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For Sale by Owner: Very nice two-story home 107 South First Street, Andover, SD – 10 minutes from Groton and 20 minutes to Webster. Includes two lots, garage, small shed, three bedrooms, kitchen, living room, dining room, 1 ½ baths, new roof. Call 605-351-7991

Open: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave.

The cardboard/paper
recycling trailer at the school is **Closed**

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Sunday, April 16

EASTER SUNDAY

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with Communion at 9 a.m. (No Sunday School)

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sunrise service at 7 a.m., Breakfast by League at 8 a.m., Worship with communion at 10:15 a.m., Sunday School serves at nursing home at 3 p.m.

Heaven Bound Ministries, Pierpont: Worship at 10 a.m.

United Methodist: Sunrise service at 7 a.m., Easter Egg Hunt after lunch at 8 a.m., UMW Easter Brunch at 8 a.m., Conde Worship at 9 a.m., Coffee Fellowship at 10 a.m., Groton worship at 11 a.m.

Catholic Parish: Mass at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church at 9 a.m., then at St. Joseph in Turton at 11 a.m.

Monday, April 17

EASTER MONDAY - NO SCHOOL

Senior Menu: Spanish rice with hamburger, green beans, Mandarin oranges, chocolate pudding, whole wheat bread.

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

St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle at 7:30 p.m.

United Methodist: Evening Bible Study at 7 p.m.

Tuesday, April 18

Senior Menu: Hot turkey combo, mashed potato and gravy, 7 layer salad, peaches.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza, fruit, juice, milk.

Fresh flowers, silks, home decor



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Protecting Your Internet Privacy Rights

Since the House and Senate voted to undo Obama-era regulations related to internet privacy last month under the Congressional Review Act (CRA), a lot of misinformation has been floating around about your privacy online. I would like to take the opportunity to clear up some of this misinformation.

First and foremost, it is important to point out that repealing these regulations did not change your current internet privacy. The new rules had not yet gone into effect due to a judicial stay. In other words, if you did not have a problem with your internet privacy before President Trump signed the CRA into law on April 2, you can take comfort knowing that nothing about your internet privacy has changed between then and now.

Now, some background: since the invention of the World Wide Web more than 25 years ago, the internet has been a breeding ground for technological advancements, growth and innovation. This is largely due to the fact that the internet is open to everyone and has been relatively free of government regulation. As a result of these advances, today nearly 9 in 10 Americans depend on the internet to go about their daily lives.

Historically, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has regulated internet privacy-related issues with a light-handed, evidence-based approach. In 2015, the Obama administration moved the jurisdiction of internet service providers (ISP) to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and proposed new internet privacy regulations that would have gone considerably further than the FTC. In doing so, it would have also imposed new, prescriptive data restrictions on ISPs such as Midco and Verizon. It would not have affected online content companies such as Google, Bing, Amazon and Netflix.

Supporters of these new regulations claimed it would provide enhanced internet privacy protections, but in reality it would have only placed new, unfair restrictions on ISPs that could be detrimental to future internet innovation and advancements, without doing anything to enhance consumer privacy online. Our CRA repealed these new, burdensome regulations, essentially telling the FCC to go back to the drawing board when writing internet privacy regulations and urging them to model them after the FTC's light-handed regulatory approach.

Another myth we continue to hear is that internet companies can collect consumer information without telling you and then sell it to the highest bidder. This was not true when the FTC was in control of privacy protections online. In reality, consumers control what data is collected about them and how it is used. Federal guidelines have historically required internet providers to not only disclose the kind of information provided about consumers, but also disclose how that information is used. The CRA we passed does not change that.

Repealing the misguided FCC rule is supported by groups like the South Dakota Telecommunications Association, the Rural Broadband Association and ISPs throughout the country. By passing the CRA, we have preserved online innovators' ability to invent and flourish, which will keep online competition healthy. And we did it without lessening consumer privacy protections for Americans.

John Thune
U.S. SENATOR - SOUTH DAKOTA



Americans' Least Favorite Season

Let's be honest, no one enjoys paying taxes. While that might be the understatement of the century, it's worth pointing out now that tax season is upon us once again. April is typically enjoyed for other, more enjoyable seasons, like the return of spring or Major League Baseball. Unfortunately, a lot of Americans spend a significant amount of time figuring out whether a return is headed their way or if they've struck out with the IRS and will need to write a check to Uncle Sam.

It's hard to argue that taxes aren't at all necessary. Communities throughout the country need money to build and maintain roads, bridges, schools, and other public utilities we've come to expect from local governments. The federal government needs revenue to support our military and the men and women who keep us safe. It also needs money to maintain things like our national park system and fund programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

South Dakotans know and appreciate the value of a hard-earned dollar more than most folks. So, while some taxes are necessary and South Dakotans are willing to pay their share, I firmly believe that we always need to be looking for ways to ensure taxpayers' money isn't being squandered by Washington bureaucrats. That means making sure the money that is being used is spent as efficiently and effectively as possible.

It's also important to remember that there's a cost associated with making sure an individual or his or her business is complying with the tax code. According to the National Taxpayers Union Foundation, the "value of the time (6.1 billion hours) plus out-of-pocket costs expended annually on complying with the individual and corporate Tax Code amounts to an economic loss of \$234.4 billion." That's a staggering amount of time and money that could be more productively spent.

Congress can help alleviate some of that unnecessary burden by taking up pro-growth tax reform this year. It would be the first time in more than 30 years that the tax code was overhauled, and I'm hopeful and optimistic that Congress will take action. My goal throughout the process will be to lower tax rates and simplify the code so South Dakotans can keep more of what they earn. More take-home pay means there's more to invest in a child's education, to build a family business, or to save for retirement. American families, small businesses, farms, and ranches need and deserve a tax code that achieves these goals.

I'm confident that if we can lower tax rates, eliminate special rules, exemptions, and deductions, and incentivize businesses to invest, we can get economic growth back to where it needs to be. A stronger, more vibrant economy is good for everyone. Not only does it instill confidence in businesses and consumers, but it also leads to higher wages, more good-paying jobs, and a better quality of life for the American people.

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Remembering South Dakota's Ace

"South Dakota draws an ace." That was one headline following the gubernatorial election of Joe Foss. The plain-spoken, unpretentious South Dakota hero held many titles throughout his life, only one of which was "governor."

Foss is best known as the Medal of Honor recipient who shot down 26 enemy planes in 63 days at Guadalcanal during World War II. The former governor served in the South Dakota National Guard, the Marine Corps and the South Dakota Air National Guard, which he founded. Foss took down 20 zero fighters, four bombers and two bi-planes. Three times he had to make dead-stick landings when his engine was damaged from enemy fire. In another instance, his plane was shot down near the island of Malaita. Not a good swimmer, he was fortunate that some nearby natives rescued him. As it turned out, Foss would have ended up on a crocodile-infested beach, had he kept swimming.

As governor, Foss emphasized a balanced budget and urged the increase of reserve funds, which he said should be used only in emergencies and not to increase spending. He described his role and the role of legislators as being the "hired hands of the people" and he became South Dakota's "leading salesman," touting the state's low tax burden to outside businesses. Under Gov. Foss, the first-ever state-level economic development office was established.

His down-to-earth manner remained intact while in office. On one occasion, he dressed as a clown for the Shriners parade to raise money for children with disabilities. He also knew he was the governor of all South Dakotans, not just those within his political party or social class. When first elected, the Governor-Elect held a press conference where he was asked about plans for the traditional inaugural ball. Gov. Foss surprised reporters, as well as members of his staff, when he said all were invited to attend. When asked what people should wear, Foss responded, "I don't care as long as they're comfortable. It'll suit me fine if the men wear overalls, cowboy gear, business suits or tuxedos."

After serving as governor, Joe Foss went on to become the first commissioner of the NFL and president of the National Rifle Association. In 2001, he founded the Joe Foss Institute which today promotes American history, patriotism and service.

Looking back on it all, Foss concluded in his auto biography that, of all the things he had experienced, his faith was what mattered most. When asked by reporters what the highlight of his life was, he'd say, referring to heaven, "It hasn't happened yet."

In 2004, the year following his passing, the state Legislature designated April 17 as Joe Foss Day in South Dakota. The day is a working holiday to remember, as it says in the statute, "South Dakota's favorite son and war hero." It's an occasion to tell the story to our children and grandchildren – the story of South Dakota's ace.

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South Dakota Severe Weather Awareness Week

April 24-28, 2017

The National Weather Service, South Dakota Emergency Management, and other state, county and local agencies have come together to host Severe Weather Awareness Week. Information about various topics on severe weather safety will be presented each day. The list of daily topics for Severe Weather Awareness Week is:

Monday, April 24th - Weather Alerts and Warnings

Tuesday, April 25th - Severe Storms, Lightning, Wind and Hail

Wednesday, April 26th - Tornado Safety Information

Thursday, April 27th - Flash Floods

Friday, April 28th - Extreme Heat

Tornado Watch/Warning Drills

The National Weather Service, South Dakota Emergency Management, and other state, county and local agencies have come together to host Severe Weather Awareness Week activities. On Wednesday, April 26th, simulated tornado watches and warnings will be issued to test the statewide warning and communications systems. The schedule for April 26th is as follows:

10:00 AM CDT: The National Weather Service will issue a simulated tornado watch for South Dakota.

10:15 AM CDT: The National Weather Service will issue a simulated tornado warning for South Dakota counties. Note that most cities and counties will activate outdoor warning siren systems, but it is up to each individual municipality to do so. The National Weather Service does not activate sirens.

For the South Dakota warnings, a TOR code (tornado warning) will be used to activate the broadcast on NOAA Weather Radios.

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EarthTalk®

From the Editors of E - The Environmental Magazine

Dear EarthTalk: What is meant by "environmental justice" and how is it under assault in the new Trump administration?

Orleans, LA

-- Mike Garner, New Orleans, LA

Environmental justice is defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin or income, with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies." In layperson's terms, it means making sure specific groups of people don't bear a disproportionate burden from potential and existing environmental threats.

Traditionally, we think of situations like the siting and construction of a pollution-spewing factory in or near a low-income minority community as an example of an environmental injustice. Some recent examples ripped from the headlines include the lead contamination of the water supply of predominantly African-American Flint, Michigan, and the siting of the potentially hazardous Dakota Access Pipeline adjacent to sacred and ecologically sensitive Standing Rock Sioux tribal land.

"The federal government has recognized for decades that air and water quality are especially poor in low-income areas and communities of color, and some of that imbalance stems directly from government permitting decisions, such as where to allow the dumping of toxic materials," reports the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a leading environmental advocacy non-profit.

Environmental justice has been a hot topic lately as it relates to who bears the brunt of climate change impacts. According to EPA research, city dwellers and the poor are among the Americans most likely to suffer from climate change. NRDC points out that 24 to 27 percent of urban African-Americans, Latinos and indigenous people in the U.S. are now living below the poverty line, compared with only 13 percent of urban whites—meaning that minority groups are at the greatest risk from the heat waves, bad air, stronger storms and other negative consequences of a warming climate.

The federal government has been working on environmental justice issues since at least 1992 when then-President George H.W. Bush created a White House office dedicated to "environmental equity." Bill Clinton took up the mantle when he assumed the presidency in 1994 and issued Executive Order #12898 calling for the federal government to identify and address "disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies and activities on minority populations and low-income populations." Clinton's order created the Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice to coordinate and oversee implementation of the rule across different federal agencies, and spawned the Environmental Justice Small Grants Program, which has awarded upwards of \$24 million since then in funding to more than 1,400 community-based and tribal organizations working in communities facing environmental justice problems.

But that all is likely to change now that Donald Trump has proposed slashing the EPA's overall budget by \$2 billion and cutting funding for environmental justice programs specifically by 78 percent, from \$6.7 million to just \$1.5 million. "These cuts are a direct attack on low-income communities and communities of color everywhere who are on the front lines of toxic pollution," says NRDC's environmental justice head Al Huang.

CONTACTS: EPA Environmental Justice, www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice; NRDC, www.nrdc.org.

EarthTalk® is produced by Roddy Scheer & Doug Moss and is a registered trademark of the nonprofit Earth Action Net

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Letter to the Editor - Earth Day

Each year on April 22, we celebrate Earth Day, a day set aside to think about how each of us affects the environment.

Earth Day began as a nationwide, grassroots environmental protest in 1970. Twenty million Americans demonstrated for a healthy, sustainable environment in massive coast-to-coast rallies.

A rare political alignment occurred that day in 1970 as the movement brought support from Republicans and Democrats as well as citizens from all walks of life. By the end of that year, the first Earth Day had led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts.

More than 1 billion people now participate in Earth Day activities each year, making it the largest civic observance in the world.

As a wholesale power provider to the city of Groton, Heartland is committed on Earth Day and every day to protecting our environment. Heartland and Groton are public power providers, meaning decisions are made at the local level with the best interests of citizens in mind, including decisions to ensure reliable, affordable power, as well as clean air.

To learn more about what public power means to you and your community, visit hcpd.com/about/public-power.

Sincerely,
Russell Olson, CEO
Heartland Consumers Power District



**Call or Text
Paul at
397-7460
or Tina at
397-7285
for
membership
Information**

GDI Living Fitness
25 Main St., Downtown Groton

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Today in Weather History

April 15, 1896: A tornado, possibly an F3, moved northeast from Burkmere, which is 10 miles west of Faulkton. About half dozen farms were torn apart. Two children were killed, and the rest of the family critically injured as a home was leveled. 6 miles northwest of Faulkton, near Millard.

April 15, 2011: A strong upper-level low-pressure area brought widespread heavy snowfall to central and parts of northeast South Dakota. This early spring storm brought 6 to 14 inches of heavy snow to the area. The heavy wet snow caused a lot of travel problems along with a few accidents. Locations with a foot or more of snowfall included 12 inches 12 SSW Harrold, 23 N Highmore, and Orient; 13 inches 14 NNE Isabel and Eureka with 14 inches at Eagle Butte.

