

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 1 of 70

[1- Upcoming Events](#)

[2- 1440 News Headlines](#)

[3- Today on GDILIVE.COM](#)

[3- JV/C Game Sponsorships](#)

[4- Info for Milbank DoubleHeader](#)

[5- SD SearchLight: Native nations with scarce internet are building their own broadband networks](#)

[7- SD SearchLight: Primaries for attorney general, term limits for PUC nixed by House panel](#)

[9- SD SearchLight: Water bills would leverage remaining \\$135 million in federal pandemic funds](#)

[10- SD SearchLight: With GOP pushing hard on immigration, parole emerges as a make-or-break issue in Congress](#)

[12- SD SearchLight: Noem's phonics literacy effort advances in Legislature](#)

[14- SD SearchLight: House panel defeats year-round daylight saving time proposal](#)

[15- SD SearchLight: Utilities plan onsite gas storage to improve reliability; critics warn of costs, safety concerns](#)

[17- Weather Pages](#)

[22- Daily Devotional](#)

[23- Subscription Form](#)

[24- Lottery Numbers](#)

[25- News from the Associated Press](#)

Thursday, Jan. 18

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, sweet potato, vegetable capri blend, chocolate pudding with. Banana, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Sloppy joes, tri taters.

Basketball Double Header hosts Milbank: (Gym: Boys C at 4 p.m., Girls C at 5 p.m.; Arena: Girls JV at 4 p.m.; Boys JV at 5:30 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

Friday, Jan. 19

Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes with ham, peas, Mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.

Boys Varsity Duals at Deuel, 6 p.m.

Girls Varsity Invitational at Pierre, 4 p.m.



Saturday, Jan. 20

Girls Basketball hosts Great Plains Lutheran: (C game 1 p.m., JV at 2:15 p.m. with varsity to follow)

Girls and Boys Varsity Wrestling Tournament at Arlington, 10 a.m.

Boys JV Invitational Wrestling at Pierre, 11 a.m.

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.

Sunday, Jan. 21

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

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship: (Conde at 8:30 a.m., Groton at 10:30 a.m.), Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's at 9 a.m. and at Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Milestones - 6th grade and sophomores; Annual Meeting with brunch following meeting; Sunday School, 10:15 a.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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Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 2 of 70

1440

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

Shipments of medicine for both Palestinians and Israelis held hostage by Hamas began arriving in the Gaza Strip yesterday—aid delivered as part of a deal brokered by Qatar and France. The agreement marked the most significant diplomatic breakthrough since a November hostage exchange.

A company backed by Silicon Valley tech titans unveiled details of an ambitious plan to turn thousands of acres of rural land between San Francisco and Sacramento into a walkable new city of at least 50,000 residents. The proposal has support from LinkedIn cofounder Reid Hoffman, venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, and philanthropist Laurene Powell Jobs.

British royals King Charles and Catherine, the Princess of Wales, will take time off from public events in the coming weeks due to planned medical procedures, according to two separate palace announcements yesterday. The revelations came less than two hours apart in what some observers have described as atypical candor around the royals' health.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Lana Del Rey, Tyler the Creator, and Doja Cat to headline 2024 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival (April 12-14, 19-21). R.E.M., Steely Dan, and Timbaland highlight 2024 inductees into Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Amazon to partner with The Wonder Project to produce faith-based content for Prime Video. Amazon purchases minority stake in Bally Sports regional networks, which owns rights to local broadcasts for 37 teams in the NBA, MLB, and NHL.

The 40th Sundance Film Festival kicks off today (Jan. 18-28) from Park City, Utah; see list of some of the most anticipated films.

Science & Technology

Greenland's ice sheet has lost roughly 2,000 square miles since 1985 due to rising temperatures, with previous calculations underestimating total ice loss by 20%. Inside a proposal to halt ice loss using undersea curtains.

Google's DeepMind solves geometry problems on par with top competitors in international math competition; ability to solve geometric theorems requires deeper reasoning useful in other applications.

Engineers create artificial plants that generate electricity by harvesting energy from the wind and rain, proof-of-principle study shows.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.6%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq -0.6%); December US retail sales rose more than expected to 0.6% over November.

Sheryl Sandberg to step down from Meta's board of directors, will become informal adviser in May. Venture capital firm General Catalyst announces plans to buy Ohio health system Summa Health and turn it into a for-profit.

Spirit Airlines shares continue to slide after potential sale to JetBlue blocked, shares close down more than 22%. US Federal Aviation Administration says first 40 inspections of Boeing 737 Max 9 planes complete.

Politics & World Affairs

Maine judge pauses secretary of state ruling that made former President Donald Trump ineligible for state's GOP primary ballot, says US Supreme Court must decide on the same issue for Colorado first. Supreme Court considers case challenging extent of regulatory authority granted to federal agencies.

CNN cancels Republican primary debate in New Hampshire ahead of state's primaries next week due to lack of participation from Trump and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley. ABC News also cancels its New Hampshire debate. Latest New Hampshire poll ties Trump, Haley.

China's population declines for second consecutive year in 2023; population of 1.4 billion is down more than 2 million from 2022 due to record-low births and COVID-19 deaths.

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.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 3 of 70

Today on GDILIVE.COM

Double Header Basketball - Milbank in Groton

Girls Varsity around 6:30 p.m. followed by Boys Varsity around 8 p.m.

GDILIVE.COM



Groton Area
Tigers

Any interest in any of
these basketball games on
GDILIVE.COM?

They are \$25 each.

Milbank Girls JV
Milbank Boys JV
Great Plains Lutheran Girls C
Great Plains Lutheran Girls JV
Northwestern Girls JV
Webster Boys C
Webster Boys JV
Webster Girls JV
Florence/Henry Girls JV
Deuel Girls JV
Vermillion Boys JV
Redfield Boys C Game
Redfield Girls JV Game
Mobridge-Pollock Boys C Game
Mobridge-Pollock Girls C Game
Mobridge-Pollock Boys JV Game
Mobridge-Pollock Girls JV Game
Dakota Valley Boys JV
Dakota Valley Girls JV

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

Groton Daily Independent

Double Header Basketball Game

Milbank @ Groton Area
Thursday, January 18, 2024

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena	Main Court in Old Gym
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 4:00PM → Girls JV- 5:00PM → Boys JV- 6:15PM → Girls Varsity<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Halftime Entertainment: HS Drumline- 7:45PM → Boys Varsity<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Halftime Entertainment: MS Drumline	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 4:00PM → Boys C- 5:00PM → Girls C <p>*Fellowship of Christian Students will be doing a Split-Pot Fundraiser during the games as well.</p>

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

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

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: Milbank 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
Milbank: 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

Old Gym → C Game Officials: Kristi Zoellner, Kevin Bohn, Jordan Carson

Boys C Game Scoreboard: Joe Schwan

Girls C Game Scoreboard: Ryan Tracy

New Gym → JV Officials: Justin Hanson, Jordan Kjellsen, Logan Huber

JV Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

JV Book: Alexa Schuring

Girls JV Shot Clock: Ryan Tracy

Boys JV Shot Clock: Joe Schwan

Varsity Officials: Nic Ahmann, Gregg DeSpiegler, Justin Deutsch

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Varsity Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

National Anthem: Pep Band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh

Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Native nations with scarce internet are building their own broadband networks

Rosebud hopes to serve more than 1,500 with \$40 million grant

BY: MADYSON FITZGERALD - JANUARY 17, 2024 7:45 PM

On the Hopi Reservation's more than 1.5 million acres of desert landscape in northeast Arizona, most residents live in villages atop arid mesas.

Below ground, there's a network of copper wires that provides telephone and internet service. Hopi Telecommunications in 2004 bought the company that had installed them, but has been struggling ever since to upgrade the network to broadband speeds.

Hopi Telecommunications serves both the Hopi reservation and parts of the surrounding Navajo Nation. To broaden access, the company provided free internet for students during the COVID-19 pandemic and began offering discounted prices for residents through a federal program.

But the copper wires aren't reaching all the reservation's residents, nor providing the fastest service, as fiber optic cables would. Hopi Telecommunications received two federal grants — one from the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program and the other from the Rural Utilities Service — to provide fiber directly to homes. But the project, which began in September, won't be finished until sometime in 2025.

"It's very important for us to have the higher bandwidth, and we can't do that with copper," said Alicia Youvella, the company's service order coordinator. "It's literally like pulling the veins out of the earth and having to relay down new ones."

Native nations historically have lagged in access to high-speed internet, because of the cost and incomplete broadband coverage data, among other barriers. The inequity became even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when broadband internet service was a crucial lifeline for people stuck in their homes.

So, some Native nations such as the Hopi are taking the matter into their own hands by building their own networks to provide high-speed internet. They also are tapping into a recent increase in state and federal funding to expand broadband across the country.

"It's within our mission to be able to be self-sufficient to hopefully grow in a way that we can provide the types of services that are needed out here," Youvella said. "And we've had a boost — in small little steps — but it's happening."

Broadband technology, including fiber networks, wireless networks and satellite, allows data to move much more quickly than dial-up internet through copper telephone lines.

In 2020, more than 18% of people living on tribal lands didn't have access to broadband technology, compared with about 4% of people living in non-tribal areas, according to a report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The agency analyzed the data after a previous GAO report found that Federal Communications Commission data was overstating broadband internet access on tribal lands, making it difficult to win additional funding and support.

Some states are trying to help tribal efforts. In 2023, Louisiana, Montana, New Mexico and Oregon enacted laws to support broadband expansion by streamlining funding to local governments, including tribes and underserved communities.

One of the measures in California's Digital Equity Bill of Rights, a first-of-its-kind bill signed into law by Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom in October, outlines how the state should ensure that all Californians

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 6 of 70

have equal access to broadband. The new law was pushed by the California Emerging Technology Fund, a nonprofit aimed at closing the state's digital divide — the widening gap between who can and cannot access digital technology.

But Matthew Rantanen, the director of technology at the Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association, says there's still work to do nationwide. Rantanen, a descendant of the Cree Nation, has worked for two decades with Native communities across the country to secure broadband access.

"As you're sitting there physically building a network you run into a lot of, 'Well, how come we can't get funding for this when everybody else can?', or 'Tribes don't have access to this spectrum because nobody's using it,' and so on," Rantanen said. "And so, you start fighting these policy pieces and figuring out there's a lot of parts that need to be sorted."

Rantanen hosts Tribal Broadband Bootcamps to equip tribes to build and maintain wireless networks in their communities.

"You can't be a part of society if you don't have access to the resources," Rantanen said. "[Internet is] hand-in-hand now with water and a roof over your head and electricity to be able to be a citizen in this day and age."

Building their own networks

FCC data overstates tribal access to broadband service, which limits the federal government's and tribal leaders' ability to best provide support, according to the Government Accountability Office report.

BroadbandNow, a data collection and research entity, estimates that 42 million Americans do not have access to broadband internet.

"It's not just in Indian Country, but it's, in fact, across the entire United States," said Frank Martinez, the vice president of strategic initiatives at Connected Nation.

For over 20 years, Connected Nation, a national nonprofit, has worked with federal, state, local and tribal agencies to help close that digital divide. Martinez, who grew up on the Navajo Nation's reservation spanning parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, said there is no one-size-fits-all solution for Native nations that vary in size, topography and culture.

"There's a lot of similarities, but there's a lot of differences," Martinez said. "I think that trying to prescribe solutions in broadband to meet a whole broad type of those cultures and nations can be very complicated."

From the Coeur d'Alene Tribe in Idaho to the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in New York, some Native nations are successfully developing their own infrastructure for better internet, as detailed in a 2021 report from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a national nonprofit that works to "build local power to fight corporate control."

In South Dakota, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe recently received a more than \$40 million grant for the installation of a fiber and LTE network that will connect 1,526 unserved Native American households. South Dakota state Sen. Shawn Bordeaux, a Democrat and member of the tribe, told Stateline the new network will prevent the region's current provider, which has a monopoly, from dictating the price and quality of services for everyone in the area.

Paying for a network and offering affordable prices for residents have been perennial challenges for tribes, said Joe Valandra, the chair and CEO of Tribal Ready. Tribal Ready, a Native-owned and -governed company, helps tribes secure access to broadband funding and resources.

Internet providers that serve Native nations, despite receiving federal and state grants, have not always put that money into tribes in rural areas, Valandra said.

"Tribes have realized that unless they take this bull by the horns and find a way to do it themselves — or find credible partners that can help them do it right — it's not going to happen," Valandra said. "Giving money to the incumbent provider hasn't worked before, and there's no faith that it'll work now."

Tribal Ready helps Native nations identify funding and programs that will let them set up a network completely under the control of the tribe, if possible. The goal, Valandra said, is to empower tribes to regulate broadband as they do other public utilities.

"I think we'll see over the next decade or so more tribes standing up their own utility authority to en-

compass this because it's a benefit for their communities," he said.

Money and staffing challenges

Up until recently, broadband providers and tribal leaders were mainly focused on building broadband networks, said H Trostle, senior policy analyst at the Center for Indian Country Development at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Now the conversation has shifted to how to sustain those networks over the long term.

Trostle praised the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program, which subsidizes broadband service for low-income families. The subsidy, which is as much as \$75 per month for households on qualifying Native lands, shows up as a credit on the family's monthly internet bill.

But the FCC said last week that if Congress does not provide more funding for the program soon, the agency will begin winding it down and millions of households will lose the benefit.

In a bid for more customers, some Native broadband companies are extending service beyond tribal lands, Trostle said.

"But one of the growing challenges is those operating and maintenance costs that just never go away," Trostle said. "And that's especially difficult for wireless networks because they have low capital costs, but very high operations costs. So, it's a very difficult policy point."

Even with a Native broadband network in place, finding workers can be a challenge. One problem is a shortage of housing. And Youvella, of Hopi Telecommunications, said her company trains nearly every technician who comes on board because few reservation residents have the requisite education.

"These are our struggles, but again, we always somehow break through and we work through it," Youvella said.

Madyson Fitzgerald is the newsletter producer and breaking news reporter for Stateline.

Primaries for attorney general, term limits for PUC nixed by House panel

Sponsor of bill to remove nominations from party conventions says he won't revive issue this year

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 17, 2024 4:40 PM

The House State Affairs Committee nixed two proposals Wednesday in Pierre that would have affected the choices of South Dakota voters.

The first defeat, which came on an 8-5 vote, was for a resolution asking voters to upend the way parties choose candidates for some statewide offices. The second, defeated on a 9-4 vote, would have created term limits for public utilities commissioners.

House Joint Resolution 5001 would have placed a constitutional amendment on this year's general election ballot that would have upended the state's party convention system for choosing attorney general, secretary of state, auditor, treasurer and commissioner of school and public lands candidates.

If passed by voters, the amendment would have created primary races for those offices.

The resolution's sponsor, Rep. Tyler Tordsen, R-Sioux Falls, said primaries would put the decision where it belongs: in the hands of voters.

General election candidates for those positions are currently chosen by party delegates to the state conventions that take place after primaries.

"These important decisions are made by a handful of party bosses," Tordsen said.

Attorney General Marty Jackley ascended to the general election ballot during the 2022 Republican convention in the face of a nearly victorious insurgent candidate. Secretary of State Monae Johnson earned her spot on the 2022 ballot thanks to a close convention vote that ousted Steve Barnett, who would have run as the incumbent candidate.

Potter County Republican Larry Eliason testified in support of the resolution, noting that not all counties have the party leadership necessary to participate in the state convention.

"At the last convention, 10 counties, including mine, had no voice," Eliason said. "They had no vote."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 8 of 70

Yvonne Taylor, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Advocacy Network for Women, also offered words of support. The League of Women Voters is among the 12 associations represented by Taylor's organization, and the league backs primary races for all statewide offices.

"We believe letting citizens decide who represents them is a bedrock principle," Taylor said.

Opposition fires back

The resolution saw heavy opposition from some GOP insiders.

State GOP Chair John Wiik of Big Stone City, who also serves as a senator for District 4, acknowledged that infighting has been an issue for his party. But he also argued that a constitutional amendment is a "big government solution" with long-term consequences.

Unlike an initiated measure passed by voters or a law passed by legislators, a constitutional amendment cannot be undone or adjusted by lawmakers. The failed Senate Bill 40 from last year would have done much of what HJR 5001 attempted to do, Wiik said, but "would have allowed the Legislature to tweak things," Wiik said.

Wiik likened the convention system to the Electoral College for presidential elections. That system, extolled as virtuous and ideal through a resolution backed by both chambers last week, is meant to offer a stronger voice to rural areas in national matters.

The convention system, which leans on votes from county-level party leaders, gives candidates an incentive to engage with people from all across the state, Wiik said.

"If we move to a primary system, what is the incentive for a candidate to visit a place like McIntosh or Martin or Milbank?" he said.

Also opposed were two elected officials who landed on the last general election ballot by way of party convention: Commissioner of School and Public Lands Brock Greenfield and Auditor Rich Sattgast. The latter official suggested that primaries would violate the spirit of Article VII, Section 3 of the state constitution, which says the Legislature "shall by law define ... the nomination of candidates."

Passing the resolution amounts to "abdicating your responsibilities," he told the committee.

Other opponents suggested that voters are too busy to keep up with candidates for all offices in primaries and rely on convention representatives to study and understand where candidates stand. Opponents also pointed to the potential for "special interests" to spend money in primaries and influence outcomes.

Democrats help defeat proposal

In his rebuttal, Tordsen said he was surprised that anyone would be opposed to letting voters decide if they'd prefer primaries or conventions. He also questioned the validity of testimony from office-holders who benefited from the current system.

"What I heard was that the process worked for them individually, and that voters can't be trusted," Tordsen said.

Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, moved to pass the resolution.

"This is about the voters, whether or not they're Republican, Democrat or independent," Rehfeldt said. "It gives the power to the voters."

But others had a different take. Rehfeldt's move to pass the resolution failed 6-7.

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, described the proposal as a "divisive" knee-jerk reaction to the messiness of the 2022 convention.

"We shouldn't upend our entire election system because some people are unhappy," said Hansen, who moved to defeat the bill.

Rep. Oren Lesmeister, D-Parade, also opposed the measure. He characterized the issue as one meaningful to Republicans with ideological differences, not one that matters to all voters or his party.

"I find it kind of amusing that we're sitting here again trying to solve a Republican Party problem," Lesmeister said. "I encourage you, please, to take your problem home and solve it."

After defeating Rehfeldt's attempt to pass the resolution onto the House floor, the committee voted 8-5 to send it to the 41st day, ending its chances of appearing on the general election ballot. The committee's two Democrats cast decisive votes in opposition.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 9 of 70

Tordsen told South Dakota Searchlight that he's fielded many calls to "smoke out" the resolution, which is a maneuver to resurrect a bill on the House floor.

Tordsen said he has no plans to do that.

"I'm not a huge fan of circumventing normal procedure, even if the rules allow it," he said in a text. "Mainly out of respect for my colleagues in their committee work. My approach was to be transparent and respectful every step of the way."

PUC term limits knocked down

The committee's other election-related proposal came from House Speaker Hugh Bartels, R-Watertown. It would have limited public utilities commissioners to two six-year terms in office, though it would allow the three current commissioners to start the clock at the next election.

Bartels said he "doesn't have a vendetta against the PUC." The idea is more about consistency, he said. Aside from judges, he said, "this is the only elected office that doesn't have a term limit."

Bartels said he understands the complexity of the PUC's work to regulate things like utility rates and pipelines, but also that the experience of a veteran commissioner isn't the only form utility expertise takes. Commissioners don't get involved with research until a question reaches a hearing.

"It's not researched by the commissioners," Bartels said. "It's researched by the staff."

PUC Commissioner Chris Nelson spoke in opposition on behalf of all commissioners. While serving as secretary of state, Nelson said, he once asked the author of South Dakota's legislative term limit statutes, former Rep. John Timmer, why he and the other backers of term limits exempted the PUC.

"He said, 'We looked at the public utilities commissioners, and we,' – meaning the drafters – 'felt that they had some technical knowledge worth keeping around,'" Nelson said.

Commissioners review thousands of pages of documents before they sit as a quasi-judicial body to make decisions for ratepayers. That the current slate of commissioners has been stable for 13 years, Nelson said, is part of the reason no decision of theirs has been overturned by the state Supreme Court in 20 years.

He coasted to victory in 2022 against Democrat Jeff Barth, and said his campaign's focus on experience and the 69% vote tally in his favor serve as proof that voters believe in the value of institutional knowledge.

"Do utility consumers want rookies working for them?" Nelson said.

Some committee members were not swayed. Rep. Roger Chase, R-Huron, said exempting commissioners from term limits can't be justified by a need for experience.

"We as legislators, sitting on this committee, at one point were all rookies," Chase said.

But Rapid City Republican Rep. Becky Drury agreed with Nelson.

"Their term limit is when they run for re-election," she said.

Rep. Rocky Blare, R-Ideal, moved to defeat the bill. That motion succeeded on a 9-4 vote.

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.

Water bills would leverage remaining \$135 million in federal pandemic funds

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 17, 2024 3:48 PM

A state Senate committee endorsed two bills Wednesday that would allocate South Dakota's remaining \$135 million in federal pandemic funds toward water and wastewater infrastructure projects.

The bills will now head to the state's legislative budget committee for review.

The allocations would utilize the state's remaining American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding before it is no longer available. That federal bill was passed in 2021.

ARPA funds must be allocated by the end of 2024 and spent by the end of 2026; otherwise, the remaining funds return to the federal government.

The 2022 Legislature passed a bill appropriating \$600 million in ARPA funding to the state Board of Water

and Natural Resources. The funding was earmarked for projects on the State Water Plan.

The board has since awarded 210 grants across the state totaling \$600 million, covering over one-third of \$1.67 billion worth of total project costs.

During her recent budget address, Governor Kristi Noem asked lawmakers to allocate the state's remaining ARPA funds toward water and wastewater projects.

The two new bills were introduced on behalf of the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, which oversees state water funding.

One bill would authorize \$94.4 million to help construct local water and wastewater projects already approved across the state. The bill would authorize up to another \$28 million for future expenses or additional water projects later on.

The other bill would allocate \$12.8 million in ARPA funds to the Bureau of Administration. That money would be used for various state agency water, wastewater, and stormwater projects.

The Senate State Affairs Committee conducted hearings on the two new bills and voted 8-0, with one absent, to send the bills to the Joint Appropriations Committee. The Senate committee included its endorsement.

Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, who served his first term in the Legislature in 1995, described the water infrastructure investments the state is making as historic. He said they're "an example of how we as a state have done things right," pointing to a unified effort between state officials and leadership to ensure funds are allocated where they're most needed.

"Thank you to Joe Biden and his leadership," said Sioux Falls Sen. Reynold Nesiba, the lone Democrat on the committee.

"Had we relied on our own federal officials," none of this would have happened, Nesiba added, referring to Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds, and Congressman Dusty Johnson, who are all Republicans and all cast no votes on ARPA.

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.

With GOP pushing hard on immigration, parole emerges as a make-or-break issue in Congress

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 17, 2024 5:12 PM

WASHINGTON — Passage of a multi-billion-dollar supplemental package hinges on curbing an executive authority used to grant immigration protection, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham said during a Wednesday press conference.

"If we don't fix parole, there will be no deal," Graham said alongside Senate Republican Whip John Thune of South Dakota.

Graham said parole is a "red line" for Senate Republicans, and his comments came as President Joe Biden met with congressional leaders to advocate for more than \$100 billion in aid for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and U.S. border security. Republicans have tied changes in immigration policy to their support for the supplemental, which the White House has said is essential to aid countries the U.S. supports.

"As these negotiations, we hope, conclude soon, there have been some significant gains made in terms of policies that are real," Thune said, adding that some of those policies include "dealing with asylum, dealing with border security measures, whether that be a physical wall or technical barriers."

The strong focus in Congress on immigration policy follows the Iowa caucuses, where former president Donald Trump easily won and vowed in his victory speech to push for harsher immigration policies. Those policies, which call for mass deportations and the continuation of building a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, are the center of his presidential reelection campaign.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 11 of 70

"We're going to seal up the border," Trump, the GOP front-runner, said to a cheering crowd after his Monday win, adding that there is an "invasion" from the people claiming asylum at the Southern border.

U.S. House Republicans on Wednesday conducted two separate hearings and a vote slamming the Biden administration's immigration policy, amid the continuation of impeachment proceedings of U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

The House also voted on a resolution, H.Res. 957, put forth by GOP Rep. Nathaniel Moran of Texas, that condemns the Biden administration's immigration policy at the border. It passed 225-187, with 14 Democrats joining Republicans.

Those Democrats include Reps. Mary Peltola of Alaska; Yadira Caraveo of Colorado; Jared Moskowitz of Florida; Eric Sorensen of Illinois; Jared Golden of Maine; Angie Craig of Minnesota; Susie Lee of Nevada; Wiley Nickel and Don Davis of North Carolina; Greg Landsman of Ohio; Henry Cuellar, Colin Allred, and Vicente Gonzalez Jr. of Texas; and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez of Washington.

"The president has failed to maintain operation control of this nation's borders," Minnesota GOP Rep. Michelle Fischbach said on the House floor during debate of the resolution.

Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon said on the House floor during debate that the resolution is a GOP campaign tool.

"It's an effort to keep campaigning on the fear of immigrants rather than any serious attempt to address the complex issues created by global migration forces and decades of congressional inaction," she said.

What is parole?

To handle the increase of people at the Southern border, the Biden administration has used its executive authority to grant parole — something that presidents have employed since the 1950s — to allow non-citizens to temporarily reside and work in the United States.

Graham said that Republicans' top negotiator on border policy, Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, has negotiated "meaningful reforms" in immigration policy through expedited removal procedures and changes to asylum law. But Graham argued that "none of those reforms will work until you deal with parole."

The Biden administration has used parole authority in two ways. The first is a limit for certain nationals such as Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans to temporarily work and live in the U.S. The White House also used parole authority for more than 140,000 Ukrainians and more than 76,000 Afghans.

