

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Tuesday, Dec. 26

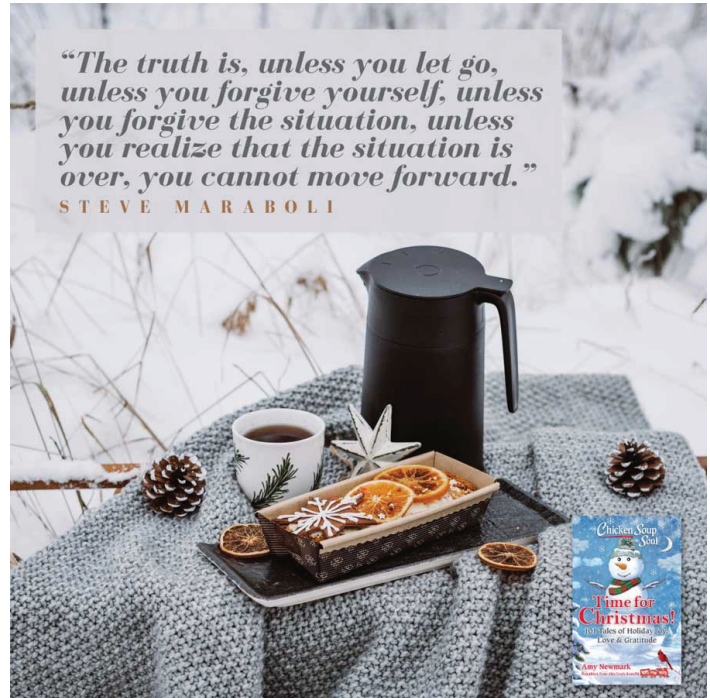
Senior Menu: Chicken Alfredo, lemon buttered broccoli, pumpkin bar, cookie, whole wheat bread.  
No School - Christmas Break  
City office and public works departments closed.

## 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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## Weekly Vikings Recap - Vikings vs. Lions

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

The Minnesota Vikings hosted the Detroit Lions on Christmas Eve in what was the Vikings' second annual white-out game. Coming into the game, there are several playoff implications for both teams. If the Lions won, they would clinch their first-ever NFC North title, since the division was formed in 2002. If the Vikings won, they would put themselves in a good spot to clinch a playoff berth and even potentially still win the NFC North.

After winning the coin toss, the Lions made the rare decision to elect to receive the ball to start the game. Since their bye week, the Lions have had arguably the worst defense in the NFL so it made sense that they would elect to begin the game with their potent offense. The decision paid off for the Lions as they drove right down the field for a touchdown to kickstart the game.

Although the Vikings responded with a touchdown of their own, it did not come without the usual turnover-worthy throw by Nick Mullens in the red zone. Although the interception was dropped by the Lions, it would be the last time they dropped a Nick Mullens pass that hit their hands. It is becoming a serious issue for the Vikings' offense that Mullens cannot keep the ball out of opposing defenders' hands. After Sunday's game, Mullens now has six interceptions in his two starts this year. The interceptions started to show their negative effect on the Vikings' defense as the Lions were able to win the time-of-possession battle by over 10 minutes and completely tire out many of the Vikings' defenders in the run game late in the game.

The unfortunate story for the Vikings on Sundays was the injuries that happened to key Vikings players. Both Jordan Addison and TJ Hockenson went out in the first half with leg injuries, and DJ Wonnum went out in the second half with what looked like a season-ending knee injury. At a certain point, there are just too many injuries for this Vikings team to overcome and the Vikings may have finally met that mark.

The main story of the game had to be the putrid performance of the referees. In the first half, they called a roughing the passer penalty on Patrick Jones II when it was not one. And then, they overturned what would have been a Vikings' scoop-and-score touchdown on a Jared Goff fumble after determining that Goff's arm was moving forward on the play. Given the call on the field was a fumble, many assumed the referees would be unable to overturn the call as it was not evident that Goff did not lose control of the ball while his arm was moving forward. Instead, the referees quickly overturned the call in what felt like a game where no call would go the Vikings' way.

The one positive out of this game was that Justin Jefferson seemed to be back to normal. Jefferson, who has yet to eclipse 100 receiving yards since week 3, finally did Sunday with his 141-yard performance. With the injuries on offense, it will not be shocking if the Green Bay Packers feel they can get away with double or triple coverage on Jefferson next week with the lack of talent elsewhere on the Vikings' offense.

In the end, Mullens' four interceptions and blown referee calls were too much for the Vikings to overcome as the Vikings fell to the Lions on Christmas Eve to officially end their chance at repeating as NFC North champions for the first time since 2009.

Lions 30 - Vikings 24

Next week, the Vikings will host the Packers on New Year's eve. If the Vikings end up falling to the Packers, their playoff chances will likely be officially over.

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Here's to teeing off for  
Christmas from the

Olive Grove  
Golf Course

*Merry  
Christmas!*



397-GOLF  
Groton, South Dakota

A silhouette of a nativity scene against a dark blue and purple night sky filled with stars. A bright star with rays of light is at the top center. The scene includes the Virgin Mary, the infant Jesus in a manger, Joseph, and three wise men. A dog is also visible on the right.

*Star of Wonder  
Star of Night  
Guide us to that  
perfect light!*

Merry Christmas from  
**Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel**

## Groton Area Kindergarten



**Vic Flihs is the son of Tigh and Adrienne Flihs of Claremont. What Christmas means to me is making Gingerbread houses**



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



**Landry Johnson is the son of Gene and Tayla Johnson of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Jesus was born.**



**Evalynn Peterson is the daughter of Jocelyn Peterson of Groton. What Christmas means to me is I like getting presents**



**Landon Buntrock is the son of Ryan and Laurie Buntrock of Columbia. What Christmas means to me is putting up the Christmas tree**



**Felicity Hanlon is the daughter of Jayde Lier of Conde. What Christmas means to me is you put up a Christmas tree and get a lot of presents**

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*May your Christmas be  
bright and cheerful!*  
**Merry Christmas**  
from Joe at

# Patios Plus

Thank you for  
your support for  
the past 20 years  
and I look  
forward to  
helping you in  
2024.

**Joe Foertsch**  
**605/397-7043**



From our POET family to yours  
**Merry Christmas &  
Happy New Year**

## Autoimmune Disorders: Self attack!

Recently I met a new patient who had waited several months for her appointment. At this first meeting, I was quickly able to diagnose Rheumatoid arthritis. Like others with this disease, her joints were swollen, and she was stiff getting up and moving to the exam table. During our discussion I learned she had felt well until about six months before. There was no good explanation for the onset of her symptoms, so she asked the question, many ask... Why did this happen?

As a rheumatologist, I specialize in managing autoimmune diseases such as Rheumatoid arthritis, as well as several others. Autoimmune disorders are a group of diseases where the immune system mistakenly targets and attacks the body's own tissues. The system of checks and balances that keeps our immune system running is broken, and the attack goes unaddressed by the body. Managing autoimmune diseases means turning down the volume on an overactive immune system to alleviate symptoms and prevent damage to one's body. Like my patient, many ask, what makes our immune system make these mistakes?

Well, as we currently understand it, a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental triggers plays a role in the development of autoimmune disorders. Certain genes are associated with an increased risk. Environmental factors, such as infection, exposure to certain chemicals, or hormonal imbalances could trigger or exacerbate an immune response. All this to say, there are multiple reasons autoimmune disorders flare up, but it is difficult to determine the exact cause and likely there is more than one factor.

Diagnosing autoimmune disorders can be challenging. The symptoms are wide ranging and overlap with other diseases. We have blood tests that identify specific markers of disease and inflammation. During the physical exam I look for rashes, joint swelling, circulation changes, hair loss, weight loss, and weakness, amongst other things. Interpreting the patient's story, lab tests, and exam together helps paint a picture that leads to a specific diagnosis.

However, the work isn't done once there's a diagnosis. Treatment for autoimmune disorders is unique to each person. Rheumatologists can prescribe medications that target specific immune cells that drive the process. Traditional treatments such as corticosteroids and immunosuppressants are used, but newer specific cell therapies, such as monoclonal antibodies, are also effective. We are also learning about ways to mobilize the immune system and restore its resilience. The future of medicine looks to tailor treatments based on individual genetic profiles and disease characteristics.

Today, I can offer my new patient confidence that she will feel better with current treatments. However, she will have to continue taking medications to remain comfortable. Ideally, we will soon find treatments that allow patients to stop medication and be well. The future holds promise that we will improve diagnosis, targeted treatment, and quality of life for people living with autoimmune disorders.

Jennifer May, M.D. is a contributing Prairie Doc® columnist. She practices rheumatology in Rapid City, South Dakota at Rapid City Medical Center and serves on the Healing Words Foundation Board of Directors, a 501c3 which provides funding for Prairie Doc® programs. Follow The Prairie Doc® at [www.prairiedoc.org](http://www.prairiedoc.org) and on Facebook and Instagram featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show providing health information based on science, built on trust, on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Jennifer May, MD

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## That's Life by Tony Bender: Harvesting memories

A friend of mine, a sometimes combative high profile member of the media, just returned from New York City. He's been seeing the sights, attending Broadway shows, getting lost in Manhattan, all the things you do in the Big Apple. Getting a slice of the local pizza. Hanging out in Central Park. Times Square.

Let's call him Mike. Because that's his name. He's a bit of a troll and has taken to jousting on the interwebs with those who have bought into the notion that all cities are lawless hellscape. They're sleeping restlessly at nights with an AK-47, which for the record, is not a fem-bot. These are the guys who could dot the "i" on a Bud Light can at 300 yards and punch out an ornery steer. But a subway calls for Depends.

The unfamiliar makes snowflakes of us all. That's why I break into a cold sweat in church. I can't imagine being Catholic. No way I'm confessing to things for which the Statute of Limitations might not have expired.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned. A lot."

"Who's that with you, my son?"

"I'm Slick Lee Dunne, your honor, attorney at law. We're seeking a plea deal."

"This is highly irregular, Tony, but I'm listening."

"I'm taking the fifth, your majesty."

OK, let's get back to my friend Mike who we last saw dashing for a Huey under suppressive fire. "How many times did you get murdered?" I asked him upon his return. It's kind of an inside joke. Neither of us can text the word "Minneapolis" without prefacing it with "the smoking ruins of what was once Minneapolis."

I love the elbow room, the people, the quality of life on the Northern Plains, but I've lived in cities and am drawn to visit them for the concerts and art. My kids knew how it would go. We'd stay in the heart of the city so I could sip coffee at an outdoor table, read the paper, and watch people. Chess hustlers. Musicians. Business people scurrying here and there. One morning, a bedraggled man asked Dylan for some help. Dylan gave him his breakfast and his last \$5. The kind of character and compassion every parent wants their kids to have.

First on the agenda are museums. History. Art. My kids and I have done marathons in museums in numerous cities, soaking in the works of famous artists and many unknowns who deserve to be on the same walls with Monet and Rembrandt.

I emerge always with hope for our suicidal species. We are capable of transcendent beauty. That, I've convinced myself, is where our future lies when we're done howling at the moon and each other.

I visited Chicago in April, truly a great city with a magnificent art museum. When you go to an concert and see a musician you've long admired, it's invigorating, and when you witness artworks you've only seen in magazines and books, it's life-changing.

In every city, it's harvest. I gather up memories, conversations, the people I meet. In Chicago, there was the young man with a valet business who drove me from the wrong restaurant to the right one. I gave him some business advice, and a nice tip, naturally.

My Uber drivers came from around the globe. Moms and dads putting kids through college, everyday celebrating the abundance of America we only deign to appreciate on holidays. Immigrants. People so many have come to fear.

There are sections of any city with a deserved reputation. In Denver, it was Colfax or North Federal, and a few others places, but I met friends there, frequented hole-in-the wall cafes, merchants, and the occasional watering hole.

One summer day, I found myself in a Hispanic neighborhood at a small grocery store with a fragrant deli in back. I have no idea if that kitchen could have passed a health inspection but my kitchen has looked worse, and the pastrami sandwiches were mouth-watering.

I found all kinds of excuses to return because the food was so good. So good that I think of those sandwiches more than I do all the delicacies I've had in New Orleans or New York. By summer's end, I was a recognizable regular who elicited giggles when I attempted even the basest Spanish.

I'll always return to the prairie until I grow restless. Then it's time to harvest more memories.

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## We the People

The South Dakota Humanities Council is making available a weekly column -- "We the People" -- that focuses on the U.S. Constitution. It is written by David Adler, who is president of The Alturas Institute, a non-profit organization created to promote the Constitution, gender equality, and civic education.



By David Adler

## A Law Court Will Affirm Colorado's Ruling on Trump

In his landmark opinion for the U.S. Supreme Court in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), Chief Justice John Marshall defined the over-arching responsibility of the High Bench: "It is emphatically the province and duty of the judiciary to say what the law is." Marshall, the greatest name in our constitutional jurisprudence, observed that the Supreme Court is a law court, not a political court, a crucial distinction for a nation founded on the rationale that ours is a government of laws, not men.

With notable exceptions, the Court, historically, has been a venerated institution precisely because the citizenry believed that the Justices served, as Alexander Hamilton anticipated in *Federalist No. 78*, as a "mouthpiece" for the Constitution, rather than as legislators who would impose their personal and political preferences. Hamilton and his fellow framers of the Constitution wanted a law court, not a political court.

It was in the Hamiltonian-Marshallian spirit that the Colorado Supreme Court, acting as a law court, ruled that Donald Trump engaged in insurrection on January 6, 2021, and therefore is ineligible for certification on the ballot since he is disqualified under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment from running for the presidency.

The Colorado Supreme Court agreed with the fact-finding conclusion of the state trial court, following a five-day trial, that Trump, based on overwhelming evidence, had engaged in insurrection, which triggered Section 3. That provision bars from "any office, civil or military, under the United States," anyone who takes an oath "as an officer of the United States ... to support the Constitution of the United States [who] shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion."

Denver District Judge Sarah B. Wallace had held that Trump "acted with specific intent to incite political violence and direct it at the Capitol with the purpose of disrupting the electoral certification." Judge Wallace, however, inexplicably said that Section 3 did not encompass presidents. The state supreme court overturned that ruling by holding, correctly, that the American Presidency is, indeed, an "office" and that the president is a "civil officer," bound by the Constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court has, since the dawn of the republic, referred to the president as an officer. In the Aaron Burr Treason Trial in 1807, for example, Chief Justice Marshall held that the president is an officer, amenable to the judicial process and required to comply with subpoenas. In 1988, in *Morrison v. Olson*, Chief Justice Rehnquist wrote for the Court, upholding the special counsel statute, and said the president is a "principal" or "superior" officer.

Trump called the Colorado ruling "fatally flawed," and it is expected that he will shortly appeal to the US Supreme Court. The decision, however, is not flawed, but rather a "masterful" opinion, in the words of retired appellate judge Edward Luttig, one of the nation's most respected conservative jurists. Indeed, the opinion was beautifully crafted in a manner that fits the expectations of the Supreme Court Justices who style themselves textualists and originalists. The Colorado opinion is firmly grounded in the textual language and the structure of Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, precisely the exalted approach to constitutional interpretation advocated by Justices Alito, Thomas, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh and Barrett. In a word, it is mother's milk for that quintet.



