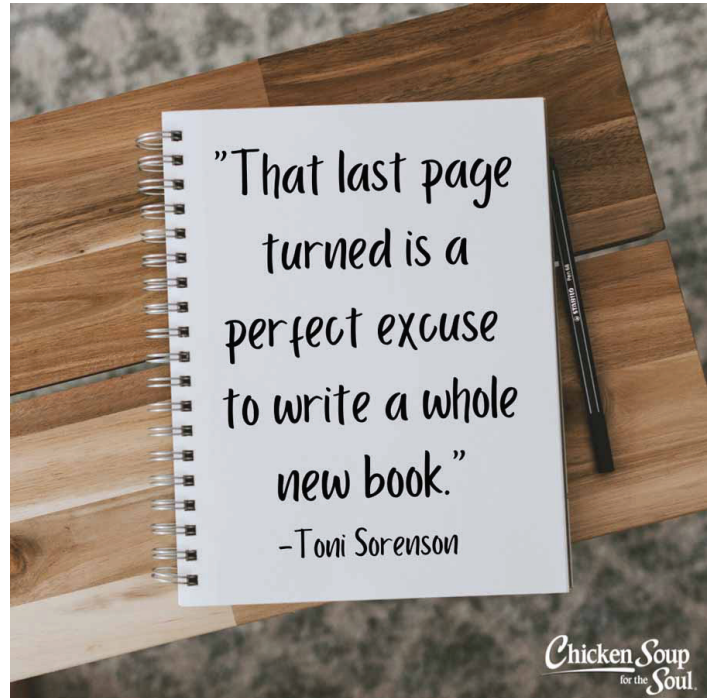


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Groton Community Calendar Friday, Feb. 3

Senior Menu: Sloppy Joe on bun, oven roasted potatoes, coleslaw, pumpkin bar.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Cheese breadstick with marinara, vegetable blend.

Wrestling at Presho

Groton Lions Dress Consignment, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Groton Community Center

Saturday, Feb. 4

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.

DAK12-NEC Girls Clash at Madison: 12:30 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Canton

Boys at Elk Point-Jefferson with C game at 1 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity

Wrestling at Stanley County, 10 a.m.

Groton Lions Prom and Formal Dress Sale, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Groton Community Center

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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

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USD athletics announces launch of GoYotes TV

VERMILLION, S.D. - South Dakota athletics is excited to announce the launch of a new cable television network, GoYotes TV, starting this Saturday, February 4th. The network is a result of a partnership between USD Athletics and 13 of SDN Communications' 17 Member companies. GoYotes TV's inaugural broadcast will be the South Dakota/North Dakota men's basketball game that will tip off at 1pm on Saturday at the Sanford Coyote Sports Center.

"We are thrilled about partnering with SDN Communications to bring GoYotes TV to life," said USD Athletics Director David Herbster. "This is a great opportunity for us to spread the red across the entire state of South Dakota and for our fans to have another outlet to support Coyote athletics."

Midco Sports will remain the primary broadcast partner for USD Athletics, with the first choice to broadcast events live on Midco Sports, Midco Sports Two and Midco Sports Plus. GoYotes TV will cover live events that are not broadcast on either Midco Sports network. These events may include men's and women's basketball, volleyball, soccer, softball, track and field, and swimming and diving. More content will be added over time. Look for classic USD games, coaches' shows, podcasts, documentaries, and other USD athletics content coming in the near future.

Future plans for GoYotes TV include the broadcast of several USD campus and community events including student concerts, live theatre performances, and the Coyote News – a student-run weekly news broadcast. The channel will highlight the entire University of South Dakota and the exciting student culture and achievements of our student body, faculty, and community.

"This a very exciting day for USD Athletics and, I believe, the state of South Dakota," said USD Senior Associate Athletics Director for External Affairs Joe Thuente. "This is a great chance to shine a spotlight on not just our athletics department, but this great university and our awesome community of Vermillion. Between GoYotes TV and our partners at Midco Sports, nearly every person with a cable subscription in the state of South Dakota will have access to our events via cable TV broadcast."

SDN Communications' Member companies are all locally owned and operated broadband providers in South Dakota. Their combined service territory covers more than 80% of the state's geography, north to south, east to west.

"This is a case of local companies promoting local content for local viewers. The University of South Dakota is a huge part of what makes this state great, and we are excited to partner with them on this new network," said SDN Communications CEO Ryan Punt.

The list of broadband providers and channels GoYotes TV will run on are below. Live events will also continue to be broadcast for free on GoYotes.com.

Alliance Communications – Ch. 255

Midstate Communications – Ch. 132

Interstate Telecommunications Cooperative – Ch 186, and Ch 132 in Milbank

Golden West Telecommunications – Ch. 78

TrioTel Communications – Ch. 119

James Valley Telecommunications – Ch. 40

Venture Communications – Ch. 378

West River Cable Television – Ch. 159

RC Technologies – Ch. 34

Santel Communications – Ch. 162

Swiftel Communications – Ch. 39

Valley Telecommunications – Ch. 275

Mitchell Telecom – Ch. 698

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Leicht with 20 and Larson with 21 lead the Tiger varsity squads

Groton Area won three of the four games Thursday night as the Tigers played Deuel in basketball action. The Lady Tigers varsity team won, 49-31, the boys varsity team lost, 61-52, and both junior varsity teams won.

The Lady Tigers scored 28 unanswered points in the game to run away from Deuel in basketball action played in Groton, 49-31. Deuel had a 9-3 lead and then the big rally happened with 28 straight points to take a 31-9 lead.

Sydney Leicht led the Tigers with 20 points, three rebounds, one assist and four steals. Jerica Locke had eight points, five rebounds, seven steals and two steals. Brooke Gengerke had six points, four rebounds. Kennedy Hansen had six points, one rebound and one steal. Jaedyn Penning had four points, three rebounds, two assists and two steals. Rylee Dunker had two points and one steal. Faith Traphagen had one point, four rebounds. Brooklyn Hansen had one rebound and one steal. Laila Roberts had one rebound and one steal.

Groton Area made 17 of 40 two-pointers for 43 percent, three of 16 three-pointers for 19 percent, six of nine free throws for 67 percent, had 26 rebounds, 15 turnovers, 11 assists, 13 steals and 15 team fouls.

Harley Hennings led the Cardinals with 13 points followed by Josie Andersen with six, Kaitlyn Gubrud five, Jaycee Hourigan, Emma Hamann and Jalyn Bury each had two points and Camdyn Peterreins added a free throw. Deuel made 11 of 37 field goals for 29 percent, seven of 12 free throws for 58 percent, had 22 turnovers and 11 team fouls.

Groton Area won the girls junior varsity game, 55-16, leading at the quarter stops at 16-2, 31-6 and 42-14.

Scoring for Groton Area: Faith Traphagen 18, Kennedy Hansen 10, Laila Roberts 7, Brooklyn Hansen 6, Emily Clark 4, Talli Wright 3, Taryn Traphagen 3, McKenna Tietz 2, Rylee Dunker 2.

Scoring for Deuel: Morgan Theisen 7, Camdyn Peterreins 4, Jaylyn Bury 3, Gracelyn Nielsen 2.

Deuel built a big lead and hung on to it, never trailing in the game as the Cardinals posted a 61-52 win over Groton Area in the boys varsity game. Deuel led, 21-11, after the first quarter, and opened up an 18-point lead in the second quarter, 31-13, and led at half time, 35-23. Deuel led, 44-41 after three quarters. The Tigers closed to whiten one, 47-46, in the fourth quarter but was unable to cross the threshold.

Tate Larson led Groton Area with 21 points, five rebounds, and one assist. Jacob Zak had 14 points, three rebounds, four assists, one steal and one blocked shot. Cole Simon had nine points, one rebound, one assist and two steals. Ryder Johnson had five points, four rebounds, one assist and two seals. Taylor Diegel had two points and one rebound. Lane Tietz had one point, four rebounds, four assists and two steals. Cade Larson had one rebound and one assist. Logan Ringgenberg had one rebound and Keegan Tracy had one assist.

Groton Area made 16 of 33 field goals for 48 percent, three of 16 in three-pointers for 19 percent, 11 of 17 free throws for 65 percent, had 20 rebounds, 12 turnovers, 13 assists, seven steals, 14 fouls and one block shot.

Gavin Bench led Deuel with 19 points while Braydon Simon had 17, Trey Maaland nine, Carter Leddy eight, Ricky Berndt four, and Owen Quail and Ronnie Begalka each had two points. The Cardinals made 24 of 35 field goals for 69 percent, 11 of 18 free throws for 61 percent, had 17 turnovers and 14 team fouls.

Groton Area boys junior varsity team used two rallies, one of nine points and one of 13 points to post a 49-29 win. Groton Area led at the quarter stops at 11-8, 23-14 and 40-21.

Scoring for Groton Area: Teylor Diegel 9, Ryder Johnson 7, Colby Dunker 6, Logan Ringgenberg 6, Dillon Abeln 5, Keegan Tracy 5, Gage Sippel 5, Holden Sippel 4, Carter Simon 2.

Scoring for Deuel: Caleb Ronde 10, Gabe Sather 5, Caden Finnesand 4, Robert Begalka 4, Troy Jensen 3, Dexter Unzen 3.

Both junior varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM and both were sponsored by Kent and Darcy Muller. The varsity game sponsors were 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 and Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc. Shane Clark did the calling of the girls games. Jeslyn Kosel and Laura Clark operated the camera.

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DAK XII – NEC “CLASH”

Girls Basketball / February 4, 2023
@ Madison High School

SCHEDULE

AUX GYM

- 11:45 / #11 Seeds / Webster Area (38.250) vs Dell Rapids (36.786)
- 1:15 / #10 Seeds / Deuel (38.917) vs Madison (38.500)
- 2:45 / #9 Seeds / Redfield (39.077) vs Tri-Valley (39.167)
- 4:15 / #8 Seeds / Clark-Willow Lk (39.538) vs West Central (39.909)
- 5:45 / #7 Seeds / Tiospa Zina (39.571) vs Dak Valley (39.929)

MAIN GYM

- 11:00 / #6 Seeds / Ab Roncalli (41.917) vs ElkPoint-Jeff (40.917)
- 12:30 / #5 Seeds / Groton Area (43.077) vs Canton (41.333)
- 2:00 / #4 Seeds / Milbank (43.250) vs Tea Area (41.636)
- 3:30 / #3 Seeds / Parkston (43.333) vs Lennox (43.071)
- 5:00 / #2 Seeds / Sisseton (45.083) vs SF Christian (45.000)
- 6:30 / #1 Seeds / Hamlin (46.923) vs Vermillion (46.500)

***** Game times are NOT rolling *****



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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No. 20 Wolves Take Down MSU Moorhead in I Hate Winter Win

Aberdeen, S.D. – The No. 20 Northern State University wrestling closed out their home slate with a 21-point victory over MSU Moorhead on Thursday evening. The Wolves took eight of the ten weights, including three bonus point wins.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 29, MSUM 8

Records: NSU 9-4 (4-3 NSIC), MSUM 1-9 (0-8 NSIC)

Attendance: 423

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Landen Fischer opened the senior night dual for the Wolves with a 12-8 decision victory over Clayson Mele
- Teagan Block rolled on for the Wolves, defeating Thomas Carillo in a 6-0 decision
- MSU Moorhead took the 141-pound bout, however No. 7 Wyatt Turnquist quickly answered back
- The Wolves 149-er notched a 16-0 technical fall win over Jacob Davis at 5:45 in the match
- Northern took the next five weights led off by Izaak Hunsley with a 5-3 decision victory over Peyton Ringling
- Chase Bloomquist grabbed a bonus point win for the Wolves, defeating Jonas Anez in an 8-0 major decision
- Sam Kruger just missed a major, notching a 7-1 decision over Brett Graham
- No. 3 Cole Huss tallied the final win of the evening for NSU, taking down Samuel Grove in a 19-4 technical fall
- The Wolves out-scored the Dragons 87-45 in the dual

UP NEXT

Northern State hits the road next Thursday and Saturday versus Augustana and UMary. Match start times are set for 7 p.m. on Thursday versus the Vikings and 7 p.m. on Saturday against the Marauders.

MATCH RESULTS

	Match Summary	NSU	MSUM
125	Landen Fischer (NSU) over Clayson Mele (MSUM) (Dec 12-8)	3.0	0.0
133	Teagan Block (NSU) over Thomas Carillo (MSUM) (Dec 6-0)	3.0	0.0
141	Hunter Hayes (MSUM) over Robert Coyle III (NSU) (MD 10-1)	0.0	4.0
149	Wyatt Turnquist (NSU) over Jacob Davis (MSUM) (TF 16-0 5:45)	5.0	0.0
157	Izaak Hunsley (NSU) over Peyton Ringling (MSUM) (Dec 5-3)	3.0	0.0
165	Chase Bloomquist (NSU) over Jonas Anez (MSUM) (MD 8-0)	4.0	0.0
174	Kelby Hawkins (NSU) over Anthony Castro (MSUM) (Dec 5-2)	3.0	0.0
184	Sam Kruger (NSU) over Brett Graham (MSUM) (Dec 7-1)	3.0	0.0
197	Cole Huss (NSU) over Samuel Grove (MSUM) (TF 19-4 7:00)	5.0	0.0
285	Andre Baguma (MSUM) over Nathan Schauer (NSU) (MD 17-8)	0.0	4.0
285	Exhibition: Airin Spell (MSUM) over George Bolling (NSU) (Fall 6:59)	0.0	0.0
	Dual Meet Score	29.0	8.0

Rodney Kappes, Manager of BDM Rural Water System Named Rural Water Manager of the Year

The South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems (SDARWS) recently named Rodney Kappes of the BDM Rural Water System as the Rural Water Manager of the Year during the organization's Annual Technical Conference in Pierre. This award recognizes managers of rural water systems across South Dakota for outstanding performance in operating a rural water system.

Rod Kappes took over as manager of BDM Rural Water in 2016 when the board of directors decided to make a change. Kappes stepped in, took the bull by the horns, and turned BDM around financially. He made the board see the importance of funding depreciation, its impact on a business, and its financial benefits to the organization. Kappes has steadfastly guided the system as it continually looks to improve infrastructure to meet commitments to members. BDM has been in a perpetual improvement phase since he arrived, and the system is better for it.

Kappes works closely with BDM's consulting engineer to ensure BDM can provide adequate high-quality water to its members while keeping the system sustainable for the long term. He has put a lot of time and energy into the WINS project, coming up with creative solutions to many problems.

The South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to enhancing South Dakota's water and wastewater industries by providing training and on-site technical assistance. SDARWS is financially supported through its membership dues and grant programs as a member-driven organization. SDARWS hosts a yearly Annual Technical Conference in Pierre during the second week of January for rural and municipal water and wastewater systems for sessions in operations, management, boardsmanship, and governance, and to recognize leaders in the water and wastewater industry.



**RURAL WATER
MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Rodney Kappes,
Manager of BDM Rural Water**

The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

ten people dead.

- George Santos admitted he had “lied to everyone else” during a conversation with a perspective employee, according to leaked audio obtained by Talking Points Memo (TPM).
- New Jersey Republican councilwoman Eunice Dwumfour was found dead inside her car outside her home with multiple gunshot wounds.
- 2022 Wimbledon runner-up Nick Kyrgios pleaded guilty to assaulting his ex-girlfriend in Australia. However, Magistrate Jane Campbell did not record a conviction against him citing that the assault was not premeditated.
- The Justice Department has charged 25 individuals in an alleged wire-fraud scheme to hand out fake nursing diplomas. The scandal could affect more than 7,600 unqualified nurses estimated to be working across the nation.
- Donald Trump has repeated his claim that he would be able to negotiate an end to the Ukraine war “within 24 hours” by speaking with Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has “overestimated” his military’s ability to quickly capture all of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

Chinese Spy Balloon Escalates Rage Against TikTok, CCP

BY KAITLIN LEWIS ON 2/3/23 AT 12:26 AM EST

TL/DR: The Chinese foreign ministry reportedly stated it is “assessing the situation,” adding that both the U.S. and China “are calm and cautious.”

China said it is “assessing the situation” after a suspected Chinese spy balloon was detected over Montana, having made its way over Alaska’s Aleutian Islands and Canada. The U.S. said it tracking the balloon, which has put a strain on U.S.-China relations. Fighter jets were mobilized, but President Joe Biden decided against firing at the balloon over concerns about the danger of falling debris. Montana is home to one of the nuclear missile silo sites.

The discovery has reignited attacks on TikTok, which has been criticized for its alleged ability to collect data for Chinese intelligence. A senior administration official told Newsweek that similar activity has been reported earlier, and the “balloon has limited value from an intelligence collection perspective.” Republicans lashed out at Biden, with some arguing that it would have “never” unfolded under Donald Trump. The incident comes amid concerns that the U.S. might not be ready for a potential war with China.

What happens now? The discovery of the balloon reignited critics of TikTok who say the video-sharing app should be banned in the U.S. for its alleged ability to collect data for Chinese intelligence. Some Republican lawmakers used news of the spy balloon to reintroduce legislation in their respective states that would ban the use of TikTok on all government-issued devices, a measure that 32 states have already enacted, reported CNN. Defense officials have said that the balloon poses no threat to civil aviation due to the altitude at which it is flying. It is unclear whether the incident will impact Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Beijing next week. Blinken will reportedly meet Chinese President Xi Jinping during the visit to hold talks on a range of issues, including security, Taiwan, COVID-19, among others.

• Hunter Biden has mounted a legal challenge calling for a probe against allies of former President Donald Trump and others who have made public allegations about him.

• Democrat Joe Manchin is once again making moves against the Biden administration, this time to challenge a rule that allows Wall Street firms to base their investment strategies on issues other than profits.

• Dangerously cold weather is expected to sweep across the Northeast and New England on Friday, as the South still remains crippled by an ice storm, which left at least

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Higher Power Sports



➤ **FREE Event**

➤ **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC!**

Groton Fellowship of Christian Students
presents **TWO** motivational speakers,

Tim Weidenbach & Deb Hadley

➤ **Sunday,
February 5th
3:16pm**
➤ **at the Groton
Methodist
Church**

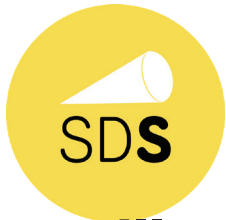


Tim's Character Coaching & Be Kind Talk:

Higher Power Sports supports & serves HS & College athletes, coaches & families throughout the Midwest. He focuses on leadership, perseverance, opportunity, integrity, loyalty & making an impact on the teams he serves. Tim shares a fun & inspiring message on how kindness is contagious & encourages acceptance.

Deb's Overcoming Adversity Presentation:

Adversity is inevitable. Deb has had more than her share of loss. Often our students are caught off guard & lack the skill set to cope with hardships that come their way. Broken relationships, setbacks from COVID, bullying, lack of playing time, academic struggles, poor body image & low self-esteem, struggles at home &/or the death of loved ones, are some of the possibilities that can send the life of a student spiraling out of control. The goal of this seminar is to equip today's youth with the tools to help prepare them to handle the hardships that come their way & inspire them to turn their setbacks into opportunities to better their lives!



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Bill to let landowners bag an elk every year gets grilled, dies in committee

Proponents say legislation would prevent land damage; opponents say it would disadvantage non-landowners

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 2, 2023 12:28 PM

PIERRE – The elk population is a “two-sided coin,” according to Jeremiah Murphy, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association.

“It’s a trophy and it’s trouble,” he told legislators Thursday at the Capitol.

A bill that tried to reconcile those two sides of the coin died in a legislative committee on an 11-1 vote.

COMMENTARY

New clean energy incentives are an opportunity South Dakotans can’t afford to miss

KARA HOVING

FEBRUARY 2, 2023 12:27 PM

South Dakota households could save thousands of dollars on energy costs and tax payments, thanks to new programs from last year’s federal climate law. The first of those incentives — tax credits on residential clean energy, energy efficiency upgrades and electric vehicles — launched last month.

With programs from the climate law that passed last August, the average household could qualify for over \$10,000 in rebates and tax credits and save \$1,800 per year on energy bills. With many families in our state still struggling with high housing and fuel costs and electricity rate hikes, these new programs present an opportunity South Dakotans simply can’t afford to miss.

Weatherization improvements

Three major consumer tax credits became available on Jan. 1. The Energy Efficient Home Improvement Credit (25C) will pay consumers back 30%, or up to \$1,200 per year, on the cost of home weatherization improvements like insulation, air sealing or efficient windows and doors. It also covers up to \$2,000 per year for electric heat pumps and water heaters. Heat pumps — which are really combined air conditioning and heating systems — are one of the most effective technologies for cutting energy costs, saving homeowners anywhere from \$100 to \$1,200 per year on utility bills.

All residents (both homeowners and renters) living in noncommercial housing qualify for the 25C tax credit for projects completed after January 1st. These tax credits can be applied year after year, so a household can install projects multiple years in a row and receive the full tax credit each time.

Renewable energy projects

The Residential Clean Energy Credit (25D) covers 30% of the cost of home renewable energy projects. This includes rooftop solar panels, geothermal heat pumps, solar water heaters, fuel cells, small wind turbines and home battery systems that store energy from the sun to power electric appliances at night. At-home renewable energy like solar panels paired with batteries can save tens of thousands of dollars in utility bills, and can help families keep the power on after disasters like winter storms or last summer’s derecho.

The 30% credit applies to the full cost of the project, including labor, equipment, permitting and in-

spection fees, and necessary upgrades to roofs, wiring or electrical panels. It's also retroactive to Jan. 1, 2022, so any project completed in the last year can qualify, and the credit carries over for one year if the amount exceeds your tax liability.

Electric vehicles

Finally, there's the Clean Vehicle Credit (30D) of up to \$7,500 for new electric vehicles (EVs) and \$4,000 for used electric vehicles. This credit comes with some income limits and caps on the total cost of the car. New made-in-America rules for EV batteries will activate in March of this year, which may limit the types of new vehicles eligible for the credit, so consumers looking for a more flexible range of car makes and models may want to act sooner rather than later. However, in 2024, a new mechanism will essentially turn the tax break into a point-of-sale discount, so families that can't afford to wait for tax season can experience those savings up front. Families should review the rules to decide when may be the right time for them to purchase an EV.

Help for low- and middle-income families

Some South Dakota families may not have enough tax liability to take advantage of these three incentives, or may not be able to afford the up-front cost of projects. The new law allocates over \$68.5 million to South Dakota for home energy efficiency and electrification rebates aimed specifically at low- and middle-income families. These rebates will bring down the up-front cost of whole-house renovations and efficient appliances ranging from stoves to clothes dryers, helping bring these cost-saving technologies to the families that need them most.

These rebates will be administered by state agencies and likely won't roll out until late this year. It's therefore imperative that the South Dakota Energy Management Office begins preparing now to ensure South Dakota families can start experiencing energy savings as soon as possible.

With new programs rolling out over the course of 2023, South Dakotans should start planning soon to take full advantage of available funds. They can start by scheduling a home energy audit to identify their home's biggest energy efficiency needs — and can even offset \$150 off the audit cost through the 25C tax credit. Households can also use tools like this to determine their eligibility and identify which programs may be best for them to maximize their energy savings.

Kara Hoving is a climate equity policy researcher and serves as communications coordinator at SoDak 350, a nonpartisan grassroots organization mobilizing South Dakotans for climate action. She lives in Brookings.

State medical cannabis programs failing to make enough progress, advocacy group finds

South Dakota receives a 'C' grade in report

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - FEBRUARY 3, 2023 12:30 AM

WASHINGTON — A report from a patient advocacy group found the future of medical cannabis in the states is hazy unless costs are decreased, product safety standards are improved, and civil rights are strengthened for patients and prescribers.

Americans for Safe Access issued its annual State of the States report on Thursday. The organization, a nonprofit, has put out the document to advocates and state policymakers since 2014, as a tool to "assess and improve medical cannabis programs."

ASA Executive Director Debbie Churgai said that one of the main surprise findings of this report was the lack of progress being made to strengthen and develop the medical cannabis sector.

"This was the first report that we saw the fewest improvements in the states," Churgai said. "So much so that I felt a little shocked at first."

The five states with the highest-graded medical cannabis access programs were Illinois, Michigan, Maryland, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Of the five, Maryland had the highest score, receiving a 75.7% on the group's scale. South Dakota's score was 57.29%, described as a "C" grade in the report.

ASA issued 13 failing grades to state medical cannabis programs: Texas, Idaho, Wyoming, Nebraska,

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Kansas, Wisconsin, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. The lowest-scoring states were Idaho and Nebraska, which both received a 0 for a lack of medical cannabis programs.

ASA issued letter grades to all state medical cannabis programs in the report, based on a 0 to 100 scale. The programs were evaluated on the metrics of: patient rights and civil protection, accessibility, program functionality, affordability, health and social equity, consumer protection and product safety, and penalties.

The report does not evaluate recreational or adult-use cannabis programs.

ASA found that the number of medical cannabis patients continues to expand across the country, now numbering more than 6 million. That represents an increase of close to 1 million patients from the 2021 State of the States report.

The authors said that two states have added legal medical cannabis access programs in 2022, bringing the total to 48 states plus the District of Columbia, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Churgai noted that when the group started issuing the report, only 14 states had medical cannabis legislation.

How grades are computed

The letter grades distributed to states in the report range from B, meaning a strong medical cannabis program, to F, for a fatally flawed or absent program. Churgai explained that an A represents the "ideal medical cannabis law," and no state received one.

"We know that we already know that some things do not exist in states, like coverage under health insurance for cannabis products," Churgai said. "We base everything on a perfect program that we know cannot exist right now without federal oversight."

As such, ASA graded on a curve in the 2022 report, allowing states that offer a full range of access and protections to the best of their ability a passable grade.

Still, even with the adjusted system, no state earned a grade above a B-, or 76% on ASA's medical cannabis grading scale.

The report also highlighted individual "gold standard" provisions in each program.

For the civil rights and patient protections category, Arizona received the highest score, at 96%. The national average score in this category was 58%.

Maryland received the highest score for consumer protection and product safety, at 84.5%, compared to the national average of 44.8%.

Illinois and Virginia scored the highest in the affordability category, with a score of 65%. The national average score for affordability was 39.6%.

For access to medicine, Maine received the highest score at 95%. The national average in this metric was 42.13%. In the health and social equity category, Ohio received the top score of 90%, while the national average was 45.82%.

ASA averaged the 56 state and territory grades to find that medical cannabis access in the United States only received 46.16% or a "D+" on ASA's grading scale. The authors said that the score marked a 2-point improvement from 2021.

"We'll take that," Churgai said. "But one of the themes actually in this year's report was our surprise that more states are not making improvements."

Affordability, consumer safety

The ASA leaders said issues with affordability and consumer safety remain commonplace nationwide.

For the second year in a row, affordability for state medical cannabis programs recorded the lowest national average score among the categories measured by ASA.

"In our patient feedback section, in almost every state, we have at least a few responses that talk about how affordability is an issue for patients," Churgai said. "So it's definitely a huge problem."

