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Thursday, Dec. 14

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, broccoli, garlic toast, orange sherbet.
School Breakfast: Pop tarts.
School Lunch: Sloppy joes, tater tots.
Basketball Double Header at Sisseton: Aux. Gym: Boys C at 4 p.m., Girls C at 5 p.m.; Main Gym: Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Boys Varsity and Girls Varsity to follow. (Boys game will be played first)
Boys and Girls Northeast Conference Wrestling Tournament at Milbank, 4 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 15

Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, rice pilaf, California blend vegetables, peach crisp, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Egg wraps.
School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.
Basketball Double Header at West Central: Boys C and Girls C, 4 p.m.; Boys JV, 5 p.m.; Girls JV, 5:15 p.m.; girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow.

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

OPEN: **Recycling Trailer in Groton**
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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1440

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The US Supreme Court yesterday agreed to weigh in on a lower court ruling that weakened the Food and Drug Administration's 2016 and 2021 decisions to make the abortion medication mifepristone widely available.

Lawmakers in the US House voted yesterday along party lines to approve an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden over allegations of financial misconduct. The move formalizes a probe launched by former Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R, CA-20) in September, which had

languished in recent months.

Cambridge researchers discovered a single hormone produced by the fetus is the major cause of "morning sickness," the persistent, first-trimester nausea and vomiting that affects more than two-thirds of pregnant women. The breakthrough is expected to help prevent the condition as well as hyperemesis gravidarum—the severe form of the condition—which often leads to weight loss, dehydration, and miscarriage.

"Home Alone" and "Apollo 13" are among 25 movies added to Library of Congress National Film Registry.

NFL to play a 2024 regular season game in Brazil, expand its 2025 international slate of games up to nine. New England Patriots to part ways with head coach Bill Belichick at the end of this season after 23 years with the team. Los Angeles' SoFi Stadium to host Super Bowl LXI in 2027.

Actor Anthony Anderson tapped to host 75th Emmy Awards (Jan. 15). "Barbie" brings in a record 18 Critics Choice Awards nominations.

Roughly 200 nations pledge to "transition away" from fossil fuels to reach net-zero emissions by 2050; nonbinding agreement came at the end of the COP28 climate conference.

Engineered immune cells relieve symptoms in 15 patients suffering from different types of autoimmune diseases, including lupus and certain types of sclerosis and myositis.

NASA's Perseverance rover pieces together history of Mars' Jezero crater based on sedimentary analysis, finds the area was once a lake stretching up to 22 miles across.

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.4%, Dow +1.4%, Nasdaq +1.4%); Dow closes above 37,000 for the first time ever as the Federal Reserve leaves interest rates unchanged, signals rate cuts in 2024.

Tesla recalls more than 2 million vehicles sold in the US between 2012 and 2023 due to safety concerns over Autopilot software; recall comes after two-year probe by US auto-safety regulators into series of crashes.

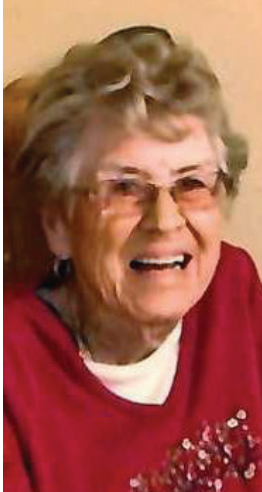
E-commerce business Etsy announces it will lay off 225 people, or 11% of its workforce, to reduce costs amid weakening demand for handcrafted goods.

Biden administration reportedly holding back sales of rifles to Israel over concerns about attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank. At least nine Israeli soldiers killed in Hamas attack in Gaza City, officials say.

US Supreme Court agrees to hear an appeal over scope of federal obstruction law used to prosecute over 300 people in the Jan. 6, 2021, storming of the US Capitol. Judge pauses former President Donald Trump's federal election interference case amid immunity appeal.

Senate passes annual National Defense Authorization Act by a 87-13 vote, which authorizes \$886B in spending and a 5.2% pay raise for service members; the bill now heads to the House

The Life of Janice Fliehs



Funeral services for Janice Fliehs, 95, of Claremont will be 2:00 p.m., Saturday, December 16th at St. John's Lutheran Church, Groton. Rev. Jeremy Yeadon will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Saturday from 12:00-2 p.m.

Janice passed away December 12, 2023 at Bethesda Home of Aberdeen, where she resided since June of 2023.

Janice Mae Lilja was born on May 20, 1928 in Aberdeen to Hjalmer and Lydia (Sip-pel) Lilja. She attended country school in Claremont Township and graduated from Groton High School in 1946.

On September 25, 1946, she was united in marriage with Irvin Fliehs at the Lilja farm home near Claremont. The couple established their 1st home on the Pur-Lee farm, in West Hanson Township. It was here that two sons were born to them.

In 1950, following the death of Janice's father, Hjalmer Lilja, they moved to the Lilja farm in rural Claremont. Their family was completed with the addition of one son and two daughters. Janice and Irvin worked as partners on the family farm which included producing grain crops, raising livestock and poultry and milking cows. Through the years, they continued working together in several business ventures including Fliehs Dixon Lawnmower Sales and Service.

From 1986-2003, Janice and Irvin spent their winters enjoying Ft. Myers Beach, Florida. They introduced the area to their children and grandchildren and many of them still enjoy the area yet today.

Janice spent many hours in her vegetable and flower gardens. She took great pride in her gladiolas that she would deliver to family and friends in the community.

Janice helped form the Junior Farmers 4-H Club and was the club leader for 20 years. All of their children kept Janice and Irvin busy for many years, attending county and state fairs. Janice spent countless hours and years writing the Claremont News for the Groton Independent.

Janice was an active member of St. John's Lutheran Church, including its Ladies Aid and Nursery Circle. She also belonged to the Claremont American Legion Auxiliary and the Groton Garden Club.

Celebrating her life are her children, Larry (Val) Fliehs of Groton, Gary (Pam) Fliehs of Hermosa, Lorin (Julie) Fliehs of Groton, Shirlee (Larry) Frohling of Groton, and son-in-law, Robert Wegner of Groton. Janice is also survived by 14 grandchildren: Lance, Jeff, Dawn, Bret, Lynde, Kalli, Tigh, Amber, Matthew, Jarod, Jonathan, Sarah, Amanda and Amy and 35 great-grandchildren.

Preceding her in death was her husband in 2004, her daughter, Jeanette Wegner and her sister Betty Olson.

Casketbearers will be her grandsons.

Honorary Casketbearers will be her granddaughters and great-grandchildren.

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Groton Community Transit
205 E 2nd Ave., Downtown Groton
invites you to its
Holiday Bake Sale

Thursday, Dec. 21, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas goodies will be served.

Groton Transit wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Blessed Year!

**If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact
the Groton Transit dispatch office at 605-397-8661.**

Any and all donations are welcome!

**2024 DOG LICENSES DUE BY
12/29/2023**

Fines start January 1, 2024



Spayed/Neutered
dogs are \$5 per dog,
otherwise \$10 per dog

Proof of rabies shot
information is RE-
QUIRED!!

Email proof to city.
kellie@nvc.net, fax to

(605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!!

Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422

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Sisseton Double Header Information - Thursday

4:00 p.m.: Girls C in North Practice Facility.; Boys JV in Ben Reifel Gym.

5:00 p.m.: Girls JV in Ben Reifel Gym; Boys C in North Practice Facility.

6:15 p.m.: Boys Varsity in Ben Reifel Gym.

7:45 p.m.: Girls Varsity in Ben Reifel Gym.

West Central Double Header Information - Friday

Girls C/JV will be in the Becker Center, Boys C/JV and both Varsity games will be in the Colosseum (New Gym).

4:00 PM - C Team - 7 minute quarters, 5 minute half

Followed by JV - 10 minute warmup, 7 minute quarters, 5 minute half

Followed by V - 15 minute warmup, 8 minute quarters, 10 minute half

ALL games (West Central and Sisseton) will be broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM.

Lake Area Tech Trap & Skeet Club Wins National Honors

Watertown, SD - The Lake Area Technical College Clay Target Team recently wrapped up a successful season that was highlighted by winning two national awards.

Earning first place in the USA Clay Target League was the Novice team. Athletes include Justin Haven (Agriculture) Brentford, SD; Elijah Fjerkenstad (Registered Nursing) Boyd, MN; Jacob Burckard (Diesel Technology) Bismarck, MN; Tyler Marotz (Aviation Maintenance Technology) Sioux Falls, SD; and Charles Lindgren (Human Services Academics) Watertown, SD.

Earning second place in the USA Clay Target League was the JV team. Athletes include Caeden Bunde (Agri-Business) Garretson, SD; Nick Letterick (Auto Body and Paint Technology) Howard, SD; Ben Pond (Welding Technology) Streator, IL; Eric Jensen (Diesel Technology/CNH) Brandon, SD; and Nathan Meyer (Agriculture) Tabor, SD.

In addition to the national rankings, the team also took third place in its conference with individual conference award winners Christina Zoellner (Agriculture) Groton, SD, earning sixth place and Olivia Throener (Agriculture) Cogswell, ND, earning tenth place. The Conference Team Top Shooters were Christina Zoellner (22.7 average) and Thomas Smith (Computer Information Systems) Brookings, SD, (23.5 average).

Team members receiving season 25 Straight awards include:

Ryder Daly (Agriculture) Columbia, SD - Week 5

Cooper Ernst (Welding Technology) Dassel, MN - Week 1, 3, & 5

Aeydon Johnson (Agriculture) Groton, SD - Week 1

Lucas Jones (Agri-Business) Pierre, SD - Week 1 & Nationals

Reid Leischner (Diesel Technology) Parkston, SD - Week 3

Isaac Loe (Automotive Technology) Pierre, SD - Nationals

Elijah Seymour (Professional Fixed Wing Pilot) Sioux Falls, SD - Week 5

Thomas Smith (Computer Information Systems) Brookings, SD - Week 2 & 4

Cloe Swanson (Welding Technology) Canton, SD - Week 3

The Lake Area Tech Trap and Skeet Club is coached by Cassy Behnke, Nick Smith (head coaches) and Kevin Behnke (assistant coach).

Names Released in Lincoln County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: 291st St between 467th and 468th Avenue, 10 miles northwest of Beresford, SD

When: 4:59 a.m., Saturday, December 9, 2023

Occupant 1: Hayden Kristofer Aaron Hall, Male, 20, Davis, SD, Serious, non-life-threatening injuries

Occupant 2: Gerard Duane Muller, Male, 20, Parker, SD, Fatal injuries

Occupant 3: Kaydence Marie Nygaard, Female, 19, Beresford, SD, Fatal injuries

Occupant 4: Collin Allen Hlavac, Male, 18, Irene, SD, Fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2014 Ram 1500 Sport

Lincoln County, S.D.- Three people died in a single vehicle crash Saturday morning in Lincoln County.

Preliminary crash information indicates a 2014 Ram 1500 Sport was driving eastbound on 291st Street and left the roadway to the right and went airborne over a driveway. The vehicle landed in the south side ditch and rolled. Three of the occupants were pronounced deceased at the scene. They include Gerard Duane Muller, 20, of Parker, SD; Kaydence Marie Nygaard, 19, of Beresford, SD; and Collin Allen Hlavac, 18, of Irene, SD.

A fourth occupant, Hayden Kristofer Aaron Hall, 20, of Davis, SD, fled the scene and was soon located and taken to a nearby hospital for treatment of serious, non-life-threatening injuries. None of the occupants were wearing seatbelts.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash including identification of the vehicle operator. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

Deadwood Gaming Distributes \$18,137,488 to Governmental Entities through Gaming Revenue Taxes and Fees in FY 2023

Media: Click [HERE](#) for South Dakota Commission on Gaming's Annual Report.

DEADWOOD (12-13-2023) – The South Dakota Commission on Gaming recently released their Fiscal Year 203 (July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2023) annual report showing distributions to state, county, municipal governments and school districts totaling \$18,137,488 from gaming revenue taxes paid by Deadwood Gaming operators.

“These governmental entities rely on the revenues produced by the Deadwood gaming industry,” said Mike Rodman, Executive Director of the Deadwood Gaming Association. “This is why a healthy gaming industry is beneficial to the interests of all South Dakotans.”

“Total adjusted gross gaming revenue for the 2023 fiscal year was \$137,716,732, an increase of .34% from fiscal year 2022.” Rodman continued, “The industry is pleased to announce that we generated \$4,327,111 for the South Dakota Department of Tourism, \$3,314,546 to the state general fund, \$1,671,113 for the South Dakota Commission on Gaming, \$100,000 to South Dakota Historic Preservation, \$30,000 to the South Dakota Department of Human Services, \$1,081,778 to Lawrence County, \$280,618 to the municipalities of Spearfish, Lead, Whitewood and Central City and another \$280,618 to the Lead/Deadwood, Spearfish, Meade and Belle Fourche school districts with the balance of the distribution going to the historic preservation and restoration in the City of Deadwood.”

“The Deadwood gaming industry is proud of the positive financial impacts of Deadwood gaming throughout South Dakota.”

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Another week has come and gone in Washington, DC. We're still working on passing the National Defense Authorization Act and a National Security supplemental with aid to Israel and Ukraine and policy changes at our southern border. More on that later. As always, we had a few South Dakotans in the office, along with visitors from other parts of the

country. I hosted the last artificial intelligence (AI) insight forums with my bipartisan AI working group, and I attended hearings and classified briefings. We're ready for another big week to wrap up key legislation before the end of the year. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakotans I visited with: J. Garret Renville, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Chairman; Ryman LeBeau, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Chairman; and Brian Bird, CEO and President of Northwestern Energy.

Meetings this past week: Dr. Paul Richanbach, Institute for Defense Analyses; Jane Fraser, CEO of Citigroup; Major General Johnny Davis, Commanding General of United States Army Recruiting Command and Fort Knox; Robin Vince, CEO of BNY Mellon; and Ronald O'Hanley, CEO of State Street. I attended a dinner at the Library of Congress where we heard from George Will.

I also hosted the last two AI insight forums this past week. One was on doomsday scenarios, where we focused on mitigating risks of AI with leaders from OpenAI, Anthropic, the Machine Intelligence Research Institute and more. The second forum centered on national security, looking at how we can use AI and its development in the defense of our country. We heard from Palantir CEO Alex Karp, Scale AI CEO Alex Wang, Microsoft VP Bill Chappell, Booz Allen Hamilton CEO Horacio Rozanski and many more.

This past week, I hosted my colleagues for our Senate Bible Study in my office. We studied Psalm 1:1-2.

Votes taken: 7 – Many of these were on nominations to positions in the judicial branch and the Department of State. As I mentioned, I took one vote on the legislative vehicle for a supplemental appropriations bill that would provide funding to Ukraine and Israel. I ultimately voted to delay this funding until the package includes meaningful policy changes at our southern border. I am hopeful that discussions will continue and that we can come to an agreement that supports Israel and Ukraine AND secures our southern border.

Hearings: I attended one hearing in the Senate Banking committee. This past week, we heard from CEOs of several large banks: Charles Scharf of Wells Fargo, Brian Moynihan of Bank of America, Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase, Jane Fraser of Citigroup, Ronald O'Hanley of State Street, Robin Vince of BNY Mellon, David Solomon of Goldman Sachs and James Gorman of Morgan Stanley. I took the opportunity to ask them about overregulation and its impact on consumers, including farm and ranch families in South Dakota. You can watch my full exchange [here](#).

Classified briefings: I had one classified briefing on the National Security supplemental bill.

Legislation introduced: I introduced bipartisan legislation with Senator Jon Tester of Montana to suspend beef imports from Paraguay. You can read more about it, along with the full text of the bill, [here](#).

South Dakota ranch families work tirelessly to produce the safest, highest quality and most affordable

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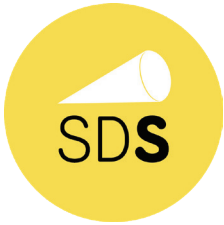
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beef in the world. Paraguay has historically struggled to contain outbreaks of foot and mouth disease. Unfortunately, the Biden administration has prioritized diplomatic initiatives in the region over the interests of American cattle producers. This poses a significant threat to not only our producers, but our consumers as well. Consumers should be able to confidently feed their families beef that has met the rigorous standards required in the United States.

This past week, I also introduced bipartisan legislation with Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) to provide back pay for military officers whose promotions were delayed in the Senate. The men and women who wear the uniform of the United States of America should not be negatively impacted by political squabbles. I disagree with the Department of Defense's policy of paying the travel expenses for service members and their dependents seeking abortions. I also support a member of the Senate's right to hold any nomination; however, our men and women in uniform should not be caught in the middle of partisan politics. I am pleased to introduce this bipartisan legislation to do the right thing and provide military officers and their families with the benefits they have earned for their decades of service and sacrifice.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Hill City, Hot Springs, Huron, Gettysburg, Sioux Falls, Wauertown and Webster.

Steps taken this past week: 56,414 steps or 27.81 miles.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Forest Service issues draft approval of drilling plan above Spearfish Canyon, with restrictions

BY: SETH TUPPER - DECEMBER 13, 2023 11:48 AM

A federal agency has provisionally approved a company's plan to conduct exploratory drilling for gold above Spearfish Canyon.

The company is Colorado-based Solitario Resources. Project maps show some of the proposed drill sites are less than a mile back from the canyon rim in the Black Hills National Forest, about 15 miles southwest of Spearfish.

"None of the proposed drill sites are located in Spearfish Canyon," says a draft decision issued Tuesday by the U.S. Forest Service.

The bottom of the canyon in that area is a popular spot, with attractions including Roughlock Falls, Spearfish Falls, Spearfish Canyon Lodge and the Latchstring Restaurant.

Opponents of the drilling, including the nonprofit Black Hills Clean Water Alliance, immediately condemned the draft decision.

"Not only does this project pose a serious risk to water quality in Lawrence County — including Spearfish Creek — it would also disrupt wildlife, add to our worsening air quality issues, and directly interrupt the recreation and tourism industry in our area," the alliance said on its website.

Solitario President and CEO Chris Herald praised the draft decision.

"Our proposed drilling program was carefully planned with all drilling activities situated on previously disturbed areas of past timber harvesting," Herald said in a news release. "Several additional administrative steps remain before final permit decisions will be forthcoming; however, we consider this decision to be the most important milestone before final approval."

The additional administrative steps include an objection period. The Forest Service received hundreds of written public comments while reviewing the project. Those commenters now have 45 days to file objections to the draft decision, which the Forest Service will review before issuing a final decision.

The draft decision from the Forest Service says that based on an environmental assessment, the project "will not significantly impact the human environment." The notice says a more comprehensive environmental impact statement will therefore not be prepared.

"The statutory right of Solitario to explore mineral resources on federally administered lands is recognized by the General Mining Law of 1872," the draft decision notes. That law says mineral deposits on federal public land are open to exploration.

The Forest Service can impose restrictions to minimize disruptions to people, wildlife, the environment and cultural or archaeological resources, and the draft decision includes many such mitigation measures. The company would also be required to restore the drilling sites to a natural-looking condition.

Solitario's plan includes up to 25 drill sites. Drill holes would average 1,300 feet in depth, and there would be 27 months of drilling, mostly from spring to fall, spread across five years. The company would examine core samples from the drilling program to determine whether there's enough economically recoverable gold to support a mine.

The company is one of several proposing gold exploration or already exploring for gold in the Black Hills, where exploration and mining have been continuously conducted since the 1870s.

The industry has brought jobs and economic growth, but also environmental damage. Before modern

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environmental regulations, the former Homestake Mine in Lead dumped so much pollution into White-wood Creek that the waterway became colloquially known as Cyanide Creek. Another former gold mine, the Gilt Edge near Lead, has been the site of a cleanup funded by the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund for more than 20 years since the mine was abandoned after its owner went bankrupt.

The only active, large-scale gold mine in the Black Hills is the Wharf Mine, near Lead and Terry Peak. The Wharf Mine's owner, Chicago-based Coeur Mining, received permission last summer from state regulators to expand.

Lithium has also become a sought-after mineral in the Black Hills, with companies staking claims and exploring for deposits to mine for use in the batteries that power electric vehicles and other devices.

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

COMMENTARY

South Dakota's new secretary of state still a mystery

DANA HESS

In 2022, Monae Johnson was elected South Dakota's secretary of state. Since then, she has earned another title: Queen of Irony.

Her reign started at the state Republican convention when Johnson and her election integrity minions expressed displeasure at the lack of effort by Steve Barnett when it came to ensuring the security of South Dakota's elections. Her complaints about election security were enough to make Republican delegates cast aside an incumbent and give the nomination to Johnson.

As a candidate, Johnson was consistently, maddeningly coy about what she thought about the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. Struggling to get Johnson to declare if Joe Biden was the legitimate winner of the election, a South Dakota Searchlight columnist likened the effort to trying to nail Jell-O to a tree. Johnson would not say what she thought of the election outcome, at the same time claiming that she did not want to be labeled as an election denier.

Her non-denial denial sent a clear message to right-wing South Dakotans that she was on their side. While Johnson was busy dodging questions about who had won the presidential election, grassroots organizations were springing up that had no qualms about claiming that Donald Trump had been robbed. They made it their mission to harangue county auditors, county commissions and election workers in the name of election integrity.

One of the ironies of that effort is that half of it is wasted in South Dakota. Elections here had plenty of integrity before the naysayers emerged. Their work, inspired by the denier-in-chief Donald Trump, wasn't needed in South Dakota since Trump won the state by 26 points. Trump, it seems, only seeks to root out election corruption in those states where he lost.

A lengthy piece by South Dakota News Watch detailed the efforts of organizations like South Dakota Canvassing Group and Midwest Swamp Watch to strengthen the state's election laws. It also noted the influence of activist Rick Weible in Johnson's campaign and the grassroots election integrity effort.

Swept up in the national conservative mania for election integrity, the South Dakota Legislature, top-heavy with Republicans, ushered through bills that made voting safer or more difficult, depending on your perspective. In 2023, the Legislature voted to ban ballot drop boxes as well as endorsing legislation on residency requirements, post-election audits, tabulation equipment testing and voter-roll updates.

Johnson formed a committee to study how to conduct post-election audits. While she campaigned for office on election integrity and transparency, she kept the public and the media away from last summer's committee meetings.

In the meantime, something happened to Johnson. According to the News Watch story, she broke off her association with Weible, the election integrity advocate. Once safely in office, perhaps Johnson realized that the road to reelection would be tougher if she kept up the drumbeat that South Dakota's elections

weren't as safe as they could be.

In late November she released a brochure: "A Guide To Understanding Secure Elections." The brochure talks about the security of using paper ballots and the lack of voting online, offers assurances that tabulation machines are not connected to the internet, touts safeguards in voter registration and voter ID requirements and seeks to recruit poll workers.

(The brochure, equal in size to two pieces of typing paper, contains Johnson's name five times, lest anyone forgets who is the Secretary of State.)

One statement in Johnson's news release announcing the brochure belongs in the Irony Hall of Fame. "Secretary Johnson and the county auditors stand united in ensuring that elections are conducted transparently and securely in South Dakota."

These are the same county auditors that Johnson tainted with her campaign questions about election integrity. These are the same county auditors being harassed by Johnson's former allies in the election integrity effort, South Dakota Canvassing Group and Midwest Swamp Watch.

Voters chose Johnson to replace Steve Barnett after delegates at the Republican convention decided he wasn't doing enough to secure the state's elections. However, despite Johnson's status as an outsider looking to shake things up, the statement she made about standing united with county auditors is one that Barnett or any of his predecessors could have made.

Perhaps the ultimate irony isn't that South Dakota voters chose an election denier to run their elections but that it looks like what they got was someone who's acting quite a bit like a secretary of state.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

Merriam-Webster now the arbiter of vanity license plates in South Dakota

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 13, 2023 11:05 AM

A state department will use an online dictionary to determine which words should be disallowed on license plates.

The South Dakota Department of Revenue has released its updated vanity plate policy. The update comes after a recent settlement in a lawsuit over First Amendment rights violations embedded in the previous policy.

The new policy removes the "offensive to good taste and decency" standard, successfully challenged in federal court by an applicant named Lynn Hart and the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota. The standard was subjective and inconsistently applied, the ACLU argued, and amounted to an unconstitutional policy – a fact presented to and ignored by the Legislature in 2008.

The new policy clarifies how far an applicant can go with a personalized plate before being denied. It strikes the previous "good taste" standard in favor of one that will reject "vulgar or swear words as defined in Merriam-Websters online dictionary as vulgar, profane, offensive, or having a sexual connotation."

Applicants also can't replicate a currently used personal plate; use special characters like dollar signs or question marks, letter and number combinations that might confuse law enforcement; or that "mimic or pretend to represent any law enforcement agency or emergency service provider."

The full policy, officially updated on Tuesday, is available online. The state also maintains a website through which residents can check to see if their preferred license plate has already been claimed by someone else.

South Dakota State University sports fans, for example, can't get a plate that reads "GOJACKS," because it's already taken. University of South Dakota fans can't claim the title of "YOTEFAN."

A news release from the revenue department also notes that anyone whose plate application had previously been denied for running afoul of the "good taste and decency" standard can now reapply.

The lawsuit's primary disputes, meanwhile, were settled officially with Tuesday's signature from U.S. District Court Judge Roberto Lange. Questions of attorney fees and who will pay them remain.

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

SD Rep. Johnson, House Republicans back formal impeachment inquiry against Biden

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - DECEMBER 13, 2023 5:57 PM

The U.S. House voted along party lines Wednesday to officially proceed with an impeachment inquiry against President Joe Biden.

The Republican-controlled chamber approved a resolution, 221-212, with Illinois Democrat Brad Schneider not voting, to allow three committees to continue their investigation into whether Biden benefited from his son Hunter's foreign business dealings. South Dakota Rep. Dusty Johnson voted with all his fellow Republicans in support of the resolution.

If such a link could be demonstrated, it would raise questions about foreign policy choices Biden made as vice president from 2009 to 2017.

Work on the investigation thus far has not demonstrated a link involving the president.

The vote was meant to show the investigation has the support of most House members.

Three committee leaders — Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer of Kentucky, Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan of Ohio and Ways and Means Chairman Jason Smith of Missouri — had previously conducted their inquiry solely at the direction of former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Subpoena power

House Republicans have subpoenaed Hunter Biden, asking him to sit for a deposition by Wednesday, but the president's son declined, offering instead to appear at a public hearing.

Wednesday's vote to formalize the investigation, which also formally bestowed the chairmen with subpoena power, would provide the inquiry more legitimacy and make it more difficult for Hunter Biden to reject future subpoenas, Jordan and Comer said hours before the vote.

"We think the House of Representatives will go on-record with a power that solely resides in the House to say we are in an official impeachment inquiry phase of our oversight," Jordan said.

"And when that happens, we'll see what their excuse is then," he added, referring to Hunter Biden and his legal team. "They should have been here today. But once we take that vote, we expect him to come in for his interview, for his deposition."

The Republicans said a deposition behind closed doors during the fact-gathering phase of the investigation should occur prior to a public hearing.

"We expect to depose the president's son, and then we will be more than happy to have a public hearing with him," Comer said.

Hunter Biden earned millions during his father's tenure as vice president for sitting on the board of Ukrainian energy company Burisma and in deals with Chinese oil tycoon Ye Jianming.

Hunter Biden speaks to press

Hunter Biden appeared outside the Capitol on Wednesday and made a brief statement to reporters. He did not take questions.

"There is no evidence to suggest that my father was financially involved in my business," he said. "Because it did not happen."

He named the GOP committee chairmen — Comer, Jordan and Smith — and said they had "lied over

and over about every aspect of my personal and professional life” and distorted the president’s paternal support as a kind of criminal act.

