

Groton Daily Independent

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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 Willow Lake: (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15, varsity to follow)

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.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Boys Basketball hosts Clark/Willow Lake: (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15, varsity to follow)

JH Boys Wrestling at Milbank, 5 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 6

Robotics at Groton Area Gym, 8 a.m.

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Lyman.

Boys JV Invitational at Madison, 9 a.m.

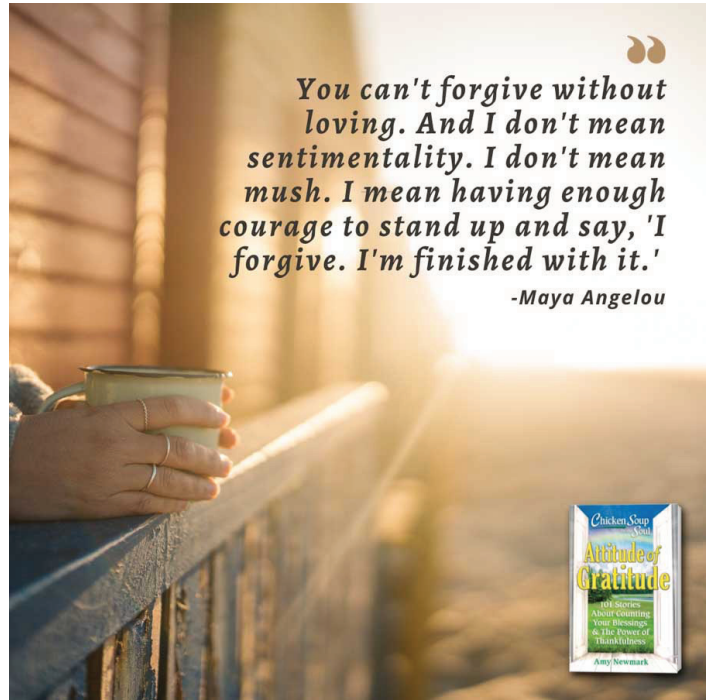
Boys Varsity Invitational at Garretson, 9:30 a.m.

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

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

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

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



Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Jan. 7

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

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

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.;

GDILIVE.COM

GT
Groton Area
Tigers

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
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1440

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At least 95 people were killed and more than 210 wounded yesterday after a pair of bombings at an Iranian cemetery in the southeastern city of Kerman. The attack took place during a memorial near the gravesite of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former leader of the country's Revolutionary Guard. Soleimani was killed by a targeted US drone strike four years ago.

Names of numerous people who interacted with or had ties to deceased sex criminal Jeffrey Epstein were released yesterday, detailed in newly unsealed documents produced from a 2015 lawsuit.

The gross US national debt surpassed \$34T earlier this week for the first time, according to a Treasury Department announcement Tuesday, an increase of \$1T since September and \$14T since early 2020. The US currently adds roughly \$5B to its debt each day, and recent estimates suggest the debt will reach \$50T by 2033.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

TV executive Nigel Lythgoe faces two new sexual assault lawsuits just days after Paula Abdul filed a similar lawsuit. Rapper TI and wife Tiny accused in lawsuit of 2005 sexual assault.

Francoise Bernet, subject of Robert Doisneau's iconic Kiss by the Hotel de Ville photo, dies at 93.

England's Luke Humphries tops 16-year-old Luke Littler to win 2024 World Darts Championships.

Science & Technology

SpaceX deploys first Starlink satellites with direct-to-smartphone capabilities; company says it will work with carriers to expand coverage, complementing its space-based Wi-Fi service.

Neuroscientists find uncommon phrases or complex sentence structures cause the brain's language processing center to fire rapidly, while nonsense phrases generate little to no neural activity.

AI models, satellite imagery combine to create the most detailed map of human activity across the Earth's oceans to date.

Business & Markets

Markets close down (S&P 500 -0.8%, Dow -0.8%, Nasdaq -1.2%) as the tech-heavy Nasdaq notches fourth losing day in a row.

Xerox to cut around 3,000 workers, or 15% of its workforce, amid operational and organizational restructuring. US job openings drop to 8.8 million, the lowest since March 2021.

General Motors sales jump 14% year-over-year in 2023, led by a more than 60% increase in sales of its Buick brand vehicles.

Politics & World Affairs

At least nine state Capitols (CT, GA, HI, KY, ME, MI, MN, MS, MT) temporarily evacuate or delay operations due to bomb threats; no incidents reported, officials say threat was received via a mass email.

Former President Trump appeals Colorado Supreme Court decision to bar him from the GOP primary ballot; name will remain on ballot while legal challenges are considered by US Supreme Court.

Ukraine and Russia carry out largest prisoner exchange between the two countries since the beginning of the current conflict. Series of retaliatory strikes between both continue.

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2023 Groton City Building Permits

- 1/24/23, Carla Tracy, 23001, \$70.00, 2-Bathroom remodel, 34 N Main St, \$9,000.00
2/14/23, Full Circle Ag, 23002, \$1,963.16, Dry fertilizer retrofit, 109 E Aspen, \$387,632.50
3/22/23, Ryan and Amanda Tarpein, 23003, \$112.26, Replace 10 windows, 506 N Broadway, \$17,451.18
4/5/23, Ian Rose, 23004, \$175.00, Remodel basement, 105 N 2nd St, \$30,000.00
4/11/23, Melvin Harrell, 23005, \$50.00, Patio door, new front door, 204 N 5th ST, \$5,000.00
4/19/23, Jared Poppen, 23006, \$39.50, deck and stairs addition, 11 N 5th St, \$2,900.00
4/21/23, Karen Debrine, 23007, \$30.88, Fence, 116 N 1st ST, \$1,175.00
4/21/23, Andrew Kappes, 23008, \$115.00, New concrete driveway, 304 N State St, \$18,000.00
4/24/23, Duane Hinman, 23009, \$27.50, Fence, 1103 N Broadway, \$500.00
4/26/23, Brian Jones, 23010, \$265.00, Addition, 203 W 2nd Ave, \$48,000.00
4/26/23, Dustin Cooper, 23011, \$110.00, shingles, garage addition, 506 N Main, \$10,000.00
5/3/23, Jodi Sternhagen, 23013, \$45.00, replace tar portion of driveway w/ concrete, 1002 N Main, \$4,000.00
5/4/23, Cody Keller, 23014, \$29.00, new fron steps/deck, 207 E 11th Ave, \$800.00
5/8/23, Michael Johnson, 23015, \$56.50, New front deck, 402 N Broadway, \$6,300.00
5/8/23, Troy Carda, 23016, \$275.00, Sidewalks and garage, 204 E 3rd Ave, \$50,000.00
5/15/23, Glacial Homes, 23017, \$2,175.00, New Home, 1605 N 6th St, \$430,000.00
5/12/23, Jeff Steen, 23018, \$41.65, Replace steps with deck, 1303 N 5th St, \$3,330.37
5/15/23, Bierman Farm Service, 23019, \$1,525.00, New Shop, 10 S Main St, \$300,000.00
5/17/23, Bill Schuck, 23020, \$65.00, Remodel garage, 306 N 4th St, \$8,000.00
5/22/23, Groton Transit, 23021, \$281.68, garage doors, concrete, 202 N Main, \$51,335.22
5/19/23, Dakota Storm Roofing, 23022, \$130.60, Roofing- Groton Transit, 202 N Main, \$21,119.21
5/26/23, Stan Monson Jr, 23023, \$25.00, Warranty work- singles, 202 W 2nd Ave, \$-
5/26/23, Sarah Person, 23024, \$67.50, Moving utility shed, 407 N Washington, \$8,500.00
5/26/23, Larry Remington, 23025, \$30.00, storage shed, 406 N 5th st, \$1,000.00
6/12/23, Jerry Peltier, 23026, \$28.00, Repair shed, 127 W 2nd Ave, \$600.00
6/12/23, Geofgrey Davis, 23027, \$35.00, Fence Around house, 310 N 5th ST, \$2,000.00
6/15/23, Wayne Hein, 23028, \$27.47, Oil Driveway, 402 E 4th Ave, \$493.00
6/15/23, Mark Abeln, 23029, \$75.63, concrete around garage and building, 106 N Main, \$10,125.00
6/21/23, Jamie Krueger, 23030, \$27.50, Fence, 8 E 4th Ave, \$500.00
6/26/23, Alfred Tastad, 23031, \$25.00, Concrete, 206 N 3rd St, \$-
6/28/23, Shirlee Frohling, 23032, \$27.50, Privacy fence around pool, 207 N Madison, \$500.00
7/7/23, Linda Himanga, 23033, \$32.50, Front deck, 407 N Main, \$1,500.00
7/10/23, Nathan Bone/ Darcie Moody, 23034, \$50.00, Deck Repair, 404 E 14th Ave, \$5,000.00
7/12/23, WW Rentals, 23035, \$279.13, Repair east wall and repair roof, 25 N Main St, \$50,825.00
7/17/23, Jeff West, 23036, \$30.00, Lean to garage, 605 N Main, \$1,000.00
7/18/23, Melvin Harrell, 23037, \$65.00, Install wall anchors in basement-West & North walls, 204 N 5th St, \$8,000.00
7/27/23, Jim Lane, 23038, \$50.00, Reshingle entire house, 105 N 5th St, \$5,000.00
8/3/23, Ken's, 23039, \$150.00, Replace concrete, 4 E Hwy 12, \$25,000.00
8/9/23, Barry & Trudy Smith, 23040, \$43.50, Gazebo and egress window, 907 N 3rd St, \$3,700.00
8/11/23, Gertrude Erickson, 23041, \$37.50, Replace awning, 102 E 2nd Ave, \$2,500.00
8/17/23, Sam Weber, 23042, \$90.00, Cement driveway and sidewalk, 204 N State St, \$13,000.00
8/17/23, Jerrie Vedvei, 23043, \$40.00, Repair steel roof on garage, 1004 N Main St, \$3,000.00
8/21/23, Duane & Laura Hinman, 23044, \$62.25, Pre-built shed by garden, 1103 N Broadway, \$7,450.00
8/29/23, Michael Johnson, 23045, \$50.00, Replace windows and window casings, 402 N Broadway, \$5,000.00
8/29/23, Adamn Franken, 23046, \$28.00, Tin part of roof, 104 N 2nd St, \$600.00

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- 8/31/23, Patrick Foster, 23047, \$275.00, Finishing garage and basement, 1301 N 5th ST, \$50,000.00
9/5/23, Betty Breck, 23048, \$50.00, Shingles, 506 N 4th St, \$5,000.00
9/6/23, Austin Barrett, 23049, \$40.00, Shingles, 509 N Main St, \$3,000.00
9/6/23, Glenn Cooper, 23050, \$60.00, New sidewalk, 2 E 2nd Ave, \$7,000.00
9/5/23, Samantha Braun, 23051, \$150.00, Kitchen and living room remodel, 309 N Washington St, \$25,000.00
9/13/23, Terry Kenny, 23052, \$27.50, Roof between garages, 610 N Main st, \$450.00
9/28/23, Hector Hernandez, 23053, \$50.00, New siding, 1502 N Broadway, \$5,000.00
9/28/23, MJ Sinclair, 23054, \$425.00, Replace concrete, 105 E Hwy 12, \$80,000.00
10/1/23, Randy Flitter, 23055, \$100.00, Remodel bathroom and bedroom, 112 N 4th St, \$15,000.00
10/4/23, Evan Erickson, 23056, \$25.00, West deck of house, 214 N 6th St, \$-
10/5/23, Todd McGannon, 23057, \$49.00, Fix foundation, 403 N Main St, \$4,800.00
10/6/23, Dan & Becky Jetto, 23058, \$29.25, Add deck to front of house, 25 W 5th Ave, \$850.00
10/6/23, Dale Fliehs, 23059, \$61.82, New windows, 105 N 4th ST, \$7,364.00
10/6/23, Justin Linville, 23060, \$325.00, Garage addition 24x64, 25 W 5th Ave, \$60,000.00
10/6/23, Dale Grenz, 23061, \$125.00, New garage, 905 N 1st St, \$20,000.00
10/11/23, Huber/Gavin Krueger, 23062, \$85.00, Replace front deck and repair siding, 504 E 8th Ave, \$12,000.00
10/16/23, Ardella Theunissen, 23063, \$125.00, Residing house, 208 N Madison, \$24,000.00
10/19/23, Patrick Foster, 23064, \$25.25, Removal of shed and putting in gravel, 1301 N 5th St, \$50.00
10/20/23, Michael Shilhanek, 23065, \$70.00, Move in garden shed, 307 W 2nd Ave, \$9,000.00
10/23/23, Ron Falk, 23066, \$75.00, Move in shed, 206 N 1st St, \$10,000.00
10/31/23, Double E Properties, 23067, \$225.00, Replace all windows and exterior repairs, 1107 N 2nd St, \$40,000.00
11/1/23, Carter Jondahl, 23012, \$75.00, siding garage, 301 N 5th St, \$10,000.00
11/2/23, James Holt, 23068, \$35.00, Fence, 6 E 5th Ave, \$2,000.00
11/4/23, Jess Kroll, 23069, \$125.00, Hoop Barn, 1506 W Aspen Ave, \$20,000.00
11/15/23, Steve Smith, 23070, \$26.50, 10'x10' kennel, 1104 N Main, \$300.00
11/16/23, Jesse Anderson, 23071, \$75.00, Repair basement foundation, 108 N 2nd St, \$10,000.00
11/27/23, Heath Giedt, 23072, \$60.00, Flooring, 1313 N 5th St, \$7,000.00
12/14/23, Abbie Kelly, 23073, \$205.00, Detached garage and driveway, 219 E 3rd Ave, \$36,000.00, Variance approved 12/11/23
12/18/23, Paul Kosel, 23074, \$115.00, Repair NGP building, 15 N Main St, \$18,000.00,

Representing Groton Area at the Snow Queen Festival



The 2024 South Dakota Snow Queen Festival will be held this month at the Aberdeen Civic Theatre. The Junior Coronation will and talent shows will be held Jan. 6 at 7 p.m. while the Snow Queen coronation will be held Jan. 13 at 7 p.m.

Camryn and Gavin will compete at 9:45 a.m. and Kyrie will compete at 12:42 p.m. this Saturday at the Aberdeen Civic Theater. If they win their category, they will perform during the evening Jr. Snow Queen Event Saturday evening at 7 p.m.



Best of luck to Groton Area Senior Snow Queen Faith Flihs and Jr. Snow Queen McKenna Tietz and Talent Winners Camryn Kurtz and Gavin Kroll (Sr. Division) and Kyrie Yeigh (Jr. Division) as they compete at the SD State Snow Queen this month! We wish you all the best of luck!



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

COMMENTARY

State would benefit if 'beaten down' Democrats can rally

DANA HESS

Reporters expect a certain amount of spin at legislative news conferences. It's the nature of the beast. What they don't expect to hear is some hard truths about politics in South Dakota.

That's what editors and publishers got from Rep. Spencer Hawley, a Brookings Democrat, during a 2016 Newspaper Day at the Legislature news conference with legislative leaders. Hawley gave some insight into what it's like to serve in a super minority by telling about the decision process incumbent Democrats use when deciding whether to run for reelection. Those decisions, Hawley explained, must be made during the session rather than after because by the end of session "we literally are totally beat down."

At the time Hawley and his colleagues were getting beat down, Democrats had eight members in the Senate and 12 members in the House. To today's legislative Democrats, 2016 must look like the good old days. Democrats currently have four seats in the Senate and seven in the House.

Their lack of numbers goes beyond the Capitol. Statewide, Democrats find themselves running third in a two-party race. Habitually ranked behind Republicans in voter registration, lately voters registered as independent or non-politically affiliated have risen into second place ahead of Democrats.

Data visualization made with Flourish

Given their sparse numbers, it was heartening to hear how upbeat Democrats were at a recent news conference. In a Dakota Scout story about the news conference, Sen. Reynold Nesiba of Sioux Falls said the time was right for Democrats to pick up more seats in the Legislature. Democrats are banking on being more electable in 2024 due to Republican Party chaos in Pierre and Washington, D.C., and the prospect of Donald Trump at the head of the GOP ticket. The state party is staking its hopes on advances in fundraising and candidate recruitment.

Here's hoping state Democrats can make good on their promises, particularly in the area of candidate recruitment. In the last election, Democrats ceded the majority in both houses to Republicans before a single vote was cast. They failed to field candidates in 25 of 35 Senate races and 32 of 70 House races.

They have recruited one high profile candidate already. Former Rep. Jamie Smith, last seen challenging Kristi Noem in the governor's race, will run for the Senate seat in District 15. Smith's reemergence is an oddity. Usually this state's Democratic candidates for governor take their beating and then disappear into the mist, never to stand for office again. Smith's reentry into state politics, if he is successful, would add to his name recognition and serve him well if he wants to take another shot at the big job in 2026.

The bad news for Democrats is that two of their 11 incumbent legislators won't be running for reelection in 2024. Rep. Linda Duba is bowing out for personal reasons and Nesiba will be term-limited. Nesiba, in particular, is a tough loss for Democrats and the Legislature as a whole. No matter what the issue, Nesiba is noted for approaching it with a clear head and a special degree of intellectual firepower.

If Democrats have just nine incumbents on the ballot in 2024, candidate recruitment will be particularly important. During a 2015 interview, Hawley, the Democratic leader from the good old days, had in mind modest election gains that would give his party a greater voice in the Legislature. He envisioned being able to do more with 24 members in the House and 12 in the Senate. Hawley explained this would give Democrats more say in appropriations bills that require a two-thirds majority for passage.

Nine incumbents is a long way from electing 36 members, but the time may be right for Democrats to make a legislative push. If legislative Republicans follow suit from recent elections, they'll beat each other

up during the primaries. In the meantime, Democrats could be embracing issues popular with voters like the minimum wage, teacher pay and eliminating the state sales tax on groceries.

None of this is meant to be an endorsement of a particular party or a particular candidate. It is an endorsement of the return to a vital two-party system that rewards voters with a lively debate on the issues, something that has been missing in South Dakota for far too long.

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

Minnehaha County defense lawyers say state is working to resolve inmate client access issue

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 3, 2024 4:36 PM

SIOUX FALLS — Public defenders in South Dakota's largest city have worked through a tentative compromise with the state Department of Corrections on access to inmate clients.

Defense lawyers sounded the alarm just over a month ago to their Minnehaha County Commission liaison about wait times and inconsistent search policies at the South Dakota State Penitentiary.

Some county-funded lawyers reported waiting an hour or longer for scheduled meetings with clients detained behind the prison walls – while racking up billable hours for their indigent clients.

The issue came to a head over a search policy that some lawyers in Minnehaha County Public Defender Traci Smith's office refused to sign. It authorized pat-down searches for anyone entering a DOC facility, as well as searches of their vehicles.

The policy was inconsistently applied, Smith said, and defense lawyers are generally loath to consent to searches without probable cause.

Smith and others brought the issue to Commissioner Joe Kippley during a late November meeting of the county's public defense advisory board. Beyond wait times for in-person meetings with clients and search form concerns, attorneys talked about logging on for video visits, only to see that their client hadn't been placed before the camera by DOC staff.

A Minnehaha County judge had briefly considered signing an order to transport prison inmates to the county jail for easier client access, Second Judicial Circuit Court Administrator Karl Thoennes confirmed for South Dakota Searchlight, but the judge decided against it.

In the month since the issue was made public, Smith said, lines of communication between her office and the DOC have opened. The agency is open to adjusting its procedures on search consent and to avoiding unnecessary vehicle searches, she said, and there is now a single point of contact with the DOC to address client access issues.

"They were receptive to our concerns about having to sign the 'consent to search' form which allows them to search our person, personal property, and vehicle without any reason at all," Smith told South Dakota Searchlight via email. "Hopefully the conversations will lead to improvements in the screening process and the lengthy wait times for attorneys will be resolved."

Lawyers visiting clients at the prison will still be subject to searches by metal detector and pat-down searches, Smith said. Her hope is that open communication and improvements to video visit procedures will cut down on the need for in-person visits and the security concerns that might accompany them.

"Our goal is simply to improve our ability to effectively communicate with our clients so that we can protect their rights and resolve their cases efficiently," Smith said.

The DOC did not reply to requests for comment on the situation in early December, late December and again this month.

Minnehaha County Commissioner Joe Kippley said he's pleased with the progress so far. He has not raised the issue with the full county commission, he said, because he believes the DOC is making a good

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faith effort to address defense attorney concerns.

"It's not fully resolved, but it's not at the point where people would be talking about having to transfer clients to the county jail," Kippley said.

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

Congress was full of postponements in 2023. Now 2024 could be even less productive.

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 3, 2024 2:17 PM

WASHINGTON — Congress got next to nothing done during the past year and could accomplish even less in 2024 as attention shifts to the November elections.

House Republican and Senate Democratic leaders reached agreement on bills and resolutions they sent to the president's desk just 34 times during the first year of the 118th Congress — making that session the least productive in decades.

Even when the two chambers brokered deals, several of the laws passed were just short-term extensions, allowing members of Congress to delay the tough job of compromise on big-picture legislation. They'll need to tackle the farm bill, reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration and approve more than \$1.5 trillion in federal spending this year, just to name a few of the unaddressed items.

Rank-and-file lawmakers aren't entirely pleased with the lackluster results and have no insight on what leaders might bring up this year, outside of the pressing issues they've avoided dealing with and now must confront again in 2024.

Texas Republican Rep. Chip Roy rebuked GOP leaders, saying during a floor speech in mid-November that for years he's heard nothing but "excuses" and "empty promises."

"I want my Republican colleagues to give me one thing, one thing, that I can go campaign on and say we did," Roy said. "Anybody sitting in the complex, if you want to come down to the floor and come explain to me one material, meaningful, significant thing the Republican majority has done besides saying, 'Oh, it is not as bad as the Democrats.'"

Oklahoma Republican Rep. Tom Cole, chair of the House Rules Committee, said in late December he hadn't heard what legislation would move through his committee this year, but doesn't expect much.

"Look, it's divided government in a presidential year," Cole said. "I don't see us moving a lot of big legislation. I think the appropriations bills, and whatever the two sides agree should be attached to them, is probably the best you're going to get."

Cole said Democrats, who control the Senate, are just as much to blame for the low number of laws as Republicans, who control the House. But, he noted that it's not necessarily a bad thing for Congress to be less productive than normal.

"If you're Republican, you believe in less government, and not doing something is sometimes a good thing," Cole said. "Just because we passed a law, doesn't mean it was a good law and doesn't mean it has a positive effect. But again, I think it's more a function of what the distribution of power is, how polarized the country is right now."

For the last three decades, Congress has been significantly more productive during its first session, typically passing at least 90 public laws in that first year.

On just two occasions have lawmakers not reached that benchmark; during the 117th Congress when there were 81 public laws during the first year and during the 113th there were just over 70 public laws.

