

Groton Daily Independent

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Tuesday, Jan. 2

Senior Menu: Goulash, green beans, pineapple/mandarin oranges, breadstick.

No School

Basketball Doubleheader at Warner: Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow.

JV/JH boys wrestling at Oakes, 4:30 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Wednesday, Jan. 3

Senior Menu: Beef stew, buttermilk biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbert.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Chicken enchilada pasta, corn

Groton Chamber Meeting, noon, at City Hall

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

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

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

Thursday, Jan. 4

Senior Menu: Chicken cacciatore, rice pilaf, Italian blend vegetables, apple sauce bars, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pop tarts.

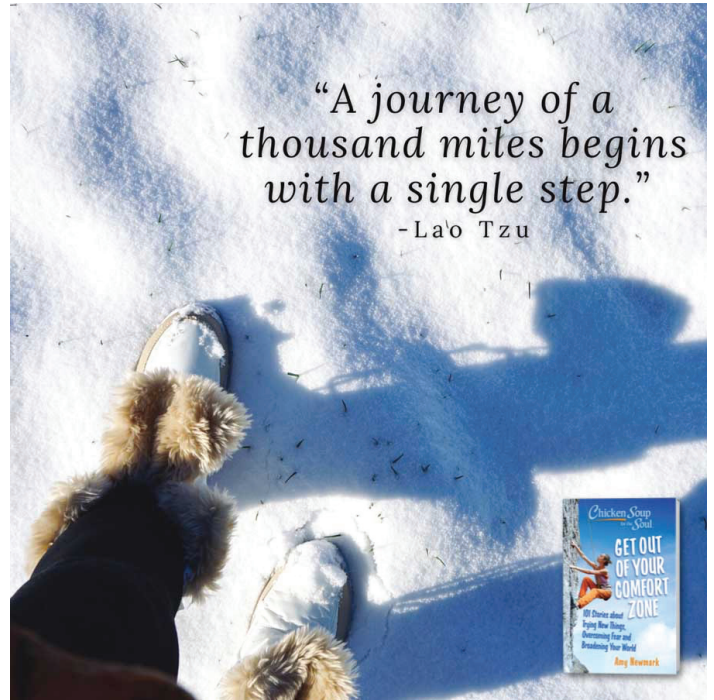
School Lunch: Corn dogs, fries.

Girls Basketball at Clark: (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15, varsity to follow)

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



Girls and Boys Wrestling at Webster, 6 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 5

Senior Menu: Baked macaroni and cheese with kielbasa, vegetable normandy. Blend fruit, whole wheat bread.

GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area
Tigers
GT

**Text Paul at
605-397-7460**

Any interest in any of these basketball games on GDILIVE.COM? They are \$25 each.

~~Warner Boys JV~~
~~Warner Girls JV~~
Clark Girls C
Clark Girls JV
Clark Boys C
Clark Boys JV
Tiospa Zina Girls JV
Tiospa Zina Boys JV
Dakota Valley Boys C
Dakota Valley Boys JV
Dakota Valley Girls JV
Milbank Girls JV
Milbank Boys JV
Great Plains Lutheran Girls C
Great Plains Lutheran Girls JV
Northwestern Girls JV
Northwestern Boys JV

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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A 7.6-magnitude earthquake struck the western coast of central Japan yesterday, collapsing dozens of buildings and forcing thousands of residents to evacuate from their homes. A major tsunami warning—the country's first since a devastating 2011 tsunami that killed 20,000 and triggered a nuclear disaster—was implemented but eventually lifted without incident. Roughly 80 aftershocks hit the country throughout the day.

The No. 1 Michigan Wolverines will face off against the No. 2 Washington Huskies in the college football national championship Monday (7:30 pm ET, ESPN), after each team won their respective semifinal games last night. It marks both teams' first appearance in the title game (and first playoff win) since the playoff format began in 2014.

Israel's Supreme Court struck down a key piece of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's judicial reforms yesterday, ruling 8-7 against an amendment that would have barred the court from overturning laws found to be "extremely unreasonable."

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Cale Yarborough, legendary NASCAR driver, dies at 84. Ana Ofelia Murguía, Mexican actress known for voice acting role in "Coco," dies at 90.

Early version of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse enters public domain, making the "Steamboat Willie" character available for public use.

Taylor Swift passes Elvis Presley for most weeks spent atop the Billboard 200 album chart by a solo artist, as Swift's "1989 (Taylor's Version)" stays at No. 1.

Science & Technology

Sony, Canon, and Nikon to develop digital signatures for photographs, distinguishing shots from AI-generated images.

NASA's Juno spacecraft returns images from Jupiter's moon Io, the most volcanic object in the solar system, after a flyby brings it within 930 miles of the surface.

Study of the Mongolian Arc—a 250-mile-long, 1,200-year-old extension of the Great Wall of China—suggests it was not used as a defensive barrier, may have provided control points for migration.

Business & Markets

Markets close down Friday (S&P 500 -0.3%, Dow -0.1%, Nasdaq -0.6%), but set to begin 2024 trading today near record highs. "Magnificent Seven"—Apple, Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, Nvidia, and Tesla—made up two-thirds of the S&P 500's gains in 2023.

Chinese automaker BYD reports selling more than 526,000 fully electric vehicles in the fourth quarter, potentially overtaking Tesla as world's top EV seller; Tesla to report sales figures today.

Global minimum tax rolled out in certain jurisdictions, including the UK, European Union, and Japan; corporations making more than roughly \$828M will see at least a 15% tax on profits, the US and China have not yet agreed to the deal.

Politics & World Affairs

Russia launches 90 drone strikes across Ukraine, the largest drone attack since the start of the war; follows Ukrainian shelling near the Russian town of Belgorod, which killed at least 21 people,

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) vetoes bill limiting transgender care for minors and prohibiting transgender girls from high school sports.

Denmark's Queen Margrethe II to step down Jan. 14, making way for her son, Crown Prince Frederik, to assume the throne.

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

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Thank you very much for all of the kindness, love, and support shown to us at this difficult time. We are so very grateful to have such a wonderful, caring community.
The Family of Gordon Nelson



December Temperature Records

January 1, 2024
9:42 AM

	<u>Pierre</u>	<u>Aberdeen</u>	<u>Watertown</u>	<u>Mobridge</u>	<u>Sisseton</u>
Average Temperature Rank (Previous Record)	31.5 4th 34.1 (1939)	30.0 2nd 32 (1894)	30.0 1st 28.3 (1939)	30.8 1st 30.2 (1939)	31.4 1st 31 (1939)



December Climate Summary

January 1, 2024
9:42 AM

<u>Aberdeen</u>	<u>Watertown</u>	<u>Mobridge</u>
Average Temperature: 30.0° Normal: 18.3° (Depart from normal: +11.7°)	Average Temperature: 30.0° Normal: 17.8° (Depart from normal: +12.2°)	Average Temperature: 30.8° Normal: 21.8° (Depart from normal: +9.0°)
Max Temperature: 63° 12/6 Min Temperature: 9° on 12/10 & 12/12	Max Temperature: 61° 12/7 Min Temperature: 9° on 12/1	Max Temperature: 61° 12/6 Min Temperature: 6° on 12/12
Moisture 2.18" (Depart from normal: +1.57")	Moisture 1.38" (Depart from normal: +0.70")	Moisture 0.87" (Depart from normal: +0.36")
Snowfall 5.5" (Depart from normal: -2.5")	Snowfall 1.6" (Depart from normal: -7.3")	Snowfall 3.0" (Depart from normal: -2.7")

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That's Life by Tony Bender: Big John's clothes

Editor's note: Tony Bender took the week off for the holidays. Here's one of our favorites.

Things can slide when you're a bachelor. You do dishes when you run out of forks. When the sock drawer is empty, you buy more. You start drinking out of milk cartons. You carry out the trash every February 29. And there's no one to yell at you.

Like I said, things start to slide.

Things started to slide for Big John some time ago.

He didn't expect interference from my mother.

For three Sundays in a row, Mom drove by John's house on her way to church. And every Sunday, she could see the same flannel shirts and trousers dangling from his clothesline. It troubled her. It's something she couldn't help.

There's a gene that women have—The Orderliness Gene—that is multiplied in strength when they become mothers. As a mother of six, Mom has an Orderliness gene so enlarged it is actually visible to the naked eye.

The Orderliness Gene makes women go to extremes—some actually polish the leaves of their houseplants for cripes' sake. But it's no weirder than the Squalor Gene found in the DNA of men. It fades with marriage but mutates unchecked in the body of a bachelor. Thus you have men who believe a living room carpet comprised of Cheetos and cornflakes is a good thing.

Frankly, I'm amazed that my mom could drive by John's laundry even twice without scooping it off the line, sewing on missing buttons and ironing his underwear. She must be getting old.

Anyway, give her credit for holding out for three weeks. As for John, he claims he was just trying to pack as much of that "fresh air softness" into his dungarees as possible. That's his story anyway. I don't figure it would hold up in court, but us journalists are supposed to tell both sides of the story—even if one is a dang big fib.

But back to our story...

As she drove by John's laundry on the third week, Mom couldn't help herself. She stopped the car and began pulling the clothes off the line.

Technically, you might call it theft, but it's a small town. Even if the town cop had driven by, the conversation would have gone something like this:

Cop: "Hey, Jan, watcha doin'?"

Mom: "Stealing Big John's laundry."

Cop: "Awwright, jest don't git caught."

Of course, once she had John's clothes there was the quandary of what to do with them. I suppose she could have saved them for the next city rummage sale and let John buy them back, but she decided to box them up and mail them back.

Our local U. S. Postmaster was only too happy to help. He encouraged Mom to send the package postage due. So she did.

She had to wait three days before John got around to getting his mail. Like I said, things start to slide.

As he walked away from the Post Office, John began opening the box. When he realized what was in it, he did an abrupt U-turn.

"Who sent this?!" he demanded.

But of course, our postal employees are sworn to uphold the confidentiality of their clients. Collusion is their business.

For weeks, John accused pretty much everyone in town of the chicanery before the truth came out.

My little brother, Mike, the one with the Blabbermouth Gene, spilled the beans. But by then the statute of limitations on clothes heisting had expired.

But trouble may again be brewing.

Just last weekend, Mom mentioned to John that his laundry had been out for an extended period again.

Just a friendly warning.

"They're just rags," he protested. "Don't steal them again!"

Then in that laconic Big John way, he added, "That was a good one..."

We the People

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



By David Adler

Mr. Smith Goes to the Supreme Court to Save the Rule of Law

Jack Smith, the special counsel prosecuting former President Donald Trump for his efforts to illegally overturn the 2020 election, made a bold and strategically wise move in a rare request to the U.S. Supreme Court to rule "expeditiously" on Trump's claim of absolute immunity from criminal prosecution. Trump's assertion that he is above the law represents a profound threat to the rule of law.

Smith's extraordinary request to the High Court to grant "certiorari before judgment" represents the best opportunity to preserve Trump's scheduled trial date—March 4, 2024—which his legal team is trying to delay. It also serves the vital interests of the rule of law, American democracy and the public's right to a speedy trial.

Federal District Court Judge Tanya S. Chutkan rejected Trump's assertion of "absolute immunity" from criminal prosecution. She rightly held that "presidents are not kings" and that in the United States, "no man is above the law." As expected, Trump appealed the ruling to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

Trump's appeal to the circuit court carries with it a pause in the pre-trial proceedings, including the process of securing jurors in what will be a historic trial. No American president has been tried on criminal charges. The delay in the proceedings serves the strategic interests of the former president who, obviously, does not want to stand trial. If Trump can delay trial until the late summer months, he may be able to postpone it until after the election since Judge Chutkan would face the difficult question of whether to try Trump in the heat of the campaign, requiring him to be in court for the duration of the trial rather than on the stump. That dilemma is exacerbated by the need, and the right, of the American people to know, before they go to the polls, whether Trump committed a crime against the United States.

Even worse, if Trump were to win the election, he could order the justice department to drop the prosecution, meaning we might never know the full scope of evidence amassed by Smith and the ultimate truth about the allegations against Trump. The "verdict," as it were, would be left to scholars—less satisfactory than the judgment rendered by a jury of Trump's peers.

The United States of America v. Donald Trump is a case of first impression, which means the first time that the High Tribunal is asked to address the question of whether a former president enjoys absolute immunity from prosecution for crimes that he committed while in office. If the Court agrees to hear the case and decides that Trump does not, in fact, enjoy immunity from criminal prosecution, then the trial may proceed. If the Court decides, on the other hand, that the president is immune from criminal prosecution, then the case is dismissed. It is possible that the Court will decide that the case and the issues at the center of it should be fully ventilated by the circuit court, leaving the Supreme Court in the position of ruling after the normal appellate process has played out. All of that would take time, of course, likely too much time.

The Supreme Court should agree to hear this case. It should grant "certiorari before judgment." Rule 11 of the Court's practice emphasizes that this will be granted in cases of "imperative public importance." This is such a case. Indeed, if the question of whether the president is above the law does not present a question of "imperative public importance," then no case meets this stringent requirement.

The Court rarely grants certiorari before judgment. Historically, the two great cases in which the Court has granted the writ were those involving sweeping assertions of presidential power, though neither presented an issue of such soaring importance as a former president claiming he is above the law. In *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer* (1952), better known as the Steel Seizure Case, the Supreme Court rejected

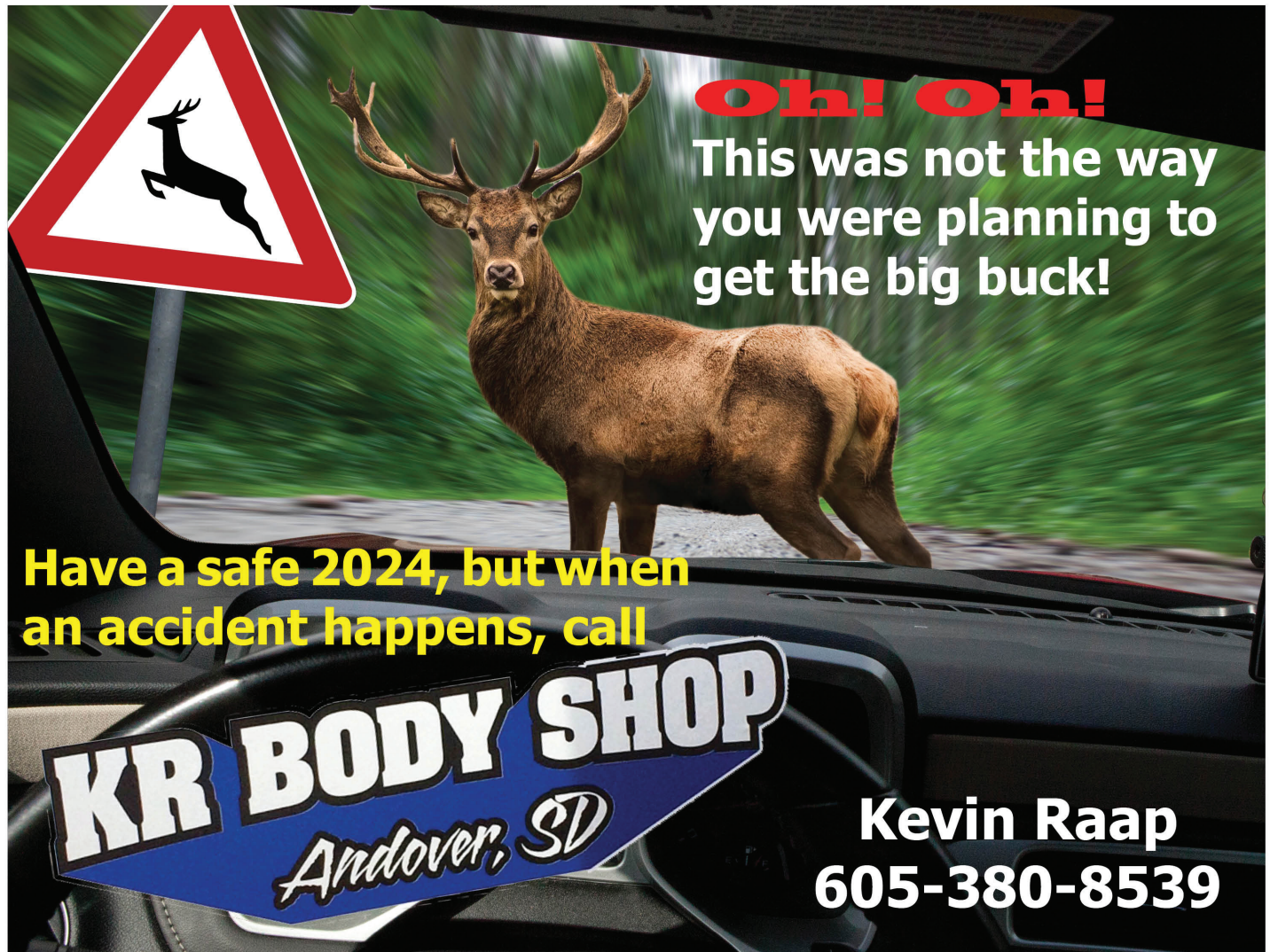
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President Harry Truman's claim of an emergency presidential power to seize the steel mills to keep them open and operating in the face of a nationwide steel strike at a time when the production of steel was vital to America's role in the Korean War and the success of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding Europe after the devastation of World War II. The Court held that no statute and no constitutional provision conferred authority upon the president to seize private property.

More recently, in 1974 in United States v. Nixon—the Watergate Tapes Case—the Court granted certiorari before judgment when President Richard Nixon asserted the power of "absolute executive privilege" to withhold taped conversations in the Oval Office in a criminal case involving Watergate defendants. The Court, in a unanimous 8-0 opinion (Justice William Rehnquist recused himself) authored by Chief Justice Warren Burger, a Nixon appointee, rejected Nixon's unprecedented assertion of power, finding no support in the architecture of the Constitution.

USA v. Trump represents the most profoundly important issue of our time, indeed, of any time in American history. The Court should decide if the president is immune from criminal prosecution and whether any man—or woman—is above the law.



Oh! Oh!
This was not the way
you were planning to
get the big buck!