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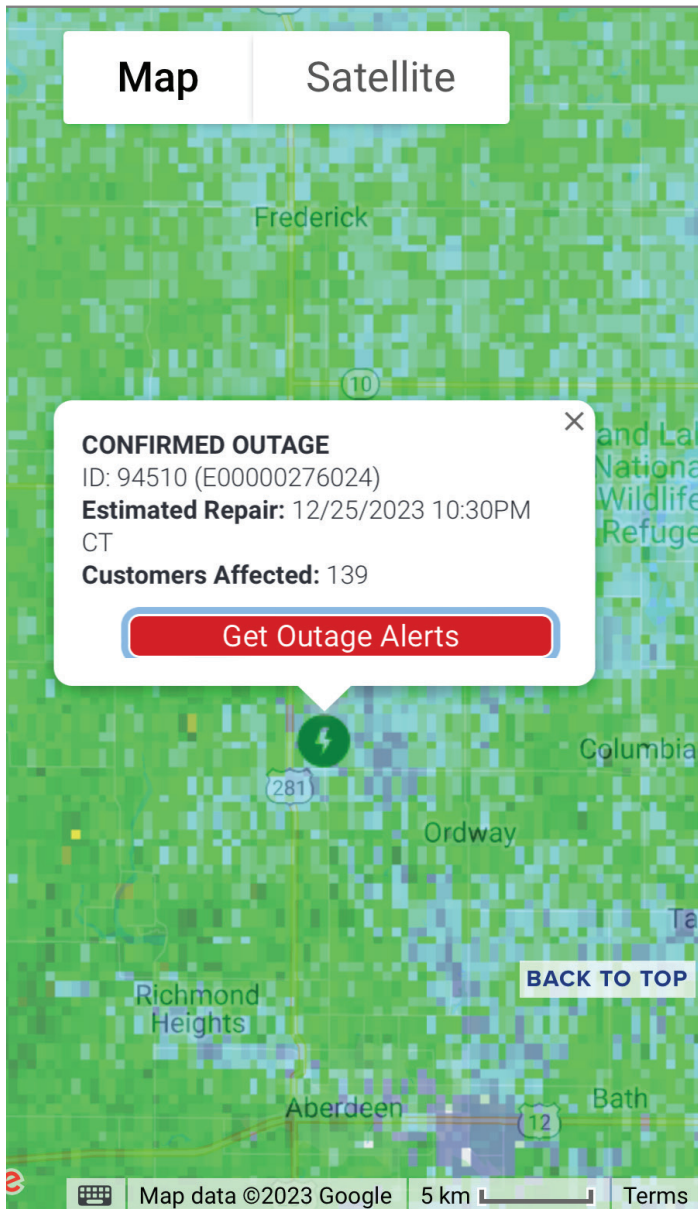
As such, if the Justices remain true to their philosophy of constitutional construction and the Court acts as a law court, then the result should be affirmation of the Colorado State Supreme Court decision. Traditionally, appellate courts do not disturb the findings of fact established by the trial court, unless there is demonstrable error. In this instance, it would be very difficult to find error since all eight of the Colorado judges—the trial court judge and the seven Supreme Court Justices, including the three dissenters—agreed that Trump had engaged in insurrection. The Court might engage in a *de novo* review—that is, a fresh review of the facts—if it looks for an exit ramp in the event it does not want to uphold the Colorado Supreme Court, but that is rare; critic's knives would be out if the Court were to abandon the traditional approach of deference to the trier of fact.

There would remain the question of application of the law—in this instance, Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. The language of that provision is crystal clear, reflecting the aims of the 39th Congress that wrote it to protect Americans from the possibility that an officer who had engaged in insurrection might regain power. Application of the law by the Supreme Court does not contemplate at all the lack of a conviction of Trump by a court of law, since there is nothing in the text or the legislative history pertaining to a requirement of a conviction before someone can be banned from the ballot. That's because Congress, in writing Section 3, anticipated the potential return to office of men who had not been convicted or would not be prosecuted, but had engaged in insurrection. Protection of the republic was of paramount importance.

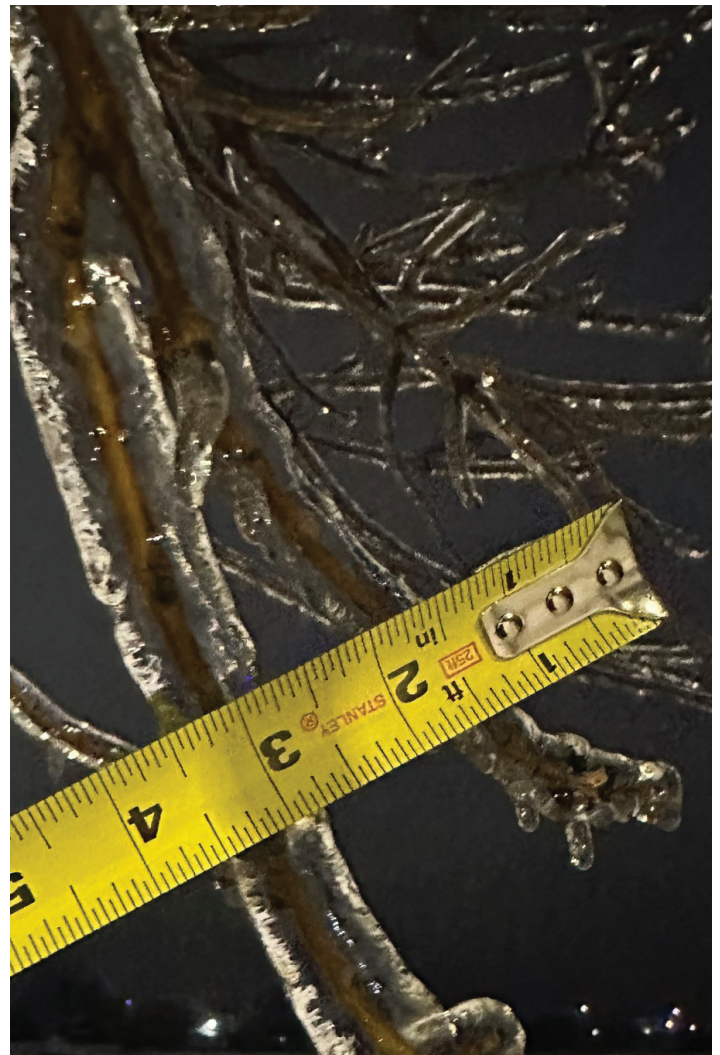
If the Supreme Court acts as a law court, in the spirit of Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall, it should affirm the Colorado Supreme Court's ruling.

## Ice storm hits area on Christmas Day

There was snow. Then there was rain. Then there was freezing rain. All of the conditions came together to create the ice storm that hit the area right on Christmas Day. There was some accumulation of snow - but it's hard to measure. There was about two inches or so on the ground that was saturated with water from the rain and the freezing rain. Be extremely careful when walking out side to your frozen vehicle. And yes, it is raining out this morning as the temperature has crawled to just above freezing.



According to the Northwestern Energy outage map, there was an outage in Columbia and an area around Columbia last evening. The outage was for about two hours.



From the National Weather Service in Aberdeen: 1:25am 12/26/2023: Temperatures have warmed up above freezing here in Aberdeen (34 degrees) and there's a little bit of melting of the ice on the trees. Here's a look at the ice accumulation we had here at the office. Total radial ice accumulation is right around 0.25".

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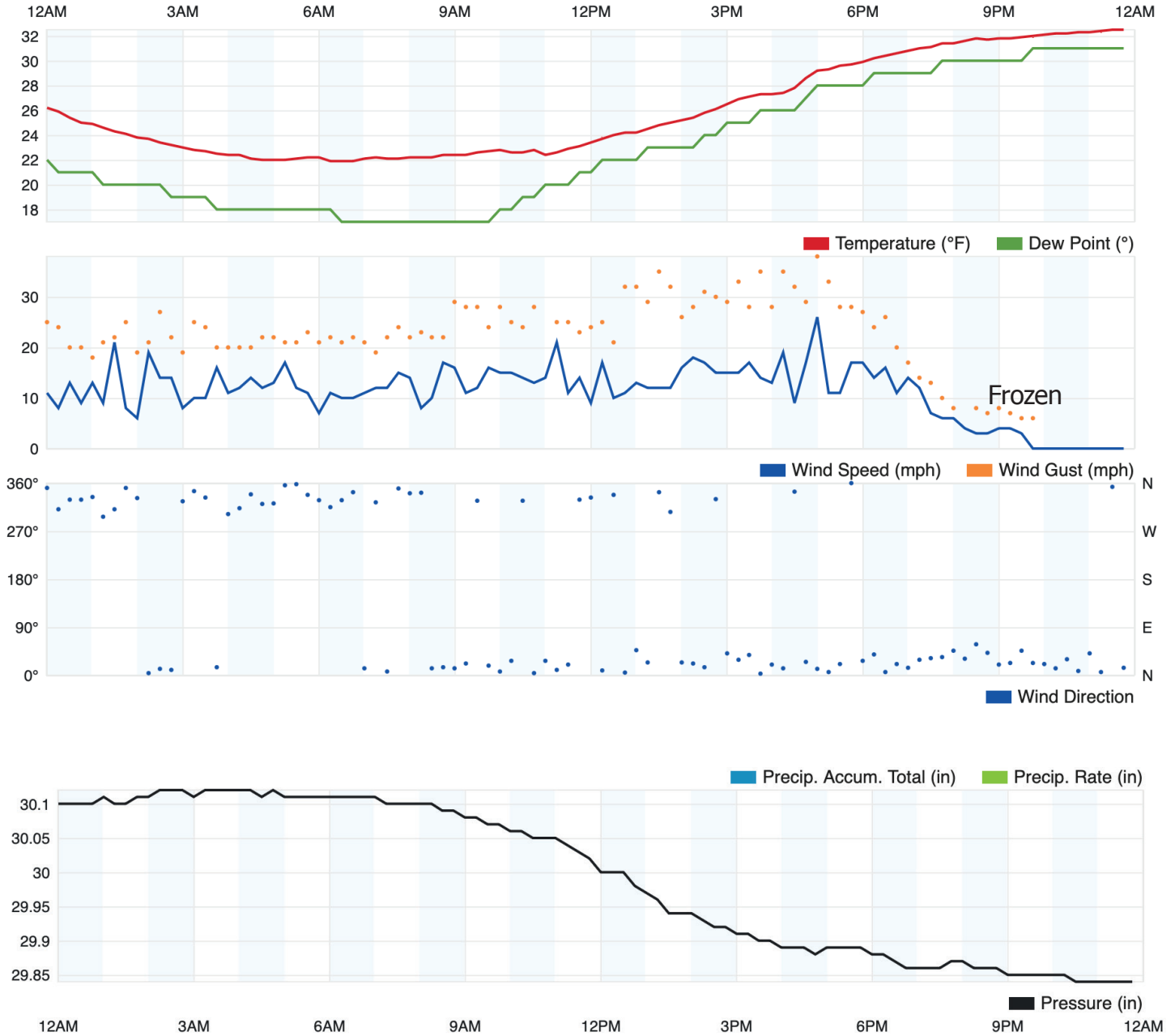


**It was the first time this winter that the city grader was used to remove snow (slush) off the streets. Looks like a mess, doesn't it!** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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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 256 AM CST Tue Dec 26 2023

Brown-Marshall-Roberts-Day-Spink-Codington-Grant-  
Including the cities of Aberdeen, Britton, Sisseton, Webster, Redfield, Watertown, and Milbank  
256 AM CST Tue Dec 26 2023

...ICE STORM WARNING REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL NOON CST TODAY...

\* WHAT...Significant icing. Additional ice accumulations of around one tenth of an inch. Winds gusting as high as 40 mph.

\* WHERE...Portions of northeast South Dakota.

\* WHEN...Until noon CST today.

\* IMPACTS...Difficult travel conditions are possible. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning 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.

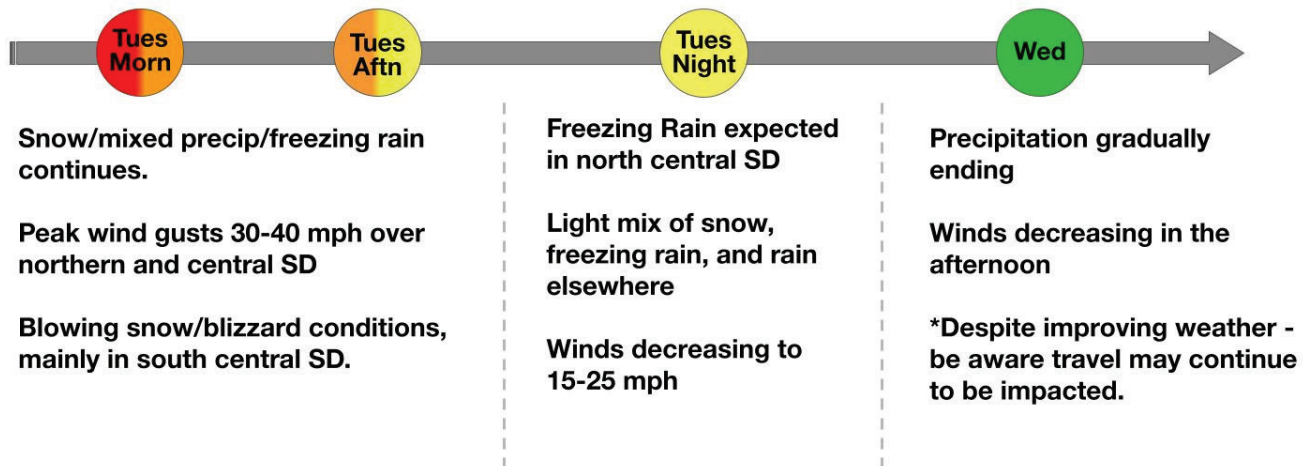
The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.



