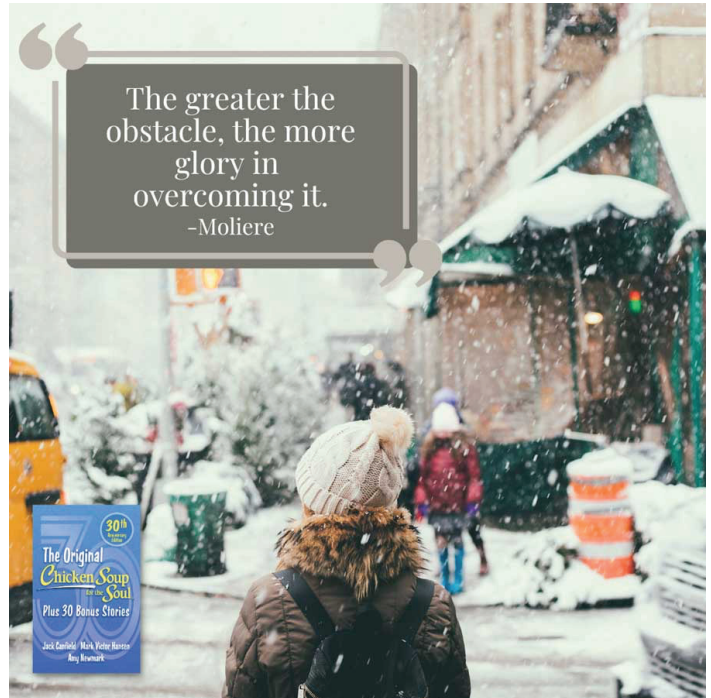


Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 1 of 72

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 Headlines](#)
- [3- S & S Lumber Christmas Ad](#)
- [3- SD Farmers Union Christmas Ad](#)
- [4- Sixth installment of Groton Area Kindergarten](#)
- [5- Spanier Harvesting Christmas Ad](#)
- [5- Sun & Sea Travel Co. Christmas Ad](#)
- [6- Seventh installment of Groton Area Kindergarten](#)
- [7- Weber Landscaping Christmas Ad](#)
- [7- Weismantel Agency Christmas Ad](#)
- [8- Final installment of Groton Area Kindergarten](#)
- [9- SD News Watch: Highway 385 project will close road critical to \\$2 billion Black Hills tourism industry](#)
- [14- SD SearchLight: Lincoln County votes to support landowner position in prison site lawsuit](#)
- [17- Weather Pages](#)
- [21- Daily Devotional](#)
- [22- 2023 Community Events](#)
- [23- Subscription Form](#)
- [24- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [25- News from the Associated Press](#)



“The greater the obstacle, the more glory in overcoming it.”
-Moliere

Wednesday, Dec. 27

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

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

No School - Christmas Break

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

Thursday, Dec. 28

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

No School - Christmas Break

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

Friday, Dec. 29

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

No School - Christmas Break

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

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

Saturday, Dec. 30

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

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

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

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

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 2 of 72

1440

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

Top Israeli officials are reviewing a draft peace proposal crafted by neighboring Egypt to end fighting in the Gaza Strip, focusing on initial steps including renewed hostage and prisoner swaps, according to reports yesterday. The role of Hamas in a postwar governing structure—a nonstarter for Israel, say experts—remains a key hurdle. Hamas and partner militant group Islamic Jihad were said to have quickly dismissed Egypt's plan.

A ban on the sale of two of Apple's flagship smartwatches will continue for the foreseeable future after a ruling by US trade regulators over a patent dispute went into effect yesterday. The Biden administration declined to veto the decision, which affects US sales of the Series 9 and Ultra 2 watches, early yesterday morning.

Temperatures across much of China rose above freezing for the first time in weeks Sunday, capping the most severe cold snap in the country in seven decades. Thermometers in Beijing had remained below 0 degrees Celsius since Dec. 11, with some parts of northeastern China reaching minus 40 degrees.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" breaks Spotify record for most streams in a day, bringing in nearly 24 million streams on Christmas Eve.

Taylor Swift's "1989 (Taylor's Version)" returns to No. 1 on Billboard 200, tying Swift with Elvis Presley for most weeks by a solo artist spent atop the album charts.

"The Color Purple" musical film adaptation leads domestic box office with \$18M on opening day, the second largest Christmas Day opening ever. Kamar de los Reyes, "One Life to Live" star, dies of cancer at 56.

Science & Technology

Apple expects to ship an estimated 500,000 Vision Pro headsets in 2024, going on sale in the first two months of 2024; \$3,500 device is Apple's first big step into virtual reality.

Study suggests reindeer can go to sleep while eating, allowing the animals to maximize energy conservation during Arctic winters.

Engineers develop fiber offering similar warmth to down jackets despite being 80% less thick; material mimics polar bear fur, with each strand possessing a porous core and a waterproof outer layer.

Business & Markets

All three major markets rise (S&P 500 +0.4%, Dow +0.4%, Nasdaq +0.5%) as S&P 500 nears all-time high. Retail sales increase 3.1% from Nov. 1 to Dec. 24 compared to the same period last year.

Roughly 1.2% of US flights were canceled during the preholiday travel period, the lowest in five years; Southwest Airlines reports more than 100 cancellations, 1,000 delays on Christmas Eve.

Chipmaker Intel to invest \$25B in Israel, including an expansion of a silicon wafer manufacturing facility; deal follows \$3.2B incentive package from Israeli government.

Politics & World Affairs

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly says he's open to cease-fire discussions in Ukraine in private conversations. Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny located in Arctic penal colony 1,200 miles north of Moscow.

The US launches drone strikes on Iran-backed militia groups in Iraq after three US service members were injured in a Christmas Day attack on Erbil Air Base.

Migrant caravan totaling around 6,000 people reportedly begins heading toward US-Mexico border from southern Mexico. Group would equal less than 3% of the total reported border encounters in November.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 3 of 72



S & S Lumber
HARDWARE HANK
Peace on Earth will come to stay
when we live Christmas every day!
- Helen Steiner Rice
Have a Merry Christmas!
201 East Hwy 12 • 605/397-2361



We are blessed to live in a state with a strong agriculture community!
Merry Christmas!
SOUTH DAKOTA Farmers Union
Doug Sombke
President

Groton Area Kindergarten



Kayson Taylor is the son of Ross and Amanda Taylor of Aberdeen. What Christmas means to me is Harmony to spend time with your family



Layla Feist is the daughter of Mike and Ashley Feist of Groton. What Christmas means to me is seeing Santa !



Kyson Land is the grandson of Chad and Chanise Pray of Groton. What Christmas means to me is I like getting presents



Kayleigh Raba is the daughter of Chris and Erica Raba of Columbia. What Christmas means to me is time with family



Harper Rowen is the daughter of Jason and Heather Rowen of Bath. What Christmas means to me is to be helpful and set up the decorations



Nolan Gingerich is the son of Daniel and Megan Gingerich of Columbia. What Christmas means to me is getting presents

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 5 of 72



MERRY CHRISTMAS



(605) 228-3880
**Spanier's Custom
Harvesting
& Trucking**



Even Santa uses
Sun & Sea Travel

*Merry
Christmas!*



**SUN & SEA
TRAVEL CO.**

Becah Flihs: (605) 380-1711

Groton Area Kindergarten



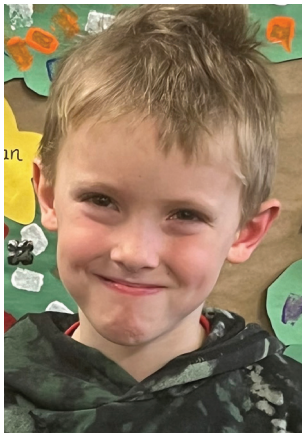
Collins Traphagen is the daughter of Trent and Heather Traphagen of Aberdeen. Making Christmas cookies with my mom



Ivy Cole is the daughter of Chuck and Carrie Cole of Groton. What Christmas means to me is I get to go see my family



Elizabeth Haskell is the daughter of Lance and Cassie Haskell of Conde. What Christmas means to me is Santa gives me presents



Ryker Herron is the son of Colin Herron and Brittany Luttrell of Groton. What Christmas means to me is getting presents



Aubrie Traphagen is the daughter of Trent and Heather Traphagen of Aberdeen. What Christmas means to me is I like to get presents



Elleit Severson is the daughter of Matt and Jordan Severson of Groton. What Christmas means to me is having fun .



Harper Cleveland is the daughter of Justin and Gretchen Cleveland of Groton. What Christmas means to me is it snowing out and I want to build a snowman

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 7 of 72



Merry Christmas.

MAY YOUR CHRISTMAS SPARKLE WITH MOMENTS OF LOVE, LAUGHTER AND GOODWILL, AND MAY THE YEAR AHEAD BE FULL OF CONTENTMENT AND JOY.

WEBER LANDSCAPING
605/380-7811
Groton



May you and those you love find true *happiness and peace* this Christmas!

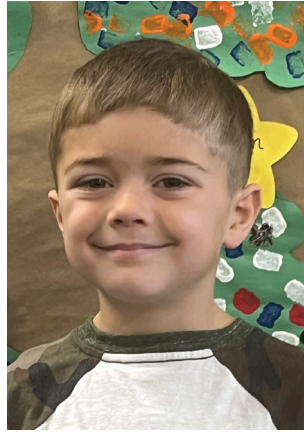
W 

Weismantel Agency
Marty Weismantel ~ 605/396-7341 ~ weisag@nvc.net

Groton Area Kindergarten



Emma Flihs is the daughter of Trey and Rebecca Flihs of Groton. What Christmas means to me is seeing my family.



Beau Bahr is the son of Dion and Samantha Bahr of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Santa is coming



Natalie Walberg is the daughter of Jeremy and Brittany Walberg of Aberdeen. What Christmas means to me is to be with my family .



Nova Washenberger is the daughter of Daniel Washenberger and Laura Arth of Bath. What Christmas means to me is I get to spend time with my family



Andrew Clark is the son of AJ and Alisen Clark if Groton. What Christmas means to me is to never be naughty, so Santa can bring me presents.



Cruz Cleveland is the son of Justin and Gretchen Cleveland of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Kindness.



Briggs Biermann is the son of Quintin and Meghan Biermann of Groton. What Christmas means to me is it's Jesus birthday.



Sunny Washenberger is the daughter of Daniel Washenberger and Laura Arth of Bath . What Christmas means to me is Happiness!

Highway 385 project will close road critical to \$2 billion Black Hills tourism industry

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

HILL CITY, S.D. – Hill City School District Superintendent Blake Gardner is trying to plan well in advance for major disruptions to student and staff transportation that will result from a \$72 million project to rebuild 15 miles of U.S. 385, the only major north-south route through the central Black Hills.

The three-year project will include five separate complete closures of the winding two-lane highway that flows amid scenic lakes, giant rock outcroppings and dramatic ridge lines but which also has a high rate of crashes and fatalities.

Gardner calls U.S. 385, which connects Custer State Park on the south to the gambling destination of Deadwood on the north, the “backbone of Black Hills travel.”

The two-lane highway provides access to Pactola Reservoir and Sheridan Lake. The road is also a pipeline to Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Crazy Horse Memorial and helps fuel a regional tourism industry that brought \$2 billion in revenue to South Dakota in 2021.

Gardner is just one of millions of people who live, work or vacation in the central Black Hills. He’s coming to grips with the delays, detours and general disruption that will be caused by construction on the road that’s critical to commerce, emergency services and daily life for residents.

“It’s going to be a tough situation for a lot of people,” Gardner said. “But we’re looking at it as a very necessary inconvenience.”

For Gardner and his team, plans now include shifting the entire annual school schedule for one year or possibly two to reduce the effects of road closures that will add an hour of daily school bus travel time for about 30 students and a handful of school employees.

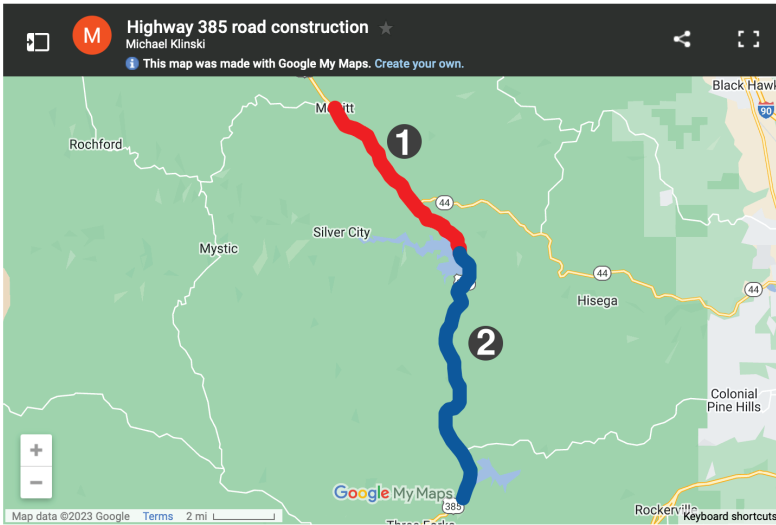
“It’s going to be a very impactful project,” he said, “but from a safety standpoint, we can all support this.”



Motorists in western South Dakota should get used to seeing signs like this during a rebuild of U.S. 385 between spring 2024 and winter 2026 that will result in several complete closures of the only north-south highway through the heart of the Black Hills. (Photo: Bart Pfankuch /South Dakota News Watch)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 10 of 72



Five separate closures planned

U.S. 385 will be closed entirely at five points over two separate time frames during the construction that will be done from spring 2024 to winter 2026 from the Pennington-Lawrence county line on the north roughly to Sheridan Lake on the south. The closures will require detours that will include a roughly 40-mile trek through Rapid City.

The construction project will include widening road shoulders, smoothing out sharp curves and adding turn lanes to make the road safer for travel.

To do so, the state Department of Transportation will need to clear trees, blast rock, enact lane closures with use of pilot cars and close the

highway completely at five separate locations for up to months at a time. Traffic on U.S. 385 has already been affected due to tree-clearing that began in November and is the first step in the project that will also include resurfacing.

Highway closures near Pactola will take place roughly from May to July 2024 and again from October 2025 to April 2026. During those times, access to the Pactola boat docks and marina will be limited. Closures near Sheridan Lake will occur from April to June 2025 and from August to October 2025. Some holiday, weekend and Sturgis rally road openings will take place.

Run-off crashes common on roadway

The overall crash rate on the 15-mile stretch of highway being rebuilt is more than double the state average, according to DOT data.

In the five-year period from 2018-2022, 187 crashes were reported, with four fatalities and 57 injuries. A third of those wrecks and most of the deaths occurred when motorists left the roadway, which in spots has almost no shoulder space while closely abutting rock walls or rimming atop significant drop-offs.

The DOT's goal is to cut the crash rate on the segment of highway by 50%, largely by eliminating tight curves, expanding sight lines for motorists or expanding shoulders from 2 to 8 feet, which has a proven success rate in reducing run-off wrecks.

"The safety enhancements designed into the Highway 385 reconstruction projects are significant," Rich Zacher, Custer area engineer for the DOT, wrote to News Watch in an email. "Safety is at the forefront of this project for local residents, area commuters and tourists."

Project communications criticized

A pair of business owners interviewed by News Watch expressed concerns that the DOT has not done enough to mitigate the potential effects of the project on the tourism industry and has not



Shoulders are narrow and drop-offs are deep in many locations along U.S. 385 in the central Black Hills, including at this site between Sheridan Lake and Pactola Reservoir. (Photo: Bart Pfankuch

/, South Dakota News Watch)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 11 of 72

adequately informed the public or business owners about the planned disruptions.

Wes Shelton of Rapid City is president of the Educational Travel Institute of America, a group that helps arrange travel opportunities in the Black Hills, and also a board member at the Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation. He said he continues to run into people and business owners in western South Dakota and beyond who are unaware of the project, especially about the planned closures of U.S. 385.

"It's going to hit a lot of people unexpectedly," he said.

Shelton, who has deep ties in the tourism industry, said the state has not done enough to inform business operators outside the state that the road will be closed or reduced to a single lane of traffic. That lack of knowledge could impact the timing and possibly the safety of tour groups that rely on closely planned time schedules to make the trips effective.

In general, Shelton said he isn't convinced the state has done enough to prepare for potential emergencies or has made enough efforts to reduce the potential effects of the project on locals and visitors.

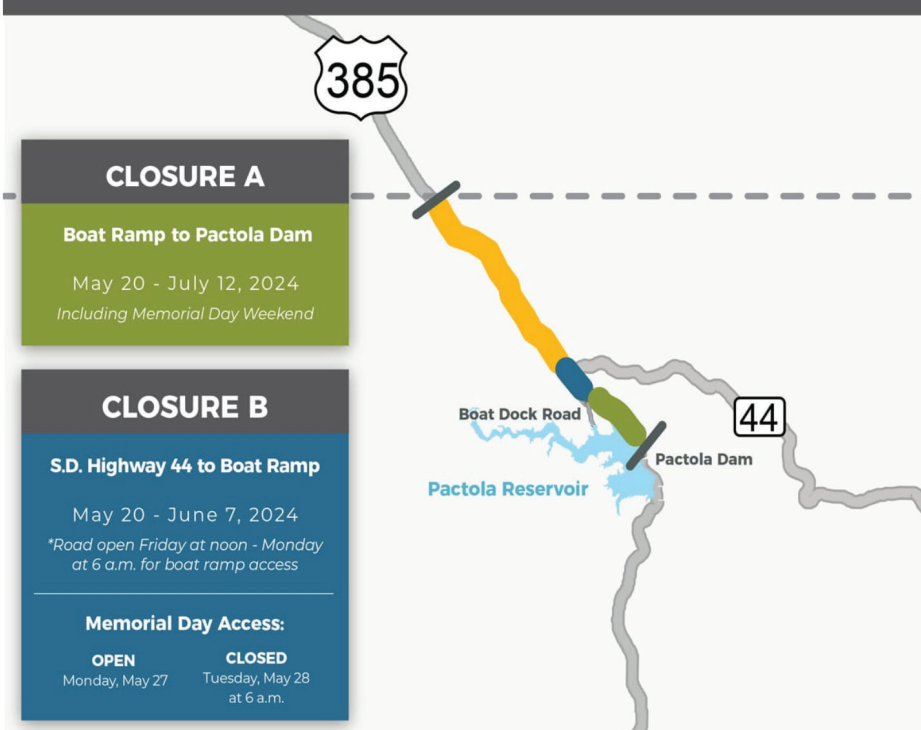
"Things have been told and things have been promised, but I'm not sure they (have) done enough to mitigate the impacts," he said. "I don't know if there's intentional efforts to mislead, but it's been sloppily done and it concerns me that the way the meetings have been done, that most people don't know anything about it."

"It's going to be a tough situation for a lot of people. But we're looking at it as a very necessary inconvenience. It's going to be a very impactful project, but from a safety standpoint, we can all support this."

Blake Gardner, Hill City School District superintendent

PHASE 1 CONSTRUCTION

Spring 2024 - Winter 2025



'Make their lives miserable'

Nancy Evangelisto operates the Summer Creek Inn, an upscale lodging, dining and event business that survives largely on summer visitors who seek a peaceful getaway at a woody site just off U.S. 385 midway between Sheridan Lake and Pactola Reservoir.

"I'm a little distressed about it," she said. "It's going to have a significant impact on our business."

Evangelisto said she feels the needs of business owners have not been taken enough into account by DOT, for example, in regard to the rock dynamiting process that she was told will occur both during the day and at night.

Evangelisto also wonders if better options could't have been found for the timing of the road closures and the location of detours that could

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 12 of 72

have been shorter in length and time.

"I understand the need for it, but a lot of the businesses are concerned about the total shutdown of the highway during the height of the season," she said, adding with a slight chuckle, "It's like they said, 'Let's just make their lives miserable all the way around.'"

DOT makes outreach efforts

DOT spokeswoman Julie Stevenson denied a request from News Watch to interview an expert on the project. But she said in an email that the department has taken great steps to inform the public and affected stakeholders about the project and its possible impacts.

The state has built a website devoted to the project and has more than 620 people receiving correspondence with project updates, Stevenson said. The state held a workshop for emergency service operators to educate them about the project and to share ideas

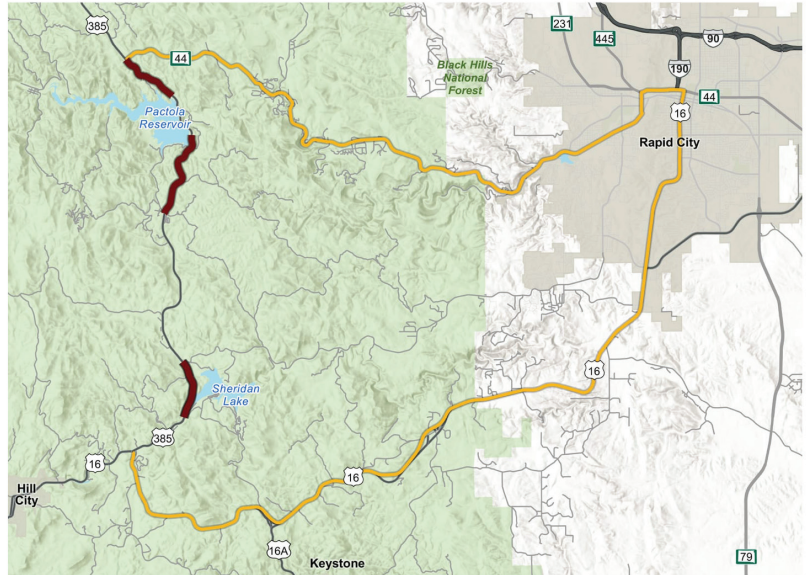
to ensure fire, medical and law enforcement operations are impacted as little as possible.

The agency held several workshops and presentations with tourism groups across the Black Hills, including at the annual meeting of the Black Hills & Badlands Tourism Association, which has 488 member businesses.

Michelle Thompson, CEO of the association, said she feels the DOT has done a good job of publishing public information about the project and listening to – and adapting to – the concerns of those affected.

She said the vast majority of tourism operators understand the need for the project and will find their own ways to keep tourists and their dollars flowing. Thompson has shared details on the construction with contacts at national trade shows and potential tourists who contact the association to let them know that disruptions in travel are likely but should not be seen as a deal-breaker.

