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## Wednesday, Jan. 10

Senior Menu: Swiss steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, vegetable winter bend, carrot bars, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

School Board meeting, 7 p.m.

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

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.

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



## Thursday, Jan. 11

Senior Menu: Hamburger chow mein, chow mein noodles, vegetable stir fry blend, peaches.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Chicken strips, baked beans.

Basketball double header hosts Tiospa Zina: (Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

## Friday, Jan. 12

Senior Menu: Salmon loaf, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, oranges, vanilla pudding, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Bagel bites.

School Lunch: Lasagna hot dish, Corn.

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Harrisburg, 2 p.m.

**OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton**  
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.  
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# 1440

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Extreme weather barreled across much of the US yesterday. Severe storms and tornadoes swept through the South, heavy rains and strong winds pummeled the East Coast, snow fell in the Midwest, and blizzard conditions blanketed the Pacific Northwest.

Last year was the hottest year in 173 years of recorded measurements, according to scientists from the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service yesterday. The rise in global average temperatures in 2023 was just shy of the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit set in

the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. See an explainer on the benchmark here.

French President Emmanuel Macron appointed 34-year-old Gabriel Attal prime minister yesterday, making Attal both the youngest and first openly gay head of France's government since the current constitution's establishment in 1958. The appointment follows the Monday resignation of Elisabeth Borne, who served for the first 18 months of Macron's second term and was the second woman in the role.

## **Sports, Entertainment, & Culture**

Tom Cruise and Warner Bros. Discovery sign partnership to jointly develop and produce films starring Cruise. Jon Favreau to direct new "Star Wars" film "The Mandalorian & Grogu".

Red Hot Chili Peppers, Post Malone among headliners tapped for 2024 Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival in Manchester, Tennessee (June 13-16); see full lineup.

Adan Canto, actor known for starring role in "Designated Survivor," dies of cancer at 42. Sinéad O'Connor's cause of death at 56 ruled to be of natural causes.

## **Science & Technology**

MIT Technology Review reveals its top 10 breakthrough technologies for 2024; areas include AI for everyday applications, weight loss drugs, advanced heat pumps, and more.

NASA delays phases II and III of its Artemis mission, which would be the first to return humans to the moon in 50 years; Artemis III crewed landing mission pushed to 2026.

Study pinpoints genetic adaptation in fruit bats that allows the animals to consume twice their body weight in sugar each day; findings may lead to new therapies for diabetes.

## **Business & Markets**

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.2%, Dow -0.4%, Nasdaq +0.1%) ahead of inflation data this week. Hewlett Packard Enterprise to acquire Juniper Networks for \$14B; Juniper Networks shares have risen 22% since Monday. BlackRock to cut 600 jobs, or 3% of workforce.

World Bank forecasts global economic growth of 2.4% this year, down from 2.6% in 2023 and 3% in 2022; slowed growth attributed to rising geopolitical tensions and tighter credit conditions.

US Labor Department issues rule reviving Obama-era guidelines for determining whether a worker is an employee or an independent contractor; Uber, Lyft, and DoorDash say rule won't affect current worker classifications.

## **Politics & World Affairs**

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was hospitalized for complications arising from a Dec. 22 surgery to treat prostate cancer; Austin did not disclose the treatment or subsequent recovery to the White House or Congress.

Former President Donald Trump attends oral arguments in Washington, DC, over whether presidential immunity shields him from election subversion charges. Final GOP primary debate before Iowa caucus tonight (9 pm ET, CNN); Gov. Ron DeSantis (FL) and former Gov. Nikki Haley (SC) to appear, Trump to skip.

Armed attacks carried out across Ecuador following the escape of a top gang leader from prison; police arrest one group of attackers who reportedly took hostages during live television broadcast.

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## Gladiators ranked fourth in Groton Robotics Tournament

Groton Robotics had an exciting weekend here in Groton with our tournament last Saturday! We had a strong number of teams participating, 22 in total, from 10 locations within South and North Dakota.

The Gladiators (9050F) Team of Jamison Penning and Garrett Schultz, Ranked 4 out of 22 after qualifying matches winning 5 out of 6 matches, highest ranking this year. They competed hard during the quarter finals, but with their alliance partner from Mitchell, just barely missed out on getting to semi finals with a score of 107 to 109.

The Gearheads (9050B) Team of Logan Clocksene, Kira Clocksene, Hayden Zoellner and Eevee Grant, Ranked 7th out of 22 teams after the qualifiers. They joined forces with Galaxy (9050E) Axel Warrington, Corbin Weismantel & Illyana Dallaire for the quarter finals and won 116 to 68. They fought hard in the semi-finals, losing to Sioux Falls area teams 63-93.

G-Force (9050A) Team of Haden Harder, Connor Kroll, Grant Cleveland participating struggled with rank of 20 out of 22.

We want to say a special Thank You for many individuals and business that helped us make this tournament happen. Jim Lane assisted us as our MC, Weston Dinger headed up IT, and Ethan Clarke & Jack Dinger, alumni of Groton Robotics, assisted us on the Skills field, along with many others. We had multiple kids assist us in setting up the field ready after each match and the tournament ran smoothly and the bleachers were full! An exciting event and we want to say Thank You to all that supported this event.

- Groton Robotics



**Gladiators - 9050F Jameson Penning & Garrett Schultz** (Courtesy Photo)



**Galaxy -9050B Hayden Zoellner, Logan Clocksene, Kira Clocksene, Eevee Grant**  
(Courtesy Photo)

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**Galaxy - 9050E Ilyanna Dallaire, Corbin Weismantel, Axel Warrington**  
(Courtesy Photo)



**G-Force 9050A Grant Cleveland, Connor Kroll, Haden Harder**  
(Courtesy Photo)

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Milbank Boys JV  
Great Plains Lutheran Girls C  
Great Plains Lutheran Girls JV  
Northwestern Girls JV  
Webster Boys C  
Webster Boys JV  
Webster Girls JV  
Florence/Henry Girls JV  
Deuel Girls JV  
~~Deuel Boys JV~~  
Vermillion Boys JV

## Gov. Kristi Noem's 2024 State of the State Address

By: Governor Kristi Noem

January 9, 2024

### Introduction

Lieutenant Governor Rhoden, Mr. Speaker, members of the House and Senate, Chief Justice Jensen, Supreme Court justices, constitutional officers, and my fellow South Dakotans:

My job today is to give you a report on the state of our state. Our State Constitution requires me to appear before you and deliver this speech, but it gives little guidance on how long the speech should be or what snacks may be served. Therefore, I plan to take some liberties. I will give you a thorough report, hopefully succinctly, and you will find snacks provided at your desk because, well, I like to eat. You may find these snacks to be reflective of this body – a bit salty, sometimes sweet, and may be a nut or two. Enjoy, and let's get started.

First, we have with us several members of the South Dakota National Guard. Would you and any veterans in attendance today please stand and be recognized for your service to our state and nation?

Speaking of great South Dakotans, how 'bout them Jackrabbits? Back-to-back champs! GO JACKS!

We are in a different time than we were just five short years ago. We used to talk about what we believe as conservatives and the importance of limited government, low taxes, American values, and personal responsibility. But then challenging times hit our state, our country, and our world. And we had to decide just how conservative we really were going to be here in South Dakota. Were we just going to talk about limited government and Freedom, or fight for it – defend it? Even when it wasn't the popular thing to do, we stood strong on the Constitution and our state's motto: "Under God the People Rule."

South Dakota is doing better than every other state in the nation because we have embraced conservative principles. I've often called our state small, more like a pilot project for conservative reforms to prove if they really do work. And we have proven that they do. Our people are thriving, our economy is growing, and the state has never been in a more stable fiscal situation. We have cut taxes, created jobs, and maximized opportunities. We have also learned that there is a trick to keeping that momentum going. We have learned that we have to tell our story in order to succeed. We can govern conservatively, but we also need to keep our foot on the gas. South Dakota's success is unprecedented. And we have a limited window of time where the eyes of the entire nation are on our state. We cannot miss the opportunity to capitalize on that.

South Dakota has proven that conservative policies help families thrive. We have shown the world that Freedom Works Here. And we're just getting started.

During my Second Inaugural Address last year, I gave a "Top Ten List" of things that surprised me about being Governor. Well, I think it's time for another such list. I can't possibly cover today for all of you all of the wonderful things that we are doing in our state. But I can hit the highlights. So today, I am proud to present my Top Ten List of things we are doing here in South Dakota to ensure that Freedom Works Here.

### #10 Freedom to Keep and Bear Arms

We protect our Second Amendment rights. Constitutional Carry was the very first bill that I signed into law. Two years ago, you all worked with me to make our state the first in the nation to waive all fees for concealed carry permits. We even pay for people's federal background checks. It doesn't cost South Dakotans a penny to exercise their 2nd Amendment rights. And last year, I signed an Executive Order which says that the State will not do business with any financial institution who infringes on people's 2nd Amendment Rights.

We have been able to market our state as a 2nd Amendment haven. My Office of Economic Development is actively working to recruit firearms businesses from states that infringe on the 2nd Amendment to move here. Last year, California became the first state in America to levy a special tax on guns and ammunition, and we immediately invited California gun manufacturers to move here to South Dakota.

We've proven that Freedom works for these gun manufacturers. They're moving here, growing, and thriving. Cole-TAC in Rapid City and Silencer Central in Sioux Falls have both had leadership who moved

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to South Dakota for a better life. These folks built thriving companies that employ South Dakotans and help our people exercise their 2nd Amendment rights. Other companies like H-S Precision, Black Hills Ammunition, and TS Custom Precision Rifles are a big part of helping this industry grow in South Dakota. Many of the leaders of these firearms businesses here with us today, would you all please stand? Thank you for giving South Dakotans the opportunity to utilize their Second Amendment rights!

And we aren't going to stop there. Just last month, our Department of Game, Fish & Parks began moving dirt for a world-class shooting range West River. The South Dakota Shooting Sports Complex will be the premier firearms range in the Midwest. But the Biden Administration is undermining this project by changing the rules after they had already signed off. I am working with GFP to continue to build this range which will host world class events here in South Dakota and impact our economy long term.

## **#9 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Enjoy the Outdoors**

My administration has made it a priority to enhance our outdoors opportunities. Every year, we're ranked either #1 or #2 for the most hunting licenses per-capita. My Second Century Initiative is expanding opportunities for animal habitat across the state. South Dakota has more than 5 million acres of public access hunting opportunities, even though 80% of our land is privately owned. In 2023, we broke the record for most private land enrolled into public hunting access. The reason why is very simple: respect. We respect each other's private property rights and seek permission to hunt on our neighbors' land before we step foot on the property.

My Nest Predator Bounty Program is aimed at teaching respect for the outdoors and the wildlife to our kids and grandkids. Every year, participants turn in 50,000 tails of predators that would otherwise devastate our pheasant and wildlife population. This past year, 46% of the program's participants were under the age of 18, and that number has been steadily increasing every year. We're getting more South Dakota kids involved in trapping, fishing, and hunting.

In fact, my Department of Game, Fish & Parks works every day with families to teach them and their kids how to hunt. For example, GFP worked with the Gingerich family, and their three kids. Would you please stand for us today as I tell your story?

Morgan is 16, Samantha is 15, and William is 13. The family signed up for the Hunting 101 program. They learned how to navigate Go Outdoors SD.com to get their licenses. They learned firearm safety. When they practiced at the range, they celebrated with ice cream for hitting the 200-yard steel target. That's a celebration I can get behind! GFP, with the help of a volunteer mentor, worked with them one-by-one to go out and attempt to fill their tags. First, William accompanied by his dad Reuben had successful harvests. Then GFP worked with Samantha (she didn't get her deer the first time – she might have been a bit too chatty), then Morgan, then Samantha again got her opportunity (she was successful this time), and finally mom Danielle. All five hunters got their deer. As a family, they learned how to process the deer and prepare the wild game for the kitchen table. Now they have the tools and the skills to get back in the field together, make memories, and continue to put food on the table. And they're still taking classes at The Outdoor Campus! The Gingerichs are here with us today – would you please join me in celebrating their harvest of five deer – and many more to come?

Those kinds of stories are possible in South Dakota because we respect the Freedom to enjoy the outdoors.

## **#8 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Farm and Ranch**

Hunting is fundamental to South Dakota's way of life, but I can think of one thing that's even more fundamental: farming. We're top-10 in the country for production of about 25 different agricultural commodities. Our farmers and ranchers provide about 30% of our state's economic output. South Dakota farmers are free to farm; South Dakota ranchers are free to ranch.

Last year, I brought forward legislation that would have stopped foreign adversaries from purchasing ag land in South Dakota. China and other evil foreign governments are executing a plan to own our land and control our food supply. Although last year's proposal to regulate these purchases did not pass, we have continued to discuss solutions. Congress has not taken action, and we cannot afford to wait another year.

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In just the past decade, China's ownership of American ag land has increased by 5,300%. This is far too important to our national security to let another year go by and let our enemies gain a larger foothold in our economy and food supply chain. South Dakota respects the Freedom to farm and ranch. That Freedom should not extend to our enemies.

## **#7 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Be Secure**

One of the biggest reasons that we cannot allow America's adversaries, like China, to own South Dakota ag land is because Ellsworth Air Force Base is going to soon be the first home of the next generation bomber that will keep America safe for decades to come. The B-21 Raider took its first test flight just two months ago. And our enemies are going to do everything in their power to get intelligence on that bomber. It is our duty to do what we must to ensure that they fail – and that we succeed at keeping our people safe.

Sometimes, keeping our people safe means that we need to extend our efforts beyond South Dakota. The Biden Administration's failures at the border have been so well documented that I don't need to go into them at great length here. For the third time in less than three years, South Dakota National Guard troops went to help. When I was with our soldiers at the border, I saw the inhumanity of Biden's failed policies.

Until those policies change, the lack of security at the Southern Border is making South Dakotans less safe here at home. Drugs and human trafficking are devastating communities. More than 70% of the overdose deaths in America are now caused by fentanyl. South Dakota is not immune. We have led the nation in the decrease in overdose deaths two out of the past three years, and we are 2nd lowest in the nation overall. But we can't stop there – we need to tackle the rising challenge of fentanyl and address the drug xylazine, otherwise known as the "zombie" drug.

When xylazine is mixed with fentanyl, it makes an already deadly drug even deadlier, and it brings with it a whole host of negative health consequences. My Department of Health is working with Attorney General Jackley on legislation to schedule xylazine as a schedule III controlled substance to combat this challenge in South Dakota.

## **#6 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Get a Second Chance**

But if South Dakotans do get involved in drugs or another aspect of crime, that should not be the final word. Their punishment should match their crime, but they should also have the opportunity to rehabilitate and become better, more capable members of our society.

The new prisons that we are working together to construct will help achieve this, but we are not waiting until they are constructed to provide second chances for our people. Late last year, I spoke at a graduation for the Sixth Circuit Problem-Solving Court. Eight graduates – all of whom had been sober for a year or more – stood up and shared their stories and their hopes and dreams for the future. In fact, more than 150 South Dakotans graduated from this initiative last year. This is a rigorous program that includes five phases and requires frequent alcohol and drug testing. It's a proven strategy that reduces recidivism, saves taxpayer dollars in the long-run, and restores hope and dignity for these individuals.

We have with us today Leta Wise Spirit, a wonderful woman who has done incredible things throughout the community. When I spoke at the problem-solving court graduation, Leta was recognized by the judges for her contributions and volunteer work. Leta, thank you for supporting these individuals – and thank you for everything that you do for our great state. We need more people like you in this world helping people recover and supporting them through this process of healing. Would you all join me in giving Leta Wise Spirit a round of applause?

Unfortunately, we can't provide this type of programming in our old and overcrowded prisons. Last month, I commuted the sentence of a number of inmates, who qualified, giving them parole. They had been incarcerated with ingestion as their highest offense. Now they can begin their supervised transitions back into the community. We will continue to evaluate these second-chance opportunities for those who can prove they deserve them.

Once individuals are out of custody and back into society, we want them to have the opportunity to build a career so that they can provide for themselves and their families. In the last several years, we have advanced licensure reform in a variety of ways. There is another step on this path that we should take.

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My Department of Labor & Regulation is bringing legislation to provide second-chance license opportunities. This bill creates a set of standards to consider criminal histories and any possible rehabilitation by applicants and licensees. We need more plumbers, more electricians, more welders, and an unrelated criminal past shouldn't stop qualified applicants from filling these roles.

## **#5 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Be Respected**

Providing these kinds of opportunities is about dignity – and it's also about respect. We should respect every person as an individual; as an equal; as an American. Tomorrow, on State-Tribal Relations Day, we will advance an effort that I have been working on since I became governor. We will hang tribal flags in the Rotunda of this Capitol. Three years ago, I signed legislation allowing our state's nine Native American tribes to have their respective tribal flags hung in the Rotunda. We will hang the first of those flags: the flags of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Our tribes are part of who we are as South Dakotans, and we will respect their heritage.

We will also continue to support the Freedom of our Jewish and Israeli neighbors to be respected. On October 7, Hamas terrorists committed atrocities against the nation of Israel, some of which are so savage they are unspeakable. Since then, further hate and discrimination has occurred in America at an increased rate of 388% over the last year. College campuses across the country have become breeding grounds for disgusting antisemitic acts. Recently, there have even been isolated incidents here in South Dakota. The more it happens, the more it will be normalized. We must stop it before that happens. I am proud to support legislation this year to define antisemitism to make it easier to prove when conduct is motivated by antisemitism. This strengthens our anti-discrimination laws and ensures our allies and our citizens are safe and protected.

## **#4 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Learn**

This includes supporting the teachers who give our kids that opportunity to learn. Teachers salaries have not kept up with increased funding to education. After this year, we will have raised funding to K-12 in South Dakota by more than 26% since I have been Governor, but teacher pay lags far behind. Our teachers deserve better.

Yes, I know that schools have their own challenges. But I also know this: the Blue-Ribbon recommendation wasn't just that teacher pay would go up – the Blue-Ribbon promise was that teachers would be the first priority – that they would be paid more. So let's do it.

In my Budget Address last month, I discussed the particular success of the Jobs for America's Graduates program, which is preparing at-risk high school students for college or a career once they graduate. These students are accomplishing incredible things. We have with us here today one such student who I am confident will accomplish fantastic things in the life ahead of her. Melina Shields is the first and current statewide president of JAG-SD. She is a junior at Lyman High School in Presho. Melina has represented South Dakota at the JAG national leadership conference in Washington, D.C., twice. Because of her visits to D.C., she is interested in pursuing a degree in political science and business, and perhaps someday representing South Dakota in a leadership role. She and the other Lyman JAG students are working to coordinate a community meal for the town of Lower Brule, which will be held this month. Melina has faced some challenges in life, and she could have let that stop her from succeeding. But because of her own hard work – and the support of the JAG initiative – she is setting herself up for a lifetime of success and a bright, bright future. Would you all join me in giving Melina a round of applause?

When students graduate, we want them to have every opportunity open for them. Some of them will jump right into a career – and that's great! Some of them will go to one of our tech colleges – and we have some of the very best in the nation. Some will go to college. Some might even join our National Guard – and then go to college. The young adults who make that brave choice to raise their right hand and serve our nation deserve our utmost respect, our thanks, and our support. Last year, this body worked with me to extend tuition for South Dakota National Guardsmen and women to 100% at our state universities. I'm asking you to finish the job and extend that opportunity to soldiers and airmen who choose to go to private colleges here in South Dakota.



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## **#3 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to be healthy**

In South Dakota, we value living a healthy life, no matter where you live. Every South Dakotan should have the Freedom to live where they want – but they shouldn't have to choose between a rural way of life and good health outcomes. In our rural communities, emergency responders are sometimes the only local healthcare providers. They often show up in our very worst moments. But the nationwide EMT turnover rate is 36%. And in South Dakota, nearly 90% of our emergency medical services are done by volunteers.

I have worked to support the dedicated men and women of this critical workforce. For the past two years, my Department of Health has been working to advance EMS access across our state with a \$20 million investment. We put brand new state-of-the-art LIFEPAK 15s in the back of ambulances across South Dakota. We also worked with Indian Health Services to get these devices to ambulance crews in Eagle Butte and Pine Ridge.

And we just completed a comprehensive analysis of the current state of EMS in South Dakota through more than 400 stakeholder meetings over the course of 8 months. Later this year, the Department of Health will roll out a \$7.5 million grant program to ambulance services. This effort will support the implementation of regional hubs and much more.

EMS transport times range from a few minutes to over an hour. During those transports, EMS professionals are in the back of an ambulance caring for the patient, oftentimes alone. South Dakota changed that. We are the first state in the country to implement Telemedicine in Motion. We are using telemedicine to connect physicians, nurses, and paramedics with the EMS personnel in the field. We work with our partners at Avel eCare to do it. There is nothing else like it in the country – and it is saving lives. Nearly 90 ambulance services throughout the state have installed Telemedicine in Motion.

One of the first major calls to Telemedicine in Motion came last December. A rancher was out caring for his buffalo when he was attacked by one of his animals. His injuries were life threatening – dozens of injuries from the horns and hooves of the animal, multiple broken ribs, lungs filling with blood, broken neck, and more. After pulling himself into a front-loader and driving back home for help, he was picked up by the local EMS agency who connected with the Avel team via telemedicine. A board-certified physician and nurses were on camera to help stabilize the rancher, coordinate with the receiving hospital, and activate the care flight team to expedite the transfer of the patient to Sioux Falls. Once the EMS crew arrived at the hospital, Avel maintained their support of the patient since Avel Emergency was installed in the hospital's ER. After the patient recovered, he shared feedback with the care team: "They held my life in their hands and gave it back to me, something that I will be forever grateful for."

Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome a buffalo rancher and outfitter from Gann Valley, Jim Lutter, along with his wife Cindy. Jim is still here with us today thanks to the dedicated work of Ed Koenechne from Kimball Ambulance Service, and our Telemedicine in Motion partners from Avel eCare in Sioux Falls.

Ed is just a volunteer, but he saved Jim's life that day, and he did it with the help of Dr. Katie DeJong along with nurse Casie Hunter, who are on the Avel team. Today, I have a very special announcement to make. I would like to honor Ed Konechne, Dr. Katie DeJong, and Casie Hunter with the Governor's Award for Heroism for their incredible action to save Jim's life.

These efforts are an investment in the future of EMS. More importantly, they are saving lives.

## **#2 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom for life**

In order to live a healthy life, we must first have the Freedom get off to the right start. That Freedom extends to every single South Dakotan – before they are born; after they are born; until the day they die. Later this week, I will proclaim that 2024 will be "Freedom for Life Year" in South Dakota. The most important way that we will advance this is by taking care of both moms and their babies before birth AND after. Being pro-life means valuing the child's life before their birth and throughout their life; it also means valuing and protecting that mother's life.

The first 1,000 days of a child's life (from the moment they are conceived to their 2nd birthday) are the most significant days for their development. Research in the fields of neuroscience, biology, and early childhood development has given us powerful insights into how nutrition, relationships, behaviors, and

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environments in the first 1,000 days shape future outcomes. Mom and baby must both be well nourished and cared for – that will lead to healthy physical, emotional, and mental growth as a child’s brain and body grow and develop. For instance, poor nutrition in the first 1,000 days can cause irreversible damage to a child’s growing brain, affecting their future in school and beyond. It can also set the stage for later obesity, diabetes, and other chronic health problems. It can even contribute to the next generation’s risk of poverty and poor health and behavioral outcomes.

If a baby is exposed to drug use, alcohol or tobacco use, poor health environments, or sexually transmitted illnesses; if there is a lack of good hygiene in the home, or lack of prenatal care and well child visits; if the child’s mother is abused; if the child does not have a safe sleep environment – each of these can have countless negative impacts on that baby’s future.

We care about the lives of our mothers and children. We have dedicated resources and time. But we can still do more to prevent the rising death rates of South Dakota moms and babies, particularly among Native Americans living on tribal lands.

So what are we doing in South Dakota? We are offering the Bright Start program to get one-on-one nursing services to first-time moms and their babies from pregnancy until the child’s second birthday. The Department of Social Services’ Pregnancy Health Home will offer care coordination to all pregnant mothers who are enrolled in Medicaid. These moms also have access to prenatal and postpartum coverage for up to a year after birth along with well-child and health maintenance exams.

The majority of infant deaths can be directly tied to unsafe sleep habits, so DOH provides safe sleep recommendations and education to new and expecting parents.

We help moms and families that struggle with smoking, drugs, or alcohol. DSS provides help for pregnant moms struggling with substance abuse disorder, walking with them and holding them accountable through their treatment.

We are doing all of this and so much more to help moms, families, and their babies both before birth and after. You can find all of this information in one place on [Life.SD.gov](http://Life.SD.gov). Moms can go there to answer questions about pregnancy, parenting, available financial resources, adoption, and more.

## **#1 Way that Freedom Works Here: Freedom to Work**

This is what America was built on. South Dakotans will continue to remind the rest of the country the value of hard work and the dignity it brings. We have the Freedom to get up every morning and to provide for ourselves and our families. That’s the American Dream.

I always say that South Dakotans are some of the hardest working people that I have ever met. We still understand the value of hard work. And my goal as Governor has never been to create a government that does everything for people, but to create a government that empowers our people to do things for themselves.

When a global pandemic hit, many states closed down. South Dakotans kept working. While other states were experiencing record high unemployment levels, we broke the national record for the lowest state unemployment less than a year ago. We are creating opportunities for people to get into the career of their dreams. Last year, we announced an effort to expand apprenticeship opportunities for professions across the state. We wanted to give workers the opportunity to get trained for a career while still bringing home a paycheck. We wanted to give businesses the support they need to start and expand apprenticeship programs. In just the first two quarters since launching the expanded effort, we’ve more than doubled the amount of new apprenticeships from recent years. And we’re just getting started.

I knew that if we could just tell our story, Freedom-loving Americans from across the country would want to be a part of what we’re doing here. I knew that we needed to celebrate our success – then take the opportunity to capitalize and build on it. I knew that we had to show all of America that Freedom Works Here.

We are continuing the Freedom Works Here workforce recruitment campaign. This campaign is only six months old, and we’ve received thousands of applicants interested in moving to our state just through the program, not counting those who independently made the move. Thousands have already moved here!

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The ads have been viewed about 850 million times nationwide.

We did some research into some of the most-needed professions in South Dakota. The results were professions like electricians, plumbers, welders, and even accountants, so we've targeted ads towards those professions. After our first round of ads, I had businesses asking me how they could help us keep the campaign going. It quickly became clear that these ads were working, and that we needed to do more. Last week, we partnered with Avera, Monument, and Sanford to roll out the latest ad to recruit nurses to the state – that is our single highest number of job openings that we need to fill.

These ads are so successful because they tell South Dakota's story. Our state licensing boards are reporting huge increases of out-of-state applicants seeking licenses in South Dakota – including a 78% increase in plumbers, a 44% increase in electricians, and a 43% increase in accountants. Our labor force has grown by more than 10,000 people in just the last year. Our license recognition bill combined with the microphone of Freedom Works Here is a powerful tandem to fill these much-needed jobs.

That is a story that many people across this country have never heard before. Folks are moving here in record numbers to become a part of our winning way of life. Californians and New Yorkers have never seen a state like ours – one that trusts our people, and one that embraces and promotes liberty and Freedom. This is indisputably the most impactful workforce campaign in South Dakota's history.

## Conclusion

Well, there you have it. My Top Ten reasons why Freedom Works Here in South Dakota. I'm sure that there are more, though. In fact, I'd say there are more than 900,000 reasons why Freedom Works Here – because every single resident of South Dakota represents our way of life, our God-given rights, and our Freedoms that we hold so dear.

I will continue to challenge the status quo, push innovation, and look for out-of-the-box solutions. Look at everything our state has accomplished in the last five years! We would not be where we are today, experiencing the growth that we have been for several years, if we had not figured out how to keep the momentum of our success going.

I am not going to slow down now. We can't afford it. Not when people are flocking here by the thousands to see what we're all about. Not when we are one of the few beacons of hope left in this country.

Freedom Works Here. Our people are thriving because of it. Thank you. God bless you. And may God continue to bless the great state of South Dakota.

## **Democratic Legislators Respond to Governor's State of the State**

Following today's State of the State address by Governor Kristi Noem, South Dakota Democratic legislators provided the following statements:

### **Sen. Reynold Nesiba (Minnehaha County)**

"There is much that South Dakota Democrats and the Governor agree. We applaud her deepening commitment to taking care of new moms and children in the first 1,000 days of life. We too believe in the dignity of work, respect for all, and are committed to freedom. We also want to enhance South Dakota's outdoor way of life while creating more opportunities for our ranchers, farmers, and business owners.

"However, the Governor's commitment to new life in South Dakota makes one wonder why she continues to oppose Pre-K education and to oppose state funding to address our childcare crisis. She also opposed accepting federal dollars to reduce child hunger during the summer that would be consistent with her support for families.

"And on some points, we simply disagree. The governor brags that we pay the cost of background checks for concealed permit applicants. We use revenue generated in part from infant formula and baby food to pay for that. That's simply wrong."

### **Rep. Oren Lesmeister (Dewey County)**

"The Governor says freedom works here, and we're spending all of this money on advertising. Why don't we spend those same dollars to help bring our in state Native American population into the workforce."

### **Rep. Kameron Nelson (Minnehaha County)**

"The Governor offered many generalities in her state of the state address. She continues to use 'freedom' as a dog-whistle to push conservative policies in our State and attract new freedom-loving Americans. Democrats love freedom too.

"The Governor overlooked the tragic loss of lives during the pandemic as she touted the freedom to work. There was no mention of federal stimulus dollars that have coursed through South Dakota over the last 3 years to bolster our economic recovery and the strong economy that she touts. South Dakota has seen a 3.2% increase in personal income growth, and yet our state median income has decreased. Not as strong as the Governor makes it out to be.

"Once again, Governor Noem insists on refusing federal funds to feed hungry children in South Dakota, update our cybersecurity and make South Dakota competitive across the nation. Our Democratic caucus will prioritize an individual's right to access healthcare and earn a living wage as well as support our Native communities, provide opportunities for the best education, and build a South Dakota for everyone."



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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### In State of State, Noem offers few new proposals while reviewing her record

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 9, 2024 5:15 PM



**Governor Kristi Noem delivers her State of the State speech at the Capitol in Pierre on Jan. 9, 2024.** (Joshua Haiar/

South Dakota Searchlight)

PIERRE — Governor Kristi Noem recounted her administration’s achievements while offering few new proposals Tuesday during her 2024 State of the State address at the Capitol.

Noem organized the speech as a “Top Ten List of things we are doing here in South Dakota to ensure that Freedom Works Here.” The list highlighted her efforts to support gun rights, hunting, agriculture and other priorities.

Noem did introduce some policy ideas. She said her Department of Labor & Regulation is bringing legislation to provide “second-chance license opportunities.”

“This bill creates a set of standards to consider criminal histories and any possible rehabilitation by applicants and licensees,” Noem said. “We need more plumbers. We need more elec-

tricians, more welders, and an unrelated criminal past shouldn’t stop qualified applicants from filling these roles.”

Noem said the state should counteract the spread of illicit fentanyl use and the drug xylazine, which she said is known as the “zombie” drug. She’s working with Attorney General Mary Jackley on legislation to schedule xylazine as a controlled substance, she said.

Referencing the war between Israel and Hamas, Noem said she’s “proud to support legislation this year to define antisemitism to make it easier to prove when conduct is motivated by antisemitism.”

Last year, legislators passed Noem’s proposal to make tuition free for South Dakota National Guard soldiers at state universities. Tuesday, she asked legislators to “extend that opportunity to soldiers and airmen who choose to go to private colleges here in South Dakota.”

On several topics, Noem referenced problems and called for solutions without specifically proposing anything.

She expressed concern over foreign adversaries buying agricultural land and said that after legislators rejected her bill on the issue last year, “we have continued to discuss solutions.”

Noem also stressed the need to adequately compensate teachers, acknowledging that teacher salaries have not kept pace with increased state education funding.

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"So let's do it," she said about paying teachers more. She did not propose a way to accomplish that. Last month during her budget address, she proposed a 4% increase in general state aid to education.

The speech also included praise for some South Dakotans. Noem presented her Governor's Award for Heroism to Ed Konechne with Kimball Ambulance Service, and Dr. Katie DeJong and nurse Casie Hunter, who are on the Avel eCare telemedicine team, for saving the life of a rancher who was attacked by a buffalo. That award was also an opportunity for Noem to highlight the state's investments in emergency medical services, particularly in rural areas.

Noem said that later this week, she will declare 2024 as the "Freedom for Life Year," emphasizing support for mothers and children, both before and after birth, through various health and support programs.

"We care about the lives of our mothers and children," Noem said. "We have dedicated resources and time. But we can still do more to prevent the rising death rates of South Dakota moms and babies, particularly among Native Americans living on tribal lands."

Noem reviewed existing efforts on that topic, including one-on-one nursing services offered through the Bright Start program.

Lastly, Noem celebrated South Dakota's low unemployment and efforts to attract new residents and professionals to the state, focusing on her Freedom Works Here campaign to boost workforce recruitment, with ads starring Noem in the roles of plumbers, welders and other high-demand jobs. That came one day after the Legislature's Executive Board scrutinized the Noem administration's method of selecting a politically connected Ohio company to carry out the campaign.

