

Groton Daily Independent

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“Christmas is the one day of the year that carries real hope and promise for all mankind.”

-Edgar Guest



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.

Wednesday, Dec. 27

Senior Menu: Chili, corn bread, coleslaw, lime pear Jell-O.

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

No School - Christmas Break

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Thursday, Dec. 28

Senior Menu: Breaded cod, parsley buttered potatoes, creamy coleslaw, rainbow sherbet, whole wheat bread.

No School - Christmas Break

Girls Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV game at 5 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Friday, Dec. 29

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, buttered carrots, apricots, whole wheat bread.

No School - Christmas Break

Boys Basketball at Hoop City Classic in Mitchell: Groton Area vs. Pine Ridge at 12:30 p.m.

Boys and Girls Wrestling at Webster, 9:30 a.m.

Saturday, Dec. 30

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #5 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus – 13, Coyotes – 13, Jackelopes – 11, Chipmunks – 9, Cheetahs – 9, Foxes – 5

Men's High Games: Brad Waage – 246, Lance Frohling – 194, Roger Spanier – 190

Women's High Games: Michelle Johnson – 225, Darci Spanier – 187, Dar Larson – 170

Men's High Series: Brad Waage – 588, Lance Frohling – 539, Tony Waage – 514

Women's High Series: Michelle Johnson – 503, Darci Spanier – 461, Sue Stanley – 455

Crescent Roll Bars

2 tubes of Pillsbury Crescent rolls

2 8 Oz pkg of cream cheese – bring to room temp

1 egg

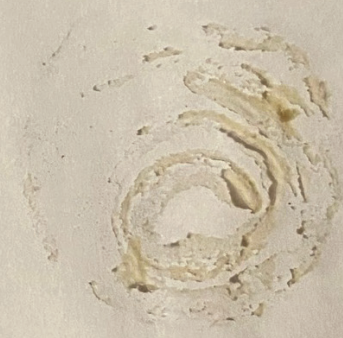
1 C of sugar

1/3 – 1/2C of cinnamon Sugar mixture (1-2T cinnamon)

Spray 9x13 pan. Layer 1 package of crescent rolls on bottom.

Mix 2 pkg of cream cheese, 1 C sugar, 1 egg yolk. (save the egg white in separate bowl). Spread mixture over crescent rolls. Sprinkle ½ the cinnamon sugar mixture over the cream cheese mixture. Layer 2nd tube of crescent rolls over the top. Beat egg white until frothy and spread over crescent rolls. Top with remaining cinnamon sugar mixture. Bake at 350 degrees for 20-30 minutes. Refrigerate when cool.

Pam Titze



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*Ho! Ho! Ho!
Merry Christmas!*

CASE IH
AGRICULTURE

Harry Implement
"Family Owned & Operated Since 1935!"
(605) 395-6421 ~ Ferney



We're rolling to wish you a
Merry Christmas!
KR BODY SHOP
Andover, SD
Kevin Raap
380-8539

Groton Area Kindergarten



Teagan Sombke is the daughter of Bryan and Whitney Sombke of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Jesus's birthday



Tayden Hendrickson is the son of Shelby Hendrickson and Travis Hendrickson of Aberdeen. What Christmas means to me is Santa gives us presents



Jed Morehouse is the son of Brent and Jessica Morehouse of Andover. What Christmas means to me is Love and sharing



Jayden Moo is the son of EhMoo and Pawshee of Aberdeen. What Christmas means to me is It's Jesus's birthday



Max Erickson is the son of Seth and Megan Erickson of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Jesus's birthday



Lexie Locke is the daughter of Spencer and Kellie Locke of Groton. What Christmas means to me is we get presents and see our whole entire family

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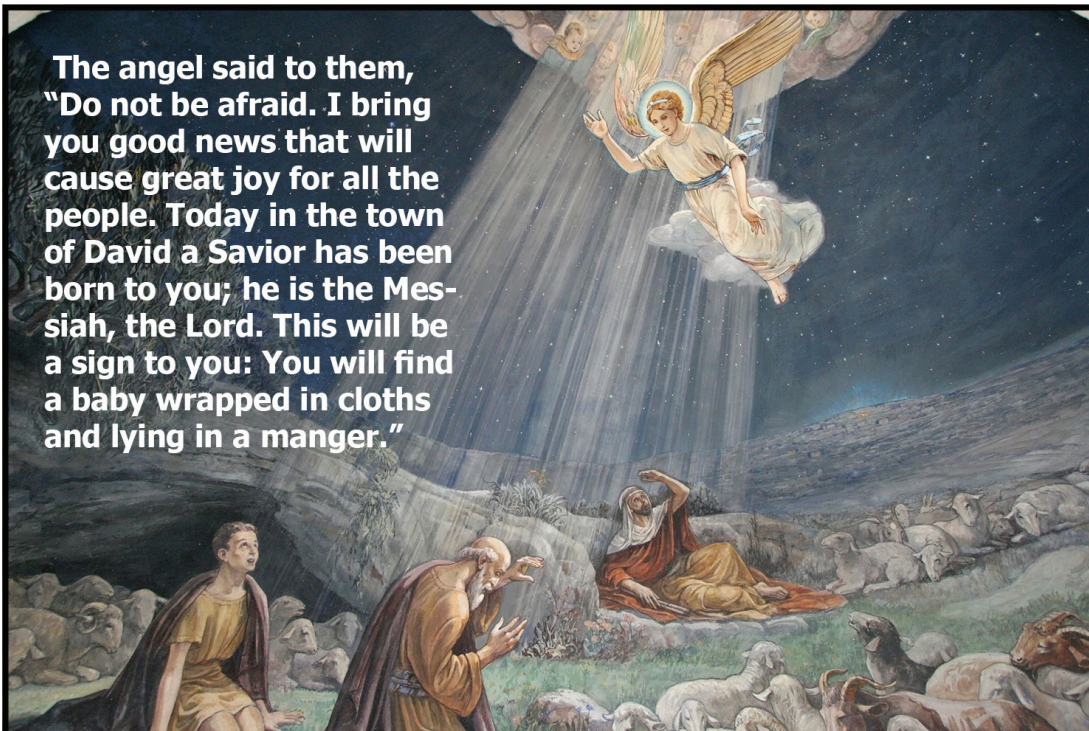
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*It was a
Holy Night
So special -
So calm -
So bright*



Merry Christmas from
Krueger Brothers Road Maintenance, Dirt & Gravel
Dave: 397-8387 ~ Roger & Dan: 397-2618

The angel said to them,
"Do not be afraid. I bring
you good news that will
cause great joy for all the
people. Today in the town
of David a Savior has been
born to you; he is the Mes-
siah, the Lord. This will be
a sign to you: You will find
a baby wrapped in cloths
and lying in a manger."



*From all of us at Lori's Pharmacy in Groton,
we wish you a very blessed Christmas!*



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

COMMENTARY

Like Republican legislators, citizens want to cut taxes

by Dana Hess

DECEMBER 24, 2023 10:00 AM

South Dakota lawmakers went through a bit of a tax cut frenzy in the last legislative session before finally settling on a reduction of the state sales tax. A recent poll shows that citizens favor getting into the tax cut game as well.

A poll of registered voters sponsored by South Dakota News Watch and the Chiesman Center for Democracy showed that 60.6% of respondents favored cutting the state sales tax on groceries. These results aren't quite as robust as the poll numbers offered by Gov. Kristi Noem during the last legislative session when she was championing a similar tax cut. Her polling found 75% of respondents in favor of cutting the tax, which would cost the state an estimated \$120 million in revenue.

With state tax revenue running ahead of projections and federal pandemic money piling up, tax cut plans were abundant during the last legislative session. In addition to the governor's plan, there was a convoluted property tax rebate bill and a plan to drop the state sales tax from 4.5% to 4%. Lawmakers ultimately agreed on a state sales tax cut from 4.5% to 4.2% that would sunset on June 30, 2027.

It's only a matter of weeks until the next legislative session and a matter of months until the 2024 election, when there is sure to be an initiated measure on the ballot seeking to cut the state sales tax on groceries. Given the polls showing the popularity of that particular sales tax cut, it will be interesting to see how the governor and lawmakers approach taxes in the coming session and the next election.

For her part, the governor is kinda, sorta in favor of cutting the state sales tax on groceries. In a News Watch story about the poll numbers, Noem's spokesman said she agreed with consumers that the tax should be cut, and that she would work with the Legislature if that sort of bill was introduced in the coming session. Notice that this falls short of being an endorsement of the ballot initiative.

Her stand is something of a change from a July News Watch story in which a different spokesman said the governor didn't favor the initiated measure. That was because, according to the attorney general's ballot explanation, its passage would jeopardize a federal cigarette settlement worth \$20 million per year, as well as throw into disarray the streamlined sales tax agreement that allows South Dakota to collect sales taxes on internet purchases.

Noem's support for the tax cut, a traditional talking point of the Democratic Party, has always been a bit of a mystery. She continues to embrace the tax cut she first touted during her reelection campaign. Prior to that, she adhered to the Republican Party line that said the state couldn't afford such a tax cut, and that it was a gateway drug that would lead to a state income tax.

Instead of preparing for the likely voter endorsement of the initiative that cuts the sales tax on groceries, Rep. Chris Karr, a Republican from Sioux Falls, has filed a bill that would take off the sunset clause and make the 4.2% state sales tax permanent. Karr told the Dakota Scout that with continuing tax revenue surpluses there would be no need for the sunset clause.

The sales tax cut that Karr likes so much resembles the stealth bomber. With a savings of just 30 cents on a \$100 purchase, it's almost undetectable for consumers. Yet it delivers a hefty payload that cuts an estimated \$104 million from state revenues.

While Karr was preparing a bill to make his tax cut permanent, House Majority Leader Will Mortenson issued a warning about any attempt by the Legislature to enact a sales tax cut on groceries. The Republican

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from Pierre said it would be "irresponsible" for the Legislature to consider a sales tax cut on food without making corresponding cuts in the state budget.

It's easy to assume Mortenson was using his stern voice when he told News Watch, "Unless you support less pay for teachers, closing more nursing homes and less public safety, I don't think you can responsibly talk about cutting something like the food sales tax without a plan to cut spending also."

Perhaps Mortenson would apply the same kind of budget restrictions to the ballot initiative, if it is endorsed by voters. During the last session's tax cut frenzy, it's hard to recall a similarly grim warning from legislative leaders concerning the need for budget cuts as lawmakers embraced a stealth tax cut that was able to leave a \$104 million hole in the budget.

At this point, lawmakers may want to consider their options:

They could use the upcoming legislative session to plan for the likely voter endorsement of the initiated measure by dumping the previous sales tax cut and writing a bill designed to cut the state sales tax on groceries while also protecting the federal cigarette settlement and the collection of sales taxes on internet purchases.

Or, they could invest in an expensive political ad campaign designed to convince South Dakota consumers that they don't really want to cut the state sales tax on food after all.

Or, they can pass Karr's bill to make that sales tax cut permanent and cross their fingers while they hope that citizens don't endorse the initiated measure and leave a blank spot in the budget where there used to be \$120 million worth of revenue.

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

EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: How feasible is so-called Direct Air Capture as a tool in mitigating runaway climate change?

-- James Hawthorne, Tampa, FL

The United Nations has emphasized limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to mitigate the severe impacts of climate change and ensure a habitable planet. Meeting this target requires a 45 percent reduction in emissions by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

Despite this ticking clock, the December 2023 United Nations Climate Summit reported a 1.1 percent increase in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions since 2022. This led researchers to believe that artificial carbon removal, or Direct Air Capture (DAC), may become essential to maintaining a livable Earth.

Plants naturally absorb and convert CO₂ into oxygen through photosynthesis. When plants die, they release carbon, but most of it is absorbed by the soil. Additionally, the ocean absorbs CO₂ through surface dissolution and the biological pump. Unfortunately, deforestation has lowered the number of carbon-sequestering trees, and converting carbon-rich ecosystems, such as forests and wetlands, into farmland has depleted topsoil, releasing stored carbon and hindering the ability to capture additional carbon. Warmer ocean waters have decreased gas solubility and released more carbon from melting ice.

Scientists are designing technologies that can extract CO₂ from the air. Air is funneled into a processor by fans and passed over a liquid solvent or a solid sorbent which captures the CO₂. After the CO₂ has been isolated, heat is applied to release it from the solvent or sorbent. Next, the gas undergoes a process called "liquefaction," or compression until it becomes liquid. It is then injected into underground rock formations where it gradually mineralizes. DAC is not meant to encourage the continuation of high-emission practices but rather to serve as a tool for offsetting the emissions that they cannot avoid.

Currently, DAC is designated by the International Energy Agency as a "technology-readiness level six" on a scale of one to nine. Immense funding and an established user base is needed before DAC can go mainstream. Maintenance and labor costs are still unpredictable. Land availability has been a concern, as well as varying weather conditions that may impact the success of DAC equipment.

DAC systems require significant amounts of heat to de-bond CO₂ from a solvent or sorbent. Solvent systems normally require 900 degrees Celsius, while sorbent systems require 80-120 degrees Celsius. To optimize efficiency, the source of this heat energy must be as close to zero emission as possible.

While having significant potential, the current major hurdle for DAC lies in cost. The early-stage cost to remove one ton of CO₂ from the atmosphere is estimated to be between \$300 to almost \$1,000. Conversely, the same quantity of removal through reforestation costs between \$50 to \$125. However, the future looks hopeful for DAC, as the Department of Energy has initiated a "Carbon Negative Shot" proposal that intends to reduce the cost of DAC to less than \$100/tonne within the next decade.

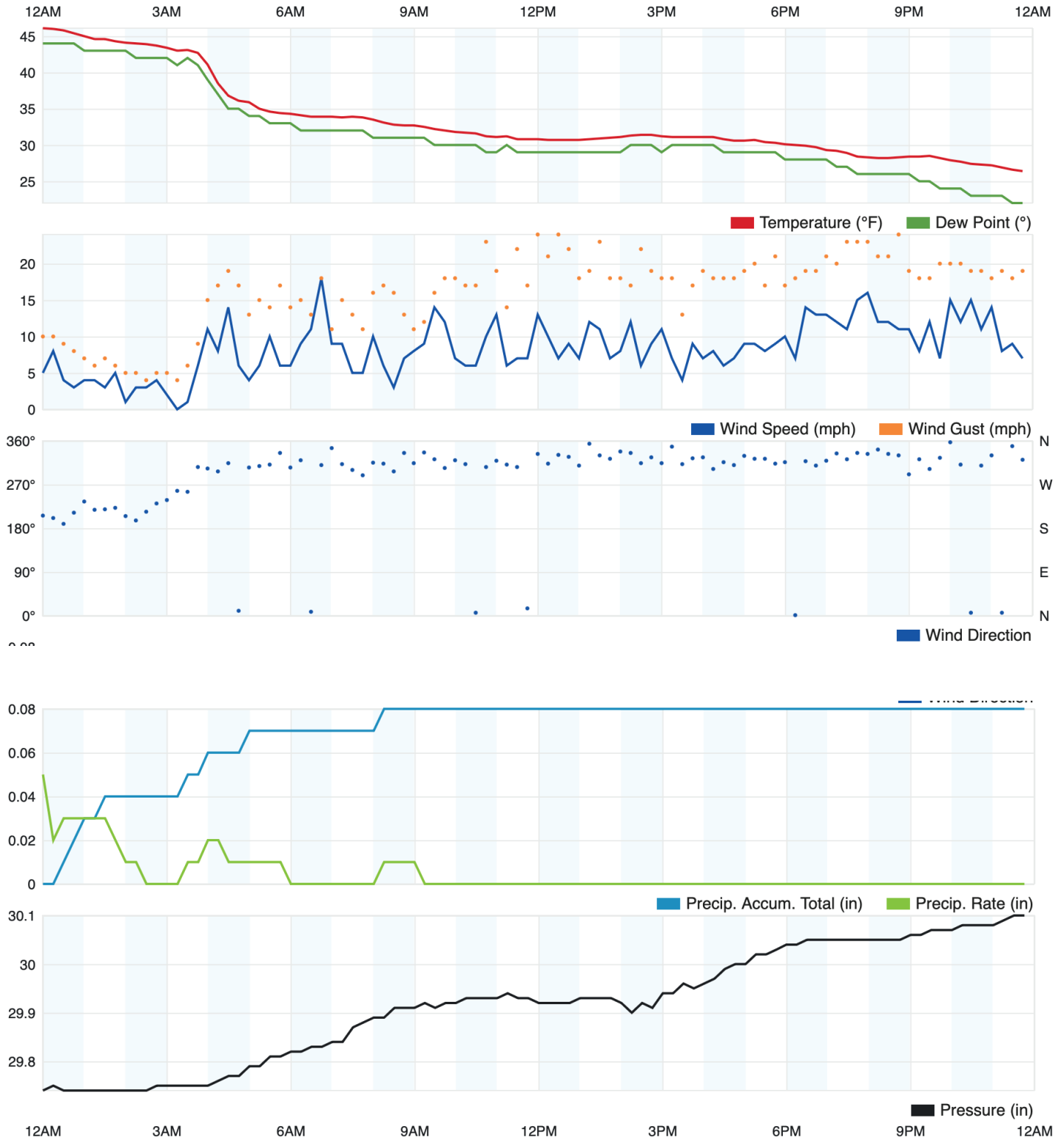


At this commercial direct air capture plant in Hinwil, Switzerland, fans draw in air and chemicals help bind the carbon dioxide so it can be stored underground. Credit: Climeworks.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Ice Storm Warning URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE National Weather Service Aberdeen SD 222 AM CST Mon Dec 25 2023

Brown-Spink-
Including the cities of Aberdeen and Redfield
222 AM CST Mon Dec 25 2023

...ICE STORM WARNING IN EFFECT FROM NOON TODAY TO NOON CST TUESDAY...