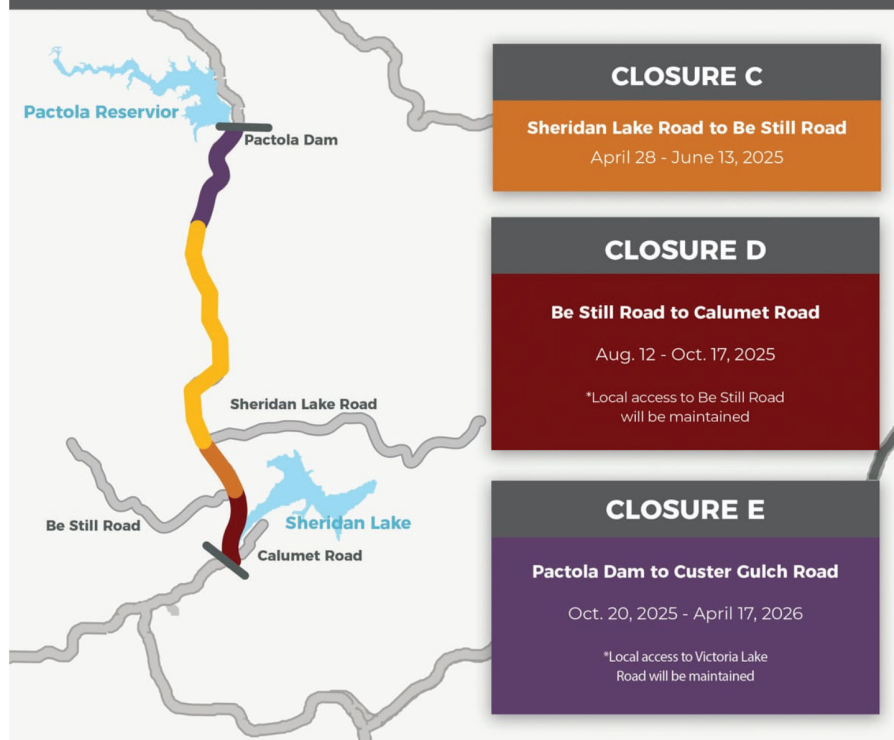
"We certainly don't want to discourage people from coming here just because there will be road construction going on," she said. "While it will be painful the next couple years, we'll just make the best of it and do what



The detour for the Highway 385 construction project goes through Rapid City on Highway 44 and Highway 16.

PHASE 2 CONSTRUCTION

Spring 2025 - Fall 2026



CLOSURE C

Sheridan Lake Road to Be Still Road

April 28 - June 13, 2025

CLOSURE D

Be Still Road to Calumet Road

Aug. 12 - Oct. 17, 2025

*Local access to Be Still Road will be maintained

CLOSURE E

Pactola Dam to Custer Gulch Road

Oct. 20, 2025 - April 17, 2026

*Local access to Victoria Lake Road will be maintained

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 13 of 72

we can to keep things moving.”

Dory Hanson, executive director of the Deadwood Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau, said she has attended three meetings about the U.S. 385 project and is working to inform the chamber’s 450 members and potential visitors about the travel disruptions.

“One of the things we’re doing right now is just getting the word out,” she said, especially about a detour process that will require tourists from the south to reroute through Rapid City and Sturgis in order to make it to Deadwood. “Right now, we’re optimistic that our travelers are still going to find us.”

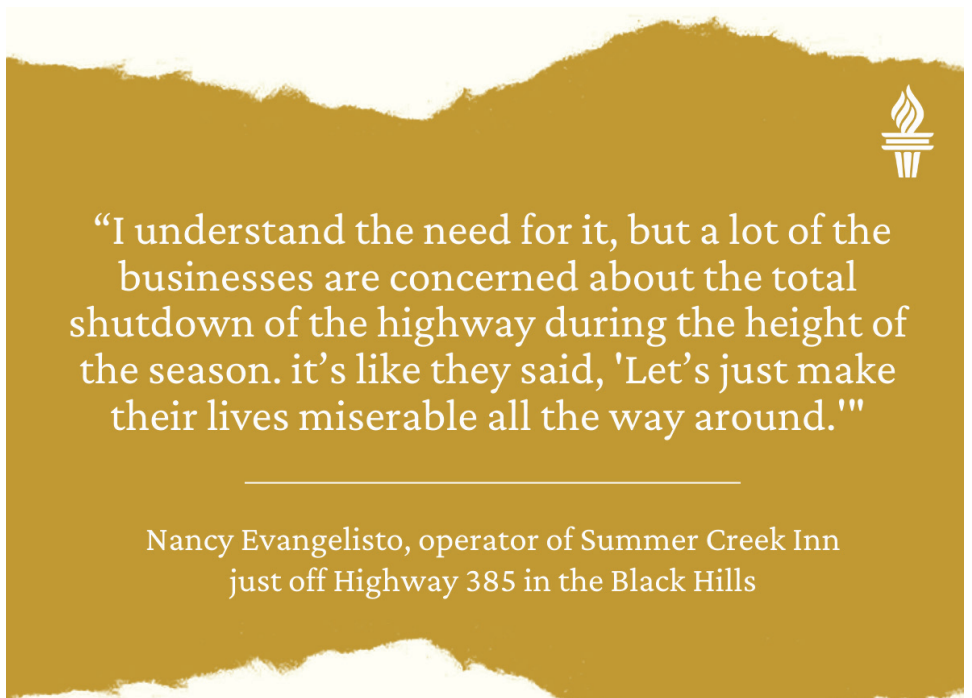
The Pennington County Sheriff’s Office, which is responsible for law enforcement in the construction area as well as for rescues at Pactola and Sheridan lakes, is well prepared to respond to emergencies during the construction, Sheriff Brian Mueller said.

“We have been involved and monitoring this project from the start,” Mueller wrote to News Watch in an email. “We have been sending staff to the community and stakeholder feedback meetings and have been routinely providing our own feedback. They have been working with us to keep an emergency access open to the lakes for emergency response.”

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at sdnewswatch.org.



Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native, he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach. Contact Bart at bart.pfankuch@sdnewswatch.org.



“I understand the need for it, but a lot of the businesses are concerned about the total shutdown of the highway during the height of the season. it’s like they said, ‘Let’s just make their lives miserable all the way around.’”

Nancy Evangelisto, operator of Summer Creek Inn
just off Highway 385 in the Black Hills



U.S. 385, shown here at its intersection with U.S. 16, is a critical link to many of the towns, attractions and businesses in the central Black Hills region. (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lincoln County votes to support landowner position in prison site lawsuit

Locals deserve a say in location of massive corrections project, commissioners argue

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 26, 2023 4:00 PM

CANTON — Lincoln County officials want a judge to decide if the state has the right to build a prison in the county without public input or local review.

On Tuesday, county commissioners voted to submit a legal argument in support of the landowners who've sued the state Department of Corrections, though the scope of their official support is narrower than the prison opponents' ultimate aim to force the state to pick another location.

Those who live near the proposed prison site south of Harrisburg organized as a nonprofit called "Neighbors Opposed to Prison Expansion" on Oct. 13. That was less than two weeks after the state announced the location for the prison, which is meant to house 1,200 male inmates and replace the aging penitentiary in north-central Sioux Falls.

The landowners say they weren't consulted, that their property values will fall and that the area lacks the infrastructure to manage what will essentially amount to a small town, rapidly erected on cropland encircled by gravel roads and neighbored by little more than other cropland and rural acreages.

Most relevant to the county is the landowner lawsuit's primary assertion: That the state is not immune to local zoning laws.

"I think they should have to abide by our local zoning requirements," said Commissioner Michael Poppens.

On a 3-1 vote, the commissioners authorized their state's attorney to file an amicus, or "friend of the court," brief to make that argument.

Commissioners: County should review prison plans

The amicus brief will not make the county a party to the lawsuit or give it the right to make legal maneuvers in the case. It will, however, make clear that county officials want the courts to adopt a "balance of interests" test for situations in which the state's plans for its land conflict with county rules.

Rather than allowing the state to do with its property what it will, such a test would define the criteria under which the state would be required to work with county officials.

Commission Chair Tiffani Landeen was the lone "no" vote on the amicus brief issue. Her concern, she said, was that taking a position in the lawsuit would complicate any zoning decisions on the prison, should any appear.

The prison doesn't fit with the county's comprehensive plan, which anticipates that the land around the prison site will remain agricultural. If the state loses the lawsuit, it would need to ask the county for a conditional use permit to build, and citizens would have the right to offer public input on that permitting decision.

Siding with landowners now could mar commissioners' neutrality in a future vote on such a permit, Landeen said.

"Arguably, we're putting ourselves in a position of having to conflict off (the decision) and stop acting like the judges we'd have to be if this comes back in front of us," said Landeen, even as she said she "doesn't like what the state did, either."

Commissioner Joel Arends, however, said taking a side on the question of whether the state needs county

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 15 of 72

permission isn't the same as taking a side on the prison project as a whole.

Decisions on the merits of a conditional use permit application wouldn't come until the state asks for one. "We can't say we think one side is better than the other, because that would disqualify us, and we'd essentially be abdicating our duties as commissioners," Arends said. "However, we're not at that point yet, because there is no pending application."

Opponents: Give us a voice

Arends and Poppens were among the commissioners in attendance at a public meeting on the prison project that drew more than 200 people to a Harrisburg event barn last Thursday.

Opponents also brought in area lawmakers for that meeting, some of whom suggested the price of the prison could balloon well beyond the estimated \$600 million due to inflation and other factors. The question of cost has also appeared about a new women's prison in Rapid City. In her budget address, Gov. Kristi Noem said that the West River project faces a \$27 million budget shortfall, though she did not offer an explanation for the increased price.

Rep. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, told the group that "inflation is going to outrun the money we're putting aside."

The prison will bring costs to the county, as well, opponents say. Thursday's meeting saw Arends talking about how Lincoln County would be on the hook to pay for legal representation for inmates charged with crimes inside the prison, were it to be built in Lincoln County.

Questions of cost also bubbled up during Tuesday's meeting, where dozens of prison opponents packed into the commission room to urge an affirmative vote for an amicus brief in the landowner lawsuit.

Landowner Mike Hoffman referenced a series of budget adjustments made by commissioners before the prison lawsuit discussion began, during which a series of county department heads asked for additional money to cover cost overruns.

All those numbers were small compared to the \$600 million construction estimate for the prison, he said, and the actual cost — to the state and the county — is unknown.

"This is a large, large, large number, and we can't even get an answer on what that number is," Hoffman said.

A lack of answers has been a sticking point for the prison location opponents, who've urged their fellow citizens to pick up signs and write lawmakers demanding accountability. DOC Secretary Kelli Wasko had planned to visit the group, but canceled their meeting after the lawsuit was filed.

Landeen pointed out on Tuesday that the lawmakers who've expressed support for landowners largely backed the 2023 bill that set aside \$323 million for the men's prison.

But Michelle Jensen, one of the landowners who filed the lawsuit, said the legislators who voted for the prison before site selection didn't know the state would sidestep local officials and affected neighbors.

"In that legislation, it was more of an appropriation of funds," Jensen said. "I don't believe they were aware that this was going to be placed in Lincoln County without any regard for zoning."

Mary Geraets lives on an acreage less than a mile from the proposed prison site. She begged commissioners on Tuesday to "be our voice" and throw support behind their efforts to get answers on prison site deliberations.

"We are sickened by the state's lack of transparency," Geraets said.

County stakes its position on authority issue

Commissioner Poppens said he's "trying to stay neutral" on whether the prison should be built, given the possibility of a conditional use permit. But he also said he feels strongly that the county ought to at least have the right to review plans for a project the size and scope of a prison.

In its response to the Lincoln County lawsuit, attorneys for the DOC argue that state law trumps local law in situations where one conflicts with the other. They also pointed to state Supreme Court cases overruling township-level regulatory objections to county-level projects as proof that the state — a government

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 16 of 72

entity larger than both townships and counties – needn't adhere to local laws.

The landowners assert that the principle is less than settled law. Their hope is to see the courts draw clearer lines around when the state can and cannot claim immunity from local rules. A hearing on the state's move to dismiss the case is set for Jan. 22 in Canton.

Were the county to avoid taking a position now, Poppens said, it would have no other opportunity to stake out a position in the future.

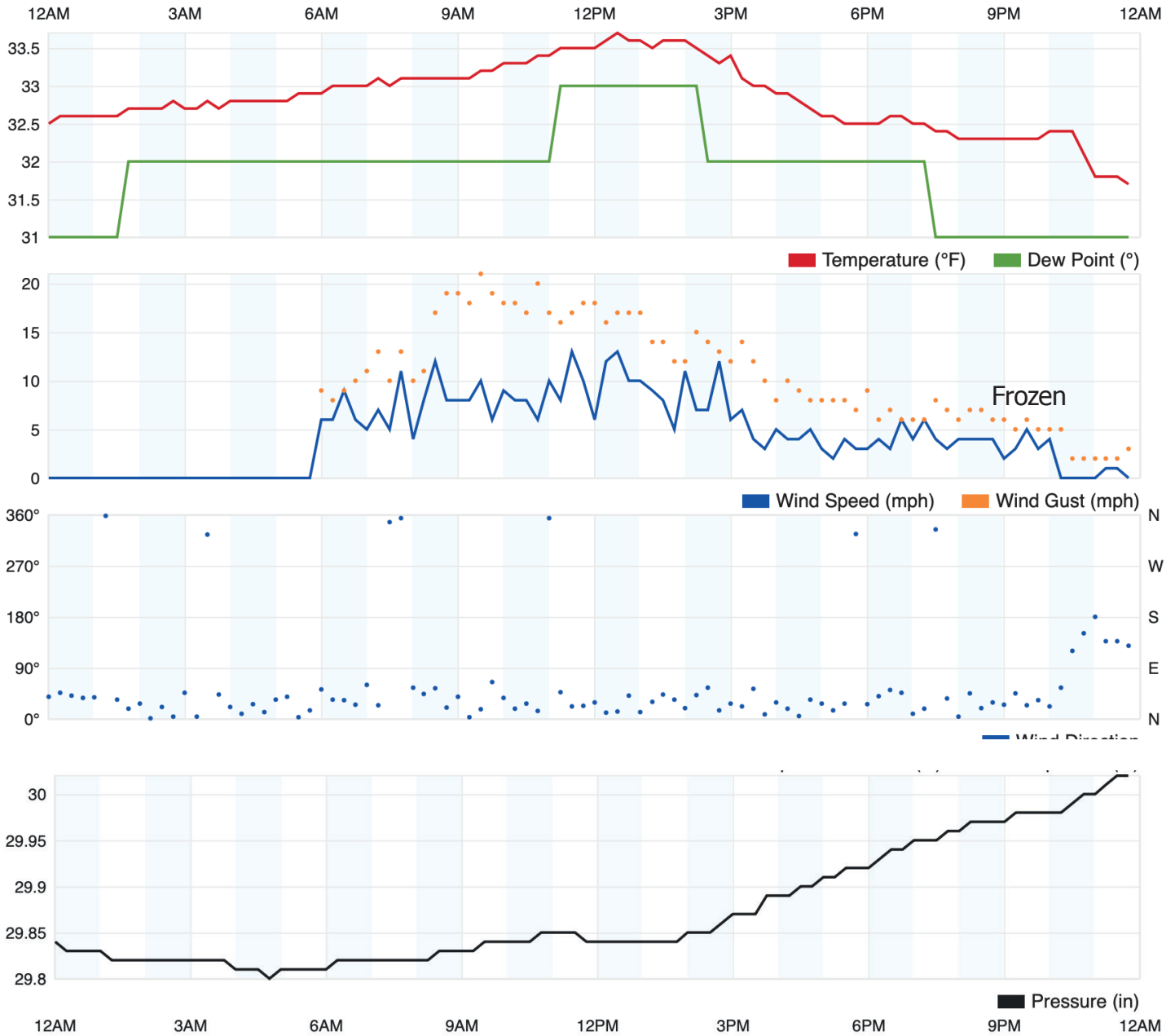
"We don't have an alternative other than to do this," Poppens said.

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

Groton Daily Independent








Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 17 of 72

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

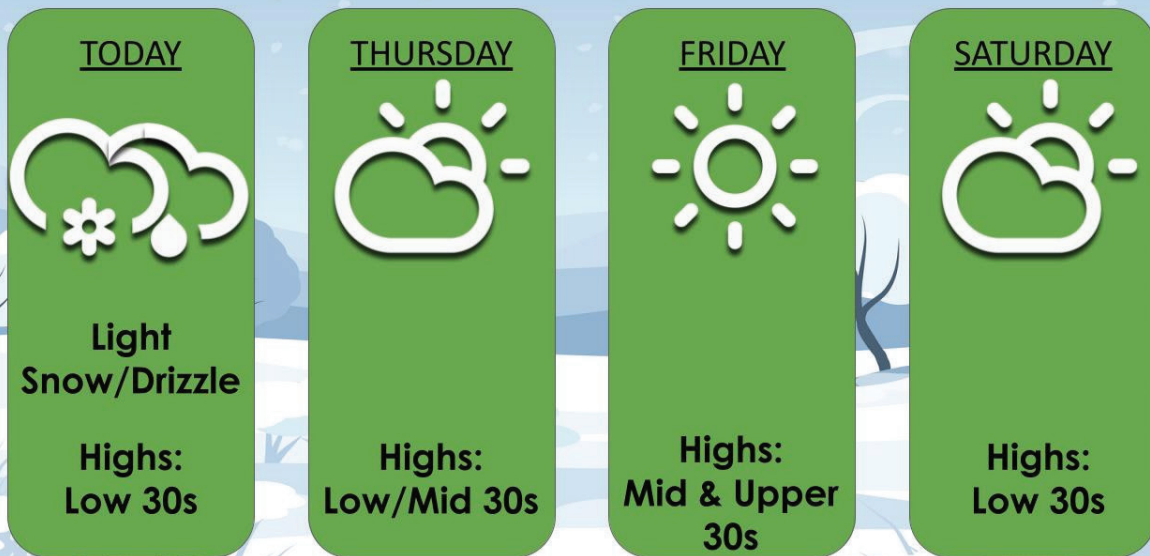


Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 18 of 72

Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
Dec 27	Dec 28	Dec 29	Dec 30	Dec 31	Jan 1	Jan 2
						
35° F 28° F	36° F 16° F	36° F 22° F	30° F 14° F	21° F 10° F	25° F 16° F	32° F 17° F
N 12 MPH	N 7 MPH	WSW 8 MPH	WNW 13 MPH	NNW 13 MPH	WSW 10 MPH	WSW 11 MPH
30%						

Lingering Light Precipitation Today
Seasonally Mild Into The Weekend



Moisture remains in place from the departing system, so light snow and drizzle will continue, with temperatures near freezing. Those clouds move out with seasonally mild temperatures returning for the end of the week. Probably a shot at some colder air for the weekend however.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 19 of 72

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 12:28 PM

Low Temp: 32 °F at 10:59 PM

Wind: 21 mph at 9:26 AM

Precip: 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 1928

Record Low: -29 in 1914

Average High: 25

Average Low: 5

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.52

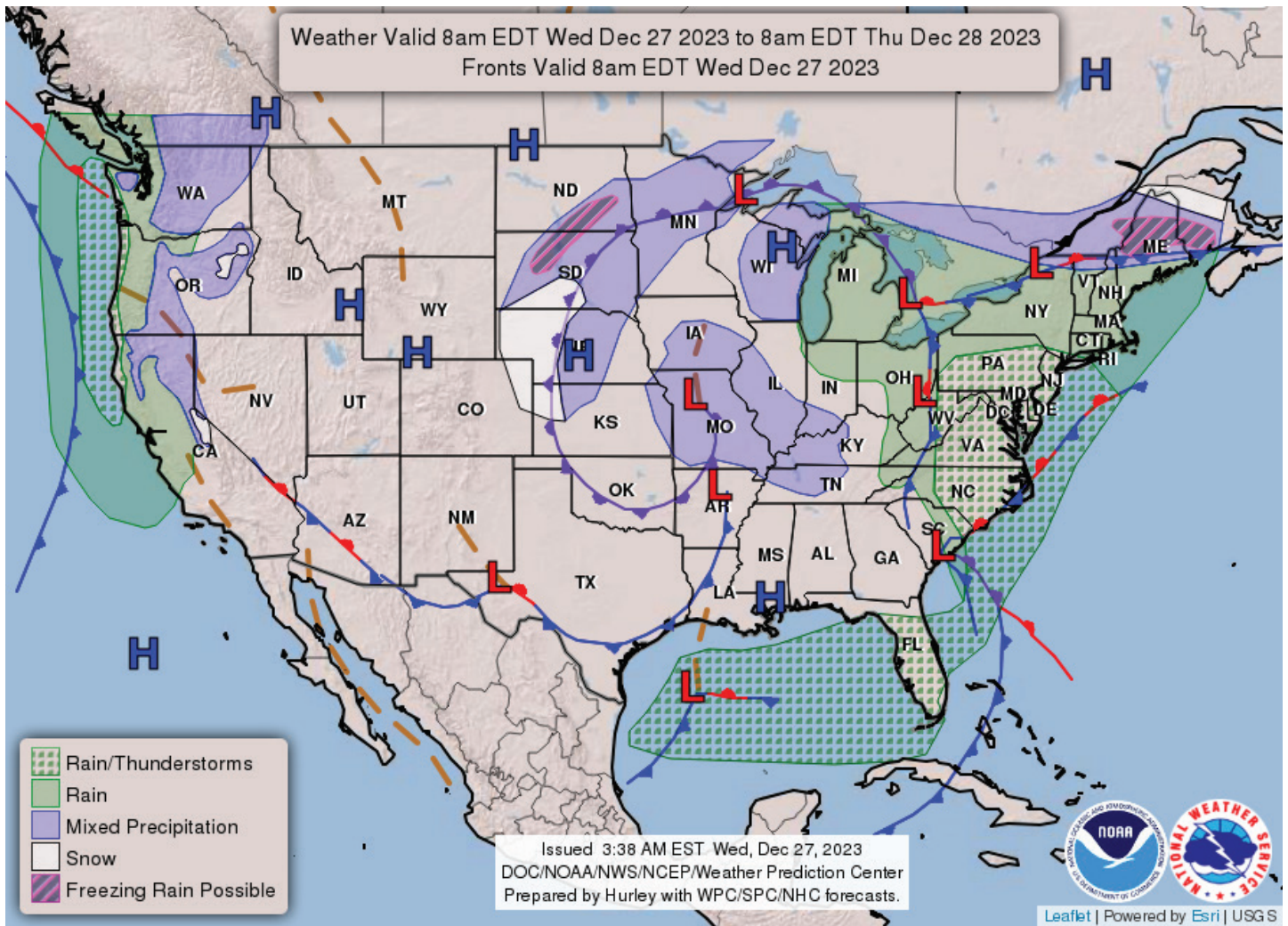
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.23

Average Precip to date: 21.73

Precip Year to Date: 23.40

Sunset Tonight: 4:57:10 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:56 am



Today in Weather History

December 27, 1959: Precipitation began as freezing rain on the morning of the 27th throughout the eastern half of South Dakota, changing to snow mixed with occasional sleet late on the 27th, then continued as mostly snow through the late afternoon of the 28th. Glaze caused extensive breakage of tree limbs and power and telephone lines in southeast sections of the state and in scattered communities in the northeast counties. More than 40 communities were without telephone service for more than 24 hours. Highway travel was very dangerous; one man was killed when a tractor skidded on an icy highway and overturned on him in Kingsbury County. Strong winds averaging 20 to 25 mph both dates increased breakage of ice-laded utility wires and caused drifting and blocking of highways by the 3 to 6 inch snowfall. Damage and repair costs to utility lines were estimated at \$400,000.

December 27, 1987: A winter storm gave some freezing rain and snow to southern and eastern South Dakota and southwest and west central Minnesota on the 27th and 28th. In Minnesota, freezing rain began Sunday morning the 27th before changing to heavy snow, which extended into the 28th. The heaviest snowfall was across the high terrain of southwest Minnesota. In southern and eastern South Dakota, six to twelve inches of snow fell. Strong northwest winds of 20-40 mph hampered travel and snow removal. Snow drifts up to 6 feet deep were common. Across many areas of southern Minnesota, visibilities were reduced to zero due to blowing snow. Snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches in DeSmet; 10 inches in Wessington Springs and Madison; 9 inches in Huron; 8 inches in Pierre, Brookings, Mission and McCook County; 7 inches in Sioux Falls, Kadoka, Pine Ridge, and Martin. 8 inches also fell in Watertown and Highmore, with 7 inches at Bryant and 6 inches in Clear Lake.