Michigan Democratic Sen. Debbie Stabenow, chair of the Agriculture Committee, said there won't be much time left in 2024 after factoring in work on the farm bill, government funding legislation and the elections.

"I'm continuing to work hard to get a bipartisan farm bill and work through issues related to that," Sta-

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benow said. "And then there certainly will be other things that need to be addressed as well. But way too much time is going to be taken up by appropriations."

The elections, she said, "will take a lot of the attention" away from legislative work in Congress. "They always do," Stabenow said.

Shutdown headaches

Congress isn't set to return to Capitol Hill until Jan. 8, less than two weeks before a Jan. 19 deadline to complete work on four of the government funding bills. The deadline for the remaining eight bills comes two weeks after that, on Feb. 2.

Lawmakers were supposed to approve the full dozen bills before the start of the current fiscal year on Oct. 1, but they've used two stopgap bills to push off making any final decisions.

Senators will need to continue negotiations on border security and immigration policy in order to move forward with a \$110 billion emergency funding package for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and U.S. border security.

Republicans have insisted they won't approve the emergency funding until there's a bipartisan agreement to change when and how immigrants, including asylum seekers, are allowed to enter the United States.

Lawmakers will need to address a long-term reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration after passing a short-term, temporary extension in December.

Republicans and Democrats will need to broker a deal on how to reauthorize the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, or FISA, especially the section of the law that allows for warrantless searches of the electronic communications of non-citizens living outside the United States.

The program has been criticized by members of both political parties for several reasons, including that the process inevitably gains access to Americans' phone calls, emails and other forms of communication without a court order.

Lawmakers will need to reach a bipartisan deal on the five-year reauthorization of the farm bill, another must-pass piece of legislation that Congress did not actually finish work on last year.

In the Senate, Democrats are expected to keep confirming President Joe Biden's judicial and executive nominations. That task would likely fall along the wayside if Republicans gain control of that chamber in November and Biden remains president.

Impeachment could move ahead

In the House, lawmakers could become increasingly occupied with the GOP's attempts to impeach Biden, though Speaker Mike Johnson insists he's not going to bring that to the floor before there's sufficient evidence.

Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, said during his last press conference of 2023 that he viewed impeaching Biden as a legal decision and not a political one.

But he declined to set a timeline for an impeachment vote, despite calls from some conservative members to move quickly, possibly before the 2024 presidential election.

"If you follow the Constitution and you do the right thing, you cannot rush it," Johnson said.

The House began an unofficial impeachment inquiry into Biden last year when Kevin McCarthy was still speaker. After Johnson became speaker, the chamber voted along party lines in December to open an official impeachment inquiry.

Oversight and Accountability Chair James Comer of Kentucky, Judiciary Chair Jim Jordan of Ohio and Ways and Means Chair Jason Smith of Missouri are the three GOP lawmakers leading up the impeachment inquiry.

Election overwhelms everything else

Republican lawmakers in the House and Democratic senators aren't entirely sure what else may make its way onto the floor next year, though they all expect the November elections will overshadow Congress.

The entire House and one-third of the Senate will be up for reelection. Voters will also decide whether Democrats maintain control of the White House or if they want a Republican to sit in the Oval Office once

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again.

Virginia Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine said during the first half of next year he plans to focus on the National Defense Authorization Act, the annual policy bill that lawmakers just approved in December but will need to debate and pass all over again this year.

Congress could take up a Supreme Court ethics bill, following a string of stories from ProPublica exposing lavish gifts and trips that Justice Clarence Thomas took without disclosing, Kaine said.

The Senate Judiciary Committee approved a new code of ethics for the nation's highest court in July, but that bill hasn't made its way onto the floor. The justices released their own ethics code in November, but many critics of their transparency said it didn't do enough.

"I think Supreme Court ethics would be a good thing to vote on," Kaine said.

Virginia Republican Rep. Bob Good, incoming chair of the House Freedom Caucus, said in mid-December that he expects the group of far-right lawmakers will have input into that chamber's legislative agenda.

Good didn't list any bills he wants leadership to put on the floor this year but said "we're having discussions about that very thing."

Republicans, Good said, need to be "united as a party in cutting our spending, securing our border and defending our constitutional freedoms."

Michigan Sen. Gary Peters, chair of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, declined to say if there are any bills he wants party leadership to bring to the floor next year to highlight the differences between the two parties.

But he did say there will be "no shortage of ways to show ... the clear differences between Democrats and Republicans."

"We'll highlight that in the campaigns and we'll continue to do that next year," Peters said.

Florida Republican Rep. Kat Cammack said she'd like to see the House take up an overhaul of the spending process and border security legislation, but she noted that many of the GOP bills won't move through the Democratic Senate.

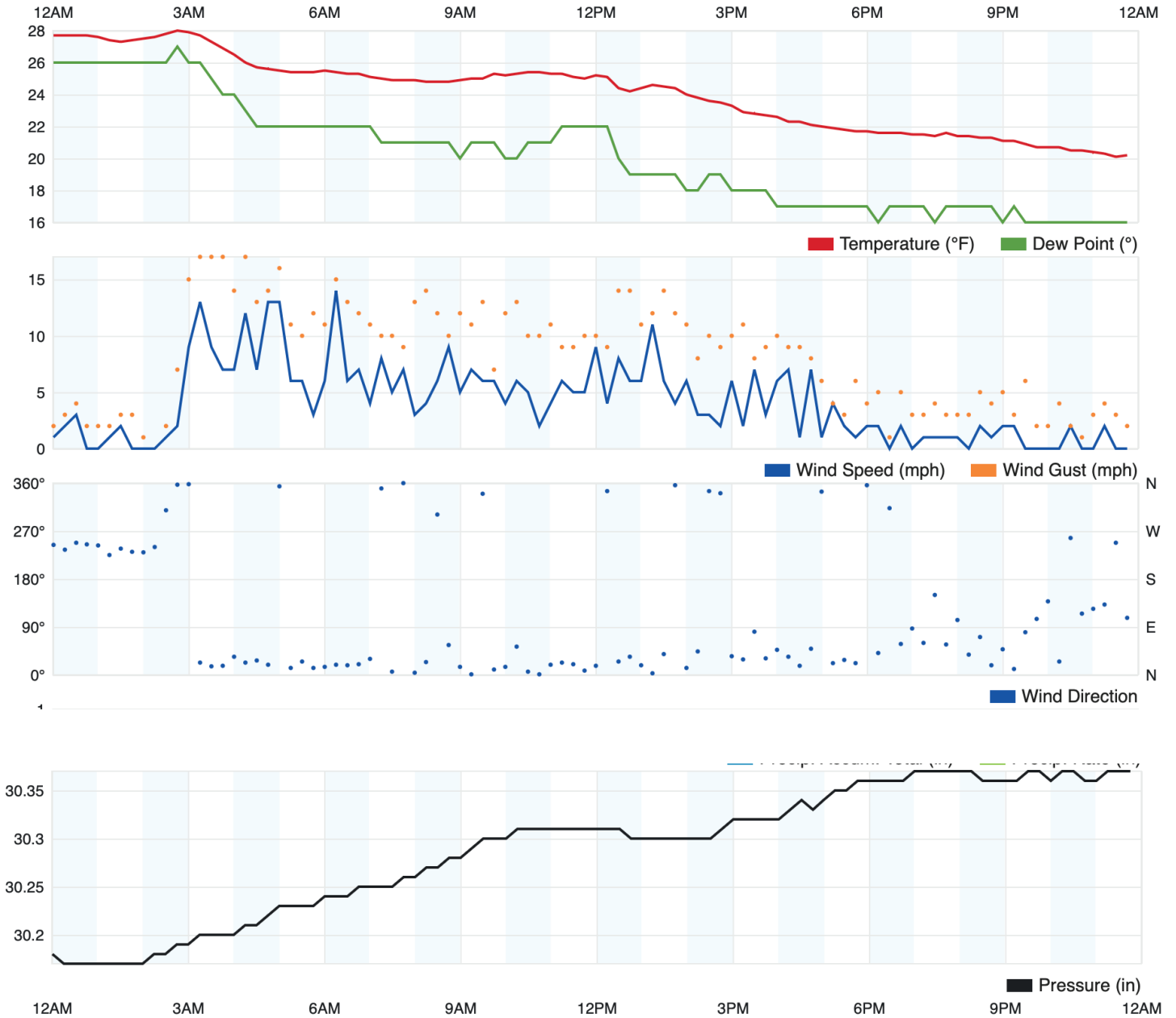
"We can't control the Senate," Cammack said. "And the Senate has been exceptional in the sense they have not picked up hardly anything that the House has passed."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thu Jan 4	Fri Jan 5	Sat Jan 6	Sun Jan 7	Mon Jan 8	Tue Jan 9	Wed Jan 10
28°F 24°F	34°F 24°F	26°F 9°F	22°F 14°F	24°F 10°F	23°F 12°F	22°F 8°F
SSE 14 MPH	S 9 MPH	NNW 13 MPH	NE 6 MPH	ENE 8 MPH	W 6 MPH	NNE 12 MPH 20%

The Forecast through the Weekend

Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Mostly Cloudy	Mostly cloudy	Cloudy	Mostly cloudy
	Slight chance of snow for James River Valley and eastward	Chance of snow, 15-50% Trace to an inch of snow possible	Cooler
HI: 25-32° F	HI: 29 to 35° F	HI: 22 to 28° F	HI: 16 to 23° F

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

An area of high pressure will keep the region dry but cloudy through Thursday. A system will bring some light snow Friday through Saturday. Generally, an inch or less of snow is expected.

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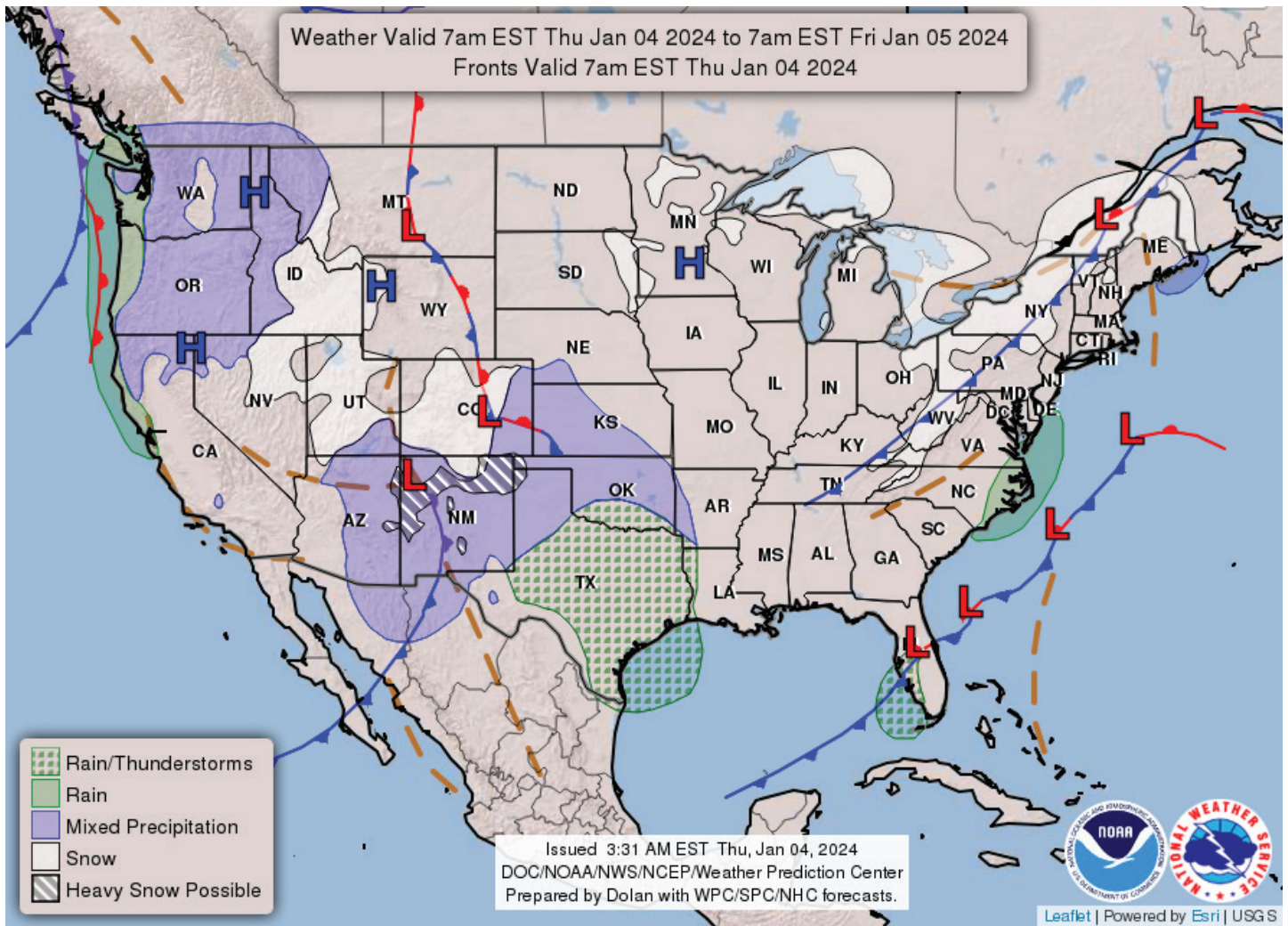
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 28 °F at 2:52 AM
Low Temp: 20 °F at 11:26 PM
Wind: 17 mph at 3:04 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 53 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 2012
Record Low: -34 in 1912
Average High: 24
Average Low: 3
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.08
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.08
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:04:05 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:17 am



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Today in Weather History

January 4, 1986: Snowfall amounts of 1 to 3 inches and winds gusting to around 40 mph produced ground blizzard conditions in western South Dakota. Visibility was near zero in many locations, with blowing and drifting snow blocking some roads. Some roads were closed in western South Dakota. Several accidents occurred, with many cars ending up in the ditch.

January 4, 2005: Heavy snow of up to 10 inches fell across much of Lyman and Jones counties from the 4th until mid-morning of the 5th.

1641: According to historical records, Mount Parker, a stratovolcano on Mindanao Island in the Philippines, erupted on this day. The eruption caused the formation of a crater lake called Lake Maughan.

1888 - Sacramento, CA, received 3.5 inches of snow, an all-time record for that location. The heaviest snow in recent history was two inches on February 5th in 1976. (4th-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1917: A tornado with estimated F3 damage cut a 15-mile path and struck a school at Vireton in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, killing 16 people. It ranks as the 4th worst school tornado disaster in U.S. history.

1971 - A blizzard raged from Kansas to Wisconsin, claiming 27 lives in Iowa. Winds reached 50 mph, and the storm produced up to 20 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1982 - Milwaukee, WI, was shut down completely as a storm buried the city under 16 inches of snow in 24 hours. It was the worst storm in thirty-five years. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm moving off the Pacific Ocean spread wintery weather across the southwestern U.S., with heavy snow extending from southern California to western Wyoming. Up to 15 inches of snow blanketed the mountains of southern California, and rainfall totals in California ranged up to 2.20 inches in the Chino area. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Frigid arctic air invading the central and eastern U.S. left Florida about the only safe refuge from the cold and snow. A storm in the western U.S. soaked Bodega Bay in central California with 3.12 inches of rain. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - Up to a foot of snow blanketed the mountains of West Virginia, and strong winds in the northeastern U.S. produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero in Maine. Mount Washington NH reported wind gusts to 136 mph along with a temperature of 30 below zero! (National Weather Summary)

1990 - A winter storm moving out of the southwestern U.S. spread heavy snow across Nebraska and Iowa into Wisconsin. Snowfall totals in Nebraska ranged up to 7 inches at Auburn and Tecumseh. Totals in Iowa ranged up to 11 inches at Carlisle. In Iowa, most of the snow fell between midnight and 4 AM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994 - A major winter storm blanketed much of the northeastern U.S. with heavy snow. More than two feet was reported in northwestern Pennsylvania, with 33 inches at Waynesburg. There were ten heart attacks, and 185 injuries, related to the heavy snow in northwest Pennsylvania. Whiteout conditions were reported in Vermont and northeastern New York State. A wind gusts to 75 mph was clocked at Shaftsbury VT. In the Adirondacks of eastern New York State, the town of Tupper reported five inches of snow between 1 PM and 2 PM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2018: NOAA's GOES-East satellite caught a dramatic view of the Bombogenesis 'Bomb Cyclone' moving up the East Coast on the morning of January 4, 2018. The powerful nor'easter is battering coastal areas with heavy snow and strong winds, from Florida to Maine. Notice the long line of clouds stretching over a thousand miles south of the storm. The storm is drawing moisture all the way from deep in the Caribbean.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

OUT OF SIGHT BUT NEVER OUT OF TOUCH

Marie had to stay home from school because of her measles. Her mother, knowing that the bright sunlight coming in through the window would cause her infected eyes to hurt, completely darkened the room as though it were night,

Sitting near her on the bed, her mother asked softly, "Are you afraid?"

"No, mother," came the reply, "as long as you sit where I can touch you."

Feelings of being alone and abandoned have haunted each of us at one time or another. We were created by God to draw feelings of strength, encouragement, hope, significance, and inspiration from others. But, there are also times when we feel as though no one is there.

And, when we feel abandoned, it is at that precise moment that we need to claim the promise the Lord made that "He will never leave us or forsake us!" That promise is unlimited, unconditional, everlasting, and unwavering. If He says it and I accept it and believe it, that ends it.

Whenever we have feelings of uneasiness or are frightened or afraid or lack the necessities of life, that is God saying, "There may be no light, but if you reach out to touch Me, you will always find Me close beside you."

Whatever need we may have, God is right there with us. No matter how far we have fallen, how often we have failed, or how deep is our doubt, He's there with us.

Prayer: Lord, we all want to be powerful, filled with courage, and have the ability to conquer life. However, we are grateful to know that when we need You, You are there. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. Isaiah 41:10



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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.02.24

3 18 27 29 64 1

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$140,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 55 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

10 17 31 47 51 4

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,150,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 10 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

3 17 21 25 43 12

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 25 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

9 10 21 30 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 25 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

8 9 17 31 56 23

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 54 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

30 31 38 48 68 8

Power Play: 10x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$35,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 54 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Jones makes game-winning shot at the buzzer and Weber State knocks off South Dakota State 75-73

By The Associated Press undefined

OGDEN, Utah (AP) — Dillon Jones scored 23 points, including a game-winning shot in the lane with 0.1 seconds left, and Weber State beat South Dakota State 75-73 on Wednesday night.

Jones also contributed six rebounds and nine assists for the Wildcats (10-4, 2-0 Big Sky Conference). Blaise Threatt added 17 points while going 6 of 10 (4 for 4 from 3-point range), and he also had five rebounds. Dyson Koehler was 5 of 11 shooting (3 for 9 from 3-point range) to finish with 15 points.

Zeke Mayo led the Jackrabbits (7-8, 1-0 Summit League) in scoring, finishing with 20 points. William Kyle III added 15 points for South Dakota State. In addition, Luke Appel finished with 13 points and four assists.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

Erikstrup scores 32 as Eastern Washington beats South Dakota 93-79

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Dane Erikstrup's 32 points led Eastern Washington over South Dakota 93-79 on Wednesday night.

Erikstrup shot 11 for 19 (7 for 12 from 3-point range) and 3 of 4 from the free-throw line for the Eagles (7-7). Cedric Coward scored 23 points and added 10 rebounds. Jake Kyman shot 4 for 9, including 3 for 7 from beyond the arc to finish with 11 points.

Bostyn Holt led the way for the Coyotes (8-8) with 30 points. Lahat Thioune added 13 points, six rebounds and two steals for South Dakota. In addition, Kaleb Stewart had 12 points.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

South Korea views the young daughter of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as his likely successor

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and JIWON SONG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The young daughter of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is seen as her father's likely heir apparent, South Korea's spy agency said Thursday, its first such assessment on the girl who was unveiled to the outside world a little more than a year ago.

There has been intense outside debate and speculation about the girl, reportedly about 10 years old and named Ju Ae, since she made her first public appearance in November 2022, when she watched a long-range missile test-launch with her father.

The girl has since accompanied her father at a number of major public events, with state media calling her father's "most beloved" or "respected" child and churning out footage and photos proving her rising political standing and closeness with her father.

A senior general knelt and whispered to her when she clapped while watching a military parade at a VIP observation stand in September. She was photographed standing in front of her father at one point during a visit to the air force headquarters in November, with both Kims wearing sunglasses and long leather jackets. In a New Year's Eve celebration at a packed Pyongyang stadium Sunday, Kim Jong Un kissed her on the cheek and she did the same to her father.

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Most of these scenes are something that had been unimaginable in North Korea, where Kim is the subject of a strong and loyal following that treats him like god.

South Korea's main spy agency, the National Intelligence Service, said Thursday that it sees Kim Ju Ae as her father's highly likely successor, citing a comprehensive analysis of her public activities and the state protocols provided to her.

The NIS public affairs office told The Associated Press that it still considers all possibilities regarding the North's power succession process because Kim is still young, has no major health issues, and has at least one other child. Kim turns 40 on Monday.

The NIS statement confirmed the comments by lawmaker Youn Kun-Young, who cited the nominee for the NIS chief, Cho Tae-yong. Youn said Cho made the same assessment in written responses to his questions ahead of his parliamentary hearing.

In phone conversations with the AP, Youn, a member of parliament's intelligence committee, reconfirmed Cho's assessment, which matched what the NIS told the AP. He said Cho's written responses to his questions contained no other details about Kim Ju Ae.

The NIS has a spotty record in confirming developments in North Korea, one of the world's most secretive nations. North Korea's state media have yet to make any direct comments on the succession plan, including whether Kim Ju Ae has any siblings.

Du Hyeogn Cha, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said while the NIS currently sees a high possibility for Kim Ju Ae to be primed as her father's successor, few can predict whether she would eventually become the North's next leader. Cha added that Kim Ju Ae lacks political achievements that he said are essential to be formally anointed as the country's future leader.

Analyst Cheong Seong-Chang at the private Sejong Institute in South Korea said that Kim Jong Un likely believes his daughter has capacity and resolve to succeed him as leader. He said Kim Jong Un's obesity appears so serious that "it won't be surprising even if he collapses tomorrow."

"By accompanying her father on major events, she's like learning kingship and building a human network at a tender age," Cheong said.

NIS and other South Korean officials earlier said it was premature to view Kim Ju Ae as her father's heir, given Kim Jong Un's relatively young age and North Korea's Confucianism-influenced, male-nominated power ranking. They had said the girl's repeated appearances were more likely meant to shore up public support of Kim's ruling family and his plan to hand over his power to one of his children.

Since its foundation in 1948, North Korea has been successively ruled by male members of the Kim family. Kim Jong Un inherited power upon his father Kim Jong Il's death in late 2011. Kim Jong Il took over power after his father and state founder Kim Il Sung when he died in 1994.

