

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Groton Community Calendar Thursday, Jan. 26

Senior Menu: Meatloaf, baked potato with sour cream, creamed peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Goulash, fresh baked bun, corn.

Boys Basketball at Webster: C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.

## Friday, Jan. 27

Senior Menu: Potato soup, chicken salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, cinnamon apple sauce, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Biscuits and gravy.

School Lunch: Fish and nuggets, spudsters.

Girls Basketball hosts Webster: C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.

## Saturday, Jan. 28

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



NEC-DAXXII boys basketball clash at Madison. (Groton vs. Elk Point-Jefferson at 2 p.m.)

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

## Sunday, Jan. 29

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center

Carnival of Silver Skates, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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## The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

- Vice President Kamala Harris called for Congress to act on tougher gun control laws as she visited victims of the Monterey Park shooting in California.

- Body camera footage from the officers who arrested Tyre Nichols, who died in hospital days after he was detained in a traffic stop in Memphis, is set to be released to the public soon, as the city's police chief calls for the expected protests to remain peaceful.

- Donald Trump has hit out at DirecTV after the television

provider dropped conservative channel Newsmax over a contractual dispute. Trump stands to lose millions of his cable news viewers ahead of a planned campaign in South Carolina.

- A judge in California has ordered the release of footage showing the attack on Paul Pelosi, husband of former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, after several news outlets sought the video.

- North Korea has locked down its capital city Pyongyang until Sunday due to rising cases of an unspecified respiratory illness. Residents have been asked to monitor their temperatures four times a day and report them to a hospital.

- Gas prices are rising across several U.S. states despite an expected fall in prices due to supply issues and higher fuel taxes. Colorado, Georgia, Ohio, Delaware, Florida, and Tennessee have seen the steepest increases from a month ago.

- Indonesian Lion Air plane damaged the roof of the building and the plane while attempting to take off from the Mopah Merauke Airport. An investigation has been launched into what went wrong.

- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has condemned the West for providing Kyiv's forces with tanks, but the Russian information space is playing down the significance that the armored vehicles could have on Vladimir Putin's invasion.



**Position available for full-time Police Officer. Experience and SD Certification preferred. Salary negotiable DOE. Please send application and resume to the City of Groton, PO Box 587, Groton, SD 57445. This position is open until filled. Applications may be found at <https://www.city.grotonsd.gov/forms/Application-ForCityEmployeePO.pdf>. For more information, please call 605-397-8422. Equal opportunity employer.**

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One thing I have realized from this past week is that GDILIVE has become a community production.

Yes, it started as a small family business but over the years it has developed into many voices, no longer just the one voice.

Little did I know that some of those voices would end up in the Captains chair, providing transportation for Jeslyn and the equipment, along with their voice.

The complexity of the original setup has given way to something that Jeslyn can set up in five minutes. And take down in five minutes. I was talking with Jeslyn about that and she relates back to the old way as a nightmare. Little did I know that the rain shower at the Clark football game would result in a new way of transporting our equipment to the away games. And now that we have

virtually double the equipment, we can keep the setup at the home games right on site without having to haul but just a bag into the Arena.

Having two systems can have its challenges at times. We found that out at the Northwestern game. The new encoder box was set up for one camera (the one we use for away games) but apparently will no longer work with the home camera until we can figure out the settings that need to be changed.

Anyway, as you know I came down with Covid last week and that took me off the market for running around to activities. Even though I was not at the events, I was still the technical engineer (my what big fancy words!) behind the scenes. I still had to make sure that the videos were going from the game to your screen at home.

Once I was done being a technical engineer I got to lay down in my comfy bed and became a gdilive.com viewer for the first time ever! I can see why so many people like to watch the events. It is actually pretty cool.

What is nice about gdilive.com is that it has many voices, different personalities, and different perspectives to help bring you the color commentary from the games.

So many people have made this a success. From the voices of the games to those who helped run cameras, to the coaches and those who provide their statistical expertise, to the advertisers and to you the GDI subscribers, thank you!

And one more note - Justin and Chelsea Hanson made my day on Monday. They gave me my own GT polo shirt with Paper Paul embroidered on it. That was special and thank you!

# GDILIVE.COM

## 85th Annual Carnival of Silver Skates

Sunday, Jan. 29th, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Broadcast for **FREE VIEWING** on **GDILIVE.COM**

sponsored by the **Carnival of Silver Skates Committee**

Internet Service for **livestreaming** provided **free of charge** from

**FREE  
VIEWING!**

 **MIDCO**

**FREE  
VIEWING!**

# GDILIVE.COM

## Dak XII/NEC Boys Basketball Clash Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson

Saturday, Jan. 28, 2023, 2 p.m.

Madison High School

Varsity Game

Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Chamber of Commerce

Groton Ford

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket required to watch. Purchased online at [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)

GDI Subscribers will have free access.

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## 85<sup>th</sup> Annual Carnival of Silver Skates

Sunday, January 29th—2:00 and 6:30  
Groton Ice Rink—west side of Groton

You are cordially invited to attend a great show performed by our local youth. This show will be sure to entertain through music, costumes, and skating talent.

**\* Skating Through the Decades \***

Admission:

13 & older—\$3.00

6-12—\$2.00

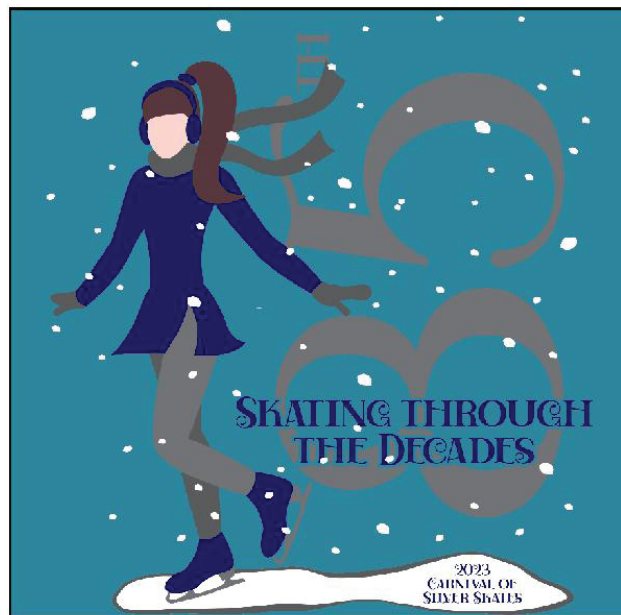
Parking:

-Provided around the rink and on the ice, or cozy up on the bleachers.

-Ice parking begins at 10 am, and again at 4:30 pm.

Check us out on Facebook at  
"Silver Skates"

WE HOPE TO  
SEE YOU THERE!



## #576 in a series

### Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Overall, there hasn't been much change in the numbers since our last Update. Seven-day new-case average is at 46,920 with a pandemic total of 101,909,009. The hospitalization average is at 35,148. Seven-day deaths are at 548 with a pandemic total of 1,113,234.

This week's CDC variant tracking shows that XBB.1.5 has all by itself become the dominant subvariant in the US with 49.1 percent of the new cases; the XBBs altogether are at 52.4 percent. BQ.1.1 comes in at 26.9 percent, which is significant; and BQ.1 is at 13.3. Nothing else even reaches five percent.

I've mentioned to you on a couple of occasions the upcoming meeting of the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee (VRBPAC). That meeting is scheduled for tomorrow, and we're getting some better hints about the agenda. On Monday, they announced a proposed new schedule for Covid-19 vaccination. The following are included in the proposal:

(1) Using the updated booster as the only vaccine, discontinuing use of the original Wuhan-Hu-1 vaccines that were all you could get until last September.

(2) Not requiring an individual to complete a primary series before receiving this updated booster. This would be a once-a-year dose irrespective whether you'd ever received prior vaccination.

(3) Updating boosters at least once a year as is currently done with influenza vaccine. The strains for the update would be selected each June so that vaccine could be produced by September for fall vaccination. They are proposing the updated vaccines could be rolled out without clinical data (that is, without clinical trials), as is currently done with the annual influenza vaccine updates. They are leaving open the possibility of an "ad-hoc strain selection meeting of VRBPAC" in the event a more virulent vaccine-escape variant turned up.

(4) Two doses would still be recommended for the elderly, the immunocompromised, and very young children.

A big chunk of the goal here is to reduce and simplify vaccination schedules in the hope it will encourage more folks to be vaccinated; after all, going to one dose and immunizing everyone against the same strains of virus will be an easier sell and far less confusing to the public. The VRBPAC will be asked to weigh in on this tomorrow. There was also mention that the "unlikely risk" for post-vaccine stroke we've talked about will also be discussed, something we've been anticipating all along.

I'm guessing this next is also part of the run-up to the Thursday VRBPAC meeting. There was a briefing today from Dr. Brendan Jackson, head of the CDC's Covid-19 response team that addressed bivalent booster vaccine effectiveness (VE) against the XBB subvariants of Omicron, and the news is pretty good, especially considering early lab results had raised questions about this. The data itself had not yet been released at the time of briefing, but cases from December 1 through January 13, a period during which XBB and XBB.1.5 were ascendant, it's looking like a bivalent booster given to people with two to four prior doses of the original vaccine is preventing symptoms in around half of those who received it, about as effective against the XBB subvariants as it was against BA.5. VE is somewhat lower in those over 65, but still 43 percent against XBB and XBB.1.5. Risk of death was reduced twofold compared with vaccinated people who had not received the bivalent booster, 13-fold compared with unvaccinated people.

This comports well with findings of a study from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center just posted Monday in preprint (so not yet peer-reviewed). This paper reports that, while XBB and XBB.1.5 do exhibit increased evasion of neutralizing antibodies, leading to decreased durability of antibody protection after the bivalent booster, these subvariants have not been successful in evading the CD4+ and CD8+ T cells critical in cell-mediated responses. It does not appear XBB.1.5's additional F485P substitution mutation confers any additional immune evasion capabilities at all, only increased transmissibility. Additional transmissibility isn't exactly great, but it's also not news: We'd been seeing the consequences of that on the ground. The fact that there is not increased evasiveness is important news.

I've also read a report in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly (MMW) from December on work done by the CDC in conjunction with a number of universities across the country. Findings here were that

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the bivalent booster reduces the risk of an emergency department or urgent care visit or hospitalization with Covid-19 by half or more for most people.

In the same issue of the MMW, another CDC-led study by a consortium of universities and hospitals was reported. This one showed that "Among immunocompetent adults aged  $\geq 65$  years hospitalized in the multistate IVY Network, a bivalent booster dose provide 73% additional protection against COVID-19 hospitalization compared with past monovalent [original] mRNA vaccination only."

And a paper from Clalit Health Services in Israel posted early this month as a preprint, so not yet peer-reviewed, by The Lancet, is reporting on a study done with 622,701 participants 65 years and over, 85,314 of whom received a bivalent booster during the study period, September 24 to December 12 of last year. Those who had never been fully vaccinated were excluded from the study, so the comparison here is between vaccinated-but-not-bivalent-boosted and bivalent-boosted individuals. Comorbidities were comparable between the two cohorts. The researchers looked at hospitalizations and deaths due to Covid-19 in this cohort. Findings were that the adjusted hazard ratio (HR) for hospitalization due to Covid-19 was 0.19, which means hospitalizations were 81 percent lower in those who had received the booster. Adjusted HR for death due to Covid-19 was 0.14, an 86 percent reduction in those who had received the booster. Since those over 75 are more likely to be boosted and more at risk for severe disease, this means the boosted cohort is a group at higher risk due to age than the unboosted cohort; still they showed these large reductions in bad outcomes. That's pretty stark. Makes it tough to understand why so few of adults in this high-risk older age group remain unboosted, doesn't it?

I read in a live chat hosted by the Washington Post with CDC director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, that we have solid research support for the proposition that up-to-date vaccination is also associated with a decrease in long-Covid and reduced risk for heart attack and stroke following infection. The foregoing round-up of research certainly supports the recommendation to get and stay up-to-date on vaccination for Covid-19. The current definition of up-to-date would be a primary series of doses of one of the original vaccines followed at least two months later by a dose of one of the bivalent booster vaccines that became available in September.

I've read a report on an analysis of workers' compensation data from the New York State Insurance Fund, a state agency that covers unemployment claims. It was published this month. From the executive summary, we have the following:

- (1) Thirty-one percent of unemployment claimants suffer(ed) from long-Covid.
- (2) Almost a fifth of long-Covid claimants have been unable to return to work for over one year. More than three-quarters of these people are under 60 years of age. Seventy-one percent either required ongoing treatment or were unable to work for at least six months.
- (3) Those over 60 had far more challenges in returning to work than younger people.
- (4) Nearly every claimant with comorbidities (e.g. lung disease, hypertension, obesity, and depression) or hospitalized for the acute infection experienced long-Covid.

We should note that the data analyzed were from January 2020 through March 2022, so captured cases from earlier in the pandemic, and there is evidence that, as vaccination became available, rates of long-Covid decreased. We should also note that, in the words of Guarav Vasisht, executive director and CEO of the fund, "It's a pretty conservative estimate. It's not capturing people who may have gone back to work and didn't seek medical attention and may still be suffering, so you know, they're just toughing it out." The average cost as of March 2022 of these cases was averaging something over \$17,000 per claimant; this would, of course, continue to grow the longer we extend the study period into the present and some proportion of these claimants are still unable to return to work. And Vasisht also pointed out the non-monetary costs: "The longer you're out of work, the harder it is for you to get back to work, and that can stigmatize patients. It could be highly disruptive to their family and professional lives."

The Government Accountability Office estimates somewhere between 7.7 million and 23 million residents of the US currently have been affected by long-Covid. I also read a report from Katie Bach, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. In her 2022 analysis of effects of long-Covid on the labor shortage, she wrote that including those unable to work at all with workers who needed to reduce their hours and estimating

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just one-quarter reduction in hours for those, she estimated the overall impact on the job market was around 1.6 million jobs, more than 15 percent of unfilled jobs in the US at the time of the report. It is important to note that the burden of reduced employment (83 percent of claims) fell disproportionately on those deemed essential workers. Bach said, "A lot of people can't afford not to work and so they're working when they really shouldn't be, continuing to work while they're sick." There is some evidence this may prolong their recoveries, and it is reasonable to conclude these people also have reduced productivity, which has further economic impacts.

We've talked on several occasions over the past few years about wastewater surveillance for SARS-CoV-2; it is a validated scientific process at this point. We've also talked in the past about the CDC's moves toward implementing wastewater analysis for new variants and subvariants of this virus. The basic strategy here would be to collect sewage from international flights that land in US airports. The collection itself is not difficult, a process companies who do this sort of work say will take less than two minutes per flight; so it's not going to delay aircraft turnaround. A lab would screen the samples for viruses and then, when SARS-CoV-2 turns up, do genomic sequencing to identify variants, the whole process of which takes around a week, which is pretty fast turnaround for something like this. This could be useful in alerting us to emerging variants, in future vaccine development, and even to spot future emerging viruses with pandemic potential. The latest word from the CDC on this strategy is they are "figuring out how to operationalize this program;" a person involved in the discussions says they're sorting out the "logistical and legal" elements in implementation. Airlines report they are willing to cooperate in these efforts. We'll see where these efforts go.

That's it for tonight. Be well, and we'll talk again.



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## Conde National League

**Jan. 23 Team Standings:** Tigers 13, Pirates 12, Giants 11, , Braves 9, Cubs 8, Mets 7.

**Men's High Games:** Chad Furney 225, Butch Farmen 222, Russ Bethke 209.

**Men's High Series:** Butch Farmen 542, Chad Furney 541, Russ Bethke 508.

**Women's High Game:** Sam Bahr 172, Michelle Johnson 163, Shannon Hjermstad 153.

**Women's High Series:** Sam Bahr 430, Vickie Kramp 425, Michelle Johnson 411.

**January 16 Team Standings:** Tigers 12, Giants 9, Braves 9, Pirates 8, Cubs 5, Mets 5.

**Men's High Games:** Russ Bethke 210, Topper Tastad 204, Ryan Bethke 201.

**Men's High Series:** Russ Bethke 528, Ryan Bethke 513, Topper Tastad 496.

**Women's High Games:** Vickie Kramp 168, Nancy Radke 146, Deb Fredrickson 145.

**Women's High Series:** Vickie Kramp 421. Nancy Radke 411, Deb Fredrickson 399.

## Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League

**Jan 19 Team Standings:** Jackelopes – 15, Chipmunks – 14, Coyotes – 12, Shihtzus – 7, Foxes – 6, Cheetahs – 6

**Men's High Games:** Randy Stanley – 233, Brad Waage – 189, Brody Sombke – 188

**Women's High Games:** Dar Larson – 201, Brenda Madsen – 173, Darci Spanier & Vicki Walter – 168

**Men's High Series:** Randy Stanley – 591, Brad Waage – 526, Brody Sombke – 522

**Women's High Series:** Dar Larson – 482, Darci Spanier – 481, Vicki Walter – 480

**Fun Game:** Most Splits – Coyotes with 17!

**Jan. 12 Team Standings:** Chipmunks – 11, Jackelopes – 11, Coyotes – 9, Shihtzus – 6, Foxes – 6, Cheetahs – 5

**Men's High Games:** Brad Waage – 193, Tony Madsen – 189, Lance Frohling – 187

**Women's High Games:** Vicki Walter – 178, Sam Bahr – 169, Lori Wiley – 168

**Men's High Series:** Brad Waage – 553, Lance Frohling – 548, Brad Larson – 496

**Women's High Series:** Vicki Walter – 505, Sue Stanley – 456, Darci Spanier – 448

# GR<sup>OTON</sup>

# RO<sup>BOTICS</sup>



## Pancake Feed

Sponsored by Groton Lions Club

Sunday, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

**10:00 AM—1:00 PM**

**Groton Community Center**

Pancakes, Sausage, Coffee, Milk and Juice

**FREE WILL DONATION!**

Proceeds will go to Groton Robotics

*Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2:00pm & 6:30 pm!*

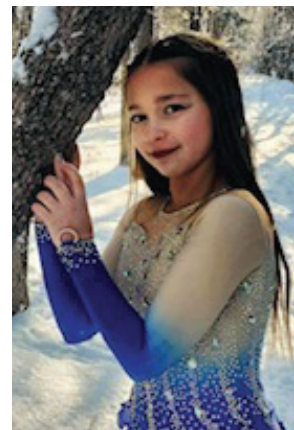


## Guest Skaters at the Carnival of Sliver Skates

Kinslee Hruby is 13 years old and is from Hartford, SD. She skates with the Watertown Figure Skating Club. She has been skating for 7 years. She began skating at the age of 6 and quickly fell in love with the sport. Over the years she has passed all levels of Learn to Skate and has moved her way quickly through the testing levels as well. Her goal is to reach Gold/Senior level in all 4 skating disciplines. She currently is working on her Junior Moves in the Field, Senior Solo Free Dance, Silver level Solo Patterned Dance and just passed her Juvenile Free skate, which she is performing for you tonight. Over the year she has made many life time friends through all her travels with competition and testing sessions.



Dasia Woertink is a 12-year-old skater from Watertown Figure Skating Club. She grew up at the ice arena and started skating at age two. She enrolled in a recreational hockey program at age four and took a couple years off before beginning figure skating at age seven. She passed all Learn to Skate Basic Skills levels in three months. The following year she completed the Learn to Skate Freeskate levels.



Since then, she has been working on her USFS testing levels, having passed the Novice Moves in the Field test. Her goal for the future is to earn USFS gold medal jackets. She sets goals annually and tests in Moves in the Field, Dance, and Freeskate. Dasia landed her axel at age 10 and is currently working on double jumps. She enjoys performing in local expos, ice shows, and competitions. Dasia loves spending time at the rink making friends with fellow skaters and is best known for her fun, spunky nature and her impromptu dance moves.

# GDILIVE.COM

## **Groton Area Boys Basketball at Webster** **Thursday, Jan. 26, 2023**

**C Game starts at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity**

**C Game Sponsor: Darcie and Eric Moody**

**JV Game Sponsor: Coach Kyle and Tyhe Gerlach**

### **Varsity Game Sponsors**

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Chamber of Commerce

Groton Ford

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting

Anyone wanting to sponsor a JV game, Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **Bipartisan bill would make state IDs free for low income South Dakotans**

**BY MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 25, 2023**

PIERRE – State identifications cards are needed to get a job, rent an apartment and vote in South Dakota. Even library cards are out of reach without an ID.

The wallet-sized card, which resembles a driver's license, costs \$28 in South Dakota.

Rep. Kady Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, wants to make state IDs free for low income South Dakotans.

Wittman's bill, House Bill 1103, was introduced on Monday with eight Democrat sponsors and six Republican sponsors — including prime Senate sponsor Jim Bolin, R-Canton, and Sen. Fred Deutsch, R-Florence.

Wittman used to work at the Bishop Dudley Hospitality House in Sioux Falls, a homeless shelter which serves more than 1,700 people annually. During her time there, she saw that fee as the "No. 1 barrier" between indigent community members and escaping homelessness.

"Imagine a scenario where you're homeless and don't have family or a support system to lend you that \$28. You don't have an ID to get work, and you don't have a bank account to save money," Wittman said. "It seems like a small barrier for those of us who are financially secure, but for someone starting from nothing that's an easy barrier we can remove."

Wittman said the bill could also help human trafficking, domestic abuse survivors and their families, since some survivors are either low income or aren't able to access services to start anew without an ID.

The bill would apply to South Dakotans with incomes below the federal poverty line. In South Dakota, that apply to about 12% of the population, or more than 100,000 people. The state would bring in \$86,000 if each of those people paid the \$28 fee, based on a fiscal note from the Legislative Research Council.

That's worth the cost to offer a "helping hand" to those in need, Bolin said.

"I believe this bill will help the poorest among us and that it could likely help with our workforce issues, at least on the margins," Bolin said in an emailed statement.

Residents who don't have a legal address or the other typical paperwork needed for a drivers license can prove their identity with notarized documents, such as a social security card, birth certificate or medical records.

As for people worried about undocumented immigrants trying to access a state ID, Wittman said the state requires such proof of residency and citizenship.

"This is a way for us to help our most vulnerable people," Wittman added. "The biggest pushback I can see is that people don't want another government handout program. But this isn't a hand out; this is a hand up for people who have literally nothing."

The bill is scheduled for a hearing in the House Transportation Committee on Thursday.

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.*

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## Some utilities charge customers for donations and events, with regulator approval

**Ratepayers foot \$4 million worth of expenses since 1995**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 25, 2023 10:30 AM**

Last October, hundreds of politicians and business leaders from all over the country gathered to be wined, dined and guided into eastern South Dakota grasslands for a pheasant hunt with the governor.

"There's a lot of schmoozing that goes on," said John Cooper, a former secretary of Game, Fish and Parks who's attended 15 of the annual hunts. "Guests get a lot of things for free that are part of the schmooze factor. And the governor gets to boast about accomplishments they've had."

Most South Dakotans aren't invited, but some help fund the event when they pay their gas or electric bill. That's because state law allows – and regulators at the Public Utilities Commission routinely approve – requests from utility companies to charge event sponsorships and other economic development-related donations and expenses directly to customers.

The four utility companies that regularly engage in the practice have charged almost \$4 million worth of these expenses to ratepayers since 1995, which is as far back as publicly available reports go. Those four companies are Xcel, NorthWestern, MidAmerican and Black Hills Energy. Other companies do not participate in the practice.

PUC Commissioner Gary Hanson said he has attended the Governor's Hunt a few times. He said the sponsorships help get the utility providers invited to the event, which is good for their business.

"And they invite some potential customers to the hunt to spend time with them," Hanson said. "They get breakfast, lunch and dinner, some 'soft sales' of the state, and an opportunity to meet the governor."

The benefits trickle down to ratepayers, according to Hanson.

"When the utility companies do better, more money enters the local economy," Hanson said.

And economic development-related sponsorships and donations attract new businesses to the state, according to Xcel Energy spokesperson Kevin Cross.

"We invest in economic development to help these communities become stronger and more vibrant," Cross said. "Half of this comes from customers, which costs them about 50 cents a year, while the rest comes from shareholders."

### **Economic development budgets**

Companies submit the requests to the PUC as annual "economic development budgets," along with a report on the previous year's spending. Besides the Governor's Hunt, the economic development funds go to events such as business meetings and conferences, community projects – building a park, for example, or helping a city develop a lot – and some staffing costs.

Utilities may charge half of the first \$100,000 of their economic development budgets to ratepayers. The other half of that first \$100,000 (plus any money beyond that) must come from shareholders of the publicly traded utilities that the PUC regulates.

### **They're nothing new**

Xcel Energy provides electricity to about 100,000 South Dakotans. It's in the midst of asking the PUC to approve increasing its electricity rates by about 18 percent – a rate that kicked in preliminarily on Jan. 1 and will remain in place until the PUC makes its decision in about six months.

Xcel Energy's approved 2022 economic development budget includes \$1,500 for a local economic conference put on by the Governor's Office, \$25,000 to a Sioux Falls group that leads initiatives to grow the economy, and \$73,500 in other community development memberships and donations.

Of the \$100,000 total amount, \$50,000 is billed to ratepayers.

PUC staff reviewed the budget request and recommended approval. The commissioners unanimously approved that budget.

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Like Xcel, MidAmerican Energy is requesting PUC approval for a rate increase. The company wants to raise its natural gas rates by about 5%.

MidAmerican's 2022 PUC-approved economic development budget and 2021 report include a list of the company's 2021 highlights, one of which is a \$15,000 sponsorship of the Governor's Hunt – half of which was charged to ratepayers.

MidAmerican's spokesperson Geoff Greenwood said it's a win-win for the company and ratepayers.

"The Governor's Pheasant Hunt has attracted out-of-state and in-state business leaders along with state and community leaders," Greenwood said. "Economic development events like these help support the area we serve and attract businesses and ultimately benefit our customers and communities."

NorthWestern Energy also gave money to the Governor's Hunt. Its 2022 budget requests (one for its electric branch and another for its natural gas operation) include a total of \$16,500 toward the Governor's Office of Economic Development to be split between the office's annual conference and the Governor's Hunt.

That sponsorship and other economic development investments cost individual ratepayers pennies, according to NorthWestern Energy spokesperson Jo Dee Black.

"All economic development investments are made with a single goal, to support and promote economic growth in the communities we serve, as well as the overall economy of South Dakota," Black said in an emailed statement.

## **Not all utilities charge ratepayers**

Some private utilities do not make economic development budget requests to the PUC.

According to the PUC website, Xcel, NorthWestern, MidAmerican and Black Hills Energy are the only utility companies with economic development budgets approved since 1995.

Otter Tail Power Company is one of the private utilities that does not request PUC authorization to charge ratepayers for an economic development budget. Stephanie Hoff, a spokesperson with Otter Tail, said the company would not charge ratepayers to sponsor an event like the Governor's Hunt.

"Something like that would come from our advertising department," Hoff said. "We would not receive that cost recovery from ratepayers."

Otter Tail isn't alone.

Natural gas and electricity provider Montana-Dakota Utilities has never requested to charge ratepayers for an economic development budget, either.

"Those costs are borne by our shareholders," said MDU spokesperson Laura Lueder.

South Dakota Intrastate Gas Pipeline, the other private utility under the PUC's purview, has no available record of requesting to charge ratepayers for an economic development budget but did not reply to a request for comment.

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

## Risky rescues have state pondering approach to drivers who ignore road closures

State issued 149 tickets last month for disregarding Interstate blockades

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 25, 2023 9:57 AM

PIERRE – Hundreds of motorists drove around Interstate blockades or ventured onto snowed-over highways during a two-week storm event late last year, diverting the energies of emergency responders to rescues that sometimes put those responders at risk.

That's not uncommon during winter storms, according to Sec. Craig Price of the Department of Public Safety (DPS). But the intensity and duration of the two-part storm last month highlighted the perennial difficulty for state troopers during severe weather, Price told the Senate Transportation Committee on Wednesday.\*

First responders worked non-stop to clear roadways and rescued a host of stranded motorists, he said, in one case working for hours to find an exposed corner of a drifted-over vehicle near Rosebud, then working hours more as V-plows got stuck clearing a path to the vehicle.

Price lauded the efforts of responders in that case, which saw the stranded couple transferred to Mission to recuperate.

The couple near Rosebud had gotten lost, Price said, but others placed themselves in peril by ignoring pleas from public safety officials to stay home.

The response from DPS is the same regardless, he said.

"When they get stuck and they call, we go and get them," Price said

The Highway Patrol alone had 33 rescues during the storm, he said, and other DPS first responders conducted many others. On more than one occasion, plow drivers attempting to rescue stranded drivers found themselves stuck and calling for more help.

The incidents have spurred discussions between Price and Department of Transportation Secretary Joel Jundt on how the agencies manage situations where drivers ignore road closure warnings could put the lives of rescue teams at risk.