1869 - A post Christmas storm in New York and Vermont produced record storm totals of 30 inches at Burlington, VT, and 39 inches at Montpelier VT. A public emergency was declared in Vermont. (David Ludlum)

1892 - An Atlantic coast storm produced a record 18.6 inches of snow at Norfolk, VA, including 17.7 inches in 24 hours. The storm also produced 9.5 inches of snow at Raleigh NC, and brought snow to northern Florida for the first time in 35 years. (26th- 28th) (The Weather Channel)

1982 - The worst Louisiana rainstorm in more than 100 years came to an end. More than 18 inches fell at Vinton, LA, during the three day storm. Flooding was widespread, and property damage was estimated at 100 to 200 million dollars. President Reagan visited the state and declared ten parishes in northeastern Louisiana disaster areas. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm produced snow and high winds in Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska. Denver CO experienced its worst snowstorm since December 1983 as high winds gusting to 46 mph created near blizzard conditions, whipping the fifteen inch snow into drifts five feet high, and closing Stapleton Airport. Snowfall totals in the foothills southwest of Denver ranged up to 42 inches, at Intercanyon. Blizzard conditions raged across southeastern Wyoming through the day, stranding 300 holiday travelers in the tiny town of Chugwater. Heavier snowfall totals included 19 inches at La Grange WY, and 22 inches at Elsmere NE. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms developing along a cold front in the south central U.S. spawned a dozen tornadoes in Mississippi between early afternoon and sunrise the following day. A tornado at Harpersville destroyed five chicken homes killing thousands of chickens. Strong thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 mph at Rolling Fork MS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Half a dozen cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Elkins, WV, with a reading of 13 degrees below zero. Watertown NY was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 37 degrees below zero. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2001: Typhoon Vamei forms in the South China Sea, about 100 miles north of the Equator. Vamei is the first recorded tropical cyclone to develop within 1.5 degrees of latitude about 104 miles of the equator.

2004 - A major storm system affected parts of the western United States during December 27-29, bringing a variety of weather conditions to the region. Heavy rainfall broke daily precipitation records at some locations in California. Very heavy snow fell across the Sierra Nevada Mountains, with some areas receiving several feet of accumulation. Winds with this weather system gusted over 65 mph at some coastal and mountain locations in California.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHY MOTHERS MATTER

One of the most beautiful passages in Scripture is found in Luke's Gospel. It is called "The Magnificat." We have Mary proclaiming, "My soul magnifies the Lord." The word "soul" is a special word and in Hebrew is used to reveal or describe a person's entire identity. It is the very essence – or being or character or the "sum total" – of a person. In this one word,

Mary reveals that all of her is committed to the Lord. The sum and substance of her life was to worship God in all of His Majesty!

If we want to study the smallest particle of God's creation we put it under a microscope to magnify it. This enlarges, or expands, every detail of the particle so we can discover its intricacies, its subtleties, and its structure. Mary was determined to put God under her "microscope" so she could understand Him personally, intimately, and completely.

In her "song" she magnified her Lord – not her Son. Often we become overly concerned about the way our children look rather than what they look at. Not so with Mary. She recognized her responsibility as a mother and knew that if God were first in her life, He would be first in her child's life. She had her priorities right.

God entrusted Mary with the Messiah because He was at the center of her life and knew that her Son would be nurtured in what matters most in the life of a child: knowing, understanding and following His will.

Prayer: We ask, Lord, that all mothers everywhere will recognize the importance of being a mother and the trust You place in them to raise children to know You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:46-55 "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.



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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 22 of 72

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 23 of 72

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.26.23

8 10 22 58 64 21

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$92,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 19 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: 16 Hrs 34 Mins 48 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.26.23

8 26 27 29 33 9

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.23.23

4 14 19 29 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.25.23

2 3 19 31 42 9

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 47 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: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Ice storms and blizzards pummel the central US a day after Christmas

By TRISHA AHMED Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — From an ice storm in North Dakota that sealed windows shut to blizzard conditions in Colorado causing hundreds of airport delays and cancellations, a winter storm pummeled much of the central United States on Tuesday, the day after Christmas.

“The heavy snow conditions in the Plains should be slowly alleviating today, but it’ll be very slow,” said Weather Prediction Center forecaster David Roth. “Even when the snow ends, the high winds should keep visibility near zero — whiteout conditions — for a decent part of today.”

Laura Schmidt-Dockter, a resident of Bismarck, North Dakota, wore ice spikes on her shoes as she walked outside to the trash can. Her driveway was sheer ice, she said. A neighbor took to the street on ice skates.

“It’s actually not bad!” the neighbor quipped about the quality of the ice, skating by Schmidt-Dockter in a video she posted to social media.

At Denver International Airport there were over 530 flight delays and 23 cancellations as of Tuesday afternoon, according to tracking website FlightAware. Blizzard conditions on Colorado’s plains closed Interstate 70 eastbound from the outer edge of the Denver area to Kansas. Travelers were also unable to head westbound into Colorado from Kansas on the highway because of the threat posed by high winds.

According to the National Weather Service, it’s considered a blizzard when winds exceed 35 miles per hour (56 kilometers per hour) for three hours or more, with considerable blowing snow and visibility down to less than a quarter-mile (0.4 kilometers).

Blizzard warnings were in effect mid-Tuesday for western portions of South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas, along with eastern portions of Colorado and Wyoming. Ice storm warnings and winter weather advisories remained in place in South Dakota, North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota.

On Christmas Day, one person was killed and three others were injured in Kansas, when the driver of a pickup truck lost control on snow and ice and collided head-on with a sport utility vehicle 5 miles (8 kilometers) west of Larned, according to the State Patrol. The woman killed in the crash was identified as Evelyn Reece, 86, of Wichita.

Rosebud Sioux Tribe officials in South Dakota said on social media that some people had ignored the no-travel advisory issued Monday evening. The advisory meant no one should have been on highways or backroads because of the whiteout, they said.

“We have multiple resources being dispatched to rescue a total of 13 people who ignored the advisory, and then rescue the ranchers who got stuck trying to get to them,” the tribe’s Office of Emergency Management posted on Facebook early Tuesday, along. Nine hours later, the office gave an update saying the motorists were safe “and all is well.”

Badlands National Park and the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site in South Dakota were closed Tuesday due to the severe weather.

On Monday, wind gusts howled as high as 67 miles per hour (108 kilometers per hour) in Oakes, North Dakota, said National Weather Service Meteorologist Megan Jones.

The ice storm has affected highways throughout the eastern parts of the state, with Interstate 29 from Grand Forks to the Canadian border closed until Tuesday afternoon, and no travel advised in south-central parts of the state. Freezing rain began in Fargo on Monday afternoon and expanded westward, Jones said, and as much as three-quarters of an inch of freezing rain fell in Jamestown.

Heavy icing and strong winds downed tree branches and cause power outages in the southern James River Valley.

No major outages were reported. Still, the weather service reminded people about the risk of fire caused by candles or space heaters. Anyone using a portable generator should keep it outside and at least 20 feet (6 meters) away from doors, windows and garages to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.

"We just want people to be careful if they have power outages," Jones said. "You always want to be careful with your heat sources."

North Dakota Republican leaders call on state rep to resign after slurs to police during DUI stop

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Republican leaders have called on a North Dakota lawmaker to resign after he lashed out at police with homophobic and anti-migrant remarks during a traffic stop earlier this month in which he was arrested for drunken driving.

Republican House Majority Leader Mike Lefor said Tuesday he called on Republican state Rep. Nico Rios, of Williston, to resign over the weekend. His statement cited a police officer's report of Rios being "verbally abusive, homophobic, racially abusive and discriminatory" toward him "for the entire duration of the incident following road side testing." Lefor also said Rios attempted to use his position as a lawmaker to intimidate police and avoid an arrest.

"There is no room in the legislature, or our party, for this behavior. I understand people make mistakes, but his comments and defiance to law enforcement are beyond the pale. In addition, any lawmaker attempting to use his or her elected position to threaten anyone or skirt the law is completely unacceptable," Lefor said in a statement.

Rios replied to an email seeking comment, but he had no immediate response. His attorney did not respond to a phone message.

In previous comments, Rios said his behavior toward the police was unacceptable, that he was sorry and vowed "to make sure this never happens again."

North Dakota Republican Party Chairwoman Sandi Sanford joined Lefor, saying, "Rep. Rios' actions and words fall short of the basic decency we expect from any of our neighbors. He endangered the community he was elected to serve and disrespected peace officers. This violates our core values as Republicans."

Police body camera footage requested by and provided to The Associated Press shows Rios cursing the officer, questioning his English accent, and using homophobic slurs and anti-migrant language. He also said he would call the North Dakota attorney general about the situation. He told the officers they would "regret picking on me because you don't know who ... I am." Forum News Service first reported on Rios' comments.

Rios said he was leaving a Christmas party before the Dec. 15 traffic stop. He was charged with misdemeanor counts of drunken driving and refusing to provide a chemical test. He is scheduled for a pretrial conference on Feb. 5 in municipal court.

Rios, who works in an oil field position involved in the hydraulic fracturing of wells, was elected in 2022 to the state House of Representatives. He sits on the House Judiciary Committee, a panel that handles law enforcement legislation.

Republicans control the North Dakota House, 82-12.

South Korean actor Lee Sun-kyun of Oscar-winning film 'Parasite' is found dead

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Lee Sun-kyun, a popular South Korean actor best known for his role in the Oscar-winning movie "Parasite," was found dead in a car in Seoul on Wednesday, authorities said, after weeks of an intense police investigation into his alleged drug use.

Police and emergency officers initially found Lee in what they believed was an unconscious state in the car parked on a street in northern Seoul. Emergency officers later confirmed he was dead, according to Seoul's Seongbuk police station.

Police had been searching for Lee, 48, after receiving a report that he was missing.

They refused to provide further details including whether they had determined Lee killed himself. But South Korean media outlets including Yonhap news agency said that Lee's family earlier Wednesday reported to police that he left home after leaving a message similar to a suicide note.

Lee appeared in "Parasite," which won Oscars for best picture and three other categories in 2020. The class satire was the first non-English-language film to win best picture in the then-92-year history of the Academy Awards, and was the first South Korean movie to win an Oscar. In the film, Lee played the head of a wealthy family.

The film's cast, including Lee, also won a Screen Actors Guild award for the best motion picture ensemble cast in 2020. He was nominated for best actor at the International Emmy Awards for his performance in the sci-fi thriller "Dr. Brain" last year, as well.

Even before "Parasite," Lee had been a popular actor in South Korea for a long time. He rose to stardom for his role in a hit TV drama series, "Coffee Prince (2007)," and gained mainstream popularity with a series of hit TV dramas such as "Behind The White Tower (2007)," "Pasta (2010)" and "My Mister (2018)."

Lee had been under a police investigation into allegations that he used illegal drugs at the residence of a bar hostess. Lee insisted he was tricked into taking the drugs and that he did not know what he was taking, according to Yonhap. But the investigation prompted extensive tabloid coverage and unconfirmed online rumors about not only his alleged drug use but also his private life. Lee filed a suit against two people including the hostess, alleging they blackmailed him.

When he was first summoned for questioning at a police station in Incheon, a city near Seoul, in late October, he deeply bowed several times and apologized to his fans and family. "I feel sorry to my family members who are enduring too difficult pains at this moment. I again sincerely apologize to everyone," he said.

Incheon police said Wednesday they would end their investigation of Lee's drug use allegations but would continue to investigate the two people Lee had sued.

South Korea has strict anti-drug laws but has seen soaring drug-related offenses in recent years. Last week, the National Police Agency said it had detained about 17,150 people over alleged illegal drug manufacturing, smuggling, sales and uses this year — a record number for a single year.

South Korea has long had the highest suicide rate among developed countries. It has also experienced a string of celebrity suicides involving K-pop stars, prominent politicians and business executives. Experts say malicious and abusive online comments and severe cyberbullying were blamed for many of the celebrity suicides.

"Lee faced some allegations but they haven't been formally verified. But the media has been assertively reporting about Lee's private life ... and I think that's something wrong," said Kang Youn-gon, a media communication professor at Seoul's Chung-Ang University.

Lee is survived by his actress wife Jeon Hye-jin and two sons.

TEPCO's operational ban is lifted, putting it one step closer to restarting reactors in Niigata

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese nuclear safety regulators lifted an operational ban Wednesday imposed on a nuclear plant owned by Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, the operator behind the Fukushima plant that ended in disaster, allowing the company to resume preparations for restarting the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant after more than 10 years.

At its weekly meeting, the Nuclear Regulation Authority formally lifted the more than two-year ban imposed on the TEPCO's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant over its lax safety measures at the site, saying a series of inspections and meetings with company officials has shown sufficient improvement. The decision removes an order that prohibited TEPCO from transporting new fuel into the plant or placing it into reactors, a necessary step for restarting Kashiwazaki-Kariwa's reactors.

The plant on Japan's northern coast of Niigata is TEPCO's only workable nuclear power plant since the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 28 of 72

March 2011 earthquake and tsunami destroyed its Fukushima Daiichi plant and caused Fukushima Daini plant to cease operations. For the company now burdened with the growing cost of decommissioning the Fukushima Daiichi plant and compensating disaster-hit residents, restarting the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa reactors soon is key to stabilizing its business.

TEPCO President Tomoaki Kobayakawa told reporters Wednesday that it was too early to comment on the prospect for the restart. He said the company will provide its safety and security measures to gain understanding from the local residents, who must approve a restart.

The NRA slapped an unprecedented ban on the operator in April 2021 after revelations of a series of sloppy anti-terrorism measures at TEPCO's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant, the world's largest nuclear power complex housing seven reactors.

The Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant was partially damaged in a 2007 earthquake, causing safety concerns and distrust among local municipalities. The March 2011 disaster caused stoppages of all 54 reactors Japan used to have before the Fukushima disaster, and prompted utility operators to shut many of them down due to additional safety costs, bringing the number of usable reactors to 33 today. Twelve reactors have been restarted under tougher safety standards, and the government wants to bring more than 20 others back online — a goal widely considered overly ambitious.

TEPCO was making final preparations to restart the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant's No. 6 and No. 7 reactors after regulators granted safety approvals for them in 2017. But in 2021, regulators gave the plant's nuclear security a "red" rating, the lowest given to any operator, resulting in the operational ban.

The case raised questions about whether TEPCO learned any lessons from the 2011 Fukushima crisis, which was largely attributed to the utility's lack of concern about safety.

NRA Chair Shinsuke Yamanaka told Wednesday's meeting that the lifting of the restrictions is just the beginning, and TEPCO is still required to keep improving its safety precautions.

"TEPCO is a unique company; in a way it had caused the accident," Yamanaka said. "It is the operator's responsibility to keep improving, and our task is to watch if improvement is adequately carried out." He said he hoped TEPCO will be an open and transparent company capable of sufficient communication across the workplace, while also accomplishing Fukushima Daiichi's cleanup.

Before TEPCO can restart the reactors, it needs the consent of nearby residents. Prior to the NRA decision Wednesday, Niigata Gov. Hideyo Hanazumi told reporters that the will of the voters he represents must be taken into consideration.

The Japanese government recently began a push to restart as many reactors as possible to maximize nuclear energy and meet decarbonization targets. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government has reversed Japan's nuclear energy phaseout plan, instead looking to use atomic power as key energy supply accounting to more than one-fifth of the country's energy supply.

A restart of Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant, along with attempts by other utility operators to resume their reactors, would "contribute to Japan's stable energy supply and its pursuit of carbon neutrality," especially when the energy-scarce country is hit by rising energy costs amid Russia's war on Ukraine, Kobayakawa said. "Of course, safety is the prerequisite."

China sanctions a US research firm and 2 individuals over reports on human rights abuses in Xinjiang

BEIJING (AP) — China says it is banning a United States research company and two analysts who have reported extensively on claims of human rights abuses committed against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups native to the country's far northwestern region of Xinjiang.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning was quoted as announcing late Tuesday night that Los Angeles-based research and data analytics firm Kharon, its director of investigations, Edmund Xu, and Nicole Morgret, a human rights analyst affiliated with the Center for Advanced Defense Studies, would be barred from traveling to China. Also, any assets or property they have in China will be frozen and organizations and individuals in China are prohibited from making transactions or otherwise cooperating with them.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 29 of 72

In a statement on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Mao said the sanctions against the company, Xu and Morgret were retaliation for a yearly U.S. government report on human rights in Xinjiang. Uyghurs and other natives of the region share religious, linguistic and cultural links with the scattered peoples of Central Asia and have long resented the Chinese Communist Party's heavy-handed control and attempts to assimilate them with the majority Han ethnic group.

In a paper published in June 2022, Morgret wrote, "The Chinese government is undertaking a concerted drive to industrialize the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which has led an increasing number of corporations to establish manufacturing operations there. This centrally-controlled industrial policy is a key tool in the government's efforts to forcibly assimilate Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples through the institution of a coerced labor regime."

Such reports draw from a wide range of sources, including independent media, non-governmental organizations and groups that may receive commercial and governmental grants or other outside funding.

China has long denied such allegations, saying the large-scale network of prison-like facilities through which passed hundreds of thousands of Muslim citizens were intended only to rid them of violent, extremist tendencies and teach them job skills. Former inmates describe harsh conditions imposed without legal process and demands that they denounce their culture and sing the praises of President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party daily.

China says the camps are all now closed, but many of their former inmates have reportedly been given lengthy prison sentences elsewhere. Access to the region by journalists, diplomats and others is tightly controlled, as is movement outside the region by Uyghurs, Kazaks and other Muslim minorities.

"By issuing the report, the United States once again spread false stories on Xinjiang and illegally sanctioned Chinese officials and companies citing so-called human rights issues," Mao was quoted as saying.

"If the United States refuses to change course, China will not flinch and will respond in kind," Mao was quoted as telling reporters at an earlier news briefing.

The U.S. has slapped visa bans and a wide range of other sanctions on dozens of officials from China and the semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong, including the country's former defense minister, who disappeared under circumstances China has yet to explain. China's foreign minister also was replaced this year with no word on his fate, fueling speculation that party leader and head of state for life Xi is carrying out a purge of officials suspected of collaborating with foreign governments or simply showing insufficient loyalty to China's most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong.

Hong Kong's government has cracked down heavily on freedom of speech and democracy since China imposed a sweeping national security law in response to massive anti-government protests in 2019.

Neither Xu or Morgret could immediately be reached for comment, and it wasn't clear what degree of connection, if any, they had with the U.S. government.

UN appoints a former Dutch deputy premier and Mideast expert as its Gaza humanitarian coordinator

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Sigrid Kaag, the Netherlands' former deputy prime minister and a Mideast expert, was appointed the U.N. coordinator for humanitarian aid to war-torn Gaza, the United Nations chief announced Tuesday.

The announcement by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres follows the Security Council's adoption of a resolution on Friday requesting him to expeditiously appoint a senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, where more than 2 million civilians are in desperate need of food, water and medicine.

Guterres said Kaag, who speaks fluent Arabic and five other languages, "brings a wealth of experience in political, humanitarian and development affairs as well as in diplomacy" to her new post. She is expected to start on Jan. 8.

"She will facilitate, coordinate, monitor, and verify humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza," he said,

adding that Kaag will also establish a U.N. mechanism to accelerate aid deliveries "through states which are not party to the conflict."

Gaza's entire 2.3 million population is in food crisis, with 576,000 people at catastrophic or starvation levels and the risk of famine is "increasing each day," according to a report released last Thursday by 23 U.N. and nongovernmental organizations. It blamed the widespread hunger on insufficient aid entering Gaza.

Israel stopped all deliveries of food, water, medicine and fuel into Gaza after the militant Hamas group's Oct. 7 incursion into southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people.

The Israel-Hamas war has so far killed more than 20,900 people in Gaza, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, which doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants among the dead.

After U.S. pressure, Israel allowed a trickle of aid in through Egypt, but U.N. agencies say that for weeks, only 10% of food needs has been entering Gaza. Last week, Israel opened the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza and truck traffic increased but an Israeli strike on Thursday morning on the Palestinian side of the crossing stopped aid pickups, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, or UNRWA, said.

Kaag has for years worked in the Middle East, including in the Palestinian territories. She started working for the United Nations in 1994 in Sudan and has worked for UNRWA and as regional director for the Mideast for the U.N. children's agency UNICEF.

She also served as assistant director of the U.N. Development Program, headed the U.N. mission to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, and was U.N. special envoy for Lebanon until October 2017.

Kaag then became minister for trade and development in the Dutch government, and in 2018 she became the country's first female foreign minister. Most recently, she served as deputy prime minister and the first female minister of finance from January 2022.

In July, she announced she was leaving Dutch politics because of "hate, intimidation and threats" that put "a heavy burden on my family." She told the website Euronews that after becoming finance minister and deputy prime minister she received many death threats, but the most frightening was when a man showed up at her home shouting and waving a burning torch.

"You don't know what's going to happen, and the safety of your family is obviously of the highest priority," Kaag, a mother of four, told Euronews in October. "For me it was difficult, but bearable. It was different for my family. I always listen to them, and their opinion counts more than anything else in the world."

Wild weather leaves at least 10 dead in Australian states of Queensland and Victoria, officials say

BRISBANE, Australia (AP) — Wild weather has left at least 10 people dead in the eastern Australian states of Queensland and Victoria, officials said on Wednesday.

Three men, aged 48, 59 and 69, were killed after a boat with 11 people on board capsized in rough weather in Moreton Bay off the south Queensland coast on Tuesday, police said. Ambulances took eight survivors to a hospital in stable conditions.

The men were aboard the 39-foot pleasure craft on an annual fishing trip, The Courier Mail newspaper reported.

Queensland Police Acting Chief Superintendent Andrew Pilotto said those rescued were lucky to survive.

"The storm was still raging when they were rescued," Pilotto said. "It would have been very difficult to survive in those conditions anywhere."

Elsewhere, a 59-year-old woman was killed by a falling tree in the Queensland city of Gold Coast on Monday night. The body of a 9-year-old girl was found on Tuesday in the neighboring city of Brisbane hours after she disappeared in a flooded stormwater drain.

The bodies of a 40-year-old woman and a 46-year-old woman were found in the Mary River in the Queensland town of Gympie. They were among three women swept into the flooded river through a stormwater drain on Tuesday. Another 46-year-old woman managed to save herself.

Queensland Police Commissioner Katarina Carroll blamed "extraordinarily difficult weather" for the trag-

edies.

"It has been a very tragic 24 hours due to the weather," Carroll told reporters.

Severe weather has lashed parts of southeast Australia since Monday including Queensland and Victoria.

A woman, who is yet to be identified, was found dead late Tuesday after flash flooding receded at a campground in Buchan in regional Victoria. The body of an unidentified man, who had been camping with the woman, was found late Wednesday, police said.

Also on Tuesday, a 44-year-old man was killed by a falling branch on his rural property in Caringal in eastern Victoria.

Thunderstorms and strong winds have brought down more than 1,000 power lines in parts of Queensland and left 85,000 people without electricity.

She died weeks after fleeing the Maui wildfire. Her family fought to have her listed as a victim.

By GENE JOHNSON, JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER, MARK THIESSEN and LINDSEY WASSON Associated Press

LAHAINA, Hawaii (AP) — Sharlene Rabang and her calico cat fled the wildfire that destroyed her town on Maui and arrived at a family home on another Hawaii island after a 24-hour odyssey that included sleeping in a car.