The executive director noted that registration fees are "still too high," ranging from \$50 to \$350 for patients, as are costs for targeted medicines.

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"It's a huge, huge burden for patients all across the country," Churgai said. "This is a medicine that they're using not only daily, but sometimes every day for the rest of their lives. And the fact that there's no insurance coverage, this is all out-of-pocket, and expensive."

Churgai and Steph Sherer, president of Americans for Safe Access, also lamented the lack of collective safety standards and training in the medical cannabis industry.

"If you go through this report and look through everything that we grade, it's astounding how different the states are in every little aspect of testing and labeling standards," Churgai said. "We need some national standards. We really need some kind of federal oversight that really guarantees that patients are protected and safe."

Other challenges ASA noted included lacking employment protections, insufficient retailers and restrictions on patient cultivation programs.

Still, the group did note some progress in improving arrest protections, increased adoption of adult-use cannabis and low-THC strains from more conservative states, and growing reciprocity programs.

Competition with recreational cannabis

More than anything, the ASA team emphasized the growing challenges represented by the recreational market.

"This is a huge trend that we're seeing as more states are allowing adult use," Churgai said. "Unfortunately, they're giving a regulatory preference to it, so much so that they're ignoring or pushing aside the patient medical program."

The executive director noted that 14 states were penalized on their report cards this year for giving regulatory preference to adult-use cannabis operations. Churgai added that the ASA analysis also showed states lumping their medical and recreational cannabis programs together, and not comprehending patient needs and protections.

"It's not the regulators' fault, or policymakers' fault," Churgai said. "I believe that they think that they're still helping people. But they don't understand the needs of patients, and why patients actually still want a medical program, and they still need a medical program."

Sherer added that the consolidation of these cannabis programs is leading to consolidation of product for cost-saving purposes, as companies fire their chief medical officers, and compete with the upstart cannabinoid market. Cannabinoids are cannabis-derived chemicals, like Delta-8 THC and cannabidiol, or CBD. Products containing these substances can be sold in grocery stores and gas stations, and have no federal age requirement.

"I think that what we're seeing is that without these companies being able to increase their available market size to a federal market, they're really struggling to stay in business," Sherer said. "They're finding that they often have to serve the adult-use population in order to pay for the business altogether."

This decision ultimately harms medical cannabis patients, as their needed medicine gets sold as a consumer product.

The ASA leaders offered policy ideas, including increasing insurance coverage of cannabis, expanding medical cannabis licensing, standardizing lab testing, and reducing taxes along the supply chain.

"It's really important to understand that we're not just telling states what they're doing wrong, or what they could be doing better," Churgai said. "But we actually give them ways to improve the law for patients."

"The big elephant in the room for these programs is that when we first created access programs to medical cannabis, they were meant to be a type of triage, to get patients off the battlefield of the war on drugs while we changed federal law," Sherer said.

"And 25 years later, states have done a lot to navigate this very odd situation of regulating an illegal substance. It's really time for the federal government to move forward with the comprehensive program for medical cannabis."

The first medical cannabis laws in the United States were implemented 26 years ago.

Consumption and sales of medical cannabis are illegal under federal law.

Adam Goldstein is the D.C. Bureau intern for States Newsroom. Goldstein is a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studying digital reporting. He is originally from San Francisco, and loves swimming, cooking, and the San Francisco 49ers.

U.S. House agrees on something: Lawmakers condemn 'the horrors of socialism'

SD's Johnson among 328 votes in favor of resolution

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 2, 2023 2:51 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House held a strongly bipartisan vote Thursday, condemning socialism and former socialist leaders, though Democrats rebuked majority Republicans for spending time on a “political stunt” and refusing to allow debate on an amendment that would have clarified Social Security and Medicare are not socialist programs.

Maryland Democratic Rep. Steny Hoyer said he lamented “the failure today to consider a resolution which would reflect the overwhelming consensus in this House — that capitalism, not socialism, has proven to be the very best economic system.”

“Such a resolution would have brought us together. It would give confidence to our fellow citizens that we are united in our support of our democratic capitalist system,” Hoyer added. “The resolution before us today, however, does not do that. Instead, it is an intellectually bankrupt screed of political demagoguery.”

The resolution from Florida Republican Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar, approved on a 328-86 vote with 14 members voting present, notes that “socialist ideology necessitates a concentration of power that has time and time again collapsed into communist regimes, totalitarian rule, and brutal dictatorships.” U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, voted with the majority.

“Congress denounces socialism in all its forms, and opposes the implementation of socialist policies in the United States of America,” it reads.

The resolution mentions Cambodia, China, Cuba, North Korea and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as examples of socialist governments, though they may more accurately be defined as communist.

It also lists several dictators, including Fidel Castro, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Kim Jong Un and Mao Zedong.

The resolution doesn't list Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, who headed the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or the millions of Jewish people and others murdered during the Holocaust and World War II.

The current Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine also are not listed as examples of the perils of socialism or dictators.

Medicare, Social Security

North Carolina Republican Rep. Patrick McHenry rejected Democrats' criticism of the resolution during floor debate, saying “there's nothing in this resolution about entitlement programs or banning social services or anything of the like.”

Republican plans to reduce government spending in their upcoming budget resolution, have elicited questions from Democrats about whether the GOP plans to make changes to Medicare and Social Security, which mostly run on autopilot outside of the annual appropriations process.

“It outlines the pain and hardship experienced by millions around the world who have suffered under a socialist regime,” McHenry said, adding the resolution “is not just messaging or a waste of time.”

“It speaks to people who have known all too well the atrocities of socialism and it gives voice to their pain,” he said.

But McHenry said later during floor debate that because it was so early in the session, the resolution didn't go through his committee or the markup process.

“What I would have preferred in this resolution was a fulsome defense of capitalism and the juxtaposition between that optimistic sense of freedom that is born out of our property rights, our speech rights, our individual rights in this country that has deeply connected us with an economic sense of freedom — and the juxtaposition of that to the misery of socialism,” he said.

McHenry also noted that Putin wasn't listed in the resolution because “he doesn't currently call himself a socialist.”

The Washington Post reported last year that Putin in 2016 said, “I really liked and still like communist

and socialist ideas," and "claimed to have kept his old party card."

Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Mark Pocan argued the resolution was "little about intelligent discourse and everything to do about laying the groundwork to cut Social Security and Medicare."

"For 35 years now I've owned a small business, giving me significantly more experience as a capitalist than the vast majority of members on the other side of the aisle," Pocan said. "So as a capitalist, let me tell you, this resolution is plain ridiculous."

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

U.S. House GOP votes to oust Rep. Omar from foreign affairs panel for past antisemitic remarks

South Dakota's Johnson votes in favor of ouster

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 2, 2023 2:44 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House voted along party lines Thursday to remove Minnesota Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee for past antisemitic statements.

The removal, the first for a Democrat during this session of Congress, followed Democrats' vote to strip two Republicans of all their committee assignments last Congress for making threats against fellow lawmakers.

The vote in the majority-Republican House to kick Omar off the panel was 218-211, with Ohio GOP Rep. David Joyce voting present. South Dakota Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson voted in favor of the ouster.

Minnesota Democratic Rep. Dean Phillips, who is Jewish, opposed the resolution, saying that Omar has learned from the outcry to her prior antisemitic statements and that "atonement should be rewarded."

"Don't get me wrong, Rep. Omar and I regularly disagree on policy, both domestic and foreign. And she has at times used words that have caused concern, offense and even personal pain to me and others," Phillips said. "She and I have spoken face-to-face on those occasions, and she has apologized, and she has learned from those missteps."

Phillips predicted that most Jewish members of the U.S. House would vote to keep Omar on the Foreign Affairs Committee because of her willingness to listen to her colleagues. He also sharply criticized Republicans for attempting to silence or "cancel" her, calling it ironic.

"This is the very weaponization of antisemitism that I, as a Jewish person, find repulsive, I find dangerous and above (all) else shameful," he said. "To my friends across the aisle, if you really are sincere about defeating antisemitism in America, how about, ask us what we need. And let me assure you, you might be surprised by the answer."

Phillips also noted that Omar has never posted a video depicting herself killing fellow members, hasn't questioned whether a plane really struck the Pentagon on 9/11, wondered if school shootings are staged, propagated space lasers as the cause of wildfires, or equated vaccine mandates with Adolf Hitler.

Those comments have all been made by Georgia Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who, along with Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar, were removed from their committees last Congress for making threats against fellow lawmakers.

Republicans throughout the debate, said that words have meaning and that members of Congress must be held to a higher standard, especially when their comments are antisemitic or anti-Israel.

"Members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs represent the United States abroad and are regarded as credible emissaries of American foreign policy," said Ohio Republican Rep. Max Miller. "Their words have significant weight in guiding our relations with other countries and are relied upon by world leaders."

"What happens when a committee member is no longer viewed as a credible emissary of our foreign policy?" Miller asked. "Given her biased comments against Israel and against the Jewish people, how can she serve as an objective decision maker on the committee?"

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Omar speaks out

Omar, during a deeply personal floor speech about her time as a refugee from a war zone and her experiences as a Black Muslim woman, said the debate was about “who gets to be an American.”

She said she wasn’t surprised that Republicans have targeted her for removal from the committee, though she noted that she would not stop speaking about American foreign policy or working to make the “myth that American foreign policy is moral a reality.”

“There is an idea out there that I do not have objective decision-making because of who I am, where I come from and my perspective. But I reject that,” Omar said.

Standing next to a photograph of herself as a 9-year-old, Omar said that girl would be disappointed if she didn’t talk “about the victims of conflict, those that are experiencing unjust wars, atrocities, ethnic cleansing, occupation, or displacement.”

“They are looking to the international community and the United States asking for help,” Omar said, adding that they turn to America because the country professes “the values of protecting human rights and upholding international law.”

“I didn’t come to Congress to be silent, I came to Congress to be their voice,” Omar said. “And my leadership and voice will not be diminished if I am not on this committee for one term — my voice will get louder and stronger.”

Omar statements detailed

The four-page resolution lists several of Omar’s previous statements, including in February 2019 when she “suggested that Jewish people and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) were buying political support, saying, ‘It’s all about the Benjamins, baby’” and in March 2019, when she referred to 9/11 as “some people did something.”

The resolution also notes that in June 2021, “Omar equated the United States and Israel with Hamas and the Taliban by stating, ‘We must have the same level of accountability and justice for all victims of crimes against humanity. We have seen unthinkable atrocities committed by the U.S., Hamas, Israel, Afghanistan, and the Taliban.’”

The resolution says that statement established “a false equivalency between Israel — which has the right and responsibility to protect itself and its citizens from all forms of terrorism — and Hamas, a foreign terrorist organization actively engaged in committing war crimes, including using civilians as human shields, which is banned under customary international humanitarian law.”

Greene and Gosar

The House voted during the 117th Congress to remove Georgia’s Greene from all her committees after she threatened fellow members, made racist and antisemitic remarks, and voiced conspiracy theories about the 9/11 terrorist attack.

Maryland Democratic Rep. Steny Hoyer took to the floor Thursday with a poster showing a social media post by Greene in which she displayed a photo of herself holding a gun next to photos of Democratic members of the House and the words “Squad’s worst nightmare.”

“The two individuals that we removed from committees were not removed for their speech, they were removed because they made threats against other members,” Hoyer said, noting Greene’s was made before she was a member.

Arizona’s Gosar was also removed from committees after he posted a video of himself killing Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and attacking President Joe Biden.

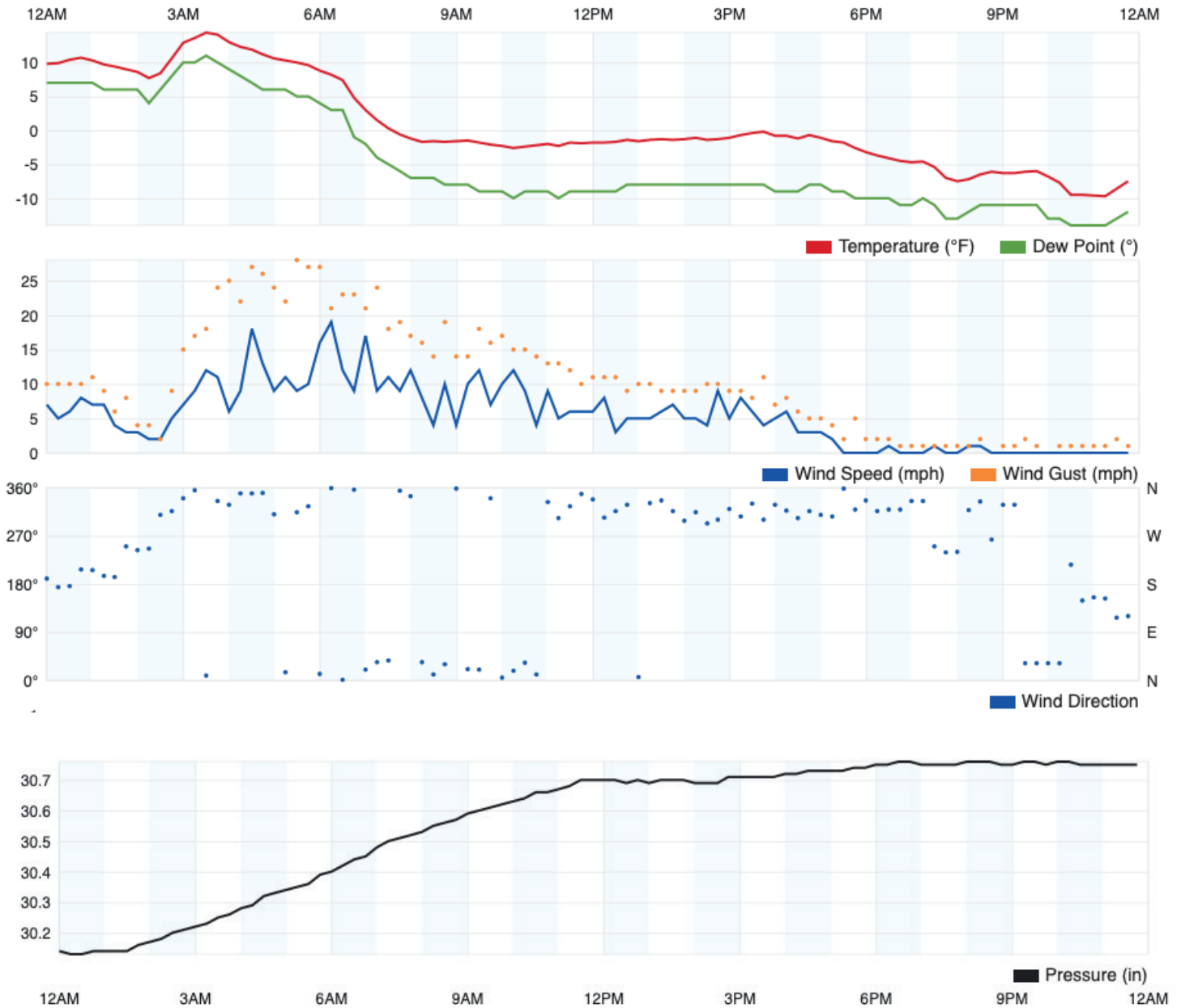
“There is no equivalency here. We believe in free speech, however hateful that speech is. And I tell you, I take a back seat to no one in this chamber in my support of Israel and against antisemitism,” Hoyer said. “But the equivalency that has been made here is absolutely without merit, and you go down a terrible road.”

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

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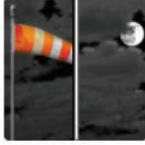



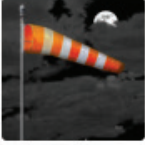

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs







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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
						
Cold and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy and Breezy then Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy and Windy	Mostly Cloudy and Breezy then Mostly Cloudy
High: 10 °F	Low: 2 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 20 °F	High: 32 °F	Low: 22 °F	High: 36 °F

WARMER DAYS AHEAD

TODAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY
			
HI: 4-35 °F LO: -1-22 °F	HI: 32-45 °F LO: 19-24 °F	HI: 27-41 °F LO: 20-31 °F	HI: 35-43 °F LO: 14-24 °F

February 3, 2023 4:12 AM



Areas around and west of the Missouri River will see a warm up today, but for the rest of us, that warm up will come tomorrow. Temperatures are expected to be 5 to 15 degrees above normal through the weekend and into next work week.

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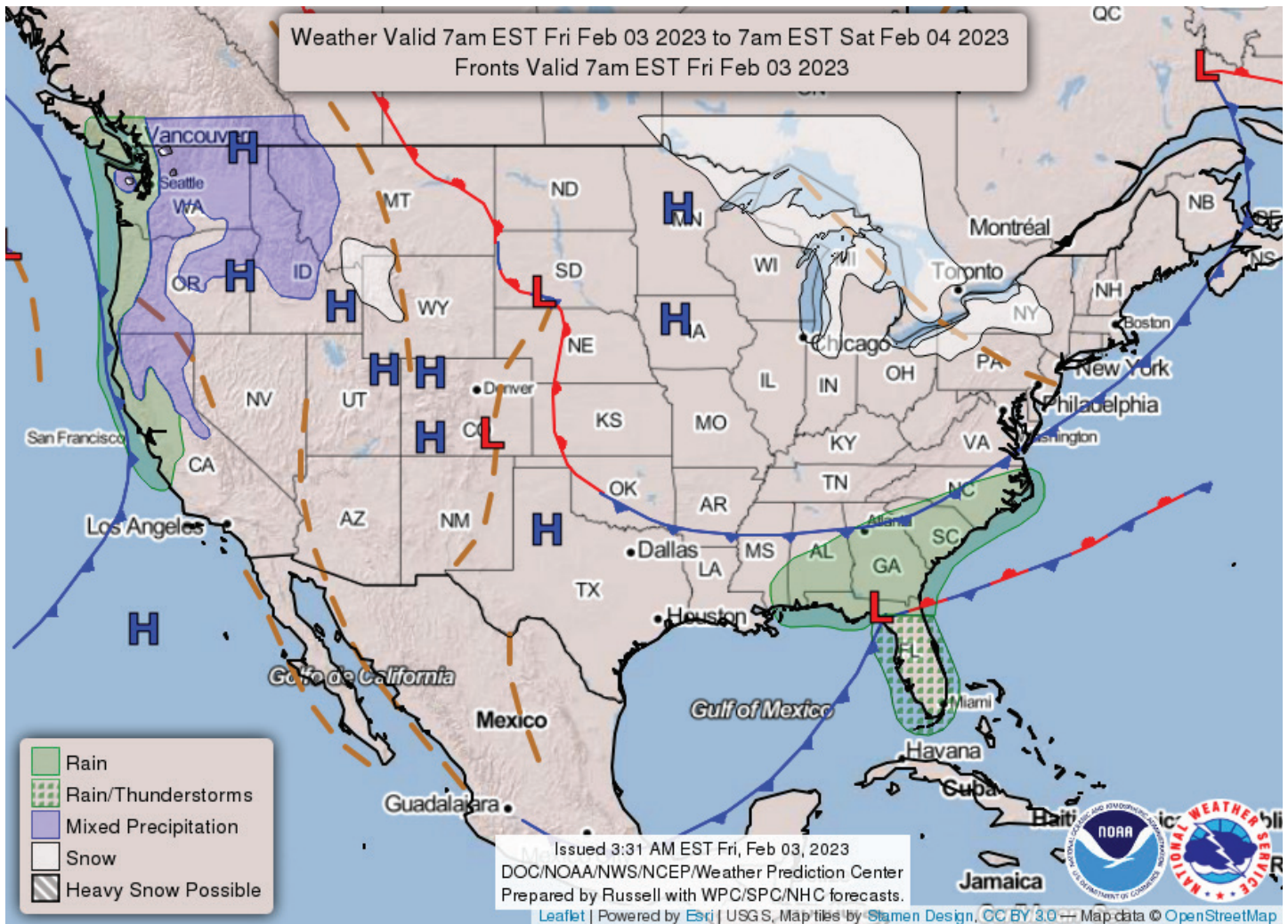
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 14.4 °F at 3:30 AM
Low Temp: -11.7 °F at 9:15 PM
Wind: 28 mph at 5:30 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 54 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1991
Record Low: -38 in 1893
Average High: 25
Average Low: 3
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.06
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.61
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:43:18 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:47:48 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 3, 1997: A winter storm dropped from 6 to 15 inches of snow across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, deepening the already expansive snowpack. The wind came up from the north at 20 to 30 mph during the morning of the 4th, causing blowing and drifting snow blocking some roads, and making travel hazardous if not impossible. Several vehicles got stuck or went off the road. Due to the massive snowfall, a roof collapsed in Aberdeen, damaging a car. Many schools started late or were canceled, adding to the number of days missed for the season. Some snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Wheaton, 6 inches at Britton, Summit, Webster, Browns Valley, Artichoke Lake, and Ortonville, 7 inches at Aberdeen, 6 SE McIntosh, Pollock, Timber Lake, 8 inches at Leola, Ipswich, Eagle Butte, and Gettysburg, 9 inches at Miller and Mellette, 10 inches at Mobridge, Watertown, Clear Lake, Pierre, Kennebec, and Onida, and 11 inches at Clark and Blunt. Snowfall amounts of a foot or more included 12 inches at Highmore, Bryant, and Gann Valley, 13 inches at Faulkton, 14 inches at 23 N Highmore and Murdo, and 15 inches at 1 SE Stephan.

1844: Boston Harbor was so thick with ice on this date that a channel had to be cut through the ice for the "Britannia" ship to leave with 30,000 letters for England.

1917 - Downtown Miami, FL, reported an all-time record low of 27 degrees. (David Ludlum)

1947: The record-low temperature for continental North America was recorded in Snag in the Yukon Territory, Canada. The temperature was 81.4 degrees below zero.

1959: At 12:55 am Central Time, a plane took off from runway 17 at the Mason City, Iowa airport, carrying the lives of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson. At the time of departure, the weather was reported as light snow, a ceiling of 3,000 feet with sky obscured, visibility 6 miles, and winds from 20 to 30 mph. At around 9:35 am, Hubert Jerry Dwyer spotted the wreckage less than 6 miles northwest of the airport. The three musicians and the pilot died from this crash.

1987 - Wintry weather was confined to freezing drizzle and light snow in the northeastern U.S., and light rain and snow in the western U.S. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Arctic air continued to invade the central U.S. The temperature at Midland TX plunged from a record high of 80 degrees to 37 degrees in just three hours. Morning lows in the higher elevations of Wyoming were as cold as 38 degrees below zero. Heavy snow blanketed southwestern Colorado, with 16 inches reported at Steamboat Springs. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm brought heavy snow and high winds to the western U.S. Up to three feet of snow blanketed the Sierra Nevada of California, and buried parts of northeastern Washington State under three feet of snow in five days. High winds across Washington State reached 75 mph, with gusts to 105 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Severe cold gripped the north central U.S. The morning low of 29 degrees below zero at Casper WY was a record for the month of February. Wisdom MT hit 53 degrees below zero. Missoula MT reported a wind chill reading of 85 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather over the central Gulf coast states during the afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms spawned seven tornadoes in Alabama, including one which touched down north of Birmingham injuring fifteen people and causing nearly three million dollars damage. A tornado at Margaret injured eleven persons and caused a million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

HIDE AND SEEK

One of my favorite pastimes, when I was a child, was playing "hide and seek" with my neighborhood friends. It was always more fun to play at dusk when shadows from trees and buildings would provide secret places. The first one found from the previous round was always given the task to count while others hid from his sight. Then, the search began for those who were quietly hiding in places they thought were impossible to find. On occasion, someone would find a place that no one had thought of before and the one searching would have to give up and the game would start again.

God "conceals" His glory in much the same way. He does not do it in a malicious manner or play a game with us. Rather, it is His way of revealing His majesty and might, power and presence. He is always there doing something in some way. But it is not always obvious.

"It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings," said Solomon. In fact, on a previous occasion, he said, "The Lord has said that He would dwell in a dark cloud."

So, where does all of this leave us? Why would He not be obvious all of the time? Why does He hide from us at all? It is because He is above and beyond us though beside and within us anxious for us to seek and trust Him.

God is worthy of worship and wonder even when He cannot be seen, when dark clouds gather over us, and darkness surrounds us. Though we may walk through a valley filled with shadows, His light is always waiting for us when we walk by faith and trust in Him.

Prayer: Give us courage, Lord, to walk in faith when days are dark, nights long and lonely, and the journey difficult. Increase our trust when our hope turns to doubt. In Jesus' Name, Amen.



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)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 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
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 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
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.31.23

7 9 18 29 39 13

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins 36
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

10 16 33 34 45 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$34,570,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 32
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.02.23

10 17 22 42 46 13

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 2 Mins 36
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

1 9 15 24 25

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$38,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 32
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

4 23 39 57 63 26

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

31 43 58 59 66 9

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$700,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Sorry, not sorry: Some 1/6 rioters change tune after apology

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Appearing before a federal judge after pleading guilty to a felony charge in the deadly Capitol riot, former West Virginia lawmaker Derrick Evans expressed remorse for letting down his family and his community, saying he made a “crucial mistake.”

Less than a year later, Evans is portraying himself as a victim of a politically motivated prosecution as he runs to serve in the same building he stormed on Jan. 6, 2021. Evans is now calling the Justice Department’s Jan. 6 prosecutions a “miscarriage of justice” and describes himself on twitter as a “J6 Patriot.”

“Some ppl have said I need to apologize and condemn #J6 if I want to win my election as the media will attack me,” he tweeted recently after announcing his bid for a U.S. House seat in 2024. “I will not compromise my values or beliefs. That’s what politicians do. We need Patriots not politicians.”

Evans joins a series of Jan. 6 defendants who — when up against possible prison time in court — have expressed regret for joining the pro-Trump mob that rattled the foundations of American democracy only to strike a different tone or downplay the riot after receiving their punishment.

The very first Jan. 6 defendant to be sentenced apologized in court and then went on Fox News Channel shortly after and seemed to minimize the riot. Another defendant who called Jan. 6 “horrifying and disgusting” later donned an orange jumpsuit to play the part of a distraught prisoner in a bizarre tribute to imprisoned Capitol rioters during a conservative conference.

Some defendants have drawn ire from judges or the Justice Department for their inconsistent comments. But there’s not much the legal system can do for an adjudicated defendant. And because some conservatives hold up Jan. 6 defendants as martyrs, there’s a political and possibly financial incentive for them to change their tune.

It could push judges to impose stronger punishments for rioters who haven’t yet made it to the end of their criminal cases. Even before Evans’ sentencing, the judge who heard his case began questioning the sincerity of rioters’ apologies after he felt duped by another defendant, saying he was “all too familiar with crocodile tears.”

Before being sentenced last June to three months behind bars for a civil disorder charge, Evans said he regrets his actions every day and told Senior Judge Royce Lamberth he is a “good person who unfortunately was caught up in a moment.”

Shortly after, prosecutors wrote to the judge about several statements Evans made on a radio show and that were “inconsistent with the contrition” he showed at sentencing. When asked whether he regretted his actions, Evans said on the show that he regretted the “situation” he was in. But he said he was “never going to have regrets when it comes to standing up and doing what’s right.”