Some state and local officials have begun to ask Price hard questions about those situations, like "at what point do we say 'it's too dangerous to go out and come get you?'"

It's the second time in as many weeks that Price offered a rundown of emergency operations to lawmakers. He told the Joint Appropriations Committee similar stories last week.

On both occasions, lawmakers questioned if there might be a way to enforce closures more strictly. Intentionally driving around road closure signs is a class two misdemeanor punishable by up to 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine.

Last month, Price said, the DPS issued 149 tickets for ignoring barricades.

During the transportation committee hearing, Sen. Arch Beal, R-Sioux Falls, told Price he'd personally pulled multiple drivers loose near his home and asked if there might be ways to further defer unsafe driving during storms.

"I went out there and thought 'if I had a ticket book, I could get some school funding,'" Beal said.

Some of the fees from criminal fines support public schools.

The trouble is with state roads, Price said. The DPS can close Interstate on- and off-ramps, but "we don't have the ability to physically close those roads.":

The tickets issued last month were written for drivers who'd driven on the Interstate, he said.

Another complicating factor is the proliferation of GPS navigation technology. After the Wednesday hearing, Col. Rick Miller of the Highway Patrol said cell phones may tell drivers that the interstate is closed, but suggest an alternate route that's even less safe.

"I think technology has pushed people to the side roads," Miller said.

The DPS will continue rescuing motorists, Price said, but he and Sec. Jundt will review protocols for the next major storm.



"We have committed to taking a look at this, because it was so highlighted by this winter storm," Price said.

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

## U.S. House GOP takes aim at fake pills containing deadly fentanyl sold on social media

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 25, 2023 5:06 PM

WASHINGTON — On a June 2020 morning, Amy Neville entered her son's bedroom to wake him for an orthodontist appointment.

Fourteen-year-old Alex didn't wake up.

He died of fentanyl poisoning after taking a counterfeit pill he bought from someone he met on Snapchat, Neville told GOP lawmakers Wednesday during a roundtable discussion of the role "Big Tech" plays in the staggering number of fentanyl overdose deaths in the United States, particularly among minors.

"Through this app, Alex was able to overcome the natural limits that keep most kids from the hardest drugs," the San Diego mother testified. "The natural limits include a supportive family, a good school, a strong community and other safeguards we knew to provide ... Social media, however, transcends these natural limits."

During the three-hour discussion, Republicans on the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee took aim on multiple fronts, including legal immunity granted to technology companies, and the flows of synthetic opioids, like fake pills laced with illicit fentanyl, entering the U.S. at the Southwest border. The event was organized by the Republican majority, and was not a formal congressional hearing.

### Drug overdoses top 100,000

Drug overdose deaths reached a grim milestone in November 2021, topping over 100,000 deaths annually. The pace has continued, with synthetic opioids as the main driver of overdose fatalities, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Lawmakers and invited guests, including Neville, criticized technology companies, singling out Snapchat, for allowing illicit drug transactions involving minors to occur over social media platforms and online marketplaces.

"Big tech has many problems, but the lethal fentanyl sales is not a general big tech problem, it's a Snap-specific problem. Snap's product is designed specifically to attract both children and illicit adult activity," said Carrie Goldberg, of the Brooklyn-based law firm C.A. Goldberg PLLC.

The firm filed suit against Snap Inc., in October on behalf of nine families whose children experienced fentanyl poisoning after accessing it via Snapchat, eight of whom died, including Alex Neville.

"... It's the only app that's aimed at children where parents cannot see the content, yet Snap still wants parents to be responsible for what their kids do on it," she continued.

Goldberg highlighted Snapchat's disappearing message and geo-location features as facets of the app that allow drug dealers to target minors and evade law enforcement.

Not so, said a representative of Snap.

The company says it's made "significant operational improvements" to detect and remove drug dealers from the platform, and it has added new layers of protection for users ages 13 to 17, including a new parental tool called Family Center, which allows parents to see their teens' Snapchat content.

"We are committed to doing our part to fight the national fentanyl poisoning crisis, which includes using cutting-edge technology to help us proactively find and shut down drug dealers' accounts," a Snap

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spokesperson said in a statement Wednesday.

"We block search results for drug-related terms, redirecting Snapchatters to resources from experts about the dangers of fentanyl. We continually expand our support for law enforcement investigations, helping them bring dealers to justice, and we work closely with experts to share patterns of dealers' activities across platforms to more quickly identify and stop illegal behavior. We will continue to do everything we can to tackle this epidemic, including by working with other tech companies, public health agencies, law enforcement, families and nonprofits," the statement continued.

## Continued appeals to Congress

Goldberg previously testified in front of the committee, when Democrats held the reins in December 2021, for a hearing to "hold Big Tech accountable" by amending Section 230.

Section 230, part of U.S. communications law since the mid-1990s, generally shields social media platforms from legal liability for what is posted on their sites by third parties.

Republicans and Democrats alike have pushed, with little success, to amend the law.

Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump have both spoken out against the law.

Dozens of legislative proposals to change Section 230 fizzled during the last two sessions of Congress, including legislation spearheaded by then longtime Pennsylvania Democratic Congressman Mike Doyle, who chaired the Communications and Technology Subcommittee.

Republicans have largely slammed big social media platforms for what they view as unfair content moderation, including banning the profiles of former President Donald Trump. Snapchat banned Trump in January 2021.

Meta, Facebook's parent company, announced Wednesday it will reinstate the former president's Facebook and Instagram profiles in the coming weeks following a two-year ban.

## Legislation on drug classification

With little agreement on how to regulate content moderation by social media companies, GOP leaders of Energy and Commerce's Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee on Tuesday reintroduced the HALT Fentanyl Act, which aims for stricter classification of illicit synthetic fentanyl-related substances under the Controlled Substances Act.

Illicit fentanyl that enters the U.S. drug supply is widely manufactured in Mexico using precursor chemicals from Asia. The synthetic opioid is significantly more potent than heroin.

A February 2022 Government Accountability Office report on drug and human trafficking highlighted the use of social media and e-commerce platforms for drug traffickers.

According to a Drug Enforcement Agency analysis last year, six out of 10 fentanyl-laced fake pills contain a lethal dose of the synthetic opioid.

Officials seized 14,700 pounds of illicit fentanyl in 2022, with the vast majority coming into the U.S. via land border crossings, according to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol.

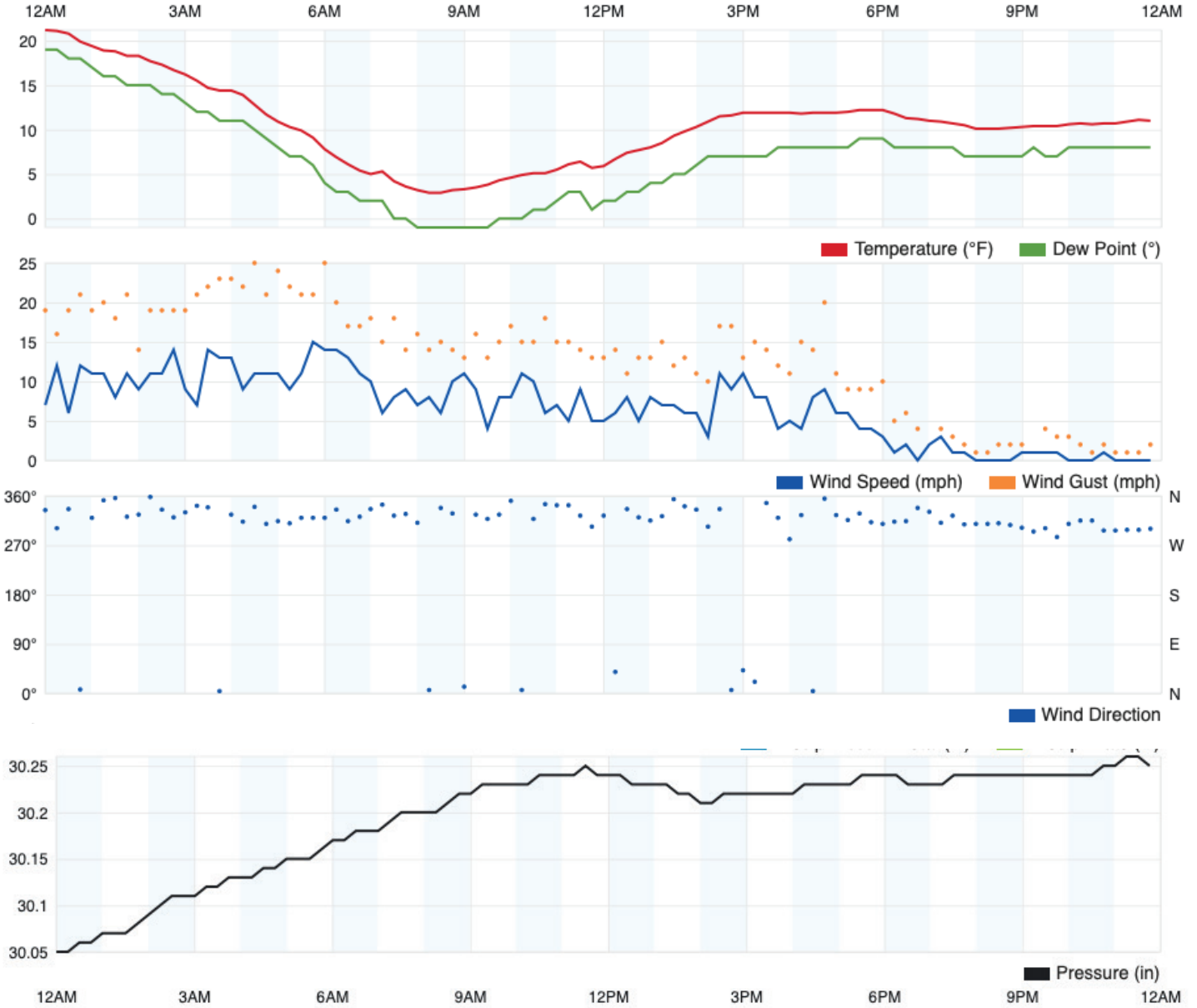
Wednesday's roundtable, led by Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, also featured Laura Marquez-Garrett, attorney with the Social Media Victims Law Center, and Spokane County, Washington, Sheriff John Nowels.

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

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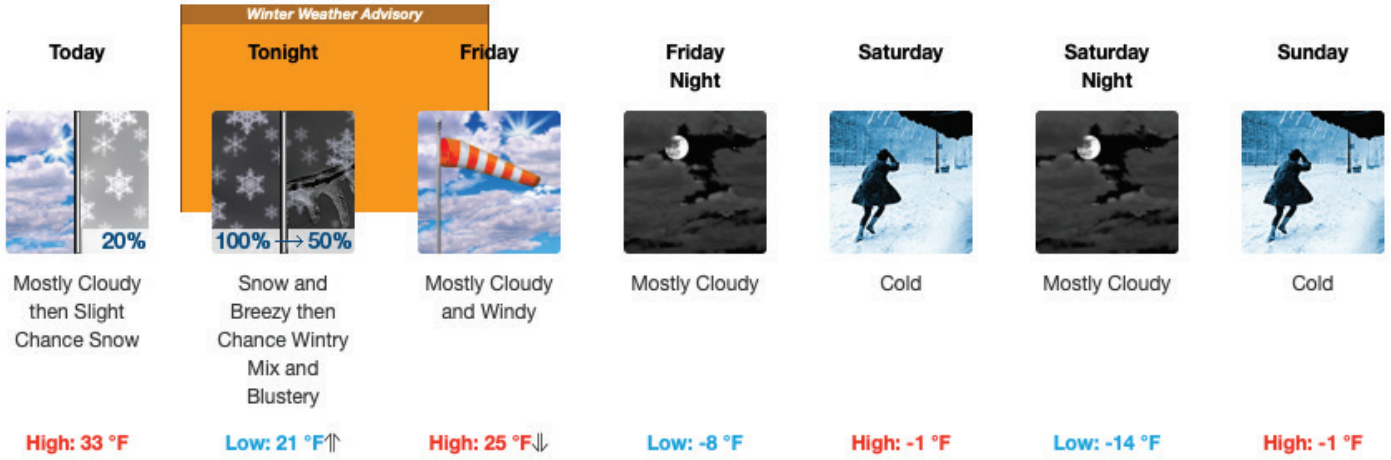
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

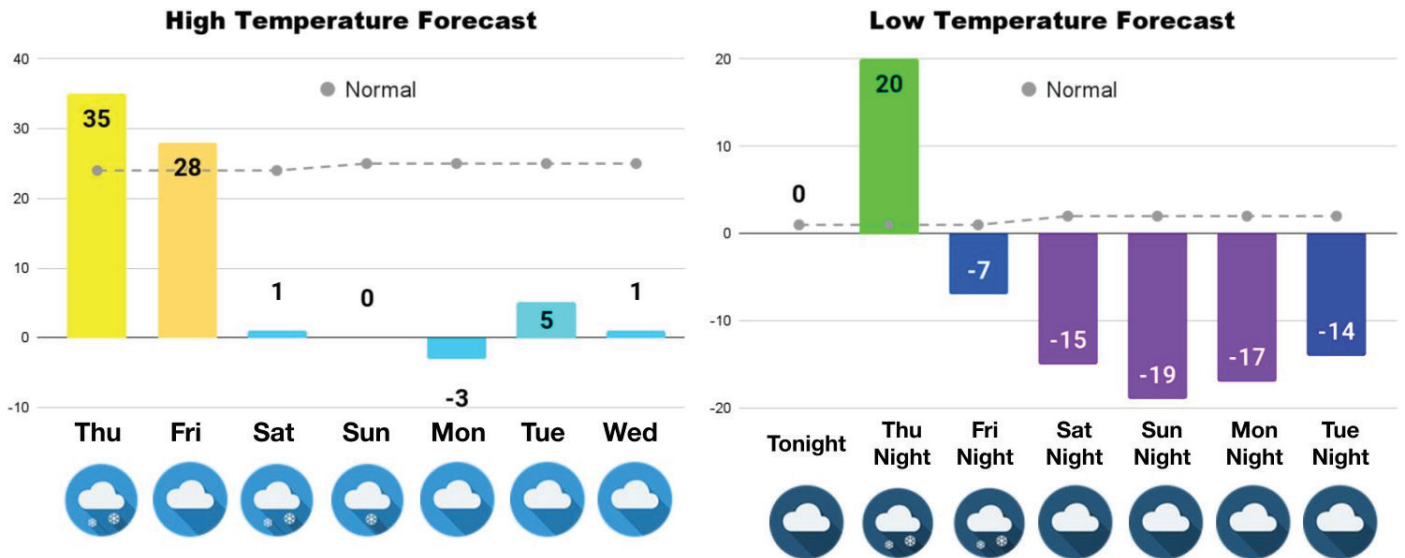


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## Arctic Air Returns this Weekend After Several Chances for Snow



January 25, 2023 3:30 PM

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD



Starting Friday, temperatures start to cool significantly and will be 15 to 20 degrees below average by Saturday.

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## Precipitation Timing

January 26, 2023  
4:07 AM

And The Potential Travel Impacts

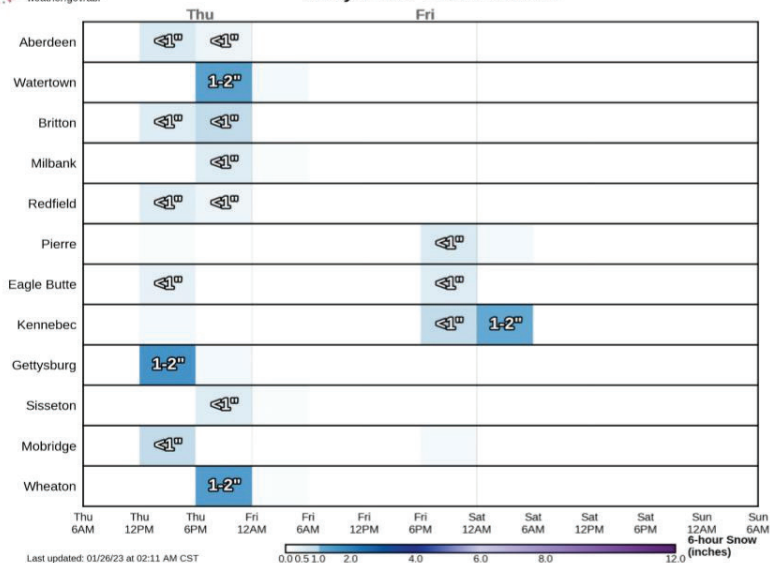
### Key Messages

- Clipper system moisture later today through early Friday
  - ◆ Rain, snow or a mix of rain/snow
  - ◆ 35 to 55 mph winds
  - ◆ Potential for icy roads + winds = locally hazardous travel
- Snow tonight in northeast SD/western MN = blowing snow for Friday morning commute
- Additional snowfall Friday night in western/central South Dakota (trending farther south though)



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD  
weather.gov/abr

### 3-Day 6-hour Snow Forecast



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

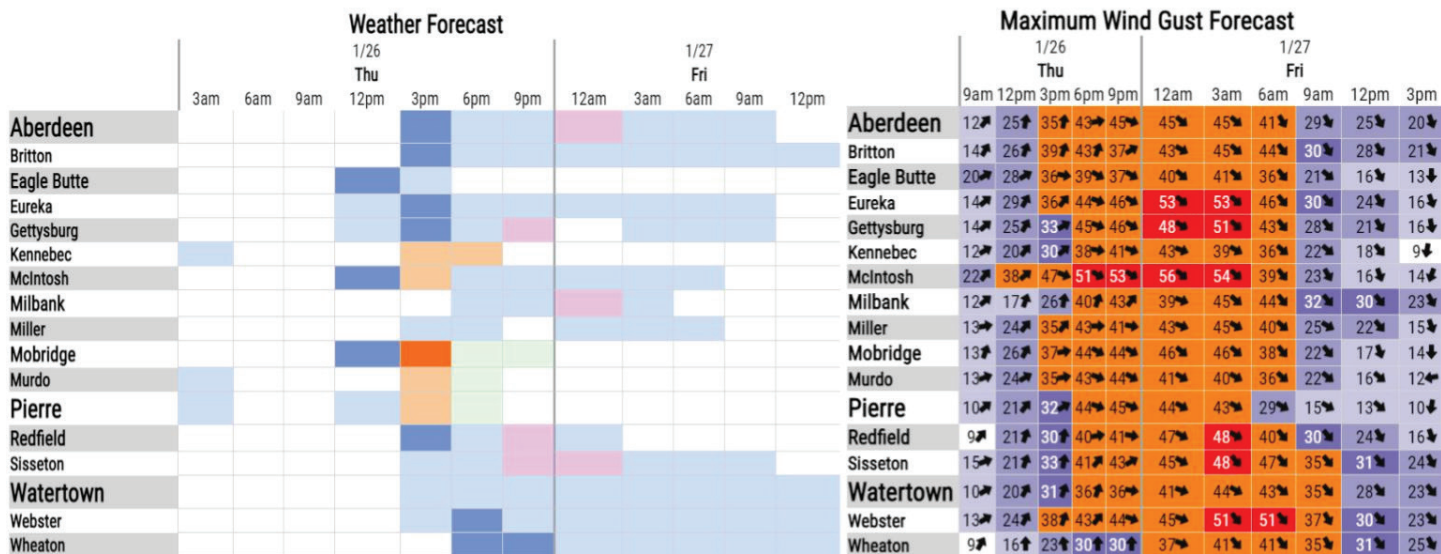
National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Moisture moving through today and tonight will fall as a wintry mix, which may result in ice on untreated surfaces. Strong winds and icy roads could result in hazardous travel. Winds and fresh snow for the Sisseton hills/glacial lakes region could result in blowing and drifting as temperatures rapidly fall behind a cold front.



## Precipitation Type & Wind Forecast

January 26, 2023  
4:14 AM



\*Created: 4 am CST Thu 1/26/2023. Shows most impactful weather for the period beginning at the time shown. Weather symbols display where Probability of Precipitation ≥ 0%.

- Rain + - Fz Rain + - Wintry Mix + - Snow +



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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 21 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: 3 °F at 8:17 AM

Wind: 28 mph at 4:47 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 33 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1947

Record Low: -30 in 1950

Average High: 24°F

Average Low: 1°F

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.47

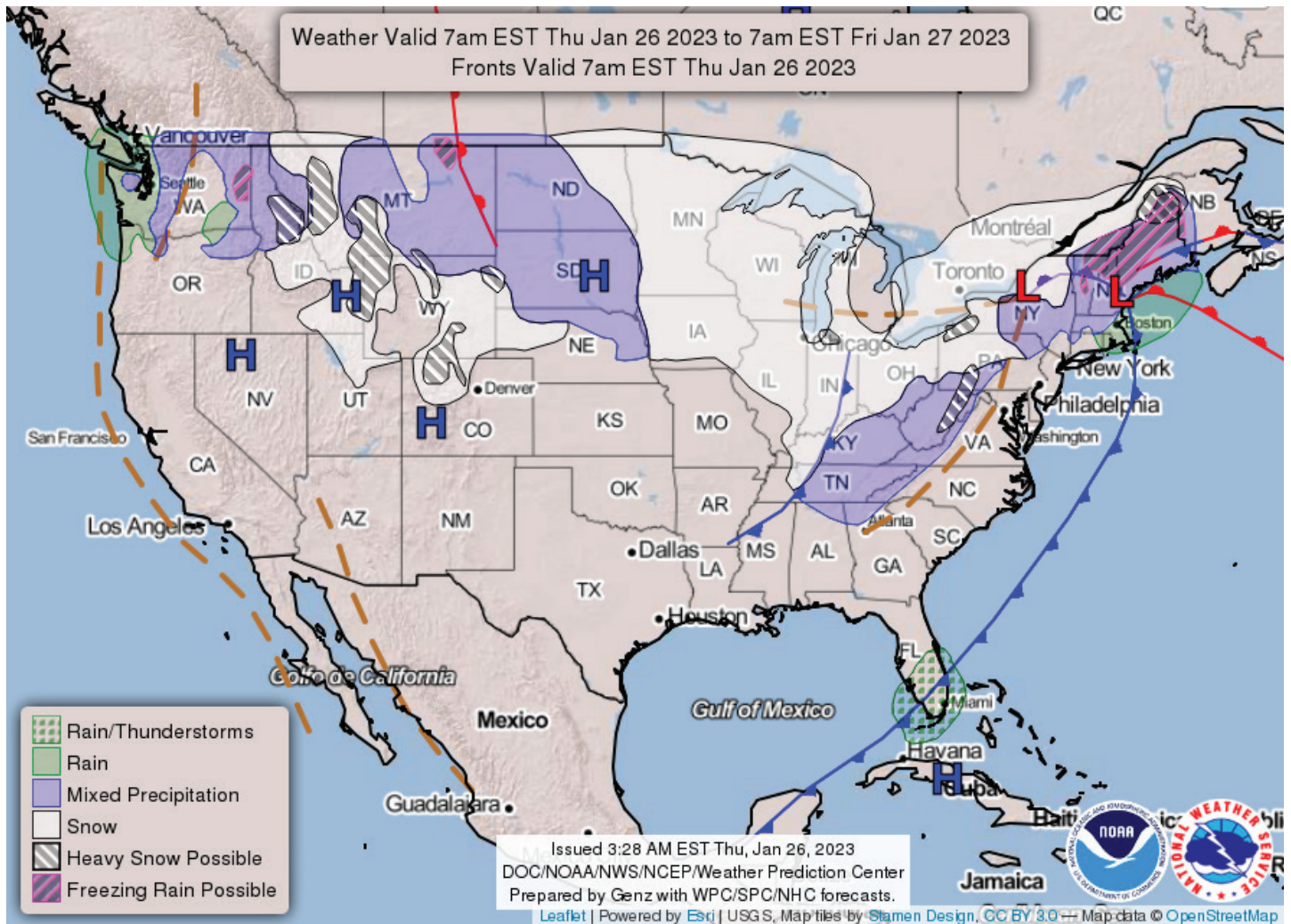
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.47

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:31:50 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:57:00 AM



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## Today in Weather History

January 26, 1977: Four days of very strong winds occurred from the 26th through the 29th, with a strong low-pressure area over western Ontario. Strong northwest winds of 30 to 45 mph with gusts into the 60s caused widespread blowing and drifting snow, with most roads closed with many traffic accidents. The winds combined with subzero temperatures creating wind chills of 60 to 80 below zero. Many schools were closed for several days.

January 26, 2014: A strong Alberta Clipper system-generated light snow and strong winds across the region resulting in blizzard conditions. On Sunday morning, a band of moderate to heavy snow showers developed over North Dakota and swept down through our region producing cloud to ground lightning and thundersnow at times. Snowfall amounts were generally three inches or less. Wind gusts ranged from 45 to 55 mph at times. Several no travel advisories were issued due to poor visibilities in blizzard conditions, with state officials closing a large portion of Interstate-29 from Brookings to the North Dakota border.

1700: A powerful earthquake struck the Pacific Northwest along the Cascadia Subduction zone. The estimated moment magnitude of 8.7-9.2 caused about a 1,000-kilometer rupture from mid-Vancouver Island to northern California. The ocean floor heaved upward approximately 20 feet, and with 10-20 minutes, a giant wave, 30-40 feet high, reached the shore. The earthquake caused a tsunami, which struck the coast of Japan.

1772: Possibly the greatest snowfall ever recorded in the Washington DC area started on this day. When the storm began, Thomas Jefferson was returning home from his honeymoon with his new bride, Martha Wayles Skelton. The newlyweds made it to within eight miles of Monticello before having to abandon their carriage in the deep snow. Both finished the ride on horseback in the blinding snow. The newlyweds arrived home late on the night of January 26th. In Jefferson's "Garden Book," he wrote, "the deepest snow we have ever seen. In Albermarle, it was about 3. F. deep."

1937: The wettest month ever in Cincinnati, Ohio, is January 1937, when 13.68 inches fell. Their average January amount is 3.00 inches of precipitation. The overabundance of precipitation over the Ohio River basin caused near-record to record flooding in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky. On this day, the river gauge reached 80 feet in Cincinnati, the highest level in the city's history. The Ohio River reached 57 feet in Louisville, Kentucky, on the 27th, setting a new record by ten feet. Seventy percent of the city was underwater at that time.

1978 - A paralyzing blizzard struck the Midwest. One to three feet of snow fell in Michigan, and 20 to 40 inches was reported across Indiana. Winds reached 70 mph in Michigan, and gusted above 100 mph in Ohio. The high winds produced snow drifts twenty feet high in Michigan and Indiana stranding thousands on the interstate highways. Temperatures in Ohio dropped from the 40s to near zero during the storm. (David Ludlum)

1983 - The California coast was battered by a storm which produced record high tides, thirty-two foot waves, and mudslides, causing millions of dollars damage. The storm then moved east and dumped four feet of snow on Lake Tahoe. (22nd-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm spread heavy snow across the Middle and Northern Atlantic Coast States, with 18 inches reported at Vineland NJ, and wind gusts to 65 mph at Chatham MA. Snow cover in Virginia ranged up to thirty inches following this second major storm in just one week. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A snowstorm in the northeastern U.S. produced 19 inches at Austerlitz NY and Stillwater NY. A storm in the Great Lakes Region left 16.5 inches at Marquette MI, for a total of 43 inches in six days. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Snow and high winds created blizzard-like conditions in northwestern Vermont. Winds at Saint Albans gusted to 88 mph. In Alaska, the town of Cold Foot (located north of Fairbanks) reported a morning low of 75 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A winter storm spread high winds from the northwestern U.S. to Wyoming and Colorado, with heavy snow in some of the high elevations. Stevens Pass WA received 17 inches of snow, half of which fell in four hours. In extreme northwest Wyoming, Togwotee Mountain Lodge received 24 inches of snow. Winds in Colorado gusted to 90 mph at Rollinsville. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### PASS IT ON

Many parents strive to leave an inheritance for their children. They have a sense of obligation and duty to work and sacrifice to make certain that those they leave behind will have more than they did. They didn't have much of this "world's goods" so they want to make life a little easier and more comfortable for the others they leave behind.

It is one thing to leave an inheritance and quite another to leave a legacy. An inheritance is made up of "things" - monetary, physical, tangible, negotiable items that have a "cash value" attached to them. However, a legacy is quite different.

While not all parents leave an inheritance for their children, all parents leave their children a legacy. Legacies are the core values of our life that we pass on to our children that guide and guard them and give them purpose in life. It is a process of instilling values in children that brings glory to God by the lives they live. Godly legacies will provide God's wisdom, insight, and knowledge that shape behaviors and give purpose and meaning to life.

An inheritance is something parents can leave to their children but a legacy is much more than that. Parents who honor God in all things leave a God-honoring legacy for their children to follow and pass on to their children. We all leave legacies to be passed on.