Dazed, coughing and weak, the frail but feisty 78-year-old headed straight for the bedroom. Her daughter headed for a drugstore, thinking the coughing might be asthma or the flu.

It wasn't.

Rabang died with her daughter holding her hand nearly a month later. She had a history of cancer, COVID and high blood pressure, and the doctor initially neglected to attribute her death to the wildfire. It wasn't until November that, at the urging of her family, Honolulu's medical examiner said a contributing cause of death was the thick, black smoke that Rabang breathed as she fled.

The report made Rabang the 100th victim of the deadliest U.S. wildfire in more than a century. The Aug. 8 fire devastated the onetime capital of the former kingdom of Hawaii. It wiped out an estimated 3,000 homes and apartments in Lahaina as it raced through dry, invasive grasses, driven by winds from a hurricane passing far to the south.

The number of people exposed to natural hazards has increased as climate change has intensified disasters like wildfires and hurricanes. Studies suggest that wildfire disproportionately affects vulnerable people such as those who are older, have a diminished capacity to respond to danger, or are low-income.

Of those killed by the Maui fire, 60 were 65 or older.

Many relatives are facing grief and anger and feeling robbed of their final years with their elders. The pain is particularly acute around the holidays.

"I don't care how many surgeries she's had in her life, I don't care that she was vulnerable," said Rabang's daughter, Lorine Lopes. "She wouldn't be dead if it wasn't because of the fire."

In September, a team of wildfire researchers in the U.S. West found that in the past decade, the number of highly vulnerable people living within the perimeter of wildfires in Washington, Oregon and California more than tripled from the decade before, to more than 43,000. When a wildfire destroyed the town of Paradise, California, in 2018, 68 of the 85 victims were 65 or older, and more than a dozen had physical or mental impairments that impeded their ability to evacuate.

Recordings of 911 calls from the Maui wildfire underscored how susceptible older residents were.

One woman called about an 88-year-old man left behind in a house: "He would literally have to be carried out," she told the dispatcher. A man reported that his elderly parents called him after their home caught fire: "They just called to say, 'I love you, we're not going to make it.'"

Several victims were residents of a 35-unit low-income senior apartment complex that burned. The nonprofit that ran it, Hale Mahaolu, stressed that its tenants lived independently, but some relatives said more should have been done to evacuate them.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 32 of 72

Louise Abihai, 97, was among the tenants who died. Strong and sharp, she walked a mile daily and enjoyed the friends she had there.

Her great-granddaughter Kailani Amine wondered if the values of caring for and respecting “kupuna,” the Hawaiian term for elders, were lost in the chaos.

“It’s just sad that they really didn’t have a chance,” Amine said.

Much can be done to reduce risk, such as asking communities what help they need, planning the transportation that may be required in an evacuation, and determining how to communicate with vulnerable people.

“Putting the resources and political will and the social will to assist those populations -- there’s capacity to do that,” said Erica Fleishman, the director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute and a co-author of the study about wildfire risk in the West. “We know this is going to keep happening.”

Rabang, who stood barely 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall and weighed under 100 pounds (45 kg), was home alone when the fire struck. Her husband, Weslee Chinen, was with family on Oahu, a short flight away. The couple tended to ignore evacuation warnings for fires and tsunamis — disaster had spared their home before and they expected it would again, Chinen said.

But this time, Rabang’s son, Brandon, showed up after driving past a police barricade and insisted she leave. They could feel the heat of the fire on their faces and inhaled intense smoke that turned the sky to darkness.

They made it to a relative’s home. There were dogs inside, so Rabang slept in the car with Poke — the calico she adopted after deciding she wanted the oldest, ugliest cat in the shelter, her daughter said.

“She felt old and decrepit, and she wanted a cat that was the same,” Lopes said. “She wanted to give a home to an animal that no one else would.”

The next morning, Rabang was gagging and struggling for breath. She seemed exhausted and heart-broken, and fretted about what her grandchildren would do with the town demolished. It took Lopes and her sister all morning to persuade her to fly to Oahu, where she could be with her husband and daughters.

By 8 p.m., her husband called an ambulance.

Rabang spent nine days in intensive care being treated for respiratory failure, anemia caused by bleeding ulcers and other conditions. She often forgot why she was in the hospital. Her hands were tied to the bed to keep her from trying to rip off her oxygen mask.

When she had recovered enough to leave the ICU, her family struggled to get her to eat, even when they made her her favorite dumpling soup or brought her fresh sashimi.

So after five days at home, an ambulance once again delivered her to the hospital. Her eyes were glazed. Her weight dropped to below 70 pounds (31.8 kg). Her son and his family flew in from Maui. Lopes and her sister took turns holding vigil. Rabang’s husband stopped by but found it too upsetting to stay long.

When doctors increased her dose of adrenaline, she went into cardiac arrest. The family ended her life support and she died Sept. 4. Her cat now lives at her husband’s family home.

Rabang, who had worked in the restaurant industry, helping turn around failing establishments, had several health conditions that made her vulnerable. She had rheumatoid arthritis, survived pancreatic cancer over a decade earlier, had a kidney removed due to carcinoma in July, and had weakened lungs from COVID.

She was also tough and more than a bit stubborn. She refused to use a wheelchair during cancer recovery and would crawl to the bathroom when her joint pain was too severe to walk.

The doctor who signed her death certificate failed to mention the fire as a cause — an omission that had financial ramifications for the family, as well as emotional ones. For Rabang’s husband to receive government help for funeral or other expenses, Lopes said, they needed to prove she was a fire victim.

After phone calls and emails with various agencies, the family persuaded the medical examiner’s office to review her death.

Rabang had already been cremated, but the medical examiner, Dr. Masahiko Kobayashi, considered her records and the family’s account, confirming in mid-November that while the main causes were pneumonia and anemia, a contributing factor was smoke inhalation, according to the report, obtained by The Associated Press through a public records request.

Lopes said that when Rabang was added to the victims list, she just started crying. After months of stress, she could finally grieve.

"It was a battle to get her on that list, and now that it happened, I'm just releasing," Lopes said, sobbing. "I watched her through every torturous moment she went through, fighting for her life. She had to get on that list, because she was part of that event."

Odds for more sports betting expansion could fade after rapid growth to 38 states

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — At his suburban St. Louis home, Brett Koenig can pull out his smartphone and open a sports betting app. But he can't place a bet. He is blocked by a pop-up message noting he is not in a legal location.

Missouri is one of a dozen states where sports wagering remains illegal more than five years after the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way for states to adopt it.

"It just seems silly that everyone else can do it and we can't," said Koenig, who has launched a social media campaign called "Let MO Play" to rally support for legal sports betting in his home state.

Other states have reaped a total of over \$4 billion of taxes from more than \$280 billion wagered on sports since 2018. Vermont will become the latest to accept sports bets, starting Jan. 11, But the odds for expansion to additional states appear iffy in 2024 because of political resistance and the sometimes competing financial interests of existing gambling operators.

"The handful of states yet to legalize are last for a reason: They all have multiple obstacles," said Becca Giden, policy director at Eilers & Krejcik Gaming, a California-based consulting firm.

After a "whirlwind" of expansion, the playing field for further sports betting has narrowed to a group of states where various stakeholders all "want to kind of maximize what they get out of the legalization framework," said Chris Cylke, senior vice president of government relations at the American Gaming Association, which represents the industry. "So that can create some friction."

The states where sports betting remains illegal are Alabama, Alaska, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Utah.

California and Texas, the nation's two most populous states, would be the biggest prizes for sports bettors. But neither appear particularly likely to adopt it in 2024.

Voters in California last year overwhelmingly defeated two rival sports betting initiatives following a record \$463 million raised by supporters and opponents. The advertising barrage was fueled by divisions among online gaming companies, tribal casinos and horse tracks. Those tensions have continued, with Native American tribes objecting to a new sports betting initiative that is seeking signatures to appear on the 2024 ballot.

The proposed sale of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team to a politically active family that runs the Las Vegas Sands casino company has raised speculation of a bigger push for legal sports betting in Texas. But the state Legislature is not in regular session in 2024, and Texas has no means of placing citizen initiatives on the ballot.

Neighboring Oklahoma already has scores of casinos run by tribes. Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt announced a plan in November to allow in-person sports betting at tribal casinos and online sports wagering through platforms licensed by the state. But his plan doesn't appear to have support from tribes, with whom Stitt has been feuding.

Minnesota is perhaps the next likeliest state to authorize sports betting, but that probably would require a bipartisan vote in the Senate, where Democrats hold a slim one-seat advantage over Republicans. Lawmakers this past year struggled to resolve differences between tribal casinos, which want exclusive rights over online and in-person sports betting, and horse racing tracks, which also want a greater share of the gambling market. But they will try again.

"From the perspective of the tribes, the moment is now, and they'd like to see it done this year," said Democratic state Sen. Matt Klein, a sponsor of sports betting legislation.

Efforts to legalize sports betting in Missouri have repeatedly stalled in the state Senate, where Republican Sen. Denny Hoskins insists it must be paired with the regulation of legally questionable slot-machine-style video games that have popped up in convenience stores and truck stops. Casinos oppose that.

Online sports wagering companies, casinos, professional sports teams and video gaming terminal interests have combined to hire about 80 lobbyists in Missouri.

The St. Louis Cardinals also are leading a coalition of the state's professional sports teams proposing an initiative petition to put sports betting on the November ballot. But Senate President Pro Tem Caleb Rowden doubts the prospects of both the initiative petition and legislation, bemoaning that Missouri may "lose out on probably some fairly significant economic activity."

Data suggests Missourians are interested in sports betting. From mid-June to mid-December, the technology firm GeoComply Solutions processed over 13.5 million location checks from 280,000 devices located in Missouri attempting to access mobile sports betting sites. About 48% were trying to use sportsbooks in Kansas, and 40% in Illinois. They were blocked from doing so.

When Koenig wants to bet on sports, he drives 45 minutes from his Missouri home to Illinois. He is not alone.

GeoComply processed 42,000 location checks from 1,900 online sports betting accounts that traveled from Missouri to an Illinois border town in the past six months. When the Kansas City Chiefs hosted the Buffalo Bills on Dec. 10, GeoComply tallied 786 location checks from 570 sportsbook accounts traveling from Missouri border towns into Kansas.

"It's very easy for people to cross over, place their bets and then return to their home and watch the game," GeoComply spokesman John Pappas said. "We see this thousands of times a day, a week, in any given state where it's not legal."

In Georgia, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp has expressed an openness to legalizing sports betting. But the effort stalled this past year when the Senate rejected a proposed constitutional amendment that would have let voters decide the issue. The debate is complex because proponents of casinos and horse racing want to leverage sports wagering to also legalize those forms of gambling.

Though still a toss-up, Georgia may be the most realistic candidate to authorize sports betting in 2024, Giden said. She expects a well-funded lobbying effort from the likes of online betting operators and sports teams.

To legally bet on sports in Alabama also would require a constitutional amendment approved by voters. In the Legislature, sports wagering proposals have become intertwined with broader efforts to expand gambling beyond the current tribal casinos, dog racing tracks and charitable bingo operators. None have been successful yet.

Republican state Sen. Greg Albritton said some lawmakers are working on new gambling legislation that would include casinos, a lottery and sports betting.

"Whatever happens, if I have my way, this issue will be debated this year," he said.

Deported by US, arrested in Venezuela: One family's saga highlights Biden's migration challenge

By JOSHUA GOODMAN AND ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Pedro Naranjo idolized his father growing up and followed him into the Venezuelan air force to fly helicopters. So deep was their bond that when the older Naranjo feared being jailed for plotting against Nicolás Maduro's socialist government, father and son fled to the United States together.

Now the two have been separated by an overstretched U.S. immigration system that has left the retired Gen. Pedro Naranjo in legal limbo in the U.S. His loyal son, a Venezuelan air force lieutenant, sits in a Venezuelan military prison after he was deported by the Biden administration as part of an attempt to discourage asylum-seekers from the turbulent South American country.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 35 of 72

"We never had a plan B," the older Naranjo said in a phone interview from Houston. He was released after 10 days in U.S. custody and is now awaiting the outcome of his own asylum request. "It never crossed our mind that the U.S., as an ally of the Venezuelan opposition and democracies over the world, a defender of human rights and freedom, would do what it did to my son."

The Venezuelan diaspora is one of the most vexing migration challenges that awaits Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas when they arrive in Mexico City on Wednesday to discuss unprecedented arrivals at the U.S. border with President Andres Manuel López Obrador.

Last year, Mexico ended visa-free travel for Venezuelans, which had been a ticket to those seeking asylum in the United States. Once arriving at a Mexican border city, Venezuelans could walk across the border in broad daylight and surrender to U.S. agents, avoiding the dangers of traversing Mexico and other countries over land.

Restricting flights to Mexico encouraged walking through the perilous Darién Gap. More than a half-million migrants, predominantly Venezuelan, have traversed the jungle at the border of Colombia and Panama this year.

The resumption for the first time in years of U.S. deportation flights to Venezuela — 10 since October, according to Witness at the Border, an advocacy group that tracks flight data — have failed to stem the surge. Venezuelans were arrested more than 85,000 times crossing the border illegally in October and November, the second-highest nationality after Mexicans.

Little is known about how those deported fare once they are returned home. However, critics and members of south Florida's close-knit community of Venezuelan exiles have blasted the Biden administration for overlooking the grave dangers faced by deportees like Naranjo.

Last week, a group calling itself Independent Venezuelan American Citizens joined Miami Republican Rep. Carlos Jimenez to denounce the younger Naranjo's deportation and subsequent arrest at the hands of Maduro. It said it sent a request to the White House on Dec. 12 seeking to block the deportation but received no response. On Dec. 14, after failing to reverse a deportation order by an asylum officer, the younger Naranjo was deported, according to his father.

Ernesto Ackerman, a member of the group, said the deportation was akin to sending a U.S. drug agent into the hands of a drug cartel.

"It's like taking a DEA agent and sending him to Chapo Guzmán," Ackerman said, referring to the Mexican drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. "I don't see any difference."

Naranjo's deportation comes against the backdrop of U.S. attempts to improve relations with Caracas after the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign failed to topple Maduro. In November, the White House eased oil sanctions on the OPEC nation to support fledgling negotiations between Maduro and his opponents over guarantees for next year's presidential elections. And last week, Biden announced a presidential pardon releasing from prison of a key Maduro ally held for more than three years on U.S. money-laundering charges.

Neither the White House nor U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement commented on the Naranjos' situation.

The father-son saga began in 2018, when Gen. Naranjo was arrested with a handful of other officers for allegedly plotting to assassinate Maduro, sow chaos and disrupt Venezuela's presidential election that year. Naranjo denies his involvement in a barracks uprising dubbed "Operation Armageddon" by Maduro but nonetheless he was court-martialed, along with other alleged plotters, on charges including rebellion and treason.

In 2021, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, Naranjo was hospitalized after suffering a stroke in prison. Under international pressure from Maduro's opponents, including the head of the Organization of American States, he was allowed to complete his sentence at home.

When the government decided to extend the sentence of his co-defendants, he feared the house arrest order would be reversed and he'd be thrown back into prison. He decided to flee at the end of 2022

and his son, who he says never conspired against the Maduro government, joined him to make sure he arrived safely.

"The only crime he committed was being a good son," said Maria Elena Machado, who has seen her son twice in prison since his return.

The two first crossed the border into Colombia, home to more than 4 million Venezuelans who've abandoned their homes since 2016. But with a leftist ally of Maduro in power, and Marxist rebels still lurking in the countryside, the two felt unsafe, so they decided to make the perilous trek through the Darién to the U.S. On Oct. 4, they crossed the Rio Grande near Brownsville, Texas, and surrendered to the U.S. Border Patrol.

Crossing illegally from Mexico exposed the Naranjos to tougher standards for passing initial asylum screenings.

A rule introduced in May applies the higher standard to anyone who crosses the border illegally after passing through another country, like Mexico, without seeking protection there. Migrants also must use one of the Biden administration's new legal avenues to asylum, such as a new mobile app for appointments at official crossings.

Illegal crossings across nationalities, including Venezuelans, fell after the rule was introduced but the lull was short-lived.

It's not clear why Naranjo's asylum request was rejected. His father said he appealed the asylum officer's initial determination that he wouldn't face retaliation if returned to Venezuela to a federal immigration judge in Pearsall, Texas, but lost.

The younger Naranjo lacked an attorney throughout the proceedings, according to his father. Asylum-seekers are entitled to call attorneys before screening interviews, but many advocates complain that those detained get little notice, often at odd hours, and are unable to find help.

Venezuelans who clear screening do relatively well before immigration judges. Their asylum grant rate was 72% in the government's fiscal year ended Sept. 30, compared to 52% for all nationalities, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse.

Upon his arrival to Venezuela, the younger Naranjo was detained again on charges of desertion. He's now being held at the military prison outside Caracas alongside several opponents of the government.

Meanwhile, migration experts warn that other Venezuelans deserving of asylum could suffer the same fate. "This is not a shocker," said Julio Henriquez, a Venezuelan-born immigration attorney in Boston. "It was bound to happen at any moment."

Burning Man survived a muddy quagmire. Will the experiment last 30 more years?

By SCOTT SONNER Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — The blank canvass of desert wilderness in northern Nevada seemed the perfect place in 1992 for artistic anarchists to relocate their annual burning of a towering, anonymous effigy. It was goodbye to San Francisco's Baker Beach, hello to the Nevada playa, the long-ago floor of an inland sea.

The tiny gathering became Burning Man's surrealistic circus, fueled by acts of kindness and avant-garde theatrics, sometimes with a dose of hallucinogens or nudity. The spectacle flourished as the festival ballooned over the next three decades.

Some say it grew too much, too fast.

Things came to a head in 2011 when tickets sold out for the first time. Organizers responded with a short-lived lottery system that left people out of what was supposed to be a radically inclusive event. As Burning Man matured, luxurious accommodations proliferated, as did the population of billionaires and celebrities.

Katherine Chen, a sociology professor in New York City who wrote a 2009 book about the event's "creative chaos," was among those who wondered whether Burning Man "would be a victim of its own success."

Exponential growth led to increasing questions about whether organizers had veered too far from the core principles of radical inclusion, expression, participation and the pledge to "leave no trace."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 37 of 72

That last hurdle was never harder to clear than this year as "Burners" tried to leave over Labor Day weekend after torching the 80-foot (24-meter) wooden sculpture that is "the Man."

A rare rainstorm turned the Black Rock Desert into a muddy quagmire 110 miles (177 kilometers) north of Reno, delaying the departure of 80,000 revelers. Once out, organizers had six weeks to clean up under terms of a federal permit.

By the smallest of margins, they passed the test last month, with a few adjustments recommended for the future. The verdict from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management means Burning Man is in line to use federal land again next year.

Debate over the event's future, however, is sure to continue as divisions grow between the aging hippy-types and wealthier, more technologically inclined newcomers. Veteran participants fear the newer set is losing touch with Burning Man's roots.

The event has made a quantum leap from a gathering of hundreds to one that temporarily becomes Nevada's third largest city after metropolitan Las Vegas and Reno. The festival drew 4,000 in 1995 and topped 50,000 in 2010.

It's no wonder seasoned Burners sound a bit like griping cribbage players on a rural town square when they mutter: "It ain't like it used to be."

"Back then, it was much more raw," said Mike "Festie" Malecki, 63, a retired Chicago mortician turned California sculptor who made his 13th trip this year to the land of colorful theme camps, towering sculptures, drum circles and art cars.

"There are more (people) who come out to party and don't participate. We call them spectators," he said.

Senior organizers long have wrestled with whether to become more civilized or remain what co-founder Larry Harvey described as a "repudiation of order and authority."

Ron Halbert, a 71-year-old from San Francisco, has worked support for Burning Man's 90-piece orchestra for 20 years and remains optimistic.

"It's still the gathering of the tribe," he said.

The event is permitted tentatively for the same 80,000 attendance cap next year. Organizers are considering some minor changes, though generally resist making new rules, Executive Director Marian Goodell said.

Critics on social media howled at the mayhem left behind this year, posting photos of garbage piles, abandoned vehicles and overflowing portable toilets while ridiculing the "hippies" and their leave-no-trace mantra.

But that mayhem may have actually helped bring Burning Man back to its roots.

Katrina Cook of Toronto said it forced people to be true to the founding principles of participation and radical self-reliance.

"The rain weeded out the people who didn't want to be there for the right reason," Cook said.

Mark Fromson, 54, was staying in an RV, but the rains forced him to find shelter at another camp where fellow burners provided food and cover. Another principle of Burning Man, he said, centers on unconditional gift giving with no expectation of something in return.

After sunset, Fromson set off barefoot through the muck for a long trek back to his vehicle, slogging through thick clay that clung to his feet and legs. The challenge, he said, was the mark of a "good burn."

Nevertheless, Jeffery Longoria of San Francisco, who marked his fifth consecutive voyage to Burning Man last summer, said its core principles are going to evolve no matter what as a new generation takes over.

"The people that created this community, a lot of them are getting older and retiring and there's a lot of new young people coming in, the kind that have, you know, a couple \$100,000 RVs and are kind of just careless about the environment."

Soren Michael, a Los Angeles technology worker who made his 11th trip this year, said the biggest change has been the ability to communicate with the outside world from the desert.

"It was almost part of the appeal to be disconnected," he said.

Twenty years ago, the psychedelic celebration like none other already was attracting academic scholars — anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists and communications professors — curious

about how the makeshift civilization functioned without real-world rules.

Burning Man references started popping up in TV episodes and talk show punchlines. The rich and famous began venturing to Black Rock City, as the festival's temporary metropolis is called.

A full-blown exhibit about the phenomenon debuted in 2018 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington. Even then, veteran Burners complained about the event becoming as much a curiosity to see as to do.

That's in part the problem veterans have with the advent of glamor camping, or glamping, in which private companies provide packaged trips to concierge camps with luxury RVs and lavish meals under chandeliers. Some believe the camps violate Burning Man principles.

The growing number of billionaires and celebrities who fly in on private jets to Black Rock City's temporary airstrip "seems to be everyone's favorite thing to hate," Goodell said. But wealth shouldn't be a cause for shame, she said.

"The question is not about glamping," she said. "Comfort doesn't assume lack of engagement. It's whether you have a glamping camp and you're not really engaging."

Burning Man's purpose remains the same: building a creative, stimulating environment, the essence of which people can take back to their own communities.

"We thought that from the beginning," Goodell said. "We just didn't know it would be 80,000 people."

Photographer Cecil Williams' vision gives South Carolina its only civil rights museum

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

ORANGEBURG, S.C. (AP) — Much of how South Carolina has seen its civil rights history has been through the lens of photographer Cecil Williams. From sit-ins to prayer protests to portraits of African Americans integrating universities and rising to federal judges, Williams has snapped it.

After years of work, Williams' millions of photographs are being digitized and categorized and his chief dream of a civil rights museum marking how Black Americans fought segregation and discrimination in the state is about to move out of his old house and into a much bigger, and more prominent, building in Orangeburg.

"Images can be very powerful storytelling," said Williams, who turned 85 last month. "And the struggle to get the rights we were due under the U.S. Constitution is a very powerful story."

While Williams' story and those in his images will be remembered, preservationists and historians worry plenty of African American history is being lost as those who lived during the civil rights era die and their letters, photographs and other mementos of the struggle are tossed out.