1927: The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 continued to rage. Tremendous rains all over the Mississippi River Valley during the preceding autumn and winter sent floodwaters raging southward over a wide area. On this date, the government levee at Dorena, MO collapsed. The surge of floodwater continued pushing downriver toward the Mississippi Delta, bursting more levees as it went. Also on this day, New Orleans saw 15 inches of rain in 18 hours. More than 4 feet of water covered parts of the city.

1998: An F3 tornado hits downtown Nashville causing extensive damage but no loss of life. An additional 62 tornadoes touched down in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. These tornadoes caused 12 fatalities and approximately 120 injuries.

2000: What a difference a day made (with the help of a strong cold front). Yesterday's 86 degrees in Goodland, Kansas, tied the record high for the date. Today's high of 29 degrees was also a date record high, but a record low high. It was a new record by 3 degrees. 1921 - Two mile high Silver Lake, CO, received 76 inches of snow in 24 hours, the heaviest 24 hour total of record for North America. The storm left a total of 87 inches in twenty-seven and a half hours. (David Ludlum)

1927 - New Orleans LA was drenched with 14.01 inches of rain, which established a 24 hour rainfall record for the state. (The Weather Channel)

1949 - A hailstone five inches by five and a half inches in size, and weighing four pounds, was measured at Troy NY. (The Weather Channel)

1958 - A tornado 300 yards in width skipped along a five mile path near Frostproof FL. A 2500 gallon water tank was found one mile from its original position (it is not known how much water was in the tank at the time). (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in the Southern Atlantic Coast Region. A tornado killed one person and injured seven others near Mount Dora FL. Drifts of hail up to two feet deep were reported in Davidson and Rowan counties in North Carolina. Myrtle Beach SC was deluged with seven inches of rain in three hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Death Valley, CA, was soaked with 1.53 inches of rain in 24 hours. Snow fell in the mountains of southern California. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms soaked the eastern U.S. with heavy rain, pushing the rainfall total for the month at Cape Hatteras NC past their previous April record of 7.10 inches. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along a stationary front produced severe weather from west central Texas to west central Arkansas during the late afternoon and evening. Thunderstorms spawned a tornado which caused more than half a million dollars damage at Fort Stockton TX, produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Dennison TX, produced baseball size hail at Silo OK and near Capps Corner TX, and drenched southeastern Oklahoma with up to 4 inches of rain in two hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday	Monday Night	Tuesday
						
Slight Chance T-storms	Mostly Clear	Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Sunny then Slight Chance Showers	Showers	Partly Sunny
High: 68 °F	Low: 33 °F	High: 65 °F	Low: 33 °F	High: 58 °F	Low: 40 °F	High: 57 °F



Today
 Showers east,
Windy west
Highs 60s

Sunday
 Sunny!
But Windy
Highs 60s


FIRE DANGER

Monday
Increasing clouds
Chance of
showers West
Highs 50-60s

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD   weather.gov/abr

Published on: 04/15/2017 at 5:35AM

A cold front crossing the region will bring isolated to scattered showers and thunderstorms to the eastern half of South Dakota. Winds will shift to the northwest and become gusty behind the front. Dry, but windy conditions are expected on Sunday.

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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 55.2

Low Outside Temp: 49.8

High Gust: 15

Snow: Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 91° in 1926

Record Low: 8° in 1914

Average High: 57°F

Average Low: 32°F

Average Precip in April.: 0.74

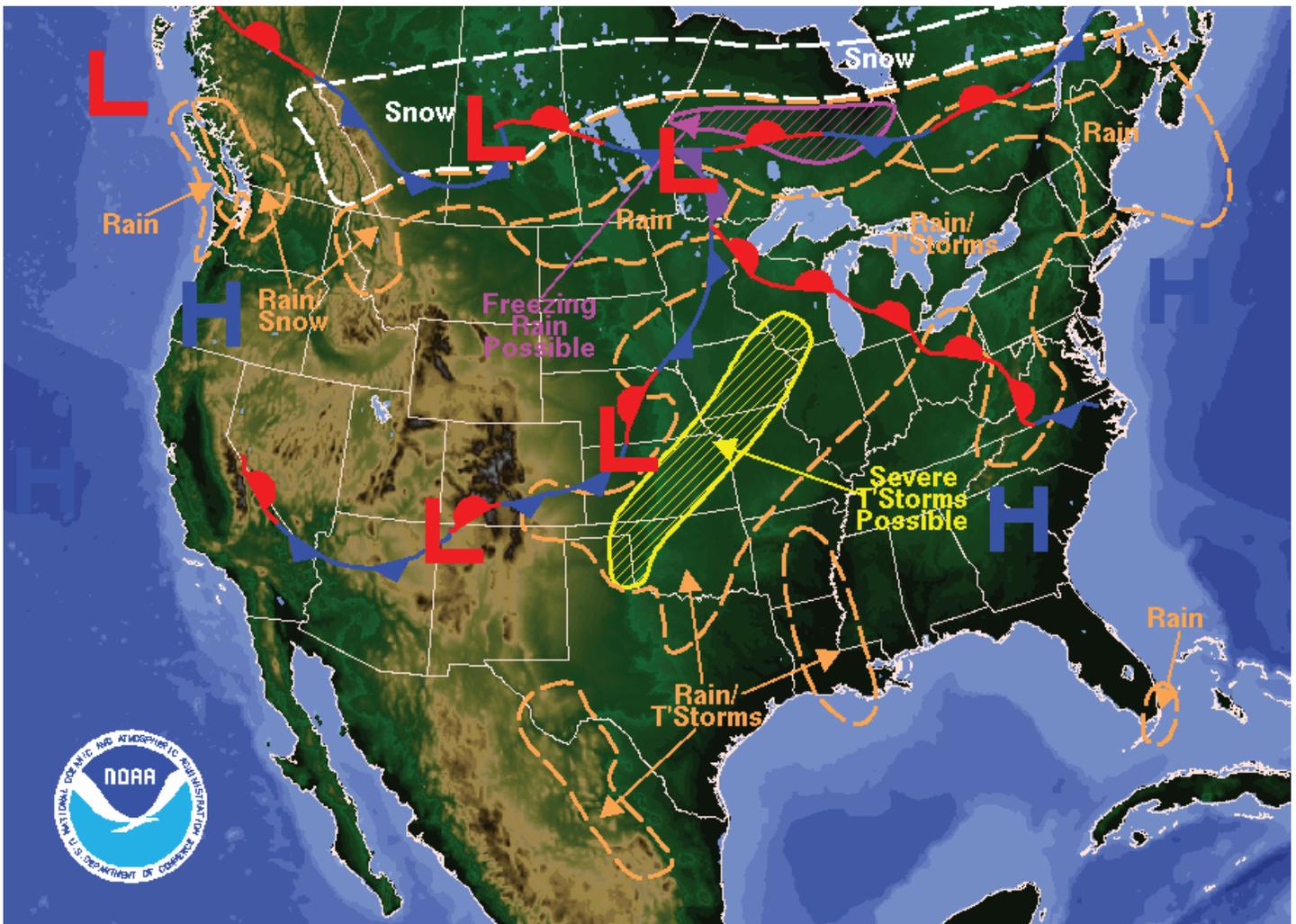
Precip to date in April.: 0.13

Average Precip to date: 2.92

Precip Year to Date: 0.72

Sunset Tonight: 8:20 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:46 a.m.



Weather Forecast for Sat, Apr 15, 2017, issued 4:49 AM EDT
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by Tate based on WPC, SPC and NHC forecasts

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BELIEVE – EXPECT – RECEIVE

The season was nearly half way over and Pete Rose was on a hitting streak. A reporter asked for an interview following a difficult loss. He said to Rose, "You need 78 hits to break Ty Cobb's record. How many times at bat will you need to get 78 hits?"

"Seventy-eight," came his quick reply.

"Come on," said the reporter. "You don't expect to get 78 hits in 78 times at bat, do you?"

"Every time I step up to the plate," said Rose, "I expect to get a hit! If I don't expect to get a hit, I have no right to step in the batter's box."

As he was in playing baseball, so ought we be in our prayer life! Every time we go to the Lord in prayer we must learn to expect results. Otherwise, why pray?

Jesus said, "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it for you so that the Father's glory will be shown through the Son." Expecting results in prayer could not be explained more clearly! If we ask in His name, He will grant our requests.

The problem, then, seems to be either/or. Either our prayers are not consistent with what is included in the "name" of Jesus or we are not asking. To "ask in His name" means that our prayer requests are consistent with What and Who Jesus represented. If when I pray, I know that God cannot and will not be able to bless what I am asking for, or if my request will not honor and glorify Him, I cannot expect Him to grant my request when I pray.

Prayer: Help us, Heavenly Father, to understand what it means to "ask in Your name" so that when we pray in faith believing, we can expect Your blessings. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: John 14:13 And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

News from the Associated Press

Rapid City arts festival canceled due to road construction

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A popular summer arts festival in Rapid City has been canceled for the first time in 42 years.

The Rapid City Journal reports (<http://bit.ly/2pD6d6l>) that the West Boulevard Summer Festival at Wilson Park has been called off due to ongoing construction on nearby Mount Rushmore Road.

The two-day event in June typically attracts around 20,000 visitors and 100 vendors.

The festival has been a mainstay at the park since 1975, offering jewelers, artists, basket weavers and other vendors a chance to sell their products. Funds raised from the event are used to protect the West Boulevard Historic District, Wilson Park and the Wilson school playground.

Information from: Rapid City Journal, <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com>

South Dakota town sees increase in felony drug arrests

DEADWOOD, S.D. (AP) — Though this city in western South Dakota saw fewer incidents of violent crime and no murders in 2016, it has seen a 130 percent increase in felony drug arrests.

The Rapid City Journal (<http://bit.ly/2opU3QH>) reports 90 percent of felony drug arrests in Deadwood were tied to methamphetamine use and distribution. Deadwood police have already made 10 felony drug arrests in 2017.

Deadwood police chief Kelly Fuller says the legalization of marijuana in nearby states have driven down prices, causing drug cartels to shift their focus on meth distribution in rural areas.

Fuller says a full-time drug investigator started in the department in January and focuses on drug-related crimes and education, as well as cooperative communications with other local law enforcement agencies.

Information from: Rapid City Journal, <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com>

Ride-sharing operations to come to rural South Dakota

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — A city in southern South Dakota will be getting its own ride-sharing operation aimed at rural communities, to the dismay of existing taxi companies.

The Yankton Press and Dakotan (<http://bit.ly/2ovc6oe>) reports that Tuesday the Yankton Area Progressive Growth's board of directors agreed to pay ride-sharing company Liberty Mobility \$25,000 to help get started in the area.

Liberty Mobility is similar to ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft, but focuses on operating in rural areas.

Yankton city commissioner Nathan Johnson says he hopes the service will put the city on the cutting edge of transportation and help residents be more mobile.

Some taxi cab companies feel the city is too small to support a ride-share program and existing cab companies.

Launch of the service in Yankton is expected within three months.

Information from: Yankton Press and Dakotan, <http://www.yankton.net/>

Native American tribes fear end of federal heating help

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

WHITE RIVER, S.D. (AP) — Eva Iyotte was waiting on propane ordered under a federal energy assistance program President Donald Trump has targeted for elimination when she lost power at her home on

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frozen tribal land in South Dakota.

As the January conditions sent temperatures plummeting inside the house, the 63-year-old, her daughter and two grandsons took blankets to their car, where they waited with the heater running until the electricity was restored.

Iyotte said there would be many more cold days like that if the program ends. It's unclear whether Congress, which passes the federal budget, will agree to the change the Trump administration is seeking.

"We might be poor, but we're like other people. We want to survive," said Iyotte, a member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe. "If that program is cut, I don't know who's going to help us out."

Tribal officials in states with harsh winters fear what would happen without the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, also known as LIHEAP. Ending it, as Trump's budget blueprint would do, could disproportionately affect Native Americans, backers of the program say.

Iyotte said propane is the primary heating source for her home. As she waited for it to arrive in January, she kept a pot of water boiling on the electric stove for warmth — until the power went out.

"People will die" without LIHEAP, said Eileen Shot, who administers it for the Rosebud Sioux, which has gotten about \$850,000 this fiscal year. Trump's budget blueprint calls it a "lower-impact program."

It's not Trump's only move to spur concern among tribes. His strong support for oil pipelines including Dakota Access and Keystone XL put him in direct opposition to American Indians who have long resisted both projects.

LIHEAP helps low-income households meet their heating and cooling needs. Under federal income guidelines, American Indians qualify for the program at slightly higher rates than Latino and black households, and far higher than whites, according to a February report from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a think tank that supports officials and experts who serve minority communities.

Besides tribal members' higher poverty rates, some reservations are in rural areas with extreme weather, and many are home to large populations of young and elderly members, making the help even more critical, said Clara Pratte, director for the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, which works to ensure the LIHEAP program is fully funded.

The federal government each year directly funds LIHEAP to roughly 150 tribal governments and organizations. Those groups provided about 43,000 Native American households with heating assistance during the 12-month period that ended in September 2016, according to preliminary data.

Tribes have gotten \$33.3 million since October, part of a larger \$3 billion handed out to date nationwide for the current budget year. Tribes that don't apply directly to the Administration for Children and Families to administer LIHEAP are typically served through the corresponding state program.

Trump has also proposed eliminating all funding this fiscal year that hasn't already been apportioned.

Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said LIHEAP is an inefficient program that would be better run and funded by states. He said advocates for every federal program that assists low-income people unrealistically treat it as the "only thing standing between the poor and some dark future."

"I like to say it's kind of like looking at a jigsaw puzzle where you only look at one piece at a time," he said.

States were expecting the program to be funded at least \$3.3 billion for the 12-month period that begins this October, said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association. He said it's unlikely that states would make up all that money if the federal program ends.

"There are a number of ways to help people afford energy, but you can't take \$3.3 billion away from this program without consequences," Wolfe said. "The amount of money is so significant it cannot be made up by supplemental state funding or charitable resources."