* WHAT...Significant icing expected. Total snow accumulations of 2 to 4 inches and ice accumulations of three tenths to four tenths of an inch. Winds gusting as high as 45 mph.

* WHERE...Brown and Spink Counties.

* WHEN...From noon today to noon CST Tuesday.

* IMPACTS...Power outages and tree damage are likely due to the ice. Travel could be nearly impossible. Patchy blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Travel is strongly discouraged. If you must travel, keep an extra flashlight, food and water in your vehicle in case of an emergency. Prepare for possible power outages.

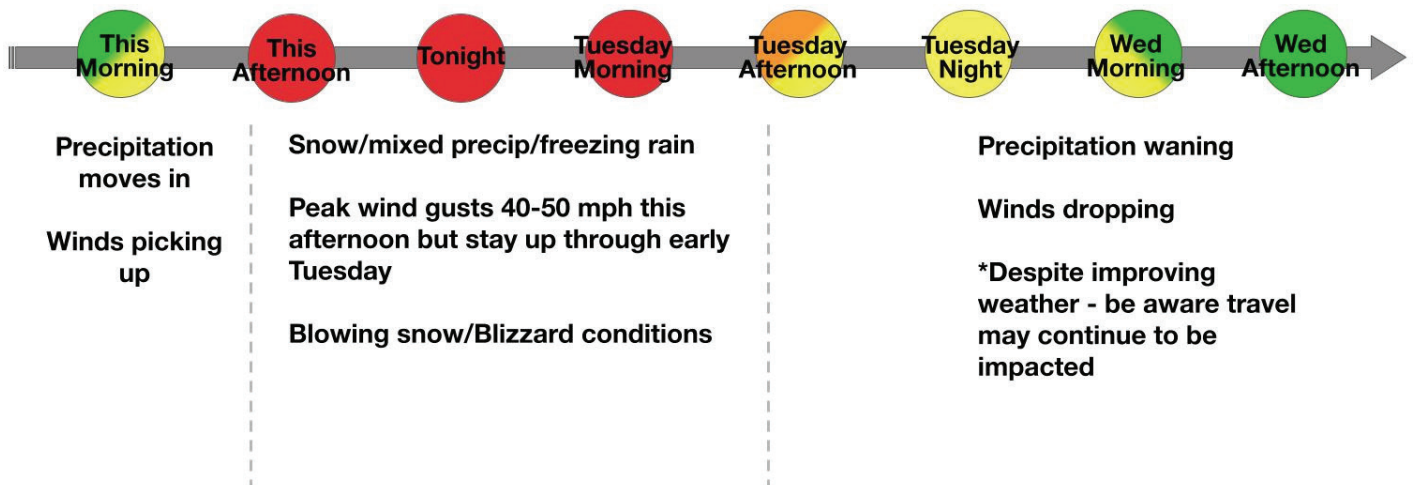
The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.



Winter Storm Timeline

December 25, 2023
5:26 AM

Consider alternative travel arrangements during periods of highest impacts



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

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Mon Dec 25	Tue Dec 26	Wed Dec 27	Thu Dec 28	Fri Dec 29	Sat Dec 30	Sun Dec 31
33°F 26°F	35°F 29°F	34°F 17°F	29°F 16°F	33°F 19°F	28°F 15°F	27°F 17°F
N 29 MPH	NNE 22 MPH	N 12 MPH	NW 5 MPH	SSW 8 MPH	NNW 12 MPH	WNW 9 MPH
100%	90%	60%				



Major Impacts For Holiday Travel

December 25, 2023

5:22 AM

Key Messages

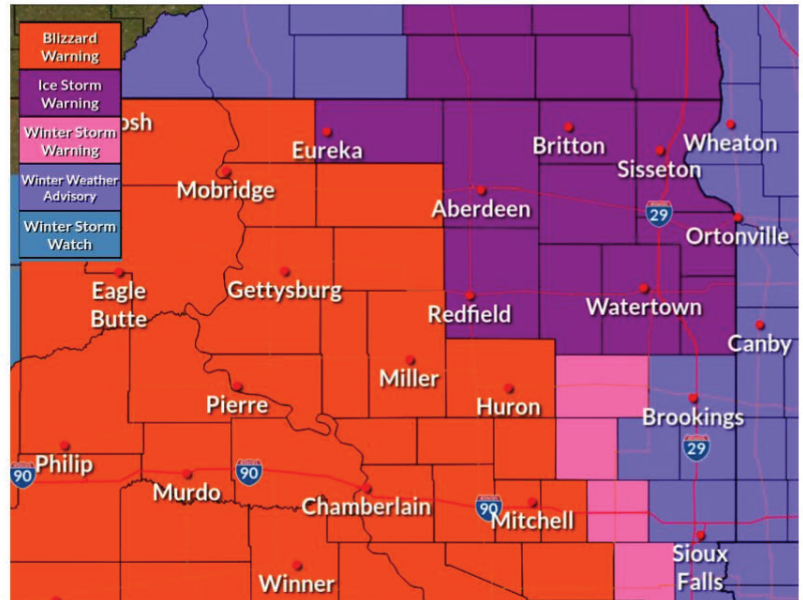
- Combination of **snow**, **mixed precipitation** & **ice**
- Winds peaking between 40-50 mph this afternoon
- Peak snow accumulation across central/south central SD in excess of 1 foot
- Peak **ice** in excess of 1/4 - 1/2+ inch between the Sisseton hills and James valley

NEW What Has Changed

- Slight western trend in track of system...shifting freezing rain potential west, increasing ice potential
- Upgrade portions of the **Winter Weather Advisory** to an **Ice Storm Warning** for eastern SD

Next Scheduled Update

- Monday afternoon



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A winter storm will have major impacts on travel today and Tuesday, with a combination of moderate to heavy snow, blowing snow and blizzard conditions, along with freezing rain, ice and wind.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 46 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: 27 °F at 11:27 PM

Wind: 26 mph at 7:31 PM

Precip: 1/4" inch of snow

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1943

Record Low: -24 in 1996

Average High: 26

Average Low: 5

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.46

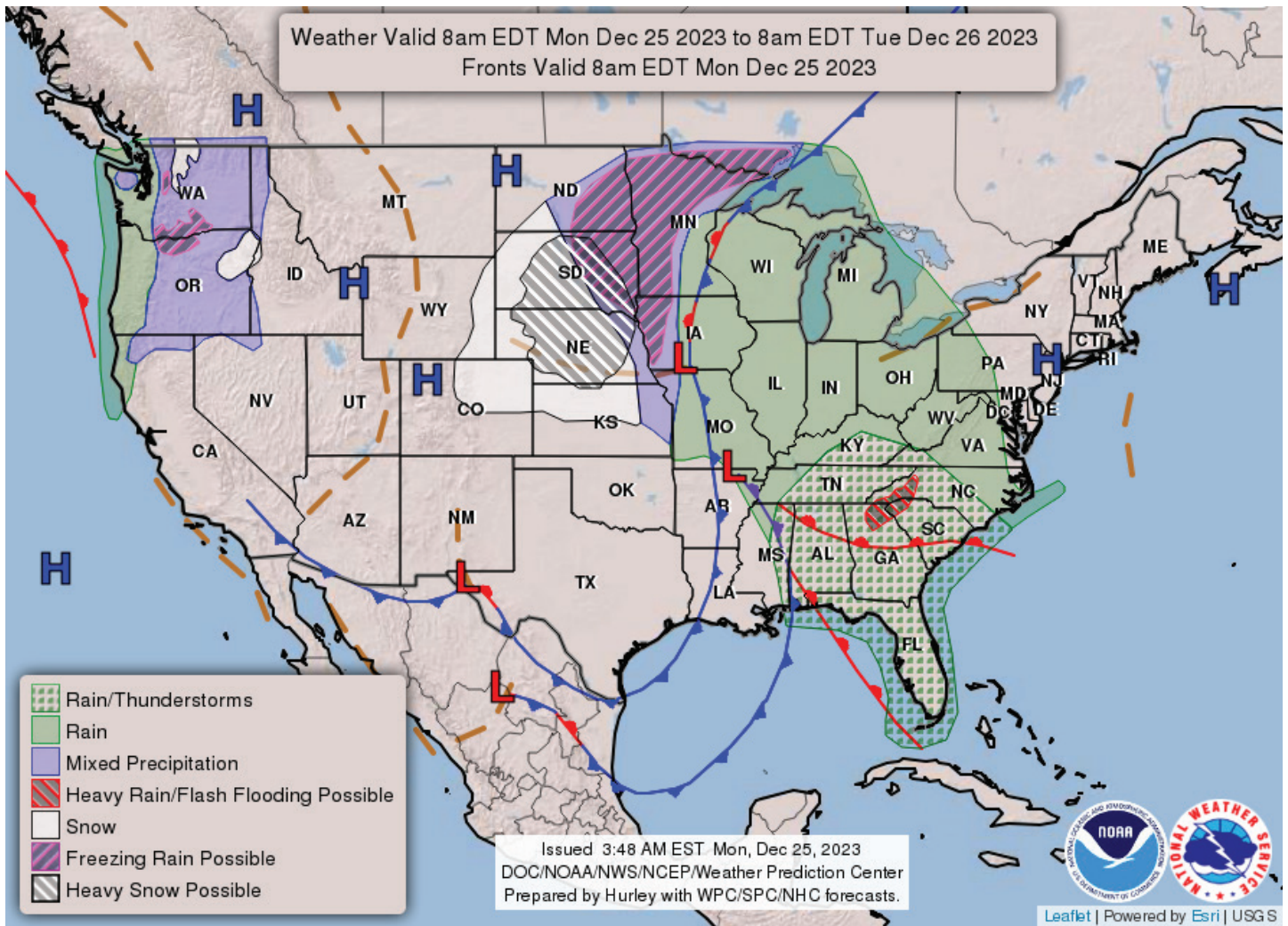
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.23

Average Precip to date: 21.67

Precip Year to Date: 23.40

Sunset Tonight: 4:55:48 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:25 am



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Today in Weather History

December 25, 1983: Winds of 20 to 30 mph, with occasional higher gusts, combined with very light falling snow and loose surface snow to cause near-blizzard conditions and dangerously low wind chills in most of South Dakota, as well as in southwest and west-central Minnesota, from the early evening of the 23rd into Christmas morning. Visibilities were frequently near zero, and four- to five-foot drifts closed the vast majority of roads, making travel impossible. Hundreds of motorists became stranded during the evenings of December 23rd and 24th. In Minnesota, many holiday travelers heading west from Minneapolis and St. Paul drove to central Minnesota before conditions became too severe to continue. Winds and severe cold in the western part of Minnesota caused several power outages as well as the loss of livestock.

In South Dakota, at least 70 vehicles were stalled at one point over a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 90 between Kennebec and Reliance in Lyman County. The Pierre Airport in Hughes County was closed twice on the 23rd as visibility was reduced to zero. Most flights were canceled at Sioux Falls Airport in Minnehaha County, stranding numerous holiday travelers. Sub-zero temperatures, combined with gusts of over 60 mph, produced wind chill indices in the 60 to 100 below zero range. Several cases of frostbite were reported, propane gas solidified, fuel jelled, and water pipes and tanks froze as a result of the extreme cold. In Minnehaha County at Wall Lake, electrical outages of 12 hours were experienced from power lines snapping as a result of the cold and winds.

1776: Thomas Jefferson noted that the first winter snow fell on December 20th, but did not last on the ground one day. Temperatures dropped to 30 degrees or colder on Christmas Day. That night, 22 inches of snow fell. From the 25th of December until March 6, 10 snow covered the ground, and some of them were deep. The first rain came on the 9th of March. In Frederick County, two feet of snow was recorded.

1872: Since records began back in 1887, Columbia, South Carolina, only a trace of snow has been reported on Christmas Day. Before records, 13-hour sleet, and snowstorm occurred in Columbia and surrounding areas. Credit goes to Cary Mock, a USC geography professor who specializes in historical weather research. Here is a link to the newspaper article.

1966 - A white Christmas was enjoyed by residents from North Carolina to New England in the wake of a major snowstorm. Even coastal Virginia was white. (David Ludlum)

1974: Cyclone Tracy was a small but powerful tropical storm that devastated the city of Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, from December 24-26th, 1974. The storm was the second smallest tropical cyclone on record, in terms of gale-force wind diameter, behind Tropical Storm Marco in 2008.

1980 - It was the coldest Christmas Day of modern record in the northeastern U.S. Temperatures as cold as 36 degrees below zero were reported in New York State, and as the sharp cold front swept south-eastward the temperature at Boston MA plunged from 34 degrees to seven degrees below zero during the day. (David Ludlum)

1987: Since 1894, Tucson, Arizona, has seen snow on Christmas Day four times. The most recent event occurred in 1987 when Tucson saw 2.6 inches.

2002: A major snowstorm moved up the east coast on Christmas Day, 2002. Widespread snowfalls of a foot or more occurred across much of central New York and northeast Pennsylvania, with amounts as high as 30 inches reported over the northwest slopes of the Catskills.

2006 - Severe thunderstorms produced four tornadoes in Florida. Columbia, Pasco, Lake and Volusia counties were hardest-hit, including the Daytona Beach area. A tornado generated considerable damage on the campus of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, delaying the start of the spring semester (Orlando Business Journal).

2010 - Up to 32 inches of snow and blizzard conditions affected parts of the eastern U.S. on December 25th-27th. A state of emergency was declared in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine. In New York City, up to 24.5 inches of snow fell, effectively shutting down rail lines, major airports, and bus services. Thousands of flights were cancelled and stranded subway riders were forced to spend a night in unheated train cars. One person was reported killed in Maine due to the weather conditions. (NCDC)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

JOSEPH'S DREAM

"...Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

'Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God is with us."'

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife."

When the Lord calls us to do His work, and we are faithful and obedient to Him, great things happen!

Prayer: Father, when You call us to do Your work in Your world, may we accept the challenge, knowing that great things will happen that will bless us and others, and Your Name glorified. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 1:18-24 For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'



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

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White \$48.99/year
- Colored \$79.88/year
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paypal.me/paperpaul



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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: 1 Days 15 Hrs 44 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.23.23

16 22 23 24 50 9

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,050,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 59 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.24.23

2 18 22 39 41 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 14 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.23.23

4 14 19 29 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 14 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.23.23

20 37 39 40 43 1

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 43 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.23.23

9 14 17 18 53 6

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$638,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 43 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Pope Francis denounces the weapons industry as he makes a Christmas appeal for peace in the world

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis on Monday blasted the weapons industry and its “instruments of death” that fuel wars as he made a Christmas Day appeal for peace in the world and in particular between Israel and the Palestinians.

Speaking from the loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica to the throngs of people below, Francis said he grieved the “abominable attack” of Hamas against southern Israel on Oct. 7 and called for the release of hostages. And he begged for an end to Israel’s military campaign in Gaza and the “appalling harvest of innocent civilians” as he called for humanitarian aid to reach those in need.

Francis devoted his Christmas Day blessing to a call for peace in the world, noting that the biblical story of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem sent a message of peace. But he said that Bethlehem “is a place of sorrow and silence” this year.