Evans said in an emailed statement to The Associated Press that he still stands behind what he said in court.

“That was my message to the judge. This is my message to the media. It’s time to tell the real story of what happened personally to me that day,” he said.

Evans said he lost “almost everything” — including his job as a state delegate and time with his kids — because of his decision on Jan. 6. “How could I not regret that?” he asked. But he said he is “done being portrayed as a villain” when he is not, noting that he didn’t overrun any officers and was inside the Capitol for only 10 minutes.

When determining an appropriate sentence, judges generally take into account whether defendants have taken responsibility for their actions and appear genuinely sorry. In some Jan. 6 cases, judges have faulted defendants for not appearing to show true remorse even before their punishment has been handed down.

A lawyer for Trennis Evans III, who took a swig of whiskey in a congressional conference room during the riot, told the judge in court papers that Evans was “sincerely remorseful, and duly contrite.” But after

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Evans suggested at his November sentencing that Jan. 6 defendants were being treated unfairly — even though he said he condemned what happened that day — the judge said she didn't believe he showed "full and genuine remorse."

Months after he was ordered to serve 20 days in jail, the Texas man traveled to South Dakota to urge state lawmakers to support a resolution encouraging "the humane and fair treatment" of Jan. 6 defendants. The resolution failed by unanimous vote.

The first Jan. 6 defendant to get her punishment, Anna Morgan-Lloyd, told Lamberth that she was ashamed of the "savage display of violence" at the Capitol before he sentenced her to probation. Shortly after, however, the Indiana woman told Fox News host Laura Ingraham that people were "very polite" during the riot and that she saw "relaxed" police officers chatting with rioters.

Lamberth apparently hasn't forgotten about it. The judge wrote in court papers that he hoped another defendant's "change of heart" was sincere because his hopes were "dashed" in her case. In another case, he wrote that he "often finds it difficult to ascertain the sincerity" of Jan. 6 defendants' remorse.

"Many defendants appear sincere at sentencing, boasting of their purportedly deep shame, regret, and desire to change and be law-abiding citizens," Lamberth wrote. "But this Court is all too familiar with crocodile tears."

Morgan-Lloyd's attorney has said that she believes her client was genuinely remorseful, was "played" by Ingraham and sent the judge a letter after her TV interview. When contacted by The Associated Press, Morgan-Lloyd's attorney said the woman would not comment.

After he dodged prison time in his Jan. 6 case, right-wing activist Brandon Straka donned an orange jumpsuit and red MAGA cap, sat in a fake jail cell and performatively wept for a procession of attendees at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas last August. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican, entered the cage and embraced Straka before they appeared to pray together.

Months earlier, with a possible jail term hanging over his head, Straka referred to Jan. 6 as "nothing more than an incredibly shameful day that had absolutely no positive attributes whatsoever."

"I'm sorry that I was present in any way at an event that led people to feel afraid, that caused shame and embarrassment on our country, and that served absolutely no purpose other than to further tear away at the already heartbreaking divide in this country," he wrote in a letter to U.S. District Judge Dabney Friedrich, who sentenced him to 36 months of probation.

An email seeking comment was sent to Straka, from Nebraska. He has said that the CPAC performance was meant "to provoke a reaction about political division, human rights abuses & more" and accused critics of trying to "criminalize art."

Since his sentencing, the judge questioned whether he wanted to withdraw his guilty plea and said he could be opening himself up to prosecution for making false statements because of public comments she said seemed to contradict things he said in court.

A written statement of offense that Straka agreed was correct under his plea deal says that he yelled "Take it! Take it!" while filming others trying to take a police officer's shield. Straka later told Fox News host Tucker Carlson that he told his lawyer that he never made that comment. He suggested he admitted doing so because he was under pressure to take a deal.

A South Dakota Senate aide's allegation roils GOP politics

By STEPHEN GROVES and AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The conversation between a state senator and a legislative aide started with a seemingly routine discussion about a bill. It suddenly spiraled as the senator allegedly harassed the aide because she had vaccinated her young child, plunging the Senate into a political drama that has divided South Dakota's Republican Party.

The Senate, where lawmakers pride themselves on a genteel code of conduct as they work from wooden desks that have been there for generations, has seemed largely insulated from the forces roiling the wider GOP.

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But even here, controversy was inevitable as an insurgent brand of Republicans look to challenge the establishment by pushing for hardline stands on social issues and passionately staking out positions that defy evidence, whether it is from medical authorities or election officials.

South Dakota is dominated by Republicans, and Gov. Kristi Noem, who is widely seen as mulling a 2024 White House bid, has branded it as the country's most conservative state. But party tensions have grown in recent years.

A contrarian group has gained traction in the House with support from activists, and the State Freedom Caucus Network, which is looking to push politics rightward and disrupt business-as-usual in state Legislatures, including Montana, Wyoming, Illinois, Arizona and Mississippi, has organized in Pierre.

"It's just sound and fury, it's blaming each other, talking smack about each other — and yet on most of the issues the principles are the same," said Michael Card, a former Republican official and political scientist at the University of South Dakota.

Nationally, the GOP has been plagued with similar strains of controversy. A politician like Rep. George Santos of New York is able to hold office despite lying about his background and facing multiple investigations into his personal and campaign finances. Former President Donald Trump remains an active and powerful force. And a handful of U.S. House holdouts were emboldened to hold up the selection of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Statehouses have become fertile ground for nationalized politics, said Gerald Gamm, a professor of political science and history at the University of Rochester who has researched state-level politics.

"Polarization at the state level is probably as high today as it's ever been," he said.

Julie Frye-Mueller, the Republican senator involved in the incident with the aide, is among a group of hardline right-wing lawmakers who have clashed with top Republicans.

The encounter took place as the aide, who has not been publicly named, was discussing a draft bill in her office last week with Frye-Mueller and the senator's husband, Mike Mueller, who was at the Capitol assisting his wife and later in the week testified in support of a resolution expressing sympathy for those facing charges for the Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot.

Both the aide and Frye-Mueller have said their discussion turned to childhood vaccinations and breastfeeding, but their accounts differ.

According to the aide's complaint, Frye-Mueller asked if she had vaccinated her child. When the aide said yes, the senator pointed her finger and aggressively told her the child could have health issues or die, according to the complaint.

She also alleged that Frye-Mueller asked her about breastfeeding. When the aide said she wished she could breastfeed, Frye-Mueller allegedly suggested that the aide's husband could "suck on my breasts" to get milk to come in, the complaint said. Frye-Mueller's husband was in the room at the time and "smiled and nodded," it added.

Frye-Mueller disputed that account in testimony to a Senate committee investigating the complaint. She said it was the staffer who brought up breastfeeding. Frye-Mueller said she asked the aide whether she wanted advice she had received as a young mother, and when the aide said yes, she said, "Have your husband help."

Frye-Mueller said she was "falsely accused" and called the aide's complaint "shocking and filthy." She also framed her comments as an issue of freedom of speech.

The senator also testified that she questioned whether newborn babies in Pierre were receiving vaccinations and informed the aide about legislation that would have eliminated school requirements for childhood vaccinations.

Republicans, who hold 31 out of 35 seats in the Senate, moved decisively and treated the incident as a personnel issue and a serious harassment allegation. The body suspended her last week, launched an investigation and on Wednesday overwhelmingly voted to censure her. The Senate also ended her suspension and adopted a report that concluded she harassed the aide.

Senate Republican leaders, who initially kept the allegations a secret, faced backlash from local party

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activists, a lawsuit from Frye-Mueller and accusations of political retribution.

During her Senate testimony, Frye-Mueller even pointed to a Facebook post from the Republican Senate Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck about the death of a family cat. She alleged it was somehow proof of a conspiracy that he was employing a “dead cat strategy” of drawing attention to something shocking to distract media attention from another story.

Schoenbeck said he was, in fact, referring to the death of a beloved family pet.

The longtime lawmaker, known for wearing Mister Rogers-style sweaters and firing colorful insults at right-wing legislators, has limited his comments on Frye-Mueller’s discipline and framed it as a personnel issue. Other Republican and Democratic leaders have sought to tone down the political context around her suspension and pointed out that all but one Senator voted for her censure.

In the past, however, Schoenbeck has called Frye-Mueller and others “wackadoodles” and funded campaigns to unseat them in primaries, with limited success.

Noem has also clashed with the right-wing lawmakers and last year supported a number of campaigns to def — again, with limited success.

As her political ambitions stretch beyond South Dakota, she has shown a willingness to concede to hardline conservatives. When House lawmakers advanced a bill in 2020 to ban gender-affirming medical procedures for transgender minors, she criticized the legislation as trying “to fill parenting gaps with more government.” This year her spokesman has voiced support for a similar proposal.

“When you have a supermajority, you will always tear yourself apart,” said Tom Dempster, a former Republican state senator who remains a close political watcher. “The primary system incentivizes extreme candidates.”

Back in Frye-Mueller’s home district, support for her remains strong. Activists in the Fall River County Republican Party drafted a resolution backing the senator.

“I’m conservative like she is — she votes the way I would,” said Ken Updike, a local party leader who pushed the resolution. Senate leaders, he said, “are more aligned with Democrats than they are Republicans.”

Thursday’s Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 63, Northwestern 49

Alcester-Hudson 52, Freeman 49

Beresford 57, Madison 46

Bon Homme 55, Parker 54

Bridgewater-Emery 58, Menno 42

Chamberlain 63, Stanley County 45

Dakota Valley 80, Elk Point-Jefferson 63

DeSmet 80, Elkton-Lake Benton 62

Dell Rapids 75, Tri-Valley 44

Dell Rapids St. Mary 82, Iroquois/ Lake Preston Co-op 58

Deuel 61, Groton Area 52

Estelline/Hendricks 64, Colman-Egan 30

Faith 56, McIntosh 26

Faulkton 76, Sunshine Bible Academy 33

Hamlin 65, Castlewood 43

Harding County 80, Bison 39

Hill City 64, Newell 33

Ipswich 51, Miller 45

Lakota Tech 77, Todd County 67

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Lemmon 57, Timber Lake 52
Lower Brule 68, Wessington Springs 62
Lyman 52, Gregory 37
Marty Indian 78, Burke 59
Mitchell Christian 69, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 47
Mobridge-Pollock 58, Belle Fourche 57
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 74, Hanson 61
Philip 84, Lead-Deadwood 49
Platte-Geddes 62, Kimball/White Lake 53
Scotland 39, Corsica/Stickney 37
Sioux Falls Christian 73, Vermillion 47
Sioux Falls Lincoln 71, Brookings 44
Sioux Valley 86, Flandreau 31
Tea Area 59, West Central 49
Wagner 70, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 47
Wakpala 62, Tiospaye Topa 50
Warner 51, Leola/Frederick 47, OT
Waubay/Summit 60, Florence/Henry 43
White River 74, Wall 44
Yankton 56, Pierre 51

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Belle Fourche 62, Mobridge-Pollock 34
Bon Homme 41, Parker 32
Centerville 65, Marty Indian 33
Crow Creek 71, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 46
Custer 44, Hot Springs 33
Dakota Valley 54, Elk Point-Jefferson 17
Dell Rapids St. Mary 86, Iroquois/ Lake Preston Co-op 46
Dupree 42, McLaughlin 38
Faulkton 48, Sunshine Bible Academy 28
Freeman 53, Alcester-Hudson 27
Garretson 58, McCook Central/Montrose 47
Great Plains Lutheran 58, Wilmot 43
Groton Area 49, Deuel 31
Hamlin 57, Castlewood 23
Hanson 53, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 47
Hill City 40, Newell 32
Jones County 42, New Underwood 21
Lennox 54, Baltic 36
Leola/Frederick 43, Warner 39
Lyman 56, Highmore-Harrold 46
Milbank 48, Aberdeen Roncalli 28
Miller 62, Ipswich 21
Northwestern 47, Aberdeen Christian 33
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 54, Mitchell Christian 26
Philip 53, Lead-Deadwood 17
Platte-Geddes 42, Scotland 40
Redfield 49, Webster 31

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Sisseton 63, Clark/Willow Lake 38
Timber Lake 60, Harding County 46
Tri-Valley 54, Dell Rapids 44
Vermillion 62, Sioux Falls Christian 55
Viborg 56, Bridgewater-Emery 27
Wagner 67, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 49
Wall 59, White River 38
Wessington Springs 50, Lower Brule 21
West Central 65, Tea Area 57
Wolsey-Wessington 59, DeSmet 54

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

Kamateros leads South Dakota over North Dakota State 71-62

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Tasos Kamateros scored 23 points as South Dakota beat North Dakota State 71-62 on Thursday night.

Kamateros added nine rebounds for the Coyotes (11-13, 6-6 Summit League). Kruz Perrott-Hunt shot 6 of 12 from the floor and scored 15. Max Burchill added 11 points.

Boden Skunberg led the Bison (9-14, 6-5) with 23 points. Grant Nelson pitched in with 13 points, 13 rebounds, four assists and two blocks. Tajavis Miller had 11 points.

NEXT UP

These two teams both play Saturday. South Dakota hosts North Dakota, while North Dakota State visits South Dakota State.

Mors scores 23, South Dakota State takes down North Dakota

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Matthew Mors scored 23 points to help South Dakota State defeat North Dakota 96-73 on Thursday night.

Mors added five rebounds for the Jackrabbits (13-11, 8-4 Summit League). Zeke Mayo scored 14 points and added 10 rebounds and six assists. Matt Dentlinger recorded 13 points and went 6 of 8 from the field.

Tsotne Tsartsidze led the Fightin' Hawks (7-17, 1-10) in scoring, finishing with 18 points and 10 rebounds. B.J. Omot added 17 points for North Dakota. Matt Norman also had 17 points.

'Dances With Wolves' actor remains jailed in sex abuse case

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

NORTH LAS VEGAS, Nev. (AP) — A former "Dances With Wolves" actor accused of sexually abusing Indigenous girls and leading a cult must remain held without bail until his next court hearing, a judge ordered Thursday morning.

Nathan Chasing Horse, 46, faces charges of sex trafficking, sexual assault against a child younger than 16, and child abuse. He has been in custody since his arrest Tuesday afternoon near the North Las Vegas home that he shares with his five wives.

He appeared briefly in court Thursday for the first time since he was taken into custody but did not speak before North Las Vegas Justice of the Peace Belinda Harris scheduled a bail hearing for Monday. Chasing Horse has not been formally charged.

A different judge is expected to address Chasing Horse's custody status Monday and could set bail after hearing from lawyers and investigators, as well as victims and the defendant's relatives if they choose to speak.

Clark County Chief Deputy District Attorney Jessica Walsh told Harris that she expected Las Vegas police detectives, FBI special agents and victims to speak at the hearing.

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Gesturing Thursday to the first row in the courtroom gallery where Chasing Horse's family members were seated, public defender Michael Wilfong said the defendant has a "great deal of support." His relatives declined to comment as they left the courthouse, as did Wilfong.

Known for his role as young Sioux tribe member Smiles a Lot in the Oscar-winning Kevin Costner film, Chasing Horse gained a reputation among tribes across the United States and in Canada as a so-called medicine man who performed healing ceremonies.

He is believed to be the leader of a cult known as The Circle whose followers believed he could communicate with higher powers, according to an arrest warrant released Wednesday. Police said he abused his position, physically and sexually assaulted Indigenous girls and took underage wives over two decades.

Chasing Horse was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, which is home to the Sicangu Sioux, one of the seven tribes of the Lakota nation.

A 50-page search warrant obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press said Chasing Horse trained his wives to use firearms, instructing them to "shoot it out" with police officers if they tried to "break their family apart." If that failed, he told his wives to take "suicide pills."

SWAT officers and detectives took Chasing Horse into custody and cleared the family's home without incident.

Detectives who searched the property and Chasing Horse's vehicles found firearms, 41 pounds (18.5 kilograms) of marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms, and a memory card with multiple videos of sexual assaults, according to Chasing Horse's arrest report released Wednesday.

Additional charges could be filed related to the videos, the report said.

Las Vegas police said in the search warrant that investigators have identified at least six sexual assault victims, including one who was 13 when she says she was abused. Police also traced sexual allegations against Chasing Horse to the early 2000s in Canada and in multiple states, including South Dakota, Montana and Nevada, where he has lived for about a decade.

One of Chasing Horse's wives was offered to him as a "gift" when she was 15, according to police, while another became a wife after turning 16. He also is accused of recording sexual assaults and arranging sex between victims and other men who paid him.

His arrest comes nearly a decade after he was banished from the Fort Peck Reservation in Poplar, Montana, amid allegations of human trafficking.

Fort Peck tribal leaders voted 7-0 to ban Chasing Horse in 2015 from stepping foot again on the reservation, citing the alleged trafficking and accusations of drug dealing, spiritual abuse and intimidation of tribal members, Indian Country Today reported.

Angeline Cheek, an activist and community organizer who has lived on the Fort Peck Reservation most of her life, said she clearly remembers the tensions that arose inside the tribal council chambers when Chasing Horse was banished.

"Some of Nathan's supporters told the members that something bad was going to happen to them," Cheek told the AP. "They made threats to our elders sitting in the council chambers."

Cheek said she remembered Chasing Horse visiting the reservation frequently when she was growing up, especially during her high school years in the early 2000s when she would see him talking with her classmates.

Cheek, now 34, said she hopes Chasing Horse's arrest will inspire more Indigenous girls and women to report crimes and push lawmakers and elected officials across the U.S. to prioritize addressing violence against Native people.

But she said she also hopes the cultural significance of medicine men doesn't get lost in the news of the crimes.

"There are good medicine men and medicine women among our people who are not trying to commercialize the sacred ways of our ancestors," Cheek said. "They're supposed to heal people, not harm."

Indian tycoon Adani hit by more losses, calls for probe

By KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Trading in shares in troubled Adani Enterprises gyrated Friday as the flagship company of India's second-largest conglomerate tumbled 30% and then rebounded after more than a week of heavy losses that have cost it tens of billions of dollars in market value.

The debacle, which led Adani to cancel a share offering meant to raise \$2.5 billion, has drawn calls for regulators to investigate after a U.S. short-selling firm, Hindenburg Research, issued a report claiming the group engages in market manipulation and other fraudulent practices. Adani denies the allegations.

Opposition lawmakers blocked Parliament proceedings for a second day Friday, chanting slogans and demanding a probe into the business dealings of coal tycoon Gautam Adani, who is said to enjoy close ties with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"We have no connection" with the Adani controversy, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi told reporters outside Parliament on Friday.

In an interview with CNN News 18, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman brushed off concerns that the losses would spook global investors and said India's financial market was "very well regulated."

"As a result, the investors' confidence which existed before shall continue even now," she said, adding that the controversy wasn't "indicative of how well Indian financial markets are governed."

Amit Malviya, the governing Bharatiya Janata Party's information and technology chief, said in a television interview that the opposition was using Adani's crisis to target the Modi government over a private company's shares and their market movements. "Regulators are looking into" what happened, he said.

The market watchdog, the Securities and Exchange Board of India, has not commented. The Economic Times newspaper reported, citing unnamed SEBI sources, that it had asked stock exchanges to check for any unusual activity in Adani stocks.

Shares in Adani Enterprises fell as much as 30%, to 1,017 rupees (\$12), on Friday. At the end of trading, the price had recovered to 1,531 rupees (\$18.70) but was still down by 2%. The company's share price has plunged more than 50% since Hindenburg released its report last week, when it stood at 3,436 rupees (\$41). Stock in six other Adani-listed companies were down 5% to 10% on Friday.

So far there has been no indication that the company's woes might threaten the wider financial sector in India. Its equities market is large enough to sustain the fallout at this moment, said Brian Freitas, a New Zealand-based analyst with Periscope Analytics who has researched the Adani Group.

"Adani stock forms a small part of the equities market and investor concerns right now are restricted to the company, not the whole system or market itself," Freitas said. India's Nifty and Sensex indexes were both higher on Friday.

It could take time for problems to surface, Shilan Shah of Capital Economics said in a report. "From the macro perspective there are few signs of contagion," he said. "But it is too early to sound the all clear."

The S&P Dow Jones indices said Thursday it would remove Adani Enterprises from its sustainability indices beginning Tuesday, following a "media and stakeholder analysis triggered by allegations of stock manipulation and accounting fraud."

That might dent the Adani Group's sustainability credentials and could affect investor sentiment, Freitas said.

Adani, who made a vast fortune mining coal and trading before expanding into construction, power generation, manufacturing and media, was Asia's richest man and the world's third wealthiest before the troubles began with Hindenburg's report.

By Friday, his net worth had halved to \$61 billion, according to Bloomberg's Billionaire Index, where he dropped to the 21st spot worldwide.

He has said little publicly since the troubles began, though in a video address after Adani Enterprises canceled its already fully subscribed share offering he promised to repay investors. The company has said it is reviewing its fundraising plans.

Hindenburg's report said it was betting against seven publicly listed Adani companies, judging them to have an "85% downside, purely on a fundamental basis owing to sky-high valuations." Other issues in

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the report included concerns over debt, alleged use of offshore shell companies to artificially raise share prices and past investigations into fraud.

Adani's speedy, debt-led expansion in recent years caused his net worth to shoot up nearly 2,000%. Even before last week, critics said his ascent was aided by his apparent close ties to Modi and his government. Analysts say he has been successful at aligning his priorities with those of the government by investing in key sectors, but point out that he also has major infrastructure projects in states that are ruled by opposition parties.

"The question now turns to the future of the Adani Group and how they will grow," said Aweek Mitra, founder of Aweekset Financial Advisory.

As a company heavily involved in infrastructure -- from airports and ports to highways -- it needs financing to grow in order to service its debt, which stands at \$30 billion, out of which \$9 billion is from Indian banks.

Adani may be able to sell some assets and continue its expansion, but at a much slower pace than earlier, Mitra said.

"Banks, financial institutions and investors will think five times before investing now," he added.

China, US tensions rise over suspected Chinese spy balloon

By EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA, TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The U.S. was tracking a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon spotted over American airspace, and China said Friday that it would look into those reports, as the discovery further strained already tense relations between Beijing and Washington.

The Pentagon decided not to shoot down the balloon, which was potentially flying over sensitive sites, because of concerns of hurting people on the ground.

The news came as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was expected to make his first trip to Beijing this weekend. The visit has not been formally announced, and it was not immediately clear if the balloon's discovery would affect his travel plans.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said she had no information on the trip. But she said China has "no intention of violating the territory and airspace of any sovereign country" and urged calm while the facts are established.

Blinken would be the highest-ranking member of President Joe Biden's administration to visit China, on a mission to mitigate a sharp downturn in relations between the countries amid trade disputes and concerns about Beijing's increasingly aggressive stance toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

A senior American defense official told Pentagon reporters Thursday that the U.S. has "very high confidence" that the object spotted over U.S. airspace in recent days was a Chinese high-altitude balloon and that it was flying over sensitive sites to collect information. One of the places the balloon was spotted was Montana, which is home to one of the nation's three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information.

The defense official said the U.S. has assessed that the balloon has "limited" value in terms of providing intelligence that couldn't be obtained by other technologies, such as spy satellites.

It was not clear what will happen with the balloon if it isn't brought down.

Mao said China was working to understand the situation in the hopes "that both sides can handle this together calmly and carefully."

"China is a responsible country and has always strictly abided by international laws, and China has no intention of violating the territory and airspace of any sovereign country," she said.

A day earlier, Pentagon press secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said similar balloon activity has been seen in the past several years and the government has taken steps to ensure no sensitive information was stolen.

He said the balloon was traveling well above the height commercial aircraft fly at and didn't present a threat to people on the ground.

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Biden was briefed and asked the military to present options, according to a senior administration official, who was also not authorized to publicly discuss sensitive information. The senior defense official said the U.S. prepared fighter jets, including F-22s, to shoot down the balloon if ordered.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised against taking "kinetic action" because of risks to the safety of people on the ground. Biden accepted that recommendation.

Even though the balloon was over a sparsely populated area of Montana, its size would create a debris field large enough that it could have put people at risk.

The defense official would not specify the size of the balloon but said commercial pilots could spot it from their cockpits.

The surveillance balloon was first reported by NBC News.

A photograph of a large white balloon lingering over the area was captured by The Billings Gazette. The balloon could be seen drifting in and out of clouds and had what appeared to be a solar array hanging from the bottom, said Gazette photographer Larry Mayer.

The balloon's appearance adds to national security concerns among American lawmakers over China's influence in the U.S., ranging from the prevalence of the hugely popular smartphone app TikTok to purchases of American farmland.

"China's brazen disregard for U.S. sovereignty is a destabilizing action that must be addressed," Republican Party House Speaker Kevin McCarthy tweeted.

Tensions with China are particularly high on numerous issues, ranging from Taiwan and the South China Sea to human rights in China's western Xinjiang region and the clampdown on democracy activists in Hong Kong. Not least on that list of irritants are China's tacit support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its refusal to rein in North Korea's expanding ballistic missile program and ongoing disputes over trade and technology.

On Tuesday, Taiwan scrambled fighter jets, put its navy on alert and activated missile systems in response to nearby operations by 34 Chinese military aircraft and nine warships that are part Beijing's strategy to unsettle and intimidate the self-governing island democracy.

Twenty of those aircraft crossed the central line in the Taiwan Strait that has long been an unofficial buffer zone between the two sides, which separated during a civil war in 1949.

Beijing has also increased preparations for a potential blockade or military action against Taiwan, which has stirred increasing concern among military leaders, diplomats and elected officials in the U.S., Taiwan's key ally.

LeBron's off-court legacy complements his basketball success

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Mya Smiley is a student at the University of Akron thanks to an assist from LeBron James, and she is determined upon graduation to become a social worker that helps foster kids.

Her education and career path would not have been possible, the sophomore says, were it not for a scholarship and counseling that she received from the LeBron James Family Foundation. "He's life-changing," Smiley said.

For all his accomplishments on the basketball court — four championships, 19 All-Star Game nominations and an imminent coronation as the NBA's all-time leading scorer — it is James' ambitious pursuits off-the-court that may ultimately distinguish his legacy from other superstar athletes'.

James co-founded a successful media and entertainment company, bought stakes in storied professional baseball and soccer franchises and, with a big assist from product endorsements, his net worth is estimated to have grown above \$1 billion. The off-court achievement that James is most proud of, he says, is working to uplift the lives of people like Smiley in his hometown of Akron.

Many athletes have excelled in one or more of these areas. But few have done all of them as well as James, who is closing in on passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the NBA's career scoring record.

"His goal, I believe, is to have 10% of his wealth go to causes and support communities, which is an

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amazing goal," said Lisa Delpy Neirotti, a professor of sports management at George Washington University. "I would say he's maybe above and beyond others, just on that aspiration alone."

James is, by any measure, an overwhelming success. And he makes Smiley — one of the many people in Akron who have received financial support from his foundation — believe that she can be a success as well.

"If I did not have the LeBron program, I probably wouldn't have ever gone to college. I would be living in a not-so-positive environment," said the 19-year-old Smiley.

"His ability to help people's futures," she added, "is what makes LeBron a great person."