A spokeswoman for Sen. Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican, said in a statement that Trump's budget proposal is "only the president's recommendation." During the appropriations process, the Senate will look at the merits of each program, said spokeswoman Natalie Krings, adding that LIHEAP has been funded in the past and will likely continue to be funded in the future.

Paulette Ecoffey, 40, said that she sees the program helping her and many other people on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

The Oglala Sioux member late last year got two cords of wood through the program for her wood stove, which helped heat her trailer for about a month.

"Wood's like gold in my house," said Ecoffey, whose furnace gave out about 2 1/2 years ago. "That's how we keep warm."

Follow James Nord on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/Jvnord>

Judge halts Arkansas plan to execute 8 inmates in 11 days

By **ANDREW DeMILLO** and **KELLY P. KISSEL**, Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — A federal judge dealt another blow Saturday to Arkansas' unprecedented plan to execute eight inmates in an 11-day period, saying the men have the right to challenge a drug protocol that could expose them to "severe pain."

The state still hopes to begin the executions Monday and the attorney general's office promised an appeal to overturn U.S. District Judge Kristine Baker's order. Arkansas' supply of one of its lethal injection drugs, midazolam, expires April 30 and Gov. Asa Hutchinson said he wants to use the drugs before they spoil.

Manufacturers object to states using their drugs in executions, and the Arkansas Department of Corrections has said in court filings that it doesn't have a way of obtaining more midazolam. In a separate case Friday, a state judge issued a temporary restraining order preventing the state from using a paralyzing drug, vecuronium bromide, made by a company that claims Arkansas obtained it under false pretenses.

Another federal judge and the state Supreme Court had already granted stays to two of the eight inmates, reducing the number of executions to six within an 11-day period. If Arkansas had proceeded with its original plan to execute eight inmates, it would have been the most people put to death by a state in that timeframe since the U.S. Supreme Court reauthorized the death penalty in 1976.

In her order, Baker said there was a significant possibility that the inmates could successfully challenge the state's execution protocol. She said that while the state demonstrated it does not plan to torture the inmates, the inmates had a right to challenge the method of execution in an attempt to show it "creates a demonstrated risk of severe pain." She also noted that the execution team did not have antidotes on hand in case there was trouble with any of the drugs.

"The schedule imposed on these officials, as well as their lack of recent execution experience, causes concern," she wrote.

The Arkansas attorney general's office said the decision strayed from previous cases before the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and the U.S. Supreme Court.

"It is unfortunate that a U.S. district judge has chosen to side with the convicted prisoners in one of their many last-minute attempts to delay justice," said Judd Deere, an office spokesman. "Attorney General (Leslie) Rutledge plans to immediately appeal to the Eighth Circuit and ask that today's injunction imposed by the district court be lifted."

Under Arkansas' protocol, midazolam is used to sedate the inmate, vecuronium bromide then stops the inmate's breathing and potassium chloride stops the heart. McKesson Corp. claims Arkansas improperly used medical credentials to obtain the vecuronium bromide and wants the product returned. It had said Thursday it issued Arkansas a refund of its purchase price but that the drug came back.

In her order Saturday, Baker cited troubled lengthy executions in Alabama, Arizona, Ohio and Oklahoma that used the sedative midazolam. Some states have barred the use of the drug, and courts have reached different decisions on what inmates would have to do to suggest alternative means of execution.

The judge also faulted the state's policy of not letting lawyers have access to the inmates at the time of their deaths and said the inmates could raise challenges about the drugs to be used.

"The court is mindful of the fact that the state of Arkansas has not executed an inmate since 2005, despite consistent support for capital punishment for Arkansawyers and their elected representatives," Baker wrote. She said the relatives of victims have waited for years to see executions, but, "by this order, that day is delayed again."

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"These thoughts weigh heavily on the court, but the court has a responsibility to uphold the Constitution. After hearing the evidence ... the court is compelled to stay these executions," she said.

Hutchinson in February had scheduled the executions to take place before the state's supply of midazolam expires. One execution was set aside because Arkansas didn't allow for a full 30-day comment period after the inmate won a clemency recommendation, and the state Supreme Court issued another a stay for another inmate Friday so courts can assess his mental health.

Arkansas hasn't executed an inmate since 2005 because of drug shortages and legal challenges.

Arkansas hasn't carried out a double execution since 1999.

The inmates' attorneys had challenges the compressed timetable and the state's use of midazolam, which has been used in flawed executions in other states. The state's attorneys have called the challenge an effort to delay the executions indefinitely and have said they don't have a replacement identified for the drug if it expires.

The inmates lost on some claims, including one that their lawyers couldn't provide adequate counsel under the state's schedule and that the tight timetable itself was improper. The lawsuit is among a flurry of challenges the inmates have filed to halt the executions.

Follow Andrew DeMillo on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ademillo> and Kelly Kissel at <https://twitter.com/kisselAP>.

AP Interview: Iran's Ahmadinejad sees no threat from US

By NASSER KARIMI, Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Saturday he does not view recent U.S. missile strikes on ally Syria as a message for Iran, which he called a "powerful country" that the U.S. cannot harm.

The controversial former president made the remarks to The Associated Press on Saturday, three days after he stunned Iranians by registering to run for president again.

His surprise candidacy must still be approved by authorities but has already upended a race that was widely expected to be won by incumbent moderate Hassan Rouhani.

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration earlier this year announced it was putting Iran "on notice" in part over its ballistic missile tests, and last week pounded a Syrian air base with cruise missiles in response to a chemical weapons attack.

Iran is the main regional backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad and is involved militarily on the ground in that country's civil war.

Ahmadinejad dismissed suggestions that the U.S. strike on Syria might also be a warning for his country.

"I do not think it has a message for Iran. Iran is a powerful country and people like Mr. Trump or the United States administration cannot hurt Iran," he said.

Ahmadinejad also voiced reluctant support for Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with the U.S. and other world powers, which saw Iran accept curbs on its nuclear program in exchange for relief from crippling international sanctions.

Iran has managed to sign a series of multibillion-dollar civilian aircraft deals since sanctions were lifted, but many ordinary Iranians are still waiting on hoped-for economic benefits of the nuclear agreement to trickle down.

"The nuclear deal is a legal document and a pact. In the Islamic Republic, the officials and the supreme leader have approved of it and declared their commitment to it," Ahmadinejad said.

"The problem about the nuclear deal is how they advertised it. Both parties have represented it in such a way as if it can solve all the issues of human history. It was incorrect. It later turned out to be untrue," he continued.

Ahmadinejad's candidacy has left many inside Iran scratching their heads.

He registered to run on the same day as did his former Vice President Hamid Baghaei, saying at the time his decision was meant to support his political ally.

His candidacy runs in opposition to a recommendation Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that he not run because it would create a "polarized situation" that would be "harmful for the county."

Ahmadinejad had ruled out running in the wake of Khamenei's comments in September, but after reversing course this week he called the supreme leader's comments "just advice" that does not prevent him from running.

Associated Press writer Adam Schreck in Dubai, United Arab Emirates contributed to this report.

North Korea flaunts long-range missiles in massive parade

By TIM SULLIVAN, Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea paraded its intercontinental ballistic missiles in a massive military display in central Pyongyang on Saturday, with ruler Kim Jong Un looking on with delight as his nation flaunted its increasingly sophisticated military hardware amid rising regional tensions.

Kim did not speak during the annual parade, which celebrates the 1912 birthday of his late grandfather Kim Il Sung, North Korea's founding ruler, but a top official warned that the North would stand up to any threat posed by the United States.

Choe Ryong Hae said President Donald Trump was guilty of "creating a war situation" on the Korean Peninsula by dispatching U.S. forces to the region.

"We will respond to an all-out war with an all-out war and a nuclear war with our style of a nuclear attack," said Choe, widely seen by analysts as North Korea's No. 2 official.

The parade, the annual highlight of North Korea's most important holiday, came amid growing international worries that North Korea may be preparing for its sixth nuclear test or a major missile launch, such as its first flight test of an ICBM capable of reaching U.S. shores.

But if the parade signaled a readiness for war, North Korea has long insisted that its goal is peace — and survival — with the growing arsenal a way to ensure that the government in Pyongyang is not easily overthrown.

North Korea saw the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Moammar Gadhafi in Libya — neither of whom had nuclear weapons — as proof of the weapons' power.

"It will be the largest of miscalculations if the United States treats us like Iraq and Libya, which are living out miserable fates as victims of aggression, and Syria, which didn't respond immediately even after it was attacked," said a Friday statement by the general staff of the North Korean army, according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

Also Friday, North Korea's vice foreign minister told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview that Trump's tweets — he recently tweeted, for example, that the North is "looking for trouble" — have inflamed tensions.

"Trump is always making provocations with his aggressive words," Han Song Ryol said.

U.S. retaliatory strikes earlier this month against Syria over a chemical weapons attack on civilians, coupled with Trump's dispatching of what he called an "armada" of ships to the region, touched off fears in South Korea that the United States was preparing for military action against the North.

Pyongyang has also expressed anger over the ongoing annual spring military exercises the U.S. holds with South Korea, which it considers a rehearsal for invasion.

But U.S. officials told The Associated Press on Friday that the Trump administration had settled on a policy that will emphasize increasing pressure on Pyongyang with the help of China, North Korea's only major ally, instead of military options or trying to overthrow Kim's regime.

A U.S. military official, who requested anonymity to discuss planning, said the United States doesn't intend to use military force against North Korea in response to either a nuclear test or a missile launch.

Kim, wearing a suit and tie, was greeted Saturday with thunderous — and extensively practiced — applause as he stepped into view on a large podium, clapping to acknowledge the thousands of soldiers and civilians taking part in the parade at Kim Il Sung Square.

The parade, an elaborate display of the state's immense power, involves tens of thousands of partici-

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pants, from goose-stepping soldiers to crowds of civilians who have spent weeks perfecting their ability to wave plastic flowers in unison.

For outside military analysts, though, the highlight is the weaponry that the North puts on display.

A series of what appeared to be KN-08 missiles were among the weapons rolled out on trucks. Analysts say the missiles could one day be capable of hitting targets as far as the continental United States, although North Korea has yet to flight test them.

The parade also included large rockets covered by canisters in two different types of transporter erector launcher trucks, or TELs. An official from South Korea's Defense Ministry couldn't immediately confirm whether any of the rockets represented a new type of ICBM.

Kim Dong-yub, a North Korea expert at Seoul's Institute for Far Eastern Studies, said the canisters and trucks suggested that the North was developing technology to "cold launch" ICBMs, ejecting them from the canisters before they ignite. This would allow North Korea to prevent its limited number of ICBM-capable launcher trucks from being damaged during launches and also make the missiles harder to detect after they're fired, he said. Cold launches would also allow the missiles to be fired from silos.

Kim, the analyst, said it's likely that North Korea is also developing solid-fuel ICBMs, and that some of the rockets inside the canisters on Saturday might have been prototypes.

Other military hardware at the parade included tanks, multiple rocket launchers and artillery, as well as a solid-fuel missile designed to be fired from submarines. Also on display was a powerful midrange missile that can potentially reach U.S. air bases in Guam, which outside analysts call a "Musudan," as well as a new solid-fuel midrange missile that can be fired from land mobile launchers, making them harder to detect before launch.

Kim Jong Un, a 30-something leader who took power in late 2011 after the death of his father, Kim Jong Il, emphasizes nuclear weapons as the foundation of his national defense strategy. Under his watch, North Korea has aggressively pursued a goal of putting a nuclear warhead on an ICBM capable of reaching the U.S. mainland.

In his annual New Year's address, Kim said North Korea's preparations for an ICBM launch had "reached the final stage." Recent satellite imagery suggests the country could conduct another underground nuclear test at any time.

North Korea conducted two nuclear tests last year alone, advancing its goal to make nuclear weapons small enough to fit on long-range missiles. The North also last year launched a long-range rocket that put a satellite into orbit, which Washington, Seoul and others saw as a banned test of missile technology.

Other senior officials joining Kim at the parade podium included Kim Won Hong, who the South Korean government had said earlier this year was fired from his job as state security minister, presumably over corruption. South Korea has a spotty record of tracking developments in North Korea, as information about the secretive, authoritarian state is often impossible to confirm.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul, South Korea, contributed to this report.

Afghan official: Massive US bomb death toll rises to 94

By RAHIM FAIEZ, Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The number of militants killed in an attack by the largest non-nuclear weapon ever used in combat by the U.S. military has risen to 94, an Afghan official said Saturday.

Ataullah Khogyani, spokesman for the provincial governor in Nangarhar, said the number of Islamic State group dead was up from the 36 reported a day earlier. A Ministry of Defense official had said Friday the number of dead could rise as officials assessed the bomb site in Achin district.

"Fortunately there is no report of civilians being killed in the attack," Khogyani said.

The increased death toll in Nangarhar was announced as officials in southern Helmand province reported at least 11 civilians were killed and one wounded in two roadside bomb blasts overnight.

The U.S. attack on a tunnel complex in remote eastern Nangarhar province near the Pakistan border

killed at least four IS group leaders, Khogyani said. He said a clearance operation to assess the site of the attack was continuing.

The strike using the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, or MOAB, was carried out Thursday against an Islamic State group tunnel complex carved into the mountains that Afghan forces had tried to assault repeatedly in recent weeks in fierce fighting in Nangarhar province.

Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai on Saturday criticized both the Afghan and U.S. governments for the attack in Nangarhar. Addressing a gathering in capital Kabul, Karzai said that allowing the U.S. to carry out the bombing was "treason" and an insult to Afghanistan.

Current President Ashraf Ghani's office said Friday there was "close coordination" between the U.S. military and the Afghan government on the operation, and they were careful to prevent any civilian casualties.

The U.S. estimates 600-800 IS fighters are in Afghanistan, mostly in Nangarhar. The U.S. has concentrated on fighting them while also supporting Afghan forces against the Taliban. The U.S. has more than 8,000 US troops in Afghanistan, training local forces and conducting counterterrorism operations.

In Helmand province, at least 11 civilians were killed and one wounded in two roadside bomb blasts late Friday evening, said Omar Zwak, spokesman for the provincial governor.