"Be wise my son, and bring joy to my heart; then I can answer anyone who treats me with contempt." It is obvious that Solomon wanted to leave a legacy for his children that did not come from his wealth but from God's wisdom that exceeded his wealth: A God-like character.

Prayer: We pray, Father, that each of us will leave legacies that honor You and inspire others to follow You. May we live like we are leaving a legacy - because we are! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Be wise my son, and bring joy to my heart; then I can answer anyone who treats me with contempt. Proverbs 27:11



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



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## 2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 – SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 – Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 – GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 – Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 – GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 – Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 – Tour of Homes & Holiday Party

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.24.23

33 41 47 50 62 20

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$20,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 15

DRAW: Mins 23 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.23.23

6 8 16 43 47 9

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$34,370,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 15 Mins 23

DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.24.23

1 25 28 39 47 10

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 15 Hrs 45 Mins 23

DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.21.23

3 11 12 22 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$27,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 15 Mins 23

DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.23.23

6 15 31 45 58 5

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 14 Mins 23

DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.23.23

12 31 47 58 60 23

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$526,000,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 14 Mins 24

DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Some Jan. 6th rioters gain sympathy for cause in red states

By AMANCAI BIRABEN and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Trennis Evans III joined the mob in the 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, climbing through a broken window and tossing back a swig of whiskey in a congressional conference room.

On Wednesday, Evans was at the South Dakota Capitol, urging lawmakers to support a resolution encouraging “the humane and fair treatment” of those, like himself, who faced or are facing federal criminal charges related to the deadly siege on Jan. 6, 2021.

The resolution failed by unanimous vote after he spoke before the Legislature’s House State Affairs Committee. But Evans’ presence in the South Dakota Capitol underscored how sympathy for the Jan. 6 attack resounds among the grassroots of the GOP’s right-wing.

While the Justice Department’s largest-ever investigation has expanded to charge nearly 1,000 people like Evans for federal crimes related to the siege, Evans and others who participated in the attack have found sympathetic audiences in places like ruby-red South Dakota.

Republican lawmakers tip-toed around the insurrection and its aftermath before voting against the resolution during Wednesday’s hearing.

Still, for Evans, the hearing itself represented a victory.

“I applaud you, this committee, for taking the time to hear and understand in a body that’s formed like this for the first time,” he said, adding that the resolution has been advanced in 80 counties in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Texas, but had never before been considered by a state Legislature.

State Rep. Phil Jensen, who co-sponsored the resolution with two other lawmakers, said he was hopeful Wednesday’s hearing would spur other state Legislatures to make similar declarations. In South Dakota, every piece of legislation is required to receive a hearing.

“I hope it brings awareness to the plight of these political prisoners,” Jensen, who joined the membership of the Oath Keepers for a year in 2014, told The Associated Press. The far-right extremist group is accused of playing a key role in the Capitol insurrection.

Of the nearly 400 people who have been sentenced so far for riot-related charges, more than 40 percent have avoided jail time entirely. About 150 rioters have gotten six months behind bars or less, according to an AP tally.

Evans, who is from Texas, pleaded guilty to a federal misdemeanor charge last year for entering the Capitol building and encouraging others to follow by raising a megaphone and saying, “Bring ‘em in,” according to prosecutors. Prosecutors sought a two-month jail term, but a judge sentenced Evans to 20 days, with the ability to serve his term in installments, rather than all at once.

Evans now operates a legal advocacy group called Condemned USA and previously developed a following on Gettr, a social media site founded by a former Trump adviser. Prosecutors said he glorified political violence on social media, including saying in February 2022 that he “love(d)” a post threatening to “stack bodies” if members of the “deep state” did not “surrender.”

In court papers before his sentencing, Evans’ lawyer called him “quite self-reproving, sincerely remorseful, and duly contrite.” The attorney said Evans is “embarrassed of this criminal conduct and the shame he has brought upon himself and his family.”

If anything, the punishment only served to advance Evans’ standing among those who see the insurrection not as an assault on democracy, but a righteous struggle to reverse what they consider a stolen 2020 presidential election. Like Evans, some Jan. 6 defendants have profited from their participation in the deadly riot, using it as a platform to drum up cash, promote business endeavors and form groups committed to aiding fellow defendants.

There is no evidence of any widespread fraud or manipulation of voting machines in the 2020 election, underscored by repeated audits, court cases and the conclusions of President Donald Trump’s own De-

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partment of Justice.

South Dakota's capital city of Pierre feels isolated amid the rolling buttes and farm country of the Great Plains, but the political ramifications of Jan. 6 have steadily made their way to the state. Top Republican officials, including Gov. Kristi Noem and Secretary of State Monae Johnson, have repeatedly expressed ambivalence about whether the 2020 presidential election was rightfully won by President Joe Biden.

Other Republicans, such as U.S. Sens. Mike Rounds and John Thune, have faced backlash from the party's right wing after speaking against former President Donald Trump's lie that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

Rounds, who helped carry the electoral college votes out of the Senate chamber as it came under attack from rioters on Jan. 6, was confronted by Jensen and other Republicans when he visited the Republican caucus in the Statehouse last week. The eagerness of Jensen and others to speak out on the Capitol attack threatens to drive a wedge in the state's dominant Republican Party.

Some statehouse Republicans condemned Wednesday's proposal as an alarming validation of an attack on the nation's seat of government.

"I think if you attack the United States Capitol, you're an enemy of America. That's pretty obvious," said Republican state Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, the top-ranking lawmaker in his chamber.

Evans, meanwhile, said he planned to stick around the South Dakota Capitol this week and continue to press his case.

"This is how you push back," Jensen said. "The states created the federal government, the federal government didn't create the states. It's a matter of values. Right and wrong isn't part of politics anymore."

## South Dakota state senator stripped of committee assignments

By AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Republican South Dakota state senator had her committee assignments stripped Wednesday in a rare punishment in the Legislature.

The move to strip Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller of her seats on two legislative committees was announced during the Senate's session on Wednesday, but legislative leaders in the Republican-controlled chamber refused to comment on what led to the move. Frye-Mueller, who is aligned with a group of contrarian, right-wing Statehouse Republicans, has had the occasional run-ins with legislative leadership during her four terms between the House and Senate.

Both Republican Sens. Lee Schoenbeck, the chamber's pro tempore, and Casey Crabtree, the Republican leader, declined to comment on why Frye-Mueller was stripped of her committee assignments. Frye-Mueller also declined to comment.

Republican leaders did not make it clear whether the punishment was temporary or permanent.

## Sheriff: Gunman didn't know Monterey Park dance hall victims

By STEFANIE DAZIO, AMY TAXIN and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

MONTEREY PARK, Calif. (AP) — The 72-year-old gunman who sprayed bullets into a Southern California ballroom dance hall, killing 11 people, had no known connection with the victims and investigators were still trying to determine a motive for the massacre, the Los Angeles County sheriff said.

Before the shooting Saturday night, Huu Can Tran parked a motorcycle just a block away from the ballroom in Monterey Park, which investigators believe he had planned to use as a backup getaway vehicle, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said during a news conference Wednesday hours after police seized the motorcycle.

Tran opened fire on a mostly elderly crowd of dancers at the Star Ballroom Dance Studio, killing 11 people and wounding nine, police said.

The carnage, during what should have been joyful Lunar New Year celebrations, sent ripples of fear through Asian American communities already dealing with increased hatred and violence directed at them.

Some reports had said Tran frequented the dance hall and fancied himself as an instructor, but Luna said

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he hadn't been there in at least five years and did not appear to target the victims specifically.

"We have not been able to establish a connection between the suspect and any of the victims thus far," Luna said.

Luna said it wasn't clear how long Tran had been planning the attack in the city about 8 miles (12.8 kilometers) from downtown Los Angeles or what prompted him to spray at least 42 bullets, taking time to reload his weapon, a variant of the MAC-10 semiautomatic machine pistol with a 30-round magazine.

Tran's motive continued to elude detectives days after the tragedy as they searched piles of items and paperwork seized from Tran's home and a van he used to flee, the sheriff said.

"It doesn't make sense," Luna said. "It really doesn't."

About 20 minutes after the carnage in Monterey Park, Tran entered another dance hall about 3.5 miles (5.6 kilometers) away in Alhambra, where an employee confronted and disarmed him during a brief struggle. Tran later shot himself in the van where his body was found Sunday morning.

Tran, who was of Vietnamese descent and lived in Hong Kong, had been in the U.S. for seven or eight years. He bought the machine pistol in Monterey Park in 1999 but it was not registered in California, the sheriff said. The gun and the high-capacity magazine are illegal in California.

Luna said Tran used a registered semiautomatic handgun when he died by suicide, and a registered bolt-action rifle was found at his home in Hemet, about 70 miles (112 kilometers) from Monterey Park. His only known criminal history was a 1990 arrest for unlawful possession of a firearm but there was no indication of a conviction.

Monterey Park Police Chief Scott Wiese on Wednesday defended his decision not to warn the public for hours that a killer was on the loose, saying he did not have enough information at the time to effectively alert residents.

Wiese said police in the region were alerted but it didn't make sense to send out a warning at night to residents in the predominantly Asian American city, even after learning the suspect may have targeted a nearby dance club after the massacre.

"I'm not going to send my officers door to door waking people up and telling them that we're looking for a male Asian in Monterey Park," Wiese told The Associated Press. "It's not going to do us any good."

The shooting at 10:22 p.m. Saturday occurred just an hour or so after tens of thousands of people attended Lunar New Year festivities in the city. The public was not notified of the mass shooting for five hours, raising questions about why an alert wasn't sent to people in the area.

Wiese, who was sworn in as chief two days before the shooting, said police were piecing together information from some 40 witnesses, including many who didn't speak English, and didn't want to broadcast incorrect information. He said notifying other local, state and federal agencies gave them the ability to get the word out.

Less than 48 hours later, a gunman in Northern California shot eight fellow farmworkers, killing seven, at mushroom farms in Half Moon Bay. The shooter was of Chinese descent and most of the victims were Asian.

Outside the locked gates of in Monterey Park's Star Dance Studio, a memorial grew higher Wednesday with mounds of bouquets and balloons. Hundreds of people carrying flowers, candles and incense showed up for a vigil.

Marlene Xu gathered with fellow dancers by a row of flower-framed photos of the victims. Xu said she danced at the studio four times a week and spent an entire day and night in tears after the violence.

"It's hard for us because it's a part of my life," she said. "It's like a part of your life is gone."

Vice President Kamala Harris visited the memorial Wednesday, adding her own bouquet, before heading to a senior center to talk to relatives of the victims. She paused in front of each of the large, rose-framed placards that contained photos or names of the victims at the memorial.

Speaking briefly to reporters, Harris relayed sentiments on behalf of President Joe Biden and called for Congress to enact stricter gun control laws.

"Tragically we keep saying the same things," Harris said. "Can they do something? Yes. Should they do

something? Yes. Will they do something? That is where we all must speak up.”

Pope Francis was among those offering condolences, saying in a message to the Los Angeles archbishop that he “implores the divine gifts of healing and consolation upon the injured and bereaved.”

Wiese said he’s seen a lot during his three decade career, but some of the first officers on the scene were rookies who had never faced such carnage and the trauma will be hard to forget.

Paramedics were loading the wounded into ambulances and treating others inside when the chief arrived. There were bodies every 10 feet: some slumped over tables, others sprawled on the dance floor.

“It’s hard to put words to it,” he said. “It takes your breath away when you see it. And it kind of burns the image into your brain.”

## Youth program founder hurt in shooting ‘has biggest heart’

By JIM SALTER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Will Keeps was a 15-year-old member of a Chicago gang when he witnessed rival members kill his friend. He escaped the streets and moved to Iowa to help other young people from troubled backgrounds.

Now, Keeps is hospitalized and in serious condition following just the sort of violence he has devoted his life to stopping: a shooting that killed two teenagers at the Starts Right Here education program he founded in Des Moines. Keeps was also shot in Monday’s attack, which police say was gang-related, and underwent surgery.

Keeps, 49, is a rapper and activist whose given name is William Holmes. He launched Starts Right Here in 2021 and partners with Des Moines Public Schools to help kids who are otherwise falling through the cracks of the educational system. One of Keeps’ songs, “Wake Up Iowa,” sends a message, “You don’t gotta do illegal stuff, you don’t gotta kill somebody just to feel tough.”

School leaders and police all agree the shooting won’t stop the program — or Keeps.

“Amazing. Incredibly passionate. Creative,” interim schools Superintendent Matt Smith said. “Has the biggest heart for kids and for our community — is a fierce advocate for justice and for serving students. He’s a genuine man. He’s a really good man.”

Preston Walls, 18, a program participant, was charged Tuesday with two counts of first-degree murder, one count of attempted murder and one count of criminal gang participation. Police said the killings of 18-year-old Gionni Dameron and 16-year-old Rashad Carr were gang-related, though Dameron’s father said his son was not involved in a gang, and Carr’s friends told the Des Moines Register he was not in a gang, either. Walls is jailed on \$1 million bond, and the public defender’s office handling his case has declined to comment.

In a LinkedIn profile, Keeps said he was 7 when he was sexually abused by his stepfather. Confused and angry, he ended up in a Chicago gang at age 13.

Two years later, after rival gang members killed his friend, they pointed the gun at Keeps, but it jammed, he said. So they cut him, beat him with baseball bats and left him for dead.

He survived and moved to Des Moines in his 20s.

“We owe it to our children to create a world where youth do not experience the challenges, barriers, and issues that I did,” Keeps said in the profile.

“Will has a huge heart for kids,” Brian Herbel, vice president of the Starts Right Here Board of Directors, said in an email. “He has made it his life’s mission to help lost kids and is like a father figure for many of them. He is able to connect with the kids because he had his own troubled past and has overcome it.”

Keeps has an unmistakable presence and passion, Smith said, though he’s soft-spoken — except for his laugh.

“You can hear it all the way down the hallway,” Smith said. “It’s very high-pitched. You don’t even know what he’s laughing about, but you can’t help but laugh with him.”

Starts Right Here is funded by grants and donors. Some students are directed to the program by the school district. Others are sent by their parents.

The program operates two tracks. One is for students 17 or older who have accumulated very few credits

and helps them catch up so they can graduate. The second track is for students who have difficulty staying focused in a traditional school setting. All told, Starts Right Here serves about 40 students.

The program fills a void, Smith said.

"Students and families just felt lost," Smith said. "They just felt like they couldn't find their footing in our education system and Des Moines Public Schools, and in connecting with Will, they felt a different sort of focus, a different sort of attention, and found incredible success."

The program's Facebook feed is filled with some of those success stories, and Keeps sometimes brags about them on his own social media. In one tweet last spring, he posed with a student who floundered in virtual school after COVID-19 hit. "She gave up," he said, until she gave Starts Right Here a try. Now: "GRADUATED!" he proclaimed.

The Starts Right Here website says 70% of the students it serves are members of minority groups. Thirty participants have graduated from high school, the district said, and five others are on track to graduate this spring.

No previous violence has occurred at the school, Smith said. But Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center, said programs that serve at-risk students need to be especially vigilant.

"If you are enrolling someone who has had a background of extensive criminal misbehavior, it's incumbent upon the school officials to take additional steps to provide a closer level of supervision," he said.

The doors at the program are always locked, Smith said. He wasn't sure if guards were present Monday. The program offers classes in the morning only; many students have internships at businesses in the afternoon. The shooting happened just before 1 p.m. Authorities haven't said who else, if anyone, was in the building at the time.

Police have said the shooting was premeditated. Walls was on supervised release for a weapons charge last year and was wearing an ankle monitor, which he cut off 16 minutes before the shooting, police said.

Investigators say in a charging document that Walls had a concealed, semiautomatic handgun with a high-capacity extended magazine when he entered a common area. Keeps tried to escort him out, but Walls pulled away, drew the gun and shot the two teenagers several times, the document stated. Keeps was also struck.

One teenage victim tried to flee, according to the document, but Walls chased him down "and shot him multiple more times." Walls was captured a short time later.

Keeps' family said in a statement Tuesday that he "has a long recovery ahead" but is determined to continue his mission of helping at-risk youth.

Advocates understand the challenges Keeps faces.

Police Chief Dana Wingerts, who is a member of the Starts Right Here Board of Directors, said in a statement Wednesday that it was especially tragic that the violence happened at a place Keeps created to "provide hope and opportunity to some of our most troubled youth."

Wingerts left no doubt he expects Keeps to bounce back.

"As troubling as this is, it would be a mistake to underestimate the passion and energy that he will bring to this important work upon his recovery," Wingerts said.

## **Palestinians say Israeli troops kill 9 in West Bank raid**

By MAJDI MOHAMMED and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JENIN REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank (AP) — Israeli forces killed at least nine Palestinians, including a 60-year-old woman, and wounded several others during a raid in a flashpoint area of the occupied West Bank on Thursday, Palestinian health officials said, in the deadliest day in years in the territory.

The violence occurred during what Palestinian health officials described as a fierce, daytime operation in the Jenin refugee camp, a militant stronghold of the West Bank that has been a focus of nearly a year of Israeli arrest raids. The conflict spiked this month, with 29 Palestinians killed since the start of the year. It was not immediately clear how many of those killed Thursday were affiliated with armed groups.

The fighting comes weeks into Israel's new government, its most right-wing ever, which has pledged



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to take a hard line against the Palestinians and ramp up settlement construction on lands the Palestinian seek for their hoped-for state. It also comes days before U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to arrive in the region and push for steps that might improve daily life for the Palestinians.

The Israeli military said it was conducting the rare daytime operation because of intelligence it had received that a militant grouping linked to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which has a major foothold in the camp, was set to carry out imminent attacks against Israelis. A gun battle erupted, during which the military said it targeted the militants. At least one of the dead was identified by Palestinians as a militant.

Images published by Palestinian media showed the charred exterior walls of a two-story building and cinderblocks and other debris scattered on a street. The military said it entered the building where the suspects were located to detonate explosives it said were being used by the suspects.

Palestinian Health Minister May Al-Kaila said paramedics were struggling to reach the wounded amid the fighting. She also accused the military of firing tear gas at the pediatric ward of a hospital, causing children to choke. Video from the hospital showed women carrying children out of hospital rooms and into the corridor. The military said tear gas had likely wafted into the hospital from the clashes nearby.

Jenin hospital identified the woman killed as Magda Obaid and the Israeli military said it was looking into reports of her death. The Palestinian Health Ministry earlier identified another one of the dead as Saeb Azriqi, 24, who was brought to a hospital in critical condition after being shot, and died from his wounds. And the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade — an armed militia affiliated with Fatah, the secular political party that controls the Palestinian Authority, claimed one of the dead, Izz al-Din Salahat, as a fighter. The ministry said at least 20 people were wounded.

Internationally-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared three days of mourning and ordered flags at half-staff. Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for the Palestinian Authority, condemned the violence, calling on the international community to speak out against it.

Akram Rajoub, the governor of Jenin, told The Associated Press the military prevented medical teams from evacuating the wounded and fired tear gas that seeped into the government hospital, affecting infants and interrupting surgeries. The military said forces closed roads to facilitate their operation, which may have complicated the efforts of rescue teams to reach the wounded.

"We ask that the international community help the Palestinians against this extremist right-wing government and protect our citizens," he said.

The deaths drew condemnation from neighboring Jordan as well as from the militant Islamic Hamas group that rules the Gaza Strip.

The Islamic Jihad branch in the coastal enclave has repeatedly fought against Israel, most recently in a fierce three-day clash last summer that killed dozens of Palestinians and disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israelis. Tensions surrounding violence in the West Bank have in the past spilled over to Gaza.

"The response of the resistance to what happened today in Jenin camp will not be delayed," warned top Hamas official Saleh Arouri.

Tensions between Israelis and Palestinians have soared since Israel launched the raids last spring, following a spate of Palestinian attacks that killed 19 people, while another round of attacks later in the year brought the death toll to 30.

Nearly 150 Palestinians were killed last year, making 2022 the deadliest since 2004, according to the Israeli rights group B'Tselem.

Israel says most of the dead were militants. But youths protesting the incursions and others not involved in the confrontations have also been killed. So far this year, and not including Thursday, one-third of the Palestinians killed by Israeli troops or civilians had ties to armed groups.

Israel says the raids are meant to dismantle militant networks and thwart future attacks. The Palestinians say they further entrench Israel's 55-year, open-ended occupation.

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war, territories the Palestinians claim for their hoped-for state.

Israel's new far-right government, headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and propped up by ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties, has pledged to put West Bank settlement expansion at the top

of its priority list and has already announced a series of punitive steps against the Palestinians for pushing the U.N.'s highest judicial body to give its opinion on the Israeli occupation.

## Tommy Paul's Australian run helps make US men relevant again

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Tommy Paul was too little at the time to remember watching Andy Roddick win the 2003 U.S. Open, the last Grand Slam singles title for an American man.

Paul, now 25, does recall seeing posters from that triumph displayed at the club in North Carolina where he learned how to play tennis as a kid. What stood out the most, Paul said, was the Reebok outfit Roddick wore.

"I was actually salty when he switched to Lacoste. I was like, 'He's not going to win another Slam now,'" Paul said with a smile after reaching the semifinals at the Australian Open, where he will face Novak Djokovic of Serbia on Friday, after Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece faces Karen Khachanov of Russia. "I thought it was the outfits."

That championship at Flushing Meadows two decades ago remains the last in Grand Slam singles for any American man, although a trio of fellows named Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Djokovic probably (wink) had more to do with where the major trophies kept going over the rest of Roddick's career — and beyond — than any clothing choices.

Paul's run at Melbourne Park is one of the many examples of the ways in which U.S. men are suddenly relevant again in tennis.

"Since I was young, that's all we've been hearing. Since like 14 years old, the coaches have been telling us, 'We need new Americans. We need new Americans.' It's kind of engraved in my head," Paul said, tapping his temple with his right index finger. "We all want to perform. ... I mean, I think we all want it pretty bad for ourselves, but we want it for U.S. tennis, too."

This breakthrough for Paul, who never had been past the fourth round at a major, comes on the heels of Frances Tiafoe's trip to the semifinals at the U.S. Open last September, which included a victory over Nadal before a loss to eventual champion Carlos Alcaraz.

That makes this sequence the first time U.S. men reached the final four at consecutive Slams in 16 years, when Roddick was the runner-up to Federer at the 2006 U.S. Open and lost to him in the semifinals at the 2007 Australian Open.

There's more evidence to support the idea that a country that produced Don Budge and Bill Tilden and Arthur Ashe and John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors and Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi and more but did not matter in men's tennis in recent years — Serena and Venus Williams, along with others, made sure U.S. women stayed at the forefront — must be taken more seriously.

Consider:

— The Australian Open men's bracket was filled with big wins by 20-something Americans, including Mackenzie McDonald beating defending champion and No. 1 seed Nadal, Jenson Brooksby beating No. 2 seed Casper Ruud, and Sebastian Korda beating the runner-up each of the last two years, No. 7 seed Daniil Medvedev;

— Paul, Ben Shelton, 20, and Korda, 22, became the first trio of Americans in the men's quarterfinals in Melbourne since 2000;

— There was a stretch of 22 majors spanning about 4 1/2 years in which not a single U.S. man made the quarterfinals at any Grand Slam tournament, a drought that ended when Sam Querrey reached that round at Wimbledon in 2016;

— With Paul set to crack the top 20 for the first time by the end of the Australian Open, and big jumps by others, there are projected to be 10 Americans in the ATP top 50 on Monday, something that last happened in June 1995.

"I don't see why, at the end of this year, we couldn't have five, six guys in the top 20, with the way that some of these guys are playing," said Shelton, who turned pro after winning the NCAA singles title as a

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sophomore at the University of Florida last year and made it all the way to the quarterfinals in Australia before losing to Paul in four sets Wednesday.

"There's a lot of hope for American tennis," Shelton said. "I'm really looking forward to being a part of it."

When Paul finished off that victory, he was asked during his on-court interview at Rod Laver Arena about what fans back home might be thinking.

"It's not just exciting for the American fans," Paul said. "It's exciting for fans all around the world. And for us, too. I'm really excited for Ben. I'm excited for all the players that are coming up."

Djokovic agreed with the premise.

He thinks having successful players from the United States taking part in the latter stages of the biggest tournaments — and being part of the conversation at last — can only be a good thing for the popularity of tennis.

"America, for our sport, is an extremely important country. We have some of the biggest tournaments in the world played there, in the North American continent. I think it is important that we see successful American men and women doing well. America is producing, historically, always top players," Djokovic said. "Now you have a list of maybe four or five young players that are knocking on the door of the top level. I think that's great for our sport."

## Russian attacks on Ukraine reported; tank training to start

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces fired another rash of missiles and self-exploding drones across several parts of Ukraine early Thursday, causing the first attack-related death of the year in Kyiv even as air defenses shot down many of the incoming projectiles.

The attacks adhered to Russia's recent pattern of launching widespread strikes about every two weeks. But the wave of weapons came a day after Germany and the United States upped the ante in Russia's 11-month war by promising to send high-tech battle tanks to Ukraine and green-lighting other allies to do the same.

Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said a strike killed one person, the city's first such death since New Year's Eve. Two others were injured, he said. The head of the Kyiv city administration, Serhii Popko said Ukrainian air defenses shot down 15 cruise missiles heading to the area were shot down.

Russia has carried out massive strikes on Ukrainian power plants and other infrastructure since early October. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the commander of Ukraine's armed forces said Thursday's volley involved 55 missiles, of which 47 were intercepted.

Self-exploding drones swept in overnight before the missile strikes, in what a spokesperson for Ukraine's Southern Defense Forces said appeared to be a Russian attempt to overwhelm or distract Ukraine's air defenses.

It was the first such barrage of Russian firepower across the country since Jan. 14.

Maksym Marchenko, the governor of southern Ukraine's Odesa region, said energy infrastructure facilities were damaged in his and several other regions, causing "significant problems with electricity supply."

The regional administration in the nearby Kherson region, where Ukrainian troops recaptured the regional capital in November, said Russian shelling killed two people and wounded five over the past day.

The attacks came a day after Germany said it would supply 14 high-tech Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine and authorize other European countries to send up to 88 more. The U.S. said it planned to ship 31 Abrams M1 tanks to Ukrainian forces.

Along with Germany and the U.S., Britain, Poland, the Netherlands and Sweden are among the nations that have sent or announced plans to supply hundreds of tanks and heavy armored vehicles to fortify Ukraine as it enters a new phase of the war and tries to break through entrenched Russian lines.

The conflict has largely been a stalemate in recent months, though Ukrainian forces acknowledged Wednesday a controlled pullout from the salt-mining town of Soledar in Donetsk province, a battle-scarred area of eastern Ukraine that has been embroiled in war since Russia-backed separatists seized large swaths

of the broader Donbas region in 2014.

Gian Gentile, a U.S. Army veteran and senior historian with the Rand think tank, said the M1 Abrams and the Leopards would give Ukraine a "mechanized armored punching force."

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said Ukrainian crews will start their training in Germany in coming days on German-made Marders, which are infantry fighting vehicles, while training on the heavier Leopard 2 tanks would start "a little later."

"In any case, the aim with the Leopards is to have the first company in Ukraine by the end of March, beginning of April," he added. "I can't say the precise day."

In an interview with Britain's Sky News on Wednesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he didn't know when the tanks from the U.S. and Europe would arrive.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, also speaking to the British network, declined to speculate on the timing, but said "allies are extremely focused on the importance of speed."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the move to provide Ukraine with modern Western tanks reflected the West's growing involvement in the conflict.

"Both European capitals and Washington keep saying that the delivery of various kinds of weapons systems, including tanks, to Ukraine, absolutely does not mean the involvement of these countries or the alliance in the hostilities ongoing in Ukraine," Peskov told reporters. "We categorically disagree with that."

"Moscow views everything the alliance and the capitals I have mentioned as direct involvement in the conflict," he added. "We can see it growing."

## **Analysis: Stakes rise as Iran can fuel 'several' atom bombs**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran has enough highly enriched uranium to build "several" nuclear weapons if it chooses, the United Nations' top nuclear official is now warning. But diplomatic efforts aimed at again limiting its atomic program seem more unlikely than ever before as Tehran arms Russia in its war on Ukraine and as unrest shakes the Islamic Republic.

The warning from Rafael Mariano Grossi of the International Atomic Energy Agency, in response to questions from European lawmakers this week, shows just how high the stakes have become over Iran's nuclear program. Even at the height of previous tensions between the West and Iran under hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad before the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran never enriched uranium as high as it does now.

For months, nonproliferation experts have suggested Iran had enough uranium enriched up to 60% to build at least one nuclear weapon — though Tehran long has insisted its program is for peaceful purposes. While offering a caveat on Tuesday that "we need to be extremely careful" in describing Iran's program, Grossi bluntly acknowledged just how large Tehran's high-enriched uranium stockpile had grown.