The name of Ju Ae matched what retired NBA star Dennis Rodman called Kim's baby daughter, whom he said he saw and held during a trip to Pyongyang in 2013. In 2023, the NIS told lawmakers Kim Ju Ae has an older brother and a younger sibling whose gender has not been made public.

Cheong, the expert, called the NIS intelligence on the older brother inaccurate, though he agrees that Kim Ju Ae has a younger sibling.

Revealing the young Kim Ju Ae came as a huge surprise to foreign experts, because neither Kim Jong Un nor Kim Jong Il were first mentioned in North Korean state media until after they became adults.

A Texas father and son arrested in the killings of a pregnant woman and her boyfriend

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — A father and son in Texas have been charged in the killings of an 18-year-old pregnant woman who disappeared before Christmas and her boyfriend, who authorities say were fatally shot in the head before their bodies were moved and discovered days later in a car.

The arrests Wednesday night came more than a week after the bodies of Savannah Nicole Soto, 18, and Matthew Guerra, 22, were found in the parking lot of a San Antonio apartment complex, a crime scene that the city's police chief originally described as "very, very perplexing."

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San Antonio police Sgt. Washington Moscoso told reporters their deaths appeared to be the result of a drug deal but did not elaborate.

Soto's family has said she was overdue to deliver her baby and had been scheduled to have an induced labor when she went missing the weekend before Christmas. Moscoso said investigators now believe the couple were killed on Dec. 21, meaning they had been dead for several days before police found them in Guerra's car the day after Christmas.

The killings have drawn attention beyond Texas and Moscoso said "misinformation" about the case had taken off on social media.

"These two individuals are the only suspects that we were looking for," he said.

Police said Christopher Preciado, 19, was charged with capital murder and his father, Ramon Preciado, 53, was charged with abuse of a corpse for allegedly helping his son move the couple's bodies. Online records for the Bexar County magistrate early Thursday did not indicate whether either man had attorneys and San Antonio police did not immediately respond to phone and email messages.

As he was placed in a patrol car late Wednesday night, Ramon Preciado was asked by reporters whether he had remorse.

"Aren't you sorry for lying about what you're saying? You don't even know what's going on. You just make stuff up like always," Preciado said.

His son did not comment as police escorted him to a separate vehicle.

Moscoso said prosecutors may pursue more charges against the men, whom he described as the only suspects in the killings. He said information on Savannah Soto's cellphone that was found in the car led them to another vehicle that was seen on surveillance footage, which authorities publicly released last week in hopes that someone would recognize the persons in the video.

That vehicle led police to a house where they found the father and son. He said Ramon Preciado answered the door and cooperated with the investigation.

"He knew why the police were there," Moscoso said.

The Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office had ruled both deaths homicides caused by gunshot wounds to the head. Moscoso did not specify where the killing took place before the couple was moved to the apartment complex.

Soto had been scheduled to have an induced labor at a hospital the weekend before Christmas, her family told KENS-TV. But her mother said she got no answer earlier when she knocked on the door of Soto's apartment in the suburb of Leon Valley.

The family spent Christmas night searching the area and Leon Valley police issued a missing-person alert.

Microsoft adds AI button to keyboards to summon chatbots

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Pressing a button will be one way to summon an artificial intelligence agent as Microsoft wields its computer industry influence to reshape the next generation of keyboards.

Starting this month, some new personal computers that run Microsoft's Windows operating system will have a special "Copilot key" that launches the software giant's AI chatbot.

Getting third-party computer manufacturers to add an AI button to laptops is the latest move by Microsoft to capitalize on its close partnership with ChatGPT-maker OpenAI and make itself a gateway for applications of generative AI technology.

Although most people now connect to the internet — and AI applications — by phone rather than computer, it's a symbolic kickoff to what's expected to be an intensively competitive year as tech companies race to outdo each other in AI applications even as they haven't yet resolved all the ethical and legal ramifications. The New York Times last month sued both OpenAI and Microsoft alleging that tools like ChatGPT and Copilot — formerly known as Bing Chat — were built by infringing on copyrighted news articles.

The keyboard redesign will be Microsoft's biggest change to PC keyboards since it introduced a special Windows key in the 1990s. Microsoft's four-squared logo design has evolved, but the key has been a fixture

on Windows-oriented keyboards for nearly three decades.

The newest AI button will be marked by the ribbon-like Copilot logo and be located near the space bar. On some computers it will replace the right "CTRL" key, while on others it will replace a menu key.

Microsoft is not the only company with customized keys. Apple pioneered the concept in the 1980s with its "Command" key marked by a looped square design (it also sported an Apple logo for a time). Google has a search button on its Chromebooks and was first to experiment with an AI-specific key to launch its voice assistant on its now-discontinued Pixelbook.

But Microsoft has a much stronger hold on the PC market through its licensing agreements with third-party manufacturers like Lenovo, Dell and HP. About 82% of all desktop computers, laptops and workstations run Windows, compared to 9% for Apple's in-house operating system and just over 6% for Google's, according to market research firm IDC.

Microsoft hasn't yet said which computer-makers are installing the Copilot button beyond Microsoft's own in-house line of premium Surface devices. It said some of the companies are expected to unveil their new models at next week's CES gadget show in Las Vegas.

Scenes of loss play out across Japan's western coastline after quake kills 84, dozens still missing

By HIRO KOMAE, AYAKA MCGILL and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

SUZU, Japan (AP) — His face hidden under a humble straw hat, the man stood silent, watching several helmeted rescue workers carefully lift his wife's body from the rubble, wrapped in blue plastic on a stretcher. He wiped his weary face with a rag. His eyes were red.

This scene in the city of Suzu was tragically repeated across Ishikawa Prefecture and nearby regions on the western coastline of Japan after Monday's 7.6 magnitude temblor that decimated houses, twisted and scarred roads and scattered boats like toys in the waters, and prompted tsunami warnings.

The death toll stood at 84 people as of Thursday.

Ishikawa officials said 48 of those who died were in the city of Wajima and 23 were in Suzu. The 13 others were reported in five neighboring towns. More than 300 people have been injured, at least 26 seriously.

Those reported missing ballooned from 15 to 79 overnight, including a 13-year-old boy. Officials initially said 80 were missing but corrected the number later.

What exacerbated matters was people visiting to ring in the new year with their loved ones when the quake hit.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reinforced rescue operations with about 3,600 soldiers in addition to the initial 1,000. Their mission is to provide those affected with fresh water and hot meals, as well as set up bathing facilities for the 34,000 who lost their homes and are now staying at evacuation facilities.

Although Japan is reputed for relatively reliable disaster relief, essential supplies such as water, food and blankets have been running short.

"All we got was a couple of rice balls," said elderly Yasuo Kobatake cupping his hand in a tiny ball to show how small the meal was. He has been staying with his wife at an elementary school, an impromptu evacuation center. He was only given a tiny paper cup, half-filled with water that "vanished in a sip."

When the earth trembled, Kobatake was about to wear his shoes to head out. He ran out of the house barefoot with just one sock on. That first tremblor was followed by the main more destructive quake which flung him to the ground. A concrete wall came crashing down, barely missing him.

Kobatake can no longer access his destroyed house.

"So here I am with my wife sleeping beside all the others (taking shelter at the school). We talk to each other and we try to encourage each other," he said.

Kobatake hoped help was on the way.

However, many roads have been blocked by landslides or suffered cracks because of the strong quake, making it difficult for trucks delivering water and food supplies to reach those in need. The hardest hit spots were on the Noto Peninsula, the center of the quake, connected by a narrow land strip to the rest

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of the main island of Honshu, making alternative routes scarce.

Snow is expected over the weekend, so finding those trapped under the rubble has become even more critical.

Three days after Monday's quake, rescuers are still pulling out people alive from under debris. But time is running out. Experts categorize the first 72 hours as crucial to finding survivors.

Authorities warned more quakes and tsunamis could follow, stressing extra caution over the coming few days. Plans are also underway to fly some evacuated people out to safer areas.

Aftershocks continued to rock the coastal areas, near the epicenter in Noto, about 300 kilometers (185 miles) from Tokyo on the opposite coast, hit Monday.

The quake set off tsunami warnings, followed by waves measuring more than 1 meter (3 feet) in some places. The warnings have since been lifted.

The usual pastoral landscape of Ishikawa was replaced by gray stretches of ash and charred walls, where a fire broke out in Wajima city.

Cars were perched crooked on roads scarred with deep giant cracks. Lopsided houses missing rooftop tiles sat sadly beside a home the quake flattened to the ground, reducing it to a pile of wood. Boats floated belly-up in the bay.

The first day of trading on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, usually a celebratory affair with the ringing of a big bell and throngs of kimono-clad women, was marked with a moment of silence, as people bowed their heads, to mourn the dead.

"I would like to express my heartfelt prayers for the souls of those who lost their lives, and my deepest sympathies to all those suffering from the disaster," said Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki.

Japan is prone to earthquakes, with many fault lines and volcanoes. A massive quake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in 2011 caused widespread damage in northeastern Japan.

So far, no major issues have been reported at nuclear plants following this week's earthquake and aftershocks.

Jeffrey Epstein documents: Here's what we know so far

By DAVID B. CARUSO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Dozens of previously sealed court documents related to Jeffrey Epstein were made public late Wednesday, as a court releases more records from a years-old lawsuit connected to the late financier.

They're likely to disappoint sleuths online, where the plan to release documents prompted rumors of a list of "clients" or "co-conspirators." In fact, the judge who made the call wrote in December that she was ordering the records released because much of the information within them is already public.

The first 40 documents, of around 250 expected to eventually be unsealed, largely mention figures whose names were already known, including high-profile friends of Epstein's and victims who have spoken publicly.

Ahead of the documents' release, misinformation about their contents ran rampant on social media. Users wrongly claimed that late-night host Jimmy Kimmel's name might appear, spurred by a joke New York Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers made Tuesday on ESPN's "The Pat McAfee Show."

Kimmel said in a response on X that he had never met Epstein and that Rodgers' "reckless words put my family in danger."

Here's what we know about the documents released so far:

WHO IS JEFFREY EPSTEIN?

A millionaire known for associating with celebrities, politicians, billionaires and academic stars, Epstein was initially arrested in Palm Beach, Florida, in 2005 after he was accused of paying a 14-year-old girl for sex.

Dozens of other underage girls described similar sexual abuse, but prosecutors ultimately allowed the financier to plead guilty in 2008 to a charge involving a single victim. He served 13 months in a jail work-release program.

Some famous acquaintances abandoned Epstein after his conviction, including former presidents Bill

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Clinton and Donald Trump, but many did not. Epstein continued to mingle with the rich and famous for another decade, often through philanthropic work.

Reporting by the Miami Herald renewed interest in the scandal, and federal prosecutors in New York charged Epstein in 2019 with sex trafficking. He killed himself in jail while awaiting trial.

The U.S. attorney in Manhattan then prosecuted Epstein's former girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, for helping recruit his underage victims. She was convicted in 2021 and is serving a 20-year prison term.

WHAT ARE THESE RECORDS ABOUT?

The documents being unsealed are part of a 2015 lawsuit filed against Maxwell by one of Epstein's victims, Virginia Giuffre. She is one of the dozens of women who sued Epstein saying he had abused them at his homes in Florida, New York, the U.S. Virgin Islands and New Mexico.

Giuffre said the summer she turned 17, she was lured away from a job as a spa attendant at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club to become a "masseur" for Epstein — a job that involved performing sexual acts.

Giuffre also claimed she was pressured into having sex with men in Epstein's social orbit, including Britain's Prince Andrew, the former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell and the billionaire Glenn Dubin, among others. All of those men said her accounts were fabricated.

Giuffre settled a lawsuit against Prince Andrew in 2022. That same year, Giuffre withdrew an accusation she had made against Epstein's former attorney, the law professor Alan Dershowitz, saying she "may have made a mistake" in identifying him as an abuser.

Giuffre's lawsuit against Maxwell was settled in 2017, but the Miami Herald went to court to access court papers initially filed under seal, including transcripts of interviews the lawyers did with potential witnesses.

About 2,000 pages were unsealed by a court in 2019. Additional documents were released in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The batch currently being released contains around 250 records that sections that were blacked out or were sealed entirely because of concerns about the privacy rights of Epstein's victims and other people whose names had come up during the legal battle but weren't complicit in his crimes.

Only around 40 of those documents were made public Wednesday. More will be released in the coming days.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT TO SEE?

U.S. District Judge Loretta A. Preska, who evaluated the documents to decide what should be unsealed, said in her December order that she was ordering the records released because much of the information within them is already public.

Some records have been released, either in part or in full, in other court cases.

The people named in the records include many of Epstein's accusers, members of his staff who told their stories to tabloid newspapers, people who served as witnesses at Maxwell's trial, people who were mentioned in passing during depositions but aren't accused of anything salacious, and people who investigated Epstein, including prosecutors, a journalist and a police detective.

There are also boldface names of public figures known to have associated with Epstein over the years, but whose relationships with him have already been well documented elsewhere, the judge said.

One of them is Jean-Luc Brunel, a French modeling agent close to Epstein who was awaiting trial on charges that he raped underage girls when he killed himself in a Paris jail in 2022. Giuffre was among the women who had accused Brunel of sexual abuse.

His name was peppered throughout the documents released Wednesday.

Clinton and Trump both factor in the court file, partly because Giuffre was questioned by Maxwell's lawyers about inaccuracies in newspaper stories about her time with Epstein. One story quoted her as saying she had ridden in a helicopter with Clinton and flirted with Trump. Giuffre said neither of those things actually happened. She hasn't accused either former president of wrongdoing.

The judge said a handful of names should remain blacked out in the documents because they would identify people who were sexually abused. The Associated Press does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they decide to tell their stories publicly, as Giuffre has done.

WHEN WILL THE REST OF THE DOCUMENTS BE MADE PUBLIC?

The judge hasn't set a target for when all of the documents should be made public, but more documents are expected to come in the next few days.

Bombings hit event for Iran's Gen. Qassem Soleimani, a shadowy figure slain in 2020 US drone strike

By NASSER KARIMI and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — For Iranians backing the country's theocracy, whose icons since the Islamic Revolution have been stern-faced clergymen, Gen. Qassem Soleimani represented a popular figure of national resilience in the face of four decades of U.S. pressure.

For the U.S. and Israel, he was a shadowy figure in command of Iran's proxy forces, responsible for fighters in Syria backing President Bashar Assad and for the deaths of American troops in Iraq.

Soleimani survived the horror of Iran's long war in the 1980s with Iraq to take control of the Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force, responsible for the Islamic Republic's campaigns abroad.

Relatively unknown in Iran until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Soleimani's popularity and mystique grew after American officials called for his killing. A decade and a half later, Soleimani had become Iran's most recognizable battlefield commander, ignoring calls to enter politics but growing as powerful, if not more, than its civilian leadership.

"The warfront is mankind's lost paradise," Soleimani said in a 2009 interview. "One type of paradise that is portrayed for mankind is streams, beautiful nymphs and greeneries. But there is another kind of paradise. ... The warfront was the lost paradise of the human beings, indeed."

A U.S. drone strike killed Soleimani, 62, and others as they traveled from Baghdad's international airport on Jan. 3, 2020. The Pentagon said then-President Donald Trump ordered the U.S. military to take "decisive defensive action to protect U.S. personnel abroad by killing" a man once referred to by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a "living martyr of the revolution."

His name again drew international attention on Wednesday, as two bombings targeting a commemoration marking the fourth anniversary of his slaying killed at least 84 people and wounded 284 others.

"These hard-hearted criminals could not tolerate the love and enthusiasm the people had to visit the shrine of their great commander, Qassem Soleimani," Khamenei said in a statement after the attack. "Let them know that the soldiers of ... Soleimani will not tolerate their vileness and crimes."

Soleimani's luck finally ran out in 2020 after he was rumored dead several times over the years. There was a 2006 airplane crash that killed other military officials in northwestern Iran and a 2012 bombing in Damascus that killed top aides of Assad. Rumors again circulated in November 2015 that Soleimani had been killed or seriously wounded leading forces loyal to Assad as they fought around Syria's Aleppo.

As tensions between the U.S. and Iran increased after Trump pulled out of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers, Iranian officials quickly vowed to retaliate. While Soleimani was the Guard's most prominent general, many others in its ranks have experience in waging the asymmetrical, proxy attacks for which Iran has become known.

"Trump through his gamble has dragged the U.S. into the most dangerous situation in the region," Hessemaddin Ashena, an adviser to Iran's former President Hassan Rouhani, once wrote. "Whoever put his foot beyond the red line should be ready to face its consequences."

Details of Soleimani's early years remain few. Born March 11, 1957, Soleimani grew up, Iranians say, near the mountainous and historic Iranian town of Rabor, famous for its forests, its apricot, walnut and peach harvests and its brave soldiers. The U.S. State Department has said he was born in the Iranian religious capital of Qom.

Little is known about his childhood, though Iranian accounts suggest Soleimani's father was a peasant who received some land under the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the monarch who was toppled in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

By the time he was 13, Soleimani was working construction, later as an employee of the Kerman Water Organization. After Iran's Islamic Revolution swept the shah from power, Soleimani joined the Revolution-

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ary Guard. He deployed to Iran's northwest with forces that put down Kurdish unrest.

Soon after, Iraq invaded Iran and began the two countries' long, bloody eight-year war. The fighting saw Iran send waves of lightly armed troops into minefields and the fire of Iraqi forces, including teenage soldiers. Soleimani's unit and others also were attacked by Iraqi chemical weapons.

Amid the carnage, Soleimani became known for his opposition to "meaningless deaths" on the battlefield. He wept with fervor when exhorting his men into combat, embracing each individually.

For several years after the Iraq-Iran war, Soleimani largely disappeared from public view, something analysts attribute to his wartime disagreements with Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as Iran's president from 1989 to 1997. But after Rafsanjani, Soleimani became head of the Quds Force. He also grew so close to Khamenei that the Supreme Leader officiated the wedding of the general's daughter.

As chief of the Quds Force — or Jerusalem Force — Soleimani oversaw the Guard's foreign operations and soon would come to the attention of Americans following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

In secret U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, U.S. officials openly discussed Iraqi efforts to reach out to Soleimani to stop rocket attacks on the highly secured Green Zone in Baghdad in 2009. Another cable in 2007 outlines then-Iraqi President Jalal Talabani offering a U.S. official a message from Soleimani acknowledging having "hundreds" of agents in the country while pledging: "I swear on the grave of (the late Ayatollah Ruhollah) Khomeini I haven't authorized a bullet against the U.S."

U.S. officials at the time dismissed Soleimani's claim as they saw Iran as both an arsonist and a fireman in Iraq, controlling some Shiite militias while simultaneously stirring dissent and launching attacks. U.S. forces blamed the Quds Force for an attack in Karbala that killed five American troops, as well as for training and supplying the bomb makers whose improvised bombs made IED — improvised explosive device — a dreaded acronym among soldiers.

In a 2010 speech, U.S. Gen. David Petraeus recounted a message from Soleimani he said explained the scope of Iranian's powers.

"He said, 'Gen. Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Soleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan,'" Petraeus said.

The U.S. and the United Nations put Soleimani on sanctions lists in 2007, though he continued to travel. In 2011, U.S. officials named him as a defendant in an outlandish Quds Force plot to allegedly hire a purported Mexican drug cartel assassin to kill a Saudi diplomat.

The attention the West gave Soleimani only boosted his profile at home. He sat by Khamenei's side at key meetings. He famously met Syria's Assad together with the supreme leader — but without Iran's then-Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, sparking a short-lived resignation by the top Iranian diplomat.

Polling data at the time routinely showed Soleimani rated more favorably than other public figures, according to the Center for International Studies at the University of Maryland. But Soleimani refused entreaties to enter politics, even as elections saw lackluster turnout and widespread protests against the country's theocracy began sweeping Iran and intensified in the years after his death.

Just before Wednesday's anniversary, Khamenei met with Soleimani's family — showing his continued prominence.

Soleimani's greatest notoriety arose from the Syrian civil war and the rapid expansion of the Islamic State group. Iran, a major backer of Assad, sent Soleimani into Syria several times to lead attacks against IS and others opposing Assad's rule. While a U.S.-led coalition focused on airstrikes, several ground victories by Iraqi forces featured photographs of Soleimani leading them without a flak jacket.

"Soleimani has taught us that death is the beginning of life, not the end of life," one Iraqi militia commander said.

California restaurant's comeback shows how outdated, false Asian stereotype of dog-eating persists

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — David Rasavong's cultural pride is evident all throughout his restaurant.

It's on the wall of family portraits and where a stunning mural depicts his family's journey from Laos to California. It's on the menu filled with Lao and Thai dishes like the crispy coconut rice salad of Nam Khao and the stir-fried rice noodles of Pad See Ew.

And it's in the fact that Love & Thai in Fresno, California, restaurant is open at all. A baseless accusation grounded in a racist stereotype about Asian food using dog meat brought a six-month barrage of harassment so heated that Rasavong, 41, closed down its previous location over fears for his family's safety.

His earlier restaurant had itself only been open for seven months when a so-called animal welfare crusader in May implied on social media that a pitbull tied up at an unconnected home next door was going to be served on the menu.

A day after the initial commentary, vitriolic statements, voicemails and calls rained down. Rasavong's body still tenses up when recounting, in particular, a call from an elderly woman.

"She was so disgusted by me and yelling and screaming, and the only thing I can remember hearing her say at the end was 'Go back to the country you came from you dog-eating mother-effer,'" Rasavong recently told The Associated Press.

Within days, he closed that restaurant because it no longer felt safe between the harassment and people loitering in the parking lot outside of business hours.

The false accusation tapped into a longstanding slur against Asian cuisines and cultures that has persisted in the U.S. for over 150 years, dating back to the xenophobia that grew in the U.S. after Chinese immigrants started arriving in more visible numbers in the 1800s and other Asian communities followed. It's also one that Asian American communities are fighting against.

It may be astonishing to some that a claim rooted in a racist stereotype took down a family's restaurant three years after "Stop Asian Hate" became a rallying cry. But for many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, it's something they've heard before as an insult or under the guise of a "joke," along with other negative reactions to the actual foods of their cultures. In December, a comedian received some backlash for dressing like a UPS delivery driver and walking into an Asian restaurant with caged puppies for a social media video.

There is hope though that more people will learn to tell truth from trope. Since the pandemic first fueled anti-Asian hostilities, AAPI communities themselves have tried to take control of the narrative that Asian food is "dirty," "weird" yet "exotic." Furthermore, the appetite to learn about food from the Asian diaspora has only grown across traditional and new media.

Still, there were moments where Rasavong felt like nobody, even media, was on his side. He said a few reporters approached him assuming the claims were true.

But he soon received tons of community support, and the closure ended up being a new beginning.