James, who entered the NBA straight after high school in 2003, planned early on to use his talents, fame — and, yes, his growing financial resources — to have an impact on the world beyond basketball.

"Even before I got into the NBA, I knew I wanted to find a way to give back to my community," said James. Although James bounced from home to home during his childhood, and experienced financial insecurity for many of those years, he also was given enormous support from friends, neighbors and educators.

The LeBron James Family Foundation, founded in 2004, at first gained local attention by giving away bikes and backpacks. Then it began looking at after-school programs, with students scattered across several dozen schools, and eventually created a public school currently serving about 575 third through eighth graders. Today the school includes a family resource center that provides a wide-range of services to parents, including mental health, financial literacy, legal aid and GED courses.

Just down the street from the school, the foundation provides rent-free housing to as many as 16 different families — when needed — and it has plans to build 50 units of affordable housing.

"I couldn't have guessed how much it would grow," James said in late January. "But we got here by listening and responding to our community and what they need."

James has made over \$400 million in NBA salary during his time with Cleveland, Miami and the Los Angeles Lakers. Another \$100 million is on the way in the next 2-1/2 years or so.

James is a pitchman for Nike, GMC, AT&T and many more multinational companies. He owns a piece of the Boston Red Sox and Britain's Liverpool football club. His entertainment company, SpringHill — named after the modest apartment complex he grew up in — is valued at \$725 million and has produced movies for HBO and Netflix.

"He's been a brilliant example for millions of kids, especially kids with lesser opportunity and haven't had the same advantages as others," San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich said in 2018, a sentiment he's repeated many times since. "They see in this guy somebody who has consistently exhibited excellence in the workplace and gives them a voice and lets them know that you can speak about anything."

James puts so much focus on giving back to Akron because of the help people there gave to him and his family. "He's never lost sight of that," said Michele Campbell, the executive director of James' foundation. "I think that keeps him grounded."

Just how down to earth "King James" really was got called into question in 2010. That's when he went on television to announce that he was leaving Cleveland to play in Miami. Billed as "The Decision" — and broadcast on ESPN — the live event was widely ripped as egotistical. But from James' perspective, the broadcast raised around \$4 million for charity, a fact that was largely overlooked.

Just a couple of years later, James would use his star power to help draw attention to a cause bigger than himself.

In the aftermath of the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin — a Black Florida teen who was wearing a hoodie when he was fatally shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer — James tweeted a photo of Heat players wearing hoodies and bowing their heads that included the hashtag "WeWantJustice."

In 2020, James helped lead the "More Than A Vote" movement, which included registration and early-vote drives and stressed the need for people — particularly Black voters — to get to the polls to fight disenfranchisement.

Also in 2020, in the aftermath of the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, James was one of the players calling for an end to racial inequality and police brutality.

"Everything I do," James said late last year, "has to have a purpose."

James has all the money and all the fame that he ever wanted or needed. His NBA records, including the scoring title, are going to last for a very long time.

As will his off-court endeavors.

"His ability to help others and put others first is what makes him a great person," Smiley said. "Not the baskets he shot."

Texas power woes linger as Arctic air heads for New England

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — As rising temperatures offered some hope for frustrated Texans shivering in their homes days after losing power in a deadly winter storm, another wave of frigid weather was taking aim Friday at the northern U.S.

An Arctic cold front was expected to move from Canada into the northern Plains and Upper Midwest and sweep into the Northeast. Wind chills in some areas could dive below minus 50 Fahrenheit (minus 45 Celsius).

In Austin, city officials compared the damage from fallen trees and iced-over power lines to tornadoes as they came under mounting criticism for slow repairs and shifting timelines to restore power.

"We had hoped to make more progress today," said Jackie Sargent, general manager of Austin Energy. "And that simply has not happened."

Across Texas, more than 250,000 customers lacked power early Friday, which was down from 430,000 on Thursday, according to PowerOutage.us.

The failures were most widespread in Austin. Impatience was rising there among about 126,000 customers two days after the electricity first went out, which for many also meant no heat. Power failures affected about 30% of customers in the city of nearly a million at any given time since Wednesday.

By Thursday night, Austin officials backtracked on early estimates that power would be fully restored by Friday evening, saying the extent of the damage was worse than originally calculated and they could no longer predict when all the lights would be back on.

For many Texans, it was the second time in three years that a February freeze caused prolonged outages and uncertainty over when the lights would come back on. Temperatures were in the 30s Fahrenheit (minus 1 to 3.8 Celsius) Thursday with wind chills below freezing.

Unlike the 2021 blackouts in Texas, when hundreds of people died after the state's grid was pushed to the brink of total failure because of a lack of generation, the outages in Austin this time were largely the result of frozen equipment and ice-burdened trees and limbs falling on power lines. But the differences were little comfort to Austin residents and businesses that also lost power for days two years ago.

The freeze has been blamed for at least 10 traffic deaths on slick roads this week in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

In a briefing Thursday with the federal Weather Prediction Center, New Englanders were warned that wind chill — the combined effect of wind and cold air on exposed skin — in the minus 50s Fahrenheit (minus 45 to minus 50 Celsius) "could be the coldest felt in decades."

The strong winds and cold air will create wind chill "rarely seen in northern and eastern Maine," according to an advisory from the National Weather Service office in Caribou, Maine.

Jay Broccolo, director of weather operations at New Hampshire's Mount Washington observatory, which for decades held the world record for the fastest wind gust, said Thursday that wind speeds could top 100 mph (160 kph).

"We take safety really seriously in the higher summits," Broccolo said, "and this weekend's forecast is looking pretty gnarly, even for our standards."

Along Ukraine-Belarus border, a war of nerves — and drones

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BELARUS BORDER, Ukraine (AP) — The reconnaissance drones fly several times a day from Ukrainian positions deep inside the thick forest that marches across the border into Belarus, a close Russian ally, scouring sky and land for signs of trouble on the other side.

Ukrainian units are monitoring the 1,000-kilometer (650-mile) frontier of marsh and woodland for a possible surprise offensive from the north, a repeat of the unsuccessful Russian thrust toward Kyiv at the start of the war nearly a year ago.

This time the Ukrainians are taking no chances. Since the summer they have been reinforcing defenses, building and expanding trenches and laying mines in the forest ahead of the springtime offensive military officials expect. Residents of villages in the region that were temporarily occupied last year are horrified by the prospect of it all starting again.

"We're listening out for every small sound and noise. This isn't a way to live," said Valentina Matveva, 64, from the village of Ripke. "When you're in constant fear, that's not life."

Concerns of a renewed military push were stirred in January after Russia and Belarus held joint air force drills, one month after a rare visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Minsk.

Military experts and Western intelligence have played down the possibility of a renewed northern offensive. The British Defense Ministry tweeted on Jan. 11 that Russian aircraft and existing Russian troops in Belarus, though numerous, are "unlikely to constitute a credible offensive force."

Belarusian officials attribute the troop deployment along the border to "strategic deterrence" according to local reports. The country's authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, has insisted he will not send troops to Ukraine.

But Ukrainian commanders are wary, remembering how Russia used Belarus as a launching pad in early 2022.

"We continuously monitor the enemy from the ground and observe the movement of troops, if they are moving, how many troops, and where they are moving," the area's army intelligence unit head said during a press tour this week a few kilometers from the border. The officer only identified himself by his first name, Oleksandr, citing security reasons.

Unlike the east with its devastating artillery duels, here in the north it's largely a war of quadcopters.

Oleksandr said the Belarusians and Russians are "constantly monitoring our guard changes, trying to find our military's positions."

At times, Oleksandr's unit detects enemy reconnaissance drones and shoots them down using anti-drone rifles. Or an enemy drone detects a Ukrainian one and tails it, at which point the Ukrainians try to capture and add it to their stock.

"We got four of their drones this way recently, and they took two of ours," Oleksandr said.

He says the reconnaissance missions have revealed no sign of worrying activity — yet. "They have a reinforcement section, and the patrol has been strengthened, but we do not observe a significant accumulation of troops from our section," he said.

Ukraine's Lt. Gen. Oleksii Pavlyuk, who is responsible for Kyiv province, was quoted in local reports as saying his country was preparing for a possible fresh attack through Belarus. "We've created a group on the border with Belarus, which is ready to meet the enemy with dignity," he was quoted as saying.

Ukrainian officials argue that no one can know how Moscow will move in the coming months, and that a state of alert is necessary along the border.

"The (fortifications) were made to prevent re-infiltration," said Oleksandr, "Whether it will happen or not, we must always be ready."

Ukrainian soldiers armed with machine guns stand in five-foot-deep trenches dug into the forest floor and reinforced with planks.

A local villager briskly cycles past. Memories here are still fresh from the temporary occupation when Russian troops attempted to lay siege to the main city of Chernihiv. They withdrew on April 3 as Moscow

switched its focus to Ukraine's eastern provinces.

But despite the Russian-Belarusian drills, there's also hope.

"The first time they invaded, we didn't have the weapons and the army (at the border)," said Hanna Pokheelko, 66, from the village of Koluchivka. "But this time we do."

Attack or no attack, Olena, from the village of Novi Yarylovychi, fears the border situation means she may never see her mother, brother and two sisters living just 3 kilometers (1.8 miles) away in a village inside Belarus.

"I can't believe they are so close and I can't see them," said the 63-year old, who is a Belarusian by birth but married into a Ukrainian family and who didn't give her full name out of concerns for her family.

EU officials hold Kyiv talks in show of support for Ukraine

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Top European Union officials were due to meet Friday in Kyiv with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a show of support for the country as it battles to counter Russia's invasion and strives to join the EU as well as NATO.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel, as well as 15 European commissioners, traveled to the Ukrainian capital for what they described as a summit meeting.

The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 — a few months before the war started. The highly symbolic visit is also the first EU political mission of its kind to a country at war.

"There will be no let-up in our resolve," Michel said in a tweet on his apparent arrival in Kyiv. "We will also support (Ukraine) every step of the way on your journey to the EU."

The high-level visit came as Ukrainian authorities reported that at least six civilians were killed and 20 others were injured over the previous 24 hours.

Among the dead were two brothers, ages 49 and 42, killed when Russian shelling destroyed an apartment block in the northeastern Kharkiv region, Ukraine's presidential office said. Their 70-year-old father was hospitalized with unspecified injuries.

Also, 18 apartment buildings, two hospitals and a school were damaged in a Russian attack in the eastern city of Kramatorsk on Thursday, injuring six, Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko told Ukrainian TV. Three people died when a Russian missile hit an apartment building in that city on Wednesday.

EU assistance for Ukraine has reached almost 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) since the fighting started, according to EU officials.

The EU is providing Ukraine with financial and humanitarian aid, among other things. It also plans to adopt a 10th package of sanctions against Russia in the coming weeks.

The EU has also announced it's ramping up its military training mission for Ukraine, from an initial target of pushing 15,000 troops through the schooling to up to 30,000 troops. One focus is to train the crews of tanks that Western countries have offered Ukraine.

Ukraine wants to join the 27-nation bloc, and formally submitted its application last June, though that could take years and require the adoption of far-reaching reforms. In the meantime, von der Leyen said Thursday that the European Commission is willing to let Kyiv join what she called some "key European programs" that will bring benefits similar to membership.

Those programs were due to be discussed in Friday's meeting, which will also address one of the main obstacles to Ukraine's EU membership: endemic corruption.

Von der Leyen, on her fourth visit to Kyiv since Russia's invasion, said Thursday she was "comforted" by Ukraine's anti-corruption drive.

The previous day, Zelenskyy had taken aim at corrupt officials for the second time in the space of a week. Several high-ranking officials were dismissed.

Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform in a country long gripped by graft.

The latest corruption allegations came as Western allies channel billions of dollars to help Kyiv fight Moscow's forces.

Ukraine's government is keen to get more Western military aid, on top of the tanks pledged last week, as the warring sides are expected to launch new offensives once winter ends. Kyiv is now asking for fighter jets.

The U.S is expected to announce Friday it will send longer-range bombs to Ukraine as part of a new \$2.17 billion aid package.

Ukraine's forces are bracing for an expected new onslaught by the Kremlin's forces in coming weeks.

Officials in the eastern Luhansk region said Russian forces have disabled mobile internet connections, stepped up shelling and deployed more troops in preparation for a full-scale offensive there.

Pope heads to South Sudan to urge peace as fighting kills 27

By NICOLE WINFIELD and DENG MACHOL Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — Pope Francis opened the second and final leg of his African pilgrimage by heading to South Sudan on Friday, hoping to encourage the young country's stalled peace process and draw international attention to continued fighting and a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Francis had one final appointment Friday in Kinshasa with Congo's bishops before flying to the South Sudanese capital, Juba. There, he joins the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Rt. Rev. Iain Greenshields, in a novel ecumenical push for peace.

Together, the three represent the religious leadership of the overwhelmingly Christian country, the world's youngest, which gained independence from the majority Muslim Sudan in 2011 but has been beset by civil war and conflict. The Christian leaders are aiming to give a joint call for South Sudan's political leaders to put aside their differences and work for the good of their people.

Continued fighting, including attacks this week in the south that killed 27 people, has displaced some 2 million people and hampered implementation of a 2018 peace deal, but residents said the arrival of Francis on the first-ever papal visit to South Sudan gave them hope.

"The pope will bring us peace," said Monica Lado, a 40-year-old from Juba, on the eve of the three leaders' arrival.

One group of about 80 Catholics from the central city of Rumbek walked for nine days, covering an estimated 300 kilometers (around 190 miles), and arrived in Juba to cheers on Thursday. The pilgrims were sore, tired and had blisters, but said they hoped to attend Francis' big Mass on Sunday and take back blessings to their homes and families.

"As the pope is coming, I believe what was killing us will stop," said a smiling Victoria Yar, 58, as she sat in a plastic chair to rest after the long journey.

Another pilgrim on the trek, Mary Yom, a mother of eight, lost two children to violence. "Our country is being destroyed by the conflict and we hope that the pope is coming with peace, and no one will be killed again," she said.

Francis and Welby first announced plans to visit South Sudan in 2017, but security concerns repeatedly thwarted the trip. In an effort to move the process forward, Francis presided in 2019 over a joint prayer in the Vatican and famously got down on hands and knees and kissed the feet of South Sudan's rival leaders, begging them to make peace.

But fighting continues, evidence of the violence that simmers in communities at times awash with arms and ethnic tensions in one of the world's poorest countries. At least 27 people were killed this week in Central Equatoria state's Kajo-keji, in the latest communal violence between cattle herders and other residents. Kajo-keji county commissioner Phaniel Dumo called the attack "barbaric" and urged calm.

Overall, the International Committee of the Red Cross this week reported an influx of wounded patients in recent months due to renewed clashes across the country. "We see terrible injuries, and often airlifting patients from remote areas is the only way to save their lives," said ICRC Juba delegation head Pierre Dorbes.

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In comments on local Eye Radio on Thursday, President Salva Kiir vowed the country would never go back to war as long as he was in power.

"The coming of the Holy Father to South Sudan is your prayers that have brought him," he said.

But part of the stall in implementing the peace accord is continued political friction between Kiir and deputy Riek Machar, who led opposition forces during the country's civil war and has long been interested in holding power himself. Lack of political will has been cited by critics for the slow implementation of the deal in a country also hampered by alleged widespread official corruption.

In Juba, Francis is widely expected to repeat his call for both men and all parties in South Sudan to commit to making progress on the accord and to put an end to corrupt practices. Already, delays forced the postponement of the country's first presidential election for another two years.

In addition, Francis is expected to call for an end to continued clashes and the dreadful plight of women in South Sudan.

The U.N. Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan last year reported that "widespread rape" was being used as a weapon by all armed groups across the country. It expressed shock at interviewees describing "staggeringly brutal and prolonged gang rapes perpetrated against them by multiple men, often while their husbands, parents or children were forced to watch, helpless to intervene."

Additionally, the United Nations warned in November that some 9.4 million people out of a population of 12.4 million would need humanitarian aid and protection this year, a half million more than in 2022. It cited continued violence, constraints on access by aid groups and climate conditions including flooding and drought as driving up the need.

At the same time, the U.N. has warned that the necessary funding for an increased aid response has dwindled, as donors redirect aid budgets to Ukraine and other crises.

Poni Mary, 45, who fled the country in 2014 during the civil war but returned to Juba last year, said she hoped South Sudanese would use the pope's visit to forgive one another.

"If you still have sins, anger or problem in your heart with someone else, it will be difficult for you to receive blessings of God," she said.

Kyrgios pleads guilty to assault, has no conviction recorded

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australian tennis star Nick Kyrgios apologized for shoving a former girlfriend to the ground two years ago after he escaped conviction Friday on a charge of common assault.

The 2022 Wimbledon runner-up pleaded guilty in the Australian Capital Territory Magistrates Court to assaulting Chiara Passari during an argument in his hometown of Canberra in January 2021.

Magistrate Beth Campbell did not record a conviction against Kyrgios for reasons including that the offense was at the low end of seriousness for a common assault, was not premeditated and he had no criminal record.

Kyrgios, who was using crutches following recent surgery on his left knee, ignored reporters' questions as he left court but issued a statement through a management company.

"I respect today's ruling and am grateful to the court for dismissing the charges without conviction," Kyrgios said. "I was not in a good place when this took place and I reacted to a difficult situation in a way I deeply regret. I know it wasn't OK and I'm sincerely sorry for the hurt I caused.

"Mental health is tough. Life can seem overwhelming. But I've found that getting help and working on myself has helped me to feel better and to be better," he added.

The only media question he responded to as he was about to be driven away from the court was: "what's next for Nick Kyrgios?"

"Just recovery and get back on court," Kyrgios replied.

Campbell described the shove as an act of "stupidity" and "frustration."

She assured him his celebrity was not a factor in him avoiding a criminal record.

"You're a young man who happens to hit the tennis ball particularly well and your name is widely rec-

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ognised outside this court room," Campbell told Kyrgios.

"I deal with you exactly the same way as any young man in this court."

Kyrgios' psychologist, Sam Borenstein, said in a written report and testimony by phone that Kyrgios had suffered major depressive episodes around the time of the assault and had used alcohol and drugs to cope. Kyrgios' mental health led to impulsive and reckless behavior.

His recent knee injury had resulted in mild to moderate symptoms of depression, but his mental health was improving, Borenstein said.

"He's doing very well," Borenstein said. "His mental health has improved significantly."

"Given the history, he is still vulnerable to recurrent episodes of depression depending on life circumstances," Borenstein added.

Lawyers for Kyrgios had sought to have charge dismissed on mental health grounds but the application was unsuccessful.

In arguing against a conviction being recorded, defense lawyer Michael Kukulies-Smith cited the opinion of Kyrgios's manager of a "strong likelihood of sanctions and impact upon sponsorship" from a conviction. Kyrgios had faced a potential maximum 2-year prison sentence if convicted.

The assault occurred when Kyrgios had been attempting to leave Passari during an argument late Jan. 10, 2021, outside her apartment in the inner-Canberra suburb of Kingston.

He called an Uber but Passari stood in the way of him closing the front passenger door. The driver wouldn't leave with the door open.

Kyrgios eventually pushed Passari's shoulders backward with open palms, causing her to fall to the pavement and graze her knee, according to agreed facts read to the court.

Passari signed a police statement alleging the assault 11 months later, after her relationship with Kyrgios had ended.

His current partner, Costeen Hatz, wrote in a character reference that she had no concerns of such violence in her relationship. Hatz was among Kyrgios' supporters who sat behind him in court.

Kyrgios, wearing a dark suit and using the crutches for support, first spoke in court when the magistrate asked him if he could stand to enter a plea.

Kyrgios replied: "Yep, no worries, Your Honor," as he rose to plead guilty.

In February last year, Kyrgios opened up about his performance at the 2019 Australian Open, saying what appeared to be a positive time in his life had been "one of my darkest periods."

"I was lonely, depressed, negative, abusing alcohol, drugs, pushed away family and friends," he wrote on Instagram. "I felt as if I couldn't talk or trust anyone. This was a result of not opening up and refusing to lean on my loved ones and simply just push myself little by little to be positive."

Kyrgios made further references to his mental health struggles during his runs last year to the final at Wimbledon and the quarterfinals at the U.S. Open.

After ending Daniil Medvedev's U.S. Open title defense last September to reach the quarterfinals, Kyrgios expressed pride at lifting himself out of "some really tough situations, mentally" and "some really scary places" off the court.

The 27-year-old Kyrgios had a career setback last month when he withdrew from the Australian Open because the knee injury which later required arthroscopic surgery.

Belgian carnival town celebrates again after COVID hiatus

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BINCHE, Belgium (AP) — On a sunny winter morning heralding a radiant Mardi Gras, Beatrice and Karl Kersten don't have a minute to spare.

In their warm workshop decorated with ancestral photos, the couple bend over their sewing machines. They are busy putting the finishing touches to the delicate lace details adorning the carnival costumes that will send a whole town into rapture once paraded through the cobbled streets of Binche.

"It's a total rush, we are late," said Karl, a fourth-generation tailor.

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But to the Kerstens and their son Quentin, now in charge of the family business in the medieval western Belgian town, this year the pressure feels really good.

After a two-year hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic that brutally brought one of Europe's oldest Mardi Gras celebrations to a halt — and the Kerstens to the verge of bankruptcy — celebrations are back with a vengeance this winter.

"There is a real excitement and enthusiasm," said Quentin. "People came much earlier to reserve their costumes than in other years."

The earliest records of the Binche Mardi Gras, which draws thousands of revelers, date to the 14th century. Many Belgian towns hold ebullient carnival processions before Lent. But what makes Binche unique are the "Gilles" — local men deemed fit to wear the Mardi Gras costumes.

Under rules established by the local folklore defense association, only men from Binche families or resident there for at least five years can wear the Gille costume. Other characters — the Peasant, the Sailor, the Harlequin, the Pierrot or the Gille's Wife — also play a role in the carnival.

The UNESCO-listed event starts three days before Lent and reaches its climax on Mardi Gras, when the Gilles — in wax masks sporting green spectacles and thin moustaches — dance in their wooden clogs to the sound of brass instruments and clarinets until the early morning hours. Women can join in, but only men wear the Gille outfit.

"The carnival is really the soul of the city of Binche, so we have been really sad over the past two years" said Patrick Haumont, a town hall staffer who often takes part in the celebrations, dressed in the red, yellow and black attire.

Over the past three weeks, rehearsals for the main parade have attracted more participants than usual. And at weekends, excitement in the bars filling the town's main square hits unprecedented levels.

"Instead of the one beer you would normally drink, it's now five," Haumont said.

After the economic struggles of the pandemic years, and amid pain from energy bills that went through the roof after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the people of Binche want to make this year's carnival one for the ages.

Although taking part requires a big financial commitment — renting a Gille costume and a lavish ostrich-feather hat costs around 300 euros (\$327) — some 1,000 Gilles are expected to parade through the narrow streets of brick row houses to the beat of the drum and the tinkling bells of their outfits.

"People have rented more costumes, more hats. Everybody wants to do it again. We can see that there is a need," Haumont said.

For Christian Mostade, an 88-year-old member of the biggest Gilles company, it will be his 38th carnival as a Gille.

"In normal times, we would be around 140 or 145," he said. "This year we'll be 158. There are old-timers who have not participated for a long time who have returned, and also many new ones."

Charly Rombaux is among the newcomers. The 35-year-old delivery driver does not want to wear the daunting traditional hat that weighs nearly 4 kilograms (8.8 pounds) for his grand debut as a Gille.

The experienced Mostade had the solution pat.

"The solution is to find three men in your company with the same head size, so you can alternate with the hat on," Mostade said as the two met for the first time this week and quickly engaged in a passionate conversation.

That need to get together again in a city where the Carnival creates a unique sense of belonging is a relief for the "louageurs" — the craftsmen making the costumes and renting them to the Gilles.

At some point during the pandemic, as he struggled to make ends meet, Quentin Kersten thought about calling it quits and starting anew as an electrician. His parents had to dip into their savings, forgetting about the trips they envisaged for their retirement days to salvage their business instead.

"It was a catastrophe," Karl Kersten summed up.

But that dark chapter is now closed. Haumont marks his words: "For a regular carnival, there is effervescence. But this year, it is just going to be madness."

Israel probes legality of US giving artifact to Palestinians

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — An ivory spoon dating back 2,700 years that was recently repatriated to the Palestinian Authority from the United States has sparked a dispute with Israel's new far-right government over the cultural heritage in the occupied West Bank.

The clash brings into focus the political sensitivities surrounding archaeology in the Middle East, where Israelis and Palestinians each use ancient artifacts to support their claims over the land.

Israel's ultranationalist heritage minister has ordered officials to examine the legality of the U.S. government's historic repatriation of the artifact to the Palestinians earlier this month, and is calling for annexing archaeology in the occupied West Bank.

The artifact — a cosmetic spoon made of ivory and believed to have been plundered from a site in the West Bank — was seized in late 2021 by the Manhattan District Attorney's office as part of a deal with the New York billionaire hedge fund manager Michael Steinhardt.

It was one of 180 artifacts illegally looted and purchased by Steinhardt that he surrendered as part of an agreement to avoid prosecution.

American officials handed an artifact over to the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities on Jan. 5 in what the U.S. State Department's Office of Palestinian Affairs said was "the first event of such repatriation" by the U.S. to the Palestinians.

Dozens of Steinhardt's surrendered artifacts have already been repatriated to Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Jordan, Libya and Israel. This spoon was the first and only item ever to be repatriated to the Palestinians.

The repatriation coincided with the first weeks of Israel's new government, which is composed of ultranationalists who see the West Bank as the biblical heartland of the Jewish people and inextricably linked to the state of Israel.

Heritage Minister Amihai Eliyahu's office said last week that the legality of the repatriation "is being examined by the archaeology staff officer with the legal counsel, which will examine all aspects of the matter, including the Oslo Accords that the U.S. has signed."

The case underscores how archaeology and cultural heritage are intertwined with the competing claims of the Israelis and Palestinians in the decades-long conflict.

"Any artifact that we know that it comes out illegally from Palestine, we have the right to have it back," said Jihad Yassin, director general of excavations and museums in the Palestinian Tourism and Antiquities Ministry. "Each artifact says a story from the history of this land."

The ministry is part of the Palestinian Authority, the government established as part of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s that exercises limited autonomy in parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Those agreements between Israel and the Palestinians were supposed to include coordination on a raft of issues, including archaeology and cultural heritage.

But the agreements have largely unraveled. Yassin said that the archaeology committee has not met in around two decades, and that there is virtually zero coordination between Israel and the Palestinians concerning antiquities theft prevention in the West Bank.

"We try to do our best to protect these archaeological sites, but we face difficulties," he said.

Yassin said that around 60% of the West Bank's archaeological sites are in territory under complete Israeli military control, and that his ministry's theft prevention workers "manage to control in a high percentage the looting" in areas under Palestinian Authority control.

Nonetheless, many of the illicit artifacts that have made their way to Israel's legal antiquities market were looted from the West Bank, he said.

