday.

Although Trump has indicated he will appeal any court ruling on the matter, Kelly noted that temporary restraining orders are "generally unappealable." He said he would schedule a hearing for motions for a preliminary injunction, which would last until the final outcome of the suit and could be appealed.

The case began Monday when the three news outlets sued the Trump administration for barring their reporters from entering the White House grounds.

The news organizations asked the district court to grant them either a temporary restraining order or a preliminary injunction that would require the White House to return the press passes, allowing the journalists to work from the complex once again.

Kelly, who was appointed by Trump during his first term, had heard arguments in the case on Wednesday and appeared skeptical at the time of Department of Justice arguments. In his ruling, he said it appeared likely that the news outlets would succeed with their claim that journalists were denied their due process rights before their passes were confiscated.

While the Department of Justice argued that earlier cases dealing with press access to the White House were wrongly decided in journalists' favor, Kelly said that he was "bound by D.C. Circuit precedent, full stop," referring to earlier rulings by the appeals court.

Kelly in his order also expressed doubt about Department of Justice arguments that the ban was in response to concerns about articles that dealt with national security or classified information, saying DOJ "offered little" to back up that contention.

Some news articles cited by the administration as endangering national security were written by reporters who didn't even have White House passes, he noted.

Trump did not mention national security in announcing the ban and "instead, he focused on the alleged lack of truthfulness and negativity of Plaintiffs' reporting," Kelly said.

"For another—and simply put—the record lacks factual support for Defendants' contention that the revocation of Plaintiffs' hard passes will in fact protect national security or that national security will be endangered if the Court orders their passes reinstated while this litigation proceeds," Kelly said.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment from States Newsroom.

Theodore J. Boutros, Jr., the lawyer for the news outlets, praised the decision. "This is a strong ruling vindicating freedom of the press, due process and the rule of law," he said in a statement. "We greatly appreciate the court's swift action."

Jennifer Shutt and Ashley Murray contributed to this report.

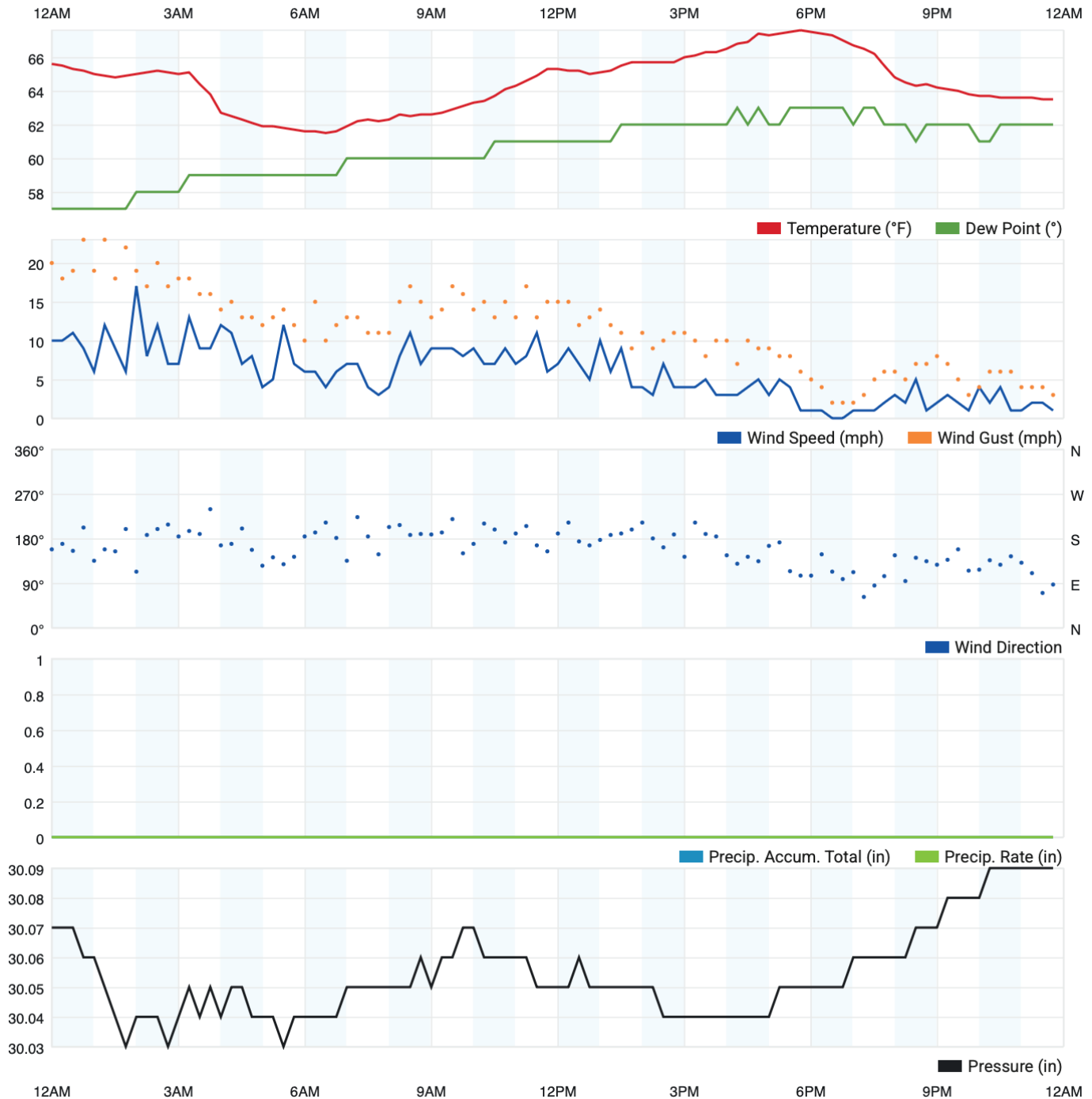
As the Washington Bureau Chief of States Newsroom, Jane directs national coverage, managing staff and freelance reporters in the nation's capital and assigning and editing state-specific daily and enterprise stories. Jane is a veteran of more than three decades in journalism.

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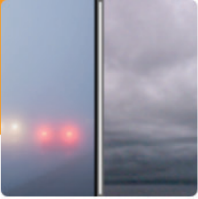
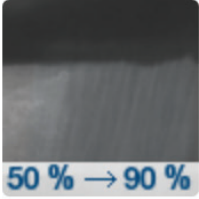
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

September 24, 2026



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Friday		Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
					
High: 68 °F		Low: 56 °F	High: 69 °F	Low: 56 °F	High: 73 °F
Patchy Dense Fog then Cloudy		Chance Drizzle and Patchy Fog then Showers and Patchy	Chance Drizzle	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny

Today

FOG



Patchy drizzle and areas of dense fog this morning. Rain moves in this evening.

64-69°

Upcoming Outlook

<i>Sat</i>	<i>Sun</i>
	
64-77°	69-75°

Rain lingers from the James Valley east on Saturday. Drier weather expected on Sunday.

weather.gov/abr
September 25, 2026 2:48 AM



There is a Dense Fog Advisory in effect until 11 am CDT for areas between the Missouri River and the James River. Patchy drizzle is also expected this morning before steadier rain moves in this evening. A few peeks of sunshine may be possible west of the James Valley on Saturday and across the area on Sunday.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 68 °F at 5:37 PM

Low Temp: 62 °F at 6:00 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 12:41 AM

Precip: 0.08

Today's Info

Record High: 95 in 1938

Record Low: 19 in 1926

Average High: 71

Average Low: 43

Average Precip in Sept.: 1.66

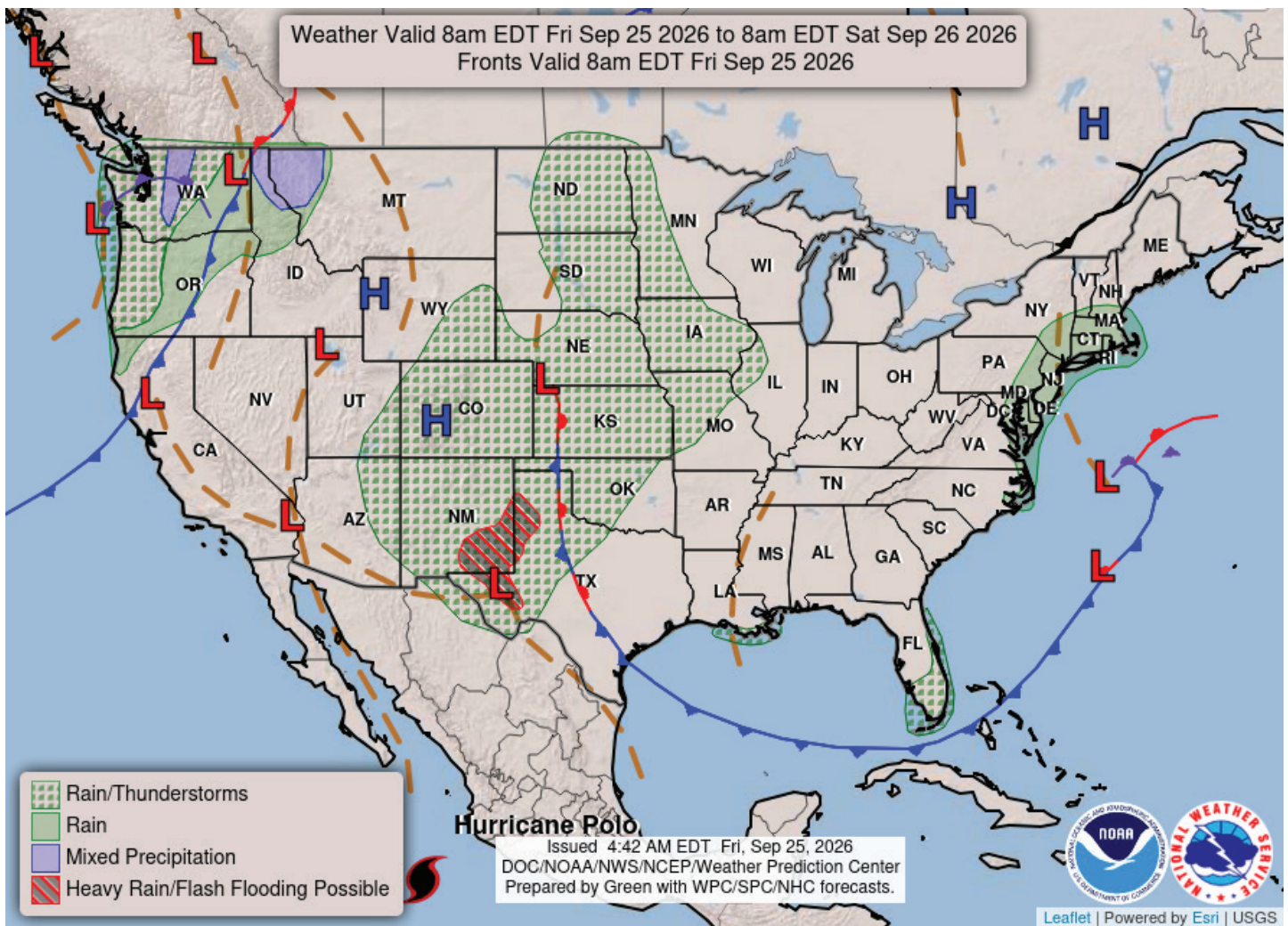
Precip to date in Sept.: 1.88

Average Precip to date: 18.00

Precip Year to Date: 21.74

Sunset Tonight: 7:25 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:24 am



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Today in Weather History

September 25, 1981: A late September tornado touched down briefly 14 miles west of Pierre during the early evening hours with no damage occurring.

September 25, 1996: An early fall storm over the Black Hills of northeast Wyoming and western South Dakota re-acquainted area residents with their winter driving techniques. Snow totals ranged from 4 to 8 inches. U.S. Highway 385, south of Deadwood South Dakota, was temporarily closed after a semi-truck jack-knifed on Strawberry Hill. Numerous minor accidents were reported in the Black Hills due to slick roads. Heavy wet snow closed the Needles Highway and Iron Mountain Road in the central/southern Black Hills until snowplows could clear the streets.

1848: The Great Gale of 1848 was the most severe hurricane to affect Tampa Bay, Florida and is one of two major hurricanes to make landfall in the area. This storm produced the highest storm tide ever experienced in Tampa Bay when the water rose 15 feet in six to eight hours.

1939 — A west coast hurricane moved onshore south of Los Angeles bringing unprecedented rains along the southern coast of California. Nearly five and a half inches of rain drenched Los Angeles during a 24 hour period. The hurricane caused two million dollars damage, mostly to structures along the coast and to crops, and claimed 45 lives at sea. "El Cordonazo" produced 5.66 inches of rain at Los Angeles and 11.6 inches of rain at Mount Wilson, both records for the month of September. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1942: From September 24th through the 26th, 1942, an early-season winter storm moved through the Northern Plains, Upper Mississippi River Valley, and Great Lakes, dropping measurable snow as it went. In many places across Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and northern Illinois, this was their earliest measurable snow on record.

1987 — Hurricane Emily crossed the island of Bermuda during the early morning. Emily, moving northeast at 45 mph, produced wind gusts to 115 mph at Kindley Field. The thirty-five million dollars damage inflicted by Emily made it the worst hurricane to strike Bermuda since 1948. Parts of Michigan and Wisconsin experienced their first freeze of the autumn. Snow and sleet were reported in the Sheffield and Sutton areas of northeastern Vermont at midday. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Low pressure off the Northern Pacific Coast brought rain and gale force winds to the coast of Washington State. Fair weather prevailed across most of the rest of the nation. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 — Twenty-three cities in the south central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Topeka KS with a reading of 33 degrees, and Binghamton NY with a low of 25 degrees. Showers and thunderstorms in the southeastern U.S. drenched Atlanta GA with 4.87 inches of rain, their sixth highest total of record for any given day. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1998 — Four hurricanes were spinning simultaneously in the Atlantic basin: Georges, Ivan, Jeanne, and Karl. That was the first time this had happened since 1893.

1998: Four hurricanes were spinning simultaneously in the Atlantic basin: Georges, Ivan, Jeanne, and Karl. That was the first time this had happened since 1893.

2015: Fairbanks, Alaska received 4–9 inches of snow. Another storm on September 27-30 produced 14.2 inches, including 11.2 inches on the 29th. September 2015 would end up being Fairbanks's second snowiest September on record with 20.9 inches.

2015: An EF2 tornado tracked nearly seven miles across Johns Island in South Carolina.

2017: A large waterspout was seen over the Ionian Sea, off the coast of Gallipoli, Italy.

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Daily Devotion

What Is Guilt?

Your sins have been paid for. So go and live freely in the joy of salvation.

Romans 5:6-11: 6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.

8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

11 And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Guilt is something with which we're all familiar. But it's worth taking the time to stop and ask the question, "What is guilt?"

When we see the term in English translations of the Bible, we often tend to apply a cultural interpretation to the passage. That is, we associate the word guilt with feelings of remorse, depression, or rejection over something in our past. Scripturally speaking, however, it is primarily a legal term used to denote responsibility, as when a court finds an offender "guilty."

What does this mean for the believer? We should already know that we've been found guilty—Romans 3:23 says we all have sinned. However, Jesus Christ took that guilt upon Himself at the cross, and He paid our debt in full. If the debt has been paid and we've been released from the charge, then we are no longer guilty. We've been declared forgiven.