Have a safe 2024, but when
an accident happens, call

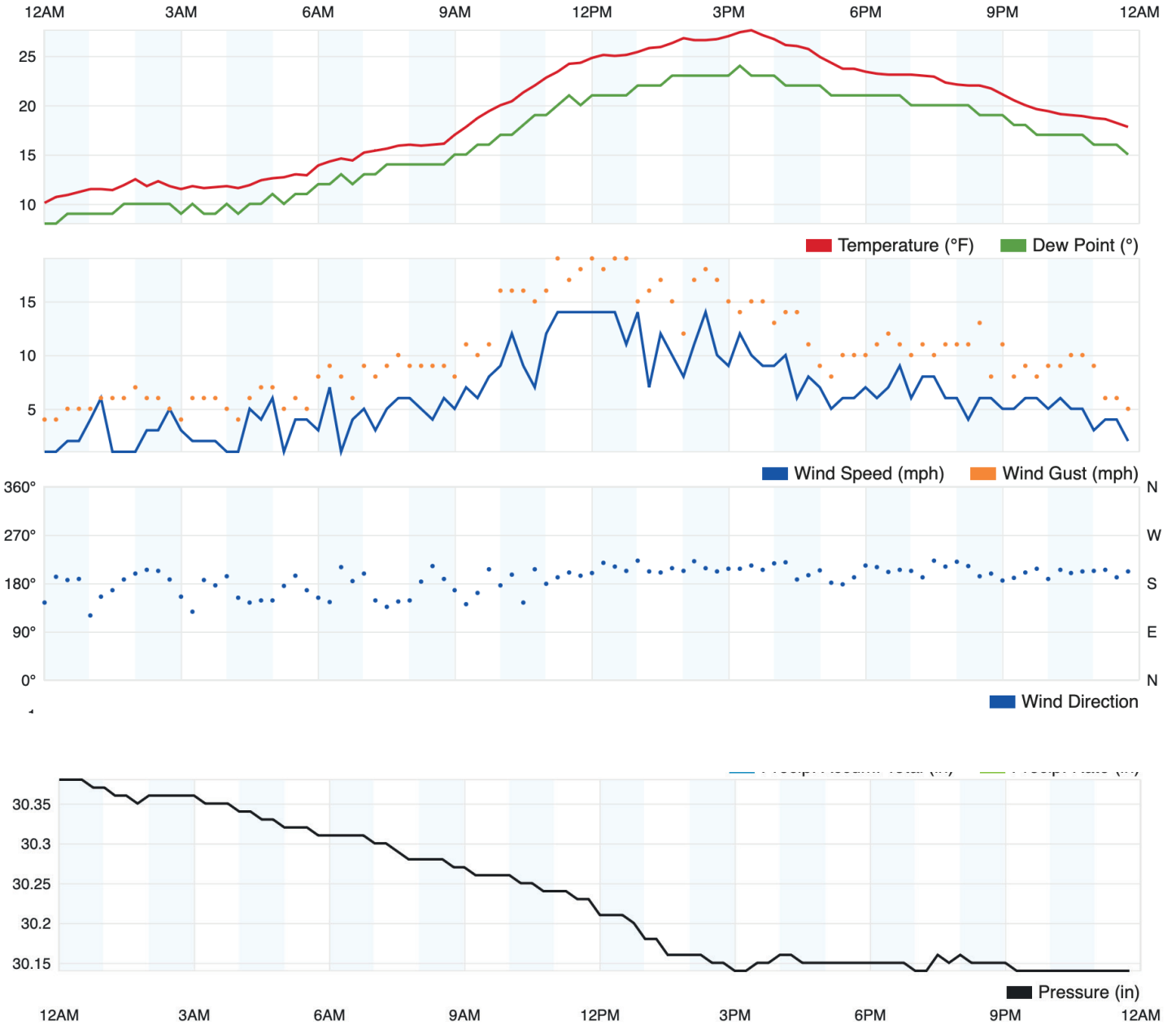
KR BODY SHOP
Andover, SD

Kevin Raap
605-380-8539

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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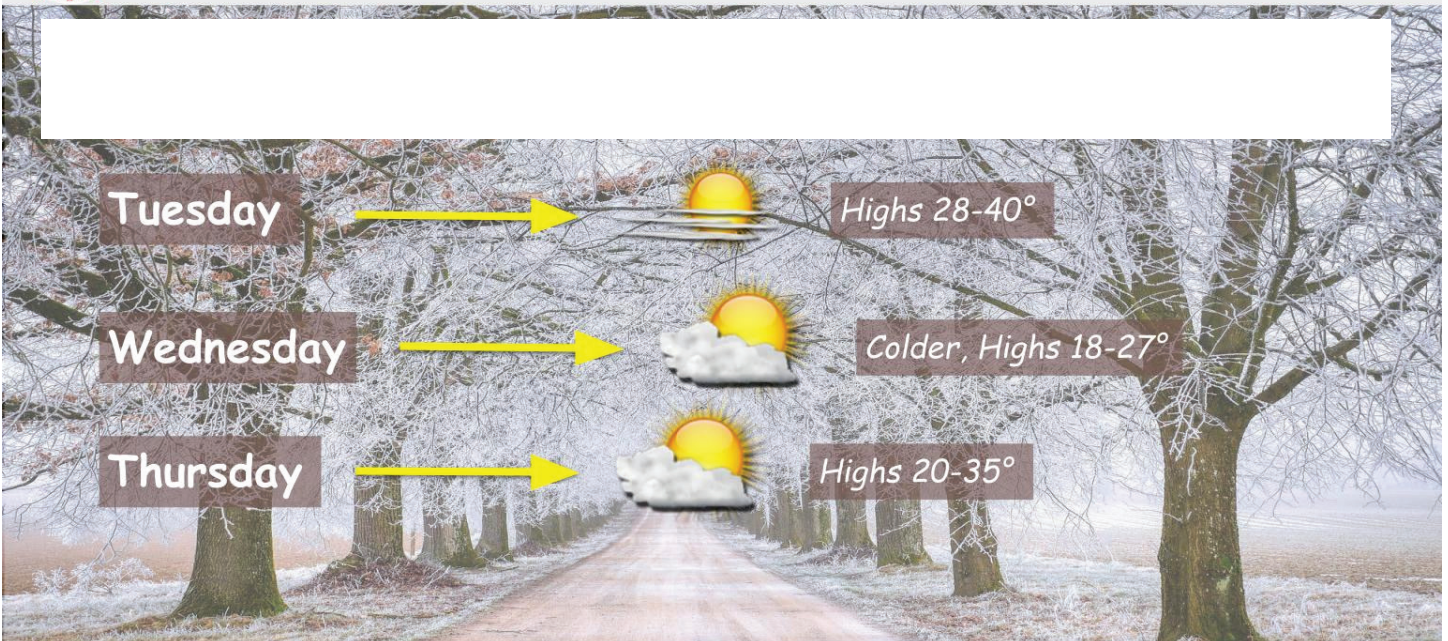
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Tue Jan 2	Wed Jan 3	Thu Jan 4	Fri Jan 5	Sat Jan 6	Sun Jan 7	Mon Jan 8
31°F	23°F	25°F	30°F	26°F	25°F	20°F
20°F	8°F	22°F	19°F	18°F	14°F	6°F
WNW	NNE	S	SSE	N	NNE	N
9 MPH	10 MPH	12 MPH	9 MPH	7 MPH	8 MPH	7 MPH
			20%	20%	30%	20%



Dry through Mid-Week

January 1, 2024
1:30 PM



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A cold front moved through the area last night, but conditions remain dry and seasonal for the work week.

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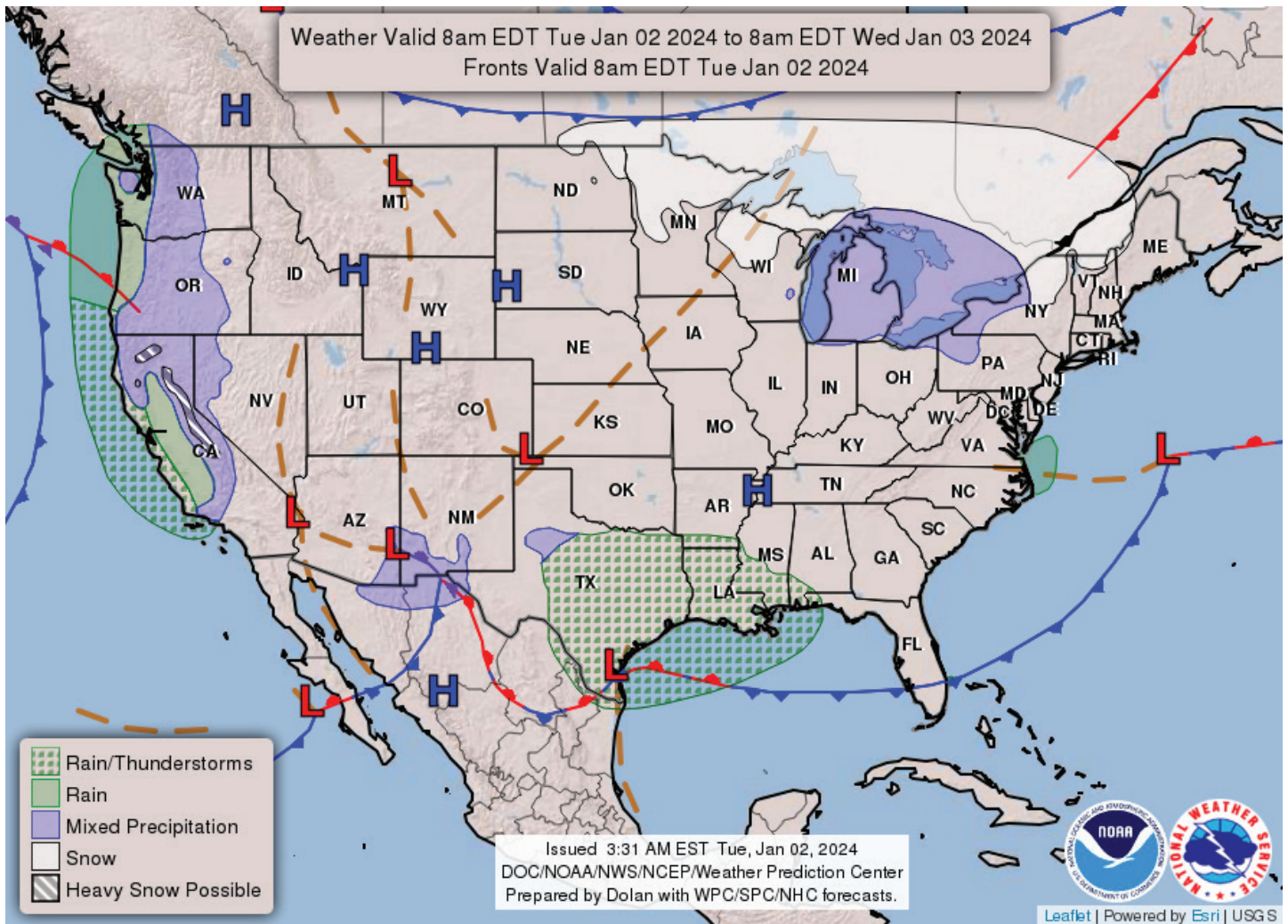
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 28 °F at 3:27 PM
Low Temp: 10 °F at 12:02 AM
Wind: 20 mph at 11:52 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 51 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1963
Record Low: -30 in 2010
Average High: 24
Average Low: 3
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.04
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.04
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:02:09 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:27 am



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Today in Weather History

January 2, 1999: Heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches fell across part of northeast South Dakota from the late afternoon hours of the 1st to the early morning hours of the 2nd. Strong north winds of 15 to 30 mph combined with temperatures in the single digits generated wind chills from 25 to 40 below and visibilities below 1/4 of a mile at times. Holiday travel along Interstate-29 and Highway 12 was most affected by this winter storm. There were some travel delays and some stranded motorists as a result. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Kidder, Victor, Sisseton, Webster, Waubay, Wilmot, and 8 inches at Britton and near Peever.

1839: It is believed Louis Daguerre took the first daguerreotype of the moon. Unfortunately, in March of that same year, his entire laboratory burnt to the ground, destroying all his written records and much of his early experimental work—and that historical image of the moon. A year later, John William Draper, an American doctor, and chemist took his own daguerreotype of the moon.

1897: Tornadoes in January? Two tornadoes touched down on this day. The first tornado touched down in Mooringsport, Louisiana, killing five people and injuring 21 others. The second tornado occurred at Benton, Arkansas. Although this tornado was more destructive in regards to property damage, it caused one death.

1949: A blizzard raged and brought heavy snow, strong winds, and cold temperatures to South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska.

1955: Hurricane Alice passed through the Islands of Saint Martin and Saba in the Caribbean Sea on this day. Alice, which developed on December 30, 1954, is the only known Atlantic hurricane to span two calendar years.

1999: A powerful winter storm developed over the Texas panhandle and moved northeast through the Missouri bootheel and then north northeast through eastern Illinois and into Michigan. Snow began accumulating in east-central Illinois and areas south of Chicago during the early evening hours of New Year's Day and overspread the city and north suburbs by midnight. Snow continued through the night and much of the day Saturday, January 2. The heaviest snow fell during the daytime hours Saturday and tapered off by late afternoon or early evening and ended by late evening. Northeast winds were 20 to 30 mph with a few higher gusts during the day Saturday. Winds gusted to over 50 mph along the Lake Michigan shoreline. The strong wind coming off the lake enhanced snowfall totals within about 10 miles of the lake. Snowfall was generally 9 to 15 inches over north central and east central Illinois and in the Chicago suburbs. Snowfall in Chicago and the north suburbs in Lake County was 18 to 22 inches. Winds subsided Saturday evening as the storm center passed over southern Lake Michigan. Then strong northwest winds developed Sunday, causing considerable blowing and drifting and hampering clean-up efforts.

The 21.6 inches at O'hare, the official observing site for Chicago, was the second greatest storm total snowfall. The record was 23.0 inches January 26-27, 1967. Of the 21.6 inches, 18.6 fell on January 2, setting a record for the most snowfall on a calendar day. Other snowfall amounts included; Algonquin 14.0, Aurora 14.4, Barrington 18.0, Brookfield 15.1, Bourbonnais 14.0, Channahon 13.0, Chatsworth 17.0, Coal City 13.0, Compton 9.7, Crestwood 14.2, DeKalb 12.4, Dixon 16.4, Earlville 11.3, Fairbury 13.0, Geneva 13.0, Glenwood 16.0, Harvard 9.0, Lake Villa 17.9, LaGrange Park 15.0, Midway Airport 20.6, Mundelein 10.0, Naperville 11.0, Olympia Fields 15.8, Orland Park 13.8, Rochelle 9.6, Rockford 9.0, Streamwood 14.0, Willow Springs 12.0. The heavy snow and blowing snow caused hazardous travel. Lake Shore Drive was closed down for the first time ever. State, county, and local road crews worked around the clock. The City of Chicago Department of Streets and Sanitation spent 12 million dollars on snow removal efforts. Three hundred flights were canceled at O'Hare and Midway airports.

2006: Six tornadoes impacted central and northern Georgia. The tornadoes were rated from F0 to F3.

2017: 36 confirmed tornadoes impacted the Deep South from Louisiana to Georgia. Many of the tornadoes came from line segments of storms known as quasi-linear convective systems. A larger convective system also created numerous wind damage reports, and in Alabama, four people died from straight-line winds.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE PROCESS AND THE PRODUCT

The village blacksmith was known for his strength and skills. He was also known for his extreme suffering and unending patience. Everyone also admired his deep and abiding faith in God and his love for the Lord.

One day a new resident of the village stopped by to meet and talk with him. Shortly after they began their conversation, the visitor to his shop said, "I understand from the folk in our town that you have great faith in God. But, sir, with all of the pain and suffering you have endured throughout the years, do you believe - deep down in your heart - that He truly loves you?"

"Oh yes," said the blacksmith, "yes, I do."

"Prove it then, if you will, because it's difficult for me to believe," said the man.

Picking up a piece of metal, the blacksmith said, "For me to make something useful of this metal, I must put it into the fire and allow the heat to make it soft. Then I must put it on the anvil and hammer it with blow after blow if it is to become a useful item. Unless I heat it until it is soft, and then hammer it until it takes shape and becomes something useful, it is worthless."

When days are difficult and nights have no guiding lights, it is not because God wants to confuse or harm us. It is because He loves us and has a unique plan for each of us to fulfill – and He is preparing us to fill it. In times of doubt, visit the Garden of Gethsemane.

Prayer: Lord, even Your Son experienced a time in His life when He openly asked, "Is there possibly another way." And, when there was none, He accepted the "heat." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: – Then at three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Mark 15:34



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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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paypal.me/paperpaul



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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.29.23

11 27 30 62 70 10

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$114,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 23 Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.01.24

7 9 19 36 45 10

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,100,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 38 Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.01.24

6 7 15 31 43 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 53 Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.30.23

1 15 17 21 22

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 53 Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.01.24

19 31 40 42 64 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 22 Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.01.24

12 21 42 44 49 1

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 22 Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Plane catches fire on runway at Japan's Haneda airport after collision, passengers reportedly safe

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's coast guard said five crewmembers are missing after a collision between its plane and a passenger plane at Tokyo's Haneda Airport that led to a major fire.

Coast Guard spokesperson Yoshinori Yanagishima confirmed the collision between the coast guard aircraft MA722 and the Japan Airlines plane.

The pilot has evacuated and contacted officials, but the other five crewmembers are unaccounted-for and the condition of the aircraft is also unknown, he said.

The 379 occupants of the passenger plane are all reported to have evacuated safely before the plane was engulfed in fire.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

TOKYO (AP) — A plane burst into flames on the runway of Tokyo's Haneda airport on Tuesday, with news reports saying it hit another aircraft after landing. NHK TV reported that all occupants, believed to total 379 people, got out safely.

Local TV video showed a large eruption of fire and smoke from the side of the Japan Airlines plane as it taxied on a runway. The area around the wing then caught fire. Footage an hour later showed the plane entirely engulfed in fire.

It said the plane was an Airbus A-350, JAL flight 516, which had flown out of Shin Chitose airport in Japan to Haneda.

NHK quoted JAL as saying it believed its plane was hit by another aircraft, possibly a Japan Coast Guard plane.