So far, there have been 168,000 benefactors from the Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan Parole Program, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank that tracks migration.

The administration has also used parole authority on a case-by-case basis for migrants at the border. For fiscal year 2022, more than 370,000 people were granted parole at the border and in fiscal year 2023, more than 304,000 people were granted parole at the border, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

While there is no bill text or framework for an immigration deal, Republicans have floated the idea of raising the bar for migrants to claim asylum, and curbing the White House's use of parole authority.

Graham warned Republicans to take the deal the Senate and White House make, because if Trump is in the White House in 2025, "Democrats will be expecting a pathway to citizenship for that (deal) in my view."

"So to my Republican friends, to get this kind of border security without granting a pathway to citizenship is really unheard of," Graham said.

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, whom Democrats tapped for negotiations on immigration policy, said that the Senate is close to a deal.

"Our goal is to give the executive branch new tools to better manage the border while living up to our values as a nation of immigrants," he said during a Wednesday press conference.

House priorities

Additionally, House Speaker Mike Johnson has continued to push for the hard-line immigration policies of H.R. 2 while a bipartisan trio in the Senate that also includes independent Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona along with Lankford and Murphy works to strike a deal on immigration policy.

Johnson said that when he attends a meeting at the White House scheduled for Wednesday about funding for Ukraine, he will push for policies at the Southern border.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 12 of 70

"We have to take care of our own house," Johnson said during a press conference earlier Wednesday. "We have to secure our own border before we talk about anything else."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has called H.R. 2 a nonstarter in the Senate.

"The hard right — typical of them — in the House have insisted on passing a highly partisan bill, H.R. 2, word-for-word," the New York Democrat said on the Senate floor.

"That is not bipartisanship. Any agreement on an issue as complex and contentious as the border is going to have to have enough support from both sides."

The House Oversight & Accountability Committee held a hearing Wednesday that focused on how the Biden administration rolled back numerous hard-right immigration policies of the Trump administration that many courts struck down. Those included the "Remain in Mexico" policy that required migrants to wait in Mexico while their asylum cases were processed and the so-called "Muslim ban" that barred entry from countries with a predominately Muslim population.

During the committee hearing, GOP Chair James Comer of Kentucky argued that no amount of funding will help the Southern border, "because what we are seeing isn't a money problem, it's a policy problem.

"It's a problem of not enforcing U.S. immigration law," he said.

The top Democrat on the committee, Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, said the hearing was an opportunity for Republicans to show how they will run on immigration policy in the upcoming 2024 election.

"It has become obvious that Trump's party doesn't want immigration solutions at the border, they want immigration problems to run against," Raskin said.

Ohio Democratic Rep. Shontel Brown said that the immigration system that Biden inherited "has been broken for a very long time." She argued that the supplemental package the Senate and White House are negotiating will help officials as they handle the increase in migrants claiming asylum at the border.

"Extreme Republicans have a choice — they can keep using immigration to try to score political points, or they can help solve the problem," Brown said.

An oversight panel of the House Energy and Commerce Committee also held a late-afternoon hearing on how the Biden administration's policies at the Southern border have impacted the health, safety and economics of U.S. communities.

And on Thursday, the House Homeland Security committee will hold its second hearing into the impeachment proceedings for Mayorkas.

Mayorkas has agreed to testify before Congress, but the committee has not announced if he will be a witness.

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

Noem's phonics literacy effort advances in Legislature

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 17, 2024 1:23 PM

PIERRE — The state House Education Committee unanimously voted Wednesday at the Capitol to support Gov. Kristi Noem's \$6 million effort to train teachers in phonics literacy. The bill now goes to the Joint Appropriations Committee.

The effort, spearheaded by the state Department of Education, provides extensive professional development to teachers in what the bill calls the "Science of Reading." It extends to training for public school, private school and tribal teachers.

The legislative ask is a continuation of the department's literacy program that started in 2023 and was paid for by federal COVID relief funds. Those funds expire by September. The \$6 million would continue the program for the next four years and will offer training to all elementary schools and teachers in the state.

"In four years, when the money runs out, we're hoping and believe that the need for the money will be well," Department of Education Secretary Joseph Graves told lawmakers.

Half of all South Dakota students aren't proficient in English Language Arts exams, according to assessment data from the 2022-2023 school year. According to the latest national KIDs Count report, 68% of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 13 of 70

South Dakota fourth graders aren't proficient in reading – an increase of four percentage points since 2021.

Early literacy skills are closely linked to reading achievement throughout school and adulthood, and experts argue reading could be the most important skill needed for success as an adult, according to the department. People who can't read are less likely than others to vote, read the news or be stably employed.

The bill was widely supported by education lobbyists and did not have any opponent testimony.

The bill follows a global debate – often called the “reading wars” – about how best to teach children to read. One side advocates for an emphasis on phonics, which is understanding the relationship between sounds and letters, while the other side prefers a “whole language” approach that puts a stronger emphasis on understanding meaning, with some phonics mixed in.

Graves called whole language teaching a “vague” and “loosey-goosey” method based on the idea that children will naturally learn to read. Critics of phonics-based instruction argue that phonics lessons are boring, prevent children from learning to love reading and distract from the ability to understand meaning in text.

By the 2000s, a “balanced literacy” approach gained popularity that was phonics inclusive but favored whole language instruction. In a 2019 Education Week survey of nearly 700 elementary teachers in the U.S., over 70% said their schools used a balanced literacy approach.

“Proficiency rates in literacy fell (across the nation), and it quickly became clear that elementary schools filled with whole language teaching resulted in Johnny not being able to read,” Graves told lawmakers.

The Science of Reading program comes from “gold standard research” and “huge statistical meta-analyses” pointing to five foundational components of literacy education, Graves said: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

Most of South Dakota's teachers who were trained in phonics before “whole language” and “balanced literacy” was the standard have retired.

Jennifer Macziewski, a first grade teacher in Rapid City, received Science of Reading training three years ago through a state grant. The training was a two year course, so she just started implementing the instruction for her classroom this year.

Macziewski has been teaching for 13 years, she told South Dakota Searchlight after the committee meeting. About 75% of her students typically finished the school year having reached the literacy proficiency benchmark prior to the Science of Reading instruction. About 40% reached that benchmark by the end of the first semester.

After implementing the Science of Reading in her classroom, 58% of her students are at or above the benchmark. She expects between 80% and 90% of her students will meet the benchmark by the end of the year.

She credits that anticipated success to the change in teaching.

“That'll open a lot of doors for them,” Macziewski said. “Typically it would take them longer to learn to read, but I already have some kids who've hit the third grade benchmark. They're going to start reading to learn instead of learning to read now, which will free up resources for teachers to help students who haven't met those benchmarks yet.”

The new instruction is explicit and systematic and “opens up the code of reading” to children so they can decipher words “as long as they can memorize that secret code.”

“Instead of students having to learn thousands of words by memorizing them, they just have to memorize 100 or so unique words,” Macziewski said. “There's an improvement in their writing too because they better understand the language, are able to break apart sounds and break down the words.”

English Language Arts standards will be up for review across the state beginning in 2024. Students are currently tested in English Language Arts standards in third through eighth grade, and in 11th grade.

The South Dakota Board of Regents plans to focus on the Science of Reading in teacher preparation programs across the state as well, Graves said, adding that if the state is going to improve its reading proficiency scores, then this type of support is needed.

“As we do this and as we continue to offer the training to teachers, we're convinced the data will quickly demonstrate SOR's efficacy,” Graves said. “Teachers in schools which adopt it will show increasing read-

ing proficiency rates while those who do not will be left behind and thereby nudged into pursuing this effective program.”

Two other education bills died in the House committee on Wednesday.

One bill would have established a grant program for 30 new South Dakota teachers as a way to incentivize graduating students to stay in-state or encourage out-of-state educators to move to South Dakota.

The second bill would have established qualifications for future members of the Board of Education Standards, with a majority of the seven-member board having a professional background in education.

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.

House panel defeats year-round daylight saving time proposal

Bill would have moved SD time zones to sidestep federal law

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 17, 2024 10:58 AM

A House panel shot down an effort to switch South Dakota's time zones one step east from November to March each year.

The prime sponsor of House Bill 1009, Rep. Ben Krohmer, R-Mitchell, said the change would offer more daylight during the darkest days of winter. That would mean more evening daylight for farmers, construction workers, winter sports enthusiasts and hunters.

It would also benefit human health, Krohmer said, as a lack of sunlight contributes to a risk of seasonal depression.

Federal law requires states to recognize daylight saving time from 2 a.m. on the second Sunday in March through the second Sunday in November unless states specifically opt out. People "spring forward" one hour in March, and "fall back" an hour in November.

Technically, Krohmer's bill wouldn't have opted out of daylight saving time. Instead, it would have moved the state's time zones during the shortest days of winter, essentially extending daylight saving time across the entire year and keeping daylight saving time year-round without saying so.

In western South Dakota, which observes Mountain time, HB 1009 would have switched those residents to Central time. In eastern South Dakota, Central time would have swapped out for Eastern time.

"We will still spring forward and fall back," Krohmer told the House State Affairs Committee on Wednesday. "However, instead of changing our clocks back an hour, we'd switch to Eastern time."

Opponents said the change would create danger for children getting to school in the dark, pointing to fatal accidents that took place in the 1970s, when the entire country opted for a single standard time system with no seasonal changes. They also pointed out that the change would create confusion for those who deal with people from other states that remain on daylight saving time.

"If we have different time zones than the states around us, it would cause problems for all of us," said Rep. John Sjaarda, R-Valley Springs.

Oren Lesmeister, D-Parade, moved to pass the bill. He noted that several states, including Minnesota, have voted to opt out of the biennial clock changes in the event Congress allows states to observe year-round daylight saving time.

In addition to the time zone switch, Krohmer's bill would have set South Dakota up to do the same thing. Last year, a bill that would have put South Dakota in the group of states that would observe permanent daylight saving time if Congress allows it failed in committee.

"I think it is about time. Is this bill the right way to go about it? I'm not sure. But I do know that the states around us have adopted this," Lesmeister said.

Rep. Gary Cammack, R-Union Center, offered a substitute motion to move the bill to the 41st day, a maneuver that defeats a bill.

Cammack's motion passed 11-2.

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.

Utilities plan onsite gas storage to improve reliability; critics warn of costs, safety concerns

Otter Tail in SD is among companies pursuing backup fuel

BY: ROBERT ZULLO - JANUARY 17, 2024 6:00 AM

As the U.S. electric power system has become more reliant on natural gas plants, it's also become more vulnerable to gas system failures.

During Winter Storm Elliott in 2022, about 18% of the anticipated power supply in the portion of the grid that serves the entire eastern half of the United States, called the Eastern Interconnection, was offline. Of the power plants that failed to perform, 47% were natural-gas fired, according to a joint inquiry by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the North American Electric Reliability Corporation.

Natural gas fuel problems accounted for 20% of all generation outages, the report noted.

However, in an era when building new gas pipelines, along with other infrastructure, has proven increasingly fraught, some utilities see a solution to gas shortages: adding liquefied natural gas storage onsite.

Virginia utility giant Dominion Energy is proposing to add liquefied natural gas storage to serve two large power plants it operates near Emporia in southern Virginia. And in South Dakota, Otter Tail Power Company is planning to add gas storage at its Astoria combustion turbine plant in Deuel County. A spokesman for Duke Energy, a large North Carolina-based utility company which was forced to cut power to customers during Elliott last year, said it is "exploring all on-site storage options, including LNG and other alternative fuel storage technologies for future use." A 2021 study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that storing gas onsite could also yield benefits for electric customers in New England, where gas supply is tight.

Some pro-renewable energy analysts, though, are wary about the costs and impacts of adding new gas infrastructure at a time when cutting emissions to mitigate climate change is becoming ever more pressing. There are also safety and environmental concerns.

'Ensuring access to fuel'

Having backup fuel on site is common at many natural gas power plants, though the go-to option is typically a distillate fuel oil (like diesel), said Michael Caravaggio, director of research and development at the Electric Power Research Institute, an independent nonprofit research organization. The main advantage is ease of storage and management over a long period of time, whereas liquefied natural gas needs to be kept at extremely low temperatures, (about -260 degrees Fahrenheit). That means that adding LNG storage involves either liquefying pipeline gas onsite or transporting LNG in for storage in specialized tanks.

"That's a lot of infrastructure for backup fuel," Caravaggio said. "The vast majority of the U.S. would likely pencil out with diesel and distillate oil as the onsite backup and that's what we see currently."

But Bill Swanson, manager of supply operations and planning for Otter Tail Power Company, which has about 133,000 customers in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, said adding LNG at the company's 245-megawatt Astoria plant made the most economic sense. Winter Storm Uri in 2021, which sent gas production plummeting, and Elliott last year prompted the company to pursue LNG backup fuel.

"During Winter Storm Elliott we had a situation where we couldn't get gas out of the pipeline," he said.

The company explored fuel oil but found it would require modifications to the gas turbine. Burning the oil, he added, also reduces the output of the plant more than 10% and increases emissions.

"On an evaluated cost basis, LNG was lower cost," Swanson said, though when asked he said the total cost of the gas storage project is not public. If Otter Tail had to liquefy the gas onsite instead of trucking it in from a nearby facility, "economics might flow back to fuel oil," he added.

Jeremy Slayton, a spokesman for Richmond-headquartered Dominion Energy, said Elliott, Uri, and the Colonial Pipeline cyberattack in 2021 all underscored the need for backup fuel.

The company is proposing to add a 25 million gallon LNG storage facility that will enable its two large combined cycle plants at Brunswick and Greenville to run at full bore for up to four days each. Those

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 16 of 70

plants alone generate enough electricity to power 700,000 of its 2.6 million Virginia customers' homes.

A cost estimate for the project was not available, Slayton said.

"We are in the process of finalizing the project design, specifications and cost estimates," he said.

Whether other electric ratepayers elsewhere across the country will be asked to pick up the tab for natural gas storage is unclear. Scott Fiedler, a spokesman for the Tennessee Valley Authority, which is the largest public power company in the U.S. and operates 17 natural gas power plant sites across its footprint, is not considering adding onsite liquefied natural gas storage at current or future plants. Fiedler cited cost, supply chain issues, regulatory and permitting challenges and safety as considerations.

Since 2011, LNG plant operators have reported 39 incidents to the U.S. Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, an agency spokesperson told States Newsroom. Eight of those "indicate the released commodity ignited," the spokesperson said. A 2022 fire and explosion at the Freeport LNG import and export facility on Quintana Island, Texas, was attributed to testing and operating procedure failures, human error and fatigue, Reuters reported. In North Carolina, where Dominion is building another large LNG storage facility designed to serve gas customers, the facility is expected to emit 65,579 tons of greenhouse gasses a year, among other pollutants. Similar storage projects intended to serve gas customers have been built or are being developed in New Mexico and Wisconsin.

Sarah Durdaller, a spokeswoman for the Edison Electric Institute, a trade group for investor-owned utilities, said the organization does not track individual projects but added that gas storage is valuable.

"Natural gas is a partner to reliability and clean energy. It's helping accelerate the clean energy transition by allowing our member companies to integrate more renewables into the energy grid while ensuring resilience and reliability," she said. "Storage, both onsite at power plants and regional hubs, along with other redundancies ensure natural gas is available when customers and the energy grid need it most."

Todd Snitchler, president and CEO of the Electric Power Supply Association, which represents competitive power producers, said their membership is "constantly evaluating the options available to ensure reliable operation of their assets, including ensuring access to fuel."

'Not the answer'

Yet, at a time when urgent action is needed to mitigate the effects of climate change, investing more money in natural gas infrastructure doesn't make sense, said Mark Specht and Paul Arbaje, energy analysts at the Union of Concerned Scientists who authored a report released Jan. 9 on the failures of gas power plants during five severe winter storms over the past 13 years.

"More gas infrastructure is not the answer. Utilities should be instead focused on diversifying and reducing their reliance on gas," Arbaje said in an interview with States Newsroom, noting that the U.S. Energy Information Administration is predicting that battery storage installations will nearly double in 2024.

Specht noted that about 70% of gas plant failures in the storms they studied were caused by freezing equipment and other problems unrelated to fuel availability.

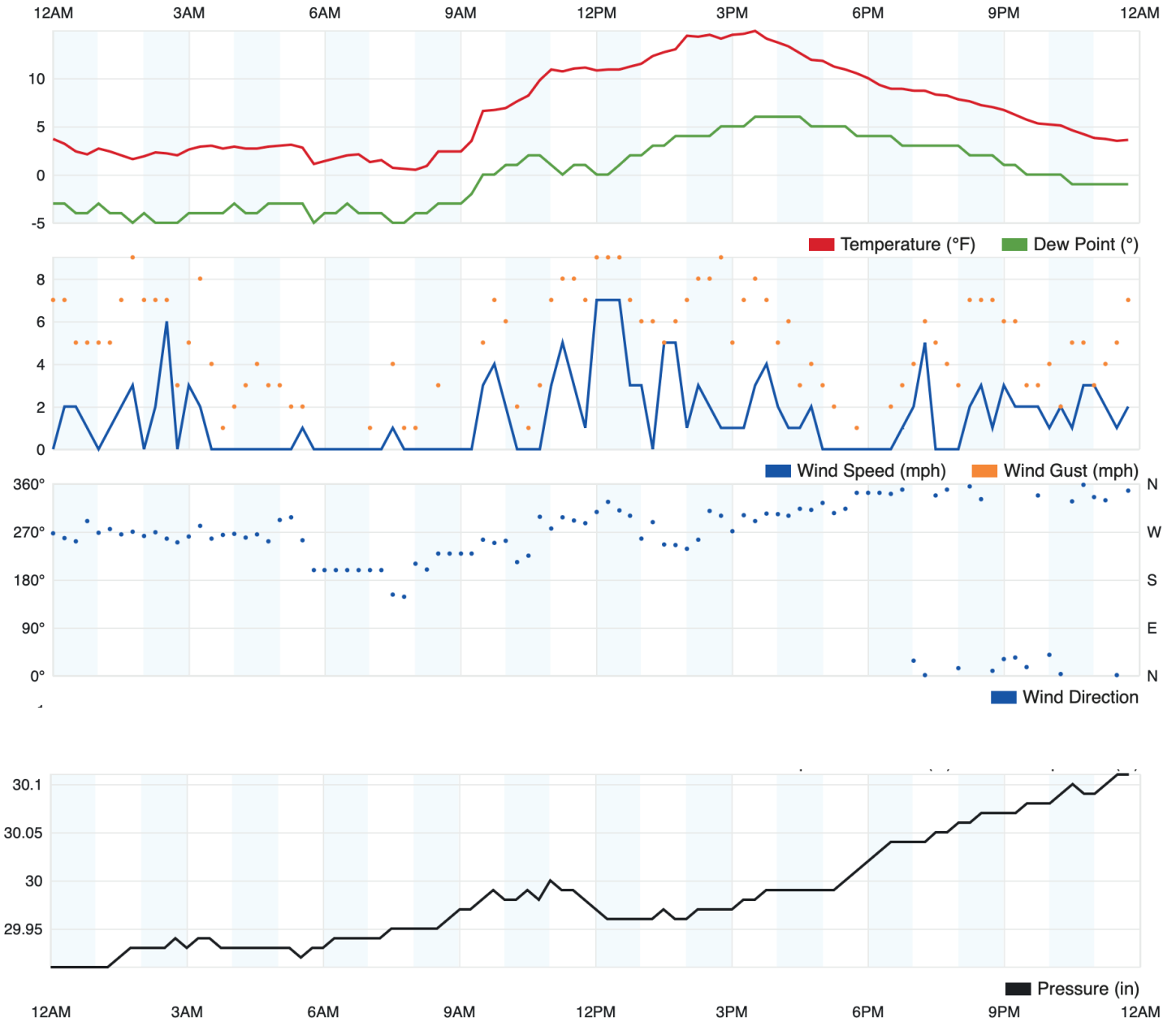
"That picture would not change if you have onsite gas storage," he said. "One of the conclusions from our report is they really should have someone regulating the reliability of the gas system. That might be a more sensible solution."

Robert Zullo is a national energy reporter based in southern Illinois focusing on renewable power and the electric grid. Robert joined States Newsroom in 2018 as the founding editor of the Virginia Mercury. Before that, he spent 13 years as a reporter and editor at newspapers in Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Louisiana. He has a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. He grew up in Miami, Fla., and central New Jersey.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 17 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 18 of 70

Thu Jan 18	Fri Jan 19	Sat Jan 20	Sun Jan 21	Mon Jan 22	Tue Jan 23	Wed Jan 24
6°F -4°F	6°F -13°F	8°F 4°F	24°F 16°F	31°F 20°F	33°F 26°F	36°F 26°F
N	NW	S	S	S	ENE	S
17 MPH	21 MPH	30 MPH	22 MPH	9 MPH	10 MPH	12 MPH
60%			10%			



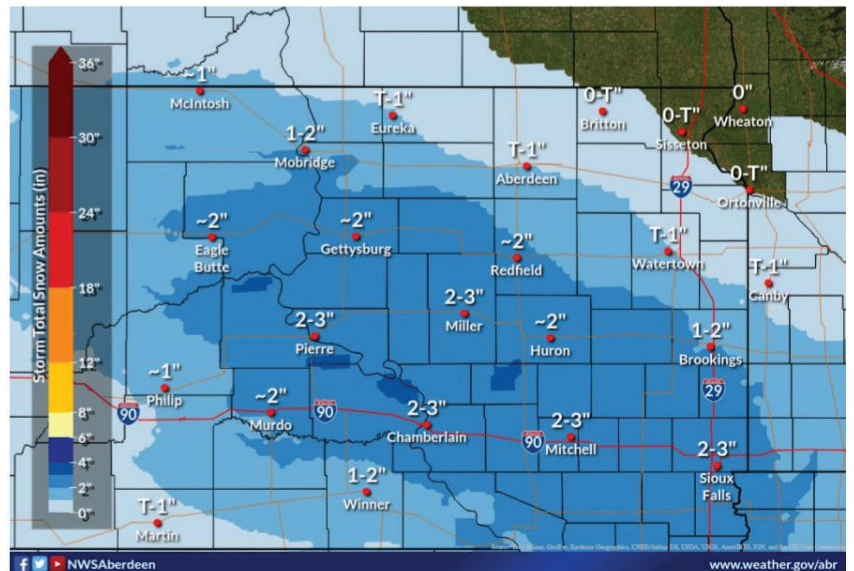
Light to Moderate Snow Today

January 18, 2024
3:27 AM

Key Messages

- An area of low pressure will bring **accumulating snowfall**, mainly to locations west of the Prairie Coteau in northeast South Dakota today.
- Snowfall amounts ranging from a **dusting to 3 inches**. Locally higher amounts possible southwest of a line from Timber Lake to Gann Valley.
- North to northwest winds today. Peak wind gusts between 30 and 45 mph this afternoon may cause **blowing and drifting snow**.

Additional Snowfall through Thursday Evening



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

We're getting (or going to get) some snow today. Amounts will range from a trace (northeast corner) to 2, maybe 3, inches (central/south central SD). With gusts between 30 and 45 mph this afternoon, blowing and drifting snow could result in reduced visibilities at times.

Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 19 of 70



Above Normal Temperatures Next Week

January 18, 2024
3:35 AM

Key Messages

- Temperatures to remain well below normal through Saturday.
- Then, temperatures warm through the weekend, with most locations at or above 30F degrees for a high temperature Monday through Wednesday.
- Downslope winds possible Saturday night into Sunday (within the box/highlighted area) during the strongest time period of the warm up.

Insert warm-up here!!

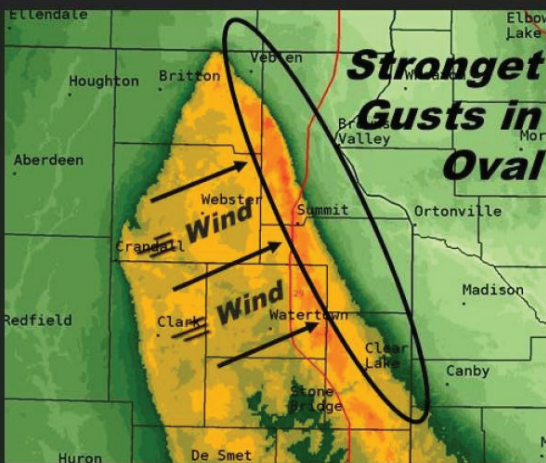
	Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)						
	1/18 Thu	1/19 Fri	1/20 Sat	1/21 Sun	1/22 Mon	1/23 Tue	1/24 Wed
Aberdeen	7	6	8	24	28	33	37
Britton	4	4	8	22	27	32	37
Brookings	9	3	3	21	30	34	36
Chamberlain	20	6	14	31	31	34	36
Clark	3	1	4	21	28	32	35
Eagle Butte	4	4	15	31	31	31	36
Ellendale	4	5	6	23	26	31	36
Eureka	4	4	10	25	29	31	35
Gettysburg	4	3	12	27	28	31	34
Huron	14	5	8	25	31	35	37
Kennebec	18	4	15	32	31	33	35
McIntosh	3	3	13	29	30	30	38
Milbank	5	5	8	22	29	34	38
Miller	6	3	10	26	28	32	35
Mobridge	7	6	15	29	31	34	37
Murdo	16	7	19	34	32	33	35
Pierre	7	7	18	33	32	35	36
Redfield	7	5	8	24	29	33	36
Sisseton	4	4	8	22	28	32	38
Watertown	4	2	3	20	29	32	36
Webster	2	1	5	20	27	32	35
Wheaton	4	5	6	21	28	32	38

Created: 3 am CST Thu 1/18/2024 | Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Strong Downslope Winds Possible Sunday AM



Could lead to blowing snow late Saturday night/early Sunday morning



What/Where?