Francis’ annual “Urbi et Orbi” (“To the City and the World”) speech typically offers a lament of all the misery facing the world, and this year’s edition was no different. From Armenia and Azerbaijan to Syria and Yemen, Ukraine to South Sudan and Congo and the Korean peninsula, Francis appealed for humanitarian initiatives, dialogue and security to prevail over violence and death.

He called for governments and people of goodwill in the Americas in particular to address the “troubling phenomenon” of migration and its “unscrupulous traffickers” who take advantage of innocents just looking for a better life.

He took particular aim at the weapons industry, which he said was fueling the conflicts around the globe with scarcely anyone paying attention.

“It should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet strings of war,” he said. “And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise?”

Francis has frequently blasted the weapons industry as “merchants of death” and has said that wars today, in Ukraine, in particular, are being used to try out new weapons or use up old stockpiles.

He called for peace between Israel and Palestinians, and for the conflict to be resolved “through sincere and persevering dialogue between the parties, sustained by strong political will and the support of the international community.”

Vatican officials said about 70,000 people filled St. Peter’s Square for Francis’ noonday speech and blessing. They included many people flying Palestinian flags, as well as some Ukrainian ones.

Francis’ address from the loggia marked his main appearance for Christmas Day, though he is expected to deliver a blessing on Tuesday, the feast of St. Stephen, which is also a holiday in Italy. Rounding out the holiday, he is to celebrate a New Year’s Eve vigil in the basilica and Mass the following day.

Despite his recent bout of bronchitis, the 87-year-old Francis appeared to hold up well Monday and during Christmas Eve Mass the previous night, though he occasionally coughed and seemed out of breath.

Ukraine says it shot down Russian fighter jets and drones as the country officially marks Christmas

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine’s air force on Monday reported that it shot down two Russian fighter jets during the night along with two cruise missiles and 28 Shahed-type drones.

The report said the attacks were aimed at southern and central regions of Ukraine, but that no casualties were immediately known. It said that 31 drones were launched in all, but details of what the three that weren’t intercepted may have struck weren’t given.

A summary from the Ukrainian presidential office said that one civilian was killed and at least four wounded in Russian attacks over the previous 24 hours. The death occurred in the town of Chornobaivka in the Kherson region, which is partly under Russian control and experiences daily fighting.

Ukraine observed Christmas on Monday, the first time the country has officially marked the holiday on Dec. 25 rather than the Jan. 7 date followed by some Orthodox countries, including Russia.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed legislation in July to move the public holiday's date.

Ukraine is predominantly Orthodox Christian, but the faith is divided between two churches, one of which had long affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which didn't recognize the authority of the Russian church and had been regarded as schismatic, was granted full recognition in 2018 by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Orthodoxy's top authority.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was a branch of the Russian church, announced in 2022 after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war that it was breaking ties with Moscow and considered itself autonomous. However, its parishes continue to follow the same liturgical calendar as the Russian church and will observe Christmas on Jan. 7.

Police in Serbia detain nearly 40 people as opposition plans more protests against election results

By JOVANA GEC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Serbian police said Monday they have detained at least 38 people who took part in a protest against reported widespread irregularities during a recent general ballot that declared the governing populists as winners of the parliamentary and local councils' elections.

Claiming election fraud, particularly in the capital, Belgrade, opposition group Serbia Against Violence has been staging protests since the Dec.17 elections while some politicians began a hunger strike. On Sunday evening, hundreds of protesters tried to enter Belgrade's city council, breaking windows, before riot police pushed them back using tear gas, pepper spray and batons.

Senior police official Ivica Ivkovic told reporters those detained are facing charges of inciting violent change of constitutional order —in reference to attempting to overthrow the government — and violent behavior. He added that eight officers were injured, several seriously.

The opposition said police beat up some of its supporters.

With more protests planned for later on Monday, police warned they would not allow roads or bridges to be blocked in the capital.

Police "are ready and capable of countering any acts of violence with determination," Ivkovic said.

The country's Serbian Progressive Party has denied rigging the vote and described the elections as fair despite criticism from international monitors and local election observers.

President Aleksandar Vucic described Sunday's protests as an attempt to overthrow the government with help from abroad, without specifying what he meant. Serbia's Prime Minister Ana Brnabic thanked Russia late Sunday for tipping Serbia in advance of violent protests against election results.

Serbia is formally seeking membership in the European Union but the Balkan nation has maintained close ties with Moscow and has refused to join Western sanctions imposed on Russia over the aggression on Ukraine.

Vucic's party claimed victory in both the parliamentary and Belgrade city ballots elections. Serbia Against Violence, the ruling party's main contender, said it was robbed of a win, especially in Belgrade.

Representatives of several international rights watchdogs observing the elections reported multiple irregularities during the vote, including cases of bought votes and ballot-box stuffing. They also noted unjust conditions for opposition candidates due to media bias, abuse of public resources by the ruling party, and Vucic dominating the ruling party's campaign and media time allocated for candidates despite not taking part in the elections himself.

Serbia Against Violence said Thursday in a letter sent to EU institutions, officials and member nations

that it would not recognize the elections' outcome. The alliance called on the EU to do the same and to initiate an investigation into the results.

Egypt floats ambitious plan to end Israel-Hamas war and create transitional Palestinian government

By SAMY MAGDY, NAJIB JOBAIN and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt has put forward an ambitious, initial proposal to end the Israel-Hamas war with a cease-fire, a phased hostage release and the creation of a Palestinian government of experts who would administer the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank, a senior Egyptian official and a European diplomat said Monday.

The proposal, worked out with the Gulf nation of Qatar, has been presented to Israel, Hamas, the United States and European governments but still appeared preliminary. It falls short of Israel's professed goal of outright crushing Hamas and would appear not to meet Israel's insistence on keeping military control over Gaza for an extended period after the war.

Israel's War Cabinet, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will meet later Monday discuss the hostage situation, among other topics, an Israeli official said, but would not say if they would discuss the Egyptian proposal. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

Word of the proposal comes after three bloody days across Gaza before Christmas Day in which Israeli airstrikes killed dozens of Palestinians at a time and 17 troops were killed in ground fighting in the north, center and south of the territory.

The war has devastated large parts of Gaza, killed more than 20,400 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

The mounting death toll among Israeli troops — 156 since the ground offensive began — could erode public support for the war, which was sparked when Hamas-led militants stormed communities in southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 and taking 240 hostage.

Israelis still largely stand behind the country's stated goals of crushing Hamas' governing and military capabilities and releasing the remaining 129 captives. That's despite rising international pressure against Israel's offensive, and the soaring death toll and unprecedented suffering among Palestinians.

EGYPTIAN PROPOSAL

The Egyptian proposal was an ambitious bid not only to end the war but also to lay out a plan for the day after.

It calls for an initial cease-fire of up to two weeks during which Palestinian militants would free 40 to 50 hostages, among them women, the sick and the elderly, in return for the release of 120-150 Palestinians from Israeli prisons, the Egyptian official said. He spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing talks.

At the same time, negotiations would continue on extending the cease-fire and the release of more hostages and bodies held by Palestinian militants, he said.

Egypt and Qatar would also work with all Palestinian factions, including Hamas, to agree on the establishment of a government of experts, he said. The government would rule Gaza and the West Bank for a transitional period as Palestinian factions settle their disputes and agree on a roadmap to hold presidential and parliamentary elections, he added.

In the meantime, Israel and Hamas would continue to negotiate a comprehensive "all-for-all" deal, he said. This would include the release of all remaining hostages in return for all Palestinian prisoners in Israel, as well as the Israeli military's withdrawal from Gaza and the Palestinian militants' halting of rocket attacks into Israel. Close to 8,000 Palestinians are held by Israel on security-related charges or convictions, according to Palestinian figures.

Egyptian officials discussed the outline of the proposal with Ismail Haniyeh, the Qatar-based political leader of Hamas, who visited Cairo last week. They plan to discuss it with the leader of the Islamic Jihad

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group, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, who arrived in Cairo on Sunday, the official said. The militant group, which also took part in the Oct. 7 attack, said it was prepared to consider releasing hostages only after fighting ends.

A Western diplomat said they are aware of Egypt's proposal. But the diplomat, who demanded anonymity to discuss the matter, doubts that Netanyahu and his hawkish government would accept the entire proposal. The diplomat gave no further details.

INSIDE GAZA

Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than two-thirds of the more than 20,400 Palestinians killed have been women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants among the dead.

Since Friday, 17 Israeli soldiers have been killed in combat, most in southern and central Gaza – an indication of the heavy fighting in and around the southern city of Khan Younis.

"The war exacts a very heavy price from us, but we have no choice but to continue fighting," Netanyahu said Sunday.

There has been widespread anger against his government, which many criticize for failing to protect civilians on Oct. 7 and promoting policies that allowed Hamas to gain strength over the years. Netanyahu has avoided accepting responsibility for the military and policy failures.

"Over time, the public will find it hard to ignore the heavy price paid, as well as the suspicion that the aims that were loudly heralded are still far from being attained, and that Hamas is showing no signs of capitulating in the near future," wrote Amos Harel, military affairs commentator for the Haaretz newspaper.

Israeli strikes continued to take a heavy toll. At a hospital in the central city of Deir al-Balah, frantic Palestinians carried in the dead, including a baby, and wounded from a strike Sunday on the Maghazi refugee camp east of Deir al-Balah. One bloodied young girl looked stunned while her body was checked for broken bones.

Seventy people were killed in the strike, including women and children, according to hospital records.

"We were all targeted," said Ahmad Turkomani, who lost several family members including his daughter and grandson. "There is no safe place in Gaza anyway."

Hospital records show that the bodies of an additional 80 people killed in strikes across central Gaza were also received at the hospital from Sunday to Monday.

In northern Gaza, Palestinians reported heavy Israeli bombardment and gunfire in the urban refugee camp of Jabaliya, an area Israel had claimed to control. The Israeli military said it had completed the dismantling of Hamas' underground headquarters in northern Gaza.

Israel faces international criticism for the civilian death toll, but it blames Hamas, citing the militants' use of crowded residential areas and tunnels. Israel says it has killed thousands of Hamas militants, without presenting evidence.

Israel also faces allegations of mistreating Palestinian men and teenage boys detained in homes, shelters, hospitals and elsewhere during the offensive. The military says it had detained hundreds of Palestinians, including more than 700 who were transferred to Israel for further interrogation about suspected ties to militants. It has denied abuse allegations and said those without links to militants are quickly released.

Speaking from a hospital bed in Rafah after his release, Khamis al-Burdainy of Gaza City said Israeli forces detained him after tanks and bulldozers partly destroyed his home. He said men were handcuffed and blindfolded.

"We didn't sleep. We didn't get food and water," he said, crying and covering his face.

King Charles III's annual Christmas message from Buckingham Palace to include sustainable touches

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III will give his second Christmas message from Buckingham Palace in front of a live tree decorated with sustainable ornaments.

The message to be broadcast at 3 p.m. on Monday will be the king's second holiday address since he ascended the throne but the first since his coronation in May.

The natural decorations adorning the tree were made from wood, dried oranges, brown glass, pine cones and paper. The tree will later be replanted, the palace says.

Charles has promoted environmental causes, such as protecting wildlife and combating climate change long before it became popular, throughout much of his life. He spoke at the beginning of the month at the U.N.'s COP28 climate summit in Dubai.

Last year, in his first Christmas message as monarch, Charles evoked memories of his late mother, Queen Elizabeth II, and paid tribute to the "selfless dedication" of Britain's public service workers.

Many of those workers spent much of the past year in a fight with the government over pay, creating disruptions in transportation, education and adding to already long wait times at hospitals as doctors, nurses and ambulance workers walked off the job — some for several days at a time — throughout the year.

While Elizabeth delivered her address from a desk, Charles last year stood by a Christmas tree at the church on the grounds of Windsor Castle where his parents are buried.

This year, he will speak from a room in Buckingham Palace that leads to the balcony where members of the royal family assembled after his coronation ceremony.

At least 68 killed in central Gaza in airstrike, adding to weekend's bloodshed

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza (AP) — At least 68 people were killed by an Israeli strike in central Gaza, health officials said Sunday, while the number of Israeli soldiers killed in combat over the weekend rose to 17.

Associated Press journalists at a nearby hospital watched frantic Palestinians carry the dead, including a baby, and wounded following the strike on the Maghazi refugee camp east of Deir al-Balah. One bloodied young girl looked stunned while her body was checked for broken bones.

The 68 fatalities include at least 12 women and seven children, according to early hospital figures.

"We were all targeted," said Ahmad Turkomani, who lost several family members including his daughter and grandson. "There is no safe place in Gaza anyway."

Earlier, the Health Ministry in Gaza gave the death toll as 70. The Israeli military had no immediate comment.

As Christmas Eve fell, smoke rose over the besieged territory, while in the West Bank Bethlehem was hushed, its holiday celebrations called off. In neighboring Egypt, tentative efforts continued on a deal for another exchange of hostages for Palestinians held by Israel.

The war has devastated parts of Gaza, killed roughly 20,400 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

The mounting death toll among Israeli troops — 156 since the ground offensive began — could erode public support for the war, which was sparked when Hamas-led militants stormed communities in southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 and taking 240 hostage.

Israelis still largely stand behind the country's stated goals of crushing Hamas' governing and military capabilities and releasing the remaining 129 captives. That's despite rising international pressure against Israel's offensive, and the soaring death toll and unprecedented suffering among Palestinians.

HAMAS EXACTS A PRICE

"The war exacts a very heavy price from us, but we have no choice but to continue fighting," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

In a nationally televised speech, Israeli President Isaac Herzog appealed for the country to remain united. "This moment is a test. We will not break nor blink," he said.

There has been widespread anger against his government, which many criticize for failing to protect civilians on Oct. 7 and promoting policies that allowed Hamas to gain strength over the years. Netanyahu has avoided accepting responsibility for the military and policy failures.

"Over time, the public will find it hard to ignore the heavy price paid, as well as the suspicion that the

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aims that were loudly heralded are still far from being attained, and that Hamas is showing no signs of capitulating in the near future," wrote Amos Harel, military affairs commentator for the Haaretz newspaper.

The Israeli military said it had completed the dismantling of Hamas' underground headquarters in northern Gaza, part of an operation to take down the vast tunnel network and kill off top commanders that Israeli leaders have said could take months.

Efforts toward negotiations continued. The head of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, arrived in Egypt for talks. The militant group, which also took part in the Oct. 7 attack, said it was prepared to consider releasing hostages only after fighting ends. Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh traveled to Cairo for talks days earlier.

INSIDE GAZA

Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than two-thirds of the 20,000 Palestinians killed have been women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

On Friday, Israeli airstrikes on two homes in Gaza killed 90 Palestinians, including dozens from an extended family, according to rescuers and hospital officials. One of the homes, located in Gaza City, became one of the deadliest airstrikes in the war after 76 people from the al-Mughrabi family were killed, said Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for Gaza's Civil Defense department.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said a 13-year-old boy was shot and killed in an Israeli drone attack while inside al-Amal Hospital in Khan Younis, a part of Gaza where Israel's military believes Hamas leaders are hiding.

An Israeli strike overnight hit a house in a refugee camp west of the city of Rafah, on Gaza's border with Egypt. At least two men were killed, according to Associated Press journalists in the hospital where the bodies were taken.

At least two people were killed and six others wounded when a missile struck a building in the Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza.

And Palestinians reported heavy Israeli bombardment and gunfire in Jabaliya, an area north of Gaza City that Israel had claimed to control. Hamas' military arm said its fighters shelled Israeli troops in Jabaliya and Jabaliya refugee camp.

Israel faces international criticism for the civilian death toll but it blames Hamas, citing the militants' use of crowded residential areas and tunnels. Israel has launched thousands of airstrikes since Oct. 7. It says it has killed thousands of Hamas militants, without presenting evidence.

Israel also faces allegations of mistreating Palestinian men and teenage boys detained in homes, shelters, hospitals and elsewhere during the offensive. It has denied abuse allegations and said those without links to militants are quickly released.

Speaking to the AP from a hospital bed in Rafah after his release, Khamis al-Burdainy of Gaza City said Israeli forces detained him after tanks and bulldozers partly destroyed his home. He said men were handcuffed and blindfolded.

"We didn't sleep. We didn't get food and water," he said, crying and covering his face.

Another released detainee, Mohammed Salem, from the Gaza City neighborhood of Shijaiyah, said Israeli troops beat them. "We were humiliated," he said. "A female soldier would come and beat an old man, aged 72 years old."

INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

The United Nations Security Council has passed a watered-down resolution calling for the speedy delivery of humanitarian aid for hungry and desperate Palestinians and the release of all the hostages, but not for a cease-fire.

But it was not immediately clear how and when deliveries of food, medical supplies and other aid, far below the daily average of 500 before the war, would accelerate. Trucks enter through two crossings: Rafah, and Kerem Shalom on the border with Israel. Wael Abu Omar, a spokesman for the Palestinian Crossings Authority, said 123 aid trucks entered Gaza on Sunday,

The head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, reiterated U.N. calls for a hu-

manitarian cease-fire, adding on social media that "the decimation of the Gaza health system is a tragedy."

Amid concerns about a wider regional conflict, the U.S. Central Command said a patrol ship in the Red Sea on Saturday shot down four drones launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, a while two Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles were fired into international shipping lanes.

The Iran-backed Houthis say their attacks are aimed at Israel-linked ships in an effort to stop the Israeli offensive in Gaza.

A plane stuck for days in France for a human trafficking investigation is leaving for India

By CHRISTOPHE ENA and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

VATRY, France (AP) — A charter plane grounded in France for a human trafficking investigation is scheduled to leave Monday for India, after an exceptional holiday ordeal that left some 300 Indians en route for Central America blocked inside a rural French airport for four days. A lawyer for the airline says most of the passengers will be aboard.

French authorities are still investigating the aim of the original flight, en route from the United Arab Emirates to Nicaragua, and two passengers have been detained. Prosecutors wouldn't comment on what kind of human trafficking was alleged, or whether the passengers' ultimate destination could have been the U.S., which has seen a surge in Indians crossing the Mexico-U.S. border this year.

French authorities worked through Christmas Eve and Christmas morning on formalities to allow passengers to leave the Vatry airfield in Champagne country, regional prosecutor Annick Browne told The Associated Press. The passengers include a 21-month-old child and 11 unaccompanied minors who were put under special administrative care.

The Legend Airlines A340 plane stopped Thursday for refueling in Vatry en route from Fujairah airport for Managua, Nicaragua, and was grounded by police based on an anonymous tip that it could be carrying trafficking victims.

The airport was requisitioned by police for days, and then turned into a makeshift courtroom Sunday as judges, lawyers and interpreters filled the terminal to carry out emergency hearings to determine next steps.

The plane received permission Sunday to leave France and was expected to depart Monday, according to an official with the Marne regional administration. A passenger stairwell was in place Monday morning beneath the unmarked plane, which has been waiting on the tarmac since Thursday.

Legend Airlines lawyer Liliana Bakayoko said it received approval from French authorities to transport 301 of the 303 passengers on a direct flight Monday to Mumbai, but that the final figure is expected to be lower.

Several passengers have requested asylum in France, according to an official with the Marne regional prefecture.

Bakayoko said some other passengers don't want to go to India because they paid for a tourism trip to Nicaragua. The airline has denied any role in possible human trafficking.

Lawyers at Sunday's hearings protested authorities' overall handling of the strange situation and the passengers' rights.

Foreigners can be held up to four days in a transit zone for police investigations in France, after which a special judge must rule on whether to extend that for eight days. Local officials, medics and volunteers installed cots and ensured regular meals and showers for those held in the Vatry airport.

The U.S. government has designated Nicaragua as one of several countries deemed as failing to meet minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking. Nicaragua has also been used as a migratory springboard for people fleeing poverty or conflict because of relaxed or visa-free entry requirements for some countries. Sometimes charter flights are used for the journey.

Afghan schoolgirls are finishing sixth grade in tears. Under Taliban rule, their education is over

By MOHAMMAD HABIB RAHMANI Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Bahara Rustam, 13, took her last class at Bibi Razia School in Kabul on Dec. 11 knowing it was the end of her education. Under Taliban rule, she is unlikely to step foot in a classroom again.

In September 2021, a month after U.S. and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan following two decades of war, the Taliban announced that girls were barred from studying beyond sixth grade.

They extended this education ban to universities in December 2022. The Taliban have defied global condemnation and warnings that the restrictions will make it almost impossible for them to gain recognition as the country's legitimate rulers.

Last week, U.N. special envoy Roza Otunbayeva expressed concern that a generation of Afghan girls is falling behind with each day that passes.

Last week, an official in the Education Ministry said Afghan girls of all ages are allowed to study in religious schools known as madrassas, which have traditionally been boys-only. But Otunbayeva said it was unclear if there was a standardized curriculum that allowed modern subjects.

Bahara is holding onto her education and pores over textbooks at home. "Graduating (from sixth grade) means we are going to seventh grade," she said. "But all of our classmates cried and we were very disappointed."

There was no graduation ceremony for the girls at Bibi Razia School.

In another part of Kabul, 13-year old Setayesh Sahibzada wonders what the future holds for her. She is sad she can't go to school anymore to achieve her dreams.

"I can't stand on my own two feet," she said. "I wanted to be a teacher. But now I can't study, I can't go to school."

Analyst Muhammad Saleem Paigir warned that excluding women and girls from education will be disastrous for Afghanistan. "We understand that illiterate people can never be free and prosperous," he said.

The Taliban have barred women from many public spaces and most jobs, all but confining women to their homes.

In battleground Arizona, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. draws Biden and Trump voters united by distrust

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Some voted for Donald Trump, others for Joe Biden. A few had never wanted anything to do with politics before they heard Robert F. Kennedy Jr., on a podcast or YouTube video.

Lined up outside a Phoenix wedding hall tucked between a freeway, a railroad track and a U-Haul rental center, the hundreds of people who turned out Wednesday to hear Kennedy speak shared little in common ideologically. What united them was a deep-seated distrust — of the media, of corporations and especially of the government — and a belief that Kennedy is the only person in politics willing to tell them the truth.

"I like that he talks to us like adults," said Gilbert Limon, a 48-year-old pharmacist from Phoenix. "He tells you the majority of what you need to know. Whereas I feel like (other politicians) just give you bits and pieces to try to fit their agenda. I've had enough of that."

Voters are not enthusiastic about a Biden-Trump rematch, and alternatives like Kennedy or the No Labels third-party movement, which would typically be longshots, see an opening. Kennedy's appearance in a 2024 battleground state highlights how he could influence the upcoming election in tough-to-predict ways. Allies of both Trump and Biden have expressed concerns that Kennedy's independent bid could pull votes from their candidate in next year's expected general election rematch.

Candidates from outside the Republican and Democratic parties rarely make a splash, if they can make the ballot to begin with. But third-party candidates don't usually carry Kennedy's famous last name or his

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existing network of supporters.

Kennedy made the stop in Phoenix as part of his laborious push to get access to the 2024 presidential ballot as an independent candidate, which he figures will require him to collect at least a million signatures across the country. Aides mingled in the crowd collecting filling up his petitions to qualify in Arizona.

Ballot access for independent and minor-party candidates is an expensive and complicated process, with each state setting its own rules for access. Campaigns usually hire people to collect signatures and often need a small army of lawyers to challenge ballot access rules and fight back against others trying to keep them off the ballot.

American Values 2024, a super PAC supporting Kennedy, has pledged to spend \$15 million to help him get on the ballot in 10 states. Kennedy secured a victory in Utah, where the lieutenant governor pushed back the deadline to qualify from January to March after Kennedy filed suit.

Kennedy is a member of one of the Democratic Party's most famous families — his father was the attorney general for his uncle, President John F. Kennedy. But he's more recently built closer ties to the far right, where his conspiratorial and isolationist views are at home.

Enriqueta Porras, a 52-year-old physician from Phoenix, voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Trump in 2020. She said she's torn about the third-party conundrum. She'd like to vote for someone she believes in like Kennedy but also wants to make sure Biden loses and may vote strategically.

"I don't want to be that person," Porras said, "but I feel like there's a lot at stake and that may just have to happen."

One of the nation's most prominent anti-vaccine activists, Kennedy has long had a loyal following of people who reject the scientific consensus that vaccines are safe and effective, and they form a backbone of his presidential campaign.

An organization that Kennedy founded, Children's Health Defense, currently has a lawsuit pending against a number of news organizations, among them The Associated Press, accusing them of violating antitrust laws by taking action to identify misinformation, including about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines.

Rigorous study and real-world evidence from hundreds of millions of administered shots prove that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Deaths caused by vaccination are extremely rare and the risks associated with not getting vaccinated are far higher than the risks of vaccination.

Among the dozen Kennedy supporters who spoke to the AP in Phoenix, many share his view that corporations, especially drug companies, wield too much power.

Debra Sheetz first started paying attention to Kennedy when she was doing her own research on COVID-19 vaccinations.

"I've been listening to him for the last several years," she said. "I was so interested when he decided to make this big leap into politics because he has a lot of good ideas. He can really speak to what people really care about."

Sheetz, 71, voted for Biden in 2020, she said sheepishly, because found him to have "more balance, a little more sanity" compared to Trump. But she's disillusioned by Biden's support for pandemic-era restrictions and what she sees as a loss of freedom to speak freely.

"We lost our First Amendment," said Sheetz, who lives in Ashland, Oregon, but has spent the past few years traveling the country in her RV. "The most important thing is the ability for free speech and free ideas to share. Other ways to look at things. If you lose that, authoritarianism is there."

Curt Eastin, a 65-year-old professional coach from Chandler, a Phoenix suburb, voted for Biden in 2020 but won't again. If Kennedy weren't running, he'd vote for Trump next year, he said.

"I like that I can trust him. I think he's honest," he said. "And even if I don't agree with him, I know that he came to his conclusions honestly. I can't trust any of the other people."

Kennedy is keenly aware that his fans avoid the mainstream media, where journalists often flag the falsity of his vaccine claims, in favor of free-wheeling alternative sources online. He said he's drawing support especially from young people but struggling with people in his own generation.

"The problem with the baby boomers, I think, is they get their news from MSNBC, Fox and CNN," he

told the crowd in Phoenix, which responded with boos. "Whereas young people are getting their news from podcasts and other alternative sources."

Third party or independent candidates rarely do well in presidential contests. Even the most successful recent example, Ross Perot in 1992, didn't win a single electoral vote despite winning 19% of the popular vote.

Sometimes, a minor-party candidate will get enough votes that partisans will blame them for tipping the scales to elect the popular vote loser, like Ralph Nader in 2000 or Jill Stein in 2016, both Green Party candidates.

"One of the biggest reasons I like him is because of his stance on partisanship in our House and our Senate, and I like how he wants to try and reunite both of them," said Michael Chacon, a 23-year-old student in Tempe who has never voted and still wasn't sure whether he will in 2024. "I think that's a really good idea. I think cooperation would go along way."

A man is killed and a woman injured in a 'targeted' afternoon shooting at a Florida shopping mall

OCALA, Fla. (AP) — Authorities in central Florida issued an arrest warrant Sunday for a 39-year-old man accused of fatally shooting another man at a shopping mall two days before Christmas in which police say the victim was "targeted."

As of Sunday afternoon, the suspect hadn't been located, and the Ocala Police Department was offering a \$5,000 award for any information leading to his arrest. The arrest warrant was for premeditated first-degree murder and attempted premeditated first-degree murder, the police department said on social media.

Ocala Police Chief Mike Balken told reporters Saturday evening that the victim was killed after he was shot multiple times in a common area at Paddock Mall in Ocala, located about 80 miles (127 kilometers) northwest of Orlando.

A woman also was shot in the leg. She was treated at a local hospital and expected to recover, Balken said.

The suspect fled the scene and left behind the firearm, Balken said.

Ocala police posted photos overnight of a person of interest that appear to be taken from a mall security camera. The three images show a male with a red cap and dark clothing. Balken previously said the suspect wore a hooded sweatshirt and a mask partially covering his face.

On Sunday, the police department urged a person who took the suspect's hat from the crime scene to turn it over to investigators or they would be charged with tampering with evidence.

"That hat may contain valuable DNA evidence, and we need it back," the Ocala Police Department said on social media. "We urge you to do the right thing and come forward immediately. Time is of the essence."

Police arrived at the mall around 3:40 p.m. Saturday after a call of multiple shots being fired at the mall.

"Officers immediately made entry into the mall (and) ultimately discovered that this was not what we would consider an active shooter," Balken told reporters.

The attack was likely a "targeted act of violence" against the man, Balken said.

Several other mall patrons suffered injuries during the shooting, with one person having chest pain and another reporting a broken arm, police said.

Police have asked the public for assistance by submitting mobile phone video of the shooting scene.

The mall's corporate owner, WPG, said in a statement that they were working with the Ocala Police Department in the investigation of what happened. The mall was closed Sunday, the day before Christmas.

"We are deeply saddened by this tragedy. Our thoughts are with all those involved," the statement said. "The safety of our guests, retailers and employees is our top priority."

The mall has dozens of stores, including J.C. Penney and Foot Locker.

Calvin and Diana Amos, who were shopping in the J.C. Penney store, told the Ocala Star-Banner that they evacuated the store quickly once they figured out what was going on. They described themselves as scared and apprehensive.

Death toll from China earthquake rises to 149, with 2 still missing

BEIJING (AP) — The death toll from China's most powerful earthquake in years has risen to 149, with two people still missing after the tremor hit northwestern parts of the country last week.

The 6.2-magnitude quake struck a remote mountainous area between Gansu and Qinghai provinces on Dec. 18, reducing homes to rubble and triggering heavy mudslides that inundated two villages in Qinghai province.

State broadcaster CCTV said Monday the death toll in Donghai city in Qinghai has risen by one, to 32, and rescuers were still searching for two missing people. In neighboring Gansu, authorities had reported 117 dead.

Nearly 1,000 were injured and more than 14,000 homes were destroyed in China's deadliest earthquake in nine years.

Primary schools in Jishishan county in Gansu resumed classes in tents on Monday, state media reported. Local authorities said they would use the upcoming winter break to repair damaged schools and erect temporary structures so that classes could resume as normal in the spring semester.

Authorities also rushed to erect temporary housing units for survivors facing temperatures well below freezing. CGTN, the state broadcaster's international arm, said the first batch of 500 temporary housing units had been built for residents in Meipo, a village in Gansu, on Friday night.

More than 87,000 people have been resettled after the quake.

The tremor caused economic losses estimated to be worth tens of millions of dollars in the agricultural and fisheries industries, according to state media.

Chinese Premier Li Qiang on Saturday visited several villages in Gansu and a county in Qinghai and urged authorities to improve living conditions for the survivors, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Li said the top priority of relief efforts was to make sure people stay warm and safe in winter.

Funerals were held throughout the week, some following the Muslim traditions of much of the population in the affected area.

Most of China's earthquakes strike in the western part of the country, including Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, as well as the Xinjiang region and Tibet.

The country's deadliest earthquake in recent years was a 7.9-magnitude tremor in 2008 that left nearly 90,000 dead or presumed dead and devastated towns and schools in Sichuan province, leading to a yearslong effort to rebuild with more resistant materials.

Dolphins nip Cowboys 22-20 on Jason Sanders' last-second field goal, secure playoff spot

By ALANIS THAMES AP Sports Writer

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. (AP) — Jason Sanders had waited all season for this moment. On a Miami Dolphins team that scores more touchdowns than any other in the NFL, the former All-Pro kicker hadn't needed to attempt many field goals.

Sanders entered Sunday's matchup against the Dallas Cowboys with just 21 field goal attempts on the year, but Miami needed his booming right leg in its biggest game of the season, and he delivered.

Sanders kicked his fifth field goal of the day, a 29-yarder as time expired, and the Dolphins secured a playoff berth with a 22-20 victory over the Cowboys.

"Not every year can be an All-Pro year," said Sanders, who is 22 of 26 on field goals and 5 of 7 from 50-plus yards. "I think I'm still hitting the kicks. I'm still right where I need to be."

Tua Tagovailoa threw for 293 yards and a touchdown for the AFC East-leading Dolphins (11-4), who beat a team with a winning record for the first time this season. He connected with Tyreek Hill twice on the decisive drive, which covered 64 yards and took the final 3:27 off the clock.

Hill, who leads the NFL in receiving yards, had nine catches for 99 yards after missing last week's victory

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over the New York Jets with an ankle injury.

Miami has the NFL's top passing and scoring offense, as well as a top-five rushing attack and an ascending defense. However, all the Dolphins' wins entering Week 16 came against teams that were .500 or worse.

"It's always big when you do something that, internally, you know that you're capable of," Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel said. "When it comes to fruition, it's pretty satisfying. ... Nobody on this team thought we were going to lose that game, and that's pretty cool when everyone tells you that you can't do X, Y or Z."