Japan's Coast Guard said it is investigating the possibility that its MA-722 aircraft might have collided with the JAL flight on the runway.

Haneda is one of the busiest airports in Japan, and many people travel over the New Year holidays.

Fighting in southern Gaza city after Israel says it is pulling thousands of troops from other areas

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Heavy fighting was reported in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis on Tuesday, a day after Israel said it was withdrawing thousands of troops from other areas in a potential shift away from the massive air and ground operations that have devastated the Hamas-ruled enclave.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to press ahead with the war until Hamas is crushed and the more than 100 hostages still held by the militant group in Gaza are freed, saying it could take several more months.

But ahead of a visit to the region by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Israel is under growing international pressure to scale back the offensive that has killed nearly 22,000 Palestinians. Blinken has urged Israel to do more to protect Palestinian civilians.

Word of the troop drawdown came as Israel's Supreme Court struck down a key component of Netanyahu's contentious judicial overhaul plan, which had deeply divided Israelis and threatened the military's readiness before the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered the war.

The ruling appeared to have dealt a fatal blow to the judicial plan. Netanyahu and his allies seem unlikely to revive the divisive initiative during wartime. Elections are widely expected once the fighting winds down, and widespread anger in Israel over intelligence and security failures linked to the Hamas attack could

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translate into a poor showing for those in power now.

The court ruling could meanwhile help Israel fend off allegations of genocide in Gaza made by South Africa at the International Court of Justice. The ICJ and other international tribunals consider whether countries have their own independent judiciaries in deciding on whether to intervene.

TROOPS ROTATE OUT BUT COMBAT CONTINUES

The army said Monday that five brigades, or several thousand troops, would be taken out of Gaza in the coming weeks. Some will head to bases for further training or rest, while many older reservists will go home. The war has taken a toll on the economy by preventing reservists from going to their jobs, running their businesses or returning to university studies.

The military has not said publicly whether the withdrawal reflects a new phase of the war. But the move is in line with the plans that Israeli leaders have outlined for a low-intensity campaign that focuses on remaining Hamas strongholds and could last for much of the year.

Israel has said it's close to operational control over most of northern Gaza, reducing the need for forces there. Yet fierce fighting has continued in other areas of the Palestinian territory, especially the south, where many of Hamas' forces remain intact and where most of Gaza's 2.3 million people have fled.

Meanwhile, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced late Monday that residents from seven Israeli communities close to Gaza can return to their homes soon, one of the most concrete signs that the army feels confident it has minimized the threat of rocket launches from parts of Gaza. The communities are located 4 to 7 kilometers (2.5 to 4.5 miles) from the border.

Palestinians reported heavy airstrikes and artillery shelling overnight and into Tuesday in the southern city of Khan Younis and farming areas to the east, near the border with Israel. Fighting was also underway in and around the built-up Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza.

Even in Gaza City, which has been largely depopulated and where Israeli ground troops have been battling militants for over two months, residents said there were clashes in different neighborhoods, as well as in the nearby urban Jabaliya refugee camp.

The war was sparked by the militant group's Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, in which 1,200 people were killed and 240 others were taken hostage.

Israel responded with an air, ground and sea offensive that has killed more than 21,900 people in Gaza, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory. The count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count. The Israeli military says 173 soldiers have died since it launched its ground operation.

Israel says, without providing evidence, that more than 8,000 militants have been killed. It blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll, saying the militants embed within residential areas, including schools and hospitals.

The war has displaced some 85% of Gaza's population, forcing hundreds of thousands of people into overcrowded shelters or teeming tent camps in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless bombed. Palestinians are left with a sense that nowhere is safe.

RULING COULD HELP ISRAEL FEND OFF GENOCIDE CHARGES

The widespread death and destruction — unprecedented in the century-old Mideast conflict — led South Africa to file a case against Israel at the ICJ, accusing it of "genocidal" acts that aim "to destroy Palestinians in Gaza." Israel rejected the accusations, calling them a "blood libel."

South Africa asked The Hague-based court last week to issue an interim order for Israel to immediately suspend its military operations in Gaza. The case, if it goes ahead, will take years, but an interim order could be issued within weeks.

It's unclear what concrete effects an ICJ ruling against Israel would have, but it would likely isolate the country politically and economically. "Israel can't afford to ignore this," said Barak Medina, a law professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

He said the Supreme Court ruling against the judicial overhaul could strengthen Israel's case by showing it has "an active and independent court" that can hold the government accountable.

The judicial overhaul itself, meanwhile, appears to have been defeated.

Medina said the Supreme Court's decision to strike down a key plank of the proposed changes makes it unlikely courts would allow the others.

Netanyahu's coalition could propose a watered-down version, but it would have to be passed by parliament, a process that would reopen deep divisions within Israeli society and generate even more anger at the prime minister, already blamed by many for the failure to prevent the Oct. 7 attack.

Powerful earthquakes leave at least 48 dead, destroy buildings along Japan's western coast

By HIRO KOMAE and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

WAJIMA, Japan (AP) — A series of powerful earthquakes that hit western Japan have left at least 48 people dead and damaged thousands of buildings, vehicles and boats. Officials warned that more quakes could lie ahead.

Aftershocks continued to shake Ishikawa prefecture and nearby areas a day after a magnitude 7.6 temblor slammed the area on Monday afternoon.

Forty-eight people were confirmed dead in Ishikawa, officials said. Sixteen others were seriously injured, while damage to homes was so great that it could not immediately be assessed, they said.

Japanese media reports said tens of thousands of homes were destroyed. Government spokesperson Yoshimasa Hayashi said 17 people were seriously injured and gave a slightly lower death tally, while saying he was aware of the prefecture's tally.

Water, power and cell phone service were still down in some areas, and residents expressed sorrow about their destroyed homes and uncertain futures.

"It's not just that it's a mess. The wall has collapsed, and you can see through to the next room. I don't think we can live here anymore," Miki Kobayashi, an Ishikawa resident, said as she swept around her house.

Their house was also damaged in a 2007 quake, she said.

Although casualty numbers continued to climb gradually, the prompt public warnings, relayed on broadcasts and phones, and the quick response from the general public and officials appeared to have kept at least some of the damage under control.

The rescue efforts that quickly followed from firefighters, police and the military proved a testament to how this nation has repeatedly withstood disasters, which have practically become a part of everyday life.

Toshitaka Katada, a University of Tokyo professor specializing in disasters, said the people were prepared because the area had been hit by quakes in recent years. They had evacuation plans and emergency supplies in stock.

"There is probably no people on earth other than Japanese who are so disaster-ready," he said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press.

Katada warned the situation remains precarious and unpredictable. The March 2011 quake and tsunami in northeastern Japan had been preceded by other quakes.

"This is far from over," Katada said.

Predictions by scientists have repeatedly been proven wrong, such as with the 2016 quake in southwestern Kumamoto, an area previously seen as relatively quake-free. The only real projection possible is that you can't make projections, Katada added.

"Having too much confidence in the power of science is very dangerous. We are dealing with nature."

Japanese media aerial footage showed widespread damage in the hardest-hit spots, with landslides burying roads, boats tossed in the waters and a major fire that had turned an entire section of Wajima city to ashes.

Japan's military dispatched 1,000 soldiers to the disaster zones to join rescue efforts, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Tuesday.

"Saving lives is our priority and we are fighting a battle against time," he said. "It is critical that people trapped in homes get rescued immediately."

A quake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.6 shook the Ishikawa area as he was speaking. More quakes

continued to rock the area, reaching more than 100 aftershocks over the past day.

Nuclear regulators said several nuclear plants in the region were operating normally. The 2011 quake and tsunami caused three reactors to melt and release large amounts of radiation at a nuclear plant in northeastern Japan.

News videos showed rows of collapsed houses. Some wooden structures were flattened and cars were overturned. Half-sunken ships floated in bays where tsunami waves had rolled in, leaving a muddied coastline.

On Monday, the Japan Meteorological Agency issued a major tsunami warning for Ishikawa and lower-level tsunami warnings or advisories for the rest of the western coast of Japan's main island of Honshu, as well as for the northern island of Hokkaido.

The warning was downgraded several hours later, and all tsunami warnings were lifted as of early Tuesday. Waves measuring more than one meter (3 feet) hit some places.

People who were evacuated from their houses huddled in auditoriums, schools and community centers. Bullet trains in the region were halted, but service was mostly restored by Tuesday afternoon. Sections of highways were closed.

Weather forecasters predicted rain, setting off worries about already crumbling buildings and infrastructure.

The region includes tourist spots famous for lacquerware and other traditional crafts, along with designated cultural heritage sites.

U.S. President Joe Biden said in a statement that his administration was "ready to provide any necessary assistance for the Japanese people."

Japan is frequently hit by earthquakes because of its location along the "Ring of Fire," an arc of volcanoes and fault lines in the Pacific Basin.

Russian ballistic missiles strike Ukraine's largest cities, killing at least 4 people

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's two largest cities came under attack from Russian hypersonic ballistic missiles on Tuesday morning, killing at least four people and injuring almost 100, officials said, as the war approached its two-year milestone and the Kremlin's forces stepped up their winter bombardment of urban areas.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on his Telegram channel that four civilians were killed and 92 injured in the capital, Kyiv, and in northeastern Kharkiv as hypersonic Kinzhal missiles that can fly at 10 times the speed of sound slammed into city blocks.

Since Sunday, Zelenskyy said, the Kremlin's forces have launched about 170 Shahed drones and "dozens of missiles of various types" against Ukrainian targets. Most were aimed at civilian areas, he said.

The Kh-47M2 Kinzhal is an air-launched hypersonic ballistic missile. Russian forces rarely use such expensive missiles against Ukraine due to their limited stocks.

The attacks created a desolate morning scene in the capital, with most cafes and restaurants remaining closed. Many people opted to stay indoors or seek refuge in shelters as powerful explosions shook the city from early morning.

Air raid sirens blared for nearly four hours, and the city's subway stations — which function as shelters — were crowded with people.

After the Ukrainian air force issued warnings about incoming hypersonic missiles, people wearing pajamas underneath their coats took sleeping bags, mats and their pets to subway stations while loud explosions echoed above the city.

At one of the central stations, called Golden Gates, hundreds of people filled the spacious underground areas while trains continued to run.

"Perhaps today was the most frightening because there were so many explosions," said Myroslava

Shcherba, 55.

The barrage extended Russia's escalated attacks on Ukraine that began Friday with its largest single assault on Ukraine since the war started, in which at least 41 civilians were killed.

The next day, shelling of the Russian border city of Belgorod killed more than two dozen people. Russia blamed Ukraine for the attack and has struck back repeatedly since.

The attack on Belgorod was one of the deadliest to take place on Russian soil since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine started more than 22 months ago. Russian officials said the death toll stood at 25 as of Monday, including five children.

Cities across western Russia have regularly come under drone attacks since May, although Ukrainian officials never acknowledge responsibility for strikes on Russian territory or the Crimean Peninsula.

"They want to intimidate us and create uncertainty within our country. We will intensify strikes. Not a single crime against our civilian population will go unpunished," Putin said Monday, describing the barrage of Belgorod as a "terrorist act."

Russia launched about 90 Shahed-type drones across Ukraine on Monday.

Putin accused Western nations of using Ukraine to try to "put Russia in its place." While vowing retribution, he insisted Russia would only target military infrastructure in Ukraine. However, Ukraine reports civilian casualties from daily Russian attacks, which have hit apartment buildings, shopping centers and residential areas in small communities.

South Korean opposition leader is stabbed in the neck by a knife-wielding man

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and JIWON SONG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's tough-speaking liberal opposition leader, Lee Jae-myung, was stabbed in the neck by an unidentified knife-wielding man who attempted to kill him during his visit to the southeastern city of Busan, police said.

Lee, 59, the head of the main opposition Democratic Party, was airlifted to a Seoul hospital for surgery after receiving emergency treatment in Busan. Police and emergency officials earlier said he was conscious after the attack and wasn't in critical condition, but his exact status was unknown.

The attack happened as Lee walked through a crowd of journalists and others after a tour of the proposed site of a new airport in Busan. The attacker approached Lee, saying he wanted to get his autograph, and then stabbed him in the left side of his neck with a knife, senior Busan police officer Sohn Jae-han said in a televised briefing.

Sohn said Democratic Party officials near Lee quickly subdued the attacker before police officers detained him. He said 41 police officers had been deployed to the area for crowd control and traffic management.

TV footage showed Lee, his eyes closed, lying on the ground as a person pressed a handkerchief to his neck to stop the bleeding. A witness, Jin Jeong-hwa, told YTN television that Lee had bled a lot. Videos circulated on social media showed the suspect, wearing a paper crown reading "I'm Lee Jae-myung," being chased and tackled by several people, apparently including plainclothes police officers.

Sohn said the suspect, aged about 67, told investigators that he bought the 18-centimeter (7-inch) knife online. He said police are investigating the motive for the attack. Other officers said police are expected to request that the suspect be formally arrested for alleged attempted murder because he told investigators he intended to kill Lee.

Lee's Democratic Party called the incident "a terrorist attack on Lee and a serious threat to democracy." It called on police to make a thorough, swift investigation.

At Pusan National University Hospital in Busan, where Lee received emergency treatment, party spokesperson Kwon Chil-seung said Lee's jugular vein was believed to have been damaged and there was concern over the large amount of bleeding. Hospital officials would not comment on Lee's condition.

President Yoon Suk Yeol expressed deep concern about Lee's health and ordered authorities to investigate

the attack, saying such violence would not be tolerated, according to Yoon's office.

Lee lost the 2022 presidential election to Yoon by 0.7 percentage point, the narrowest margin ever recorded in a South Korean presidential election. Recent public surveys indicated Lee and his main conservative rival Han Dong-hoon, a former justice minister, are the two early favorites to succeed Yoon as president when his single five-year term ends in 2027.

Since his election defeat, Lee has been a harsh critic of Yoon's major policies. Last year, Lee held a 24-day hunger strike to protest what he called Yoon's failure to oppose Japan's release of treated radioactive wastewater from its crippled Fukushima nuclear power, his handling of the country's post-pandemic economy and his hard-line policies on North Korea.

Lee faces an array of corruption allegations, including that he provided unlawful favors to a private investor who reaped huge profits from a dubious housing project in the city of Seongnam, where Lee was mayor for a decade until 2018. Lee has denied legal wrongdoing and accused Yoon's government of pursuing a political vendetta.

Last September, a South Korean court denied an arrest warrant for Lee over the allegations, but Lee faces a continuing investigation by prosecutors. The court hearing was arranged after the opposition-controlled parliament voted to lift Lee's immunity to arrest, a move that reflected growing divisions within his Democratic Party over his legal troubles.

Lee, who also served as governor of Gyeonggi province, which surrounds Seoul, is known for his outspoken style. His supporters see him as an anti-elitist hero who could reform establishment politics, eradicate corruption and solve growing economic inequality. Critics view him as a dangerous populist who relies on stoking divisions and demonizing his conservative opponents.

Violence against high-profile figures has sometimes occurred in South Korea in recent years.

In March 2022, Song Young-gil, then the leader of the Democratic Party, was assaulted by a man wielding a hammer during a rally for Lee ahead of the presidential vote. Song was treated for stitches but avoided serious injury.

In 2015, then-U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert was slashed in the face and arm by an anti-American activist. The assault required 80 stitches to close the cut on Lippert's face.

In 2006, Park Geun-hye, then a conservative opposition leader, was knifed by a man with a box cutter during an election rally. She was given 60 stitches to close an 11-centimeter (4-inch) gash on her face. Park was elected president in 2012.

Michael Penix Jr. leads No. 2 Washington to 37-31 victory over Texas and spot in national title game

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The remarkable comeback story of Michael Penix Jr. is a victory away from a perfect ending for Washington.

Penix passed for 430 yards and two touchdowns, and the Huskies held off Texas 37-31 in the Sugar Bowl on Monday night to advance to the College Football Playoff title game, earning both the sixth-year quarterback with two surgically repaired knees and the beleaguered Pac-12 a chance to go out a champion.

The second-ranked Huskies (14-0) will face No. 1 Michigan next Monday night in Houston with a 21-game winning streak, looking for their first national championship since 1991 and the Pac-12's first since Southern California in 2004.

Washington is one of 10 schools fleeing the Pac-12 for other Power Five conferences next season, with the Huskies headed to join Michigan in the Big Ten. The conference is not going away, but its days as a potential football power are likely done.

But first, the final season of the four-team playoff before expansion to 12 in 2024 comes down to a Pac-12-Big Ten matchup, just like the first when Ohio State beat Oregon.

"Huskie Nation stand up," Penix told the UW crowd in the postgame trophy ceremony. "We goin' to the natty!"

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No. 3 Texas (12-2) had four shots at the end zone after getting to the UW 12 with 15 seconds left, but Quinn Ewers missed on the last three. The final throw was a fade to Adonai Mitchell that was well-covered by Elijah Jackson.

"Those guys are the most resilient guys I have ever been around," Washington coach Kalen DeBoer said.

In Texas' first CFP appearance and final football game as a member of the Big 12 before it goes to the Southeastern Conference, Ewers passed for 318 yards and a touchdown. But it wasn't enough against Penix and his array of talented receivers.

"They were a second away from playing for a national championship," Texas coach Steve Sarkisian said. "They should be proud of themselves. Penix got hot and (Washington) made some big plays down the field."

Penix spent his first four college seasons at Indiana, suffering three season-ending injuries, one to each knee and one to his throwing shoulder.

When his former offensive coordinator at Indiana, DeBoer, took over at Washington, Penix didn't think twice before moving to Seattle, and then decided to take advantage of an extra year of eligibility and returned for a second year.

"He's been on a mission since he chose to come back, and a lot of the other guys followed his lead," DeBoer said

The left-hander stayed healthy and blossomed into a star, the Heisman Trophy runner-up this year, and now has a chance to win a national championship after another brilliant performance.

"It was the tough times. I feel like everything I've been through built me for this," Penix said.

Penix went 29 for 38 with no turnovers. He completed 12 straight at one point, the longest on-target streak in the CFP's 10-year history.

And he did it attacking down field as usual. He completed six passes of at least 20 yards, connecting with Rome Odunze six times for 125 yards and Ja'Lynn Polk five times for 122.