"All victims of the attack were innocent civilians including women and children," said Zwak. The 11 died in a blast in Nawa district when their vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb. Another person was wounded when a second bomb exploded in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand, he said.

Also on Saturday, Khogyani said a district leader and three others were wounded when their vehicle was targeted by a bomb. One of the wounded was Ghalib Mujahid, Bati Kot district chief, he said.

"The district chief and others are out of danger and are not in life-threatening condition," he said.

Last November, Mujahid was attacked by a sticky bomb attached to the vehicle and he was wounded and his driver was killed.

Syrian army moves to tame rebellious Damascus districts

By **BASSEM MROUE**, Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Backed by Russian air power and allied militiamen on the ground, Syrian troops have recaptured entire cities from rebels and Islamic State group extremists in the past year, including the key cities of Aleppo, Homs and Palmyra.

Yet for the past three years, President Bashar Assad's forces have been unable to free opposition-held neighborhoods of the capital Damascus, where rebel fighters have built a labyrinth of secret underground tunnels, beyond the reach of airstrikes and connected to opposition-held suburbs farther out.

A weeks-long push to expand the security belt around Assad's seat of power, however, shows a new determination to retake the three areas north and northeast of the capital partially held by rebels — a long-festering thorn in the government's side.

The offensive is the strongest in years, with warplanes reportedly conducting more than 70 airstrikes in one day and using surface-to-surface missiles in some of the deadliest attacks in weeks.

"The regime is pushing with all the powers it has," said Ahmad Mahmoud, an opposition activist based in a rebel-held eastern suburb of Damascus.

The Damascus neighborhoods of Barzeh, Qaboun, and Jobar form a semi arc from the northern to eastern edge of Damascus. They are partially held by rebels and are often used to fire mortar shells into the metropolis and stage hit-and-run attacks, a constant threat and reminder that rebels can disrupt life in the city that has escaped much of the destruction and violence of other areas.

Qaboun and Barzeh had witnessed relative calm since 2014 thanks to a reconciliation deal between rebels and the government. During that period, vegetables and daily products were allowed out of the neighborhoods into Damascus and in return the government allowed food and other products into the neighborhoods.

That allowed government troops to turn their attention elsewhere and in December government forces and their allies captured rebel-held eastern neighborhoods of the northern city of Aleppo, marking Assad's

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biggest victory of the six-year war. Aleppo is Syria's largest city and once commercial center.

In March, rebels began evacuating al-Waer, the last rebel-held neighborhood in the Homs, the country's third-largest city, and more recently they evicted rebels from the Wadi Barada region northwest of Damascus. In August last year, rebels evacuated the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Daraya after years of siege.

The victories have freed thousands of troops and pro-government fighters who are now marching in northern, central and southern Syria against rebels and members of the Islamic State group.

Opposition activists say that some of these troops will be used in the battle to capture the Damascus neighborhoods and eastern Ghouta in what would boost the security belt around Damascus and ease pressure on the capital.

"They are dealing with the eastern Ghouta enclave last, because it is much larger than all the other enclaves," said Aron Lund, a fellow at The Century Foundation. "It is bigger, more populated, and better defended than Eastern Aleppo was."

Lund, a Syria analyst, said Qaboun and Barzeh have supplied the eastern Ghouta rebels with arms, fuel, and other goods through smuggling tunnels, "so taking these areas would probably be the first step toward retaking the Eastern Ghouta."

It will not be an easy battle.

"They have their own world underground," said Rami Abdurrahman of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on a network of activists around the country. He was referring to the elaborate underground tunnels that the fighters use to move from one place to another, smuggle food, or launch attacks against government forces before disappearing underground again.

Anas al-Dimashqi, an opposition activist based in eastern Ghouta, said that many of the tunnels have been destroyed by the government recently, collapsing under the pressure of airstrikes, or come under control of troops in previous incursions that would eventually turn the balance of power in favor of the government.

Having surrounded the areas from all sides, coupled with the unravelling of a truce that lasted years, it will be easier for the government to eventually get these areas under its control.

Earlier this year clashes broke out in Damascus and on March 1, rebels killed Brig. Gen. Bilal Ibrahim Mubarak who was commanding the operations in Jobar and Qaboun.

In mid-March, government forces launched a wide offensive, pushing deep into the so-called al-Darb al-Tawileh road cutting Barzeh and Qaboun from eastern Ghouta. The retaliation came days later as insurgents, including fighters linked with al-Qaida, launched suicide attacks and captured some areas from the government — in their deepest incursion into Damascus since 2012 — only to lose them days later.

On April 3, government forces launched an offensive in Damascus capturing the Hafez road, a strategic artery, and sieged Barzeh in what would eventually facilitate its capture.

Opposition activists say government forces have now gained experience of how to slowly take control of areas after besieging them by starving the population and targeting hospitals and clinics in order to force them to accept a deal that would lead to an evacuation — a process that has occurred across other parts of the country.

Marwan al-Omawi, a media activist in eastern Ghouta, said that if the neighborhoods and eastern Ghouta face an all-out attack, rebels are only few kilometers (miles) from the capital and can retaliate by shelling it to pressure the government.

He said powerful groups are present in the neighborhoods and eastern Ghouta, including the Army of Islam, Failaq al-Rahman, the al-Qaida-linked Levant Liberation Committee, the ultraconservative Ahrar al-Sham and the Fajr al-Umma group, illustrating that the battle will not be easy for the government.

Osama Abu Zeid, a Syria-based activist said these areas will resist a government attack but eventually "these pockets have no supply lines and no lines to evacuate the wounded."

Mahmoud, the Ghouta-based activist, says the government will have to carpet bomb the area to force opposition rebels to surrender.

"We know that the regime can fire 10,000 shells on an area. The regime might be able to advance but only after destroying whole districts with airstrikes and surface-to-surface missiles," he said.

North Korea rolls out missiles, other weaponry at parade

By TIM SULLIVAN, Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea rolled out intercontinental ballistic missiles and other military hardware at a massive parade on Saturday to celebrate the birthday of the country's late founder, as third-generation leader Kim Jong Un looked on in delight.

State television showed Kim, wearing a black suit and white shirt, stepping out of a limousine and saluting his honor guard before walking down a red carpet. He then stepped up to a podium and clapped with senior government officials to address the thousands of soldiers and civilians taking part in the parade at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, the capital.

The festivities, celebrating the 105th birthday of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Un's grandfather, took place amid concerns that North Korea is possibly preparing for its sixth nuclear test or a significant rocket launch, such as its first flight test of an ICBM.

State television showed what appeared to be several KN-08 and KN-14 missiles rolled out on trucks at the parade. Military analysts say the missiles could one day be capable of hitting targets as far as the continental United States, although the North has yet to flight test them.

North Korean soldiers also rolled out what appeared to be another large rocket covered by a canister. An official from South Korea's Defense Ministry couldn't immediately confirm whether the rocket was a new ICBM.

Other military hardware at the parade included tanks, multiple rocket launchers and artillery guns, as well as a solid-fuel missile designed to be fired from submarines. Also on display was a powerful midrange missile that outside analysts call a "Musudan," and which can potentially reach U.S. air bases in Guam, as well as a new solid-fuel midrange missile that can be fired from land mobile launchers, making them harder to detect before launch.

Military planes flew in formation, creating the number "105" above Kim Il Sung Square.

Choe Ryong Hae, who some say is the second-most powerful official in North Korea, said in a speech that the country is ready to stand up to any threat posed by the United States. He criticized the new U.S. government under President Donald Trump for "creating a war situation" on the Korean Peninsula by dispatching strategic military assets to the region.

"We will respond to an all-out war with an all-out war and a nuclear war with our style of a nuclear attack," Choe said.

Other senior officials joining Kim at the podium included Kim Won Hong, who the South Korean government had said earlier this year was fired from his job as state security minister, presumably over corruption. South Korea has a spotty record of tracking developments in North Korea, as information about the secretive, authoritarian state is often impossible to confirm.

Kim Jong Un didn't speak before North Korean television ended the live broadcast.

Kim, a 30-something leader who took power in late 2011, emphasizes nuclear weapons as the foundation of his national defense strategy. The country under his watch has been aggressively pursuing a goal of putting a nuclear warhead on an ICBM capable of reaching the continental United States.

In his annual New Year's address, Kim said that North Korea's preparations for an ICBM launch have "reached the final stage." U.S. satellite imagery suggests the country could conduct another underground nuclear test at any time.

North Korea conducted two such tests last year alone, which analysts say would have taken the country a step forward in gaining the knowledge to make nuclear weapons small enough to fit on long-range missiles. The North also last year launched a long-range rocket that put a satellite into orbit, which Washington, Seoul and others saw as a banned test of missile technology.

Amid the elevated tensions, the United States a few days ago dispatched what Trump called an "armada" of ships in a show of force, including an aircraft carrier, into waters off the Korean Peninsula.

The move, coupled with the U.S. retaliatory strikes against Syria over a chemical weapons attack on civilians, touched off fear in South Korea that the United States was preparing for military action on the North.

However, U.S. officials told The Associated Press on Friday that the Trump administration has settled on a policy that will emphasize on increasing pressure on Pyongyang with the help of China, North Korea's only major ally, instead of military options or trying to overthrow Kim's leadership.

A U.S. military official, who requested anonymity to discuss planning, said the United States doesn't intend to use military force against North Korea in response to either a nuclear test or a missile launch.

Pyongyang has expressed anger over the annual spring military exercises the U.S. holds with South Korea, which it considers an invasion rehearsal. It has warned of a nuclear attack on the United States in retaliation for any sign of aggression, a threat that has been made numerous times in the past.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul, South Korea, contributed to this report.

Train stuck in tunnel 3 hours, then stun gun sparks stampede

By JENNIFER PELTZ and VERENA DOBNIK, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A train with about 1,200 passengers became stuck in a tunnel between New York and New Jersey for nearly three hours on Friday, and the chaotic scene escalated to pandemonium when Amtrak police used a stun gun to subdue a disruptive man in a station, sparking a stampede.

It was the latest in a series of recent rail problems plaguing the metropolitan area.

The New Jersey Transit train became disabled in the Hudson River tunnel late Friday afternoon, when Amtrak was experiencing overhead power problems. A New Jersey Transit spokeswoman said the train finally reached New York's Penn Station in the early evening.

The overcrowded train station erupted in panic when Amtrak police used a Taser to subdue a man who was causing a disturbance. New York police said the use of the Taser led to false rumors of gunshots at the station. People screamed and ran, leaving the station strewn with abandoned bags. The nearby Macy's department store was briefly locked down. Sixteen people suffered non-life-threatening injuries, police said.

Amtrak said Friday night the subdued man, who wasn't a passenger from the disabled train, was in police custody.

The loss of power in the tunnel caused delays of an hour or more on Amtrak and New Jersey Transit. It happened three weeks after the derailment of an Amtrak train at Penn Station and a week after a New Jersey Transit derailment shut down eight of 21 tracks there and disrupted travel in the region for days. No injuries were reported in any of the incidents.

One passenger from Friday's train, Mia Sanati, described a scene of confusion.

Sanati said she and her husband were headed for the New York International Auto Show when they boarded the train in Secaucus, New Jersey, at Secaucus Junction, the last New York-bound stop before Penn Station.

She said shortly after the train entered the tunnel to go under the Hudson River, they felt a bump on the side of the train and saw sparks.

"About 30 seconds later, the train just came to a complete stop," Sanati said.

The power went out, except for emergency lights, and so did the air conditioning, said Sanati, who made video of the darkened car.

"It got really hot really fast, with that many people crammed together," she said.

As riders waited and plans changed — they were told that the train would be towed, then that it would be evacuated — some tried to make light of the situation or scooted over in their seats to make room for people who were standing. But others were shaking, pacing, saying they had to get out or mulling about walking through the tunnel, Sanati said.

After the electricity came back on and the train started moving, there were cheers, said Sanati, who lives in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, and just finished a doctoral program in mass communications.

Rush hour passengers trying to leave New York faced mounting delays.

Adam Rosen, a chemical engineer going to Hamilton, New Jersey, said, "They keep extending the delays from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and now indefinitely. This is the worst."

New Jersey Transit executive director Steven Santoro said in a statement to affected riders, "we deeply

apologize for your experience, and I would like to hear from you.”

NJ Transit spokeswoman Nancy Snyder said the railroad was working with Amtrak to determine the cause of the problem.

Arkansas' multiple execution plan appearing to unravel

By **ANDREW DeMILLO**, Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Arkansas' already compromised plan to execute eight men by the end of the month appeared to unravel Friday, with a judge blocking the use of a lethal injection drug and the state's highest court granting a stay to one of the first inmates who had been scheduled to die.

Pulaski County Circuit Judge Wendell Griffen issued a temporary restraining order blocking the state from using its supply of vecuronium bromide after a company said it had sold the drug to the state for medical purposes, not capital punishment. Griffen scheduled a hearing Tuesday, the day after the first execution was scheduled.

Griffen's order effectively halts the executions, which had dropped to six after Friday's state Supreme Court order blocking one execution and a federal judge halting another last week, unless it's reversed or the state finds a new supply of the drug.

Arkansas, which has not executed an inmate since 2005 because of drug shortages and legal challenges, had initially planned to execute eight before the end of April, when its supply of midazolam expires. That plan, if carried out, would have marked the most inmates executed by a state in such a short period since the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

Attorney General Leslie Rutledge's office said she planned to file an emergency request with the state Supreme Court to vacate Griffen's order, saying Griffen shouldn't handle the case. Local media outlets had tweeted photos and video of Griffen appearing to mimic an inmate strapped to a gurney at an anti-death penalty demonstration outside the Governor's Mansion Friday afternoon.

"As a public opponent of capital punishment, Judge Griffen should have recused himself from this case," Rutledge spokesman Judd Deere said.

The order came the same day justices issued a stay for Bruce Ward, who was scheduled to be put to death on Monday night for the 1989 death of a woman found strangled in the men's room of the Little Rock convenience store where she worked. Attorneys asked for the stay after a Jefferson County judge said she didn't have the authority to halt Ward's execution. Ward's attorneys have argued he is a diagnosed schizophrenic with no rational understanding of his impending execution.

