

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, Jan. 26

Senior Menu: Potato soup, ham salad on croissant, tomato spoon salad, Mandarin oranges.
School Breakfast: Egg wraps.
School Lunch: Vegetable soup, cheese stick.
Girls Basketball at Webster: (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15 p.m., Varsity to follow)
Groton Area Wrestling Triangular, 6 p.m. (Britton-Hecla and Canistota)

Saturday, Jan. 27

Boys Basketball at NEC/DAK12 Clash in Madison
Boys and Girls Varsity Wrestling Tournament at Groton, 10 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. 28

Carnival of Silver Skates, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.
Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10 a.m., Groton Community Center
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Wor-

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



ship 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 at St. John's at 9 a.m. and at Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Pastor at Bethesda, Aberdeen.

Monday, Jan. 29

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Oatmeal.
School Lunch: French bread pizza, peas.
Girls Basketball hosts Florence/Henry: (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15 p.m. followed by Varsity)
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 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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1440

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The US economy grew at an annualized rate of 3.3% in the final quarter of 2023, according to preliminary data released yesterday, significantly outpacing analyst expectations of around 2%. Sustained consumer spending fueled the growth, including a holiday season that saw record retail spending of almost \$965B (unadjusted for inflation).

French farmers continued protesting yesterday, blocking roads and dumping imported produce across the country, demanding government action to address numerous grievances. The protests, now in

their second week, are moving toward Paris after breaking out in the southwest agricultural region. At least two people have died during the protests.

The mother of the convicted Oxford High School shooter went on trial yesterday for involuntary manslaughter charges, the first time a parent of a US school shooter has been charged directly in connection with an attack. The father faces a separate trial in March.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The NFL postseason continues Sunday with the AFC (3 pm ET, CBS) and NFC (6:30 pm ET, Fox) Championship games. Quarterbacks Lamar Jackson and Brock Purdy among finalists for MVP; see finalists for major NFL awards.

Melanie, singer-songwriter known for chart-topping single "Brand New Key," dies at 76. Herbert Coward, actor known for iconic supporting role in "Deliverance," dies in car accident at 85.

WWE founder Vince McMahon accused in lawsuit of sexual assault and trafficking by former employee; McMahon stepped down as CEO in 2022 amid separate allegations of misconduct.

Science & Technology

Japanese moon lander reaches the lunar surface, lands upside down after battery and thruster issues during descent; craft will attempt to be repowered in coming weeks.

Oldest known evidence of syphilis infections in South America discovered, dating to roughly 2,000 years ago; where the family of disease-causing bacteria first emerged remains an open question.

New 3D printing technique using liquid metal can build furniture-size aluminum components in minutes.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +0.6%, Nasdaq +0.2%); S&P 500 extends streak of record highs. Turkey's central bank raises key interest rate to 45% to curb annual inflation of nearly 65%.

General Motors' self-driving vehicle unit Cruise faces probes by US Justice Department, US Securities and Exchange Commission over October collision with pedestrian. Federal Aviation Administration halts production expansion of Boeing 737 Max aircraft, but clears the way for 737 Max 9 to return to service.

Microsoft lays off 1,900 staff, or roughly 9% of workers, from its video game division following its Activision Blizzard acquisition. Health insurer Humana reports lower-than-expected full-year guidance, citing rising medical costs.

Politics & World Affairs

CIA Director William Burns to lead negotiations on a potential deal including a cease-fire in Gaza and the release of hostages taken by Hamas. See updates on the war.

Former President Donald Trump testifies in defamation lawsuit brought by writer E. Jean Carroll; Carroll was awarded \$5M in a previous civil sexual abuse lawsuit against Trump.

Japanese court delivers death penalty sentence for arsonist who killed 36 people in a 2019 fire at a popular anime studio. South Korean lawmaker hospitalized after the second attack on politicians in the past month.

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Wrestling Triangular

Canistota and Britton-Hecla @ Groton Area

Friday, January 26th, 2024

Match Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena

- 6:00PM
- First Dual → Groton Area vs. Canistota
- Second Dual → Canistota vs. Britton-Hecla
- AAU Wrestling → Groton Area vs. Britton-Hecla
- Exhibition Matches → Groton Area vs. Britton-Hecla
- Third Dual → Groton Area vs. Britton-Hecla

****At 5:45PM We will be having Parents Night for all 6-12 wrestlers.**

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$4.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: Britton-Hecla will use the first locker room down the JH Hallway. Canistota will use the second locker room down the JH Hallway.

WEIGH-INS/SKIN CHECKS: 5PM

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

Livestream: NFHS

Official: Chad Schaunaman

Table Workers: Kristi Zoellner and Scott Thorson

Announcer: Tom Woods

National Anthem: Groton Area 5th Grader, Charli Jacobsen

Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director

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GHS Boys' Basketball

Three hit double figures as Groton Area beats Webster Area

Three players hit double figures Thursday night as the Groton Area boys' basketball team defeated Webster Area, 66-30. It was a night where 34 team fouls were called and only two jump ball calls were made.

The Tigers had a 19-6 lead after the first quarter and led it 31-19, at halftime. Webster Area battled back to within eight at 35-27, but then Groton Area scored 15 straight points and led it 52-29 after the third quarter.

Ryder Johnson had three-three-pointers on the night and led the Tigers with 19 points, had eight rebounds, one steal and one block. Lane Tietz had 17 points, five rebounds, four assists and four steals. Jacob Zak had 10 points, five rebounds, two assists, three steals and two blocked shots. Teylor Diegel had five points which included one three-pointer. Logan Ringgenberg and Kassen Keough each had four points, two rebounds, one assist and two steals. Easton Weber made a three-pointer and finished with three points. Keegen Tracy had two points, two rebounds, four assists and two steals. Keough had stolen the ball and was on the way to the basket, but then looked back and saw Holden Sippel and passed the ball off to him and Sippel made the layup for two points. Sippel also had one assist. Blake Pauli had one assist and one steal. Colby Dunker had two rebounds, one assist and one steal. Gage Sippel had four rebounds and two blocks. Karson Zak had one rebound. Turner Thompson had one block.

Groton Area made 22 of 37 two-pointers for 59 percent, five of 20 three-pointers for 25 percent, seven of 10 free throws for 70 percent, had 31 rebounds, 13 turnovers, 15 assists, 16 steals, 18 team fouls and six block shots.

Matthew Mount led Webster Area with 11 points which included two three-pointers, Ian Lesnar made two three-pointers and finished with eight points, score two points apiece were Jeron McCreary, Peyton Kuecker, Tommy Vergeldt and Jack Shoemaker, while Thomas Kuecker made one free throw.

Webster Area made eight of 28 field goals for 29 percent, made 10 of 18 free throws for 56 percent, had 16 team fouls and 18 turnovers.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 52-24. Webster Area held a 10-9 lead after the first quarter while the Tigers took over at halftime, 21-14, and led 32-18 after the third quarter.

Gage Sippel led Groton Area with 17 points while Kassen Keough made two three-pointers and finished with 12 points, Jayden Schwan had five, Turner Thompson and Ethan Kroll each had four points, Blake Pauli made a three-pointer for three points, and Karson Zak, Teylor Diegel and Easton Weber each had two points.

Martin Dorsett led Webster Area with 14 points while Tate Mammenga and Carson Mount each had four points and Thomas Kuecker and Seth Lesnar each had one point.

Groton Area made it a clean sweep with a 48-14 win in the C game. Groton Area led at the quarterstops at 23-3, 30-7 and 43-12.

Easton Weber made two three-pointers to lead the Tigers with 10 points, Ryder Schelle had nine points, Logan Warrington and Jayden Schwan each had eight points, Jace Johnson seven and Karson Zak six.

John Sonstebo led Webster Area with six points while Sheldon Schmieg and Seth Lesnar each had four points.

All three games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The C and junior varsity games were sponsored by Justin and Chelsea Hanson. The varsity game was sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Locke Electric, The MeatHouse of Andover, Rix Farms/R&M Farms and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking. Paul Kose did the play-by-play and Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera.

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The GHS dance team performed at halftime of the boys' basketball game Thursday night in Groton. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

GDILIVE.COM

GT Groton Area
Tigers

Text Paul at
605-397-7460

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

They are \$25 each.

~~Webster Girls C~~
Webster Girls JV
Florence/Henry Girls JV
Deuel Girls JV
Vermillion Boys JV
Redfield Boys C
Redfield Girls JV
Mobridge-Pollock Boys C
Mobridge-Pollock Girls C
Mobridge-Pollock Boys JV
Mobridge-Pollock Girls JV
Britton-Hecla Girls JV
Britton-Hecla Boys JV
Florence/Henry Boys C
Florence/Henry Boys JV
Aberdeen Christian JV

END OF SEASON!

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NSU Wrestling

No. 18 Wolves Rally Comes up Short Against No. 5 Huskies

St. Cloud, Minn. – The No. 18 Northern State University wrestling team battled with one of the top teams in the country Thursday evening, falling to No. 5 St. Cloud State. The Wolves won three weights, two of which were bonus point wins.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 13, SCSU 25

Records: NSU 7-9 (2-2 NSIC), SCSU 10-1 (5-0 NSIC)

HOW IT HAPPENED

The dual kicked off at 285-pounds and a decision victory for the Huskies, who extended that lead with a major decision at 125

Jason Henschel Jr. put the Wolves on the board with a shutout victory over Caleb Meekins; the NSU 133-pounder tallied a 10-0 major decision and four team points

Braydon Mogle battled with No. 12 Alyeus Craig, but ultimately fell at 141-pounds

The Wolves were back in the thick of it with an 8-2 decision win by No. 2 Wyatt Turnquist over No. 8 Colby Njos; the first of two ranked matches of the evening

The 157-pound weight went to top-ranked Nick Novak in a 5-2 decision over No. 4 Devin Bahr

St. Cloud State extended their lead to 16-7 following a decision win at 165-pounds

Seth Brossard chipped away in the following match, defeating Bryce Dagele by fall at 4:27; however the Huskies closed out the dual with a victory by fall and decision

FINAL RESULTS

285 : Elijah Novak (St. Cloud State) over Nathan Schauer (Northern State) (Dec 9-2)

125 : #7 Conor Knopick (St. Cloud State) over Landen Fischer (Northern State) (MD 15-2)

133 : Jason Henschel Jr. (Northern State) over Caleb Meekins (St. Cloud State) (MD 10-0)

141 : #12 Alyeus Craig (St. Cloud State) over Braydon Mogle (Northern State) (Dec 2-1)

149 : #2 Wyatt Turnquist (Northern State) over #8 Colby Njos (St. Cloud State) (Dec 8-2)

157 : #1 Nick Novak (St. Cloud State) over #4 Devin Bahr (Northern State) (Dec 5-2)

165 : #10 Anthony Herrera (St. Cloud State) over Chase Bloomquist (Northern State) (Dec 11-4)

174 : Seth Brossard (Northern State) over Bryce Dagele (St. Cloud State) (Fall 4:27)

184 : #10 Bryce Fitzpatrick (St. Cloud State) over Mason Fey (Northern State) (Fall 0:34)

197 : #4 Dominic Murphy (St. Cloud State) over Treyton Cacek (Northern State) (Dec 4-1)

UP NEXT

The Wolves return to Wachs Arena next Friday and Saturday hosting No. 13 UMary and No. 4 Wisconsin Parkside. Dual start times are slated for 7 p.m. on Friday against the Marauders and 4 p.m. on Saturday versus the Rangers. For full promotional details on home duals this season [CLICK HERE](#).

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Gov. Noem Going to Warzone at Southern Border

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Kristi Noem announced that she will be going to the warzone at the southern border to stand with Texas and the National Guard and tell them that the nation is with them. She made the announcement on “Hannity” on Fox News.

“This is about our Constitution. This is about us standing united... I’m going to be at the border tomorrow to tell the Texas National Guard... that we’re not only with them, that we have continued to be with them for the last several years. South Dakota has deployed our National Guard to support them and stand alongside them three separate times,” Governor Noem said on Hannity. “I’m so proud of what Texas is doing to defend itself. We’ll be right there beside them. We’ll do everything we can to make sure that this invasion stops.

Earlier yesterday, Governor Noem joined 24 Republican governors in supporting Governor Abbott’s efforts to secure the Southern Border.

When Hannity asked if Governor Noem is willing to send South Dakota National Guard troops to the border, Governor Noem responded: “I already have three times... I am willing to send National Guard down there to stand alongside them. I want it to be different arrangements this time. If we’re going to enforce Texas law – and if I’m going to have the ability to use these soldiers in a way that’s effective – that will be absolutely fantastic.”

Governor Noem was the first governor to send National Guard soldiers to help defend the Southern Border nearly three years ago. Last summer, she sent once again sent 50 South Dakota National Guard soldiers to Texas to help them secure the border.

This past August, Governor Noem also participated in a press conference at the Southern Border and viewed the warzone from the air in a helicopter.

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

Special School Board Meeting

January 30, 2024 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Consider adoption of Opt-Out Resolution.
3. Discussion regarding football cooperative with Langford School District.

NEW BUSINESS:

ADJOURN



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Thune: Immigration deal 'at a critical moment'

U.S. Senate Republicans insist they won't bow to Trump demands to quit talks

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 25, 2024 4:30 PM

WASHINGTON — Top U.S. Senate negotiators said Thursday that final details on an immigration policy deal remain under debate in the U.S. Senate, despite outside pressure from GOP presidential front-runner Donald Trump to sink any agreement as he makes immigration his central campaign message.

The No. 2 Senate Republican and GOP whip, Sen. John Thune, said that negotiations on an immigration deal tied to the passage of a multi-billion-dollar global securities supplemental package are at "a critical moment, and we've got to drive hard to get this done."

"If we can't get there, then we'll go to Plan B," the South Dakota Republican said.

He did not go into details on what a "Plan B" would look like or if a deal on immigration would be removed from the supplemental, which would provide critical aid to Ukraine that some Republican and Democratic senators are advocating as the country runs low on ammunition in its war with Russia.

Like in his first presidential campaign, Trump has made immigration a main theme, often referring to migrants claiming asylum at the Southern border as an "invasion." On his social media site, Truth Social, he has urged congressional Republicans to not accept a deal.

During a closed-door meeting on Wednesday night, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky acknowledged the difficulty of passing an immigration bill and the potential it would undermine Trump, the top Republican negotiator of the deal, Oklahoma Sen. James Lankford, told reporters at the Capitol.

But Lankford disputed that McConnell's comments, which were first reported by Punchbowl News, meant a deal on immigration would be killed so that Trump can attack President Joe Biden on the issue.

"McConnell was laying out the political realities of where things are, and it was the elephant-in-the-room conversation," Lankford said. "We're in a political election season."

But Republican Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, a longtime Trump critic, told CNN that "the fact that (Trump) would communicate to Republican senators and Congress people that he doesn't want us to solve the border problem, but basically wants to blame Biden for it — this is really appalling."

Lankford said that he has not talked to Trump in months and that he, along with the bipartisan group of senators working on the border deal — Sens. Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, and Kyrsten Sinema, independent of Arizona — are still moving forward.

"It's now the end of January, in the middle of the presidential primary season, so I think that's the shift that has occurred that he's just acknowledging," Lankford said of McConnell. Trump on Tuesday sailed to victory in the New Hampshire presidential primary, following his victory in the Jan. 15 Iowa caucuses, with former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley his sole major remaining opponent.

It's also unclear whether any eventual Senate deal will survive in the House, as GOP Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana is demanding hard-line House immigration legislation be adopted and is moving forward with impeachment proceedings for U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas over his immigration policies.

Johnson has also thrown his support behind Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who is defying U.S. Supreme Court orders and the White House in keeping and installing razor wire along the Texas-Mexico border.

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Parole targeted

While no framework or bill text of a Senate deal has been released, some of the proposals put forth would curb the Biden administration's use of parole authority, which the administration has heavily relied on to grant temporary protections to migrants by allowing them to live and work in the United States without visas.

The Biden administration has invoked its parole authority more often than previous administrations to manage the large number of migrants at the Southern border, according to data compiled by Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, or TRAC, which compiles immigration data.

The deal is also likely to make changes to asylum law that would raise the bar for migrants claiming asylum.

For four months, Lankford, Sinema, and Murphy have worked to strike a deal with the White House to free up more than \$100 billion in supplemental global security aid to Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan, and for U.S. border security.

Senate Republicans have hinged their support for the global supplemental package on immigration policy changes.

If passed, it would be the most substantial change to immigration law in 30 years.

Whether a deal passes is up to Republicans, Murphy said.

"We have negotiated a border policy package, we did what Republicans asked us to do, and now they seem to be having a hard time actually closing the deal," he said.

Murphy said that the negotiators have an outline that appropriators are considering. He added that he's not sure if aid to Ukraine would be unlinked to changes in immigration policy.

"I think what is very scary to some Republicans is that the deal we have reached will actually fix a big part of the problem, and I know for Donald Trump and some Republicans, it's not in their best interest for there to be policy changes that actually fix the broken asylum system, or give the president new tools to better manage the border," Murphy said.

Sen. Steve Daines, the chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the GOP campaign arm, said that he has not spoken to Trump about the immigration deal.

"It seems to me quite ironic that folks are blaming Trump for the border deal when this is Biden who created the problem and can solve the problem unilaterally through executive action," the Montana Republican said.

South Carolina's Lindsey Graham, a staunch Trump supporter, said that he's talked to the former president and has "told him what we're trying to accomplish," but declined to answer questions if the deal could be passed without Trump's approval.

Some Republicans reluctant to wait

Despite the push from Trump to quash the talks, some Senate Republicans said that they have an obligation to address the Southern border.

GOP Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who endorsed Trump earlier this week, said that "Texas can't afford to wait 11 months," referring to a potential second Trump presidency in 2025.

"Some people have said, well, the (immigration) issue is going to go away, and so that'll be denying President Trump the issue. I think that's a fantasy," Cornyn said. "You're not going to turn off what's happening at the border like a water faucet, so this is going to continue to be a problem and it's obviously a very, potent, political issue."

He said that while Trump is "an important voice," the Senate "has a job to do, and we intend to do it."

Lankford echoed the same sentiments, and expressed doubt that Republicans would be able to get substantial immigration policy done under a second term with Trump because "we tried to do some immigration work while President Trump was president (and) Democrats would not join us in that conversation, and I'm not sure that they would in the next administration in that time period as well."

Lankford noted that the deal they are working on now, if passed, will set immigration policy for decades.

"It's really setting what's going to be the policy direction for a long time," he said. "So I encourage people to have a longer look on this, to say, 'What can we do to be able to make sure that we have a consistent policy that works better than what we have now?'"

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

Senate votes to return clemency bill for lifers to earlier, more stringent form

Committee had offered discretion to parole board, Senate sets hard timeline

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 25, 2024 4:29 PM

A bill that would force prison lifers to wait longer between clemency requests was returned to its original, more stringent form by the South Dakota Senate.

As amended Thursday afternoon on a 17-15 vote, Senate Bill 9 would require anyone with a life sentence for a violent crime to wait four years between requests for clemency through the Board of Pardons and Paroles.

After hearing Tuesday testimony from Board Chair Myron Rau, the Senate Judiciary Committee altered the bill to give the board the discretion to set repeat requests out anywhere from one to four years. Currently, state law allows repeat requests each year.

The bill sponsor told her fellow lawmakers that the amendment defeated the purpose of her bill.

"The bill is now watered down to the point of minimal effectiveness," said Sen. Erin Tobin, R-Winner.

The parole board can recommend a commutation for those serving life without parole, but only the governor can grant one. A commutation in such a case offers the inmate a shot at eventual parole.

Tobin pointed to chilling Tuesday testimony from the families of two victims brutally murdered decades ago who've had to appear at clemency hearings for the men who killed them. They told the committee they don't want to be re-traumatized by a hearing every year.

The amendment that offered the board discretion came from Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City. On the Senate floor, Duhamel urged the lawmakers to trust the ability of the parole board to consider cases individually.

Some inmates serving life sentences for violent crimes committed them at a young age, she said, sometimes under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Those who've served significant portions of their sentence and appear to be making progress ought not be made to wait if the board sees growth.

Clemency is part of the state constitution, she said, and the board is there to help the governor make wise clemency decisions.

"One size fits all is not real life," Duhamel said.

Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, echoed Duhamel and urged the preservation of board discretion.

"We don't want to set a law based on two of the worst cases you can think of," Wheeler said.

The measure could also dash inmate hopes for freedom, said Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls. Inmates without hope, Nesiba said, have no reason to behave in prison.

"I just worry that this is going to make our state penitentiary a more dangerous place," he said.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, supported the amendment. The board's displeasure with the loss of discretion should not influence legislators when victims support an idea, he said.

"We have to remember that this is what we do for the citizens of this state ... Like any other subject, we're the ones who make the decision," Reed said.

The constitution doesn't spell out a one-year waiting period, said Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown. That law was put in place near the turn of the century to reign in the actions of "a certain governor's administration that was giving out clemencies like candy," a reference to former Gov. Bill Janklow.

The law doesn't stop any governor from going around the board and granting clemency, he noted.

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"If somebody's got a compelling case, they can still write the governor," Schoenbeck said. "It's just they don't get to have a public hearing and make the families come back in more often."

Gov. Kristi Noem has issued commutations to inmates who never saw the board, as well as to those for whom the board did not recommend clemency.

In her final remarks, Tobin told the Senate that adjusting the waiting period alone doesn't kill off hope for mercy. Other states have longer waiting periods.

"This is middle ground," she said.

After about 20 minutes of debate, the Senate voted to return the bill to its original form.

Shortly thereafter, SB 9 passed as amended on a 19-13 vote. It now moves on to the House of Representatives.

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.

State intends to expand Medicaid to doula services, official says

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 25, 2024 10:34 AM

The state Department of Social Services plans to extend Medicaid reimbursement to doula services for prenatal, delivery and postpartum care for pregnant South Dakotans this year.