It was in some ways a perfect CFP semifinal for the last season before massive changes in college football: two teams switching conferences next season, led by star quarterbacks who transferred in.

A wild first half included a 77-yard connection with Polk on Penix's second pass of the game, Texas defensive tackle Byron Murphy II plunging into the end zone for a 1-yard TD run, a Penix-to-Polk TD pass when the receiver tipped the ball to himself and the Longhorns capping the second quarter with a long touchdown drive to tie it at 21-all at intermission.

There was a fourth-and-1 stop by Texas of Washington deep in Longhorns territory, which didn't deter DeBoer from going for a fourth-and-1 at his own UW 33, and converting.

Penix had 255 yards in the first half alone, and then kept it rolling on the first drive of the second half, throwing a dart down the middle to Jalen McMillen for a 19-yard score.

Washington added two field goals by Grady Gross to take a 34-21 lead early in the fourth quarter. Holding the Huskies to field goals kept Texas in the game, and when Ewers found Adonai Mitchell, the Georgia transfer with two national titles, for a 1-yard score with 7:23 left, it was a one-possession game.

The Superdome sounded like Darrell K. Royal Stadium east, with Texas fans easily outnumbering the visitors from the Pacific Northwest.

Penix calmly went back to work, hitting Odunze over the shoulder for 32 yards down the sideline to set up a first-and-goal that led to the third field goal of the day for Gross, a former walk-on who was put on scholarship after hitting a walk-off winner in the Apple Cup.

That put Washington up 37-28 with 2:40 left, and had its purple-clad fans doing its best to drown out the Longhorns with a "Let's go Huskies!" chant.

Texas kicked a field goal with 1:09 left cut the lead to six. Washington recovered an onside kick, but couldn't kill the clock. Texas flew down the field and had an improbable comeback in sight.

"Just was looking to give my guys an opportunity to go make a play," Ewers said of his final throws. At the end of the day, that's all you can really do.

Washington came through in the clutch — again.

"They've done it all year, coming up with big-time stops in big-time moments," Penix said.

The Huskies' last nine victories have all been decided by 10 points or fewer. The close games have brought doubters.

"We're always disrespected, always made the underdogs," said defensive end Bralen Trice, another up-perclassman who returned this season to make title run.

THE TAKEAWAY

Texas: Came in with a vaunted defensive line led by All-America defensive tackle T'Vondre Sweat and second-team All-American Murphy. They were tough to run against, as usual, but they didn't get much pressure on Penix through an offensive line that was named the best in the country. Throughout the week both sides seemed a little tired of talking about the line matchup when the Huskies had the ball. Ultimately, the Huskies' big guys came out on top, not allowing a sack.

Washington: On the Huskies' final offensive play as they tried to burn clock, star running back Dillon Johnson was shaken up, which stopped the clock and gave Texas an extra 30 seconds or so for their own drive. There was no word on Johnson's status for the matchup with Michigan.

UP NEXT

Texas: Will Ewers be back for the Longhorns or is it Arch Manning time in Austin? Stay tuned.

Washington: The Huskies are 5-8 all-time against Michigan, including 2-2 in Rose Bowls.

A boozy banana drink in Uganda is under threat as authorities move to restrict home brewers

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

MBARARA, Uganda (AP) — At least once a week, Girino Ndyanabo's family converges around a pit in which bananas have been left to ripen. The bananas are peeled and thrown into a wooden vat carved like a boat, and the patriarch steps in with bare feet.

The sweet juice he presses out is filtered and sprinkled with grains of sorghum, which converts the juice into ethanol, and left to ferment for up to a day. The result is a beverage Ugandans call tonto, or tontomera, a word in the Luganda language that alludes to drinkers' poor coordination. Weaker than bottled beer, the drink has a fruity aroma and bits of sorghum floating on its dark surface.

Tonto is legendary in Uganda. Folk singers have crooned about it, politicians seeking a common touch take a sip when hunting for votes, and traditional ceremonies terminate at dusk with tonto parties. Its devotees are many, ranging from officials in suits to laborers in sandals.

But its production is under threat as cheap bottled beer becomes more attractive to drinkers and as authorities move to curb the production of what are considered illicit home brews, which have the risk of sometimes deadly contamination. And because tonto production takes place outside official purview, authorities are unable to collect revenue from its sale.

A bill in the national assembly seeking to regulate the production and sale of alcohol would criminalize the activities of home brewers of tonto, along with other traditional brews made across this East African country.

But farmers have a more pressing concern: Not enough new banana juice cultivars are being planted to produce the brew. Communities are prioritizing the more commercially viable varieties that are boiled and eaten as a popular mash called matooke.

Ndyanabo, a farmer in the western district of Mbarara whose first experience with tonto was as a little boy in the 1970s, said he has only a few plants left of the cultivars from which the banana juice is extracted.

He sources his bananas one bunch at a time from farmers near him until he can fill the small pit on his plantation. The natural underground heat ripens the bananas within days as Ndyanabo prepares for the weekly pressing.

The event is so important in the family's routine that they can't imagine a time when there would no tonto to sell.

While Ndyanabo said his weekly brew has an assured market, he has seen both demand and supply slow in recent years. This is partly because the retail price of tonto has been largely static over the decades,

while the process of brewing it has become more cumbersome.

The distances traveled in search of bananas have grown. The price of sorghum has gone up.

"You take a lot of time doing this work. It's not as easy as someone who cuts matooke, puts it on a bicycle and sells it for cash immediately," Ndyanabo said of the green bananas that are eaten raw as a Ugandan staple. "Alcohol comes from very far."

He's been trying to plant more of the banana juice cultivars that are known to grow faster. And his son, Mathias Kamukama, is always there to help.

The family makes five or six 20-liter jerricans in each batch. A jerrican's worth sells for the equivalent of about \$8. A half-liter of tonto retails for about 27 cents, compared to 67 cents for the cheapest bottled beer.

One customer is Benson Muhereza, an electrician who regularly visits a small bar in a poor suburb of Mbarara.

"It's like a favorite drink when you have your lunch. It's like a juice. When you don't want to take beer, you come and have your tonto," Muhereza said.

He described tonto like a "porridge" that doesn't give him a hangover. "Every day you should have it," he said.

Christine Kyomuhangi, the tonto seller, said she receives two jerricans of the brew every day. She acknowledged the threats to her business but smiled, insisting her work is sustainable. She said customers come from all over the city.

"Tonto will never get finished," she said.

Harbaugh's Michigan Wolverines to play for national title after stopping Alabama 27-20 in OT

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

PASADENA, Calif. (AP) — Jalen Milroe caught a low snap on fourth down in overtime at the Rose Bowl and ran straight ahead into wall of blue and maize.

That wall of Michigan defenders had been hardened by the Wolverines' violent practice drills. Toughened by two previous College Football Playoff losses. Made impenetrable by months of turmoil that battered the program and its beloved head coach, Jim Harbaugh.

Alabama's quarterback went nowhere.

The Wolverines are going to Houston.

Blake Corum rushed for a 17-yard touchdown on the second snap of overtime, and top-seeded Michigan advanced to its first CFP championship game with a 27-20 victory over fourth-seeded Alabama in the Rose Bowl on Monday night.

Harbaugh's Wolverines (14-0) will play for their school's first national title since 1997 against Washington on Jan. 8 — but only after a fourth-quarter comeback and a hair-raising finish when the two winningest programs in college football history played just the second overtime game in the 110 editions of the Granddaddy of Them All.

"Glorious. That was glorious," Harbaugh said. "It was a tremendous football game."

Roman Wilson made a 4-yard TD catch with 1:34 left in regulation for the Wolverines, who hadn't scored in the second half until that gritty 75-yard drive led by J.J. McCarthy.

Corum, who caught an early TD pass and rushed for 83 yards, needed only two snaps to score in the first overtime period, breaking tackles and spinning wildly into the end zone.

After Milroe was stopped 2 yards short of the end zone on the final snap, the Wolverines' entire sideline sprinted onto the field, throwing a few helmets in the air while fireworks soared from behind the Rose Bowl scoreboard.

"Everything that we went through this entire year made us unbreakable, and in the biggest moments, we were going to show up," said McCarthy, who passed for 221 yards and three touchdowns to win the Offensive Player of the Game award.

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Jase McClellan rushed for 87 yards and two touchdowns for Alabama (12-2), which fell heartbreakingly short of the chance to play for Nick Saban's seventh national title at the school. The Tide led 20-13 on Will Reichard's 52-yard field goal with 4:41 to play, but their defense couldn't preserve it.

"We just didn't finish the last four minutes of the game like we would like to, and we're all very disappointed," Saban said. "But one thing I told them in the locker room, this is one of the most amazing seasons in Alabama football history in terms of where this team came from and what they were able to accomplish."

Milroe passed for 116 yards and rushed for 63 for the Tide, whose 11-game winning streak ended.

Michigan is the sixth straight No. 1 seed to win its semifinal game in the CFP's 10 years of existence — but only after surviving just the third overtime Playoff game. After everything that has happened to Michigan in the past several months, Harbaugh believes his team is primed to keep fighting.

"If ever a game was going to be won up front, it was going to be won with toughness and physicality," Harbaugh said. "Our guys were just there in rhythm and got it done. Epic game. Epic game. The stick-togetherness — I guess what people don't know, how could they know, what the togetherness is like? There's just nothing that can separate these guys."

Michigan is one win away from reaching the primary goal set by Harbaugh when he returned to his alma mater in 2015 to restore its dominance. The former Wolverines quarterback won no Big Ten titles in his first six seasons, but Michigan has been elite since 2021, winning three straight conference titles and advancing to three Playoffs.

"We broke through after the COVID year, getting here," linebacker Michael Barrett said. "We fell short a couple of times, man, but finally doing this, especially against Alabama, especially with a great coach like Nick Saban, great athletes they have, just having this tone-setting win, it's definitely a turning point for the program."

The Wolverines' pristine record masked a profoundly messy season bookended by two three-game suspensions for Harbaugh — the first issued preemptively by the school amid an investigation of possible recruiting violations, and the second mandated by the Big Ten over allegations of sign-stealing and in-game scouting.

"It's almost been an unfair advantage, all the things that the team has gone through," Harbaugh said. "We don't care anymore. Don't care what people say. Don't care about anything that comes up. We just know we're going to overcome it."

Michigan defensive coordinator Jesse Minter acknowledged that the program's infamously difficult 9-on-7 tackling drills are "definitely" done for moments just like the end of this Rose Bowl.

"You put the faith in your players and trust their training, and when the game's on the line, you let them go play fast and don't overthink it," Minter said. "The game comes down to the last play. We're going after him, and that's what we're able to do. So proud of our guys for the win."

Michigan was the dominant team for long stretches of the first three quarters of the Rose Bowl, yet Alabama hung in impressively with big plays and just enough defensive stops.

The Wolverines snapped their six-bowl losing streak and survived a handful of potentially disastrous mistakes that undercut their long stretches of superiority in this matchup. The biggest was a muffed punt by Jake Thaw, who was tackled at the Michigan 1 with 43 seconds left in regulation and barely avoided what would have been one of the most spectacular safeties in football history.

McClellan made an untouched 34-yard TD run in the first quarter, and Michigan answered with Corum's 8-yard catch for his FBS-leading 25th TD — his first on a reception. Corum has been at Michigan for three straight appearances in the CFP, but he barely played two years ago when the Wolverines were routed by Georgia, and he was injured when they were upset by TCU last year.

The Wolverines went ahead shortly before halftime when Tyler Morris made a 38-yard TD catch, but McClellan put the Tide up 17-13 with a 3-yard TD run on the second snap of the fourth quarter. Down seven moments later, Michigan finally got moving with Corum and Wilson making big plays before Wilson's tying TD.

"It's very frustrating, man," Alabama defensive back Malachi Moore said. "We always preach finishing, and we're competitors at the end of the day, so when it come down to stuff like that it really eat at you."

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THE TAKEAWAY

Alabama: The Tide will go three straight seasons without a national title for the first time in Saban's tenure, but there's no reason to be embarrassed about this well-played game against an elite opponent. The low snap on the final play will be crushing for center Seth McLaughlin, who didn't want to talk to reporters afterward.

Michigan: The Wolverines have broken through the penultimate barrier in Harbaugh's tenure with a victory that emphasized the upside of everything their coach teaches.

UP NEXT

Alabama: The Tide will return with another touted recruiting class. Saban's program remains a gold-standard powerhouse, and it'll likely stay that way for as long as he wants to keep coaching.

Michigan: The College Football Playoff championship game in Houston on Jan. 8.

Brazil's economy improves during President Lula's first year back, but a political divide remains

By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva likes to boast he had a good first year after returning to the job. The economy is improving, Congress passed a long-overdue tax reform bill, rioters who wanted to oust him are now in jail, and his predecessor and foe Jair Bolsonaro is barred from running for office until 2030.

Still, the 78-year-old leader has struggled to boost his support among citizens and lawmakers. Some major setbacks, including a series of votes by Congress to override his vetoes, signaled that Lula's future could be less productive in a Brazil almost evenly split between his supporters and Bolsonaro's.

"Brazil's political polarization is such that it crystallized the opinions of Lula and Bolsonaro voters beyond the economy," said political consultant Thomas Traumann, the author of a recent best-selling book on Brazil's political divisions. "These groups are separated by very different world views, the values that form the identity of each group are more important than food prices or interest rates."

Lula took office on Jan. 1, 2023, after a narrow victory over Bolsonaro in October 2022. At the beginning of his four-year term, only one fourth of Brazil's Congress sided with him. Business and opposition leaders feared Lula had gone too far to the left.

A riot led by Bolsonaro supporters destroyed government buildings in the capital of Brasilia on Jan. 8 and more turmoil looked certain. Former Finance Minister Paulo Guedes, among other conservatives, forecast Lula's policies would make Brazil's economy soon turn as sour as those in crisis-ridden Argentina and Venezuela.

"Six months to become Argentina. One year and a half to become Venezuela," Guedes said in an interview. Fast forward to December.

Brazil's economy is set to grow 3% this year instead of the 0.6% expected by market economists. Inflation looks controlled at about 4.7% on a yearly basis, slightly above projections but far from the double digits of recent years. The unemployment rate fell to 7.5% in November, one percentage point below the day Bolsonaro left office.

The Sao Paulo stock exchange hit record levels in December, rising above 134,000 points for the first time in its history. Brazil's real currency is also rising against the U.S. dollar. All that brought back the optimistic, keen-to-travel-abroad Lula who had been missing during almost a decade of personal gloom.

"We needed to get our house fixed (in 2023), put things into place," Lula said in a meeting at the presidential palace on Dec. 12. "And now I say get ready. Next year, the Brazilian economy will not let anyone down."

Yet some polls have shown unchanged support for the president, at between 38% and 40% since January 2023. The numbers didn't pick up even after the announcement of a higher minimum wage in 2024, the buildup of Bolsonaro's legal woes or Brazil's return as a player in foreign affairs under Lula.

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About a third of Brazilians consider Lula's presidency about average and another third deeply dislike the way he governs Latin America's powerhouse economy, which rose once again to the top 10 biggest in the world after years of sinking.

Lula's supporters are at home, but Bolsonaro's are still taking to the streets.

Though not as numerous as in the recent past, the few thousand protesters asking Congress to impeach Lula on corruption allegations have shown the resilience of the far-right leader's political base.

Bolsonaro was barred in June 2023 from running for office again until 2030 after Brazil's electoral court ruled that he abused his power and cast unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system.

Engineer Eduardo Carlos Santos, 73, believes Brazil's economy recovered due to the work of Bolsonaro. A devout evangelical, as with many in the former president's base, he says there is a cultural war against conservatives and that leftists should have no place in government.

"Like it or not, Bolsonaro left a better economy and Lula is just reaping the fruits of that," said Santos, who blames the economic difficulties during the previous presidency on the COVID-19 pandemic and health restrictions. "Lula is a former inmate, sentenced for corruption. He had his time in office, we needed to move the country to another direction. I don't see a bright year coming ahead."

Lula was imprisoned for alleged corruption in 2018, when he led polls to return to the presidency. He was released after the country's Supreme Court ruled the following year that prison sentences could only take place after every appeal has been exhausted — which was not the case with Lula. Later, the same court ruled that the judge in Lula's case, now a pro-Bolsonaro senator, was biased against him.

Lula's difficulties on the streets also appeared in Congress, which voted several times to override his vetoes, especially on environmental legislation. The most recent was in December, when lawmakers reinstated legislation to undo protections of Indigenous peoples' land rights. The decision set up a new battle between lawmakers and the country's top court on the matter.

Brazil's Congress also decided to override Lula's veto of a multibillion-dollar bill that exempts multiple sectors of the economy from paying some taxes. The bill was introduced in 2011 and would lose validity at the end of 2023. It will remain in place until 2027, one year after the president's term ends.

Other measures depleted the federal treasury of budget money by enabling lawmakers to approve earmarked resources for themselves, without interference from the executive branch.

Lula's allies have blamed some defeats on Speaker Arthur Lira, once a staunch Bolsonaro supporter who has operated more quietly. Lira, who will remain in his position for another year, can't run for reelection under current congressional rules.

Supporters of the president are also upset with his decision not to appoint another woman to replace Chief Justice Rosa Maria Weber on the Supreme Court. They also complain about the leftist leader's slow approach in providing more resources for welfare programs and inclusion.

That's the case of Daniela Fernandes, 34, who works in a government agency in Sao Paulo.

"I believe we can improve our economy, but I am also hoping that the revenue gets spent with the poor, not in making the rich richer with high interest rates and construction work that only suits some lawmakers," he said. "I am here because I want our president to tame the military that sided with Bolsonaro all these years, to challenge the far-right on the streets too."

Traumann, the political consultant, said Lula's future will depend on how he moves between antagonistic groups within Brazilian society.

"Dealing with this divided country is surely the biggest challenge for the Lula administration next year," he said.

A missing person with no memory: How investigators solved the cold case of Seven Doe

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Buried at the edge of a Chicago Catholic cemetery are an elderly person's remains marked only by a cement cylinder deep in the ground labeled with the numbers 04985. The person died in 2015 at a nursing home not remembering much, including their own name.

They went by Seven.

Now police specializing in missing people and cold cases have discovered Seven's identity in one of the most unusual investigations the Cook County sheriff's office has pursued and one that could change state law. Using post-mortem fingerprints, investigators identified Seven as 75-year-old Reba C. Bailey, an Illinois veteran missing since the 1970s.