“They have taken the light of my dad’s love for me and presented it as darkness,” he said.

Joe Biden has repeatedly demonstrated support for his son amid his recovery from addiction to alcohol and crack cocaine.

Hunter Biden on Wednesday referred to past mistakes he’d made and his struggles with addiction, but denied that his father based any policy decisions on his own business dealings.

At Wednesday’s White House press briefing, press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said President Biden was “familiar with” what his son would say but declined to offer more details. She referred most questions about the matter to representatives for Hunter Biden, noting that he is not associated with the White House as “a private citizen.”

But she criticized House Republicans for proceeding in the inquiry without evidence and for focusing on impeachment rather than negotiations on the border, averting a government shutdown in January and other policy priorities.

“Instead they focus on baseless political stunts,” Jean-Pierre said.

‘Zero evidence of wrongdoing’

Several House Democrats also blasted the inquiry in floor speeches Wednesday, calling it “a political hit job” and “a witch hunt” meant to smear President Biden.

“A year of investigation, piles of documents and a herd of the Republicans’ own witnesses confirmed there is zero evidence of wrongdoing,” Florida Democrat Debbie Wasserman Schultz said. “Instead, the Republicans’ wasteful witch hunt just confirms that President Biden is a good and honorable man. What this resolution really does is cover up a full year of do-nothing Republican policies.”

Since taking the House majority this year, Republicans in the chamber have investigated Hunter Biden’s business dealings, including with companies in Ukraine and China, and have claimed that Joe Biden and other family members benefited.

But they haven’t shown any direct link from Hunter Biden’s businesses to the president. Witnesses that GOP leaders asked to testify at the House Oversight and Accountability Committee’s first hearing in September acknowledged there was no evidence tying Joe Biden to Hunter Biden’s business activities.

McCarthy directed the three House committees to open the investigation in September as he faced pressure from the Republican conference amid a push to keep the government funded. The move didn’t mollify the far-right members of his party, who voted with every Democratic member to oust McCarthy the following month.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Immigration talks in Congress lag as Latino lawmakers urge rejection of GOP proposals

Thune: Negotiations with White House in ‘concept phase’

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - DECEMBER 13, 2023 5:37 PM

WASHINGTON — Negotiations over immigration policy made small progress Wednesday, but not enough to strike a deal and ease the passage of billions in global security aid before Congress leaves for a three-week recess.

Meanwhile, members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus said they are frustrated that some proposals under discussion would make major changes in immigration policy for the first time in years, yet no Latino senators are part of Senate talks.

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A disagreement over border security policy has been the linchpin that has snagged a \$110.5 billion emergency supplemental spending package to bolster aid to Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and U.S. border security.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that Democrats are still trying to reach an agreement in negotiations over policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, and that "real progress was made."

He implored Republicans to stay in Congress through the holidays, but many GOP senators acknowledged that there is simply not enough time for an agreement, especially as both chambers are scheduled to leave this week. Work on the supplemental would be punted to next year absent a deal.

"The stakes are high," Schumer, a New York Democrat, said. "Time is of the essence."

Republican Whip Sen. John Thune of South Dakota said that negotiations about immigration are not far along and that "these are all concepts right now."

"I think these things that the discussions that are happening with the White House right now are largely ... in the concept phase," he said.

Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance and Indiana Sen. Todd Young, both Republicans, said that Democrats have moved in the direction of the GOP somewhat in immigration policy negotiations, but not enough.

"I think now the White House's got involved there's at least some logjam that's broken, but my sense is there's still a lot of uncertainty," Vance said.

Young said that the lead Republican on negotiations, Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, indicated that "there's still some work to do before he can bring a proposal back" to Republicans.

"It sounds like, you know, there's finally been some forward movement, so most of us are encouraged by that," Young said.

Texas Republican Sen. John Cornyn suggested that it wouldn't be a good idea for the Senate to pass the emergency supplemental and then have the House pick up the package in the new year.

"It'll be a piñata out there," he said. "People will take potshots for the next couple of weeks."

Latino lawmakers speak out

In addition to a tight schedule, a coalition of Democratic Latino lawmakers expressed their frustration over some of the negotiations that they say would drastically change asylum law and mirror hard-line Trump immigration policies.

"We're here to call on President Biden and Majority Leader Chuck Schumer to reject the immigration and border proposals at the hands of Republicans in the ongoing negotiations around the supplemental aid package," Congressional Hispanic Caucus Nanette Barragán of California said at a press conference outside the Capitol.

She added that the caucus has tried to have a meeting with the White House, and she expressed frustration that Senate "negotiations (are) taking place without a single Latino senator at the table."

Democratic Sens. Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Ben Ray Luján of New Mexico, both Latinos, said right-wing immigration approaches are being floated.

They include the resurrection of a pandemic-era tool used to expel migrants and bar them from claiming asylum known as Title 42, expedited removal proceedings and raising the bar for migrants to claim asylum by making changes to the "credible fear" standard.

"These would be the most far-sweeping, anti-immigrant and permanent changes to our law in a generation," Menendez said.

Menendez stepped down as chair of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in September amid federal indictment charges of conspiracy to commit bribery.

Luján added that the caucus has asked for a meeting with the White House's chief of staff.

"Let's sit down and talk and let's find real solutions that are going to be meaningful for all of the challenges that are before us in the United States of America, while living up to our national security responsibilities," he said.

The chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Pramila Jayapal of Washington, said that the Senate and White House "must not agree to these extreme demands."

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She said the proposals being discussed would only create more chaos at the Southern border. Jayapal said the changes to the credible fear standard would “completely shut down the asylum system for people who are facing danger in their home countries.”

“These are hallmarks of Donald Trump and extreme MAGA Republicans,” she said. “They cannot tend not to become the hallmarks of the Biden administration and Democrats.”

Time running short

Several Senate Republicans acknowledged that even if there was an agreement, there is not enough time to pass the emergency supplemental request in the House, despite the push from Democrats to approve critical aid to Ukraine.

The White House warned Wednesday that funding could run out within a month if Ukraine does not get aid.

The slow negotiations follow Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s visit to Capitol Hill Tuesday in an attempt to convince members of Congress, particularly Republicans, to approve about \$50 billion in additional aid to his country amid a nearly two-year war with Russia.

But Republicans said national security demands major shifts in immigration policy at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Wyoming’s Sen. John Barrasso, the No. 3 Republican, said that Senate Republicans are “going to stand firm unless serious changes are made” on immigration policies at the Southern border.

The Biden administration in October asked Congress to approve more than \$105 billion in emergency aid to Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and U.S. border security.

Senate Democrats released a \$110.5 billion spending package last week that would have provided funding for all four of those areas. But Republicans blocked the bill from moving forward, insisting the legislation include changes to immigration policy.

In the emergency supplemental, Senate Democrats included \$1.42 billion for staff hires for immigration judges, such as clerks, attorneys and interpreters; \$5.31 billion for U.S. Customs and Border Protection to expand border security, such as fentanyl detection; and \$2.35 billion for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement for operational costs, fentanyl detection and enforcement.

“I’m doing my job,” President Joe Biden wrote on X, formerly Twitter. “Republicans on the Hill should do theirs.”

Republican Sen. Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma said the Senate has to be “realistic” on whether a deal can be made, and he criticized the White House for not getting involved with negotiations sooner.

GOP Sen. Steve Daines of Montana said that it was “way too late” for the president to take part in talks. “He’s just very, very late to the party,” Daines said of Biden.

The Biden administration became involved in negotiations over the weekend, and U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas met Tuesday with a group of bipartisan senators tasked with striking a deal — Sens. Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, Lankford and Kyrsten Sinema, independent of Arizona.

Ariana covers the nation’s capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

SD’s Duba among dozens of Democratic legislators meeting with White House on gun violence

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - DECEMBER 13, 2023 2:28 PM

WASHINGTON — The White House announced its Office of Gun Violence Prevention was meeting Wednesday with nearly 100 Democratic state legislators in an effort to reduce gun violence and offer federal support.

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Attendees included South Dakota Rep. Linda Duba, D-Sioux Falls.

As part of the meeting, known as the Safer States Initiative, the Biden administration will aim to provide states with more tools and federal support to protect their communities, such as investing in evidence-informed solutions to prevent and respond to gun violence and strengthening gun background checks.

Stefanie Feldman, who leads the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, said on a call with reporters Tuesday that the initiative will strengthen federal and state partnerships to combat gun violence.

"One thing we hear all the time is they want to do more to reduce gun violence," Feldman said of state lawmakers.

The initiatives come as the United States continues to suffer from an epidemic of mass shootings. Firearm-related injuries are now the leading cause of death for children and adolescents in the United States, according to the New England Journal of Medicine.

There have been several high-profile mass shootings this year, including a school shooting in Nashville, Tennessee where three children and three teachers were killed and another in Lewiston, Maine where 18 people were killed and another 13 were injured.

This year, nearly 41,000 people have died due to gun violence and there have been 636 mass shootings, according to data from the Gun Violence Archive. Last year, there were 647 mass shootings and in 2021 there were 690 mass shootings.

State legislators from Maine will also attend the meeting, Feldman said.

Only Democratic state legislators were invited, a White House spokesperson said.

Additionally, the Department of Justice is releasing two pieces of model gun safety legislation — storing firearms safely and reporting stolen or lost firearms. A senior Justice Department official said the legislation on reporting missing or stolen firearms is modeled on state laws in Hawaii, Virginia and Maryland.

Office created in gun safety law

The Office of Gun Violence Prevention was established in September as part of the gun safety bipartisan legislation Congress passed last year.

Feldman said Wednesday's announcement outlines actions that states could take, such as establishing a state Office of Gun Violence Prevention, investing in evidence-based solutions to prevent gun violence, such as community violence interventions, and strengthening support for victims and survivors of gun violence.

The other actions include promoting responsible firearm ownership, such as the safe storage of firearms and reporting of lost and stolen firearms.

"We know that safe storage saves lives," Feldman said. "The majority of K-12 shooters are obtaining firearms from the home or the home of a friend."

Other actions that states could take, Feldman said, included strengthening background checks, as well as holding the gun industry accountable by banning assault weapons and high capacity magazines.

Feldman said the White House will not only address mass shootings but "daily acts of gun violence," such as domestic violence and suicide by gun violence.

According to the White House, legislators invited come from states including: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

US Supreme Court to decide fate of medication abortion access nationwide

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 13, 2023 9:20 AM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Supreme Court announced Wednesday it will hear oral arguments and decide whether broad access to the abortion pill can remain legal across the United States.

The justices' decision to hear the case this term will put abortion access and the politics that comes with it back in front of the nation's highest court just before voters head to the polls for the 2024 presidential election.

The drug at the center of the case, mifepristone, is used in more than half of pregnancy terminations within the United States as part of a two-pharmaceutical regimen that includes misoprostol as the second medication. Both are also used in miscarriage treatment.

Patients' ability to access mifepristone cannot change until the Supreme Court issues its ruling, under an order the court put out earlier this year.

The nine members of the court will be answering three questions in their ruling, including whether changes the U.S. Food and Drug Administration made to prescribing and dosage in 2016 and 2021 were "arbitrary and capricious." Those changes that expanded access included shipping the abortion pill to patients through the mail.

The Supreme Court will also decide if the federal district court judge who ruled earlier this year to overturn the FDA's original 2000 approval of the pharmaceutical "properly granted preliminary relief."

Nancy Northup, president and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights, said in a written statement the Supreme Court "has never invalidated a long-standing FDA approval like they are being asked to do here."

"The stakes are enormous in post-Roe America," Northup said. "Even those living in states with strong protections for abortion rights could have their ability to access mifepristone severely restricted if the Court rules against the FDA."

Northup said the ability for health care providers to prescribe the medication through telehealth and for patients to get it delivered to their homes became "critical" after the court ended the constitutional right to an abortion last year.

"Abortion pills have been used safely in the U.S. for more than 20 years, and they are more important than ever in this post-Roe landscape," Northup said. "That is precisely why the anti-abortion movement is attacking them."

Alliance Defending Freedom Senior Counsel Erin Hawley said in a written statement the anti-abortion organization urged the Supreme Court to determine "that the FDA acted unlawfully in removing common-sense safeguards for women and authorizing dangerous mail-order abortions."

"Like any federal agency, the FDA must rationally explain its decisions," Hawley said. "Yet its removal of common-sense safeguards — like a doctor's visit before women are prescribed chemical abortion drugs — does not reflect scientific judgment but rather a politically driven decision to push a dangerous drug regimen."

Constitutional right to abortion overturned

The nine Supreme Court justices who will hear the case and ultimately render a ruling are the same justices who overturned the constitutional right to abortion in a June 2022 ruling.

In the majority opinion in that case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the conservative justices wrote that "the authority to regulate abortion is returned to the people and their elected representatives."

Following that decision, states throughout the country began to implement laws of their choosing, with some setting significant restrictions on when abortion is legal and other states moving to expand access.

Several states have prohibited legal access to the abortion pill mifepristone, despite it being an FDA-approved pharmaceutical.

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In mid-November 2022, Alliance Defending Freedom filed a lawsuit challenging the original approval of the abortion pill in 2000 as well as the changes to when and how the drug could be used that were made in 2016 and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine, the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American College of Pediatricians and the Christian Medical & Dental Associations as well as four doctors from California, Indiana, Michigan and Texas.

U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas Judge Matthew Joseph Kacsmaryk ruled in April 2023 that mifepristone should be removed from the market entirely, though he wrote that he did "not second-guess FDA's decision-making lightly."

"But here, FDA acquiesced on its legitimate safety concerns — in violation of its statutory duty — based on plainly unsound reasoning and studies that did not support its conclusions," Kacsmaryk wrote.

The Biden administration requested the ruling be placed on hold until it could appeal the case, which was ultimately granted by the Supreme Court. That stay from the justices ensured mifepristone remains legal until they issue a ruling.

5th Circuit ruling

The case went before the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, Louisiana, which heard arguments in May 2023.

The three-judge panel ruled in August 2023 that it believed the abortion pill should stay available nationwide, but that dosage and use should revert to what was in place before the FDA began implementing changes in 2016.

That ruling was immediately placed on hold pending an appeal to the Supreme Court. Had the justices decided not to hear the appeal, that ruling would have taken effect.

Going back to what was in place before 2016 would prevent mifepristone from being prescribed during a telehealth appointment or sent through the mail.

Only doctors would be able to prescribe mifepristone, removing the option for other healthcare providers with the ability to prescribe medication from being able to do so with that particular drug.

Prescriptions could only be written for up to seven weeks gestation, less than the 10-week threshold currently used by prescribers.

Patients would need to attend three in-person doctor's office appointments in order to receive a medication abortion. The dosage and timing of mifepristone as well as the second drug, misoprostol, would both revert to what was used more than seven years ago.

DOJ appeal

Following the 5th Circuit's ruling, the U.S. Justice Department appealed its ruling to the Supreme Court, arguing the two lower courts made "serious legal errors."

"The loss of access to mifepristone would be damaging for women and healthcare providers around the Nation," the DOJ wrote in the 42-page document. "For many patients, mifepristone is the best method to lawfully terminate their early pregnancies. They may choose mifepristone over surgical abortion because of medical necessity, a desire for privacy, or past trauma."

"Surgical abortion is an invasive medical procedure that can have greater health risks for some patients, such as those who are allergic to anesthesia," DOJ added.

Numerous medical organizations have filed briefs to either the district court or the appeals court or both, arguing that science supports the use of mifepristone for medication abortion up to 10 weeks.

More than a dozen medical groups — including American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association and Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine — wrote in a 48-page brief filed in the appeals case that the "overwhelming weight of the scientific evidence supports the FDA's finding that mifepristone is safe and effective."

"Mifepristone is one of the most studied medications prescribed in the U.S. and has a safety profile

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comparable to ibuprofen," they wrote.

The medical organizations wrote that "denying or limiting access to mifepristone will not make patients safer — it will actively jeopardize their health."

"Pregnancy can be dangerous," they wrote. "The risks of maternal mortality in the U.S. are alarmingly high and drastically higher for Black women, poor women, and all those whose access to reproductive care has been historically and geographically limited."

White House, congressional reaction

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a written statement released Wednesday after the Supreme Court announced it would take up the case that the Biden administration "will continue to stand by FDA's independent approval and regulation of mifepristone as safe and effective."

"Across the country, we've seen unprecedented attacks on women's freedom to make their own health decisions," Jean Pierre said. "States have imposed extreme and dangerous abortion bans that put the health of women in jeopardy and that threaten to criminalize doctors for providing the health care that their patients need and that they are trained to provide."

Washington state Democratic Sen. Patty Murray said in a written statement Wednesday the "case has nothing to do with the safety or efficacy of FDA-approved mifepristone — which is not up for debate — but about Republicans' anti-women, anti-science, and anti-abortion agenda which they continue to force on the American people despite repeated and overwhelming rejection at the ballot box and in the court of public opinion."

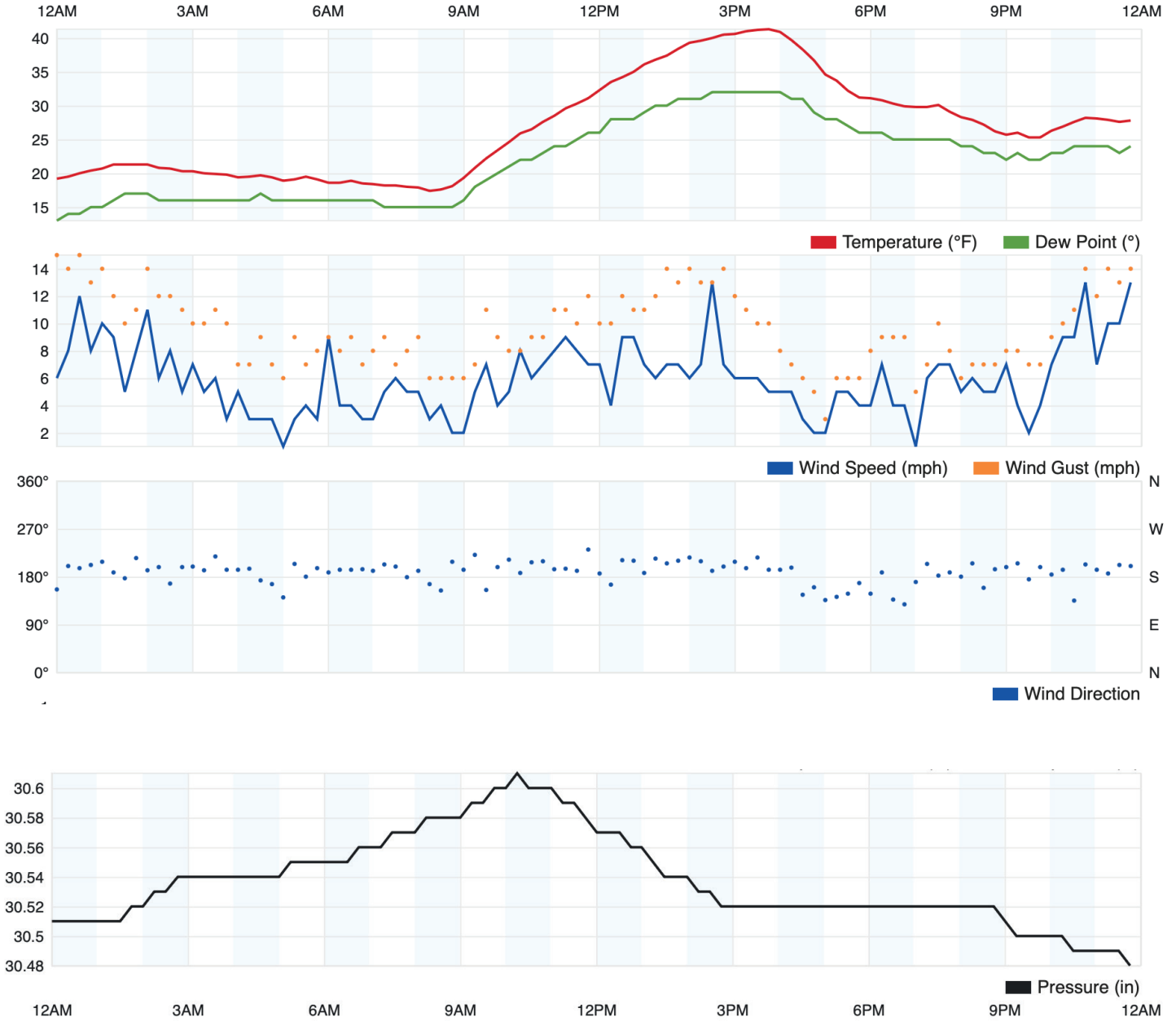
"Beyond the truly devastating harm this case would do to women's access to essential health care — at a time where medication abortion accounts for more than half of abortions in the U.S. — the implications for other FDA-approved medications that Americans rely on are enormous," Murray said. "It is essential that the Supreme Court overturn the Fifth Circuit's ruling and definitively reject the plaintiffs' outrageous, politically motivated efforts to drastically restrict access to necessary and lifesaving abortion care throughout the entire country."

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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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



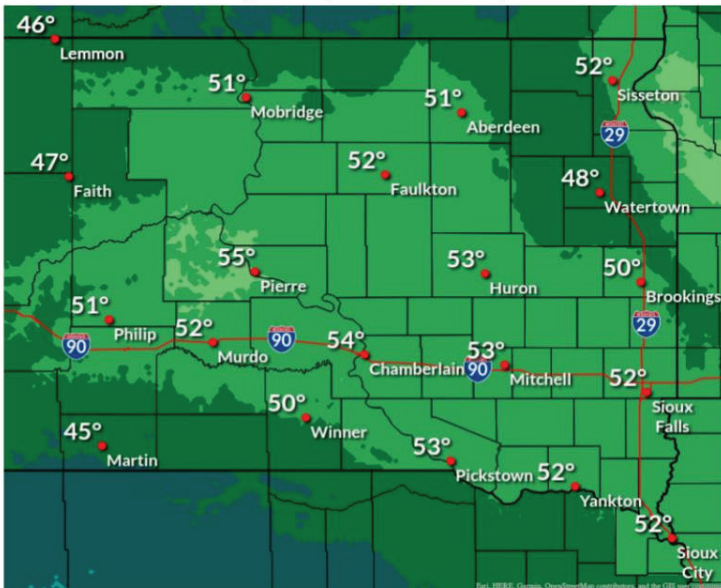
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Thu Dec 14	Fri Dec 15	Sat Dec 16	Sun Dec 17	Mon Dec 18	Tue Dec 19	Wed Dec 20
47° F 34° F	42° F 29° F	35° F 24° F	36° F 18° F	34° F 25° F	42° F 24° F	38° F 22° F
SSW 16 MPH	S 8 MPH	N 8 MPH	WSW 14 MPH	NNE 7 MPH	S 19 MPH	N 12 MPH

 **Today: Mild With Southerly Winds** December 14, 2023
4:30 AM

High Temperatures Today



Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	12/14 Thu			12/15 Fri		Maximum
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	
Aberdeen	26↑	30↑	30↑	21↑	16↑	30
Britton	33↑	35↑	31↑	28↑	18↑	35
Brookings	23↑	28↑	28↑	30↑	24↑	30
Chamberlain	22↑	26↑	23↑	22↑	18↑	26
Clark	30↑	32↑	37↑	33↑	28↑	37
Eagle Butte	32↑	35↑	24↑	18↑	24↑	35
Ellendale	26↑	30↑	24↑	17↑	10↑	30
Eureka	24↑	28↑	22↑	16↑	10↑	28
Gettysburg	28↑	32↑	32↑	23↑	17↑	32
Huron	24↑	28↑	30↑	23↑	18↑	30
Kennebec	28↑	30↑	28↑	25↑	17↑	30
McIntosh	23↑	29↑	17↑	17↑	20↑	29
Milbank	29↑	29↑	23↑	22↑	20↑	29
Miller	29↑	32↑	35↑	29↑	22↑	35
Mobridge	24↑	26↑	23↑	14↑	17↑	26
Murdo	31↑	32↑	30↑	24↑	22↑	32
Pierre	22↑	26↑	25↑	22↑	17↑	26
Redfield	22↑	30↑	32↑	22↑	20↑	32
Sisseton	36↑	31↑	23↑	21↑	20↑	36
Watertown	28↑	33↑	36↑	32↑	29↑	36
Webster	31↑	36↑	37↑	33↑	26↑	37
Wheaton	26↑	25↑	23↑	16↑	14↑	26

Created: 4 am CST Thu 12/14/2023 | Values are maxima over the period beginning at the time shown.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures 15 to 25 degrees above normal are in store today as southerly winds gust to 30 to 40 mph. Warmer than average temperatures will persist through the weekend. Low pressure will bring some light rain and snow to the region Friday afternoon into Saturday.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 41 °F at 3:34 PM

Low Temp: 17 °F at 8:20 AM

Wind: 15 mph at 12:04 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 48 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 1998

Record Low: -30 in 1917

Average High: 29

Average Low: 8

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.27

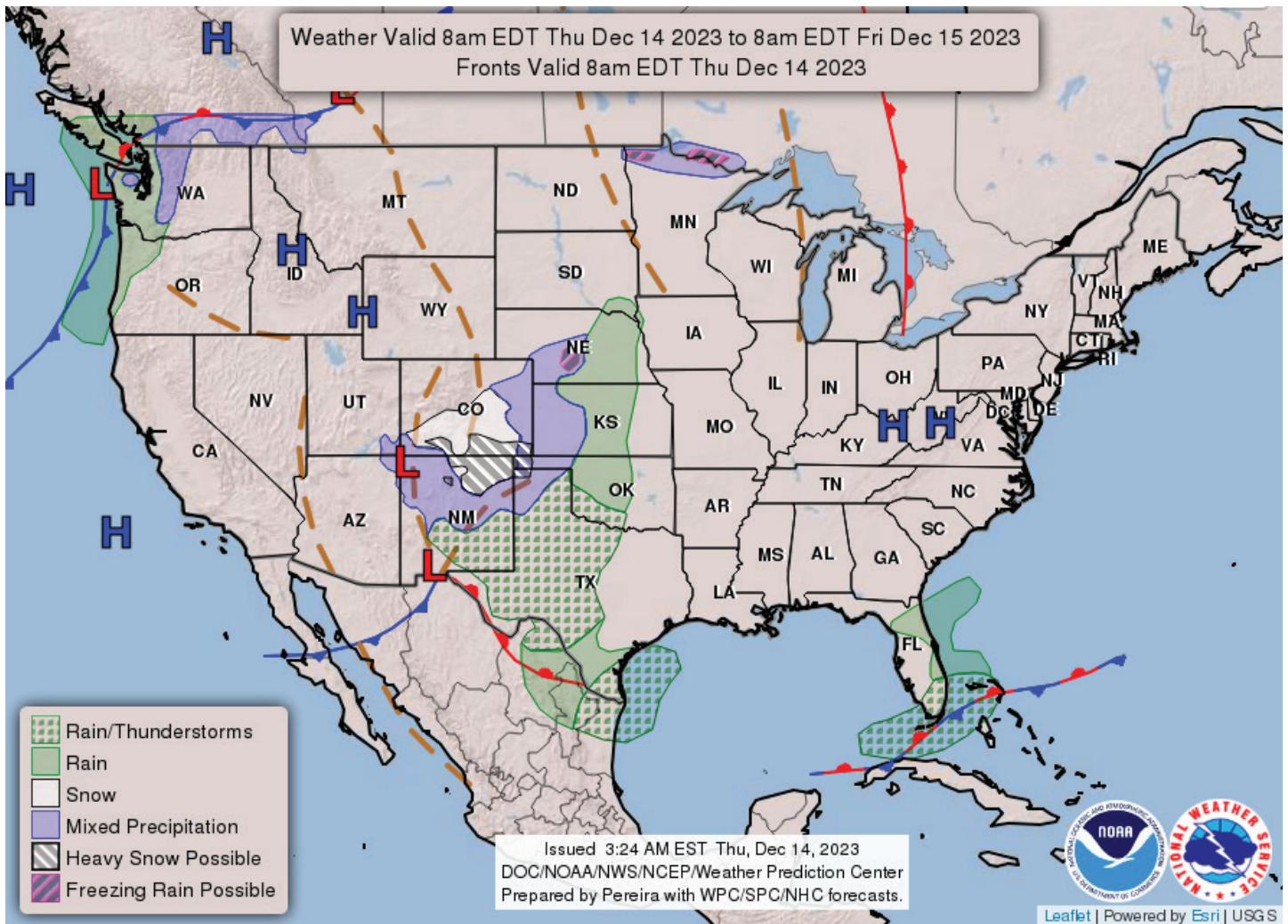
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.48

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:51:14 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:03:36 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 14, 1994: Snow accumulated over all of South Dakota on the 14th but was heavy in the central part of the state and at a few places in the northwest. The greatest accumulations were 11 inches at Murdo and 10 inches at the Lake Sharpe project and near Stephan. The storm caused numerous accidents, but no fatalities or injuries were reported. Eight inches of snow fell at McLaughlin and Miller, with 7 inches at Faulkton and McIntosh, 6 inches at Eagle Butte and Timber Lake, and 5 inches at Mobridge, Kennebec, and near Highmore.

