

Groton Daily Independent

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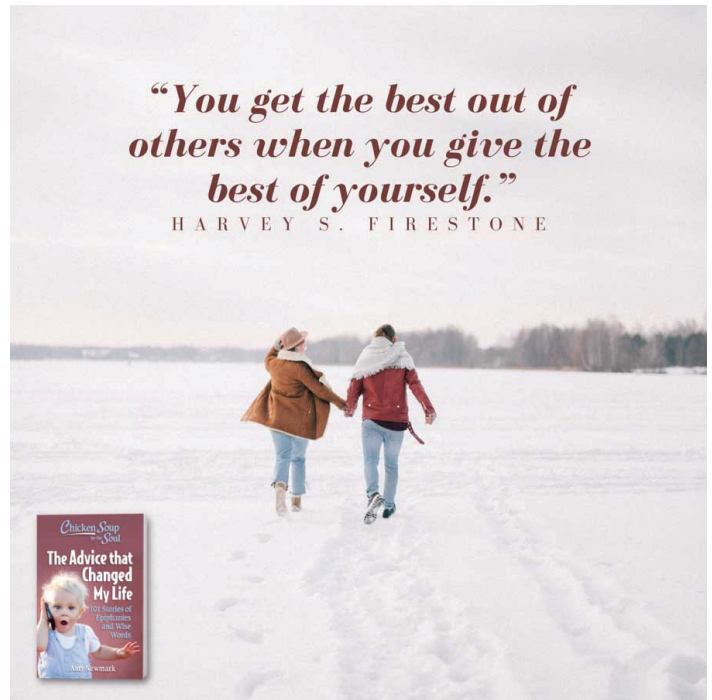
Thursday, Jan. 11

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,

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



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.

Saturday, Jan. 13

Girls Varsity and Boys JH/JV/Varsity Wrestling at Gettysburg, 10 a.m.

Basketball Doubleheader hosts Dakota Valley (Gym: Boys C, 2 p.m., Girls C, 3:15 p.m., Areana: Girls JV at 2:00 p.m., Boys JV at 3:15 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

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

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

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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At least 12 people have died and over 130 prison workers have been held hostage amid widespread gang violence—including a brief takeover of a live TV station—in Ecuador sparked by the weekend prison escape of a high-ranking gang leader. The nation's new president, Daniel Noboa, announced a 60-day state of emergency in response.

University of Alabama head football coach Nick Saban announced his retirement yesterday, stepping down after 17 seasons with the Crimson Tide. The news came 10 days after a 27-20 playoff loss to Michigan,

in what became his final game at Alabama.

US financial regulators approved yesterday the creation of exchange-traded funds based on bitcoin, a move that allows mainstream investors to invest in the cryptocurrency via their regular brokerage accounts. The decision is expected to significantly increase the number of investors holding bitcoin.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

NFL games averaged 17.9 million television viewers, up 7% from last year and the best ratings since 2015. Pete Carroll out as head coach of the Seattle Seahawks after 14 seasons and a 2013 Super Bowl win. "Barbie," "Oppenheimer," and "Succession" lead TV and film nominations for the 2024 Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Screen Actors Guild and music recording industry support bipartisan legislation that would penalize the unauthorized use of AI video deepfakes and voice clones.

Science & Technology

OpenAI launches store allowing users to build and share customized versions of its ChatGPT chatbot; analysts liken the marketplace to an early version of Apple's App Store.

Genetic analysis finds variants associated with multiple sclerosis arrived in Europe roughly 5,000 years ago, as populations migrated from Western Asia.

Study links snowpack decline in the US Southwest and Northeast—key water sources for major population centers—with rising global temperatures; some areas decreased by 10% or more per decade since 1981.

Business & Markets

Markets close up (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.5%, Nasdaq +0.8%), with investors expecting positive data on inflation to be released later this morning.

Amazon lays off "several hundreds" of employees in Prime Video and MGM divisions; Amazon-owned Twitch to cut headcount by 35%, or around 500 employees.

Software giant SAP to pay \$220M in a coordinated global settlement over charges it bribed various government officials across the world between 2014 and 2022.

Politics & World Affairs

Former Gov. Chris Christie (NJ) drops out of GOP presidential primary, just ahead of Monday's Iowa caucuses. GOP holds primary debate with Gov. Ron DeSantis (FL) and former Gov. Nikki Haley (SC); former President Donald Trump appears on Fox.

Closing arguments to begin today in civil fraud trial against former President Donald Trump and the Trump Organization. See trial overview. House Oversight Committee advances Hunter Biden contempt charges for ignoring subpoena for private testimony, full floor vote to follow.

US and British naval forces repel largest drone and missile launched by Houthi rebels into the Red Sea to date. Al-Shabab militants capture United Nations helicopter after craft is forced to make an emergency landing in central Somalia.

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

School Board sets amount and term for school opt-out resolution

A school district opt-out has been talked about since 2016 and the board has engaged in serious discussion for the past six months. At the meeting held Wednesday evening, the board agreed with a maximum opt out of \$1.25 million for a term of 10 years. Now that the dollar amount and term have been set, a resolution will be passed at the next school board meeting. Projections have the district using \$1.25 million in 2025, \$1.15 million in 2026, \$1 million then for the next four years, \$1.045 million in year seven, \$1.062 million in year eight, \$1.125 million in year nine and \$1,135 million in year 10.

A lot of school districts are using capital outlay funds to help fund the general fund. There are also a number of districts (about 25 percent) that also have an opt-out and are using capital outlay funds. Groton Area has been using \$600,000 to \$830,000 from capital outlay to fund the general fund.

Superintendent Joe Schwan said he wants to restore the integrity of the capital outlay fund to keep its funds. The board entered into a lengthy discussion to figure out what the dollar amount should be and the term of the opt out should be in order to create a resolution.

Schwan said you take what you need. He said that the board does not need to take the full amount of the opt-out. It is decided on a year-by-year basis. His projection reflects a 3 percent annual expenditure growth.

"We can't pocket the money," Becky Hubsch, school business manager, said. "We have to maintain a certain cash balance." A district has to have at least one month of under 30 percent cash balance which is set by state law. "The days of sitting on large fund balances are long gone," Schwan said.

Hubsch said that the flexibility of the opt out would benefit the district. "Something weird could happen with the state formula," she said, "but we have to have teachers in the building."

"I think we would be tying our hands if we go any lower than \$1.25 million," said board member Marty Weismantel. "This school is going to be here. We are looking out for the best interest of the students, staff and the district."

Board President Deb Gengerke said if the district did the \$1 million opt out, by year seven, the district would need to start withdrawing funds from the capital outlay fund, which could be up to \$295,088 by year 15. With the \$1.25 million opt out, the district would opt out in varying amounts to keep the district from taking money from capital outlay. However even at that, by year 14n(2038), the district would need to pull \$7,367 from capital out and by year 15 (2039), it would be \$45,088. "We need to finance a sound district," she said.

"We're in a pickle," said Board Member Kara Pharis.

Weismantel encouraged the general public to ask questions. "We welcome the opportunity to talk about it," he said. "Talk to the administration. Talk to a board member."

State funding formula is going to be reviewed by the state legislature this year. One of the things being considered is the teacher salaries where districts are getting money from the state but that money is not totally being used for teacher salaries and Schwan said that Governor Noem is questioning if that should continue. There will be different accountably in the works.

The Langford School District wants to engage in discussion for a co-op with Groton Area for football next year. The discussion started two years ago, but Langford is now looking more seriously about it. Options with Webster and Britton-Hecla are off the table. A coop with Langford Area would not change Groton Area's classification. The board agreed to proceed with talks. Langford is planning a community meeting in February.

The school van was stolen in Sioux Falls. Schwan said that they found the license plates. The kids belongings were not on the bus. "It could have been a lot worse," Schwan said.

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The board set April 9 as the date for the school board election, if there is one. The terms of Marty Weismantel and Kara Pharis are up this year - they are three-year terms. The deadline to submit a petition is 5 p.m. on February 23. Petitions can be taken out January 27th.

There were a number of resignations approved: Anna Fuhrman as ag instruction at the end of the 2023-24 school year (husband has a new job and they will be moving to Watertown); Brittany Hubbard as oral interp advisor (no student interest in the program); Mike Nehls as head custodian effective February 2, 2024 (moving out to the Mobridge area to work for the Mobridge-Pollock school and also as a code enforcer for the City of Mobridge); and the retirement of Julie Milbrandt at the end of the 2023-24 school year.

The board approved a HVAC change order for about \$1,100 to add an additional swing door for filter change-out ease.

The 2024-25 school calendar was approved. Start date is Wednesday, Aug. 21. Final day is Wednesday, May 15 with graduation being held on Saturday, May 17.

Next school board meeting is set for Tuesday, Jan. 30, 7 p.m.

- Paul Kosel

Groton Area performs above state average in all three subject areas

Gengerke read a letter from the Associated School Boards of South Dakota:

"During the previous school year, your students and district achieved something academically that less than half of the state's public school districts did by scoring above the state average in all three subject areas - English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science - of the annual state assessments. The Board of Directors and staff members of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota congratulate your district's students, staff, administration and school board for this accomplishment as we believe it evidences high academic performance in your district."

- Paul Kosel

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2024-2025 Groton Area School District



Drafted 11/14/2023; w/ Amendments 1/3/2024

August 2024

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

August

- 19 - Teacher Inservice
 - 19 - Elementary Open House; 6th Welcome Walk
 - 20 - Teacher Inservice
 - 21 - First Day of School
 - 30 - No School - LABOR DAY BREAK
- Student Contact: 7; Inservice: 2

January 2025

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

January

- 2 - School Resumes
- Student Contact: 22; Inservice: 0

September 2024

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

September

- 2 - No School - LABOR DAY
- Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0

February 2025

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	

February

- 13 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (1:30-8:00)
 - 14 - No School - Teacher Inservice
 - 17 - No School - PRESIDENTS DAY
- Student Contact: 18; Inservice: 2

October 2024

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

October

- 3 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (1:30-8:00)
 - 4 - No School - Teacher Inservice
 - 7 - No School - NATIVE AMERICAN DAY
 - 11 - Lake Region Marching Festival
 - 22 - End of 1st Quarter (41)
- Student Contact: 21; Inservice: 2

March 2025

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

March

- 7 - End of 3rd Quarter (45)
 - 20-21 - No School - SPRING BREAK
- Student Contact: 19; Inservice: 0

November 2024

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

November

- 11 - Veterans Day Program
 - 27-29 - No School - THANKSGIVING BREAK
- Student Contact: 18; Inservice: 0

April 2025

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

April

- 6 - Pops Concert (2:00 & 5:00)
 - 12 - PROM
 - 18 & 21 - No School - EASTER BREAK
 - 24 - Middle School Spring Concert (7:00)
 - 29 - Elementary Spring Concert (7:00)
- Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0

December 2024

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

December

- 5 - MS/HS Christmas Concert (7:00 PM)
 - 20 - Elementary Christmas Concert (1:00 PM)
 - 20 - Early Dismissal (2:00 PM)
 - 20 - End of 2nd Quarter (40/81)
- Student Contact: 15; Inservice: 0

May 2025

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

May

- 1 - High School Concert/Awards/Art Show (7:00)
 - 14 - End of 2nd Semester (44/89)
 - 15 - Teacher Inservice
 - 17 - Graduation
- Student Contact: 10; Inservice: 1

 Faculty Inservice	 End of Quarter/Semester
 No School	 Early Dismissal
 Important Dates	

81

89

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What is an Opt-Out?

Opting out is to impose an excess levy above any current limitations. If the school district cannot operate on the revenues generated by the maximum allowed for the general or capital outlay funds, then the school district may choose to “opt-out” of the limitations.

Our general fund budget pays for general operating expenses of a district. 80% to 85% of the general fund budget is used to pay for salaries and benefits.

Since 2013, we’ve reduced our teaching staff size by seven through attrition. That is approximately a 15% reduction in the size of our teaching staff and accounts for over \$500,000 in annual savings in salary and benefits.

In its entirety, the extra-curricular budget accounts for only 5.54% of the district’s budget yet provides educational opportunities for our students outside of the regular classroom setting and is critical to student enrollment and development of all students.

Why do we need an opt-out?

1. **Changes to the state funding formula for education, primarily the equalization of “other revenues”, have erased a beneficial additional revenue source once enjoyed by our District.**
2. **Provides a level of financial stability and certainty for a prescribed amount of time.**
3. **Restores the integrity of capital outlay fund.**
4. **Preserves district programming and allows us to remain competitive in the teacher and auxiliary staff employment markets.**

In 2016, as part of the statewide Blue Ribbon Task Force, the funding formula for school districts was re-written as part of the deal that saw the state sales tax increase by 0.5% to increase teacher salaries statewide.

Two primary changes to the formula created a negative impact on the Groton Area School District. First, was the elimination of the Pension Fund. The Pension Fund was, prior to 2016, a separate tax that districts levied to cover expenses of employee retirement plans. In the five years prior to elimination of the Pension Fund, the Groton Area School District collected an average of \$189,000 to cover these expenses which are now part of the General Fund.

The second major change is known as the “equalization” of “Other Revenue.” Prior to 2016, these sources of revenue were gains to school districts outside of the state funding formula. Our district was one of the top collectors of other revenues in the state, collecting over \$886,000 in funds annually primarily from Utility Taxes and Wind Farm Taxes. Those revenues contributed greatly to the ability of our school district to offer programs and services above what is minimally required.

Over a five-year period, those sources of revenue were added into our local tax effort reducing our eligibility for State Aid on a dollar-for-dollar basis. The effect is very flat general fund revenues for the past several years during a period of increased competition for hiring qualified personnel and increasing expenditures for normal operating expenses, such as fuel, natural gas, and supplies.

To accommodate the gap, the District has utilized capital outlay dollars as permitted by state law to maintain programming and operations. In fiscal year 2016, the District was using \$100,000 from capital outlay to supplement the general fund budget. As other revenues were equalized, that amount has increased to \$700,000 in fiscal year 2024.

History of Capital Outlay Transfer									
Year	FY2024	FY2023	FY2022	FY2021	FY2020	FY2019	FY2018	FY2017	FY2016
Amount	\$700,000	\$600,000	\$600,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$250,000	\$100,000	\$100,000
Percent of GF Revenue	13.18%	11.20%	11.38%	9.15%	9.68%	9.46%	5.39%	2.22%	2.32%

The ongoing use of Capital Outlay Funds to supplement the General Fund has made it increasingly difficult to maintain District facilities and make improvements so badly needed. One goal of the opt-out is to restore the integrity of the

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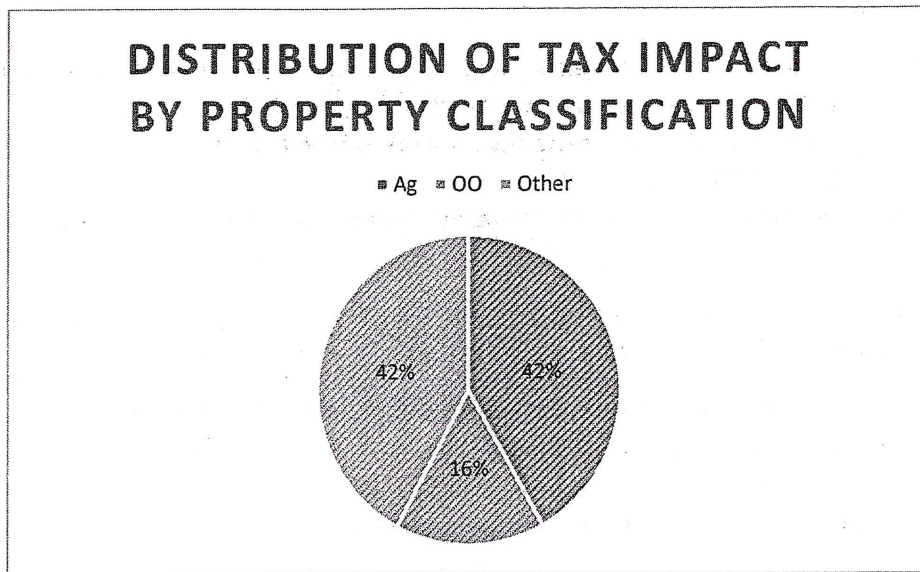
Capital Outlay fund so that it is used solely for traditional capital outlay purposes, such as infrastructure maintenance and improvements, equipment purchases, vehicle and school bus purchases, technology equipment, and textbooks.

Are we alone?

No. In tax year 2024, there are 65 of 148 school districts with an opt-out in place. Forty one of 148 school districts, like us, are utilizing allowable capital outlay flexibility to supplement their general fund. Thirty three of 148 school districts are utilizing both. All these districts have also decided that the programs and services provided to their students and communities are important enough to fund over and above the statutorily defined need.

What is the tax impact?

Based on a proposed opt-out of \$1.25M, the maximum tax impact to ag land is \$0.57 per \$1,000 of taxable valuation. The maximum impact to owner occupied property is \$1.277 per \$1,000 and the maximum impact to other property (i.e. commercial property, utilities) is \$1.642 per \$1,000 of taxable valuation. These estimates are based on taxable valuation projections. If approved, the tax impact would begin in calendar year 2025.



On a statewide basis, the Groton Area School District has some of the lowest tax levies. For taxes payable in 2023, the District had the 12th lowest tax levy for ag property, the 10th lowest tax levy for owner occupied property, and the 7th lowest tax levy for other property.

Calendar Year 2023 Tax Levies			
District	Ag	Owner Occupied	Other
Northwestern Area	2.867	4.553	7.813
Clark	2.916	4.728	8.233
Groton Area (12, 10, 7)	3.593	5.28	8.543
Doland	3.6	5.739	9.875
Langford	3.71	5.396	8.656
Britton-Hecla	3.874	5.56	8.82
Frederick Area	4.404	6.731	11.231
Webster	5.081	6.772	10.042
Warner	5.299	6.985	10.246
Aberdeen	6.492	8.278	11.732

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What if we don't need the full amount of the opt out?

The opt-out sets a top limit for the District, but the District is not required to collect the full amount annually. The Board can decide to use all, some, or none of the opt-out amount available in any given year. Each year, the Board will determine how much is needed and make the request to the county auditors.

How long will this last?

The Board is required to set a term of length for any opt-out. After the time period specified in the resolution, the Board will need to go through the process to start a new one, if deemed necessary.

Resolution

The Governing Board of Groton Area School District 06-6 do state that the above said board is unable to operate under the tax limitation measure currently in statute for the general fund. We therefore opt out of such tax limitation in the amount of **\$1,250,000** starting with calendar year 2024 taxes payable in the calendar year 2025. This opt out will be for **ten years**, which will be through taxes payable in the calendar year 2039. This action has been taken by the board and approved by at least a two-thirds vote of the board.

The decision may be referred to a vote of the people upon a petition signed by at least five percent of the registered voters in the district and filed with the governing board within twenty days of the first publication of this decision.

Unless this action is referred to a vote of the people and reversed by such vote, this resolution authorizes the county auditor to spread an excess levy to raise tax dollars in the above stated amount.

Projected opt-out amounts

Year	CY	CY Opt Out Amount	FY Revenue	FY	Projected short-fall or surplus
0	2024	0.00	0.00	FY2024	
1	2025	1,250,000.00	625,000.00	FY2025	231,205.81
2	2026	1,150,000.00	1,200,000.00	FY2026	-318,108.01
3	2027	1,000,000.00	1,075,000.00	FY2027	-166,651.25
4	2028	1,000,000.00	1,000,000.00	FY2028	-64,400.79
5	2029	1,000,000.00	1,000,000.00	FY2029	-36,332.81
6	2030	1,000,000.00	1,000,000.00	FY2030	-7,422.80
7	2031	1,045,000.00	1,022,500.00	FY2031	-145.48
8	2032	1,062,000.00	1,053,500.00	FY2032	-474.85
9	2033	1,125,000.00	1,093,500.00	FY2033	-8,884.09
10	2034	1,135,000.00	1,130,000.00	FY2034	-12,845.61

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January 10, 2024 BOARD REPORT

BUSINESS MANAGER

BECKY HUBSCH

- The Groton Area School District 2022 audit is complete. The 2023 audit is also being finished, and we should have a final draft approximately by the end of January.
- The Indirect Cost Worksheet has been submitted to DOE. This is the first year DOE has requested this, and it is utilized to figure percentages that can be utilized for indirect costs in grant/federal program funding.
- The Red Rover Platform is live. This system helps align substitutes, leave requests, and employees who clock in and out on one platform. Staff training was completed in December.
- Updating Board personnel files. Please complete the employment packet and provide two forms of identification for your file.
- Election Terms: Green is the year elected, and red is when a board member's term is up for re-election. The board will establish an election date in the January meeting. If the board chooses to stay with an April 9th election date, publishing of notice vacancies will happen between January 15-30th and the earliest date for a candidate to sign the declaration of candidacy to begin petition circulation and the earliest date to file the nomination petition is January 27th. The deadline to file a petition is February 23rd by 5:00 pm.

Board Terms	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Grant Rix				X			X			X			X							
Heather Lerseth-Fliehs													X							
Travis Harder									X			X								
Tigh Fliehs									X			X								
Deborah Gengerke						X			X			X								
Kara Pharis								X			X									
Martin Weismantel		X			X			X			X									

- Processing employee tax reports W-2s, 1099s, and 1095. Will be filing electronically this year.

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Elementary Principal
Board Report

1/10/2024

1. Enrollment

- a. JK – 19
- b. KG – 52 (+1)
- c. 1st – 42
- d. 2nd – 46
- e. 3rd – 43
- f. 4th – 50
- g. 5th – 54 (+1)
- i. Total – 306

2. **South Dakota Comprehensive Needs Assessment Framework and Process:** Our next two meetings we will be looking at our data which will be on January 11 and 12. Some of these pieces of data include SBAC results, parent/teacher/student/staff surveys, teacher/staff interviews, principal interview, teacher lesson plans, etc.
3. **MAPS Testing:** We have finished up our MAPS testing and are currently having grade level meetings to review results/progress and plans for the upcoming semester.
4. **Images of the World:** Elementary PAC has arranged for us to have a school assembly set for May 9th at a time to be determined. Two separate presentations for our lower and upper pod students. This assembly emphasizes social studies, science, geography, history, art, reading, writing, health lifestyle choices, and goal setting. Program choices include:
Land of the Dragon – Exploring the rapidly changing and fascinating culture of China.
Rainforests & Maya Ruins – Mexico & Central America featuring Hispanic culture.
Volcanoes of the World – Around the world combining science and culture.
African Safari – Southern Africa animals, people and culture.
Mummies & Mosques – Ancient civilizations of Egypt and Greece; Islamic culture.
World Bicycle Tour — Our most multicultural program across four continents.
5. **Elementary Track and Field Day:** Tentatively, I have track and field day scheduled for May 10 starting at 12:30 with no makeup day due to limited time/days in May. We will once again encourage parents and families to attend lunch with their child.

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Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

January 10, 2024

HS HVAC Upgrade Work. We're now in the "punch list" phase of competing this project. Luke from Sichmeller Engineering was on site on December 22 to conduct an inspection and provided a list of items that require the contractors to complete.

Fiber Replacement Work. We've made some progress on installation of the fiber. The fiber has been pulled through the pipe between the two buildings and some of the interior fiber line replacement has been completed.

School Van. Last weekend, the District had a van stolen from in front of the hotel the wrestling team was staying at. We've been working through the process of filing an insurance claim for the assumed loss and looking for replacement options.

2024 Legislative Session.

HB1002. Require administration of the ACT to public school students in grade eleven.

HB1020. Revise the method by which completion of a required suicide awareness and prevention training is verified.

HB1021. Merge the Professional Teachers Practices and Standards Commission and the Professional Administrators Practices and Standards Commission.

HB1022. Make an appropriation to the Department of Education to provide professional development in literacy to teachers, and to declare an emergency.

HB1042. Establish parameters for the reimbursement of school districts that provide free or reduced price meals to students.

HB1048. Revise the requirements pertaining to the target teacher salary.

HB1066. Provide a grant to qualifying teachers to incentive recruitment and retention and to make an appropriate therefor.

HB1072. Establish qualifications for members of the Board of Education Standards.

SB2. Remove provisions for establishing a uniform method for calculating high school credit received from completing a postsecondary course.

SB34. Establish and modify provisions related to school safety.

SB51. Revise property tax levies for school districts and to revise the state aid to general and special education formulas. [New proposed levies: Ag \$1.195, OO \$2.694, Other \$5.534]

SB72. Increase the annual limit of tax credits that an insurance company may claim through the partners in education tax credit program.

sasd.org and click on "Link to the SASD 2024 Legislative Bill Tracker"

School Board Meeting Principal Report
MS/HS- Shelby Edwards
01/10/2024

Class Counts-

6th- 40

7th- 44

8th- 43

9th- 41

10th- 45

11th- 46

12th- 40

Total- 299 Students

1. Second MAPS Testing window open until 2/28/2024- Most teachers have completed
2. SASD Leadership Meeting #3- Mitchell, SD- 01/17/2024
3. NEAP Meeting- Watertown, SD- 01/23/2024
4. Starting to look into scheduling for 24-25 school year
5. Continuing revisions of handbook for 24-25 school year

Double Header Basketball Game

Tiospa Zina @ Groton Area

Thursday, January 11, 2024

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena

- 4:00PM → Girls JV
- 5:00PM → Boys JV
- 6:15PM → Girls Varsity
 - *Halftime Entertainment: MS Drumline*
- 7:45PM → Boys Varsity
 - *Halftime Entertainment: HS Drumline*

Prior to the Girls Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$5.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: Tiospa Zina will use the two locker rooms down the JH hallway (two doors on the left). Boys Team will be in the first. The Girls' Team will be in the second.

**Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Tiospa Zina: North Bench**

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: GDlive.com (must pay to watch) or NFHS

JV Officials: Kristi Zoellner, Justin Hanson, Chris Frost

JV Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

JV Book: Alexa Schuring

JV Shot Clock: Joe Schwan

Varsity Officials: Kris Frericks, Kim Zimmerman, Tim Steinwandt

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Varsity Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

National Anthem: Pep Band under the direction of Dez Yeigh.

Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem celebrates tribal flag display, but only two of nine participating so far

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 10, 2024 3:38 PM

PIERRE — Governor Kristi Noem celebrated a new, permanent display of Native American tribal flags in the Capitol Rotunda on Wednesday, but only two of the nine tribes in the state have contributed flags so far.

The two tribal nations whose flags now hang in the Capitol are the Rosebud and Standing Rock Sioux tribes.

Crow Creek Sioux Tribe Chairman Peter Lengkeek attended the flag-raising ceremony even though his tribe is not currently allowing its flag to be displayed. He said the tribe won't contribute its flag until the governor and legislators pass more laws and implement more policies that improve conditions on reservations.

"We want something tangible," Lengkeek said. "We want our children protected in foster care, our missing women brought home."

Noem announced her plan to raise the flags of the state's nine tribes four years ago. In response, six of the nine tribal nations from across the state demanded their flags not be on display. No tribal flags went up in the Rotunda until Wednesday.

Noem's relationships with the state's tribal governments have been contentious at times.

She was at odds with some tribal leaders over their COVID-19 checkpoints on reservation borders during the worst of the pandemic. In response to her support of legislation cracking down on anti-oil pipeline protests, the Oglala Sioux Tribe temporarily banned her from the Pine Ridge Reservation. Last winter, some tribal leaders criticized Noem for an insufficient state response to a winter storm that killed at least six people on the Rosebud Reservation.

Sen. Shawn Bordeaux, D-Mission, is a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and said the tribe shares the same goals as Crow Creek but is taking a different approach to the flag display.

"We're not just saying you can hang our flag here," Bordeaux said. "We expect reciprocity. Noem needed something she could point to and say, 'Look what I've done for Natives.'"

Bordeaux said he is "optimistic and hopeful that all tribes will eventually hang their flags."

Noem described the ceremony as a step toward better "government-to-government relations." The event included traditional Native American prayers, songs and speeches emphasizing the need for continued dialogue and collaboration between the state and the tribes.



The flags of the Standing Rock and Rosebud Sioux tribes, center, stand between the U.S. and South Dakota flags on Jan. 10, 2024, in the Capitol Rotunda in Pierre. (Joshua Haiar/

South Dakota Searchlight)

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The governor's chief of communications, Ian Fury, told South Dakota Searchlight that "these are only the first two to have brought their flags to the Capitol," and the office expects more to come.

State Department of Tribal Relations Secretary David Flute, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, told South Dakota Searchlight that "the governor has been very diplomatic in her approach in working with tribes." Flute described the multi-year effort of getting the flags in the Capitol as "some back and forth, some discussions and negotiations."

"There's been some turnover in tribal leadership," Flute said. "Some of the sentiments have changed."

Rep. Tyler Tordsen, R-Sioux Falls, is a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate. He said tribal members wanting to see more than symbolic gestures in Pierre should stay tuned.

"Discussions are happening," Tordsen said. "Conversations are happening in the education space and the foster care system. You might see some legislation on that."

State of the Tribes

Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribal Vice President Cyndi Weddell delivered the annual State of the Tribes address to legislators after the flag ceremony. Each year, a leader from one of the tribes in the state gives the address.

The speech focused on economic development.

"The future of the tribe depends on the ability to be self-sufficient," Weddell said. "And to continue to grow the tribe's economy in collaboration between the tribe, local, state and federal governments."

Weddell highlighted Native Nations Cannabis, a medical marijuana dispensary she said employs 70 people, and the tribe's gaming industry. She also celebrated successful partnerships with the state, like the development of a nursing home.

She called for the provisions of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act to be enshrined in state laws. The act aims to keep Indigenous foster children with their families and relatives in their own communities to preserve their culture and identity.

"All children should be put in safe, culturally appropriate homes," Weddell said.

The speech came during the first week 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 demographer projects older population over the next decade

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 10, 2024 6:00 PM

South Dakota's population will continue to grow, but at a slower rate, while continuing to become more diverse and elderly in the next couple of decades, according to state demographer and South Dakota State University professor Weiwei Zhang.

Zhang presented her findings, based on census data, to the legislative House State Affairs Committee on Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre.

That projected change in demographics will inform legislative priorities this session and for future sessions, said House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Pierre — especially regarding education, long-term care and workforce development.

"We're just flat out short on people," Mortenson said during the meeting.

South Dakota's unemployment rate was 2% in November 2023, with a record low of 1.8% in June. South

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The sun sets behind the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre on Dec. 5, 2023. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Dakota had 30,000 job openings in August 2023, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Enrollment in public and private schools shrank by more than 600 students this school year. Long-term care facilities — such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities — are preparing for greater strain on the industry as the state's population ages.

South Dakota's population growth of 8.9% from 2010 to 2020 is slightly higher than the national average. The state's growth is expected to slow to about 7% from 2020 to 2030, Zhang said. South Dakota's estimated population stands at over 900,000, according to a September 2023 census report.

Laws should be made "with the next generation and the generation after that in mind," Mortenson said after the meeting.

"We have a massive demographic shift underway," he said. "Our population is growing older. We have more demand for services — from healthcare to manufacturing to education to hospitality — without a suitable number of folks to provide for them. Keeping our kids here and attracting others is paramount for the success of our state and twenty years from now."

Birth rate decreases, but remains higher than national average

Adults older than 65 years are projected to surpass 20% of the state's population by 2030, and children are expected to drop below 20% of the state's population by that time.

A drop in the state's birth rate factors into that demographic switch. Before the COVID pandemic, the state reported 15 live births per 1,000 people. After the pandemic, there are about 12 live births per 1,000 South Dakotans, Zhang said.

That drop in births follows the national and international trend for developed countries, though South Dakota is one of the top states for fertility, which is the number of children born to women of childbearing age. South Dakota ranked highest in the country for fertility rates in 2022, closely followed by North Dakota. The state is on track for "replacement fertility," Zhang said, which means enough babies are being born in the state to replace the prior generation.

Black, Asian and Hispanic South Dakotans are having more babies as their demographic populations rise. White and Native American South Dakotans' birth rates are declining.

Young, educated adults moving to South Dakota

About 3.5% of the state's population is foreign born, with that demographic continuing to grow since 1990. Another 3.5% of the state's population moved to South Dakota from another state.

Slightly more males have moved to South Dakota from other states in 2023, with a large share of migrants holding bachelor's degrees or higher. Most of those new residents are younger — with 50% under the age of 27 — and move from Minnesota, followed by Iowa, Nebraska, California and North Dakota.

Most foreign-born residents are from Asia and Africa, Zhang said.

Mortality rates increase from pandemic

South Dakota's death rate spiked during the COVID pandemic. It dropped in 2021 but is not back to pre-2020 mortality levels, Zhang said.

Counties that include reservations report mortality rate increases of more than 40% in the last few years, highlighting a "great geographic disparity," Zhang said.

Native American males saw the largest decline in life expectancy between 2019 and 2020 — a drop of five years. Hispanic males and Native American females followed with the next largest drop in life expectancies.

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.

Chief justice: Prioritize public defense, problem solving courts and help for young adults

State of Judiciary message updates lawmakers on state court system efforts

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 10, 2024 5:05 PM

South Dakota should embrace the role of public defenders, work to guide young adults out of trouble's way, try harder to protect judges from danger and support problem-solving alternative courts, South Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice Steven Jensen told lawmakers on Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre.