A shopping center property manager offered him the chance to take over a suite vacated by another restaurant. Nkundwe P. van Wort-Kasyanju, a graphic designer in the Netherlands, and Los Angeles-based interior designer Danny Gonzales proffered their services for free. Hana Luna Her, a local artist, painted the mural. By the Nov. 3 grand opening of the new space, Love & Thai definitely felt the love. The place was bustling all day, Rasavong said, and the city presented a proclamation.

Rasavong is holding onto the belief that he went through this whole saga for a reason.

"There's a journey that we're supposed to go on," said Rasavong, who declined to say if he'll pursue legal action. "Don't get me wrong. People need to realize this business is not easy ... But you know, we believe in what we're doing and so far so good."

In actuality, consuming dog meat is something that has happened in various parts of the world for centuries, where they weren't seen as domesticated family pets, said Robert Ku, author of "Dubious Gas-

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tronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA." Greeks and Romans referenced it. The French also ate dog meat during World War II.

But when Chinese immigrants came to the U.S., it was linked to them as part of "the myths that the Chinese were these bizarre people who had bizarre diets," Ku said. "It was one of the attractions of actually going to Chinese restaurants back in the day because it came with 'danger.'"

As other Asian immigrant groups came, the stereotype spread to include them.

"This is a real just blurring of the Asian identity where it doesn't matter if you're Thai or Korean or Vietnamese or Cambodian. You're all the same," Ku said.

Along with the false allegation of eating dog meat, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders over the generations have often faced disgust and worse from others when they've brought their cultures' foods from home to public spaces like school or work.

They're taking steps to fight back, like in 2021, when San Francisco-Bay Area-based writers Diann Leo-Omineto, Anthony Shu and Shirley Huey self-published "Lunchbox Moments," a compilation of over two dozen personal essays and illustrations that raised \$6,000 for charity.

The project became "a powerful thing for all of us," Leo-Omineto said.

"We tried to show it's not always about being in relation to being American or being white or assimilated," she said. "You can have moments of joy, too...I hope that it opened people's minds a little bit more — or made them want to try new foods."

It's actually been a big year in publishing and food media for Asian cuisine. Publishers Weekly dedicated a feature in August entirely to Chinese and Taiwanese food after observing nine new cookbooks on the subjects were coming out this year. Several of the authors grew up outside of Asia. The titles range from "Vegan Chinese Food," to "Kung Food" and "A Very Chinese Cookbook" from America's Test Kitchen. Also, children's book author Grace Lin released "Chinese Menu," which relays folklore behind favorite Chinese American dishes. They all share personal anecdotes and readers often seem drawn to "personality-driven" cookbooks, said Carolyn Juris, features editor.

"It's not just about the recipes. It's about the stories behind them and I think people respond to that," Juris said.

Like any other culture, Asian cultures encompass many different regional cuisines and nuances. With the growing Asian diaspora, it's not strange that so many cookbooks can be mined and "publishers are savvy enough to know that there is a market for these books," Juris added.

Back at Love & Thai, Rasavong is busy filling online orders for a waiting third-party delivery driver. He is optimistic about keeping up business now that the initial hoopla around his restaurant renaissance has calmed down. Rasavong also hopes his situation will remind others to think before they speak.

"People say these jokes and they think it's just fun and just light-hearted," he said. "There are certain things that you shouldn't say that really do cross a line."

A major storm sweeping the US is expected to bring heavy rain, snow to East Coast this weekend

NEW YORK (AP) — A winter weather system moving through the U.S. is expected to wallop the East Coast this weekend with a mix of snow and freezing rain from the southern Appalachians to the Northeast — although it's too early to say exactly which areas will get what kind of precipitation and how much.

Details on the storm's path should firm up this week as the Pacific system moves through Colorado and New Mexico Thursday and into Texas and the Southeast before moving up the East Coast, said Tony Fracasso, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Maryland.

"It's still a few days away, so we'll have to hash out the storm track — where the precipitation falls, and how long the cold air can stay," he said Wednesday.

Major U.S. cities accustomed to white winters — such as Boston, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia — didn't receive much snow last year due to a lack of cold air.

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The National Weather Service in New York City posted on social media platform X Wednesday that the city has a low probability of snow and sleet Saturday into Sunday, with significant snowfall expected in areas west and north of the city.

Earlier this week, the NWS of New York said that 2023 would go down as the city's "least snowiness" year, with just 2.3 inches (6 centimeters) measured in Central Park.

One attack, two interpretations: Biden and Trump both make the Jan. 6 riot a political rallying cry

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump will spend Saturday's third anniversary of the Jan. 6 insurrection on the campaign trail in Iowa, holding two rallies in his bid to win back the White House.

That is set to come a day after President Joe Biden visits a site near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington and the struggling Continental Army endured a tough winter during the American Revolution. His advisers say the stop in a critical swing state will highlight Trump's role in the Capitol riot and be a chance for him to lay out the stakes of this year's election.

With Biden and Trump now headed toward a potential 2020 rematch, both are talking about the same event in very different ways and offering framing they believe gives them an advantage. The dueling narratives reflect how an attack that disrupted the certification of the election is increasingly viewed differently along partisan lines — and how Trump has bet that the riot won't hurt his candidacy.

Rioters loyal to Trump stormed the Capitol building in an attempt to stop Congress from certifying Biden's victory, forcing lawmakers and then-Vice President Mike Pence to flee for their lives. Many walked to the Capitol after a rally outside the White House in which Trump exhorted the crowd to "fight like hell" or "you're not going to have a country anymore."

Nine deaths were linked to the attack and 700-plus people have gone to court for their roles in it, with more than 450 sentenced to prison.

Federal prosecutors in Washington have charged Trump in connection with the riot, citing his promotion of false and debunked theories of election fraud and efforts to overturn the results. Trump has pleaded not guilty and continued to lie about the 2020 election.

The former president has still built a commanding lead in the Republican primary, and his rivals largely refrain from criticizing him about Jan. 6. He has called it a beautiful day and described those imprisoned for the insurrection as "great, great patriots" and "hostages." He has played at some of his rallies a recording of "The Star-Spangled Banner" sung by jailed rioters interspersed with him reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Republican strategist Alice Stewart said that "a lot of Republican voters don't love Jan. 6, but they're not obsessed about it either" and may support Trump because they oppose Biden's economic policies.

"Republican voters can hold two consecutive thoughts and say, 'Jan. 6, that wasn't great, but that doesn't affect my bottom line,'" she said.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis called Jan. 6 a "protest" that "ended up devolving," and has more recently said Trump "should have come out more forcefully" against the rioters. Former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley frequently tells crowds that Jan. 6 "was not a beautiful day, it was a terrible day."

But views overall of the attack have hardened along partisan lines.

In the days after the attack, 52% of U.S. adults said Trump bore a lot of responsibility for Jan. 6, according to the Pew Research Center. By early 2022, that had declined to 43%. The number of Americans who said Trump bore no responsibility also increased to 32% in 2022 compared to 24% in 2021.

A Washington Post-University of Maryland poll released this week found that about 7 in 10 Republicans say too much is being made of the attack. Just 18% of GOP supporters say that protesters who entered the Capitol were "mostly violent," down from 26% in 2021, while 77% of Democrats and 54% of independents say the protesters were mostly violent — essentially unchanged from 2021.

A December poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, meanwhile, found

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that 87% of Democrats and 54% of independents believe a second Trump term would negatively affect U.S. democracy. Some 82% of Republicans believe democracy would be weakened by another Biden win, with 56% of independents agreeing.

Biden marked the first anniversary of the riot in 2022 by standing inside the Capitol's National Statuary Hall — which was flooded by pro-Trump rioters during the attack — to suggest that his predecessor and his supporters had had "a dagger at the throat of America."

Ahead of the 2022 midterm elections, the president repeatedly characterized Trump as a threat to democracy. That included a speech at Philadelphia's Constitution Hall, where he said that the "extreme ideology" of Trump and his supporters "threatens the very foundation of our republic."

On the second anniversary of the attack in 2023, Biden awarded presidential medals to 14 people for their work protecting the Capitol during the attack and decried "a violent mob of insurrectionists." More recently, he said there was "no question" Trump supported an insurrection.

"Not even during the Civil War did insurrectionists breach our Capitol," said Julie Chavez Rodriguez, manager of Biden's reelection campaign, in a call with reporters this week. "But, at the urging of Donald Trump, insurrectionists on January 6, 2021 did."

Biden originally planned to speak near Valley Forge on Saturday but moved the speech up because of weather concerns.

But Trump now argues that the federal charges he's facing related to Jan. 6 — as well as authorities in Maine and Colorado trying to keep him off primary ballots on grounds that he incited an insurrection — show that Democrats are the ones looking to undercut the nation's core values.

"Joe Biden and his allies are a real and compelling threat to our democracy," Trump senior campaign advisers Chris LaCivita and Susie Wiles wrote in a memo this week.

Aside from the back and forth of politics, such arguments over who endangers America more could indicate a deeper problem.

"When each side starts talking about the other as a threat to democracy — whatever the reality is — that's a sign of a democracy that's deconsolidating," said Daniel Ziblatt, a government professor at Harvard University and co-author of the book "How Democracies Die."

Unsealed court records offer new detail on old sex abuse allegations against Jeffrey Epstein

BY MICHAEL R. SISAK, REBECCA BOONE and DAVID B. CARUSO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Amid great hype, a new batch of previously secret court documents was unsealed late Wednesday related to Jeffrey Epstein, the jet-setting financier who killed himself in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges.

Social media has been rife in recent weeks with posts speculating the documents amounted to a list of rich and powerful men who were Epstein's "clients" or "co-conspirators."

There was no such list. The first 40 documents in the court-ordered release largely consisted of already public material revealed through nearly two decades of newspaper stories, TV documentaries, interviews, legal cases and books about the Epstein scandal.

Still, the records — including transcripts of interviews with some of Epstein's victims and old police reports — contained reminders that the millionaire surrounded himself with famous and powerful figures, including a few who have also been accused of misconduct.

There were mentions of Epstein's past friendship with Bill Clinton — who is not accused of any wrongdoing — and of Britain's Prince Andrew, who previously settled a lawsuit accusing him of having sex with a 17-year-old girl who traveled with Epstein.

Epstein accuser Johanna Sjoberg testified in a newly released deposition that she once met Michael Jackson at Epstein's Palm Beach, Florida, home, but that nothing untoward happened with the late pop icon.

The documents being unsealed are related to a lawsuit filed in 2015 by one of Epstein's victims, Virginia Giuffre. She is one of dozens of women who sued Epstein for abusing them at his homes in Florida, New

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York, the U.S. Virgin Islands and New Mexico. This suit was against Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein's former girlfriend who is now serving a 20-year prison term for helping recruit and abuse his victims.

Giuffre's lawsuit was settled in 2017, but the court had kept some documents blacked-out or sealed because of concerns about the privacy rights of Epstein's victims and others whose names had come up during the legal battle. More documents were to be released in coming days.

Among newly unsealed records were court memos in which Giuffre's lawyers complained that some women who had worked for Epstein were proving difficult to serve with subpoenas, as was Epstein himself. Two of those women had invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination when questioned in other lawsuits about whether they had helped procure young women for Epstein to abuse.

Maxwell, in her deposition, chaffed at being asked about Giuffre's allegations that she had arranged for her to have sexual encounters with Prince Andrew. She also reacted angrily to being asked about whether she had purchased sex toys or revealing outfits, or seen young, topless women at Epstein's home.

One former member of Epstein's domestic staff said in a deposition that he felt uncomfortable with the number of young women showing up at the house, and felt threatened by Maxwell to stay quiet.

Other documents included legal arguments over whether Giuffre should be allowed more time to depose potential witnesses, including Clinton. Giuffre never alleged he was involved in illegal behavior, but her attorneys said the former president was a "key person who can provide information about his close relationship" with Maxwell and Epstein.

Maxwell's attorneys countered that Clinton testimony was not relevant.

The records included depositions of several Epstein victims, many of whom have told their stories publicly previously.

In her May 2016 deposition, Sjoberg described going to a dinner at one of Epstein's homes also attended by magician David Copperfield.

She said Copperfield did magic tricks before asking if she was aware "that girls were getting paid to find other girls." One of the key allegations against Epstein and Maxwell was that some of the girls he paid for sex acts then acted as recruiters to find him other victims. Sjoberg said Copperfield didn't get more specific about what he meant.

A publicist for Copperfield did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Sjoberg also shed new light on an April 2001 trip to New York in which she said Prince Andrew touched her breast while they posed for a photo at Epstein's Manhattan town house.

In the testimony, some of which appeared as excerpts in previous court filings, Sjoberg said she and Giuffre had flown with Epstein to New York on his private jet. Maxwell and Prince Andrew met them there.

At one point, she testified, Maxwell called her to an upstairs closet where they pulled out a puppet of Prince Andrew that had been made for a television program.

"It looked like him," Sjoberg said. "And she brought it down and presented it to him; and that was a great joke, because apparently it was a production from a show on BBC."

"And they decided to take a picture with it, in which Virginia and Andrew sat on a couch. They put the puppet on Virginia's lap, and I sat on Andrew's lap, and they put the puppet's hand on Virginia's breast, and Andrew put his hand on my breast, and they took a photo."

On the way to New York, Sjoberg testified, Epstein's jet diverted to Atlantic City, New Jersey, and spent a few hours at one of Donald Trump's casinos, because of bad weather.

Upon hearing the change of plans, Sjoberg recalled Epstein saying, "Great, we'll call up Trump and we'll go to" the casino. Sjoberg wasn't asked if they'd met up with Trump that night. Later in her testimony, she said she was never asked to give Trump a massage.

Sjoberg also testified that though she never met Clinton, Epstein once remarked to her that "Clinton likes them young," a remark she took as a reference to young women or girls.

Clinton has previously said through a spokesperson that while he traveled on Epstein's jet several times, he never visited his homes, had no knowledge of his crimes, and hadn't spoken to him since his conviction. Trump has also said that he once thought Epstein was a "terrific guy," but that they later had a falling out.

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In her deposition, Giuffre said the summer she turned 17, she was lured away from a job as a spa attendant at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club to become a "masseur" for Epstein — a job that involved performing sexual acts.

She settled a lawsuit against Prince Andrew in 2022 in which she claimed he had sexually abused her during a trip to London. That same year, Giuffre withdrew an accusation she had made against Epstein's former attorney, law professor Alan Dershowitz, saying she "may have made a mistake" in identifying him as an abuser.

The records released Wednesday included many references to Jean-Luc Brunel, a French modeling agent close to Epstein who was awaiting trial on charges that he raped underage girls when he killed himself in a Paris jail in 2022. Giuffre was among the women who had accused Brunel of sexual abuse.

Clinton's name also came up because Giuffre was questioned by Maxwell's lawyers about inaccuracies in newspaper reports about her time with Epstein, including a story quoting her as saying she had ridden in a helicopter with Clinton and flirted with Trump. Giuffre said neither of those things actually happened.

The judge said a handful of names should remain blacked out in the documents because they would identify people who were sexually abused. The Associated Press does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they decide to tell their stories publicly, as Giuffre and Sjöberg have done.

Even before the documents were released, misinformation about what was in them abounded. Social media users wrongly claimed that late-night host Jimmy Kimmel's name might appear in the documents, spurred by a crack New York Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers made Tuesday on ESPN's "The Pat McAfee Show."

Kimmel said in a response on X that he had never met Epstein and that Rodgers' "reckless words put my family in danger."

Israel's Mossad chief vows to hunt down Hamas members a day after senior figure killed in strike

By TIA GOLDENBERG, FADI TAWIL and SAMI MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The chief of Israel's Mossad intelligence service vowed Wednesday that the agency would hunt down every Hamas member involved in the Oct. 7 attack on Israel, no matter where they are. His pledge came a day after the deputy head of the Palestinian militant group was killed in a suspected Israeli strike in Beirut.

Israel has refused to comment on reports it carried out the killing, but the remarks by David Barnea appeared to be the strongest indication yet it was behind the blast. He made a comparison to the aftermath of the slayings at the Munich Olympics in 1972, when Mossad agents tracked down and killed Palestinian militants involved in killing Israeli athletes.

Israel was on high alert Wednesday for an escalation with Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia after the strike in the Lebanese capital killed Saleh Arouri, the most senior Hamas member slain since the war in Gaza erupted nearly three months ago.

The strike in Hezbollah's southern Beirut stronghold could cause the low-intensity fighting along the Lebanon border to boil over into all-out war.

In a speech Wednesday evening, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah promised revenge, repeating his group's statement that "this dangerous crime" of Arouri's killing will not go "without response and without punishment." But he left the audience guessing as to when and in what form.

Nasrallah said Hezbollah had so far been careful in its strategic calculus in the conflict, balancing "the need to support Gaza and to take into account Lebanese national interests." But if the Israelis launch a war on Lebanon, the group is ready for a "fight without limits."

"They will regret it," he said. "It will be very, very, very costly."

Arouri's killing provided a morale boost for Israelis still reeling from the Oct. 7 attack as the militants

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continue to put up stiff resistance in Gaza and hold scores of hostages.

Barnea said the Mossad is "committed to settling accounts with the murderers who raided the Gaza envelope," referring to the area of southern Israel that Hamas attacked. He vowed to pursue everyone involved, "directly or indirectly," including "planners and envoys."

"It'll take time, as it took time after the Munich massacre, but we will put our hands on them wherever they are," he said. Barnea was speaking at the funeral of former Mossad head Zvi Zamir, who died at age 98 a day earlier.

Zamir headed the intelligence agency at the time of the Munich attack, in which Palestinian militants killed 11 members of the Israeli Olympic delegation. Israel subsequently killed members of the Black September militant group who carried out the attack.

LOOKING TO HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah and the Israeli military have been exchanging fire almost daily over the Israeli-Lebanese border since the war in Gaza began. But Nasrallah has appeared reluctant to escalate it further, perhaps fearing a repeat of the monthlong 2006 war, when Israel heavily bombed Beirut and southern Lebanon.

At the same time, Hezbollah also faces pressure to show support for its ally Hamas.

Nasrallah's comments on balancing interests reflected the group's wariness of being blamed by Lebanese if its exchanges with Israel spiral into an all-out war that brings destruction similar to the 2006 war. He avoided specifics on any possible reprisal for Arouri's killing, though he said he would address the issue further in a speech Friday.

But he said if Israel attacks Lebanon, it would be in the national interest to fight back. "We are not afraid of war," he said. "If the enemy thinks about launching a war against Lebanon, then we will fight back without ceilings and without limits."

Hezbollah boasts an arsenal of tens of thousands of rockets and missiles as well as different types of drones. The United States has sought to prevent any widening of the conflict, including by deploying two aircraft carriers and other military assets to the region. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was expected in the region this week.

Nasrallah praised Arouri as well as the group's Oct. 7, attack, saying it "brought light back onto the Palestinian cause after it was nearly forgotten." He said Israel has so far failed in all its objectives in the Gaza war and was suffering damage to its international reputation.

The Israeli military chief of staff, Lt. Col. Herzl Halevi, visited Israel's northern border with Lebanon on Wednesday, saying "We are on high readiness in the north."

Hamas leaders clearly expect Hezbollah to have its back.

In an interview Saturday, three days before Arouri's killing, The Associated Press asked Beirut-based Hamas political official Osama Hamdan if the group was worried about the possibility of Israel assassinating its officials in Lebanon.

Hamdan predicted that Hezbollah would not let that go unpunished, and an all-out war would ensue.

"So why would Israel want to do that? Does it want a war" in Lebanon? he asked. "War can happen if Israel acts wrongly and aggressively," or war might not occur "if Israel takes a step back and acts in a way that is not aggressive against Lebanon."

In what appeared to be an escalation, Hezbollah said Wednesday nine of its fighters were killed in Israeli strikes in Lebanon, among the highest daily death tolls in nearly three months of clashes.

Hezbollah also announced that its fighters carried out 11 attacks against Israeli posts along the border, including four using heavy warhead Burkan rockets, which the group has rarely fired during the current conflict. The statement did not directly link the fire to Arouri's killing.

Arouri was the deputy of Hamas' supreme political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, and headed the group's presence in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. He was also a key liaison with Hezbollah.

A U.S. official confirmed that the Israeli military carried out the strike that killed Arouri and did not give the White House advance notice. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the operation.

The strike would be the first time since the war that Israel has reached into another country to target

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Hamas leaders, many of whom live in exile around the region.

The Mossad chief's comments suggested more assassinations of Hamas figures were to come, echoing threats by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to kill Hamas leaders wherever they are. Hamas's Oct. 7 attack from Gaza into southern Israel killed around 1,200 people, and some 240 others were taken hostage.

ISRAEL SEEKS A 'CLEAR VICTORY' IN GAZA

The focus of the war remains on Gaza, where Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Israel is seeking a "clear victory" over Hamas, which has ruled the territory since 2007.

Israel's air, ground and sea assault in Gaza has killed more than 22,300 people, 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.

The campaign has driven some 85% of Gaza's population from their homes, forcing hundreds of thousands of people into overcrowded shelters or teeming tent camps in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless bombed. A quarter of Gaza's population face starvation, according to the United Nations, as Israeli restrictions and heavy fighting hinder aid delivery.

Still, Israel appears far from achieving its goals of crushing Hamas and returning the estimated 129 hostages still held by the group.

Gallant said several thousand Hamas fighters remain in northern Gaza, where Israeli troops have been battling militants for over two months and where entire neighborhoods have been blasted into rubble.

Heavy fighting is also underway in central Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, where Israeli officials say Hamas' military structure is still largely intact. Yehya Sinwar, Hamas' top leader in Gaza, and his deputies have thus far eluded Israeli forces.

U.N. associate spokesperson Florencia Soto Niño said officials from the U.N.'s humanitarian office and the World Health Organization visited the Al Amal hospital in Khan Younis on Tuesday, which was reportedly hit by a deadly strike, and witnessed extensive damage.

The U.N. and its humanitarian partners have been unable to deliver aid to northern Gaza for three days, Soto Niño said.

The U.N. humanitarian office has warned that "Gaza is a public health disaster in the making," she said.

Since Oct. 7, more than 400,000 cases of infectious diseases have been reported, Soto Niño said, including some 180,000 people with upper respiratory infections and over 136,000 cases of diarrhea – half among children under the age of 5.

More hospitals are requiring masks as flu and COVID-19 cases surge

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — More U.S. hospitals are requiring masks and limiting visitors as health officials face an expected but still nasty post-holiday spike in flu, COVID-19 and other illnesses.

While many experts say this season likely won't prove to be as deadly as some other recent winters, it still could mean hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and many thousands of deaths across the country.

New York City last week instituted a mask mandate for the city's 11 public hospitals. Similar measures were ordered last week at some hospitals in Los Angeles and Massachusetts. Some hospitals reinstated masking rules for employees months ago, in anticipation of a seasonal rush of sick people.