"We talk about superheroes like Superman or the Black Panther. But I wish young people would realize there are superheroes in their neighborhoods who fought injustice every day," Williams said.

Williams got his first camera when he was 9. A few years later he took one picture of civil rights attorney and later Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall getting off a train to work on a segregation case — just one frame because it was dark and flashbulbs were \$1 each.

The photo got a lot of attention. Soon, Jet magazine had Williams taking pictures. He kept going for decades, capturing images of the Charleston hospital workers strike, U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond's last campaign and the Confederate flag being removed from atop the Statehouse dome.

In 2019, Williams, his wife and a friend realized there was no museum focused on civil rights in South Carolina, unlike every other Southern state.

So Williams converted his old house and darkroom in a residential neighborhood in Orangeburg into the Cecil Williams South Carolina Civil Rights Museum. He created the exhibitions and partitioned off the rooms himself. It's had 25,000 visitors with little marketing.

His photographs are everywhere, but that's not all. There is a bowling pin and shotgun shells from the All-Star Bowling Lanes where demonstrations to desegregate in 1968 ended with police firing on protes-

Greton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 39 of 72

tors, killing three of them in what became known as the Orangeburg Massacre.

Close to his heart is the section about Briggs v. Elliott, the South Carolina case that provided the foundation for the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn legal segregation in Brown v. Board of Education.

Williams displays the Bible of the Rev. Joseph DeLaine, one of the plaintiffs in Briggs v. Elliott who organized Black parents to fight their local school district over its grossly unequal schools. There also is DeLaine's long gun which he used to protect himself and his family when racists came to attack them one night.

Williams' latest efforts are a longshot attempt to get the U.S. Supreme Court to rename the Brown case the Briggs case in its official records. The Briggs cases landed on the Supreme Court's docket in 1951; Brown was added a year later. The court has said the name happened when a clerk consolidated five cases against segregation including the Brown and Briggs lawsuits. Williams said he thinks it was intentional to obscure that South Carolina generated the case that killed segregation.

"Sometimes in history, being first matters. And this is one time where it should have mattered," Williams said.

The negatives containing the history Williams chronicled have been scanned in by Claflin University. Students are working to catalog them with dates and the people in the photographs. But historians worry that's not the case everywhere as the generation that fought for civil rights dies.

People like historian Brent Leggs aren't only interested in preserving the houses where civil rights meetings took place and the malt shops where Black people sat at whites-only counters. They want letters, posters, recordings of speeches and sermons, furniture, and anything else that tells the story of what happened, what it looked like, and how it sounded.

"I just believe there is a deep civic well in the Black community. As generations change and change moves through these families, we lose an understanding of the importance of that type of history," said Leggs, the executive director for the African American Cultural Action Heritage Fund. He urges saving the material and having historians look it over.

In the next year or so, Williams hopes to move his museum into a building three times larger in downtown Orangeburg with full-time staff.

It's part of a \$23 million federal grant to revitalize Railroad Corner in Orangeburg as a gateway to the city that is nearly three-quarters African American with two neighboring historically Black universities. And it's the culmination of years of trying to get support from anyone who will listen.

"We're running out of time. I'm running out of time. I have tried for four or five decades to make an impact, to make our history known," Williams said.

Williams notes almost all the money for the work is coming from federal or local sources.

"South Carolina has long wanted to hide this history," said Williams, who thinks South Carolina leaders wanted to keep quiet the racism occurring throughout the state.

Williams made sure his museum showed that hidden history. Along with the Briggs case, it remembers Sarah Mae Flemming, an African American woman kicked off a Columbia bus seven months before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama.

"Sometimes I put myself into situations where I'm photographing things that became a part of history. But there were other times that it just seems to be my destiny that I arrived at a situation," Williams said. "I became a poster boy for people who couldn't speak for themselves."

At the pinnacle of his career, Williams and his pictures were unwelcome in whites-only South Carolina newsrooms. In Columbia, he was kept from the state's largest newspaper but allowed in the nearby offices of The Associated Press, which transmitted some of his photos to the world.

"White-owned newspapers in South Carolina did not employ Black reporters or photographers and seldom covered the events of Black people's lives. Sometimes, thanks to AP distribution, Williams' work countered this omission," author Claudia Smith Brinson wrote in *Injustice In Focus*, a book she wrote with Williams about his life.

Nikki Haley has bet her 2024 bid on South Carolina. But much of her home state leans toward Trump

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

GILBERT, S.C. (AP) — Standing inside a rustic barn a short drive from the state capital, Henry McMaster shocked many South Carolina Republicans seven years ago by backing Donald Trump for president.

Then the lieutenant governor, McMaster became the highest-ranking state official to endorse Trump in 2016. The event was in Lexington County, the adopted political home of then-Gov. Nikki Haley, who had repeatedly criticized Trump and endorsed Florida Sen. Marco Rubio.

Trump would win the 2016 primary in South Carolina and eventually the presidency. After campaigning against him, Haley would accept his nomination as United Nations ambassador, making McMaster governor.

That complicated history is coming to the fore as Haley mounts a spirited effort to become the leading Republican alternative to Trump. Her strategy is centered on a strong showing in next month's Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary before much of the campaign's focus shifts to South Carolina, where the Feb. 24 contest could be the last chance for anyone other than Trump to prove they can survive.

But her home state has shifted closer to Trump in the near-decade since she last ran for state office, threatening her ability to tap into her local roots to notch the victory she has promised.

"Ten years is an eternity when all politics are national," said Matt Moore, a former state GOP chairman. "Trump tapped into thousands of low-frequency voters who have reshaped South Carolina politics. Many of them weren't focused on state-level issues prior, or even now."

Trump's grip on GOP

The former president this time has the endorsement of almost every major South Carolina Republican. Sen. Lindsey Graham, who ran against Trump, suggested he would destroy the Republican Party and openly questioned McMaster's thinking over the 2016 endorsement, is now a close ally of the former president and is co-chairing Trump's state campaign with McMaster.

South Carolina's lieutenant governor, state treasurer, attorney general and three of its six Republican U.S. House members all back Trump. The only congressman to endorse Haley is Rep. Ralph Norman, a longtime ally.

Trump drew an estimated 50,000 people to a sweltering Fourth of July rally in Pickens, South Carolina, in the strongly conservative Upstate region. Haley, meanwhile, set a record for her campaign last month with 2,500 people along the state's southern coast, known for its wealthier and more traditional conservative set.

John Reed, a businessman from upscale Hilton Head Island who donated to Haley's 2010 campaign, backed Trump in 2016 and 2020. But he is supporting Haley this time because he says she offers a contrast from Trump's "divisive and disrespectful" tenor.

"I think Nikki's the best of them because she has abilities and experience," said Reed. "Trump's narcissism and pride and arrogance is just too much for the office."

Losing South Carolina would be a huge blow to Haley's campaign, which is counting on outlasting rivals like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and picking up momentum from people open to a Trump alternative. A home state primary loss has devastated previous campaigns, including Rubio, who dropped out of the 2016 primary after a blowout loss to Trump in Florida. Sen. Elizabeth Warren dropped out of the 2020 Democratic race after losing several primaries in one day, including in her home state of Massachusetts.

Lexington County, where McMaster endorsed Trump, is Haley's adopted political home and the area she represented in the state legislature. She came back to the same rustic barn in April to hold a rally for her presidential campaign.

She was little known when she launched a bid for governor against three high-profile candidates — including McMaster — running on a message of fiscal responsibility and going after what she described as entrenched powers in Columbia. She aligned with the "tea party" movement that arose during President Barack Obama's first term.

Her key endorsement in that race was Sarah Palin, the former Alaska governor who remained a powerhouse in GOP politics after her 2008 vice presidential bid. After also being backed by Mitt Romney, whose

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 41 of 72

2008 White House run she had supported, Haley nearly won the GOP primary outright and was victorious in the runoff.

Haley's record

Haley points to several accomplishments during her six years as governor, including bringing economic investment and jobs to the state, requiring companies to verify the employment eligibility of their workers, and supporting voter ID laws. She's perhaps best remembered nationally for helping to persuade the Legislature to remove the Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds after a mass shooting in which a white gunman killed eight Black church members who were attending Bible study — although Haley had previously dismissed the need for the flag to come down.

Haley's presidential campaign points toward her previous popularity in South Carolina as a signal she will perform well when it comes time for her home state's voters to make their selection.

"South Carolinians first elected Nikki when she was the anti-establishment, conservative candidate for governor," said Olivia Perez-Cubas. "They know she has what it takes to win because they've seen her beat the odds before — not just once, but twice."

But Trump changed Republican politics in South Carolina and nationally.

That includes Lexington County, where the county GOP has been roiled for months by a legal battle between two people claiming to oversee it, a split within a recently elected slate supportive of Trump's "Make America Great Again" vision.

Michael Burgess, who served as a vice chairman for the Lexington County GOP and described himself as a "never ever, ever Trumper," said he felt the area's shift toward populism in the years after Trump's 2016 election.

"Lexington County is a microcosm of South Carolina," said Burgess, who teaches AP U.S. History at a local high school. "What we've seen since the 2020 election is a concerted effort by MAGA to take over the county party mechanism, and essentially, when they do that, to drive out long-term establishment Reagan Republicans."

Burgess, who said he voted for neither Trump nor Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton in 2016 and supported Democrat Joe Biden in 2020, said he had initially backed South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott in the 2024 GOP primary, but now sees Haley as the party's best bet to defeat Trump.

But another person who supported Haley when she ran in 2010 now blames her for criticizing Trump in 2016, even though he supported her work as governor.

"When she came out and said, 'We need to ignore a lot of the loud voices,' that kind of really rubbed me wrong, because it was those voices that got her elected governor," said Allen Olsen, who founded a "tea party" group in South Carolina's capital city of Columbia. "Although I understood what she was doing, it really kind of felt like I got stabbed in the back."

State Rep. RJ May, a leader of the state's House Freedom Caucus, argued Haley is now more of an establishment figure due to her service as governor and then United Nations ambassador.

He said he doesn't see Trump the same way — even though Trump is now a former president running his third campaign for the White House.

"It's hard to take that lane from Donald Trump, considering the weaponization of the federal government that we're seeing," said May, who has not endorsed a candidate in the presidential primary. "One thing I don't think you can call Donald Trump is an insider."

But there are still people in South Carolina who have been waiting for Haley to run for the White House.

At the event in Bluffton, South Carolina, that drew 2,500 people, Veronica Wetzel donned a "Nikki 2024" hat she said she bought years ago. Now, she said she's ready to vote for Haley, in part because she wants to see Republicans win in November.

"I really don't know if Donald Trump can win," said Wetzel, adding she had supported Trump in past contests. "We need to put somebody in there who can win because the last thing we need right now is to lose this election."

Americans sour on the primary election process and major political parties, an AP-NORC poll says

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the GOP primary process just about to start, many Republicans aren't certain that votes will be counted correctly in their presidential primary contest, amid widespread pessimism about the future of both the Democratic and Republican parties, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

About one-third of Republicans say they have a "great deal" or "quite a bit" of confidence that votes in the upcoming Republican primary elections and caucuses will be counted correctly. About three in 10 Republicans report a "moderate" amount of confidence, and 32% say they have "only a little" or "none at all." In contrast, 72% of Democrats have high confidence their party will count votes accurately in its primary contests. Democrats are also slightly more likely than Republicans to have a high level of confidence in the Republican Party's vote count being accurate.

Republicans continue to be broadly doubtful about votes being counted accurately — in the early contests or beyond them. About one-quarter of Republicans say they have at least "quite a bit" of confidence that the votes in the 2024 presidential election will be counted accurately, significantly lower than Democrats. Slightly fewer than half of U.S. adults overall (46%) believe the same, which is in line with an AP-NORC poll conducted in June.

The skepticism among Republicans comes after years of former President Donald Trump falsely blaming his 2020 loss on election fraud. Federal and state election officials and Trump's own attorney general have said there is no credible evidence the election was tainted. The former president's allegations of fraud were also roundly rejected by courts, including by judges Trump appointed.

"Nothing will be fair because the last election was rigged," said Julie Duggan, 32, of Chicago, a Trump voter, referring to 2020. "I don't trust any of them at this point."

The AP-NORC poll found a widespread lack of trust in both major political parties among U.S. adults overall.

About one-quarter of U.S. adults say they have "only a little" confidence or "none at all" that both the Democratic Party and Republican Party have a fair process for selecting a presidential nominee. About half of Independents have that low level of confidence in both party's processes, compared with one-quarter of Republicans and 19% of Democrats.

Slightly fewer than half of U.S. adults — 46% — say they are pessimistic about the way the country's leaders are chosen.

About half of U.S. adults are pessimistic about the future of the Republican Party, including one-third of Republicans and 45% of Independents. The poll found 45% of U.S. adults are pessimistic about the future of the Democratic Party, including about one-quarter of Democrats and 41% of Independents.

"The way they're spending our money, sending it all over the world and not protecting our people here in the United States of America," said Gary Jackson, a 65-year-old retired trucker and Republican in Boise, Idaho. "Right now, I'm not impressed with either party."

Christine Allen, a political independent in Gambrills, Maryland, sees her state's last governor, Larry Hogan, a moderate Republican, as a model for the country. But Hogan refused to run in the GOP presidential primary, which she sees as emblematic of how the two-party system prevents talented leaders from holding office.

"Everybody right now is a bunch of children, stomping their feet until they get their way," Allen, 44, said. "Everybody's at fault here. There's no winners."

Nonetheless, Allen thinks the primaries will be fair. "They're fairer than the Electoral College," she said.

Even those who identify with the two political parties are uneasy about whom their organizations will nominate. A recent AP-NORC poll showed Democrats and Republicans are also not especially confident that their party's process will result in a candidate who can win the general election in November. Additionally, there are some doubts on both sides that the emerging candidates will represent their party's views or Americans overall.

Only three in 10 Democrats say they are confident the Democratic party's process will result in a can-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 43 of 72

didate whose views represent most Americans. About one-quarter of Democrats believe the process will produce a candidate whose views represent their own. Similarly, about three in 10 Republicans say the GOP process will produce a candidate who represents a majority of Americans. About one-third of Republicans expect they'll get a nominee whose views represent their own.

Mark Richards, a 33-year-old middle school teacher in Toledo, Ohio, and a Democrat, said he expects President Joe Biden will be nominated again by the party, despite his low job approval numbers. The incumbent faces only token opposition in the Democratic presidential primary.

"I feel like there's got to be someone better out there, but I don't think another Democrat is going to unseat Joe Biden," Richards said.

Though Richards thinks the primary process will be fair and the votes accurately counted, he sees the nominating system as inherently flawed. "It's all about money, who can get the most money from PACs and SuperPACs," he said, referring to political committees that donate to candidates or spend millions of dollars on their behalf.

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

As the Endangered Species Act turns 50, those who first enforced it reflect on its mixed legacy

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — On Dec. 28, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act. "Nothing," he said, "is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed." The powerful new law charged the federal government with saving every endangered plant and animal in America and enjoyed nearly unanimous bipartisan support.

The Act was so sweeping that, in retrospect, it was bound to become controversial, especially since it allowed species to be listed as endangered without consideration for the economic consequences. In that way it pitted two American values against each other: the idea that Americans should preserve their incredible natural resources (the United States invented the national park, after all) and the notion that capitalism was king and private property inviolate.

The Endangered Species Act was just one in a raft of environmental legislation passed beginning in the mid-1960s that included the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Wilderness Act and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Taken together, it was the most extensive environmental legislation the world had ever seen.

It was a time of widespread support for cleaning up the environment after unchecked greed had polluted our air and water and wiped out some of our most iconic species. Added to the desire for a cleaner natural world was a belief that the federal government could solve our nation's problems.

The United States' own national animals, the bison and the bald eagle, had been driven to near extinction. When they started to recover, Americans saw the Endangered Species Act as a success. But when animals that people had never heard of began interfering with development, it was a different story.

Left to navigate this minefield was a group of young biologists in Washington — the first Office of Endangered Species.

THE SNAIL DARTER

Ichthyologist Jim Williams, the Office of Endangered Species' first "fish guy," was hired in 1974, just as things were getting up and running. Williams describes his cohort as "a bunch of conservation-minded biologists that were all on a mission to save every last one of our chosen group of organisms come hell or high water, and, by the way, to hell with the bureaucrats and politicians."

His unconventional attitude and methods soon became apparent with the listing of the snail darter, a little fish now so notorious it has become synonymous with government overreach. At the time, it had

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 44 of 72

just been discovered and was only known to exist in one stretch of the Little Tennessee River — which the Tennessee Valley Authority was planning to dam.

"I started talking about listing it, and boy, oh boy, did the crap hit the fan," Williams says. He said the associate director "called me in one day and said, 'You're going to cost us the whole damn Act. They're going to just throw this thing out when you try to list this thing. You can't do this.' And I said, 'Hey, I'm calling them like I see them.'"

Williams did list the snail darter. The Act survived. But it would never again enjoy the support of its earliest days. Whether the government should try to save all species from extinction, or if not, where to draw the line, became a point of conflict that has never been fully resolved.

At one point, administrators implemented a priority system for what animals should be listed. "And literally it would change almost from week to week," Williams says.

The exasperated biologists put together a fake memorandum listing a different criterion for every single day. Although it was meant as satire, it reflected the reality of what kinds of species were the least controversial to list. It included "things that are warm and fluffy" and "things difficult to step on."

Williams chafed at this attempt to curtail his work and sometimes relied on allies in the nonprofit world with influence in the Interior Department for help.

"We had our friends in high places. I mean, if you're right and you did everything right, there's somebody out there in the conservation community that had our backs," he says. "And we knew that. And that was a good feeling."

'SAVE KEN DODD AND RATTLESNAKES'

Ken Dodd is a herpetologist who was recruited to the Office of Endangered Species in 1976 for a 30-day appointment that turned into eight years.

"There was not a whole lot of conservation theory at the time to draw on," he says. "So we were really at the cutting edge of determining what is necessary for conservation. ... So we were — I'm not saying winging it — we were deeply into what an endangered species is, how it is to be determined."

Like Williams, Dodd regularly butted heads with administrators. He also followed the science where it led without thought for whom it might inconvenience. That included going up against the Purina pet food company (successfully) and Monsanto (not so much).

"I was threatened many times," Dodd says of his time overall at the Office of Endangered Species. "They were going to get me.' 'They were going to get me fired.' And this was from companies, not just individuals."

But the thing that actually got him fired — in 1979 — was not a listing but a letter.

A man named Dominique D'Ermo owned a Washington restaurant that was serving rattlesnake meat he said was from Pennsylvania. That would have violated a law called the Lacey Act. "So I wrote to the restaurant and said, 'Hey, Dominique, I think you need to get a better source,'" Dodd says.

It turned out Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus was a regular patron of the restaurant. When he learned what Dodd had done, "He fired me — which did not go over real well. ...You can't just fire a federal employee, you know, just because you don't like what they did."

Dodd hired an attorney. Meanwhile, according to Williams, "We all went down to a T-shirt shop, got shirts that said 'Save Ken Dodd and Rattlesnakes'."

The ensuing publicity made an impact. Soon, Dodd was back at work.

GRAY WOLF SEASON

Ron Nowak joined the office in 1973 after working on surveys of wolves and panthers. The animals he was responsible for were often furry and charismatic, more relatable for most people than a fish or salamander. But Nowak would not suffer fools, which is how he ended up, in the mid-1980s, testifying against his own agency.

In northern Minnesota, the gray wolf was coming back from "just a tiny remnant of a couple hundred animals to maybe several hundred or a thousand" thanks to the Endangered Species Act. "And so what did the Fish and Wildlife Service want to do? They wanted to cooperate with the state of Minnesota and open the gray wolf to public hunting."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 45 of 72

That would require a regulation showing that a hunting season would benefit the wolves and was the only way to control their population.

"They told me, 'You have to write the regulation,'" Nowak says. "And I said, 'It would be illegal.'"

The Fish and Wildlife Service found someone else to write the regulation. Conservation groups sued, calling Nowak as a witness. He went out to Minnesota and gave depositions saying the wolves should not have been open to hunting.

The conservation groups won. The government appealed. The conservation groups won again.

Nowak heard his supervisors wanted to fire him but "did not want to create another martyr like Ken Dodd." His success may have made him overconfident, he says, because he then sought outside help that forced the agency to move on a stalled listing for the Louisiana black bear, the inspiration for the original teddy bear.

"I think that was the breaking point," he says. By late 1987, his unit had been "dismembered" and he was reassigned.

Today, Nowak has nothing but praise for his colleagues.

"They wanted to show a true reflection of that part of the natural world that was in danger of disappearing," he says. "You could go there at night or on weekends, and they'd be there, not for any extra pay, but just because they believed in it.

"And you could find them out in the field, sometimes, actually going to just try to look for these animals and plants. Really, I think it was a unique place — one that we may never see again."

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR

LaVerne Smith was hired in 1978 as one of the Office of Endangered Species' first botanists. Unlike many of her colleagues, she continued to work in the endangered species program for most of her career, through many office reorganizations.

That included a 1987 shuffle that moved the responsibility for listing species to regional offices — a reorg controversial enough that it prompted a eulogy of sorts in The New York Times. "The Office of Endangered Species has gone the way of the dusky seaside sparrow and the Sampson's pearly mussel," the story read. "Like six of the species that it was created to protect in 1973, it has become extinct."

When Smith was hired, only nine years earlier, "It still felt very, very new."

"The agency was just getting hiring people, getting staffed up, trying to figure out what to do with this amazing new piece of legislation," she says. "So it was it was a pretty exciting time."

One of the early decisions involved the critically endangered California condor, whose numbers had dwindled to 23 by 1982. Biologists debated if they should they watch the condors go extinct or bring those final birds into captivity and try to breed them. If they did, what would be the likelihood of success?

High, it turned out. "They're out sailing around in California again. They're out sailing around the Grand Canyon. And I think anyone who's seen one — the day I saw one sail over the Grand Canyon, I was like, 'Oh my God! That was all worth it.'"

Smith later transferred to Alaska, where she led the listing for the polar bear, the first animal to be listed as endangered because of climate change.

"That is a whole new era of challenge for the agency. I think it means a whole lot more species are going to be impacted," she says. "It means that you've got to make decisions much quicker because of the pace that the threat is occurring."

Smith hopes there is still some resiliency in the natural systems, "like during COVID when everybody sort of stopped, hit the pause button for a while, and all the air cleaned up."

"People were very worried that we would never be able to do anything for the condor," she says. "Certainly it still requires a lot of protection and a lot of help, but it's still out there. ... If you want to be in the conservation business, you have to hang on to hope."

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

Marc Imlay studies mollusks. He is a malacologist who began working at the Office in 1971, before the current Endangered Species Act was passed. He was focused on freshwater mussels — which, it turns

out, is one of the most critically endangered groups of organisms in the country.

One of their biggest threats was dams. Imlay surreptitiously stopped TVA and the Army Corps of Engineers from building eight of them.

"I decided that they destroyed a lot of habitat, and I would call this guy with the Sierra Club in Missouri and say, 'Did you know there's an endangered mussel there?'" It worked. The dam was stopped.

Though the Endangered Species Act prohibits the federal government from doing anything that would harm an endangered species, Imlay says that if he wanted to keep his job, he sometimes had to work around the bureaucracy.

"That's how I did it. Secretively," he says. "Oops."

