

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, Dec. 15

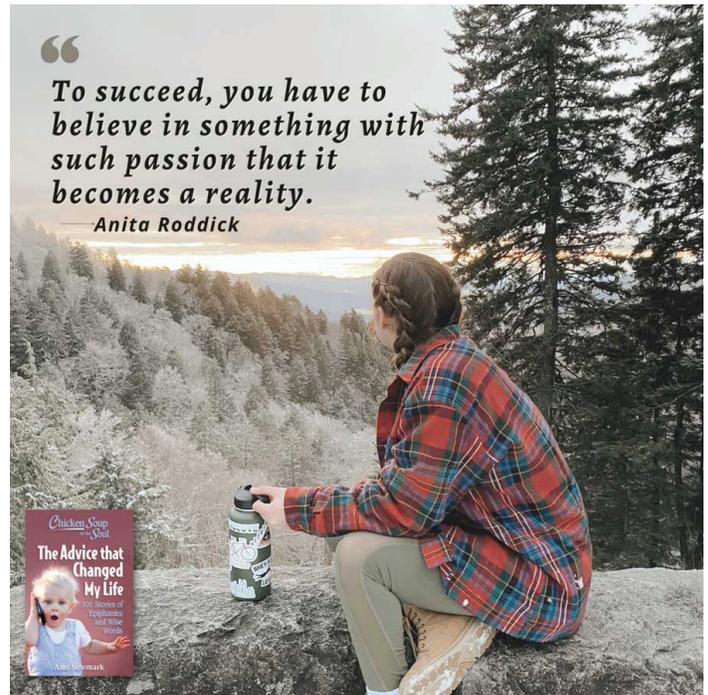
Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, rice pilaf, California blend vegetables, peach crisp, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Egg wraps.
School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.
Basketball Double Header at West Central: Boys C and Girls C, 4 p.m.; Boys JV, 5 p.m.; Girls JV, 5:15 p.m.; girls Varsity and Boys Varsity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

Saturday, Dec. 16

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

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.



“

To succeed, you have to believe in something with such passion that it becomes a reality.

—Anita Roddick

Girls Wrestling at South Border (Ashley), 9 a.m.
Boys Wrestling at Sioux Valley (Volga), 10 a.m.

Sunday, Dec. 17

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sunday school program practice, 9 a.m.; Worship with Sunday school program, 10:30 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion: at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school Christmas program practice, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship with Sunday school Christmas program during service, 10:30 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.; Christmas program and dinner, 5 p.m. (everyone welcome to attend)

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

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

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1440

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The European Union agreed yesterday to begin talks with Ukraine and Moldova on bringing the countries into the 27-member organization. Ukraine applied for membership last February, four days after Russia's initial invasion.

European officials said yesterday they had detained four men—three in Germany and one in the Netherlands—on suspicions of plotting terror attacks on Jewish sites across Europe. The suspects are believed to be members of Hamas—authorities said one person had been tasked

with locating a stockpile of weapons that had been secretly stored in the past. Authorities said there was not a direct link with the Israel-Hamas war, as their investigation preceded Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel.

No. 1 Nebraska will face defending national champions Texas in the NCAA women's volleyball national championship Sunday (3 pm ET, ABC). Texas, who has won four titles, will be led by standouts Madisen Skinner—the Big 12 player of the year—and middle blocker Asjia O'Neal. The five-time champion Huskers (32-1), whose only loss this season was to Wisconsin, are led by captains Merritt Beason and Lexi Rodriguez.

Comedian Trevor Noah tapped to host Grammy Awards (Feb. 4) for fourth consecutive year. Director Greta Gerwig selected as president of 2024 Cannes Film Festival jury.

College football bowl season begins tomorrow, with 43 bowl games over the next three weeks; see complete viewing schedule.

George McGinnis, Basketball Hall of Famer, dies at 73 of a cardiac arrest. Emmanuelle Debever, actress who accused French actor Gérard Depardieu of sexual assault, dies at 60 by apparent suicide.

Amazon's Project Kuiper demonstrates communication between satellites via infrared lasers; allows the space-based internet network to send 100GB of data per second between multiple satellites.

Daydreaming may play a role in brain plasticity, training the brain to react in certain ways to the subject of the daydream. Scientists identify neurons linking poor sleep with high stress.

Proof-of-principle device extracts uranium from seawater, demonstrating a potential alternative source of nuclear fuel; estimates suggest 4.5 billion tons of uranium is diluted in the world's oceans.

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.3%, Dow +0.4%, Nasdaq +0.2%), Dow sets new record close; US 10-year Treasury yield falls below 4% for the first time since August. European Central Bank and Bank of England hold interest rates steady, giving no signal for future rate cuts.

General Motors' self-driving vehicle business Cruise to lay off 900 employees, or 24% of workforce; news comes after Cruise dismisses nine senior leaders amid vehicle safety investigation.

French media giant Vivendi mulls splitting into three businesses: a premium television channel, an advertising unit, and an entity that includes its majority stake in publishing group Lagardère.

From our partners: The art of the balance transfer. This card offers not one, not two, not six, but 18 months of 0% intro APR on qualifying balance transfers, giving you a year and a half to save big. All with no annual fee. Learn more about this card today.

US Supreme Court declines to hear arguments challenging Illinois ban on owning and selling high-power semi-automatic rifles and high-capacity magazines.

House passes \$886B annual defense authorization bill; legislation extends controversial foreign surveillance program, leaves out provisions limiting abortion coverage and transgender care for service members.

Former FBI counterintelligence chief sentenced to more than four years in prison for working on behalf of Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska.

Tigers win five of six games at Sisseton

Groton Areas basketball teams won five of the six games played Thursday in Sisseton.

Boys Varsity

The boys varsity team defeated Sisseton, 83-38. The Tigers scored the last 17 points of the first quarter and Sisseton had 11 turnovers as the Tiger defense was relentless on the floor. Groton Area led at the quarter breaks at 30-6, 63-21 and 74-30.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 21 points, three rebounds, two assists and three steals. Ryder Johnson had 18 points, five rebounds, four assists, two steals and one block. Jacob Zak had 16 points, seven rebounds, four assists, four steals and one block. Keegen Tracy had seven points, one rebound and one steal. Colby Dunker had six points and four rebounds. Logan Ringgenberg had four points, three rebounds, one steal and one block. Kassen Keogh had four points, two rebounds, one assist and four steals. Gage Sippel had two points and three rebounds. Blake Pauli had three rebounds, two assists and one block.

Groton Area made 30 of 44 two-pointers for 68 percent, four of 15 three-pointers for 27 percent, 11 of 21 free throws for 52 percent, had 31 rebounds, five turnovers, 14 assists, 19 steals, 14 team fouls and five blocks.

3-Pointers: Tracy 1, Johnson 1, Tietz 1, Zak 1.

Nate Tchida led the Redmen with 13 points while Mason Herzog had eight, Gage Hanson seven, Austin Kohl had three, Christian Shepherd, Bradley Hanson and Jeremiah Perez each had two points and Hayden Hellwig added one free throw.

Sisseton made 13 of 32 field goals for 41 percent, eight of 16 free throws for 50 percent, had 21 turnovers and 13 team fouls.

Boys Junior Varsity

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 66-25. Everyone scored for the Tigers with Kassen Keough leading the way with 14 points followed by Gage Sippel with 12, Jayden Schwan 11, Taylor Diegel had nine, Karson Zak and Easton Weber each had six, Blake Pauli four and Logan Ringgenberg and Turner Thompson each had two points.

3-Pointers: Keough 2, Schwan 1, Diegel 1, Weber 3.

Hayden Hellwig and Jeremias Perez led the Redmen with seven points apiece.

Boys C Game

Groton Area won the C game, 58-25, leading at the quarter stops at 14-6, 29-13 and 45-20.

Karson Zak led Groton Area with 20 points followed by Easton Weber with 11, Logan Warrington seven, Ethan Kroll six, Jayden Schwan and T.C. Schuster each had five, and Jace Johnson and Ryder Schelle each had two points.

3-Pointers: Zak 4, Schwan 1, Weber 3, Schuster 1, Kroll 1.

Vincent Donnell led Sisseton with 10 points.

Girls Varsity

Sisseton won the girls varsity game, 65-22. The Redmen had a 20-point run in the third quarter. Sisseton led at the quarter stops at 17-5, 31-23 and 53-15.

Jaedyn Penning led Groton Area with six points and seven rebounds. Jerica Locke had five points, five rebounds, one assist and two steals. Rylee Dunker had four points, five rebounds. Mia Crank had three points, two rebounds. Kennedy Hansen had two points, one rebounds, two assists. Brooklyn Hansen had one point, two rebounds. Faith Trapahgen had one point and one rebound. Sydney Leicht had two rebounds and two steals. Laila Roberts had one assist. Talli Wright had one rebound. Taryn Traphagen had one steal.

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Groton Area made four of 28 two-pointers for 14 percent, two of 20 three-pointers for 10 percent, eight of 12 free throws for 67 percent, had 26 rebounds, 17 turnovers, four assists, five steals and seven team fouls.

3-Pointers: Penning 1, Crank 1.

Krista Langager led the Redmen with 20 points followed by Hannah Levenson with 15, Alexia Quinn had 12, Emmalee Nielsen and Chloe Langager each had seven points and Ruby Rice and Rylie Huff each had two points.

Girls Junior Varsity

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 35-27. Brooklyn Hansen led Groton Area with nine points while Faith Traphagen had six, Taryn Traphagen five, Kelly Tracy four, Ashlynn Warrington three, McKenna Tietz and Mia Crank each had two and Laila Roberts and Talli Wright each had one points.

3-Pointers: > Traphagen 1, Hoffman 2.

Elliot Hortness led Sisseton with 10 points.

Girls C Game

Groton Area won the C game, 40-22, leading at the quarter stops at 12-2, 25-10 and 31-18.

McKenna Tietz led Groton Area with 15 points while Sydney Locke had nine, Emerlee Jones had five, Kella Tracy four, Avery Crank three, and Brenna Imrie and Estella Sanchez each had two points.

3- Pointers: Locke 1, Crank 1.

Saylor Langager led Sisseton with 11 points.

All games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The varsity games were sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Locke Electric and Rix Farms/R&M Farms. Sub-varsity sponsors were Gordon and Dorene Nelson for two games, Ed and Connie Stauch for a game and one that remained nameless.

Shane and Laura Clark assisted Paul and Jeslyn Kosel.

- Paul Kosel

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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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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.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #4 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus – 11, Coyotes – 11, Jackelopes – 9, Chipmunks – 7, Cheetahs – 6, Foxes – 4

Men's High Games: Brad Waage – 215, Tony Waage – 199, Ron Belden – 190

Women's High Games: Dar Larson – 157, Vicki Walter – 154, Brenda Waage – 149

Men's High Series: Brad Waage – 582, Ron Belden – 515, Roger Spanier – 483

Women's High Series: Vicki Walter – 433, Darci Spanier – 424, Brenda Waage – 407

Week 4 – Most 9 Counts w/out Fill – Foxes with 16!

NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves Run Away With The Win Over The Beavers

Minot, N.D. – The Northern State women's basketball team took down Minot State, 67-57 on Thursday night. Rianna Fillipi notched her first double-double of the season with ten points and rebounds each.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 67, MISU 57

Records: NSU 9-2 (5-0 NSIC), MISU 3-10 (1-4 NSIC)

Attendance: 170

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State notched 18 points in the first quarter, 19 in the second, 12 in the third, and 18 in the fourth; out-scoring the Beavers by ten in the first quarter

NSU notched 30 points in the paint along with 36 rebounds off the glass and 15 assists in the win

The Wolves shot 40.0 percent from the floor, 20.0 percent from the 3-point arc, and 82.4 percentage from the foul line

Northern handled the ball well with eight turnovers along with scoring 23 points off Minot's 15 turnovers

Madelyn Bragg led the team with 23 points and eight rebounds along with draining 81.1 percent of shots from the floor

Rianna Fillipi dished out ten rebounds to lead the team along with ten points for her first double-double of the season and five assists

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 23 points, 8 rebounds, 81.8 field goal %

Rianna Fillipi: 10 points, 10 rebounds, 5 assists,

Alayna Benike: 8 points, 4 assists, 40.0 3-point %

UP NEXT

Northern State returns to action Saturday to face off against Minnesota Crookston. Tip-off time is set for 3 p.m. from Crookston, Minn. against the Golden Eagles to end the first half of the season.

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Ehresmann, Krueger are NEC Champions

Groton Area had two wrestlers that took first place at the Northeast Conference match. The tournaments were held Thursday.

Christian Ehresmann took first at 150 pounds and Liza Krueger took first at 100 pounds. Gavin England took third at 285 pounds while placing fourth were Lincoln Krause at 113m Walker Zoellner at 132 and Ben Hoeft at 175.

100: Liza Krueger (2-1) placed 1st and scored 20.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 2-1 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 2-1 received a bye () (Bye)

1st Place Match - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 2-1 won by fall over Reagan Cook (Tiospa Zina) 2-6 (Fall 2:00)

106: Wyatt Hagen (3-3) scored 3.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Tayten Kurkowski (Webster Area) 9-3 won by decision over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 3-3 (Dec 4-2)

Cons. Round 1 - Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 3-3 won by fall over Lincoln Kilker (Britton/Hecla) 4-8 (Fall 3:59)

Cons. Semi - Maddon Odland (Redfield) 7-3 won by fall over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 3-3 (Fall 3:43)

113: Lincoln Krause (3-3) placed 4th and scored 9.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 3-3 won by fall over Bentley Fokken (Deuel) 1-4 (Fall 1:52)

Semifinal - Evan Folk (Milbank) 7-4 won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 3-3 (Fall 1:42)

Cons. Semi - Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 3-3 won by decision over Tate Neuharth (Redfield) 0-5 (Dec 4-1)

3rd Place Match - Kaden Wookey (Clark/Willow Lake) 6-2 won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 3-3 (Fall 0:46)

120: John Bisbee (0-4)

Quarterfinal - John Bisbee (Groton Area) 0-4 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Owen Fischer (Milbank) 8-2 won by fall over John Bisbee (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 0:17)

Cons. Semi - Jake Wipf (Redfield) 2-1 won by fall over John Bisbee (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 0:24)

126: Donavon Block (1-4)

Quarterfinal - Tacey Miller (Webster Area) 8-3 won by fall over Donavon Block (Groton Area) 1-4 (Fall 1:35)

Cons. Round 1 - Ryker Gauger (Deuel) 5-5 won by fall over Donavon Block (Groton Area) 1-4 (Fall 4:38)

132: Walker Zoellner (4-3) placed 4th and scored 7.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 4-3 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Conner Zens (Redfield) 9-0 won by decision over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 4-3 (Dec 7-0)

Cons. Semi - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 4-3 won by fall over Tyson Hagberg (Deuel) 2-6 (Fall 3:59)

3rd Place Match - John Yonker (Hamlin) 7-3 won by decision over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 4-3 (Dec 6-0)

150: Christian Ehresmann (4-1) placed 1st and scored 20.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 4-1 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 4-1 won by fall over Joe French (Milbank) 9-5 (Fall 4:50)

1st Place Match - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 4-1 won by decision over Gavin Kloos (Deuel) 7-1 (Dec 7-4)

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165: Easten Ekern (0-4) p

Quarterfinal - Ben Suther (Britton/Hecla) 9-4 won by fall over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 1:07)

Cons. Round 1 - Easten Ekern (Groton Area) 0-4 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Hughin Current (Sisseton) 2-4 won by fall over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 0:45)

175: Ben Hoeft (2-4) placed 4th and scored 7.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Dashed Davidson (Britton/Hecla) 5-6 won by fall over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 2-4 (Fall 0:46)

Cons. Round 1 - Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 2-4 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 2-4 won by major decision over Hunter Bourassa (Webster Area) 2-4 (MD 19-8)

3rd Place Match - Dashed Davidson (Britton/Hecla) 5-6 won by fall over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 2-4 (Fall 0:48)

190: Drew Thurston (0-4)

Quarterfinal - Isaac Nelson (Webster Area) 5-3 won by fall over Drew Thurston (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 1:20)

Cons. Round 1 - Drew Thurston (Groton Area) 0-4 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Riley Popp (Clark/Willow Lake) 2-7 won by fall over Drew Thurston (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 1:32)

215: Isiah Scepaniak (0-4)

Quarterfinal - Collin Gaikowski (Clark/Willow Lake) 4-6 won by fall over Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 0:25)

Cons. Round 1 - Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-4 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Matthew Angiolelli (Webster Area) 3-4 won by fall over Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-4 (Fall 3:47)

285: Gavin Englund (6-2) placed 3rd and scored 15.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Grady Fey (Redfield) 8-0 won by fall over Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 6-2 (Fall 1:14)

Cons. Round 1 - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 6-2 won by fall over Raymond Klein (Deuel) 5-6 (Fall 2:02)

Cons. Semi - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 6-2 won by fall over Noah Smith (Hamlin) 10-4 (Fall 0:45)

3rd Place Match - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 6-2 won by fall over Tucker Hardy (Britton/Hecla) 8-5 (Fall 3:40)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Fundraising begins for \$100 million institute at underground lab in Lead

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 14, 2023 6:30 PM

A lot of research happens underground, from physicists searching for tiny particles to geologists studying tectonic movements of Earth's crust.

But those disciplines are not necessarily communicating with one another.

The Sanford Underground Research Facility Foundation aims to change that by raising money and constructing a \$100 million Institute for Underground Science in Lead by 2034.

"There is a need because there is so much being done in underground science," said Constance Walter, of the foundation. "We want to unite the global underground science community."

The institute would be an addition to the existing Sanford Underground Research Facility, which consists of scientific experiments and other infrastructure housed below and above ground at the former Homestake Gold Mine. Former mining tunnels nearly a mile underground provide an exceptionally low-disturbance environment for experiments in physics, biology and geology.

The facility is particularly known for research into dark matter, the undetected substance that's theorized to make up much of the matter in the universe, and neutrinos, one of the most abundant subatomic particles.

The institute would host public lectures and conferences at a 300-person auditorium and provide space for collaborative research. There would also be on-site housing for researchers.

"Most of this stuff is already happening," Walter said. "What we're hoping to do is now create a space where it can all happen under one roof."

Fundraising to build the new institute has just begun and will continue over the next decade.

"And it will be entirely privately funded," Walter said.

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

State boards approve \$20.64 million in bonds, loans and grants

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - DECEMBER 14, 2023 4:17 PM

State government boards approved \$20.64 million in bonds, loans and grants to private businesses and communities during meetings this month.

Members of the Board of Economic Development and Economic Development Finance Authority are appointed by the governor. The bond, loan and grant programs are administered by the Governor's Office of Economic Development.

A press release from the Governor's Office says the projects funded by the bonds, loans and grants are projected to create 336 new jobs.

The following is a list of the projects receiving funding.

County Line Dairy, LLC: This is a large dairy in northeast Hamlin County with 5,000 cows. It was approved for up to \$12.5 million in bonds to help build structures to manage cow manure.

Borns Group, Inc.: A family-owned marketing business in Aberdeen, Borns Group received a loan of \$1.57 million to help buy new equipment.

Dark Canyon Coffee: This coffee roasting company in Rapid City serves five states, including South Dakota, and was approved for a \$60,000 loan to expand and buy new equipment.

Convenience store in Pickstown: Two loans totaling \$245,000 will support the purchase and improvement of an existing convenience store in Pickstown. This will include remodeling and buying new equipment. The first loan will be made to MaSco8 LLC for \$115,000 for remodeling the facility and expansion of the existing building. The second will go to Gus Stop 8 for \$130,000 to purchase new equipment.

DeSCO Architectural, Inc.: Based in De Smet, this company makes aluminum windows and got a loan of \$34,366 to buy automated equipment for increased production.

S&S Ag Supply, LLC: A seed cleaning and treatment company in Hurley, it received a \$358,384 loan to move to a new facility.

Local Infrastructure Improvement Program (LIIP) Grants: Three communities received \$500,000 each to expand their industrial parks. The communities are the cities of Viborg and Corsica and the Lake Area Improvement Corporation in Madison.

Red Rock Real Estate, LLC: In Centerville, this company will build a new milk processing plant near a dairy farm. It was approved for a program refunding \$1.09 million of the sales and use tax it pays for the project. The plant will process about 1.8 million pounds of milk daily.

Sonstegard Foods: This company will build a new egg-laying facility in Turner County with a \$3.28 million grant. The facility will have five barns for 1.25 million chickens, a manure barn, a processing facility, a feed mill, and a pullet site.

What's not in Noem's budget? Governor omitted some summer-study items sought by lawmakers

Some legislators also want to consider a tuition freeze for state universities

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 14, 2023 3:49 PM

Legislators spent long hours last summer digging deep into specific issues deemed potential priorities for the 2024 legislative session, including long-term care, funding for county governments and legal representation for low-income defendants.

During her budget address last week, Gov. Kristi Noem did propose a 4% increase in state reimbursement to health care providers, including nursing homes, and she also proposed the creation of a statewide indigent legal defense commission. But she omitted other big-ticket recommendations from the summer studies that would affect the state's budget.

That leaves legislators to figure out how Noem's "meat and potatoes" budget aligns with their own priorities, said Rep. Roger Chase, R-Huron. The annual legislative session begins Jan. 9 at the Capitol in Pierre.

"The governor gave her proposal and the Legislature will come up with legislation we're comfortable with, and then we'll see where it goes," Chase said. "When it's all said and done, we'll have a legislative session where we can work together and come up with positive funding for all of South Dakota."

'A very small step' for county funding support

Noem's proposal for a statewide indigent legal defense commission was a recommendation from the Indigent Legal Services Task Force that also addresses one of the largest concerns from the county funding summer study. The proposed commission would cost the state an estimated \$1.4 million a year, which would save counties an estimated \$1.5 million to \$2 million a year — saving South Dakota taxpayers a net of up to \$600,000.

Currently, counties bear the entire burden for providing public defenders or paying for court-appointed attorneys for criminal defendants who can't afford a lawyer. As envisioned by the task force, a state commission would pick up criminal appeals filed by defendants who'd been represented by county-funded

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lawyers at the trial level, and would handle appeals in abuse and neglect cases. The commission could also study and recommend joint state-county funding structures, seek grants for public defense, audit bills from private attorneys who contract with counties for indigent legal aid, and create and monitor caseloads statewide.

House of Representatives Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said the state commission addresses the most important county expense that can be handled more effectively and efficiently by the state. Mortenson served on the task force this summer.

"It's an opportunity to provide legal services in a better way to folks who flat out can't afford it. That's a constitutional right," Mortenson said. "In South Dakota, we want to make sure you have the right to a competent attorney, make it accessible across the state and not bankrupt counties."

Some legislators don't think the proposal goes far enough. The county funding summer study committee recommended a bill that would set a cap on indigent defense costs for counties, saving them millions of dollars more per year.

Sen. Randy Deibert, R-Spearfish and vice-chair of the county funding summer study, said he was disappointed in the budget proposal.

"I was expecting a small step and we got a very small one," Deibert said. "It's a great concept, and I'm really happy we got what we got, but I was expecting we'd get some more."

Another top recommendation put forward by the county funding summer study was the creation of local government cybersecurity grants. Noem's administration has turned down federal funding for grants twice. Deibert still plans to bring a bill forward on the issue.

Chase, who was chair of the county funding summer study, said most of the bills recommended by the group will still be introduced during session and won't impact the state budget. He added that legislators are working with Noem's administration to work out differences on how to address indigent legal defense costs.

"We feel good about where we're headed," Chase said. "We just have to work with the Governor's Office to get details worked out."

Tuition freeze as a workforce retention tool

Noem mentioned a public university tuition freeze and long-term care in her budget address to legislators, saying some of them might support more money for those items "instead of helping some providers" such as community service providers and developmental disability providers. She proposed a 4% increase in state funding to those providers as well as nursing homes, state employees and K-12 education — something many legislators welcomed.

But House Speaker Hugh Bartels, R-Watertown, is optimistic about finding funds for another tuition freeze. For several years — even before the pandemic — when the Legislature's budget committee conducted its revenue adjustment, there was an increase in revenue projections rather than a decrease. If that trend continues, that'll free up some money.

"I think a tuition freeze will be one of the top two or three things we look at then," Bartels said. "I think that's a high priority if there's additional revenue we think we're going to get."

This might be the year that bucks that trend though, Mortenson said. Noem has been outspoken about the need to be fiscally responsible and conservative this session as the state spends the last of billions in federal pandemic aid it received during the past several years. As of October 2023, the state's ongoing general fund revenue was up 12% compared to the prior year.

The South Dakota Board of Regents indicated at a meeting earlier this year that a tuition freeze would be its main request of the Legislature and Noem this session. A tuition freeze would cost an estimated \$4.2 million.

Regents President Tim Rave told Mortenson and Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, during the board's meeting in Brookings on Thursday that the board would want to discuss a tuition freeze if there is extra money found during session.

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Tuition and fees at South Dakota universities have increased 1.1% over the last four years while Minnesota and Montana universities have seen a 10% increase in that time and Wyoming has seen over a 15% increase, Regents Executive Director Nathan Lukkes said during the meeting.

Combined with the expansion of in-state tuition for out-of-state students from surrounding states, the state's university system has seen an increase in enrollment numbers and the number of out-of-state students who choose to stay and work in South Dakota after graduation, Lukkes said. Nearly 800 out-of-state South Dakota graduates remained and worked in-state last year, he added.

"You can see this is working," Lukkes said. "It's moving the needle."

Mortenson told South Dakota Searchlight that affordable higher education is a "proven way of recruiting young people to the state, keeping them in the state and bolstering our workforce."

"It's easier to recruit an 18-year-old from out of state than a 45-year-old with a mortgage," Mortenson added. "That'll be a priority of mine and others in the caucus who see workforce retention — or attracting and retaining young, hardworking folks — in a tuition freeze."

Slow Medicaid enrollment could open up funds

Bartels served on the long-term care summer study, which came out with recommendations including a \$5 million technology grant for nursing facilities and a proposal to expand Medicaid to palliative care, which could cost between \$1.23 million and \$3.55 million.

Bartels is skeptical about the the need for the high price tag on the technology grant, but hopes there will be some extra Medicaid money available this session to address some of the summer study's proposals.

Medicaid enrollment dropped substantially this year after the expiration of federal pandemic requirements, and re-enrollment after voter-approved Medicaid expansion has been slow, which could free up some more money in the budget.

"That number is up in the air, so we might be able to absorb it," Bartels said.

Competition for one-time funds: prisons or other priorities

Overall, Bartels expects each priority will get a little bit of what it needs.

He agrees with Noem's proposal to place about a quarter-billion in additional funds into the state's new prison projects, which could save millions of dollars in interest by not bonding for the projects.

Construction of the additional women's prison in Rapid City is underway, but Noem said last week "there is a \$27 million shortfall to build this facility with the space and programming that it needs." The proposed men's prison in rural Lincoln County — which would largely replace the antiquated penitentiary in Sioux Falls — is mired in controversy over its location.

Noem told the Dakota Scout recently that she would "be up there kicking and screaming" if legislators made amendments to prison funding in her proposed budget.

"That'll be the competition there," Bartels said. "How much do we put in the incarceration fund versus other one-time ventures?"

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

North Dakota defends DAPL, Standing Rock fears for its water

BY: JEFF BEACH AND AMY DALRYMPLE - DECEMBER 14, 2023 6:45 PM

North Dakota officials filed more than 200 pages arguing to keep the Dakota Access Pipeline operating just as a public comment period for the controversial project closed Wednesday.

The state argues in comments to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that shutting down the pipeline would cause "irreparable harm" to North Dakota, including a loss of oil revenue and a shift of oil transportation to rail.

"These submitted comments reaffirm that the safest, most efficient and most environmentally friendly

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means of transporting all liquids is by pipeline – especially when that pipeline is already in place and has been operating safely for over six years,” Gov. Doug Burgum said in a statement.

Leaders of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, meanwhile, have pointed to the potential harm a pipeline breach would have on the tribe’s water supply.

“Our tribe is not saying we’re against oil. We are not,” Standing Rock Chairwoman Janet Alkire told the North Dakota Monitor last month. “What we are saying is, ‘can you not put it in our water?’ That’s all we want is to protect the water.”

The pipeline has been operating since June 2017, carrying crude oil from North Dakota’s Bakken oilfield to Illinois on a route that passes through South Dakota. In 2020, a judge revoked the easement for the pipeline crossing under the Missouri River just north of the Standing Rock reservation, requiring additional study but allowing the pipeline to continue operating.