The Lord doesn't want us to hide the joy of our salvation beneath a smothering blanket of guilt. Rather, we are called to rejoice in the glorious redemption that Christ's sacrifice made possible. We can joyfully claim the promise of John 8:36: "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Go, and be free today.

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

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The Groton Independent

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WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.24.26

1 4 17 25 40 3

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

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 58 Mins 30 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.22.26

7 13 26 37 68 8

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$277,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 43 Mins 30 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.23.26

13 24 32 41 48 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$5,320,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 58 Mins 30 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.23.26

17 18 30 31 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$66,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 13 Mins 30 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.23.26

10 17 19 21 40 6

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 42 Mins 30 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.23.26

5 15 26 29 30 14

Power Play: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$360,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 42 Mins 30 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL

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Belle Fourche def. Bison, 25-19, 27-25, 15-25, 25-19
Bennett County def. Lyman, 25-15, 25-17, 25-15
Boyd County, Neb. def. Andes Central/Dakota Christian, 21-25, 25-17, 25-12, 25-15
Brandon Valley def. Huron, 25-15, 25-12, 25-15
Bridgewater-Emery def. Canistota, 25-12, 25-11, 25-9
Britton-Hecla def. Florence-Henry, 25-22, 25-21, 25-23
Canton def. Sioux Falls Lutheran, 25-27, 25-19, 12-25, 27-25, 15-9
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Chester def. Garretson, 25-19, 25-10, 25-12
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Freeman def. Menno, 25-11, 25-15, 25-10
Groton def. Mobridge-Pollock, 25-12, 25-21, 25-20
Hamlin def. Webster, 25-11, 25-16, 25-21
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Marty def. Scotland, 15-25, 16-25, 25-20, 25-19, 15-12
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Northwestern def. Waubay/Summit, 25-7, 25-11, 25-16
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland def. Flandreau, 25-4, 25-15, 25-9
Rapid City Stevens def. Rapid City Central, 25-15, 25-16, 25-20
Riggs def. Douglas, 25-22, 25-27, 25-19, 25-13
Sioux Falls Lincoln def. Sioux Falls Washington, 23-25, 25-12, 25-11, 20-25, 15-6
Spearfish def. Custer, 25-20, 22-25, 25-7, 25-15
Stanley County def. Gettysburg, 15-25, 25-18, 29-27, 25-16
Sully Buttes def. Sunshine Bible Academy, 17-25, 25-21, 15-25, 25-15, 18-16
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Chamberlain Triangular=
Bon Homme def. Chamberlain, 27-25, 25-22, 25-23
Burke def. Chamberlain, 25-15, 25-15, 25-14

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

PREP FOOTBALL

Little Wound 48, St. Francis Indian 6

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

Pope Leo XIV affirms need for media to cover public figures when asked about Trump ban

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE (AP) — Pope Leo XIV told reporters they were welcome to cover him, as he responded to the Trump administration's attempt to bar U.S. media from the White House and affirmed the importance of journalists covering public figures.

Leo spoke to reporters Friday on his way to France for a four-day visit. Asked by a CNN reporter about the Trump administration's attempt to bar CNN and other reporters, Leo said the media was welcome on his plane.

"I am very happy that here, you are all welcome," he said. Good media coverage is important, he said, and equally important "that we have it all the way around, for everyone"

CNN, MS NOW and Politico were back at the White House on Thursday after a judge handed them a reprieve from President Donald Trump's ban, but the extraordinary showdown between him and outlets whose coverage he dislikes continued.

On a high-profile day when Chinese leader Xi Jinping was visiting Washington and attending a state dinner, no major American network was airing live coverage, and both CNN and MS NOW said their journalists were denied access to Xi's state dinner arrival.

Leo has long affirmed the need for free and independent press, a point he made in one of his first audiences as pope. Speaking to journalists who covered the 2025 conclave that elected him, the American pope called for the release of imprisoned journalists and affirmed the "precious gift of free speech and the press."

That said, since the COVID-19 pandemic, independent media have been prevented from covering photo opportunities inside the pope's private studio when visiting heads of state meet with the pontiff. Additionally, many of the pope's private audiences with other groups and individuals are closed to non-Vatican press.

On the flight Friday, Leo also apologized for missing an opportunity to speak with the press the last time he traveled internationally, when his Iberia charter broke down in Spain's Canary Islands and he returned home solo on the king's private jet, skipping his traditional airborne press conference with reporters.

More than 70 reporters and the Vatican delegation waited for several hours at the airport for a replacement plane to arrive. Leo addressed the media's disappointment when he came to the back of the plane to greet reporters.

"A special mention I would like to make for those of you who were traveling with me when we returned to Rome from Spain," he said. "I want to apologize personally for an incident, that I had nothing to do with, but which I know left a number of you unhappy with the fact that we couldn't have the flight back together back to Rome."

In other comments to reporters, Leo said he believed his alma mater Villanova would be the fan favorite when the Augustinian university plays Notre Dame's basketball team in Rome on Nov. 1.

"They tell me that the people coming to the match, 90% are Villanova and 10% Notre Dame, so the voice of the people of God will be very strong on the Villanova side," Leo said.

Board of Peace has met with UNRWA despite saying it has no Gaza role, agency's ex-chief says

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As the U.S.-created Board of Peace pushes ahead with plans to rebuild Gaza, it has said there's no place for the U.N. body that for decades has provided support to displaced Palestinians. But the agency's last chief says that behind the scenes, board members and others have been more open to working with the U.N. agency for Palestinians than it seems.

Israel wants the agency known as UNRWA out of Gaza and has repeatedly accused it of being infiltrated by Hamas militants, allegations the International Court of Justice says have not been substantiated. And yet UNRWA remains the territory's largest aid provider, playing a key role in health and education.

Philippe Lazzarini, who led UNRWA until earlier this year, told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview — his first since stepping down — that members of the Palestinian technocratic committee want to work with the agency. Another U.N. official shared with AP minutes from meetings where UNRWA and the committee discussed collaborating on plans for Gaza.

A Board of Peace official confirmed that board members had met multiple times with UNRWA officials. And while the agency's days are over, its programs "may persist if they are serving Gazans well," the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

Israel's Foreign Ministry did not respond when asked about these remarks.

UNRWA has more workers in Gaza than anyone else

There's been no reconstruction in Gaza, almost a year since the ceasefire. Israel still prevents the entry of the Palestinian committee chosen by the Board of Peace to eventually govern the strip, saying Hamas must first disarm. The committee says it needs to be inside the strip to activate Gaza plans.

That's left UNRWA on the ground in Gaza, with far more workers than any other U.N. agency or non-governmental organization. It props up about half of Gaza's public health system, said Lazzarini, whose last working day was March 31. He plans to publish a book this year about his tenure.

"They want to get rid of the agency, but on the other hand they know that if you get completely rid of the agency today, it might have a further additional devastating impact on the population," Lazzarini said.

During the war, sparked by the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, UNRWA temporarily took on a larger role, coordinating the entry and distribution of aid into the besieged Palestinian territory. Israel's attacks on the agency neutered that role, banning UNRWA international staff and humanitarian aid from entering Gaza.

But UNRWA's core programs remained, Lazzarini said.

It still has around 11,000 Palestinian employees in Gaza. They conduct about 14,000 medical appointments daily, maintain water and waste management systems for over a million Palestinians, run digital literacy and math programs for over 280,000 children and staff temporary learning spaces for 60,000 more, UNRWA says.

UNRWA makes sure aid reaches people, Lazzarini said. "If you want the vaccine to end up in the mouths of the children, you still need the workforce, the presence of an agency like ours."

UNRWA was told it's vital in planning Gaza's future

Publicly, the agency has not been included in the Board of Peace's planning for Gaza. At Wednesday's

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board briefing, members named various U.N. agencies as partners in the territory's reconstruction, but not UNRWA.

However, behind the scenes, the Palestinian committee that will eventually govern Gaza acknowledged that UNRWA is necessary for planning, Lazzarini said.

Two senior U.N. officials and the board official told the AP the board had met multiple times with UNRWA since the ceasefire was signed.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media, confirmed at least three meetings between UNRWA officials and the Palestinian committee this year, most recently this month. Two took place during Lazzarini's tenure.

Shortly before the end of his tenure, Lazzarini said, he spoke to Ali Shaath, a former Palestinian Authority deputy minister who leads the Palestinian committee.

"Basically, he said, 'I don't know how I can succeed without you,'" Lazzarini said. Shaath and a spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment.

An internal U.N. description of a Jan. 26 meeting in Cairo, held without UNRWA, said Shaath praised the agency, showed a clear intention to see it back on track and said the Palestinian committee's system would largely build on its work.

The Tony Blair Institute, a Board of Peace partner, also asked for UNRWA's help and spoke to UNRWA personnel, one senior U.N. official said. The institute did not respond to a request for comment.

At a pledging conference for UNRWA on June 30, the agency's current acting chief, Christian Saunders, called it "vital" to efforts by the board and the Palestinian committee to move forward with the ceasefire.

But the Board of Peace official painted a different picture, saying the meetings focused on determining how UNRWA's operations work in order to develop programs that are "far more efficient and accountable."

"UNRWA's days are over," the official said. Still, its employees "will remain if they pass vetting and are delivering on their mandate and not advancing ideology or Hamas interests."

Lazzarini said it's an "absurd contradiction" — the Board of Peace says UNRWA is not wanted while U.N. member countries "expect it to deliver."

"We continue to emphasize that UNRWA is indispensable," Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, told journalists Thursday after over 50 countries attended a ministerial meeting on the agency at U.N. headquarters.

Lazzarini says he has faced personal attacks

UNRWA was established to help Palestinians who fled or were driven out of what is now Israel during the 1948 war surrounding its creation.

In January 2024, Israel claimed, in many cases without providing evidence, that hundreds of Palestinian militants worked for the agency and that over a dozen of its employees took part in the Oct. 7 attack.

Lazzarini said that he was never given written evidence to back up the allegations despite asking Israel and UN member states, but that he doesn't regret his decision to fire the employees accused of taking part in the attack.

"I did because it was in the best interest of the agency and the population we were helping," Lazzarini said, adding that he has faced "extraordinary vicious, heinous attacks on social media" as well as being accosted in the streets, "in Geneva and in New York" and shouted at by "pro-Israeli groups."

His book, "A Witness to Gaza: What Cannot Be Erased," will be published in French in October, with an English version to follow.

Europe uses subsidies, taxes and policy pauses to offset pain of high fuel prices

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Wars in the Middle East and Ukraine are driving governments across Europe to craft subsidies, taxes and policy revisions that might shield their economies, companies and increasingly aggrieved citizens from record gasoline and diesel prices.

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Countries around the world have intervened to limit the economic impact of diminished energy supplies and soaring fuel prices since the start of the Iran war, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Seven of the 10 nations working most actively to contain the economic damage are in the European Union, the OECD said in a report published Wednesday.

Lithuania cut train ticket prices in half. Greece is taxing gambling more to fund public relief efforts. Italy delayed the scheduled demolition of coal-fired power plants and slashed the required paperwork for oil and natural gas projects. The Netherlands increased funding for a program that provides free energy-saving services in homes. Poland has proposed heavily taxing the record profits of certain fuel producers and sellers.

Before the United States and Israel attacked Iran, Russia's war in Ukraine disrupted global energy supplies and caused turmoil in Europe. The EU imports nearly all of the oil it uses and 85% of its natural gas. Overall, imports supply 57% of the bloc's energy needs, with much of its domestically produced energy coming from renewable and nuclear sources, according to the EU's statistical office.

Europeans are becoming more incensed as pump prices surpass the equivalent of \$12 a gallon in some countries. EU citizens are spending an extra 203 million euros (\$231 million) a day just for diesel fuel, according to the European advocacy organization Transport & Environment.

"It's a cruel irony that the U.S. is the least vulnerable to a crisis of its own making, while Europe's economy again takes the hit," Antony Froggatt, an analyst at the organization, said.

Some European governments are spending billions to help their countries weather the current energy crisis.

EU leaders in Brussels gave member nations temporary discretion to provide state aid to households and energy-intensive industries like agriculture, transportation and fishing. They also offered limited leeway from EU spending rules for investments that strengthen energy security and reduce the bloc's long-term reliance on imported oil and natural gas.

"The pressures from higher energy prices and borrowing costs are biting for people and for businesses," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in her annual State of the European Union address last week. "We need to double down on our affordable, homegrown, clean energy, be it renewables and nuclear, or biomethane and others" to "give us independence and drive down energy prices."

France rolls out diesel subsidies and a Red Sea mission

France has adopted an expanding array of targeted measures to cushion consumers and fuel-intensive businesses from higher prices.

The French government on Tuesday announced a 450 million-euro (\$512 million) package to expand its relief measures. It broadened means-tested aid for people who drive more than 30 kilometers (18 miles) round trip to work or more than 8,000 kilometers (4,900 miles) annually for professional purposes. The expansion makes 5.5 million workers eligible for 100-euro (\$113) payments to defray fuel costs through the end of the year, the government said.

The new package also extended fuel subsidies for farmers, fishermen and construction companies until the end of the year, and will make energy vouchers of 48 euros to 277 euros available three months early to help 5.8 million families pay their winter energy bills.

French President Emmanuel Macron has asked von der Leyen to promote a relaxation of EU fuel quality regulations on density, sulfur content and other criteria to help increase diesel and kerosene production in Europe. The EU took a similar step during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a letter to the EU executive seen by The Associated Press, Macron warned that the global oil market would soon see "strong increases in prices" if the Strait of Hormuz off Iran's coast did not reopen to tanker traffic and Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline to the Red Sea was not repaired.

He also called for raising the EU limit on conventional biodiesel content in standard diesel fuel from 7% to 10%.

On Thursday, Macron said in an interview with French broadcasters that he would deploy French troops, radars and defensive systems to Saudi Arabia to help protect energy infrastructure from attacks by Iran-

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backed Houthi rebels who have seized new territory near the Bab al-Mandab, a key chokepoint in the global economy. "We are putting ourselves in a position to protect this site because a few weeks ago more than 5 million barrels came out of this site every day," he said, referring to an export terminal in Yanbu on the Red Sea for the Saudi East-West pipeline.

Germany and Spain cut fuel taxes to give motorists some breathing room

A two-month round of fuel tax cuts in Germany expired at the end of June. The government agreed last week to renew the tax cuts, which will lower gasoline and diesel prices by 17 cents per liter, from Oct. 1 until the end of the year. The German government said the new reduction will cost 2.5 billion euros.

The government also said it would hold talks with the oil industry about introducing a fuel price cap by Jan. 1. Neighboring Belgium and Luxembourg have had similar price caps in place for decades.

Spain's government also extended gasoline and diesel tax cuts it introduced in March as part of a 5 billion-euro (\$5.7 billion) package to counter the effects of the Iran war on local energy prices.

The tax break amounted to 5 cents per liter this month. An automatic mechanism would increase it to 20 cents per liter if fuel-price inflation exceeds 15% year-on-year.

The government also extended fuel subsidies for transportation companies, farmers, livestock producers and fishermen.