Dak Prescott went 20 of 32 for 253 yards and two touchdowns for the Cowboys (10-5), who have already clinched a playoff spot but fell a half-game behind Philadelphia in the NFC East.

Prescott put Dallas in front 20-19 with an 8-yard touchdown pass to a leaping Brandin Cooks in the corner of the end zone. But the Cowboys were haunted by their red-zone struggles earlier in the game, including a fumble by Prescott on first-and-goal from inside the 1 on Dallas' first possession.

"We're not taking any moral victories from this," Prescott said. "We will take some confidence. We're committed to one another and holding each other accountable in our goal."

Sanders' first field goal was a career-long 57-yarder in the first quarter. He added kicks of 52, 54 and 35 yards to help the Dolphins take a 19-10 lead late in the third.

Dallas got back into the red zone early in the fourth quarter, but Miami's defense held and the Cowboys settled for a field goal to get within 19-13.

Prescott's dynamic playmaking kept Dallas in it. On the go-ahead drive, he completed a pass to Michael Gallup as Miami linebacker Duke Riley was pulling him to the ground at the 21.

After Miami safety DeShon Elliott was flagged for defensive holding in the end zone on fourth-and-goal, Prescott got the ball to Cooks, who hauled in the ball over over All-Pro cornerback Jalen Ramsey.

CeeDee Lamb caught six passes for 118 yards for the Cowboys, including a 49-yard score in the first quarter.

Raheem Mostert scored his NFL-leading 21st touchdown of the season on a grab from Tagovailoa just before halftime. The 31-year-old, who was undrafted out of Purdue in 2015 and bounced around the league earlier in his career, had 46 yards rushing Sunday to put him over 1,000 yards for the first time in his career. He's the Dolphins' first 1,000-yard rusher since Jay Ajayi in 2016.

Miami defensive coordinator Vic Fangio opted to not have Ramsey shadow Lamb, and it initially looked like the dynamic fourth-year receiver would make him pay for it. Lamb torched the rest of Miami's secondary early for 93 yards on four catches in the first quarter.

Prescott hit Lamb on a crossing route that went 22 yards on the Cowboys' second possession. A few plays later, Lamb beat second-year cornerback Kader Kohou in the slot for a catch-and-run touchdown that put Dallas ahead 7-3.

After giving up more than 150 yards on Dallas' first two drives, Miami's defense settled in. Fangio dialed up more pressures, and it worked. The Dolphins sacked Prescott four times, which gave them a franchise-best 50 on the season and forced four straight Cowboys punts.

"It's just finally good to get over that hump of the narrative and changing the narrative to be what we want it to be," linebacker Bradley Chubb said, "and it's just been dope to see this team come together, not worry about the outsiders, the naysayers and just do what we do and prepare like we're a championship team each and every week."

INJURIES

Dolphins: WR Robbie Chosen left in the first quarter to be evaluated for a concussion and did not return. ... WR Jaylen Waddle left briefly after being poked in the eye in the second quarter. He returned, but then limped off the field after a tackle in the third quarter. He was ruled out with a shin injury.

UP NEXT

Cowboys: Host Detroit on Saturday night.

Dolphins: At Baltimore next Sunday.

A North American military command is tracking Santa's every move and kids can follow along

By SAGAR MEGHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As children around the world eagerly await Santa's arrival on Christmas, the military is closely tracking his every move.

Armed with radar, sensors, aircraft and Christmas spirit, the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado is reporting on the movements of Santa's sleigh since his takeoff from the North Pole for parts of the globe where Christmas comes first. Once again it is sharing those details so kids can follow along.

NORAD is the joint military command that is responsible for protecting U.S. and Canadian airspace, but it has a jolly side, too. It has launched its noradsanta.org website, social media sites and mobile app, loaded with games, movies, books and music.

By late Christmas Eve in Thailand, late morning Sunday in the eastern U.S., the tracker reported that Santa had departed Bangkok and moved on to Burma, Tibet, China and Russia, distributing nearly 2 billion gifts so far in his travels.

NORAD's findings could not be independently verified.

The White House said President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden participated in NORAD Santa tracking calls on Sunday evening with children and families across the country. A post from Jill Biden on the social media platform now known as X showed a picture of her and the president, sitting on a couch with a Christmas tree behind them, and said that NORAD had "confirmed the good news: Santa is on his way!"

The military is tracking Santa with "the same technology we use every single day to keep North America safe," said U.S. Air Force Col. Elizabeth Mathias, NORAD's chief spokesperson. "We're able to follow the light from Rudolph's red nose."

Mathias says that while NORAD has a good intelligence assessment of his sleigh's capabilities, Santa does not file a flight plan and may have some high-tech secrets up his red sleeve this year to help guide his travels — maybe even artificial intelligence.

"I don't know yet if he's using AI," said Mathias. "I'll be curious to see if our assessment of his flight this year shows us some advanced capabilities."

In 1955, Air Force Col. Harry Shoup — the commander on duty at the NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense Command — fielded a call from a child who dialed a misprinted telephone number in a newspaper department store ad, thinking she was calling Santa.

A fast-thinking Shoup quickly told his caller he was Santa, and as more calls came in, he assigned a duty officer to keep answering. And the Santa-tracking tradition began.

NORAD expects some 1,100 volunteers to help answer calls this year in a dedicated operations center at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs, ranging from command staff to people around the world.

"It's a bit of a bucket list item for some folks," says Mathias, calling the operations center "definitely the most festive place to be on December 24th."

The operations center is open Christmas Eve until midnight MST. Anyone can call 1-877 HI-NORAD (1-877-446-6723) to talk directly to NORAD staff members who will provide updates on Santa's exact location.

In a troubled world, Christians strive to put aside earthly worries on Christmas Eve

By DAVID McHUGH, ABDUL RAHMAN SHAHEEN and SHAZIA BHATTI Associated Press

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Christians around the world were striving on Christmas Eve to put aside the worries and fears of an unsettled, war-torn world as they prepared to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Before leading Sunday Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, Cardinal Timothy Dolan reminded congregants to keep war-torn parts of the Middle East in their Christmas prayers.

"As we anticipate Christmas, our hearts always go to the holy land," he said, referring to parts of Israel and

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the Palestinian territories. "The holy land is under a cloud, the holy land is suffering, the holy land is filled with violence and hatred and retribution. And this dulls and threatens to suffocate the joy of Christmas."

Believers in Syria gathered in a country still suffering from the aftermath of a long civil war and suffocating economic blockade. Despite festive lights and Christmas decorations adorning houses and shopfronts in the capital Damascus, events in Gaza and ongoing battles in parts of the country have left the holiday atmosphere subdued.

In Yabroud, a city north of Damascus, worshippers gathered in the St. Constantine and Helen Cathedral to enjoy Christmas carols sung by the Joy Choir from Damascus. "Everyone should try, with what the Lord has given them, to spread joy in order to help end this sorrow," said Fadi Homsy, a member of the choir.

Prosperous, mostly secular Europe marked the holiday in historic cathedrals and brightly lit holiday markets, with an undertone of tension spread by the war in Gaza and by one even closer to home in neighboring Ukraine. Wages that haven't yet caught up with inflation dampened the mood during the pre-holiday shopping and dining season.

Sightseeing-only visits were barred at Germany's landmark cathedral in Cologne and Christmas Eve worshippers faced security checks to get into midnight Mass there Sunday as police responded to indications of a potential attack. Still, officials urged people not to shy away from holiday celebrations out of fear.

Auxiliary Bishop Rolf Steinhäuser greeted people attending services with a relaxed smile and an expression of thanks for police security efforts, a day after police descended on the cathedral and searched it with sniffer dogs. With several dozen officers on duty outside, he said it was "probably the most secure church service in all of Germany."

In Austria, police said they also were stepping up security around Vienna's churches and Christmas markets, apparently responding to the same intelligence about a potential threat. They did not give further information, but the dpa news agency reported without citing a source that the threat was from an Islamic extremist group.

Cologne's towering cathedral, whose twin spires rise 157 meters (515 feet) high, is a major tourist destination visited by some 6 million people a year. It is home to the Shrine of the Three Kings, a gold- and silver-decorated casket said to contain the relics of the wise men described in the New Testament as paying homage to the newborn Jesus.

The European Union's home affairs commissioner, Ylva Johansson, warned Dec. 5 that Europe faces a "huge risk of terrorist attacks" over the Christmas holidays due to fallout from the war between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Johansson provided no details about any police or security information that might have led to her warning.

Ukraine is preparing to officially mark Christmas as a state holiday on Dec. 25 for the first time after moving the date in line with countries in Western Europe. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed legislation in July moving the holiday to Dec. 25 from Jan. 7, when it is observed by the Russian Orthodox Church and also by one of Ukraine's two competing Orthodox churches. Some Eastern Orthodox churches continue to use the ancient Julian calendar, under which Christmas falls 13 days later.

A note attached to the law said its goal was to "abandon Russian heritage" and cited "the desire of all Ukrainians to live their lives with their own traditions, holidays."

"The nights before Christmas are the longest of the year. However, the day has already begun to lengthen and the light has begun to prevail. The light grows stronger. Darkness will eventually lose. Evil will be defeated," Zelenskyy said in a video address Sunday.

In Pakistan's eastern Punjab province, Christians whose homes were destroyed or damaged by a Muslim mob in August celebrated against a background of fear in the city of Jaranwala. Christians fled their homes to escape the attackers, returning to scenes of destruction.

Jaranwala resident Ratan Bhatti said Christmas won't be like it used to be. "Every house used to be illuminated, decorated with stars," he said. "People are still in fear and grief. Our biggest church was burnt. It is difficult to forget that day."

The rampage was one of the most destructive attacks on Christians in Pakistan's history and drew

nationwide condemnation. The minority, who are among Pakistan's poorest, face an increasingly intolerant atmosphere in the Muslim-majority nation where radical religious and sectarian groups have become more prominent.

Local priest Khalid Mukhtar said people in Jaranwala had yet to emerge from their trauma. "We are yet to see the traditional spirit of Christmas. We are trying to motivate people to celebrate the festival with traditional fervor."

"We are determined to celebrate it," Mukhtar added.

Grounded charter jet freed to leave France. Lawyer says most passengers expected to return to India

By ANGELA CHARLTON and ELISE MORTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A charter plane sequestered while carrying 303 Indians to Nicaragua was authorized Sunday to leave the French airport where it has been grounded for four days for a human trafficking investigation. A lawyer for the airline said the plane would take many of the stranded passengers back to India on Monday.

Local authorities were working through Christmas Eve on formalities to allow some passengers to leave the small Vatry Airport in Champagne country, regional prosecutor Annick Browne told The Associated Press. All of the passengers, including a 21-month-old child, had been stuck in the airport terminal since Thursday.

Two passengers were detained as part of a special French investigation into suspected human trafficking by an organized criminal group. Several others requested asylum in France, according to the local administration. Prosecutors said 11 passengers were unaccompanied minors who were put under special administrative care.

The Legend Airlines A340 plane stopped Thursday for refueling in Vatry en route from Fujairah airport in United Arab Emirates for Managua, Nicaragua, and was grounded by police based on an anonymous tip that it could be carrying trafficking victims.

The airport was requisitioned by police for days, and then turned into a makeshift courtroom Sunday as judges, lawyers and translators filled the terminal to carry out emergency hearings to determine whether to keep the Indians sequestered any longer.

The hearings were halted midway because of a dispute over the procedure used to block the Indians in the airport, and a decision on next steps was expected overnight, the prosecutor said Sunday.

The seizure order for the airliner was lifted Sunday morning, a decision that "makes it possible to contemplate the passengers in the waiting area being rerouted," according to a statement from the Marne administration.

The French Civil Aviation Authority then set about trying to get the necessary permissions for the plane to take off once again, which should be in place "no later than Monday morning," according to the prefecture.

Legend Airlines lawyer Liliana Bakayoko told AP that the company hoped the plane could head to Mumbai, India, on Monday "with as many passengers as possible."

She estimated around 280 passengers should be able to leave. The prosecutor and regional administration could not confirm an exact figure.

Local officials, medics and volunteers installed cots and ensured regular meals and showers for those held in the airport. But lawyers at Sunday's hearings protested authorities' overall handling of the strange situation.

"I'm surprised at how things unfolded in the waiting area. People should have been informed of their rights, and clearly that was not the case," Francois Procureur, the head of the Châlons-en-Champagne Bar Association, told BFM television. He called the mass, hasty airport hearings "unprecedented."

Foreigners can be held up to four days in a transit zone for police investigations in France, after which a special judge must rule on whether to extend that for eight days.

Prosecutors wouldn't comment on what kind of trafficking was alleged, or whether the passengers' ulti-

mate destination was the U.S., which has seen a surge in Indians crossing the Mexico-U.S. border this year. The 15 crew members were questioned and released Saturday, Bakayoko said. She said the airline denied any role in possible human trafficking. A "partner" company that chartered the plane was responsible for verifying identification documents of each passenger and communicated their passport information to the airline 48 hours before the flight, Bakayoko said.

The U.S. government has designated Nicaragua as one of several countries deemed as failing to meet minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking. Nicaragua has also been used as a migratory springboard for people fleeing poverty or conflict because of relaxed or visa-free entry requirements for some countries. Sometimes charter flights are used for the journey.

Indian citizens were arrested 41,770 times entering the U.S. illegally from Mexico in the U.S. government's budget year that ended Sept. 30, more than double from 18,308 the previous year. ____

Morton reported from London. Associated Press journalist Jeffrey Schaeffer in Paris contributed to this report.

Manchester United announces deal to sell up to 25% of EPL club to UK billionaire Jim Ratcliffe

By JAMES ROBSON AP Soccer Writer

MANCHESTER, England (AP) — After failing to win the Premier League in the last 10 years, Manchester United announced Sunday that it had agreed to sell a minority stake in the storied club to Jim Ratcliffe in a deal that would also see the British billionaire and boyhood fan take control of its soccer operations.

"We all want to see Manchester United back where we belong, at the very top of English, European and world football," Ratcliffe said Sunday.

The record 20-time league champions have not won the title since former manager Alex Ferguson retired in 2013, prompting increased anger toward the Glazer family, United's American owners.

The announcement of a deal came more than a year after the club was put up for sale.

Ratcliffe, who owns petrochemicals giant INEOS and is one of Britain's richest people, has secured a stake of "up to 25%" in United and will invest \$300 million in its Old Trafford stadium.

Ratcliffe will provide \$200 million upon completion of the deal and a further \$100 million by the end of 2024, United said. In total the deal will be worth around \$1.6 billion, including the \$300 million of funding.

The deal is subject to approval by the Premier League.

United is currently eighth in the league and has already been eliminated from European competition. Under-fire manager Eric ten Hag watched his team lose 2-0 at West Ham on Saturday, United's 13th defeat in 26 games in all competitions this season.

Ratcliffe, who was born in Failsworth, Greater Manchester, had originally bid to buy the entire majority share of around 69% held by the Glazers.

"As a local boy and a lifelong supporter of the club, I am very pleased that we have been able to agree a deal with the Manchester United Board that delegates us management responsibility of the football operations of the club," Ratcliffe said.

"Whilst the commercial success of the club has ensured there have always been available funds to win trophies at the highest level, this potential has not been fully unlocked in recent times. We will bring the global knowledge, expertise and talent from the wider INEOS Sport group to help drive further improvement at the club, while also providing funds intended to enable future investment into Old Trafford."

The transaction will be funded by Trawlers Limited — a company wholly owned by Ratcliffe — without any debt, United said. United fans have been critical of the leveraged nature of the Glazers' buyout that loaded debt onto the club, as well as a perceived lack of investment and the dividends taken out by the owners.

Trawlers was named after a famous quote by former United great Eric Cantona. The Frenchman said at a news conference in 1995: "When the seagulls follow the trawler, it's because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea."

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Avram Glazer and Joel Glazer, United executive co-chairmen and directors, said in the statement: "Sir Jim and INEOS bring a wealth of commercial experience as well as significant financial commitment into the club. ... Manchester United has talented people right across the club and our desire is to always improve at every level to help bring our great fans more success in the future."

In November last year, the Glazers announced plans to seek new investment and instructed US merchant bank Raine to oversee the process, which included the potential of a full sale.

Ratcliffe had been in competition with Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani to buy out the Glazers, who also own the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers. But after months of protracted negotiations Sheikh Jassim withdrew his bid in October to leave Ratcliffe in position to take a minority share in the club.