The Missouri River is the water supply for Standing Rock Reservation and Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota.

Corps options

The Corps is now studying five alternatives: One would allow the pipeline to continue operating, while another would add additional conditions. Two options involve shutting down the pipeline, either leaving the pipe in the ground or removing it. A fifth option involves looking at a route north of Bismarck; however, the Corps has no authority over routing of pipelines. A reroute would require additional permitting and review.

The Corps held two days of meetings in Bismarck in November, which included taking public comment on a draft environmental impact statement as well as tribal consultation sessions that were not open to the public.

Alkire and Cheyenne River Chairman Ryman LeBeau of the Cheyenne River Sioux in South Dakota participated in the tribal comment session. In interviews afterward, both said the pipeline is operating illegally without an easement and should be shut down.

Alkire said tribal chairs are tasked with protecting future generations of tribal members.

“When we are in these positions, we have to plan for the seven generations. That’s what our ancestors always told us. That means seven generations ahead of you,” Alkire said.

The Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which straddles the North Dakota-South Dakota state line, became a flashpoint of environmental protests during pipeline construction.

Environmental groups continue to criticize the project. The Dakota Resource Council called the oil spill response plan inadequate and argues the pipeline should be shut down.

North Dakota arguments

In its filing, North Dakota says shutting down Dakota Access, commonly referred to as DAPL, would cost the state \$1.2 billion in the first year and \$116 million annually thereafter.

At risk is an estimated:

\$375 million annually in direct oil tax revenue

\$23 million in interest costs to the Bank of North Dakota

\$30 million annually in Trust Lands revenue \$102 million in losses annually to the Legacy Fund

\$3 million losses in profits by the State Mill.

The losses by the State Mill, which processes wheat and other grains into flour, would result from increased costs for shipping because of more competition with the oil industry on rail lines.

Such competition would likely have a negative ripple effect across agriculture in the Midwest.

A study by Elaine Kub, an agricultural economist from South Dakota, is part of the state of North Dakota’s filing.

Because of increased freight competition, she projects annual losses of more than \$3 billion for the ag industry.

The state also submitted a 2021 declaration from Chairman Mark Fox of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Ari-

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kara Nation in which he said shutting down DAPL would cause the tribe financial and environmental harm.

Environmental justice dilemma

About 60 pages of the state of North Dakota's comments are a study from the University of Chicago that weighs the pros and cons of blocking the pipeline. The study, first written in 2017 and updated in October, concludes that about 81% of the oil flowing from North Dakota through the pipeline would still reach its intended market by rail. But shutting down the pipeline would have a negative effect on those living along those rails.

"Blocking DAPL presents an environmental justice dilemma, since the policy reduces global climate damages while imposing local pollution damages onto communities near railroad corridors," the study said in its conclusion.

A final environmental impact statement is expected sometime next year.

North Dakota Monitor Deputy Editor Jeff Beach is based in the Fargo area. His interests include agriculture, renewable energy and rural issues.

Amy Dalrymple is editor-in-chief of North Dakota's States Newsroom outlet, North Dakota Monitor. She previously was editor of The Bismarck Tribune and a newspaper journalist in Williston and Fargo.

State ag officials oppose beef imports from Paraguay

BY: JARED STRONG - DECEMBER 14, 2023 4:41 PM

Federal officials did not sufficiently assess the risk posed by a devastating cattle disease when they recently decided to allow beef imports from Paraguay, according to agriculture officials of several top beef-producing states.

A new U.S. Department of Agriculture rule that ended a 25-year prohibition on those imports went into effect Thursday.

The prohibition was the result of the South American country's struggles to eradicate foot-and-mouth disease, a much-feared affliction that is highly contagious and has the potential to cause huge losses for livestock producers. The USDA estimates that a severe outbreak in the United States has the potential to cost more than \$200 billion.

The viral disease causes blisters to form in the mouths and on the feet of infected cattle. It is not often fatal to adult animals but can lessen their food consumption and limit their movement. It does not infect humans.

The disease was eradicated in the United States nearly 100 years ago, according to the USDA. The worst outbreak of the disease was in 1914, when 22 states were quarantined and more than 170,000 cattle and other livestock were destroyed to contain the virus. The virus can infect a range of animals with divided hooves.

Imports of those animals and their meat is generally prohibited from countries where the disease circulates. Paraguay's last known outbreak of the disease was about a decade ago, but the USDA does not consider the country free of the disease because its cattle are still routinely vaccinated against it.

The USDA analyzed the risks to domestic livestock posed by the import of chilled or frozen beef from Paraguay — at the country's request to allow those imports — and proposed a rule to allow the imports in March. That rule was officially codified last month and is now in effect.

"Our risk analysis concluded that the overall risk associated with importing fresh beef from Paraguay is low and that Paraguay has the infrastructure and emergency response capabilities needed to effectively report, contain, and eradicate (the disease) in the event of an outbreak and to do so in a timely manner," the USDA wrote in regard to the new rule.

The rule has requirements that the disease has not been detected in the country for at least a year and that the cattle are inspected before and after slaughter for signs of the illness.

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Beef groups dispute USDA risk analysis

But beef industry groups and some federal lawmakers have opposed the change, claiming that the risk analysis was based on outdated information. They say the USDA's last visit to Paraguay was more than nine years ago.

The department did not immediately respond to a request to comment for this article. Its risk analysis included information provided in recent years by Paraguay.

This week, Iowa's Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig and officials from seven other states asked Tom Vilsack, the U.S. agriculture secretary, to halt the change and review the risks further.

"While we are strong proponents of robust trade, we must do so in a manner that does not put our livestock producers at risk," Naig and the others wrote in a letter to Vilsack. "We urge USDA to consider pausing the implementation of this rule until a more reliable risk assessment can be completed based on modern visits in Paraguay."

Ag officials in Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming also signed the letter.

Cattlemen claim beef decision based on diplomacy goals

The letter mimicked the criticism that has been leveled for months by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. The association has alleged that the conclusions of the USDA's risk analysis were pre-determined by government officials who wish to bolster international relations with the country.

"While winning friends and allies in South America may be part of the long-term interests of U.S. diplomacy, it should not be done on the backs of U.S. cattle producers or by putting at risk the health and livelihood of the safest and most efficient cattle and beef production system in the world," Kent Bacus, an executive of the association, said in a press release last month.

Paraguay is a key U.S. ally in South America, a continent where federal officials have worried about China's growing influence. Beef is one of Paraguay's major exports.

Congresswoman Maria Salazar, a Florida Republican, called Paraguay "the region's most reliably pro-American country" in a recent letter to President Joe Biden about an unrelated matter.

"At a time when so many countries in Latin America are enhancing their ties with China, Paraguay insists on keeping its strong relationship with the United States," she wrote.

But some federal lawmakers fear that beef imports from Paraguay are too risky. This month, Sens. Jon Tester, a Montana Democrat, and Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican, introduced legislation to suspend the imports.

Also this month, U.S. Rep. Randy Feenstra, an Iowa Republican, joined 13 colleagues in a letter to Vilsack that sought to delay the imports amid further review of the safety risks.

"By allowing countries like Paraguay — where foot-and-mouth disease remains prevalent — to sell their beef in the United States, we unnecessarily threaten our domestic herds with disease and jeopardize the financial wellbeing of cattle producers and their families," Feenstra said last week.

Feenstra did not elaborate on why he believes the disease is prevalent in Paraguay, and his spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request to comment.

Jared Strong is the senior reporter for the Iowa Capital Dispatch. He has written about Iowans and the important issues that affect them for more than 15 years, previously for the Carroll Times Herald and the Des Moines Register. His investigative work exposing police misconduct has notched several state and national awards. He is a longtime trustee of the Iowa Freedom of Information Council, which fights for open records and open government. He is a lifelong Iowan and has lived mostly in rural western parts of the state.

US Senate postpones winter break as lawmakers try to craft an immigration deal

SD Sen. Thune: 'I still don't see any way it gets done'

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ARIANA FIGUEROA - DECEMBER 14, 2023 4:27 PM

WASHINGTON — Members of the U.S. House headed home Thursday for a three-week winter break without completing work on several must-pass bills, but senators are now scheduled to return to Capitol Hill on Monday as leaders in the upper chamber and the White House look for an agreement on immigration policy.

The last-minute scheduling change for the Senate came Thursday afternoon, when Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced he was adding a week to the calendar to try to unlock funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, potentially combined with new limits on acceptance of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

"That will give negotiators from the White House, Senate Democrats, Senate Republicans a time to work through the weekend in an effort to reach a framework agreement," Schumer said. "It's not easy to reach an agreement on something this complicated. This might be one of the most difficult things we have ever had to work through."

Schumer said Democrats "hope to come to an agreement, but no matter what, members should be aware that we will vote on a supplemental proposal next week."

Senate Minority Whip John Thune said Thursday afternoon "signs are encouraging," but said lawmakers were still a long way from reaching a bipartisan agreement on border security that can pass the Senate.

The South Dakota Republican said even if a bipartisan deal is struck in the days ahead, GOP senators are likely to slow down final approval of the bill.

"Even if we had text by early next week, I still don't see any way it gets done because we've got members who are going to object for various reasons and use all the procedural tools at their disposal," Thune said, referring to specific language in legislation.

It also remains an "open question" whether House GOP leaders would bring that chamber back before the scheduled end of their recess on Jan. 9 to clear any bipartisan deal for the president's desk, Thune said. The Senate had been expected to return on Jan. 8.

Progressive, Latino lawmakers raise concerns

Senate negotiators and the White House have tried for weeks to reach agreement on changes in immigration law that GOP leaders insist are necessary to approve more than \$100 billion in emergency aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Progressive and Latino Democratic lawmakers have become increasingly concerned and frustrated about the direction talks are moving and have urged the Senate and President Joe Biden to reject major changes in immigration policy that mirror far-right goals.

Some of those proposals being floated include the resurrection of a pandemic-era immigration tool used to expel migrants and bar them from claiming asylum known as Title 42, and raising the bar for migrants to claim asylum by making changes to the "credible fear" standard.

Senate Democrats' supplemental spending package includes \$1.42 billion for staff hires for immigration judges, such as clerks, attorneys and interpreters and \$5.31 billion for U.S. Customs and Border Protection to expand border security, such as fentanyl detection, among other provisions.

But Republicans say that increase in funding isn't enough, calling for a reduction in the number of undocumented immigrants entering the United States from Mexico.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday morning the emergency spending bill for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and the U.S. border security needs to have "substantive policy changes at the border instead of just throwing money at the problem."

"The Senate cannot claim to address major national security challenges without a solution to the one we are facing on the Southern border," McConnell said.

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, the lead negotiator for Democrats on immigration and border policy, said that after the White House became involved, there has been some progress.

"We don't have a deal, but we've gotten closer to it," he said.

Murphy added that he's not sure if the House will pick up the supplemental if the Senate strikes a deal.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday during the daily press briefing the president believes negotiations are "heading in the right direction."

"We understand we have to find a bipartisan compromise," she said, adding that the White House wants a deal by the end of the year.

Jean-Pierre also addressed concerns from Latino and progressive Democrats about agreeing to immigration proposals that are reminiscent of the Trump era.

"(The president) believes we need to fix what's happening with the broken immigration system," she said. "He's willing to find a bipartisan compromise to get that done."

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.

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

Ellsworth, SD National Guard funding included in massive defense bill passed by Congress

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 14, 2023 12:27 PM

WASHINGTON — The massive annual defense policy package cleared Congress ahead of the holiday recess, despite protests about attaching a foreign surveillance extension and criticism that the bill did not block a Pentagon abortion policy.

U.S. House lawmakers approved the package on Thursday 310-118, under a suspension of the chamber's rules, meaning a two-thirds majority was required. South Dakota Republican Dusty Johnson voted yes; South Dakota Sens. John Thune and Mike Rounds, both Republicans, voted for the bill earlier in the Senate.

A bloc of the most far-right representatives voted against the legislation, as did members of the House's most progressive wing.

If signed into law, which is expected, the roughly \$884 billion legislation would authorize a 5.2% pay raise for troops, approve a nuclear submarine program for the Indo-Pacific region and carry the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, also known as FISA, until mid-April.

The National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, for fiscal year 2024 authorizes the dollar amounts that will be dedicated to continuing military and nuclear operations but does not directly provide the funds. Congress has yet to pass its annual funding bills.

Direct funding for Ukraine's war effort is also knotted up in congressional infighting over immigration policy. The NDAA would direct \$300 million to Ukraine in security assistance as well as support programs for Ukrainian troops suffering post-traumatic stress disorders and brain injuries.

South Dakota-related items in the defense bill

\$269 million for construction projects at Ellsworth Air Force Base to accommodate the future arrival of B-21 bombers.

\$2.325 billion for B-21 procurement (the first B-21s are expected to be stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base sometime this decade).

\$66.8 million for the Long Range Standoff Weapon, which will enable the B-21 to provide better conventional and nuclear deterrence in a contested environment.

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\$5.25 million to complete the construction of the National Guard Readiness Center in Sioux Falls.

Promotes the use and funding of "cold spray" technology for maintenance, repair and overhaul to increase the service life of aging systems, provided by a South Dakota company using a technology developed at the South Dakota Mines in Rapid City.

— Sources: Offices of Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, and Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota

Bipartisan Senate passage

The U.S. Senate passed the legislation in a bipartisan 87-13 vote Wednesday night.

"I am pleased that the Senate has come together to once again pass a strong, bipartisan defense bill. This is a dangerous moment in the world, and the NDAA makes critical progress toward meeting the threats we face," Sen. Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat who chairs the Senate Committee on Armed Services, said in a statement late Wednesday.

Sen. Roger Wicker, the committee's ranking member, said the bill "should signal to China, Russia, and others that we will not accept a world where America does not have the best fighting force."

"While I would have preferred to send the President a substantially larger proposed investment in our industrial base, he now should approve the monumental investments Congress intends to make in our servicemembers, warships, submarines, aircraft, and technology," the Mississippi Republican said in a statement after the vote.

The vote followed a failed attempt by GOP Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky to block a controversial decision to use the defense package as a vehicle to temporarily extend FISA, which would have expired Dec. 31.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle oppose the surveillance law's ability to scoop up communications by U.S. citizens while spying on foreign targets.

'Best shipbuilders in the world'

Several senators praised the bill for economic activity that will be brought to their states.

Sen. John Fetterman of Pennsylvania said \$300 million was authorized for his state's defense-related workforce and activities.

"Pennsylvania's military installations and defense industry continue to play a key role in supporting allies like Taiwan, Ukraine, and Israel against attacks on democracy abroad," Fetterman, a Democrat, said in a statement Thursday morning.

Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia also issued a morning statement lauding the legislation's support of Virginia's defense and shipbuilding industries.

"The legislation also bolsters our alliances, as it includes my bipartisan bill to prevent any U.S. President from withdrawing from NATO, as well as provisions I secured to support the Australia-U.K-U.S. (AUKUS) agreement.

"Our NATO and AUKUS alliances are critical to our national security and economic growth in Hampton Roads, which is home to the only operational NATO command in the U.S. and the best shipbuilders in the world," the Virginia Democrat said, referring to an area in Virginia with a large military presence, including Langley Air Force Base and the Norfolk Naval Shipyard.

Senate Republican Whip John Thune of South Dakota on the floor Tuesday applauded the bill's funding authorization for the B-21 bomber, the first of which will be located in his state at Ellsworth Air Force Base.

Senators who opposed the bill included New Jersey Democrat Cory Booker, Indiana Republican Mike Braun, Missouri Republican Josh Hawley, Utah Republican Mike Lee, Wyoming Republican Cynthia Lummis, Massachusetts Democrats Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren, Oregon Democrats Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, Kentucky's Rand Paul, Vermont independent Bernie Sanders, Ohio Republican J.D. Vance and Vermont Democrat Peter Welch.

Hawley vehemently opposed the legislation after his amendment to compensate those exposed to residual radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project was removed from the final bill.

Hawley's original amendment, which passed the Senate in July to be attached to the NDAA, would have

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opened the compensation program for St. Louis, Missouri residents and to those living in Colorado, Idaho, Guam, Montana and New Mexico, as well as expanded coverage areas in Arizona, Nevada and Utah.

Far-right opposition

While the bill followed a relatively smooth path among senators, the defense policy legislation hit opposition in the GOP-led House, where far-right lawmakers maintain their priorities were stripped from the compromise legislation.

"With this NDAA conference report, you almost feel like a parent who's sent a child off to summer camp and they've come back a monster," GOP Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida said on the floor Thursday morning.

Gaetz was among the no votes.

House Freedom Caucus members accused the bill's negotiators of secretive, non-inclusive negotiations during which their amendments to block a Department of Defense abortion policy, ban certain transgender care for troops and completely eliminate any Pentagon diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, programs were nixed.

"The Swamp's 'compromise' NDAA allows the DOD to use your tax dollars to fund abortion travel for servicemembers. As a proud pro-life conservative, I'll be voting NO," Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia posted Tuesday night on X after the Senate voted to advance the bill.

GOP Rep. Ralph Norman of South Carolina wrote on social media Wednesday that "The Backroom NDAA is a disaster for conservatives in so many ways."

The Pentagon's abortion policy gives time off and travel reimbursement for service members who seek abortions in states where it remains legal. The policy, instated after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Roe v. Wade, fueled Alabama GOP Sen. Tommy Tuberville's monthslong freeze on military promotions.

Clyde and Norman both opposed the NDAA Thursday morning, along with outgoing House Freedom Caucus Chair Rep. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania.

Some members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus who voted no included its chair Pramila Jayapal of Washington, deputy chair Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Maxwell Frost of Florida, Cori Bush of Missouri, Summer Lee of Pennsylvania, Mark Pocan of Wisconsin and retiring Earl Blumenauer of Oregon.

Policies on flags, DEI hiring remain

While some far-right House amendments are not in the final text, other conservative priorities remained, including a measure to prohibit, with some conditions negotiated by the Senate, the display of unapproved flags. Democrats protested the original language as a ban on LGBTQ+ flags.

Despite throwing out the amendment to eliminate all DEI programs and positions, negotiators landed on a hiring freeze and pay grade cap for employees on the initiatives.

The Senate receded during negotiations and also allowed a House-led amendment to remain that bans any funding for critical race theory at military service academies and during training.

Negotiators also kept a familiar conservative priority of codifying the rights of parents to review school curricula. The guarantee, usually already available to school parents, will now be codified in the NDAA for parents of schoolchildren enrolled in Department of Defense Education Activity programs.

The legislation heads to President Joe Biden's desk. The administration had called on Congress for the bill's "swift passage."

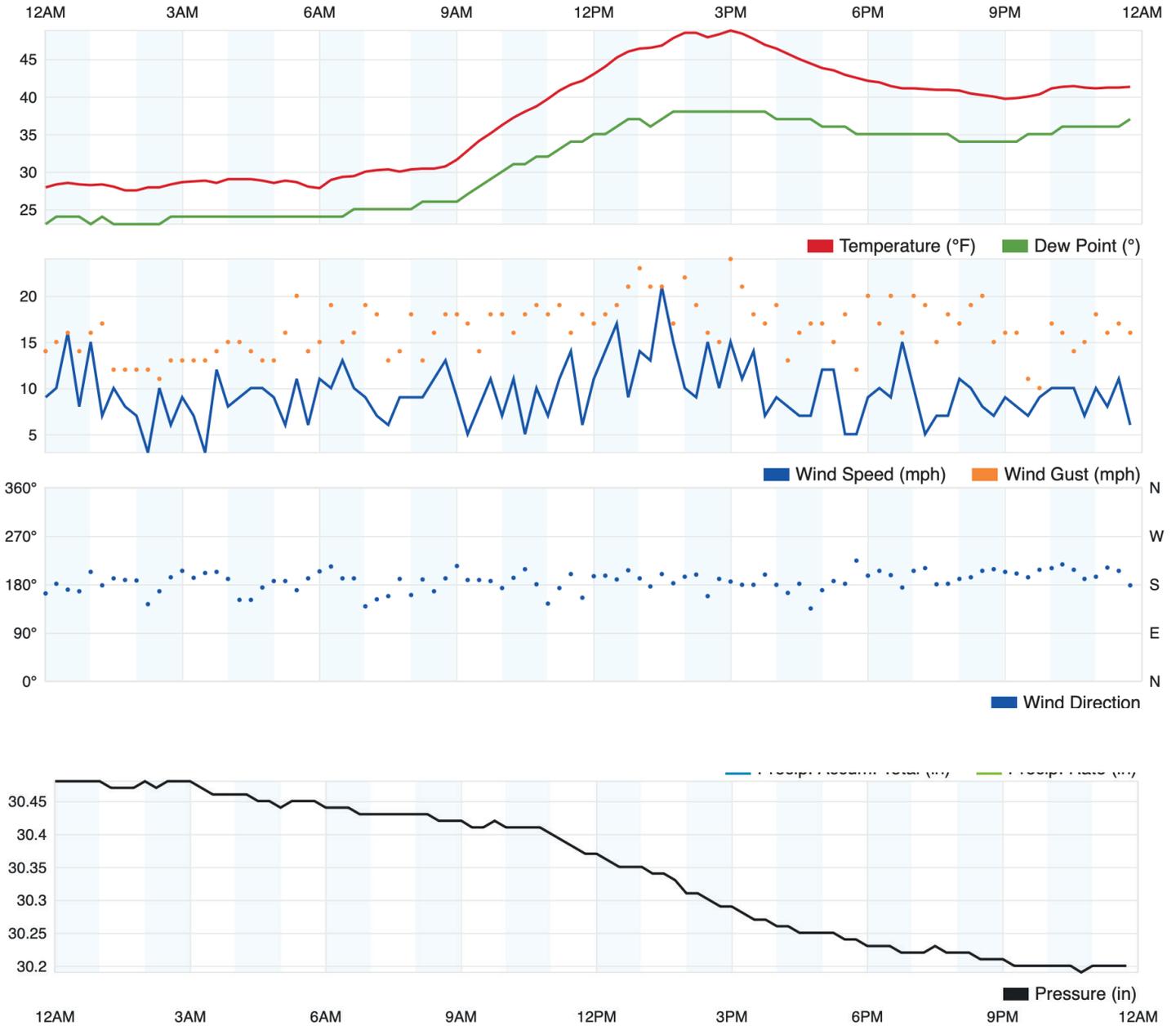
Congress has passed the NDAA for 63 consecutive years. The annual defense policy package typically draws bipartisan support.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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| Fri | Sat | Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Dec 15 | Dec 16 | Dec 17 | Dec 18 | Dec 19 | Dec 20 | Dec 21 |
| | | | | | | |
| 42°F | 35°F | 39°F | 29°F | 40°F | 39°F | 42°F |
| 28°F | 26°F | 17°F | 22°F | 22°F | 26°F | 27°F |
| S | N | NNW | NNW | S | NE | SE |
| 12 MPH | 10 MPH | 16 MPH | 9 MPH | 9 MPH | 8 MPH | 8 MPH |

Your Weekend Forecast

Highs 33 to 43°

Today



Patchy morning fog over n central SD

Daytime: 30% chance of light rain over e SD/w MN

Tonight: 30% chance of precipitation, increasing to 80% over ne SD. Light rain, mixing with and changing over to light snow. Light snow accumulations of 1" or less

Saturday



Light morning snow over far eastern SD with little to no additional accumulation

Dry in the afternoon. Becoming mostly sunny over central SD

Sunday



Dry

Increasing winds out of the northwest 10 to 20 mph



Aberdeen, SD

weather.gov/aberdeen

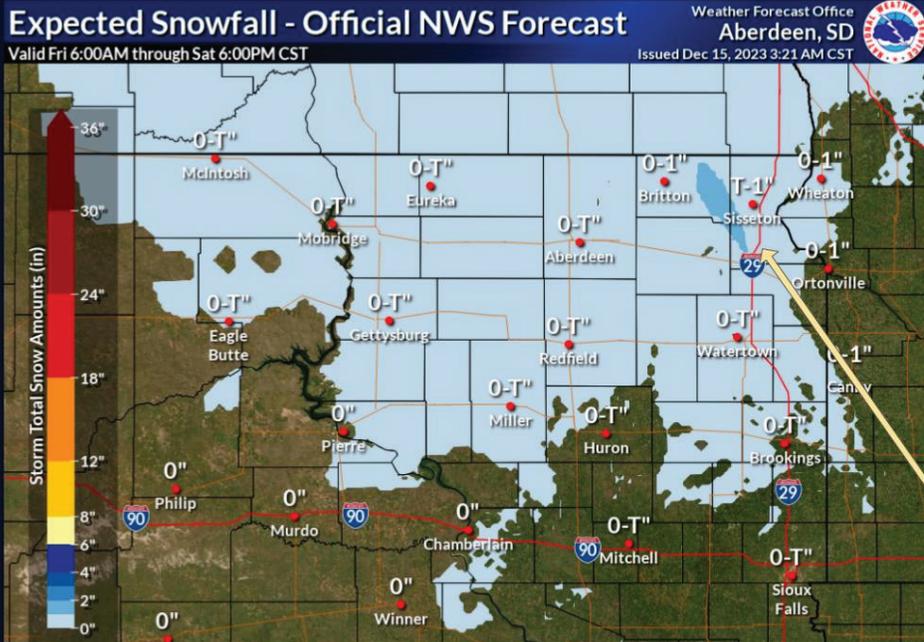
Light precipitation will remain possible into Saturday morning. Expect light rain over eastern SD and west central MN during the daytime hours today. Additional rain over northern SD will transition to a wintry mix before turning to all snow overnight. Light snow accumulations of mainly less than 1" are expected, highest across the higher elevations west of Sisseton. Drier air will work in Saturday afternoon and Sunday.

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Light Snow accumulation possible, mainly overnight into early Saturday morning

Precipitation Timeline



Today: 30% chance of light rain over eastern SD/western MN

Tonight: 30% chance of precipitation, increasing to 80% over northeastern SD. Light rain, mixing with and changing over to light snow. Light snow accumulations of 1" or less, highest across northern portions of the Sisseton Hills.