Jensen also touched on potential changes to bar admission for law school graduates, trumpeting the work of a committee that recently recommended a pathway to licensure through public service or rural practice.



South Dakota Supreme Court justices, from left, Scott Myren, Patricia DeVaney, Mark Salter and Janine Kern listen to Chief Justice Steven Jensen deliver his State of the Judiciary message on Jan. 10, 2024, at the Capitol in Pierre. (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

State-level public defense

The Unified Judicial System will ask lawmakers for additional money in two areas, Jensen said. The first request would fund a statewide public defense office, which will assign attorneys to handle appeals of local cases and abuse and neglect cases. The \$1.4 million budget boost would pay for one lead public defender, four staff attorneys and two support staffers.

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That request was an outgrowth of the work from a 13-member task force that met several times last year to discuss issues of indigent defense. When the group first convened, South Dakota was one of two states to saddle counties with the entire financial burden of providing legal representation to those who can't afford to pay lawyers, Jensen said.

Now, South Dakota is the last state in that category.

"This past fall, the other state, Pennsylvania, authorized state funding and oversight for indigent defense for the first time," Jensen said.

The constitutionally protected right to an attorney has become a budget buster for many counties, particularly smaller ones that face high-profile felony trials involving the payment of expert defense witnesses. It's also becoming quite difficult to find lawyers to take on court appointments in rural areas, Jensen said, as the majority of lawyers live in urban areas.

"There are six counties in South Dakota that have no attorneys and 23 counties that have three or fewer lawyers," Jensen said. "The lack of structure, oversight, and inefficiencies in our current indigent defense system has created legal deserts across the state."

Jensen said he hopes the state public defense office will eventually come to serve a broader role in the justice system, offering guidance to counties and court-appointed lawyers and eventually offering legal help in cases before they reach the appeals stage.

An indigent defense commission will oversee the office and guide future changes, he said.

More staff for Sioux Falls

The UJS will also ask for additional money to help the Second Judicial Circuit manage its rapidly growing caseload. That circuit covers the fewest number of counties – just two, Lincoln and Minnehaha – but represents a workload swelling far more quickly than other areas thanks to the growth of Sioux Falls.

In the past 10 years, annual felony caseloads have doubled in the circuit, from 2,267 to 4,441, but there are only two more judges than there were in 2013. Funding another judge and deputy clerk of courts will help manage the workload, he said.

"Our judicial resources in the Second Circuit have simply not kept up with the increasing demands created by population growth and other changes in the circuit," Jensen said.

Gov. Kristi Noem included those positions in her proposed budget.

Problem-solving courts

Jensen, as Noem did the day before in her State of the State address, took time to highlight the value of the state's 17 drug, DUI, veterans and mental health courts. The "problem-solving courts" funnel people with felony charges into an 18- to 20-month program that offers intensive supervision and case management and regular check-ins with other court members.

The courts help address what Jensen described as the "societal problems" of addiction and mental health, frequently factors in the 12,000 felony criminal cases that were filed last year in South Dakota, Jensen said.

The courts save money compared to incarceration and help those who graduate – around 60% of participants, according to the most recent UJS annual report on the courts – work their way into a sober, stable life. A 2018 program assessment found that the courts saved the UJS \$1.6 million between fiscal years 2012 and 2018.

At that point, 486 people had participated in a specialty court program. Jensen told lawmakers on Wednesday that 2,489 people have been served in total, with 1,120 graduating.

He told the stories of three of them during his speech, noting each graduate's past struggles with addiction and highlighting their current successes in their work and family lives.

"Problem-solving courts play a pivotal role in reshaping the narrative around the intersection of criminal justice and treatment by providing intensive, long-term supervision and treatment," Jensen said.

Emerging adults

The recommendations of another summer task force appeared in the speech, as well.

The emerging adults task force took on the question of how best to serve those between 18 and 25 years old. That age group has an out-sized impact on criminal justice costs, Jensen said, and those in it often struggle to manage the basics of responsible adulthood. The task force recommended better supervision for those young people, as well as tailored programs meant to divert them out of the system.

One such pilot program in Mitchell, he said, pairs young offenders with life coaches "to provide a stable influence in their daily life." That program will expand to Yankton this year, he said. Another program in Pennington County has diverted more than 1,000 young people, with 51% completing.

"There are research-based community supervision practices that can support emerging adults' needs, ensure community safety, hold young people more accountable, and reduce recidivism," Jensen said.

Court security

Near the end of his speech, Jensen told lawmakers of an increasing need for security. Courts have adopted additional security measures like metal detectors in recent years, but Jensen said there are now threats outside the courthouse walls.

He pointed to two judges murdered in Wisconsin and Maryland by people unhappy with their decisions, and attempts to kill others in Nevada, Texas and Ohio.

In South Dakota, he said, 40 threats to judges were reported in 2023, with two "credible" threats to the lives of judges.

"In one of these incidents, the assailant was in possession of a cache of weapons," Jensen said. "In the other event, the assailant knew where the judge lived and places the judge frequented."

The court system is working to ensure that personally identifying information does not appear in public documents – a requirement under a law passed in 2022 – and is removed from websites.

"We will keep the Legislature updated on these efforts, including any needs for future funding for such efforts," he said.

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

Another stopgap spending bill in the works as Congress struggles to avert shutdown

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 10, 2024 4:45 PM

WASHINGTON — Congress on Wednesday appeared to be on track to pass a third deadline extension for at least some of the government funding bills that were supposed to become law more than three months ago — putting off a potential government shutdown.

The move, while not final, would give the Republican House, Democratic Senate and Biden administration a few more weeks to reach a bipartisan compromise on the dozen annual appropriations bills.

Meanwhile, a group of 13 House Republicans blocked that chamber from debating unrelated legislation Wednesday as a way of signaling their frustration with a bipartisan spending agreement forged by their leadership during the holiday break.

Montana Republican Rep. Matt Rosendale said shortly afterward during a press conference that group of GOP lawmakers will continue taking "whatever action we can with the tools that are available to us to let the administration know that they are not going to get additional funding for their priorities until we see a secure border."

Rosendale and a few others called for shutting down the government in order to get the changes they

want on immigration and border policy enacted.

While the group could potentially slow down approval of a short-term spending patch or eventually the full-year spending bills, they don't appear to have the votes to block passage in either chamber.

On the question of a stop-gap spending bill, often called a continuing resolution or CR, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, said Tuesday that it was obvious lawmakers would need that extension.

McConnell said the length of that would be up to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, and House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican.

"We need to prevent a government shutdown and so the obvious question is how long does the CR need to be, and that will be up to the majority leader and the speaker to determine the length of the CR," McConnell said. "The simplest things take a week in the Senate, so I think frequently the House doesn't understand how long it takes to get something through the Senate."

Schumer and Johnson weren't ready to say that Congress needs another continuing resolution on Wednesday, though neither ruled it out.

"The pedal is to the metal right now and I'm very hopeful and optimistic that we can meet the deadlines," Johnson said during a press conference.



Montana Republican Rep. Matt Rosendale speaks during a press conference inside the U.S. Capitol on immigration and border policy on Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024. Also pictured from left are Utah Sen. Mike Lee, Florida Sen. Rick Scott, Tennessee Rep. Andy Ogles, Florida Rep. Cory Mills and Illinois Rep. Mary Miller. (Photo by Jennifer Shutt/States Newsroom)

Two deadlines ahead

Schumer said Wednesday during a floor speech that he and Johnson agree there shouldn't be a partial government shutdown. But on Tuesday at a press conference, he declined to say whether he thinks another continuing resolution would be needed.

"You know, the appropriators and their staffs are really good. We have real consensus among the four corners that they want to get something done," Schumer said. "We are going to fight as hard as we can to get this done as soon as possible."

Schumer said Wednesday afternoon that he would "make an assessment tomorrow as to what to do."

Four of the full-year spending bills must pass before Jan. 19, otherwise the federal departments and agencies funded by the Agriculture, Energy-Water, Military Construction-VA and Transportation-HUD spending bills would begin a shutdown.

The departments and agencies in the other eight bills are funded under the last CR through Feb. 2. If Congress doesn't pass another short-term bill or complete work on those full-year bills before that deadline, those departments would begin their shutdowns.

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Democrats and Republicans hashed out an agreement for \$886.3 billion in defense and \$772.7 billion in domestic discretionary spending for the fiscal year that began back on Oct. 1 over the weekend. But Congress has several steps to go before those bills can become law.

The first is for the House and Senate to agree how to divvy up those so-called topline numbers to each of the 12 bills. They'll then need to merge the House and Senate bills into final legislation that can pass both chambers.

'A real challenge'

Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray, a Washington state Democrat, said Tuesday there's no timeline for reaching agreement on those individual funding levels, but said she hopes to get that done as soon as possible.

Murray didn't rule out the idea of using another short-term stopgap spending bill to avoid a shutdown while Congress tries to complete work on the full-year bills.

"Right now we're trying to get our allocations and begin work on our bills," she said. "It's going to be a real challenge."

West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, the top Republican on the Labor-HHS-Education funding panel, said that Murray and the House chairwoman are working out spending levels for the bills, but said she didn't know when those would be finalized.

Capito said if lawmakers move quickly, they could avoid another continuing resolution covering the four spending bills that are due on Jan. 19.

"I think we can finish the ones by next Friday. And that's my preferred route. That's what we should be doing," Capito said. "So I could support a short-term CR, but I'd prefer not to."

Kansas Sen. Jerry Moran, the top Republican on the Commerce-Justice-Science Subcommittee, said he has been instructed to clear "the underbrush, so to speak," referring to small disputes within the bills.

"We're doing, what are the modest kinds of things that need to be resolved," Moran explained. "So, trying to be in a position to be ready to move when we're able to do so."

Moran said the Senate could accomplish its work, but noted he's concerned the House won't be able to pass full-year spending bills.

"If across the line is the Senate, I think that's accomplishable," Moran said. "If across the line includes the House, I still have great concerns about their reaction and capability of advancing appropriation bills."

Arkansas Republican Sen. John Boozman, ranking member on the Military Construction-VA spending panel, said while getting final-year bills enacted will be challenging, there is a path forward.

"The appropriators generally know each other fairly well, the staffs, so they've been informally talking for a long time about this," he said. "They're continuing and I think they're getting a little bit more serious."

But Boozman said lawmakers will need more time to reach agreement than they have under the current stopgap spending law, which covers some of the bills until Jan. 19 and some until Feb. 2.

"I think it's going to be really difficult to get them done in that short of a time frame," he said. "So I would say probably, March is a fair statement."

'Practical, workable solution'

Arkansas Republican Rep. Steve Womack, chairman of the Financial Services spending panel, said Wednesday "a short-term CR seems to be about the only practical, workable solution, short of shutting this government down."

Moving the deadline back to March through that continuing resolution would be a good option, he said.

Once Congress has more time to work out agreement on the full-year spending bills, House Republicans will face hurdles to compromising with the Senate on policy language. House GOP leaders will also have to sort out the differing opinions within the party on when and how the federal government should spend money, Womack said.

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"There's a lot of division within the conference," he said. "It may be a brand new year, but it's kind of the same old song and dance. So whatever we do, it's obvious to me, we're going to have to have some kind of a bipartisan solution because we're just not going to be able to move it on our own."

Florida Republican Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart, chairman of the State-Foreign Operations spending panel, said it's "highly unlikely" that the four bills due by Jan. 19 can become law on time, though he added it's "premature" to talk about the length or details of another continuing resolution.

Díaz-Balart rejected calls from some of his fellow Republicans like Rosendale to tie changes to immigration and border policy to the annual government funding bills.

He said those efforts should remain linked to the supplemental spending bill for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. That spending package is currently separate from the annual appropriations process.

"We've always talked about linking the supplemental to border security," Díaz-Balart said. "And now all of a sudden, I think in an effort to just criticize the speaker, you're trying to link something that none of us ever talked about linking to border security."

Oklahoma Republican Tom Cole, chairman of the Transportation-HUD subcommittee, said he "understands the frustration behind" calls to shut down the government, but said it's a "stupid idea" that won't lead to any victories for the GOP.

"If somebody can show me once where it worked — where somebody shut down the government and then produce the political result that they said they were going to achieve by shutting it down — then, I'll rethink my position," Cole said. "But in my experience, it just simply never works."

Johnson faces potential revolt

Any agreement on the dozen full-year government funding bills could lead some House Republicans to revolt against Speaker Johnson, using the same procedural tool that allows any one lawmaker to call for a vote on the motion to vacate.

Some more conservative House GOP lawmakers have publicly rebuked Johnson for agreeing to the spending levels in the bipartisan deal announced over the weekend.

Johnson said Wednesday that he's "not concerned" about being removed from the speaker's office, though he, like former Speaker Kevin McCarthy, will have little control over that.

"Leadership is tough," Johnson said. "You take a lot of criticism. But remember, I am a hardline conservative. That's what they used to call me. I come from that camp."

Johnson said he agreed with those GOP lawmakers frustrated with the spending deal that Congress needs to cut federal spending, though he also pointed out to them that Republicans have an especially thin majority in the House and don't control the Senate or the White House.

"We have very difficult challenges, but we're going to advance the ball," Johnson said. "We're going to advance our conservative principles, and we are going to demonstrate that we can govern well. And I'm going to keep trudging forward."

On Wednesday, Rosendale, while unhappy with the bipartisan spending deal, rebuffed calls to oust Johnson.

"I would not say that with this group, our intention is to threaten Speaker Johnson with his job," he said. "What we are saying is that we're going to do everything within our power, with the tools that the House of Representatives has... to make sure that we do not continue funding aspects of government until we have a secure border."

Tennessee Republican Rep. Tim Burchett said during that press conference that Congress holds "this country's purse strings and we ought to get some guts in exercising them."

Virginia Republican Rep. Bob Good, chairman of the far-right Freedom Caucus, said during that press conference that he and like-minded "colleagues are prepared to do what's necessary to make a difference."

"The American people elected us to cut our spending, to restore fiscal stability to this Congress, to save the country and to secure the border," Good said. "And we're willing to do whatever it takes."

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

Which states will join the new summer meal program for low-income kids? Here's the list.

South Dakota one of 15 states not participating

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 10, 2024 1:34 PM

WASHINGTON — Children from low-income families in 35 states, four tribes and all U.S. territories will now receive permanent food assistance during the summer months when schools are closed, leaving children in 15 states — including South Dakota — excluded from the benefits.

Low-income families will now receive \$40 each month for each eligible school-aged child, up to \$120, to buy groceries beginning in the summer of 2024. The cash will come via electronic benefit transfer, often called EBT, and will be added to food assistance debit cards.

Congress authorized the program's permanent status in December 2022.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that the program will reach 21 million children — or around 70% of U.S. children eligible for government meal programs — in the states, tribes and territories that signed on to be part of the initial launch.

A list of implementing agencies in those states, tribal lands and territories will be available in the spring of 2024, according to the USDA. USDA is encouraging families to check for updates at www.fns.usda.gov/sebt/household.

Notably the participating four tribes have lands in Oklahoma, Texas and Mississippi, three states that are not part of the launch.

The USDA said other states that will not provide the new grocery benefits for low-income children include: Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Louisiana, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's spokesman, Ian Fury, told South Dakota News Watch in August that because of "South Dakota's record low unemployment rate, our robust existing food programs, and the administrative burden associated with running this program, we declined these particular federal dollars."

Some states are preparing to launch the program in 2025, but the USDA did not identify which ones. Agency language in a press release Wednesday noted that "(w)orking with future implementers is a top priority."

"No kid should have to spend their summer hungry, or without nutritious food," USDA Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small said in the press release.

"Summer EBT is a giant step forward in meeting the needs of our nation's children and families throughout the year, and especially in the summer months."

Schools are typically where low-income children can access free or reduced breakfast or lunch when classes are in session. Those children become vulnerable to hunger during the summer months, according to the USDA and several organizations that monitor child nutrition assistance.



A sign noting the acceptance of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards that are used by state welfare departments to issue benefits is displayed at a grocery store in 2019 in Oakland, California. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Pilot programs

USDA cites success during several pilot programs conducted during the summers of 2012 to 2013 as the

basis to recommend the new benefit. During the test programs, amounts ranging from \$30 to \$60 were provided during summers for families already enrolled in other summer nutrition assistance or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, otherwise known as WIC.

The new program will expand the reach of already established summer meal programs, according to the USDA. Those programs include free summer meals via delivery or at designated community sites. Private nonprofits, local government agencies and youth sports programs are often the sponsors and played a significant role as the program expanded beyond summer during pandemic school closures.

Participation in those programs has decreased since the pandemic, according to an analysis by the Food Research and Action Center, or FRAC. The advocacy organization attributes the decrease in part to Congress' delay in greenlighting community sponsors to operate the programs in 2022.

Top-ranking states for participation in the summer lunch programs in 2021 and 2022, according to FRAC's analysis, included New Jersey, New York, Vermont, New Mexico and Maryland. The lowest-ranking states for average daily participation were Texas, Alaska, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Louisiana and Nebraska.

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

Wounded Knee descendants decide not to burn artifacts

BY: AMELIA SCHAFER, RAPID CITY JOURNAL/ICT - JANUARY 10, 2024 6:00 AM

RAPID CITY — More than 150 recently repatriated artifacts from the Wounded Knee Massacre were set to be burned. Instead, tribal leaders from the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and later the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe asked to halt the ceremony.

On Dec. 29, instead of burning the artifacts, descendants of Wounded Knee Massacre survivors gathered to pray, sing and remember the over 300 Lakota men, women and children killed by the United States military.

The issue stems from disagreements over what to do with items repatriated from the Woods Memorial Library's Founders Museum Collection in Barre, Massachusetts. While one group of descendants planned to burn artifacts, others requested more time to consider alternatives.

In November 2022, the Woods Memorial Library's Founders Museum gave items back to a group of descendants of Wounded Knee survivors. The group, Si'Tanka Ta' Oyate O'mniceye (Descendants of the Si' Tanka (Big Foot) Nation), is comprised of Mniconju and Hunkpapa Lakota survivor descendants most of whom live in the Oglala area on Pine Ridge.

Following the massacre, several survivors chose to settle in the Oglala area, said the group's historian Michael He Crow, Mniconju Lakota. He Crow's own family settled in the Oglala area after the massacre.

The repatriated artifacts had been taken from the mass graves of Wounded Knee Massacre victims



The Woods Memorial Library in Barre, Massachusetts, repatriated over 150 items to a group of Wounded Knee Massacre descendants. (Photo courtesy of Cedric Broken Nose)

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killed in 1890. The military had been sent to Pine Ridge to stop a potential "Indian uprising." Instead, they encountered a band of mostly Mniconju Lakota led by Chief Spotted Elk (nicknamed Big Foot by the military). The military misinterpreted the group's ghost dance songs as an intent to attack and opened fire on the band.

The items returned from the Founders Museum were stolen from the graves of Wounded Knee victims. Most of the items are clothing – moccasins and ghost dance shirts. Some moccasins have blood splatters on them. The rest of the items are several peace pipes, hand drums, a few dolls, two tomahawks, a bow with arrows and a few beaded lizard and turtle amulets/pouches containing umbilical cords.

Mixed in amongst the artifacts are items from other tribes – Ojibwe-style moccasins, Dakota and Cheyenne beadwork and other items.

The Founders Museum is a private collection of items. As such it is exempt from provisions from the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The repatriation did not have to follow federal guidelines. Instead, it was "inspired by NAGPRA," according to the museum's initial press release. As such, the items were given back to a group of the museum's choice.

The Founders Museum did not respond to requests for comment about the repatriation process.

Since the artifacts were returned, the group has hosted public meetings once a month, sometimes twice a month, for community members. The meetings were meant to be a way for survivor descendants to voice their opinions, He Crow said.

"The Cheyenne River tribe supported what we planned to do up until October of this year (2023)," He Crow said.

The tribe published a statement on the eve of the Wounded Knee ceremony voicing its opposition to burning the artifacts.

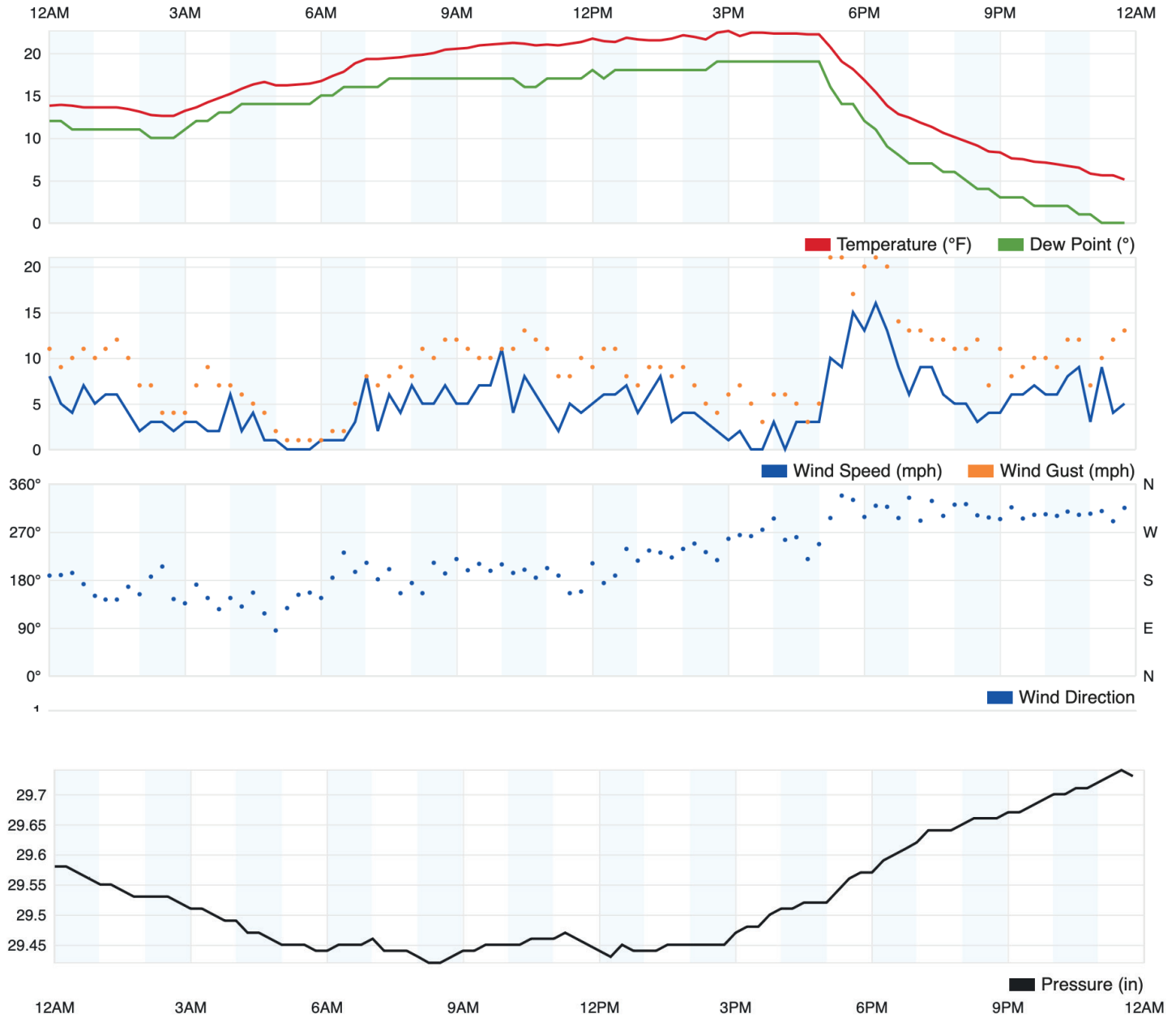
"The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and many Wounded Knee descendants have not seen the artifacts that were repatriated by the Barre Museum," a press release from the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe said. "Accordingly, we ask that any proposal to burn the artifacts be halted and we propose a joint meeting between the Oglala Sioux Tribe, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and our Wounded Knee survivor associations be held in the coming days so that we can meet and discuss the artifacts and our plans concerning the artifacts."

Amelia Schafer covers Indigenous communities in the South Dakota area as part of a partnership between the Rapid City Journal and ICT, an independent, nonprofit news enterprise that covers Indigenous peoples.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thu Jan 11	Fri Jan 12	Sat Jan 13	Sun Jan 14	Mon Jan 15	Tue Jan 16	Wed Jan 17
7°F	2°F	-3°F	-5°F	0°F	7°F	12°F
-4°F	-7°F	-13°F	-10°F	-8°F	-1°F	2°F
WNW	N	NNW	NW	WNW	W	W
16 MPH	21 MPH	26 MPH	17 MPH	18 MPH	13 MPH	16 MPH
	30%	60%				



Bitterly Cold Temperatures

January 11, 2024

3:00 AM

weekend highs around zero or colder

Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)

	1/11 Thu	1/12 Fri	1/13 Sat	1/14 Sun	1/15 Mon
Aberdeen	7	2	-3	-4	1
Britton	7	2	-3	-5	-1
Brookings	8	6	-2	-8	-4
Chamberlain	8	3	-3	-5	3
Clark	5	0	-6	-9	-4
Eagle Butte	6	-1	-10	-7	4
Ellendale	6	0	-4	-5	-1
Eureka	4	-1	-6	-7	0
Gettysburg	4	-2	-8	-8	1
Huron	8	4	-1	-5	1
Kennebec	8	1	-5	-7	3
McIntosh	5	-2	-10	-8	1
Milbank	9	6	-1	-5	-1
Miller	6	0	-6	-7	0
Mobridge	7	1	-6	-5	4
Murdo	8	1	-8	-8	3
Pierre	9	3	-5	-4	6
Redfield	7	1	-3	-5	0
Sisseton	8	4	-2	-5	-2
Watertown	6	3	-4	-8	-4
Webster	5	0	-5	-8	-4
Wheaton	9	5	-1	-5	-2

Minimum Temperature Forecast (°F)

	1/11 Thu	1/12 Fri	1/13 Sat	1/14 Sun	1/15 Mon
Aberdeen	-9	-9	-19	-19	-13
Britton	-8	-9	-18	-18	-13
Brookings	-6	-7	-20	-20	-16
Chamberlain	-8	-9	-20	-20	-13
Clark	-7	-10	-20	-20	-15
Eagle Butte	-11	-15	-21	-21	-14
Ellendale	-10	-10	-18	-18	-14
Eureka	-12	-13	-21	-21	-15
Gettysburg	-11	-14	-22	-22	-14
Huron	-7	-7	-19	-19	-13
Kennebec	-7	-11	-23	-23	-14
McIntosh	-12	-16	-21	-21	-15
Milbank	-5	-6	-16	-16	-13
Miller	-9	-11	-21	-21	-13
Mobridge	-9	-11	-20	-20	-12
Murdo	-10	-14	-24	-24	-15
Pierre	-7	-10	-20	-20	-11
Redfield	-7	-9	-20	-20	-13
Sisseton	-6	-6	-15	-15	-13
Watertown	-7	-9	-20	-20	-16
Webster	-8	-9	-19	-19	-15
Wheaton	-4	-6	-15	-15	-13



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Very cold surface high pressure will bring bitterly cold wind chills to the region tonight and through the entire weekend.

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January 11, 2024
3:07 AM

DRESSING FOR COLD WEATHER

adding layers will help keep you warm as the temperature drops

CHILLY

- 1-2 layers
- long layer
- outer layer to keep out wind, rain
- warm shoes water proof

COLD

- 2-3 layers
- gloves
- warm hat
- outer layer to keep out wind, wet snow
- boots water proof
- 1-2 layers

EXTREME COLD

- 3+ layers 1 insulating
- gloves
- warm hat
- face mask
- outer layer to keep out wind
- boots water proof
- 2+ layers

weather.gov/safety

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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



Dangerously Cold Wind Chills

January 11, 2024
3:03 AM

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	1/11 Thu		1/12 Fri		1/13 Sat		1/14 Sun		1/15 Mon										
	6am	12pm	6am	12pm	6am	12pm	6am	12pm	6am	12pm									
Aberdeen	24	23	20	20	23	31	31	35	37	37	35	29	25	26	25	24	26	28	23
Britton	24	24	18	18	21	30	30	32	33	36	33	30	25	26	25	25	26	28	25
Brookings	18	18	17	22	26	29	29	31	35	35	29	24	24	25	24	25	26	28	25
Chamberlain	22	23	20	17	18	22	26	35	38	38	29	25	26	29	28	29	30	32	24
Clark	24	22	18	20	23	32	31	37	37	38	36	33	26	26	26	26	29	29	28
Eagle Butte	29	26	18	15	20	32	37	45	45	45	40	32	31	32	32	32	33	32	25
Ellendale	30	28	20	21	23	32	33	37	39	38	36	33	26	28	26	26	30	30	26
Eureka	30	30	20	15	20	30	29	38	39	39	37	33	31	31	30	30	33	33	29
Gettysburg	30	29	20	17	21	31	32	40	41	44	38	33	30	31	29	30	31	31	26
Huron	23	23	21	22	26	30	30	33	38	38	31	24	25	26	25	26	29	29	24
Kennebec	25	26	20	16	17	29	33	43	45	46	38	35	29	31	29	29	30	32	23
McIntosh	31	30	20	18	21	33	38	46	46	48	41	35	33	36	32	31	32	33	28
Milbank	21	20	16	18	23	32	32	33	33	35	35	35	26	26	28	26	29	29	28
Miller	23	23	17	16	18	28	28	36	39	39	35	31	28	29	28	28	30	31	26
Mobridge	26	26	20	14	18	29	32	39	40	39	38	29	28	29	26	26	26	28	23
Murdo	24	25	17	13	17	29	36	44	46	46	38	30	28	31	29	29	29	29	22
Pierre	22	23	17	12	16	26	32	39	39	41	36	29	26	28	28	28	28	28	22
Redfield	23	23	18	18	23	31	30	36	37	38	36	31	26	28	25	25	28	29	25
Sisseton	26	25	20	18	22	33	32	35	36	38	35	35	29	29	29	29	31	31	29
Watertown	22	20	16	18	22	31	30	32	33	36	33	32	26	26	28	28	30	30	28
Webster	28	25	21	21	25	36	33	37	38	40	37	36	26	28	26	28	30	31	28
Wheaton	22	22	18	18	21	31	30	31	32	33	33	33	26	26	26	26	28	28	28

Minimum Wind Chill Forecast (°F)

	1/11 Thu		1/12 Fri		1/13 Sat		1/14 Sun		1/15 Mon											
	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm								
Aberdeen	-18	-21	-16	-20	-24	-28	-21	-26	-32	-33	-29	-34	-39	-35	-30	-30	-33	-34	-25	-27
Britton	-17	-20	-16	-18	-24	-25	-21	-25	-32	-33	-30	-35	-38	-36	-31	-31	-32	-34	-28	-29
Brookings	-16	-18	-12	-16	-20	-21	-17	-20	-24	-27	-27	-33	-36	-38	-33	-34	-34	-34	-28	-29
Chamberlain	-12	-15	-11	-16	-20	-20	-17	-22	-29	-32	-29	-32	-36	-39	-32	-33	-34	-35	-25	-26
Clark	-18	-21	-17	-18	-23	-25	-25	-27	-34	-36	-33	-38	-42	-39	-36	-33	-35	-36	-31	-30
Eagle Butte	-23	-23	-20	-20	-25	-28	-27	-32	-43	-45	-42	-45	-47	-42	-38	-37	-39	-38	-29	-27
Ellendale	-20	-25	-19	-22	-25	-29	-24	-27	-35	-36	-32	-37	-41	-38	-34	-33	-35	-36	-28	-28
Eureka	-24	-26	-22	-22	-26	-29	-25	-29	-40	-42	-37	-41	-47	-41	-35	-35	-37	-39	-31	-29
Gettysburg	-28	-25	-21	-22	-26	-28	-28	-29	-39	-41	-39	-43	-47	-42	-38	-36	-37	-38	-30	-28
Huron	-15	-19	-14	-19	-23	-24	-19	-20	-24	-28	-29	-32	-35	-36	-32	-31	-32	-34	-26	-26
Kennebec	-15	-16	-15	-16	-20	-22	-23	-28	-37	-39	-35	-40	-45	-41	-35	-36	-37	-37	-26	-26
McIntosh	-26	-28	-24	-22	-28	-31	-29	-34	-45	-47	-43	-47	-49	-46	-41	-37	-40	-39	-29	-28
Milbank	-12	-15	-10	-14	-19	-23	-21	-21	-29	-30	-27	-34	-38	-35	-30	-32	-31	-32	-28	-27
Miller	-20	-20	-17	-19	-22	-26	-24	-27	-35	-36	-35	-39	-44	-39	-35	-33	-35	-36	-29	-27
Mobridge	-23	-23	-18	-18	-23	-25	-23	-27	-36	-37	-35	-39	-42	-38	-34	-31	-33	-34	-26	-25
Murdo	-15	-17	-15	-18	-21	-25	-25	-29	-41	-42	-39	-45	-47	-43	-38	-36	-39	-39	-28	-27
Pierre	-13	-14	-12	-13	-17	-20	-20	-23	-34	-36	-34	-37	-41	-38	-34	-32	-33	-34	-24	-23
Redfield	-20	-22	-15	-17	-23	-25	-21	-25	-32	-34	-31	-36	-41	-37	-31	-32	-32	-34	-27	-27
Sisseton	-15	-18	-14	-17	-22	-25	-21	-23	-31	-32	-29	-34	-38	-36	-31	-30	-32	-32	-29	-26
Watertown	-16	-19	-14	-15	-21	-24	-21	-24	-32	-34	-31	-36	-42	-39	-34	-34	-35	-36	-32	-30
Webster	-20	-23	-19	-19	-24	-26	-26	-28	-34	-35	-34	-39	-42	-39	-34	-34	-35	-36	-33	-32
Wheaton	-11	-16	-13	-15	-20	-21	-19	-21	-27	-29	-27	-33	-36	-34	-30	-29	-30	-30	-28	-28