The US has become one of the EU's most important energy suppliers

Alongside national relief programs, EU nations have tapped their strategic reserves as part of an agreement by the International Energy Agency's 32 member countries to make 400 million barrels of oil from their emergency stockpiles available to the market. Macron has said Thursday he would rally G7 nations to release more fuel, too.

The EU has worked to reduce its reliance on energy imported from Russia through renewable energy production and converting systems and industries to run on electricity instead of fossil fuels.

Von der Leyen said greater electrification could reduce the EU's annual bill for imported oil, gas and other fossil fuels by 260 billion euros (\$296.6 billion) by 2040.

As the EU tried to wean itself off Russian energy, it became more dependent on the United States. Von der Leyen personally struck a deal with President Donald Trump last year that included a commitment for the EU to buy \$750 billion worth of American energy over three years.

The Iran war has made the relationship both more vital and more complicated for the EU, which has increasingly turned to the U.S. for diesel. The support Trump expressed this week for banning diesel exports to drive down U.S. prices worries the bloc, which would have to find alternative sources of the fuel.

Brussels is lobbying Washington to drop the idea of suspending overseas diesel sales.

"We believe this is a bad idea," European Commission spokesperson Olof Gill said Thursday. "EU-U.S. cooperation in the field of energy is strong, stable and mutually beneficial. Any disruption would risk negatively impacting both sides."

A month after Nepal-China floods, Ukrainian families still desperate for answers

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Olena Kalynychenko was looking forward to sharing the chrysanthemum tea she had bought in China with her partner.

"She said, 'When I come back home, we will drink the tea made from Chinese flowers,'" said Oles Visich, Kalynychenko's partner. He has now been waiting for news about her for a month, after she and thousands of others disappeared in catastrophic flooding along the Nepal-China border.

Her last known location was exiting China at a border post at 10:22 a.m. local time, 15 minutes before the flood.

Kalynychenko, 36, was part of a group of 56 people, mostly Ukrainians, who had traveled to Mount Kailash in Tibet for a spiritual retreat.

Their families' situation is a sign of how complex and time-consuming the process is of rescuing, recov-

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ering and identifying victims lost to the disaster. Given the number of missing, the process will likely take months.

They disappeared while heading from China to Nepal on their way home. Some relatives say they have received no information from authorities. The Chinese government has told at least two families that their relatives left Chinese territory before the flood struck, but they haven't been able to confirm whether they entered Nepal as Nepal's immigration complex and its records were destroyed in the floods.

Little information is reaching families

The floods killed more than 1,400 people and left more than 6,000 missing, most of them on the Nepali side of the border. Nepal has said that 636 foreign nationals remain missing, including 54 Ukrainians. China has reported 261 foreign nationals among the missing on its side, including one Ukrainian.

Families in Ukraine say most of them have not received any answers since realizing their relatives were among the missing.

"We only have the statistics that are being posted online — how many people have been found, how many are alive, how many are dead, and how many are still missing," said Stanislav Solohub, whose brother and sister-in-law went missing on Aug. 25.

Nepal says it has recovered 1,451 bodies, but only 112 have been handed over to families so far.

The government said it has collected DNA samples from 2,035 relatives so far, but it has not disclosed how many victims have been identified.

Last messages were sent minutes before the floods began

The group, led by Irina Blonskaya, a spiritual teacher who often organized retreats, was returning from its journey home in China when the flood struck Aug. 26. Their plan was to travel by bus from the Tibet region to Kathmandu, where its members would board flights to their respective countries. The group's last message was sent at 8:27 a.m. Nepal time, about 10 minutes before the mountain slope collapsed.

Many had not checked in with their loved ones that morning, owing to the time difference.

Authorities have said the were triggered when a section of ice and rock broke away from a Himalayan mountain slope, creating a fast-moving torrent of water, ice, mud and debris. It destroyed communities and Gyirong Port, a border crossing used by some pilgrims traveling to or returning from Mount Kailash.

'Who is looking for them?'

Vladsylava Horlova's mother, Elena, was traveling in the group as well. She initially found her mother's name of the list of the missing from the Nepali government, but hasn't received any further information from the Nepali side. Later, the Chinese embassy confirmed her mother had left the country, and was not counted in China's list of missing people.

Horlova, a college student who is a refugee in Norway, worries that her mother was not recorded as being in either country, and that neither side is looking for her. There's a stretch of road between the Nepali immigration building and the Chinese one along the border, videos from travelers show.

"You think about what if someone appeared to be in a no man's land or that they left China, but not physically, who's looking for them?" she asked.

Horlova has attempted to contact organizations ranging from the Ukrainian embassy in China, to Norwegian police, and even the Red Cross. She, like the others, have submitted their DNA samples to police to help the search.

On the other side of the border, China has said that when the remains of foreigners are identified, it will notify their respective embassies, but the authorities have not given any details about how many identities have been confirmed so far.

People still have hope

Though it has been a month since the original disaster, some families are still holding on to hope.

Just days before Kalynychenko left for her travels, she organized a retreat for women in Ukraine whose partners were fighting on the front lines of the war, some of whom had not heard from their partners for two years.

Visich, her partner, sees the irony of his situation, but like others in the group, has chosen to stay positive.

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Visich, also a psychologist, wrote a support guide for others like himself, offering tips on mental health. "Because for my Olenka, for example, the most important thing in our connection, that each other ... needs to be happy," Visich said.

Pope arrives in secular France with an appeal to respect the dignity of every human life

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

ORLY, France (AP) — Pope Leo XIV began a four-day visit to France on Friday, hoping to draw attention to his appeals for peace at a time of war, and for greater reflection as artificial intelligence questions the very essence of what it means to be human.

Leo is spending four intense days in Paris, the Catholic shrine at Lourdes and the northeastern city of Metz. Church bells across France tolled when Leo's charter flight landed at Paris' Orly airport, and upward of a million people are expected to turn out to see him during his visit. The welcome has underscored the surprising level of interest in Leo's visit, the first by a pope in 18 years.

Leo was greeted by President Emmanuel Macron at the airport and will meet again at the Élysée Palace. During his busiest day of the trip, Leo was to then deliver a speech at UNESCO headquarters, celebrate vespers at the newly reopened Notre-Dame cathedral and then preside over a massive youth vigil at the Paris stadium Friday night.

A capstone visit as Macron's term ends

For Macron, who is barred from seeking a third term in May elections, hosting the American pope is something of a capstone, after Pope Francis refused repeatedly to make a proper state visit to France during his 12-year pontificate.

"For a president of the republic as Macron, who is at the end of his mandate, it can be important to be aside the pope and to capture a part of his popularity. It's not new," said Charles Mercier, director of history and sociology of Catholicism studies at Paris EPHE university.

With seven months left in his term, Macron's approval ratings are near record lows, driven by anger over the rising cost of living and criticism of France's growing debt and deficit and deteriorating public services. Macron's office said Friday's meeting with Leo will provide an opportunity to discuss global challenges such as climate change and artificial intelligence, along with European and international affairs. The talks also are expected to address end-of-life care and the protection of children.

Leo to appeal to loftier questions about life

Leo seems keen to emphasize Europe's Christian roots and try to push the church's message about the value and dignity of human life in a country where the right to abortion was enshrined in the Constitution in 2024 and where lawmakers recently gave final approval to a bill allowing adults with incurable illnesses to receive lethal medication.

The French Catholic hierarchy strongly opposed the measures, in keeping with Catholic teaching that human life must be protected and defended from conception until natural death. But the French hierarchy has lost much of its influence amid the secularizing trends at play across Western Europe as well as a credibility crisis stemming from France's reckoning with its legacy of clergy sexual abuse.

France's distinctive model of secularism, known as *laïcité* and enshrined in its Constitution, guarantees the freedom to believe or not to believe, as well as the freedom to practice a religion as long as it doesn't disturb public order. It also requires the state to remain neutral toward all religions.

Key rules have been defined by a historic 1905 law, primarily intended to distance the state from the then-powerful influence of the Catholic Church.

Leo, whose paternal ancestors were French, isn't expected to scold the French over the abortion and end-of-life legislation. Rather, he's expected to summon them to a fundamental, higher-altitude consideration about what it means to be human today, said the Vatican's editorial director Andrea Tornielli.

"The pope is not landing in the City of Light to condemn anyone, nor to barge into the French political debate, which is as polarized as that of every other European country," Tornielli wrote in Vatican News.

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"He comes as a shepherd to meet a people, their history, and their culture."

High security reminiscent of Olympics

Olympic-level security measures were being put in place, including mounted police, bomb disposal experts, anti-drone measures and counter-terrorism measures, said Paris police prefecture spokesperson Hélène Denéchère.

In Paris alone, plans called for 14,000 police officers, gendarmes, and military personnel and 2,500 firefighters on Friday. On Saturday, when Leo celebrates Mass at the central Place de la Concorde, the numbers are only slightly lower.

"We are implementing a system similar to what was in place during the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which means a protective perimeter around which other security perimeters will be added," Denéchère said.

Trump's state dinner for Xi features sea bass and a long list of tech titans

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A tech-heavy guest list, the fashion choices of those on it, who sat where and what was on the menu marked the softer — often and glitzier — details of diplomacy as Donald Trump threw a Thursday night state dinner honoring China's leader Xi Jinping.

The event featured a cavalcade of billionaires, Washington powerbrokers, business leaders and the type of festivities that most excite Trump, who has a reputation for reveling in hosting parties.

"President Xi and I both understand we represent different systems, but the ties between our people endure, and we've never gotten along better," Trump said during his toast, adding that "together, we can continue to build a relationship that promotes prosperity and security for future generations."

Trump has done his best to impress Xi during China's leader's during Xi's three-day visit to Washington, and praised their close personal relationship — even as he has decried top Democratic candidates as "communists" ahead of the November midterm elections.

Xi and Trump discussed tensions over Taiwan, trade and artificial intelligence during business hours — even as an ongoing First Amendment fight over press access at the White House has unfolded. But Trump publicly chose to focus on showing Xi his White House updates on Thursday afternoon, including letting him tour his Marine One presidential helicopter and a new helipad he built for it — before attention quickly turned to the flashy details of the swanky meal.

Xi noted in his own toast that "President Trump has pledged to make America great again" and that "China is committed to achieving great national rejuvenation."

"These two goals are both ambitious and can surely be mutually reinforcing," Xi said.

Trump wore a tuxedo, and her office said first lady Melania Trump opted for a tuxedo-style outfit: a white Saint Laurent cotton poplin blouse, a black silk cummerbund and black brocade pants — both from Dolce & Gabbana — with a peony motif.

Xi chose a black suit and his wife, Peng Liyuan, wore a red gown. The East Room, where the dinner was held, featured low lighting and place settings with elegant red and gold decor.

Those in attendance included OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who signed autographs upon arriving at the White House. Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang opted for a tuxedo over his trademark black leather jacket. Bernard Arnault, the CEO of French luxury goods company LVMH, walked through black security fencing to enter the event.

Trump says he can't help but talk up the ballroom being built

The president toasted his strong relationship with Xi and the bond between the U.S. and China, but then added, "If I could go off script just for a second, I just want to say I had to do it," as those assembled laughed.

"I'd like to invite everyone in the room to visit through that beautiful curtain in the back," Trump said,

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referring to the construction site of his White House ballroom on the South Lawn, which he said, "you've heard so much about."

Trump said the project was a year from completion, and said he thought attendees "will see something that I think you will really love."

The president said that after the dinner attendees could go see the worksite and be "the first people to step foot" on it.

"We'll do that. Maybe after we've finished with the entertainment tonight," Trump said, asking, "Anybody wants to walk into a construction site that's nice and sparkling, it's our honor to have you do so."

Trump has called the ballroom he's building the "Great Hall of the United States," and suggested it could rival the Great Hall of the People, where he dined during a state visit to Beijing in May.

The president also presented Xi with an eagle statue that he said was designed "in personal collaboration with Melania and myself." Xi did not present Trump a public gift in return during the dinner.

Guests dined on squash and sea bass

The first lady helped craft the evening's menu, which was served on the red china from Ronald Reagan's presidency. It featured a first course of yellow squash velouté with wild mushrooms, fresh herbs, crispy pancetta and drizzled scallion oil.

After that, guests got sesame-crusted sea bass with braised baby bok choy, roasted garden eggplant and a sauce verte. Dessert was vanilla crèmeux with sour cherry confit and walnut frangipane, as well as ice cream with honey from the White House.

Trump has sought to one-up Xi after Beijing

The dinner came after the president took the unusual step of personally greeting Xi and his wife on Wednesday as they arrived at Joint Base Andrews outside Washington. Normally, presidents wait for their state visit guests to arrive at the White House itself before offering a formal welcome.

Thursday's dinner was packed with technology industry titans like Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, Google and Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai, OpenAI President and co-founder Greg Brockman, and Dell Technologies chairman and CEO Michael Dell.

During his own visit to Beijing in May, Xi hosted Trump for a state dinner that unfolded beneath grand chandeliers in the Great Hall of the People. That event also included many tech luminaries, such as Tim Cook, formerly Apple's CEO, and Musk.

It was all a stark departure from 2015, when then-President Barack Obama was preparing to host Xi for a state visit and Trump — in the midst of his first presidential run — criticized all the hubbub.

"Just take them to McDonald's and go back to the negotiating table," Trump said then, during a rally in South Carolina. He later conceded on Fox News Channel that Xi might at least be worthy of getting "probably a double-size Big Mac."

Yemen's civil war returns and overwhelms hospitals with 'a very dangerous situation'

By FATMA KHALED, AHMED AL-HAJ and CARA ANNA Associated Press

ADEN, Yemen (AP) — Tarek al-Salami, aged 7, sat in a diaper, looking frail. Normally, the malnutrition and diarrhea that weakened his tiny frame would have been treated within a few days, but nothing is normal in Yemen anymore.

Tarek's father carried him on foot from the southwestern city of Mokha as Iran-backed rebels swept in this month, bringing a return to civil war. The boy reached a hospital two days later in the government-held city of Aden, 270 kilometers (170 miles) away but it said it had no beds. Like others, it was overwhelmed by the wounded. They finally found a therapeutic feeding center.

The boy arrived in "acute crisis" after the delay in care, according to the center's director, Dr. Arwa Atef, and he only began walking again on Wednesday, over a week later.

"I swear to God, when I look at him, my heart breaks," said his father, Mohammed al-Salami. "He looks almost lifeless."

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This is how the already fragile health system in the Arab world's poorest nation is collapsing, caught in a new front of the Iran war. The Associated Press spoke with patients, medical workers and aid groups in Yemen and outside as medicines run short and some workers flee. A few facilities have been overtaken by the fighting.

Some health centers are turning pregnant women and others in need away to focus on trauma patients. Vulnerable children are filling incubators and sharing beds. Millions of people are affected by the fighting backed by two of the Middle East's biggest powers as Iran-backed Houthis advance against government forces supported by Saudi Arabia. Over 130,000 have fled their homes.

The feeding center where Tarek and other children are recovering is struggling to cope with a rise in patients in a country where many already were hungry, Atef said.

"We can't keep up with the situation," she said.

Overwhelmed hospitals focus on the wounded

Most hospitals and primary health centers affected by the escalation in fighting closed for the first 48 hours before resuming services, the United Nations said. But some are now harder to reach. The Houthis have seized the Red Sea coast, including key ports for aid.

Less than 10% of the affected health centers are fully equipped with the trauma services that wounded people need, the World Health Organization has said. With resources thin, a painful triage is underway.