Breezy to windy conditions are possible this weekend in the oval on the map. Cold temperatures and existing snow cover could lead to blowing snow and reduced visibilities mainly across portions of Marshall, Roberts and Grant Counties.

When?

Mainly from midnight CST Sunday through noon CST Sunday, January 21st

Impacts

Use caution while traveling, especially on I-29 north of Summit and other downslope wind-prone roads where snow exists.



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 20 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 15 °F at 2:36 PM

Low Temp: 0 °F at 8:05 AM

Wind: 11 mph at 12:07 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 15 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 51 in 1944

Record Low: -34 in 1970

Average High: 23

Average Low: 1

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.35

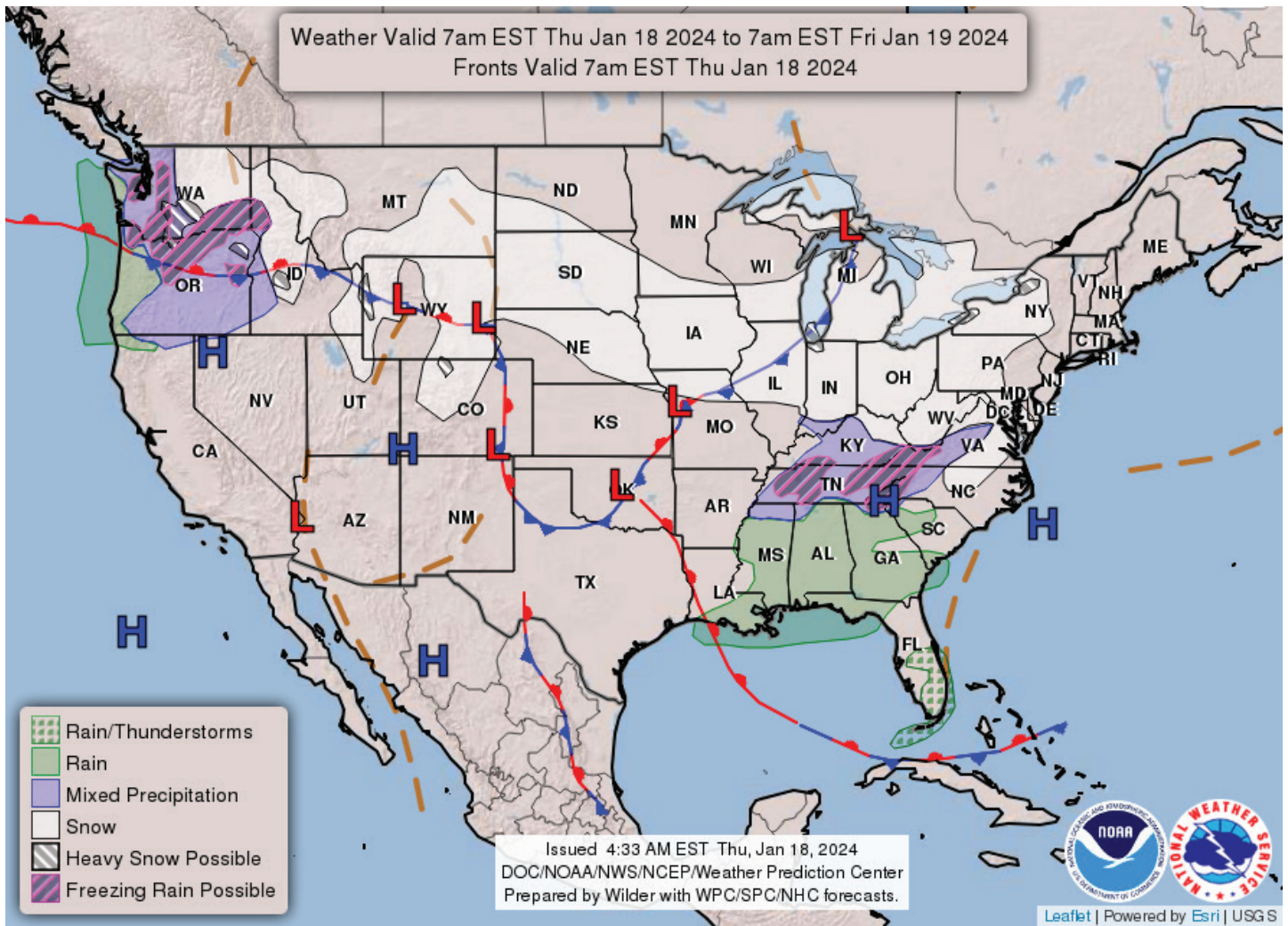
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.35

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:20:32 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:04:13 am



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 21 of 70

Today in Weather History

January 18, 1979: An area of low pressure moving across the region brought widespread snow of 5 to 10 inches to much of Minnesota from the 18th through the 20th. Travel was difficult, if not impossible, in many areas where there were near blizzard conditions. Schools and businesses closed, along with many flights canceled.

January 18, 1999: One to 4 inches of snowfall combined with winds of 30 to 45 miles an hour brought blizzard conditions to part of northeast South Dakota. Highway 12 and Interstate 29 were most affected by the low visibilities. There was a seven-car pileup on Highway 12 near Andover with minor injuries. As a result, traffic was shut off in the westbound lanes for a few hours. Over 200 people were stranded overnight at a restaurant near Summit. There was also a rollover north of Summit, which resulted in minor injuries. One traveler said the visibility was frequently near zero.

January 18, 2014: A strong Alberta Clipper low-pressure system moved over the Northern Plains Friday night and Saturday morning. Anywhere from a trace to just near 3 inches of fresh snowfall accompanied this low-pressure system. Over this area, strong northwest winds of 25 to 40 mph developed by late Friday night with gusts of 45 to 55 mph. A few areas even experienced gusts to 58 mph or higher again. This system packed such a wallop that a couple of instances of thundersnow occurred, as evidenced by the cloud to ground lightning strikes showing up in southwestern Day County and northwestern Clark County early Saturday morning.

Numerous reports of visibility reduced to one-quarter mile or less across northeast South Dakota, specifically on or just to the east of the Glacial Lakes region, were received.

1857 - A great cold storm swept across the Atlantic Seaboard. Snowfall totals of 12 inches were common, whole gales caused shipwrecks and damage property on islands, and temperatures near zero prevailed from Virginia northward. Great drifts of snow blocked transportation. Richmond VA was cut off from Washington DC for a week. (David Ludlum)

1943: Idaho's coldest night on record occurred as the low temperature dropped to 60 degrees below zero at Island Park Dam.

1950: Oregon continued in the grips of one of its worst winter months ever. A significant winter storm brought a thick glaze of ice to Columbia River Gorge, stopping automobile traffic in its tracks. Hundreds of motorists were stranded and had to be rescued by train. Even that wasn't easy with the coating of ice. The storm caused widespread power outages.

1971: A warm Santa Ana condition brought a 95 degree reading to Los Angeles, the highest January temperature on record. It was 95 degrees in Palm Springs, the highest temperature on record for January as well.

1973: The first tornado death of the year has been registered north of Core, Louisiana, during the afternoon hours. Although a girl was killed when a tenant farm was destroyed, a baby received only minor injuries when it was carried 300 to 400 yards by the tornado.

1978: In Connecticut, the Hartford Arena collapsed after experiencing the largest snowstorm of its 5-year life. Multiple issues caused the collapse.

1980: A tropical depression that developed on January 15th became Tropical Storm Hyacinthe on the 18th. From the 18th through the 27th, this storm produced a world-record rainfall amount of 223.5 inches at Cratère Commerson on La Réunion.

1987 - A storm in the south central U.S. blanketed Oklahoma City with eight inches of snow, their highest total since 1948. Snowfall totals in Oklahoma ranged up to 13 inches at Gage, with drifts five feet high. Roof collapses across the state resulted in seven million dollars damage. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A storm in the southwestern U.S. produced a 15 to 20 foot surf along the southern coast of California resulting in more than fifty million dollars damage. A small tornado in Orange County CA lifted a baseball dugout fifteen feet into the air and deposited it in the street, 150 yards away. The same storm also produced 26 inches of snow at Duck Creek UT. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 22 of 70

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

PROFIT AND LOSS

It was one of those days when nothing seemed to go right at work. Ralph had lost sale after sale and was three hours late for his lunch.

He sat down on his favorite stool in his favorite diner waiting to place his order. When the waitress asked for his order, he said meekly, "Please, I'd like two things: an order of pot roast and a few kind words."

Looking at him kindly, she replied, "The kindest words I can think of right now are, 'Don't order the pot roast.'"

Offering "kind words" is the responsibility of every Christian every day to everyone we meet. All of us, most of the time, welcome words of strength, hope, and encouragement to meet the challenges we face. Life, for most of us, has various shades of difficulty each day.

Have you ever asked, "What are the kindest words I can ever offer anyone?" Perhaps they are these: "Don't forget the next world while living in this one."

It is natural for each of us to put our values on the wrong things. No one is immune from being caught up "in the moment" when we are tired, vulnerable, discouraged, and weak. How sad it will be if we live our lives and, at the last moment, discover life's greatest mistake: we did not include God in our plans. Jesus asked, "What do you benefit, really, if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?"

Prayer: We pray, Lord, that we will recognize our greatest need: to accept You as our Savior. Then, help us if You will, to share our faith with others. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? Mark 8:34-38



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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 23 of 70

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 24 of 70



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.16.24

2 10 42 49 54 13

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$236,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 26 Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.24

9 14 16 23 40 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,450,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 41 Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.24

3 13 16 29 36 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 56 Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.24

3 15 17 24 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$24,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 56 Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.24

14 38 51 53 55 25

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 25 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.24

18 22 43 61 65 2

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$120,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 25 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Crazy Horse 52, Little Wound 49

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Panhandle Conference Tournament

Edgemont 38, Hemingford, Neb. 24

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

South Dakota House passes bill that would make the animal sedative xylazine a controlled substance

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House passed a bill Wednesday that would make xylazine, an animal sedative that is being mixed with fentanyl and then used by some people, a controlled substance.

The measure, which passed unanimously in the Republican-held House and now goes to the Senate, would establish penalties of up to two years in prison and fines of up to \$4,000 for possession and use of xylazine. There are exceptions for veterinary use, however.

Xylazine in humans can cause health problems including difficulty breathing, dangerously low blood pressure, a slowed heart rate, wounds that can become infected and even death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Last year the Office of National Drug Control Policy designated the combination of fentanyl and xylazine as an "emerging threat."

The South Dakota Health Department and Republican state Attorney General Marty Jackley brought the bill in South Dakota. Jackley said Congress has been slow to act even as xylazine has "become a national epidemic."

As things stand now, "If we were to arrest a drug dealer and they don't have fentanyl on them yet, and they've got a pile of xylazine, we can't confiscate it, we can't arrest them for it, and that's a serious concern," Jackley said.

Police are encountering xylazine in the state, mainly in Sioux Falls, he said.

Gov. Kristi Noem highlighted the issue of xylazine in her recent State of the State address.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. January 16, 2024.

Editorial: Sales Tax Cut And An Extraordinary Moment

Unlike the sales tax cut that South Dakota lawmakers approved last winter, the overall drama over sales taxes in the state doesn't look to sunset anytime soon.

Last year, the legislators passed a cut in the sales tax, reducing the rate from 4.5% to 4.2%. However, it was the product of considerable debate between the House and a leery Senate and, ultimately, some compromises, including the insertion of a sunset clause that terminates the cut in 2027.

Fast-forward to last week: The House voted 54-12 to make last year's cut permanent, but according to a South Dakota Searchlight story, the prospects of its passage in the Senate are not good.

"(House members) know it's not going to get out of the Senate, so it's a pretty easy vote for somebody over there," said Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown. "I don't think the Senate's attitude has changed from last year."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 26 of 70

While everyone likes the concept of tax cuts in general principle, this sales tax reduction has several factors bearing on it.

The current debate over making the cut permanent comes at a time when South Dakota's revenues are uncertain. The last few years, the state has received considerable COVID federal money, but that stream is gradually drying up. Many lawmakers are cautioning that the budgetary business of the Legislature is going to be shifting back to what one might describe as pre-COVID normal, which means tighter budgeting and much more fretting over the bottom line on some things.

Meanwhile, the pressure to make the tax cut permanent will continue. Gov. Kristi Noem has publicly stated her preference for such a course. This will likely fuel the debate during the session.

Also playing into this scenario is the effort to place a repeal of the state tax on food on the fall ballot. Petitions are currently circulating, and should the initiative make it to a public vote, many people believe it would pass. A recent South Dakota News Watch poll showed more than 60% support among respondents for such a repeal. That must be a potential factor in any considerations.

There are also concerns about how the state economy will perform in the coming years. While the chances of a recession appear less likely now than they did a year ago, there is no such thing as a sure thing.

Also, as one lawmaker who voted "no" last week on making the sales tax cut permanent noted, the agricultural economy is facing lower commodity prices right now, and that could impact future revenues.

And, as a reminder, South Dakota lawmakers won't really know the updated state of the revenue situation with which they must ultimately work until the tail end of the session.

So, cutting any tax and/or making a particular tax cut a permanent feature must be weighed with care by lawmakers. They face a unique, perhaps even extraordinary, set of circumstances that could lead to a promising path of economic opportunity, or they steer us into a minefield.

END

Power line falls on car during Oregon ice storm, killing 3 and injuring a baby, authorities say

By CLAIRE RUSH and HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A power line fell on a parked car in northeast Portland, Oregon, on Wednesday, killing three people and injuring a baby during an ice storm that turned roads and mountain highways treacherous in the Pacific Northwest.

Shortly before noon, dispatchers started receiving frantic calls about a downed power line and people appearing to be electrocuted, according to a statement from the city's fire department. A branch had fallen on a power line, causing it to fall onto an SUV, the statement said.

As the chaotic situation unfolded, a resident grabbed the baby from one of the people lying in the street in a bid to save its life, according to the statement. The three killed — two adults and one teenager — were found dead upon firefighters' arrival, and the baby was taken to a hospital. It is believed the victims were electrocuted after they got out of the vehicle, the statement said.

The power company later deenergized the line, the statement added without specifying which company.

Around Portland, driving and even walking were virtually impossible as slick ice coated roads and sidewalks. Icicles dangled from roofs and cars, and ice encased branches, plants and leaves like thick glass.

A large swath of the region was under warnings Wednesday for as much as 1 inch (2.5 centimeters) of ice, promising only to add to the damage wrought by a deadly, powerful storm that hit over the weekend. The warning area was reduced later in the morning to parts of southwest Washington and northwest Oregon, including Portland, and further limited to the western edge of the Columbia River Gorge in the afternoon.

Freezing rain could return to the region Thursday evening through Friday morning, the National Weather Service said. The areas most likely to be impacted include the eastern Portland metro area and the western Columbia River Gorge.

Portland transportation officials asked the public to stay off the roads through Thursday morning, and numerous school districts, including Oregon's largest, canceled classes for a third straight day as roads

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 27 of 70

remained slick.

The three deaths Wednesday added to at least seven deaths linked to fallen trees and suspected hypothermia during the previous weekend's storm.

Daniel Buck, who lives just a few steps from where the deaths took place in northeast Portland, told The Associated Press he heard an explosion and then saw a person running out of a car with a downed power line laying on top in flames. When he got closer, he said, he saw that person and two others on the ground about 35 feet (10.7 meters) away from the car, where the rest of the power line had fallen. He said he saw one of the victim's pant legs on fire.

"All of them were making contact with the live wire, so nobody could touch them to help," said Buck, who described the victims as residents of a nearby apartment. "It was just terrible."

Diane Flaherty, resident of a forested neighborhood in southwest Portland, said her home has been without power since Saturday. That day, she left her house to stay with her brother-in-law when she saw the large tree in her front yard start swaying in the strong wind.

"It was like a war zone," she said, describing the sound of trees cracking as they toppled onto her neighbors' cars and homes. "We were absolutely stunned."

The storm canceled or delayed flights, including in Vancouver, British Columbia, where heavy snow blanketed the city and snarled traffic, The Canadian Press reported.

The storm hit the northwest corner of the U.S. as much of the rest of the country coped with bitter weather that in some places put electricity supplies at risk. Some 90,000 homes and businesses across the U.S. — mostly in Oregon — did not have power as of late Wednesday, according to PowerOutage.us.

Freezing temperatures spread as far south as North Florida on Wednesday morning, the National Weather Service said.

It was 5 degrees in Chicago (minus 15 Celsius) and 6 degrees (minus 14.4 Celsius) in Detroit — significantly colder than Alaska's capital of Juneau, where it was 18 degrees (minus 7.8 Celsius). Some Midwesterners managed to find a bright side.

"It's probably the most beautiful time in Chicago, ever," Richard Wineberg said as he admired the snow-covered landscape.

In western New York, the weather was blamed for three deaths in three days. Two people were apparently stricken while clearing snow, and a third was struck by a vehicle while brushing snow from his car, officials said Wednesday.

Five people were struck and killed by a tractor-trailer on Interstate 81 in northeastern Pennsylvania after they left their vehicles following a separate crash on slick pavement. Investigators were still determining the exact cause.

Heavy lake-effect snow was forecast in Buffalo, with up to 4 inches (10 centimeters) an hour expected through the afternoon. The blast came days after a storm that delayed an NFL playoff game for a day.

Early Wednesday, Patrick Sahr shoveled snow from his car and driveway in Buffalo after at least 18 inches (45.7 centimeters) of snow fell overnight — on top of 3 feet (1 meter) over the weekend.

"I just want to keep up with it," he said during a lull.

On the Crow Creek Sioux Reservation near Fort Thompson, South Dakota, about three dozen people stayed in a shelter and the tribe paid to put up about 40 families in a motel. The tribe also provided propane and wood for home heating, and plastic to cover drafty windows, for what tribal Chairman Peter Lengkeek called "substandard government homes."

It's expensive, but "you can't put a price on life and suffering," Lengkeek said.

In Tennessee, health officials have confirmed at least 14 weather-related deaths. Memphis-Shelby County Schools, the state's largest public school system with about 100,000 students, canceled Thursday classes.

The Tennessee Valley Authority, which provides electricity to seven Southern states, reported a preliminary all-time record for peak power demand Wednesday morning as the region dropped to an average of 4 degrees (minus 15.5 Celsius).

Israeli strike kills 16 in southern Gaza; no word on whether medicines reached hostages

By NAJIB JOBAIN and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — An Israeli airstrike on a home killed 16 people, half of them children, in the southern Gaza town of Rafah, medics said early Thursday. The military continued to strike targets in areas of the besieged territory where it has told civilians to seek refuge.

There was meanwhile no word on whether medicines that entered the territory Wednesday as part of a deal brokered by France and Qatar had been distributed to dozens of hostages with chronic illnesses who are being held by Hamas.

More than 100 days after Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7 attack, Israel continues to wage one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history, with the goal of dismantling the militant group that has ruled Gaza since 2007 and returning scores of captives. The war has stoked tensions across the region, threatening to ignite other conflicts.

More than 24,000 Palestinians have been killed, some 85% of the narrow coastal territory's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, and the United Nations says a quarter of the population is starving.

Hundreds of thousands have heeded Israeli evacuation orders and packed into southern Gaza, where shelters run by the United Nations are overflowing and massive tent camps have gone up. But Israel has continued to strike what it says are militant targets in all parts of Gaza, often killing women and children.

Dr. Talat Barhoum at Rafah's el-Najjar Hospital confirmed the death toll from the strike in Rafah and said dozens more were wounded. Associated Press footage from the hospital showed relatives weeping over the bodies of loved ones.

"They were suffering from hunger, they were dying from hunger, and now they have also been hit," said Mahmoud Qassim, a relative of some of those who were killed.

Internet and mobile services in Gaza have been down for five days, the longest of several outages during the war, according to internet access advocacy group NetBlocks. The outages complicate rescue efforts and make it difficult to obtain information about the latest strikes and casualties.

WAR REVERBERATES ACROSS REGION

The war has rippled across the Middle East, with Iran-backed groups attacking U.S. and Israeli targets. Low-intensity fighting between Israel and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon threatens to erupt into all-out war, and Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to target international shipping despite United States-led airstrikes.

Iran has launched a series of missile attacks targeting what it described as an Israeli spy base in Iraq and militant bases in Syria as well as in Pakistan, which carried out reprisal strikes against what it described as militant hideouts in Iran early Thursday.

It was not clear if the strikes in Syria and Pakistan were related to the Gaza war. But they showcased Iran's ability to carry out long-range missile attacks at a time of heightened tensions with Israel and the U.S., which has provided crucial support for the Gaza offensive and carried out its own strikes against Iran-allied groups in Syria and Iraq.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas to ensure it can never repeat an attack like the one on Oct. 7. Militants burst through Israel's border defenses and stormed through several communities that day, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostages.

Israel has also vowed to return all the hostages remaining in captivity after more than 100 — mostly women and children — were released during a November cease-fire in exchange for the release of scores of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Family members and supporters were marking the first birthday of Kfir Bibas, the youngest Israeli hostage, in a somber ceremony Thursday in Tel Aviv.

The red-haired infant and his 4-year-old brother Ariel were captured along with their mother, Shiri, and their father, Yarden. All four remain in captivity.

MEDICINES BOUND FOR HOSTAGES ENTER GAZA

The agreement to ship in medicines was the first to be brokered between the warring sides since No-

vember. Hamas said that for every box of medicine bound for the hostages, 1,000 would be sent for Palestinian civilians, in addition to food and humanitarian aid.

Qatar confirmed late Wednesday that the medicine had entered Gaza, but it was not yet clear if it had been distributed to the hostages, who are being held in secret locations, including underground bunkers.

Hamas has continued to fight back across Gaza, even in the most devastated areas, and launch rockets into Israel. It says it will not release any more hostages until there is a permanent cease-fire, something Israel and the United States, its top ally, have ruled out.

Gaza's Health Ministry says at least 24,448 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war, with over 60,000 wounded. It says many other dead and wounded are trapped under rubble or unreachable because of the fighting. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths but says around two-thirds of those killed were women and children.

Israel blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas because it fights in dense residential areas. Israel says its forces have killed roughly 9,000 militants, without providing evidence, and that 193 of its own soldiers have been killed since the Gaza ground offensive began.

Harsh Israeli rhetoric against Palestinians becomes central to South Africa's genocide case

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Fighting "human animals." Making Gaza a "slaughterhouse." "Erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth."

Such inflammatory rhetoric is a key component of South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide at the U.N. world court, a charge that Israel denies. South Africa says the language — in comments by Israeli leaders, soldiers and entertainers about Palestinians in Gaza since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack sparked war — is proof of Israel's intent to commit genocide.

Israeli leaders have downplayed the comments, and some in Israel say they're a result of the trauma from Hamas' attack.

Rights groups and activists say they're an inevitable byproduct of Israel's decades-old, open-ended rule over the Palestinians and that they've intensified during the war. They say such language has been left unchecked, inciting violence and dehumanizing Palestinians.

"Words lead to deeds," said Michael Sfar, a prominent Israeli lawyer. "Words that normalize or legitimize serious crimes against civilians create the social, political and moral basis for other people to do things like that."

The genocide case against Israel opened last week at the International Court of Justice at The Hague. South Africa is looking to prove that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza and that Israel has specific intent to commit genocide. It is using the litany of harsh statements as part of the evidence in its case.

THE COMMENTS

With the ground offensive getting underway in late October, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cited the Bible in a televised address: "You must remember what Amalek has done to you." Amalekites were persecutors of the biblical Israelites, and a biblical commandment says they must be destroyed.

South Africa argued that the remarks showed Israel's intent to commit genocide against Palestinians. Netanyahu denied that this week and said he was referring to Amalek as a way to describe Hamas and its attack.

Two days after the Hamas attack, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Israel was "fighting human animals," in announcing a complete siege on Gaza.

Deputy Knesset speaker Nissim Vaturi from the ruling Likud party wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, that Israelis had one common goal, "erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth." Israeli Heritage Minister Amichay Eliyahu, from the far-right Jewish Power party, suggested that Israel drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza and said there were "no uninvolved civilians" in the territory.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 30 of 70

Israeli soldiers caught on video made similar remarks as they sang and danced in the early days of Israel's ground offensive.

On Oct. 7, a journalist wrote on X that Gaza should become "a slaughterhouse" if the roughly 250 people taken hostage by Hamas were not returned.

Military officials and two Israeli pop singers are also cited by South Africa for making inflammatory comments.

"The language of systemic dehumanization is evident here," lawyer Tembeka Ngcukaitobi said for South Africa in remarks before the court. "Genocidal utterances are therefore not out in the fringes. They are embodied in state policy."

South Africa is asking for a series of legally binding rulings declaring that Israel is breaching "its obligations under the Genocide Convention" — a decision that could take years — and for a binding interim order that Israel cease hostilities, a ruling on which is expected in the coming weeks.

ISRAEL'S RESPONSE

Defending Israel in court, lawyer Malcolm Shaw said the remarks were made mostly by officials with little role in determining Israeli policy, calling them "random quotes" that were misleading and had been in some cases repudiated by Netanyahu.

But Roy Schondorf, a former Israeli deputy attorney general, said in an interview that the statements still carried risk, even out of context: "It would have been better if some of these remarks had not been said."

Israel argued that its justice system would take action against unacceptable speech. But critics say statements against Palestinians have gone unpunished or undenounced. Lawyer Sfard appealed to the country's attorney general earlier this month on behalf of a group of prominent Israeli figures, demanding to know why the rhetoric hasn't been reined in.

In a statement two days before the case launched at the world court, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara said calling for intentional harm to civilians could amount to a criminal offense and that Israeli authorities were examining several such cases, without elaborating. The comments appeared to be aimed at heading off the South African accusations.

Overall, Israel vehemently denies the charges at the world court. Israel says it's fighting a war of self-defense against Hamas after it killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

Israeli officials say the country adheres to international law and does its utmost to protect civilians, blaming the high death toll on Hamas for embedding in civilian areas. More than 24,000 people have been killed in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza.