December 14, 1996: Heavy snow of 6 to 20 inches fell across most of central, north central, and part of northeast South Dakota during the late evening of the 14th. Strong north winds of 20 to 35 mph created near-blizzard conditions and heavy drifting across the area. Travel was tough if not impossible, with several cars going into the ditch. A two-car accident between Blunt and Pierre left several people injured. Many activities were postponed or canceled. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Fort Pierre, Ipswich, Kennebec, Aberdeen, and Pollock; 7 inches at Mobridge; 8 inches at Lake Sharpe, Clark, and Mellette; 9 inches at Roscoe, Gettysburg, and McIntosh; 10 inches at Highmore, Eagle Butte, 22 miles SSW of Keldron, and at West Whitlock; 11 inches at Blunt and Miller; 12 inches at Ree Heights, McLaughlin, and Onida; 13 inches at Highmore; 14 inches at Redfield; 15 inches at Timber Lake; 18 inches at Faulkton; and 20 inches at Hoven.

December 14, 1287: A powerful storm affected the Netherlands and Northern Germany on this day. Called the St. Lucia's flood, which was the day before, this storm broke a dike, flooding much of the land in what is now the Waddenzee and IJsselmeer. A significant percentage of the country's population perished in this disaster and had been rated as one of the most destructive floods in recorded history. The death toll from this storm was between 50,000 to 80,000 people. Also, 180 residents of Hickling village, which is 137 miles north-east of London was impacted by this storm. The storm surge rose a foot above the high altar in the church. From British-History.ac.uk, "Hickling was one of the townships that suffered most severely from the tremendous storm of December, 1287, no fewer than nine score persons being drowned there. In the priory the water rose more than a foot above the high altar, and all the canons fled away except two, who stayed behind and managed to save the horses and other property by bringing them up into the dormitory over the vaulted undercroft."

1924 - The temperature at Helena, MT, plunged 79 degrees in 24 hours, and 88 degrees in 34 hours. The mercury plummeted from 63 above to 25 below zero. At Fairfield MT the temperature plunged 84 degrees in just 12 hours, from 63 at Noon to 21 below zero at midnight. (David Ludlum)

December 14, 1952: Trace of snow or sleet at or near Pensacola, Crestview, DeFuniak Springs, Quincy, Carrabelle, Tallahassee, St. Marks, Monticello, Madison, Mayo, Live Oak, Lake City, Glen St. Mary, and Hilliard in Florida. Frozen precipitation occurred before noon at most points, but happened in the afternoon at Mayo and Lake City and near Hilliard. Temperatures were above freezing and snow or sleet melted as it fell.

1987 - A powerful storm spread heavy snow from the Southern High Plains to the Middle Mississippi Valley, and produced severe thunderstorms in the Lower Mississippi Valley. During the evening a tornado hit West Memphis TN killing six persons and injuring two hundred others. The tornado left 1500 persons homeless, and left all of the residents of Crittendon County without electricity. Kansas City MO was blanketed with 10.8 inches of snow, a 24 hour record for December, and snowfall totals in the Oklahoma panhandle ranged up to 14 inches. Strong winds, gusting to 63 mph at Austin TX, ushered arctic cold into the Great Plains, and caused considerable blowing and drifting of snow. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

December 14, 1997: Central Mississippi and western Alabama saw significant snowfall of 4 to 8 inches on this day. In Mississippi, this was one of the heavier snowfalls to occur since 1929. The weight of the snow caused limbs of trees to break, which knocked down power lines.

1988 - Blowing snow was reported in western Kansas, as snow and gusty winds plagued the Central Rockies and Central High Plains. Colorado Springs CO reported thirteen inches of snow. Low pressure in Wisconsin brought heavy snow to the Lake Superior snowbelt area, with 22 inches reported at Marquette MI. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHERE'S JESUS' PRESENT?

It was Christmas Eve. The tree was brightly decorated, the presents were wrapped with beautiful paper and colorful bows, the meal was over, and the family gathered together to read the Story of the Birth of Jesus, followed by a time of prayer. It was a family tradition.

"Now," said Dad, "let each one of us say a prayer and I will end our prayer-time before we go to bed."

After praying, Susie went to the tree and began to look at each present. She looked at the name on each of them very carefully. The family was curious but quiet.

Finally, Susie, looked at each member of the family and asked, "Where's the present for Jesus? What are we giving Him this year?"

Stunned, the family sat in silence. No one had thought about a gift for Jesus.

Paul has a suggestion for the best gift we could give Christ this Christmas. Writing to the Romans he said, "And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies – your entire self – to God... be a living and holy sacrifice to Him – the kind He will accept."

When we think of giving gifts this Christmas each of us would do well to think first of the gift God wants from us. We need to take Paul's words seriously, and give the most valuable gift – the gift of ourselves – to God!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, trouble our hearts with the words of Paul this season, and carefully and prayerfully consider the gift You want most – surrendered lives! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.



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 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 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
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 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
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.12.23

8 23 44 45 53 3

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$28,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

4 25 34 38 46 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,850,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 15 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

8 35 37 39 46 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 30 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

1 3 4 7 8

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$92,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 30 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

32 53 57 60 63 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

3 8 41 56 64 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$535,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Lakota Nations Invitational
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 63, Crazy Horse 17
Lakota Tech 62, St. Francis Indian 27
Little Wound 49, Lower Brule 35
Marty Indian 64, Santee, Neb. 56
McLaughlin 42, Crow Creek Tribal School 32
Rapid City Christian 52, Pine Ridge 12
Red Cloud 93, Tiospa Zina Tribal 19
Tiospaye Topa 65, Takini 18
Todd County 43, Custer 41, OT
Wakpala 50, Oelrichs 49
Wall 73, Dupree 52
White River 69, Omaha Nation, Neb. 44

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Lakota Nations Invitational
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 78, Oelrichs 19
Crazy Horse 58, Crow Creek Tribal School 49
Custer 64, Wall 43
Dupree 60, St. Francis Indian 48
Lakota Tech 67, McLaughlin 39
Lower Brule 74, Marty Indian 64
Pine Ridge 72, Omaha Nation, Neb. 52
Rapid City Christian 89, Little Wound 45
Red Cloud 63, Todd County 51
Santee, Neb. 106, Takini 31
Wakpala 40, Tiospaye Topa 31
White River 59, Tiospa Zina Tribal 46

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

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. December 12, 2023.

Editorial: Studying The Impact Of Zebra Mussels

It appears South Dakota's battle against invasive zebra mussels in its waterways is turning a bit accusatory. A nonprofit organization announced Monday that it's commissioning a study to determine what kind of environmental and economic damage the mussels could potentially inflict on South Dakota and what needs to be done to protect the state's waterways.

According to a South Dakota Searchlight story published in Tuesday's Press & Dakotan, the South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association (SDLSA), based in Sioux Falls, has announced the \$107,000 study that will give lawmakers in Pierre the facts they need to draw up plans of action.

In making the announcement, SDLSA chided state officials for their response to date.

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“(South Dakota has been) throwing up its hands in capitulation,” said Deb Soholt, a former state senator and an SDLSA board member. “... We believe it is important to conduct the needed research to understand the economic impact, so policymakers have the necessary information to do both containment and mitigation.”

Zebra mussels are tiny, invasive mollusks that most likely arrived in this nation by way of the Great Lakes in the 1980s in the form of ballast water discharged by large European ships, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Once introduced into a water body, zebra mussels impact ecosystems by filtering out algae that native aquatic species feed on, as well as clog up water intakes and incapacitate native mussels.

The Yankton area is well aware of the zebra mussel issue, as they have been found in both Lewis & Clark Lake and Lake Yankton. Although very small, they are also very sharp and can cause lacerations on the unprotected feet of swimmers. They also literally encrust objects such as boats and buoys. Because they are so tiny, they can be accidentally transported quite easily.

The SDLSA’s criticism of the state’s response was answered in the Searchlight story by Nick Harrington — communications manager for the state Department of Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) — who said the state has worked to slow the spread of zebra mussels and has undertaken a vigorous educational campaign for boaters and fishermen to drain and dry their boats whenever they’re on the water and to inspect their boats before and after loading them.

On this point, we can confirm that the GFP, as well as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, have taken an aggressive approach in promoting these measures. The signage is everywhere in the Lewis & Clark Recreation Area, for example, so the message is hard to miss.

Are these measures enough?

More specifically, are we accepting the zebra mussels as an unfortunate reality without taking more aggressive action?

Which would lead to the million-dollar question: What would that action be?

In terms of raising awareness, the SDLSA study, which is being conducted at the University of South Dakota in partnership with South Dakota State University, is a good idea. To understand the problem, producing an economic measure of the possible impacts would be beneficial in creating a more relatable perspective.

The SDLSA study is receiving input from Nanette Nelson, a research economist with the University of Montana, whose 2019 study forecast that an infestation of zebra mussels in all Montana waterways could result in \$122 million in mitigation expenses, \$112 million in lost revenue and nearly a half-billion dollars in lost property value.

That is a sobering take to bring to the issue in this state.

If the study leads to more steps and new approaches in tackling this issue, it would be money well spent.
END

Putin says there will be no peace in Ukraine until goals are achieved, while offering rare details

By HARRIET MORRIS Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed that there would be no peace in Ukraine until his goals are achieved and said those objectives remain unchanged at a year-end news conference.

Offering rare detail on Moscow’s operation, Putin dismissed the need for a second wave of mobilization of reservists, saying there are some 617,000 Russian soldiers currently in Ukraine, including around 244,000 troops who were called up to fight alongside professional Russian military forces.

The Russian president, who has held power for nearly 24 years and announced recently he is running for reelection, was greeted with applause as he arrived in the hall in central Moscow.

Putin did not hold his traditional press conference last year after his military failed to take Kyiv and as the Ukrainian army retook swaths of territory in the east and south of the country. But with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy now returning to Washington to plead for U.S aid, a stalling counteroffensive and

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reports of fracturing Western support for Ukraine, the Russian president has decided to face the media once more — though the broadcast remains heavily choreographed and more about spectacle than scrutiny.

This year, ordinary citizens have the chance to phone in questions along with those asked by journalists, and Russians have been submitting questions for Putin for two weeks. It is the first time Putin, who has heavily limited his interaction with foreign media, will potentially face multiple questions from Western journalists since before the fighting in Ukraine began.

The press conference opened with questions about the conflict in Ukraine and highlighted concerns some Russians have about fears of another wave of mobilization, which has proved unpopular. In September 2022 Putin ordered a partial military call-up as he tried to boost his forces in Ukraine, sparking protests.

“There is no need,” for mobilization now, Putin said, because 1,500 men are being recruited into the Russian army every day across the country. He said, as of Wednesday evening, a total of 486,000 soldiers have signed a contract with the Russian military.

Putin reiterated that Moscow’s goals in Ukraine — “de-Nazification, de-militarization and a neutral status” of Ukraine — remain unchanged.

He spelled out those objectives the day he sent troops to the country in February 2022.

“De-Nazification” refers from Russia’s allegations that the Ukrainian government is heavily influenced by radical nationalist and neo-Nazi groups — claims derided by Kyiv and the West.

Putin has also demanded that Ukraine remain neutral — and not join the NATO alliance.

“There will be peace when we will achieve our goals,” Putin said.

The Kremlin has since repeatedly said that the “special military operation” in Ukraine will continue until those loosely defined goals are achieved.

In addition to skipping his usual call-in show with ordinary Russians and his traditional session with reporters last year, Putin’s annual state-of-the-nation address was delayed until February of this year. His last news conference was in 2021 amid U.S warnings that Russia was on the brink of sending troops into Ukraine.

Along with to the fighting in Ukraine, the economy and social services are expected to be discussed at the news conference, Russian state journalists said.

Putin’s appearance is primarily aimed at a domestic audience and is a chance for him to personally resolve the problems of ordinary Russian citizens and reinforce his grip on power ahead of the March 17 election.

“For the majority of people, this is their only hope and possibility of solving the most important problems,” according to a state television news report on the Russia 1 channel.

State media said that as of Wednesday, about 2 million questions for Putin had been submitted ahead of the broadcast.

In 2021, Putin called a citizen who asked about water quality in the city of Pskov in western Russia and personally assured him he would order the government and local officials to fix the problem.

Some Russian journalists, who lined up for hours in freezing temperatures to get into the venue, have donned traditional dress, including elaborate hats in order to catch Putin’s attention. Many journalists also hold placards, prompting the Kremlin to limit the size of signs they can carry during the news conference, which often lasts about four hours.

Attendees must test for COVID-19 and flu before entering the news conference site. Putin enforced strict quarantine for visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A judge may rule on Wyoming’s abortion laws, including the first explicit US ban on abortion pills

By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — A judge in Wyoming will decide as soon as Thursday whether to strike down, affirm or hold a trial over the state’s abortion bans, including its first-in-the-nation explicit prohibition on the use of medication to end pregnancy.

Any decision on the bans during or after a pretrial conference before Teton County District Judge Melissa

Owens in Jackson likely would be appealed to the Wyoming Supreme Court. Both sides have asked Owens to issue a ruling without holding a bench trial that is scheduled to begin April 15.

So far, Owens has shown sympathy for arguments that the bans violate women's rights under the state constitution. Three times over the past year and a half, the judge has blocked the laws from taking effect while they were disputed in court.

One of the laws bans abortion except to protect to a pregnant woman's life or in cases involving rape and incest. The other made Wyoming the only state to explicitly ban abortion pills, though other states have instituted de facto bans on the medication by broadly prohibiting abortion.

The laws were challenged by four women, including two obstetricians, and two nonprofit organizations. One of the groups, Wellspring Health Access, opened as the state's first full-service abortion clinic in years in April following an arson attack in 2022.

They argued that the bans stood to harm their health, well-being and livelihoods, claims disputed by attorneys for the state. The women and nonprofits also argued the bans violated a 2012 state constitutional amendment saying competent Wyoming residents have a right to make their own health care decisions, an argument Owens has said had merit.

Wyoming voters approved the amendment amid fears of government overreach following approval of the federal Affordable Care Act and its initial requirements for people to have health insurance.

Attorneys for the state argued that health care, under the amendment, didn't include abortion.

Separately, the U.S. Supreme Court will take up a dispute over mifepristone, one of two drugs used in the most common method of ending pregnancy in the U.S.

Wyoming has just two clinics providing abortions: Wellspring Health Access in Casper and the Women's Health and Family Care Clinic in Jackson. The Jackson clinic provides only medication abortions and is scheduled to close Friday due to rising costs. Physicians at the clinic have said they will resume providing medication abortions elsewhere in Jackson within the next couple months if allowed.

Israel vows to fight on in Gaza despite deadly ambush and rising international pressure

By NAJIB JOBAIN and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel has vowed to keep fighting in Gaza until it crushes Hamas after one of the deadliest single battles of the war for its soldiers, even as it faces mounting international calls for a cease-fire and unease on the part of its closest ally, the United States.

The ambush in Gaza City showed Hamas is still able to fight in some of the hardest-hit areas more than two and a half months into a massive air and ground war aimed at destroying its military capabilities. Israel has imposed a total siege on northern Gaza and flattened much of it, forcing most of the population to flee south several weeks ago.

Hamas' resilience has called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out Gaza. Support for Hamas has surged among Palestinians — in part because of the militant group's stiff resistance to a far more powerful foe — while Israel's most important ally, the U.S., has expressed growing discomfort over civilian deaths in what is already one of the 21st century's most devastating military campaigns.

"We are continuing until the end, there is no question," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said late Wednesday. "I say this even given the great pain and the international pressure. Nothing will stop us."

U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan was set to visit Israel on Thursday. The U.S. has pressed Israel to take greater measures to spare civilians, and President Joe Biden said earlier this week that Israel was losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing."

The ambush took place Tuesday in the dense Gaza City neighborhood of Shijaiyah, which was also the scene of a major battle during the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas. The dead included two high-ranking officers. A total of 116 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive, which began Oct. 27.

Heavy fighting has raged for days in Shijaiyah and other areas in and around eastern Gaza City that were encircled earlier in the war. Tens of thousands of people remain in the north despite repeated evacuation

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orders, saying they don't feel safe anywhere in Gaza or fear they may never return to their homes if they leave them.

A HEAVY CIVILIAN TOLL

Israel's air and ground assault, launched in response to Hamas' unprecedented attack into southern Israel on Oct. 7, has killed more than 18,600 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza.

The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Its latest count did not specify how many were women and minors, but they have consistently made up around two-thirds of the dead in previous tallies. Thousands more are missing and feared dead beneath the rubble.

Nearly 1.9 million Palestinians have been driven from their homes, with most seeking refuge in the south, even as Israel has continued to strike what it says are militant targets in all parts of the territory, often killing women and children.

Residents reported Israeli airstrikes overnight in Rafah, the southernmost town along the Egyptian border. An Associated Press reporter saw 27 bodies brought into a local hospital early Thursday.

One woman burst into tears after recognizing the body of her child.

"They were young people, children, displaced, all sitting at home," Mervat Ashour said as she and others mourned their relatives. "There were no resistance fighters, rockets, or anything."

A neighbor who helped pull bodies from the rubble of one strike said there were no survivors. "We saw people in pieces," Hassan Abdulaal said.

New evacuation orders issued as troops pushed into the southern city of Khan Younis earlier this month have pushed U.N.-run shelters to the breaking point and forced people to set up tent camps in even less hospitable areas. Heavy rain and cold in recent days has compounded their misery, swamping tents and forcing families to crowd around fires to keep warm.

Israel has sealed Gaza off to all but a trickle of humanitarian aid, and U.N. agencies have struggled to distribute it since the offensive expanded to the south because of fighting and road closures. Almost no aid has reached the north since the start of the war.

RISING SUPPORT FOR HAMAS

Israel might have hoped that the war and its hardships would turn Palestinians against Hamas, hastening its demise, but as with previous rounds of violence, it seems to be having the opposite effect.

A poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found 44% of respondents in the occupied West Bank said they supported Hamas, up from just 12% in September. In Gaza, the militants enjoyed 42% support, up from 38% three months ago.

That's still a minority in both territories. But even many Palestinians who do not share Hamas' commitment to destroying Israel and oppose its attacks on civilians see it as resisting Israel's decades-old occupation of lands they want for a future state.

The poll meanwhile showed overwhelming rejection of Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, with nearly 90% saying he must resign. The 88-year-old leader's administration, which governs parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, is widely seen by Palestinians as a corrupt and autocratic accomplice to the occupation because it works with Israel to suppress Hamas and other militant groups.

The U.S. wants Abbas' internationally recognized Palestinian Authority to also govern Gaza, which it lost to Hamas in a week of street fighting in 2007. The U.S. also wants to revive the long-defunct peace process to negotiate the creation of a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu's government is firmly opposed to Palestinian statehood and has said it will maintain open-ended security control over Gaza.

Hamas' exiled leader, Ismail Haniyeh, who is based in Qatar, said late Wednesday that any plans for Gaza that do not involve Hamas are an "illusion and mirage," though he said the group is open to another truce.

Israelis remain strongly supportive of the war and see it as necessary to prevent a repeat of Oct. 7, when Hamas burst through the country's vaunted defenses. Palestinian militants attacked communities across southern Israel that day, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking some 240 hostage.

Around half the hostages, mostly women and children, were released last month during a weeklong

cease-fire in exchange for the release of 240 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Earliest version of Mickey Mouse set to become public domain in 2024, along with Minnie, Tigger

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — M-I-C-K-E-Y will soon belong to you and me.

With several asterisks, qualification and caveats, Mickey Mouse in his earliest form will be the leader of the band of characters, films and books that will become public domain as the year turns to 2024.

In a moment many close observers thought might never come, at least one version of the quintessential piece of intellectual property and perhaps the most iconic character in American pop culture will be free from Disney's copyright as his first screen release, the 1928 short "Steamboat Willie," featuring both Mickey and Minnie Mouse, becomes available for public use.

"This is it. This is Mickey Mouse. This is exciting because it's kind of symbolic," said Jennifer Jenkins, a professor of law and director of Duke's Center for the Study of Public Domain, who writes an annual Jan. 1 column for "Public Domain Day." "I kind of feel like the pipe on the steamboat, like expelling smoke. It's so exciting."

U.S. law allows a copyright to be held for 95 years after Congress expanded it several times during Mickey's life.

"It's sometimes derisively referred to as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act," Jenkins said. "That's oversimplified because it wasn't just Disney that was pushing for term extension. It was a whole group of copyright holders whose works were set to go into the public domain soon, who benefited greatly from the 20 years of extra protection."

"Ever since Mickey Mouse's first appearance in the 1928 short film Steamboat Willie, people have associated the character with Disney's stories, experiences, and authentic products," a Disney spokesperson said in a statement to The Associated Press. "That will not change when the copyright in the Steamboat Willie film expires."

Current artists and creators will be able to make use of Mickey, but with major limits. It is only the more mischievous, rat-like, non-speaking boat captain in "Steamboat Willie" that has become public.

"More modern versions of Mickey will remain unaffected by the expiration of the Steamboat Willie copyright, and Mickey will continue to play a leading role as a global ambassador for the Walt Disney Company in our storytelling, theme park attractions, and merchandise," Disney's statement said.

Not every feature or personality trait a character displays is necessarily copyrightable, however, and courts could be busy in the coming years determining what's inside and outside Disney's ownership.

"We will, of course, continue to protect our rights in the more modern versions of Mickey Mouse and other works that remain subject to copyright," the company said.

Disney still solidly and separately holds a trademark on Mickey as a corporate mascot and brand identifier, and the law forbids using the character deceptively to fool consumers into thinking a product is from the original creator. Anyone starting a film company or a theme park will not be free to make mouse ears their logo.

Disney's statement said it "will work to safeguard against consumer confusion caused by unauthorized uses of Mickey and our other iconic characters."

"Steamboat Willie," directed by Walt Disney and his partner Ub Iwerks and among the first cartoons to have sound synced with its visuals, was actually the third cartoon featuring Mickey and Minnie the men made, but the first to be released. It features a more menacing Mickey captaining a boat and making musical instruments out of other animals.

In it, and in a clip from it used in the introduction to Disney animated films in recent years, Mickey whistles the 1910 tune "Steamboat Bill." The song inspired the title of the Buster Keaton film "Steamboat Bill Jr.," released just a few months before "Steamboat Willie," which in turn may have inspired the title of the Disney short. The copyright wasn't renewed on the Keaton film and it's been in the public domain

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since 1956.

Another famous animal sidekick, Tigger, will join his friend Winnie the Pooh in the public domain as the book in which the bouncing tiger first appeared, "The House at Pooh Corner," turns 96. Pooh, probably the most celebrated prior character to become public property, took on that status two years ago when A.A. Milne's original "Winnie the Pooh" entered the public domain, resulting in some truly novel uses, including this year's horror film "Winnie The Pooh: Blood and Honey."

Young Mickey could get the same treatment.

"Now, the audience is going to set the terms," said Cory Doctorow, an author and activist who advocates for broader public ownership of works.

Jan. 1, 2024, has long been circled on the calendars of public domain watchers, but some say it serves to show how overlong it takes for U.S. works to go public, and many properties with less pedigree than Winnie or Minnie can disappear or be forgotten with their copyrights murky.

"The fact that there are works that are still recognizable and enduring after 95 years is is frankly remarkable," Doctorow said. "And it makes you think about the stuff that we must have lost, that would still have currency."

Other properties entering the U.S. public domain are Charlie Chaplin's film "Circus," Virginia Woolf's novel "Orlando" and Eugene O'Neill's play "Long Day's Journey into Night."

The current copyright term passed in 1998 brought the U.S. into closer sync with the European Union, making it unlikely Congress would extend it now. There are also now powerful companies, including Amazon with its fan-fiction-heavy publishing arm and Google with its books project, that in some cases advocate for the public domain.

"There's actually more pushback now than there was 20 some years ago when the Mickey Mouse act was passed," said Paul Heald, a professor at the University of Illinois College of Law who specializes in copyright and international intellectual property law.

In some instances, the U.S. goes well beyond Europe, and maintains copyright on work that is already public in its country of origin, though international agreements would allow the U.S. to adopt the shorter term of other nations on work produced there.

The books of George Orwell for example, including 1947's "Animal Farm" and 1949's "1984," are now public domain in his native Great Britain.

"Those works aren't going to fall into the public domain in the United States for 25 years," Heald said. "It would be literally costless for Congress to pass a law saying, 'we now adopt the rule of the shorter term,' which would throw a butt ton of works into the public domain over here."

How are Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea affecting global trade?

By COURTNEY BONNELL and DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writers

LONDON (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels have escalated attacks on ships passing through the Red Sea during the Israel-Hamas war, raising concerns about the impact on the flow of oil, grain and consumer goods through a major global trade artery.

Israeli-linked vessels have been targeted, but the threat to trade has grown this week as a Norwegian-flagged oil tanker was struck and missiles were fired at a vessel carrying jet fuel toward the Suez Canal, where about 10% of the world's trade passes through.

Here are things to know about the recent attacks and the impact on global shipping:

WHO IS ATTACKING SHIPS IN THE RED SEA AND WHY?

The Houthis are Iranian-backed rebels who swept down from their northern stronghold in Yemen and seized the capital, Sanaa, in 2014, launching a grinding war against a Saudi-led coalition seeking to restore the government.

The Houthis have sporadically targeted ships in the region over time, but the attacks have increased since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas.

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They have used drones and anti-ship missiles to attack vessels and in one case used a helicopter to seize an Israeli-owned ship and its crew.

In recent days, they have threatened to attack any vessel they believe is either going to or coming from Israel. That's now escalated to apparently any vessel given the attacks this week, with the Houthis also hailing vessels by radio to try to convince them to change course closer to the territory they control.

"The numerous attacks originating from Houthi-controlled territories in Yemen threaten international navigation and maritime security, in grave contravention of international law," the European Union foreign policy office said Wednesday. Houthi "interference with navigational rights and freedoms in the waters around the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the Red Sea, is unacceptable."

WHY IS THE RED SEA IMPORTANT?

The Red Sea has the Suez Canal at its northern end and the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the southern end leading into the Gulf of Aden. It's a busy waterway with ships traversing the Suez Canal to bring goods between Asia and Europe.