Fewer facilities are handling the pregnancy-related emergencies that were killing three Yemeni women every day even before the escalation, said Francesco Galtieri with the United Nations Population Fund. That's one of the highest rates in the Arab world.

"Around 2,000 pregnant women are on the move," with over 200 expected to deliver in the next week or so, he said.

Maternity wards have been converted into emergency rooms in some hospitals close to the fighting, said Hashem Osseiran, an International Committee of the Red Cross spokesperson, adding that many lack enough anesthesia drugs, oxygen supplies and sterile surgical gloves.

At a hospital treating mothers and children in the government-held city of Marib, Dr. Ahmed Modhesh said they are seeing more emergency maternity cases as other city hospitals focus on the wounded.

But his facility, Martyr Mohamed Hayel hospital, lacks intensive care specialists and doesn't have enough generators to keep all departments running if the power goes out.

A midwife said the number of childbirths the hospital is handling has basically doubled to about 80. One woman with an ectopic pregnancy arrived bleeding heavily, yet the under-resourced staff were still able to perform an emergency procedure to save her life, the midwife said. She spoke on condition of anonymity because she wasn't authorized to speak with the media.

Yemen's healthcare was in trouble before the fighting

Even before the escalation, hospitals in Yemen relied on limited government support and citizen donations. Some were not able to fully pay staff.

Now, "we are in a very dangerous situation," said Fahd al-Nazari, manager of the health office in Taiz province, which has received most of the newly displaced. "Within a day or two, or a week at most, we might have to close down (some facilities). In fact, some hospitals are already closed."

Three of the province's 17 hospitals are no longer under government control. Hospitals across Taiz had received around 635 casualties, including 112 bodies, as of Thursday after the Houthis captured Mokha, al-Nazari said. They included civilians and combatants.

"We're exhausted receiving wounded people under these circumstances," al-Nazari said.

Medical supplies and fuel are running short after key supply routes between Mokha and Taiz were largely cut off, forcing convoys onto mountainous roads unsuitable for large trucks. Even before the escalation, public hospitals in the province had just one MRI machine available.

At the Yemeni-Swedish Maternity and Children's Hospital in Taiz, incubators were full and two or three children were sharing beds in the emergency room, general manager Sami al-Sharabi said.

"I'm scared that the conflict would reach the hospital," he said. "Any explosive that could hit us would

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destroy the hospital, as some parts of the building are already weak.”

Even hospitals in Aden, where Yemen’s government is based, struggle to cope. Doctors Without Borders said more than 60 wounded people had been admitted to Al-Gamhouria hospital in a week. Many needed urgent surgery or blood transfusions.

Fighters are also seeking emergency treatment

At a private hospital treating rebels in the Houthi-held city of Sanaa, two medical officials last week said it was overwhelmed with hundreds of wounded. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

It was not clear how many Houthi fighters have been killed or wounded overall. Few aid agencies operate in rebel-controlled areas, as the group has detained and harassed dozens of humanitarian workers. Experts say the Houthis have struggled to pay salaries to civil servants, including public sector doctors and diverted most tax revenues to their military wing.

The ICRC, one of the few global agencies still able to operate in Sanaa, last week said it delivered 22 tons of badly needed medical supplies to support “overwhelmed” hospitals.

There is also little information about casualties among government forces, though one government-allied group has said over 1,500 of its fighters were wounded.

Some medical workers have fled the conflict, making it harder to find care.

In Mokha, Doctors Without Borders said its small team was still working “despite the severe shortage of health professionals.” The charity’s deputy coordinator of operations in Yemen, Emmanuel Massart, said three other hospitals there had closed for days before resuming services.

The need for hospital funding and resources in Yemen remains urgent, Massart said, speaking to the AP from Brussels, even as he acknowledged that resupplying remains a major challenge because of closed roads.

“We should not forget about Yemen,” he said. It “remains one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.”

Israel’s Netanyahu, at UN, calls accusations of genocide in Gaza ‘the biggest lie of the century’

By SAM METZ Associated Press

Lashing out at his country’s critics, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu angrily dismissed allegations of Israeli genocide in Gaza as “the biggest lie of the century” in a defiant speech to the U.N. General Assembly that asserted his nation’s right to wage war against Iran. Scores of delegates trooped out of the hall in protest.

Netanyahu addressed the plenum after days of speeches by world leaders condemning Israel’s war in Gaza and accusing him of orchestrating a genocide against the Palestinian people. At times, the Israeli leader, facing a tough race for re-election next month, became emotional and indignant as he lectured his critics, among them New York’s mayor.

Netanyahu, his voice rising in emphasis, said attacking Iran “was one of the easiest decisions I’ve ever had to make” and denounced as “moral cowards” a mass of delegates who walked out of the hall when he took the podium to speak.

“In defending itself, Israel is also defending many of the countries whose delegates just left this hall,” Netanyahu said. “In fact, I want you to know that many of their leaders even thank us privately for taking out Iran’s nukes.”

When Netanyahu walked to the rostrum, a mix of cheers, boos and mass walkouts erupted. Scores of delegates marched out and a majority of visible seats sat empty afterward. “Order in the hall, please,” General Assembly President Khalilur Rahman said repeatedly.

“If there are any other moral cowards who have not yet left this hall, please do so now,” Netanyahu said.

A speech aimed at a domestic audience

Netanyahu’s remarks — which at times sounded like a stump speech — were aimed largely at the audi-

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ence at home as the country prepares for elections on Oct. 27. It was delivered during the evening prime time in Israel and filled with standard talking points used to defend policies in the occupied West Bank and treatment of the Palestinians.

Netanyahu reminded the assembly of the scale of the Oct. 7, 2023, attack in which Hamas militants killed about 1,200 people.

"This is equal to 40,000 innocent Americans slaughtered in less than 24 hours," he said, or 16 times the death count of the 9/11 attacks that left nearly 3,000 people dead in New York and more in Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon.

Netanyahu said the attack left Israel with no choice but to hit Hamas hard. Many governments have accused Israel of committing war crimes, and Netanyahu himself faces an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court accusing him of crimes against humanity.

He predicted the fall of Iran's government

While the war in Iran has been inconclusive and caused havoc on the global economy, Netanyahu insisted he had made the right decision.

He thanked U.S. President Donald Trump for taking decisive action against Iran, and predicted Iran's theocratic government would fall. Trump made a similar assertion at the outset of the war that began nearly seven months ago, but the Iranian government appears to remain firmly in charge.

Netanyahu, known for using visual aids during his General Assembly speeches, at one point held up a pager while reminding the audience of the Sept. 17, 2024, attack in which Israel remotely detonated thousands of pagers that had been distributed to the Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group in Lebanon. The pager attack wounded more than 3,000 people and killed 12, including two children.

He says reports of settler violence in the West Bank are distorted

Netanyahu dismissed incidents of Israeli settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank as a "handful of young juvenile delinquents" throwing stones, chopping down olive trees and lighting fires.

"I can't stand that. I won't stand for vigilantism," the prime minister said before accusing foreign leaders and the international press of distorting the scale of violence in the West Bank.

Netanyahu's government is dominated by settlers and their allies, and has made few arrests in the wave of settler violence.

Israel captured the West Bank and east Jerusalem in the 1967 war, and the Palestinians want both as part of their future state. The Palestinians and most of the international community view the settlements as illegal and as an obstacle to creating a viable, contiguous Palestinian state.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has reported more than 1,600 settler attacks this year.

At least 104 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli settlers or soldiers this year, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Health Ministry. Four Israelis have been killed by Palestinians over the same period. This week, a settler was killed and the son of Israel's ambassador to the U.S. badly wounded in separate Palestinian attacks.

Israel is increasingly isolated on the world stage

Netanyahu also accused New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani of spreading lies about Israel and endangering Jewish New Yorkers with his criticism of the country's military actions in Gaza.

Before the prime minister arrived in New York, Mamdani called him a "war criminal" and pushed for his arrest. The mayor has acknowledged that New York does not have the authority to execute an International Criminal Court warrant but urged federal authorities to do so.

In past years, Netanyahu has used his General Assembly speech to both denounce the United Nations as biased and make Israel's case to world leaders. His address is the cornerstone of an abbreviated trip to the United States as Israel has grown increasingly isolated throughout the war in Gaza.

The war in Gaza began on Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas-led militants attacked Israel, killing around 1,200 people and kidnapping 251. At least 73,922 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's subsequent offensive, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, part of the Hamas-run government whose numbers are generally

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considered reliable by the international community.

A ceasefire agreed to by Israel and Hamas last October halted the heaviest of the fighting and led to the release of the remaining hostages yet further steps have since stalled. Israel maintains control of most of Gaza and continues to carry out airstrikes on Palestinians near military-held zones. Hamas not disarmed or relinquished power and there has been no progress toward reconstruction in the mostly destroyed territory.

Netanyahu has said no Palestinian state will be established while he is Israel's leader and has argued that the Palestinian Authority is not a partner for peace.

Netanyahu followed the Palestinian president's remote speech

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas also addressed the U.N. General Assembly earlier Thursday, delivering prerecorded remarks from his office in Ramallah after the United States denied him a visa to attend the gathering for the second year in a row.

Though world leaders have repeatedly invoked the plight of Palestinians in speeches throughout the week, Abbas urged the international community to take more tangible action against Israel.

"How long will some countries continue to remain silent about Israel, or continue supplying it with weapons that it uses against our people?" Abbas said. "What, then, is the international community waiting for before it acts to protect the Palestinian people?"

Powerful Hurricane Polo drenches Mexico's coast as Nolo takes aim at Hawaii

By MEGAN JANETSKY and GABRIELA AOUN ANGUIERA Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Residents along Mexico's west coast stacked sandbags to fortify beachfront shops and evacuated their homes, while Hawaii's Big Island and Maui braced for potentially catastrophic flooding, as separate hurricanes swirled in the Pacific on Thursday.

Nolo became a hurricane in the Pacific Ocean on Thursday night and was expected to strengthen while turning toward the Big Island, the National Hurricane Center said. Forecasters warned that the Big Island could see rainfall totals of 15 to 30 inches (38 to 76 centimeters), with higher amounts possible through Saturday. The island of Maui also could be hit with life-threatening floods, the hurricane center said.

Meanwhile, heavy rains from powerful Hurricane Polo could cause torrential flooding and landslides in Mexico, according to the U.S. hurricane center. In the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, seawater already swept through homes Thursday and left wooden planks and furniture strewn on the streets.

Polo has fluctuated between Category 4 and 5, both major-hurricane strength. It was expected to regain Category 5 status on Friday, then gradually weaken Friday night and Saturday, the hurricane center said.

After skirting Mexico's coast, Polo was expected to move farther out to sea Thursday night and Friday before hooking back toward land to the north on Saturday.

The series of powerful storms comes as the weather phenomenon El Niño prompts major environmental shifts across the world, fueling drought in some areas and flooding in others. El Niño traditionally dampens the Atlantic hurricane season, while it tends to rev up tropical cyclone activity in the Pacific with moist air and little wind shear.

Hawaii has been battered this year by major flooding in the spring, an earthquake and two other hurricanes since mid-August.

"In my 20 years of experience here, I've never seen three hurricane watches for the islands in the same year," said John Bravender of the National Weather Service in Honolulu.

Polo could trigger flooding and mudslides in Mexico

Mexican authorities were opening shelters and clearing people from beaches, while coastal residents tried to protect businesses from getting swept away. People in high-risk areas were being evacuated, though authorities didn't immediately say how many.

Much of the worry from locals comes from hurricanes in past years that devastated cities along the Pacific coast. Hurricane Otis in 2023 unexpectedly plunged Acapulco into turmoil for weeks.

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"So many people said it wouldn't happen and then it did. After that, you're left on edge," said Gonzalo Ramírez, a bartender in the city.

Polo posed the biggest threat to Guerrero and Michoacán, neighboring states in southwest Mexico that share a long coastline scattered with small ports, tourist towns and fishing villages. Much of the area is marked by poverty, and residents routinely complain they are left to fend for themselves during natural disasters.

Mexican authorities have deployed 15,000 security personnel across the coast and suspended schools.

In Lázaro Cárdenas, a port city in Michoacán that was hit with high surf, locals and government officials were clearing out piles of wooden planks from a number of destroyed ramadas and shoveling thick mud coating much of the town.

Alicia Contreras said the walls and roof of her restaurant had been severely damaged by 15-foot (4.5-meter) waves. As officers and family helped pick through the damaged house, Contreras worried how she would economically recover.

"This is huge because we have no other source of income. Now we're just surviving," Contreras said.

Nolo could flood parts of Hawaii still recovering from other storms

While the Big Island is expected to bear the brunt of Nolo, its full path remains uncertain, according to Bravender, the weather service's warning coordination meteorologist in Hawaii.

Most concerning, he said Thursday, is that the heaviest rain is likely to fall over the same southeastern region of the Big Island hit in August by Hurricane Lala and where grounds are still wet from additional precipitation.

"There are several communities that were isolated, flooded, roads that were washed out," he said. "It's that same area that is most under threat," Bravender said.

Hawaii officials told residents to put together emergency kits and the governor issued an emergency proclamation, activating more than 230 Hawaii National Guard members. Schools were closed for the rest of the week.

Hawaiian Electric, the state's primary utility, said crews that had been helping restore power in Kauai after this month's Hurricane Lowell would return to Oahu, Maui and the Big Island in preparation for the coming storm.

Odalys and Fay are not near land

A third storm in the Pacific, Hurricane Odalys, was centered far from land, roughly 1,110 miles (1,785 kilometers) west-southwest of the southern tip of Mexico's Baja California peninsula.

In the northern Atlantic Ocean, Tropical Storm Fay re-formed early Thursday, the U.S. hurricane center said. It was nearly 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) west-southwest of the Azores.

Tropical Storm Gonzalo formed in the Atlantic Ocean late Thursday, about 190 miles (306 kilometers) southeast of the Cape Verde islands off the coast of West Africa. The U.S. hurricane center said that if it stays on its current track, the storm will pass near or over portions of the islands Friday.

It's been an intense hurricane season in the Pacific and there's still a long way to go

By JOHN RABY Associated Press

It's already been an intense hurricane season in the Pacific Ocean — and there's still quite a ways to go.

Tropical storms have spawned in what seems like assembly-line fashion in recent weeks, as El Nino conditions that emerged in June have caused waters to grow warmer than normal, setting off a chain of unusual weather around much of the world.

"It's ramping up to be perhaps the strongest El Nino on record," University of Miami hurricane expert Brian McNoldy said.

The number of hurricanes in the eastern Pacific has already surpassed what occurs in a typical season. This week alone, Hurricane Polo drenched Mexico's Pacific coast as it seesaws between Category 4 and 5. And in storm-weary Hawaii, there's the potential for catastrophic flooding from a growing Hurricane Nolo.

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During El Nino, low-level surface winds blowing from east to west across the Pacific are weakened or sometimes reversed. It causes a shift in the jet stream and drives record global heat, severe droughts, wildfires and shrinking water supplies.

El Ninos don't follow a regular schedule, occurring every two to seven years on average. Some can be mild. Others can pack a punch. McNoldy predicted that the current El Nino will peak during the coming winter but linger into 2027.

"It doesn't turn off right away," he said.

