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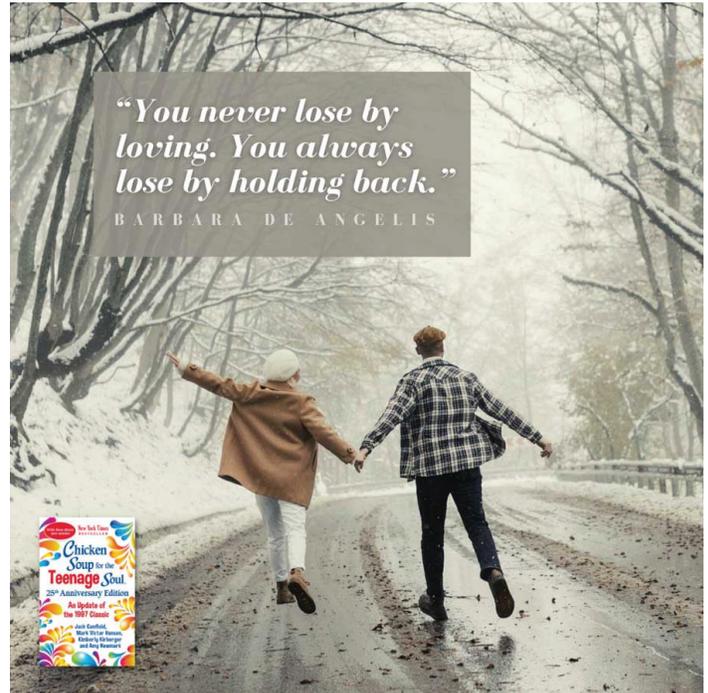
Friday, Feb. 2

Ground Hot Day
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch Taco Salads.
Senior Menu: Chicken cordon bleu hot dish, vegetable Catalina blend, pears, tapioca pudding, whole wheat bread.
Boys Wrestling Varsity Quad at Lyman.
Boys'. Basketball hosts Vermillion: C game at 4 p.m., JV at 5:15 p.m., Varsity at 6:30 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 3

Girls Basketball at DAK X!!/NEC Clash at Madison.
Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson at 12:30 p.m.
Boys Wrestling at Yankton, 9 a.m.

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



Girls Wrestling at Stanley County, 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, Feb. 4

Open Gym:
Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; 1st Communion Class, 1 p.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship with communion at Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:30 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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Hundreds of farmers protested outside the European Parliament building in Brussels yesterday as lawmakers gathered for a summit. Demonstrators blocked roads with over 1,000 tractors, toppled a statue, set fires, launched fireworks, and threw eggs (see video).

Apple's Vision Pro headset launches in the US today, the company's first major product release since the Apple Watch debuted in April 2015. Starting at \$3,500, the headset boasts compatibility with more than 1 million apps and games, including Disney+, PGA Tour Vision,

and Microsoft 365 productivity tools.

The nation's attention turns to western Pennsylvania this morning to watch the country's most famous groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, determine whether 2024 will bring an early spring or a longer winter. The prescient land-beaver will pick one of two scrolls, each containing separate wintery prophecies.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 65th Grammy Awards to be presented Sunday (8 pm ET, CBS); see nominations and predictions for all categories. See full list of Grammys performers.

Lewis Hamilton, seven-time Formula One world champion, to depart Mercedes and join Ferrari at end of 2024 season. NFL Pro Bowl Games kick off, continue Sunday (3 pm ET, ESPN). Mike Martin, all-time winningest college baseball coach, dies at 79.

Alec Baldwin pleads not guilty to involuntary manslaughter charges stemming from 2021 shooting death of "Rust" cinematographer Halyna Hutchins.

Science & Technology

Scientists pinpoint why women are at much higher risk of autoimmune disorders than men; a process known as X chromosome inactivation, meant to throttle the activity of the second X chromosome, can trigger an immune system response.

AI researchers demonstrate language model trained on film captured by a headcam attached to a single infant; approach may shed light on how children learn to speak and understand language.

Study suggests clownfish may have the ability to count; research finds fish determine who is friendly or a potential threat based on the number of white strips exhibited.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.3%, Dow +1.0%, Nasdaq +1.3%), rebounding after sell-off driven by Fed's decision to keep interest rates steady.