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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 23 °F at 3:01 PM

Low Temp: 6 °F at 11:27 PM

Wind: 21 mph at 5:13 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 3 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 1987

Record Low: -31 in 1912

Average High: 23

Average Low: 2

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.23

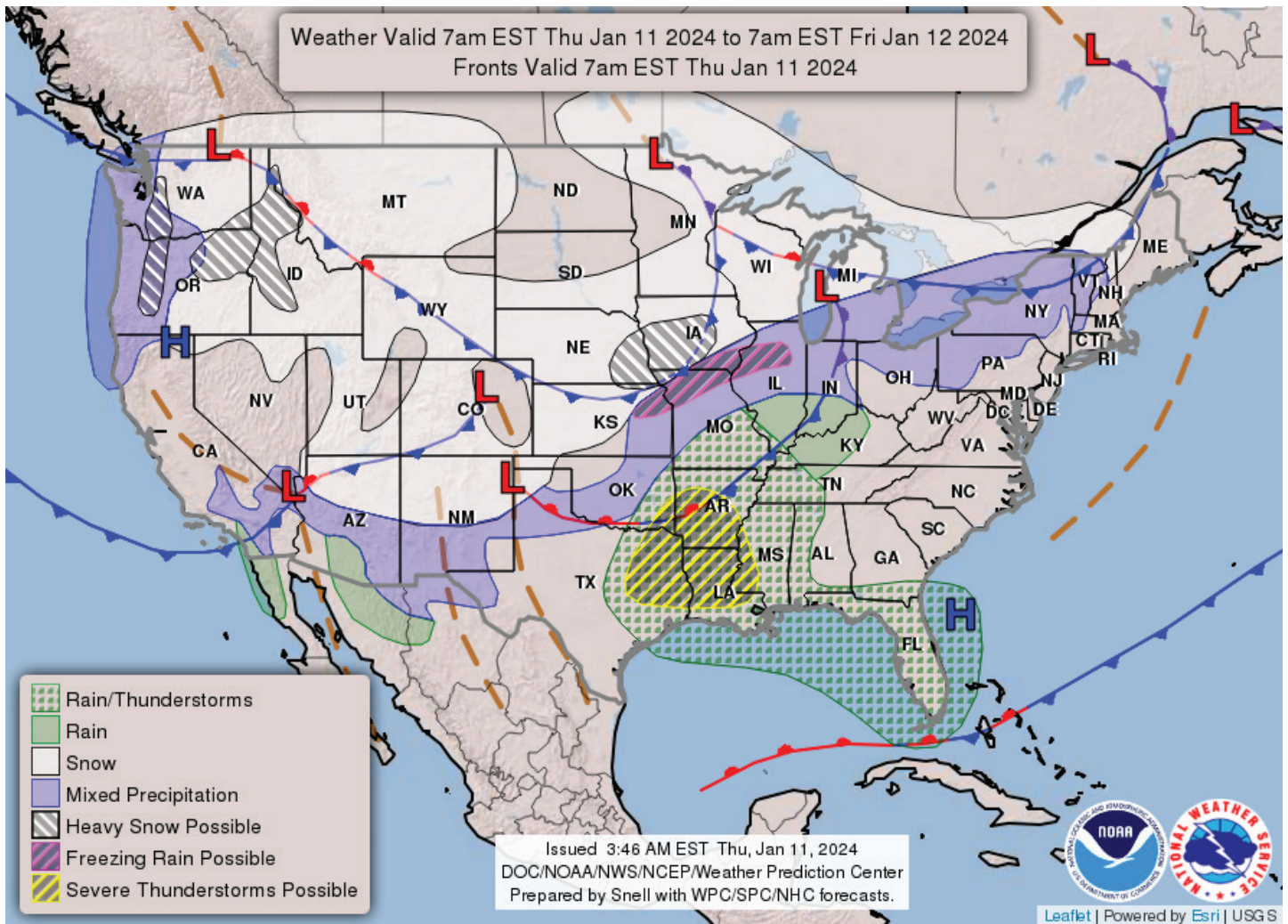
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.23

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:11:45 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:16 am



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Today in Weather History

January 11, 1980: A strong area of low pressure resulted in strong winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts to 70 mph across Minnesota on the 11th and 12th. Blowing and drifting snow made roads hazardous or impossible. The strong winds also caused some damage. There were areas in western Minnesota that had a lot of blowing dirt.

January 11, 1995: A combination of an ice storm, heavy frost accumulation, and strong winds for several days caused widespread damage to electrical systems resulting in power outages across central and north-central South Dakota. The first ice storm occurred on the 11th and the 12th. In the days following, widespread fog developed and resulted in additional heavy deposits of ice and frost on power lines and other surfaces. Much of the damage occurred when strong winds, mainly from the 16 through the 18th, caused the heavily weighted power lines and poles to collapse. Power outages lasted as long as eight days. Several electric cooperatives had never experienced damages of this magnitude. Some traffic accidents resulted from icing, and many vehicles slid off the roads. The property damage was estimated at 3.5 million dollars.

January 11, 2009: A vigorous but fast-moving winter storm system moved through the Dakotas last night and early today. Although snow accumulations from the storm only ranged from 1 to 4 inches, strong winds behind the system produced significant blowing and drifting snow and widespread blizzard conditions across the area. Reports from trained spotters and law enforcement indicated visibility dropped to below one-quarter mile for several hours and near-zero (white-out conditions) in many rural or unsheltered areas. Sustained north to northwest winds at many locations was 20 to 35 mph, with peak wind gusts as high as 60 to 65 mph. As the arctic airmass surged into the region, temperatures fell some 30 degrees from early this morning to mid-afternoon. Click [HERE](#) for webcam images.

1898: An estimated F4 tornado struck the city of Fort Smith, Arkansas, just before midnight. The tornado, which touched down about 100 miles southwest of town, killed 55 people and injured 113 others along its track.

1918: A powerful area of low pressure brought snow and bitterly cold temperatures to Chattanooga, Little Rock, and Shreveport. Birmingham, Alabama, picked up an inch of snow. In far southeastern Alabama, an estimated F3 tornado virtually damaged every building in the town of Webb. The tornado leveled one rural school, killing one teacher and seven students. Please note, the date on the historical marker is an error. January 10th in 1918 was a Thursday.

1963: An F2 tornado was reported in Scott County, Indiana, north of Louisville, Kentucky. It was on the ground for 5 miles north of Scottsburg and damaged or destroyed several homes and barns.

1972: Downslope winds hit the eastern slopes of the Rockies in northern Colorado and southeastern Wyoming. Boulder CO reported wind gusts to 143 mph and twenty-five million dollars property damage.

1987 - A storm in the northeastern U.S. buried the mountains of central Vermont with up to 26 inches of snow, and snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to 27 inches at Telos Lake. Winds gusted to 45 mph at Newark NJ and Albany NY. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow and high winds in Utah resulted in a fifty car pile-up along Interstate 15. Winds in Wyoming gusted to 115 mph at Rendezvous Peak. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A cold front which the previous day produced 21 inches of snow at Stampede Pass WA and wind gusts to 75 mph at Mammoth Lakes CA, spread snow across Colorado. Totals in Colorado ranged up to 17 inches at Steamboat Springs. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Strong northwesterly winds associated with a deep low pressure system crossing the Upper Great Lakes Region ushered cold air into the central U.S. Winds gusted to 72 mph at Fort Dodge IA, and wind gusts reached 75 mph at Yankton SD. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in northwestern Minnesota. Squalls produced heavy snow in parts of Upper Michigan and northern Lower Michigan, with 16 inches reported at Wakefield. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2008 - Iraqis in Baghdad woke up to the novelty of falling snowflakes as the city experienced its first snowfall in about 100 years. (NCDC)

2010: Bitter cold temperatures gripped central and southern Florida with lows in the teens and 30s.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GOD'S MASTER PLAN

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle studied to be a physician. After completing his studies, he established a medical partnership with a friend. It did not go well, and they soon parted ways.

Shortly afterward, he opened his own practice. Initially, he had very few patients, and to pass away the long, boring days, he began to write fictitious crime stories. His first writings were not well received. But, since he had empty hours to fill, he continued to write.

Two of his characters were Sherlock Holmes and Watson. He framed his stories around much of the information he learned while studying to become a doctor. He also applied the concept of "differential diagnosis" from the field of medicine to his writings. This intriguing method of writing mystery stories brought great interest and attention to his works. Applying this idea to his books was genius, and he gave up medicine and began a new career.

Some may wonder why he did not go directly into writing crime stories rather than the field of medicine. Yes, that was an option. But it was his understanding of "differential diagnosis" that he learned in medical school that made his crime stories different and brought him success.

Often we have difficulty getting through "things" that seem stupid or foolish, troubling, and worthless, tedious, and even frustrating. However, God has an individual plan for each of us – and sometimes, the journey to get to the destination takes time. But the mission is worth it!

Prayer: Help us, Father, to be patient and open while You prepare us for our life's work. May we be willing to do our best to develop our talents carefully and wisely for You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28



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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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Groton, SD 57445-0034

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www.397news.com

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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: 1 Days 17 Hrs 11 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.10.24

7 19 27 38 51 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,300,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 26 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.10.24

2 3 15 22 30 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 41 Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.10.24

2 28 30 31 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 41 Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.10.24

2 7 27 34 51 19

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 10 Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.10.24

25 40 43 48 50 11

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$77,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 10 Mins 12 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

A North Dakota lawmaker is removed from a committee after insulting police in a DUI stop

By JACK DURA Associated Press

A North Dakota lawmaker has been stripped of his committee assignment as calls have grown for him to resign after he blasted police with vulgar, homophobic, and anti-migrant language during a traffic stop in which he was arrested on a drunken driving charge.

In a letter requested by The Associated Press, Republican House Majority Leader Mike Lefor on Tuesday notified Republican state Rep. Nico Rios, of Williston, that he has removed him from the Legislature's interim Judiciary Committee, effective immediately.

The House-Senate panel meets throughout the year and a half between North Dakota's biennial legislative sessions. The committee handles studies of topics involving law enforcement and the legal system for future and potential legislation.

Lefor said he didn't think it would be fair for law enforcement officers to testify in front of a committee of which Rios is a member.

Rios did not immediately respond to an email or text message for comment.

Lefor and state and local Republican Party officials called on Rios to resign after the Dec. 15 traffic stop. Lefor said Wednesday he still wants Rios to step down.

Rios has said he is "seriously mulling all aspects" of his future, and plans to seek help for issues with alcoholism, but he made no immediate plans to resign. He also previously said he takes responsibility for his "disgusting actions," and apologized "to those I have hurt and disappointed," including law enforcement officers.

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

Rios has said he was leaving a Christmas party before police pulled him over. He was charged with misdemeanor counts of drunken driving and refusing to provide a chemical test. He is scheduled for a pretrial conference on Feb. 5 in municipal court.

Rios, who works in an oil field position involved in the hydraulic fracturing of wells, was elected unopposed in 2022 to a four-year term in the state House of Representatives. Republicans control the House, 82-12.

Tribal flags celebrated at South Dakota Capitol, but one leader sees more still to do

By JACK DURA Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem and tribal leaders celebrated the new display of two tribal nations' flags on Wednesday at the South Dakota Capitol as a symbol of unity. But at least one tribe sees more to be done before it gives its flag.

Representatives of the Standing Rock and Rosebud Sioux tribes presented their flags, three years after Noem signed legislation to display flags in the state Capitol of the nine tribal nations within South Dakota's boundaries.

While relations between Noem and various tribes have not been without tension during her tenure, tribal leaders praised the move as cooperative and unifying.

"For me, we want to build these relationships so we can help our people," Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairwoman Janet Alkire said in an interview.

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Alkire said the flag display signifies a spirit of cooperation and commitment to ensuring a state-tribal partnership.

Standing Rock, which straddles the North Dakota-South Dakota border, also has its flag displayed at the North Dakota Capitol. Gov. Doug Burgum in 2019 announced the display of tribal flags in that statehouse.

Alkire said she would like South Dakota lawmakers to see the flag and her tribe's colors as they perform their duties to the state and to know they represent Standing Rock, too.

Noem highlighted state-tribal relationships and agreements on such issues as law enforcement, sales tax collections and distributions, social services, Medicaid, and other areas.

"It has been my great honor to work with our tribal nations," Noem said. "It has been a privilege for me to be able to spend time with them, to be able to learn the culture and more in-depth, and to be a part of the way of life that they enjoy and that they share with future generations and share with me and my family."

But the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe isn't ready to offer its flag, "not the way things are now," Crow Creek Sioux Tribal Chairman Peter Lengkeek said.

"We don't see enough transparency, enough accountability. We don't see any acknowledgement of the tribes," Lengkeek said. "The governor, these legislators, they'll stand there and say we have these nine tribes and this and that, but true acknowledgement of tribes, I have not seen yet."

Noem has drawn the ire of tribes over the years. In 2019, the Oglala Sioux Tribe declared her unwelcome on its reservation after she supported legislation targeting pipeline protests; the tribe later rescinded the move. In 2020, Noem clashed with two tribes over highway checkpoints implemented to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In 2021, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe disputed in court with Noem over her effort to shoot Independence Day fireworks at Mount Rushmore. And last year, the Crow Creek Sioux tribal chairman criticized the emergency response to a deadly snowstorm.

Noem's spokesman, Ian Fury, said the 2021 legislation offered the tribes the opportunity to gift their flags to the state. The governor's office is talking to the seven tribes who have yet to do so and "reiterating that invitation," Fury said.

Democratic state Sen. Shawn Bordeaux, a former Rosebud tribal councilman, quipped that he stole the idea from North Dakota. He was key in the efforts to advance a Capitol display of tribal flags, begun in 2019. He said he'd like to keep disagreements from years ago over the Keystone XL oil pipeline in the past.

"I talked about my children coming to the Capitol, embracing the fact that their flag is hanging here. I want to look forward, but it's not pretty looking back," Bordeaux said.

The ceremony occurred during the opening week of South Dakota's legislative session. Eight of 105 state lawmakers are tribal members.

Later in the day, Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribal Vice President Cyndi Allen-Weddell addressed the Legislature and spoke about her tribe. She praised collaborative legislation in the past, including development of a skilled nursing home on the tribe's reservation and authorizing state reimbursement to the tribe for Medicaid-eligible patients.

"The tribe urges the state to collaborate with it and the other tribes in South Dakota to create a better South Dakota," she said.

Ukraine's Zelenskyy rules out a cease-fire with Russia, saying Moscow would use it to rearm

By JIM HEINTZ and ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday ruled out a cease-fire in his country's war with Russia, saying the Kremlin's forces would use the pause to rearm and regroup before overwhelming Kyiv's troops.

"A pause on the Ukrainian battlefield will not mean a pause in the war," Zelenskyy said during a visit to Estonia.

"A pause would play into (Russia's) hands," he said. "It might crush us afterward."

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Limited cease-fires have occasionally been proposed since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 but have never taken hold.

Both sides are scrambling to replenish their weapons after 22 months of fighting and with the prospect of a protracted conflict. With the roughly 1,500-kilometer (630-mile) front line mostly static during freezing winter weather, they both require artillery shells, missiles and drones that enable long-range strikes.

Zelenskyy noted that Moscow is allegedly buying artillery shells and missiles from North Korea and drones from Iran.

Zelenskyy was in the Estonian capital Tallinn as part of a two-day swing through Baltic countries which have been among Ukraine's staunchest supporters in the war.

The Ukrainian president is pressing allies to provide his country with more support, after already receiving billions of dollars in military aid from its Western allies.

"Ukraine needs more, it needs better weapons," Estonian President Alar Karis said during a joint news conference with Zelenskyy at the Presidential Palace.

"We must boost military production capabilities so that Ukraine may get what it needs," he said. "And it's not tomorrow, they should get it today."

Karis noted that European Union countries have so far provided 85 billion euros (\$93 billion) of support for Ukraine.

But the flow of support has slowed, alarming Ukrainians who would find it hard to stand alone against their bigger neighbor.

A plan by the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden to send \$60 billion in new funding to Kyiv is being held up in Congress. Europe's pledge in March to provide 1 million artillery shells within 12 months has fallen short, with only about 300,000 delivered so far.

Zelenskyy says Ukraine particularly needs air defense systems to fend off Russian aerial onslaughts that have repeatedly hit civilian areas, though Moscow officials insist they aim only at military targets.

Recent massive Russian barrages — more than 500 drones and missiles were fired between Dec. 29 and Jan. 2, according to officials in Kyiv — are using up Ukraine's air defense resources and leaving the country vulnerable unless it can secure further weapons supplies.

Zelenskyy won a pledge of more support from Lithuania on Wednesday, and was heading to Latvia after Estonia.

The small eastern European countries are among Ukraine's staunchest political, financial and military supporters. Some people in the Baltics worry that they could be Moscow's next target.

The three countries were seized and annexed by Josef Stalin during World War II and regained independence with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. They joined NATO in 2004, placing themselves under the military protection of the U.S. and its Western allies.

A Russian S-300 missile hit a hotel in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, late Wednesday, injuring 13 people including a Turkish journalist, regional Governor Oleh Syniehubov said. The city has been attacked for four consecutive nights, the governor said.

Live updates | UN top court hears genocide allegation as Israel focuses fighting in central Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

The United Nations' top court began hearings Thursday for South Africa's allegation that Israel's war with Hamas amounts to genocide against Palestinians. Israel strongly denies the claim. Although the case is likely to take years to resolve, South Africa is asking the International Court of Justice to order an immediate suspension of Israel's military offensive in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli military operations in Gaza have lately focused on the southern city of Khan Younis and urban refugee camps in the territory's center. Hundreds of people have been killed in recent days in strikes across the territory, including in areas of the far south where Israel told people to seek refuge.

Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been meeting with leaders across the Mideast,

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seeking to rally the region behind postwar plans for Gaza. Blinken spoke with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Wednesday about a reformed Palestinian Authority governing Gaza once the war is over. Blinken then flew to Manama, the capital of the tiny Gulf nation of Bahrain.

The Oct. 7 Hamas attack from Gaza into southern Israel that triggered the war killed around 1,200 people and saw some 250 others taken hostage by militants. 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:

— The U.N.'s top court opens hearings on South Africa's allegation that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

— Blinken seeks Palestinian governance reform for postwar Gaza.

— The Israeli military says it found traces of hostages in an underground tunnel in Gaza.

— Nelson Mandela's support for Palestinians endures with South Africa's genocide case against Israel.

— Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's what's happening in the war:

LAWYER FOR SOUTH AFRICA TELLS THE WORLD COURT THAT PALESTINIANS HAVE NOWHERE SAFE TO GO

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — A lawyer representing South Africa's legal team says Palestinians under Israeli bombardment have nowhere safe to go.

In her address Thursday to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Adila Hassim said Palestinians in Gaza "are killed in their homes in places where they seek shelter, in hospitals, in schools or in mosques, in churches." She said Palestinians have been killed if they did not follow Israeli orders to evacuate, but also if they evacuated to Israeli-designated safe corridors.

"The level of killing is so extensive that those whose bodies are found buried in mass graves often unidentified," Hassim said.

South Africa is trying to prove to the court that Israel is committing genocide in its war against Hamas in Gaza. Israel vehemently denies the allegation, saying it is battling militants in a war of self-defense after Hamas' deadly Oct. 7 attack.

TOP UN COURT OPENS HEARINGS ON SOUTH AFRICA ACCUSING ISRAEL OF GENOCIDE IN GAZA

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Judges filed solemnly into the International Court of Justice on Thursday to hear two days of legal arguments in a case filed by South Africa accusing Israel of genocide in its Gaza war. Israel rejects the allegation.

Lawyers for South Africa will ask judges at Thursday's hearings to impose binding preliminary orders on Israel, including an immediate halt to Israel's military campaign in Gaza.

Ahead of the proceedings, hundreds of pro-Israeli protesters marched close to the courthouse with banners saying "Bring them home," referring to the hostages still held by Hamas. Among the crowds, people were holding Israeli and Dutch flags.

Outside the court, others were protesting and waving the Palestinian flag in support of South Africa's move.

GENOCIDE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST ISRAEL ARE UNFOUNDED, US STATE DEPARTMENT SPOKESPERSON SAYS

TEL AVIV, Israel — State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller says accusations that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are unfounded, hours before the International Court of Justice in The Hague begins to hear South Africa's case against Israel.

Miller said late Wednesday that the court "plays a vital role in the peaceful settlement of disputes," but he said Israel had the right to defend itself and said it was Israel's enemies who were calling for the "mass murder of Jews."

Miller reiterated the United States' support for Israel in its war while calling for more ways to protect civilians, and for Israel to abide by international humanitarian law. He also condemned inflammatory rhetoric

on all sides.

In its court filing, South Africa cited incendiary remarks from Israeli leaders and military officials as an indication of intent to commit genocide.

PALESTINIAN JOURNALIST DESCRIBES BEING DETAINED BY THE ISRAELI MILITARY AS THE 'WORST 33 DAYS OF MY LIFE'

BEIRUT — A Palestinian journalist who was detained by the Israeli military in Gaza in December described the experience as the "worst 33 days of my life." Diaan al-Kahlout, a reporter for the Arabic-language Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, said in an interview Thursday with his network that he was detained with around 100 men, including several relatives, who were sheltering in the northern town of Beit Lahiya.

He says the soldiers accused them of being members of Hamas and forced them to strip to their underwear. He says he was questioned about an article he wrote in 2018 about a botched Israeli military operation in Gaza, calling it a "distressing experience." Those detained included boys as young as 16 and a 77-year-old man apparently suffering from dementia, according to al-Kahlout. He says they were held at the Zikim military base north of Gaza and were forced to sit "on their knees" for the first 25 days.

The Israeli military was looking into the allegation and had no immediate comment.

The Israeli military says it has detained and interrogated hundreds of people it suspects of links to Hamas, which triggered the war in Gaza with its Oct. 7 rampage into Israel. Several detainees have said after their release that they were denied food and water and subjected to beatings and other abuse. The military has denied allegations of mistreatment.

South Africa tells the UN top court Israel is committing genocide in Gaza as a landmark case begins

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — A continent away from the fighting between Israel and Hamas, South Africa told judges at the United Nations' top court on Thursday that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza and pleaded with the court to urgently order Israel to halt its military operation. Israel has vehemently denied such arguments.

South African lawyers said the latest Gaza war is part of a decades-long oppression of the Palestinians by Israel.

Israel has vehemently denied such arguments even ahead of the opening arguments at the U.N. court in The Hague.

Lawyers for South Africa asked judges at Thursday's hearings to impose binding preliminary orders on Israel, including an immediate halt to Israel's military campaign in Gaza.

"Genocides are never declared in advance, but this court has the benefit of the past 13 weeks of evidence that shows incontrovertibly a pattern of conduct and related intention that justifies as a plausible claim of genocidal acts," South African lawyer Adila Hassim told the judges and audience in the packed, ornate room of the Peace Palace in The Hague.

"Nothing will stop the suffering except an order from this court. Without an indication of provisional measures, the atrocities will continue, with the Israeli Defense Force indicating that it intends pursuing this course of action for at least a year," she said.

Ahead of the proceedings, hundreds of pro-Israeli protesters marched close to the courthouse with banners saying "Bring them home," referring to the hostages still held by Hamas. Among the crowds, people were holding Israeli and Dutch flags.

Outside the court, others were protesting and waving the Palestinian flag in support of South Africa's move.

The dispute strikes at the heart of Israel's national identity as a Jewish state created in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide in the Holocaust.

It also involves South Africa's identity: Its governing party, the African National Congress, has long com-

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pared Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank to its own history under the apartheid regime of white minority rule, which restricted most Blacks to "homelands" before ending in 1994.

Although it normally considers U.N. and international tribunals unfair and biased, Israel has sent a strong legal team to defend its military operation launched in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas.

South Africa immediately sought to broaden the case beyond the narrow confines of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

"The violence and the destruction in Palestine and Israel did not begin on Oct. 7, 2023. The Palestinians have experienced systematic oppression and violence for the last 76 years," said South African Justice Minister Ronald Lamola.

Vusimuzi Madonsela, the co-leader of South Africa's delegation said that "at the outset, South Africa acknowledges that the genocidal acts and omissions by the state of Israel inevitably form part of a continuum of illegal acts perpetrated against the people of Palestinian people. since 1948," when Israel declared its independence.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a video statement Wednesday night defending his country's actions and insisted they had nothing to do with genocide.

"Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population," he said. "Israel is fighting Hamas terrorists, not the Palestinian population, and we are doing so in full compliance with international law."

He said the Israeli military is "doing its utmost to minimize civilian casualties, while Hamas is doing its utmost to maximize them by using Palestinian civilians as human shields."

In the opening session in The Hague, South Africa called for the court to issue an interim order for an immediate halt to Israel's military actions. A decision will likely take weeks.

Israel's offensive has killed more than 23,200 Palestinians in Gaza, 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.

"Mothers, fathers, children, siblings, grandparents, aunts, cousins are often all killed together. This killing is nothing short of destruction of Palestinian life. It is inflicted deliberately. No one is spared. Not even newborn babies," said Hassim.

Finding food, water, medicine and working bathrooms has become a daily struggle for Palestinians living in Gaza. Last week, the 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." Israel itself has always focused attention on the Oct. 7 attacks themselves, when Hamas fighters stormed through several communities in Israel and killed some 1,200 people, mainly civilians. They abducted around 250 others, nearly half of whom have been released.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken dismissed the case as "meritless" during a visit to Tel Aviv on Tuesday.

"It is particularly galling, given that those who are attacking Israel — Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, as well as their supporter Iran — continue to call for the annihilation of Israel and the mass murder of Jews," he said.

The world court, which rules on disputes between nations, has never judged a country to be responsible for genocide. The closest it came was in 2007 when it ruled that Serbia "violated the obligation to prevent genocide" in the July 1995 massacre by Bosnian Serb forces of more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica.

The International Criminal Court, based a few miles (kilometers) away in The Hague, prosecutes individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

The case revolves around the genocide convention that was drawn up in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II and the murder of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust. Both Israel and South Africa are signatories.

Israel is back on the International Court of Justice's docket next month, when hearings open into a U.N. request for a non-binding advisory opinion on the legality of Israeli policies in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Nelson Mandela's support for Palestinians endures with South Africa's genocide case against Israel

By GERALD IMRAY Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — Barely two weeks after he was released from prison in 1990, Nelson Mandela flew to Zambia to meet with African leaders who had supported his fight against South Africa's apartheid system of forced racial segregation.

One figure stood out among the men in dark suits eagerly waiting to greet Mandela on the airport tarmac: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, wearing his black and white checkered keffiyeh headdress, had traveled to see the newly freed Mandela.

He grabbed Mandela in a bear hug and kissed him on each cheek. Mandela smiled broadly. It was confirmation of the solidarity between two men who considered their peoples' struggles for freedom to be the same.

South Africans continue to support the Palestinian cause, and the country has taken the rare step of bringing a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice because of its war in Gaza.

South Africa is not a diplomatic heavyweight and is geographically far from the conflict. But its ruling African National Congress, which Mandela led from an anti-apartheid liberation movement to a political party in government, has retained its strong pro-Palestinian stance even after Mandela died in 2013.

"We have stood with the Palestinians and we will continue to stand with our Palestinian brothers and sisters," Mandela's grandson, Mandla Mandela, said at a pro-Palestinian rally in Cape Town in October, days after the Hamas attack in southern Israel spurred the war on Gaza. Mandla Mandela, an ANC lawmaker, wore a black and white Palestinian keffiyeh around his neck as he spoke to a large crowd.

A SHARED STRUGGLE

Nelson Mandela regularly raised the plight of the Palestinians. Three years after apartheid and white minority rule was dismantled in South Africa and Mandela was elected president in historic all-race elections in 1994, he thanked the international community for its help. He added: "But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."

Mandela and South African leaders after him compared the restrictions Israel placed on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank with the treatment of Black South Africans during apartheid, framing the two issues as fundamentally about people oppressed in their homeland. Israel provided weapons systems to South Africa's apartheid government and maintained secret military ties with it up until the mid-1980s, even after publicly denouncing apartheid.

The ANC has consistently criticized Israel as an "apartheid state," even before the current war. International rights groups have also accused Israel of the crime of apartheid against Palestinians and that "resonates strongly with South Africa," said Thamsanqa Malusi, a South African human rights lawyer.

Israel adamantly rejects that characterization, saying its Arab minority enjoys full civil rights. It views Gaza, from which it withdrew soldiers and settlers in 2005, as a hostile entity ruled by the Islamic militant group Hamas, and it considers the West Bank to be disputed territory subject to peace negotiations — which collapsed more than a decade ago.

Malusi said many in the South African government experienced the oppression of apartheid and that could help explain its decision to lodge the case against Israel at the U.N.'s top court.

While Mandela, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning statesman, also reached out to Israel in an attempt to foster a peaceful solution, anti-Israeli rhetoric in South Africa has strengthened over the years, sometimes seeping into everyday life. For example, the ANC's youth wing pressured South African grocery store chains to drop Israeli products and threatened to forcibly shut them down if they didn't.

RESPONSE TO THE WAR

Israel's assault on Gaza sparked renewed solidarity with the Palestinian cause in South Africa. Thousands have marched in support of Gaza in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and buildings in the Cape Town neighborhood of Bo Kaap were adorned with pro-Palestinian graffiti in the weeks after the war broke out.

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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa — the current leader of the ANC — has criticized both Israel and Hamas for what he calls atrocities committed by both sides in the conflict. But he also appeared in public wearing a keffiyeh and holding a Palestinian flag, even as he offered condolences to Israel over the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, leaving little doubt where South Africa's sympathies lie.

HAMAS CONNECTIONS

ANC officials, including Mandla Mandela, hosted three Hamas officials in South Africa last month, including the group's top representative in Iran. They attended a ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of Nelson Mandela's death before a statue of the former South African President at the seat of government in a nod to his historic connection with the Palestinian cause.

On Wednesday, the eve of the court proceedings, Palestinians in the West Bank city of Ramallah crowded around another statue of Mandela, waving Palestinian and South African flags and holding signs that read: "Thank You South Africa."

The Hamas visit to South Africa was not welcomed by all, though.

South Africa's main opposition party has said it considers Hamas a terrorist organization, as do the United States and European Union, and support for Palestinians in South Africa has complicated racial connotations. Black and mixed-race South Africans, brutally oppressed under apartheid, have been at the forefront of the support for Palestinians. Support is not as pronounced among South Africa's white minority.

ACCUSATIONS OF HYPOCRISY

South Africa's ANC-led government says it is taking a moral stance in its genocide case against Israel, first seeking an order for Israel to stop the assaults in Gaza that have killed more than 23,300 Palestinians, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

But the case has given rise to accusations of hypocrisy: The ANC has itself ignored international court orders.

The ANC government refused to arrest then-Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir when he visited South Africa in 2015 while the subject of a warrant on allegations of genocide by the separate International Criminal Court. South Africa has also retained strong ties with Russia and President Vladimir Putin since the invasion of Ukraine, overlooking an ICC indictment against Putin for alleged war crimes in relation to the abduction of children from Ukraine.

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 says Israel's campaign in Gaza amounts to genocide. What can the UN do about it?

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Israel will defend itself in the United Nations' highest court starting Thursday against allegations that its military campaign in Gaza amounts to genocide.

South Africa asked the International Court of Justice to consider Israel's actions in light of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, drawn up in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust.

The convention defines genocide as acts such as killings "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."

The case will likely drag on for years.

Here are some details on the case and its ramifications.

WHAT IS SOUTH AFRICA'S ARGUMENT?

South Africa's 84-page filing says Israel's actions "are genocidal in character because they are intended to bring about the destruction of a substantial part" of the Palestinians in Gaza.

It asks the ICJ for a series of legally binding rulings. It wants the court to declare that Israel "has breached

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and continues to breach its obligations under the Genocide Convention," and to order Israel to cease hostilities in Gaza that could amount to breaches of the convention, to offer reparations, and to provide for reconstruction of what it has destroyed in Gaza.

The filing argues that genocidal acts include killing Palestinians, causing serious mental and bodily harm, and deliberately inflicting conditions meant to "bring about their physical destruction as a group." And it says Israeli officials have expressed genocidal intent.