While the focus is on the increased number of Pacific storms, El Ninos conversely curtail hurricane activity in the Atlantic Ocean: Tropical weather activity in the Atlantic has been virtually silent this year.

A turbocharged hurricane year in the Pacific

Thanks to El Nino, both the eastern Pacific and the central Pacific have seen four more tropical storms than is normal to date with more than two months left in the hurricane season, said Matthew Rosencrans, lead hurricane season forecaster with NOAA's National Weather Service.

From 1991 to 2020, there was an average of 15 named storms in the eastern Pacific per season, which runs from May 15 to Nov. 30.

But surpassing the yearly average in September? "That's a different story," Rosencrans said.

What also sets this year's El Nino-fueled storms apart is that three Pacific hurricanes have reached Category 5 strength, tying a record set in 2002, also during an El Nino, he said.

The most active season on record in the eastern Pacific was 1992, when there were 25 named storms, Rosencrans said. For the central Pacific, it was 14 in 2015.

In 2015 there were nine major hurricanes, of Category 3 or higher, in the eastern Pacific, but no reported deaths. Due to El Nino, forecasters said the eastern Pacific storms formed farther west and tracked more westward, remaining over the open ocean throughout their cycle.

During another strong El Nino in 1997, hundreds of people died when Hurricane Pauline tore across Mexico's Pacific coast. That same year Tropical Storm Nora gave landlocked southwestern Arizona an unusual soaking. And a December storm in Southern California caused flooding that swept cars into a storm channel and prompted evacuations of some mobile home parks.

In 1998, El Nino was blamed for flooding in China that killed 4,150 people, most along the Yangtze River. Hawaii finds itself in the crosshairs again

Hawaii has felt the wrath of two hurricanes over the past month. Lala in August and Lowell in early September combined to destroy or damage more than 510 homes and cause \$168 million in damage to public infrastructure. Lala also caused \$21.5 million in damage to 38 schools.

Nolo, which strengthened to a hurricane Thursday night, is expected to make it three. Forecasters say the storm could drop rainfall amounts on Hawaii that are measured in feet, not inches.

On top of that, heavy rains in March caused the worst flooding to hit Hawaii in two decades. That was followed in May by a magnitude-6.0 earthquake, prompting Gov. Josh Green to remark that this year has been "unlike anything I can recall."

Two hurricanes came within 200 miles (320 kilometers) of Hawaii in 1957, but that did not happen again for more than a half century. Then it occurred in 2014, 2016 and 2018 before this year's predicted trifecta.

Meteorologists often worry about "preparedness fatigue," when communities gear up for storms that never arrive or fall short of their potential strength. But John Bravender, a weather service warning coordination meteorologist, said 2026 has yielded a different type of weariness in Hawaii.

"The fact that we've had these damaging impacts that keep happening, and as we're recovering from them, we have to get ready for the next event — that's a new one that really drains the resources and leads to this overall sense that this is a very busy hurricane season for us," he said.

Residents understand the risks and are getting more accustomed to preparing.

"I think community members realize how dangerous the weather can be, how important it is for them to be self-sufficient, have food, water and also look out for their neighbors," Bravender said.

Xi is wrapping his visit to Washington with a peek at the Constitution and Bill of Rights

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is taking Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit the National Archives on Friday, showing off the sacred texts of U.S. democracy to the leader of the world's most powerful communist country to cap off a three-day state visit criticized for being heavy on pomp and light on substance.

Xi is expected to depart Washington after touring the nation's vault of records, where the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are held. The two leaders have made a show of working to preserve harmony between the world's two largest economies, though there were no major breakthroughs on issues such as trade or the safety of artificial intelligence.

The visit comes as the U.S. celebrates the 250th anniversary of its founding, and Trump said Thursday that he wanted to show Xi "some of the greatest treasures of that proud history."

The Archives has a special exhibit marking the sesquicentennial, titled "The American Story," which highlights the country's accomplishments and advances, along with images depicting its darker moments.

Trump showed Xi one copy of the Declaration of Independence on Thursday — a wall-mounted copy he keeps in the Oval Office.

The U.S. president also said he wanted to show Xi artifacts about the relationship between the two countries. "Just as our ancestors reached across the ocean centuries ago to trade, to learn, and to build a better world, our two countries do really the same thing, and we're very proud of it," he said.

Xi's day will begin at the White House, where Trump and first lady Melania Trump will host the Chinese leader and his wife, Peng Liyuan, for tea.

The Trumps feted their guests Thursday night with a black-tie state dinner attended by technology industry titans. Earlier in the day, Trump gave Xi a personal tour of his White House flourishes, including a gallery wall of presidents and a new 100-foot-long (30-meter) granite helicopter landing pad — and pointed out his ballroom, still under construction. Melania Trump and Peng Liyuan toured the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art.

The two leaders also met behind closed doors for 90 minutes on Thursday, during which they discussed issues such as the Middle East, Ukraine and the Korean Peninsula, according to the official Chinese government readout of the meeting. The White House has not yet provided any information about the private talks.

Trump administration turns to Supreme Court as third-country deportations are thrown into question

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A ruling to halt deportations of people to countries other than their own threw a core immigration policy of the Trump administration into question, at least temporarily, and prompted a desperate appeal to the Supreme Court on Thursday.

The administration said the ruling by the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals came Wednesday just minutes before midnight, forcing the cancellation of a flight with 70 people that was headed to three countries. It said justices needed to step in to "halt that chaos" and said the flight cancellation "required a new round of diplomatic engagement with each of the three countries," which it did not name.

Plaintiffs for immigrants sought emergency relief from the appeals court Wednesday night, saying they heard from "multiple sources" that a deportation flight was scheduled the next day from Alexandria, Louisiana, to Burundi, Rwanda and the Central African Republic.

Within hours of that request, the appeals court said it was clarifying a ruling against the policy last week and said a previous order allowing flights to continue while legal challenges play out was no longer in effect.

Administration officials reacted furiously. Attorney General Todd Blanche said the order "in the dark of night" robbed authorities of "an entirely legal and valuable tool to stem the tide of illegal immigration."

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The justices previously allowed the deportation flights to temporarily continue when the case came before them last year.

The vast majority of people deported to countries other than their own have been sent to Mexico, but under a series of often-secret agreements, the administration has deported thousands of others to more than two dozen countries, from Liberia to Guyana.

Some have found themselves in countries they'd never heard of before their arrivals and held there against their will. Some also face serious safety risks, and are left with little choice except to return to the home countries they were fleeing.

This month, lawyers for two men deported to Equatorial Guinea said they were beaten and held at gunpoint in a hotel-turned-detention center by police who covered their heads with bags.

Trump's Republican administration has said that it sends people with final deportation orders to third countries when their homelands won't accept them or they can't be returned there. Those governments provide assurances that people won't be persecuted or tortured, attorneys said.

James Percival, the Department of Homeland Security's general counsel, said Wednesday on X that 25,000 people in the U.S. illegally have been deported to third countries, calling those deportations "an essential public safety tool."

The lower court order doesn't completely prohibit third-country deportations, but it requires the government give people a meaningful chance to object.

The Trump administration asked the Supreme Court to halt that decision, arguing it would force unreasonable delays and the reworking of agreements with foreign countries.

"The order below would again obstruct DHS from efficiently removing aliens ... by inordinately delaying third-country removal for any alien who voices a fear of persecution or torture in that country, no matter how frivolous or belated the claim," Solicitor General D. John Sauer wrote.

The appeal comes amid a sweeping immigration crackdown by the Trump administration, which has pledged to deport millions of people who are living in the United States illegally.

Famed radio and TV priest Fulton Sheen is beatified in St. Louis, putting him a step from sainthood

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — As tens of thousands of Catholic worshippers stood Thursday in a football stadium-turned-temporary cathedral, all eyes focused on a teenage boy walking solemnly toward the makeshift altar, accompanied by his parents and siblings.

James Fulton Engstrom carried an ornate vessel containing the relics of his namesake, the man whom the Catholic Church credits with his miraculous survival as a newborn — Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who died in 1979.

It was a highlight of a lengthy ceremony of beatification for the famed 20th century TV prelate, who will now be known as Blessed Fulton Sheen — one step away from sainthood.

Catholic devotees converged on St. Louis for the afternoon ceremony, taking place at the Dome at America's Center after years of delays. The indoor stadium was chosen because there wasn't a venue large enough in his home Diocese of Peoria, Illinois, to accommodate the anticipated crowd.

The ceremony comes 16 years to the month since James was born at home without a pulse and was rushed to the hospital, even as his parents and others prayed earnestly and asked Sheen to add his heavenly prayers, following the Catholic tradition of seeking the intercessions of departed holy people.

After a formal inquiry, the Catholic Church determined that James' resuscitation — when medical workers were about to declare him dead — was a miracle attributable to Sheen's prayers. To qualify for beatification, the Vatican typically requires one miracle attributed to the candidate.

James' mother, Bonnie Engstrom, said before the ceremony that she expected it would feel like a "fore-taste of heaven."

She said she'd been praying to Sheen throughout her pregnancy, and "it was just a very natural thing

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in the hardest hour of our life" to seek his help.

The presentation of the relics, placed on a pedestal by the altar, was a highlight of a lengthy service that began with a formal procession of hundreds of priests and scores of bishops, lasting more than half an hour and accompanied by robust organ, choral and orchestral music.

A 20th century bishop draws a new audience

About 50,000 tickets were distributed, according to organizers. The halls and exhibit areas were thronged in the morning by pilgrims — priests in cassocks, nuns in habits, families with young children in tow, elderly worshippers who recalled watching Sheen on TV. Scores of bishops, a thousand priests and hundreds of religious order members, seminarians and deacons participated.

Many thronged exhibit booths or stood in long lines to give confession. Others quietly meditated throughout the morning in a makeshift chapel in front of a Eucharist displayed on an altar, including some who knelt on the concrete floor. Bishops have been seeking to promote this traditional devotion, which Sheen practiced regularly.

The Vatican's top evangelization official, Filipino Cardinal Luis Tagle, the lead celebrant for the Mass, brought greetings from Pope Leo XIV, calling him Sheen's "fellow Illinoisan." Tagle called Sheen a model for evangelization, or sharing the faith.

Sheen was once a regular presence in the living rooms of millions of Americans — including that of the future pontiff, who says he watched Sheen's broadcasts while growing up in Chicago.

Attendees, many too young to have seen Sheen's broadcasts, said they've taken inspiration from his books and online videos.

"There's just a revival in the American church as a whole," said Joseph Punswick, a seminarian from the Diocese of Kansas City, Kansas. "To have an American pope, to have an American beatified man, is amazing to see. Look around. You see kids, you see young families, you see college kids."

Other attendees, such as Mary Chalupsky of Milford, Connecticut, recalled watching Sheen's original TV programs. "He brought so many to the faith," she said.

The service reflected the modern media era, with a livestreamed liturgy and electrical signs urging attendees to use the social media hashtag #celebratesheen.

Sheen's journey from Peoria to primetime

Sheen was a pioneering radio priest who quickly adopted the burgeoning medium of television in the 1950s, when he began hosting the Emmy-winning program, "Life is Worth Living." Dressed in a cassock, cape and skullcap, he stood at a chalkboard and delivered moral and religious lessons without a narrow Catholic focus.

Sheen was born in 1895 in the small town of El Paso, Illinois, and raised in Peoria. After becoming a priest and earning a doctorate in philosophy, he became a professor at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

He became known for his academic lectures and his plainspoken addresses from the pulpit and the broadcast studio. He often signed off with the benediction, "God love you."

Sheen appeared in a Time magazine cover article, and he guided celebrities and others converting to Catholicism.

He met with popes and spoke at the reformist Second Vatican Council. He railed against communism, though he opposed the Vietnam War.

Sheen raised funds and traveled the world on behalf of Catholic missions. He served as a bishop in New York State, retiring as an archbishop. After his death at 84, he was buried at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York until his niece won a court battle in 2019 to move his body to Peoria's Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, which now draws pilgrims to his tomb.

The Illinois teen tied to Sheen's path to sainthood

The late Pope Francis approved the beatification, attributing to Sheen the miracle of James' resuscitation.

James was born at home without a pulse in September 2010 and rushed to the hospital. Medical workers attempted to resuscitate him but were about to declare him deceased when his heart began beating normally, Engstrom and other witnesses said.

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Bonnie Engstrom said she and her husband chose Sheen for James' patron after discovering the prelate's old videos, adding that Sheen's Midwestern-accented voice reminded her of her grandfather and great-grandfather. "He's like a local boy," she said at a news conference.

James, who just turned 16, has a devotion to Sheen, but he's largely avoiding the media spotlight. "He's a delightful young man, but he's still just a teenage boy, and he needs to be given the space and the grace to have his own journey of life," his mother said.

Sheen's beatification backstory

The beatification was originally scheduled for 2019, but the Vatican delayed the ceremony. The Diocese of Rochester, which Sheen briefly led in the 1960s, requested the delay out of caution, due to legal investigations taking place then into the oversight of priests accused of sexual abuse across New York State.

Church officials later concluded that Sheen's record gave no cause for further delay, and plans for the ceremony resumed. Pope Leo approved the beatification earlier this year.

Monsignor Jason Gray, executive director of the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Foundation, said church investigators review records and interview witnesses before determining whether a healing qualifies as a miracle. He said there are now six more cases under investigation; a second miracle would qualify Sheen for sainthood under Vatican rules.

Peoria Bishop Louis Tylka said he believes the wait for canonization will be shorter than for the beatification, especially with an Illinois-born pope who's "very much aware of who Sheen is and how he influenced his own life."

California Supreme Court orders Riverside County sheriff to return 650,000 seized ballots

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A Republican California sheriff must return more than a half-million ballots he seized for an investigation into unfounded voting improprieties in a special election last year, the state Supreme Court ruled Thursday.

Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco in February seized approximately 650,000 ballots from a November 2025 special election on statewide congressional redistricting favorable to Democrats and pushed by Gov. Gavin Newsom. The measure easily passed statewide, and won in Bianco's county by roughly 80,000 votes.

The court called the ballots' seizure "unlawful," saying California law requires ballots to remain in the custody and control of election officials, even during a criminal investigation.

Bianco said in an email message to his supporters that he will comply with the court's order.

"We are very disappointed and wholeheartedly disagree with the court's ruling," Bianco said in a statement shared later Thursday with The Associated Press.

Election officials watched the case with an eye to the November midterms

Bianco's ballot investigation came as President Donald Trump repeatedly disputed the results of the 2020 election, citing unsubstantiated instances of fraud. Trump's administration in January seized ballots and other documents from an election office in Georgia. Some Republicans have mirrored Trump's rhetoric on voting in their states.

Election officials and civil rights groups have been following the Bianco case carefully as they brace for the possibility that Trump or his allies may try to seize ballots in November.

Democratic Attorney General Rob Bonta immediately launched a legal challenge after the seizure, arguing the sheriff had no authority over election materials and warning his action was designed to sow distrust in elections. He ordered Bianco to return the ballots, but Bianco did not.

"The Court has now made clear that this kind of defiance cannot stand, that the Attorney General has the authority to intervene when sheriffs take improper action, and that voted ballots belong in the custody of elections officials," Bonta said Thursday.