Sheikh Jassim always maintained he was interested in a complete takeover.

United said Ratcliffe had paid \$33 per share.

'MIXED FEELINGS'

Uncertainty over the ownership had led to fan protests outside the club's Old Trafford stadium, while chants of "Glazers out" have been regularly heard during games.

While Ratcliffe was long seen by fans as a popular potential owner, his minority investment means the Glazers remain in place, despite years of fan campaigns to drive them out.

Manchester United Supporters Trust (MUST) felt fans would be left with "mixed feelings" after Ratcliffe's investment left the Glazers still in overall charge.

"We welcome the investment from a boyhood red, Sir Jim Ratcliffe and his INEOS company, but many will wish his ownership stake was greater than the initially rumored 25%," MUST said. "We note the statements that he and his team will control sporting activities, yet puzzle how any organization can put its very core business in the hands of a minority shareholder, and how that meaningfully works in practice."

MUST added: "Today might — just might — be a step forward for Manchester United after some very difficult years."

The late tycoon Malcolm Glazer bought United in 2005 for 790 million pounds (then about \$1.4 billion) amid a backlash from supporters.

Ratcliffe is said to be worth around \$15 billion and tried to buy Premier League club Chelsea last year.

He already owns French soccer club Nice, cycling team INEOS Grenadiers, and is a one-third shareholder of the Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula One team. INEOS Britannia competes in the America's Cup.

WHAT'S NEXT?

INEOS' responsibility for the management of United's soccer operations is set to include "all aspects" of both the men's and women's teams as well as the academies.

Just how Ratcliffe and INEOS will implement those on a day-to-day basis remains to be seen.

United's statement noted the deal was still "subject to customary regulatory approvals" which is expected to take some time. The process must be ratified by the Premier League and also an official announcement made via the New York Stock Exchange.

There have been suggestions it could take up to six weeks for changes to the club's ownership to be established with all the relevant parties.

BAD TIMING?

Former United captain Gary Neville attacked the timing of the announcement, which came at 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

"Manchester United 2023 has been a disgrace to the end," the soccer pundit wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. "The timing of this is truly awful and no functioning organization would even think about it."

Neville added: "Anyway all the very best to Jim Ratcliffe and I hope he can somehow work out a way to get the club right again and back to being something respectable on and off the pitch."

Mike Nussbaum, prolific Chicago stage actor with film roles including 'Field of Dreams,' dies at 99

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Mike Nussbaum, reputed as the oldest professional actor in America with a prolific stage career and roles in films including "Field of Dreams" and "Men in Black," has died. He was 99.

He died of old age at his Chicago home on Saturday, just days before his 100th birthday, his daughter, Karen Nussbaum, told The Associated Press.

"He was a good father and a good man who raised us to care about other people and respect other people and care about justice," she said.

Mike Nussbaum was acknowledged by the Actor's Equity Association union multiple times in the past several years as the oldest professional actor in the country. When asked about his status as a working nonagenarian over the years, Nussbaum said he simply enjoyed the work.

"I am gifted and lucky to still be able to do the thing that is the most fun for me in life," he told WBEZ Chicago in 2019 when he was 94 years old. "As long as I can do it, I will."

Born in December 1923 in Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood, Nussbaum first acted in summer camps. He didn't pursue acting full time until he was in his 40s, working for a time as an exterminator. He received his Equity card in the 1970s.

Nussbaum spent more than 50 years on stages in the Chicago area, including at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. He played Shylock in a 2005 production of "The Merchant of Venice" and Gremio in "The Taming of the Shrew," among many other roles.

In 1984, he won a Drama Desk Award for his performance in David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross," which won a Pulitzer Prize the same year. Nussbaum worked with Mamet often over the years.

Nussbaum performed into his 90s, including a 2017 role as Albert Einstein in the play "Relativity" at Northlight Theatre in suburban Skokie, where he also served briefly as artistic director.

"His genius was that you couldn't tell he was acting," said B.J. Jones, a longtime friend and colleague who is current artistic director at Northlight. "His level of truth was unparalleled. You never saw him sweat. He wasn't trying to draw attention to himself."

Though he was primarily a stage actor, his film credits included a school principal in "Field of Dreams" and in "Men in Black" as Gentle Rosenberg, whose head opens during a pivotal scene to reveal a small alien creature.

A private funeral service is planned. A public memorial service will be held next year.

Finding new dimensions, sisterhood, and healing in 'The Color Purple'

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

It's not a secret that Fantasia Barrino did not want to play Celie again. The "American Idol" winner hadn't had the best time doing "The Color Purple" on Broadway.

The protagonist of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel tells her story of sexual, physical and psychological abuses in the early 20th century South in a series of letters to God. And it was a character she found it difficult to leave behind at the end of the day. Even the prospect of starring in her first major motion picture didn't seem worth it.

But director Blitz Bazawule had a different vision: He wanted to give Celie an imagination. This Barrino found intriguing.

"Once she understood the assignment, she quickly agreed," Bazawule said in a recent interview with The Associated Press.

Now, four decades after "The Color Purple" became a literary sensation and a Steven Spielberg film, the story is on the big screen again. This time it's a grand, big budget Warner Bros. musical starring Barrino, Taraji P. Henson, as the sultry singer Shug Avery, and Danielle Brooks, reprising her Broadway role as the

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strong-willed Sofia. It opens in theaters nationwide on Christmas.

"I'm glad that I didn't allow my fear of my past experience with Celie, because of where my life was at that time, to hinder me from doing something is great," Barrino said. "I'm riding on a high right now."

Oprah Winfrey is one of several big-name producers on "The Color Purple," alongside Spielberg, Quincy Jones and Scott Sanders. Winfrey got her acting break and first Oscar nomination playing Sofia in the 1985 adaptation, before helping Sanders turn it into a Broadway musical 20 years later.

Bazawule was not an obvious candidate to direct this film, however. The multi-hyphenate Ghanaian artist had received acclaim and recognition for co-directing Beyoncé's visual album "Black is King." The only other film he had under his belt was the microbudget "The Burial Of Kojo," which was made for less than \$100,000.

But he had ambitious ideas involving large scale musical numbers that would take audiences on a dazzling journey through the history of Black music in America, from gospel to blues to jazz. And, of course, Celie's inner life. He wasn't at all sure he would get it, but he knew the story he wanted to tell.

"I thought, if I could just find a way to show the audience how this Black woman from the rural South was able to imagine her way out of pain and trauma it will debunk a myth that is that people who have dealt with abusing trauma are docile and passive or waiting to be saved," Bazawule said. "If we could just imbue in (Celie) that scale, then that's the version that needed to exist. Thankfully they said yes."

They would have to jump through some hoops, however, to secure the kind of budget (reportedly around \$100 million) that they needed to support the vision, including auditioning Henson, an Oscar-nominated actor, and Brooks, who already had a Tony nomination for her portrayal of Sofia.

"We were not the studio's choices" Henson said. "I just felt some way about having to audition. I'm Academy Award nominated. I had just got finished singing on NBC's 'Annie Live.' But I checked my ego and I did it. I went in as Shug. I found a dress, had a flower in my hair and faux fur stole and I kicked the door down because I didn't want them to ever second guess me again."

For Brooks, it was a six-month process that had her doubting herself. A lot of the people involved in "The Color Purple" felt the exhaustion of both having to prove themselves yet again, but also wanting to rise to the challenge nonetheless because this film was worth it.

"This is a huge undertaking to be part of," said Brooks. "This movie is about legacy and it's what I've been calling a cinematic heirloom."

Her Broadway production was very minimalist and stripped down, so to be on location in Georgia, around Macon, Savannah, Atlanta and the small town of Grantville, was revelatory.

"My world really opened up because I got to use all of my senses," Brooks said. "I got to explore all of Sofia because now I have a juke joint and I have a dinner table. I have a house. We had a white mob attacking me."

The juke joint was a real set that required a real swamp to be dredged, where they'd stage Shug's showstopper, "Push Da Button."

"It's probably the perfect confluence of my amazing technical and creative teams," Bazawule said.

The film gives a new boldness to Celie and Shug's relationship with one another and more dimensions to the male characters, including Colman Domingo's Mister.

And all carry the weight of responsibility not only to the material and its predecessors, but also to future films made with primarily Black casts at this level.

"It's not the first time I have been in a production of this scale but what matters to me is that it's a Black production and it's a production with Black producer, a Black director, predominately Black cast," Henson said. "It's like usually we're supposed to make a dollar out of 15 cents. And after 20+ in the game, it's like finally the studio trusted us to deliver."

The question of awards is a loaded one. Though "The Color Purple" has all the makings of a big Oscar contender (Barrino and Brooks have already been nominated for Golden Globes), it comes with history. Spielberg's film was nominated for 11 Oscars and infamously won none. And then there is the even stickier subject of Black women and Hollywood awards. Halle Berry remains the only Black best actress Oscar winner.

Bazawule is not particularly interested in the "dog and pony show" of awards season. It's hard for him to fathom how anyone can pit one film against another, but he does understand that there are real gains in earning potential and creative freedom that happen if his actors, especially the women, get nominated and win.

"Our job was to go in and honor Alice Walker's brilliant book. We did that. We found our healing through it and we're an amazing group together. Our Q&As are out of this world," he said, before taking a pause. "Now THAT I want and award for."

All seem to agree that what they experienced is bigger than any validation from an award.

"There's something magical about this story," Brooks said. "It really does tamper with your heart in the best way. It opens it up. I've never experienced anything like what I've experienced during the journey of working on 'The Color Purple.'"

Pope says 'our hearts are in Bethlehem' as he presides over the Christmas Eve Mass in St. Peter's

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Recalling Jesus' birth in a stable in Bethlehem, Pope Francis in a Christmas Eve homily said that "the clash of arms even today" prevents Jesus "from finding room in the world."

The pontiff presided Sunday over the evening Mass attended by about 6,500 faithful who took their place amid the splendor of St. Peter's Basilica behind rows of white-clad prelates.

"Our hearts are in Bethlehem, where the Prince of Peace is once more rejected by the futile logic of war," the pope said, referring to the war sparked by Hamas' deadly Oct. 7 rampage and hostage-taking in Israel.

As Mass began, a statuette of the Christ child was unveiled before the altar bedecked in greenery and white flowers, and children representing all corners of the globe placed flowers around a gilded throne.

Francis, draped in white robes, led the Mass standing at the foot of one of St. Peter's grand columns.

Recalling that Jesus was born during a census meant to reinforce King David's power, Francis warned against "the quest for worldly power and might, fame and glory, which measures everything in terms of success, results, numbers and figures, a world obsessed with achievement."

By contrast, Jesus entered the world humbly, taking human flesh. "Here, we see not a god of wrath and chastisement, but the God of mercy, who takes flesh and enters the world in weakness," the pope said.

A pagan deity is linked to "power, worldly success and idolatry of consumerism," the pope said. "God, on the other hand, waves no magic wand; he is no god of commerce who promises everything all at once. He does not save us by pushing a button, but draws near us, in order to change our world from within."

When the Christmas Eve Mass ended, the pope, pushed in a wheelchair, moved down the basilica with the life-sized statue of Baby Jesus on his lap and flanked by children carrying bouquets. The statue was placed in a manger in a nativity scene in the basilica.

Francis, 87, has been using a wheelchair to navigate long distances due to a painful knee ligament and a cane for shorter distances.

During the traditional Angelus blessing overlooking St. Peter's Square at midday, the pontiff remembered those suffering from war, recalling specific fighting in Ukraine and Israel's bombardment and siege of the Gaza Strip in response to Hamas' attack.

"We are close to our brothers and sisters suffering from war. We think of Palestine, Israel, Ukraine. We also think of those who suffer from misery, hunger, slavery," Francis said. "May the God who took a human heart for himself infuse humanity into the hearts of men," he added.

Speaking from the window of his studio to the thousands of faithful gathered in St. Peter's Square for the Angelus prayer, the pontiff also invited the faithful "not to confuse celebration with consumerism. One can and, as a Christian, must celebrate in simplicity without waste and by sharing with those who lack necessities or lack companionship."

Traditionally, Catholics mark Christmas Eve by attending Mass at midnight. But over the years, the starting time at the Vatican has crept earlier, reflecting the health or stamina of popes and then the pandemic.

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The Vatican has kept a 7:30 p.m. time originally set during a pandemic curfew.

On Christmas Day, tens of thousands of Romans, tourists and pilgrims were expected to crowd into St. Peter's Square to hear Pope Francis deliver an address on world issues and give his blessing. The speech, known in Latin as "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and to the world), is traditionally an occasion to review crises including war, persecution and hunger, in many parts of the globe.

On the weekend before Christmas, 'Aquaman' sequel drifts to first

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

"Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom" led a crowd of new releases at the box office on the weekend before Christmas Monday. The DC and Warner Bros. superhero sequel starring Jason Momoa earned an estimated \$28.1 million in its first three days of release in 3,706 locations in North America, according to studio estimates Sunday. By Monday it is projected to have around \$40 million in domestic ticket sales.

Despite many new offerings — including the family friendly animated film "Migration," the R-rated romantic comedy "Anyone But You," the wrestling tragedy "The Iron Claw" and a ghostly tearjerker in "All of Us Strangers" — this will go down as a quieter pre-holiday frame at the box office. Moviegoing audiences perhaps just had other priorities than going to the cinema.

It is never great for Hollywood or theaters when Christmas Eve falls on a prime weekend day, but the last time Christmas was on a Monday, in 2017, "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" dominated the four-day charts with \$71.5 million from its second weekend.

On Christmas Day, which often brings big crowds back to the theaters, they'll be joined by more new films, including the big budget musical adaptation of "The Color Purple," Michael Mann's racing film "Ferrari" and George Clooney's adaptation of the rowing drama "The Boys in the Boat." All should get a boost between Christmas and New Years, too, a traditionally lucrative time for movie theaters.

But none will compare some of the biggest holiday earners, like "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," "Avatar" and "Spider-Man: No Way Home." It was not lost on social media that this was the weekend that Patty Jenkins' Star Wars movie "Rogue Squadron" was supposed to come out.

"Seven openers in the course of four days is unusual," said Paul Dergarabedian, the senior media analyst for Comscore.

"Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom" is estimated to have cost around \$200 million to produce, not including marketing and promotion costs. Including international estimates at \$80 million through Monday, "Aquaman" is heading toward a \$120 million global debut.

The first film opened to \$67.8 million in 2018 and went on to make almost \$1.2 billion globally. Dergarabedian noted that the first film also earned more than 70% of its box office internationally.

The "Aquaman" opening ends a tricky, transitional year for DC superhero films, full of box office disappointments including "Shazam! Fury of the Gods," "The Flash" and "Blue Beetle," as the studio phases out this slate to welcome in James Gunn's vision for the future. "Aquaman 2" was the final "holdover" of the previous administration.

Its studio, Warner Bros. also has the No. 2 movie of the weekend, "Wonka" and one of the major Christmas openings, "The Color Purple," a buffet of big movies that was sorely needed by theaters — especially without no new movie from the Walt Disney Company or Paramount. By Monday, Warner Bros. will likely have three spots in the top five.

"Warners has something for everybody" said Jeff Goldstein, the studio's head of domestic distribution. "With lots of holiday time to see all three."

"Wonka," in its second weekend, earned an estimated \$17.7 million over the weekend and \$26.1 million including Monday, bringing its total domestic earnings to \$83.6 million.

Third place went to Illumination and Universal's "Migration," a PG-rated animated adventure about a family of mallards traveling South. Voice actors include Kumail Najiani, Elizabeth Banks and Awkwafina. It earned an estimated \$12.3 million from 3,761 locations in North America through Sunday, which will likely increase to \$17.1 million by the end of Monday. Its global total through Sunday is sitting at an estimated

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\$34.3 million, and it could soar with kids out of school.

"Migration" flew into theaters with really, really exciting audience reactions pointing to what we think won't just be a fantastic run throughout the holidays but also into the next year," said Jim Orr, Universal's head of domestic distribution.

Aside from Disney's re-releases of some of its Pixar titles early in the year, there will be no new direct competition until "Kung Fu Panda 4" comes out on March 8.

In fifth place was the Telugu-language action film "Salaar: Part 1—Ceasefire," which made \$5.5 million from only 802 theaters. The top 10 was rounded out by another Indian film, the Hindi-language "Dunki," which earned \$2.7 million from 686 locations. The top 10 also included two Japanese films in "Godzilla Minus One" and "The Boy and the Heron."

