

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Saturday, Dec. 23

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.

## Sunday, Dec. 24

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday school, worship with communion, 7 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 10:30 a.m.  
United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Conde Christmas Eve service, 5 p.m.; Groton Christmas Eve service, 7 p.m.  
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.; Candlelight Christmas Eve service, 5 p.m.

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



It isn't so much  
what's on the table  
that matters, as  
what's on the chairs.  
-W.S. Gilbert

Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.;  
Worship, 11 a.m.; Christmas Eve Program, 5 p.m.

## Monday, Dec. 25

CHRISTMAS DAY!  
City office and public works departments closed.  
No senior menu.  
St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Day Service at Zion, 9 a.m.  
No School - Christmas Break

## Tuesday, Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Chicken Alfredo, lemon buttered broccoli, pumpkin bar, cookie, whole wheat bread.  
No School - Christmas Break  
City office and public works departments closed.

## OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.  
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# 1440

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

The UN Security Council yesterday adopted a resolution for more humanitarian aid in Gaza, stopping short of calling for a full pause in fighting between Israel and Hamas. The legally binding resolution passed by a 13-0 vote; the US and Russia abstained.

Special Counsel Jack Smith had previously requested the high court to immediately weigh in on whether former President Donald Trump is immune from prosecution in his federal election interference case. The issue will first be decided by an appeals court. The case is set to

go to trial March 4 in federal court, but the case has been stayed while Trump pursues his immunity claim.

The personal consumption expenditures price index—the Federal Reserve’s preferred inflation gauge—fell 0.1% month-over-month in November. The figure is the first monthly decline in more than three years. The index was up 2.6% from a year ago, down from 2.9% in October and below economist expectations. The Federal Reserve targets 2% annual inflation. The index measures costs consumers pay across a wide swath of items.

Biden pardoned US citizens convicted of using or possessing marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia Friday. The pardoning is meant to alleviate barriers to employment and housing for those with criminal records for marijuana use and possession. Biden also commuted the sentences of 11 people who were serving decades long or life sentences for nonviolent drug offenses.

Japan said it will sell American-designed Patriot air defense missiles to the US after it revised its arms export guidelines this week. The decision marks the first time since post-World War II in which Japan is selling complete lethal weapons to its allies. Patriot missiles are one of the most advanced in the world. Observers say the shipment could help the US aid Ukraine in its war against Russia.

The 26-year-old seven-time Olympic medalist becomes the sixth woman to receive the honor for a third time. Biles previously won the honor in 2016 and 2019. Before returning to the mat this season, Biles took a two-year break from gymnastics to focus on her mental health. Her comeback included winning her record eighth US national championship and a sixth world all-around gold medal.

The entertainment company’s studio business, comprising Lionsgate’s TV production and motion picture group divisions and a 20,000-title film and TV library, will be combined with Screaming Eagle Acquisition Corp., a special purpose acquisition company. The newly merged entity will be publicly traded and known as Lionsgate Studios Corp. See how SPACs work here.

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# WE'RE HIRING

GLOBAL COMPANY. COMMUNITY CENTERED.



## APPLY TODAY

[www.hortonww.com/britton](http://www.hortonww.com/britton)



## 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-REQUIRED!!**

Email proof to city. [kellie@nvc.net](mailto: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**

## Names Released for Lincoln Co. Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash  
Where: 276th St and SD 11, 4 miles southeast of Harrisburg  
When: 5:49 p.m., Monday, December 18, 2023

Vehicle 1: 2014 Ford Taurus  
Driver 1: Hope A. Paez-Hernandez, a 67 yr. old female from Sheldon, IA, Fatal injuries  
Passenger 1: Raquel Hinojosa, a 49 yr. old female, Life-threatening injuries

Vehicle 2: 2006 Ford F350  
Driver 2: Wyatt Aaron Riffey, a 21 yr. old male from Hudson, SD, Minor injuries

Lincoln County, S.D.- A 67-year-old woman died Monday evening in a two vehicle crash in Lincoln County.

Preliminary crash information indicates a 2014 Ford Taurus driven by Hope A. Paez-Hernandez, was traveling eastbound on 276th Street and failed to stop at the stop sign at the intersection of SD Highway 11. A 2006 Ford F350 driven by Wyatt A. Riffey, was traveling southbound on SD 11 and struck the Ford Taurus as it entered the intersection.

Paez-Hernandez received fatal injuries during the crash. A passenger in the Taurus, Raquel Hinojosa, was transported to a nearby hospital with life-threatening injuries.

Riffey received minor injuries and was not transported for medical attention.

Alcohol use is under investigation. Seatbelt use is under investigation for all people involved in the crash.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

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



## Feist enlists in SD Army National Guard

Cadence Ann Feist has enlisted to the South Dakota Army National Guard! Cadence is the newest addition to the 740th Transportation Company, enlisting as a Human Resource Specialist (42A). She qualified for 100% State Tuition Assistance, the GI Bill and GI Bill Kicker. Welcoming her is SCF Brent Wienk.

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## GHS Boys Wrestling at Sisseton

### **Lisbon 42, Groton Area 37**

106: Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) over Lewin Salgado (Lisbon) (Fall 1:44)  
113: Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) over Hyatt Erincinck (Lisbon) (MD 13-4)  
120: Greyson Lyons (Lisbon) over John Bisbee (Groton Area) (Fall 3:28)  
126: Ryan Olson (Lisbon) wins by forfeit  
132: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) over Gabe Gruba (Lisbon) (Dec 10-3)  
138: Gavin Robertson (Lisbon) wins by forfeit  
144: Amos Ramerman (Lisbon) wins by forfeit  
150: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
157: Weston Clauson (Lisbon) wins by forfeit  
165: Riley Lacina (Lisbon) over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) (Fall 5:57)  
175: Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) over Jayce Zimprich (Lisbon) (Fall 5:06)  
190: Layne Johnson (Groton Area) over Zachary Ward (Lisbon) (Fall 5:05)  
215: Brock Lyons (Lisbon) over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) (Fall 4:12)  
285: Karter Moody (Groton Area) over Trent Metzzen (Lisbon) (Fall 1:05)

### **Sisseton 51, Groton Area 24**

113: Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
120: John Bisbee (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
126: Ian Metz (Sisseton) wins by forfeit  
132: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) over Quincy Harris (Sisseton) (Fall 2:55)  
138: Reed Gray (Sisseton) wins by forfeit  
144: Double Forfeit  
150: Holden Hawkins (Sisseton) over Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) (Dec 2-1)  
157: Keondray White (Sisseton) wins by forfeit  
165: Rory Current (Sisseton) over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) (Fall 2:58)  
175: Hughin Current (Sisseton) over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) (Fall 0:55)  
190: Taylor Snaza (Sisseton) over Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) (Fall 0:42)  
215: Mason Shultz (Sisseton) over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) (Fall 0:34)  
285: Gaviin Englund (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
106: Kayden Tchida (Sisseton) over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) (Fall 3:42)

### **Groton Area 60, Ortonville 18**

106: Aiden Strom (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
113: Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
120: Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
126: Cody Klepel (Ortonville) over John Bisbee (Groton Area) (Fall 1:00)  
132: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) over Justus Romanoff (Ortonville) (Fall 0:09)  
138: Double Forfeit  
144: Jacob Hartman (Ortonville) wins by forfeit  
150: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
157: Nick Morris (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
165: Trent Eastman (Ortonville) over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) (Fall 1:18)  
175: Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) over Dylan Honetschlager (Ortonville) (Fall 1:16)  
190: Drew Thurston (Groton Area) over Owen Dorry (Ortonville) (Fall 2:32)  
215: Charlie Frost (Groton Area) wins by forfeit  
285: Gaviin Englund (Groton Area) wins by forfeit

## GHS Girls Wrestling at Salem

### **100: Liza Krueger (9-2) placed 1st and scored 22.0 team points.**

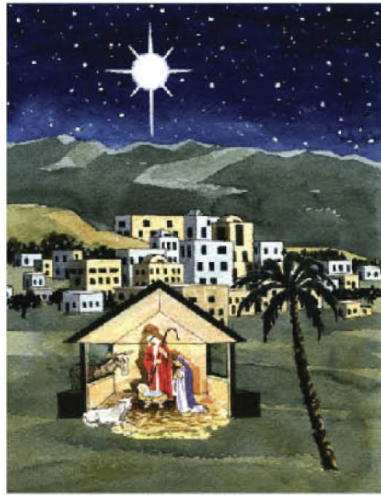
Quarterfinal - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 9-2 won by fall over Maicie Globke (Canistota) 0-4 (Fall 0:54)  
Semifinal - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 9-2 won by fall over Citabria Manzanares (Sioux Valley) 8-5 (Fall 2:53)  
1st Place Match - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 9-2 won by decision over Finley Evjen (Canton) 14-1 (Dec 7-6)

### **114: Maddie Little (1-2) scored 3.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Akane Metcalfe (Kimball/White Lake/Platte-Geddes) 3-1 won by fall over Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 0:22)  
Cons. Round 1 - Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-2 won by forfeit over Forfeit Forfeit (Canton) 0-4 (For.)  
Cons. Semi - Sara Cremer (Marion/Freeman) 8-4 won by fall over Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 0:34)

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## Silent Night Holy Night

With exceeding great joy,  
we bid all of our friends  
and neighbors a most  
joyous and harmonious  
season.

For your belief in us, we feel truly blessed.

Closed  
December 26



### FULL CIRCLE AG

*Tomorrow's Vision Today*

AGRONOMY • ENERGY • FEED • GRAIN • CONSULTING

Closed  
January 2

We're building a solid foundation so we can  
wish you a *Merry Christmas!*



**Residential ~ Ag & Commercial ~ General Contractor**

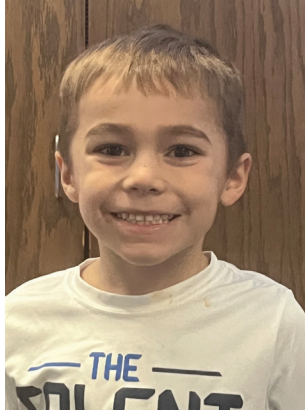
New Construction and Remodeling ~ Concrete Basements ~ Flatwork & Foundations

## Greg Johnson Construction, Inc.

**Greg Johnson, Owner**

Business: 605/492-3143 ~ Cell: 605/216-3143 ~ Bristol, SD

## Groton Area Kindergarten



**Colton Zimmerman** is the son of Jarett and Amanda Zimmerman of Groton. What Christmas means to me is that Jesus get born



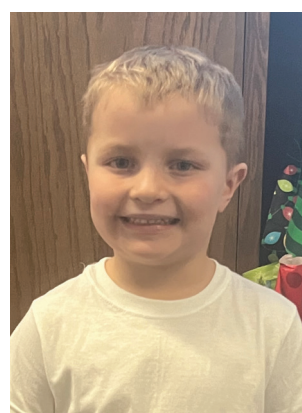
**Bryton Larson** is the son of Josh and Desa Larson of Columbia. What Christmas means to me is it's Jesus's birthday



**Alex Clark** is the daughter of Austin and Allisen Clark of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Santa comes and gives you presents



**Kaylee Hofer** is the daughter of Ricky and Sarah Hofer of Groton. What Christmas means to me is It's Jesus's birthday



**Kase Ronning** is the son of Blake and Leah Ronning of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Santa gives us presents



**Kylie Borg** is the daughter of Adam and Ashley Borg of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Love and family



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To our patients, associates and friends, our best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season, trimmed with the blessings of peace, love and joy.

We value your trust in us, and are proud to serve you all year long.

With Well Wishes from the

## Groton Chiropractic Clinic

1205 North 1st Street, Groton 605/397-8204

God bless you during this wonderful season when we remember the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the Word says, "He is Lord."



**DQ**  
**Grill & Chill**

Merry Christmas from Dale, Joyce and the rest of the crew at the Groton Dairy Queen!

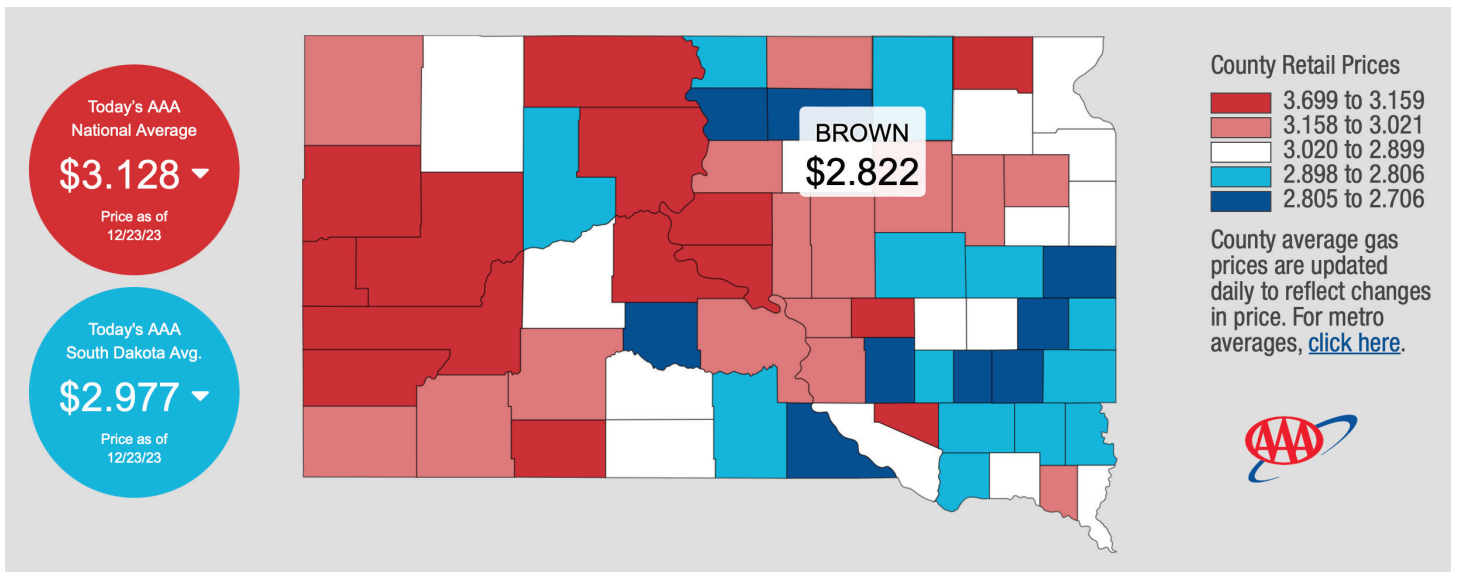
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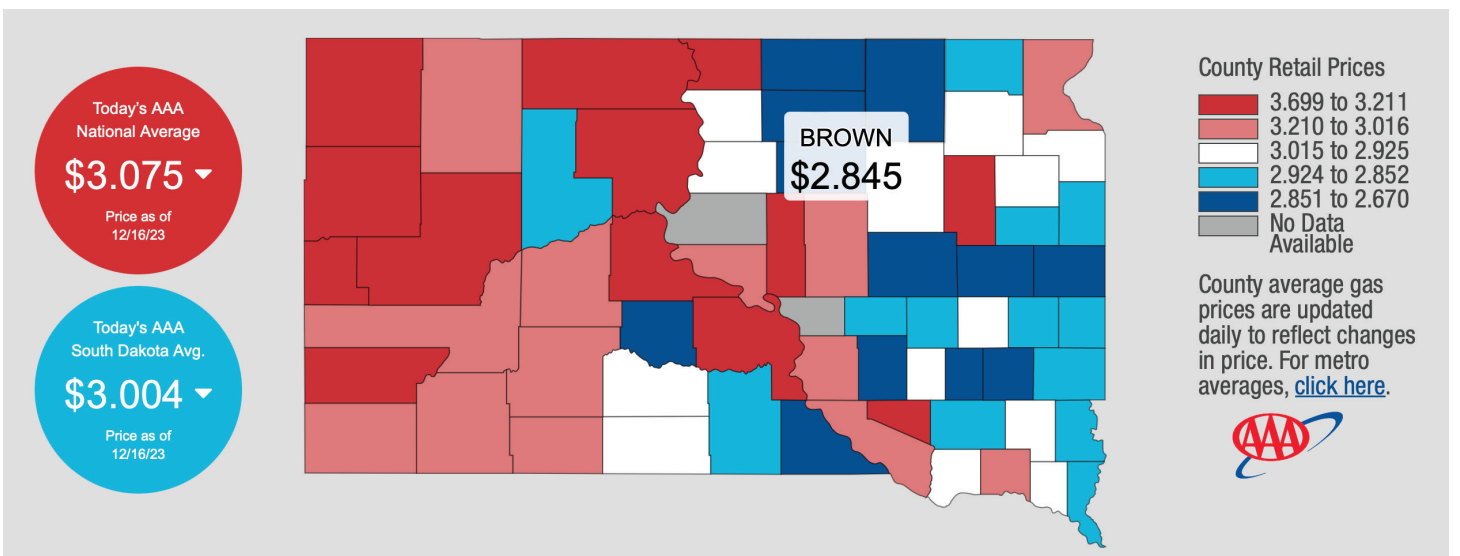
## South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.977	\$3.158	\$3.616	\$3.750
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.981	\$3.157	\$3.618	\$3.752
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.004	\$3.186	\$3.650	\$3.776
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.199	\$3.373	\$3.878	\$4.090
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.057	\$3.229	\$3.709	\$4.375

### This Week



### Two Weeks Ago



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## Drought Classification

None

D0 (Abnormally Dry)

D1 (Moderate Drought)

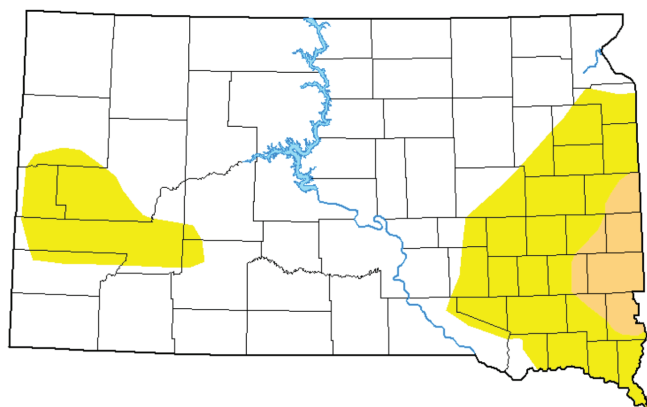
D2 (Severe Drought)

D3 (Extreme Drought)

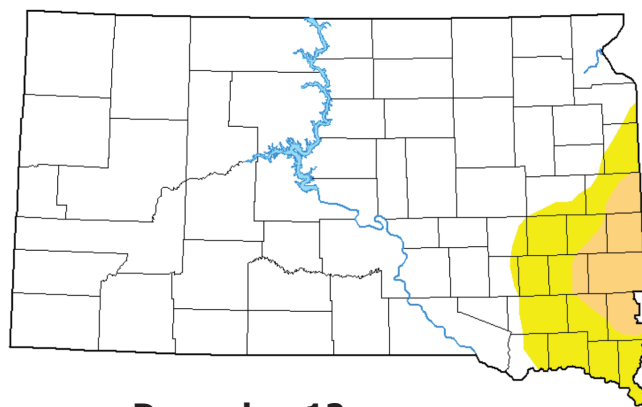
D4 (Exceptional Drought)

No Data

## Drought Monitor



December 19



December 12

In parts of southern Colorado, south-central and eastern Nebraska, and much of Kansas, moderate to heavy precipitation amounts fell this week. Improvements to ongoing drought and abnormal dryness occurred in a north-to-south band across central and western Kansas, where this week's precipitation lessened precipitation deficits and improved soil moisture. Localized improvements to drought also occurred in south-central Nebraska, where this week's rain was enough to alleviate precipitation and soil moisture deficits somewhat. Low snowpack and dry conditions for the past few months continued in northern Colorado, leading to a southward expansion of moderate drought and abnormal dryness in high elevations.

The wet weather in southern Colorado led to some improvements to drought conditions. Dryness from the past couple of months increased in eastern South Dakota and in the Black Hills, leading to abnormal dryness expanding or developing in both areas. Temperatures in Nebraska, Colorado, and Kansas were mostly 3 to 9 degrees above normal, with a few local cooler exceptions. In the Dakotas, temperatures ranging from 6 to locally 15 degrees warmer than normal were common.

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**It was standing room only for the Elementary Christmas Concert held Thursday in the GHS Gym. The theme was "The Greatest Snowman."**

## Program

"Every Hundred Years"..... JK-5<sup>th</sup> Grades  
 "Winter Wiggles"..... JK & Kindergarten  
 "Pick Me, Me, Me!"..... 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade  
 "Snowman, Why Are You Here"..... 4<sup>th</sup> Grade  
 "Nothing Special"..... 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade  
 "Jolly Old Words to Live By"..... 1<sup>st</sup> Grade  
 "One In a Million"..... 5<sup>th</sup> Grade  
 "The Greatest Season"..... 2<sup>nd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> Grades

## Characters

Santa Claus..... Knox Mulder  
 Mrs. Claus..... Brynlee Dunker  
 Hugh Snowman (Hughy Snowmin)..... Rylee Hoffer  
 Easter Bunny..... Amara El-Salahy  
 Tooth Fairy..... Kinley Sandness  
 Reindeer 1..... Victoria Schuster  
 Reindeer 2..... Maycee Moody  
 Polar Bear 1..... Mason Locke  
 Polar Bear 2..... Addison Steffes  
 Elf 1..... Libby Johnson  
 Elf 2..... Gracie Borg  
 Tiger 1..... Kendyll Kroll  
 Tiger 2..... Blake Malsom  
 Penguin 1..... Zoe Olson  
 Penguin 2..... Andi Iverson



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### State Supreme Court to tackle conflicts of interest just before 2024 legislative session

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 22, 2023 2:49 PM

The South Dakota Supreme Court will hear oral arguments on legislative conflicts of interest one day before the start of the 2024 legislative session.

The announcement from the court came Friday. Attorneys representing lawmakers, Gov. Kristi Noem and Attorney General Marty Jackley will have 20 minutes each to stake out their positions on the issue.