Sheriff seized the ballots after receiving a complaint about the vote count

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Bianco said he confiscated the election materials after receiving a complaint from a local citizens group that the count was off. The group said it found a gap between the number of ballots cast and the number of ballots received in the election for the measure, sparked by a nationwide redistricting fight.

The group said it found a roughly 45,000-vote gap between the number of ballots cast and the number of ballots received by Riverside County in the special election for Proposition 50, the measure that redrew California's congressional districts to favor Democrats.

Riverside County Registrar of Voters Art Tinoco said the group misread ballot data and that the actual gap was 103, well within the margin of error set by California's secretary of state.

At the time, Bianco was one of two prominent Republicans running for governor in a crowded June primary. He did not advance to the general election and later announced plans to seek reelection as sheriff in 2028.

The University of California, Los Angeles Voting Rights Project also sued the sheriff and the Riverside County Registrar of Voters on behalf of several voters. Xavier Becerra, a former state attorney general and Democrat running for governor, was part of the UCLA lawsuit.

The state Supreme Court heard arguments in both cases last month.

Bianco began his own recount

Bianco began recounting the vote shortly after seizing the ballots, using sheriff's officials under the supervision of a special master appointed by a court. But he suspended it days later, citing mounting legal challenges. He stopped the count after the California Supreme Court ordered him to do so.

Attorney Bradley Hertz, representing Bianco, argued before the court that the sheriff had a legal duty to open the investigation after receiving the complaint and followed the penal code to carry out that investigation, first issuing search warrants in February, but the court disagreed.

"If election misconduct is suspected, the Elections Code provides several mechanisms for law enforcement to review and examine ballots without compromising their integrity," the court wrote.

The court ruled Thursday that a search warrant does not override the state's electoral law.

"These are the voters' ballots. They must be protected through the processes the Legislature has established. This ruling provides important clarity for election officials, law enforcement, and voters across California," said Chad Dunn, legal director and co-founder of the UCLA Voting Rights Project.

On Saturday, Newsom signed a bill that would prevent anyone from seizing ballots.

Court finds state attorney general orders are binding

The court also settled whether the state's attorney general has authority over county sheriffs, saying the attorney general's orders are binding. Bianco had argued that an attorney general's role is that of an adviser.

Bianco said in an email message to his supporters that while he will comply with the court's rulings, he "will not obey the message behind them — that local law enforcement works for Sacramento, not for the people who elected us."

Man who was shot during 2024 Trump campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, has died

By GENE JOHNSON and JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

James Copenhagen, one of three campaign rally attendees shot in 2024 during an assassination attempt on then-candidate Donald Trump, has died in Pittsburgh, his lawyer said Thursday. He was 76.

Copenhagen was in the bleachers during the event in Butler, Pennsylvania, when a 20-year-old gunman opened fire from a nearby rooftop, grazing Trump's right ear with one bullet. Copenhagen was struck in the arm and in the abdomen, wounds that left him with lingering injuries and walking with a cane.

Two other attendees were also shot — David Dutch, who survived, and Corey Comperatore, who shielded his family from gunfire and was killed.

Copenhagen died Wednesday at Allegheny Health Network's West Penn Hospital in Pittsburgh, according to a statement from the Allegheny County medical examiner cited in local media accounts.

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Copenhaver's lawyer, Joseph Feldman, said in a statement issued on behalf of the family that he died surrounded by loved ones. The statement did not specify if his death was directly related to the injuries he suffered at the rally.

Copenhaver and his wife, Marianne Copenhaver, sued the federal government in June, alleging that the Secret Service and Department of Homeland Security had "utterly failed" to provide appropriate security at the rally. Copenhaver's injuries required multiple surgeries, including a transection of his colon, and he had lingering kidney and other damage, including a loss of feeling in his leg. The lawsuit described the wounds as "debilitating, grievous, permanent and life altering."

The family's statement Thursday called Copenhaver above all else a devoted husband, father and grandfather who instilled the values of hard work, integrity and the service to others in his children.

"James's dedication to this great country was a defining part of his life," it said. "As a veteran, he proudly served our nation in the armed forces, and his love of country never wavered. James was a true American patriot who believed deeply in the freedoms and ideals upon which this nation was founded, and he embodied the very best traits of our great nation."

In a statement posted to social media, Trump on Thursday called Copenhaver "a true American Patriot."

"Jim showed tremendous bravery, courageously continuing to FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT, and maintaining a positive spirit despite unimaginable hardships," Trump wrote.

40 days to midterms, election officials say new US cyber plan comes too late

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The nation's cybersecurity agency on Thursday released an election infrastructure security plan 40 days before November's midterms, laying out potential threats to election systems and listing services it would offer to election officials to protect the vote.

Election officials said the plan is both inadequate and belated after the administration gutted the agency's election security work last year, prompting the officials to pay for private services to ensure they were prepared for the upcoming elections.

"For them to come in five weeks before the election, yeah, nice effort," said Nevada's Democratic Secretary of State Cisco Aguilar, who added that he would have liked to see the federal government provide more funding for cybersecurity, rather than Nevada taxpayers having to pay for it.

Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin had originally promised to release the plan by mid-August as part of the Trump administration's move to kickstart election security assistance after a hiatus. He announced the plan at the same time he threatened election officials for not cooperating with the administration's preferred methods to hunt down noncitizen voting, a phenomenon that research shows is extremely rare.

The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which is housed under the Department of Homeland Security, has since its founding in 2018 helped warn state and local election officials about potential threats from foreign governments.

But CISA, as it's known, was largely absent from that role in last year's elections after the Trump administration dismantled much of its role in election security. The administration cut some 1,000 employees from CISA and slashed \$10 million from two cybersecurity initiatives, including one dedicated to helping state and local election officials.

CISA has also gone the entirety of Trump's second term without a Senate-confirmed director, instead cycling through a series of acting leaders.

Plan refers to 'consistent' support that many election officials say has been lacking

The 13-page document released Thursday warns of various threats to election security, including software vulnerabilities, hacks of voter registration databases, insider threats and physical security incidents, such as bomb threats that targeted several polling locations in the 2024 elections.

But it affirms that many longstanding election practices can address such threats and says the agency's

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goal is "to ensure the American people can trust voting systems and know that physical safety measures will be in place when they go to their assigned polling locations to cast their votes."

It states that DHS has "consistently supported CISA's delivery of cybersecurity and physical security services to election officials," something numerous election officials around the country have said isn't true.

Multiple secretaries of state told The Associated Press that services previously provided by CISA, such as live tabletop exercises and penetration tests to evaluate security of their systems, were not available in the lead-up to this year's midterms.

Minnesota Secretary of State Scott Simon, a Democrat, said in August that his office expects to spend roughly \$250,000 on private vendors to conduct penetration testing, which can expose security vulnerabilities and recommend actionable fixes.

Shenna Bellows, the Democratic secretary of state in Maine, told the AP the same month that communications with CISA had been "sporadic and irregular, to say the least." She said it would be helpful if the Trump administration could restore intelligence briefings that used to be granted to election officials about threats from foreign adversaries, but noted that trust with federal officials had been broken with the cuts to the agency.

Thursday's plan doesn't mention any specific 2026 threats from adversaries like Russia, Iran or China, all of whom have sought to meddle in U.S. elections — either directly through hacking or indirectly through influence campaigns.

Kris Warner, the Republican secretary of state in West Virginia, said Thursday that some of CISA's assistance to his state had been continual throughout the Trump administration, including no-cost reviews of its public-facing websites for cybersecurity issues.

Warner acknowledged CISA had cut back under the Trump administration but said he views the agency "as a resource and not as a service provider" and said his office had last year hired a departing CISA election security adviser who has helped fill any gaps that may exist.

Report follows August call between CISA and election officials

In early August, two CISA officials — acting director Nick Anderson and assistant director for integrated operations Jim Harrell — joined a National Association of Secretaries of State call attended by a bipartisan group of secretaries of state, according to several election administrators.

The call grew tense when Arizona's Democratic Secretary of State Adrian Fontes voiced his concerns about the withdrawal of federal resources.

Fontes told the AP at the time that he told the CISA officials he didn't trust them. He said it seemed to him the officials were there "to cover their butts."

"They even acknowledged on the call that it was too late for them to do anything for 2026," he said.

Simon said the officials appeared interested in rebuilding relationships and previewing their future plans, which he appreciated. But he said the effort at goodwill came later than election officials needed.

"Secretaries of state have already moved on and sought other partners and other resources for the services that CISA has retreated from over the last year and a half," Simon said.

In Michigan, a voting rights group has tried to fill the gap

In Michigan, where mail ballots have already been sent out for the Nov. 3 elections, Deputy Secretary of State Aghogho Edevbie said the state's relationship with CISA has been "nonexistent" this year despite working together closely in previous election cycles.

"If the federal government wants to be helpful, they can't do so at the 11th hour," the Democrat said.

Ashiya Brown, the Michigan state director of the voting rights group All Voting Is Local, agreed. She noted the new plan says CISA has 10 regional directors to support election administrators but still doesn't answer her biggest question.

"Does CISA still have the people and capacity to provide that support when clerks need it?" she asked. "I'm glad CISA has put forward a plan, but what matters now is whether the support described in it reaches local election officials before November."

CISA has been hiring on its website for new positions, Brown said, but it's unclear whether they are all staffed yet.

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Meanwhile, Brown, a former security official with the Michigan Department of State, said her group has hired former CISA employees to help provide training and other support to election clerks and fill the gap.

Edevbie said even without collaboration with CISA, he is confident the state's elections are secure.

"We are always prepared to defend our elections and to ensure that every voter who is eligible to cast a ballot can do so here in Michigan," he said.

Homeland Security defends officers in immigrant's fatal car crash in Michigan

By ED WHITE Associated Press

Federal immigration officers were about a half-mile away when a man who was illegally in the U.S. crashed a car at high speed and died in Michigan last weekend, authorities said Thursday, attempting to rebut any claim that they were in hot pursuit.

The death of Mario Coronado Juarez has angered friends and activists, and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has directed state police to investigate the Sunday morning crash in Grand Rapids.

Juarez, a native of Guatemala, apparently was not the specific target of officers. But he was driving a car that was registered to another person who was also in the U.S. illegally and wanted back in Guatemala, the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement.

"As officers attempted the stop to confirm the identity of the driver, the driver of the vehicle fled at a high rate of speed," DHS said. "In the interest of public safety, ICE officers immediately discontinued the enforcement action."

"A short time later, officers saw smoke nearly half a mile from the attempted stop and discovered the vehicle had crashed into a tree and caught fire," DHS said.

The agency said officers tried to help Juarez and put out the fire before Grand Rapids first responders arrived. Juarez, who was in his 30s, died at the scene.

ICE officers have followed and arrested people believed to be targets who turn out to be someone else. But as the agency rapidly expands with the hiring of 12,000 officers, its long-held practices are getting more scrutiny.

In Evanston, Illinois, a U.S. citizen was left bloodied on the side of the road Sunday after a confrontation with immigration officers who mistook him for a fugitive, police said. Homeland Security said the man initially refused to identify himself despite "lawful commands."

Grand Rapids Mayor David LaGrand supports a state police investigation of Juarez's death. The city police department said it had no role Sunday until called to the crash site.

"While we don't know what Mario was thinking and feeling, we know that his death happened in the context of a national effort to create fear among our immigrant neighbors," LaGrand said.

Juarez was supporting a wife and three children by working in construction in Grand Rapids and saving money to build a home for them in Guatemala, where they live, said Gema Lowe, an immigrant rights activist.

She led a chant of Juarez's name at a plaza outside city hall Tuesday and said he had died because of ICE's "vicious persecution of immigrant workers."

Democratic U.S. Rep. Hillary Scholten, who represents Grand Rapids, sent a detailed letter to ICE that included a request that any video recorded by officers be preserved.

A shaky day for oil prices and the bond market leaves US stocks not far from where they started

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After whipping through a couple sudden reversals, stocks ended a shaky day of trading on Wall Street Thursday roughly where they began.

The S&P 500 finished nearly flat and edged down by less than 0.1% following several turns between

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losses and gains. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 161 points, or 0.3%, and the Nasdaq composite added less than 0.1%.

Stocks have slowed their rally since the S&P 500 climbed to the brink of its all-time high earlier this week as pressure from the bond market has cranked higher.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury jumped to 5.20% from 5.11% late Wednesday and is back to where it was in 2007. High yields slow the overall economy by making it more expensive to borrow money, while also undercutting prices for stocks and other investments.

Yields climbed through the morning, which pushed stocks downward, until they took a sudden turn lower in the midday hours. The 10-year yield dropped from nearly 5.17% to less than 5.13% in about 20 minutes before ultimately turning higher again.

Yields once again were following the track of oil prices, which have been scattershot because of uncertainty about when the war with Iran will allow crude oil to flow freely again from the Middle East.

The price for a barrel of Brent crude in the most actively traded part of the market went from \$102 to roughly \$99 in a matter of minutes midday Thursday. It later rose to settle at \$100.22, up 2.1% from the prior day.

It's not just worries about expensive oil and inflation that have sent Treasury yields higher. The U.S. economy continues to expand, which also supports yields.

On Thursday, a report showed fewer U.S. workers applied for unemployment benefits last week and further strengthened expectations for the economy.

Such numbers could convince the Federal Reserve that the economy can withstand more hikes to short-term interest rates. The Fed raised its main interest rate last week for the first time in three years in hopes of slowing the economy and removing some of the fuel for inflation.

Traders now see better than a coin flip's chance that the Fed could raise rates twice more by the end of the year, according to data from CME Group.

So far, the solid overall economy has helped U.S. companies continue to deliver strong growth in profits. That in turn has helped their stock prices remain relatively strong despite worries about war, inflation and tariffs.

"The headlines have turned more ominous, but the underlying drivers of growth remain intact," strategists at Barclays wrote in a report. "As long as AI-related investment, US corporate profitability, and consumer spending continue to beat expectations, the economy and markets seem capable of absorbing tighter central banks and higher rates."

Stitch Fix became one of the latest U.S. companies late Wednesday to report better quarterly results than analysts expected. But its stock nevertheless tumbled 21.6% after it said "a more challenging consumer environment" could hold back its revenue growth this upcoming fiscal year.

Darden Restaurants, the company behind Olive Garden and LongHorn Steakhouse, fell 3% after reporting a profit for the latest quarter that matched analysts' expectations.

High yields in the bond market hurt prices for all kinds of stocks, and they often hit hardest on those seen as the most expensive. That puts the target on AI stocks, which soared for years in the frenzy around the technology.

Higher yields also make it more expensive for companies to borrow money to build AI data centers, which could slow their construction and restrain demand for AI chips.

Nvidia slipped 0.4% and was the heaviest weight on the S&P 500.

On the winning side of Wall Street was Everpure. The data storage and management company's stock jumped 11.2% after it stood by its financial forecasts for this fiscal year and said it expects revenue growth to accelerate in the following one.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 1.90 to 7,704.13 points. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 161.61 to 51,349.98, and the Nasdaq composite rose 3.34 to 26,939.37.

In stock markets abroad, indexes fell modestly around much of the world. A drop of 1.2% in Shanghai and gain of 0.8% in Tokyo were two of the bigger moves.

8 sailors in Lincoln carrier group attempted suicide on extended deployment, Navy leader says

By BEN FINLEY and KONSTANTIN TOROPIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Eight sailors attempted suicide while deployed with the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier strike group, which spent a record-setting uninterrupted time at sea supporting the Iran war, the Navy's top civilian leader said this week.