"This is indisputably the most impactful workforce campaign in South Dakota's history," Noem said.

## Lawmakers respond

Democrats noted a lack of new initiatives in the speech. Sen. Shawn Bordeaux, D-Mission, said he went into the speech expecting Noem to use platitudes throughout, "but I took note and she said 'freedom' 36 times." (The prepared text of the speech, issued by Noem's office, actually contained more than 40 instances of "Freedom," all with a capital "F.")

"We all love freedom," Bordeaux said. "She used to talk about her ideas."

Rep. Kameron Nelson, D-Sioux Falls, criticized Noem's Freedom Works Here campaign.

"The Freedom Works Here campaign is about the governor, not South Dakotans," Nelson said. "That campaign could be told through actual South Dakotans. Paying taxes for her to play dress-up is an insult to many of those professionals."

Rep. Aaron Aylward, R-Harrisburg, chairs the South Dakota Freedom Caucus. He was happy to hear Noem celebrate the Second Amendment and pro-life policies but also criticized the Freedom Works Here campaign.



**Governor Kristi Noem's cabinet listens to her deliver the State of the State speech at the Capitol in Pierre on Jan. 9, 2024.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

"The millions that went to that could have been put toward a tax cut," Aylward said.

The Noem administration has said the campaign has cost at least \$6.5 million.

Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton, appreciated the speech's novel approach.

"When we look at freedoms, this is how it works in South Dakota," she said. "The governor is challenging us to come up with our ideas to strengthen that, and we're excited to jump in."

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, previously served as Noem's chief of staff. He wants to learn more about some of the ideas the governor didn't flesh out in her speech.

"Very interested in what she was saying about being pro-life and supporting young mothers," he said.

Also Tuesday, Noem announced the merging of the Bureau of Human Resources and the Bureau of Administration, which she said would streamline state government.

Noem's speech marked the beginning of the annual legislative session, which lasts until March.

*Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.*

## State changes child care subsidy policy to better support providers

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 9, 2024 5:32 PM



(Daria Nipot/Getty Images)

A program meant to help low-income families pay for child care changed this month to better support providers.

The change to the South Dakota Department of Social Services' Child Care Assistance Program moved from an attendance-based policy to enrollment-based, which child care advocates say is welcome.

Department Secretary Matt Althoff said in a news release last month that the program is intended to serve "both families and providers in a way that can provide predictable payments that ease budgeting as well as the administrative burdens of program participation."

The change took effect on Jan. 1.

The state's child care subsidy programs have been under fire in recent years. Of the roughly 29,000 South Dakota children who qualify for

subsidized child care, only 1,800 receive assistance — about 7%.

That low participation rate is compounded by the fact that child care providers often lose money when they accept state subsidies, Early Learner South Dakota Director Kayla Klein told South Dakota Searchlight last year.

"People tend to want paying parents and don't want to deal with subsidies because there are so many flaws in the system," Klein said at the time.

The previous assistance program policy reimbursed child care providers based on the hours a child was in child care, rather than for a full day. Many families don't keep their children in day care for the entire time a provider is open.

If parents who are eligible for a subsidy picked up their child early, the provider wouldn't get the full day's amount, even though the spot was reserved for a full day.

"At the end of the day, the child spot still needs to be paid in full," Klein said in a news release.

The switch to enrollment-based subsidies would cover the entire day, saving child care businesses money and allowing providers to better predict their bottom line, said Mike Bockorny, chair of the Economic Development Professionals Association, in a news release.

Child care advocates have cited a number of other policy and legislative changes that could boost South Dakota's child care industry, including:

Changing regulations that disqualify or discourage some low-income families — single parents, teen parents and homeless families — from the state subsidy program.

Basing child care subsidy rates on true costs rather than market rates.

Partnering with a national organization to analyze how the state is financially supporting the child care industry.

"This change is part of an ongoing effort to reduce barriers to Child Care Assistance participation," Althoff said. "We will continue to look towards opportunities afforded through system modernization."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.*

## Flights paused at Ellsworth as crash investigation continues, commander says

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - JANUARY 9, 2024 1:45 PM

The top officer at Ellsworth Air Force base near Rapid City said this week that flights are paused while the investigation continues into Thursday's B-1 bomber crash.

"We are carefully assessing checklists and safety procedures to resume flight operations when safe to do so," said Col. Derek Oakley, commander of the 28th Bomb Wing. He made the comments in a video message released Monday evening.

Oakley said the incident involved two B-1s flying in a training formation. The lead aircraft landed at the base, but the second plane crashed at 5:50 p.m. "during the landing phase," Oakley said.

All four crew members in the second aircraft ejected. Three were treated on base and released for what Oakley described as minor injuries, and one was still being treated Monday at a hospital for what Oakley described as non-life threatening injuries.

Oakley said due to privacy laws imposed by the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, known by the acronym HIPAA, he "will not be releasing the names of those affected at this time."

The crash caused a fire, which Oakley said firefighters on the base extinguished. Neither the initial news releases from the Air Force nor Oakley's video message disclosed whether the plane was destroyed or merely damaged. A spokesman for the base has not yet answered a South Dakota Searchlight question on that topic.



**Col. Derek Oakley, left, the commander of the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base, and Master Sgt. Keelan Rasmusson, 28th Bomb Wing command chief, provide an update Jan. 8, 2024, on a Jan. 4 crash at the base.** (Air Force video screenshot)



An Air Force-assigned safety team was at the base Monday to begin the investigation into the cause of the accident, said Oakley, who added that the investigation could take "from weeks to months." He said the purpose of convening a safety investigation board is preventing future accidents.

A second process is convening an accident investigation board, Oakley said, "to conduct a legal investigation, to inquire into the facts and circumstances surrounding the accident, to prepare a publicly releasable report, and to preserve all available evidence."

"I will not speculate on the cause of the mishap and will wait for the investigative process to be completed," Oakley said.

The commander also thanked responders from Ellsworth and the local community.

"Their professionalism is what allows us to recover quickly from moments like the one we are currently experiencing."

## Immigration talks center on parole, asylum policy; Thune says deal unlikely before deadline

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 9, 2024 4:37 PM

WASHINGTON — A deal on changes to immigration policy remained elusive on Tuesday for top U.S. Senate negotiators.

Those leading the talks — Sens. James Lankford, Republican of Oklahoma, Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut and Kyrsten Sinema, independent of Arizona — have worked for weeks to strike a deal between the White House and Senate Republicans on immigration policy changes at the U.S. Southern border.

Congress was on a break for the holidays but returned this week.

"Everybody's still at the table talking, so that's a good thing," Lankford said, adding that he's hoping there can be bill text later this week.

Democratic Senate Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said that negotiations on an immigration deal have made progress.

"We're going to be persistent," Schumer said. "We're closer today to an agreement than we have ever been."

For the past month, the Biden administration has been negotiating with that group of bipartisan senators to strike a deal that would tighten immigration restrictions in exchange for passage of a more than \$100 billion in emergency supplemental aid for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and U.S. border security.

"There needs to be a strong border provision (as) part of (the supplemental)," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said during a Tuesday press conference.

A major demand by Republicans is to make changes to asylum law to set a higher bar for migrants to claim asylum and to curb the Biden administration's use of its parole authority.

Republican Whip Sen. John Thune of South Dakota said that the White House and Democrats "are now finally starting to address (parole), and if they can get that addressed, we'll see how it goes this week."

Thune added that it's unlikely that there will be an agreement on immigration and the supplemental before



**U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, speaks during a press conference following the Senate Republican weekly policy luncheon at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 9, 2024, in Washington, D.C.** (Samuel Corum/Getty Images)

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Congress' first funding deadline on Jan. 19. If it is not met, there could be a partial government shutdown.

## Mayorkas impeachment

The talks in the Senate come as House Republicans are moving forward with a Wednesday hearing beginning impeachment proceedings against Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas over the Biden administration's immigration policy at the Southern border.

Mayorkas, who visited the Southern border on Monday, defended his agency's policies and called on Congress to pass immigration reform.

"Some have accused DHS of not enforcing our nation's laws," Mayorkas said during his trip to the border. "This could not be further from the truth."

Mayorkas said that Border Patrol agents and officers dealt with a high number of migrants at the Southern border in December.

Since fiscal year 2024 began on Oct. 1, there have been more than 483,000 encounters with noncitizens at the Southwest land border, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data.

House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana also led a delegation of House Republicans to the Southern border recently, criticizing the White House's immigration policy, and advocating for Trump-era immigration policies.

## Debate over parole

Democrats and immigration advocates have pushed back against changes to asylum and parole authority. Nicole Melaku, executive director of the National Partnership for New Americans, a coalition of more than 60 immigrant and refugee rights organizations, said proposals to change asylum and parole will "only worsen existing challenges at the border."

"We urge you to hold the line and bring forward solutions that improve our immigration system, fully resource welcoming infrastructure, and honor our nation's long-standing responsibility to offer refuge to those in need of safety," Melaku said.

There are two ways the Biden administration has used parole authority. The first is for certain nationals such as Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans to temporarily work and live in the U.S.

The administration has also used parole authority on a case-by-case basis for migrants.

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, the U.S. secretary of Homeland Security has the authority to "parole into the United States temporarily under such conditions as he may prescribe only on a case-by-case basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit any [noncitizen] applying for admission to the United States."

Lankford has stated multiple times that he wants to curb the Biden administration's broad use of parole authority for migrant releases at the border.

Murphy said he thinks it's important to preserve the presidential authority to use parole, but did not specify the potential changes to the White House's use of parole authority under discussion.

"The president uses parole to help better manage the border and to make sure that people are vetted before they arrive," Murphy said. "My worry is that many Republicans who are asking for parole reforms are actually trying to increase, not decrease, the chaos at the border."

*Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.*

## Three-judge federal panel grills Trump lawyer on claim of presidential immunity

**Trump hints of more unrest if his prosecution continues**

**BY: ASHLEY MURRAY AND JACOB FISCHLER - JANUARY 9, 2024 2:18 PM**

WASHINGTON — Former President Donald Trump appeared in federal court Tuesday seeking immunity from charges that he schemed to overturn the 2020 presidential election results and knowingly fed lies to supporters who turned violent on Jan. 6, 2021.

Trump, who is leading polls in the 2024 Republican presidential primary field, watched while his attorney D. John Sauer was grilled by a panel of judges as he argued that the former president is shielded from criminal prosecution because he acted in an official capacity. Trump in a brief press conference later suggested a ruling against his immunity claim would spur “bedlam” from his supporters.

The former president arrived at the courtroom minutes before the proceedings with his team of lawyers and sat mostly expressionless, taking no notes, while Sauer answered questions from a three-judge all-female panel, according to reporters inside the courtroom. Dozens of other journalists watched a live feed from a media room for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia in the E. Barrett Prettyman Courthouse.

Presiding Judges Karen LeCraft Henderson, Florence Y. Pan and J. Michelle Childs fired question after question to Sauer for roughly 40 minutes as he argued that Trump’s acts leading up to and on Jan. 6 were “official” and that his eventual acquittal by the U.S. Senate protects him from double jeopardy.

Trump was impeached by the U.S. House for inciting an insurrection on Jan. 6.

The decision by the appeals judges — Henderson, appointed under President George H. W. Bush, and the others recent President Joe Biden appointees — is likely to land in the U.S. Supreme Court, where a ruling could have significant implications for presidential liability.

Under questioning, Sauer told the appeals panel that “to authorize the prosecution of a president for his official acts would open a Pandora’s box (from) which this nation may never recover.”

The judges questioned whether a president’s actions while in office, no matter the legality, would be immune from criminal prosecution.

“You’re saying a president could sell pardons, could sell military secrets, could order SEAL Team Six to assassinate a political rival,” Pan said to Sauer.

Sauer conceded that selling military secrets “strikes me as something that might not be held to be an official act.”

Pan replied that Sauer’s concession undermines the Trump team’s argument that the government’s separation of powers guarantees the judiciary cannot hold the executive branch accountable.



**Former President Donald Trump speaks on May 28, 2022, in Casper, Wyoming.** (Chet Strange/Getty Images)

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"Given that you're conceding that presidents can be criminally prosecuted under certain circumstances, doesn't that narrow the issues before us to 'Can a president be prosecuted without first being impeached and convicted?'" Pan said.

"Your separation of powers argument falls away, your policy arguments fall away if you concede that a president can be criminally prosecuted under some circumstances," Pan said.

Henderson, questioning whether Trump's actions can be defended as official acts, said, "I think it's paradoxical to say that his constitutional duty to take care that the laws be faithfully executed allows him to violate (federal law)."

## Government's case

Arguing for the U.S. Department of Justice, Assistant Special Counsel James Pearce described the potential for an "awfully scary" and "frightening" future if presidents could be completely immune from criminal prosecution.

Pearce rebuffed the notion that "floodgates" would open for cases against presidents.

"This investigation doesn't reflect that we are going to see a sea change of vindictive tit for tat prosecutions in the future. I think it reflects the fundamentally unprecedented nature of the criminal charges here," Pearce said.

Trump could be seen shaking his head in disagreement at the comment, according to reporters in the room.

"If as I understood my friend on the other side is to say here, a president orders his SEAL team to assassinate a political rival and resigns, for example, before an impeachment, (it's) not a criminal act. I think that's an extraordinarily frightening future," Pearce said during his roughly 20 minutes of questioning.

In his five-minute rebuttal, Sauer said a United States in which a president is "very, very, very seldom prosecuted because they have to be impeached and convicted first is the one we've lived under for 235 years. That's not a frightening future, that's our republic."

Sauer said the criminal charges against Trump are now creating "a situation where we have the prosecution of the political opponent who's leading in every poll in the presidential election next year and is being prosecuted by the administration that he's seeking to replace."

The three-judge panel concluded oral arguments after an hour and 15 minutes and did not indicate when judges would release a decision.

## Trump calls for immunity, warns of 'bedlam'

In brief remarks following the hearing at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Washington, which was a Trump-branded property until his business sold the lease in 2022, Trump said presidents should have legal immunity, proclaimed his innocence and hinted his supporters would create more unrest if he were prosecuted.

Biden was using federal prosecutions to damage his chief rival politically, Trump said.

"This is the way they're going to try to win," he said. "And that's not the way it goes. There'll be bedlam in the country. It's a very bad thing, it's a very bad precedent. As we've said, it's the opening of a Pandora's box. It's a very sad thing that's happened with this whole situation.

"When they talk about threat to democracy, that's your real threat to democracy and I feel that as a president, you have to have immunity," Trump added.

The remarks drew on a strategy the Trump campaign has employed for months to use the former president's myriad legal troubles to boost his electoral standing by framing him as a victim of political persecution.

Trump suggested that he was being prosecuted for official acts related to curbing voter fraud and repeated debunked claims that the 2020 election was decided by fraudulent votes.

"I did nothing wrong, absolutely nothing wrong," he added. "I'm working for the country."

Trump spoke for just more than seven minutes and did not take questions.

## Trump indictment

U.S. District Court Judge Tanya Chutkan in December denied Trump's motion to dismiss his case based on presidential immunity.

U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith asked the Supreme Court to immediately take the case, bypassing the appeals level, but the justices declined.

A federal grand jury indicted Trump in August for interfering in election results following the November 2020 presidential contest.

The indictment accuses Trump of conspiring with attorneys, a U.S. Department of Justice official and a political consultant, all unnamed, to organize fake electors for Trump from seven key states that Biden in fact won. Those states included Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

The indictment also outlined Trump's pressure campaign on former Vice President Mike Pence to reject electors from those states during his ceremonial role of certifying the election results on Jan. 6, 2021.

Leading up to that date, the indictment recounts, Trump knowingly fed a stream of lies to his supporters that he won the election, igniting a rally during which he spoke on Jan. 6, 2021 and culminating in a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol. The official four charges against Trump include conspiracy to defraud the United States; conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding; obstruction of, and attempt to obstruct, an official proceeding; and conspiracy against rights.

*Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.*

*Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.*

## Agreement with regulators reduces NorthWestern electric rate increase from 16% to 11%

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 9, 2024 1:09 PM

PIERRE — Electric rates for the average NorthWestern Energy residential customer in South Dakota will rise by \$13.67 per month instead of \$19.14 after state regulators approved a settlement with the company Tuesday.

The state's three elected regulators on the Public Utilities Commission unanimously approved the settlement after a recommendation from their staff.

"We were able to resolve our differences," staff attorney Amanda Reiss said.

The original proposal, filed on June 15, sought a \$30.9 million annual increase in revenue, amounting to a 16% increase. The newly approved settlement, a product of analysis and negotiations by commission staff, has reduced the revenue increase to \$21.52 million, which equates to 11.4%.

"You eliminated about one-third of the request," Commissioner Chris Nelson told staff, complimenting their review. He also complimented the company for its efforts in ensuring a smooth rate case.

The company said it has faced increasing costs, including the addition of a 58-megawatt natural gas plant in Huron, which is part of \$267 million in electricity investments since NorthWestern's last rate review in December 2014. The company is also considering construction of a more than \$1 billion nuclear plant in the state.

The decrease from NorthWestern's initial request reflects various adjustments, including the removal of several expenses deemed inappropriate for customer charges.

Examples of expenses initially proposed for inclusion but later removed from the rate increase were costs associated with spouse travel and participation in the National Lineman's Rodeo, and various advertising costs, including promotional contests, yard makeover prizes, and ads outside the South Dakota electric territory. Sponsorship of the Leadership South Dakota program and certain "economic development" ex-

penses were also removed.

Additionally, the PUC staff identified and excluded expenses related to association dues, particularly those associated with lobbying and charitable donations, along with the board of directors' deferred compensation plans.

The settlement prohibits NorthWestern from filing another application for an electric rate increase before 2027, barring extraordinary circumstances.

NorthWestern provides electricity or natural gas to 764,200 customers in South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana and Yellowstone National Park.

*Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.*



**The state's three elected public utilities commissioners (from left), Gary Hanson, Chris Nelson and Kristie Fiegen, question a NorthWestern Energy lawyer on Jan. 9, 2024, in Pierre.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

## Trump legal problems abound as first test of 2024 presidential campaign nears in Iowa

**BY: ASHLEY MURRAY AND JACOB FISCHLER - JANUARY 9, 2024 5:00 AM**

WASHINGTON — On the cusp of a 2024 election season like none other in U.S. history, former President Donald Trump's legal and political worlds are set to converge.

Trump's lawyers today will argue before a federal appeals court in Washington, D.C. that he is immune from prosecution for actions he's accused of taking while in office — less than a week before Iowa Republicans congregate in town halls and church basements for their first-in-the-nation presidential caucuses.

If Trump disagrees with the decision at the appeals level, he is expected to escalate his case to the U.S. Supreme Court, whose decision could have wide-ranging implications if the justices take the case, a likely possibility.

That request would mark the second time Trump has petitioned the high court ahead of the election. Last week Trump asked the justices — one-third of whom he appointed — to review the Colorado Supreme Court's decision to strike his name from the ballot, citing his role on Jan. 6, 2021. The U.S. Supreme Court accepted the case and set legal arguments for Feb. 8.

Trump has appealed a similar decision in Maine, but at a state court level.

Both Colorado and Maine concluded that Trump violated the 14th Amendment's Civil War-era insurrection clause on Jan. 6, 2021, and therefore cannot seek elected office.

The nation's 45th commander-in-chief, vying to again occupy the Oval Office, faces 91 criminal charges

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spread across four federal and state indictments, is the subject in a string of civil suits and sits in limbo over whether his name can remain on primary ballots in Colorado and Maine. At the same time, the primary season will kick off with Iowa's caucuses on Jan. 15, quickly followed by the New Hampshire primary on Jan. 23 and a long lineup of state contests through the spring.

Polls show Trump holding a commanding lead in the Republican presidential primary, and the highly polarized political climate suggests he won't lose much support among GOP voters even as his legal troubles intensify, experts said. Trump, buoyed by his supporters, has so far shown a remarkable talent for turning his scandals to his political advantage.

Even a small shift among general election voters, though, could have a significant impact on the general election, which may be decided by tens of thousands of votes in swing states like Arizona, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia and Wisconsin.

While much lesser scandals have sunk presidential bids in previous eras, Trump's message has been effective in a deeply divided country, Kathleen Dolan, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said in an interview.

Rather than seeing criminal allegations as disqualifying, Trump's base views the prosecutions as evidence to support Trump's claims of political corruption that only he can fix.

"He benefits enormously — and has benefited enormously since 2016 — from the polarization that exists in the country," she said.

"There are people on the right who see him being persecuted by the government for political purposes," she added. "If you believe that about him, and you believe that the Biden administration is trying to destroy him through the legal system, that's going to help solidify his appeal."

Representatives for the Trump campaign did not respond to a message seeking comment.

## Presidential immunity?

Key oral arguments on Trump's immunity are scheduled for today in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Court documents filed ahead of the date show that Trump's attorneys will assert that the former president has criminal immunity for his "official acts."

Trump posted Monday on his media platform Truth Social that he plans to attend the hearing.

A lower court in December denied Trump's claim that he cannot be prosecuted on four federal criminal charges accusing him of working with co-conspirators to subvert the 2020 presidential election results that declared Joe Biden the winner.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan set Trump's election interference trial for March 4, just one day before the election year's so-called Super Tuesday, when more than a dozen states will hold their presidential primaries.

However, that trial date is likely to be postponed as the Supreme Court considers the question of presidential immunity, adding uncertainty to Trump's legal and campaign calendars.

U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith, who is leading two cases against Trump, had already requested the Supreme Court bypass the appeals level and quickly settle the question, but the justices declined.

Trump's team of lawyers argued in their brief to the appeals court that language in the U.S. Constitution prevents Trump from criminal prosecution, maintaining the country's "234-year unbroken tradition of not prosecuting Presidents for official acts, despite vociferous calls to do so from across the political spectrum, provides powerful evidence of it."

Attorneys, including John Lauro, Todd Blanche and John Sauer, wrote in the 41-page brief filed Jan. 2 that because executive power is "exclusively vested in the President," the judicial branch "cannot sit in criminal judgment" over his or her official acts.

They further lean on the Constitution's impeachment judgment clause and the "principles of double jeopardy" to say that because Trump was impeached for his actions related to the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, but later acquitted by the Senate, he cannot be criminally tried on federal charges accusing him of interfering in the 2020 presidential election results.

Critics say those arguments are "misguided and without foundation," as put by former Trump administration White House Special Counsel Ty Cobb, who was among 16 constitutional lawyers, former prosecutors,

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and former elected officials to file an amicus brief to the appeals court opposing Trump's argument.

"This is a specious appeal done solely for delay," Cobb told reporters Jan. 4 during a virtual press conference.

Norm Eisen, a former Obama White House official and co-counsel to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee during Trump's first impeachment, told reporters that Trump's argument for presidential immunity was "abhorrent to American law."

"If Donald Trump were to be afforded the form of immunity that he seeks as a former president, the election to the presidency would serve as a get-out-of-jail-free card," Eisen said. "That would allow the Oval Office to become the setting for a crime spree. That is not the American idea."

Olivia Troye, former special advisor on homeland security and counterterrorism for Vice President Mike Pence, said the matter should be settled "as soon as possible."

"We need a decision on this," Troye, who joined Cobb and Eisen in signing the amicus brief, said Thursday.

## Mixing court cases and fundraising

Trump has skillfully used the allegations against him as a boon to his campaign, repeating, without evidence, that the prosecutions are baseless attempts by the establishment to undercut his movement, political observers said.

Trump routinely comments on his criminal cases in fundraising pitches and other campaign material.

On Jan. 2, Trump's campaign released a vitriolic statement after his lawyers filed a brief requesting to hold special counsel Smith in contempt of court for filing a motion in trial court while Trump's presidential immunity appeal is pending.

Campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said in an email to supporters that Smith "unilaterally decided to disobey the stay order and continue with his harassing litigation, all done in order to keep parroting the pathetic Biden Campaign's corrupt talking points in the name of election interference."

"As a result, President Trump is seeking to hold Deranged Jack in contempt of Court," Cheung wrote, using a derogatory nickname for Smith also often used by Trump.

While not one of his criminal cases, Trump's campaign is also attempting to energize his base around keeping his name on the Colorado ballot. The campaign sent a message Jan. 5 urging voters to "Help win the Supreme Court battle to save your right to vote," and asked them to contribute in amounts ranging from \$24 to \$250.

Because of the polarized political environment, most Republican primary voters are unlikely to be swayed by Trump's legal problems, said Larry Jacobs, the director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance in the Hubert H. Humphrey School and the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

But that could change in a general election, where even a slight shift away from Trump among the relatively few swing voters could be determinative, he said.

"It's a mistake to say, 'Oh, Republicans are going to turn on Trump,'" Jacobs said. "No. The partisanship guarantees they won't turn on Trump. But if you get a small percent in a divided country, that will be the difference."

## Commanding primary lead

The string of indictments against Trump last year appeared to do little to hurt his prospects in the Republican primary, where he still leads national polls by nearly 50 percentage points over his closest rivals, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley.

Early-state nominating contests this month will provide the first firm data on where the race stands. Trump's lead is slightly smaller in Iowa — about 30 percentage points — than in national surveys, and Haley holds an outside chance of winning New Hampshire's primary eight days later, where polls show her within 5 points of Trump.

Part of Trump's appeal in the primary is the sense that his renomination is inevitable, Jacobs said. If early results challenge that assumption, the shape of the race could change, he said.



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Dolan noted that despite large polling leads, Trump has not yet won a single vote in the 2024 election cycle and there's still some degree of uncertainty around primary results.

"Polls don't vote," she said.

"These early states can have some surprises," Christopher Stout, a political scientist at Oregon State University, said. "Haley could win or someone could surprise Trump in Iowa or New Hampshire and change the framing."

## Yet more legal cases

The March 4 trial on election interference charges is the earliest scheduled criminal proceeding against the former president, but others could soon follow.

A four-count indictment in that case accuses Trump of seeking to overturn his loss in the 2020 election. Trump conspired to recruit false slates of electors, knowingly lied to the public about non-existent election fraud and encouraged supporters to obstruct the election certification in a violent attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

That case is just one of four pending criminal trials in which he's a defendant.

All four indictments were charged last year and all could have trials begin in 2024. Three cases are scheduled to begin trials in the coming months, though those dates could change.

Trump is accused in New York state court of falsifying business records by reporting hush money payments as legal expenses.

According to that state indictment, Trump's attorney and personal fixer, Michael Cohen, paid adult film star Stormy Daniels \$130,000 to stay silent during the 2016 campaign about an alleged affair between her and Trump. Trump then repaid Cohen through his business, but recorded the transactions as legitimate legal expenses.

That trial is scheduled to begin March 25.

Trump also faces federal charges that he mishandled classified documents as president. That trial, brought in a federal court in South Florida, is scheduled to begin May 20, though U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon has pushed back some pretrial deadlines that could indicate the trial itself will be delayed.

Trump was also indicted in Georgia state court on election interference charges. The Georgia indictment focuses on an alleged conspiracy to overturn the state's election results. A trial date has not been set in that case, though the district attorney has requested an August date.

A conviction in any of the cases before the election would not disqualify Trump from the presidency.

But it's an unsettled legal question if he could pardon himself in a second term that could lead to yet more time in the courts.

"The Supreme Court would have to decide whether or not presidential pardon powers in Article II are absolute," Stout said. "Can an individual pardon themselves? I anticipate that would lead to a host of other legal fights that would happen after his election."

Trump also faces a slew of civil lawsuits.

Trump and his company are snarled in a civil case in the New York State Supreme Court that could end with hundreds of millions in fines for the former president. The company stands accused of inflating the value of assets as a means to secure better standing with insurers and banks.

Meanwhile, a civil defamation trial against the former president is set to begin Jan. 16 in a Manhattan federal district court. Writer E. Jean Carroll, who in 2019 publicly accused Trump of raping her in the 1990s, sued Trump for defaming her after her accusation.

Trump tried to claim presidential immunity in the civil defamation case, but was denied in December.

A jury in May already found Trump liable for sexual abuse of Carroll stemming from a 1996 incident, which Trump denies. The court awarded Carroll \$5 million in damages. Trump has appealed the decision.

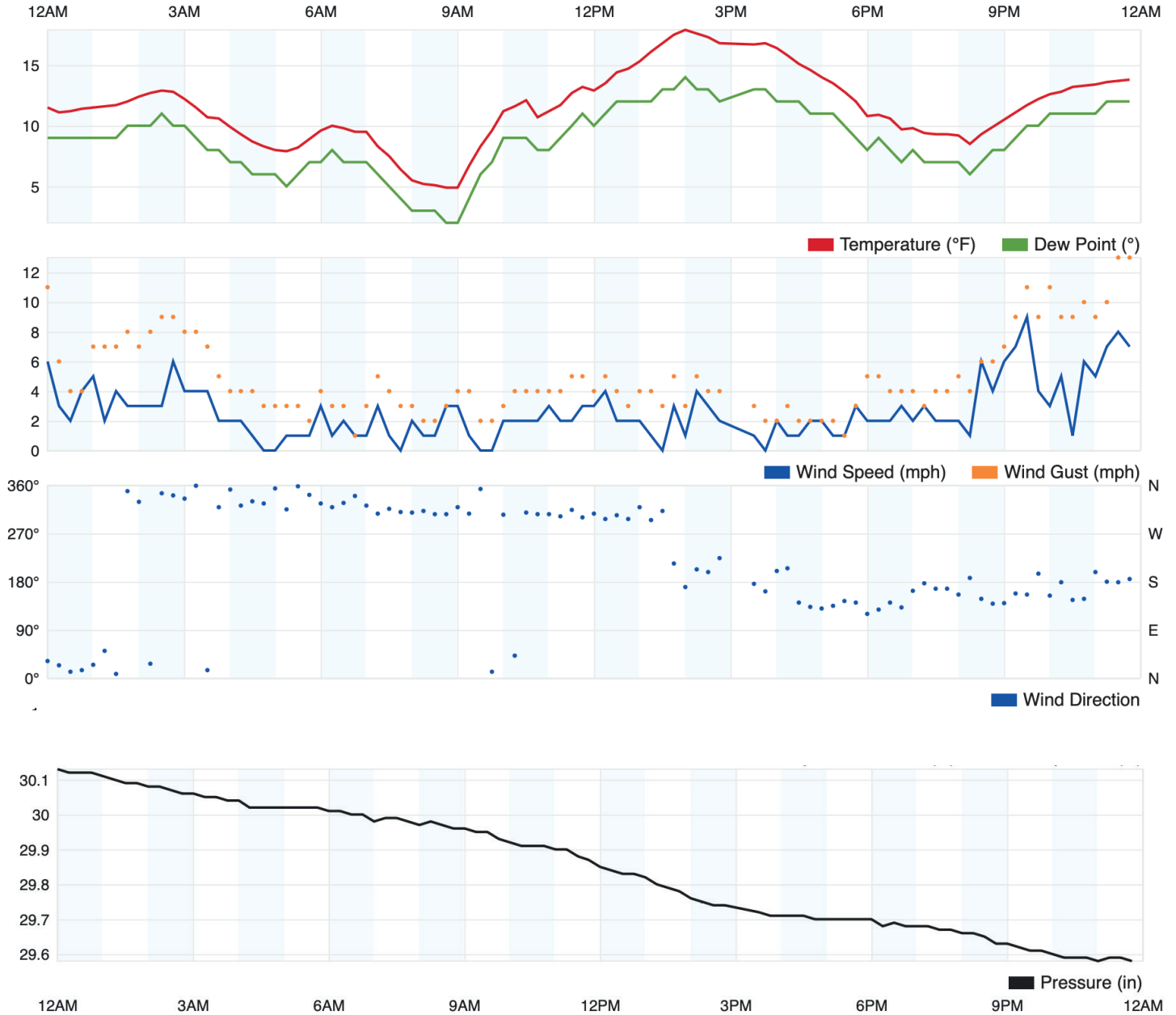
*Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.*

*Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Wed Jan 10	Thu Jan 11	Fri Jan 12	Sat Jan 13	Sun Jan 14	Mon Jan 15	Tue Jan 16
23°F -1°F	7°F -6°F	4°F -3°F	-2°F -14°F	-5°F -11°F	0°F -9°F	7°F -1°F
S	WNW	N	NNW	WNW	WNW	W
10 MPH	14 MPH	17 MPH	19 MPH	16 MPH	17 MPH	13 MPH
40%		20%	50%			



## Highs & Lows through the Weekend

January 10, 2024  
3:13 AM

	Minimum Temperature Forecast (°F)					Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)				
	1/10 Wed	1/11 Thu	1/12 Fri	1/13 Sat	1/14 Sun	1/10 Wed	1/11 Thu	1/12 Fri	1/13 Sat	1/14 Sun
Aberdeen	-3	-10	-10	-19	-19	25	6	3	-1	-3
Britton	-2	-9	-9	-18	-18	25	6	2	-2	-5
Brookings	2	-5	-8	-18	-18	18	5	4	-2	-7
Chamberlain	2	-7	-11	-19	-19	33	8	3	-2	-4
Clark	-3	-8	-10	-20	-20	21	4	0	-4	-7
Eagle Butte	-2	-10	-14	-20	-20	32	5	0	-7	-4
Ellendale	-3	-10	-11	-18	-18	25	5	1	-3	-5
Eureka	-4	-13	-14	-20	-20	28	4	1	-5	-5
Gettysburg	-3	-12	-14	-20	-20	30	4	0	-7	-6
Huron	2	-5	-9	-17	-17	22	5	3	-2	-4
Kennebec	2	-10	-12	-21	-21	35	8	2	-4	-5
McIntosh	-6	-10	-16	-20	-20	28	4	-1	-8	-6
Milbank	2	-5	-7	-16	-16	22	9	5	0	-5
Miller	-2	-10	-11	-20	-20	29	4	0	-4	-6
Mobridge	-2	-10	-12	-18	-18	31	6	2	-5	-2
Murdo	0	-11	-14	-22	-22	34	6	1	-6	-6
Pierre	3	-8	-10	-18	-18	36	9	3	-3	-2
Redfield	-3	-10	-10	-19	-19	25	6	2	-1	-4
Sisseton	2	-5	-7	-15	-15	23	7	4	-1	-5
Watertown	-2	-8	-10	-20	-20	21	5	3	-3	-7
Webster	-2	-8	-10	-19	-19	23	4	1	-3	-7
Wheaton	2	-5	-7	-16	-16	20	8	5	-1	-5

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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Cold high pressure will nudge south into the region this weekend, with brutally cold temperatures and windchills anticipated.