"One thing is true: They have amassed enough nuclear material for several nuclear weapons, not one at this point," Grossi said.

The Argentine diplomat then referred to Benjamin Netanyahu's famous 2012 speech to the United Nations, in which the Israeli prime minister held up a placard of a cartoon-style bomb with a burning wick and drew a red line on it to urge the world to not allow Tehran's program to highly enrich uranium. While the 2015 nuclear deal drastically reduced Iran's uranium stockpile and capped its enrichment to 3.67%, Netanyahu successfully lobbied then-President Donald Trump to withdraw from the accord and set up the current tensions.

"You remember there was to be this issue of the breakthrough and Mr. Netanyahu drawing things at the U.N. and putting lines — well, that is long past. They have 70 kilograms (155 pounds) of uranium enriched at 60%. ... The amount is there," Grossi said. "That doesn't mean they have a nuclear weapon. So they haven't proliferated yet."

But the danger remains. Analysts point to what happened with North Korea, which had reached a 1994 deal with the U.S. to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The deal fell apart in 2002. By 2005 and wary

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of U.S. intentions after its invasion of Iraq, Pyongyang announced it had built nuclear weapons. Today, North Korea has ballistic missiles designed to carry nuclear warheads that are capable of reaching the U.S.

Iran's mission to the U.N. did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday on Grossi's remarks and authorities in Tehran did not directly acknowledge them. However, Iranian state television quoted Mohammad Eslami, the head of the country's civilian nuclear program, on Thursday as saying Tehran would welcome a visit by Grossi to the country.

Iranian diplomats for years have pointed to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's preachings as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran wouldn't seek an atomic bomb. However, Iranian officials in recent months have begun openly talking about the prospect of building nuclear weapons.

Talks between Iran and the West ended in August with a "final text" of a roadmap on restoring the 2015 deal that Iran until today hasn't accepted. As Iran's rial currency plunges further to historic lows against the dollar, Iranian officials including Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian make unsupported claims about American officials agreeing to their demands or frozen money abroad being released.

At the State Department, the denials about Iran's claims have grown more and more pointed.

"We've heard a number of statements from the Iranian foreign minister that are dubious if not outright lies, so I would just keep that broader context in mind when you point to statements from the Iranian foreign minister," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Monday in a response to a question.

Price and others in President Joe Biden's administration say any future talks with Iran remain off the table as Tehran cracks down on the months-long protests after the death of Mahsa Amini, a young woman detained in September by the country's morality police. At least 527 people have been killed and over 19,500 arrested amid the unrest, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran, a group monitoring the protests.

Another part of the Americans' exasperation — and increasingly of the Europeans as well — comes from Iran arming Russia with the bomb-carrying drones that repeatedly have targeted power plants and civilian targets across Ukraine. It remains unclear what Tehran, which has a strained history with Moscow, expects to get for supplying Russia with arms. One Iranian lawmaker has suggested the Islamic Republic could get Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets to replace its aging fleet comprised primarily of pre-1979 American warplanes, though such a deal hasn't been confirmed.

Such fighter jets would provide a key air defense for Iran, particularly as its nuclear sites could increasingly be eyed. Israel, which has carried out strikes to halt nuclear programs in Iraq and Syria, has warned it will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear bomb.

The U.S. and Israel also launched its largest-ever joint air, land and sea exercise this week called Juniper Oak that the Pentagon described as "not meant to be oriented around any single adversary or threat." However, it comes amid the heightened tensions with Iran and includes aerial refueling, targeting and suppressing enemy air defenses — capabilities that would be crucial in conducting airstrikes.

For now, Grossi said there was "almost no diplomatic activity" over trying to restore the Iran nuclear deal, an agreement he now describes as "an empty shell." But he still urged more diplomacy as Tehran still would need to design and test any possible nuclear weapon.

"We shouldn't give up," he said.

## Russia downplays West's move on tanks, strikes Ukraine again

By The Associated Press undefined

From Washington to Berlin to Kyiv, a Western decision to send battle tanks to Ukraine was hailed enthusiastically. Moscow first shrugged it off — and later launched another barrage of attacks.

The Kremlin has previously warned that such tank deliveries would be a dangerous escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, and it has strongly denounced the watershed move by Germany and the United States to send the heavy weaponry to its foe.

But it insists the new armor won't stop Russia from achieving its goals in Ukraine.

"The potential it gives to the Ukrainian armed forces is clearly exaggerated," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "Those tanks will burn just like any others."

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Moscow played down the move right after the announcement in an apparent attempt to save face as the West raised the stakes in Ukraine. Some Russian experts also emphasized that the supply of the deadly armor will be relatively limited and could take months to reach the front.

On Thursday, Russia launched a new wave of missiles and self-exploding drones across Ukraine — the latest in a series of strikes, many of which have targeted power plants and other key infrastructure.

Russian military bloggers and commentators say that such attacks involve meticulous preparation — so the latest barrage was likely planned in advance and was not necessarily linked to the tank announcement.

Yohann Michel, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank, observed that while Western arms supplies irk Russia, it can do nothing to stop them. "It's a problem that they can't necessarily address," he said, noting that earlier decisions by the U.S. and its allies to supply air-defense weapons to Ukraine could have been even more worrying for Moscow.

President Vladimir Putin, his diplomats and military leaders have repeatedly warned the West that supplying long-range weapons capable of striking deep inside Russia would mark a red line and trigger a massive retaliation.

While other weapons like tanks and certain air defense systems have drawn warnings from Russian officials, the wording has been deliberately vague, perhaps to allow the Kremlin to avoid getting cornered by making specific threats.

Poland, the Czech Republic and other NATO countries have already provided Ukraine with hundreds of smaller Soviet-made tanks from the Cold War era when they were part of the Soviet bloc. Ukrainian armed forces, who have used similar aging weaponry, needed no extra training to use them. They played an important role on the battlefield, helping Ukraine reclaim broad swaths of territory in 11 months of fighting.

As Ukraine's armored units suffered attrition and stockpiles of the old T-72 tanks ran dry in the arsenals of its allies in Central and Eastern Europe, Kyiv has increasingly pushed for delivery of German-made Leopard 2 and U.S. M1 Abrams tanks.

After weeks of hesitation, Germany said Wednesday it will provide Ukraine with 14 Leopard 2 tanks and allow other allies willing to follow suit to deliver 88 Leopards to form two tank battalions. The U.S. announced it will send 31 M1 Abrams tanks.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his officials, who long have said the country needs hundreds of tanks to counter a foe with a far superior number as well as other weapons, greeted the Western decision as a major breakthrough, voicing hope that more supplies would follow.

"The deliveries of Leopard 2 will take our ground forces to a qualitatively new level," Ukrainian military expert Oleh Zhdanov told The Associated Press. Even though Leopard 2s are heavier than Soviet-designed tanks, they have a strong edge in firepower and survivability.

"One Leopard 2 could be equivalent to three or five Russian tanks," Zhdanov said.

But he noted that the promised number of Western tanks represents only the minimum that Ukraine needs to repel a likely offensive by Moscow, adding that Russia has thousands of armored vehicles.

"Kyiv is preparing for a defensive operation, and its outcome will determine the future course of the conflict," Zhdanov said.

Russian military analysts were more skeptical about the Western tanks, arguing that while Abrams proved clearly superior to older models of Soviet-built tanks during the war in Iraq, newer Russian models are more closely matched. They also charged that Leopard 2 tanks used by the Turkish army against the Kurds in Syria proved vulnerable to Soviet-era anti-tank weapons.

Some Russian online media quickly posted diagrams of the vulnerable points of the Leopard 2. "Hit Leopard as your grandfather hit Tiger and Panther!" one headline said, referring to Nazi tanks in World War II.

Andrei Kartapolov, a retired general who heads the defense affairs committee in the lower house of the Russian parliament, argued that both Leopard 2 and Abrams are inferior to Russia's T-90, a modified version of the T-72.

The latest Russian tank, the T-14 Armata, has been manufactured only in small numbers and so far hasn't been used in the war. The British Ministry of Defense said in its latest intelligence update that Rus-

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sia has worked to prepare a small batch of T-14s for deployment in Ukraine, but said it had engine and other problems.

Russian observers, meanwhile, noted it could take a significant time for the Western tanks to reach Ukraine, adding that training Ukrainians to use them and properly maintain them would add to the challenge.

"It likely means that the Ukrainian military will probably receive a few small batches of tanks that could be incompatible with each other," Moscow-based defense analyst Ilya Kramnik said in a commentary.

Zhdanov, the Ukrainian military analyst, argued that by agreeing to provide Ukraine with tanks, the West crossed an important psychological barrier and could eventually follow up by supplying even more deadly weapons.

"Handing over Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine marks a major change in the policy of Western allies, who stopped fearing escalation and are now ready to challenge Russia in the war of resources," he said. "The West is forced to more widely open the doors to its military arsenals to Ukraine."

Speaking in a video address late Wednesday, Zelenskyy hailed the creation of what he called a "tank coalition" and said Ukraine now will seek more artillery and push for unlocking supplies of long-range missiles and, ultimately, warplanes.

Ukrainian officials long have expressed hope for getting U.S. F-16 fighter jets and long-range rockets for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, known as HIMARS, to hit targets far behind the front lines.

Such desires drew ominous remarks from Russian diplomat Konstantin Gavrillov, similar to the kind voiced earlier by Putin and others.

"If Washington and NATO give Kyiv weapons to strike peaceful cities deep inside Russia and try to seize the territories that constitutionally belong to Russia, it will force Moscow to take harsh retaliatory action," Gavrillov told a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. "Don't tell us then that we haven't warned you."

## How classified documents became a schoolgirl's show-and-tell

By CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — On a winter's day in 1984, a briefcase stuffed with classified government documents showed up in a building in Pittsburgh, borne by someone who most certainly wasn't supposed to have them.

That someone was 13-year-old Kristin Preble. She took the papers to school as a show-and-tell project for her eighth grade class. Her dad had found them in his Cleveland hotel room several years earlier and taken them home as a souvenir.

As a different sort of show and tell unfolds in Washington over the mishandling of state secrets by the Trump and now Biden administrations, the schoolgirl episode from four decades ago stands as a reminder that other presidents, too, have let secure information spill.

The Grade 8 escapade and one known as Debategate both involved the mishandling of classified documents that Democratic President Jimmy Carter used to prepare for a debate with Republican rival Ronald Reagan in Cleveland on Oct. 28, 1980. In the latter instance, the Reagan campaign obtained — some said stole — Carter's briefing materials for the debate.

In today's docu-dramas, special counsels have been assigned to investigate Donald Trump's post-presidential cache of classified documents, which he initially resisted turning over, and Joe Biden's pre-presidential stashes, which he willingly gave up when they were discovered but did not disclose to the public for months.

With classified material also found at former Vice President Mike Pence's home, there is now a palpable sense in the halls of power that as more officials or ex-officials scour their cabinets or closets, more such oops moments will emerge.

The Carter files fell into Kristin's hands through a somewhat meandering route.

Two days after the 1980 debate, businessman Alan Preble found the papers in his Cleveland hotel room, apparently left behind by Carter press secretary Jody Powell. Preble took them to his Franklin Park home,

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where they sat for more than three years as a faintly appreciated keepsake.

"We had looked through them but didn't think they were important," Carol Preble, Kristin's mother, said back then, apparently unimpressed by the classified markings. But for social studies class, Kristin "thought they'd be real interesting. I thought they'd be great, too."

Off the girl went to Ingomar Middle School on Jan. 19, 1984, with the zippered briefcase.

Teacher Jim DeLisio's eyes popped when he saw the warnings on the documents inside. Among them: "Classified, Confidential, Executive" and "Property of the United States Government."

"I truly didn't want to look at it," he said then. "I was just too ... scared. I didn't want to know."

Curiosity got the better of him. That night, he said, he and his wife and daughter pored over the documents, containing "everything you'd want to know from A to Z" on world and U.S. developments. One folder was marked "Iran." Libya was also in the mix.

Unable to reach Kristin's family by phone, DeLisio the next day called the FBI, which swiftly retrieved the papers.

A Justice Department official who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity at the time said the bundle of documents was 4 inches (10 centimeters) thick.

Despite steering the secrets back to their proper place, DeLisio was reprimanded by school officials for calling the authorities before reaching the Preble family or them. The discovery fed into a broader investigation by a Democratic-led congressional committee of the official Carter papers obtained by the winning Reagan campaign.

The Reagan Justice Department declined calls by the committee to appoint a special counsel in that matter. A court case trying to force that appointment failed, and no criminal case was brought. Debategate faded, but not the concern over how classified documents are handled by those in power.

As for Kristin, she earned a niche in history and a "B" on her school project.

## Police raid home of Spain church attacker

By SERGIO RODRIGO and JENNIFER O'MAHONY Associated Press

ALGECIRAS, Spain (AP) — Police raided the home of a machete-wielding attacker on Thursday, a day after twin attacks on churches left one man dead and a priest seriously injured.

Spain's Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska said that police were searching the as-yet unnamed attacker's home to "determine the nature, terrorist or otherwise," of the incident on Wednesday night. Grande-Marlaska also confirmed no other suspects were involved and that the detainee had no prior criminal record.

The Interior Ministry meanwhile said the suspect was still being questioned, and had been under a Spanish deportation order since June last year. The minister is cutting short a visit to Stockholm for a European Union ministers' meeting to head to Algeciras.

Algeciras is a highly cosmopolitan port city and the first point of arrival for many boats from North Africa, putting it at the center of Spanish debates on irregular migration.

The Interior Ministry earlier said the man killed in the attack was a sacristan, a person who prepares Mass, at Nuestra Señora de La Palma, while a priest was wounded earlier at another church. The Algeciras town hall said the sacristan was named Diego Valencia and identified the wounded priest as Antonio Rodríguez. Rodríguez remains in serious condition.

Manolo González, another sacristan at Nuestra Señora de La Palma, said he served with Valencia. The attacker climbed on the altar, González said, and Valencia came out "and asked to know what was going on." He was confronted by a man wielding a machete, so fled outside to a public square. The attacker pursued him and then inflicted mortal wounds.

Candles and flowers adorned the two small churches with whitewashed walls on Thursday, as residents nervously passed police vans waiting in the street. Flags were flown at half-staff in Algeciras, and a minute's silence was to be held later in the day.



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## Rybakina, Sabalenka to meet in Australian Open women's final

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — What all seemed so different, so daunting, even, about trying to win a Grand Slam title to Elena Rybakina a little more than six months ago is now coming rather naturally.

And if she can win one more match, she will add a championship at the Australian Open to the one she collected at Wimbledon.

Rybakina, a 23-year-old who represents Kazakhstan, reached her second final in a span of three major tournaments by beating Victoria Azarenka 7-6 (4), 6-3 at Melbourne Park on Thursday, signaling a rapid rise toward the top of tennis.

"Everything was new at Wimbledon," Rybakina said after hitting nine aces in the semifinals to raise her tournament-leading total to 44. "Now I more or less understand what to expect."

That could come in handy Saturday. That is when she will face No. 5 seed Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus, who reached her first Grand Slam title match at age 24 by beating unseeded Magda Linette 7-6 (1), 6-2 in Thursday's second semifinal.

Sabalenka improved to 10-0 in 2023 and has won all 20 sets she's contested this season.

More importantly, the victory over Linette gave Sabalenka her first taste of success in a Slam semi after going 0-3 at that stage until now, losing each previous attempt by a 6-4 score in the third third set.

## Monterey Park, an Asian cultural hub, shaken by shooting

By TERRY TANG and DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

MONTEREY PARK, Calif. (AP) — For decades, Monterey Park has been a haven for Asian immigrants seeking to maintain a strong cultural identity — and a culinary heaven worth visiting for anybody near Los Angeles craving authentic Asian cuisine.

Signs across the vibrant suburb are written in English and Chinese. Families raise bilingual children. And residents in their golden years enjoy karaoke, the Chinese tile game mah jong and — as the outside world learned last week after a horrific mass shooting — ballroom dancing.

"It's a very quiet, humble place. And we mind our own," says Denny Mu, a second-generation American who runs the popular Mandarin Noodle House started by his grandfather.

That sense of peace was shattered after a gunman killed 11 people in their 50s, 60s and 70s and wounded nine others last Saturday during a Lunar New Year celebration at the Star Dance Ballroom. But while residents of the tight-knit community work through the trauma — just as they did during the coronavirus pandemic, when anti-Asian sentiment rose nationwide — the tragedy has only sharpened their feelings about what makes Monterey Park so special, and worth protecting.

Kristina Hayes, who started staging tango events at Star Ballroom when the studio reopened after the pandemic, said dance is "hugely important" for Monterey Park's seniors.

"It's a pastime, hobby and even competitive — but in the best way possible."

Mu, whose restaurant is known for its scallion pancakes and beef noodle soup, said he has no plans of leaving Monterey Park, and believes the slowdown in visitors over the past week will be fleeting.

"It's the food mecca, especially if you like any sort of Asian food," said Mu, who is Chinese.

Monterey Park's transformation to a predominantly Asian city was the brainchild of Fred Hsieh, a Chinese immigrant who was also a savvy real estate developer. He is credited with first coining the city's nickname of the "Chinese Beverly Hills." In the '70s and '80s, he used that phrase in Asian newspapers abroad to lure people from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the land of opportunity. He cleverly highlighted the city's area code, 818. In Chinese culture, the number eight is seen by some as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune.

When Hsieh died in 1999, Monterey Park had at the time become the only U.S. city with an Asian-majority population, with 65% Asian residents, according to an Associated Press obituary. Today, nearly 70% of the residents are Asian, mostly of Chinese descent.

As residents deal with the shock and grief that the shooting brought, they hope people will continue to see the city of about 60,000 for the vibrant community it is.

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The backstory of Mandarin Noodle House, which at 43 years old remains one of the oldest restaurants in Monterey Park, is the story of many Asian immigrant families who have stayed faithful to the community and elevated it beyond some cookie-cutter suburb. For decades, the city has been revered as the flagship location in Southern California for authentic Asian food, particularly Chinese cuisine from various regions.

For the 36-year-old Mu, the regular customers at Mandarin Noodle House are one reason he can't see himself leaving Monterey Park.

"It's nice to go to a restaurant and ask the customer 'How was your day? How was your kid's dance recital? ... All that stuff,'" Mu said. "It's all about community."

Hayes said her specialty over the years has been creating dance programs for seniors, especially for those who have lost mobility or have dementia. Some dedicated dancers who came to the ballroom showed up after work and on the weekends.

"In the Asian American community across the country, seniors have kept ballroom dancing alive," said Hayes, who is white.

Betina Hsieh, a second-generation Taiwanese American and an associate professor at Cal State Long Beach's College of Education, knows at least one person whose parents went to Star Ballroom. Dance halls and churches in Asian communities have traditionally been safe spaces for older people.

"There is a big separation or tension between immigrant parents and people like me who are second generation," Hsieh said. "Our families bought into this idea of helping us kids assimilate. But, they remained in their ethnic enclaves and mingled among themselves, which means they have limited spaces to gather as they age."

Kevin Mok, 32 and of Chinese descent, runs Japanese dessert shop Mr. Obanyaki with his parents and brother. Since the shooting, he said he still feels "there's a sense of fear in this community," because there are less people on the streets.

"It's quieter than usual," Mok said, while eating lunch at Mu's restaurant. "I feel like my sales have dropped like 15 to 20% at night. Hopefully, it'll come back."

The gunman — a 72-year-old Asian man known in the community — shot and killed himself.

Hsieh, the professor, grew up in Santa Clarita, but has deep connections to Monterey Park. Her grandparents lived there or went there for doctor's appointments because it was the only place they could find Mandarin-speaking physicians.

"It was the first 'ethnoburb' in Southern California for Asians," Hsieh said. "Monterey Park was this place we had before we even knew how to have an Asian American identity, a place where our families could gather and stay connected to their home and culture."

Immigrant-run restaurants and shops flourished in the burgeoning ethnoburb because immigrants are the least likely group to tolerate watered-down versions of their food.

"Within five minutes I can get access to all the good food," said Yvonne Yiu, a former Monterey Park mayor. "Because they are very competitive, they have to be good. A lot of people travel far away to Monterey Park to eat and dine."

Ballroom dancing is also embedded in the city's culture, and Hayes of Star Ballroom is confident the community will rekindle its dance-floor joy.

"People are going to come, and they are going to dance again," she said.

## Australia Day focuses on Black recognition in constitution

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australians marked the 235th anniversary of British colonization Thursday with a public holiday that evokes anger at Indigenous injustice, focusing national attention on a new government push to acknowledge Australia's first inhabitants in the constitution.

The government joined several large corporations in allowing staff the choice of taking the holiday off or working Thursday and taking another day off instead, in recognition of growing public unease at celebrating the 1788 hoisting of the Union Jack at Sydney Cove.

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There are growing public calls to change the date of Australia Day, which is known to many Indigenous people as Invasion Day and Survival Day, because of the disastrous impacts on First Nations people of British colonists taking their land without a treaty.

The focus on Australia's checkered European history ignited debate Thursday about a referendum due late this year that would create an Indigenous body known as the Voice to address Parliament on Indigenous issues.

The referendum, expected to be held between August and November, would enshrine the Voice in the constitution.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese committed to the referendum on the day his center-left Labor Party government was elected in May last year.

Albanese said he wanted Indigenous people recognized as Australia's original inhabitants in the constitution, which has existed since 1901, before next year's Australia Day.

"If not now, when will this change occur? And if not the people of Australia this year, who will make this change which will improve our country, improve our national unity?" Albanese told reporters Thursday.

"It is a great country. Australia will be even better when we recognize our First Nations people in our constitution," he added.

Noel Pearson, an Indigenous leader and longtime advocate of constitutional change, said the Voice would be a move toward a "settlement between the natives and those who took over the continent and established modern Australia."

"This year is the most important year in the relationship between the natives of Australia and its so-called settlers in the 235 years since the landing of the First Fleet," Pearson wrote Thursday in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, referring to the 11 British ships carrying convicts that established Sydney as a penal colony.

But reactions to the Voice are mixed, including among Indigenous leaders.

Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, an Indigenous senator for the conservative Nationals party, opposes the Voice. Her party supports her view that the Voice would divide Australia along racial lines.

Lidia Thorpe, an Indigenous senator for the progressive Greens party, on Wednesday threatened to oppose the Voice unless the referendum question includes acknowledgement that traditional owners never gave up their land.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton said his conservative Liberal Party needed more detail about what the Voice would entail before they could decide whether to support constitutional change.

"As you move around the community, it's quite obvious that people don't understand what it is that the prime minister's talking about," Dutton told reporters.

"They understand that changing the constitution is a big deal and, instinctively like me and like millions of Australians, we want a better outcomes for Indigenous Australians," he added.

Indigenous Australians account for 3.2% of the population and are the nation's most disadvantaged ethnic group. They die younger than other Australians, achieve lower education levels, are less likely to be employed and are overrepresented in prison populations.

They were not allowed to vote at federal elections until 1962, and Australian courts did not acknowledge until 1992 that their ancestors had legally owned the land when the British arrived.

Australia Day celebrations Thursday centered on Sydney Harbor, where attractions included an annual race of historic sailing ships.

Separately, thousands gathered in downtown Sydney to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the original Mourning Day protest in 1938 when demonstrators made demands, including citizen rights, for Indigenous Australians.

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## **EXPLAINER: What is an Australian Black Voice to Parliament?**

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australians expect to vote this year in a referendum that would enshrine in the nation's constitution a mechanism for Indigenous people to advise Parliament on policies that effect their lives known as the Voice.

Proponents say embedding the Voice in the constitution would recognize the special place that Indigenous people have in Australian history while giving them input in government policies.

Skeptics and opponents say Australians need more details before they vote on a proposal that risks dividing the nation along racial lines without reducing Indigenous disadvantage.

As Australia's first referendum in a generation approaches, the bipartisan support regarded as essential to successfully changing the constitution has yet to emerge and Indigenous leaders remain divided.

Here are some questions and answers about key issues behind the referendum:

### WHO ARE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS?

Australia is unusual among former British colonies in that no treaty was ever signed with the nation's Indigenous inhabitants. The Aboriginal people of Australia's mainland are culturally distinct from Torres Strait Islanders who come from an archipelago off the northeast coast. So Australia's Indigenous population is known collectively as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

They accounted for 3.2% of Australia's population in the 2021 census. Indigenous numbers had soared 25% since the previous census in 2016. Some say declining stigma encouraged more Australians to acknowledge their Indigenous heritage. Others say Indigenous roots are being faked to claim government benefits aimed at overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged ethnic group in Australia. They die younger than other Australians, are less likely to be employed, achieve lower education levels and are overrepresented in prison populations.

### WHAT IS THE VOICE?

The proposed referendum question only asks Australians if they agree with the Voice in principle.

"Do you support an alteration to the constitution that establishes an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice?" the government proposal asks.

If the answer is "yes," the constitution would be rewritten to state that the Voice "may make representations" to the Parliament and executive government "on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."

Proponents say there would be no Indigenous right of veto over government policy and lawmakers would be free to disregard the Voice's representations.

But opponents argue the courts might interpret the Voice's constitutional powers in unpredictable ways, creating legal uncertainty.

It's not clear who would be part of the Voice and how they would get there.

The Parliament would "have power to make laws with respect to the composition, functions, powers and procedures" of the Voice, the constitution would say.

### WHERE DID THE IDEA OF A VOICE COME FROM?

The Voice was recommended in 2017 by a group of 250 Indigenous leaders who met at Uluru, a landmark sandstone rock in central Australia that is a sacred site to traditional owners. They were delegates of the First Nations National Constitutional Convention that the then-government had asked for advice on how the Indigenous population could be acknowledged in the constitution.

The conservative government immediately rejected the proposal, arguing that a Voice would be seen as a "third chamber" of Parliament, an unwelcome addition to the House of Representatives and the Senate.

When the center-left Labor Party won elections in May last year, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese used

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his first speech to commit his government to creating the Voice.

The Nationals party, the junior coalition partner in the former government, announced in November they had decided to oppose the Voice, saying it would divide the nation along racial lines.

The Nationals also argue the Voice would undermine the work of 11 Indigenous legislators among the 227 federal lawmakers in Parliament.

The Liberal Party, the senior coalition partner, has yet to announce a position, but has demanded more details.

## WHEN WILL THE REFERENDUM BE HELD?

The government plans to introduce legislation to Parliament in March that would set up the referendum.

The legislation would be scrutinized by a Parliamentary committee for six weeks, during which more details would emerge, before the government hopes it goes to a vote in May.

The government hopes the referendum will be held on a Saturday sometime between August and November.

## HOW IS AUSTRALIA'S CONSTITUTION CHANGED?

Changing the constitution has never been easy and more than four in five referendums fail.

A referendum to change the constitution requires what is known as a double majority — the support of most Australian adults nationwide plus a majority of voters in a majority of states. Five referendums have failed because while they were supported by most Australians, they fell short of gaining majorities in at least four of the six states. Voter turnout is high because voting is compulsory.

Of the 44 referendums held since the constitution took effect in 1901, only eight have been carried and none since 1977.

When Australia last held a referendum in 1999, Indigenous recognition in the constitution was a key issue behind one of the questions. Australians were asked to approve adding a preamble to the constitution — an introduction that carried only symbolic and no legal significance.

The preamble was to have acknowledged that Indigenous Australians had inhabited the country "since time immemorial" and were "honored for their ancient and continuing cultures."

Some observers argue that such an acknowledgment of Indigenous Australians' place in the nation's story would be an easier constitutional change to make today than the creation of the Voice.

## Slotkin preps Senate run after winning tough reelection bid

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich.. (AP) — Just three months ago, Rep. Elissa Slotkin was one of the most vulnerable Democrats in Washington, fighting an expensive campaign for reelection in a Michigan district that Republicans were sure they could retake.

That was all a distant memory recently as Slotkin sat beaming next to Sen. Debbie Stabenow at a Lansing luncheon commemorating Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Fresh off a surprisingly comfortable 5 percentage-point victory, Slotkin was eager to praise Stabenow, the dean of Michigan Democrats, whose Senate seat is suddenly open after the four-term senator announced her plans to retire.

"She knows what it takes to win and she is not going to let her seat flip when she leaves," Slotkin said of Stabenow in an interview. "She feels, I think, very connected to making sure her legacy is upheld by passing the torch to someone who can win it."

In what is quickly emerging as one of the most closely watched Senate races of the 2024 campaign, Slotkin is aggressively acting on Stabenow's call for "the next generation of leadership." The 46-year-old former CIA intelligence officer is taking steps to prepare for a Senate run, including forming a national campaign team, according to an aide close to the congresswoman who requested anonymity to discuss planning.