South Africa argues that the court has jurisdiction because both countries are signatories of the genocide convention, whose ninth article says such disputes can be submitted to the International Court of Justice.

Many South Africans, including President Cyril Ramaphosa, compare Israel's policies regarding Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank with South Africa's past apartheid regime of racial segregation. Israel rejects such allegations.

WHAT WAS ISRAEL'S RESPONSE?

Israel's government swiftly denounced the genocide claim. The Foreign Ministry said South Africa's case lacked a legal foundation and constitutes a "despicable and contemptuous exploitation" of the court.

Eylon Levy, an official in the Israeli prime minister's office, accused South Africa of "giving political and legal cover" to the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas that triggered Israel's campaign, and said Israel would send a legal team to the Hague "to dispel South Africa's absurd blood libel."

An Israeli official said the country, which has a history of ignoring international tribunals, decided to defend itself for several reasons. Among them are Israel's role in promoting the original genocide convention after the Holocaust and the nation's belief that it has "a strong case." He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing behind-the-scenes deliberations.

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

HOW DID ISRAEL REACT TO EARLIER COURT PROCEEDINGS?

Israel did not attend hearings in 2004 when the ICJ discussed an advisory opinion requested by the U.N. into the legality of Israel's barrier wall. The court ruled in a non-binding opinion that the wall was "contrary to international law." Israel sent a written statement to the court before the ruling saying it did not consider it to have jurisdiction and should not respond to the U.N. request for the advisory opinion.

Israel also has in the past refused to cooperate with an investigation after the 2008-9 Gaza war, a UN investigation into the 2014 Gaza war, and the ongoing Human Rights Council investigation into alleged abuses against Palestinians.

Israel is not a member of another Hague-based court, the International Criminal Court. Other countries that are not ICC members include major global powers the United States, China and Russia.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

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."

Such orders, known as provisional measures, would remain while the case progresses. They're legally binding but not always followed. In 2022, in a genocide case filed by Ukraine against Russia, the court ordered Moscow to immediately suspend its invasion, but the order was ignored.

The court is the highest judicial body of the United Nations but it does not have a police force to implement its rulings. If a nation believes another member has failed to comply with an ICJ order, it can report that to the Security Council.

The 15-member council is the U.N.'s most powerful body, charged with maintaining international peace and security. Its tools range from sanctions to authorizing military action, but all actions require support from at least nine council nations and no veto by a permanent member — the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France.

The court is holding public hearings Thursday and Friday, and lawyers representing South Africa and Israel can make arguments. A panel of 15 judges drawn from around the world, and one each nominated

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by Israel and South Africa, could take days or weeks to issue a decision on preliminary measures.

The court will then enter a lengthy process of considering the full case.

Israel could challenge the jurisdiction and seek to have the case thrown out before lawyers start arguing. Other countries that have signed the genocide convention could also apply to make submissions.

IS THE COURT HEARING SIMILAR CASES?

Two other genocide cases are on the court's docket. The case filed by Ukraine shortly after Russia's invasion accuses Moscow of launching the military operation based on trumped-up claims of genocide and accuses Russia of planning acts of genocide in Ukraine.

Another involves Gambia, on behalf of Muslim nations, accusing Myanmar of genocide against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

In a past case brought by Bosnia, the court in 2007 ruled that Serbia "violated the obligation to prevent genocide ... in respect of the genocide that occurred in Srebrenica in July 1995." The court declined to order Serbia to pay compensation. Croatia also sued Serbia in 2015, but the world court ruled that Serbia didn't breach the convention in that case.

ICJ OR ICC?

The Hague calls itself the international city of peace and justice. It is home not only to the ICJ, but also the International Criminal Court, just a few miles away, near the North Sea coastline.

The two courts have different mandates.

The ICJ, which first sat in 1946 as the world emerged from the carnage of WWII, adjudicates cases between nations. They're often land and maritime border disputes, as well as disagreements over the interpretation of international treaties.

The ICC is much younger. It started work in 2002 with the lofty goal of ending global impunity for atrocities. Unlike the ICJ, it seeks to hold individuals criminally responsible for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The ICC has an ongoing investigation into the Israel-Palestinian conflict, dating back to the last war in Gaza. So far, it has not issued any arrest warrants. Israel says the ICC has no jurisdiction because Palestinians do not belong to an independent sovereign state.

ICC prosecutor Karim Khan said last month that an investigation into possible crimes by Hamas militants and Israeli forces "is a priority for my office."

During a visit to The Hague in October, Palestinian Foreign Affairs Minister Riyad al-Maliki said the Palestinian Authority would not interfere with an ICC investigation into Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks. "We cannot say 'Investigate here, don't investigate there,'" al-Maliki said.

The ICC was established to prosecute senior figures accused of involvement in crimes. That means it could charge Israeli political and military leaders.

The ICC last year issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin accusing him of personal responsibility for abductions of children from Ukraine.

WHAT ABOUT PAST U.N. CASES?

Two now-defunct U.N. tribunals also held landmark genocide trials.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia convicted a series of high-ranking Bosnian Serbs, including former President Radovan Karadzic and his military chief Gen. Ratko Mladic, for their roles in the July 1995 massacre of more than 8,000 men and boys in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica.

Karadzic and Mladic were given life sentences.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda convicted a string of leaders involved in the African nation's 1994 genocide when some 800,000 people, mainly ethnic Tutsis, were slaughtered.

Ukraine's Zelenskyy says Russia can be stopped but Kyiv badly needs more air defense systems

By LIUDAS DAPKUS Associated Press

VILNIUS, Lithuania (AP) — Ukraine has shown the world that Russia's military can be stopped, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Wednesday as he began a visit to the Baltic nations in search of more help for his country against the Kremlin's larger and better-supplied forces in the 22-month-old invasion.

Speaking in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, Zelenskyy said Ukraine still must bolster its air defenses against Russia's intensified missile and drone onslaughts and replenish its ammunition supplies as long-range strikes become the main feature of this winter's fighting.

"We have proven that Russia can be stopped, that deterrence is possible," he said after talks with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda on his first foreign trip of the year.

The massive Russian barrages — more than 500 drones and missiles were fired between Dec. 29 and Jan. 2, according to officials in Kyiv — are using up Ukraine's weapons stockpiles, however. The escalation is stretching Ukraine's air defense resources and leaving the country vulnerable unless it can secure further weapons supplies.

"We lack modern air defense systems badly," Zelenskyy said, noting that they are "what we need the most."

He acknowledged, however, that stockpiles are low in countries that could provide such materiel. "Warehouses are empty. And there are many challenges to world defense," he said.

Ukraine hopes to accelerate development of its domestic defense industry and establish joint projects with foreign governments to speed up ammunition and weapons production.

Ukrainian officials traveling with Zelenskyy signed several documents on cooperation on joint arms production. Similar agreements are expected in the other Baltic countries Zelenskyy is expected to visit this week.

Nausėda said Lithuania will send ammunition, generators and detonation systems to Ukraine this month, and in February will provide armored personnel carriers. It has approved 200 million euros (\$219 million) in support for Kyiv, he said.

The focus of his two-day trip to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, Zelenskyy said on his official Telegram channel, will be security concerns, Ukraine's hopes to join the European Union and NATO, and building partnerships in drone production and electronic warfare capacities.

Zelenskyy thanked Lithuania for its military assistance and goodwill.

He then travelled to the Estonian capital Tallinn, where he is to meet with the prime minister, the president and address the parliament and then is to go to neighboring Latvia.

"We know how tiring this long-running war is, and we are interested in Ukraine's complete victory in it as soon as possible," Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda told reporters.

The small eastern European countries are among Ukraine's staunchest political, financial and military supporters, and some in the Baltics worry that they could be Moscow's next target.

The three countries were seized and annexed by Josef Stalin during World War II before regaining independence with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. They joined NATO in 2004, placing themselves under the military protection of the U.S. and its Western allies.

"Democratic countries have done a lot to help Ukraine, but we need to do more together so that Ukraine wins and the aggressor loses," Estonian President Alar Karis said in a statement.

"Then there is the hope that this will remain the last military aggression in Europe, where someone wants to dictate to their neighbor with missiles, drones and cannons what political choices can be made," he said.

In his Telegram message, Zelenskyy expressed gratitude to the Baltic countries for their "uncompromising" support of Ukraine over the past 10 years, referring to 2014 when Russia's aggression started with the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula.

Russia's recent escalation of missile and drone attacks is stretching Ukraine's air defense resources, a Ukrainian air force official said Tuesday, leaving the country vulnerable unless it can secure further weap-

ons supplies.

Zelenskyy's energetic international diplomacy during the war has been essential to maintain pressure on friendly countries to keep supplying Kyiv with billions of dollars in weaponry, including German Leopard tanks, U.S. Patriot missile systems and British Storm Shadow cruise missiles.

That support has tailed off recently, however. A plan by the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden to send to Kyiv billions of dollars in further aid is stuck in Congress, and Europe's pledge in March to provide 1 million artillery shells within 12 months has fallen short, with only about 300,000 delivered so far.

Meanwhile, long-range strikes by the Kremlin's forces have continued.

Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, came under attack from Russian S-300 missiles late Tuesday, said Mayor Ihor Terekhov.

The Russians hit an unoccupied summer camp on the northeastern city's outskirts, he said on Telegram. Several buildings were damaged but no casualties were reported.

Ukraine also kept up its attempts to hit targets inside Russia.

The Russian Defense Ministry said its air defenses downed a Ukrainian drone early Wednesday over the Saratov region of southwestern Russia, on the Volga River.

Saratov Gov. Roman Busargin said the drone was downed over the Engels district, which is home to Russia's main strategic bomber base that have launched cruise missiles at Ukraine. He said there were no casualties or damage.

Hunter Biden expected to plead not guilty in Los Angeles hearing on federal tax charges

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's son will head back to court on Thursday for arraignment in Los Angeles on federal tax charges filed after the collapse of a plea deal that could have spared him the spectacle of a criminal trial during the 2024 campaign.

Hunter Biden is expected to plead not guilty to nine felony and misdemeanor tax offenses. The charges stem from what federal prosecutors say was a four-year scheme to skip out on paying the \$1.4 million he owed to the IRS and instead use the money to fund an extravagant lifestyle that by his own admission included drugs and alcohol.

The court appearance will also include a discussion over future court dates and filing deadlines. Meanwhile, Hunter Biden has also been charged in Delaware with lying in October 2018 on a federal form for gun purchasers when he swore he wasn't using or addicted to illegal drugs. He was addicted to crack cocaine at the time. He's also accused of possessing the gun illegally and has pleaded not guilty in that case.

The accusations all come from a yearslong federal investigation into Hunter Biden's tax and business dealings that had been expected to wind down over the summer with a plea deal in which he would have gotten two years' probation after pleading guilty to misdemeanor tax charges. He also would have avoided prosecution on the gun charge if he stayed out of trouble.

The deal unraveled when a federal judge who had been expected to approve the deal instead began to question it. Now, the tax and gun cases are moving ahead as part of an unprecedented confluence of political and legal drama: As the 2024 election draws closer, the Justice Department is actively prosecuting both the president's son and Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner.

Hunter Biden's original proposed plea deal with prosecutors had been pilloried as a "sweetheart deal" by Republicans, including Trump. The former president is facing his own criminal problems — 91 charges across four separate cases, including that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election, which he lost to Biden, a Democrat.

Hunter Biden's criminal proceedings are also happening in parallel to so far unsuccessful efforts by congressional Republicans to link his business dealings to his father. Republicans are pursuing an impeachment inquiry into President Biden, claiming he was engaged in an influence-peddling scheme with his son. Hunter Biden defied a congressional subpoena to appear for closed-door testimony, insisting he wanted

to testify in public. He made a surprise appearance at a congressional hearing on Wednesday as House Republicans took steps to file contempt of Congress charges.

No evidence has emerged so far to prove that Joe Biden, in his current or previous office, abused his role or accepted bribes, though questions have arisen about the ethics surrounding the Biden family's international business dealings.

If convicted of the tax charges, Hunter Biden, 53, could receive a maximum of 17 years in prison. Following the collapse of the plea deal, Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed a special counsel to handle the matter. A special counsel is tapped to handle cases in which the Justice Department perceives itself as having a conflict or where it's deemed to be in the public interest to have someone outside the government step in.

Hunter Biden's defense attorney, Abbe Lowell, has accused special counsel David Weiss of "bowing to Republican pressure."

"Based on the facts and the law, if Hunter's last name was anything other than Biden, the charges in Delaware, and now California, would not have been brought," Lowell has said.

Amid firestorm created by Austin's cancer secrecy, missed opportunities to build trust and educate

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The secrecy surrounding Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalizations due to prostate cancer surgery set off a political firestorm, launched multiple reviews and triggered calls for his ouster.

To some, the uproar may be puzzling or even offensive. An individual's right to privacy, particularly about medical issues, is sacred. And most people have that right to privacy. But not all.

As a member of President Joe Biden's Cabinet, a key national security adviser and a guardian of the use and maintenance of the country's nuclear arsenal, Austin gives up some personal privacy. He must be ready to act on a moment's notice if the U.S. is attacked and must be able to make an array of immediate, critical decisions on the deployment of troops or the use of America's military might anywhere in the world.

Although he transferred key decision-making authorities to Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks during the surgery and early part of his current hospital stay, he did not tell her why. He also did not tell Biden, other U.S. government leaders, and his senior staff about his surgery, his diagnosis — or that he was rushed by ambulance to the hospital — until days later.

Here's a look at what happened and why it set off an outcry and launched a government-wide demand to fix such lapses.

THE CANCER

Austin, 70, was diagnosed with prostate cancer in early December after a routine screening.

He was admitted to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Dec. 22 and underwent a surgical procedure called a prostatectomy. It is a common procedure to remove all or part of the prostate gland and is often used to treat prostate cancer. He went home the following day.

On Jan. 1, he felt nauseous and was having severe abdominal, hip and leg pain, due to what turned out to be a urinary tract infection related to the surgery. His doctors, who released a detailed medical statement on Tuesday, 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.

The doctors said his cancer was detected early, and his prognosis is excellent.

TRANSFER OF AUTHORITY

Based on routine protocols, Austin transferred decision-making authorities to his deputy. That process is not unusual and happens anytime Austin does not have access to secure, classified communications.

For example, last month he flew out to a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, and he transferred authorities to Hicks

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during that flight, took them back once he was on the ship, which has full communications capabilities, and then did a similar swap on the flight back to land.

It's not uncommon for Austin to not give Hicks a reason for the transfer, which is handled by email. And such transfers happen regularly across the Defense Department and other agencies, including by military service leaders, service chiefs and combatant commanders.

The department has said Hicks is taking on some of Austin's day-to-day duties as he recovers.

THE SECRECY

The secrecy surrounding the surgery and his current hospital stay has been extensive and shocking to senior leaders in government and the Pentagon. And it's raised questions about his candor with staff and the Biden White House.

Pentagon officials disclosed last Friday that Austin was hospitalized, but gave no details. They later acknowledged that a few of his senior staff were told Jan. 2, but they did not tell the White House until Jan. 4. And they did not disclose his cancer diagnosis when it was first made a month ago, the Dec. 22 surgery or details about the latest complications until Jan. 9.

A glaring omission appears to be during his phone call on Saturday with Biden. The White House says it was a very brief call for Biden to share well wishes with Austin, who was still hospitalized.

But questions remain — did the president not ask Austin why he was in the hospital? Or did he ask, and not get a full answer? No one will say.

Asked repeatedly about the delays in public notification about the secretary's condition, Pentagon press secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said discussions about prostate cancer screening and treatment are often deeply personal and private.

WHY WOULD AUSTIN HAVE LESS PRIVACY?

Government transparency is a vital, long-held tenet of democracy. On Biden's first day in office, the White House pledged to bring back truth and transparency and rebuild trust with the American people.

Austin's failure to disclose his hospitalization and the fact that he'd delegated decision-making to his deputy for days before telling the president, is counter to normal practice. The president and other Cabinet members routinely make public when they are incapacitated or have serious health issues. Doctors for the president — the current one and those who served before him — have routinely done press conferences on medical check-ups.

Austin is just below the president in the chain of command for the military, including oversight of U.S. nuclear bombs. He's sixth in the line of succession if something happens to the commander-in-chief.

And his hospitalization comes as the U.S. juggles war and diplomacy in Israel and Ukraine, and as American ships in the Red Sea shoot down missiles and drones fired by Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, and militias repeatedly attack bases where U.S. troops are stationed in Iraq and Syria.

The attacks have forced the Biden administration to threaten retaliation against the Houthis and to strike back in Iraq and Syria multiple times, requiring sensitive, top-level discussions and decisions by Austin and other key military leaders.

DOES IT MATTER?

It comes down to trust.

The multiple omissions, if not lies, have eroded the credibility of the Pentagon at a critical time, with both the public and the Biden White House. And, the lack of disclosure has — for no reason — given the administration a black eye, and provided fodder for Biden opponents, who are calling for Austin's resignation.

It also shines a bright light on the apparent lack of detailed procedures that should be followed if a key leader is suddenly rushed to an ambulance and incapacitated.

Pentagon leaders incessantly describe the department as a "planning organization." The five-sided building is famously known for its obsession with chain of command, endless processes for troops down to the lowest private, and war plans for any and all contingencies around the world.

It's unclear if staff violated any procedures, or if those rules aren't detailed enough or well known.

OPPORTUNITY MISSED

Austin's silence also was a critical opportunity missed. He failed as a mentor.

Austin could have seized his prostate check and early discovery of the cancer as a teaching moment, for his many male troops and workers across the department, and, even more importantly, for the African American population.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer among American men. It affects 1 in every 8 men — and 1 in every 6 African American men — during their lifetime.

Specifically, it's been a problem for some of Austin's own troops. The Pentagon and Veterans Affairs Department are involved in multiple studies to address cancer rates — including prostate cancer — among service members, such as those deployed to war, aviators and aircrew, and those operating the nation's nuclear missiles.

When TV personality Al Roker was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2020, he went public and urged others at risk — particularly Black men — to ensure they see a doctor and get checkups to stop a cancer that is very treatable if detected early.

"The problem for African American men is any number of reasons from genetics to access to healthcare, and so we want to make it available and let people know they got to get checked," Roker said.

Speaker Johnson is facing conservative pushback over the spending deal he struck with Democrats

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Speaker Mike Johnson gathered House Republicans behind closed doors Wednesday to sell the spending deal he reached with Democrats, one thing quickly became clear: many GOP lawmakers weren't buying it.

Rep. Warren Davidson of Ohio left early, saying he'd had enough.

"I'm not going to sit there and listen to that drivel, because he has no plans to do anything but surrender," Davidson said.

In the afternoon, 13 Republicans refused to support a routine procedural vote setting the stage for considering three GOP-led bills. A similar revolt occurred in June when, for the first time in some 20 years, such a routine vote was defeated, essentially grinding the House to a halt.

"We needed to send a message that what's going on with this announced agreement is unacceptable," said Rep. Bob Good, R-Va., the chairman of House Freedom Caucus, made up many of the House's most conservative lawmakers.

House Republicans are off to a raucous start in their first week back in Washington after an extended holiday break. The open criticism of the speaker and the parliamentary standoff reflects deep divisions within the party that have continued despite new leadership, raising questions about his ability to unite the conference.

Most Republicans are still voicing support for Johnson, saying he is doing the best he can with such a slim majority and Democrats in control of the Senate and White House. But it took only eight Republicans to oust Rep. Kevin McCarthy as speaker last year — along with 208 Democrats. A similar revolt from just a handful of Republicans would leave Johnson vulnerable as well.

Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, told Fox News he's not going to say what would trigger a motion by him to seek Johnson's removal, but "we've got to do better than this." Rep. Tim Burchett, R-Tenn., said "a lot of people are talking about" a motion to vacate Johnson from the speakership. But the Tennessee Republican who helped oust McCarthy said he's personally not there "yet."

"There is a lot of division with the conference. We've got a brand new leader, but it's kind of the same ol' song and dance," Rep. Steve Womack, R-Ark., told reporters upon exiting Wednesday's closed-door meeting of House Republicans.

Facing reporters afterward, Johnson said he was not concerned about losing his job.

"Look, leadership is tough. You take a lot of criticism, but remember, I am a hardline conservative. That's what they used to call me," Johnson said. "I come from that camp."

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He called the spending deal a "down payment on restoring us to fiscal sanity in this country." He also said that if Republicans "demonstrate we govern well" it would help them grow their majority in the next Congress, which could help them get more of the spending cuts they want down the road.

"We're going to turn this thing completely around, and I can't wait to do it," Johnson said.

Many Republicans doubt that colleagues would want to put the House through more of the chaos that erupted when McCarthy was ousted. It took nearly three tense weeks to land on Johnson as a replacement for McCarthy. Johnson has been on the job for less than three months, having just recently filled out his staff.

"The reality is nobody wants to go through another speaker's campaign," said Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla. "You can take somebody down once and say you're killing a tyrant. When you do it twice, you become an assassin. So I think the speaker is much more secure than people realize."

Government funding expires Jan. 19 for about 20% of the federal government, while the rest of the government is funded only through Feb. 2. The agreement that McCarthy negotiated with the White House called for capping defense spending at \$886 billion and non-defense spending at about \$704 billion for the current fiscal year, which began in October. A series of side agreements made as part of the debt ceiling deal lifts the non-defense spending to about \$772 billion.

In recent months, lawmakers have been working to incorporate that agreement into the spending bills that will fund the federal government for the year. House and Senate leaders announced their agreement on overall spending levels Sunday.

Johnson said when announcing the overall spending numbers that he was able to speed up the roughly \$20 billion in cuts already agreed to for the Internal Revenue Service in the debt ceiling deal and rescind about \$6 billion in COVID relief money not yet spent. He called it the most favorable budget agreement Republicans have achieved in over a decade.

However, McCarthy's debt ceiling deal was not popular with many House Republicans and contributed to his ouster. They were hoping Johnson would gain more non-defense spending cuts and do more to deter the historic number of people arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border from countries all over the world.

"We're not addressing the two greatest crises facing the country," Good said.

The GOP infighting gives Democrats that chance to highlight the division going into an election year.

"These guys are unable to govern and they're unfit to govern and that's what you saw today," said Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass.

The debate over this year's spending bills is separate from the negotiations that are taking place to secure additional funding for Israel and Ukraine. That funding is a top priority of the Biden administration, but Republicans are insisting that such a package contain tougher immigration restrictions.

Johnson met for nearly two hours after the floor debacle with hard-right Republicans, who emerged satisfied afterward that the new speaker was considering their frustrations and changing course. Good left saying they were on a better "path forward."

Many Republicans believe Johnson got what he could given the slim majority and debt ceiling agreement he inherited.

"He's doing the best he can under the circumstances," said Rep. Tom Emmer, R-Minn.

"When you barely control one house of Congress and you don't control the executive branch, you're not dealing with the strongest hand to begin with. I think most people who are practical understand that. We'll just see how many practical people there are in the next few days," said Rep. Frank Lucas, R-Okla.

Donald Trump's civil fraud trial in New York heads to closing arguments, days before vote in Iowa

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump's New York civil fraud trial is back in session Thursday for closing arguments but it won't be the former president doing the talking.

Trump, the leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination, had angled to deliver his own

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closing remarks in the courtroom, in addition to summations from his legal team, but a judge nixed that unusual plan Wednesday.

That will leave the last words to the lawyers in a trial over allegations that Trump exaggerated his wealth on financial statements he provided to banks, insurance companies and others.

New York Attorney General Letitia James, a Democrat, wants the judge to impose \$370 million in penalties. Trump says he did nothing wrong, didn't lie about his fortune and is the victim of political persecution.

The former president had hoped to make that argument personally, but the judge — initially open to the idea — said no after a Trump lawyer missed a deadline for agreeing to ground rules. Among them, Judge Arthur Engoron warned that Trump couldn't use his closing remarks to "deliver a campaign speech" or use the opportunity to impugn the judge and his staff.

Trump is still expected to be in court as a spectator, despite the death of his mother-in-law, Amalija Knavs, and the launch of the presidential primary season Monday with the Iowa caucus.

Since the trial began Oct. 2, Trump has gone to court nine times to observe, testify and complain to TV cameras about the case, which he called a "witch hunt and a disgrace."

He clashed with Engoron and state lawyers during 3½ hours on the witness stand in November and remains under a limited gag order after making a disparaging and false social media post about the judge's law clerk.

Thursday's arguments are part of a busy legal and political stretch for Trump.

On Tuesday, he was in court in Washington, D.C., to watch appeals court arguments over whether he is immune from prosecution on charges that he plotted to overturn the 2020 election — one of four criminal cases against him. Trump has pleaded not guilty.

James sued Trump in 2022 under a state law that gives the state attorney general broad power to investigate allegations of persistent fraud in business dealings.

Engoron decided some of the key issues before testimony began. In a pretrial ruling, he found that Trump had committed years of fraud by lying about his riches on financial statements with tricks like claiming his Trump Tower penthouse was nearly three times its actual size, or valuing his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida at more than \$612 million based on the idea that the property could be developed for residential use, when he had signed an agreement surrendering rights to develop it for any uses but a club.

The trial involves six undecided claims, including allegations of conspiracy, insurance fraud and falsifying business records.

Trump's company and two of his sons, Eric Trump and Donald Trump Jr., are also defendants.

Besides monetary damages, James wants Trump and his co-defendants barred from doing business in New York.

State lawyers say that by making himself seem richer, Trump qualified for better loan terms from banks, saving him at least \$168 million.

Trump contends his financial statements actually understated his net worth. He said the outside accountants that helped prepare the statements should've flagged any discrepancies and that the documents came with disclaimers that shield him from liability.

Engoron said he is deciding the case because neither side asked for a jury and state law doesn't allow for juries for this type of lawsuit. He said he hopes to have a decision by the end of the month.

Last month, in a ruling denying a defense bid for an early verdict, the judge signaled he's inclined to find Trump and his co-defendants liable on at least some claims.

"Valuations, as elucidated ad nauseum in this trial, can be based on different criteria analyzed in different ways," Engoron wrote in the Dec. 18 ruling. "But a lie is still a lie."

What we know about 'Fito,' Ecuador's notorious gang leader who went missing from prison

By GABRIELA MOLINA Associated Press

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — José Adolfo Macías Villamar, leader of Los Choneros, one of the Ecuadorian gangs considered responsible for a spike in car bombings, kidnappings and slayings, was discovered missing from his prison cell where he was serving a sentence for drug trafficking.

Macías began serving a 34-year sentence in 2011, but his prison stays have been in style and comfort.

His disappearance Sunday led the government to declare a state of emergency that involved sending the military into prisons, which sparked a wave of at least 30 attacks around the South American country, including an assault at a television station in Guayaquil.

The brazen raid of the station while it was broadcasting a newscast live Tuesday stunned Ecuadorean TV viewers who saw 15 minutes of gang members waving guns, threatening staff and claiming they had bombs. It also led President Daniel Noboa to declare that the country had an "armed internal conflict."

Macías, who is known as "Fito," was born 44 years ago in Manta, a coastal city in the province of Manabí, where authorities say Los Choneros emerged. Often sporting a beard, wavy hair, protruding belly and heavy build, he has become a recognizable figure in a country traumatized by violence.

Little is known about his humble origins in Manta, but his criminal record is extensive. Robbery, murder, manslaughter, illicit association, organized crime, possession of weapons, attack on life and crime against property are among at least 30 charges against him, according to Ecuador's judiciary.

He is on Ecuador's most wanted list and a reward was offered for information leading to his capture.

His mother, Marisol Villamar, says he is innocent.

"He's being investigated for everything," she said. "They accuse him of selling drugs, stealing cars and even of stealing chickens. For everything that happens in Manta they want to hold him responsible," Villamar complained in a 2017 interview published by local newspaper El Diario de Manta.

After the death of Los Choneros' boss José Luis Zambrano, alias "Rasquiña," in December 2020, Macías and Junior Roldán were left in charge of the gang but the latter was killed shortly after exiting prison, leaving Macías as its sole leader. Authorities in Ecuador have classified the gang as a terrorist organization.

According to authorities, the group controls the passage of drugs through the Pacific coast and it has links with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, to whom it has provided security and logistics services for decades.

Los Choneros originated in the 1990s, and police say it dominates prison pavilions. Until 2020, when Rasquiña died, it controlled other criminal groups. But the death of its initial leader launched a power struggle with rivals such as Los Tiguerones, Los Lobos and Los Chonekillers, who were formerly allies.

Ecuador's president recently questioned Macías' prison privileges by saying his cell had more more electric outlets than a hotel room.

"Let's start with the fact that there shouldn't be a plug to charge his cell phone or an internet router inside his cell," Noboa said.

Authorities say Macías likes to be seen and does little to hide the privileges he has enjoyed in prison, almost defying the state by flaunting them in videos and photographs on social media. There are murals with his image inside prisons.

During his stay at La Regional prison, authorities say, he threw parties and had access to forbidden items including weapons, appliances, liquor, fighting cocks and jewelry, among other items. A framed painting shows him in robes, since he graduated as a lawyer in prison. His bathroom was decorated with ceramics.

The prison complex in Guayaquil, about 170 miles (270 kilometers) southwest of the capital, also houses the largest and most dangerous lockup in the country.

From prison, Macías sent recorded messages to authorities and "to the Ecuadorian people." In his last video, released in July 2023, he appeared surrounded by armed men and a police officer, whose participation authorities said was coerced.

One video clip he appeared in was of a Mexican corrido. He attributed the ballad's production to his daughter. The so-called "corrido of the lion" starts by calling Macías "the boss of bosses," "leader of Los

Choneros" and "a very good person."

He is believed to have escaped from his cell before his transfer to a maximum security prison where he would be held in isolation, though no official in Ecuador has used the word "escape." Authorities refer to his absence from his cell, leaving it unconfirmed whether he actually escaped.

If true, it wouldn't be the first time he escaped from prison. He previously did it in 2013, but was re-captured.

In an interview Wednesday, President Noboa said Macías was in his cell during roll call the day before at 7 p.m., although he admitted that "it may be that they falsified the list."

The truth is that they don't know where Macías is or when or even how he left his cell.

In his 1st interview, friend who warned officials of Maine shooter says 'I literally spelled it out'

By HOLLY RAMER, NICK PERRY and DAVID SHARP Associated Press

LEWISTON, Maine (AP) — Sean Hodgson watched and worried as his best friend of nearly two decades unraveled. His former roommate and fellow U.S. Army reservist's anger and paranoia were mounting, he had access to guns, and he refused to get help. So Hodgson did the hardest thing of his life: He sent a text about Robert Card to their Army supervisor.

"I believe he's going to snap and do a mass shooting," he wrote on Sept. 15.

Six weeks later, Card fatally shot 18 people at a bowling alley and a bar in Lewiston before killing himself. His body was found in a trailer after a two-day search and regionwide lockdown.

"I wasn't in his head. I don't know exactly what went on," Hodgson told The Associated Press last week in an exclusive interview, his first since the Oct. 25 shootings. "But I do know I was right."

The series of warning signs about Card have been well documented. In May, relatives warned police that Card had grown paranoid, and they expressed concern about his access to guns. In July, Card was hospitalized in a psychiatric unit for two weeks after shoving a fellow reservist and locking himself in a motel room. In August, the Army barred him from handling weapons while on duty and declared him nondeployable.

And in September, Hodgson raised the most glaring red flag, telling authorities to change the passcode to the gate at their Army Reserve training facility and arm themselves if Card showed up.

"Please," he wrote. "I believe he's messed up in the head."

But authorities declined to confront Card — the clearest example of the missed opportunities to intervene and prevent the deadliest shooting in state history. That's hard to swallow for Hodgson, who's pushing back against an independent report for law enforcement that described him as "over the top" and "alarmist."

"I did my job, and I went over and beyond it, and I literally spelled it out for them," said Hodgson, 43, referred to by only his last name in documents related to the case. "I don't know how clear I could have gotten."

Hodgson's account, taken together with law enforcement documents, videos and other interviews, provides the most comprehensive picture to date of potential missteps leading up to the attack.

In replying to AP's questions about the investigation and Hodgson's warning, the Army Reserve said in a statement this week that no one should jump to conclusions until its own investigation and an independent probe by the Army inspector general are finalized.

"Any speculation at this point without having all the details could affect the outcome of the investigation. More details may become available once the investigation is complete," Lt. Col. Addie Leonhardt, Army Reserve spokesperson, said in the statement. Officials wouldn't comment further.

Sheriff Joel Merry — of Sagadahoc County, where Card lived — didn't respond to AP's questions about whether Hodgson's warning was taken seriously enough but suggested a need for public policy changes. He previously said his office has been "fully transparent" and is cooperating with an independent commission appointed by the governor.

Hodgson said he doesn't know where the failings occurred but believes more could have been done to

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help his friend and prevent tragedy.

"I understand he did a horrific thing. I don't agree with it. But I loved him," he said. "I didn't want any of this for anybody."

For much of their friendship, Card was "the sensible one," Hodgson said. They met in 2006 in the Army Reserve and became especially close when they both divorced around the same time.