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## Wind/Wind Chill Forecast through Weekend

January 10, 2024  
4:07 AM

Bundle Up!

	Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)									
	1/10 Wed		1/11 Thu		1/12 Fri		1/13 Sat		1/14 Sun	
	12am	12pm	12am	12pm	12am	12pm	12am	12pm	12am	12pm
Aberdeen	18	25	26	25	21	29	33	28	24	25
Britton	16	23	26	25	18	28	35	26	24	26
Brookings	15	15	20	20	22	26	31	31	25	23
Chamberlain	17	22	23	24	15	26	33	35	23	24
Clark	15	24	26	23	21	28	37	28	25	26
Eagle Butte	29	32	31	28	16	33	40	31	31	31
Ellendale	21	26	31	28	20	33	36	29	28	29
Eureka	23	29	33	32	15	29	39	30	30	31
Gettysburg	18	30	31	30	17	33	40	31	30	30
Huron	16	26	25	25	21	26	33	32	23	23
Kennebec	20	26	25	28	15	33	40	32	28	30
McIntosh	33	39	36	31	18	33	40	31	31	33
Milbank	15	17	21	20	21	33	40	29	25	28
Miller	20	23	26	24	16	26	37	30	28	29
Mobridge	23	31	29	28	15	31	37	29	25	28
Murdo	30	32	26	28	15	35	38	30	28	29
Pierre	18	26	23	23	13	31	36	30	26	29
Redfield	18	24	28	24	20	29	36	29	26	26
Sisseton	14	23	26	24	18	30	38	29	28	29
Watertown	14	20	23	21	20	26	35	28	26	28
Webster	16	25	30	26	21	29	38	28	26	29
Wheaton	15	16	22	21	18	26	35	28	26	28

	Minimum Wind Chill Forecast (°F)							
	1/10 Wed		1/11 Thu		1/12 Fri		1/13 Sat	
	12am	12pm	12am	12pm	12am	12pm	12am	12pm
Aberdeen	1	-10	-24	-25	-31	-28	-35	-37
Britton	-1	-8	-23	-23	-29	-28	-33	-37
Brookings	-3	1	-15	-15	-20	-18	-26	-31
Chamberlain	6	2	-15	-16	-19	-22	-29	-31
Clark	-2	-6	-25	-21	-28	-28	-35	-38
Eagle Butte	6	-13	-25	-24	-30	-30	-42	-40
Ellendale	-1	-14	-25	-26	-30	-29	-37	-35
Eureka	5	-18	-28	-26	-32	-28	-41	-39
Gettysburg	4	-15	-26	-26	-31	-29	-42	-41
Huron	-2	-2	-18	-16	-22	-18	-29	-30
Kennebec	11	-2	-18	-19	-26	-30	-39	-38
McIntosh	6	-21	-31	-24	-30	-32	-44	-42
Milbank	-4	3	-15	-20	-24	-25	-32	-35
Miller	0	-9	-23	-23	-29	-27	-36	-37
Mobridge	7	-12	-23	-22	-28	-28	-39	-36
Murdo	13	-5	-21	-23	-28	-29	-41	-39
Pierre	10	-3	-15	-16	-23	-24	-35	-36
Redfield	-2	-9	-24	-25	-31	-28	-35	-36
Sisseton	2	-3	-19	-20	-24	-22	-32	-33
Watertown	-6	-2	-21	-22	-28	-27	-35	-41
Webster	-2	-9	-24	-22	-29	-29	-35	-37
Wheaton	-1	1	-16	-17	-24	-23	-31	-35

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

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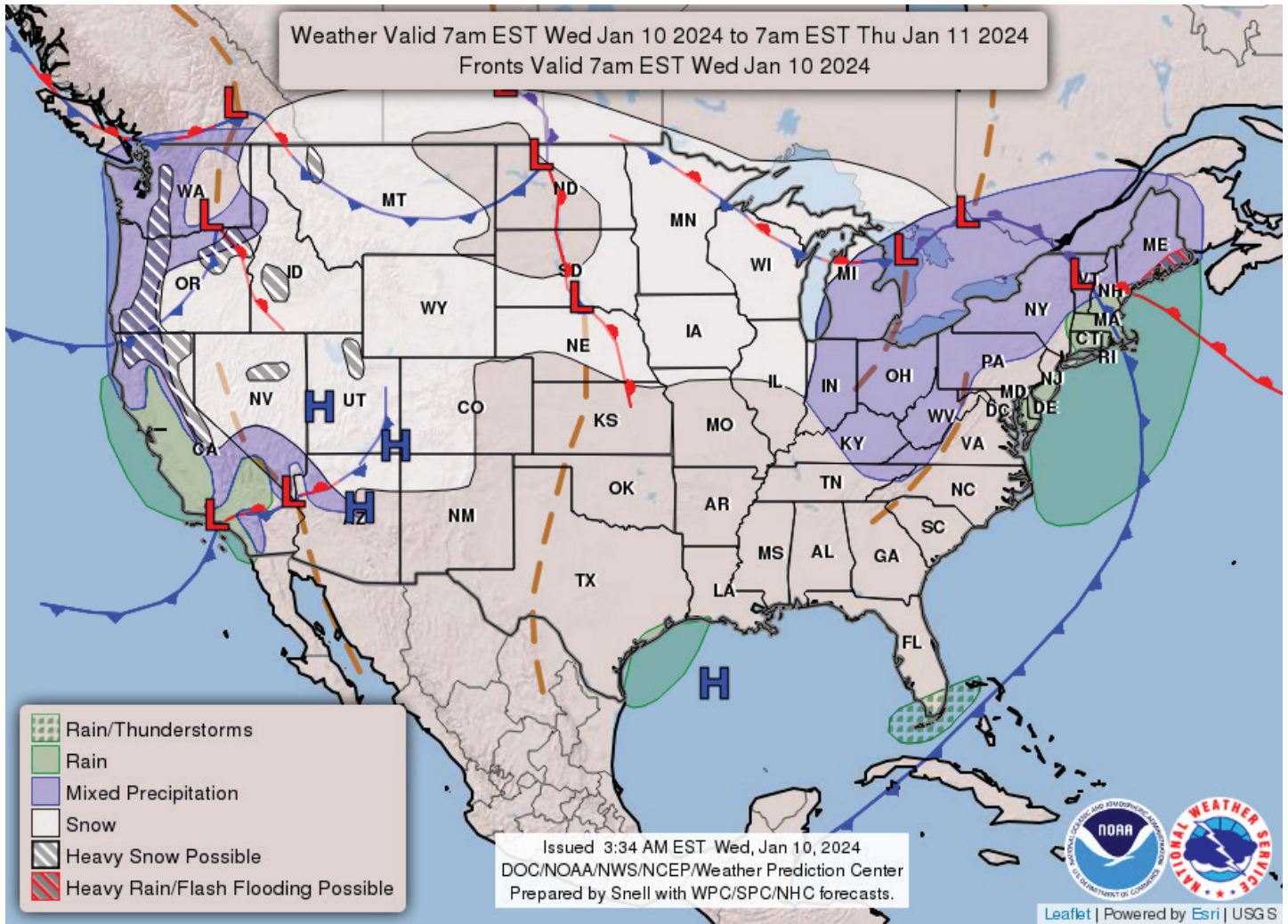
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 19 °F at 1:39 PM**  
**Low Temp: 5 °F at 8:50 AM**  
**Wind: 11 mph at 9:30 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 9 hours, 1 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 2012  
Record Low: -30 in 1978  
Average High: 23  
Average Low: 2  
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.21  
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 0.21  
Precip Year to Date: 0.00  
Sunset Tonight: 5:10:34 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:41 am



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## Today in Weather History

January 10, 1911: The temperature at Rapid City, South Dakota, plunged 47 degrees in just fifteen minutes. At 7 AM, the temperature was 55 degrees. Fifteen minutes later, it was 4 degrees below zero.

January 10, 1975: An intense area of low pressure moved from eastern Iowa through eastern Minnesota. The storm center set many low-pressure records as it moved across eastern Minnesota. New snow of 3 to 6 inches across much of Minnesota began to blow and drift on the morning of the 10th and then developed into a full-blown blizzard with heavy snowfall developing. The blizzard continued through the 11th with winds of 30 to 50 mph with gusts of 60 to 80 mph. Drifts up to 20 feet high in west-central Minnesota paralyzed the area. Snowfall amounts from 1 to 2 feet occurred. Numerous roads were closed due to drifting and low visibility. Numerous sustained power outages occurred, particularly in rural sections. Thousands of people were stranded, with 168 people trapped in a train in Willmar. Wind chills ranged from 50 below to 80 below the storm. Extensive losses to life and property occurred. There were 35 deaths during the storm and many injuries. Tens of thousands of livestock and poultry losses also occurred, with 140 farm buildings damaged or destroyed. Losses to livestock and property were over 20 million. It took 11 days to clear some areas.

In South Dakota, snow began to fall on the 10th in the afternoon, and then the winds increased and reached blizzard conditions by evening. These severe blizzard conditions continued through the 11th and the morning of the 12th. Wind chills fell to 50 below to 70 below zero. Many cars stalled on roads due to poor visibility, icy roads, and blowing and drifting snow. Eight people lost their lives. Thousands of livestock and poultry were lost. During the blizzard, a 2000 foot radio and TV antenna just east of Sioux Falls collapsed.

January 10, 2000: High winds gusting to over 60 mph caused some spotty damage across central and north-central South Dakota. Near Mobridge, the high winds blew a semi-tractor-trailer off the road and tipped it over while heading westbound on Highway 12. The semi-tractor-trailer sustained quite a bit of damage as a result. The high winds also damaged the windmill at the museum in Mobridge, breaking off the tail and bending several blades. Some high wind reports include; 56 mph at McLaughlin, 58 mph at Onida and Mobridge, and 63 mph at Pierre.

1800: According to David Ludlum, Savannah, Georgia, received a foot and a half of snow and ten inches blanketed Charleston, SC. It was the heaviest snowfall of record for the immediate Coastal Plain of the southeastern U.S.

1911 - The temperature at Rapid City, SD, plunged 47 degrees in just fifteen minutes. (The Weather Channel)

1949 - Snow was reported at San Diego, CA, for the first and only time since 1882. Snow was noted even on some of the beaches in parts of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Burbank reported 4.7 inches, and Long Beach and Laguna Beach received one inch of snow. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1973: A powerful F5 tornado struck San Justo, a town in the province of Santa Fe, Argentina, on January 10, 1973. At least 63 people were reported dead, and 350 were reported injured as it cut a 300-yard wide swath through the town.

1975 - The "Storm of the Century" hit Minnesota. A severe blizzard moved northward across the state producing up to two feet of snow. High winds drove wind chill readings to 80 degrees below zero, and at Duluth MN the barometric pressure dipped to 28.55 inches. The storm, which claimed 35 lives, occurred on the 102nd anniversary of the infamous "Pioneer Blizzard" in Minnesota. (David Ludlum)

1982 - The temperature at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, IL, plunged to an all-time record of 26 degrees below zero, and high winds drove the wind chill reading to 77 degrees below zero. The temperature in Downtown Chicago reached 23 degrees below zero. A week later a second arctic surge sent the temperature plunging back down to 25 degrees below zero. (Weather Channel) (National Weather Summary)

1987 - Bitter cold air invaded the Rocky Mountain Region, with subzero readings reported as far south as Gallop NM. Pocatello ID reported a record low reading of 14 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### GREAT WORK TO DO TODAY

John Tyndall was a nineteenth-century physicist who was highly respected and widely recognized for his scientific research in physics. He was the author of seventeen books, and his work led to many discoveries that advanced our knowledge about the universe. Many believe that it was his work that led to an interest in studying the science of physics.

Once a colleague asked him, "Where did your greatest inspiration come from?"

"A servant," he replied casually. "Every morning he'd knock at my door and say, 'Arise, Sir! You have great work to do today.'"

We do, too.

Paul talks about the attitude and perspective we who are Christians should possess. "Work hard," he says, "and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than people." In other words, focus on what you are doing to honor God, not praise from people.

Ever since the dawn of creation, God has given us work to do. And, if we view this work as Paul asks us to view it, it will be done as an act of service and worship to our Creator. Having this view of our daily responsibilities will take away much of the drudgery and dissatisfaction that often makes our work boring and appear meaningless to us. We might even end our complaining and have less resentment for what we do. If we believe that God has called us to do whatever we are doing, we will gain a new perspective on life. Life then becomes all about Him, not us!

Prayer: Lord, give us thankful hearts, healthy bodies, and sound minds that enable us to work. May we see all that we do as an opportunity to bring You honor and glory. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than people. Colossians 3:23-24



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: 01.09.24

12 15 32 33 53 24

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$187,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 19 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.08.24

12 21 37 39 45 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$2,250,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 34 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.09.24

5 29 30 39 40 17

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.06.24

3 9 22 25 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.08.24

3 38 55 57 62 17

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.08.24

7 17 28 40 45 2

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$60,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## News from the Associated Press

### Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

#### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Central 41, Watertown 35  
Aberdeen Roncalli 55, Faulkton 22  
Arlington 53, Deuel 25  
Belle Fourche 53, Lead-Deadwood 11  
Clark-Willow Lake 47, Castlewood 43  
Ethan 65, Bridgewater-Emery 31  
Great Plains Lutheran 51, Estelline-Hendricks 36  
Hanson 71, McCook Central-Montrose 57  
Howard 54, DeSmet 40  
James Valley Christian 64, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 42  
Lemmon High School 76, Wakpala 37  
Leola-Frederick High School 43, North Central 40, OT  
Lower Brule 49, Sunshine Bible Academy 20  
Lyman 72, Kadoka Area 52  
Milbank 79, Tiospa Zina 21  
Miller 56, Redfield 20  
Mitchell 44, Huron 41  
Philip 74, Crazy Horse 20  
Potter County 39, Stanley County 35  
Rapid City Christian 57, Sturgis Brown 43  
Red Cloud 81, Lakota Tech 43  
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 58, Kimball-White Lake 27  
St. Thomas More 44, Custer 34  
Tiospaye Topa 63, Bison 61  
Warner 37, Hitchcock-Tulare 31  
Winner 52, North Central, Neb. 17  
Wolsey-Wessington 40, Aberdeen Christian 34  
Westover Tournament=  
Faith 42, New Underwood 20  
Hot Springs 49, Oelrichs 29  
Newell 48, Moorcroft, Wyo. 36  
Upton, Wyo. 58, Edgemont 29  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
Chester vs. Colman-Egan, ppd.  
Colome vs. Marty Indian, ppd.  
Dell Rapids vs. Sioux Falls Christian, ppd.  
Freeman Academy-Marion vs. Avon, ppd.  
Hamlin vs. Sioux Valley, ppd.  
Menno vs. Canistota, ppd.  
Timber Lake vs. McIntosh, ppd.

#### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Central 64, Watertown 62

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Belle Fourche 59, Lead-Deadwood 51  
Bison 48, Tiospaye Topa 36  
Bridgewater-Emery 59, Ethan 51, 2OT  
Castlewood 66, Clark-Willow Lake 47  
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 65, Crow Creek Tribal School 55  
Corsica/Stickney 70, Mitchell Christian 50  
DeSmet 56, Howard 46  
Deuel 62, Arlington 37  
Estelline-Hendricks 49, Great Plains Lutheran 48  
Faulkton 59, Highmore 48  
Florence-Henry 78, Northwestern 59  
Ipswich 68, Sully Buttes 65  
Kimball-White Lake 47, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 45  
Lemmon High School 51, Wakpala 50  
Leola-Frederick High School 59, North Central 28  
Miller 72, Redfield 40  
Mitchell 67, Huron 56  
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 67, James Valley Christian 35  
Pierre T F Riggs High School 60, Winner 55, OT  
Pine Ridge 80, St. Francis Indian 48  
Rapid City Christian 76, Sturgis Brown 37  
Red Cloud 70, Lakota Tech 66  
Warner 59, Hitchcock-Tulare 49  
Waubay/Summit 62, Sisseton 36  
Wessington Springs 78, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 47  
Wilmot 43, Britton-Hecla 40  
Wolsey-Wessington 58, Aberdeen Christian 45  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
Dell Rapids vs. Sioux Falls Christian, ppd.  
Freeman Academy-Marion vs. Avon, ppd.  
McCook Central-Montrose vs. Beresford, ppd. to Jan 16th.  
Sioux Valley vs. Hamlin, ppd.  
Timber Lake vs. McIntosh, ppd.  
Western Christian, Iowa vs. Lennox, ppd. to Jan 13th.

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

## **Sprawling storms wallop US with tornado reports, damage and heavy snow, closing roads and schools**

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE and KATHY McCORMACK Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A sprawling storm hit the U.S. South, with tornado warnings and high winds that blew roofs off homes, flipped over campers and tossed about furniture in Florida on Tuesday, while another storm buried cities across the Midwest in more than a half a foot of snow, stranding people on highways as it headed to the Northeast.

The weather has already affected campaigning for Iowa's Jan. 15 precinct caucuses, where the snow is expected to be followed by frigid temperatures that could drift below zero degrees (minus 18 Celsius). It forced former President Donald Trump's campaign to cancel multiple appearances by Arkansas Gov. Sarah Sanders and her father, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who had been scheduled to court Iowa voters on Trump's behalf Monday.

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White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said at Tuesday's briefing that winter storms continue to be a threat across the country.

"We are closely monitoring the weather, and we encourage all Americans to do the same," she said.

## THE SOUTH IS HIT WITH DEADLY STORMS AND TORNADO WARNINGS

At least three deaths were attributed to the storm pummeling the South, where 55 mph (88 kph) winds and hail moved through the Florida Panhandle and into parts of Alabama and Georgia by sunrise Tuesday, along with several reports of radar-confirmed tornadoes, the National Weather Service said. A wind gust of 106 mph (171 kph) was recorded before dawn near the coast in Walton County, Florida.

Near Cottonwood, Alabama, a small city near the Georgia and Florida borders, 81-year-old Charlotte Paschal was killed when her mobile home was tossed from its foundation, the Houston County coroner said. A suspected tornado had touched down in the area.

Police in Clayton County, south of Atlanta, say a man died during heavy rain when a tree fell on his car on a state highway in Jonesboro.

Storm-related injuries were reported in Florida, but no deaths. A section of Panama City Beach, Florida, showed parts of roofs blown away, furniture, fences and debris strewn about, and a house that appeared tilted on its side, leaning on another home. About 10 miles (16 kilometers) away in Panama City, police early Tuesday asked residents to stay indoors and off the roads "unless absolutely necessary." Both cities are in Bay County, where multiple tornadoes were reported, Sheriff Tommy Ford said in a brief Facebook Live post.

The Walton County sheriff's department in the Florida Panhandle posted photos of power lines draped across a road, damage to a gas station and large pieces of building materials littering the area. About 70 miles (112 kilometers) northeast, in Jackson County, Florida, photos showing damage to a campground and RV park in Marianna were posted.

The National Weather Service office in Tallahassee is planning to send out three tornado survey teams on Wednesday to examine suspected tornado damage in Walton, Bay and Jackson counties in Florida, and two more on Thursday to look at Houston County, Alabama, and Calhoun County, Georgia.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who gave his State of the State address Tuesday as tornado warnings were active outside the Capitol, issued an executive order to include 49 counties in North Florida under a state of emergency.

Heavy rain across Georgia stopped air traffic at Atlanta's busy airport for a time Tuesday morning and caused flash flooding, blocking some lanes on freeways around Atlanta during the morning commute. More than 80 public school systems across Georgia called off classes entirely while others taught students online or delayed the start of in-person classes.

Rain and high winds extended into the nation's capital Tuesday night, forcing Vice President Kamala Harris' aircraft to divert from Joint Base Andrews to Dulles International Airport near Washington when it encountered wind shear — a sudden shift in wind direction or speed — as Harris returned from a trip to Georgia.

More than 200,000 customers were without power in Florida, Alabama, and Georgia, while nearly 150,000 people in North Carolina lacked electricity, according to the PowerOutage.us website.

In North Carolina, one person has died and two others were in critical condition after a suspected tornado struck a mobile home park in the town of Claremont, north of Charlotte, said Amy McCauley, a spokesperson for Catawba County. And in Rocky Mount, downed power lines shut down both directions of I-95, one of the nation's busiest highways, the North Carolina's Department of Transportation said in a statement.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper declared a state of emergency before the storm arrived. Some schools canceled classes or shut down early.

A possible tornado knocked down several old brick storefronts in downtown Bamberg, South Carolina, blocking the main intersection through the city about 60 miles (96 kilometers) south of Columbia. Thousands of bricks blocked U.S. 301, the main road through that part of the state, and about 40 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, said Democratic Rep. Justin Bamberg, who represents the area.

UP TO A FOOT OF SNOW POSSIBLE FOR LARGE SWATH OF THE MIDWEST

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In the Midwest, where a snowstorm started Monday, up to 12 inches (30 centimeters) of snow could blanket a broad area stretching from southeastern Colorado all the way to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. That includes western Kansas, eastern Nebraska, large parts of Iowa, northern Missouri and northwestern Illinois, said Bob Oravec, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

In Des Moines, Iowa, Laura Burianov had nearly finished shoveling her driveway Tuesday morning. But with snow still falling, she acknowledged she likely would have to shovel again later in the day.

"It's going to get harder. I shoveled last night and you can't really tell, but I can pretend that three less inches makes a difference," she said.

The storm dumped around 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30 centimeters) of snow across Kansas, eastern Nebraska and South Dakota, western Iowa, and southwestern Minnesota on Monday. In North Sioux City, South Dakota, the National Weather Service reported 15 inches (38 centimeters) of snow. Lower amounts fell over central Minnesota, Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

Madison, Wisconsin, was under a winter storm warning until early Wednesday, with as much as 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow and 40 mph (64 kph) winds on tap.

Poor road conditions contributed to a fatal crash early Tuesday in southeastern Wisconsin, Jefferson County Sheriff Paul Milbrath said in a news release. An SUV driver was killed following a head-on collision with a semitrailer on state Highway 18 around 5:40 a.m. The driver of the semitrailer was not hurt. Sheriff's Capt. Travis Maze said in a telephone interview that layers of slush and snow covered the center and fog lines on the highway.

In western Michigan, a 35-year-old woman died Tuesday after she lost control of her minivan on a slushy highway and it collided with an SUV, the Lake County Sheriff's Office said. The ambulance taking her to a Grand Rapids hospital, where she was pronounced dead, was struck by another vehicle en route there, and a second ambulance was needed to finish the transport to the hospital.

Northwestern Illinois was also under a winter storm warning with forecasts calling for 7 to 12 inches (18 to 30 centimeters) of snow by early Wednesday. The Chicago area as well as Gary, Indiana, were under winter storm advisories, with forecasts calling for up to 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow and wind gusts of up to 30 mph (48 kph).

It was the first major winter storm of the season for the Kansas City metro area in Kansas and Missouri, where the National Weather Service predicted 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow by the time the storm moved on later Tuesday.

Whiteout conditions in central Nebraska closed a long stretch of Interstate 80, while Kansas closed Interstate 70 from the central city of Russell all the way west to the Colorado border. Several vehicles slid off I-70 in the northeastern part of the state, authorities said.

## WINTER WEATHER EXPECTED TO MOVE INTO NORTHEAST TUESDAY NIGHT

From the Midwest, the storm was expected to head east, bringing a combination of snow, rain and strong winds to the Northeast by Tuesday night, as well as concerns about flooding in areas such as New England, parts of which got more than a foot of snow Sunday.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy already declared a state of emergency as of 5 p.m. Tuesday, ahead of what's expected to be heavy rain and wind that will exacerbate the effects of bad weather conditions since December. He encouraged people Monday not to underestimate the storm.

In New York City, officials began evacuating nearly 2,000 migrants who had been housed at a sprawling white tent complex at a former airport located in a remote corner of Brooklyn. An aide to New York City Mayor Eric Adams pointed to predicted wind speeds of more than 70 mph (112 kph) Tuesday night.

In western New York, an empty tractor trailer blew over on the state Thruway on Tuesday morning, temporarily blocking all westbound traffic, state police said. The state banned empty trucks and trailers on numerous major roadways.

In Maine, Gov. Janet Mills has delayed the opening of all state offices until noon Wednesday due to the storm.

Massachusetts electricity provider National Grid said they were prepared for possible hazardous wind

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gusts and heavy rains and have additional crews and personnel to respond to any power outages.

## COLD FRONT IN SOUTHWEST BRINGS FREEZING TEMPERATURES AND SNOW

In parts of Arizona, a cold front brought below-freezing temperatures early Tuesday, with the National Weather Service reporting a minus-17 reading at the Snow Bowl in northern Arizona. In northeastern New Mexico, the state Department of Transportation said snowplows spent hours Monday afternoon clearing U.S. Highway 56 to free more than 25 stranded vehicles.

## Gov. Kristi Noem touts South Dakota's workforce recruitment effort

By JACK DURA Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem touted her state's economic success and employment opportunities Tuesday, highlighting her workforce recruitment campaign to lawmakers who are beginning their legislative session.

In her State of the State address, the second-term Republican governor urged the GOP-controlled Legislature to ban foreign adversaries from owning farm land, define antisemitism, boost teacher pay and offer "second chance" occupational licensing for people with criminal histories.

Noem lauded her Freedom Works Here advertising campaign to attract people to move to the state, which has 20,000 open jobs. She said the videos, which feature her as a plumber, welder and in other high-demand jobs, have already drawn thousands of new residents and hundreds of millions of views.

"I'm not going to slow down. We can't afford it, not when people are flocking here by the thousands to be like us, not when we are the few beacons of hope left in this country," she said.

South Dakota, which has about 900,000 residents, had a 2% unemployment rate in November, just behind North Dakota's 1.9% rate and Maryland's 1.8% rate. Nationally, the rate was 3.7% for that month, the most recent data available from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Noem said South Dakota's workforce has grown by more than 10,000 people in the last year. In a news release, she noted "huge increases of out-of-state applicants seeking licenses in South Dakota — including a 78% increase in plumbers, a 44% increase in electricians, and a 43% increase in accountants," reported from state licensing boards.

Republican Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree said he welcomed Noem's economic message.

"When we've got a strong economy, we've got a better quality of life. It means better education. It means better health care. It means a better all-around life for the people of South Dakota, and so continuing to focus on that is smart," Crabtree said.

Democratic state Rep. Linda Duba said she wants to see "hard data" and the return on investment from the Freedom Works Here campaign, which has drawn scrutiny from a top legislative panel. The campaign's first phase cost \$5 million. The budget for its second phase is about \$1.5 million.

Duba also said that while she supports some of the governor's goals, she would like to see earlier help for criminal offenders on their addictions and a focus on support for families through such things as child care and food assistance.

Noem touted South Dakota's parenting and pregnancy resources, including a nursing services program for first-time mothers, care coordination for pregnant women enrolled in Medicaid, and safe sleep recommendations for new parents.

The governor also announced plans to hang the flags of the Standing Rock and Rosebud Sioux tribes in the state Capitol rotunda on Wednesday. The two tribes will be the first of the nine tribal nations within South Dakota's boundaries to have their flags displayed. Noem called the tribes "part of who we are as South Dakotans."

In December, Noem presented her budget plan to lawmakers, including 4% increases for the state's "big three" priorities of K-12 education, health care providers and state employees. She pitched a nearly \$7.3 billion budget for fiscal year 2025.

Once seen a 2024 presidential candidate, Noem last year endorsed former President Donald Trump in his bid.

## **Voters don't always have final say -- state legislatures and governors are increasingly undermining ballot measures that win**

Anne Whitesell Miami University

(The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.)

Anne Whitesell, Miami University

(THE CONVERSATION) Less than half of Americans trust elected officials to act in the public's interest. When voters want something done on an issue and their elected officials fail to act, they may turn to citizen initiatives to pursue their goals instead. The citizen initiative process varies by state, but in general, citizens collect signatures to have an issue put directly on the ballot for the voters to voice their preferences. Nearly half the states, 24 of them, allow citizen initiatives.

These measures, also called "ballot initiatives," often focus on the controversial issues of the day. Citizen initiatives on same-sex marriage and marijuana legalization have been on many state ballots through the years. Abortion rights have repeatedly been on the ballot since 2022, after the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional protection for abortion, and more voters can expect to vote on the issue in 2024.

I am an American politics scholar who studies the connection between representation and public policy. In American democracy, the people expect to have a voice, whether that comes through electing representatives or directly voting on issues.

Yet it is becoming increasingly common for lawmakers across the country to not only ignore the will of the people, but also actively work against it. From 2010 to 2015, about 21% of citizen initiatives were altered by lawmakers after they passed. From 2016 to 2018, lawmakers altered nearly 36% of passed citizen initiatives.

Invalidate, weaken, repeal

Here's what some of those cases look like, from successful to unsuccessful efforts to alter the will of the people:

- In November 2023, Ohio voters passed an amendment to their state's constitution protecting the right to abortion. Within a week, a group of Ohio Republican lawmakers declared the amendment to be invalid and introduced legislation that would strip state courts from having authority to rule on the issue of abortion. Ohio House Speaker, Republican Jason Stephens, rejected the proposed legislation.

- In July 2018, Washington, D.C., voters approved an increase in the minimum wage for tipped workers. Three months later, the City Council repealed the initiative.

- In 2016, voters in South Dakota supported an initiative to revise campaign finance and lobbying laws and create an ethics commission. Governor Dennis Daugaard signed a law repealing the initiative in February 2017. Another citizen initiative to create an ethics commission was on the ballot in 2018, but did not pass.

Revise and amend

Often lawmakers rewrite laws passed through initiative. Some revisions change key components of the initiatives, while others amend technical details.

- Ohioans voted in favor of legalizing marijuana in November 2023. In that initiative, part of the tax revenue from marijuana sales would go to a financial assistance program for those who show "social and economic disadvantage." The Ohio Senate passed a bill the following month that would instead use the tax revenue to fund jails and law enforcement.

- Massachusetts voters passed recreational marijuana legalization in 2016. In 2017, the Legislature passed a bill to increase the excise tax on marijuana from the 3.75% set in the citizens' initiative to 10.75%.

- In 2018, Utah voters made adults with income up to 138% of the federal poverty level eligible for Medicaid – a federal-state health insurance program for low-income individuals and those with disabilities. The state Legislature applied to the federal government for waivers to lower the income limit to 100% of the federal poverty level, which curtailed the expansion voters approved.

- Arizona voters approved a tax increase on the wealthy to fund the state's schools in 2020. In 2021, the Legislature responded by exempting business earnings from the tax. There was an attempt by citizen

initiative later that year to repeal the legislature's law exempting business earnings, but it did not gather enough signatures from citizens to make it to the ballot.

Governors object

In some cases, it is not the legislature that opposes the will of the voters, but the governor. In recent years, several Republican governors have refused to implement Medicaid expansions passed by voter initiatives.

- Maine's former governor, Paul LePage, said he would go to jail before he would implement Medicaid expansion after it passed by voter initiative in 2017. Medicaid was not expanded until Democrat Janet Mills took office in 2019.

- Missouri Governor Mike Parson said he would not move forward with the 2020 voter-passed Medicaid expansion because it would not pay for itself. In 2021, the Missouri Supreme Court ruled the initiative valid and Medicaid expansion moved forward.

Why they do it

Lawmakers who rewrite or overturn ballot initiatives sometimes argue that voters do not understand what they are supporting. Lawmakers, unlike citizens, have to balance state budgets every year, and they often raise questions about how to pay for the policies or programs passed by initiative.

Lawmakers also argue that outside groups play an outsized role in passing ballot initiatives. While political science research provides some support for this claim, outside groups also have influence in the regular legislative process. And they often work to defeat initiatives as well.

Citizen initiatives became popular during the Progressive Era of the early 20th century as a way to give power back to citizens. Then, as now, citizens felt political power was too concentrated in the hands of the wealthy. Initiatives were one way for everyday people to get more involved in their government.