According to court documents, Steinhardt bought the ivory cosmetic spoon in 2003 from Israeli antiquities dealer Gil Chaya for \$6,000. The artifact had no provenance — paperwork detailing where it came from and how it had entered the dealer's inventory — but Chaya said the object was from the West Bank town of El-Koum, which is under Palestinian Authority control.

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Another artifact believed to have been looted from the same town, a "Red Carnelian Sun Fish amulet (that) dates to circa 600 B.C.E.," remains missing, according to the DA's office. Steinhardt has yet to locate the item, but if it is found, it will be repatriated to the Palestinians, the office said.

American authorities returned 28 objects to Israel last year, not including three that were seized in place at the Israel Museum of Jerusalem. Seven others meant to be returned to Israel have yet to be found. Several of the items returned to Israel are believed to have been looted from the West Bank.

The Israel Antiquities Authority declined comment on the artifact's repatriation to the Palestinians.

Heritage Minister Eliyahu, a religious ultranationalist in Netanyahu's government now in charge of the country's Antiquities Authority, denies the existence of a Palestinian people.

Since taking office, he has accused the Palestinian Authority of committing "national terrorism" and "erasing heritage" at an archaeological site in a Palestinian-controlled area near the West Bank city of Nablus.

It remains unclear what impact, if any, a review by the ministry's legal counsel could have. It appears unlikely Israel could confiscate the artifact from the Palestinians, but a legal opinion against the move could potentially complicate future repatriations.

Earlier this week, Eliyahu said he would be giving the Israel Antiquities Authority full control over archaeological sites, cultural heritage and theft prevention throughout the West Bank — a move that critics say would in effect apply Israeli law over occupied territory in breach of international law.

Currently, archaeological excavations and antiquities in the West Bank are managed by the Civil Administration's archaeology staff officer, which is part of the Defense Ministry. Israel has not formally annexed the West Bank, and the territory is treated as occupied and is governed under military law.

"All heritage on both sides of the green line will earn full protection, at an international and scientific standard," Eliyahu wrote in a Facebook post on Sunday. He said the state of Israel would "act in a uniform and professional manner from the (Mediterranean) sea to the Jordan."

Alon Arad, director of Israeli cultural heritage non-governmental organization Emek Shaveh, said that putting the Israel Antiquities Authority in charge of archaeology in the occupied territory was "activating Israeli law in the West Bank, which means annexation."

Eliyahu's office declined repeated interview requests.

Yassin said that for the time being, the artifact will remain at the ministry, where it will be studied by one of its archaeologists. Then, he said, it will be displayed at one of the West Bank's museums.

"It's not the only one," Yassin said. "It is the beginning."

US seeks to expel Russian mercenaries from Sudan, Libya

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The United States has stepped up pressure on Middle East allies to expel the Wagner Group, a military contractor with close ties to Russia's president, from chaos-stricken Libya and Sudan where it expanded in recent years, regional officials told The Associated Press.

The U.S. effort described by officials comes as the Biden administration is making a broad push against the mercenaries. The U.S. has slapped new sanctions on the Wagner Group in recent months over its expanding role in Russia's war in Ukraine.

The group is owned by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Pentagon has described it as a surrogate for the Russian Defense Ministry. The Kremlin denies any connection.

The Biden administration has been working for months with regional powers Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to pressure military leaders in Sudan and Libya to end their ties with the group, according to more than a dozen Libyan, Sudanese and Egyptian officials. They asked for anonymity to speak freely and because they were not authorized to discuss the issue with the media.

"Wagner obsesses them (American officials)," said an Egyptian senior government official with direct knowledge of the talks. "It is at the top of every meeting."

The group doesn't announce its operations, but its presence is known from reports on the ground and

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other evidence. In Sudan, it was originally associated with former strongman Omar al-Bashir and now works with the military leaders who replaced him. In Libya, it's associated with east Libya-based military commander Khalifa Hifter.

Wagner has deployed thousands of operatives in African and Middle Eastern countries including Mali, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Syria. Its aim in Africa, analysts say, is to support Russia's interests amid rising global interest in the resource-rich continent. Rights experts working with the U.S. on Jan. 31 accused the group of committing possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Mali, where it is fighting alongside government forces.

"Wagner tends to target countries with natural resources that can be used for Moscow's objectives – gold mines in Sudan, for example, where the resulting gold can be sold in ways that circumvent Western sanctions," said Catrina Doxsee, an expert on Wagner at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Prigozhin did not respond to a request for comment sent to the press department of the Concord Group, of which he is an owner.

The group's role in Libya and Sudan was central to recent talks between CIA director William Burns and officials in Egypt and Libya in January. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also discussed the group with President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi in a late-January trip to Cairo, Egyptian officials said. Weeks after the visits, Burns acknowledged in a Thursday speech at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., that after recent travel to Africa he was concerned about the Wagner's growing influence in the continent.

"That is a deeply unhealthy development and we're working very hard to counter it," Burns said.

Burns and Blinken called on el-Sissi's government to help convince Sudan's ruling generals and Libya's Hifter to end their dealings with the Wagner, an Egyptian official briefed on the talks said.

The group and its founder have been under U.S. sanctions since 2017, and the Biden administration in December announced new export restrictions to restrict its access to technology and supplies, designating it as a "significant transnational criminal organization."

SUDAN

Leaders in Sudan have received repeated U.S. messages about Wagner's growing influence in recent months, via Egypt and Gulf states, said a senior Sudanese official.

Abbas Kamel, the director of Egypt's Intelligence Directorate Agency, conveyed Western concerns in talks in Khartoum last month with the head of Sudan's ruling sovereign council, Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, the official said. Kamel urged Burhan to find a way to address Wagner's "use of Sudan as a base" for operations in neighboring countries such as the Central African Republic, the official said.

Wagner started operating in Sudan in 2017, providing military training to intelligence and special forces, and to the paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces, according to Sudanese officials and documents shared with The Associated Press.

The RSF, which grew out of the feared Janjaweed militias, is led by powerful general Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, who has close ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Dagalo has been sending troops to fight alongside the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen's long-running civil war.

Wagner mercenaries are not operating in a combat role in Sudan, officials said. The group, which has dozens of operatives in the country, provides military and intelligence training, as well as surveillance and protection of sites and top officials.

Sudanese military leaders appear to have given Wagner control of gold mines in return. The documents show that the group has received mining rights through front companies with ties to Sudan's powerful military and the RSF. Its activities are centered in gold-rich areas controlled by the RSF in Darfur, Blue Nile and other provinces, according to officials.

Two companies have been sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Treasury for acting as fronts for Wagner's mining activities — Meroe Gold, a Sudanese gold mining firm, and its owner, the Russian-based M Invest firm. Prigozhin owns or controls both, according to the Treasury. Despite sanctions, Meroe Gold is still operating across Sudan.

The Russian mercenaries helped the paramilitary force consolidate its influence not only in the country's

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far-flung regions, but also in the capital of Khartoum, where it helps run pro-RSF social media pages.

The main camp of Wagner mercenaries is in the contested village of Am Dafok on the borders between the Central African Republic and Sudan, according to the Darfur Bar Association, a legal group that focuses on human rights.

"Nobody can approach their areas," said Gibreel Hassabu, a lawyer and member of the association.

LIBYA

In Libya, Burns held talks in Tripoli with Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, head of one of Libya's two rival governments.

The CIA director also met with Hifter in eastern Libya, according to officials with Hifter's forces. One official briefed on the meeting in al-Rajma military complex, the seat of Hifter's command just outside Benghazi, said Wagner was the main issue discussed.

U.N. experts said Wagner mercenaries were deployed Libya since 2018, helping Hifter's forces in their fight against Islamist militants in eastern Libya. The group was also involved in his failed offensive on Tripoli in April 2019.

The U.S. Africa Command, AFRICOM, estimated that some 2,000 Wagner mercenaries were in Libya between July-September 2020, before a cease-fire. The mercenaries were equipped with armored vehicles, air defense systems, fighter aircraft, and other equipment, which were supplied by Russia, according to the AFRICOM assessment. The report also said the Wagner group appeared to be receiving money from the UAE, a main foreign backer of Hifter.

Since the 2020 cease-fire, Wagner's activities have centered around oil facilities in central Libya, and they have continued providing military training to Hifter forces, Libyan officials said. It is not clear how many Wagner mercenaries are still in Libya.

American officials have demanded that mercenaries be pulled out of oil facilities, another Libyan official said.

Hifter did not offer any commitments, but asked for assurances that Turkey and the Libyan militias it backed in western Libya will not initiate an attack on his forces in the coastal city of Sirte and other areas in central Libya.

Egypt, which has close ties with Hifter, has demanded that Wagner not be stationed close to its borders.

There is no evidence yet that the Biden administration's pressure has yielded results in either Sudan or Libya, observers said.

Doxsee, the expert, said the U.S. and allies should resist promoting narratives that "Russia is bad and what we have to offer is good" and instead focus on offering better alternatives to Wagner.

"Ultimately, at the end of the day, Wagner is a business. If you can cut out the profit and you can reduce the business case for using Wagner, that's what is going to make it a less appealing case," she said.

DeSantis eyes 2024 from afar as GOP rivals move toward runs

By STEVE PEOPLES, THOMAS BEAUMONT and ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis may be months away from publicly declaring his presidential intentions, but his potential rivals aren't holding back.

No fewer than a half dozen Republicans eyeing the White House have begun actively courting top political operatives in states like New Hampshire and Iowa, which traditionally host the opening presidential primary contests. At the same time, former President Donald Trump, the only announced candidate in the race, is launching regular attacks against DeSantis — and others — while locking down key staff and endorsements in early voting South Carolina.

For now, DeSantis is plowing forward with a fiery "anti-woke" agenda in the legislature before a presidential announcement in late spring or early summer. His team is beginning to hold informal conversations with a handful of prospective campaign staff in key states, according to those involved in the discussions. But compared with would-be rivals, the Florida governor, famous for crafting his own political strategy, appears to be stepping into the 2024 presidential primary season much more deliberately.

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"They understand they are in kind of a sweet spot now. They can feel the demand building and they don't really have to show any leg yet," said David Kochel, a veteran Republican operative who has been in touch with DeSantis' team to relay interest from activists. "I just don't think there's any urgency yet to start putting things in place."

For voters, it may seem early in the 2024 presidential election season. But by historical standards, it is not. The GOP's opening presidential primary debates are just six months away, expected in late July or early August when the Republican National Committee holds its summer meeting in Milwaukee.

Already, Trump has been in the race for more than two months. The former president on Saturday released a list of high-profile supporters in South Carolina, including Gov. Henry McMaster and Sen. Lindsay Graham. And on Feb. 15, Nikki Haley, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, is set to launch her own White House bid in South Carolina, followed by immediate appearances in Iowa and New Hampshire.

Haley is among a half dozen Republican prospects in various levels of conversations with political operatives in New Hampshire and Iowa about job openings, according to people involved with the discussions who requested anonymity to discuss internal planning. Beyond Haley, they include former Vice President Mike Pence, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan and former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson.

Hogan, a term-limited governor who left office only two weeks ago, talked up his executive experience in multiple New Hampshire radio interviews on Thursday. He told The Associated Press he was launching a multi-day fundraising tour beginning this weekend in DeSantis' Florida.

"There's plenty of room for Trump and DeSantis and me in the same state," Hogan said. "Everybody says it's Donald Trump or Ron DeSantis. But I think it might be somebody that nobody's talking about right now, which is what usually happens. ... My argument is the frontrunners almost never win."

Indeed, recent political history is littered with tales of seemingly strong early contenders who ultimately failed. They include the likes of former Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who looked like a frontrunner in 2015 and was forced out of the race before the first voting contest. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush then emerged as the strong favorite before being overtaken by Trump.

Veteran Republican strategist Ari Fleischer recalled the 2000 presidential campaign when his then-boss, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, successfully waited until mid-June to enter the Republican presidential primary. In the months before the announcement, Bush aggressively worked behind the scenes to line up donors, staff and endorsements.

For DeSantis to adopt a similar winning playbook, Fleischer said, it's critical to work now to assemble a strong campaign apparatus in private. He likened a successful strategy at this phase to a duck, who appears calm but is paddling hard just below the water's surface.

"So long as (DeSantis) is paddling furiously underwater like a duck, he can afford to wait," Fleischer said. "The amount of work it takes to build a presidential campaign is phenomenal. I don't think people understand what's involved unless they've done it. It's brutal. ... And if you don't put the labor into it quietly, privately, it falls apart."

DeSantis' team declined to comment on his 2024 plans publicly, but the Florida governor's allies expect him to enter the race in late June or early July.

In the short-term, he's preparing to promote his upcoming book, "The Courage to be Free," set for release on Feb. 28. And he'll spend much of the coming months stacking up legislative victories in the Florida statehouse, where the Republican supermajority stands ready to deliver a bevy of measures sure to entice the most conservative voters in a GOP presidential primary.

In recent days, DeSantis said he's backing new laws that would ban abortions after 6 weeks of conception, ease restrictions for those wishing to carry concealed firearms and end the state's unanimous jury requirement for death penalty cases. He released a plan to end sales taxes on gas stoves, picking up on a false claim circulating on the right that the Biden administration plans to ban the appliance.

DeSantis is also asking the state legislature for another \$12 million to relocate unwanted migrants, signaling a continued focus on illegal immigration after spending millions in Florida taxpayer dollars to fly

migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard last year.

And he's zeroing in on issues related to race and education. He installed a conservative majority on the board of trustees at a small liberal arts school and has debuted a proposal to block programs on diversity, education and inclusion from state colleges. At the same institutions, he would also ban programs on critical race theory, which centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation's institutions, which function to maintain the dominance of white people in society.

In the coming days, DeSantis is expected to declare victory in his battle against Disney, the state's largest employer, which drew the governor's ire after opposing the so-called "Don't Say Gay" law. State lawmakers are expected to meet for a special session as soon as next week to complete a takeover of a self-governing district Disney controls over its properties in Florida, all at DeSantis' request.

As DeSantis focuses on Florida's statehouse, Trump has dramatically escalated his attacks on the man he and his aides see as, by far, his most concerning rival. But as other Republicans prepare to enter the race, Trump is also attacking them.

For example, in a Thursday interview with conservative commentator Hugh Hewitt, Trump described Haley in sexist terms as "overly ambitious," noting that she once vowed not to seek the presidency in 2024 if Trump was also running.

"She's a very ambitious person. She just couldn't stay in her seat," Trump said.

In the same interview, he also criticized DeSantis, claiming he cried while asking for Trump's endorsement during the 2018 governor's race.

"DeSantis got elected because of me. You remember he had nothing. He was dead. He was leaving the race. He came over and he begged me, begged me for an endorsement," Trump said. "He said, 'If you endorse me, I'll win.' And there were tears coming down from his eyes."

DeSantis has largely avoided responding to Trump's digs. And without a campaign apparatus, he doesn't have a rapid response team or surrogate operation designed to engage with 2024-related fire.

But earlier this week, he seemed to be knocking Trump — at least, indirectly — when asked about the former governor's repeated attacks.

"The good thing is, is that the people are able to render a judgment on that whether they re-elect you or not," DeSantis said when asked about Trump, who lost his 2020 reelection.

Indian gay couples begin legal battle for same-sex marriage

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Utkarsh Saxena and Ananya Kotia's love story began just like any other college romance. Except no one else knew about the gay couple's relationship.

It was 2008. Homosexuality was yet to gain a degree of acceptance in deeply conservative India, with many gay couples facing stigma and isolation. So Saxena and Kotia took their time, watching from a distance how people's acceptance of homosexuality was changing.

"We were actually quite scared about the consequences," said Saxena, a public policy scholar at the University of Oxford. "We were very fragile and vulnerable, a young couple figuring out ourselves, and didn't want, you know, something as drastic as this to break us in some sense."

Over the years, as Indian society became more accepting of homosexuality and much of the country's LGBTQ community began celebrating their sexuality openly, the couple decided to make their relationship known to their friends and family. Most of them were accepting.

Now, 15 years into their relationship, they have set out for a bigger challenge and filed a petition to India's Supreme Court that seeks the legalization of same-sex marriage. Three other gay couples have filed similar petitions that will be heard by the country's top court in March.

If legalized, India would become the second economy in Asia after Taiwan to recognize same-sex marriage, a significant right for the country's LGBTQ community more than four years after the top court decriminalized gay sex. A favorable ruling would also make India the biggest democracy with such rights for LGBTQ couples but run counter to the ruling Hindu nationalist government's position, which opposes same-sex marriages.

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"Our relationship has been, in a social sense, undefined for so long that we would like it to now be embraced in the same way as any other couples' relationship," Saxena said.

Legal rights for LGBTQ people in India have been expanding over the past decade, and most of these changes have come through the Supreme Court's intervention.

In 2014, the court legally recognized non-binary or transgender persons as a "third gender" and three years later made an individual's sexual orientation an essential attribute of their privacy. The historic ruling in 2018 that struck down a colonial-era law that had made gay sex punishable by up to 10 years in prison expanded constitutional rights for the gay community. The decision was seen as a landmark victory for gay rights, with one judge saying it would "pave the way for a better future."

Despite this progress, legal recognition of same-sex marriage has been met with resistance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

In a court filing last year it said same-sex marriages would cause "complete havoc with the delicate balance of personal laws in the country." Sushil Modi, a lawmaker from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, told Parliament in December that such marriages would be "against the cultural ethos of the country" and a decision on that should not be left to "a couple of judges."

India's Supreme Court has, however, signaled it could challenge the government's position.

In January, its collegium — comprising the Chief Justice of India and two Justices — said the government was opposing a gay judge's nomination in part because of his sexual orientation. India's federal government did not respond to the allegations.

Gay couples and LGBTQ activists argue that by refusing to recognize same-sex marriage, the government is depriving homosexual couples of their right to equality enshrined in the constitution and opportunities enjoyed by married heterosexual couples.

"Basically, you need to be treated the same as any other citizen. It's not special rights that are being asked for, it's just the right that every other citizen has," said Ruth Vanita, an expert on gender studies and author of "Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West."

In India, marriage is governed by a set of different laws tailored to the country's religious groups, and a secular law for interfaith couples called the Special Marriage Act. All limit marriage between men and women.

With no legal backing for same-sex marriages, many couples say they have faced a host of hurdles.

Indian law restricts owning and inheriting property to LGBTQ individuals. Gay and lesbian couples are not allowed to have children born with the help of an Indian surrogate mother. And LGBTQ persons can only apply for adoption as single parents.

Many such couples believe that legal recognition of same-sex marriage would not just be a vital step toward equality but also result in more people coming out as homosexuals and strengthening their relationship with the state.

"We would want the state to recognize marriage as an institution also for same-sex couples ... for acceptance at a social level," said Kotia, an economics scholar at the London School of Economics.

Homosexuality has long carried a stigma in India's traditional society, even though there has been a shift in attitudes toward same-sex couples in recent years. India now has openly gay celebrities and some high-profile Bollywood films have dealt with gay issues. According to a Pew survey, acceptance of homosexuality in India increased by 22 percentage points to 37% between 2013 and 2019.

But many same-sex couples continue to face harassment in many Indian communities, whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian.

In December, India's LGBTQ community found support from an unexpected quarter.

The head of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist group that is the ideological parent of Modi's party, said LGBTQ people are "a part of the Indian society" and that Indian civilization has traditionally acknowledged the community. Mohan Bhagwat's comments, which could force the government to reassess its position, were a departure from the group's long-held views on homosexuality, which has a tangled history in India, even though some of Hinduism's most ancient texts are accepting of same-sex couples.

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"In the West, right up to the 19th century, people were executed for same-sex relations, or they were put in prison. India has, as far as we know, no such history. We have always written about it (homosexuality), talked about it, and discussed it," said Vanita.

Without the legal right to marriage, many LGBTQ couples have still been participating in commitment ceremonies, particularly in big cities. Such marriages are not legally binding under Indian laws, but it has not stopped them from having traditional Indian wedding rituals.

Saxena and Kotia said they were planning one as well, preferably if the court rules in their favor.

"I think we would like a big wedding. Our relatives and our family and friends would like an even bigger wedding," Saxena said.

January may have delivered lower, if still solid, job growth

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The American economy has an unusual problem: The job market looks too strong — at least to the inflation fighters at the Federal Reserve.

Companies are still seeking more workers and are hanging tightly onto the ones they have. Putting aside some high-profile layoffs at big tech companies like Microsoft, Google, Amazon and others, most workers are enjoying an unusual level of job security even at a time when many economists foresee a recession approaching.

Employers have added at least 200,000 jobs every month for 24 straight months — the longest such streak in government records dating to 1939. Economists think the streak ended last month, if just barely: They have forecast that the government will report Friday that the economy added 185,000 jobs in January, according to the data firm FactSet, and that the unemployment rate ticked up to 3.6% from a half-century low of 3.5%.

That would still represent a solid job gain, though decisively below the red-hot pace of the past year. For all of 2022, the economy added a sizzling average of 375,000 jobs a month. That was a pace vigorous enough to have contributed to the painful inflation Americans have endured, the worst such bout in 40 years. A tight job market tends to put upward pressure on wages, which, in turn, feed into inflation.

Hence, uneasiness at the Fed. The central bank, hoping to cool the job market and the economy — and, as a consequence, inflation — has raised its benchmark interest rate eight times since March, most recently on Wednesday. Since July, monthly hiring has steadily decelerated even while remaining at historically healthy levels.

Year-over-year measures of consumer inflation have steadily eased since peaking at 9.1% in June. But at 6.5% in December, inflation remains far above the Fed's 2% target, which is why the central bank's policymakers have reiterated their intent to keep raising borrowing rates for at least a few more months.

The Fed is aiming to achieve a "soft landing" — a pullback in the economy that is just enough to tame high inflation without triggering a recession. The policymakers hope that employers can slow wage increases and inflationary pressures by reducing job openings but not necessarily by laying off many employees.

But the job market's resilience isn't making that hoped-for outcome any easier. On Wednesday, the Labor Department reported that employers posted 11 million job openings in December, an unexpected jump from 10.4 million in November and the largest number since July. There are now about two job vacancies, on average, for every unemployed American.

The Labor Department's monthly count of layoffs has amounted to fewer than 1.5 million for 21 straight months. Until 2021, that figure had never dropped so low in records dating back two decades.

Yet another sign that workers are benefiting from unusual job security is the weekly number of people who apply for unemployment benefits. That figure is a proxy for layoffs, one that economists monitor for clues about where the job market might be headed. The government said Thursday that the number of jobless claims fell last week to its lowest level since April.

The pace of applications for unemployment aid has remained rock-bottom despite a steady stream of headline-making layoff announcements. Facebook parent Meta is cutting 11,000 jobs, Amazon 18,000,

Microsoft 10,000, Google 12,000. Some economists suspect that many laid-off workers might not be showing up at the unemployment line because they can still find new jobs easily.

Economic forecasters will be closely watching Friday's figure for hourly wage growth in January. According to the FactSet survey, they foresee a 0.3% average pay increase from December to January. Nancy Vanden Houten, lead economist at Oxford Economics, said that figure would translate into annual pay growth of 4.3%, down from a 4.6% year-over-year increase in December.

It would be an improvement, she said, but "still too strong for the Fed to be confident that the moderation is enough to take the heat off inflation."

"Layoffs remain low, and demand for workers is still strong, evident in elevated job openings, strong job growth and an unemployment rate that is at a half-decade low," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "The labor market has yet to respond meaningfully to a rapid increase in interest rates."

Chill pervades China's tech firms even as crackdown eases

By ZEN SOO AP Technology Writer

HONG KONG (AP) — A grinding crackdown that wiped billions of dollars of value off Chinese technology companies is easing, but the once-freewheeling industry is bracing for much slower growth ahead.

Analysts say China's easing of restrictions on companies like e-commerce giant Alibaba and online games company Tencent and talk of support for the private sector reflects Beijing's decision to refocus on growth after the economy was ravaged by the pandemic and restrictions imposed to fight COVID-19.

But controls on internet content remain firmly in place. And the crackdown has left a "chilling" effect on the industry, potentially slowing innovation, while U.S. restrictions against China's computer chips industry are hindering progress in developing leading edge technology in 5G and artificial intelligence.

In January, a top official at China's central bank said in an interview with state-owned media that the crackdown on technology companies was "basically" over, adding that companies would be encouraged to lead economic growth and create more jobs. That came just weeks after China dropped stringent entry restrictions and testing and quarantine requirements that were part of its "zero-COVID" strategy meant to quash the virus.

"With the end of the zero-COVID policy, China is returning to prioritizing economic growth, and the technology sector is obviously a critical driver of growth in China and a celebrated source of innovation," said Gregory Allen, a senior fellow in the Strategic Technologies Program at the U.S. research organization Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Companies like Alibaba and Tencent control everyday apps and services that are used ubiquitously by large swathes of the population — including online payments, messaging, food delivery and e-commerce.

Such companies flourished for two decades with scant regulation before Beijing launched a barrage of anti-monopoly, data security and other restrictions from late 2020, seeking to rein in e-commerce, social media and other companies it viewed as too big and independent.

Signaling an easing, Didi Global — which was ordered to stop new-user registrations in 2021 following accusations that it violated data security rules — recently was allowed to resume taking on new users.

Regulators said e-commerce giant Alibaba's finance affiliate Ant Group can go ahead with plans to raise \$1.5 billion for its consumer finance unit, an important step forward after the government called off a planned IPO two years ago and ordered the firm to restructure.

After slamming online games as "spiritual opium" and enforcing strict controls on screen time for minors, regulators last April began approving new games following an eight-month hiatus, with the first foreign titles greenlighted in December.

Stocks of technology companies, including Alibaba, Tencent as well as others such as food delivery company Meituan and search engine and artificial intelligence firm Baidu have seen their stock prices nearly double since they hit rock bottom in late October. The market valuations of these companies, however, are still far from their peak in 2019.

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The crackdown's chilling effects for investors and entrepreneurs will linger, Allen said, since the authorities have shown they're willing and able to forego growth to impose controls on the industry at any time.

Over the past two years, several founders of technology companies have stepped down as CEO or chairman of their respective firms – including Alibaba's Jack Ma, JD.com's Richard Liu, Bytedance's Zhang Yiming and Pinduoduo's Colin Huang.

In January, Alibaba's financial affiliate Ant Group said that Ma — once China's richest man — would give up control of the firm following a restructuring, and that no single shareholder would have control. Ma has rarely been seen in public since regulators pulled the plug on Ant Group's market debut in Hong Kong and Shanghai following his criticism of China's financial sector in 2020. He since reportedly has moved to Tokyo.

"If you were a technology entrepreneur in China five years ago, very likely someone like Jack Ma was your hero, your idol, and was precisely what you aspired to achieve and the sort of person you aspire to become," said Allen. "And to see a man like that kind of torn down, I think sends a really strong message."

He and other analysts say the crackdown could potentially stifle innovation, as investors and entrepreneurs become more cautious about operating in China.

"The crackdown was deep and cut far to the bone, probably more than the government expected it to," said Shaun Rein, founder and managing director of China Market Research Group in Shanghai. "Because what's happened is over the last two years, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs have been scared to deploy capital and start new companies."