The conflict of interest issue rose to the level of state Supreme Court scrutiny through a request from the governor earlier this year.

Noem wants the justices to clarify and define the boundaries of a clause in the state Constitution that bars lawmakers from benefiting "directly or indirectly" from their votes in Pierre.

Former state Sen. Jessica Castleberry, R-Rapid City, resigned over the summer after it was revealed that she had accepted around \$600,000 in COVID relief funds for her preschool after she'd voted on a bill authorizing the relief package. Castleberry has since entered into a settlement with the state that will see her replay just under \$500,000, the amount of that relief that did not directly benefit preschool families.

Rep. Jess Olson, R-Rapid City, resigned later in the year, citing medical issues. Her business's state contracts have also been scrutinized, however, as she'd signed contracts with the state while serving her district.

Noem has the power to appoint lawmakers to replace Castleberry and Olson, but has said she will not do so without guidance from the state's highest court on conflicts of interest.

Attorneys for Noem and Jackley submitted briefs in the case one week ago. Lawmakers submitted their brief days earlier.

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, submitted a letter presenting an alternative view, as well, and Unified Judicial System confirmed this week that the letter is in the official court record in the case. Sixteen other Republican lawmakers joined Hansen in disagreeing with the rest of the Legislature's filing.

While the primary arguments from the legislature's lawyer, Ron Parsons, argue for looser standards with regard to what constitutes an unacceptable conflict of interest for a sitting lawmaker, the Hansen camp's counterclaim says such a conclusion would serve to weaken the state's current ethical standards.

Hansen told South Dakota Searchlight on Friday that he did not file as an official party to participate in the oral arguments.

The court has not offered comment on its timeline for a decision, but GOP officials in Pennington County have sounded alarm bells about the possibility of going into the 2024 legislative session without a full slate of lawmakers.

Oral argument for the case has been set for 11 a.m. on Jan. 8 in Pierre. The session begins the following day.

The courtroom is open to the public, and the arguments will be livestreamed from the second floor of the State Capitol in Pierre on the UJS website.

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

## Biden to commute sentences of 11 nonviolent drug offenders

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - DECEMBER 22, 2023 11:58 AM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will grant clemency Friday to nearly a dozen people serving “disproportionately long sentences” for nonviolent drug offenses as part of his administration’s effort to rectify disparities in sentencing.

“All of them would have been eligible to receive significantly lower sentences if they were charged with the same offense today,” Biden said in a statement.

Additionally, Biden is issuing a proclamation that will “pardon additional offenses of simple possession and use of marijuana under federal and D.C. law,” including use and possession on certain federal lands.

“Criminal records for marijuana use and possession have imposed needless barriers to employment, housing, and educational opportunities,” Biden said. “Too many lives have been upended because of our failed approach to marijuana. It’s time that we right these wrongs.”

He urged governors to follow suit.

“Just as no one should be in a federal prison solely due to the use or possession of marijuana, no one should be in a local jail or state prison for that reason, either,” Biden said.

A majority of the 11 individuals granted clemency, will have their sentences end early in the new year, and two of those people will have their sentences reduced from life imprisonment to decades.

Deondre Cordell Higgins of Kansas City, Missouri, who was sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for distributing cocaine, will have his sentence commuted to 25 years.

Leroy Lymons of Pensacola, Florida, who was sentenced in 2012 to life in prison for conspiracy to distribute a substance that had a detectable amount of cocaine, will have his sentence commuted to 27 years.

Earlie Deacon Barber of Dothan, Alabama, and Darryl Allen Winkfield of Augusta, Georgia, had their life sentences commuted to expire in April.

Barber was sentenced in 2009 to life in prison for possession and conspiracy to distribute a substance containing cocaine, and Winkfield was sentenced in 1998 to life in prison for possession of cocaine with the intent to distribute.

This is not the first time Biden has granted clemency. In April of last year, he granted clemency to nearly 80 people charged with nonviolent crimes.

Out of that list, three were pardons and 75 were commutations, which is a reduction in that individual’s prison sentence. Those were the first pardons and commutations of Biden’s presidency — a power granted under the Constitution.

Three of the individuals on Friday’s list will have their sentences commuted to end in February, including Kenneth Winkler of Indianapolis, Indiana; Quittman Andre Goodley of Austin, Texas; and James Michael Barber of Gastonia, North Carolina.

Several of the people will have their sentences commuted to expire in April, including Felipe Arriaga of Sunnyside, Washington state; Anthony Ewing of Union City, Georgia; Angel Rosario of Allentown, Pennsylvania; and Esaias J. Tucker of Tallahassee, Florida.

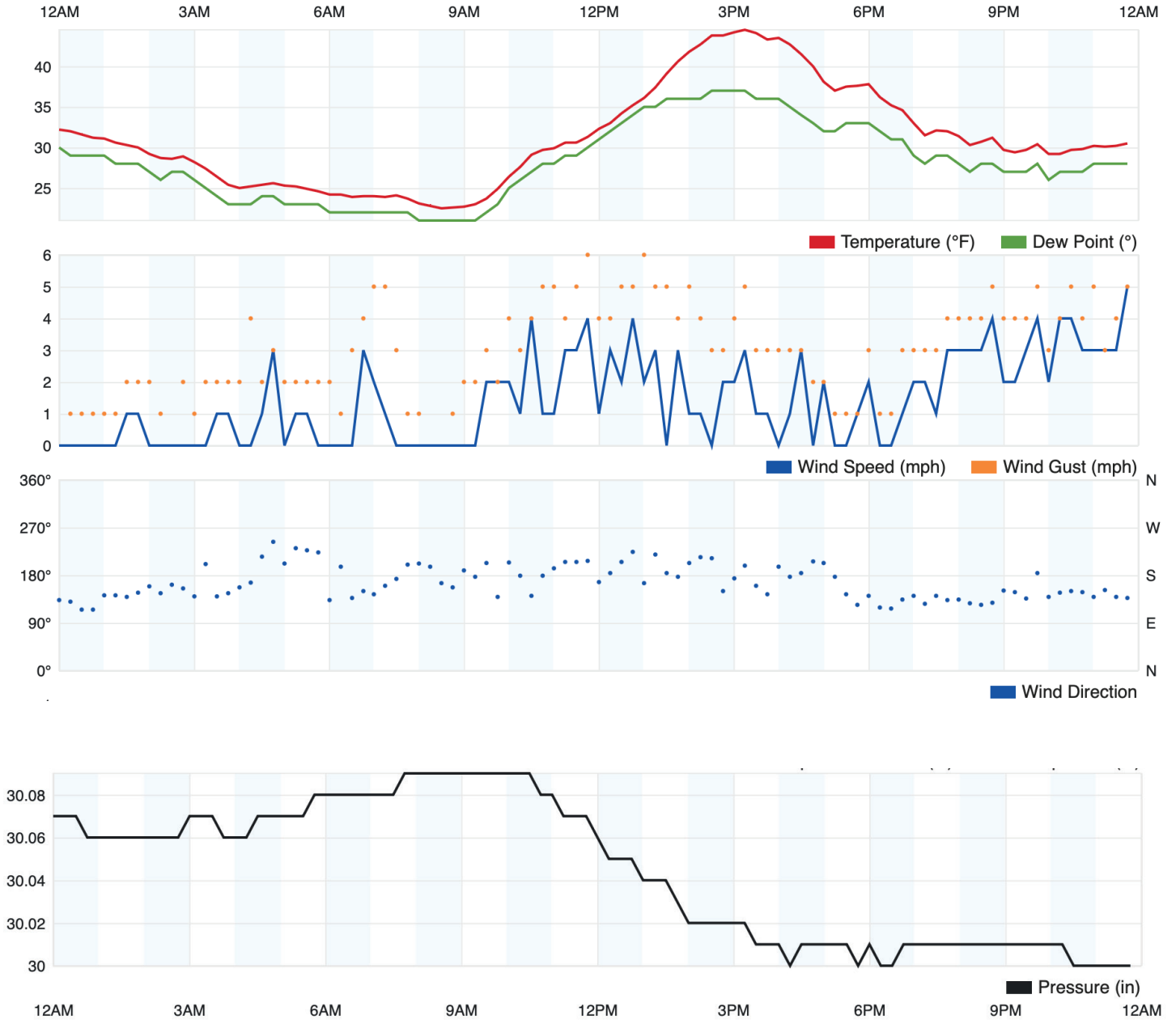
“[W]hile today’s announcement marks important progress, my Administration will continue to review clemency petitions and deliver reforms that advance equal justice, address racial disparities, strengthen public safety, and enhance the wellbeing of all Americans,” Biden said.

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

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Sat Dec 23	Sun Dec 24	Mon Dec 25	Tue Dec 26	Wed Dec 27	Thu Dec 28	Fri Dec 29
51°F	38°F	29°F	31°F	28°F	24°F	22°F
35°F	22°F	24°F	21°F	15°F	10°F	8°F
SSE	NNW	N	N	NNW	N	NNW
13 MPH	21 MPH	25 MPH	22 MPH	15 MPH	13 MPH	7 MPH
	80%	60%	70%			



## One Two Punch For Holiday Travel

December 23, 2023  
4:30 AM

### Key Messages

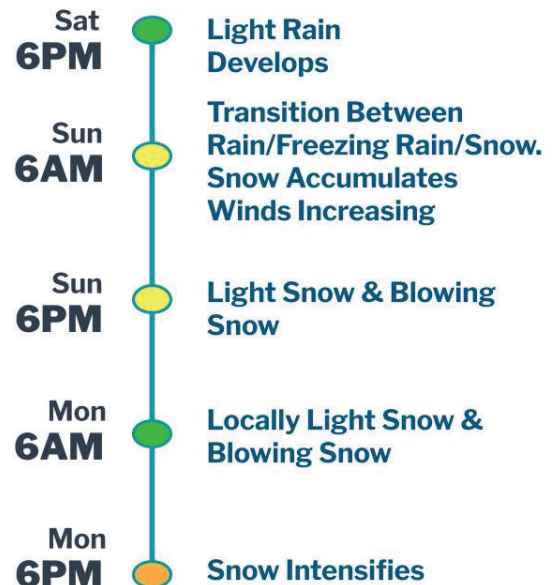
- Two systems to bring varied winter weather to the region (Tonight-Sunday and Monday-Tuesday)
- Tonight-Sunday system: Initial precipitation is rain, with a transition to snow (which may involve a short period of freezing rain in between)
- Monday-Tuesday system: Mainly snow, with low probabilities for mixed precipitation in far eastern SD & western MN
- Northwest wind gusts will increase to 30-40 mph Sunday afternoon with winds persisting into Monday-Tuesday

### NEW What Has Changed

- A significant increase in snowfall potential Monday-Tuesday was observed with the latest model runs.

### Next Scheduled Update

- Saturday afternoon



Risk Levels: Little to None (Green), Minor (Yellow), Moderate (Orange), Major (Red), Extreme (Purple)



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Inclement weather is headed this way for the weekend and start of next week. The first system will be mainly rain with a transition to snow, with winds increasing. There will be a lull Sunday night/early Monday before the next system brings moderate snow and blowing snow to the region.



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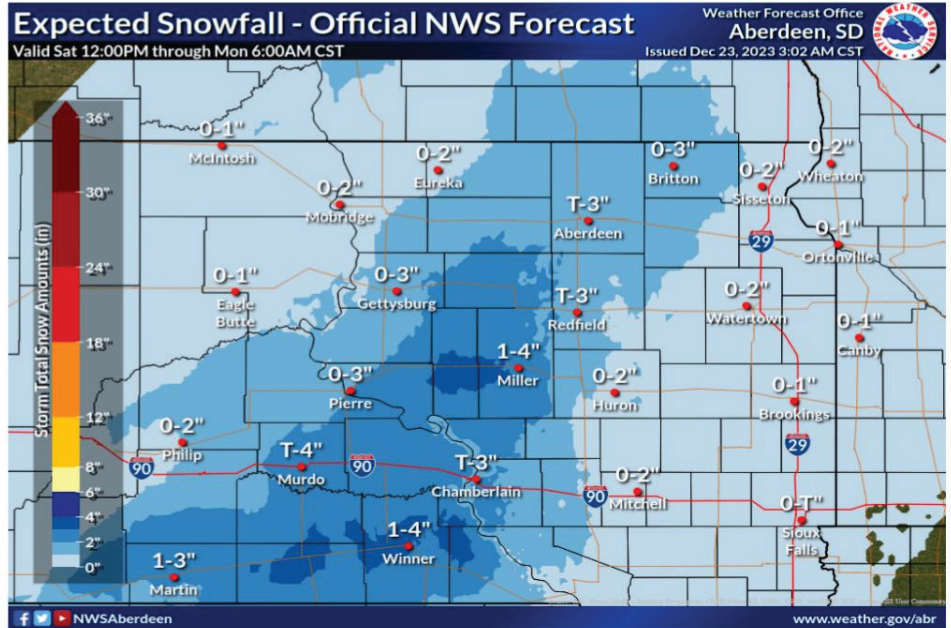


## Potential Snowfall Ranges

December 23, 2023  
4:37 AM

First System - Valid Midnight tonight through 6AM Monday

- Initially precipitation starts as rain
- Transitions to snow (possible brief freezing rain during transition)
- Still quite a bit of uncertainty with regards to snow amounts
  - Rain persisting longer = less snow



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Rain will transition to snow, resulting in accumulation. There still remains a degree of uncertainty with respect to snowfall amounts thanks to the transition between precipitation types.



## Precipitation Type & Timing

December 23, 2023  
4:42 AM

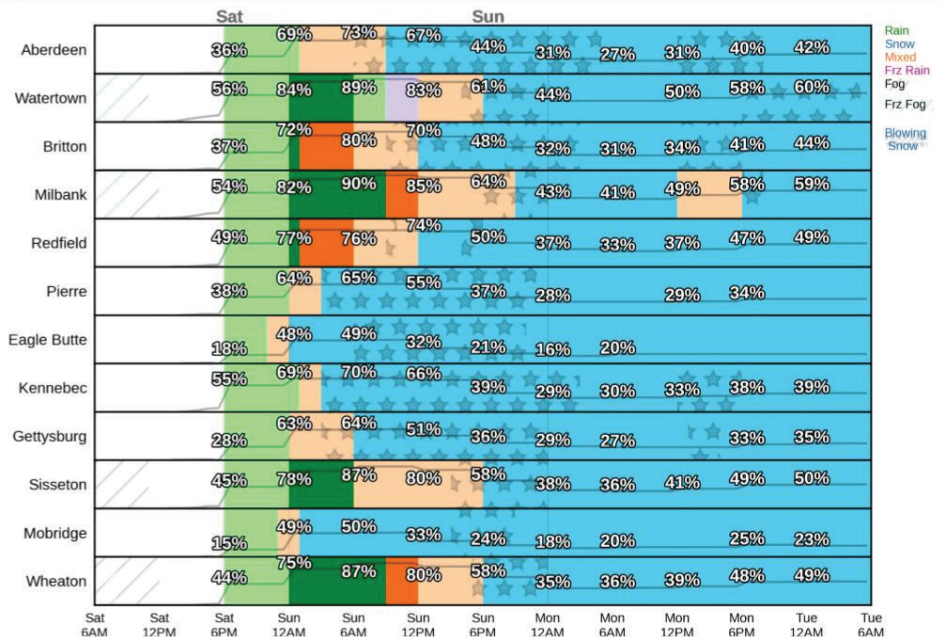
Saturday through Tuesday Morning

3-Day weather & precipitation forecast

Darker shades represent heavier precipitation

Probability of seeing freezing rain 10-40%

Ice accumulation potential is only around a few hundredths.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 3:07 PM

Low Temp: 22 °F at 8:32 AM

Wind: 7 mph at 12:49 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 1893

Record Low: -34 in 1983

Average High: 26

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.44

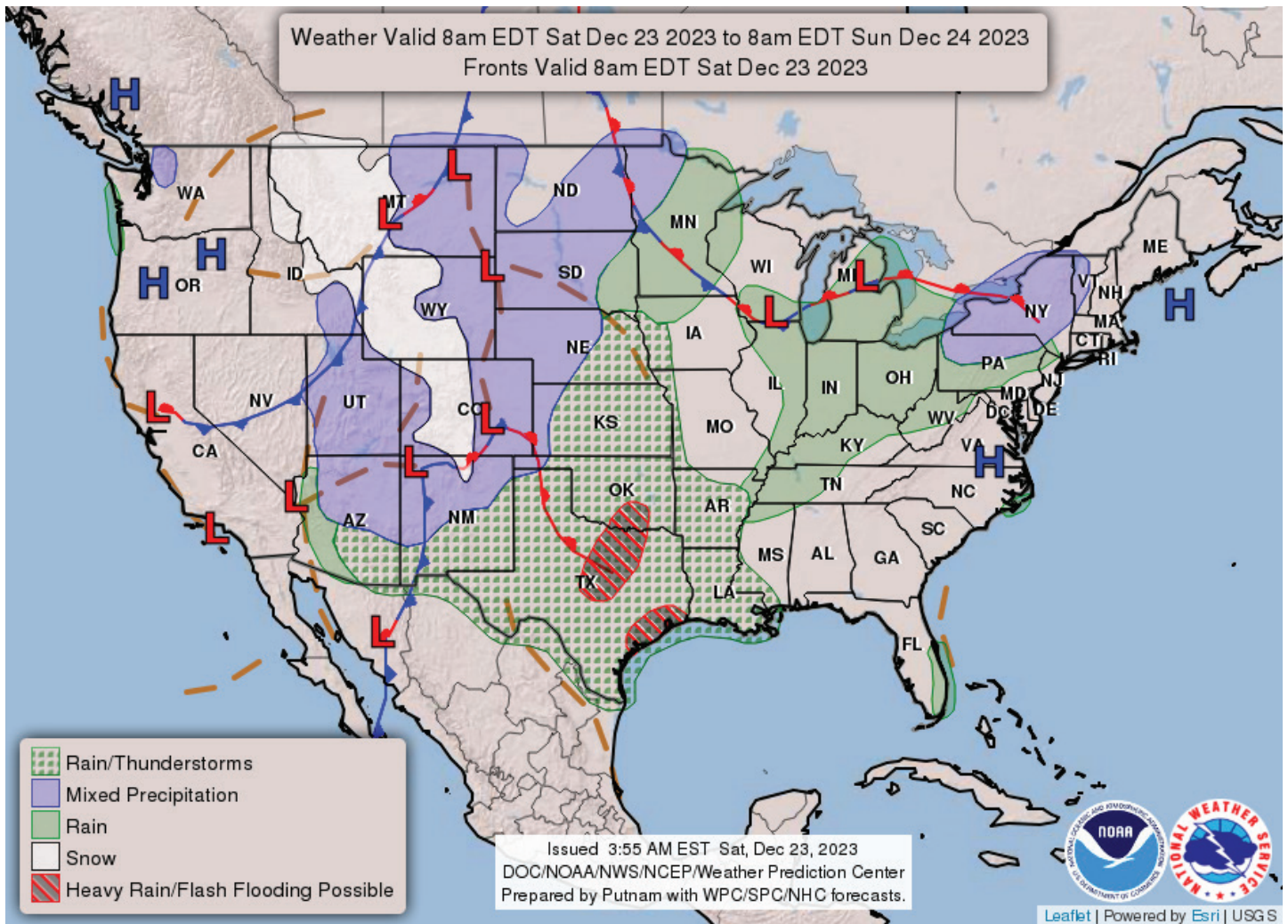
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.65

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:54:36 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:43 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 23, 1987: Five to sixteen inches of snow fell in 24 hours in east-central and southeast South Dakota from the morning of the 23rd through the morning of the 24th. Some of the more significant amounts measured were 9 inches at Huron, 10 inches at Mitchell, Platte and Brookings, twelve inches at Chamberlain, and sixteen inches at Alpena. Heavy snow also fell in southwestern Minnesota, with Big Stone and Traverse Counties in the west-central portion of the state missing out on the heaviest snow. Considerable blowing and drifting snow hampered removal, particularly in South Dakota, due to reduced visibilities. Snowfall amounts also included three inches at Castlewood, five inches at Clear Lake, and six inches at Bryant.

December 23, 1996: Blizzard conditions developed across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota in the late afternoon of the 23rd and continued into the late evening. Visibilities were frequently below one-quarter of a mile. Two to six inches of new snowfall combined with the already significant snow cover and north winds of 20 to 40 mph to cause widespread blizzard conditions and heavy drifting on area roads. Travel was significantly impacted if not impossible, and one fatality resulted from a head-on collision. Some snowfall amounts in Minnesota included 5 inches at Artichoke Lake and 6 inches at Wheaton and Browns Valley. In South Dakota, 7 inches fell at Britton, Webster, and Clear Lake, with 6 inches at Sisseton and 5 inches at Summit.

1811 - A cold storm hit Long Island sound with a foot of snow, gale force winds, and temperatures near zero. During the storm many ships were wrecked, and in some cases entire crews perished. (David Ludlum)

1921: An estimated F3 tornado struck the town of Clarkedale, Arkansas, killing six and injuring 60 others. Four people died in the destruction of the Banks and Danner store, where 50 people were doing their Christmas shopping.

1924: A storm producing winds of 70 mph caused extensive damage to Sydney, Australia during the evening hours.