That only half of states permit citizen initiatives suggests that political elites are not always supportive of a process that limits their own power. Historically, though, legislators have respected the results. Some lawmakers, including Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, state they will continue to "accept" the will of the people. To do otherwise undermines democracy.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article here: <https://theconversation.com/voters-dont-always-have-final-say-state-legislatures-and-governors-are-increasingly-undermining-ballot-measures-that-win-218764>.

## **Blinken seeks Palestinian governance reform as he tries to rally region behind postwar vision**

By MATTHEW LEE, NAJIB JOBAIN AND SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Wednesday to seek governance reforms as part of U.S. efforts to rally the region behind postwar plans for Gaza that also include concrete steps toward a Palestinian state.

Blinken says he has secured commitments from multiple countries in the region to assist with rebuilding and governing Gaza after Israel's war against Hamas, and that wider Israeli-Arab normalization is still possible, but only if there is "a pathway to a Palestinian state."

The approach faces serious obstacles. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is adamantly opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and the autocratic, Western-backed Palestinian leadership, whose forces were driven from Gaza when Hamas took over in 2007, lacks legitimacy in the view of many Palestinians.

The war in Gaza is still raging with no end in sight, fueling a humanitarian catastrophe in the tiny coastal enclave. The fighting has also stoked escalating violence between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militants that has raised fears of a wider conflict.

BLINKEN PRESSURES BOTH SIDES ON WHIRLWIND TRIP

On his fourth visit to the region since the war began three months ago, Blinken has met in recent days with the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. He says they are open to contributing to postwar plans in return for progress on creating a Palestinian state.



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The Saudi Ambassador to the U.K. went even further on Tuesday, telling the BBC that the kingdom is still interested in a landmark normalization agreement with Israel, but that it must include "nothing less than an independent state of Palestine."

"One doesn't come without the other," Prince Khalid bin Bandar said.

After meeting with Netanyahu and other top Israeli officials on Tuesday, Blinken delivered a stark message, saying Israel must stop undercutting the Palestinians' ability to govern themselves with its expansion of settlements, home demolitions and evictions in the West Bank.

But he also said the Palestinian Authority "has a responsibility to reform itself, to improve its governance," and that he would discuss that with the 88-year-old Abbas, who has not stood for elections since 2005 and lacks support among his own people.

The Palestinian Authority governs parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank under interim peace deals reached in the 1990s and cooperates with Israel on security matters. But it has been powerless to prevent the expansion of settlements in occupied territory it wants for a future state, and there have been no serious or substantive peace talks since Netanyahu returned to office in 2009.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has been unable to get Israel to make even relatively minor concessions to the Palestinians, like turning over all the tax revenue it collects on their behalf, or allowing the reopening of a U.S. Consulate to serve Palestinians in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem.

Later Wednesday, Abbas was set to meet with the leaders of Jordan and Egypt, two U.S. allies who have long served as mediators in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in Jordan's Red Sea city of Aqaba.

## WAR RAGES ON WITH NO END IN SIGHT

Israel has vowed to keep fighting until it crushes Hamas and returns scores of hostages held by the group after its Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war. Israeli officials say the campaign will continue through the rest of the year, and its own postwar plans call for open-ended military control over the territory, from which it withdrew soldiers and settlers in 2005.

Nearly 85% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have been driven from their homes by the fighting, and a quarter of its residents face starvation, with only a trickle of food, water, medicine and other supplies entering through an Israeli siege.

Blinken said more food, water, medicine and other aid needs to enter and be distributed effectively, and he called on Israel to "do everything it can to remove any obstacles."

The offensive has reduced much of northern Gaza, including Gaza City, to a moonscape, raising concerns over whether the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who fled from those areas will ever be able to return. Far-right members of Netanyahu's government have called for them to be resettled elsewhere, which critics say would amount to ethnic cleansing.

Blinken said the U.S. was opposed to any such scenario and that resettlement is not the policy of the Israeli government. He also said he had secured agreement on a U.N. inspection mechanism in northern Gaza to evaluate how and when people can return.

## HEAVY FIGHTING IN CENTER AND SOUTH

The military is now focusing major operations on the southern city of Khan Younis and built-up refugee camps in central Gaza that date back to the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation. Hundreds of people have been killed in recent days in continuing strikes across the territory, including in areas of the far south where people have been told to seek refuge.

An airstrike late Tuesday hit a four-story house west of the southernmost city of Rafah, killing at least 14 people and wounding at least 20 others, including women and children, health officials said. Associated Press reporters saw the dead and wounded being brought into nearby hospitals.

Jaber Abu Hamed, who fled his home in Gaza City last month and is sheltering near the main hospital in Khan Younis, said he heard constant gunfire and explosions. "The ambulance sirens didn't stop," he said.

Since the war began, Israel's offensive has killed more than 23,200 Palestinians, roughly 1% of the territory's population, and more than 58,000 people have been wounded, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. About two-thirds of the dead are women and children, health officials say. The death toll does not distinguish between combatants and civilians.

In the Oct. 7 attack, in which Hamas overwhelmed Israel's defenses and stormed through several communities, Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mainly civilians. They abducted around 250 others, nearly half of whom were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November.

The Israeli military says it tries to avoid harming civilians and blames the high toll on Hamas because the militants fight in densely populated areas. It says it has killed some 8,000 militants — without providing evidence — and that 186 of its own soldiers have been killed in the offensive.

## **Yemen's Houthis launch their largest Red Sea drone and missile attack, though no damage is reported**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels fired their largest-ever barrage of drones and missiles targeting shipping in the Red Sea, forcing the United States and British navies to shoot down the projectiles in a major naval engagement, authorities said Wednesday. No damage was immediately reported.

The attack by the Iranian-backed Houthis came despite a planned United Nations Security Council vote later Wednesday to potentially condemn and demand an immediate halt to the attacks by the rebels, who say their assaults are aimed at stopping Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

However, their targets increasingly have tenuous — or no — relationship with Israel and imperil a crucial trade route linking Asia and the Middle East to Europe. That raises the risk of a U.S. retaliatory strike on Yemen that could upend an uneasy cease-fire that's held in the Arab world's poorest country.

The assault happened off the Yemeni port cities of Hodeida and Mokha, according to the private intelligence firm Ambrey. In the Hodeida attack, Ambrey said ships described over radio seeing missiles and drones, with U.S.-allied warships in the area urging "vessels to proceed at maximum speed."

Off Mokha, ships saw missiles fired, a drone in the air and small vessels trailing them, Ambrey said early Wednesday. The British military's United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations also acknowledged the attack off Hodeida.

The U.S. military's Central Command said the "complex attack" launched by the Houthis included bomb-carrying drones, anti-ship cruise missiles and one anti-ship ballistic missile.

It said 18 drones, two cruise missiles and the anti-ship missile were downed by F-18s from the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as by American Arleigh Burke-class destroyers the USS Gravelly, the USS Laboon and the USS Mason, as well as the United Kingdom's HMS Diamond.

"This is the 26th Houthi attack on commercial shipping lanes in the Red Sea since Nov. 19," Central Command said. "There were no injuries or damage reported."

"Vessels are advised to transit with caution and report any suspicious activity," the UKTMO added.

British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps described the assault as "the largest attack by the Iranian-backed Houthis in the Red Sea to date," saying the Diamond used Sea Viper missiles and guns to shoot down multiple drones.

"The U.K. alongside allies have previously made clear that these illegal attacks are completely unacceptable and if continued the Houthis will bear the consequences," Shapps said in a statement. "We will take the action needed to protect innocent lives and the global economy."

The Houthis, a Shiite group that's held Yemen's capital since 2014, did not formally acknowledge launching the attacks. However, the pan-Arab satellite news network Al Jazeera quoted an anonymous Houthi military official saying their forces "targeted a ship linked to Israel in the Red Sea," without elaborating.

The Houthis say their attacks aim to end the pounding Israeli air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip amid that country's war on Hamas. However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue.

The Red Sea links the Mideast and Asia to Europe via the Suez Canal, and its narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait. That strait is only 29 kilometers (18 miles) wide at its narrowest point, limiting traffic to two channels for

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inbound and outbound shipments, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Nearly 10% of all oil traded at sea passes through it. An estimated \$1 trillion in goods pass through the strait annually.

A U.S. draft resolution before the U.N. Security Council, obtained late Tuesday by The Associated Press, says the Houthi attacks impede global commerce "and undermine navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace and security." The resolution would demand the immediate release of the first ship the Houthis attacked, the *Galaxy Leader*, a Japanese-operated cargo ship with links to an Israeli company that it seized in November along with its crew.

An initial draft of the resolution would have recognized "the right of member states, in accordance with international law, to take appropriate measures to defend their merchant and naval vessels."

The final draft is weaker, eliminating any U.N. recognition of a country's right to defend its ships. Instead, it would affirm that the navigational rights and freedoms of merchant and commercial vessels must be respected, and take note "of the right of member states, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms."

A U.S.-led coalition of nations has been patrolling the Red Sea to try and prevent the attacks. American troops in one conflict sank Houthi vessels and killed 10 rebel fighters. There's been no broad retaliatory strike yet, despite warnings from the U.S. However, Tuesday's attack appeared to be testing what response, if any, would come from Washington.

Meanwhile, a separate, tentative cease-fire between the Houthis and a Saudi-led coalition fighting on behalf of Yemen's exiled government has held for months despite that country's long war. That's raised concerns that any wider conflict in the sea — or a potential reprisal strike from Western forces — could reignite those tensions in the Arab world's poorest nation. It also may draw Iran, which so far has largely avoided directly entering the wider Israel-Hamas war, further into the conflict.

## **Over 50 countries go to the polls in 2024. The year will test even the most robust democracies**

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — More than 50 countries that are home to half the planet's population are due to hold national elections in 2024, but the number of citizens exercising the right to vote is not unalloyed good news. The year looks set to test even the most robust democracies and to strengthen the hands of leaders with authoritarian leanings.

From Russia, Taiwan and the United Kingdom to India, El Salvador and South Africa, the presidential and legislative contests have huge implications for human rights, economies, international relations and prospects for peace in a volatile world.

In some countries, the balloting will be neither free nor fair. And in many, curbs on opposition candidates, weary electorates and the potential for manipulation and disinformation have made the fate of democracy a front-and-center campaign issue.

A possible rematch between President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump looms large in the election calendar; a Trump victory in November is perhaps the greatest global wildcard. Yet high-stakes votes before then also will gauge the "mood of dissatisfaction, impatience, uneasiness" among far-flung electorates, said Bronwen Maddox, director of the London-based think-tank Chatham House.

### **VOTES WITH GLOBAL IMPACT**

Taiwan's elections for president and the 113-member legislature take place Saturday under intense pressure from China, which makes the outcome important to much of the Asia-Pacific region, as well as to the U.S.

Beijing has renewed its threat to use military force to annex the self-governing island it regards as its own territory, and described the elections as a choice between war and peace. None of the three leading presidential candidates has indicated a desire to try China's resolve by declaring Taiwan's independence.

That said, front-runner William Lai, who is currently Taiwan's vice president, has promised to strengthen the island's defense, and a victory by him could heighten cross-strait tensions. The opposition Nationalist

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Party, or Kuomintang, is more amenable to Beijing than Lai's Democratic People's Party.

Taiwan's 23 million people overwhelmingly favor maintaining the island's de facto independence through self-rule. Domestic issues such as housing and health care therefore are likely to play a deciding role in the presidential race.

## LEADERS LOOK TO TIGHTEN THEIR GRIPS

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the world's longest-serving female leader, won a fourth successive term Monday in an election that opposition parties boycotted and preceded by violence. Hasina's Awami League party was reelected on a low turnout of 40%, and the stifling of dissent risks triggering political turmoil.

India, the world's most populous country, is due to hold a general election by mid-2024 that is likely to bring Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party a third consecutive term.

To his supporters, Modi is a political outsider who has cleaned up after decades of corruption and made India an emerging global power. Critics say assaults on the press and free speech, as well as attacks on religious minorities by Hindu nationalists, have grown brazen on his watch.

Another leader seeking to retain power is El Salvador President Nayib Bukele, who has won widespread support since using emergency powers for an aggressive crackdown on ultra-violent street gangs.

A Supreme Court filled by his party's appointees cleared Bukele to run on Feb. 4 despite a constitutional ban on presidents serving two consecutive terms. While foreign governments have criticized the suspension of some civil rights, Bukele is not expected to face serious competition.

## MILESTONES — AND MORE OF THE SAME

Mexico is poised to elect its first female president on June 2 -- either former Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, a protégé of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or a former opposition senator, Xóchitl Gálvez. The winner will govern a country with daunting drug-related violence and an increasingly influential military.

Voters in Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest democracy, are choosing a successor to President Joko Widodo on Feb. 14. Opinion polls indicate a close race between Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, a right-wing nationalist, and former Central Java Gov. Ganjar Pranowo, the governing party's candidate.

Subianto's running mate is outgoing leader Widodo's son, prompting speculation of a dynasty in the making. Either winner, though, would mark a continuation of the corruption-tainted politics that have dominated Indonesia since the end of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998.

Pakistan's Feb. 8 parliamentary election also is being contested by well-established politicians, under the eye of the country's powerful military. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan, a popular opposition figure, is imprisoned, and election officials blocked him from running.

His rival, three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League, was allowed on the ballot after his corruption convictions were overturned. Also running is the Pakistan Peoples Party led by former Foreign Minister Bulawal Bhutto Zardari.

Analysts say the election is likely to produce a shaky government. The vote may be postponed amid plummeting relations with Taliban-controlled neighbor Afghanistan and deadly attacks on Pakistani security forces.

## HAS POPULISM PEAKED?

Populism gained ground in Europe as the continent experienced economic instability and mass migration from elsewhere. June elections for the parliament of the 27-nation European Union will be a sign of whether traditional parties can see off populist rivals, many of which are skeptical of military support for Ukraine.

Last year's national elections produced mixed signals: Slovakia elected pro-Russia populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, but voters in Poland replaced a conservative government with a coalition led by centrist Donald Tusk.

Mujtaba Rahman of political consultancy Eurasia Group predicted that the upcoming European Parliament races won't produce a populist majority but "the center will lose ground compared to the last vote" in 2019.

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In former EU member Britain, populism found expression in the 2016 Brexit referendum and the turbulent term of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. A U.K. general election this year will pit the governing Conservatives against the center-left Labour Party, which is firmly ahead in opinion polls as it seeks to regain power after 14 years.

## DEMOCRACY'S CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

Climate change, disrupted grain supplies from the Ukraine war, and increasing attention from China and Russia are among the forces reshaping Africa, the world's fastest-growing continent.

Eight West African countries have had military coups since 2020, including Niger and Gabon in 2023.

Senegal is regarded as a bastion of stability in the region. Now that President Macky Sall is stepping down, his country's Feb. 25 election is seen as an indicator of the country's political resilience.

Supporters of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko accuse the government of trying to stop him running with a series of legal cases that have sparked deadly protests. The presidential election could "mark a return to the norms of previous years or signal a lasting shift towards more volatile politics," said Eurasia group analyst Tochi Eni-Kalu.

In South Africa, a legislative election due between May and August has a struggling economy, crippling power blackouts and an unemployment rate of nearly 32% as the political backdrop. Overcoming voter disillusionment will be a challenge for the long-dominant African National Congress.

The ANC has held the presidency and a majority in parliament since the end of the country's racist apartheid system in 1994, but the previously revered organization won less than half the vote in 2021 local elections.

If its support drops below 50%, the party will need to form a coalition to ensure that lawmakers reelect President Cyril Ramaphosa.

South Sudan, the world's youngest country, plans to hold its long-delayed first elections in December. The balloting would represent a key milestone but could be rife with danger and vulnerable to failure under current conditions.

Nicholas Haysom, who heads the U.N. mission in the country, told the Security Council last month that voter registration details, a security plan and a way to resolve disputes are among the missing elements needed to ensure free elections that are "deemed credible and acceptable to South Sudanese citizens."

## RUBBER-STAMP EXERCISES

There's little doubt about who will win Russia's presidential election in March. President Vladimir Putin faces only token opposition in his bid for a fifth term. His main rivals are in prison, in exile or dead, and a politician calling for peace in Ukraine was disqualified.

It's a similar story in Belarus, led by President Alexander Lukashenko. On Feb. 25, the country is expected to hold its first parliamentary election since Lukashenko's government crushed protests against the Putin ally's disputed 2020 reelection. Thousands of opponents are in prison or have fled the country.

Still, for all its problems, the democratic ideal retains widespread appeal, even for authoritarian leaders, Maddox said.

"The fact that they choose to hold elections shows that they see the value of claiming to have a free vote," she said.

## Secrecy surrounding the defense secretary's hospitalization has put the White House on the defensive

By SEUNG MIN KIM and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration pledged from day one to restore truth and transparency to the federal government — but now it's facing a maelstrom of criticism and credibility questions after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization was kept secret for days, even from the White House.

The controversy has prompted a government-wide review of what protocols are in place to prevent such failures and the Pentagon is scrutinizing its own procedures following the extraordinary lapse, which left

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even Austin's top deputies unaware of his condition for days. Senior congressional Republicans are investigating whether Austin ignored legal requirements to inform Congress, and Biden administration officials are privately fuming about Austin's lack of disclosure, believing it to be an unforced error that undercuts the president's message of restoring competency through his administration.

The prolonged focus on a senior official's medical secrecy is also shedding an unwelcome spotlight on Biden's own health, which already was under scrutiny as the oldest president in history seeks another term and faces regular questions and concerns from voters about his age. Combined, the questions over transparency and health have put the White House on the defensive for days as the election year opens and have given ammunition to Biden political opponents who question whether his administration is living up to its pledges of competency.

The Pentagon disclosed Tuesday afternoon, after days of silence on Austin's medical diagnosis, that the secretary has prostate cancer. Austin, 70, was admitted to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Dec. 22 and underwent surgery to treat the disease, but developed a urinary tract infection a week later and was admitted into intensive care. He remained hospitalized Tuesday.

Austin was diagnosed with prostate cancer during a routine screening in early December, but the White House insisted that no one there, including Biden, knew about the diagnosis until Tuesday.

"I think we all recognize — and I think the Pentagon has been very, very honest with themselves — about the challenge to credibility by what has transpired here, and by how hard it was for them to be fully transparent with the American people," John Kirby, spokesman for the National Security Council, said Tuesday. "We all recognize that this didn't unfold the way it should have — on so many levels."

There is no government-wide policy in the Biden administration on how absences of Cabinet officials should be handled, according to people familiar with the matter, although there is a general expectation that the White House should be made aware of such circumstances. The people spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss government practices.

While there is no statutory requirement for public officials to disclose their medical histories, it has become common practice for presidential and vice presidential candidates and incumbents to do so. Many choose to share more about their health than a private citizen would.

Other top figures, though, have opted to remain cagey about their health, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell after recent incidents in which he froze up, and the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who delayed revealing the recurrence of pancreatic cancer or the seriousness of her condition before her death weeks ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

Disclosures to the public about a Cabinet official's absence have varied between federal agencies. For instance, the Justice Department in 2022 announced that Attorney General Merrick Garland would undergo surgery to remove enlarged prostate tissue a week in advance of his procedure.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg cleared his parental leave with the White House after he and his husband adopted twins in 2021, but the leave was not disclosed publicly until he had returned to work.

Multiple current and former officials said White Houses generally aim to keep closer tabs on the whereabouts of the secretaries of state and defense due to their prominent positions in the line of presidential succession, and particularly in the case of the Pentagon.

Cedric Leighton, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel, noted that the chain of command for the U.S. military runs from the president through his defense secretary to the combatant commanders, who then execute orders that could include command and control of any potential use of nuclear weapons.

He said it was "imperative" that the president, top administration and military officials, select members of Congress and even key allied counterparts be notified of even a temporary absence.

"It's highly unusual for any Cabinet secretary not to notify the president, the White House chief of staff, or the NSC of any absence, especially a medical one," he added.

White House chief of staff Jeff Zients, in a Tuesday memo to Cabinet secretaries, directed them to report back by Friday on any existing procedures for delegating authority in the event of incapacitation or loss of communication. He also is requiring agencies to provide notice if an agency expects a circumstance in

which a Cabinet head can't perform his or her duties.

The matter is expected to be discussed at a previously scheduled meeting Wednesday with Zients and Cabinet members, according to a person familiar with the plans granted anonymity to speak about a private gathering.

The White House also reiterated this week that it is committed to releasing medical information about Biden promptly.

Biden last underwent a physical in February 2023, when his doctor declared him to be "healthy, vigorous" and "fit." A skin lesion removed from his chest was later found to be a basal cell carcinoma, among the most common and easily treated forms of cancer.

Biden transferred power to Vice President Kamala Harris for one hour and 25 minutes in 2021 when he was under anesthesia during a routine colonoscopy. The White House provided advance notice that he was undergoing the procedure, but waited until Biden awoke before saying precisely when he was unconscious.

The president last year began using a continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP, machine at night to help with sleep apnea. His use of the machine was only disclosed to the public after journalists spotted telltale indentations on his face from the CPAP mask.

Biden's sleep apnea diagnosis was first revealed in medical reports in 2008, but it did not appear in medical write-ups of the physical he took when he ran for the White House in 2020, or of the two physicals he underwent since taking office in 2021.

The Austin incident has sparked bipartisan criticism from lawmakers who have numerous questions about how his condition could have been kept secret from the White House, Capitol Hill and the public.

Mississippi Sen. Roger Wicker, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Tuesday that Austin's lack of disclosure to key lawmakers about his condition and transferring of duties to Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks was a "clear violation of the law." Congress was not told until Friday afternoon of Austin's hospitalization, the Pentagon has said, a day after Biden and national security adviser Jake Sullivan were informed.

Wicker's aides said a federal law governing vacancies requires Congress to be informed immediately if a Senate-confirmed official dies, resigns or is otherwise unable to carry out the duties of the office. A March 1999 opinion from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel said the requirement could apply to sickness in such circumstances.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said he was not satisfied with the Pentagon's explanations so far and called for the Senate Armed Services Committee to look into the matter, potentially with a hearing.

"He owes Congress and the American people additional facts to ensure us that he can continue to serve," Blumenthal said.

In the House, Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike Rogers on Tuesday sent letters to Austin, Hicks and Kelly Magsamen, Austin's chief of staff, demanding a detailed accounting of what transpired regarding notification and operational impacts during the secretary's hospitalization.

"Someone has to resign or be fired," said Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., an Army veteran. "Maybe there are more facts to come out that will shed light on who exactly is responsible besides the secretary, but to show such a breakdown in communication and poor judgment in such a simple matter really raises questions about judgment in much bigger matters."

## **Ecuador's escalating gang violence is broadcast live to the nation as masked gunmen storm TV studio**

By ALLEN PANCHANA and GONZALO SOLANO Associated Press

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador (AP) — It was a day like any other at the TC Television studio in Ecuador, with its mid-afternoon newscast underway, when masked gunmen burst in, unleashing at least 15 minutes of threats and fear — all broadcast live.

First, a man with a pistol appeared in the middle of the public TV station's live transmission, followed by

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a second man with a shotgun, then a third and more. With the show's "After the News" title behind them, station employees were brought onto the set and ordered to lie down. Screams could be heard followed by the sound of gunshots.

"We are on air, so you know that you cannot play with the mafia," one of the assailants is heard saying.

Masked men could be seen aiming guns at news staff. Someone said: "Don't shoot!" After about 15 minutes the transmission was cut.

The unprecedented assault on the TV station in Guayaquil, a port city in Ecuador, came hours after a series of other attacks and police officer abductions. It also followed the apparent escapes from prison of two of the leaders of the country's most powerful gangs.

No one was killed in Tuesday's attack and authorities say the 13 attackers were arrested and would be charged with terrorism. President Daniel Noboa, who came into power in November with a promise to bring peace to the South American country, issued a decree saying the violence-plagued country had entered an "internal armed conflict," in what some analysts see as a watershed moment for Ecuador.

Late Tuesday, Noboa met with his security Cabinet and, afterward, the head of the Armed Forces Joint Command said the attacks were the gangs' reactions to the government's moves against them.

"They have unleashed a wave of violence to frighten the population," Adm. Jaime Vela told journalists, describing the attacks as "unprecedented" in Ecuador's history.

The South American country had been rocked by attacks since Monday night, but the assault on the newscast was seen in real time in thousands of homes across the country.

"This is a turning point," said Will Freeman, a political analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations, adding that while gangs in Ecuador assassinated presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio and set off car bombs in front of government buildings, Tuesday's events marked a new peak in violence.

"Depending on how the government responds, it will set the precedent for these kinds of incidents to continue, or it will use this as a catalyst and make some very necessary structural reforms so that the state can start to win its war against crime," Freeman said.

Alina Manrique, the head of news for TC Television, was ordered to get on the floor.

"They aimed the gun at my head," she told The Associated Press. "I thought about my entire life, about my two children."

Manrique said some of the assailants ran from the studio and tried to hide when they realized they were surrounded by police.

"I am still in shock," she said. "Everything has collapsed. ... All I know is that it's time to leave this country and go very far away."

Police officers entered the TV station and subdued the attackers, who can face up to 13 years in prison if they are convicted of terrorism.

On Monday, a day after a notorious gang leader's apparent escape from prison, President Noboa had declared a national state of emergency, a measure that lets authorities suspend people's rights and mobilize the military in places like prisons.

On Tuesday, shortly after the gunmen stormed the TV station, Noboa issued another decree designating as terrorist groups 20 drug-trafficking gangs operating in the country, and authorizing Ecuador's military to "neutralize" them within the bounds of international humanitarian law.

The government has said at least 30 attacks have taken place since authorities announced that Los Choneros gang leader Adolfo Macías, alias Fito, was discovered missing from his cell in a low-security prison Sunday. He was scheduled to be transferred to a maximum security facility that day.

Ecuadorean officials on Tuesday announced that another gang leader, Fabricio Colón Pico of the Los Lobos group, had escaped from a prison in the town of Riobamba. Colón Pico was captured on Friday as part of a kidnapping investigation and has also been accused of trying to murder one of the nation's lead prosecutors.

Other attacks include an explosion near the house of the president of the National Justice Court and the Monday night kidnappings of four police officers. Police said one officer was abducted in the capital, Quito, and three in Quevedo city.



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Authorities say Los Choneros, one of the Ecuadorian gangs considered responsible for a spike in violence mostly tied to drug trafficking, has links with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

Macías' whereabouts are unknown. Prosecutors opened an investigation and charged two guards in connection with his alleged escape, but neither the police, the corrections system, nor the federal government confirmed whether the prisoner fled the facility or might be hiding in it.

In February 2013, he escaped from a maximum security facility but was recaptured weeks later.

Macías, who was convicted of drug trafficking, murder and organized crime, was serving a 36-year sentence in La Regional prison in the port of Guayaquil.

Located on South America's Pacific coast between Peru and Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producers, Ecuador has become a key transit point for the drug in recent years. Much of the violence suffered by the country comes as drug gangs fight each other and the government for control of ports and smuggling routes.

## Northeast seeing heavy rain and winds as storms that walloped much of US roll through region

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE and KATHY McCORMACK Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A storm packing high winds and heavy rain was sweeping through the Northeast early Wednesday, while wild winter weather elsewhere brought tornadoes and deadly accidents in the Midwest and South, flood threats in Florida and blizzards in the Northwest.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy already declared a state of emergency Tuesday afternoon and New York City officials evacuated nearly 2,000 migrants housed at a sprawling tent complex ahead of predicted wind speeds that could top 70 mph (112 kph) at times.

In Maine, Gov. Janet Mills delayed the opening of all state offices until noon Wednesday due to the storm.

The National Weather Service warned of possible major flooding in portions of Long Island with up to 9-foot (2.7-meter) seas through Wednesday morning and a chance of major and minor flooding along streams and rivers throughout the Tri-State area, even though rain was expected to tail off.

The wild weather came as portions of the Northeast were still digging out from a nor'easter that dumped more than a foot of snow in some areas over the weekend.

On Tuesday, the same weather system brought heavy rain, hail and at least three reported tornadoes to the South before moving eastward.

Rain and high winds extended into the nation's capital Tuesday night, forcing Vice President Kamala Harris' aircraft to divert from Joint Base Andrews to Dulles International Airport near Washington when it encountered wind shear — a sudden shift in wind direction or speed.

Near Cottonwood, Alabama, a small city near the Georgia and Florida borders, 81-year-old Charlotte Paschal was killed when her mobile home was tossed from its foundation, the Houston County coroner said. A suspected tornado had touched down in the area.

Police in Clayton County, south of Atlanta, said a man died during heavy rain when a tree fell on his car on a state highway in Jonesboro.

More than 80 public school systems across Georgia called off classes entirely while others taught students online or delayed the start of in-person classes.

In North Carolina, one person died and two others were in critical condition after a suspected tornado struck a mobile home park in the town of Claremont, north of Charlotte, said Amy McCauley, a spokesperson for Catawba County.

A possible tornado knocked down several old brick storefronts in downtown Bamberg, South Carolina, blocking the main intersection through the city about 60 miles (96 kilometers) south of Columbia. Thousands of bricks blocked U.S. 301, the main road through that part of the state, and about 40 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, said Democratic Rep. Justin Bamberg, who represents the area.

Storm-related injuries were reported in Florida, but no deaths. A section of Panama City Beach showed parts of roofs blown away, furniture, fences and debris strewn about, and a house that appeared tilted

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on its side, leaning on another home.

The National Weather Service office in Tallahassee planned to send out three tornado survey teams on Wednesday to examine suspected tornado damage in Walton, Bay and Jackson counties in Florida, and two more on Thursday to look at Houston County, Alabama, and Calhoun County, Georgia.

Many areas of Florida remained under flood watches, warnings and advisories early Wednesday morning amid concerns that streams and rivers were topping their banks. Gov. Ron DeSantis, who gave his State of the State address Tuesday as tornado warnings were active outside the Capitol, issued an executive order to include 49 counties in North Florida under a state of emergency.

"Turn around, don't drown when encountering flooded roads. Most flood deaths occur in vehicles," the weather service warned in a statement.

Another storm that began Monday buried cities across the Midwest in snow, stranding people on highways. Some areas saw up to a foot (30 centimeters) of snow on Monday, including Kansas, eastern Nebraska and South Dakota, western Iowa, and southwestern Minnesota.

In southeastern Wisconsin, an SUV driver died Tuesday in a head-on collision with a semitrailer on a slushy, snowy state highway, authorities said.

In Des Moines, Iowa, Laura Burianov had nearly finished shoveling her driveway Tuesday morning. But with snow still falling, she acknowledged she likely would have to shovel again later in the day.

"It's going to get harder. I shoveled last night and you can't really tell, but I can pretend that three less inches makes a difference," she said.

Madison, Wisconsin, was under a winter storm warning until early Wednesday, with as much as 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow and 40 mph (64 kph) winds on tap.

In western Michigan, a 35-year-old woman died Tuesday after she lost control of her minivan on a slushy highway and it collided with an SUV, the Lake County Sheriff's Office said. The ambulance taking her to a Grand Rapids hospital, where she was pronounced dead, was struck by another vehicle en route there, and a second ambulance was needed to finish the transport to the hospital.

The weather has already affected campaigning for Iowa's Jan. 15 precinct caucuses, where the snow is expected to be followed by frigid temperatures that could drift below zero degrees (minus 18 Celsius). It forced former President Donald Trump's campaign to cancel multiple appearances by Arkansas Gov. Sarah Sanders and her father, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who had been scheduled to court Iowa voters on Trump's behalf Monday.

Forecasters warned snow-struck regions of the Midwest and the Great Plains that temperatures could plunge dangerously low because of wind chill, dipping to around minus 20 (29 Celsius) and even far lower in Chicago, Kansas City and some areas of Montana.

In the Pacific Northwest, a blizzard pounded Washington and Oregon mountains on Tuesday, knocking out power and prompting the closure of highways and ski resorts.

At one point, some 150,000 customers in those states were without electricity, although that was down to under 20,000 by late Tuesday night,

The storms with their potent mix of snow, rain, hail and wind played havoc with power lines in other states. More than 600,000 customers remained without power in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina and Virginia, according to the website poweroutage.us.

Another 77,000 customers were in the dark in North Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

## **Video appears to show the Israeli army shot 3 Palestinians, killing 1, without provocation**

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

BEIT RIMA, West Bank (AP) — Security camera video from a West Bank village shows a young man standing in a central square when he is suddenly shot and drops to the ground. Two others rushing to his aid are also hit, leaving a 17-year-old dead, moments before Israeli military jeeps roll in.

An Associated Press review of the video and interviews with the two wounded survivors showed Israeli

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soldiers opened fire on the three when they did not appear to pose a threat. One of the wounded Palestinians was shot a second time after he got up and tried to hop away.

The fatal shooting in the village of Beit Rima last week is the latest in a series of incidents in which soldiers appeared to fire without provocation, a trend Palestinians say has worsened since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza three months ago.

The Israeli military said troops entered Beit Rima overnight Thursday into Friday as part of a "counter-terrorism operation." It said troops fired at suspects who threw explosives and firebombs at them.

The video, obtained by the AP from a local smoke shop, does not show anyone throwing explosives.

After reviewing the footage, a military spokesperson said soldiers reported that one of the Palestinians — visible kneeling in front of an object just outside the frame — was igniting a Molotov cocktail when he was shot.