The value of venture capital deals in China plunged 44% to \$62.1 billion in the first 10 months of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021, according to research firm Preqin.

Some entrepreneurs and venture capitalists are taking a wait-and-see attitude, "worried in the long term that if they invest in a hot sector that the government that goes against China's agenda or doesn't fit with the government's agenda for the private sector that they might get wiped out," Rein said.

Well-established internet companies are still at an advantage to other tech industries in China that face added uncertainty due to friction between Washington and Beijing over advanced technology and trade as the U.S. seeks to block exports of high-end semiconductors and chip-making equipment and to limit Western dealings with companies like Huawei Technologies, the world's largest maker of telecommunications networking gear.

The Biden administration has stopped approving renewal of licenses to some U.S. companies that have been selling essential components to the Chinese tech giant. That's according to two people familiar with the matter who were not authorized to comment publicly on the sensitive matter and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Washington gradually has tightened controls over U.S. exports to Huawei but had allowed some companies like Intel and Qualcomm to sell its processors used in devices like laptops and lower-end smartphones. The U.S. has justified such sanctions on national security grounds. Huawei denies the accusations.

Under such pressure, China has accelerated efforts to become more self-sufficient in semiconductors and other advanced technologies, providing billions in subsidies and investments for the industry. But it remains years behind in some of the most advanced semiconductor manufacturing processes and a U.S. prohibition against supporting development and production of integrated circuits at some chip factories in China has deprived Chinese chip firms of the foreign talent that has long contributed to its domestic industry.

A U.S. ban on selling crucial semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China is another obstacle.

"It's one thing to go into areas like software and cloud services, in which Chinese companies are already quite strong," said Allen of CSIS.

"It's a very different thing to take Chinese companies that are a decade or two behind in state-of-the-art semiconductor manufacturing equipment and tell them to grow up immediately by replicating some of the most advanced technologies that the world has ever produced."

Inside the hunt for a serial kidnapper, and a bloody finale

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Police in rural southwest Oregon were on high alert: A man with a history of kidnapping and torturing women in two states was on the run in their territory.

When a tip came in from a cab company that had given him a ride, they went house-to-house to check on residents. Peering through a window of one home, they found a gruesome scene: the bodies of two men who had been beaten to death.

The discovery Tuesday near Grants Pass, Oregon, was a bloody link in a chain of dramatic events that ended hours later with the suicide of the wanted man, 36-year-old bartender Benjamin Obadiah Foster. The finale, played out on a normally quiet residential street in Grants Pass, marked an end to the largest manhunt in the state in recent memory and brought relief to terrified residents in the region of forested mountains.

Authorities in Grants Pass say none of this would have happened if authorities in Nevada hadn't been so quick just over a year ago to release Foster from prison, where he was serving time for holding his then-girlfriend in Las Vegas captive for two weeks and torturing her. And a Grants Pass woman would not now be in a hospital, comatose and in critical condition, they say.

It's "extremely troubling," Grants Pass Police Chief Warren Hensman said.

In the 2019 incident in Las Vegas, Foster broke seven of his girlfriend's ribs, gave her two black eyes, choked her to the point of unconsciousness and forced her to eat lye before she managed to escape, authorities said. Foster already had a suspended jail sentence on a concealed-weapons charge and was awaiting trial in another domestic violence case.

In a plea deal with prosecutors, Foster was sentenced to one to 2 1/2 years. He was set free on Oct. 21, 2021, the same day he was transferred to a Nevada state prison because he had already served 729 days in jail for the crimes before he was sentenced, according to a Nevada corrections official.

Fifteen months later, Foster was living in Oregon and in a relationship with the Grants Pass woman. On Jan. 24, her friend grew concerned because she hadn't been seen for several days. The friend went to the woman's house, where she was found bound and beaten to unconsciousness.

The case rattled the town of 40,000, which has seen high unemployment and poverty rates and public safety layoffs with the decline of the timber industry. Law enforcement authorities said they were bringing all their resources to bear to find Foster.

On Jan. 26, police, sheriff's deputies, an Oregon State Police SWAT team and federal agents carried out a raid in Wolf Creek, about 20 miles (30 kilometers) north of Grants Pass, after receiving word Foster was there. Agents seized his car, but Foster had vanished.

The next day, police announced that Foster was using dating apps to find people who could help him avoid the police or find new victims. Authorities offered a \$2,500 reward for Foster and set up a tip line.

Then, a major break in the case. One of the tips came from a cab company saying a man had requested a taxi from Sunny Valley, just south of Wolf Creek, Hensman said Wednesday.

Police went around checking homes Tuesday in Sunny Valley, to ensure residents hadn't been harmed. But in one house, they found the bodies of Richard Lee Barron Jr. and Donald Owen Griffith, who were killed sometime between Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning, according to Oregon State Police Capt. Kyle Kennedy.

"It's a brutal scene, unfortunately, that we're processing," Kennedy said Wednesday, adding that police firmly believe Foster had killed the men, who lived together. Barron, age 73, and Griffith, who was 64, apparently didn't know Foster.

Several items were taken from the house, including the men's dog. On Tuesday, Foster was spotted in Grants Pass — with the dog. Police rushed to the neighborhood, the same one where Foster's girlfriend had been found.

The officers, carrying rifles and using an armored personnel carrier, massed outside the house. Area residents were told to shelter in place.

"While we're deploying teams to secure the residence, we also have to take into account what this man just did: He brutally murdered two innocents in Sunny Valley, and we didn't know when he was going to stop," Hensman said.

Police searched the house, but didn't find anyone. Then they sent a sheriff's department robot to a crawlspace and found signs that Foster was burrowed deep underneath the home. His presence was confirmed by a camera. The fugitive had water and other supplies stashed there, apparently in hopes he could wait out the police presence undetected.

The officers expected a gunfight. Instead, Foster shot himself in the head, Hensman said. Police found Foster still breathing, unconscious and holding a .45-caliber pistol. Officers had to cut into the floorboards to extract him.

Foster was taken to a hospital, where he died Tuesday night.

Trump campaign staff on 2020 election lies: 'fan the flame'

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A newly released audio recording offers a behind-the-scenes look at how former President Donald Trump's campaign team in a pivotal battleground state knew they had been outflanked by Democrats in the 2020 presidential election. But even as they acknowledged defeat, they pivoted to allegations of widespread fraud that were ultimately debunked — repeatedly — by elections officials and the courts.

The audio from Nov. 5, 2020, two days after the election, is surfacing as Trump again seeks the White House while continuing to lie about the legitimacy of the outcome and Democrat Joe Biden's win.

The Wisconsin political operatives in the strategy session even praised Democratic turnout efforts in the state's largest counties and appeared to joke about their efforts to engage Black voters, according to the recording obtained Thursday by The Associated Press. The audio centers on Andrew Iverson, who was the head of Trump's campaign in the state.

"Here's the deal: Comms is going to continue to fan the flame and get the word out about Democrats trying to steal this election. We'll do whatever they need. Just be on standby if there's any stunts we need to pull," Iverson said.

Iverson is now the Midwest regional director for the Republican National Committee. He deferred questions about the meeting to the RNC, whose spokesperson, Keith Schipper, declined comment because he had not heard the recording.

The former campaign official and Republican operative who provided a copy of the recording to the AP was in the meeting and recorded it. The operative is not authorized to speak publicly about what was discussed and did not want to be identified out of concern for personal and professional retaliation, but said they came forward because Trump is mounting a third attempt for the White House.

In response to questions about the audio, Trump campaign spokesperson Steven Cheung said: "The 2024 campaign is focused on competing in every state and winning in a dominating fashion. That is why President Trump is leading by wide margins in poll after poll."

Wisconsin was a big part of Trump's victory in 2016, when he smashed through the Democrats' so-called "Blue Wall" in the upper Midwest, and his campaign fought hard to keep the swing state in his column four years later before his loss to Biden.

Biden defeated Trump by nearly 21,000 votes in Wisconsin in 2020, a result that has withstood independent and partisan audits and reviews, as well as lawsuits and recounts in the state's two largest and Democratic-leaning counties.

Yet, two days after the election, there was no discussion of Trump having won the state during the meeting of Republican campaign operatives.

Instead, parts of the meeting focus on discussions about packing up campaign offices and writing final reports about how the campaign unfolded. At one point on the recording, Iverson is heard praising the GOP's efforts while admitting the margin of Trump's defeat in the state.

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"At the end of the day, this operation received more votes than any other Republican in Wisconsin history," Iverson said. "Say what you want, our operation turned out Republican or DJT supporters. Democrats have got 20,000 more than us, out of Dane County and other shenanigans in Milwaukee, Green Bay and Dane. There's a lot that people can learn from this campaign."

The meeting showcases another juxtaposition of what Republican officials knew about the election results and what Trump and his closest allies were saying publicly as they pushed the lie of a stolen election. Trump was told by his own attorney general there was no sign of widespread fraud, and many within his own administration told the former president there was no substance to various claims of fraud or manipulation — advice Trump repeatedly ignored.

In the weeks after the election, Trump and his allies would file dozens of lawsuits, convene fake electors and pressure election officials in an attempt to overturn the will of the voters and keep Trump in office.

It's unclear whether the staff in Wisconsin coordinated their message directly with campaign officials in Washington.

Parts of the Nov. 5 meeting also center on Republican outreach efforts to the state's Black community.

At one point, the operatives laugh over needing "more Black voices for Trump." Iverson also references their efforts to engage with Black voters.

"We ever talk to Black people before? I don't think so," he said, eliciting laughter from others in the room.

Another speaker on the recording with Iverson is identified by the source as GOP operative Clayton Henson. At the time, Henson was a regional director for the RNC in charge of Wisconsin and other Midwestern states. They give a postmortem of sorts on the election, praising Republican turnout and campaign efforts while acknowledging the Democrats' robust turn-out-the-vote campaign.

Henson specifically references Democratic turnout in Dane County, which includes Madison, the state capital, and is a liberal stronghold in the state. A record-high 80% of the voting-age population cast ballots in 2020 in the county, which Biden won with 76% of the vote.

"Hats off to them for what they did in Dane County. You have to respect that," Henson said. "There's going to be another election in a couple years. So remember the lessons you learned and be ready to punch back."

Henson, reached by phone Thursday, said, "No thank you" when asked to comment about the meeting.

Pentagon: Chinese spy balloon spotted over Western US

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. is tracking a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon that has been spotted over U.S. airspace for a couple days, but the Pentagon decided not to shoot it down over concerns of hurting people on the ground, officials said Thursday. The discovery of the balloon puts a further strain on U.S.-China relations at a time of heightened tensions.

A senior defense official told Pentagon reporters that the U.S. has "very high confidence" it is a Chinese high-altitude balloon and it was flying over sensitive sites to collect information. One of the places the balloon was spotted was Montana, which is home to one of the nation's three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information.

Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, provided a brief statement on the issue, saying the government continues to track the balloon. He said it is "currently traveling at an altitude well above commercial air traffic and does not present a military or physical threat to people on the ground."

He said similar balloon activity has been seen in the past several years. He added that the U.S. took steps to ensure it did not collect sensitive information.

A senior administration official, who was also not authorized to publicly discuss sensitive information, said President Joe Biden was briefed and asked the military to present options. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised against taking "kinetic action" because of risks to the safety of people on the ground. Biden accepted that recommendation.

The defense official said the U.S. has "engaged" Chinese officials through multiple channels and com-

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municated the seriousness of the matter.

The incident comes as Secretary of State Antony Blinken was supposed to make his first trip to Beijing, expected this weekend, to try to find some common ground. Although the trip has not been formally announced, both Beijing and Washington have been talking about his imminent arrival.

It was not immediately clear if the discovery of the balloon would impact Blinken's travel plans.

The senior defense official said the U.S. did get fighter jets, including F-22s, ready to shoot down the balloon if ordered to by the White House. The Pentagon ultimately recommended against it, noting that even as the balloon was over a sparsely populated area of Montana, its size would create a debris field large enough that it could have put people at risk.

It was not clear what the military was doing to prevent it from collecting sensitive information or what will happen with the balloon if it isn't shot down.

In a letter sent Thursday to Austin, Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., wrote: "The fact that this balloon was occupying Montana airspace creates significant concern that Malmstrom Air Force Base and the United States' intercontinental ballistic missile fields are the target of this intelligence gathering mission. ... It is vital to establish the flight path of this balloon, any compromised U.S. national security assets, and all telecom or IT infrastructure on the ground within the U.S. that this spy balloon was utilizing."

The defense official said the spy balloon was trying to fly over the Montana missile fields, but the U.S. has assessed that it has "limited" value in terms of providing China intelligence it couldn't already collect by other means, such through spy satellites.

The official would not specify the size of the balloon, but said it was large enough that despite its high altitude, commercial pilots could see it. All air traffic was halted at Montana's Billings Logan International Airport from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Wednesday, as the military provided options to the White House.

A photograph of a large white balloon lingering over the area was captured by The Billings Gazette, but the Pentagon would not confirm if that was the surveillance balloon. The balloon could be seen drifting in and out of clouds and had what appeared to be a solar array hanging from the bottom, said Gazette photographer Larry Mayer.

The defense official said what concerned them about this launch was the altitude the balloon was flying at and the length of time it lingered over a location, without providing specifics.

Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte said he was briefed Wednesday about the situation after the Montana National Guard was notified of an ongoing military operation taking place in Montana airspace, according to a statement from the Republican governor and spokesperson Brooke Stroyke.

"From the spy balloon to the Chinese Communist Party spying on Americans through TikTok to CCP-linked companies buying American farmland, I'm deeply troubled by the constant stream of alarming developments for our national security," Gianforte said in a statement.

The administration official said congressional leaders' staffs were briefed on the matter Thursday afternoon. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., tweeted, "China's brazen disregard for U.S. sovereignty is a destabilizing action that must be addressed."

Tensions with China are particularly high on numerous issues, ranging from Taiwan and the South China Sea to human rights in China's western Xinjiang region and the clampdown on democracy activists in Hong Kong. Not least on that list of irritants are China's tacit support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its refusal to rein in North Korea's expanding ballistic missile program and ongoing disputes over trade and technology.

On Tuesday, Taiwan scrambled fighter jets, put its navy on alert and activated missile systems in response to nearby operations by 34 Chinese military aircraft and nine warships that are part Beijing's strategy to unsettle and intimidate the self-governing island democracy.

Twenty of those aircraft crossed the central line in the Taiwan Strait that has long been an unofficial buffer zone between the two sides, which separated during a civil war in 1949.

Beijing has also increased preparations for a potential blockade or military action against Taiwan, which has stirred increasing concern among military leaders, diplomats and elected officials in the U.S., Taiwan's key ally.

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The surveillance balloon was first reported by NBC News.

Some Montana residents reported seeing an unusual object in the sky around the time of the airport shutdown Wednesday, but it's not clear that what they were seeing was the balloon.

From an office window in Billings, Chase Doak said he saw a "big white circle in the sky" that he said was too small to be the moon.

He took some photos, then ran home to get a camera with a stronger lens and took more photos and video. He could see it for about 45 minutes and it appeared stationary, but Doak said the video suggested it was slowly moving.

"I thought maybe it was a legitimate UFO," he said. "So I wanted to make sure I documented it and took as many photos as I could."

Frustrated Texans endure winter storm with no power, heat

By PAUL J. WEBER and KEN MILLER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Thousands of frustrated Texans shivered in homes without power for a second day Thursday, most of them around booming Austin, and fading hopes of a quick fix stirred grim memories of a deadly 2021 blackout after an icy winter storm across the southern U.S.

The freeze has been blamed for at least 10 traffic deaths on slick roads this week in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma. And even as Texas finally began thawing Thursday, a new Arctic front from Canada was headed toward the northern U.S. and threatening New England with potentially the coldest weather in decades. Wind chills could dive below minus 50 (minus 45 Celsius).

In Austin, city officials compared the damage from fallen trees and iced-over power lines to tornadoes as they came under mounting criticism for slow repairs and shifting timelines to restore power.

"We had hoped to make more progress today," said Jackie Sargent, general manager of Austin Energy. "And that simply has not happened."

Across Texas more than 280,000 customers were without power Thursday night, down from 430,000 earlier in the day, according to PowerOutage.us. The failures were most widespread in Austin, where impatience was rising among 150,000 customers nearly two days after the electricity first went out, which for many also means no heat. Power failures have affected about 30% of customers in the city of nearly a million at any given time since Wednesday.

By Thursday night, Austin officials backtracked on early estimates that power would be fully restored by Friday evening, saying the extent of the damage was worse than originally calculated and that they could no longer predict when all the lights may come back on.

Allison Rizzolo, who lost power in Austin, told KEYE-TV that she wished there were more clarity from the city on what to do or expect.

"I get that there's a fine line between preparedness and panic, but I wish they'd been more aggressive in their communications," Rizzolo said.

For many Texans, it was the second time in three years that a February freeze — temperatures were in the 30s Thursday with wind chills below freezing — caused prolonged outages and uncertainty over when the lights would come back on.

Unlike the 2021 blackouts in Texas, when hundreds of people died after the state's grid was pushed to the brink of total failure because of a lack of generation, the outages in Austin this time were largely the result of frozen equipment and ice-burdened trees and limbs falling on power lines. But the differences were little comfort to Austin residents and businesses that also lost power for days two years ago.

Among those still without power Thursday was the Central Texas Food Bank, according to Travis County Judge Andy Brown, the county's top elected official.

"They have 21 counties to serve. They've been down for at least three days now. There's a lot of need that they have," Brown said.

School systems in the Dallas and Austin area, plus many in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Memphis, Tennessee, closed Thursday as snow, sleet and freezing rain continued to push through. In Austin, schools will

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not open until next week at the earliest.

Hundreds more flights were canceled again in Texas, although not as many as in previous days.

Airport crews battled ice to keep runways open. By Thursday morning, airlines had canceled more than 500 flights at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport — more than a quarter of all flights scheduled for the day. Still, that was down from about 1,300 cancellations on Wednesday and more than 1,000 on Tuesday, according to FlightAware.com.

Dozens more flights were canceled at Dallas Love Field and Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

Another wave of frigid weather in the U.S. is on the horizon, with an Arctic cold front expected to move from Canada into the northern Plains and Upper Midwest and sweep into the Northeast by Friday.

In a briefing Thursday with the federal Weather Prediction Center, New Englanders were warned that wind chills — the combined effect of wind and cold air on exposed skin — in the minus 50s “could be the coldest felt in decades.”

The strong winds and cold air will create wind chills “rarely seen in northern and eastern Maine,” according to an advisory from the National Weather Service office in Caribou, Maine.

Jay Broccolo, director of weather operations at an observatory on New Hampshire’s Mount Washington — which for decades held the world record for the fastest wind gust — said Thursday that wind speeds could top 100 mph (160 kph).

“We take safety really seriously in the higher summits,” Broccolo said, “and this weekend’s forecast is looking pretty gnarly, even for our standards.”

Federal appeals court strikes down domestic violence gun law

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

A federal appeals court ruled Thursday that the government can’t stop people who have domestic violence restraining orders against them from owning guns — the latest domino to fall after the U.S. Supreme Court’s conservative majority set new standards for reviewing the nation’s gun laws.

Police in Texas found a rifle and a pistol at the home of a man who was the subject of a civil protective order that banned him from harassing, stalking or threatening his ex-girlfriend and their child. The order also banned him from having guns.

A federal grand jury indicted the man, who pled guilty. He later challenged his indictment, arguing the law that prevented him from owning a gun was unconstitutional. At first, a federal appeals court ruled against him, saying that it was more important for society to keep guns out of the hands of people accused of domestic violence than it was to protect a person’s individual right to own a gun.

But then last year, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a new ruling in a case known as *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen*. That case set new standards for interpreting the Second Amendment by saying the government had to justify gun control laws by showing they are “consistent with the Nation’s historical tradition of firearm regulation.”

The appeals court withdrew its original decision and on Thursday decided to vacate the man’s conviction and ruled the federal law banning people subject to domestic violence restraining orders from owning guns was unconstitutional.

Specifically, the court ruled that the federal law was an “outlier that our ancestors would never have accepted” — borrowing a quote from the *Bruen* decision.

The decision came from a three-judge panel consisting of Judges Cory Wilson, James Ho and Edith Jones. Wilson and Ho were nominated by former Republican President Donald Trump, while Jones was nominated by former Republican President Ronald Reagan.

The U.S. Justice Department Thursday night issued the following statement from Attorney General Merrick B. Garland following the decision: “Nearly 30 years ago, Congress determined that a person who is subject to a court order that restrains him or her from threatening an intimate partner or child cannot lawfully possess a firearm. Whether analyzed through the lens of Supreme Court precedent, or of the text, history, and tradition of the Second Amendment, that statute is constitutional. Accordingly, the Department

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will seek further review of the Fifth Circuit's contrary decision."

Thursday's ruling overturned the federal law and is not likely to impact similar state laws, including one in California. Still, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, called the judges who issued the ruling "zealots" who are "hellbent on a deranged vision of guns for all, leaving government powerless to protect its people."

"This is what the ultra-conservative majority of the U.S. Supreme Court wants. It's happening, and it's happening right now," Newsom said. "Wake up America — this assault on our safety will only accelerate."

Chuck Michel, president of the California Rifle and Pistol Association, said the problem with laws like the one the federal appeals court struck down is that they are too broad and don't take into account the details of each case.

He offered as an example a client of his whose neighbor filed a restraining order against them because they had pointed a security camera on their property.

"They lost their gun rights," he said. "When they do a blanket prohibition without considering individualized circumstances, they shoot the dogs with the wolves."

Thursday's ruling demonstrates the far-reaching impacts of the Bruen decision. In California, the decision has prompted lawmakers to overhaul their law regarding permits to carry concealed weapons.

Wednesday, Newsom endorsed a bill in the state Legislature that would ban people from carrying concealed guns in nearly all public places, with an exception for churches and businesses who put up a sign saying guns are OK.

Ally claims Bolsonaro plotted coup to block Lula presidency

By ELÉONORE HUGHES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — A Brazilian magazine on Thursday released audio of a senator claiming then President Jair Bolsonaro sought help in a plot to annul the October elections and keep himself in power.

In the recording, Sen. Marcos do Val tells the magazine *Veja* that the idea was discussed when he met with Bolsonaro and lawmaker Daniel Silveira on Dec. 9 at the presidential residence, three weeks before leftist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was set to take office.

Do Val, who was an ally during Bolsonaro's four-year term, said the far-right leader gave him the "mission" of recording Alexandre de Moraes, a Supreme Court justice who also heads Brazil's electoral authority, while trying to get the judge to admit he overstepped his powers under the constitution.

"I annul the election, Lula isn't sworn in, I stay in the presidency and arrest Alexandre de Moraes because of his comments," do Val quotes Bolsonaro as saying.

Veja released the audio in response to denials the senator issued following the magazine's report Thursday morning about the purported plot, which had not cited him as its source. Do Val told reporters after the magazine published its story that the plot had been Silveira's idea and that the former president hadn't said a word during the meeting.

Later Thursday, de Moraes ordered the Federal Police to take do Val's sworn testimony within five days. Bolsonaro, who has been keeping a low profile in Florida since Dec. 30, did not comment on the matter on any of his social media channels. He recently applied for a six-month tourist visa to stay in the U.S.

Contacted by The Associated Press, Bolsonaro's lawyer Frederick Wassef declined to comment.

The alleged meeting adds to the growing list of woes for Bolsonaro, who is already under investigation for his possible role in his supporters' uprising in the Brazilian capital on Jan. 8.

Bolsonaro cast doubt on the nation's electronic voting system for months in the lead-up to the election, and he then refused to concede defeat. His die-hard supporters have accused de Moraes of rigging the election in Lula's favor, without offering any evidence, and of overstepping his authority by blocking social media accounts and ordering allegedly arbitrary arrests and searches.

Suspensions of a coup plot increased after police searching the home of Bolsonaro's former justice minister found a draft decree that would have seized control of the electoral authority and potentially overturned the election. The origin of the unsigned document is unclear, and it remains unknown if Bolsonaro or his

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subordinates took any steps to implement the measure.

Lula said in an interview Thursday that Bolsonaro tried to stop him from taking office. He also said supporters of the former president had hoped to invade government buildings on his inauguration day but had to settle for Jan. 8, one week later.

"Now I am aware, and I will say it loud and clear: That man prepared the coup. They wanted to make that mess on January 1st, but they noticed they could not because there was too much police, too many people on the street," Lula told the TV network RedeTV!.

Do Val told both *Veja* magazine and journalists later Thursday that he informed de Moraes of what was discussed at the meeting with Bolsonaro and Silveira, and that he declined to participate in the alleged plot.

Sen. Flávio Bolsonaro, the former president's son, said he was aware of the meeting, which he described as an attempt by Silveira to persuade the other two men to do something "absolutely unacceptable, absurd and illegal." But discussing such an idea does not constitute a crime, he said.

Silveira was arrested Thursday on de Moraes' order for violating terms of his release from prison. Silveira was previously sentenced for anti-democratic acts after issuing threats against de Moraes and other justices, but was released after Bolsonaro pardoned him. Still, he was prohibited from using his social media accounts and required to wear an electronic ankle bracelet as other investigations targeting him proceed.

At Nichols' funeral, Black America's grief on public display

By AARON MORRISON AP National Writer

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — The sound of the djembe drums started as a low tremble and grew more distinct as the musicians drew closer to the hundreds gathered inside the Memphis church.

"We love you, Tyre," the drummers chanted, referring to Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man whose beating by five police officers led to his death and this funeral on the first day of Black History Month.

By the time the procession reached Nichols' black casket draped in a large white bouquet, the congregation in the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church was on its feet shouting the chant in unison. Some raised clenched fists. Others let out screams of grief. Many grabbed tissues to dab at tears. All of it streamed live on television.

The funeral on Wednesday had all the hallmarks of what's known as a homegoing service in Black American communities: comforting gospel hymns, remembrances from loved ones and a stirring eulogy from a clergyman.

But in addition to offering an outlet for the private mourning of Nichols' family and friends, this ritual was also public and political. It was a venue to air the shared grief of Black Americans — and to once again call for leaders to address an epidemic of police violence so that this time might be different.

"As we celebrate Tyre's life and comfort this family, we serve notice to this nation that the rerun of this episode that makes Black lives hashtags has been canceled and will not be renewed for another season," said the Rev. J. Lawrence Turner, senior pastor of the church.

"We have come and we shall overcome," he said.

Such funeral services are one part heartfelt tribute and one part civil rights rally — a symbolic tax Black Americans have paid time and again from Emmett Till and George Floyd to those killed in mass shootings by white supremacists in Charleston and Buffalo.

"Grieving has many forms — the form that it's taken for African Americans, historically and even today, is that the grieving process for us is not silent," said W. Franklyn Richardson, chairman of The Conference of National Black Churches, a public policy and social justice organization that represents predominantly Black Christian denominations.

"Part of the way you get healed is to do something about what has happened to your loved one unfairly," he said. "You have the opportunity, while you have the attention, to try to participate in getting justice."