But many times in his career, he has found solutions that satisfied everyone. "Time and time again, you can work with a developer. Identify high quality land. Leave that alone. So you put the housing where you protect the existing natural areas."

"I tell young people, I've accomplished Mission: Impossible at least a third of the time in my life."

THE BOSS

John Spinks was an early chief of the Office of Endangered Species. He had the unenviable task of managing his band of misfit biologists.

"People who really put their heart and soul into those kind of specific studies are special," he says. "I mean, they bleed for their species. And I was just extremely fortunate to have that group of talented people. And my main job was to stay out of the way and let them do their job."

Spinks was apparently aware of the propensity for some of his staff to make end runs around the bureaucracy. At one point there was a particular listing that was being blocked by Interior Department attorneys.

"I wrote a memorandum to someone above me in the agency. And for some reason, that memorandum got leaked to The Washington Post. God only knows how that happened."

The leak "caused all hell to break loose."

"This memorandum clearly showed the solicitor's office as being a deliberate roadblock that kept species from being listed. ... And of course, we were as clean as the driven snow. There was nothing that would ever come back to us. That was many years ago, but I still think about that with great satisfaction."

A US delegation to meet with Mexican government for talks on the surge of migrants at border

MEXICO CITY (AP) — A top U.S. delegation is to meet with Mexico's president Wednesday in what many see as a bid to get Mexico to do more to stem a surge of migrants reaching the U.S. southwestern border.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has said he is willing to help, but also says he wants to see progress in U.S. relations with Cuba and Venezuela, two of the top senders of migrants, and more development aid for the region.

Both sides face strong pressure to reach an agreement after past steps like limiting direct travel into Mexico or deporting some migrants failed to stop the influx. This month, as many as 10,000 migrants were arrested daily at the southwest U.S. border.

The U.S. has struggled to process thousands of migrants at the border, or house them once they reach northern cities. Mexican industries were stung last week when the U.S. briefly closed two vital Texas railway crossings, arguing border patrol agents had to be reassigned to deal with the surge.

Another non-rail border crossing remained closed in Lukeville, Arizona, and operations were partially suspended in San Diego and Nogales, Arizona. U.S. officials said those closures were done to reassign officials to help with processing migrants.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken left open the possibility those crossing could be reopened if Mexico provides more help.

"Secretary Blinken will discuss unprecedented irregular migration in the Western Hemisphere and identify ways Mexico and the United States will address border security challenges, including actions to enable the reopening of key ports of entry across our shared border," his office said in a statement prior

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 47 of 72

to Wednesday's meeting.

Mexico already has assigned over 32,000 military troops and National Guard officers — about 11% of its total forces — to enforce immigration laws, and the National Guard now detains far more migrants than criminals.

But the shortcomings of that approach were on display Tuesday, when National Guard officers made no attempt to stop a caravan of about 6,000 migrants, many from Central America and Venezuela, when they walked through Mexico's main inland immigration inspection point in southern Chiapas state, near the Guatemala border.

In the past, Mexico has let such caravans go through, trusting that they would tire themselves out walking along the highway. No caravan has ever walked the 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) to the U.S. border.

But wearing them out — by obliging Venezuelans and others to hike through the jungle-clad Darien Gap, or corralling migrants off passenger buses in Mexico — no longer works.

Many have simply found other ways. So many migrants have been hopping freight trains through Mexico that one of the country's two major railroad companies was forced to suspend trains in September because of safety concerns.

Actual police raids to pull migrants off railway cars — the kind of action Mexico took a decade ago — might be one thing the American delegation would like to see.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and homeland security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall will also be in on the meeting.

One thing the U.S. has already done is show that one country's problems on the border quickly become both countries' problems. The Texas railway closures put a chokehold on freight moving from Mexico to the U.S., as well as grain needed to feed Mexican livestock moving south.

López Obrador confirmed last week that U.S. officials want Mexico to do more to block migrants at its southern border with Guatemala, or make it more difficult to move across Mexico by train or in trucks or buses, a policy known as "contention."

But the president said that in exchange he wanted the United States to send more development aid to migrants' home countries, and to reduce or eliminate sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela.

"We are going to help, as we always do," López Obrador said. "Mexico is helping reach agreements with other countries, in this case Venezuela."

"We also want something done about the (U.S.) differences with Cuba," López Obrador said. "We have already proposed to President (Joe) Biden that a U.S.-Cuba bilateral dialogue be opened."

"That is what we are going to discuss, it is not just contention," he said.

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

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.

Pistons lose NBA single-season record 27 straight games, falling to Nets 118-112

By LARRY LAGE AP Sports Writer

DETROIT (AP) — The Detroit Pistons have made NBA history.

Detroit became the league's first team to lose 27 straight games in a season, falling 118-112 to the Brooklyn Nets on Tuesday night.

"Is it heavy? Yeah, I would imagine for everybody it is," said Pistons first-year coach Monty Williams, a former NBA coach of the year. "Nobody wants this kind of thing attached to them.

"I was brought in here to change this thing. It's probably the most on me than anybody. Players are playing their hearts out. I got to get them in a position where they don't feel tight or heavy."

The Nets beat the Pistons on Saturday in Brooklyn, handing them their 26th consecutive defeat to match the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers for the most losses in a row within one

season.

Detroit no longer shares the unwanted mark.

Next up is the overall record of 28 straight losses, set by the Philadelphia 76ers from late in the 2014-15 season through early 2015-16.

At least matching the record seems likely with a game Thursday night against the NBA-leading Boston Celtics on the road.

The game against Brooklyn, like the season, started with some hope.

Detroit led 9-1 and had a 14-point lead in the first quarter before poor shooting, defense coupled with turnovers paved the way for Brooklyn to extend the Motor City's misery.

The Nets outscored the Pistons by 13 in the second quarter to lead 61-54 at halftime.

Cade Cunningham scored 18 of his 41 points in the third quarter and made a 3-pointer early in the fourth to give Detroit a 97-92 lead.

Just as fans who nearly filled Little Caesars Arena started cheering with passion heard at a playoff game, the Nets went on a 13-0 run to take the lead for good.

"I've been through tough playoff losses, and this is relative to that," said Williams, who led Phoenix and New Orleans to postseason appearances. "When you lose a playoff game, when you get eliminated, this kind of feels like that."

Cunningham did his part to give the team a shot to finally win, but he didn't have much help and even he had a turnover late in the game that appeared to be unforced.

The No. 1 pick overall from the 2021 NBA draft had a message for his teammates in the locker room after the latest loss.

"Don't jump off the boat," he said. "We've got to stay together. Right now is the easiest time to stand off and be on your own, but we need to continue to lean on each other and continue to push each other, and hold each other accountable more than ever now."

Bojan Bogdanovic did score 23 points before fouling out and after leaving Cam Johnson wide open for a 3-pointer that gave Brooklyn a six-point lead with 1:40 to go.

"We had a few breakdowns," Williams said. "It just cost us."

Jaden Ivey, the No. 5 pick overall last year, missed 9 of 12 shots as the Nets backed off him and welcomed the guard to shoot.

In the final minute, fed-up fans started to chant, "Sell the team! Sell the team!" though Pistons owner Tom Gores was not in the building to hear it.

Gores recently spoke with reporters remotely, and passed along his apologies to the fans for the disappointing season while standing by Williams and general manager Troy Weaver.

"Change is coming," he said. "I'm just saying in terms of Monty, Troy, they'll be in place."

Migrant caravan slogs on through southern Mexico with no expectations from a US-Mexico meeting

By EDGAR H. CLEMENTE Associated Press

HUIXTLA, Mexico (AP) — Under a beating sun, thousands of migrants in a caravan continued to trudge through southern Mexico on Tuesday, with some saying they expect nothing good from an upcoming meeting this week between American and Mexican officials about the migrant surge at the U.S. border.

The migrants passed by Mexico's main inland immigration inspection point outside the town of Huixtla, in southern Chiapas state. National Guard officers there made no attempt to stop the estimated 6,000 members of the caravan.

The migrants were trying to make it to the next town, Villa Comaltitlan, about 11 miles (17 kilometers) northwest of Huixtla. In the past, Mexico has let migrants go through, trusting that they would tire themselves out walking along the highway. No migrant caravan has ever walked the 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) to the U.S. border.

U.S. officials are expected to press Mexico to stop more migrants at a meeting scheduled for Wednesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 49 of 72

The meeting “will be between fools and fools, who want to use women and children as trading pieces,” said migrant activist Luis García Villagrán, one of the organizers of the caravan. “We are not trading pieces for any politician.”

“What Mexico wants is the money, the money to detain and deport migrants,” Villagrán said.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador confirmed last week that U.S. officials want Mexico to do more to block migrants at its southern border with Guatemala, or make it more difficult to move across Mexico by train or in trucks or buses — a policy known as “contention.”

But the president said that in exchange, he wants the United States to send more development aid to migrants’ home countries, and to reduce or eliminate sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela, noting “that is what we are going to discuss, it is not just contention.”

Some on the caravan, like Norbey Díaz Rios, a migrant from Colombia, said turning back was not an option. Díaz Rios, 46, said he left his home because of threats from criminal gangs, and plans to ask for asylum in the U.S.

“You know that you are walking for a purpose, with a goal in mind, but it is unsure if you are going to make it, or what obstacles you will find along the way,” said Díaz Rios. “I can’t return to Colombia.”

“They should give me a chance to remain in a country where I can get papers and work and provide for my family,” he added.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and White House homeland security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall will travel to Mexico City for the talks.

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

The Mexican government felt pressure to address that problem, 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 U.S., as well as grain needed to feed Mexican livestock moving south. The rail crossings have since been reopened, but the message appeared clear.

The caravan started out on Christmas Eve from the city of Tapachula, near the border with Guatemala, and migrants spent Christmas night sleeping on scraps of cardboard or plastic stretched out under awnings, in tents, or on the bare ground.

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

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.

Israeli military says Gaza ground offensive has expanded into urban refugee camps

By NAJIB JOBAIN, WAFAA SHURAFU and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli forces on Tuesday expanded their ground offensive into urban refugee camps in central Gaza after bombarding the crowded Palestinian communities and ordering residents to evacuate. Gaza’s main telecom provider announced another “complete interruption” of services in the besieged territory.

The military’s announcement of the new battle zone threatens further destruction in a war that Israel says will last for “many months” as it vows to crush the ruling Hamas militant group after its Oct. 7 attack. Israeli forces have been engaged in heavy urban fighting in northern Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, driving Palestinians into ever-smaller areas in search of refuge.

The U.S. said Israel’s minister for strategic affairs, Ron Dermer, was meeting with Secretary of State

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 50 of 72

Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan to discuss topics including transitioning to a different phase of the war to maximize focus on high-value Hamas targets, improving the humanitarian situation, and planning for governance and security in Gaza after the war.

Despite U.S. calls for Israel to curb civilian casualties and international pressure for a cease-fire, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the military was deepening the fighting.

"We say to the Hamas terrorists: We see you and we will get to you," Netanyahu said.

Israel's offensive is one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than 20,900 Palestinians, two-thirds women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, whose count doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants. The agency said 240 people were killed over the past 24 hours.

The U.N. human rights office said the continued bombardment of middle Gaza had claimed more than 100 Palestinian lives since Christmas Eve. The office noted that Israel had ordered some residents to move there.

Israel said it would no longer grant automatic visas to U.N. employees and accused the world body of being "complicit partners" in Hamas' tactics. Government spokesman Eylon Levy said Israel would consider visa requests case by case. That could further limit aid efforts in Gaza.

Residents of central Gaza described shelling and airstrikes shaking the Nuseirat, Maghazi and Bureij camps. The built-up towns hold Palestinians driven from their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 war, along with their descendants.

"The bombing was very intense," Radwan Abu Sheitta said by phone from Bureij.

The Israeli military ordered residents to evacuate a belt of territory the width of central Gaza, urging them to move to nearby Deir al-Balah. The U.N. humanitarian office said the area ordered evacuated was home to nearly 90,000 people before the war and now shelters more than 61,000 displaced people, mostly from the north.

The military later said it was operating in Bureij and asserted that it had located a Hamas training camp.

The telecom outage announced by Paltel follows similar outages through much of the war. NetBlocks, a group that tracks internet outages, confirmed that network connectivity in Gaza was disrupted again and "likely to leave most residents offline."

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan said several countries had sent proposals to resolve the conflict following news of an Egyptian proposal that would include a transitional Palestinian government in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. He did not offer details of the proposals.

REGIONAL SPILLOVER

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Israel faces a "multi-arena war" on seven fronts — Gaza and the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Iran. "We have responded and acted already on six of these," he told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

Iranian-backed militia groups around the region have stepped up attacks in support of Hamas.

Iranian-backed militias in Iraq carried out a drone strike on a U.S. base in Irbil on Monday, wounding three American service members, according to U.S. officials. In response, U.S. warplanes hit three locations in Iraq connected to a main militia, Kataib Hezbollah.

Almost daily, Hezbollah and Israel exchange missiles, airstrikes and shelling across the Israeli-Lebanese border. On Tuesday, Israel's military said Hezbollah struck a Greek Orthodox church in northern Israel with a missile, wounding two Israeli Christians, and fired again on arriving soldiers, wounding nine.

"Hezbollah is risking the stability of the region for the sake of Hamas," said Israel's military spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari.

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. The Israeli military said a fighter jet on Tuesday shot down a "hostile aerial target" above the Red Sea that the military asserted was on its way to Israeli territory.

The USS Laboon, a Navy destroyer, and American fighter jets shot down 12 drones, three anti-ship ballistic missiles and two land-attack cruise missiles in the southern Red Sea that were fired by the Yemen-based

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 51 of 72

Houthis over a 10-hour period Tuesday, according to the Pentagon. U.S. Central Command said there was no damage to ships in the area or reported injuries.

A MASS GRAVE

More than 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been driven from their homes. U.N. officials say a quarter of the territory's population is starving under Israel's siege, which allows in a trickle of food, water, fuel, medicine and other supplies. Last week, the U.N. Security Council called for immediately speeding up aid deliveries, but there has been little sign of change.

In an area Israel had declared a safe zone, a strike hit a home in Mawasi, a rural area in the southern province of Khan Younis. One woman was killed and at least eight were wounded, according to a cameraman working for The Associated Press at the nearby hospital.

In response, Israel's military said that it wouldn't refrain from operating in safe zones, "if it identifies terrorist organization activity threatening the security of Israel."

Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took about 240 others hostage. Israel aims to free the more than 100 hostages who remain in captivity.

President Joe Biden and Qatar's ruling emir, Amir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, spoke on Tuesday, discussing the urgent effort to secure the release of all remaining hostages held by Hamas, including American citizens. The leaders also discussed the ongoing efforts to facilitate increased and sustained flows of life-saving access to humanitarian aid into Gaza.

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

At the Kerem Shalom border crossing, U.N. and Gazan medical workers unloaded a truck carrying about 80 unidentified bodies that had been held by Israeli forces in northern Gaza. They were buried in a mass grave.

Medical workers called the odors unbearable. "We cannot open this container in a neighborhood where people live," Dr. Marwan al-Hams, health emergency committee director in Rafah, told the AP. He said the health and justice ministries would investigate the bodies for possible "war crimes."

The Israeli military announced the deaths of two more soldiers, bringing the total killed since the ground offensive began to 161.

Police investigating incidents involving Colorado justices after Trump removed from state's ballot

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Police said Tuesday they are investigating incidents directed at Colorado Supreme Court justices and providing extra patrols around their homes in Denver following the court's decision to remove former President Donald Trump from the state's presidential primary ballot.

The Denver Police Department declined in an email to provide details about its investigations, citing safety and privacy considerations and because they are ongoing.

The department "is currently investigating incidents directed at Colorado Supreme Court justices and will continue working with our local, state and federal law enforcement partners to thoroughly investigate any reports of threats or harassment," the email said.

Officers responded to the home of one justice on Thursday evening, but police said it appeared to be a "hoax report." That case is also still being investigated police said.

The FBI said it is working with local law enforcement on the matter.

"We will vigorously pursue investigations of any threat or use of violence committed by someone who uses extremist views to justify their actions regardless of motivation," a spokesperson for the Denver's FBI office, Vikki Migoya, said in a statement.

In a 4-3 decision last week, Colorado's highest court overturned a ruling from a district court judge who found that Trump incited an insurrection for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, but had said he could not be barred from the ballot because it was unclear that U.S. Constitution's insurrection clause

was intended to cover the presidency.

The state's highest court didn't agree, siding with attorneys for six Colorado Republican and unaffiliated voters who argued that it was nonsensical to imagine that the framers of the amendment, fearful of former confederates returning to power, would bar them from low-level offices but not the highest one in the land.

The court stayed its decision until Jan. 4, or until the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the case. Colorado officials say the issue must be settled by Jan. 5, the deadline for the state to print its presidential primary ballots.

Mexico's army-run airline takes to the skies, with first flight to the resort of Tulum

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico launched its army-run airline Tuesday, when the first Mexicana airlines flight took off from Mexico City bound for the Caribbean resort of Tulum.

It was another sign of the outsized role that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has given to Mexico's armed forces. The airline's military-run holding company now also operates about a dozen airports, hotels, trains, the country's customs service and tourist parks.

Gen. Luís Cresencio Sandoval, Mexico's defense secretary, said that having all those diverse businesses run by the military was "common in developed countries."

In fact, only a few countries like Cuba, Sri Lanka, Argentina and Colombia have military-run airlines. They are mostly small carriers with a handful of prop planes that operate mostly on under-served or remote domestic routes.

But the Mexicana airline plans to carry tourists from Mexican cities to resorts like Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, Zihuatanejo, Acapulco and Mazatlan. Flights appear to be scheduled every three or four days, largely on weekends.

The carrier hopes to compete mainly on price: the first 425 tickets sold offered prices of about \$92 for the flight from Mexico City to Tulum, which the government claimed was about one-third cheaper than commercial airlines.

However, Mexicana's first flight didn't go according to plan. The company said Flight MXA 1788 had to be re-routed to the colonial city of Merida because of poor weather conditions in Tulum. After a wait, it finally took off again and arrived in Tulum about five hours after it took off from Mexico City, about double the usual travel time.

Mexicana also hopes to fly to 16 small regional airports that currently have no flights or very few. For those worried about being told to "Fasten your seatbelt, and that's an order," the cabin crew on the Mexicana flight appeared to be civilians. In Mexico, the air force is a wing of the army.

Sandoval said the airline began operations with three Boeing jets and two smaller leased Embraer planes, and hopes to lease or acquire five more jets in early 2024.

López Obrador called the takeoff of the first Boeing 737-800 jet "a historic event" and a "new stage," marking the return of the formerly government-run airline Mexicana, which had been privatized, then went bankrupt and finally closed in 2010.

The airline combines Lopez Obrador's reliance on the military — which he claims is the most incorruptible and patriotic arm of the government — and his nostalgia for the state-run companies that dominated Mexico's economy until widespread privatizations were carried out in the 1980s.

López Obrador recalled fondly the days when government-run firms operated everything from oil, gas, electricity and mining, to airlines and telephone service. He bashed the privatizations, which were carried out because Mexico's indebted government could no longer afford to operate the inefficient, state-owned companies.

"They carried out a big fraud," the president said at his daily morning news briefing. "They deceived a lot of people, saying these state-run companies didn't work."

In fact, the state-run companies in Mexico accumulated a well-deserved reputation for inefficiency, poor service, corruption and political control. For example, Mexico's state-run paper distribution company often

refused to sell newsprint to opposition newspapers.

When the national telephone company was owned by the government, customers routinely had to wait years to get a phone line installed, and were required to buy shares in the company in order to eventually get service, problems that rapidly disappeared after it was privatized in 1990.

While unable to restore the government-run companies to their former glory, the administration depicts its efforts to recreate them on a smaller scale as part of a historic battle to return Mexico's economy to a more collectivist past.

"This will be the great legacy of your administration, and will echo throughout eternity," the air traffic controller at Mexico City's Felipe Angeles airport intoned as the first Mexicana flight took off.

López Obrador has also put the military in charge of many of the country's infrastructure building projects, and given it the lead role in domestic law enforcement.

For example, the army built both the Felipe Angeles airport and the one in Tulum.

Apart from boosting traffic at the underused Felipe Angeles airport, the army-run Mexicana apparently will provide flights to feed passengers into the president's Maya Train tourism project. The army is also building that train line, which will connect beach resorts and archaeological sites on the Yucatan Peninsula.

The army, which has no experience running commercial flights, has created a subsidiary to be in charge of Mexicana.

As social media guardrails fade and AI deepfakes go mainstream, experts warn of impact on elections

By ALI SWENSON and CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly three years after rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol, the false election conspiracy theories that drove the violent attack remain prevalent on social media and cable news: suitcases filled with ballots, late-night ballot dumps, dead people voting.

Experts warn it will likely be worse in the coming presidential election contest. The safeguards that attempted to counter the bogus claims the last time are eroding, while the tools and systems that create and spread them are only getting stronger.

Many Americans, egged on by former President Donald Trump, have continued to push the unsupported idea that elections throughout the U.S. can't be trusted. A majority of Republicans (57%) believe Democrat Joe Biden was not legitimately elected president.

Meanwhile, generative artificial intelligence tools have made it far cheaper and easier to spread the kind of misinformation that can mislead voters and potentially influence elections. And social media companies that once invested heavily in correcting the record have shifted their priorities.

"I expect a tsunami of misinformation," said Oren Etzioni, an artificial intelligence expert and professor emeritus at the University of Washington. "I can't prove that. I hope to be proven wrong. But the ingredients are there, and I am completely terrified."

AI DEEPFAKES GO MAINSTREAM

Manipulated images and videos surrounding elections are nothing new, but 2024 will be the first U.S. presidential election in which sophisticated AI tools that can produce convincing fakes in seconds are just a few clicks away.

The fabricated images, videos and audio clips known as deepfakes have started making their way into experimental presidential campaign ads. More sinister versions could easily spread without labels on social media and fool people days before an election, Etzioni said.

"You could see a political candidate like President Biden being rushed to a hospital," he said. "You could see a candidate saying things that he or she never actually said. You could see a run on the banks. You could see bombings and violence that never occurred."

High-tech fakes already have affected elections around the globe, said Larry Norden, senior director of the elections and government program at the Brennan Center for Justice. Just days before Slovakia's recent elections, AI-generated audio recordings impersonated a liberal candidate discussing plans to raise

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 54 of 72

beer prices and rig the election. Fact-checkers scrambled to identify them as false, but they were shared as real across social media regardless.

These tools might also be used to target specific communities and hone misleading messages about voting. That could look like persuasive text messages, false announcements about voting processes shared in different languages on WhatsApp, or bogus websites mocked up to look like official government ones in your area, experts said.

Faced with content that is made to look and sound real, "everything that we've been wired to do through evolution is going to come into play to have us believe in the fabrication rather than the actual reality," said misinformation scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Republicans and Democrats in Congress and the Federal Election Commission are exploring steps to regulate the technology, but they haven't finalized any rules or legislation. That's left states to enact the only restrictions so far on political AI deepfakes.

A handful of states have passed laws requiring deepfakes to be labeled or banning those that misrepresent candidates. Some social media companies, including YouTube and Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, have introduced AI labeling policies. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to consistently catch violators.

SOCIAL MEDIA GUARDRAILS FADE

It was just over a year ago that Elon Musk bought Twitter and began firing its executives, dismantling some of its core features and reshaping the social media platform into what's now known as X.