## Winter Storm Timeline

December 26, 2023  
4:16 AM

Consider alternative travel arrangements during periods of highest impacts



Risk Levels

Little to None

Minor

Moderate

Major

Extreme










National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

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Tue Dec 26	Wed Dec 27	Thu Dec 28	Fri Dec 29	Sat Dec 30	Sun Dec 31	Mon Jan 1
						
37°F 29°F	34°F 24°F	33°F 16°F	33°F 22°F	30°F 16°F	23°F 12°F	26°F 16°F
NNE 21 MPH	N 11 MPH	NNW 4 MPH	SW 8 MPH	NNW 10 MPH	N 10 MPH	SSW 10 MPH
80%	30%					



## System Slowly Winding Down

December 26, 2023  
4:15 AM

Greatest impacts will be today, but light mixed precipitation will linger into Wednesday

### Key Messages

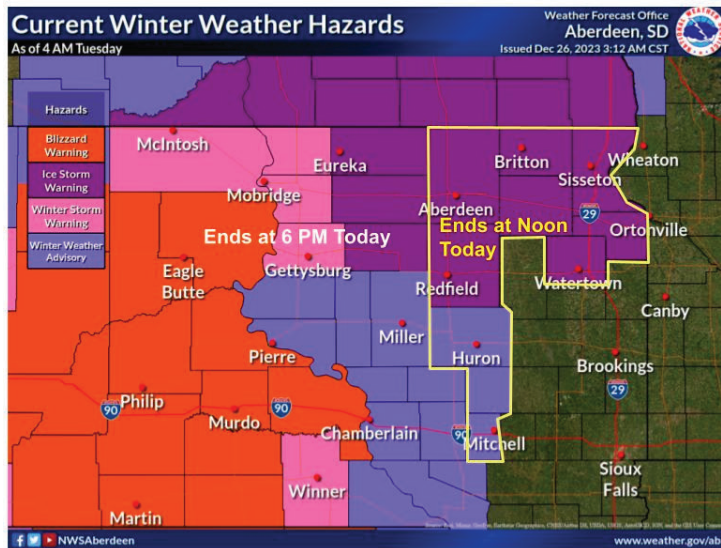
- Combination of snow, rain, freezing rain, and sleet continues into this afternoon
  - Mainly snow or freezing rain tonight into Wednesday
- Additional ice accumulations of 0.1"-0.25" are possible over north central SD
- Winds have diminished some, but will still gust to 30 to 40 mph for most locations, producing areas of blowing snow for areas receiving snow

### NEW What Has Changed

- Adjustments made to portions of the headlines in central SD
- Blizzard and Winter Storm Warnings transitioned to Winter Weather Advisory for Hand/Hyde/Hughes/Sully/Bufalo Counties

### Next Scheduled Update

- This is expected to be the last update.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

A wintry mix of precipitation and winds gusting to 30 to 40 mph will lead to continued hazardous to extremely difficult travel today.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 32 °F at 11:24 PM

Low Temp: 22 °F at 6:31 AM

Wind: 38 mph at 4:54 PM

Precip: Few inches of snow and 1/4" of ice accumulation

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 2011

Record Low: -29 in 1990

Average High: 25

Average Low: 5

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.50

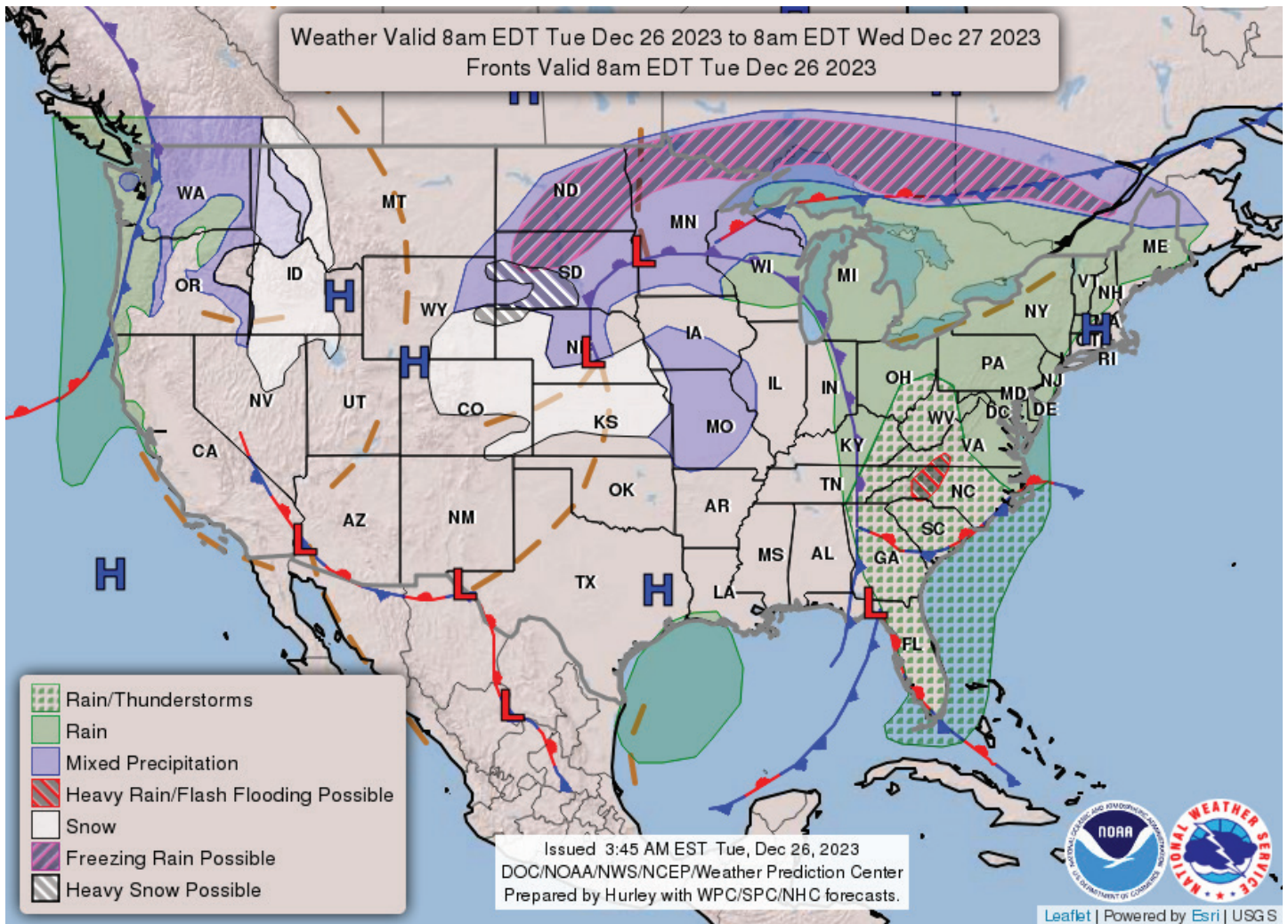
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.23

Average Precip to date: 21.71

Precip Year to Date: 23.40

Sunset Tonight: 4:56:28 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:42 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 26, 1988: Moderate to heavy snow fell across western and northern South Dakota, as well as across most of Minnesota, from the evening of the 25th through the morning of the 27th. Much of the northern one-half to two-thirds of Minnesota and the western and northern sections of South Dakota were blanketed with 6-12 inches of new snow. Numerous accidents and minor injuries were indirectly related to the snowy conditions. Several snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches at Timber Lake; 10 to 12 inches at Seneca and Hoven; 11 inches at Aberdeen; 8 inches at Pierre, Eureka and Blunt; 7 inches at Chelsea, Redfield, Cottonwood, and Rapid City; and 6 inches at Ferney, Huron, and Eden. In Minnesota, 8 inches fell in Browns Valley, 6 inches fell at Wheaton, and 5 inches accumulated at Artichoke Lake.

December 26, 1776: George Washington crossed the ice-clogged Delaware River. He marched on Trenton in the midst of snow and sleet thus surprising and captured many of the British garrisons.

1947 - New York City received a record 26.4 inches of snow in 24 hours, with as much as 32 inches reported in the suburbs. The heavy snow brought traffic to a standstill, and snow removal cost eight million dollars. Thirty thousand persons were called upon to remove the 100 million tons of snow. The storm claimed 27 lives. (26th-27th) (David Ludlum)

1983 - Miami, FL, established a December record with a morning low of 33 degrees. Just three days earlier, and again three days later, record warm temperatures were reported in Florida, with daytime highs in the 80s. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Freezing rain plagued parts of the south central U.S., from northwest Texas to southwestern Missouri. Southwestern Missouri was turned into a huge skating rink as roads became sheets of ice. Damage to tree limbs and power lines compared to a hundred tornadoes, and half of the city of Springfield was left without electricity for 24 hours. Snow, sleet and ice covered the northwest two thirds of Oklahoma. 75,000 homes were left without electricity as ice accumulated one to two inches in a 40-mile band from Duncan to Norman to Tulsa to Miami. 25,000 of those homes were still without power a week later. The storm claimed the lives of seven persons. (24th-27th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Low pressure produced heavy snow from North Dakota to western sections of the Great Lakes Region, with up to fourteen inches reported in the Chicago area. Cold arctic air hovered over the Plateau Region. Temperatures in the Big Smokey Valley of Nevada plunged to 31 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong northerly winds behind an arctic cold front produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region and dangerous wind chill temperatures in the northeastern U.S. Wind chill readings as cold as 40 degrees below zero were reported in New York State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2003 - A major snow storm in Utah caused several fatalities due to avalanches. As much as 2 ft of snow fell in parts of the state, particularly south of Salt Lake City. Three people that were seen snowboarding in the Aspen Grove recreational area have been presumed dead, all others managed to escape or be rescued (Reuters).

December 26, 2004: A magnitude 9.1 earthquake near Sumatra, Indonesia generated a tsunami that caused tremendous devastation throughout the Indian Ocean. The quake, which is the third largest in the world since 1900, caused severe damage and casualties in northern Sumatra, Indonesia, and in the Nicobar Islands, India. The tsunami that followed killed more people than any other tsunami in recorded history, with 227,898 dead or missing. The total estimated material losses in the Indian Ocean region were \$10 billion, and insured losses were \$2 billion.



Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### THE BIRTH OF JESUS

"And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no lodging available for them.

"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the armies of heaven - praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.'

'When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

'They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger."

Prayer: We lift our hearts in praise this day, Lord of Life, for the birth of Your Son, our Savior. Our minds cannot comprehend, nor our hearts contain, the generosity of Your love, mercy, grace, love, and hope that we have because of the gift of Your one and only Son. Fill our hearts with unending gratitude for Your salvation. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:6-16 I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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## 2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.22.23

10 26 36 54 69 4

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$73,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 1 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.25.23

4 10 25 48 52 3

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$3,100,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 16 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.25.23

4 15 27 29 30 2

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.23.23

4 14 19 29 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 31 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.25.23

2 3 19 31 42 9

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.25.23

5 12 20 24 29 4

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$685,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### **Holiday travel is mostly nice, but with some naughty disruptions again on Southwest Airlines**

Conditions were mostly nice this year for travelers flying ahead of and on Christmas, but some naughty disruptions again plagued those flying with Southwest Airlines.

For millions of people traveling over the holiday, this year was much better than last. Christmas morning put a bow on a relatively smooth weekend.

Only 157 flights within, into or out of the U.S. had been canceled and 2,111 were delayed as of late afternoon on Monday, according to the tracking website FlightAware.

For this holiday season, U.S. airlines prepared for massive waves of travelers by hiring thousands of pilots, flight attendants and other workers — in an effort to avoid the delays and cancellations that marred travel in 2022, culminating with the Southwest Airlines debacle that stranded more than 2 million people.

Still, Southwest experienced hiccups again over the weekend that the airline was looking to clear by Monday. Just 2% of the airline's flights were canceled Monday, though 16% were delayed, which is 693 flights total, according to FlightAware.

On Saturday and Sunday, Southwest canceled 426 flights and delayed 2,689 flights, FlightAware data showed.

A Southwest spokesperson blamed the issues on dense fog in Chicago on Saturday and Sunday that prevented planes from landing and said some additional cancellations may be necessary Monday ahead of what was expected to be a full recovery on Tuesday.

Auto club AAA predicted that between Saturday and New Year's Day, 115 million people in the U.S. would travel at least 50 miles (80 kilometers) from home by air or car. That's up 2% from last year.

More than 2.6 million people were screened by the Transportation Security Administration on Thursday, according to TSA records. Data from the weekend is yet to be released.

Over Thanksgiving, a record number of people traveled through U.S. airports, topping pre-COVID numbers in 2019 with a single-day record of 2.9 million people screened by TSA on Sunday, Nov. 26.

Compared with the holiday season last year, more mild weather has helped keep air travel schedules on time.

But on the ground, road conditions were dangerous in parts of the country on Christmas Day, thanks to accumulating snow and ice in the Midwest and Great Plains. Most of Nebraska and South Dakota were facing blizzard conditions, and parts of eastern North and South Dakota were facing ice storms, according to the National Weather Service.

The busiest days on the road were predicted to be Saturday, Dec. 23, and next Thursday, Dec. 28, according to transportation data provider INRIX.

### **Kalen DeBoer is a South Dakota man through and through. It shows in his work at Washington**

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Kalen DeBoer got called into the athletic director's office a few days after the University of Sioux Falls won its third national championship in four years.

The 2009 Cougars had just finished one of the most dominating seasons in NAIA history. In Willie Sanchez's mind, DeBoer had outgrown the small, Baptist-affiliated school in South Dakota's largest city.

Sanchez said he asked DeBoer if he had aspirations of coaching at a higher level. DeBoer, hesitantly, told him he did.

"He's a South Dakota boy, and it seems like in the Midwest people don't want to leave and I can understand why," Sanchez recalled. "I said, 'Kalen, you have more ability and should go forward.' He said he

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had some inquiries, and I told him he needed to look into those possibilities.”

For good measure, Sanchez threatened to fire him if he didn't take another job.

“I said that in a joking way,” he said. “I certainly wasn't going to fire a guy who just won a national championship, but it was a way to kind of motivate him, and hopefully he would look for a position at a higher level, which he did. And I'm glad he did.”

DeBoer, who lived his first 35 years in South Dakota, is 49 now and head coach at Washington. He has led the unbeaten Huskies to the College Football Playoff in his second season, an effort that earned him coach of the year honors from The Associated Press last week. They play Texas in the semifinal at the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1.

No one knows if DeBoer really needed Sanchez's nudge, but the coach still appreciates the belief his old boss had in him.

“I was still pretty young, and getting a chance to go be challenged at the next level with different people was certainly something I think he saw for me,” DeBoer said, “even if I didn't feel that way at the time.”

DeBoer's rise through the coaching ranks began a few weeks after his meeting with Sanchez when he was hired as Southern Illinois' offensive coordinator. It was the first of six stops over 12 years.

In nine seasons as a head coach — Sioux Falls (2005-09), Fresno State (2020-21) and Washington (2022-23) — his record is 103-11.

“It is crazy,” said DeBoer's high school coach, Mike Busch, drawing out the last word. “It's by no accident, either. It's hard to win games at any level, and him and his staff, they find a way to win and their kids find a way to win and they believe.”

Though DeBoer left South Dakota in 2010, South Dakota never left him. Neither did the lessons he learned from his mentor at Sioux Falls, NAIA Hall of Fame coach Bob Young.

Young, who died last January, spoke of DeBoer often with close friend Jim Heinitz, the retired coach at Augustana in Sioux Falls. Heinitz said Young knew DeBoer had the makings of a good coach and did what he could to foster his growth.

Young developed DeBoer into an All-America receiver who helped the Cougars win their first national championship in 1996 and kept him around to coach receivers the next year. Then he helped him get an assistant's job at Washington High in Sioux Falls and hired him in 2000 as offensive coordinator. When Young retired, he urged Sanchez to hire DeBoer as his successor.

DeBoer went 67-3 in five seasons, 49-1 in conference games and won NAIA titles in 2006, 2008 and 2009. The Cougars went 56-1 from 2006-09, with the only loss coming in the 2007 championship game. His last Sioux Falls team outscored opponents 775-158 and beat North Dakota of the Football Championship Subdivision, 28-13.

His ties to Sioux Falls remain strong.

Washington defensive coordinator Chuck Morrell was DeBoer's teammate and later his defensive coordinator at Sioux Falls. Huskies offensive coordinator Ryan Grubb was DeBoer's line coach at Sioux Falls and on staff with him at Eastern Michigan and Fresno State.

“I understand who they are as people,” DeBoer said. “I know that they're relentless in their work ethic and that they want to do the same things I want to, and that's making a difference in the people around us and the lives we touch each and every day. I know that they'll leave the ego at the door and do what's always best for our team.”

DeBoer grew up in northeastern South Dakota, first in Corona, pop. 69, and later Milbank, pop. 3,500. His mother, Phylis Waterfall, worked at a drugstore while raising him and his brother and sister as a single parent.

“It probably forced me to grow up a little bit quicker,” DeBoer said. “But I will say this: I always felt like I had everything. I didn't feel like I was missing anything. I had people around me, my dad, too. I knew everyone loved me. I knew I was going to be safe.”

“Maybe there were times where things were a little bit harder,” he added. “I think it's all part of my journey and what what made me who I am today.”