Female audiences helped the Glen Powell and Sydney Sweeney romantic comedy "Anyone But You" land a fourth place start with an estimated \$6.2 million from its first three days and nearly \$9 million including Monday. Directed by Will Gluck, the movie that was loosely inspired by "Much Ado About Nothing" divided critics sharply with some crying foul and others celebrating the return of a beloved genre that has recently seemed relegated to Netflix. Audiences gave it a B+ CinemaScore.

A24's "The Iron Claw," about the tragedy-stricken Von Erich wrestling family, opened on 2,774 screens riding a wave of good reviews praising Zac Efron's transformative lead performance. The studio estimates its three-day earnings to be \$5.1 million, which should go up to \$7.5 million by the end of Monday. It got an A- CinemaScore from audiences, which is the highest ever for the studio behind "Everything Everywhere All At Once." The studio also has Jonathan Glazer's "The Zone of Interest" on six screens where it made \$89,931 over the weekend.

Searchlight Pictures' "All of Us Strangers," starring Andrew Scott and Paul Mescal, opened in four theaters in New York and Los Angeles this weekend with a strong \$33,034 per/theater average. Yorgos Lanthimos' gothic black comedy "Poor Things" also expanded to 800 theaters where it earned \$2.1 million.

"No matter where the box office ends up on the 31, whether it hits \$9 billion or is just close, this is just a boom time to be a moviegoer," Dergarabedian said. "The top 10 reads like a greatest hits of every type of cinema."

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore. Final domestic figures including Christmas Day will be released Tuesday.

1. "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom," \$28.1 million.
2. "Wonka," \$17.7 million.
3. "Migration," \$12.3 million.
4. "Anyone But You," \$6.2 million.
5. "Salaar: Part 1-Ceasefire," \$5.5 million.
6. "The Iron Claw," \$5.1 million.
7. "The Hunger Games: The Ballard of Songbirds & Snakes," \$3.2 million
8. "The Boy and the Heron," \$3.2 million.
9. "Godzilla Minus One," \$2.7 million.
10. "Dunki," \$2.7 million.

As conflicts rage abroad, a fractured Congress tries to rally support for historic global challenges

By STEPHEN GROVES and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the Senate wrapped up its work for the year, Sen. Michael Bennet took to the floor of the nearly empty chamber and made a late-night plea for Congress to redouble support for Ukraine: "Understand the stakes at this moment."

It was the third time in recent months the Colorado Democrat has kept the Senate working late by holding up unrelated legislation in a bid to cajole lawmakers to approve tens of billions of dollars in weaponry and economic aid for Ukraine. During a nearly hour-long, emotional speech, he called on senators to see

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the nearly 2-year-old conflict as a defining clash of authoritarianism against democracy and implored them to consider what it means for Ukrainians to fight "on that freezing front line and not know whether we're going to come through with the ammunition."

Yet Congress broke for the holidays and is not expected to return for two weeks while continued aid for Ukraine has nearly been exhausted. The Biden administration is planning to send one more aid package before the new year, but says it will be the last unless Congress approves more money.

With support slipping in Congress even as conflicts and unrest rattle global security, the United States is once again struggling to assert its role in the world. Under the influence of Donald Trump, the former president who is now the Republican Party front-runner, GOP lawmakers have increasingly taken a skeptical stance toward U.S. involvement abroad, particularly when it comes to Ukraine.

Leaders of traditional allies Britain and France have implored Western nations to continue their robust support, but Russia's President Vladimir Putin is emboldened and building up resources for a fresh effort as the war heads towards its third year.

Bolstering Ukraine's defense used to be celebrated in the Capitol as one of a few remaining bipartisan causes. But now the fate of roughly \$61 billion in funding is tied to delicate policy negotiations on Capitol Hill over border and immigration changes. And in the last year, lawmakers have had to mount painstaking, round-the-clock efforts to pass even legislation that maintains basic functions of the U.S. government.

Still, congressional leaders are trying to rally members to address global challenges they say are among the most difficult in decades: the largest land invasion of a European nation since World War II, a war between Israel and Hamas, unrest and economic calamity driving historic levels of migration and China asserting itself as a superpower.

In the Senate, both Democratic and Republican leaders have cast the \$110 billion aid package, which is attempting to address all those issues, as a potential turning point for democracy around the world. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters last week that "history will look back if we don't support our ally in Ukraine."

In a year-end speech, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said: "From South Texas to Southeast Asia and from the Black Sea to the Red Sea, it is an historically challenging and consequential time to protect America's interests, our allies and our own people."

The Republican leader, a key supporter of Ukraine aid, has tried for months to build support in his party for Ukraine. But after a \$6 billion military and civilian aid package for Ukraine collapsed in October, McConnell began telling top White House officials that any funding would need to be paired with border policy changes.

The White House deliberately stayed out of the negotiations until senior officials felt the time was right to do so. But senior Republicans involved in the border talks believe the administration stepped in too late, ultimately delaying the prospects of additional Ukraine aid getting approved until the new year.

Senate negotiators have had to navigate both the explosive politics of border policy as well as one of the most complex areas of American law.

"This is a tightrope, but we are still on it," said Sen. Chris Murphy, the lead Democratic negotiator.

The White House's strategy of including Republican priorities such as Israel aid and border security in the package has also raised several thorny issues for Democrats.

Progressive lawmakers, critical of Israel's campaign into Gaza that has killed thousands of civilians, have called for humanitarian conditions to be placed on the money for Israel. And Latino Democrats in both the Senate and House have also been critical of restrictions on asylum claims.

Any package also faces deep uncertainty in the House, where Republican Speaker Mike Johnson holds tenuous control of the closely divided chamber. Before becoming speaker in October, Johnson had repeatedly voted against aid for Ukraine, but he has surprised many by offering support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and saying he wants to find a way to approve the aid.

But Trump's allies in the House have repeatedly tried to stop the U.S. from sending more aid to Ukraine.

As the border and immigration talks drag forward in the Senate, Johnson has pushed for sweeping measures. On social media, he has called for "transformational change to secure the border," and pointed

to a hardline bill that passed the House on a party-line vote.

As senators left Washington, they still sought to assure Ukrainians that American help was on its way. White House staff and Senate negotiations planned to work on drafting border legislation for the next two weeks in hopes that it would be ready for action when Congress returns.

Schumer told The Associated Press he was "hopeful," but "I wouldn't go so far as to say confident yet." He sought to put the pressure on Republicans, saying they needed to be ready to compromise.

Yet Sen. Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican who is a Ukraine supporter, expressed confidence that Congress would act. He alluded to the words of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, another European leader who eventually elicited robust support from the U.S. to repel an invasion.

"Americans will always do the right thing," Wicker said. "After they've exhausted every other alternative."

On Christmas Eve, Bethlehem resembles a ghost town. Celebrations are halted due to Israel-Hamas war.

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — The typically bustling biblical birthplace of Jesus resembled a ghost town Sunday after Christmas Eve celebrations in Bethlehem were called off due to the Israel-Hamas war.

The festive lights and Christmas tree that normally decorate Manger Square were missing, as were the throngs of foreign tourists and jubilant youth marching bands that gather in the West Bank town each year to mark the holiday. Dozens of Palestinian security forces patrolled the empty square.

"This year, without the Christmas tree and without lights, there's just darkness," said Brother John Vinh, a Franciscan monk from Vietnam who has lived in Jerusalem for six years.

Vinh said he always comes to Bethlehem to mark Christmas, but this year was especially sobering. He gazed at a nativity scene in Manger Square with a baby Jesus wrapped in a white shroud, reminiscent of the thousands of children killed in the fighting in Gaza.

Barbed wire surrounded the scene, the grey rubble reflecting none of the joyous lights and bursts of color that normally fill the square during the Christmas season. Cold, rainy weather added to the grim mood.

The cancellation of Christmas festivities was a severe blow to the town's economy. Tourism accounts for an estimated 70% of Bethlehem's income — almost all of that during the Christmas season.

With many major airlines canceling flights to Israel, few foreigners are visiting. Local officials say over 70 hotels in Bethlehem were forced to close, leaving thousands of people unemployed.

Gift shops were slow to open on Christmas Eve, although a few did once the rain had stopped pouring down. There were few visitors, however.

"We can't justify putting out a tree and celebrating as normal, when some people (in Gaza) don't even have houses to go to," said Ala'a Salameh, one of the owners of Afteem Restaurant, a family-owned falafel restaurant just steps from the square.

Salameh said Christmas Eve is usually the busiest day of the year. "Normally, you can't find a single chair to sit, we're full from morning till midnight," said Salameh. On Sunday morning, just one table was taken, by journalists taking a break from the rain.

Under a banner that read "Bethlehem's Christmas bells ring for a cease-fire in Gaza," a few teenagers offered small inflatable Santas, but no one was buying.

Instead of their traditional march through the streets of Bethlehem, young scouts stood silently with flags. A group of local students unfurled a massive Palestinian flag as they stood in silence.

An organist with the Church of the Nativity choir, Shukry Mubarak, said the group changed much of the traditional Christmas musical repertoire from joyful holiday songs to more solemn hymns in minor keys.

"Our message every year on Christmas is one of peace and love, but this year it's a message of sadness, grief and anger in front of the international community with what is happening and going on in the Gaza Strip," Bethlehem's mayor, Hana Haniyeh, said in an address to the crowd.

Dr. Joseph Mugasa, a pediatrician, was one of the few international visitors. He said his tour group of 15 people from Tanzania was "determined" to come to the region despite the situation.

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"I've been here several times, and it's quite a unique Christmas, as usually there's a lot of people and a lot of celebrations," he said. "But you can't celebrate while people are suffering, so we are sad for them and praying for peace."

More than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 50,000 wounded during Israel's air and ground offensive against Gaza's Hamas rulers, according to health officials there, while some 85% of the territory's 2.3 million residents have been displaced.

The war was triggered by Hamas' deadly assault Oct. 7 on southern Israel in which militants killed about 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took more than 240 hostages.

The Gaza war has been accompanied by a surge in West Bank violence, with some 300 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire.

The fighting has affected life across the Israeli-occupied territory. Since Oct. 7, access to Bethlehem and other Palestinian towns in the West Bank has been difficult, with long lines of motorists waiting to pass military checkpoints. The restrictions have also prevented tens of thousands of Palestinians from exiting the territory to work in Israel.

Amir Michael Giacaman opened his store, "Il Bambino," which sells olive wood carvings and other souvenirs, for the first time since Oct. 7. There have been no tourists, and few local residents have money to spare because those who worked in Israel have been stuck at home.

"When people have extra money, they go buy food," said his wife, Safa Giacaman. "This year, we're telling the Christmas story. We're celebrating Jesus, not the tree, not Santa Claus, she said, as their daughter Mikaella ran around the deserted store.

The fighting in Gaza was on the minds of the small Christian community in Syria, which is coping with a civil war now in its 13th year. Christians said they were trying to find joy, despite the ongoing strife in their homeland and in Gaza.

"Where is the love? What have we done with love?" said the Rev. Elias Zahlawi, a priest in Yabroud, a city about 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Damascus. "We've thrown God outside the realm of humanity and unfortunately, the church has remained silent in the face of this painful reality."

Some tried to find inspiration in the spirit of Christmas.

Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, arriving from Jerusalem for the traditional procession to the Church of the Nativity, told the sparse crowd that Christmas was a "reason to hope" despite the war and violence.

The pared-down Christmas was in keeping with the original message of the holiday and illustrated the many ways the community is coming together, said Stephanie Saldaña, who is originally from San Antonio, Texas, and has lived in Jerusalem and Bethlehem for the past 15 years with her husband, a parish priest at the St Joseph Syriac Catholic Church.

"We feel Christmas as more real than ever, because we're waiting for the prince of peace to come. We are waiting for a miracle to stop this war," Saldaña said.

As conflicts rage abroad, a fractured Congress tries to rally support for historic global challenges

By STEPHEN GROVES and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the Senate wrapped up its work for the year, Sen. Michael Bennet took to the floor of the nearly empty chamber and made a late-night plea for Congress to redouble support for Ukraine: "Understand the stakes at this moment."

It was the third time in recent months the Colorado Democrat has kept the Senate working late by holding up unrelated legislation in a bid to cajole lawmakers to approve tens of billions of dollars in weaponry and economic aid for Ukraine. During a nearly hour-long, emotional speech, he called on senators to see the nearly 2-year-old conflict as a defining clash of authoritarianism against democracy and implored them to consider what it means "to be fighting on that freezing front line and not know whether we're going to come through with the ammunition."

Yet Congress broke for the holidays and is not expected to return for two weeks while continued aid for

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Ukraine has nearly been exhausted. The Biden administration is planning to send one more aid package before the new year, but says it will be the last unless Congress approves more money.

With support slipping in Congress even as conflicts and unrest rattle global security, the United States is once again struggling to assert its role in the world. Under the influence of Donald Trump, the former president who is now the Republican Party front-runner, GOP lawmakers have increasingly taken a skeptical stance toward U.S. involvement abroad, particularly when it comes to aid to Ukraine.

Leaders of traditional allies Britain and France have implored Western nations to continue their robust support, but Russia's President Vladimir Putin is emboldened and building up resources for a fresh effort as the war heads towards its third year.

Ukraine's lifelines to the West are also imperiled in the European Union, which sent 1.5 billion euros (\$1.6 billion) each month to ensure macroeconomic stability, pay wages and pensions, keep hospitals and schools running, provide shelter for displaced people and rebuild infrastructure destroyed in the war.

That package has now expired and the EU's executive branch failed to produce another one for the new year when Hungary vetoed a 50 billion euro (\$55 billion) package this month.

Bolstering Ukraine's defense used to be celebrated in the U.S. Capitol as one of a few remaining bipartisan causes. But now the fate of roughly \$61 billion in funding is tied to delicate policy negotiations on Capitol Hill over border and immigration changes. And in the last year, lawmakers have had to mount painstaking, round-the-clock efforts to pass even legislation that maintains basic functions of the U.S. government. Bills with ambitious changes have been almost completely out of reach for the closely divided Congress.

Still, congressional leaders are trying to rally members to address global challenges they say are among the most difficult in decades: the largest land invasion of a European nation since World War II, a war between Israel and Hamas, unrest and economic calamity driving historic levels of migration and China asserting itself as a superpower.

In the Senate, both Democratic and Republican leaders have cast the \$110 billion aid package, which is attempting to address all those issues, as a potential turning point for democracy around the world. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters last week that "history will look back if we don't support our ally in Ukraine."

"We're living in a time when there are all kinds of forces that are tearing at democracy, at here and abroad," Bennet said.

In a year-end speech, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said: "From South Texas to Southeast Asia and from the Black Sea to the Red Sea, it is an historically challenging and consequential time to protect America's interests, our allies and our own people."

The Republican leader, a key supporter of Ukraine aid, has tried for months to build support in his party for Ukraine. But after a \$6 billion military and civilian aid package for Ukraine collapsed in October, McConnell began telling top White House officials that any funding would need to be paired with border policy changes.

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Senate negotiators have had to navigate both the explosive politics of border policy as well as one of the most complex areas of American law.

"This is a tightrope, but we are still on it," said Sen. Chris Murphy, the lead Democratic negotiator.

At one point during the negotiations, McConnell felt compelled to stress the urgency to administration officials and impose a deadline to reach a border deal in time for the agreement to be drafted into legislative provisions before the end of the year.

With the negotiations still plodding along, McConnell called White House chief of staff Jeff Zients on Dec. 7 and said a deal must be reached within five days — a message that the Kentucky Republican emphasized to President Joe Biden himself when the two men spoke later that day, according to a person familiar with the discussions.

It wouldn't be until five days later, on Dec. 12, that Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and

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senior White House aides came to the Capitol to participate directly in the negotiations. A White House official said the administration got involved when it did because it felt the talks had moved beyond the realm of unacceptable or unattainable measures — and to a more productive phase.

A second White House official stressed that previous legislative negotiations, such as the bipartisan infrastructure law that is now more than two years old, started similarly, with Republican and Democratic senators talking on their own and the administration stepping in once it felt the talks were ready for White House involvement.

Still, “it would be nice to have had them earlier,” Oklahoma Sen. James Lankford, the chief GOP negotiator, said last week.

“We would have a lot more progress, and we would have had potential to be able to get this done by this week if they would have gotten earlier,” Lankford said. The two White House officials and the person familiar with McConnell’s phone call to Biden all spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private and ongoing negotiations.

The White House’s strategy of including Republican priorities such as Israel aid and border security in the package has also raised several thorny issues for Democrats.