Efforts are underway nationwide to expand Medicaid coverage, the joint federal-state health insurance program for low-income and disabled people, to doula services as a way to counter maternal and infant mortality rates. Doulas are non-medical trained professionals who provide physical, emotional and educational support to pregnant clients.

South Dakota's infant mortality rate is 7.4 deaths per 1,000 births – significantly higher than surrounding states and steadily increasing in the last five years. South Dakota also leads surrounding states for maternal mortality with 25.9 deaths per 100,000 live births, slightly higher than Montana and also increasing over the last five years, according to data from the state Department of Health.

About half of all births in South Dakota are covered by Medicaid, and about 37% of Medicaid-covered people are Native American, according to DSS. Infant mortality is three times higher among Native Americans than white South Dakotans.

South Dakota Department of Social Services Secretary Matt Althoff told lawmakers on Thursday during a House Health and Human Services Committee hearing at the Capitol in Pierre that the state hopes to include doula services in Medicaid coverage by the time it opens its Pregnancy Health Home program in April.

The Legislature appropriated \$3.1 million toward the initiative during the 2023 legislative session, which aims to provide better care management and participation among South Dakota Medicaid recipients for prenatal, postpartum and well-child care.

The announcement came in response to a bill that would instruct the department to expand coverage. Prime sponsor Rep. Mellissa Heermann, R-Brookings, requested the committee table the bill so the department could handle the matter through administrative rule.

Supporters of the bill included doula and OB-GYN professionals as well as South Dakota Right to Life. Professionals told legislators that expanding access to doula services is crucial to addressing health disparities in South Dakota.

"Continuous support by a doula is one of the most effective tools to affect labor and delivery outcomes," said Michelle Sand, obstetrics director at Brookings Health System, citing a report from the American College of OB-GYN and Society of Maternal-Fetal Medicine.

A 2013 study reported that pregnant people using doulas were two times less likely to have birth complications. A 2016 study found that doula services can be cost-effective for state Medicaid programs, with patients experiencing lower rates of preterm and C-section births when using a doula.

"We're going to take a very close exam and do all we can to expand coverage for doula services in our normal protocols and procedures posthaste — before even the end of the fiscal year," Althoff said.

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.

\$6 million quantum computing center earns first legislative endorsement

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 25, 2024 10:02 AM

PIERRE — A committee of lawmakers endorsed a bill Thursday aimed at advancing the state's position in the burgeoning field of quantum computing.

The South Dakota Senate Education Committee approved the bill 6-0 with one member excused and sent it to the Legislature's budget committee for further deliberation.

Introduced at the behest of the Board of Regents, which oversees the state's public universities, the bill would provide \$6.03 million for research into the field.

According to the MIT Technology Review, regular computers use bits, which are a stream of electrical or optical pulses representing 1s or zeros. Quantum computers achieve much faster processing power by using qubits, which are typically subatomic particles such as electrons or photons.

The quantum computing proposal would fund a new Center for Quantum Information Science & Technology. The center would not be a physical location, but rather a partnership among Dakota State University in Madison, South Dakota Mines in Rapid City, South Dakota State University in Brookings, and the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.

During her recent budget address, Governor Kristi Noem spoke about the plan.

"This new field can do exponentially more than a regular computer can do. Imagine a task that it would take regular computers 20 years to accomplish," Noem told lawmakers. "A quantum computer could handle that task in just a matter of seconds."

Her budget documents say the funding would be used for initial startup costs, "to support faculty and graduate students, hold an annual research symposium, and purchase access to cloud quantum computing resources from one or more of the major computing providers." The long-term proposal also includes the implementation of degree programs.

The quantum center, once established, is expected to provide a boost to the state's educational and technological sectors, placing South Dakota at the forefront of an evolving and competitive field, according to Dr. José-Marie Griffiths, president of Dakota State University. She recently briefed lawmakers on quantum computing, its dangers, and its benefits.

"There's all these things we could do in a much, much better way with this better computing," she explained.

Griffiths said precision agriculture, health sciences, banking and cyber security – all significant parts of South Dakota's economy – will benefit from the state being ahead in the quantum computing field.

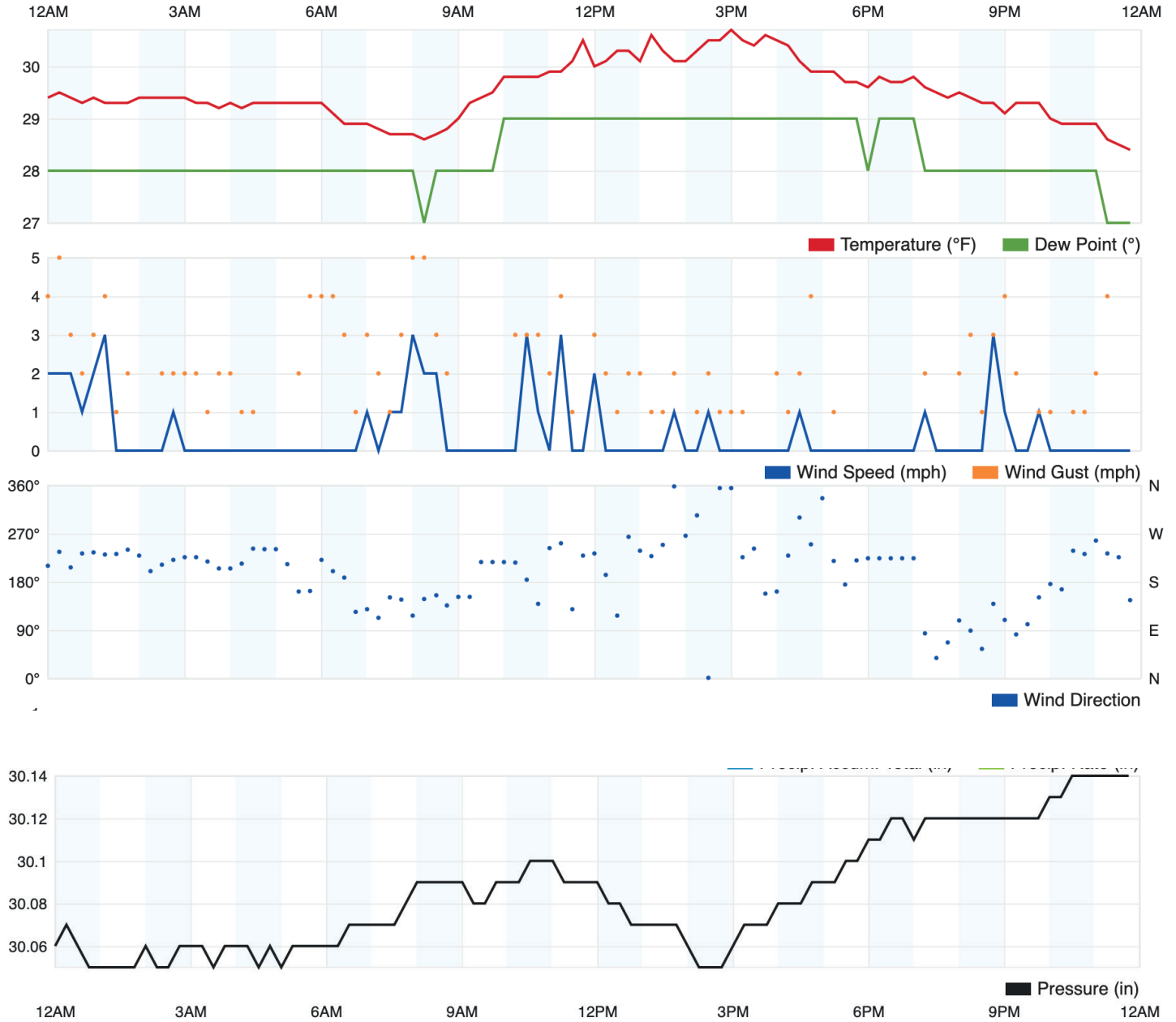
Griffiths said if the state doesn't invest in this new field of computing, "we simply won't be in the game."

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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

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Fri Jan 26	Sat Jan 27	Sun Jan 28	Mon Jan 29	Tue Jan 30	Wed Jan 31	Thu Feb 1
32° F	34° F	35° F	41° F	40° F	40° F	40° F
19° F	18° F	24° F	28° F	28° F	28° F	31° F
SSW	SW	S	SW	NW	S	SE
10 MPH	6 MPH	12 MPH	11 MPH	11 MPH	11 MPH	12 MPH

Fog and Clouds Through Friday Then Sun!

	Maximum Sky Cover Forecast (%)																
	1/25 Thu		1/26 Fri				1/27 Sat				1/28 Sun		1/29 Mon				
	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm				
Aberdeen	97	96	90	80	75	40	24	13	34	49	64	64	26	40	53	40	35
Britton	97	98	90	76	79	61	42	17	38	55	60	53	35	52	56	49	44
Brookings	100	100	98	95	90	85	65	57	26	57	54	49	47	34	49	45	47
Chamberlain	99	99	97	94	85	79	57	12	37	45	46	47	35	32	32	35	36
Clark	96	96	94	84	82	77	57	57	28	57	56	54	38	36	51	50	42
Eagle Butte	81	88	76	66	49	13	12	12	29	42	52	43	17	19	34	36	27
Ellendale	97	96	87	76	65	31	25	11	36	51	67	57	32	46	50	35	40
Eureka	92	93	84	74	66	30	28	17	30	44	57	47	26	41	56	43	36
Gettysburg	92	94	85	78	63	39	24	13	33	43	57	50	26	28	54	46	34
Huron	100	97	96	81	86	78	57	19	35	47	53	53	35	34	46	48	41
Kennebec	93	96	89	81	68	59	57	11	35	40	42	38	37	28	35	38	33
McIntosh	80	88	66	54	17	10	13	10	33	49	51	24	20	26	40	32	27
Milbank	99	99	99	73	59	47	57	57	23	40	50	43	39	29	46	38	41
Miller	97	96	91	82	70	54	57	11	23	31	51	53	27	26	41	43	31
Mobridge	88	95	81	73	56	26	20	11	35	44	55	40	25	27	47	42	32
Murdo	86	91	75	62	40	24	10	8	23	35	47	41	22	20	23	23	22
Pierre	91	95	90	78	63	35	22	12	32	44	59	43	34	25	39	40	31
Redfield	97	97	91	81	82	62	34	16	37	46	58	58	38	36	50	51	45
Sisseton	98	97	91	60	65	53	57	11	27	44	55	49	40	38	51	46	43
Watertown	98	98	96	86	84	74	57	57	27	57	57	52	44	33	48	42	49
Webster	96	97	91	80	82	66	57	57	24	57	53	48	38	43	49	44	40
Wheaton	99	98	93	75	69	59	57	15	33	54	64	49	40	40	56	56	48

Created: 3 pm CST Thu 1/25/2024 | Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

Friday

- Fog/freezing fog & freezing drizzle possibly early
- Mostly cloudy with some clearing west of the Missouri River late Friday night
- Highs: 30 to 40°
- Lows: 17 to 23°

Weekend

- Clearing west to east Saturday
- A blend of clouds/sun Sunday
- Highs: 30s/40s

NWS Aberdeen, SD
weather.gov/abardeen

We have just more day of grey to get through until the sun starts to shines on us again. Temperatures will also be increasing into the 30s to 40s as we get closer to the weekend. We can do it!

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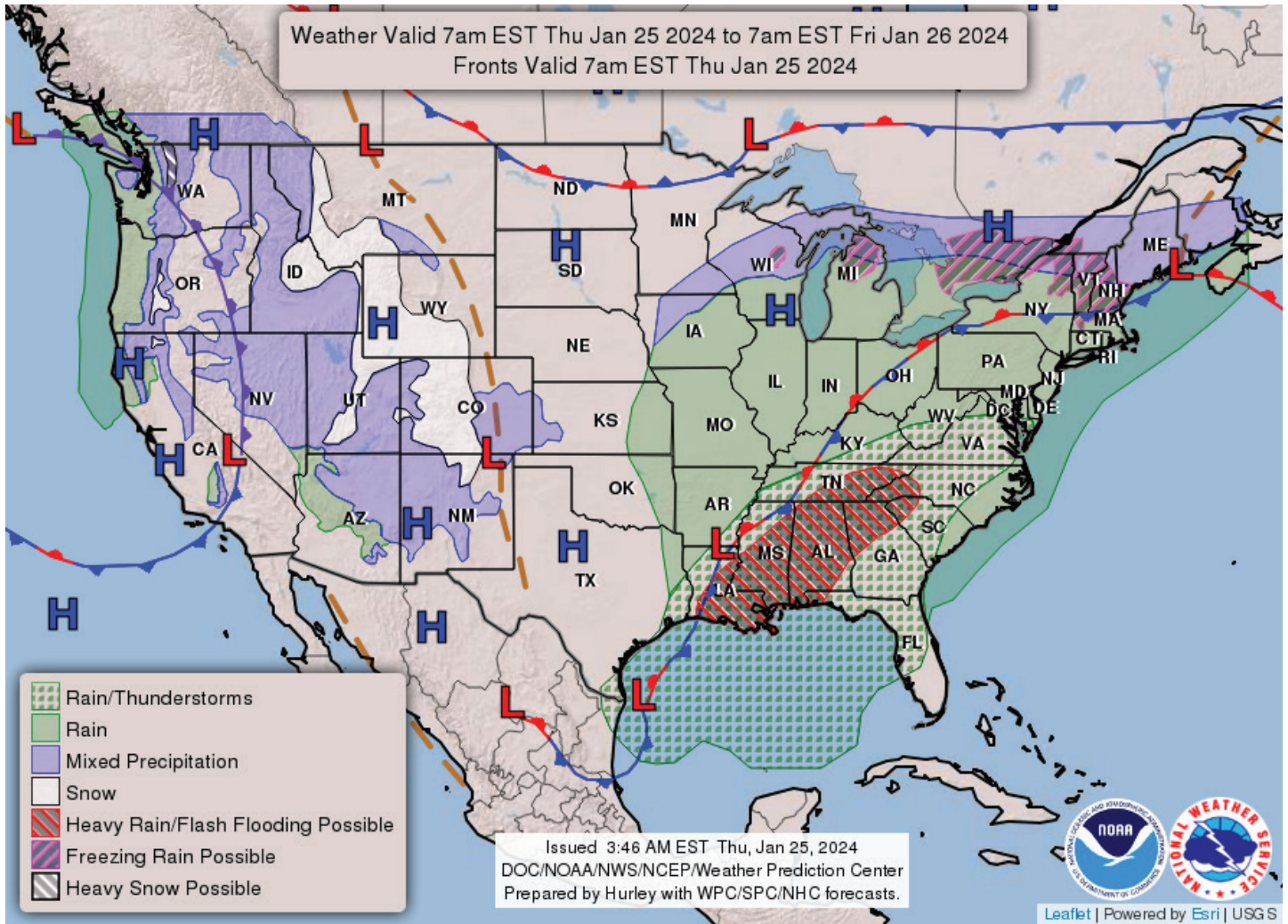
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 31 °F at 2:56 PM
Low Temp: 28 °F at 7:39 AM
Wind: 6 mph at 8:05 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 33 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1947
Record Low: -30 in 1950
Average High: 24
Average Low: 1
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.47
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.47
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:31:29 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:57:15 am



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Today in Weather History

January 26, 1977: Four days of very strong winds occurred from the 26th through the 29th, with a strong low-pressure area over western Ontario. Strong northwest winds of 30 to 45 mph with gusts into the 60s caused widespread blowing and drifting snow, with most roads closed with many traffic accidents. The winds combined with subzero temperatures creating wind chills of 60 to 80 below zero. Many schools were closed for several days.

January 26, 2014: A strong Alberta Clipper system-generated light snow and strong winds across the region resulting in blizzard conditions. On Sunday morning, a band of moderate to heavy snow showers developed over North Dakota and swept down through our region producing cloud to ground lightning and thundersnow at times. Snowfall amounts were generally three inches or less. Wind gusts ranged from 45 to 55 mph at times. Several no travel advisories were issued due to poor visibilities in blizzard conditions, with state officials closing a large portion of Interstate-29 from Brookings to the North Dakota border.

1700: A powerful earthquake struck the Pacific Northwest along the Cascadia Subduction zone. The estimated moment magnitude of 8.7-9.2 caused about a 1,000-kilometer rupture from mid-Vancouver Island to northern California. The ocean floor heaved upward approximately 20 feet, and with 10-20 minutes, a giant wave, 30-40 feet high, reached the shore. The earthquake caused a tsunami, which struck the coast of Japan.

1772: Possibly the greatest snowfall ever recorded in the Washington DC area started on this day. When the storm began, Thomas Jefferson was returning home from his honeymoon with his new bride, Martha Wayles Skelton. The newlyweds made it to within eight miles of Monticello before having to abandon their carriage in the deep snow. Both finished the ride on horseback in the blinding snow. The newlyweds arrived home late on the night of January 26th. In Jefferson's "Garden Book," he wrote, "the deepest snow we have ever seen. In Albermarle, it was about 3. F. deep."

1937: The wettest month ever in Cincinnati, Ohio, is January 1937, when 13.68 inches fell. Their average January amount is 3.00 inches of precipitation. The overabundance of precipitation over the Ohio River basin caused near-record to record flooding in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky. On this day, the river gauge reached 80 feet in Cincinnati, the highest level in the city's history. The Ohio River reached 57 feet in Louisville, Kentucky, on the 27th, setting a new record by ten feet. Seventy percent of the city was underwater at that time.

1978 - A paralyzing blizzard struck the Midwest. One to three feet of snow fell in Michigan, and 20 to 40 inches was reported across Indiana. Winds reached 70 mph in Michigan, and gusted above 100 mph in Ohio. The high winds produced snow drifts twenty feet high in Michigan and Indiana stranding thousands on the interstate highways. Temperatures in Ohio dropped from the 40s to near zero during the storm. (David Ludlum)

1983 - The California coast was battered by a storm which produced record high tides, thirty-two foot waves, and mudslides, causing millions of dollars damage. The storm then moved east and dumped four feet of snow on Lake Tahoe. (22nd-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm spread heavy snow across the Middle and Northern Atlantic Coast States, with 18 inches reported at Vineland NJ, and wind gusts to 65 mph at Chatham MA. Snow cover in Virginia ranged up to thirty inches following this second major storm in just one week. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A snowstorm in the northeastern U.S. produced 19 inches at Austerlitz NY and Stillwater NY. A storm in the Great Lakes Region left 16.5 inches at Marquette MI, for a total of 43 inches in six days. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Snow and high winds created blizzard-like conditions in northwestern Vermont. Winds at Saint Albans gusted to 88 mph. In Alaska, the town of Cold Foot (located north of Fairbanks) reported a morning low of 75 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A winter storm spread high winds from the northwestern U.S. to Wyoming and Colorado, with heavy snow in some of the high elevations. Stevens Pass WA received 17 inches of snow, half of which fell in four hours. In extreme northwest Wyoming, Togwotee Mountain Lodge received 24 inches of snow. Winds in Colorado gusted to 90 mph at Rollinsville. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

ONE ANSWER

It was the first day in her new position as the secretary to the president. As she was presented with her first task, she wanted to appear confident and competent.

Speaking very carefully, he said to her, "These accounts that I am giving you are critical. They are the foundation of our income. I want you to go over each of them at least three times to make sure that all of the numbers in each are correct before you return them to me. Your results must be right!"

Working anxiously for quite some time, she finally completed her task. Returning the work assigned her by the president, she proudly gave him the results of her efforts. As he took the papers from her hands, she said with confidence, "Sir, I want you to know that I exceeded your expectations. I went over each page ten times, and discovered that there are ten different answers to each column."

When asked the Way to heaven and eternal life, Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through Me."

This statement in John's Gospel is one of the most basic and important passages in all of Scripture. If anyone anywhere wants to know the Way to God and eternal life, this is the one and only answer. Jesus, with no hesitation, declared once and for all that He is the Way. Some may argue that this declaration and proclamation is much too narrow. But, in all reality, it is wide enough for anyone, anywhere to enter into at any time.