Busch, DeBoer's coach at Milbank, remember him as a player who would do anything to help the team

win. He was a dependable receiver. He filled in at quarterback for two games when the starter was injured to keep alive a run to the state semifinals his senior year. He made plays sideline-to-sideline as a middle linebacker.

Sioux Falls' program was underfunded when DeBoer arrived as a player. The practice field was only 80 yards and turned to mud after the lightest of rains. Until 2007, when Bob Young Field opened, home games were played off campus.

The Cougars' dominance over DeBoer's five seasons as head coach, and maybe Sanchez's nudge, led to his four-year run at Southern Illinois. Coordinator jobs followed at Eastern Michigan, Fresno State and Indiana, where he first met Michael Penix Jr., now the Huskies' starting quarterback and the Heisman Trophy runner-up.

DeBoer went back to Fresno State for his first Division I head coaching job in 2020, and he took the Bulldogs from 3-3 in the pandemic-shortened season to 10-3 with a bowl win the next year.

"He wanted to progress up the ladder of college football, and to do that, I guess, you've got to pay your dues," longtime Sioux Falls radio play-by-play man Tom Frederick said. "From NAIA to the NCAA probably was not the easiest thing to do."

Washington hired him Nov. 29, 2021, to revive a program that had fallen off. DeBoer was able to retain key talent and he brought in Penix as a transfer.

"The relationship he has with Penix, there's mutual respect," Heinitz said. "You can see on TV that Penix and the rest of the players are really happy for him and the success he's having, and they share the success."

DeBoer's home state has a proud football history. South Dakota State is now the dominant team in the FCS and 61 natives from the state of 895,000 have played in the NFL, with seven first-round draft picks and NFL career scoring leader Adam Vinatieri among them.

The people who know DeBoer from Sioux Falls said if there were a Mount Rushmore of football in the Mount Rushmore State, DeBoer would belong up there if Washington wins the national title.

"It doesn't matter if you're from small-town South Dakota or small-town Alabama or wherever, if coaching is your passion and you're doing what Kalen's doing, you're going to make it to the top," Busch said. "Down the road, is the NFL next for him or is another Power Five big team? Who knows? Right now it's fun to watch the Huskies."

## Israeli forces bombard central Gaza in apparent move toward expanding ground offensive

By NAJIB JOBAIN, WAFAA SHURAFU and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli forces bombarded Palestinian refugee camps in central Gaza on Tuesday, residents said, in apparent preparation to expand their ground offensive into a third section of the besieged territory.

The opening of a potential new battle zone points to the long and destructive road still ahead as Israel vows to crush Hamas after its Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. For weeks, Israeli forces have been engaged in heavy urban fighting in northern Gaza and in the southern city of Khan Younis, driving Palestinians into further smaller corners of territory in search of refuge.

Despite international pressure for a cease-fire and U.S. calls for a reduction in civilian casualties, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday warned that the fight "isn't close to finished."

Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than 20,600 Palestinians, two-thirds of them women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants among the dead.

Meanwhile, there were new signs of the Israel-Hamas war enflaming tensions around the region. An Israeli airstrike in Syria killed an Iranian general, bringing vows of revenge from Iran. U.S. warplanes hit Iranian-backed militias in Iraq who had carried out a drone strike that wounded American soldiers there.

Residents of central Gaza on Tuesday described a night of shelling and airstrikes shaking the Nuseirat, Maghazi and Bureij camps. The camps are built-up towns, housing Palestinians driven from their homes

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in what is now Israel during the 1948 war and their descendants -- and now also crowded with people who fled from the north.

"The bombing was very intense," Radwan Abu Sheitta, a Palestinian teacher said by phone from his home in Bureij. "It seems they are approaching," he said of the Israeli troops.

The Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military arm, said its fighters struck an Israeli tank east of Bureij. Its report could not be independently confirmed, but it suggested Israeli forces were moving toward the camp.

Warplanes and artillery also hammered areas east of Nuseirat camp. "We couldn't sleep because of the bombing," said Ezzel-Din Mohammed Abdallah al-Masry, a Palestinian fisherman who was displaced to the area from northern Gaza with his five children and other family. "The children are terrified. We are terrified."

## REGIONAL SPILLOVER

Iranian-backed militias in Iraq carried out a drone strike on a U.S. base in Irbil in northern Iraq on Monday, wounding three American servicemembers, one of them critically, according to U.S. officials. In response, American warplanes before dawn Tuesday hit three locations in Iraq connected to one of the main militias, Kataib Hezbollah.

The Israeli strike Monday hit a neighborhood of the Syrian capital Damascus, killing Gen. Seyed Razi Mousavi, an adviser of the Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria. The strike hit as he was entering a farm reportedly used as an office of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah in the district of Sayeda Zeinab on Damascus' outskirts, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Throughout the war, a constellation of Iranian-backed militia groups around the region have stepped up attacks in support of Hamas. So far, all sides have appeared to calibrate the violence to stay short of sparking an all-out conflict, but the fear is that an unexpected escalation could spiral out of control.

Hezbollah and Israel almost daily exchange volleys missiles, airstrikes and shelling across the Israeli-Lebanese border. Iran-backed militias in Iraq have launched more than 100 attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria.

In the Red Sea, attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen against commercial ships have disrupted trade and prompted a U.S.-led multinational naval operation to protect shipping routes.

## GAZA FIGHTING

Israeli troops have been engaged in nearly two months of ground combat with Hamas and other militants in northern Gaza and weeks of urban fighting in Khan Younis. The battles and bombardment have levelled large swaths of both areas, and strikes have continued across the territory.

Still, Hamas fighters have shown a tough resilience. The Israeli military announced the deaths of two more soldiers Tuesday, bringing the total killed in the ground offensive to 158. Militants late Monday launched a barrage of rockets into Israel, triggering air raid sirens in the southern city of Ashkelon. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

Israel has vowed to continue fighting to eliminate Hamas' military and governing capabilities in Gaza, after the militants carried out their shock attack into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking some 240 hostage. Israel says it also aims to free the more than 100 hostages who remain in captivity in Gaza.

Israel faces international criticism for the civilian death toll. 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.

In Khan Younis, the Palestinian Red Crescent said Tuesday morning its medics evacuated several dead and wounded after a house in the city's al-Amal neighborhood was bombed overnight. In nighttime footage posted by the charity, first responders and residents pulled a dead person from the rubble, using lights from mobile phones.

An Associated Press cameraman on the scene saw at least two dead and 15 wounded, mostly children.

The expanding fighting has pushed the population into a shrinking area, particularly the central city of Deir al-Balah and Rafah, at the far south of Gaza on the Egyptian border. More than a million people have squeezed into U.N. shelters, and many more displaced people are crowded into houses.



U.N. officials have warned that a quarter of the population is starving under Israel's siege of the territory, which allows in only a trickle of food, water, fuel, medicine and other supplies.

The U.N. Security Council last week called for immediately speeding up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza. But so far there has been little concrete sign of a change in entry of aid, which the U.N. has said it struggles to distribute because many areas are cut off by fighting.

Meanwhile, negotiations have seemed to make little headway toward a pause in fighting to allow the exchange of more hostages held in Gaza for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Egypt has put forward an ambitious peace proposal aiming not only to end the war but also to lay out a plan for the day after. It calls for a phased hostage release and the formation of a Palestinian government of experts to administer the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank, according to a senior Egyptian official and a European diplomat familiar with the proposal.

But it has gotten a cool public reception from Israel and Hamas. It falls short of Israel's declared goal of crushing Hamas and appears to be at odds with Israel's insistence on maintaining military control over Gaza for an extended period after the war. It is also unclear if Hamas would agree to relinquish power after controlling Gaza for the past 16 years.

## **276 Indians stuck in a French airport for days for a human trafficking probe arrive in India**

By CHRISTOPHE ENA and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

VATRY, France (AP) — A charter plane that was grounded in France for a human trafficking investigation arrived in India with 276 Indians aboard early Tuesday, authorities said. The passengers had been heading to Nicaragua but were instead blocked inside the Vatry Airport for four days in an exceptional holiday ordeal.

The regional administration said that 276 of the original 303 passengers were en route to Mumbai, and that 25 others requested asylum in France. Those who remained were transferred to a special zone in Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport for asylum-seekers, it said. The passengers grounded in France had included a 21-month-old child and several unaccompanied minors.

The remaining two passengers were initially detained as part of a human trafficking investigation but were released Monday after appearing before a judge, the Paris prosecutor's office said. The judge named them as "assisted witnesses" to the case, a special status under French law that allows time for further investigation and could lead to eventual charges or to the case being dropped.

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

Prosecutors wouldn't comment on 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 are working to determine the aim of the original flight, and opened a judicial inquiry into activities by an organized criminal group helping foreigners enter or stay in a country illegally, the prosecutor's office said.

It did not specify Monday whether human trafficking — which the U.N. defines as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit" — is still suspected.

The Vatry airport was requisitioned by police for days. Local officials, medics and volunteers installed cots and ensured regular meals and showers for those held inside. Then it turned into a makeshift courtroom Sunday as judges, lawyers and interpreters filled the terminal to carry out emergency hearings to determine the next steps.

Some lawyers at Sunday's hearings protested authorities' handling of the situation and the passengers' rights, suggesting that police and prosecutors overreacted to the anonymous tip.

The Indian Embassy posted its thanks on X, formerly Twitter, to French officials for ensuring that the

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Indians could go home. French authorities worked through Christmas Eve and Christmas morning on formalities to allow passengers to leave France, regional prosecutor Annick Browne told The Associated Press.

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 to eight days.

Legend Airlines lawyer Liliana Bakayoko said some passengers didn't want to go to India because they had paid for a tourism trip to Nicaragua. The airline has denied any role in possible human trafficking.

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.

## The right to protest is under threat in Britain, undermining a pillar of democracy

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — For holding a sign outside a courthouse reminding jurors of their right to acquit defendants, a retiree faces up to two years in prison. For hanging a banner reading Just Stop Oil off a bridge, an engineer got a three-year sentence. Just for walking slowly down the street, scores of people have been arrested.

They are among hundreds of environmental activists arrested for peaceful demonstrations in the U.K., where tough new laws restrict the right to protest.

The Conservative government says the laws prevent extremist activists from hurting the economy and disrupting daily life. Critics say the arrests mark a worrying departure.

"The government has made its intent very clear, which is basically to suppress what is legitimate, lawful protest," said Jonathon Porritt, an ecologist and former director of Friends of the Earth.

### A PATCHWORK DEMOCRACY

Britain is one of the world's oldest democracies, home of the Magna Carta, a centuries-old Parliament and an independent judiciary. That system is underpinned by an "unwritten constitution" — a set of laws, rules, conventions and judicial decisions accumulated over the years.

The result is "we rely on self-restraint by governments," said Andrew Blick, author of "Democratic Turbulence in the United Kingdom" and a political scientist at King's College London. "You hope the people in power are going to behave themselves."

But what if they don't? During three scandal-tarnished years in office, Boris Johnson pushed prime ministerial power to the limits. More recently, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak asked Parliament to overrule the U.K. Supreme Court, which blocked a plan to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda.

Critics say cracks have appeared in Britain's democratic foundations.

As former Conservative justice minister David Lidington put it: "The 'good chap' theory of checks and balances has now been tested to destruction."

### GOVERNMENT TAKES AIM AT PROTESTERS

The canaries in the coal mine are environmental activists who have blocked roads and bridges, glued themselves to trains, splattered artworks with paint, sprayed buildings with fake blood and doused athletes in orange powder to draw attention to climate change.

Groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain argue that civil disobedience is justified, but Sunak has called them "ideological zealots."

In 2022, a statutory offense of "public nuisance" was created, punishable by up to 10 years in prison. The 2023 Public Order Act broadened the definition of disruptive protest, increased police search powers and imposed penalties of up to 12 months in prison for protesters who block roads or other "key infrastructure."

In May, six anti-monarchist activists were arrested before the coronation of King Charles III before they had so much as held up a "Not My King" placard. All were released without charge.

In recent months, hundreds of Just Stop Oil activists have been detained under a new rule that criminal-

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izes slow walking protests. Some protesters have received prison sentences that have been called unduly punitive.

Structural engineer Morgan Trowland was one of two activists who scaled a bridge over the River Thames in October 2022, forcing police to shut the highway below for 40 hours. He was sentenced to three years in prison.

He was released early on Dec. 13 after 14 months in custody.

Ian Fry, the United Nations' rapporteur for climate change and human rights, has called Britain's anti-protest law a "direct attack on the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly."

The Conservative government has dismissed the criticism. "Those who break the law should feel the full force of it," Sunak said.

Even more worrying, some legal experts say, is the "justice lottery." Half the environmentalists tried by juries have been acquitted after explaining their motivations. But at other trials, judges have banned defendants from mentioning climate change or their reasons for protesting. Several defendants who defied the orders were jailed for contempt of court.

Tim Crosland, a former government lawyer turned environmental activist, said the silencing of defendants "feels like something that happens in Russia or China, not here."

To highlight concern, retired social worker Trudi Warner sat outside a London court in March holding a sign reading "Jurors – You have an absolute right to acquit a defendant according to your conscience." She is now being prosecuted.

## IS BREXIT TO BLAME?

Many legal and constitutional experts say the treatment of protesters is a symptom of an increasingly reckless attitude toward Britain's democratic structures that has been fueled by Brexit.

The 2016 referendum on whether to leave the European Union was won by a populist "leave" campaign that promised to restore Parliament's – and by extension the public's -- sovereignty.

The divorce brought to power Boris Johnson, who tested Britain's unwritten constitution. When lawmakers blocked his attempts to leave the EU without an agreement, he suspended Parliament -- until the U.K. Supreme Court ruled that illegal. He later proposed breaking international law by reneging on the U.K.'s exit treaty with the bloc.

He was ejected from office by his own fed-up lawmakers in 2022 after a series of personal scandals.

"People were elevated to high office (by Brexit) who then behaved in ways which were difficult to reconcile with maintenance of a stable democracy," said Blick, the King's College professor.

The populist instinct, if not the personal extravagance, has continued. In November, the U.K. Supreme Court ruled that a plan by Sunak to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda was unlawful because the country is not safe for refugees. The government said it would pass a law declaring Rwanda safe, disregarding the court.

Former Solicitor-General Edward Garnier has likened the plan to lawmakers deciding "that all dogs are cats."

But that doesn't mean it won't become law. Blick said that in Britain's unwritten constitution, "nothing can actually be deemed clearly to be unconstitutional."

Remedies have been proposed for Britain's democratic deficit, including citizens' assemblies, a new body to oversee the constitution and a higher bar for changing key laws. But none of that is on the horizon.

The protesters, meanwhile, say they are fighting for democracy as well as the environment.

Sue Parfitt, 81, is an Anglican priest who has been repeatedly arrested as part of the group Christian Climate Action. She has no plans to stop.

"It's worth doing to keep the right to protest alive, quite apart from climate change," she said. "It would be difficult for me to get to prison at 81. But I'm prepared to go."

## **Biden orders strike on Iranian-aligned group after 3 US troops injured in drone attack in Iraq**

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden ordered the U.S. military to carry out retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian-backed militia groups after three U.S. servicemembers were injured in a drone attack in northern Iraq.

National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson said one of the U.S. troops suffered critical injuries in the attack that occurred earlier Monday. The Iranian-backed militia Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups, under an umbrella of Iranian-backed militants, claimed credit for the attack that utilized a one-way attack drone.