Light rain is expected become a wintry mix before changing over to light snow overnight. Light snow accumulations of generally 1" or less are expected, highest across the higher elevation west of Sisseton.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 49 °F at 2:56 PM

Low Temp: 28 °F at 1:44 AM

Wind: 24 mph at 3:00 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1939

Record Low: -24 in 1917

Average High: 29

Average Low: 8

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.29

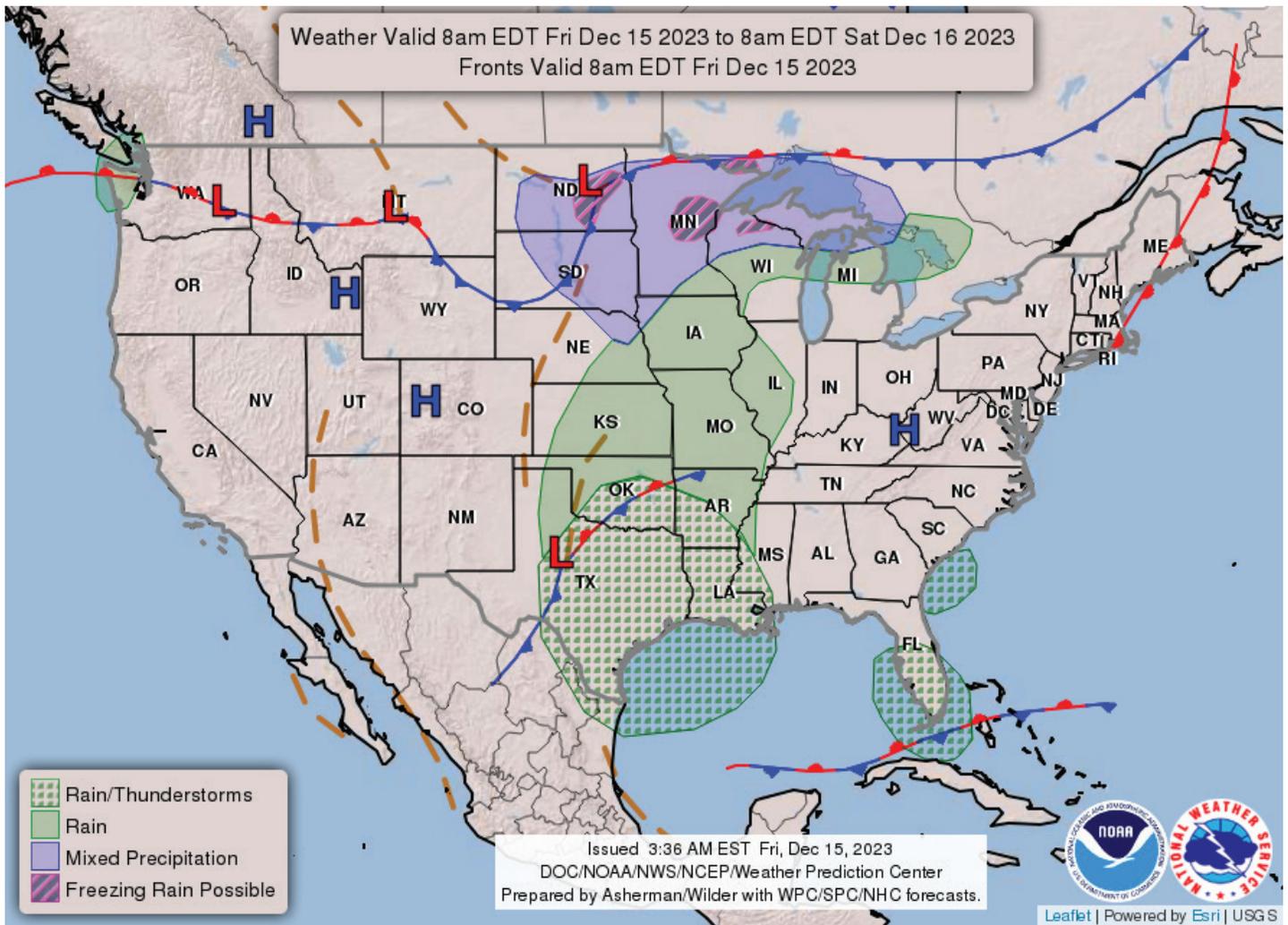
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.50

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:51:26 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:04:19 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 15, 1983: A storm system impacted the region on the 14-15th with five inches of snow and high winds to produce blocked roads and numerous school closings on the 15th throughout most of the eastern third of South Dakota. No travel was advised from late afternoon on the 14th due to low visibility and blocked roads in Roberts and Brookings Counties. The conditions contributed some to several traffic accidents. Meanwhile, snow also spread across Minnesota on December 13th and diminished late on the 15th. Snow accumulations ranged from 1 to 2 inches in west central Minnesota to higher amounts over 10 inches to the east. Winds increased and temperatures began to fall on December 14th as an arctic cold front pushed through the state. The strongest winds occurred during the night of December 14th and into the morning of December 15th. Near-blizzard conditions developed in the southwest and west-central sections of Minnesota where the visibility was reported to be near zero with winds of 20 to 30 mph. The wind chill index dropped to 30 below to 60 below zero. Blowing and drifting snow conditions occurred to some degree throughout all of Minnesota. Snow drifts caused many roads to close. Drifting snow continued during the evening of December 15th as the winds and snowfall gradually diminished. This event, associated with an arctic cold front, was the beginning of what would become, and remains, the coldest stretch of December days on record across most of the area. For the next nine days, beginning on December 16th, Aberdeen did not warm above -6 degrees, enduring temperatures as low as -34 F and high temperatures as low as -15 F. Other stations around the region had very similar cold temperatures during the December 16th through December 24th period, with temperatures warming into single digits above zero on Christmas Day.

1839 - The first of triple storms hit Massachusetts Bay. The storm produced whole gales, and more than 20 inches of snow in interior New England. There was great loss of life at Gloucester MA. (David Ludlum)

1901 - An intense cold front swept across the eastern U.S. The cold front produced heavy rain in Louisiana, and heavy snow in the northeastern U.S. (David Ludlum)

1945 - A record December snowstorm buried Buffalo, NY, under 36.6 inches of snow, with unofficial totals south of the city ranging up to 70 inches. Travel was brought to a halt by the storm. (14th-17th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A major winter storm hit the Great Lakes Region, intensifying explosively as it crossed northern Illinois. High winds and heavy snow created blizzard conditions in southeastern Wisconsin. Winds gusted to 73 mph, and snowfall totals ranged up to 17 inches at LaFarge. The barometric pressure at Chicago IL dropped three quarters of an inch in six hours to 28.96 inches, a record low reading for December. Up to a foot of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and winds in the Chicago area gusted to 75 mph. O'Hare Airport in Chicago was closed for several hours, for only the fourth time in twenty years. High winds derailed train cars at Avon IN. Light winds and partly sunny skies were reported near the center of the storm, a feature typical of tropical storms. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - High pressure in the Pacific Northwest and low pressure in the southwestern U.S. combined to produced high winds from Utah to California. Winds gusting to 70 mph in the San Francisco area left nearly 300,000 residents without electricity. Winds in Utah gusted to 105 mph at Centerville. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A couple of low pressure systems spread heavy snow across the northeastern U.S. Up to two feet of snow was reported along Lake Erie in northeastern Ohio, and up to ten inches was reported in Connecticut. Heavy snow squalls developed over Michigan for the third day in a row. Three Oaks MI reported 25 inches of snow in two days. Twenty-six cities in the north central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 10 degrees below zero at Wichita KS was a December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Freezing rain and ice pellets fell throughout portions of the southeast U.S. The accumulation of ice caused about 683,000 utilities customers to lose power from northern Georgia northward through the western Carolinas. The power outages were the result of ice accretions of up to three-quarter inch in thickness. The ice storm was blamed for at least four deaths (Associated Press).

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

PLANNING AHEAD

It was the Sunday before Christmas and the teacher of the fifth-grade class was reviewing the details of the birth of Jesus. With carefully chosen words, she talked about the difficult journey to Bethlehem. Then she said with sadness, "And when they arrived, there was no room for them in the inn. Wasn't that terrible?"

George, after thinking for a moment about the vacations his family had taken and the careful, detailed plans they made said without thinking, "Why didn't Joseph make a reservation?"

There will be many around us during this holiday season who will make no room – no reservation – for Jesus to be with them this year. We often remind each other that "He's the reason for the Season" but do not take time to explain to others what that "reason" is. We are quick to condemn those who want to take "Christ out of Christmas" but do not take time to plant the message of Christ in their minds and hearts at Christmas. We place the manger scene under the tree, cover it with presents and then wrap it back up and forget about His birth and its significance for another year.

Hanging next to Jesus on a cross was a thief who was dying for crimes he committed. In his final moments, he turned to Him and said, "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus said, "I certainly will! Today you will be with me in paradise." The best day to make your reservation to be with Him is this day if you have not done so. Don't delay!

Prayer: Your Word, Lord, declares with certainty: "Today is the day of salvation." May we take advantage of this day and not risk the uncertainties of life! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:1-7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.



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: 16 Hrs 23 Mins 35 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: 1 Days 15 Hrs 38 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.14.23

11 18 41 46 48 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 53 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

1 3 4 7 8

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$92,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 53 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

32 53 57 60 63 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 22 Mins 34 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: 1 Days 16 Hrs 22 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central-Dakota Christian 59, Gayville-Volin High School 46

Arlington 46, Castlewood 38

Bon Homme 65, Scotland 18

Centerville 65, Avon 33

Colman-Egan 45, Dell Rapids St. Mary 33

DeSmet 44, Estelline-Hendricks 31

Deubrook 68, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 43

Elk Point-Jefferson 68, Parker 31

Elkton-Lake Benton 49, Iroquois-Lake Preston 41

Ethan 53, James Valley Christian 40

Flandreau 62, Beresford 37

Florence-Henry 54, Waverly-South Shore 17

Harding County 55, Timber Lake 10

Highmore-Harrold 39, Potter County 32

Hill City 44, New Underwood 14

Lennox 60, Madison 15

Leola-Frederick High School 43, Aberdeen Christian 41, OT

Milbank 62, Clark-Willow Lake 30

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 66, Miller 36

Philip 44, Stanley County 40

Redfield 51, Deuel 47

Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 45, Corsica/Stickney 35

Sioux Valley 59, Baltic 31

Sisseton 65, Groton Area 22

Tea Area 67, Tri-Valley 41

Vermillion 55, Ponca, Neb. 31

Wagner 73, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 29

Winner 56, Burke 42

Lakota Nations Invitational=

He Sapa Bracket=

Marty Indian 66, Crazy Horse 10

Oelrichs 55, Tiospaye Topa 50

Santee, Neb. 51, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 49

Wakpala 66, Takini 13

Makosica Bracket=

Crow Creek Tribal School 66, St. Francis Indian 28

Dupree 53, Todd County 49

Lower Brule 69, Tiospa Zina Tribal 40

Omaha Nation, Neb. 67, Pine Ridge 32

Oceti Sakowin Bracket=

Lakota Tech 48, McLaughlin 41

Rapid City Christian 60, White River 59

Red Cloud 81, Little Wound 33

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Wall 64, Custer 54

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central-Dakota Christian 63, Gayville-Volin High School 35
Bon Homme 48, Scotland 32
Boys Town, Neb. 73, Vermillion 68
Bridgewater-Emery 75, Menno 38
Canistota 64, Freeman 39
Castlewood 73, Arlington 30
Clark-Willow Lake 58, Milbank 53
DeSmet 62, Estelline-Hendricks 42
Deuel 79, Redfield 29
Elk Point-Jefferson 58, Parker 22
Faith 59, Bison 23
Faulkton 57, Herreid 30
Flandreau 71, Beresford 45
Gregory 73, Colome 28
Groton Area 83, Sisseton 38
Hill City 54, New Underwood 25
Kimball/White Lake 65, Mitchell Christian 24
Lennox 51, Madison 47
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 54, Miller 38
Philip 67, Stanley County 53
Platte-Geddes 77, Burke 47
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 54, Corsica/Stickney 26
Sioux Falls Jefferson 56, Brandon Valley 48
Sioux Valley 62, Baltic 50
Wagner 39, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 26
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 81, Takini 36
Dupree 63, Wakpala 55, OT
Santee, Neb. 100, Oelrichs 26
St. Francis Indian 67, Tiospaye Topa 28
Makosica Bracket=
Little Wound 56, Crow Creek Tribal School 36
Marty Indian 66, Omaha Nation, Neb. 55
McLaughlin 40, Todd County 34
Tiospa Zina Tribal 68, Wall 51
Oceti Bracket=
Lakota Tech 52, Red Cloud 47
Pine Ridge 73, Lower Brule 55
Rapid City Christian 86, Crazy Horse 43
White River 52, Custer 48

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

Easley scores 22 as South Dakota State defeats Mayville State 94-62

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Charlie Easley had 22 points in South Dakota State's 94-62 victory against Mayville State on Thursday night.

Easley added six rebounds and five steals for the Jackrabbits (6-5). Zeke Mayo added 17 points while going 5 of 10 (5 for 9 from 3-point range), and he also had five rebounds. Kalen Garry shot 4 for 12, including 2 for 7 from beyond the arc to finish with 11 points.

The Comets were led in scoring by Thomas Gieske, who finished with 17 points, 11 rebounds and two steals. Jamison Kramer added 15 points for Mayville State. BJ Woods also had 10 points.

Men charged with killing 3,600 birds, including bald and golden eagles, to sell on black market

By MATTHEW BROWN and AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

Two men killed about 3,600 birds, including bald and golden eagles, during a "killing spree" on Montana's Flathead Indian Reservation and elsewhere, then sold eagle parts on a black market that has been a long-running problem for U.S. wildlife officials, a federal grand jury indictment says.

The men worked with others to hunt and kill the birds, according to the indictment, and in at least one instance used a dead deer to lure in an eagle that was shot. The two defendants conspired with others who weren't named to sell eagle feathers, tails, wings and other parts for "significant sums of cash" across the United States and elsewhere, the indictment said.

Simon Paul, 42, of St. Ignatius, Montana and Travis John Branson, 48, of Cusick, Washington, face 13 counts of unlawful trafficking of bald and golden eagles and one count each of conspiracy and violating wildlife trafficking laws.

Text messages obtained by investigators showed Branson and others telling buyers he was "on a killing spree" to collect more eagle tail feathers for future sales, according to the indictment that described Paul as a "shooter" for Branson.

The indictment said the killings began in January 2015 and continued until 2021 near Ronan, Montana, on the Flathead Reservation, home of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. It did not say how many of the 3,600 birds killed were eagles.

Illegal shootings are a leading cause of golden eagle deaths, according to a recent government study.

"We just hope that if these individuals are proven guilty that it will serve as a warning to others that we are watching," said Rich Janssen, director of the tribes' Natural Resources Department. He said that members of the tribes use eagle feathers for traditional dress and in honor ceremonies.

Tribal law enforcement was involved in the investigation of Paul and Branson, but Janssen did not know why it so long for them to be charged.

Bald eagles are the national symbol of the United States, and both bald and golden eagles are widely considered sacred by American Indians. U.S. law prohibits anyone without a permit from killing, wounding or disturbing eagles or taking any parts such as nests or eggs. Even taking feathers found in the wild can be a crime.

Federally recognized tribes can apply for permits with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take a bald or golden eagle for religious purposes, and enrolled tribal members can apply for eagle feathers and other parts from the National Eagle Repository. But there's a lengthy backlog of requests, according to Janssen and two independent eagle researchers.

The researchers said that backlog could be driving the black market for eagle parts. Feathers from young golden eagles are especially in high demand, with waits as long as five years to receive them from the repository, said researcher Bryan Bedrosian with the Teton Raptor Center in Wilson, Wyoming.

"It has kind of created this market unfortunately" for illegal eagle parts, he said.

Addressing those delays could help reduce the illegal trade in eagle parts, said Rob Domenech, executive

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director of Raptor View Research Institute in Missoula, Montana.

He said the area where the birds were allegedly being shot has some of the highest concentrations of eagles and other large raptors in the U.S. West. That includes breeding hawks and eagles and other birds that migrate from the north to winter in the Flathead area.

"It's basically a raptor bonanza at certain times of year, which would make it ripe for this type of activity," Domenech said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials did not immediately respond to questions regarding the backlog of permit requests from tribes. A spokesperson for Montana U.S. Attorney Jesse Laslovich, whose office is prosecuting the case, declined to comment beyond what was in the indictment.

Bald eagles were killed off across most of the U.S. last century, due in large part to the pesticide DDT, but flourished under federal protections and came off the endangered species list in 2007. Their population has been rapidly increasing in recent years. Golden eagle populations are less secure, and researchers say shootings, energy development, lead poisoning and other problems have pushed the species to the brink of decline.

There are an estimated 346,000 bald eagles in the U.S., versus about 40,000 golden eagles, which need much larger areas to survive and are more inclined to have trouble with humans.

Widespread illegal eagle killings last decade brought federal investigations that resulted in criminal convictions against 17 defendants from several states and two South Dakota pawn shops. In that case, the inspected bird parts were bought and sold over the internet, including in Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

Earlier this year a Montana man was sentenced to three years in prison after prosecutors in South Dakota said he sold golden eagle tails for several hundred dollars each.

The grand jury indictment unsealed last week alleges Branson traveled from Washington state to the Flathead Reservation to shoot the eagles.

"When Branson arrived on the Flathead Indian Reservation, Paul would meet and help kill, transport, and ship bald and golden eagles for future sales on the black market," the indictment states.

Paul and Branson were not in custody and were issued summons to appear for arraignments on Jan. 8 in U.S. District Court in Missoula.

Court documents did not name attorneys for the men, and they could not be immediately reached at telephone numbers listed for them.

New Mexico extends ban on oil and gas leasing around Chaco park, an area sacred to Native Americans

By SUSAN MONTROYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — New oil and natural gas leasing will be prohibited on state land surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park, an area sacred to Native Americans, for the next 20 years under an executive order by New Mexico Land Commissioner Stephanie Garcia Richard.

Wednesday's order extends a temporary moratorium that she put in place when she took office in 2019. It covers more than 113 square miles (293 square kilometers) of state trust land in what is a sprawling checkerboard of private, state, federal and tribal holdings in northwestern New Mexico.

The U.S. government last year adopted its own 20-year moratorium on new oil, gas and mineral leasing around Chaco, following a push by pueblos and other Southwestern tribal nations that have cultural ties to the high desert region.

Garcia Richard said during a virtual meeting Thursday with Native American leaders and advocates that the goal is to stop the encroachment of development on Chaco and the tens of thousands of acres beyond the park's boundaries that have yet to be surveyed.

"The greater Chaco landscape is one of the most special places in the world, and it would be foolish not to do everything in our power to protect it," she said in a statement following the meeting.

Cordelia Hooee, the lieutenant governor of Zuni Pueblo, called it a historic day. She said tribal leaders

throughout the region continue to pray for more permanent protections through congressional action.

"Chaco Canyon and the greater Chaco region play an important role in the history, religion and culture of the Zuni people and other pueblo people as well," she said. "Our shared cultural landscapes must be protected into perpetuity, for our survival as Indigenous people is tied to them."

The tribal significance of Chaco is evident in songs, prayers and oral histories, and pueblo leaders said some people still make pilgrimages to the area, which includes desert plains, rolling hills dotted with piñon and juniper and sandstone canyons carved by eons of wind and water erosion.

A World Heritage site, Chaco Culture National Historical Park is thought to be the center of what was once a hub of Indigenous civilization. Within park boundaries are the towering remains of stone structures built centuries ago by the region's first inhabitants, and ancient roads and related sites are scattered further out.

The executive order follows a tribal summit in Washington last week at which federal officials vowed to continue consultation efforts to ensure Native American leaders have more of a seat at the table when land management decisions affect culturally significant areas. New guidance for federal agencies also was recently published to help with the effort.

The New Mexico State Land Office is not required to have formal consultations with tribes, but agency officials said they have been working with tribal leaders over the last five years and hope to craft a formal policy that can be used by future administrations.

The pueblos recently completed an ethnographic study of the region for the U.S. Interior Department that they hope can be used for decision-making at the federal level.

US and Israel discuss when to scale back Gaza combat but agree fight will take months, envoy says

By KARIN LAUB, NAJIB JOBAIN and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — The United States agrees with Israel that the fight against Hamas will take months, but officials are discussing the timetable for scaling back from high-intensity combat to more precise ways of targeting the militant group's leaders, a top U.S. envoy said Friday amid growing American unease about the mounting death toll in Gaza.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan planned to talk to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas later in the day about the besieged enclave's postwar future, which, according to a senior U.S. official, could include bringing back Palestinian security forces driven from their jobs in Gaza by Hamas in its 2007 takeover.

American and Israeli officials have been vague in public about how Gaza will be run if Israel achieves its goal of ending Hamas control — and the idea, floated as one of several, appeared to be the first time Washington offered some detail on its vision for security arrangements in the enclave.

Any role for Palestinian security forces in Gaza is bound to elicit strong opposition from Israel, which seeks to maintain an open-ended security presence there and says it won't allow a postwar foothold for the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank but is deeply unpopular with Palestinians.

In meetings with Israeli leaders on Thursday and Friday, Sullivan discussed a timetable for winding down the intense combat phase of the war.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told Sullivan that it would take months to destroy Hamas, but did not say whether his estimate referred to the current phase of heavy airstrikes and ground battles.

Sullivan said Friday that "there is no contradiction between saying the fight is going to take months and also saying that different phases will take place at different times over those months, including the transition from the high-intensity operations to more targeted operations."

He said he discussed a timeline with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's War Cabinet, and that such conversations would continue during an upcoming visit by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The offensive, triggered by the unprecedented Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, has flattened much of northern Gaza and driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Displaced people

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have squeezed into shelters mainly in the south in a spiraling humanitarian crisis.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has expressed unease over Israel's failure to reduce civilian casualties and its plans for the future of Gaza, but the White House continues to offer wholehearted support for Israel with weapons shipments and diplomatic backing.

"I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives," Biden said Thursday when asked if he wants Israel to scale down its operations by the end of the month. "Not stop going after Hamas, but be more careful."

A deadly Hamas ambush on Israeli troops in Gaza City this week showed the group's resilience and called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out the entire territory.

Israel's air and ground assault over the past 10 weeks has killed more than 18,700 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. Thousands more are missing and feared dead beneath the rubble.

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.

On Friday morning, communications services, which telecommunications provider Paltel said Thursday were cut due to ongoing fighting, still appeared to be down across Gaza.

Israeli airstrikes and tank shelling continued overnight and into Friday, including in the southern city of Rafah, part of the shrinking areas of tiny, densely populated Gaza to which Palestinian civilians had been told by Israel to evacuate. At least one person was killed, according to an Associated Press journalist who saw the body arriving at a local hospital.

Israelis remain strongly supportive of the war and see it as necessary to prevent a repeat of Oct. 7, when Palestinian militants attacked communities across southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking some 240 hostage. A total of 116 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive, which began Oct. 27.

The Israeli military on Friday confirmed the recovery of the bodies of three hostages. Two were soldiers, both aged 19, and the third was a 28-year-old dual French-Israeli national kidnapped from a music festival.

More than 100 hostages have been freed, most during a cease-fire last month in exchange for the release of 240 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Sullivan was scheduled to meet Friday with Abbas, who lost control of Gaza when Hamas drove out his security forces in 2007. The takeover came a year after Hamas defeated Abbas' Fatah party in parliament elections and the rivals failed to form a unity government.

A senior U.S. official said that Sullivan and others have discussed the prospect of having those associated with the Palestinian Authority security forces before the Hamas takeover serve as the "nucleus" of postwar peacekeeping in Gaza.

It was one idea of many being considered for establishing security in Gaza, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with White House ground rules. He said such talks were taking place with Israel, the Palestinian Authority and regional partners.

The U.S. has said it eventually wants to see the West Bank and Gaza under a unified Palestinian government, as a precursor to Palestinian statehood — an idea soundly rejected by Netanyahu, who leads a right-wing government that is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

The Palestinian prime minister told The Associated Press it's time for the United States to deal more firmly with Israel, particularly on Washington's calls for postwar negotiations for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Now that the United States has talked the talk, we want Washington to walk the walk," Mohammed Shtayyeh said Thursday. "If the United States cannot deliver Israel, who can?"

As part of postwar scenarios, Washington has also called for revitalizing the Palestinian Authority, without letting on whether such reforms would require personnel changes or general elections, which last took place 17 years ago.

The 88-year-old Abbas is deeply unpopular, with a poll published Wednesday indicating close to 90% of

Palestinians want him to resign. Meanwhile, Palestinian support for Hamas has tripled in the West Bank, with a small uptick in Gaza, according to the poll. Still, a majority of Palestinians do not back Hamas, according to the survey.

A US pine species thrives when burnt. Southerners are rekindling a 'fire culture' to boost its range

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

WEST END, N.C. (AP) — Jesse Wimberley burns the woods with neighbors.

Using new tools to revive an old communal tradition, they set fire to wiregrasses and forest debris with a drip torch, corralling embers with leaf blowers.

Wimberley, 65, gathers groups across eight North Carolina counties to starve future wildfires by lighting leaf litter ablaze. The burns clear space for longleaf pine, a tree species whose seeds won't sprout on undergrowth blocking bare soil. Since 2016, the fourth-generation burner has fueled a burgeoning movement to formalize these volunteer ranks.

Prescribed burn associations are proving key to conservationists' efforts to restore a longleaf pine range forming the backbone of forest ecology in the American Southeast. Volunteer teams, many working private land where participants reside or make a living, are filling service and knowledge gaps one blaze at a time.

Prescribed fire, the intentional burning replicating natural fires crucial for forest health, requires more hands than experts can supply. In North Carolina, the practice sometimes ends with a barbecue.

"Southerners like coming together and doing things and helping each other and having some food," Wimberley said. "Fire is not something you do by yourself."

More than 100 associations exist throughout 18 states, according to North Carolina State University researchers, and the Southeast is a hot spot for new ones. Wimberley's Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association is considered the region's first, and the group reports having helped up to 500 people clear land or learn how to do it themselves.

The proliferation follows federal officials' push in the past century to suppress forest fires. The policy sought to protect the expanding footprint of private homes and interrupted fire cycles that accompanied longleaf evolution, which Indigenous people and early settlers simulated through targeted burns.

"Fire is medicine and it heals the land. It's also medicine for our people," said Courtney Steed, outreach coordinator for the Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association and a Lumbee Tribe member. "It's putting us back in touch with our traditions."

The longleaf pine ecosystem spans just 3% of the 140,000 square miles (360,000 square kilometers) it encompassed before industrialization and urbanization. But some pockets remain, from Virginia to Texas to Florida. The system's greenery still harbors the bobwhite quail and other declining species. The conifers are especially resistant to droughts, a hazard growing more common and more severe due to climate change.

A big tent of environmentalists, hunters, nonprofit groups and government agencies recently celebrated a 53% increase in the longleaf pine range since 2009, spanning an estimated 8,100 square miles (20,000 square kilometers). However, those strides fell short of their goal to hit 12,500 square miles (32,000 square kilometers).

Private landowners are central to the coalition's latest restoration effort. They hold roughly 86% of forested land in the South, according to America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative.

The partnership needs thousands of new landowners to support longleaf management on their properties. The nascent burn associations are vital in their education, according to a 15-year plan released in November.

Federal agencies back the endeavor through activities such as invasive species removal and land management workshops. Nearly \$50 million in federal grants are available for projects bolstering forest health, including prescribed fire.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a "Longleaf Pine Initiative" partnering with burn groups like Wimberley's. Farm bill money supports planning and planting. Personnel can help install firebreaks.

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But applicants are increasingly competing for limited funding that cannot cover all the needed maintenance burns, USDA spokesperson Matthew Vandersande said.

Landowners say liability-concerned states are reluctant to send their relatively few burners onto private property and private contractors cannot meet the demand.

"When it comes time to drop the match, you're kind of on your own," said Keith Tribble, 62, who owns a North Carolina tree farm.

While state forestry services provide classes, Tribble credits burn associations for the hands-on experience and crews needed to confidently manage the pines.

Humidity and wind speed are the biggest factors in a burn plan, according to Hitchcock Woods Superintendent Bennett Tucker, manager of a private forest in South Carolina. The pine's oils allow it to almost always carry fire and he typically burns at a relative humidity between 25% and 50%.

"With a prescribed fire, we can control the where, the when, the how and all those factors by choosing the best conditions," Tucker said.

Handheld weather meters ensure wind speed, temperature and humidity fall within limits under plans written beforehand. The prescriptions also can reduce potential liability in the event a fire escapes. Runaway fires are rare, according to studies of federal agencies and surveys of community burn groups. Wimberley's teams haven't had one yet, even with 40 burns per year.

Climate change is reducing the number of safe burn days. Rising temperatures cause lower relative humidity in the South and intensify periods when it's too dry, said Jennifer Fawcett, a North Carolina State University wildland fire expert.

As the severity and frequency of storms, droughts and wildfires increase, longleaf pines could become even more important for ecological resilience in the South. Deep roots anchor them during strong winds and stretch far into the ground for water. Flames enhance soil nutrients.

Further, the surrounding ecosystems have few known rivals for biodiversity in the U.S. Light pours through open canopies onto the sparse floor, giving way to flora like an insect-eating plant that needs sun exposure and wet soil. Gopher tortoises feed on the native vegetation and dig up to 15-foot (4.5-meter) burrows sheltering other at-risk species.

"It's more than just planting trees," said Lisa Lord, The Longleaf Alliance conservation programs director. "We want to take the time to restore all of the values of the forest."

A late 1920s education campaign known as the "Dixie Crusaders" harmed those interdependent relationships. Federal officials turned southerners against the practice and burning fell off. Flammable needles and wiregrasses piled up to dangerous tinder levels.

Wimberley's family resisted, knowing their livelihoods depended on fire. His ancestors first applied it to "sweat" out the pine's lucrative sap distilled into turpentine or exported as sealants. Later generations burned to shield crops.

Burning looks different from the times Wimberley's mother dragged kindling known as "fat lighter" through the forest. But public understanding of its importance is returning and the ranks are growing.

"We're all a bunch of pyromaniacs," said Tribble, the tree farm owner.

Still, Tribble burns for a reason: he values connecting with people and the land.

Before his burns, brush cluttered the ground, choking waterflow to parts of the property that were "bone dry." Now water runs from more marshy areas and the squeaky call of the rarely spotted red-cockaded woodpecker resounds from mature pines. Wild turkeys appear when smoke fills the sky.

Steed, the Lumbee outreach coordinator, is heartened by the rekindling of this proactive "fire culture" beyond the tribe that she says introduced it to the region.

She ran through her grandfather's scorched woods as a child, but the expanse has gone about a decade without fire. Steed plans to lead her first burn next year in Wimberley's woods and then manage a family property she recently inherited.

"It feels empowering," Steed said of prescribed fire. "It feels like a very tangible way to connect to the past and also guide the future."