In the interview, Slotkin nodded to the plans, saying she was putting her "ducks in a row" before an announcement.

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Slotkin would almost certainly face competition from fellow Democrats in one of the most politically competitive states in the U.S. The ultimate winner of next year's primary will be crucial in the party's effort to maintain the Senate, where Democrats hold a one-seat majority and are facing tough headwinds as they defend seats in Republican-leaning states from West Virginia to Montana and Ohio.

But Slotkin is gaining notice as someone who can help bring generational change to a party whose ranks on Capitol Hill are dominated by people several decades her senior. And the margin of her victory last year could offer reassurance that she's prepared for another tough campaign.

"Extremely hard-working. Great fundraiser. Has run in tough elections. I think she would be at the very top," Michigan Democratic strategist Amy Chapman, who was Barack Obama's state director in 2008, said in assessing Slotkin's primary prospects. Chapman is neutral in the Senate primary.

Slotkin's potential Democratic rivals include Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Reps. Debbie Dingell and Haley Stevens, Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist and state Sen. Mallory McMorrow. Only one Michigan Republican has held a seat in the Senate in the past 40 years, Spencer Abraham, from 1995 to 2001. He was defeated for reelection by Stabenow.

Many of the possible contenders have their own unique background that could distinguish them in a primary.

Gilchrist is the only Black party prospect in a state where the Detroit area accounts for half of the statewide vote. Benson won reelection by a wider margin in November than Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who sailed to a second term. McMorrow made a national name for herself last year with an impassioned floor speech about her opposition to restrictions on race- and gender-related topics in schools. Dingell, whose late husband, John, was the longest-serving House member ever, represents suburban Detroit.

But for now, Slotkin appears to be the most aggressive in acting in light of Stabenow's Jan. 5 retirement announcement, which surprised much of the Michigan Democratic establishment.

Slotkin used her regular internal political meeting that day to begin discussing steps she would need to take to explore a bid, according to a person with knowledge of the conversation who requested anonymity to discuss private planning. Since then, she has talked to state and local Michigan Democratic elected officials and has been in touch with donors inside and outside Michigan who have helped establish her as one of the U.S. House's top campaign fundraisers.

Slotkin raised \$10 million for her 2022 campaign, second among targeted Democrats only to Rep. Katie Porter of California.

Slotkin was elected in 2018 by narrowly beating two-term incumbent Republican Rep. Mike Bishop in a longtime Republican-leaning district. She also became Stabenow's congresswoman, representing the senator's home in Lansing.

The 72-year-old Stabenow, who represented the Lansing area in the House for four years before running for the Senate, took the junior Democrat under her wing on the campaign trail, guiding her to influential activists and groups, Slotkin said. Their relationship has stayed strong since, according to Slotkin.

"Sometimes she lets me borrow her little hideaway office near the House floor if I have votes until two in the morning," Slotkin added.

Stabenow has given no sign she plans to support any of the several prospects seeking to succeed her, except to nod to the list's several relative newcomers. "I'm really enthused about the the opportunity for the next generation of leadership," she said in an interview.

After Slotkin narrowly won reelection in 2020, new congressional maps divided her home in Holly just northeast of Lansing from the state Capitol, her district's population center and its Democratic voting base. In moving to Lansing to run in Michigan's new 7th District, Slotkin was viewed by Republicans as vulnerable because she would be new to about a third of the district's voters, many in rural GOP-leaning counties north of Lansing.

Democrat Joe Biden also had barely won in the new configuration, giving hope to Republican House strategists who wagered Biden's low job approval last year would help sink vulnerable House Democrats.

Instead, Slotkin beat Republican state Sen. Tom Barrett in a race in which the two parties combined to

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spend more than \$40 million, making it the third-most expensive House race in 2022.

"She's had millions and millions of dollars spent raising her positive name ID throughout the current iteration of her congressional district and the prior iteration," said Adrian Hemond, a Democratic political strategist who is neutral in the primary. "That's why you've got to call Slotkin the favorite."

Slotkin, however, is little known among Michigan's Black voters, a liability considering nearly 78 percent of Detroit's population is Black, according to the 2020 U.S. Census.

Though she has advertised on Detroit television during her campaigns, she has never represented Detroit nor its exurbs with large Black populations such as Flint.

"I do believe she has her work cut out for her in the Black community in Detroit," said Alexis Wiley, the former chief of staff to Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan. "I don't think you can overstate the uphill battle there."

Slotkin entered Congress with nationally recognized freshmen such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, who openly clashed with then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. She carved out a reputation in the House as quietly persevering, though vocal when necessary, said former Rep. Cindy Axne of Iowa, who entered Congress with Slotkin and calls her a friend.

"There's nobody better at strategy that I'm aware of than Elissa Slotkin," Axne said.

Last week, Slotkin traveled to Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan's two largest cities and both outside her district, to attend events commemorating King's birthday with Black leaders.

It was what she called part of an effort to "talk to opinion leaders" and "see what they think," though she stopped short of suggesting a deadline for an announcement.

Ever the strategist, she noted "first movers are important in politics," but that it's also a "countervailing wind against preparation and methodical planning."

"I could make an announcement, but then I don't have the team in place," she said. "So, I want to do it right."

## Boeing to be arraigned in court over two Max jet crashes

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Boeing representatives and relatives of some of the passengers killed in two crashes of Boeing 737 Max jets will meet face-to-face in a Texas courtroom Thursday, where the aerospace giant will be arraigned on a criminal charge that it thought it had settled two years ago.

In a brief filed Wednesday, lawyers for the families accused Boeing of committing "the deadliest corporate crime in U.S. history."

The family members were never consulted before Boeing cut a deal with the U.S. Justice Department to avoid prosecution on a felony charge of fraud. Up to a dozen or so people from several countries are expected to testify about how the loss of loved ones has affected them.

There will be two main phases to the arraignment: Boeing will enter a plea, and then relatives of the passengers will ask the court to impose conditions on Boeing much as it would on any criminal defendant.

The families said in a filing Wednesday those conditions should include a court-picked monitor to evaluate whether Boeing is creating a culture of safety and ethics — as it promised the government — and that its steps to do so be made public.

Boeing has faced civil lawsuits, congressional investigations and massive damage to its business since the crashes in 2018 and 2019, which killed a combined total of 346 people. Boeing and its top officials have avoided criminal prosecution, however, because of the settlement reached between the company and the government in January 2021.

Boeing was charged with a single count of defrauding the United States to get regulators to approve the Max jet. But the outgoing Trump administration's Justice Department agreed to defer prosecution and drop the charge if Boeing paid \$2.5 billion — mostly to airlines, but including a \$243.6 million fine — and commit no other crimes for three years.

U.S. District Judge Reed O'Connor ordered Boeing to be arraigned after finding that the Justice Department violated a victims-rights law by not telling the families about secret negotiations with Boeing. He has

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not ruled on a separate issue of whether Boeing should lose its immunity from prosecution.

Paul Cassell, a lawyer representing the families, said he hopes Thursday's testimony by relatives will convince the Justice Department to throw out the settlement.

The Biden administration's Justice Department did not oppose an arraignment, but it continues to agree with Boeing that the settlement should stand. In a court filing last November, the department said that without the settlement, the government would lose its ability to ensure that Boeing follows through with reforms designed to prevent future tragedies.

The first Max passenger flight was in 2017. The first crash occurred in October 2018 in Indonesia and was followed by another in March 2019 in Ethiopia.

Before both crashes, an automated flight-control system that Boeing did not initially disclose to airlines and pilots pushed the nose down based on a faulty sensor reading. Boeing blamed two former employees for misleading the Federal Aviation Administration about the system, known by its acronym, MCAS.

One of those former employees, a test pilot, is the only person prosecuted in connection with the Max. A jury in Judge O'Connor's courtroom found him not guilty last year.

## US economy likely slowed but still posted solid growth in Q4

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. economy likely rolled out of 2022 with momentum, registering decent growth in the face of painful inflation, high interest rates and rising concern that a recession may be months away.

Economists have estimated that the gross domestic product — the broadest measure of economic output — grew at a 2.3% annual pace from October through December, according to a survey of forecasters by the data firm FactSet.

The Commerce Department will issue its first of three estimates of fourth-quarter GDP growth at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time Thursday.

Despite a likely second straight quarter of expansion, the economy is widely expected to slow and then slide into a recession sometime in the coming months as increasingly high interest rates, engineered by the Federal Reserve, take a toll. The Fed's rate hikes have inflated borrowing costs for consumers and businesses, from mortgages to auto loans to corporate credit.

The housing market, which is especially vulnerable to higher loan rates, has been badly bruised: Sales of existing homes have dropped for 11 straight months. Investment in housing plunged at a 27% annual rate from July through September.

And consumer spending, which fuels roughly 70% of the entire economy, is likely to soften in the months ahead, along with the still-robust job market. The resilience of the labor market has been a major surprise. Last year, employers added 4.5 million jobs, second only to the 6.7 million that were added in 2021 in government records going back to 1940. And last month's unemployment rate, 3.5%, matched a 53-year low.

But the good times for America's workers aren't likely to last. As higher rates make borrowing and spending increasingly expensive across the economy, many consumers will spend less and employers will likely hire less.

Last year, the Fed raised its benchmark rate seven times in unusually large increments to try to curb the spike in consumer prices. Yet another Fed rate hike, though a smaller one, is expected next week.

The central bank has been responding to an inflation rate that remains stubbornly high even though it has been gradually easing. Year-over-year inflation was raging at a 9.1% rate in June, the highest level in more than 40 years. It has since cooled — to 6.5% in December — but is still far above the Fed's 2% annual target.

Another threat to the economy this year is rooted in politics: House Republicans could refuse to raise the federal debt limit if the Biden administration rejects their demand for broad spending cuts. A failure to raise the borrowing cap would prevent the federal government from being able to pay all its obligations and could shatter its credit.



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Moody's Analytics estimates that the resulting upheaval could wipe out nearly 6 million American jobs in a recession similar to the devastating one that was triggered by the 2007-2009 financial crisis.

At least the economy is likely beginning the year on firmer footing than it did at the start of 2022. Last year, the economy shrank at an annual pace of 1.6% from January through March and by a further 0.6% from April through June. Those two consecutive quarters of economic contraction raised fears that a recession might have begun.

But the economy regained strength over the summer, propelled by resilient consumer spending and higher exports. It expanded at an unexpectedly strong 3.2% annual pace from July through September.

## **UN: Myanmar opium cultivation has surged 33% amid violence**

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — The production of opium in Myanmar has flourished since the military's seizure of power, with the cultivation of poppies up by a third in the past year as eradication efforts have dropped off and the faltering economy has led more people toward the drug trade, according to a United Nations report released Thursday.

In 2022, in the first full growing season since the military wrested control of the country from the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021, Myanmar saw a 33% increase in cultivation area to 40,100 hectares (99,090 acres), according to the report by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

"Economic, security and governance disruptions that followed the military takeover of February 2021 have converged, and farmers in remote, often conflict-prone areas in northern Shan and border states have had little option but to move back to opium," said the U.N. office's regional representative Jeremy Douglas.

The overall value of the Myanmar opiate economy, based on U.N. estimates, ranges between \$660 million and \$2 billion, depending on how much was sold locally, and how much of the raw opium was processed into heroin or other drugs.

"Virtually all the heroin reported in East and Southeast Asia and Australia originates in Myanmar, and the country remains the second-largest opium and heroin producer in the world after Afghanistan," Douglas said. "There is no comparing the two at this point as Afghanistan still produces far more, but the expansion underway in Myanmar should not be dismissed and needs attention as it will likely continue — it is directly tied to the security and economic situation we see unfolding today."

The so-called Golden Triangle area, where the borders of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet, has historically been a major production area for opium and hosted many of the labs that converted it to heroin. Decades of political instability have made the frontier regions of Myanmar, also known as Burma, largely lawless, to be exploited by drug producers and traffickers.

Most of the opium exported by Myanmar goes to China and Vietnam, while heroin goes to many countries across the region, Douglas said.

"It is really where the value is for traffickers," he said. "Very high profits."

The cultivation of opium had been trending downward in recent years before the military took control of the government in 2021.

Production estimates hit a bottom of 400 metric tons (440 tons) in 2020. After rising slightly in 2021, that spiked in 2022 to an estimated 790 metric tons (870 tons), according to the report.

Since it took control of the government, the military's use of deadly force to hold on to power has escalated conflict with its civilian opponents to the point that some experts describe the country as now being in a state of civil war.

The costs have been high, with 2,810 people killed by government forces to date and 17,427 detained, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

The violence has meant that the government has been unable to reach some areas to carry out drug eradication raids, and has also had to divert its resources elsewhere. Consequently, eradication efforts appear to have decreased substantially, with 1,403 hectares (3,467 acres) reported eradicated in 2022 — some 70% fewer than in 2021.

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At the same time, as the conflict continues to take its toll on Myanmar's economy, an increasing number of rural households have been pushed into relying more on opium cultivation for income, the U.N. said.

"The expansion of opium production that is underway is fundamentally about poverty and people in rural areas reacting to the economic situation," Douglas said. "It has always been there in tough times. At the same time, the security situation is clearly difficult with increasing frequency and intensity of conflict, and those involved in the drug economy have been left largely unchecked."

Its synthetic drug economy has also been surging for the same reasons, with reported regional seizures of methamphetamine and other drugs reaching record levels. In a single bust in September in Laos, for example, authorities seized 33 million methamphetamine tablets along with 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) of crystal methamphetamine.

## Cuba picks 5 MLB affiliated players for World Classic

HAVANA (AP) — Cubans signed with Major League Baseball organizations and other foreign clubs will for the first time join domestic stars on the national team that will play in the World Baseball Classic, officials announced Wednesday evening.

The Cuban Baseball Federation long defended the idea of amateurism and punished those who left the island to seek their fortunes in professional baseball.

But that changed when a program on state television announced the roster of 30 players for Cuba's national team that will play in the international tournament that begins March 8 in Taiwan.

The team will include third baseman Yoán Moncada and center fielder Luis Robert of the Chicago White Sox plus three players from Triple-A rosters: infielder Andy Ibáñez of the Detroit Tigers' Toledo Mud Hens, right-hander Miguel Romero of the Oakland Athletics' Las Vegas Aviators and right-hander Ronald Bolaños of the Kansas City Royals' Omaha Storm Chasers.

Also on the team will be former New York Mets outfielder Yoenis Céspedes, a 37-year-old two-time All-Star who last played in the major leagues in 2018.

Two Cubans who play in Japan were picked, outfielder Yurisbel Gracial of the Pacific League's Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks and catcher Ariel Martínez of the Central League's Chunichi Dragons.

To arrange participation of the MLB players, Cuba had to get special permission from the United States because Washington maintains sanctions on Cuba. Under the agreement, those players are barred from coming to Cuba to work with the team.

Baseball is the national sport in Cuba but economic difficulties, the philosophy of restricting the movement of athletes and the temptations of professional contracts abroad has decimated the game on the island.

## Spain: 1 dead in church machete attacks, terror link probed

By JOSEPH WILSON Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — A machete-wielding man killed a sexton and injured a priest at two Catholic churches in the city of Algeciras on Wednesday before being arrested, Spain's interior ministry said. Authorities are investigating the attacks as a possible act of terrorism.

The suspect is in the custody of Spain's National Police. The ministry did not identify him.

Algeciras is near the southern tip of Spain, resting across from a bay from Gibraltar. It is home to an important port with ferry connections to northern Africa.

The attack started around 7 p.m., when an armed man went into the church of Maria Auxiliadora y San Isidro and assaulted a priest, who was seriously injured, the ministry said.

The assailant then went to a second church, Nuestra Señora de La Palma, a five-minute walk away, where he attacked the sexton. The sexton, whose job it is to take care of the church, fled outside to a public square, where the attacker dealt him mortal wounds, the ministry said.

The Algeciras town hall said the sexton was named Diego Valencia and identified the wounded priest as Antonio Rodríguez. The town hall said he was hospitalized and in stable condition.

Local media reported that at least three other people were injured.

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Spain's National Court said a judge has opened an investigation into a possible act of terrorism. Police are investigating the incident, the interior ministry said, to determine the "nature of the attack." It offered no detail on the attacker's motive.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez joined the outpouring of support.

"I want to express my sincerest condolences for the families of the sexton slain in the terrible attack in Algeciras," Sánchez wrote on Twitter. "I wish the injured a swift recovery."

The secretary general of Spain's Episcopal Conference, Francisco García, wrote on Twitter that "I have received the news of the incident in Algeciras with great pain." The conference is an organization of Spain's Catholic bishops, based in Rome.

"These are sad moments of suffering, we are united by the pain of families of the victims and for the Diocese of Cádiz," García added.

The town hall declared a day of mourning when flags will fly at half-staff.

"We are all stunned by these acts, which have filled us with pain," Mayor José Landaluce said. "Algeciras has always been a city where concord and tolerance reign, despite incidents like this that create an image that does not correspond to reality."

## Donald Trump to be allowed back on Facebook after 2-year ban

By BARBARA ORTUTAY and JILL COLVIN The Associated Press

Facebook parent Meta said Wednesday it will restore former President Donald Trump's personal account in the coming weeks, ending a two-year suspension it imposed in the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection.

The company said in a blog post it is adding "new guardrails" to ensure there are no "repeat offenders" who violate its rules, even if they are political candidates or world leaders.

"The public should be able to hear what their politicians are saying — the good, the bad and the ugly — so that they can make informed choices at the ballot box," wrote Nick Clegg, Meta's vice president of global affairs.

Clegg added that when there is a "clear risk" to real-world harm, Meta will intervene.

"In the event that Mr. Trump posts further violating content, the content will be removed and he will be suspended for between one month and two years, depending on the severity of the violation," he wrote. Facebook suspended Trump on Jan. 7, 2021, for praising people engaged in violent acts at the Capitol a day earlier. But the company had resisted earlier calls — including from its own employees — to remove Trump's account.

Meta said Trump's accounts will be restored "in the coming weeks" on both Facebook and Instagram. Banned from mainstream social media, Trump has been relying on Truth Social, which he launched after being blocked from Twitter.

Facebook is not only the world's largest social media site, but had been a crucial source of fundraising revenue for Trump's campaigns, which spent millions of dollars on the company's ads in 2016 and 2020. The move, which comes as Trump is ramping up his third run for the White House, will not only allow Trump to communicate directly with his 34 million followers — dramatically more than the 4.8 million who currently follow him on Truth Social — but will also allow him to resume direct fundraising. During the suspension, his supporters were able to raise money for him, but couldn't run ads directly from him or in his voice.

Responding to the news, Trump blasted Facebook's original decision to suspend his account as he praised Truth Social.

"FACEBOOK, which has lost Billions of Dollars in value since "deplatforming" your favorite President, me, has just announced that they are reinstating my account. Such a thing should never again happen to a sitting President, or anybody else who is not deserving of retribution!" he wrote.

Other social media companies, including Snapchat, where he remains suspended, also kicked him off their platforms following the insurrection. He was recently reinstated on Twitter after Elon Musk took over the company. He has not tweeted yet.

Civil rights groups and others on the left were quick to denounce Meta's move. Letting Trump back on Facebook sends a signal to other figures with large online audiences that they may break the rules without

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lasting consequences, said Heidi Beirich, founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism and a member of a group called the Real Facebook Oversight Board that has criticized the platform's efforts.

"I am not surprised but it is a disaster," Beirich said of Meta's decision. "Facebook created loopholes for Trump that he went right through. He incited an insurrection on Facebook. And now he's back."

NAACP President Derrick Johnson blasted the decision as "a prime example of putting profits above people's safety" and a "grave mistake."

"It's quite astonishing that one can spew hatred, fuel conspiracies, and incite a violent insurrection at our nation's Capitol building, and Mark Zuckerberg still believes that is not enough to remove someone from his platforms," he said.

But Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University called the reinstatement "the right call — not because the former president has any right to be on the platform but because the public has an interest in hearing directly from candidates for political office."

The ACLU also called it the right move.

"Like it or not, President Trump is one of the country's leading political figures and the public has a strong interest in hearing his speech. Indeed, some of Trump's most offensive social media posts ended up being critical evidence in lawsuits filed against him and his administration," said Anthony D. Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union. "The biggest social media companies are central actors when it comes to our collective ability to speak — and hear the speech of others — online. They should err on the side of allowing a wide range of political speech, even when it offends."

Clegg said that in light of his previous violations, Trump now faces heightened penalties for repeat offenses. Such penalties "will apply to other public figures whose accounts are reinstated from suspensions related to civil unrest under our updated protocol."

If Trump — or anyone else — posts material that doesn't violate Facebook's rules but is otherwise harmful and could lead to events such as the Jan. 6 insurrection, Meta says it will not remove it but it may limit its reach. This includes praising the QAnon conspiracy theory or trying to delegitimize an upcoming election.

While Trump has insisted publicly that he has no intention of returning to Twitter, he has been discussing doing so in recent weeks, according to two people familiar with the plans who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Though it has been eclipsed culturally by newer rivals like TikTok, Facebook remains the world's largest social media site and is an incredibly powerful political platform, particularly among older Americans, who are most likely to vote and give money to campaigns.

Throughout his tenure as president, Trump's use of social media posed a significant challenge to major social media platforms trying to balance the public's need to hear from their elected leaders with worries about misinformation, harassment and incitement of violence.

"In a healthier information ecosystem, the decisions of a single company would not carry such immense political significance, and we hope that new platforms will emerge to challenge the hegemony of the social media giants," the ACLU's Romero said.

## Freed after 20 years, Hawaii man reflects on case, future

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — On Ian Schweitzer's first morning of freedom Wednesday, he woke up in a hotel room, looked over the balcony at the ocean and took in the beauty of the island he had been away from for over 20 years while imprisoned for a 1991 killing and rape he has always maintained he didn't commit.

In an interview with The Associated Press from the Big Island, he reflected on a range of emotions, from his faith in God that kept him positive to his complicated feelings about police and the criminal justice system to a quest to help solve who really killed Dana Ireland.

"We want justice for Dana," Schweitzer said.

Schweitzer said he considers himself a victim of the same crimes he was convicted of: "I feel like they murdered 25 years of my life. I feel like they kidnapped me away from my family. I feel like they raped me of being a son."

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A judge ordered his release Tuesday after hours of expert testimony on new evidence showing Schweitzer wasn't responsible for the death of Ireland, 23, a tourist from Virginia. She was visiting a remote part of the Big Island when she was found along a fishing trail, raped and beaten and barely alive. She died later at a hospital.

The new evidence, thanks to advances in DNA testing, included a finding that a T-shirt discovered nearby and soaked with Ireland's blood belonged to an unknown man, and not Schweitzer or the two others convicted of killing her.

Hawaii County Prosecuting Attorney Kelden Waltjen said in a statement this week that his office is committed to identifying that unknown man. He was expected to make an announcement about the case Thursday.

Repeated attempts by The Associated Press to reach Ireland's relatives were unsuccessful.

"I think there's a sister out there, you know, God bless her," Schweitzer said. "I want her to know that my team is going to do everything that they possibly can to work with ... prosecutors in finding the unknown DNA."

Innocence Project attorneys in Hawaii and New York filed a petition late Monday outlining the new evidence and seeking Schweitzer's release. They are also studying a Hawaii statute that would let him collect \$50,000 for every year he was behind bars.

Barry Scheck, one of his New York attorneys, said they don't expect prosecutors to pursue further charges and he hopes Hawaii can learn from this case.

"If three innocent people could be convicted in the biggest murder case in the history of the state, then people have to step back and say, how can we prevent this from happening again?" Scheck said.

Attorneys are now turning to exonerating the other two. They include Schweitzer's younger brother Shawn, who took a guilty plea deal after his brother was convicted in 2000 and sentenced to 130 years.

The younger Schweitzer recanted in October, which helped bolster the case for his brother's release.

Keith Shigetomi, the lawyer who represented Shawn Schweitzer when he pleaded guilty in exchange for credit for about year in jail, said Wednesday that he truly believed back then that he could convince a jury of his client's innocence, but Shawn Schweitzer feared telling the truth would mean sharing the same fate as his brother.

The family thought about it. "Ian told him, do it, save yourself," Shigetomi said, adding that lawyers are working on withdrawing the plea.

The Schweitzers became suspects amid intense pressure to find Ireland's killer. In 1994, Frank Pauline Jr. came forward and claimed he was with them when Ian Schweitzer ran Ireland's bike over and then killed her.

But he was interviewed at least seven times and gave inconsistent accounts each time. When it was clear he would be indicted along with the Schweitzers, he tried to take it all back and said he had lied to try to get drug charges dropped against his half-brother.

Pauline was convicted, along with the brothers, and killed by a fellow inmate in a New Mexico prison in 2015.

Myles Breiner, an attorney representing Pauline's family, said Wednesday he will file a motion seeking to have him posthumously exonerated.

Ian Schweitzer said it's clear to him the justice system is flawed.

"It didn't matter if I was innocent," he said. "They just needed a conviction."

Martin Tankleff knows how Schweitzer feels. He was wrongly convicted of murdering his parents on Long Island, New York, and was released in 2007 after 17 years in prison.

"The best piece of advice I can give him is take it extremely slow," Tankleff said, recalling how he was overwhelmed by everyday things like the options in the cereal aisle of the grocery store. "The world will be completely different."

Schweitzer served his time in Arizona because of a lack of prison space in Hawaii. Back on the Big Island, he reflected on what it felt like to be home.

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"Sitting right here in this beautiful hotel, it looks the same," he said. "But I know once I go down the street and everything's changed, everything's changed."

## Dems vote to give states more time on new primary calendar

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Democratic National Committee panel voted Wednesday to give New Hampshire and Georgia more time to make changes that would allow both to be part of a revamped group of five states leading off the party's presidential primary starting next year.

But even as they voted 25-0 to extend the compliance deadline until June 3, members of the DNC rules committee complained about New Hampshire's ongoing feud with the national party because the new calendar would cost it the chance to hold the nation's first primary.

The fight underscores how the effort to shake up the Democratic presidential primary could turn increasingly bitter, even at a time when the party will be counting on staying unified as it tries to hold the White House and Senate in 2024.

The DNC rules committee voted last month to approve a plan championed by President Joe Biden that would strip Iowa's caucus of its traditional post leading off the primary and replace it with South Carolina, which would open primary voting on Feb. 3. New Hampshire and Nevada would hold primaries together three days later, with Georgia's primary coming Feb. 13 and Michigan's two weeks later. Most of the rest of the country would subsequently vote on Super Tuesday in early March.

The Democrats' proposed shakeup comes after Iowa's 2020 caucus was marred by technical problems. Biden says the new proposed calendar better reflects his party's deeply diverse electoral base, which relies heavily on African American voters.

The president is also seeking to reward South Carolina, where nearly 27% of the population is Black, after a decisive win there revived his 2020 presidential campaign following losses it suffered in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada.

Those changes are set to be formally approved for next year's presidential race by the full DNC at its meeting next week in Philadelphia.

Nevada and South Carolina have already agreed to comply with the new calendar's requirements. In Michigan, moving the primary date requires an act of the Legislature. Democrats control both chambers in that state, but they would need Republican support to enact the change before the end of February 2024, so it's not yet clear when the proposed changes might be approved.

The greater sticking points have been New Hampshire and Georgia.

New Hampshire state law mandates that it hold the nation's first primary — a rule Iowa was able to circumvent only because it held a caucus. Top New Hampshire Democrats say they've handled that responsibility successfully for more than a century and have vowed to simply jump the other states and lead off primary voting again in 2024, regardless of the DNC's new calendar.

In Georgia, Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger sets his state's primary date. He has indicated he'd only be willing to move it if the Republican National Committee pushes to change the date of its Georgia primary, which hasn't happened.

Wednesday's vote gave Georgia and New Hampshire more time — but also saw committee members voice their frustrations with New Hampshire.

"I really do believe it is irresponsible, the statements being made in New Hampshire," said Lee Saunders, a rules committee member and president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

"I would just urge everybody to cool down a little bit," Saunders said.

Rules committee member Leah Daughtry said she was "similarly taken aback and quite frankly shocked" by New Hampshire's objections to the new calendar. She also rejected that state's assertions that it shouldn't lose its place because of tradition stretching back more than a century.

"Hanging their argument on this 100-year-old privilege is really, for me as an African American woman,

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really quite disturbing,” Daughtry said, noting that Black women didn’t have the right to vote about a century ago.

Rules committee member JoAnne Dowdell from New Hampshire countered that “politics is part of our DNA.”

“We believe it is possible to lift up diverse voices and keep New Hampshire at the start of the process,” Dowdell said.

The Democrats’ 2024 primary calendar could be moot if Biden opts to run for reelection, as expected. In that case, Democrats will have little appetite for building out a robust primary schedule that could allow a major challenger from his own party to run against the president.