Prayer: Thank You, Heavenly Father, for sending Your One and only Son into the world to become, if we choose, Our Savior. "He" is the Way to eternal life with You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. John 14:6



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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.23.24

21 28 58 69 70 20

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$285,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 16 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.24.24

10 13 15 29 47 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,600,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 31 Mins 24 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.25.24

2 14 35 37 38 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 46 Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.24.24

6 17 27 30 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$30,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 46 Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.24.24

7 28 46 47 58 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 15 Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.24.24

1 5 32 50 64 8

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$164,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 15 Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 62, Wilmot 35
Beresford 49, Baltic 31
Bon Homme 45, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 38
Bowman County, N.D. 49, Faith 15
Burke 55, Boyd County, Neb. 45
Clark-Willow Lake 50, Redfield 37
Crow Creek Tribal School 59, Stanley County 44
Dell Rapids St Mary 71, Alcester-Hudson 51
Douglas 55, Lead-Deadwood 31
Elk Point-Jefferson 44, Tri-Valley 43
Faulkton 45, Leola-Frederick High School 37
Flandreau 58, Parker 23
Florence-Henry 59, Great Plains Lutheran 41
Freeman 63, Canistota 60
Garretson 46, McCook Central-Montrose 33
Harding County 64, New England, N.D. 31
Highmore-Harrold 45, Wolsey-Wessington 38
Hill City 65, Wall 61, OT
Irene-Wakonda 40, Freeman Academy-Marion 18
James Valley Christian 53, Miller 50
Lakota Tech 65, Pierre 34
Lyman 62, New Underwood 12
Milbank 49, Deuel 16
Parkston 47, Lennox 42
Philip 66, Dupree 36
Potter County 61, North Central 36
Rapid City Central 58, Spearfish 27
Rapid City Christian 44, Hot Springs 27
Sioux Falls Christian 62, Dakota Valley 53
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 50, Sioux Falls Washington 31
Sioux Valley 59, Chester 51
Sisseton 75, Hamlin 61
St Thomas More 48, Sturgis Brown 22
Sully Buttes 49, Hitchcock-Tulare 40
Tea 69, Madison 18
Todd County 65, Pine Ridge 47
Vermillion 44, Dell Rapids 12
Viborg-Hurley 57, Centerville 26
Wagner 62, Scotland 11
Wessington Springs 51, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 41
White River 70, Colome 21
Dakota Oyate Challenge=
Lower Brule 67, Flandreau Indian 46

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Marty 66, Crazy Horse 22
Omaha Nation, Neb. 86, Takini 19
Wakpala 61, Tiospaye Topa 47

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 58, Tea 43
Aberdeen Roncalli 59, Britton-Hecla 44
Belle Fourche 52, Harding County 42
Bon Homme 48, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 32
Boyd County, Neb. 57, Burke 40
Canton 66, Sioux Falls Lutheran 25
Crow Creek Tribal School 84, Stanley County 75
Dell Rapids 65, Vermillion 61, OT
Douglas 83, Lead-Deadwood 59
Elkton-Lake Benton 65, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 43
Estelline-Hendricks 77, Arlington 47
Ethan 71, Mitchell Christian 61
Faulkton 63, Leola-Frederick High School 55
Freeman Academy-Marion 60, Irene-Wakonda 45
Great Plains Lutheran 63, Florence-Henry 35
Gregory 72, Avon 49
Groton 66, Webster 30
Hamlin 64, Sisseton 31
Hill City 70, Wall 55
Hitchcock-Tulare 54, Sully Buttes 46
Hot Springs 54, Faith 47
Huron 52, Sioux Falls Lincoln 50
Ipswich 73, Herreid-Selby 43
James Valley Christian 70, Miller 59
Lakota Tech 75, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 55
Lemmon High School 73, McIntosh 21
Lennox 64, Parkston 44
Milbank 60, Deuel 48
Mitchell 68, Brookings 55
New Underwood 68, Lyman 47
Philip 63, Dupree 44
Potter County 62, North Central 35
Sioux Falls Christian 77, Dakota Valley 70
Sioux Falls Jefferson 51, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 48
Sioux Falls Washington 60, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 50
Sioux Valley 72, McCook Central-Montrose 30
Spearfish 47, Rapid City Central 44
Timber Lake 74, Bison 34
Tri-Valley 57, Elk Point-Jefferson 53
Viborg-Hurley 68, Centerville 39
Wagner 56, Scotland 47
Dakota Oyate Challenge=
Crazy Horse 94, Flandreau Indian 13
Lower Brule 78, Takini 32
Marty 83, Tiospaye Topa 27

Omaha Nation, Neb. 83, Wakpala 46

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

Bruner scores 49, offsets 44 from South Dakota's Stewart in Denver's 111-110 victory in 2OT

DENVER, Colo. (AP) — Tommy Bruner scored a career-high 49 points and his steal led to Isaiah Addo-Ankrah's game-winning 3-pointer at the buzzer in the second overtime as Denver rallied to beat South Dakota 111-110 on Thursday night.

Bruner's effort offset a career-high 44-point outing by South Dakota's Kaleb Stewart. It is the two highest scoring totals in the nation this season.

Bruner made 15 of 34 shots, including 5 of 12 from 3-point range, and 14 of 15 free throws in posting the third highest total in the history of the Pioneers (13-8, 4-2 Summit League). He added eight rebounds and finished with three steals. Matt Teahan set the record with 61 points in a win over Nebraska Wesleyan during the 1978-79 season.

Touko Tainamo finished with 22 points and 13 rebounds for Denver. Addo-Ankrah and Isaiah Carr both scored 12. Carr came off the bench and made all six of his shots.

Stewart shot 16 for 31 from the floor, including 8 of 13 from beyond the arc, for the Coyotes (9-12, 2-4). It is the fourth highest total for South Dakota. Lahat Thioune had 15 points and eight rebounds before fouling out. Freshman Jevon Hill sank three 3-pointers and scored 14. Bostyn Holt and reserve Paul Bruns both scored 11. Holt added seven rebounds and five assists.

Holt sank a jumper for South Dakota with 19 seconds left to force the first overtime tied at 81.

Bruner had a four-point play with 10 seconds left to force the second extra period tied at 96. Stewart, who fouled Bruner, missed a 3-pointer with 5 seconds to go.

Georgia lawmakers, in support of Israel, pass bill that would define antisemitism in state law

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia lawmakers passed a bill Thursday that would define antisemitism in state law, with Republicans uniting in support of Israel's war on Hamas and some Democrats splitting over fears of suppressing support for Palestinians.

"Today we can fight a pervasive and escalating threat in our state and fight it together," said Senate President Pro Tem John Kennedy, a Macon Republican who guided the bill to Senate passage, 44-6. The measure had stalled in a Senate committee in 2023.

The House later agreed to changes, voting 129-5 for passage. Republican Gov. Brian Kemp said he would sign the bill, saying it "builds on our commitment to protect Georgians from criminal acts, including those based on hate."

Sponsors say adopting the definition put forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance would help prosecutors and other officials identify hate crimes and illegal discrimination targeting Jewish people. Georgia has a hate crimes law that allows higher criminal penalties for crimes motivated by certain types of bias.

The definition, which is only referred to in the bill, describes antisemitism as "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

Some lawmakers opposed the bill, saying they thought it would be used to censor free speech rights.

"The First Amendment guarantees our rights as citizens to criticize any government, foreign and domestic," said Sen. Nikki Merritt, a Lawrenceville Democrat. "Does our Constitution not mean anything?"

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But supporters say the definition will only come into play after someone has committed a crime.

"This legislation is not about stifling free speech," Kennedy said. "Nor is it about the government stopping someone from simply sharing their views. It is about safeguarding the dignity and the safety of our Jewish friends and neighbors."

In at least eight states nationwide, lawmakers are working on measures to define antisemitism, part of an upsurge of legislation motivated in part by the Israel-Hamas war. Arkansas passed such a law last year. New bills are pending this year in Indiana, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey and South Dakota.

The measure grew only more fraught with the start of the Israel-Hamas war. Some protesters chanting "Free Free Palestine!" were dragged from a committee room by police Monday, prompting one arrest. That came after some Jewish residents of Georgia testified they had experienced a surge of bias incidents, including an antisemitic group that hung a Jewish person in effigy outside a Macon synagogue over the summer.

Ghada Elnajjar, a Palestinian mother from the Atlanta suburb of Alpharetta, said she was concerned the bill could embolden those seeking to stifle criticism of Israel.

She was particularly worried about her sons, saying they have been posting social media messages criticizing Israel for civilian deaths in Gaza. The sons have also worn keffiyehs, the black and white checkered scarfs that symbolize Palestinian solidarity.

The bill "might take a simple thing as wearing a keffiyeh or a social media post and take it a step further and criminalize it and jeopardize my boys' future," she said.

State Rep. John Carson, a Marietta Republican who sponsored the bill, told the House the bill shows "Georgia stands with our friends in the Jewish community." Rep. El-Mahdi Holly, a Stockbridge Democrat and one of Georgia's handful of Muslim lawmakers, retorted, "I wish that was true of Palestinians as well."

Some opponents said Thursday that they didn't want to choose sides in the Israel-Hamas war.

"We can mourn the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian lives," said Sen. Kim Jackson, a Stone Mountain Democrat. "We can both condemn the unacceptable acts of antisemitism that are plaguing the Jewish community around our state and acknowledge that our citizens have the right to voice their dissent about the tremendous harm being visited upon Palestinian civilians."

Some Democrats said that if Georgia moves to define antisemitism, then it should also define what prejudice against Muslims, African Americans or LGBTQ+ people looks like.

"If we're going to define antisemitism in the law, then there a lot of other groups that experience racism, and they should also have definitions," said Sen. Sally Harrell, an Atlanta Democrat who didn't vote on the bill.

But other Democrats said they wanted to support Jewish constituents and allies, with some recalling the historic support of Jewish people in the struggle for Black civil rights.

"The Jewish community stood hand-in-hand with us," said Senate Minority Gloria Butler, a Stone Mountain Democrat. "Today I return their favor and stand with them."

South Dakota Senate OKs measure for work requirement to voter-passed Medicaid expansion

By JACK DURA Associated Press

Many low-income people in South Dakota would need to have a job in order to get Medicaid health care coverage, under a requirement that passed the Republican-led state Senate on Thursday.

The resolution next heads to the GOP-led House, after passing the Senate in a 28-4 vote.

South Dakota Republican lawmakers want to add the work requirement for people who are not physically or mentally disabled, and who are eligible for an expansion of the government-sponsored program that voters approved in 2022. The change, which took effect last summer, greatly increased the number of people who qualify for Medicaid.

The work requirement would still need to be approved by voters in November, and the federal government would then have to sign off on it.

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The 2022 constitutional amendment expanded Medicaid eligibility to people who earn up to 138% of the federal poverty level, which the state Department of Social Services says is up to \$41,400 for a family of four.

The expansion was previously opposed by both Republican Gov. Kristi Noem and the GOP-controlled Legislature, which defeated a proposed Medicaid expansion earlier in 2022.

"Really, it's a fundamental question," Republican Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree, a prime sponsor of the work requirement, told reporters. "Do we want to incentivize those who can, or are able-bodied, those who can work, to do so? Or do we want to leave a gap where government dependency can become a way of life?"

He asserted that work requirements on other state programs have been successful.

Opponents lamented the work requirement as unnecessary, ineffective at encouraging work and going against the will of the voters — as well as creating more paperwork.

"This is about government bureaucracy," Democratic Senate Minority Leader Reynold Nesiba said. "This is about denying health care to people who otherwise qualify for it."

Republican Sen. John Wiik bemoaned the 2022 measure as "a petition mostly from out-of-state money to put a federal program into our constitution."

"Our hands are effectively tied. We need to go back to the voters every time we want to make a change to this program," he said. "And this is the point we need to learn: Direct democracy doesn't work."

Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen, another prime sponsor, said the resolution is a "clarifying question" that wouldn't reverse the 2022 vote.

"If this amendment was approved, and if the federal government allowed a work requirement, and if we decided we wanted to implement a work requirement, two or three steps down the line from now, we would have to talk about what exemptions are available," Venhuizen told a Senate panel on Wednesday.

The expanded eligibility took effect July 1, 2023. Roughly 18,000 South Dakotans are enrolled in Medicaid expansion, according to state Secretary of Social Services Matt Althoff. Of those, 12,000 are already receiving food assistance, thus meeting a work requirement.

More people are expected to enroll in Medicaid expansion, something the Legislature's budget writers are trying to estimate, Venhuizen said. The 2022 measure was estimated to expand eligibility to 42,500 people.

Two men convicted of kidnapping, carjacking an FBI employee in South Dakota

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A federal jury in South Dakota has convicted two men on charges related to the 2022 kidnapping of an FBI employee.

The jury in Rapid City on Tuesday found 29-year-old Deyvin Morales and 25-year-old Juan Alvarez-Soto guilty of kidnapping, carjacking and other counts, the Rapid City Journal reported. Alvarez-Soto, who is from El Salvador, also was found guilty of unlawfully entering the U.S. after being deported.

Both men face sentencing April 12 and could get up to life in prison.

The men and a third suspect, 29-year-old Karla Lopez-Gutierrez, left Greeley, Colorado, on May 5, 2022, and were on a "drug trafficking trip" to South Dakota in a Ford Expedition, prosecutors said.

The Expedition was chased by a South Dakota trooper at one point before getting away. Nearly out of gas at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Morales told the others they needed to "take over" a new vehicle, Lopez-Gutierrez testified.

A short time later, the FBI employee was speeding in his Dodge Durango when he saw the Expedition and pulled over, believing it was a tribal officer. Prosecutors said the suspects took the Durango at gunpoint and forced the victim to go along.

When the group stopped to buy gas and zip ties at the town of Hermosa, South Dakota, about 22 miles (35 kilometers) from Red Shirt, the victim was able to escape.

Morales and Alvarez-Soto were arrested in Greeley, a week later. Lopez-Gutierrez was arrested in August

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2022 in Loveland, Colorado. She pleaded guilty in August and is scheduled for sentencing Feb. 8.

Alvarez-Soto's defense attorney, Alecia Fuller, cited "a lot of doubt" in the government's case. Fuller said there was no intent to harm the victim.

Jonathan McCoy, the attorney for Morales, said there was no proof that Morales was even present for the crime.

King Charles III is admitted to a hospital for a scheduled prostate operation

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III was admitted to a private London hospital Friday to undergo a "corrective procedure" for an enlarged prostate, Buckingham Palace said.

The 75-year old king will be treated at the London Clinic, where the Princess of Wales is recovering after undergoing abdominal surgery. The king visited Kate at the hospital after he arrived.

"The King was this morning admitted to a London hospital for scheduled treatment," the palace said. "His Majesty would like to thank all those who have sent their good wishes over the past week."

Charles, who acceded to the throne 16 months ago, was diagnosed with the benign condition on Jan. 17 after going for a check-up because he was experiencing symptoms. He canceled engagements and was urged to rest ahead of the procedure.

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 palace said the king was "delighted to learn that his diagnosis is having a positive impact on public health awareness."

Jannik Sinner ends 10-time champion Novak Djokovic's unbeaten streak in Australian Open semifinals

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Jannik Sinner ended 10-time champion Novak Djokovic's perfect semifinal record at the Australian Open, earning a place in a Grand Slam final for the first time on the back of Friday's commanding win.

The 22-year-old Italian broke Djokovic's serve twice in each of the first two sets but missed a match point in the third set before holding on for a 6-1, 6-2, 6-7 (6), 6-3 victory. Djokovic had won all 10 semifinals and all 10 finals he'd played previously on Rod Laver Arena.

Almost an hour after his first match point, Sinner converted his second to complete his third win in four head-to-head encounters since a straight-set loss to Djokovic in last year's Wimbledon semifinals.

"It gives you a better feeling when you know that you can beat one player," Sinner said. "It's always nice to have this kind of player who you can learn from."

"I lost last year in the semifinals in Wimbledon and I learned a lot from that. The confidence from the end of last year has for sure kept the belief."

The youngest player to reach the men's final in Australia since Djokovic's first title in 2008, Sinner will play either third-seeded Daniil Medvedev or No. 6 Alexander Zverev for the championship on Sunday.

Djokovic's bid for a record-extending 11th Australian and 25th major title overall will have to wait.

He hadn't lost a match at Melbourne Park since a fourth-round exit in 2018 and was on a 33-match winning streak at the season's first major.

"He's deservedly in the finals. He outplayed me completely," Djokovic said. "Look, I was, in a way, shocked with my level — in a bad way. There was not much I was doing right in the first two sets."

"Yeah, I guess this is one of the worst Grand Slam matches I've ever played. At least that I remember."

Djokovic didn't get a look at a break point at all — the first time he's experienced that in a completed Grand Slam match.

"That stat says a lot," Djokovic said. "First of all, he was serving very accurately, precise, he was backing his serve very well."

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"There's a lot of negative things that I've done on the court today in terms of my game that I'm not really pleased with in return or, you know, movement or forehand, backhand. Everything, you know, was just subpar."

Sinner took the first two sets in under 1 1/4 hours in an astonishing start to the match against a player who lost only one Grand Slam match last year — the Wimbledon final to Carlos Alcaraz.

Djokovic, as he so often does, picked up his service percentage, cut down his unforced errors and and upped the pressure in the third.

He was serving at 5-5 and at deuce when play was interrupted while a spectator received medical help in the stands. After ambulance officers helped the man walk out, Djokovic held serve and saved a match point at 5-6 in the tiebreaker.

Djokovic won three straight points to force a fourth set, but was immediately in trouble again on his serve.

He fended off three break points to hold from 15-40 down in the second game of the fourth but Sinner got a decisive service break in the fourth game, winning five straight points from 40-0 down to take a 3-1 lead.

Continuous chants of "Nole, Nole, Nole, Nole" echoed around Rod Laver Arena between big points from Djokovic fans encouraging their champion, giving it a football vibe.

It helped lift the intensity of both players.

The chair umpire asked spectators three times to keep quiet with Sinner serving for the match.

The loss to Djokovic at Wimbledon has become a turning point in their rivalry. After losing the first three meetings, Sinner won two of the next three — all in November — in the group stage of the ATP Finals in Turin and in the Davis Cup semifinals.

Sinner was the only player in the final four who didn't drop a set in the tournament, and he spent almost four fewer hours on court through five rounds than Djokovic, who was taken to four sets three times.

Still, the odds were stacked against fourth-seeded Sinner.

But he played calm, nearly flawless tennis in the first two sets and piled pressure on Djokovic's serve in a relatively cool 21 degrees Celsius (70 Fahrenheit) and a light breeze.

The 36-year-old Djokovic missed his first chance to be just the third person in history to win 11 titles at any Grand Slam event — Rafael Nadal has 14 French Open titles and Margaret Court won 11 Australian Open women's titles.

The top UN court is set to issue a preliminary ruling in South Africa's genocide case against Israel

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Israel is set to hear Friday whether the United Nations' top court will order it to end its military offensive in Gaza in a preliminary ruling while the panel hears a case filed by South Africa accusing Israel of genocide.

The International Court of Justice's president, Joan E. Donoghue, will read out the highly anticipated decision taken by a panel of 17 judges.

The ruling comes at an early stage in South Africa's case alleging that Israel's military action in its war with Hamas in Gaza amounts to genocide. Israel vehemently rejects the accusation and has asked the court to throw out the case.

South Africa has asked the judges "as a matter of extreme urgency" to impose so-called provisional measures to protect Palestinians in Gaza while the case proceeds slowly through the court, a process likely to take years.

Top of the South African list is a request for the court to order Israel to "immediately suspend its military operations in and against Gaza."

Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy said Thursday that Israel expects the court to toss out the case.

"We expect the ICJ to throw out these spurious and specious charges," he said.

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An Israeli official said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu huddled with top legal, diplomatic and security officials on Thursday in anticipation of the ruling. He said Israel is confident in its case but discussed "all scenarios." Israel's war cabinet was meeting later Thursday as well. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing confidential meetings.

Marieke de Hoon, an associate professor of international law at the University of Amsterdam, said she doesn't think the court will end the case Friday because the legal bar South Africa has to clear at this early stage in proceedings is lower than if the court decides to rule on the merits of the claim.

"The standard ... is not, has there been genocide? But a lower standard," she said. "Is it plausible that there could have been a risk of genocide that would invoke Israel's responsibility to prevent genocide?"

But De Hoon also does not expect the world court to order an end to Israel's military operation.

"I think that they will shy away from actually calling for a full ceasefire, because I think they will find that beyond their abilities right now," she said in a telephone interview.

Provisional measures by the world court are legally binding, but it is not clear if Israel would comply with any orders the court might make.

European Union foreign policy spokesman Peter Stano said the 27-nation bloc's position is clear: "We respect the ICJ and we are of the opinion that the verdicts and decisions of the ICJ should be respected. This is the highest UN court."

Israel launched its massive air and ground assault on Gaza soon after Hamas militants stormed through Israeli communities on Oct. 7 killing some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and abducting another 250.

Netanyahu has vowed to fight on until his country achieves a "complete victory" over Hamas.

The offensive has come at a high humanitarian cost for Gaza residents. More than 26,000 Palestinians have been killed, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said on Friday, and over 64,000 people have been wounded.

The ministry does not differentiate between combatants and civilians in its death toll, but has said about two-thirds of those killed were women and children.

The Israeli military claims at least 9,000 of those killed in the nearly four-month conflict are Hamas militants.

Israel's massive ground and air assault has also decimated vast swathes of Gaza and driven nearly 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes. Much of northern Gaza, including Gaza City, has been reduced to rubble.

U.N. officials have expressed fears that even more people could die from disease, with at least one-quarter of the population facing starvation.

South Africa's foreign ministry said in a statement Thursday that it was seeking an interim ruling from the world court that "Israel immediately cease its military operations in Gaza, take reasonable measures to prevent the genocide of Palestinians, ensure that the displaced return to their homes and have access to humanitarian assistance, including adequate food, water, fuel, medical and hygiene supplies, shelter and clothing."

It also said Israel should "take necessary steps to punish those involved in the genocide and preserve the evidence of genocide."

South Africa will be represented at the ruling at The Hague by Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor. She spoke with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken by phone on Thursday, according to the State Department.

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Blinken spoke about the need to protect all civilians in the war in Gaza and guarantee that humanitarian assistance reaches Palestinian civilians, while working towards lasting regional peace that "ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of an independent Palestinian state."

"The secretary reaffirmed support for Israel's right to ensure the terrorist attacks of Oct. 7 can never be repeated," Miller said.

The genocide case strikes at the national identity of Israel, which was founded as a Jewish state after the Nazi slaughter of 6 million Jews during World War II.

South Africa's own identity is key to it bringing the case. Its governing party, the African National Con-

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gress, has long compared Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank to its own history under the apartheid regime of white minority rule, which restricted most Black people to "homelands" before ending in 1994.

French President Macron joins India's Republic Day celebrations as chief guest

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Thousands of people lined a ceremonial boulevard in the heart of India's capital on Friday to watch a colorful parade showcasing the country's military power and cultural heritage to mark its 75th Republic Day.

French President Emmanuel Macron attended the parade as the chief guest at the celebration of the adoption of the country's Constitution on Jan. 26, 1950, following India's independence from British colonial rule.

Indian President Draupadi Murmu escorted Macron in a ceremonial British-era horse-drawn carriage from the nearby president's palace to the viewing stand. It was the first time the carriage has been used at the parade since it was abandoned by the government 40 years ago in favor of an automobile.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, wearing a saffron-and-yellow-colored turban representing Hindu nationalist colors, greeted Macron at the viewing stand.