Ballistic missile fired from rebel-held Yemen strikes cargo ship in Red Sea after earlier attack

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A ballistic missile fired from rebel-held territory in Yemen struck a Liberian-flagged cargo ship Friday in the Red Sea near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, an assault that apparently sought to target a vessel struck earlier, a U.S. defense official said.

The official identified the vessel as the MSC Palatium III and said it remained unclear if anyone was hurt. The missile apparently was aimed at the Al Jasrah, which was set on fire by a projectile earlier Friday, the official said. Another missile launched in the salvo missed both ships.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters. MSC, the vessel's operator, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen did not immediately acknowledge either attack.

The attacks further escalate a campaign by the Houthi rebels, who have claimed responsibility for a series of missile assaults in recent days that just missed shipping in the Red Sea and its strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

The attacks are a response to the Israel-Hamas war and the pounding air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip, though the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults has grown more tenuous — or nonexistent — as the attacks continue.

The private intelligence firm Ambrey also confirmed the earlier attack on the Al Jasrah.

"The projectile reportedly hit the port side of the vessel and one container fell overboard due to the impact," Ambrey said. "The projectile caused a 'fire on deck' which was broadcast via" radio.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which monitors Mideast shipping lanes, also acknowledged the first attack, warning vessels to exercise caution. The UKMTO said there had been no reported casualties from the attack on the Al Jasrah.

The Al Jasrah is operated by German-based shipper Hapag-Lloyd, which said no crew member had been hurt in the attack.

"Hapag-Lloyd will take additional measures to secure the safety of our crews," the company said, without elaborating.

It wasn't clear if the attack involved a drone or a missile.

Ambrey noted that Hapag-Lloyd "is known to have offices in the Israeli ports of Ashdod, Haifa and Tel Aviv."

On Thursday, the Houthis fired a ballistic missile that missed a container ship traveling through the strait.

The day before that, two missiles fired from Houthi-held territory missed a commercial tanker loaded with Indian-manufactured jet fuel near the key Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Also near the strait, a missile fired by Houthis on Monday night slammed into a Norwegian-flagged tanker in the Red Sea.

Global shipping has increasingly been targeted as the Israel-Hamas war threatens to become a wider regional conflict — even during a brief pause in fighting during which Hamas exchanged hostages for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The collapse of the truce and the resumption of a punishing Israeli ground offensive and airstrikes on Gaza have raised the risk of more sea attacks.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is only 29 kilometers (18 miles) wide at its narrowest point, limiting traffic to two channels for inbound and outbound shipments, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Nearly 10% of all oil traded at sea passes through it. An estimated \$1 trillion in goods pass through the strait annually.

In November, Houthis seized a vehicle transport ship linked to Israel in the Red Sea off Yemen. The rebels still hold the vessel near the port city of Hodeida. Separately, a container ship owned by an Israeli billionaire came under attack by a suspected Iranian drone in the Indian Ocean.

A separate, tentative cease-fire between the Houthis and a Saudi-led coalition fighting on behalf of Yemen's exiled government has held for months despite that country's long war. That's raised concerns that

any wider conflict in the sea — or a potential reprisal strike from Western forces — could reignite those tensions in the Arab world's poorest nation.

Also Thursday, unknown attackers boarded the Malta-flagged bulk carrier Ruen, managed by Navigation Maritime Bulgare, in the Arabian Sea off the Yemeni island of Socotra, Ambrey and the UKMTO said. Bulgarian media said the ship's 18-member crew hailed from Angola, Bulgaria and Myanmar. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the assault.

On Friday, the UKMTO issued a warning to shippers saying the security manager for the Ruen "believes the crew no longer has control of the vessel" and that it is heading toward Somalia. Somali piracy had dropped in recent years, but there has been growing concern it could resume amid the wider chaos of the Houthi attacks and the political uncertainty gripping Somalia.

Prince Harry wins phone hacking lawsuit against British tabloid publisher, awarded 140,000 pounds

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry won his phone hacking lawsuit Friday against the publisher of the Daily Mirror and was awarded over 140,000 pounds (\$180,000) in the first of his several lawsuits against British tabloids to go to trial.

Justice Timothy Fancourt in the High Court found phone hacking was "widespread and habitual" at Mirror Group Newspapers over many years and private investigators "were an integral part of the system" to gather information unlawfully. He said executives at the papers were aware of the practice and covered it up.

Fancourt said he awarded the Duke of Sussex damages for 15 of the 33 newspaper articles in question at trial that were the result of unlawful information gathering and resulted in the misuse of Harry's private information.

"Today is a great day for truth, as well as accountability," Harry said in a statement read by his lawyer outside court.

Fancourt awarded the duke damages for the distress he suffered and a further sum for aggravated damages to "reflect the particular hurt and sense of outrage" over the fact that two directors at Trinity Mirror knew about the activity and didn't stop it.

"Instead of doing so, they turned a blind eye to what was going on and positively concealed it," Fancourt said. "Had the illegal conduct been stopped, the misuse of the duke's private information would have ended much sooner."

Harry, the estranged younger son of King Charles III, had sought 440,000 pounds (\$560,000) as part of a crusade against the British media that bucked his family's longstanding aversion to litigation and made him the first senior member of the royal family to testify in court in over a century.

His appearance in the witness box over two days in June created a spectacle as he lobbed allegations that Mirror Group Newspapers had employed journalists who eavesdropped on voicemails and hired private investigators to use deception and unlawful means to learn about him and other family members.

"I believe that phone hacking was at an industrial scale across at least three of the papers at the time," Harry asserted in the High Court. "That is beyond any doubt."

The judge said that Harry had a tendency in his testimony "to assume that everything published was the product of voicemail interception," which was not the case. He said the Mirror Group was "not responsible for all of the unlawful activity directed at the duke."

The case is the first of three lawsuits Harry has brought to court against the tabloids over allegations of phone hacking or some form of unlawful information gathering. They form the front line of attack in what he says is his life's mission to reform the media.

Harry's beef with the news media runs deep and is cited throughout his memoir, "Spare." He blames paparazzi for causing the car crash that killed his mother, Princess Diana, and he said intrusions by journalists led him and his wife, Meghan, to leave royal life for the U.S. in 2020.

Harry alleged that Mirror Group Newspapers used unlawful means to produce nearly 150 stories on his

early life between 1996 and 2010, including his romances, injuries and alleged drug use. The reporting caused great emotional distress, he said, but was hard to prove because the newspapers destroyed records.

Of the 33 articles at the center of the trial, Mirror denied using unlawful reporting methods for 28 and made no admissions concerning the remaining five.

The same judge that heard the Mirror case previously tossed out Harry's hacking claims against the publisher of The Sun. He is allowing Harry and actor Hugh Grant, who has similar claims, to proceed to trial on allegations that News Group Newspapers journalists used other unlawful methods to snoop on them.

Another judge recently gave Harry the go-ahead to take a similar case to trial against the publisher of the Daily Mail, rejecting the newspaper's efforts to throw out the lawsuit.

Phone hacking by British newspapers dates back more than two decades to a time when unethical journalists used an unsophisticated method of phoning the numbers of royals, celebrities, politicians and sports stars and, when prompted to leave a message, punched in default passcodes to eavesdrop on voicemails.

The practice erupted into a full-blown scandal in 2011 when Rupert Murdoch's News of the World was revealed to have intercepted messages of a murdered girl, relatives of deceased British soldiers and victims of a bombing. Murdoch closed the paper.

Newspapers were later found to have used more intrusive means such as phone tapping, home bugging and obtaining flight information and medical records.

Mirror Group Newspapers said it has paid more than 100 million pounds (\$128 million) in other phone hacking lawsuits over the years, but denied wrongdoing in Harry's case. It said it used legitimate reporting methods to get information on the prince.

In one instance, Mirror Group apologized "unreservedly" for hiring a private investigator for a story about Harry partying at a nightclub in February 2004. Although the article, headlined "Sex on the beach with Harry," wasn't among those at issue in the trial, Mirror Group said he should be compensated 500 pounds (\$637).

Live updates | As fighting rages in Gaza, a US envoy is set to meet with the Palestinian president

By The Associated Press undefined

The Palestinian president was set to meet Friday with U.S. officials to discuss postwar arrangements for Gaza that could include reactivating Palestinian security forces driven out by Hamas in its 2007 takeover of the territory.

While Israel has vowed to keep fighting until it wipes out Gaza's Hamas rulers, the international call for a cease-fire has grown in volume. Israel has drawn international outrage and rare criticism from the U.S. — its main ally — over the killing of civilians.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told U.S. President Joe Biden during a call Thursday that a quick cease-fire for Gaza would be possible if Washington withdrew its unconditional support for Israel.

More than 18,700 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-controlled territory, which does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Israel says 116 of its soldiers have died in its ground offensive after Hamas raided southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing about 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and taking about 240 hostages.

Currently:

- Israel's president says now isn't the time to discuss a two-state solution.
- Israel's mass arrest campaign sows fear in northern Gaza.
- A Liberian-flagged cargo ship is hit and set ablaze by a projectile from rebel-controlled Yemen.
- EU leaders increasingly back a humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's what's happening in the war:

HAGUE COURT REJECTS BID TO BAN TRANSFER TO ISRAEL OF F-35 FIGHTER JET PARTS FROM DUTCH

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WAREHOUSE

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — A Dutch court rejected a request Friday by a group of human rights and humanitarian organizations to order a halt to the transfer to Israel of parts for F-35 fighter jets.

The organizations went to court Dec. 4 arguing that delivery of parts for F-35 jets makes the Netherlands complicit in possible war crimes being committed by Israel in its war with Hamas. The parts are stored in a warehouse in the Dutch town of Woensdrecht.

In a written statement, the court said that the judge who heard the civil case concluded that the Dutch government “weighed the relevant interests” before agreeing to the delivery of parts. It was not immediately clear if the groups that brought the civil case would appeal.

Government lawyer Reimer Veldhuis told the judge hearing the civil case that a ban on transfers from the Netherlands would effectively be meaningless as “the United States would deliver these parts to Israel from another place.”

A LIBERIAN-FLAGGED CARGO SHIP IS HIT BY A PROJECTILE FROM REBEL-CONTROLLED YEMEN

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A Liberian-flagged cargo ship caught fire Friday in the Red Sea after being hit by a projectile launched from rebel-controlled Yemen, a U.S. defense official and a private intelligence firm said.

The attack on the Al Jasrah further escalates a campaign by Yemen’s Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who have claimed responsibility for a series of missile assaults in recent days in the Red Sea and its strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The attacks come as a response to the Israel-Hamas war and the pounding air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip, though linking the ships targeted in the rebel assaults has grown more tenuous — or nonexistent — as the attacks continue.

The U.S. official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters. The Houthis did not immediately claim responsibility for the assault.

The Al Jasrah is operated by German-based shipper Hapag Lloyd, which declined to immediately comment about the attack. It wasn’t yet clear if any of the crew on board the vessel had been hurt in the attack, which may have come from either a drone or a missile.

Associated Press writer Jon Gambrell contributed.

A FRENCH ISRAELI HOSTAGE’S BODY IS FOUND IN GAZA, FRANCE SAYS

PARIS — France’s foreign minister says the body of a French-Israeli citizen taken hostage by Hamas militants has been found in Gaza.

The minister, Catherine Colonna, posted on social media her “immense sadness” at the death of Elia Toledano.

She said the Israeli military announced that his body had been found. He was reported to have been taken hostage at a music festival attacked by militants during Hamas’ Oct. 7 assault on Israel.

Americans agree that the 2024 election will be pivotal for democracy, but for different reasons

By GARY FIELDS and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a politically polarized nation, Americans seem to agree on one issue underlying the 2024 elections — a worry over the state of democracy and how the outcome of the presidential contest will affect its future.

They just disagree over who poses the threat.

A poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 62% of adults say democracy in the U.S. could be at risk depending on who wins next fall. Majorities of Democrats (72%) and Republicans (55%) feel the same way, but for different reasons.

President Joe Biden has attempted to paint a dystopian future if GOP front-runner and former President Donald Trump returns to the White House after promising to seek retribution against opponents and declining to rule out that he would abuse the powers of the office. The former president has tried to

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flip the narrative lately, saying the election subversion and documents cases against him show Biden has weaponized the federal government to prosecute a political opponent. He has called Biden the "destroyer of American democracy."

"I think from the side of the left, it's pretty obvious that they're concerned about electing a president who is avowedly authoritarian, someone who clearly wants to reduce checks and balances within the government to strengthen the presidency and to do so in ways that give the executive branch kind of an unprecedented reach across the population and sectors of the government," said Michael Albertus, political science professor at the University of Chicago.

"From the right, the Republicans think about government overreach, big government, threats to freedom and mandates to act in a certain way or adopt certain policies," he said.

Against that backdrop, the poll found that about half of U.S. adults, 51%, say democracy is working "not too well" or "not well at all."

The poll asked about the importance of the coming presidential election for 12 issues and found that the percentage who said the outcome will be very or extremely important to the future of democracy in the U.S. (67%) ranked behind only the economy (75%). It was about equal to the percentage who said that about government spending (67%) and immigration (66%).

Tony Motes, a retired firefighter who lives in Monroe, Georgia, cited a number of reasons he believes "we're not living in a complete democracy." That includes what he sees as a deterioration of rights, including parental rights, thieves and other criminals not being held accountable, and a lack of secure borders.

The 59-year-old Republican also said the various criminal cases being brought against Trump undermine the country's democratic traditions.

"They're trying to keep him from running because they know he's going to win," he said.

The poll's findings continue a trend of Americans' lackluster views about how democracy is functioning. They also believe the country's governing system is not working well to reflect their interests on issues ranging from immigration to abortion to the economy.

Robert Lieberman, a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, has studied the fall of democracies elsewhere and the common elements that feed their demise.

The factors include polarization, growing ethnic or racial antagonism, rising economic inequality and a concentration of power under a country's executive officeholder.

"For a number of years now, the United States has had all four of these conditions, really for the first time in history," he said. "So we're in a period that's ripe for challenges to democracy."

Trump is not the cause of the pattern, Lieberman said, but "seems to have an unerring instinct to make things worse, and he certainly has authoritarian impulses and a lot of followers who seem to validate or applaud him."

The AP-NORC poll found that 87% of Democrats and 54% of independents believe a second Trump term would negatively affect U.S. democracy. For Republicans, 82% believe democracy would be weakened by another Biden win, with 56% of independents agreeing.

About 2 in 10 U.S. adults (19%) say democracy in the U.S. is "already so seriously broken that it doesn't matter who wins the 2024 presidential election." Republicans (23%) are more likely than Democrats (10%) to say this, but relatively few in either party think U.S. democracy is resilient enough to withstand the outcome.

Social media platforms and news sites that reinforce biases accelerate the polarization that leads people from different political perspectives to believe the other side is the one representing the gravest threat to the nation's democracy, said Lilliana Mason, an associate professor of political science at Johns Hopkins.

"I don't think that people are exaggerating. I think it's that they actually are living in information environments in which it is true for them that democracy is under threat," she said.

Mason said one side fears what Trump has said he will do if he wins, while the other is responding to the fear created in a media ecosystem that says the Democrats want to destroy America and turn it into a socialist or communist society.

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For some, the danger is more than Trump's statements and concern over how he might turn toward authoritarianism. It also is what's happening in the states and courts, where political gerrymandering and threats to voting rights are continuing, as are measures that limit people's ability to vote easily, such as reducing drop box locations for mail-in ballots and tightening voter identification requirements.

"Look at all the roadblocks that have been put up to keep people, especially people of color, from being able to vote," said Pamela Williams, 75, of New York City, who identifies as a Democrat. "That isn't democracy."

Douglas Kucmerowski, 67, an independent who lives in the Finger Lakes region of New York, is concerned over those state-level actions and the continued use of the Electoral College, which can allow someone to be president even if they lose the popular vote.

He also questions the state of the nation's democracy when a large proportion of the country supports a candidate facing multiple criminal charges who has spoken about pursuing retribution and using the military domestically, among other things.

Trump also has lied about the outcome of the 2020 election, which has been affirmed by multiple reviews in the battleground states where he disputed his loss, and called his supporters to a Washington rally before they stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in a violent attempt to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's win.

"That candidate, in any other age, probably would have been ruled out. But for some reason, in this society, he's one of the best choices," Kucmerowski said. "If this country is that confused that they can't tell the difference between right and wrong and ex-presidents making statements that on day one he will be a dictator, doesn't anybody care about day two or three or four when he's still a dictator?"

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

Gunmen kill 11 people, wound 8 others in an attack on a police station in Iran, state TV says

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Suspected members of a separatist group killed 11 people and wounded eight others in a nighttime attack on a police station in southeastern Iran, state TV said Friday.

The deputy governor of Sistan and Baluchestan province, Ali Reza Marhemati, said senior police officers and soldiers were killed and wounded in the 2 a.m. attack in Rask town, about 1,400 kilometers (875 miles) southwest of Tehran.

He said police killed several of the attackers in a shootout.

The advocacy group HalVash, which reports on issues affecting the Baluch people, shared video online that purported to include the heavy gunfire that accompanied the predawn attack. It also showed helicopters later flying over the area in daylight.

State TV blamed the attack on Jaish al-Adl, a separatist group. In 2019, Jaish al-Adl claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on a bus that killed 27 members of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. However, the militants did not immediately claim the new attack. They typically conduct hit-and-run operations from their hideouts in neighboring Pakistan.

Majid Mirahmadi, a deputy interior minister, told state TV that the attack wounded eight police officers. He said two gunmen had been killed and one arrested. He said during the attack the gunmen also ambushed deployed forces to stop them from reaching the shootout. He said a search was underway in the area to find the gunmen.

In recent months, militants and small separatist groups have attacked police stations as part of a low-level insurgency against the government.

Sistan and Baluchestan province is one of the least developed areas of Iran. It was the site of heavy

crackdowns on rallies following nationwide protests over the death in police custody of a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, in Tehran who had been detained for allegedly improperly wearing an Islamic veil.

Anti-government demonstrations have been happening for months as well on Fridays in the restive province, which is a majority Sunni region. Its Baluch people long have complained about being treated as second-class citizens by Iran's Shiite rulers.

Serbia's Vucic seeks to reassert populist dominance in elections this weekend

By JOVANA GEC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is pushing hard to reassert his populist party's dominance in this weekend's early parliamentary and local elections that observers say are being held in an atmosphere of intimidation and media bias.

The vote in the troubled eastern European country on Sunday pits Vucic's governing Serbian Progressive Party, or SNS, against a pro-Western opposition coalition which is trying to undermine the firm grip on power the populists have maintained since 2012.

Though he is not formally a candidate, the Serbian president has campaigned relentlessly for the SNS and its list of candidates, which appears on the ballot under the name "Aleksandar Vucic -- Serbia must not stop!" The main opposition Serbia Against Violence bloc gathers parties that were behind months of street protests this year triggered by two back-to-back mass shootings in May.

Campaign monitors have reported pressure on voters and fearmongering and abuse of public offices and institutions fostered by the authorities. Reports have mounted of vote-buying and voter-bribing, and falsifying of signatures on election lists.

Serbia, a Balkan country which has maintained warm relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia, has been a candidate for European Union membership since 2014 but has faced allegations of steadily eroding democratic freedoms and rules over the past years.

Both Vucic and his SNS have denied allegations of campaign abuse and attempted vote-rigging, as well as charges that Vucic as president is violating the constitution by campaigning for one party.

The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability, or CRTA, a nongovernmental organization that monitors election activities, reported a range of issues that break the rules for a free and fair election.

"For the first couple of weeks of the campaign, CRTA filed more complaints to the anti-corruption agency, regulatory body for electronic media and other institutions than we filed in overall campaign (for the presidential and parliamentary vote) last year," said the group's program director, Rasa Nedeljkov. "It gives you the impression ... how things are even more dramatic than they used to be."

Hardly any of the past complaints or recommendations by local and foreign observers have resulted in changes so far.

"Election conditions are not the same. The conditions are worse than in the past," said opposition politician Dragan Djilas, one of the leaders of the Serbia Against Violence bloc. "But we as opposition must take part in this election."

The reported irregularities include voting invitations sent to non-existent or dead voters. Journalists from the Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia published evidence of vote-buying, while CRTA monitors recorded intimidation and pressure on public employees to support the governing party.

Vucic called the Dec. 17 snap vote only a year and a half after a previous parliamentary and presidential election, although his party holds a comfortable majority in the 250-member parliament.

Analysts believe Vucic was seeking to consolidate power after two back-to-back shootings triggered months of anti-government protests, and as high inflation and rampant corruption fueled public discontent. Vucic has also faced criticism over his handling of a crisis in Kosovo, a former Serbian province that declared independence in 2008, a move that Belgrade does not recognize.

His supporters view Vucic as the only leader who can maintain stability and lead the country.

The Serbian president has been touring the country and attending his party's rallies, promising new

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roads, hospitals and one-off cash bonuses. Vucic's image is seen on billboards all over the country, though he has stepped down as SNS party leader.

The Serbia Against Violence opposition list is expected to mount the biggest challenge to the populists on the ballot for the city council in Belgrade. An opposition victory in the capital would seriously dent Vucic's hard-line rule in the country, analysts say.

Several right-wing groups, including pro-Russian parties, as well as Socialists allied to Vucic, are also running for control of parliament and some 60 cities and towns, as well as regional authorities in the northern Vojvodina province.

The election does not include the presidency, but the governing authorities, backed by pro-government media, have run the campaign as a referendum on Vucic, Nedeljkov said.

As a result, "25% of citizens think that we have presidential elections, 60% of citizens think that (the) president of Serbia is the candidate in these elections," he told the AP. "That is a huge manipulation from the perspective of the citizens."

Another "huge disbalance" concerns mainstream media which favor the governing parties while presenting the opposition in a negative or neutral tone, Nedeljkov said.

He said Vucic has addressed the nation live, directly and without interruption more than 260 times this year, for 35 minutes on average. Opposition leaders are nowhere close.

In such circumstances, "it's really hard to talk about the equal opportunity for candidates to present their ideas or (the) citizens to understand ... the electoral offer," Nedeljkov said.

An independent media monitoring agency, the Bureau for Social Research, also reported "government promotion" in the mainstream media with Vucic garnering 88% positive reporting. The agency's director, Zoran Gavrilovic, recently told N1 television, an independent regional channel, that "we do not have elections ... to have elections, you have to have free media and free citizens."

Major polling agencies have refrained from publishing pre-election surveys, citing fear among Serbia's 6.5 million eligible voters and high polarization.

Vucic has brushed off criticism as attacks on himself and his party, saying he is confident of victory.

"Things are not ideal and it is easy to find reasons to be angry," he said last week on pro-government Pink television. "But it is clear that the vote for them (the opposition) is a vote against this country, against the vital interests of this country."

A year of war: 2023 sees worst-ever Israel-Hamas combat as Russian attacks on Ukraine grind on

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A boy, his face coated in fresh blood, screams as rescuers try to pull him out of the rubble of a destroyed building following an Israeli airstrike in Gaza. A bruised, elderly Israeli hostage is taken away by Hamas in a golf cart as a man clutching a machine gun sits behind her, smiling. A 10-year-old girl cries next to the body of her brother as he is buried near Kyiv, Ukraine.

This year as in years past, The Associated Press was there up close to document the world's conflicts and their toll on civilians.

From the Israel-Hamas war to Russia's grinding battles against Ukraine, 2023 has shown the dangers of armed conflicts breaking out into region-wide combat. But behind their long shadows, the world faces strife in countries stretching both the globe and the alphabet from Afghanistan all the way to Yemen.

Coups and violence across Africa upended life in nations there. Myanmar in Southeast Asia faces what some experts describe as a slow-burning civil war. Drug-trade-fueled violence continues in Central and South America.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan remain suspicious of each other. North Korea's atomic arsenal continues to grow. And Iran now enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels.

"Conflicts have become more complex, deadly and harder to resolve. ... Concerns about the possibility of nuclear war have re-emerged. New potential domains of conflict and weapons of war are creating new

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ways in which humanity can annihilate itself," United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in July. Here's a look at where some of the world's major wars stand now.

THE DEADLIEST-EVER ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

The bloodiest war between Israel and Hamas began Oct. 7, when militants broke through the walls surrounding the seaside enclave of the Gaza Strip. Its fighters killed some 1,200 people in Israel and took more than 200 others hostages, spiriting them back into the territory. The attack, described as the worst one-day mass killing of Jews since the Holocaust, stunned an Israel that had believed its border wall, technologically advanced military and intelligence services broadly protected them from all but harassing militant rocket fire.

Israel's embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, already reeling from months of protests over his hard-right government's attempts to overhaul the country's judiciary and corruption allegations, launched a massive campaign of retaliatory airstrikes.

Israeli troops also entered the Gaza Strip for the first time in years, moving into Gaza City and fighting intense street-to-street combat. The offensive killed over 18,700 people in the Gaza Strip, home to more than 2 million residents also facing an Israeli siege largely blocking food, fuel, water and medicine shipments.

Meanwhile, the mass killing of Israelis and Palestinians sparked protests across the world, many sympathetic to the Palestinians after years of deadlock over them obtaining their own state.

Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, fired on Israel. The U.S. sent in two aircraft carriers, troops and other weaponry to the region to try and deter a wider regional war from breaking out. But Israel's repeated stated goal — the destruction of Hamas — guaranteed a long military campaign ahead, raising risks.

RUSSIA AND UKRAINE REMAIN LOCKED IN COMBAT

The fast pace of the Israel-Hamas war overshadowed Russia's war on Ukraine in late 2023. But in the months prior, little had changed on the battlefield for either side.

Ukraine received tanks, weapons and Western training before launching a renewed counteroffensive believed to be aimed at reaching the Sea of Azov and splitting the Russian lines in the country's south. But Ukrainian forces faced dug-in Russian troops, multiple defense lines, minefields and other hazards, making gains either slowly or not at all. And while Western nations remained publicly unified behind Ukraine, polls including the U.S. presidential election next year could affect just how much aid Kyiv will get in the future.

Russia faced difficulties as well, including a march on Moscow by the leader of the private military firm Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, that represented the greatest challenge yet to President Vladimir Putin's yearslong rule. Prigozhin backed off the march, only to die weeks later in a mysterious, fiery plane crash.

AFRICAN UNREST

Sudan, a big East African nation that had been teetering since the overthrow of longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir, collapsed into civil war in April. The war pits the country's military against a powerful paramilitary force known as the Rapid Support Forces, long linked to atrocities in Darfur. The fighting saw crossfire set airplanes ablaze at Khartoum's international airport and nations rush to try to evacuate their nationals by land, sea and air. The fighting has killed some 9,000 people so far.

Meanwhile, a wave of military coups roiling Africa in recent years continued. In Niger, a former French colony that's a key uranium exporter, soldiers toppled the country's democratically elected president in July. A month later, troops similarly staged a coup in Gabon overthrowing its long-term ruling president.

LATIN AMERICA'S DRUG WARS

Drug cartel violence raged across portions of Mexico as they fight over territory and supply routes into the United States. But the conflict isn't limited to there. Violence has surged in other Central American nations, like Honduras and even in once-peaceful Costa Rica, now believed to be a major warehousing and transshipment point for drugs heading onto Europe. Colombia meanwhile has reached an all-time high for its production of coca, the leaf from which cocaine is made.

STALEMATES AND MILITANCY ELSEWHERE

In the Southeast Asian nation of Myanmar, some U.N. experts say a civil war is underway between rebels

and the army since a coup overthrew the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. Afghanistan, two years after the Taliban topped Kabul's Western-backed government, faces militant attacks from an offshoot of the Islamic State group as girls remain barred from secondary education.

And in Yemen, that country's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and a Saudi-led coalition battling them have yet to reach a permanent peace deal, which has seen the militants begin to again step up their attacks in recent weeks.

How the US keeps funding Ukraine's military — even as it says it's out of money

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House has been increasingly pressuring Congress to pass stalled legislation to support Ukraine's war against Russia, saying that funding has run out.

On Tuesday, however, President Joe Biden touted a new military aid package worth \$200 million for Ukraine.

Money is dwindling. But the announcement of more weapons being sent to Kyiv just underscores the complexity of the funding. So has the money run out? Or are there still a few billion dollars floating around? It's complicated.

STORE CREDIT ...

In a Nov. 4 letter to Congress, White House budget director Shalanda Young said flatly: "We are out of money to support Ukraine in this fight. This isn't a next year problem. The time to help a democratic Ukraine fight against Russian aggression is right now."