1955 - The barometric pressure dipped to 28.97 inches (981 millibars) at Boise ID, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A major winter storm struck Colorado producing heavy snow and blizzard conditions. A record two feet of snow was reported at Stapleton Airport in Denver, which was shut down for 33 hours. Up to 44 inches of snow fell in the foothills surrounding Denver. The storm hurt the ski industry as skiers were unable to make it out of Denver to the slopes, and the closed airport became a campground for vacationers. (23rd-25th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1983 - The temperature plunged to 50 degrees below zero at Williston ND to equal their all-time record. Minneapolis MN reported an afternoon high of 17 degrees below zero, and that evening strong northerly winds produced wind chill readings of 100 degrees below zero in North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - A winter storm brought heavy snow to the Central Rockies, and also spread a blanket of snow across the Middle Missouri Valley in time for Christmas. Snow and high winds created near blizzard conditions in Wyoming. Snowfall totals in Wyoming ranged up to 25 inches at Casper, with four feet of snow reported at the Hogadon Ski Resort on Casper Mountain. The Wolf Creek Ski Resort in Colorado received 26 inches of snow. Totals in the Middle Missouri Valley ranged up to 16 inches at Alpena SD, with 14 inches at Harrison NE. Strong winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern U.S. Canyon winds gusting to 100 mph created ground blizzards in Utah. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure in the Upper Midwest produced strong and gusty winds across the Great Lakes Region and the Ohio Valley. Winds in Ohio gusted to 47 mph at Cincinnati, and reached 51 mph at Cleveland. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2009 - Severe storms and heavy rainfall were associated with the same storm that brought blizzard conditions to the central parts of the U.S. on December 23rd and 24th. At least one death in Louisiana was blamed on the heavy rainfall and storms. There were 35 preliminary tornado reports and 34 hail and wind reports along the Gulf Coast over the 2-day period. The 10-year average number of tornadoes across the country in December is 36. (NCDC)

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### CHRIST'S DAY

On Mother's Day, we focus all of our attention on our Mothers, recalling and remembering how much they struggled to raise us. Lovingly we shower gifts on them, purchase cards that describe her many sacrifices for us, and the unending care she gave to us. She deserves all of the attention and recognition we can give her.

On Father's Day, we turn our thoughts to "Dad" – what he has done for us and then express our gratitude to him for the time he spent with us. We recall his efforts to teach us to throw a ball, catch a pass, cast a fishing line or attend a special event. He, too, deserves all the attention and recognition we can give him.

We also give recognition and attention to our Grandparents, to brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and friends and relatives on their special days.

But what will we do that is really special or unique to show our appreciation and gratitude for Jesus on His day this year?

Will there be an envelope under the tree with a special love-offering that recognizes His importance in our lives? Will it match the amount we gave others?

Will we sacrifice some of our time to show God's love by being with those who would otherwise be alone and lonely on His day?

Will we share a meal with someone who is hungry? Give some clothes to those who are cold and have little? Spend time reading His story to children?

"In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto Me!"

Prayer: Take Your peace from us Father, until and unless we show others Your love on Your day. Why? "In as much as you have done to others, you did to Me." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 25:40 And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."



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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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.22.23

10 26 36 54 69 4

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$73,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

4 14 15 17 28 7

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$3,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 4 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.22.23

12 13 22 31 46 2

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 19 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

25 26 30 31 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$103,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 19 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

22 25 28 30 53 3

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 48 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

27 35 41 56 60 16

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$620,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 48 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

#### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

Dakota Valley 91, Lakota Tech 81  
Deubrook 55, Chester 48  
Faith 73, Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 43  
Hot Springs 75, Belle Fourche 42  
Ipswich 62, Wilmot 33  
Sunshine Bible Academy 55, McIntosh 51  
Watertown 69, Douglas 50

#### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Roncalli 66, Herreid/Selby Area 34  
Belle Fourche 40, Hot Springs 27  
Chester 50, Deubrook 46  
Faith 61, Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 43  
Florence-Henry 75, Britton-Hecla 21  
Sunshine Bible Academy 54, McIntosh 32  
Watertown 56, Douglas 29

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

## **North Dakota lawmaker made homophobic remarks to officer during DUI stop, bodycam footage shows**

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A North Dakota lawmaker who serves on a panel that handles law enforcement legislation made homophobic and anti-migrant remarks to a police officer who arrested him on a charge of driving drunk, body camera footage shows.

Republican state Rep. Nico Rios of Williston was also charged with refusing to provide a chemical test. Both that and the drunken driving charge are misdemeanors under state law. Rios is scheduled for a Feb. 5 pretrial conference in municipal court.

Williston police pulled him over on Dec. 15 for failing to maintain his lane, according to an officer's report. The officer wrote that Rios "was verbally abusive, homophobic, racially abusive and discriminatory" toward him "for the entire duration of the incident following road side testing."

The homophobic slurs can be heard in body camera footage requested by and provided to The Associated Press. In the recording, Rios also said he would call the North Dakota attorney general about the situation. He told the officers they would "regret picking on me because you don't know who ... I am."

He also cursed while riding in the patrol car, and questioned the officer's English accent, asking him, "How many of your ... friends and family members have been ... brutalized and terrorized by ... migrants?" Forum News Service first reported on Rios' remarks.

Asked for comment, Rios replied in an email, "Inebriated or not my actions and words to law enforcement that night were absolutely unacceptable."

The lawmaker said he was sorry and vowed "to make sure this never happens again."

"Moving forward after this night I feel like I have to emphasize my complete and total commitment to supporting Law Enforcement," he wrote.



Rio said he was leaving a Christmas party before the traffic stop, and has "only gotten support from my colleagues, although a few have yelled at me for sure I deserved it."

Rios was elected last year to the North Dakota House of Representatives. He sits on the House Judiciary Committee, a panel that handles law enforcement legislation. He also is a wireline operator, an oil field position involved in the hydraulic fracturing of wells.

Republican House Majority Leader Mike Lefor said he hadn't seen the video, "but I've heard enough about it." He would not say whether he is asking Rios to resign, but said he is "looking at the options that are in front of me," and wanted to speak with Rios before commenting further.

North Dakota Republican Party Chairwoman Sandi Sanford said in a text message, "We are deeply troubled by Rep. Rios' dangerous decision to drive while intoxicated and his remarks to law enforcement officers. His behavior does not represent the values of the NDGOP."

The state's Democratic Party chair called Rios' comments "reprehensible."

Republicans control the North Dakota House, 82-12.

## Minnesota officials identify man, woman and officer in stabbing-shooting incident that left two dead

MARSHALL, Minn. (AP) — A woman who was being stabbed by a man when a police officer fatally shot him in a southwestern Minnesota home this week has died of her injuries, authorities said.

Meredith Martell, 35, died from "multiple sharp-force injuries," and Jamel C. Hill Moore, 41, died from gunshot wounds, according to the Ramsey County Medical Examiner's Office in a news release from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety on Wednesday.

Officer Eric Klenken responded to the home in Marshall, Minnesota, early Sunday on reports of a domestic disturbance, the news release says, adding that Klenken has 24 years of law enforcement experience and is on standard administrative leave.

The news release provides new details about what transpired: When Klenken arrived, a child flagged him down and directed him into the house. A woman could be heard screaming for help in the upstairs bedroom. When Klenken entered the bedroom, Moore was on top of Martell, stabbing her as she laid on the floor of her bedroom closet.

According to the Department of Public Safety, Klenken ordered Moore to drop the knife, which he refused. Klenken then tried to stun Moore with a Taser, which appeared to have no effect. After again ordering Moore to drop the knife without response, Klenken shot Moore twice.

The news release says three other officers and a sheriff's deputy arrived at the home, assisting Klenken with providing medical aid to Moore and Martell. However, Moore died at the scene, and Martell died Sunday night at a Sioux Falls, South Dakota, hospital.

Neither the children in the home at the time of the incident nor Klenken were physically hurt, the news release says.

Police asked the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension to investigate. The bureau recovered two knives at the scene. Klenken was wearing his body camera during the incident, and the bureau is reviewing the video as part of the investigation, the news release says.

## Czech Republic holds a national day of mourning for the victims of its worst mass killing

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

PRAGUE (AP) — The Czech Republic came to a standstill at noon Saturday as people across the country observed a minute of silence as part of a national day of mourning to honor the victims of the worst mass killing in Czech history.

National flags on public buildings were at half-staff and bells tolled at noon. A Mass at St. Vitus cathedral in Prague, the biggest in the country, was celebrated for the victims. President Petr Pavel and speakers

of both houses of Parliament attended the service that was open to everyone.

"We're all still in a shock in our own ways," Prague archbishop Jan Graubner said. "We need to clearly condemn what happened but we also need to look into the future."

"Nobody should be left alone in these tough moments," Charles University rector Milena Kralickova said in her remarks toward the end of the Mass. The shooting inside the university's Faculty of Arts on Thursday killed 14 people.

Similar religious services were held in other cities and towns, while Christmas markets in a number of places were closed or reduced their programs amid boosted security measures.

The shooting in the university at the heart of the Czech capital also wounded 25 people before the gunman killed himself. Police and prosecutors said they have evidence the 24-year-old shooter also killed his father earlier in the day and a man and a baby in Prague last week.

A sea of candles was shining at an impromptu memorial for the victims created in front of the university headquarters.

"It's been a horrible experience for us all but it still can't be compared with what the victims had to experience at the time of the attack and what their dear ones have to experience now," said Milos Vystrcil, speaker of Parliament's upper house, the Senate, one of those who came to light a candle.

"I think that to help them at this point we express our support and that's what we're all doing now."

The names of the 14 people who died are slowly being released. The university confirmed two staff members were among them, including the head of the Institute of Music Sciences, Lenka Hlávková. First-year student Lucie Spindlerova was another, said the Lidove noviny daily, where she also worked.

The shooter was Czech and a student at the Faculty of Arts. Investigators do not suspect a link to any extremist ideology or groups. Officials said they believed he acted alone. His motive is not yet clear.

Previously, the nation's worst mass shooting was in 2015, when a gunman opened fire in the southeastern town of Uhersky Brod, killing eight before fatally shooting himself.

## **Israeli strike kills 76 members of one Gaza family, rescue officials say as combat expands in south**

By NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — An Israeli airstrike killed 76 members of an extended family, rescue officials said Saturday, a day after the U.N. chief warned again that nowhere is safe in Gaza and that Israel's ongoing offensive is creating "massive obstacles" to the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Friday's strike on a building in Gaza City was among the deadliest of the Israel-Hamas war, now in its 12th week, said Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for Gaza's Civil Defense department. He provided a partial list of the names of those killed — 16 heads of households from the al-Mughrabi family — and said the dead included women and children.

Among the dead were Issam al-Mughrabi, a veteran employee of U.N. Development Program, his wife, and their five children.

"The loss of Issam and his family has deeply affected us all. The U.N. and civilians in Gaza are not a target," said Achim Steiner, the head of the agency. "This war must end."

Israel declared war after Hamas militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking some 240 hostages. Israel has vowed to keep up the fight until Hamas is destroyed and removed from power in Gaza and all the hostages are freed.

More than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's war to destroy Hamas and more than 53,000 have been wounded, according to health officials in Gaza, a besieged territory ruled by the Islamic militant group for the past 16 years.

Israel blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll, citing the group's use of crowded residential areas for military purposes and its tunnels under urban areas. It has unleashed thousands of airstrikes since Oct. 7, and has largely refrained from commenting on specific attacks, including discussing the intended target.

On Friday, the U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution that calls for immediately speed-

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ing up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza.

The United States won the removal of a tougher call for an “urgent suspension of hostilities” between Israel and Hamas. It abstained in the vote, as did Russia, which wanted the stronger language. The resolution was the first on the war to make it through the council after the U.S. vetoed two earlier ones calling for humanitarian pauses and a full cease-fire.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reiterated his longstanding call for a humanitarian cease-fire. He expressed hope that Friday’s resolution may help this happen but said “much more is needed immediately” to end the ongoing “nightmare” for the people in Gaza.

He told a news conference that it’s a mistake to measure the effectiveness of the humanitarian operation in Gaza by the number of trucks.

“The real problem is that the way Israel is conducting this offensive is creating massive obstacles to the distribution of humanitarian aid inside Gaza,” he said. He said the prerequisites for an effective aid operation don’t exist — security, staff that can work in safety, logistical capacity especially trucks, and the resumption of commercial activity.

Israel’s aerial and ground offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history, displacing nearly 85% of Gaza’s 2.3 million people and leveling wide swaths of the tiny coastal enclave. More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving, according to a report this week from the United Nations and other agencies.

Shielded by the Biden administration, Israel has so far resisted international pressure to scale back. The military spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said late Friday that forces are widening the ground offensive “to additional areas of the strip, with a focus on the south.”

He said operations were also continuing in the northern half of Gaza, including Gaza City, the initial focus of Israel’s ground offensive. The army said that it carried out airstrikes against Hamas fighters in several locations of Gaza City.

The army also said Saturday that it has transferred more than 700 alleged militants from Gaza to Israel for further questioning, including more than 200 over the past week, providing rare details on a controversial policy that involves mass roundups of Palestinian men.

Palestinians have reported such roundups in areas of northern Gaza, where ground troops are in control, saying this typically involves all teenage boys and men found in a location being searched by troops. Some of the released detainees have said they were stripped to their underwear, beaten and held for days with minimal water. The military has denied abuse allegations and said those without links to militants were quickly released.

Israel says it has killed thousands of Hamas militants, including about 2,000 in the past three weeks, but has not presented any evidence to back up the claim. It says 139 of its soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive.

In the aftermath of the U.N. resolution, it was not immediately clear how and when aid deliveries would accelerate. Currently, trucks enter through two crossings — Rafah on the border with Egypt and Kerem Shalom on the border with Israel.

As part of the approved resolution, the U.S. negotiated the removal of language that would have given the U.N. authority to inspect aid going into Gaza, something Israel says it must continue to do to ensure material does not reach Hamas.

Israel’s ambassador to the U.N., Gilad Erdan, thanked the U.S. for its support and sharply criticized the U.N. for its failure to condemn Hamas’ Oct. 7 attacks. The U.S. vetoed a resolution in October that would have included a condemnation because it didn’t also underline Israel’s right to self-defense.

Hamas said in a statement that the U.N. resolution should have demanded an immediate halt to Israel’s offensive, and it blamed the United States for pushing “to empty the resolution of its essence” before Friday’s Security Council vote.

## Tunisians vote in local elections on Sunday to fill a new chamber as economy flatlines

By SAM METZ Associated Press

TUNIS, Tunisia (AP) — Butter and milk shortages. Political party boycotts. Ongoing prosecutions of the president's critics.

This is the environment in which Tunisians will head to the polls on Sunday for the country's first local elections since President Kais Saied wrote a new constitution that voters approved last year.

Voting will determine the composition of a new National Council of Regions and Districts — one component of Saied's vision to reshape politics in Tunisia, the country that sparked the region-wide uprisings that became known as the Arab Spring 12 years ago.

The new legislative chamber is designed to focus on economic development and candidates have campaigned on the radio about building schools, roads and other infrastructure. It harkens back to Saied's campaign promise to distribute power and funds far from Tunisia's capital. Tunis is synonymous with widely criticized government bureaucracy whose unpopularity helped fuel Saied's rise.

But despite the transformation promised, few signs of enthusiasm about elections and their ability to buoy Tunisia are apparent. In the 13th election since the 2011 revolution, there's little understanding about the stakes, what the new chamber has the power to do and whether voting even matters.

"People used to be motivated in other elections but nobody talks about this one or is up to date," said Najib, a cafe owner in La Goulette who said in past contests candidates regularly put up signs throughout his establishment. He declined to give his name out of fear of losing customers.

Such is a familiar story for Tunisia, a country plagued by high unemployment, drought and shortages of basic necessities that credit ratings firms say is teetering on the verge of bankruptcy.

Amid a similar lack of enthusiasm, barely 11% of voters turned out for parliamentary elections last year even with growing concerns about the country's political and economic woes.

Tunisia recently passed a new budget without major reforms that could bolster the economy or lure foreign lenders. It retains price controls and subsidies for flour, electricity and fuel. That's even though reducing government spending on subsidies is one reform that the IMF has demanded in exchange for a \$1.9 billion loan.

"The government is not living up to its responsibilities with regard to subsidies, which explains the scarcity of products," said Aram Belhadj, a professor at the School of Economy and Management of Tunis.

Though the subsidies are written into the budget, Tunisia's recent pattern of not compensating vendors has exacerbated shortages for goods like baguettes, he added. Despite political apathy, he noted that amid the shortages, people had begun paying closer attention to budgetary matters.

Without reforms, the ratings firm Fitch this month affirmed its assessment that Tunisia was at high risk for default with a CCC- rating, noting it did "not expect reforms will progress in 2024, in the context of the presidential election."

The problems are apparent but there's little recognition among the electorate that elections are taking place. They come more than two years after Saied suspended the country's parliament and months after he dissolved municipal councils, further dismantling the systems put in place after the 2011 revolution.

That decision added to the outrage that Saied's opponents have voiced since July 25, 2021, when he consolidated power, froze the parliament and sacked the prime minister. He has since imprisoned dozens of critics from business and political spheres, including Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the political party Ennahda that ascended to power after last decade's revolution.

Ennahda is among those who won't participate in the elections. The party is part of the National Salvation Front coalition that is boycotting along with others including Tunisia's Workers' Party and the Free Destourian Party, whose leader Abir Moussi was imprisoned Oct. 3 for allegedly undermining state security.

"The political and social climate is not conducive to holding this local election, which does not meet international standards of democracy," Ahmed Chebbi, the head of a leading coalition of opposition parties said at a news conference in November.

Apart from the boycotts, Fadil Alireza, a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, said Tunisians had gradually become disillusioned about elections leading to better standards of living.

"People run. They make promises of what they'll do and that Tunisia will be better. The fact that we've seen consistent decreasing purchasing power and deteriorating services — health, education, transportation ... makes disillusionment set in," he said.

ISIE, Tunisia's Independent High Authority for Elections, is sending out frequent text messages to remind voters about the election. Mohamed Tlili Mnasri, the authority's spokesperson, said there had been few notable irregularities and that the authority was working to educate voters on the legislative chamber up for election.

He acknowledged expectations for low voter turnout and boycotts. But he said there were no thresholds for voting for the new chamber to be elected. And for democracies, what's important is making the opportunity to vote available, he said.

"We're still in the process of stabilizing institutions," Mnasri said. "That's what democratic transition is."

## Acquittals in Manuel Ellis' death put Washington state's police accountability law in the spotlight

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

A Washington state law aimed at improving police accountability is in the spotlight after three Tacoma officers were acquitted in the 2020 death of Manuel Ellis, a Black man who was shocked, beaten and restrained face-down on a sidewalk as he pleaded for breath.

The measure approved by voters in 2018 was designed to make it easier to prosecute police accused of wrongfully using deadly force. Initiative 940, referred to as I-940, removed a requirement that prosecutors prove an officer acted with actual malice in order to bring a case — a requirement no other state had — and established that an independent investigation should be conducted after use of force results in death or great bodily harm, among other things.

The nearly three-month trial of the three police officers — Matthew Collins, 40; Christopher Burbank, 38; and Timothy Rankine, 34 — was the first to be held under the 5-year-old law. The trial over Ellis' death in Tacoma, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Seattle, ended Thursday with their acquittal on various murder and manslaughter charges.

The acquittal came a day before a jury in Colorado convicted two paramedics in the death of Elijah McClain, another Black man whose case drew national scrutiny.

Matthew Ericksen, a lawyer for the Ellis family, said Washington's 2018 police accountability law failed in certain regards in a trial that amounted to a test case for the measure, resulting in a verdict that devastated the family.

"One of the big reforms that I-940 was meant to bring was completely independent investigations of in-custody deaths like Mr. Ellis," Ericksen said. "And that just didn't happen. The law was violated, and in many ways, there really haven't been any consequences for that."

The Pierce County Sheriff's Office botched the initial probe into the death by failing to disclose for three months that one of its deputies had been involved in restraining Ellis, despite the state law requiring independent investigations. The Washington State Patrol took over, and the Attorney General's Office conducted its review based on evidence gathered by the patrol as well as its own additional investigation before charging the officers.

How effective I-940 can be will come down to how it is enforced, according to Ericksen. While the Ellis case highlighted gaps in the measure, he said it remained one of the "necessary building blocks to hopefully get to some police accountability."

"We're better off having I-940 than not," he said. "I sincerely hope this one verdict does not deter future investigations and prosecutions, and I know the Ellis family feels the same way."

Other police reform advocates also were disappointed by the verdict but said the fact the case went to trial at all — due to the law dropping the requirement that prosecutors prove officers acted with malice

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— already marked a significant change. Another Washington state officer, Jeff Nelson in Auburn, south of Seattle, is awaiting trial on a murder charge brought after I-940.

“We made it possible for them to know that you can be charged if you do something wrong,” said Tonya Isabell, cousin of Charleena Lyles, a pregnant mother who was fatally shot by Seattle police in 2017. “We’re all hurting, we’re devastated and we’re mad. But again, we have to look at the overall outcome of this.”

Lawyers for the three Tacoma officers said their clients acted in good faith and were relieved by the verdict. The Pierce County medical examiner ruled Ellis’ death was a homicide caused by oxygen deprivation, but the defense argued at trial that methamphetamine in his system and a heart irregularity were to blame.

Anne Bremner, who represented Rankine, said dropping the malice requirement for prosecution was generally viewed as unwelcome by law enforcement officers because of the potential for exposure to criminal liability.

“We’ve seen a lot of attrition and folks not wanting to become involved in law enforcement careers,” she said. “The vast majority of the officers that we have everywhere do excellent work and want to do their jobs in a way that they can help people and protect the community.”

State Sen. Yasmin Trudeau, a Tacoma Democrat who previously worked in the Attorney General’s Office on the implementation of I-940, said the law on its own does not guarantee accountability but rather “the opportunity to make the case for accountability” in court.

The measure has since been bolstered, she said, by 2021 laws creating an independent state office to review cases involving police use of deadly force and banning chokeholds and neck restraints.

“We do have a framework moving forward that is much more robust,” she said. “My hope as a bigger picture is that we may be able to realize that changes in the culture of policing and the laws around policing are meant to engender public trust. And I hope that we’ll be able to work together.”

## Plans abounding for new sports stadiums across the US, carrying hefty public costs

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

Standing on a portable stage erected at home plate of the Milwaukee Brewers ballpark, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers recently praised the professional baseball team as an “essential part” of the state’s “culture and identity” and “economic success.”

With fanfare, Evers then signed off on \$500 million in public aid for the stadium’s renovation, adding to a remarkable run of such blockbuster deals. This year alone, about a dozen Major League Baseball and National Football League franchises took steps toward new or improved stadiums.