The parade was broadcast live by television networks and watched by millions of Indians across the country.

India traditionally invites foreign leaders to witness the spectacle. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sissi was the guest of honor last year, former French President Francois Hollande in 2016 and former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2015. Ten Southeast Asian leaders watched the parade in 2018.

Tanks, missile systems, infantry combat vehicles and medium-range surface-to-air missile systems were displayed at the parade, with hundreds of police and military personnel marching with them. Stunt performers on motorbikes, including more than 250 women, also joined.

Other participants included a camel-mounted regiment with mustachioed riders led by a shiny brass band.

Floats showcased Hindu Lord Rama, whose temple was inaugurated earlier this week, India's moon lander, its first indigenous aircraft carrier, a light combat aircraft and helicopter, and a submarine.

Macron accepted India's invitation at short notice after U.S. President Joe Biden couldn't make it, reportedly because of his State of the Union address and reelection bid.

A French 30-member band and 90-member marching group joined the parade.

A French transport aircraft and two fighter jets from the French air force joined 54 Indian air force aircraft in a fly-over past the viewing stand.

"A great honor for France. Thank you, India," Macron said on X, formerly called Twitter.

Rajpath Avenue, built by India's former British rulers, has been redeveloped as part of the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of Indian independence three years ago. It is lined by huge lawns, canals and rows of trees and has been renamed Kartavayapath, or Boulevard of Duty.

Live updates | Gaza death toll surpasses 26,000 as Israel awaits a UN court ruling on its offensive

By The Associated Press undefined

The International Court of Justice was set to read out its decision Friday on whether to order Israel to halt its offensive in Gaza as the Health Ministry announced that deaths there had surpassed 26,000 since the Israel-Hamas war began.

South Africa accused Israel of genocide and asked the court in The Hague, Netherlands, for interim orders, including that Israel halt its offensive in Gaza. Israel swiftly rejected the filing and asked the court to throw out the case.

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The Health Ministry in Gaza said Friday that 26,083 people have been killed and more than 64,400 wounded in the enclave since the Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel, when militants from Gaza killed around 1,200 people and took about 250 hostages.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Thursday that Israeli fire struck a crowd of people waiting for humanitarian aid at a roundabout in Gaza City on Thursday, killing at least 20 and wounding 150. The Israeli military says it was looking into the reports.

Currently:

- Israel vows to fight Hamas all the way to Gaza's southern border. That's fueling tension with Egypt.
- How genocide officially became a crime, and why South Africa is accusing Israel of committing it.
- Georgia lawmakers, in support of Israel, pass a bill that would define antisemitism in state law.
- The U.S. and the U.K. sanction four Yemeni Houthi leaders over Red Sea shipping attacks.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

MORE THAN 26,000 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KILLED IN GAZA SINCE THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR STARTED, HEALTH MINISTRY SAYS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The number of Palestinians killed in Gaza since the start of the Israel-Hamas war has surpassed 26,000, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Friday.

The ministry said the total number of dead is 26,083, with 64,487 Palestinians wounded since the start of the war on Oct. 7. The ministry does not differentiate between combatants and civilians in its death toll, but has said about two-thirds of those killed were women and children.

In the past 24 hours, 183 people were killed and 377 others were injured, ministry spokesperson Ashraf al-Qidra said in a statement.

Israel's blistering ground and air offensive has decimated vast swaths of Gaza during the nearly 4-month-old war. The conflict broke out on Oct. 7 when Hamas militants stormed southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted some 250.

SOUTH AFRICA ISSUES A STATEMENT AHEAD OF THE INTERNATIONAL COURT'S INTERIM RULING EXPECTED FRIDAY

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — South Africa's foreign ministry said in a statement that it was seeking an interim ruling that "Israel immediately cease its military operations in Gaza, take reasonable measures to prevent the genocide of Palestinians, ensure that the displaced return to their homes and have access to humanitarian assistance, including adequate food, water, fuel, medical and hygiene supplies, shelter and clothing."

The statement late Thursday also said Israel should "take necessary steps to punish those involved in the genocide and preserve the evidence of genocide." Israel has denied the allegations of genocide.

South Africa will be represented at the ruling at The Hague by Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor, who spoke with United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken by phone Thursday, according to the State Department. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Blinken spoke about the need to protect civilians in the war in Gaza and ensure there was humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians, while working toward lasting regional peace that "ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of an independent Palestinian state."

"The secretary reaffirmed support for Israel's right to ensure the terrorist attacks of Oct. 7 can never be repeated," Miller said.

Gaza's Health Ministry blames Israeli troops for deadly shooting as crowd waited for aid

By NAJIB JOBAIN, JACK JEFFERY and LEE KEATH Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Gaza's Health Ministry and witnesses said Israeli troops opened fire as a crowd of Palestinians gathered for humanitarian aid in Gaza City on Thursday, killing at least 20 and wounding dozens.

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The Israeli military said it was looking into the reports. The Associated Press could not independently confirm the details of what happened.

Witnesses and health officials said the shooting took place at a roundabout on Gaza City's southern edge, where a large crowd had gathered for distribution of food. Footage posted online and confirmed to have been taken on the main road near the roundabout showed hundreds of people fleeing, some carrying boxes of aid, as shots rang out in the background. Men loaded wounded Palestinians onto horse and donkey carts that took off charging down the avenue.

At Shifa Hospital, where casualties were treated, Mohammad al-Reafi lay on the floor, his bloodied leg bandaged, as medics worked on other wounded around them. He said Israeli troops fired into the crowd.

"We were going to get flour ... young people were martyred and other young people were injured," he said. Health Ministry spokesperson Ashraf al-Qidra said 20 people were killed and 150 others wounded by the shooting.

A number of aid agencies distribute food and other supplies in Gaza. It was not immediately known which one was operating in the area at the time of the incident. The United Nations refugee agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, and the U.N. World Food Program both said they were not involved.

Israeli troops and tanks pushed into Gaza City shortly after the ground invasion began in October and have been battling Palestinian militants there for nearly two months. The military says it has largely dismantled Hamas in northern Gaza but is still facing pockets of resistance, and large swaths of Gaza City and surrounding areas have been reduced to rubble by Israeli bombardment.

The U.N. has said it has been struggling to deliver aid to the north amid Israeli restrictions and continued fighting. Several hundred thousand people are believed to remain in the north after most of the population fled south. U.N. officials say a quarter of Gaza's population of 2.3 million are facing starvation.

Israel launched its offensive in Gaza vowing to destroy Hamas after the Oct. 7 cross-border attack in which the militants killed around 1,200 people and abducted around 250 others. One of the largest air and ground campaigns in recent history, the assault has killed over 25,900 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Its count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants, but the ministry says most of the dead are women and minors. It says the real toll is higher because many casualties were buried under the rubble or are in areas where medics can't reach them.

Israel blames the high civilian toll on Hamas because the militant group positions fighters, rocket launchers and tunnels in dense, residential neighborhoods. The military says it has killed thousands of militants, without providing the basis for its count, and that 219 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza offensive.

For weeks, heavy fighting has raged as Israeli troops push into the southern city of Khan Younis and in a cluster of built-up refugee camps in central Gaza that date back to the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

The death toll from a strike on a crowded U.N. shelter in Khan Younis on Wednesday has risen to 12, with over 75 wounded, according to Thomas White, a senior official with the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA. He said 15 of the wounded were in critical condition.

UNRWA says two tank shells hit a building in a carpentry training center housing thousands of displaced Palestinians on Wednesday, causing the building to catch fire. It did not directly blame Israel, which is the only party to the conflict that has tanks.

The Israeli military said it has "currently ruled out" that the strike was carried out by its aircraft or artillery but was still investigating. It says the building might have been hit by a Hamas rocket.

Fighting has cut off the two main hospitals, Nasser and Al Amal, trapping hundreds of patients and thousands of displaced people inside. White said another hospital, Al-Khair, was evacuated overnight and that among the patients who departed were women who had just undergone cesarean sections.

Israeli troops earlier in the week seized Al-Khair hospital, which is located in a coastal zone near Khan Younis that the military had previously said was a safe zone for Palestinians.

Thousands of Palestinians fled Khan Younis toward the Mediterranean coast Thursday to escape the

fighting. Two women who spoke with the Associated Press said they were among a number of people that Israeli troops forced to evacuate from a school where they had been sheltering.

"Suddenly, they started calling from the microphones to evacuate the site within half an hour," said one of the women, Amal, who said she gave birth three days earlier and fled the school with her newborn. "Now we are here, not knowing where to go," she said. The troops detained young men at the school for interrogation, she said.

The Israeli military said its troops were engaging in close, urban combat with Hamas fighters in neighborhoods of Khan Younis, calling in airstrikes and attack helicopters to hit militants spotted with RPGs and weapons.

Footage released by the military showed paratroopers charging into the city's municipal building, which was battered and punctured from shelling, while the area around it was reduced to dirt mounds. The soldiers scoured through empty offices and fired out of windows.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to press ahead with the offensive until "complete victory" over Hamas, and to return all the hostages. The United States, Israel's top ally, has provided crucial military support and shielded it from international calls for a cease-fire while urging it to scale back operations and facilitate the delivery of more humanitarian aid.

South Africa has accused Israel of committing genocide before the U.N. world court at The Hague, which announced that it would issue a decision Friday on its request for an interim order telling Israel to halt the hostilities.

Alabama execution using nitrogen gas, the first ever, again puts US at front of death penalty debate

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

ATMORE, Ala. (AP) — A man who was paid \$1,000 to kill an Alabama woman more than 30 years ago was put to death with pure nitrogen gas, a first-of-its-kind execution that again placed the U.S. at the forefront of the debate over capital punishment.

Kenneth Eugene Smith, 58, appeared to shake and convulse at the start before being pronounced dead at 8:25 p.m. Thursday at an Alabama prison after breathing the gas through a face mask to cause oxygen deprivation. It marked the first time a new execution method was used in the United States since 1982, when lethal injection was introduced and later became the most common method.

Smith appeared conscious for several minutes into the procedure. For at least two minutes, Smith made seizure-like movements on the gurney that sometimes had him pulling against the restraints. That was followed by several minutes of labored breathing. He was pronounced dead after 22 minutes.

In a final statement, Smith said: "Tonight Alabama causes humanity to take a step backwards. ... I'm leaving with love, peace and light." He made the "I love you sign" with his hands toward family members who were witnesses. "Thank you for supporting me. Love, all of you," Smith said.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said the execution was justice for the murder-for-hire killing of 45-year-old Elizabeth Sennett in 1988.

"After more than 30 years and attempt after attempt to game the system, Mr. Smith has answered for his horrendous crimes. ... I pray that Elizabeth Sennett's family can receive closure after all these years dealing with that great loss," Ivey said in a statement.

The state had previously attempted to execute Smith in 2022, but the lethal injection was called off at the last minute because authorities couldn't connect an IV line.

The state had maintained the new execution method would be humane, but critics called it cruel and experimental. Those disagreements continued after Smith was put to death.

Mike Sennett, the victim's son, noted Thursday night that Smith "had been incarcerated almost twice as long as I knew my mom."

"Nothing happened here today is going to bring Mom back. It's kind of a bittersweet day. We are not going to be jumping around, whooping and holler 'Hooray' and all that. ... I'll end by saying Elizabeth

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Dorlene Sennett got her justice tonight," he said.

Asked about Smith's shaking and convulsing on the gurney, Alabama corrections Commissioner John Q. Hamm, who watched the execution, said they appeared to be involuntary movements and the type of breathing that comes with not getting enough oxygen.

"That was all expected and was in the side effects that we've seen or researched on nitrogen hypoxia," Hamm said. "Nothing was out of the ordinary from what we were expecting." He said he thought Smith might have been holding his breath at the start of the execution.

However, Smith's spiritual adviser, the Rev. Jeff Hood, said the execution did not match the state attorney general's prediction in court filings that Smith would lose consciousness in seconds followed by death within minutes.

"We didn't see somebody go unconscious in 30 seconds. What we saw was minutes of someone struggling for their life," said Hood, who attended the execution. "I stood there and cried as I saw someone get suffocated to death," he added.

The execution came after a last-minute legal battle in which Smith's attorneys contended the state was making him the test subject for an experimental execution method that could violate the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Federal courts rejected Smith's bid to block it, with the latest ruling coming Thursday night from the U.S. Supreme Court.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who along with two other liberal justices dissented, wrote: "Having failed to kill Smith on its first attempt, Alabama has selected him as its 'guinea pig' to test a method of execution never attempted before. The world is watching."

The majority justices did not issue any statements.

State Attorney General Steve Marshall said late Thursday that nitrogen gas "was intended to be — and has now proved to be — an effective and humane method of execution."

Some doctors and organizations had expressed alarm about the method, and Smith's attorneys asked the Supreme Court to halt the execution to review claims that it violates the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment and deserved more legal scrutiny before it was used on a person.

"There is little research regarding death by nitrogen hypoxia. When the State is considering using a novel form of execution that has never been attempted anywhere, the public has an interest in ensuring the State has researched the method adequately and established procedures to minimize the pain and suffering of the condemned person," Smith's attorneys wrote.

In her dissent, Sotomayor said Alabama has shrouded its execution protocol in secrecy, releasing only a heavily redacted version. She also said Smith should have been allowed to obtain evidence about the protocol and to proceed with his legal challenge.

In his final hours, Smith met with family members and his spiritual adviser, according to a prison spokesperson. He ate a last meal of T-bone steak, hash browns, toast and eggs slathered in A1 steak sauce, Hood said by telephone before the execution was carried out.

Smith was strapped to a gurney in the execution chamber — the same one where he was strapped down for several hours during the 2022 lethal injection attempt. He had a blue-rimmed respirator facemask covering his entire face. Hamm, the corrections commissioner, confirmed afterward that the nitrogen gas flowed for about 15 minutes. The state protocol called for the nitrogen gas to flow for at least 15 minutes or "five minutes following a flatline indication on the EKG, whichever is longer,"

Some states are looking for new ways to execute people because the drugs used in lethal injections have become difficult to find. Three states — Alabama, Mississippi and Oklahoma — have authorized nitrogen hypoxia as an execution method, but no state had attempted to use the method until now.

Smith's attorneys had raised concerns that he could choke to death on his own vomit as the nitrogen gas flowed. The state made a last-minute procedural change so he would not be allowed food in the eight hours beforehand.

Sennett was found dead in her home March 18, 1988, with eight stab wounds in the chest and one on each side of her neck. Smith was one of two men convicted in the killing. The other, John Forrest Parker,

was executed in 2010.

Prosecutors said they were each paid \$1,000 to kill Sennett on behalf of her pastor husband, who was deeply in debt and wanted to collect on insurance. The husband, Charles Sennett Sr., killed himself when the investigation focused on him as a suspect, according to court documents.

Smith's 1989 conviction was overturned, but he was convicted again in 1996. The jury recommended a life sentence by 11-1, but a judge overrode that and sentenced him to death. Alabama no longer allows a judge to override a jury's death penalty decision.

Kerry and Xie exit roles that defined generation of climate action

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United Nations climate summit in Dubai was wrapping up last month when John Kerry went to a meeting with his Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua only to find a surprise waiting for him. Xie's 8-year-old grandson had brought Kerry a card for his 80th birthday.

The lanky American, who had signed the landmark Paris climate accord with his granddaughter on his knee almost a decade earlier, bent down to thank the boy and praise his grandfather, according to someone who described the private encounter on the condition of anonymity.

Just how overheated a planet those two grandchildren half a world apart will inherit has hinged in part on the unusually warm bond between Kerry and Xie, whose relationship for the past decade and a half helped forge the globe's stutter-step progress in curbing climate change. Xie, 74, retired in December, and Kerry recently announced that he's stepping down soon.

It was a partnership that defined one generation's hopes of saving a future one.

At a glance, the two men make an odd pairing. Xie is balding and bespectacled, with a face as round as Kerry's is narrow and angular. Xie got his start in the Chinese countryside during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution before climbing the ranks of the Communist Party in environmental and economic agencies. Kerry is a son of New England privilege and boarding schools who fought in the Vietnam War and later protested against it. He became a politician and a diplomat, marrying into fabulous wealth along the way.

But over the years, Kerry and Xie forged a remarkable level of trust and respect in the world of international climate negotiations. They checked in on each other when they were sick, met each other's families and spent long hours debating, quarreling and compromising in the fight against global warming.

The result was a series of agreements despite rising tensions between the U.S. and China that have even raised fears of war. Kerry and Xie paved the way for progress at international summits that could have otherwise stagnated. Their passports read like a history of modern climate negotiations — Copenhagen, Lima, Paris, Glasgow, Sunnylands, Beijing, Dubai and many stops in between.

Christiana Figueres, a former United Nations climate chief who oversaw the Paris agreement in 2015, said she struggled to think of any parallel in recent history for the rapport between Kerry and Xie in terms of length and impact.

The two "trusted each other, trusted each other's sincerity, trusted each other's attempts, each other's promises," she said.

Before the Paris deal, Earth was on a trajectory for about 3.5 degrees Celsius (6.3 degrees Fahrenheit) of warming over pre-industrial levels, scientists projected. Now Climate Action Tracker projects warming of 2.1 degrees (3.8 degrees Fahrenheit) — if world leaders follow through on their promises, that is.

However, even that level of warming may be catastrophic, and the departures of Kerry and Xie are reshuffling climate diplomacy at a moment when scientists warn that the move toward clean energy is still happening too slowly. Xie's successor has been named, but it's unclear what will happen with Kerry's position.

"If the U.S. and China do not get along with each other, then global climate progress will be delayed," said Li Shuo, an analyst at the Asia Society who previously worked with Greenpeace in Beijing. "It is imperative to kind of align these countries as much as possible if we want to achieve global climate progress."

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Kerry was settling into a new role as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when he traveled to Beijing in 2009. It had been five years since he lost the presidential election to George W. Bush, but now he had a fresh opportunity to shape foreign policy during Barack Obama's administration.

The annual U.N. climate summit was being held in Copenhagen later that year, and Kerry was eager to talk about it with Chinese officials. Xie stood out to Kerry as someone who wanted to lean forward.

There was little progress at first, and the Copenhagen summit was widely viewed as a disappointment. Although China had become the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases around this time, it was reluctant to take any steps that could hinder its economic growth.

When Obama was reelected in 2012, he named Kerry secretary of state. Tackling climate change was a priority, and better relations with China was a key part of the strategy. The deadline was 2015, when the U.N. would hold a highly anticipated summit in Paris.

Todd Stern, then the top U.S. negotiator, described climate talks as "a hard Rubik's Cube," with every turn of the puzzle creating new challenges to solve. He found Xie to be a tough yet amenable interlocutor.

"He laughs, he finds things funny, he jokes back at you," Stern said. "He also gets mad and indignant and all of that."

China was facing environmental problems that were creating political headaches, such as thick smog that choked cities. It was the opening that the U.S. needed to push for progress, and negotiations advanced behind closed doors.

In 2014, Obama traveled to Beijing to announce a surprise bilateral agreement with President Xi Jinping. The U.S. set a more ambitious target for reducing emissions by 2025, while China promised to peak emissions by 2030.

Stern said the deal "ricocheted around the climate world" and convinced countries that "we can actually get this done."

The importance of the deal became evident one month later. International negotiators were in Lima, Peru, to lay the groundwork for Paris, but they kept getting stuck. Figueres said Xie came to her office at 3 a.m. and asked, "Can we talk?"

Xie urged Figueres to use the earlier agreement between the U.S. and China to help break the gridlock. She spent the next two hours shuttling between the two countries' delegations until a deal was reached.

The next year, the Paris summit produced a milestone agreement by obligating all countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, creating the foundation for every subsequent negotiation over climate change.

It was the relationship with China, Kerry said afterward, that helped "change the paradigm."

The warm feelings were short-lived. Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, and he promptly withdrew the U.S. from the Paris agreement after taking office. Kerry and Xie stepped away from government service.

The hiatus lasted four years. When Joe Biden defeated Trump in 2020, he asked Kerry to serve as special envoy for climate negotiations.

Xi responded by calling Xie out of retirement, seen as a clear signal that Beijing was ready to work together again.

"If your president hadn't wanted you to come back, I wouldn't have come back either," Xie told Kerry, according to a person who requested anonymity to discuss a private conversation. "I'll be here roughly as long as you're here."

Despite Kerry and Xie's rapport, it was slow going. The coronavirus pandemic made it difficult to travel. And even with Trump gone, tensions remained. Biden described China as a top foreign policy challenge, and disputes piled up over intellectual property, maritime access in the South China Sea and the future of Taiwan.

"These kind of things complicate the conversation," said Jonathan Pershing, who worked for Kerry then and is now the environment program director at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. (The foundation also supports The Associated Press' coverage of climate change.)

Kerry and Xie stayed in touch informally even after Beijing cut off communications with the U.S. after

then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in 2022. Although the island governs itself as a democracy, China views it as part of its territory.

More hurdles were around the corner. First Kerry was waylaid by COVID-19 during the U.N. summit in Egypt. Xie checked in, asking Kerry's staff "how is my brother John doing," according to a person briefed on the conversations.

Then Xie suffered his own health problems, believed to be a stroke, and Kerry returned the favor by calling and sending written messages.

"They obviously didn't agree a lot of the time," said John Podesta, a climate policy veteran who works in the White House. "You could only take a personal relationship so far."

However, Podesta said, "having that level of trust and dialogue was important."

Their work culminated in November, when Kerry and Xie met at the Sunnylands resort in California. China agreed to include methane, a particularly potent greenhouse gas, as part of its emissions target.

The next month was their final U.N. summit in Dubai, which ended with a global agreement to transition away from fossil fuels. It was a better outcome than expected for a summit hosted by the oil-producing United Arab Emirates, but not the aggressive move that some wanted at a time of record temperatures.

When the negotiations were over, Kerry and Xie held a joint press conference.