Biden, who is spending Christmas at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, was alerted about the attack by White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan shortly after it occurred on Monday and ordered the Pentagon and his top national security aides to prepare response options to the attack on an air base used by American troops in Erbil.

Sullivan consulted with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Biden's deputy national security adviser, Jon Finer, was with the president at Camp David and convened top aides to review options, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity.

Within hours, Biden convened his national security team for a call in which Austin and Gen. CQ Brown, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed Biden on the response options. Biden opted to target three locations used by Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups, the official said.

The U.S. strikes were carried out at about 4:45 a.m. on Tuesday in Iraq, less than 13 hours after the U.S. personnel were attacked. According to U.S. Central Command, the retaliatory strikes on the three sites, "destroyed the targeted facilities and likely killed a number of Kataib Hezbollah militants."

"The President places no higher priority than the protection of American personnel serving in harm's way," Watson said. "The United States will act at a time and in a manner of our choosing should these attacks continue."

The latest attack on U.S. troops follows months of escalating threats and actions against American forces in the region since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel that sparked the devastating war in Gaza.

The dangerous back-and-forth strikes have escalated since Iranian-backed militant groups under the umbrella group called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and Syria began striking U.S. facilities Oct. 17, the date that a blast at a hospital in Gaza killed hundreds. Iranian-backed militias have carried out dozens of attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria since the start of the Israel-Hamas war more than two months ago.

Last month, U.S. fighter jets struck a Kataib Hezbollah operations center and command and control node, following a short-range ballistic missile attack on U.S. forces at Al-Assad Air Base in western Iraq. Iranian-backed militias also carried out a drone attack at the same air base in October, causing minor injuries.

The U.S. has also blamed Iran, which has funded and trained Hamas, for attacks by Yemen's Houthi militants against commercial and military vessels through a critical shipping choke point in the Red Sea.

The Biden administration has sought to prevent the Israel-Hamas war from spiraling into a wider regional conflict that either opens up new fronts of Israeli fighting or that draws the U.S. in directly. The administration's measured response — where not every attempt on American troops has been met with a counterattack — has drawn criticism from Republicans.

The U.S. has thousands of troops in Iraq training Iraqi forces and combating remnants of the Islamic State group, and hundreds in Syria, mostly on the counter-IS mission. They have come under dozens of attacks, though as yet none fatal, since the war began on Oct. 7, with the U.S. attributing responsibility to Iran-backed groups.

"While we do not seek to escalate conflict in the region, we are committed and fully prepared to take further necessary measures to protect our people and our facilities," Austin said in a statement.

## Inside Ukraine's covert Center 73, where clandestine missions shape the war behind the frontline

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

KHERSON, Ukraine (AP) — Their first battle plan was outdated the moment the dam crumbled. So the Ukrainian special forces officers spent six months adapting their fight to secure a crossing to the other side of the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine.

But it wasn't enough just to cross the river. They needed backup to hold it. And for that, they needed proof that it could be done. For one of the officers, nicknamed Skif, that meant a flag — and a photo op.

Skif, Ukrainian shorthand for the nomadic Scythian people who founded an empire on what is now Crimea, moves like the camouflaged amphibian that he is: Calculating, deliberate, until the time to strike.

He is an officer in Center 73, one of Ukraine's most elite units of special forces — frontline scouts, drone operators, underwater saboteurs. Their strike teams are part of the Special Operations Forces that run the partisans in occupied territories, sneak into Russian barracks to plant bombs and prepare the ground for reclaiming territory seized by Russia.

Their mission on the more dynamic of the two main fronts in the six-month counteroffensive reflects many of the problems of Ukraine's broader effort. It's been one of the few counteroffensive successes for the Ukrainian army.

By late May, the Center 73 men were in place along the river's edge, some of them almost within view of the Kakhovka Dam. They were within range of the Russian forces who had controlled the dam and land across the Dnipro since the first days after the February 2022 full-scale invasion. And both sides knew Ukraine's looming counteroffensive had its sights on control of the river as the key to reclaim the occupied south.

In the operation's opening days, on June 6, an explosion destroyed the dam, sending a wall of reservoir water downstream, killing untold numbers of civilians, and washing out the Ukrainian army positions.

"We were ready to cross. And then the dam blew up," Skif said. The water rose 20 meters (yards), submerging supply lines, the Russian positions and everything else in its path for hundreds of kilometers. The race was on: Whose forces could seize the islands when the waters receded, and with them full control of the Dnipro?

For most Ukrainians who see them on the streets in the nearly deserted frontline villages of the Kherson region, they are the guys in T-shirts and flip-flops — just regular people. The locals who refused to evacuate have all become accustomed to the sounds of war, so even their unnerving calm in the face of air raid alarms, nearby gunfire and artillery doesn't seem unusual.

AP joined one of the clandestine units several times over six months along the Dnipro. The frogmen are nocturnal. They transform themselves from nondescript civilians into elite fighters, some in wetsuits and some in boats. In the morning, when their operations end, they're back to anonymity.

They rarely take credit for their work and Ukrainians rarely learn about their operations. But Russian military statements gleefully and erroneously announcing the destruction of Center 73 are an indication of their effectiveness.

JUNE 2023

The men had the most modern equipment, night-vision goggles, waterproof rifles that can be assembled in a matter of seconds, underwater breathing apparatus that produces no surface bubbles, and cloaks that hide their heat signature during nighttime raids.

It was a matter of days before the start of the counteroffensive, and Center 73 had already located the Russian positions they would seize on the Dnipro River islands. Skif's men were within earshot of the June 6 explosion that destroyed the Kakhovka Dam, flooded vast stretches of the Kherson region, and upended Skif's attack plan.

An AP investigation found Russian forces had the means, motive and opportunity to blow up the dam.

Both the Russians and Ukrainians retreated from the river to regroup — Russians to the south and

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Ukrainians to the north.

Abandoned homes, clubs, shops became headquarters, with banks of computer screens filling the rooms and improvised weapons workshops nearby. Always secretive, frequently changing locations, they meticulously plan every operation, they sleep only a few hours during the day with curtains closed.

They wake around sunset, load gear into a 4X4 and drive to a different point on the riverbank to scout new routes for a counteroffensive, provoke Russian forces into shooting at them to pinpoint the enemy's location, retrieve soggy caches of supplies with their boat. Periodically, they captured a Russian soldier stuck in a tree or found a clutch of landmines washed up on shore.

And they themselves were stuck. Other special forces took part in battles in eastern Ukraine, the other main front in the counteroffensive. Skif's men waited patiently for the water to subside so they could seize positions and lay the groundwork for the arrival of infantry and marines in the Kherson region.

Skif, a veteran of the 2022 battle for Mariupol who had survived 266 days as a prisoner of war, wanted to fight. He had been part of Center 73 before Mariupol and rejoined after he was freed in a POW exchange.

Ukraine created its special forces in response to Russia's lightning-fast annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014, a precursor to the wide-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

"We realized that we were much smaller in terms of number than our enemy," said Oleksandr Kindratenko, a press officer for Special Operations Forces. "The emphasis was placed on quality. These were supposed to be small groups performing operational or strategic tasks."

He said they were trained and equipped in part by Europeans, including those from NATO countries, but their own recent battle experience means they are now as much teachers as students.

Tasks that the unit considers routine — scouting as close to Russians as possible, planting explosives under their noses, underwater operations — most soldiers would consider high-risk. High-risk missions are practically a death wish.

Skif knew he first had to plan and persuade the generals that if his men could secure a bridgehead — a strategic crossing point — it would be worthwhile to send troops. And that would mean high-risk river missions.

"My phone book is a little graveyard," he said. "A lot of good, decent people are dead. They were killed on the battlefield. One burned to death in an armored truck. One was shot by howitzers. Somebody stepped on a landmine. Everyone died differently, and there are so many of them."

JULY – AUGUST 2023

The water retreated in July. The Russians and Ukrainians advanced again toward the river from opposite directions, the Russians from the south and Ukrainians from the north.

Groups of Center 73 scouted and advanced along the river. The mission for Skif's unit was to reclaim an island near the dam, now a web of cracked mud and dead trees. Their network of spies in the Kherson region, as well as drones and satellite images, told them where Russian forces had re-positioned.

They disembarked the boats and moved in, walking through the bare branches of the forest through swarms of mosquitoes so loud their bodycam picked up the sound. One of the men tripped a wire connected to a grenade and flung himself as far as he could away from the Russian explosive.

Just as the shrapnel pierced his back, mayhem broke out. The injured Ukrainian crawled toward the unit's waiting boat 3 kilometers (2 miles) away, as the Russian troops who set the boobytrap rained gunfire on them. Skif's men made it to the boat, which sprang a leak, and retreated back to their side of the Dnipro. Russians established their position on the island, and it took weeks more for the Ukrainians to expel them.

Then new orders came. Go upstream and breach Russian defenses beneath a destroyed railway bridge.

The men had an often-underestimated advantage over their Russian enemy: Many Ukrainians grow up bilingual and understand Russian communications intercepted in real time, while Russian soldiers need a translator for Ukrainian.

So when Skif's unit started picking up Russian radio communications by the railway bridge, they immediately grasped how many men they were up against and the kind of munitions they would face. They made the crossing, avoided the Russians, and waited for backup,

That's when their advantage evaporated. In a single battle, the Russians sent Iskander missiles and

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dozens of drones, dropping hundreds of grenades.

"In the air, they had absolute dominance compared to us and they held the ground," he said.

The backup was nowhere near enough. Ukrainian forces retreated under heavy fire. More men out of commission and another difficult task ahead.

SEPTEMBER — OCTOBER 2023

A lucky thing happened soon after that battle. A Russian officer who claimed he'd been opposed to the war since its beginning was sent to the front in Kherson. It was, he later said, every bit as bad as he'd feared.

He made contact with Ukrainian intelligence and said he had 11 comrades who felt similarly. The group surrendered to Skif and his men.

The Russians told Skif exactly what he needed to know about their unit on the island they were now tasked with taking, just outside the village of Krynky.

He was sure he could take the island and more with 20 experienced men. But not without the promise of sufficient backup so Ukrainian regular forces could hold the territory. Fine, his commander said. He'd get the backup — if he returned with footage of his unit in the village hoisting the Ukrainian flag.

And that's how, in mid-October, a Ukrainian drone carrying the national blue and yellow flag came to fly above Krynky at just the moment Skif and his men made their way to the occupied village across the river. They got their photo op to prove the road was cleared, sent it to the military headquarters, and established the bridgehead.

NOVEMBER — DECEMBER 2023

Multiple Ukrainian brigades were sent to hold the position and have been there ever since.

But nighttime temperatures are dipping well below freezing, and Ukrainian forces are vastly under-equipped compared to the Russians nearby. Holding and advancing in winter is much harder on soldiers' bodies and their morale.

In recent weeks, Russia has sent waves of glide bombs — essentially enormous munitions retrofitted with gliding apparatus to allow them to be launched from dozens of kilometers (miles) away, as well as swarms of grenade-launching drones and Chinese all-terrain vehicles, according to the Institute for the Study of War and the Hudson Institute, two American think-tanks analyzing open-source footage from the area.

In a news conference earlier this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the battle and acknowledged Russian forces had pulled back "several meters." But he insisted Ukrainian forces were battling pointlessly and losing far more than they gained.

"I don't even know why they're doing this," Putin said.

Despite having never fully controlled the territory during the six-month counteroffensive, Russia claims it as its own.

And Ukrainian forces and Center 73 keep fighting into the new year.

"This is our work," Skif said. "No one knows about it, no one talks about it, and we do it with little reward except to benefit our country."

## **Inside Ukraine's covert Center 73, where clandestine missions shape the war behind the frontline**

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

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Skif, Ukrainian shorthand for the nomadic Scythian people who founded an empire on what is now

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Crimea, moves like the camouflaged amphibian that he is: Calculating, deliberate, until the time to strike. He is a Center 73 officer, one of Ukraine's most elite units of special forces — water operations specialists, frontline scouts, drone operators, underwater saboteurs. They are part of the Special Operations Forces that run partisans in occupied territories, sneak into Russian barracks to plant bombs and prepare the ground for reclaiming territory seized by Russia.

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They rarely take credit for their work. Ukraine created the special services operations in response to Russia's lightning-fast annexation of Crimea in 2014, a precursor to the widescale invasion of Ukraine eight years later.

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But a lucky thing happened in early autumn. A Russian officer who claimed he'd been opposed to the war since its beginning was sent to the front in Kherson. It was, he later said, every bit as bad as he'd feared.

He made contact with Ukrainian intelligence and said he had 11 comrades who felt similarly. The group surrendered together and Skif ended up taking custody of the Russian officer and his men.

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Multiple Ukrainian brigades were sent to hold the position and have been there ever since, including those men from Center 73 still in shape to fight.

But nighttime temperatures are dipping well below freezing, and Ukrainian forces are vastly underequipped



compared to the Russians nearby. Holding and advancing in winter is much harder on soldiers' bodies and their morale.

In recent weeks, Russia has sent waves of glide bombs — essentially enormous munitions retrofitted with gliding apparatus to allow them to be launched from dozens of kilometers (miles) away, as well as swarms of grenade-launching drones and Chinese all-terrain vehicles, according to the Institute for the Study of War and the Hudson Institute, two American think-tanks analyzing open-source footage from the area.

But Ukrainian forces and Center 73 keep fighting.

"My phone book is a little graveyard," Skif said one evening, coordinating over the radio his men on another boat mission. "This is our work. No one knows about it, no one talks about it, and we do it with little reward except to benefit our country."

## **Lose a limb or risk death? Growing numbers among Gaza's thousands of war-wounded face hard decisions**

By WAFSA SHURAF and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The doctors gave Shaimaa Nabahin an impossible choice: lose your left leg or risk death.

The 22-year-old had been hospitalized in Gaza for around a week, after her ankle was partially severed in an Israeli airstrike, when doctors told her she was suffering from blood poisoning. Nabahin chose to maximize her chances of survival, and agreed to have her leg amputated 15 centimeters (6 inches) below the knee.

The decision upended life for the ambitious university student, as it has for untold others among the more than 54,500 war-wounded who faced similar gut-wrenching choices.

"My whole life has changed," said Nabahin, speaking from her bed at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the central town of Deir al-Balah. "If I want to take a step or go anywhere, I need help."

The World Health Organization and the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza say amputations have become commonplace during the Israel-Hamas war, now in its 12th week, but could not offer precise figures. At the hospital in Deir al-Balah, dozens of recent amputees are in various stages of treatment and recovery.

Experts believe that in some cases, limbs could have been saved with proper treatment. But after weeks of Israel's blistering air and ground offensive, only nine out of Gaza's 36 hospitals are still operational. They are greatly overcrowded, offer limited treatment and lack basic equipment to perform surgeries. Many wounded are unable to reach the remaining hospitals, pinned down by Israeli bombardment and ground combat.

Sean Casey, a WHO official who recently visited several hospitals in Gaza, said the acute lack of vascular surgeons — the first responders to trauma injuries and best positioned to save limbs — is increasing the likelihood of amputations.

But also in many cases, he said, the severe nature of the injuries means some limbs are not salvageable, and need to be removed as soon as possible.

"People may die of the infections that they have because their limbs are infected," Casey told a news conference last week. "We saw patients who were septic."

Israel declared war after Hamas militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking more than 240 hostages. Israel has vowed to keep up the fight until Hamas is destroyed and removed from power in Gaza and all the hostages are freed. More than 20,600 Palestinians have been killed in the fighting, about 70% of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants among the dead.