Flu and COVID-19 infections have been increasing for weeks, with high levels of flu-like illness reported in 31 states just before Christmas. Updated national numbers are to be released Friday, but health officials predict infections will grow in many states well into January.

"What we're seeing right now, in the first week of January, is really an acceleration — of flu cases, in particular," said Dr. Mandy Cohen, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There is some good news. Flu and COVID-19 cases may peak by the end of the month and then drop, Cohen said. Though the flu has been skyrocketing, this year's cases are being caused by a strain that usually doesn't cause as many deaths and hospitalizations as some other versions. What's more, signs suggest current flu vaccines are well-matched to the strain.

"I don't think it's going to be overwhelming," said Dr. William Schaffner, Vanderbilt University infectious

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diseases expert. He deemed the current season "moderately severe."

The CDC is pointing the public to an agency website where people can look up their county, which can help them make decisions about whether to wear masks or take other precautions. Cohen urged people to get vaccinated and to seek treatment for flu and COVID-19.

Vaccinations are down this year, officials say. About 44% of U.S. adults had gotten flu shots by Dec. 23, according to the most recently available CDC vaccination survey data. Only about 19% of U.S. adults were reported to have received an updated COVID-19 shot as of early December.

COVID-19 cases are causing more severe disease than the flu but have been rising less dramatically. Health officials are keeping an eye on JN.1, a new version of the ever-evolving coronavirus. The omicron variant was first detected in the U.S. in September and just before Christmas accounted for an estimated 44% of COVID-19 cases.

The JN.1 variant may spread easier or be better at evading our immune systems, but there is no evidence that it causes more severe disease than other recent variants, health officials say. Current evidence indicates vaccines and antiviral medications work against it.

The CDC also has reported disappointing vaccination rates against another seasonal bug, respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV. That is a common cause of mild cold-like symptoms, but it can be dangerous for infants and older people. RSV cases rose in the fall but appear to have plateaued and are even going down in some places, according to the latest data.

At Hillsdale Hospital in southern Michigan, a 65% increase in respiratory illness activity in late December triggered a limitation to visitors in the birthing center. Only a spouse, a support person and grandparents can visit. They all must wear a mask and not show symptoms of sickness.

The restriction is common for the hospital around this time of year, said Dr. Nichole Ellis, a pediatrician who is the hospital's medical chief of staff. But it's more difficult this season, she added.

"In the past, we would have one ... disease that we were tracking or monitoring at one time," Ellis said. "But now, babies and children will have multiple diseases at the same time. It's not that they just have RSV ... but they're getting RSV and COVID at the same time, or influenza and RSV at the same time because all of the diseases are prevalent in our community."

Young voters in Bangladesh dream of a future free from political chaos as the nation votes Sunday

By JULHAS ALAM and AL-EMRUN GARJON Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — At a technology center in Bangladesh's capital, young women huddle around a computer, discussing a coding issue. Many of them make the daily trip to Dhaka on the shining new metro rail while scouring their smartphones for the latest on social media.

For decades, political battles in Bangladesh have been fought on the streets, often with violence, by parties led by two powerful women. But there are signs of a generational change as the country of 169 million heads into another general election Sunday.

While an opposition boycott and acrimony tarnish the polls, millions of young voters are seeking a different narrative. A burgeoning technology industry, lively e-commerce and a growing public digital infrastructure are helping one of South Asia's fastest growing economies capitalize on a tech-savvy workforce that is demanding change from politicians.

Ahead of the election, boycotted by the main opposition led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is trying to woo first-time voters with her government's "Digital Bangladesh" project, promising a "smart Bangladesh" by 2041 and 15 million new jobs for young people by 2030.

In an address at a large election rally outside Dhaka on Saturday, Hasina asked young voters for their support "so that the advancement of Bangladesh continues."

Some are listening. Shahrima Tanjin Arni, 26, who teaches law at Dhaka University, called Hasina a bold leader with a vision for a digital future.

"She holds the values of the past, but at the same time, she has a progressive thinking in her progres-

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sive heart, which is not very common in Bangladeshi societies," Arni said.

The previous two general elections were marred by allegations of vote-rigging and intimidation, which authorities denied. Hasina, seeking a fourth consecutive term, pledges a free and fair election. But her critics allege she is undermining the process for an inclusive election and suppressing the opposition, which Hasina blames for violence.

Younger voters say they want a break from the highly polarized political culture and concerns over democratic rights.

"My desire is that ... people of Bangladesh will freely exercise their voting right, their freedom of speech will be ensured and the justice system will work independently," said Abdur Rahim Rony, a student at Dhaka University. "I also wish that no political party or the government will interfere with the constitutional institutions."

One-fourth of the country's population is in the 15-29 age group, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Almost one-third of the country's 119.1 million registered voters are between 18 and 30.

An October survey by the Bangladesh Citizen's Platform for SDGs, or sustainable development goals, conducted online and involving 5,075 people aged 18-35, found that 69% of young people in Bangladesh considered corruption and nepotism as the main obstacles to development as the country sheds its least-developed economic status and grows into a middle-income developing country.

"We don't want any chaos on streets or violence. When I will finish my study, I wish to do a job or start my own business peacefully," said 20-year-old Raul Tamjid Rahman, a first-time voter and computer science student at Brac University in Dhaka. "It's a call from our generation to our politicians and policymakers."

The telecom boom in Bangladesh began in 1997 when Hasina issued free licenses to three operators to run the mobile phone sector. It was a key chance for global companies to invest in one of the world's most densely populated countries.

"The expansion of digital economy is a miracle that is bringing changes to the economic landscape, with young people at the helm," said Abu Saeed Khan, a senior policy fellow at the Sri Lanka-based think tank LIRNEasia.

According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, the country now has close to 127 million internet users, with about 114 million mobile internet subscribers.

The government has spent millions of dollars to turn a network of 8,500 rural post offices into e-centers for local communities. New startups include some funded by Silicon Valley investors, and mobile money transfers have become common. Most of Bangladesh's 4 million garment workers, a majority of them women, use SMS-based money transfer apps to help their families in rural areas.

But inflation and dwindling foreign currency reserves still challenge Bangladesh's economy. The country sought a \$4.5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund in 2022 to safeguard its finances.

The government is optimistic, however, that the economy, which grew from \$8.75 billion in 1971 to \$460 billion in 2022, will soon be worth half a trillion dollars.

"Mobile voice and mobile video both have become the oxygen of (the) economy, as simple as that," analyst Khan said.

The expansion of digital infrastructure has come with concerns over a contentious 2018 Digital Security Act and its recent replacement, the Cyber Security Act. The government says they are needed to fight misinformation, hacking and attempts to undermine people's rights.

Critics and rights activists said the previous law was misused by the government to suppress dissent and freedom of speech. Critics say the new cyber security law will not bring many differences. In March, a journalist for a leading newspaper was arrested under the law on charges of spreading false news.

T.I.M. Nurul Kabir, executive director of the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said that despite challenges, Bangladesh's digital development is attracting young people.

"This is the new generation who are coming ahead with innovations," he said. "For a developed Bangladesh, these young people, these digital dreamers, are the backbone. Women are also increasingly joining that future journey."

Tech entrepreneur Achia Nila is one of them.

"Technology is super important in my daily life. It fits into everything I do," Nila said, adding that it helps to connect with clients and the international market.

Ahead of Sunday's election, Nila called on political parties not to fight and instead focus on working together to further develop Bangladesh.

Many young people feel frustrated with corruption and bureaucracy, she said, and warned that they may prefer to migrate to other countries because of better opportunities.

US calls for urgent UN action on attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels on ships in the Red Sea

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The United States called on the U.N. Security Council Wednesday to take urgent action against Yemen's Houthi rebels for attacking ships in the key Red Sea trade route and warned their longtime financier Iran that it has a choice to make about continuing to provide support to the rebels.

U.S. deputy ambassador Christopher Lu told an emergency council meeting that the Houthis have carried out more than 20 attacks since Nov. 19 -- and despite losing 10 fighters in a confrontation with U.S. forces after trying unsuccessfully to board a cargo ship on Sunday, the rebel group announced Wednesday morning they had targeted another container ship.

The Houthis, who have been engaged in a civil war with Yemen's internationally recognized government since 2014, have said they launched the attacks on ships in the Red Sea with the aim of ending Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip triggered by the Palestinian militant group Hamas' Oct. 7 surprise attack in southern Israel.

International Maritime Organization Secretary-General Arsenio Dominguez told the council that as a result of the Houthi attacks, around 18 shipping companies have rerouted their vessels around South Africa to avoid the risk of being hit.

Some 15% of international trade goes through the vital Red Sea area, he said, and rerouting ships around the Cape of Good Hope represents an additional 10-day journey, negatively impacts global trade, and increases freight rates.

U.S. envoy Lu stressed to the council that the Houthis have been able to carry out the attacks because Iran has supplied them with money and advanced weapons systems including drones, land attack cruise missiles and ballistic missiles -- in violation of U.N. sanctions.

"We also know that Iran has been deeply involved in planning operations against commercial vessels in the Red Sea," Lu said.

He said the United States isn't seeking a confrontation with Iran but Tehran has a choice.

"It can continue its current course," Lu said, "or it can withhold its support without which the Houthis would struggle to effectively track and strike commercial vessels navigating shipping lanes through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden."

After the U.S. Navy sank three Houthi boats on Sunday with the loss of 10 of its fighters, the spokesman for the White House National Security Council wouldn't say what further actions the Biden administration was considering.

John Kirby told ABC's "Good Morning America" the United States has made it clear to the Houthis that "we take these threats seriously and we're going to make the right decisions going forward."

Lu, the U.S. deputy ambassador, said the Houthi attacks "pose grave implications for maritime security, international shipping and commerce" and it's vital that the Security Council speak out now on the need to uphold international law and the right to freedom of navigation.

A U.S. draft resolution circulated to council members after the open meeting and obtained by The Associated Press would condemn and demand an immediate halt to the Houthi attacks and recognize the right of any country to defend their merchant and naval vessels in accordance with international law.

Without mentioning Iran, the draft would also condemn "the provision of arms and related materiel of all types to the Houthis" in violation of U.N. resolutions. It would also call for all countries to implement the

arms embargo on the Houthis and recall that the U.N. panel of experts monitoring sanctions "has found many Houthi weapons to be of Iranian origin."

The U.S. draft would underscore "the need to avoid further escalation of the situation."

There was near unanimous condemnation of the Houthi attacks in speeches Wednesday by the 15 council members, and many calls for the rebel group to release the *Galaxy Leader*, a Japanese-operated cargo ship with links to an Israeli company that it seized on Nov. 19 along with its crew.

A statement issued later by the U.S., Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand and the United Kingdom called for the immediate end of Houthi attacks and warned that further attacks would require collective action.

"The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways," the 12 countries said.

On Dec. 1, the Security Council issued a press statement condemning and demanding an immediate halt to Houthi attacks against commercial vessels in the Red Sea "in the strongest terms."

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia called on Houthi leaders to implement that statement and halt attacks, but he stressed that they must be seen as a response to the violence in Gaza "where Israel's brutal operation has continued for three months now," leading to escalating attacks in the West Bank and along the Israel-Lebanon border.

Russia sees two scenarios for the current Red Sea situation, he said.

The favorable one would be for the Security Council to redouble efforts to end the Yemen civil war and the violence in Gaza, Nebenzia said.

The "catastrophic" scenario is to escalate the use of force in the Red Sea — which he said the U.S. and its allies are calling on the council to do — which risks derailing a settlement of the Yemen conflict and would create conditions "for igniting a new major conflict around at least the Arabian Peninsula" and a wider regional conflict.

US warns Houthis to cease attacks on Red Sea vessels or face potential military action

By ZEKE MILLER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States and 12 allies issued what amounted to a final warning to Houthi rebels on Wednesday to cease their attacks on vessels in the Red Sea or face potential targeted military action.

The Yemen-based militants have carried out at least 23 attacks in response to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza since Dec. 19.

A senior Biden administration official declined to detail rules of possible engagement if the attacks continue, but underscored that the Iranian-backed Houthis should "not anticipate another warning" from the U.S. and its allies.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, spoke soon after the countries issued a joint statement earlier Wednesday condemning the attacks and underscoring that international patience was strained.

The statement was signed by the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Separately, the U.S. called on the United Nations Security Council on Wednesday to take action against the Houthis and warned their financier Iran that it has a choice to make about continuing to provide support to the rebels.

"Let our message now be clear: we call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews," the countries said. "The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways."

For weeks, the Houthis have claimed attacks on ships in the Red Sea that they say are either linked to

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Israel or heading to Israeli ports. They say their attacks aim to end the Israeli air-and-ground offensive in the Gaza Strip that was triggered by the Palestinian militant group Hamas' Oct.7 attack in southern Israel.

However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue.

The attacks have targeted commercial shipping vessels transiting through the critical Bab el-Mandeb Strait that links markets in Asia and Europe since the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas and Israel's subsequent war against the militant group in Gaza.

The U.S. and its allies have formed Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect ship traffic, and currently, warships from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom are patrolling the area. On Sunday, U.S. helicopters opened fire on Houthi rebels after they attacked a cargo ship in the Red Sea, killing several of them.

The U.S. Navy helicopters returned fire in self-defense sinking three of the four boats and killing the people on board while the fourth boat fled the area, according to U.S. Central Command said. The Houthis acknowledged that 10 of their fighters were killed in the confrontation and warned of consequences.

U.S. ships in recent weeks have shot down waves of Houthi ballistic missiles and one-way explosive drones.

President Joe Biden has sought to keep the three-month war between Israel and Hamas from escalating into a broader regional conflict. But the official stressed that the U.S. and its allies would respond similarly to such malign action that has impacts on global commerce anywhere around the globe.

"As the President has made clear, the United States does not seek conflict with any nation or actor in the Middle East, nor do we want to see the war between Israel and Hamas widen in the region," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said. "But neither will we shrink from the task of defending ourselves, our interests, our partners, or the free flow of international commerce."

The official said any potential action against the Houthis will be done in a "very smart way that does not potentially draw us in deep to a situation" with Iran and its proxy groups.

At the U.N., U.S. deputy ambassador Christopher Lu said that without Iranian support the Houthis "would struggle to effectively track and strike commercial vessels navigating shipping lanes through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden."

Biden last week ordered U.S. airstrikes against Iranian-backed militia groups, including Kataib Hezbollah, after three U.S. servicemembers were injured in a drone attack in northern Iraq.

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

—
Associated Press reporter Edith M. Lederer contributed from the United Nations.

Jewish protesters calling for cease-fire in Gaza disrupt first day of California legislative session

By ADAM BEAM and TRÂN NGUYỄN Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Hundreds of protesters calling for a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war interrupted the first day of California's legislative session on Wednesday, forcing the state Assembly to adjourn just moments after convening.

Lawmakers had just listened to the opening prayer and said the Pledge of Allegiance when protesters wearing matching black t-shirts stood from their seats and started singing "Cease-fire now" and "Let Gaza live."

A few people unfurled banners from the chamber's gallery that read: "Jews say never again for anyone."

At first, Jim Wood, a Democratic assemblymember from Healdsburg who was presiding over the session, tried to continue the session despite the singing. Eventually though he called for a recess and adjourned a few minutes later.

Nearly all of the lawmakers left the floor. Protesters cheered when officials turned the lights off in the

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chamber, holding up the flashlights on their phones as they continued to sing, which included a lengthy call-and-response chant from the gallery.

"We are Jews and Californians, Assembly members, we call on you to join us in demanding a cease-fire now," they said.

Democratic Assembly Speaker Robert Rivas' office declined to comment. Assemblymember James Gallagher, the Republican leader, said the protesters obstructed their work.

"Look, we're trying to open up our session. Granted, we probably didn't have a whole lot of, you know, big business to do today. But if the objective is to shut down the government functions, I don't think that's a good way to go about getting your message across," he said. "We can't let them shut us down. We have to go about our business. We have big pressing issues this year."

Wednesday's protest was organized by groups including Jewish Voice for Peace, IfNotNow and the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network. Binya Kóatz, a Jewish teacher and artist who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, said Americans have "not only the right but the responsibility to stop business as usual as long as our country is giving a blank check to Israel."

Kóatz said the groups chose to protest at the California state Legislature because, while those lawmakers do not control federal money sent to Israel, "we know that state Legislatures have the ear of their national counterparts in California and that getting this body to call for a cease-fire now can put California at the forefront of the national movement."

It's not the first time that protesters calling for a cease-fire have disrupted events in California's capital city. In November, protesters forced their way inside a Sacramento convention hall and prompted the California Democratic Party to cancel some events during their nominating convention. And last month, Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom canceled an in-person Christmas tree lighting ceremony after protesters planned an action at the event.

Protesters did not disrupt the state Senate, which held its session as scheduled and included lawmakers giving speeches in memory of former U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who died in September.

Across the country, it was a day of disruptions at state capitols. A bomb threat emailed to officials in multiple states prompted evacuations of statehouse offices or buildings in Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana. Other states — including Missouri, Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Wyoming — received threats but did not evacuate.

California's legislative session, which began Wednesday and runs through Aug. 31, is expected to be dominated by decisions on artificial intelligence and the massive budget deficit. But as Wednesday's protest showed, ongoing fallout from the Israel-Hamas war will likely have an impact.

The California Legislative Jewish Caucus sent a letter to state lawmakers on Wednesday, calling for the creation of a committee to explore policy changes to protect the Jewish community.

"We have our own criticisms of Israel. We want the war to end," said Democratic state Sen. Scott Wiener of the Jewish caucus. "We also know the cease-fire resolutions we see at the local level have at times gone off the rails in terms of dredging up a lot of anti-Jewish hate and that causes a lot of fear in our community."

Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel, a Democrat from Los Angeles, said his 3-year-old child now has to walk through metal detectors to enter his preschool at a local synagogue.

"The level of fear and anxiety and tension is unlike anything I have ever seen in my lifetime," Gabriel said.

Lawmakers are scheduled to return to the chamber on Thursday morning. But the bulk of their work will come later, after Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom reveals his plan for how to cover an estimated \$68 billion deficit — a shortfall that is larger than the entire operating budgets of many states.

And with many California companies at the forefront of the artificial intelligence boom, a number of state lawmakers are eyeing ways to govern the use of the technology before it dominates daily life — much like social media.

State Sen. Steve Padilla proposed a measure Wednesday to require California to establish safety, privacy, and nondiscrimination standards around generative AI tools and services. Those standards would even-

tually be used as qualifications in future state contracts. He also introduced a plan to create a state-run research center to further study the technology.

Assemblymember Akilah Weber said she'll try to tackle "deepfakes" through a bill that would require labeling on AI-generated content.

Plagiarism charges downed Harvard's president. A conservative attack helped to fan the outrage

By COLLIN BINKLEY and MORIAH BALINGIT AP Education Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — American higher education has long viewed plagiarism as a cardinal sin. Accusations of academic dishonesty have ruined the careers of faculty and undergraduates alike.

The latest target is Harvard President Claudine Gay, who resigned Tuesday. In her case, the outrage came not from her academic peers but her political foes, led by conservatives who put her career under intense scrutiny.

Reviews by Harvard found multiple shortcomings in Gay's academic citations, including several instances of "duplicative language." The university concluded the errors "were not considered intentional or reckless" and didn't rise to misconduct. But the allegations continued, with new ones as recently as Monday.

Conservatives zeroed in on Gay amid backlash over her congressional testimony about antisemitism on campus. Her detractors charged that Gay — who has a Ph.D. in government, was a professor at Harvard and Stanford and headed Harvard's largest division before being promoted — got the top job in large part because she is a Black woman.

Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist who helped orchestrate the effort against Gay, celebrated her departure as a win in his campaign against elite institutions of higher education. On X, formerly Twitter, he wrote "SCALPED," as if Gay was a trophy of violence, invoking a gruesome practice taken up by white colonists who sought to eradicate Native Americans and also used by some tribes against their enemies.

"Tomorrow, we get back to the fight," he said on X, describing a "playbook" against institutions deemed too liberal by conservatives. His latest target: efforts to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in education and business.

"We must not stop until we have abolished DEI ideology from every institution in America," he said. In another post, he announced a new "plagiarism hunting fund," vowing to "expose the rot in the Ivy League and restore truth, rather than racialist ideology, as the highest principle in academic life."

In a New York Times op-ed published Wednesday, Gay acknowledged making mistakes. She said her published work contained passages where "some material duplicated other scholars' language, without proper attribution." But she said she never had claimed credit for others' work, and she stands by her original research. And at the December congressional hearing that started the onslaught of criticism, she wrote, "I neglected to clearly articulate that calls for the genocide of Jewish people are abhorrent and unacceptable."

Her departure comes just six months after becoming Harvard's first Black president.

As the figureheads of their universities, presidents often face heightened scrutiny, and numerous leaders have been felled by plagiarism scandals. Stanford University's president resigned last year amid findings that he manipulated scientific data in his research. A president of the University of South Carolina resigned in 2021 after he lifted parts of his speech at a graduation ceremony.

In Gay's case, many academics were troubled with how the plagiarism came to light: as part of a coordinated campaign to discredit Gay and force her from office, in part because of her involvement in efforts for racial justice on campus. Her resignation came after calls for her ouster from prominent conservatives including Rep. Elise Stefanik, a Harvard alumna, and Bill Ackman, a billionaire hedge fund manager who has donated millions to Harvard.

The campaign against Gay and other Ivy League presidents has become part of a broader right-wing effort to remake higher education, which has often been seen as a bastion of liberalism. Republican detractors have sought to gut funding for public universities, roll back tenure and banish initiatives that make

colleges more welcoming to students of color, disabled students and the LGBTQ+ community. They also have aimed to limit how race and gender are discussed in classrooms.

Walter M. Kimbrough, the former president of the historically Black Dillard University, said what unfolded at Harvard reminded him of an adage from his mother, a Black graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1950s.

As a Black person in academia, "you always have to be twice, three times as good," he said.

"There are going to be people, particularly if they have any inkling that the person of color is not the most qualified, who will label them a 'DEI hire,' like they tried to label her," Kimbrough said. "If you want to lead an institution like (Harvard) ... there are going to be people who are looking to disqualify you."

The allegations against Gay initially came from conservative activists, some who stayed anonymous. They looked for the kinds of duplicated sentences undergraduate students are trained to avoid, even with citation.

In dozens of instances first published by The Washington Free Beacon, a conservative website, Gay's work includes long stretches of prose that mirror language from other published works. A review ordered by Harvard acknowledged she duplicated the language without using quotation marks.

Harvard previously said Gay updated her dissertation and requested corrections from journals.

Among her critics in conservative circles and academia, the findings are clear evidence that Gay, as the top academic at the pinnacle of U.S. higher education, is unfit to serve. Her defenders say it isn't so clear-cut.