The breakthrough is bringing closure to generations of relatives and friends. But whether they knew the name or the numeral, the investigation has unearthed more mysteries about how Reba, a Women's Army Corps veteran raised in a large family, became homeless with no recollection, aside from wanting to be identified as a man called Seven.

Public records, interviews, newspapers and police work have offered some insight about the person with two lives, even with so much still unknown. Investigators say the next step is to honor them with a new gravestone and military honors.

"That's a horrible circumstance that someone could die and no one knows who they are. That's why we pursue these cases so strongly, out of dignity," said Commander Jason Moran, who oversees the sheriff's missing persons unit. "A person deserves a name."

Sheriff Tom Dart's office took on the case of Seven Doe — the name in some official records — last year. The office has gained notoriety for cold case work, including identifying victims of serial killer John Wayne Gacy.

But Seven's case, involving a person who was unidentified both in life and death, is rare.

"We never had anything like that before," Dart said. "This one is different and it just kept getting more different."

Seven died from heart disease with dementia and diabetes as contributing factors, according to the Cook County medical examiner in 2015. Fingerprints taken at the time were run against police databases but there was no match. Seven was buried at Mount Olivet Catholic Cemetery in the section for unidentified people.

Eight years later, Cook County investigators took the case. Since foul play was ruled out, they started with the postmortem fingerprints, running them across multiple databases, including military records.

A match came up for Reba, who enlisted in the Army in 1961.

While all of Reba's five siblings are dead, she has more than half a dozen nieces and nephews. Most never met her, but they had heard of her.

Rick Bailey, the son of Reba's late brother Richard, was "totally in shock" when he got a call from investigators about his long-lost aunt.

"My dad had searched for years to try and find his sister," said Bailey, who is 65 and believes Reba's siblings would celebrate the news. "They would all be thrilled if they were here."

Investigators were able to piece together parts of Reba's life.

She was born in 1940, the daughter of a carpenter who often moved for work. Tragedy hit Reba's life at age 10 when she lost her mother in a car wreck that also left her, her father and her brother injured.

About a decade after the accident, she joined the military, serving in Alabama, Texas and California. Investigators found she was briefly married to a fellow veteran, John H. Bilberry, who passed in 1989.

Military records show she was honorably discharged in 1962 "due to marriage."

What happened to Reba between returning from the military and showing up at a Chicago worker house with no memory remains a mystery.

Relatives heard stories about a fight between Reba and her father, but there are different versions on

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what it was about. Some say it was about the decision to join the military. Others heard it was about sexual orientation.

They also don't know what prompted the memory loss, the change in gender identity or the name Seven. Many people who might have had insight have died or knew Reba as Seven, a person with no past memories.

Denise Plunkett found Seven on a cold day in the late 1970s on the porch of St. Francis Catholic Worker House. It is a hospitality house for people who are homeless and others who want to live in a community.

Plunkett said the person she found spoke of themselves in the third person, called themselves a man and didn't answer personal questions.

When asked their name, they would often say "Mr. Seven."

Before too long, Seven became the house cook. When word of Seven's hearty casseroles and rice and bean dishes spread, crowds started lining up for meals.

"Nobody could have done more to help the homeless," Plunkett said of Seven.

Seven spent decades at the house before leaving in 2003 after a health scare. Seven passed out in the hallway, which doctors later said was diabetic shock, and was then moved to a nursing home for medical care.

Since Seven didn't have a legal name or known family, Chicago police launched an investigation, but were unsuccessful. Seven became a ward of the state and died in 2015.

Relatives who've learned more about Reba's later years have found comfort.

"We know she was cared for," said Amanda Ingram, who would have been Reba's great niece. "That is the best that my grandfather could have ever asked for."

Cook County investigators have updated the entry for Seven Doe in a federal database of missing people, adding Reba Bailey's name and photo. Their next step is a new gravestone and military honors in the spring.

The case could also change Illinois law.

The sheriff's office wants to amend the state's Missing Persons Identification Act to require postmortem fingerprints be checked against all available state and federal databases. The idea is a fuller search at the time of death could help identify people sooner.

In Reba's case, family could have had the chance to plan funeral services. Dart's office is drafting legislation.

Family members did consider moving Reba's body closer to family. But moving the body would be expensive and complicated.

"We decided as a family not to disturb her," Rick Bailey said. "At least we know where she is now."

States and Congress wrestle with cybersecurity at water utilities amid renewed federal warnings

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The tiny Aliquippa water authority in western Pennsylvania was perhaps the least-suspecting victim of an international cyberattack.

It had never had outside help in protecting its systems from a cyberattack, either at its existing plant that dates to the 1930s or the new \$18.5 million one it is building.

Then it — along with several other water utilities — was struck by what federal authorities say are Iranian-backed hackers targeting a piece of equipment specifically because it was Israeli-made.

"If you told me to list 10 things that would go wrong with our water authority, this would not be on the list," said Matthew Mottes, the chairman of the authority that handles water and wastewater for about 22,000 people in the woodsy exurbs around a one-time steel town outside Pittsburgh.

The hacking of the Municipal Water Authority of Aliquippa is prompting new warnings from U.S. security officials at a time when states and the federal government are wrestling with how to harden water utilities against cyberattacks.

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The danger, officials say, is hackers gaining control of automated equipment to shut down pumps that supply drinking water or contaminate drinking water by reprogramming automated chemical treatments. Besides Iran, other potentially hostile geopolitical rivals, including China, are viewed by U.S. officials as a threat.

A number of states have sought to step up scrutiny, although water authority advocates say the money and the expertise are what is really lacking for a sector of more than 50,000 water utilities, most of which are local authorities that, like Aliquippa's, serve corners of the country where residents are of modest means and cybersecurity professionals are scarce.

Besides, utilities say, it's difficult to invest in cybersecurity when upkeep of pipes and other water infrastructure is already underfunded, and some cybersecurity measures have been pushed by private water companies, sparking pushback from public authorities that it is being used as a back door to privatization.

Efforts took on new urgency in 2021 when the federal government's leading cybersecurity agency reported five attacks on water authorities over two years, four of them ransomware and a fifth by a former employee.

At the Aliquippa authority, Iranian hackers shut down a remotely controlled device that monitors and regulates water pressure at a pumping station. Customers weren't affected because crews alerted by an alarm quickly switched to manual operation — but not every water authority has a built-in manual backup system.

With inaction in Congress, a handful of states passed legislation to step up scrutiny of cybersecurity, including New Jersey and Tennessee. Before 2021, Indiana and Missouri had passed similar laws. A 2021 California law commissioned state security agencies to develop outreach and funding plans to improve cybersecurity in the agriculture and water sectors.

Legislation died in several states, including Pennsylvania and Maryland, where public water authorities fought bills backed by private water companies.

Private water companies say the bills would force their public counterparts to abide by the stricter regulatory standards that private companies face from utility commissions and, as a result, boost public confidence in the safety of tap water.

"It's protecting the nation's tap water," said Jennifer Kocher, a spokesperson for the National Association of Water Companies. "It is the most economical choice for most families, but it also has a lack of confidence from a lot of people who think they can drink it and every time there's one of these issues it undercuts the confidence in water and it undercuts people's willingness and trust in drinking it."

Opponents said the legislation is designed to foist burdensome costs onto public authorities and encourage their boards and ratepayers to sell out to private companies that can persuade state utility commissions to raise rates to cover the costs.

"This is a privatization bill," Justin Fiore of the Maryland Municipal League told Maryland lawmakers during a hearing last spring. "They're seeking to take public water companies, privatize them by expanding the burden, cutting out public funding."

For many authorities, the demands of cybersecurity tend to fade into the background of more pressing needs for residents wary of rate increases: aging pipes and increasing costs to comply with clean water regulations.

One critic, Pennsylvania state Sen. Katie Muth, a Democrat from suburban Philadelphia's Montgomery County, criticized a GOP-penned bill for lacking funding.

"People are drinking water that is below standards, but selling out to corporations who are going to raise rates on families across our state who cannot afford it is not a solution," Muth told colleagues during floor debate on a 2022 bill.

Pennsylvania state Rep. Rob Matzie, a Democrat whose district includes the Aliquippa water authority, is working on legislation to create a funding stream to help water and electric utilities pay for cybersecurity upgrades after he looked for an existing funding source and found none.

"The Aliquippa water and sewer authority? They don't have the money," Matzie said in an interview.

In March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed a new rule to require states to audit the

cybersecurity of water systems.

It was short-lived.

Three states — Arkansas, Missouri and Iowa — sued, accusing the agency of overstepping its authority and a federal appeals court promptly suspended the rule. The EPA withdrew the rule in October, although a deputy national security adviser, Anne Neuberger, told The Associated Press that it could have “identified vulnerabilities that were targeted in recent weeks.”

Two groups that represent public water authorities, the American Water Works Association and the National Rural Water Association, opposed the EPA rule and now are backing bills in Congress to address the issue in different ways.

One bill would roll out a tiered approach to regulation: more requirements for bigger or more complex water utilities. The other is an amendment to Farm Bill legislation to send federal employees called “circuit riders” into the field to help smaller and rural water systems detect cybersecurity weaknesses and address them.

If Congress does nothing, 6-year-old Safe Drinking Water Act standards will still be in place — a largely voluntary regime that both the EPA and cybersecurity analysts say has yielded minimal progress.

Meanwhile, states are in the midst of applying for grants from a \$1 billion federal cybersecurity program, money from the 2021 federal infrastructure law.

But water utilities will have to compete for the money with other utilities, hospitals, police departments, courts, schools, local governments and others.

Robert M. Lee, CEO of Dragos Inc., which specializes in cybersecurity for industrial-control systems, said the Aliquippa water authority’s story — that it had no cybersecurity help — is common.

“That story is tens of thousands of utilities across the country,” Lee said.

Because of that, Dragos has begun offering free access to its online support and software that helps detect vulnerabilities and threats for water and electric utilities that draw under \$100 million in revenue.

After Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022, Dragos tested the idea by rolling out software, hardware and installation at a cost of a couple million bucks for 30 utilities.

“It was amazing, the feedback,” Lee said. “You wonder, ‘Hey I think I can move the needle in this way’ ... and those 30 were like, ‘Holy crap, no one’s ever paid attention to us. No one’s ever tried to get us help.’”

Biden and Trump are poised for a potential rematch that could shake American politics

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

LACONIA, N.H. (AP) — U.S. presidential elections have been rocked in recent years by economic disaster, stunning gaffes, secret video and a pandemic. But for all the tumult that defined those campaigns, the volatility surrounding this year’s presidential contest has few modern parallels, posing profound challenges to the future of American democracy.

Not since the Supreme Court effectively decided the 2000 campaign in favor of Republican George W. Bush has the judiciary been so intertwined with presidential politics.

In the coming weeks, the high court is expected to weigh whether states can ban former President Donald Trump from the ballot for his role in leading the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Meanwhile, a federal appeals court is weighing Trump’s argument that he’s immune from prosecution.

The maneuvers are unfolding as prosecutors from New York to Washington and Atlanta move forward with 91 indictments across four criminal cases involving everything from Trump’s part in the insurrection to his efforts to overturn the 2020 election and his hush money paid to a porn actress.

Depending on how Trump’s appeals play out, he could be due in court as early as March 4, the day before Super Tuesday, raising the unprecedented prospect that he could close in on the GOP nomination from a courtroom.

On the Democratic side, President Joe Biden is seeking reelection as the high inflation that defined much of his first term appears to be easing. But that has done little to assuage restless voters or ease

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widespread concerns in both parties that, at 81, he's simply too old for the job.

And at least three serious candidates who have launched outsider presidential bids threaten to scramble the campaign and eat into the support from independent voters who were critical to Biden's success in 2020.

Facing such uncertainty, few expect the traditional rules of politics to apply in 2024. Jim Messina, who managed former President Barack Obama's reelection, said Trump could very well defeat Biden in the fall, even if the former president is in prison.

"We just don't know," Messina said. "Everyone in the world knows, especially me, that this election is going to be really, really close."

Implications for abortion, immigration and U.S. role in the world

The results will have long-term implications on everything from the future of abortion rights and immigration policy to the role of the U.S. in the world. A Trump victory would raise the possibility of the U.S. largely abandoning Ukraine as it seeks to repel Russia's invasion. Domestic politics could also test Biden's commitment to Israel, a policy that threatens to erode his standing with young voters and people of color who are critical elements of his coalition.

One of the few certainties at this point is that Biden is a virtual lock to be the Democratic nominee again, facing only token opposition in this year's primary despite overwhelming concerns within his own party about his physical and mental fitness. And though a few rivals are fighting furiously to stop Trump, he is well positioned to win the GOP nomination for the third consecutive election.

The strength of the GOP opposition to Trump will become more clear on Jan. 15 when the Iowa caucuses launch the nomination process. Trump holds a commanding lead in most national polls, although former U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis are fighting to stop him.

That hasn't been easy, however, as DeSantis has struggled to connect with voters and has embraced culture war topics that often left him competing for the same base of support as Trump. And Haley's pitch as a more sensible, moderate candidate was threatened last week when she was pressed on the cause of the Civil War and didn't mention slavery.

Allies of DeSantis and Haley privately concede that their best chance to wrestle the nomination away from Trump would come in a long-shot push for a contested convention in Wisconsin in July.

Many leaders in both parties are already convinced that Trump will be the GOP nominee. More than 90 House Republicans, 18 senators and seven governors have endorsed Trump. Haley and DeSantis have secured the endorsements of just six House Republicans, no senators and two governors combined.

"This will be one of the earliest primaries wrapped up in my lifetime," Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who endorsed Trump back in November 2022, said in an interview. "I'm already focused on the general election. ... There is going to be a political earthquake next November."

Biden vs. Trump

Public polling strongly suggests that voters do not want a rematch between Trump and Biden.

Most U.S. adults overall (56%) would be "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied with Biden as the Democratic presidential nominee in 2024, according to a poll conducted last month by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. A similar majority (58%) said they would be very or somewhat dissatisfied with Trump as the GOP's pick.

Perhaps because of such apathy, some voters simply don't believe Biden and Trump will end up on the general election ballot, despite strong evidence to the contrary. That's an idea that conservative strategist Sarah Longwell, who founded the Republican Accountability Project, says she hears regularly during weekly focus groups with voters across the political spectrum.

"Voters really aren't thinking about it, so they don't see the thing that's coming right at us — the most likely scenario, which is Trump vs. Biden," Longwell said. "But Trump is so dangerous. ... I wish the level of urgency from everybody matched the reality of where we are headed."

Threats to democracy

While concerns about Biden are centered on his age, Trump has increasingly embraced authoritarian messages that serve as clear warnings of his plans to dismantle democratic norms if he returns to the

White House.

Echoing strongmen leaders throughout history, Trump has framed his campaign as one of retribution and has spoken openly about using the power of government to pursue his political enemies. He has repeatedly harnessed rhetoric once used by Adolf Hitler to argue that immigrants entering the U.S. illegally are "poisoning the blood of our country." He said on Fox News last month that he would not be a dictator "except for day one." And he shared a word cloud last week to his social media account highlighting words like, "revenge," "power" and "dictatorship."

Biden, like his party more broadly, has leaned into concerns about the future of democracy should Trump return to the White House, but that has done little to improve his standing. Early polls reveal weakness among core segments of his coalition, including voters of color and young people.

People on Biden's team do not fear that his base will defect to Trump in the general election, but they privately worry some of the Democratic president's supporters may not vote at all. They're betting that Biden's achievements, which include landmark legislation on gun control, climate change and infrastructure, will eventually help overcome pervasive concerns about his age.

Ultimately, however, Biden's campaign believes that voters will rally behind the president once they fully understand that Trump could realistically return to the White House.

'This election will be a choice'

Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, who sits on Biden's advisory council, said the president's reelection campaign "knows it can't take any vote for granted," which is why the campaign has already invested heavily in efforts to mobilize Biden's diverse coalition.

"This election will be a choice — a choice between a president who has delivered historic results for the American people and someone who poses an existential threat to our democracy and freedoms," Dickens said. "We will win in November once we fully make the case, explain the stakes and make the choice clear."

Meanwhile, there is a sense of deep uncertainty on the ground in Iowa and New Hampshire, where Republican presidential candidates in particular have been showering primary voters with attention for much of the last year.

Rodney Martell, a 65-year-old Republican from Loudon, New Hampshire, said he's ready for the voting to begin. He's supporting Haley's primary bid, but said he'd support Trump in the general election if he had no other choice — even if Trump is a convicted felon.

Martell said he doubts the 2024 election will ultimately be a rematch of Trump and Biden, however: "Honestly, if it comes to that kind of race again, I think it could get pretty ugly."

More than 1,000 miles or 1,600 kilometers to the west, Susie Fortuna offered a similar assessment during a recent Haley campaign event in Coralville, Iowa. Fortuna lives in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, but she was in Iowa to visit family.

She isn't convinced that Biden and Trump will emerge as their party's nominees, either. The political year ahead, she said, feels "unsettling."

"I feel like there are things out there that we don't know yet, to be honest," Fortuna said.

Israel is pulling thousands of troops from Gaza in a possible precursor to a scaled-back offensive

By JOSEF FEDERMAN, WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military confirmed Monday that it was pulling thousands of troops out of the Gaza Strip, a step that could clear the way for a new long-term phase of lower-intensity fighting against the Hamas militant group.

The confirmation of the planned troop drawdown came the same day that Israel's Supreme Court struck down a key component of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's contentious judicial overhaul plan. While the plan is not directly connected to the war effort, it was the source of deep divisions inside Israel and had threatened the military's readiness before the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered the ongoing war.

Politicians warned against reigniting those divisions and harming the national unity that has prevailed

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throughout the Israel-Hamas war.

Netanyahu has vowed to press ahead with the military offensive until Hamas is crushed and the more than 100 hostages still held by the militant group in Gaza are freed.

But Israel has come under growing international pressure to scale back an offensive that has led to the deaths of nearly 22,000 Palestinians. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has repeatedly urged Israel to do more to protect Palestinian civilians, is expected in the region next week.