Peloton shares drop nearly 25% after reporting mixed results, trims full-year revenue outlook. Meta shares rise 14% in after-hours trading, announces first-ever dividend and authorizes \$50B share buyback. Apple's revenue grows for first time in a year. Amazon sees 14% revenue increase in Q4.

Deutsche Bank to cut 3,500 jobs, or 4% of workforce, in effort to slash costs by \$2.7B by 2025. Zoom to lay off roughly 150 jobs, or nearly 2% of workforce. More than 100 tech companies have laid off over 30,000 people since the start of 2024.

Politics & World Affairs

Biden administration issues sanctions against Israeli settlers involved in violence with Palestinians in the West Bank.

European Union to launch mission to protect commercial vessels in the Red Sea from Houthi militia attacks within the next three weeks. EU separately agrees to \$54B in aid to Ukraine, as Ukrainian government says its military is nearly out of basic military supplies.

First of two atmospheric rivers moves through California, with storms expected to bring threats of flooding across the state and add up to 5 feet of snowpack in the Sierra Nevada.

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

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Groton's basketball teams had a clean sweep of five games at Deuel

Boys Varsity: 69-35

Groton Area outscored Deuel, 26-2, between the second and third quarters to run away from the Cardinals in boys' basketball action. Groton Area won, 69-35, leading at the quarterstops at 15-12, 27-20 and 54-26.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 22 points, three rebounds, two assists and four steals. Jacob Zak had 13 points, six rebounds, three assists and four steals. Logan Ringgenberg had 10 points and three rebounds. Ryder Johnson had nine points, one rebound, two assists and four steals. Keegen Tracy had five points, two rebounds, one assist and four steals. Colby Dunker had two points, two rebounds, one assist, one steal and one block. Gage Sippel had two points, four rebounds and one steal. Holden Sippel had two points. Turner Thompson had two points and two assists. Easton Weber had two points. Blake Pauli had one assist. Kassen Keough had two assists and three steals. Karson Zak had one steal.

Three-Pointers: Tietz - 2, Johnson - 1.

Groton Area made 25 of 37 two-pointers for 68 percent, three of nine three-pointers for 33 percent, made 10 of 12 free throws for 83 percent, had 21 rebounds, 16 turnovers, 14 assists, 20 steals, eight team fouls and one block shot.

Trey Maaland and Gabe Sather each led Deuel with 13 points while Dexter Unzen had three and Troy Jenson and Garret Olson each had two points.

Deuel made 15 of 31 field goals for 48 percent, three of six free throws, had 25 turnovers and 13 team fouls.

Three-Pointers: Maaland - 2.

Boys Junior Varsity: 28-20

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 28-20, leading at the quarter stops at 10-0, 12-8 and 22-16.

Kassen Keough led Groton Area with eight points followed by Logan Warrington and Gage Sippel with five each, Karson Zak and Turner Thompson each had three points, Ethan Kroll had two and Jayden Schwan added one point.

Kyle Finnesand led Deuel with nine points while Garret Olson had seven, Gavin Maaland two and Sutton Benck and Caden Finnesand each had one point.

Groton Area C Game: 27-21

Groton Area won the C game, 37-21, leading at the quarter stops at 10-7, 22-9 and 32-11.

Logan Warrington led Groton Area with 13 points followed by Karson Zak with eight, Jayden Schwan had six, Easton Weber four, and Jace Johnson, Ryder Schelle and Ethan Kroll each had two points.

Gavin Maaland led Deuel with 13 points while Axel Gallardo had five and Emmett Schwiesow added two points.

Girls Varsity: 42-30

Defense took its toll on Deuel Thursday as the Lady Tigers pulled away from the Cardinals for a 42-30 Northeast Conference win. Groton Area led at the quarter stops at 17-10, 27-14 and 35-24.

Sydney Leicht led the Tigers with 14 points and one rebound. Jaedyn Penning had 10 points, seven rebounds, one assist and three steals. Taryn Traphagen had five points, two rebounds and three steals. Rylee Dunker had four points, six rebounds, three steals and one block shot. Faith Traphagen had four points, two rebounds, three assists and one steal. Jerica Locke had three points, two rebounds, eight assists and five steals. Brooklyn Hansen had two points, two rebounds, two assists and two steals.