Not all victims' families welcome the attention. Some will put limits on the number of journalists and cameras allowed into the funeral, or ask that media be prohibited from the service altogether.

But the public is rarely shut out, and funerals for Black victims of brutality and racist violence typically

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draw people who did not personally know the victim — from the community where the violence occurred and from across the U.S.

Shirley Anderson, a lifelong resident of Memphis, said she had been grieving over Nichols since his death on Jan. 10, three days after a traffic stop by a now-disbanded police unit. Video released of the stop shows Black officers holding Nichols down and repeatedly punching him, kicking him and striking him with batons as he screamed for his mother. Five officers have been charged with murder.

The thought that her three grandsons could meet the same demise brought Anderson to Wednesday's service.

"Lord, have mercy! I don't want nothing to happen to them that's happened to Tyre and so many before Tyre," Anderson, 58, said after the funeral ended.

Some have argued that the collective grief in Nichols' death is compounded by the fact that his attackers were themselves Black. Others have countered that the attackers' identity is more evidence that systems of policing continually produce racist outcomes, no matter who wears the badge.

During Wednesday's service, Nichols' family shared details that almost anyone would want remembered about their loved one. As a kid, Nichols was easy to care for, as long as he had a big bowl of cereal and the TV fixed on cartoons, his older sister Keyana Dixon shared.

He loved photography. He was an avid skateboarder. He was father to a 4-year-old son.

During a eulogy, the Rev. Al Sharpton sought to assure Nichols' mother and stepfather that their loss won't be in vain.

"I believe that babies unborn will know about Tyre Nichols because we won't let his memory die," said Sharpton who, in just the last decade, has delivered remarks on such occasion dozens of times.

"We're going to change this country because we refuse to keep living under the threat of the cops and the robbers."

Elected officials typically attend these funerals to send a signal to the community that their cries for justice aren't being ignored. But Vice President Kamala Harris' presence Wednesday was also personal. Harris, who is the nation's first Black vice president and the first of South Asian descent, spoke of the fears of Black parents for their children.

"Mothers around the world, when their babies are born, pray to God, when they hold that child, that that body and that life will be safe for the rest of his life," Harris said. "When we look at this situation, this is a family that lost their son and their brother, through an act of violence, at the hands and the feet of people who have been charged with keeping them safe."

Among the most prominent examples of using such a funeral to call for justice was that of Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old whose lynching in Mississippi in 1955 catalyzed the U.S. civil rights movement.

His mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, demanded that Emmett's decomposing remains be taken back home to Chicago and placed in an open casket at a funeral attended by tens of thousands. Till-Mobley's mission to spread Emmett's story, as only a heartbroken mother could, galvanized calls for justice and eventually helped spur passage of landmark federal civil rights and voting rights legislation.

That example and others speak to the complexity of Black grief, said civil rights leader the Rev. William Barber II. It's not just the loss of the loved one, but that they were taken by violence that Black people have worked for decades to eradicate, only to face it again, he said.

"The grieving is so multifaceted," said Barber, who is president of the Repairers of the Breach, a faith-based social justice nonprofit, and founding director of the Center for Public Theology & Public Policy at Yale Divinity School.

While a smattering of law enforcement reforms has been enacted, countless proposed measures meant to address structural racism in policing have shriveled due to partisan gridlock.

"I'm tired of the tears," Barber said. "When will America decide that death from bad public officials and public policy is no longer acceptable?"

That Black Americans nevertheless continue to bear their pain publicly is a testament to the community's understanding of what's at stake if it doesn't grieve in this way, said Richardson, of The Conference of National Black Churches.

"There's no alternative," he said. "There are no guarantees when you fight against injustice. But we

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have to expose it.”

Anderson, the Memphis-based grandmother, said she struggles to not let grief overtake her.

“It’s so hard, when you’ve got so many killings of people who look just like me,” she said. “I hope peace comes from this, but most of all police reform. Keep your hands up off my children!”

As James nears record, Tuesday’s Lakers game moved to TNT

NEW YORK (AP) — The NBA has further adjusted the schedule of nationally televised games with LeBron James closing in on Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the league’s scoring record.

James is on pace to break the record Tuesday at home against the Oklahoma City Thunder. That game will now be shown on TNT, a change that forced a reworking of that night’s entire schedule on the network.

TNT was supposed to show Atlanta at New Orleans, followed by Minnesota at Denver. Instead, it’ll show Phoenix at Brooklyn first, followed by the Thunder-Lakers game.

It’s a move that follows the NBA making similar adjustments earlier this week to show James and the Lakers nationally on Saturday, as he presumably moves closer to Abdul-Jabbar. That game was moved up two hours to a 6 p.m. Eastern start. The Lakers-Pelicans game was moved to ESPN2, preceding a national broadcast between Dallas and Golden State at 8:30 p.m. on ABC.

James entered Thursday needing 89 points to pass Abdul-Jabbar, who has been the league’s leading scorer since 1984.

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said last month in Paris that the league would ensure James’ record-breaking game is shown nationally, as well as making it globally available.

If James doesn’t have the record after Tuesday’s game, his next game is already scheduled for national TV. The Lakers’ home game Feb. 9 against Milwaukee — the team that Abdul-Jabbar started his career with, before he joined the Lakers — will be shown on TNT.

Eye drops recalled after US drug-resistant bacteria outbreak

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. health officials said Thursday a company is recalling its over-the-counter eye drops that have been linked to an outbreak of drug-resistant infections.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this week sent a health alert to doctors, saying the outbreak included at least 55 people in 12 states. One died and at least five others had permanent vision loss.

The infections, including some found in blood, urine and lungs, were linked to EzriCare Artificial Tears. Many said they had used the product, which is a lubricant used to treat irritation and dryness.

The eye drops are sold under the name EzriCare and is made in India by Global Pharma Healthcare. The Food and Drug Administration said the company recalled unexpired lots of EzriCare Artificial Tears and another product, Delsam Pharma’s Artificial Tears.

The FDA recommended the recall based on manufacturing problems including lack of testing and proper controls on packaging. The agency also blocked import into the United States.

The infections were caused by a bacteria called *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. Investigators detected it in open EzriCare bottles, but further testing was underway.

EzriCare, the company that markets the eye drops in the U.S., said it is not aware of any evidence definitively linking the outbreak to the product, but that it has stopped distributing the eye drops. It also has a notice on its website urging consumers to stop using the product.

Infections were diagnosed in patients in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Nevada, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. A person in Washington died with a blood infection.

The outbreak is considered particularly worrisome because the bacteria driving it are resistant to standard antibiotics.

Investigators found the bacteria were not susceptible to any antibiotics routinely tested at public health

laboratories. However, a newer antibiotic named cefiderocol did seem to work.

How could eye drops cause infections in the blood or lungs? The eye connects to the nasal cavity through the tear ducts. Bacteria can move from the nasal cavity into the lungs. Also, bacteria in these parts of the body can seed infections at other sites such as in the blood or wounds, CDC officials said.

Biden's handwritten notes part of classified docs probe

By ZEKE MILLER, COLLEEN LONG and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is a man who writes down his thoughts. And some of those handwritten musings over his decades of public service are now a part of a special counsel's investigation into the handling of classified documents.

It isn't clear yet what the investigators are looking for by taking custody of notes from his time as vice president and his decades in the Senate that were found in his Delaware homes in Rehoboth Beach and Wilmington.

Biden's attorneys did not say whether the notes were considered to be classified, only that they were removed. But over his 36 years in the Senate and eight as vice president, Biden had a front-row seat to a lot of highly sensitive moments in U.S. history, including the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2011 death of Osama bin Laden and unfolding political turmoil in Ukraine.

The special counsel is working to determine how classified information from Biden's time as senator and vice president came to wind up in his home and former office — and whether any mishandling involved criminal intent or was unintentional. But they'll also have to determine whether the notes they took are considered personal and therefore belong to Biden, and would then likely be returned to him.

Some of the documents held by Trump also had handwritten notes, according to the FBI. In seeking permission to search Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in August, an FBI agent wrote in an affidavit that some of the documents returned to the National Archives last January contained what appeared to be Trump's handwriting. The affidavit does not say whether agents believed those notes to discuss classified material.

Under the Presidential Records Act, records of a presidential administration generally belong with the National Archives, especially classified items. There are some exceptions, including when records are determined to be purely personal.

But even a handwritten note can be considered classified if someone is recording observations related to a classified document or briefing. Such notes can be deemed classified even if not marked as such.

Larry Pfeiffer, a former senior director of the White House situation room and chief of staff to retired CIA Director Michael Hayden, said that when he took notes during secret or top-secret meetings, he would mark each page by specific levels of classification.

"It's pretty clear in those meetings when they're hearing classified information," he said. When Pfeiffer left the CIA, he submitted his notebooks to the agency archives.

Longtime aides say they believe Biden has been keeping personal diaries for decades, though the only public glimpse of them so far has come in Biden's book "Promise Me, Dad," which chronicled the then-vice president's heartache and grief over his son Beau's fatal cancer diagnosis.

In the book, Biden quotes passages written in his diary about Beau's condition and death that were written on Air Force Two, in the vice president's residence at the Naval Observatory in Washington, and at his Wilmington home, as well as one jotted down as he weighed whether to run for president in 2016. In the book, Biden describes taking the notes as he navigated being a supportive parent for an ailing family member and largely maintaining his official schedule of meetings and calls.

He details how he had a secure phone installed at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston so he could work while he was there with his son as Beau underwent treatment. But he also wrote about his debate over whether he'd run for office in 2016:

"A lot happening, I wrote in my diary when I finally got some downtime in Wilmington the next weekend. 'Need to be careful it doesn't get away from me. I need to slow down, ramp down my schedule.'"

It's unknown whether handwritten notes may have been turned over to the Department of Justice by

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former Vice President Mike Pence or whether any of former President Donald Trump's writings from his time in office was found during the FBI's search of his Florida estate last year.

It was also unclear whether recent former presidents and vice presidents would make any of their personal notes written during their time in office available for review to determine whether they contained any potential federal records or information that should be classified.

Attorney General Merrick Garland and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines have declined to discuss their investigations or brief members of Congress.

The leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee sent a third letter Thursday urging Garland and Haines to allow the panel to view the papers in secret and be briefed on their potential risk to national security.

Sens. Mark Warner of Virginia and Marco Rubio of Florida wrote that without access to the documents, "we cannot effectively oversee the efforts of the Intelligence Community to address potential risks to national security arising from the mishandling of this classified information."

There's a precedent in keeping personal records personal: Access to Ronald Reagan's personal diaries was sought after he left office by his former national security adviser John Poindexter as he faced trial for his role in the Iran-Contra affair. A federal judge accepted Reagan's invocation of executive privilege to shield the diaries from disclosure.

Reagan frequently wrote about the substance of his official meetings — including details on classified sessions — and impressions of world leaders, often commingled with mundane details about his life like his dinner companions and personal calls. But it wasn't until after Reagan's death and with the consent of his widow, Nancy Reagan, that they were published.

There have been multiple cases in recent years of high-level officials mishandling notes about classified operations. Former CIA Director David Petraeus was prosecuted for his handling of eight notebooks of classified and unclassified notes he collected during his time leading U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan. According to a plea agreement, Petraeus kept the notebooks in his private possession and allowed his biographer, with whom he was having an affair, to review them.

He pleaded guilty in 2015 to one count of unauthorized removal and retention of classified material and received probation.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was found by the FBI to have discussed classified material in emails kept on her private server. Some of those emails had classified information at the time they were sent, while others were subsequently classified during the FBI's investigation of her use of the server.

Then-FBI Director James Comey recommended against charging Clinton in 2016 because he said there was not clear evidence Clinton or her subordinates intended to violate laws about classified information.

Biden's lawyers were closing up his office at the Penn Biden Center think tank last November when they came across classified documents in a locked closet. The records were turned over to the Justice Department. But after Biden's lawyers searched his Wilmington home and found additional classified items, Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed a special counsel to investigate. Biden has said he was surprised the documents were there, and has cooperated with investigators, including voluntarily consenting to the FBI searches.

When FBI agents searched Biden's Wilmington home last month, they "also took for further review personally handwritten notes from the vice-presidential years," according to his lawyer, Bob Bauer. When the FBI searched Biden's Rehoboth Beach home on Wednesday, they took "some materials and handwritten notes that appear to relate to his time as Vice President" but found no other classified documents, according to Bauer.

The White House has refused to comment on what was in Biden's notes, other than to say some of the writing pertained to his time as vice president.

"I think that they want to make sure that the Justice Department has access to the information that they need to sift through materials as a part of this ongoing investigation," White House spokesman Ian Sams said Wednesday. "And so I'm not going to characterize too much of the underlying contents."

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Bryan Adams, crafting albums amid Grammy Award nomination

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Bryan Adams may have nabbed his first Grammy nomination in over two decades, but he won't be at the ceremony. He's got a gig that night.

The Canadian rock star had committed to a concert in Las Vegas on Sunday and he didn't want to disappoint his fans or his crew by cancelling.

"Work is work. I mean, I've got 40 people in my tour, so I want to make sure I keep them in hot food and shoes, you know?" he said earlier this week.

Working hard is a theme for Adams, who last year released four albums — his 15th studio effort, "So Happy It Hurts," the cast album for "Pretty Woman: The Musical" and "Classic" and "Classic Pt. II," which saw him re-record songs from his catalog and handle most of the instruments.

On Sunday, he's up in the category of best rock performance for "So Happy It Hurts," the title track, which includes the lyric "I'm so happy it hurts/I'm so glad, it's outrageous." His last nomination came in 1998 with the song "I Finally Found Someone."

"I'm absolutely gobsmacked to be nominated, especially after such a long time. But, I mean, I'm really appreciative. I don't think I'm going to win it, but I'm happy to be nominated," he said.

To win, Adams must beat Beck and his cover of Neil Young's "Old Man"; "Patient Number 9" by Ozzy Osbourne featuring Jeff Beck; The Black Keys' "Wild Child"; Brandi Carlile's "Broken Horses"; Idles' "Crawl!" and Turnstile's "Holiday." Adams suspects "Patient Number 9" will win to honor Jeff Beck, who died earlier this year.

If Adams does win, the trophy will join the Grammy he won in 1992 for best song written for a motion picture for "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You," which was used on the "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves" soundtrack.

This is a remarkably rich period for the 63-year-old singer-songwriter. He says ideas were coming all the time as he crafted "So Happy It Hurts" and he recorded more songs than usual. Faced with the pandemic, he ended up playing most of the instruments by himself.

"I'm not a particularly good drummer, but I sure love giving it every everything I have to try and make it great," he says, laughing.

The album is filled with gratitude and mature love, with optimistic titles like "You Lift Me Up," "I've Been Looking for You" and "Let's Do This." On the song "These Are the Moments That Make Up My Life," he sings "I like to make the kids breakfast/I like the family way/I like the sound of their laughter/While I plan out my day."

"I think one of the things as a songwriter which we should actually tap into is our truth," he says. "If you can start writing songs that really are about your truth and being able to really open up in a way that you can relate it to your life without giving too much away, I think people will connect with it."

He also dug up his old amps, guitars and equipment and began re-recording all his hits, like "Summer of '69," "Run to You" and "Everything I Do (I Do It for You)." He did it after Universal Music Group refused to return his original masters and drew inspiration from Taylor Swift, who has begun re-recording her catalog, too.

"It brought back a lot of memories. It brought back memories of, first of all, where I was, who I was recording with, the amount of work that went into making those records and sort of the appreciation generally of what I was doing back then," he said.

"There's sort of minor alterations to things, but generally I stay true to the original recordings because I felt that's what people would recognize," he added. "Unless it was a live recording, it needed to have the same structure and emotion."

This year will find Adams in familiar territory — working. After a spring tour of Asia, he hits 26 cities across the U.S. this summer, kicking off in Baltimore in June with stops in New York City, Boston, Denver, Phoenix, San Francisco and more. Joan Jett is opening.

He also plans a "Classic Pt. III" and has recorded three of his early albums live at the Royal Albert Hall

in London that he hopes to release — “Cuts Like a Knife,” “Into the Fire” and “Waking Up the Neighbors.” “It’s super exciting,” he says, and then has to go. After all, he has a gig on late night TV to prepare for.

US to send Ukraine longer-range bombs in latest turnaround

By TARA COPP, MATTHEW LEE and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After months of agonizing, the U.S. has agreed to send longer-range bombs to Ukraine as it prepares to launch a spring offensive to retake territory Russia captured last year, U.S. officials said Thursday, confirming that the new weapons will have roughly double the range of any other offensive weapon provided by America.

The U.S. will provide ground-launched small diameter bombs as part of a \$2.17 billion aid package it is expected to announce Friday, several U.S. officials said. The package also for the first time includes equipment to connect all the different air defense systems Western allies have rushed to the battlefield and integrate them into Ukraine’s own air defenses, to help it better defend against Russia’s missile attacks.

For months, U.S. officials have hesitated to send longer-range systems to Ukraine out of concern that they would be used to target inside Russia, escalating the conflict and drawing the U.S. deeper in. The longer-range bombs are the latest advanced system, such as Abrams tanks and the Patriot missile defense system, that the U.S. has eventually agreed to provide Ukraine after initially saying no. U.S. officials, though, have continued to reject Ukraine’s requests for fighter jets.

Ukrainian leaders have urgently pressed for longer-range munitions, and on Thursday officials said the U.S. will send an undisclosed number of the ground-launched, small diameter bombs, which have a range of about 95 miles (150 kilometers). The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the aid package not yet made public.

To date, the longest-range missile provided by the U.S. is about 50 miles (80 kilometers). The funding in the aid package is for longer-term purchases, so it wasn’t clear Thursday how long it will take to get the bomb to the battlefield in Ukraine.

Ukraine’s defense minister, Oleksii Reznikov, said Thursday the country is prepared to offer guarantees to its Western partners that their weapons won’t be used to strike inside Russian territory, adding that Kyiv needs weapons with a range of up to 300 kilometers (about 185 miles) to expel the Russian forces.

“If we could strike at a distance of up to 300 kilometers, the Russian army wouldn’t be able to mount a defense and will have to withdraw,” Reznikov said at a meeting with EU officials. “Ukraine is ready to provide any guarantees that your weapons will not be involved in attacks on the Russian territory. We have enough targets in the occupied areas of Ukraine, and we’re prepared to coordinate on (these) targets with our partners.”

The U.S. aid package includes \$425 million in ammunition and support equipment that will be pulled from existing Pentagon stockpiles and \$1.75 billion in new funding through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is used to purchase new weapons from industry.

The assistance initiative, which will pay for the longer-range bombs and the air defense system integration, also funds two HAWK air defense systems, anti-aircraft guns and ammunition, and counter-drone systems.

Since Russia’s invasion last February, Western allies have pledged a myriad of air defense systems to Ukraine to bolster its own Soviet-made S-300 surface-to-air missile defense systems, and the latest aid package aims to provide the capability to integrate them all, which could improve Ukraine’s ability to protect itself against incoming Russian attacks.

The U.S. has pledged medium- to long-range National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems, or NASAMS, and truck-launched short-range Avenger air defense systems; the Netherlands, Germany and the U.S. are sending Patriot missile defense systems; Germany is sending medium-range IRIS-T air defense systems; and Spain is sending Aspide anti-aircraft air defense systems.

The addition of longer-range bombs to the latest aid package was first reported by Reuters.

Ukraine is still seeking F-16 fighter jets, which U.S. President Joe Biden has opposed sending since the beginning of the war. Asked Monday if his administration was considering sending F-16 fighter jets to

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Ukraine, Biden responded, "No."

On Tuesday, the Ukrainian defense minister was asked if Biden's "no" to F-16s was the final word.

"All types of help first passed through the 'no' stage," Reznikov said. "Which only means 'no' at today's given moment. The second stage is, 'Let's talk and study technical possibilities.' The third stage is, 'Let's get your personnel trained.' And the fourth stage is the transfer (of equipment)."

Don't like Phil's forecast? Check out these rodents instead

By The Associated Press undefined

Rodents predicting weather trends. Why?

Just as fair a Groundhog Day question, though, is this: Why not? And more importantly, why should Punxsutawney Phil always get to, well, hog the press?

The spring-heralding (or spring-delaying) small animal has taken firm root in some swaths of American culture. And while Phil and his Pennsylvania ilk are the most celebrated, there is an astonishingly broad selection of other critters who have felt the need (or, at least, their handlers have) to put reputations on the line to "predict" meteorology in the dead of winter. Here we offer just a few.

Before we take a look, pause for a moment to remember one particular groundhog of yore — Charlotte, a stand-in for Staten Island Chuck in 2014. She predicted six more weeks before being famously dropped by then-New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio and dying a week later.

Do take aboard a disclaimer, though. This is merely a smattering of groundhoggery, offered up in no particular order. Please don't be offended if your animal isn't included. Maybe next year.

JIMMY THE GROUNDHOG, Wisconsin: Caused controversy in 2015 after biting the mayor of Sun Prairie on the ear.

MILLTOWN MEL, New Jersey: Event got caught up in problems with state law this year after the previous prognosticator expired.

WOODY THE WOODCHUCK, Michigan: Emerged from a tiny green door in a small, human-made tree stump on Thursday.

WOODSTOCK WILLIE, Illinois. Saw his shadow Thursday. Site of where the best-ever PR around the day — the 1993 movie "Groundhog Day" — was filmed.

OCTORARO ORPHIE, Pennsylvania: Predicts from a home base in Quarryville in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Because of Pennsylvania Dutch folklore, which helped give birth to the Groundhog Day tradition, that region has several on the job, including Mount Joy Minnie and Dover Doug.

STATEN ISLAND CHUCK, New York: Longtime predictor in the New York City borough. This year, the current mayor didn't attend.

BUCKEYE CHUCK, Ohio: Another Chuck, this one further inland. This year, according to reports, the Chuck used publicly was a stuffed one after an animal-rights group objected to how a live one had been treated.

GEN. BEAUREGARD LEE, Georgia: Claims high accuracy rate. Contradicted Phil this year.

Extremist Israeli group halts fund-raising effort in US

By URI BLAU of Shomrim and MIKE CATALINI of The Associated Press undefined

LAKEWOOD, N.J. (AP) — An Israeli group that assists Jewish prisoners convicted in some of the country's most notorious hate crimes has halted its fund-raising efforts through a U.S.-based Jewish charity following an investigation by The Associated Press and the Israeli nonprofit news organization Shomrim.

The fund-raising through the Lakewood, New Jersey-based World of Tzedaka had allowed American donors to make tax-exempt contributions to the hard-line Israeli group, and suggested that Israel's far right was making new inroads into the U.S.

World of Tzedaka confirmed that it was no longer working with Shlom Asiraich, while a fund-raising link on the Israeli group's website that connected donors to the American nonprofit has stopped working.

"We don't do any business with them anymore, so we don't have anything else to do with them," said

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Yaakov Cohen, who identified himself as a manager for World of Tzedaka.

Shlom Asiraich, or "The Well-Being of Your Prisoners," has been raising money in Israel since at least 2018. The group was officially registered as a nonprofit in 2020 by a group consisting mostly of Israelis from hard-line settlements in the West Bank.

According to its promotional materials, the group has provided assistance to Yigal Amir, who assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995; Amiram Ben-Uliel, who was convicted in the 2015 murder of a Palestinian baby and his parents in an arson attack; and Yosef Haim Ben David, who was convicted of abducting and killing a 16-year-old Palestinian boy in Jerusalem in 2014. The group also assists an extremist ultra-Orthodox man who fatally stabbed a 16-year-old Israeli girl at Jerusalem's gay pride parade in 2015.

A spokesman for Shlom Asiraich slammed down the phone twice when he was called by The Associated Press for comment on Thursday.

It's not clear when the U.S. fundraising efforts on behalf of Shlom Asiraich began. Being a relatively new organization, the group's official filing to Israel's nonprofit registry provides little data and does not indicate how much money it has raised. But in its promotional flyers, recently broadcast by Israeli Channel 13 news, the organization indicated it has raised 150,000 shekels, or about \$43,000.

It's also not clear how much of that money was raised in the U.S. by World of Tzedaka, a group that assists Jewish families in distress, according to its website. Lakewood, New Jersey, is home to a sizeable Orthodox Jewish community.

Cohen, the World of Tzedaka representative, said his group had raised just \$200 for Shlom Asiraich before the connection was halted, though that figure could not be verified.

"It didn't really get off the ground that much. Then we started hearing some questionable information about them. Then rabbis advised to stop doing business with them, so we did," he said.

Just when the break happened isn't clear. Cohen said it happened "a few months" ago after "a few people locally" brought the connection to their attention.

But he couldn't specify when, and a link on the Shlom Asiraich website that connects to the World of Tzedaka donation page was still working when the AP-Shomrim investigation was published on Jan. 24. Another link directly on World of Tzedaka's website has also disappeared.

"We removed them from our website, and we asked them to remove our name from their website and whatever they had and we completely separated from them," Cohen said.

Israeli universities, hospitals and charities often have fund-raising operations in the U.S., but activities like those of extremist groups like Shlom Asiraich are rare.

It is not known whether Shlom Asiraich or World of Tzedaka broke any U.S. laws. The U.S. Internal Revenue Service's rules for fund-raising by nonprofit organizations are vague – saying the groups cannot exert political influence or benefit private interests.

The IRS declined to comment on the case. The U.S. State Department said it was aware of the reports about Shlom Asiraich, but referred questions to the Justice Department.

"We condemn extremist violence in all its forms," the State Department said.

The Justice Department did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new far-right government took office in late December, giving ultranationalists and extremist lawmakers unprecedented power. There is no direct link between Shlom Asiraich and the government, though its registration with Israeli authorities was handled by a top aide to Israel's ultranationalist national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Psychedelic churches in US pushing boundaries of religion

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

HILDALE, Utah (AP) — The tea tasted bitter and earthy, but Lorenzo Gonzales drank it anyway. On that frigid night in remote Utah, he was hoping for a life-changing experience, which is how he found himself inside a tent with two dozen others waiting for the psychedelic brew known as ayahuasca to kick in.

Soon, the gentle sounds of a guitar were drowned out by people vomiting — a common downside of

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the drug. Some gagged; several threw up in buckets next to them.

Gonzales started howling, sobbing, laughing and repeatedly babbling “wah, wah” like a child. Facilitators from Hummingbird Church placed him face down on the grass, calming him momentarily before he started laughing and crawling on all fours.

“I seen these dark veins come up in this big red light, and then I seen this image of the devil,” Gonzales said later. He had quieted only when his wife, Flor, put her hand on his shoulder and prayed.

His journey to this small town along the Arizona-Utah border is part of a growing global trend of people turning to ayahuasca in search of spiritual enlightenment and an experience they say brings them closer to God than traditional religious services. Many hope the psychedelic tea will heal physical and mental afflictions after conventional medications and therapy failed. Their problems include eating disorders, depression, substance use disorders and PTSD.

The rising demand for ayahuasca has led to hundreds of churches like this one, which advocates say are protected from prosecution by a 2006 U.S. Supreme Court ruling. In that case, a New Mexico branch of a Brazilian-based ayahuasca church won the right to use the drug as a sacrament — even though its active ingredient remains illegal under U.S. federal law. A subsequent lower court decision ruled Oregon branches of a different ayahuasca church could use it.