In highly specialized fields, scholars often use similar language to describe the same concepts, said Davarian Baldwin, a historian at Trinity College who writes about race and higher education. Gay clearly made mistakes, he said, but with the spread of software designed to detect plagiarism, it wouldn't be hard to find similar overlap in works by other presidents and professors.

The tool becomes dangerous, he added, when it "falls into the hands of those who argue that academia in general is a cesspool of incompetence and bad actors."

John Pelissero, a former interim college president who now works for the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, said instances of plagiarism deserve to be evaluated individually and that it's not always so cut and dried.

"You're looking for whether there was intentionality to mislead or inappropriately borrow other people's ideas in your work," Pelissero said. "Or was there an honest mistake?"

Without commenting on the merits of the allegations against Gay, President Irene Mulvey of the American Association of University Professors said she fears plagiarism investigations could be "weaponized" to pursue a political agenda.

"There is a right-wing political attack on higher education right now, which feels like an existential threat to the academic freedom that has made American higher education the envy of the world," Mulvey said.

She worries Gay's departure will put a new strain on college presidents. In addition to their work courting donors, policymakers and alumni, presidents are supposed to protect faculty from interference so they can research unimpeded.

"For presidents to be taken down like this, it does not bode well for academic freedom," she said. "I think it'll chill the climate for academic freedom. And it may make university presidents less likely to speak out against this inappropriate interference for fear of losing their jobs or being targeted."

Trump asks US Supreme Court to overturn Colorado ruling barring him from ballot over Jan. 6 attack

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Former President Donald Trump on Wednesday asked the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn a ruling barring him from the Colorado ballot, setting up a high-stakes showdown over whether a constitutional provision prohibiting those who "engaged in insurrection" will end his political career.

Trump appealed a 4-3 ruling in December by the Colorado Supreme Court that marked the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment was used to bar a presidential contender from the ballot.

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The court found that Trump's role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol disqualified him under the clause.

The provision has been used so sparingly in American history that the U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on it.

Wednesday's development came a day after Trump's legal team filed an appeal against a ruling by Maine's Democratic Secretary of State, Shenna Bellows, that Trump was ineligible to appear on that state's ballot over his role in the Capitol attack. Both the Colorado Supreme Court and the Maine secretary of state's rulings are on hold until the appeals play out.

Trump's critics have filed dozens of lawsuits seeking to disqualify him in multiple states. He lost Colorado by 13 percentage points in 2020 and does not need to win the state to gain either the Republican presidential nomination or the presidency. But the Colorado ruling has the potential to prompt courts or secretaries of state to remove him from the ballot in other, must-win states.

None had succeeded until a slim majority of Colorado's seven justices — all appointed by Democratic governors — ruled last month against Trump. Critics warned that it was an overreach and that the court could not simply declare that the Jan. 6 attack was an "insurrection" without a judicial process.

"The Colorado Supreme Court decision would unconstitutionally disenfranchise millions of voters in Colorado and likely be used as a template to disenfranchise tens of millions of voters nationwide," Trump's lawyers wrote in their appeal to the nation's highest court, noting that Maine has already followed Colorado's lead.

Trump's new appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court also follows one from Colorado's Republican Party. Legal observers expect the high court will take the case because it concerns unsettled constitutional issues that go to the heart of the way the country is governed.

All the parties to the case have urged the court to move quickly. Trump's lawyers on Wednesday asked the court to overturn the ruling without even hearing oral arguments. The lawyers representing the Colorado plaintiffs have urged oral arguments but also seek a vastly accelerated schedule, calling for a resolution by next month. Colorado's primary is March 5.

Sean Grimsley, an attorney for the plaintiffs seeking to disqualify Trump in Colorado, said late last month on a legal podcast called "Law, disrupted" that he hopes the nation's highest court hurries once it accepts the case, as he expects it will.

"We have a primary coming up on Super Tuesday and we need to know the answer," Grimsley said.

The Colorado high court upheld a finding by a district court judge that Jan. 6 was an "insurrection" incited by Trump. It agreed with the petitioners, six Republican and unaffiliated Colorado voters whose lawsuit was funded by a Washington-based liberal group, that Trump clearly violated the provision. Because of that, the court ruled he is disqualified just as plainly as if he failed to meet the Constitution's minimum age requirement for the presidency of 35 years.

In doing so, the state high court reversed a ruling by the lower court judge that said it wasn't clear that Section 3 was meant to apply to the president. That's one of many issues the nation's highest court would consider.

Additional ones include whether states such as Colorado can determine who is covered by Section 3, whether congressional action is needed to create a process to bar people from office, whether Jan. 6 met the legal definition of insurrection and whether Trump was simply engaging in First Amendment activity that day or is responsible for the violent attack, which was intended to halt certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory. Trump held a rally before the Capitol attack, telling his supporters that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

Six of the U.S. Supreme Court's nine justices were appointed by Republicans, and three by Trump himself.

The Colorado ruling cited a prior decision by Neil Gorsuch, one of Trump's appointees to the high court, when he was a federal judge in Colorado. That ruling determined that the state had a legitimate interest in removing from the presidential ballot a naturalized U.S. citizen who was ineligible for the office because he was born in Guyana.

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Section 3, however, has barely been used since the years after the Civil War, when it kept defeated Confederates from returning to their former government positions. The two-sentence clause says that anyone who swore an oath to "support" the Constitution and then engaged in insurrection cannot hold office unless a two-thirds vote of Congress allows it.

Legal scholars believe its only application in the 20th century was being cited by Congress in 1919 to block the seating of a socialist who opposed U.S. involvement in World War I and was elected to the House of Representatives.

But in 2022, a judge used it to remove a rural New Mexico county commissioner from office after he was convicted of a misdemeanor for entering the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Liberal groups sued to block Republican Reps. Madison Cawthorn and Marjorie Taylor Greene from running for reelection because of their roles on that day. Cawthorn's case became moot when he lost his primary in 2022, and a judge ruled to keep Greene on the ballot.

Some conservatives warn that, if Trump is removed, political groups will routinely use Section 3 against opponents in unexpected ways.

Biden's administration has noted that the president has no role in the litigation.

The issue of whether Trump can be on the ballot is not the only matter related to the former president or Jan. 6 that has reached the high court. The justices last month declined a request from special counsel Jack Smith to swiftly take up and rule on Trump's claims that he is immune from prosecution in a case charging him with plotting to overturn the presidential election, though the issue could be back before the court soon depending on the ruling of a Washington-based appeals court.

And the court has said that it intends to hear an appeal that could upend hundreds of charges stemming from the Capitol riot, including against Trump.

Mother and uncle of a US serviceman are rescued from Gaza in a secret operation

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The mother and American uncle of a U.S. service member were safe outside of Gaza after being rescued from the fighting in a secret operation coordinated by the U.S., Israel, Egypt and others, a U.S. official told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

It is the only known operation of its kind to extract American citizens and their close family members during the months of devastating ground fighting and Israeli airstrikes in Gaza. The vast majority of people who have made it out of northern and central Gaza through the Rafah crossing into Egypt fled south in the initial weeks of the war. An escape from the heart of the Palestinian territory through intense combat has become far more perilous and difficult since.

Zahra Sckak, 44, made it out of Gaza on New Year's Eve, along with her brother-in-law, Farid Sukaik, an American citizen, a U.S. official told The Associated Press. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to confirm the rescue, which had been kept quiet for security reasons.

Sckak's husband, Abedalla Sckak, was shot earlier in the Israel-Hamas war as the family fled from a building hit by an airstrike. He died days later. One of her three American sons, Spec. Ragi A. Sckak, 24, serves as an infantryman in the U.S. military.

The extraction involved the Israeli military and local Israeli officials who oversee Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the U.S. official said. There was no indication that American officials were on the ground in Gaza.

"The United States played solely a liaison and coordinating role between the Sckak family and the governments of Israel and Egypt," the official said.

A family member and U.S.-based lawyers and advocates working on the family's behalf had described Sckak and Sukaik as pinned down in a building surrounded by combatants, with little or no food and with only water from sewers to drink.

There were few immediate details of the on-the-ground operation. It took place after extended appeals

from Sckak's family and U.S.-based citizens groups for help from Congress members and the Biden administration.

The State Department has said some 300 American citizens, legal permanent residents and their immediate family members remain in Gaza, at risk from ground fighting, airstrikes and widening starvation and thirst in the besieged territory.

With no known official U.S. presence on the ground, those still left in the territory face a dangerous and sometimes impossible trip to Egypt's border crossing out of Gaza, and a bureaucratic struggle for U.S., Egyptian and Israeli approval to get themselves, their parents and young children out of Gaza.

Imam killed outside New Jersey mosque, and the shooter remains at large, authorities say

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

A New Jersey imam was gunned down outside his mosque before dawn Wednesday, leaving authorities hunting for a shooter and saying they've found no evidence yet that an anti-Muslim bias played a part in the shooting.

Imam Hassan Sharif was in his car when he was shot more than once at about 6 a.m. near the Masjid-Muhammad Mosque in Newark, the state's largest city, Essex County Prosecutor Ted Stephens said at a news conference. He was taken to a nearby hospital but died in the afternoon.

"I know that in light of global events and with a rise in bias directed at many communities we're experiencing across our state — particularly the Muslim community — there are many in New Jersey right now who are feeling a heightened sense of fear or anxiety at the news of this slaying," Attorney General Matt Platkin said.

Despite that, Platkin said law enforcement has stepped up outreach to houses of worship, particularly Jewish and Muslim ones, explicitly acknowledging the tensions unfolding in many parts of the world amid the fighting in Gaza since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel.

Sharif had been a resident imam at the local mosque for five years, Newark Public Safety Director Fritz Fragé said. He remembered the imam as a leader in the interfaith community who worked to keep the city safe.

"We share your pain and we promise to utilize the full resources of those here and those who are continuing to partner with us to we make sure that this heinous crime is solved," he said.

The New Jersey chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the nation's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, called Sharif a "beacon of leadership and excellence." and said that while the shooter's motives are unknown, the group is advising all mosques to "remain cautious" while keeping their doors open.

About 320,000 of the state's roughly 9 million residents are Muslim, Platkin said. After Wednesday's shooting, officials reached out to Muslim communities in the city and across the state.

"We're asking everybody in our community and our partners to let us know if there's anything that they want to be done and anything that is making them feel unsafe so we can respond," he said.

Speaker Johnson demands hard-line policies during a border visit as Ukraine aid hangs in the balance

By VALERIE GONZALEZ and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas (AP) — U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson led about 60 fellow Republicans in Congress on a visit Wednesday to the Mexican border to demand hard-line immigration policies in exchange for backing President Joe Biden's emergency wartime funding request for Ukraine. He expressed serious doubts about whether he would support a bipartisan compromise.

The trip to Eagle Pass, Texas, came as the Senate engages in delicate negotiations in hopes of striking a deal on border policies that could unlock Senate GOP support for Biden's \$110 billion package for Ukraine,

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Israel and other U.S. security priorities.

But Johnson, R-La., told The Associated Press during the border tour that he was holding firmly to the policies of a bill passed by House Republicans in May without a single Democratic vote. The bill, H.R. 2, would revive many of the policies pursued by former President Donald Trump, build more of the border wall and impose new restrictions on asylum seekers. Democrats called the legislation "cruel" and "anti-immigrant," and Biden promised a veto.

"If it looks like H.R. 2, we'll talk about it," Johnson said of any border legislation that emerges from the Senate.

With the number of illegal crossings into the United States topping 10,000 on several days last month, Eagle Pass has been at the center of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star, his nearly \$10 billion initiative that has tested the federal government's authority over immigration and elevated the political fight over the issue.

The GOP House members touted their event as the largest congressional border trip ever. They traveled in two large buses beneath an international bridge in Eagle Pass where just two weeks ago illegal crossings prompted a large federal response that included closing railroad traffic and creating a large field for processing migrants. By Wednesday, the field sat empty with only stakes in the ground and orange fencing.

At a news conference, Johnson suggested he could use a looming government funding deadline as further leverage.

"If President Biden wants a supplemental spending bill focused on national security, it better begin with defending America's national security," he said. Johnson added: "We want to get the border closed and secured first."

Biden has expressed willingness to make policy compromises as the historic number of migrants crossing the border is an increasing challenge for his 2024 reelection campaign. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and White House staff have been involved in the Senate negotiations.

"We've got to do something," Biden told reporters Tuesday night. He said Congress should approve his national security proposal because it also includes money for managing the influx of migrants. "They ought to give me the money I need to protect the border," he said.

Administration officials have criticized Johnson's trip as a political ploy that will do little to solve the problem. White House spokesperson Andrew Bates said Republicans were compromising national security by threatening to shut down the government and delaying approval of funding for additional border security.

"When they're at the border, they're going to see the magnitude of the problem and why we have said now for about three decades, their broken immigration system is in desperate need of legislative reform," Mayorkas told CNN on Wednesday. "So we are focused on the solutions, and we hope that they will return to Washington and focus on the solutions as well."

House Republicans also contend that Mayorkas' management of the border has amounted to a dereliction of his duties and they are moving ahead with rare impeachment proceedings against a Cabinet member, with a first committee hearing on the matter scheduled for next week. Mayorkas told MSNBC he would cooperate with an inquiry.

During parts of December, border crossings in Eagle Pass, as well as other locations, swamped the resources of Customs and Border Protection officials. Authorities closed cargo rail crossings in Eagle Pass and El Paso for five days and shut down border crossings in the Arizona city of Lukeville.

Authorities say the numbers of migrants eased over the December holidays as part of a seasonal pattern. The border crossings are reopening, and arrests for illegal crossings from Mexico fell to about 2,500 on Monday, from more than 10,000 on several days in December, officials said.

"We need to fix the border. There's virtually unanimous agreement among Democrats and Republicans about that," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday. He added: "Everyone's going to have to give something to get this done."

Republicans are pressuring Biden and Democrats to accept strict border measures, and they see the high number of migrants arriving at the border as a political weakness for the president.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell told reporters in Kentucky on Tuesday that in a conversation

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with 81-year-old Biden, he made the case: "You can't do anything about how old you are, you can't do anything about inflation, but this is something that's measurable that you could claim credit for."

McConnell also said he was approaching the talks with "optimism that somehow we will get this all together and we're giving it our best shot."

Sen. James Lankford, the Oklahoma Republican negotiating the Senate agreement, called H.R. 2 "a great bill," but said it was not realistic to expect the president or Senate Democrats to support the measures.

Senate negotiators have focused on tougher asylum protocols for migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border, bolstering border enforcement with more personnel and high-tech systems, and enforcement measures that would kick in if the number of daily crossings passed a certain threshold.

Sens. Kyrsten Sinema, I-Ariz, Chris Murphy, D-Conn., and Lankford met Wednesday afternoon and said they were trying to agree on legislative text they could present to their colleagues. Sinema said the group was "closing in" on an agreement, but technical work remained before Congress returns to Washington next week.

"We're going to work out a bill, if we're successful, that will have Republican and Democratic votes," said Murphy, the chief Democratic negotiator.

Murphy has raised concern that the longer the talks draw out, the longer it leaves Ukraine's defenses hanging without assured support from the U.S. in the war with Russia.

The Pentagon in late December announced what officials say could be the final package of military aid for Ukraine if Congress does not approve Biden's funding request. The weapons, worth up to \$250 million, include air munitions and other missiles, artillery, anti-armor systems, ammunition, demolition and medical equipment and parts.

Russia has unleashed a flurry of missile and drone strikes on Ukraine in the new year.

Second administration official resigns in protest of Biden's support for Israeli war in Gaza

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and COLLIN BINKLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Department of Education policy adviser appointed by the Biden administration quit Wednesday to protest the administration's crucial military support of Israel's war in Gaza and its handling of the conflict's repercussions at home and abroad.

Tariq Habash, a Biden administration appointee who had worked in the education department to help overhaul the student loan system and address inequities in higher education, told The Associated Press he submitted his resignation Wednesday. That was after he and others had "done everything imaginable" to work within the system to try to register their objections to administration leaders, he said.

Habash becomes at least the second official, and the first known official of Palestinian origin, to resign from the administration in protest of President Joe Biden's actions regarding the war. State Department veteran Josh Paul stepped down in October as the administration accelerated arms transfers to Israel.

Habash had been among the administration staffers of Middle East, Muslim and Jewish background taking part in meetings with senior White House officials and others in the administration in response to staffers' concerns on the U.S. role in the war. Habash on Wednesday described the sessions as more briefings from higher-ups than opportunity for staffers to be heard.

The White House referred questions about Habash to the Department of Education and a department spokesperson said "we wish him the best in his future endeavors."

Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks killed 1,200 people in Israel. More than 22,000 people have died since Israel launched its offensive in Gaza.

Biden and his top officials have defended Israel's devastating air and ground campaign in Gaza as Israel's rightful self-defense against Hamas. They point to their repeated urging to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to change how it is fighting the war so as to lessen deaths among Palestinian civilians.

Fallout from the Israel-Hamas war has roiled campuses across the U.S. and reignited a debate over free speech. College leaders have struggled to define the line where political speech crosses into harassment

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and discrimination, with Jewish and Arab students raising concerns that their schools are doing too little to protect them.

The issue came to a boil in December when the presidents of Harvard, Penn and MIT were asked to testify at a congressional hearing on campus antisemitism. Asked by Republican lawmakers whether calls for the genocide of Jews would violate campus policies, the presidents offered lawyerly answers and declined to say unequivocally that it was prohibited speech.

Their answers sparked weeks of backlash from donors and alumni, ultimately leading to the resignation of Liz Magill at Penn and Claudine Gay at Harvard.

The Education Department has warned colleges that they're required to fight antisemitism and Islamophobia on their campuses or risk a loss of federal money. The agency has opened civil rights inquiries at dozens of schools and colleges in response to complaints of antisemitism and Islamophobia in the wake of Oct. 7, including at Harvard, Stanford and MIT.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona met with Jewish students from Baltimore-area colleges in November and vowed to take action to keep them safe. He later met with the leaders of national Muslim, Arab, and Sikh organizations to discuss the rise of Islamophobia on college campuses.

In his resignation letter, Habash wrote, "The Department of Education must play an active role in supporting institutions as they respond to the needs of students, faculty, and staff. This includes protecting all students who choose to exercise their first amendment right to engage in nonviolent actions, including expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza."

Earlier months of the war saw some administration staffers sign petitions and open letters urging Biden to call for a cease-fire.

Russia and Ukraine exchange hundreds of prisoners of war in biggest release so far

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia and Ukraine on Wednesday exchanged hundreds of prisoners of war in the biggest single release of captives since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Ukrainian authorities said that 230 Ukrainian prisoners of war returned home in the first exchange in almost five months. Russia's Defense Ministry said that 248 Russian servicemen have been freed under the deal sponsored by the United Arab Emirates.

The UAE's Foreign Ministry attributed the successful swap to the "strong friendly relations between the UAE and both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Ukraine, which were supported by sustained calls at the highest levels."

The UAE has maintained close economic ties with Moscow despite Western sanctions and pressure on Russia after it launched its invasion in 2022.

Ukraine's human rights ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, said it was the 49th prisoner exchange during the war.

Some of the Ukrainians had been held since 2022. Among them were some of those who fought in milestone battles for Ukraine's Snake Island and the Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

Russian officials offered no other details of the exchange.

Also Wednesday, Russia said it shot down 12 missiles fired at one of its southern regions bordering Ukraine, as Kyiv's forces seek to embarrass the Kremlin and puncture President Vladimir Putin's argument that life is going on as normal despite the fighting.

The situation in the border city of Belgorod, which came under two rounds of shelling on Wednesday morning, "remains tense," said regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov, writing on Telegram.

"Air defense systems worked," he said, promising more details about possible damage after inspecting the area later in the day, part of a New Year's holiday week in Russia.

Ukraine fired two Tochka-U missiles and seven rockets at the region late Tuesday, followed by six Tochka-U missiles and six Vilkha rockets on Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

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The Soviet-built Tochka-U missile system has a range of up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) and a warhead that can carry cluster munitions. Ukraine has received some cluster munitions from the United States but the Tochka-U and Vilkha can use their own cluster munitions.

The Russian side of the frontier has come under increasingly frequent attack in recent days. Throughout the war, border villages have sporadically been targeted by Ukrainian artillery fire, rockets, mortar shells and drones launched from thick forests where they are hard to detect.

Lately, as Russia fired missiles and drones at Ukrainian cities, Kyiv's troops have aimed at Belgorod's regional capital, which is about 100 kilometers (60 miles) north of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city.

Belgorod, with a population of about 340,000, is the biggest Russian city near the border. It can be reached by relatively simple and movable weapons such as multiple rocket launchers.

On Saturday, shelling of Belgorod killed 25 people, including five children, in one of the deadliest strikes on Russian soil since Moscow's full-scale invasion. Another civilian was killed Tuesday in a new salvo.

Hitting Belgorod and disrupting city life is a dramatic way for Ukraine to show it can strike back against Russia, whose military outnumbers and outguns Kyiv's forces.

The tactic appeared to be having some success, with signs the attacks are unsettling the public, political leaders and military observers.

On Monday, Putin lashed out against the Belgorod attacks by Ukraine. "They want to intimidate us and create uncertainty within our country," he said, promising to step up retaliation.

Answering a question from a soldier who asked him about civilian casualties in Belgorod, Putin said: "I also feel a simmering anger."

Many Russian military bloggers have expressed regret about Moscow's withdrawal from the border area in September 2022 amid a swift counteroffensive by Kyiv, and they have argued that more territory must be seized to secure Belgorod and other border areas.

Russia describes Ukrainians as "terrorists" who indiscriminately target residential areas while insisting Moscow only aims at depots, arms factories and other military facilities — even though there is ample evidence that Russia is hitting Ukrainian civilian targets.

Ukrainian officials rarely acknowledge responsibility for strikes on Russian territory.

In another Russian border region on Wednesday, the city of Zeleznogorsk was briefly cut off from the power grid after Ukrainian shelling, local officials said.

Authorities were forced to temporarily shut down an electricity substation in the city of 100,000 people in the Kursk region to repair the damage from an aerial attack, Kursk Gov. Roman Starovoit said on Telegram.

Residents were without power or heat, he said, although electricity was restored in most of the city about two hours later, he said.

Russia has recently intensified its long-range attacks on Ukrainian cities, including using Kinzhal missiles which can fly at 10 times the speed of sound. The Kremlin's forces appear to be targeting Ukraine's defense industry, the U.K. Defense Ministry said Wednesday.

The onslaught has prompted Kyiv officials to ask its Western allies to provide further air defense support.

NATO announced Wednesday that it would help member nations buy up to 1,000 surface-to-air Patriot guided missiles in a deal possibly costing about \$5.5 billion. That could allow alliance members to send more of their own defense systems to Ukraine.

Alzheimer's drugs might get into the brain faster with new ultrasound tool, study shows

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scientists have found a way to help Alzheimer's drugs seep inside the brain faster — by temporarily breaching its protective shield.