The video, however, shows that the first shot does not hit the kneeling man, but rather another Palestinian man, Nader Rimawi. Nader told the AP that the object was a stack of cardboard boxes and scraps of paper that 17-year-old Osaid Rimawi had gathered and was preparing to light to keep the men warm.

Other videos of the shooting posted to social media and reviewed by AP appear consistent with Nader's description of the object Osaid was preparing to light. It is possible videos taken from other angles could further illuminate what happened.

In interviews with the AP, the wounded village residents denied having thrown explosives and said the shootings, about 2 a.m. Friday, were unprovoked.

Two of the six Rimawi brothers were in the town square when word spread that Israeli soldiers were in the village. They said they were aware of the army presence, but that there had been no confrontations. "We were with the young men standing at the roundabout of the town," said Mohammed Rimawi, 25. "We started looking around as we were standing and not doing anything."

The half-hour security camera video begins about 20 minutes before the shootings with men gathering in small groups, walking in and out of the frame as cars come and go. Some men gesture elsewhere in the village.

The crowd in the frame eventually thins to under 10 men. Then they scatter as a shot hits Mohammed's brother, 29-year-old Nader, in the left leg.

The video shows Mohammed running to help before being shot.

"We saw a sniper who started shooting. He shot him. I went to help him. Then he shot me," said Mohammed, who was struck by a bullet in his right hip.

The video shows Osaid rushing to aid them as he slips something into his pocket. He is quickly shot and later dies of his wounds. His brother, Islam Rimawi, later told AP that he found a lighter, 20 shekels (\$5.36), and a pack of cigarettes in Osaid's pocket.

Mohammed was able to crawl away, but the other two were left rolling on the ground. Nader stood up and attempted to hop away, before again collapsing to the ground. Speaking from his hospital bed days later, Nader said he collapsed after being shot in his right leg.

Apart from Israeli troops carrying guns, no weapons are visible throughout the video. The shooter is not visible either.

The video showed four armored Israeli vehicles arriving about 2 minutes after the shooting and roughly a dozen soldiers getting out, guns prone. They gathered around Mohammed. One soldier prodded Osaid with his foot. Within 4 minutes, the soldiers left the wounded Palestinians on the ground and drove away, ignoring the stack of boxes and declining to arrest them.

Another video of the shooting reviewed by the AP shows the stack of boxes is then toppled by a Palestinian car rushing to evacuate the wounded.

Shortly after, Osaid — a high school student studying to become a barber — was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital.

The military spokesperson said that there were other instances where Palestinians had thrown Molotov cocktails at the forces in Beit Rima that night but said he did not know when. The men shot in the video said this was the only altercation in Beit Rima they were aware of that night.

The military did not respond when asked if soldiers had violated military policy and did not say whether there would be an official investigation.

The Israeli rights group B'Tselem said that even if questionable shootings are caught on camera and investigated by the military, they rarely result in indictments.

"Cases like these happen quite regularly, but no one's hearing about them," said Dror Sadot, a spokesperson for the group. "The military will say that it is opening an investigation. And this investigation will last for years, probably without any media covering it. And then it will be washed down the drain."

In response to Sadot's allegation, a military spokesperson provided this statement: "Each investigation file is examined according to its circumstances. In the appropriate cases, various enforcement measures are taken, including the filing of indictments."

Human rights groups have previously presented cases in which soldiers opened fire without their lives being in danger, in apparent violation of the military's rules of engagement. In most cases, the victims were Palestinians, but Israelis have also been killed in high-profile shootings during the war.

In December, three Israeli hostages who had escaped their Hamas captors in Gaza waved white flags and shouted for help in Hebrew before being gunned down by soldiers.

Sadot said her organization has seen an unprecedented level of violence from soldiers and settlers in the West Bank since the war broke out. The West Bank is experiencing one of the deadliest phases on record, according to United Nations monitors.

Beit Rima resident Ahmed Rimawi, whose two brothers were wounded in the shooting, said he believes soldiers have become more aggressive since the start of the war. In the past, they would initially fire stun grenades to disperse crowds in the village. Now, he said, "they open fire directly on people."

Palestinian health officials said 340 Palestinians have been killed in the three tense months since Hamas militants attacked southern Israel and killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

The Hamas attack prompted Israel to wage a blistering air and ground campaign on the Gaza Strip that has killed over 23,000 people — and to tighten its grip on the West Bank through near-nightly, often deadly, raids. Israel says the crackdown is aimed at Hamas and other militant groups.

Mohammed and Nader are recovering from their wounds. Both normally work at a factory in a nearby Palestinian village, packaging prepared salads for market. They said they won't work again until they are able to walk.

Nader underwent surgery Sunday for injuries to his thigh. Mohammed has been released from the hospital but is unable to put weight on his right leg. He limps around the family's small ornate home in Beit Rima — a village of about 4,000 people north of the city of Ramallah — with the aid of a metal walker.

Back at the village roundabout, the walls are plastered with the weathered faces of local men killed in encounters or clashes with Israeli forces. Among their ranks now appears Osaid's photograph, gazing over the pockmarked spot in the ground where he was killed.

## **UN Security Council to vote on a resolution demanding Houthi rebels stop attacks on Red Sea shipping**

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. Security Council scheduled a vote Wednesday on a resolution that would condemn and demand an immediate halt to attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels on merchant and commercial vessels in the Red Sea area.

The U.S. draft resolution, obtained late Tuesday by The Associated Press, says at least two dozen Houthi attacks are impeding global commerce "and undermine navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace and security."

The Iranian-backed Houthis, who have been engaged in a civil war with Yemen's internationally recognized government since 2014, have said they launched the attacks with the aim of ending Israel's devastating air-and-ground offensive in the Gaza Strip.

It was triggered by the Palestinian militant group Hamas' Oct. 7 surprise attack in southern Israel which

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killed about 1,200 people and led to some 250 others being taken hostage. Israel's three-month assault in Gaza has killed more than 23,000 people, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Hams-run Gaza Health Ministry which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

The resolution would demand the immediate release of the first ship the Houthis attacked, the *Galaxy Leader*, a Japanese-operated cargo ship with links to an Israeli company that it seized on Nov. 19 along with its crew.

However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue. In the latest incident, a barrage of drones and missiles fired by the Houthis late Tuesday targeted shipping in the Red Sea, though the U.S. said no damage was reported.

The Red Sea links the Mideast and Asia to Europe via the Suez Canal, and its narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Nearly 10% of all oil trade and an estimated \$1 trillion in goods pass through the strait annually. But the Houthi attacks have forced many shipping companies to bypass this route and use the much longer and more expensive route around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa.

A U.S.-led coalition of nations has been patrolling the Red Sea to try and prevent the attacks.

Last week the U.S. and 12 other countries issued a statement calling for the immediate end of Houthi attacks and warning 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," they said.

While the Houthis have not stopped targeting ships, a tentative cease-fire between the Houthis and a Saudi-led coalition fighting on behalf of Yemen's exiled government has held for months despite that country's long war. That's raised concerns that any wider conflict in the sea — or a potential reprisal strike from Western forces — could reignite those tensions in the Arab world's poorest nation.

At an open Security Council meeting last week, Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia called on Houthi leaders to implement the statement by the 13 countries and halt attacks.

But he stressed that the Houthi's actions must be seen as a response to "Israel's brutal operation in Gaza," and the best scenario would be for the Security Council to redouble efforts to end the Yemen civil war and the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The "catastrophic" scenario, Nebenzia said, would be to escalate the use of force in the Red Sea which risks derailing a settlement of the Yemen conflict. It would also create conditions "for igniting a new major conflict around at least the Arabian Peninsula" and a wider regional conflict, he said.

Given these concerns, it's uncertain whether Russia will abstain or veto the draft resolution.

The final draft makes some changes that appear aimed at getting broader support.

The initial draft would have recognized "the right of member states, in accordance with international law, to take appropriate measures to defend their merchant and naval vessels."

The final draft is weaker, eliminating any U.N. recognition of a country's right to defend its ships. Instead, it would affirm that the navigational rights and freedoms of merchant and commercial vessels must be respected, and take note "of the right of member states, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms."

Without naming Iran, the Houthis' main arms supplier, the draft to be voted on would condemn all arms dealings with the rebels, which violate Security Council sanctions. It would also call for "additional practical cooperation to prevent the Houthis from acquiring the materiel necessary to carry out further attacks."

Both drafts recognize the need to avoid escalating the situation, but the resolution to be voted on is broader. It "urges caution and restraint to avoid further escalation of the situation in the Red Sea and the broader region." And it "encourages enhanced diplomatic efforts by all parties to that end, including continued support for dialogue and Yemen's peace process under the U.N. auspices."

## Economy tops US priorities for government across racial groups, AP-NORC and AAPI Data polls show

By MATT BROWN and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans of various racial backgrounds largely agree that the government should focus on the economy and foreign policy issues in 2024, but recent polling shows that views among racial groups diverge on some high-profile topics, including racism and immigration.

About 7 in 10 U.S. adults across racial backgrounds — including white, Black, Hispanic and Asian adults — name issues related to the economy in an open-ended question that asks people to share up to five topics they would like the government to prioritize in 2024, making it the most commonly mentioned issue for each group, as well as for U.S. adults overall at 76%.

Inflation specifically stood out as a major issue. About 3 in 10 adults who are white, AAPI or Hispanic list inflation as an important focus for 2024. About 2 in 10 Black adults also listed inflation as a top concern.

The data on U.S. adults overall — including Black, Hispanic and white adults — comes from an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll conducted in December. The data on AAPI communities comes from an AAPI Data/AP-NORC poll that aims to improve the survey data available about Asian American communities in the U.S., which are often underrepresented in public opinion research.

On some issues beyond the economy, views diverge.

Immigration was named as a top priority for government action by 43% of Hispanic adults, 36% of white adults and 29% of Asians and Pacific Islanders, but only 19% of Black adults. Black and AAPI adults are less likely than white and Hispanic adults to say the government should work on the country's involvement overseas. About one quarter of white and Hispanic adults mention this as an issue to prioritize, compared to 7% for both Black and AAPI adults.

"You've got so many people crossing the border," said Rick Chan, an artificial intelligence engineer in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"People should obey the laws when coming into the country," said Chan, who is Chinese American.

White adults were more likely than adults from other racial and ethnic groups to name politics as an important issue for the upcoming year. Four in 10 white adults name politics as a necessary focal point for the government, compared to 2 in 10 Black or AAPI adults. About one-third of Hispanic adults consider politics an important focus. White adults are also more likely than non-white adults to be concerned about government spending, government corruption and taxes.

"We always have to have a budget in place to keep the government from shutting down. I don't think the Republicans look at it that way," said Jim O'Leary, a former railroad worker from Missouri. O'Leary, who is white, thinks the government should be most focused on the economy and democracy issues.

A Democrat, O'Leary said he wanted the government to take greater action on the federal budget but opposes hard-right economic policies. "They just don't see the bigger picture," O'Leary said, citing proposed budget cuts by conservative lawmakers in ongoing negotiations on Capitol Hill. He feels Trump is too polarizing a figure to return to office.

"I mean, he wants to be a dictator. If that guy gets back in, we'll be in real trouble," O'Leary said.

"I believe what we what we need to focus on most is election integrity. I think we're down the drain if we don't get some kind of election integrity back," said Jerry Lassiter, a retired human resource specialist. Lassiter, who is white, said that corruption in government, the prosecution of rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and immigration were other top issues he felt the government needed to focus on in 2024.

Lassiter, a Republican, also expressed concern about issues including immigration, crime and "getting people back to work."

Ivory Hunter Jr., a 59-year-old warehouse and transportation worker in Texas, said he "hears a lot of negative things" about potential cuts to federal government programs like Medicare and Social Security.

"And they're not having solid plans that would suffice to solving the issues," said Hunter, who is Black.

Hunter, a Democrat, said that while some Republicans had policy proposals he found appealing, he felt

that the party was too supportive of former President Donald Trump, whom he sees as “tearing down our democracy” if he wins the White House. Hunter said he felt alienated from rhetoric and policies from many GOP politicians over voting rights, racism and immigration.

“I can’t stomach how they decide to do things, the statements that they make, or the actions that they take,” Hunter said.

Non-white adults are more likely than white adults to highlight racism or racial inequality among the topics for the government to address. About 2 in 10 Black adults highlight racial issues, compared to 13% of Hispanic adults and 12% of AAPI adults. Each of these groups is more likely than white adults, at 7%, to mention it. Non-white adults also mention employment issues at a higher rate than white adults do, including job availability and the minimum wage.

About 7 in 10 U.S. adults and AAPI adults are “slightly” or “not at all” confident that the federal government will be able to make progress on important issues in 2024. Nearly 8 in 10 white adults expressed a low confidence in the government’s ability to solve problems, a significantly higher rate of pessimism than that of other racial groups. They are more likely than Hispanic adults, at 63%, and Black adults, at 46%, to have little faith in the federal government to address their top concerns.

“The system is rigged. It’s already rigged. The people in Washington don’t lose their power. They’re going to do everything they can do to not lose their gravy train and their cushy jobs once they’re out of government,” Lassiter said.

“What’s optimistic about the future in this country? I don’t know. You just go with it every morning. You wake up and hope it didn’t blow up, that the world didn’t end overnight,” O’Leary said. “You just wake up in the morning and hope that there is still a world.”

## **With threats, pressure and financial lures, China seen as aiming to influence Taiwan’s elections**

By CHRISTOPHER BODEEN and JOHNSON LAI Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Using military threats, diplomatic pressure, fake news and financial inducements for politicians, China is being accused of deploying a broad strategy to influence voters in Taiwan’s elections to pick candidates who favor unification.

China’s ultimate goal is to take control of the self-governing island democracy, whose high-tech economy supplies key components for computers, cellphones and other electronic devices and ships much of the world’s goods out from the Taiwan Strait. Beijing has long insisted Taiwan is part of China and must be regained, by military force if necessary, regardless of the views of the island’s people.

Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu says China’s “global objective is that they want to use Taiwan as a test ground. If they are able to successfully shape the results of the Taiwan elections, they will try to apply their tactics on other countries.”

China has been sending warships and fighter jets near Taiwan on a near-daily basis in recent years, hoping to intimidate the island’s 23 million people and wear down its military, which relies heavily on support from the United States. China has described Saturday’s elections as a choice between war and peace.

While the numbers of such missions have dropped off slightly in recent days, Taiwan has reported a number of suspicious balloons traveling over the island from China. The Defense Ministry also sent out an air raid alert via cell phones about a Chinese rocket launch Tuesday that it later amended to describe as the placement of a satellite into space but on an “abnormal trajectory.” It said the alert was justified by the potential threat to civilians on the ground in Taiwan.

Previous efforts to intimidate Taiwanese voters with missile launches and direct threats were largely seen as backfiring after the election of China critics in 1996 and 2000.

China has also restricted imports from Taiwan and invited local leaders on all-expenses-paid visits aimed at persuading them to press colleagues to support pro-China candidates in the elections for the island’s president and 113-member legislature. Cases have been opened against dozens of ward officials for accepting such gifts in violation of Taiwanese law.

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China in general refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Taiwan's political institutions in keeping with the Communist Party's insistence that the democracy does not exist.

In line with that policy, China has not commented on Taiwan's upcoming elections. However, the head of the Chinese Cabinet's Taiwan Affairs office, Song Tao, said on Jan. 2 that China would continue to "unswervingly oppose" Taiwan's independence while also working to "safeguard peace, expand exchanges, enhance cooperation, deepen integration and advance reunification to ensure that cross-Strait relations move in the right direction of peaceful development," according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

Surveys show most Taiwanese embrace their current de facto independence — including compulsory military service for all men, the ability to travel worldwide on Taiwanese passports, and the right to choose their leaders in democratic elections at all levels.

While the race remains tight, support is strong for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, even though China has refused to engage with the government since President Tsai Ing-wen was elected in 2016. She is unable to run again due to term limits.

The DPP favors closer ties with the United States as a way to preserve Taiwan's separate status and has refused to agree that Taiwan falls under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China, which has never exercised political control over the island or its outlying territories. The DPP's presidential candidate, current Vice President William Lai, leads most pre-election surveys.

The main opposition Nationalist Party candidate, Hou Yu-ih, is appealing to voters who fear a military conflict with China that could draw in the U.S. and disrupt the global economy. Hou opposes Taiwanese independence and agrees with Beijing's view that Taiwan is part of China, although under separate governments.

A third candidate, Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party, has sought to straddle the differences by appealing to young voters turned off by the rivalry between the Nationalists, also known as the KMT, and the DPP.

However, Taiwanese elections are often decided on the basis of local issues such as housing, employment, education and healthcare that are separate from relations with China.

Taiwan, long a melting pot of Asian and European cultures, was a Japanese colony for 50 years until 1945, when it was handed over to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist government at the end of World War II. The Nationalists relocated their government and military to the island in 1949 after the Communists under Mao Zedong took power on the mainland amid a civil war in which millions were killed and which has yet to be formally resolved.

China accuses the U.S. of encouraging Taiwan to raise tensions between the sides by supplying it with military weapons.

"Any attempt to use Taiwan to contain China is doomed to failure," Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Col. Wu Qian said at a briefing in Beijing last week. "Seeking independence by military force is a dead end."

China's armed forces would "as always take all necessary measures to firmly safeguard our national sovereignty and territorial integrity," he added.

The non-profit Taiwan Fact Check Center says fake news linked to the elections has been traced to China and the pressure is increasing. Online postings described as deep fakes have depicted Tsai and Lai as doing and saying things that were entirely fabricated.

"The creators of false information have their own motives," said the center's CEO, Eve Chiu. "They are all false accusations related to politics."

Beijing-sponsored visits to China by district wardens, equivalent to city and county representatives in the U.S., have also raised concerns in Taiwan. Several officials are being investigated on suspicion they accepted free accommodations, travel and entertainment in return for promoting pro-China candidates. That would violate Taiwanese law, which was carefully written to end a legacy of vote buying and voter coercion.

Among the visitors to China was the Nationalist Party's vice chairman, Andrew Hsia, who traveled there last month, reawakening concerns about private dealings between the party and China's ruling Communists.



Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, which oversees relations with China, has warned Taiwanese that China is using both economic and political means to impact the vote.

"We advise the Communist Party of China to stop using ineffective means and stop harming relations across the Taiwan Strait," spokesperson Chan Chih-hung said. He added that China is likely to keep trying to manipulate Taiwanese politics regardless of the election's outcome.

## **Israel taps top legal minds, including a Holocaust survivor, to battle genocide claim at world court**

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel is sending top legal minds, including a Holocaust survivor, to The Hague this week to counter allegations that it is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

The robust engagement with the International Court of Justice is unusual for Israel, which normally considers the United Nations and international tribunals as unfair and biased. The decision to participate rather than boycott reflects Israeli concerns that the judges could order Israel to halt its war against Hamas and tarnish its image internationally.

"Israel cannot run away from an accusation that is so serious," said Alon Liel, a former director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry and a former Israeli ambassador to South Africa.

Israel, which as one of the parties in the case is entitled to send a judge, has tapped a former Israeli Supreme Court chief justice to join the court's 15 regular members who will rule on the accusation. It has also enlisted a British barrister and lauded international law expert as part of its defense team.

Israel hopes their expertise will trounce the South African claim that Israel's military campaign in Gaza amounts to genocide and prevent an interim court order to force Israel to stop the fighting. Israel says halting the war when Hamas' capabilities are intact in many places and with hostages still in its captivity would amount to a Hamas victory.

The genocide charge strikes at the heart of Israel's national identity. The country sees itself as a bulwark of security for Jews after 6 million were killed in the Holocaust. International support for Israel's creation in 1948 was deeply rooted in outrage over Nazi atrocities.

The same year, with Israel's involvement, world powers drew up the convention against genocide in hopes of preventing similar atrocities.

Israel's unprecedented air, ground and sea offensive has killed more than 23,200 Palestinians, two-thirds of them women and children, according to health officials in Hamas-run Gaza. Israel's military campaign has displaced roughly 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million population, many with no homes to return to. More than a quarter of the population is starving.

South Africa, which has long been a critic of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, launched the case at the United Nations' top court in The Netherlands. Many South Africans compare Israel's policies toward Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank with their own country's former apartheid regime of racial segregation.

Israel vehemently disputes the genocide claims, saying it is fighting a war of self-defense after Hamas militants launched its Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 hostage. Israel says its actions comply with international law and that it does its best to prevent harm to civilians, blaming Hamas for embedding in residential areas.

South Africa's 84-page filing says Israel's actions, including killing Palestinians and causing serious mental and bodily harm, "are genocidal in character." It says Israeli officials have expressed genocidal intent.

The case will likely drag on for years. But South Africa's filing includes a request for the court to urgently issue legally binding interim orders for Israel to "immediately suspend its military operations in and against Gaza."

Abiding by such a ruling would be politically costly for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with Israelis still largely supportive of the war. Israel would also fall short of its declared goal of crushing the militant group.

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If it doesn't abide, Israel could face U.N. sanctions. Although the U.S., Israel's closest ally, could veto such a move, doing so would anger many Democrats who have already soured on President Joe Biden over his strong support for Israel in the war. That could be damaging for Biden as he seeks reelection. U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said Tuesday that the case is "meritless."

Eylon Levy, an Israeli government spokesman, criticized South Africa, saying it was giving Hamas political and legal cover.

"We are appalled that South Africa has chosen to play advocate for the devil," he said.

An Israeli official said Israel agreed to cooperate with the court because it is confident it will prevail. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter with the media. Israel boycotted a prominent case at the court in 2004 about its West Bank separation barrier, which the court ruled was "contrary to international law," saying the proceedings were politically motivated.

Israel chose Aharon Barak — a mainstay of the country's legal world for decades — to join the panel of international judges. A former attorney general and peace negotiator who served as chief justice of Israel's highest court from 1995-2006, Barak has ruled in cases related to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

The internationally renowned 87-year-old has received honorary degrees from multiple universities, including Yale and Oxford.

He is also a Holocaust survivor who was sent to Lithuania's Kovno Ghetto at age 5, where he has said he repeatedly evaded death. That personal detail could be significant in his discussions with the other judges.

Just a few months ago, Netanyahu and his allies vilified Barak as they pushed forward with their plans to overhaul Israel's judiciary. Barak, under whom the courts took on a more robust role, was seen as a symbol of an overly interventionist legal system.

Protesters held sit-ins outside his Tel Aviv home and politicians lashed out at the octogenarian in Knesset speeches. But facing the case in The Hague, Netanyahu did a quick about face, surprising even his critics.

"At a time of legal troubles in the international arena, Israel has only one person to rely on," commentator Yossi Verter wrote in the Haaretz daily. "Even Netanyahu understood that there's nobody but him. He's our '911' emergency service."

British lawyer Malcolm Shaw, who will defend Israel, is the author of what's seen as the definitive textbook on international law. He has represented numerous states, including Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates, in international litigation, including at the International Court of Justice, according to a biography posted online by Essex Court Chambers, where Shaw is a barrister.

Robbie Sabel, a former legal adviser at the Israeli Foreign Ministry who counts Shaw as a friend, said it remained to be seen whether judges from nations with poor ties to Israel will rule objectively. But he said Israel had positioned itself to meet the charges head on.

"They chose the top people," he said. "It means Israel is taking it very seriously."

## **Armed attack during live broadcast at Ecuadorian TV station. What's behind the spiraling violence?**

By GONZALO SOLANO Associated Press

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador (AP) — A group of armed, masked men in Ecuador launched an audacious attack on a television station during a live broadcast and so revealed the country's spiraling violence in the wake of an apparent recent prison escape.

The imprisoned leader of a drug gang mysteriously vanished from his cell in the coastal city of Guayaquil on Sunday, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency.

On Tuesday, thousands of viewers tuned in to TC Television watched live as the men threatened presenters and studio hands with firearms and explosives that appeared to be sticks of dynamite. Sounds resembling shots were audible, as well as pleas and moans of pain.

Police neutralized the scene and arrested 13 people. Ecuador's attorney general's office said Tuesday they will be charged with terrorism, facing up to 13 years imprisonment.

The violence comes after Los Choneros gang leader Adolfo Macías, alias "Fito," made his apparent es-

cape. He had been serving a 36-year sentence for murder, drug trafficking and other crimes.

## WHEN DID CRIMINAL VIOLENCE IN ECUADOR SURGE?

The recent surge in violence began in Feb. 2021 with a massacre inside the country's most violent prison, known as the Literol penitentiary. It left at least 79 dead, and sparked a series of shocking episodes within the Ecuadorian prisons.

In September of the same year, the nation's worst prison massacre saw 116 inmates killed in a single prison, with several of them beheaded. A total 18 clashes inside prisons have killed more than 450 people.

According to authorities, disputes between gangs inside the prisons prompted the death in December of 2020 of a Los Choneros leader, Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias "Rasquiña," in an attempt to usurp his power. This generated divisions among the local groups subsidiary to the gang, which are disputing control of territory to control drug distribution. Authorities say some of the gangs have ties to Mexico's Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels.

Violence within the prison's walls has spread to the streets, with rampant kidnapping, murder, robbery and extortion that has made the country among the most violent in the region. Last year was Ecuador's bloodiest in on record, with more than 7,600 murders that marked a surge from 4,600 in the prior year.

## WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT DOING TO CONTROL THE SITUATION?

President Daniel Noboa, who took office Nov. 23, has promised to eradicate violence through his so-called Phoenix Plan, details of which he hasn't revealed to the public. To face up to the crisis, Noboa decreed a state of emergency and curfew on Monday, tasking police and armed forces with enforcing compliance. It restricts the rights to move freely, to assemble and allows police entry into homes without a court order.

But the attack on TC Television elicited another decree, this time recognizing that the country possesses an armed, domestic conflict and identifying more than a dozen organizations as "terrorists and belligerent non-state actors." These groups include the Choneros, Lobos, Tiguerones and Aguilas.

The decree also enabled the armed forces to carry out military operations "to neutralize the identified groups," while observing international humanitarian law.

## WHAT IS CAUSING THE VIOLENCE IN ECUADOR?

Authorities say the criminal violence started in the prisons, due to disputes between gangs for control of the penitentiaries, national and international drug smuggling routes and control of turf for the sale of drugs.

When the violence spread outside the prisons, it shattered the tranquility of Ecuadorians' daily lives and forced small- and medium-sized enterprises to shutter as they were overwhelmed by extortionists.

Ecuador's former defense minister, Luis Hernández, told The Associated Press that the TV studio episode is unprecedented and reveals that organized crime groups "perceived the state's weakness" and that they could easily undertake actions "to terrorize the state and send it into a state of panic."

Hernández supported the president's decree recognizing an armed conflict and allowing for the use of lethal force. He added that Noboa should send a clear message to the population to not submit to fear and chaos.

## Secret tunnel in NYC synagogue leads to brawl between police and worshippers

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A historic Brooklyn synagogue that serves as the center of an influential Hasidic Jewish movement was trashed this week during an unusual community dispute that began with the discovery of a secret underground tunnel and ended in brawl between worshippers and police.

The conflict erupted in the global headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in Crown Heights, a deeply revered Jewish site that each year receives thousands of visitors, including international students and religious leaders. Its Gothic Revival facade, immediately recognizable to adherents of the Chabad movement, has inspired dozens of replicas across the world.

But on Tuesday, the synagogue remained closed off by police barricades as New York City building safety agents inspected whether a tunnel dug without official permission may have caused structural damage

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to the famed property.

Officials and locals said young men in the community recently built the passage to the sanctuary in secret. When the group's leaders tried to seal it off Monday, they staged a protest that turned violent as police moved in to make arrests.

The exact purpose and provenance of the tunnel that incited the altercation remained the subject of some debate.

The passageway is believed to have started in the basement of an empty apartment building behind the headquarters, snaking under a series of offices and lecture halls before eventually connecting to the synagogue, according to Motti Seligson, a spokesperson for Chabad.

He characterized its construction as a rogue act of vandalism committed by a group of misguided young men, condemning the "extremists who broke through the wall to the synagogue, vandalizing the sanctuary, in an effort to preserve their unauthorized access."

Those who supported the tunnel, meanwhile, said they were carrying out an "expansion" plan long envisioned by the former head of the Chabad movement, Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Schneerson led the Chabad-Lubavitch for more than four decades before his death in 1994, reinvigorating a Hasidic religious community that had been devastated by the Holocaust.

Supporters of the expansion said the basement synagogue had long been overcrowded, prompting a push to annex additional space that some in the community felt was taking too long. Many of those supporters subscribe to the messianic belief that Schneerson is still alive.

"That's what the rabbi wants, that's what everybody wants," said Zalmy Grossman, a 21-year-old Brooklyn resident. He said the tunnel project began late last year as a way to connect the synagogue with "the whole empty space" behind it.

Chabad leaders declined to say when they discovered the underground connection. But several worshippers said word of the tunnel's existence had spread through the community in recent weeks.

The situation came to a head Monday, when a cement truck arrived to seal the opening. Proponents of the tunnel then staged a protest and ripped off the wooden siding of the synagogue.

A police department spokesperson said officers were called to the building in the afternoon to respond to a disorderly group that was trespassing and damaging a wall.

For several hours, police pleaded with the young men to leave the entrance to the tunnel, according to witnesses. After they refused, the officers covered the area with a white curtain and entered the dusty crevasse with zip ties to detain the protesters.

"When they took the first person out with zip ties, that's when the outburst happened," said Baruch Dahan, a 21-year-old studying at the synagogue who videotaped the congregants fighting. "Almost everyone was against what they did, but as soon as people saw the handcuffs there was confusion and pushing."

Footage posted to social media shows scores of onlookers, mostly young men, jeering at the NYPD's community affairs officers. Some lifted wooden desks into the air, sending prayer books scattering. In response, an officer appeared to deploy an irritating spray to disperse the group.

Nine people — between the ages of 19 and 22 — were ultimately arrested on charges that included criminal mischief, reckless endangerment, and obstructing governmental administration, according to police. Another three received summonses for disorderly conduct.

A spokesperson for the Department of Buildings said the inspection results were pending on Tuesday evening.

While the building remained closed, some worshippers completed their prayers outside in the drizzling rain. "The community feels terrible," Dahan said. "It's a disgrace, instead of expanding, they destroyed."

## Live updates | Blinken presses Israel on Gaza's postwar future as Lebanon border clashes escalate

By The Associated Press undefined

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is back in Tel Aviv and, after meeting with top leaders Tuesday, said Israel must do more to lessen the Gaza war's toll on civilians and said Washington rejects any proposal for settling Palestinians outside the territory.

Hundreds of people have been killed in recent days as the Israeli offensive's focus shifts to the southern city of Khan Younis and built-up refugee camps in the central Gaza. The entire 2.3 million population is also in a food crisis, with 576,000 people at catastrophic or starvation levels.

Israeli strikes in southern Lebanon killed at least four members of the militant group Hezbollah members, a day after a similar attack killed a commander with the militant Hezbollah group. Israel claimed it killed Ali Hussein Barji, who it said was in charge of Hezbollah's drones in the south, but a Hezbollah official, speaking on condition of anonymity in accordance with the group's regulations, said he was only a fighter.

Hamas' Oct. 7 attack from Gaza into southern Israel triggered the war and killed around 1,200 people, and militants took some 250 others hostage. Israel's air, ground and sea assault in Gaza has killed more than 23,000 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.

Currently:

- Hezbollah launches drone strike on northern Israel base, Israeli military says there's no damage.
- Blinken urges Israel to engage with region on postwar plans that include path to Palestinian state.
- Israeli strike kills an elite Hezbollah commander in the latest escalation linked to the war in Gaza.
- Former U.K. opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn will join South Africa's delegation accusing Israel of genocide.

— Find more of AP's coverage at: <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's what's happening in the war:

U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL TO VOTE ON HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN RED SEA

UNITED NATIONS – The U.N. Security Council has scheduled a vote Wednesday on a U.S.-proposed resolution that would condemn attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels on merchant and commercial vessels in the Red Sea area and demand an immediate halt.

The draft resolution, obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press, says at least two dozen Houthi attacks are impeding global commerce "and undermine navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace and security."

The resolution would demand the immediate release of the first ship the Houthis attacked, the Galaxy Leader, a Japanese-operated cargo ship with links to an Israeli company that was seized on Nov. 19 along with its crew.

Without naming Iran, the Houthis' main arms supplier, the draft to be voted on would condemn all arms dealings with the rebels, which violate Security Council sanctions.

It also "urges caution and restraint to avoid further escalation of the situation in the Red Sea and the broader region." And it "encourages enhanced diplomatic efforts by all parties to that end, including continued support for dialogue and Yemen's peace process under the U.N. auspices."

Associated Press writer Edith Lederer contributed.

YEMEN'S HOUTHİ REBELS LAUNCH DRONE AND MISSILE ATTACK ON RED SEA SHIPPING

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Yemen's Houthi rebels unleashed a barrage of drones and missiles targeting shipping in the Red Sea late Tuesday, though it initially appeared no ship was damaged, authorities said Wednesday.

The assault happened off the Yemeni port cities of Hodeida and Mokha, according to the private intelligence firm Ambrey. In the Hodeida incident, Ambrey said ships described over radio seeing missiles and drones, with U.S.-allied warships in the area urging "vessels to proceed at maximum speed."