"We are grateful that the Arkansas Supreme Court has issued a stay of execution for Bruce Ward so that they may consider the serious questions presented about his sanity," Scott Braden, an assistant federal public defender representing Ward, said in a statement.

U.S. District Judge Kristine Baker is also considering the inmates' arguments that such a compressed schedule could lead to undue pain and suffering. Baker had not ruled by Friday evening. Arkansas scheduled the executions to take place before its supply of midazolam expires at the end of the month.

McKesson said it had requested Arkansas return its supply of vecuronium bromide after the San Francisco-based company learned it would be used in executions. The firm said Thursday night the state had assured it would return the drug and the company had even issued a refund, but it never was given back. The company accused the Department of Correction of misleadingly using its medical director's license, which was to be used only to order products for "legitimate medical uses," to buy the drug.

"Without the medical license, and the associated tacit representation that the controlled drug would only be used for a legitimate medical purpose, McKesson would not have sold the vecuronium to ADC," the company said in its lawsuit.

Under Arkansas' protocol, midazolam is used to sedate the inmate, vecuronium bromide then stops the inmate's breathing and potassium chloride stops the heart.

Baker is also considering a request from two pharmaceutical companies that their products not be used for capital punishment. Fresenius Kabi USA and West-Ward Pharmaceuticals Corp. filed a court brief

Thursday asking the court to prohibit Arkansas from using their drugs.

Arkansas' execution timeline drew condemnation from hundreds of death penalty opponents who rallied at the Capitol waving signs including a large banner that read, "We remember the victims ... But not with more killing." The rally was headlined by actor Johnny Depp and Damien Echols, who spent nearly 18 years on Arkansas' death row before he and two other men, known as the West Memphis Three, were freed in 2011 in a plea deal in which they maintained their innocence.

"I didn't want to come back, but when I heard about the conveyor belt of death that the politicians were trying to set in motion, I guess I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't come back and try to do something," said Echols, who now lives in New York.

Associated Press writers Tafi Mukunyadzi and Kelly P. Kissel contributed to this report.

Follow Andrew DeMillo on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ademillo

Rian Johnson debuts teaser trailer for 'The Last Jedi'

By JAKE COYLE, AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Is the Force still strong with Luke Skywalker?

The first trailer for "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" dropped on Friday, showcasing a morose and withdrawn Skywalker. The two-minute teaser, unveiled by director Rian Johnson at the "Star Wars Celebration" fan event in Orlando, Florida, offered few clues to the film. But it notably includes Mark Hamill's iconic hero gravely intoning, "It's time for the Jedi to end," from a dark cave.

The trailer whetted the appetites of ravenous "Star Wars" fans who turned out in droves in Orlando and online, where the event was streamed live. Actor Josh Gad, a Disney star from another universe ("Frozen," "Beauty and the Beast"), hosted a panel including Johnson, producer Kathleen Kennedy and cast members Daisy Ridley, John Boyega and a new addition, Kelly Marie Tran.

"The Last Jedi" picks off where "The Force Awakens" left off, with Rey (Ridley) meeting Luke on a remote island, filmed off the coast of Ireland. Some shots in the trailer also suggested Skywalker training Rey on the island. In "The Force Awakens," Adam Driver's Kylo Ren has turned to the dark side after being tutored by Luke.

The presentation was mostly a game of teasing hints about the film while revealing very little about it.

"I actually can tell you some things. A small amount," said Ridley, laughing. She said the film will go "deep" into Rey's story and reveal how it can be difficult meeting your heroes — presumably alluding to a cranky Skywalker. "They may not be what you expect," said Ridley to knowing groans in the crowd.

"The Force Awakens" director and "Last Jedi" producer J.J. Abrams has previously hailed Hamill's performance in the film, suggesting it could land him an Oscar nomination. Hamill, the most raucously received star on Friday, said he drew on his own experiences for this new chapter in Luke's life.

"I said: I have to relate to things that are real in my own life to understand where Luke is at this point in his life," Hamill said.

"The Last Jedi" is due in theaters Dec. 15.

It will be Carrie Fisher's last appearance in the core "Star Wars" films that follow the saga of the Skywalker family. Kennedy told ABC News Friday that Fisher, who died in December, will not appear in the planned ninth "Star Wars" film.

"Sadly, Carrie will not be in (Episode) Nine," Kennedy said. "We'll see a lot of her in VIII, which is great."

Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB4I68XVPzQ>

Sliding home: Jackie Robinson gets statue at Dodger Stadium

By BETH HARRIS, AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — He was the first black man to play in the major leagues, ending six decades of racial segregation, and a first-ballot Hall of Famer.

Fittingly, Jackie Robinson is the first to be honored with a statue at Dodger Stadium. It will be unveiled Saturday on the 70th anniversary of his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Two years ago on Jackie Robinson Day, owner and chairman Mark Walter suggested a sculpture belonged at Dodger Stadium of the six-time All-Star second baseman who starred when the team was in Brooklyn.

"He just felt it was an idea whose time had come," said Janet Marie Smith, the team's senior vice president of planning and development.

The 77-inch tall bronze statue depicts Robinson as a rookie in 1947 stealing home, a nod to his aggressive baserunning. It weighs 700 pounds and is secured with a 150-pound steel rod. It stands in the left field reserve plaza, with sweeping views of downtown Los Angeles in one direction and Elysian Park in the other.

Smith said the location was chosen because it's where the majority of fans enter the hillside ballpark that opened 55 years ago.

On the statue's granite base are three of Robinson's quotes as chosen by the family, including wife Rachel's favorite: "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

"Our goal was to both celebrate Jackie Robinson as an athlete and to acknowledge the important role he had in civil rights and social change in America," Smith said.

The family shared numerous photos of Robinson with sculptor Branly Cadet of Oakland, California.

"They really wanted me to get the likeness and I assured them I'd be working very hard on that," he said. "That was the element I spent the most time on to capture an expression that would be happening in that moment."

Now 94, Rachel Robinson is traveling from the East Coast to attend the unveiling, along with daughter Sharon and son David. Their other son, Jackie Jr., died in a car accident in 1971.

Also invited are about 50 members of Robinson's extended family, the majority from his late brother Mack's side of the family in nearby Pasadena. That's where the Georgia-born Jackie grew up and first became a four-sport standout in football, basketball, track and baseball at John Muir High. He played all four sports at Pasadena City College before going on to UCLA.

"This is going to be a very special time," Sharon Robinson said. "My dad was a humble person and here he is 70 years later being recognized. He used to come home and say, 'I got a standing ovation today,' and he would be so shocked."

Some of the biggest names in Dodgers history will be on hand: retired broadcaster Vin Scully, who was friendly with Robinson; pitching greats Sandy Koufax and Don Newcombe, who were Robinson's teammates when the Dodgers won the 1955 World Series; and Hall of Fame manager Tom Lasorda. Also, Frank Robinson, a Hall of Fame player and the first black to manage in the majors and no relation; Dodgers co-owner Magic Johnson; and Stan Kasten, team president and CEO.

The first 40,000 fans at Saturday's game against Arizona receive a replica of the statue.

Robinson's statue at the ballpark is the eighth of him, the most of any American athlete, according to two British researchers.

Statistician Chris Stride from the University of Sheffield and Ffion Thomas, a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Central Lancashire, have cataloged Robinson's monuments as part of their Sporting Statues Project database.

They found just two of his existing statues depict him playing baseball, while the rest commemorate Robinson's social achievements or association with a particular location. Two oversized busts of Jackie and Mack Robinson, an Olympic track medalist, are located across from Pasadena City Hall.

"Each of the statues, and given their location, reflects the totality of the man," Sharon Robinson said. "He would have wanted that very much."

The researchers found that relocated major league franchises are less likely to have statues. And, if they

do, they rarely honor players who starred in the team's previous location and incarnation.

Sharon Robinson views the statue as a fitting connection between her father's local roots and his 10-year Hall of Fame career spent in New York.

"It really links the Brooklyn Dodgers with the Los Angeles Dodgers," she said.

Since 2004, baseball has honored Robinson's barrier-breaking career every April, the one day every player on every team wears his retired No. 42 jersey. The players' union is making a grant this week from its Players Trust to the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

"It's not about looking back so much as it is feeling inspired," Sharon Robinson said. "There's still lots and lots of struggles in this world and it's a very complicated place. Jackie Robinson showed us you can stand up, be strong and be respected, and play great ball under tremendous pressure."

Lawyer: Little money involved in Trump sanctuary order

By SUDHIN THANAWALA, Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — President Donald Trump's executive order withholding funding from communities that limit cooperation with immigration authorities applies to a small pot of grant money, not the billions of dollars that San Francisco and a California county say is at stake for them, a lawyer with the Department of Justice said Friday.

Acting Assistant Attorney General Chad Readler made the comments during a court hearing on lawsuits filed by San Francisco and the Silicon Valley county of Santa Clara against Trump's order targeting so-called sanctuary cities.

Readler said the city and county were interpreting the order too broadly.

The funding cutoff applies to DOJ and Department of Homeland Security grants contingent on compliance with a federal law that prohibits local governments from refusing to provide people's immigration status to federal authorities, he said.

The order would affect less than \$1 million in funding for Santa Clara County and possibly no money for San Francisco, Readler said. "There is no mystery," he said.

The plaintiffs have argued that more than \$1 billion was at stake for each of them, citing all federal funds they receive for a variety of programs and services.

Sarah Eisenberg, a deputy city attorney in San Francisco, disputed Readler's claim, saying the city has money at stake.

Readler's comments about the money appeared to catch U.S. District Judge William Orrick by surprise. Orrick then questioned the point of the president's executive order.

The administration was using a "bully pulpit" to highlight an issue it cares deeply about, Readler responded.

John Kecker, an attorney for Santa Clara County, rejected Readler's interpretation and said the order referred to all federal funds now received by local governments that don't detain immigrants for possible deportation when they are due for release from jail.

"They've come up with a further interpretation," Kecker said. "It won't wash."

San Francisco and Santa Clara County have asked for a court order blocking the Trump administration from cutting off funds to any sanctuary cities. Orrick did not immediately issue a ruling after Friday's hearing.

Readler said the request was premature because decisions about withholding funds and what jurisdictions qualify as sanctuary cities have yet to be made.

Mollie Lee, another deputy city attorney in San Francisco, said the Trump administration has labeled San Francisco a sanctuary city in public comments, so the city had good reason to believe it was a target.

The sanctuary city order was among a flurry of immigration measures the president signed in January, including a ban on travelers from seven majority Muslim countries and a border security directive calling for a wall with Mexico.

A federal appeals court blocked the travel ban. The administration then revised it, although the new version is also stalled in court.

The Trump administration says sanctuary cities allow dangerous criminals back on the street, and the

president's order is needed to keep the country safe. San Francisco and other sanctuary cities say turning local police into immigration officers erodes trust that's needed to get people to report crime.

The order has also prompted lawsuits by Seattle, two Massachusetts cities, Lawrence and Chelsea, and a third San Francisco Bay Area government, the City of Richmond, though none of those cases has received a court hearing yet.

San Francisco, the first city to challenge the order in court, said in court documents that the president does not have authority over federal funds and cannot force local officials to enforce federal immigration law.

Delta OKs offers of up to \$9,950 to flyers who give up seats

By DAVID KOENIG and DAMIAN TROISE, AP Business Writers

Delta is letting employees offer customers nearly \$10,000 in compensation to give up seats on overbooked flights, hoping to avoid an uproar like the one that erupted at United after a passenger was dragged off a jet.

United is taking steps too. It will require employees seeking a seat on a plane to book it at least an hour before departure, a policy that might have prevented last Sunday's confrontation.

Those and other changes show airlines are scrambling to respond to a public-relations nightmare — the video showing airport officers violently yanking and dragging 69-year-old David Dao from his seat on a sold-out United Express flight.

Dao and three others were ordered off the plane after four airline employees showed up at the last minute and demanded seats so they could be in place to operate a flight the next day in Louisville, Kentucky.

On Friday, a United spokeswoman said the airline changed its policy to require traveling employees to book a flight at least 60 minutes before departure. Had the rule been in place last Sunday, United Express Flight 3411 still would have been overbooked by four seats, but United employees could have dealt with the situation in the gate area instead of on the plane.

Delta Air Lines is moving to make it easier to find customers willing to give up their seats. In an internal memo obtained Friday by The Associated Press, Delta said gate agents can offer up to \$2,000, up from a previous maximum of \$800, and supervisors can offer up to \$9,950, up from \$1,350.

United said it is reviewing its compensation policies. The airline would not disclose its current payment limit.

Other airlines said they were examining their policies. American Airlines updated its rules to say that no passenger who has boarded the plane will be removed to give the seat to someone else.

None would describe their limits on paying passengers.

When there aren't enough seats, airlines usually ask for volunteers by offering travel vouchers, gift cards or cash.

Last year Delta got more passengers to give up their seats than any other U.S. airline, partly by paying more than most of the others.

As a result, it had the lowest rate among the largest U.S. airlines of bumping people off flights against their will — something that is legal but alienates customers and requires the airline to pay compensation of up to \$1,350 per person.

Overselling flights is a fact of life in the airline business. Industry officials say that it is necessary because some passengers don't show up, and that overbooking keeps fares down by reducing the number of empty seats.

The practice has been questioned, however, since video of the United Express incident went viral. United Continental CEO Oscar Munoz's initial attempts to apologize were roundly criticized. On Friday, company Chairman Robert Milton said the board supported Munoz.

"We need to use this regrettable event as a defining moment and pivot off it to craft friendly policies," Milton said in a note to employees.

The dragging has turned into a public-relations nightmare for the entire industry, not just United, and led to calls from politicians and consumer advocates to suspend or ban overbooking.

Ben Schlappig, a travel blogger who first wrote about the Delta compensation increase, said it shows Delta is trying to reduce forced bumping. He said he couldn't imagine many situations in which people wouldn't jump at nearly \$10,000.