The novel experiment was a first attempt in just three patients. But in spots in the brain where the new technology took aim, it enhanced removal of Alzheimer's trademark brain-clogging plaque, researchers reported Wednesday.

"Our goal is to give patients a head start," by boosting some new Alzheimer's treatments that take a long time to work, said Dr. Ali Rezai of West Virginia University's Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute, who led the study.

At issue is what's called the blood-brain barrier, a protective lining in blood vessels that prevents germs and other damaging substances from leaching into brain from the bloodstream. But it also can block drugs for Alzheimer's, tumors and other neurologic diseases, requiring higher doses for longer periods for enough to reach their target inside the brain.

Now scientists are using a technology called focused ultrasound to jiggle temporary openings in that shield. They inject microscopic bubbles into the bloodstream. Next, they beam sound waves through a helmetlike device to a precise brain area. The pulses of energy vibrate the microbubbles, which loosen gaps in the barrier enough for medications to slip in.

Prior small studies have found the technology can safely poke tiny holes that seal up in 48 hours. Now Rezai's team has gone a step further — administering an Alzheimer's drug at the same time.

Some new Alzheimer's drugs, on the market or in the pipeline, promise to modestly slow worsening of the mind-robbing disease. They're designed to clear away a sticky protein called beta-amyloid that builds up in certain brain regions. But they require IV infusions every few weeks for at least 18 months.

"Why not try to clear the plaques within a few months?" Rezai said, his rationale for the proof-of-concept study.

His team gave three patients with mild Alzheimer's monthly doses of one such drug, Aduhelm, for six months. Right after each IV, researchers aimed the focused ultrasound on a specific amyloid-clogged part of each patient's brain, opening the blood brain-barrier so more of that day's dose might enter that spot.

PET scans show patients' amyloid levels before and after the six months of medication. There was about 32% greater plaque reduction in spots where the blood-brain barrier was breached compared to the same region on the brain's opposite side, researchers reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

This pilot study is elegant but too tiny to draw any conclusions, cautioned Dr. Eliezer Masliah of the National Institute on Aging.

Still, "it's very exciting, compelling data," added Masliah, who wasn't involved with the research. "It opens the door for more extensive, larger studies definitely."

Rezai is about to begin another small test of a similar but better proven drug named Leqembi. Eventually large studies would be needed to tell if combining focused ultrasound with Alzheimer's drugs makes a real difference for patients.

Masliah said it's also important to closely check whether speedier plaque reduction might increase the risk of a rare but worrisome side effect of these new drugs — bleeding and swelling in the brain.

Alzheimer's isn't the only target. Other researchers are testing if breaching the blood-brain barrier could allow more chemotherapy to reach brain tumors, and ways to target other diseases.

Vigil held to honor slain Muslim boy as accused attacker appears in court in Illinois

By CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press/Report for America

JOLIET, Ill. (AP) — An Illinois man charged with murder, attempted murder and a hate crime in an October attack on a Palestinian American mother and her young son appeared at a pretrial hearing Wednesday as community members gathered outside the courthouse in support of the child's family.

Joseph Czuba, 71, is accused of fatally stabbing of 6-year-old Wadee Alfayoumi and wounding Hanan Shaheen on Oct. 14 in in Plainfield, Illinois, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) southwest of Chicago. He has pleaded not guilty to all charges.

Shaheen survived the attack but was hospitalized during her son's funeral. She has since been discharged.

Shaheen told police that Czuba, their landlord, was upset over the Israel-Hamas war and attacked them after she urged him to "pray for peace." An autopsy showed the boy had been stabbed dozens of times.

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An attorney for his father provided the spelling of the boy's name as Wadee Alfayoumi. At the time he was killed, the boy's name was reported as Wadea Al-Fayoume.

Authorities said the victims were targeted because of their Muslim faith and as a response to the war, which began a week before the attack.

A few dozen members of the Chicago-area Muslim community gathered outside the Will County Courthouse in Joliet, Illinois, before Czuba's hearing Wednesday morning. They held up white electric candles.

Wadee's father, Odai Alfayoumi, addressed reporters in Arabic and a translator then repeated his statement in English.

"My son was a remarkable child," Alfayoumi said. "He was filled with dreams and aspirations. He loved basketball, soccer and Legos. He carried the bright light of hope wherever he went and was always smiling. But that light was tragically taken from us far too soon. His life was cut short by an act of Islamophobia that has left us all stunned and heartbroken."

Alfayoumi said he wants Czuba to face the "maximum amount" of responsibility, adding that his son "deserves nothing less than that." He said people must remember that Wadee was targeted for his Muslim faith.

"We must stand together, Muslims and non-Muslims, and condemn all forms of hatred, hatred and discrimination," he said.

Czuba remained silent during the hearing, which lasted only a few minutes. His next scheduled court date is the morning of March 7.

The county public defender's office did not immediately return messages requesting comment about the case and vigil. ____

Savage is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

An apparent Israeli strike killed a top Hamas commander. How might it impact the Gaza conflict?

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The killing of a top Hamas commander in an apparent Israeli airstrike on a Beirut apartment has given Israel an important symbolic achievement in its 3-month-old war against the Islamic militant group.

But history has shown the benefits of such dramatic operations are often short-lived, bringing on further violence and equally formidable replacements as leaders of militant groups.

The drone strike on Saleh Arouri, the deputy political head of Hamas and a founder of the group's military wing, follows a long line of suspected Israeli killings of senior militant leaders over the years.

While Israel did not claim responsibility for Tuesday's blast, it had all the hallmarks of an Israeli attack. Both Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group immediately blamed Israel and could soon respond.

Here is a look at the strike and Israel's history of suspected killings of militants abroad:

WHAT HAPPENED?

A mysterious blast shook a Beirut neighborhood. Hamas officials confirmed the deaths of Arouri and six other Hamas members, including two military commanders.

A Lebanese security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, said the attack appeared to have been carried out by a drone that fired missiles into the building, targeting one specific floor.

Israeli officials declined to comment. Israel has frequently used armed drones for precise targeting of militants in the West Bank and Gaza, including during the current war.

Israel had accused Arouri, 57, of masterminding attacks against it in the West Bank, where he was the group's top commander. He also was believed to be a key figure in Hamas' relations with both Hezbollah

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and the group's Iranian patrons. In 2015, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Arouri as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, offering \$5 million for information about him.

IS ISRAEL BEHIND THE STRIKE?

Israel rarely takes responsibility for targeted assassinations or comments publicly on its forces' forays abroad. It took 25 years for the country to acknowledge its role in killing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's deputy, Khalil al-Wazir, known as Abu Jihad, in Tunisia in 1988.

The strike that killed Arouri came just over a week after another suspected Israeli airstrike outside of Damascus killed Seyed Razi Mousavi, a longtime adviser of the Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria.

Some Israeli politicians were quick to praise Arouri's assassination.

Danny Danon, Israel's former representative to the United Nations and a member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, congratulated the security forces for the killing on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a member of Israel's Security Cabinet, stopped short of outright acknowledging Israel's involvement. He posted on social media a passage from the biblical book of Judges saying "so perish your enemies Israel."

Israel clearly stands to gain from such a strike amid its war against Hamas.

Arouri's assassination was a tangible achievement to show Israelis still reeling from the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered the war, when more than 1,200 people were killed and 240 taken hostage in Gaza. Arouri was well known in Israel for his role in deadly attacks, especially in the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers that sparked the 2014 Gaza war.

"It's important to prop up morale and show Israel that the security and intelligence system is working, because many Israelis lost faith in the security forces after Oct 7," said Danny Orbach, a professor of military history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Still, some in Israel, especially relatives of the 129 hostages still held in Gaza, expressed anger that the assassination could endanger their family members or hostage negotiations.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE TARGETED KILLINGS?

Targeted assassinations can provide a "temporary advantage," Orbach said, but do not often have a lasting impact because new leaders emerge.

Hezbollah's charismatic leader, Hassan Nasrallah, for instance, took power after his predecessor was killed in an Israeli airstrike in 1992.

Orbach said an example of an impactful strike was the 2004 assassination of Hamas political leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi, just a month after the group's founder and spiritual leader, Ahmed Yassin, was assassinated.

This quick succession of assassinations created a power vacuum in Hamas, leading to infighting and helping contribute to the end of the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, in the early 2000s, said Harel Chorev, an expert on Palestinian affairs at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University.

He said targeted assassinations are more effective in centralized organizations, where the loss of a strong, central leader upsets the whole organization. But Hamas is decentralized, with strong leaders in both its Gaza base and across the Middle East. Chorev said the removal of a figure like Arouri might have a short-term impact but is less critical to the group's survival.

"It's really a question of: What is the pool of operatives that can replace a certain leader who's been assassinated?" Chorev said.

Such killings are not unique to Israel. Russia is widely believed to be behind the killings of critics of President Vladimir Putin, and the U.S. has killed leaders of al-Qaida and the Islamic State group.

Among such killings was that of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former head of Iran's elite Quds Force, who was slain in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in January 2020. Iran says twin bomb blasts on Wednesday killed at least 95 people at an event honoring Soleimani.

WHY SALEH AROURI?

Arouri, the deputy of Hamas' supreme political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was known for his charisma and his networking ability.

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He was a key figure in promoting the "Axis of Resistance," the collection of Iran's regional allies, including Hezbollah and Syria. Arouri was also a vital part of Hamas' reconciliation with Syrian President Bashar Assad in 2022, after Hamas initially backed the opposition during the Syrian civil war.

Arouri's role as a bridge builder means his assassination will reverberate widely within Hamas, said military historian Orbach.

The most impactful assassinations aren't necessarily the top leader, who will quickly be replaced, but leaders who are the most connected across the organization. Regional leaders or deputies such as Arouri have often spent years forging personal connections that are not easily replicated.

"Arouri was an especially attractive target because he controlled or brokered between disparate networks in the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran," said Orbach.

A look at killings of militant leaders believed targeted by Israel

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Hamas and Hezbollah have accused Israel of carrying out an airstrike that killed a top Hamas leader in Beirut.

While Israel has not claimed responsibility, Tuesday's airstrike had the hallmarks of an Israeli attack.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders have repeatedly threatened to kill Hamas leaders following the group's deadly Oct. 7 cross-border attack that sparked the war in Gaza.

Israel also has a long history of assassinating its enemies, many carried out with precision airstrikes. A look at some of those targeted killings:

December 2023

Seyed Razi Mousavi, a longtime adviser of the Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria, is killed in a drone attack outside of Damascus. Iran blames Israel.

2019

An Israeli airstrike hits the home of Bahaa Abu el-Atta, a senior Islamic Jihad commander in the Gaza Strip, killing him and his wife.

2012

Ahmad Jabari, head of Hamas' armed wing, is killed when an airstrike targets his car. His death sparks an eight-day war between Hamas and Israel.

2010

Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a top Hamas operative, is killed in a Dubai hotel room in an operation attributed to the Mossad spy agency but never acknowledged by Israel. Many of the 26 supposed assassins were caught on camera disguised as tourists.

2008

Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's military chief, was killed when a bomb planted in his car exploded in Damascus. Mughniyeh was accused of engineering suicide bombings during Lebanon's civil war and of planning the 1985 hijacking of a TWA airliner in which a U.S. Navy diver was killed. Hezbollah blamed his killing on Israel. His son Jihad Mughniyeh was killed in an Israeli strike in 2015.

2004

Hamas spiritual leader Ahmed Yassin is killed in an Israeli helicopter strike while being pushed in his wheelchair. Yassin, paralyzed in a childhood accident, was among the founders of Hamas in 1987. His successor, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, is killed in an Israeli airstrike less than a month later.

2002

Hamas's No. 2 military leader Salah Shehadeh is killed by a bomb dropped on an apartment building.

1997

Mossad agents tried to kill then-Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal in Amman, Jordan. Two agents entered Jordan using fake Canadian passports and poisoned Mashaal by placing a device near his ear. They were captured shortly afterward. Jordan's then-King Hussein threatened to void a still-fresh peace accord if Mashaal died. Israel ultimately dispatched an antidote, and the Israeli agents were returned home. Mashaal

remains a senior figure in Hamas.

1996

Yahya Ayyash, nicknamed the “engineer” for his mastery in building bombs for Hamas, is killed by answering a rigged phone in Gaza. His assassination triggered a series of deadly bus bombings in Israel.

1995

Islamic Jihad founder Fathi Shikaki is shot in the head in Malta in an assassination widely believed to have been carried out by Israel.

1988

Palestine Liberation Organization military chief Khalil al-Wazir is killed in Tunisia. Better known as Abu Jihad, he had been PLO chief Yasser Arafat’s deputy. Military censors cleared an Israeli paper to reveal details of the Israeli raid for the first time in 2012.

1973

Israeli commandos shoot a number of PLO leaders in their apartments in Beirut, in a nighttime raid led by Ehud Barak, who later became Israel’s top army commander and prime minister. His team killed Kamal Adwan, who was in charge of PLO operations in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Mohammed Youssef Najjar, a member of the PLO’s executive committee, and Kamal Nasser, a PLO spokesman and charismatic writer and poet. The operation was part of a string of Israeli assassinations of Palestinian leaders in retaliation for the killings of 11 Israeli coaches and athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

As a missile hits a Kyiv apartment building, survivors lose a lifetime’s possessions in seconds

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — With trembling hands and labored breath, Serhii Slobodiannyk meticulously searched his fire-damaged apartment, seeking to salvage any of his family’s treasured belongings following a Russian missile attack on Kyiv.

“Everything I had worked for over 30 years was destroyed in less than a second,” says Slobodiannyk, still dressed in the clothes he managed to throw on in his burning apartment Tuesday.

He and his wife, Olena, had moved into the building in Kyiv’s Solomianskyi district in 1984. Now the structure is uninhabitable — ravaged by fire, part of its facade torn off, and a huge crater gouged next to it by the missile that struck at 7:40 a.m.

Two of the building’s residents were killed and 54 were injured in Tuesday’s bombardment that also killed two others elsewhere in the region surrounding Kyiv. The barrage was part of Russia’s recent winter campaign against urban areas in the nearly 2-year-old war.

It was the first attack in months in which an apartment building suffered such heavy damage in Kyiv, where air defenses have been strengthened considerably since the start of the war.

The attacks have left many residents rattled and anxious.

In Slobodiannyk’s apartment, family photos hung on the charred walls, burned books were strewn on the shelves, and a damaged exercise bike stood useless in the corner.

The 63-year-old moved painfully, his feet still sore from being cut by shards of glass as he and his wife scrambled to safety in the smoky minutes after the flat was set ablaze. They had to climb to the ninth floor and escape via the roof because the fire engulfed the stairwell, blocking their way out.

On Wednesday, Slobodiannyk and his wife were among over 100 residents and volunteers who gathered at the building in freezing temperatures and snow to clear away debris and save anything they could.

Curious onlookers also stopped by, approaching the massive crater to taking photos and videos in an attempt to grasp the scale of the destruction. New Year’s decorations could be seen in the windows of blackened apartments.

It was the second big missile attack that Russia unleashed in less than a week, as air raid sirens provided a grim soundtrack to the holidays for millions across Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russia had launched at least 500 missiles and drones in the last five days.

Bohdan Stanekevych, who wasn't home when the missile struck, inspected the ruins of his first-floor apartment Wednesday.

When part of the Kyiv region was occupied in the first days of the invasion in 2022, he and his family stayed in their other house near Bucha, spending most of the time in the basement, and he had believed that was the most difficult time of the war.

Until now.

"Today you're alive, and tomorrow everything is gone. How can you find strength here?" he asked.

As his apartment burned on Tuesday, Slobodiannyk said he believed he and his wife were going to die.

"We were preparing to say goodbye to our lives because it was so hard to breathe," he said.

But they and their neighbors were found by emergency crews, who led them to safety.

On the building's fifth-floor, in the apartment above his, a woman who was a university professor was killed by flying glass.

"I can say that I am coming back today with victory," Slobodiannyk said, adding that he survived when the blast hurled a carpet over him, shielding from the broken glass.

"It was like a tornado," he recalled. Now they are moving in with family members.

His wife, Olena, described their survival as a one-in-a-million chance.

"Our relatives survived the Second World War, and we are going through this," she said with a nervous smile.

Israel's Supreme Court delays activation of law that makes it harder to remove Netanyahu from office

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A law that would make it harder to remove Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from office must go into effect only after the next parliamentary elections, the country's Supreme Court ruled Wednesday, saying the legislation was clearly crafted for personal reasons.

Israeli legislators passed the law last year as part of the government's contentious legal overhaul plan, which sparked widespread opposition and tore open deep divisions in society. Critics said the law was designed to protect Netanyahu from being deemed unfit to rule over claims of a conflict of interest. He had been working to reshape the justice system while on trial for alleged corruption.

"The personal affairs of the sitting prime minister were not just the motive for legislating the amendment but also the dominant justification for its legislation at the time it was enacted," wrote outgoing Chief Justice Esther Hayut. "The amendment's promoters wanted the amendment to enter into force immediately and that it apply to the sitting prime minister."

The next parliamentary elections are expected in 2026 but could be held before then, meaning Netanyahu is in theory exposed until then to being deemed unfit to serve. However, Israel's attorney general, who historically has had the authority to make that call, hasn't publicly indicated she would.

While the court did not outright strike down the law, the ruling in a 6-5 vote deepens a divide that lingers between overhaul supporters and those who view the court as a bulwark defending Israel's democratic fundamentals.

The Movement for Quality Government in Israel, an advocacy group that petitioned against the law, welcomed the ruling and said the prime minister "cannot create a golden cage for himself" while he is on trial.

"The court in its decision restored the logic that disappeared when this despicable law was enacted," said the group's chairman, Eliad Shraga.

The ruling comes days after the court overturned the first major piece of the overhaul in a blow to Netanyahu's government. The government has said the legal changes were meant to restore power to elected officials, but critics said they would upend Israel's delicate system of checks and balances.

Israelis have found some unity after Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks and the war they sparked, but the rift over the legal overhaul still looms.

Netanyahu's governing coalition — Israel's most religious and nationalist ever — last year passed the

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amendment known as the "incapacitation law," which allows a prime minister to be deemed unfit to rule only for medical or mental health reasons. Under the amendment, only the prime minister or the government has the power to determine a leader's unfitness.

The previous version of the law was vague about the circumstances in which a prime minister could be deemed unfit, as well as who had the authority to declare it. But experts said the amendment expressly stripped the attorney general of the ability to do so.

The attorney general claims Netanyahu violated a conflict of interest agreement by dealing with the legal overhaul while on trial for corruption charges. He faces charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate cases. He denies wrongdoing.

His government was pressing ahead with the legal overhaul when Hamas struck in October, killing 1,200 people and taking 240 people hostage.

It's not clear what the government plans for the legal changes now that the country is at war.

The 49ers have a rare quartet of 1,000-yard players. Dolphins and Lions could do the same.

By JOSH DUBOW AP Pro Football Writer

Inside the Numbers dives into NFL statistics, streaks and trends each week. For more Inside the Numbers, head here.

The San Francisco 49ers and their deep group of playmakers accomplished a rare feat.

They soon could have company from the Miami Dolphins and Detroit Lions.

Tight end George Kittle became the latest Niners player to eclipse 1,000 yards from scrimmage this season, joining Christian McCaffrey, Brandon Aiyuk and Deebo Samuel.

That made San Francisco the sixth team ever to have four players hit that mark in one season, joining the 2020 Carolina Panthers, the 2004 Indianapolis Colts, 1995 Atlanta Falcons, 1990 Houston Oilers and 1989 Washington.

McCaffrey leads the way with 2,023 yards for the fifth-best total in franchise history. It is the second time he has eclipsed 2,000 yards from scrimmage after doing it with Carolina in 2019. He joins Erik Dickerson and Marshall Faulk as the only players to do it with two franchises.

San Francisco also has a 4,000-yard passer, with Brock Purdy setting a franchise record with 4,280 — two more than Jeff Garcia's total in 2000.

Of the previous teams with four 1,000-yard players, only the Colts, Falcons and Oilers also had a 4,000-yard passer.

The Dolphins can join that group if rookie De'Von Achane gains 64 yards next week to join teammates Tyreek Hill, Raheem Mostert and Jaylen Waddle with at least 1,000. Tua Tagovailoa already has more than 4,000 yards passing.

The Lions also have an outside shot at it but would need rookie Sam LaPorta to get 136 yards to join Amon-Ra St. Brown, Jahmyr Gibbs and David Montgomery with at least 1,000 yards from scrimmage. Jared Goff already has hit the 4,000-yard mark in passing.

IMPRESSIVE STREAKS

The Kansas City Chiefs wrapped up their eighth straight AFC West title when they beat Cincinnati on Sunday.

That's the second-longest streak in NFL history, trailing only the 11 straight division titles won by New England from 2009-19.

Kansas City's nine straight playoff berths are tied with Indianapolis (2002-10) and Dallas (1975-83) for the second-longest streak, behind only the 11-year run for the Patriots.

While the Chiefs have dominated the AFC West, no one has been able to do that in the NFC East. If the Cowboys win on Sunday or if the Eagles lose, it will mark the 19th straight season a team failed to repeat as division champions. Philadelphia was the last to do it in 2003-04.

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Pittsburgh coach Mike Tomlin extended his impressive streak of never having a losing record after the Steelers beat Seattle for their ninth win of the season.

The Steelers have gone 20 straight seasons without a losing record — one shy of Dallas' record set from 1965-85. Tomlin has been the coach for 17 of those seasons, trailing only Tom Landry (21 straight seasons) and Bill Belichick (19) for the longest streaks for a coach.

ONE-SIDED RIVALRY

The New England Patriots end their season against their favorite opponent of late, aiming for a 16th straight win over the New York Jets.

Only four teams have ever beaten an opponent 16 straight times in the regular season. Kansas City's 16-game streak against Denver ended earlier this season.

Washington had a 16-game winning streak over Detroit from 1968-97, San Francisco beat the Rams 17 times in a row from 1990-98 and Miami had 20 straight wins against Buffalo from 1970-79.

If the Patriots lose, there will be more on the line than just the streak. It would also be the 178th loss of Belichick's career, including the playoffs, which would tie Landry for the most ever. A loss on Sunday would also tie the record of 165 regular-season losses held by Jeff Fisher and Dan Reeves.

FABULOUS FLACCO

Joe Flacco's journey from his couch to the Cleveland Browns' huddle led to one of the most prolific months ever for a quarterback.

Flacco made his debut for Cleveland on Dec. 3 after sitting out all season and threw for 1,616 yards and 13 TDs to help the Browns win four out of five games in December to clinch a playoff berth. Flacco threw more TD passes in December than the Jets (11), Titans (12) and Steelers (12) have all season.

This marked just the fifth time in NFL history that a quarterback threw for at least 1,600 yards and 13 TDs in a calendar month, with Patrick Mahomes doing it in October 2018, Peyton Manning in November 2014 and December 2013, and Jim Kelly in September 1991.