A huge amount of Europe's energy supplies, like oil and diesel fuel, come through that waterway, said John Stawpert, senior manager of environment and trade for the International Chamber of Shipping, which represents 80% of the world's commercial fleet.

So do food products like palm oil and grain and anything else brought over on container ships, which is most of the world's manufactured products.

HOW ARE HOUTHIS ATTACKS AFFECTING TRADE?

Some Israeli-linked vessels have apparently started taking the longer route around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, said Noam Raydan, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. That lengthens the trip from around 19 days to 31 days depending on vessel speed, increasing costs and adding delays, she said.

The global oil market has shrugged off the most recent attacks. Prices have fallen, and the market is more worried about weak demand in major economies.

The single biggest immediate impact of the Houthi escalation has been increased insurance costs.

The attack and attempted strikes this week show the increased threat to vessels in the Red Sea and represent a "significant impediment" to commercial shipping in the region, said Munro Anderson, head of operations for Vessel Protect, which assesses war risks at sea and provides insurance with backing from Lloyd's, whose members make up the world's largest insurance marketplace.

"The latest incident represents a further degree of instability facing commercial operators within the Red Sea which is likely to continue to see heightened rates across the short to medium term," he said.

Insurance costs have doubled for shippers moving through the Red Sea, which can add hundreds of thousands of dollars to a journey for the most expensive ships, said David Osler, insurance editor for Lloyd's List Intelligence, which provides analysis for the global maritime industry.

For Israeli ship owners, they have gone up even more — by 250% — and some insurers won't cover them at all, he said.

While shippers are applying a so-called war risk charge of \$50 to \$100 per container to customers bringing over everything from grain to oil to things you buy off Amazon, that's a low enough fee that it should not drive up prices for consumers, he said.

Osler expects insurance costs to keep rising but said the situation would have to get a lot worse — such as the loss of several ships — to raise prices considerably and make some ship owners rethink moving through the region.

"At the moment, it's just an inconvenience that the system can handle," he said. "Nobody likes to be paying hundreds of thousands of dollars more, but you can live with it if you have to."

COULD THE HOUTHIS BLOCK THE RED SEA?

Unlikely, experts say. The Houthis have no formal naval warships with which to impose a cordon, relying on harassing fire and only one helicopter-borne assault so far. Meanwhile, U.S., French and other coalition warships patrol the area, keeping the waterway open.

Still, the attacks are making the shipping industry nervous, and "it's not being taken lightly," said Stawpert

of the shipping chamber. But "you'll still see there's an awful lot of trade going through the Red Sea because it's such a crucial supply line for Europe and Asia."

He noted that the Houthis' area of influence in the waterway also remains limited.

"I just don't see there being a possibility of the Houthis shutting transport through the Red Sea," he said. It is "simply not how the shipping industry works. It's not how we respond to threats like this. We will do everything we can to mitigate any such threats and keep trade flowing."

That's been on display in other conflicts like the war in Ukraine, with the closure of some parts of the Black Sea, Stawpert said.

He doesn't see a threat to shipping in general or closure of Red Sea routes, but "if that were to arise as a potentiality, I think we would see a much more robust reaction from navies in the area."

With inflation down, people are talking rate cuts. The European Central Bank may say not so fast

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — The inflation plaguing European shoppers has fallen faster than expected. The economy is in the dumps. That has people talking about interest rate cuts by the European Central Bank, perhaps as soon as the first few months of next year.

No rate move is expected at the bank's policy meeting Thursday, and analysts say ECB President Christine Lagarde is highly unlikely to confirm any plans to cut. She may even warn that it's too early to declare victory over inflation despite how it's improved.

Like the ECB, the U.S. Federal Reserve and other central banks are running into market expectations that they will trim rates to support flagging economic growth now that price spikes have eased.

The Fed kept its key interest rate unchanged Wednesday, and its officials signaled that they expect to make three quarter-point cuts to their benchmark rate next year. That strongly suggested the Fed is finished with rate hikes and is edging closer to cuts as early as next summer.

However, the Bank of England, which also meets Thursday, is widely thought to be further away from cutting rates than the Fed or the ECB, with inflation in the U.K. higher than in the U.S. or across the 20 European Union countries that use the euro currency.

Inflation in the eurozone surprisingly fell to 2.4% in November. That is not too far from the ECB's goal of 2% considered best for the economy and a far cry from the peak of 10.6% in October 2022.

But wages are still catching up with inflation, leaving consumers feeling less than euphoric even as European city centers deck themselves in Christmas lights.

In Paris, travel agent Amel Zemani says Christmas shopping will have to wait for the post-holiday sales. "I can't go shopping this year, I can't afford Christmas gifts for the kids," she said. "What do they want? They want sneakers. I'm waiting for the sales to give them the gifts then. And they understand."

Steven Ekerovich, an American photographer living in the French capital, said that while "Paris was lagging easily 50% behind the rest of the major cosmopolitan cities in pricing, it's catching up fast. Rents, food, clothing. So, you have got to be careful now."

Europe's falling inflation and economic stagnation — output declined 0.1% in the July-to-September quarter — mean the ECB may be the first major central bank to pivot to rate cuts, said Frederik Ducrozet, head of macroeconomic research at Pictet Wealth Management.

But the expectations vary, from Deutsche Bank's prediction that March is a possibility to Pictet's view that June is most likely. Lagarde has emphasized that decisions will be made based on the latest information about how the economy is doing.

"It remains to be seen how strong Lagarde will be able to push back against market pricing. She is more likely to stress the ECB's data dependence, refraining from committing to any specific sequencing," Ducrozet said in a research note.

Expectations of a March rate cut may be "excessive euphoria," said Holger Schmieding, chief economist

at Berenberg bank, cautioning that inflation could rise again before falling further. He doesn't see a rate cut before September.

Central banks, including the Fed that met Wednesday and the Bank of England also meeting Thursday, drastically raised rates to stamp out inflation that occurred as the economy rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic, straining supply chains, and as Russia's invasion of Ukraine drove food and energy prices higher.

Higher interest rates combat inflation by increasing the cost of borrowing throughout the economy, from bank loans and lines of credit for businesses to mortgages and credit cards. That makes it more expensive to borrow to buy things or invest, lowering demand for goods and easing prices.

Facing an energy crisis that fueled record inflation, the ECB raised its benchmark rate from below zero to an all-time high of 4% between July 2022 and this July.

But higher rates also have held back economic growth. For example, apartment construction projects are being canceled across Germany, the biggest European economy, because they no longer make business sense amid higher interest costs.

Dismayed by Moscow's war, Russian volunteers are joining Ukrainian ranks to fight Putin's troops

By VASILISA STEPANENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — When Russia's invasion of Ukraine ignited into war, back in Moscow, a young Russian who now goes by the name of Karabas was plunged into despair. Shocked by images of what was happening to Ukrainians in Russian-occupied areas, he decided to act — against Russia, his home and country.

Karabas said he knew that what he was doing was drastic. He packed his bags and decided to find a way to get to Ukraine to join the ranks of Kyiv's troops fighting Russian forces.

It took him almost a year to make it happen.

Today, he is part of the Siberian Battalion, a unit made up of Russians who have joined Ukrainian military ranks to fight against their homeland, hoping someday to help oust Russian President Vladimir Putin. Its members hail mostly from ethnic minorities from Russia's far east.

"I was disillusioned with my own people," recounted Karabas, who like other fighters in the battalion spoke to The Associated Press on condition that only his military call sign be used.

"That is why I wanted to come here ... and fight for a free Ukraine," he added.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, Karabas said he was dismayed by how most Russians he knew either blindly supported Putin or were indifferent to the war.

Sometimes, Karabas said his grief felt so overwhelming, he would break down and cry.

Unlike other volunteer units in Ukraine that have Russian nationals — such as the Freedom of Russia Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps — the Siberian Battalion is officially part of the regular Ukrainian army.

Its fighters undergo lengthy security checks, which sometimes take up to a year, before they are trained and deployed to the front lines in eastern Ukraine, which has seen some of the most ferocious fighting of the war and where Ukrainian and Russian forces are locked in a grinding battle for control.

Karabas went to Armenia first. There, he sought out Ukrainian friends and learned the language, which he now speaks fluently, refusing to utter a word in his native Russian.

On Wednesday, at a training exercise outside Ukraine's capital of Kyiv, over a dozen Russians from the battalion fired their machine guns during a firing practice, sprinkling cartridges all over the snow blanketing the ground.

Fighters in the battalion from eastern Siberia hope a Ukrainian victory will bring them one step closer to dismantling Moscow's political control over their region, among the poorest in Russia. Those from the area's Yakut and Buryat ethnic communities complain of racism and oppression in Russia, which has driven some activist calls for independence.

Another Russian fighter, who goes by the call sign Holod, openly says he wants Putin's administration removed from power.

"When this happens, we can talk about victory," he said. "Russia will at least cease to be a source of

sudden aggression.”

Russians like Karabas left their entire lives, including families and friends, behind. They first had to escape to a third country before they could travel on to Ukraine but they say they had no other choice.

Integration into the Ukrainian forces was a lengthy process, they said — their documents were scrutinized, and if they passed this step, they were questioned at length upon arrival in Ukraine.

The battalion, which numbers a few dozen, was created six months ago. Ukrainian military leaders are hopeful more will come to join its ranks and based on applications that have come in so far, they are aiming to have a 300-man-strong battalion of Russian fighters.

Some from the battalion have already been deployed near Avdiivka, a Ukraine-controlled city in the Donetsk region, which Putin’s forces have long tried to overrun.

Karabas says “there must be tens, hundreds of thousands of” other Russians like him, willing to fight with Ukraine.

“I think we should have a lot more (Russian fighters),” he said.

Amazon rift: Five things to know about the dispute between an Indigenous chief and Belgian filmmaker

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The renowned chief from the Amazon rainforest and the Belgian filmmaker appeared to be close friends at this year’s Cannes Film Festival. Far from the flashing cameras, however, their decades-long partnership was nearing its end.

With his feathered crown and wooden lip plate, Chief Raoni of the Kayapo tribe is instantly recognizable the world over. He has met with presidents, royals and celebrities to raise funds for Brazil’s Indigenous peoples and to protect their lands. Almost always in the background was a less familiar face, that of Jean-Pierre Dutilleux, whose documentary about Raoni was a 1979 Oscar nominee. In the years since, he has acted as Raoni’s gatekeeper abroad and brokered meetings with leaders and luminaries. But many Kayapo and others who crossed Dutilleux’s path harbored growing suspicions about him.

The Associated Press interviewed dozens of people over nearly a year — including both Raoni and Dutilleux — to provide an inside look at the falling out and what it signals about efforts to preserve the Amazon.

HOW DID THEY RAISE MONEY?

The two repeatedly traveled to Europe, meeting with leaders including French Presidents Jacques Chirac and Emmanuel Macron, Leonardo DiCaprio, Monaco’s Prince Albert II, the Grand Duke Henri of Luxembourg and even Pope Francis. At each of those encounters, they sought contributions to help Raoni’s people and other Indigenous groups in the Amazon — and secured pledges for hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. They also hosted galas, charity dinners and auctions for private donors.

Dutilleux launched the Rainforest Foundation with music legend Sting, who put down his guitar to travel the world with Raoni and Dutilleux to spotlight the plight of Indigenous people. Their efforts largely contributed to the Brazilian government’s recognition — and, theoretically, protection — of the Menkragnoti Indigenous Territory, an area of 5 million hectares (19,000 square miles). Several films and books about the Indigenous chief, including one about their tour with Sting, yielded royalties. Dutilleux also raised money in Raoni’s name through Association Forêt Vierge, one of the several non-profit groups created to receive donations during his tour with Sting.

WHAT ARE THE ACCUSATIONS?

The tribal leader, two other members of his non-profit group, the Raoni Institute, and Raoni’s future successor as leader of the tribe all said Dutilleux over the last two decades repeatedly promised them large sums of money to fund social projects but only delivered a fraction of it. They said he also refused to be transparent about money raised in Raoni’s name on their tours of Europe, or from his books and films about the Kayapo.

“My name is used to raise money,” Raoni told The Associated Press in an interview in Brasilia. “But Jean-

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Pierre doesn't give me much."

Others who have come to work with Dutilleux in the Amazon over the years have also expressed concerns about the filmmaker's relationship with Raoni. In interviews with the AP, many have complained about his lack of transparency when it came to raising funds for Indigenous peoples.

Some directly suffered from it, including Spanish photographer Alexis de Vilar, whose non-profit group was in charge of organizing a charity gala for the U.S. premiere of Dutilleux's "Raoni" documentary in 1979. The funds were supposed to go to Indigenous peoples in Brazil and the U.S. Dutilleux had been in charge of collecting money from ticket sales for the event, but never turned over any amount, de Vilar said. "There was no money, not even to build a school," de Vilar said.

Sting accused Dutilleux in 1990 of keeping all royalties from the book about their tour, rather than giving them to the Rainforest Foundation as was promised on the book's cover. As a result, the Rainforest Foundation removed him as a trustee.

HOW MUCH OF THE TOTAL RAISED WAS PROVIDED TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE?

AP was not able to determine the amount of money raised over the last five decades.

Association Forêt Vierge president Robert Dardanne told the AP that the group gave the Raoni Institute all the money that it was owed. The organization provided records indicating it sent 14,200 euros (\$15,300) after a 2011 fund-raising trip and a little over 80,000 euros (\$86,000) after a 2019 campaign. But it did not supply records for at least four previous campaigns, saying that under French law it was only required to retain such records for a decade.

Raoni and others close to him say these amounts pale in comparison with the millions of dollars that Dutilleux has repeatedly promised them.

Dardanne said he believed a lack of communication between the chief and the Raoni Institute was at the root of the chief's discontent. "There is sometimes a gap between the expectations of Indigenous communities and reality," he said.

WHAT DOES DUTILLEUX SAY?

Dutilleux told the AP that he never had access to the money raised and denied Raoni's claims that he had failed to deliver.

"He can sometimes say things like that, it has to do with age. Maybe it'll happen to me too, to say stupid things," Dutilleux, now 74, said in an interview in Paris. "I want nothing to do with money. It doesn't interest me. I'm a filmmaker, I'm an artist. I'm not an accountant."

He maintains that the gala in Mann's Chinese Theatre did not generate any profit and said his relationship with Sting had broken down due to their "different visions," without elaborating.

Dutilleux said criticism of his legacy in the Amazon involved "three or four people" who were trying to take him down. The AP spoke to more than two dozen people for this story.

WHY DID RAONI KEEP FUNDRAISING WITH DUTILLEUX FOR SO LONG?

Despite the Kayapo's suspicions that stretch back nearly 20 years, Raoni's inner circle believed he could not abandon Dutilleux. It was a decision, they said, rooted in the centuries-old power imbalance that exists when an Indigenous tribe partners with an influential white man. In short, Raoni needed help from someone — anyone — for preservation of the Amazon, and Dutilleux was willing and able to open doors to international donors.

"He sees far beyond petty quarrels between egos and clans," said French environmentalist Philippe Barre, who has worked with Raoni in the past. "What matters to him is that the important subjects emerge ... even if some feather their own nests in the process."

The Republican leading the probe of Hunter Biden has his own shell company and complicated friends

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rep. James Comer boasts of being one of the largest landholders near his rural Kentucky hometown, and he has meticulously documented nearly all of his holdings on congressional

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financial disclosure documents – roughly 1,600 acres in all.

But there are six acres that he bought in 2015 and co-owns with a longtime campaign contributor that he has treated differently, transferring his ownership to Farm Team Properties, a shell company he co-owns with his wife.

Interviews and records reviewed by The Associated Press provide new insights into the financial deal, which risks undercutting the force of some of Comer's central arguments in his impeachment inquiry of President Joe Biden.

In particular, Comer has attacked some Biden family members, including the president's son Hunter, over their use of "shell companies" that appear designed to obscure millions of dollars in earnings they received from shadowy middlemen and foreign interests.

Such companies typically exist only on paper and are formed to hold an asset, like real estate. Their opaque structures are often designed to help hide ownership of property and other assets.

The companies used by the Bidens are already playing a central role in the impeachment investigation, which is expected to gain velocity after House Republicans voted Wednesday to formally authorize the probe. The vote follows the federal indictment last week of Biden's son Hunter on charges he engaged in a scheme to avoid paying taxes on his earnings through the companies.

But Comer's high-profile role has also drawn attention to his own finances and relationships, including his ties to prominent figures from his hometown who have complicated pasts not all that dissimilar to some of those caught up in his Biden probe.

Comer declined to comment through a spokesman, but has aggressively denied any wrongdoing in establishing a shell company, calling criticisms the kind of thing "only dumb, financially illiterate people pick up on."

The AP found that Farm Team Properties functions in a similarly opaque way as the companies used by the Bidens, masking his stake in the land that he co-owns with the donor from being revealed on his financial disclosure forms, which states the company is worth as much as \$1 million.

It's not clear why Comer decided to put those six acres in a shell company, or what other assets Farm Team Properties may hold.

Ethics experts say House rules require members of Congress to disclose all assets held by such companies that are worth more than \$1,000.

"It seems pretty clear to me that he should be disclosing the individual land assets that are held by" the shell company, said Delaney Marsco, a senior attorney who specializes in congressional ethics at the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center in Washington.

Comer created the company in 2017 to hold his stake in the six acres that he purchased two years earlier in a joint venture with Darren Cleary, a major campaign contributor and construction contractor from Monroe County, Kentucky, where the congressman was born and raised.

Cleary did not respond to an interview request. But the two have offered mutual praise for each other over the years, including Comer having called Cleary "my friend" and "the epitome of a successful businessperson" from the House floor.

Cleary, his businesses and family have donated roughly \$70,000 to Comer's various campaigns, records show.

At the time he and Comer entered their venture, Cleary was selling an acre of his family's land to Kentucky so it could build a highway bypass near Tompkinsville, which was completed in 2020. He sold Comer a 50% stake for \$128,000 in six acres he owned that would end up being adjacent to the highway.

Comer, a powerful political figure in this rural part of Kentucky, announced his bid for Congress days after purchasing the land.

Farm Team Properties has also become more valuable. On Comer's financial disclosure forms, it has risen in value from between \$50,000 and \$100,000 in 2016 to between \$500,001 and \$1 million in 2022, records show.

As House Oversight Committee chairman, Comer has presented himself as a bipartisan ethics crusader

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only interested in uncovering the truth. As evidence, he has pointed to a long career as a state legislator and official who sought to build bridges with Democrats.

Interviews with allies, critics and constituents, however, reveal a fierce partisan who has ignored wrongdoing by friends and supporters if they can help him advance in business and politics.

"The Jamie Comer I knew was light and sunshine and looking for common ground. Now he's Nixonian," said Adam Edelen, a former Democratic state auditor and friend, comparing the lawmaker to a disgraced former president who resigned from office amid the Watergate scandal.

In Comer's telling, he is a man of self-made wealth who founded his first farm while still enrolled at Western Kentucky University and shrewdly invested in land. He also cut his teeth in the bare-knuckled machine politics of Monroe County, Kentucky, and knew how to win allies, according to those who knew him.

When he was barely out of high school, Comer was writing campaign checks to state politicians, including a \$4,000 contribution to a Republican candidate for governor in 1990, according to campaign finance disclosures published in local news stories.

Comer followed in the footsteps of his paternal grandfather, Harlin Comer, who was a leading figure in local Republican politics.

When Harlin Comer died in 1993, the 21-year-old Comer took over as chairman of the Monroe County GOP. A wave of indictments against local Republican office holders, some of whom helped launch Comer's political career and became close friends, soon followed.

Mitchell Page and Larry Pitcock were among those charged in the sweep. Page, then the county's chief executive, and Pitcock, the former county clerk, were sentenced in 1996 to 18 months in prison for tampering with a state computer database so that they and their families could avoid paying vehicle taxes.

Comer has remained close to the men, who did not respond to requests for comment. He praised Page on the House floor in 2020 for his "principled leadership."

Pitcock and his family members, meanwhile, have donated about \$9,000 to Comer's political campaigns and held one of Comer's first fundraisers when he ran to become state agriculture commissioner, records show. Comer dismissed questions about the propriety of having Pitcock sponsor a fundraiser for him, noting to CN2 News that it helped him raise nearly \$60,000.

In 2011, a voter fraud case roiled local politics and swept up Billy Proffitt, Comer's longtime friend and former college roommate. Proffitt pleaded guilty in December 2011 and was sentenced to probation.

A few years later, Proffitt came to Comer's defense from allegations that nearly derailed the future congressman's political career.

During the 2015 Republican primary for governor, the Louisville Courier-Journal received a letter from a former college girlfriend, in which she asserted that Comer had hit her and that their relationship had been "toxic."

Proffitt, however, told the newspaper that he had never seen Comer be abusive toward Thomas.

"That doesn't sound like Jamie at all," said Proffitt, using Comer's nickname.

Comer ended up losing the race by 83 votes. But the two remain close friends and business associates.

Proffitt's family's real estate company is spearheading the efforts to sell the land held by Farm Team Properties.

Few US adults would be satisfied with a possible Biden-Trump rematch in 2024, AP-NORC poll shows

By SEUNG MIN KIM and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's the presidential election no one is really jazzed about.

Relatively few Americans are excited about a potential rematch of the 2020 election between President Joe Biden and Donald Trump, although more Republicans would be satisfied to have Trump as their nominee than Democrats would be with Biden as their standard-bearer, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

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That palpable apathy from voters comes even as both Biden and Trump are facing relatively few obstacles in their paths to lock down their respective parties' nominations next year. Biden has amassed broad support from Democratic officials as a handful of mostly token primary challengers have struggled to spark momentum. And despite 91 indictments across four criminal cases — including some centered on his attempts to overturn his electoral loss to Biden in 2020 — Trump's grip on GOP primary voters shows no signs of loosening a month before the first nominating contest in Iowa.

"Probably the best way to put it is, I find it sad for our country that that's our best choices," said Randy Johnson, 64, from Monett, Missouri. Johnson, who is a Republican, said he wishes there were a third legitimate option for president but that the political system does not make that viable and added: "We're down to the lesser of two evils."

Andrew Collins, 35, an independent from Windham, Maine, said: "This is probably the most uniquely horrible choice I've had in my life."

About half of Democrats say they would be very or somewhat satisfied if Biden becomes the party's 2024 nominee. About one-third of Democrats would be dissatisfied, and about 1 in 5 would be "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied." When it comes to the Republican Party nomination, enthusiasm is higher for GOP front-runner Donald Trump. Two-thirds of Republicans would be satisfied with Trump as the Republican nominee for 2024. About one-quarter would be dissatisfied, and 9% would be neutral.

Looking at U.S. adults broadly — setting aside party affiliations — there's still not much enthusiasm for a Biden-Trump rematch.

Most U.S. adults overall (56%) would be "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied with Biden as the Democratic presidential nominee in 2024, and a similar majority (58%) would be very or somewhat dissatisfied with Trump as the GOP's pick. Nearly 3 in 10 U.S. adults, or 28%, say they would be dissatisfied with both Trump and Biden becoming their party's respective nominees — with independents (43%) being more likely than Democrats (28%) or Republicans (20%) to express their displeasure with both men gaining party nominations.

Deborah Brophy is an independent who says she supported Biden in the 2020 presidential election. But now, the 67-year-old has soured on the president, saying she felt Biden is too focused on dealing with conflicts abroad rather than "what's going on under his own nose," such as homelessness, gun violence and the economy.

"What's going on with Biden right now?" said Brophy, of North Reading, Massachusetts. "I don't think he's, health-wise, able to continue another four years in office. I think his mind is a little bit going the wrong way in the way of not being able to think."

Yet she is turned off by Trump's attitude and said he "seems a little racist," even while praising his business acumen.

"So I don't know what I'm going to do," Brophy added.

Among Democrats and Republicans alike, having a candidate who can win is given slightly more importance than having a candidate whose views represent most people in the party or even themselves, according to the AP-NORC poll.

Only about 3 in 10 Democrats are "extremely" or "very" confident that the Democratic Party's process will result in nominating a candidate who can win the general election in November. About half are somewhat confident, and 18% are not very confident or not at all confident. While relatively few are highly confident they'll get a winning nominee out of the process, three-quarters of Democrats say it's "extremely" or "very" important that the party's process for nominating a presidential candidate does result in a candidate who can win the general election.

Meanwhile, one-third of Republicans are extremely or very confident that the Republican Party's process for nominating a presidential candidate will result in someone who can win the general election. Slightly fewer than half, or 46%, are somewhat confident, and 2 in 10 are not very or not at all confident. Seven in 10 Republicans say it's extremely or very important that their process results in a nominee who can win in 2024.

"I've voted for Trump twice. I'll vote for him again if I had to. I certainly would not vote for Biden," said

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Joe Hill, 70, a Republican from West Point, Georgia. "But I would welcome someone new and quite frankly, I'm not confident he can win against Biden."

Hill said he was concerned that Trump could be too polarizing with a wide swath of voters.

"I want a Republican to be elected, so I'm in favor of any Republican that would be on the ballot," Hill said. "I would more so, if it wasn't him."

The poll shows neither man is viewed favorably by a majority of the U.S. public, with only 42% saying they have a favorable view of Biden and 36% saying the same of Trump.

Both are generally viewed favorably within their own party: About three-quarters of Democrats have a favorable view of Biden and about 7 in 10 Republicans have a favorable view of Trump. But Republicans are more likely to say their view of Trump is strongly favorable than Democrats are to say the same of Biden, 46% vs 34%. Democrats are more likely than Republicans are to say they have only a somewhat favorable view of their party's 2024 frontrunner, 44% vs 24%.

Josh Reed, of Pittsburg, California, said he prefers alternatives to Trump in the Republican field such as South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, or South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, who withdrew from the race last month.

But if the choice in front of voters next fall is Biden and Trump, "it's between those two," said Reed, 39, a registered Republican, though he says he holds more libertarian views. "There's no third party that's going to make a dent in anything. Sometimes it is what it is. You got to pick between those two."

He will definitely vote next year, Reed said. But, he added: "I'm not really excited for either one of these guys."

The poll of 1,074 adults was conducted Nov. 30 – Dec. 4, 2023, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, designed to represent the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.

Guyana and Venezuela leaders to meet face-to-face as region pushes to defuse territorial dispute

GEORGETOWN, Guyana (AP) — The leaders of Guyana and Venezuela headed for a tense meeting Thursday as regional nations sought to defuse a long-standing territorial dispute that has escalated with Venezuelans voting in a referendum to claim two-thirds of their smaller neighbor.

Pushed by regional partners, Guyanan President Irfaan Ali and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro agreed to meet at the Argyle International airport on the eastern Caribbean island of St. Vincent. The prime ministers of Barbados, Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago said they also would attend.

The meeting is aimed at easing the tensions that have flared over Essequibo, a vast border region rich in oil and minerals that represents much of Guyana's territory but that Venezuela claims as its own.

Venezuela's president followed the referendum by ordering his state-owned companies to explore and exploit the oil, gas and mines in Essequibo. And both sides have put their militaries on alert.

It was unclear if the session would lead to any agreements or even ease the border controversy.

Guyana's president has repeatedly said the dispute needs to be resolved solely by the International Court of Justice in the Netherlands.

"We are firm on this matter and it will not be open for discussion," Ali wrote Tuesday on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Venezuela insists the Essequibo region was part of its territory during the Spanish colonial period, and argues the 1966 Geneva Agreement between their country, Britain and Guyana, the former colony of British Guiana, nullified the border drawn in 1899 by international arbitrators.

In a letter sent Tuesday to Ralph Gonsalves, prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Guyana's president said the Geneva Agreement states that the International Court of Justice should settle any border controversy.

Ali also said he was concerned about what he described as "inaccurate assertions" made by Maduro's

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own letter to Gonsalves.