Before the war, Gaza's health system was overwhelmed after years of conflict and a border blockade enforced by Israel and Egypt in response to the 2007 Hamas takeover of the territory. In 2018 and 2019, thousands were wounded by Israeli army fire in weekly Hamas-led anti-blockade protests, and more than 120 of the wounded had limbs amputated.

Even then, Gaza amputees had a hard time getting prostheses that would help them return to an active life.

Those joining the ranks of amputees now face near-impossible conditions. Some 85% of the population of 2.3 million have been displaced, crowding into tents, schools-turned-shelters or homes of relatives. Water, food and other basic supplies are scarce.

On Nov. 13, when an Israeli airstrike hit the home of Nabahin's neighbor in Bureij, an urban refugee camp in central Gaza, her ankle and arteries in her leg were partially severed by a clump of cement that blew into her home from the explosion next door. She was the only one of her family who was injured, while a number of her neighbors were killed, she said.

She was quickly taken to nearby Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, where doctors managed to sew up her leg and stop the bleeding.

But after that, Nabahin said she received minimal treatment or attention from doctors, who were dealing with a growing number of critically wounded people amid dwindled medical supplies. Days later, her leg turned a dark color, she said.

"They discovered that there was ... shrapnel that was poisoning my blood," she said.

The amputation went well, but Nabahin said she remains in acute pain and can't sleep without sedatives.

Jourdel Francois, an orthopedic surgeon with Doctors Without Borders, says the risk of post-op infections in war-stricken Gaza is high. Francois, who worked at Nasser Hospital in the southern town of Khan Younis in November, said hygiene was poor, mainly because of scarce water and the general chaos in a hospital that's overwhelmed with patients while hosting thousands of displaced civilians.

He recalled a young girl whose legs had been crushed and urgently needed a double amputation, but she couldn't be booked into surgery that day because of the high number of other critical injuries. She died later that night, Francois said, likely from sepsis, or blood poisoning by bacteria.

"There are 50 (injured) people arriving every day, you have to make a choice," he told The Associated Press by phone after leaving Gaza.

At Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, many of the new amputees struggle to get to grips with how the loss of limb has changed their lives. Nawal Jaber, 54, had both legs amputated after she was injured on Nov. 22, when an Israeli bombardment hit her neighbor's empty house and damaged her house in Bureij. Her grandson was killed, and her husband and son were wounded, she said.

"I wish I could meet the needs of my children, (but) I am unable," the mother of eight said, with tears streaming down her face.

Before the conflict, Nabahin had started her degree in international relations in Gaza and planned to travel to Germany to continue her studies.

She said her goal now is to get out of Gaza, to "save what is left of me, and to install a prosthetic limb and live my life normally."

## **Their lives were torn apart by war in Africa. A family hopes a new US program will help them reunite**

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

HASLET, Texas (AP) — Worried about his mother's health, Jacob Mabil tried for months to persuade her to let him start the process that would take her from a sprawling refugee camp where she had spent almost a decade after fleeing violence in South Sudan.

He wanted her to come live with him and his young family in the U.S. But before she would agree, she asked for a promise: that he would one day also bring the granddaughters she had raised since they were babies.

Mabil, now 44, said he would do everything he could. But it turned out that he was allowed to petition only for immediate family members. Though his mom joined him in suburban Fort Worth, Texas, in 2020, his nieces remained in Africa.

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"That always killed me," said Mabil, whose own childhood was ripped apart by civil war in Sudan.

As the U.S. government transforms the way refugees are being resettled, Mabil and his family now have hope that they will be reunited with two of his nieces, who soon turn 18 and 19. The Biden administration opened the application process this month that lets Americans who have formed groups to privately sponsor refugees request the specific person they want to bring to the U.S.

When he was just 8, Mabil was forced to run for his life as soldiers came into his village in what is now South Sudan, setting it on fire as they killed people. He became part of the group of children known as the "lost boys," who spent years on their own and walked hundreds of miles to flee violence.

Mabil, who didn't even know his mother was alive until shortly after he arrived in the U.S. in his early 20s, said he wants his sister's daughters to have the same opportunities that he has had.

Traditionally, resettlement agencies have placed refugees in communities, but the push to add private sponsorship as well has come as President Joe Biden works to restore a program that was decimated under former President Donald Trump. The launch at the start of 2023 of the State Department's Welcome Corps program, which allows everyday Americans the chance to form their own groups to privately sponsor refugees, came after a similar endeavor that let U.S. citizens sponsor Afghans or Ukrainians.

"In many ways it is, I think, one of the most important things that the U.S. resettlement program has ever done," said Sasha Chanoff, founder and CEO of RefugePoint, a Boston-based nonprofit that helps refugees. "It will allow families who are in desperate need to reunite to do so."

With the U.S. hoping to bring in 125,000 refugees this fiscal year, the use of private sponsors expands the capacity of the existing system, said Welcome Corps spokeswoman Monna Kashfi said. She added that the opportunity to apply to sponsor a specific refugee has been greatly anticipated.

"We have heard all throughout the year from people who wanted to know ... when they could submit an application to sponsor someone that they know," she said.

Mabil, his wife and his mother have already joined two family friends to form their own sponsor group to start the process to bring over his two nieces, who were placed in a boarding school when their grandmother left Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya for the U.S. One is set to graduate soon and the other has returned to the camp after graduating.

Chanoff said that unaccompanied girls are often "in extraordinary danger" at the camp and regularly kidnapped and sold into marriage.

Mabil's wife, Akuot Leek, 33, is also from South Sudan and spent her childhood traveling from place to place with her family to try to escape violence. She wants the young women to have the same freedom that she had to choose what to do with their lives.

Leek and Mabil began dating after meeting at a wedding in the U.S. and both are college graduates who now work in finance.

Mabil was one of about 20,000 youths who joined an odyssey that took them first to Ethiopia, where they spent about three years before a war there forced them to flee again. The survivors eventually made it to Kakuma, where Mabil spent almost a decade before coming to the U.S.

"They had survived bullets and bombs and wild animal attacks and things that you and I can't imagine to get to Kakuma camp," said Chanoff, who met Mabil at the camp.

Leek and Mabil say that once his nieces are settled in Texas, they may work to bring over other family members.

Mabil's mother, Adeng Ajang, said living with her son and daughter-in-law and four grandchildren in their comfortable home has made her very happy. Now, the only stress she has in her life is worrying about her granddaughters.

"It was difficult to leave them," said Ajang as her daughter-in-law translated from the Dinka language. "It was hard."

Ajang said talks to her granddaughters on the phone often. "Sometimes we talk and then we will start to cry," she said.

For Mabil, he's excited and nervous to start the process. "This is my last chance," he said.

## Egypt floats plan to end Israel-Hamas war. The proposal gets a cool reception

By SAMY MAGDY, NAJIB JOBAIN and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Israel and Hamas on Monday gave cool public receptions to an Egyptian proposal to end their bitter war. But the longstanding enemies stopped short of rejecting the plan altogether, raising the possibility of a new round of diplomacy to halt a devastating Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip.

The Egyptian plan calls for a phased hostage release and the formation of a Palestinian government of experts to administer the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank, according to a senior Egyptian official and a European diplomat familiar with the proposal.

The Egyptian official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the proposal, said the details were worked out with the Gulf nation of Qatar and presented to Israel, Hamas, the United States and European governments. Egypt and Qatar both mediate between Israel and Hamas, while the U.S. is Israel's closest ally and a key power in the region.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not comment directly on the proposal. But speaking to members of his Likud Party, he said he was determined to press ahead with Israel's offensive, launched in response to an Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel that killed 1,200 people and took 240 others hostage.

"We are expanding the fight in the coming days and this will be a long battle and it isn't close to finished," he said.

Hamas has continued to fire rockets into Israel throughout the fighting. Late Monday, it launched a barrage of rockets, triggering air raid sirens in the southern city of Ashkelon. AP video showed what appeared to be several interceptions by Israel's rocket defense system. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

The Egyptian proposal falls short of Israel's declared goal of crushing Hamas. It also appears to be at odds with Israel's insistence on maintaining military control over Gaza for an extended period after the war.

But Netanyahu faces heavy domestic pressure to reach a deal to bring home the more than 100 Israeli hostages who remain in captivity in Gaza.

As he vowed to continue the war during a speech in parliament, relatives of the hostages interrupted him and called for their immediate return. "Now! Now!" they shouted.

The rising death toll of Israeli soldiers from the ground operation also threatens to undermine public support for the war. The Israeli military announced the deaths of two more soldiers Monday, bringing the total killed in the war to 156.

Netanyahu's War Cabinet was expected to meet late Monday. It was unclear if they would discuss the Egyptian proposal.

Hamas did not officially react to the proposal. But it is unclear if Hamas would agree to relinquish power after controlling Gaza for the past 16 years.

Izzat Rishq, a senior Hamas official who is believed to be based in Qatar, issued a statement repeating the group's position that it will not negotiate without a "complete end to the aggression." He said Hamas would not agree to a "temporary or partial truce for a short period of time."

Word of the proposal came as Israeli airstrikes heavily pounded central and southern Gaza.

In the Maghazi refugee camp Monday, rescue workers were still pulling bodies from the wreckage of a strike the previous night. Records at the nearby Al-Aqsa Hospital seen by The Associated Press showed at least 106 people killed, making it one of the deadliest strikes of Israel's air campaign.

The United Nations' World Health Organization visited the hospital on Monday, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"The hospital is taking in far more patients than its bed capacity and staff can handle. Many will not survive the wait," he said in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

The war has devastated large parts of Gaza, killed more than 20,600 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

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U.N. officials have warned that a quarter of the population is starving under Israel's siege of the territory, which allows in only a trickle of supplies.

In the southern Gaza Strip, Hamas admitted to shooting dead a 13-year-old boy who was among a group of people who tried to seize aid from a truck. The shooting prompted a violent protest and rare public criticism of Hamas.

## EGYPTIAN PROPOSAL

The Egyptian proposal is 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.

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. Israeli officials estimate that 20 of the hostages have died or been killed in captivity.

Egypt and Qatar would also work with all Palestinian factions, including Hamas and the rival, internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, 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 work toward presidential and parliamentary elections, he added.

In the meantime, Israel and Hamas would 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.

More than 8,000 Palestinians are held by Israel on security-related charges or convictions, according to Palestinian figures. Some have been convicted in deadly attacks on Israelis. While their release would be controversial, Israel has a history of agreeing to lopsided releases.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry spoke by phone Monday with Iran's chief diplomat, Hossein Amirabdollahian, on the war in Gaza, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry said. The statement said Shoukry discussed efforts to achieve a comprehensive cease-fire. It didn't offer further details. Iran is a major supporter of Hamas.

In Washington, the White House declined to comment about the Egyptian proposal.

U.S. officials remain in close contact with Egypt and Qatar about getting more hostages released and several proposals have been floated, according to a person familiar with the talks. While the Egyptian proposal is viewed as a positive sign, the U.S. is skeptical it will result in a breakthrough, the person said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss behind the scenes diplomacy.

## INSIDE GAZA

Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than two-thirds of the 20,674 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.

The offensive has led to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, with shortages of food, medicines and other basic supplies.

With aid shipments limited, crowds have tried to seize some of the goods coming in on trucks. Hamas gunmen have been seen on top of some of the vehicles. The group says it is protecting the shipments, while Israel accuses it of stealing aid.

In the southern Gaza Strip, Hamas acknowledged that a policeman with the Hamas-run Interior Ministry shot dead a 13-year-old boy, saying the shots were fired when a group of people tried to seize aid from a truck near the city of Rafah on Sunday, an official with Hamas government media office said Monday.

The shooting prompted a violent protest and rare public criticism of Hamas, which has shown little tolerance for dissent during its rule.

Enraged relatives of the slain boy, Ahmed Brikeh, attempted to attack a police station, burning tires and demanding the policeman be held accountable.

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A relative, Mosaad Brikeh, blamed Hamas for the killing in video comments circulated on social media, accusing the policeman of shooting the boy "directly in his head."

He said the family has previously cooperated with Hamas to secure the border area with Egypt. He called for the policeman to be held accountable, warning the family would prevent "any vehicles" from passing through the area.

The devastation of the war over the past weeks has brought sporadic eruptions of anger against Hamas, something that has previously been unthinkable during the group's 16-year rule over Gaza.

Israel faces international criticism for the civilian death toll. 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.

Late on Monday, the Israeli army said it had discovered the stolen car of the family of an Israeli hostage, Samer Al-Talalka, in a hospital compound in northern Gaza. Al-Talalka was among three hostages mistakenly shot dead by Israeli soldiers in Gaza earlier this month.

The army said grenade fragments and bloodstains of another hostage were found in the vehicle. "The finding of the vehicle directly links the hospital to the brutal events of Oct. 7," it said.

## CHRISTMAS AMID WAR

Dozens of members of Gaza's tiny Christian community held a Christmas Eve service in the Holy Family Church in Gaza City, which they have also used as a shelter. Last week, Catholic officials said that two Christian women were killed by Israeli sniper fire at the compound.

"This is not a feast," said Kamal Ayad, whose wife and daughter were killed in the shooting. "This is a feast of pain for the Palestinian people."

He said his only wish was for "peace and hope for a cease-fire."

The service was held late Sunday, but details only emerged on Monday due to frequent internet outages. Bethlehem was hushed for Christmas, its holiday celebrations called off.

## Ukraine celebrates Christmas on Dec. 25 for the first time, distancing itself from Russia

By VOLODYMYR YURCHUK Associated Press

KRYVORIVNIA, Ukraine (AP) — Christmas carried more than spiritual weight for many Ukrainians this year as the country newly observed it as a public holiday on Dec. 25 rather than the later date followed in Russia.

The change, enacted in legislation signed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in July, reflects both Ukrainians' dismay with the 22-month-old Russian invasion and their assertion of a national identity.

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 2019 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.

Many Ukrainians embraced the move to celebrate Christmas on Dec. 25 with enthusiasm.

"It's historical justice," said Yevhen Konyk, a 44-year-old serviceman who, along with his family, participated in traditional celebrations at an open-air museum in Kyiv. "We need to move forward not only with the world but also with the traditions of our country and overcome the imperial remnants we had."

In the village of Kryvorivnia, thousands of worshipers, many in traditional garb including the embroidered shirts called vyshyvankas, crowded the streets and streamed to the settlement's noted elaborate wooden church.

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Kryvorivnia, in the Carpathian mountains, is about 800 kilometers (500 miles) west from the frontline, but the war was on the minds of the worshipers. "People didn't just come to observe the celebration, they came to pray," said local priest Ivan Rybaruk, who said 16 people from the village of only 1,500 residents have died in the fighting.

"People understand that we live here as safe as it could be. Missiles don't fly here, bombs don't explode, but we have lost a lot of guys," said 27-year-old Olha Mynykh, standing in front of the house of a soldier who was declared missing. "People don't feel that kind of joy. Of course, they feel joy because of Christmas because it's impossible not to feel the light of God in the heart. But the scale of the celebration, the nature of the celebration, has obviously changed. It's not as joyful and full of fun as before."

Oksana Poviakel, the director of the Pyrohiv Museum of Folk Architecture and Life of Ukraine in Kyiv, where Christmas celebrations took place, said that observing the holiday on the 25th is "another important factor of self-identification."

"We are separating ourselves from the neighbor who is currently trying to destroy our state, who is killing our people, destroying our homes, and burning our land," she said.