Acting Navy Secretary Hung Cao provided the information to Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand in a letter dated Tuesday after the New York Democrat inquired last month about the strike group's crew. The Lincoln's extended deployment drew the nation's attention following reports of crew stress and poor mental health, as well as supply shortages, including food and hygiene products.

Eight attempts in a strike group of 6,000 sailors over 10 months is actually low, experts say. The Navy reported 356 suicide attempts across the service in 2024, while there were more than 1,500 attempts among all active duty personnel that year, according to the latest annual report.

However, the reported attempts are not the best measure for conditions on the Lincoln and its supporting destroyers, particularly with no other additional details, said Dr. Harold Kudler, a former national lead for mental health services at the Department of Veterans Affairs and a retired VA psychiatrist.

"But something happened to get those families upset. Something happened to raise concerns about the health and well-being of those troops," Kudler said, referring to media reports that quoted sailors and their families. "It reverberated through the military and reverberated across the country. So we need to understand what that was because we don't need that to happen again."

Acting Navy secretary offers information following questions about mental health and hygiene

Gillibrand had asked Cao several questions focused on ship conditions, including about the availability of mental health support and healthy food as well as hygiene. The senator also asked if there were any suicides.

"There have been no suicides on board during this deployment," Cao wrote in the letter, which was obtained by The Associated Press and reported earlier by CNN. "Since the beginning of LINCOLN'S deployment, there have been a total of eight suicide attempts across the strike group — this number includes the LINCOLN crew and Sailors from the carrier wing, strike group and destroyer squadron staff, escorting destroyers, and all embarked aviation squadrons."

Cao wrote that the carrier deployed with a psychologist, a clinical social worker, a counselor, three behavioral health technicians and a therapy dog.

Cao said the Lincoln maintained adequate food supplies, but because combat operations limited resupply opportunities, meal options were reduced from two to one for a short time. However, he wrote that four nutritionally balanced meals were served daily.

Cao acknowledged delays in scheduled resupply shipments but said the Navy prioritized the delivery of hygiene products and established a rotation to streamline distribution to different squadrons. He also acknowledged piping failures on the carrier early in its deployment as well as temporary issues with desalination units.

Trump had downplayed reports on ship conditions

President Donald Trump had downplayed reports about conditions on the Lincoln, which left its homeport in San Diego in November, arrived in the Middle East in January in support of Iran operations, and spent a record-setting uninterrupted time at sea of more than 260 days.

The carrier and some of its supporting ships stopped in Thailand in early September on their way back home to California. The Lincoln's commanding officer, Capt. Dan Keeler, said then that the ship was heading home soon but may make further supply stops. He declined to say the exact date the strike group was expected back in the U.S.

Last month, Trump called the nearly nine months at sea that the sailors endured a "good period of time" but added that "over the years, we've had them out there much longer."

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Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also had said that conditions about the Lincoln were “completely misrepresented.”

Gillibrand slams the Trump administration for ‘deteriorating conditions’ for troops

Gillibrand took aim at Trump and Hegseth in a statement released this week in response to Cao’s letter.

“What Trump and Secretary Hegseth dismissed as ‘fake news’ turned out to be serious and deteriorating conditions for our service members,” she stated.

“Our troops and their families make immense sacrifices every single day, yet the president dismissed them with open disrespect,” Gillibrand said. “That this administration can find endless taxpayer dollars for bombs, ballrooms, and billionaires, but cannot take care of our service members, is completely unacceptable.”

Extended deployments of carriers wear on service members who are away from home for long periods and increase strain on the ship and its equipment. The Navy is enforcing a blockade on Iranian ports in the Strait of Hormuz, and the Trump administration has offered no clarity on how it intends to wind down the nearly seven-month-old war.

Kudler, the retired VA psychiatrist, said it can be challenging for troops counting down the days of their deployment to have it extended. He said the Lincoln could be a learning opportunity for the Navy.

“Let’s really do a serious look at what lessons have been learned and what we can do in the future,” he said, “to ensure that these kinds of deployments, if they are necessary, are easier on the service members and the families.”

Deaths of students at the University of Mississippi cast spotlight on kratom

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

A drug task force in Mississippi is urging people to avoid kratom after authorities found packages of the substance while investigating the deaths of two University of Mississippi students.

The warning Tuesday came despite no “confirmed information” that kratom contributed to either death, Lafayette County Metro Narcotics said in a news release. The students were found Monday afternoon in different locations, one on campus and the other off campus, a university spokesperson said.

The university on Thursday identified the students as Aidan Hamilton, a freshman from Englewood, Colorado, and Robert Strang, a junior from Atlanta. The school said in a statement that their families “have asked for privacy as they grieve.”

U.S. health officials and states have increasingly scrutinized kratom, an herbal extract that acts as a stimulant at low doses and a sedative at high doses, over the past decade. Kratom is legal at the federal level, but some state and local governments have banned the substance and federal authorities have issued warnings about its risks.

Toxicology reports aren’t yet available

Two state agencies were working to expedite toxicology reports for the students, Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves said in a statement Wednesday.

“Mississippi is praying for the families and friends of the two Ole Miss students during this incredibly difficult time,” Reeves said.

Authorities said they had no evidence the deaths were connected but noted the kratom found at the scenes was sold at a retail store. Officials did not name the store or say whether any criminal charges would be filed.

“Out of an abundance of caution, we encourage everyone to avoid kratom and any other medication or substance that was not prescribed to you or obtained from a trusted, regulated source,” the task force’s news release said.

Kratom is extracted from a tree native to Southeast Asia

It is used in capsules, powders and liquids that are often sold in gas stations or smoke shops. Proponents say that in its pure form, kratom is a safe, natural herbal supplement that can help manage pain, anxiety and depression and ease the effects of opioid withdrawal.

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Doctors who treat addiction, however, say people can quickly become dependent on it, leading to withdrawal symptoms. A U.S. Food and Drug Administration webpage is blunt: Don't use it.

The agency says it carries the risk of serious adverse effects, including liver toxicity, seizures and substance use disorder.

In rare cases, it's been associated with deaths, though kratom was usually used in combination with other drugs in those cases, and the contribution of kratom in the deaths is unclear, the agency says on its website.

A trade organization has pushed back

Mac Haddow, with the American Kratom Association, said the FDA and states that have banned kratom are conflating the natural product with synthetic and chemically manipulated ones, which are associated with adverse effects and even deaths.

Haddow, a senior fellow on public policy with the association, said he's heard numerous people tell lawmakers over the years how kratom has improved their lives.

"Some believe it saved their lives because it allowed them to get off of opioids," he said.

Podcast host Joe Rogan and Cindy Crawford's late son, Presley Gerber, have talked about their experiences using kratom.

Last year, the FDA recommended a ban on products with concentrated levels of 7-hydroxymitragynine, a chemical found in only trace amounts in natural kratom.

Mallory Pullman, managing director at Mississippi Poison Control, said she's seen an increase in such concentrated products in recent years, and consumers may not be able to distinguish them from natural kratom.

"Until you know what product you're working with, whether it's kratom or some of these highly concentrated derivatives, you really have to be careful about buying a product and just taking it arbitrarily," she said in a phone interview with The Associated Press.

Eleven states have banned kratom

Others, including Mississippi, have regulated it, in part by requiring people to be 21 or older to buy it. Both the city of Oxford and Lafayette County, where the University of Mississippi is located, have bans in place.

North Dakota Gov. Kelly Armstrong signed a bill this month restricting the sale of kratom products after declaring kratom a public health crisis this summer and calling a special legislative session to address it. The state has had 50 deaths associated with kratom since 2019, according to the governor's office.

Despite the bans and restrictions, use of kratom in the U.S. has increased, according to researchers at the University of Michigan and Texas State University.

In a paper published this year, they found kratom use in the U.S. was at an all-time high, with more than 5 million people saying they had used it in their lifetime. The group includes more than 100,000 children ages 12-17.

"Policy changes regarding kratom and 7-OH products are needed in all states if we are serious about protecting our children," the study's main researcher, Sean McCabe, said in a statement in the University of Michigan News.

Senate rejects resolution to halt the Iran war as gas prices upend midterms

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Despite rising political anxiety over the Iran war, senators on Thursday narrowly rejected a war powers resolution seeking to halt President Donald Trump's military action, which has been largely blamed for the spike in gas prices and become a flashpoint in the midterm election.

The Senate tally, 49-50, coming days after Trump's bombastic address to the United Nations in which he threatened to "annihilate" Iran, was likely the last chance for lawmakers to go on record about the war ahead of November. More Republicans are peeling away from the president as the war drags on, a rare slap back to Trump, as they campaign for control of Congress. The Senate outcome fell short, with four

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GOP senators joining most Democrats in favor of the resolution.

"They have been carrying water for this ridiculous and illegal war for months and months and months and not listening to their constituents," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., who pushed the war powers resolution forward.

About half of rural American voters believe the economy is worse off now than when Trump returned to office, according to a new survey from The Associated Press in partnership with KFF. The costs of groceries, gas and healthcare rank as top pain points for the rural voters.

"We've got to break the cycle," said Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., who joined in voting yes.

Republican Sens. Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Rand Paul of Kentucky also voted for the resolution to end the war, as they have in many previous tallies, and Democratic Sen. John Fetterman voted against.

This was the 14th time the Senate has considered a war powers resolution, since Trump launched the conflict on Feb. 28.

War powers resolutions are largely political statements, without the full force of law, but stand among the sharper tools the House and Senate have to express disapproval of the White House, short of halting funds for Trump's military actions. As resolutions, they do not go to the president's desk for his signature.

As gas prices climb, Republicans start to question the war

Republicans in control of Congress have shied away from directly confronting Trump over the war, now stretching past the seven-month mark. But their unrest is surfacing as stubbornly high gas prices leave voters in a cash crunch back home.

Diesel costs, in particular, have almost doubled, topping \$6 a gallon, according to AAA.

Just returning from a swing through Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska stumping for GOP candidates who are suddenly at risk in their elections, Sen. John Kennedy of Louisiana called on Trump to hold a prime-time address to the nation to explain the Iran war strategy and the end game.

"People are confused about the war and upset about the cost of living," he said.

But he and others were not yet ready to vote against the war.

"My own view is that the focus right now needs to be on attacking the cost of living issues," said Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., who opposes the war powers resolution and believes the president is acting within his authority to conduct the military action.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries scoffed at the handful of Republicans now trying to distance themselves from what he called Trump's failed economy. "Now all of a sudden they're waking up," he said.

Democrats keep pushing war powers votes in Congress

Earlier this month, the House for a third time approved a war powers resolution, this time with seven Republicans joining the Democrats, including two from battleground Iowa, Rep. Zach Nunn and Rep. Mariannette Miller Meeks, where affordability issues among rural voters are dominating the campaigns.

Senators, though, have rarely been able to confront Trump by passing a war powers resolution.

In June, the Senate approved a war powers resolution after four GOP senators joined Democrats, but Republicans abruptly reversed course the next day after Trump berated them during a private lunch over the outcome.

At the time, Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, stood up to defend his vote only to end up in a shouting match with Trump. He later switched to oppose the war powers resolution after receiving a personal briefing from the White House.

Thursday's vote was on a resolution that had passed the House in July with GOP support. Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., who authored the House resolution, said the Senate outcome was "a slap in the face to the millions of American people who want this war to end."

Other options to halt the Iran war

As the war drags on, costing \$43.5 billion so far, Congress is also seeking other ways to force Trump to rethink his military strategy in Iran.

Rep. Thomas Massie, the renegade Republican from Kentucky, pushed forward articles of impeachment

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against Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth before the GOP leadership abruptly adjourned the House and sent lawmakers home to campaign for the election, avoiding any potential vote on the matter.

Lawmakers also have the power of the purse to curtail military spending, something Republicans have been reluctant to do but Democrats are sure to tackle if they win power in the midterm election. The White House's request for an additional \$87.6 billion funding package for the war and other needs has idled in Congress.

First created in the aftermath of the Vietnam War as a way to hold a president accountable for military actions, the war powers act has long posed a test of the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government.

While the Constitution says only Congress can declare war, the president as commander-in-chief is also able to engage the military. The war powers act seeks to provide clarity by requiring the president, within 60 days of any such action, to seek approval — or risk disapproval — from Congress.

Mortgage rates climb for 5th straight week, pushing average rate on a 30-year home loan above 7%

By ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writer

The average long-term U.S. mortgage rate rose this week above 7% for the first time since January 2025, the latest affordability setback for prospective homebuyers following a five-week run of rate increases.

The weekly average rate on a 30-year fixed-rate home loan rose to 7.03% from 6.95% last week, mortgage buyer Freddie Mac said Thursday. One year ago, the average rate was 6.30%.

The average rate is now the highest it's been since Jan. 16, 2025, when it was at 7.04%.

"Beyond the immediate financial constraints, the 7% threshold is a foreboding psychological barrier," said Lisa Sturtevant, chief economist at Bright MLS. "Crossing this mark could create a chilling effect on the market" that would lead to a considerable slowing of home sales transactions this fall.

Higher mortgage rates can add hundreds of dollars a month to borrowers' costs, limiting homebuyers' purchasing power. As rates rise, that can also lead prospective home shoppers to delay buying.

In late February, the average rate on a 30-year mortgage briefly dipped to 5.98%, its lowest level going back to late 2022. The roughly 1 percentage point increase in the rate since then translates roughly into an additional \$276 a month cost for a borrower financing a \$400,000 home loan at the current average rate.

Depending on a borrower's income, credit and other factors, they may qualify for a rate on a 30-year mortgage that is below or above the current average.

The housing market has been stuck in a rut this year in large part because of elevated mortgage rates, which have been climbing in the months since the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran in late February.

Mortgage rates are influenced by inflation, Federal Reserve policy and bond-market investors' expectations for the economy, among other factors. They generally follow the trajectory of the 10-year Treasury yield, which lenders use as a guide to pricing home loans.

Expectations of higher inflation amid surging oil prices have pushed up the 10-year Treasury yield, which was at 3.97% in late February, before the war began. It surged to 5.17% in midday trading on the bond market Thursday. That's put it roughly back to where it was in 2007.

The latest increase in the 10-year Treasury yield suggests that "upward mortgage rate pressure seems likely to linger," said Anthony Smith, senior economist at Realtor.com.

The Federal Reserve's decision last week to increase its key interest rate for the first time in three years in a bid to tame surging inflation could also keep upward pressure on mortgage rates.

While the central bank doesn't set mortgage rates, its decisions to raise or lower its short-term rate are watched closely by bond investors and can ultimately affect the yield on 10-year Treasuries. The Fed also signaled that another rate hike could occur later this year.

Wall Street traders now see close to a coin flip's chance that the Fed could raise rates twice more by the end of the year, according to data from the CME Group.

The U.S. housing market has been in a slump since 2022, when mortgage rates began to climb from

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pandemic-era lows. Sales of previously occupied U.S. homes were essentially flat last year, stuck at a 30-year low. U.S. sales of those homes slowed again last month.

The latest data on home loan applications show that the upward trend in mortgage rates has given some would-be homebuyers reason to pause.

Mortgage applications, which include loans to buy a home or refinance an existing mortgage, fell 1.5% last week from the previous week, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association. This marks the third straight weekly drop.