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Off Mokha, ships saw missiles fired, a drone in the air and small vessels trailing them, Ambrey said. The British military's United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations, which monitors shipping attacks in the region, said there were no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

The Houthis did not immediately issue a formal statement acknowledging launching the attacks. But the pan-Arab satellite news network Al Jazeera quoted an anonymous Houthi military official as saying their forces "targeted a ship linked to Israel in the Red Sea," without elaborating.

The Iran-backed militants have carried out more than two dozen attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea in response to the Israel-Hamas war, disrupting international trade and leading to increased efforts by the U.S. and its allies to patrol the vital waterway.

## UNITED STATES DEFENDS VETOING A RUSSIAN AMENDMENT TO U.N. CEASE-FIRE PLAN

UNITED NATIONS — The United States defended its veto last month of a Russian-proposed amendment to a Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza. U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood said the Russian proposal on Dec. 22 had been "disconnected from the situation on the ground."

At a U.N. General Assembly meeting on Tuesday, the Palestinian and Arab delegations were joined by many other countries demanding an immediate halt to the Israel-Hamas war — calls that were echoed by a group of anti-war rabbis in the gallery.

Wood repeated that Washington is working to secure a "pause" in the Israel-Hamas war and the release of 136 Israeli hostages in Gaza. He said it was "striking" that those urging an end to the conflict have made very few demands of Hamas, whose Oct. 7 attack on Israel sparked the war.

The U.N. adopted a resolution in 2022 requiring any Security Council member who vetoes a resolution to explain why to the General Assembly.

The U.S. only got support from Israel. A cease-fire would be "a victory for Hamas ... to continue the reign of terror in Gaza," said Israel's U.N. Ambassador Gilad Erdan. He said Israel supports delivering aid to Gaza but accused Hamas of "looting" humanitarian assistance before it gets to civilians. He also accused the U.N. of doing "nothing" to bring the hostages home.

Some 36 rabbis from the group Rabbis 4 Ceasefire, who oppose Israel's ongoing military action, came to the U.N. as tourists. The majority of them briefly held signs in the empty Security Council chamber saying "Biden Stop Vetoing Peace." A small group did the same in the gallery of the General Assembly chamber before being hustled out by U.N. security officers.

Riyad Mansour, the U.N. Palestinian ambassador, told the assembly his people are "being slaughtered," with entire families killed, and stressed that "the horrors need to end, and the only way to end them is a cease-fire."

"The whole world is calling for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire," he said, accusing Israel of "destroying everything to make Gaza livable." However, he said, "The Palestinian people are here to stay."

## ISRAEL APPROVES NEARLY 700 NEW SETTLEMENT UNITS IN EAST JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM — Almost 700 housing units for Jewish settlers in east Jerusalem were given final approval by a local committee on Tuesday, according to Ir Amim, an anti-settlement monitoring group.

The announcement came as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was meeting with Israeli leaders and reiterating his calls for movement toward the establishment of a Palestinian state after the Gaza war. A similar announcement during a visit by then-Vice President Joe Biden in 2010 caused a diplomatic incident at the time.

The Givat HaShaked development is part of a cluster of settlements on the southern edge of east Jerusalem, many of which have already been built up into full-fledged residential neighborhoods.

Critics say the settlements further undermine any hopes for a two-state solution.

Israel captured the West Bank and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war, and some 700,000 Jewish settlers now live in settlements built across both territories. The Palestinians seek both areas for their future state.

Aviv Tatarsky, a researcher at Ir Amim, says another plan for 1,500 settler homes was approved just weeks ago. He says settlement planning in the city has been unaffected by the war.

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"Nothing to do with settlements has stopped," Tatarsky said. "Oct. 7 didn't change anything."

Israel considers all of Jerusalem to be its undivided capital. But its annexation of the eastern sector is not internationally recognized.

Beit Safafa is already mostly encircled by Jewish settlements and the Givat HaShaked development further prevents its growth, said Tatarsky.

**ISRAELI HOSTAGE SAYS OTHER CAPTIVE WOMEN WERE SEXUALLY ABUSED AND TORTURED**

**JERUSALEM** — An Israeli woman who spent 51 days in captivity in the Gaza Strip says other female hostages suffered sexual abuse and torture.

Aviva Spiegel delivered the testimony Tuesday in a special hearing at the Knesset, or Israeli parliament, dedicated to the 136 hostages still held in Gaza.

Spiegel says that after one female hostage went to the bathroom, she returned looking agitated.

"I'm going to say words that are not pretty, but that bastard touched her," she said. "And he didn't even allow me to hug her after it happened. It's awful, just awful."

Siegel said in another episode, their captors tortured a woman they believed was an officer in the Israeli army while she was right next to Siegel.

Siegel did not elaborate on how her fellow hostages were abused, but she appeared visibly upset as she spoke.

Siegel, 62, was among some 250 people taken hostage during Hamas' Oct. 7 cross-border attack. She was released in late November during a weeklong cease-fire.

She pleaded with lawmakers to take action to release her husband, Keith Siegel, 64, who is still being held in captivity.

**BLINKEN CALLS ON ISRAEL TO WORK WITH MODERATE PALESTINIANS ON POSTWAR PLANS**

**TEL AVIV, Israel** — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday called on Israel to take greater steps to protect civilians, allow more aid into Gaza and work with moderate Palestinian leaders, saying regional countries would only invest in the reconstruction of Gaza if there is a "pathway to a Palestinian state."

He also said he was "crystal clear" that Palestinians must be able to return to their homes "as soon as conditions allow" and said the U.S. rejects any proposal for settling them outside the territory — something far-right members of Israel's governing coalition have called for.

He also dismissed a case filed by South Africa against Israel at the International Court of Justice accusing it of genocide, calling the allegations "meritless" and saying they distract from efforts to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. He said it was "particularly galling" as Hamas and other groups attacking Israel call for its annihilation.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday in Tel Aviv, Blinken said the case, filed in the International Court of Justice, is a distraction from efforts to halt the Israel-Hamas war.

**LEADERS OF EGYPT, JORDAN AND PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY WILL MEET TO DISCUSS WAR**

**AMMAN, Jordan** — The leaders of Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, will meet this week to discuss the war in Gaza and surging violence in the West Bank.

Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas have continually called for an immediate cease-fire and have met several times during the Israel-Hamas conflict.

According to a statement issued by Jordan's royal court, Wednesday's meeting will be held in the southern Red Sea city of Aqaba. Few further details about the summit were made public. It comes as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is in the region.

Egypt and Jordan have acted as peace brokers in past conflicts between Israel and Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip.

Both nations have accused Israel of trying to liquidate Palestinian demand for statehood by driving Palestinians off Gaza.

**BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY IS CONCERNED ISRAEL MAY HAVE BROKEN INTERNATIONAL LAW IN**

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## GAZA WAR

LONDON — British Foreign Secretary David Cameron says he is worried Israel may have acted unlawfully during its war in Gaza against Hamas.

During a question session with lawmakers on Tuesday, Cameron was asked whether he had been advised that Israel was breaking international humanitarian law.

The former prime minister replied: "Am I worried that Israel has taken action that might be in breach of international law in Gaza, because this particular premises has been bombed, or whatever? Yes, of course."

Cameron urged Israel to restore the water supply in Gaza, but would not say whether depriving the territory of water broke international law.

Asked by a member of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee whether U.K. government lawyers think Israel is vulnerable to challenge at the International Court of Justice in the Hague, Cameron said: "It's close to that."

Britain has said it supports Israel's right to defend itself following the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, but urged it to act within international rules.

## FUNERAL FOR HEZBOLLAH COMMANDER KILLED BY ISRAEL DRAWS THOUSANDS OF MOURNERS

KHIRBET SELM, Lebanon — The funeral for an elite commander of the Lebanese militia Hezbollah was attended by thousands of mourners on Tuesday, a day after he was killed by an Israel drone strike.

Wissam al-Tawil's coffin, draped in Hezbollah's yellow flag, was carried through streets of the southern Lebanese village of Khirbet Selm to the cemetery where he was laid to rest.

Al-Tawil, 48, is the most senior Hezbollah militant killed in the three months of war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, and was the latest escalation in the daily skirmishes between Israel and Hezbollah skirmishes on the Lebanese border.

"The enemy should never one day think that we will be afraid," said al-Tawil's sister-in-law Samira on Tuesday.

Israeli officials have been demanding for weeks that the Hezbollah withdraws its fighters from the border area to allow tens of thousands of Israelis displaced by the fighting to return to their homes.

## ISRAELI FORCES FATALLY SHOOT PALESTINIAN MAN AFTER ALLEGED STABBING

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says its forces shot and killed a Palestinian man following an alleged stabbing attack in the West Bank, as violence surges across the occupied territory.

An army statement says the Palestinian was shot Tuesday after attempting to stab a soldier near the city of Ramallah. The Palestinian Health Ministry says the 31-year-old man was killed in the nearby village of Ein Sinya.

The West Bank has seen a spike in deadly violence since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel set off the war in Gaza.

The Palestinian Health Ministry says Israeli forces have killed 341 Palestinians in the West Bank during that time. Most have been killed in confrontations with Israeli forces during arrest raids or protests.

## MORE THAN 23,000 HAVE NOW BEEN KILLED IN GAZA, UN AGENCY SAYS

GENEVA — A top World Health Organization official in Gaza says he's seeing no letup in the intensity of the conflict between Israel and Hamas. The U.N. health agency, citing the latest figures from the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, also says the conflict that erupted Oct. 7 has now killed more than 23,000 people in the enclave.

Sean Casey, WHO's emergency medical teams coordinator based in southern Rafah, decried dire food shortages in the north. He said some health workers are now fleeing out of fear for their own lives -- after sticking it out for months to treat patients.

"I've been in Gaza for five weeks. I have not seen a lowering of the intensity of the conflict," Casey told a U.N. briefing in Geneva by video from the southern Gaza city of Rafah. "I went to Nasser Medical Complex just a few days ago and saw multiple explosions just in the few minutes that I was driving down the roads."

Dr. Rik Peepkorn, WHO representative for the occupied Palestinian territory, said from Jerusalem that in addition to the more than 23,000 people killed, nearly 59,000 people had been injured.

He cited multiple trauma cases: "spinal trauma, crush injuries, severe burns, amputees -- I've never seen



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so many amputees in my life, including among children.”

“This will have such a long-term impact for everything,” he said.

**A PROJECTILE FALLS AT AN ARMY BASE IN NORTHERN ISRAEL, MILITARY SAYS**

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military says a projectile fell at an army base in northern Israel after Hezbollah said it launched an exploding drone toward the area.

The military said its air defense system was activated to try to intercept a “hostile aircraft,” and that the aircraft fell at the base.

The military said no damage was caused to the base Tuesday. It did not specify where exactly the base was located but Hezbollah said it targeted Safed, a city farther away from where the daily Israel-Hezbollah skirmishes have been taking place.

**AN ISRAELI DRONE STRIKE HITS A CAR IN LEBANON, KILLING 3, OFFICIALS SAY**

BEIRUT — An Israeli drone strike hit a car Tuesday morning in southern Lebanon, killing three people inside it, security officials in the area and the state news agency said.

There was no immediate word on the identities of the three. The strike on the village of Ghandouriyeh came a day after a similar attack killed a commander with the militant Hezbollah group. Ghandouriyeh is about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the border with Israel.

Two security officials said Israeli drones carried out three strikes in the area including one that hit the car killing the three instantly. They spoke on condition of anonymity due to briefing regulations.

The state-run National News Agency said the strike in Ghandouriyeh inflicted casualties without giving further details. Hezbollah officials did not immediately respond to calls for comment.

Tuesday’s strike is the latest along the Lebanon-Israel border since Hezbollah started attacking Israeli military posts following the deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel by Hamas. Since then, Hezbollah has lost 150 fighters in the near-daily exchanges of fire.

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Associated Press writer Bassem Mroue contributed.

**ISRAELI ACTOR REPORTEDLY SERIOUSLY WOUNDED IN GAZA**

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israeli media reported Tuesday that an actor on the hit Netflix show “Fauda” has been seriously wounded in the Gaza Strip.

Idan Amedi, 35, was sedated and intubated at an Israeli hospital and covered in shrapnel wounds, the Israeli news site Ynet said. He was in stable condition. Ynet said Amedi has been on reserve duty since Hamas launched its attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7 and was wounded Monday.

“Fauda” follows a team of undercover agents from Israel’s domestic security agency Shin Bet in their operations against Palestinians. While the show is critically acclaimed, some Palestinians say it trivializes their experience under Israel’s open-ended military occupation of the West Bank. Amedi played Sagi Tzur, a rookie undercover agent, during the series’ second to fourth seasons, and is also a successful singer-songwriter in Israel.

Israel has enlisted roughly 360,000 reserve soldiers from all walks of life in its war against Hamas.

**GROUP WARNS THAT HOSTAGES HELD BY HAMAS FACE HEALTH RISKS**

TEL AVIV — A group representing people held hostage by Hamas and other militants in the Gaza Strip warned Tuesday of the detrimental health risks to many of those held captive.

In a report released Tuesday, the medical team of The Hostages and Missing — Families Forum said at least one-third of the roughly 108 hostages said to be alive in captivity suffer from chronic illnesses or conditions like diabetes, cancer or heart disease that require medical care or medication. It said 10% of hostages were over 65 and were vulnerable without nursing assistance. The report also expressed concern for the hostages’ mental health and for those who had been wounded during Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack against Israel.

“If no medical care is provided urgently for all hostages, the result could be irreversible health problems at best and death at worst,” the group said.

Hamas and other militants took some 250 people hostage in their October attack, according to Israeli

authorities. Roughly 105 people were freed in a cease-fire deal at the end of November, while around 24 have been killed in captivity.

## **US defends its veto of call for Gaza cease-fire while Palestinians and others demand fighting stop**

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The United States defended its veto of a call for the immediate suspension of hostilities in Gaza at a U.N. meeting Tuesday and again faced demands by the Palestinians and many other countries for a cease-fire now in the Israel-Hamas war — as well as by a group of rabbis in the gallery.

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood called the Russian-proposed amendment to a Dec. 22 Security Council resolution which it vetoed “disconnected from the situation on the ground.” The council then adopted a watered-down resolution, with the U.S. abstaining, calling for urgent steps to immediately allow expanded humanitarian aid into Gaza, “and to create conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities.”

Wood called it “striking” that those urging an end to the conflict have made very few demands of Hamas, following its surprise Oct. 7 invasion of southern Israel that killed around 1,200 people, “to stop hiding behind civilians, lay down its arms, and surrender.” And he reiterated ongoing U.S. efforts to secure a “pause” in the fighting to get 136 Israeli hostages out of Gaza.

The U.N. General Assembly was meeting because of a resolution it adopted in April 2022 requiring any of the five permanent Security Council members — the U.S., Russia, China, Britain and France — that vetoes a resolution to explain why to the 193-member world body.

The U.S. only got support Tuesday from Israel’s U.N. Ambassador Gilad Erdan, who said a cease-fire would be “a victory for Hamas ... to continue the reign of terror in Gaza,” which it has ruled since 2007.

He said Israel supports every effort to deliver aid and accused Hamas of looting humanitarian assistance before it reaches the people of Gaza. He also accused the United Nations of becoming “an accomplice to terrorists,” being “obsessed” with Gazans, ignoring Israeli victims and doing nothing to bring the hostages home, and remaining silent on condemning Hamas.

To illustrate the plight of the hostages, Erdan brought a cake with him for Kfir Bibas who will turn 1 year old in the coming days while in captivity. He accused the U.N. of all but forgetting the pain of the innocent baby and asked the General Assembly president to leave the cake — with the name Kfir on it — on the speaker’s podium “as a painful reminder.” But as soon as Erdan finished, a U.N. staff member whisked the cake away.

As a sign of the growing division among Jews over the war, three dozen rabbis from the group Rabbis 4 Ceasefire came to the U.N. as tourists to protest Israel’s offensive in Gaza. The majority of them briefly held signs in the empty Security Council chamber saying “Biden Stop Vetoing Peace,” and a small group called for a ceasefire from the balcony of the General Assembly chamber before being hustled out by U.N. security officers.

Wood, the U.S. envoy, praised U.N. humanitarian efforts, telling the assembly “the United Nations is playing an irreplaceable role in delivering and distributing lifesaving assistance to people in Gaza.”

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the U.N. has seen no reports of looting — just videos of some hungry, desperate people trying to take food from trucks — and reiterated that delivering aid to combat zones is very challenging.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza has said Israel’s military campaign has killed over 23,000 people, more than two-thirds of them women and children. The count doesn’t differentiate between civilians and combatants. Last Friday, U.N. humanitarian chief called Gaza “uninhabitable” and said “People are facing the highest levels of food insecurity ever recorded (and) famine is around the corner.”

Riyad Mansour, the U.N. Palestinian ambassador, told the assembly his people are “being slaughtered,” and declared “the horrors need to end and the only way to end them is a ceasefire.”

“The whole world is calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire,” he said, pointing to the 153 countries

that supported a General Assembly resolution urging an end to the fighting along with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, humanitarian organizations, and "moral voices."

Cuba's U.N. Ambassador Gerardo Peñalver Portal called it "deplorable" that the Dec. 22 resolution didn't include a call for an immediate cessation of hostilities, saying a cease-fire is "a priority to halt the genocide against the Palestinian population."

He accused Israel of the collective punishment of Palestinians, saying more than 9,000 children have been killed.

And in a retort to the Israeli ambassador, the Cuban envoy said: "None of them will be able to receive their birthday cakes."

## **Sprawling storms wallop US with tornado reports, damage and heavy snow, closing roads and schools**

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE and KATHY McCORMACK Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A sprawling storm hit the U.S. South, with tornado warnings and high winds that blew roofs off homes, flipped over campers and tossed about furniture in Florida on Tuesday, while another storm buried cities across the Midwest in more than a half a foot of snow, stranding people on highways as it headed to the Northeast.

The weather has already affected campaigning for Iowa's Jan. 15 precinct caucuses, where the snow is expected to be followed by frigid temperatures that could drift below zero degrees (minus 18 Celsius). It forced former President Donald Trump's campaign to cancel multiple appearances by Arkansas Gov. Sarah Sanders and her father, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who had been scheduled to court Iowa voters on Trump's behalf Monday.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said at Tuesday's briefing that winter storms continue to be a threat across the country.

"We are closely monitoring the weather, and we encourage all Americans to do the same," she said.

### **THE SOUTH IS HIT WITH DEADLY STORMS AND TORNADO WARNINGS**

At least three deaths were attributed to the storm pummeling the South, where 55 mph (88 kph) winds and hail moved through the Florida Panhandle and into parts of Alabama and Georgia by sunrise Tuesday, along with several reports of radar-confirmed tornadoes, the National Weather Service said. A wind gust of 106 mph (171 kph) was recorded before dawn near the coast in Walton County, Florida.

Near Cottonwood, Alabama, a small city near the Georgia and Florida borders, 81-year-old Charlotte Paschal was killed when her mobile home was tossed from its foundation, the Houston County coroner said. A suspected tornado had touched down in the area.

Police in Clayton County, south of Atlanta, say a man died during heavy rain when a tree fell on his car on a state highway in Jonesboro.

Storm-related injuries were reported in Florida, but no deaths. A section of Panama City Beach, Florida, showed parts of roofs blown away, furniture, fences and debris strewn about, and a house that appeared tilted on its side, leaning on another home. About 10 miles (16 kilometers) away in Panama City, police early Tuesday asked residents to stay indoors and off the roads "unless absolutely necessary." Both cities are in Bay County, where multiple tornadoes were reported, Sheriff Tommy Ford said in a brief Facebook Live post.

The Walton County sheriff's department in the Florida Panhandle posted photos of power lines draped across a road, damage to a gas station and large pieces of building materials littering the area. About 70 miles (112 kilometers) northeast, in Jackson County, Florida, photos showing damage to a campground and RV park in Marianna were posted.

The National Weather Service office in Tallahassee is planning to send out three tornado survey teams on Wednesday to examine suspected tornado damage in Walton, Bay and Jackson counties in Florida, and two more on Thursday to look at Houston County, Alabama, and Calhoun County, Georgia.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who gave his State of the State address Tuesday as tornado warnings were

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active outside the Capitol, issued an executive order to include 49 counties in North Florida under a state of emergency.

Heavy rain across Georgia stopped air traffic at Atlanta's busy airport for a time Tuesday morning and caused flash flooding, blocking some lanes on freeways around Atlanta during the morning commute. More than 80 public school systems across Georgia called off classes entirely while others taught students online or delayed the start of in-person classes.

Rain and high winds extended into the nation's capital Tuesday night, forcing Vice President Kamala Harris' aircraft to divert from Joint Base Andrews to Dulles International Airport near Washington when it encountered wind shear — a sudden shift in wind direction or speed — as Harris returned from a trip to Georgia.

More than 200,000 customers were without power in Florida, Alabama, and Georgia, while nearly 150,000 people in North Carolina lacked electricity, according to the PowerOutage.us website.

In North Carolina, one person has died and two others were in critical condition after a suspected tornado struck a mobile home park in the town of Claremont, north of Charlotte, said Amy McCauley, a spokesperson for Catawba County. And in Rocky Mount, downed power lines shut down both directions of I-95, one of the nation's busiest highways, the North Carolina's Department of Transportation said in a statement.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper declared a state of emergency before the storm arrived. Some schools canceled classes or shut down early.

A possible tornado knocked down several old brick storefronts in downtown Bamberg, South Carolina, blocking the main intersection through the city about 60 miles (96 kilometers) south of Columbia. Thousands of bricks blocked U.S. 301, the main road through that part of the state, and about 40 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, said Democratic Rep. Justin Bamberg, who represents the area.

## UP TO A FOOT OF SNOW POSSIBLE FOR LARGE SWATH OF THE MIDWEST

In the Midwest, where a snowstorm started Monday, up to 12 inches (30 centimeters) of snow could blanket a broad area stretching from southeastern Colorado all the way to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. That includes western Kansas, eastern Nebraska, large parts of Iowa, northern Missouri and northwestern Illinois, said Bob Oravec, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

In Des Moines, Iowa, Laura Burianov had nearly finished shoveling her driveway Tuesday morning. But with snow still falling, she acknowledged she likely would have to shovel again later in the day.

"It's going to get harder. I shoveled last night and you can't really tell, but I can pretend that three less inches makes a difference," she said.

The storm dumped around 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30 centimeters) of snow across Kansas, eastern Nebraska and South Dakota, western Iowa, and southwestern Minnesota on Monday. In North Sioux City, South Dakota, the National Weather Service reported 15 inches (38 centimeters) of snow. Lower amounts fell over central Minnesota, Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

Madison, Wisconsin, was under a winter storm warning until early Wednesday, with as much as 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow and 40 mph (64 kph) winds on tap.

Poor road conditions contributed to a fatal crash early Tuesday in southeastern Wisconsin, Jefferson County Sheriff Paul Milbrath said in a news release. An SUV driver was killed following a head-on collision with a semitrailer on state Highway 18 around 5:40 a.m. The driver of the semitrailer was not hurt. Sheriff's Capt. Travis Maze said in a telephone interview that layers of slush and snow covered the center and fog lines on the highway.

In western Michigan, a 35-year-old woman died Tuesday after she lost control of her minivan on a slushy highway and it collided with an SUV, the Lake County Sheriff's Office said. The ambulance taking her to a Grand Rapids hospital, where she was pronounced dead, was struck by another vehicle en route there, and a second ambulance was needed to finish the transport to the hospital.

Northwestern Illinois was also under a winter storm warning with forecasts calling for 7 to 12 inches (18 to 30 centimeters) of snow by early Wednesday. The Chicago area as well as Gary, Indiana, were under winter storm advisories, with forecasts calling for up to 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow and wind gusts

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of up to 30 mph (48 kph).

It was the first major winter storm of the season for the Kansas City metro area in Kansas and Missouri, where the National Weather Service predicted 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow by the time the storm moved on later Tuesday.

Whiteout conditions in central Nebraska closed a long stretch of Interstate 80, while Kansas closed Interstate 70 from the central city of Russell all the way west to the Colorado border. Several vehicles slid off I-70 in the northeastern part of the state, authorities said.

## WINTER WEATHER EXPECTED TO MOVE INTO NORTHEAST TUESDAY NIGHT

From the Midwest, the storm was expected to head east, bringing a combination of snow, rain and strong winds to the Northeast by Tuesday night, as well as concerns about flooding in areas such as New England, parts of which got more than a foot of snow Sunday.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy already declared a state of emergency as of 5 p.m. Tuesday, ahead of what's expected to be heavy rain and wind that will exacerbate the effects of bad weather conditions since December. He encouraged people Monday not to underestimate the storm.

In New York City, officials began evacuating nearly 2,000 migrants who had been housed at a sprawling white tent complex at a former airport located in a remote corner of Brooklyn. An aide to New York City Mayor Eric Adams pointed to predicted wind speeds of more than 70 mph (112 kph) Tuesday night.

In western New York, an empty tractor trailer blew over on the state Thruway on Tuesday morning, temporarily blocking all westbound traffic, state police said. The state banned empty trucks and trailers on numerous major roadways.

In Maine, Gov. Janet Mills has delayed the opening of all state offices until noon Wednesday due to the storm.

Massachusetts electricity provider National Grid said they were prepared for possible hazardous wind gusts and heavy rains and have additional crews and personnel to respond to any power outages.

## COLD FRONT IN SOUTHWEST BRINGS FREEZING TEMPERATURES AND SNOW

In parts of Arizona, a cold front brought below-freezing temperatures early Tuesday, with the National Weather Service reporting a minus-17 reading at the Snow Bowl in northern Arizona. In northeastern New Mexico, the state Department of Transportation said snowplows spent hours Monday afternoon clearing U.S. Highway 56 to free more than 25 stranded vehicles.

## **CES 2024 updates: The most interesting news and gadgets from tech's big show**

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Welcome to opening day of CES 2024. This multi-day trade event put on by the Consumer Technology Association is expected to bring in some 130,000 attendees and more than 4,000 exhibitors to Las Vegas. Swaths of the latest advances and gadgets across personal tech, transportation, health care, sustainability and more — with burgeoning uses of artificial intelligence almost everywhere you look — will be on display.

The Associated Press will be keeping a running report of everything we find interesting from the floor of CES, from the latest announcements to most quirky smart gadgets.

## IRON MAN ACTOR TARGETS DIGITAL SCAMMERS

Robert Downey Jr. fought off villains as "Iron Man" on the big screen for more than a decade. Now, in his latest off-screen role as a board member and strategist at AI security startup Aura, Downey wants to fight off digital scammers, he said at CES 2024.

Aura is an online app that uses artificial intelligence to monitor and track accounts and help prevent digital crimes, like scams, hacks and identity theft. The company revealed Tuesday at a panel that it will launch a new AI feature this year that it says will help parents identify depression, anxiety and other issues in their children's lives by tracking their cellphone usage habits.

Downey said he was drawn to the company's mission statement after his Instagram account was hacked

in 2019.

"We're all so busy in this information age," he said, while emphasizing that he thought he had been proactive about protecting his accounts and information before he was hacked. "But it's nowhere near enough."

## MERCEDES-BENZ MAKES TALKING TO YOUR CAR AN EXPERIENCE

Mercedes-Benz unveiled several in-car tech upgrades at CES 2024 today, including an AI-powered virtual assistant that will be rolling out to its vehicles soon.

The German automaker's boasts their new cloud-connected AI-assistant is "natural, predictive, empathetic and personal" as it works to personalize interactions between drivers and their cars. The update will pair AI with added functions for infotainment, automated driving, seating comfort and charging.

Mercedes-Benz CTO Markus Schäfer also announced a partnership with Google to pre-install and integrate certain apps into their vehicles.

## HONDA DEBUTS ITS ZERO SERIES EV CONCEPT CARS

Honda premiered two concept vehicles, dubbed the "Saloon" and "Space-Hub," for a new global electric vehicle series on Tuesday. The Japanese automaker says the Zero Series approach for EV development focuses on models that are "thin, light and wise," with specific goals to minimize battery size.

The first models of the Zero Series are aimed at making their way to the North American market in 2026, the company said, with plans to introduce those vehicles in Japan, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East and South America afterward. Honda also unveiled a new "H mark" logo set to be used for its next generation of EVs.

## GOOGLE TALKS CHROMECAST, CAR APPS

Google on Tuesday showcased various ways the tech giant is integrating generative AI features into Android devices — including previously-announced customizable, AI-generated wallpapers and suggested text messages responses, written in styles ranging from casual to "Shakespearean."

The California-based company also took the opportunity to unveil some new features.

Chromecast is being expanded to more apps and devices, with TikTok content now able to be cast directly to TVs.

More automakers are also partnering with Google to offer vehicles with pre-install apps such as Google Maps and Assistant. The apps will come to select models from Ford, Nissan and Lincoln this year, with Porsche following suit in 2025.

## INTEL UNVEILS UPDATED 14th GEN PROCESSOR LINEUP

Intel may be leaning into supporting AI with its Core Ultra chips, but the company decided to announce an expansion of its 14th Gen processor family for gamers and media creators who need raw power and performance from their PCs.

## Ray Epps, a target of Jan. 6 conspiracy theories, gets a year of probation for his Capitol riot role

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A man targeted by right-wing conspiracy theories about the U.S. Capitol riot was sentenced on Tuesday to a year of probation for joining the Jan. 6, 2021, attack by a mob of fellow Donald Trump supporters.

Ray Epps, a former Arizona resident who was driven into hiding by death threats, pleaded guilty in September to a misdemeanor charge. He received no jail time, and there were no restrictions placed on his travel during his probation, but he will have to serve 100 hours of community service.

He appeared remotely by video conference and wasn't in the Washington, D.C., courtroom when Chief Judge James Boasberg sentenced him. Prosecutors had recommended a six-month term of imprisonment

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for Epps.

Epps' sentencing took place in the same building where Trump was attending an appeals court hearing as the Republican former president's lawyers argued he's immune from prosecution on charges he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election he lost.

Fox News Channel and other right-wing media outlets amplified conspiracy theories that Epps, 62, was an undercover government agent who helped incite the Capitol attack to entrap Trump supporters. Epps filed a defamation lawsuit against Fox News last year, saying the network was to blame for spreading baseless claims about him.

Epps told the judge that he now knows that he never should have believed the lies about a stolen election that Trump and his allies told and that Fox News broadcast.

"I have learned that truth is not always found in the places that I used to trust," said Epps, who asked for mercy before learning his sentence.

The judge noted that many conspiracy theorists still refuse to believe that the Capitol riot was an insurrection carried out by Trump supporters. The judge said he hopes that the threats against Epps and his wife subside so they can move on with their lives.

"You were hounded out of your home," the judge said. "You were hounded out of your town."

Federal prosecutors have backed up Epps' vehement denials that he was a government plant or FBI operative. They say Epps has never been a government employee or agent beyond serving in the U.S. Marines from 1979 to 1983.

The ordeal has forced Epps and his wife to sell their property and businesses and flee their home in Queen Creek, Arizona, according to his lawyer.

"He enjoys no golf, tennis, travel, or other trappings of retirement. They live in a trailer in the woods, away from their family, friends, and community," attorney Edward Ungvarsky wrote in a court filing.

The internet-fueled accusations that upended Epps' life have persisted even after the Justice Department charged him with participating in the Jan. 6 siege.

"Fear of demented extremists has no apparent end in sight so long as those who spread hate and lies about Mr. Epps don't speak loudly and publicly to correct the messaging they delivered," Epps' lawyer wrote.

Epps pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct on restricted grounds, a charge punishable by a maximum of one year behind bars.

A prosecutor, Michael Gordon, said Epps doesn't deserve to be inundated with death threats but should serve jail time for his conduct on Jan. 6.

"He didn't start the riot. He made it worse," Gordon told the judge.

Epps' lawyer sought six months of probation without any jail time. Ungvarsky said his client went to Washington on Jan. 6 to peacefully protest the certification of the Electoral College vote for Joe Biden, a Democrat, over Trump, a Republican.

"You're never going to see Mr. Epps commit a crime again," the defense attorney said.

On the evening of Jan. 5, 2021, Epps was in a crowd at Washington's Black Lives Matter Plaza when he was captured on video advocating for entering the Capitol the following day. At Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally on Jan. 6, Epps was recorded telling other attendees: "As soon as the President is done speaking, we go to the Capitol. The Capitol is this way!"

At the Capitol, Epps was photographed whispering into the ear of another man before rioters breached a police barricade. Epps also helped other rioters push a large, metal-framed sign into a group of police officers and participated in "a rugby scrum-like group effort" to push past a line of officers, Gordon, an assistant U.S. attorney, said in a court filing.

"Even if Epps did not physically touch law enforcement officers or go inside of the building, he undoubtedly engaged in collective aggressive conduct," Gordon wrote.

Epps surrendered to the FBI two days after the riot after learning that agents were trying to identify him. He agreed to be interviewed by FBI agents as well as by the House committee that investigated the Jan. 6 insurrection.

The government initially declined to prosecute Epps in 2021 after the FBI investigated his conduct on

Jan. 6 and found insufficient evidence to charge him with a crime, according to Ungvarsky. Epps isn't accused of entering the Capitol or engaging in any violence or destruction on Jan. 6.

"Mr. Epps was one of many who trespassed outside the Capitol building. Through the exercise of prosecutorial discretion, most of those persons will never be charged," the defense lawyer wrote.