In its announcement, the army said that five brigades, or several thousand troops, would be taken out of Gaza in the coming weeks. Some will return to bases for further training or rest, while many older reservists will go home. The war has taken a toll on the economy by preventing reservists from going to their jobs, running their businesses or returning to university studies.

The army's chief spokesperson, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, did not say whether the withdrawal of some troops reflected a new phase of the war.

"The objectives of the war require prolonged fighting, and we are preparing accordingly," he told reporters late Sunday.

But the move is in line with the plans that Israeli leaders have outlined for a low-intensity campaign, expected to last for much of the year, that focuses on remaining Hamas strongholds and "pockets of resistance."

Israel has said it's close to operational control over most of northern Gaza, reducing the need for forces there. Yet fierce fighting has continued in other areas of the Palestinian territory, especially the south, where many of Hamas' forces remain intact and where most of Gaza's 2.3 million people have fled.

Israel has vowed to crush Hamas' military and governing capabilities in the ongoing war, which was sparked by the militant group's Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel in which 1,200 people were killed and 240 others were taken hostage.

Israel responded with an air, ground and sea offensive that has killed more than 21,900 people in Gaza, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count. The Israeli military says 173 soldiers have died since it launched its ground operation.

Israel also says, without providing evidence, that more than 8,000 militants have been killed. It blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll, saying the militants embed within residential areas, including schools and hospitals.

The war has displaced some 85% of Gaza's population, forcing tens of thousands of people in overcrowded shelters or teeming tent camps in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless bombed. Palestinians are left with a sense that nowhere is safe.

With tensions high across the region, the United States announced Monday that it would send an aircraft carrier strike group home and replace it with an amphibious assault ship and accompanying warships.

BATTLES IN THE SOUTH

In Khan Younis, a city in southern Gaza that Israel says is a key Hamas stronghold, residents reported airstrikes and shelling in the west and center of the city. Combat was also reported in urban refugee camps in central Gaza, where Israel expanded its offensive last week.

An Associated Press reporter saw at least 17 bodies, including those of four children, at a hospital in the central town of Deir al-Balah after a missile struck a house.

"It's our routine: bombings, massacres and martyrs," said Saeed Moustafa, a Palestinian from the Nuseirat camp.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Monday that 156 people had been killed in the past day. The Israeli military said an airstrike killed Adel Mismah, a regional commander of Hamas' elite Nukhba forces, in Deir al-Balah.

In Israel, Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the communities hit by Hamas on Oct. 7, announced Monday that Ilan Weiss, who was thought to have been kidnapped, is now believed to be dead. Weiss' daughter, Noga Weiss, 18; and wife, Shiri Weiss, 53; were held in captivity in Gaza and released on Nov. 25 during a weeklong cease-fire.

A TEST FOR UNITY

Groton Daily Independent

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The Israeli Supreme Court's landmark decision to strike down part of Netanyahu's planned judicial overhaul could reopen the fissures in Israeli society that preceded the war against Hamas.

The plan sparked months of mass protests and rattled the cohesion of Israel's military. Those divisions were largely put aside after Oct. 7.

Benny Gantz, a rival of Netanyahu's who joined the three-member War Cabinet, called on all sides to put aside their differences and focus on the war. "These are not days for political arguments. There are no winners and losers today," he said.

In Monday's decision, the court narrowly voted to overturn a law that prevents judges from striking down government decisions they deem "unreasonable." The law passed in July was the first part of the government's plan to curb the authority of unelected judges.

REGIONAL TENSIONS

The fighting in Gaza has threatened to spread across the region.

Israel has engaged in near-daily battles with Hezbollah militants in Lebanon, to Israel's north, and struck Iranian-linked targets in neighboring Syria as well.

Israel's warplanes and drones struck several areas in southern Lebanon, including a strike on the village of Kfar Kila that killed three people, state media and security officials said. Hezbollah said the three were some of its fighters.

Since the latest exchange of fire began along the Lebanon-Israel border on Oct. 8, 133 Hezbollah fighters and around 20 civilians have been killed in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have fired long-range missiles at Israel and attacked civilian cargo ships in the Red Sea.

The United States has sent warships to the Mediterranean and Red Seas, providing protection for Israel and underscoring concerns that the fighting could widen.

On Monday, the U.S. Navy announced that after months of extra duty at sea, the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier strike group would head home. The Ford will be replaced by the amphibious assault ship the USS Bataan and its accompanying warships.

Klee Benally, Navajo advocate for Indigenous people and environmental causes, dies in Phoenix

PHOENIX (AP) — Klee Benally, a Navajo man who advocated on behalf of Indigenous people and environmental causes, has died, his sister said. He was 48 years old.

Benally died Saturday at a Phoenix hospital, Jeneda Benally said. His cause of death was not disclosed.

Klee Benally was among the most vocal opponents of snowmaking at Arizona Snowbowl ski resort in Flagstaff. At least 13 tribes consider the mountain on public land to be sacred.

He protested police violence and racial profiling and was among activists who gathered outside metro Phoenix's NFL stadium in 2014 to denounce the offensive team name previously used by the franchise from Washington, D.C.

Benally advocated for the cleanup of abandoned mines, where uranium ore was extracted from the Navajo Nation over decades to support U.S. nuclear activities during the Cold War.

He also spoke out against an ordinance that, in a bid to address the problem of homelessness, had banned camping on public property in Flagstaff.

"There is no compassionate way to enforce the anti-camping ordinance," Benally said in 2018 when officials declined to alter the 2005 ordinance. "Life is already hard enough for our unsheltered relatives on the streets."

Benally was also a guitarist, and played with his sister and brother in the Native American punk rock band Blackfire.

NJ mayor says buses of migrants bound for NY are being dropped off at NJ train stations

SECAUCUS, N.J. (AP) — A New Jersey mayor says buses of migrants bound for New York City have been stopping at the train station in his town and others in an apparent effort to evade an executive order by New York's mayor trying to regulate how and when migrants can be dropped off in the city.

Secaucus Mayor Michael Gonnelli said Sunday that Secaucus police and town officials had been told by Hudson County officials about the arrival of buses at the train station in Secaucus Junction beginning Saturday. He said four buses were believed to have arrived and dropped off migrants who then took trains into New York City.

Gonnelli said the executive order signed recently by Mayor Eric Adams of New York requires bus operators to provide at least 32 hours' advance notice of arrivals and to limit the hours of drop-off times.

"It seems quite clear the bus operators are finding a way to thwart the requirements of the executive order by dropping migrants at the train station in Secaucus and having them continue to their final destination," Gonnelli said in a statement. He suggested that the order may be "too stringent" and is resulting in "unexpected consequences."

Gonnelli called the tactic a "loophole" bus operators have found to allow migrants to reach New York City, and added that state police have reported that "this is now happening at train stations throughout the state." Gonnelli vowed to work with state and county officials and to "continue to monitor this situation closely."

A message posted on a social media account for Jersey City said the city's emergency management agency reports that "approximately 10 buses from various locations in Texas and one from Louisiana have arrived at various transit stations throughout the state, including Secaucus, Fanwood, Edison, Trenton." About 397 migrants had arrived at those locations since Saturday, the post Sunday said.

"This is clearly going to be a statewide conversation so it is important that we wait for some guidance from the governor here on next steps" as buses continue, the post said.

Tyler Jones, a spokesperson for New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, told lehighvalleylive.com that New Jersey is being used as a transit point for migrants, almost all of whom continued on to New York City. Jones said New Jersey officials are "closely coordinating with federal and local officials" including our colleagues across the Hudson."

In New York City, a spokesperson for City Hall said Monday that the city had "led the nation in responding to this national humanitarian crisis, providing compassion, care, shelter, and vital services to more than 161,000 migrants" since spring 2022. The spokesperson characterized the executive order as "part of that effort, ensuring the safety and well-being of both migrants and city staff."

The Texas governor, the spokesperson said, was treating asylum seekers "like political pawns" and dropping off families in surrounding areas "in the cold, dark of night with train tickets to travel to New York City" as was done in Chicago in response to a similar executive order there.

"This is exactly why we have been coordinating with surrounding cities and counties since before issuing our order to encourage them to take similar executive action to protect migrants against this cruelty," the spokesperson said.

Adams last week joined mayors of Chicago and Denver to renew pleas for more federal help and coordination with Texas over the growing number of asylum-seekers arriving in their cities by bus and plane.

"We cannot allow buses with people needing our help to arrive without warning at any hour of day and night," Adams said at a virtual news conference Wednesday with the other mayors. "This not only prevents us from providing assistance in an orderly way, it puts those who have already suffered" so much in danger.

The Democratic mayors, who met last month with President Joe Biden, want more federal funds, efforts to expand work authorization, and a schedule for when buses arrive. Cities have already spent hundreds of millions of dollars to house, transport and provide medical care for migrants.

Japan lowers tsunami warning after a series of earthquakes but tells people to stay away from coast

By YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan dropped its highest-level tsunami alert after issuing one following a series of major earthquakes Monday but told residents of coastal areas not to return to their homes as deadly waves could still come.

The quakes, the largest of which had a magnitude of 7.6, started a fire and collapsed buildings on the west coast of Japan's main island, Honshu. It was unclear how many people might have been killed or hurt.

The Japan Meteorological Agency reported more than a dozen strong quakes in the Japan Sea off the coast of Ishikawa and nearby prefectures starting shortly after 4 p.m. local time.

At least six homes were damaged by the quakes, with people trapped inside, government spokesman Yoshimasa Hayashi said. A fire broke out in Wajima city, Ishikawa Prefecture, and electricity was out for more than 30,000 households, he said.

The meteorological agency initially issued a major tsunami warning for Ishikawa and lower-level tsunami warnings or advisories for the rest of the western coast of Honshu, as well as for the northernmost of the country's main islands, Hokkaido.

Hayashi stressed that it was critical for people to move away from coastal areas.

"Every minute counts. Please evacuate to a safe area immediately," he said.

The warning was downgraded to a regular tsunami several hours later, meaning the sea could still generate waves of up to 3 meters (10 feet). Aftershocks could also slam the same area over the next few days, the agency said.

Japanese public broadcaster NHK TV initially warned that torrents of water could reach as high as 5 meters (16.5 feet). The network continued to air warnings hours later as aftershocks rocked the region.

People returning to get their wallets and other belongings have been known to be swept away and drowned even hours after the first evacuation warning. People were evacuated to stadiums, where they will likely have to stay for a few days.

Japanese media footage showed people running through the streets, and red smoke spewing from a fire in a residential neighborhood. Photos showed a crowd of people, including a woman with a baby on her back, standing by huge cracks that had ripped through the pavement.

Some people sustained minor injuries when they tripped and fell while fleeing, or objects fell off shelves and hit them, according to NHK.

Hayashi said no reports of deaths or injuries were confirmed from the quakes, saying the situation was still unclear. Japan's military was taking part in rescue efforts, he said.

Bullet trains in the area were halted, although some parts of the service were restored by evening. Parts of a highway were also closed, and water pipes had burst, according to NHK. Some cell phone services in the region weren't working.

The Meteorological Agency said in a nationally broadcast news conference that more major quakes could hit the area over the next week, especially in the next two or three days.

More than a dozen strong quakes had been detected in the region, with risks of setting off landslides and houses collapsing, according to the agency.

Takashi Wakabayashi, a worker at a convenience store in Ishikawa Prefecture, said some items had tumbled from the shelves, but the biggest problem was the huge crowd of people who arrived to stock up on bottled water, rice balls and bread.

"We have customers at three times the level of usual," he said.

Tsunami warnings were also issued for parts of North Korea and Russia.

The Japanese government has set up a special emergency center to gather information on the quakes and tsunami and relay them speedily to residents to ensure safety, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters.

U.S. President Joe Biden said in a statement that his administration was in touch with Japanese officials and "ready to provide any necessary assistance for the Japanese people."

Japan is an extremely quake-prone nation, but a tsunami warning of the magnitude of Monday's had not been issued since a major quake and tsunami caused meltdowns at a nuclear plant in March 2011.

Government spokesman Hayashi told reporters that nuclear plants in the affected area did not report any irregularities Monday. Nuclear regulators said no rises in radiation levels were detected at the monitoring posts in the region.

The USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier is returning home after extended deployment defending Israel

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After months of extra duty at sea providing protection for Israel, the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier strike group will be heading home, the Navy announced Monday.

The Ford and its accompanying warships will be replaced by the amphibious assault ship the USS Bataan and its accompanying warships, the USS Mesa Verde and the USS Carter Hall. The three vessels had been in the Red Sea and have been transiting toward the Eastern Mediterranean over the last few days.

The Ford will sail for home "in the coming days," the U.S. 6th Fleet, the European-based U.S. naval command that's responsible for ships sailing in the Mediterranean, said in a statement.

The Ford was sent to the Eastern Mediterranean to be within striking distance of Israel since the day after Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks. The carrier stayed in the Eastern Mediterranean while its accompanying warships had sailed into the Red Sea, where they repeatedly intercepted incoming ballistic missiles and attack drones fired from Houthi-controlled Yemen. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited the Ford last month.

Since it was extended in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Ford and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier have been part of a two-carrier presence bracketing the Israel-Hamas war, underscoring U.S. concerns that the conflict will widen. The Eisenhower has recently patrolled near the Gulf of Aden, at the mouth of the Red Sea waterway, where so many commercial vessels have come under attack in recent weeks.

On Sunday, helicopters from the Eisenhower and its destroyer the USS Gravelly responded to a distress call from the container ship Maersk Hangzhou, which was under attack by four Iranian-backed Houthi small boats. As the helicopters responded, the boats fired at them with crew-served weapons and small arms and the helicopters returned fire, sinking three of the four boats and killing their crews, the U.S. Central Command said.

The incessant attacks on the commercial ships have led some companies to suspend transits through the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Gulf of Aden to the southern Red Sea and then the Suez Canal.

The Bataan's accompanying warship the Mesa Verde is a transport dock ship, carrying approximately 2,000 Marines from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit. Those Marines provide "forces capable of supporting a wide range of missions," the U.S. 6th Fleet said. The Carter Hall is a dock landing ship, which carries amphibious landing craft and their crews. Both vessels and the Bataan can support rotary aircraft; the Bataan can also carry and support Marine Corps' F-35 vertical takeoff fighter aircraft.

The New Year offers a clean slate for long-elusive resolutions. Will 2024 be the year to keep them?

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and DANIEL KOZIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It's an annual end-of-year exercise in futility for many. But a clean slate awaits at the stroke of midnight for the next round of resolutions.

From the first spray of fireworks to the closing chorus of "Auld Lang Syne" 366 days into the future — 2024 is a leap year — it could be the year for finally achieving long-elusive goals, fulfilling aspirations and being resolute on all those New Year resolutions.

"As humans, we are creatures that aspire," said Omid Fotuhi, a social psychologist who is a motivation and performance researcher.

"The fact that we have goals, the fact that we want to set goals is just a manifestation of that internal and almost universal desire to want to stretch, to want to reach, to want to expand and grow," said Fotuhi, the director of learning innovation at Western Governors University Labs and a research associate at the University of Pittsburgh.

"New Year's resolutions are one of those ways in which we do that," he said. "There's something very liberating about a fresh start. Imagine starting on a blank canvas. Anything is possible."

If so, could this be the year to run a marathon, vanquish (or make peace with) old foes such as the bathroom scale and a thickening waist? Maybe learn Mandarin or register to vote, and actually vote? So many questions, and so much time to delay.

Tim Williams used to issue himself a panoply of resolutions: lose weight, drink less, exercise more and yada yada.

Now, he doesn't bother.

"In the past, I would make them, and I would fail or give up on them or whatever," said Williams, a part-time resident of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Carla Valeria Silva de Santos, a Florida transplant from Brazil, wants to learn to play the guitar. A native Portuguese speaker, she wants to learn Spanish and improve her English.

With any resolution, she said, the ultimate goal is "to improve your life and be in peace with yourself."

Josh Moore, another Fort Lauderdale resident, sees things in line with the natural philosopher Sir Isaac Newton and physics. For every action there must be an equal reaction.

"If you do something like eat a bunch of candy or a bunch of desserts at a holiday party, go run," he said while interrupting a jog with his dog. "Maybe you went out drinking too much and you might have a hangover. But then next day when you're feeling better, go to the gym."

Too many people are too soft on themselves, he posited. "You've got to actually hold yourself accountable."

Resolutions don't have to be big, grandiose or overly ambitious, Fotuhi said.

Even if they are, he said value should not exclusively be derived from the achievement but also be measured by what you become by trying to better yourself.

"Goals are only there to serve a function to get you started," Fotuhi said. "If they don't do that, then maybe that's not the appropriate goal for you."

In other words, it is a time to recalibrate goals and expectations, he said, adding that some people hang on to outdated goals for way too long.

"If you set a goal that's overly ambitious, that doesn't have the effect of getting you excited and making you believe that it's possible, then maybe you should think about a goal that's a little bit more within your reach — starting with a 5k for instance, then moving up to 10K," Fotuhi said.

An Israeli who fought Hamas for 2 months indicted for impersonating a soldier and stealing weapons

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

Jerusalem (AP) — An Israeli man who never served in the military was charged with impersonating a soldier and stealing weapons after sneaking into an army unit and joining the fighting against Hamas.

According to an indictment filed Sunday, Roi Yifrach, 35, took advantage of the chaotic situation in the aftermath of Hamas' Oct. 7 attack to join combat operations and steal large amounts of military gear, including weapons, munitions, and sensitive communications equipment.

Israeli media said he spent time fighting in Gaza and even appeared in a photo next to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during one of his visits to soldiers in the field.

Yifrach went to southern Israel on Oct. 7 and presented himself alternately as a combat soldier from elite anti-terrorism units, a bomb dispersal expert, and a member of the Shin Bet internal security service, the indictment said.

Police arrested Yifrach on Dec. 17 and found large amounts of weapons, grenades, magazines, walkie-talkies, a drone, uniforms, and other military equipment in his possession.

Eitan Sabag, Yifrach's lawyer, told Israel's Channel 12 TV that Yifrach went down to the south to help as a paramedic with a first responder organization, and fought bravely to defend Israel for more than two months. "He was helping people and helping rescue people, all under fire, while also fighting against terrorists," Sabag said.

Police also detained four other people, including a police officer, in connection with the weapons theft.