Applications for loans to refinance existing mortgages also declined, falling to their slowest pace since February 2025.

The latest move in rates on 15-year fixed-rate mortgages, often sought by borrowers refinancing a home loan, is likely to discourage some homeowners eager to refinance. That average rate increased this week to 6.42% from 6.26% last week. A year ago, it was at 5.49%.

The elevated mortgage rates are driving more prospective homebuyers to adjustable-rate mortgages, or ARMs. Such loans, which typically offer lower initial interest rates than traditional 30-year, fixed-rate mortgages, accounted for nearly 10% of all mortgage applications last week, MBA said.

Starbucks to shutter 250 stores in North America this week in 2nd wave of closings

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Starbucks plans to close 250 North American stores later this week.

It is the second big round of store closures under Starbucks Chairman and CEO Brian Niccol, who joined the company in 2024. Last September, Starbucks closed 627 stores in North America and Europe.

In a letter to employees, Starbucks Chief Operating Officer Mike Grams said the locations targeted either aren't delivering acceptable financial results or can't provide the kind of experience that Starbucks wants for customers and employees.

The company didn't say Thursday which coffeehouses will close or how many are located in the U.S.

Starbucks Workers United, which represents workers at the 700 company-owned U.S. Starbucks stores that have voted to unionize, said 20 unionized stores are among the 250 that are closing, or 8% of the total. Starbucks stores have been voting to unionize since late 2021, but the union and the company have yet to reach a labor agreement.

Grams said Starbucks is continuing to retrofit its North American coffeehouses to make them cozier and more inviting. The company expects 1,500 stores will be retrofitted by Sept. 30, which is the end of Starbucks' fiscal year.

"This progress has given us a clearer view of the performance of every coffeehouse," Grams said in his letter. "While most are benefiting from this overall momentum, some coffeehouses continue to underperform despite the hard work and commitment of all of you."

Grams said Starbucks is still committed to growing its store count in North America. At the end of June, the company had 18,371 stores in the region.

Starbucks said it will transfer employees to other stores if possible or provide severance support if it's not able to place an employee in another location. Starbucks Workers United said Thursday it's sending a formal request for information to Starbucks about the planned closures and will engage in bargaining at every unionized store.

Starbucks has also been cutting its corporate ranks. The company laid off 900 nonretail employees when it closed stores last September. In May, Starbucks laid off an additional 300 corporate employees and closed some underused U.S. offices.

The company said it will incur \$300 million in restructuring charges with this round of closures, including \$200 million in cash charges as it exits leases and pays employee separation benefits and \$100 million in non-cash charges due to the disposal and impairment of coffeehouse assets.

Starbucks shares fell less than 1% Thursday in afternoon trading.

US citizen injured in Illinois after ICE agents mistook him for fugitive, tried to arrest him

By CYBELE MAYES-OSTERMAN Associated Press/Report for America

CHICAGO (AP) — A U.S. citizen was left bloodied and injured on the side of the road in a Chicago suburb after a confrontation with immigration enforcement agents who mistook him for a fugitive, according to local police and a resident who tried to help the man.

The man, whose identity was not disclosed, was taken away in an ambulance after the encounter on Sunday in Evanston, a city around 12 miles (19 kilometers) north of downtown Chicago. He told police his head, neck and teeth were injured, according to a news release from the Evanston Police Department.

A federal agent told officers who responded to calls reporting an altercation at just before 10 a.m. that morning that five agents in separate vehicles were looking for a fugitive with a Chicago address and a warrant for his arrest, according to the release. The agents mistook the man for the fugitive, the agent told police.

When the man refused to give his identification, the agents tried to handcuff him, the agent said. After realizing he was a U.S. citizen and not the person they were seeking, they released him.

One police officer saw blood on the agent's hands, according to the release. The agent told police he was injured while trying to handcuff the man, and that they left the area immediately after because they feared protesters who had gathered would attack them, it noted.

Police have visited the man at the hospital and photographed his injuries, and are investigating the encounter.

Local authorities investigating

Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss said in a post on X that the man was treated at St. Francis Hospital for minor injuries. The police department "continues to investigate the situation, and we will remain vigilant about federal activities," he wrote.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers had "encountered an individual who resembled the target" of a "targeted enforcement operation," the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement. "The individual was given lawful commands but was not cooperative and refused to identify himself."

The officers "left the scene without further incident" after the man identified himself, according to the statement. "When ICE officers offered the individual assistance, he refused."

Illinois authorities condemn bloody encounter

The incident drew condemnation from Illinois officials as backlash grows against ICE's presence in communities around the country. ICE announced a record number of arrests last month, with nearly 51,000 people arrested.

"I am disgusted and outraged by reports of what happened in my hometown of Evanston on Sunday," Illinois Rep. Jan Schakowsky said in a statement.

Eyewitnesses tell AP what they saw

Ryan Garton, 56, told The Associated Press that he saw the agents pinning down the man, who was Black, on the side of the road as he was driving home. He pulled over to document what was happening on video.

One agent had his knee on the man's back and was "beating up on him," Garton told the AP. "I'm a citizen, leave me alone," Garton said the man screamed as the agent pinned him down. Around five people stood nearby and yelled at the agent to stop.

Garton said he urged the agent to get off the man so he could inspect his injuries, and that the agent acknowledged that he was already aware the man was a U.S. citizen. When the agent stepped away, Garton saw bloodstains in the shape of handprints on the man's shirt.

"His upper right eye socket and temple were swollen as if he had been punched" and his face was scraped "as if it had been ground into the sidewalk," he said.

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The man told Garton that he had been walking to the pharmacy to pick up a prescription when the agents stopped him.

Michael Lipson, the owner of a store across the street from where the incident occurred, said he saw the agents wrestle the man to the ground as he repeatedly yelled that he is a U.S. citizen. The man's face looked "badly messed up," Lipson told the AP.

Lipson said the agents checked cards and papers from the man's wallet before leaving them scattered on the road. Lipson laid out his sweatshirt for the man to rest on while Garton inspected his injuries.

The same day, ICE agents shot and wounded a man in Austin, Texas, the latest in a string of shootings by federal immigration agents that have prompted growing backlash against the Trump administration's aggressive immigration tactics.

At least 10 people have died in encounters with immigration agents in President Donald Trump's second term, including a Colombian man shot dead in Maine in July by an agent with a history of violent behavior, and a Mexican man hit by a tractor trailer as he fled agents in Florida the same month. ICE agents fatally shot Renee Good and Alex Pretti, both U.S. citizens, during the Trump administration's siege of Minneapolis, named "Operation Metro Surge," earlier this year.

Claims for unemployment benefits drop to 197,000, the lowest since mid-July as layoffs remain rare

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fewer people applied for U.S. unemployment benefits last week, as U.S. jobless claims remain at historically low levels and most Americans enjoy job security.

The Labor Department said Thursday that 197,000 people applied for unemployment checks last week, the fewest since mid-July and down from a revised 198,000 the week before. The four-week average of claims, which smooths out week-to-week ups and downs, fell to 202,250 last week from 204,000.

Claims for jobless benefits are a proxy for layoffs, and economists watch them because they can be a sign of where the job market is headed. So far this year, claims have mostly stayed below 220,000 — historically low.

The American job market has remained sturdy despite higher energy prices that have squeezed businesses and consumers since the fighting with Iran began Feb. 28.

Layoffs are low. Businesses, remembering the labor shortages that followed the end of pandemic lockdowns, are reluctant to let go of staff. They're hiring — but modestly by the standards of recent years.

So far this year, employers — companies, government agencies and nonprofits — have been adding an average of 80,000 jobs a month, including a surprising 162,000 in August. That is an improvement on a dismal 2025 when monthly job creation averaged 9,700 as high interest rates and President Donald Trump's unpredictable trade policies discouraged hiring.

The Labor Department will release the jobs report for September next week. It's expected to show that employers added 52,500 jobs and that the unemployment rate remained low at 4.1%, according to a survey of forecasters by the data firm FactSet.

Hiring remains well below the 166,000 monthly jobs created, on average, in 2023 and 2024, and the 491,000 a month recorded during the 2021-2022 hiring boom that followed COVID-19 lockdowns.

Russian strikes kill 8 in Ukraine as the UN debates how to end the war

By HANNA ARHIROVA and BARRY HATTON Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian drone and missile attacks on Ukraine overnight killed at least eight civilians, officials said Thursday, as Moscow's 4½-year-long invasion of its neighbor grinds on despite renewed appeals for a settlement at this week's U.N. General Assembly.

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A strike on Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region killed six agricultural workers and wounded 12 others, Interior Minister Ihor Vyhivskyi said. An attack on the capital Kyiv killed a man and a woman, he said, while officials in the southern port of Odesa also reported a major bombardment.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed in a speech at the United Nations late Wednesday for countries to starve Russia of revenue through sanctions and trade bans, denying Moscow the money it needs to prolong the war. He and other leaders at previous U.N. general assemblies have sought to pressure Moscow into giving up its ambitions in Ukraine.

But despite years of diplomatic efforts there is no sign of a breakthrough in ending a war that has had repercussions for the global food and energy supply, as well as severely straining relations between Russia and Western countries.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov repeated Moscow's demand for a comprehensive peace deal, not a temporary break in hostilities, following Ukraine's call for a complete and unconditional ceasefire.

"We believe it's necessary to seek peace, not a temporary truce," Peskov told reporters Thursday. Russia's demands for Ukraine to surrender its territory, among other things, are unacceptable for Kyiv.

The aerial war has intensified in recent months. Russia keeps hammering Ukraine with cruise and ballistic missiles, powerful glide bombs and jet-powered drones, while Ukraine's long-range drones target oil refineries and businesses that are a vital part of the Russian economy.

There have been few significant changes since last year along the roughly 1,250-kilometer (800-mile) front line in eastern and southern Ukraine, where a huge number of drones on both sides limit movement.

Russian strikes are an ordeal for Ukrainian civilians

The attack on Kyiv damaged more than 50 civilian sites, including apartment blocks, post offices, a maternity hospital and a textile plant, Vyhivskyi, the interior minister, said.

Russia has repeatedly hit Ukrainian trains, shopping malls, supermarkets and gas stations, among other sites, keeping civilians on edge.

Valentyna Kolosenko, a 49-year-old Kyiv resident, said a solid oak door she was standing behind saved her when three blasts occurred around her home. She said she would endure the hardship, even though she was scared.

"Everything is paralyzed. Nothing works," she told The Associated Press. "Getting to work is incredibly difficult and frightening."

Liubov Paziuk, a 74-year-old pensioner in the capital whose house windows were shattered, said she remained determined to resist the Russian onslaught. "We don't get used to it, we adapt, because we have only one choice: to stay here, on our land, despite everything," she said.

Russia's Defense Ministry said the military overnight struck arms factories, telecommunications and logistical facilities in Kyiv and the Odesa region.

The United Nations said last week that more Ukrainian civilians were killed and wounded in the first eight months of 2026 than in the whole of last year. Russian attacks in August killed at least 368 civilians and wounded 2,314 others, according to the U.N. Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.

"Russia's escalation of terror demonstrates that active diplomacy must come hand in hand with devastating pressure on Putin's regime and unwavering support for the defense of Ukraine," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said on X.

As another Ukrainian subzero winter approaches, Zelenskyy said things are likely to get worse. But he promised to keep fighting.

"Ukrainians understand that this winter could be very harsh for us. But in response, we will have no choice but to make it painful for Russia, too," the Ukrainian leader said on social media. "And that's exactly why we say that de-escalation steps are important are needed before winter."

Ukrainian drones strike in western Russia

Officials in western Russia on Thursday reported Ukrainian long-range attacks but provided few details.

Ukrainian drone fragments damaged an administrative building of an oil refinery in the Rostov region but there was no fire, Gov. Yuri Slyusar said.

In the Krasnodar region, Ukrainian drone fragments sparked a brief fire on the premises of an industrial

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facility, regional emergency officials said.

Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment.

Drones fly into Romania and Moldova

Romania's Ministry of National Defense said Thursday that a drone violated its airspace for four minutes before crashing near a town in the north of the country, near the border with Ukraine.

The ministry had earlier scrambled two Romanian F-16s and two Spanish F-18s to monitor its airspace in two separate locations after a spate of drones were detected in Ukraine near the border.

Authorities did not specify who the drone belonged to.

Also, Moldova's Ministry of Defense said Thursday that it recorded a spate of airspace incursions during Russia's attacks on neighboring Ukraine. The incidents prompted authorities to close part of Moldova's northern airspace, the ministry said.

Today in History: September 25, Military escorts Little Rock Nine into Central High

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Sept. 25, the 268th day of 2026. There are 97 days left in the year.

On Sept. 25, 1957, nine Black students who had been forced to withdraw from Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, because of unruly white crowds were escorted to class by members of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and the National Guard.

In 1513, Spanish explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama and sighted the Pacific Ocean.

In 1789, the first United States Congress adopted 12 amendments to the Constitution and sent them to the states for ratification. (Ten of the amendments became the Bill of Rights.)

In 1956, the first trans-Atlantic telephone cable officially went into service with a three-way ceremonial call between New York, Ottawa and London.

In 1978, 144 people were killed when a Pacific Southwest Airlines Boeing 727 and a private plane collided over San Diego.

In 2005, in the presence of disarmament observers, the Irish Republican Army decommissioned its arsenal of weapons, officially ending a 36-year armed campaign for a unified Irish state.

In 2012, President Barack Obama, speaking to the U.N. General Assembly, pledged U.S. support for Syrians trying to oust President Bashar Assad, calling him "a dictator who massacres his own people."

In 2013, skipper Jimmy Spithill and Oracle Team USA won the America's Cup with one of the greatest comebacks in sports history, speeding past Dean Barker and Emirates Team New Zealand in the winner-take-all Race 19 on San Francisco Bay.

In 2018, Bill Cosby was sentenced to three to 10 years in prison for drugging and molesting a woman at his suburban Philadelphia home. (After serving nearly three years, Cosby went free in June 2021 after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned his conviction.)

In 2025, a Paris court sentenced former French President Nicolas Sarkozy to five years in prison after finding him guilty of criminal conspiracy in a scheme to finance his 2007 campaign with funds from Libya. He served about three weeks behind bars before his conditional release while appealing his conviction.

Today's Birthdays: Basketball Hall of Famer Hubie Brown is 93. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates is 83. Actor-producer Michael Douglas is 82. Model Cheryl Tiegs is 79. Actor Mimi Kennedy is 78. Film director Pedro Almodovar is 77. Actor-director Anson Williams is 77. Actor Mark Hamill is 75. Basketball Hall of Famer Bob McAdoo is 75. Actor Heather Locklear is 65. Actor Aida Turturro is 64. Actor Tate Donovan is 63. Actor Maria Doyle Kennedy is 62. Basketball Hall of Famer Scottie Pippen is 61. Actor Will Smith is 58. Actor Catherine Zeta-Jones is 57. Basketball Hall of Famer Chauncey Billups is 50. Actor Clea DuVall is 49. Rapper T.I. is 46. Actor-rapper Donald Glover (Childish Gambino) is 43. Actor Zach Woods is 42. Actor Jordan Gavaris is 37. Actor Bella Ramsey is 23. Actor Leah Jeffries is 17.