Since then, he has upended its verification system, leaving public officials vulnerable to impersonators. He has gutted the teams that once fought misinformation on the platform, leaving the community of users to moderate itself. And he has restored the accounts of conspiracy theorists and extremists who were previously banned.

The changes have been applauded by many conservatives who say Twitter's previous moderation attempts amounted to censorship of their views. But pro-democracy advocates argue the takeover has shifted what once was a flawed but useful resource for news and election information into a largely unregulated echo chamber that amplifies hate speech and misinformation.

Twitter used to be one of the "most responsible" platforms, showing a willingness to test features that might reduce misinformation even at the expense of engagement, said Jesse Lehigh, co-founder of Accountable Tech, a nonprofit watchdog group.

"Obviously now they're on the exact other end of the spectrum," he said, adding that he believes the company's changes have given other platforms cover to relax their own policies. X didn't answer emailed questions from The Associated Press, only sending an automated response.

In the run-up to 2024, X, Meta and YouTube have together removed 17 policies that protected against hate and misinformation, according to a report from Free Press, a nonprofit that advocates for civil rights in tech and media.

In June, YouTube announced that while it would still regulate content that misleads about current or upcoming elections, it would stop removing content that falsely claims the 2020 election or other previous U.S. elections were marred by "widespread fraud, errors or glitches." The platform said the policy was an attempt to protect the ability to "openly debate political ideas, even those that are controversial or based on disproven assumptions."

Lehigh said even if tech companies want to steer clear of removing misleading content, "there are plenty of content-neutral ways" platforms can reduce the spread of disinformation, from labeling months-old articles to making it more difficult to share content without reviewing it first.

X, Meta and YouTube also have laid off thousands of employees and contractors since 2020, some of whom have included content moderators.

The shrinking of such teams, which many blame on political pressure, "sets the stage for things to be worse in 2024 than in 2020," said Kate Starbird, a misinformation expert at the University of Washington.

Meta explains on its website that it has some 40,000 people devoted to safety and security and that it

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 55 of 72

maintains “the largest independent fact-checking network of any platform.” It also frequently takes down networks of fake social media accounts that aim to sow discord and distrust.

“No tech company does more or invests more to protect elections online than Meta – not just during election periods but at all times,” the posting says.

Ivy Choi, a YouTube spokesperson, said the platform is “heavily invested” in connecting people to high-quality content on YouTube, including for elections. She pointed to the platform’s recommendation and information panels, which provide users with reliable election news, and said the platform removes content that misleads voters on how to vote or encourages interference in the democratic process.

The rise of TikTok and other, less regulated platforms such as Telegram, Truth Social and Gab, also has created more information silos online where baseless claims can spread. Some apps that are particularly popular among communities of color and immigrants, such as WhatsApp and WeChat, rely on private chats, making it hard for outside groups to see the misinformation that may spread.

“I’m worried that in 2024, we’re going to see similar recycled, ingrained false narratives but more sophisticated tactics,” said Roberta Braga, founder and executive director of the Digital Democracy Institute of the Americas. “But on the positive side, I am hopeful there is more social resilience to those things.”

THE TRUMP FACTOR

Trump’s front-runner status in the Republican presidential primary is top of mind for misinformation researchers who worry that it will exacerbate election misinformation and potentially lead to election vigilantism or violence.

The former president still falsely claims to have won the 2020 election.

“Donald Trump has clearly embraced and fanned the flames of false claims about election fraud in the past,” Starbird said. “We can expect that he may continue to use that to motivate his base.”

Without evidence, Trump has already primed his supporters to expect fraud in the 2024 election, urging them to intervene to “guard the vote” to prevent vote rigging in diverse Democratic cities. Trump has a long history of suggesting elections are rigged if he doesn’t win and did so before voting in 2016 and 2020.

That continued wearing away of voter trust in democracy can lead to violence, said Bret Schafer, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Alliance for Securing Democracy, which tracks misinformation.

“If people don’t ultimately trust information related to an election, democracy just stops working,” he said. “If a misinformation or disinformation campaign is effective enough that a large enough percentage of the American population does not believe that the results reflect what actually happened, then Jan. 6 will probably look like a warm-up act.”

ELECTION OFFICIALS RESPOND

Election officials have spent the years since 2020 preparing for the expected resurgence of election denial narratives. They’ve dispatched teams to explain voting processes, hired outside groups to monitor misinformation as it emerges and beefed up physical protections at vote-counting centers.

In Colorado, Secretary of State Jena Griswold said informative paid social media and TV campaigns that humanize election workers have helped inoculate voters against misinformation.

“This is an uphill battle, but we have to be proactive,” she said. “Misinformation is one of the biggest threats to American democracy we see today.”

Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon’s office is spearheading #TrustedInfo2024, a new online public education effort by the National Association of Secretaries of State to promote election officials as a trusted source of election information in 2024.

His office also is planning meetings with county and city election officials and will update a “Fact and Fiction” information page on its website as false claims emerge. A new law in Minnesota will protect election workers from threats and harassment, bar people from knowingly distributing misinformation ahead of elections and criminalize people who non-consensually share deepfake images to hurt a political candidate or influence an election.

“We hope for the best but plan for the worst through these layers of protections,” Simon said.

In a rural Wisconsin county north of Green Bay, Oconto County Clerk Kim Pytleski has traveled the region giving talks and presentations to small groups about voting and elections to boost voters’ trust. The

county also offers equipment tests in public so residents can observe the process.

"Being able to talk directly with your elections officials makes all the difference," she said. "Being able to see that there are real people behind these processes who are committed to their jobs and want to do good work helps people understand we are here to serve them."

Disney says in lawsuit that DeSantis-appointed government is failing to release public records

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Disney has filed a lawsuit claiming that the oversight government for Walt Disney World, which was taken over by appointees of Gov. Ron DeSantis earlier this year, has failed to release documents and properly preserve records in violation of Florida public records law.

Disney said in the lawsuit filed Friday that the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District, often referred to as CFTOD, has been so slow in fulfilling its public records duties that it has failed to respond completely to a request the company made seven months ago when it paid more than \$2,400 to get emails and text messages belonging to the five district board members appointed by DeSantis.

Disney, DeSantis and the DeSantis appointees already are battling for control of the government in two pending lawsuits in federal and state court.

The public records lawsuit is asking a judge to review any documents that the district claims are exempt from being released, declare that the district is violating state public records law and order the district to release the documents that Disney has requested.

"CFTOD has prevented Disney from discovering the actions of its government through public records requests, in violation of Florida law," said the lawsuit filed in state court in Orlando. "The Court should grant Disney relief."

An email was sent to the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District seeking comment.

The new lawsuit claims that the district is failing to follow public records laws in other ways, such as allowing the DeSantis-appointed board members to use personal email addresses and texts for district business without a process for making sure they are preserved and failing to make sure board members don't auto-delete messages dealing with district business.

The feud between DeSantis and Disney started last year after the company publicly opposed the state's so-called don't say gay law, which bans classroom lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades. The law was championed by DeSantis, who is running for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination. In retaliation, DeSantis and Republican legislators took over the district Disney had controlled for more than five decades and installed five board members loyal to the governor.

Around 50 out of about 370 employees have left the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District since it was taken over in February, raising concerns that decades of institutional knowledge are departing with them, along with a reputation for a well-run government.

Sweden moves a step closer to NATO membership after Turkey's parliamentary committee gives approval

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — The Turkish parliament's foreign affairs committee gave its consent to Sweden's bid to join NATO on Tuesday, drawing the previously nonaligned Nordic country closer to membership in the Western military alliance.

Sweden's accession protocol will now need to be approved in the Turkish parliament's general assembly for the last stage of the legislative process in Turkey. No date has been set.

Turkey, a NATO member, has delayed ratification of Sweden's membership for more than a year, accusing the country of being too lenient toward groups that Ankara regards as threats to its security, including

Kurdish militants and members of a network that Ankara blames for a failed coup in 2016.

The Turkish parliament's foreign affairs committee had begun discussing Sweden's membership in NATO last month. But the meeting was adjourned after legislators from Erdogan's ruling party submitted a motion for a postponement on grounds that some issues needed more clarification and that negotiations with Sweden hadn't "matured" enough.

On Tuesday, the committee resumed its deliberations and a large majority of legislators in the committee voted in favor of Sweden's application to join.

Briefing the committee members before the vote, Deputy Foreign Minister Burak Akcapar cited steps Sweden had taken to meet Turkish demands, including lifting restrictions on defense industry sales and amending anti-terrorism laws in ways that "no one could have imagined five or six years ago."

"It is unrealistic to expect that the Swedish authorities will immediately fulfill all of our demands. This is a process, and this process requires long-term and consistent effort," he said, adding that Turkey would continue to monitor Sweden's progress.

Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström welcomed the committee's decision on a message posted on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter.

"The next step is for parliament to vote on the matter. We look forward to becoming a member of NATO," he tweeted.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also welcomed the development, saying that he counts on Turkey and Hungary "to now complete their ratifications as soon as possible. Sweden's membership will make NATO stronger."

Hungary has also stalled Sweden's bid, alleging that Swedish politicians have told "blatant lies" about the condition of Hungary's democracy. Hungary hasn't announced when the country's ratification may occur.

Earlier this month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had openly linked ratification of Sweden's NATO membership to the U.S. Congress' approval of a Turkish request to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter jets and kits to modernize Turkey's existing fleet.

Erdogan also called on Canada and other NATO allies to lift arms embargoes imposed on Turkey.

The White House has backed the Turkish F-16 request but there is opposition in Congress to military sales to Turkey.

Sweden and Finland abandoned their traditional positions of military nonalignment to seek protection under NATO's security umbrella, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Finland joined the alliance in April, becoming NATO's 31st member, after Turkey's parliament ratified the Nordic country's bid.

NATO requires the unanimous approval of all existing members to expand, and Turkey and Hungary are the only countries that have been holding out.

The delays have frustrated other NATO allies who were swift to accept Sweden and Finland into the alliance.

Ukraine damages a Russian landing ship in the Black Sea after battlefield disappointments

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian warplanes damaged a Russian ship moored in the Black Sea off Crimea, both countries said Tuesday, bolstering Ukrainian morale after battlefield disappointments and doubts about the future of Western aid.

The planes fired guided missiles at the landing ship Novocherkassk, which is moored at a base in the city of Feodosia, Russia's Defense Ministry said. Video on Russian and Ukrainian social media showed an explosion in the port.

Ukrainian authorities claimed the ship was destroyed. They said it was likely carrying ammunition and possibly drones.

The 360-foot Novocherkassk can carry 10 tanks and 225 sailors.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 58 of 72

"We saw how powerful the blast and detonation were. It's extremely difficult for a ship to survive something like that," Ukrainian air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said on U.S.-backed Radio Liberty.

"The Russian fleet has become smaller," Ukrainian air force Cmdr. Mykola Oleschuk said in a mocking message on the social media app Telegram. He urged Russians to leave Crimea "while it's not too late."

Over the last few months, Ukrainian forces have conducted a string of attacks around Crimea, a Black Sea peninsula invaded and illegally annexed by Russia in 2014. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy credits those attacks, mostly with naval drones, with allowing Ukraine to restore navigation in the Black Sea and export of millions of tons of grain.

In September, a Ukrainian attack hit the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in the Crimean city of Sevastopol, killing one serviceman. Ukraine launched more missiles against the city the following day.

But despite high hopes for a broader Ukrainian summer counteroffensive, the front line barely moved, and political disputes in allied countries have left billions of dollars of aid in doubt.

This week, President Joe Biden is struggling to secure congressional support for continuing American assistance to Ukraine. Even though he's repeatedly promised that the United States would back Ukraine for "as long as it takes" to defeat the Russian invasion, there's no sign of a bipartisan deal to maintain the flow of supplies as the war approaches its third year.

Showing Ukrainian forces' difficulties on the battlefield, commander-in-chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi said Tuesday that his troops had retreated to the northern outskirts of the city of Marinka.

Russia said Monday that it had taken Marinka, which sits about 20 kilometers (12 miles) west of Donetsk, the largest city in Russian-held territory.

Zaluzhnyi told journalists Tuesday that Ukrainian troops had held Marinka for almost two years but Russians "were destroying it street by street, house by house."

"Our forces prepared a defensive line beyond this settlement. But I can say that this town no longer exists," Zaluzhnyi said. He compared Russian tactics in Marinka to its tactics in Bakhmut, which was reduced to rubble by the time the Russian army captured the city.

Against that backdrop, the attack on the Novochoerkassk offered some hope to Ukraine's allies.

U.K. Defense Secretary Grant Shapps wrote on X that, "This latest destruction of Putin's navy demonstrates that those who believe there's a stalemate in the Ukraine war are wrong!"

"They haven't noticed that over the past 4 months 20% of Russia's Black Sea Fleet has been destroyed," Shapps wrote. "Russia's dominance in the Black Sea is now challenged."

Russia also said Tuesday two Ukrainian fighter jets were destroyed by anti-aircraft fire during the attack. Ihnat, of the Ukrainian air force, denied that.

The Russia-appointed head of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, said one person was killed in Tuesday's attack and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu briefed Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to Russian news agencies that provided no details.

Shoigu touted Russian accomplishments in the war this year, saying, "The main efforts in the outgoing year were focused on achieving the goals of the special military operation. The main one is to disrupt the counteroffensive of the Ukrainian armed forces, loudly announced by Ukraine and its NATO allies. This task has been successfully completed."

Russian authorities use wording "special military operation" for the war it started in Ukraine nearly two years ago.

The Novochoerkassk was damaged in an attack in March 2022, about a month after the war started, but Ihnat said it has been recently used to transport weapons and soldiers to the Zaporizhzhia region, which is partly held by Russian forces.

The Ukrainian air force's Tuesday morning update said that Russia launched 19 drones, mostly against the Odesa and Mykolaiv regions — 13 of which were shot down — over the past night. The remaining drones caused infrastructure damage, but no casualties were reported, according to Ukraine's presidential office.

Biden orders strikes on an Iranian-aligned group after 3 US troops wounded in drone attack in Iraq

By AAMER MADHANI, ZEKE MILLER and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

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

National Security Council spokesperson 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.

Iraqi officials said that U.S. strikes targeting militia sites early Tuesday killed one militant and wounded 18. They came at a time of heightened fears of a regional spillover of the Israel-Hamas war.

Iran announced Monday that an Israeli strike on the outskirts of the Syrian capital of Damascus killed one of its top generals, Seyed Razi Mousavi, who had been a close companion of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former head of Iran's elite Quds Force. Soleimani was slain in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in January 2020.

Iranian officials vowed revenge for the killing of Mousavi, but didn't immediately launch a retaliatory strike. The militia attack Monday in northern Iraq was launched prior to the strike in Syria that killed Mousavi.

Biden, who was spending Christmas at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, was alerted to the attack by White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan shortly after it occurred 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 Irbil.

Sullivan consulted with U.S. 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 wasn't 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, chair 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. 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 more than 100 attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria since the start of the Israel-Hamas war more than two months ago.

In November, 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 the Hamas group, 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 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.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 60 of 72

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.

The clashes put the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in a delicate position. He came to power in 2022 with the backing of a coalition of Iranian-backed parties, some of which are associated with the same militias launching the attacks on U.S. bases.

A group of Iranian-backed militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces were key in the fight against Islamic State militants after the extremist group overran much of Iraq in 2014. The PMF is officially under the command of the Iraqi army, but in practice the militias operate independently.

In a statement Tuesday, Sudani condemned both the militia attack in Irbil and the U.S. response.

Attacks on "foreign diplomatic mission headquarters and sites hosting military advisers from friendly nations ... infringe upon Iraq's sovereignty and are deemed unacceptable under any circumstances," the statement said.

However, it added that the retaliatory strikes by the U.S. on "Iraqi military sites" — referring to the militia — "constitute a clear hostile act." Sudani said some of those injured in the strikes were civilians.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene targeted by failed Christmas swatting attempt

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

Republican U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene was the target of a swatting attempt at her Georgia residence on Christmas morning, the congresswoman and local police said, marking the latest instance of someone calling in a fake emergency to draw armed officers or SWAT teams to her home.

The Rome Police Department quickly verified that the call was a hoax and did not send officers to the house, department spokesperson Kelly Madden said.

"I was just swatted. This is like the 8th time. On Christmas with my family here. My local police are the GREATEST and shouldn't have to deal with this," Greene wrote in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline just before 11 a.m. Monday, claiming that he had shot his girlfriend at Greene's home and was going to kill himself next, Madden said. The call was quickly transferred to police when suicide hotline responders recognized the Georgia congresswoman's address.

The department said it contacted Greene's private security detail to confirm she was safe and that there was no emergency at her residence. The call was then determined to be a swatting attempt so the police response was canceled en route, Madden explained.

"We determined before our personnel could get to her location that there was no emergency and there was no reason to respond," she said. "Her security detail had it all under control, and there actually was nothing going on."

The congresswoman, who represents the cities of Rome, Dalton and Calhoun in northwest Georgia, spent her first term stripped of committee assignments by the former House Democratic majority over racist comments, her embrace of conspiracy theories and her past endorsement of violence against Democratic officials. She has since gained more influence under the House's current Republican leadership and continues to be a firebrand for the far-right.

Greene's statement that she has been the target of roughly eight swatting attempts is accurate, Madden said. Past calls claimed that dead bodies had been found in the bathtub and in other areas of her home, which is located about 70 miles (113 kilometers) northwest of Atlanta. Police also responded last year to false reports of shootings outside her residence.

The department said it sent officers to the house in response to those prior incidents but has since formed a close working relationship with Greene's security detail, which allows officers to better assess the threat level. The criminal investigations division is working to identify Monday's caller and build a case,

Madden said.

Another New York man was sentenced in August to three months in prison for making threatening phone calls to Greene's office in Washington, D.C.

Republican U.S. Rep. Brandon Williams said in a post on X that he was also targeted by a swatting attempt on Christmas Day. The Cayuga County Sheriff's office said it received a false report of a shooting at the congressman's home in central New York and sent officers to confirm that there was no present danger. Sheriff Brian Schenck did not immediately respond to phone messages seeking further details.

"Our home was swatted this afternoon," Williams wrote. "Thanks to the Deputies and Troopers who contacted me before arriving. They left with homemade cookies and spiced nuts! Merry Christmas everyone!"

Tis the season for giving: A guide for how to give, even a little

By THALIA BEATY Associated Press

Christmas is over, but giving season for nonprofits is just starting to peak.

The end of the calendar year is when nonprofits make appeals far and wide to attract donors — in part because of holiday traditions or, for some, tax advantages. Nonprofits get about 30% of their annual donations in December — including 10% in the final three days of the year — according to marketing agency Nonprofits Source.

"This is one of the busiest times of the year for us as we assist donors with their year-end giving," said Erin Musgrave, a spokesperson for the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

Many potential donors don't realize how much nonprofits value even small gifts, especially local organizations that meet community needs. And nonprofits and industry groups warn that donations are down this year, so gifts right now could help them a lot.

Only 11% of Americans itemize their taxes, which allows them to claim significant tax deductions for charitable donations. That means most Americans don't give in December for tax reasons.

"They're thinking about the organization in their community that's having an impact and digging deep and giving," said Chuck Collins, director of the Program on Inequality and the Common Good at the Institute for Policy Studies.

As you watch commercial appeals and sort through donation requests, here are some things to consider:
WHERE SHOULD I DONATE?

Experienced donors often have a short list of criteria they use to help select nonprofits to support. It could be organizations that serve the area where they live or specific causes or issues with which they have a personal connection.

A question to ask yourself is: "What are the issues or communities that are important to me and where do I want to make a difference?"

A great way to find out about organizations in your area is to ask your friends, coworkers and neighbors. They may have interacted directly with a nonprofit that supports after-school programs, sends companions to elderly residents, advocates around traffic safety or supports local artists. For any topic that is important to you, an organization in your area is likely working on it.

Another potential consideration is check if your employer will match donations to the nonprofit you want to support. If so, your donation could go even further.

If you feel burdened by all the urgent appeals everywhere from the checkout line to the mail or online, one tactic is to make a budget and set aside time to give to organizations important to you. Be realistic, make a plan and then, set aside the guilt.

DO I HAVE TO GIVE NOW? I HAVE LOTS OF EXPENSES.

No, simply put.

First, there's no obligation to give to nonprofits. Many people make a difference in their communities — donating blood, volunteering with their fire department, caring for neighbors and myriad other ways.

Second, many nonprofits actually prefer for donors to set up automatic monthly donations, even in very small amounts, rather than giving a lump sum at the end of the year. The automatic donation from your

bank account or credit card means they can plan for how to spend those funds in advance, which often helps them save money and resources.

HOW DO I EVEN KNOW MY MONEY IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

Some donors say they want their dollars to go directly to the nonprofit's work and not to pay for rent or salaries. This perennial view of wasteful "overhead" spending has some drawbacks, though to be clear, donors have good reason to assess the organizations they support carefully.

But a useful data point comes from the nonprofit ratings agencies themselves. Starting ten years ago, the agencies like BBB Wise Giving Alliance and GuideStar, now part of Candid, teamed up to challenge the idea that the best way to measure the value of a nonprofit was the portion of its funds spent on administrative costs and fundraising.

Michael Thatcher, the president and CEO of Charity Navigator, which overhauled its rating methodology in September, advises that donors consider the organization's impact and whether it's achieving its mission.

"What does the money do? Not where was the money spent?" he told The Associated Press earlier this year.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A LOT TO GIVE?

People who study philanthropy and advise donors like Vanessa Lee, a program officer who coordinates giving circles at the Chicago Foundation for Women, emphasize that giving back is not the purview of the ultrawealthy.

"It's not like you have to have millions of dollars to be a philanthropist," said Lee. "You can do this at \$10 a month."

Additionally, donations from low- and middle-income people, who give smaller amounts, usually go directly to nonprofit organizations, in contrast to many of the wealthiest donors, Collins of the Institute for Policy Studies said. His organization has researched the giving behaviors of billionaires and found that a growing portion of the overall dollars donated each year goes to donor-advised funds and foundations, not directly to nonprofits.

In one recent example, the CEO of Dell Technologies, Michael Dell, donated stocks valued at \$1.7 billion in October and December to the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and to donor-advised funds for future charitable donations. Private foundations are obligated to grant out at least 5% of their assets each year but there is no minimum granting requirement for DAFs.

"The very wealthy are giving it to intermediaries they control and parking the money indefinitely," Collins said. "So there's a more of a tax advantage goal, whereas most people are giving, regardless of the tax consequence."

For a new generation of indie rock acts, country music is king

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Singer-songwriter Mitski's "My Love Mine All Mine," plays out like a whispered dirge.

The song is gothic lounge music for a listener who only has about two minutes to have their heart broken — a silky soft slow burn stacked with a choir, organ, bass and most critically, pedal steel guitar, the kind favored by country and western purists.

In no way does that description scream "mainstream hit," and yet, for 12 weeks, it has been on the Billboard Hot 100, an unusual metric of success for a wholly independent artist. And for 10 weeks, her indie rock-meets-chamber pop-meets-country held the No. 1 position on Billboard's TikTok trending chart.

Mitski is not from the American South, though her discography has long considered small town U.S.A. and she relocated to Nashville a few years ago to mine the geography's humanity. ("Valentine, Texas" from last year's "Laurel Hell" album is an example, but there are many.)