He rebutted Maduro's description of oil concessions granted by Guyana as being "in a maritime area yet to be delimited." Ali said all oil blocks "are located well within Guyanese waters under international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea."

Ali also rejected what he said Maduro described as "meddling of the United States Southern Command, which has begun operations in the disputed territory."

The U.S. Southern Command conducted flight operations within Guyana in recent days.

"Any allegation that a military operation aimed at Venezuela exists in any part of Guyanese territory is false, misleading and provocative," Ali said in his letter to Gonsalves.

Maduro's letter to Gonsalves repeats Venezuela's contention that the border drawn in 1899 was "the result of a scheme" between the U.S. and the U.K. It also said the dispute "must be amicably resolved in a matter acceptable to both parties."

Maduro also referred to the Dec. 3 referendum on Venezuela claiming ownership of Essequibo, which has vast oil deposits off its coast.

The meeting between the two leaders was scheduled to last one day, although many expect the disagreement to drag on into next year.

Ohtani can opt out of Dodgers deal if execs Walter, Friedman lose roles with team, AP source says

By BETH HARRIS and RONALD BLUM AP Sports Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shohei Ohtani can opt out of his \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers if either of two key executives is no longer in place, a person familiar with the agreement told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Ohtani, who will be formally introduced by the Dodgers at a news conference Thursday, would be allowed to terminate his deal if Mark Walter no longer is controlling owner or president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman no longer is with the team, the person said. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the terms were not announced.

Ohtani's deal, announced Monday, provides that 97% of the money be deferred without interest and not fully paid until 2043.

The Athletic first reported Wednesday that Ohtani's deal contained a provision allowing him to opt out at the end of a season if the Dodgers made specific personnel changes.

The deal is still in the form of a letter of agreement between Ohtani's representatives and the team, and a formal contract has not been submitted to Major League Baseball, the person said.

Led by Walter, the private partnership Guggenheim Baseball Management purchased the Dodgers in 2012 for \$2.15 billion. In his early years as controlling owner, Walter was a regular at Dodger Stadium. But his presence gradually decreased and last season he attended only a handful of games.

Walter's global financial services company, Guggenheim Partners, has headquarters in Chicago and New York. He is a native of Iowa.

Friedman was hired by the Dodgers in 2014 after spending a decade with the Tampa Bay Rays. He gradually rebuilt that franchise and the team reached the World Series in 2008 despite operating with one of the sport's lowest payrolls.

Friedman has an enviable record in Los Angeles, with the Dodgers winning nine division titles under his leadership, three NL pennants and the 2020 World Series during the pandemic-shortened season. He overhauled the club's farm system and reorganized and expanded the front office.

Ohtani's contract calls for annual salaries of \$70 million and of each year's salary, \$68 million is deferred with no interest, payable in equal installments each July 1 from 2034-43.

MLB proposed as part of bargaining on June 21, 2021, to ban deferred compensation, but the union rejected the concept and MLB dropped it.

Ohtani will be introduced during a news conference in Dodger Stadium's Centerfield Plaza starting at 3

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p.m. PST.

MLB reported Wednesday that Ohtani broke Fanatics' record for the highest jersey sales within the first 48 hours of a release, topping soccer stars Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Ohtani was out of sight at the stadium on Wednesday, meeting with teammates, including seven-time All-Star outfielder Mookie Betts and reliever Joe Kelly.

"I had a chance to talk to him," Kelly said, surrounded by kids attending an outdoor holiday party with music blaring. "He was already working out, already grinding, getting bigger and stronger. His arm looked good to me."

Ohtani's deal includes a full no-trade provision and provides for a hotel suite on road trips, a premium luxury suite for home games and a fulltime interpreter. Ohtani will donate to the Dodgers' charity an amount not to exceed 1%.

Ohtani last spoke with reporters on Aug. 9, two weeks before a pitching injury that required surgery and will keep him off a mound until 2025. He had the operation on Sept. 19, but the nature of the surgery was not fully announced. Ohtani had Tommy John surgery on Oct. 1, 2018.

A unique two-way star as both a hitter and pitcher, the 29-year-old left the Los Angeles Angels as a free agent after six years.

Kelly is switching uniform numbers after finalizing his \$8 million, one-year contract with the team on Monday, opening No. 17 for Ohtani, who thanked him for the gesture.

"I wasn't going to give it up to just anybody," Kelly said. "If Shohei keeps performing, he'll be a future Hall of Famer and I'll be able to have my number retired. That's the closest I'll get to the Hall of Fame."

Asked what Ohtani was giving him in return, Kelly said, "Oh, there's a list, but no comment."

Ohtani spoke infrequently to the media during his years in Anaheim, leaving his teammates to be peppered with questions about the enigmatic superstar.

Kelly said he was prepared to entertain Ohtani questions "maybe once a week."

Ohtani's move from Anaheim to Hollywood has sent fans on both sides of the Pacific Ocean flocking to buy Dodgers merchandise and inquire about tickets on the secondary market. The team has yet to begin single-game ticket sales for next season.

"It's going to be sold out every game," Kelly said. "Every game that we're a part of is going to be like a playoff atmosphere."

Ahead of his 30th birthday on July 5, Ohtani has a .274 batting average with 171 homers, 437 RBIs and 86 stolen bases along with a 39-19 record with a 3.01 ERA and 608 strikeouts in 481 2/3 innings. Ohtani has 34.7 Wins Above Replacement (WAR), per Baseball Reference.

"I think all around it's a good gig for both parties," Kelly said. "The Dodgers are competitive every year and this is one of those things, he's the highest-paid player in all of sports, and we're still going to be able to add to our team every single year he's a Dodger."

There are three different evaluations of what the contract is worth in present-day dollars.

— For purposes of the luxury tax, a 4.43% discount rate is used and the value is \$460,767,685. That is the federal mid-term rate as defined in Section 1274(d) of the Internal Revenue Code, using the October 2023 rate. The figure means the Dodgers' luxury tax payroll will be charged about \$46.1 million annually for Ohtani.

— For purposes of MLB regular payrolls, a 10% discount rate is used and the value is \$282,107,876. That is the J.P. Morgan Chase prime rate plus 1% rounded to the nearest full percentage point, as defined in Article XV (K) of the collective bargaining agreement.

— The players' association evaluated the contract at \$437,830,563.

Stranger charged with break-in and murder in slaying of Detroit synagogue leader

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — A stranger accused of breaking into the home of a Detroit synagogue leader was charged with her murder Wednesday, nearly two months after her body was found outdoors with multiple stab wounds, authorities said.

There was not a “shred of evidence” that Samantha Woll was killed as a result of antisemitism or any hate crime, prosecutor Kym Worthy said.

Michael Jackson-Bolanos, 28, of Detroit, was charged with murder, home invasion and lying to police. A not-guilty plea was entered during his appearance in 36th District Court, and he was subsequently returned to jail without bond.

Attorney Brian Brown said he will vigorously defend Jackson-Bolanos.

“I don’t necessarily agree with the charges,” Brown told The Associated Press. “We’ll wait for the evidence.”

Woll, 40, was found dead outside her home, east of downtown Detroit, on Oct. 21, hours after returning from a wedding. Investigators believe she was attacked inside the residence.

“There are no facts to suggest this defendant knew Ms. Woll,” Worthy said.

The killing immediately stirred speculation that it might have been some type of retaliation amid the Israel-Hamas war. Authorities have repeatedly knocked the theory down, even before Jackson-Bolanos’ arrest.

Police said a person of interest was in custody over the weekend. A different person who was in custody was released in November.

“This was an extraordinarily sad and tragic case,” Worthy said, adding: “This takes time. We never want to rush to judgment.”

Police Chief James White said Jackson-Bolanos “came on our radar a few weeks ago” when investigators were trying to solve larcenies in the area.

“This is not a case you can solve like on television,” White said. “Hours and hours of evidence, hours and hours of video, of phone work, seven days a week.”

Woll was president of the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue. Besides her work for the synagogue, Woll had worked for Democratic U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin and on the political campaign of state Attorney General Dana Nessel.

Biden considers new border and asylum restrictions as he tries to reach Senate deal for Ukraine aid

By STEPHEN GROVES, LISA MASCARO and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Biden administration officials labored Wednesday to try to reach a last-minute deal for wartime aid for Ukraine by agreeing to Senate Republican demands to bolster U.S.-Mexico border policies, with urgency setting in as Congress prepared to depart Washington with the impasse unresolved.

The White House was racing to lock in a deal in principle with key Senate negotiators, according to two people familiar with the plans who demanded anonymity to discuss them. A core negotiating group, which has included Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, departed the Capitol Wednesday evening after making progress but without the principles of a deal finalized.

As details of the plan emerged, advocates for immigrants and members of President Joe Biden’s own Democratic Party fretted about the policies under discussion. Some demonstrated at the Capitol, warning of a return to the hardline border and immigration policies of the Trump era.

Congress has little time to reach an agreement on Biden’s \$110 billion request for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs that Republicans are holding up to demand changes to border policy. While White House officials and key Senate negotiators appeared to be narrowing in on a list of priorities to tighten the U.S.-Mexico border and remove some recent migrant arrivals already in the U.S., Senate Republicans earlier Wednesday said not enough progress had been made to justify staying in Washington

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beyond Thursday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Washington this week to implore lawmakers for support, but lawmakers were still ready to leave for weeks with one of the U.S.'s key international commitments — helping halt Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion into Ukraine — seriously in doubt. Also left hanging would be a deal on one of the most unwieldy issues in American politics: immigration and border security.

"The talks are continuing," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer as he closed the Senate Wednesday night.

Among the proposals being seriously discussed, according to several people familiar with the private talks, are plans to allow Homeland Security officials to stop migrants from applying for asylum at the U.S. southern border if the number of total crossings exceeds daily capacity of roughly 5,000. Some one-day totals this year have exceeded 10,000.

Also under discussion are proposals to detain people claiming asylum at the border, including families with children, potentially with electronic monitoring systems.

Negotiators are also eyeing ways to allow authorities to quickly remove migrants who have been in the United States for less than two years, even if they are far from the border. But those removals would only extend to people who either have not claimed asylum or were not approved to enter the asylum system, according to one of the people briefed on the negotiations.

The policies resemble ones that President Donald Trump's Republican administration tried to implement to cut border crossings, but many of them were successfully challenged in court. If Congress were to make them law, it would give immigration advocates very little legal ground to challenge the restrictions for those seeking asylum.

Advocates for immigrant warned of a return to anti-immigrant policies and questioned whether they would even address problems at the border.

"I never would have imagined that in a moment where we have a Democratic Senate and a Democratic White House we are coming to the table and proposing some of the most draconian immigration policies that there have ever been," said Maribel Hernández Rivera, American Civil Liberties Union director of policy and government affairs.

The Senate negotiators had also found some agreement on raising the threshold for people to claim asylum in initial credible fear screenings.

Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, a key Democratic negotiator, said it should be no surprise there are Democrats unhappy about some of the provisions being discussed, which is why they need a balanced agreement.

"I would just say that it's clear we have to get a lot of Democratic votes and a lot of Republicans in order to pass this and that means making sure that this is a fair agreement," Murphy said after a long day of talks.

Senate Republicans discussed the White House's proposal at a lunchtime meeting and expressed some optimism that Biden's administration was directly involved in shaping the legislation. But many senators said there was simply not enough time to iron out an agreement.

"Nobody's written anything up. These are all concepts right now," said Sen. John Thune, the no. 2 Senate Republican, adding, "The deal has not come together."

But the Senate's most ardent supporters of Ukraine urged congressional leaders to keep lawmakers in Washington until the package is passed. One group of Democratic senators met in Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell's office Wednesday afternoon, and Sen. Michael Bennet, a Colorado Democrat who organized the meeting, emerged calling it a "productive" session.

In a separate meeting, Mayorkas met for roughly two hours at the Capitol with a core negotiating group. It was the second day in a row the Cabinet secretary traveled to the Capitol, but issues still remained in striking an agreement.

"Good progress," said Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona late in the evening.

Even if the Senate stayed in Washington to pass the proposals, House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana, a Republican, would also need to push the legislation through his chamber, where there will likely be

opposition from both parties. Hard-line conservatives complain the Senate proposals do not go far enough, while progressive Democrats and Hispanic lawmakers are opposed to cutting off access to asylum.

At a press conference in front of the Capitol, leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and Congressional Hispanic Caucus vowed to oppose the policies under consideration. They also said that Latino lawmakers should have been central to the negotiations.

"(Biden) campaigned on restoring the soul of the nation and holding firm to our democratic values and the principles of our founding fathers. And that includes defending our asylum system and respectful treatment of refugees," said Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif.

He called it "unconscionable" for the Democratic president to make concessions on border policy without gaining policies that benefit immigrants.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the administration was "encouraged" by progress in the negotiations and stressed that any final product has to be a "bipartisan compromise." She declined to address criticism from advocates that the provisions under discussion could be more draconian than that of Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

In the Capitol, the senators who have been negotiating the border package also considered asking to have lawmakers return to Washington next week, hoping that they could use this week's momentum to push through the package.

But their colleagues warned that having the Senate pass the package would be futile unless the House was ready to move quickly.

"It'll be a piñata out there that people take potshots at for the next couple of weeks," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

Texas high school Black student suspended over hair likely won't return to his class anytime soon

By JUAN A. LOZANO and CHEYANNE MUMPHREY Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A Texas high school Black student who has been disciplined and kept away from his classroom for months for refusing to change his hairstyle is not likely to be back with his regular classmates anytime soon.

Efforts by Darryl George's attorney to ask a judge to pause his punishment by his Houston-area school district over his locs as well as a civil rights lawsuit he and his family filed in September remain on hold in federal court.

George, 18, returned to in-school suspension at his campus, Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu, Texas, last week and for now he will remain there. Before that, he had spent a month at an off-site disciplinary program.

Here are some things to know regarding why George's discipline over his hairstyle has continued for months, why his school district believes its actions have been justified and how various legal issues are complicating George's situation.

WHY DOES DARRYL GEORGE CONTINUE TO BE DISCIPLINED AND UNABLE TO RETURN TO CLASS?

George was first pulled from his classroom in August after school officials said his locs fell below his eyebrows and ear lobes and violated the district's dress code. His family argues his hairstyle does not break any rules.

Allie Booker, the attorney for George's family, said after a hearing Wednesday on the federal lawsuit, that people have been trying to tell George he should give up and cut his hair.

"But he's not going to break. He's strong ... He's like, 'I'm not going to cut my hair, but I just can't believe I'm going through this,'" Booker said. But Booker added she fears George could ultimately be expelled.

WHAT IS THE CROWN ACT AND WHY DOES THE SCHOOL DISTRICT BELIEVE IT'S NOT VIOLATING IT?

George's family has argued his punishment is discriminatory and violates the CROWN Act, which became law in Texas in September and is intended to prohibit race-based hair discrimination and bars employers and schools from penalizing people because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including Afros, braids,

dreadlocks, twists or Bantu knots.

In court filings, attorneys for the Barbers Hill School District have said students don't have a protected right under federal law to wear their hair at the length and style of their choice while attending school.

During Wednesday's court hearing, Jonathan Brush, one of the school district's attorneys, said Barbers Hill has for decades had a hair restriction policy for male students related to length.

"Locs have always been permitted," Brush said.

Jaleesa Reed, an assistant professor at Cornell University whose research focuses on the intersections of beauty culture, identity and place informed by human geography, said repeated attempts to control Black hair expression through such policies shows the need for the CROWN Act at the federal level.

"Rather than punishing students, providing opportunities to learn more about cultural hairstyles could enrich the learning environment and foster acceptance of differences," Reed said.

William Sherman, an attorney in Washington, D.C., and the legal strategist for the CROWN Act, said that George is being denied an education.

"Why? Because his hairstyle does not fit the Eurocentric ideal of neat and clean," he said.

WHAT ARE OTHER LEGAL ISSUES COMPLICATING DARRYL GEORGE'S CASE?

George's family has filed a formal complaint with the Texas Education Agency and a federal civil rights lawsuit against Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton along with the school district, alleging they failed to enforce the CROWN Act. The lawsuit is before U.S. District Judge Charles Eskridge.

The school district had filed a separate lawsuit in state district court asking a judge to clarify whether its dress code restrictions limiting student hair length for boys violate the CROWN Act. But George's attorney filed a motion to move that lawsuit to federal court. That separate case is before another Houston federal judge.

During Wednesday's court hearing, Eskridge discussed a motion to consolidate the two lawsuits, as well as motions to dismiss the lawsuit against Abbott and Paxton and the school district and to move the case to federal court in nearby Galveston.

Booker said she is hoping to argue a motion asking for a temporary injunction that would halt the school district's punishment of George until his case is resolved. But she said she can't do that until Eskridge rules on these other motions first and that might not happen until early next year.

"It's very frustrating. It's just overwhelming because it's like you just want to get there ... knowing that you're going to win. Case precedent has been set. We will win the injunction," Booker said.

Barbers Hill's policy on student hair was previously challenged in a May 2020 federal lawsuit filed by two other students. Both students withdrew from the high school but one returned after a federal judge granted a temporary injunction, saying the student showed "a substantial likelihood" that his rights to free speech and to be free from race discrimination would be violated if not allowed to return to campus. That lawsuit remains pending.

House approves impeachment inquiry into President Biden as Republicans rally behind investigation

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House on Wednesday authorized the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, with every Republican rallying behind the politically charged process despite lingering concerns among some in the party that the investigation has yet to produce evidence of misconduct by the president.

The 221-212 party-line vote put the entire House Republican conference on record in support of an impeachment process that can lead to the ultimate penalty for a president: punishment for what the Constitution describes as "high crimes and misdemeanors," which can lead to removal from office if convicted in a Senate trial.

Biden, in a rare statement about the impeachment effort, questioned the priorities of House Republicans in pursuing an inquiry against him and his family.

"Instead of doing anything to help make Americans' lives better, they are focused on attacking me with

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lies," the president said following the vote. "Instead of doing their job on the urgent work that needs to be done, they are choosing to waste time on this baseless political stunt that even Republicans in Congress admit is not supported by facts."

Authorizing the monthslong inquiry ensures that the impeachment investigation extends well into 2024, when Biden will be running for reelection and seems likely to be squaring off against former President Donald Trump — who was twice impeached during his time in the White House. Trump has pushed his GOP allies in Congress to move swiftly on impeaching Biden, part of his broader calls for vengeance and retribution against his political enemies.

The decision to hold a vote came as Speaker Mike Johnson and his team faced growing pressure to show progress in what has become a nearly yearlong probe centered around the business dealings of Biden's family members. While their investigation has raised ethical questions, no evidence has emerged that Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

"We do not take this responsibility lightly and will not prejudge the investigation's outcome," Speaker Mike Johnson and his leadership team said in a joint statement after the vote. "But the evidentiary record is impossible to ignore."

House Democrats stood in united opposition to the inquiry resolution Wednesday, calling it a farce perpetrated by those across the aisle to avenge the two impeachments against Trump.

"This whole thing is an extreme political stunt. It has no credibility, no legitimacy, and no integrity. It is a sideshow," Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., said during a floor debate.

Some House Republicans, particularly those hailing from politically divided districts, had been hesitant in recent weeks to take any vote on Biden's impeachment, fearing a significant political cost. But GOP leaders have made the case in recent weeks that the resolution is only a step in the process, not a decision to impeach Biden. That message seems to have won over skeptics.

"As we have said numerous times before, voting in favor of an impeachment inquiry does not equal impeachment," Rep. Tom Emmer, a member of the GOP leadership team, said at a news conference Tuesday.

Emmer said Republicans "will continue to follow the facts wherever they lead, and if they uncover evidence of treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors, then and only then will the next steps towards impeachment proceedings be considered."

Most of the Republicans reluctant to back the impeachment push have also been swayed by leadership's recent argument that authorizing the inquiry will give them better legal standing as the White House has questioned the legal and constitutional basis for their requests for information.

A letter last month from a top White House attorney to Republican committee leaders portrayed the GOP investigation as overzealous and illegitimate because the chamber had not yet authorized a formal impeachment inquiry by a vote of the full House. Richard Sauber, special counsel to the president, also wrote that when Trump faced the prospect of impeachment by a Democratic-led House in 2019, Johnson had said at the time that any inquiry without a House vote would be a "sham."

Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-S.D., said this week that while there was no evidence to impeach the president, "that's also not what the vote this week would be about."

"We have had enough political impeachments in this country," he said. "I don't like the stonewalling the administration has done, but listen, if we don't have the receipts, that should constrain what the House does long-term."

Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., who has long been opposed to moving forward with impeachment, said that the White House questioning the legitimacy of the inquiry without a formal vote helped gain his support. "I can defend an inquiry right now," he told reporters this week. "Let's see what they find out."

House Democrats remained unified in their opposition to the impeachment process, saying it is a farce used by the GOP to take attention away from Trump and his legal woes.

"You don't initiate an impeachment process unless there's real evidence of impeachable offenses," said Rep. Jerry Nadler, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, who oversaw the two impeachments into Trump. "There is none here. None."

Democrats and the White House have repeatedly defended the president and his administration's coop-

eration with the investigation thus far, saying it has already made a massive trove of documents available.

Congressional investigators have obtained nearly 40,000 pages of subpoenaed bank records and dozens of hours of testimony from key witnesses, including several high-ranking Justice Department officials currently tasked with investigating the president's son, Hunter Biden.

While Republicans say their inquiry is ultimately focused on the president himself, they have taken particular interest in Hunter Biden and his overseas business dealings, from which they accuse the president of personally benefiting. Republicans have also focused a large part of their investigation on whistleblower allegations of interference in the long-running Justice Department investigation into the younger Biden's taxes and his gun use.

Hunter Biden is currently facing criminal charges in two states from the special counsel investigation. He's charged with firearm counts in Delaware, alleging he broke laws against drug users having guns in 2018, a period when he has acknowledged struggling with addiction. Special counsel David Weiss filed additional charges last week, alleging he failed to pay about \$1.4 million in taxes over a three-year period.

Democrats have conceded that while the president's son is not perfect, he is a private citizen who is already being held accountable by the justice system.

"I mean, there's a lot of evidence that Hunter Biden did a lot of improper things. He's been indicted, he'll stand trial," Nadler said. "There's no evidence whatsoever that the president did anything improper."

Hunter Biden arrived for a rare public statement outside the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, saying he would not be appearing for his scheduled private deposition that morning. The president's son defended himself against years of GOP attacks and said his father has had no financial involvement in his business affairs.

His attorney has offered for Biden to testify publicly, citing concerns about Republicans manipulating any private testimony.

"Republicans do not want an open process where Americans can see their tactics, expose their baseless inquiry, or hear what I have to say," Biden said outside the Capitol. "What are they afraid of? I am here."

GOP lawmakers said that since Hunter Biden did not appear, they will begin contempt of Congress proceedings against him. "He just got into more trouble today," Rep. James Comer, the House Oversight Committee chairman, told reporters Wednesday.

Tesla recalls nearly all vehicles sold in US to fix system that monitors drivers using Autopilot

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Tesla is recalling nearly all vehicles sold in the U.S., more than 2 million, to update software and fix a defective system that's supposed to ensure drivers are paying attention when using Autopilot.

Documents posted Wednesday by U.S. safety regulators say the update will increase warnings and alerts to drivers and even limit the areas where basic versions of Autopilot can operate.

The recall comes after a two-year investigation by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration into a series of crashes that happened while the Autopilot partially automated driving system was in use. Some were deadly.

The agency says its investigation found Autopilot's method of making sure that drivers are paying attention can be inadequate and can lead to "foreseeable misuse of the system."

The added controls and alerts will "further encourage the driver to adhere to their continuous driving responsibility," the documents said.

But safety experts said that, while the recall is a good step, it still makes the driver responsible and doesn't fix the underlying problem that Tesla's automated systems have with spotting and stopping for obstacles in their path.

The recall covers models Y, S, 3 and X produced between Oct. 5, 2012, and Dec. 7 of this year. The update was to be sent to certain affected vehicles on Tuesday, with the rest getting it later.

Shares of Tesla slid more than 3% in earlier trading Wednesday but recovered amid a broad stock mar-

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ket rally to end the day up 1%.

The attempt to address the flaws in Autopilot seemed like a case of too little, too late to Dillon Angulo, who was seriously injured in 2019 crash involving a Tesla that was using the technology along a rural stretch of Florida highway where the software isn't supposed to be deployed.

"This technology is not safe, we have to get it off the road," said Angulo, who is suing Tesla as he recovers from injuries that included brain trauma and broken bones. "The government has to do something about it. We can't be experimenting like this."

Autopilot includes features called Autosteer and Traffic Aware Cruise Control, with Autosteer intended for use on limited access freeways when it's not operating with a more sophisticated feature called Autosteer on City Streets.

The software update will limit where Autosteer can be used. "If the driver attempts to engage Autosteer when conditions are not met for engagement, the feature will alert the driver it is unavailable through visual and audible alerts, and Autosteer will not engage," the recall documents said.

Depending on a Tesla's hardware, the added controls include "increasing prominence" of visual alerts, simplifying how Autosteer is turned on and off, and additional checks on whether Autosteer is being used outside of controlled access roads and when approaching traffic control devices. A driver could be suspended from using Autosteer if they repeatedly fail "to demonstrate continuous and sustained driving responsibility," the documents say.

According to recall documents, agency investigators met with Tesla starting in October to explain "tentative conclusions" about the fixing the monitoring system. Tesla did not concur with NHTSA's analysis but agreed to the recall on Dec. 5 in an effort to resolve the investigation.

Auto safety advocates for years have been calling for stronger regulation of the driver monitoring system, which mainly detects whether a driver's hands are on the steering wheel. They have called for cameras to make sure a driver is paying attention, which are used by other automakers with similar systems.

Philip Koopman, a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Carnegie Mellon University who studies autonomous vehicle safety, called the software update a compromise that doesn't address a lack of night vision cameras to watch drivers' eyes, as well as Teslas failing to spot and stop for obstacles.

"The compromise is disappointing because it does not fix the problem that the older cars do not have adequate hardware for driver monitoring," Koopman said.

Koopman and Michael Brooks, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Auto Safety, contend that crashing into emergency vehicles is a safety defect that isn't addressed. "It's not digging at the root of what the investigation is looking at," Brooks said. "It's not answering the question of why are Teslas on Autopilot not detecting and responding to emergency activity?"

Koopman said NHTSA apparently decided that the software change was the most it could get from the company, "and the benefits of doing this now outweigh the costs of spending another year wrangling with Tesla."

In its statement Wednesday, NHTSA said the investigation remains open "as we monitor the efficacy of Tesla's remedies and continue to work with the automaker to ensure the highest level of safety."

Autopilot can steer, accelerate and brake automatically in its lane, but is a driver-assist system and cannot drive itself, despite its name. Independent tests have found that the monitoring system is easy to fool, so much that drivers have been caught while driving drunk or even sitting in the back seat.

In its defect report filed with the safety agency, Tesla said Autopilot's controls "may not be sufficient to prevent driver misuse."

A message was left early Wednesday seeking further comment from the Austin, Texas, company.

Tesla says on its website that Autopilot and a more sophisticated Full Self Driving system are meant to help drivers who have to be ready to intervene at all times. Full Self Driving is being tested by Tesla owners on public roads.

In a statement posted Monday on X, formerly Twitter, Tesla said safety is stronger when Autopilot is engaged.

NHTSA has dispatched investigators to 35 Tesla crashes since 2016 in which the agency suspects the vehicles were running on an automated system. At least 17 people have been killed.

The investigations are part of a larger probe by the NHTSA into multiple instances of Teslas using Auto-pilot crashing into emergency vehicles. NHTSA has become more aggressive in pursuing safety problems with Teslas, including a recall of Full Self Driving software.