During Cleveland's four-game winning streak, Flacco has thrown for at least 300 yards with two or more TDs in all of those games. The only other players to do that during a four-game winning streak in a season since 2000 are Manning (twice), Mahomes, Aaron Rodgers, Drew Brees and Kurt Warner.

HIGH PICK

The Chicago Bears are the recipients of the No. 1 pick in the draft for a second straight season — although this time they didn't have to endure all the losses to get it.

The Carolina Panthers clinched the worst record in the NFL less than 10 months after trading their 2024 first-round pick to Chicago as part of a package to move up from No. 9 to No. 1 in last year's draft.

The most recent time a team traded the pick that turned out to be No. 1 before the season came in 1983 when Cincinnati dealt quarterback Jack Thompson to Tampa Bay.

The Buccaneers went 2-14 in 1983 and had to send the top pick in the 1984 draft to Cincinnati. The Bengals then traded that pick to New England. The Patriots drafted Irving Fryar No. 1.

The same thing happened five years earlier when San Francisco traded the pick that turned out to be No. 1 overall to Buffalo for O.J. Simpson.

The Bills used the pick on Tom Cousineau, who went to Canada instead of signing with Buffalo and then later was traded to Cleveland when he came back to the NFL.

That 1979 draft worked out just fine for San Francisco even without the top pick. The Niners drafted Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana in the third round.

Meet the newest breed to join the American Kennel Club, a little dog with a big smile

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It's small in stature, big on activity and known for a "smile," and it's ready to compete with 200 other dog breeds.

Say hello to the Lancashire heeler, the latest breed recognized by the American Kennel Club. The or-

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ganization announced Wednesday that the rare herding breed is now eligible for thousands of U.S. dog shows, including the prominent Westminster Kennel Club show.

With long bodies and short coats that are often black and tan, the solidly built dogs are shaped a bit like a downsized corgi, standing around 1 foot (30 centimeters) at the shoulder and weighing up to about 17 pounds (7.7 kilograms). Historically, they were farm helpers that could both drive cattle and rout rats, and today they participate in an array of canine sports and pursuits.

"They're gritty little dogs, and they're very intelligent little dogs," says Patricia Blankenship of Flora, Mississippi, who has bred them for over a decade. "It's an enjoyable little breed to be around."

Their official description — or breed standard, in dog-world parlance — calls for them to be "courageous, happy, affectionate to owner," and owners say contented heelers sometimes pull back their lips in a "smile."

They're "extremely versatile," participating in everything from scent work to dock diving contests, says United States Lancashire Heeler Club President Sheryl Bradbury. But she advises that a Lancashire heeler "has to have a job," whether it's an organized dog sport or simply walks and fetch with its owners.

The dogs benefit from meeting various different people and canines, added Bradbury, who breeds them in Plattsmouth, Nebraska.

Lancashire heelers go back centuries in the United Kingdom, where they're now deemed a "vulnerable native breed" at risk of dying out in their homeland. Britain's Kennel Club has added an average of just 121 Lancashire heelers annually to its registry in recent years, and the American Kennel Club says only about 5,000 exist worldwide.

Founded in 1884, the AKC is the United States' oldest purebred dog registry and functions like a league for many canine competitions, including sports open to mixed-breeds and purebreds. But only the 201 recognized breeds vie for the traditional "best in show" trophies at Westminster and elsewhere.

To get recognized, a breed must count at least 300 pedigreed dogs, distributed through at least 20 states, and fanciers must agree on a breed standard. Recognition is voluntary, and some breeds' aficionados approach other kennel clubs or none at all.

Adding breeds, or even perpetuating them, bothers animal rights activists. They argue that dog breeding powers puppy mills, reduces pet adoptions and accentuates canine health problems by compressing genetic diversity.

The AKC says it promotes responsibly "breeding for type and function" to produce dogs with special skills, such as tracking lost people, as well as pets with characteristics that owners can somewhat predict and prepare for. The club has given over \$32 million since 1995 to a foundation that underwrites canine health research.

Thousands of doctors in Britain walk off the job in their longest-ever strike

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Patients faced canceled treatments after thousands of British doctors walked off the job on Wednesday, the start of a six-day strike over pay that was set to be the longest in the history of the state-funded National Health Service.

Managers said tens of thousands of appointments and operations will be postponed because of the walkout across England by junior doctors, those in the first years of their careers. The doctors, who form the backbone of hospital and clinic care, plan to stay off the job until 7 a.m. on Tuesday.

Senior doctors and other medics have been drafted to cover for emergency services, critical care and maternity services.

Julian Hartley, chief executive of health care managers' organization NHS Providers, said the strike came at one of the toughest times of the year for the health service, "immediately after the Christmas and New Year period because of the pressures the demands, and of course we've got flu, we've got COVID.

"So there's going to be an impact on patients that will be significant," he said.

Britain has endured a year of rolling strikes across the health sector as staff sought pay rises to offset

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the soaring cost of living. Unions say wages, especially in the public sector, have fallen in real terms over the past decade, and double-digit inflation in late 2022 and early 2023, fueled by sharply rising food and energy prices, left many workers struggling to pay bills.

The union says newly qualified doctors earn 15.53 pounds (\$19.37) an hour — the U.K. minimum wage is just over 10 pounds an hour — though salaries rise rapidly after the first year.

On a picket line outside St. Thomas' Hospital in central London, 28-year-old Dr. Georgia Blackwell said stress and low pay were driving many doctors to take jobs overseas.

"A lot of doctors are moving to Australia — not just because of the pay, but also the work-life balance is better," she said.

The walkouts have strained the already stretched health service still struggling to recover from backlogs created by the coronavirus pandemic.

Health Secretary Victoria Atkins said the strikes were having "a serious impact on patients," with more than 1.2 million appointments rescheduled in the months since the wave of industrial action began.

The impact is difficult to quantify. Some claim that delays in testing and treatment due to the strikes may lie behind an increase in excess deaths in the U.K., which were at their highest in 2023 since the pandemic year of 2020.

There is little firm evidence of a link, however, with factors including COVID-19 and an aging population contributing to an increase in deaths in the U.K. and other countries.

Nurses, ambulance crews and senior doctors have reached pay deals with the government, but the union representing junior doctors has held out, and negotiations broke down late last year. The government says it won't hold further talks unless doctors call off the strike, while the medics' union, the British Medical Association, says it won't negotiate unless it receives a "credible" pay offer.

The government gave the doctors an 8.8% pay raise last year, but the union says it is not enough because junior doctors' pay has been cut by more than a quarter since 2008.

"The notion that we're hellbent on calling strikes and all we want to do is call strikes is not what we want," said Dr. Vivek Trivedi, co-chair of the British Medical Association's Junior Doctors Committee. "What we want is to negotiate an offer we can put to our members and for our members to accept it."

After tumbling in polls, Netanyahu clings to power and aims to improve political standing during war

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — In the wake of Hamas' brutal Oct. 7 attack, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's days in office seemed numbered.

Despite his reputation as the ultimate political survivor, the devastation of the attack and the security failures that allowed it to happen on his watch appeared to be too much for him to overcome.

But nearly three months after war erupted following the attack, Netanyahu remains firmly in charge and is putting up a fight. He has increasingly used his perch as wartime leader to test campaign slogans, appease his coalition partners and shirk responsibility for the calamity — all, critics say, with an eye on buying time and notching up his shrinking poll numbers.

"Every moment of his life, he is a politician," said Mazal Mualem, a Netanyahu biographer. "Bibi always thinks he has a chance."

Netanyahu — who's served longer than any other Israeli leader, after 17 years in power — has found a formula for success. He appeals to his nationalist base, crafts a catchy political message, and pits his rivals and opponents against one another.

He's maintained that instinct for political survival even through the deadliest attack in the country's history and as many Israelis view him as responsible for creating conditions for the violence.

Critics say his aspiration for political redemption is clouding his wartime decision-making and dividing a nation striving for unity.

"It is no longer the good of the country Netanyahu is thinking about, but his own political and legal

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salvation," wrote military commentator Amos Harel, in the liberal daily Haaretz.

Other critics have said Netanyahu has an interest in dragging out the war to regain public support through military achievements, such as the apparent Israeli strike Tuesday on Hamas' second-in-command in Beirut, or in hopes that time might work in his favor as the nation still reels from Hamas' onslaught.

Supporters say he's been unfairly demonized and that engaging in politics even amid war is unavoidable.

Netanyahu has long been polarizing. In the leadup to the war, Israelis had endured years of political turmoil, facing five elections in four years, each a referendum on Netanyahu's fitness to serve while on trial for corruption. Netanyahu has used his office to fight the charges that could send him to prison, making it a bully pulpit to rally supporters and lash out against prosecutors and judges.

Former political allies turned on the long-serving leader. Unable to form a coalition government, Netanyahu was ousted for a year. When he returned to office at the end of 2022, he cobbled together the country's most nationalist and religious coalition ever.

That coalition's first step was to launch a controversial legal overhaul plan that prompted months of mass street protests and bitterly divided the country.

Many reservists, who make up the backbone of Israel's military, said they wouldn't turn up for service as long as the government pursued the legal changes. Top brass from the security establishment, including the country's defense minister, warned that the divisions sowed by the plan were harmful to security.

The Oct. 7 attacks, in which Hamas killed 1,200 people and kidnapped 240 others, caught Israel at its most divided.

While Israelis quickly rallied behind the military, Netanyahu and his Likud party took a hit in opinion polls. They show Israelis now believe Netanyahu is less fit to govern than Benny Gantz, a rival who agreed to join Netanyahu in an emergency wartime Cabinet. Polls also show Netanyahu's coalition wouldn't win re-election.

As the war churns on, Netanyahu has refused to discuss his political future and berated journalists for asking him about it.

"I am stunned. I am just stunned. Our soldiers are fighting in Gaza. Our soldiers are dying in battle. The families of the hostages are in a huge nightmare, and this is what you have to do? There will be a time for politics," he said in response to one question about his public support.

Yet critics say Netanyahu is increasingly engaging in politicking.

While a long list of security officials have taken responsibility for failures surrounding Oct. 7, Netanyahu has not, saying only that he has tough questions to answer once the war is over. He has gone so far as to blame his security chiefs.

Live broadcasts meant to update the nation on the war's progress have often felt more like stump speeches.

"I won't allow Hamastan to be replaced by Fatahstan," he said during one news conference, rebuffing a U.S.-backed idea that a revitalized Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah faction, will govern Gaza.

Netanyahu also has maneuvered between his nationalist coalition government and the downsized yet influential War Cabinet, whose members hold more moderate opinions on how Gaza might be ruled and rehabilitated after the war.

That juggling has delayed any decision about Israel's post-war plans, to Washington's chagrin. Netanyahu also has moved ahead on contentious budgets for his ultranationalist coalition partners, even as the country braces for the economic aftershocks of the war.

Aviv Bushinsky, a former Netanyahu aide, said the leader's moves appear intended to set him on better political footing ahead of elections.

Without publicly taking responsibility for any role in the Oct. 7 failures, Israeli media won't have a damning soundbite they can play once elections roll around. Taking a firm stance against the Palestinian Authority's role in Gaza distinguishes him from rival Gantz, who hasn't said whether he'd agree to its inclusion, Bushinsky said.

Avraham Diskin, a veteran political analyst who has served as an informal adviser to Netanyahu, said

the prime minister was simply responding to a virulent campaign by opponents that has intensified during the war.

"Is it he who is campaigning or them?" he said.

That hasn't stopped some supporters from calling for Netanyahu to announce that he intends to step down in the near future.

Veteran Israeli journalist Nadav Shragai wrote in the conservative, Netanyahu-friendly Israel Hayom daily: "How good and how correct it would be if after so many years on the job, Netanyahu were to bring himself to this war without suspicion he is acting out of political interest or egocentrism and is focused only on the objectives of the war?"

Sheikh Hasina once fought for democracy in Bangladesh. Her critics say she now threatens it

By KRUTIKA PATHI and JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was Bangladesh's opposition leader in 2007, when hundreds of troops raided her home and took her to a court in the capital of Dhaka, where she was arrested on extortion charges.

Hasina, who had served as premier in 1996-2001, slammed the charges as a conspiracy to keep her from running in upcoming polls. She was fighting for the rights of her people, she said at the time, in a Bangladesh trapped in a state of emergency under a military-backed interim government.

She was given a choice: leave the country or stay in jail, according to a close associate. She opted to stay — 11 months later, she was released and in 2008, she was reelected prime minister.

Today, she is the longest-serving leader in the history of Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim nation of over 160 million people strategically located between India and Myanmar, and is set to tighten her grip on power in Sunday's general election. The vote follows Hasina's 15-year-rule that saw her turn from a leader fighting for democracy to, critics say, one of its biggest threats.

Hasina's main rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, is boycotting the Jan. 7 polls, saying her government cannot ensure a fair vote. That sets the stage for the 76-year-old premier to secure her fourth consecutive and fifth overall term in office.

Her supporters say Hasina and her Awami League have given them a new Bangladesh. Where there were frequent power cuts, there is now industry. More girls are going to school, development projects are humming and the stability she brought has staved off military coups that have shaken the young nation's turbulent history.

In the middle are disenchanted voters who see little chance of changing the status quo.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Hasina's political life was shaped by the Aug. 15, 1975, military coup and assassination of her father, Sheikh Mujib Rahman, the first leader of independent Bangladesh.

That fateful night, while 28-year-old Hasina was in Germany with her younger sister, a group of army officers burst into the family's Dhaka home and killed her parents, three other siblings and the household staff — 18 people in all.

Some say the brutal act pushed her to consolidate unprecedented power. It was also what motivated her throughout her political career, analysts say.

"Hasina has one very powerful quality as a politician — and that is to weaponize trauma," said Avinash Paliwal, a senior lecturer specializing in South Asian strategic affairs at SOAS University of London.

To Hasina, her father was the founder of independent Bangladesh after its forces, aided by India, defeated Pakistan in 1971. At the heart of her ambitions was to create the nation he envisioned, according to the associate, who worked closely with Hasina.

"She felt her father's work was cut short, and that only she could complete it," the associate told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to speak candidly about the matter.

After the assassination, Hasina lived for years in exile in India, then made her way back to Bangladesh

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and took over the helm of Awami League. But the military rulers had her in and out of house detention all through the 1980s until, after general elections in 1996, she became prime minister for the first time.

TWO WOMEN, TWO PARTIES

What followed was a decadeslong power struggle between Hasina and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, the chief of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, now ailing and under house arrest.

The two women ran the country alternatively for years in a bitter rivalry that polarized Bangladesh politics. Hasina has often accused the BNP of courting hard-line extremists that her party, which calls itself moderate and secular, had worked to stamp out, while Zia's BNP claims the Awami League is using oppressive tactics to stay in power.

Analysts, however, say that while they project different ideologies, both parties are tainted by a history of electoral violence and politics of retribution.

Recently, Hasina's government accused the BNP of arson and sabotage after a fire on a passenger train killed four people in December, claiming the opposition was trying to create chaos ahead of the election. The BNP denied the accusation.

YEARS OF TURMOIL

Hasina's party lost the 2001 general election, after which she again became the leader of the opposition. Political violence, unrest and military interventions marked the following years until she was reelected in 2008.

This time, she fixed her sights on the economy and built infrastructure previously unseen in Bangladesh. A strong electricity grid that reaches far-flung villages; big-ticket projects such as highways, rail lines and ports. The country's garment industry became one of the world's most competitive.

Abdul Halim, a rickshaw puller in Dhaka, says he is not a supporter of the prime minister, but "Hasina gave us electricity."

"I thought my family would never have power at home. Now my entire village has electricity," he said.

The development gains sparked other advances — girls were educated on par with boys, and an increasing swell of women joined the workforce. Those close to her describe Hasina as being very hands-on and passionate about uplifting women and poor people. Her supporters also credit her with neutralizing a growing threat of Islamic militancy.

According to Mohammad A. Arafat, an Awami League lawmaker in Dhaka, what Hasina has done for Bangladesh's economic development "has been phenomenal."

SUNDAY'S VOTE

Ahead of the election, Hasina flaunted some of her signature achievements, such as Dhaka's metro or the country's longest bridge, which she inaugurated in 2021. She has cast herself as the leader of an impoverished nation aspiring to become an upper-middle-income country by 2031.

"Bangladesh will never look back again," Hasina said in 2023. "It will continue marching to be a smart, developed and prosperous country."

But the recent global economic slowdown has not spared Bangladesh, exposing cracks in its economy that have triggered labor unrest and dissatisfaction with the government.

Mohammed Shohid, a driver in Dhaka, said the government has failed to stop price hikes of essential goods — prices of beans and tomatoes have nearly doubled in the past two years. "We cannot afford them anymore," he said.

Hasina's critics say her government has used harsh tools to muzzle dissent, shrink press freedoms and curtail civil society. Rights groups cite forced disappearances of critics. The government rejects the accusations.

In the 2018 election, an AL-led alliance won 96% of the parliament seats amid widespread allegations of vote-rigging, which authorities denied. In 2014, all major opposition parties boycotted the vote.

The BNP says about 20,000 of its members have been arrested in recent months on trumped-up charges ahead of Sunday's vote, and tens of thousands of their supporters have rallied on the streets, with some protests turning violent.

With Zia under house arrest and other party leaders behind bars or in exile, observers say Hasina's next

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term is practically guaranteed.

An array of independent candidates, including some from the AL itself, and a few smaller opposition parties are meant to project a veneer of competition but can actually do very little, critics say.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Hasina's government insists the election is inclusive and fair, and has slammed the BNP for staying out of the race. But some analysts say the polls reflect the broader signs of trouble in Bangladesh's democracy.

"There's a history of an autocratic slide in Hasina's decision-making," said Paliwal, the university lecturer. "The current elections may be a final stamp on a full-blown one-party state."

Voters like Dhaka resident Tamanna Rahman, 46, said the prime minister has no real challengers. "We do not have any option but to elect Hasina again."

On the international stage, Hasina has cultivated ties with powerful countries and successfully balanced between rivals. She staunchly supports both India and China, even as the two Asian giants are locked in a stand-off over a disputed border region. In turn, Beijing and New Delhi have bankrolled a slew of Bangladesh's infrastructure projects.

Hasina has also nurtured Bangladesh's historic ties with Russia, shunned by much of the West over its invasion of Ukraine — even as she increasingly courts Western leaders.

"Say what you will about Hasina, but she has managed the great power competition very effectively," said Michael Kugelman, director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute.

Hasina also won international praise when she gave shelter to Rohingya Muslims fleeing prosecution in neighboring Myanmar in 2017. Some 1.1 million Rohingya live in overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh today, and untold numbers of them perish on treacherous sea voyages for a chance of a better life elsewhere.

The United States — the biggest export market for Bangladeshi garments — announced visa restrictions in May on anyone disrupting the electoral process in Bangladesh. The announcement came after Washington expressed concerns over human rights violations and press freedoms in the country.

Analysts saw the move as an attempt to push Hasina to hold a fair election. She hit back, accusing the U.S. of trying to oust her from power.

But some of the pressure she has been under became evident during a recent news conference.

"If you talk too much, I will shut down everything," she snapped, her salt-and-pepper hair covered by a traditional sari, her grey eyes fixed on the reporters.

Zillur Rahman, director at the Dhaka-based Center for Governance Studies, says Hasina — who survived 19 assassination attempts and racked up a long list of political enemies — has "no safe exit."

"She is always under threat ... and she has to be in power," Rahman said.

Today in History: January 4

Nancy Pelosi becomes first female speaker of the House

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 4, the fourth day of 2024. There are 362 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 4, 2007, Nancy Pelosi was elected the first female speaker of the House as Democrats took control of Congress.

On this date:

In 1821, the first native-born American saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton, died in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address, called for legislation to provide assistance for the jobless, elderly, impoverished children and the disabled.

In 1948, Burma (now called Myanmar) became independent of British rule.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI began a visit to the Holy Land, the first papal pilgrimage of its kind.

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In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered his State of the Union address in which he outlined the goals of his "Great Society."

In 1974, President Richard Nixon refused to hand over tape recordings and documents subpoenaed by the Senate Watergate Committee.

In 1987, 16 people were killed when an Amtrak train bound from Washington, D.C., to Boston collided with Conrail locomotives that had crossed into its path from a side track in Chase, Maryland.

In 1990, Charles Stuart, who'd claimed that he'd been wounded and his pregnant wife fatally shot by a robber, leapt to his death off a Boston bridge after he himself became a suspect.

In 1999, Europe's new currency, the euro, got off to a strong start on its first trading day, rising against the dollar on world currency markets.

In 2002, Sgt. 1st Class Nathan Ross Chapman, a U.S. Army Special Forces soldier, was killed by small-arms fire during an ambush in eastern Afghanistan; he was the first American military death from enemy fire in the war against terrorism.

In 2006, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a significant stroke; his official powers were transferred to his deputy, Ehud Olmert (EH'-hood OHL'-murt). (Sharon remained in a coma until his death in January 2014.)

In 2015, Pope Francis named 156 new cardinals, selecting them from 14 countries, including far-flung corners of the world, to reflect the diversity of the Roman Catholic church and its growth in places like Asia and Africa.

In 2018, the Trump administration moved to vastly expand offshore drilling from the Atlantic to the Arctic oceans with a five-year plan that would open up federal waters off of California for the first time in decades and possibly open new areas of oil and gas exploration along the East Coast.

In 2023, Rick Singer, the mastermind of a nationwide college admissions bribery scandal, was sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison and ordered to pay \$19 million after helping authorities secure the convictions of a slew of wealthy parents involved in his scheme to rig the selection process at top-tier schools.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Barbara Rush is 97. Actor Dyan Cannon is 85. Author-historian Doris Kearns Goodwin is 81. Country singer Kathy Forester (The Forester Sisters) is 70. Actor Ann Magnuson is 69. Rock musician Bernard Sumner (New Order, Joy Division) is 69. Country singer Patty Loveless is 67. Rock singer Michael Stipe is 64. Actor Patrick Cassidy is 62. Actor Dave Foley is 61. Actor Dot Jones is 60. Actor Rick Hearst is 59. Singer-musician Cait O'Riordan is 59. Actor Julia Ormond is 59. Former tennis player Guy Forget (ghee fohr-ZHAY') is 59. Country singer Deana Carter is 58. Rock musician Benjamin Darvill (Crash Test Dummies) is 57. Actor Josh Stamberg is 54. Actor Damon Gupton is 51. Actor-singer Jill Marie Jones is 49. Actor D'Arcy Carden is 44. Christian rock singer Spencer Chamberlain (Underoath) is 41. Actor Lenora Crichlow is 39. Comedian-actor Charlyne Yi is 38. MLB All-Star Kris Bryant is 31. Actor-singer Coco Jones is 26.