When Hodgson was evicted from his New Hampshire apartment in 2022, Card told him to move to Maine, and they lived together for about a month, he said. When Card was hospitalized in New York in July, Hodgson was the one who drove him back to Maine.

By then, Hodgson said, Card had begun venting to him about his belief that those around him were accusing him of being a pedophile. Hodgson believed some of Card's complaints were true — a case of mistaken identity stemming from the fact that another Robert Card is on the state's sex offender registry — and described an incident at the bowling alley when a father snatched his daughter away from Card after he offered the toddler a hello.

"I always believed him. I always stuck by him," Hodgson said. "I am the closest one to Robert Card. Besides his mother, he pushed everybody away."

"I was the last one he pushed away."

In September, after a night out at the Oxford Casino, Card began "flipping out," Hodgson said — pounding the steering wheel and almost crashing multiple times. After Hodgson begged him to pull over, he said, Card punched him in the face.

"We were having a good night, and he just snapped," he said.

Hodgson told Card to drop him off at a gas station near his house.

"I love you, and I'll always be here for you no matter what," he said he told his friend as he got out of the car.

Hodgson sent his text two days later, telling his training supervisor he feared what Card might do. He didn't speak to Card after that, he said, though they passed each other at work.

"It took me a lot to report somebody I love," he said. "But when the hair starts standing up on the back of your neck, you have to listen."

After his text, Hodgson said, military officials followed up, asking whether Card threatened specific people. He told them he hadn't. But they didn't ask for help in approaching Card, he said, even though they drove trucks for the same company and he knew his friend's schedule and route.

"I could've told them when he was at work, when he was at home, what hours he worked," he said.

Authorities briefly staked out the Army Reserve Center and visited Card's home. They declined to confront him, fearing that would "throw a stick of dynamite on a pool of gas," according to video released last month by the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office.

In the videos, officials downplayed Hodgson's warning, suggesting he might have been drunk when he texted at 2:04 a.m. Speaking to police at the training center, Army Reserve Capt. Jeremy Reamer describes Hodgson as "not the most credible of our soldiers" and later tells Sagadahoc Sheriff Sgt. Aaron Skolfield his message should be taken "with a grain of salt."

Hodgson, who was unaware of those comments until contacted by AP, acknowledged in a series of interviews that he struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol addiction but said he wasn't drinking that night and was awake because he works nights and was waiting for his boss to call.

Hodgson also acknowledges that he faces two criminal charges, one alleging he assaulted a woman he was dating in 2022 and another alleging that he violated his bail conditions by possessing alcohol last month. He's also in hot water for wrecking a military vehicle last summer, he said. But he said authorities should have taken him more seriously given his relationship with Card, his past training on threat detection and mitigation, and his previous work as a security officer at a nuclear plant.

"That was the most difficult thing I ever had to do, was report him to command, and I did that. And for

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them to discredit me?" he said. "It pisses me off because all they had to do is listen."

In a text message this week, Reamer declined to comment on questions from AP and referred them to Army Reserve public affairs officers.

According to the independent review for the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office, officers didn't have sufficient grounds the day they staked out Card's house to force the issue and take him into protective custody after he refused to answer the door. That step is necessary to trigger Maine's "yellow flag" law. It allows a judge to temporarily remove someone's guns during a psychiatric health crisis.

But Stephanie Sherman, an attorney who's represented several families of survivors of the 2022 mass shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, said police had more than enough information to take to a local judge.

The videos show officers with a disturbingly casual approach to the threat Card posed, Sherman said. She also noted that Skolfield referred to the Cards as a "big family in this area" and said he didn't want to publicize over police radio that officers were visiting the home.

"It was sort of balancing the safety of the public versus this family's reputation," she said. "And that should not be a factor."

Watching the videos was gut-wrenching for Tammy Asselin, who became separated from her 10-year-old daughter during the chaos of the bowling alley shooting. She said it was the first time she knew for sure that steps could have been taken to prevent the massacre.

"Listening to that interaction between the military and the sheriff, it hurt me to hear the giggle and the laughter in their voice," Asselin said, a tear running down her cheek. "Because I don't think they would be giggling and laughing had they been the ones in my shoes that day, not knowing where their daughter was."

For weeks after sending the text about Card to their supervisor, Hodgson said he prayed that it wouldn't come true. But as soon as he heard about the shooting, he called his sergeant.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said he told him. "I know it's Robert Card."

Hodgson was driving to Massachusetts for work that day. He fielded phone calls to and from multiple law enforcement agencies that didn't seem to be communicating with one another, he said.

He said he told authorities right away that Card likely was headed to the Maine Recycling Corp.

Card had worked there, and it wasn't far from the boat launch where his car was found after the shootings. His body would eventually be found there, after initial unsuccessful searches that critics said were too cautious.

More than two months later, Hodgson said, he hates that Card "took the easy way out" and isn't around to answer questions or face the consequences of what he did. It's not the Robert Card he knew and loved for 17 years, he said, and he struggles with that every day.

Hodgson said he wants people to know he did everything he could to save lives.

"I don't know how to express to people how much I loved him, how much I cared about him," he said. "And how much I hate what he did."

DeSantis and Haley jockey for second without Trump and other takeaways from Iowa GOP debate

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

There were only two Republicans on the presidential debate stage Wednesday, as former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis met for the highest-stake faceoff yet just five days before the nominating process formally starts with Iowa's caucuses.

Haley and DeSantis' spirited debate came in the shadow of a live town hall held by the man who is dominating the primary contest, Donald Trump. The former president, of course, has stayed away from all five debates, holding a rival town hall Wednesday on Fox News. The one Republican candidate whose entire campaign has been based around stopping Trump, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, suspended his campaign just hours before the debate.

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Christie wasn't scheduled to be on the stage anyway as the field was whittled down to the only two candidates who are battling for a very distant second to Trump.

Here are takeaways from the event.

THE FIGHT FOR SECOND

Ever since debates began in August, Trump's absence has created a surreal scene of politicians badly trailing in the polls talking about what they'll do when they win the presidency. On Wednesday, at least, it was clear that the remaining contenders in the Republican primary are fighting for second place.

The opening question was why each of the two candidates thought they were the best option for voters who didn't want to support Trump. That set the stakes squarely about second place and the candidates snapped to it.

Haley opened the debate by touting a new website to track DeSantis' "lies."

DeSantis countered, "We don't need another mealy-mouthed politician who just tells you what she thinks you want to hear, just so she can get into office and do her donors' bidding."

The sharpest exchange came after Haley continued to needle DeSantis on how he ran his campaign, saying it showed he couldn't be trusted to run the country if he could spend \$150 million and have so much internal chaos and stagnant polling. When the Florida governor tried to interrupt her, Haley said, "I think I hit a nerve."

DeSantis dismissed Haley's criticism as "process stuff" that voters don't care about and bragged about his conservative record in Florida while jabbing her for failing to pass school choice as governor.

It went on and on like that, with the two candidates constantly sniping at each other. They made swipes at Trump, but spent the overwhelming amount of time on the person standing at the podium next to them.

The political rationale is clear — Trump is 77 years old and faces four separate sets of criminal charges plus a bid to disqualify him from being president that is currently at the U.S. Supreme Court. Anything can happen, and if it does you'd rather be the runner-up than in third or lower. Plus, maybe Trump reaches down and picks his running mate from the top of the also-rans.

Trump's campaign has already quipped that the debates are actually vice presidential debates and, during his Fox News town hall, suggested he already knew who his pick would be.

As has been the case, Wednesday's debate didn't seem likely to change the overall trajectory of the race, with Trump dominating. But at least there were some stakes.

ATTACKING TRUMP ... CAREFULLY

By staying physically offstage, Trump has largely avoided being attacked in the debates. It's tricky to criticize a man beloved by most Republican voters, and for the most part, the contenders haven't bothered. But that's been slowly changing, and it continued to Wednesday.

DeSantis opened with what's become his standard campaign sound bite, claiming that Trump is only interested in "his issues" and DeSantis cares about "your issues." Haley quickly criticized the former president for piling onto the federal deficit, not being strong enough against China and failing to end illegal immigration.

The main mission for both candidates was to vault into second. But there are increasing signs that both know that, if they make it there, they have to have an argument for why Republican voters should back them and not their former president.

DIVIDE OVER ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Haley and DeSantis have both led conservative southeastern states and become emblems of right-of-center governance. However, the debate exposed a fundamental philosophical difference between them over the role of government.

The two were asked whether it was appropriate for government to try to bend corporations to its social stances, as DeSantis has tried to do in Florida by punishing Disney for opposing one of his measures to limit references to homosexuality in schools.

Absolutely, DeSantis said. "The proper role of government, if it means anything, is to protect our kids and I've protected our kids."

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Haley gave a more traditional, small-government Republican answer. "Government was intended to secure the freedoms of the people," she said. "We don't need government fighting against our private industries."

It's been a longstanding bone of contention between the two — when DeSantis first went after Disney, Haley invited them to look at relocating to South Carolina. "We need to stand up for the people, and not bow down to woke corporations," DeSantis said. "We know Nikki Haley will cave to the woke mob every time."

Haley contended that DeSantis had a warm relationship with Disney until the fight over the school regulations and that it showed that he was willing to use government to pursue personal vendettas.

TRUMP'S COUNTERPROGRAMMING

Many of Trump's rivals, including some of his fellow Republicans and President Joe Biden, have warned that he is surrounded by chaos and would be ineffective in the presidency at best — and a threat to democracy at worst. During his appearance at a Fox News town hall that aired at the same time as the debate, Trump seemed to downplay such concerns.

He backed away from his comments, also delivered on Fox last month, that he wouldn't be a dictator "except for day one." On Wednesday, he said he's "not going to be a dictator."

"I'm not going to have time for retribution," he said despite having repeatedly framed his campaign as a vehicle of retribution against his perceived political enemies. "There won't be retribution. There'll be success."

When asked if political violence is ever acceptable, Trump, who helped spark an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, said "of course" such activity is never acceptable. That's despite predicting "bedlam" just a day earlier if criminal cases against him succeed.

Trump has spent the past several weeks standing by his comments about retribution or being a dictator, remarks that are extraordinary for any candidate for the presidency. The question now is whether his tone on Wednesday reflects a shift days ahead of an election or whether he will return to his hardline rhetoric that has echoed authoritarian leaders.

UNITER VS. FIGHTER

Without other candidates vying for attention on stage, voters got to see the contrasts between the two candidates. The biggest one may have been their style — Haley repeatedly talked about the importance of bringing people together while DeSantis was often scornful of reaching out to the other side.

Part of Haley's pitch to the Republican electorate is that she could unite the warring sides of the country. On Wednesday, she bemoaned politicians who keep telling people who's "wrong" as opposed to uniting the public. "What a leader does is they bring out the best in people," she said.

She was throwing a jab at Trump, but might have also aimed for DeSantis, a renowned partisan brawler who touts how he's defeated the Democratic Party and liberal interest groups as governor. The contrast was sharpest at the end of the debate, when the subject turned to crime and DeSantis bemoaned the "BLM riots" — a reference to "Black Lives Matter" — after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020 and Trump's response.

"He sat in the White House and tweeted 'law and order,' but he did nothing to ensure law and order," DeSantis said, noting he mobilized the Florida National Guard and vowing that he'd keep Americans safe if president during similar unrest. He then dinged Haley for sending out a consolatory tweet about Floyd's death.

DeSantis called the tweet "virtue signaling," saying Haley "was trying to impress people who are never going to like us."

Haley bristled. She noted that South Carolina saw two horrible incidents during her tenure — the shooting of an unarmed Black man, Walter Scott, by a white police officer and the 2015 murder of nine Black people by a white supremacist at a historically Black Charleston church. After the church shooting, Haley removed the Confederate flag from the state capitol.

"We came together as a state in prayer and we had no riots," Haley said. "We didn't need the national guard, because a leader knows how to bring out the best in people."

The line may get her votes, but in a Republican Party that's dominated by Trump's "us versus them"

rhetoric, it's not clear whether it can get her enough to win the nomination.

A British postal scandal ruined hundreds of lives. The government plans to try to right those wrongs

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said he will introduce measures to reverse the convictions of more than 900 Post Office branch managers wrongly accused of theft or fraud because of a faulty computer system in what is considered one of the gravest injustices in the nation's history.

The announcement Wednesday follows a TV docudrama on the wrongdoing that created a huge surge of public support for the former postmasters who have spent years trying to reclaim lives ruined by the scandal.

"This is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our nation's history," Sunak said. "People who worked hard to serve their communities had their lives and their reputations destroyed through absolutely no fault of their own. The victims must get justice and compensation."

Lawmakers said they would provide compensation to those who had been convicted. Some also called for bringing those to justice who were responsible for the wrongdoing.

Some things to know about the scandal:

WHAT HAPPENED

After the Post Office rolled out the Horizon IT system, developed by Japanese company Fujitsu, in 1999 to automate sales accounting, local Post Office managers began finding unexplained losses they were responsible to cover.

The state-owned Post Office maintained Horizon was reliable and accused branch managers of dishonesty. Between 2000 and 2014, some 900 postal workers were wrongly accused of theft, fraud and false accounting, with some convicted and imprisoned and others forced into bankruptcy.

In total, over 2,000 people were affected by the scandal. Some committed suicide or attempted it. Others said their marriages fell apart and reported becoming community pariahs.

A group of postal workers took legal action against the Post Office in 2016. Three years later the High Court in London ruled that Horizon contained a number of "bugs, errors and defects" and that the Post Office "knew there were serious issues about the reliability" of the system.

"Failures of investigation and disclosure were so egregious as to make the prosecution of any of the 'Horizon cases' an affront to the conscience of the court," Justice Timothy Holroyde said.

To date, just 95 convictions have been overturned, Post Office minister Kevin Hollinrake said.

WHY NOW

A government minister claimed this moment of reckoning has long been coming. But it was turbo-charged by a four-part TV docudrama that aired Jan. 1 and fueled public outrage that led to days of bruising headlines about the scandal and sparked a swift response by lawmakers.

The ITV show, "Mr. Bates vs the Post Office," told the story of branch manager Alan Bates, played by Toby Jones, who has spent nearly two decades trying to expose the scandal and exonerate his peers.

Despite hundreds of news stories over the years about court hearings and an ongoing public inquiry, the show seen by millions rapidly galvanized support for victims of the injustice.

Police last week opened a fraud investigation into potential offenses of perjury and perverting the course of justice over investigations and prosecutions carried out by the Post Office.

More than a million people signed an online petition calling for former Post Office chief executive Paula Vennells to lose her Commander of the Order of the British Empire title she received in 2018. By the end of Tuesday, she said she would relinquish the honor.

WHO WAS AFFECTED

The Post Office is state owned with independent franchise operators. Branch owners and employees typically lived in the communities where they operated and many became outcasts when accused of stealing.

Lisa Brennan, a former clerk at a post office in Huyton, near Liverpool, told the inquiry that after being

falsely accused of stealing 3,000 pounds (\$3,800) in 2003 her marriage fell apart, she lost her house and ended up homeless with a young daughter.

"It's scandalous, it should never have happened," she told the inquiry in 2022. "I wasn't the only one but that's what I was told: 'It's only you, you're the only one.'"

Janine Powell, a former subpostmistress in Tiverton in Devon who was accused of stealing around 71,000 pounds (\$90,000), said she felt broken after being sentenced to 18 months in prison after being convicted in 2008.

She had to leave her three children, aged 10 to 18 at the time, and that strained their relationship. She harmed herself, considered suicide and struggled to get a job after her release.

"It had a big impact. You have to declare obviously that you've got a criminal record," Powell said. "When you try to explain (to employers) it's a 'no' straight away, so I couldn't work."

WHAT COMPENSATION COULD THEY RECEIVE

The government plans to set aside 1 billion pounds (\$1.27 billion) to compensate the wrongly convicted and others whose lives were destroyed in the scandal.

To date, nearly 150 million pounds have been paid to more than 2,500 victims, Sunak said.

The legislation envisioned would quash convictions and award those who have been cleared at least 600,000 pounds (\$763,000), the government said. They could receive more if they go through a process to assess their claim.

Those who were not convicted but lost money would be offered at least 75,000 pounds (\$95,000).

The government said there is a chance some postal employees who did commit fraud or theft could end up being exonerated and receive compensation.

"The risk is that instead of unjust convictions, we shall end up with unjust acquittals and we just do not know how many," Hollinrake said. "But we cannot make the provision of compensation subject to a detailed examination of guilt."

IS ANYONE BEING HELD ACCOUNTABLE

Some members of Parliament called for bringing charges against those who had been aware of the software problems and allowed prosecutions to go forward.

"Will the government accelerate the investigations to convict those who are really guilty of causing this scandal by perverting the course of justice?" said David Davis, a Conservative member of the House of Commons.

Hollinrake said the ongoing public inquiry will identify the organizations and individuals responsible for the scandal.

Duncan Baker, a Conservative who had once run a postal branch in Norfolk, said he wanted to know how much money the Post Office pocketed.

"One question that has never been answered is just how much money was taken unlawfully from thousands of innocent men and women," Baker said. "The Post Office took that money, we have never known that figure."

Efforts to restrict transgender health care endure in 2024, with more adults targeted

By ANDREW DeMILLO and HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

Republican-led state legislatures are considering a new round of bills restricting medical care for transgender youths — and in some cases, adults — returning to the issue the year after a wave of high-profile bills became law and sparked lawsuits.

As legislatures begin their work for the year, lawmakers in several states have proposed enacting or strengthening restrictions on puberty-blocking drugs and hormone treatments for minors. Bills to govern which pronouns kids can use at school, which sports teams students can play on, and which bathroom they can use are back, as well, along with efforts to restrict drag performances and some books and school curriculums.

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LGBTQ+ advocates say that most of the states inclined to pass bans on gender-affirming care have done so, and that they now expect them to build on those restrictions and expand them to include adults. With legislatures in most states up for election this year, transgender youths and their families worry about again being targeted by conservatives using them as a wedge issue.

They include Mandy Wong, a mother in Santa Barbara, California, who said she's tired of conservative politicians using transgender children as "campaign fuel." While she doesn't expect such a policy to pass in her Democrat-led state, Wong said, her child and his friends feel emotionally drained.

"It was just heartbreaking to tell him ... I don't think this is going away anytime soon," she said. "All the negative attention trans kids, even us as parents, have gotten because of these proposals doesn't seem to be dying down."

In Ohio, House Republicans voted Wednesday to override Republican Gov. Mike DeWine's veto of legislation banning all forms of gender-affirming care for minors. The Senate is expected to follow suit this month. Despite his veto, DeWine signed an order banning the rare occurrence of gender-transition surgeries before adulthood. He also proposed rules mandating a care team for children and adults that critics say could severely restrict access for all patients.

In South Carolina, one of the few Southern states without a ban on gender-affirming care for minors, a House committee voted Wednesday to send a ban to the House floor. The bill, sponsored by the state's Republican House speaker, would also prevent Medicaid from covering such treatments for anyone under age 26. And last week in New Hampshire, the House voted to ban gender-transition surgeries for minors.

At least 22 states have enacted bans on gender-affirming care for children, with most of them approved in the past year. Those who support the bans say they want to protect children and have concerns about the treatments themselves. Major medical groups, including the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, oppose the bans and have endorsed such care, saying it's safe when administered properly.

Last year's limits included a Florida law that has made it nearly impossible for many transgender adults in the state to receive gender-affirming care. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has promoted that ban as one of his accomplishments as he seeks the Republican presidential nomination.

"They'll stop at nothing, so we don't know what exactly to anticipate (in 2024)," said Katy Erker-Lynch, executive director of PROMO, an advocacy group in Missouri, where lawmakers have proposed more than 20 bills targeting LGBTQ+ people.

Bills filed in Missouri include efforts to remove two provisions that were key in overcoming a Democratic filibuster to that state's ban on gender-affirming care for youths. The new Missouri Freedom Caucus is prioritizing a bill that would make the ban on gender-affirming care for minors permanent, removing a provision that allows it to expire in 2027. Legislation would also remove a clause that allows minors who began the care before the law went into effect to continue with it.

Republican state Sen. Mike Moon, who is sponsoring bills both to repeal the expiration date on the medical restrictions and to require schools to tell parents if a student wants to go by a name or pronoun other than the one the parent used to register the child for school, compared transgender medical restrictions for minors to age thresholds in laws for smoking, drinking and driving.

"Children, especially younger children, don't make good decisions, and they're not certain exactly what reality is sometimes," Moon said.

LGBTQ+ activists call laws that require schools to tell parents about a student's desire to change names or pronouns "forced outing," saying schools might be the only safe place for a transgender or nonbinary student to express their gender identify.

Missouri's large number of filed bills has drawn attention from activists, but Republican legislative leaders say they don't think there's much of an appetite for revisiting the restrictions and don't want to prioritize them.

"We passed what I thought was a strong and fairly broad bill last year," said Missouri Senate President Pro Tem Caleb Rowden, referring to the medical ban.

In Oklahoma, at least two bills remain active from last year that target gender-affirming care for adults.

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One proposal would prohibit insurance coverage for the procedures for adults, while another would prohibit public funds from going to any entity that provides such care.

Both measures stalled in the Republican-controlled Legislature last year but could be reconsidered during the legislative session starting in February.

The rules proposed in Ohio by DeWine last week place new limits on adults that advocates say would make treatment difficult, if not impossible, for some people. They include mandating a team for individuals that would consist of at least an endocrinologist, a bioethicist and a psychiatrist. The rules also would require departments to collect data submitted by medical providers on gender dysphoria and subsequent treatment.

Several bills have been filed in Florida, including a measure to require employees at state agencies or at any entity that receives state funding to use the pronouns consistent with their assigned sex at birth.

Legislation introduced Wednesday in West Virginia would ban gender-affirming care up to age 21 and prohibit mental health professionals from supporting what lawmakers call a transgender patient's "delusion" about their gender identity.

In California, which has offered refuge to transgender youths and their families from states with medical bans, conservatives are mounting a longshot effort to put a measure on next year's ballot targeting the rights of transgender minors.

Nebraska state Sen. Kathleen Kauth, who last year sponsored the state's gender-affirming care ban for those under 19, said partisan politics are not behind her push for bills aimed at LGBTQ+ people. This year she is again pushing a bill she introduced last year that would restrict transgender students' participation in sports and limit their access to bathrooms and locker rooms.

Kauth's medical ban led progressive lawmakers to filibuster nearly every bill of last year's session.

"I don't think it's something that is designed to get reelected because, you know, my district is actually half and half — slightly more are conservative than liberal," Kauth said. "I am about pushing back on federal government overreach, whatever it looks like, and protecting kids."

Nationwide, challenges to laws already in place are moving closer to the U.S. Supreme Court. The American Civil Liberties Union has asked the court to block restrictions on care for youths in Kentucky and Tennessee.

The full 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is also considering Arkansas' request to reverse a ruling that struck down the state's first-in-the-nation ban on gender-affirming care for youths.

Federal rulings against the bans so far have come from judges appointed by both Democratic and Republican presidents.

DeMillo reported from Little Rock, Arkansas, and Schoenbaum from Salt Lake City. Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers David Lieb and Summer Ballentine in Jefferson City, Missouri; Margery Beck in Omaha, Nebraska; Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City; and Sophie Austin in Sacramento, California.

Pete Carroll is out as head coach of the Seattle Seahawks after 14 seasons

By TIM BOOTH AP Sports Writer

RENTON, Wash. (AP) — Pete Carroll's mantra was "always compete," — it was the title of a book, after all. And he did right up to the point where the ownership of the Seattle Seahawks decided it was time for a new voice to be in charge following 14 seasons.

After bringing the Seahawks two NFC championships and the team's only Super Bowl title, Carroll will no longer be the head coach in Seattle following the longest stretch of success in franchise history.

The decision seems less a firing and more a separation, but one the 72-year-old Carroll was at least somewhat forced to accept following discussions with ownership. Carroll will move into an undefined advisory role within the organization, according to Wednesday's statement from owner Jody Allen.

But it's clear that Carroll wanted to continue in the role he had and see if he could produce one more title team.

"I competed pretty hard to be the coach, just so you know," Carroll said during an emotional farewell

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news conference. "I just wanted to make sure I stood up for all of our coaches and the players and the things that we had accomplished. Not just so we could be the coach still, but so we could continue to have a chance to be successful and keep the organization going. That's what I was fighting for.

"In that regard, that's what I was representing in our discussions," Carroll continued. "And we got to a good part, good, clean spot where it made sense, and I went along with their intentions."

With staff from throughout the facility, assistant coaches and a few current players filling the auditorium, Carroll spoke for more than 30 minutes through a mix of tears and laughter about a tenure that will be difficult for any coach to match in the future.

"I'm thrilled that we've had this run. I really am. This level of consistency that we've demonstrated is such that it makes you proud," Carroll said.

Carroll will step aside as the most successful coach in franchise history, but with an unsatisfactory conclusion after several seasons of middling results, including a 9-8 record and no playoff berth in his final season.

He'll forever be lauded as the first coach to bring the Lombardi Trophy to Seattle with the Super Bowl 48 victory over Denver. Carroll finished with a 137-69-1 record in the regular season with the Seahawks. He led Seattle to five NFC West titles and 10 playoff victories.

But Carroll and the organization never fully recovered from what happened in the Super Bowl 49 and Russell Wilson's goal line interception in the final seconds. The core that took Seattle to those title games eventually unraveled and while Carroll tried several different reboots, the Seahawks never again found that level of talent and chemistry to experience another title and wash away the memories of that painful loss.

Seattle also plateaued toward the end of Carroll's time, finishing with a losing record in 2021 followed by consecutive 9-8 seasons while falling short of becoming more of a contender in the NFC West.

The postseason was another problem. Seattle has not advanced past the divisional round since the 2014 playoffs and lost in the wild-card round in three of its past four postseason appearances.

"We lost our edge, really, the edge to be great, which was really how we ran the football and how we played defense. It wasn't as good as it needed to be," Carroll said.

The fact the news about Carroll and Alabama coach Nick Saban announcing his retirement happened on the same day wasn't lost on the coaching community that each touched.

"Would not be where I am today without these two men as mentors," Texas coach Steve Sarkisian wrote on social media.

The future for Seattle will be under the watch of a different coach and with general manager John Schneider entirely in control of personnel.

One of the unique aspects of Seattle's success was the marriage between Schneider and Carroll. It was Carroll that was hired first in January 2010 before bringing aboard Schneider as his running mate. It was Carroll that retained final control over personnel decisions.

Now, it's flipped. Schneider will be making the call on the next coach and personnel.

"It's why this happened," Carroll said. "You want to know? I want him to have this chance. It's been 14 years he's been sitting there waiting for his opportunity and he deserves it. And he's great at what he does."

Despite the lackluster final chapter, Carroll's tenure in Seattle will be viewed as the most successful run since the franchise arrived in 1976. He ushered in a player-friendly environment built around allowing personalities to show within the defined structure of his system. Carroll preached competition, but made it fun along the way.

The Seahawks thrived under Carroll with the personalities of Marshawn Lynch, Doug Baldwin and Richard Sherman, for example. They plucked Wilson out of the third round and watched him help the team win a Super Bowl in his second season. Known for his defensive mind, Carroll created a defense that was the best of its era for multiple seasons and was at the foundation of those back-to-back teams which won NFC titles.

Several players expressed their appreciation for Carroll on Wednesday, including Wilson. Geno Smith, Bobby Wagner, Noah Fant and Tyler Lockett were among the handful of players to show up in person.

"Coach Carroll is a stud. If I'm sitting up here being able to do that as long as he did ... that be impres-

sive," Rams coach Sean McVay said.

Seattle is the seventh NFL team at the moment looking for a new coach, joining Tennessee, Atlanta and Washington who have fired coaches since the regular season ended. The Raiders, the Chargers and Panthers didn't wait for the season to end before firing coaches.

NFL teams can't start in-person interviews until after the divisional round after owners voted in October to push those back a week to slow down the hiring process and try to increase diversity in hiring. They also cannot interview head coaching candidates employed by other NFL teams until Tuesday or Wednesday for any coach whose team is done or team has a playoff bye. Teams can start virtual interviews.

Any internal candidates or someone not currently employed by the NFL can interview in person.

Speculation will immediately turn to Dallas defensive coordinator Dan Quinn, who served in the same role for the Seahawks during their two NFC championship seasons. Quinn was 43-42 with two playoff appearances and one memorable Super Bowl collapse in his five-plus seasons as the head coach of the Atlanta Falcons.

Chris Christie ends his Republican presidential bid, criticizing his rivals on his way out

By STEVE PEOPLES, JILL COLVIN and HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

WINDHAM, N.H. (AP) — Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie on Wednesday suspended his Republican presidential bid just days before Iowa's leadoff caucuses, ceding to growing pressure to drop out of the race from those desperate to deny Donald Trump a glidepath to the nomination.

Addressing supporters at a New Hampshire town hall, Christie said he had come to the conclusion that he had no pathway to victory.

"Campaigns are run to win. That's why we do them," he said. "It's clear to me tonight that there isn't a path for me to win the nomination."

"My goal has never been to be just a voice against the hate and division and the selfishness of what our party has become under Donald Trump," he added, vowing to continue to warn the party and the country about the dangers of a second Trump term.

"I am going to make sure that in no way do I enable Donald Trump to ever be president of the United States again. And that's more important than my own personal ambition," he said.

Christie did not immediately endorse any of rivals and instead continued to lace into them in his remarks for failing to directly target Trump for fear of alienating the front-runner's loyal supporters. Underscoring his deep frustrations, he was overheard on a hot mic before the event began criticizing former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley.

"She's going to get smoked," he said in an audio broadcast on the campaign's livestream feed. "She's not up to this." He was also overheard saying Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis had called him, petrified, but the audio was cut before he finished the thought.

Haley responded in a statement calling Christie "a friend for many years," and commending him "on a hard-fought campaign." DeSantis posted on X, formerly Twitter, that he agreed with Christie that Haley would "get smoked."

Christie's dropout comes as a surprise, given the former governor had staked his campaign on New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary, which is less than two weeks away. He had insisted as recently as Tuesday night that he had no plans to leave the race, continuing to cast himself as the only candidate willing to tell the truth and directly take on the former president.

"I would be happy to get out of the way for someone who is actually running against Donald Trump," he said at a town hall in Rochester, New Hampshire, while arguing that none of his rivals had stepped up to the plate.

"I'm famous enough. ... I've got plenty of titles. ... The only reason to do this is to win," he added. "So I'd be happy to get out of the way for somebody if they actually were going against Donald Trump."

But Christie faced a stark reality: While recent polls showed him reaching the double digits in New

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Hampshire, Haley shows signs of momentum. A CNN/UNH poll conducted in the state this week found Trump's lead down to the single digits, with 4 in 10 likely Republican primary voters choosing Trump and about one-third now choosing Haley.

Allies of Haley, including New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu and other anti-Trump Republicans, had been urging Christie to exit. They are hoping a large portion of his supporters will flock to Haley, who is seen as the most moderate candidate remaining, giving her a chance to turn the race into a two-candidate contest with Trump, the overwhelming favorite for the nomination.

The New Hampshire poll — which showed Christie at 12% — found about two-thirds of his supporters would select Haley as their second choice.

Christie had run as the race's fiercest critic of the former president-turned-GOP front-runner. He warned voters against nominating a candidate who has been criminally indicted four times and could very well be a convicted felon by the November general election. And he argued Trump will lose in a rematch with President Joe Biden, the likely Democratic nominee.

While his anti-Trump message attracted much media attention and helped bring in waves of small-dollar donations that kept him in the race — and on the debate stage — far longer than many expected, Christie was plagued by high unfavorability ratings in a party that remains deeply loyal to Trump.

Nonetheless, Christie managed to outlast far better-known and better-funded candidates, including former Vice President Mike Pence and Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, in part because he ran a frugal campaign. Instead of flying by private jet and hiring a litany of expensive consultants, he relied on a tight-knit staff of just over a dozen people and had a far lower "burn rate" than rivals like DeSantis, spending far less per day.

And just as he did when he ran in 2016, Christie banked his campaign on New Hampshire, believing his brash "tell it like it is" style would resonate with the state's more independent-leaning voters, including those who are unaffiliated with a party and can vote in the Republican primary.

He also campaigned in South Carolina and hoped to emerge as the last man standing against Trump after the early state contests.

Christie had long insisted that he had no plans to leave the race before New Hampshire's primary on Jan. 23 and appeared on track to perform better than he had in 2016, when he finished in sixth with just 7% of the vote.

At the town hall Tuesday, he delivered a sharply worded rebuttal to those calling on him to drop out to clear the path for Haley, arguing that she wasn't even trying to beat the front-runner.

"I have no interest in being a spoiler for someone who wants to beat Donald Trump," he said. "But if you'd be willing to be his vice president, if you'd pardon him if you became president, if you'd vote for him even if he's a convicted felon ... I mean, geez, really?"

Christie asked the crowd to imagine what would happen if he dropped out to support Haley and then she agreed to serve as Trump's running mate.

"What will I look like? What will all the people who supported her at my behest look like?" he asked. "You know, I made that mistake once, eight years ago. I made an endorsement decision based on politics eight years ago when I supported Trump. I'm not going to make the same mistake again. Can't do it."