Israel also says it is Hamas that exhibited genocidal actions with its attack and genocidal intentions with its violent speech against Israelis, including promises to repeat the Oct. 7 assault and the group's commitment to Israel's destruction.

THE RHETORIC'S MOVE TO THE MAINSTREAM

The war is being fought under Israel's most hardline government ever, dominated by far-right Cabinet ministers with a long record of controversial remarks well before Oct. 7.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich once called for "erasing" a Palestinian West Bank town. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir talked of the supremacy of freedom of movement for Jewish West Bank settlers over that same right for Palestinians.

And since Oct. 7, such speech has moved further into the mainstream.

Israelis, like Palestinians, have been hardened by decades of deadly conflict and its sense of intractability. Some in Israel say the trauma of Hamas' unprecedented attack unleashed the current discourse.

"The intense collective trauma gave free rein to the expression of dark feelings of revenge that in the mainstream was less pleasant to utter until today," deputy editor-in-chief Noa Landau wrote in the daily Haaretz. She said the statements reflected "the social zeitgeist."

While little appears to have been done to confront violent rhetoric directed at Palestinians, Palestinian citizens of Israel who have shown empathy for people in Gaza are facing a crackdown, according to Adalah, a legal rights group. Police say the speech amounts to incitement, promotes violence or shows support for terror groups.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 31 of 70

Adalah says at least 270 Palestinian citizens of Israel have had some sort of interaction with law enforcement — arrests, investigations or warnings, with at least 86 charged for speech offenses. Some Jewish Israelis who expressed sympathy for Palestinians have also faced arrest or sanction by their employers.

Aeyal Gross, a professor of international law at Tel Aviv University, said that how Israel responds to the inflammatory rhetoric matters in the case with South Africa, because Israel, as a signatory to the Genocide Convention, is prohibited not only from committing genocide but also from inciting to genocide.

Gross said that it was probably too late for Israel to take steps that show it doesn't condone such speech. Punishing such remarks could have sent a message to the court as well as to Israeli society that the state doesn't tolerate incendiary rhetoric.

"It's important because it would have said, 'It's not our intent,'" he said. "But it's also important because it would have meant we are sending the soldiers on the ground a message not to act in this way."

US military launches another barrage of missiles against Houthi sites in Yemen

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military fired another wave of ship- and submarine-launch missile strikes against Houthi-controlled sites Wednesday, U.S. Central Command said, marking the fourth time in days it has directly targeted the group in Yemen as violence that ignited in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war continues to spill over in the Middle East.

The strikes were launched from the Red Sea and hit 14 missiles that the command deemed an "imminent threat." The strikes followed an official announcement Wednesday that the U.S. has put the Houthis back on its list of specially designated global terrorists. The sanctions that come with the formal designation are meant to sever violent extremist groups from their sources of financing.

"Forces conducted strikes on 14 Iran-backed Houthi missiles that were loaded to be fired in Houthi controlled areas in Yemen," Central Command said in a statement posted on X late Wednesday. "These missiles on launch rails presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and U.S. Navy ships in the region and could have been fired at any time, prompting U.S. forces to exercise their inherent right and obligation to defend themselves."

Despite the sanctions and military strikes, including a large-scale operation Friday carried out by U.S. and British warships and warplanes that hit more than 60 targets across Yemen, the Houthis are continuing their harassment campaign of commercial and military ships. The latest incident occurred Wednesday when a one-way attack drone was launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen and struck the Marshall Islands-flagged, U.S.-owned and -operated M/V Genco Picardy in the Gulf of Aden.

The U.S. has also strongly warned Iran to cease providing weapons to the Houthis. On Thursday a U.S. raid on a dhow intercepted ballistic missile parts the U.S. said Iran was shipping to Yemen. Two U.S. Navy SEALs remain unaccounted for after one was knocked off the vessel by a wave during the seizure and the second followed the overcome SEAL into the water.

On Wednesday, Pentagon press secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said the U.S. would continue to take military action to prevent further attacks.

"They are exploiting this situation to conduct attacks against the ships and vessels from more than 50 countries ... around the world. And so we're going to continue to work with our partners in the region to prevent those attacks or deter those attacks in the future," Ryder said.

There have been several incidents since the Friday joint operations. The Houthis fired an anti-ship cruise missile toward a U.S. Navy destroyer over the weekend, but the ship shot it down. The Houthis then struck a U.S.-owned ship in the Gulf of Aden on Monday and a Malta-flagged bulk carrier in the Red Sea on Tuesday. In response Tuesday, the U.S. struck four anti-ship ballistic missiles that were prepared to launch and presented an imminent threat to merchant and U.S. Navy ships in the region.

Hours later, the Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack on the Malta-flagged bulk carrier Zografia. The ship was hit, but no one was injured and it continued on its way.

Biden to promote internet access in North Carolina, a state he hopes to win in the 2024 election

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is going to North Carolina on Thursday to highlight \$82 million in new investments that would connect 16,000 households to high-speed internet.

Biden's reelection campaign has made winning North Carolina and its 16 electoral votes one of its top priorities in this year's presidential election. The Democrat narrowly lost the state in 2020 by 1.34 percentage points to former President Donald Trump, the current Republican front-runner in what will likely be a political rematch.

The Democratic president plans to use his stop in the state capital of Raleigh to stress that his administration is connecting poorer communities and businesses to the digital economy.

Polling shows that the economy has been a weakness for Biden, a reflection of inflation hitting a four-decade high in June 2022. Easing inflation rates since then have yet to pull Biden's approval ratings back to their levels at the start of his presidency.

One way the administration says it has lowered costs for families is by providing discounted internet service to 880,000 households in North Carolina.

The administration is committing a total of \$3 billion to build out and fund internet connections in North Carolina. Estimates from the administration are that an additional 300,000 of the state's residents will be able to access the internet by the end of 2026.

Bid by meatpacker JBS to join New York Stock Exchange faces opposition over Amazon deforestation

By FABIANO MAISONNAVE undefined

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — In recent weeks, lawmakers in the United States and the United Kingdom have sent letters to the Securities and Exchange Commission cautioning against the listing of JBS, the world's largest meatpacking company, on the New York Stock Exchange.

Trading on the world's largest exchange would give JBS, which applied in July, access to more capital and enhance its credibility. But the lawmakers, along with environmental groups, argue that expanded capital would allow the company, responsible for much deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, to do even more harm.

"Dozens of journalistic and NGO reports have shown that JBS is linked to more destruction of forests and other ecosystems than any other company in Brazil. The company has made repeated claims that it will eliminate deforestation but has not taken meaningful steps to do so," said the letter from 15 U.S. senators, released last week.

The U.S. letter, signed by Democrats and Republicans, comes days after a similar letter from 11 British lawmakers that said letting JBS raise capital from shareholders "contradicts global efforts of governments and businesses to take action to mitigate climate change" and to "preserve essential natural habitats."

A spokesperson for the SEC, which has regulatory oversight of the NYSE, said that they don't comment on individual filings. JBS and the NYSE did not respond to questions.

The dispute highlights the connection between finance and various drivers of climate change, such as deforestation. It also raises questions about gauging claims that a company is committed to improving its environmental record.

Two-thirds of Amazon deforestation results from conversion to pasture for livestock, according to the Brazilian government. JBS, which has the largest slaughter capacity in the region, buys thousands of cows raised illegally every year, according to audits by federal prosecutors.

In December, The Associated Press and Brazil's Agencia Publica revealed that Rondonia state is suing JBS for purchasing cattle raised illegally in a protected area that has been damaged to the point of near

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 33 of 70

total destruction. According to court papers, the company accepted documents that showed cattle going straight to the slaughterhouse from land that is legally protected. The company has declined to comment.

JBS has pledged to make all cattle purchases traceable by 2025 and to reach net zero, or equalize all carbon emissions, by 2040.

In 2020, it created the JBS Fund For the Amazon. The goal is to finance "innovative, long-term initiatives that build on JBS S.A.'s legacy of conservation and sustainable development in the Amazon Biome," according to an SEC filing.

In the three years since inception, the JBS Fund for The Amazon has provided \$15 million to 20 projects, according to its website. The company has pledged to commit a total of \$51 million to the fund through next year.

The initiatives include cocoa farming integrated with trees; managed fishing of pirarucu, a giant freshwater fish, and support for the Forest Peoples Connection, which has been installing Starlink internet units donated by Elon Musk's SpaceX in remote areas, such as Indigenous communities.

It also granted money to two U.S.-based nonprofits: Forest Trends, which supports handicrafts and Brazil nut production in Indigenous territories, and the Good Food Institute, which works to research local products from Amazon fungi to tucuma, a local palm tree.

Still, the contributions are tiny for the company. From 2021 through the last quarter of 2023, JBS net sales approached \$209 billion, according to a company statement. That means the amount disbursed for environmental projects so far represents 0.007% of JBS' net sales for the period.

The U.S. is the meatpacker's largest market, with 51% of sales, followed by 27% in Brazil, where it employs about 270,000 people.

A previous attempt by JBS to join the New York Stock Exchange was thwarted amid a major corruption scandal in 2017 when the company admitted the bribery of hundreds of Brazilian politicians. In 2020, JBS paid the SEC \$26.8 million for accounting irregularities at its U.S. subsidiary Pilgrim's Pride, one of the largest poultry producers in the country.

As JBS' current application is being considered, a prominent advisor who backed the sustainability fund is having second thoughts. Carlos Nobre is an Earth scientist and co-author of five reports for the International Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations' top body on climate change.

Nobre, who sits on JBS' board, said he has been disillusioned with the company's launch of a project intended to support 3,500 small livestock-producing families in the Amazon. JBS Sustainability Director Liège Correia promoted the project at the COP28 in Dubai. At \$20 million over the coming years, it is one of the fund's biggest.

"I only joined the fund because I was assured there would be no money for livestock. Now they changed their minds," he said in an interview with the AP.

Supporting small cattle ranchers to increase their productivity helps to preserve the Amazon, according to Andrea Azevedo, who directs the fund and helped create the project, known as TOGETHER.

"We have done tests and seen that the fund can work with cleared areas, too. Because if you take good care of these areas, you prevent people cutting down more forest," Azevedo told the AP. "We need to stop Amazon deforestation altogether, that's a fact."

Azevedo worked most of her career with environmental groups and said she respects Nobre's position, but other board members agreed with the fund in supporting cattle ranching. It's a place for experimentation, independent of JBS business strategy, she said.

Azevedo said the meat giant's efforts to improve its environmental record are genuine. For example, it is trying to identify cattle suppliers who conceal the illegal origin of their animals and opening "green offices" to provide technical assistance in compliance with environmental legislation.

Glenn Hurowitz, CEO of Mighty Earth, one of the groups pushing for the SEC to deny the application, said it's too big of a risk.

"If JBS gains access to billions of dollars to expand its industrial meat operations, it would bring more deforestation, more market manipulation, more human rights abuses and more outsized climate pollution,"

he said. "The SEC should not allow this IPO to proceed."

Live updates | Israel-Hamas war tensions inflame the Middle East as fighting persists in Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

Hamas militants are keeping up a stiff resistance across the Gaza Strip to Israel's offensive. The war shows no sign of ending and has inflamed tensions across the Middle East, with a dizzying array of strikes and counterstrikes in recent days.

Pakistan launched retaliatory airstrikes on Iran early Thursday, killing multiple people and further raising the threat of violence spreading in a Middle East unsettled by Israel's war with Hamas.

In Gaza, a shipment of medicine for dozens of hostages held by the Palestinian militant group Hamas entered the territory late Wednesday in a deal that Qatar and France worked out between Israel and Hamas.

Gaza's Health Ministry says more than 24,200 Palestinians have died. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths, but said 70% of the dead were women and children. In Israel, around 1,200 people were killed during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that sparked the war and saw some 250 people taken hostage by militants.

Currently:

- Pakistan launches retaliatory airstrikes in Iran after an earlier attack by Tehran, killing 9 people.
- The U.S. pledges new sanctions over Houthi attacks will minimize harm to Yemen's hungry millions.
- An estimated 60,000 wounded Palestinians are overwhelming the remaining doctors, the U.N. says.
- Harsh Israeli rhetoric against Palestinians becomes central to South Africa's genocide case.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

PAKISTAN LAUNCHES RETALIATORY STRIKES IN IRAN AS MIDEAST TENSIONS RISE

Pakistan's air force launched retaliatory airstrikes early Thursday in Iran, allegedly targeting militant hideouts in an attack that killed at least nine people and further raised tensions between the neighboring nations.

The tit-for-tat attacks Tuesday and Thursday appeared to target two Baluch militant groups with similar separatist goals on both sides of the Iran-Pakistan border. However, the two countries have accused each other of providing safe haven to the groups in their respective territories.

The attacks come as the Middle East remains unsettled by Israel's war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Iran also staged airstrikes late Monday in Iraq and Syria over an Islamic State-claimed suicide bombing that killed over 90 people in early January.

The strikes imperil diplomatic relations between the two neighbors, as Iran and nuclear-armed Pakistan have long regarded each other with suspicion over militant attacks. Each nation also faces its own internal political pressures — and the strikes may in part be in response to that.

FAMILY IN TEL AVIV WILL MARK THE 1ST BIRTHDAY OF THE YOUNGEST ISRAELI HELD HOSTAGE BY HAMAS

TEL AVIV, Israel — Family members and supporters will mark the first birthday of Kfir Bibas, the youngest Israeli held by Hamas militants in Gaza, in a somber ceremony in Tel Aviv on Thursday.

The red-haired infant, who has been in captivity for a quarter of his life, has become a symbol for the helplessness and anger in Israel over the dozens of hostages still held in Gaza after Hamas' deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel.

On Tuesday, his family gathered at the Bibas' home in Kibbutz Nir Oz near Gaza, blowing up orange balloons to hang on the walls to cover bullet holes and spatters of blood, and filling his nursery school classroom with birthday decorations.

"It's celebrating for someone who isn't here," Yossi Schneider, a cousin of Kfir's mother, Shiri, told Israel's Channel 12 TV. "He's supposed to be out here on the grass of the kibbutz, with balloons on the trees, with family and high-fives and presents and love and hugs, and none of those things will be there."

In video from the Hamas attack, Kfir and his 4-year-old brother, Ariel, are being held by their terrified mother as gunmen shout in Arabic. The boys' father, Yarden, was also taken captive and appears in photos to have been wounded. Under a weeklong temporary cease-fire, Hamas released women, children and teens, but Shiri Bibas and her sons were not included in the list.

Israel's president and the OpenAI CEO will take part in Davos on Day 3 of the World Economic Forum

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

DAVOS, Switzerland (AP) — Israel's president and the head of ChatGPT company OpenAI will make appearances at the World Economic Forum on Thursday, the third day of the annual gathering of elites at the Swiss resort of Davos that discusses everything from conflict to computers and climate.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog could seek to return focus on the plight of Israeli hostages held by Hamas since its deadly Oct. 7 raid into Israel. Much of the world's attention has been on rising casualty counts in Gaza as Israeli forces lead a blistering military campaign aimed to quash the armed militants.

A breakfast panel on the sidelines of the meeting Thursday concentrated on Ukraine's fight against Russia, a major theme in Davos this year.

Polish President Andrzej Duda called for the release of confiscated Russian assets in Western banks to help Ukraine, saying \$60 billion earmarked for reconstruction of Ukraine by the United States and €50 billion by the European Union were "crucial."

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron urged the EU and U.S. to move forward with stalled aid packages and urged Ukraine's allies to remember that together their economies are 25 times bigger than Russia's: "All we need to do is make our economic strength show, make it pay, and we will be able to help Ukraine bring this to to a conclusion."

The four-day confab at Davos has taken up a vast array of topics, not least the concerns about climate change and artificial intelligence that offers economic promise to some, and peril for jobs to others.

"Artificial intelligence is now undoubtedly the most important potential contribution for global development," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres told reporters in Davos on Wednesday, a day when leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron and President Javier Milei of Argentina also showed up.

"This is something that cannot be dealt with business as usual," he added, saying governments were "to a certain extent, ill-equipped, ill-prepared, to deal with this new reality."

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who kept his job after a turbulent executive-suite reshuffle late last year, will take part in a panel that explores how technology could "amplify our humanity," right after another discussion on whether generative AI is a "boon or bane for creativity."

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani will take part in a Q&A session Thursday. On Wednesday, Iran's foreign minister defended his country's strike on what he claimed was an Israeli intelligence operations site in the autonomous Kurdish region.

The husband of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, Doug Emhoff, was traveling to Davos on Thursday to talk about combating antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of hate and to promote gender equity and women's rights.

UN: Palestinians are dying in hospitals as estimated 60,000 wounded overwhelm remaining doctors

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Palestinians are dying every day in Gaza's overwhelmed remaining hospitals which can't deal with the tens of thousands people hurt in Israeli's military offensive, a U.N. health emergency expert said Wednesday, while a doctor with the International Rescue Committee called the situation in Gaza's hospitals the most extreme she had ever seen.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 36 of 70

The two health professionals, who recently left Gaza after weeks working in hospitals there, described overwhelmed doctors trying to save the lives of thousands of wounded people amid collapsing hospitals that have turned into impromptu refugee camps.

The World Health Organization's Sean Casey, who left Gaza recently after five weeks of trying to get more staff and supplies to the territory's 16 partially functioning hospitals, told a U.N. news conference that he saw "a really horrifying situation in the hospitals" as the health system collapsed day by day.

Al-Shifa Hospital, once Gaza's leading hospital with 700 beds, has been reduced to treating only emergency trauma victims, and is filled with thousands of people who have fled their homes and are now living in operating rooms, corridors and stairs, he said.

"Literally five or six doctors or nurses" are seeing hundreds of patients a day, Casey said, most with life-threatening injuries, and there were "so many patients on the floor you could barely move without stepping on somebody's hands or feet."

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza estimates that 60,000 people have been wounded, with hundreds more wounded per day.

Since Israel declared war against Hamas following its surprise attacks into the country's south on Oct. 7, it has repeatedly accused the Islamic militant group of using Gaza's hospitals as cover for military activities. It singled out Al-Shifa in Gaza City, saying Hamas had hidden command centers and bunkers underneath the hospital's sprawling grounds. In late November, the Israeli military unveiled what it claimed was a Hamas military facility under the hospital.

Casey said he was able to reach Al-Shifa three times with deliveries of medical supplies, fuel and food, but once it took 12 days because of Israeli refusals, mainly for security or operational reasons.

At Al-Ahli Hospital, also in Gaza City, the situation was also dire, he said.

"I saw patients who were lying on church pews, basically waiting to die in a hospital that had no fuel, no power, no water, very little in the way of medical supplies and only a handful of staff remaining to take care of them," he said.

Last week, Casey said, he visited the Nasser medical complex, the main hospital in Khan Younis, which is at 200% of its bed capacity with only 30% of its staff, so "patients are everywhere, in the corridors, on the floor."

"I went to the burn unit where there was one physician caring for 100 burn patients," he said.

Even in Rafah in the south near the Egyptian border, where Israel has urged Gazans to move, Casey said the population has skyrocketed from 270,000 a few weeks ago to almost a million, and the city doesn't have the health facilities to deal with the massive influx of displaced people.

Gaza historically had a strong health system with 36 hospitals, 25,000 health workers and many specialists, he said, but 85% of the territory's 2.3 million people are now displaced, and that includes health workers, doctors, nurses, surgeons and administrative staff.

Casey said many of these medical professionals are in shelters, under plastic sheeting on streets in Rafah, and not in hospitals. One hospital director told him his plastic surgeon couldn't do surgery because he was out collecting sticks to burn as firewood to cook food for his family.

What's needed first and foremost to help the tens of thousands of injured Gazans and people with health issues is a ceasefire and the safety and security that would bring, Casey said, but that's not enough.

"It's really the overall package," he said, saying medical supplies first need to overcome obstacles and inspections and get into Gaza, and then they need to get to the hospitals where they're needed.

But without health workers, medical supplies, and fuel to run the generators at hospitals and health facilities, "you can't do the surgeries, you can't provide the postoperative care," he said.

Casey said the World Health Organization is trying to mobilize international emergency medical teams to support Gaza's hospitals and provide care. It has also supported the establishment of several field hospitals over the last six weeks or so, he said.

"The numbers of medical evacuations going outside of the Gaza Strip is very limited," he said. "We know that there are thousands of people who would benefit from higher-level care that can no longer be provided within the Gaza Strip," including cancer patients and people with complex injuries.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 37 of 70

"People are dying every day," Casey said. "I've seen children full of shrapnel dying on the floor because there are not the supplies in the emergency department, and the health care workers ... to care for them."

Speaking at another press briefing, Dr. Seema Jilani, a pediatrician and the International Rescue Committee's senior technical advisor for emergency health, said she just went to Gaza for two weeks in collaboration with Medical Aid for Palestinians and what she saw was "harrowing, and scenes out of nightmares."

Jilani, who previously worked in hotspots including Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon, said "In my experience of working in conflict zones around the world, this is the most extreme situation I have seen in terms of scale, severity of injuries, number of children that have suffered that have nothing to do with any of this."

Jilani worked in the emergency room at Al-Aksa Hospital in Deir al-Balah, the only hospital in the middle area of Gaza. On her first day, she said, she tried to save an approximately 1-year-old boy whose right arm and right leg had been blown off, without any of the necessary medication. Next to him was a dying man with "flies ... already feasting on him," she said.

Jilani said she treated children with injuries from traumatic amputations to extreme burns, sometimes seeing the smoke from nearby Israeli bombings. "And one day a bullet did indeed go through the intensive care unit."

After she left, Jilani said, the hospital ran out of fuel and the lights went out. She doesn't know how the babies she treated are doing, or whether they were evacuated.

A Franciscan friar has the pope's ear on AI and how it can help — or hurt — humanity

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Friar Paolo Benanti wears the plain brown robes of his medieval Franciscan order as he pursues one of the most pressing issues in contemporary times: how to govern artificial intelligence so that it enriches — and doesn't exploit — people's lives.

Benanti is the Vatican's go-to person on the technology and he has the ear of Pope Francis as well as some of Silicon Valley's top engineers and executives.

With a background in engineering, a doctorate in moral theology and a passion for what he calls the "ethics of technology," the 50-year-old Italian priest is on an urgent mission that he shares with Francis, who, in his annual peace message for 2024 pushed for an international treaty to ensure the ethical use of AI technology.

"What is the difference between a man who exists and a machine that functions?" said Benanti in an interview this week with The Associated Press during a break at the Pontifical Gregoriana University, where he teaches courses, including moral theology and bioethics, to students preparing for the priesthood. "This is perhaps the greatest question of these times, because we are witnessing a challenge that every day grows more profound with a machine that is humanizing."

Benanti is a member of the United Nations' Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence as well as head of an Italian government commission tasked with providing recommendations on how to safeguard journalism from fake news and other disinformation. He is also a consultant to the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life.

Benanti says he helps "better clarify the more technical terms for the Holy Father" during their encounters. His knowledge came in handy for a 2023 meeting at the Vatican between Francis and Microsoft President Brad Smith that focused on how AI could help or hurt humanity.

Francis and Smith had also discussed artificial intelligence "at the service of the common good" during a meeting a few years earlier, according to the Vatican. With a papacy heavily attentive to those who live on society's margins, Francis has made clear his concern that AI technology could limit human rights by, say, negatively impacting a homebuyer's mortgage application, a migrant's asylum bid or an evaluation of an offender's likelihood to repeat a crime.

"It's clear that if we choose some data that aren't sufficiently inclusive, we will have some choices that aren't inclusive," said Benanti, whose religious order was founded in the early 13th century by St. Francis

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 38 of 70

of Assisi, who renounced earthly riches and promoted charitable works.

Microsoft first reached out to Benanti several years ago for his thoughts on technology, the friar said. In 2023, Smith did a podcast with Benanti in Rome, describing the friar as bringing “one of the most fascinating combinations in the world” in terms of his background in engineering, ethics and technology, to the AI debate.

Benanti, who was one year shy of obtaining his engineering degree at Rome’s Sapienza University when he forsook the degree — and also his girlfriend — to join the Franciscans in his 20s, described how AI could be a “really powerful tool” in bringing down the cost of medicine and empowering doctors to help more people.

But he also described the ethical implications of a technology that could have the same capabilities as a human — or perhaps even more.

“It is a problem not of using (AI) but it is a problem of governance,” the friar said. “And here is where ethics come in — finding the right level of use inside a social context.”

Benanti noted that much of the data that informs AI is fed by low-wage workers, many in developing countries entrenched in a history of colonialism and an exploited workforce.

“I don’t want this to be remembered as the season in which we extract from the global South cognitive resources,” he said. If one examines “the best tools that we are producing in AI” in the West, one sees that AI is “trained with underpaid workers from English-speaking former colonies.”

How to govern AI is an issue that countries all over the globe are trying to resolve. Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, who worries that AI could lead to job losses, will make the technology a focus of this year’s G-7 summit being hosted by Italy. The European Union became a trailblazer late last year when negotiators secured a deal that paves the way for legal oversight of AI technology.

For his part, Benanti said that regulating artificial intelligence shouldn’t mean limiting its development.

“It means keeping them compatible with that fragile system that is democracy, that today seems to be the best system,” he said.

Police response during Uvalde school shooting will be scrutinized again in Justice Department report

By ACACIA CORONADO and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

UVALDE, Texas (AP) — A federal report into the halting and haphazard law enforcement response to a school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, was set to be released Thursday, reviving scrutiny of the hundreds of officers who responded to the 2022 massacre but waited more than an hour to confront and kill the gunman.

Uvalde, a community of more than 15,000, continues to struggle with the trauma left by the killing of 19 elementary students and two teachers, and remains divided on questions of accountability for officers’ actions and inaction.