The DNC rules committee also has already pledged to revisit the primary calendar after 2024. Still, any changes it makes for next year — even if there is ultimately no competitive primary — could help shape future decisions about which states go first, potentially triggering an important shift on where presidential candidates campaign hardest as future races begin.

Rules committee co-chair Minyon Moore said its members remain committed to “the president’s vision.”

“We want to make sure the states can have as much time as they need to work through this process,” Moore said.

## **EXPLAINER: Why the US flipped on sending tanks to Ukraine**

By TARA COPP and LOLITA BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For months, U.S. officials balked at sending M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine, insisting they were too complicated and too hard to maintain and repair.

On Wednesday, that abruptly changed. Ukraine’s desperate pleas for tanks were answered with a sweeping, trans-Atlantic yes.

The dramatic reversal was the culmination of intense international pressure and diplomatic arm-twisting that played out over the last week. And it resulted in a quick succession of announcements: The U.S. said it will send 31 of the 70-ton Abrams battle tanks to Ukraine, and Germany announced it will send 14 Leopard 2 tanks and allow other countries to do the same.

A look at the massive battle weapon, why it is important to Ukraine’s war with Russia, and what drove the Biden administration’s tank turnabout.

### **WHAT ARE THE ABRAMS?**

M1 Abrams tanks have led American battle assaults for decades.

Carrying a crew of four, the Abrams was first deployed to war in 1991. It has thick armor, a 120 mm main gun, armor piercing capabilities, advanced targeting systems, thick tracked wheels and a 1,500-horsepower turbine engine with a top speed of about 42 miles per hour (68 kilometers per hour).

Crews interviewed in a 1992 Government Accountability Office review after the Persian Gulf War praised its high survivability and said “several M1A1 crews reported receiving direct frontal hits from Iraqi T-72s with minimal damage.”

More recently, the battle titans led the charge to Baghdad during America’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, as 3rd Infantry Division units conducted what was dubbed “Thunder Runs” to break through Iraqi defenses.

The Abrams’ powerful jet engine can propel the tank through almost any terrain, whether heavy snow or heavy mud, said Kevin Butler, a former Army lieutenant who served as an Abrams tank platoon leader. Butler recalled a muddy exercise in the late 1990s at Fort Stewart, Georgia, where he’d voiced concern about the tanks getting stuck because it had already stuck the Humvees.

The Abrams, he said, “didn’t even notice” the mud.

### **WHY THE U.S. KEPT SAYING NO**

The Abrams’ jet engine needs hundreds of gallons of fuel to operate.

It will burn through fuel at a rate of at least two gallons per mile (4.7 liters per kilometer), whether the tank is moving or idling, Butler said, which means a constant supply convoy of fuel trucks must stay within reach so it can keep moving forward.

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The U.S. worried that the fuel demands would create a logistical nightmare for Ukrainian forces. While an Abrams can storm through the snow and mud, fuel trucks can't. In addition, like any jet engine, the Abrams' turbine needs air to breathe, which it sucks in through filtered rear vents. When those vent filters get clogged — whether by sand, as soldiers reported to GAO in 1992, or by debris they might encounter in Ukraine — they can't perform.

"The Abrams tank is a very complicated piece of equipment. It's expensive, it's hard to train on. ... It is not the easiest system to maintain. It may or may not be the right system," The under secretary of defense for policy, Colin Kahl, told reporters last week at the Pentagon.

The Abrams also will require months of training. Ukrainian forces will have to learn how to operate its more complex systems, and how to keep it running and fueled.

## THE ARM-TWISTING TURNABOUT

Despite all the drawbacks expressed by the U.S., when all was said and done, it came down to political realities and a diplomatic dance.

Germany had been reluctant to send the Leopards, or allow allies to send them, unless the U.S. put its Abrams on the table, due to concerns that supplying the tanks would incur Russia's wrath. The U.S., meanwhile, argued that the German-made Leopards were a better fit because Ukrainian troops could get them and get trained on them far more quickly and easily.

The impasse frustrated European allies, such as Poland, who wanted to send Leopards but couldn't without Germany's OK. Thus began the more fierce negotiations.

U.S. and German officials both used the word "intensive" to describe the talks that ultimately led to the tank turnabout by both countries.

"This is the result of intensive consultations, once again, with our allies and international partners," Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in an address to German lawmakers on Wednesday.

Echoing Scholz, a senior U.S. administration official said talks had been going on for some time but "in a much more intensified way over the last number of weeks." The official spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details on the decision.

From President Joe Biden on down, calls were made, including to Scholz. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke and met with their German counterparts and other allies.

Last Friday, the pressure was palpable. Top defense leaders from more than 50 countries met at Ramstein Air Base in Germany to discuss Ukraine's ongoing weapons and equipment needs. Tanks were a key subject. Leaders from countries that have Leopard tanks met with the new German defense minister.

Gradually, the German stance began to publicly soften, leading to Wednesday's announcements. Asked repeatedly what changed, Biden administration officials sidestepped. Asked directly about German pressure, Biden told reporters, "Germany didn't force me to change our mind."

## HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE

Timing for both delivery of the tanks to Ukraine and the training of Ukrainian troops is fuzzy. U.S. officials would only say that it will take "many months" to deliver the Abrams tanks, but that the Leopards will arrive faster.

Doug Bush, assistant secretary of the Army for acquisition, said the U.S. no longer buys new Abrams, but uses older ones as "seed vehicles" and refurbishes them. Doing that, however, isn't quick or easy, he said.

The training can begin more quickly, and the Pentagon is developing a program.

"We want to make sure that they (the tanks) fall on ready hands, and that the Ukrainians know how to use them, they know how to keep them running, and they've got the supply chain in place for spare parts and supplies," said National Security Council spokesman John Kirby.

Bush said the Ukrainians have shown they have the knowledge and capabilities to learn new systems quickly.

"We can often abbreviate and accelerate what we can do in terms of training for Ukrainian army soldiers," he told reporters Wednesday. "With enough motivation and dedicated 24/7 access to them, we can train



people really quickly," he said. "The U.S. Army knows how to do that."

## Lawyer: Warnings boy had gun ignored before he shot teacher

By DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — Concerned staff warned administrators at a Virginia elementary school three times that a 6-year-old boy had a gun and was threatening other students in the hours before he shot and wounded a teacher, but the administration "was paralyzed by apathy" and didn't call police, remove the boy from class or lock down the school, the wounded teacher's lawyer said Wednesday.

Later in the day, the school board voted to fire school district superintendent George Parker III as part of a separation agreement that will pay Parker a little over \$502,000 in severance — two years of his current base salary of \$251,000. Parker has been sharply criticized by parents and teachers since the Jan. 6 shooting.

Diane Toscano, an attorney for Abigail Zwerner, said during a news conference that she has notified the school board in Newport News that the 25-year-old teacher at Richneck Elementary School plans to sue the school district over the shooting, which left Zwerner with serious injuries.

"On that day, over the course of a few hours, three different times — three times — school administration was warned by concerned teachers and employees that the boy had a gun on him at the school and was threatening people. But the administration could not be bothered," Toscano said.

She said that Zwerner first went to an administrator at around 11:15 a.m. on the day of the shooting and said the boy had threatened to beat up another child, but no action was taken.

About an hour later, another teacher went to an administrator and said she had taken it upon herself to search the boy's bookbag, but warned that she thought the boy had put the gun in his pocket before going outside for recess, Toscano said.

"The administrator downplayed the report from the teacher and the possibility of a gun, saying — and I quote — 'Well, he has little pockets,'" Toscano said.

Shortly after 1 p.m., another teacher told an administrator that a different student who was "crying and fearful" said the boy showed him the gun during recess and threatened to shoot him if he told anyone. Again, no action was taken, she said.

When another employee who had heard the boy might have a gun asked an administrator to search the boy, he was turned down, Toscano said.

"He was told to wait the situation out because the school day was almost over," she said.

About an hour later, "Abby Zwerner was shot in front of those horrified kids, and the school and community are living the nightmare, all because the school administration failed to act," Toscano said.

"Were they not so paralyzed by apathy, they could have prevented this tragedy," she said.

School district spokesperson Michelle Price declined to comment.

"Since the school division's investigation is ongoing, I cannot comment on the statements presented by Ms. Zwerner's lawyer at this time," Price wrote in an email.

The shooting raised questions over security at the school and stunned Newport News, a city of about 185,000 people roughly 70 miles (113 kilometers) southeast of Richmond.

Parker's departure had been expected since a school board agenda was posted Tuesday showing that the panel was set to vote on his separation package. The separation and severance agreement says the board has decided to "terminate the Contract and Superintendent's employment."

The board voted 5-1 in favor of the agreement after several members praised Parker's past performance as superintendent.

Board member Gary Hunter delivered a long defense of Parker as some members of the audience sighed and told him to "move on." Hunter said he thought Parker was being unfairly blamed for the shooting and said the real problem is the lack of "commonsense gun laws."

"Getting rid of someone is not going to fix this particular problem," Hunter said.

As part of the agreement, board Chair Lisa Surles-Law read a statement in which the board said the

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decision to terminate Parker was made "without cause" and that Parker "is a capable division leader" who has served the school district for almost five years "through some extremely challenging circumstances."

Parker has said that at least one administrator was told on the day of the shooting that the boy might have a weapon, but no weapon was found when his backpack was searched. Police have said that school officials did not tell them about that tip before the shooting, which happened hours later.

Cindy Connell, a middle school teacher in Newport News, called the events described by Toscano "beyond horrifying."

"This is just another example of administrators not listening to the concerns of teachers, and the only reason we're talking about this one is because Abby Zwerner got shot," Connell said.

"I think any administrator that was told repeatedly that this child has a weapon, we think this child has a weapon — anyone who knew about this situation and did nothing should lose their job."

Police Chief Steve Drew has repeatedly characterized the shooting as "intentional," saying the boy aimed at Zwerner and fired one round, striking her in the hand and chest. Zwerner was hospitalized for nearly two weeks but is now recovering at home, Toscano said.

"The road to full recovery will be long ... and the psychological scars will be lasting," Toscano said.

The boy's mother legally purchased the gun used in the shooting, police said. The boy's family said in a statement last week that the gun was "secured." The family's attorney, James Ellenson, told The Associated Press that his understanding was that the gun was in the woman's closet on a shelf well over 6 feet (1.8 meters) high and had a trigger lock that required a key.

The family also said in its statement that the boy has an "acute disability" and was under a care plan "that included his mother or father attending school with him and accompanying him to class every day." The week of the shooting was the first when a parent was not in class with him, the family said.

James Ellenson, an attorney for the boy's family, released a statement Wednesday saying they "continue to pray for Ms. Zwerner and wish her a complete and full recovery."

"Our hearts go out to all involved," Ellenson said.

The school, which has been closed since the shooting, is scheduled to reopen next week. Karen Lynch, a longtime principal in the Newport News school district, has been named as an "administrator on special assignment" at Richneck, Lynch said in a note to parents on Monday.

Ahead of the reopening, administrators and teachers held an Open House at the school Wednesday for students and their families to visit staff and participate in activities. Signs along the sidewalks in front of the school offered reassuring messages to the students: "You've got this," "We are Praying for You" and "You are Loved."

## Passion for dance drew many of those slain to ballroom

By JAMIE STENGLE, DEEPA BHARATH and CHRISTOPHER WEBER undefined

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Among the 11 people killed when a gunman opened fire during a Lunar New Year celebration at a Los Angeles-area dance hall popular with older Asian Americans were a family's beloved aunt, a retired man who decided to return to school and the venue's always-smiling manager.

For many, a passion for dance and a desire to gather with friends had drawn them to the Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park on Saturday night for what was set to be a joyous celebration.

"I recognize the faces of these people who created friendships, connections and a community around their passion — dancing," said Kristina Hayes, who has organized tango events at the dance hall. "I'm still in shock."

Following the attack, the gunman went to another nearby ballroom but was disarmed before anyone was shot. He fled — and on Sunday shot and killed himself.

As of Wednesday, a GoFundMe organized by the Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California had raised over \$700,000 for the families of the victims.

Here are profiles of some of the 11 people killed:

MING WEI MA

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Ming Wei Ma, 72, was the manager of the Star Ballroom and a talented dancer himself. He was described by those who knew him as always smiling, helping out and making people feel welcome.

"He was a genuine, special person who was loved by all," Walter Calderon, a dance instructor who held events there, told The Associated Press.

Calderon said that while Ma didn't speak much English, he conveyed a lot with his facial expressions.

Siu Fong told the AP she would sometimes lead karaoke outings for older people there, where Ma would always say hello to everyone. "He would go into my session, and talk to the singers and greet them."

MYMY NHAN

Mymy Nhan, 65, was a regular at Star Ballroom. She had been the main caretaker for her mother, who recently died, and was looking forward to the dance hall's Lunar New Year celebrations as a way to "start the year fresh," her niece Fonda Quan said.

"It is comforting to know that she enjoyed her last dance, even though it was her last dance," she continued.

Tiffany Liou, a reporter with WFAA television station in Dallas, wrote for the station's website that for Nhan, her husband's aunt, "her family was her passion." Liou said that Nhan had no children but "loved her nieces and nephews like her own."

"She was kind to all strangers. Her warm smile was contagious. She was everyone's biggest cheerleader," Liou wrote.

Nhan, who was of Chinese descent, was raised in Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. in 1985, Liou wrote.

VALENTINO ALVERO

Valentino Alvero, 68, was remembered as a dedicated family man who loved ballroom dancing and was "the life of any party," his family said in statement.

Alvero was "a loving father, a dedicated son and brother, a grandfather who loved his three granddaughters fiercely, an uncle who loved his nieces and nephews like his own," his family said in a statement.

"He loved people and hearing about their lives and in return, he shared his own stories with so much enthusiasm that you couldn't help but listen and laugh along with him," the family said.

The statement said Alvero, a devout Catholic, loved ballroom dancing.

"We hope that he danced to his heart's content until the very end and hope that he is now dancing in heaven," the family said.

WEN TAU YU

Wen Tau Yu, 64, was retired, but he'd recently returned to school to study to be a pharmacist, his son said.

"He was 64 years old and retired, but he was exploring his second career," Szu Fa Yu told The New York Times. "I really admire him for that."

Wen Tau Yu had immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan, where he was a manager at an agricultural company, his son said.

On Saturday, the family had gathered to celebrate the Lunar New Year before his father went out to celebrate with friends. When his father's friends said he'd never made it to lunch the next day, the family reported to police that he was missing.

Szu Fa Yu said that if his father was a dancer, he didn't know about it. He said the family wasn't sure if he was killed inside the dance hall or while passing by it.

YU LUN KAO

Yu Lun Kao, 72, was a longtime member of the dance community in Monterey Park, and he was known to practice for hours.

"All day long, that's how much he loved dancing," Alex Satrin, an instructor who teaches at Star Ballroom, told The New York Times.

Satrin said that Kao, who also went by Andy, had participated in his group classes and also frequently practiced on his own.

Kao's brother, Alan Kao, told the newspaper that his brother worked in the construction business after coming to California from Taiwan two decades ago.

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## MUOI DAI UNG

Muoi Dai Ung, 67, who came to the U.S. from Vietnam over a decade ago to be with family members who fled the country in the 1970s and 1980s, was an extrovert who loved to dance, her family said.

Her niece, Juily Phun, told the Washington Post that her aunt came to the U.S. in hopes of building a life here "different from the sorrows she had experienced."

On Saturday, Ung, who worked multiple jobs, including as a seamstress, had gone to the Star Ballroom to celebrate the Lunar New Year with her best friend.

A statement from Ung's family described her as "complicated, messy, easy to love and sometimes hard to understand from the outside."

This month, Ung's daughter was visiting her from overseas. "She came to see her mother, and now she has to bury her," Phun said.

## DIANA TOM

Diana Tom, 70, was a "hard-working mother, wife and grandmother who loved to dance," her family said in a statement provided to The Associated Press.

Her family said that she went to the ballroom to celebrate the Lunar New Year by dancing with her friends.

"To those who knew her, she was someone who always went out of her way to give to others," her family said.

## NANCY LIU

Hongying Jian, 62, who was known as Nancy Liu, and her husband Jeff were regulars at the Star Ballroom, their daughter said.

"They know everyone," Juno Blees told The New York Times.

The couple emigrated from China more than 25 years ago and did everything together, Blees said. They liked to socialize at the dance hall because the clientele were about their age, and many were also Asian immigrants.

A neighbor, Serena Liu, described Nancy Liu as "a very nice, cute, kind person" who liked to sing, play piano and go out dancing.

"She used to say she can make friends with anyone if she wants," Liu told the Los Angeles Times.

On Saturday night, Jeff Liu was near the entrance when he witnessed the gunman storm in and open fire. He saw his wife collapse, Blees said.

They got separated and he never saw her again.

Jeff Liu's shoulder was grazed by two bullets. He was discharged from the hospital on Sunday.

## CHIA LING YAU

Chia Ling Yau, 76, had a passion for music, dance and travel, his family said in a statement, the Washington Post reported.

Yau's family said he was a caring father, uncle, brother and friend who was a happy, fun-loving person. His family said that he was the kind of friend who was generous with his time, and to his children "he was generous with words of love and affirmation."

## Review: Even J.Lo can't save this 'Shotgun Wedding'

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

Spoiler alert: J.Lo looks fantastic in a wedding dress.

You surely knew that, given not only the plethora of wedding-themed movies Jennifer Lopez has made over the years, from "The Wedding Planner" to "Monster-in-Law" to the recent "Marry Me," but also her own offscreen life, of course.

And now comes "Shotgun Wedding," where the ageless pop star and rom-com queen dons a pouffy white concoction that gradually sheds layers of tulle to become increasingly sexy as Lopez fights off not only cringey wedding guests but machine-gun toting pirates. She switches at one point to combat boots — plucked from a dead guy! — over wedding heels, and here's another spoiler alert: if anyone can make combat boots work with pouffy tulle while running in slow motion, it's Lopez.

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But all the charm and style in the world, and J.Lo has more than anyone, can't make up for the bizarre tonal imbalance of "Shotgun Wedding," a movie too violent to be funny and too funny (in the odd, weird sense) to be fun. The movie, directed by Jason Moore, also commits the unlikely crime of under-using that other bulletproof Jennifer of the moment, Jennifer Coolidge, who often seems to be searching palpably for decent lines. Come on, people! You had BOTH Jennifers! This should have been a slam dunk.

Kudos, though, to whoever picked the stunning resort for this particular destination wedding (the shoot took place in the Dominican Republic, standing in for the Philippines). It's here that we first meet Darcy, our bride, at the rehearsal dinner, already looking so much better than everyone else, in resort wear and turquoise chunky jewelry — but we digress.

Darcy is navigating a guest list filled with proverbial hand grenades, even before the real grenades start flying. There's her icy mother (Sonia Braga, also sadly underused), who is divorced from her father (Cheech Marin) and appalled at the oddly ditzy new girlfriend he's brought to the wedding (D'Arcy Carden). Mom tells Darcy she should have accepted her dad's millions (or billions?) to make the wedding perfect, but Darcy replies that the couple wanted to do it their way. Besides, they're grownups.

The groom, you ask? We're getting to that. Initially the part was to be played by Ryan Reynolds, a tantalizing comedic possibility. Then it was to be Armie Hammer, who stepped aside for obvious reasons, and now we have Josh Duhamel, perfectly handsome and agreeable but ... the chemistry rests with Lopez, and not between them.

In a clever twist, Tom is the "groomzilla," obsessed with wedding details, and spray-painting the pineapples all night long. As for his mother, well, she's the delightfully ditzy Carol (Coolidge), obsessed with "South Pacific" and eager to have a good time. (Coolidge, hot off "White Lotus," knows her way around a resort).

It must be said that Coolidge — who at this point in her career would be anyone's top choice to play any mother — more than pulls her weight. But there's only so much she can do with dialogue that seems slapped together with minimum effort. True, Coolidge can make almost anything sound funny, but at times it feels like her script instructions said nothing more than "Carol says something wacky."

Anyway, things get wacky overall pretty fast, starting with the arrival of a surprise guest by helicopter — it's Sean, Darcy's ex-fiance, a swaggering, shirt-unbuttoned, walking Y chromosome played by Lenny Kravitz. Tom is immediately perplexed by Sean's presence.

But there's no time to fret. The next day, with everyone dressed for the wedding, more unexpected guests arrive — and they definitely weren't on the list. They're pirates, and they're after Darcy's dad's money.

The pirates take everyone hostage, confining them to, well, OK, an infinity pool, but still confining them! In a stroke of rom-com luck, the bride and groom are elsewhere, having a little talk about their relationship. Soon, though, the relationship is beside the point — they have to save themselves and everyone else, too. And that's when the killing starts.

Not to give away too much, but there's lots of automatic gunfire and grenade-throwing and other mayhem that feels out of place anyway you slice it — oh yes, knives too! — and this rom-com doesn't end up feeling very romantic OR comedic.

Not to detract from Lopez's appeal, which is timeless. She's the one actor in the whole enterprise whose every line reading seems to ring true, no matter how silly on paper — as when she says she can't breathe, and Tom assumes it's, you know, the machine guns, but she says no, "It's the shapewear." J.Lo makes it work. (She's also a producer on the film.)

There is one charming scene, to be fair, where we're all allowed to relax and have fun. People are singing and dancing and doing karaoke, and it feels like a blast. Finally these are people we'd want to get to know. Unfortunately, it's all during the closing credits.

Stick around for them, though. It'll feel like a cool dip in an infinity pool.

"Shotgun Wedding," an Amazon Studios release, has been rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America "for language and some violence/bloody images." Running time: 100 minutes. Two stars out of four.

## Afghan soldier seeking US asylum freed from immigration hold

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — An Afghan soldier seeking U.S. asylum who was arrested while trying to cross the Mexico border has been freed and reunited with his brother after spending months in immigration detention, his attorney said Wednesday.

Abdul Wasi Safi's release from custody in a detention center in Eden, Texas, came after a judge dropped an immigration charge against him at the request of federal prosecutors.

Wasi Safi, an intelligence officer for the Afghan National Security Forces, fled Afghanistan following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021, fearing reprisals from the Taliban because he had provided U.S. forces with information on terrorists. In the summer of 2022, he began a treacherous journey from Brazil to the U.S.-Mexico border, where he was arrested in September near Eagle Pass, Texas. He had hoped to join his brother, who lives in Houston.

Prosecutors filed a motion asking a federal judge in Del Rio, Texas, to dismiss the immigration charge "in the interest of justice" and on Monday the judge granted that request.

Zachary Fertitta, one of his criminal defense attorneys, said Wednesday that Wasi Safi is receiving medical care at an undisclosed location but that he plans to speak at a news conference on Friday in Houston.

Fertitta said Wasi Safi and his brother "are overjoyed to be reunited."

Jennifer Cervantes, one of Wasi Safi's immigration attorneys, said there was no reason to keep him in custody, especially given that the FBI has already spoken to him and found no problems.

"He's certainly not a danger to the United States. He's done a lot of good service for the United States," Cervantes said.

U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, a Houston Democrat, belongs to a bipartisan group of lawmakers that has been working to free Wasi Safi. She said in a statement Tuesday night that she expects him to arrive in her hometown by Friday.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees Customs and Border Protection and ICE, has not responded to an email seeking comment Wednesday.

Sami-ullah Safi, Wasi Safi's brother, was employed by the U.S. military for several years as a translator. Sami Safi said he is pleased the criminal case has been dropped but that he remains frustrated about how his sibling has been treated in light of his family's support for the U.S. in Afghanistan.

"If we categorize my brother's service, how many lives he has saved because of his service and how many lives I have saved because of my service being a combat translator?" Sami Safi said.

Wasi Safi's case was first reported by The Texas Tribune.

On his journey from Brazil to the U.S., Wasi Safi suffered serious injuries from beatings, including damaged front teeth and hearing loss in his right ear.

Fertitta said Wasi Safi's injuries were not sufficiently treated while he was detained but it's unclear how serious of a concern they have become.

"I'm going to have to wait to be advised by the medical personnel on that," Fertitta said.

The lawyers, lawmakers and military organizations that have been working to free Wasi Safi say his case highlights how America's chaotic military withdrawal continues to harm Afghan citizens who helped the U.S. but were left behind.

Nearly 76,000 Afghans who worked with American soldiers since 2001 as translators, interpreters and partners arrived in the U.S. on military planes after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. But their immigration status remains unclear after Congress failed to pass a proposed law, the Afghan Adjustment Act, that would have solidified their legal residency status.

Cervantes said Wasi Safi's case is not unique and that other Afghans seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border have also faced difficulty getting their cases properly reviewed. She said she hopes her work "sheds some light on that and (helps) these guys get what I think is the right thing to do, what I think is fair for them."

## The AP Interview: Pope says homosexuality not a crime

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis criticized laws that criminalize homosexuality as “unjust,” saying God loves all his children just as they are and called on Catholic bishops who support the laws to welcome LGBTQ people into the church.

“Being homosexual isn’t a crime,” Francis said during an exclusive interview Tuesday with The Associated Press.

Francis acknowledged that Catholic bishops in some parts of the world support laws that criminalize homosexuality or discriminate against LGBTQ people, and he himself referred to the issue in terms of “sin.” But he attributed such attitudes to cultural backgrounds, and said bishops in particular need to undergo a process of change to recognize the dignity of everyone.

“These bishops have to have a process of conversion,” he said, adding that they should apply “tenderness, please, as God has for each one of us.”

Francis’ comments, which were hailed by gay rights advocates as a milestone, are the first uttered by a pope about such laws. But they are also consistent with his overall approach to LGBTQ people and belief that the Catholic Church should welcome everyone and not discriminate.

Some 67 countries or jurisdictions worldwide criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity, 11 of which can or do impose the death penalty, according to The Human Dignity Trust, which works to end such laws. Experts say even where the laws are not enforced, they contribute to harassment, stigmatization and violence against LGBTQ people.

In the U.S., more than a dozen states still have anti-sodomy laws on the books, despite a 2003 Supreme Court ruling declaring them unconstitutional. Gay rights advocates say the antiquated laws are used to justify harassment, and point to new legislation, such as the “Don’t say gay” law in Florida, which forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, as evidence of continued efforts to marginalize LGBTQ people.

The United Nations has repeatedly called for an end to laws criminalizing homosexuality outright, saying they violate rights to privacy and freedom from discrimination and are a breach of countries’ obligations under international law to protect the human rights of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Declaring such laws “unjust,” Francis said the Catholic Church can and should work to put an end to them. “It must do this. It must do this,” he said.

Francis quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church in saying gay people must be welcomed and respected, and should not be marginalized or discriminated against.

“We are all children of God, and God loves us as we are and for the strength that each of us fights for our dignity,” Francis said, speaking to the AP in the Vatican hotel where he lives.

Francis’ remarks come ahead of a trip to Africa, where such laws are common, as they are in the Middle East. Many date from British colonial times or are inspired by Islamic law. Some Catholic bishops have strongly upheld them as consistent with Vatican teaching, while others have called for them to be overturned as a violation of basic human dignity.

In 2019, Francis had been expected to issue a statement opposing criminalization of homosexuality during a meeting with human rights groups that conducted research into the effects of such laws and so-called “conversion therapies.”

In the end, after word of the audience leaked, the pope didn’t meet with the groups. Instead, the Vatican No. 2 did and reaffirmed “the dignity of every human person and against every form of violence.”

There was no indication that Francis spoke out about such laws now because his more conservative predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, recently died. The issue had never been raised in an interview, but Francis willingly responded, citing even the statistics about the number of countries where homosexuality is criminalized.

On Tuesday, Francis said there needed to be a distinction between a crime and a sin with regard to homosexuality. Church teaching holds that homosexual acts are sinful, or “intrinsically disordered,” but

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that gay people must be treated with dignity and respect.

Bantering with himself, Francis articulated the position: "It's not a crime. Yes, but it's a sin. Fine, but first let's distinguish between a sin and a crime."

"It's also a sin to lack charity with one another," he added.

Francis has not changed the church's teaching, which has long riled gay Catholics. But he has made reaching out to LGBTQ people a hallmark of his papacy.

The pope's comments didn't specifically address transgender or nonbinary people, just homosexuality, but advocates of greater LGBTQ inclusion in the Catholic Church hailed the pope's comments as a momentous advance.

"His historic statement should send a message to world leaders and millions of Catholics around the world: LGBTQ people deserve to live in a world without violence and condemnation, and more kindness and understanding," said Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of the U.S.-based advocacy group GLAAD.

New Ways Ministry, a Catholic LGBTQ advocacy group, said the church hierarchy's silence on such laws until now had had devastating effects, perpetuating such policies and fueling violent rhetoric against LGBTQ people.

"The pope is reminding the church that the way people treat one another in the social world is of much greater moral importance than what people may possibly do in the privacy of a bedroom," the group's executive director, Francis DeBernardo, said in a statement.