Three-Pointers: Leicht - 2, Taryn Traphagen -1.

Groton Area made 16 of 38 two-pointers for 42 percent, three of 15 free throws for 20 percent, one of two free throws for 50 percent, had 22 rebounds, 10 turnovers, 14 assists, 17 steals, nine team fouls and one block shot.

Josie Anderson led Deuel with 11 points followed by Jaycee Hourigan had eight, Camden Peterreins

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seven and Kaitlyn Gubrud added four points.

Three-Pointers: Hourigan - 2, Anderson - 2, Peterreins - 1.

Deuel made 12 of 38 field goals for 32 percent, one of two free throws, had 23 turnovers and 10 team fouls.

Girls Junior Varsity: 40-12

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 40-12. Groton Area had 14-point run in the first lap to take a 17-2 lead at half time and the Tigers led, 21-5, after three quarters.

Taryn Traphagen led Groton Area with nine points, Faith Traphagen and Talli Wright each had eight points, Laila Roberts six, Ashlynn Warrington four and Emerlee Jones had three points.

Alayna Carlson and Braylin Kreger each had four points for Deuel.

All five games on GDILIVE.COM

All five games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The boys C game was sponsored for the grandparents watch. The girls junior varsity game was sponsored by Tom and Lindsey Tietz. The boys junior varsity game was sponsored by Coach Kyle Gerach and family. The varsity games were 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 Kosel and Shane Clark did the play-by-play and Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera.

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Northern State Releases 2024 Football Schedule, Opens the Season at South Dakota

Aberdeen, S.D. – Northern State University football will officially open the 2024 season at the University of South Dakota on Thursday, Aug. 29. It will be the first meeting between the two programs since 1997 and the Coyotes' move to NCAA Division I. The teams met seven times from 1990-97, with South Dakota holding an 8-0 advantage in the series. Northern's last victory against USD game in the fall of 1973 by a score of 61-12.

"We are excited to announce our 2024 football schedule and are looking forward to opening the season against the University of South Dakota," noted Director of Athletics Nate Davis. "With the new NCAA legislation that passed last month, we wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to fill out our 11-game schedule and provide a meaningful experience for our student-athletes. This is an important moment for our football program, that we feel will create positive momentum."

The unique match-up comes during a calendar year in which FCS teams are permitted to play a 12-game schedule. In addition, Division II passed the "week 0" initiative at the 2024 NCAA Convention, allowing its members to play their first permissible contest one week earlier than the prior legislative date.

Following the contest at South Dakota, the Wolves will kick-off their NSIC schedule at home versus the University of Sioux Falls on September 7. Northern will then play a pair of back-to-back away and home games, heading to Minot State and Augustana, and hosting Winona State and Bemidji State. The October 5 contest against the Beavers will be the annual Gypsy Days game.

The Wolves then hit the road, traveling to Minnesota Duluth on October 12. They close out the month of October at home against Southwest Minnesota State (Oct. 19) and on the road at Concordia-St. Paul (Oct. 26).

November slates Northern with their final regular season home game, hosting Minnesota State on the second. They then close out the regular season at Wayne State College on November 9. The full 2024 schedule is outlined below.

2024 Football Schedule

<u>Date</u>	<u>Opponent</u>	<u>Location</u>
8/29	@ South Dakota	Vermillion, S.D.
9/7	Sioux Falls	Aberdeen, S.D.
9/14	@ Minot State	Minot, N.D.
9/21	@ Augustana	Sioux Falls, S.D.
9/28	Winona State	Aberdeen, S.D.
10/5	Bemidji State	Aberdeen, S.D.
10/12	@ Minnesota Duluth	Duluth, Minn.
10/19	Southwest Minnesota State	Aberdeen, S.D.
10/26	@ Concordia-St. Paul	St. Paul, Minn.
11/2	Minnesota State	Aberdeen, S.D.
11/9	@ Wayne State	Wayne, Neb.

The Northern State University football team will announce their 2024 high school signing class next Wednesday, February 7. As a part of the national signing day festivities, NSU Athletics will host the annual signing day part from Lager's Inn that evening. The event begins at 5:30 p.m. and is open to the public with food provided. Stop in and learn more about the 2024 class.