But it’s unclear what new light the U.S. Department of Justice review will shed. The shooting has already been picked over in legislative hearings, news reports and a damning report by Texas lawmakers who faulted law enforcement at every level with failing “to prioritize saving innocent lives over their own safety.”

In the 20 months since the Justice Department announced its review, footage showing police waiting in a hallway outside the fourth-grade classrooms where the gunman opened fire has become the target of national ridicule.

Attorney General Merrick Garland was in Uvalde on Wednesday ahead of the release of the report, visiting murals of the victims that have been painted around the center of the town. Later that night, Justice Department officials privately briefed family members at a community center in Uvalde before the findings were made public.

Berlinda Arreola, whose granddaughter was killed in the shooting, said following Wednesday night’s meeting that accountability remained in the hands of local prosecutors who are separately conducting a

criminal investigation into the police response.

"I have a lot of emotions right now. I don't have a lot of words to say," Arreola said.

The review by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services was launched just days after the shooting, and local prosecutors are still evaluating a separate criminal investigation by the Texas Rangers. Several of the officers involved have lost their jobs.

The Justice Department has said its investigation would "provide an independent account of law enforcement actions and response that day" and identify lessons learned and best practices to help first responders prepare for active shooter events.

Uvalde County District Attorney Christina Mitchell said in a statement Wednesday that she had not been given a copy of the Justice Department's report but had been informed it does not address any potential criminal charges.

How police respond to mass shootings around the country has been scrutinized since the tragedy in Uvalde, about 85 miles (140 kilometers) southwest of San Antonio.

In Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott initially praised the courage of officers' response and blame was later cast heavily on local authorities in Uvalde. But an 80-page report from a panel of state lawmakers and investigations by journalists laid bare how over the course of more than 70 minutes, a mass of officers went in and out of the school with weapons drawn but did not go inside the classroom where the shooting was taking place. The 376 officers at the scene included state police, Uvalde police, school officers and U.S. Border Patrol agents.

The delayed response countered active-shooter training that emphasizes confronting the gunman, a standard established more than two decades ago after the mass shooting at Columbine High School showed that waiting cost lives. As what happened during the shooting has become clear, the families of some victims have blasted police as cowards and demanded resignations.

At least five officers have lost their jobs, including two Department of Public Safety officers and Uvalde's school police chief, Pete Arredondo, who was the on-site commander during the attack.

Nearly two years after invasion, West still seeking a way to steer frozen Russian assets to Ukraine

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's been nearly two years since the United States and its allies froze hundreds of billions of dollars in Russian foreign holdings in retaliation for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. That roughly \$300 billion in Russian Central Bank money has been sitting untapped as the war grinds on, while officials from multiple countries have debated the legality of sending the money to Ukraine.

The idea of using Russia's frozen assets is gaining new traction lately as continued allied funding for Ukraine becomes more uncertain and the U.S. Congress is in a stalemate over providing more support. But there are tradeoffs since the weaponization of global finance could harm the U.S. dollar's standing as the world's dominant currency.

At this week's World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for a "strong" decision this year for the frozen assets in Western banks to "be directed towards defense against the Russian war and for reconstruction" of Ukraine.

"Putin loves money above all," he said. "The more billions he and his oligarchs, friends and accomplices lose, the more likely he will regret starting this war."

Biden administration officials who previously dismissed the idea as legally cumbersome are showing growing openness to the idea.

Penny Pritzker, the U.S. special representative for Ukraine's economic recovery, said at the Davos forum that the U.S. and Group of Seven allies are still looking for an adequate legal framework to pursue the plan.

"Get all the lawyers and all the various governments and all the parties really to come together to sort that through," she said. "It's hard, it's complicated, it's difficult, and we need to work."

Administration officials caution that even if a legal way can be found to transfer the frozen dollars to

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 40 of 70

Ukraine, the war-torn nation has immediate needs for funds that must be met by other means since U.S. assistance to Ukraine's military has ground to a halt.

Bipartisan legislation circulating in Washington called the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act would use assets confiscated from the Russian Central Bank and other sovereign assets for Ukraine.

A senior official who spoke on condition of anonymity to relay internal discussions said the administration was generally supportive of legislation to give the U.S. more flexibility in making sure Russia pays for the damage it has caused and is in "active conversations" with allies on how best to do that.

But even if legislation were enacted, Nicholas Mulder, a sanctions expert at Cornell University, cautioned that seizing frozen assets could have the unintended effect of undermining efforts to ensure longer-term funding for Ukraine.

"Right now it is being advanced by Washington as a substitute rather than a complement to long-term Western support for Ukraine," he said. "If the assets are transferred, these funds too will run out sooner or later. But by that time Western leaders will have ceased to make any political case for supporting Ukraine, and getting support back up will be much harder."

The U.S. announced at the start of Russia's invasion that America and its allies had blocked access to more than \$600 billion that Russia held outside its borders — including roughly \$300 billion in funds belonging to Russia's Central Bank. Since then, the U.S. and its allies have continued to impose rounds of targeted sanctions against companies and the wealthy elite with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The World Bank's latest damage assessment of Ukraine, released in March 2023, estimates that costs for reconstruction and recovery of the nation stand at \$411 billion over the next 10 years, which includes needs for public and private funds.

Since the war began in February 2022, the United States has given Ukraine roughly \$111 billion in weapons, equipment, humanitarian assistance and other aid. Other countries also have provided Ukraine with substantial support — the U.K. announced a \$3 billion assistance package on Friday.

At the White House, Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young this month told a group of reporters that while the possibility of seizing Russian assets is being studied, it would not have an immediate impact on Ukraine's financial needs.

"That does not absolve the need to provide funding now," Young said. "That is a future benefit to Kyiv I think we should look at and take seriously."

Sergey Aleksashenko, a former Russian Central Banker who is now a member of the Russian Antiwar Committee with other dissidents, said that while he strongly believes Russia should be forced to compensate Ukraine, "I do not believe that there is any way to confiscate assets of the Russian Central Bank without a court deciding on the matter."

"Because if there is no legal basis to confiscate Russian assets, and if it is done by the decision of the administration, that means that there is no rule of law in the U.S. and there is no protection of private property."

He said an administrative decision to confiscate Russia's assets could prompt nations like China — the biggest holder of U.S. Treasuries — to determine that it is not safe to keep its reserves in U.S. dollars.

There are some efforts under way to seize Russian funds and those of sanctioned oligarchs under limited circumstances. Last May, the Justice Department announced that it had transferred \$5.4 million seized from Russian tycoon Konstantin Malofeyev to a State Department fund for rebuilding Ukraine.

And in December, Germany's federal prosecutor filed a motion for asset forfeiture concerning more than 720 million euros (\$789 million) deposited by a Russian financial institution in a Frankfurt bank account because of a suspected attempt to violate embargo regulations.

Belgium, which is holding the rotating presidency of the European Union bloc for the next six months, is now leading the talks on whether to seize Russia's assets. Belgium is also the country where most frozen Russian assets under sanctions are being held.

The country is collecting taxes on the assets. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said in October that 1.7 billion euros (\$1.8 billion) in tax collections was already available and that the money would be

used to buy military equipment, humanitarian aid and help with the rebuilding of the war-torn country. But EU countries are worried that going further by confiscating the assets could pave the way for serious legal problems and could also destabilize the financial system.

De Croo said this week he is hearing "a lot of prudence" when the issue of seizing assets is raised. "It's crucial that we stay within a legal framework," he said.

Maria Snegovaya, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, cautioned that if Ukraine's immediate needs aren't met, "no amount of seized Russian assets is unfortunately going to compensate for what may happen."

"And by then it is going to be very overwhelming."

Ann Arbor Public Schools approves Mideast cease-fire resolution that had stoked controversy

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. (AP) — A public school district in Michigan approved a resolution calling for a bilateral cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war while also encouraging its teachers to discuss the conflict in its classrooms following an emotionally charged meeting Wednesday.

The resolution approved by the Ann Arbor Public Schools board appears to be among the first times that a public school system in the United States has made such a statement on the international conflict.

It followed an over five-hour meeting that stretched into the early hours of Thursday after 120 people gave public comments in both support and opposition of the resolution.

Tensions remained high throughout the meeting in Ann Arbor, a community close to 40 miles (64 kilometers) west of Detroit and home to the University of Michigan. Similar tensions have been seen across the nation in response to the war in Gaza, which is now entering its fourth month following a deadly Oct. 7 attack by Hamas militants.

The conflict has divided college campuses, where long-simmering tensions are occasionally erupting in violence and shattering the sense of safety that makes colleges hubs of free discourse. Dozens of U.S. cities, including Ann Arbor, have approved cease-fire resolutions that have no legal authority but reflect the pressure on local governments to speak up on the Israel-Hamas war,

The resolution passed in Ann Arbor was one of the first times that a public school system in Michigan had considered such a statement, said Don Wotruba, executive director at Michigan Association of School Boards, prior to the scheduled vote.

"What they're thinking about doing would be pretty rare, if not the first time. Particularly as it's related to a more international situation," Wotruba said.

The district "expresses support for a bilateral ceasefire in Gaza and Israel," according to the resolution, and "encourages educators within the Ann Arbor School District to facilitate informed and respectful dialogue about the conflict."

Four of the seven board members voted in favor of the resolution, with two abstaining from the vote. Rima Mohammad, who is Palestinian, had been one of the most outspoken members in support of it.

"This resolution says that kids who have names like mine are seen, heard and valued," Mohammad said just prior to the vote.

Some parents in the district, which holds nearly 17,000 students, had expressed outrage about the resolution, and a petition opposing it collected nearly 2,000 signatures. The petition said that the issue has taken resources away from other important matters such as hiring a new superintendent, which the district is without.

"This resolution does not help advance the quality of life of one single child in this district," said Daniel Sorkin, a parent of two students in the district who spoke out against the resolution Wednesday.

Tasneem Madani, a student teacher in the district, supported the resolution and stressed its importance, saying that "our students are watching us."

"It is my responsibility, particularly as an English teacher, to help students develop the skills to engage

in informed academic dialogue in safe spaces," Madani said at Wednesday's meeting.

Other schools across the country have contemplated similar resolutions. In California, the Oakland Unified School District has considered a resolution calling for a cease-fire and release of hostages in Israel and Palestine, but has yet to pass it.

Ann Arbor has long been known for its progressive politics, but the city and its university has found itself divided over the Gaza conflict beyond the confines of its public schools.

Nearly 6,500 Jewish students attend the University of Michigan, a total of 15% of its entire student population, according to the University of Michigan Hillel. A significant number of Arab American students also attend the university, which is near one of the largest Muslim populations in the nation.

In December, University of Michigan President Santa Ono barred students from voting on two resolutions related to the Israel-Hamas war, calling them "controversial and divisive." The Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations accused the university of suppressing free speech at the time.

"The proposed resolutions have done more to stoke fear, anger and animosity on our campus than they would ever accomplish as recommendations to the university," Ono said in an online post at the time.

Trump, blending legal battles and campaign, tops long day in court with rambling New Hampshire rally

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. (AP) — Dan Steele knows what a long day in court is like. So he was extra appreciative on Wednesday that former President Donald Trump journeyed to New Hampshire after spending the day in a New York courtroom, where he sat defiantly during his trial to determine damages for defaming a magazine writer after she accused him of sexual assault.

A retired trial lawyer for the Justice Department, Steele said he hasn't dug into the details of the wide array of cases against Trump. That includes four prosecutions — including two by Steele's former employer — plus the defamation lawsuit, which comes on the heels of a \$5 million verdict for E. Jean Carroll in her initial sexual assault lawsuit against Trump, plus a fraud case filed by the New York Attorney General's office. But Steele dismissed them as "all campaign interference by the Democrats because they can't beat him any other way."

"Every time he goes into a courtroom," Steele, 75, who retired in 2016, said approvingly of Trump, "he always comes out with more support."

Steele and a few hundred other supporters spent hours waiting for Trump, who delayed his New Hampshire appearance to hold a late-afternoon news conference after court concluded in which he slammed the judge in the case as "a radical Trump-hater."

The former president spoke more than two hours later than scheduled in a location that was much smaller than his normal venue — a hotel ballroom that could only accommodate some 300 people. He concluded his long day with a rambling speech that lasted more than an hour.

He mocked his rivals in the primary, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley. Then he quickly went off-message, touting a cognitive test he took as president, his administration's campaign against the Islamic State group and other familiar themes. Eventually he came around to bemoaning his legal woes.

"You know I've been indicted more than Al Capone," Trump told the crowd. "You ever heard of Al Capone? Probably the greatest mobster of them all."

The scene in New Hampshire was a somewhat surreal early look at the coming campaign, in which the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination is still scheduled to face his first criminal trial on March 5, which is also known as Super Tuesday because 14 states vote in the nominating contest. While that trial start date may be delayed, Trump will have to juggle stump speeches and his legal defense throughout the year as he did on Wednesday.

Trump has made his legal woes a centerpiece of his presidential primary campaign, and his voters don't seem fazed by his increasingly confrontational approach to the U.S. justice system. Last week, as his rivals

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 43 of 70

crisscrossed first-in-the-nation Iowa before Monday's caucuses, Trump largely stayed in New York and Washington, attending legal proceedings in two cases against him and making sure his voters saw him as fighting back against persecution. He won Iowa with 51% of the caucus vote.

New Hampshire is the next state in the Republican nominating contest, and Trump seems intent on mixing court with campaigning. On Wednesday, Trump was warned by the judge in the case that he'd be tossed from the courtroom if he kept talking while Carroll testified.

"I would love it," Trump replied.

The crowd in New Hampshire cheered wildly as Trump came onstage and hooted warmly at some of his standard campaign lines. Trump was in an obvious good mood, enjoying back and forth with a receptive crowd after a day of being forced to sit still and admonished to keep quiet in court.

"Would you trust Joe Biden to run your store while you go off to New Hampshire to find a small hill to go skiing?" Trump asked at one point, riffing on his likely Democratic rival in November like a standup comic.

Later, he quipped about former President Jimmy Carter, who is currently in hospice care in Georgia with terminal cancer. "He's happy because his presidency is now considered brilliant in comparison to Joe Biden," Trump said.

At one point, after Trump quoted praise from his former White House physician, now a Republican congressman from Texas and a fierce Biden critic, the crowd burst out laughing. "That's Ronny Jackson of Texas," Trump said, as if he was crediting a fellow performer on stage.

Eventually, as Trump's speech extended past an hour, the ballroom grew stuffy and people began to trickle out.

Attendees had waited outside for hours in 20-degree New Hampshire weather before having to wait hours more inside. But they were sympathetic to Trump, echoing his often-repeated arguments about what he contends is his legal persecution.

"I think it's disgusting what they're doing to him, but he's doing what he has to do," said Beverly Rider, who traveled from next-door Maine to the Portsmouth hotel Wednesday morning to begin waiting for Trump. "He's doing it for us."

Judge threatens to boot Donald Trump from courtroom over loud talking as E. Jean Carroll testifies

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, LARRY NEUMEISTER and JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump was threatened with expulsion from his Manhattan civil trial Wednesday after he repeatedly ignored a warning to keep quiet while writer E. Jean Carroll testified that he shattered her reputation after she accused him of sexual abuse.

Judge Lewis A. Kaplan told the former president that his right to be present at the trial will be revoked if he remains disruptive. After an initial warning, Carroll's lawyer said Trump could still be heard making remarks to his lawyers, including "it is a witch hunt" and "it really is a con job."

"Mr. Trump, I hope I don't have to consider excluding you from the trial," Kaplan said in an exchange after the jury was excused for lunch, adding: "I understand you're probably very eager for me to do that."

"I would love it," the Republican presidential front-runner shot back, shrugging as he sat between lawyers Alina Habba and Michael Madaio at the defense table.

"I know you would. You just can't control yourself in these circumstances, apparently," Kaplan responded.

"You can't either," Trump muttered.

Afterward, Trump ripped the judge in brief remarks to reporters at an office building he owns near the courthouse. He called the Bill Clinton appointee "a nasty judge" and a "Trump-hating guy," echoing his own social media posts that Kaplan was "seething and hostile," and "abusive, rude, and obviously not impartial."

Trump has made similar comments about the judge in another case: a state of New York lawsuit accusing him of inflating his property values to get better rates on insurance and loans.

On Wednesday, Judge Kaplan denied a request from Trump's lawyers that he step aside from the case involving Carroll, a longtime Elle magazine advice columnist.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 44 of 70

Kaplan cracked down after Carroll lawyer Shawn Crowley complained for a second time that Trump could be heard "loudly saying things" throughout her testimony as he sat at the defense table, frequently tilting back and leaning over to speak with his lawyers.

Crowley suggested that if Carroll's lawyers could hear Trump from where they were sitting, about 12 feet (3.7 meters) from him, jurors might've been able to hear him, too. Some appeared to split their focus between Trump and the witness stand.

"I'm just going to ask that Mr. Trump take special care to keep his voice down when conferring with counsel to make sure the jury does not hear it," Kaplan said before jurors returned to the courtroom after a morning break.

Earlier, without the jury in the courtroom, Trump could be seen slamming his hand on the defense table and uttering the word "man" when the judge again refused his lawyer's request that the trial be suspended on Thursday so he could attend his mother-in-law's funeral in Florida.

Trump, fresh from a win Monday in the Iowa caucuses, has made his various legal fights part of his campaign. He sat in on jury selection Tuesday, then jetted to a New Hampshire rally before returning to court Wednesday and repeating the cycle with another Granite State event Wednesday night.

Carroll was the first witness in a Manhattan federal court trial to determine damages, if any, that Trump owes her for remarks he made while he was president in June 2019 as he vehemently denied ever attacking her or knowing her. A jury last year already found that Trump sexually abused her and defamed her in a round of denials in October 2022.

Carroll's testimony was somewhat of a tightrope walk because of limitations the judge has posed on the trial in light of the previous verdict and prior rulings he's made restricting the infusion of political talk. Habba lobbed multiple objections seeking to prevent the jury from hearing details of Carroll's allegations.

"I'm here because Donald Trump assaulted me and when I wrote about it, he said it never happened. He lied and he shattered my reputation," Carroll testified.

"He has continued to lie. He lied last month. He lied on Sunday. He lied yesterday. And I am here to get my reputation back and to stop him from telling lies about me," Carroll said.

Once a respected columnist, Carroll lamented: "Now, I'm known as the liar, the fraud and the whack job." She became emotional as she read through some of hundreds of hateful messages she's received from strangers, apologizing at one point to the jury for reading the nasty language aloud.

Carroll said Trump's smears "ended the world" she knew, costing her millions of readers and her "Ask E. Jean" advice column, which ran in Elle for more than 25 years. The magazine has said her contract ended for unrelated reasons.

Carroll said her worries about her personal safety after a stream of death threats led her to buy bullets for a gun she inherited from her father, install an electronic fence, warn her neighbors of threats and unleash her pit bull to roam freely on the property of the small cabin in the mountains of upstate New York where she lives alone.

She also brought security along for the trial this week and last May and said she'd thought often about hiring security more often to accompany her.

"Why don't you?" her attorney, Roberta Kaplan — no relation to the judge — asked.

"Can't afford it," Carroll answered.

She took the stand after a hostile encounter between Habba and the judge — culminating in Trump's desk slam — over his refusal to adjourn the trial on Thursday so Trump could attend the funeral for former first lady Melania Trump's mother, Amalija Knavs, who died last week.

Habba called Judge Kaplan's ruling "insanely prejudicial" and the judge soon afterward cut her off, saying he would "hear no further argument on it."

Habba told the judge: "I don't like to be spoken to that way, your honor." When she mentioned the funeral again, the judge responded: "It's denied. Sit down."

Carroll's testimony came nine months after she was in the same chair convincing a jury in the hopes that Trump could be held accountable in a way that would stop him from frequent verbal attacks against her.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 45 of 70

Because the first jury found that Trump sexually abused Carroll in the 1990s and then defamed her in 2022, the new trial concerns only how much more — if anything — he'll be ordered to pay her for other remarks he made in 2019 while he was president.

Carroll accused Trump of forcing himself on her in a luxury department store dressing room in 1996. Then, she alleges, he publicly impugned her honesty, her motives and even her sanity after she told the story publicly in a 2019 memoir.

Trump, 77, asserts that nothing ever happened between him and Carroll, 80, and that he never met her. He says a 1987 party photo of them and their then-spouses "doesn't count" because it was a momentary greeting.

Trump did not attend the previous trial in the case last May, when a jury found he had sexually abused and defamed Carroll and awarded her \$5 million in damages. The jury said, however, that Carroll hadn't proven her claim that Trump raped her.

Carroll is now seeking \$10 million in compensatory damages and millions more in punitive damages.

The Associated Press typically does not name people who say they have been sexually assaulted unless they come forward publicly, as Carroll has done.

Live updates | US-owned ship attacked near Yemen, medicine for Israeli hostages enters Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

Yemen's Houthi rebels launched a bomb-carrying drone into a U.S.-owned ship on Wednesday, officials said, the second such attack in recent days targeting vessels directly linked to America after U.S.-led strikes against the Houthis in recent days. The U.S. military launched another wave of ship- and submarine-launched missile strikes against Houthi-controlled sites, U.S. officials said.

In Gaza, a shipment of medicine for dozens of hostages held by Palestinian militant group Hamas entered the territory late Wednesday, Qatar's foreign ministry said. The Gulf nation and France worked out a deal between Israel and Hamas to deliver medicine to both the hostages and for Palestinians.

More than 100 days into the Israel-Hamas war, Palestinian militants are still putting up stiff resistance across the besieged enclave. The conflict shows no sign of ending and has inflamed tensions across the Middle East, with a dizzying array of strikes and counterstrikes in recent days.

The Palestinian death toll in Gaza has risen to 24,285 people, Health Ministry said Tuesday. In Israel, around 1,200 people were killed during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that sparked the war and saw some 250 people taken hostage by militants.

Currently:

- How watermelon imagery, a symbol of solidarity with Palestinians, spread around the planet
- U.S. pledges new sanctions over Houthi attacks will minimize harm to Yemen's hungry millions.
- A freed Israeli hostage relives the horrors of captivity. She fears for her husband, still held in Gaza.
- U.S. senators reject Bernie Sanders' effort to curb Israel-Hamas war. The vote signals rising unease.
- A chaotic wave of attacks and reprisals in the Middle East fuel worries of a broader regional war.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

US military launches more missile strikes against Houthi sites in Yemen

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military launched another wave of ship- and submarine-launched missile strikes against Houthi-controlled sites Wednesday, U.S. officials said, marking the fourth time in days it has targeted the group in Yemen as violence ignited by the Israel-Hamas war continues to spill over in the Middle East.

The strikes were launched from the Red Sea and hit 14 missiles that the U.S. Central Command deemed an "imminent threat."

The strikes followed the official announcement that the U.S. has put the Houthis back on its list of specially designated global terrorists. The sanctions that come with the formal designation are meant to sever

violent extremist groups from their sources of financing.

The Houthis are continuing their campaign of harassment of commercial and military ships. On Wednesday, an attack drone launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen struck the U.S.-owned bulk carrier Genco Picardy in the Gulf of Aden.

— By Tara Copp and Lolita C. Baldor.

Yemen's Houthi rebels attack a US-owned ship in the Gulf of Aden with bomb-carrying drone

JERUSALEM -- A U.S.-owned ship in the Gulf of Aden was hit Wednesday by a bomb-carrying drone launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels, officials said.

The attack on the Genco Picardy was the second this week targeting vessels directly linked to the United States after U.S.-led strikes targeting the Houthis. It happened about 70 miles (110 kilometers) southeast of Aden, said the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, an arm of the British navy that oversees Mideast waterways.

The ship's captain reported that a fire onboard had been extinguished, it said.

In a statement, the Genco Picardy's owner, New York City-based Genco Shipping & Trading Ltd., said the ship was carrying a load of phosphate rock. "All seafarers aboard the vessel are confirmed to be uninjured," the company said, adding that "the vessel has remained stable and underway on a course out of the area."

Satellite-tracking data had put the vessel off Saudi Arabia in recent days as it was bound for India.

On Monday, a Houthi missile hit the U.S.-owned bulk carrier Gibraltar Eagle. The U.S. military's Central Command said the ship reported no injuries or significant damage.

The Houthis say their attacks on shipping are aimed at backing Hamas and Palestinians trapped in the Gaza Strip during Israel's war on Hamas. The U.S. and its allies have carried out three rounds of airstrikes targeting Houthi sites over the last week to try to deter the militants.

UNTREATED WOUNDS, OVERCROWDED HOSPITALS AS GAZA'S HEALTH SYSTEM COLLAPSES

UNITED NATIONS — People are dying every day from untreated injuries in Gaza's overwhelmed hospitals as the territory's health care system collapses, a U.N. health emergency expert says.

The World Health Organization's Sean Casey, who left Gaza recently after five weeks of trying to get more staff and supplies to the 16 partially functioning hospitals, told a U.N. news conference Wednesday about the health emergency he witnessed which deteriorated during his time in the territory.

At Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City, "I saw patients who were lying on church pews, basically waiting to die in a hospital that had no fuel, no power, no water, very little in the way of medical supplies and only a handful of staff remaining to take care of them," he said.

Shifa Hospital in northern Gaza City, once the territory's leading hospital with 700 beds, has been reduced to treating emergency trauma victims, and is reportedly filled with tens of thousands of people who have fled their homes and are now living in operating rooms, corridors and stairs, he said.

"Literally five or six doctors or nurses" are seeing hundreds of mainly trauma victims a day, Casey said, and there were "so many patients on the floor you could barely move without stepping on somebody's hands or feet."

Last week, Casey said, he visited the Nasser medical complex, the main hospital further south in Khan Younis, which is at 200% of its bed capacity with only 30% of its staff, so "patients are everywhere, in the corridors, on the floor."

He said a cease-fire is what's needed, first and foremost, to help some 60,000 injured people and several hundred new arrivals every day. To address the crisis, he said, safe and secure access to hospitals and health facilities is essential — and medical supplies need to be delivered to facilities where there is adequate staff and electricity to help the thousands in need.