Asia Landarenko, 63, said she prays every day for her son, who is currently in the military. "The state of war affects everything, including the mood. The real celebration of Christmas will be after the victory, but as the Savior was born, so will be our victory," she said.

## The secret life of gift cards: Here's what happens to the billions that go unspent each year

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Gift cards make great stocking stuffers — just as long as you don't stuff them in a drawer and forget about them after the holidays.

Americans are expected to spend nearly \$30 billion on gift cards this holiday season, according to the National Retail Federation. Restaurant gift cards are the most popular, making up one-third of those sales.

Most of those gift cards will be redeemed. Paytronix, which tracks restaurant gift card sales, says around 70% of gift cards are used within six months.

But many cards — tens of billions of dollars' worth — wind up forgotten or otherwise unused. That's when the life of a gift card gets more complicated, with expiration dates or inactivity fees that can vary by state.

Here's what to know about the gift cards you're giving — or getting:

### LOVED, BUT LOST

After clothing, gift cards will be the most popular present this holiday season. Nearly half of Americans plan to give them, according to the National Retail Federation.

But many will remain unspent.

Gift cards get lost or forgotten, or recipients hang on to them for a special occasion. In a July survey, the consumer finance company Bankrate found that 47% of U.S. adults had at least one unspent gift card or voucher. The average value of unused gift cards is \$187 per person, a total of \$23 billion.

### THE GIFT OF TIME

Under a federal law that went into effect in 2010, a gift card can't expire for five years from the time it was purchased or from the last time someone added money to it. Some state laws require an even longer period. In New York, for instance, any gift card purchased after Dec. 10, 2022, can't expire for nine years.

Differing state laws are one reason many stores have stopped using expiration dates altogether, says Ted Rossman, a senior industry analyst at Bankrate.

### USE IT OR LOSE IT

While it may take gift cards years to expire, experts say it's still wise to spend them quickly. Some cards — especially generic cash cards from Visa or MasterCard — will start accruing inactivity fees if they're not used for a year, which eats away at their value. Inflation also makes cards less valuable over time. And if a retail store closes or goes bankrupt, a gift card could be worthless.

Perhaps consider clearing out your stash on National Use Your Gift Card Day, a five-year-old holiday cre-

ated by a public relations executive and now backed by multiple retailers. The next one is Jan. 20, 2024.  
OR SELL IT

If you have a gift card you don't want, one option is to sell it on a site like CardCash or Raise. Rossman says resale sites won't give you face value for your cards, but they will typically give 70 to 80 cents per dollar.

#### THE MONEY TRAIL

What happens to the money when a gift card goes unused? It depends on the state where the retailer is incorporated.

When you buy a gift card, a retailer can use that money right away. But it also becomes a liability; the retailer has to plan for the possibility that the gift card will be redeemed.

Every year, big companies calculate "breakage," which is the amount of gift card liability they believe won't be redeemed based on historical averages. For some companies, like Seattle-based Starbucks, breakage is a huge profit-driver. Starbucks reported \$212 million in revenue from breakage in 2022.

But in at least 19 states — including Delaware, where many big companies are incorporated — retailers must work with state unclaimed property programs to return money from unspent gift cards to consumers. Money that isn't recovered by individual consumers is spent on public service initiatives; in the states' view, it shouldn't go to companies because they haven't provided a service to earn it.

#### CLAIM IT

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have unclaimed property programs. Combined, they return around \$3 billion to consumers annually, says Misha Werschkul, the executive director of the Washington State Budget and Policy Center.

Werschkul says it can be tricky to find the holders of unspent gift cards, but the growing number of digital cards that name the recipient helps. State unclaimed property offices jointly run the website MissingMoney.com, where consumers can search by name for any unclaimed property they're owed, including cash from gift cards.

## Migrant caravan in southern Mexico marks Christmas Day by trudging onward

By EDGAR H. CLEMENTE Associated Press

HUIXTLA, Mexico (AP) — Christmas Day meant the same as any other day for thousands of migrants walking through southern Mexico: more trudging under a hot sun.

There were no presents, and Christmas Eve dinner was a sandwich, a bottle of water and a banana handed out by a local church to some of the migrants in the town of Álvaro Obregón, in the southern state of Chiapas, which borders Guatemala.

Migrants spent Christmas night sleeping on a scrap of cardboard or plastic stretched out under an awning or tent, or the bare ground.

In the morning, it was waking as usual at 4 a.m., to get an early start and avoid the worst of the heat, walking to the next town, Huixtla, 20 miles (30 kilometers) away.

Karla Ramírez, a migrant from Honduras who was traveling with other adults and four children, got to Álvaro Obregón too late Sunday to get any of the food being given out by the church. So they had to buy whatever little they could afford.

"It was sad: we have never, ever been in the street before," Ramírez said. "Our Christmas dinner was some mortadella, butter and tomato, with a tortilla."

Mariela Amaya's seven-year-old son didn't understand why they had to spend Christmas this way. Amaya, also from Honduras, tugged the hand of her tired, recalcitrant son as they walked.

"They don't understand why we have to do this to get a better life," Amaya said. Nor did the governments of Mexico and the United States, she said.

"Why can't they help us? We need their help," she said.



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What little help there was came from local families, one of whom gave out tamales — traditional seasonal fare — and water to the passing migrants.

The migrants included single adults but also entire families, all eager to reach the U.S. border, angry and frustrated at having to wait weeks or months in the nearby city of Tapachula for documents that might allow them to continue their journey.

Mexico claims it doesn't give out transit visas, but migrants keep hoping to get some sort of document so they could at least take buses to the border.

"This journey has been really hard for us migrants. We need the (Mexican) immigration office and the government to have some pity on us, and give us a safe conduct pass," said Jessica García, a migrant from Venezuela.

Mexico says it detected 680,000 migrants moving through the country in the first 11 months of 2023.

At around 6,000 people, the migrant caravan that set out Sunday was the largest one since June 2022, when a similarly sized group departed Tapachula.

And like the 2022 caravan — which started as U.S. President Joe Biden hosted leaders in Los Angeles for the Summit of the Americas — this year's Christmas caravan came a few days before U.S. officials are to meet with their Mexican counterparts in Mexico City to explore ways of stemming the number of migrants showing up at the U.S. southwest border.

The Mexican government has already said it is willing to help try to block migrants from crossing Mexico; the government had little choice, after U.S. officials briefly closed two vital Texas railway border crossings, claiming they were overwhelmed by processing migrants.

That put a chokehold on freight moving from Mexico to the United States, as well as grain needed to feed Mexican livestock moving south. The rail crossings have since been reopened, but the message was clear.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to arrive in Mexico City Wednesday to hammer out new agreements to control the surge of migrants seeking entry into the United States. The U.S. delegation will also include Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and White House homeland security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall.

This month, as many as 10,000 migrants were arrested per day at the U.S. southwest border.

In May, Mexico agreed to take in migrants from countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba who had been turned away by the U.S. for not following rules that provided new legal pathways to asylum and other forms of migration.

But that deal, aimed at curbing a post-pandemic jump in migration, appears to be insufficient as numbers rise once again, disrupting bilateral trade and stoking anti-migrant sentiment among conservative voters in the U.S.

Arrests for illegal crossing topped 2 million in each of the U.S. government's last two fiscal years, reflecting technological changes that have made it easier for migrants to leave home to escape poverty, natural disasters, political repression and organized crime.

## Holiday travel is mostly nice, but with some naughty disruptions again on Southwest Airlines

Conditions were mostly nice this year for travelers flying ahead of and on Christmas, but some naughty disruptions again plagued those flying with Southwest Airlines.

For millions of people traveling over the holiday, this year was much better than last. Christmas morning put a bow on a relatively smooth weekend.

Only 157 flights within, into or out of the U.S. had been canceled and 2,111 were delayed as of late afternoon on Monday, according to the tracking website FlightAware.

For this holiday season, U.S. airlines prepared for massive waves of travelers by hiring thousands of pilots, flight attendants and other workers — in an effort to avoid the delays and cancellations that marred travel in 2022, culminating with the Southwest Airlines debacle that stranded more than 2 million people.

Still, Southwest experienced hiccups again over the weekend that the airline was looking to clear by

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Monday. Just 2% of the airline's flights were canceled Monday, though 16% were delayed, which is 693 flights total, according to FlightAware.

On Saturday and Sunday, Southwest canceled 426 flights and delayed 2,689 flights, FlightAware data showed.

A Southwest spokesperson blamed the issues on dense fog in Chicago on Saturday and Sunday that prevented planes from landing and said some additional cancellations may be necessary Monday ahead of what was expected to be a full recovery on Tuesday.

Auto club AAA predicted that between Saturday and New Year's Day, 115 million people in the U.S. would travel at least 50 miles (80 kilometers) from home by air or car. That's up 2% from last year.

More than 2.6 million people were screened by the Transportation Security Administration on Thursday, according to TSA records. Data from the weekend is yet to be released.

Over Thanksgiving, a record number of people traveled through U.S. airports, topping pre-COVID numbers in 2019 with a single-day record of 2.9 million people screened by TSA on Sunday, Nov. 26.

Compared with the holiday season last year, more mild weather has helped keep air travel schedules on time.

But on the ground, road conditions were dangerous in parts of the country on Christmas Day, thanks to accumulating snow and ice in the Midwest and Great Plains. Most of Nebraska and South Dakota were facing blizzard conditions, and parts of eastern North and South Dakota were facing ice storms, according to the National Weather Service.

The busiest days on the road were predicted to be Saturday, Dec. 23, and next Thursday, Dec. 28, according to transportation data provider INRIX.

## Suspect found dead after standoff, fire at California home on Christmas Eve

Associated Press undefined

HERMOSA BEACH, Calif. (AP) — An armed man who faced off with officers at a California home for several hours on Christmas Eve was later found dead in the home's garage, authorities told local media.

The Los Angeles County Fire Department responded to a 911 call on 11th Street in Hermosa Beach around 3:30 p.m. on Sunday, KTLA-TV reported.

A witness said neighbors heard an argument and saw a man with a gun who went into the two-story home and refused to surrender to police who arrived at the scene, KTLA reported.

The garage at the home caught fire shortly before 5 p.m., KTLA reported.

Hermosa Beach Police Chief Paul LeBaron said the suspect's immediate family members, including children, fled before police arrived, KTLA reported.

"They came out and, at that point, the only person left inside that we were aware of was the suspect," LeBaron said, adding that neighboring homes were evacuated.

Police reported hearing explosions, which may have been gunshots, but officers did not believe they were targeted, LeBaron said.

Firefighters and police who arrived at the scene did not attempt to enter the home and were unsure at the time if the armed man remained inside, the Daily Breeze newspaper reported, citing a fire official at the scene.

Firefighters set up a defensive perimeter around the garage to contain the blaze and prevent the fire from spreading to other buildings, the fire official told the newspaper.

At about 9:30 p.m., police and deputies with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department entered the home to try to arrest the man and found him dead inside the garage, KTLA reported. His identity had not yet been released as of Monday morning.

The county coroner's office will determine how he died and the cause of the fire is still under investigation by the county fire department.

## King Charles III's Christmas message reflects a coronation theme and calls for planet's protection

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III reflected his coronation theme of public service Monday in a Christmas message that he connected to the health of the planet and wars that are raging.

In a prerecorded video shot with him standing beside a Christmas tree in Buckingham Palace, the king spoke of the message of Jesus' life in serving those less fortunate as he honored the "selfless army" that forms the "backbone of our society" helping others.

"My heart has been warmed by countless examples of the imaginative ways in which people are caring for one another, going the extra mile to help those around them simply because they know it is the right thing to do," he said.

It was the king's second Christmas speech since he ascended the throne after his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, died in September 2022, but the first since his coronation in May when he was officially crowned in a medieval ceremony rich in pageantry and pomp.

Charles, who has long campaigned for environmental causes and recently told foreign leaders at the COP28 Climate Meeting that achieving climate goals remain "dreadfully far off track," said he was encouraged to see awareness growing of the need to protect the earth.

"To care for this creation is the responsibility owned by people of all faiths and of none," he said. "We care for the earth for the sake of our children's children."

In his own gesture towards sustainability, the evergreen next to him was bedecked in natural decorations made from wood, dried oranges, pinecones and paper. The tree, the first live one at the palace, was to be replanted after the holidays.

As Charles spoke, video showed highlights from his past year, including helping plant a tree during a trip to Kenya — his first state visit as monarch with Queen Camilla to a Commonwealth country.

It also featured footage from the coronation in which he declared, "I come not to be served but to serve." Another clip showed his eldest son, Prince William, heir to the throne, along with his wife, Kate, the princess of Wales, and their three children carrying out that mission by helping to rebuild a Scout hut during a day of service that followed the coronation.

His estranged son, Prince Harry, who left the ranks of the senior royals when he moved to the U.S. in 2020 with this wife, Meghan, wasn't shown in the video. Harry, who showed up alone at the coronation and was seated in the third row, inflamed tensions with his best-selling memoir, "Spare," published early in the year that accused his brother of beating him up.

At a time of "increasingly tragic conflict around the world," a reference to wars in Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas, Charles invoked the words of Christ to "do unto others as you would have them do to you."

"They remind us to imagine ourselves in the shoes of our neighbors and to seek their good as we would our own," he said. "My heart and my thanks go to all who are serving one another, all who are caring for our common home and all who see and seek the good of others, not least the friend we do not yet know."

## An Israeli airstrike in Syria kills a high-ranking Iranian general

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — An Israeli airstrike Monday in a Damascus neighborhood killed a high-ranking Iranian general, Iranian state media said.

Iranian officials and allied militant groups in the region vowed revenge for the killing but did not immediately launch any retaliatory strike.

The killing of Seyed Razi Mousavi, a longtime adviser of the Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria, comes amid ongoing fears of the Israel-Hamas war sparking a regional spillover. Iran-backed groups in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq have launched attacks on Israel and its allies in support of Hamas.

Clashes along the Lebanon-Israel border between Hezbollah and Israel have continued to intensify, with daily exchanges of missiles, airstrikes and shelling across the frontier.

In the Red Sea, attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen against ships they believe to be connected to Israel have disrupted trade and prompted the launch of a U.S.-led multinational naval operation to protect shipping routes.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq operating under an umbrella group dubbed the Islamic Resistance in Iraq have also launched more than 100 attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, which they have said are in retaliation for Washington's support of Israel.

The group claimed an attack on a U.S. base next to the commercial airport in Irbil in northern Iraq on Monday. A U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity in accordance with regulations, confirmed the attack and said it had caused injuries but did not provide further details.

Israeli strikes killed two other generals earlier this month in Syria.

Israel on Monday struck the Sayida Zeinab neighborhood, located near a Shiite Muslim shrine, Iran's official news agency IRNA and Britain-based opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. IRNA described Mousavi as a close companion of Gen. Qassim Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force who was slain in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in January 2020.

Neither the Israeli military nor Syrian state media immediately issued a statement about Monday's attack. Israeli officials declined to comment.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in a statement said that Mousavi was "martyred while serving as an adviser for the resistance front, defending holy shrines in Syria as well as safeguarding Islamic ideals." He threatened that the "Israeli regime will definitely pay for this crime."

Hossein Akbari, Iran's ambassador to Syria, condemned the killing, saying that Mousavi was in Syria as a "formal military advisor."

"(Israel) will definitely get a response to this crime at the right time and the right situation," Akbari said, speaking from Damascus.