Kerry described his counterpart as "a partner in this climate fight with many people for these years." Xie said that "I feel so lucky that I can make such a good friend like Secretary Kerry." Mentioning his grandson, Xie said he hoped "this cause will be carried forward, generation after generation."

There was no hug, but they shook hands warmly. Kerry leaned toward the microphone one more time, cracking his widest smile, to say how impressive the young boy had been — "unbelievable, he's great."

It was the last public moment for the two grandfathers together.

As US brings home large numbers of jailed Americans, some families are still waiting for their turn

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — By any standard, the past 18 months have been remarkable for getting wrongfully detained Americans home. There were major swaps with adversaries like Iran and Russia, including one that secured the freedom of WNBA star Brittney Griner, and a large prisoner exchange just last month with Venezuela.

But Harrison Li has had little to celebrate. Despite the succession of high-profile releases, jubilant family reunions and triumphant photos on government airplanes, his father, Kai, remains detained in China on espionage charges his family says are bogus and politically motivated.

Li, a Stanford University doctoral student, says though he feels "so much joy and happiness" for the other families — many of whom he's become friendly with over the years — "I'd be lying if I didn't say that then the next thought is, you know, when's it our turn?"

He added, "When you see so many folks come home but then you still see your loved one not, then, yeah, there's definitely an element of frustration."

Li is not alone. For all the releases of wrongly detained Americans, several dozen remain imprisoned or held hostage, often by a hostile government. In some instances, there have been few signs of progress, and families have sometimes seen the foreign countries that are holding their loved ones release other detainees — but not yet their relatives.

Those sensitivities are not lost on Roger Carstens, the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs and the Biden administration's public face for matters related to hostages and wrongful detainees — the label applied to Americans jailed in foreign countries on legally specious allegations or for improper motivations.

He handles negotiations with foreign governments and once the deal is done flies out to bring the released prisoner back, routinely telling them that on behalf of the U.S. government, "I'm here to take you home."

"There's always a very short-lived celebration because we still have a lot of work to do to bring other people home," Carstens said in an interview.

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The Biden administration has been notably aggressive in cutting deals, signing off on prisoner exchanges and other concessions that would once have been unthinkable and achieving releases at what advocates say is a historically high level. U.S. officials have called bringing home wrongfully detained Americans a core administration priority even when it brushes up against other foreign policy or law enforcement interests, though in all cases, the ability to get a deal done depends on negotiators reaching mutually agreeable conditions — no small thing for countries who otherwise have little they agree on.

Last month, Venezuela freed 10 Americans and returned to the U.S. for prosecution an indicted Navy contractor known as “Fat Leonard” in exchange for the U.S. releasing an ally of President Nicolas Maduro charged in a money-laundering conspiracy. In September, five Americans jailed for years in Iran walked free in a deal that saw the release of nearly \$6 billion in frozen Iranian assets. Months earlier, Rwanda freed Paul Rusesabagina, who inspired the film “Hotel Rwanda,” after a diplomatic intervention on his behalf by the U.S.

And in 2022, the U.S. swapped an imprisoned Taliban drug lord for an American contractor in Afghanistan, and a notorious Russian arms trafficker for Griner.

As hostage diplomacy has generated front-page news and become a key area of focus — elevated in part by the October capture of scores of hostages in Israel by Hamas — families of detainees have jostled for attention from the U.S. government, including from President Joe Biden himself.

The president has met with some families — he had in-person and virtual conversations with families of American hostages held in Gaza — though some, like Li, are still seeking their first encounter.

Kai Li, a Chinese immigrant who started his own export business in the U.S., was detained in September 2016 after flying into Shanghai. He was placed under surveillance, interrogated without a lawyer and accused of providing state secrets to the FBI. The U.S. government has designated him as wrongfully detained and a United Nations working group has called his 10-year prison sentence arbitrary.

Complicating the matter are diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and China, with Washington and Beijing regarding each other as strategic rivals. Harrison Li regards a November summit between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping as a missed opportunity to more forcefully move his father’s case toward resolution, and wonders what additional steps he can be taking.

“You think, OK, what else can you do? What is something that you’re not doing properly or you could do better or you could do more of?” Li said.

Maryam Kamalmaz has had no trace of her father, Majd Kamalmaz, since the psychologist from Texas was stopped at a checkpoint in Syria in 2017 after traveling there to visit an elderly family member. He remains one of several Americans missing in Syria, including journalist Austin Tice, despite a 2020 visit by Carstens to try to negotiate their release.

“Other families know their loved ones’ condition. They know what’s going on. In my father’s case, there’s been no trial, there’s been no case. There’s nothing against him. He’s just basically disappeared into their system, disappeared completely,” said Kamalmaz.

Part of Carstens’ job involves regular communication with families. Sometimes the updates are cheerful, sometimes they’re painful.

Just before Griner’s release, a representative from his office visited the sister of Paul Whelan, a corporate security executive from Michigan detained in Russia since December 2018, to break the news in person that Griner would be coming home but that Russia had refused to free her brother as part of the swap.

Carstens said deals like that, in which a detainee from one country is released but another is not, are “no small thing” and weigh heavily on his team.

“Unless someone’s coming off a plane, onto a tarmac, in the United States of America and into the arms of their loved ones, we’re not getting a win,” he said.

Whelan’s brother, David, released a statement upon Griner’s release trumpeting her freedom while noting the “public disappointment” of his brother’s continued imprisonment.

In an interview, Whelan said he feels elated when detainees return, though he acknowledged his feelings are more nuanced when it has come to deals with Russia that don’t involve his brother. He laments

that his brother is not home, but also doesn't believe that the U.S. government has diverted resources to other detainees that should have gone to his brother.

Despite the administration's recent spate of success with other detainees, he said he was pragmatic about the absence of an obvious solution.

At the end of the day, Whelan said: "I think the enemy is the Kremlin. And the people who can make the decision (to release him) are in the Kremlin."

Putin opponent offers hope to thousands, although few expect him to win Russian election

By EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

They have lined up by the thousands across Russia in recent days, standing in the bitter cold for a chance to sign petitions to support an unlikely challenger to President Vladimir Putin.

Boris Nadezhdin has become a dilemma for the Kremlin as he seeks to run in the March 17 presidential election. The question now is whether Russian authorities will allow him on the ballot.

The stocky, bespectacled 60-year-old local legislator and academic has struck a chord with the public, openly calling for a halt to the conflict in Ukraine, the end of mobilizing Russian men for the military, and starting a dialogue with the West. He also has criticized the country's repression of LGBTQ+ activism.

"The collection of signatures has gone unexpectedly well for us," Nadezhdin told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday in Moscow. "We didn't expect this, to be honest."

Nadezhdin's name is a form of the Russian word for "hope," and although he is highly unlikely to defeat the still-popular Putin, the lines are a rare sign of protest, defiance and optimism in a country that has seen a harsh crackdown on dissent since its troops rolled into Ukraine nearly two years ago.

Nadezhdin is running as a candidate for the Civic Initiative Party. Because the party is not represented in parliament, he's not guaranteed a spot on the ballot and must collect over 100,000 signatures, with a limit of 2,500 from each of the dozens of the vast country's regions, not just the biggest, more progressive cities.

Putin, who is running as an independent candidate rather than as the candidate of the United Russia ruling party, has collected over 3 million.

Waiting to sign a petition in St. Petersburg, Alexander Rakityansky told AP he went through a "period of apathy when I thought I couldn't do anything." Now, however, he sees Nadezhdin's campaign as a chance to exercise his civil rights.

Originally from Belgorod, the Russian border city hit by repeated Ukrainian attacks, Rakityansky said he backed Nadezhdin so his hometown "doesn't get bombed and people don't die on the streets."

Online videos have shown queues of supporters not just in Moscow and St. Petersburg but also in Krasnodar in the south, Saratov and Voronezh in the southwest and beyond the Ural Mountains in Yekaterinburg.

Even in the Far East city of Yakutsk, 450 kilometers (280 miles) south of the Arctic Circle, Nadezhdin's team said up to 400 people a day braved temperatures that plunged to minus 40 Celsius (minus 40 Fahrenheit) to sign petitions.

"Our weather conditions are not perfect and it's generally accepted that it's difficult to involve people in the north in some kind of activity, but people are coming every day," said Alexei Popov, the head of Nadezhdin's election team in Yakutsk. He said they had initially expected about 500 signatures in total for the entire region.

At a petition collection site in Moscow, Kirill Savenkov, 48, said he supported Nadezhdin because of his stand on Ukraine and peace negotiations.

Others said they wanted a real alternative to Putin, who they suggested had led the country into a dead end.

"The economy is really falling, people are getting poorer and prices are rising," said Anna, 21, of St. Petersburg, who refused to give her full name because she feared for her security. Putin, she said, has not done "anything good for the country."

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Nadezhdin's campaign got a boost after opposition leaders abroad, including former tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky and supporters of imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny, urged Russians to support any candidate who could deny Putin a share of the vote.

Exiled opposition activist Maxim Katz said on YouTube that whatever the outcome, Nadezhdin's candidacy shows "there is one thing we know right now: Conversations about civic apathy in Russia are very far from reality. What we have is not civic apathy but a civic famine — an enormous hidden potential."

Some analysts say the surge of support for Nadezhdin has surprised even the Kremlin, although Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that "we don't see him as a rival."

Analysts say the election's outcome is a foregone conclusion and that Putin will stay in power for another six years, but some also suggest it's still a moment of genuine political risk for the Kremlin, which must project an aura of legitimacy for the balloting to be seen as a genuine contest.

For Putin to win a convincing victory, he needs his supporters to turn out and his critics must stay home with no "glimmer of hope," said Ekatarina Schulmann, a political scientist and nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin.

"This is why Nadezhdin is such a problem," she said in an interview. "He provides a shadow of hope."

Nadezhdin's supporters lining up in Moscow and St. Petersburg told AP it gave them the rare opportunity to be with like-minded people who want a different leader from Putin, 71, who has ruled Russia for 24 years.

"I understood that these are the people who want to change the current government and I want to be a part of this," said Margarita, a 28-year-old student who also declined to give her surname for fear of retribution.

So far, Russia's Central Election Commission has approved three candidates who were nominated by parties represented in parliament that largely support Kremlin policies: Nikolai Kharitonov of the Communist Party, Leonid Slutsky of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and Vladislav Davankov of the New People Party. Kharitonov ran against Putin in 2004, finishing a distant second.

In December, authorities barred from the ballot Yekatarina Duntsova, a former regional lawmaker who had called for peace in Ukraine. The commission cited technical errors in her paperwork.

Duntsova was probably barred because authorities "don't know her, and so in their terms she is unpredictable. And above all they dislike unpredictable things," Schulmann said.

Although there have been claims that Nadezhdin secretly has the Kremlin's approval to run and is seen as kind of a spoiler candidate, he still could be ruled ineligible.

He has appeared as a pundit on Russian television and even criticized the conflict in Ukraine during a talk show on state-controlled NTV in September 2022 — a rare level of visibility not enjoyed by other opposition politicians such as Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza, both now imprisoned.

In that appearance, Nadezhdin said Putin was misled by intelligence services that apparently told him Ukrainian resistance would be brief and ineffective.

In his AP interview, Nadezhdin said he believes he has been allowed to run because he is a known entity and has not specifically criticized Putin.

"I personally know Putin," he said, saying he met him before he became president in 2000, adding that in the 1990s, he was an assistant to then-Prime Minister Sergey Kiriyenko, now Putin's first deputy chief of staff.

Schulmann said that while authorities could allow Nadezhdin to run, it's a "dangerous gamble."

"I think they will cut him off at the next stage when he brings those signatures," she said, suggesting the Central Election Commission could declare some of them invalid and bar him from the ballot. She suggested authorities could also threaten him and his team with prison if he later urged his supporters to protest.

The election is the first since Putin annexed four Ukrainian regions and the first in which online voting will be used nationwide. Critics suggest that both are opportunities to rig results in favor of Putin — something the Kremlin has denied it will do.

No matter what the actual outcome, some analysts and political opponents suggest that the sight of those lining up in the cold for Nadezhdin reveals more about Russia today than the vote itself.

Although Nadezhdin indicated he believes Putin's team did not initially perceive him as a risk, he said

"the Kremlin administrators are now in a difficult position."

If he were in their shoes, he said, "I would now be thinking, 'Why did we let him do this?'"

A day after Trump testifies, lawyers have final say in E. Jean Carroll defamation trial

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Closing arguments are to begin Friday in the defamation case against Donald Trump a day after the former president left a New York courtroom fuming that he hadn't been given an opportunity to refute E. Jean Carroll's sexual abuse accusations.

Lawyers will get to sum up their cases for nine jurors who will start deliberating later in the day whether Carroll, a former advice columnist, is entitled to more than the \$5 million she was awarded in a separate trial last year.

The final remarks from the lawyers come a day after Trump managed to sneak past a federal judge's rules severely limiting what he could say during his turn on the witness stand, which wound up lasting just 3 minutes.

"She said something that I considered to be a false accusation," Trump said, later adding: "I just wanted to defend myself, my family and, frankly, the presidency." The jury was told by Judge Lewis A. Kaplan to disregard both remarks.

A different jury last May concluded that Trump sexually abused Carroll in the spring of 1996 in the changing room of a luxury Manhattan department store. It also found that he defamed her in 2022 by claiming she made up the allegation to sell a memoir.

Trump, the Republican frontrunner in this year's presidential election, has long regretted his decision not to testify at that trial, blaming his lawyers for bad advice.

The jury in this new trial has been told that it is there for a limited purpose.

Kaplan will instruct jurors on the law before they deliberate, telling them that they must accept the verdict reached last year and only determine whether additional damages are owed for statements Trump made in June 2019 while he was president. The claims had been delayed for years by court appeals.

Carroll's lawyers seek over \$10 million in compensatory and punitive damages. Trump attorney Alina Habba has argued against damages, saying Carroll's association with Trump had given her the fame she craved and that death threats she received cannot be blamed on Trump's remarks.

Carroll, 80, testified at last year's trial that she had a chance encounter with Trump at a Bergdorf Goodman store that was flirtatious and lighthearted until Trump cornered her in a changing room. Her claim that Trump raped her was rejected by last year's jury, though it agreed she was sexually abused.

Last week, Carroll testified that her career was shattered by Trump's statements about her claims over the last five years, most recently on the campaign trail for president. She said she bought bullets for a gun she inherited from her father and installed an electronic fence around her home.

On Thursday, Trump testified that he stood "100%" behind comments he made in an October 2002 deposition in which he denied Carroll's accusations, calling her "sick" and a "whack job."

Kaplan intends to instruct jurors Friday that the jury last year concluded that Trump had digitally penetrated Carroll in the department store, but the same jury did not find that he had raped her, according to how rape is defined under New York state law.

Trump attorney Michael Madaio argued at a conference Thursday between lawyers and the judge that Kaplan should not tell jurors specifically what sexual abuse Carroll had alleged because it was "completely unnecessary and inflammatory."

The judge rejected the argument.

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

Finns go to the polls Sunday to elect a new president at a time of increased tension with Russia

By JARI TANNER Associated Press

HELSINKI (AP) — Finns will vote Sunday to elect a new president at an unprecedented time: the Nordic nation is now a NATO member following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its eastern border with Russia is closed, both almost unthinkable a few years ago.

Unlike in most European countries, the president of Finland holds executive power in formulating foreign and security policy, particularly when dealing with countries outside the European Union like the United States, Russia and China.

"Clearly, the main task of the president is to steer foreign policy," said Teivo Teivainen, professor of world politics at the University of Helsinki.

Some 4.5 million citizens are eligible to vote for Finland's new head of state from an array of nine candidates — six men and three women — and pick a successor to hugely popular President Sauli Niinistö, whose second six-year term expires in March. He is not eligible for re-election.

Recent polls suggest that former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb, 55, and ex-Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, 65, are the top contenders in Sunday's first round of voting. None of the candidates are expected get more than 50% of the vote, pushing the race into a runoff in February.

Stubb, who headed the Finnish government in 2014-2015, and Haavisto, who is running for the post for the third time, are both estimated to gather 23%-27% of the votes, followed by Parliament speaker and far-right politician Jussi Halla-aho with around 18%. Bank of Finland governor Olli Rehn was expected to receive about a 14% share of the votes.

A brief look at a map shows why foreign and security policy matters are important political themes in this northern European country of 5.6 million people: Finland shares a 1,340-kilometer (832-mile) border with Russia.

Candidate debates on television and media coverage have largely focused on Finland's new role as a member of NATO, as well as the situation in neighboring Russia and its effects on Finland's security. The war in Ukraine — where Finland is among the top European providers of military and humanitarian aid to Kyiv — and Israel's war with Hamas in the Middle East have also emerged as key topics in the race.

Teivainen, the professor, said the head of state's overall influence in Finland has strengthened due to its NATO membership and the growing importance of security issues in recent years, not least because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has deeply affected Finns.

Abandoning decades of military non-alignment, which guaranteed pragmatic and friendly relations with Moscow ever since the end of World War II, Helsinki opted to join NATO in May 2022 together with Nordic neighbor Sweden. The government's decision, endorsed by Niinistö and strongly supported by the citizenry, was a direct result of Moscow's assault on Ukraine, which started on Feb. 24 the same year.

Finland became the Western military alliance's 31st member in April last year, much to the annoyance of Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

NATO membership and a war raging a mere 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) away from Finland's border "stresses the security policy dimension" in the duties of the president, who also acts as the supreme commander of the Finnish military, Teivainen said.

"The threat of war is now a much more concrete thing," he said.

Compared to the previous election in 2018, the geopolitical status of Finland — which for decades maintained a careful balancing act between the East and the West — has made an about-face and presidential candidates have focused in their speeches on the nation's new role as a NATO front-line country.

Under the Finnish Constitution, the president decides on foreign and security policy issues together with the government. He or she also appoints the prime minister and government members, signs bills into law, and acts as a moral leader of the nation on major issues.

In a practice that has become a rule during the reign of Niinistö, Finland's president since 2012, the prime minister, currently Petteri Orpo, focuses on EU issues in the foreign policy arena, while the president deals

with other countries and largely stays out of domestic politics.

Niinistö has won praise among Finns for maintaining close ties and seeking dialogue with his counterparts in Moscow, Washington and Beijing to help the Nordic nation punch above its weight and bring attention to its positions.

Since the start of Moscow's Ukraine assault nearly two years ago, the Finnish president's ties to Putin have ceased to exist. Moscow has harassed Finland with a range of retaliatory measures — apparently due to its NATO membership and Helsinki's enhanced military cooperation with Washington — from cyber attacks to threats of Russia's increased military activity in the Baltic Sea region.

"It's utterly important for us to keep connection not only with the United States but also with China and, as soon as it's realistic, with Russia," Niinistö told Finnish public broadcaster YLE earlier this month.

Late last year, Finland closed its border with Russia after some 1,300 migrants without proper documentation or visas arrived across the frontier just months after Finland joined NATO.

With such "hybrid warfare" Helsinki suspects Moscow is trying to undermine the Nordic country's security by sending undocumented migrants across the frontier — a claim that the Kremlin denies.

Finland acts as the European Union's external border in the north and makes up a significant part of NATO's northeastern flank.

All eight Finland-Russia border crossing points for passengers have been closed since Dec. 15. The southeastern rail checkpoint for cargo trains in Vainikkala remains open for now.

Schools are using surveillance tech to catch students vaping, snaring some with harsh punishments

By JACQUELINE MUNIS and ELLA McCARTHY

When Aaliyah Iglesias was caught vaping at a Texas high school, she didn't realize how much could be taken from her.

Suddenly, the rest of her high school experience was threatened: being student council president, her role as debate team captain and walking at graduation. Even her college scholarships were at risk. She was sent to the district's alternative school for 30 days and told she could have faced criminal charges.

Like thousands of other students around the country, she was caught by surveillance equipment that schools have installed to crack down on electronic cigarettes, often without informing students.

Schools nationwide have invested millions of dollars in the monitoring technology, including federal COVID-19 emergency relief money meant to help schools through the pandemic and aid students' academic recovery. Marketing materials have noted the sensors, at a cost of over \$1,000 each, could help fight the virus by checking air quality.

This story is a collaboration between student journalists at Stanford University and the University of Missouri, in partnership with The Associated Press.

E-cigarettes have inundated middle and high schools. The devices can dispense vapor containing higher concentrations of nicotine than tobacco cigarettes. Millions of minors report vaping despite efforts to limit sales to kids by raising the legal age to 21 and ban flavored products preferred by teenagers.

Some districts pair the sensors with surveillance cameras. When activated by a vaping sensor, those cameras can capture every student leaving the bathroom.

It can surprise students that schools even have such technology. Iglesias, who graduated in May from Tyler High School in Tyler, Texas, first learned it had sensors after an administrator came into a restroom as students started vaping.

"I was in awe," Iglesias said. The administrator tried to figure out who was involved but ultimately let all the students go.

The episode that got her in trouble happened elsewhere in Texas, at Athens High School, where her debate team was competing last February. Iglesias went into a bathroom to vape. Later that day, her

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coach told her she had been caught.

"I decided to partake in something that I'm not proud of, but I did it," Iglesias said, adding that her senior year was a stressful time and a close relative of hers was about to come out of jail. "I had had a lot of personal stuff building up outside."

She immediately was pulled from the debate tournament and her coach told her she could face charges because she was 18. She was sent to her district's alternative school for 30 days, which was the minimum punishment for students caught vaping under Tyler schools' zero-tolerance policy.

Students found vaping also can receive a misdemeanor citation and be fined up to \$100. Students found with vapes containing THC, the chemical that makes marijuana users feel high, can be arrested on felony charges. At least 90 students in Tyler have faced misdemeanor or felony charges.

The Tyler district declined to comment on the disciplinary actions, saying in a written statement that tracking of vape usage addresses a problem that is hurting children's health.