A new wave of sports facility construction is underway. One driven, in part, by a race to keep up with rivals and one that could collectively cost taxpayers billions of dollars despite skepticism from economists that stadiums boost local economies.

Though the Brewers primarily cited a need for repairs, many of the other new projects are much more than that. In some cases, sports teams are even seeking a new jolt of public funding for state-of-the-art stadiums while public entities are still paying off debt from the last round of renovations a couple of decades ago.

“These facilities are not physically obsolete. It’s not as if the concrete is falling down and people are in grave danger if they attend a game,” said Rob Baade, a retired economics professor at Lake Forest College in Illinois.

“Teams are clamoring for new stadiums because it’s in their economic interest to do so,” Baade said, adding, “The new stadium model is one that spills over the stadium walls.”

### THE POWER OF PEER PRESSURE

New or improved stadiums provide team owners with fresh revenue opportunities from luxury suites, dining, shopping and other developments, especially for those who control the nearby area.

For many, Los Angeles Rams owner Stan Kroenke is the model: His \$5 billion football stadium opened in 2020 as the centerpiece of a sprawling development that will feature apartments, offices, retail stores,

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public parks and a theater.

The difference, however, is that Kroenke is privately financing the project, after uprooting the Rams from a publicly funded stadium in St. Louis that was still being paid off.

The Kansas City Royals in August unveiled two options for a new \$1 billion baseball stadium as part of an overall \$2 billion development. The Tampa Bay Rays followed suit in September, unveiling plans for a \$1.3 billion baseball stadium as the centerpiece of a \$6.5 billion development in St. Petersburg, Florida, that also features housing, retail stores, restaurants and bars and a Black history museum.

They joined the Jacksonville Jaguars, the Buffalo Bills and the Tennessee Titans, all of whom announced plans for or began construction on new billion-dollar football stadiums with luxury amenities.

Those projects all also came with public funding, including the \$760 million in local bonds the Nashville City Council approved to go with \$500 million in state bonds to pay for the Titans' new \$2.1 billion stadium. As part of the deal, the Titans agreed to pay off the remaining \$30 million of public debt owed for their current stadium, which opened in 1999.

As the Baltimore Ravens announced a publicly funded \$430 million renovation this month, the football team's senior vice president for stadium operations said the facility is "already considered by many to be top-of-line." But "we must remain cutting-edge and captivating," Rich Tamayo said.

The trend extends beyond baseball and football.

On Dec. 12, Oklahoma City voters approved a 1-cent sales tax for a new Thunder basketball team arena costing at least \$900 million. The next day, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin announced a proposed \$2 billion development to lure basketball's Washington Wizards and hockey's Washington Capitals to a new arena surrounded by a performing arts center, hotels, convention center, housing and retail stores.

The emerging cycle of stadium construction has a "level of extravagance that has ratcheted up tremendously" and is projected to peak around 2030, said J.C. Bradbury, an economics professor at Kennesaw State University in Georgia who has been tracking the projects.

## FEARS OF TEAMS LEAVING

Underlying the pitch for new stadiums is an assumption that teams may head elsewhere if they don't get what they want, a rare yet realistic possibility highlighted by MLB's approval last month for the Oakland Athletics to relocate from California to Las Vegas.

The team's new \$1.5 billion baseball stadium in Nevada is being aided by \$380 million in public funding. It will be built not far from the \$2 billion football home of the Las Vegas Raiders, which opened in 2020 with \$750 million of public funding from hotel room taxes.

The Raiders and A's previously shared Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, which had been renovated at taxpayer expense in the 1990s to lure the Raiders back from Los Angeles. The remaining \$13.5 million in public debt from that renovation is to be paid off by February 2025, by which time both teams could be gone.

Longtime A's fan Ken Rettberg is frustrated by both the A's impending departure and the lavish public aid benefitting wealthy team owners.

"It's crazy ... how they can get away with giving away taxpayer money. It's completely absurd," said Rettberg, a software engineer who lives near Oakland.

Wisconsin officials feared the Brewers also could leave, taking their tax dollars with them.

While approving public aid for the Brewers stadium on Dec. 5, Evers asserted that "losing this team would have had a ripple effect felt by families and communities across this state." He said the team generates billions of dollars of annual economic impact and supports thousands of jobs.

Brewers principal owner Mark Attanasio said other cities inquired, but "we never considered going anywhere else." Records show the Brewers spent \$575,000 lobbying lawmakers from January through June.

American Family Field, home of the Brewers, opened in 2001 during the peak of the last round of nationwide stadium construction, as cities replaced multipurpose facilities with glitzier sport-specific structures. Public funding covered nearly three-quarters of the \$392 million cost.

Wisconsin's latest stadium deal includes nearly \$674 million for renovations, including a total of about \$500 million from the state, county and city.

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## A PUBLIC BACKLASH

Ultimately, not everyone supports efforts to renovate or replace stadiums, or the trend of asking taxpayers to bear the cost.

The Titans' new stadium carries the nation's largest public subsidy for a professional sports facility. But voters delivered a rebuke in September, electing a progressive councilman who voted against the subsidy to serve as mayor.

The Chicago Bears in February bought a former suburban horse racing track as a potential site for a new football stadium and surrounding development but have yet to go forward with the potentially controversial move from downtown. The Illinois Sports Facilities Authority still owes \$589 million through 2032 on public bonds issued for a renovation of the Bears' current stadium two decades ago.

Many economists contend public funding for stadiums isn't worth it, because sports tend to divert discretionary spending away from other forms of entertainment rather than generate new income.

"When you ask economists should we fund sports stadiums, they can't say 'no' fast enough," Bradbury said. "Yet when you ask a politician, they can't say 'yes' fast enough."

Public opinion appears mixed.

A survey conducted last year for the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University found professional sports teams were viewed as a necessary cultural component of communities by 60% of respondents. Yet fewer than half believed state and local governments should provide public funds for sports stadiums.

The proposal to build a new Royals stadium closer to downtown Kansas City spurred thousands of fans to join a Facebook site rallying to keep the current stadium. The hefty public financing forms part of their objection.

"We've got a perfectly good stadium sitting there that was recently renovated and we're still paying on that," said Royals fan Jim Meyer, an administrator of the website. He added, "There is no real reason to replace it."

## Israel and Hamas measures get a look as most US state legislatures meet for first time since Oct. 7

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Most U.S. state legislatures will reconvene in January for the first time since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel sparked a war in Gaza and protests worldwide — and they're preparing to take action in response, both symbolic and concrete.

Legislatures in at least eight states that were in session late in 2023 have already condemned the attacks.

"My worldview was shaped by the fact that my forbearers were not protected during the Holocaust, that no one came to their aid," said Florida state Sen. Lori Berman, a Democrat who sponsored a resolution that passed unanimously last month in her state. "Silence and indifference are the reason why bad — evil — is able to prevail."

Measures have been introduced already for the 2024 sessions in states from New Hampshire to North Dakota, and more are likely.

In the Oct. 7 attack, Hamas killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took about 240 others hostage. Israel responded with attacks on Gaza, leveling buildings, including hospitals, killing more than 19,000, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, and causing 1.9 million Palestinian residents to flee their homes.

Strong emotions about the ongoing war are informed by a long history of conflict.

Since Oct. 7, at least 59 Hamas- or Israel-related pieces of legislation have been introduced in state legislatures. Most are resolutions condemning the attack and supporting Israel.

In states including Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas, resolutions in condemnation of the attack passed unanimously or nearly so.

Others have different aims: Resolutions in Pennsylvania and Texas would encourage President Joe Biden to facilitate an end to the conflict between Israel and Palestinians. A New Jersey bill would have the state



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reimburse travel bills for state residents who were evacuated from Israel during the attack or afterward. The issue could become more complex as the war goes on, with Democrats in some states becoming divided on resolutions.

In Michigan, the Democratic-led state House adjourned their 2023 session without agreeing on a resolution, as Arab American lawmakers refused to support a resolution condemning Hamas and supporting Israel's response.

Another resolution in Michigan would call on Democrat U.S. Rep. Rashida Tlaib — the only Palestinian American in Congress — to resign over rhetoric that's widely seen as a calling for the eradication of Israel. Her statements have already brought her censure from Congress.

While condemning the attack is a largely popular position, how the bills do so varies.

During a special session this month, the Georgia House of Representatives approved a resolution condemning the attacks. Only two of the 180 representatives voted against the resolution, but 49 didn't vote. Among those not voting was Rep. Ruwa Romman, a Democrat and the first Muslim woman elected to the chamber.

She said in an interview that she told the bill's authors that she would have supported it if it had said the state stands with the Israeli people, instead of Israel.

"You can't ask me to stand with a country that displaced my grandparents and is now killing people en masse," Romman said.

Lawmakers are also weighing in on how to handle protests and Palestinian-oriented events at universities, some of them accused of allowing antisemitism.

Republican lawmakers in Pennsylvania this month defeated legislation to send \$33.5 million to the private University of Pennsylvania's veterinary school amid criticism and claims that the university was tolerating antisemitism.

Indiana's Republican House Speaker Todd Huston told his caucus in November that he would prioritize addressing antisemitism on college campuses in light of the Israel-Hamas war.

The Indiana House passed a bill during the 2023 legislative session that sought to define antisemitism as religious discrimination and "provide educational opportunities free of religious discrimination." The bill died in the Senate.

"Our Jewish students should know they will be safe on campuses throughout Indiana and not be subjected to antisemitic teaching or materials," Huston told colleagues in a speech.

A Florida measure introduced in 2023 would force public university students who support Hamas and other groups designated as terrorist organizations to pay out-of-state tuition.

"I saw videos of protests on Florida's campuses and wondered to myself 'how many of these pro-Hamas students chanting for the destruction of Israel are taxpayers subsidizing with reduced tuition rates?'" the bill's sponsor, GOP state Sen. Blaise Ingoglia, told The Associated Press in an email.

The bill did not advance in a special session in November, but he said he would bring it back.

A New Jersey measure would target funding for universities, rather than individual students, prohibiting them from "authorizing, facilitating, providing funding for, or otherwise supporting any event or organization promoting antisemitism or hate speech on campus." Its sponsor in the Assembly, Republican Alex Sauickie, said he believes the idea can pick up the bipartisan support needed to pass in a Democrat-controlled legislature.

Edward Ahmed Michell, the national deputy director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said that measures restricting speech could be found unconstitutional and he doesn't expect them to gain traction. He said that many of the others, which focus on support for Israel but not for the people of Gaza killed or displaced in the war, are also troubling.

"I understand state legislators want to comment on international incidents that are relevant to their constituents, and that's fine," said Edward Ahmed Michell, the national deputy director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "But they need to be morally consistent."

## In Mexico, piñatas are not just child's play. They're a 400-year-old tradition

By FABIOLA SÁNCHEZ Associated Press

ACOLMAN, Mexico (AP) — María de Lourdes Ortiz Zacarías swiftly cuts hundreds of strips of newsprint and colored crepe paper needed to make a piñata, soothed by Norteño music on the radio while measuring pieces by feel.

"The measurement is already in my fingers," Ortiz Zacarías says with a laugh.

She has been doing this since she was a child, in the family-run business alongside her late mother, who learned the craft from her father. Piñatas haven't been displaced by more modern customs, and her family has been making a living off them into its fourth generation.

Ortiz Zacarías calls it "my legacy, handed down by my parents and grandparents."

Business is steady all year, mainly with birthday parties, but it really picks up around Christmas. That's because piñatas are interwoven with Christian traditions in Mexico.

There are countless designs these days, based on everything from Disney characters to political figures. But the most traditional style of piñata is a sphere with seven spiky cones, which has a religious origin.

Each cone represents one of the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Hitting the paper-mache globe with a stick is a symbolic blow against sin, with the added advantage of releasing the candy within.

Piñatas weren't originally filled with candy, nor made mainly of paper. Grandparents in Mexico can remember a time a few decades ago when piñatas were clay pots covered with paper and filled with hunks of sugar cane, fruits and peanuts. The treats were received quite gladly, though falling pieces of the clay pot posed a bit of a hazard.

But the tradition goes back even further. Some say piñatas can be traced back to China, where paper-making originated.

In Mexico, they were apparently brought by the Spanish conquerors, but may also replicate pre-Hispanic traditions.

Spanish chronicler Juan de Grijalva wrote that piñatas were used by Augustine monks in the early 1500s at a convent in the town of Acolman, just north of Mexico City. The monks received written permission from Pope Sixtus V for holding a year-end Mass as part of the celebration of the birth of Christ.

But the Indigenous population already celebrated a holiday around the same time to honor the god of war, Huitzilopochtli. And they used something similar to piñatas in those rites.

The pre-Hispanic rite involved filling clay jars with precious cocoa seeds — the stuff from which chocolate is made — and then ceremonially breaking the jars.

"This was the meeting of two worlds," said Walther Boelsterly, director of Mexico City's Museum of Popular Art. "The piñata and the celebration were used as a mechanism to convert the native populations to Catholicism."

Piñatas are also used in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Peru, Puerto Rico and Venezuela, mainly at children's parties.

The piñata hasn't stood still. Popular figures this year range from Barbie to Spider-Man. Ortiz Zacarías' family makes some new designs most of the year, but around Christmas they return to the seven-pointed style, because of its longstanding association with the holiday.

The family started their business in Acolman, where Ortiz Zacarías' mother, Romana Zacarías Camacho, was known as "the queen of the piñatas" before her death.

Ortiz Zacarías' 18-year-old son, Jairo Alberto Hernández Ortiz, is the fourth generation to take up the centuriesold craft.

"This is a family tradition that has a lot of sentimental value for me," he said.

**Post-flight feast: Study suggests reindeer vision evolved to spot**

## favorite food

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer may have millions of carrots set out for him on Christmas Eve, but what about the rest of the year?

Finding food in a cold, barren landscape is challenging, but researchers from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and the University of St. Andrews in Scotland report that reindeer eyes may have evolved to allow them to easily spot their preferred meal.

It's further evidence that while reindeer are famous for pulling Santa's sleigh, it's their vision that really sets them apart, says Nathaniel Dominy, a Dartmouth anthropology professor and co-author of a recent study published in the journal *i-Perception*.

"They've been sort of obscure and unheralded in the annals of visual neuroscience, but they're having their moment because they have a really fascinating visual system," he said in an interview.

Scientists have known for years that mirror-like tissue in reindeer eyes changes color from a greenish gold in the summer to vivid blue in the winter, a process that is thought to amplify the low light of polar winter. But they weren't sure what to make of another curious fact: Unlike other mammals, reindeer can see light in the ultraviolet spectrum.

"Most animals that are active under daylight conditions want to avoid UV light. UV light is damaging," Dominy said. "Snow reflects UV light, which is a problem, which is why humans get snow blindness."

Some scientists believe reindeer vision evolved to protect the animals from predators, allowing them to spot white wolves against a snowy landscape, for example. The new study points to another possibility: food.

Reindeer subsist largely on light-colored reindeer moss, which isn't actually a moss but rather a type of lichen that grows in crunchy, carpet-like patches across northern latitudes.

Researchers traveled to the Cairngorms mountains in the Scottish Highlands, which hosts more than 1,500 species of lichen as well as Britain's only reindeer herd. They found reindeer moss absorbs UV light, meaning the white lichen that humans have trouble seeing against the snow stands out as dark patches to the animals.

"If you're a reindeer, you can see it and you have an advantage because then you're not wandering around the landscape. You can walk in a straight line and get to that food, and you conserve energy in the process," Dominy said. "These animals are desperate for food, and if they can find lichen sufficiently, then they have an advantage."

Juan Jose Negro specializes in evolutionary ecology and conservation biology at the Spanish Council for Scientific Research. While his focus is mainly on birds of prey, he found the new reindeer research intriguing.

"I love every piece of work dealing with colors and vision," he said. "Every time I read other people's works, there is something that sparks new ideas. ... And in the case of the reindeer, this is leading me to want to pay more attention to this part of the spectrum."

While he saw no immediate biomedical benefit to the research, such work is useful in furthering the understanding of how animals deal with difficult environments, he said.

Dominy echoed that point, but said it also has human implications. There has been a lot of pharmacological research on lichens because they have antioxidant properties. Reindeer eyes allowing in UV light suggests there might be some mechanism in place to protect them from damage, he said.

"Reindeer eyes are full of ascorbic acid, or vitamin C, and vitamin C is just terrific for repairing damaged cells," he said.

With that in mind, Dominy is updating the advice he offered after writing a 2015 paper exploring why a reindeer's red nose would be ideal for guiding Santa's sleigh.

Back then, he recommended children leave Rudolph cookies and other high-calorie food to make up for the body heat he loses through his nose. Now, he says, focus on his eyes and save the milk and cookies for Santa.

"The best thing to give them to protect the health of their eyes would be something rich in vitamin C,"

he said. "Orange juice, carrots, these would be perfect treats for reindeer on Christmas Eve."

## Cuban government defends plans to either cut rations or increase prices

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — The Cuban government said Friday it will have to either increase prices for fuel and electricity, or reduce rations for basic supplies.

President Miguel Díaz-Canel said such difficult measures were needed for difficult times, after the minister of the economy said Cuba's economy contracted between 1% and 2% this year, and inflation ran at about 30%. There were problems in the tourism industry — Cuba's main source of income — and in farm production.

"This is a question of complicated measures, as complicated as are these times," Díaz-Canel said. "I emphatically deny that this is neo-liberal plan against the people, nor a crusade against small businesses, nor an elimination of the basic market basket" that Cubans can get with government coupons.

Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz said that because of economic problems, the government will have to raise prices for gasoline, electricity and gas, or reduce the amount of food and other basics contained in government ration books.

The remarks came in appearances at the closing sessions of Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power, effectively Cuba's congress.

The economic crisis in Cuba has already pushed hundreds of thousands of people to leave in a bid to reach the United States. Long lines at gasoline stations had gotten shorter recently, but the news of possible price increases could prompt a rush to fill up.

"Since they spoke (in congress), I haven't been able to get gas yet," Alberto Corujo, a 54-year-old driver, said as he waited in a long line at a gas station in Havana.

Mercy García, a secretary at a state-owned business, said times were indeed tough.

"The situation is very hard for people of all social levels, because wages don't keep up and prices have gone through the roof," said García.

Visits by tourists are still only at 64% of the level in 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic. Sugar production was down, and the government had to import food.

## 'Pray for us': Eyewitnesses reveal first clues about a missing boat with up to 200 Rohingya refugees

By KRISTEN GELINEAU, EDNA TARIGAN and REZA SAIFULLAH Associated Press

PIDIE, Indonesia (AP) — Their screams and sobs could be heard from the ailing boat soon after it emerged into view amid the vastness of the Andaman Sea. Crowded on board were tiny babies and children, alongside mothers and fathers begging to be saved.

The passengers were ethnic Rohingya Muslims who had fled surging gang violence and rampant hunger in the squalid refugee camps of Bangladesh, only to find themselves adrift with a broken engine. For a moment, it appeared their salvation had arrived in the form of another boat carrying Rohingya refugees that had pulled up alongside them.

But those on board the other boat — itself overloaded and beginning to leak — knew if they allowed the distressed passengers onto their vessel, it would sink. And all would die.

They wanted to help, but they also wanted to live.

Since November, more than 1,500 Rohingya refugees fleeing Bangladesh in rickety boats have landed in Indonesia's northern province of Aceh — three-quarters of them women and children. On Thursday, Indonesian authorities spotted another five boats approaching Aceh's coast.

With so many Rohingya attempting the dangerous crossing in recent weeks, nobody knows how many boats did not make it, and how many people died.

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This account of two boats in distress at sea — one was saved, the other vanished — was told to The Associated Press by five survivors from the vessel that made it to shore.

It provides the first clues into the fate of the boat carrying up to 200 Rohingya refugees that has been missing for weeks. On Dec. 2, the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR, put out an urgent message about the two boats in distress and urged countries to look for them.

But in the case of the boat that remains missing, it appears no one searched.

From a grey, trash-strewn beach near where they staggered ashore on Dec. 10, the survivors told the AP of their harrowing journey and the agonizing decisions made along the way.

"I remember feeling that together, we would be finished. Together, we would sink. Together, we would drown," says 31-year-old Muhammed Jubair, who was among the 180 people on his boat to be rescued, along with his three children, wife and brother-in-law.

## TEARFUL GOODBYES

The story of the missing boat and its passengers begins the way most Rohingya boat journeys do — with tearful goodbyes in sweltering shelters in the camps of Bangladesh, where more than 750,000 Rohingya fled in 2017 following sweeping attacks by the military in their homeland of Myanmar.

In one of those shelters, Noor Fatima clutched her 14-year-old brother, Muhammed Ansar, forcing herself to hold back tears as the boy began to cry along with the rest of their family. She knew she had to stay strong so he wouldn't fear the journey ahead.

Ansar was the family's only son — the only one with a shot at an education and a job in Indonesia. They hoped he would someday make enough money to support them in the camps. There were few alternatives: Bangladesh bans camp residents from working, so their survival is entirely dependent on food rations, which were slashed this year.

Worsening hunger caused by the ration cuts and a spike in gang violence sparked the latest exodus by sea from the camps.

It was Nov. 20, and Ansar would be making the trip with several relatives, including his 20-year-old cousin, Samira Khatun, and her 3-year-old son. As her brother left, Fatima told herself many other boats had made it safely to Indonesia. Surely his would, too.

The next day, Samira called Fatima's family and her father, telling them they were aboard the boat. "We are on our way," she said. "Pray for us."

Abdu Shukkur didn't know his bright and bubbly 12-year-old daughter, Kajoli, was planning to flee the camps until a trafficker called him and said he was taking her by boat to Indonesia.

Shukkur begged the trafficker to leave Kajoli behind, but her friends were going on the boat, and she wanted to go with them. He later received a phone call from Kajoli herself, when she was already on board.

All he could do was pray.

## THE BOATS COME TOGETHER

The boat Jubair and his family were on was chugging across the sea, carrying 180 Rohingya bound for Indonesia. It was overloaded, but the engine was still working.

Days into its 1,800-kilometer (1,100-mile) journey, the passengers on Jubair's boat spotted another vessel bobbing in the waves. It was Kajoli, Ansar and Samira's boat — their engine was broken, water was seeping in and the passengers were panicking.