In May, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, whose department includes NHTSA, said Tesla shouldn't be calling the system Autopilot because it can't drive itself.

9 Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza City ambush in sign that Hamas resistance is still strong

By WAFAA SHURAF, JACK JEFFERY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Palestinian militants carried out one of the deadliest single attacks on Israeli soldiers since the Gaza invasion began, killing at least nine in an urban ambush, the military said Wednesday, a sign of the stiff resistance Hamas still poses despite more than two months of devastating bombardment.

The ambush in a dense neighborhood came after repeated recent claims by the Israeli military that it had broken Hamas' command structure in northern Gaza, encircled remaining pockets of fighters, killed thousands of militants and detained hundreds more.

The tenacious fighting underscores how far Israel appears to be from its aim of destroying Hamas — even after the military unleashed one of the 21st century's most destructive onslaughts. Israel's air and ground assault has killed more than 18,600 Palestinians, according to Gaza's health officials. Gaza City and surrounding towns have been pounded to ruins. Nearly 1.9 million people have been driven from their homes.

The resulting humanitarian crisis has sparked international outrage. The United States has repeatedly called on Israel to take greater measures to spare civilians, even as it has blocked international calls for a cease-fire and rushed military aid to its close ally.

Israeli troops are still locked in heavy combat with Palestinian fighters in and around Gaza City, more than six weeks after invading Gaza's north following the militants' Oct. 7 attack.

Clashes raged overnight and into Wednesday in multiple areas, with especially heavy fighting in Shijaiyah, a dense neighborhood that was the scene of a major battle during the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas.

"It's terrifying. We couldn't sleep," Mustafa Abu Taha, a Palestinian agricultural worker who lives in the neighborhood, said by phone. "The situation is getting worse, and we don't have a safe place to go."

The ambush took place Tuesday in Shijaiyah, where Israeli troops searching a cluster of buildings lost communication with four soldiers who had come under fire, the military said. When the other soldiers launched a rescue operation, they were ambushed with heavy gunfire and explosives.

Among the nine dead were Col. Itzhak Ben Basat, 44, the most senior officer to have been killed in the ground operation, and Lt. Col. Tomer Grinberg, a battalion commander.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said it was a "very difficult day," but he rejected international calls for a cease-fire.

"We are continuing until the end, there is no question. I say this even given the great pain and the international pressure. Nothing will stop us, we will continue until the end, until victory, nothing less," he said in a talk with military commanders.

SUFFERING IN THE SOUTH

Heavy rainfall overnight swamped tent camps in Gaza's south, where Israel has told people to seek refuge, even as that region has also come under daily bombardment.

In the central city of Deir al-Balah, the storm brought cold winds and flooded a shelter area behind a hospital, sending torrents of water coursing between the tents. "The situation is catastrophic," said Ibrahim Arafat, a father of 13 who fled Shijaiyah.

Because of the fighting and Israel's blockade of Gaza, the health care system and humanitarian aid operations have collapsed in large parts of the territory, and aid workers have warned of starvation and the

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spread of disease among displaced people.

Israel invaded southern Gaza nearly two weeks ago, and heavy fighting has continued in its first target — the city of Khan Younis. Israeli strikes overnight hit two residential buildings in and around the city, and the dead included three children, two women and an elderly man, according to relatives and hospital records.

A strike Wednesday evening in the southern city of Rafah killed 19 people from two families, according to hospital records.

The Israeli military rarely comments on individual strikes. Israel says it tries to avoid harming civilians and blames the high toll on Hamas because it conceals fighters, tunnels and weapons in residential areas.

DISTANT WAR AIMS

Anger over the war's toll appears to have brought a surge in support among Palestinians for Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007 and touts itself as resisting Israeli occupation.

A poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found 44% of respondents in the occupied West Bank said they supported Hamas, up from just 12% in September. In Gaza, the militants enjoyed 42% support, up from 38% three months ago.

Though Hamas' backing remains a minority, the poll showed overwhelming rejection of Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, with nearly 90% saying he must resign. Many Palestinians view the octogenarian leader's administration as corrupt, autocratic and ineffective.

The findings signal more difficulties ahead for the American administration's postwar vision for Gaza and raise questions about Israel's stated goal of ending Hamas' military and governing capabilities.

The U.S. wants Abbas' internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the West Bank, to also govern Gaza, which Hamas seized from it in 2007. It also wants to revive the long-defunct peace process to negotiate the creation of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu's government is firmly opposed to Palestinian statehood.

Late Wednesday, Hamas' supreme leader, Ismail Haniyeh said any plans for Gaza that do not involve Hamas are an "illusion and mirage," though he said the group is open to halting the fighting. Speaking to Al-Masira TV, a channel linked to Yemen's Houthi militant group, he claimed Hamas had dealt a "resounding blow" to Israel. Haniyeh lives in exile in Qatar, but it was not clear where he was when he made those comments.

U.S. President Joe Biden said Tuesday he told Netanyahu that Israel was losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing."

"Israel doesn't seem to be anywhere near achieving its military objective," Mairav Zonszein, a senior Israel analyst with the International Crisis Group, wrote on X, pointing to Tuesday's deadly ambush.

"With Biden already signaling loss of patience, with no signs of a hostage release and Israel's economy overstretched, and with a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions in Gaza, Israel could find itself in a much worse position the day after, with a lot of losses and no win," she wrote.

While the Israeli public appears to overwhelmingly support the war against Hamas, that sentiment could change if the death toll among Israeli soldiers continues to rise.

Deaths of soldiers are an emotional topic in Israel, a small country of 9 million people where military service is compulsory for most Jews. Virtually every family knows a relative, friend or co-worker who has lost a family member in war. The names of fallen soldiers are announced at the top of national newscasts.

In Israel, attention is still focused on the atrocities carried out on Oct. 7, when some 1,200 people were killed, mostly civilians, and some 240 people were taken hostage, around half of whom remain in captivity. The military says 115 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive.

There has been little media coverage or public discussion of the plight of civilians in Gaza, even as international outrage has mounted.

Despite U.S. calls to reduce civilian casualties, the toll has continued to mount at a dizzying rate.

When it released the latest Gaza death toll of 18,600, the Gaza Health Ministry did not specify the number of women and minors, but they have consistently made up around two-thirds of the dead. The toll is likely higher because thousands are believed buried under rubble. The ministry's count does not differentiate

between civilians and combatants.

Hunter Biden defies a GOP congressional subpoena. 'He just got into more trouble,' Rep. Comer says

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hunter Biden on Wednesday defied a congressional subpoena to appear privately for a deposition before Republican investigators who have been digging into his business dealings. He insisted he would only testify in public.

The Democratic president's son slammed the GOP-issued subpoena for the closed-door testimony, arguing that information from those interviews can be selectively leaked and manipulated.

"Republicans do not want an open process where Americans can see their tactics, expose their baseless inquiry, or hear what I have to say," Biden said outside the Capitol in a rare public statement. "What are they afraid of? I am here."

GOP Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, chairman of the House Oversight and Accountability Committee, has said Republicans expect "full cooperation" with the private deposition. Comer and Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, who leads the House Judiciary Committee, told reporters later Wednesday that they will begin looking at contempt of Congress proceedings in response to Hunter Biden's lack of cooperation.

"He just got into more trouble today," Comer said.

For months, Republicans have pursued an impeachment inquiry seeking to tie President Joe Biden to his son's business dealings. So far, GOP lawmakers have failed to uncover evidence directly implicating the elder Biden in any wrongdoing.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the president was familiar with what his son would say. "I think that what you saw was from the heart, from his son," she said. "They are proud of their son."

Democrats have been united against the Republican impeachment push, saying it's "an illegitimate exercise" merely meant to distract from GOP chaos and dysfunction.

"We are at a remarkable juncture for the U.S. House of Representatives," said Rep. Jamie Raskin, the top Democrat on the Oversight and Accountability Committee. "Because this is an impeachment inquiry where no one has been able to define what criminal or constitutional offense they're looking for."

But questions have arisen about the ethics surrounding the Biden family's international business, and lawmakers insist their evidence paints a troubling picture of "influence peddling" in their business dealings, particularly with clients overseas.

"There is no evidence to support the allegations that my father was financially involved in my business because it did not happen," Hunter Biden said.

The White House has chalked up the whole process as a "partisan smear campaign" that Republicans are pushing ahead with "despite the fact that members of their own party have admitted there is no evidence to support impeaching President Biden."

While Republicans have maintained that their impeachment inquiry is ultimately focused on the president himself, they have taken particular interest in Hunter Biden and his overseas business dealings, from which they accuse the president of personally benefiting. Republicans have also focused a large part of their investigation on whistleblower allegations of interference in the long-running Justice Department investigation into the younger Biden's taxes and his gun use.

Hunter Biden is currently facing criminal charges in two states from the special counsel investigation. He's charged with firearm counts in Delaware, alleging he broke laws against drug users having guns in 2018, a period when he has acknowledged struggling with addiction. Special counsel David Weiss filed additional charges last week, alleging he failed to pay about \$1.4 million in taxes over a three-year period.

Later Wednesday, the House authorized the impeachment inquiry. House Republicans hoped a vote to formalize their investigation would help their legal standing when enforcing subpoenas to Hunter Biden and other Biden family members.

"Mr. Biden's counsel and the White House have both argued that the reason he couldn't come for a

deposition was because there wasn't a formal vote for an impeachment inquiry," Jordan told reporters. "Well, that's going to happen in a few hours."

He added, "And when that happens, we'll see what their excuse is then."

Democrats and the White House have defended the president and his administration's cooperation with the investigation thus far, saying it has already made dozens of witnesses and a massive trove of documents available.

Congressional investigators have obtained nearly 40,000 pages of subpoenaed bank records, dozens of hours of testimony from key witnesses, including several high-ranking Justice Department officials currently tasked with investigating Hunter Biden.

One of those Justice Department officials, Lesley Wolf, the assistant U.S. attorney for Delaware, is expected to arrive for a private deposition with lawmakers on Thursday, according to a person familiar with the negotiations, who was granted anonymity to discuss details that had not yet been made public.

Federal Reserve keeps key interest rate unchanged and foresees 3 rate cuts next year

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve kept its key interest rate unchanged Wednesday for a third straight time, and its officials signaled that they expect to make three quarter-point cuts to their benchmark rate next year.

The Fed's message Wednesday strongly suggested that it is finished with rate hikes — after the fastest increases in four decades — and is edging closer to cutting rates as early as next summer.

Speaking at a news conference, Chair Jerome Powell said that Fed officials are likely done raising rates because of how steadily inflation has cooled.

"Inflation keeps coming down, the labor market keeps getting back into balance and, it's so far, so good," Powell said after the Fed's 19-member policy committee ended its latest meeting.

On Wall Street, traders celebrated the prospect of lower rates ahead. Stock prices soared and bond yields sank after the Fed issued its statement and Powell held his news conference.

Wednesday marked a major shift in the central bank's outlook on interest rates and the economy. Just two weeks ago, Powell had said it was "premature" to conclude that the Fed has finished raising its key benchmark rate or to "speculate" about cuts in that rate.

But on Wednesday, he signaled that the Fed is almost certainly done raising rates. And he acknowledged that the officials had discussed the prospect of rate reductions in their meeting.

He also conceded that his warning, in a high-profile speech last year, that the "pain" of higher unemployment would accompany a sharp decline in inflation, was overly pessimistic. Instead, inflation has slowed significantly toward the Fed's 2% target, even while unemployment, at 3.7%, and the pace of layoffs, have remained low.

In response to a question, Powell said the Fed recognizes that keeping rates high for too long, and waiting too long to cut them, could endanger the economy.

"We're aware of the risk that we would hang on too long" before reducing borrowing rates, the Fed chair said. "We know that's a risk, and we're very focused on not making that mistake."

Diane Swonk, chief economist at KPMG, said she thought the Fed's message Wednesday was: "We're done."

The Fed, she said, has the "luxury" of leaving rates elevated, for now, in case the economy and inflation reaccelerate, "while declaring that they're done hiking, and that cuts are in the making."

Wall Street investors are betting that rate cuts could begin as soon as March, while economists generally foresee them beginning in May or June.

Throughout his news conference, Powell expressed optimism that inflation, which has bedeviled American consumers and businesses for more than two years, is edging down toward the Fed's 2% target. He noted, by example, that inflation has eased in goods, housing and services — three categories the Fed

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has been closely monitoring.

The Fed chair downplayed one concern that some economists have expressed — that the final step down to 2% inflation, from its current level of about 3%, could be harder than the previous slowdowns in price increases.

“We kind of assume that that it will get harder from here,” he said. “But so far it hasn’t.”

The Fed kept its benchmark rate at about 5.4%, its highest level in 22 years, a rate that has led to much higher costs for mortgages, auto loans, business borrowing and many other forms of credit. Higher mortgage rates have sharply reduced home sales. Spending on appliances and other expensive goods that people often buy on credit has also declined.

Conversely, interest rate cuts by the Fed, whenever they happen, would reduce borrowing costs across the economy. Stock prices could rise, too, though share prices have already rallied in expectation of rate cuts, potentially limiting any further increases.

So far, the Fed has achieved what few observers had thought possible a year ago: Inflation has tumbled without an accompanying surge in unemployment or a recession, which typically coincide with a central bank’s efforts to cool the economy and curb inflation. Though inflation remains above the Fed’s 2% target, it has declined faster than Fed officials had expected, allowing them to keep rates unchanged and wait to see if price increases continue to ease.

On Wednesday, the Fed’s quarterly economic projections showed that its officials envision a “soft landing” for the economy, in which inflation would continue its decline toward the central bank’s 2% target without causing a steep downturn. The forecasts showed that the policymakers expect to cut their benchmark rate to 4.6% by the end of 2024 — three quarter-point reductions from its current level.

A sharp economic slowdown could prompt even faster rate reductions. So far, though, there is no sign that a downturn is imminent.

In its quarterly projections, the Fed’s policymakers now expect “core” inflation, according to its preferred measure, to fall to just 2.4% by the end of 2024, down from a 2.6% forecast in September. Core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy costs, is considered a better gauge to inflation’s future path.

The policymakers foresee unemployment rising to 4.1% next year, from its current 3.7%, which would still be a low level historically. They project that the economy will expand at a modest 1.4% next year and 1.8% in 2025.

One reason the Fed could be able to cut rates next year, even if the economy plows ahead, would be if inflation kept falling, as expected. A steady slowdown in price increases would have the effect of raising inflation-adjusted interest rates, thereby making borrowing costs higher than the Fed intends. Reducing rates, in this scenario, would simply keep inflation-adjusted borrowing costs from rising.

The Fed is the first of several major central banks to meet this week, with others also expected to keep their rates on hold. Both the European Central Bank and the Bank of England will decide on their next moves Thursday.

Israel-Hamas war tensions roil campuses; Brown protesters are arrested, Haverford building occupied

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM Associated Press

Dozens of student protesters at Brown University were arrested, and a weeklong sit-in at Haverford College ended Wednesday under threat of disciplinary action as U.S. college campuses continue to be roiled by tensions over the Israel-Hamas war.

Brown’s police department charged 41 students with trespass when they refused to leave the University Hall administrative building after business hours on Monday, according to officials at the Ivy League school in Providence, Rhode Island.

Earlier that day, protesters had met with Brown President Christina H. Paxson and demanded that Brown divest “its endowment from Israeli military occupation,” the school said in a statement on the arrests. Students were photographed and fingerprinted at the administration building before their release Monday

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night. Other students waited outside to cheer them on.

It was the second round of arrests at Brown in a little over a month as college administrators around the country try to reconcile the rights of students to protest with the schools' imperative to maintain order.

Twenty students protesting Israel's invasion of Gaza were arrested for trespass on Nov. 8, although Brown dropped the charges on Nov. 27, two days after a Palestinian student at Brown, Hisham Awartani, and two other Palestinian college students were shot in Burlington, Vermont.

Brown said Wednesday that while protest is "a necessary and acceptable means of expression on campus," students may not "interfere with the normal functions of the University." The school warned of even more severe consequences if students fail to heed restrictions on the time, place and manner of protests.

"The disruption to secure buildings is not acceptable, and the University is prepared to escalate the level of criminal charges for future incidents of students occupying secure buildings," Brown said.

At Haverford, outside Philadelphia, student activists began their sit-in on Dec. 6 and occupied Founders Hall, which houses administrative offices. They are demanding that college President Wendy Raymond publicly call for a cease-fire in Gaza, which Israel invaded after the Oct. 7 attack on Israel by Hamas militants.

Hundreds of students participated over the last week, taking deliveries of food and setting up study spaces. Professors even dropped in to teach, according to student organizers.

The college asserted that the protesters were hindering fellow students, staff and faculty, and told the sit-in organizers Tuesday night that "they must discontinue actions that impede student learning and the functions of the College, which include the sit-in inside Founders Hall," Raymond and the college dean said in a campus message Wednesday morning.

Student organizers told The Associated Press that college officials threatened to haul protesters before a disciplinary panel if they didn't leave the hall. About 50 students defied the warning and slept in the building overnight before protesters held one last rally Wednesday morning and delivered letters to Raymond before disbanding.

The threat of discipline played a role in the decision to end the sit-in, according to Julian Kennedy, a 21-year-old junior and organizer with Haverford Students for Peace. But he said organizers also concluded that the sit-in would not compel Haverford to meet the group's demands.

"At this point, we just see that this college as an institution is broken and has lost its values," said Kennedy, accusing Haverford of betraying its Quaker pacifist roots.

Ellie Baron, a 20-year-old junior and protest organizer, said the group will pressure Haverford in other ways.

"Just because the sit-in is over, doesn't mean our efforts are over. We are extraordinarily upset our president refuses to call for a cease-fire," Baron said.

A Palestinian American student at Haverford, Kinnan Abdalhamid, was also among the three Palestinian college students who were shot over Thanksgiving break in Vermont. The suspected gunman was arrested and has pleaded not guilty to three counts of attempted murder. Officials are investigating whether the shooting, which seriously injured one of the other students, was a hate crime.

Abdalhamid, who took part in Wednesday's rally, said in a statement that "our presence here is a powerful message that we will not stay silent, we will not be passive observers."

The arrests and sit-in came amid continuing fallout over the testimony given by leaders of the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and MIT at a congressional hearing on antisemitism last week. The presidents drew fire for carefully worded responses to a line of questioning from New York Republican Elise Stefanik, who repeatedly asked whether "calling for the genocide of Jews" would violate the schools' rules. Penn's president resigned over the weekend while, at Harvard, the governing board declared its support for the school's embattled president.

Supreme Court will hear a case that could undo Capitol riot charge against hundreds, including Trump

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it will hear an appeal that could upend hundreds of charges stemming from the Capitol riot, including against former President Donald Trump.

The justices will review a charge of obstruction of an official proceeding that has been brought against more than 300 people. The charge refers to the disruption of Congress' certification of Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory over Trump.

That's among four counts brought against Trump in special counsel Jack Smith's case that accuses the 2024 Republican presidential primary front-runner of conspiring to overturn the results of his election loss. Trump is also charged with conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding.

The court's decision to weigh in on the obstruction charge could threaten the start of Trump's trial, currently scheduled for March 4. The justices separately are considering whether to rule quickly on Trump's claim that he can't be prosecuted for actions taken within his role as president. A federal judge already has rejected that argument.

A lawyer for Trump didn't immediately return a message seeking comment on the Supreme Court's decision to review the charge.

The Supreme Court will hear arguments in March or April, with a decision expected by early summer.

The obstruction charge, which carries up to 20 years behind bars, is among the most widely used felony charges brought in the massive federal prosecution following the deadly insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in a bid to keep Biden, a Democrat, from taking the White House.

At least 152 people have been convicted at trial or pleaded guilty to obstructing an official proceeding, and at least 108 of them have been sentenced, according to an Associated Press review of court records.

A lower court judge had dismissed the charge against Joseph Fischer, a former Pennsylvania police officer, and two other defendants, ruling it didn't cover their conduct. The justices agreed to hear the appeal filed by lawyers for Fischer, who is facing a seven-count indictment for his actions on Jan. 6, including the obstruction charge.

The other defendants are Edward Jacob Lang, of New York's Hudson Valley, and Garret Miller, who has since pleaded guilty to other charges and was sentenced to 38 months in prison. Miller, who's from the Dallas area, could still face prosecution on the obstruction charge.

U.S. District Judge Carl Nichols found that prosecutors stretched the law beyond its scope to inappropriately apply it in these cases. Nichols ruled that a defendant must have taken "some action with respect to a document, record or other object" to obstruct an official proceeding under the law.

The Justice Department challenged that ruling, and the appeals court in Washington agreed with prosecutors in April that Nichols' interpretation of the law was too limited.

Other defendants, including Trump, are separately challenging the use of the charge.

Defense attorney Kira Anne West, who has represented several Jan. 6 defendants charged with obstruction of an official proceeding, said the courts will have to "undo a whole bunch of cases" and adjust many sentences if the Supreme Court rules in their favor.

"This is a watershed day," she said. "In our world — defense lawyer world — this is huge."

West represents a man scheduled to be tried in early January on charges including the obstruction count. She doesn't yet know if she will seek a delay until the Supreme Court resolves the challenge.

More than 1,200 people have been charged with federal crimes stemming from the riot, and more than 700 defendants have pleaded guilty.

It's a 'silly notion' that Trump's Georgia case should pause for the election, Willis tells the AP

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The district attorney prosecuting Donald Trump over efforts to overturn the 2020 election in Georgia says she has a duty to file charges against anyone who violates the law and that it's a "silly notion" that the former president's case should be paused just because he is running for office.

In an interview this week with The Associated Press, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis declined to say whether she or her team has been in touch with U.S. Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith, who has filed federal charges in an election interference case against Trump in Washington. She also raised the possibility that more of Trump's 18 co-defendants in the Georgia case could take plea deals, further paring down the number who could go on trial with him.

Willis is seeking an August trial date for Trump and his co-defendants, a time frame that would put the current front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination in court defending himself in the months, weeks and even days leading up to the November general election. Trump's lawyer has said that if Trump is the nominee, that would be "the most effective election interference in the history of the United States."

Willis brushed off that idea, pointing out that prosecutors all over the country are always investigating people for various crimes and that they do not stop doing so just because someone runs for office.

"If the prosecutor finds that they violated the law, they have an ethical duty to bring forth charges and so this is a silly notion to me that because one runs from office that your criminal case would stop," she said.

Willis has alleged that Trump, lawyer Rudy Giuliani, former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and others participated in a wide-ranging scheme to overturn the results of the 2020 election after voters elected Democrat Joe Biden as president.

Four of the 19 people charged have pleaded guilty after reaching deals with prosecutors. Trump, Giuliani, Meadows and the others remaining have pleaded not guilty.

Willis and her team have said they want to have a single trial for the rest of the defendants. Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee, who is presiding over the case, has expressed skepticism about the idea of trying too many people at once. He said earlier this month that even 12 people at once could be a stretch.

Willis disagrees with the judge on that. "My answer would be it's whittled down now to a size we can try, but I don't know that all 15 will be at the table once they get through the process," she said.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys have been exchanging evidence. Pretrial motions for most of the defendants are due early next month.

As they sift through that evidence and once the judge rules on what is permissible for trial, some defense lawyers may advise their clients that a negotiated plea is in their best interest, Willis said.

Asked whether she expects that Trump will spend time behind bars in Georgia once the case runs its course, Willis declined to speak about any particular defendant. But she noted that the indictment includes serious charges, including alleged violations of the state's anti-racketeering law, that carry significant prison time.

"You can look at the statutes that we charged. It's a very serious case," she said. "And there are consequences to violating serious laws."

The case is one of four criminal prosecutions brought against Trump this year, and it has significant overlap with the indictment brought in Washington by Smith.

Willis would not say whether her office had been in contact with Smith, but she seemed to indicate that she had no reason to seek help from him.

"A woman in Georgia is able to get evidence, look at the evidence and make charging decisions, and we can actually do it all here in the state of Georgia," said Willis, a Democrat who is up for reelection next year.

Some Republicans have suggested that her case against Trump is politically motivated.

She has been involved in a caustic back-and-forth with U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and a close Trump ally. Jordan has demanded that Willis turn over documents,

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including any communications with the Justice Department or federal executive branch officials related to her investigation.

Closer to home, legislators in Georgia passed a law this year creating a commission to discipline and remove state prosecutors. Willis said she finds it "very interesting" that while the law was framed as a way to go after prosecutors who were improperly refusing to prosecute certain crimes, some Republicans tried to use it to target her, "someone who actually did their job, that did bring forth cases."

Georgia's Supreme Court last month refused to approve rules for the commission, preventing it from acting, for now.

Additionally, a state Senate subcommittee is looking into the problem-plagued Fulton County Jail, where Trump and his co-defendants were booked and processed shortly after they were indicted. One co-defendant, Harrison William Prescott Floyd, spent several days at the jail after failing to negotiate a bond agreement before surrendering.

Some Republicans have placed some of the blame for overcrowding at the jail on Willis, suggesting she is expending too many resources on the Trump prosecution and neglecting other cases.

"They don't know what they're talking about in terms of the facts of the jail, nor do they understand the process," Willis said. She said a vast majority of those who are arrested are given bonds within 72 hours. She noted that the law says anyone held more than 90 days without being indicted is entitled to a bond.

The jail is under the control of the sheriff, not the district attorney, and Willis agreed that it needs to be replaced. She said county officials have "sat on their hands" for too long, not wanting to invest in the jail "and now the chickens are coming home to roost."

She said state senators should instead focus on the violent and understaffed state prison system, which is under their jurisdiction.

The Justice Department has opened investigations into detention conditions in both Fulton County and the state prison system.

In a first, delegates at UN climate talks agree to transition away from planet-warming fossil fuels

By SETH BORENSTEIN, DAVID KEYTON, JAMEY KEATEN and SIBI ARASU Associated Press
DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Nearly 200 countries agreed Wednesday to move away from planet-warming fossil fuels — the first time they've made that crucial pledge in decades of U.N. climate talks though many warned the deal still had significant shortcomings.

The agreement was approved without the floor fight many feared and is stronger than a draft floated earlier in the week that angered several nations. But it didn't call for an outright phasing out of oil, gas and coal, and it gives nations significant wiggle room in their "transition" away from those fuels.

"Humanity has finally done what is long, long, long overdue," Wopke Hoekstra, European Union commissioner for climate action, said as the COP28 summit wrapped up in Dubai.

Within minutes of opening Wednesday's session, COP28 President Sultan al-Jaber gavelled in approval of the central document — an evaluation of how off-track the world is on climate and how to get back on — without giving critics a chance to comment. He hailed it as a "historic package to accelerate climate action."

The document is the central part of the 2015 Paris accord and its internationally agreed-upon goal to try to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial times. The goal is mentioned 13 times in the document and al-Jaber repeatedly called that his "North Star." So far, the world has warmed 1.2 degrees (2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) since the mid 1800s. Scientists say this year is all but certain to be the hottest on record.

Several minutes after al-Jaber rammed the document through, Samoa's lead delegate Anne Rasmussen, on behalf of small island nations, complained that they weren't even in the room when al-Jaber said the deal was done. She said that "the course correction that is needed has not been secured," with the deal representing business-as-usual instead of exponential emissions-cutting efforts. She said the deal could "potentially take us backward rather than forward."

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When Rasmussen finished, delegates whooped, applauded and stood, as al-Jaber frowned, eventually joining the standing ovation that stretched longer than his plaudits. Marshall Islands delegates hugged and cried.

Hours later, outside the plenary session, small island nations and European nations along with Colombia, held hands and hugged in an emotional show of support for greater ambition.

But there was more self-congratulations Wednesday than flagellations.