The campaign, in many ways, felt like a mission of redemption for the former governor, who arguably did more than any other Republican to help Trump win the presidency when they faced each other in 2016.

During that contest, Christie delivered a fatal blow to Marco Rubio, another 2016 presidential rival, during a debate that came just as the GOP establishment appeared to be coalescing around the senator from Florida as a Trump alternative. No other candidate ever emerged in his place.

Then, after Christie dropped out, he became the first major GOP figure to endorse Trump during a surprise press conference. He went on to lead Trump's White House transition operation — before he was unceremoniously fired — and to serve as an on-again-off-again adviser, including preparing Trump for the debates.

It was during one of their 2020 debate prep sessions that Christie believes Trump gave him COVID-19, putting Christie in the hospital in intensive care.

But it wasn't until the night of the 2020 election that Christie, who had been friends with Trump and his wife for 20 years, broke with the then-president after Trump falsely claimed victory long before all the votes had been counted. Christie later penned a book that was deeply critical of the former president.

After the announcement, Republican Norm Olsen, 71, of Portsmouth, said he wasn't surprised by Christie's announcement given his position in the polls.

"It's very disappointing," he said. "I think Chris Christie was the best Republican candidate and he had the courage to do what has to happen in this party, and that is stand up against former President Trump."

Olsen said with Christie out of the race, he'll be voting for Haley, in part because she, like Christie, has experience being a governor.

"The most important thing over the next couple of weeks is that former President Trump does not win," he said. "It will be the first chance to save the Republican Party from him."

Haley and DeSantis faced off in a GOP debate while Trump held a town hall. Follow live updates

By The Associated Press undefined

Former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis faced off in the first one-on-one debate of the 2024 election cycle, while former President Donald Trump held a town hall at the same time.

The competing Wednesday night events in Iowa come just five days before the state's leadoff presidential caucuses and as the candidates are issuing last-minute appeals to voters to turn out for the Jan. 15 contest, which could be the coldest caucus night ever.

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who didn't qualify for the debate, dropped out of the race Wednesday in a late effort to blunt Trump's momentum heading into Iowa.

What to know

Urgency sparks fireworks at the Haley-DeSantis debate

The debate could help decide the Republican alternative to Trump

Christie drops out of the GOP race

Feeling caucus confusion? Your guide to how Iowa works

Haley and DeSantis say the other was a good governor

Toward the end of the debate, DeSantis and Haley were asked what they admired about the other.

DeSantis cited Haley's time as South Carolina's governor and as the United Nations ambassador during Trump's administration.

"At the United Nations, I did think that she spoke out strongly on some key issues, and I appreciated that," DeSantis said. "I also appreciate the state of South Carolina. My wife is a College of Charleston graduate. Her parents lived there for many, many years. And so it is a wonderful state. There's a lot of great people there. To be able to have been governor, there is a great achievement."

Haley's answer was succinct: "I think he's been a good governor." It prompted an awkward "OK" from CNN's Jake Tapper.

Trump advisers sound optimistic note after debate

Trump's advisers are feeling confident heading into the Iowa caucuses.

Trump senior adviser Jason Miller told reporters that Wednesday night's debate between Haley and DeSantis showed "two candidates who were nowhere near ready for primetime."

Asked if they had any concerns about with record lows forecast in Iowa for caucus day, senior adviser Chris LaCivita quipped: "Wear a coat."

He added the campaign has "people that are actually from Iowa who are running Iowa so they know that in January, it snows." He also said there are "contingencies" in place, including drivers to get people to caucus sites.

No need to wean US off oil and gas, Haley and DeSantis agree

Haley and DeSantis say there is no need for Americans to wean themselves off oil and gas when it comes to dealing with climate change.

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After the two found much else to spar over Wednesday, both suggested there was no point in the U.S. cutting its fossil fuel use since China was the world's top polluter. Climate scientists disagree.

"The reason I took us out of the Paris climate agreement was because ... they didn't do anything to hold China and India to account," said Haley, who was the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. when Trump pulled the country out of the landmark global climate deal.

Both also said they'd target Biden's climate-friendly efforts as president and suggested that U.S. technology could innovate the country's way out of climate danger.

'Here in Florida'

If you tuned in at the wrong time, you might have thought the debate was filmed in Florida rather than snowy Iowa.

DeSantis spent much of his time onstage talking about his work as governor in his home state, even using the term "here in Florida" without correcting himself during the debate.

"We are in a situation here in Florida and as Republicans, you need somebody that is going to be in there and fight for you," he said.

Even CNN moderator Jake Tapper slipped up on the debate location in the second hour.

"Here in Florida — I'm sorry, Gov. DeSantis, here in Iowa," Tapper said before referring to the floods that have left farms underwater in the Midwestern state.

Haley and DeSantis asked about Trump's call to terminate parts of Constitution

Haley and DeSantis were asked whether there was a meaningful difference in how they and the former president view the Constitution, considering Trump once called for the "termination" of parts of the document over his lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

Haley says it's wrong for Trump to continue to falsely claim the 2020 election was stolen. She called the Jan. 6 Capitol riot a "terrible day" and said, "I think President Trump will have to answer for it."

DeSantis deflected a bit after saying that it was fair for the media to criticize Trump on this issue.

"You can't just terminate the Constitution. I know he does word vomit from time to time on social media. But obviously I will uphold the Constitution."

But he quickly changed the topic to COVID-19 and how federal authorities imposed strict rules for lockdowns and social distancing.

'Ballistic podiatry'

In a well-rehearsed zinger during a back-and-forth over Social Security reform, DeSantis joked that Haley has a "problem with ballistic podiatry."

That means "shooting yourself in the foot every other day," he quickly explained, drawing an eye roll from Haley.

The joke was a nod to Haley's recent campaign trail gaffes, among them her omission of slavery when a voter asked her about the causes of the Civil War.

DeSantis campaign ally Rep. Thomas Massie used the term on the social media platform X last week after Haley said in an interview that you "change personalities" going from Iowa to New Hampshire.

"We called this ballistic podiatry at MIT," the GOP Kentucky congressman wrote.

Raising the retirement age? Haley supports it, DeSantis doesn't

DeSantis and Haley are disagreeing over whether to raise the retirement age.

Haley supports raising the retirement age and has said that the current age of 65 is too low.

DeSantis on Wednesday night referenced his grandmother, who lived to be 91 and whose sole source of income was Social Security. He cited declining life expectancy in the United States as a reason he wouldn't support raising the age.

Haley said DeSantis voted as a congressman to raise the retirement age to 70. She says, "You can't trust him."

Haley mocks DeSantis for campaign challenges

Haley is mocking DeSantis and the challenges his campaign has faced as numerous senior members of a super PAC backing him have resigned or been fired in recent weeks.

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"It's been a revolving door of political people in and out of his campaign," Haley said.

"If he can't handle the financial parts of a campaign, how is he going to handle the economy when it comes to the White House?" he asked.

DeSantis says Haley likes to focus on political processes that voters do not care about while he prefers to talk about his record as a governor.

School choice sparks disagreement at GOP debate

DeSantis and Haley are clashing over how they would lead the country in terms of education reform.

Asked about South Carolina's low ranking in terms of K-12 education during her time as governor, Haley said she advocated for more parent involvement and apprenticeships that "taught our kids how to build the things we're making."

DeSantis responded that Haley had "caved to the teachers union" when she was governor and wasn't able to get school choice. DeSantis says school choice is "universal" in Florida, passed through a state Legislature that has been very favorable to him.

Haley said she "wanted school choice" but that her own state's Republican legislature wouldn't do it.

Trump says he already knows who he'd pick as VP

Donald Trump sidestepped a question about who is in the running to be his running mate if he wins the nomination, but suggested he's already made up his mind.

"Well I can't tell you that, really," he said at a Fox News town hall. He added: "I mean, I know who it's going to be."

Trump was asked if he would consider someone who has run against him and was open to mending fences.

"Oh sure, I will, I will. I've already started to like Christie better," he quipped after Christie, who dropped out of the race Wednesday, was caught on a hot mic saying he thinks Haley has no chance.

Christie was one of Trump's top finalists for his running mate in 2016, but he chose Mike Pence instead.

Christie, a vocal Trump critic, has made clear he has no interest in the role.

Haley says DeSantis brought 'most anti-Israel Republican' to Iowa

During a discussion on the Israel-Hamas War, Haley twice accused DeSantis of bringing "the most anti-Israel Republican" with him on the campaign trail in Iowa.

She was referring to Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie, who has been stumping for DeSantis in Iowa.

Massie was the lone House Republican to vote against a GOP resolution condemning antisemitism on university campuses in December. He has previously critiqued antisemitism-related legislation as restricting free speech.

DeSantis dismissed the jab, which Haley has used before while campaigning.

"That's just cheap garbage," DeSantis said.

Haley pans Biden for not knowing about Austin's hospitalization

Haley says Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's secret hospitalization is evidence that the Biden administration doesn't have a handle on how to handle the war between Israel and Hamas — or his own Cabinet.

Asked if she would support strikes on Iran to knock out Hezbollah, Haley said dealing with the situation was further complicated by Austin's recent hospitalization for prostate cancer. The White House has said President Joe Biden didn't know until Austin had already been in the hospital for days.

"How does Biden not talk to his secretary of defense every single day, knowing that we have a war in Europe, a war in the Middle East?" Haley asked. "The idea that the secretary of defense would not even be in contact with the president, much less than contact with his staff, is unforgivable."

Haley and DeSantis split on support for Ukraine

Haley and DeSantis are splitting on the U.S. continuing support for Ukraine's defense, with DeSantis suggesting it's not a top U.S. priority.

DeSantis accused Haley of wanting an "open-ended commitment" of U.S. money and arms for Ukraine. For his part, DeSantis said of Ukraine's battle against Russian invaders, "we need to find a way to end this." The U.S. should be focusing instead on the border and competition with China, he said.

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Haley cast supporting Ukraine as a vital U.S. priority, saying it was essential to stop Russia's aggression. "You do not have to choose" between priorities like the border and Ukraine, she said. "This is about keeping America safe. This is about preventing war."

DeSantis knocks Haley with 'pale pastels' insult

DeSantis has twice used the phrasing of "pale pastels" as a knock on Haley. She is the only woman in the race, and she is standing next to him on stage, clad in a pastel pink dress.

DeSantis first used the reference to portray the former South Carolina governor as in favor of raising taxes. He said, "We need to fly a flag of bold colors. Carrying the banner putting the American people first — not the pale pastels of the warmed-over corporatism of people like Nikki Haley."

Minutes later, he said it again in reference to immigration, saying Haley is "bankrolled by people who want open borders" and adding, "You should work with corporate CEOs, Governor, that is pale pastels."

Haley says remark about New Hampshire needing to 'correct' Iowa's decision was a joke

Haley says she was only joking when she told voters in New Hampshire that they would have the opportunity to "correct" the decision made by Iowa caucusgoers.

DeSantis reminded viewers on Wednesday night about her comments and called them insulting.

"She was in another state, and she said the people of Iowa need to be corrected," DeSantis said. "We don't need a candidate who is going to look down on middle America."

"Iowans know when you're telling a joke," Haley replied.

Haley touts her UN experience

Haley is pointing to her foreign policy experience pretty often in the opening minutes of the debate.

"I dealt with Russia, Iran, China every day," she said of her time as U.N. ambassador. "No one ever said I caved. I defended America and I fought for America."

Haley and DeSantis trade jabs on lies

At the very start of the debate, DeSantis and Haley are going after each other for lying and misrepresenting their positions.

Referencing Haley, DeSantis said, "We don't need another mealy-mouthed politician who just tells you what she thinks you want to hear just to try to get your vote, then to get an office and to do her donors' bidding." He also mentioned her previous positive comments about drawing inspiration from Hillary Clinton, a point that he's hit repeatedly during the GOP campaign.

Haley several times mentioned a new website called DeSantisLies.com that her campaign has stood up. She said that DeSantis' campaign is "exploding" and that "he's only mad about the donors, because the donors used to be with him, but they're no longer with him now."

Haley's campaign also blasted out an email heralding the website as her "surprise gift" that would be "detailing and fact checking all of DeSantis' lies."

And we're off!

The fifth Republican presidential debate and a competing town hall have begun in Iowa.

Wednesday night's debate is the last big opportunity for DeSantis and Haley to make their case to voters before the state's leadoff GOP caucuses next week.

Meanwhile, Trump is once again skipping the debate. This time, he'll be sitting down with Fox News hosts Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum for a live town hall in Des Moines.

Trump rarely sits for interviews with mainstream hosts. His recent Fox town halls have been with his longtime friend Sean Hannity, though he did participate in a heated CNN town hall. His last sit-down with Baier included pointed questions about his handling of classified information and other topics.

What's at stake for Republicans in Iowa?

For Republicans, there are usually two prizes in the Iowa caucuses: delegates and bragging rights.

Iowa Republican voters will indicate their picks for the party's presidential nominee next Monday, and the results of that vote will determine how many of the state's 40 convention delegates each candidate will receive.

Candidates win national convention delegates in direct proportion to the percentage of the vote they receive. There is no minimum threshold required to qualify for delegates.

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For Democrats, nothing is at stake, since the 2024 caucuses will have no bearing on the presidential race. Dozens of vehicles stranded after Iowa snowstorm

An AP reporter driving from Des Moines to Davenport for a Trump campaign event spotted dozens of cars and trucks stranded along the side of Interstate 80, a major artery through Iowa.

A couple of trucks were on their side, while other vehicles had crashed into a barrier along the median.

Candidates were forced to cancel their events earlier in the week when heavy snow hit the leadoff caucus state. Vivek Ramaswamy said his car got stuck in a ditch while driving in snowy weather Monday night to Des Moines from northwest Iowa.

Trump and DeSantis agree: Haley will 'get smoked'

Trump and DeSantis don't agree on much but do find common ground on one thing: Christie's parting shot at Haley.

Trump said Wednesday that he might "even get to like" Christie again after the departing presidential candidate was caught on a hot mic saying that Haley was "going to get smoked" and was "not up to this."

DeSantis' sentiment in a post on X was similar: "I agree with Christie that Nikki Haley is 'going to get smoked.'"

Haley, meanwhile, was gracious in her well wishes for Christie, calling her former fellow governor "a friend for many years" and commending him "on a hard-fought campaign."

Hot mic moment before Christie drops out

Christie was caught on a hot mic bashing Haley moments before he ended his campaign at a New Hampshire town hall.

"She's going to get smoked," he said of Haley, adding: "She's not up to this."

He also said that former Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis had called him, "petrified" that he was going to endorse Haley, but the hot mic was cut before he finished speaking.

Christie also appeared to defend his performance in the race as Trump continues to dominate.

"People don't want to hear it. They don't want to hear it. We know we're right, but they don't want to hear it," he said. "We couldn't have been any clearer. We couldn't have been any more direct or worked any harder."

Stakes are high for Haley and DeSantis

Haley and DeSantis have spent much of the Republican presidential primary flanked by lower-polling rivals, so the stakes are high for the former U.N. ambassador and the Florida governor at Wednesday's debate.

The moment is especially important for Haley, a politician long known for her disciplined approach to messaging but who has recently suffered a series of gaffes.

Oops!

DeSantis left an important item in Florida when he flew back to Iowa after delivering his State of the State address Tuesday.

"I actually do have a winter coat," DeSantis told a construction contractors convention in Des Moines on Wednesday. "And I forgot it. I left it at home."

The temperatures for Iowa were below freezing and headed to below zero through Monday's caucuses. DeSantis told the crowd that his staff was hustling his coat from Tallahassee before he headed up to even-chillier northwest Iowa on Thursday.

"I think I'll need much more than that," he said. "I think I'm going to need the earmuffs and all that stuff."

Avalanche kills 1, injures 3 at California ski resort that once hosted Winter Olympics

By SCOTT SONNER and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — An avalanche roared through a section of expert trails at a California ski resort near Lake Tahoe on Wednesday, sweeping up four people and killing one, as a major storm with snow and gusty winds moved into the region, authorities said.

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The avalanche occurred about 9:30 a.m. and prompted Palisades Tahoe to close as search crews combed the area under the K-22 lift, which 30 minutes earlier had opened for the first time this season. It serves "black diamond" runs for skilled skiers and snowboarders.

Skier Mark Sponsler said he arrived at the KT-22 lift amid howling winds and white-out conditions to find it shut down. Unbeknownst to him, the avalanche had just hit.

He spoke to someone who was in the second group to ride up the lift that morning. That person was in the lift and watched the disaster from above, said Sponsler, a veteran weather forecaster and founder of stormsurf.com.

"There was screaming, there were skis and poles and a hand sticking up out of the snow," Sponsler said the witness told him.

The avalanche debris field spanned about 150 feet (45.72 meters) wide, 450 feet (137.16 meters) long and 10 feet (3.05 meters) deep, the sheriff's office said.

"This is a very sad day for my team and everyone here," said Dee Byrne, president of Palisades Tahoe, her voice emotional.

The Placer County Sheriff's Office identified the person killed as Kenneth Kidd, 66, a resident of nearby Truckee and Point Reyes. One person suffered a lower leg injury and two others were treated for unspecified injuries and released, officials said.

The avalanche occurred on steep slopes in the GS Gully area. Michael Gross, vice president of mountain operations, said ski patrols had been on the slopes checking the avalanche conditions since Sunday.

"They've been up there doing control work, evaluating weather conditions, setting up all safety markings, hazard markings, et cetera, to get them prepared for today's opening," Gross said at a news conference Wednesday.

The cause of the avalanche is under investigation, officials said. It happened as a powerful storm was expected to bring as much as 2 feet (61 centimeters) of snow to the highest elevations by early Thursday.

Palisades, the site for the 1960 Winter Olympics, is on the western side of Lake Tahoe, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) from Reno, Nevada. Winds at the top of Palisades resort (8,000 feet) were gusting between 31 mph and 38 mph at the time of the avalanche.

Dan Lavelly, 67, of Reno is a season pass holder at Palisades and skied mostly at Alpine Meadows on Monday when there was very little snow and the KT-22 lift was closed.

The KT-22 run along the side of the lift is where the giant slalom was held during the 1960 Olympics, he said.

"Really good skiers love it because it's really steep," he said. "I remember when I was really young I was skiing around there. I fell over and slid like two-thirds of the way down the mountain. There was no way to stop because it's just so steep."

The death Wednesday was the first U.S. avalanche fatality of the season, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, which monitors nationwide.

A 2020 avalanche at Alpine Meadows killed one skier and seriously injured another a day after a major storm. Another avalanche at the resort in March 1982 killed seven people, including several employees.

Haley and DeSantis tear into each other's records in a hostile head-to-head Republican debate

By MEG KINNARD, STEVE PEOPLES and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — In their most hostile encounter yet, Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis attacked each other early and often in Wednesday's Republican primary debate rather than focus on Donald Trump, the absent front-runner, as both tried to demonstrate they were the strongest alternative to the former president.

DeSantis and Haley called each other liars and insulted each other's records and character in the opening minutes of the debate. They seemed to relish the chance to go head to head without their lower-polling rivals interrupting, as in past debates. The two Republicans instead drilled into each other's policy ideas

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and directed viewers to dueling fact-checking websites their campaigns set up.

The one-on-one format displayed their sharp differences over issues ranging from foreign policy to abortion less than a week before the Republican primary process begins in Iowa. But it was unclear whether the debate could reshape a race that's been dominated by Trump, who had the stage to himself at a separate Fox News event in Des Moines where he was seldom challenged and teased the audience about whom he'd pick as his running mate.

Standing at lecterns an arm's length apart, DeSantis and Haley fired off detailed critiques and sarcastic quips from the beginning.

"You're so desperate. You're just so desperate," the former U.N. ambassador interrupted DeSantis at one point.

The Florida governor in turn said Haley's "got this problem with ballistic podiatry, shooting herself in the foot every other day."

In one of her most brutal critiques, Haley ridiculed DeSantis for the turmoil within his political operation, with several rounds of personnel changes and new strategies along with the millions spent on his behalf.

"Why should we think you can manage or do anything in this country?" Haley asked.

DeSantis accused Haley of being beholden to big donors and of flip-flopping on conservative issues.

"We don't need another mealy-mouthed politician who just tells you what she thinks you want to hear just to try to get your vote, then to get into office and to do her donors' bidding," DeSantis said of Haley.

One rare point of agreement was that Trump should have been onstage too.

When asked about Trump's comments in 2022 calling for the "termination" of parts of the Constitution over his lie that the 2020 election was stolen, Haley was blunter than DeSantis about critiquing the president she once worked for.

"That election, Trump lost it. Biden won the election," Haley said.

She also said the Jan. 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol by his supporters "was a terrible day and I think President Trump will have to answer for it."

DeSantis, who has been suggesting the party will need to nominate someone other than Trump because of his legal challenges, predicted that the former president would likely end up being convicted for the criminal charges he faces for his efforts to overturn the election.

"I don't think he gets through that," DeSantis said of one of Trump's trials. "So what are we going to do as Republicans?"

Hours before Haley and DeSantis took the stage, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie announced he was dropping out of the race, a curveball with major implications. Christie, by far the most aggressive Trump critic running for the GOP nomination, had faced intense pressure to step aside so opponents of the former president could unify behind a single candidate and improve the odds of dethroning the frontrunner.

Christie, along with biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, did not qualify for Wednesday's debate after appearing in earlier events.

Trump said he's "not exactly worried" about Christie dropping out. He said he agreed with comments Christie made on a hot mic ahead of his announcement, when he said Haley is "going to get smoked" and is "not up to this."

Wednesday's debate was especially important for Haley, a politician long known for her disciplined approach to messaging. That reputation has been tested recently after a series of gaffes, including her failure to mention slavery as the root cause of the Civil War and a quip that New Hampshire voters will have a chance to "correct" the results that emerge from Iowa.

The debate offered Haley a chance to reset a campaign that has come under fresh scrutiny by everyone from her GOP rivals to President Joe Biden, a sign that her opponents in both parties see her as a rising contender.

DeSantis has bet his campaign on Iowa's caucuses and has vowed to win them despite trailing badly in most state polls. He has visited all of Iowa's 99 counties and has the endorsement of Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds.

Each tried to take the position as the leader who would address the U.S.-Mexico border and the strain

of record-high numbers of migrants crossing.

DeSantis noted his state chartered a flight to fly migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, without notifying local officials. He also pledged to finish building the border wall Trump made central to his presidency and accused Haley of being insufficiently supportive of it.

Haley pointed to her actions as South Carolina's governor, noting she passed a law requiring businesses to check the immigration status of employees and job applicants and a law requiring local police to inquire about the immigration status of people they stop. The latter drew a lawsuit from the U.S. Justice Department during the administration of former President Barack Obama — something Haley noted with pride.

The central role the U.S. is playing in the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war emerged as a clear dividing line between Haley and DeSantis.

Haley offered a passionate defense of sending aid to Ukraine and Israel. DeSantis charged that she was more concerned about the Ukrainian border than the southern border of the United States.

"You can take the ambassador out of the United Nations, but you can't take the United Nations out of the ambassador," DeSantis jabbed.

Haley punched back.

"This is about preventing war," she said. "You only do that when you focus on national security, not telling lies to the American people that they have to choose. That is wrong."

Alabama's Nick Saban retires after 7 national titles, most in major college football history

By JOHN ZENOR AP Sports Writer

Nick Saban's coaching reign has come to an end. His dominance over college football, however, will forever linger in lore.

Saban, who won seven national championships — more than any major college football coach — and turned Alabama back into a national powerhouse that shattered an Associated Press poll record for most consecutive seasons at No. 1, announced his retirement Wednesday.

"The University of Alabama has been a very special place to Terry and me," Saban said in a statement. "It is not just about how many games we won and lost, but it's about the legacy and how we went about it. We always tried to do it the right way."

Saban, 72, restored a Crimson Tide program once ruled by Paul "Bear" Bryant to the top of college football after taking over in 2007. As he stacked his wins, Saban's celebrity status reached royalty levels in the state of Alabama.

For a time, he was the sport's overlord and there was little that could be done to stop him.

Saban won six of his titles during his 17 seasons at Alabama. He won his first with LSU in 2003. His Tide teams were ranked No. 1 in the AP poll in a remarkable 15 straight seasons, breaking the old record of seven held by Miami.

Saban's wife, Terry, posted about their "incredible run" at Alabama on the Facebook page for Nick's Kids Foundation.

"We hope that the Saban legacy will be about helping others and making a positive difference in people's lives as well as the winning tradition on the field," Terry Saban wrote.

Saban's tutelage helped launch the head coaching careers of Georgia's Kirby Smart, Texas' Steve Sarkisian and Mississippi's Lane Kiffin, among others.

He finished just shy of the top in his final season, leading the Tide from a shaky start to a Southeastern Conference championship and back into the College Football Playoff before falling in overtime to Michigan in a semifinal game at the Rose Bowl.

Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne called him "one of the greatest coaches of all time, in any sport."

Saban led the Tide to nine SEC championships and won his first national title at Alabama with a 14-0 season in 2009. Titles came again in 2011, 2012, 2015, 2017 and 2020. He also won the SEC with LSU in 2001 and 2003.

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After a 7-6 debut in 2007, Saban won at least 10 games in his final 16 seasons.

It wasn't until the rise of Dabo Swinney's Clemson teams in the late 2010s and later Smart's Georgia Bulldogs that any school could be considered a consistent threat to the Tide.

Saban has stepped away as the fabric of college football undergoes dramatic change. Colorado's Deion Sanders, a coach who has sought to capitalize on the intervention of players profiting financially from their play on the field, said on social media "College Football just lost the GOAT."

"WOW! I knew it would happen 1 day soon but not this soon," he wrote. "The game has change so much that it chased the GOAT away. College football let's hold up our mirrors and say HONESTLY what u see."

Terry Saban addressed the changes to college football in her post, referencing her husband's famed "process."

"The rules for the game of football may change, but the 'process' will never go out of style: hard work, discipline, the relentless pursuit of a worthy goal, not cutting corners, and doing things the right way for the sake of constant personal improvement, not for the scoreboard," she wrote.

Saban made a two-year foray into the NFL with the Miami Dolphins before returning to college to revive one of the nation's most storied programs, which hadn't won a national title in 15 years. Saban is 297-71-1 as a college head coach, with stops at Toledo, Michigan State and LSU. But Alabama is where he cemented his status as one of college football's greatest coaches.

He coached Alabama's first four Heisman Trophy winners and numerous NFL players, going 206-29, a winning clip of 87.7%. His teams produced 44 first-round draft picks, including last year's No. 1 quarterback Bryce Young.

During that span, he also adapted to the changing times of up-tempo offenses, churning out high-scoring teams after winning with some of the nation's best defenses, along with the new NIL and transfer rules.

He led Toledo to a Mid-American Conference championship in 1990, his lone season as that program's coach. Saban worked as Bill Belichick's defensive coordinator with the Cleveland Browns for four seasons before becoming the first Michigan State coach to lead his first three teams to bowl games.

"I think he's the greatest coach in the history of football," Michigan State basketball coach and longtime Saban friend Tom Izzo said in a telephone interview Wednesday. "There are a lot of great coaches, but what he's done and the consistency that he did it — in an era where so many people and things are coming at you — is remarkable."

Saban's latest team dealt with plenty of adversity early, including a loss to Texas, but rebounded with the emergence of quarterback Jalen Milroe to upset then-No. 1 Georgia in the SEC championship game.

Saban didn't sound like a coach looking to give up the job any time soon after the game. But it wasn't a bad way to go, even without the title.

"This is one of the most amazing seasons in Alabama football history in terms of where this team came from, what they were able to accomplish and what they were able to do, winning the SEC championship, and really, really proud of this group," he said. "I just wish that I could have done more as a coach to help them be successful and help them finish, and all we can do now is learn from the lessons that sometimes failings bring to us."

SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey feels Saban isn't done entirely with college football.

"Knowing Nick? He's not walking away from the game. He's walking away from a role," Sankey said.

Judge says Donald Trump won't give own closing argument at civil fraud trial after disputing rules

By JENNIFER PELTZ and JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump won't make his own closing argument after all in his New York civil business fraud trial after his lawyers objected to the judge's insistence that the former president stick to "relevant" matters and "not deliver a campaign speech."

Judge Arthur Engoron nixed Trump's unusual plan on Wednesday, a day ahead of closing arguments.

The judge had initially indicated he was open to the idea, saying he'd let Trump speak if he agreed to

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abide by rules that apply to attorneys' closing arguments. Among other things, Engoron wanted the former president and current Republican front-runner to promise he wouldn't assail his adversaries in the case, the judge or others in the court system.

Trump's legal team said those limitations unfairly muzzled him. When Engoron didn't hear from them by a Wednesday deadline, the judge told them he assumed Trump was not agreeing to the restrictions and therefore would not be speaking.

"MEAN & NASTY," Trump wrote of the judge's decision on his Truth Social platform. Trump indicated he will still attend Thursday's court proceeding and reiterated his desire to "personally do the closing argument."

The trial could cost Trump hundreds of millions of dollars in penalties and strip him of his ability to do business in New York. He's fighting allegations that his net worth was inflated by billions of dollars on financial statements that helped him secure business loans and insurance.

The former president denies any wrongdoing, and he has lambasted the case as a "hoax" and a political attack on him. The judge is a Democrat, as is New York Attorney General Letitia James, who brought the lawsuit.

The trial came after Engoron decided, in a pretrial ruling, that Trump had engaged in fraud for years. The judge ordered at that point that a receiver take control of some of the ex-president's properties, but an appeals court has put that order on hold.

The trial concerns remaining claims of conspiracy, insurance fraud and falsifying business records. Engoron will decide the verdict.

It's extremely uncommon for people who have lawyers to give their own closing arguments. But Trump's lawyers had signaled privately to the judge last week that the ex-president planned to deliver a summation personally, in addition to arguments from his legal team. James' office objected, saying that the proposal would effectively amount to testimony without cross-examination.

In an email exchange filed in court Wednesday, Engoron initially approved the request, saying he was "inclined to let everyone have his or her say."

But he said Trump's remarks would have to stay within the bounds of "commentary on the relevant, material facts that are in evidence, and application of the relevant law to those facts."

Trump would not be allowed to introduce new evidence, "comment on irrelevant matters" or "deliver a campaign speech" — or impugn the judge, his staff, the attorney general, her lawyers or the court system, the judge wrote.

Trump attorney Christopher Kise responded that those limitations were "fraught with ambiguities, creating the substantial likelihood for misinterpretation or unintended violation." Engoron said that they were "reasonable, normal limits" and would allow for comments on the attorney general's arguments but not personal attacks.

Kise termed the restrictions "very unfair."

"You are not allowing President Trump, who has been wrongfully demeaned and belittled by an out of control, politically motivated attorney general, to speak about the things that must be spoken about," the attorney wrote.

"I won't debate this yet again. Take it or leave it," the judge shot back, with an all-caps addition saying he wouldn't push back an already extended and imminent deadline to resolve the matter. The deadline passed without a response from Trump's lawyers.

Earlier in the exchange, the judge also denied Kise's request to postpone closing arguments until Jan. 29 because of the death Tuesday of Trump's mother-in-law, Amalija Knavs. The judge expressed condolences but said he was sticking to the scheduled date, citing the security and logistics required for Trump's planned visit to court.

Taking on a role usually performed by an attorney is dicey for any defendant, and summations are a last chance to try to show how the evidence from the trial has or hasn't met legal requirements for proving the case.

A closing argument isn't constrained to the question-and-answer format of testimony. But "it's absolutely not a free-for-all," said Christine Bartholomew, a University at Buffalo School of Law professor who

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specializes in civil procedure.

"Unless you're legally trained ... the chance of a misstep is really, really high," she said, adding that it's "extra-risky" when a judge has already taken issue with a defendant's conduct during the case.

Trump ran afoul of Engoron after making a disparaging social media post about the judge's law clerk on the trial's second day. The post included a false insinuation about the clerk's personal life.

Engoron then imposed a limited gag order, barring all participants in the trial from commenting publicly about court staffers. The judge later fined Trump a total of \$15,000, saying he'd repeatedly violated the order. Trump's defense team is appealing it.

During the recent email exchange about Trump's potential summation, Engoron warned Trump's lawyers that if the former president violated the gag order, he'd be removed from the courtroom and fined at least \$50,000.

Trump testified in November, sparring verbally with the judge and state lawyers as he defended himself and his real estate empire. He later considered but ultimately decided against a second round of testimony, explaining that he had "nothing more to say."

Snow in the West and flooding in the Northeast. And more foul weather is on the way

By KATHY McCORMACK and SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — Drenching rains, flooding and fierce winds stranded vehicles, shuttered schools and knocked out power to hundreds of thousands in the Northeast, the swan song of a bout of violent weather that battered most of the United States. Forecasters warned Wednesday that more misery was not far behind.

The storm hit the Northeast on Tuesday night and moved out Wednesday after toppling trees, downing power lines, and forcing water rescues on flooded or washed-out roads.

Wind gusts reached as high as 95 mph (153 kph) in Maine, and blustery weather continued Wednesday. Philadelphia, which sits on the Delaware River upstream from the Atlantic Ocean, experienced its highest storm surge on record.