"The vape detectors have been efficient in detecting when students are vaping, allowing us to address the issue immediately," the school system said.

A leading provider, HALO Smart Sensors, sells 90% to 95% of its sensors to schools. The sensors don't have cameras or record audio but can detect increases in noise in a school bathroom and send a text alert to school officials, said Rick Cadiz, vice president of sales and marketing for IPVideo, the maker of the HALO sensors.

The sensors are marketed primarily for detecting vape smoke or THC but also can monitor for sounds such as gunshots or keywords indicating possible bullying.

"What we're seeing with the districts is they're stopping the vaping in the schools with this, but then we don't want a \$1,000 paperweight that the school invests for no other uses, right?" Cadiz said. "We want it to be a long-term investment."

During the pandemic, HALO noted on its website that monitoring indoor air quality was an approved use for federal COVID relief money.

"With the HALO Smart Sensor, you can combat COVID-19 in your schools and create a safe work and learning environment, while also reaping the benefits of vape detection, security monitoring, and more," the company said.

Schools now also can use some of the nearly \$440 million Juul Labs is paying to settle a lawsuit claiming it marketed its products to youth, Cadiz said.

The company is aware of privacy concerns around the sensors, Cadiz said.

"All it's doing is alerting that something's going on," he said. "You need someone to physically investigate the alert that comes out."

The sensors do not always work as administrators hope.

At San Dieguito Union High School District in California, the vape smoke was so thick in bathrooms some students found it unbearable. In a pilot program, the district installed vape sensors in bathrooms and cameras outside the doors.

"In a way it was too successful," said Michael Allman, a district board member who explained the sensors went off so frequently that administrators felt it was useless to review security footage each time.

On social media, students around the country describe ways to outsmart the sensors. Some report covering them in plastic wrap. Others say they blow the smoke into their clothes.

At the Coppell Independent School District in Texas, sensors are part of a prevention strategy that includes educational videos and a tip line. Students can receive \$50 for reporting vaping by peers and "they were turning each other in right and left," said Jennifer Villines, the district's director of student and staff services.

Students can be sent to an alternative school or serve in-school suspensions but are not expelled for vaping, she said.

"We want our kids here. If they're not here, they're not learning," Villines said. "We also feel like in some cases, behaviors such as these are coping mechanisms, and we want to keep them in our environment where they learn to self-regulate."

The consequences for Iglesias included having to step down as student council president and debate captain and leaving the National Honor Society. At the alternative school where she spent a month, students do regular coursework but do not attend classes and are not guaranteed to have the materials included in their normal classes.

Iglesias was still able to attend prom, walk at graduation and stay in most of her clubs. She also kept her college scholarship and now attends Tyler Junior College.

For her, the punishments for vaping have gone too far.

"The people that make these policies and implement these things sit in a room and do not walk the campuses or see the results, the consequences to these policies that they're making to actually ensure that it's working, because it's not," Iglesias said. "I'm never going to do something like that again, because the repercussions I faced were horrible."

Republican National Committee pulls resolution declaring Trump as the 'presumptive 2024 nominee'

By MEG KINNARD. JILL COLVIN and THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — The Republican National Committee has pulled a resolution to consider declaring Donald Trump the party's "presumptive 2024 nominee" before he formally clinches the requisite number of delegates, a person familiar with the decision said Thursday.

News of the withdrawal came shortly after Trump posted on his Truth Social site that, while he "greatly" appreciated the notion, he felt, "for the sake of PARTY UNITY, that they should NOT go forward with this plan, but that I should do it the 'Old Fashioned' way, and finish the process off AT THE BALLOT BOX."

The measure, according to a draft obtained Thursday by The Associated Press, had said it "declares President Trump as our presumptive 2024 nominee for the office of President of the United States and from this moment forward moves into full general election mode welcoming supporters of all candidates as valued members of Team Trump 2024."

The withdrawal was confirmed by a person familiar with the decision who was not authorized to publicly discuss the proposal and spoke on condition of anonymity Thursday night.

If approved, the measure would have further solidified Trump's control of the party and its operation at a time when former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley is still competing against Trump for the GOP nomination.

RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel had earlier signaled her approval for the resolution. On Tuesday, after Haley finished second to Trump in New Hampshire, McDaniel said that while she felt the former ambassador had "run a great campaign," Republicans "need to unite around our eventual nominee, which is going to be Donald Trump."

The resolution had been expected to be discussed at the RNC's winter meeting in Las Vegas next week, even though only two states have voted and the former president had nowhere near the requisite number of delegates to secure the nomination.

Haley's camp said Thursday that it wasn't up to the RNC to decide who the GOP nominee would be.

"Who cares what the RNC says? We'll let millions of Republican voters across the country decide who should be our party's nominee, not a bunch of Washington insiders," said campaign spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas.

The AP has a policy to not refer to any candidate as the "presumptive nominee" until he or she has captured the number of delegates needed to win a majority vote at the national party conventions this summer. The earliest that could happen is March.

But there were no party rules prohibiting the RNC from making such a move. If it had been adopted, it could have given the Republican Party a jump-start on planning a general election matchup with Democratic President Joe Biden, who has begun framing his reelection campaign as a 2020 rematch against Trump.

There was also precedent for the committee to declare a candidate the presumptive nominee before winning the 1,215 requisite delegates to clinch the nomination. Then-RNC Chair Reince Priebus did so

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with Trump in May 2016.

Despite losing both the Iowa and New Hampshire contests to Trump, Haley has argued that her performance — outlasting all the other Trump rivals — shows the strength of her candidacy.

Trump currently has 32 delegates to Haley's 17. There is one delegate left to be assigned after the New Hampshire contest.

During a rally Wednesday night in her home state of South Carolina, Haley — the former governor — noted that her campaign had brought in more than \$1 million since her second-place finish in New Hampshire. Trump followed up with a remark that appeared aimed at intimidating her donors.

"Anybody that makes a 'Contribution' to Birdbrain, from this moment forth, will be permanently barred from the MAGA camp," Trump wrote, using the nickname he has crafted for Haley and the abbreviation for his "Make America Great Again" slogan. "We don't want them, and will not accept them, because we Put America First, and ALWAYS WILL!"

Haley's campaign said Thursday that it raised an additional \$1.2 million "after Trump's unhinged pledge to 'permanently bar' any individual who contributed to Haley's campaign."

"Donald Trump's threats highlight the stark choice in this election: personal vendettas or real conservative leadership," said Haley spokesperson AnnMarie Graham-Barnes. "Trump's scheme blew up in his face. The contributions to the Haley campaign are pouring in — proof that people are sick of the drama and are rallying behind Nikki's vision for a strong and proud America."

Trump's dismissal of any Haley donors had no effect on T.J. Petrizzo, a former top Capitol Hill staffer and now lobbyist who supports Haley.

"That's something out of a 'Godfather' movie. Never betray the family? Come on," he added. "You've got to play this through."

Petrizzo said he understands that some Republicans may be ready to pivot to a head-to-head contest between Trump and Biden, but he notes that there is a lot of time left before a general election.

"I've heard a lot of elected officials in the Republican Party, including the RNC chair, say, 'We need to rally around a candidate.' That this is going to be our candidate. 'It was chosen by Iowa and New Hampshire, so we must go ahead and rally around Trump,'" Petrizzo said. "Well, there's 285 days until the election. There's plenty of time on the clock."

Raheem Morris hired as head coach by Atlanta Falcons, who pass on Bill Belichick

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Three years ago, the Atlanta Falcons passed on a chance to make Raheem Morris their head coach.

They didn't let him get away this time -- even after an exhaustive search that included six-time Super Bowl winner Bill Belichick.

The Falcons hired the Los Angeles Rams defensive coordinator on Thursday, bringing back a familiar name who served as Atlanta's interim coach for the final 11 games of the 2020 season after Dan Quinn was fired.

The 47-year-old Morris was hired by the Falcons after 14 candidates were interviewed, with Belichick the most notable among them. Earlier Thursday, the team conducted a second interview with Houston Texans offensive coordinator Bobby Slowik.

In the end, the Falcons decided to go with an experienced coach who has been in the league all but one season going back to 2002, including a three-year stint as head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He previously worked in Atlanta from 2015-2020.

Morris becomes the first non-interim Black coach in Falcons history and joins general manager Terry Fontenot, who also is Black, in leading a franchise that hasn't had a winning season since 2017.

The hiring ensures there will be at least nine minority head coaches to start the 2024 season, the most ever.

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"This is a historic day for the Atlanta Falcons," owner Arthur Blank said in a statement. "Raheem emerged from a field of excellent candidates and is the right leader to take our team into the future."

Blank also revealed a change in the leadership structure of the Falcons to become more involved with the daily football operations. Fontenot and Morris will each report directly to the 81-year-old owner instead of CEO Rich McKay, as was the case with Fontenot and previous coach Arthur Smith.

McKay, a former Falcons GM, will now be limited to representing the team in league matters.

After being passed over for the Falcons job following the 2020 season in favor of Smith, Morris moved to the Rams. He spent three seasons as that team's defensive coordinator, a tenure that included a Super Bowl championship his first year.

Smith was fired by the Falcons shortly after their final regular-season game. He went 7-10 in each of his three seasons.

Morris was just 33 years old when he got his first head coaching job with the Buccaneers in 2009. He lasted three seasons, finishing with one winning season, no playoff appearances and a record of 17-31.

During his previous time in Atlanta, Morris worked on both sides of the line as a pass game coordinator, receivers coach and secondary coach under Quinn. He was promoted to defensive coordinator ahead of the 2020 season, and moved up to interim coach after an 0-5 start led to Quinn's firing.

Morris guided the Falcons to a 4-7 mark the rest of the season, leaving his career record at 21-38. He was the first of seven candidates to interview for the full-time job that eventually went to Smith, who was offensive coordinator of the Tennessee Titans.

This time, the Falcons picked Morris.

"We have conducted one of the most thorough and comprehensive searches and saw many incredible candidates through this process," Fontenot said. "Raheem is the right fit for our team, culture, and shared vision for success in Atlanta. I cannot wait to start working with him and have his energy in our building."

Morris inherits a team that has undergone a major makeover since he last coached in Atlanta, though it still hasn't produced a winning record. They have used their last three first-round picks on offensive players Kyle Pitts, Drake London and Bijan Robinson, while spending big in free agency to bulk up the defense.

But the major issue facing the new coach is the same one that bedeviled his predecessor: Who plays quarterback?

Smith went back and forth between Desmond Ridder and Taylor Heinicke, who combined for 17 touch-down passes and 16 interceptions, making it imperative that the Falcons upgrade the most important position on the field either through the draft, a trade or free agency.

Morris is just the second coach in Atlanta history to get two stints as the team's head coach. Marion Campbell held the job from 1974-76 and returned to the post from 1987-89, failing to produce a winning season in either tenure.

The hiring of Morris came as something of a surprise, given the team's clear interest in a coach of Belichick's stature and its interviews with several youthful assistants, including Slowik, who were considered rising stars.

It will be especially interesting to see how the new coach is viewed by a fan base that had grown increasingly apathetic in the midst of six straight losing seasons and the Falcons' failure to produce a Super Bowl title over their 58-year history.

Many thought Blank would go for a big name, given the thousands of empty seats that have become the norm at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Rams general manager Les Snead raved about Morris' impact on a team that returned to the playoffs this season after missing out in 2022. The GM noted his experience coaching both offense and defense.

"There's not many coaches in the planet who has been in both of those rooms," Snead said. "He's going to give any organization an edge in just how collaborative he is. It's going to be an edge most teams won't be able to compete with."

Blank said Morris' tenure in Los Angeles helped persuade the Falcons that he's the right man for the job this time around.

"His time in LA has given him an enhanced perspective on everything from personnel, team operations,

game planning, working with an outstanding offensive staff and many other things that have helped him develop into an even more prepared coach in all aspects of the game," Blank said.

Under Morris this past season, the Rams' defense ranked 20th in yards allowed (337.9 per game), 13th in passing yards (231.1), 12th in rushing yards (106.8) and 18th in scoring defense (22.3 points per game).

Morris is the fourth minority hire during this coaching cycle, joining Dave Canales in Carolina, Jerod Mayo in New England and Antonio Pierce in Las Vegas. The league's minority coaches also include Pittsburgh's Mike Tomlin, Houston's DeMeco Ryans, Tampa Bay's Todd Bowles, Miami's Mike McDaniel and the New York Jets' Robert Saleh.

There are two openings left to be filled, in Seattle and Washington.

"This is a major milestone for the National Football League," said Richard Lapchick, founder of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics In Sport (TIDES).

The Falcons seemed to be closing in on Belichick as their next coach after he flew into Atlanta on one of Blank's private jets for a second interview last Friday.

But it wasn't clear how he might mesh with Fontenot, who the Falcons decided to keep as GM after dumping Smith.

Blank insisted right from the start that Fontenot would retain in charge of personnel matters. That would have been a big change for Belichick, who had total control over all football-related issues during his tenure in New England.

But, while speculation about Belichick swirled, the Falcons made it clear they were considering a large group of candidates that also included former Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh, who wound up taking an offer from the Los Angeles Chargers, and ex-Tennessee Titans coach Mike Vrabel.

Senate deal on border and Ukraine at risk of collapse as Trump calls it 'meaningless'

By STEPHEN GROVES and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bipartisan Senate deal to pair border enforcement measures and Ukraine aid faced potential collapse Thursday as Senate Republicans grew increasingly wary of an election-year compromise that Donald Trump, the likely Republican presidential nominee, says is "meaningless."

Senate negotiators have been striving for weeks to finish a carefully negotiated compromise on border and immigration policy that is meant to tamp down the number of migrants who come to the U.S. border with Mexico. But now that negotiations have dragged for weeks, election-year politics and demands from Trump are weighing it down.

At stake is a plan that both President Joe Biden and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell have worked on for months to broker in hopes of cajoling Congress to approve wartime aid for Ukraine. The U.S. has run out of money to supply Ukraine, potentially leaving the country stranded without robust supplies of ammunition and missiles to fend off Russia's invasion.

Trump on Thursday ramped up his criticism of the potential compromise, writing in two lengthy posts on his social media platform that it would be "meaningless" in terms of border security and "another Gift to the Radical Left Democrats" as Biden runs for reelection.

The former president said the Senate is better off not making a deal, even if it means the country will "close up" for a while. He did not propose alternate policy options.

In a closed-door Republican meeting on Wednesday, McConnell acknowledged the reality of Trump's opposition, that he is the party's likely presidential nominee and discussed other options, including potentially separating Ukraine and the border, according to two people familiar who spoke anonymously to discuss the private meeting. Punchbowl News first reported the remarks.

McConnell's comments raised fresh doubts in the Senate about his level of commitment to the border deal, though advocates for moving forward countered that the leader's remarks were being misinterpreted.

"We're still working on it," McConnell told reporters on Thursday morning.

He also reassured the conference at a Republican luncheon Thursday that he still personally supports

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pairing the border and Ukraine, said Sen. Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican.

Oklahoma Sen. James Lankford, the head GOP negotiator, said the group is still working on the package. He said McConnell was advocating for the proposal while simply acknowledging the political reality that the presidential primary season is fully underway.

"I think that's the shift that has occurred, that he's just acknowledging," Lankford said. "That's just a reality."

Lankford has been working with a small bipartisan group and White House officials to try and close out the border deal. But release of the legislation has been held up by haggling over the price of the new policies and continued disagreements over limiting the president's ability to allow people into the country under special circumstances, such as fleeing war and unrest.

"We're really focused on making sure we get the bill out and that we get it through the Senate," said Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who has been central to the talks.

White House spokeswoman Olivia Dalton told reporters aboard Air Force One on Thursday that the Biden administration has been working with the negotiators "in good faith," feels that progress has been made, and hopes it will continue.

"We're at a critical moment, and we've got to drive hard to get this done," said South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the second-ranked Senate Republican. "If we can't get there, then we'll go to plan B."

But congressional leaders have not identified any other way to push wartime funding for Ukraine through the darkening political prospects of the cause. Scores of House Republicans are unwilling to send more money to the fight, even as longtime party stalwarts, like McConnell, have tried to convince them that preventing Russian President Vladimir Putin's advance in Europe is directly in America's interest.

"We know that if Putin prevails in Ukraine, the consequences for Western democracy and for the American people will be severe, and haunt us for years," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. "Democrats are also resolute on reaching an agreement on securing the southern border."

Trump has loomed large over the talks, first skewering American support for Ukraine and now potentially upending a political compromise on the border that would hand his likely opponent, Biden, new policies meant to contain the historic numbers of migrants making their way to the country. With Republicans continuously raise the issue on the campaign trail, the border will likely remain central to elections this year.

Although many in Congress are anxiously awaiting the bill text, Trump has already said on social media that there should be no bipartisan border deal "unless we get EVERYTHING needed to shut down the INVASION of Millions & Millions of people."

The lead Democratic negotiator, Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, said he still has hope that Republicans will decide to accept the compromise — even though Democrats didn't want to tie Ukraine aid and border security together in the first place.

"A lot of Republicans have become used to this being just merely a political issue, not an actual policy problem," Murphy said. "And that's hard for them to get over. But there is a big group of Senate Republicans who do want to solve the problem."

Seeking to hold off objections from Trump, Republican senators have argued that the policies under discussion would not have an immediate effect on problems at the border and would even give Trump greater border enforcement authority if he is reelected.

"The issue will still be a live issue and I'd think it'd be one of the defining issues in the campaign," said Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican. "So we need to do our job here."

But this week, a vocal contingent of Republicans have raised objections, including with heated exchanges during a closed-door Republican lunch on Tuesday, according to several senators in the meeting. They have argued that presidents already have enough authority to implement hardline border measures and Trump should have his say.

"If we expect him to be able to secure the border, he ought to be able to see this bill, and he ought to be able to be engaged and say, is this going to help me secure the border or not," said Sen. Rick Scott, a Florida Republican, at a Wednesday news conference. "What we know is, he doesn't need it."

Sen. J.D. Vance, an Ohio Republican who is a Trump ally, said he spoke with the former president about

the deal last week and he expressed worry that it would be “too weak.”

“When it fails, as it will, it allows the president to blame quote, unquote ‘MAGA Republicans’ for the failure of a border security package when in reality what failed was very weak border security package that didn’t actually do anything,” Vance said.

But some Republicans worried walking away from an opportunity to enact border policy could backfire.

“If we were given an opportunity, and we decided for political purposes, not to do it, yeah, I think we could be in serious trouble,” said Rounds. “A lot of our candidates could be in serious trouble back home.”

Donald Trump testifies for less than 3 minutes in defamation trial and is rebuked by judge

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ, JENNIFER PELTZ, and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — He testified for under three minutes. But former President Donald Trump still broke a judge’s rules on what he could tell a jury about writer E. Jean Carroll’s sexual assault and defamation allegations, and he left the courtroom Thursday bristling to the spectators: “This is not America.”

Testifying in his own defense in the defamation trial, Trump didn’t look at the jury during his short, heavily negotiated stint on the witness stand. Because of the complex legal context of the case, the judge limited his lawyers to asking a handful of short questions, each of which could be answered yes or no — such as whether he’d made his negative statements in response to an accusation and didn’t intend anyone to harm Carroll.

But Trump nudged past those limits.

“She said something that I considered to be a false accusation,” he said, later adding: “I just wanted to defend myself, my family and, frankly, the presidency.”

After Judge Lewis A. Kaplan told jurors to disregard those remarks, Trump rolled his eyes as he stepped down from the witness stand. The former president and current Republican front-runner left the courtroom during a break soon after, shaking his head and declaring to spectators — three times — that “this is not America.”

Carroll looked on throughout from the plaintiff’s table. The longtime advice columnist alleges that Trump attacked her in 1996, then defamed her by calling her a liar when she went public with her story in a 2019 memoir.

While Trump has said a lot about her to the court of public opinion, Thursday marked the first time he has directly addressed a jury about her claims.

But jurors also heard parts of a 2022 deposition — a term for out-of-court questioning under oath — in which Trump vehemently denied Carroll’s allegations, calling her “sick” and a “whack job.” Trump told jurors Thursday that he stood by that deposition, “100%.”

Trump didn’t attend a related trial last spring, when a different jury found that he did sexually abuse Carroll and that some of his comments were defamatory, awarding her \$5 million. This trial concerns only how much more he may have to pay her for certain remarks he made in 2019, while president. She’s seeking at least \$10 million.

Because of the prior jury’s findings, Kaplan said Trump now couldn’t offer any testimony “disputing or attempting to undermine” the sexual abuse allegations. The law doesn’t allow for “do-overs by disappointed litigants,” the judge said.

Even before taking the stand, Trump chafed at those limitations as the judge and lawyers for both sides discussed what he could be asked.

“I never met the woman. I don’t know who the woman is. I wasn’t at the trial,” he cut in from his seat at the defense table without jurors in the room. Kaplan told Trump he wasn’t allowed to interrupt the proceedings.

Trump was the last witness, and closing arguments are set for Friday.

Carroll, 80, claims Trump, 77, ruined her reputation after she publicly aired her account of a chance meeting that spiraled into a sexual assault in spring 1996. At the time, he was a prominent real estate

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developer, and she was an Elle magazine advice columnist who'd had a TV show.

She says they ran into each other at Bergdorf Goodman, a luxury department store close to Trump Tower, bantered and ended up in a dressing room, teasing each other about trying on lingerie. She has testified that she thought it would just be a funny story to tell but then he roughly forced himself on her before she eventually fought him off and fled.

The earlier jury found that she was sexually abused but rejected her allegation that she was raped.

Besides Trump, his defense called only one other witness, a friend of Carroll's. The friend, retired TV journalist Carol Martin, was among two people the writer told about her encounter with Trump shortly after it happened, according to testimony at the first trial.