Delta no doubt hopes that gate agents and their supervisors won't need to make maximum offers, and the financial cost to the airline is likely to be limited. If Delta paid \$9,950 to every person it bumped involuntarily last year, that would total \$12 million. Delta earned nearly \$4.4 billion.

Raising the limits "lets them solve some PR problems" and might head off U.S. Transportation Department regulations to curb overbooking, said another travel blogger, Gary Leff. "They can say, 'Look, we're already solving the problem.'"

An AP analysis of government data shows that in 2015 and 2016, Delta paid an average of \$1,118 in compensation for every passenger that it denied a seat. Southwest Airlines paid \$758, United \$565, and American Airlines \$554.

After the incident in Chicago, critics questioned why United didn't offer more when no passengers accepted the airline's \$800 offer for volunteers to give up their seats.

"If you offer enough money, even the guy going to a funeral will sell his seat," said Ross Aimer, a retired United pilot.

David Koenig can be reached at <http://twitter.com/airlinewriter>

Ex-NFL star Hernandez, serving life, acquitted in 2 slayings

By DENISE LAVOIE, AP Legal Affairs Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Former NFL star Aaron Hernandez, already serving a life sentence for a 2013 murder, was acquitted Friday in a 2012 double slaying prosecutors said was fueled by his anger over a drink spilled at a nightclub.

The former New England Patriots tight end choked back tears as the verdicts were read in court. A few moments later, he looked back at his fiancée and nodded somberly as relatives of the victims sobbed loudly. A defense attorney hugged him.

After six days of deliberations, the jury found Hernandez not guilty of first-degree murder in the killings of Daniel de Abreu and Safiro Furtado but convicted him of unlawful possession of a gun. The judge sentenced him to an additional four to five years in prison, separate from his existing life sentence.

Suffolk District Attorney Daniel Conley said the victims' families were devastated by the verdicts and by the defense's portrayal of the men as "gang bangers" and "drug dealers."

"These were two hardworking, humble, Cape Verdean immigrants," Conley said. "It was unnecessary, and it was wrong, and it shouldn't have been done."

Conley said prosecutors and the families take solace in the fact Hernandez is serving a life sentence in the killing of Odin Lloyd, a semi-professional football player who was dating the sister of Hernandez's fiancée. Prosecutors in the double murder trial weren't allowed to mention his conviction in Lloyd's case.

Conley said one of the victims' relatives said, "At least he's not walking out the door today."

The defense team had pointed the finger at Alexander Bradley, a drug dealer and close friend of Hernandez, who was with him the night of the shootings. The defense hammered at Bradley's credibility, citing his immunity deal with prosecutors to testify against Hernandez, his role as the driver of their car the night of the shootings and his criminal record. Bradley is serving a five-year prison term in Connecticut for firing shots at a Hartford nightclub in 2014.

Bradley testified that Hernandez became enraged after de Abreu bumped into him while dancing at the Boston nightclub, spilling his drink. He said Hernandez later opened fire on the men's car as they waited at a stoplight.

Prosecutors charged Hernandez with shooting Bradley in the face months after the double slaying to try to silence him as a witness. Bradley lost his right eye. Hernandez was acquitted of witness intimidation in that shooting.

Defense attorney Ronald Sullivan Jr. said the jury was able to see through the "smoke and mirrors" that

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made up the state's case. He described Hernandez as a "very good young man who happened to hang out with a very bad guy in Alexander Bradley."

Conley said prosecutors would not go after Bradley in the killings because they believe they already charged the right person.

"Our theory of the case stands," Conley said. "In our minds, (the evidence) points inescapably to Aaron Hernandez."

Jury forewoman Lindsey Stringer read a statement noting the more than 70 witnesses and 380 exhibits presented in the case.

"We based our decision on the evidence presented and the law," said Stringer, who took no questions.

Prosecutors had introduced evidence Hernandez got a tattoo that memorialized the double slaying. California tattoo artist David Nelson testified Hernandez requested an image of a revolver with the gun barrel facing forward. Hernandez wanted five bullets visible in the cylinder of the gun and one cylinder empty, Nelson said.

Authorities said Hernandez fired five shots from a revolver into the car carrying de Abreu and Furtado.

Hernandez, 27, grew up in Bristol, Connecticut, and played for the Patriots from 2010 to 2012. About six weeks after Furtado and de Abreu were killed, Hernandez signed a five-year, \$40 million contract with the Patriots and went on to play another season before Lloyd was killed. He was cut from the team shortly after he was arrested in Lloyd's killing in June 2013. He was not charged in the 2012 killings until 2014.

Hernandez's defense team in the double murder trial included Jose Baez, known for winning an acquittal for Florida mom Casey Anthony in the death of her daughter. Baez, dealing with a medial issue, wasn't in court Friday.

Hernandez's conviction in Lloyd's killing will automatically be reviewed by the state Supreme Judicial Court.

Cutting Trump slack: Voters forgive reversals _ to a point

By NANCY BENAC, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — What's wrong with being flexible? All presidents change their minds. He's only human.

President Donald Trump's voters can be a forgiving lot — up to a point.

"He thinks too fast and then makes decisions too fast," says Miriam Naranjo in Miami Lakes, Florida.

"He's changing his mind on almost everything he said," says Bob Brown, of South Windsor, Connecticut.

Naranjo is willing to give Trump more time. Brown is not.

The president's recent shifts in position on big foreign policy issues have got his supporters pondering: Are the reversals worth a mere shrug of the shoulders, or are they a cause for greater concern.

Where critics see a flip-flopper, many Trump voters see the kind of recalibrating that's to be expected from any new president, even more so for the first in history to land in the Oval Office without any government or military experience.

"It's definitely worth keeping an eye on and making sure he doesn't stray too far from where he campaigned," says Christian Ziegler, a marketing professional from Sarasota, Florida, who served as one of Trump's electors in the state. "I'm not concerned yet."

In recent weeks, the president has gone from labeling NATO "obsolete" to "no longer obsolete." He's ordered a cruise missile bombardment in Syria after saying during the campaign that the U.S. should steer clear of the place. He's decided the Export-Import Bank, which he once opposed, is a good thing after all. And he's done a U-turn on his pledge to label China a currency manipulator. Many of those issues were prominent applause lines at candidate Trump's campaign rallies.

Now, as he shifts positions, Trump says he's being flexible — and proud of it.

For plenty of Trump voters, that's fine, particularly when a situation suddenly arises like the chemical weapons attack in Syria that killed more than 80 people and prompted Trump to order airstrikes.

"Once someone releases nerve gas on children, you have to do something," says Susan Holly, of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

"Nobody can stand around and be black and white," she said. "Everybody makes changes."

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Some prominent conservatives haven't hesitated to criticize Trump's recent actions.

Columnist Ann Coulter, writing for Breitbart News, the website once run by White House adviser Steve Bannon, called the president's Syrian airstrikes an immoral "misadventure" that "violates every promise he ran on and could sink his presidency."

However, nearly three months into Trump's presidency, many supporters say they never really expected him to hew to all his campaign positions anyway. Trump, a former Democrat, was never one to attract the labels of policy wonk or ideologue.

"I don't think any president really knows what they're doing the first few months in office," says Jeff Baumgardner, 59, an airline captain from Shindler, Pennsylvania. "What they say on a campaign is always different than what they do."

Sure, Trump needs to deliver on some of his promises, says Baumgardner, "but some of them are just election banter."

Husband and wife Larry and Eleanor Sacilowski, from Langhorne, Pennsylvania, don't see Trump's policy shifts as a problem.

"It makes him human," says Eleanor, 70, a receptionist.

"You never stop learning," adds Larry, 74, an auto parts deliveryman.

For Ziegler, 33, a Republican state committeeman in Florida, Trump's shifts are a sign he's getting "different information" now that he's president. As long as Trump holds firm on Ziegler's top priorities — opposing abortion and refusing to grant amnesty to immigrants living in the country illegally — Ziegler says he's OK with other policy changes.

"Let's remember Donald Trump's a dealmaker, and when you're negotiating in business you don't always get 100 percent of what you want," says Ziegler.

Naranjo, a Cuban-born Trump voter, thinks the president's performance has been lackluster but there's still time for him to turn things around.

"We're expecting too much too fast," says Naranjo, 70.

To a number of Trump voters, as long as the president delivers on his repeal-and-replace pledge for the health care law — far from a sure thing — other issues are secondary. Trump's campaign promises to dial back U.S. engagement overseas and put "America First" may have roused crowds, but it's the issues with direct impact on their lives that could drive them away.

William "Drew" Cato, 57, of Anchorage, Alaska, says he voted for Trump even though he credits the health care law enacted under former President Barack Obama with saving his life by helping him get drug addiction and mental health treatment.

If Trump guts the health law and doesn't provide a replacement, say Cato, "I would just have to scratch my head and go, 'That's a promise. That was an all-out lie.'"

In Sacramento, 58-year-old Dennis O'Flaherty, who works in landscaping, is worried about Trump's departures from his campaign positions. But he's not sure what to make of it.

"Maybe he was not aware of exactly what was going on," says O'Flaherty, who had just finished making a pot of split-pea soup as a volunteer at the Veterans of Foreign Wars post. "You don't want to think that he misled people intentionally, but I guess that's a possibility. ... It's concerning."

In Connecticut, Brown, a 65-year-old retired municipal worker, isn't giving Trump the benefit of the doubt anymore.

"He's so erratic, that's what disappoints me the most," says Brown, just after watching a minor league baseball game in Hartford. "All these years, everyone's had the notion that Donald Trump was a smart guy. And to me, he really isn't. He may know the art of the deal ... but as far as global knowledge. ..."

Brown finishes the thought with a shake of his head and a rueful laugh.

Follow Nancy Benac on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/nbenac>

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Florida; Mark Thiessen in Anchorage; Becky Bohrer in Juneau, Alaska, and Sophia Bollag in Sacramento contributed to this report.

Officials: No need for Trump's approval to use massive bomb

By ROBERT BURNS, AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. commander in Afghanistan who ordered use of the “mother of all bombs” to attack an Islamic State stronghold near the Pakistani border didn’t need and didn’t request President Donald Trump’s approval, Pentagon officials said Friday.

The officials said that even before Trump took office in January, Gen. John Nicholson had standing authority to use the bomb, which is officially called the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, or MOAB, the largest non-nuclear bomb ever dropped in combat. The bomb, dropped by a special operations MC-130 aircraft, had been in Afghanistan since January.

The officials weren’t authorized to speak publicly on the matter and requested anonymity.

The bomb’s use has attracted enormous attention, but its aim in Thursday’s attack was relatively mundane by military standards: destroy a tunnel and cave complex used by Islamic State fighters in a remote mountainous area of eastern Afghanistan.

Nicholson had a secondary goal in mind, however, according to an official who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss internal matters. The official said Nicholson wanted to demonstrate to leaders of the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan the seriousness of his determination to eliminate the group as a military threat.

The official said use of the weapon had nothing to do with sending a message to any other country, including North Korea.

The Air Force estimates each MOAB costs about \$170,000 to build. It hasn’t said how much it cost to develop the bomb or how many exist. An Air Force spokeswoman, Erika A. Yepsen, said the bomb was made “in-house,” with some parts manufactured by the Air Force itself, so the overall cost is only an estimate. Most weapons are made by defense companies under written government contracts.

Nine years ago the Air Force published an account of how it came to manufacture the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, known technically as the GBU-43B, a designation that reflects the fact that it is precision-guided. The weapon from which it evolved, the BLU-82 (Bomb Live Unit-82), was about half MOAB’s size and was an unguided, or dumb, bomb.

The MOAB was developed and built at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida by the Air Force Research Laboratory Munitions Directorate.

The Air Force account, written in March 2008, said MOAB “started out simply as an idea” that became a request in late November 2002 as the administration of George W. Bush was contemplating invading Iraq to topple President Saddam Hussein.

The Air Force conducted and released video footage of the bomb’s final test detonation on March 11, 2003, just days before the U.S. launched its invasion, which successfully removed Saddam from power but led to an unanticipated Sunni Arab insurgency that created a military quagmire and has yet to return Iraq to normalcy.

Asked about the test on the day it was conducted, then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said, “There is a psychological component to all aspects of warfare. The goal is to not have a war. The goal is to have the pressure be so great that Saddam Hussein cooperates. Short of that, an unwillingness to cooperate, the goal is to have the capabilities of the coalition so clear and so obvious that there is an enormous disincentive for the Iraqi military to fight against the coalition, and there’s an enormous incentive for Saddam Hussein to leave and spare the world a conflict.”

The 2008 Air Force account quoted one of the MOAB project leaders, Robert Hammack, as saying many of the bomb parts were engineered and made in-house, and that the project drew so much interest that experts came out of retirement to work on it. Once built, the bomb was transported to an ammunition

depot in Oklahoma to be filled with explosive materials and painted.

"A little known fact is why the MOAB is green," Hammack was quoted as saying. "Since we were in such a rush to get the weapon into our inventory to send over to aid the (Iraq) war effort, resources were limited. The weekend the MOAB arrived, the only color available in the amount we needed was John Deere green."

White House decides to keep visitor records secret

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and CHAD DAY, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House said Friday that lists of visitors to the building will be kept secret, breaking with the practice of President Donald Trump's predecessor.

The Trump administration cited privacy and national security concerns, but the decision angered government watchdog groups who accused Trump of reneging on his promise to "drain the swamp" in Washington. The groups see the visitor logs as important tools for monitoring which individuals or groups may be trying to influence White House policy. Trump has been widely criticized for a lack of openness in refusing to release his tax returns, breaking with decades of precedent.

Senior White House officials argued that the decision to keep the logs secret is in line with what previous administrations have done, except for President Barack Obama's, and that continuing Obama's practice of voluntarily releasing the records could interfere with policy development.

White House communications director Michael Dubke said Trump has taken steps to improve the ethical climate in Washington, such as imposing new restrictions on lobbying by departing administration officials and opening the White House press briefing room to outlets that previously didn't have access.

He said the decision was based on the "grave national security risks and privacy concerns of the hundreds of thousands of visitors annually."