Another storm could bring heavy rain and high winds to the Northeast from Friday night into Saturday, forecasters said.

The region's woes followed a day of tornadoes and deadly accidents in the South and blizzards in the Midwest and Northwest. In some parts of the Pacific Northwest and the Rockies, more than 2 feet (about 75 centimeters) of snow fell. Bone-chilling cold promised to follow in some areas, and an avalanche in California killed at least one person as a new storm rolled in.

Hundreds of thousands of customers lost power at some point as storms swept the country. At least 250,000 customers remained without power Wednesday afternoon on both coasts and in parts of the Midwest, with New York and Pennsylvania leading the count, according to PowerOutage.us.

Nearly 700 flights were canceled across the country Wednesday, according to FlightAware.com.

The effects of the storm by region, and what's still to come:

NEW YORK, NEW JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA

A couple of Pennsylvania communities got more than 4 inches (10 centimeters) of rain, and others came close. Emergency responders rescued some drivers as low-lying roads flooded.

In Lower Macungie, outside Allentown, a Mercedes remained in the middle of a now-dry two-lane road Wednesday afternoon, its owner having yet to retrieve it. An orange cone, a sign that rescuers had cleared the car, sat atop it. All told, first responders rescued four motorists in the bedroom community.

"It's a common occurrence that when we have the heavy rains and the flooding occurs, and we shut down these roads, that some people choose to take their chances," said Lower Macungie Fire Chief David Nosal. "And some make it through, some don't, and those that don't end up calling 911, and then we have to go out and retrieve them."

The storm surge at Philadelphia was the highest in records dating to 1900, said Jeff Masters, a meteo-

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rologist with Yale Climate Connections. The storm flooded roads, uprooted trees and cut power.

The previous high surge came during Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

"Coastal flooding is accelerating and will continue to do so because sea level rise is accelerating, as well," Masters said.

In New Jersey, roads flooded and rivers rose after some up to 3 inches (7.6 centimeters) of rain fell on ground already saturated by another storm a few weeks ago.

Lou DeFazio, 65, of Manville, lives steps from the Millstone River, which flooded disastrously in 2021 in the remnants of Hurricane Ida.

"It's getting worse and worse," he said as the river swelled Wednesday.

In New York's Nassau County, on Long Island, cars slogged through water in the streets of Freeport. Farther east, near the Hamptons, flooding was reported at Shinnecock Bay. Several schools across Long Island canceled or delayed classes.

New York City officials evacuated nearly 2,000 migrants housed at a sprawling tent complex in Brooklyn amid fears high winds could collapse it. Families slept on the floor of a high school. The migrants returned to the complex early Wednesday after winds eased.

NEW ENGLAND AND CANADA

Winds gusted to 95 mph (153 kph) at Maine's Isle au Haut, an island in Penobscot Bay, said Jon Palmer, of the National Weather Service.

Winds pushed a parked but empty Southwest Airlines plane into a jet bridge early Wednesday at Portland International Jetport, Maine's largest airport, officials said. No one was hurt, but a wing was damaged and a new aircraft was sent to operate the flight.

The storm canceled events and government functions in Maine, where some areas were still recovering from a snowstorm over the weekend and flooding the previous month. In a parking lot at a Portland wharf, lobstermen used pumps in an attempt to thwart floodwaters.

The storm caused severe coastal flooding at Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, with police discouraging people from getting too close to the surf. Hampton Beach's Ocean Boulevard was temporarily closed, and residents were told to shelter in place as the surf crashed over sea walls.

Water surrounded entire neighborhoods and made roads impassable, and a shelter was set up in Hampton. No injuries were reported.

A dam breach in Connecticut brought evacuation orders along the Yantic River in Norwich. It was lifted hours later after the dam was deemed not in danger of failing. A power substation that had been shut down, cutting electricity to 5,000 customers, was being brought back online.

Later, another Connecticut dam — Pameacha Pond Dam in Middletown — experienced a partial breach as a result of flooding from Tuesday's storm. The state Department of Public Works says no businesses or homes were affected.

In Vermont, winds gusted to 70 mph, and rain followed heavy, wet snow. Many schools closed or delayed classes.

The storm also hit Atlantic Canada with snow, rain, and high winds and waves, closing schools and cutting power to thousands in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia.

WEST

An avalanche at the Palisades Tahoe ski resort in California killed one person Wednesday and injured three others as a major storm with snow and wind gusts moved into the region, officials said. One The resort was the site of the 1960 Winter Olympics.

The storm is expected to bring as much as 2 feet (61 cm) of snow to the highest elevations in the Sierra Nevada by Thursday. The National Weather Service issued a rare snow squall warning as night fell Wednesday east of Reno, Nevada, with as much as 2 inches (5 cm) of snow per hour possible in some areas. The weather service said rare snowfall was possible on the Las Vegas Strip.

Storms in the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountains had already dumped 29 inches (74 centimeters) at Stevens Pass in Washington and 30 inches (76 centimeters) outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, according to the National Weather Service.

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Authorities issued warnings for very dangerous avalanche conditions in mountainous areas of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Washington and Oregon. Backcountry travelers were advised to stay away from steep slopes.

In parts of northern Montana, temperatures could drop below minus 30 (minus 34 Celsius) by Saturday morning. High temperatures were expected to remain below freezing as far south as Oklahoma.

MIDWEST

Slushy highways led to fatal collisions in Wisconsin and another in Michigan.

The storm, which began Monday, buried cities across the Midwest, 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.

Madison, Wisconsin, expected much as 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow and 40 mph (64 kph) winds.

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).

Forecasters warned of dangerous temperatures and windchills in the Midwest and Plains dipping to minus 20 (29 Celsius) or lower in Chicago, Kansas City and some areas of Montana.

The University of Kansas Health System said it is treating several people injured shoveling or hurt in crashes after the latest round of winter weather. One person found outside in the snow died, the health system said in a news release.

SOUTH

Several deaths have been blamed on heavy rain, hail and wind, including possible tornadoes. Roofs were blown off homes, and furniture, fences and debris were strewn about.

An 81-year-old woman in Alabama was killed when her mobile home was tossed from its foundation by a suspected tornado. A man died south of Atlanta when a tree fell on his car. Another person died in North Carolina in a suspected tornado.

Some areas of Florida were cautioned about streams and rivers flooding Wednesday afternoon. Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a state of emergency for dozens of counties in North Florida.

Rescuers in Virginia pulled two people from floodwaters, where they clung to branches after their vehicle flooded and they were swept from its roof, according to Albemarle County Fire Rescue. They weren't injured and were in the water for at least 10 minutes.

Ancient human DNA hints at why multiple sclerosis affects so many northern Europeans today

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ancient DNA helps explain why northern Europeans have a higher risk of multiple sclerosis than other ancestries: It's a genetic legacy of horseback-riding cattle herders who swept into the region about 5,000 years ago.

The findings come from a huge project to compare modern DNA with that culled from ancient humans' teeth and bones — allowing scientists to trace both prehistoric migration and disease-linked genes that tagged along.

When a Bronze Age people called the Yamnaya moved from the steppes of what are now Ukraine and Russia into northwestern Europe, they carried gene variants that today are known to increase people's risk of multiple sclerosis, researchers reported Wednesday.

Yet the Yamnaya flourished, widely spreading those variants. Those genes probably also protected the nomadic herders from infections carried by their cattle and sheep, concluded the research published in the journal *Nature*.

"What we found surprised everyone," said study co-author William Barrie, a genetics researcher at the University of Cambridge. "These variants were giving these people an advantage of some kind."

It's one of several findings from a first-of-its-kind gene bank with thousands of samples from early humans in Europe and western Asia, a project headed by Eske Willerslev of Cambridge and the University

of Copenhagen who helped pioneer the study of ancient DNA. Similar research has traced even earlier cousins of humans such as Neanderthals.

Using the new gene bank to explore MS was a logical first step. That's because while MS can strike any population, it is most common among white descendants of northern Europeans and scientists have been unable to explain why.

The potentially disabling disease occurs when immune system cells mistakenly attack the protective coating on nerve fibers, gradually eroding them. It causes varying symptoms — numbness and tingling in one person, impaired walking and vision loss in another — that often wax and wane.

It's not clear what causes MS although a leading theory is that certain infections could trigger it in people who are genetically susceptible. More than 230 genetic variants have been found that can increase someone's risk.

The researchers first examined DNA from about 1,600 ancient Eurasians, mapping some major shifts in northern Europe's population. First, farmers from the Middle East began supplanting hunter-gatherers and then, nearly 5,000 years ago, the Yamnaya began moving in — traveling with horses and wagons as they herded cattle and sheep.

The research team compared the ancient DNA to about 400,000 present-day people stored in a UK gene bank, to see the MS-linked genetic variations persist in the north, the direction the Yamnaya moved, rather than in southern Europe.

In what is now Denmark, the Yamnaya rapidly replaced ancient farmers, making them the closest ancestors of modern Danes, Willerslev said. MS rates are particularly high in Scandinavian countries.

Why would gene variants presumed to have strengthened ancient immunity later play a role in an autoimmune disease? Differences in how modern humans are exposed to animal germs may play a role, knocking the immune system out of balance, said study co-author Dr. Astrid Iversen of Oxford University.

The findings finally offer an explanation for the north-south MS divide in Europe but more work is needed to confirm the link, cautioned genetic expert Samira Asgari of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, who wasn't involved with the research, in an accompanying commentary.

Israeli military says it found traces of hostages in an underground tunnel in Gaza

By OHAD ZWIGENBERG Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Israeli military said Wednesday it has found evidence that hostages were present in an underground tunnel in the Gaza Strip city of Khan Younis, which has become the focus of Israel's ground offensive.

The military showed the tunnel to journalists who were escorted into a neighborhood near the ruins of destroyed homes and streets. A corrugated tin hut covered the tunnel's entrance in a residential yard.

A makeshift ladder led to the narrow underground pathway, about 2.5 meters (8 feet) below. The tunnel was hot and humid, with walls lined with concrete and electrical wires. Farther inside was a bathroom, where the military said it found evidence that hostages had been there, including their DNA.

"Hostages were held here in this tunnel system," said Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the army's chief spokesman.

Hagari offered no details on what exactly was found in the tunnel, nor did he say when the hostages were there or identify them. He did not say if they were known to be dead or alive.

In a later statement to the media, he said the captives were held in "difficult conditions," without elaborating.

Several hostages freed in a cease-fire deal in late November described being held inside tunnels, which Hamas has laid throughout the Gaza Strip and which Israel says have long been used to smuggle weapons and fighters throughout the blockaded territory.

The tunnel was found in a part of the city that appears to have endured heavy fighting. The nearby residence was badly damaged.

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In another building, the walls were blasted out of several apartments. Large mounds of dirt surrounded the area, apparently from Israeli bulldozers searching for buried explosives. A tank was parked outside an empty school, where an Israeli flag was hung from the exterior walls. The sound of what appeared to be a drone buzzed overhead, and gunfire could be heard in the distance.

The military says Hamas is operating from inside the tunnels, and military officials have made the destruction of the tunnel system a top goal.

Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfus, commander of the military's 98th Division, described the tunnels as posing "a 720-degree threat."

"It's not 360, but it's 720, underground and over ground," Goldfus said.

Israel also believes that Hamas leader Yehya Sinwar is hiding in a tunnel somewhere in Khan Younis.

The beleaguered city, Gaza's second-largest, has become the focus of Israel's war on Hamas in recent weeks. On Wednesday's tour for journalists, no residents appeared to be in the area. Israel has ordered residents to evacuate portions of the city as it proceeds with the offensive.

In its fierce Oct. 7 attack, Hamas and other militants killed 1,200 people and took hostage roughly 250, according to Israeli authorities.

The attack sparked the war. More than 23,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza. More than 85% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has been displaced, and vast swaths of the territory have been leveled.

About 110 hostages have been released. Some 110 remain with their captors, along with the bodies of about 20 people killed in captivity, according to Israel. Several other bodies of captives were retrieved by Israeli forces, and three hostages were killed mistakenly by the military.

The plight of the hostages has gripped Israelis, who see them as an enduring symbol of the state's failure to protect its citizens on Oct. 7.

Israel has made freeing the hostages part of its war aims, along with crushing Hamas' military and governing capabilities.

Blinken seeks Palestinian governance reform for postwar Gaza as deadly Israeli strikes continue

By MATTHEW LEE, WAFAA SHURAFU and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken pressed the Palestinian president Wednesday to reform his government, seeking to rally the region behind postwar plans for Gaza that include concrete steps toward a Palestinian state.

The U.S. wants a reformed Palestinian Authority to govern Gaza once the war is over. Getting President Mahmoud Abbas on board, as well as other Arab countries the U.S. hopes will help rebuild Gaza, depends on promising movement toward a Palestinian state after years of a defunct peace process.

But the vision outlined by Blinken faces serious obstacles.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has so far rejected Palestinian Authority control in Gaza and adamantly opposes the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. 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. Israeli strikes on Wednesday hit an ambulance and a building near a hospital in central Gaza, killing some two dozen people, health officials said.

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 have

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agreed to help rebuild the territory and that wider Israeli-Arab normalization is still possible, but only if there is "a pathway to a Palestinian state."

The Saudi ambassador to the U.K. went even further 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.

In their meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Blinken told Palestinian President Abbas that the U.S. supports "tangible steps" toward a Palestinian state, according to State Department spokesman Matthew Miller.

Blinken said later that they discussed reforming the Palestinian Authority so "it can effectively take responsibility for Gaza." Abbas appeared ready to "engage in all of these efforts," Blinken said at his next stop, the Bahraini capital of Manama.

Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh said they heard "good statements" from the Americans. "But nothing has happened," he said. "The priority now is to stop the war on Gaza."

The 88-year-old Abbas has not stood for election since 2005 and lacks support among his own people.

His 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 Israeli 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.

After meeting with Netanyahu and other top Israeli officials 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.

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. Israel's 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.

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. But Netanyahu insisted in a video statement Wednesday that Israel does not aim to expel the Palestinian population.

"I want to make a few points absolutely clear: Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population," Netanyahu said.

Blinken 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 strikes across the territory, including in areas of the far south where people have been told to seek refuge.

A heavy strike on Wednesday brought down a two-story building in the central town of Deir al-Balah,

close to its main Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, killing at least 20 people, according to Palestinian health officials.

Footage captured by The Associated Press showed dozens of people running in panic as mountains of dust rose into the sky from the blast. Several bloodied corpses were seen lying by the skeleton of the building, where dozens dug for survivors.

Another strike in Deir al-Balah hit an ambulance of the Palestinian Red Crescent, killing four of its crew and two other people, the group said. The ambulance was struck on Salah al-Din Street, the main highway running the length of the enclave, it said in a post on X.

Since the war began, Israel's offensive has killed more than 23,300 Palestinians and wounded more than 59,000, according to an update issued Wednesday by 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. Israel says it has killed some 8,000 militants — without providing evidence — and that 186 of its own soldiers have been killed in the offensive.

FACT FOCUS: Discovery of a tunnel at a Chabad synagogue spurs false claims and conspiracy theories

By MELISSA GOLDIN Associated Press

News of a brawl between police and worshippers on Monday over a secret underground tunnel found connected to a historic Brooklyn synagogue was picked up quickly on social media, with posts spreading baseless claims about the passage, many laced with antisemitism.

The conflict at the Chabad Lubavitch World Headquarters in New York City, which serves as the center of an influential Hasidic Jewish movement, began when a cement truck arrived to seal the tunnel's opening. Proponents of the tunnel then staged a protest and ripped off the wooden siding of the synagogue. Police called to the scene ultimately arrested nine people.

Those supporting the tunnel said they were carrying out an "expansion" plan long envisioned by the former head of the movement, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. But that hasn't stopped a proliferation of social media posts falsely suggesting the passage is proof of illicit activities such as child sex trafficking.

Here's a closer look at the facts.

CLAIM: The tunnel is connected to a local children's museum.

THE FACTS: The tunnel does not connect to the Jewish Children's Museum, which is located across the street from Chabad's headquarters.

Commonly referred to as 770, a nod to the address of the complex's original building, the Chabad headquarters now encompasses multiple adjacent structures in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn.

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, Motti Seligson, a spokesperson for Chabad, told The Associated Press.

A building at 770 Eastern Parkway was purchased in 1940, the first of what would become the Chabad complex. Its upper floors served as a home for Chabad's Sixth Rebbe, or spiritual leader, while the first floor housed offices and a main synagogue for the movement, according to Chabad's website.

Starting in the 1960s, the headquarters expanded into an apartment building next door, at 784-788 Eastern Parkway. The main synagogue, where Monday's brawl took place, was moved from the original building to the basement of this structure. A smaller synagogue remains in use at 770 Eastern Parkway. Another building, on the original structure's west side at 760 Eastern Parkway, is now a Chabad library.

The complex is a deeply revered Jewish site, especially within the Chabad movement. It receives thou-

sands of visitors each year, including international students and religious leaders.

The Jewish Children's Museum can be found on the corner directly to the east of Chabad's headquarters, across Kingston Avenue at 792 Eastern Parkway. It began as an exposition at the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York City in 1986 and opened as a permanent museum in 2004.

CLAIM: The tunnel was used for child sex trafficking or other illicit activities.

THE FACTS: Such claims are unfounded, hinting at long-standing antisemitic tropes and more recent baseless conspiracy theories about child trafficking rings run by elite public figures, including government officials.

The exact purpose and provenance of the tunnel remains the subject of some debate, but there is no credible evidence it was used for the nefarious purposes social media users are falsely connecting it to.

Officials and locals said young men in the Chabad community recently built the passage to the sanctuary in secret.

Seligson, the Chabad spokesperson, characterized the construction as a rogue act of vandalism committed by a group of misguided young men, calling them "extremists" who were attempting to "preserve their unauthorized access" to the synagogue. Those who supported the tunnel, however, said they were carrying out an "expansion" plan long envisioned by Schneerson, the former head of the Chabad movement.

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

Many supporters of the expansion believe Schneerson is still alive and that he is the Messiah. This idea is largely rejected by Chabad and has created a schism within the movement.

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

Asked for comment regarding the claims of sex trafficking or other illicit activities, the NYPD sent the AP a list of the charges issued in the case.

Nine people were arrested as a result of the brawl at Chabad's headquarters. They were charged with crimes including criminal mischief, reckless endangerment, and obstructing governmental administration, according to police. Another three received summonses for disorderly conduct.

Republicans push ahead with Hunter Biden contempt charge after his surprise visit to Capitol Hill

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans on Wednesday took the first step toward holding Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress for defying a congressional subpoena. They advanced the charge to a full House vote just hours after the president's son sparked a momentary political frenzy by appearing in the front row for part of the debate.

The House Oversight and Judiciary committees each passed contempt charges against the younger Biden with unanimous Republican support and all Democrats opposed. The action sets up a House vote on recommending criminal charges against a member of President Joe Biden's family as the GOP moves into the final stages of an impeachment inquiry into the president himself.

If the House votes to hold Hunter Biden in contempt, it will be up to the Department of Justice, specifically the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, to decide whether to prosecute.

It's the latest step for the inquiry, which began in September, but has so far failed to uncover evidence directly implicating the president in wrongdoing involving his son's business dealings.

Hunter Biden has defended his lack of compliance with the GOP-issued subpoena, which ordered him to appear for closed-door testimony in mid-December. Biden and his attorneys said information from private interviews can be selectively leaked and manipulated by House Republicans and insisted that he would

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only testify in public

The arrival of the president's son at the Oversight Committee, which has been engaged in a yearlong probe, sitting in the audience with his legal team, including attorney Abbe Lowell, sent the panel into chaos.

One Republican Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina, insisted that Hunter Biden be quickly arrested. GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia called him a coward as he left during her remarks. Democratic lawmakers argued that Biden, who has refused to testify to the panel behind closed doors, should be allowed to speak publicly.

Committee Chairman James Comer struggled to regain control. "Mr. Biden doesn't make the rules, we make the rules," he said.

Hunter Biden and his attorneys left the committee room shortly after, making a brief statement to reporters outside. Lowell reiterated Wednesday that, unlike the president, his client "was and is a private citizen."

"Despite this, Republicans have sought to use him as a surrogate to attack his father," he said. "And, despite their improper partisan motives, on six different occasions, since February of 2023, we have offered to work with the House committees to see what and how relevant information to any legitimate inquiry could be provided."

Hunter Biden's only remarks to reporters were when asked why he had his father on speaker phone several times during business meetings. "If he called you, would you answer the phone?" he responded.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre also emphasized Wednesday that Hunter Biden is a private citizen, and she refused to say whether the White House was informed in advance of his surprise appearance on Capitol Hill.

"He makes his own decisions like he did today," Jean-Pierre said.

If the contempt referral against Hunter Biden passes the full House it would be yet another challenge for federal prosecutors already under heavy scrutiny for their handling of charges against him related to his taxes and gun use.

Shelving the contempt of Congress charges would likely further stoke conservative criticism that the Justice Department is politicized — especially given that two one-time advisers to former President Donald Trump were prosecuted for contempt of Congress by the Biden administration. But prosecuting contempt cases can be difficult.

Further angering Republicans, Hunter Biden did come to the Capitol on the day specified by the subpoena — but not to testify. Instead, he stood behind microphones outside the U.S. Capitol complex — a couple hundred feet away from the awaiting GOP investigators — and delivered a rare public statement defending his business affairs and castigating the yearslong investigations into him and his family.

"There is no evidence to support the allegations that my father was financially involved in my business because it did not happen," the president's son said in those remarks.

He added, "There is no fairness or decency in what these Republicans are doing — they have lied over and over about every aspect of my personal and professional life — so much so that their lies have become the false facts believed by too many people.

Speaker Mike Johnson gave his stamp of approval Wednesday to the contempt process, saying that the House must uphold its subpoena power.

"We have to do this. This is our role. It's our responsibility," the Louisiana Republican said during a press conference. But, he added, "we're not taking any pleasure in this."

The contempt resolution, released by Republicans on Monday, reads behavior has been "contemptuous, and he must be held accountable for his unlawful actions."

While Republicans say their inquiry is ultimately focused on the president, they have taken particular interest in Hunter Biden and his overseas business dealings, questioning whether the president profited from that work.

Republicans have also focused a large part of their investigation on whistleblower allegations that there has been political interference in the long-running Justice Department investigation into Hunter Biden.

The committees' votes Wednesday on contempt of Congress come a day before Hunter Biden is sched-

uled to make his first court appearance on tax charges filed by a special counsel in Los Angeles. He is facing three felony and six misdemeanor counts, including filing a false return, tax evasion, failure to file and failure to pay.

His lawyer has accused David Weiss, the special counsel overseeing the yearslong case, of "bowing to Republican pressure" by bringing the charges.

Florida welcomes students fleeing campus antisemitism, with little evidence that there's demand

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis this week directed the state's universities to make it easier for out-of-state students facing antisemitism and other religious harassment in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war to transfer to Florida campuses.

DeSantis' directive on Tuesday piggybacks on blowback some Ivy League leaders have faced in response to how they're handling antisemitism and anti-Israel protests on their campuses. The governor's office said there has been an increase in inquiries about transferring, without providing any numbers to back that up.

"With leaders of so-called elite universities enabling antisemitic activities, rather than protecting their students from threats and harassment, it is understandable that many Jewish students are looking for alternatives and looking to Florida," DeSantis, who is campaigning for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination, said in a statement.

The order referred to all students facing religious harassment, and when asked if it included Muslims, Christians and others, a spokeswoman for the board governing Florida's university systems, said Wednesday it covers any student fearful of religious persecution following the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel. However, neither she nor the governor's office said how many students had made inquiries about transferring.

Democratic state Sen. Lori Berman said she knows of Florida students at Harvard who are concerned about antisemitism on campus, but has also heard from a student at the University of South Florida in Tampa, adding that antisemitism is a problem in many places and DeSantis' directive is doing little to prevent it.

"It's kind of interesting that we're offering our Florida schools when I'm not sure that our Florida schools are any different than what's going on elsewhere in the nation," said Berman, who is Jewish.

The lawmaker from South Florida also noted there have been Nazi and antisemitic demonstrations and activities in Florida that DeSantis has said little about.

"He didn't condemn that at all. He did not condemn any of the neo-Nazi ideology that we've seen," Berman said, adding the governor's latest move seems to be more aimed at voters than to solve the problem of antisemitism on college campuses.

"It's a political talking point right before the Iowa caucuses."

DeSantis has waded into the political side of the Israel-Hamas war previously, including organizing flights that brought dozens of U.S. citizens in Israel back to Florida in the conflict's early days.

Shortly after that, the governor and the state board that oversees public universities sought to kick off Florida campuses chapters tied to the national Students for Justice in Palestine organization. The governor claimed their expressions of support for Hamas equated to backing a terrorist organization. The University of Florida chapter and others sued the governor in federal court in November, claiming they have First Amendment rights to advocate and speak out on the issue. That case remains pending in a Tallahassee court.

College campuses across the U.S. have been roiled by protests since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, and university presidents have been caught in the crosshairs, criticized for how they've responded to antisemitic and anti-Muslim acts on and off campus, as well as their public statements on the war. The leaders of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania resigned recently in the wake of criticism over their testimony at a congressional hearing where they were unable to say unequivocally that calls on campus for the genocide of Jews would violate the schools' conduct policies, citing free speech rights.

Under an emergency order signed by the chancellor of the Florida university system on Tuesday, an out-of-state student who has demonstrated "a well-founded fear of persecution" based on religion would have certain requirements, application deadlines and out-of-state tuition waived.

"I think it would be wonderful if it were all religious discrimination. I hope it reads that broadly," said Rabbi Rachael Jackson in Orlando, who reviewed the order.

Just under 10% of the U.S. Jewish population of 7.6 million people live in Florida, the third-highest state after New York and California, according to the American Jewish Population Project at Brandeis University.

Rabbi David Kay in Orlando said while he hasn't heard of any out-of-state Jewish students wanting to transfer to Florida campuses he knows Jewish students who decided not to enroll at Florida universities because of efforts by DeSantis and Republican lawmakers to weaken professor tenure, eliminate diversity initiatives and the takeover by DeSantis appointees of New College, a traditionally progressive school in Sarasota.

The order may backfire by appearing to give Jewish students special treatment, he added.

"It may have the opposite effect," Kay said, with other students thinking, "Why is discrimination against Jewish students being singled out, instead of Muslim students, Hispanic students and Black students?"

Engine maker Cummins to repair 600,000 Ram trucks in \$2 billion emissions cheating scandal

By ALEXA ST. JOHN and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Engine maker Cummins Inc. will recall 600,000 Ram trucks as part of a settlement with federal and California authorities that also requires the company to remedy environmental damage caused by illegal software that let it skirt diesel emissions tests.

New details of the settlement, reached in December, were released Wednesday. Cummins had already agreed to a \$1.675 billion civil penalty to settle claims – the largest ever secured under the Clean Air Act – plus \$325 million for pollution remedies.

That brings Cummins' total penalty to more than \$2 billion, which officials from the Justice Department, Environmental Protection Agency, California Air Resources Board and the California Attorney General called "landmark" in a call with reporters Wednesday.

"Let this settlement be a lesson: We won't let greedy corporations cheat their way to success and run over the health and wellbeing of consumers and our environment along the way," California AG Rob Bonta said.

Over the course of a decade, hundreds of thousands of Ram 2500 and 3500 heavy duty pickup trucks – manufactured by Stellantis – had Cummins diesel engines equipped with software that limited nitrogen oxide pollution during emissions tests but allowed higher pollution during normal operations, the governments alleged.

In all, about 630,000 pickups from the 2013 through 2019 model years were equipped with the so-called "defeat devices" and will be recalled. Roughly 330,000 more trucks from 2019 through 2023 had emissions control software that wasn't properly reported to authorities, but the government says those didn't disable emissions controls. Officials could not estimate how many of the recalled trucks remain on the road.

Stellantis deferred comment on the case to Cummins, which has denied allegations made by the government and is not admitting liability, according to court documents.

The engine maker said in a statement that Wednesday's actions do not involve any more financial commitments than those announced in December. "We are looking forward to obtaining certainty as we conclude this lengthy matter and continue to deliver on our mission of powering a more prosperous world," the statement said.

Cummins also said the engines that were cited but are not being recalled did not exceed emissions limits. Punishment for the unreported software is included in the penalty, the company said.

As part of the settlement, Cummins will make up for smog-forming pollution that resulted from its actions. Preliminary estimates suggested its emissions bypass produced "thousands of tons of excess emissions

of nitrogen oxides," U.S. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland previously said in a prepared statement.

The Clean Air Act, a federal law enacted in 1963 to reduce and control air pollution across the nation, requires car and engine manufacturers to comply with emission limits to protect the environment and human health.

The transportation sector is responsible for about one-third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and much of that stems from light-duty vehicles. Limits aim to curb the amount of emissions from burning gasoline and diesel fuel, including carbon dioxide and other problematic pollutants.

"We increasingly are finding that the public health impacts from emissions from cars are really devastating and it is one of our biggest sources also of emissions leading to climate change," said Jacqueline Klopp, director of the Center for Sustainable Urban Development at the Columbia Climate School.

"To the extent that vehicle manufacturers are trying to evade our emission standards that are our biggest tool for protecting us from these public health impacts and climate change, these kinds of fines for evasion are hopefully a very important deterrent," she added. "There are profound justice and equity issues around air pollution produced by transport emissions."

Diesel exhaust is harmful to human health; it's a carcinogen. Long-term exposure to ozone-creating nitrogen oxides can cause health issues like respiratory infections, lung disease, and asthma.

Officials said Wednesday it was not lost on them that the Cummins settlement follows several other notable emissions cheating cases involving the auto industry in recent years.

Wednesday's details come seven years after German automaker Volkswagen agreed to plead guilty to criminal felony counts following investigations into its use of similar defeat devices, a massive emissions scandal known as Dieseldiegate.

The company installed software in certain model year 2009-2015 diesel vehicles across its brands, circumventing emissions standards and emitting up to 40 times more pollution than those standards allow. Volkswagen said 11 million vehicles across the globe were equipped with the pollution controls.

In 2017, the automaker agreed to pay a \$2.8 billion criminal penalty in addition to \$1.5 billion in separate civil resolutions.

Fiat Chrysler saw similar consequences in 2019 for failing to disclose defeat devices used to make vehicle emission control systems function differently during emission testing. More than 100,000 EcoDiesel Ram 1500 and Jeep Grand Cherokee vehicles were sold in the U.S. with the unauthorized software.

The automaker agreed to pay a \$305 million civil penalty to settle the claims of cheating emission tests in 2019.

In 2020, Daimler, the auto parent of Mercedes-Benz, agreed to a \$857 million civil penalty as a result of its disclosure failures and claims over its violations of the Clean Air Act.

"There's a lot of sunk money into diesel engines and people making profits off of diesel engines," Columbia's Klopp said. "Unless you give them a really big fine and a really big deterrent, they're willing to pay the fines to get those profits. That's really sad because it puts the profits before the health of our communities."

Federal judge says Alabama can conduct nation's 1st execution with nitrogen gas; appeal planned

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama will be allowed to put an inmate to death with nitrogen gas later this month, a federal judge ruled Wednesday, clearing the way for what would be the nation's first execution using a new method the inmate's lawyers criticize as cruel and experimental.

U.S. District Judge R. Austin Huffaker rejected inmate Kenneth Eugene Smith's request for a preliminary injunction to stop his scheduled Jan. 25 execution by nitrogen hypoxia. Smith's attorneys have said Alabama is trying to make Smith the "test subject" for an untried execution method after he survived the state's previous attempt to put him to death by lethal injection.

Smith's attorney, Robert Grass, said he will appeal the decision but declined further comment. The question of whether the execution can ultimately proceed could end up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

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Smith, now 58, was one of two men convicted of the murder-for-hire of a preacher's wife that rocked Alabama in 1988. Prosecutors said Smith and the other man were each paid \$1,000 to kill Elizabeth Sennett on behalf of her husband, who was deeply in debt and wanted to collect on insurance.

Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall praised Wednesday's decision, saying it moves the state closer to "holding Kenneth Smith accountable for the heinous murder-for-hire slaying" he was convicted of committing.

"Smith has avoided his lawful death sentence for over 35 years, but the court's rejection today of Smith's speculative claims removes an obstacle to finally seeing justice done," his statement added.

The state's plans call for placing a respirator-type face mask over Smith's nose and mouth to replace breathable air with nitrogen, causing him to die from lack of oxygen. Three states — Alabama, Mississippi and Oklahoma — have authorized nitrogen hypoxia as an execution method, but none has used it so far.

Smith's attorneys argued the new protocol is riddled with unknowns and potential problems and violates a constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

Huffaker acknowledged that execution by nitrogen hypoxia is a new method but noted that lethal injection — now the most common execution method in the country — once was also new. He said while Smith had shown the theoretical risks of pain and suffering under Alabama's protocol, those risks don't rise to an unconstitutional violation.

"Smith is not guaranteed a painless death. On this record, Smith has not shown, and the court cannot conclude, the Protocol inflicts both cruel and unusual punishment rendering it constitutionally infirm under the prevailing legal framework," Huffaker wrote in the 48-page ruling.