Israel's Supreme Court overturns a key component of Netanyahu's polarizing judicial overhaul

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's Supreme Court struck down a key component of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's contentious judicial overhaul Monday, delivering a landmark decision that could reopen the fissures in Israeli society that preceded the country's ongoing war against Hamas.

The planned overhaul sparked months of mass protests, threatened to trigger a constitutional crisis between the judicial and legislative branches of government, and rattled the cohesion of Israel's powerful military.

Those divisions were largely put aside after Hamas militants carried out a bloody cross-border attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7, triggering a war that has raged in Gaza for nearly three months. But Monday's court decision could reignite those tensions even while the country remains at war.

Justice Minister Yariv Levin, a Netanyahu ally and the architect of the overhaul, lambasted the court's decision, saying it demonstrated "the opposite of the spirit of unity required these days for the success of our soldiers on the front."

The ruling "will not discourage us," Levin said without indicating whether the government would try to revive his plan in the short term. "As the campaigns are continuing on different fronts, we will continue to act with restraint and responsibility," he said.

In Monday's decision, the court narrowly voted to overturn a law passed in July that prevents judges from striking down government decisions they deem "unreasonable." Opponents had argued that Netanyahu's efforts to remove the standard of reasonability opens the door to corruption and improper appointments of unqualified cronies to important positions.

The law was the first in a planned overhaul of the Israeli justice system. The overhaul was put on hold after Hamas militants carried out their Oct. 7 attack, killing some 1,200 people and kidnapping 240 others. Israel immediately declared war, and is pressing forward with an offensive that Palestinian health officials say has killed nearly 22,000 people in Gaza.

In an 8-7 decision, the Supreme Court justices struck down the law because of the "severe and unprecedented harm to the core character of the State of Israel as a democratic country."

The justices also ruled 12-3 that they had the authority to overturn so-called "Basic Laws," major pieces of legislation that serve as a sort of constitution for Israel.

It was a significant blow to Netanyahu and his hard-line allies, who claimed the national legislature, not the high court, should have the final word over the legality of legislation and other key decisions. The justices said the Knesset, or parliament, does not have "omnipotent" power.

Netanyahu's government could decide to ignore Monday's ruling, setting the stage for a constitutional showdown over which branch of government has ultimate authority.

The court issued its decision because its outgoing president, Esther Hayut, is retiring, and Monday was her last day on the job.

Netanyahu and his allies announced their sweeping plan to reshape the judiciary shortly after taking office a year ago. It calls for curbing the power of the judges, including by limiting the Supreme Court's ability to review parliamentary decisions and changing the way judges are appointed.

Supporters said the changes aim to strengthen democracy by circumscribing the authority of unelected judges and turning over more powers to elected officials. But opponents see the overhaul as a power grab by Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption charges, and an assault on a key watchdog.

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The Movement for Quality Government in Israel, a good-government group that opposed the legislation, called the Supreme Court's ruling "a tremendous public victory for those who seek democracy."

"Only an unreasonable government, one that acts unreasonably, that makes unreasonable moves, abolishes the reasonability standard," the group's chairman, Eliad Shraga, said.

Before the Israel-Hamas war, hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets in weekly protests against the government. Among the demonstrators were military reservists, including fighter pilots and members of other elite units, who said they would stop reporting for duty if the overhaul was passed. Reservists make up the backbone of the Israeli military.

While the reservists quickly returned to duty after the Oct. 7 attacks in a show of unity, it remains unclear what would happen if the overhaul efforts were revived. A resumption of the protests could undermine national unity and affect the military's readiness if soldiers refused to report for duty.

Under the Israeli system, the prime minister governs through a majority coalition in parliament — in effect, giving him control over the executive and legislative branches of government.

As a result, the Supreme Court plays a critical oversight role. Critics say that by seeking to weaken the judiciary, Netanyahu and his allies are trying to erode the country's checks and balances and consolidate power over the third, independent branch of government.

Netanyahu's allies include an array of ultranationalist and religious parties with a list of grievances against the court.

His allies have called for increased West Bank settlement construction, annexation of the occupied territory, perpetuating military draft exemptions for ultra-Orthodox men, and limiting the rights of LGBTQ+ people and Palestinians.

The U.S. had previously urged Netanyahu to put the plans on hold and seek a broad consensus across the political spectrum.

Peter Magubane, a South African photographer who captured 40 years of apartheid, dies at age 91

By GERALD IMRAY Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — Peter Magubane, a fearless photographer who captured the violence and horror of South Africa's apartheid era of racial oppression, and was entrusted with documenting Nelson Mandela's first years of freedom after his release from prison, has died. He was 91.

Magubane died Monday, according to the South African National Editors' Forum, which said it had been informed of his death by his family.

He was a "legendary photojournalist," the editors' forum said. The South African government said Magubane "covered the most historic moments in the liberation struggle against apartheid."

Magubane photographed 40 years of apartheid South Africa, including the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, the trial of Mandela and others in 1964, and the Soweto uprising of 1976, when thousands of Black students protested against the apartheid government's law making the Afrikaans language compulsory in school.

The Soweto uprising became a pivotal moment in the struggle for democracy in South Africa after police opened fire on the young protesters, killing at least 176 of them and drawing international outrage. Magubane's award-winning photographs told the world about the killings.

Magubane became a target of the apartheid government after photographing a protest outside a jail where Mandela's then-wife Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was being held in 1969.

Magubane was jailed and kept in solitary confinement for more than a year-and-a-half. He was imprisoned numerous times during his career and subjected to a five-year ban that prevented him from working or even leaving his home without police permission. He said he was shot 17 times with shotgun pellets by apartheid police while on assignment and was beaten and had his nose broken by police when he refused to give up the photographs he took of the Soweto uprisings.

Faced with the option of leaving South Africa to go into exile because he was a marked man by the apartheid regime, he chose to stay and continue taking photographs.

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"I said, 'no I will remain here. I will fight apartheid with my camera,'" he said in a recent interview with national broadcaster SABC.

While Magubane photographed some of the most brutal violence, he also created searing images of everyday life under apartheid that resonated just as much.

One of his most celebrated photographs was a 1956 image of a Black maid sitting on a bench designated for whites only while seemingly caressing the neck of a white child under her care in a wealthy Johannesburg suburb. The photo spoke of the absurdity of the forced system of racial segregation given that so many white children were looked after by Black women.

Magubane began his career at the South African magazine, Drum, gained fame at the Rand Daily Mail newspaper and also worked for Time magazine and Sports Illustrated, earning international recognition.

He was appointed official photographer to Mandela after the anti-apartheid leader was released from prison in 1990 and photographed Mandela up until he was elected the first Black president of South Africa in historic all-race elections in 1994.

He said his favorite photograph of Mandela was him dancing at his 72nd birthday party months after being released after 27 years in prison.

"You can see the joy of freedom shining in his eyes," Magubane said.

More Americans think foreign policy should be a top US priority for 2024, an AP-NORC poll finds

By WILL WEISSERT and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In this time of war overseas, more Americans think foreign policy should be a top focus for the U.S. government in 2024, with a new poll showing international concerns and immigration rising in importance with the public.

About 4 in 10 U.S. adults named foreign policy topics in an open-ended question that asked people to share up to five issues for the government to work on in the next year, according to a December poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

That's about twice as many who mentioned the topic in the AP-NORC poll conducted last year.

Long-standing economic worries still overshadow other issues. But the new poll's findings point to increased concern about U.S. involvement overseas — 20% voiced that sentiment in the poll, versus 5% a year ago.

It also shows that the Israeli-Hamas war is feeding public anxiety. The conflict was mentioned by 5%, while almost no one cited it a year ago. The issue has dominated geopolitics since Israel declared war on Hamas in Gaza after that group's Oct. 7 attack on Israeli soil.

Four percent of U.S. adults mentioned the conflict between Russia and Ukraine as something for their government to focus on this year. That's similar to the 6% who mentioned it at the end of 2022.

Foreign policy has gained importance among respondents from both parties. Some 46% of Republicans named it, up from 23% last year. And 34% of Democrats list foreign policy as a focal point, compared with 16% a year ago.

Warren E. Capito, a Republican from Gordonsville, Virginia, worries China could soon invade Taiwan, creating a third major potential source of global conflict for the U.S. "They would love to have us split three ways," he said of China, and "we're already spread so thin."

Immigration is also a rising bipartisan concern.

Overall, the poll found that concerns about immigration climbed to 35% from 27% last year. Most Republicans, 55%, say the government needs to focus on immigration in 2024, while 22% of Democrats listed immigration as a priority. That's up from 45% and 14%, respectively, compared with December 2022.

Janet Brewer has lived all her life in San Diego, across from Tijuana, Mexico, and said the situation on the border has deteriorated in recent years.

"It's a disaster," said Brewer, 69, who works part time after running a secretarial and legal and medical transcription small business. "It's crazy."

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The politics of foreign military aid and immigration policy are entangled, with President Joe Biden's administration promoting a \$110 billion package that includes aid for Ukraine and Israel that remains stalled in Congress while Republicans push for a deal allowing major changes in immigration policy and stricter enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Brewer said she wouldn't vote for Biden or a Republican for president in 2024, and may opt for independent Robert F. Kennedy Jr. But she also questions whether a change in the White House would necessarily improve immigration policy.

As for foreign aid, she said: "I know that we need to help. But come on. We've done enough."

Even as immigration and foreign policy rose as concerns, those issues were no match for worries about the economy. Inflation has fallen, unemployment is low and the U.S. has repeatedly defied predictions of a recession — yet this poll adds to a string of them showing a gloomy outlook on the economy.

Some 76% of U.S. adults said this time that they want the government to work on issues related to the economy in 2024, nearly the same as the 75% who said so at this point in 2022.

About 85% of Republicans and 65% of Democrats name the economy as a top issue. But Republicans are more likely than Democrats to want the government to address some specific economic issues: on inflation 41% vs. 22% and on government spending or debt, 22% vs. 7%.

Meanwhile, 3 in 10 U.S. adults listed inflation as an issue that the government should focus on, unchanged from 2022.

The economy is a top issue mentioned by 18- to 29-year-olds (84%), followed by inflation specifically (39%), personal finances issues (38%) and foreign policy (34%). In the same age bracket, 32% mentioned education or school loans as something for the government to address in 2024. That's despite the Biden administration trying new, more modest efforts to cancel debts after the Supreme Court struck down its larger original push.

Among those 30 and older, only 19% mention student loans. But Travis Brown, a 32-year-old forklift operator in Las Vegas, noted that he's back to getting calls seeking payment of his student loans.

"Right now, with the economy, wages are not matching," Brown said. "Blue collar's going away and I don't see how that's going to boost an economy. An economy thrives off the working class. Not off the rich."

Brown also suggested that the U.S. is too focused on shipping aid to its overseas allies.

"I care about others, I do," he said. "But when you sit here and say, 'I just sent \$50 million over to Israel' and then I go outside and I see half a neighborhood rundown ... you've got to take care of home."

One possible sign that larger sentiments on the economy could be improving slightly is that overall mentions of personal financial issues declined some, with 30% mentioning them now compared with 37% last year. Drops occurred for Democrats, 27% vs. 33%, and among Republicans, falling to 30% compared with 37% in 2022.

One-quarter of U.S. adults say 2024 will be a better year than 2023 for them personally, and 24% expect it will be a worse year. Some 37% of Republicans expect it'll be a worse year for them, compared with 20% of independents and 13% of Democrats.

Just 5% of U.S. adults are "extremely" or "very" confident that the federal government can make progress on the important problems and issues facing the country in 2024, with 7% of Democrats and 11% of independents being optimistic, compared with 1% of Republicans.

Brown is a Democrat but said he was disillusioned enough to perhaps sit out the presidential election — especially if it proves to be a 2020 rematch between Biden and former President Donald Trump, who has built a commanding early lead in the 2024 Republican primary.

"I don't think I will participate and maybe that's bad," Brown said. "But, it's like, you're losing faith."

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.

Zapatista indigenous rebel movement marks 30 years since its armed uprising in southern Mexico

By EDGAR H. CLEMENTE Associated Press

OCOSINGO, Mexico (AP) — Members and supporters of the Zapatista indigenous rebel movement celebrated the 30th anniversary of their brief armed uprising in southern Mexico on Monday even as their social base erodes and violence spurred by drug cartels encroaches on their territory.

Hundreds gathered in the remote community of Dolores Hidalgo in the preceding days to mark the occasion. Some 1,500 young Zapatistas donning uniforms — black balaclavas, green caps and red kerchiefs — stood in formation listening to speeches early Monday.

Subcommander Moises — his nom de guerre — called for the Zapatistas to continue organizing themselves to fight to maintain their autonomy, freedom and democracy.

“We’re alone, like 30 years ago, because alone we have found the new path that we are going to follow,” Moises said. He noted the continuing need to defend their communities from violence. “We don’t need to kill soldiers and bad governments, but if they come we’re going to defend ourselves.”

In November, it was Subcommander Moises who sent a statement saying the Zapatistas had decided to dissolve the “autonomous municipalities” they had established.

At the time, Moises cited the waves of gang violence that have hit the area of Chiapas that borders Guatemala, but did not say whether that was a reason for dissolving the townships. The area held by the Zapatistas includes land near the border.

Details about what will replace the autonomous municipalities remain scarce, but it appears they will reorganize at more of a community level.

The Zapatistas were launched publicly on Jan. 1, 1994 to demand greater Indigenous rights.

Hilario Lorenzo Ruiz saw a number of his friends die in those early days of clashes with the Mexican army in Ocosingo, one of the five municipalities the Zapatistas took control of in January 1994.

Years later he left, demoralized by the movement’s limited results in areas like health access, education, land reform and employment.

Reflecting this week, Ruiz said perhaps the movement’s greatest achievement was drawing the Mexican government’s and the world’s attention to the impoverished state of Chiapas. While some land was redistributed, access to basic services remains poor, he said.

“Even this improvement is relative, we can’t say we’re well, a lot is lacking,” Ruiz said. “Not even in the municipal center is the health service good. We come here to the hospital and there’s nothing.”

The levels of poverty now in Chiapas remain stubbornly similar to what they were 30 years ago when the Zapatistas appeared, according to government data.

Support for the movement has eroded with time and Ruiz lamented that younger generations have not carried the same convictions to maintain the struggle.

Gerardo Alberto González, a professor in the Department of Public Health at the Southern Border College in San Cristobal de las Casas, who has observed the Zapatistas for decades, said the group successfully transitioned from armed conflict to politics and achieved a level of autonomy and recognition for Mexico’s Indigenous peoples that hadn’t existed before.

González said the Zapatistas should be lauded for their contributions to Mexico’s democratization. But after 30 years, the Zapatistas’ ranks have been thinned by outward migration and the incursion of drug traffickers, he said.

González also faulted internal power struggles and a lack of turnover in leadership positions, which have been held by many of the same people for years.

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Purdue remains No. 1 in AP Top 25, Gonzaga falls to No. 24 but runs poll streak to 142 weeks

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

Purdue remained atop the AP Top 25 men's college basketball poll for the third straight week Monday, while Gonzaga dropped to No. 24 after a loss to San Diego State but kept alive its streak of 142 consecutive weeks in the poll.

The Boilermakers picked up three more first-place votes and had 49 of 63 from the national media panel, easily outdistancing second-place Kansas, which received five first-place nods. Houston remained third despite keeping its perfect record intact with a victory over Penn and picking up the other nine first-place votes.

UConn and Tennessee each moved up one spot to round out the top five following Arizona's loss to Stanford on Sunday.

Meanwhile, the Bulldogs fell 11 spots from No. 13 after their 84-74 loss to San Diego State. Gonzaga has been ranked in every poll since Jan. 11, 2016, but that streak is in jeopardy after coach Mark Few's team dropped to 9-4 with no Quad 1 wins this season.

"These guys have some great fight and spirit and a lot of substance to them," Few said, "but at this point, we should be pretty well along on our way on some of the mental errors we're making, and we're just not quite."

The Bulldogs were 11th in the preseason poll and climbed as high as seventh before three losses in their past five games.

"We've got to keep that fight," Few said, "and we have to clean up some of these missed assignments."

Arizona coach Tommy Lloyd knows something about missed defensive assignments. The Wildcats, who spent two weeks at No. 1 earlier this season, fell from fourth to 10th after the Cardinal rolled to a 100-82 victory in their Pac-12 matchup.

The Wildcats' second loss in three games allowed a bunch of teams to jump ahead of them: Kentucky climbed two spots to sixth, Marquette moved up three spots to seventh, North Carolina rose to eighth and Illinois climbed two spots to ninth.

Oklahoma began the next 10, with Big 12 newcomer BYU right behind. Colorado State climbed back to No. 13 to match the best ranking in school history, set earlier this season, while Duke, Memphis and Clemson were right behind the Rams.

FAU dropped from a program-best seventh to No. 17 as voters grappled with the odd resume the Owls have put together this season. They beat Texas A&M and earned a marquee win with a double-overtime victory over Arizona, but they lost to Bryant and were upset by Florida Gulf Coast on Saturday night.

"They outplayed us in every facet of the game," Owls coach Dusty May said afterward. "As a group, we haven't handled success as well as we need to. As we close the 2023 preconference schedule, we are pleased where we are overall, but what we learned is our highs are very high and our lows are relatively low."

Baylor was No. 18, with James Madison and Texas rounding out the top 20. The final five in the first poll of 2024 were Wisconsin, unbeaten Mississippi, Providence, struggling Gonzaga and Auburn, which is ranked for the first time this season.

RISING AND FALLING

Memphis made the biggest positive move, climbing four spots to No. 15 after beating Austin Peay, while Marquette rose three spots to seventh after knocking off No. 22 Creighton on Saturday. Gonzaga dropped 11 spots, FAU fell 10 and Arizona dropped six as they took losses on what was a relatively light slate of games during the holidays.

IN AND OUT

Auburn moved into the poll for the first time since Jan. 30, 2023, after improving to 10-2 with a victory over Chattanooga. The Tigers took their spot in the Top 25 from the Bluejays, whose 72-67 loss to Marquette was their third in four games.

CONFERENCE WATCH

There were 10 conferences represented in the poll this week, led by six from the Big 12, which also had four of the top 12 teams in the nation. The SEC was next with four, followed by the Big Ten, Big East and ACC with three apiece.