Trump lawyer Alina Habba confronted Martin on Tuesday with text messages in which she called Carroll a "narcissist" who seemed to be reveling in the attention she got from accusing and suing Trump. Martin said she regretted her word choices and doesn't believe that Carroll loved the attention she has been getting.

Carroll has testified that she has gotten death threats that worried her enough to buy bullets for a gun she inherited from her father, install an electronic fence, warn her neighbors and unleash her pit bull to roam freely on the property of her small cabin in the mountains of upstate New York.

Trump's attorneys have tried to show the jury through their cross-examination of various witnesses that by taking on Trump, Carroll has gained a measure of fame and financial rewards that outweigh the threats and other venom slung at her through social media.

After Carroll's lawyers rested Thursday, Habba asked for a directed verdict in Trump's favor, saying Carroll's side hadn't proven its case. Kaplan denied the request.

Even before testifying, Trump had already tested the judge's patience. After he complained to his lawyers last week about a "witch hunt" and a "con job" within earshot of jurors, Kaplan threatened to eject him from the courtroom if it happened again. "I would love it," Trump said. Later that day, Trump told a news conference Kaplan was a "nasty judge" and that Carroll's allegation was "a made-up, fabricated story."

While attending the trial last week, Trump made it clear — through muttered comments and gestures like shaking his head — that he was disgusted with the case. When a video clip from a Trump campaign rally last week was shown in court Thursday, he appeared to lip-synch himself saying the trial was rigged.

The trial had been suspended since early Monday because of a juror's illness. When it resumed Thursday, the judge said two jurors were being "socially distanced" from the others.

Trump attended the trial fresh off big victories in the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday and the Iowa caucuses last week. Meanwhile, he also faces four criminal cases. He has been juggling court and campaign appearances, using both to argue that he's being persecuted by Democrats terrified of his possible election.

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

Israel vows to fight Hamas all the way to Gaza's southern border. That's fueling tension with Egypt

By SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Israel faces a growing risk of damaging its peace with neighboring Egypt as its military pushes the offensive against Hamas further south in the Gaza Strip. Already, the two sides are in a dispute over a narrow strip of land between Egypt and Gaza.

Israeli leaders say that to complete their destruction of Hamas, they must eventually widen their offensive to Gaza's southernmost town, Rafah, and take control of the Philadelphi Corridor, a tiny buffer zone on the border with Egypt that is demilitarized under the two countries' 1979 peace accord.

In a news conference last week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hamas continues to smuggle weapons under the border — a claim Egypt vehemently denies — and that the war cannot end "until we close this breach," referring to the corridor.

That brought a sharp warning from Egypt that deploying Israeli troops in the zone, known in Egypt as the Salaheddin Corridor, will violate the peace deal.

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"Any Israeli move in this direction will lead to a serious threat to Egyptian-Israeli relations," Daa Rashwan, head of Egypt's State Information Service, said Monday.

EGYPT'S CONCERNS

Egypt fears that an Israeli attack on Rafah will push a massive wave of Palestinians fleeing across the border into its Sinai Peninsula.

More than 1 million Palestinians – nearly half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million — are crowded into Rafah and its surroundings on the border, most driven there after fleeing Israeli bombardment and ground offensives elsewhere in Gaza.

If Israeli troops assault Rafah, they have nowhere to flee. Palestinians have broken through before: In 2008, early in the blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel and Egypt after the Hamas takeover, Hamas blew open the border wall. Thousands of people stormed into Egypt.

Egypt told the Israelis that before any ground assault on Rafah, Israel must let Palestinians return to northern Gaza, a senior Egyptian military official involved in coordination between the two countries told The Associated Press. He spoke on condition of anonymity to talk about the internal discussions.

Israel says it has largely driven Hamas out of northern Gaza but is likely to resist allowing Palestinians back in the near term. Israel's bombardment and ground assault have reduced much of the north to rubble, leaving many without homes.

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA

The dispute puts Israel in a bind. If it stops its offensive without taking Rafah, it falls short on its top war goal of crushing Hamas. If its military pushes to the border, it risks undermining its peace deal with Egypt — a foundation of stability in the Mideast for decades — and upsetting its closest ally, the United States.

Israel and the U.S. are already divided over Gaza's post-war future. The Israeli military is working to create an informal buffer zone about a kilometer (half a mile) wide inside Gaza along the border with Israel to prevent militants from attacking nearby communities. The U.S. says it opposes any attempt by Israel to shrink Gaza's territory.

Israel vows to expunge the militants from the entire Gaza Strip and has done so by a strategy of systematic destruction, at a huge cost in civilian lives. Starting in north Gaza, it leveled large swaths of the urban landscape, saying it was eliminating Hamas tunnels and infrastructure while battling militants. It is working its way down the territory, doing the same in central Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis.

Netanyahu has said Israel intends to keep open-ended security control over Gaza to ensure Hamas cannot repeat its Oct. 7 attacks that triggered Israel's assault. He has been vague on what form that would take but said ensuring control over the Philadelphi Corridor is crucial.

"There are a few options on how we can close it, we are checking all of them, and we haven't made a decision, except for one thing: It must be closed," he said.

Egypt warned Israel and the U.S. that any military operations in the zone "could tear apart our peace," a second Egyptian official said. "We will not tolerate such a move." The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press.

IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILADELPHI CORRIDOR

The corridor is a narrow strip – about 100 meters (yards) wide in parts – running the 14-kilometer (8.6-mile) length of the Gaza side of the border with Egypt. It includes the Rafah crossing into Egypt, Gaza's sole outlet not controlled by Israel.

The corridor is part of a larger demilitarized zone along both sides of the entire Israel-Egypt border. Under the peace accord, each side is allowed to deploy only a tiny number of troops or border guards in the zone. At the time of the accord, Israeli troops controlled Gaza, until Israel withdrew its forces and settlers in 2005.

Hamas has had free rein of the border since its 2007 takeover.

Smuggling tunnels were dug under the Gaza-Egypt border to get around the Israeli-Egyptian blockade. Some of the tunnels were massive, large enough for vehicles. Hamas brought in weapons and supplies, and Gaza residents smuggled in commercial goods, from livestock to construction materials.

That changed over the past decade, as Egypt battled Islamic militants in the Sinai. The Egyptian military

cracked down on the tunnels and destroyed hundreds of them, saying they were being used to funnel weapons into the Sinai. It bolstered its border wall above and below ground and cleared the population from a 5-kilometer-deep (3-mile) area adjacent to Gaza where only military and police forces are allowed.

During the fight against Sinai militants, Egypt negotiated with Israel and the U.S. to allow the deployment of its military in Zone C, as the demilitarized zone is known on its side of the border.

DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE WAR

In mid-December, Israel made an official request to Egypt to deploy its forces in the Philadelphi corridor, the Egyptian military official said. Egypt rejected the request. Egypt's main fear is that any ground operation in the area would result in thousands of Palestinians storming into Sinai, he said.

Since the war began, Egypt has pushed back hard against calls that it take in a mass exodus of Palestinians. It fears Israel won't allow them to return to Gaza and says it doesn't want to abet ethnic cleansing. It also warned that militants from Gaza could enter the Sinai with those fleeing, bringing the potential for cross-border exchanges with Israel that could wreck the peace accord.

Israel contends it must have control over the border to prevent weapons smuggling to Hamas.

Rashwan, of Egypt's State Information Service, called Israeli claims of continued smuggling "lies" aimed at justifying a takeover of the corridor. After destroying 1,500 tunnels, Egypt has "complete control" over the border, he said.

Kobi Michael, senior researcher with Israeli think tanks Institute for National Security Studies and the Misgav Institute, said the quantity of Hamas weapons found during the offensive shows smuggling continues and Israel must have power to monitor the border.

"The only way such quantities of weapons could have reached the Gaza Strip are via the Philadelphi Corridor," he said.

But Alon Ben-David, military affairs correspondent for Israel's Channel 13 TV, said 90% of the weapons in Gaza were produced in Gaza and that Egypt's crackdown largely shut down smuggling.

"The tunnels were really taken care of comprehensively by the Egyptians," he said.

Sexual harassment on women's US Biathlon team leads to SafeSport investigation -- and sanctions

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

U.S. Biathlon national champion Joanne Reid was sexually harassed and abused for years by a ski-wax technician while racing on the elite World Cup circuit, a watchdog group that oversees sex-abuse allegations in Olympic sports found. When the two-time Olympian complained, she says she was told his behavior was just part of the male European culture.

Teammate Deedra Irwin says she repeatedly had to step in to protect Reid. Outraged by what she called "a culture of harassment and misogyny," Irwin, a biathlete with the Army National Guard, notified her military superiors, who immediately demanded action.

Only then, in April 2021, did U.S. Biathlon officials alert the U.S. Center for SafeSport.

Its 18-month investigation found that Petr "Gara" Garabik had engaged in repeated sexual harassment and unwanted sexual contact with Reid. The Czech citizen was suspended for six months and put on probation until December 2024.

Wax technicians play a critical role in biathlon, which combines cross-country skiing with precision-rifle shooting, preparing skis for the day's snow conditions so racers glide over the trails with ease. It was a power dynamic that left Reid vulnerable.

An athlete sexually harassed by a wax tech would have trouble making him stop, "out of concern it would jeopardize the athlete's performance," said confidential SafeSport reports on its investigation obtained by The Associated Press.

It was an argument Reid had made in complaints to U.S. Biathlon officials since 2019.

Still, it would take two years for U.S. Biathlon to bring the case to SafeSport, created to investigate and

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punish abuse in Olympic sports in the aftermath of the Larry Nassar USA Gymnastics sexual molestation scandal that revealed flaws in U.S. sports leaders' handling of sex-abuse cases.

SafeSport's investigation found that Garabik "engaged in a pattern of sexualized behavior" involving Reid, "including sexualized commentary and inappropriate sexualized touching, over the course of six years."

Garabik's behavior was well-known and team officials acted like it was normal, or "European," said Reid, 31, the daughter of Olympic speed-skater Beth (Heiden) Reid and niece of Olympic speed-skate superstar Eric Heiden.

"New women on the team were warned about him," Reid told the AP. For years she refrained from complaining, she said, as she tried to find her footing as a new team member and for fear the ski-wax techs would quit, leaving the team in trouble.

Garabik told the AP in an email that the case against him was "complete nonsense from the start." But he acknowledged to SafeSport investigators and the AP that his comments were sexual in nature.

"I have never done anything to anyone without their consent and the fact that I had some jokes and hints was never sexual pressure," he told the AP. "We always laughed about it. By that I mean other team members."

Last May, six months after SafeSport concluded its investigation, U.S. Biathlon retroactively changed the criteria for being pre-qualified for the World Cup team — and Reid was bumped off. Reid had to start over, competing in qualifying races. The change didn't affect the status of anyone else on the team.

Reid said she believed the move was retaliation for calling attention to how U.S. Biathlon handled the problem. She turned down a spot on the U.S. national team and stopped going to trainings.

"They treat me like a naughty 9-year-old, and being in team space has been very difficult for me due to this environment," Reid told the AP.

"There was no way I was going to put on my uniform and represent them on a world stage."

U.S. Biathlon CEO Jack Gierhart denied the World Cup rule change was retaliation, saying in an interview that it was developed and approved by a committee that includes athletes to set standards to help the organization reach its goals.

Asked about Reid's SafeSport case at U.S. Biathlon's annual meeting in December, he said policies were implemented to address the issues.

"Athlete safety is a critical issue for us," Gierhart told the biathletes and officials attending the Zoom session. "We're always working to improve how we address that, how we educate our athletes ... how we educate our staff, and the safeguards we put in place."

"It was a process. The system worked from a reporting procedure, and a decision and a sanctioning procedure," he said.

Gierhart also noted in an email sent to U.S. Biathlon members late Thursday that SafeSport's investigation, "did not find any violations of the SafeSport code or protocols by U.S. Biathlon."

Reid told investigators the sexual harassment started in 2016, with constant touching, unwelcomed hugs, lewd jokes and pats on the buttocks. She was in her early 20s and Garabik in his late 40s.

He grabbed, touched and hugged her whenever they were in the wax cabin together, made inappropriate jokes when she bent over to put on her skis, and sent a stream of flirtatious emojis over WhatsApp, she said.

In March 2017, Garabik showed up drunk at her hotel room, pushed his way inside, held her down and tried to kiss her as she fought back, the SafeSport report said. Her roommate arrived and pulled him off, it said.

In 2019, with Irwin's support, Reid reported the abuse to then-coach Bernd Eisenbichler. He took Reid off Garabik's wax rotation and reprimanded him, but the behavior didn't stop, the report said, and two days later Garabik grabbed Reid's buttocks while giving her a good-luck hug before a race.

Garabik's "inappropriate conduct" even after being reprimanded by a coach suggests "an ongoing potential risk to safety of others, particularly women in sport," the SafeSport findings said.

In 2020, Reid and Irwin went to U.S. Biathlon High Performance Director Lowell Bailey with their con-

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cerns and, they told the AP, he responded that you can't teach sexual harassment rules to a European.

Asked by the AP about the response, Bailey said: "That's not true."

"Maybe they misinterpreted," he added.

Asked if he would have been required to file a report to SafeSport after the women complained, he said: "I don't recall the specifics. I can't speak to that, honestly."

In February 2021, a year after the athletes complained to Bailey, Garabik told Reid at an event in Slovenia that a package on a high shelf was hers — then grabbed her between the legs and lifted her up by the crotch to reach it, the SafeSport findings said.

In a statement two months later to U.S. Biathlon, Irwin said female athletes were treated with disrespect, "and then everyone refuses to address it and calls it 'part of European culture' or 'just a joke.'"

U.S. Biathlon removed Garabik from working with its teams in November 2021.

During the SafeSport investigation Reid underwent hours of questioning, a process that retraumatized her, she said.

"Does it serve some higher purpose for me to relive this?" she said in an April 2021 letter to U.S. Biathlon. "Does the specific time I opened my door at well past midnight to a knock that turned out to be my drunk ski technician, only to have his tongue down my throat seconds later, help some database? What day was it? How many centimeters did his tongue go down? Did he taste like Pilsner or was it stout?"

SafeSport CEO Ju'Riese Colón acknowledged investigations can be stressful, but said it's important work.

"Culture change requires accountability," she said in an email to the AP. "We understand that revisiting traumatic experiences is difficult for those who come forward, and the center has put in place measures to help minimize that impact."

To protect Reid from Garabik, Irwin told the AP she would get between Reid and the wax tech. The women became "battle buddies," she said — a military term meaning soldiers take care of each other.

"You never go anywhere without your battle buddy so there's always two against one and there's always someone to corroborate your story," she told the AP in December while racing in Austria.

The AP does not generally identify victims of sexual abuse except in cases where they publicly identify themselves.

In November, after years of silence, Reid went public with her SafeSport story on her popular Instagram and Facebook pages, and was encouraged by the outpouring of support.

"I am absolutely floored, actually, by the amount of people coming out of the woodwork on behalf of me and the safety of our women's team and biathletes in general," Reid told the AP.

"Though it sucks right now it's an amazing, inspiring thing."

AP VoteCast: What the first contests tell us about the Trump and Biden coalitions

By JOSH BOAK and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Based on the momentum from this month's presidential contests in Iowa and New Hampshire, Joe Biden and Donald Trump appear poised to give the nation a sequel to the 2020 election — but even strong victories this week for both men revealed weak spots for each.

AP VoteCast surveys conducted in Iowa and New Hampshire show that Trump, the former president, has nurtured a fervent loyalty among the Republican base. But that loyalty exacts a price: He has so far not gained traction with the college graduates and suburbanites who could be decisive in November's general election.

Biden, the current president, has enjoyed the benefit of a broad and diverse Democratic coalition. Yet the breadth also gives his coalition a brittleness, with differences over the conflict in the Middle East and immigration possibly splitting the voter bloc.

At stake is not just control of the presidency, but how the world's wealthiest and most militarily powerful nation sees itself. The divides in the population have set a course for an uncertain future, one in which a group of voters worn down by the pandemic and political dysfunction may well need to choose between

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greatly diverging paths – again.

AP VoteCast is a survey of 1,989 New Hampshire voters who took part in the Republican primary and 915 Democratic primary voters. The survey was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

THE LIMITS OF TRUMP'S APPEAL

Many Republicans who once idolized Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan are now stepping in sync with the 77-year-old Trump, who has recast the party in his own image.

States like New Hampshire and Iowa are full of voters from small towns and rural communities. The majority don't have college degrees. Nearly all are white. In 2020, AP VoteCast found that 43% of all voters nationwide in the general election were white and without a college degree. Trump won a resounding 62% of this group four years ago, a base that makes him formidable within the GOP and beyond.

The polling shows these voters like his messages on restricting immigration, erecting a wall along the Mexican border and pumping out more oil and natural gas within the United States. But those policy stances also stir controversy with voters who see immigration as a positive, border walls as ineffective if not evil and fossil fuels as worsening the damage from climate change.

For all his rambunctious rallies and speeches, Trump failed to win the national popular vote in 2016 or 2020. The polling shows he continues to repel many college graduates and self-identified political moderates.

In New Hampshire, Trump lost a majority of moderates and about two-thirds of those who identify as independents. He lost about 6 in 10 who have college degrees, and he's shown a persistent vulnerability among voters living in suburbs.

The New Hampshire results offer insights into November's possible national electorate, as the state allows people unaffiliated with either major party to participate in its primaries. Nearly half of the GOP primary participants were unaffiliated, and Trump appears not to have won them over.

Among those voting in New Hampshire's Republican primary, a solid third said they would not vote for Trump in November. Nearly half – including some who would still vote for him in the general election – said they would be dissatisfied if he were the nominee.

Meanwhile, Trump's final remaining major rival for the GOP nomination faces a different math problem: Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley held broader appeal among moderate and college-educated voters and those who have doubts about Trump's ability to win in the general election. But she has little support within the GOP base. That leaves her with an ever-narrowing path to the nomination, and, if she did prevail, a different general election challenge in turning out core Republicans.

IS BIDEN'S COALITION SPREAD TOO THIN?

Biden's name was not on the ballot in New Hampshire's primaries. The Democrats moved their first official presidential contest to South Carolina, leaving New Hampshire to proceed with a largely symbolic event that required his supporters to write in his name.

In the months leading up to the primary, Biden showed potential weaknesses in separate polling of U.S. adults by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. High inflation had hampered his public approval, while his policy wins on infrastructure, computer chips and addressing climate change did little to excite voters.

New Hampshire did deliver a pleasant surprise for Biden. It showed that 8 in 10 Democratic voters approved of his economic leadership, which is slightly higher than his national approval among Democrats on the issue in AP-NORC polls. That optimism comes amid data showing that the economy grew briskly in 2023 as inflation eased dramatically and hiring was solid.

Nearly 9 in 10 of those voting in the Democratic primary said they would vote for Biden in November. Still, Biden failed to win over a majority among the small set of unaffiliated voters who chose to cast a ballot on the Democratic side.

And the 81-year-old Biden struggled with younger segments of the party. Among Democrats under 45, only about half wrote in Biden's name. By comparison, about 7 in 10 Democratic voters older than 45 backed him in New Hampshire. About 6 in 10 of those younger voters say Biden is too old to serve another

term, while about 6 in 10 older voters disagree.

There are limits to what his primary win can say about the strengths of Biden's coalition. In 2020, 26% of general election voters were non-white and Biden won 73% of that group, an edge that helped him beat Trump. New Hampshire's mostly white population provides few details about how those voters are thinking.

Still, New Hampshire showed some fissures on policy issues. Voters were split on whether to approve or disapprove of how he's handling the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and only about half of those who disapprove of his approach voted for him.

WHAT'S TO COME

There are still plenty of primaries, lots of speeches, a pair of party conventions and a plethora of ads and social media posts ahead.

But as the field shrinks, there are signs that the key strategy will be to attack opponents. Biden is already warning of parallels between Trump's statements and Nazi rhetoric, in addition to blaming Trump for the overturning of abortion protections in *Roe v. Wade*. Trump is already saying that Biden's age means he lacks the stamina to be president.

The race will depend on how each candidate's coalition develops state by state in an effort to win the needed 270 electoral college votes. In that regard, New Hampshire provides a glimpse into the strategies in the coming months.

Trump could try to win by pushing up his numbers with white voters without college degrees. But Biden could try to improve his standing with these voters by touting his own blue-collar backing from labor unions.

The Democratic president has made student debt forgiveness a priority to appeal to college graduates and young voters, but the latter group appears less than enamored with him. Trump's campaign has seen the potential to make inroads with voters of color, a group that has overwhelmingly backed Democrats in past elections.

The fundamental puzzle confronting both campaigns is how to build a winning coalition. Their choices will become clearer as a divided country gets closer and closer to November's election, when the numbers will unmistakably tell whether they succeeded or fell short.

Transgender veterans sue to have gender-affirming surgery covered by Department of Veteran Affairs

By PAT EATON-ROBB Associated Press

A group of transgender veterans filed a lawsuit Thursday seeking to force the Department of Veterans Affairs to begin providing and paying for gender-affirming surgeries.

The lawsuit from the Transgender American Veterans Association seeks to compel the VA to codify in its regulations verbal assurances the department has made that it would begin providing those services, said Rebekka Eshler, the president of the association.

She said the surgeries are needed to reduce the risk of suicides, depression, and psychological distress for transgender people who live with gender dysphoria.

"It would also mean that those veterans do not have to seek this care through private doctors, which is often prohibitively expensive," the transgender veterans association said in its lawsuit, which it said was filed in the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit in Washington.

A spokesperson for the Department of Veterans Affairs said it does not comment on ongoing litigation. But he pointed to 2021 statements from Veteran Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough, who said the VA was beginning a yearslong rulemaking process that would result in providing gender-affirming surgeries. McDonough said the VA would use the time to "develop capacity to meet the surgical needs" of transgender veterans.

The decision, he said, will allow "transgender vets to go through the full gender confirmation process with VA by their side."