One of the cardinals recently appointed by the pope – Robert McElroy, the bishop of San Diego -- is among those Catholics who would like the church to go further, and fully welcome LGBTQ people into the church even if they are sexually active.

"It is a demonic mystery of the human soul why so many men and women have a profound and visceral animus toward members of the L.G.B.T. communities," McElroy wrote Tuesday in the Jesuit magazine America. "The church's primary witness in the face of this bigotry must be one of embrace rather than distance or condemnation."

Starting with his famous 2013 declaration, "Who am I to judge?" — when he was asked about a purportedly gay priest — Francis has gone on to minister repeatedly and publicly to the gay and transgender communities. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, he favored granting legal protections to same-sex couples as an alternative to endorsing gay marriage, which Catholic doctrine forbids.

Despite such outreach, Francis was criticized by the Catholic gay community for a 2021 decree from the Vatican's doctrine office that said the church cannot bless same-sex unions.

In 2008, the Vatican declined to sign onto a U.N. declaration that called for the decriminalization of homosexuality, complaining the text went beyond the original scope. In a statement at the time, the Vatican urged countries to avoid "unjust discrimination" against gay people and end penalties against them.

## US, Germany to send advanced tanks to aid Ukraine war effort

By FRANK JORDANS, KIRSTEN GRIESHABER and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany and the United States announced Wednesday that they will send advanced battle tanks to Ukraine, offering what one expert called an "armored punching force" to help Kyiv break combat stalemates as the Russian invasion enters its 12th month.

The announcement marked the first stage of a coordinated effort by the West to provide dozens of the heavy weapons, which Ukrainian military commanders said would enable counter-offensives, reduce casualties and help restore dwindling ammunition supplies.

American President Joe Biden said the U.S. will send 31 M1 Abrams tanks, reversing months of persistent arguments by Washington that they were too difficult for Ukrainian troops to operate and maintain.

The U.S. decision followed Germany's agreement to send 14 Leopard 2 A6 tanks from its own stocks. Germany had refused to send the Leopards unless the U.S. put its Abrams on the table, not wanting to incur Russia's wrath without the U.S. making a similar commitment.

"This is the result of intensive consultations, once again, with our allies and international partners," Chancellor Olaf Scholz told German lawmakers. "It was right, and it is important that we didn't let ourselves



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be driven" into the decision.

Biden said European allies have agreed to send enough tanks to equip two Ukrainian tank battalions, or a total of 62 tanks.

"To liberate their land, they need to be able to counter Russia's evolving tactics and strategy on the battlefield in the very near term," Biden said.

Several European countries have equipped their armies with Leopard 2 tanks, and Germany's announcement means they can give some of their stocks to Ukraine.

Speaking in a video address late Wednesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hailed the creation of what he described as a "tank coalition."

"We must form a tank fist, a fist of freedom whose hits will not let tyranny stand up again," Zelenskyy said.

He said Ukraine will push for more weapons, including long-range missiles and aircraft.

"The terrorist state must lose. The right to life must be protected. And it will be so," Zelenskyy said.

Though it will take months before the tanks arrive, Ukrainian soldiers on the front lines said the decision comes at a critical point.

"Tanks will help reduce casualties among our soldiers ... then gain new results and win this war quicker," said Oleksander Syrotiuk, commander of a company in the 17th Tank Brigade deployed in Bakhmut.

Ukrainian soldiers and experts said Ukrainian forces are running low on spare parts to repair old Soviet-era tanks and the specific ammunition they require while enduring relentless barrages of Russian artillery. The Western tanks could help open a new pipeline for ammunition to flow to Ukraine.

With an expected springtime Russian offensive looming, the tanks will also enable Ukraine's forces to launch new offensives and curb casualties, three military commanders, including two in the army's tank division, told The Associated Press.

"Without the new tanks, we cannot win this war," said Maksim Butolin, chief sergeant of the 54th Brigade's Tank Division. He spoke to the AP by phone earlier this week from near the Bakhmut front.

Ukrainian forces have had to preserve ammunition and deal with frequent breakdowns and maintenance issues, Syrotiuk said.

"The main problem we have with our tanks is they are old," he said.

Expressing a preference for the Leopard 2, which he said was more suitable for Ukraine's terrain, Syrotiuk said the modern tanks had more precise targeting systems, better armor and equipment to allow nighttime operations.

Gian Gentile, a U.S. Army veteran and senior historian with the Rand think tank, said the M1 Abrams and the Leopards will give Ukraine a "mechanized armored punching force."

The Abrams tanks can hit a moving target up to 2,000 meters (1.25 miles) away while rolling across rough terrain, he said.

Scholz spoke by phone Wednesday with Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, the German chancellery said in a statement. All five leaders agreed to continue military support to Ukraine in close Euro-Atlantic coordination.

Altogether, France, the U.K., the U.S., Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden will send hundreds of tanks and heavy armored vehicles to fortify Ukraine as it attempts to break through entrenched Russian lines.

Ukraine's supporters have supplied tanks in the past, but those were Soviet models in the stockpiles of countries that once were in Moscow's sphere of influence but are now aligned with the West. Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials insisted their forces need more modern Western-designed tanks.

Russia's ambassador to Germany, Sergey Nechayev, called Berlin's decision "extremely dangerous," saying it "shifts the conflict to a new level of confrontation and contradicts the statements of German politicians about their reluctance to get involved in it."

Scholz had insisted that any decision to provide Ukraine with the powerful tanks would need to be taken in conjunction with Germany's allies, chiefly the U.S. By getting Washington to commit some of its own

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tanks, Berlin hopes to share the risk of any backlash from Russia.

Ekkehard Brose, head of the German military's Federal Academy for Security Policy, noted the deeper historical significance of the decision.

"German-made tanks will face off against Russian tanks in Ukraine once more," he said, adding that this was "not an easy thought" for Germany, which takes seriously its responsibility for the horrors of World War II.

"And yet it is the right decision," Brose said, arguing that it was up to Western democracies to help Ukraine stop Russia's military campaign.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius cautioned that it would take about three months for the first tanks to be deployed in Ukraine. He described the Leopard 2 as "the best battle tank in the world."

The German government said it planned to swiftly begin training Ukrainian tank crews in Germany. The package being put together would also include logistics, ammunition and maintenance.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the tanks would "burn down."

"Simply because of technological aspects, this is a rather disastrous plan," Peskov said, citing "a completely obvious overestimation of the potential" the tanks would add to the Ukrainian military. "It is yet another fallacy, a rather profound one."

Peskov predicted that the tanks "will burn down just like all the other ones. ... Except they cost a lot, and this will fall on the shoulders of European taxpayers."

John Herbst, who was U.S. ambassador to Ukraine from 2003 to 2006, questioned the timeline for delivery of the American tanks.

"Under this schedule, Ukraine would be lucky to receive them this calendar year," said Herbst, who is now senior director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center.

Other European nations, such as Finland and Spain, indicated a willingness Wednesday to part with their own Leopard or similar battle tanks as part of a larger coalition.

## New lawsuits target state restrictions on abortion pills

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supporters of abortion rights filed separate lawsuits Wednesday challenging two states' abortion pill restrictions, the opening salvo in what's expected to be a protracted legal battle over access to the medications.

The lawsuits argue that limits on the drugs in North Carolina and West Virginia run afoul of the federal authority of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which has approved the abortion pill as a safe and effective method for ending pregnancy.

The cases were brought by a North Carolina physician who prescribes the pill, mifepristone, and Gen-Pro, which makes a generic version of the drug and sued in West Virginia.

While the federal court lawsuits target specific state laws, they represent key legal tests that could eventually determine access to abortion for millions of women. Medication recently overtook in-clinic procedures as the most common form of abortion in the U.S.

The new litigation turns on a longstanding principle that federal law, including FDA decisions, pre-empt state laws. Indeed, few states have ever tried to fully ban an FDA-approved drug because of past rulings in the agency's favor.

But with the fall of *Roe v. Wade* there's little precedent for the current patchwork of laws governing abortion.

After the Supreme Court overturned the decision in June, previously adopted restrictions on abortion kicked in and two states adopted new ones. Currently, bans on abortion at all stages of pregnancy are being followed in 13 states.

On top of that, 19 states — including North Carolina and West Virginia — have separate laws controlling how, when and where physicians can prescribe and dispense abortion drugs.

"West Virginia cannot override the FDA's safety and efficacy determinations, nor can it disrupt the national

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market for this medication," David Frederick, an attorney representing GenBioPro, said in a statement. Legal experts foresee years of court battles over access to the pills.

North Carolina bans nearly all abortions after 20 weeks, with narrow exceptions for urgent medical emergencies. Physicians can only prescribe medication abortion after state-mandated counseling for their patients and must dispense the drug in person.

The lawsuit, filed by Dr. Amy Bryant, an obstetrician and gynecologist, argues that such requirements contradict FDA-approved labeling for the drug and interfere with her ability to treat patients.

"We know from years of research and use that medication abortion is safe and effective — there's no medical reason for politicians to interfere or restrict access to it," Bryant said in a statement provided by the Expanding Medication Abortion Access project, an abortion rights group working on legal challenges to state laws.

The office of Attorney General Josh Stein, who is a defendant in the complaint because he's the state chief law enforcement officer, was reviewing the complaint on Wednesday, his spokesperson Nazneen Ahmed wrote in an email. Stein, a Democrat who announced last week a bid for governor in 2024, is an abortion-rights supporter.

The FDA approved mifepristone in 2000 to end pregnancy, when used in combination with a second drug, misoprostol. The combination is approved for use up to the 10th week of pregnancy.

For more than 20 years, FDA limited dispensing of the drug to a subset of specialty offices and clinics, due to safety concerns. In rare cases, the drug combination can cause excess bleeding, requiring emergency care. But since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency has repeatedly eased restrictions and expanded access, increasing demand even as state laws make the pills harder to get for many women.

In late 2021, the agency eliminated the in-person requirement for the pill, saying a new scientific review showed no increase in safety complications if the drug is taken at home. That change also permitted the pill to be prescribed via telehealth and shipped by mail-order pharmacies.

Earlier this year the FDA further loosened restrictions by allowing brick-and-mortar pharmacies to dispense the drug, provided they undergo certification.

That change was made at the request of the two drug manufactures: GenBioPro and Danco Laboratories, which makes brand-name Mifeprex.

In its West Virginia lawsuit, GenBioPro argues that state laws interfere with drug regulations crafted by the FDA, which has sole authority over the approval and regulation of all U.S. drugs.

West Virginia's law outlaws most abortions, with some exceptions for rape and incest victims and in cases of life-threatening medical emergencies and nonviable pregnancies. The near-total ban, signed into law in September, supersedes earlier laws on abortion pill access.

"The ban and restrictions make it impossible for GenBioPro to market and distribute mifepristone in West Virginia in accordance with FDA's requirements," the company states in its suit filed in the state's southern federal district.

West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey said he would defend the new abortion law. "While it may not sit well with manufacturers of abortion drugs, the U.S. Supreme Court has made it clear that regulating abortion is a state issue," he said in a statement.

Abortion opponents have filed their own lawsuits seeking to halt use of the pill, including a Texas suit arguing that the FDA overstepped its authority in approving the medication. Anti-abortion groups on Wednesday vowed to support state abortion limits.

"We stand with the people of North Carolina and West Virginia against the abortion lobby's reckless push to mandate abortion on demand in every state," said Marjorie Dannenfelser of the Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America group.

Mifepristone dilates the cervix and blocks the effects of the hormone progesterone, which is needed to sustain a pregnancy. Misoprostol, a drug also used to treat stomach ulcers, is taken 24 to 48 hours later. It causes the uterus to cramp and contract, causing bleeding and expelling pregnancy tissue.

## 'Happening way too often': Report delves into mass attacks

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the nation reels from a week of high-profile shootings, a new report on mass attacks calls for communities to intervene early when they see warning signs of violence, encourages businesses to consider workplace violence prevention plans and highlights the connection between domestic violence, misogyny and mass attacks.

The report released Wednesday by the U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center analyzed 173 mass attacks carried out over a five-year period from January 2016 to December 2020 in public or semi-public places such as businesses, schools or churches.

It was released as the U.S. experienced a particularly deadly start to the new year that has left 39 people dead in six mass killings, including one this week in Monterey Park, California, that left 11 people dead at a dance hall as they welcomed in the Lunar New Year.

"It's just happening way too often," said Lina Alathari, the center's director, during a news conference ahead of the report's release. Alathari said that while the center had not specifically studied the shootings that took place this week, there are themes seen "over and over again" when analyzing mass attacks.

The report is the latest in a series undertaken by the center to look at the problem of mass attacks. While previous reports examined the specific years of 2017, 2018 and 2019, the new report noted that it analyzed multiple years of data and gives more "in-depth analysis of the thinking and behavior of mass attackers."

The center defines a mass attack as one in which three or more people — not including the attacker — were harmed. Almost all the attacks were carried out by one person, 96% of attackers were men and the attackers ranged in age from 14 to 87.

The report noted that nearly two-thirds of attackers exhibited behaviors or communications "that were so concerning, they should have been met with an immediate response." It said these concerns were often shared with law enforcement, employers, school staff or parents. But in one-fifth of the cases, the concerning behavior wasn't relayed to anyone "in a position to respond, demonstrating a continued need to promote and facilitate bystander reporting."

The report also called for greater attention toward domestic violence and misogyny, noting that nearly half of the attackers studied had a history of domestic violence, misogynistic behavior or both.

"Though not all who possess misogynistic views are violent, viewpoints that describe women as the enemy or call for violence against women remain a cause for concern," the report said.

About half the attacks in the study involved a business location, and attackers often had a prior relationship with the business, as an employee, a customer or a former employer. The report also noted the role that grievances like workplace disputes or feuds with neighbors played in mass attacks. About half the attacks were motivated "in whole or in part by a perceived grievance," according to the report.

"Workplaces should establish behavioral threat assessment programs as a component of their workplace violence prevention plans, and businesses should also establish proactive relationships with area law enforcement so that they may work collaboratively to respond to incidents involving a concern for violence, whether that concern arises from a current employee, a former employee, or a customer," the report read.

## Tax season already? Some tips for avoiding stress and scams

By ADRIANA MORGA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — For many people filing U.S. tax returns — especially those doing it for their first time — it can be a daunting task that's often left to the last minute. But if you want to avoid the stress of the looming deadline, start getting organized as soon as possible.

Whether you do your taxes yourself, go to a tax clinic or hire a professional, navigating the tax system can be complicated and stressful. Courtney Alev, a consumer financial advocate for Credit Karma, recommends you go easy on yourself.

"Take a breath. Take some time, set out an hour, or go through it over the weekend. You'll hopefully see that it's a lot simpler than you think," Alev said.

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If you find the process too confusing, there are plenty of free resources to help you get through it.

Here are some things you need to know:

## WHEN IS THE DEADLINE TO FILE TAXES?

Taxpayers have until April 18 to submit their returns from 2022.

## WHAT DO I NEED TO FILE MY TAX RETURN?

While the required documents might depend on your individual case, here is a general list of what everyone needs:

- Social Security number
- W-2 forms, if you are employed
- 1099-G, if you are unemployed
- 1099 forms, if you are self-employed
- Savings and investment records
- Any eligible deduction, such as educational expenses, medical bills, charitable donations, etc.
- Tax credits, such as child tax credit, retirement savings contributions credit, etc.

To find a more detailed document list, visit the IRS website.

Tom O'Saben, director of tax content and government relations at the National Association of Tax Professionals, recommends gathering all of your documents in one place before you start your tax return and also having your documents from last year if your financial situation has drastically changed.

Theresa Grover, site coordinator for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, also recommends taxpayers create an identity protection PIN number with the IRS to guard against identity theft. Once you create a number, the IRS will require it to file your tax return.

## HOW DO I FILE MY TAXES?

You can either file your taxes online or on paper. However, there is a great time difference between the two options. Paper filing can take up to six months for the IRS to process, while electronic filing cuts it down to three weeks.

## WHAT RESOURCES ARE OUT THERE?

For those who make \$73,000 or less per year, the IRS offers free guided tax preparation that does the math for you. If you have questions while working on your tax forms, the IRS also offers an interactive tax assistant tool that can provide answers based on your information.

Beyond the popular companies such as TurboTax and H&R Block, taxpayers can also hire licensed professionals, such as certified public accountants. The IRS offers a directory of tax preparers across the United States.

The IRS also funds two types of programs that offer free tax help: VITA and the Tax Counseling for the Elderly program (TCE). People who earn \$60,000 or less a year, have disabilities or are limited English speakers, qualify for the VITA program. Those who are 60 or older, qualify for the TCE program. The IRS has a site for locating organizations hosting VITA and TCE clinics.

If you have a tax problem, there are clinics around the country that can help you resolve these issues. Generally, these tax clinics also offer services in other languages such as Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese.

## HOW CAN I AVOID MISTAKES IN MY TAX RETURN?

Many people fear getting in trouble with the IRS if they make a mistake. Here's how to avoid some of the most common ones:

- Double check your name on your Social Security card.

When working with clients, O'Saben always asks them to bring their Social Security card to double-check their number and their legal name, which can change when when people get married.

"You may have changed your name but you didn't change it with Social Security," O'Saben said. "If the Social Security number doesn't match to the first four letters of the last name, the return will be rejected and that will delay processing."

- Search for tax statements when you have opted out of paper mail.

Many people like to opt out of snail mail but when you do, it can also include your tax documents.

"If you didn't get anything in the mail doesn't mean that there isn't an information document out there

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that you need to be aware of and report accordingly," O'Saben said.

—Make sure you report all of your income.

If you had more than one job in 2022, you need the W-2 forms of each — not just the one from the job you ended the year with, says Christina Wease, interim director of the tax clinic at Michigan State University.

Additionally, if you have a business that uses PayPal or Venmo as a service, it must be reported in your tax return. For 2022, the use of those services needs to be reported if they amounted to 200 transactions in the calendar year and more than \$20,000 in sales from goods or services.

**WHAT IF I MAKE A MISTAKE?**

Mistakes happen, and the IRS takes different approaches depending on each case. In general, if you make a mistake or you're missing something in your tax records, the IRS will audit you, Alev said. An audit means that the IRS will ask you for more documentation.

"Generally, they are very understanding and willing to work with folks. You're not going to get arrested if you type in the wrong field," Alev said.

**WHAT IF I HAVEN'T FILED FOR YEARS?**

Wease explains that you can file taxes late and, if you were supposed to get a refund, you might still get it. If you haven't filed for years and you owe money to the IRS, you may be hit with penalties but the agency will can work with you to manage payment plans.

**HOW CAN I AVOID SCAMS?**

Tax season is prime time for tax scams, according to the IRS. These scams can come via phone, text, email and social media. The IRS uses none of those means to contact taxpayers.

Sometimes scams are even operated by tax preparers so it's important to ask lots of questions. If a tax preparer says you will get a refund that is larger than what you've received in previous years, for example, that may be a red flag, O'Saben said.

If you can't see what your tax preparer is working on, get a copy of the tax return and ask questions about each of the entries.

**HOW LONG SHOULD I KEEP COPIES OF MY TAX RETURNS?**

It's always good practice to keep a record of your tax returns, just in case the IRS audits you for an item you reported years ago. Both Wease and O'Saben recommend keeping copies of your tax return documents for up to seven years.

## **AmazonSmile's end is alarming, say nonprofits that benefited**

By THALIA BEATY and GLENN GAMBOA Associated Press

Amazon's surprise decision to shut down its AmazonSmile donation program has left thousands of its nonprofit beneficiaries disappointed and concerned about finding ways to replace the funding.

The e-commerce giant had launched AmazonSmile in 2013, contributing 0.5% of every purchase made by participating customers to the charity of their choosing. As of 2022, the company said it has donated \$449 million to various charities.

Before it ends the program next month, Amazon says, it will provide a final donation to each of the 1 million-plus nonprofits that used AmazonSmile, equivalent to 25% of what the charity received from the program in 2022.

Some of the e-commerce giant's competitors, including Walmart and Target, have their own community donation programs that somewhat resemble AmazonSmile.

But nonprofits say they feel let down.

Tenisha Taylor says she felt Amazon insulted her Chicago nonprofit's work by saying its program hadn't provided enough of an impact for its charitable beneficiaries.

"You haven't talked to me," said Taylor, who founded the Ezekiel Taylor Foundation, which provides scholarships to young Black men from Chicago whose lives have been affected by gun violence. "You haven't seen my bottom line of impact of these brilliant young men that I have walking on campuses across this country."

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Taylor noted the huge disparity between the wealth of Amazon's founder, Jeff Bezos, and the small amounts that nonprofits use to try to make their communities healthier and safer.

"We are making this company (Amazon) rich — we are," said Taylor referring to communities of color like hers. "At the very least, they can be good corporate citizens to pay it forward in the communities that are patronizing them."

Amazon's decision to end the program was part of a strategic shift to support initiatives that work on a larger scale, like its \$2 billion contribution to build affordable housing, said Patrick Malone, a company spokesperson. After 10 years, he said, it was time to reevaluate the program. He said the move is not a criticism of the nonprofits it supported.

The company also recently announced that it would lay off 18,000 employees and cut other less profitable parts of its business.

Taylor and other nonprofit founders say they are angry that Amazon didn't give them an earlier warning about the program's end. Many nonprofits had promoted AmazonSmile in their own fundraising appeals because the program provided them with a passive revenue stream from Amazon customers.

Lauren Wagner, executive director of the Long Island Arts Alliance, based in Patchogue, New York, said she had encouraged the nonprofits she supports to sign up for AmazonSmile. Now, she's concerned that her organization doesn't know the identity of those customers and wants Amazon to seek permission to share that information with nonprofits.

Malone said Amazon had notified customers of the program's end and has no plans to share customer information with nonprofits.

Wagner said she contacted Amazon many times over the years to suggest improvements to the program. Among her suggestions were allowing users to donate without specifically going to smile.amazon.com and providing the option to donate when shopping on the Amazon app, something the company eventually allowed.

"They certainly never listened to any of the emails that were sent or they never surveyed us," she said. "They never got our input on how to make it more impactful."

A former Amazon employee, Adam Goldstein, said he, too, doubts how interested the company was in improving the program. For three years at Amazon, Goldstein said, he helped nonprofits claim donations, which he said felt was personally rewarding. But he didn't get the impression that the company cared deeply about giving back to the community.

"I only ever got the sense that it was really just about Amazon's bottom line, and the charitable giving was marketing fodder," Goldstein said.

Goldstein, who went on to become a grant writer and now works for a jobs initiative in Seattle, said he was told by a senior marketing manager that the program had been created to encourage customers to buy directly from Amazon rather than clicking through from a Google search for the product. That saved Amazon from having to pay a fee to Google.

Malone said that was not true. He said AmazonSmile was launched to allow customers to direct donations to a charity of their choosing, in what he called a win-win.

Kari Niedfeldt-Thomas, a managing director of Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose, a business coalition that advises companies on social responsibility issues, said she was not surprised by Amazon's decision to eliminate the program.

"A lot of companies start out their corporate community investment programs with what we would refer to as a 'confetti approach' — they give to everyone and everyone's really excited," Niedfeldt-Thomas said. "Then, over time, we see companies moving their strategic pillars to what we would refer to as a more 'concentrated approach.'"

In its letter to customers, Amazon said it would "pursue and invest in other areas where we've seen we can make meaningful change — from building affordable housing to providing access to computer science education for students in underserved communities."

Niedfeldt-Thomas said her coalition considers companies that donate more than 1% of their pre-tax profits to be "good corporate citizens." According to Amazon's 2021 financials, it donates much more than that.

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Malone said the company wants to focus its philanthropic work around its strengths — by, for example, mobilizing large responses during disasters or distributing food aid.

The business coalition's research for 2021 shows that corporate donations were down slightly compared to 2020, when companies accelerated contributions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Niedfeldt-Thomas said. She noted that the current economic climate, with inflation and recession concerns, may also cause further decline.

Though some corporations were "leveling off" in their giving, Niedfeldt-Thomas said her coalition found that 58% of the companies surveyed increased their total community investment between 2019 and 2021 and 35% of companies increased their budgets by more than 25%.

Walmart last year launched a community donation program called Spark Good, in addition to its existing philanthropic efforts that are directed through its store managers. The new program, Spark Good, like AmazonSmile, allows customers to select the nonprofit they want to support when they shop online with Walmart, and lets them buy goods from a nonprofit's registry.

Unlike AmazonSmile, Spark Good does not donate a percentage of a customer's sale. Rather, it allows them to round up their payment to the nearest dollar.

Julie Gehrki, Walmart's vice president of philanthropy, said that Spark Good was designed with input from nonprofits and that it lets them engage with customers in the ways that feel relevant to their organization.

"We started with this idea that we could help connect customers to issues they care about," she said. "We could make their daily shopping experience one that allows them to give back to who they want to and that, in aggregate, that would make a big difference."

Wagner and Taylor said they hoped Amazon would reinstate the program. The small donations they received from customers, they said, were always helpful.

While working at Amazon, Goldstein said, he frequently saw how valuable even the smallest donations were to nonprofits.

"When Amazon says it wasn't the impact that we really wanted, I think the big question is: what was the impact that you wanted?" he said. "And what I hear is, the impact on Amazon's bottom line isn't what they wanted."

## Pope discusses his health, his critics and future of papacy

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis says he hasn't considered issuing norms to regulate future papal resignations and plans to continue for as long as he can as bishop of Rome, despite a wave of criticism from some top-ranking conservative cardinals and bishops about his papal priorities.

In his first interview since the Dec. 31 death of retired Pope Benedict XVI, Francis addressed his critics, his health and the next phase of his pontificate, which marks its 10th anniversary in March without Benedict's shadow in the background.

Francis' comments, delivered Tuesday at the Vatican hotel where he lives, came at a particularly difficult time, as the pontiff navigates conservative opposition to his insistence on making the Catholic Church a more welcoming, inclusive place — criticism that he attributed to the equivalent of a 10-year itch of his papacy.

"You prefer that they don't criticize, for the sake of tranquility," Francis told The Associated Press. "But I prefer that they do it because that means there's freedom to speak."

Some commentators believe Francis might be freer to maneuver now following Benedict's death. Others suggest that any sort of ecclesial peace that had reigned was over and that Francis is now more exposed to critics, deprived of the moderating influence Benedict played in keeping the conservative Catholic fringe at bay.

Francis acknowledged the knives were out, but seemed almost sanguine about it.

"I wouldn't relate it to Benedict, but because of the wear-and-tear of a government of 10 years," Francis said of his critics. He reasoned that his election was initially greeted with a sense of "surprise" about a South American pope. Then came discomfort "when they started to see my flaws and didn't like them,"



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he said of his critics.

"The only thing I ask is that they do it to my face because that's how we all grow, right?" he added.

The pontiff, meanwhile, said he was in good shape, that a slight bone fracture in his knee from a fall had healed without surgery and was ready to get on with his agenda.

"I'm in good health. For my age, I'm normal," the 86-year-old pontiff said, though he revealed that diverticulosis, or bulges in his intestinal wall, had "returned." Francis had 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his large intestine removed in 2021 because of what the Vatican said was inflammation that caused a narrowing of his colon.

"I might die tomorrow, but it's under control. I'm in good health," he said with his typical wry sense of humor.

Speculation about Francis' health and the future of his pontificate has only risen following the death of Benedict, whose 2013 resignation marked a turning point for the Catholic Church since he was the first pontiff in six centuries to retire.

Francis praised Benedict as an "old-fashioned gentleman," and said of his death: "I lost a dad."

"For me, he was a security. In the face of a doubt, I would ask for the car and go to the monastery and ask," he said of his visits to Benedict's retirement home for counsel. "I lost a good companion."

Some cardinals and canon lawyers have said the Vatican must issue norms to regulate future papal retirements to prevent the few hiccups that occurred during Benedict's unexpectedly long retirement, during which he remained a point of reference for some conservatives and traditionalists who refused to recognize Francis' legitimacy.

From the name Benedict chose (pope emeritus) to the (white) cassock he wore to his occasional public remarks (on priestly celibacy and sex abuse), these commentators said norms must make clear there is only one reigning pope for the sake of the unity of the church.

Francis said issuing such norms hadn't even occurred to him.

"I'm telling you the truth," he said, adding that the Vatican needed more experience with papal retirements before setting out to "regularize or regulate" them.

Francis has said Benedict "opened the door" to future resignations, and that he too would consider stepping down. He repeated Tuesday that if he were to resign he'd be called the bishop emeritus of Rome and would live in the residence for retired priests in the diocese of Rome.

Francis said Benedict's decision to live in a converted monastery in the Vatican Gardens was a "good intermediate solution," but that future retired popes might want to do things differently.