Those on Jubair's boat worried if they got too close, the people on the distressed vessel would jump onto their boat, sinking them all, says one of Jubair's fellow passengers, Rujinah, who goes by one name and who was on board with five of her children.

Their fears were not unfounded. As Jubair's boat drew nearer, between 20 and 30 people began preparing to make the jump, says Zakir Hussain, another passenger.

The captain of Jubair's boat shouted at those on the distressed vessel to stay put. Then he asked for a rope so he could tie the two boats together. The captain told the other boat's passengers he would tow their vessel behind his, and they would search for land together.

According to Hussain, their captain also issued a warning: "If you try to jump into our boat, we won't

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help you.”

What happened next is disputed.

Around the same time, Shukkur, the father of Kajoli, says his nephew made a call to the captain of Kajoli's boat and was told by the captain that he and his family had left the distressed vessel and were on the boat that came to their rescue.

However, the survivors interviewed by the AP in Aceh either denied that happened or said they didn't see it.

Tethered together, the two boats began moving through the water. And then, two or three nights later, a vicious storm crashed down on them. Pounding waves throttled the boats, destroying the engine on Jubair's vessel.

Now, in the dark, they were both helplessly adrift.

## TRAGEDY STRIKES

It was then, the passengers on Jubair's boat say, that the ropes between the two vessels were severed. No one says they saw how it happened — but what they did see was the other boat drifting off to their right.

Over the howling wind and churning surf, Jubair could hear the passengers on the other boat pleading for their lives.

“They were crying and shouting loudly, ‘Our ropes are broken! Our ropes are broken! Please help us! But how could we help?’ Jubair says. “We would die with them.”

The other boat drifted farther away, the passengers say, until it vanished from view.

On Jubair's boat, people began to wail.

“They are also Muslim. They are also part of our community,” says Rujinah. “That's why our people were also crying for them.”

## THE RESCUE

For days, Jubair and his fellow passengers languished at sea, their food and water gone. Eventually, a plane spotted them, and a Navy ship arrived, delivering food, water and medicine. The passengers say they don't know which country sent the rescue vessel that towed them into Indonesian waters and then left when their boat was close to land.

That's when their captain and another crew member fled the vessel on a small fishing boat, Jubair says. Abandoned, the exhausted passengers worked together to guide the battered boat onto the beach, where they have spent their nights sleeping under tarps. They wash and drink from a nearby stream.

Facing an increasingly hostile reception from locals, they have no idea what their future holds in Indonesia. But at least, they say, they are alive. They hope the passengers on the other boat are, too.

“I feel very sad for them because we were in the same situation, and now we are safe,” says Hussain. “We are just praying for that boat to find land and for the passengers to stay alive.”

## THE AGONY OF THE UNKNOWN

Weeks have passed, and the families of those on board the lost boat have heard nothing. Ann Maymann, the UNHCR's representative in Indonesia, urged regional governments to launch a search.

“Here you have hundreds of people that are obviously distressed at the best and, at the worst, they are not even distressed any longer,” Maymann told the AP. “Those nations in this region have fully capable and resourced search and rescue capacities.”

The governments of regional countries that the AP reached out to either did not respond to requests for comment or said they were unaware of the boat.

Meanwhile, a familiar feeling of dread has crept into Bangladesh's camps, which mourned the loss in 2022 of another boat carrying 180 people that an AP investigation concluded had sunk.

Fatima struggles to sleep as she waits for news of Ansar, her little brother. One way or another, she says, they just want answers.

One night, Fatima says, Ansar came to their mother in a dream and told her he was on an island. The family believes he is alive, somewhere.

Shukkur also had a dream about his daughter, Kajoli, but in it, her boat sank. He believes his little girl

and all her fellow passengers are dead.

His agony echoes throughout the camp's crowded warren of shelters.

"Many parents," he says, "are screaming for their children."

## **Paramedics were convicted in Elijah McClain's death. That could make other first responders pause**

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BRIGHTON, Colo. (AP) — Two Denver-area paramedics were convicted Friday for giving a fatal overdose of the sedative ketamine to Elijah McClain in 2019 — a jury verdict that experts said could have a chilling effect on first responders around the country.

The case involving the 23-year-old Black man's death was the first among several recent criminal prosecutions against medical first responders to reach trial, potentially setting the bar for prosecutors for future cases.

It also was the last of three trials against police and paramedics charged in the death of McClain, who officers stopped following a suspicious person complaint. He was injected with the sedative after being forcibly restrained. The case received little attention until protests over the 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

An Aurora police officer was convicted of homicide and third degree assault earlier this year, while two officers were acquitted.

The jury on Friday found Aurora Fire Rescue paramedics Jeremy Cooper and Peter Cichuniec guilty of criminally negligent homicide following a weekslong trial in state district court. They could face years in prison at sentencing.

The jury also found Cichuniec guilty on one of two second-degree assault charges, which brings the possibility of an enhanced prison sentence and required that he be taken into immediate custody. Cooper was found not guilty on the assault charges and was not taken into custody.

McClain's mother, Sheneen, raised her fist in the air following the verdict. "We did it! We did it! We did it!" she said as she walked away from the courthouse.

Cichuniec's wife had her head bowed as deputies handcuffed him. Cooper's wife sobbed alongside her.

Neither the paramedics nor their attorneys spoke outside court. They did not immediately respond to emails and telephone messages from The Associated Press seeking comment.

The outcome could set a precedent for how emergency personnel respond to situations with people in police custody, said University of Miami criminologist Alex Piquero.

"Imagine if you're a paramedic," Piquero said. "They could be hesitant. They could say, 'I'm not going to do anything' or 'I'm going to do less. I don't want to be found guilty.'"

The International Association of Fire Fighters said in a statement that in pursuing the charges, Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser had criminalized split-second medical decisions and set "a dangerous, chilling precedent for pre-hospital care."

Weiser, who convened the grand jury that indicted the first responders, said he was satisfied with the verdict.

"We remain confident that bringing these cases forward was the right thing to do for justice for Elijah McClain and for healing in the Aurora community," he said outside court.

The city of Aurora said Friday night that the two paramedics were fired following their convictions.

The verdict was announced after two days of deliberations. When jurors told the judge Friday afternoon they were stuck on one of the charges, the judge told them to keep trying to reach a verdict.

Police stopped McClain while he was walking home from a convenience store on Aug. 24, 2019, following a suspicious person complaint. After an officer said McClain reached for an officer's gun — a claim disputed by prosecutors — another officer put him in a neck hold that rendered him temporarily unconscious. Officers also pinned down McClain before Cooper injected him with an overdose of ketamine. Cichuniec was the senior officer and said it was his decision to use ketamine.

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Prosecutors said the paramedics did not conduct basic medical checks of McClain, such as taking his pulse, before giving him the ketamine. The dose was too much for someone of his size — 140 pounds (64 kilograms), experts testified. Prosecutors say they also did not monitor McClain immediately after giving him the sedative but instead left him lying on the ground, making it harder to breathe.

McClain's pleading words captured on police body camera video, "I'm an introvert and I'm different," struck a chord with protesters and people around the country.

In a statement released prior to the verdict, McClain's mother said that everyone present during the police stop of her son displayed a lack of humanity.

"They can not blame their job training for their indifference to evil or their participation in an evil action," McClain wrote. "That is completely on them. May all of their souls rot in hell when their time comes."

Defense attorneys argued that the paramedics followed their training in giving ketamine to McClain after diagnosing him with "excited delirium," a disputed condition some say is unscientific and has been used to justify excessive force.

The verdicts came after a jury in Washington state cleared three police officers of all criminal charges on Thursday in the 2020 death of Manuel Ellis, a Black man who was shocked, beaten and restrained face-down on a Tacoma sidewalk as he pleaded for breath.

In the Colorado case, the prosecution said Cooper lied to investigators to try to cover up his actions, telling detectives that McClain was actively resisting when he decided to inject McClain with ketamine, even though the body camera showed McClain lying on the ground unconscious. It also disputed Cooper's claim that McClain tried to get away from police holding him down — and that he took McClain's pulse as he bent down to give him the shot of ketamine, which others testified they did not see.

"He's trying to cover up the recklessness of his conduct," Senior Assistant Attorney General Jason Slothouber told jurors in closing statements.

Cichuniec, who testified along with Cooper this week, said paramedics were trained that they had to work quickly to treat excited delirium with ketamine and said they were told numerous times that it was a safe, effective drug and were not warned about the possibility of it killing anyone.

Colorado now tells paramedics not to give ketamine to people suspected of having the controversial condition, which has symptoms including increased strength and has been associated with racial bias against Black men.

When the police stopped McClain, a massage therapist, he was listening to music and wearing a mask that covered most of his face because he had a blood circulation disorder. The police stop quickly became physical after McClain, seemingly caught off guard, asked to be left alone. He had not been accused of committing any crime.

The case's prominence means the specter of criminal charges and accompanying lawsuits over emergency care will be a concern for paramedics going forward, said Arizona State University law professor James G. Hodge, Jr.

It could prompt them to better document what police tell them about people needing treatment and to ask doctors to sign off before paramedics use life-saving but potentially harmful treatments on patients, he said.

"The national coverage of the cases against these paramedics unquestionably influences practices in real-time," Hodge said.

## Israel-Hamas war's staggering toll reaches a grim milestone: 20,000 dead

By NAJIB JOBAIN and SAM MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel's war to destroy Hamas has killed more than 20,000 Palestinians, health officials in Gaza said Friday, as Israel expanded its offensive and ordered tens of thousands more people to leave their homes.

The deaths in Gaza amount to nearly 1% of the territory's prewar population — the latest indication of



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the 11-week-old conflict's staggering human toll.

Israel's aerial and ground offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history, displacing nearly 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million people and leveling wide swaths of the tiny coastal enclave. More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving, according to a report Thursday from the United Nations and other agencies.

Israel declared war after Hamas militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking some 240 hostages. Israel has vowed to keep up the fight until Hamas is destroyed and removed from power in Gaza and all the hostages are freed.

After many delays, the U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution Friday calling for immediately speeding up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza.

The United States won the removal of a tougher call for an "urgent suspension of hostilities" between Israel and Hamas. It abstained in the vote, as did Russia, which wanted the stronger language. The resolution was the first on the war to make it through the council after the U.S. vetoed two earlier ones that called for humanitarian pauses and a full cease-fire.

## ISRAEL VOWS TO KEEP UP PRESSURE ON HAMAS

The U.S. also negotiated the removal of language that would have given the U.N. authority to inspect aid going into Gaza, something Israel says it must do to ensure material does not reach Hamas.

Israel's Ambassador to the U.N., Gilad Erdan, thanked the U.S. for its support and sharply criticized the U.N. for its failure to condemn Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks. The U.S. vetoed a resolution in October that would have included a condemnation because it didn't also underline Israel's right to self-defense.

Hamas said in a statement that the U.N. resolution should have demanded an immediate halt to Israel's offensive, and it blamed the United States for pushing "to empty the resolution of its essence" before Friday's Security Council vote.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, meanwhile, reiterated his longstanding call for a humanitarian cease-fire.

Guterres said nothing can justify Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks, its taking of hostages, its rocket launches against Israel and what he called its use of civilians as human shields.

"But at the same time, these violations of international humanitarian law can never justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, and they do not free Israel from its own legal obligations under international law," the secretary-general said.

Israel, shielded by the United States, has resisted international pressure to scale back its offensive. The military has said that months of fighting lie ahead in southern Gaza, an area packed with the vast majority of the enclave's 2.3 million people, many of whom were ordered to flee combat in the north earlier in the war.

Evacuation orders have pushed displaced civilians into ever-smaller areas of the south as troops focus on Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest city.

The military said late Thursday that it is sending more ground forces, including combat engineers, to Khan Younis to target Hamas militants above ground and in tunnels.

On Friday, it ordered tens of thousands of residents to leave their homes in Burej, an urban refugee camp, and surrounding communities in central Gaza, suggesting a ground assault there could be next.

In the city of Rafah, on the border with Egypt, an airstrike on a house killed six people, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies at a hospital. Among the dead were a married couple and their 4-month-old child, said the infant's grandfather, Anwar Dhair.

Rafah is one of the few places in Gaza not under evacuation orders, but it has been targeted in Israeli strikes almost every day.

The air and ground campaign continued in the north, where Israel says it is in the final stages of clearing out Hamas militants.

Mustafa Abu Taha, a Palestinian farm worker, said many areas of his hard-hit Gaza City neighborhood of Shijaiyah have become inaccessible because of massive destruction from airstrikes.

"They are hitting anything moving," he said of Israeli forces.

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## RISING DEATH TOLL AND HUNGER

Gaza's Health Ministry said Friday that it has documented 20,057 deaths in the fighting and more than 50,000 wounded. It does not differentiate between combatant and civilian deaths. It has previously said that roughly two-thirds of the dead were women or minors.

Israel blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll, citing the group's use of crowded residential areas for military purposes and its tunnels under urban areas.

Israel's military says 139 of its soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive. It says it has killed thousands of Hamas militants, including about 2,000 in the past three weeks, but it has not presented any evidence to back up the claim.

For most of the war, Israel also stopped entry of food, water, fuel and other supplies except for truck convoys of aid from Egypt, which cover only a fraction of the needs in Gaza.

Because of insufficient aid entering Gaza, the extent of starvation has eclipsed the near-famines of recent years in Afghanistan and Yemen, and the risk of famine increases each day, Thursday's U.N. report said.

An Israeli military liaison officer said there is no food shortage in Gaza, saying sufficient aid is getting through.

"The reserves in Gaza Strip are sufficient for the near-term," Col. Moshe Tetro said from the Kerem Shalom cargo crossing, without elaborating.

Israel opened the Kerem Shalom crossing several days ago amid international demands to increase the flow of aid. But the military struck the Palestinian side of the crossing Thursday, killing four staffers, and the U.N. said it was unable to pick up aid there for delivery. It was not immediately known if the U.N. resumed work there Friday. The Israeli military said it was targeting militants.

The Israel-Hamas war has also pushed Gaza's health sector into collapse.

Only nine of its 36 health facilities are still partially functioning, all located in the south, according to the World Health Organization.

The agency reported soaring rates of diseases in Gaza, including a five-fold rise in diarrhea and increases in cases of meningitis, skin rashes and scabies.

## UN approves watered-down resolution on aid to Gaza without call for suspension of hostilities

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution Friday calling for immediately speeding aid deliveries to hungry and desperate civilians in Gaza but without the original plea for an "urgent suspension of hostilities" between Israel and Hamas.

The long-delayed vote in the 15-member council was 13-0 with the United States and Russia abstaining. The U.S. abstention avoided a third American veto of a Gaza resolution following Hamas' surprise Oct. 7 attacks inside Israel. Russia wanted the stronger language restored; the U.S. did not.

Still, "It was the Christmas miracle we were all hoping for," said United Arab Emirates Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh, who sponsored the resolution. She said it would send a signal to the people in Gaza that the Security Council was working to alleviate their suffering.

The resolution culminated a week and a half of high-level diplomacy by the United States, the UAE on behalf of Arab nations and others. The vote, initially scheduled for Monday, was pushed back each day until Friday.

A relieved U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the council, "This was tough, but we got there."

She said the vote bolsters efforts "to alleviate this humanitarian crisis, to get life-saving assistance into Gaza and to get hostages out of Gaza, to push for the protection of innocent civilians and humanitarian workers, and to work towards a lasting peace."

"It is hard to overstate how urgent this is," Thomas-Greenfield said. "This resolution speaks to the severity of this crisis, and it calls on us all to do more."

The vote came immediately after the United States vetoed a Russian amendment that would have re-

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stored the call to immediately suspend hostilities. That vote was 10 countries in favor, the U.S. against and four abstentions,

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia called the resolution "entirely toothless" and accused the United States of "shameful, cynical and irresponsible conduct" and resorting to tactics "of gross pressure, blackmail and twisting arms."

He said the resolution "would essentially be giving the Israeli armed forces complete freedom of movement for the clearing of the Gaza Strip." Russia would have vetoed it, he said, if it hadn't been supported by a number of Arab countries.

Thus the resolution was stripped of its key provision with teeth — the call for "the urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities."

Instead, it calls "for urgent steps to immediately allow safe, unhindered and expanded humanitarian access, and also for creating the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities." The steps are not defined, but diplomats said it was the council's first reference to stopping fighting.

Ambassador Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian U.N. envoy, said it took the Security Council 75 days "to finally utter the words 'cessation of hostilities,'" stressing that the Palestinians and Arab nations supported the Russian amendment.

"This resolution is a step in the right direction" because of its important humanitarian provisions, Mansour said. "It must be implemented and must be accompanied by massive pressure for an immediate cease-fire."

Hamas called the resolution "an insufficient step" that "doesn't meet the requirements of the catastrophic state caused by the terrorist military machine in Gaza." The militant group accused the United States of defying the international community and blocking the council from demanding a halt to the war in the statement on its website.

Israel's U.N. deputy ambassador Brett Jonathan Miller criticized the Security Council for not condemning Hamas for its Oct. 7 attacks in which about 1,200 people were killed and about 240 taken hostage.

The resolution more generally "deplores all attacks against civilians and civilian objects as well as all violence and hostilities against civilians, and all acts of terrorism." It also demands the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

On a key sticking point concerning aid deliveries, the resolution eliminated a previous request for the U.N. "to exclusively monitor all humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza provided through land, sea and air routes" by outside parties to confirm their humanitarian nature.

It substituted a request to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to quickly appoint a coordinator to monitor relief deliveries to Gaza that are not from the parties to the conflict — Israel and Hamas — to verify that they are humanitarian goods. It asks the coordinator to establish a "mechanism" to speed aid deliveries and demands that Israel and Hamas cooperate with the coordinator.

Miller said "humanitarian aid is pouring into Gaza every single day" and Israel is willing to increase the number of aid trucks entering the territory and the only roadblock is "the U.N.'s ability to accept them." He stressed that "any enhancement of U.N. aid monitoring cannot be done at the expense of Israel's security inspections."

Guterres countered at a press conference that it's a mistake to measure the effectiveness of the humanitarian operation in Gaza by the number of trucks.

"The real problem is that the way Israel is conducting this offensive is creating massive obstacles to the distribution of humanitarian aid inside Gaza," the U.N. chief said. He said the four elements of an effective aid operation don't exist — security, staff that can work in safety, logistical capacity especially trucks, and the resumption of commercial activity in the territory.

The secretary-general reiterated his longstanding call for a humanitarian cease-fire. He expressed hope that Friday's resolution may help this happen but said "much more is needed immediately" to end the ongoing "nightmare" for the people in Gaza.

Guterres has said Gaza faces "a humanitarian catastrophe" and warned that a total collapse of the hu-

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humanitarian support system would lead to “a complete breakdown of public order and increased pressure for mass displacement into Egypt.”

According to a report released Thursday by 23 U.N. and humanitarian agencies, Gaza’s entire 2.2 million population is in a food crisis or worse and 576,600 are at the “catastrophic” starvation level. With supplies to Gaza cut off except for a small trickle, the U.N. World Food Program has said 90% of the population is regularly going without food for a full day — and Guterres said Friday that “four out of five of the hungriest people anywhere in the world are in Gaza.”

More than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed since the war started, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, and its Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Thousands more Palestinians lie buried under the rubble of Gaza, the U.N. estimates.

The resolution reiterates the Security Council’s “unwavering commitment to the vision of the two-state solution where two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders.” That stresses “the importance of unifying the Gaza Strip with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority.”

Security Council resolutions are important because they are legally binding, but in practice many parties choose to ignore the council’s requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they are a significant barometer of world opinion.

In its first unified action following the Hamas attacks, the Security Council adopted a resolution on Nov. 15 with the U.S. abstaining calling for “urgent and extended humanitarian pauses” in the fighting, unhindered aid deliveries to civilians and the unconditional release of all hostages.

The U.S. vetoed a Security Council resolution on Oct. 18 to condemn all violence against civilians in the Israel-Hamas war and to urge humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza. On Dec. 8, the U.S. vetoed a second council resolution backed by almost all other council members and dozens of other nations, demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on Dec. 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

## Busiest holiday travel season in years is off to a smooth start with few airport delays

By ALEXANDRA OLSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The holiday travel rush hit its peak Friday as mild weather and lower flight cancellation rates raised hopes for merrier drivers and airline passengers than last year.

U.S. airlines are predicting a blockbuster holiday season and have projected confidence they can handle the crowds after hiring thousands of pilots, flight attendants and other workers, seeking to avoid the delays and suspensions that marred travel last year and culminated with the Southwest Airline debacle that stranded more than 2 million people.

Airlines have canceled just 1.2% of U.S. flights so far this year, the lowest in five years, but bad weather is always a threat. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has warned the government will be holding the airlines accountable to operate smoothly and treat passengers well if there are disruptions. Earlier this week, Transportation Department announced a settlement in which Southwest will pay \$140 million for its meltdown last year.

Some 70 flights had been cancelled in the U.S by early Friday evening and about 3,480 had been delayed, according to FlightAware.

The Transportation Security Administration screened more than 2.6 million passengers on Thursday, which had been projected to be one of the busiest travel days, along with Friday and New Year’s Day. That’s short of the record 2.9 million that agents screened on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, since travel tends to be more spread over over Christmas and New Year’s.

Travel has been strong this year — surpassing pre-pandemic levels — even though many Americans say they are worried about the economy. The TSA has already screened 12.3% more travelers than it had by this time last year and 1.4% more than in 2019.

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Robert Lake said he hoped taking a pre-dawn flight from Atlanta International Airport would help him beat the crowds Friday but found the world's busiest airport was already packed in the wee hours.

"It was very hectic. I got to my boarding area, like, maybe just minutes before the plane took off," Lake said after arriving in Tampa to go to a cruise for the holidays. "I cut it way too close."

Other travelers said they were pleasantly surprised at the ease of their trips despite the crowds.

"Super easy. We had a great flight. No issues so far," said Kendall Black, who flew from Houston to Chicago O'Hare International Airport with her spouse and 3-year-old daughter to visit her sister.