Colorado mother suspected of killing her 2 children and wounding a third arrested in United Kingdom

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press/Report for America

A Colorado mother suspected of killing two of her young children and injuring a third was arrested Saturday in the United Kingdom, according to the Colorado Springs Police Department.

Kimberlee Singler's 9-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son were found dead on Dec. 19 when police responded to a report of a burglary at their home. Police later said the report turned out to be unfounded.

Singler, 35, initially cooperated with police but disappeared during the investigation, said Ira Cronin, spokesperson for the Colorado Springs Police Department. Authorities were unable to apprehend her after obtaining an arrest warrant Tuesday on charges of murder and attempted murder, among other allegations.

Singler was not under surveillance and was last seen in Colorado Springs on Dec. 23, said Cronin.

Authorities did not provide further details on the overseas arrest, but said they are working with multiple law enforcement agencies.

Attempts to reach Singler for comment through phone numbers listed for her were unsuccessful. Cronin said he didn't know if she has an attorney.

When police first responded to Singler's home, they found her with minor injuries, the two children's bodies and Singler's 11-year-old daughter hurt. At first, Singler was treated as a burglary victim, said Cronin.

The injured girl was hospitalized for a few days before being released and is recovering in Colorado Springs, said Cronin.

The children's deaths came amid an ongoing legal battle between Singler and her ex-husband over parenting time and other issues, according to court filings.

The Empire State rings in the new year with a pay bump for minimum-wage workers

Associated Press undefined

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York's minimum-wage workers had more than just the new year to celebrate Monday, with a pay bump kicking in as the clock ticked over to 2024.

In the first of a series of annual increases slated for the Empire State, the minimum wage increased to \$16 in New York City and some of its suburbs, up from \$15. In the rest of the state, the new minimum wage is \$15, up from \$14.20.

The state's minimum wage is expected to increase every year until it reaches \$17 in New York City and its suburbs, and \$16 in the rest of the state by 2026. Future hikes will be tied to the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers, a measurement of inflation.

New York is one of 22 states getting minimum wage rises in the new year, according to a recent report by the Economic Policy Institute.

In California, the minimum wage increased to \$16, up from \$15.50, while in Connecticut it increased to \$15.69 from the previous rate of \$15.

This most recent pay bump in New York is part of an agreement made last year between Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul and the state Legislature. The deal came over the objections of some employers, as well as some liberal Democrats who said it didn't go high enough.

The federal minimum wage in the United States has stayed at \$7.25 per hour since 2009, but states and some localities are free to set higher amounts. Thirty states, including New Mexico and Washington, have done so.

'Wonka' ends the year No. 1 at the box office, 2023 sales reach \$9 billion in post-pandemic best

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Hollywood closed out an up and down 2023 with "Wonka" regaining No. 1 at the box office, strong sales for "The Color Purple" and an overall \$9 billion in ticket sales that improved on 2022's grosses but fell about \$2 billion shy of pre-pandemic norms.

The New Year's weekend box office this year lacked a true blockbuster. (This time last year, "Avatar: The Way of Water" was inundating theaters.) Instead, a wide array of films — among them "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom," "The Boys in the Boat," "Migration," "Ferrari," "The Iron Claw" and "Anyone But You" — sought to break out over the year's most lucrative box-office corridor.

The top choice, though, remained "Wonka," Paul King's musical starring Timothée Chalamet as a young Willy Wonka. In its third weekend, the Warner Bros. release collected an estimated \$24 million Friday through Sunday and \$31.8 million factoring in estimates for the Monday holiday. That brings the film's domestical total to \$142.5 million.

That bested Warner Bros.' own "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom," which, like previous DC superhero films, is struggling. James Wan's "Aquaman" sequel starring Jason Momoa took in \$19.5 million in its second weekend to bring its two-week haul to a modest \$84.7 million including New Year's Day estimates.

The original "Aquaman," which ultimately surpassed \$1.1 billion worldwide, had grossed \$215.4 million over a similar period in 2018 — more than double that of the sequel. Internationally, "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom" added \$50.5 million.

Weekend sales only tell part of the story this time of year. From Christmas through New Year's, when kids are out of school and many adults aren't working, every day is like Saturday to film distributors.

"The Color Purple," Blitz Bazawule's adaptation of the 2005 stage musical from Alice Walker's novel, debuted on Monday and led all movies on Christmas with \$18 million. Through the week, the Warner Bros. release has grossed \$50 million, including \$13 million Friday through Sunday. That's a strong start for the crowd-pleaser starring Fantasia Barrino, Taraji P. Henson and Danielle Brooks. Audiences gave it an "A" CinemaScore.

The roughly \$100 million production, which boasts Oprah Winfrey, Steven Spielberg and Quincy Jones (all from the 1985 film) as producers, should play well through awards season. It's nominated for several Golden Globes and expected to be in the Oscar mix.

"We saw this opportunity to go wide at Christmas since there were so few movies and we were confident the movie would be well received," said Jeffrey Goldstein, distribution chief for Warner Bros. "Going into the competitive landscape that's so thin in January and February, the excitement of awards season could really help ignite a bigger box office."

Despite a blockbuster-less holiday frame, the last weekend of the year pushed the industry past \$9 billion in box office for the year in U.S. and Canadian theaters for the first time since before the pandemic. Ticket sales on the year were up 21% from 2022, according to data firm Comscore.

Still, it was a mark that seemed more easily within reach during the summer highs of Barbenheimer when both "Barbie" and "Oppenheimer" were breaking box-office records.

The enormous success of those two films changed the trajectory of Hollywood's 2023, but so did the monthslong actors and writers strikes. Those forced the postponement of some top films (most notably "Dune: Part Two"), diminishing an already patchwork fall lineup with few guaranteed ticket-sellers. One exception was the last-minute addition of "Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour," which set a new record for concert films.

This year, Hollywood needed Swift and every penny to reach \$9 billion. It crossed that threshold Saturday, with one day to spare. That total, though, still doesn't come close to the \$11 billion-plus years that preceded the pandemic. The number of wide releases in 2023 came about 20 films shy of those released in 2019.

The production delays caused by the strikes could have an even greater impact on 2024. Several top

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releases have already been postponed until at least the following year, including "Mission: Impossible" and "Spider-Verse" sequels. After a rocky year for Marvel and a string of less predictable hits, Hollywood will have to hope it can adapt to changing audience tastes – and that another "Barbie" is lurking somewhere.

"It's an \$11 billion business. We're climbing our way back," said Goldstein. "This next year is going to be a big challenge because of the strikes. But we're seeing very clearly in 2023, when there are movies out there that people want to see, they come."

Meanwhile, a host of releases sought to capitalize over the holidays – and most succeeded.

"This crop of seven wide releases at the end of the year, they got us over the hump of \$9 billion," said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for data firm Comscore. "This final push of the year provided great insight into what audiences are looking for. It's movies big and small. It's different types of movies."

Though "Wonka" won out as the family movie choice for the holidays, Universal Pictures' "Migration" is attracting young audiences, too. The animated movie from "Minions"-maker Illumination notched \$17.2 million in 3,839 theaters in its second weekend, and \$59.4 million since opening.

"The Boys in the Boat," the George Clooney-directed sports drama, grossed \$24.6 million since opening Dec. 25. The Amazon MGM Studios release, about the U.S. men's crew in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, wasn't a smash with critics (58% "fresh" on Rotten Tomatoes) but audiences gave it an "A" CinemaScore. "The Boys in the Boat," which cost about \$40 million to make, could hold well in coming weeks.

Though romantic comedies have largely migrated to streaming platforms, Sony Pictures' "Anyone But You" is proving the genre can still work in theaters. The film, starring Sydney Sweeney and Glen Powell, collected \$9 million in its second weekend to bring its total to \$27.6 million through Monday.

Sean Durkin's wrestling drama "The Iron Claw" is also performing well. The A24 film, starring Zac Efron, Holt McCallany and Jeremy Allen White, has grossed \$18 million since opening Dec. 22, including \$5 million on the three-day weekend. The film dramatizes the tragic story of the Von Erich family.

Michael Mann's "Ferrari," a project the director sought to make for three decades, took in \$10.9 million since launching in theaters on Monday, including \$4.1 million for the weekend. While that ranks as one of the biggest debuts for indie distributor Neon, it's nowhere near what a movie that cost close to \$100 million to make needs to turn a profit.

The film, starring Adam Driver as Enzo Ferrari, has been celebrated by critics, but appears likely to follow Mann's previous film, 2015's "Blackhat" (\$19.6 million worldwide against a \$70 million budget), as a commercial disappointment.

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

1. "Wonka," \$24 million.
2. "Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom," \$19.5 million.
3. "Migration," \$17.2 million.
4. "The Color Purple," \$13 million.
5. "Anyone But You," \$9 million.
6. "The Boys in the Boat," \$8.3 million.
7. "The Iron Claw," \$5 million.
8. "Ferrari," \$4.1 million.
9. "The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes," \$2.9 million.
10. "The Boy and the Heron," \$2.5 million.

Russia launches record number of drones in Ukraine, and Putin says Moscow will intensify its attacks

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched a record 90 Shahed-type drones across Ukraine during the early hours of the new year, and Russian President Vladimir Putin said his country would “intensify” its attacks on its neighbor.

Speaking during a New Year’s Day visit to a military hospital, Putin said Ukraine could expect more such strikes after shelling of the Russian border city of Belgorod that killed more than two dozen people and wounded more than 100 others.

“They want to intimidate us and create uncertainty within our country. We will intensify strikes. Not a single crime against our civilian population will go unpunished,” the Russian leader said, describing the barrage of Belgorod as a “terrorist act.”

Russia has blamed Ukraine for Saturday’s attack, which was one of the deadliest to take place on Russian soil since Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine started more than 22 months ago. Russian officials said the death toll stood at 25 as of Monday, including five children.

Cities across western Russia regularly have come under drone attacks since May, although Ukrainian officials never acknowledge responsibility for strikes on Russian territory or the Crimean Peninsula.

Putin accused Western nations of using Ukraine to try and “put Russia in its place.” While vowing retribution, he insisted Russia would only target military infrastructure in Ukraine.

“Of course, we can hit public squares in Kyiv and in any other Ukrainian city,” he said. “I understand — I’m boiling with rage — but do we need to hit civilians? No. We are hitting military targets, and that’s what we will keep doing.”

Both Ukraine and Russia have relied extensively on explosive droves during the war. The wave of Russian attacks in Ukraine continued throughout the day Monday.

A 15-year-old boy was killed and seven people wounded after falling debris from one of 87 downed drones hit a residential building in the southern Ukrainian city of Odesa, the head of the region’s military administration, Oleh Kiper, said. Debris also sparked a number of small fires, including at the city’s port.

Drone strikes and artillery fire also killed three people in Ukraine’s Kherson, Kharkiv and Sumy regions, including a 73-year-old woman.

In the western city of Lviv, Russian attacks severely damaged a museum dedicated to Roman Shukhevych, a controversial Ukrainian nationalist and military commander who fought for Ukrainian independence during World War II. University buildings in the town of Dubliany were also damaged, although no casualties were reported.

Writing on social media, Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi described the strike as “a war for our history” that was “symbolic and cynical.”

Meanwhile, four people were killed and 13 more wounded following Ukrainian shelling on Russian-occupied areas of Donetsk, according to the region’s Kremlin-installed leader, Denis Pushilin. Russian state media reported that a journalist was among the victims, but provided no further details.

One person was also killed and another wounded in shelling on the Russian border town of Shebekino, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

Pakistan human rights body says an upcoming election is unlikely to be free and fair

By MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan’s independent human rights commission said Monday there is little chance of free and fair parliamentary elections in the country next month because of “pre-poll rigging.” It also expressed concern about authorities rejecting the candidacies of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and most other members of his party.

At a news conference in Islamabad, the co-chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan,

Munizae Jahangir, said other political parties have been subjected to similar tactics to varying degrees.

"At this point, there is little evidence to show that the upcoming elections will be free, fair or credible," Jahangir said.

She said Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, or PTI, was "being dismembered in a systematic manner" and that the rejection of nomination papers for most of its candidates raised questions about the country's Election Commission.

People should be allowed to vote for their candidate of choice on February 8, she added, and there are "apprehensions that the electoral process is being engineered."

Jahangir condemned the state's "clampdown" on dissent, saying it has further constricted civic discourse at a time when Pakistanis should be allowed to express their views freely given the upcoming election.

Farhatullah Babar, a veteran human rights leader, said the Election Commission's decisions keeping Khan and other PTI members off the ballot amounted to "apparent pre-poll rigging."

He said Pakistan's caretaker government has a duty to ensure free and fair elections and the Election Commission's is responsible for providing all political parties equal opportunities.

Some of the country's main parties would not accept the outcome of a rigged election, and a disputed vote would create further political instability, Babar warned.

Khan is currently in prison and serving a three-year sentence for corruption. He also faces a stack of other charges, making it difficult for him to run for office. Despite knowing his nomination papers could be rejected, Khan through his legal team sought to run for a seat in the National Assembly.

According to election officials, Khan was barred from running because of his conviction.

His disqualification was a fresh blow for the 71-year-old former cricketer, who is the country's most popular opposition figure. He was ousted from office in April 2022 following a no-confidence vote in Parliament by his political opponents.

German officials detain a fifth suspect in connection with a threat to attack Cologne Cathedral

BERLIN (AP) — German authorities said Monday they detained another suspect in connection with an alleged threat of an attack on the world-famous Cologne Cathedral over the holidays, bringing the overall number of people detained in connection with the alleged plot to five.

The latest suspect, a 41-year-old German-Turkish man, was detained Sunday night in the western city of Bochum in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Police detained three people on Sunday morning and one man last week. All of the detained suspects allegedly belong to a larger Islamic extremist network that included people across Germany and in other European countries, according to Cologne police chief Johannes Hermanns, German news agency dpa reported.

The other four suspects were detained in different cities across North Rhine-Westphalia. The one who was detained last week was identified as a 30-year-old Tajik man. No details were given for the three who were detained Sunday morning.

The attack was supposed to have been carried out on New Year's Eve with a car loaded with explosives, local media reported.

Cologne police said in a Sunday news conference that the cathedral's underground parking garage had been searched and that explosives detection dogs had been deployed, but nothing was found. The entrance and exit of the underground garage had also been checked for suspicious activity.

North Rhine-Westphalia's Interior Minister Herbert Reul on Sunday called the latest detentions a "success, for which I would like to thank the investigators."

Islamic extremists have always been active, but they are currently more active than usual and the Catholic cathedral was a prime target for them, Reul said, according to dpa. "The police always try to be a few steps ahead," he added.

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Police had received information about a planned militant attack on Cologne Cathedral shortly before Christmas.

The city's world-famous cathedral has been under high protection for a week and the threat led to the closure of the house of worship for tourists since Christmas Eve.

Today in History: January 2 John F. Kennedy launches bid for presidency

By The Associated Press

Today is Tuesday, Jan. 2, the second day of 2024. There are 364 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 2, 1960, Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts launched his successful bid for the presidency.

On this date:

In 1788, Georgia became the fourth state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

In 1811, Sen. Timothy Pickering, a Federalist from Massachusetts, became the first member of the U.S. Senate to be censured after he'd improperly revealed the contents of an executive document.

In 1900, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay announced the "Open Door Policy" to facilitate trade with China.

In 1929, the United States and Canada reached agreement on joint action to preserve Niagara Falls.

In 1942, the Philippine capital of Manila was captured by Japanese forces during World War II.

In 1967, Republican Ronald Reagan took the oath of office as the new governor of California in a ceremony that took place in Sacramento shortly after midnight.

In 1971, 66 people were killed in a pileup of spectators leaving a soccer match at Ibrox Stadium in Glasgow, Scotland.

In 1974, President Richard Nixon signed legislation requiring states to limit highway speeds to 55 miles an hour as a way of conserving gasoline in the face of an OPEC oil embargo. (The 55 mph limit was effectively phased out in 1987; federal speed limits were abolished in 1995.)

In 2007, the state funeral for former President Gerald R. Ford began with an elaborate service at Washington National Cathedral, then moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In 2015, Little Jimmy Dickens, a diminutive singer-songwriter who was the oldest cast member of the Grand Ole Opry, died at age 94.

In 2016, a heavily armed group led by Ammon and Ryan Bundy seized the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, beginning a 41-day standoff to protest the imprisonment of two ranchers convicted of setting fires on public land and to demand the federal government turn over public lands to local control.

In 2018, Sen. Al Franken formally resigned from the Senate a month after the Minnesota Democrat announced his plan to leave Congress amid a series of sexual misconduct allegations, while NBC News announced that Hoda Kotb (HOH'-duh KAHT'-bee) would be the co-anchor of the first two hours of the "Today" show, replacing Matt Lauer following his firing due to sexual misconduct allegations.

In 2023, at the Vatican, tens of thousands of people filed past the body of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI as it lay in St. Peter's Basilica, while in Brazil, thousands paid their respects to soccer legend Pele in a procession past his coffin at Vila Belmiro Stadium in his hometown of Santos.

Today's Birthdays: TV host Jack Hanna is 77. Actor Wendy Phillips is 72. Actor Cynthia Sikes is 70. Actor Gabrielle Carteris is 63. Movie director Todd Haynes is 63. Retired MLB All-Star pitcher David Cone is 61. Baseball Hall of Famer Edgar Martinez is 61. Actor Tia Carrere is 57. Actor Cuba Gooding Jr. is 56. Model Christy Turlington is 55. Actor Taye Diggs is 53. Actor Renée Elise Goldsberry is 53. Rock singer Doug Robb (Hoobastank) is 49. Actor Dax Shepard is 49. Actor Paz Vega is 48. Ballroom dancer Karina Smirnoff (TV: "Dancing with the Stars") is 46. Rock musician Jerry DePizzo Jr. (O.A.R.) is 45. R&B singer Kelton Kessee (IMX) is 42. Pop singer-musician Ryan Merchant (Capital Cities) is 43. Actor Kate Bosworth is 41. Actor Anthony Carrigan is 41. Actor Peter Gadiot is 39. Jazz singer-musician Trombone Shorty is 38. Singer-songwriter Mandy Harvey (TV: "America's Got Talent") is 36. R&B singer-rapper Bryson Tiller is 31. San Diego Padres shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr. is 25.