She is, of course, not the first indie artist to explore weeping Americana sounds. Many of the leading acts in contemporary indie rock pull from the South — like Mitski — or hail from there, like soloists Angel Olsen and Waxahatchee, or groups like Plains, Wednesday and two-thirds of the Grammy-nominated band boygenius. Lucinda Williams' "too country for rock 'n' roll, too rock 'n' roll for country" style is a clear

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 63 of 72

predecessor; and every few generations, it seems like a great new band pulls from alt-country's narrative specificity.

A WORLD INTERESTED IN COUNTRY

Interestingly, indie rock's current adoption of country comes at a time of increased global interest in country music. According to the Midyear Music Report for data and analytics platform Luminate, country music experienced its biggest streaming week ever this year, a whopping 2.26 billion.

The genre has historically been enjoyed by English-speaking Americans, but their reporting shows growth in non-Anglophonic territories such as Philippines, Indonesia, India, Brazil, Mexico, Germany, and Vietnam.

In March 2023, Spotify launched a new playlist dedicated to the phenomenon of country-influence in indie rock titled "Indie Twang." It's curated by Carla Turi, Spotify's folk and acoustic music editor, who says the playlist was the result of conversations dating back to summer 2022, when they noticed growing "country influence in indie rock," as she calls it. It's a legacy that extends to the late 2010s when country iconography started cropping up in spaces not-traditionally considered country: everything from Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" to Mitski's 2018 album "Be the Cowboy."

"I also think, through the lockdown we experienced in 2020, listeners sort of emerged craving more organic-sounding music as a way to connect with others," she continued. The indie twang playlist was born out of all of that, amplified by successful indie artists like Ethel Cain and Plains.

"I'm seeing this space as a kind of movement, rather than a trend," she adds. "The sound will always have its peaks and valleys. I do think that the fanbase, overall, continues to grow. I think that this sort of surge of Americana and singer-songwriter music here in the States has shifted listening habits across the entire country."

AN ALTERNATIVE STATE OF MIND

In 2023, these indie artists offer an alternative to the pop-country acts dominating mainstream charts like Morgan Wallen, Luke Combs, and Jason Aldean. The movement is led by female performers, for one, and artists who don't immediately fit into a traditional genre format.

They also offer an alternative to traditional images of indie rock: instead of shying away from their geographic identities — like moving to New York and smoothing out to "y'alls" and "ma'ams" from their speech and music — they're embracing them. Banjos and lap steel abound. Songs about God, rural roads, trucks, guns, humidity, and crickets do, too.

Like Turi, Jess Williamson of Plains sees the connection to country music from a more traditional indie rock audience as a post-COVID-19 lockdown revelation. "We saw people leaving cities, moving to smaller towns and out to the country. We saw people in cities baking bread, starting herb gardens, craving something simple, nostalgic, and that feels good," she said.

"On tour, we covered 'Goodbye Earl' by the Chicks, everyone is singing along, and that's the least cool s--- I can imagine. People are through being cool and are embracing who we are and what we really like. And for a lot of people, that's country music."

She says she had to leave the South in order to return to it and fully appreciate her love for both it and country music, the way "Texans leave and then immediately get a tattoo of the state of Texas," she says, laughing.

KEEPING IT CLOSE TO HOME

Karly Hartzman, frontperson of the Asheville band Wednesday, has never left North Carolina. "I think where we live is inseparable from our music at this point. Of course, we are influenced by country music, but country music sounds and feels the way it does because of the environment it's made in. A great country song feels like where it's from," she says.

Wednesday's 2023 full-length "Rat Saw God" made AP's best albums of the year list for its alt-country rock sensibility, where pulling the listener into the quiet parts of a Carolinas hometown is as much a part of the sonic fabric as lap steel or guitar fuzz or a poetic line sung out of key.

Hartzmann adds that the complications of living in the South are "the stereotypes ... which are founded of course. The politics, the racism, and the inequity," she says. "I'm strongly against leaving this place 'cause I disagree with the politics of those in power, though. It's invigorating cause I feel empowered to

fight against that (expletive), especially for those who are unable to do that themselves here.”

She says the South is her “favorite place on Earth” — beyond its influential music — but the appeal to stick around and create there is economic, too, which may have an impact on indie artists pulling from country sounds.

“I think affordability is a big factor for people trying to make it from their hometowns now instead of moving to big cities,” she says. “The internet makes that possible, obviously.”

It also means, for listeners on an Indie Twang playlist, or those at a rock club in a major city or a honky tonk in a small town, new approaches to familiar Southern sounds are more accessible than ever before.

Americans ramped up spending during the holidays despite some financial anxiety and higher costs

By ANNE D’INNOCENZIO and HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Holiday sales rose this year and spending remained resilient during the shopping season even with Americans wrestling with higher prices in some areas and other financial worries, according to the latest measure.

Holiday sales from the beginning of November through Christmas Eve climbed 3.1%, a slower pace than the 7.6% increase from a year earlier, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks all kinds of payments including cash and debit cards.

This year’s sales are more in line with what is typical during the holiday season, however, after a surge in spending last year during the same period.

“This holiday season, the consumer showed up, spending in a deliberate manner” said Michelle Meyer, Chief Economist, Mastercard Economics Institute. “The economic backdrop remains favorable with healthy job creation and easing inflation pressures, empowering consumers to seek the goods and experiences they value most.”

The number of people seeking unemployment benefits has remained very low by historical standards and employers are still having a hard time finding enough workers.

Still, sales growth was a bit lower than the 3.7% increase Mastercard SpendingPulse had projected in September. The data released Tuesday excludes the automotive industry and is not adjusted for inflation.

Clothing sales rose 2.4%, though jewelry sales fell 2% and electronics dipped roughly 0.4%. Online sales jumped 6.3 % from a year ago and in-person spending rose a modest 2.2%.

Consumer spending accounts for nearly 70% of U.S. economic activity and economists carefully monitor how Americans spend, particularly during the holidays, to gauge how they’re feeling financially.

There had been rising concern leading up to the holiday about the willingness of Americans to spend because of elevated prices for daily necessities at a time that savings have fallen and credit card delinquencies have ticked higher. In response, retailers pushed discounts on holiday merchandise earlier in October compared with a year ago. They also took a cautious approach on how much inventory to order after getting stung with overstuffed warehouses last year.

The latest report on the Federal Reserve’s favored inflation gauge, issued Friday, shows prices are easing. But costs remain still higher at restaurants, car shops, or for things like rent. Americans, however, unexpectedly picked up their spending from October to November as the holiday season kicked off, underscoring their spending power in the face of higher costs.

A broader picture of how Americans spent their money arrives next month when the National Retail Federation, the nation’s largest retail trade group, releases its combined two-month statistics based on November-December sales figures from the Commerce Department.

The trade group expects holiday expects U.S. holiday sales will rise 3% to 4%. That’s lower than last year’s 5.4% growth but again, more consistent with typical holiday spending, which rose 3.6% between 2010 and 2019 before the pandemic skewed numbers.

Industry analysts will dissect the fourth-quarter financial performance from major retailers when they release that data in February.

The big concern: whether shoppers will pull back sharply after they get their bills in January. Nikki Baird, vice president of Aptos, a retail technology firm, noted customers, already weighed down by still high inflation and high interest rates, might pull back more because of the resumption of student loan payments that kicked in Oct. 1.

"I am worried about January," she said. "I can see a bit of a last hurrah."

Baltimore's new approach to police training looks at the effects of trauma, importance of empathy

By LEA SKENE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — A three-minute viral video shows an irate Baltimore police officer berating a teenager because he ignored orders to stop skateboarding and called the officer "dude."

"Obviously your parents don't put a foot in your butt quite enough because you don't understand the meaning of respect," he shouted at the skateboarder, who remained relatively calm.

That 2007 interaction cost the officer his job. But as policing evolves, others are learning from his mistakes.

The Baltimore Police Department recently started requiring its members to complete a program on emotional regulation that uses video as a learning tool and teaches them the basics of brain science by examining the relationship between thoughts, feelings and actions. It's a far cry from traditional police training.

In a city whose embattled police force has long struggled to earn public trust, especially since Freddie Gray's 2015 death from spinal injuries sustained in police custody, department leaders are demonstrating their willingness to think outside the box. The approach could become more common as agencies nationwide dedicate more resources to addressing mental health challenges among officers and preventing negative public interactions.

Baltimore's program is overseen by the anti-violence organization Roca, which works primarily with at-risk youth from the city's poorest and most violent neighborhoods — a population that has more in common with police officers than some might think, according to Roca staff. The organization has provided a curriculum for the eight-hour Rewire4 course, which is now required of all Baltimore police officers. Other law enforcement agencies along the East Coast have also adopted the program, including the Boston Police Department.

"In the streets, we look at some police officers like they're crazy, and they look at us like we're crazy," said James "JT" Timpson, a Baltimore resident who helps lead the Roca Impact Institute. "But we're both experiencing the same thing, which is trauma."

Understanding that common ground helps officers relate to members of the public, said Maj. Derek Loeffler, who oversees training and education for the Baltimore Police Department.

Officers in the course were asked to describe some of their most memorable calls for service. One officer recalled a case where three children were found decapitated, comparing the scene to something out of a horror movie. She said the images will haunt her forever.

"It takes a toll," instructor Lt. Lakishia Tucker told the class. "This stuff ain't normal that we see, that we deal with, that we handle on a daily basis."

Police officers are human underneath the uniform, she said, and experiencing repeated trauma can result in hypervigilant behavior.

Instructors played the 2007 viral video as an example of what happens when a person gets triggered and starts operating in survival mode, which they called "bottom brain" because it activates neurological pathways associated with fear and stress responses. The "top brain," however, is where reason prevails, leading to slower, more careful decision-making.

The training, which was observed by an Associated Press reporter, presented a series of practices rooted in cognitive behavioral therapy, a type of psychotherapy aimed at strengthening healthy neurological pathways in the brain through awareness and repetition. "Flex your thinking" and "Label your feelings" are among the skills presented. Participants can also sign up to receive key lesson reminders via text

messages from Roca staff after the training.

The Rewire4 curriculum is a modified version of what the organization's outreach workers use in their interactions with at-risk youth. Roca, which was founded in Massachusetts over three decades ago, opened an office in Baltimore in 2018. It has since provided hundreds of young men with life-coaching services, job opportunities and behavioral health tools aimed at preventing the rapidly escalating conflicts that so often turn deadly.

Exposing police to similar tools could help reduce police violence, avoid unfavorable headlines and build community trust, organizers said.

"Today is an invitation for you to learn something that can help you personally and professionally," Tucker told the class of officers. "Law enforcement is different today. Every single thing is being recorded."

The increased prevalence of body cameras and cellphones means officers are facing more pressure to stay calm even when they get triggered.

During the class, instructors talked about how to avoid a "bottom brain" reaction, in part by approaching others with empathy.

"We have to learn how to separate the person from the behavior," Tucker said.

That could mean dismantling stereotypes, such as assuming everyone in a certain neighborhood is a drug dealer, said Sgt. Amy Strand, another instructor.

"I like to twist it and say, what about us?" she said, describing how some people assume all police officers are corrupt and aggressive. "We get it dealt to us, so let's not deal it out to everybody else. Give some grace."

The Baltimore Police Department recently started administering the training amid a slew of other reform efforts dating back years. In the wake of Gray's death, Justice Department investigators uncovered a pattern of unconstitutional policing practices, especially against Black residents. That led to a 2017 federal consent decree mandating a series of court-ordered changes.

Soon thereafter, several officers were indicted on federal racketeering charges as the Gun Trace Task Force corruption scandal reverberated through the department, further fracturing public trust. In recent months, the department received criticism after two police shootings in adjacent neighborhoods.

Sgt. Maria Velez, the third instructor, said the career brings its challenges, but she still wants to help people. She asked her colleagues to think about their reasons for joining the police force.

"This is more than just a job. You have a calling for this, something inside of you that makes you want to get up every single day and push through adversity," she said. "Everyone here is still choosing to show up, regardless of what's happened."

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 prison 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 civil rights are being eroded without enough scrutiny from lawmakers or protection by the courts. They say the sweeping arrests of peaceful demonstrators, along with government officials labeling environmental activists extremists, mark a worrying departure for a liberal democracy.

"Legitimate protest is part of what makes any country a safe and civilized place to live," said Jonathon Porritt, an ecologist and former director of Friends of the Earth, who joined a vigil outside London's Central Criminal Court to protest the treatment of demonstrators.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 67 of 72

"The government has made its intent very clear, which is basically to suppress what is legitimate, lawful protest and to use every conceivable mechanism at their disposal to do that."

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 democratic system is underpinned by an "unwritten constitution" — a set of laws, rules, conventions and judicial decisions accumulated over hundreds of years.

The effect of that patchwork 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 turbulent and scandal-tarnished years in office, Boris Johnson pushed prime ministerial power to the limits. More recently, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has asked Parliament to overrule the U.K. Supreme Court, which blocked a plan to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda.

Such actions have piled pressure on Britain's democratic foundations. Critics say cracks have appeared. 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 of the right to protest are environmental activists who have blocked roads and bridges, glued themselves to trains, splattered artworks with paint, sprayed buildings with fake blood, doused athletes in orange powder and more to draw attention to the threats posed by climate change.

The protesters, from groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain, argue that civil disobedience is justified by a climate emergency that threatens humanity's future.

Sunak has called the protesters "selfish" and "ideological zealots," and the British government has responded to the disruption with laws constraining the right to peaceful protest. Legal changes made in 2022 created a statutory offense of "public nuisance," punishable by up to 10 years in prison, and gave police more powers to restrict protests judged to be disruptive.

It was followed by the 2023 Public Order Act, which broadened the definition of "serious disruption," allowing police to search demonstrators for items including locks and glue. It imposes penalties of up to 12 months in prison for protesters who block "key infrastructure," defined widely to include roads and bridges.

The government said it was acting to "protect the law-abiding majority's right to go about their daily lives." But Parliament's cross-party Joint Human Rights Committee warned that the changes would have "a chilling effect on the right to protest."

Days after the new act took effect 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 later released without charge.

In recent months the pace of protests and the scale of arrests has picked up, partly as a result of a legal tweak that criminalized slow walking, a tactic adopted by protesters to block traffic by marching at low speed along roads. Hundreds of Just Stop Oil activists have been detained by police within moments of starting to walk.

Some protesters have received prison sentences that have been called unduly punitive.

Structural engineer Morgan Trowland was one of two Just Stop Oil activists who scaled the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge over the River Thames near London in October 2022, forcing police to shut the highway below for 40 hours. He was sentenced to three years in prison for causing a public nuisance. Judge Shane Collery said the tough sentence was "both for the chaos you caused and to deter others from seeking to copy you."

He was released early on Dec. 13, having spent a total of 14 months in custody.

Ian Fry, the United Nations' rapporteur for climate change and human rights, wrote to the British government in August over the stiff sentences, calling the anti-protest law a "direct attack on the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly." Michel Forst, the U.N. special rapporteur on environmental defenders, in October called the British laws "terrifying."

The Conservative government has dismissed the criticism.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 68 of 72

"Those who break the law should feel the full force of it," Sunak said in response.

Even more worrying, some legal experts say, is the "justice lottery" facing arrested protesters. Half the environmentalists tried by juries have been acquitted after explaining their motivations, including nine women who smashed a bank's windows with hammers and five activists who sprayed the Treasury with fake blood from a firehose.

But at some other trials, judges have banned defendants from mentioning climate change or their reasons for protesting. Several defendants who defied the orders have been jailed for contempt of court.

Tim Crosland, a former government lawyer turned environmental activist, said it's "Kafkaesque if people are on trial and they've got a gag around their mouth."

"That feels like something that happens in Russia or China, not here," he said.

To highlight concern about such judges' orders, retired social worker Trudi Warner sat outside Inner London Crown Court in March holding a sign reading "Jurors – You have an absolute right to acquit a defendant according to your conscience." She was arrested and later informed by the solicitor-general that she would be prosecuted for contempt of court, which is punishable by up to two years in prison. Britain has strict contempt laws intended to protect jurors from interference.

Since then, hundreds more people have held similar signs outside courthouses to protest a charge they say undermines the foundations of trial by jury. Two dozen of the "Defend Our Juries" protesters have been interviewed by police, though so far no one apart from Warner has been charged.

Porritt said the aim is "to bring it to people's attention that there is now this assault on the judicial process and on the rights of jurors to acquit according to their conscience."

IS BREXIT TO BLAME?

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

Britain's 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 and control over U.K. borders, money and laws.

The divorce brought to power Boris Johnson, who vowed to "get Brexit done," but appeared unprepared for the complexities involved in unpicking decades of ties with the EU.

Johnson tested Britain's unwritten constitution. When lawmakers blocked his attempts to leave the bloc without a divorce 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 EU.

He also became enmeshed in personal scandals – from murky funding for his vacations and home decoration to lockdown-breaking parties during the pandemic. He was finally ousted from office by his own fed-up lawmakers in 2022, and later found to have lied to Parliament.

"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 under Johnson's Conservative successors as prime minister. In November, the U.K. Supreme Court ruled that a plan by Sunak to send asylum-seekers on a one-way trip to Rwanda was unlawful because the country is not a safe place for refugees. The government has responded with a plan to pass a law declaring Rwanda safe, regardless of what the court says.

The bill, which is currently before Parliament, has caused consternation among legal experts. Former Solicitor-General Edward Garnier said "changing the law to declare Rwanda a safe haven is rather like a bill which says that Parliament has decided that all dogs are cats."

But Blick says Britain's unwritten constitution means that checks and balances are easier to override than in some other democracies.

"Nothing can actually be deemed clearly to be unconstitutional," he said. "So there's no real blockage (on political power) other than that's where you come back to self-restraint."

A DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT?

In Britain's system, Parliament is meant to act as a bulwark against executive overreach. But in recent

years, the government has given lawmakers less and less time to scrutinize legislation. Because the Conservative government has a large House of Commons majority, it can push bills through after perfunctory time for debate. Many laws are passed in skeleton form, with the detail filled in later through what's known as secondary legislation, which does not receive the full parliamentary scrutiny given to a bill.

It increasingly falls to Parliament's upper chamber, the House of Lords, to scrutinize and try to amend laws that the House of Commons has waved through. The Lords spent months this year trying to water down the anti-protest provisions in the Public Order Act. But ultimately the upper house can't overrule the Commons. And as an unelected assortment of political appointees, a handful of judges and bishops and a smattering of hereditary nobles, it's arguably not the height of 21st-century democracy.

"Of course the Lords is indefensible, but so is the Commons in its current form," William Wallace, a Liberal Democrat member of the Lords, told a recent conference on Britain's constitution. "The Commons has almost given up detailed scrutiny of government bills."

Since Brexit, academics, politicians and others have been debating Britain's democratic deficit in a series of meetings, conferences and reports. Proposed remedies include citizens' assemblies, a new body to oversee the constitution and a higher bar for changing key laws. But none of that is on the immediate horizon — much less a written constitution.

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

Sue Parfitt, an 81-year-old Anglican priest who has been arrested more times than she can remember as part of the group Christian Climate Action, has twice been acquitted of criminal charges. She, too, was interviewed by police after holding a sign outside court reminding jurors of their rights.

"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. ... There is a sense in which going to prison is the ultimate statement you can make."

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.

"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 un-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 70 of 72

der 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.

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

By ANGELA CHARLTON and RAFIQ MAQBOOL Associated Press

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

Upon arrival in Mumbai, the passengers filed out of the airport without speaking publicly about what they'd been through or where they would go next. Carrying backpacks or small suitcases, some wore hoods or masks to conceal their identities.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 71 of 72

A total of 303 passengers had originally boarded the Legend Airlines A340 plane last week in Fujairah airport in the United Arab Emirates for a flight to Managua, Nicaragua. When the plane stopped in France's Vatry Airport in Champagne country for refueling Thursday, it was grounded by police based on an anonymous tip that it could be carrying human trafficking victims.

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.

The plane was authorized to leave Monday and took off for Mumbai. Local French authorities said that 276 of the original 303 passengers boarded the flight to India, and 25 others requested asylum in France.

The asylum-seekers, who include five children, were transferred to a special zone in Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport for processing, 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.

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 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.

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 tweeted its thanks to French officials for ensuring that the Indians could go home.

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.

Today in History: December 27, Soviets forces seize Afghanistan

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 27, the 361st day of 2023. There are four days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 27, 1979, Soviet forces seized control of Afghanistan. President Hafizullah Amin (hah-FEE'-zoo-lah ah-MEEN'), who was overthrown and executed, was replaced by Babrak Karmal.

On this date:

In 1822, scientist Louis Pasteur was born in Dole, France.

In 1831, naturalist Charles Darwin set out on a round-the-world voyage aboard the HMS Beagle.

In 1904, James Barrie's play "Peter Pan: The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up" opened at the Duke of York's Theater in London.

In 1932, New York City's Radio City Music Hall first opened.

In 1945, 28 nations signed an agreement creating the World Bank.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 186 ~ 72 of 72

In 1958, American physicist James Van Allen reported the discovery of a second radiation belt around Earth, in addition to one found earlier in the year.

In 1985, Palestinian gunmen opened fire inside the Rome and Vienna airports in terrorist attacks that killed 19 people; four attackers were slain by police and security personnel. American naturalist Dian Fossey, 53, who had studied gorillas in the wild in Rwanda, was found hacked to death.

In 1995, Israeli jeeps sped out of the West Bank town of Ramallah, capping a seven-week pullout giving Yasser Arafat control over 90 percent of the West Bank's 1 million Palestinian residents and one-third of its land.

In 1999, space shuttle Discovery and its seven-member crew returned to Earth after fixing the Hubble Space Telescope.

In 2001, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld announced that Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners would be held at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In 2002, a defiant North Korea ordered U.N. nuclear inspectors to leave the country and said it would restart a laboratory capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons; the U.N. nuclear watchdog said its inspectors were "staying put" for the time being.

In 2012, retired Army general Norman Schwarzkopf, who as head of United States Central Command led forces against Iraq in the Gulf War, died in Tampa, Florida at age 78.

In 2016, actor Carrie Fisher died in a hospital four days after suffering a medical emergency aboard a flight to Los Angeles; she was 60. (Her mother, Debbie Reynolds, would die the following day.)

In 2021, U.S. health officials cut isolation restrictions for asymptomatic Americans infected with the coronavirus from 10 to five days, and similarly shortened the time that close contacts needed to quarantine;

Today's Birthdays: Actor John Amos is 84. Rock musician Mick Jones (Foreigner) is 79. Singer Tracy Nelson is 79. Actor Gerard Depardieu is 75. Jazz singer-musician T.S. Monk is 74. Singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff is 72. Rock musician David Knopfler (Dire Straits) is 71. Actor Tovah Feldshuh is 70. Journalist-turned-politician Arthur Kent is 70. Actor Maryam D'Abo is 63. Actor Ian Gomez is 59. Actor Theresa Randle is 59. Actor Eva LaRue is 57. Wrestler and actor Bill Goldberg is 57. Bluegrass singer-musician Darrin Vincent (Dailey & Vincent) is 54. Rock musician Guthrie Govan is 52. Musician Matt Slocum is 51. Actor Wilson Cruz is 50. Actor Masi Oka is 49. Actor Aaron Stanford is 47. Actor Emilie de Ravin is 42. Actor Jay Ellis is 42. Christian rock musician James Mead (Kutless) is 41. Rock singer Hayley Williams (Paramore) is 35. Country singer Shay Mooney (Dan & Shay) is 32. Actor Timothee Chalamet is 28.