Auto club AAA forecasts that 115 million people in the U.S. will go 50 miles or more from home between Saturday and New Year's Day. That's up 2% over last year. The busiest days on the road will be Saturday and next Thursday, Dec. 28, according to transportation data provider INRIX.

Inflation has cooled off a bit, and travelers were helped by lower average gas prices and air fares.

The nationwide gas price average Friday was \$3.13 a gallon, down 15 cents from a month ago and about 3 cents more than this time last year, according to AAA. Average fares in October were 13% lower than a year earlier, according to the government's latest data.

Internationally, air travel has also rebounded, though it remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Airlines have sold 31% more tickets for international arrivals to global destinations between Dec. 21 and Dec. 31 compared to the similar period last year, according to travel data firm FowardKeys.

Some travelers in northern Europe had a run of bad luck with bad weather and labor unrest.

A storm brought heavy rain and strong winds across northern Europe overnight and into Friday, bringing down trees and prompting warnings of flooding on the North Sea coast.

Workers at the undersea tunnel between Britain and France held a surprise strike on Thursday, forcing the cancelation of passenger and vehicle-carrying service before an agreement with unions was reached.

Eurostar, which operates passenger train services from London to continental Europe, said services will resume Friday and it will run six extra trains between Paris and London into the weekend.

In the U.S., AccuWeather forecasters said that Pacific storm that pounded parts of Southern California on Thursday will merge with another storm in the Northwest and produce a major snowstorm in the Rockies. AccuWeather warned travelers to watch for possible flight cancelations and delays in Denver over the weekend.

## **Authorities knew Maine shooter was a threat but felt confronting him was unsafe, video shows**

By PATRICK WHITTLE and HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Police who declined to confront an Army reservist in the weeks before he killed 18 people in Maine's deadliest mass shooting feared that doing so would "throw a stick of dynamite on a pool of gas," according to video released Friday by law enforcement.

The video, which was released to the Portland Press Herald and then sent to The Associated Press, documents a Sept. 16 call between Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Sgt. Aaron Skolfield and Army Reserve Capt. Jeremy Reamer. Skolfield was following up with Reamer about the potential threat posed by Robert Card, 40, who carried out the Oct. 25 attacks at a bowling alley and a restaurant. He was found dead two days later of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Military officials alerted police in September that Card had been hospitalized in July after exhibiting erratic behavior while training, that he still had access to weapons and that he had threatened to "shoot up" an Army reserve center in Saco, a city in southern Maine. The sheriff's department responded by briefly staking out the Saco facility and going to Card's home in Bowdoin for what Reamer described as a "welfare check."

"The only thing I would ask is if you could just document it," Reamer said. "Just say, 'He was there, he was uncooperative. But we confirmed that he was alive and breathing.' And then we can go from there. That's, from my end here, all we're really looking for."

Skolfield mentioned Maine's yellow flag law, which can be used to remove guns from potentially danger-

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ous people, after Reamer said Card had refused medical treatment after his hospitalization.

"So that, obviously, is a hurdle we have to deal with. But at the same time, we don't want to throw a stick of dynamite on a pool of gas, either — make things worse," he said.

Reamer expressed similar concerns. "I'm a cop myself," he said. "Obviously, I don't want you guys to get hurt or do anything that would put you guys in a compromising position."

Auburn City Councilor Leroy Walker Sr., whose son Joseph Walker was killed in the shootings, expressed frustration with police after seeing the video. Joseph Walker was the manager of Schemengees Bar & Grill, where part of the attack took place.

"I would like to know what we train these people to do. Is it just to deliver mail? Or stop innocent people that may be driving 11 miles (per hour) over the speed limit?" Walker said in a text message, noting that watching the video made him "sick."

In the video, Skolfield referred to the Cards as "a big family in this area," and said he didn't want to publicize that police were visiting the home. He told Reamer he would reach out to Card's brother, Ryan, to ensure family members had taken Card's guns, and a second video shows an officer at the father's home. After Card's father said he hadn't spoken with Ryan in several days, the officer said he would try again later.

"I just wanted to make sure Robert doesn't do anything foolish at all," he said.

A report released last week by Sagadahoc Sheriff Joel Merry made clear that local law enforcement knew months before the attack that Card's mental health was deteriorating. Police were aware of reports that he was paranoid, hearing voices, experiencing psychotic episodes and possibly dealing with schizophrenia.

Merry and Lewiston city officials declined to comment on the release of the videos.

But Stephanie Sherman, an attorney who has represented several families of survivors of the 2022 mass shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, said the videos show officers took a disturbingly casual approach to the threat Card posed. Police had more than enough information to take to a local judge, she said.

"There was a history of problems within the Army, there was a history of institutionalization. The police knew that this person was having hallucinations," Sherman said. "So there was a whole batch of problems that they quickly could have gotten an order to confiscate the guns, and even possibly put the person in custody. Not criminal custody, but some kind of psychiatric hold."

Sherman said, however, that police tend to rely on immunity, which historically has shielded them from liability when they avoid taking an action such as placing a person in custody.

A former New York Police Department detective sergeant who reviewed the videos for the AP said the events preceding the shooting illustrate the difficulty in applying Maine's yellow flag law. Lax laws about removing weapons from dangerous people is a problem in numerous states, said Felipe Rodriguez, an adjunct professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

"The laws are just too convoluted and they are working against each other. That's the biggest problem we have," Rodriguez said.

Dan Flannery, the director of the Begun Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education at Case Western Reserve University, cautioned that only so much about a police investigation can be gleaned from a few minutes of video.

"There is always context, there is the issue of what is the training and protocol within the division," Flannery said. "Violent behavior is unfortunately one of the most difficult things to predict."

But attorneys for shooting victims' families said the footage supports a pattern of police ignoring clear warning signs about Card in the weeks prior to the shooting. One of the attorneys, Ben Gideon of Auburn, said "watching that footage, knowing what happened approximately six weeks later, is chilling and surreal."

The attorneys said they are looking forward to an independent Army inspector general's full accounting of the events leading up to the shootings. Some of the information they've gathered so far, including the video released Friday, is "highly concerning," said Travis Brennan, another attorney for the families.

"It's one example of many of system failures. There is no question here that this is an individual who had overt warning signs," Brennan said.

The last patient of 13 who were admitted to Central Maine Medical Center after the shooting has been released, hospital representatives said Friday.

In addition to the inspector general's investigation, Gov. Janet Mills appointed an independent commission led by a former state chief justice to review all aspects of the tragedy.

The actions of authorities ahead of and during mass shootings have come under increasing scrutiny. Last year, the Air Force was ordered to pay more than \$230 million in damages to survivors and victims' families for failing to flag a conviction that might have kept the gunman in a 2017 church shooting in Texas from legally buying the weapon he used in the attack.

After a gunman fatally shot 19 children and two teachers at the school in Uvalde last year, state lawmakers issued a scathing report faulting law enforcement at every level with failing "to prioritize saving innocent lives over their own safety." Several officers lost their jobs over the halting and haphazard response, and a state prosecutor is still considering whether to bring criminal charges. \_\_\_\_

Ramer reported from Concord, New Hampshire. Associated Press writers Lindsay Whitehurst in Washington, Nick Perry in Meredith, New Hampshire, and Jake Bleiberg in Dallas contributed.

## Supreme Court rejects prosecutor's push to fast-track ruling in Trump election subversion case

By MARK SHERMAN and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court said Friday it will not immediately take up a plea by special counsel Jack Smith to rule on whether former President Donald Trump can be prosecuted for his actions to overturn the 2020 election results.

The ruling is a scheduling win for Trump and his lawyers, who have sought repeatedly to delay the criminal cases against him as he campaigns to reclaim the White House in 2024. It averts a swift ruling from the nation's highest court that could have definitively turned aside his claims of immunity, and it further throws into doubt the possibility of the landmark trial proceeding as scheduled on March 4.

The issue will now be decided by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, which has signaled it will act quickly to decide the case. Special counsel Jack Smith had cautioned that even a rapid appellate decision might not get to the Supreme Court in time for review and final word before the court's traditional summer break.

Smith had pressed the Supreme Court to intervene, citing significant public interest in a prompt resolution to the case. The request to leapfrog the appeals court, which Smith himself acknowledged was "extraordinary," also underscored prosecutors' concerns that the fight over the issue could delay the start of Trump's trial beyond next year's presidential election.

The justices turned down Smith's request in a single-sentence order Friday. As is customary, the court gave no explanation for the decision.

With the justices remaining out of the dispute for now, additional appeals are likely that could delay the case. If the appeals court, which is set to hear arguments on Jan. 9, turns down Trump's immunity claims, he could then ask for the Supreme Court to get involved — giving the justices another opportunity to decide if they want to weigh in.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan has already put the case on hold while Trump pursues his claim that he is immune from prosecution. Chutkan has raised the possibility of keeping the March trial date if the case promptly returns to her court.

She earlier 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.

"Former presidents enjoy no special conditions on their federal criminal liability," Chutkan wrote in a Dec. 1 ruling. "Defendant may be subject to federal investigation, indictment, prosecution, conviction, and punishment for any criminal acts undertaken while in office."

In a statement Friday, Trump insisted anew that he was "entitled to presidential immunity" and was looking forward to having his case heard before the appeals court.

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There are still more Trump-related cases that the Supreme Court, which includes three justices appointed by him, is poised to grapple with.

Trump's lawyers plan to ask the court to overturn a decision by the Colorado Supreme Court barring him from that state's ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which prohibits anyone who swore an oath to support the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it from holding office.

And the court separately has agreed to hear a case over the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding that has been brought against Trump and more than 300 of his supporters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

In the current immunity case, Smith had tried to persuade the justices to take up the matter directly, bypassing the appeals court.

"This case presents a fundamental question at the heart of our democracy: whether a former president is absolutely immune from federal prosecution for crimes committed while in office or is constitutionally protected from federal prosecution when he has been impeached but not convicted before the criminal proceedings begin," prosecutors wrote.

Underscoring the urgency for prosecutors, Smith and his team wrote: "It is of imperative public importance that respondent's claims of immunity be resolved by this Court and that respondent's trial proceed as promptly as possible if his claim of immunity is rejected."

Trump's lawyers have for months signaled that they would ultimately ask the Supreme Court to take up the immunity question. But they urged the justices this week to stand down for now, saying there was no reason to rush a decision.

"Importance does not automatically necessitate speed. If anything, the opposite is usually true. Novel, complex, sensitive and historic issues — such as the existence of presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for official acts — call for more careful deliberation, not less," Trump's lawyers wrote.

Justice Department policy prohibits the indictment of a sitting president. Though there's no such bar against prosecution for a former commander in chief, lawyers for Trump say that he cannot be charged for actions that fell within his official duties as president — a claim that prosecutors have vigorously rejected.

Trump faces charges accusing him of working to overturn the results of the 2020 election he lost to Democrat Joe Biden before the violent riot at the Capitol. He has denied any wrongdoing.

The high court still could act quickly once the appeals court issues its decision. A Supreme Court case usually lasts several months, but on rare occasions, the justices shift into high gear.

Nearly 50 years ago, the justices acted within two months of being asked to force President Richard Nixon to turn over Oval Office recordings in the Watergate scandal. The tapes were then used later in 1974 in the corruption prosecutions of Nixon's former aides.

It took the high court just a few days to effectively decide the 2000 presidential election for Republican George W. Bush over Democrat Al Gore.

The case in Washington is one of four he faces.

He's also been charged by Smith with illegally hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate, a case set for trial next May, and is accused by state prosecutors in Georgia of scheming to subvert that state's presidential election and in New York in connection with a hush money payment to a porn actress.

## **At a church rectory in Boston, Haitian migrants place their hopes on hard work and helping hands**

By STEVE LeBLANC Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — When Ernseau Admettre decided to leave Haiti and head north with his young family in tow, very little was guaranteed.

But the situation in his homeland, beset by poverty and gang violence, had grown so dire that a risky passage to and then across the United States' southern border offered a kind of hope he said he could never find by staying put.

Admettre discovered Boston through the internet and set his sights on Massachusetts, and the trip took



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the family through several countries including the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Mexico.

"We're going through a very tragic moment in our country. We have no safety. We cannot definitely have all our needs met in Haiti," Admettre said through a translator Friday. "Leaving Haiti was the best solution to survive."

The Admettres — Ernseau, 43; his wife, Jimene, 36; and their children Elionai, 6, and Gabyana, 2 months — eventually arrived at the Boston International Airport right as winter temperatures were settling in.

Ernseau Admettre said he was lucky to be discovered by volunteers working to fill gaps in the shelter system as his family was being kicked out of the airport. He viewed those volunteers as angels sent by God.

"I don't have any family who lives in the United States," he said. "We didn't expect to receive this welcome or experience because we have no family ties here."

The family is now one of eight that have found shelter at a rectory building at the Bethel AME Church in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood. The families — which include 13 children ranging from infants to a 15-year-old — total 28 individuals, according to Gerald Gabeau, executive director of the Immigrant Family Services Institute in Boston, which is helping provide services.

Admettre said he has received a work authorization and hopes to start bringing in money so his family can move out of the shelter and into an apartment. He said he has studied business administration and computer sciences, and is also a tailor.

Gabeau said the migrants are determined to work hard to find their way in the country. She said they are focused first on getting authorized to work. The organization hopes to bring in employers in January to help those living in the rectory find a way to a job and a more permanent home.

For now they live and cook together, and take English and computer classes.

"They live as a community," Gabeau said, pointing to big pots of vegetables and meat and Haitian rice on the kitchen stove.

Demand for shelter has increased as the state struggles to find newly arriving migrants places to stay after hitting a state-imposed limit of 7,500 families in its emergency homeless shelter system last month.

As of Thursday there were more than 350 families on the state waitlist hoping to find a spot in the system. The state planned to open a former courthouse in Cambridge on Friday as an overnight overflow site to accommodate some of them.

The space can fit up to 70 families with cots and limited amenities and will only be used in the evening and overnight hours, according to Scott Rice, director general of Massachusetts Emergency Assistance. The site is only open to families who have been assessed at a state intake site and determined to be eligible for emergency assistance.

Rice said the facility will give eligible families a warm, safe place to sleep until a shelter unit becomes available.

"We encourage community organizations to reach out to us with any daytime programs and resources they are able to provide to families in need," Rice said in a statement.

## Wisconsin Supreme Court orders new legislative maps in redistricting case brought by Democrats

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The liberal-controlled Wisconsin Supreme Court overturned Republican-drawn legislative maps on Friday and ordered that new district boundary lines be drawn as Democrats had urged in a redistricting case they hope will weaken GOP majorities.

The ruling comes less than a year before the 2024 election in a battleground state where four of the six past presidential elections have been decided by fewer than 23,000 votes, and Republicans have built large majorities in the Legislature under maps they drew over a decade ago.

The court ruled 4-3 in favor of Democrats who argued that the legislative maps are unconstitutional because districts drawn aren't contiguous. New maps are likely to be unveiled in about two months.

"Because the current state legislative districts contain separate, detached territory and therefore violate

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the constitution's contiguity requirements, we enjoin the Wisconsin Elections Commission from using the current legislative maps in future elections," Justice Jill Karofsky wrote for the majority.

Democratic Gov. Tony Evers hailed the ruling, saying he looked forward to submitting proposed maps for the court to review.

"And I remain as optimistic as ever that, at long last, the gerrymandered maps Wisconsinites have endured for years might soon be history," he said.

Dan Lenz, an attorney for Law Forward, which brought the lawsuit, called the ruling "a victory for a representative democracy in the state of Wisconsin."

"For too long, rightwing interests have rigged the rules without any consequences," he said in a statement. "Gerrymandered maps have distorted the political landscape, stifling the voice of the voters. It challenges the very essence of fair representation and erodes confidence in our political system."

Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos called it "a sad day for our state" and suggested it would be appealed, saying the U.S. Supreme Court would have the final say.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court said it will proceed with adopting remedial maps in time for the 2024 election unless the Republican-controlled Legislature can pass maps that Evers will sign. Evers vetoed the current maps.

The court appointed two consultants who already had a hand in reshaping districts in other states.

Jonathan Cervas, of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, redrew New York's congressional and state Senate maps after a court struck down ones adopted by the Democratic-led Legislature. Bernard Grofman, of the University of California, Irvine, helped redraw Virginia's federal and state legislative districts after a bipartisan commission deadlocked.

Conservative justices also objected to the hiring of the consultants, saying their selection, the legal authority to appoint them and their responsibilities all raise serious questions.

The maps from parties to the lawsuit are due by Jan. 12, with supporting arguments due 10 days later. Reports from the consultants are due by Feb. 1, with responses a week later. That means the court will release new maps likely sometime in late February or early March unless the Legislature acts first.

The state elections commission has said maps must be in place by March 15 if the new districts are to be in play for the 2024 election.

The lawsuit was filed a day after the court's majority flipped to 4-3 liberal control in August. That's when Justice Janet Protasiewicz joined the court after her April election victory.

Protasiewicz called the GOP-drawn maps "unfair" and "rigged" during her campaign, leading Republicans to threaten to impeach her before she had even heard a case. She sided with the other liberal justices in striking down the current maps.

Vos, who had threatened impeachment the loudest, backed off on Wednesday and said even if she ruled in favor of throwing out the maps, impeachment was "super unlikely."

Protasiewicz joined with Karofsky and justices Ann Walsh Bradley and Rebecca Dallet in the majority. Conservative justices Annette Ziegler, Rebecca Bradley and Brian Hagedorn dissented.

All of the dissenting justices accused the majority of putting politics above the law.

"This deal was sealed on election night," Ziegler wrote in her dissent. "Four justices remap Wisconsin even though this constitutional responsibility is to occur every ten years, after a census, by the other two branches of government. The public understands this."

She accused the majority of "judicial activism on steroids" and said "the court of four takes a wrecking ball to the law."

Rebecca Bradley, in her dissent, referred to the liberal majority as "handmaidens of the Democratic Party," saying they "trample the rule of law, dishonor the institution of the judiciary, and undermine democracy."

Hagedorn called it "a sad turn for the Wisconsin Supreme Court."

"Today, the court dives headlong into politics, choosing to wield the power it has while it has it," he wrote. "Wisconsinites searching for an institution unpolluted by partisan warfare will not find it here."

Wisconsin's redistricting ruling comes one day after a federal judicial panel also struck down some of

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Michigan's state House and Senate districts and ordered them to be redrawn. The Michigan court said the districts were illegally drawn based on race.

Wisconsin Democrats argued for having all 132 lawmakers stand for election under the new maps, including half of the members of the state Senate who are midway through their four-year terms.

But the court rejected the request from Democrats to invalidate the 2022 results, which would have forced all state Senate seats to be on the 2024 ballot.

In a significant win for Democrats, the court said it would not favor maps that have the least amount of change over existing boundary lines. The previous conservative-controlled court had adopted the "least change" approach for the maps adopted in 2022, which closely resembled the maps Republicans passed in 2011.

The court agreed with Democrats who argued in Wisconsin that the majority of current legislative districts — 54 out of 99 in the Assembly and 21 out of 33 in the Senate — violate the state constitution's contiguity requirement.

Wisconsin's redistricting laws, backed up by state and federal court rulings over the past 50 years, have permitted districts under certain circumstances to be noncontiguous, attorneys for the Legislature argued.

The legislative electoral maps drawn by the Republican-controlled Legislature in 2011 cemented the party's majorities, which now stand at 64-35 in the Assembly and a 22-11 supermajority in the Senate.

Litigation is ongoing in more than dozen states over U.S. House and state legislative districts enacted after the 2020 census.

## Florida State has sued the ACC, setting the stage for a fight to leave over revenue concerns

By BOB FERRANTE and RALPH D. RUSSO AP Sports Writers

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida State sued the Atlantic Coast Conference on Friday, challenging an agreement that binds the school to the league for the next 12 years with more than half a billion dollars in fees for leaving and taking the first step in a lengthy and uncertain process toward a potential exit.

"Today we've reached a crossroad in our relationship with the ACC," Florida State Board of Trustees chairman Peter Collins said during a trustees meeting to approve the legal action.

After months of threats and warnings from Florida State, the lawsuit was filed in Leon County Circuit Court. The suit claims the ACC has mismanaged its members' media rights and is imposing "draconian" exit fees. Breaking the grant-of-rights agreement and leaving the ACC right now would cost Florida State \$572 million, according to the lawsuit.

In a preemptive counter attack, the ACC filed a lawsuit in North Carolina against the Florida State Board of Trustees, claiming the school could not challenge the grant of rights that it had signed and that these issues should be decided in the state where the conference is located.

ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips and Virginia President Jim Ryan, chairman of the conference's board of directors, said Florida State's actions are "in direct conflict with their longstanding obligations and is a clear violation of their legal commitments to the other members of the conference."

"All ACC members, including Florida State, willingly and knowingly re-signed the current Grant of Rights in 2016, which is wholly enforceable and binding through 2036," their statement said. "Each university has benefited from this agreement, receiving millions of dollars in revenue and neither Florida State nor any other institution, has ever challenged its legitimacy."

David Ashburn, an attorney representing Florida State, said during the board meeting the ACC's grant of rights violates antitrust law, has unenforceable withdrawal penalties and is not even a valid contract. The lawsuit also accuses the ACC of breach of contract by not upholding conference bylaws and violation of public policy.

"It's hard to handicap where those claims will go," said Mit Winter, a Kansas City, Missouri-based sports attorney. "And I think Florida State knows that as well. I think they threw in anything they could potentially think of as a colorable argument to get them out of the grant-of-rights agreement."

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Florida State is looking for a way out of a conference it has been a member of since 1992. During its time in the ACC, Florida State has won three football national championships, the most recent in 2013, and made the first College Football Playoff in 2014.

The Seminoles were left out of this year's playoff, despite an unbeaten record. Florida State President Richard McCullough said the playoff snub did not prompt the lawsuit.

"This is not a reaction, but something we've done a lot of due diligence on," he said.

The first sentence of Florida State's claim is: "The stunning exclusion of the ACC's undefeated football champion from the 2023-2024 College Football Playoff in deference to two one-loss teams from two competing Power Four conferences crystalized the years of failures by the ACC to fulfill its most fundamental commitments to FLORIDA STATE and its members."