"I am in awe of the spirit of cooperation that has brought everybody together," United States Special Envoy John Kerry said. He said it shows that nations can still work together despite what the globe sees with wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. "This document sends very strong messages to the world."

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that "for the first time, the outcome recognizes the need to transition away from fossil fuels."

"The era of fossil fuels must end — and it must end with justice and equity," he said.

United Nations Climate Secretary Simon Stiell told delegates that their efforts were "needed to signal a hard stop to humanity's core climate problem: fossil fuels and that planet-burning pollution. Whilst we didn't turn the page on the fossil fuel era in Dubai, this outcome is the beginning of the end."

Stiell cautioned people that what they adopted was a "climate action lifeline, not a finish line."

The new deal had been floated early Wednesday and was stronger than a draft proposed days earlier, but had loopholes that upset critics.

"The problem with the text is that it still includes cavernous loopholes that allow the United States and other fossil fuel producing countries to keep going on their expansion of fossil fuels," Center for Biological Diversity energy justice director Jean Su told The Associated Press. "There's a pretty deadly, fatal flaw in the text, which allows for transitional fuels to continue" which is a code word for natural gas that also emits carbon pollution.

Goals agreed at earlier summits have not been reached, in part because major emitters have not fulfilled their climate promises, or have declined to sign on.

The deal also calls for tripling the use of renewable energy and doubling energy efficiency. Earlier in the talks, the conference adopted a special fund for poor nations hurt by climate change and nations put nearly \$800 million in the fund.

The deal doesn't go so far as to seek a "phase-out" of fossil fuels, despite the pleas of more than 100 nations including small island states and European nations. Instead, it calls for "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade."

German climate envoy Jennifer Morgan said the difference between phase-out and transitioning away could be seen as a positive: "I think the 'phase-out' was about sending a clear signal. And I think the 'just transition away from' is a way of phrasing the phase-out with the equity component included in it" for poorer nations who can't act as quickly as richer ones.

Li Shuo of the Asia Society said when the two phrases are translated into Mandarin or Japanese there is essentially no difference.

In a press conference, Kerry called it "a clear unambiguous message on one of the most complicated issues that we face." He said the United States wanted stronger language, but it was too much "of a steep climb" to get from 195 nations.

He said "there were times in the last 48 hours where some of us thought this could fail." But "we stayed at it. People showed good faith. People stepped up."

U.S. President Joe Biden called it "one significant step closer" to keeping the 1.5 degree goal within reach, but said it depends on countries doing more "to build a safer, more hopeful future for our children."

The deal says that the transition would be done in a way that gets the world to net zero greenhouse gas emissions — where emissions entering the atmosphere are balanced by those removed — in 2050, and carbon pollution to peak by the year 2025, but gives wiggle room to individual nations like China to peak later.

It was the third version presented in about two weeks and the word "oil" does not appear anywhere in the 21-page document. "Fossil fuels" appears twice.

Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, a Nobel Peace Prize winning climate activist, said while it is an important milestone "to finally recognize that the climate crisis is at its heart a fossil fuel crisis," he called the deal "the bare minimum" with "half measures and loopholes."

"Whether this is a turning point that truly marks the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era depends on the actions that come next," Gore said.

In hypochondria paradox, Swedish study finds a higher death rate in those who fear serious illness

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

A large Swedish study has uncovered a paradox about people diagnosed with an excessive fear of serious illness: They tend to die earlier than people who aren't hypervigilant about health concerns.

Hypochondriasis, now called illness anxiety disorder, is a rare condition with symptoms that go beyond average health worries. People with the disorder are unable to shake their fears despite normal physical exams and lab tests. Some may change doctors repeatedly. Others may avoid medical care.

"Many of us are mild hypochondriacs. But there are also people on the other extreme of the spectrum who live in a perpetual state of worry and suffering and rumination about having a serious illness," said Dr. Jonathan E. Alpert of Montefiore Medical Center in New York.

People with the disorder are suffering and "it's important to take it seriously and to treat it," said Alpert, who was not involved in the new study. Treatment can involve cognitive behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, education and sometimes antidepressant medication.

The researchers found that people with the diagnosis have an increased risk of death from both natural and unnatural causes, particularly suicide. Chronic stress and its impact on the body could explain some of the difference, the authors wrote.

The study, published Wednesday in JAMA Psychiatry, addressed "a clear gap in the literature," said David Mataix-Cols of the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, who led the research. "We got lucky," he said, because the Swedish classification system for diseases has a separate code for hypochondriasis, allowing data analysis on thousands of people over 24 years, 1997-2020.

Older research had suggested the risk of suicide might be lower for people with the condition, but "our hunch, based on clinical experience, was that this would be incorrect," Mataix-Cols said. In the study, the risk of suicide death was four times higher for the people with the diagnosis.

They looked at 4,100 people diagnosed with hypochondriasis and matched them with 41,000 people similar in age, sex and county of residence. They used a measurement called person years, which accounts for the number of people and how long they were tracked.

Overall death rates were higher in the people with hypochondriasis, 8.5 versus 5.5 per 1,000 person years. People with the condition died younger than the others, a mean age of 70 versus 75. Their risk of death from circulatory and respiratory diseases was higher. Cancer was an exception; the risk of death was about the same.

Referring an excessively anxious patient to mental health professionals takes care, said Alpert, who leads the American Psychiatric Association's council on research. Patients can be offended, because they feel they're being accused of imagining symptoms.

"It takes a great deal of respect and sensitivity conveyed to patients that this itself is a kind of condition, that it has a name," Alpert said. "And, fortunately, there are good treatments." _____

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Analysis: At COP28, Sultan al-Jaber got what the UAE wanted. Others leave it wanting much more

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — As the United Nations COP28 climate summit ended Wednesday, Sultan al-Jaber walked out with what the United Arab Emirates wanted all along — the prestige of hosting negotiations that got the world to agree to transition away from fossil fuels while still being able to pump ever-more oil.

That left some wanting much more from the two weeks of talks, even as many praised its historic accord. But it no longer will matter to the state oil company chief executive and renewable energy advocate who embodies many of the traits that have propelled this young nation into the global spotlight.

Al-Jaber, who as president of COP28 facilitated the negotiations, faced criticism and scrutiny from the moment he took the position due to his oil ties. He tried to disarm critics among the delegates through an Emirati tradition, at one point convening a “majlis,” or a traditional ruler’s sitting room to listen to concerns that he said he wanted not to have been laundered through layers of diplomacy and bureaucracy. Most still were.

But after an initial proposal drew screams, al-Jaber and his entourage presented another early Wednesday that gained the consensus required in the COP process.

And for all words written, said and broadcast about this global event, it really just boiled down to 34 in one clause-packed sentence: “Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science.”

After the agreement’s adoption, al-Jaber received immediate support from some on hand.

“I have to say that the people that has criticizing Dr. Sultan and the UAE owe them an apology,” said Dan Jørgensen, Denmark’s climate minister. “They have been a transparent and inclusive presidency.”

Others offered a more critical take, noting that al-Jaber’s Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. still plans to boost its oil production up to 5 million barrels of crude a day. That means more of the carbon-belching fuels driving climate change — which cause more-intense and more-frequent extreme events such as storms, droughts, floods and wildfires.

“The atmosphere responds to one thing: Emissions. It’s physics, stupid,” said Alden Meyer, a senior associate at the independent climate change think tank E3G. “And all the declarations, all the decisions, all the platitudes, all the announcements in the world, if it doesn’t translate into real world action that reduces emissions, is not worth the paper it’s written on.”

Though hosted in Dubai, the final agreement reached at the summit ended up being called “the UAE Consensus,” an extremely unusual move as other deals have been named after their cities, like the landmark Paris Accords or the Kyoto Protocol. All this feeds into the wider ambitions of the UAE, an autocratic federation of seven sheikhdoms, to grow its political stature in the international arena and to punch beyond its weight while further unifying this country that only formed in 1971.

Al-Jaber, long a trusted technocrat under leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, ultimately had only one boss to satisfy. But reaching the deal here also required negotiating across fractious coalitions of countries that emerged at the talks.

The traditional Western nations held largely similar views, with U.S. envoy John Kerry staying close to al-Jaber in the months leading up the talks. The growing powers of China and India focused on ensuring their rise wouldn’t be curtailed through shutting off their coal-fired power plants. And the Gulf crude producers, led by neighboring Saudi Arabia, want to make sure their oil fields pump into the next generation to fuel their economic ambitions.

There were protests, both outside in the United Nations-administered Blue Zone at the summit and on the plenary floor, with 12-year-old activist Licypriya Kangujam rushing to the front to hold up a sign declaring: “End Fossil Fuel. Save Our Planet And Our Future.”

In a country where political dissidents face imprisonment, the Emiratis exercised restraint as U.N. of-

ficers oversaw those limited demonstrations as their tight grip across the rest of this monitored nation remained unchallenged.

Yet the al-Jaber-engineered deal faced criticism in the end.

"Many people here would have liked clearer language about the need to begin peaking and reducing fossil fuels in this critical decade," Kerry told the summit. "But we know this was a compromise between many parties."

An even-more stinging rebuke came from Samoa's lead negotiator Anne Rasmussen, who highlighted what she described as "a litany of loopholes" in the final agreement.

"We didn't want to interrupt the standing ovation when we came into the room, but we are a little confused about what happened," Rasmussen said. "It seems that you just gaveled the decisions and the small island developing states were not in the room."

She added: "It is not enough for us to reference the science and then make agreements that ignore what the science is telling us we need to do. This is not an approach that we should be asked to defend."

The science says the world must work to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) since pre-industrial times to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Rasmussen's remarks earned her a standing ovation at the summit, longer than that greeting the "UAE Consensus." Al-Jaber sat, grimacing slightly for a few moments.

In the end, though, he stood up to applaud the Samoan as well. It was enough to have already won the war.

The Supreme Court will rule on limits on a commonly used abortion medication

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court agreed on Wednesday to take up a dispute over a medication used in the most common method of abortion in the United States, its first abortion case since it overturned *Roe v. Wade* last year.

The justices will hear appeals from the Biden administration and the maker of the drug mifepristone asking the high court to reverse an appellate ruling that would cut off access to the drug through the mail and impose other restrictions, even in states where abortion remains legal. The restrictions include shortening from the current 10 weeks to seven weeks the time during which mifepristone can be used in pregnancy.

The nine justices rejected a separate appeal from abortion opponents who challenged the Food and Drug Administration's initial approval of mifepristone as safe and effective in 2000.

The case will be argued in the spring, with a decision likely by late June, in the middle of the 2024 presidential and congressional campaigns.

Mifepristone, made by New York-based Danco Laboratories, is one of two drugs used in medication abortions, which account for more than half of all abortions in the United States. More than 5 million people have used it since 2000.

The Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion in June 2022. That ruling has led to bans on abortion at all stages of pregnancy in 14 states, with some exceptions, and once cardiac activity can be detected, which is around six weeks, in two others.

Abortion opponents filed their challenge to mifepristone the following November and initially won a sweeping ruling six months later revoking the drug's approval entirely. The appeals court left intact the FDA's initial approval of mifepristone. But it would reverse changes regulators made in 2016 and 2021 that eased some conditions for administering the drug.

The justices blocked that ruling from taking effect while the case played out, though Justices Samuel Alito, the author of last year's decision overturning *Roe*, and Clarence Thomas said they would have allowed some restrictions to take effect while the case proceeded.

Women seeking to end their pregnancies in the first 10 weeks without more invasive surgical abortion can take mifepristone, along with misoprostol. The FDA has eased the terms of mifepristone's use over

the years, including allowing it to be sent through the mail in states that allow access.

In its appeal, the Democratic administration said the appeals court, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, ignored the FDA's scientific judgment about mifepristone's safety and effectiveness since its approval in 2000.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that the appellate ruling "threatens to undermine the FDA's scientific, independent judgment and would reimpose outdated restrictions on access to safe and effective medication abortion."

Lawyers for the anti-abortion medical groups and individual physicians who have challenged the use of mifepristone had urged the Supreme Court to turn away the appeals.

"The modest decision below merely restores the common-sense safeguards under which millions of women have taken chemical abortion drugs," wrote lawyers for the Alliance Defending Freedom, which describes itself as a Christian law firm. The lead attorney on the Supreme Court filing is Erin Hawley, wife of Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri.

U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, an appointee of President Donald Trump in Texas, initially revoked FDA approval of mifepristone.

Responding to a quick appeal, two more Trump appointees on the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the FDA's original approval would stand for now. But Judges Andrew Oldham and Kurt Engelhardt said most of the rest of Kacsmaryk's ruling could take effect while the case winds through federal courts.

Besides reducing the time during which the drug can be taken and halting distribution through the mail, patients who are seeking medication abortions would have had to make three in-person visits with a doctor. Women also might have been required to take a higher dosage of the drug than the FDA says is necessary.

Health care providers have said that if mifepristone is no longer available or is too hard to obtain, they would switch to using only misoprostol, which is somewhat less effective in ending pregnancies.

'I feel trapped': Scores of underage Rohingya girls forced into abusive marriages in Malaysia

By KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — In a bedroom in Malaysia that has become a prison, the 14-year-old girl wipes away tears as she sits cross-legged on the concrete floor. It is here, she says, where her 35-year-old husband rapes her nearly every night.

Last year, the Rohingya girl sacrificed herself to save her family, embarking on a terrifying journey from her homeland of Myanmar to a country she had never seen, to marry a man she had never met.

It wasn't her choice. But her family, she says, was impoverished, hungry and terrified of Myanmar's military, which attacked the country's Rohingya Muslim minority in 2017. In desperation, a neighbor found a man in Malaysia who would pay the 18,000 ringgit (\$3,800) fee for the girl's passage and — after she married him — send money to her family for food.

And so, the teenager — identified along with all the girls in this story by her first initial to protect her from retaliation — hugged her parents goodbye. Then M climbed into a trafficker's car packed with children.

Deteriorating conditions in Myanmar and in neighboring Bangladesh's refugee camps are driving scores of underage Rohingya girls to Malaysia for arranged marriages with Rohingya men who frequently abuse them, The Associated Press found in interviews with 12 young Rohingya brides who have arrived in Malaysia since 2022. The youngest was 13.

All the girls interviewed by the AP said their controlling husbands rarely let them outside. Several said they were beaten and raped during the journey to Malaysia, and five said they were abused by their husbands. Half the girls are pregnant or have babies, despite most saying they were not prepared for motherhood.

"This was my only way out," says 16-year-old F, who in 2017 watched as Myanmar's soldiers burned her house and killed her aunt. "I wasn't ready to be married, but I didn't have a choice."

These unwanted marriages are the latest atrocity bestowed upon Rohingya girls: from childhoods marred by violence to attacks where security forces systematically raped them to years of hunger in Bangladesh's

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squalid refugee camps.

Global apathy toward the Rohingya crisis and strict migration policies have left these girls with almost no options. The military that attacked the Rohingya overthrew Myanmar's government in 2021, making any return home a life-threatening proposition. Bangladesh has refused to grant citizenship or working rights to the million stateless Rohingya languishing in its camps. And no country is offering large-scale resettlement opportunities.

And so the Rohingya are increasingly fleeing — and those who are fleeing are increasingly female. During the 2015 Andaman Sea boat crisis, in which thousands of Rohingya refugees were stranded at sea, the vast majority of passengers were men. This year, more than 60% of the Rohingya who have survived the Andaman crossing have been women and children, according to the United Nations' refugee agency.

In Bangladesh, Save the Children says child marriage is one of the agency's most reported worries among camp residents.

"We are seeing a rise in cases of child trafficking," says Shaheen Chughtai, Save the Children's Regional Advocacy and Campaigns Director for Asia. "Girls are more vulnerable to this, and often this is linked to being married off in different territories."

Accurate statistics on how many Rohingya child brides live in Malaysia don't exist. But local advocates who work with the girls say they have seen a spike in arrivals over the past two years.

"There are really a lot of Rohingyas coming in to get married," says Nasha Nik, executive director of the Rohingya Women Development Network, which has worked with hundreds of child brides in recent years.

Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nations' refugee convention, so the girls — who enter the country without permission — are less likely to report their assaults to authorities. Doing so could put them at risk of being thrown into one of Malaysia's detention centers, which have long been plagued by reports of abuse.

Malaysia's government did not respond to the AP's requests for comment.

M didn't even know her future husband's name when she climbed into the trafficker's car alongside several other girls headed to Malaysia for marriage.

For a week, they traveled through Myanmar and Thailand. After crossing into Malaysia, they stopped at a house. Four of the trafficker's friends arrived and each selected a girl.

The man who chose M — who looked to be around 50 — drove her to another house. When they got inside, she says, he raped her.

In the morning, he locked her in the bedroom and left her there all day with no water or food. The next night, he returned and raped her again. She was terrified he would kill her.

M was then handed over to another man who drove her to her fiancé's apartment.

She didn't dare tell her fiancé she'd been raped, because then he would reject her.

Her fiancé insisted they get married that day. In agony and bleeding from the rapes, M told her husband she had her period, so he wouldn't touch her.

A Rohingya women's advocate, who confirmed M's account to the AP, heard about the situation and brought M to the hospital for treatment.

When M returned to her husband, she learned he was already married with two children. She had no power to object to the situation, or to the beatings, cruel taunts and rapes she regularly endures. She said nothing about the abuse to her parents, lest her husband stop sending them 300 ringgit (\$64) a month.

She sits now in her bedroom, her thin frame cloaked in teddy bear pajamas. Dangling from the ceiling is a rope designed to hold a hammock for any babies her husband forces her to bear.

She once dreamed of going to school and becoming a teacher or a doctor. But she has stopped thinking of her future. For now, she just tries to survive her present.

"I want to go back home, but I can't," she says. "I feel trapped."

'I feel trapped': Scores of underage Rohingya girls forced into abusive marriages in Malaysia

By KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — In a bedroom in Malaysia that has become a prison, the 14-year-old girl wipes away tears as she sits cross-legged on the concrete floor. It is here, she says, where her 35-year-old husband rapes her nearly every night.

Last year, the Rohingya girl sacrificed herself to save her family, embarking on a terrifying journey from her homeland of Myanmar to a country she had never seen, to marry a man she had never met.

It wasn't her choice. None of this was. Not the decision to leave behind everything she knew, nor the arranged marriage for which she was not ready.

But her family, she says, was impoverished, hungry and terrified of Myanmar's military, which unleashed a series of sweeping attacks against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority in 2017. In desperation, a neighbor found a man in Malaysia who would pay the 18,000 ringgit (\$3,800) fee for the girl's passage and — after she married him — send money to her parents and three little siblings for food.

And so, the teenager — identified along with all the girls in this story by her first initial to protect her from retaliation — tearfully hugged her parents goodbye. Then M climbed into a trafficker's car packed with children.

She didn't yet know the horrors that awaited her. All she knew then was that the weight of her family's survival was on her slender shoulders.

She sits now in her bedroom in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, her thin frame cloaked in teddy bear pajamas. The room is devoid of furniture, its blank white walls chipped and stained. Dangling from the ceiling is a knotted rope, designed to hold a hammock for any babies her husband forces her to bear.

"I want to go back home, but I can't," she says in a small voice barely above a murmur. "I feel trapped."

Deteriorating conditions in Myanmar and in neighboring Bangladesh's refugee camps are driving scores of underage Rohingya girls to Malaysia for arranged marriages with Rohingya men who frequently abuse them, The Associated Press found in interviews with 12 young Rohingya brides who have arrived in Malaysia since 2022. The youngest was 13.

All the girls interviewed by the AP said they are held hostage by controlling husbands who rarely let them outside. Several said they were beaten and raped by traffickers and other men during the journey to Malaysia, and five said they were abused by their husbands. Half the girls are pregnant or already have babies, despite most saying they were not prepared for motherhood.

When asked if they had protested their parents' decisions to marry them off, they appeared confused.

"This was my only way out," says 16-year-old F, still haunted by her memories of Myanmar, where in 2017 she watched as soldiers burned her house, raped her neighbors and fatally shot her aunt. In the years that followed, so frequent were the soldiers' gunshots in the night that she was terrified by the sound of her friends popping balloons in the day. "I wasn't ready to be married, but I didn't have a choice."

Now trapped with a 27-year-old husband, she yearns for a freedom she and her people have never known.

"The Rohingya have no place to be happy," she says.

These unwanted marriages are the latest atrocity bestowed upon Rohingya girls: from childhoods marred by violence to attacks where security forces systematically raped them to years of hunger in Bangladesh's squalid refugee camps.

Global apathy toward the Rohingya crisis and strict migration policies have left these girls with almost no options. The military that attacked the Rohingya overthrew Myanmar's government in 2021, making any return home a life-threatening proposition. Bangladesh has refused to grant citizenship or even basic working rights to the million stateless Rohingya wasting away in its camps. And no country is offering any large-scale resettlement opportunities.

And so the Rohingya are increasingly fleeing — and those who are fleeing are increasingly female. During the 2015 Andaman Sea boat crisis, in which thousands of Rohingya refugees were stranded at sea, the overwhelming majority of passengers were men. This year, more than 60% of the Rohingya who have

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survived the Andaman crossing have been women and children, according to the United Nations' refugee agency.

In Bangladesh, Save the Children says child marriage is one of the agency's most reported worries among camp residents.

"We are seeing a rise in cases of child trafficking," says Shaheen Chughtai, Save the Children's Regional Advocacy and Campaigns Director for Asia. "Girls are more vulnerable to this, and often this is linked to being married off in different territories."

Because these girls live on the fringes of the fringe, accurate statistics on how many live in Malaysia do not exist. But local advocates who work with the girls say they have seen a spike in arrivals over the past two years.

"There are really a lot of Rohingyas coming in to get married," says Nasha Nik, executive director of the Rohingya Women Development Network, which has worked with hundreds of child brides since it was founded in 2016.

Inside the organization's small office in Kuala Lumpur, there are toys for the girls' babies, stacks of educational kits about gender-based violence and a row of sewing machines where women and girls learn to make jewelry and other crafts they sell to help support themselves.

"There are no other safe spaces for Rohingya women in Malaysia," Nasha says. "Domestic violence is very high."

Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nations' refugee convention, so the girls — who enter the country without permission — are less likely to report their assaults to authorities. Doing so could put them at risk of being thrown into one of Malaysia's detention centers, which have long been plagued by reports of abuse.

Malaysia's government did not respond to the AP's requests for comment.

To understand why a parent would send their child into this hell, you need to understand the hell from which they came.

Outside her bamboo and tarp shelter in one of Bangladesh's camps, Hasina Begum's sobs swallow her words as she speaks of her daughter.

Begum last saw 16-year-old Parvin Akter in 2022, when she sent her and Parvin's brother, Azizul Hoque, on a boat bound for Indonesia. Begum hoped Parvin would make it to Malaysia to marry a man who could support her. But an AP investigation concluded the boat sank with all 180 on board.

Begum's husband abandoned the family years ago, leaving her to care for their six children. The food rations weren't enough to sustain them, and Begum couldn't afford the traditional dowry that Rohingya brides' parents are expected to pay grooms in the camps, typically thousands of dollars. The grooms in Malaysia forfeit dowries and often send money to the brides' parents.

Local gangs, meanwhile, terrorized Begum's family, once kidnapping Azizul and holding him until Begum borrowed 50,000 taka (\$450) for the ransom.

Which is why Begum says she sent her daughter and son to Malaysia — so they, and the rest of her family, could survive. Even now, another boat carrying Rohingya refugees has been missing at sea for weeks, likely with other girls who may never make it.

Begum sits now amid the misery and the muck of the camps as the stench from a nearby latrine wafts by, wishing she could hear her children call her "mother" one more time. She pulls up a photo of them on her phone, then presses it to her heart.

"To be Rohingya," she says, "is to suffer."

For 14-year-old M, like so many Rohingya girls, the suffering started early. At age 9, she began working as a housekeeper for a local family in Myanmar. The patriarch often beat her, but she never told her parents. She knew her \$1 a day wage helped feed her family.

She has a few fond memories of Myanmar: the play shop she set up with her best friend. The cows her family once owned. But after attacks against the Rohingya in 2017, soldiers stole their animals. Her family descended further into poverty, unable to afford the dowry to marry M off in Myanmar.

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She climbed into the trafficker's car just one day after her parents told her she'd been promised to a man in Malaysia. She didn't know his name, hadn't seen his picture.

In the car were several other girls headed to Malaysia for marriage. M was frightened. She'd heard stories of traffickers raping girls along the route.

For a week, they drove and walked through the jungles of Myanmar and south into Thailand. After crossing into Malaysia, they stopped at a house. Four of the trafficker's friends arrived and each selected a girl, telling them that they would drive them to their fiancé's homes.

Instead, M says, the man who chose her — who looked to be around 50 — drove her to another house. When they got inside, he pushed her. She began to cry and scream.

"If you keep shouting, I will kill you," he warned. And then he raped her.

She tried to fight him off, but he beat her. She wanted to die.

In the morning, he locked her in the bedroom and left her there all day with no water or food, though she couldn't have eaten anyway. The next night, he returned and raped her again. Afterwards, she vomited.

She was terrified he would kill her.

M's experience is not an anomaly. One girl spoke of a boat captain who viciously beat her back with a stick. Another spoke of a trafficker who beat her, threw her to the ground and threatened to kill her unless she persuaded her parents to send him more money. She later wept as she helplessly watched the trafficker rape a group of girls who couldn't pay more. The youngest, she says, was 12.

Sixteen-year-old T was frightened from the moment she saw the boat on the beach in Bangladesh. Though she and her family were starving in the camps, she couldn't bear to leave them for a man she did not know.

"Even if you don't have food," she says, "if you have your parents, you're happy."

The boat took her east into Myanmar, the country she'd fled five years earlier after soldiers burned her house and shot dead her best friend. From there, a trafficker hustled her and around 50 others onto another vessel headed south. The passengers were packed in so tight she could scarcely move, sitting stiffly for days with her arms hugging her knees.

A month-long journey on foot and by car through Thailand followed. The roads were crawling with authorities, so for 12 days, she and a group of girls were stuck in a house. With them, she says, was a trafficker who showed them no mercy.

Each night, she says, the trafficker ordered a different girl to have sex with him. When T's turn came, she tried to run, but he caught her. She began to cry. "This is not your father's house — stop being dramatic," he barked. Then he beat her back with a belt.

It was Ramadan, and when the time came to break the traditional fast, T was famished. But the trafficker told her she would receive no food unless she had sex with him.

She cannot speak of what happened next.

Now inside a shadowy apartment in Malaysia, she shakes her head and stares at the floor.

"I was so scared of him," she says quietly.

Marriage did not end the girls' anguish. What it did end were their childhoods.

After enduring the second rape by her trafficker's friend, M was handed over to another man who drove her to her 35-year-old fiancé's apartment.

The sight of her future husband terrified her. She didn't dare tell him she'd been raped, because then he would reject her.

Her fiancé insisted they get married that day and called an imam to the apartment. In agony and bleeding from the rapes, M could not bear the thought of wedding night sex.

All she wanted was to go home. Instead, she submitted to the wedding ceremony, then told her husband she had her period, so he wouldn't touch her.

A Rohingya women's advocate, who confirmed M's account to the AP, heard about the situation and intervened, telling the girl's husband that his exhausted bride needed time to recover from her journey. The advocate then brought M to the hospital for treatment and cared for her until she was physically healed.

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When M returned to her husband, she learned he was already married with two children. She had no power to object to the situation, or to the beatings, cruel taunts and rapes she regularly endures. She said nothing about the abuse to her parents, lest they blame themselves, and lest her husband stop sending them 300 ringgit (\$64) a month.

In her spartan bedroom, where her pink cellphone with its heart decals and delicate ribbon is the lone glimmer of girlish joy, she wonders out loud why this man hurts her.

She can summon no answers.