The court on Thursday ordered the VA to file a response to the lawsuit within 14 days.

The veterans first petitioned for the rule change in May of 2016. Since then, the VA has held hearings

and prepared multiple proposed rules for cost-benefit analysis, the association said. But while the VA currently provides hormone therapy and other services to transgender veterans at some locations, it has failed to change its rules in a timely manner and provide any coverage for the surgeries, the group said.

"I get phone calls from veterans that are so in crisis that they are calling us because they can't handle it anymore and they are wanting to go kill themselves," Eshler said.

The association said there are approximately 150,000 living transgender veterans, and at least 10,000 veterans that receive some type of transition-related care through the VA.

Natalie Kastner, a 39-year-old disabled veteran from Texas, said she went to the VA in 2022 seeking surgery. When doctors there denied her request, she said she took a knife and attempted self-castration. She hit an artery and almost died, but doctors were able to save her life.

"I did not go into that bathroom looking to kill myself," she said. "I went into that bathroom looking to fix myself. I can only imagine how many others have done the same and have not been so lucky and have simply been listed as a suicide."

Eshler said she hopes the lawsuit also will standardize the care transgender veterans receive, which said can vary from state to state and even clinic to clinic.

A rhino got pregnant from embryo transfer, in a success that may help nearly extinct subspecies

By TOM ODULA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Researchers say a rhinoceros was impregnated through embryo transfer in the first successful use of a method that they say might later make it possible to save the nearly extinct northern white rhino subspecies.

The experiment was conducted with the less endangered southern white rhino subspecies. Researchers created an embryo in a lab from an egg and sperm collected from rhinos and transferred into a southern white rhino surrogate mother at the Ol-Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya.

"The successful embryo transfer and pregnancy are a proof of concept and allow (researchers) to now safely move to the transfer of northern white rhino embryos — a cornerstone in the mission to save the northern white rhino from extinction," the group said in a statement Wednesday.

However, the team learned of the pregnancy only after the surrogate mother died of a bacterial infection in November 2023. The rhino was infected when spores from the clostridium strain were released from the soil by floodwater, and the embryo was discovered during a post-mortem examination.

Still, the scientists were optimistic about their finding, though some conservationists are skeptical that the breakthrough has come in time to save the northern white rhino.

"Now we have the clear evidence that an embryo that is frozen, thawed, produced in a test tube can produce new life and that is what we want for the northern white rhino," said Thomas Hildebrandt, the lead researcher and head of the Department of Reproduction at BioRescue.

Roughly 20,000 southern white rhinos remain in Africa. That subspecies as well as another species, the black rhino, are bouncing back from significant reduction in their populations due to poaching for their horns.

However, the northern white rhinoceros subspecies has only two known members left in the world.

Najin, a 34-year-old, and her 23-year-old offspring, Fatu, are both incapable of natural reproduction, according to the Ol-Pejeta Conservancy where they live.

The last male white rhino, Sudan, was 45 when he was euthanized in 2018 due to age-related complications. He was Najin's sire.

Scientists stored his semen and that of four other dead rhinos, hoping to use them in in vitro fertilization with eggs harvested from female northern white rhinos to produce embryos that eventually will be carried by southern white rhino surrogate mothers.

Some conservation groups have argued that it is probably too late to save the northern white rhino with in vitro fertilization, as the species' natural habitat in Chad, Sudan, Uganda, Congo and Central African Republic has been ravaged by human conflict.

Skeptics say the efforts should focus on other critically endangered species with a better chance at survival.

"News of the first successful embryo transfer in a rhino is an exciting step, however it sadly comes too late to recreate a viable population of northern white rhinos," said Dr. Jo Shaw, CEO of Save the Rhino International.

Shaw said her group's focus remains on addressing the two main threats to the five species of rhino around the world — poaching of rhinos for their horns and their loss of habitat to development.

"Our best hope remains to work with the range of partners involved to give rhinos the space and security they need to thrive naturally," she said.

Her group said it continues to encourage natural breeding to boost numbers. It cited the example of the Sumatran rhino, which has fewer than 80 animals left. Last year, two calves were born through natural reproduction, the group said.

Auto dealers up campaign urging Biden administration to halt EPA tailpipe emission limits regulation

By ALEXA ST. JOHN Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — More than 4,700 auto dealerships across the United States urged President Joe Biden in a letter Thursday to halt the Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to enforce stricter vehicle-pollution standards.

The missive comes just weeks before the agency's expected ruling on its tailpipe-emissions proposal, which addresses both climate change and pollutants that are harmful to health.

It is the second letter that auto dealers have sent to the White House in two months on the EPA's upcoming ruling, which could codify the agency's strictest-ever tailpipe emissions limits, proposed last April. The dealerships said Thursday that the Biden administration did not respond to their first letter sent on Nov. 28.

An EPA spokesperson said the agency cannot comment as the proposal is currently in the interagency review process.

"President Biden is investing in a future that is made in America by American workers as we position the United States to lead the clean energy future," a White House spokesperson said in a statement Thursday. "More Americans are buying EVs every day—with EV sales rising faster than traditional gas-powered cars—as the President's Inflation Reduction Act makes EVs more affordable and helps Americans save money when driving."

With the world focused on trying to limit warming to no more than 1.5-degree Celsius temperature above pre-industrial times, the administration has an ambitious goal to cut domestic planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030. Part of its focus is on the transportation sector, 58% of the emissions from which come from passenger cars and trucks, according to the EPA. The regulation also limits hydrocarbons, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter into the air. These emissions cause a host of health issues and disproportionately affect people who live near heavy traffic.

The EPA says its proposed regulations could mean that up to two out of every three vehicles sold in the U.S. are electric by 2032. That's higher than the administration's target of 50% set two years ago.

The regulations, which impact light- and medium-duty vehicles beginning with the 2027 model year, could mean a 56% drop in projected greenhouse gas emissions from the fleet, relative to existing standards, avoiding nearly 7.3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions by 2055. They also reduce pollutants harmful to health by 60% from the existing standard by model year 2032.

Most automakers around the globe have pledged hundreds of billions of dollars to transition to all-electric new vehicle sales in the coming decade as momentum to address climate change builds. Last year, U.S. EV sales overall grew 47% to a record 1.2 million, according to Motorintelligence.com. EVs are seeing year-over-year growth, but only hit 7.6% of overall market share in 2023.

Given that, thousands of auto dealers say they won't be able to meet the EPA's stringent goals.

Nearly 4,000 dealerships of the nearly 17,000 franchised shops nationwide asked Biden to "tap the brakes"

on the EPA proposal in the November letter, referring to the rules as an "electric vehicle mandate." House Republicans approved a bill in December to block the pollution limits and also called the rules a mandate.

In this week's letter, the dealerships asked Biden to "hit the brakes" entirely, citing several factors that they say indicate slowing EV adoption. The signers said the supply of EVs on dealer lots is twice that of internal combustion engine vehicles, and that they won't be able to sell EVs at the rate the regulations would require.

"It is uncontested that the combination of fewer tax incentives, a woefully inadequate charging infrastructure, and insufficient consumer demand makes the proposed electric vehicle mandate completely unrealistic," the letter says.

The EPA's tailpipe-pollution limits wouldn't require automakers to sell a specific number of EVs every year.

Automakers can meet EPA regulations not just through pure-electric vehicle sales, but also through a sales mix including hybrid and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, plus cleaner internal-combustion engine vehicles. The EPA has also said that the auto industry could employ widespread use of particulate filters, which mitigate the soot emitted from conventional gasoline-fueled engines.

"In order to stay on track to meeting overall climate policy goals that have been adopted by the country, I think it's important to be aggressive in this sector where you have the technology, progress is being made, there's momentum in markets," said Jessika Trancik, a professor in energy studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "This can be a really important part of the overall effort to reach 2030 and ultimately, 2050 emissions reduction targets.

"There are a number of different ways you can improve efficiencies and reduce emissions," Trancik added. But, "If you want to meet those targets, fully electric vehicles are probably going to be a really important tool, at least in part, to allow for that because they do offer the greatest emissions cuts."

The EPA is also proposing regulations for medium- and heavy-duty trucks, and the government's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has separately proposed a fuel-economy increase.

US warned Iran that ISIS-K was preparing attack ahead of deadly Kerman blasts, a US official says

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. government privately warned Iran that the Islamic State group's affiliate in Afghanistan was preparing to carry out a terrorist attack before bombings in Kerman earlier this month that killed 95 people, a U.S. official said Thursday.

The official, who was not authorized to comment and insisted on anonymity to discuss the intelligence, said the U.S. was following its longstanding policy of a "duty to warn" other governments against potential lethal threats.

The official did not detail how the U.S., which does not have diplomatic relations with Iran, conveyed the warning about its intelligence on ISIS-Khorasan, known as ISIS-K, but noted that government officials "provide these warnings in part because we do not want to see innocent lives lost in terror attacks."

Iranian state media did not acknowledge the U.S. giving Tehran the information, and Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the Jan. 3 attack on Kerman, about 820 kilometers (510 miles) southeast of Iran's capital, Tehran. The dual suicide bombing killed at least 95 people and wounded dozens of others attending a commemoration for the late Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the Revolutionary Guard's expeditionary Quds Force, who had been killed in a 2020 U.S. drone strike in Baghdad.

In the time since, Iran has been trying to blame the U.S. and Israel for the attack amid Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. It has launched missile attacks on Iraq and Syria. It then launched strikes on nuclear-armed Pakistan, which responded with its own strikes on Iran, further raising tensions in a region inflamed by the Israel-Hamas war.

The Wall Street Journal was first to report that the U.S. had provided the warning to Iran.

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ISIS-K was behind the August 2021 suicide bombing at the Kabul airport that left 13 U.S. troops and about 170 Afghans dead during the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

ISIS-K has thousands of members and is the Taliban's most bitter enemy and top military threat. The group has continued to carry out attacks in Afghanistan and beyond since the Taliban takeover.

The NFL's final 4 QBs are often first-round picks. This time, 1 is not like the others

By JOSH DUBOW and HOWARD FENDRICH AP Sports Writers

Joe Theismann won one Super Bowl and played in a second with Washington after entering the NFL as a fourth-round draft pick with another franchise.

He starred for a coach Joe Gibbs, whose path to the Hall of Fame featured three championships with three starting QBs — including one selected in the sixth round (Mark Rypien) and one who was chosen in the first round but wound up taking a detour to the USFL before reaching the sport's pinnacle (Doug Williams).

So perhaps Theismann's view is shaded by all of that personal experience. He does not consider it vital for a team to find its quarterback early in the draft, even if recent evidence shows that conference title game participants most often do employ first-rounders at the sport's most important position, a trend reflected in Sunday's matchups: Patrick Mahomes' Chiefs at Lamar Jackson's Ravens in the AFC, and Jared Goff's Lions at Brock Purdy's 49ers in the NFC. Three outta four ain't bad.

"I definitely don't believe that being a No. 1 pick is the key to getting to a championship game. It's still a team game," said Theismann, who made it to the Super Bowls after the 1982 and 1983 seasons, beating the Dolphins in the first and losing to the Raiders in the second. "I've always said this: The quarterback is the most dependent player on the field. So if you've got first-round talent at that position, good for you, but that's also no guarantee."

Of course not. Nothing is certain when it comes to talent evaluation, fulfilling potential shown in college or blossoming in the pros. But it clearly can be a sign of things to come when a QB goes at, or near, the top of a draft, which is why USC's Caleb Williams, UNC's Drake Maye and LSU's Jayden Daniels are expected to hear their names called early in April.

So, sure, Purdy famously earned the "Mr. Irrelevant" moniker by being the 262nd and last choice in the 2022 draft and is now set to appear in a second NFC championship game in two NFL seasons, but otherwise, a trio of high picks will help determine which two teams head to the Super Bowl in Las Vegas on Feb. 11.

"Super proud of him. I just hope he continues to blaze trails and just show people that draft status is what happens on draft day. What happens after that is up to you," Niners All-Pro left tackle Trent Williams said about Purdy. "You get a player like that with the last pick of the draft? Literally like playing the lottery and winning the Powerball when it's at \$2 billion."

The only newcomer to this round among the quartet is Jackson, who becomes the 30th quarterback to start a conference title game in the last 15 seasons. He got there with a masterful performance in a 34-10 victory over the Houston Texans last weekend — throwing for two touchdowns and running for two more — after beginning his career 1-3 in the playoffs.

Take a look at that group of 30 and the pattern is obvious: 20 were first-rounders (including Goff at No. 1 overall to the Los Angeles Rams in 2016, Mahomes at No. 10 in 2017 and Jackson at No. 32 in 2018); five went in the second round, two in the third, one in the sixth (Tom Brady) and one (Purdy) in the seventh. Only one of the 30 was undrafted: Case Keenum, whose Minnesota Vikings fell one game short of Super Sunday after the 2017 season.

"Brock is sort of the exception to the rule, I guess you could say," Theismann said. "It's always good to have that one guy in there that might say: 'I don't fit that mold that everybody projects for us. But I still can get the job done.'"

And how. Purdy compiled an NFL-best passer rating of 113 this season, accumulating 4,280 yards and 31 TDs while completing 69.4% of his throws. His 9.6 yards per attempt were the most for a qualifying

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QB since Kurt Warner's 9.9 back in 2000.

He was the only one of the eight quarterbacks who started in the divisional round last weekend to be drafted after the first round. But only one of those eight quarterbacks — Houston rookie C.J. Stroud — was picked in the top five by his current team.

Purdy is "putting up numbers that are impressive for first-rounders," said Christian McCaffrey, the San Francisco running back who was a unanimous choice for The Associated Press 2023 NFL All-Pro Team. "At some point it's not surprising. At some point, it's just who he is."

The other starting quarterbacks still around have impressive pedigrees, but the ways they arrived at their current clubs demonstrate that going through a season so bad that a team is in position to take a franchise QB with one of the top few picks isn't always the path to success.

The Chiefs were coming off back-to-back playoff berths with Alex Smith at quarterback when they made the bold decision to package two first-round picks and a third-rounder to move up 17 spots to draft Mahomes.

After Mahomes sat for most of his rookie year, the Chiefs traded Smith and now have gone to six straight conference title games — the second-longest streak ever — and won two Super Bowls with the two-time MVP at the helm.

A year later, the Ravens jumped back into the first round via a trade to take Jackson so he could replace Super Bowl 47 MVP Joe Flacco.

Jackson became the starter midway through his first season, won the MVP award the following year and was a first-team All-Pro this season as the Ravens, like the Chiefs, benefited from going after a young quarterback even when they had a veteran starter in place.

"I think everybody in the world can now see that he's the MVP, he's probably, not probably, he is the best quarterback in football," Ravens kicker Justin Tucker said about the front office's decision to draft Jackson.

"But for those guys to have that foresight, and the ability to develop along the way, with a player-coach partnership, it does speak to how well that they do things upstairs."

For more than a decade, the Lions boasted a QB taken at No. 1 overall after turning their 0-16 record in the 2008 season into Matthew Stafford.

But poor management and the inability to build the rest of the roster led to zero playoff wins in 12 seasons with Stafford. So Detroit sent him to the Rams — who won the Super Bowl in his first season there — and Los Angeles dealt two first-round picks to the Lions and made Detroit take on Goff's hefty contract as part of the exchange.

But Goff played like the QB who helped the Rams reach the Super Bowl in the 2018 season, the Lions used the extra draft picks to add talent around him and Detroit is in a conference title game for the second time in the Super Bowl era — and got there by beating the team that discarded him three years ago.

Here's something else all four QBs remaining have in common: Every member of the quartet is a twentysomething, the second consecutive season in which the last four standing had yet to turn 30. The only other time that happened in back-to-back playoffs since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger came in 2003 and 2004.

"If you're under 30, you're still young enough that you haven't been beaten to a pulp," Theismann observed. "Which is important, because you don't start feeling things that aren't there."

Man sentenced to death for arson attack at Japanese anime studio that killed 36

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese court sentenced a man to death after finding him guilty of murder and other crimes Thursday for carrying out an arson attack on an anime studio in Kyoto that killed 36 people.

The Kyoto District Court said it found the defendant, Shinji Aoba, mentally capable to face punishment for his crimes and announced the sentence of capital punishment after a recess in a two-part session on Thursday.

Aoba stormed into Kyoto Animation's No. 1 studio on July 18, 2019, and set it on fire. Many of the victims

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were believed to have died of carbon monoxide poisoning. More than 30 other people were badly burned or injured.

Judge Keisuke Masuda said Aoba had wanted to be a novelist but was unsuccessful and so he sought revenge, thinking that Kyoto Animation had stolen novels he submitted as part of a company contest, according to NHK national television.

NHK also reported that Aoba, who was out of work and struggling financially after repeatedly changing jobs, had plotted a separate attack on a train station north of Tokyo a month before the arson attack on the animation studio.

Aoba plotted the attacks after studying past criminal cases involving arson, the court said in the ruling, noting the process showed that Aoba had premeditated the crime and was mentally capable.

"The attack that instantly turned the studio into hell and took the precious lives of 36 people, caused them indescribable pain," the judge said, according to NHK. During the trial, Aoba told the victims' families that he was sorry, but he did not show sincere regret or face their sufferings fully, and there was little hope for correction, the ruling said.

Aoba, 45, was severely burned and was hospitalized for 10 months before his arrest in May 2020. He appeared in court in a wheelchair.

His defense lawyers argued he was mentally unfit to be held criminally responsible.

About 70 people were working inside the studio in southern Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, at the time of the attack. One of the survivors said he saw a black cloud rising from downstairs, then scorching heat came and he jumped from a window of the three-story building gasping for air.

The company, founded in 1981 and better known as KyoAni, made a mega-hit anime series about high school girls, and the studio trained aspirants to the craft.

Japanese media have described Aoba as being thought of as a troublemaker who repeatedly changed contract jobs and apartments and quarreled with neighbors.

The fire was Japan's deadliest since 2001, when a blaze in Tokyo's congested Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi said the Kyoto Animation attack was "a highly tragic case" and that the government has since stepped up restrictions on gasoline sales, including mandatory identification checks of purchasers. Hayashi, however, declined to comment on the death penalty ruling.

Japan has maintained the death penalty despite growing international criticism. Justice ministry officials say it is a justified response to continuing heinous and violent crimes. A survey by the Japanese government showed an overwhelming majority of the public supports executions.

Executions are carried out in high secrecy in Japan, where prisoners are not informed of their fate until the morning they are hanged. Since 2007, Japan has begun disclosing the names of those executed and some details of their crimes, but disclosures are still limited.

Today in History: January 26

Kobe Bryant, daughter Gianna and 7 others die in helicopter crash

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Jan. 26, the 26th day of 2024 There are 340 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 26, 2020, NBA legend Kobe Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter Gianna and seven others were killed when their helicopter plunged into a steep hillside in dense morning fog in Southern California; the former Lakers star was 41.

On this date:

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Rocky Mountain National Park Act, which created America's 10th national park.

In 1962, the United States launched Ranger 3 to land scientific instruments on the moon. (The probe

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ended up missing its target by more than 22,000 miles.)

In 1992, Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton, appearing with his wife, Hillary, on CBS' "60 Minutes," acknowledged "causing pain in my marriage," but said past problems were not relevant to the campaign.

In 1993, Vaclav Havel (VAHTS'-lahv HAH'-vel) was elected president of the newly formed Czech Republic.

In 1994, a scare occurred during a visit to Sydney, Australia, by Britain's Prince Charles as college student David Kang lunged at the prince, firing two blank shots from a starter's pistol. (Kang was later sentenced to 500 hours of community service.)

In 1998, President Bill Clinton forcefully denied having an affair with a former White House intern, telling reporters, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

In 2005, a U.S. Marine helicopter crashed in western Iraq, killing 30 Marines and a Navy medic aboard.

In 2009, Nadya Suleman gave birth at Kaiser Permanente Bellflower Medical Center in California to six boys and two girls; criticism came after the public learned that the unemployed, single mother had gotten pregnant with the octuplets and six elder children through in vitro fertilization.

In 2012, some 12,000 people — including Penn State students, fans and football stars — paid tribute to the late Joe Paterno in a campus memorial service that exposed a strong undercurrent of anger over his firing.

In 2016, character actor Abe Vigoda, star of "The Godfather" and "Barney Miller," died in Woodland Park, New Jersey at age 94.

In 2022, Spotify said it would grant the request of veteran rocker Neil Young to have his music removed from the streaming platform after he objected to the company's decision to allow COVID-19 misinformation to spread in podcasts.

In 2023, Israeli forces killed at least nine Palestinians and wounded several others in a large-scale raid in the occupied West Bank, the deadliest single operation in the territory in two decades.

Today's birthdays: Cartoonist Jules Feiffer is 95. Sportscaster-actor Bob Uecker is 89. Actor Scott Glenn is 85. Activist Angela Davis is 80. Actor Richard Portnow is 77. Rock musician Corky Laing (Mountain) is 76. Actor David Strathairn (streh-THEHRN') is 75. Producer-director Mimi Leder is 72. Alt-country singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams is 71. Reggae musician Norman Hassan (UB40) is 66. Actor-comedian-talk show host Ellen DeGeneres is 66. Rock musician Charlie Gillingham (Counting Crows) is 64. Hockey Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky is 63. Musician Andrew Ridgeley is 61. R&B singer Jazzie B (Soul II Soul) is 61. Actor Paul Johansson is 60. Director Lenny Abrahamson is 58. Actor Bryan Callen is 57. Gospel singer Kirk Franklin is 54. Actor Nate Mooney is 52. Actor Jennifer Crystal is 51. Rock musician Chris Hesse (Hoobastank) is 50. Actor Matilda Szydagis is 50. Actor Gilles Marini (ZHEEL ma-REE'-nee) is 48. Gospel singer Tye Tribbett is 48. Retired NBA player Vince Carter is 47. Actor Sarah Rue is 46. Actor Colin O'Donoghue is 43.