"He was still 'enslaved' as a pope, no?" Francis said. "Of the vision of a pope, of a system. 'Slave' in the good sense of the word: In that he wasn't completely free, as he would have liked to have returned to his Germany and continued studying theology."

By one calculation, Benedict's death removes the main obstacle to Francis resigning, since the prospect of two pensioner popes was never an option. But Francis said Benedict's death hadn't altered his calculations. "It didn't even occur to me to write a will," he said.

As for his own near-term future, Francis emphasized his role as "bishop of Rome" as opposed to pontiff and said of his plans: "Continue being bishop, bishop of Rome in communion with all the bishops of the world." He said he wanted to put to rest the concept of the papacy as a power player or papal "court."

Francis also addressed the criticism from cardinals and bishops that burst into public in the weeks since Benedict's death, saying it's unpleasant — "like a rash that bothers you a bit" — but that is better than keeping it under wraps. Francis has been attacked for years by conservatives and traditionalists who object to his priorities of social justice issues such as poverty, migration and the environment.

"If it's not like this, there would be a dictatorship of distance, as I call it, where the emperor is there and no one can tell him anything. No, let them speak because ... criticism helps you to grow and improve things," he said.

The first salvo in the latest wave of attacks came from Benedict's longtime secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, who revealed the bad blood that accumulated over the last 10 years in a tell-all memoir published in the days after Benedict's funeral.

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In one of the most explosive sections, Gaenswein revealed that Benedict learned by reading the Vatican daily newspaper L'Osservatore Romano that Francis had reversed one of the former pope's most significant liturgical decisions and re-imposed restrictions on celebrating the Old Latin Mass.

A few days later, the Vatican was rattled anew by the death of another conservative stalwart, Cardinal George Pell, and revelations that Pell was the author of a devastating memorandum that circulated last year that called the Francis pontificate a "disaster" and a "catastrophe."

The memo, which was initially published under the pseudonym "Demos," listed what it considered problems in the Vatican under Francis, from its precarious finances to the pontiff's preaching style, and issued bullet points for what a future pope should do to fix them.

Francis acknowledged Pell's criticism but still sang his praises for having been his "right-hand man" on reforming the Vatican's finances as his first economy minister.

"Even though they say he criticized me, fine, he has the right. Criticism is a human right," Francis said. But he added: "He was a great guy. Great."

## **EXPLAINER: Novak Djokovic's successful return to Australia**

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic was still in the first set of his Australian Open quarterfinal against Andrey Rublev when the guy who would face the winner of that match, Tommy Paul, sat down for a news conference.

"Probably have a better chance of winning if it's Rublev," Paul said with a smile, "but to play Novak here in Australia would be awesome."

Well, he'll get that chance Friday at Rod Laver Arena in the semifinals.

Djokovic was never really tested en route to beating No. 5 seed Rublev 6-1, 6-2, 6-4 on Wednesday night to extend his winning streak at Melbourne Park to 26 matches, tied with Andre Agassi for the longest run by a man there in the Open era, which dates to 1968.

If he makes that 28 in a row with victories over the unseeded Paul and then either No. 3 Stefanos Tsitsipas or No. 18 Karen Khachanov in Sunday's final, Djokovic would earn his 10th championship at the Australian Open, adding to a mark he already owns, and his 22nd from all Grand Slam tournaments, equaling Rafael Nadal's record for men.

There was, of course, a pause during Djokovic's streak: He did not play in last year's Australian Open, which is part of what he calls the "something extra" that made him want "to really do well" this time around.

Here's a look at why Djokovic was not at the tournament in 2022, why he is back in 2023, and whether anyone can prevent him from leaving town with the trophy:

**WHY WASN'T DJOKOVIC AT LAST YEAR'S AUSTRALIAN OPEN?**

The short answer: He wasn't vaccinated against COVID-19. The longer answer: Djokovic sought, and initially obtained, an exemption that would allow him into the tournament — and the country — even though there were strict rules requiring shots. But after his flight landed, he was detained at the airport, his visa was canceled and he was sent to an immigration hotel. A judge later reinstated the visa and ordered Djokovic's release, ruling he wasn't given enough time to speak to his lawyers. Australia's immigration minister then took away the visa again, based on "public interest." Djokovic's appeal of that ruling was denied by a three-judge panel, and he was deported. He faced a possible three-year ban from the country as someone whose visa was revoked.

**WHY IS HE PLAYING THERE THIS YEAR?**

Djokovic, a 35-year-old from Serbia, is still not vaccinated against the illness caused by the coronavirus — and has said he won't get inoculated, even if it means missing tournaments. But Australia had a change of government, the country's pandemic border rules changed, and the current immigration minister granted him a visa this time. (As of now, the United States still bars unvaccinated foreigners, which could prevent Djokovic from competing at the U.S. Open for the second year in a row.)

**HOW HAS HE BEEN RECEIVED BY SPECTATORS?**

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From the moment he arrived in Melbourne, Djokovic has been showered with affection (other than from the occasional persistent heckler). Dozens of Serbian flags dot the stands during these matches. So do signs proclaiming him the sport's "GOAT" — "Greatest of All-Time." Chants of his two-syllable nickname, "No-le! No-le!" fill the air repeatedly.

## HOW IS HE PLAYING?

Djokovic got off to a slow start, hampered by an injured left hamstring that was taped for each match. But after playing at something less than his best, what he has said is a rigorous treatment regimen and "a lot" of pain-killing pills helped him look superb lately: He has won 11 consecutive sets and ceded just 27 games. Here was Alex de Minaur's takeaway after losing to Djokovic 6-2, 6-1, 6-2: "If that's the level, I think he's definitely the guy that's going to take the title." On Wednesday, Djokovic called his last two performances "something that sends a message to all my opponents remaining in the draw."

## CAN ANYONE BEAT HIM?

A key statistic: Djokovic is a combined 18-0 in semifinals and finals in Melbourne. Plus, not only is he the only man left who owns a Grand Slam trophy, the other three semifinalists have participated in a total of one major final: Tsitsipas was the runner-up to Djokovic at the 2021 French Open, taking a two-set lead before losing in five. One might think Tsitsipas would be the one who would like to forget that ever happened, but it was Djokovic who seemed to not remember the other day, when he said about the 24-year-old from Greece: "He has never played a final, am I wrong?" Reminded by reporters about Roland Garros, Djokovic replied: "That's right. Sorry, my bad." As for head-to-head against the semifinalists, Djokovic has never played Paul, is 10-2 against Tsitsipas (winning the last nine) and 8-1 against Khachanov (winning the last seven). Looking ahead to facing Paul, an American ranked 35th, Djokovic said: "If I play this way, I think I have a good chance to go through."

## Hurts, Jefferson, Mahomes among AP NFL MVP finalists

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Jalen Hurts, Justin Jefferson and Patrick Mahomes are finalists for The Associated Press 2022 NFL Most Valuable Player and Offensive Player of the Year awards.

The winners will be announced at NFL Honors on Feb. 9. A nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the league completed voting before the start of the playoffs.

Bills quarterback Josh Allen and Bengals QB Joe Burrow also are finalists for MVP.

Hurts had 3,701 yards passing, 760 yards rushing and 35 touchdowns combined, leading the Philadelphia Eagles to a 14-3 record in the regular season and the No. 1 seed in the NFC. The Eagles (15-3) are in the NFC championship game for the second time in six seasons.

Jefferson led the NFL with 128 catches and 1,809 yards receiving in his third season with the Minnesota Vikings. Jefferson was one of two unanimous choices for AP All-Pro along with Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce.

Mahomes, the 2018 NFL MVP, helped Kansas City go 14-3 to earn the No. 1 seed in the AFC. The Chiefs (15-3) are in the AFC title game for the fifth straight season. They'll host the Bengals. Mahomes led the NFL with 5,250 yards passing and 41 TDs. He received 49 of 50 votes for AP first-team All-Pro.

San Francisco 49ers edge rusher Nick Bosa, Chiefs defensive tackle Chris Jones and Dallas Cowboys edge rusher Micah Parsons are the finalists for AP Defensive Player of the Year.

Bosa led the NFL with 18 1/2 sacks, Jones had 15 1/2 and Parsons got 14 1/2.

Brian Daboll, Doug Pederson and Kyle Shanahan are the finalists for AP Coach of the Year award. Daboll led the New York Giants to a 9-7-1 record in his first season as head coach. Pederson guided the Jacksonville Jaguars to a 9-8 record and an AFC South title in his first year with the team. Shanahan led the San Francisco 49ers to a 13-4 mark, including 5-0 down the stretch with third-string rookie quarterback Brock Purdy.

Purdy, Seattle Seahawks running back Kenneth Walker III and New York Jets wide receiver Garrett Wilson are the finalists for AP Offensive Rookie of the Year.

Purdy, the last player selected in the draft, began the season as third-string QB and stepped in after

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injuries to Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo. He led San Francisco to a 5-0 record down the stretch, two playoff wins and an appearance in the NFC championship game at Philadelphia.

Walker led all rookies with 1,050 yards rushing and nine TDs. Wilson led all rookies with 83 catches and 1,103 yards receiving.

Jets cornerback Ahmad "Sauce" Gardner, Detroit Lions defensive end Aidan Hutchinson and Seahawks cornerback Tariq Woolen are the finalists for AP Defensive Rookie of the Year.

New York Giants running back Saquon Barkley, 49ers running back Christian McCaffrey and Seahawks quarterback Geno Smith are the finalists for AP Comeback Player of the Year.

Lions offensive coordinator Ben Johnson, 49ers defensive coordinator DeMeco Ryans and Eagles offensive coordinator Shane Steichen are the finalists for AP Assistant Coach of the Year.

This was the first year for the AP's new voting system. Voters chose a top 5 for MVP and top 3 for all other awards. For MVP, first-place were worth 10 points. Second through fifth-place votes were worth 5, 3, 2 and 1 points.

For all the other awards, first-place votes equaled 5 points, second were 3 and third were 1.

## Shiffrin adds to record total with 84th win in another GS

SAN VIGILIO DI MAREBBE, Italy (AP) — Mikaela Shiffrin didn't wait long to add to her record total of World Cup wins.

A day after securing record victory No. 83, Shiffrin added her 84th win on Wednesday in another giant slalom on the same course.

And like how she did it a day earlier, Shiffrin led from start to finish, dominating the first run down the steep Erta course and then adding to her advantage in the second run.

Shiffrin finished a massive 0.82 seconds ahead of two-time Olympic silver medalist Ragnhild Mowinckel and 1.19 ahead of Olympic champion Sara Hector.

When Shiffrin reached the finish after her second run, she collapsed to the snow in apparent exhaustion — with her skis still attached to her boots — before Mowinckel and Hector came over to congratulate her and help her up.

"Oh my gosh," Shiffrin said. "I was pushing so hard and I just hoped I ended up on the right side of all the gates. Now I'm a bit dead mentally — just so tired. But when you ski like that it keeps your energy going so just an incredible feeling."

While Tuesday's win moved Shiffrin ahead of the previous women's mark of 82 victories held by former American teammate Lindsey Vonn, Wednesday's victory moved her within two of the overall record — between men and women — of 86 wins held by Ingemar Stenmark.

Vonn retired four years ago when injuries cut her career short, while Stenmark raced in the 1970s and 80s.

If Shiffrin wins two slaloms in Spindleruv Mlyn, Czech Republic, this weekend, she could match Stenmark on Sunday.

"Technically, it is possible," Shiffrin said with a laugh. "We'll see if I can put the energy on my slalom skis for two more races.

"It's been busy, and I am in a kind of an unfortunate time of my monthly cycle, so I'm more tired right now. We just normalized talking about that," she added.

Spindleruv was where Shiffrin made her World Cup debut as a 15-year-old prodigy nearly 12 years ago.

"It's a special place for me," she said. "So I'm really looking forward to go."

Former World Cup giant slalom champion Marta Bassino was on track for the podium before she lost control a few gates from the finish and plowed through a gate, which hit her hard in the shins.

It was Shiffrin's 10th win of the season and her 19th career victory in giant slalom, moving her within one of Vreni Schneider's record of 20 in the discipline.

Shiffrin said she had a late night after her record-breaking day.

"But it was a really nice evening," she said. "It was so nice to see messages from people and so much support and so much excitement about the race. I was definitely looking a lot at all of that and then try-

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ing to go to bed and have a good night's sleep. And I was awake at midnight. I was awake at 3. Then I was awake at 5. I was hungry all night. I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm a mess.'"

Still, Shiffrin managed to pull herself together in order to bring out her best skiing again.

"After yesterday, I was just so tired, which made today pretty hard," she said. "And I felt nervous because when I am skiing tired, I make mistakes. And I didn't want to make a mistake today.

"In the first run, I thought, 'Either I am going out at the fourth gate or it's going to be a really good run.' It ended up being a really good run. The second run, I was just trying to trust my skiing and keep pushing, no matter what I felt."

## Microsoft reports outage for Teams, Outlook, other services

LONDON (AP) — Microsoft said it's seeing some improvement to problems with its online services including the Teams messaging platform and Outlook email system after users around the world reported outages Wednesday.

In a status update, the tech company reported "service degradation" for a number of its Microsoft 365 services.

Thousands of users reported problems with Teams, Outlook, the Azure cloud computing service and Xbox Live online gaming service early Wednesday on the Downdetector website, which tracks outage reports. Many users also took to social media to complain that services were down.

By later in the morning, Downdetector showed the number of reports had dropped considerably.

"We're continuing to monitor the recovery across the service and some customers are reporting mitigation," the Microsoft 365 Status Twitter account said. "We're also connecting the service to additional infrastructure to expedite the recovery process."

It tweeted earlier that it had "isolated the problem to a networking configuration issue" and that a network change suspected to be causing the problem was rolled back.

It comes after Microsoft reported Tuesday that its quarterly profit fell 12%, reflecting economic uncertainty that the company said led to its decision this month to cut 10,000 workers.

## Central American gangs raising fears in southern Mexico

By EDGAR H. CLEMENTE Associated Press

TAPACHULA, Mexico (AP) — With threatening phone calls, burned minibuses and at least three drivers shot to death, street gangs more closely associated with Central America are imposing their brand of terror-based extortion on public transportation drivers in southern Mexico.

Organized crime groups including the rival Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs have long maintained a presence along the border between Mexico and Guatemala, but Mexican authorities say their numbers have increased over the past year as El Salvador cracks down on gang members and their criminal enterprises.

Drivers of the passenger vans and taxis people depend on for transportation in largely rural Chiapas say they live in fear for their livelihood, or their lives. They have raised the alarm, holding temporary work stoppages to get authorities' attention. The owner of one transport company in Tapachula has started moving with bodyguards.

Some admit to paying the extortion, having seen what happens to those who didn't.

"If we don't do anything we're going to be a little (El) Salvador," said a leader of drivers in the town of Huixtla, where a driver was shot by two men on a motorcycle last February. The man requested anonymity, fearing gang reprisals.

Drivers in Huixtla showed The Associated Press vouchers dating back a year, documenting the payments.

Generally, it starts with someone climbing aboard the bus and handing a phone to the driver, sometimes while pointing a gun at the driver's head. The drivers are told to give the phone to the owner of the bus, van or taxi, establishing a direct line of communication.

Then the threats begin.

Callers show the owners that they know who they are, where they live, their routines and their liveli-

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hoods, according to recordings reviewed by the AP. Speaking with distinctive Central American accents, Salvadoran slang and vulgarity, they ask for \$50 initially and then \$50 per month for each van or taxi, said a representative of drivers in Tapachula, who also requested anonymity out of fear.

The latest attack came Monday, when an unidentified man fired into the local bus terminal in Cacahoatan. No one was injured, but bullets struck a parked van and led drivers to suspend service. The shooter fled with another man on a motorcycle. Earlier this month, a van was set on fire in the same municipality.

Local authorities formed an anti-gang task force and posted police at transport hubs, and last month Mexico's military deployed an additional 350 soldiers to communities along the Guatemalan border.

"The intent is to support the civilian population to decrease the homicides tied to organized crime and the level of violence that has been on the rise in recent days," said Ángel Banda Lozoya, commander of the local army regiment.

But the drivers remain exposed as they make frequent stops on long rural routes, and military might can't easily quash a threat that arrives unseen, through menacing calls and messages.

José Mateo Martínez, Chiapas state prosecutor for migrant affairs, says El Salvador's crackdown on organized crime is behind the increase in criminal activity in Mexico. "People are coming to hide from that, but there are also gang leaders who come to create a criminal group here," he said.

In March 2022, El Salvador suspended some constitutional rights in reaction to an explosion of violence. The state of exception has continued since then, despite wide criticism by human rights organizations, with more than 60,000 people arrested on suspicion of gang ties.

Enforcement has been less forceful among El Salvador's neighbors: From 2018 through November 2022, Mexico arrested and deported 97 Salvadorans allegedly tied to gangs, mostly in the last two years, according to the Chiapas state prosecutor's office. Neighboring Guatemala deported 90 alleged Salvadoran gang members last year, National Civilian Police spokesman Edwin Monroy said.

The gangs are transnational by nature, with tens of thousands of members in the United States as well as Central America and Mexico. El Salvador's dominant street gangs formed in Los Angeles among communities of immigrants who had fled armed conflicts in the 1980s. Eventually deported, they found fertile ground for more violence, committing crimes in one country and then hiding out in another, blending in with the daily flow of migrants across borders.

These gangs have long operated along Mexico's borders, sometimes providing street muscle for Mexico's powerful drug cartels or running their own criminal enterprises, profiting from the illicit traffic of drugs, guns and migrants. And some Mexican cartels extort businesses in other parts of the country.

But another Tapachula transportation leader, who requested anonymity because he feared reprisals insisted that these extortionists are Central American gangsters, not Mexican cartel members.

Extorting local transportation has been a key line of their revenue in El Salvador. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele said in August that extortion of that sector had fallen dramatically. His transportation minister estimated bus companies had stopped paying some \$50 million to gangs.

Other authorities have announced some successes: In August, Mexican police took down a gang cell that sold drugs and robbed clients at a bar in Tapachula. One of the five people captured had a pending arrest order from El Salvador and was deported.

In November, Mexican authorities arrested and deported to El Salvador a purported leader of the Barrio 18 gang, suspected in the killings of six people in San Salvador in 2020. Authorities in El Salvador said he had fled to Mexico with his family and other gang members to avoid capture under El Salvador's special emergency powers.

And on Jan. 3, Guatemala captured and deported a Salvadoran gang member who had multiple arrest warrants on charges ranging from aggravated murder to terrorism.

But people who depend on transit in southern Mexico remain dissatisfied. There's a police vehicle parked daily at the local station in Tapachula where vans arrive and depart constantly, but their drivers remain exposed.

Two of the killings happened northwest of Tapachula near the Pacific coast. In September, a man got

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out of a van driving the route between Tonalá and Arriaga and shot the female driver. In late October, a driver was shot in Mapastepec by two men on a motorcycle, not far from the local terminal.

## Leaders are meant to keep state secrets. Just not at home.

By CALVIN WOODWARD and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats responded with aggrieved fury when former President Donald Trump was found in possession of classified documents that should have been turned over to the government when he left office. Then disclosures that President Joe Biden also mishandled secret papers set loose a Republican “well, what about” roar.

Now, with another discovery of classified documents, this time at the home of Trump’s vice president, Mike Pence, the partisan finger-pointing seems to be melting into a chorus of mortification from Democrats and Republicans.

The highest U.S. secrets, it now appears, are not necessarily safe with the highest officials. Not when they’re in the hands of Trump, who disdains the rules and customs of government, and not in the hands of Biden and Pence, who subscribe to them.

“What the hell’s going on around here?” asked Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, when asked about Pence.

“Obviously there’s a systemic problem in the executive branch,” Rubio said. “We’re talking about two successive administrations from two different parties, with officials at the top level having, in their possession, documents in places that they don’t belong.”

The Democratic chairman of that panel, Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, had tart advice for all ex-presidents and future ones regardless of party: “Go check your closets.”

The latest disclosure came from Pence lawyer Greg Jacob, who informed the National Archives — the proper place for such material — that classified documents were found in Pence’s Indiana home last week.

Jacob said an apparently small number of papers were inadvertently boxed and transported to the home at the end of the Trump administration and came to light when Pence, prompted by the discoveries in Biden’s home and pre-presidential think-tank offices, asked lawyers to see if he had some, too.

Special counsels are investigating the Trump and Biden episodes. In all three matters, the significance of the classified material and whether its mishandling breaches national security is not publicly known. But it is clear that some of the documents retrieved at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago home in Palm Beach, Florida, were top secret.

Trump, a Republican, took it as an affront that the government came searching his quarters for classified material he wasn’t supposed to have, even though he fought efforts to reclaim them for months, and the government was forced to issue a subpoena to get them. Aides to Biden, a Democrat, say they cooperated quickly and fully when such material was found at a former office in Washington, though they waited for months to make public what had happened.

In the Republican-controlled House, Rep. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, a contender to lead the Intelligence Committee, said he will ask for the same intelligence review and damage assessment in the Pence case as he did in earlier discoveries.

“It is a serious matter for any government official to mishandle classified documents,” Turner said.

Heedless handling of secure information by top officials became a politically charged issue during the 2016 presidential race, when Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate, was investigated for her loose email practices as secretary of state.

Then-FBI chief James Comey concluded she and aides were “extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information,” but not willfully so, and he recommended against criminal prosecution.

The sprawling, ungainly U.S. government has plenty of people who can see at least some secrets and are supposed to keep them closely held. Some 1.25 million held top-secret clearance in 2019, according to a government report.

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Leaks of classified information to the media aren't uncommon. But lawmakers from both parties said something is broken in the classification system when a president, an ex-president and an ex-vice president are found with papers they are not entitled to have.

"I don't believe there were 'sinister motives' with regards to the handling of classified information by President Biden, President Trump, or Vice President Pence," Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina tweeted. "We have a classified information problem which needs to be fixed."

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and a senior member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he and Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., have been working for years on an overhaul of the classification system, which he called a "broken-down mess."

"The overall system is at the point where there is so much out there it is hard to determine what ought to be classified, and then it is hard to determine what should be declassified," Wyden said.

Avril Haines, national intelligence director, "has begun the chore, for the first time really in years and years, to work on a bipartisan basis on this," Wyden added. "I think it's a gutsy move for her."

"Maybe it's as simple as how they're packing boxes," Rubio mused. "I know the processes we have in place to safeguard such material at the legislative level, but we need to have a better understanding of how this is being handled at the executive level, and probably not just limited to presidents and vice presidents, but key staffers and other officials in the government that have access to this."

Representatives of former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, as well as of Bush Vice President Dick Cheney, said there were no instances of classified documents being found outside the custody of the archives after their time in office.

But at least several times a year, former officials from all levels of government discover they have classified material and turn it over to authorities, said a person familiar with the process, speaking on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of classified documents.

That person said former President Jimmy Carter found classified materials at his home in Plains, Georgia, on at least one occasion and returned them to the National Archives. But Carter's records legally belonged to him because it was not until after his presidency that the law defined all presidential and vice presidential records as property of the U.S. government.

Jason R. Baron, former director of litigation at the National Archives, said it's possible for innocent mistakes to happen when one administration hands over power to the next one, given "the harried nature of staff preparing for a presidential transition."

"I am not surprised that documents with classified markings can be found mixed in with personal papers in the homes of former government officials," he said. He recommended that outgoing officials at the highest levels be required to subject papers designated "personal" to much stricter reviews before any boxes leave the premises.

On Capitol Hill, meantime, it was becoming clear that the Pence episode had reset the blame game.

"No one is above the law," Republican Sen. Rick Scott of Florida said. "I don't know how anybody ends up with classified documents. ... I mean, every classified document I've ever seen has a big 'Classified' on it."

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas noted that classified documents are only moved out of the committee's offices in locked bags.

"In my book, it's never permissible to take classified documents outside of a secure facility or by some secure means of transport in between those secure facilities," he said.

Wyden said that in his many years on the committee, it has always been a "lodestar" that you don't take anything out of the room.

"Period," he said. "Full stop."



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## Today in History: JAN 26, Kobe Bryant and daughter killed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 26, the 26th day of 2022. There are 339 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 26, 1998, President Bill Clinton forcefully denied having an affair with a former White House intern, telling reporters, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

On this date:

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Rocky Mountain National Park Act, which created America's 10th national park.

In 1962, the United States launched Ranger 3 to land scientific instruments on the moon. (The probe ended up missing its target by more than 22,000 miles.)

In 1992, Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton, appearing with his wife, Hillary, on CBS' "60 Minutes," acknowledged "causing pain in my marriage," but said past problems were not relevant to the campaign.

In 1993, Vaclav Havel (VAHTS'-lahv HAH'-vel) was elected president of the newly formed Czech Republic.

In 1994, a scare occurred during a visit to Sydney, Australia, by Britain's Prince Charles as college student David Kang lunged at the prince, firing two blank shots from a starter's pistol. (Kang was later sentenced to 500 hours of community service.)

In 2005, a U.S. Marine helicopter crashed in western Iraq, killing 30 Marines and a Navy medic aboard. A man parked his SUV on railroad tracks in Glendale, California, setting off a crash of two commuter trains that killed 11 people. (The SUV's driver, Juan Alvarez, was convicted of murder and sentenced to 11 consecutive life terms.)

In 2009, Nadya Suleman gave birth at Kaiser Permanente Bellflower Medical Center in California to six boys and two girls; criticism came after the public learned that the unemployed, single mother had gotten pregnant with the octuplets and six elder children through in vitro fertilization.

In 2016, the FBI arrested the leaders of an armed group that was occupying a national wildlife refuge in Oregon for more than three weeks during a traffic stop that left one man, Robert "LaVoy" Finicum, dead. Character actor Abe Vigoda, 94, died in Woodland Park, New Jersey.

In 2020, NBA legend Kobe Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter and seven others were killed when their helicopter plunged into a steep hillside in dense morning fog in Southern California; the former Lakers star was 41. Eighteen-year-old singer Billie Eilish made history at the Grammy Awards, becoming the youngest to win one of Grammy's top awards and the first to sweep all four in nearly 40 years.

Ten years ago: Thousands of people, many holding signs with names of gun violence victims, joined a rally in Washington, D.C. for gun control, marching from the Capitol to the Washington Monument. Victoria Azarenka won her second consecutive Australian Open title, beating Li Na 4-6, 6-4, 6-3. Ashley Wagner became the first woman since Michelle Kwan in 2005 to win back-to-back titles in the U.S. Figure Skating Championships, holding off up-and-comer Gracie Gold in Omaha, Neb.

Five years ago: A jury in suburban New Orleans found Ronald Gasser guilty of manslaughter in the shooting death of NFL running back Joe McKnight in a December 2016 road-rage confrontation. (Gasser, 56, was later sentenced to 30 years in prison.) Michigan State University Athletic Director Mark Hollis retired, two days after the university's president resigned over the school's handling of sexual abuse allegations against disgraced former sports doctor Larry Nassar. A fire raced through a small South Korean hospital with no sprinkler system, killing 37 people.

One year ago: The Federal Reserve signaled that it planned to start raising interest rates to fight high inflation. Boston's Brigham & Women's Hospital defended its decision to deny a man a heart transplant in part because he refused to be vaccinated for COVID-19. Spotify said it would grant the request of veteran rocker Neil Young to have his music removed from the streaming platform; Young objected to what he said was Spotify's decision to allow COVID-19 misinformation to spread in podcasts. After 40 consecutive

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wins and nearly \$1.4 million in prize money, the winning streak of "Jeopardy!" champion Amy Schneider came to an end.

Today's birthdays: Cartoonist Jules Feiffer is 94. Sportscaster-actor Bob Uecker is 88. Actor Scott Glenn is 84. Singer Jean Knight is 80. Activist Angela Davis is 79. Actor Richard Portnow is 76. Rock musician Corky Laing (Mountain) is 75. Actor David Strathairn (streh-THEHRN') is 74. Producer-director Mimi Leder is 71. Alt-country singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams is 70. Reggae musician Norman Hassan (UB40) is 65. Actor-comedian-talk show host Ellen DeGeneres is 65. Rock musician Charlie Gillingham (Counting Crows) is 63. Hockey Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky is 62. Musician Andrew Ridgeley is 60. R&B singer Jazzie B (Soul II Soul) is 60. Actor Paul Johansson is 59. Director Lenny Abrahamson is 57. Actor Bryan Callen is 56. Gospel singer Kirk Franklin is 53. Actor Nate Mooney is 51. Actor Jennifer Crystal is 50. Rock musician Chris Hesse (Hoobastank) is 49. Actor Matilda Szydagis is 49. Actor Gilles Marini (ZHEEL ma-REE'-nee) is 47. Gospel singer Tye Tribbett is 47. Retired NBA player Vince Carter is 46. Actor Sarah Rue is 45. Actor Colin O'Donoghue is 42.