Though IRNA didn't provide other details about the attack, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the Israeli military targeted Mousavi after he entered a farm in the area, which allegedly was one of several offices for Hezbollah. The Lebanese militant group, alongside Iran and Russia, has played a key military role in keeping President Bashar Assad's government in power throughout the Syrian conflict.

Hezbollah in a statement called Mousavi "one of the best of brothers who worked to support the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon for decades of his honorable life."

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of war-torn Syria in recent years. It doesn't usually acknowledge its airstrikes on Syria. But when it does, Israel says it's targeting Iran-backed groups there that have backed Assad's government.

## **Taylor Swift celebrates Christmas Day by watching Travis Kelce and Chiefs play Las Vegas**

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Pop superstar Taylor Swift walked into Arrowhead Stadium alongside Santa Claus on Monday to watch her boyfriend and Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce as they played the Las Vegas Raiders in a Christmas Day showdown.

Swift and Kelce have become one of the hottest celebrity couples in the world since they began dating early in the season, and the 12-time Grammy Award-winner has watched her boyfriend numerous times at Arrowhead Stadium.

This time she showed up in a festive red shirt under a black jacket with St. Nick by her side.

Swift wasn't the only celebrity in Arrowhead Stadium on Monday. Iowa basketball star Caitlin Clark, the reigning AP women's player of the year, was on the sideline for pregame warmups. She swapped jerseys with Chiefs wide receiver Rashee Rice.

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## Florida Atlantic has highest ranking ever in AP Top 25. Purdue remains No. 1

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

Florida Atlantic's run to the Final Four last season was viewed as a nice story, a small program making a surprise run before sliding back into anonymity.

The Owls are showing this season that that was no fluke.

Coming off a double-overtime win over No. 4 Arizona, FAU moved up seven places to No. 7 in The Associated Press men's college basketball poll released Monday. It's the Owls' highest ranking as a program after being No. 10 in the preseason poll.

"We wanted to play it in the worst way for a lot of reasons," FAU coach Dusty May said before the 96-95 win over Arizona on Saturday. "National television. Our guys wanted to be challenged. They love the challenge. And we felt our program was at a point where we needed these games to elevate even more than a Final Four run."

Purdue maintained its top ranking for the second straight week, receiving 46 first-place votes from a 60-person media panel after blowing out Jacksonville. No. 2 Kansas had five first-place votes and No. 3 Houston received nine. Arizona and UConn rounded out the top five.

Florida Atlantic made massive waves last season, earning the program's first ranking in the AP Top 25 during the regular season before making a magical run in the NCAA Tournament. The Owls just missed a shot at the national championship game when San Diego State's Lamont Butler beat them with a buzzer-beating jumper.

Florida Atlantic (10-2) returned nearly everyone from that team and has shown another deep run could be coming.

The Owls suffered an unexpected slipup with an early home loss to Bryant and lost to then-No. 20 Illinois by seven at Madison Square Garden on Dec. 5. FAU won the ESPN Events Invitational by knocking off then-No. 12 Texas A&M in the semifinals and Virginia Tech in the title game.

The Owls showed plenty of grit in Las Vegas on Saturday, going toe to toe with Arizona in one of the best games of the season so far.

Johnell Davis scored 35 points and FAU dodged Caleb Love's 3-point attempt at the buzzer to win its fifth game over a ranked opponent over the past two seasons. The Owls had been 1-19 against AP Top 25 teams before last season.

### RISING AND FALLING

FAU had the biggest jump of the week within the poll and No. 16 Duke climbed five places after beating No. 17 Baylor 78-70. No. 19 Memphis moved up four places following wins over Virginia and Vanderbilt.

No. 22 Creighton had the biggest drop of the week, falling 10 places after losing to Villanova in overtime. No. 12 Oklahoma fell five places after losing by 12 to No. 9 North Carolina.

### IN AND OUT

No. 25 Providence moved into the poll for the first time since hitting No. 20 last Feb. 27 after beating No. 10 Marquette and Butler last week.

Virginia's return to the AP Top 25 proved to be short lived. The Cavaliers dropped out this week from No. 22 after the loss to Memphis.

### CONFERENCE WATCH

The Big 12 again had the most ranked teams with six and the Big East had four. The ACC, Big Ten and SEC each had three.

The American Athletic Conference had two ranked teams while the Pac-12, West Coast, Mountain West and Sun Belt conferences had one each.

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

By ALEX BABENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Monday hailed the shooting down of two Russian fighter jets on Christmas Eve and said “this Christmas sets the right mood for the entire year ahead.”

In a Christmas message marking the first time the country has officially observed the holiday on Dec. 25 rather than Jan. 7, Zelenskyy also referred to Ukraine’s claim to have destroyed a further three Russian fighter planes on Friday.

“The stronger our air defense, the fewer Russian devils will be in our skies and on our land,” Zelenskyy said, praising Ukraine’s “capabilities in negotiations with partners, capabilities in bolstering our sky shield, capabilities in defending our homeland from Russian terrorists.”

His upbeat assessment comes amid growing concern about battlefield disappointments and about the future of Western aid for Ukraine’s war effort. Despite high hopes for a summer counteroffensive, the front line has barely moved and political disputes in allied countries leave billions of dollars of aid in doubt.

Russia on Monday claimed a battlefield advance. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Moscow’s forces had taken control of Marinka, a now-deserted strategic town about 20 kilometers (12 miles) west of Donetsk, the largest city in Russian-held territory.

“This allows us today to more effectively protect Donetsk from attacks,” Shoigu said at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ukrainian officials didn’t comment on the possible seizure of the town.

Ukraine said that along with the two Russian planes that were shot down during the night, its air defense forces intercepted 28 Russian drones. The air force said 31 drones were launched in all, but no details were given about what the three that weren’t intercepted may have struck.

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 under Ukrainian control and experiences frequent attacks.

Zelenskyy signed legislation in July to move the date for the Christmas public holiday. 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 2019 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.

Many Ukrainians embraced the change with enthusiasm, viewing it as a positive step that will further strengthen their cultural separation from Russia.

“It’s historical justice,” said Yevhen Konyk, a 44-year-old serviceman who, along with his family, participated in traditional celebrations at the open-air museum in Kyiv. “We need to move forward not only with the world but also with the traditions of our country and overcome the imperial remnants we had.”

Konyk, who serves in Kyiv, said he is hopeful of victory next year but noted the dire situation on the frontline.

“This year, everyone expected major achievements on the front, but it turned out that the predictions were too optimistic. The enemy was also preparing,” he said.

Oksana Poviakel, the director of the Pyrohiv Museum of Folk Architecture and Life of Ukraine, where the celebrations of Christmas took place, said that celebrating on Dec. 25 is “another important factor of self-identification.”

“We are separating ourselves from the neighbor who is currently trying to destroy our state, who is kill-

ing our people, destroying our homes, and burning our land," she said.

## South Carolina stays unanimous No. 1 in women's AP Top 25. West Virginia in, Washington out

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

South Carolina remained the No. 1 team in The Associated Press women's basketball poll on Monday.

The Gamecocks received all 36 votes from a national media panel, marking the seventh consecutive week that they've been No. 1. South Carolina had a run of 38 straight weeks as the top team over the previous two seasons before LSU was the preseason No. 1 this year.

With most teams having a light schedule last week ahead of the holidays, the top 10 were unchanged. UCLA, North Carolina State, Iowa and Texas followed the Gamecocks.

Southern California, LSU, Colorado, Stanford and Baylor were next.

Ohio State dropped four spots to No. 17 after losing to UCLA by six points.

### BIG 12 RISING

West Virginia gave the Big 12 Conference a fifth team in the poll as the Mountaineers entered at No. 25 and Washington fell out. It's the first appearance since 2021 for WVU. The Big 12 now has Texas, Baylor, No. 11 Kansas State, No. 23 TCU and West Virginia ranked, marking the first time since the 2021-22 season that's happened. The Big 12, Pac 12 and SEC are the only three conferences to have every school still with a winning record.

### TESTS BEFORE THE NEW YEAR

Conference play begins this week for most schools, with a trio of stellar games set for Saturday. UCLA plays USC, Colorado faces Utah and Baylor meets Texas. The next day has a key Big East matchup with Marquette visiting UConn.

### HOLIDAY POLL HISTORY

This is the seventh time the poll has been released on Christmas, with the previous one coming in 2017. That year was a notable as Stanford dropped out of the rankings for the first time in 17 years. The other years were 1979, 1983, 1995, 2000 and 2006.

## Imprisoned Russian politician Navalny is now in a penal colony near the Arctic Circle

MOSCOW (AP) — Associates of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said Monday that he has been located at a prison colony above the Arctic Circle nearly three weeks after contact with him was lost.

Navalny, the most prominent foe of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is serving a 19-year sentence on charges of extremism. He had been imprisoned in the Vladimir region of central Russia, about 230 kilometers (140 miles) east of Moscow, but his lawyers said they had not been able to reach him since Dec. 6.

His spokesperson, Kira Yarmysh, said he was located in a prison colony in the town of Kharp, in the Yamalo-Nenets region about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

Navalny is "fine — at least as much as possible after such a long stage" and a lawyer visited him, Yarmysh told The Associated Press.

The region is notorious for long and severe winters. The town is about 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Vorkuta, whose coal mines were among the harshest of the Soviet Gulag prison-camp system.

"It is almost impossible to get to this colony; it is almost impossible to even send letters there. This is the highest possible level of isolation from the world," Navalny's chief strategist, Leonid Volkov, said on X.

Transfers within Russia's prison system are shrouded in secrecy and inmates can disappear from contact for several weeks. Navalny's team was particularly alarmed when he could not be found because he had been ill and reportedly was being denied food and kept in an unventilated cell.

Yarmysh said the transfer was connected with the campaign for the Russian presidential election in March.

While Putin's reelection is all but certain, given his overwhelming control over the country's political scene and a widening crackdown on dissent, Navalny's supporters and other critics hope to use the campaign to erode public support for the Kremlin leader and his military action in Ukraine.

"They deliberately sent him to this particular colony precisely in order to isolate Alexei as much as possible, so as not to give him any opportunity to communicate with the outside world," she said. "This is all happening precisely because Alexei, despite the fact that he is in prison, is still the main opponent of Vladimir Putin ... It is not surprising that they began to transfer him to another colony right now, so that he could not interfere with Putin's campaign."

Navalny has been behind bars in Russia since January 2021, when he returned to Moscow after recuperating in Germany from nerve agent poisoning that he blamed on the Kremlin. Before his arrest, he campaigned against official corruption and organized major anti-Kremlin protests.

He has since received three prison terms and spent months in isolation in Penal Colony No. 6 for alleged minor infractions. He has rejected all charges against him as politically motivated.

## **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.

## 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 election in ways that are tough to predict. 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 a famous last name like Kennedy’s, or his 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, 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. Campaigns usually hire people to collect signatures and often need a small army of lawyers to challenge access rules and fight back against others trying to keep the candidates 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

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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 she found him to have "more balance, a little more sanity" compared with Trump. But she was 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, minor-party candidates 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."

## Shipping firm Maersk says it's preparing for resumption of Red Sea voyages after attacks from Yemen

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Shipping firm Maersk says that it's preparing to allow vessels to resume sailing through the Red Sea, thanks to the start of a U.S.-led multinational naval operation to protect shipping from attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Houthi attacks have led to a major disruption of shipping through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, one of the most important arteries for trade in oil, natural gas, grain and consumer goods between Europe and Asia.

Maersk said in a statement Sunday that "we have received confirmation that the previously announced multi-national security initiative Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG) has now been set up and deployed to allow maritime commerce to pass through the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden and once again return to using the Suez Canal as a gateway between Asia and Europe."

The company said it was working on plans for the first vessels to make the journey "and for this to happen as soon as operationally possible."

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The Houthis are Iranian-backed rebels who seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in 2014, launching a grinding war against a Saudi-led coalition seeking to restore the government. The Houthis have sporadically targeted ships in the region, but the attacks have increased since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

The rebels have threatened to attack any vessel they believe is either going to or coming from Israel. That has escalated to apparently any vessel, with container ships and oil tankers flagged to countries like Norway and Liberia being attacked or drawing missile fire.

Major shipping companies include Maersk have been avoiding the Red Sea and sending their ships around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope. That added what analysts say could be a week to two weeks of voyages. The disruption also hiked fuel and insurance costs.

On Saturday, a U.S. warship shot down four incoming drones originating from Houthi-controlled areas, and a Norwegian-flagged chemicals and oil tanker reported a near miss of an attack drone, while an India-flagged tanker was hit with no injuries reported., the U.S. Central Command said Sunday on X, formerly Twitter. The incidents represented the 14th and 15th attacks on commercial shipping by the Houthis since Oct. 17.

## Today in History: December 26 Tsunami kills hundreds of thousands in Asia

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 26, the 360th day of 2023. There are five days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 26, 2004, more than 230,000 people, mostly in southern Asia, were killed by a 100-foot-high tsunami triggered by a 9.1-magnitude earthquake beneath the Indian Ocean.

On this date:

In 1799, former President George Washington was eulogized by Col. Henry Lee as "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

In 1865, James H. Nason of Franklin, Massachusetts, received a patent for "an improved coffee percolator."

In 1908, Jack Johnson became the first Black boxer to win the world heavyweight championship as he defeated Canadian Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia.

In 1917, during World War I, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation authorizing the government to take over operation of the nation's railroads.

In 1941, during World War II, Winston Churchill became the first British prime minister to address a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress.

In 1966, Kwanzaa was first celebrated.

In 1980, Iranian television footage was broadcast in the United States showing a dozen of the American hostages sending messages to their families.

In 1990, Nancy Cruzan, a young woman in an irreversible vegetative state whose case led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision on the right to die, died at a Missouri hospital.

In 1994, French commandos stormed a hijacked Air France jetliner on the ground in Marseille, killing four Algerian hijackers and freeing 170 hostages.

In 1996, six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey was found beaten and strangled in the basement of her family's home in Boulder, Colorado. (To date, the slaying remains unsolved.)

In 2003, an earthquake struck the historic Iranian city of Bam, killing at least 26,000 people.

In 2006, former President Gerald R. Ford died in Rancho Mirage, California at age 93.

In 2018, Japan announced that it was leaving the International Whaling Commission in order to resume commercial whale hunts for the first time in 30 years, but said it would no longer go to the Antarctic for annual killings that had been harshly criticized.

In 2021, South African Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu died at 90; the retired archbishop had been an uncompromising foe of apartheid and a modern-day activist for racial justice and LGBT rights.

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Today's Birthdays: R&B singer Abdul "Duke" Fakir (The Four Tops) is 88. "America's Most Wanted" host John Walsh is 78. Country musician Bob Carpenter (The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) is 77. Funk musician George Porter Jr. (The Meters) is 76. Baseball Hall of Fame catcher Carlton Fisk is 76. Retired MLB All-Star Chris Chambliss is 75. Baseball Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith is 69. Former Democratic Sen. Evan Bayh of Indiana is 68. Humorist David Sedaris is 67. Rock musician James Kottak (The Scorpions) is 61. Rock musician Lars Ulrich (Metallica) is 60. Actor Nadia Dajani is 58. Rock singer James Mercer (The Shins; Flake) is 53. Actor-singer Jared Leto is 52. Actor Kendra C. Johnson is 47. Rock singer Chris Daughtry is 44. Actor Beth Behrs is 38. Actor Kit Harington is 37. Actor Eden Sher is 32. Pop singer Jade Thirlwall (Little Mix) is 31. Actor Zach Mills is 28.