“In every major city in the United States, every weekend, there’s multiple ayahuasca ceremonies. It’s not just a twice-a-year thing,” said Sean McAllister, who represents an Arizona church in a lawsuit against the federal government after its ayahuasca from Peru was seized at the port of Los Angeles.

But with the growth of pro-psychedelics movements has come increased scrutiny. In addition to ayahuasca shipments from South America being seized, some churches stopped operating over fears of prosecution. There are also concerns these unregulated ceremonies might pose a danger for some participants and that the benefits of ayahuasca haven’t been well studied.

“Our knowledge is kind of limited,” said Anthony Back, a professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle. “There is not as much information about safety as the regular other medical treatments that you might get if you went to a regular doctor in the United States.”

It was dark as the Hummingbird ceremony began on a Friday night in October, except for flickering candles and the orange glow of heaters. Psychedelic art hung from the walls; statues of the Virgin Mary and Mother Earth were positioned near a makeshift altar.

A mix of military veterans, corporate executives, thrill seekers, ex-members of a polygamous Mormon sect and a man who supposedly struck it rich on a game show had converged for the \$900 weekend. Many appeared apprehensive yet giddy to begin the first of three ceremonies.

They sat silently, awaiting the arrival of Taita Pedro Davila, the Colombian shaman and traditional healer who oversaw the ceremony.

The brew contains an Amazon rainforest shrub with the active ingredient N, N-Dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, and a vine containing harmala alkaloids that prevent the drug from breaking down in the body.

Those who drink ayahuasca report seeing shapes and colors and going on wild, sometimes terrifying journeys that can last hours. In this dreamlike state, some say they encounter dead relatives — one woman saw family members who had died in a car accident — as well as friends and spirits who talk to them.

“When you were invited here, you were invited for a weekend of healing,” Davila told the group in Spanish through a translator, before people lined up for shot glass-sized-doses of the thick, dark tea in plastic cups.

Davila, wearing a fedora, a boar-tooth necklace and beaded chest plate with a jaguar image, locked eyes with each participant, uttered a prayer over the cup, blew on it with a whistling sound and handed it over. After everyone drank and was settled on mattresses, Davila strolled through the tent as the drugs took hold, shaking a bundle of leaves and playing a mournful tune on the harmonica.

“Every process is an individual one and completely different for every one of us,” he said. “We are going to turn off our minds and open our hearts. If you feel like you are dying, die. This is going to allow you to be reborn.”

Gonzales and his wife, Flor, were among several ayahuasca newcomers.

They had driven from California, hoping for relief for Gonzales. He’d battled drug addiction for much of

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his 50 years, was suffering the effects of COVID-19 and had been diagnosed with early-stage dementia — likely a result of concussions over the years, one from a motorcycle crash and another from an industrial accident. He doesn't drive due to memory loss, rarely sleeps and is prone to angry outbursts.

"My poor body is dying and I don't want it to die," Gonzales said.

Flor Gonzales, 48, had grown weary of doctors and the pills they prescribed. None of it worked and she feared losing Lorenzo. So the born-again Christian who favors natural medicine researched ayahuasca and figured it was worth trying.

"If he's already sick and he's been placed on all these medications that have side effects, what do we have to lose? ... It might stop the progression of the illness," she said. "It might help him ... accept things more without the anger."

Maeleene Jessop was also an ayahuasca newcomer but was intimately familiar with Hildale, the Utah town where the ceremony was held. She's a former member of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or FLDS, a polygamist offshoot of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The ceremony was held in a tent on the grounds of a house owned by a former FLDS member in Hildale, where Jessop grew up, enduring sexual and physical abuse in the group's stronghold. Jessop left the church after its leader, Warren Jeffs, was arrested for sexually assaulting girls he considered brides. He is serving a life sentence in federal prison.

The 35-year-old woman has struggled to adapt to life after the FLDS, which controlled almost everything from what she ate to what she wore. Since leaving, she has tried anti-depressants, therapy and other psychedelics like mushrooms to deal with depression and a range of physical ailments, including hearing and vision problems she blames on the abuse she suffered.

"I felt like I needed something more, like I needed a stronger breakthrough. So this is the next step," she said of ayahuasca. "Hopefully it's the last step."

She remains wary of organized religion, but felt like Hummingbird offered what she was looking for — a sense of community and freedom to connect "to a higher power, whether that's us or the universe or God, whatever you want to call it."

More than three months after the ceremony, Jessop said she credits ayahuasca with easing her depression and improving her focus. She found some clarity about her life goals and plans to study communications to help her speak out about abuse.

The roots of ayahuasca go back hundreds of years to use by Indigenous groups in the Amazon. In the past century, churches sprouted up in South America where ayahuasca is legal. Some Brazilian churches are a mix of Christian, African and Indigenous influences.

The movement found a foothold in the United States in the 1980s and interest has intensified more recently as celebrities like NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers, Hollywood star Will Smith and Britain's Prince Harry talked about using it.

Some people spend thousands of dollars taking ayahuasca at five-star retreats in the Amazon. In the U.S., the movement remains largely underground, promoted by social media and word of mouth. Some ceremonies occur at supporters' homes, Airbnb rentals and remote areas to avoid law enforcement scrutiny.

Like many of these, Hummingbird won't be mistaken for a traditional Western church.

It has no written text and relies primarily on Davila's prayers, chants and songs, in Spanish and the language of the Kamëntsa people, to guide participants. Davila follows traditions he learned from his grandfather in Colombia, spending several days preparing the ayahuasca.

Before serving the tea, Davila conducts cleansing rituals — like blowing tobacco snuff up some participant's noses to heighten its effects.

Courtney Close, Hummingbird's founder who credits ayahuasca with helping her overcome cocaine addiction and post-partum depression, believes the designation as a church helps show that participants are "doing this for religious reasons." But when it comes to defining it as a religion, Close stresses much depends on individual participants' experience.

"We just try to create a spiritual experience without any dogma and just let people experience God for themselves," said the 42-year-old, who participated in about 200 ceremonies and had a vision to start the

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church at one of them.

Since holding the church's first ceremony in Joshua Tree five years ago, Close has seen Hummingbird's numbers grow and its demographic change — mostly from young hipsters to older, working-class people desperate for mental health treatment.

The most jarring moments have been people talking openly about suicide and viewing ayahuasca as their only hope. She recalled a sex crimes investigator and combat veteran who was so depressed he couldn't speak without crying and told her: "If this doesn't work, I'm killing myself."

Close said Davila offered the man ayahuasca then said to wrap him in a blanket on his side so he wouldn't choke on his vomit. She hoped the psychedelic would provide him with a transformative, death-like experience while remaining physically safe.

"After the weekend, he looked like a different person where I was like, 'Oh my God. Like, this guy is smiling and talking to people,'" she said.

But Close knows ayahuasca comes with risks, especially when inexperienced users focused on making money start hosting events.

"That's so dangerous," she said, recounting instances of people at ceremonies being sexually assaulted, ripped off and sent home without follow-up support.

To improve safety, Hummingbird has brought doctors, nurses and CPR-trained staff to ceremonies, encouraged participants to stop taking certain medications before they arrive, and created an intake process that weeds out those with severe mental illnesses and some heart conditions. They implemented a no-touching policy during ceremonies and stopped offering other psychedelics.

But Close worries a U.S. government crackdown is coming, given the presumption the largely unregulated movement is "an epidemic of psychedelic churches that are creating a public health crisis."

Back in California, Flor Gonzales is convinced the drug is behind Lorenzo's improvement.

"The ayahuasca changed him in a lot of ways," she said. "We're more optimistic about the future."

The father of four said he has stopped taking pills for depression, PTSD and insomnia. He still has moments of forgetfulness and doesn't drive, but says he sleeps through the night and his screaming fits are a thing of the past.

"I feel healthier," he said. "I feel like a dark force has been taken out of my soul."

Russia hits civilian targets anew, EU officials visit Kyiv

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian missiles hit residential areas in an eastern Ukrainian city Thursday for the second time in 24 hours, while top European Union officials held talks with the government in Kyiv as the war with Russia approaches its one-year milestone.

The latest strikes in Kramatorsk came as rescue crews searched for survivors in the rubble of an apartment building hit late Wednesday by a Russian missile that killed at least three people and wounded 21 others. At least one more victim was thought to be under the debris, Ukraine's presidential office said.

"Kramatorsk again shattered by explosions — the Russians made two more rocket strikes," regional governor Pavlo Kyrylenko wrote in a Telegram post.

He said at least five civilians were wounded in the latest strikes, which hit residential buildings as well as a children's clinic and a school in the heart of the city. Kramatorsk Mayor Oleksandr Honcharenko urged residents to stay in shelters.

Kramatorsk is a major hub for the Ukrainian military in the east.

No further details of Thursday's attack were immediately available.

Russia has frequently struck apartment buildings during the war, causing civilian casualties, although the Kremlin has denied targeting residential structures.

Russian shelling across Ukraine over the previous 24 hours killed at least eight civilians and wounded 29 others, the presidential office said. Along with the victims in Kramatorsk, the toll included four who died when a Russian mortar shell hit a basement where they were sheltering in the northeastern Chernihiv region.

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen ahead of what officials described as a summit on Friday. The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 — a few months before the war started on Feb. 24, 2022.

Von der Leyen praised wartime Ukraine's "brilliant application" for European Union membership, though Brussels officials note that Ukraine joining the 27-nation bloc is still a long way off.

Ahead of possible membership, Von der Leyen said, the Commission is proposing that Kyiv "join key European programs — this will give Ukraine benefits close to those of EU membership in many areas."

EU assistance for Ukraine, she said, has reached 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) since the start of Russia's war.

She said the EU plans to adopt a 10th package of sanctions against Russia before Feb. 24. Von der Leyen also announced that the International Center for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression in Ukraine would be set up in The Hague to coordinate the collection of evidence of war crimes.

Von der Leyen, on her fourth visit to Kyiv since Russia's invasion, added that she was "comforted" by Ukraine's anti-corruption drive. Stamping out endemic corruption is a key condition for joining the EU.

Zelenskyy on Wednesday took aim at corrupt officials for the second time in the space of a week. Several high-ranking officials were dismissed.

Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform in a country long gripped by graft.

The latest corruption allegations came as Western allies are channeling billions of dollars to help Kyiv fight Moscow's forces and as the Ukrainian government is introducing reforms so it can potentially join the EU.

Ukraine's government is keen to get more Western military aid, on top of the tanks pledged last week, as the warring sides are expected to launch new offensives once winter ends. Kyiv is now asking for fighter jets.

Kyiv expects Russia to "attempt something" on the Feb. 24 anniversary, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told France's BFM television. He stressed his government's urgency on getting weapons without delay.

"We are telling our partners that we too need to be ready as fast as possible," he said in an interview late Wednesday.

U.S. President Joe Biden has ruled out providing F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday during a trip to the Philippines that the focus of American aid is to increase Ukraine's military capabilities by sending artillery, armor and air defense, and training Ukrainian troops.

The U.S. is "focused on providing Ukraine the capability that it needs to be effective in its upcoming anticipated counteroffensive in the spring," Austin said.

"And so we're doing everything we can to get them the capabilities that they need right now to be effective on the battlefield," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that strategy would backfire, by prompting Moscow to ensure that potential Russian targets were out of range.

"The longer range the weapons supplied to the Kyiv regime, the farther we would need to push them away from the territories that are part of our country," Lavrov said in an interview with Russian state media.

He said Moscow would like to see the war end, but noted that the length of the conflict was less important than its desired outcome: to protect Russian territory and "people who want to remain part of the Russian culture," reaffirming Moscow's declared goal to defend Russian speakers in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin drew on national pride at a ceremony to mark the 80th anniversary of the Nazi defeat in the World War II battle of Stalingrad as he sought to stiffen support at home for the fight in Ukraine, where the Kremlin's forces have suffered some embarrassing setbacks in recent months.

"The strength of the defenders of Stalingrad is the most important moral beacon for Russian soldiers," he said in Volgograd, as Stalingrad was renamed in 1961. "All that defines Russia and makes us strong and confident in ourselves, the rightness of our cause and our victory."

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Iranian film director goes on hunger strike in prison

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — An Iranian director who was arrested last summer, weeks before his latest film was released to widespread acclaim, has gone on hunger strike to protest his continued detention amid more than four months of anti-government protests.

Jafar Panahi, whose films have thrilled critics and won numerous international prizes, issued a statement saying he would refuse food or medicine starting Wednesday "in protest against the extra-legal and inhumane behavior of the judicial and security apparatus."

He's among a number of Iranian artists, sports figures and other celebrities who have been detained after speaking out against Iran's theocracy. Such arrests have become increasingly frequent since nationwide protests broke out in September over the death of a young woman in police custody.

Panahi, 62, was sentenced to six years in prison in 2011 on charges of producing anti-government propaganda, but the sentence was never carried out. Banned from both travel and filmmaking, he continued to make underground films that were released abroad to great acclaim.

He was arrested in July when he went to the Tehran prosecutor's office to inquire about the arrests of two other Iranian filmmakers. A judge later ruled that he must serve the earlier sentence.

His latest film, "No Bears," in which he plays a fictionalized version of himself while making a film along the Iran-Turkey border, premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September, a week before the protests began. The New York Times and The Associated Press named it one of the top 10 films of the year, and film critic Justin Chang of The Los Angeles Times called it 2022's best movie.

The protests erupted after 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died while being held by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating the country's strict Islamic dress code. The demonstrations rapidly escalated into calls for the overthrow of Iran's ruling clerics, a major challenge to their four-decade rule.

On Wednesday, around 100 people took part in a protest in the western Iranian city of Abadan, the semiofficial Tasnim news agency reported. It said five "rioters" suffered minor injuries when security forces intervened and that 10 people were arrested, without providing further details.

Iran heavily restricts media access to demonstrations and periodically shuts down the internet, making it difficult to confirm specific incidents or gauge the scale of the ongoing demonstrations.

At least 527 protesters have been killed and more than 19,500 people have been detained since the demonstrations began, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran, a group that has closely monitored the unrest. Iranian authorities have not released official figures on deaths or arrests.

Taraneh Alidoosti, the 38-year-old star of Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning 2016 film, "The Salesman," was arrested in December after taking to social media to criticize the crackdown on protests. She was released three weeks later on bail.

Review: '80 for Brady' is a sports film fumble for the ages

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

Tom Brady has officially — and finally, he insists — retired from the National Football League. Based on his new movie "80 For Brady," it's also time that he immediately retire from filmmaking.

No one emerges with glory from this syrupy, undercooked story of four older friends who are determined to see Brady lead an astonishing come-from-behind win at the 2017 Super Bowl.

A quartet of our finest actors — Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, Rita Moreno and Sally Field— are sacrificed for cheap laughs and unearned poignancy. And Brady, an executive producer, sullies one of his greatest triumphs. That hissing sound you hear in the theater is not footballs losing air but an audience deflated.

Screenwriters Sarah Haskins and Emily Halpern seem to have opened a door into exploring loss, obligation and regret in our sunset years, but fumble badly, instead drifting into granny-accidentally-takes-an-edible territory.

Up on that screen is an EGOT winner, multiple Oscar, Tony and Emmy owners, a recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor as well as Kennedy Center and Cecil B. DeMille Award honorees. But they are utterly wasted. At one point Field is reduced to participating in a pointless hot wings eating contest.

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There's nothing wrong with silly buddy movies or celebrating age on screen and it's refreshing to see both bundled here. But don't tell us you're empowering older people by making them dance The Twist to get past security into the Super Bowl. Add this to the utter misuse of Diane Keaton in last year's "Mack & Rita," and we call Hollywood for illegal blindsided blocks on people over 70 and a loss of 15 yards.

Very, very loosely based on actual events, the film is so light plot-wise that it threatens to float away. A ticket mix-up pads a few extra minutes but logic is tossed out, like the time our heroines just happen to find four empty seats in a row just at kickoff — at the Super Bowl.

Brady is a constant benevolent presence throughout, whether speaking to Tomlin's character through one of his bobble heads or from TV screens in dialogue only she can hear. "This is going to work out," he promises.

Each of our leading ladies get a single note to develop: Fonda plays the vain, boy-crazy author of Rob Gronkowski erotic fan fiction. Field is the sensible, responsible one. Recent widow Moreno is up for any adventure and Tomlin is the glue holding them together.

When one of the quartet becomes fearful of a recurrence of cancer, Brady becomes her north star and she asks a bust of him what she should do, like a prayer. "He never gives up no matter what he's up against," she says. You come to expect a bright halo to appear over Brady's head.

Director Kyle Marvin fails to build any real tension as he frighteningly shifts from farce to cringe to melancholy, but real footage of the big game is nicely knitted into the second half. The message here is simple: When you're down, dig deep and go for it. In other words, have the courage to go to a different movie.

At some points the film just becomes a branding opportunity, like for Microsoft Surface and the theme park NFL Experience. "This is better than my wildest dreams," one of our august actors is forced to say while throwing footballs. When the four later finagle their way into a skybox during the game, one helpfully explains: "You can see everything!" Yes, from up here, you can see terrible writing.

This is a movie that is supposed to boost people in their 70s and 80s but has jokes about fanny packs and Pat Sajak. Co-stars Billy Porter, Sara Gilbert and Guy Fieri somehow emerge OK in small roles but the main heroines tread water in what can only be considered an after-school special for older people.

"80 for Brady," a Paramount Pictures release that is only in theaters starting Feb. 3, is rated PG-13 for brief strong language, some drug content and some suggestive references. Running time: 98 minutes. Half a star out of four.

Florida city highlights conflicts over local gerrymandering

BY AYANNA ALEXANDER Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — Not far from the postcard images of Jacksonville -- the white sand beaches, the riverfront fountain, the upscale shopping district — is another side of the city.

Here, neighborhood roads are pitted with potholes and sometimes unpaved. Weeds swallow abandoned cars in empty lots. Grocery stores are sparse.

The people who live in this other Jacksonville are mostly Black, and many of them lay blame for their neighborhoods' lack of services on the city's politics. They point to a lack of representation resulting in part from the way the districts have been drawn for the city council, the decision-making body for Jacksonville's 950,000 residents.

"It's about diluting Black representation, Black power and change that needs to happen in the Black community," said Moné Holder, a city resident who holds a leadership role at Florida Rising, a local voting rights group that focuses on communities of color. "Others may tell a different story as to why it is, but we see it in the lack of resources that go into those communities."

A group of Jacksonville residents and local civil rights organizations sued the city last year, alleging that the council's redistricting maps packed Black communities into four of the 19 council districts, five of which are at-large.

A U.S. district court judge last fall ruled in their favor and ordered the maps redrawn. Advocates said the city returned with more of the same, and in December the same court ordered that a map proposed

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by the advocates be used for Jacksonville's elections this spring.

"There's just naturally an incentive to keep things the same, and that's what you saw in the Jacksonville process," said Nick Warren, staff attorney with the ACLU of Florida.

The council argued in its court filings that the advocates' latest plan would be the third council map in less than a year and would "cause voter confusion and undermine voter confidence." The court rejected the appeal in early January, so voters will be casting ballots in new council districts for the city's March elections.

The fight over how Jacksonville's districts are drawn reflects an aspect of redistricting that often remains in the shadows. Redistricting for congressional and state legislative boundaries captures wide attention after new census numbers are released every 10 years, as the two major political parties seek mapmaking advantages that will help them retain or regain power at the federal or state level — a process known as gerrymandering.

No less fierce are the battles over the way voting lines are drawn in local governments, for city councils, county commissions and even school boards.

Conflicts over local redistricting erupted into public view late last year when a leaked audiotape revealed how Latino members of the Los Angeles City Council were plotting to gerrymander council districts in a way that would boost political power for their community at the expense of traditionally Black ones.

The exchange was punctuated with racist and graphic language and has widened racial fissures within the city, led the state Department of Justice to announce an investigation and prompted a legislative effort to remove the council's redistricting power.

"Self-interest should not be the deciding factor," said the bill's sponsor, Democratic state Sen. María Elena Durazo. "It should be the Voting Rights Act, the California Constitution and the U.S. Constitution."

When the city was going through the redistricting process, Los Angeles City Councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson recalled bringing up topics important to his constituents related to what he termed the "One Black district" but said he was ignored.

"Now I understand that that was on purpose," he said.

A U.S. Supreme Court ruling a decade ago gutting a section of the federal Voting Rights Act gave state and local governments tremendous freedom to change voting procedures and to redraw political boundaries, even if redistricting was done in a way that diluted the voting power of minority communities. Previously, some states and local governments were required to get approval from the Justice Department before making significant voting-related changes.

The gerrymandering for local government bodies receives far less attention than congressional or state legislative gerrymandering, in part because few local groups have the money and expertise to bring lawsuits against what they perceive as unfair maps.

Jacksonville is an exception. Local branches of the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union teamed up with community civil rights groups to challenge the maps the City Council approved in March 2022.

Some community activists trace the city's redistricting problems to a 1968 consolidation with Duval County, which allowed the city to grow but also changed its racial dynamics. At the time, it was hoped that a mix of predominantly Black council districts and at-large council positions would help boost Black representation.

Yet in the more than half-century since the merger, just six Black residents have served in the at-large positions, which are elected on a citywide basis, and just two of those were Democrats, according to research by Marcella Washington, a retired Florida State College at Jacksonville political science professor who is a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

Black residents made up at least 40% of Jacksonville's total population at the time of the consolidation, and today they account for a little over 30%.

While seven members of today's Jacksonville council are Black, Washington said they don't always vote in the interest of the Black community. As one example, she cited contentious votes over whether to remove Confederate monuments across the city. Other residents noted additional concerns in predominantly Black areas of Jacksonville they feel the council does not prioritize — city properties that are overgrown,

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problems with water and sewer service, inadequate services for homeless people.

Councilman Rory Diamond was the lone vote against the council's original map, saying it was designed to protect incumbents. But he also is critical of the redrawn map to be used in the upcoming elections because he believes it could have the unintended consequence of "destroying African-American representation on the City Council." Other council members declined to comment, citing the litigation.

Local activists say forcing Black residents into a handful of council districts has led to a sense in those communities that their voice doesn't matter. That has made it difficult to get them engaged politically, said Rosemary McCoy, a plaintiff in the lawsuit and CEO of the Harriet Tubman Freedom Fighters, a nonprofit that registers new voters.

"We understand that when you pack a group of people together, then these people don't have a say. Their vote happens to be wasted," McCoy said. "I ask people to sign petitions to put things on the ballot ... and many times they're telling us, 'My vote don't matter. My vote don't count. Why should I vote? Nothing's going to change'"

Ben Frazier, another plaintiff in the case and CEO of the Northside Coalition of Jacksonville, which focuses on injustice, said he would like the court fight in Jacksonville to inspire other groups around the country to challenge local redistricting maps when they appear to be drawn unfairly.

"I'm hopeful that there will be other cities and other states who look at Jacksonville and say Jacksonville moved against them, and maybe we should, too," he said.

Today in History: FEB 3, The day the music died

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 3, the 34th day of 2023. There are 331 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 3, the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, providing for a federal income tax, was ratified.

On this date:

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln and Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens held a ship-board peace conference off the Virginia coast; the talks deadlocked over the issue of Southern autonomy.

In 1917, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, the same day an American cargo ship, the SS Housatonic, was sunk by a U-boat off Britain after the crew was allowed to board lifeboats.

In 1943, during World War II, the U.S. transport ship SS Dorchester, which was carrying troops to Greenland, sank after being hit by a German torpedo in the Labrador Sea; of the more than 900 men aboard, only some 230 survived.

In 1959, rock-and-roll stars Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson died in a small plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa.

In 1966, the Soviet probe Luna 9 became the first manmade object to make a soft landing on the moon.

In 1988, the U.S. House of Representatives handed President Ronald Reagan a major defeat, rejecting his request for \$36.2 million in new aid to the Nicaraguan Contras by a vote of 219-211.

In 1994, the space shuttle Discovery lifted off, carrying Sergei Krikalev (SUR'-gay KREE'-kuh-lev), the first Russian cosmonaut to fly aboard a U.S. spacecraft.

In 1995, the space shuttle Discovery blasted off with a woman, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Eileen Collins, in the pilot's seat for the first time in NASA history.

In 1998, a U.S. Marine plane sliced through the cable of a ski gondola in Italy, causing the car to plunge hundreds of feet, killing all 20 people inside.

In 2006, an Egyptian passenger ferry sank in the Red Sea during bad weather, killing more than 1,000 passengers.

In 2009, Eric Holder became the first Black U.S. attorney general as he was sworn in by Vice President Joe Biden.

In 2020, in closing arguments at President Donald Trump's first impeachment trial, Democratic prosecu-

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tors urged senators to stop a "runaway presidency" and recognize Trump's actions in Ukraine as part of a pattern of behavior that would allow him to "cheat" in the 2020 election; Trump's defenders accused Democrats of trying to undo the 2016 election and said voters should decide Trump's fate.

Ten years ago: A fired Los Angeles police officer launched a revenge war on law enforcement and the families of those he blamed for ending his career, killing four people during a 6-day manhunt that ended with his apparent suicide at a cabin in San Bernardino County. The Baltimore Ravens survived a partial power outage during Super Bowl XLVII in New Orleans to edge the San Francisco 49ers 34-31.

Five years ago: Linebacker Ray Lewis and receiver Terrell Owens were among eight people voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The New York Times reported an accusation from actress Uma Thurman that disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein had forced himself on her sexually years ago in a London hotel room; Weinstein acknowledged making an "awkward pass" but strongly denied any physical assault.

One year ago: Winter storms across the United States knocked out power to hundreds of thousands, brought the cancellation of more than 9,000 flights, caused a deadly tornado in Alabama and brought rare measurable snowfall to parts of Texas. President Joe Biden announced that the leader of the Islamic State group blew up himself and members of his family during a raid by U.S. special operations forces of his hideout in the village of Atmeh, Syria. U.S. officials called it a "significant blow" to the radical militant organization.

Today's birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Fran Tarkenton is 82. Actor Blythe Danner is 80. Football Hall of Famer Bob Griese is 78. Singer-guitarist Dave Davies (The Kinks) is 76. Singer Melanie is 76. Actor Morgan Fairchild is 73. Actor Pamela Franklin is 73. Actor Nathan Lane is 67. Rock musician Lee Ranaldo (Sonic Youth) is 67. Actor Thomas Calabro is 64. Rock musician/author Lol Tolhurst (The Cure) is 64. Actor-director Keith Gordon is 62. Actor Michele Greene is 61. Country singer Matraca Berg is 59. Actor Maura Tierney is 58. Actor Warwick Davis is 53. Actor Elisa Donovan is 52. Reggaeton singer Daddy Yankee is 47. Actor Isla Fisher is 47. Human rights activist Amal Clooney is 45. Singer-songwriter Jessica Harp is 41. Actor Matthew Moy is 39. Rapper Sean Kingston is 33. Actor Brandon Micheal Hall is 30.