But Judicial Watch, a conservative legal advocacy group which has sued administrations of both parties over the visitor records and other matters, argued that Trump should allow the Secret Service to release the logs under the Freedom of Information Act, which would allow sensitive details to remain private. The White House says the records are exempt from the law.

"This new secrecy policy undermines the rule of law and suggests this White House doesn't want to be accountable to the American people," said Tom Fitton, the group's president.

The Obama administration initially fought attempts by Congress and conservative and liberal groups to obtain visitor records. But after being sued, it voluntarily began disclosing the logs in December 2009, posting records every three to four months. It continued to release the records even though a federal appeals court ruled in 2013 that the logs can be withheld under presidential executive privilege. That unanimous ruling was written by Judge Merrick Garland, whom Obama later nominated to the Supreme Court.

Ultimately, nearly 6 million visitor records were released, though certain visits were excluded, including for national security or law enforcement reasons. That meant the records provided an incomplete account of who passed through the White House gates.

The Trump administration's decision to keep the records secret means no documentation of any White House comings and goings will be routinely released while Trump is in office, though officials said information could be released case by case.

However, visitor logs for White House agencies, such as the Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Trade Representative, may be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

Robert Weissman, president of the consumer advocacy group Public Citizen, said, "The only reason to keep secret the White House visitor logs is to hide from the American public the corporate influence-peddlers who are seeking favors and gifts from the White House." He said more secrecy will breed more cronyism, insider dealing and corruption.

Three government watchdog groups sued this week to try to force the Trump administration to reinstate the public release of the logs. Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, the National Security Archive and the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University cited freedom of information laws.

CREW said Friday's decision was disappointing, given that Trump repeatedly promised at his raucous campaign rallies to "drain the swamp."

"The Obama administration agreed to release the visitor logs in response to our lawsuits, and despite the Trump administration's worry over 'grave national security risks and concerns,' only positives for the American people came out of them," said Noah Bookbinder, the group's executive director. "It looks like we'll see them in court."

Associated Press writer Stephen Braun contributed to this report.

Follow Darlene Superville and Chad Day on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/dsupervilleap> and <https://twitter.com/ChadSDay>

How Trump insurance changes could affect coverage next year

By TOM MURPHY, AP Health Writer

A much tighter sign-up deadline and coverage delays will be waiting for some health insurance customers now that President Donald Trump's administration has finished a plan designed to stabilize shaky insurance markets.

Shoppers will have a shorter time period to choose a 2018 plan and a harder time enrolling outside that window if they lose a job or have some other special circumstance that affects their coverage. Insurers also will have more flexibility to design lower-cost coverage under a set of changes announced Thursday for the Affordable Care Act's insurance exchanges.

The exchanges, accessed by customers through the federal HealthCare.gov or state-run sites, were established as a way for people to compare and shop for insurance coverage. But insurers have raised prices sharply or abandoned markets in many regions, leaving some customers with little choice. Companies are considering leaving more markets for next year because they say they are losing money. The administration responded with a series of changes aimed at reducing the number of insurance company defections while it pursues a broader remake of the federal law.

These changes may help convince insurers to return to the market for next year, but they also could make shopping tougher for consumers in a few ways.

Customers will have 45 days to shop for 2018 coverage, starting Nov. 1 and ending Dec. 15. In previous years, they had twice that much time, and could still buy coverage until Jan. 31. The tighter time frame aims to prevent people from gaming the system by waiting until they become sick before signing up for coverage.

The smaller enrollment window could be tough on some shoppers because they often have to search for an insurance plan that includes their doctor to avoid big medical bills. That's no quick task when a patient has several doctors, insurers are leaving exchanges, and those that remain have narrow doctor networks. Then shoppers have to figure out whether they can afford the coverage and if any tax credits are available to help.

"It's a very delicate subject when you're dealing with someone's health and if the plan doesn't work, you're stuck with it for the next year," said Dallas-based broker Tanya Boyd. "It's not a five-minute conversation."

The administration also placed curbs on "special enrollment periods" that allow consumers to sign up or change coverage outside the normal enrollment period if they have a big change in their life like a move, divorce or the birth of a child. Insurers say loose enforcement of these periods has been an expensive problem because it also allows people to game the system.

Customers will now have to verify first that they qualify for a special-enrollment period before they can enroll. That could create coverage delays.

"For some people, the hassle or difficulty in pulling together verification could discourage them from signing up altogether," said Larry Levitt, a health insurance expert with the Kaiser Family Foundation, which studies health care issues.

The administration also gave insurers more flexibility to design lower-cost coverage that may attract younger and healthier customers, which would help insurers offset the higher cost of insuring older, less healthy people. That lower-cost coverage could come with a higher deductible, though, which means those customers will need to pay more out of their own pockets for most care before the insurer starts paying.

Whether these changes help convince insurers to stick around for 2018 remains to be seen. They are weighing their options and may soon announce whether they plan to offer coverage for next year. But customers won't know for sure for months, because insurers can still back out up to a few weeks before the start of the open enrollment period.

Insurers have called the changes — most of which they had requested — a step in the right direction. But a key concern has yet to be addressed.

Insurers, doctors, hospitals and the business community have asked the Trump administration to preserve "cost-sharing" subsidies that help reduce the impact of high deductibles and copayments for consumers with modest incomes. These are separate from the better-known so-called premium subsidies that most customers receive.

The cost-sharing subsidies, estimated at \$7 billion year, have been challenged in a court case that's now on hold. Without the payments, experts say, the government marketplaces that provide private insurance for about 12 million people will be overwhelmed by premium increases and insurer departures.

The Trump administration has indicated that the payments will continue as long as the case is being litigated, but insurers want more of an assurance that these subsidies will be available next year.

In a Wall Street Journal interview this week, Trump raised the possibility of shutting off the money if Democrats won't bargain on health care. But the president also said he hasn't made up his mind, and that he doesn't want people to get hurt.

Most communities will have competing insurers on their public marketplaces next year, but a growing number will be down to one, and some areas may face having none.

Premium increases averaged 25 percent this year for standard plans in states served by HealthCare.gov.

Prices could climb another 10 percent or more next year due to higher medical expenses that affect coverage sold both on and off the public exchanges, according to Dave Dillion of the Society of Actuaries.

AP writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report from Washington, D.C.

Trump strategy on NKorea: 'Maximum pressure and engagement'

By MATTHEW PENNINGTON, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration has settled on its North Korea strategy after a two-month review: "Maximum pressure and engagement."

U.S. officials said Friday the president's advisers weighed a range of ideas for how to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, including military options and trying to overthrow the isolated communist dictatorship's leadership. At the other end of the spectrum, they looked at the notion of accepting North Korea as a nuclear state.

In the end, however, they settled on a policy that appears to represent continuity.

The administration's emphasis, the officials said, will be on increasing pressure on Pyongyang with the help of China, North Korea's dominant trade partner. The officials weren't authorized to speak publicly on the results of the policy review and requested anonymity.

The new strategy will be deployed at a time of escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. U.S., South Korean and other officials are closely monitoring the North amid indications it could conduct another missile test or nuclear explosion to coincide with an important national anniversary this weekend.

Pyongyang has undertaken five nuclear tests since 2006.

An influential Washington think tank estimated Friday that North Korea could already have up to 30 bombs.

The Institute for Science and International Security cited a worrying increase in North Korea's nuclear program, but said the arsenal may only have been as large as 13 atomic weapons at the end of 2016. Its

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research suggested a range between 10 and 16 such weapons two years earlier. The institute's estimates are based on what it believes the North has produced in plutonium and weapons-grade uranium. The margins represent uncertainty as to whether North Korea has one or two uranium enrichment facilities.

The North has owned up to one such facility, at its Nyongbyon nuclear complex, but the U.S. government assumes it has more.

"The bottom line is that North Korea has an improving nuclear weapons arsenal," said David Albright, the institute's president.

He said the North may have a handful of plutonium-based warheads it can mount on medium-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching South Korea and Japan. But it's doubtful the North is currently able to build reliable, survivable warheads for an intercontinental ballistic missile that can strike the U.S. mainland, he said.

As for the Trump administration's policy, the U.S. officials emphasized that no engagement of North Korea is currently taking place. Although China advocates for diplomatic outreach, the focus for now is on pressure.

The officials said the goal of engagement would have to be North Korea's denuclearization. It cannot lead to an arms control agreement or reduction of the North's atomic arsenal that would imply American acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear power.

The officials are hopeful China and Russia would agree to tighter U.N. sanctions on North Korea if it conducts another nuclear test. They pointed to a recent editorial in a state-run Chinese newspaper advocating tighter restrictions on selling oil to North Korea.

Beijing's decision earlier this year to cut off coal imports from North Korea also are being seen as a hopeful sign. Coal sales are an important source of revenue for Kim Jong Un's government, and the U.S. says China has turned back some shipments in recent days. Russia and China are critical to any pressure campaign on North Korea because they both hold veto power on the U.N. Security Council.

In an interview Friday with The Associated Press, North Korea's Vice Minister Han Song Ryol said President Donald Trump's tough tweets toward Pyongyang were adding to a "vicious cycle" of tensions. Han said if the U.S. shows any sign of "reckless" military aggression, Pyongyang is ready to launch a pre-emptive strike of its own.

Trump, who last week acted unilaterally in ordering a cruise missile strike on Syria, has been using America's military might to send a message to Kim. An aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, is heading to waters off Korea in a show of force. Trump has repeatedly issued ambiguous threats that if Beijing isn't willing to do more to squeeze the North, the U.S. might take the matter into its own hands.

But a U.S. military official, who requested anonymity to discuss planning, said the U.S. doesn't intend to use military force against North Korea in response to either a nuclear test or a missile launch. The official said plans could change in the unlikely event a North Korean missile targets South Korea, Japan or U.S. territory.

AP National Security Writer Robert Burns contributed to this report.

N. Korean official: Ready for war if Trump wants it

By ERIC TALMADGE, Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — President Donald Trump's tweets are adding fuel to a "vicious cycle" of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's vice foreign minister told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview Friday. The official added that if the U.S. shows any sign of "reckless" military aggression, Pyongyang is ready to launch a pre-emptive strike of its own.

Vice Minister Han Song Ryol said Pyongyang has determined the Trump administration is "more vicious and more aggressive" than that of Barack Obama. He added that North Korea will keep building up its nuclear arsenal in "quality and quantity" and said Pyongyang is ready to go to war if that's what Trump wants.

Tensions between Pyongyang and Washington go back to President Harry Truman and the 1950-53

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Korean War, which ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty. But the heat has been rising rapidly since Trump took office in January.

This year's joint war games between the U.S. and South Korean militaries are the biggest so far. The USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier has been diverted back to the waters off Korea after heading for Australia, and U.S. satellite imagery suggests the North could conduct another underground nuclear test at any time. Pyongyang recently tested a ballistic missile and claims it is close to perfecting an intercontinental ballistic missile and nuclear warhead that could attack the U.S. mainland.

Many experts believe that at its current pace of testing, North Korea could reach that potentially game-changing milestone within a few years — under Trump's watch as president. Despite reports that Washington is considering military action if the North goes ahead with another nuclear test, Han did not rule out the possibility of a test in the near future.

"That is something that our headquarters decides," he said during the 40-minute interview in Pyongyang, which is now gearing up for a major holiday — and possibly a big military parade — on Saturday. "At a time and at a place where the headquarters deems necessary, it will take place."

The North conducted two such tests last year alone. The first was of what it claims to have been a hydrogen bomb and the second was its most powerful ever. Expectations are high the North may put its newest missiles on display during Saturday's parade.

The annual U.S.-South Korea military exercises have consistently infuriated the North, which views them as rehearsals for an invasion. Washington and Seoul deny that, but reports that exercises have included "decapitation strikes" aimed at the North's leadership have fanned Pyongyang's anger.

Han said Trump's tweets have also added fuel to the flames.

Trump posted a tweet Tuesday in which he said the North is "looking for trouble" and reiterated his call for more pressure from Beijing, North Korea's economic lifeline, to clamp down on trade and strengthen its enforcement of U.N. sanctions to persuade Pyongyang to denuclearize.

Trump has threatened that if Beijing isn't willing to do more to squeeze the North, the U.S. might take the matter into its own hands.

"Trump is always making provocations with his aggressive words," Han said. "It's not the DPRK but the U.S. and Trump that makes trouble." North Korea's official name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

He added: "We will go to war if they choose."

A U.S. State Department official said later Friday the U.S. was aligning "all elements of national power" to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs.

The official, who wasn't authorized to be quoted by name and demanded anonymity, lamented Pyongyang's "far too common and far too dangerous" provocations, and said Washington would work with international partners to cut the North's government off "from the rest of the world."

The U.S. seeks nothing more than a "stable and economically prosperous Korean peninsula," not military conflict, the official said. But the U.S. will respond to North Korea's threats accordingly and won't engage Pyongyang until it "chooses a more peaceful way forward."

Han said U.S. sanctions efforts are misguided and cited the opening ceremony of a sprawling new high-rise residential area in Pyongyang on Thursday as evidence that sanctions have failed to ruin the country's economy. Leader Kim Jong Un presided over the ceremony before about 100,000 residents and a large contingent of foreign journalists who have been allowed in to cover the holiday.

Han dismissed the suggestion Trump made last year during his presidential campaign that he was willing to meet Kim Jong Un, possibly over hamburgers.

"I think that was nothing more than lip service during the campaign to make himself more popular," Han said. "Now we are comparing Trump's policy toward the DPRK with the former administration's and we have concluded that it's becoming more vicious and more aggressive."

Han said North Korea changed its military strategy two years ago, when the reports of "decapitation strike" training began to really get attention, to stress pre-emptive actions.

"We've got a powerful nuclear deterrent already in our hands, and we certainly will not keep our arms crossed in the face of a U.S. pre-emptive strike," he said. "Whatever comes from the U.S., we will cope with it. We are fully prepared to handle it."

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How much such comments are bluster, or how realistic they are, is hard to gauge.