Since then, the U.S. has announced three more aid packages totaling \$475 million. That may seem contradictory, but it's due to the complex programs used to send aid to Ukraine.

There are two pots of money for weapons and security assistance set up specifically for the war. One is the Presidential Drawdown Authority, or PDA, under which the U.S. provides weapons already in its stockpile. The other is the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which funds long-term weapons contracts.

Money for USAI has all been spent. That pot is empty.

And money for the PDA also appeared to be gone. But then the Pentagon determined that it had overstated the value of the weapons it had already sent Ukraine, overcharging the Ukraine weapons account by \$6.2 billion. That effectively left Ukraine with a store credit that is slowly being whittled down. It now stands at around \$4.4 billion.

PDA packages continued to be announced every few weeks. But in recognition of the dwindling money, the latest packages have been smaller — about \$200 million or less, compared with previous ones that often totaled \$400 million to \$500 million.

... BUT EMPTY SHELVES

In theory, the Pentagon would have enough equipment to offer these smaller packages for months. But there's a caveat: While the credit exists, there may not be enough stock on the Pentagon shelves. So some weapons may be unavailable.

Congressional funding to buy weapons to replace the ones the U.S. sends to Ukraine is now down to about \$1 billion. That dwindling money means the military services are worried they won't be able to buy all the weapons they need to ensure the U.S. military is ready to defend the American homeland.

For example, the 155 mm rounds commonly used by Howitzers are one of the most requested artillery munitions by Kyiv. The demand has been so high that the Army has pressed the Scranton Army Ammunition Plant in Pennsylvania, where the shell casings for the rounds are made, to increase production in order to meet war demands and have enough on hand for American military needs.

On Thursday, Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, told reporters the U.S. could provide the full \$4.4 billion in weapons, but with only a quarter of that amount available for replenishment, it's a tough choice. "We have to start to make decisions about our own readiness," he said.

THE POLITICAL WRANGLING

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The U.S. has already sent Ukraine \$111 billion in weapons, equipment, humanitarian assistance and other aid since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his invasion more than 21 months ago. But the latest package is stalled.

Support for Ukraine funding has been waning as some lawmakers see the war taking funding from domestic needs. But the broader problem is a political battle over the southern U.S. border.

President Joe Biden is urging Congress to pass a \$110 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs. It includes \$61.4 billion for Ukraine, with about half to replenish Pentagon stocks. It also includes about \$14 billion for Israel as it fights Hamas and \$14 billion for U.S. border security. Other funds would go for security needs in the Asia-Pacific.

Prospects for compromise remain in doubt, even as Zelenskyy warned in a speech at the National Defense University in Washington on Monday that, "If there's anyone inspired by unresolved issues on Capitol Hill, it's just Putin and his sick clique."

THE JOBS ARGUMENT

Harkening back to the "all politics is local" idea, the Pentagon and the White House have rolled out maps and statistics to show members of Congress how their own districts and states are reaping benefits from the Ukraine funding.

Charts detail \$10 billion in industry contracts for weapons ranging from air defense systems and missiles to a wide array of drones, ammunition and other equipment. And they break out an additional nearly \$16.8 billion in contracts to replenish Pentagon stocks.

The maps show contracts benefitting industries and companies in more than 35 different states. And U.S. officials are hoping the local jobs argument will help build support for the funding.

HOW BIG IS THE NEED?

Winter has set in, so the fighting in Ukraine has leveled off a bit. And along stretches of the battlefield, fighting is somewhat stalemated.

But Ukrainian forces have been taking ground back in some key locations, and Zelenskyy and other leaders have said they want to keep pushing forward. Ukraine does not want to give the Russians weeks or months this winter to reset and further solidify their fighting positions — as they did last winter.

During his visit to Washington this week, Zelenskyy said his forces are making progress, and the White House pointed to newly declassified intelligence that shows Ukraine has inflicted heavy losses on Russia in recent fighting around the eastern city of Avdiivka — including 13,000 casualties and over 220 combat vehicles lost. The Ukrainian holdout in the country's partly occupied east has been the center of some of the fiercest fighting in recent weeks.

Putin on Thursday, however, said his troops are making gains.

"Almost all along the line of contact our armed forces, let's put it modestly, are improving their positions, almost all are in an active stage of action and there is an improvement in the position of our troops all along," he said.

Shooting of Palestinian college students came amid spike in gun violence in Vermont

By LISA RATHKE Associated Press

BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) — The recent shootings of three college students of Palestinian descent in Vermont's largest city come as the small rural state, often ranked as one of the nation's safest, is grappling with a spike in gun violence.

Two days after the students were shot and seriously wounded during their Thanksgiving break, Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger said it "was one of the most shocking and disturbing events in this city's history."

Statewide, Vermont has had 10 homicides and one suspicious death since October, including a double homicide in Burlington, Weinberger said. Burlington has seen 16 gunfire incidents so far this year, he said, adding that Vermont's largest city is not alone.

"Many communities are experiencing an alarming rise in gun violence with recent shootings happening in

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Newport, Danville, St. Johnsbury, Brattleboro, Castleton, Leicester, Brookfield," Weinberger said at the time.

Overall the country had a 6% decrease in national firearms homicides between 2021 and 2022, but Vermont saw a 185% jump, according to Vermont State Police Capt. Shawn Loan.

"So we went from seven firearms deaths in 2021 to 20 in 2022," he said, adding that he did not yet have the current total for this year.

About half of the homicides in Vermont involved a firearm between 2017 and 2021, he said. Last year that rose to 86%, Loan said.

While authorities are investigating the shooting of the students as a possible hate crime, many of the homicides around Vermont this fall are likely drug-related and all are isolated from each other, Vermont State Police Director Col. Matthew Birmingham said.

"Vermont is experiencing many drug-related issues. Fentanyl is a huge problem for this state and the country, for that matter," said Birmingham. "Our overdose death rate is climbing every year, which is a problem and something that should be on everybody's radar."

The shooting deaths this fall have taxed the short-staffed Vermont State Police, which has made arrests in two of them. The agency has a 15% vacancy rate — with 51 positions unfilled — and about a 25% functional vacancy rate meaning there are a certain number of people on family, military or other leave that are not available, Birmingham said.

"So that puts us in a challenging position. We're doing more work — our calls for service go up every year — with less people," he said.

Statewide, Vermont's homicide rate last year was about 3.9 per 100,000, compared to Los Angeles at 3.1 and New York City at 2.3 per 100,000, Loan said. Burlington's rate was 11.2 per 100,000, exceeding the rates in Philadelphia, Phoenix and Springfield, Mass., according to Loan.

"We don't have enough ambulances to run, we don't have enough homicide investigators because we're not designed to have that high rate of violent crime. So it has a bigger effect," he said.

In Burlington, the drug problem is spiraling out of control and it's routine to see people injecting drugs downtown, in city hall park and in other places, said Andrew Vota, who has lived in the city for 25 years.

"It's a citywide issue and people experience it in the downtown but they're also experiencing it in their neighborhoods and it's everywhere across the city and it's scary," he said of the drug activity.

Retail theft and other crime has increased and some businesses have left downtown.

Vota and Jane Knodell, a former chair of the Burlington City Council, drafted a letter this fall that now has been signed by about 1,500 residents in the city of about 45,000, that outlines concerns and makes recommendations.

"The increasing levels of violence, burglary, retail, automobile, and bike theft, unlawful public drug and alcohol consumption, drug dealing, graffiti, and other illegal activity are unacceptable," the letter states.

The crimes come as the city's police department tries to rebuild its staffing levels. In 2020, the City Council passed a resolution directing the department to reduce its maximum number of officers through attrition from 105 to 74, amid calls in Burlington and nationwide for racial justice and to defund police.

More than a year later, the City Council authorized the department to increase its staffing level to an effective number of 87, but then-Acting Police Chief Jon Murad said at the time that it would take years to rebuild the department. As of Nov. 15, Burlington had 69 sworn officers.

"I think the fundamental problem is the reduction in the police force because that's kind of the back bone. Because they are a deterrent," said Knodell, who did not support the cap.

The city has added security guards to the Church Street Marketplace, a pedestrian outdoor mall downtown, to help shoppers feel safe during the holiday season. Other businesses are planning to fill some of the vacancies, Weinberger said. The city also planned to hold a community public safety forum Thursday and has another one planned next week to discuss drug trafficking, gun crime, substance use and property crime.

After the shooting of the Palestinian students, suspect Jason J. Eaton, 48, was arrested the next day at his Burlington apartment. He has pleaded not guilty to three counts of attempted murder and is currently

being held without bail. The shooting came as threats against Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities have increased across the U.S. since the the Israel-Hamas war erupted in early October.

Meanwhile, Vermont State Police are making progress on the investigations into other shooting deaths around the state this fall, Birmingham said, including that of a 77-year-old retired college dean who was shot while walking on a recreational trail in the small town of Castleton in October.

Castleton residents are still rattled. They don't think police are doing enough and don't feel safe walking on the trail, said Mark Brown, a business owner in town, who has organized a daily group walk Monday through Friday on the trail. A fundraising effort led by Brown has raised more than \$25,000 for a reward leading to an arrest.

Some investigations will take longer than others, Birmingham said last month. "But I am confident that we are going to make progress on all of them that will end in resolutions for victims," he said.

An appeals court will hear arguments over whether Meadows' Georgia charges can move to federal court

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A federal appeals court will hear arguments Friday over whether the election interference charges filed against Trump White House chief of staff Mark Meadows should be moved from a state court to federal court.

Meadows, who is charged alongside former President Donald Trump and 17 others, is accused of scheming to keep the Republican in power after Democrat Joe Biden won Georgia in 2020. Meadows testified at a hearing in August that the actions detailed in the sweeping indictment were taken as part of his job.

U.S. District Judge Steve Jones ruled in September that Meadows did not meet the threshold to move his case to federal court. The evidence presented showed the actions were taken "on behalf of the Trump campaign with an ultimate goal of affecting state election activities and procedures," he wrote.

Meadows appealed Jones' ruling to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which set oral arguments in the case for Friday. It is to be heard by a three-judge panel made up of Chief Circuit Judge William Pryor, Circuit Judge Robin Rosenbaum and Circuit Judge Nancy Abudu. Pryor was appointed by President George W. Bush, Rosenbaum was appointed by President Barack Obama and Abudu was appointed by Biden.

Lawyers for Meadows argued in a court filing with the 11th Circuit that Jones "unnecessarily complicated a straightforward federal officer removal case." The Federal Officer Removal Statute allows federal officials to move legal cases against them to federal court when they are related to their official duties "so they may assert a federal defense in a federal forum," specifically Supremacy Clause immunity, his lawyers wrote.

The bar to qualify for removal is low, his lawyers wrote, and Meadows' testimony "about the breadth of the Chief of Staff role, and about the connection between that role and the conduct charged in the Indictment, were more than enough to clear it."

Jones was wrong to require that Meadows prove that "a heavy majority" of the actions for which he is charged related to his role as chief of staff and in finding that "political activity" was outside the scope of his duties, Meadows' lawyers argued.

Prosecutors argued that the removal statute is meant to protect federal authority but that there "is no federal authority to protect" in this case. Instead, they wrote in a filing, Meadows and the others charged "engaged in activities designed to accomplish federal meddling in matters of state authority."

Meadows failed to show any connection between the charges and his official duties, prosecutors wrote. In fact, they argued, the evidence "overwhelmingly indicated" that the bulk of the activities for which he was charged "fell outside the scope of his official duties" because there is no federal authority over Georgia's post-election activities and because he was acting for the benefit of the Trump campaign.

The three-judge panel has asked the lawyers to explain what effect, if any, an October ruling by the 11th Circuit could have on Meadows' effort to move his case to federal court.

In that case, a man had filed a lien against property owned by people he believed had wronged him, including a former IRS commissioner and a former U.S. treasury secretary. He was convicted under a

law that criminalizes the filing of retaliatory liens against the property of "any officer or employee of the United States." The 11th Circuit found that, for the purposes of that statute, a former civil servant does not count as an "officer or employee of the United States" and vacated his convictions on those counts.

Pryor, Rosenbaum and Abudu all joined the majority opinion in that case.

Meadows' attorneys argued in a court filing that that decision "has no material impact on this case." The 11th Circuit judges found that what mattered was not the federal officers' status at the time of the indictment, but instead their status when the liens were filed.

Prosecutors countered that the 11th Circuit's reasoning in that case reinforces their earlier arguments that only current federal officers may move cases to federal court under the removal law.

Four people have already pleaded guilty in the Georgia election case after reaching deals with prosecutors. The remaining 15, including Trump, Meadows and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, have pleaded not guilty.

Why more women live in major East Coast counties while men outnumber them in the West

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

Anyone who has suspected that there are more women than men where they live, or vice versa, will find fodder for their suspicions in new data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Whether it refutes or confirms their suspicions likely depends on where they live.

Women outnumber men in the largest urban counties east of the Mississippi River, along the Eastern Seaboard and in the Deep South, while the West skews male, according to data released last week from the 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, the most comprehensive source of data on American life. Those numbers were also backed up by age and sex figures from the 2020 census released earlier this year.

There are limitations to what can be concluded from the data. Still, Nancy Averbach, 57, doesn't find the numbers surprising. She lost her husband eight years ago, and has since found it hard to meet a compatible partner.

Across the U.S. in 2022, the most recent year that figures are available, there were 96.6 adult men for every 100 adult women — and in the Atlanta suburb of DeKalb County, where Averbach lives, that ratio was 87.1, according to the survey. An equal ratio of men to women would be 100.

"It's really tough to find quality men who share similar values," Averbach said. There aren't many singles groups that cater to her age group, she says, and when such groups put on events, they usually attract more women than men.

Her county has a low sex ratio, which means there are more women than men. A high ratio indicates there are more men than women.

The sex ratio numbers don't reflect sexual preference, gender identity or whether those surveyed are looking for partners. The figures also don't reflect intersex people, who, historically, have had relatively scant data collected on them.

The ratios vary by geography, in part because of the presence of certain institutions and industries with gender imbalances. In the most populous counties in the West, this is especially discernible. San Diego, for instance, has several male-dominated military bases, which is reflected in the sex ratio. In Austin, San Francisco, Seattle and San Jose there are plentiful jobs in tech, a sector where men account for around three-quarters of the workforce.

This is in contrast to areas with large numbers of colleges or universities, which typically have more women, according to a Census Bureau report from May.

Adding to the imbalance are the effects of historic racism in the U.S., including high rates of incarceration and the mortality gap, which have lowered the number of men in some communities, said Karen Guzzo, director of the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina.

Among U.S. counties with 500,000 residents or more, the areas where adult women outnumber adult

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men most noticeably were in Baltimore, New York, Atlanta and Philadelphia, as well as Birmingham, Alabama; and Memphis, Tennessee; where the ratios ranged in the mid-80s.

The biggest imbalances of men to women, with ratios above 103 for those age 18 and over, were recorded in the West, in counties that are home to Colorado Springs, Colo.; and Austin, as well as California counties that are home to San Francisco, San Jose and Bakersfield, where agriculture and energy are two of the biggest industries.

At birth, the sex ratio in the U.S. has historically been 105 men for every 100 women. The ratio inverts around age 30. Since the mortality rate is higher for men than it is for women at almost every age group — due to violence, drinking, smoking, job hazards and suicide — that ratio decreases with age, until at age 90 or above there are typically about two women to every man.

Compared to the previous decade though, more men are now living into older age, according to the 2020 census.

Michal Naisteter, a professional matchmaker in the Philadelphia area, has given the imbalance some thought — and mostly in terms of the dating market because of her work. She thinks single women are more likely than men to live within the city limits of Philadelphia, but that single men are more willing to commute from the suburbs than vice versa.

She advises people looking for a partner to put in the effort, perhaps even to expand the geographical reach of their day-to-day lives.

"It should take work," Naisteter said. "Because nothing is sweeter than something you have to work for."

In communities with more men than women, people tend to marry at an earlier age than in places where women outnumber men. Women are more likely to live with a partner without getting married in places where they outnumber men, and if they do marry, it is more often to men who are less educated or earn less than they do, Guzzo said.

That's not likely to happen with Averbach, who is doing just fine on her own in suburban Atlanta.

"Why would I want to settle?" she said. "I don't need a guy to make me happy."

The Vatican's 'trial of the century,' a Pandora's box of unintended revelations, explained

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Verdicts are expected Saturday for a cardinal and nine other defendants in the most complicated financial trial in the Vatican's modern history: a case featuring a Hollywood-worthy cast of characters, unseemly revelations about the Holy See and questions about Pope Francis' own role in the deals.

The trial had initially been seen as a showcase for Francis' reforms and his willingness to crack down on alleged financial misdeeds in the Vatican, which long had a reputation as an offshore tax haven.

But after 2 1/2 years of hearings, no real smoking gun emerged to support the prosecution's hypothesis of a grand conspiracy to defraud the pope of millions of euros (dollars) in charitable donations.

Even if some convictions are handed down, the overall impression is that the "trial of the century" turned into something of a Pandora's box of unintended revelations about Vatican vendettas, incompetence and even ransom payments that ultimately cost the Holy See reputational harm.

WHAT WAS THE TRIAL ABOUT?

After a two-year investigation that featured unprecedented police raids in the Apostolic Palace, Vatican prosecutors in 2021 issued a 487-page indictment accusing 10 people of numerous financial crimes, including fraud, embezzlement, extortion, corruption, money laundering and abuse of office.

The main focus involved the Holy See's 350 million euro investment in a luxury London property. Prosecutors allege brokers and Vatican Monsignors fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions, and then extorted the Holy See for 15 million euros (\$16.5 million) to cede control of the property.

The original London investigation spawned two tangents that involved the star defendant, Cardinal An-

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gelo Becciu, once one of Francis' top advisers and a onetime papal contender.

Chief prosecutor Alessandro Diddi is seeking prison sentences from three to 13 years for each of the 10 defendants, as well as the confiscation of some 415 million euros (\$460 million) in damages and restitution.

HOW DOES THE CARDINAL FIT IN?

Becciu wasn't originally under investigation in the London deal since he had been transferred from the Vatican secretariat of state to the saint-making office before the key London transactions occurred.

But he became enmeshed after prosecutors began looking into other deals, including 125,000 euros in Vatican money that he sent to a diocesan charity in his native Sardinia.

Prosecutors alleged embezzlement, since the charity was run by his brother. Becciu argued that the local bishop requested the money for a bakery to employ at-risk youths, and that the money remained in the diocesan coffers.

Becciu is also accused of paying a Sardinian woman, Cecilia Marogna, for her intelligence services. Prosecutors traced some 575,000 euros in transfers from the Vatican to her Slovenian front company.

Becciu said he thought the money was going to be used to pay a British security firm to negotiate the release of a Colombian nun who had been taken hostage by Islamic militants in Mali in 2017. Marogna, who is also on trial, denied wrongdoing.

THE MYSTERIOUS MONSIGNOR PERLASCA

No figure in the trial was as intriguing as Monsignor Alberto Perlasca, who ran the office that managed the Vatican's sovereign wealth fund, with estimated assets of 600 million euros (around \$630 million).

It was Perlasca who signed the contracts in late 2018 giving operative control of the London property to London broker Gianluigi Torzi, another defendant who is accused of then extorting the Vatican for 15 million euros to get the property back.

Because of his intimate involvement in the deal, Perlasca was initially a prime suspect. But after his first round of questioning, he fired his lawyer, changed his story and began cooperating with prosecutors.

Perlasca escaped indictment and was even allowed to be listed as an injured party, enabling him to possibly recover damages.

Only during the course of the trial did it emerge that Perlasca had been manipulated into changing his story to turn on Becciu, his former boss.

THE MYSTERIOUS WOMEN WHO COACHED HIM

In a trial that had plenty of surreal twists, perhaps none was as jaw-dropping as when a controversial figure from the Vatican's past emerged as having had a starring role in coaching Perlasca to change his testimony.

Public relations specialist Francesca Chauqui had previously served on a papal commission tasked with investigating the Vatican's murky finances. She is known in Vatican circles for her role in the "Vatileaks" scandal of 2015-2016, when she was convicted by the same tribunal of conspiring to leak confidential Vatican documents to journalists and received a 10-month suspended sentence.

Chauqui openly nurtured a grudge against Becciu because she blamed him for supporting her Vatileaks prosecution. She apparently saw the investigation into the London property as a chance to settle scores.

And so it emerged in late 2022, when Perlasca was being questioned on the stand, that Chauqui had engaged in an elaborate plot with a Perlasca family friend to persuade the prelate to turn on Becciu.

"I knew that sooner or later the moment would come and I would send you this message," Chauqui wrote Perlasca in a text message that was entered into evidence. "Because the Lord doesn't allow the good to be humiliated without repair. I pardon you Perlasca, but remember, you owe me a favor."

Diddi, the prosecutor, hasn't said what, if any, charges are pending for anyone involved in the Perlasca testimony saga.

THE POPE'S OWN ROLE

Francis made clear early on that he strongly supported prosecutors in their investigation. But the trial produced evidence that his involvement went far beyond mere encouragement.

Defense lawyers discovered that the pope had secretly issued four decrees during the investigation to

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benefit prosecutors, allowing them to conduct intercepts and detain suspects without a judge's warrant. Lawyers cried foul, arguing such interference by an absolute monarch in a legal system where the pope exercises supreme legislative, executive and judicial power violated their clients' fundamental rights and robbed them of a fair trial.

Diddi argued the decrees served as a "guarantee" for the suspects.

In addition, witnesses testified that Francis was very much aware of key aspects of the deals in question, and in some cases explicitly authorized them:

-- The former head of the financial intelligence agency who is on trial said Francis explicitly asked him to help the secretariat of state negotiate the exit deal with Torzi;

-- Becciu testified Francis had approved spending up to 1 million euros to negotiate the nun's freedom;

-- Becciu's onetime secretary, who is on trial, said Francis was so pleased with the outcome of the Torzi negotiation that he paid for a celebratory group dinner at a fancy Roman fish restaurant.

In a religious hierarchy where obedience to superiors is a foundational element of a vocation, defense lawyers argued their underling clients merely obeyed orders from the pope on down. That included negotiating the exit strategy with Torzi, who was previously unknown to the Vatican but was brought into the deal by a friend of Francis.

"Torzi was introduced by Giuseppe Milanese, who was a friend of the pope's, so why wouldn't we trust him?" said Massimo Bassi, a lawyer for another of the defendants.

Milanese wasn't charged. Torzi denied wrongdoing.

Trump loves the UFC. His campaign hopes viral videos of his appearances will help him pummel rivals

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After Donald Trump attended South Carolina's annual Palmetto Bowl, video of the crowd chanting "We want Trump!" as the former president arrived at Williams-Brice Stadium spread across conservative social media.

It was much the same two weeks earlier when the GOP front-runner attended an Ultimate Fighting Championship event in New York, fist-bumping and waving to the crowd as he entered Madison Square Garden like he was one of the fighters, with an entourage that included the musician Kid Rock, UFC president Dana White and former Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

While Trump has spent less time campaigning in early-voting states than many of his Republican primary rivals, his campaign has been filling his schedule with appearances at major sporting events including Saturday's UFC fight in Las Vegas. Videos of his appearances routinely rack up hundreds of thousands of views across social media, particularly on non-political outlets, including popular online sports channels and fan sites. And they are far easier and cheaper to produce than campaign rallies.

It's a strategy that, aides say, puts him in front of potential voters who may not closely follow politics or engage with traditional news sources. And it is part of a broader effort to expand Trump's appeal with young people and minority voters, particularly Latino and Black men, that the campaign hopes to win over in greater numbers after gains in 2020. UFC's fanbase in particular is overwhelmingly male.

Aides stress Trump is a genuine sports fan who frequented fights and games long before he ran for the White House and would be attending even if he weren't running. He is a particular aficionado of boxing and other combat sports. During a summer appearance on the "UFC Unfiltered" podcast, Trump recalled his favorite fights from decades ago, blow by blow.

In the 1980s, he befriended boxing legends like Mike Tyson and promoter Don King as he hosted high-profile fights at his Atlantic City casinos and became so involved with professional wrestling that he starred in WrestleMania 23's "Battle of the Billionaires." And for a time, he owned the New Jersey Generals, a professional football team that played in the NFL-rival United States Football League.

In recent years, he has become particularly tied to mixed martial arts and its machismo. He is close personal friends with White, UFC's founder, who spoke at the Republican National Conventions in 2016

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and 2020 and credits Trump for saving the sport by hosting fights when others shunned it as too violent. Campaign staff often tune into fights late at night aboard Trump's private plane as he returns to Palm Beach, Florida, following events, streaming fights on ESPN+ or DAZN.

Trump has also drawn support from the sport's stars, including Colby Covington, who will be fighting Leon Edwards Saturday night for UFC's welterweight title. Covington said this week that organizers overruled his request to have Trump walk him out to the octagon. But Trump may still get a role if he wins.

"He's going to wrap that belt around me," Covington told reporters on Thursday, wearing a suit jacket signed by Trump that featured the former president's mug shot on the back. "It's going to be a spectacle."

There is of course a long history of sports in presidential politics. Candidates have used them to project an image of strength and vigor, endear themselves to voters and seem more accessible.

Presidential historian Michael Beschloss wrote about how Theodore Roosevelt was frequently pictured boxing, horseback riding and hiking, while John Kennedy swam, sailed and played touch football despite serious injuries sustained during the war. Richard Nixon "went to great lengths" to emphasize his football and baseball fandom as he tried to court working-class voters, while George W. Bush famously threw out the ceremonial first pitch of the first World Series game in New York after 9/11, trying to signal to nervous Americans that life would go on after the terror attack.

Trump's team sees the appearances as a way to connect with sports fans, signaling he shares their interests, and a way to showcase a different side of the combative politician, who has been indicted four times and is usually shown on the news railing from behind a rally lectern. They also hope to capitalize on his history as a celebrity and his relationships with business and entertainment figures.

When Trump attends an event like Saturday's fight, "The audience gets to see him through an unvarnished filter that isn't tainted by news media and political biases," said his spokesman Steven Cheung, who previously worked for UFC himself. "It gives us the great opportunity to connect with voters who are, quite frankly, turned off by many traditional news outlets."

Jeffrey Montez de Oca, a professor of sociology and the founding director of the Center for Critical Sport Studies at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs, said politicians "use sports all the time and they're used to connect with regular people," as well as to "project strength and power."

Sports, he said, generate "powerful emotions" that take hold of fans and "make you feel like you're a part of something much larger than yourself" — emotions that politicians try to harness.

"For Trump to walk into that space, he's able to participate in the general feeling going on in that room. The love, the enthusiasm, the feeling of connection with the sport, with the athletes, then attaches to him as well," he said.

Kyle Kusz, a University of Rhode Island professor who studies the connection between sports and the far right, recalled how Trump aligned himself with sports figures during his 2016 campaign, appearing with basketball coach Bobby Knight, who was fired for abusive behavior, and invoking Penn State football coach Joe Paterno, who was fired in connection with the child sex abuse scandal involving his former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky, among others facing scandal. He noted all were white men whose diehard fans saw them as unfairly victimized.

Sports stars in 2016 were among the few celebrities willing to campaign with Trump, who was shunned by the Hollywood establishment.

This time, Trump's appearances are part of a broader effort by the former president's team to engage with non-traditional media outlets, including YouTube shows and podcasts like "UFC Unfiltered" that can drive millions of views. The appearances allow Trump to reach listeners who may be turned off by the mainstream media and politics, and get their news from alternative sources.

They have also tried to harness the power of social media by creating their own viral moments. His team realized early on that video of Trump interacting with supporters had particular traction, and now often organizes stops where he has passed out Blizzards at Dairy Queen or tossed autographed footballs into the crowd at a frat house in Iowa.

The scenes have also provided a contrast, first with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, once seen as Trump's leading primary rival, who is often criticized for seeming wooden and awkward at public events, and now

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with President Joe Biden as both men gear up for a widely expected general election rematch. Biden has largely eschewed campaign events, holding just a single rally, his campaign launch event.

In first news conference with Dodgers, Shohei Ohtani dodges questions about Tommy John surgery

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shohei Ohtani opened his first news conference with the Los Angeles Dodgers by dodging questions about whether he had a second Tommy John surgery.

"At the time of the announcement, we didn't know which way we were going to go. That's why I never said what type of procedure was going to be done," Ohtani said through a translator Thursday during his introduction after receiving a record \$700 million, 10-year contract.

It was Ohtani's first time speaking with the media since Aug. 9, two weeks before a pitching injury that required surgery with Dodgers head team physician Dr. Neal ElAttrache on Sept. 19 and will keep him off the mound until 2025. Ohtani had Tommy John surgery performed by ElAttrache on Oct. 1, 2018.