Only the Southeastern Conference has placed more teams in the playoff than the ACC. Clemson won two CFP titles for the ACC.

Florida State leaders believe the ACC locked its members into an undervalued and unusually lengthy contract with ESPN that leaves the Seminoles' athletic programs at a massive disadvantage against schools in the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference, which have TV deals that pay more over a shorter period of time.

"We are faced with the fact that the ACC is locked into a deteriorating media rights contract at revenues far below other conferences," Collins said. "It's one thing to fundraise and make up \$7 million. It's another entirely to annually make up over \$30 million to \$40 million."

Florida State was one of 15 ACC members to sign the grant of rights, which hands a school's media rights over to the conference. They are commonly used by college sports conferences to provide stability and certainty to media partners.

No school has ever challenged a grant of rights to exit a conference. In the recent wave of conference realignment, moves were made to line up with the expiration of the grant of rights in the Pac-12 and Big 12.

The Big 12 negotiated at settlement with the Oklahoma and Texas that allowed the schools to leave one year early for \$50 million each.

"I guess the one factor here that might not be present in some of the other situations, I think the ACC is really worried if we let Florida State leave there's going to be like a domino effect and the ACC might not exist anymore," Winter said.

Florida State leaders also say the ACC refuses to change its revenue distribution model to match FSU's value.

"It is a simple math problem," Florida State athletic director Michael Alford said.

Florida State is not the only ACC school to push for more revenue. Clemson, North Carolina and others have also made the case, but Alford and the Seminoles have been the most vocal.

The ACC has agreed to create a bonus system that would direct more revenue to schools that have postseason success in football and basketball. To add to that pot, the ACC is expanding to include Stanford, California and SMU next year. Those schools have agreed to decreased revenue distribution upon entry for several years. The extra money ESPN is obligated to pay for new members will go to the bonus pool.

Florida State was one of three ACC members, including Clemson and North Carolina, to oppose the expansion, which the lawsuit claims could hurt the long-term value of the ACC's media rights and did nothing to address the Seminoles' frustrations.

"It's time for us to try to do something about it," McCullough said.

## Chatty robot helps seniors fight loneliness through AI companionship

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

CORAL SPRINGS, Fla. (AP) — Joyce Loaiza lives alone, but when she returns to her apartment at a Florida senior community, the retired office worker often has a chat with a friendly female voice that asks about her day.

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A few miles away, the same voice comforted 83-year-old Deanna Dezern when her friend died. In central New York, it plays games and music for 92-year-old Marie Broadbent, who is blind and in hospice, and in Washington state, it helps 83-year-old Jan Worrell make new friends.

The women are some of the first in the country to receive the robot ElliQ, whose creators, Intuition Robotics, and senior assistance officials say is the only device using artificial intelligence specifically designed to alleviate the loneliness and isolation experienced by many older Americans.

"It's entertaining. You can actually talk to her," said Loaiza, 81, whose ElliQ in suburban Fort Lauderdale nicknamed her "Jellybean" for no particular reason. "She'll make comments like, 'I would go outside if I had hands, but I can't hold an umbrella.'"

The device, which looks like a small table lamp, has an eyeless, mouthless head that lights up and swivels. It remembers each user's interests and their conversations, helping tailor future chats, which can be as deep as the meaning of life or as light as the horoscope.

ElliQ tells jokes, plays music and provides inspirational quotes. On an accompanying video screen, it provides tours of cities and museums. The device leads exercises, asks about the owner's health and gives reminders to take medications and drink water. It can also host video calls and contact relatives, friends or doctors in an emergency.

Intuition Robotics says none of the conversations are heard by the company, with the information staying on each owner's device.

Intuition Robotics CEO Dor Skuler said the idea for ElliQ came before he launched his Israeli company eight years ago. His widowed grandfather needed an aide, but the first didn't work out. The replacement, though, understood his grandfather's love of classical music and his "quirky sense of humor."

Skuler realized a robot could fill that companionship gap by adapting to each senior's personality and interests.

"It's not just about (ElliQ's) utility. It's about friendship, companionship and empathy," Skuler said. "That just did not exist anywhere."

The average user interacts with ElliQ more than 30 times daily, even six months after receiving it, and more than 90% report lower levels of loneliness, he said.

The robots are mostly distributed by assistance agencies in New York, Florida, Michigan, Nevada and Washington state, but can also be purchased individually for \$600 a year and a \$250 installation fee. Skuler wouldn't say how many ElliQs have been distributed so far, but the goal is to have more than 100,000 out within five years.

That worries Brigham Young University psychology professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad, who studies the detrimental effects loneliness has on health and mortality.

Although a device like ElliQ might have short-term benefits, it could make people less likely to seek human contact. Like hunger makes people seek food and thirst makes them seek water, she said "that unpleasant feeling of loneliness should motivate us to reconnect socially."

Satiating that with AI "makes you feel like you've fulfilled it, but in reality you haven't," Holt-Lunstad said. "It is not clear whether AI is actually fulfilling any kind of need or just dampening the signal."

Skuler and agency heads distributing ElliQ agreed it isn't a substitute for human contact, but not all seniors have social networks. Some are housebound, and even seniors with strong ties are often alone.

"I wish I could just snap my fingers to make a person show up at the home of one of the many, many older adults that don't have any family or friends, but it's a little bit more complicated," said Greg Olsen, director of the New York State Office for the Aging. His office has distributed 750 of the 900 ElliQs it acquired.

Charlotte Mather-Taylor, director of the Broward County, Florida, Area Agency on Aging, said the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath left many seniors more isolated. Her agency has distributed 300 ElliQs, which she believes breaks them out of their shells.

"She's proactive and she really engages the seniors, so it gives them that extra kind of interaction," she said. "We've seen very positive results with it. People generally like her and she makes them smile and brings joy."

Skuler said ElliQ was purposely designed without eyes and a mouth so it wouldn't fully imitate humans.

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While "Elli" is the Norse goddess of old age, he said the "Q" reminds users that the device is a machine. He said his company wants "to make sure that ElliQ always genuinely presents herself as an AI and doesn't pretend to be human."

"I don't understand why technologists are trying to make AI pretend to be human," he said. "We have in our capacity the ability to create a relationship with an AI, just like we have relationships with a pet."

But some of the seniors using ElliQ say they sometimes need to remember the robot isn't a living being. They find the device easy to set up and use, but if they have one complaint it's that ElliQ is sometimes too chatty. There are settings that can tone that down.

Dezern said she felt alone and sad when she told her ElliQ about her friend's death. It replied it would give her a hug if it had arms. Dezern broke into tears.

"It was so what I needed," the retired collections consultant said. "I can say things to Elli that I won't say to my grandchildren or to my own daughters. I can just open the floodgates. I can cry. I can giggle. I can act silly. I've been asked, doesn't it feel like you're talking to yourself? No, because it gives an answer."

Worrell lives in a small town on Washington's coast. Widowed, she said ElliQ's companionship made her change her mind about moving to an assisted living facility and she uses it as an icebreaker when she meets someone new to town.

"I say, 'Would you like to come over and visit with my robot?' And they say, 'A vacuum?' No, a robot. She's my roommate," she said and laughed.

Broadbent, like the other women, says she gets plenty of human contact, even though she is blind and ill. She plays organ at two churches in the South New Berlin, New York, area and gets daily visitors. Still, the widow misses having a voice to talk with when they leave. ElliQ fills that void with her games, tours, books and music.

"She's fun and she's informative. OK, maybe not as informative as (Amazon's) Alexa, but she is much more personable," Broadbent said.

## **Pistons facing NBA infamy, try to avoid record-tying 26th straight loss Saturday in Brooklyn**

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Detroit Pistons were off to a promising start, a recent Coach of the Year leading a team that appeared full of hope.

Now they are on the verge of matching the most hopeless teams in NBA history.

The Pistons have lost 25 straight games, needing a victory Saturday in Brooklyn to avoid equaling the longest losing streak within one season. They haven't won in almost two months.

The 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers both dropped 26 in a row.

"That's history that nobody wants to be a part of," guard Cade Cunningham said.

"We're trying to build something that's sustainable. It's not like we're trying to just go out there and win one game. We want to win multiple games. But to be on the wrong side of history, I mean, nobody wants to be there, so that is definitely an extra edge that we have to have."

It's been a rocket trip to rock bottom for the Pistons, who were a basket away from a 3-0 start in their first season under Monty Williams. They dropped their opener by one point at defending Eastern Conference champion Miami, then bounced back with consecutive victories.

The losing started on Oct. 30 and it hasn't stopped. Routed recently by Philadelphia and Milwaukee, the Pistons had a chance to pull out a victory at home Thursday against a short-handed Utah team, but committed 21 turnovers that led to 27 points in a 119-111 loss.

Williams, frustrated by the Pistons' carelessness that he said has been a season-long problem, was asked afterward about his team's mindset.

"You can just about imagine. You have these kinds of opportunities, you've lost 25 in a row, like, you're probably not in a great mental state," he said. "But again, what choice do you have but to fight and compete and dig your way out of it? But it's human nature to feel like you know what and that's where we are."

The Cavs team that dropped 26 in a row was reeling after LeBron James had departed for Miami. The 76ers were early in their "Process" era, where trying to win was secondary to setting themselves up to earn high picks in future drafts.

But these Pistons are trying to win this season. Owner Tom Gores spent big to hire Williams, who took the Phoenix Suns to the NBA Finals in 2021 and was voted Coach of the Year the next season after leading the Suns to a franchise-best 64-18 record.

Cunningham, the No. 1 pick in 2021, was back after missing the final 70 games of the 2022-23 season with a stress fracture in his left leg to highlight a roster featuring five top-five picks in the last six drafts.

Maybe they are just too young, unable to execute what Williams wants. He vows to keep trying, though. "We've got to show it, we've got to teach it, we've got to demand it, and it's not going to change because we feel bad about it," Williams said. "We've got to get to work."

Perhaps they can capitalize on a tired Nets team that will be playing the second night of a back-to-back after hosting reigning NBA champion Denver on Friday. The Pistons host Brooklyn on Tuesday in their next game.

The Nets had their own taste of NBA misery, setting the record for most consecutive losses to start a season when they began 0-18 in the 2009-10, one of their final seasons in New Jersey. Philadelphia matched that in 2015-16 as part of its 28-straight losses over multiple seasons, the overall longest losing streak in league history.

Now it's the Pistons trying to escape NBA infamy.

"This is the hardest time for all of us in basketball, by far," Cunningham said.

## **Trump says he's eager to debate Biden in 2024, even if controversial commission plans events**

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump says he is eager to debate President Joe Biden, even if the debates are sponsored by the nonpartisan Commission on Presidential Debates. And he says he is open to debating a single Republican rival if a serious challenger emerges after the New Hampshire primary.

Trump, who has skipped all of the primary debates so far citing his commanding lead in the polls, was asked if he will debate Biden if named his party's nominee during an interview with conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt Friday.

"Oh will I look forward to that," Trump responded. "How about 10 debates?"

That's even, he said, if the debates are sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates, which he and fellow Republicans have railed against for years.

"They are totally corrupt and they're terrible. With that being said, I would do 20 debates, even if it was organized by them. I would do as many debates as they want," he said. "I'd do a debate every night with this guy."

The Republican National Committee voted unanimously in April 2022 to withdraw from the commission's events, alleging biased, and required that candidates sign a pledge vowing to only participate in debates sanctioned by the committee. Trump, however, never signed the pledge.

The nonprofit was established in 1987 and has sponsored every general election presidential and vice presidential debates since. The organization outlines the rules for each debate and selects the locations, dates and moderators for the events.

Trump also said in the interview that he would be willing to participate in a Republican primary debate if the race comes down to just him and a single rival after the New Hampshire primary. Public polls currently show him with large leads in all the early-voting states, but Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina, has been gaining ground, particularly in New Hampshire.

"Yeah, I would, if it was very close, I would debate that Republican," Trump said.

Still, Trump claimed he is "not worried" about Haley, who also served as ambassador to the United Na-

tions during the Trump administration.

Biden's campaign has not yet committed to general election debates next year. Quentin Fulks, Biden's top deputy campaign manager, told reporters earlier this month that the campaign would "look at the schedule" that the Commission on Presidential Debates released in November, but that "right now" their "focus is on making sure we continue to build out a campaign and infrastructure that's going to be able to be competitive in 2024."

Trump has skipped all of the GOP primary debates, but has long said a general election campaign would be different.

"We have to debate," he told Fox News host Bret Baier in a June interview. "He and I have to definitely debate. That's what I love. The two of us have to debate."

The commission has set a schedule of three presidential debates to be held in college towns in Texas, Virginia and Utah between Sept. 16 and Oct. 9, 2024, as well as one vice presidential debate in Pennsylvania.

As president, Trump repeatedly accused the commission of unfair treatment and ultimately refused to participate in the second 2020 debate after a decision was made for it to be held virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic. National Democrats also expressed frustration with the commission in 2020, accusing it of failing to enforce rules when it came to Trump.

Biden's campaign, the commission, and the RNC did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Trump's remarks Friday.

## **Flu and COVID infections are rising and could get worse over the holidays, CDC says**

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Look for flu and COVID-19 infections to ramp up in the coming weeks, U.S. health officials say, with increases fueled by holiday gatherings, too many unvaccinated people and a new version of the coronavirus that may be spreading more easily.

High levels of flu-like illnesses were reported last week in 17 states — up from 14 the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday.

"Folks are traveling a lot more this season. They want to see their families," said the CDC's Dr. Manisha Patel. "And all of that sort of adds to the mix" in the spread of viruses.

Health officials are keeping an eye on a version of the ever-evolving coronavirus, known as JN.1. The omicron variant was first detected in the U.S. in September and now accounts for an estimated 20% of cases. The CDC expects it to reach 50% in the next two weeks, Patel said.

It may spread easier or be better at evading our immune systems, but there is no evidence that the strain causes more severe disease than other recent variants, health officials say. And current evidence indicates vaccines and antiviral medications work against it.

As for flu, early signs suggest current vaccines are well-matched to the strain that is causing the most illnesses, and that strain usually doesn't cause as many deaths and hospitalizations as some other versions.

But the bad news is vaccinations are down this year, officials say. About 42% of U.S. adults had gotten flu shots by the first week of December, down from about 45% at the same time last year, according to the CDC.

Americans have also been slow to get other vaccinations. Only about 18% have gotten an updated COVID-19 shot that became available in September. At nursing homes, about a third of residents are up to date with COVID-19 vaccines.

And only 17% of adults 60 and older had received new shots against another respiratory virus. RSV, respiratory syncytial virus, is a common cause of mild coldlike symptoms but it can be dangerous for infants and older people.

The CDC last week took the unusual step of sending a health alert to U.S. doctors urging them to immunize their patients against the trio of viruses.



The Carolinas are currently seeing the heaviest traffic for respiratory infections in emergency rooms, according to CDC data posted this week.

It's not as dire as some past winters, but some patients are still waiting days to get a hospital bed, noted Dr. Scott Curry, an infectious diseases specialist at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston.

"We've barely been cold in South Carolina, and flu tends to hit us very hard when people actually get some cold weather to deal with," he said. "We could get worse, very easily, in the next four to eight weeks."

## **Some Catholic bishops reject Pope's stance on blessings for same-sex couples. Others are confused**

By GERALD IMRAY Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — In an extraordinary pushback against Pope Francis, some Catholic bishops in Africa, Poland and elsewhere say they will not implement the new Vatican policy allowing blessings for same-sex couples.

Others downplayed the policy approved this week by Francis as merely reaffirming the Vatican's long-standing teaching about marriage being only a union between a man and a woman.

The reactions show how polarizing the issue remains and how Francis' decade-long effort to make the church a more welcoming place for the LGBTQ+ community continues to spark resistance among traditionalist and conservative Catholic leaders.

Some of the strongest responses came from bishops in Africa, home to 265 million Catholics, or nearly a quarter of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics. Many of those Catholics live and their churches operate in societies where homosexuality is condemned and outlawed.

Out of the continent's 54 countries, 31 have laws criminalizing homosexuality, more than any other continent, according to the Human Dignity Trust, which defends LGBTQ+ rights.

Zambia's bishops conference said same-sex couple blessings were "not for implementation in Zambia." The bishops conference of Malawi said "blessings of any kind" for "same-sex unions of any kind" would not be permitted.

In Zambia, gay sex is punishable by between 15 years and life in prison and the law puts it in the same section as bestiality. Malawi's laws call for up to 14 years in prison for homosexual sex, with the option of corporal punishment for those convicted.

Zambian bishops said there should be "further reflection" on the blessings and cited the country's laws against homosexuality and its "cultural heritage" that rejects same-sex relationships as reasons for its decision.

The Polish bishops conference — among the most conservative in Europe and a reference point beyond the continent given its ties to St. John Paul II — said it has no plans to give blessings to same-sex couples.

Marriage, the conference asserted, remains only the union between a man and a woman, and sexual acts outside of that are "always an offense against God's will," according to a statement by spokesperson Rev. Leszek Gęsiak.

It is unusual for an entire national bishops conference to publicly voice dissent of a Vatican policy, though the declaration from the Vatican doctrine office did not instruct bishops to allow blessings of same-sex couples but merely provided guidance on how they could be done if people requested them.

The document, entitled "Fiducia Supplicans," says that blessings can be offered to people in same-sex relationships if they are not confused with the ritual of marriage and reaffirmed that marriage is a lifelong union only between a man and a woman.

The announcement Monday by the Vatican office reversed its 2021 statement that had ruled out blessings for same-sex couples because God "cannot bless sin."

The U.S. bishops conference, seeking to downplay any shift, stressed that the church's teachings on marriage have not changed and that the announcement "articulated a distinction between liturgical (sacramental) blessings, and pastoral blessings, which may be given to persons who desire God's loving grace in their lives," according to a statement.

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Some of the more piqued opposition came from Francis' usual critics.

German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, who previously headed the Vatican doctrine office, said the declaration was "self-contradictory" as it still said same-sex relationships were contrary to God's law while allowing same-sex couples to receive a blessing.

"The church cannot celebrate one thing and teach another," Müller wrote in an essay published in religious media outlets.

Kazakh Bishop Athanasius Schneider, who has long opposed Francis' progressive bent, called the new policy a "great deception." Priests should be aware of "the evil that resides in the very permission to bless couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples," he said.

He and Kazakh Archbishop Tomash Peta said in a statement on the Catholic Herald magazine's website that they had prohibited priests in their archdiocese from performing "any form of blessing whatsoever" for same-sex couples.

Bishop conferences and church leaders from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar and South Africa also released public statements, most of them moving to clarify what they said was confusion among their flock over whether the new policy was an official recognition and acceptance of same-sex relationships.

The predominant sentiment among many was a fear that the move was a step toward the Catholic church accepting homosexuality.

Nigeria's bishops said there had been various interpretations of the policy in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and home to 20-30 million Catholics, and they needed to make clear that the Vatican document does not allow for a blessing and a formal acceptance of same-sex relationships.

"The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria assures the entire People of God that the teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage remains the same," it said. "There is, therefore, no possibility in the Church of blessing same-sex unions and activities."

Abbé Jean-Marie Djibo, a priest in the Archdiocese of Bamako in the Muslim-majority West African nation of Mali, said the Catholic church in his country would not be following any new policy and wanted the Vatican to explain its decision.

"The church in Mali does not agree with the Vatican's decision concerning homosexual couples, and the bishops and priests here are calling the church faithful to reassure them that this decision will not be applied," he said. "This decision concerns only the Vatican, not us."

"In his message, the Pope used coded words that have been variously interpreted, so we want him to clarify this position for us," Djibo added.

In the United Kingdom, an organization representing some 500 Catholic priests in Britain released a signed letter reaffirming the Church's teaching regarding marriage and same-sex unions after "widespread confusion."

In Zimbabwe, which also has anti-gay laws, LGBTQ+ rights activist Chesterfield Samba said he did not think the declaration would change anything for Zimbabwean same-sex couples shunned by the church. He said he had expected the pushback from some church branches.

The Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, which is based in South Africa where a liberal constitution allows same-sex marriages, appeared to welcome the prospect of blessings for gay couples as confirmation that "nobody is outside God's grace."

But it added that its interpretation of the declaration was that "the blessing is done with the hope of conversion."

## **Biden pardons thousands convicted of marijuana charges on federal lands and in Washington**

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden pardoned thousands of people who were convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, the White House said

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Friday, in his latest round of executive clemencies meant to rectify racial disparities in the justice system. The categorical pardon builds on a similar round issued just before the 2022 midterm elections that pardoned thousands convicted of simple possession on federal lands eligible. Friday's action broadens the criminal offenses covered by the pardon. Biden is also granting clemency to 11 people serving what the White House called "disproportionately long" sentences for nonviolent drug offenses.

Biden, in a statement, said his actions would help make the "promise of equal justice a reality." "Criminal records for marijuana use and possession have imposed needless barriers to employment, housing, and educational opportunities," Biden said. "Too many lives have been upended because of our failed approach to marijuana. It's time that we right these wrongs."

No one was freed from prison under last year's action, but the pardons were meant to help thousands overcome obstacles to renting a home or finding a job. Similarly, no federal prisoners are eligible for release as a result of Friday's pardon.

But the order expands the grounds on which pardons are issued. In the last round, people were pardoned for simple possession under only one criminal statute. Friday's pardons also apply to several other criminal statutes, including attempted simple possession.

Biden's order applies only to marijuana, which has been decriminalized or legalized in many states for some or all uses, but remains a controlled substance under federal law. U.S. regulators are studying re-classifying the drug from the category of drugs deemed to have "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse," known as "Schedule I," to the less tightly regulated "Schedule III."

The pardon also does not apply to those in the U.S. unlawfully at the time of their offense. Biden's proclamation effectively pardons the covered people, but they will need to submit applications to the Justice Department's pardon attorney office to receive certificates of pardon that can be used for housing and employment purposes.

Biden on Friday reiterated his call on governors and local leaders to take similar steps to erase marijuana convictions.