MEDICINE SHIPMENT FOR ISRAELI HOSTAGES ENTERS GAZA STRIP, QATAR SAYS

CAIRO — A spokesperson for Qatar's Foreign Ministry says that a shipment of medicine for dozens of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 47 of 70

hostages held by Hamas has reached the Gaza Strip.

The medicine arrived Wednesday as part of a France- and Qatar-mediated deal that was the first agreement between Israel and Hamas since a truce in late November that freed dozens of captives, mostly women and children. For every box that arrives for a hostage, 1,000 boxes will arrive to Palestinians in Gaza, a senior Hamas official said.

In a post on X, formerly Twitter, Qatar Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed al-Ansari did not say whether the aid had been distributed.

More than 100 captives remain, among them several older men. A group representing the hostages says about a third of those in captivity suffer from chronic diseases that require medical care.

IRAN SAYS ITS STRIKES IN IRAQ AND SYRIA WERE IN SELF-DEFENSE

UNITED NATIONS — Iran has told the United Nations that it exercised its right to self-defense in carrying out “targeted attacks against the bases and facilities of terrorist groups situated in Syria and Iraq.”

Iran’s U.N. Ambassador, Amir Saeid Iravani, reiterated his government’s “inherent rights, as recognized by international law, to safeguard its sovereignty, national security, and its citizens against any threats or attacks.”

“This commitment reflects Iran’s resolve to protect its interests and maintain peace and security within its borders,” he said in letters to the U.N. Security Council and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press.

He said the anti-terrorism operations were undertaken in response to two bombings on Jan. 3 targeting a commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the slaying of Gen. Qassem Soleimani that he said killed over 100 civilians and injured many others. The Islamic State extremist group, a battlefield foe of Soleimani’s, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Iravani said ballistic missile attacks in the early hours of Jan. 16 targeted facilities of the Islamic State and al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria’s northwestern Idlib region and in northeast Syria.

In addition, he said, Iran targeted a facility in Irbil in Iraq’s Kurdistan region used by “anti-Iranian terrorist groups associated with the Israeli regime ... for intelligence and sabotage operations in Iran.” Iraq protested the violation of its sovereignty and recalled its ambassador to Iran.

Iravani reiterated Iran’s “unwavering commitment” to respect the sovereignty of Syria and Iraq.

The strikes heightened tensions in the region amid fears of a wider spillover of the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas following the militants’ Oct. 7 surprise attacks in southern Israel.

The letter, dated Jan. 16, did not mention Iran’s airstrikes in Pakistan’s restive southwestern Baluchistan province on Tuesday. Iran claimed it targeted bases for a militant Sunni separatist group. Pakistan denounced the attack as a “blatant violation” of its airspace, said it killed two children, and recalled its ambassador to Tehran.

A BRITISH NATIONAL WAS KILLED IN IRAQ BY RECENT IRANIAN STRIKES, UK SAYS

BAGHDAD — The U.K.’s ambassador to Iraq said Wednesday that a British national, Karam Mikhael, was among the civilians killed by an Iranian strike on the city of Irbil in northern Iraq earlier this week. Ambassador Stephen Hitchen issued condolences to Mikhael’s family and those of the others killed in the attack in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Iran fired missiles late Monday at what it said was a Israeli “spy headquarters” in an upscale neighborhood near the sprawling U.S. Consulate compound in Irbil. Iraqi officials have denied that the location struck had any connection to Israeli intelligence.

The Iranian strike in Irbil killed at least four people, among them Mikhael, a British-Iraqi businessman, and Peshraw Dizayi, a prominent local businessman with a portfolio that included real estate and security services companies. Iraq recalled its ambassador from Tehran for consultations and summoned Iran’s chargé d’affaires in Baghdad to protest the attack.

HAMAS FIRES ROCKETS FROM LEBANON INTO NORTHERN ISRAEL

BEIRUT — Hamas said it fired 20 missiles from Lebanon toward a military barracks near Israel’s northern coast on Wednesday.

It was first rocket attack from Lebanon by the Palestinian militant group since late December and came

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 48 of 70

a day after at least 25 rockets were fired from Gaza into southern Israel in one of the strongest bombardments in more than a week.

A statement from Hamas said Wednesday's attack was partly a response to the presumed Israeli airstrike that killed top Hamas official Saleh Arouri on Jan. 2 in the Beirut suburbs.

It was not immediately clear if there were damage or casualties in Israel. The Israeli military said its warplanes and artillery struck launch sites in southern Lebanon.

Hamas later announced that one of its fighters, from the Mieh Mieh Palestinian refugee camp near the city of Sidon, had been killed in an Israeli strike in southern Lebanon.

In recent days, the intensity of cross-border fighting between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah has escalated.

Regarding the prospects for another cease-fire agreement in Gaza and a release of hostages, Hamas political official Osama Hamdan told reporters in Beirut that the group had "presented a vision" to Egypt in Qatar in response to proposals put forward by those two countries, but accused Israel of "stalling" in its response.

The Hamas official also criticized the international community for its concern about getting medication to the dozens of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza, when more than 2 million Palestinians there have been living for months in dire conditions without access to health care.

IRAN'S TOP DIPLOMAT WARNS THE WAR COULD EXPAND AS LONG AS ISRAEL TRIES TO CRUSH HAMAS
TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's foreign minister warned that fighting could intensify in the Mideast if Israel does not end its war against Hamas.

"Today, we are witnessing genocide in Gaza and the West Bank. This means that war is ongoing, so there is possibility of extension," Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said, speaking Wednesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Amirabdollahian added that Lebanon's Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, was not itching to enter the conflict directly. Offering support for what he said was the militant group's desire to limit bloodshed, he said Hezbollah had been committed to upholding a weeklong November cease-fire in Gaza.

Amirabdollahian also claimed that Iran's airstrikes on a Kurdish area of northern Iraq had targeted Israeli sites. He called Israel "a mutual enemy of Iran and Iraq."

A SECOND ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE IN THE WEST BANK KILLS 4 MORE PALESTINIANS
JERUSALEM — An Israeli airstrike killed four Palestinians during a Wednesday raid in the occupied West Bank.

The military says it targeted a group of militants who had opened fire and were throwing explosives at Israeli soldiers in the Tulkarem refugee camp, a built-up residential area in the northern West Bank.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said four people were killed. The Israeli army said a soldier was seriously wounded.

The army said the troops arrested seven others who Israel alleges were involved in planting roadside bombs during the raid.

An earlier airstrike near another West Bank refugee camp Wednesday killed five Palestinians. Israel said the target, a senior militant allegedly involved in attacks against Israelis, was killed along with members of his cell.

At least 360 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza started, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Most were killed in confrontations during violent protests or Israeli arrest raids.

Israel's military says it has arrested some 2,700 Palestinians in the West Bank since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack from Gaza into Israel, which ignited the war. It says around 1,300 are suspected Hamas members.

MOOD AND CONDITIONS ARE DETERIORATING IN SOUTHERN GAZA, HEAD OF U.N. AGENCY SAYS
JERUSALEM — The head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees says he is shocked by how poor conditions in the Gaza Strip have become after 3 1/2 months of war.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini spoke to reporters on Wednesday, a day after wrapping

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 49 of 70

up his fourth visit to Gaza since Oct. 7.

Lazzarini said he was struck by the moods and circumstances of the masses of displaced people who have sought safety in the southern part of the territory, many living in sprawling tent camps. The U.N. estimates that over 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced.

He said the conditions have steadily worsened with each of his trips. His previous visit came just before Christmas.

"Now you have a plastic makeshift site having mushroomed almost everywhere," Lazzarini said. "Hundreds of thousands of people living now in the street, living in this plastic makeshift, sleeping on the concrete."

He said U.N. shelters are not an option because they are overcrowded and suffering from poor sanitary conditions.

In some places, women have all but stopped eating or drinking because they do not want to use the filthy bathrooms, Lazzarini said. Diarrhea and skin diseases are fast spreading, he said.

Lazzarini said he also was struck by the sense of helplessness in the people he saw. He said they are in "survival mode," exhausted and demoralized by the appalling hygiene conditions and lack of hope. Many think it will be impossible to return home when the fighting stops because the destruction is so vast, and many talk of leaving Gaza in hope of building new lives elsewhere.

"They don't see how they can continue to bring up their children in this type of environment," Lazzarini said.

U.N. AGENCY SEEKS REVIEW OF ALLEGED PRO-HAMAS ACTIVITY IN ITS RANKS

JERUSALEM — The head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees says he has requested an independent review of claims by pro-Israel groups of unchecked pro-Hamas activity in his organization.

Philippe Lazzarini told reporters Wednesday he would soon appoint a professional consulting group or some other "independent entity" to look into the claims.

Israeli officials and their allies have repeatedly alleged that the refugee agency, known by its acronym UNRWA, allows anti-Israeli incitement to be taught in its hundreds of schools. They also alleged that some of the agency's tens of thousands of staff members support or collaborate with the Hamas militant group or have written inappropriate social media posts.

UNRWA serves millions of Palestinians across the Middle East whose families fled or were forced from properties inside what is Israel during the war surrounding Israel's creation in 1948. Israel rejects a return of the refugees to their former lands, saying it would undermine the country's Jewish character.

Those pushing back against the allegations say the refugee agency is being tarnished as part of a campaign to diminish the long-festering issue of Palestinian refugees and their descendants. Israeli critics have accused UNRWA of perpetuating the Palestinian refugee issue — a charge Lazzarini rejected.

Lazzarini said that "constant scrutiny" has had an impact on the agency's already-stretched operations by encouraging some donor nations to consider defunding the organization. He said it also has hurt morale at a time when UNRWA is conducting "this huge humanitarian operation in Gaza."

Lazzarini said he wants the review to determine "what is true or untrue" and to look at how the agency deals with problematic cases. He says he is confident the investigation will find there is "no systemic policy" violating U.N. standards and that there is a proper system of oversight in place.

He said the assessment would also look at "what is disingenuous, what is politically motivated" among the critics.

JORDAN SAYS A MEDIC FROM A HOSPITAL IT RUNS WAS WOUNDED IN GAZA

AMMAN, Jordan — The Jordanian military says a medic working at a field hospital it operates in Gaza was wounded by clashes nearby.

An army statement released Wednesday said the individual was wounded in the thigh and hand and would be evacuated to the kingdom. It did not provide further details about the individual.

It said a Palestinian who was receiving treatment was also wounded. It says the hospital in Khan Younis suffered "severe material damage" as a result of "continuous Israeli bombing" nearby.

The Israeli military said it was looking into the incident.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 50 of 70

Jordan's military says it holds Israel responsible for the safety of the hospital's staff and described the attack on the hospital as a "flagrant violation of international humanitarian law."

Jordan, a close Western ally, made peace with Israel in 1994 but supports the Palestinian cause and has repeatedly called for a cease-fire in Gaza.

ISRAELI ARMY TRAINS FOR A POSSIBLE OFFENSIVE IN LEBANON

JERUSALEM — The Israeli army has held a training exercise simulating an offensive in southern Lebanon as it continues to exchange fire with Hezbollah fighters along the border.

Maj. Gen. Ori Gordin, head of the army's Northern Command, said in a statement issued Tuesday: "We're more prepared for this than ever before, even for tonight if needed."

More than 2,000 rockets have been fired toward Israel from Lebanon, the home of Hezbollah, since the start of the war in Gaza, killing 12 Israeli soldiers and six civilians, including a mother and son on Monday.

Israel's airstrikes in Lebanon have killed around 150 militants and 20 civilians, according to Hezbollah. Earlier this week, Israel said it stopped an infiltration of militants into the contested Golan Heights.

Gordin says reserve soldiers are spread out along the border to bolster Israel's defenses.

Hezbollah says its attacks are aimed at tying down Israeli forces and will continue until there is a cease-fire in Gaza. Israel has warned of an all-out war if Hezbollah does not pull back from the border in accordance with a U.N. resolution that ended the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.

HAMAS OFFICIAL: GAZA RESIDENTS TO GET MEDICINE AS PART OF HOSTAGE AID DEAL

CAIRO — Hamas has provided more details about an agreement brokered by France and Qatar to deliver medicine to Israeli hostages held by its fighters in Gaza.

Senior Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouk said Wednesday that for each box of medicine provided to the hostages, 1,000 boxes would be sent for use by Palestinian civilians.

In a posting on X, he said the International Committee of the Red Cross would deliver all the medicines, including those destined for the hostages, to hospitals serving all parts of Gaza.

The agreement also includes the delivery of additional food and humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Abu Marzouk says Israeli authorities will not have the chance to inspect the shipments. He says Hamas insisted that Qatar provide the medications and not France because of the European country's support for Israel.

This is the first agreement reached between the warring sides since a weeklong cease-fire in November. Hamas and other militants are still holding around half of the estimated 250 hostages they captured during the Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war. Most of the rest were freed in November in return for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Those remaining in captivity in Gaza include several older men and others who require medication for chronic illness.

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE IN WEST BANK KILLS SENIOR PALESTINIAN MILITANT, ARMY SAYS

JERUSALEM — The Israeli army says it killed a senior Palestinian militant in an airstrike in the West Bank.

Ahmed Abdullah Abu Shalal, whom the Israeli military said was responsible for infrastructure and had planned multiple attacks against Israelis in Jerusalem, was killed along with four others early Wednesday near the built-up Balata refugee camp in the city of Nablus.

The Palestinian Red Crescent says Israeli forces prevented medics from reaching the site of the strike, saying in a social media post that "gunfire was directed at our teams."

The military alleged that Abu Shalal and his cell planned to carry out an imminent attack and had received funding and guidance from "Iranian sources." It did not provide evidence for the allegation.

Violence has surged in the Israeli-occupied West Bank since the start of the war in Gaza. Over 350 Palestinians have been killed in the last three months, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry, mainly during Israeli arrest raids and violent protests.

Israel has increasingly used airstrikes in the West Bank as the fighting has grown more intense, but targeted killings are still relatively rare in the territory.

Medicine for hostages and Palestinians arrives in Gaza under first Israel-Hamas deal since November

By NAJIB JOBAIN, JACK JEFFERY and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — A shipment of medicine for dozens of hostages held by Hamas arrived in Gaza on Wednesday, part of a France- and Qatar- mediated deal that marked the first agreement between Israel and the militant group since a weeklong cease-fire in November.

The deal could bring respite to some of the roughly 100 hostages who remain in captivity, as well as to Palestinians in Gaza in desperate need of aid. But fighting still rages in many parts of the beleaguered enclave, and an end to the war — or the release of the hostages — seems nowhere in sight.

Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Majed al-Ansari, announced late Wednesday on X, formerly Twitter, that the shipment had crossed into Gaza, without saying when or how the medicine would be distributed.

"Over the past few hours, medicine & aid entered the Gaza Strip, in implementation of the agreement announced yesterday for the benefit of civilians in the Strip, including hostages," he wrote.

A senior Hamas official said that for every box provided for the hostages, 1,000 boxes of medicine would be sent in for Palestinians. The deal also includes the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza residents.

The agreement came 100 days into the conflict and as Palestinian militants are still putting up resistance across Gaza in the face of one of the deadliest military campaigns in recent history. More than 24,000 Palestinians have been killed. Some 85% of the narrow coastal territory's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, and the United Nations says a quarter of the population is starving.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas to ensure it can never repeat an attack like the one on Oct. 7 that triggered the war. Militants burst through Israel's border defenses and stormed through several communities that day, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and capturing around 250.

Israel also has promised to win the return of the hostages still held inside Gaza.

Hamas has said it will not release any more hostages until there is a permanent cease-fire, something Israel and the United States, its top ally, have ruled out.

AID BOUND FOR HOSTAGES AND PALESTINIAN CIVILIANS

The last deal in late November between Israel and Hamas brought a temporary truce in exchange for the release of more than 100 hostages, mostly women and children, as well as freedom for dozens of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

A Qatari official said the medicine would be delivered to the hostages by the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory. It was not immediately clear when the drugs would be delivered, or how the handover would be verified. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts.

France said it took months to organize the shipment of the medicines. Qatar, which has long served as a mediator with Hamas, helped broker the deal that will provide three months' worth of medication for chronic illnesses for 45 of the hostages, as well as other medicine and vitamins. Several older men are among the remaining hostages.

Moussa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas official, said in a post on X that the International Committee of the Red Cross will deliver all the medicines, including the ones destined for the hostages, to hospitals serving all parts of Gaza. The ICRC declined to comment.

Senior U.N. officials have warned that Gaza faces widespread famine and disease if more aid is not allowed in.

Israel completely sealed off Gaza after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack and only relented under U.S. pressure. It says there are now no limits on the entry of humanitarian aid and that U.N. agencies could reduce the delays by providing more workers and trucks.

But U.N. officials say aid delivery is hobbled by the opening of too few border crossings, a slow vetting process and fighting throughout the territory — all of which is largely under Israel's control.

HEAVY FIGHTING IN GAZA

Israel said at the start of the year that it had largely defeated Hamas in northern Gaza and would scale

back operations there, focusing on dense urban areas in the center and south of the territory. Additional Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza on Monday, but there has been little apparent letup in strikes, with scores of Palestinians killed every day.

A strike on a home killed a woman and two children in the southernmost town of Rafah. An Associated Press reporter saw the bodies arrive at a nearby hospital. Tens of thousands of people who heeded Israeli evacuation orders have sought shelter in the town, which is home to the border crossing with Egypt.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Wednesday that 163 bodies were brought to the territory's remaining functioning hospitals in the past 24 hours, as well as 350 wounded people. The update brought the war's overall death toll in Gaza to 24,448, with over 60,000 wounded. The ministry said many other dead and wounded are trapped under rubble or unreachable because of the fighting.

The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths but says around two-thirds of those killed were women and children.

Israel blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas because it fights in dense residential areas. Israel says its forces have killed roughly 9,000 militants, without providing evidence, and that 192 of its own soldiers have been killed since the Gaza ground offensive began.

Militants are still fighting in all parts of the territory, and Israel appears no closer to freeing the remaining hostages. The deaths of two more hostages were confirmed Tuesday after Hamas said they were killed in Israeli airstrikes.

TENSIONS ACROSS THE REGION

Tensions are soaring in the occupied West Bank, where Israeli forces have conducted near-daily arrest raids that often trigger shootouts with Palestinian militants.

Israeli forces killed at least 10 Palestinians Wednesday in the territory, including five in the urban Balata refugee camp in the north, the military said. Among that group was a senior militant whom the military said was responsible for militant infrastructure and was allegedly involved in recent attacks against Israelis.

Five Palestinians were killed in an Israeli strike in Tulkarem, the Palestinian Health Ministry said. The military said it targeted a group of militants who had opened fire and were throwing explosives at Israeli soldiers.

Over 360 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since Oct. 7.

The Middle East has seen a dizzying array of strikes and counterstrikes from northern Iraq to the Red Sea and from southern Lebanon to Pakistan.

In recent days, a U.S.-led coalition has carried out strikes against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. The U.S. military launched more strikes on 14 Houthi missiles deemed an "imminent threat" by U.S. Central Command as the Houthis continue attacks on commercial and military ships. A bomb-carrying drone launched from a Houthi-controlled area hit a U.S.-owned ship in the Gulf of Aden Wednesday.

Iran has struck what it described as an Israeli spy headquarters in northern Iraq and anti-Iran militants in Pakistan and Syria. Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah have escalated the intensity of their fighting across the border, raising fears of another war.

Freezing temperatures complicate Chicago's struggles to house asylum-seekers

By SOPHIA TAREEN and MELISSA PEREZ WINDER Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — As temperatures hover below freezing in Chicago, dozens of asylum-seekers are staying in the lower level of a library until the bitter cold gripping much of the country lifts.

But after that, Chicago's plans for offering immediate shelter to the growing number of migrants arriving in the nation's third-largest city remain murky.

For more than a year, Chicago has wrestled with how to house new arrivals until shelter space is free, utilizing measures that city leaders insist are a stopgap. Last week, it was parked city buses. Before that it was police station lobbies and airports. The makeshift approach has frazzled volunteers, nonprofit groups and migrants wary of the lack of a long-term plan, particularly during the city's long winters.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 53 of 70

"The city's favorite word for everything is 'temporary,'" said Vianney Marzullo, a volunteer who has helped migrants staying at O'Hare International Airport. "It's their new choice of Band-Aid word. Everything is temporary, temporary, temporary."

Chicago has struggled, like New York and Denver, to deal with the crisis that started in 2022 when migrants began arriving in Democratic-led cities, largely at the direction of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. The winter weather has further complicated efforts. Last week, New York, which has received more than 170,000 migrants, evacuated a massive tent camp ahead of a storm. Big city mayors have asked repeatedly for more federal help.

Chicago's response has stood out for its haphazard approach with a heavy reliance on volunteers who have spent more than a year providing medical care, food and donated items.

City leaders say the situation keeps changing and there have been snags along the way.

Mayor Brandon Johnson floated the idea of a heated tent encampment, but construction was scrapped over the risk of contaminants at the former industrial site.

The city had instituted a 60-day limit for shelter stays, but delayed the first batch of notices twice because of the weather. They'll now go out on Feb. 1, the city confirmed Wednesday. Meanwhile, the city has been heavily criticized for conditions at its shelters and the death of a young boy whose family stayed at one.

The political fight has also heated up and spread to the suburbs.

Texas Gov. Abbott's busing operation has been dropping off migrants at all hours in different Chicago area cities without coordination. When the city began fining bus companies and filing lawsuits, Abbott fired back with chartered planes. Johnson had planned a summit for this week with suburban mayors to discuss the problem; it was canceled by the weather. His office didn't return a request for comment Wednesday.

"This is an international crisis that requires federal intervention of which local government is subsidizing that work. Never designed to do it, but yet here we are still standing," Johnson said last week ahead of the storm.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker also wrote to Abbott last week asking to suspend buses until the temperatures rise and with many migrants arriving without winter coats or shoes. But Abbott rejected the notion, saying the federal government needs to step up.

More than 33,000 migrants, mostly from Venezuela, have arrived in Chicago since 2022. Currently, nearly 15,000 migrants are living in 28 shelters and the city is continually opening more. Many migrants have gone elsewhere or live with family and friends in the area. Chicago, like other cities, has offered bus tickets out of the city.

The city wound down its much-maligned use of police stations to house migrants, but O'Hare International Airport is still being used, with some asylum-seekers staying for weeks at a time as they await shelter. More than 200 were there Wednesday, according to the city.

Until the weather turned, the city was keeping migrants aboard eight city buses that were running continuously and parked near a downtown highway in an area designated "the landing zone."

Six heated tents are under construction nearby, which the city says will be used for intake and services, such as medical care. It's unclear if they will also be used for housing.

Marylin Gonzalez, 34, slept on the buses last week along with her husband and three children, ages 15, 16 and 18. The buses were crowded with sicknesses spreading quickly.

Gonzalez described the atmosphere aboard as tense with many worried about where they would go. She said it made her feel like a prisoner.

"The children are stressed. People get stressed, they argue, they are already desperate," she said. "Sometimes we have to sleep sitting up because there is no space to lay down."

Outside the buses, many would take up activities, like throwing around a football, to keep warm.

The landing zone was cleared of people and vehicles on Monday, but by Wednesday morning, the empty warming buses were parked there again, a signal that the city intends to return to using them. The city's Office of Emergency Management didn't respond to questions Wednesday about the city's plans when the weather warms.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 54 of 70

Roughly 50 migrants were staying in the lower level of the Harold Washington Library Center, the city's flagship location downtown during the cold snap, according to people staying there. Migrants, including those who came in on their own to avoid the cold, were living with others facing homelessness. According to the city's tally, 5 migrants at the library site were on lists for shelters. An Associated Press reporter was not allowed inside.

Angel Alberto Chourio, 30, slept there over the weekend, saying he was trying to figure out his next steps. He and a friend arrived from Venezuela last year. The promise of work out of state didn't pan out so they came back to Chicago recently. Without any place else to go, they came to the library.

He said Wednesday he was nervous about the shelter stay limits and was not on a waiting list for one. "We are not used to this. The cold is too much, since it is already below zero," he said, looking for a silver lining. "At least they give one a chance to continue living."

DeSantis shifts his campaign away from New Hampshire days before the state's primary, AP sources say

By STEVE PEOPLES and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

HAMPTON, N.H. (AP) — Ron DeSantis has decided to shift his presidential campaign away from New Hampshire just six days before the state's first-in-the-nation Republican primary while his leading super PAC executes another round of layoffs, moves that reflect the Florida governor's rapidly shrinking path to the 2024 GOP nomination.

DeSantis won't ignore the state completely over the coming days, but he's reallocating the majority of his staff to South Carolina, the home state of rival Nikki Haley, with its primary in just over a month. That's according to senior campaign officials who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to share internal discussions.

At the same time, the pro-DeSantis super PAC Never Back Down has transferred several of its Iowa staffers to other early states, while laying off the rest. It's unclear exactly how many people were laid off, although a super PAC official speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal strategy said those who lost their jobs would be paid through the end of January.

The strategic shifts by DeSantis' operation underscore his weakness in the 2024 Republican nomination race after he finished a distant second to front-runner Donald Trump in Iowa's caucuses Monday. DeSantis had made Iowa the centerpiece of his White House bid, yet Trump bested him by 30 percentage points there. Haley finished 2 percentage points behind DeSantis.

Trump appears to be tightening his grip on the GOP nomination, although he could be vulnerable in New Hampshire's Jan. 23 primary. A CNN/University of New Hampshire poll conducted this month found that about 4 in 10 likely Republican primary voters in New Hampshire chose Trump, while about one-third picked Haley.

The former president set high expectations for himself in New Hampshire while speaking to reporters after a New York court appearance. He noted, however, that independents are permitted to vote in the New Hampshire primary, which makes the electorate there more moderate than Iowa's.