Also on Friday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said all sides must stop provoking and threatening and start taking a flexible approach to resuming dialogue. He said China is willing to support any such effort.

"Once a war really happens, the result will be nothing but multiple-loss. No one can become a winner," Wang said. "No matter who it is, if it wants to make war or trouble on the Korean Peninsula, it must take the historical responsibility and pay the due price."

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said Han's remarks on the North's readiness to conduct a nuclear test and even go to war reveal the "true colors of North Korea's government that is bellicose and a breaker of regulations."

The ministry issued a statement saying North Korea will face strong punishment it will find hard to withstand if it makes a significant provocation, such as another nuclear test or an ICBM launch.

Military experts generally agree a shooting war with North Korea would likely be far more costly than something along the lines of the recent targeted strike Trump ordered against a Syrian air base believed to be linked to a chemical weapons attack by the regime of Bashar Assad. That attack alarmed the North and was condemned as "unpardonable" by Pyongyang, which counts Syria as an ally.

Even without nuclear weapons, the North could cause severe damage with its conventional artillery batteries aimed at the South Korean capital of Seoul.

Associated Press writer Matthew Pennington in Washington contributed to this report.

New leak suggests NSA penetrated Mideast banking networks

By RAPHAEL SATTER, AP Cybersecurity Writer

PARIS (AP) — A new set of documents purportedly lifted from the U.S. National Security Agency suggests that American spies have burrowed deep into the Middle East's financial network, apparently compromising the Dubai office of the anti-money laundering and financial services firm EastNets. The company said Friday the documents were dated and denied that any customer data had been affected.

TheShadowBrokers, which startled the security experts last year by releasing some of the NSA's hacking tools, has recently resumed pouring secrets into the public domain. In a first for TheShadowBrokers, the data include PowerPoint slides and purported target lists, suggesting the group has access to a broader range of information than previously known.

"This is by far the most brutal dump," said Comae Technologies founder Matt Suiche, who has closely followed the group's disclosures and initially helped confirm its connection to the NSA last year. In a blog post, he said it appeared that thousands of employee accounts and machines from EastNets' offices had been compromised and that financial institutions in Kuwait, Bahrain and the Palestinian territories had been targeted for espionage.

In a statement, EastNets said there was "no credibility" to the allegation that its customers' details had been stolen.

The company, which acts as a "service bureau" connecting customers to the financial world's electronic backbone, SWIFT, said the ShadowBrokers documents referred to a "low-level internal server" that had since been retired and that a "complete check" of its systems had turned up no evidence of any compromise.

The denial drew skepticism from those who'd reviewed the files.

"Eastnets' claim is impossible to believe," said Kevin Beaumont, who was one of several experts who spent Friday combing through the documents and trying out the code. He said he'd found password dumps, an Excel spreadsheet outlining the internal architecture of the company's server and one file that was "just a massive log of hacking on their organization."

SWIFT, based in Belgium, released a less categorical statement, saying, "we understand that communications between these service bureaus and their customers may previously have been accessed by unauthorized third parties." It said there was no evidence its own network had been compromised.

Repeated messages seeking clarification from EastNets went unreturned.

Beaumont said there was bad news in the release for Microsoft as well. He said the malicious code published Friday appeared to exploit previously undiscovered weaknesses in older versions of its Windows operating system — the mark of a sophisticated actor and a potential worry for many of Windows' hundreds of millions of users.

The opinion was seconded by Matthew Hickey of Prestbury, England-based cybersecurity company Hacker House.

"It's an absolute disaster," Hickey said in an email. "I have been able to hack pretty much every Windows version here in my lab using this leak."

Microsoft said in a statement that it is reviewing the leak and "will take the necessary actions to protect our customers." It declined to elaborate.

The NSA, which did not respond to emails, has previously shown interest in targeting SWIFT, according to documents leaked by former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, and Suiche said other documents in the release suggested an effort to monitor the world's financial transactions that went beyond EastNets.

"I'll bet it's not the only SWIFT service bureau that's been compromised," he said.

Online:

Raphael Satter is reachable on: <http://raphaelsatter.com>

Syria's divisions crystallize with latest evacuations

PHILIP ISSA, Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Thousands of Syrians were bused out of their towns on Friday in the first stage of a widely criticized population transfer that reflects the relentless segregation of Syrian society along political and sectarian lines.

The coordinated evacuations delivered war-weary fighters and residents from two years of siege and hunger, but moved the country closer to a division of its national population by loyalty and sect.

As diplomacy in Moscow focused on the U.S. airstrikes targeting Syria, more than 2,350 people were bused out of the twin rebel-held towns of Madaya and Zabadani near Damascus, and another 5,000 from the pro-government towns of Foua and Kfraya in the country's north.

"There was no heating, no food, nothing to sustain our lives. We left so that God willing (the siege) may ease on those who remain," said Ahmad Afandar, a 19-year-old evacuee from Madaya whose parents stayed behind.

Madaya and Zabadani, once summer resorts to Damascus, have been shattered under the cruelty of government siege. The two towns rebelled against Damascus' authority in 2011 when demonstrations swept through the country demanding the end of President Bashar Assad's rule.

Residents were reduced to hunting rodents and eating the leaves off trees. Photos of children gaunt with hunger shocked the world and gave new urgency to U.N. relief operations in Syria.

Foua and Kfraya, besieged by the rebels, lived under a steady hail of rockets and mortars. They were supplied with food and medical supplies through military airdrops.

In a video posted on Facebook from one of the buses departing Madaya, a man identified as Hossam said: "We were forced to leave. We left our land, our parents, our memories, our childhood — everything."

Critics say the string of evacuations, which could see some 30,000 people moved across battle lines over the next 60 days, amounts to forced displacement along political and sectarian lines. The United Nations is not supervising the evacuations.

The predominantly Shiite towns of Foua and Kfraya have remained loyal to the Syrian government while surrounding Idlib province has come under hard-line Sunni rebel rule. Their populations will now find security under the government's outwardly secular authority.

Madaya and Zabadani, on the other hand, are believed to now be wholly inhabited by Sunnis, the consequence of six years of deft political maneuvering by Assad to steer what started as a broad movement against his authority into a choice between him and Sunni Islamist rule.

Playing on fears of al-Qaida rule, Assad's government showed leniency to the country's Christian, Shiite

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and Alawite minorities while bringing the weight of its military against majority Sunni areas — especially Sunni pockets in demographically mixed areas, such as along the Lebanese border, where Madaya and Zabadani lie, and along the Mediterranean coast.

“They of course wanted to beat the Sunni rebels into submission,” said Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma. “This has had the effect of driving them out.”

Since 2011, 5 million Syrians have been made refugees and another 7 million have been displaced within the country’s borders.

“The amount of population rearrangement has been tremendous in Syria,” said Landis. The latest evacuations are “a drop in the bucket.”

Madaya and Zabadani are the latest in a constellation of towns once held by the opposition around Damascus to submit to government rule. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said government forces entered Madaya after the evacuation Friday. Rebel gunmen were expected to leave Zabadani on Saturday.

Of the estimated 40,000 inhabitants of Madaya, some 2,000 elected to take the buses to rebel-held Idlib province rather than be subjected to the notorious government security services. They include former fighters, activists and medical workers, who have been targeted by the government with detention, torture and bombardment throughout the conflict.

“Honestly, when we left Madaya, I felt sadness, anger and sorrow. But now, on the road, I don’t feel anything. I feel cold as ice,” said Muhammad Darwish, a 27-year-old medical worker.

Zabadani, however, is to be depopulated. The town’s last 160 hold outs — all believed to be fighters or medical workers— will evacuate to Idlib on Saturday.

The fates of Fuoua and Kfraya are less clear. Most of the towns’ combined population of 26,000 will leave or have already left for Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and a government stronghold. But there were conflicting accounts of what will happen next.

According to Abdul Hakim Baghdadi, an interlocutor who helped negotiate the evacuations, government conscripts will stay and defend the towns. However, Yasser Abdelatif, a media official for the ultraconservative rebel group Ahrar al-Sham, said the two towns will be depopulated completely.

Friday’s evacuations were notable because they were reciprocal — seldom during the war has there been an organized population swap between rebels and the government.

But there have been other cases of expulsion of the government’s opponents to the country’s contested northern provinces. The government maintains it is offering its opponents amnesty and the right to stay in their homes, but its brutal military campaigns have already pushed tens of thousands of people into Idlib and Aleppo provinces.

In the last year alone, the government has uprooted residents and gunmen from the towns of Moadamiyeh, Hameh, Qudsaya, Darayya and the Barada Valley around the capital, as well as once rebellious neighborhoods of Aleppo and Homs, Syria’s largest and third-largest cities, respectively.

Most of eastern Aleppo was depopulated through force, as well. A U.N. inquiry said the evacuation of east Aleppo amounted to a war crime because it was coerced through the joint Russian and Syrian government campaign against the city’s civilian infrastructure. More than 20,000 people were bused out of Aleppo at the end of last year, to rebel-held provinces in the northwest.

For the displaced, the war goes on. They face daily bombardment at the hands of the government’s air force in Idlib province.

“I have conviction that we will be back,” Hossam, the man from Madaya, said in the video.

Amer Burhan, the director of Zabadani’s field hospital, said he expects the gunmen among the evacuees to resume fighting government forces in northern Syria.

In Moscow, the foreign ministers of Russia, Syria and Iran strongly warned the United States against launching new strikes on Syria, after it targeted an air base with a volley of missiles last week. The attack was in response to a chemical weapons attack on April 4 on a northern Syrian town that Washington blamed on Damascus. Almost 90 people were killed, including 27 children, according to the U.N.’s children’s

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agency, UNICEF.

Associated Press writer Sarah El Deeb contributed to this report.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Saturday, April 15, the 105th day of 2017. There are 260 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson, baseball's first black major league player, made his official debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers on opening day at Ebbets Field. (The Dodgers defeated the Boston Braves, 5-3.)

On this date:

In 1817, America's oldest existing school for the deaf opened in Hartford, Connecticut.

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln died nine hours after being shot the night before by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater in Washington; Andrew Johnson became the nation's 17th president.

In 1892, General Electric Co., formed by the merger of the Edison Electric Light Co. and other firms, was incorporated in Schenectady, New York.

In 1912, the British luxury liner RMS Titanic foundered in the North Atlantic off Newfoundland more than 2 1/2 hours after hitting an iceberg; 1,514 people died, while less than half as many survived.

In 1920, a paymaster and a guard were shot and killed during a robbery at a shoe company in South Braintree, Massachusetts; Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were accused of the crime, convicted and executed amid worldwide protests that they hadn't received a fair trial.

In 1945, during World War II, British and Canadian troops liberated the Nazi concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had died on April 12, was buried at the Roosevelt family home in Hyde Park, New York.

In 1959, Cuban leader Fidel Castro arrived in Washington to begin a goodwill tour of the United States. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles resigned for health reasons (he was succeeded by Christian A. Herter).

In 1974, members of the Symbionese Liberation Army held up a branch of the Hibernia Bank in San Francisco; a member of the group was SLA kidnap victim Patricia Hearst, who by this time was going by the name "Tania" (Hearst later said she'd been forced to participate).

In 1989, 96 people died in a crush of soccer fans at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England. Students in Beijing launched a series of pro-democracy protests; the demonstrations culminated in a government crackdown at Tiananmen Square.

In 1997, Jackie Robinson's number 42 was retired 50 years after he became the first black player in major league baseball.

In 2002, retired Supreme Court Justice Byron R. White died at age 84.

In 2013, two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon finish line, killing two women and an 8-year-old boy and injuring more than 260. (Suspected bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev (TAM'-ehr-luhn tsahr-NEYE'-ehv) died in a shootout with police; his brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (joh-HAHR' tsahr-NEYE'-ehv), was tried, convicted and sentenced to death.)

Ten years ago: Riot police beat and detained dozens of anti-Kremlin demonstrators in St. Petersburg, Russia, on a second day of protests against the government of President Vladimir Putin. Brant Parker, the original illustrator of "The Wizard of Id" comic strip, died in Lynchburg, Virginia, at age 86, just days after the passing of the strip's writer, Johnny Hart.

Five years ago: Six people were killed by a tornado in the Woodward, Oklahoma, area. North Korea's new leader, Kim Jong Un, gave his first public speech since taking power upon death of his father, Kim Jong Il, the previous December, portraying himself as a strong military chief unafraid of foreign powers. Passengers and crew of the cruise ship MS Balmoral said prayers at the spot in the North Atlantic where the Titanic sank 100 years earlier.

One year ago: House Republicans departed Washington, having missed a deadline to pass their long-

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stalled budget in an embarrassment for House Speaker Paul Ryan. A North Korea missile launch meant to celebrate the birthday of the country's founder, Kim Il Sung, apparently ended in failure.

Today's Birthdays: Country singer Roy Clark is 84. Actress Claudia Cardinale is 79. Author and politician Jeffrey Archer is 77. Rock singer-guitarist Dave Edmunds is 74. Actor Michael Tucci is 71. Actress Lois Chiles is 70. Writer-producer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason is 70. Actress Amy Wright is 67. Columnist Heloise is 66. Actor Sam McMurray is 65. Actress-screenwriter Emma Thompson is 58. Bluegrass musician Jeff Parker is 56. Singer Samantha Fox is 51. Olympic gold, silver and bronze medal swimmer Dara Torres is 50. Rock musician Ed O'Brien (Radiohead) is 49. Actor Flex Alexander is 47. Actor Danny Pino is 43. Actor Douglas Spain is 43. Country singer/songwriter Chris Stapleton is 39. Actor Luke Evans is 38. Rock musician Patrick Carney (The Black Keys) is 37. Actor-writer Seth Rogen is 35. Actress Alice Braga is 34. Americana singer-songwriter Margo Price is 34. Rock musician De'Mar Hamilton (Plain White T's) is 33. Actress Samira Wiley (TV: "Orange is the New Black") is 30. Actress Emma Watson is 27. Actress Maisie Williams is 20.

Thought for Today: "History would be an excellent thing if only it were true." — Leo Tolstoy, Russian author (1828-1910).