More than 1,200 defendants have been charged with Capitol riot-related federal crimes. Over 900 of them have pleaded guilty or been convicted after trials decided by a judge or jury. Approximately 750 rioters have been sentenced, with nearly two-thirds getting some term of imprisonment.

Epps once served as an Arizona chapter leader for the Oath Keepers, but he parted ways with the anti-government extremist group a few years before the Jan. 6 attack.

Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes and other members were convicted of seditious conspiracy for plotting to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power from Trump to Biden after the 2020 election. Rhodes was sentenced last year to 18 years in prison.

Fox News has sought the dismissal of Epps' lawsuit, calling it "a direct attack on the First Amendment."

## Investigation into why a panel blew off a Boeing Max 9 jet focuses on missing bolts

By DAVID KOENIG and TOM KRISHER AP Business Writers

The extended grounding of some Boeing 737 Max jetliners is adding to pressure on Boeing and the subcontractor that made the fuselage and installed a panel that blew out leaving a gaping hole in an Alaska Airlines plane last week.

Investigators know the sequence of events that led to the blowout Friday night, but they don't know the cause. A key question is whether bolts used to help secure the panel, called a door plug, were installed. A National Transportation Safety Board investigator says the bolts have not been recovered and the agency won't know if they were even in place until the door plug is examined in a laboratory.

Adding to Boeing's problems, Alaska Airlines and United Airlines — the two U.S. carriers that fly the Max 9 — reported finding loose bolts and other hardware in other panels, suggesting quality issues with the door plugs are not limited to one plane.

The plugs are installed in Max 9 fuselages by subcontractor Spirit AeroSystems, which was spun off by Boeing in 2005. Spirit has a history of manufacturing problems, many uncovered in a U.S. House probe of two fatal crashes involving Boeing 737 Max 8 planes.

"The focus needs to turn to Spirit," said former congressman Peter DeFazio, who chaired the investigating committee. "Boeing has been happy with the crappy stuff from Spirit because it's cheap."

The company said in a statement Monday that "quality and product integrity" are a priority. "Spirit is a committed partner with Boeing on the 737 program, and we continue to work together with them on this matter," it said.

The process of inspecting Max 9s and returning them to service has been slower than Alaska and United had hoped. The Federal Aviation Administration grounded all Max 9s in the United States on Saturday until they could be inspected, but Boeing didn't provide inspection instructions until Monday.

On Tuesday, the FAA said those instructions were being revised "because of feedback," and it extended the grounding of the planes.

"The safety of the flying public, not speed, will determine the timeline for returning the Boeing 737-9 Max to service," the FAA said in a statement.

However, the inspection delays threw airline schedules into turmoil.

United said it canceled another 170 flights Tuesday because of the grounding. Alaska said it scrubbed 109 flights because it couldn't fly Max 9s.

The part that failed on the Alaska flight is installed on some Boeing jets when airliners don't have enough seats to require more emergency exits. The plugs are lighter than an aircraft door, reducing the plane's weight and saving fuel. They are common on cargo planes that have been converted from passenger use.

During a briefing late Monday, NTSB officials described how the plug on Alaska flight 1282 rolled upward



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and flew off the jet. Four bolts and 12 connecting points between the plug and the door frame are supposed to prevent that from happening.

"We have not yet recovered the four bolts that restrain (the plug) from its vertical movement, and we have not yet determined if they existed there," said NTSB aerospace engineer Clint Crookshanks. "That will be determined when we take the plug to our lab in Washington, D.C."

It is not clear whether Spirit AeroSystems or Boeing technicians last worked on the door plug, which can be opened for maintenance. Steven Wallace, former head of accident investigations for the FAA, said it was unlikely that Alaska crews worked on the plug because the plane was only delivered to the airline in October.

That means the investigation will likely focus on manufacturing, assembly and quality control, Wallace said.

This could put more pressure on Boeing CEO David Calhoun, who was brought in to help the company get past the crisis created by the Max crashes. During his tenure, Boeing has lost \$23 billion and struggled with manufacturing flaws that have at times held up deliveries of 737s and larger Boeing 787s.

Calhoun called an all-employees meeting Tuesday, hosted at the company's 737 factory in Renton, Washington.

"We're going to approach this, number one, acknowledging our mistake," Calhoun said, according to comments provided by Boeing. Reporters were not allowed to attend. The CEO said he trusts the NTSB to find the cause of the accident, and trusts the FAA to take all necessary steps "to ensure every next airplane that moves into the sky is in fact safe, and that this event can never happen again."

No one was seriously hurt Friday aboard the affected Alaska jetliner, but Ed Pierson, a former senior manager at Boeing's 737 factory, said the door plug issue is a wake-up call for Boeing and regulators to act before something worse happens.

Pierson, now the executive director of The Foundation for Aviation Safety, said Boeing assembly line workers are pressured to rush, and that the company has cut back on quality control inspections. That, he said, can lead to mistakes.

"The pressure is 'Move the plane down the line,' It's not, 'Stop, let's fix it, let's do it right,'" he said.

Other former Boeing employees and outsiders who have examined the company say its safety culture degraded after a 1997 merger that left many McDonnell Douglas leaders in charge.

"They rejected the Boeing culture, where the engineers had the final say on everything, in order to chase the stock price and their executive options," DeFazio said. "They need to go back to being what they were and could be, which is the greatest engineering aerospace company in the world."

Spirit AeroSystems' record is also likely to come under more scrutiny.

In a federal securities lawsuit filed last May in Manhattan, an investor charged that Spirit concealed widespread quality failures including defects in fuselage fittings, improperly drilled holes in bulkheads that keep planes pressurized, and missing fasteners.

The lawsuit includes an unidentified manufacturing team leader's email that said a manager told workers to falsify reports on the number of defects found on planes. The lawsuit was reported early Tuesday by The Lever, an investigative-journalism website. Spirit declined Tuesday to comment on the lawsuit.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said the NTSB must determine "whether additional inspection and maintenance should have been done before the aircraft carried passengers anywhere." He asked new FAA Administrator Michael Whitaker what the regulatory agency is doing to protect air traveler safety.

A focus on how the door plugs were installed could be the best outcome for Boeing, said John Goglia, a former member of the NTSB. He said a finding of sloppy installation work would eliminate the need for more costly, time consuming door plug redesign.

"Installation errors happen all the time," said Goglia, who started his career as an aircraft mechanic. Faulting the installation in Boeing planes "impeaches their quality system, but it doesn't impeach their design."

Shares of The Boeing Co. fell 1% Tuesday, a day after they plunged 8%. Spirit AeroSystems was nearly unchanged Tuesday but lost 11% Monday.

## Former gang leader charged in killing of Tupac Shakur is allowed \$750K bail and house arrest

By KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A Nevada judge set bail Tuesday at \$750,000 for a former Los Angeles-area gang leader charged with orchestrating the killing of hip-hop legend Tupac Shakur in 1996, saying he can serve house arrest with electronic monitoring ahead of trial on a murder charge.

Court-appointed attorneys for Duane "Keffe D" Davis told The Associated Press after the judge's decision that they believe Davis can post that amount. They had asked for bail of not more than \$100,000 and noted for the judge that the demands of preparing a defense based on two decades of evidence may require a postponement of the current June trial date.

Clark County District Attorney Steve Wolfson told reporters that he expects Clark County District Judge Carli Kierny will hold a "source hearing" to determine whether money posted for bail is legally obtained. The judge did not set a new trial date but called for a status check Feb. 20.

Prosecutors Binu Palal and Marc DiGiacomo argued Tuesday that Davis has never left gang life, that his 15 years of admissions about his role in Shakur's killing show he is guilty of murder, and that a jailhouse phone call in October suggested he poses a threat to witnesses.

"There is one constant," Palal told the judge. "Mr. Davis has consistently admitted to being architect of the murder."

DiGiacomo called Davis "a very, very high danger to the community."

The judge, in her ruling, acknowledged that Davis "made a living talking about his past life as a leader of the South Side Crips," a street gang in his hometown of Compton, California, "and also the killing of Mr. Shakur in graphic detail."

Robert Arroyo and co-counsel Charles Cano argued that police and prosecutors could have arrested Davis 15 years ago but didn't, and that the prosecutors were wrong with their interpretation of the jail telephone call and a list of names provided to Davis' family. The defense lawyers said it is Davis and his family who are at risk.

Arroyo and Cano said their 60-year-old client is in poor health after battling cancer, which is in remission, and said he would not flee to avoid trial.

They also downplayed evidence against Davis as the product of tales told by witnesses with gang backgrounds that make them not credible, and noted the prosecution lacks evidence, including the gun and the car involved in the September 1996 drive-by shooting that killed Shakur.

Arroyo focused Tuesday on what he called "the obvious question" dating to 2008 and 2009 — when Davis talked with police in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. He went on to write a 2019 tell-all memoir and began giving interviews on social media in which he described his role as gang leader and "shot-caller" in Shakur's death.

"If his guilt is so overwhelming, what's been happening for 15 years?" Arroyo asked in court Tuesday. "Why did we wait 15 years to make the arrest?"

Davis was arrested Sept. 29 outside his home in suburban Henderson, which Las Vegas police had searched in mid-July. He pleaded not guilty in November to first-degree murder and has been jailed without bail at the Clark County Detention Center in Las Vegas, where detainees' phone calls are routinely recorded. If convicted at trial, he could spend the rest of his life in prison.

Arroyo argued Tuesday that his client's accounts in "the YouTube world" accentuated violence to attract viewers and make money.

"Conflict sells," Arroyo said. "They get on these interviews, they puff out their chest. They're trying to get clicks."

Prosecutors say Davis' own words are strong evidence that he is responsible for the crime, even if he didn't pull the trigger. DiGiacomo said other people who have described Davis' role in other media interviews, and to police, corroborate his accounts.

Davis is the only person still alive who was in the car from which shots were fired, mortally wounding Shakur and wounding rap mogul Marion "Suge" Knight. Knight is serving 28 years in a California prison

for an unrelated fatal shooting in the Los Angeles area in 2015.

Davis' attorneys noted that Knight is an eyewitness to the Shakur shooting but did not testify before the grand jury that indicted their client.

Davis maintains he was given immunity from prosecution in 2008 by an FBI and Los Angeles police task force investigating the killings of Shakur in Las Vegas and rival rapper Christopher Wallace, known as The Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls, six months later in Los Angeles.

DiGiacomo and Palal say any immunity agreement was limited. Last week, they submitted to the court an audio recording of a December 2008 task force interview during which they said Davis was told that what he said in the room would not be used against him, but that if he talked to other people he could be in legal jeopardy.

Davis' attorneys responded with a reference to the publication 12 years ago of a book written by former Los Angeles police Detective Greg Kading, who attended those interviews.

"Duane is not worried," the attorneys said, "because his alleged involvement in the death of Shakur has been out in the public since ... 2011."

## **With Trump present in court, judges express skepticism of claims that he's immune from prosecution**

By ERIC TUCKER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With Donald Trump listening intently in the courtroom, federal appeals court judges in Washington expressed deep skepticism Tuesday that the former president was immune from prosecution on charges that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The panel of three judges, two of whom were appointed by President Joe Biden, also questioned whether they had jurisdiction to consider the appeal at this point in the case, raising the prospect that Trump's appeal could be dispensed with on more procedural grounds.

During lengthy arguments, the judges repeatedly pressed Trump's lawyer to defend claims that Trump was shielded from criminal charges for acts that he says fell within his official duties as president. That argument was rejected last month by the lower-court judge overseeing the case against Trump, and the appeals judges suggested through their questions that they, too, were dubious that the Founding Fathers envisioned absolute immunity for presidents after they leave office.

"I think it's paradoxical to say that his constitutional duty to take care that the laws be faithfully executed allows him to violate criminal law," said Judge Karen LeCraft Henderson, an appointee of former President George H.W. Bush.

The outcome could carry enormous ramifications both for the landmark criminal case against Trump and for the broader, and legally untested, question of whether an ex-president can be prosecuted for actions taken in the White House. It will also likely set the stage for further appeals before the U.S. Supreme Court, which last month declined a request to weigh in but could still get involved later.

A swift decision is crucial for special counsel Jack Smith and his team, who are eager to get the case — now paused pending the appeal — to trial before the November election. But Trump's lawyers, in addition to seeking to get the case dismissed, are hoping to benefit from a protracted appeals process that could delay the trial well past its scheduled March 4 start date, including until potentially after the election.

Underscoring the importance to both sides, Trump, the 2024 Republican presidential primary front-runner, attended Tuesday's arguments even though the Iowa caucuses are just one week away and despite the fact that there's no requirement that defendants appear in person for such proceedings. Making his first court appearance in Washington since his arraignment in August, Trump sat at the defense table, watching closely and occasionally taking notes and speaking with his lawyers.

His appearance and his comments afterward underscored his broader effort to portray himself as the victim of a justice system he claims is politicized. Though there's no evidence Biden has had any influence on the case, Trump's argument could resonate with Republican voters in Iowa as they prepare to launch the presidential nomination process.

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After the hearing, Trump spoke to reporters at The Waldorf-Astoria hotel, which used to be the Trump International Hotel, calling Tuesday "a very momentous day." He insisted he did nothing wrong and claimed he was being prosecuted for political reasons.

"A president has to have immunity," he said.

Former presidents enjoy broad immunity from lawsuits for actions taken as part of their official White House duties. But because no former president before Trump has ever been indicted, courts have never before addressed whether that protection extends to criminal prosecution.

Trump's lawyers insist that it does, arguing that courts have no authority to scrutinize a president's official acts and that the prosecution of their client represents a dramatic departure from more than two centuries of American history that would open the door to future politically motivated cases.

"To authorize the prosecution of a president for official acts would open a Pandora's box from which this nation may never recover," said D. John Sauer, a lawyer for Trump, asserting that, under the government's theory, presidents could be prosecuted for giving Congress "false information" to enter war or for authorizing drone strikes targeting U.S. citizens abroad.

He later added, "If a president has to look over his shoulder or her shoulder every time he or she has to make a controversial decision and wonder if 'after I leave office, am I going to jail for this when my political opponents take power?' that inevitably dampens the ability of the president."

But the judges were skeptical about those arguments. Judges Henderson and Florence Pan noted the lawyer who represented Trump during his 2021 impeachment trial suggested that he could later face criminal prosecution, telling senators at the time: "We have a judicial process in this country. We have an investigative process in this country to which no former office holder is immune."

"It seems that many senators relied on that in voting to acquit" Trump, Pan told Sauer.

Judge J. Michelle Childs also questioned why former President Richard Nixon would need to be granted a pardon in 1974 after the Watergate scandal if former presidents enjoy immunity from prosecution. Sauer replied that in Nixon's case, the conduct did not involve the same kind of "official acts" Trump's lawyers argue form the basis of his indictment.

Aside from the merits of the immunity claim, the judges jumped right into questioning Trump's lawyer over whether the court has jurisdiction to hear the appeal at this time. Sauer said presidential immunity is clearly a claim that is meant to be reviewed before trial. Smith's team also said that it wants the court to decide the appeal now.

Smith's team maintains that presidents are not entitled to absolute immunity and that, in any event, the acts Trump is alleged in the indictment to have taken — including scheming to enlist fake electors in battleground states won by Biden and pressing his vice president, Mike Pence, to reject the counting of electoral votes on Jan. 6, 2021 — fall outside a president's official job duties.

"The president has a unique constitutional role but he is not above the law. Separation of powers principles, constitutional text, history, precedent and immunity doctrines all point to the conclusion that a former president enjoys no immunity from prosecution," prosecutor James Pearce said, adding that a case in which a former president is alleged to have sought to overturn an election "is not the place to recognize some novel form of immunity."

When Judge Henderson asked how the court could write its opinion in a way that wouldn't open the "floodgates" of investigations against ex-presidents, Pearce said he did not anticipate "a sea change of vindictive tit-for-tat prosecutions in the future." He called the allegations against Trump fundamentally unprecedented.

"Never before has there been allegations that a sitting president has, with private individuals and using the levers of power, sought to fundamentally subvert the democratic republic and the electoral system," he said. "And frankly, if that kind of fact pattern arises again, I think it would be awfully scary if there weren't some sort of mechanism by which to reach that criminally."

It's not clear how quickly the panel from the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals from the D.C. Circuit will rule, though it has signaled that it intends to work quickly.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan rejected the immunity arguments, ruling last month that the office of

the presidency does not confer a “get-out-of-jail-free” pass. Trump’s lawyers appealed that decision, but Smith’s team, determined to keep the case on schedule, sought to leapfrog the appeals court by asking the Supreme Court to fast-track the immunity question. The justices declined to get involved.

The appeal is vital to a Trump strategy of trying to postpone the case until after the November election, when a victory could empower him to order the Justice Department to abandon the prosecution or even to seek a pardon for himself. He faces three other criminal cases, in state and federal court, though the Washington case is scheduled for trial first.

## **Blinken urges Israel to engage with region on postwar plans that include path to Palestinian state**

By MATTHEW LEE, NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday called on Israel to work with moderate Palestinians and neighboring countries on plans for postwar Gaza, saying they were willing to help rebuild and govern the territory but only if there is a “pathway to a Palestinian state.”

The U.S. and Israel are united in the war against Hamas but sharply divided over Gaza’s future, with Washington and its Arab allies hoping to revive the long-moribund peace process, an idea that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition partners sharply oppose.

The war in Gaza is still raging, with no end in sight, and fueling a humanitarian catastrophe in the tiny coastal enclave. The fighting has also stoked escalating violence between Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah militants that has raised fears of a wider conflict.

Speaking at a news conference after meeting with top Israeli leaders, Blinken said Israel “must stop taking steps that undercut the Palestinians’ ability to govern themselves effectively.”

Israel, he added “must be a partner of the Palestinian leaders who are willing to lead their people” and live “side by side in peace with Israel.” Settler violence, settlement expansion, home demolitions and evictions “all make it harder, not easier, for Israel to achieve lasting peace and security.”

U.S. officials have called for the Palestinian Authority, which currently administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to take the reins in Gaza. Israeli leaders have rejected that idea but have not put forward a concrete plan beyond saying they will maintain open-ended military control over the territory.

Blinken has said that Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey agreed to begin planning for the reconstruction and governance of Gaza once the war ends. The leaders of Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority are set to meet Wednesday in Jordan’s southern Red Sea city of Aqaba.

### **HEAVY FIGHTING IN GAZA**

The United States, which has provided crucial military and diplomatic support for Israel’s offensive, has pressed it to shift to more precise operations targeting Hamas. But the pace of death and destruction has remained largely the same, with hundreds killed in recent days.

Israel has vowed to keep going until it destroys Hamas, which triggered the war with its Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel. Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and abducted around 250 others, nearly half of whom were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November.

The Israeli military says it has dismantled Hamas infrastructure in northern Gaza — where entire neighborhoods have been demolished — but is still battling small groups of militants. The offensive’s focus has shifted to the southern city of Khan Younis and built-up refugee camps in central Gaza.

“The fighting will continue throughout 2024,” said Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, a military spokesman.

Since the war began, Israel’s assault in Gaza has killed more than 23,200 Palestinians, roughly 1% of the territory’s population, and more than 58,000 people have been wounded, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. About two-thirds of the dead are women and children. The death toll does not distinguish between combatants and civilians.

A strike late Monday hit a house in the central town of Deir al-Balah, killing the mother, three daughters and three small grandchildren of Jamal Naeim, a well-known dentist in Gaza. Outside the hospital, Naeim cradled a small bundle of white cloth containing all that remained of one of his adult daughters, Shaimaa,

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who was also a dentist.

"This is what we found of her, just the skin of her head and her hair," he said, breaking into sobs. Naeim is the brother of Bassem Naeim, a political figure in Hamas, but is not a member of the group himself, residents said.

At least eight people were killed when a strike hit a five-story residential building in Rafah in southern Gaza on Tuesday, Palestinian Health officials said. Six of the bodies were taken to nearby Al-Kuwaiti Hospital and were counted by an Associated Press journalist. Two other corpses were transported to Youssef al-Najjar Hospital, also in Rafah, according to Dr. Sohaib al-Hams, who works at Al-Kuwaiti Hospital.

Monday was one of the deadliest days yet for Israeli troops in Gaza, with nine killed, according to the military. Six of them died in an accidental blast when forces were preparing a controlled demolition of a weapons production site in central Gaza, the military said.

It says 185 soldiers have been killed since the ground offensive began in late October.

## A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Nearly 85% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have been driven from their homes by the fighting, and a quarter of its residents face starvation, with only a trickle of food, water, medicine and other supplies entering through an Israeli siege.

The U.N. humanitarian office, known as OCHA, warned that the fighting was severely hampering aid deliveries. Several warehouses, distribution centers, health facilities and shelters have been affected by the military's evacuation orders, it said.

The situation is even more dire in northern Gaza, which Israeli forces cut off from the rest of the territory in late October. Tens of thousands of people who remain there face shortages of food and water.

The World Health Organization has been unable to deliver supplies to the north for two weeks. OCHA said the military rejected five planned aid convoys to the north over that period, including deliveries of medical supplies and fuel for water and sanitation facilities.

Blinken said more food, water, medicine and other aid needs to enter and be distributed effectively. He called on Israel to "do everything it can to remove any obstacles from crossings to other parts of Gaza."

## FEARS OF A WIDER CONFLICT

The war in Gaza has threatened to trigger a wider conflict, with Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah trading escalating strikes following the killing of Hamas' deputy political leader in Beirut last week.

On Tuesday, Hezbollah said its exploding drones targeted the Israeli army's northern command in the town of Safed — deeper into Israel than previous fire by the group. The Israeli military said a drone fell at a base in the north without causing damage, suggesting it had been intercepted. Military officials did not identify the base.

Israeli strikes in southern Lebanon meanwhile killed at least four Hezbollah members, including one who was killed in the village where a funeral was held for a Hezbollah commander killed the day before.

Israel claimed the man killed ahead of the funeral, Ali Hussein Barji, was in charge of Hezbollah's drones in the south, but a Hezbollah official, speaking on condition of anonymity in accordance with the group's regulations, said he was only a fighter.

## Trump plans to deliver a closing argument at his civil fraud trial, AP sources say

By JENNIFER PELTZ and JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump aims to deliver his own closing argument Thursday in his New York civil business fraud trial in addition to his legal team's summations, according to two people familiar with the highly unusual plan.

Trump is a defendant in the case brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James. She claims his net worth was inflated by billions of dollars on financial statements that helped him secure business loans and insurance.

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An attorney for Trump informed Judge Arthur Engoron earlier this week that the former president wished to speak during the closing arguments, and the judge approved the plan, according to one of the two people who spoke to The Associated Press. Both persons who confirmed the plan did so on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to disclose the information to reporters.

The Trump campaign and a spokesperson for James declined to comment.

The former president and current Republican front-runner denies any wrongdoing, and he has condemned the case during a peppery day of testimony, on social media and in verbal comments in the courthouse hallway. In recent days on his Truth Social platform, he called the case a "hoax," dismissed the months-long proceedings as a "pathetic excuse for a trial" and criticized the judge and attorney general, both Democrats.

But delivering a summation would be another matter.

Although some people represent themselves, it's very uncommon for defendants personally to give summations if they have attorneys to do so. Trump has several, and he isn't a lawyer himself.

ABC News first reported Trump's plan.

In closing arguments, both sides give their views of what the evidence has shown and why they should win. It's each camp's last chance to try to persuade the ultimate decision-maker — in this case, Judge Engoron.

Trump's plans regarding the trial have changed before. In December, he was scheduled to testify as a witness for a second time, but he canceled the day before, saying he had "nothing more to say."

James' office says Trump, his business and some top executives defrauded banks and insurers by hugely goosing the values of assets such as his triplex at Trump Tower in New York and his Mar-a-Lago club and residence in Florida.

The state claims the bigger numbers got Trump better rates, while lenders and insurers didn't get the information they needed to make a truly informed assessment of the risk they were taking on and what they should charge for it.

The "defendants reaped hundreds of millions of dollars in ill-gotten gains through their unlawful conduct," state lawyers wrote in a court filing Friday. They are seeking \$370 million in penalties, plus interest, and a ban on Trump doing business in New York.

The defense says Trump more than qualified for the deals he got — and say he upheld his end of them, including by repaying all the loans. He and his lawyers maintain that his financial statements were clearly offered as unaudited estimates that recipients should check out for themselves, and that the net worth numbers were far too low, not the opposite. Any overstatements were just errors too small to affect the bottom line, the defense says.

"There have been no losses to any party, as the loans here were negotiated between very sophisticated parties," Trump lawyers Christopher Kise and Michael T. Madaio wrote Friday in court papers. "Lenders made their own informed decisions."

Engoron will weigh claims of conspiracy, insurance fraud and falsifying business records. He has said he hopes to have a verdict by the end of this month.

He decided the lawsuit's top claim before trial, ruling that Trump and other defendants engaged in fraud for years. The judge then ordered that a receiver take control of some of the ex-president's properties, but an appeals court has frozen that order for now.

## **Austin kept prostate cancer, surgery complications a secret from everyone, even Biden**

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has prostate cancer, and his recent secretive hospitalization was for surgery and later to treat a urinary tract infection related to that operation, his doctors said Tuesday.

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The cancer revelation answers the main question about Austin's hospitalization, which has now lasted eight days. But it may only add to questions of accountability, since President Joe Biden only learned about the cancer diagnosis on Tuesday, even though it was made about a month ago.

"Nobody at the White House knew that Secretary Austin had prostate cancer until this morning," said John Kirby, the National Security Council spokesman. "And the president was informed immediately after."

The 70-year-old Austin was admitted to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Dec. 22 and underwent surgery to treat the cancer. He developed the infection a week later. Biden and other senior administration officials were not told for days about his hospitalization or his cancer.

According to the doctors, the cancer was detected when Austin had a regular screening in early December. They said he "underwent a minimally invasive surgical procedure" and went home the next day. But on Jan. 1 he reported nausea and severe abdominal, hip and leg pain due to the infection.

They said his prostate cancer was detected early, and his prognosis is excellent.

The cancer revelation comes after days of persistent questions about Austin's hospitalization and the delays in notifying key leaders. And it raises more questions about the transparency and truthfulness of the Defense Department, which for the past four days said he was initially at Walter Reed for an "elective medical procedure," and not prostate surgery.

Asked about that choice of wording, Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, said in a briefing on Tuesday that it was developed in consultation with Austin's doctors.

When pressed on the delays in public notification, Ryder said, "Despite the frequency of prostate cancer, discussions about screening, treatment and support are often deeply personal and private ones." It was still not clear Tuesday how this will affect Austin's job, travel or other public engagements going forward. Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks is expected to take on some of his day-to-day duties as he recovers.

The lack of transparency about Austin's hospitalization — including the failure to tell Biden and other top officials about it or the reason for it for days — has triggered sharp criticism.

Austin spoke with Biden on Saturday, the same day he issued a public statement saying he recognized he could have done a better job insuring the public was informed about his hospitalization, and said "I commit to doing better." He did not, however, tell the president in that phone call that he had cancer.

Several Republican lawmakers even said Austin should be ousted. Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, launched a formal inquiry into the situation. And, earlier Tuesday, the White House chief of staff ordered Cabinet members to notify his office if they ever can't perform their duties.

Dr. John Maddox, trauma medical director, and Dr. Gregory Chesnut, director of the Center for Prostate Disease at Walter Reed, provided the first details of Austin's prognosis in a statement put out by the Pentagon. They said he was under anesthesia during the initial surgery, and when he went to intensive care on Jan. 2 the infection had triggered an intestinal backup and his stomach had to be drained with a tube in his nose.

Medical experts said it's likely Austin had urine leak into his abdomen, a rare complication of prostate surgery, and that led to a bowel problem.

"All of this is temporary and reverses relatively quickly," said Dr. Benjamin Davies, a professor of urology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

"We anticipate a full recovery, although this can be a slow process," Maddox said. They noted that prostate cancer is the most common cancer among American men, and it affects 1 in every 8 men — and 1 in every 6 African American men — during their lifetime.

The doctors said Austin underwent a surgical procedure called a prostatectomy. That is a common procedure to remove all or part of the prostate gland and is often used to treat prostate cancer, but is not the only option. Some men and their doctors choose radiation treatment or actively monitoring the disease, which involves watching it closely but no immediate treatment.

Prostate surgery can be done with small incisions and the aid of a tiny camera. It's not minor surgery,



experts said, but "it's not as big a deal as it once was," said Dr. David Penson, who chairs Vanderbilt University's urology department. "It's not all that different than, say, having your gallbladder removed with a laparoscope."

Meanwhile, the Biden administration, reeling from learning of Austin's surprise, is mounting a policy review. And the Pentagon has also begun its own review.

Chief of staff Jeff Zients sent a memo to Cabinet secretaries directing them to send to the White House by Friday any existing procedures for delegating authority in the event of incapacitation or loss of communication.

Biden and other top officials weren't informed for days that Austin had been hospitalized and had turned over power to his deputy. A Pentagon spokesman blamed the lapse on a key staffer being out sick with the flu.

"Agencies should ensure that delegations are issued when a Cabinet Member is traveling to areas with limited or no access to communication, undergoing hospitalization or a medical procedure requiring general anesthesia, or otherwise in a circumstance when he or she may be unreachable," Zients said in the memo. He also directed agencies to document when any such transfer of authority occurs and that the person serving in the acting role promptly establish contact with relevant White House staff.

A copy of the memo was obtained by The Associated Press.

During Austin's two hospitalizations, he transferred some of his authorities to Hicks, but she was not told why. The White House was not informed Austin was in the hospital until Jan. 4, and the public and Congress didn't learn of it until a day later.

The Pentagon issued a memo Monday on its internal review, and broadened the circle of leaders who would be informed of any delegation of authorities by the defense secretary to ensure that, in the future, "proper and timely notification has been made to the President and White House and, as appropriate, the United States Congress and the American public."

Going forward, any time authority is transferred, a wider swath of officials will also be notified, to include the Pentagon's general counsel, the chair and vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the combatant commanders, service secretaries, the service chiefs of staff, the White House Situation Room, and the senior staff of the secretary and deputy secretary of defense.

## **More delays for NASA's astronaut moonshots, with crew landing off until 2026**

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Astronauts will have to wait until next year before flying to the moon and at least two years before landing on it, under the latest round of delays announced by NASA on Tuesday.

The space agency had planned to send four astronauts around the moon late this year, but pushed the flight to September 2025. The first human moon landing in more than 50 years also got bumped, from 2025 to September 2026. NASA cited safety concerns with its own spacecraft, as well as development issues with the moonsuits and landers coming from private industry.

"Safety is our top priority," said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson. The delays will "give Artemis teams more time to work through the challenges."

The news came barely an hour after a Pittsburgh company abandoned its own attempt to land its spacecraft on the moon because of a mission-ending fuel leak.

Launched Monday as part of NASA's commercial lunar program, Astrobotic Technology's Peregrine lander was supposed to serve as a scout for the astronauts. A Houston company will give it a shot with its own lander next month.

NASA is relying heavily on private companies for its Artemis moon-landing program for astronauts, named after the mythological twin sister of Apollo.

SpaceX's Starship mega rocket will be needed to get the first Artemis moonwalkers from lunar orbit

down to the surface and back up. But the nearly 400-foot (121-meter) rocket has launched from Texas only twice, exploding both times over the Gulf of Mexico. A third test flight is planned for February.

The longer it takes to get Starship into orbit around Earth, first with satellites and then crews, the longer NASA will have to wait to attempt its first moon landing with astronauts since 1972. During NASA's Apollo era, 12 astronauts walked on the moon. The competition back then was the Soviet Union; now it's China. Nelson told reporters he's not worried that China will beat America to the moon with a crew, even with the latest delay. Even so, "we don't fly until it's ready," he stressed.

The Government Accountability Office warned in November that NASA was likely looking at 2027 for its first astronaut moon landing, citing Elon Musk's Starship as one of the many technical challenges. Another potential hurdle: the development of moonwalking suits by Houston's Axiom Space.

"We need them all to be ready and all to be successful in order for that very complicated mission to come together," said Amit Kshatriya, NASA's deputy associate administrator. He added that even with the delay, a 2026 moon landing represents "a very aggressive schedule."

NASA has only one Artemis moonshot under its belt so far. In a test flight of its new moon rocket in 2022, the space agency sent an empty Orion capsule into lunar orbit and returned it to Earth. To engineers' surprise, some charred material came off the capsule's heat shield during reentry. Later, testing of another capsule uncovered a design flaw in the life-support electronics, and separate battery issues popped up.

It's the same kind of capsule that will carry astronauts to and from the moon, linking up with Starship in lunar orbit for the trip down to the surface and back up.

Starship will need to fill up its fuel tank in orbit around Earth, before heading to the moon; SpaceX estimates an estimated 10 fuel transfers will be needed. The company plans an orbiting fuel depot to handle the job, another key aspect of the program yet to be demonstrated.

NASA's moon-landing effort has been delayed repeatedly over the past decade, adding to billions of dollars to the cost. Government audits project the total program costs at \$93 billion through 2025.

## **Hezbollah launches drone strike on base in northern Israel but military says there's no damage**

By HUSSEIN MALLA Associated Press

GHANDOURIYEH, Lebanon (AP) — Hezbollah said it launched a drone strike at the Israeli army's northern headquarters Tuesday in retaliation for recent strikes in Lebanon that killed top Hamas and Hezbollah officials.