"I'm not obviously an expert in the medical field, but it was a procedure," Ohtani said. "I'm not sure what it's called. I know it was completely different from my first time, so I don't know what you want to call it. You could probably talk to my doctor about that."

Ohtani refused to say what other teams he negotiated with before the agreement with the Dodgers last weekend.

"Free agency is still going on and I don't really want to mess with their plans and I don't want to say anything wrong, so I don't want to really talk about what talks I had with other organizations," he said through translator Ipppei Mizuhara.

Ohtani did, however, reveal the name of his dog, seen on his lap when he appeared on MLB Network for the announcement of his second MVP award on Nov. 16. The dog has the American name "Decoy" and a Japanese name, "Dekopin" or "Decopin" depending on the transliteration.

Ohtani wore a navy business suit with a white shirt and blue tie, took off the jacket and put on a Dodgers home jersey with No. 17 and then the blue cap with the interlocking L&A while receiving polite applause. He took off the cap before speaking.

"One thing that really stands out in my head," he said, "when I had the meeting with the Dodgers, the ownership group, they said when they looked back at the last 10 years, even though they made the play-offs every single year, won one World Series ring, they considered that a failure. And when I heard that, I knew they were all about winning, and that's exactly how I feel."

Ohtani never reached the playoffs in six seasons with the Los Angeles Angels.

An electronic sign flashed "Welcome to the Dodgers, Shohei Ohtani" in English and Japanese above the stage at Dodger Stadium. Fifteen rows of seats were filled with media, Dodgers employees and sponsors on the Centerfield Plaza under sunny skies. Numerous Japanese television crews and photographers ringed the seating area.

Ohtani thanked controlling owner Mark Walter, team president Stan Kasten, president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman, general manager Brandon Gomes and manager Dave Roberts.

The Dodgers had attempted to sign Ohtani out of high school before he joined the Nippon Ham Fighters.

"Shohei is arguably the most talented player who has ever played this game," Friedman said, flanked by Ohtani and Walter. "One of our goals is to have baseball fans in Japan convert to Dodger blue."

A unique two-way star as both a hitter and pitcher, the 29-year-old Japanese sensation left the Angels as a free agent. He's moving 30 miles up Interstate 5 after the Dodgers won out over the competition in a deal announced Monday. He said he made his decision Friday night, on the eve of his announcement.

Ohtani also thanked the Angels during the news conference that was shown in Japan, where it began at 8 a.m. Friday.

"It was a fun ride, a great ride for the last six years. ... I'll never forget all the memories I have," he said. "There's always sadness leaving teams. Last time it was the Fighters and in this case it was the Angels."

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The two-time AL MVP 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.

Ohtani's unusual 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. Kasten said Ohtani's agent, Nez Balelo, proposed the deferred money last Friday, when there were false reports of a possible deal with Toronto.

"I wouldn't have had the guts to propose it," Friedman said.

Deferred money lowered the annual charge to the Dodgers' luxury tax payroll to about \$46 million, lowering their competitive balance tax.

"I figured if I can defer as much money as I can, if that's going to help the CBT and that's going to help the Dodgers be able to sign better players and make a better team, I felt like that was worth it," Ohtani said.

Ohtani can opt out of the deal if either Walter or Friedman no longer is with the team, a person told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the terms were not announced.

"Everybody has to be on the same page in order to have a winning organization," Ohtani said. "I feel like those two are at the top of it and they're in control of everything. And I feel almost like I'm having a contract with those two guys. And I feel like if one of them are gone ... things might get a little out of control so I just wanted a safety net."

Said Friedman: "Obviously, it's really flattering but also it's a non-factor for me."

Ukraine gets EU membership boost, but no new European aid, after setback in US

By RAF CASERT and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union failed to agree on a 50 billion-euro (\$54 billion) package in financial aid that Ukraine desperately needs to stay afloat, even as the bloc decided Thursday to open accession negotiations with the war-torn country.

The aid was vetoed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, delivering another tough blow to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy after he failed this week to persuade U.S. lawmakers to approve an additional \$61 billion for Ukraine, mainly to buy weapons from the U.S.

The start of accession talks was a momentous moment and stunning reversal for a country at war that had struggled to find the backing for its membership aspirations and long faced obstinate opposition from Orban.

Hungary's leader decided not to veto the accession talks, but then blocked the aid package.

"I can inform you that 26 leaders agreed on the (budget negotiation)," European Council President Charles Michel said. "I should be very precise. One leader, Sweden, needs to consult its parliament, which is in line with the usual procedure for this country, and one leader couldn't agree."

The decisions required unanimity among the EU's members.

Still, Michel, who was chairing the Brussels summit, called the start of accession talks "a clear signal of hope for their people and our continent."

Although the process between opening negotiations and Ukraine finally becoming a member could take many years, Zelenskyy welcomed the agreement as "a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe."

"History is made by those who don't get tired of fighting for freedom," Zelenskyy said.

The financial package could not be endorsed after Orban vetoed both the extra money and a review of the EU budget. Ukraine is badly counting on the funds to help its damaged economy survive in the coming year.

Michel said leaders would reconvene in January in an effort to break the deadlock.

Orban had warned before the summit that forcing a decision on the Ukraine issues could destroy EU unity. Decisions on enlarging the EU and on a review of its long-term budget, which contains the 50 billion

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euros (\$54.1 billion) in aid for the government in Kyiv, must be unanimous among all 27 member countries.

Orban had also threatened to veto the start of accession talks but ultimately backpedaled.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo called the opening of membership discussions a black eye for Russian President Vladimir Putin. "It is a very clear message to Moscow. Us Europeans, we don't let go of Ukraine," he said.

Orban said that his opposition remained steadfast, but that he decided not to use his veto because the 26 other nations were arguing so strongly in favor. Under EU rules, an abstention does not prevent a decision from being adopted.

An EU official, who insisted on not being quoted by name because the summit negotiations were private, said Orban was "momentarily absent from the room in a pre-agreed and constructive manner" when the decision was made.

Orban said he stepped aside since all of his counterparts were committed to putting Ukraine on the EU membership path, though their position did not change his mind.

"Hungary's perspective is clear: Ukraine is not ready for us to begin negotiations on its EU membership. It's a completely illogical, irrational and improper decision" he said.

Others lauded Orban's gesture. They had been preparing for the summit spilling over into an extra day Saturday.

"Certainly quicker than any of us expected," Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said.

"In fairness to Prime Minister Orban, he made his case, made it very strongly. He disagrees with this decision and he's not changing his opinion in that sense, but essentially decided not to use the veto power," Varadkar said.

"I respect the fact that he he didn't do that, because it would have put us in a very difficult position as a European Union," the Irish leader added.

Belgium's De Croo had a slightly different take, saying he thought Orban "didn't use his veto because he realized that it would be indefensible."

At the same time as Ukraine, the EU leaders also decided to open membership negotiations with Ukraine's neighbor Moldova.

In the United States, national security adviser Jake Sullivan welcomed "the EU's historic decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, a crucial step toward fulfilling their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

In Kyiv, the news was met with cautious optimism.

"We are Europe. Ukraine is Europe, the center of Europe. I want us to be given the status of a proud member of Europe," said Olha Paradovska, a 70-year-old Kyiv resident.

Ivan Olezko, 19, said the decision to start accession talks was long overdue. "If everything goes well, I will be happy, but we don't know what will happen next," he said.

EU leaders had expected the summit to take at least until late Friday before any sort of breakthrough might be clinched, so the fateful announcement came totally unexpectedly after Orban did not block the move by his colleagues.

A beaming Michel came down in the summit media room unscheduled and said "This is a historic moment, and it shows the credibility of the European Union. The strength of the European Union. The decision is made."

He said the negotiations would open before a report will be made to the leaders in March.

The surprise came at a dire time for Zelenskyy, straight off a trip this week to Washington where his pleas for more aid from the U.S. Congress fell on deaf ears. Ukraine's president was looking for a better response in Brussels.

"It is just as important that Ukraine has the means to continue the war and rebuild its country," De Croo said.

The urgency to find a solution is matched only by the potential blow to the EU's credibility, the Ukrainian president said in a video address to the leaders assembled in Brussels.

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"Nobody wants Europe to be seen as untrustworthy. Or as unable to take decisions it prepared itself," he said.

Israeli defense minister says war on Hamas will last months as US envoy discusses timetable

By JULIA FRANKEL, PAUL HAVEN and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel's defense minister said it will take months to destroy Hamas, predicting a drawn-out war even as his country and its top ally, the United States, face increasing international isolation and alarm over the devastation from the campaign in Gaza.

Yoav Gallant's comments came as U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan met with Israeli leaders to discuss a timetable for winding down major combat in Gaza. Israeli leaders repeated their determination to pursue the military assault until they crush the militant group for its Oct. 7 attack.

The exchange seemed to continue a dynamic the two allies have been locked in for weeks. President Joe Biden's administration has shown unease over Israel's failure to reduce civilian casualties and its plans for the future of Gaza, but the White House continues to offer wholehearted support for Israel with weapons shipments and diplomatic backing.

"I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives," Biden said Thursday when asked if he wants Israel to scale down its operations by the end of the month. "Not stop going after Hamas, but be more careful."

Meanwhile, aside from small adjustments, Israel has changed little in what has been one of the 21st century's most devastating military campaigns, with a mounting death toll.

The prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mohammed Shtayyeh, said it's time for the United States to deal more firmly with Israel, particularly on Washington's calls for postwar negotiations for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Now that the United States has talked the talk, we want Washington to walk the walk," Shtayyeh said in an interview with The Associated Press a day before Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is to meet with Sullivan in Ramallah.

The encounter is expected to focus, among other things, on Palestinian security forces and on revitalizing the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority, an autonomous government that administers pockets of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, said a senior Biden administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House.

The U.S. is exploring having security personnel associated with the Palestinian Authority help restore public safety in Gaza if Israel is successful in removing Hamas from control, the official said. Sullivan and other officials have discussed the prospect of having people associated with the Palestinian Authority security forces before Hamas took over the territory in 2007 serve as the "nucleus" of postwar peacekeeping in Gaza, the official said, adding that this was one idea of many being considered.

A deadly Hamas ambush on Israeli troops in Gaza City this week showed the group's resilience and called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out the entire territory. The campaign has flattened much of northern Gaza and driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Displaced people have squeezed into shelters mainly in the south in a spiraling humanitarian crisis.

Gallant said Hamas has been building military infrastructure in Gaza for more than a decade, "and it is not easy to destroy them. It will require a period of time."

"It will last more than several months, but we will win, and we will destroy them," he said.

After talks with Sullivan in Tel Aviv, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he told Israel's "American friends" that the country was "more determined than ever to continue fighting until Hamas is eliminated — until complete victory."

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Sullivan talked with Netanyahu about moving to "lower intensity operations" sometime "in the near future."

"But I don't want to put a time stamp on it," he said.

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Earlier this week, Biden said Israel was losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing." U.S. officials have been telling Israel for several weeks that the country's window is closing for concluding major combat operations in Gaza without losing even more support internationally.

ARRESTS IN THE NORTH

The Palestinian telecommunications provider Paltel said Thursday that all communication services across Gaza were cut off due to ongoing fighting, severing the besieged territory from the outside world.

Heavy fighting has raged for days in areas around eastern Gaza City that were encircled earlier in the war. Tens of thousands of people remain in the north despite repeated evacuation orders, saying they don't feel safe anywhere in Gaza or fear they may never be allowed to return to their homes if they leave.

The military released footage Thursday showing Israeli troops leading a line of dozens of men with their hands above their heads out of a damaged building it said was the Kamal Adwan Hospital in the north Gaza town of Beit Lahia. Men brought out four assault rifles and set them on the street along with several ammunition magazines.

In the video, a commander said militants had fired on troops from the hospital and that troops were evacuating those inside while detaining suspected militants. Earlier in the week, a Gaza Health Ministry official said weapons inside belong to the hospital's guards. Neither side's claims could be independently verified.

Israeli troops have held the hospital since Tuesday, according to the Health Ministry and U.N. During that time, 70 medical workers and patients were detained, including the hospital director, they said.

Several thousand displaced people sheltering there were evacuated after the raid, and the remaining patients — including 12 children in intensive care — will be taken to Gaza City's Shifa Hospital, the Health Ministry said.

Israel says it is rounding up men in northern Gaza as it searches for Hamas fighters, and recent videos have shown dozens of detained men stripped to their underwear, bound and blindfolded in the streets. Some released detainees have said they were beaten and denied food and water.

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 18,700 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.

Multiple strikes hit Thursday in the southern cities of Khan Younis and Rafah, residents reported. After an early morning strike in Rafah, an Associated Press reporter saw 27 bodies brought into a local hospital 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. "There were no resistance fighters, rockets or anything."

New evacuation orders issued as troops pushed into 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 have 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.

RISING SUPPORT FOR HAMAS

Israel might have hoped that the war and its hardships would turn Palestinians against Hamas, hastening its demise. But 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 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

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of lands they want for a future state.

Israelis, meanwhile, remain strongly supportive of the war and see it as necessary to prevent a repeat of Oct. 7, when Palestinian militants attacked communities across southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking some 240 hostage. A total of 116 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive, which began Oct. 27.

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.

Ukraine's a step closer to joining the EU. Here's what it means, and why it matters

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Ukraine got a green light Thursday to start sped-up talks on joining the European Union. That's a big boost for war-ravaged Ukraine and a loud message to Vladimir Putin — but it could be years before the country actually becomes a member of the EU.

Here's a look at what Thursday's decision means, and why joining the EU is especially important, and especially hard, for Ukraine.

WHAT IS THE EU AND HOW DO YOU JOIN?

The European Union was born after World War II as a trading bloc with a bold ambition: to prevent another war between Germany and France. The six founding members were Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

Since then, the EU has steadily expanded to contain 27 democratic nations, many from the former communist bloc in Eastern Europe, inspired by the idea that economic and political integration among nations is the best way to promote prosperity and peace.

This notably led to the creation of the shared euro currency in 1999, the continent's open borders, and trailblazing rules to reduce carbon emissions and regulate tech giants.

To join the EU, candidate countries must go through a lengthy process to align their laws and standards with those of the bloc and show that their institutions and economies meet democratic norms. Launching accession talks requires approval by consensus from the current member nations.

WHY JOINING IS IMPORTANT TO UKRAINE

Ukraine is one of several countries that have long wanted to join the EU, seeing it as a path to wealth and stability. While the EU is not a military alliance like NATO, membership in the bloc is seen by some as a rampart against Russian influence.

Ukraine officially applied for EU accession less than a week after Russia invaded in February 2022. Its capital, Kyiv, faced the threat of capture, and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government faced the threat of collapse.

The start of membership talks less than two years later is only one step in a long journey. But it sends a strong signal of solidarity with Ukraine just as U.S. support for Ukraine's military is faltering and a Ukrainian counteroffensive is stalled — and as Putin appears increasingly emboldened.

And it offers a ray of hope for Ukraine even as EU members failed Thursday to agree on a more immediate boost in the form of 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) in aid to keep the Ukrainian economy afloat.

WHY UKRAINE'S MEMBERSHIP JOURNEY IS ROCKY

EU officials had said talks couldn't officially begin until Ukraine addresses multiple issues including corruption, lobbying concerns and restrictions that might prevent national minorities from studying and reading in their own language. While EU officials say Ukraine has made progress on these issues in recent months, it still has a long way to go.

Every EU country has gradually agreed to support Ukraine's bid — except Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Putin's greatest ally within the EU. Orban maintains that Ukraine isn't ready to even start talking about EU membership. In a surprise move, Orban stepped aside Thursday and abstained from the vote

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to allow Ukraine's membership talks to begin.

It is just a beginning, and many steps remain.

Debt crises, waves of migration and Brexit had all contributed to the bloc's skittishness toward expanding its ranks in recent years. So, too, did the growth of Euro-skeptic political forces in many member countries.

But the urgency created by Russia's invasion and Ukraine's request for expedited consideration upended the EU's go-slow approach to adding new members and reversed years of "enlargement fatigue."

Thursday's decision also has an impact on other would-be members, who feel the EU is showing favoritism.

WHO ARE THE OTHER CANDIDATES?

Turkey applied for membership in 1987, received candidate status in 1999, and had to wait until 2005 to start talks for actual entry. Only one of more than 30 negotiating "chapters" has been completed in the years since, and the whole process is at a standstill as a result of various disputes.

Several countries in the Balkans, meanwhile, have become discouraged by the bloc's failure to live up to its lofty membership promises.

North Macedonia submitted its entry bid in 2004. Even after subsequently changing its name to settle a longstanding dispute with EU member Greece, the country is still waiting for membership talks to begin because Bulgaria threw up a hurdle related to ethnicity and language.

Bosnia remains plagued by ethnic divisions that make reform an almost impossible challenge. The commission said last month that it should only start membership talks after more progress is made. It expressed concern about the justice system and other rights failures in the Bosnian Serb part of the country.

Serbia and Kosovo refuse to normalize their relations and stand last in the EU's line.

Israeli military veteran tapped as GOP candidate in special election to replace George Santos

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Republicans have picked a little-known county lawmaker who once served in the Israeli military as their candidate in a special election to replace ousted New York congressman George Santos, party officials said Thursday.

Nassau County legislator and former Israeli paratrooper Mazi Pilip will face off against Democratic former congressman Tom Suozzi in a Feb. 13 special election for the seat, which includes northern parts of Queens and Long Island.

The selection pits Pilip, a relatively unknown local lawmaker originally from Ethiopia, against a political veteran in Suozzi, who previously represented the district for six years during a lengthy career in Long Island politics.

In a statement, Republicans in Queens and Nassau County loosely outlined some of her potential policy positions and said she would bring a new perspective to the House.

"Pilip is an effective tax fighter who will prioritize public safety, economic recovery, border security and tax relief in Congress," the statement read. "She will bring a fresh new perspective to Washington, starkly contrasting her from the candidate for the other major political party."

The party will hold a formal announcement ceremony for Pilip on Friday. She did not immediately return a message left at her office.

The election is expected to draw significant attention as both parties zero in on New York as a potential battleground for control of the House.

Republicans picked Pilip after vetting a number of potential candidates following the expulsion of Santos from Congress earlier this month for fabricating much of his life story and being criminally charged with defrauding donors.

The selection process appeared to be slowed after media began digging into the personal and professional histories of potential candidates, revealing damaging information that could become public during a campaign.

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Politico reported last week that Pilip is a registered Democrat, though she holds her current position as a Republican and has been backed by Republicans when she was running for county office. The arrangement is not entirely uncommon in states that have closed primaries, where so-called crossover voters who identify with one party register under another so they can vote in primary elections.

Suozi was tapped by Democrats last week after emerging as the party's frontrunner for the nomination. His extensive political experience could be a major advantage when it comes to name recognition and fundraising for the special election.

Suozi, a centrist Democrat, was elected to the House in 2016 and won reelection in 2020, before leaving to launch the unsuccessful campaign for governor. He also served as the mayor of Glen Cove from 1994 to 2001, and as Nassau County's elected executive from 2002 to 2009.

Ahead of meeting with US envoy, Israeli president says now isn't time to discuss 2-state solution

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's president has joined the ranks of high-ranking Israeli officials to speak out against a two-state solution after the war in Gaza.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Thursday, Isaac Herzog said it is not the time to be talking about establishing an independent Palestinian state when the country's pain from Hamas' Oct. 7 attack is still fresh.

"What I want to urge is against just saying two-state solution. Why? Because there is an emotional chapter here that must be dealt with. My nation is bereaving. My nation is in trauma," said Herzog.

"In order to get back to the idea of dividing the land, of negotiating peace or talking to the Palestinians, etc., one has to deal first and foremost with the emotional trauma that we are going through and the need and demand for full sense of security for all people," he said.

Herzog spoke a day before a meeting with the White House's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan. The Biden administration has said that after the war, efforts must be renewed to restart negotiations aimed at establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel under the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

Herzog, whose position is largely ceremonial, is a former leader of Israel's Labor Party, which advocates a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

But in the wake of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered Israel's war in Gaza, Israeli leaders have spoken out against attempts to restart peace talks after the war and ruled out any role for the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority.

Some 1,200 people were killed in the Oct. 7 attack and 240 others were taken hostage. Israel immediately declared war, carrying out weeks of airstrikes and a ground offensive in which over 18,000 Palestinians have died, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

With the U.S. pushing for a timetable from Israel, Herzog predicted the Israeli campaign in hard-hit northern Gaza could wrap up within weeks. But he declined to say when the war would end.

Israel has ducked international calls for a ceasefire, saying it will press ahead until it dismantles Hamas' military and political capabilities.

"I think one can see that in the northern part of Gaza, one can see the horizon," Herzog said. "We can see the end of that campaign, not far away in the next few weeks."

He added that the end of the campaign in the south would only come when Hamas was "completely eradicated."

Herzog also spoke in favor of an emerging U.S.-led coalition to protect the Red Sea from the Yemen's Houthi rebels.

The Iranian-backed Houthis have carried out a series of attacks on vessels in the Red Sea and also launched drones and missiles targeting Israel. In recent days, they have threatened to attack any vessel they believe is either going to or coming from Israel.

The coalition, set to be formally announced next week, is composed of U.S. and European allies, and

aims to protect international shipping from the Houthis attacks. Israel will not be contributing its own ships to the coalition, Israeli officials told The Associated Press, preferring to allow the international community to target the issue and focus on the war in Gaza.

"I demand and I call upon all nations who understand this to join the coalition, which is led by the United States of America, to fight against the Houthis and make it clear that this is unacceptable and won't be repeated again," said Herzog.

Sickle cell affects more families in Africa and India, but new gene therapies are out of reach

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Gautam Dongre's two children in India and Pascazia Mazeze's son in Tanzania live with an inherited blood disorder that turns blood cells into instruments of pain.

Now that new gene therapies promise a cure for their sickle cell disease, Dongre says he's "praying the treatment should come to us."

But experts say the one-time treatment is out of reach in India and Africa — places where the disease is most common. Vast inequities cut much of the world off from gene therapy in general.

While access to all sorts of medicine is limited in developing countries, the problem is especially acute with these therapies, which are among the most expensive treatments in the world.

Beyond their sky-high prices, these therapies are extremely complex to give patients because they require long hospitalizations, sophisticated medical equipment and specially trained doctors and scientists. So far, the two gene therapies for sickle cell have only been approved in wealthier countries: both of them in the U.S., and one in Britain and Bahrain as well.

"The vast, vast majority of patients live in an area where they have no access to this kind of therapy," said Dr. Benjamin Watkins, who treats sickle cell in New Orleans and is also involved in pediatric work internationally. "We as medical professionals, and as a society, have to think about that."

Access to gene therapies was a major focus of this year's international summit on human genome editing in London. A subsequent editorial in the journal *Nature* said high prices leave low- and middle-income countries "entirely in the lurch" and could stymie progress across the field.

Some scientists worry that new cures won't reach their potential, future treatments may never be invented and the prospect of wiping out diseases like sickle cell will remain a distant dream.

STRUGGLING FOR BASIC TREATMENT

For gene therapy to even be an option, people in developing nations must stay alive long enough to get it. There, sickle cell disease is more likely to disable or kill than in wealthy regions. Late diagnosis is common and basic care can be hard to come by.

While gene therapy "is a huge leap forward ... we can't forget about those patients," said Watkins, of Children's Hospital New Orleans.

Sickle cell disease begins its assault on the body at birth, affecting hemoglobin, the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. A genetic mutation causes the cells to become crescent-shaped, which can block blood flow and cause problems such as excruciating pain, organ damage and stroke.

The only other cure is a bone marrow transplant, which must come from a closely matched donor and brings a risk of rejection.

Global estimates of how many people have the disease vary, but some researchers put the number between 6 million and 8 million. It's more common in malaria-prone regions because carrying the sickle cell trait helps protect against severe malaria. More than 1 million people with sickle cell disease live in India, studies show, and more than 5 million are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dongre, who lives in Nagpur in central India, has seen the struggles in his own family and among people he's met as a leader in the National Alliance of Sickle Cell Organizations in India. For many years, awareness of the disease has been lacking, he said, even among some health professionals.

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Dongre recalled how his newborn son Girish cried constantly from stomach and leg pain. Doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong and didn't diagnose him with sickle cell for 2 1/2 years. When their daughter Sumedha was born, he and his wife had her tested immediately and learned she had the disease too.

Other patients go undiagnosed for a decade or more. Lalit Pargi, who lives in Udaipur in northern India, said he wasn't diagnosed until he was 16 despite having the tell-tale yellow eyes and skin of jaundice, a common sign of sickle cell. That meant a childhood filled with inexplicable pain.

'GOD AND GOOGLE'

Available treatments can reduce the bouts of pain known as "crises." Dongre's children, now 19 and 13, take a medicine called hydroxyurea, a decades-old chemo drug that helps prevent the formation of sickle-shaped red blood cells and control the disease. Both have been hospitalized for pain episodes, especially when they were younger.

Other patients in rural areas are dying at very young ages without getting the right treatments, Dongre said.

In July, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a sickle cell "elimination mission" that combines awareness, education, screening, early detection and treatment. Dongre lauded the effort but said the country faces huge obstacles to meet its goals.

The situation is much the same in East Africa's Tanzania, where the health ministry has partnered with drug company Novartis, which makes sickle cell medicine, to improve access to diagnosis and treatment.

Mazeze scrambled for information after her son, Ian Harely, was diagnosed.

"I Googled and Googled and I couldn't sleep," said Mazeze, executive director of the Tanzania Sickle Cell Warriors Organization. "After that, I was praying. It was God and Google."

Her son is now 10 and takes hydroxyurea and folic acid for anemia. They've helped, but haven't eliminated pain episodes like the one that put him in the hospital for two weeks earlier this year.

Still, Mazeze counts herself lucky she can afford treatment at all.

"We have people in Tanzania who can't even manage folic acid," she said. "Folic acid for a month is 1,000 Tanzanian shillings – less than a dollar," while out-of-pocket costs for hydroxyurea can be more than 35 times that.

'SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES'

Such stark realities make the cost of gene therapies an insurmountable obstacle, experts say. The price tags for the two sickle cell therapies in the U.S. are \$3.1 million and \$2.2 million although the cost for gene therapies can vary by country.

The process of giving the therapies is just as big a hurdle.

Patients must go to the hospital, where stem cells are removed from their blood in a process that requires specialized equipment. One treatment, made by Vertex Pharmaceuticals and CRISPR Therapeutics, involves sending the cells to a lab as quickly as possible to keep them fresh and using a gene-editing tool called CRISPR to knock out a gene. The cells must be sent back in liquid nitrogen so they stay frozen until they're ready to use.

The other therapy, made by Bluebird Bio, doesn't use CRISPR but involves the same process for patients. In both cases they must undergo chemotherapy before they get back their altered cells by IV, and spend weeks in the hospital. The process can stretch on for months.

"The infrastructure doesn't exist to make it possible in many parts of the world," said Dr. David Altshuler, chief scientific officer at Vertex. "There's great unmet need, but there are also significant challenges."

Not only do many medical centers lack things like specialized equipment, but health care systems themselves are comparatively skeletal. For example, World Health Organization data shows India and Tanzania both have less than a quarter of the per-capita hospital beds the U.S. has.

Scientists say one possible solution — though not an immediate fix — is to develop easier-to-administer versions of the new therapies. Altshuler said Vertex is trying to find ways to provide the same benefits without requiring chemo, which comes with serious risks such as infertility. His team is working on making a pill that wouldn't edit genes but would have the same goal: helping the body produce a fetal form of hemoglobin since the adult form is defective in people with sickle cell.

Other scientists are also working on simpler potential cures, including Dr. Stuart Orkin, one of the scientists whose work led to the development of the Vertex therapy.

Orkin said he's not sure if next-generation treatments like pills will necessarily be affordable.

"Someone's going to want to be compensated for the development of that pill," although foundations could help bring it to the developing world, said the Harvard Medical School pediatrics professor, who is paid by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which also supports The Associated Press' Health and Science Department. Experts said governments will likely also be instrumental in getting cures to patients.

Dongre said he hopes gene therapy for sickle cell eventually makes it to India. If it does, he'd like his children to be among the first to get it. Mazeze said she may wait to see how other patients fare but will consider it for her son too.

Both agreed that patients in all countries — rich or poor — should have the option.

"We all are part of one single planet," Dongre said.