Across the city, 13-year-old D plays with a blue plastic whale, rhythmically opening and closing its jaws as she talks about the pain of her wedding night and all the nights since.

"You can see my body looks older, but my heart and mind are still young," she says.

Yet her body does not look older. She is tiny, with the soft cheeks of a child. Her ankle is scarred from the jungle floor that slashed her skin open as she and a trafficker walked through Myanmar barefoot, to avoid making noise.

Back in Bangladesh's camps, she says, she loved to play jump rope with her friends. Here in Malaysia, she is not allowed to play with anyone. She dreams of going to the market to see the colorful stalls. But her 25-year-old husband won't let her outside.

She disliked him from the moment they met, on their wedding day. When the imam arrived, she began to cry and refused to consent to the marriage. One of her cousins beat her until she said yes.

That night, her husband raped her. The pain was excruciating. Afterwards, she fled to the nearby apartment of an older Rohingya woman she had befriended.

Her husband later forced her to return home. And now he regularly forces her to have sex.

She spends her days sleeping and sitting and scrolling through TikTok. Sometimes the loneliness overwhelms her to the point of tears. When her parents call and ask if she is happy, she tells them she is not. But she doesn't tell them the extent of her despair. Their lives are hard enough, she says.

She prays she won't get pregnant, but her husband wants children. She knows it's only a matter of time.

Her voice grows desperate.

"I want to run."

In an apartment complex filled with locked metal gates and caged-in balconies, the babies' cries echo through the cavernous hallways. They are the children of child brides, who arrived while many of the brides still felt like babies themselves.

Yet motherhood was another choice made for them, and another shackle they cannot escape.

Sixteen-year-old R cradles her wailing newborn in her skinny arms, his tiny hands reaching for her. She looks back at her baby, who was born in a rush of pain 24 days earlier, but her eyes are vacant, her bony shoulders slumped.

She and her 27-year-old husband began trying for a baby one month after they wed. She wasn't ready, but it didn't matter.

Though her life in Bangladesh was bleak, as one of 11 children, she never felt alone. In Malaysia, when her husband leaves for work, she has no one.

And so when her baby arrived, she felt a hint of joy.

"When I saw my baby's face, I was happy, because now I have a friend," she says softly.

But she cannot sleep, because he always wants to breastfeed. He cries all the time. She does, too.

Sixteen-year-old T survived 12 days in the Thai house where the trafficker had raped a different girl each night. She then prepared herself to survive marriage and all that would follow. Yet five months after her son was born, motherhood still feels alien.

"Even if we are not ready for babies, we have to be," she says. "I don't feel like a mother."

She doesn't know how to breastfeed and her 25-year-old husband refuses to allow anyone to help her. He has never held their child.

Her husband verbally abuses her and won't even let her go to the playground outside their apartment. She is banned from speaking to visitors. She prays that any daughter she has will go to school rather

than marry young.

Her nervousness manifests as a girlish giggle. But when she speaks of the ache for her own mother, her grin fades and her eyes well with tears.

"I miss my mom," she says. "I want my parents."

Back inside M's bedroom, the 14-year-old thinks back to the dreams she once had while growing up in Myanmar: to go to school, to get a job, maybe even as a teacher or a doctor.

She still longs for those things, but knows they are impossible. So she has stopped thinking of her future. For now, she just tries to survive her present.

Another girl, 16-year-old S, enters the bedroom. Her swollen belly strains against her pink T-shirt, which is adorned with hearts and butterflies.

S is 7 months' pregnant and homeless. Her 25-year-old husband divorced her and left her for another teenage girl the day he learned S was pregnant. Though her husband was abusive, she pleaded with him to stay. She hasn't heard from him since.

She spends her days begging on the streets for food and a place to sleep. Today, she has been permitted to stay at M's apartment for a couple of nights. It's a temporary reprieve.

She still wears her wedding ring and plans to sell it just before the birth to help pay the hospital delivery fee. But the ring is worth a couple hundred dollars at best, and the hospital will charge more than \$1,000.

For Rohingya girls, she says, the agony never ends.

"From the moment we are born, every day we face difficulty after difficulty," she says.

She hopes her child will go to school. She hopes her child will be kind. But she has stopped hoping for anything else.

"I once dreamed of having a happy family, but my husband divorced me," she says. "I don't dream much anymore."

The last residents of a coastal Mexican town destroyed by climate change

By DANIEL SHAILER Associated Press

EL BOSQUE, Mexico (AP) — People moved to El Bosque on the Gulf of Mexico in the 1980s to fish and build a community. Then climate change set the sea against the town.

Flooding driven by some of the world's fastest sea-level rise and by increasingly brutal winter storms has all but destroyed El Bosque, leaving twisted piles of concrete where houses used to line the sand. Forced to flee the homes they built, locals are waiting for government aid in rentals they can scarcely afford.

The U.N. climate summit known as COP28 finally agreed this month on a multimillion-dollar loss-and-damage fund to help developing countries cope with global warming. It will come too late for the people of El Bosque, but by 2050 millions more Mexicans will be displaced by climate change, according to the Mayors Migration Council, a coalition researching internal migration.

Just two years ago over 700 people lived in El Bosque; barely a dozen are left.

Between those numbers lie the relics of a lost community. At one of the few solid buildings left — the old, concrete fishing cooperative — enormous, vault-like refrigerators have become makeshift storage units for belongings left behind.

Guadalupe Cobos is one of the few still living in El Bosque. Residents' relationship with the sea is "like a toxic marriage," Cobos said, sitting facing the waves on a recent afternoon.

"I love you when I'm happy, right? And when I'm angry I take away everything that I gave you," she said.

Along with rapidly rising water levels, winter storms called "nortes" have eaten more than one-third of a mile (500 meters) inland since 2005, according to Lilia Gama, coastal vulnerability researcher at Tabasco Juarez State University.

"Before, if a norte came in, it lasted one or two days," said Gama. "The tide would come in, it would go

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up a little bit and it would go away.”

Now, fueled by warming air which can hold more moisture, winter storms stay for several days at a time. Local scientists say one more powerful storm could destroy El Bosque for good. Relocation, slowed by bureaucracy and a lack of funding, is still months away.

As the sun sets over the beach, Cobos, known as Doña Lupe to neighbors, points to a dozen small, orange stars on the line of the horizon — oil platforms burning off gas.

“There is money here,” she says, “but not for us.”

As El Bosque was settled, state oil company Pemex went on an exploration spree in the Gulf — tripling crude oil production and making Mexico into a major international exporter. Now Mexico plans to open a new refinery in Tabasco, just 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of El Bosque.

Gulf of Mexico sea levels are already rising three times faster than the global average, according to a study co-authored by researchers from the United Kingdom, New Orleans, Florida and California this March.

The stark difference is partly caused by changing circulation patterns in the Atlantic as the ocean warms and expands.

Swathes of the coast known as the Emerald Coast in the state of Veracruz are storm-battered, flooded and falling into the sea, and a quarter of neighboring Tabasco state will be inundated by 2050, according to one study.

Around the world, facing similar slow-motion battles with the water, coastal communities from Quebec to New Zealand have begun beating a “managed retreat.”

Very little, however, seems managed about the retreat from El Bosque. When the Xolo family fled their home on Nov. 21, they left in the middle of the night, all 10 children under a tarpaulin in pouring rain.

When The Associated Press visited El Bosque during a storm at the end of November, the community was accessible only by foot, or motorbike. That same day the shelter was closed, with papered-over windows and a government sign advertising “8 steps to protect your health in the event of a flood.”

Meanwhile, new houses will not be ready before fall 2024, according to Raúl García, head of Tabasco’s urban development department, who himself said the process is too slow.

While advocates call for specific climate adaptation laws, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, born just inland, has made oil development a key part of his platform. That might change if former Mexico City Mayor and accomplished scientist Claudia Sheinbaum is elected president next year. Despite being López Obrador’s protégée, she pledges to commit Mexico to sustainability, a promise more urgent than ever.

Eglisa Arias Arias, a grandmother of two, was forced to flee her home in El Bosque on Nov 3.

“I would go to sleep listening to the sea’s noise,” she said. “I would tell him I know I’m going to miss you because with that noise you taught me how to love you.”

When the flood came for Arias’ house, she only asked the sea for enough time to collect her things, and it gave her that.

“And so, when I left there, I said goodbye to the sea. I gave him thanks for the time he was there for me.”

The AP names its five Breakthrough Entertainers of 2023

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — In this big year of entertainment — think “Barbenheimer,” the twin conquests of Taylor Swift and Beyoncé and the jolting strikes by actors and writers — we witnessed five streaking stars. Their party was 2023.

Kris Bowers, René Rapp, Charles Melton, Lily Gladstone and Ayo Edebiri all set down markers in TV, film and music this year. The five have been named The Associated Press’ Breakthrough Entertainers of the Year.

Gladstone and Melton both snagged Golden Globe nominations and are getting Oscar buzz for their work in “Killers of the Flower Moon” and “May December,” respectively. Gladstone has been called “the quiet, powerful center” at the heart of Martin Scorsese real-life tale of greed and treachery, while Melton “will break your heart” in his movie about an actor preparing to play a Mary Kay Letourneau-like role.

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A year of success for all the honorees puts all those years of working hard in perspective.

"I was walking dogs and working Chinese takeout seven years ago," Melton tells the AP.

For Gladstone, the weight of history is woven into her success. If she were to win an Academy Award, she'd become the first Native American to ever win a competitive Oscar. "It would be an incredible moment in my life, but it would mean so much more than just me," she says.

On the small screen, Edebiri had a great 2023, earning Emmy and Golden Globe nominations for her role as Sydney Adamu on Hulu's culinary dramedy "The Bear" and laughs for her portrayal of Josie in the satirical coming-of-age teen comedy "Bottoms."

"I was really fortunate to have people in my corner who were like, 'We're going to help you. Like, why wouldn't we?'" she tells the AP.

Like her fellow honorees, Rapp was making a name for herself as an actor but made the leap to pop star. She went from "Mean Girls" on Broadway and Mindy Kaling's "The Sex Lives of College Girls" on TV to betting on herself and her music, releasing her first album, "Snow Angel," and touring.

Of her experience as an actor, Rapp is honest: "It was just like a welcomed blessing that was a means to get to what I wanted to do." Apparently others agree: "Snow Angel" debuted at No. 44 on Billboard 200 Album charts.

For Bowers, it's all been about music right from the start. This year alone, the composer and pianist's credits include "Origin" and "The Color Purple" in addition to "Chevalier," "Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story," and "Haunted Mansion."

"I feel like the daily process is always trying to figure out the voice inside that's telling me that I don't belong or shouldn't be here," he says.

For him and the four other honorees, the place they do belong is on the list of The Associated Press' Breakthrough Entertainers of the Year.

After recalls and infections, experts say safer eyedrops will require new FDA powers

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — When you buy eyedrops at a U.S. store, you might assume you're getting a product made in a clean, well-maintained factory that's passed muster with health regulators.

But repeated recalls involving over-the-counter drops are drawing new attention to just how little U.S. officials know about the conditions at some manufacturing plants on the other side of the world — and the limited tools they have to intervene when there's a problem.

The Food and Drug Administration is asking Congress for new powers, including the ability to mandate drug recalls and require eyedrop makers to undergo inspections before shipping products to the U.S. But experts say those capabilities will do little without more staff and resources for foreign inspections, which were a challenge even before the COVID-19 pandemic forced regulators to skip thousands of visits.

"The FDA is not getting its job done in terms of drug quality assurance inspections abroad," said David Ridley of Duke University and co-author of a recent paper tracking the downturn in inspections. "Very few foreign drugmakers have been inspected in the past four years."

In 2022, FDA foreign inspections were down 79% from 2019, according to agency records collected by Ridley's group. Inspections increased this year but are still far below pre-pandemic levels.

FDA spokesman Jeremy Kahn said: "The FDA works to inspect as many facilities possible, but ultimately industry is responsible for the quality of their products."

An October recall of two dozen eyedrop brands came after FDA staff found cracked floors, barefoot workers and other unsanitary conditions at a Mumbai plant that supplied products to CVS, Walmart and other major retailers. It was the first time FDA staff had visited the site.

That inspection was prompted by an earlier recall of tainted eyedrops from a different Indian plant that's been linked to four deaths and more than a dozen cases of vision loss. That plant had also never been

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previously inspected.

"These are very rare instances, but what we've seen is that these products can cause real harm," said Dr. Timothy Janetos, an ophthalmologist at Northwestern University. "Something needs to change."

Experts point to three possible changes:

EARLIER INSPECTIONS

Prescription medicines are highly regulated. Before a drugmaker can sell one in the U.S., it must undergo FDA review to establish its safety and effectiveness. As part of the process, the FDA typically inspects the factory where the drug will be made.

But eyedrops and other over-the-counter products don't undergo preliminary review or inspections. Instead, they are governed by a different system called a monograph, essentially a generic recipe for all medicines in a particular class. So long as drugmakers attest that they are using the standard recipe, they can launch a product within days of filing with the FDA.

"It's nothing more than electronic paperwork," said Dr. Sandra Brown of the Dry Eye Foundation, a non-profit advocating for increased regulation. "There's no requirement for the facility to be inspected prior to shipping for sale."

The FDA says it has flexibility to adjust its review process "to ensure safety."

But the agency is asking Congress for the power to require manufacturers of eyedrops and other sterile products to give at least six months notice before shipping products from a new factory. That would give inspectors time to visit facilities that aren't on their radar.

The proposal could face pushback from some over-the-counter drugmakers, who aren't accustomed to preapproval inspections.

But Brown says the unique risks of tainted eyedrops require a different approach from pills and tablets.

"Anything you swallow is going to meet up with your stomach acid, which is going to kill most bacteria," Brown said. "It's much more dangerous to put a product in your eye."

REQUIRING RECALLS

The FDA warned consumers in late October not to use the eyedrops sold at CVS, Rite-Aid and other stores. But the products weren't officially recalled until Nov. 15, almost three weeks later.

That's because Indian manufacturer, Kilitch Healthcare, initially declined to cooperate. The FDA can force recalls of food, medical devices and many other products, but it lacks the same authority for drugs and instead must ask companies to voluntarily take action.

The FDA recently asked Congress for mandatory recall authority over drugs.

FUNDING FOREIGN INSPECTORS

Since the 1990s, drug manufacturing has increasingly moved to India, China and other lower-cost countries.

The Government Accountability Office has raised concerns for years about the FDA's oversight of the global supply chain, flagging it as a "high-risk" issue for more than a decade.

The FDA said in a statement it uses "all available tools" to ensure Americans get "high quality, safe and effective" medications.

The agency generally prioritizes factories that have never been inspected or haven't been inspected in the last five years. It halted most routine, in-person foreign inspections in March 2020 and did not resume them until 2022. The agency didn't conduct any inspections in India during the first year of COVID-19.

FDA leaders have long said it's challenging to recruit and keep overseas inspectors.

Experts say Congress can and should address that.

"Federal hiring is inherently slow and pay is often not competitive," said Ridley, the Duke researcher. "Congress needs to try and help FDA solve that problem and then hold them responsible for staffing inspections."

US Asians and Pacific Islanders view democracy with concern, AP-NORC/AAPI Data poll shows

By MATT BROWN and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — About 7 in 10 Asian American and Pacific Islanders in the United States believe the country is headed in the wrong direction and only about 1 in 10 believe democracy is working “extremely” or “very” well, according to a new poll from AAPI Data and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

About half say they disapprove of President Joe Biden, though more lean toward the Democratic Party than toward the Republicans. The poll shows Asian Americans are more likely to trust Democrats over Republicans to handle issues like the spread of misinformation, election administration, student debt and climate change, but slightly more likely to trust Republicans than Democrats on handling the economy and split on which is better suited to handle immigration. Many in the community trust neither party to handle major issues, especially election integrity and misinformation.

The poll is part of a series of surveys designed to reflect the views of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, whose attitudes and opinions can often not be analyzed in other surveys due to small sample sizes. It finds that the dour views among Asian Americans are broadly in line with the perspectives of the general public. In a December AP-NORC poll of U.S. adults, 75% said they believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. Asian Americans hold only a slightly more positive view of Biden than the general public, at 45% compared with 41% of all U.S. adults in December.

Cassie Villasin, a product manager in Washington, said she believed the country has gotten worse in recent years but said “that doesn’t necessarily mean it was all Joe Biden’s fault. I think that it was already going downhill prior to his election.” Villasin said she approved of Biden generally, citing issues like his handling of student loan debt.

Just 12% of Asian American adults believe U.S. democracy is working extremely or very well, though another 47% say it functions “somewhat” well. Three quarters said the views of most people living in the U.S. should matter significantly when enacting policy in the country. That is slightly higher than the number who said the same of the views of people from their similar background, at 64%, and substantially more who said the same of the opinions of policy makers, at 31%, or interest groups at 7%.

Joy Kobayashi, a retiree in California, said she feared Donald Trump’s potential reelection in 2024 signaled an “existential crisis for democracy” but that she believes U.S. democracy “is currently functioning quite well” because of the criminal indictments against the former president for various issues related to the 2020 election.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are broadly skeptical of both parties’ presidential nominating processes. Only 27% have a high degree of confidence in the Democrats’ selection process and 20% feel the same for the Republican nominee process.

“I’m not going to say they are perfect,” Kobayashi, 63, said of the Democratic Party. “But they are much more for trying to fight to make voting convenient and not requiring things like photo ID or putting up artificial barriers.”

“I choose to believe that democracy is working, but I have my doubts,” said Ed Robertson, an independent in Arizona. Robertson said he believes the 2020 election was correctly decided but that “corruption” exists in all elections.

Will Chou, a Republican, said that American democracy had been “unchanged” as a system for at least the last 100 years. “I don’t think (democracy is) under threat. We have so many checks and balances and separation of powers, which are all structural elements of the Constitution. And I think it’s worked,” Chou said.

Chou, 55, said that he trusts Republicans to better handle elections and believes Democrats are “letting in millions of millions of people from outside and find ways to let these people vote.”

Concerns about misinformation were high, with 83% saying misinformation is a major issue in U.S. elections, surpassing concerns over election integrity issues or restrictions on free speech.

"It seems like more misinformation is spread through the Republican Party from my personal experiences," Villasin said. "In terms of informing people with scientific evidence, or just evidence in general, it seems like the Democratic Party is more likely to provide that," she said.

Chou said that misinformation is a major problem but believed that both Democrats and Republicans often spread false claims. Kobayashi, on the other hand, believes social media platforms restricting some information, including misinformation, is a "violation of free speech" but, not a major issue in U.S. politics.

The poll of 1,115 U.S. adults who are Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders was conducted Nov. 6-15, 2023, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based Amplify AAPI Panel, designed to be representative of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

A volcano on Hawaii's Big Island is sacred to spiritual practitioners and treasured by astronomers

By DEEPA BHARATH and AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

MAUNA KEA, Hawaii (AP) — Shane Palacat-Nelsen's voice drops to a reverent tone as he tells the story of the snow goddess Poliahu who Native Hawaiians believe inhabits the summit of Mauna Kea, the highest point in Hawaii.

The tale speaks of a chief who yearned to court Poliahu but was stopped by her attendants guarding the sacred mountain top — the abode of the gods and cradle of creation.

Today, this sublime summit on Hawaii's Big Island is also treasured by astronomers as a portal to finding answers to the universe's many mysteries, creating varied — and sometimes incompatible — views on what's best for Mauna Kea's future.

The chief was eventually granted access on the condition that he stepped only on the same set of footprints left by the attendant escorting him up and down, said Palacat-Nelsen. He says it's a metaphor for why Mauna Kea must be protected from further human intrusion, pollution and erosion.

"You do not go up the sacred mountain unless you are called. You do not go up without a purpose."

Mauna Kea is a dormant 14,000-foot shield volcano. In Native Hawaiian lore, it is the first-born son of the sky father and earth mother. The mountain's dry atmosphere and limited light pollution make for a perfect location to study the skies — one of just a handful on the planet.

Over the past 50 years, astronomers have mounted a dozen giant telescopes on the summit, with several yielding exalted discoveries, like proving the Milky Way has a supermassive black hole at its center. That research led to a Nobel Prize in Physics in 2020.

The proliferation of observatories has troubled many Native Hawaiians, who have pushed back. In their view, such construction is polluting the sacred mountain top and eroding the environment. In 2019, thousands protested a proposed \$2.65-billion Thirty Meter Telescope project near the summit. This protest catalyzed the passage of a new state law transferring jurisdiction of the mountain to a new stewardship authority comprising scientists and Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners.

Neither side wants to reduce this debate to a culture-versus-science conflict because Hawaiian spirituality embraces science, and many astronomers respect Hawaiian culture. Some observatory staff and cultural practitioners are taking small, tentative steps toward new dialogue, but overcoming the divide will involve difficult conversations and understanding different perspectives.

Mauna Kea's summit soars 13,796 feet (4,205 meters) above sea level, evoking an ethereal feeling as fluffy clouds swaddle its cinder cones and blanket its reddish, almost Mars-like soil. On a clear day, Mauna Loa, one of the world's most active volcanoes, is visible.

Climbing Mauna Kea is like peeling the layers of an onion, says Kealoha Pisciotta, a longtime activist. Its slopes contain ceremonial platforms, ancestral burial sites and the waters of Hawaii's lone alpine lake, believed to possess healing properties.

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"The higher you go, the closer your heart is to the heavens," she says, adding that building and bulldozing near the summit threatens people's sacred connection to the land.

Palacat-Nelsen, who served on the working group that laid the foundation for the new authority, says to protect the mountain and preserve the summit's sacredness, people must be ready to have uncomfortable conversations.

John O'Meara, who moved to Hawaii to become the chief scientist at Keck shortly before the 2019 protest, is now a key player in that dialogue. He's learning about the strong connection many Native Hawaiians have to Mauna Kea, and he's fascinated by similarities between spirituality and astronomy.

"We are fundamentally asking the same questions, which are: Where are we? Where did we come from? And where are we going? There is a deep connection to the universe...which is the thing that we should be focusing on," he said.

Doug Simons, director of the University of Hawaii's Institute for Astronomy, points to the opening lines of the Kumulipo, a centuries-old Hawaiian creation chant which describes a scene strikingly similar to what astronomers believe existed during the Big Bang.

The Kumulipo's description of a dark, eternal form of energy from which everything emerges sounds to Simons like dark energy, which astronomers believe predated the universe. Mauna Kea's telescopes are at the forefront of discoveries about dark energy, Simons said.

Lanakila Mangauil, a Native Hawaiian spiritual practitioner, was around 9 when he first stepped on the mountain for snow play at lower elevations. His family never went to the summit.

"One of the important spiritual practices on Mauna Kea is our absence," he said. "We stay off it because it is sacred."

Mangauil doesn't like to use the word "religion" to describe his spiritual practice. Hawaiians don't have a central religion, he said, but spiritual practices born of different communities, families and environments.

Not all Native Hawaiians hold Mauna Kea sacred in a religious sense, including Makana Silva, an astronomer who grew up on Oahu and was raised Catholic. He is now a post-doctoral fellow at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, and visited Mauna Kea's summit for the first time three years ago. He believes astronomy on the mountain should thrive so there's a place for Hawaiians to perpetuate their legacy of innovation.

The future of astronomy on the mountain will in large part be decided by the Mauna Kea Stewardship and Oversight Authority, which is taking over managing the mountain from the University of Hawaii. Astronomers like Simons worry that if the 65-year lease for the summit lands expires as scheduled in 2033, it could mean the end for astronomy in Hawaii. Simons says that would be "catastrophic" and hurt the aspirations of Hawaii's budding astronomers.

Palacat-Nelsen doesn't believe astronomy on the summit will end any time soon. But he does see the lease being renewed at a higher price than the \$1 a year the University of Hawaii pays now.

He holds out hope for better understanding between the two communities. He recently invited a few Keck astronomers and officials to his family's "heiau" or place of worship on Big Island. It had an impact on Rich Matsuda, Keck's interim director, who said the experience shed light on the extensive preparation required to enter a sacred space, such as leaving one's everyday troubles outside. He has since followed similar protocols when traveling to the summit and believes they could be shared more broadly with other telescope workers.

Palacat-Nelsen said such efforts by observatories give him hope that people will become more mindful of their footprints on Mauna Kea. He is grateful to his ancestors for preserving Mauna Kea so current generations have the opportunity to experience the divine. He wonders if he can do that for posterity.

"Can they speak about me in that way 200 years from now?" he asks. "I hope."

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Today in History: December 14, U.S. COVID vaccinations begin

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 14, the 348th day of 2023. There are 17 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 14, 2020, the largest vaccination campaign in U.S. history began with health workers getting shots on the same day the nation's COVID-19 death toll hit 300,000.

On this date:

In 1799, the first president of the United States, George Washington, died at his Mount Vernon, Virginia, home at age 67.

In 1819, Alabama joined the Union as the 22nd state.

In 1861, Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, died at Windsor Castle at age 42.

In 1911, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (ROH'-ahl AH'-mun-suhn) and his team became the first men to reach the South Pole, beating out a British expedition led by Robert F. Scott.

In 1939, the Soviet Union was expelled from the League of Nations for invading Finland.

In 1961, a school bus was hit by a passenger train at a crossing near Greeley, Colorado, killing 20 students.

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States, ruled that Congress was within its authority to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964 against racial discrimination by private businesses (in this case, a motel that refused to cater to Blacks).

In 1981, Israel annexed the Golan Heights, which it had seized from Syria in 1967.

In 1985, former New York Yankees outfielder Roger Maris, who'd hit 61 home runs during the 1961 season, died in Houston at age 51.

In 1986, the experimental aircraft Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager, took off from Edwards Air Force Base in California on the first non-stop, non-refueled flight around the world.

In 2006, a British police inquiry concluded that the deaths of Princess Diana and her boyfriend, Dodi Fayed, in a 1997 Paris car crash were a "tragic accident," and that allegations of a murder conspiracy were unfounded. Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun died in New York at age 83.

In 2012, a gunman with a semi-automatic rifle killed 20 first-graders and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, then took his own life as police arrived; the 20-year-old had also fatally shot his mother at their home before carrying out the attack on the school.

In 2013, actor Peter O'Toole who achieved instant stardom as Lawrence of Arabia and was nominated eight times for an Academy Award without winning, died in London at age 81.

In 2020, the Electoral College decisively confirmed Joe Biden as the nation's next president, ratifying his November victory in a state-by-state repudiation of President Donald Trump's refusal to concede he had lost; electors gave Biden 306 votes to Trump's 232.

In 2021, Stephen Curry set a new NBA career 3-point record; the Golden State Warriors' guard hit his 2,974th 3-point shot against the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden.

Today's Birthdays: Singer-actor Abbe Lane is 92. Actor Hal Williams is 89. Pop singer Joyce Vincent Wilson (Tony Orlando and Dawn) is 77. Entertainment executive Michael Ovitz is 77. Actor Dee Wallace is 75. R&B singer Ronnie McNeir (The Four Tops) is 74. Rock musician Cliff Williams is 74. Actor-comedian T.K. Carter is 67. Rock singer-musician Mike Scott (The Waterboys) is 65. Singer-musician Peter "Spider" Stacy (The Pogues) is 65. Actor Cynthia Gibb is 60. Actor Nancy Valen is 58. Actor Archie Kao is 54. Actor Natascha McElhone is 54. Actor-comedian Michaela Watkins is 52. Actor-comedian Miranda Hart is 51. R&B singer Brian Dalrymple (Soul For Real) is 48. Actor KaDee Strickland is 48. Actor Tammy Blanchard is 47. Actor Sophie Monk is 44. Actor-singer-musician Jackson Rathbone is 39. Actor Vanessa Hudgens is 35. Rock/R&B singer Tori Kelly is 31.