"I think we'll do there, maybe similar to what we did in Iowa," Trump said of New Hampshire.

Trump had spent much of the day in a Manhattan courtroom, where a judge threatened to expel him from his civil trial for repeatedly ignoring warnings to keep quiet while writer E. Jean Carroll testified that he shattered her reputation after she accused him of sexual abuse. The jury already found that Trump sexually abused Carroll in the 1990s and then defamed her in 2022.

Trump was set to finish the day at a rally along New Hampshire's coast.

DeSantis' rivals seemed to enjoy the Florida governor's struggles.

Trump spokesperson Steven Cheung said in response to the governor's shift away from New Hampshire, "DeSantis is still running?"

Haley's campaign greeted the news with a dig, too.

"South Carolina is a great state," Haley spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas said in a statement to the AP.

"We hope they enjoy their vacation time here."

DeSantis super PAC officials, meanwhile, sought to project strength, even as they confirmed the new job cuts. Never Back Down has now gone through at least three significant rounds of job cuts, in addition to a leadership shakeup late last year.

"Never Back Down continues to host a slew of events on the ground for Gov. DeSantis in South Carolina, New Hampshire, and beyond aligned with our core mission of mobilizing grassroots field operations in those states," Never Back Down CEO Scott Wagner said. "We've mobilized several members of our robust Iowa team over to the other early primary states to help in these efforts and will continue working to help elect Gov. DeSantis, the most effective conservative leader in the race, our next president."

DeSantis was set to return to Florida later Wednesday before returning to New Hampshire on Friday and spending much of the weekend in South Carolina.

By shifting toward South Carolina, DeSantis' team is trying to take advantage of Haley's perceived weakness in her home state, where Trump appears to have a significant advantage over both of them. Yet DeSantis' allies believe that Haley will be forced to drop out of the race altogether if she loses South Carolina's Feb. 24 primary, giving DeSantis an opportunity to reemerge as a viable Trump alternative heading into the series of primary contests on March 5 known as Super Tuesday.

It's a risky strategy at best.

Haley is campaigning in New Hampshire this week, although she left the state Tuesday night to visit her ailing father in South Carolina.

She's also taking a cautious approach on the campaign trail.

The former South Carolina governor has been limiting questions from voters and reporters for several weeks. She declined to participate in either New Hampshire debate scheduled over the next week unless Trump agreed to be there. He did not, and both debates were canceled.

Meanwhile, DeSantis made no mention of the changes in his organization as he campaigned Wednesday in Hampton, a coastal town where the beach bars and souvenir shops were buried under piles of plowed snow.

Tom O'Keefe, a retired engineer from nearby Nottingham, said he was a past Trump voter but felt like the Florida governor or Haley, a former U.N. ambassador, might offer a better chance of beating Democratic President Joe Biden in November.

O'Keefe said DeSantis has not invested as much time in New Hampshire as he did in Iowa, which complicates his chances of winning here with less than a week to go.

"I wish he really could, but I don't feel like he has it, and he doesn't have much time," O'Keefe said about DeSantis' pulling off a New Hampshire upset. "I'm saying a prayer that he will."

Hawaii lawmakers open new legislative session with eyes on wildfire prevention and housing

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Hawaii lawmakers on Wednesday opened a new session of the state Legislature vowing to address glaring problems laid bare by the deadly wildfire that destroyed the historic town of Lahaina in August: the threat posed by wildfires and the lack of affordable housing.

Lahaina is still in ruins as the cleanup proceeds slowly and methodically nearly six months after the blaze killed 100 people. Thousands of displaced residents continue to live in hotel rooms paid for by the Federal Emergency Management Agency because they can't find places to rent — even with FEMA rental subsidies. West Maui's tight housing market, which is heavily populated by expensive vacation rentals, is one reason.

Lawmakers said solutions to these problems are badly needed for Maui but would also help communities across the state.

Fire mitigation would a top Senate priority, Senate President Ron Kouchi, a Democrat, said.

"And as we go forward, we want to make sure it doesn't happen on any other island," Kouchi said about the Lahaina fire in speech on the Senate floor.

House Speaker Scott Saiki, a Democrat, spoke of “centering Hawaii” by putting the needs and well-being of Maui’s and Lahaina’s people first.

Proposals to prioritize water use for affordable housing would be one way to do this, Saiki told reporters. He also wants the Legislature to take action to limit vacation rentals, which a University of Hawaii analysis said accounts for 15% of Maui’s housing supply and 40% of Lahaina’s.

“It’s really, really important for the state government, for the Legislature to take on short-term rentals head-on, because I don’t know if the counties are really able to do that,” Saiki said. “A couple of them have tried over the years and haven’t been too successful.”

The House’s bipartisan wildfire bill package includes legislation that would give the counties explicit authority to phase out short-term rentals, said Rep. Nadine Nakamura, the House majority leader.

Sen. Troy Hashimoto, a Democrat who represents central Maui on the other side of the West Maui Mountains from Lahaina, said the Legislature needs to work on where residents will live after FEMA housing aid ends in February 2025.

“We’ve got to stay laser-focused on that, getting the resources in that area. And we need to show progress,” Hashimoto said.

Protesters from the group Lahaina Strong, who have been camping out in front of Lahaina’s beachfront hotels on Kaanapali Beach to demand housing, held a march in Honolulu and a rally at the Capitol to remind lawmakers of their needs.

“There are still over 5,000 Lahaina fire victims displaced and sheltering in hotels,” said Jordan Ruidas, one of the organizers who flew over to Oahu for the demonstration. “The concept of home remains a distant dream.”

Ruidas said Lahaina Strong wants the county to revoke exemptions it has given to 2,500 vacation-rental properties in West Maui that don’t have permits to be rented for less than 30 days at a time. The group is also asking for protections against rent increases and evictions and for mortgage payments for homes lost in the fire to be deferred.

Hashimoto said lawmakers know Lahaina Strong wants stable housing for the people of Lahaina.

“We’re listening, and we know that that’s the issue,” Hashimoto said.

Sen. Joy San Buenaventura, the chairperson of the Senate’s health committee, said mental health care would be another priority because of the disaster. Last year lawmakers didn’t increase funding for behavioral health care but she hopes they will this year.

“The longer the victims remain unstable, the higher the stressors, the higher the potential for suicides and the higher the mental health problems are going to be,” she said.

Democrats have overwhelming majorities at the Legislature, controlling 45 out of 51 seats in the House and 23 out of 25 seats in the Senate.

King Charles III will have a prostate operation next week while Kate recovers from abdominal surgery

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III and the Princess of Wales are both dealing with medical issues that will force them to delay previously planned public engagements over the coming weeks.

Charles will undergo a “corrective procedure” for an enlarged prostate next week, Buckingham Palace said on Wednesday. The palace said the king’s condition is benign.

Moments earlier, the princess’ office announced that Kate would remain at a private hospital in London for up to two weeks after undergoing planned abdominal surgery. The princess, formerly Kate Middleton, is the wife of Prince William, the heir to the throne.

While it is somewhat unusual for members of the royal family to release details about their health, the twin announcements may help to avoid speculation if events featuring Charles or Kate have to be postponed or canceled over the coming weeks.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 57 of 70

The publicity around the king's surgery is seen as an opportunity to encourage other men to have their prostates checked in line with public health advice. The 75-year-old monarch sought treatment "in common with thousands of men each year," the palace said.

An enlarged prostate is common in men over age 50. The condition affects how one urinates and isn't usually a serious health threat. It's not cancer and doesn't lead to an increased risk of developing prostate cancer.

The U.K. and foreign media have been focused on the health of Britain's senior royals in recent years, first as the late Queen Elizabeth II faded from public view during the last months of her 70-year reign, then when Charles ascended the throne at an age when most of his contemporaries were long retired.

A series of events on the monarch's schedule have already been postponed, including plans for a number of foreign dignitaries and members of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Cabinet to travel to Dumfries House in Scotland.

Kate, 42, was admitted to The London Clinic on Tuesday.

The princess' office at Kensington Palace didn't offer further details, but said her condition wasn't cancerous. Though she has generally experienced good health, Kate was hospitalized while pregnant because of severe morning sickness.

Kate apologized for postponing upcoming engagements, and the palace said she wouldn't return to public duties until after Easter, Kensington Palace said.

"The Princess of Wales appreciates the interest this statement will generate," the palace said. "She hopes that the public will understand her desire to maintain as much normality for her children as possible; and her wish that her personal medical information remains private."

After Prince Harry and Meghan's stormy departure to California in 2020, the Prince and Princess of Wales have solidified their position as being among the most popular members of the royal family.

Kate, in particular, has remained a reliable royal in the public eye — the smiling mother of three who can comfort grieving parents at a children's hospice or wow the nation by playing piano during a televised Christmas concert.

A cholera outbreak in Zambia has caused more than 400 deaths and infected 10,000

By NOEL SICHALWE Associated Press

LUSAKA, Zambia (AP) — Zambia is reeling from a major cholera outbreak that has killed more than 400 people and infected more than 10,000, leading authorities to order schools across the country to remain shut after the end-of-year holidays.

A large soccer stadium in the capital city has been converted into a treatment facility.

The Zambian government is embarking on a mass vaccination program and says it's providing clean water — 2.4 million liters a day — to communities that are affected across the southern African nation.

The national disaster management agency has been mobilized.

Cholera is an acute diarrhea infection caused by a bacteria that is typically spread via contaminated food or water. The disease is strongly linked to poverty and inadequate access to clean water.

The outbreak in Zambia began in October and 412 people have died and 10,413 cases have been recorded, according to the latest count on Wednesday from the Zambia Public Health Institute, the government body that deals with health emergencies.

The Health Ministry says cholera has been detected in nearly half of the country's districts and nine out of 10 provinces, and the nation of about 20 million people has been recording more than 400 cases a day.

"This outbreak continues to pose a threat to the health security of the nation," Health Minister Sylvia Masebo said, outlining it was a nationwide problem.

The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, called the fatality rate of around 4% in the three-month outbreak "a devastatingly high number." When treated, cholera typically has a death rate of less than 1%.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 58 of 70

There have been recent cholera outbreaks in other southern African nations including Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. More than 200,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths have been reported in southern Africa since the start of 2023, UNICEF said.

Malawi had its worst cholera outbreak in decades in 2023. Last year, the World Health Organization reported that about 30 countries globally, also including Nigeria and Uganda in Africa, suffered serious outbreaks in the last few years.

Cholera barely affects countries in the developed world and can be easily treated but can be quickly fatal if not treated.

More than half — 229 — of the victims in the Zambian outbreak died before being admitted to a health facility, the public health institute said.

Zambia has had several major cholera outbreaks since the 1970s but this one is the worst for 20 years in terms of the caseload, according to Dr. Mazyanga Mazaba, the director of public health policy and communication at the public health institute.

The cholera bacteria can also survive longer in warmer weather and unusually heavy rains and storms in southern Africa have contributed to recent outbreaks, experts say.

WHO said last year that while poverty and conflict remain the main drivers for cholera, climate change has contributed to the disease's upsurge in many places across the globe since 2021 by making storms wetter and more frequent. A cyclone sparked a spiraling cholera outbreak in Mozambique last year.

Heavy rains and flash flooding in Zambia have converted some neighborhoods into soggy or waterlogged areas.

The Zambian government announced in early January that schools — which were meant to open for the year on Jan. 8 — will only open on Jan. 29. Parents and children were urged to make use of education programs on public TV and radio, a situation that had echoes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The education minister ordered schools to be cleaned and inspected.

Zambia's Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit was mobilized and it was delivering large water tanks and trucking in clean water to some neighborhoods daily. Granulated chlorine to treat water was also being provided, it said.

The majority of cases are in the capital, Lusaka, where a 60,000-seat national soccer stadium has been converted into a treatment center and is dealing with around 500 patients at any one time, the health minister said.

She said Zambia had received around 1.4 million doses of the oral cholera vaccine from the WHO and expected more than 200,000 more to arrive soon. Zambian government officials, including Masebo, took a vaccine publicly to encourage others to also do so.

Health experts have previously warned that the numerous cholera outbreaks globally have strained the supply of vaccines, which are mostly distributed to poor countries through an international body run by the U.N. and partners. Vaccines alliance Gavi predicted that the vaccine shortage could last until 2025.

US pledges new sanctions over Houthi attacks will minimize harm to Yemen's hungry millions

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MATTHEW LEE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States on Wednesday put Yemen's Houthis rebels back on its list of specially designated global terrorists, piling financial sanctions on top of American military strikes in the Biden administration's latest attempt to stop the militants' attacks on global shipping. But a new Houthi attack on an American-owned ship was reported.

Biden administration officials said they would design the financial penalties on the Houthis to minimize harm to Yemen's 32 million people, who are among the world's poorest and hungriest after years of war between the Iran-backed Houthis and a Saudi-led coalition.

But aid officials expressed concern. The decision would only add "another level of uncertainty and threat for Yemenis still caught in one of the world's largest humanitarian crises," Oxfam America associate direc-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 59 of 70

tor Scott Paul said.

The sanctions that come with the formal designation are meant to sever violent extremist groups from their sources of financing.

President Donald Trump's administration designated the Houthis as global terrorists and a foreign terrorist organization in one of his last acts in office. President Joe Biden reversed course early on, at the time citing the humanitarian threat that the sanctions posed to ordinary Yemenis.

Military strikes by the U.S. and Britain against Houthi targets in Yemen have failed to stop weeks of drone, rocket and missile strikes by Houthi forces on commercial shipping transiting the Red Sea route, which borders Yemen.

The Houthis are one in a network of Iran- and Hamas-allied militant groups around the Middle East that have escalated attacks on Israel, the U.S. and others since Israel's military offensive in Gaza, in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks in Israel.

The Houthis were originally a clan-based rebel movement. They seized Yemen's capital in 2014 and withstood a subsequent yearslong invasion led by Saudi Arabia aimed at driving the Houthis from power. Two-thirds of Yemen's people live in territory now controlled by the Houthis.

Even as administration officials previewed the new sanctions, Houthis launched the second attack this week against an American-owned ship, striking with a bomb-carrying drone. The vessel and crew were safe after extinguishing a fire from the attack, the captain reported.

Houthi spokesperson Mohammed Abdul-Salam, meanwhile, said in a post on X, formerly Twitter, that the militant group considered its new terrorist designation by the U.S. to be "a badge of honor for Yemen for its support of Palestinian resistance in Gaza."

Critics say the additional broad U.S. sanctions may have little effect on the Houthis, a defiant and relatively isolated group with few known assets in the U.S. to be threatened. There is also concern that designating the Houthis as terrorists may complicate international attempts to broker a peace deal in the now-subsided war with Saudi Arabia.

War and chronic misgovernment have left 24 million Yemenis at risk of hunger and disease, and roughly 14 million are in acute need of humanitarian assistance, the United Nations says. Aid groups during the height of Yemen's war issued repeated warnings that millions of Yemenis were on the brink of famine.

Aid organizations worry that just the fear of running afoul of U.S. regulations could be enough to scare away shippers, banks and others in the commercial supply chain that Yemenis depend upon for survival. Yemen imports 90% of its food.

U.S. officials said the sanctions would exempt commercial shipments of food, medicine and fuel, and humanitarian assistance into Yemeni ports. The U.S. will wait 30 days to put the sanctions into effect, officials said, giving shipping companies, banks, insurers and others time to prepare.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said in a statement that the U.S. would roll out "unprecedented" exemptions in the sanctions for staples including food to "help prevent adverse impacts on the Yemeni people," adding that they "should not pay the price for the actions of the Houthis."

The administration, for now, is not reimposing the more severe designation of foreign terrorist organization on the Houthis. That would have barred Americans, along with people and organizations subject to U.S. jurisdiction, from providing "material support" to the Houthis. Aid groups said that step could have the effect of criminalizing ordinary trade and assistance to Yemenis.

The U.S. will reevaluate the designation if the Houthis comply, Sullivan said.

Jared Rowell, the Yemen country director for the International Rescue Committee, said last week that the attacks and counterattacks already were interrupting the delivery of goods and aid into Yemen, delaying shipments of vital commodities and raising prices for food and fuel.

Conservatives have pressed for the foreign terrorist designation to be reimposed ever since the Biden administration lifted it.

Republican Rep, Michel McCaul of Texas, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, cited the series of Houthi attacks as he condemned the White House's decision not to reimpose that tougher des-

ignation, which carries more sweeping penalties.

When Biden was asked last week whether the Houthis were a terrorist group, he replied, "I think they are." Hisham Al-Omeisy, a Yemeni analyst living in the Washington, area, said the U.S. designation plays into the Houthis' narrative to the world that they are standing up to a superpower to champion Muslims everywhere.

At home, the designation helps the Houthis' message to Yemenis that the U.S. is the cause of their suffering, Al-Omeisy said.

In the past, he said, the Houthis were angered that "the U.S. was basically treating them as a bug on the windshield."

Now, "they're like, 'You know what, they respect us,'" he said of the Houthis' attitude. "Yeah, we can go toe to toe with the Americans, right?"

It's not clear if any U.S. partners are working on similar sanctions.

European Commission spokesman Peter Stano declined to comment on whether sanctions are being discussed.

Maine judge delays decision on removing Trump from ballot until Supreme Court rules in Colorado case

By DAVID SHARP and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — A Maine judge on Wednesday put on hold a decision on former President Donald Trump's ballot status to allow time for the U.S. Supreme Court to rule on a similar case in Colorado.

Trump's lawyers appealed in state court when Secretary of State Shenna Bellows removed the Republican front-runner from the presidential primary ballot but then asked the judge to pause proceedings to allow the U.S. Supreme Court to rule on the Colorado case, which could render the lawsuit moot.

Superior Court Judge Michaela Murphy concluded she lacked authority to stay the judicial proceedings but she wrote that she did have authority to send the case back to the secretary of state with instructions to await the outcome of the U.S. Supreme Court case before withdrawing, modifying or upholding her original decision.

In her decision, the judge said that the issues raised in the Maine case mirror the issues raised in the Colorado case before the U.S. Supreme Court. She wrote that her decision "minimizes any potentially destabilizing effect of inconsistent decisions and will promote greater predictability in the weeks ahead of the primary election."

"Put simply, the United State Supreme Court's acceptance of the Colorado case changes everything," she wrote.

Bellows concluded last month that Trump didn't meet ballot qualifications under the insurrection clause in the U.S. Constitution, citing his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. She became the first election official to ban Trump from the ballot under the 14th Amendment. Trump contended Bellows was biased and overstepped her authority.

The nation's highest court has never ruled on Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which prohibits those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office. Some legal scholars say the post-Civil War clause applies to Trump for his role in trying to overturn the 2020 presidential election and encouraging his backers to storm the U.S. Capitol after he lost to Democrat Joe Biden. Activists conducted a campaign urging election officials to bar Trump under the clause.

Bellows, a Democrat, was reviewing the judge's decision Wednesday and had no immediate comment, her spokesperson said. Bellows already had delayed implementation of her decision pending the outcome of the court cases. She had said she would follow the rule of law and abide by any legal decision.

She made her ruling a week after Colorado became the first state to bar Trump from the ballot, although the decision in that state, too, has been paused pending the outcome of its appeal in the nation's highest court. The U.S. Supreme Court scheduled arguments for Feb. 8.

Trump, who won the Iowa caucuses on Monday, remains on the Maine ballot for the March 5 primary for now, given a Saturday deadline for sending overseas ballots. If the U.S. Supreme Court allows Trump

to be kept off the ballot, then Bellows would have to notify local election officials that votes cast for him would not be counted.

Maine has just four electoral votes, but it's one of two states to split them. Trump earned one of Maine's electors when he was elected in 2016 and again in 2020 when he lost reelection.

Pakistan recalls its ambassador to Iran over airstrikes by Tehran that killed 2 people

By MUNIR AHMED and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan recalled its ambassador to Tehran on Wednesday, a day after Iran conducted airstrikes inside Pakistan that it claimed targeted bases for a militant Sunni separatist group.

Islamabad denounced the attack as a "blatant violation" of its airspace and said it killed two children.

Tuesday's airstrikes in Pakistan's restive southwestern Baluchistan province imperiled diplomatic relations between the two neighbors, but both sides appeared wary of provoking the other. Iran and nuclear-armed Pakistan have long regarded each other with suspicion over militant attacks.

The attack raised the threat of violence spreading in a Middle East unsettled by Israel's war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Iran also staged airstrikes late Monday in Iraq and Syria over an Islamic State-claimed suicide bombing that killed over 90 people earlier this month. Iraq recalled its ambassador from Iran for consultations.

Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, the spokesperson for Pakistan's Foreign Ministry, announced that Islamabad was recalling its ambassador to Iran over the strikes.

"Last night's unprovoked and blatant breach of Pakistan's sovereignty by Iran is a violation of international law and the purposes and principles of the charter of the United Nations," she said in a televised address.

Baloch added that Pakistan asked the Iranian ambassador, who was visiting Tehran, not to return.

Iran did not immediately acknowledge Pakistan's decision.

Iranian state media reports, which were later withdrawn without explanation, said the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard targeted bases in Pakistan belonging to the militant group Jaish al-Adl, or the "Army of Justice."

Iran's defense minister also said Wednesday that Iran would respond to any threats against itself, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Without naming any country, Gen. Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said: "We will show reaction to threat against the Islamic Republic of Iran from any region. The reaction will be corresponding, harsh and strong."

Jaish al-Adl, which seeks an independent Baluchistan for ethnic Baluch areas in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, acknowledged the assault in a statement shared online.

Six bomb-carrying drones and rockets struck homes that the militants claim housed children and wives of their fighters. Jaish al-Adl said the attack killed two children and wounded two women and a teenage girl.

Videos shared by the Baluch activist group HalVash, purportedly from the site, showed a burning building and two charred, small corpses.

A Pakistani intelligence report said the two children killed were a 6-year-old girl and an 11-month-old boy. Three women were injured, aged between 28 and 35, it said. The report also said three or four drones were launched from the Iranian side, hitting a mosque and other buildings, including a house.

Iran has fought in border areas against militants, but the air attack on Pakistan is unprecedented.

A senior Pakistani security official, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to talk to reporters, said Iran had shared no information prior to the strike. He said that Pakistan reserved the right to respond at a time and place of its choosing and that any strike would be measured and in line with public expectations.

However, there were signs Pakistan was trying to contain anger over the attack. The country's typically outspoken and nationalistic media reported on the airstrikes with unusual restraint Wednesday. Pakistan is three weeks away from an election, and politicians are focused on campaigning.

Iranian state media did not address the strikes, instead discussing a joint naval drill held by Pakistan

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 62 of 70

and the Iranian navy in the Persian Gulf on Tuesday. Pakistani officials acknowledged the drill but said it came earlier than Iran's attack.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian acknowledged Tehran carried out the attack in Pakistan while speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He defended the action while repeatedly being told by the interviewer that Pakistan had condemned the attack.

"Regarding Pakistan, none of the nationals of our neighbor, brother and friend Pakistan were the target of Iran's drones and missiles," Amirabdollahian said. "We have discussed them with Pakistan's high-ranking military, security and political officials. Our response is against Iranian terrorists inside Pakistani soil."

Pakistani Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani said he received a call later from Amirabdollahian.

Jilani told the Iranian the attack seriously damaged relations and could undermine regional peace and stability, according to a statement from the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad. "No country in the region should tread this perilous path," Jilani said in the call.

Pakistani defense analyst Syed Muhammad Ali said that the government might take some measures in response to the attacks, but that it would weigh any military retaliation carefully. He noted Pakistan's air defense and missile systems are primarily deployed along its eastern border to respond to potential threats from India.

Jaish al-Adl was founded in 2012, and Iranian officials believe it largely operates in Pakistan. The group has claimed bombings and kidnapped members of Iran's border police in the past. In December, suspected Jaish al-Adl members killed 11 people and wounded eight others in a nighttime attack on a police station in southeastern Iran. Another recent attack killed a police officer in the area.

In 2019, Jaish al-Adl claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing targeting a bus that killed 27 members of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

Iran has suspected that Sunni-majority Pakistan is hosting insurgents, possibly at the behest of its regional arch-rival Saudi Arabia. However, Iran and Saudi Arabia reached a Chinese-mediated detente last March, easing tensions. Pakistan, meanwhile, has blamed Iran for militant attacks targeting its security forces.

It remained unclear why Iran launched the attack now, particularly as its foreign minister met with Pakistan's caretaker prime minister, Anwar ul-haq Kakar, the same day at the World Economic Forum.

Kakar had yet to comment publicly on the attacks but he is expected to preside over a meeting of top military generals and government officials upon his return from Davos to consider the country's response to the attacks.

His predecessor, Shehbaz Sharif, said he was shocked at the breach of sovereignty. Writing on X, formerly known as Twitter, Sharif said that "sincere dialogue and meaningful cooperation" between the two countries was needed.

The party of imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan has also condemned the Iranian attack.

Overdraft fees could drop to as low as \$3 under new Biden proposal

By KEN SWEET and CORA LEWIS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The cost to overdraw a bank account could drop to as little as \$3 under a proposal announced by the White House, the latest effort by the Biden administration to combat fees it says pose an unnecessary burden on American consumers, particularly those living paycheck to paycheck.

The proposed change by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau would potentially eliminate billions of dollars in fee revenue for the nation's biggest banks, which were gearing up for a battle even before Wednesday's announcement. Exactly how much revenue depends on which version of the new regulation is adopted.

Banks charge a customer an overdraft fee if their bank account balance falls below zero. Overdraft started as a courtesy offered to some customers when paper checks used to take days to clear, but proliferated thanks to the growing popularity of debit cards. So, for instance, a \$10 debit card transaction could cost a bank customer \$40 if their balance goes below zero.

"For too long, some banks have charged exorbitant overdraft fees — sometimes \$30 or more — that

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 63 of 70

often hit the most vulnerable Americans the hardest, all while banks pad their bottom lines," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "Banks call it a service — I call it exploitation."