Big pay raise for troops in defense bill sent to Biden. Conservatives stymied on cultural issues

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House passed a defense policy bill Thursday that authorizes the biggest pay raise for troops in more than two decades, overcoming objections from some conservatives concerned the measure did not do enough to restrict the Pentagon's diversity initiatives, abortion travel policy and gender-affirming health care for transgender service members.

The \$886 billion bill was approved by a vote of 310-118 and now goes to President Joe Biden after the Senate had overwhelmingly passed it Wednesday. It is likely the last piece of major legislation Congress will consider before leaving for the holiday break, though negotiations continue on a bill to aid Ukraine and Israel and boost border security.

The spending called for represents about a 3% increase from the prior year. The bill serves as a blueprint for programs Congress will seek to fund through follow-up spending bills.

Lawmakers have been negotiating a final defense policy bill for months after each chamber passed strikingly different versions in July. Some of the priorities championed by social conservatives were a no-go for Democrats. Negotiators dropped them from the final version to get it over the finish line.

That did not go over well with some Republican lawmakers, though most did end up voting for a bill that traditionally has broad, bipartisan support. About twice as many Republicans voted for the bill as voted against it.

"You almost feel like a parent who's sent a child off to summer camp and they came back a monster," Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., said in opposing the bill. "That's what we've done. This bill came back in far worse shape."

As an example, Gaetz said the House bill eliminated the position of the chief diversity officer at the Defense Department, but the final measure did not include that provision.

Washington Rep. Adam Smith, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, chided the bill's critics for what he described as an unwillingness to compromise.

"Apparently, you don't like democracy because that's what democracy is. You compromise and you work with people and you do it all the time," Smith said.

Most notably, the bill does not include language sought by House Republicans to restrict gender-affirming health care for transgender service members and it does not block the Pentagon's abortion travel policy, which allows reimbursement for travel expenses when a service member has to go out of state for an abortion or other reproductive care.

Republicans did win some concessions on diversity and inclusion training in the military. For example, the bill freezes hiring for such training until a full accounting of the programming and costs is completed and reported to Congress.

One of the most divisive aspects of the bill was a short-term extension of a surveillance program aimed

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at preventing terrorism and catching spies. The program has detractors on both sides of the political aisle who view it as a threat to the privacy of ordinary Americans.

Some House Republicans were incensed that the extension was included in the defense policy bill and not voted upon separately through other legislation that included proposed changes to Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, or FISA.

The extension continues a tool that permits the U.S. government to collect without a warrant the communications of non-Americans located outside the country to gather foreign intelligence.

U.S. officials have said the tool, first authorized in 2008 and renewed several times since then, is crucial in disrupting terror attacks, cyber intrusions and other national security threats. It has produced vital intelligence that the U.S. has relied on for specific operations, such as the killing last year of al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri.

But the administration's efforts to secure reauthorization of the program have encountered strong bipartisan pushback. Lawmakers are demanding better privacy protections for those Americans caught up in the monitoring. They wanted a separate vote on legislation making changes to the program.

"The FBI under President Biden has been weaponized against the American people and major reform is needed," said Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Mont. "FISA should not be combined with our national defense. And it is unacceptable that leadership is bypassing regular order to jam members by forcing them to vote on two unrelated bills with one vote."

Matthew G. Olsen, an assistant attorney general at the Justice Department, praised the passage of the extension.

He said: "We cannot afford to be blinded to the many threats we face from foreign adversaries, including Iran and China, as well as terrorist organizations like Hamas and ISIS," or the Islamic State group.

Enough opposition to the bill had developed within the GOP ranks that it forced House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., to tee up the defense policy bill for a vote through a process generally reserved for non-controversial legislation.

Under that process, at least two-thirds of the House had to vote in favor of the legislation for it to pass, but going that route avoided the prospect of a small number of Republicans blocking it from the floor.

Consideration of the bill comes at a dangerous time for the world, with wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and as China increasingly flexes its military might in the South China Sea.

On Ukraine, the bill includes the creation of a special inspector general for Ukraine to address concerns about whether taxpayer dollars are being spent in Ukraine as intended. That's on top of oversight work already being conducted by other agency watchdogs.

"We will continue to stay on top of this, but I want to assure my colleagues that there has been no evidence of diversion of weapons provided to Ukraine or any other assistance," GOP Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, told lawmakers this week in advocating for the bill.

Ukraine's supporters in Congress have argued that helping Kyiv now could prevent a wider war if Russia were to invade a member of NATO, the military alliance that maintains that an attack against one member nation is considered an attack against all.

The bill includes provisions by Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla., that says the president must get the advice and consent of the Senate or an act of Congress before withdrawing U.S. membership from NATO. That seems to have in mind former President Donald Trump, the current front-runner for the 2024 Republican nomination, who has said he will continue to "fundamentally reevaluate" NATO's purpose and mission.

On China, the bill establishes a new training program with Taiwan, requires a plan to accelerate deliveries of Harpoon anti-ship missiles to Taiwan, and approves an agreement that enables Australia to access nuclear-powered submarines, which are stealthier and more capable than conventionally powered vessels.

Older Americans to pay less for some drug treatments as drugmakers penalized for big price jumps

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds of thousands of older Americans could pay less for some of their outpatient drug treatments beginning early next year, the Biden administration announced Thursday.

The White House unveiled a list of 48 drugs — from chemotherapy treatments to growth hormones used to treat endocrine disorders — whose prices increased faster than the rate of inflation this year. Under a new law, drugmakers will have to pay rebates to the federal government because of those price increases. The money will be used to lower the price Medicare enrollees pay on the drugs early next year.

“For years, there’s been no check on how high or how fast big pharma can raise drug prices,” President Joe Biden said Thursday, speaking in a lab at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. “Let’s call this for what it is — it simply is a rip off. They’re ripping off Medicare. They’re ripping off the American people. We’re now fighting back.”

This is the first time drugmakers will have to pay the penalties for outpatient drug treatments under the Inflation Reduction Act, passed by Congress last year. The rebates will translate into a wide range of savings — from as little as \$1 to as much as \$2,700 — on the drugs that the White House estimates are used every year by 750,000 older Americans.

The types of drugs on the government’s list vary. They include generic drugs, medications taken orally or injected, and treat a variety of disorders or illnesses, according to a review by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists of the administration’s list.

But all of the drugs, the White House said, raised their prices significantly this year, many by nearly 20%.

The price decreases will only be seen for patients who access the drugs on Medicare Part B, the government outpatient care coverage. But the rebates are “an important tool to discourage excessive price increases,” Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, the administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, said Thursday in a statement.

Only a small number of drugs met the criteria for penalties, pointed out Stephen Ubl, the president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, also called PhRMA.

“It’s a tiny fraction of overall working medicines,” he said.

As it readies for a 2024 reelection campaign, the Biden administration has rolled out a number of efforts to push pharmaceutical companies to lower drug prices. Last week, the White House announced it was considering an aggressive, unprecedented new tactic: pulling the patents of some drugs priced out of reach for most Americans.

“On no. We’ve upset Big Pharma again,” the White House posted on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, last week, just hours after the announcement.

The president plans to make his push for lower drug prices a central theme of his reelection pitch to Americans.

The U.S. Health and Human Services agency also released a report on Thursday that will help guide its first-ever negotiation process with drugmakers over the price of 10 of Medicare’s costliest drugs. The new prices for those drugs will be negotiated by HHS next year, in the middle of next year’s presidential campaign.

Hungry, thirsty and humiliated: Israel’s mass arrest campaign sows fear in northern Gaza

By ISABEL DEBRE and WAFAA SHURAFI Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Israeli military has rounded up hundreds of Palestinians across the northern Gaza Strip, separating families and forcing men to strip to their underwear before trucking some to a detention camp on the beach, where they spent hours, in some cases days, subjected to hunger and cold, according to human rights activists, distraught relatives and released detainees themselves.

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Palestinians detained in the shattered town of Beit Lahiya, the urban refugee camp of Jabaliya and neighborhoods of Gaza City said they were bound, blindfolded and bundled into the backs of trucks. Some said they were taken to the camp at an undisclosed location, nearly naked and with little water.

"We were treated like cattle, they even wrote numbers on our hands," said Ibrahim Lubbad, a 30-year-old computer engineer arrested in Beit Lahiya on Dec. 7 with a dozen other family members and held overnight. "We could feel their hatred."

The roundups have laid bare an emerging tactic in Israel's ground offensive in Gaza, experts say, as the military seeks to solidify control in evacuated areas in the north and collect intelligence about Hamas operations nearly 10 weeks after the group's deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. Militants killed about 1,200 people and abducted over 240 that day.

In response to questions about alleged mistreatment, the Israeli military said that detainees were "treated according to protocol" and were given enough food and water. The army spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said the men are questioned and then told to dress, and that in cases where this didn't happen, the military would ensure it doesn't occur again. Those believed to have ties to Hamas are taken away for further interrogation, and dozens of Hamas members have been arrested so far, he said.

Photos and video showing Palestinian men kneeling in the streets, heads bowed and hands bound behind their backs, sparked outrage after spreading on social media.

To Palestinians, it is a stinging indignity. Among those rounded up were boys as young as 12 and men as old as 70, and they included civilians who lived ordinary lives before the war, according to interviews with 15 families of detainees.

"My only crime is not having enough money to flee to the south," said Abu Adnan al-Kahlout, an unemployed 45-year-old with diabetes and high blood pressure in Beit Lahiya. He was detained Dec. 8 and released after several hours when soldiers saw he was too faint and nauseated to be interrogated.

Israeli forces have detained at least 900 Palestinians in northern Gaza, estimated Ramy Abdu, founder of the Geneva-based Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, which has worked to document the arrests. Based on testimony it collected, the group presumes Israel is holding most detainees from Gaza at the Zikim military base just north of the enclave.

The Israeli military declined comment on where the detainees were taken.

Palestinians cowered with their families for days as Israel poured heavy machine-gun fire into Beit Lahiya and Jabaliya, the firefights with Hamas militants stranding families in their homes without electricity, running water, fuel or communications and internet service.

"There are corpses all over the place, left out for three, four weeks because no one can reach them to bury them before the dogs eat them," said Raji Sourani, a lawyer with the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza. He said he saw dozens of dead bodies as he made his way from Gaza City to the southern border with Egypt last week.

Palestinians recounted soldiers going door to door with dogs, using loudspeakers to call on families to come outside. In most cases, women and children are told to walk away to find shelter.

Some released detainees described enduring humiliating stretches of near-nudity as Israeli troops took the photos that later went viral. Some guessed they were driven several kilometers (miles) before being dumped in cold sand.

Released detainees said they were exposed to the chill of night and repeatedly questioned about Hamas activities that most couldn't answer. Soldiers kicked sand in their faces and beat those who spoke out of turn.

Several Palestinians held for 24 hours or less said they had no food and were forced to share three 1.5-liter bottles with some 300 fellow detainees.

Darwish al-Ghabrawi, a 58-year-old principal at a U.N. school, fainted from dehydration. Mahmoud al-Madhoun, a 33-year-old shopkeeper, said the only moment that gave him hope was when soldiers released his son, realizing he was just 12.

Returning home brought its own horrors. Israeli soldiers dropped detainees off after midnight without their clothes, phones or IDs near what appeared to be Gaza's northern border with Israel, those released

said, ordering them to walk through a landscape of destruction, tanks stationed along the road and snipers perched on roofs.

"It was a death sentence," said Hassan Abu Shadkh, whose brothers, 43-year-old Ramadan and 18-year-old Bashar, and his 38-year-old cousin, Naseem Abu Shadkh, walked shoeless over jagged mounds of debris until their feet bled.

Naseem, a farmer in Beit Lahiya, was shot and killed by an Israeli sniper as they made their way to a U.N. school in Beit Lahiya, Abu Shadkh said. His brothers were forced to leave their cousin's body in the middle of the road.

Israeli officials say they have reason to be suspicious of Palestinians remaining in northern Gaza, given that places like Jabaliya and Shijaiyah, in eastern Gaza City, are well-known Hamas bastions.

Human rights groups say mass arrests should be investigated.

"Civilians must only be arrested for absolutely necessary and imperative reasons for security. It's a very high threshold," said Omar Shakir, Human Rights Watch's regional director.

Experts at odds over result of UN climate talks in Dubai; 'Historic,' 'pipsqueak' or something else?

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The climate negotiations that just finished in Dubai hit upon the essence of compromise, finding common language that nearly 200 countries accepted, at times grudgingly.

For the first time in nearly three decades of such talks, the final agreement mentioned fossil fuels — coal, oil and natural gas — as the cause of climate change and said the world needs to be "transitioning away" from them. But it did not use the words "phase out," sought by advocates and more than 100 countries who argued it would provide sharper direction for the world to move quickly toward renewable energies that don't produce the greenhouse gas emissions that heat the planet.

For an agreement so steeped in compromise, what experts thought of it, including what impact it could have in the years to come, was as polarizing as can be.

The Associated Press asked 23 different delegates, analysts, scientists and activists where they would rank COP28 among all climate conferences. More than half said COP28 was the most significant climate talks ever. Yet a smaller but still large chunk dismissed it as awful. Even some who deemed it the most significant also highlighted what they characterized as big problems.

Thirteen of the 23 said they'd rank what COP28 president Sultan al-Jaber calls the UAE Consensus in the top five of negotiations and deals. Several called it the most significant since the 2015 Paris talks, which set specific goals to limit temperature increases and was the nearly unanimous choice for the most meaningful climate meeting.

The two weeks of negotiations at COP28 also put into effect a new compensation fund for nations hit hard by the impacts of climate change, like cyclones, floods and drought. Called loss and damage, the fund drew nearly \$800 million in pledges during the talks. Nations also agreed to triple the use of renewable fuel, double energy efficiency and adopted stronger language and commitments to help poorer nations adapt to worsening extreme weather from climate change.

Leaders, mostly non-scientists, said Dubai kept alive the world's slim and fading hopes to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial temperatures, the goal adopted in Paris. The world has already warmed 1.2 degrees (2.2 degrees Fahrenheit). Many scientific calculations that look at policies and pledges project at least 2.5 to nearly 3 degrees of warming (4.3 to nearly 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit), which could lead to more extremes and make it harder for humans to adapt.

Negotiators, who spent late Tuesday night and early Wednesday morning in special closed-door meetings with al-Jaber before the agreement was reached, were especially proud, using the word historic frequently in public pronouncements. When asked where COP28 fit in that history, they stayed on message.

"I think it ranks very high," said Zambia Green Economy and Environment Minister Collins Nzovu, who headed his nation's delegation. "Loss and damages is there. GGA (the adaptation agreement) is there. We

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talked about fossil fuels, as well. So I think we're going somewhere."

German climate special envoy Jennifer Morgan, who has attended all these talks either as an analyst, environmental activist and now negotiator, said it "is very significant" and not just for the list of actions agreed to.

"It shows that multilateralism works in a world where we are having trouble cooperating in a number of different areas," Morgan told the AP hours after the agreement was gavelled through.

Former U.S. special climate envoy Todd Stern, who helped craft the Paris deal, put the UAE agreement as number five in his list of significant climate meetings, with Paris first.

Stern's colleague at the RMI think-tank, CEO Jon Creyts, put this year's deal second only to Paris "precisely because the message is comprehensive, economywide. It also engaged the private sector and local communities at a scale that is unprecedented. The U.S. and China were once again united in leadership mode while voices of the most vulnerable were heard."

Power Shift Africa's Mohamed Adow also thought it ranked second only to Paris: "This COP saw the loss and damage fund established, it finally named the cause of the climate crisis — fossil fuels — for the first time and it committed the world to transition away from them, with action required in this decade. That is a lot more than we get from most COPs."

Johan Rockstrom, a scientist who heads the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany, praised what happened, but like so many others who ranked it high, also saw problems.

"Finally, we have a plan the world can work with towards a phase-out of oil, coal and gas. It is not perfect, by far, and not entirely aligned with science, but it is something we can work with," Rockstrom said in an email. "Will it deliver 1.5°C (even if implemented)? The answer is no."

The problem is the agreement has too many loopholes that allow countries to continue producing and even expand use of fossil fuels, said Center for Biological Diversity's Jean Su. She also cited a portion of the text that allows for "transitional" fuels — a term the industry often uses for natural gas that isn't as polluting as coal but still contributes to warming.

"Politically it broke a major barrier, but it also contained poison pills that could lead to the expansion of fossil fuels and climate injustice," she said.

Joanna Depledge, a climate negotiations historian at Cambridge University in England, said the idea that the weak language is "somehow seen as a triumph" shows the world is in trouble, Depledge said.

"The yawning chasm between science and policy, between intention and action, barely shifted in Dubai," she added.

Scientists were among those who ranked the UAE deal low.

"In the context of these previous, truly significant COPs, Dubai is a pipsqueak," said Princeton University climate scientist Michael Oppenheimer, who is also a professor of international affairs.

The agreement language was "like promising your doctor that you will 'transition away from doughnuts' after being diagnosed with diabetes," said University of Pennsylvania climate scientist Michael Mann. "The lack of an agreement to phase out fossil fuels was devastating."

Mann, like former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, called for a dramatic reform of the COP process. For his part, Gore said it's too early to judge this COP's significance, but he's unhappy with the slow progress.

"It's been 31 years since Rio, and eight since the Paris Agreement," Gore said. "Only now are we even summoning the political will to name the core problem, which has otherwise been blocked by fossil fuel companies and petrostates."

Gore and others still have hope, though.

"I think 1.5 is achievable," said Thiyyan Ibrahim, who led negotiations on adaptation on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States. "You need to ensure that people are going to do the things that they have said they'll do, that the pledges will be actually reached and that commitments will be followed through."

Hungry, thirsty and humiliated: Israel's mass arrest campaign sows fear in northern Gaza

By ISABEL DEBRE and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Israeli military has rounded up hundreds of Palestinians across the northern Gaza Strip, separating families and forcing men to strip to their underwear before trucking some to a detention camp on the beach, where they spent hours, in some cases days, subjected to hunger and cold, according to human rights activists, distraught relatives and released detainees themselves.

Palestinians detained in the shattered town of Beit Lahiya, the urban refugee camp of Jabaliya and neighborhoods of Gaza City said they were bound, blindfolded and bundled into the backs of trucks. Some said they were taken to the camp at an undisclosed location, nearly naked and with little water.

"We were treated like cattle, they even wrote numbers on our hands," said Ibrahim Lubbad, a 30-year-old computer engineer arrested in Beit Lahiya on Dec. 7 with a dozen other family members and held overnight. "We could feel their hatred."

The roundups have laid bare an emerging tactic in Israel's ground offensive in Gaza, experts say, as the military seeks to solidify control in evacuated areas in the north and collect intelligence about Hamas operations nearly 10 weeks after the group's deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. Militants killed about 1,200 people and abducted over 240 that day.

"This is already helping us, and it will be crucial for the next stage of the war," said Yaakov Amidror, a former national security adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "That's the stage where we clean areas from all the remnants of Hamas."

In response to questions about alleged mistreatment, the Israeli military said that detainees were "treated according to protocol" and were given enough food and water. The army spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said this week that arrests took place in two Hamas strongholds in northern Gaza and that detainees were told to strip to make sure they didn't conceal explosives.

Hagari said the men are questioned and then told to dress, and that in cases where this didn't happen, the military would ensure it doesn't occur again. Those believed to have ties to Hamas are taken away for further interrogation, and dozens of Hamas members have been arrested so far, he said.

The others are released and told to head south, where Israel has told people to seek refuge, Hagari said.

Photos and video showing Palestinian men kneeling in the streets, heads bowed and hands bound behind their backs, sparked outrage after spreading on social media. U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller on Monday said the United States "found those images deeply disturbing" and was seeking more information.

To Palestinians, it is a stinging indignity. Among those rounded up were boys as young as 12 and men as old as 70, and they included civilians who lived ordinary lives before the war, according to interviews with 15 families of detainees.

"My only crime is not having enough money to flee to the south," said Abu Adnan al-Kahlout, an unemployed 45-year-old with diabetes and high blood pressure in Beit Lahiya. He was detained Dec. 8 and released after several hours when soldiers saw he was too faint and nauseated to be interrogated.

"Do you think Hamas are the ones waiting in their homes for the Israelis to come find them now?" he asked. "We stayed because we have nothing to do with Hamas."

Israeli forces have detained at least 900 Palestinians in northern Gaza, estimated Ramy Abdu, founder of the Geneva-based Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, which has worked to document the arrests. Based on testimony it collected, the group presumes Israel is holding most detainees from Gaza at the Zikim military base just north of the enclave.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians are believed to have stayed in the north despite the danger — unable to afford a ride, unable to abandon disabled relatives or convinced things are no safer in the overcrowded south, which also has come under daily bombardment.

Palestinians cowered with their families for days as Israel poured heavy machine-gun fire into Beit Lahiya and Jabaliya, the tank shelling and firefights with Hamas militants stranding families in their homes without

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electricity, running water, fuel or communications and internet service. Hundreds of buildings have been crushed by Israeli bulldozers, clearing paths for tanks and armored troop carriers.

"There are corpses all over the place, left out for three, four weeks because no one can reach them to bury them before the dogs eat them," said Raji Sourani, a lawyer with the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza. He said he saw dozens of dead bodies as he made his way from Gaza City to the southern border with Egypt last week. Israeli forces are holding one of his colleagues, human rights researcher Ayman Lubbad, in custody.

Palestinians recount similar terrifying scenes as the Israeli military combs through northern towns. Soldiers go door to door with dogs, using loudspeakers to call on families to come outside, residents said. Or they blast doors of homes open with a grenade, yelling at men to remove their clothes and confiscating money, IDs and cellphones.

In most cases, women and children are told to walk away to find shelter.

Some released detainees reported soldiers shouting sexually explicit insults at women and children and beating men with their fists and rifle butts after bursting into their homes. Others reported enduring humiliating stretches of near-nudity as Israeli troops took the photos that later went viral. Some guessed they were driven several kilometers (miles) before being dumped in cold sand.

The Israeli military declined comment on where the detainees were taken.

Abu Adnan al-Kahlout's family believes its members were singled out for mistreatment because they share a last name with the spokesman for Hamas' military wing better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Obeida. But family members — among them electricians, a tailor, a bureau chief for London-based news site Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and employees of Hamas' political rival, the Palestinian Authority — insist they have nothing to do with Gaza's Islamic militant rulers.

Three family members remain in Israeli custody. No one has heard from them in days. Other relatives, like 15-year-old Hamza al-Kahlout and 65-year-old Khalil al-Kahlout, returned home Dec. 8 to find their five-story building a charred skeleton. They fled to a nearby U.N. shelter at a school. But the Israeli military stormed the school and arrested them again as it pressed on with its crackdown.

Released detainees said their wrists were blistered from tightly drawn handcuffs. Exposed to the chill of night, they endured repeated questions about Hamas activities that most couldn't answer. Soldiers kicked sand in their faces and beat those who spoke out of turn.

Several Palestinians held for 24 hours or less said they had no food and were forced to share three 1.5-liter bottles with some 300 fellow detainees. Construction worker Nadir Zindah said he was fed meager scraps of bread over four days in custody.

Darwish al-Ghabrawi, a 58-year-old principal at a U.N. school, fainted from dehydration. Mahmoud al-Madhoun, a 33-year-old shopkeeper, said the only moment that gave him hope was when soldiers released his son, realizing he was just 12.

Returning home brought its own horrors. Israeli soldiers dropped detainees off after midnight without their clothes, phones or IDs near what appeared to be Gaza's northern border with Israel, those released said, ordering them to walk through a landscape of destruction, tanks stationed along the road and snipers perched on roofs.

"It was a death sentence," said Hassan Abu Shadkh, whose brothers, 43-year-old Ramadan and 18-year-old Bashar, and his 38-year-old cousin, Naseem Abu Shadkh, walked shoeless over jagged mounds of debris until their feet bled. They begged the first person they saw for rags to cover their bodies.

Naseem, a farmer in Beit Lahiya, was shot and killed by an Israeli sniper as they made their way to a U.N. school in Beit Lahiya, Abu Shadkh said. His brothers were forced to leave their cousin's body in the middle of the road.

Israeli officials say they have reason to be suspicious of Palestinians remaining in northern Gaza, given that places like Jabaliya and Shijaiyah, in eastern Gaza City, are well-known Hamas bastions.

"We will continue to dismantle each and every one of these Hamas strongholds until we finish in Jabaliya and Shijaiyah and then continue," government spokesperson Eylon Levy said, signaling the military would widen its campaign as ground forces press deeper into the south, where over a million Palestinians have

taken refuge.

He said the southern town of Khan Younis, now at the center of fighting, would be next.

"We will of course work out who needs to be arrested and detained and put to justice as a Hamas terrorist and who does not," Levy said.

Human rights groups say mass arrests should be investigated.

"It isn't clear on what basis Israel is holding them and it raises real serious questions," said Omar Shakir, Human Rights Watch's regional director. "Civilians must only be arrested for absolutely necessary and imperative reasons for security. It's a very high threshold."

Meanwhile, families plead for information about loved ones who disappeared. The International Committee of the Red Cross said its hotline had received 3,000 calls from people trying to connect with missing relatives from the beginning of the war until Nov. 29.

"I can't take not knowing, I feel sick," said 40-year-old Zindah, the construction worker, who arrived Monday by foot at the hospital in Deir al-Balah after four days in Israeli detention with his 14-year-old son, Mahmoud. "I don't know where my wife and seven kids are. Are they alive? Are they dead? Are they in prison?"

An emboldened, confident Putin says there will be no peace in Ukraine until Russia's goals are met

By HARRIET MORRIS Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Emboldened by battlefield gains and flagging Western support for Ukraine, a relaxed and confident President Vladimir Putin said Thursday there would be no peace until Russia achieves its goals, which he says remain unchanged after nearly two years of fighting.

It was Putin's first formal news conference that Western media were allowed to attend since the Kremlin sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022. The highly choreographed session, which lasted over four hours and included questions from ordinary Russians about things like the price of eggs and leaky gymnasium roofs, was more about spectacle than scrutiny.

But while using the show as an opportunity to reinforce his authority ahead of an election in March that he is all but certain to win, Putin also gave a few rare details on what Moscow calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine.

He said that a steady influx of volunteers means there is no need for a second wave of mobilization of reservists to fight in Ukraine — a move that was deeply unpopular. He said there are some 617,000 Russian soldiers there, including around 244,000 troops who were mobilized a year ago to fight alongside professional forces.

"There will be peace when we will achieve our goals," Putin said, repeating a frequent Kremlin line. "Victory will be ours."

Putin, who has held power for nearly 24 years and announced last week he is running for reelection, was greeted with applause as he arrived in the hall in central Moscow. He didn't hold his traditional news conference last year amid setbacks in Ukraine.

But with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleading for more U.S. aid amid a stalling counteroffensive and fracturing Western support, he decided to face reporters once more — even though only two Western journalists were called on for questions.

Putin highlighted Russia's successes in Ukraine and the flagging support by Kyiv's allies.

"Ukraine today produces nearly nothing, they are trying to preserve something but they don't produce practically anything themselves and bring everything in for free," he said. "But the freebies may end at some point and apparently it's coming to an end little by little."

Putin noted "an improvement in the position of our troops all along" the front line.

"The enemy has declared a big counteroffensive, but he hasn't achieved anything anywhere," he added.

The session dealt mostly with Ukraine and domestic issues, but a few international topics were addressed:

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— Putin said he wanted to reach a deal with Washington to free U.S. journalist Evan Gershkovich and U.S. businessman Paul Whelan, both held in Russia on espionage-related charges. “We’re not refusing to return them,” Putin said but added an agreement that satisfies Moscow was “not easy.”

— He deplored the death of thousands of civilians in Gaza amid the Israeli-Hamas war, citing U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who called it a “graveyard for children.” He urged greater humanitarian aid, adding that Russia proposed setting up a field hospital in Gaza near the border with Egypt but Israel responded it would be unsafe.

— Asked what he would have told himself from today’s perspective when he started his first term in 2000, Putin said he would have warned against “naivety and excessive trustfulness regarding our so-called partners” in the West.

The 71-year-old leader appeared calm and relaxed during the questions, although he frequently cleared his throat, blaming the air conditioning.

Ordinary citizens submitted questions alongside those from journalists, and Russian media said at least 2 million were sent in advance, giving him a chance to appear personally involved in resolving their problems. That’s especially vital for Putin ahead of the March 17 election.

Irina Akopova of the southern Krasnodar region, who addressed Putin as “my favorite president,” complained about the rising price of eggs. He apologized to her and blamed “a glitch in the work of the government” for not increasing imports quickly enough.