Progressive lawmakers, critical of Israel’s campaign into Gaza that has killed thousands of civilians, have called for humanitarian conditions to be placed on the money for Israel. And Latino Democrats in both the Senate and House have also been critical of restrictions on asylum claims.

Any package also faces deep uncertainty in the House, where Republican Speaker Mike Johnson holds tenuous control of the closely divided chamber. Before becoming speaker in October, Johnson had repeatedly voted against aid for Ukraine, but he has surprised many by offering support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and saying he wants to find a way to approve the aid.

But Trump’s allies in the House have repeatedly tried to stop the U.S. from sending more aid to Ukraine. And Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a close ally to the former president, said it was a mistake for Republicans even to insist on border policy changes because it could “give the Biden administration some kind of policy wins out on the campaign trail.”

As the border and immigration talks drag forward in the Senate, Johnson has weighed in from afar to push for sweeping measures. On social media, he has called for “transformational change to secure the border,” and pointed to a hardline bill that passed the House on a party-line vote.

As senators left Washington, they still sought to assure Ukrainians that American help was on its way. White House staff and Senate negotiations planned to work on drafting border legislation for the next two weeks in hopes that it would be ready for action when Congress returns.

Schumer told The Associated Press he was “hopeful,” but “I wouldn’t go so far as to say confident yet.” He sought to put the pressure on Republicans, saying they needed to be ready to compromise.

Yet Sen. Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican who is a Ukraine supporter, expressed confidence that Congress would act. He alluded to the words of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, another European leader who eventually elicited robust support from the U.S. to repel an invasion.

“Americans will always do the right thing,” Wicker said. “After they’ve exhausted every other alternative.”

New migrants face fear and loneliness. A town on the Great Plains has a storied support network

By JESSE BEDAYN The Associated Press/Report for America

FORT MORGAN, Colo. (AP) — Magdalena Simon’s only consolation after immigration officers handcuffed and led her husband away was the contents of his wallet, a few bills.

The hopes that had pushed her to trudge thousands of miles from Guatemala in 2019, her son’s small frame clutched to her chest, ceded to despair and loneliness in Fort Morgan, a ranching outpost on Colorado’s eastern plains, where some locals stared at her too long and the wind howls so fiercely it once blew the doors half off a hotel.

The pregnant Simon tried to mask the despair every morning when her toddlers asked, “Where’s papa?”

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To millions of migrants who have crossed the U.S. southern border in the past few years, stepping off greyhound buses in places across America, such feelings can be constant companions. What Simon would find in this unassuming city of a little more than 11,400, however, was a community that pulled her in, connecting her with legal council, charities, schools and soon friends, a unique support network built by generations of immigrants.

In this small town, migrants are building quiet lives, far from big cities like New York, Chicago and Denver that have struggled to house asylum-seekers and from the halls of Congress where their futures are bandied about in negotiations.

The Fort Morgan migrant community has become a boon for newcomers, nearly all of whom arrive from perilous journeys to new challenges: pursuing asylum cases; finding a paycheck big enough for food, an attorney and a roof; placing their kids in school; and navigating a language barrier, all while facing the threat of deportation.

The United Nations used the community, 80 miles (129 kilometers) northeast of Denver, as a case study for rural refugee integration after a thousand Somalis arrived to work in meatpacking plants in the late 2000s. In 2022, grassroots groups sent migrants living in mobile homes to Congress to tell their stories.

In the last year, hundreds more migrants have arrived in Morgan County. More than 30 languages are spoken in Fort Morgan's only high school, which has translators for the most common languages and a phone service for others. On Sundays, Spanish is heard from the pulpits of six churches.

The demographic shift in recent decades has forced the community to adapt: Local organizations hold monthly support groups, train students and adults about their rights, teach others how to drive, ensure kids are in school and direct people to immigration attorneys.

Simon herself now tells her story to those stepping off buses. The community can't wave away the burdens, but they can make them lighter.

"It's not like home where you have your parents and all of your family around you," Simon tells those she meets in grocery stores and school pickup lines. "If you run into a problem, you need to find your own family."

The work has grown amid negotiations in Washington, D.C., on a deal that could toughen asylum protocols and bolster border enforcement.

On a recent Sunday, advocacy groups organized a *posada*, a Mexican celebration of the biblical Joseph and Mary seeking shelter for Mary to give birth and being turned away until they were given the stable.

Before marching down the street singing a song adaption in which migrants are seeking shelter instead of Joseph and Mary, participants signed letters urging Colorado's two Democratic senators and Republican U.S. Rep. Ken Buck to reject stiffer asylum rules.

A century ago, it was sugar beet production that brought German and Russian migration to the area. Now, many migrants work inside dairy plants.

When area businesses were raided several times in the 2000s, friends disappeared overnight, seats sat empty in schools and gaps opened on factory lines.

"That really changed the the understanding of how deeply embedded migrants are in community," said Jennifer Piper of American Friends Service Committee, which organized the *posada* celebration.

Guadalupe "Lupe" Lopez Chavez, who arrived in the U.S. alone in 1998 from Guatemala at age 16, spends long hours working with migrants, including helping connect Simon to a lawyer after her husband was detained.

One recent Saturday, Lopez Chavez sat in the low-ceilinged office of One Morgan County, a nearly 20-year-old migration nonprofit. In a folding chair, Maria Ramirez sifted through manila folders dated November 2023, when she'd arrived in the U.S.

Ramirez fled central Mexico, where cartel violence claimed her younger brother's life, and asked Lopez Chavez how she could get health care. Ramirez's 4-year-old daughter — who pranced behind her mother, blowing bubbles and popping the ones that landed in her brown curls — has a lung condition.

Ramirez said she would work anywhere to move from the living room they sleep in, with just a blanket on the floor as cushioning.

In the offices resembling a hostel's well-loved communal space, Lopez Chavez cautioned Ramirez to consult a lawyer before applying for health care. Sitting aside Ramirez were two settled migrants offering support and advice.

"A lot of stuff that you heard in Mexico (about the U.S.) was you couldn't walk on the streets, you had to live in the shadows, you'd be targeted," said Ramirez. "It's beautiful to come into a community that's united."

Lopez Chavez works with new migrants because she remembers shackles snapping around her ankles after she was stopped for a traffic violation in 2012 and turned over to the U.S. immigration authorities.

"I just wanted to leave there because I'd never been in a cage before," Lopez Chavez said in an interview, her eyes filling with tears.

At her first court hearing, Lopez Chavez and her husband stood alone. At her second hearing, after Lopez Chavez was connected to the community, she was flanked by new friends. That wall of support allowed her to keep her chin up as she fought her immigration case before being granted residency last year.

Lopez Chavez now works to cultivate that strength across the community.

"I don't want any more families to go through what we went through," said Lopez Chavez, who also encourages others to tell their stories. "Those examples give people the idea: If they can manage their case and win, maybe I can too."

In Fort Morgan, train tracks divide a mobile home park, where many migrants live, and the city's older homes. Some older migrants see new arrivals as getting better treatment by the U.S. and feel that is unfair. The community can't solve every challenge, and hasn't laid the last brick on cultural bridges between the diverse communities.

But at the posada event, crowded in the One Morgan County offices, the assurances of community itself showed through the eyes of partygoers as children in cultural regalia danced traditional Mexican dances.

Among those bouncing around the long room was 7-year-old Francisco Mateo Simon. He doesn't remember the journey to the U.S., but his mother, Magdalena, does.

She remembers how ill he became as she carried him the last miles to the border. Now he spits out armadillo facts between the nubs of incoming front teeth in their mobile home, then points to his favorite ornament on their white, plastic Christmas tree.

"That's our brand new tree," said his mother, as her eldest daughter practiced English with a kids' book.

"It's new," she repeated, "It's our first new tree because in the past we've only had trees from the thrift store."

Second suspect arrested in theft of Banksy stop sign artwork featuring military drones

LONDON (AP) — A second suspect was arrested in the alleged theft of a work by the elusive street artist Banksy of a stop sign adorned with three military drones, London police said Sunday.

A man in his 40s was in custody on suspicion of theft and criminal damage, the Metropolitan police said. A suspect in his 20s who was arrested Saturday was released on bail.

Witnesses who arrived at a street corner Friday in the south London section of Peckham less than an hour after Banksy posted a photo of the work on Instagram said they were stunned to watch a man with bolt cutters remove the sign as another man steadied a bike he stood on.

The incident was captured in photos and video.

Much of Banksy's political and satirical art is critical of war, and many of his followers interpreted the work as calling for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip.

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The NBA's annual Christmas slate awaits. Teams insist it's special to be picked

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

MIAMI (AP) — Erik Spoelstra was part of 12 Christmas games as a staff member, assistant coach or head coach in his first 20 seasons with the Miami Heat.

And in the eight seasons that followed, the Heat played on Christmas only once.

Here's what he realized: For an NBA team, playing on Christmas beats not playing on Christmas. The Heat return to the league's holiday slate for the first time since 2020 on Monday, when they play host to the Philadelphia 76ers as part of the NBA's traditional Christmas quintuple header.

The other games: Milwaukee at New York, Golden State visits defending champion Denver, Boston visits the Los Angeles Lakers in the rekindling of the NBA's greatest all-time rivalry and Dallas goes to Phoenix.

"It is an honor to have that opportunity to play on Christmas," Spoelstra said. "The whole league doesn't play on the holiday and there were several years in a row where we were never even considered for playing on Christmas. And then you go back, you almost took it for granted that we were always playing on Christmas."

Other teams also insist they don't take it for granted.

Golden State playing on Christmas has become a holiday tradition; the Warriors are on the Dec. 25 schedule for the 13th time in the last 14 years. And Warriors guard Stephen Curry still gets excited about what awaits.

"Marquee games on Christmas, it's going to be a great atmosphere," Curry said. "You know, we've been in that environment before, so I understand what it's going to be like. On the road, it's going to be fun to just compete. It's a test."

The Christmas slate was long considered the unofficial point in the NBA schedule where more fans start paying attention. Football is winding down, and the NBA games are all shown nationally either on ABC or ESPN.

LeBron James will pay attention, too — but not until certain other Christmas business is complete. The NBA's all-time leading scorer has played more games on Dec. 25 than anyone in league history, though his top priority entering the holiday is watching 9-year-old daughter Zhuri light up when she rips the wrapping paper off what's coming her way.

"The only thing I care about Monday right now is my daughter waking up and opening her gifts," James said Saturday after he and the Los Angeles Lakers beat Oklahoma City.

The Heat planned a short practice for Christmas Eve morning. They were getting most of Sunday off, along with Christmas morning. Players aren't due at the arena until Monday afternoon for the game, with Spoelstra trying to make sure everyone gets time to celebrate as they wish.

"These are a bunch of wins," Spoelstra said, "but we've just got to make sure we get the win."

MOST AND LEAST

The Lakers have the most Christmas wins with 24, one more than the Knicks. The Knicks will play on Christmas for the 56th time, extending their record.

The teams without a Christmas win are Charlotte (0-0), Memphis (0-1) and Toronto (0-2).

James will aim for his 11th win on Christmas, which would break a tie with former teammate Dwyane Wade for the most by a player in NBA history. James will play in his 18th Christmas game, extending his record; Kobe Bryant played in 16 for the league's second-highest total.

Among active players, Kevin Durant has the second most and is set to play on Christmas for the 11th time when the Suns meet the Mavericks.

Spoelstra — who is 8-0 as a head coach on the holiday — will try to become the fifth coach with nine Christmas wins. He would join Jack Ramsay (11-3), Phil Jackson (11-7), Gene Shue (9-4) and Red Auerbach (9-6).

SAME TEAMS, PRETTY MUCH

Of the 10 teams picked for Christmas this year, nine also played on Dec. 25 last year. The exception is

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Miami — the Eastern Conference champion Heat are back on the Christmas schedule, and Memphis is off after debuting last year.

The Lakers are on the Christmas schedule for the 25th consecutive year while Golden State is playing for the 11th straight year.

Boston got a Christmas game for the eighth consecutive year, Milwaukee for the sixth straight and Dallas for the fourth in a row.

New York and Phoenix have been picked in each of the last three years, and Denver and Philadelphia are back on the Christmas schedule for the second straight season.

MILESTONES AWAIT

Dallas' Luka Doncic will arrive in Phoenix 11 points shy of reaching 10,000 for his career. If he gets there Monday against the Suns, the milestone will come in his 358th career game — tying Bob McAdoo for the sixth-quickest trip to 10,000 points in NBA history.

The others who got there faster: Wilt Chamberlain (236 games), Michael Jordan (303), Elgin Baylor (315), Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (319) and Oscar Robertson (334).

Meanwhile, for the Suns, Durant needs one point to become the fifth player in history with 300 on Christmas. He'd join James (460 entering Monday), Bryant (395), Robertson (377) and Wade (314) on that list.

CHRISTMAS DROUGHTS

Charlotte has not played in a Christmas game, and a few other franchises have been waiting a long time to be part of the holiday lineup.

Sacramento's last Christmas game was 2003, Indiana's was in 2004, Detroit's was in 2005, Orlando's was in 2011 and the most recent ones for Chicago and San Antonio were in 2016.

QUOTABLE

Warriors guard Klay Thompson told the team's television broadcast Saturday night what awaits his prized English bulldog Rocco this year: "He does have a stocking. He's got some rabbit jerky in there. He's got some good stuff. So, Rocco's well taken care of."

But did Thompson get all of his teammates gifts? Evidently not. "The rookies just get to be benefited with my presence," Thompson said.

Today in History: December 25 George Washington crosses the Delaware

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 25, the 359th day of 2023. There are six days left in the year. This is Christmas Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 25, 1776, Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, New Jersey, during the American Revolutionary War.

On this date:

In A.D. 336, the first known commemoration of Christmas on Dec. 25 took place in Rome.

In 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned King of England.

In 1818, "Silent Night (Stille Nacht)" was publicly performed for the first time during the Christmas Mid-night Mass at the Church of St. Nikolaus in Oberndorf, Austria.

In 1926, Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito.

In 1946, comedian and actor W.C. Fields died in Pasadena, California, at age 66.

In 1977, comedian and filmmaker Sir Charles Chaplin died in Switzerland at age 88.

In 1989, ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo) and his wife, Elena, were executed following a popular uprising.

In 1991, Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev went on television to announce his resignation as the eighth and final leader of a communist superpower that had already gone out of existence.

In 1999, Space Shuttle Discovery's astronauts finished their repair job on the Hubble Space Telescope

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and released it back into orbit.

In 2003, 16 people were killed by mudslides that swept over campgrounds in California's San Bernardino Valley.

In 2009, passengers aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253 foiled an attempt to blow up the plane as it was landing in Detroit by seizing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahb-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), who tried to set off explosives in his underwear. (Abdulmutallab later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2012, Chicago mobster Frank Calabrese Sr. died in a federal prison in North Carolina at age 75.

In 2017, Russian election officials formally barred opposition leader Alexei Navalny from running for president, prompting him to call for a boycott of the March, 2018 vote.

In 2021, NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, the world's largest and most powerful space telescope, rocketed away from French Guiana in South America on a quest to see light from the first stars and galaxies and search the universe for signs of life.

In 2020, a recreational vehicle parked in the deserted streets of downtown Nashville exploded early Christmas morning, damaging dozens of buildings, causing widespread communications outages and grounding holiday travel at the city's airport; investigators later determined that the bomber, a 63-year-old Nashville-area man, was killed in the explosion.

Today's Birthdays: Author Anne Roiphe is 88. Actor Hanna Schygulla (SHEE'-goo-lah) is 80. R&B singer John Edwards (The Spinners) is 79. Actor Gary Sandy is 78. Pro and College Football Hall-of-Famer Larry Csonka is 77. Country singer Barbara Mandrell is 75. Actor Sissy Spacek is 74. Blues singer/guitarist Joe Louis Walker is 74. Former White House adviser Karl Rove is 73. Actor CCH Pounder is 71. Singer Annie Lennox is 69. Reggae singer-musician Robin Campbell (UB40) is 69. Country singer Steve Wariner is 69. Baseball Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson is 65. The former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Christina Romer, is 65. Actor Klea Scott is 55. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is 52. Rock musician Noel Hogan (The Cranberries) is 52. Singer Dido is 52. Rock singer Mac Powell (Third Day) is 51. R&B singer Ryan Shaw is 43. Country singer Alecia Elliott is 41. Pop singers Jess and Lisa Origliasso (The Veronicas) are 39. Actor Perdita Weeks is 38. Rock singer-musician Lukas Nelson (Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real) is 35.