Israel's military acknowledged that one of its army bases in northern Israel was targeted but said there were no injuries or damage. It did not specify where the base was located.

Also Tuesday, an Israeli drone strike in Lebanon killed three Hezbollah members, officials said.

The increasing cross-border attacks have led to fears of a second conflict against the backdrop of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war sparked by the deadly Oct. 7 assault on southern Israel by the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Hezbollah says that by keeping Israel's northern front active, it is helping to reduce pressure on Hamas in Gaza. Hezbollah has lost some 150 fighters in the near-daily exchanges of fire.

Hezbollah said it targeted the Israeli army's northern command headquarters in Safed with several drones, calling it retaliation for an Israeli strike in Beirut last week that killed top Hamas official Saleh Arouri, and for a drone strike on Monday that killed Hezbollah commander Wissam al-Tawil.

Tawil was the most senior member of the Iran-backed group to be killed in recent months.

The city of Safed is somewhat removed from where most of the daily Israel-Hezbollah skirmishes have been taking place, located about 12 kilometers (7 miles) from the border.

The Israeli military said its air defense system was activated to try to intercept "hostile aircraft" and that a projectile struck the base, without specifying where it hit.

Hezbollah later said it also attacked at least six Israeli posts along the border.

In the southern Lebanese village of Khirbet Selm, thousands of people took part in the funeral of Hez-

ollah commander al-Tawil. His coffin, draped in Hezbollah's yellow flag, was carried through the streets to the cemetery.

Israeli officials have been demanding for weeks that Hezbollah withdraw its fighters from the border area to allow tens of thousands of Israelis displaced by the fighting to return to their homes. During a visit to Israel last month, U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan said a "negotiated outcome" would be the best way to reassure residents of northern Israel.

But Sheik Nabil Qaouk, a member of Hezbollah's Central Council, said in a speech during the funeral that al-Tawil's killing will not stop attacks along the border.

Shortly before the funeral, an Israeli drone strike on Khirbet Selm killed a Hezbollah member, according to a Hezbollah official who spoke on condition of anonymity in accordance with the group's regulations. The Israeli military claimed that the man killed, Ali Hussein Barji, was in charge of Hezbollah's drones in the south. Hezbollah in a statement denied it.

Earlier on Tuesday, an Israeli drone strike on the southern village of Ghandouriyeh hit a car, killing three Hezbollah members, according to two security officials and a Hezbollah official. The security officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with briefing regulations.

Hezbollah announced the names of the members killed in the strike on Ghandouriyeh, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the border with Israel, but no further information about them.

The state-run National News Agency reported that when an ambulance tried to reach the car hit in Ghandouriyeh, a drone fired a missile in front of it, wounding a paramedic.

## **Michigan's ability to contend for repeat national title hinges on decisions by Harbaugh, key players**

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — After winning its first national championship in 26 years, Michigan heads into an uncertain future.

Who stays, who goes and is a repeat possible in an expanded and loaded Big Ten that will include the Washington team the Wolverines beat 34-13 in the national championship game?

The biggest question after Michigan wrapped up a 15-0 season is the status of coach Jim Harbaugh. The ninth-year coach has led his alma mater to three straight Big Ten titles and College Football Playoff appearances and is the top target for NFL teams with head coach openings. Harbaugh has not commented about his intentions.

Several players also are considering whether to enter the NFL draft or return to school with NCAA sanctions possibly coming.

Third-year quarterback J.J. McCarthy is widely projected to be a late first-round pick if he decides to declare. Fourth-year running back Blake Corum strongly considered entering the draft a year ago and indicated Tuesday he would move on after being named offensive player of the game Monday night.

Receiver Roman Wilson and four of the five starting offensive linemen also have decisions to make.

The Wolverines' defense led the nation in fewest points and yards allowed per game and could lose as many as eight starters depending on how many choose to declare.

One who will return is second-year cornerback Will Johnson, the defensive player of the game Monday. He said there is enough talent waiting in the wings to make Michigan a factor again.

"We had a great group of guys that will be back next year that are super talented in my class, and other guys that will come back, too," he said. "So I'm just ready to keep enjoying this while I can and get back to work whenever we get started again."

Odds makers aren't forecasting a repeat for the Wolverines. FanDuel Sportsbook on Tuesday listed them as the fifth betting choice behind Georgia, Alabama, Ohio State and Texas.

"I definitely think the guys will run it back," Corum said. "They know what it takes. They know what it's like. And something Coach Harbaugh always says is don't get a big head. And none of the guys on the

team will have a big head after this win.”

Harbaugh repeated his postgame comment about why his players didn’t become distracted by off-field matters. Harbaugh twice served three-game suspensions, the first imposed by the school for recruiting violations and the second by the Big Ten for the sign-stealing scheme that hung over the program all season. The NCAA continues to investigate both cases.

“We knew we were innocent,” he said. “We stood tall, upright and innocent.”

Going 15-0, he said, was the result of “good old-fashioned, roll-up-your-sleeve hard work and teamwork.”

“It’s been a beautiful thing,” he said. “You’re chasing perfection, and it’s hard to be perfect. And it rarely comes around.”

Harbaugh also used what might have been his final news conference as Michigan’s coach to reiterate his belief that college athletes deserve to share in the revenue they help generate.

“We’re all robbing the same train,” he said. “And the ones that are in the position to do the heavy lifting, the ones that risk life and limb out there on the football field are the players. And not just football players, student-athletes. The organizations are fighting hard to keep all the money — the universities, the NCAA, the conferences. It’s long past time to let the student-athletes share in the ever-increasing revenues.”

Harbaugh said he would encourage college athletes to form a union if stakeholders aren’t willing to share the wealth voluntarily. He has suggested coaches, conferences and the NCAA take 5% or 10% of the money they make and put it in a pool to pay athletes.

Harbaugh drew laughs from reporters when he expressed his willingness to meet with NCAA officials to discuss the issue.

“I think they know my number,” he said.

## **Shohei Ohtani’s Dodgers deal prompts California controller to ask Congress to cap deferred payments**

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Controller Malia M. Cohen wants Congress to change the tax code to cap deferred payments, a change that could ensure the state is owed more money from Shohei Ohtani.

Cohen made the request four weeks after the two-way star and the Los Angeles Dodgers agreed to a record \$700 million, 10-year contract that contains \$680 million in deferred payments due from 2034-43. If Ohtani is not living in California at the time he receives the deferred money, he potentially could avoid what currently is the state’s 13.3% income tax and 1.1% payroll tax for State Disability Insurance.

“The current tax system allows for unlimited deferrals for those fortunate enough to be in the highest tax brackets, creating a significant imbalance in the tax structure,” Cohen said in a statement Monday. “The absence of reasonable caps on deferral for the wealthiest individuals exacerbates income inequality and hinders the fair distribution of taxes. I would urge Congress to take immediate and decisive action to rectify this imbalance.”

Cohen’s statement was first reported by the Los Angeles Times.

Ohtani’s deal has the potential to save \$98 million in state tax, according to the California Center for Jobs and the Economy, a public benefit corporation that aims to provide information on job creation and economic trends.

Cohen became controller last year. She was president of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors in 2018 and ‘19.

“Introducing limits on deductions and exemptions for high-income earners promotes social responsibility and contributes to a tax system that is just and beneficial for all,” she said. “This action would not only create a more equitable tax system, but also generate additional revenue that can be directed towards addressing pressing important social issues and fostering economic stability.”

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## Even Andrew Scott was startled by his vulnerability in 'All of Us Strangers'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — On a recent winter day in New York when the sun was shining, Andrew Scott rushed into a coffee shop between recording sessions for an upcoming series.

"I'm scheduled tighter than a teenage pop star," he said, beaming.

The interview had been postponed once, and the location was switched at the last minute to save Scott some time in traffic. But he sat down fully engaged and eager to start talking. Immediately, though, a passerby tapped on the storefront glass and asked for a photo. Scott, without a grumble, sprinted out to oblige, even though the gesture seemed more like a command ("You're under arrest," joked Scott) than a polite request.

Scott, the 47-year-old Irish actor, is in demand like never before. That's partly due to accrued good will. A regular presence on stage in the West End, Scott is known to many as the "Hot Priest" of "Fleabag" or the cunning Moriarty of "Sherlock." Soon, he'll play Tom Ripley in the Netflix series "Ripley," adapted from the Patricia Highsmith novel.

But the real reason Scott's time is short right now is Andrew Haigh's new film, "All of Us Strangers." In it, Scott plays a screenwriter working on a script about his childhood. The film is gently poised in a meta-physical realm; when Adam (Scott) returns to his childhood home, he finds his parents (Claire Foy, Jamie Bell) as they were before they died many years earlier.

At the same time, the movie, loosely adapted from Taichi Yamada's 1987 book "Strangers," balances a budding romance with a neighbor ( Paul Mescal ), a relationship that unfolds with profound reverberations of family, intimacy and queer life. In a dreamy, longing ghost story, Scott is its aching, shimmering soul.

"The challenge of it was to try to go to that place but not gild the lily too much," Scott says. "As an actor, I have to be in touch with that playful side of myself and that part of you that's childish. I was actually quite struck by how vulnerable I looked in the film."

Scott's acutely tender performance has made him a contender for the Academy Awards. He was named best actor by the National Society of Film Critics. At the Golden Globes on Sunday (Scott wore a white tux and t-shirt), he was nominated for best actor in a drama.

Scott has long admired actors like Anthony Hopkins, Judi Dench and Meryl Streep — performers with a sense of humor who, he says, "are able to understand what you feel and what you present." Scott, too, is often funny on screen (see Lena Dunham's medieval romp "Catherine Called Birdy" ). And even in quiet moments, he seems to be buzzing inside at some discreet frequency. Something is always going on under the surface.

He's been acting since he was young; drama classes were initially a way to get over shyness. Scott's first film role came at age 17. He has often spoken about seeking to maintain a childlike perspective in acting. In that way, "All of Us Strangers" is particularly fitting. On Adam's trips home, he sort of morphs back into the child he was. In one scene, he wears his old pajamas and crawls into bed with his parents.

"So many of the things that are required of you as an actor are a sense of humor and some ability to be able to put yourself in a situation. Because it's all down to imagination," says Scott. "For me, that's the thing you need to keep. That's the thing — because I started out when I was young — I don't want to move too far away from. Like when kids go, 'OK, you be this and I'll be this.' That ability doesn't leave us. What does leave us is a lack of self-consciousness. Our job is to hold on to that."

Haigh, the British filmmaker of "45 Years" and "Weekend," began thinking of Scott for the role early on. They met and talked through the script for a few hours.

"He's a similar generation to me. He's a tiny bit younger than me, but he's from the same generation," says Haigh. "He understands that experience."

Scott came out publicly in 2013, but his natural inclination is to be private. "I feel like I've given so much of myself in the film, you think you don't want to give it all away," he says. He describes "All of Us Strangers" — which Haigh shot partly in his childhood home — as personal, but not autobiographical in its depiction of the alienation that can linger after coming out.

"Mercifully, I feel very comfortable for the most part. But it stays with you that pain, and it actually makes

you more compassionate, I think. Because we shot in Andrew's childhood home, that sort of threw down the gauntlet in relation to how much of his own personality he was giving," says Scott. "I wanted it to be sort of unadorned, unarmored and raw. That's why I think there's such tenderness in the film."

Scott has sometimes recoiled from how sexuality is talked about the media and in Hollywood. He recently said the phrase "openly gay" should be done away with. As of late December, Scott hadn't yet watched "All of Us Strangers" with his parents, though he planned to.

"The best way to express it is to say I'll be very sensitive to how they watch it and how they feel about it, and how it makes me feel them watching it," Scott says.

The tenderness in the film is also owed in part to Scott's chemistry with Mescal. On-screen chemistry is an amorphous quality that the film industry has long tried to turn into a science with camera tests and marketing that flirts with real-life romance.

But for Scott, it's something different. He and Phoebe Waller-Bridge had chemistry, overwhelmingly, in "Fleabag," but that didn't have anything to do with sexual attraction. Pinpointing that quality is something Scott pondered during Simon Stephens and Sam Yates' recent staging of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya" at the National Theater. Scott played all eight roles, meaning he essentially had to have chemistry with himself.

"Chemistry isn't just about sexual chemistry. It's something to do with listening, and I think it's something to do with playfulness," Scott says. "Your ability to listen to someone and take note of what someone is doing is chemistry. You have to wait and see what the other actor is doing."

A few moments later, Scott will have to rush out just as quickly as he arrived. But before that, he leaned back, naturally lit by the winter sun, and pondered whether "All of Us Strangers," in the nakedness of his performance, had taken him somewhere he hadn't before been as an actor.

"Yeah, I think so," said Scott. "Or else to return to something that perhaps I've been before."

## How an animated character named Marlon could help Trump win Iowa's caucuses

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

SIoux CENTER, Iowa (AP) — Well before Donald Trump takes the stage, a waiting audience of hundreds of supporters sits captivated as dramatic music begins to swell throughout the room. On projector screens, a rotating Planet Earth appears.

"Making America Great Again starts one place on Earth, and one place only," a deep-voiced narrator begins as the image zooms into the middle of the U.S. "Right here in Iowa."

It's the beginning of a nearly three-minute "Schoolhouse Rock!"-like video featuring an animated character named Marlon, who informs viewers of "everything you need to know about how to successfully caucus for President Trump."

The goal is to turn out a wave of first-time caucusgoers and generate a commanding win for the former president in Iowa's leadoff voting contest on Jan. 15, setting the stage for a romp through the Republican primary and a strong start to the general election campaign. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley are battling for a notable finish in Iowa that could propel one of them to a head-to-head challenge with Trump for the GOP nomination.

Most campaigns use face time at events to encourage Iowans to caucus for the candidate, and they rely on pledge cards with names, addresses and phone numbers to contact supporters again later. But the Trump campaign doesn't wait until after the voters leave the venue — they are filling in any gaps in knowledge of how the caucuses work on site.

The civics lesson, with its easy-to-follow instructions, is a reflection of just how quirky the caucus process is. Unlike primaries, which allow voters to cast their ballots throughout the day, Iowa caucusgoers are required to show up at a specific time — 7 p.m. Central time on the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday — and at a site that may be different from their usual polling place. Caucusgoers also have to stay put for what can be a lengthy process of protocol and supporting speeches.

And it's often cold, sometimes snowing. Below-zero temperatures are forecast across Iowa on caucus day.

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"We'd love bad weather," Trump said Saturday in Newton, arguing that it will dissuade other candidates' supporters but not his. "My people will walk on glass."

But it's not only the weather that may make it challenging for people to participate.

Marin Curtis, 25, from North Liberty stood in line for a Trump rally in Coralville, but she has never been to a caucus before and she doesn't know much about it. Besides, she said, she has a toddler and might not be able to make it.

Ron Wheeldon, 64, an undecided truck driver from Newton, Iowa, was scoping out candidates at several campaign events, even though he'll have to work the night shift on the day of the caucuses.

And in Sioux Center last month, Steve and Shari Rehder of Hawarden were attending a forum of some major candidates, including DeSantis and Haley. They said they were interested in an alternative to Trump. But whoever they like won't be getting their vote on caucus night — they'll be out of state on vacation.

The get-out-the-vote efforts by Trump's 2024 campaign are a nod to the lessons learned since 2016, when the political novice acknowledged not knowing the first thing about caucuses. Trump finished second to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz that year in Iowa's leadoff voting, though he would go on to win the next three early states, the GOP nomination and ultimately the presidency.

This year, the former president has been touting his lead in national and early state polls, but he has also warned his supporters not to get complacent and says he isn't taking Iowa for granted. In Sioux Center last Friday, he kicked off the first of at least eight "commit to caucus" events and noted he plans to be back in Iowa on caucus day.

"Look, we gotta get out and vote because, you know, bad things happen when you sit back," Trump said, encouraging the crowd to "really show the strength" of support. "We're voting now, but it's going to make a big difference in November."

Wrapped in a blanket waiting in line for Trump's rally, Josie Zeutenhorst, a 20-year-old from Sioux Center who attends Dordt University, said she wanted to hear from Trump in person instead of on TV. She recognizes how much of an impact voters can have on election results but wasn't planning on participating in a caucus.

"I don't know enough, I guess," she said. "I don't really know how it works."

In a follow-up interview after the rally, Zeutenhorst said she found the caucus instructional video "very helpful" and felt more comfortable having learned the process.

"I really am considering it," she said of participating in the caucuses, though she still isn't sure it'll work with her schedule.

Regan Ronning, 52, who attended a Trump rally back in 2016, said the Trump campaign called him a few months ago to ask if he'd be a caucus captain. Now he's door knocking and making phone calls to people in his area.

"Education's a big part of it," he said. Ronning thinks the videos and volunteers help, since some of the people he talks to are confused about what a caucus is. "I just try to tell them what the process is, that it's nothing scary."

Trump's team has said they've held hundreds of trainings for their volunteers and precinct captains, the individuals representing the campaign within a given precinct on caucus night.

The campaign also has had captains prioritize a new assignment — to bring 10 people to the caucuses who have never participated in one before. The campaign has identified several hundred thousand Trump supporters across Iowa who fit the bill.

It's an approach they hope to replicate in the general election, as they seek to chip away at the Biden coalition and win over voters who have generally supported Democrats.

Meanwhile, Trump's competitors are trying to persuade voters in Iowa that the race isn't over yet.

"This is the most impactful vote you can cast. The number of people that go to these caucuses is 150,000 people," DeSantis told a crowd in Sioux Center last week. "So if you're coming and you bring neighbors or family members, all that, you're packing a big punch."

## Michigan overpowers Washington 34-13 as Jim Harbaugh delivers a national title

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Jim Harbaugh raised the championship trophy as gold and white confetti sprayed over his team and “We Are the Champions” blared.

Nine years after he took over at Michigan, Harbaugh delivered on the lofty expectations he brought with him to his beloved alma mater.

Blake Corum ran for 134 yards and two fourth-quarter touchdowns as Harbaugh and the top-ranked Wolverines — undeterred by suspensions and a sign-stealing case that shadowed the program — completed a three-year surge to a national title by beating No. 2 Washington 34-13 Monday night in the College Football Playoff.

“We’re innocent and we stood strong and tall because we knew we were innocent. And I’d like to point that out,” Harbaugh said when asked about off-field issues, jumping in to answer a question posed to his players. “And these guys are innocent. And overcome that? It wasn’t that hard because we knew we were innocent.

“(The season) went exactly how we wanted it to go. It went exactly how we wanted it to go.”

The Wolverines (15-0) sealed their first national title since 1997 when Corum, who scored the winning touchdown in overtime against Alabama in the Rose Bowl, blasted in from the 1-yard line with 3:37 left to put Michigan up by 21 and set off another rousing rendition of “The Victors” from the band.

After a third consecutive playoff appearance, Harbaugh won the championship so many expected when he took over a struggling powerhouse in 2015 — despite missing six regular-season games this season while serving two suspensions.

“That man, he’s the reason we’re here today,” Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy said of his coach.

And Harbaugh did it with a team his old coach, Bo Schembechler, would have adored. The Wolverines ran for 303 yards against Washington (14-1), and their rugged defense held Michael Penix Jr. and the Huskies’ prolific passing game to just one touchdown while intercepting the Heisman Trophy runner-up twice.

“There are more than 100 Michigan men who are on this team,” Harbaugh said. “What they’ve done is amazing. They will forever be known as national champions.”

Penix’s remarkable six-year college career ended with maybe his worst performance of the season. Usually unfazed by pressure, Penix was not nearly as precise against a Michigan defense that took away his signature deep throws.

“That was a spectacular game by our defense,” Harbaugh said.

The Indiana transfer who came back from two knee surgeries and two shoulder injuries was roughed up by the Wolverines, limping at times, stepped on another time.

Asked how he was feeling, Penix said, still undaunted: “Better than I was three years ago.”

Penix finished 27 for 51 for 255 yards and a touchdown as the Huskies had their 21-game winning streak snapped.

“They’ve given me everything they possible can,” coach Kalen DeBoer said of a group of players who went 4-8 just two seasons ago and 25-3 since he took over in 2022.

McCarthy had a modest game, throwing for 140 yards and running for 31. But it was enough for him to improve to 27-1 as a starter for the Wolverines.

Michigan gave Washington a taste of life in the Big Ten, where the Pac-12 champions are heading next season, and the Huskies were up for the grind for a while.

Two long touchdown runs by Donovan Edwards and 229 yards rushing in the first quarter put the Wolverines up 17-3 early in the second and conjured up memories of last year’s historic Georgia blowout of TCU.

Washington stabilized and didn’t allow the Wolverines another point in the first half. After the Huskies stopped Michigan on a fourth-and-2 from the UW 38 with 4:46 left in the second quarter, Penix went to work.

He found Jalen McMillan on a fourth-and-goal with 42 seconds left for a 3-yard touchdown. After being



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on the verge of getting buried by the Wolverines, the Huskies fans sang along to "Who Let the Dogs Out," happily down only 17-10 at half.

Will Johnson's interception of Penix on the first play of the second half gave Michigan another opportunity to open up a two-touchdown lead, but the Huskies forced a field goal by James Turner to make it 20-10.

"Today was a complete, complete team effort," Corum said.

Michigan nursed a touchdown lead until halfway through the fourth quarter, when it put together a 71-yard drive, capped by Corum's tackle-breaking 12-yard touchdown that finally gave the Wolverines some room with a 27-13 lead and 7:09 left.

Corum, the engine of the ground-and-pound offense and heart and soul of a team loaded with fourth-, fifth- and even sixth-year players, missed the CFP last year with a knee injury. He was named offensive player of the final national title game in before the College Football Playoff expands from four teams to 12 next season.

"Michigan, this is for you," Corum told the Wolverines fans.

Michigan seemed to be steaming toward a third consecutive Big Ten championship when in October it was revealed the NCAA was investigating the program for potentially breaking rules that prohibit in-person scouting of opponents and using video equipment to attempt to decode opponents' play signals.

The scandal turned Connor Stalions, the low-level Michigan recruiting staffer accused of orchestrating the scheme, into a household name and threatened to derail the Wolverines' season.

The NCAA process will linger well into 2024 and it is unknown what penalties Michigan could face. The Big Ten, though, decided to act quickly and punished Michigan by suspending Harbaugh for the final three games of the regular season, including matchups with Penn State and rival Ohio State.

With offensive coordinator Sherrone Moore taking Harbaugh's place, it became Michigan vs. Everybody and nobody could stop the Wolverines.

Harbaugh returned for the postseason, completed the mission and got to celebrate with his 84-year-old father, Jack — himself a former college football coach — as he accepted the trophy.

Michigan became the first college football program to record 1,000 victories when it beat Maryland in November and won its third national title in January.

"Who has it better than us?" Jack Harbaugh asked the fans during the trophy ceremony. They replied with a boisterous: "Nobody!"

Now the question is whether Harbaugh has coached the team he once quarterbacked for the last time, with the NFL seemingly beckoning again.

Harbaugh said it felt good to no longer be the only coach in the family without a national championship. His father won a Division I-AA title with Western Kentucky and brother John won a Super Bowl with the Baltimore Ravens by beating Jim's San Francisco 49ers 11 years ago.

"I can now sit at the big person's table in the family," Harbaugh said.

As for what's next?

"I just want to enjoy this," he said. "I hope you give me that. Can I have that? Does it always have to be what's next, what's the future?"

## South Korea's parliament passes landmark ban on production and sales of dog meat

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's parliament on Tuesday passed a landmark ban on production and sales of dog meat, as public calls for a prohibition have grown sharply over concerns about animal rights and the country's international image.

Some angry dog farmers said they plan to challenge the bill's constitutionality and hold protest rallies, a sign of continued heated debate over the ban.

After a three-year grace period, the bill would make slaughtering, breeding and sales of dog meat for

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human consumption illegal from 2027 and punishable by 2-3 years in prison. It doesn't provide any penalties for eating dog meat.

Dog meat consumption, a centuries-old practice on the Korean Peninsula, is neither explicitly banned nor legalized in South Korea. It has long been viewed as a source of stamina on hot summer days. Recent surveys show more than half of South Koreans want dog meat banned and a majority no longer eat it. But one in every three South Koreans still opposes a ban even though they don't consume it.

The National Assembly passed the bill by a 208-0 vote. It will become law after being endorsed by the Cabinet Council and signed by President Yoon Suk Yeol, considered formalities since his government supports the ban.

"This law is aimed at contributing to realizing the values of animal rights, which pursue respect for life and a harmonious co-existence between humans and animals," the legislation says.

The bill offers assistance to dog farmers and others in the industry in shutting down their businesses and shifting to alternatives. Details are to be worked out among government officials, farmers, experts and animal rights activists.

Dozens of animal rights activists gathered at the National Assembly to celebrate the bill's passage. They carried large photos of dogs, chanted slogans and held placards reading "Dog meat-free Korea is coming."

Humane Society International called the legislation's passage "history in the making."

"I never thought I would see in my lifetime a ban on the cruel dog meat industry in South Korea, but this historic win for animals is testament to the passion and determination of our animal protection movement," said JungAh Chae, executive director of HSI's Korea office.

Dogs are also eaten in China, Vietnam, Indonesia, North Korea and in some African countries. But South Korea's dog meat industry has drawn more attention because of the country's reputation as a cultural and economic powerhouse. It's also the only nation with industrial-scale dog farms. Most farms in South Korea raise about 500 dogs, but one visited by The Associated Press in July had about 7,000.

Farmers were extremely upset by the bill's passage.

"This is a clear case of state violence as they are infringing on our freedom to choose our occupation. We can't just sit by idly," said Son Won Hak, a farmer and former leader of a farmers' association.

Son said dog farmers will file a petition with the Constitutional Court of Korea and hold demonstrations. He said farmers will meet on Wednesday to discuss other steps.

There is no reliable official data on the exact size of South Korea's dog meat industry. Activists and farmers say hundreds of thousands of dogs are slaughtered for meat each year.

The anti-dog meat campaign received a huge boost from the country's first lady, Kim Keon Hee, who has repeatedly expressed her support for a prohibition. She has become the subject of withering criticism and crude insults during demonstrations by farmers.

The legislation doesn't clearly specify how dog farmers and others in the industry will be supported. Agriculture Minister Song Mi-ryung said Tuesday the government will try to formulate reasonable assistance programs for them.

Ju Yeongbong, an official of the farmers' association, said most farmers are in their 60-80s and hope to continue their businesses until older people, their main customers, die. But Ju said the legislation would "strip them of their right to live" because it would likely end up only offering assistance for dismantling their facilities and for transitions, without compensation for giving up their dogs.

Son said many elderly dog farmers are willing to close their farms if proper financial compensation is provided because of the extremely negative public view of their jobs.

Cheon JinKyung, head of Korea Animal Rights Advocates in Seoul, accused farmers of demanding unrealistically high compensation. She said compensation based on the number of dogs owned by farmers won't be accepted, but acknowledged that payments would likely be a major issue.

Ordinary citizens were split over the ban.

"Dogs are different from cows, chickens and pigs," said Kim Myung-ae, a 58-year-old Seoul resident. "Why would you still eat dogs when they are now seen more as family-like pets than food?"

Another Seoul resident, Jeong Yoon Hee, disagreed, saying whether to eat dog meat is a matter of a personal choice and dietary culture. "Dogs are dogs, not humans," she said.

## Explosion at historic Texas hotel injures 21 and scatters debris in downtown Fort Worth

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — An explosion at a historic Texas hotel in Fort Worth on Monday blew out windows, littered downtown streets with large sections of debris from the building and injured 21 people, including one who was in critical condition, authorities said.

The blast flung doors and entire sections of wall onto the road in front of the 20-story hotel, where authorities said rescue crews found several people trapped in the basement. Fifteen people were taken to hospitals, including six whose conditions were described as "semi-critical" by MedStar, which provides ambulances and emergency medical services in Fort Worth.

Authorities did not indicate anyone was missing but fire officials said late Monday that they would continue searching the building.

More than two dozen rooms were occupied at the Sandman Signature Hotel at the time, officials said. Authorities said they believe a gas leak caused the explosion — which happened in the middle of the afternoon at the start of the workweek — and said the hotel had been undergoing construction.

"There was debris. There was insulation. There was office furniture," Charlie Collier, 31, told The Associated Press. He was working nearby when he said he saw a large flash and what sounded like thunder.

"Everything that was in the first couple floors of the building was blown out all over the street," he said.

The Sandman Signature Hotel is in a busy area of downtown about one block from the Fort Worth Convention Center. Footage from news helicopters showed firefighters picking their way through the piles of drywall, shattered glass and mangled metal that coated the street outside the hotel. Authorities urged people to avoid the area.

Craig Trojacek, a spokesman for the Fort Worth Fire Department, said a restaurant in the building had been under construction but said it was not definitive that is where the blast occurred.

Rebecca Martinez was among those in nearby buildings who recalled hearing a loud crack and seeing a wall of dust and debris sweep through the city streets. Stepping outside to see what happened, she came upon a man and a woman leaned up against a fire hydrant.

"The man was all bloody, his face was all bloody," Martinez said. "Then I started smelling natural gas, real intense and I thought, 'I might need to get away from here.'"

Moments later, she said, authorities evacuated her building and some of the surrounding neighborhood.

Paula Snider, a delivery driver for UPS, was doing a pickup nearby when she said she heard a large boom and saw a puff of black smoke. A large piece of metal grating landed under her truck and another dropped nearby.

"I jumped out and took off running," she said.

A grey haze covered normally busy streets of downtown Fort Worth as firefighters walked through layers of debris. Remnants of the building lay scattered across the street and over parked vehicles, and gaping holes could be seen on the ground.

Trojacek said investigators were working with federal investigators to determine the cause of the blast. The scene had left rescue teams unable to immediately reach some parts of the building.

"We had reports of people trapped down in the basement, and because of the explosion that took place, some of those access areas were either covered up or it didn't feel safe at that point to get people down into," Trojacek said.

Technicians from Atmos Energy, a Dallas-based natural gas distributor, were examining the blast site Monday. A spokesperson for the Railroad Commission of Texas, the state's oil and gas regulator, said an agency inspector was also on the scene and working with local authorities.

Northland Properties Co., the Canadian company that owns the hotel, said in a statement that it was

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working with officials to determine how the explosion occurred and how much damage it caused.

"The safety and well-being of our team members and guests is our priority," the company said. "We are working with those who have been injured to fully support them at this time."

According to the hotel website, the Sandman Signature Fort Worth Downtown Hotel has 245 rooms and was built in 1920 as the "Waggoner Building," named after cattle rancher and oilman William Thomas Waggoner. The building has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1979.

## Today in History: January 10 Thomas Paine publishes 'Common Sense'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 10, the 10th day of 2024. There are 356 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 10, 1776, Thomas Paine anonymously published his influential pamphlet, "Common Sense," which argued for American independence from British rule.

On this date:

In 1860, the Pemberton Mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts, collapsed and caught fire, killing up to 145 people, mostly female workers from Scotland and Ireland.

In 1861, Florida became the third state to secede from the Union.

In 1863, the London Underground had its beginnings as the Metropolitan, the world's first underground passenger railway, opened to the public with service between Paddington and Farringdon Street.

In 1870, John D. Rockefeller incorporated Standard Oil.

In 1920, the League of Nations was established as the Treaty of Versailles (vehr-SY') went into effect.

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in his State of the Union address, asked Congress to impose a surcharge on both corporate and individual income taxes to help pay for his "Great Society" programs as well as the war in Vietnam.

In 1971, French fashion designer Coco Chanel died in Paris at age 87.

In 1984, the United States and the Vatican established full diplomatic relations for the first time in more than a century.

In 2002, Marines began flying hundreds of al-Qaida prisoners in Afghanistan to a U.S. base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

In 2003, North Korea withdrew from a global treaty barring it from making nuclear weapons.

In 2007, the Democratic-controlled House voted 315-116 to increase the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour.

In 2011, a judge in Austin, Texas, ordered former U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay to serve three years in prison for his money laundering conviction. (DeLay's conviction was ultimately overturned.)

In 2022, Robert Durst, the New York real estate heir who was sentenced to life in prison for killing his best friend, died at age 78 at a hospital outside the California prison where he'd been serving his sentence.

Today's birthdays: Jan. 10: Opera singer Sherrill Milnes is 89. Movie director Walter Hill is 84. Actor William Sanderson is 80. Singer Rod Stewart is 79. Rock singer-musician Donald Fagen (Steely Dan) is 76. Boxing Hall of Famer and entrepreneur George Foreman is 75. Roots rock singer Alejandro Escovedo is 73. Rock musician Scott Thurston (Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers) is 72. Singer Pat Benatar is 71. Hall of Fame race car driver and team owner Bobby Rahal is 70. Rock musician Michael Schenker (UFO) is 69. Singer Shawn Colvin is 68. Rock singer-musician Curt Kirkwood (Meat Puppets) is 65. Actor Evan Handler is 63. Rock singer Brad Roberts (Crash Test Dummies) is 60. Actor Trini Alvarado is 57. Rock singer Brent Smith (Shinedown) is 46. Rapper Chris Smith (Kris Kross) is 45. Actor Sarah Shahi is 44. American roots singer Valerie June is 42.