Huffaker also wrote that there wasn't enough evidence to find the method "is substantially likely to cause Smith superadded pain short of death or a prolonged death."

Smith survived a prior attempt to execute him. The Alabama Department of Corrections tried to give Smith a lethal injection in 2022 but called it off when authorities couldn't connect two intravenous lines.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Smith's spiritual adviser who plans to be with Smith during the execution, said he was troubled by the ruling. "Horror is an understatement. The State of Alabama now has the permission of a federal court to suffocate its citizens," Hood said.

Experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council earlier this month cautioned that, in their view, the execution method would violate the prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.

Wednesday's ruling followed a December court hearing and legal filings in which attorneys for Smith and Alabama gave diverging descriptions of the risks and humaneness of death from nitrogen gas exposure.

The state attorney general's office had argued that the deprivation of oxygen would "cause unconsciousness within seconds, and cause death within minutes." Its court filings compared the new execution method to industrial accidents in which people passed out quickly and died after exposure to nitrogen gas.

But Smith's attorneys noted in court filings that the American Veterinary Medical Association wrote in 2020 euthanasia guidelines that nitrogen hypoxia is an acceptable method of euthanasia for pigs but not for other mammals because it could create an "anoxic environment that is distressing for some species."

Smith's attorneys also argued that the gas mask, which sits over the nose and mouth, would interfere with Smith's ability to pray aloud or make a final death chamber statement.

The attorney general's office called those concerns speculative.

Alabama's prison system agreed to minor changes to settle concerns that Smith's spiritual adviser would be unable to minister to him before the execution. The state wrote in a court filing that the adviser could enter the execution chamber before the mask was placed on Smith's face to pray with him and anoint him with oil.

The murder victim Sennett was found dead on March 18, 1988, in the home she shared with her husband Charles Sennett Sr. in Alabama's northern Colbert County. The coroner testified the 45-year-old woman had been stabbed repeatedly. Her husband, then the pastor of the Westside Church of Christ, killed himself when the murder investigation focused on him as a suspect, according to court documents.

Smith's initial 1989 conviction was overturned on appeal. He was retried and convicted again in 1996.

The jury recommended a life sentence by a vote of 11-1, but a judge overrode the recommendation and sentenced Smith to death. Alabama no longer allows a judge to override a jury's decision on death penalty decisions.

John Forrest Parker, the other man convicted in the case, was executed in 2010.

As House GOP launches effort to impeach Mayorkas, senators want to strike a border deal with him

By LISA MASCARO and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Marching ahead with multiple impeachment plans, House Republicans set their sights Wednesday on Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who they intend to prove is "derelict in his duty" over handling the surge of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, Rep. Mark Green, launched Mayorkas impeachment proceedings at a peculiar political moment: On one side of the Capitol, a bipartisan group of senators has been engaged in almost daily negotiations with Mayorkas over a landmark border security package. On the other, the House wants to remove him from office.

Opening the hearing, Green, R-Tenn, said there is "no reasonable alternative but to pursue the possibility of impeachment."

The House panel has been circling Mayorkas all year, at times expected to lurch ahead with impeachment proceedings against him as the border crossings hit record highs, topping 10,000 on some days. The number has recently dipped.

But impeaching a Cabinet secretary is rare, having only happened once before in the nation's history when the House impeached Defense Secretary William Belknap in 1876 over kickbacks in government contracts. Going after an official for a policy dispute, in this instance over the claim that Mayorkas is not upholding immigration laws, is unprecedented.

"You cannot impeach a Cabinet secretary because you don't like a president's policies," said the top Democrat on the committee, Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi.

Thompson said evidence throughout the hearings will show that Mayorkas is, in fact, doing his job. He decried the political dysfunction coming from the House Republican majority. "This is not a legitimate impeachment," he said.

With the House GOP's impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, over his son Hunter Biden's business dealings, lumbering along as lawmakers work to dig up information, the Republicans are sharpening their focus on the border crossings and the probe of Mayorkas.

Speaker Mike Johnson, who leads a majority that prefers conducting oversight and investigations over pursuing bipartisan legislating to resolve concerns, gave nod to the proceedings and called Mayorkas the "leading perpetrator" of the border problems. "Congress is now going to have to take the next step and hold him accountable," he said at a press conference.

Johnson also spoke Wednesday with Biden and "strongly encouraged" the president to use his executive authority to secure the southern border, said the speaker's spokesman, Raj Shah.

Green's committee conducted a multi-part investigation into Mayorkas and the department but kicked the process into high gear when hard-right Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene pushed forward the impeachment resolution after Johnson won the speaker's gavel following the ouster of Rep. Kevin McCarthy as speaker.

It remains to be seen if the House investigation will convince lawmakers that Mayorkas' conduct rises to the level of the "high crimes and misdemeanors" the Constitution specifies for impeachment.

Many Republicans prefer a return to Donald Trump-era immigration policies, and they blame Biden for taking actions to stop construction of the border wall and end the COVID-19 era restrictions that prevented many migrants from entering the U.S. Both policies had been championed by the former president, who is now the GOP front-runner for the party's 2024 presidential nomination.

"The evidence documented throughout this report will demonstrate that Mayorkas has been, and con-

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tinues to be, derelict in the solemn duty to secure the nation's borders," the panel's initial report said.

Green, the chair of the committee, has echoed a baseless racist conspiracy idea known as the "great replacement theory" when he argued recently that Mayorkas' "intent" by removing fewer migrants than Trump did was to "fundamentally change the population of the United States, and I believe to empower the Democrat party in perpetuity."

Late Monday, Green said what's happening on the two sides of the Capitol are "separate," adding negotiations between Mayorkas and the senators "will go on and hopefully they'll come to an agreement."

The Homeland Security Department released a memo noting that Mayorkas and the bipartisan senators are working hard to find "real solutions" to fix broken immigration laws while the House majority is wasting time on "baseless and pointless political attacks" by trying to impeach him.

Sen. James Lankford, the chief GOP negotiator of the border package, who has been in almost daily negotiations involving Mayorkas, said he understands his colleagues' frustrations. But he encouraged them to focus as he has on legislation to force Biden's hand.

"Mayorkas is gearing up President Biden's policies — that's what a secretary is going to do," Lankford told reporters. "So you can swap secretaries, the policies are going to be exactly the same."

Lankford briefed House and Senate GOP lawmakers privately Wednesday on the border talks, which hit a setback this week. Senators struggled with certain differences, particularly over parole programs to allow immigrants who claim asylum entry into the U.S. as they await court proceedings. Reaching a border deal is key to a broader funding package for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs.

Over the course of the talks, Mayorkas and Lankford have grown to trust each other as the Cabinet secretary has tried to advocate for an immigration system that brings "order and humaneness," according to one person familiar with the talks who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

But any goodwill for Mayorkas has not spread to the House, where Republicans are readying their effort to remove him from office. The House Homeland Security Committee plans to hold hearings throughout January with the end goal of impeaching Mayorkas.

During Wednesday's nearly five-hour session, Republicans hammered away at Mayorkas's performance, saying he'd failed to do his job detaining migrants who didn't have the right to be in the country and allowed others to remain as they await proceedings.

"We're going to impeach him," said Rep. Clay Higgins, R-La.

The panel heard testimony from attorneys general about the flow of fentanyl to their states often from drug cartels and from a law professor about the grounds for impeachment.

Democrats said the hearing was designed by Republicans to score political points instead of improving the immigration system. "Impeachment will not make our borders any safer," said Rep. Delia Ramirez, D-Ill.

As the House proceeds with its various impeachment probes, not all Republicans have been eager for the undertakings.

Eight Republicans voted in November to put off the final Mayorkas impeachment vote by sending it to committee. And some GOP senators have been caught in a political bind as they try to support, but also distance themselves from, their hard-right colleagues.

If the House agrees to impeach Mayorkas, the case would go to trial in the Senate, where it takes a super-majority to convict. In the Grant-era, Defense Secretary Belknap was acquitted in the Senate.

"Does his handling of that meet the threshold of 'high crimes and misdemeanors'? That's a question we'll have to get answered," said Sen. John Thune, the second-ranking GOP leader in the Senate.

Somali extremists kill 1 person and capture 5 others from UN helicopter after its emergency landing

By OMAR FARUK Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — Fighters with al-Qaida's East Africa affiliate al-Shabab attacked a United Nations helicopter that made an emergency landing Wednesday in territory controlled by the extremists in Somalia, killing one passenger and abducting five others, officials said.

The minister of internal security of Galmudug state in central Somalia, Mohamed Abdi Aden Gaboobe, told The Associated Press by phone that the helicopter made the landing due to engine failure in Xindheere village. He said six foreigners and one Somali national were on board and one was shot dead while trying to escape. One was missing.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric confirmed that "there was an incident involving a U.N.-contracted helicopter that took place today in Galmudug." He said that for the safety of those on board he would not provide other details except to say that "response efforts are under way. ... We're fully engaged on the issue and trying to resolve it."

The nationalities of the passengers were not immediately available.

The extremists then burnt the helicopter after confiscating what they thought was important, the Galmudug minister said.

Al-Shabab did not immediately claim responsibility for the attack.

An aviation official said medical professionals and soldiers were on board the helicopter that had been headed to Wisil town for a medical evacuation. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak with the media.

Al-Shabab intensified attacks on Somali military bases in recent months after it lost control of some territory in rural areas to a military offensive that followed the Somali president's call for "total war" on the fighters.

Al-Shabab still controls parts of southern and central Somalia and continues to carry out attacks in the capital, Mogadishu, and other areas while extorting millions of dollars a year from residents and businesses in its quest to impose an Islamic state.

The widespread insecurity means the U.N. and other humanitarian entities travel around Somalia by air. The U.N. mission in the Horn of Africa nation offers humanitarian assistance in a country periodically hit by deadly drought and with one of the world's least developed health systems.

The U.N. mission also supports a 19,000-strong multinational African Union peacekeeping force that has begun a phased withdrawal from the country with the aim of handing over security responsibilities in the coming months to Somali forces, who have been described by some experts as not ready for the challenge.

Last month, Somalia's government welcomed the U.N. Security Council's vote to lift the arms embargo imposed on the country more than three decades ago, saying it would help in the modernization of Somali forces.

Dujarric, the U.N. spokesman, said Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke to Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud on Wednesday morning at his request, but the main aim wasn't the helicopter incident. It was about the agreement signed Jan. 1 between Ethiopia and the breakaway region of Somaliland to give landlocked Ethiopia access to part of its coast.

Somalia's president has rejected the agreement, calling it a violation of international law.

"The secretary-general recalled that the Security Council has repeatedly affirmed the respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Somalia," Dujarric said, and he hopes "all parties will engage in peaceful and constructive dialogue. and to refrain from any actions that could further escalate the situation."

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 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 Democratic 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 Wednesday.

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.

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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 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."

France's youngest prime minister is a rising political star who follows in Macron's footsteps

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to appoint a 34-year-old prime minister surprised many because of his age and relatively short career. But Gabriel Attal has become one of the most prominent and ambitious figures on the French political scene in recent years, saying there's "nothing greater than serving France."

The centrist politician is often compared to Macron, France's youngest president, who went from presidential adviser to head of state in a few years. Macron, now 46, was first elected in 2017 at age 39.

Macron's office in a statement said the choice of Attal to replace Elisabeth Borne, 62, shows the president's willingness to allow "new politicians" to emerge — one of the mottos of the so-called "Macronism" that seeks to break with traditional political parties. The office called Attal someone who gets results quickly.

Attal during the handover ceremony on Tuesday described his appointment as "the symbol of audacity."

Attal also is France's first openly gay prime minister. He recently detailed on national television TF1 how he suffered bullying at middle school, including homophobic harassment.

Attal has listed education, security and fighting unemployment amid his top priorities as prime minister.

Political analyst Jerome Jaffré noted a "real change" with Attal's appointment. Previously, Macron "didn't want a prime minister with political weight and an existence in the eyes of the public," Jaffré told RTL radio. But Attal is one of the most famous politicians in France, he said.

French opinion polls show Attal was the most popular minister in the previous government — and is more popular than the president.

As his star has risen, Attal has been discreet about his private life. When his political career took off while he was in a relationship with another politician from Macron's party, he repeatedly said he didn't want to make a statement with it.

In his October declaration to the High Authority for Transparency in Public Life, which compiles declarations by high-ranking officials to record potential conflicts of interest, Attal declared having no partner.

He was born in 1989 to a father of Jewish descent, a lawyer and video producer, and a mother of Russian descent working in a video company. He attended a renowned private high school in Paris before studying public affairs at the prestigious Sciences-Po Paris school.

Critics often cite his Paris upbringing when they accuse him of being out of touch with people struggling in the provinces.

Attal became an adviser to the health minister in 2012 under Socialist President Francois Hollande. He joined Macron's newly launched centrist political movement in 2016. The next year, as Macron was elected president, Attal was elected a lawmaker at the National Assembly, France's lower house of parliament, from the Paris region.

In 2018, aged 29, he became the youngest member of the French government as a junior minister in charge of education and youth. Notably, he was in charge of launching France's universal national service program, following a promise by Macron to encourage young people to take on a mission for public good.

In 2020, Attal's career took off when he was appointed government spokesperson. The job gave him media visibility during press briefings following the weekly Cabinet meeting.

He started using social media widely in a way no government official had done before, launching his own Twitch and YouTube live broadcasts that allowed followers to ask him questions.

In 2021, when France adopted a law allowing single women and lesbians access to medically assisted reproduction, Attal posted on Instagram photos of himself as a baby, saying he was born via such a practice and said it "can now benefit millions of other families who until now have been unfairly deprived of it."

In less than six months at the head of the prestigious education ministry, where he was appointed last summer, Attal made his mark with a series of high-profile announcements.

He announced a ban on long robes in classrooms that took effect with the new school year in September, saying the garments worn mainly by Muslims were testing secularism in schools. He also launched a plan

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to experiment with uniforms in some public schools.

His TikTok account as education minister collected millions of views, with videos focusing on the fight against cyberbullying and on promoting change at middle and high schools.

Kentucky is the all-time No. 1 team through 75 storied years of AP Top 25 college basketball polls

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

Sustained excellence is difficult to achieve in any sport.

It takes hiring the right coaches, year after year. A constant stream of great players to replace those that depart. It takes luck, to be sure, but also passionate fans, elite facilities, proper marketing and the flexibility to adapt to the times.

In college basketball, those that get the mixture right just might land atop the AP Top 25.

Since The Associated Press began ranking teams in January 1949, when Saint Louis was installed at No. 1, many schools have laid claim to the crown. Some fell by the wayside, replaced by others that climbed the venerable poll. But through the vast changes that have transformed college basketball, and more than 1,200 polls that have tried to make sense of it all, one thing has remained constant: Kentucky is usually somewhere near the top.

To celebrate this month's 75th anniversary of the Top 25, the AP reviewed every poll to determine the all-time No. 1 and the Wildcats — the winningest program in college basketball — narrowly edged North Carolina for the top of the heap.

"When I got here," current Kentucky coach John Calipari recalled, "it was just knowing that it matters in this state. The fans are incredibly engaged. There were people who knew more about our recruiting than I did. That's when you realize this is different."

It's been that way ever since Adolph Rupp, the Kansas-born farm boy who became the Baron of the Bluegrass, built the Wildcats into a perennial power over 42 seasons starting in 1930.

They eventually supplanted Saint Louis at No. 1 that first season and have rarely strayed too far over the past 75 years. So when teams were awarded points based on where they landed on each ballot, just as they are in the weekly rankings today, Kentucky ended up No. 1 with 17,852 points through last season. The Tar Heels had 17,268, while Duke, Kansas and UCLA were next.

"They all have an awesome following. They all recruit excellence. But it all goes back to the players," said current St. John's coach Rick Pitino, who won national championships at both Kentucky and Louisville, which came in at No. 6 on the all-time list.

"At Kentucky," Pitino said, "every year you can get a great player, from Dan Issel and Pat Riley on down."

Arizona was seventh on the all-time list, followed by Indiana, Syracuse and Michigan State rounding out the top 10.

The list is not intended to crown the greatest college basketball program, because greatness can be measured in different ways: Duke has been the most dominant program over the past three decades; Kansas is considered the cradle of coaches, laying claim in part to not only Rupp and Calipari but North Carolina's Dean Smith and current coach Bill Self; and UCLA has the most national championships with 11. Besides, the final AP poll each season is released before the NCAA Tournament.

Rather, the AP's all-time Top 25 is a measure of sustained excellence as reflected by generations of voters, men and women who have covered the sport and attempted to order the most deserving teams on their weekly ballots.

Did voters get it right over all those years? Pitino thinks so, as do many coaches surveyed by the AP in recent months.

"The AP poll is the one that everybody has a lot of respect for," said Tom Izzo, whose four decades as an assistant and head coach at Michigan State helped land the Spartans in the top 10. "I think to do something like that means you've been consistent over 75 years. And a lot of those years I wasn't alive, but a lot of those years I was part of it."

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Kentucky has appeared in more than 75% of AP polls, while Duke has been No. 1 more than any other program.

"I think the poll got it right," said ESPN analyst Dick Vitale, a longtime AP voter. "The voters take it seriously and make sure the most deserving teams are ranked. There's a reason those teams are called the bluebloods, and this lends credence to that."

START TO FINISH

There have been 14 teams that were wire-to-wire No. 1, including Gonzaga during a 2020-21 season perhaps best remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bulldogs' perfect season ended against Baylor in the national title game.

Half of those wire-to-wire teams went on to win the title: Bill Russell and San Francisco in 1956; John Wooden's teams at UCLA in 1967, '69, '72 and '73; Indiana in 1976, the last team to finish a season unbeaten; and the Duke team in 1992 that needed a heroic shot from Christian Laettner to beat Kentucky in the NCAA Tournament, then toppled Michigan for the title.

Three other wire-to-wire No. 1s had perfect seasons end in the tourney: Ohio State in 1961, UNLV in '91 and Kentucky in '15.

THE NUMBERS GAME

There have been 206 teams in the poll, including 13 that have made a single appearance. The most recent was Old Dominion, which was ranked No. 25 on Jan. 1, 2015, lost to Western Kentucky and has yet to return.

UCLA holds the record for consecutive polls at 221, beginning the 1966-67 season at No. 1 and sticking around until a loss to USC on Jan. 12, 1980. The longest streak entering 2024 belonged to Gonzaga, whose run of 142 barely stayed alive when the Bulldogs fell 11 places to No. 24 in the poll released Jan. 1.

REMEMBER ME

Eleven programs that made the Top 25 no longer play at college basketball's highest level. Some of them, such as Wayne State and West Texas A&M, dropped to Division II. Beloit, New York and Hamline, which played the first recorded intercollegiate game in 1895, are among those that dropped to the Division III level.

Some are no longer around at all. Texas-Pan American merged with Texas-Brownsville to create Texas-Rio Grande Valley, which does play Division I hoops. St. Francis (Brooklyn) ended all intercollegiate athletics last year due to financial concerns.

SPECIAL AND SUPERLATIVE

Given current conference configurations, the ACC had the most schools in the all-time top 10 (four) and was tied with the Big Ten for the most in the Top 25 with seven apiece. The Big East was next with four, followed by the Big 12 with three.

Kansas and Michigan share the record for the biggest poll jump, going from out of the rankings to No. 4 the following week. The Jayhawks accomplished the feat on Nov. 27, 1990, while the Wolverines did it on Dec. 2, 2020.

Maryland is the highest-ranked team in the all-time poll never to reach the top spot in the AP Top 25, though the 16th-ranked Terrapins have spent 25 weeks at No. 2. Next on the list of never-No. 1s is Utah at No. 43 in the all-time poll.

No preseason No. 1 team has won the national championship since North Carolina in 2009. Kentucky in 2012 was the last No. 1 entering the NCAA Tournament to cut down the nets. Each of the last eight champions have been in the top 10, though.

Seven schools have spent a single glorious week at No. 1: Oklahoma State (1951), Wichita State (1964), South Carolina (1969), Georgia Tech (1985), Iowa (1987), Saint Joseph's (2004) and Wisconsin (2007).

Kremlin foe Navalny, smiling and joking, appears in court via video link from an Arctic prison

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — A smiling and joking Alexei Navalny appeared in court Wednesday via video link from the Arctic penal colony where he is serving a 19-year sentence, the first time the Russian opposition leader has been shown on camera since his transfer to the remote prison.

Russian news outlets released images of Navalny, in black prison garb and with a buzz cut, on a live TV feed from the “special regime” penal colony in the town of Kharp, in the Yamalo-Nenets region about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

At the hearing, Navalny cracked jokes about the Arctic weather and asked if officials at his former prison threw a party when he was transferred.

The video was beamed to a hearing in a courtroom hundreds of miles away in the town of Kovrov, in the Vladimir region of central Russia, about 240 kilometers (150 miles) east of Moscow, near Penal Colony No. 6, where Navalny had been held until last month. The hearing was for one of many lawsuits he filed against the penal colony — this particular one challenged one of his stints in a “punishment cell.”

In video footage and media reports from the hearing, Navalny, 47, talked in his usual sardonic tone about how much he had missed officials at his old prison and the Kovrov court officials, and he joked about the harsh prison in Russia’s far north.

“Conditions here (at the penal colony in Kharp) — and that’s a dig at you, esteemed defendants — are better than at IK-6 in Vladimir,” Navalny deadpanned, using the penal colony’s acronym.

“There is one problem, though — and I don’t know which court to file a suit about it — the weather is bad here,” he added with a chuckle.

He was transferred in December to the “special regime” penal colony in Kharp — the highest security level of prisons in Russia. Navalny, who is President Vladimir Putin’s fiercest political foe, is serving time on charges of extremism.

Navalny spent months in isolation at Prison Colony No. 6 before his transfer. He was repeatedly placed in a tiny punishment cell over alleged minor infractions, like buttoning his prison uniform wrong. They also refused to give him his mail, deprived him of writing supplies, denied him food he had ordered and paid for in addition to regular meals, and wouldn’t allow visits from relatives, Navalny argued in his lawsuits challenging his treatment.

In the one heard Wednesday, Navalny contested a stint in solitary confinement, and the judge ruled against him and sided with prison officials — just like in other such lawsuits he filed.

Russian independent news site Mediazona reported that the court played a video of an incident last year in which Navalny lashed out at a prison official who took away his pen. The official then accused Navalny of insulting him, and the politician was put in the punishment cell for 12 days.

According to the report, Navalny admitted Wednesday that he shouldn’t have “yelled” at the official and “overdid it” by calling him names, but he argued nonetheless that he was allowed to have the pen and shouldn’t have been punished by prison officials.

Navalny also asked the penal colony’s representatives whether they celebrated his transfer with a “party, or a karaoke party,” drawing laughter from the judge, Mediazona reported.

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

He has since received three prison sentences, rejecting all the charges against him as politically motivated.

On Tuesday, Navalny said in a social media statement relayed from behind bars that prison officials in Kharp accused him of refusing to “introduce himself in line with protocol,” and also ordered him to serve seven days in an isolated punishment cell.

“The thought that Putin will be satisfied with sticking me into a barracks in the far north and will stop torturing me in the punishment confinement was not only cowardly, but naive as well,” he said.

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SAG Awards nominate 'Barbie,' 'Oppenheimer,' snub DiCaprio

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The 30th Screen Actors Guild Awards on Wednesday heaped nominations on "Oppenheimer," "Barbie" and "American Fiction," while snubbing Leonardo DiCaprio for best male actor.

As they were at the Golden Globes, Greta Gerwig's "Barbie" and Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" were again the lead nominees. Each film picked up four nods including best ensemble. Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling were nominated for their performances in "Barbie," while Cillian Murphy, Robert Downey Jr. and Emily Blunt received nods for "Oppenheimer."

"Oppenheimer" continues to rule Hollywood's awards season, just as it did the summer box office.

Cord Jefferson's "American Fiction" got the biggest momentum boost, landing three nods: best ensemble, Jeffrey Wright for best male actor and Sterling K. Brown for supporting male actor.

Along with those three films, Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon" and Blitz Bazawule's "The Color Purple" were nominated for best ensemble, the guild's top award.

Most notably left out of that group was Yorgos Lanthimos' "Poor Things," which on Sunday won best comedy/musical at the Golden Globes. The film's star, Emma Stone, was nominated for best female actor while Willem Dafoe (but not Mark Ruffalo) was nominated for best supporting male actor.

But those were far from the only snubs in the nominations announced by Issa Rae, a co-star in both "Barbie" and "American Fiction," and Kumail Nanjiani on Instagram Live.

Nominated for best actor were Bradley Cooper ("Maestro"), Colman Domingo ("Rustin"), Paul Giamatti ("The Holdovers"), Murphy and Wright. DiCaprio had long been seen as a presumed nominee for his performance in Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon." Lily Gladstone, who is poised to potentially make history at the Oscars, was among the best female actor nominees, while Robert De Niro was nominated for best supporting male actor.

Todd Hayne's "May December" was completely shut out, as was Celine Song's tender love story, "Past Lives." Charles Melton, co-star of "May December," was expected to be among the supporting male actors. And neither Sandra Hüller ("Anatomy of a Fall") nor Fantasia Barrino ("The Color Purple") scored individual nominations.

Along with Gladstone and Stone, the nominees for best female actor are Carey Mulligan ("Maestro") and Annette Bening ("Nyad"). Bening's co-star, Jodie Foster, joined the supporting female actor category which also featured Da'Vine Joy Randolph ("The Holdovers"), Danielle Brooks ("The Color Purple") and Penélope Cruz for "Ferrari."

The SAG Awards are closely watched as an Oscar bellwether. Their picks don't always align exactly with those of the film academy, but seldom is a best picture or acting winner not nominated first by SAG. That means any best picture hopes for films like "Poor Things" just took a hit. "Past Lives," Celine Song's tender love story, also was set back.

The last two best-ensemble winners — "Everything Everywhere All at Once" and "CODA" — went on to win best picture at the Oscars.

This year's SAG Awards follow a grueling 118-day strike by the actors guild SAG-AFTRA that put Hollywood in a months-long battle over its future. Pay in the streaming era and artificial intelligence were top issues.

In the television categories, the trio that nearly swept the Golden Globes — "Succession," "The Bear" and "Beef" — were again among the lead nominees. "Succession" led all series with five nods (though Jeremy Strong was passed over), while "The Last of Us," "Ted Lasso" and "The Bear" all collected four nominations.

The SAG Awards will take place Feb. 24 at the Shine Auditorium & Expo Hall in Los Angeles. Netflix will live stream the ceremony for the first time. Last year's awards were streamed on Netflix's YouTube account.

The show will mark one of Netflix's most notable forays into live programming. The streamer, which has for years been an awards season force, will first to play host, too, in the runup to the Academy Awards in March.

Barbra Streisand will receive the SAG Life Achievement Award.

USDA estimates 21 million kids will get summer food benefits through new program in 2024

By KENYA HUNTER AP Health Writer

Nearly 21 million children in the U.S. and its territories are expected to receive food benefits this summer through a newly permanent federal program, the United States Department of Agriculture announced Wednesday.

Thirty-five states, all five U.S. territories and four tribes opted into the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer program, or Summer EBT, which the government says is meant to supplement existing programs during the summer that have had a more limited reach.

"No child in this country should go hungry," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in an interview with The Associated Press. "They certainly shouldn't go hungry because they lose access to nutritious school meals during the summer months."

In December 2022, Congress made Summer EBT permanent starting in 2024 after the USDA had tested it for several years. The states that chose not to opt in for this summer will have a chance to join for summer 2025, the USDA said.

Who is eligible for Summer EBT?

Families with children who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (that is, families who are at or under 185% of the federal poverty line) will be eligible for Summer EBT, which will cover about 70% of the eligible population in its first year.

In an October report, the USDA said an estimated 17 million households in the U.S. reported problems finding enough food in 2022. That was up from 13.5 million in 2021, when there was more pandemic-era federal food aid.

How much do families get?

Eligible families will receive \$40 per month per child during the summer — a total of \$120 per child. The money will be loaded on an EBT card, which can be used at stores that also take Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

The USDA estimates it will provide a total of \$2.5 billion in grocery benefits in 2024 through the Summer EBT program.

Who opted in?

The Cherokee Nation is one of the four tribes that'll be a part of the inaugural summer. Cherokee National Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. said it was an easy decision.

"I think we're seeing a lot of pressures on households in terms of rent or other housing costs, all of that hitting very finite household budgets," he said, adding, "... This puts a dent in that overall problem by empowering parents to just simply be able to go out and purchase more food and some healthy options that are available."

The Cherokee Nation has its headquarters in Tahlequah, Oklahoma — a state that opted out of Summer EBT. Hoskin said he expects more applications from non-tribal citizens who live on the reservation.

Which states will not participate, and why?

Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont and Wyoming chose not to participate this summer.

Nebraska, Iowa and Oklahoma cited existing programs that already feed children during the summer as reasons not to join Summer EBT.

Implementing a Summer EBT program this year was "not feasible" in Texas, state Health and Human Services Commission spokesperson Thomas Vazquez said in a statement to the AP. He said that was due to USDA guidance coming in late December, "the level of effort needed" to start a new program and the need for the state legislature to approve money for it.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt said in a statement that he doesn't want "a single Oklahoma child to go hungry, and I'll keep working to accomplish that, but large, duplicative federal programs don't accomplish that goal.

"They cause more bureaucracy for families to wade through."

What other federal summer food programs are available?

All 50 states already administer the Summer Food Service Program, which provides sites where kids can eat for free. Vilsack said he's worried it doesn't "provide the help for all the children, no matter how well-intentioned it is."

"For the life of me I don't see why 50 governors aren't doing (Summer EBT)," he said, "but we're happy that 35 are, we're happy that territories are in and we're happy that the tribes are continuing to work with us."

US adults across racial groups agree the economy is a top priority, 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 mention involvement in overseas conflicts and other U.S. involvement internationally. 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 special-

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ist. 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."

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

The poll of 1,115 U.S. adults who are Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders was conducted Nov. 6-15, 2023, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based Amplify AAPI Panel, designed to be representative of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

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 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

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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.

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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.

Today in History: January 11

Theodore Roosevelt makes Grand Canyon a national monument

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 11, the 11th day of 2024. There are 355 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 11, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the Grand Canyon National Monument (it became a national park in 1919).

On this date:

In 1913, the first enclosed sedan-type automobile, a Hudson, went on display at the 13th National Automobile Show in New York.

In 1927, the creation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was proposed during a dinner of Hollywood luminaries at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

In 1935, aviator Amelia Earhart began an 18-hour trip from Honolulu to Oakland, California, that made her the first person to fly solo across any part of the Pacific Ocean.

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In 1943, the United States and Britain signed treaties relinquishing extraterritorial rights in China.

In 1963, the Beatles' single "Please Please Me" (B side "Ask Me Why") was released in Britain by Parlophone.

In 1964, U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry issued "Smoking and Health," a report that concluded that "cigarette smoking contributes substantially to mortality from certain specific diseases and to the overall death rate."

In 1978, two Soviet cosmonauts aboard the Soyuz 27 capsule linked up with the Salyut 6 orbiting space station, where the Soyuz 26 capsule was already docked.

In 1989, nine days before leaving the White House, President Ronald Reagan bade the nation farewell in a prime-time address, saying of his eight years in office: "We meant to change a nation and instead we changed a world."

In 2003, calling the death penalty process "arbitrary and capricious, and therefore immoral," Illinois Gov. George Ryan commuted the sentences of 167 condemned inmates, clearing his state's death row two days before leaving office.

In 2010, Mark McGwire admitted to The Associated Press that he'd used steroids and human growth hormone when he broke baseball's home run record in 1998.

In 2018, Edgar Ray Killen, a 1960s Klan leader who was convicted decades later in the slayings of three civil rights workers, died in prison at the age of 92.

In 2020, health authorities in the central Chinese city of Wuhan reported the first death from what had been identified as a new type of coronavirus; the patient was a 61-year-old man who'd been a frequent customer at a food market linked to the majority of cases there.

In 2023, Jeff Beck, a guitar virtuoso who pushed the boundaries of blues, jazz and rock 'n' roll and influenced generations of players, died at age 78.

Today's birthdays: Former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (zhahn kray-tee-EHN') is 90. Movie director Joel Zwick is 82. World Golf Hall of Famer Ben Crenshaw is 72. Singer Robert Earl Keen is 62. Actor Phyllis Logan is 68. Musician Vicki Peterson (The Bangles) is 66. Actor Kim Coles is 61. Actor Jason Connery is 61. Former child actor Dawn Lyn (TV: "My Three Sons") is 61. Rock musician Tom Dumont (No Doubt) is 56. Movie director Malcolm D. Lee is 54. Singer Mary J. Blige is 53. Musician Tom Rowlands (The Chemical Brothers) is 53. Actor Marc Blucas is 52. Actor Amanda Peet is 52. Actor Rockmond Dunbar is 51. Actor Aja Naomi King is 39. Actor Kristolyn Lloyd is 39. Reality TV star Jason Wahler is 37. Pop singer Cody Simpson is 27.