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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #11 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus – 12, Coyotes – 11, Chipmunks – 11, Foxes – 7, Jackelopes – 6, Cheetahs – 1

Men's High Games: Vern Meyers – 244, Brody Sombke – 206, Butch Farmen – 197

Women's High Games: Alexa Schuring – 178, Brenda Waage – 175, Darci Spanier – 167

Men's High Series: Vern Meyers – 583, Lance Frohling – 534, Butch Farmen – 526

Women's High Series: Alexa Schuring – 474, Darci Spanier – 431, Hayley Merkel & Brenda Waage – 422

Fur

Boys Basketball Game

Vermillion @ Groton Area

Friday, February 2nd, 2024

Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

- 4:00PM → Boys C
- 5:00PM → Boys JV
- 6:30PM → Boys Varsity
 - o *Halftime Entertainment: FCCLA Shoot for a Pop*

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

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$5.00 Students: \$4.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: Vermillion will use the far back locker room down the JH Locker Room Hallway.

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Vermillion: North Bench

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

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

C Game Book: Krissi Zak

C Game Officials: Kristi Zoellner, Marty Weismantel

Varsity Officials: Eric Donat, Scott Witlock, Brendan Roth

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Marty Weismantel

National Anthem: Groton Area Senior and Miss Wolf Pack's Teen 2024, Anna Bisbee

Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director

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NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves Drops to Marauders in Thursday Night Action

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women's basketball team fell to the University of Mary Thursday Night, 77-72. The score tied ten times throughout the game, but the Marauders late lead kept the win out of reach from the Wolves.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 72, MARY 77

Records: NSU 15-6 (11-4 NSIC), MARY 15-8 (11-4 NSIC)

Attendance: 2257

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State notched 15 points in the first quarter, 22 in the second, 12 in the third, and 23 in the fourth. They notched 34 rebounds, 24 points in the paint, 15 assists, 11 points off of turnovers, and ten bench points.

The Wolves shot 37.5 % from the floor, 43.8 % from the 3-point arc, and 85.2 % from the foul line.

Madelyn Bragg dished out a team lead of 20 points and ten rebounds for her third double-double of the season along with three blocks.

Alayna Benike and Brynn Alfson both notched double figures with 14 and ten points respectively.

In addition, Benike drained 66.7 % of shots from beyond the 3-point line.

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 20 points, 10 rebounds, 3 blocks

Alayna Benike: 14 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 66.7% 3-point

Brynn Alfson: 10 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists

UP NEXT

Northern State hits the road to take on St. Cloud State on Saturday for a mid-day game. Tip-off time is set for 1 p.m. from St. Cloud Minn. against the Huskies to close out the week.

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NSU Men's Basketball

Second Half Spark Lifts Northern State over the University of Mary

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State University men's basketball team pulled away from the University of Mary on Thursday evening, scoring 58 second half points in their win over the Marauders. NSU trailed by two at the half and rallied back shooting 67.9% from the floor and 100.0% from the foul line in the second.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 71, MARY 85

Records: NSU 8-13 (6-9 NSIC), MARY 6-15 (1-14 NSIC)

Attendance: 2501

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern tallied 27 points in the first and 58 in the second, while Mary notched 29 and 42

The Wolves shot 50.9% from the floor in the win and hit a perfect 22-of-22 from the foul line

They scored 44 points in the paint, 16 points off turnovers, 15 second chance points, and seven points off the bench

NSU recorded a game high 36 rebounds, 11 assists, six steals, and three blocks; out-rebounding the Marauders by nine in the win

Jacksen Moni led three in double figures with his seventh double-double of the season, scoring 31 points and grabbing 13 rebounds

Isaiah Hagen tallied all seven bench points for the Wolves and added three rebounds

It was a career night for Andrew Bergan who tallied 14 points, going 8-of-8 from the foul line

Augustin Reede and Michael Nhial rounded out the starting five adding eight and seven points respectively

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL LEADERS

Jacksen Moni: 31 points, 72.2 field goal%, 13 rebounds, 3 assists, 2 blocks

Josh Dilling: 18 points, 8 rebounds, 6 assists, 2 steals

Andrew Bergan: 14 points (career high), 4 rebounds

UP NEXT

The Wolves close out their week at St. Cloud State on Saturday afternoon. Tip-off time is set for 3 p.m. versus the Huskies.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

State Senate shoots down property tax valuation cap

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 5:00 PM

PIERRE — The South Dakota Senate shot down an effort Thursday to cap property tax valuation increases at 3% a year for homeowners and rental properties.