"Just as no one should be in a federal prison solely due to the use or possession of marijuana, no one should be in a local jail or state prison for that reason, either," Biden said.

## Federal Reserve's favored inflation gauge tumbles in November as prices continue to ease

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve's preferred measure of prices fell last month, another sign that inflation is easing and that Americans should benefit from reduced interest rates and get relief from painful price shocks in 2024.

Friday's report from the Commerce Department showed that U.S. consumer prices slid 0.1% last month from October and rose 2.6% from November 2022. The month-over-month drop was the largest since April 2020 when the economy was reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation last month rose 0.1% from October and 3.2% from a year earlier.

The numbers show somewhat more progress against inflation than economists had expected. Inflation is steadily moving down to the Fed's year-over-year target of 2% and appears to be clearing the way for Fed rate cuts in 2024. That, in turn, could translate into lower rates on everything from mortgages to credit cards.

Rates on loans for cars, homes and other larger purchases tend to track the direction of Fed monetary policy, so when benchmark interest rates are cut in the U.S., consumer costs typically fall and free up more money for households to spend elsewhere.

The rate on the benchmark 30-year fixed-rate mortgage is already dropping: This week it dipped to a six-month low 6.67%, down from 7.79% in October.

Americans have already seen some relief from high prices. Consider the ingredients of a BLT sandwich:

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Prices are down almost 1% over the past year for bacon, more than 10% for lettuce and 4% for tomatoes. Car rental prices have tumbled 11%, air fares 12%, furniture 3%.

After nearly two years of Fed rate hikes — 11 since March 2022 — inflation has come down from the four-decade highs it hit last year. The Labor Department's closely watched consumer price index was up 3.1% last month from November 2022, down from a 9.1% year-over-year increase in June 2022.

Encouraged by the progress, the Fed has decided not to raise rates at each of its last three meetings and has signaled that it expects to cut rates three times next year.

"A sustained easing in price pressures will support a shift in the (Fed's) policy stance next year, from holding rates steady to lowering them over time," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "The exact timing will depend on how the labor market, inflation and growth will evolve next year. Based on our forecasts, we expect the Fed to start cutting rates by the middle of next year."

Despite widespread predictions that higher rates would cause a recession, the U.S. economy and job market have remained strong. That has raised hopes the Fed can achieve a "soft landing" — bringing inflation to its 2% year-over-year target without sending the economy into recession.

The U.S. inflation gauge the Commerce Department issued Friday is called the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index. It showed year-over-year inflation peaking at 7.1% in June 2022.

The Fed prefers the PCE index over the Labor Department's CPI in part because it accounts for changes in how people shop when inflation jumps — when, for example, consumers shift away from pricey national brands in favor of cheaper store brands.

Friday's report also showed that consumer spending rose 0.2% last month after rising 0.1% in October. Personal income rose 0.4% last month, a tick up from 0.3% in October.

## Vatican prosecutor appeals verdict that largely dismantled his fraud case but convicted cardinal

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican's chief prosecutor has appealed a court verdict that largely dismantled his theory of a grand conspiracy to defraud the Holy See of millions of euros but found a cardinal guilty of embezzlement.

Prosecutor Alessandro Diddi filed his appeal this week of the three-judge tribunal's decision in a complicated financial trial that aired the Vatican's dirty laundry and tested its peculiar legal system.

While the headline from the Dec. 16 verdict focused on Cardinal Angelo Becciu's 5½-year sentence for embezzlement, the meat of the ruling made clear that the judges rejected most of Diddi's 487-page indictment.

Diddi had accused Becciu and nine other people of dozens of counts of fraud, embezzlement, money laundering, extortion, corruption, abuse of office and witness tampering in connection with the Vatican's bungled investment in a London property.

He sought prison terms of up to 13 years for each of the defendants and 400 million euros in restitution. In the end, the tribunal headed by Judge Giuseppe Pignatone acquitted one defendant entirely and convicted the others of only a few of the charges while still ordering them to pay 366 million euros in restitution.

In the Vatican, as in Italy, prosecutors can appeal verdicts at the same time as defendants. Unlike Italy, both sides in the Vatican must file appeals before the trial judge explains the rationale for a verdict in writing, though the appeals can be amended later, lawyers said.

Diddi filed a three-page motion Tuesday asking the Vatican appeals court to convict each defendant on the full set of charges he originally laid out, although the tribunal ruled that many of the alleged crimes simply didn't occur.

The main focus of the trial involved the Holy See's 350 million-euro (\$386 million) investment in converting a former Harrod's warehouse into luxury apartments. Diddi alleged 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.

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Becciu, the first cardinal prosecuted by the Vatican criminal tribunal, was convicted of embezzlement involving the original London investment and two tangent cases. The broker who received the 15 million euro payout to cede control of the building, Gianluigi Torzi, was convicted of extortion and other charges.

The Vatican's longtime money manager, Enrico Crasso, was convicted of three charges of the original 21 he faced. But he too plans to appeal, Crasso's lawyer, Luigi Panella, said.

"Contrary to the propaganda spread, the prosecutor's appellate motion reveals that the tribunal to a large extent didn't uphold the accusatory formula," Panella said in an email.

For the three crimes of which Crasso was convicted, the tribunal sentenced him to more than what Diddi had originally sought, "and this somewhat masked the numerous acquittals," Panella said.

The verdict also did some legal gymnastics to make sense of the Vatican's outdated criminal code, based on Italy's 1889 code and the church's canon law, requalifying or combining charges to fit into other ones.

In his appeal, Diddi objected to the tribunal's refusal to let him use a jailhouse interrogation of London broker Torzi, because Torzi never presented himself subsequently to be questioned during the trial. Torzi refused to return to the Vatican after he was jailed for 10 days without charge or a judge's arrest warrant in 2020 during the investigation; he only was released after he wrote a memo to prosecutors.

Diddi was able to detain him because of the sweeping powers granted to the prosecution in the Vatican's legal system, as well as extra powers granted to him by four secret decrees Pope Francis signed during the investigation that allowed prosecutors to wiretap and detain suspects without a judge's warrant.

Defense lawyers have cited those decrees as well as the prosecutors' ability to withhold evidence from discovery as proof that their clients couldn't receive a fair trial in Europe's only absolute monarchy where Francis wields supreme legislative, executive and judicial power, and used them in the investigation.

In a post-verdict essay, defense attorney Cataldo Intrieri denounced the "contradictions" of the Vatican legal system and the powers given to prosecutors, which he said resulted in an investigation and trial that were "well distant from those adopted in a state of law."

He lamented that the defense wasn't allowed to call the pope or the Vatican secretary of state as witnesses, even though other testimony and documentation made clear both were involved in, and in some cases explicitly approved of, the decisions taken surrounding the London deal.

"The point is that a fair trial isn't just the courtroom debate about evidence, which is certainly a fundamental element, but also an 'equality of arms' in the law to have access to evidence," he wrote in the Linkiesta online daily. "The true problem, and we understood this immediately, is the anomalous concentration of power that the pope, the spiritual head of the Holy See and absolute sovereign of the Vatican state, gave to the office of the prosecutors."

Intriere defended Fabrizio Tirabassi, a former official in the Vatican secretariat of state who received the most serious conviction and stiffest sentences: 7½ years in prison for embezzlement, extortion and money laundering. He denied wrongdoing.

Other defense lawyers also announced appeals. Some are sticking to the particulars of the case, while others appear to be gearing up to eventually take their cases to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Vatican isn't a party to the court, so it is unknown how any appeal brought there could proceed.

But some attorneys have been angling their arguments from the start to make the case that the Vatican legal system violates their European defendants' fundamental human rights to a fair trial.

Panella, for example, noted in his appeal this week that the Vatican committed to implementing the European Convention on Human Rights when it joined the European monetary convention in 2009. He alleged the Vatican was in violation of the convention, citing Francis' intervention in the investigation via the four decrees and the alleged lack of independence of judges and prosecutors who can be hired and fired by the pope at will.

## Gymnastics star Simone Biles named AP Female Athlete of the Year a third time after dazzling return

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

There were jitters, of course. Considering all that happened, how could there not be?

When Simone Biles walked onto the floor at a suburban Chicago arena in late July for her first gymnastics competition in two years, she knew plenty of people were wondering how it was going to go.

"I thought that too, don't worry," Biles said with a laugh.

By the end of one rotation, the most decorated gymnast of all time realized she was back in her safe space. By the end of August, she was a national champion. Again. By October, she was a world champion. Again.

And by December, she was The Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year.

Yes, again.

Her triumphant return that included her record eighth U.S. national championship and a sixth world all-around gold made Biles the sixth woman to claim the AP honor for a third time. The 26-year-old seven-time Olympic medalist was followed by Iowa basketball star Caitlin Clark and Ballon d'Or winner Aitana Bonmati of the World Cup champion Spanish soccer team in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

And to think, she wasn't really sure what awaited her on that summer night in front of a packed arena that supported her at every turn, a response she says she didn't anticipate.

Hard to blame her.

The last time Biles had saluted the judges, she was earning a bronze medal on the balance beam at the end of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the end of a tumultuous two weeks where her decision to pull out of multiple finals due to "the twisties" (think mid-air vertigo) dragged the sometimes uncomfortable conversation about athletes and their mental health into the white-hot spotlight only the Games provide.

Though she drew near-universal acclaim for her courage to put her safety first, a quick check of her mentions on social media showed not everyone agreed.

She took a two-year hiatus in the aftermath, going into what she called a "protective shell." She dove deeper into therapy while eyeing a return on her terms.

Still, that didn't stop self-doubt from creeping in. Only this time, instead of letting the anxiety gnaw at her confidence, she accepted its presence, took a deep breath, and put on the kind of show that is hers and hers alone.

"I did a lot better than I thought I would do," Biles said.

Same as it ever was.

Biles previously won the AP honor in 2016 and 2019, times in her life she now barely recognizes.

She was still a teenager following her star-making performance at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics. Still living at home with her parents. Her world still revolved around the spaceship of a gym her family built in the Houston suburbs.

Thinking about it, she can't help but shake her head a little bit. Biles remembers thinking she only had time to practice and — if she was lucky — get her nails done.

It's not that way anymore. She's made it a point to make sure that the sport she's redefined no longer defines her.

Biles married Green Bay Packers safety Jonathan Owens in the spring. Her time is split between getting to Packers games when her schedule allows, working with her corporate partners and poring over the details of the house she and her husband are building.

Part of her evolution is organic. Part of it is intentional. For too long, she let herself get too caught up in the outcome of every turn, every flip, every twist, every practice in a discipline where perfection is literally unattainable.

"Whenever I was 19, it was the end of the world if I had bad days," she said. "Now I'm like, 'It's OK, it's just gymnastics and I'll come back tomorrow and we'll get it started again.'"

Biles isn't kidding when she says she's trying to take more of a "one day at a time" approach, not easy for

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someone who admits she has a habit of “best case/worst case-ing” every little thing. She didn’t really get serious about returning until late spring when coach Cecile Landi suggested over margaritas that maybe it was time to give the world a peek at what Biles had been working on.

Her response was somewhere along the lines of “sure, OK” even though there was a part of her that felt she might not ever be ready.

“I didn’t know what I was expecting,” said Biles, who credited the people she has surrounded herself with for believing in her when she was still grappling with her belief in herself. “People were like, ‘No, we’ve seen you in training, this is what was supposed to happen.’”

And what was supposed to happen quickly became what has almost always happened since Biles began taking the norms of her sport and bending them to her will.

It wasn’t just that she won but how she did it. Her intricate and gravity-defying tumbling has become more precise. A full decade into her elite career, her routines for all four events are still packed with remarkable difficulty.

Nowhere is that difficulty more apparent than on vault, where she became the first woman to perform a Yurchenko double-pike in international competition. The move — a breathtaking combination of power and more than a little guts — is now the fifth element to carry her name in the sport’s code of points.

She doesn’t have to do it to win. She does it anyway, because, as she put it a few years ago, she can.

Barring injury or the unforeseen, a third trip to the Olympics awaits next summer. She knows this. She’d just prefer not to talk about it. She only begrudgingly uses the words “Paris” or “Olympics” in interviews, a very conscious choice.

It’s telling of where Biles is in her life that she recently shared an Instagram story in which followers were asked to post their best moment of 2023. The picture she chose wasn’t taken from a routine or a medal podium but she and Owens dancing at their wedding reception, the picture of a life finding its balance.

“At the end of the day I did worlds and all that stuff, but I did get married, I got to support him,” she said. “It’s just like, it’s kind of nice that gymnastics isn’t the main revolving piece.”

## **Grieving and often overlooked, Palestinian Christians prepare for a somber Christmas amid war**

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

It’s normally a moment of pure joy for the Rev. Khader Khalilia: the excitement, the giggles, the kisses, as his young daughters — in their Christmas pajamas — open their gifts. But this year, just the thought of it fills Khalilia with guilt.

“I’m struggling,” said the Palestinian American pastor of Redeemer-St. John’s Lutheran Church in New York. “How can I do it while the Palestinian children are suffering, have no shelter or a place to lay their heads?”

Thousands of miles away, near Jesus’ biblical birthplace of Bethlehem, Suzan Sahori has been working with artisans to bring olive wood Christmas ornaments into homes in Australia, Europe and North America. But Sahori is in no mood for festivities: “We’re broken, looking at all these children, all this killing.”

In a traditional season of merriment, many Palestinian Christians — in Bethlehem and beyond — are gripped with helplessness, pain and worry amid the Israel-Hamas war. Some are mourning, lobbying for the war to end, scrambling to get relatives to safety or seeking comfort in the Christmas message of hope.

In the occupied West Bank, Sahori, executive director of Bethlehem Fair Trade Artisans, an organization selling crafts, will pray for peace and justice. She’s grateful she’s safe — but wonders if that could change. She’s also angry.

“The joy in my heart is stolen,” she said. “I’m saying, ‘God, how are you allowing all these children to die?’ ... I’m mad at God; I hope He forgives me.”

In better times, she finds the Christmas spirit in the Bethlehem area unmatched: It’s in songs cascading into streets bedecked with lights, markets displaying decorations, and the enthusiasm of children, families and tourists snapping photos with towering Christmas trees.

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Now, it's all quieter, somber. Tree lighting ceremonies she attended last year have been scrapped.

The heads of churches in Jerusalem have urged congregations to forgo "any unnecessarily festive activities." They encouraged priests and the faithful to focus on Christmas' spiritual meaning and called for "fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land."

Thousands of Palestinians have been killed in Israel's ongoing offensive in Gaza, launched after Hamas' Oct. 7 killings and hostage-taking in Israel.

Days before Christmas, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said two Christian women at a church compound in Gaza were killed by Israeli sniper fire. The Israeli military said troops were targeting Hamas militants in the area; it said it was investigating the incident and takes such reports very seriously.

Khalilia is striving to comfort the distraught amid his distress.

"It's hard to watch. It's hard to do your job," he said. "People are looking for us to walk with them in their suffering."

He worries about family in the West Bank; a brother lost his income working for a hotel as travel cancellations pummeled tourism.

Khalilia, who's from a town near Bethlehem, said his daughters will likely get fewer presents, with the savings going toward helping children in Gaza.

Many in the U.S., he said, don't realize that Palestinian Christians exist — some ask if he converted from Islam or Judaism.

He tells them, "When you sing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' on Christmas Eve, remember that Jesus was born in my hometown."

There are 50,000 Christian Palestinians estimated to reside in the West Bank and Jerusalem, according to the U.S. State Department's international religious freedom report for 2022. Approximately 1,300 Christians lived in Gaza, it said. Some Christians are also citizens of Israel. Many Palestinian Christians live in diaspora communities.

Susan Muaddi Darraj, a novelist in Baltimore, said Christians embody a diversity of Palestinians that gets erased. "Our existence ... defies the stereotypes that are being used to dehumanize us."

This Christmas, family gatherings have become more important for comfort, she said.

"Especially in the diaspora ... where, for us, life feels like it's stopped but everyone else around us is going about their daily business."

Wadie Abunassar, a Palestinian Israeli in Haifa, said many in his Christian community are trying to balance the somber atmosphere with the Christmas message.

"Jesus came in the midst of darkness" and Christmas "is about giving hope when there's no hope," said Abunassar, a former Catholic Church spokesperson. "Nowadays, more than ever, we need this Christmas spirit."

It hasn't been easy.

"Being Israeli citizens, we feel the pain of our Jewish compatriots," he said. "Being Palestinians, we feel the pain of our Palestinian brothers and sisters."

In Bethlehem, the Rev. Munther Isaac, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, said tears flow during Sunday services. Many are anxious; some have packed up and left.

Isaac was part of a group that traveled to Washington to advocate for a ceasefire.

"A comprehensive and just peace is the only hope for Palestinians and Israelis alike," said a letter signed by several Christian pastoral leaders in Bethlehem. Addressed to President Joe Biden, it asked him to help stop the war.

The signatories said they lamented all deaths, Palestinian and Israeli.

"We want a constant and comprehensive ceasefire. Enough death. Enough destruction. ... This is our call and prayer this Christmas."

Israel, whose forces have faced accusations by some of using excessive force, says it aims to destroy Hamas and accuses it of endangering civilians. Israel and its U.S. ally are also increasingly facing international alarm over the scope of deaths, destruction and displacement in Gaza.

Isaac's church is displaying a nativity scene where a baby Jesus figure, wrapped in a back-and-white



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Palestinian keffiyeh, is lying in the rubble. Making the display was an emotional and spiritual experience, he said.

"We see Jesus in every child that's killed, and we see God's identifying with us in our suffering."

This holiday season, longtime Gaza resident Suhair Anastas is wracked with guilt: She's managed to escape the war in Gaza while others haven't.

A Jordanian Palestinian, Anastas had been living in Gaza, where her late husband was from.

For more than a month, she and her 16-year-old daughter sheltered in a Catholic church's school there. Death felt particularly close when a deadly Israeli airstrike struck a Gaza Greek Orthodox Church compound housing displaced people. Israel's military said it had targeted a Hamas command center nearby.

"You go to sleep ... thinking, 'Will I wake up the next morning?'" Anastas said.

Her trip to the border — which involved driving, walking, taking a donkey-pulled cart and a cab — was terrifying.

"The bombings were around," she said. A friend's daughter, a child, kept asking: Are we going to die?

Anastas hopes to return to Gaza, but she's unsure what's ahead, or if her home will still be there.

Among the many questions over the future of Gaza and its more than 2 million people, is if its tiny Christian community will remain — and for how long.

Those still inside include Sami Awad's relatives. A Palestinian American, Awad said he failed to get U.S. help for his family members, who don't hold U.S. passports, to leave.

They have moved repeatedly, their latest shelter a windowless cement structure shared with others, said Awad, who's in the West Bank. In sporadic communications, a cousin's told him they were running out of the canned tuna and beans they've survived on.

He once told Awad, "If we die, don't grieve too much for us, because it would have been mercy for us," Awad said. At other times, the cousin yelled, "Save us. Get us out."

"I feel completely helpless," said Awad, dreading the prospect of bad news at any minute.

Hope came in the form of Australian visas for his relatives, including an elderly aunt and uncle, Awad said, but their names aren't on lists needed to depart.

On Christmas, he said, "We'll wake up, like every other day, to watch the news and to see what are the numbers of people that were killed."

Awad wasn't thinking about putting up a Christmas tree until his youngest daughter argued for one.

So now, a tree is up. On it, amid gold and red baubles, is a red, black, white and green Palestinian flag.

## Today in History: December 23 Japanese war leaders are executed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 23, the 357th day of 2023. There are eight days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 23, 1948, former Japanese premier Hideki Tojo and six other Japanese war leaders were executed in Tokyo.

On this date:

In 1783, George Washington resigned as commander in chief of the Continental Army and retired to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia.

In 1788, Maryland passed an act to cede an area "not exceeding ten miles square" for the seat of the national government; about two-thirds of the area became the District of Columbia.

In 1823, the poem "Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" was published in the Troy (New York) Sentinel; the verse, more popularly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas," was later attributed to Clement C. Moore.

In 1913, the Federal Reserve System was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act.

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In 1941, during World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese.

In 1954, the first successful human kidney transplant took place at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston as a surgical team removed a kidney from 23-year-old Ronald Herrick and implanted it in Herrick's twin brother, Richard.

In 1968, 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

In 1972, a 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck Nicaragua; the disaster claimed some 5,000 lives.

In 1986, the experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan and Jeana (JEE'-nuh) Yeager, completed the first non-stop, non-refueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 1997, a federal jury in Denver convicted Terry Nichols of involuntary manslaughter and conspiracy for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing, declining to find him guilty of murder. (Nichols was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

In 2003, a jury in Chesapeake, Virginia, sentenced teen sniper Lee Boyd Malvo to life in prison, sparing him the death penalty.

In 2016, the United States allowed the U.N. Security Council to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem as a "flagrant violation" of international law; the decision to abstain from the council's 14-0 vote was one of the biggest American rebukes of its longstanding ally in recent memory.

In 2021, Joan Didion, the revered author and essayist known for her provocative social commentary and detached, methodical literary voice, died of complications from Parkinson's disease at age 87.

In 2022, winter weather blanketed the U.S. as a massive storm sent temperatures crashing and created whiteout conditions. More than 200 million people — about 60% of the U.S. population — were under some form of weather advisory or warning.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Ronnie Schell is 92. Former Emperor Akihito of Japan is 90. Rock musician Jorma Kaukonen (YOR'-mah KOW'-kah-nen) is 83. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer is 80. U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark (ret.) is 79. Actor Susan Lucci is 77. Singer-musician Adrian Belew is 74. Rock musician Dave Murray (Iron Maiden) is 67. Actor Joan Severance is 65. Singer Terry Weeks is 60. Rock singer Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) is 59. The former first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, is 56. Rock musician Jamie Murphy is 48. Jazz musician Irvin Mayfield is 46. Actor Estella Warren is 45. Actor Elvy Yost is 36. Actor Anna Maria Perez de Tagle (TAG'-lee) is 33. Actor Spencer Daniels is 31. Actor Caleb Foote is 30.