Children in Russian-annexed Crimea asked him about a leaking roof and mold in their sports hall.

Immediately after the show, Russia’s main criminal investigation agency declared it had launched inquiries into alleged wrongdoing by local authorities in regions whose residents asked Putin to resolve their problems.

That included a disruption in water supplies to the village of Akishevo in western Russia, the lack of transport link to the village of Serebryanskoye in the southwestern Volgograd region, and in the Crimean village where the children complained about the leaking roof.

Although he has taken some questions from reporters at smaller events and foreign trips, Putin’s last big news conference was in 2021 as the U.S. warned that Russia was about to move into Ukraine. He delayed an annual state-of-the-nation address until February 2023.

Since then, relations with the West have plunged to new lows amid the conflict in Ukraine.

He claimed Ukraine’s attempt to create a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Dnieper River had fizzled and Kyiv suffered heavy losses, saying its government was sacrificing its troops in order to show some success to its Western sponsors as it seeks more aid, a tactic he called “stupid and irresponsible.”

U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller responded by saying that Putin “still wishes to conquer Ukraine” but the belief that Russia would outlast the West or the United States was wrong.

Putin’s news conference also highlighted concerns some Russians have about another wave of mobilization. “There is no need” for mobilization now, Putin said, because 1,500 men are recruited as volunteers every day. As of Wednesday, 486,000 soldiers have signed contracts with the military, he said.

His remarks about another mobilization were met with skepticism by some independent Russian media, which noted he had promised not to draft reservists for Ukraine and then reversed course and ordered a “partial” call-up. The move, which he announced in September 2022, prompted thousands of Russians to flee the country.

He reiterated that Moscow’s goals in Ukraine — “de-Nazification, de-militarization and a neutral status” of Ukraine — remain unchanged. He had spelled out those loosely defined objectives the day he sent in troops February 2022.

The claim of “de-Nazification” refers to Russia’s false assertions that Ukraine’s government is heavily influenced by radical nationalist and neo-Nazi groups — an allegation derided by Kyiv and the West.

He reaffirmed his claim that much of today’s Ukraine, including the Black Sea port of Odesa and other coastal areas, historically belonged to Russia and were given away by Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin.

While Moscow had accepted the new reality after the USSR’s collapse in 1991, Putin said he was forced

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to respond to what he described as an attempt by the West to turn Ukraine into a tool to challenge and threaten Russia.

"Russians and Ukrainians are one people, and what's going on now is a huge tragedy, a civil war between brothers who have found themselves on the opposite sides," he added.

Some journalists who lined up for the news conference in freezing temperatures for hours to enter the hall wore traditional dress, including elaborate hats, to catch his eye. Many held identifying placards.

Although the event is tightly controlled, some online questions that Putin ignored appeared on screens in the hall.

"Mr. President, when will the real Russia be the same as the one on TV?" one text message said, apparently referring to the Kremlin's control over the media that portrays Putin positively and glosses over the country's problems.

Another read: "I'd like to know, when will our president pay attention to his own country? We've got no education, no health care. The abyss lies ahead."

Putin was asked by an artificial intelligence version of himself, speaking with his face and voice, on whether he uses body doubles — a subject of intense speculation by some Kremlin watchers. Putin brushed off the suggestion.

"Only one person should look like myself and talk in my voice -- that person is going to be me," he said, deadpanning: "By the way, this is my first double."

2023: The year we played with artificial intelligence — and weren't sure what to do about it

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Artificial intelligence went mainstream in 2023 — it was a long time coming yet has a long way to go for the technology to match people's science fiction fantasies of human-like machines.

Catalyzing a year of AI fanfare was ChatGPT. The chatbot gave the world a glimpse of recent advances in computer science even if not everyone figured out quite how it works or what to do with it.

"I would call this an inflection moment," pioneering AI scientist Fei-Fei Li said. "2023 is, in history, hopefully going to be remembered for the profound changes of the technology as well as the public awakening. It also shows how messy this technology is."

It was a year for people to figure out "what this is, how to use it, what's the impact — all the good, the bad and the ugly," she said.

PANIC OVER AI

The first AI panic of 2023 set in soon after New Year's Day when classrooms reopened and schools from Seattle to Paris started blocking ChatGPT. Teenagers were already asking the chatbot — released in late 2022 — to compose essays and answer take-home tests.

AI large language models behind technology such as ChatGPT work by repeatedly guessing the next word in a sentence after having "learned" the patterns of a huge trove of human-written works. They often get facts wrong. But the outputs appeared so natural that it sparked curiosity about the next AI advances and its potential use for trickery and deception.

Worries escalated as this new cohort of generative AI tools — spitting out not just words but novel images, music and synthetic voices — threatened the livelihoods of anyone who writes, draws, strums or codes for a living. It fueled strikes by Hollywood writers and actors and legal challenges from visual artists and bestselling authors.

Some of the AI field's most esteemed scientists warned that the technology's unchecked progress was marching toward outsmarting humans and possibly threatening their existence, while other scientists called their concerns overblown or brought attention to more immediate risks.

By spring, AI-generated deepfakes — some more convincing than others — had leaped into U.S. election campaigns, where one falsely showed Donald Trump embracing the nation's former top infectious

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disease expert. The technology made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between real and fabricated war footage in Ukraine and Gaza.

By the end of the year, the AI crises had shifted to ChatGPT's own maker, the San Francisco startup OpenAI, nearly destroyed by corporate turmoil over its charismatic CEO, and to a government meeting room in Belgium, where exhausted political leaders from across the European Union emerged after days of intense talks with a deal for the world's first major AI legal safeguards.

The new AI law will take a few years to fully take effect, and other lawmaking bodies — including the U.S. Congress — are still a long way from enacting their own.

TOO MUCH HYPE?

There's no question that commercial AI products unveiled in 2023 incorporated technological achievements not possible in earlier stages of AI research, which trace back to the mid-20th century.

But the latest generative AI trend is at peak hype, according to the market research firm Gartner, which has tracked what it calls the "hype cycle" of emerging technology since the 1990s. Picture a wooden rollercoaster ticking up to its highest hill, about to careen down into what Gartner describes as a "trough of disillusionment" before coasting back to reality.

"Generative AI is right in the peak of inflated expectations," Gartner analyst Dave Micko said. "There's massive claims by vendors and producers of generative AI around its capabilities, its ability to deliver those capabilities."

Google drew criticism this month for editing a video demonstration of its most capable AI model, called Gemini, in a way that made it appear more impressive — and human-like.

Micko said leading AI developers are pushing certain ways of applying the latest technology, most of which correspond to their current line of products — be they search engines or workplace productivity software. That doesn't mean that's how the world will use it.

"As much as Google and Microsoft and Amazon and Apple would love us to adopt the way that they think about their technology and that they deliver that technology, I think adoption actually comes from the bottom up," he said.

IS IT DIFFERENT THIS TIME?

It's easy to forget that this isn't the first wave of AI commercialization. Computer vision techniques developed by Li and other scientists helped sort through a huge database of photos to recognize objects and individual faces and help guide self-driving cars. Speech recognition advances made voice assistants like Siri and Alexa a fixture in many people's lives.

"When we launched Siri in 2011, it was at that point the fastest-growing consumer app and the only major mainstream application of AI that people had ever experienced," said Tom Gruber, co-founder of Siri Inc., which Apple bought and made an integral iPhone feature.

But Gruber believes what's happening now is the "biggest wave ever" in AI, unleashing new possibilities as well as dangers.

"We're surprised that we could accidentally encounter this astonishing ability with language, by training a machine to play solitaire on all of the internet," Gruber said. "It's kind of amazing."

The dangers could come fast in 2024, as major national elections in the U.S., India and elsewhere could get flooded with AI-generated deepfakes.

In the longer term, AI technology's rapidly improving language, visual perception and step-by-step planning capabilities could supercharge the vision of a digital assistant — but only if granted access to the "inner loop of our digital life stream," Gruber said.

"They can manage your attention as in, 'You should watch this video. You should read this book. You should respond to this person's communication,'" Gruber said. "That is what a real executive assistant does. And we could have that, but with a really big risk of personal information and privacy."

Promising new gene therapies for sickle cell are out of reach in countries where they're needed most

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Gautam Dongre's two children in India and Pascazia Mazeze's son in Tanzania live with an inherited blood disorder that turns blood cells into instruments of pain.

New gene therapies promise a cure for sickle cell disease, and Dongre says he's "praying the treatment should come to us."

But experts say the one-time treatment is out of reach in India and Africa — places where the disease is most common. Vast inequities cut much of the world off from gene therapy in general.

While access to all sorts of medicine is limited in developing countries, the problem is especially acute with these therapies, some of the most expensive treatments in the world.

Beyond their sky-high prices, these therapies are extremely complex to give patients because they require long hospitalizations, sophisticated medical equipment and specially trained doctors. So far, the two gene therapies for sickle cell have only been approved in wealthier countries: both in the U.S., and one in Britain and Bahrain as well.

"The vast, vast majority of patients live in an area where they have no access to this kind of therapy," said Dr. Benjamin Watkins, who treats sickle cell at Children's Hospital New Orleans. "We as medical professionals, and as a society, have to think about that."

Access to gene therapies was a major focus of this year's international summit on human genome editing in London. A subsequent editorial in the journal *Nature* said high prices leave low- and middle-income countries "entirely in the lurch" and could stymie progress across the field.

Some scientists worry that new cures won't reach their potential, future treatments may never be invented and the prospect of wiping out diseases like sickle cell will remain a distant dream.

STRUGGLING FOR BASIC TREATMENT

For gene therapy to even be an option, people in developing nations must stay alive long enough to get it. There, sickle cell disease is more likely to disable or kill than in wealthy regions. Late diagnosis is common and basic care can be hard to come by.

Sickle cell disease affects hemoglobin, the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. A genetic mutation causes the cells to become crescent-shaped, which can block blood flow and cause problems such as excruciating pain and organ damage.

Global estimates of how many people have the disease vary, but some researchers put the number between 6 million and 8 million — with more than 1 million in India and more than 5 million in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dongre, who lives in Nagpur in central India, has seen the struggles in his own family and among people he's met as a leader of India's National Alliance of Sickle Cell Organizations.

He recalled how his newborn son Girish cried constantly from stomach and leg pain. Doctors didn't diagnose him with sickle cell for 2 1/2 years. When their daughter Sumedha was born, he and his wife had her tested immediately and learned she had the disease too.

Available treatments can reduce the bouts of pain known as "crises." Dongre's children, now 19 and 13, take hydroxyurea, a decades-old chemo drug that helps prevent the formation of sickle-shaped red blood cells and control the disease.

Other patients in rural areas are dying at very young ages without getting the right treatments, Dongre said.

The situation is much the same in East Africa's Tanzania.

Mazeze scrambled for information after her son, Ian Harely, was diagnosed.

"I Googled and Googled and I couldn't sleep," said Mazeze, executive director of the Tanzania Sickle Cell Warriors Organization. "After that, I was praying. It was God and Google."

Her son is now 10 and takes hydroxyurea and folic acid for anemia. They've helped, but haven't eliminated pain episodes.

Still, Mazeze counts herself lucky she can afford treatment at all. She said some in Tanzania can't even pay for folic acid, which costs less than a dollar.

'SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES'

Such stark realities make the cost of gene therapies an insurmountable obstacle, experts say. The price tags for the two sickle cell therapies in the U.S. are \$3.1 million and \$2.2 million although costs can vary by country.

The process of giving the therapies is just as big a hurdle.

Patients must go to the hospital, where stem cells are removed from their blood. One treatment, made by Vertex Pharmaceuticals and CRISPR Therapeutics, involves quickly sending the cells to a lab and using a gene-editing tool called CRISPR to knock out a gene.

The other therapy, made by Bluebird Bio, doesn't use CRISPR but involves the same process for patients. They must undergo chemotherapy before they get back their altered cells, and spend weeks in the hospital. The process can stretch on for months.

"There's great unmet need, but there are also significant challenges," said Dr. David Altshuler, chief scientific officer at Vertex.

Scientists are working to make easier-to-administer versions of the new therapies. Altshuler's team is trying to develop a pill that wouldn't edit genes but would have the same goal: helping the body produce a fetal form of hemoglobin since the adult form is defective in people with sickle cell.

But experts say simpler cures will likely still be unaffordable to many, so foundations and governments will be instrumental in getting them to patients.

If the gene therapy eventually makes it to India, Dongre would like his children to be among the first to get it. Mazeze said she may wait to see how other patients fare but will consider it for her son too.

Both agreed it should be an option in all countries — rich or poor.

"We all are part of one single planet," Dongre said.

Appeals court again upholds gag order barring Donald Trump from commenting about judge's staff

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York appeals court has again upheld a gag order that bars Donald Trump from commenting about court personnel in his civil fraud trial, ruling Thursday that the former president's lawyers used the wrong legal mechanism to fight the restriction.

A four-judge panel in the state's mid-level appellate court ruled Thursday that Trump's lawyers erred by suing trial Judge Arthur Engoron, who imposed the gag order in October after Trump disparaged his law clerk.

Instead, the appellate judges wrote, Trump's lawyers should've followed the normal appeals process by asking Engoron to reverse the gag order and then, if denied, fighting that decision in a higher court.

Trump lawyer Christopher Kise said the decision denies his client "the only path available to expedited relief and places his fundamental constitutional rights in a procedural purgatory."

"We filed the petition because the ordinary appellate process is essentially pointless in this context as it cannot possibly be completed in time to reverse the ongoing harm," Kise said.

The appeals court ruling came a day after testimony wrapped in the 2½-month trial in New York Attorney General Letitia James' lawsuit. Closing arguments are scheduled for Jan. 11 in the case, which threatens Trump's real estate empire. Engoron said he hopes to have a verdict by the end of January.

Trump's lawyers sued Engoron in last month, objecting to the gag order as an abuse of power. They filed the lawsuit under a state law known as Article 78, which allows lawsuits over some judicial decisions.

The four-judge panel ruled that Trump's gag order can't be challenged that way, citing a prior ruling from the state's highest court that characterized such lawsuits as an "extraordinary remedy."

"Here, the gravity of potential harm is small, given that the Gag Order is narrow, limited to prohibiting

solely statements regarding the court's staff," the panel wrote.

Engoron imposed the gag order Oct. 3 after Trump, the leading contender for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, posted a derogatory comment about the judge's law clerk to social media. The post, which included a baseless allegation about the clerk's personal life, came on the second day of the trial.

Judge David Friedman of the appeals court suspended the gag order on Nov. 16, citing "constitutional and statutory" concerns, but a four-judge panel restored it on Nov. 30.

Over the trial's first few weeks, Engoron fined Trump \$15,000 for violating the gag order. The judge expanded the order — which initially covered only parties in the case — to include lawyers after Trump's attorneys questioned the law clerk's prominent role on the bench.

State lawyers have supported the restriction, saying it was a reasonable step to protect Engoron's staff. A lawyer for the court system tied Trump's comments to an uptick in nasty calls and messages directed at the judge and law clerk.

'Uniquely horrible choice:' Few US adults want a Biden-Trump rematch in 2024, an 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.

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

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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 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.

Trump's first criminal trial is scheduled to begin in March but legal appeals threaten that date

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump's 2020 election interference case in Washington once appeared likely to be the first of the former president's criminal trials to begin, with the judge having scheduled a March 4 start date. But appeals of issues central to the case are threatening to change that.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan on Wednesday put the case on hold while Trump pursues his claim in higher courts that he is immune from prosecution. Chutkan raised the possibility of keeping the March date if the case promptly returns to her court, but it is possible the appeal could tie up the case for months.

Potentially further complicating prosecutors' effort to go to trial swiftly is the Supreme Court's review of an obstruction charge used against Trump and hundreds of his supporters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Trump's lawyers have made clear that their legal strategy involves pushing his trial off until after the 2024 election and they could use the Supreme Court's involvement to try to further delay the case. Trump is the current front-runner for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

A look at the legal issues complicating the trial date and the potential political ramifications:

WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE OBSTRUCTION CHARGE?

Trump is charged, as are more than 300 people accused of participating in the Capitol riot, with obstruction of an official proceeding, which refers to the joint session of Congress held Jan. 6 to certify Democrat Joe Biden as the winner of the presidential election. The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it would consider a case challenging the use of the obstruction charge against a former police officer who joined the mob at the Capitol.

Trump's lawyers could try to make the argument that Trump's case cannot go forward until the Supreme Court rules on the scope of the obstruction offense, which potentially could affect both the obstruction charge and a related conspiracy charge against Trump. His team would have to persuade the trial court judge to agree to the pause.

At least two other Jan. 6 defendants convicted of the obstruction charge have asked to cancel sentencing hearings scheduled for next week and put them off until after the Supreme Court rules on the issue. Under the Supreme Court's normal schedule, the justices would not hear arguments on the case until late March or April.

David Alan Sklansky, a former federal prosecutor, said he does not think Trump has a good argument for delaying the case while the justices review the obstruction charge. Sklansky, now a professor at Stanford Law School, noted that cases move forward all the time even though they involve laws that are being challenged in other cases.

"If the Supreme Court ultimately decided to interpret the statute that's an issue in that case narrowly, that could affect whether convictions under that statute in Trump's case would be upheld on appeal," Sklansky said. But he said: "It would be unusual to delay a trial waiting for the Supreme Court to decide a legal issue of this kind."

WHAT OTHER ISSUES ARE COMPLICATING THE MARCH TRIAL DATE?

Immunity.

It's a word and legal concept that will dominate discussion in the courts in the coming weeks. And it could wind up delaying the trial.

In addition to taking up the obstruction statute, the Supreme Court is also being asked to consider a question with an even more direct impact on the Trump case. It's one that never has been tested before the justices: Is a former president immune from federal prosecution?

Chutkan rejected the Trump team's arguments that an ex-president could not be prosecuted over acts that fall within the official duties of the job.

After Trump's lawyers appealed, special counsel Jack Smith's team sought a quick, once-and-for-all resolution, asking the Supreme Court this week to not only consider that question but to fast-track a decision so the case can continue along the current schedule.

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The Supreme Court has said it would decide quickly whether or not it will hear the case. In the meantime, Smith's team also asked the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit to expedite a decision of its own on presidential immunity.

That appeals court late Wednesday agreed to expedite the case, setting deadlines for briefs to be filed between Dec. 23 and Jan. 2. But the appeals court has yet to set a date for when it will hear arguments.

COULD ANY OF THE OTHER THREE CRIMINAL CASES AGAINST TRUMP REACH TRIAL BEFORE THE ELECTION?

It's possible.

The other criminal case brought by Smith charges Trump with illegally hoarding classified documents at his Florida estate and obstructing FBI efforts to get them back. The trial is currently scheduled for May 20. But the judge in that case has pushed back has multiple other deadlines and signaled an openness to revisiting the trial date during a pivotal pretrial conference set for March.

A separate case on charges that Trump falsified business records in connection with hush money payments to a porn actress is set to go to trial on March 25 in New York state court, but that date isn't set in stone either. Judge Juan Manuel Merchan, responding to a Trump team request to postpone that trial, said in September that he would rather stick to the original schedule for now and wait until the next pretrial hearing in February to see if "there are any actual conflicts" requiring a delay.

No trial date has been set in Fulton County, Georgia, where the district attorney's office has charged Trump with trying to subvert that state's election in 2020. Prosecutors have asked for an August trial date, but his lawyer has said it would amount to "election interference" to stage a trial then.

WHY DO THE TRIAL DATES MATTER?

The trial dates carry enormous political ramifications.

If Trump was the GOP nominee and won election next November, for instance, he presumably could use his authority as head of the executive branch to try to order a new attorney general to dismiss the federal cases or he potentially could seek a pardon for himself — something that's a legally untested proposition.

Smith's team is looking to secure convictions and sentences in the coming year before that election. Trump, as a private citizen and not an officeholder, possesses no more power or privileges than anyone else under the law. In a recent filing in the election subversion case, Smith's team said the "public has a strong interest in this case proceeding to trial in a timely manner."

Trump's team has accused Smith of trying to rush the case through for political reasons. Trump's lawyers told an appeals court this week that "the prosecution has one goal in this case: To unlawfully attempt to try, convict, and sentence President Trump before an election in which he is likely to defeat President Biden."

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

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

TOMPKINSVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Rep. James Comer, a multimillionaire farmer, boasts of being one of the largest landholders near his rural Kentucky hometown, and he has meticulously documented nearly all of his landholdings on congressional financial disclosure documents — roughly 1,600 acres (645 hectares) in all.

But there are 6 acres (2.4 hectares) 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. For months, the chairman of the House Oversight Committee and his Republican colleagues have been pounding Biden, a Democrat, for how his relatives traded on their famous name to secure business deals.

In particular, Comer has attacked some Biden family members, including the president's son Hunter, over

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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 as Comer works to "deliver the transparency and accountability that the American people demand" through the GOP's investigation, his own finances and relationships have begun to draw notice, too, including his ties to prominent local figures 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.

After Democrats blasted him for being a hypocrite following the Daily Beast's disclosure of the company last month, Comer countered by calling a Democratic lawmaker a "smurf" and saying that the criticism was 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. Those records describe Farm Team Properties as his wife's "land management and real estate speculation" company without providing further details.

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. On his most recent financial disclosure forms, Comer lists its value as being as much as \$1 million, a substantial sum but a fraction of his overall wealth.

After this story first published Thursday, Comer responded during an appearance on FOX News, stating that Farm Team Properties "has five different assets and lots of revenue." He didn't reveal what those other assets may be. He also falsely claimed that the donor, Darren Cleary, "wasn't a campaign contributor" at the time the property was purchased. Cleary and his family have donated to Comer's political campaigns since at least 2010, records show.

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.

Marsco and other experts were perplexed as to why Comer would place such assets in a shell company, especially since he disclosed his other holdings and does not appear to have taken other efforts to hide his wealth.

"This is actually a real problem that anti-corruption activists would love to get legislative reform on," said Kathleen Clark, a law professor at Washington University in St. Louis who specializes in government ethics. "It is hard to trace assets held in shell companies. His is a good example."

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 Cleary, a campaign contributor and construction contractor from Monroe County, Kentucky, where the congressman was born and raised.

It's not clear how Comer came to invest with Cleary, who did not respond to an interview request. They 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. He has also lauded Comer on social media for "For Fighting For Us Everyday" and has posted photos of the two on a golf course together.

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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.

Marketing materials described the land as "choice" property and play up its proximity to the bypass. The partnership sold off about an acre last year for \$150,000, a substantial increase over its value when purchased, property records show.

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 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 and to "clean up scandal, restore confidence, and crack down on waste, fraud, and abuse."

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.

After graduating in 1993, Comer got into the insurance business with Billy D. Polston, a family friend.

The two later had a falling out. When poor health prevented Polston from running for reelection as a state representative in 2000, Comer, then 27, took on Polston's wife in the GOP primary, winning that race and the general election. For years, Comer took credit in interviews for defeating the "incumbent."

Comer 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, followed by another check in 1991 for \$1,050, according to campaign finance disclosures published in local news stories. Both contributions listed Comer's occupation as "student."

Comer followed in the footsteps of his paternal grandfather, Harlin Comer, who was a leading figure in local Republican politics, as well as a construction contractor and bank officer.

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.

Rather than turning on Pitcock and Page, Comer has remained close to the men. He praised Page on the House floor in 2020 for his "principled leadership."

Page did not respond to a request for comment. Pitcock could not be reached at phone numbers listed to him.

Pitcock and his family members 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.

Comer eventually hired Pitcock's son to work for him in the agriculture commissioner's office, records

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show. Members of the Pitcock family have since attended a House Republican fundraiser with Comer in Washington and posed for photographs with him inside the U.S. Capitol.

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, a local blogger began posting about accusations that Comer had abused a college girlfriend.

Comer vehemently denied the allegations. And in the hopes of discrediting the stories, he leaked emails to a local paper that suggested a rival campaign had been coordinating the coverage with the blogger, according to The New York Times. The leak allegation may have discredited the other candidate, Hal Heiner, but ended up hurting Comer's campaign.

The coverage angered the former girlfriend, Marilyn Thomas, who wrote a letter to the Louisville Courier-Journal in which she asserted that Comer had hit her and that their relationship had been "toxic." She also told the newspaper that Comer became "enraged" in 1991 after he learned she had used his name on a form she submitted before receiving an abortion at a Louisville clinic.

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, adding that he had never heard about the allegations of Thomas getting an abortion.

Comer ended up losing the primary by 83 votes to Matt Bevin, who went on to win the general election. It was the only campaign that Comer has lost.

The lawmaker and Proffitt 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.

In a brief interview, Proffitt called the focus on Comer's shell company "much ado about nothing," adding that the lawmaker "is a loyal friend and a good man who comes from a really, really good family."

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.

A missile fired from Houthi-controlled territory also missed a Hong Kong-flagged container ship traveling from Oman to Saudi Arabia on Thursday.

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, but the attacks have increased since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

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

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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.

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 HOUSHI 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 HOUSHI 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.”

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 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

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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 cooperation 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.

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Today in History: December 15, the Bill of Rights takes effect

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Dec. 15, the 349th day of 2023. There are 16 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 15, 1791, the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution, went into effect following ratification by Virginia.

On this date:

In 1890, Sioux Indian Chief Sitting Bull and 11 other tribe members were killed in Grand River, South Dakota, during a confrontation with Indian police.

In 1939, the Civil War motion picture epic "Gone with the Wind," starring Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, had its world premiere in Atlanta.

In 1944, a single-engine plane carrying bandleader Glenn Miller, a major in the U.S. Army Air Forces, disappeared over the English Channel while en route to Paris.

In 1967, the Silver Bridge between Gallipolis (gal-ih-puh-LEES'), Ohio, and Point Pleasant, West Virginia, collapsed into the Ohio River, killing 46 people.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter announced he would grant diplomatic recognition to Communist China on New Year's Day and sever official relations with Taiwan.

In 1989, a popular uprising began in Romania that resulted in the downfall of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHEHS'-koo).

In 2000, the long-troubled Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine was closed for good.

In 2001, with a crash and a large dust cloud, a 50-foot tall section of steel — the last standing piece of the World Trade Center's facade — was brought down in New York.

In 2011, the flag used by U.S. forces in Iraq was lowered in a low-key Baghdad airport ceremony marking the end of a war that had left 4,500 Americans and 110,000 Iraqis dead and cost more than \$800 billion.

In 2012, a day after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, investigators worked to understand what led the 20-year-old gunman to slaughter 26 children and adults after also killing his mother and before taking his own life. In his Saturday radio address, President Barack Obama declared that "every parent in America has a heart heavy with hurt" and said it was time to "take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this."

In 2013, Nelson Mandela was laid to rest in his childhood hometown, ending a 10-day mourning period for South Africa's first Black president.

In 2016, a federal jury in Charleston, South Carolina, convicted Dylann Roof of slaughtering nine Black church members who had welcomed him to their Bible study.

In 2020, the Food and Drug Administration cleared the first kit that consumers could buy without a prescription to test themselves for COVID-19 entirely at home. After weeks of holding out, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Joe Biden on winning the presidential election.

In 2021, former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin pleaded guilty to a federal charge of violating George Floyd's civil rights, admitting for the first time that he held his knee across Floyd's neck and kept it there even after Floyd became unresponsive, resulting in the Black man's death.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Cindy Birdsong (The Supremes) is 84. Rock musician Dave Clark (The Dave Clark Five) is 81. Rock musician Carmine Appice (Vanilla Fudge) is 77. Actor Don Johnson is 74. Actor Melanie Chartoff is 73. Movie director Julie Taymor is 71. Movie director Alex Cox is 69. Rock musician Paul Simonon (The Clash) is 68. Movie director John Lee Hancock is 67. Democratic Party activist Donna Brazile is 64. Country singer Doug Phelps (Brother Phelps; Kentucky Headhunters) is 63. Movie producer-director Reginald Hudlin is 62. Actor Helen Slater is 60. Actor Paul Kaye (TV: "Game of Thrones") is 59. Actor Molly Price is 58. Actor Garrett Wang (wahng) is 55. Actor Michael Shanks is 53. Actor Stuart Townsend is 51. Figure skater Surya Bonaly is 50. Actor Geoff Stults is 47. Actor Adam Brody is 44. Actor Michelle Dockery is 42. Actor George O. Gore II is 41. Actor Camilla Luddington is 40. Rock musician and actor Alana Haim (HYM) is 32. Actor Maude Apatow (AP'-ih-tow) is 26. Actor Stefania Owen is 26.