Under the proposed rule, banks could only charge customers what it would cost them to break even on providing overdraft services. This would require banks to show the CFPB the costs of running their overdraft services, a task few banks would want to handle.

Alternatively, banks could use a benchmark fee that would apply across all affected financial institutions. Regulators proposed several fees — \$3, \$6, \$7 and \$14 — and will gather industry and public input on the most appropriate amount. The CFPB says it arrived at these figures by looking at how much it cost banks to recoup losses from accounts that went negative and were never paid back.

Banks could also provide small lines of credit to allow customers to overdraft, a service that would operate like a credit card. Some banks like Truist Bank currently offer that type of service.

According to research conducted by Bankrate last August, the average overdraft fee was \$26.6 1. Some banks charge as much as \$39. The nation's biggest banks still take in roughly \$8 billion in overdraft fees every year, according to data from the CFPB and banks' public records. The bureau's research also shows overdraft fees overwhelmingly impact the poor and households of color, who often overdraft multiple times a year.

Biden has made the elimination of "junk fees" one of the cornerstones of his administration's economic agenda heading into the 2024 election. Overdraft fees have been at the center of that campaign, and the White House directed government regulators last year to do whatever is in their power to further curtail the practice.

The rules would apply only to banks with more than \$10 billion in assets, which is roughly 175 banks that make up most of the financial institutions Americans do business with. The rules spare small banks and credit unions, some of which rely disproportionately on overdraft fees. CFPB officials told reporters that it chose to focus on the largest banks since most Americans bank at these large institutions and that is where the widespread abuses have historically happened. Roughly two-thirds of all overdraft fees are charged by these 175 banks.

Decades ago, banks created a service that allowed certain customers with checking accounts to go negative in their accounts to avoid bouncing paper checks. What started as a niche service became a massive profit center for the banks after the proliferation of debit cards that caused customers to debit their bank accounts for small and large amounts of money multiple times a day.

Overdraft fees have been a financial bonanza for the banking industry, with the CFPB estimating that banks collected \$280 billion in overdraft fees in the last 20 years. These fees became so popular that one bank CEO named his boat the "Overdraft."

But banks have changed their overdraft practices in response to political and popular pressure in the last few years, and question the need for the government regulators to step in now. Most of the biggest banks have added safeguards to customers' accounts to allow them to bring the balance back into positive territory before they incur a fee. Bank of America, once considered by industry critics to be the biggest abuser of overdraft fees, cut its fee from \$35 to \$10 two years ago and says revenue from overdraft fees is now less than 10% of what it had been.

JPMorgan, the nation's largest bank, now gives customers a \$50 cushion when they go negative in their account. CEO Jamie Dimon told lawmakers in 2022 that with changes the bank has made, roughly 70% of all transactions that cause a negative balance do not incur overdraft fees.

The banking industry is expected to fight the new regulations vigorously to protect the fee revenue. The regulations are likely to end up in a protracted legal battle that could reach the Supreme Court. If the rule is adopted and survives political and legal challenges, the new regulations would go into effect in the autumn of 2025.

Banks have long argued that government regulations on overdraft could cause them to eliminate the service altogether. While some banks have eliminated overdraft fees and created accounts that cannot go negative, Bankrate estimates that roughly nine out of 10 banks still offer the service.

"If enacted, this proposal could deprive millions of Americans of a deeply valued emergency safety net

while simultaneously pushing more consumers out of the banking system," said Lindsey Johnson, president and CEO of the Consumer Bankers Association, the trade and lobby organization for the larger consumer banks.

Indigenous faithful and Christians work with environmentalists to conserve India's sacred forests

By DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

SHILLONG, India (AP) — Tambor Lyngdoh made his way through the fern-covered woodland — naming plants, trees, flowers, even stones — as if he were paying older family members a visit.

The community leader and entrepreneur was a little boy when his uncle brought him here and said these words: "This forest is your mother."

This sacred space is in the village of Mawphlang, nestled in the verdant Khasi Hills in the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya, whose name means "abode of clouds." On an overcast day, the forest, a bumpy 15-mile drive from the state capital of Shillong, was tranquil but for the sound of crickets chirping and raindrops rustling the bright green foliage.

The ground, carpeted by dead leaves and green saplings, was peppered with moss-covered sacred stones, which for centuries have served as sacrificial altars and recipients of chants, songs and prayers.

Mawphlang is one of more than 125 sacred forests in Meghalaya, and arguably the most famous one. These forests are ancient, virgin woodlands that have been protected by Indigenous communities for many centuries; comparable tracts have been documented in other parts of India and around the globe, from Nigeria and Ethiopia to Turkey, Syria and Japan.

In Meghalaya, these forests represent an ancient tradition of environmental conservation, rooted in Indigenous religious beliefs and culture. For hundreds of years, people have come to sacred groves to offer prayers and animal sacrifice to the deities they believe reside there. Any form of desecration is taboo; in most forests, even plucking a flower or leaf is prohibited.

"Here, communication between man and God takes place," said Lyngdoh, a descendant of the priestly clan which sanctified the Mawphlang forest. "Our forefathers set aside these groves and forests to signify the harmony between man and nature."

Many of these forests are primary sources of water for surrounding villages. They are also treasure troves of biodiversity. Lyngdoh counts at least four species of trees and three types of orchids that are extinct outside of the Mawphlang sacred grove.

Today, climate change, pollution and deforestation threaten these spaces. They have also been affected by the Indigenous population's conversion to Christianity, which began in 19th century under British rule. Christian converts lost their spiritual connection to the forests and lore, said H.H. Morhmen, an environmentalist and retired Unitarian minister. Meghalaya is 75% Christian in a country that is almost 80% Hindu.

"They viewed their new religion as the light and these rituals as darkness, as pagan or even evil," he said.

In recent years, environmentalists working with Indigenous and Christian communities as well as government agencies have helped spread the message about why the forests, invaluable to the region's ecosystem and biodiversity, must be tended. Morhmen said that work is bearing fruit in rural communities.

"We're now finding that even in places where people have converted to Christianity, they are taking care of the forests," Morhmen said.

Mustem village in Jaintia Hills is one example. Heimonmi Shylla, headman of the hamlet with about 500 households and a deacon, says almost all residents are Presbyterian, Catholic or members of the Church of God.

"I don't consider the forest holy," he said. "But I have great reverence for it."

It serves as the village's source of drinking water and is a sanctuary for fish.

"When the weather gets really warm, the forest keeps us cool," he said. "When you breathe in that fresh air, your mind becomes fresh."

Shylla worries about climate change and insufficient rain, but he said there are plans to promote tourism

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 65 of 70

and “make the forest greener” by planting more trees.

Petros Pyrtuh takes his 6-year-old son, Bari Kubar, to a sacred forest near his village, also in Jaintia Hills. He is Christian, but said the forest is an important part of his life; he hopes his son will learn to respect it.

“In our generation, we don’t believe it is the dwelling place of the gods,” he said. “But we continue with the tradition of protecting the forest because our ancestors have told us not to defile the forest.”

B.K. Tiwari, a retired professor of environmental science from North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, is heartened to see that conversion to Christianity has not disconnected the people entirely from the land.

“In the Indigenous religion everything is sacred — animals, plants, trees, rivers,” said Tiwari, who has studied the biological and cultural diversity of Meghalaya’s sacred forests. “Now, they may not feel any connection with the divine or spiritual, but as a culture, they understand their roles as the custodians.”

Donbok Buam, a native of Jaintia Hills who still practices the Indigenous faith, explained that in his village’s sacred forest, rituals are performed at the confluence of three rivers honoring the goddess Lechki, denizen of the forest and guardian of the village.

“If people have a problem or sickness or if women have trouble conceiving children, they go there and perform sacrifices,” Buam said.

One of the rituals involves carrying river water before daybreak and offering it to the goddess at a specific location in the forest. The water is poured in gourds and placed alongside five betel nuts and five betel leaves — four for the rivers and one for the sacred forest. A white goat is sacrificed in honor of the forest deity, he said.

“We believe the goddess walks in the forest, even today,” Buam said.

The Nongrum clan is one of three that cares for the Swer sacred forest near Cherrapunji, an area about 35 miles southwest of Shillong, which is among the wettest in the world. They follow the pantheistic Seng Khasi religion, which holds that God exists in everyone and everything. The forest is a temple where their deities reside, and rituals are performed to ward off war, famine and disease, said Knik Nongrum, president of the local committee that cares for the forest.

“When there is a healthy forest, there is prosperity in the village,” he said, vowing that this forest will continue to thrive because his clan is determined to carry on the traditions established by their ancestors.

Like most sacred forests, this one is not easily accessible from the road. It is located up a steep hill whose terrain can become treacherous if hit by a downpour — as it frequently is. It is impossible to enter the forest without feeling the brush of twisted branches, breathing in the scent of flowers and herbs, and being showered by droplets of water shaken off leaves.

The part of the forest the people hold sacred is a leaf-covered plot surrounded by thick, tall trees.

Most of the rituals are performed only during turbulent times; the most recent tribulation was the global coronavirus pandemic. One particular ritual — the sacrifice of a bull — is done by the head priest once in his lifetime, a practice that gives him authority to perform other rites for his community.

Jiersingh Nongrum, 52, pointed to the sacrificial altar just outside the forest, which has a crater in the middle where the animal’s blood pools. He was 6 when he witnessed that once-in-a-lifetime sacrifice.

“It was such an intense experience,” he said. “When I think about it today, it feels like a vision that I can’t even properly describe in words.”

Some sacred forests also serve as ancestral burial sites, said Hamphrey Lyngdoh Ryntathiang, the chief caretaker of one such forest in Khasi Hills. He practices the Khasi faith and his wife is Christian.

Each forest has its own set of rules and taboos. In this forest, people can take fruit from the trees, but are prohibited from burning anything, he said. In others, the fruit can be plucked from the tree, but must be eaten in the forest. Deities are believed to punish people for disturbances.

Lyngdoh from Mawphlang is Christian, but he participates in the forest rituals, invoking the deities believed to appear as a leopard and snake. He also sees the effects of climate change on forests in the area, and noted the invasive birds, fungi-infested trees and disappearing species.

In rural Meghalaya, the poorest people rely most on the land, said Lyngdoh, noting forests can be life-giving as well as economic engines, providing water and driving tourism.

“But above all, a sacred grove is set aside so we can continue to have what we have had from the time

this world was created.”

‘Not rock ‘n’ roll’s little sister’: Inside country music’s new golden era — and what comes next

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — It was an unexpected musical success story last year, one that has only continued to snowball: Country music, with its loyal listenership on the margins of pop’s mainstream, had a crossover moment.

Some of the biggest albums and songs of the year are credited to country musicians like Morgan Wallen, Zach Bryan and Luke Combs, whose hits went beyond country radio stations and onto pop rotations.

But when the 2024 Grammy nominations were announced in November, something seemed amiss. Country was not represented in the main categories — except for Jelly Roll and The War and Treaty, who are up for best new artist. It seemed like a notable absence for a genre that topped the charts all year. The lack of nominations surprised Recording Academy CEO and President Harvey Mason jr.

“We need to do more work with our country voters and continue to invite more country voters to the process,” he told The Associated Press at the time.

That hasn’t always been the case: In 2019, Kacey Musgraves won album of the year at the Grammys for her “Golden Hour,” a release celebrated for its innovative take on the country genre that combined elements of pop and disco. It’s the kind of innovation often celebrated by the Recording Academy.

Still, country music has broken new ground. In July, country acts held the top three spots on the Billboard Hot 100 for the first time in the chart’s 65-year history: Controversy hoisted Jason Aldean’s “Try That In a Small Town” to No. 1 for a short week, followed by Wallen’s “Last Night” and Combs’ cover of Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car.” The latter also won song of the year at the 2023 Country Music Awards, despite the fact that the original was written in 1988.

Oliver Anthony’s viral hit “Rich Men North of Richmond” also made it to No. 1, making him the first artist without any prior chart history.

Wallen is in a league of his own. His latest album, with its inventive exploration of trap beats over heartbreaking country, titled “One Thing at a Time,” spent 16 weeks at the top of the Billboard 200 in 2023 — which meant he held the top spot for 30% of the year ... and his record was released in March. It also means that Wallen’s album spent the more time at No. 1 than any other album since Adele’s “21” dominated over a decade ago. Unsurprisingly, “One Thing at a Time” was the most-consumed album in the U.S. last year.

Across iHeartRadio stations, Wallen accounted for 2.1 billion total audience spins.

Beyond Wallen and those other chart-toppers, newer country talent has begun experiencing some cross-over success, like the hip-hop head Jelly Roll (with “Need a Favor”), Lainey Wilson’s Deana Carter-referencing “Watermelon Moonshine,” and Bailey Zimmerman’s hard rock rasp on “Rock and A Hard Place.” (Wilson is the only woman on the list, but additional attention can and should be given to other newcomers, like Gabby Barrett, Carly Pearce, Ingrid Andress, among others.)

If pop has begun embracing a “genreless” approach to music, it seems like that unconventionality is opening doors for country as well — and it is accounting for the music’s popularity. At least, that’s what Dan Smyers of the three-time Grammy award winning duo Dan + Shay believes. “There’s so many different sounds in country happening right now,” he says, which has inspired “crossover” moments over the last few years — like his group’s song “10,000 Hours,” which featured Justin Bieber and got Top 40 radio play.

Getting in those all-genre spaces allows for discovery. “Somebody who might have been listening to the top 40 station in their town goes like, ‘Oh, that’s cool. I dig that song. I’ve never really listened to country,’” Smyers says. “And then they start digging into the catalog and listening to our back catalog, or to other country acts, and they fall in love with it. And now it’s like this perfect storm with streaming.”

“Since I’ve been in the game, I can confidently say country is bigger than ever. I think we’re in a really strong spot,” says award-winning, “Small Town Boy” singer Dustin Lynch. Particularly in that country acts

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 67 of 70

can now play with different sounds. "I've been able to do very traditional country leaning (music) and had success with that, and a straight up rock song as well."

He says country music is now in a position where people who "maybe never gave us a chance" are listening to country music with an open-mindedness.

And there's something to that: According to Luminate, country music experienced its biggest streaming week ever in 2023, a whopping 2.26 billion, the data and analytics platform's Midyear Music Report found. In the first 26 weeks of 2023, the data and analytics platform found that country music consumption in the United States was up 20.3% year-over-year, a number Wallen is particularly responsible for: He accounted for 40% of the growth in country consumption last year.

The genre has historically been enjoyed by English-speaking Americans, but Luminate's reporting also shows growth in the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Brazil, Mexico, Germany and Vietnam. That's something Darius Rucker has noticed firsthand. "I've seen what country is doing, especially in Europe. It's crazy. I tour Europe and you know, we do well. And it's just great to see what America has known forever," he says, "And people just didn't want to embrace, and so many people are embracing now."

"It just shows that country music is not rock and roll's little sister anymore," he adds.

Smyers has his own theories to why country music is experiencing this explosive period. "Western culture is having a moment," he theorizes, referencing the success of the popular television show "Yellowstone." "It was a big movement for that kind of rootsy Americana country sound," he says, which served as another platform for viewers to potentially become country music fans.

But ultimately, he believes "people are starved for authenticity in just everything in life, in TV and movies, especially in music," he says. "And I feel like country music kind of does the authenticity thing better than any other genre."

Up-and-comer Megan Moroney agrees. "I think people are just like really drawn more towards authenticity nowadays," she says, highlighting country music's "real life lyrics."

Thanks to social media, where there's "so much fake stuff," she believes there's a hunger for truth-telling. It's why she describes her single "I'm Not Pretty," not as a "country song," but as a "cultural song," one with lyrics that tackle universal concerns like doom scrolling and insecurity.

Veterans of the genre, too, have taken note of country's big year. Reba McEntire, who joined "The Voice" as a coach for the first time in 2023, taking over from Blake Shelton, views her role there as an opportunity to champion this era of country music performers. "I just kind of stay in my lane and do the best I can with supporting country music," she told AP. Next month, Dan + Shay will join her, John Legend and Chance the Rapper as season 25's coaches — marking the first-time half of the four spots will have been occupied by country musicians.

Garth Brooks, too, has watched as country music enjoys a new kind of crossover moment — and he's meeting it in a big way. In May of last year, Brooks announced he was launching his own radio station with the streaming platform TuneIn called The Big 615, with a focus on traditional country music un beholden to major labels, which dominate terrestrial radio. He's hoping to use it to promote more women on the airwaves as well as have a positive influence on country music's growing global footprint.

"If you're in country music," he says, "They're going to try and fix your music if they take it outside of the United States — which usually means steel (guitars) and fiddles get taken off. Now, that doesn't work for us," Brooks told AP, referring to archaic radio structures.

"So, what I love, it's fresh(ly) baked out of Nashville and it's a global station. So, you're hearing it the moment it hits the streets. Very proud of it."

And if his career can be used as evidence of country music's enduring appeal, this new class of performers only have more exciting things ahead.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 68 of 70

Another Republican debate is canceled after Haley says she'll only participate if Trump does, too

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Another Republican presidential debate has been canceled after Nikki Haley's refusal to participate in any forum that doesn't also include former President Donald Trump, meaning that for the first time in years there will not be an on-the-ground face-off ahead of New Hampshire's primary next week.

CNN announced Wednesday that it was calling off its debate, which had been scheduled for Sunday at New England College.

That comes a day after ABC and WMUR-TV said they were also canceling Thursday's debate, planned at Saint Anselm College, following Haley's assertion that the next debate in which she participates "will either be with Donald Trump or Joe Biden."

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis had committed to take part in both debates, but with front-runner Trump having skipped all of the GOP debates thus far, Haley's participation had been the deciding factor in whether they would go on.

The move by the former South Carolina governor and United Nations ambassador could be in part a result of the last debate, which featured only Haley and DeSantis. Haley didn't perform as well as expected, and DeSantis ultimately ended up beating her for second place in Monday's lead-off Iowa caucuses.

Haley's decision to skip prompted reaction from her GOP rivals, with DeSantis saying that Haley "is afraid to debate because she doesn't want to answer the tough questions" and a Trump spokesman calling her a "desperate globalist."

Haley had argued to caucusgoers that picking her gives Republicans a better chance to defeat Biden, a Democrat, in November, pointing to survey data showing her with the largest lead among the GOP field in a theoretical general election matchup.

Although Haley finished third in Iowa, behind Trump and DeSantis, she has been shown to be better-positioned in the next state to vote, New Hampshire, and has angled to frame the remainder of the primary as a two-person race between Trump and herself.

CNN said Wednesday that it would instead host a town hall with Haley on Thursday from New England College.

DeSantis took part in his own CNN town hall on Tuesday.

What are sacred forests?

By DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

KOTAGIRI, India (AP) — Sacred forests and groves are primeval woodlands that different faith communities around the world have safeguarded for centuries as abodes of the spiritual or the divine.

Thousands of sacred forests have survived. They're the church forests in Ethiopia's highlands, hillside groves considered holy by Catholics in Italy, woodlands revered by Shinto practitioners in Japan and Indigenous people in Siberia, Australia, the Americas and India.

Sacred forests are also treasure troves of biodiversity and are often the last bastion for species of flora and fauna that have become rare or even extinct elsewhere in those regions.

Climate change, pollution and urbanization pose threats to these sacred spaces. Tended for generations by faithful caretakers, environmentalists and governments are now making a push to protect these areas as well.

Why are forests sacred?

In many parts of the world, small groves or larger forests have been preserved because the local people consider these spaces their connection to the divine.

Sacred forests share a number of commonalities. They are often in hilly areas where deities are said to reside. The trees, rivers, plants, animals, even the stones that inhabit the holy space are viewed as sacred as well. These woodlands may be sites that are linked to specific events, and sites that surround places

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 69 of 70

of worship or ancestral shrines.

What can you do or not do in a sacred forest?

Many sacred forests have restrictions prohibiting activities and limiting access only to specific communities. Hunting, gathering, wood cutting, cultivation and other activities may be strictly prohibited in these spaces. In many sacred forests even breaking a twig or plucking a leaf or flower is unacceptable.

Selvi Nanji is a member of the Kurumba tribe that cares for Banagudi Shola, a sacred forest in Kotagiri in the Nilgiris Hills of southern India. She said the worship spaces and temples in that woodland are often restricted to male members who perform the rituals and care for the shrines. Nanji, who now lives in Sweden, wrote a book titled "Devasolai," which means "sacred forest" in Kurumba.

In Banagudi forest, entering with footwear is prohibited near holy shrines. However, in some forests, people are permitted to collect fallen timber or fruit as well as honey, medicinal plants, and wood for cremation.

How are Indigenous rituals and practices different?

In India, the Kurumbas, whose total population Nanji estimates as 2,000, are officially classified as Hindu. About 80% of India is Hindu. However, Nanji said Indigenous religious practices and rituals are different from those of Hindu traditions.

"Hindu rituals typically involve offering coconuts and bananas to the deities," she said. "But, in Indigenous traditions, we perform rituals with what is available in the forest. Resin from trees is used."

Plants are used to dress the deities instead of fabric, which is typically used in Hindu temples. In Banagudi Shola, sacred rituals are performed annually by the tribe's men to coincide with agricultural seasons. An animal, typically a goat, is sacrificed during the ritual, Nanji said. The Kurumba medicine people collect herbs, roots and tree bark from the forest, she said.

Are there different types of sacred forests?

Yes. An example is Muttunad Mund near Kotagiri, a grassland that is sacred to the Toda tribe. Aradkuttan, an elder in the community, said this location is akin to the tribe's headquarters. The location is marked by a conical temple dedicated to the deity Moonbu, constructed with stone, cane and a special type of grass from the sacred grasslands. The annual temple ritual is a one-month affair featuring song, dance, rituals and buffalo, which are sacred to the tribe. Celebrants eat a special meal during the festival — white rice mixed with buffalo buttermilk and butter.

M. Alwas, who heads the Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association in Kotagiri, a nonprofit that aims to help tribes in the region, said one of the main challenges is getting the younger generation involved.

"Each community has its own traditional knowledge," said Alwas, who belongs to the Toda tribe. "They have stories of why a forest or river or tree is important."

As interest in preserving faith traditions wanes, Alwas fears those stories and practices could be lost and with them, the value of these sacred spaces.

While some worry tourism would "commercialize" the forests, others like Nanji believe that ecotourism could be beneficial if done right. She said it might help outsiders understand the importance of sacred groves and boost job opportunities in the region.

"Spotlighting local food can also give traditional agriculture a much-needed shot in the arm," Nanji said.

Today in History: January 18, Captain Cook reaches Hawaii

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 18, the 18th day of 2024. There are 348 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On Jan. 18, 1778, English navigator Captain James Cook reached the present-day Hawaiian Islands, which he named the "Sandwich Islands."

On this date:

In 1911, the first landing of an aircraft on a ship took place as pilot Eugene B. Ely brought his Curtiss biplane in for a safe landing on the deck of the armored cruiser USS Pennsylvania in San Francisco Harbor.

In 1913, entertainer Danny Kaye was born David Daniel Kaminsky in New York City.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 18, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 208 ~ 70 of 70

In 1943, during World War II, Jewish insurgents in the Warsaw Ghetto launched their initial armed resistance against Nazi troops, who eventually succeeded in crushing the rebellion.

In 1975, the situation comedy "The Jeffersons," a spin-off from "All in the Family," premiered on CBS-TV.

In 1990, a jury in Los Angeles acquitted former preschool operators Raymond Buckey and his mother, Peggy McMartin Buckey, of 52 child molestation charges.

In 1991, financially strapped Eastern Airlines shut down after more than six decades in business.

In 1993, the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday was observed in all 50 states for the first time.

In 2005, the world's largest commercial jet, the Airbus A380 "superjumbo" capable of flying up to 800 passengers, was unveiled in Toulouse, France.

In 2012, President Barack Obama rejected the Keystone XL project, a Canadian company's plan to build a 1,700-mile pipeline to carry oil across six U.S. states to Texas refineries.

In 2013, former Democratic New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin was indicted on charges that he'd used his office for personal gain, accepting payoffs, free trips and gratuities from contractors while the city was struggling to recover from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. (Nagin was later convicted and released from prison in 2020.)

In 2019, Jason Van Dyke, the white Chicago police officer who gunned down Black teenager Laquan McDonald in 2014, was sentenced to nearly seven years in prison.

In 2020, ahead of opening statements in the first Senate impeachment trial of President Donald Trump, House prosecutors wrote that Trump had "used his official powers to pressure a foreign government to interfere in a United States election for his personal political gain," while Trump's legal team denounced what it called a "brazen and unlawful attempt to overturn the results of the 2016 election."

In 2023, a helicopter carrying Ukraine's interior minister crashed into a kindergarten in a foggy residential suburb of Kyiv, killing him and about a dozen other people, including a child on the ground.

Today's birthdays: Movie director John Boorman is 91. Former Sen. Paul Kirk, D-Mass., is 86. Singer-songwriter Bobby Goldsboro is 83. Comedian-singer-musician Brett Hudson is 71. Actor-director Kevin Costner is 69. Country singer-actor Mark Collie is 68. Actor Mark Rylance is 64. Actor Alison Arngrim (TV: "Little House on the Prairie") is 62. Former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley is 61. Actor Jane Horrocks is 60. Comedian Dave Attell (uh-TEHL') is 59. Actor Jesse L. Martin is 55. Rapper DJ Quik is 54. Rock singer Jonathan Davis (Korn) is 53. Former NAACP President and CEO Benjamin Todd Jealous is 51. Singer Christian Burns (BBMak) is 50. Actor Derek Richardson is 48. Actor Jason Segel is 44. Actor Samantha Mumba is 41. Country singer Kristy Lee Cook (TV: "American Idol") is 40. Actor Devin Kelley is 38. Actor Ashleigh Murray (TV: "Riverdale") is 36. Tennis player Angelique Kerber is 36. Actor Mateus Ward is 25.