Senate Bill 167 would have capped increases in response to the heavy hikes in property valuations that followed the COVID-19 pandemic's start in 2020.

Sen. Jack Kolbeck, R-Sioux Falls, said his goal was to offer some relief to long-term homeowners whose new neighbors from other states helped push home values beyond what local incomes can absorb.

The bill narrowly cleared the Senate Taxation Committee on Wednesday despite opposition from a parade of lobbyists for schools, local governments and the state Department of Revenue.

On the Senate floor, opponents pointed to some of the same points raised by those lobbyists. Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, argued that the change would disconnect property tax valuations from the market and offer more relief to those with higher-priced homes.

Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, said the bill would shift tax burdens in ways the lawmakers could not predict from the Senate floor.

Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, pointed to the state Constitution, which requires that property tax assessments be fair and equitable across all property classes.

"There is a constitution, and we have to follow it," Schoenbeck said.

Kolbeck made one final plea before the Senate voted.

"When you go home this weekend, and you're talking to your constituents about property taxes that keep going up and up and up, I hope you have the right answer for them," Kolbeck said.

The bill was rejected by a vote of 20-11.

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.

Death penalty repeal fails by one vote in Senate committee

Emotional testimony from clergy, retired judge, widow of slain officer precede vote

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 4:51 PM

PIERRE — A Senate panel narrowly shot down a bill to repeal the death penalty in South Dakota on Thursday.

The 4-3 vote from the Senate Judiciary Committee came after about an hour of emotional testimony from a judge who presided over a death penalty case, the widow of a slain correctional officer and multiple members of the clergy.

Senate Bill 106 came from Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, who has sponsored similar bills in the past.

Nesiba told the committee that the proposal would not undo the death sentence of Briley Piper, the state's only death row inmate, then deferred most of his time to supporters to make the case for why no one else should face a death sentence in South Dakota.

The leader of South Dakotans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, Denny Davis, told the committee that a survey of county auditors on capital murders – cases for which the death penalty could conceivably be imposed – revealed that death penalty cases cost 10 times as much to prosecute and manage after

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convictions than those where the defendant is sentenced to life without parole.

"This is an unnecessary burden for counties that are up here every year begging for money," Davis said.

The fiscal point underscored Davis' main concern, which is the idea that the state would sanction the taking of a life.

"Is the death penalty really what we want to do as a people?" Davis said.

Pastor, former judge support bill

Art Rusch, a former judge and state lawmaker, presided over the death penalty trial of Donald Moeller, who was executed in October 2012 for the 1990 rape and murder of 9-year-old Becky O'Connell.

"All of you can talk about the death penalty in an abstract sense. But I spent a year of my life preparing for that death penalty case," Rusch said.

Such cases exact a heavy mental toll on jurors, he said. Death penalty cases have two phases: an initial trial to determine a defendant's innocence or guilt, and a second trial that weighs the possibility of a death sentence. Rusch dismissed one juror in the Moeller case due to the stress their decision had caused.

All that stress and all the knock-on expenses from doubled-up trials and post-conviction appeals does not deter crime, Rusch argued, citing his own experiences and the words of former Attorney General Mark Meierhenry.

Another former legislator, Pastor Steve Hickey, also testified in favor of the bill. Hickey opposes the death penalty on moral grounds, but also political ones. In a time when government has been "weaponized," in his words, the authority to impose the death penalty is too much.

"I've come to the conclusion that conservatives will rue the day they supported the death penalty, a government big enough to decide who lives and who dies," Hickey said.

Life without parole would suffice as an ultimate punishment, the bill's supporters said.

Attorney general testifies in opposition

Attorney General Marty Jackley was the first opponent to Nesiba's bill. He opened his defense of death for murderers by acknowledging the deeply held beliefs behind the opposition.

But one of Jackley's first points was a refutation of the efficacy of life without parole as a final solution for justice.

A sentence of life without parole can be commuted by a governor. That happened for Deb Jenner, who stabbed her infant daughter to death with a toy aluminum airplane and served nearly two decades before earning a commutation from former Gov. Bill Janklow.

She was eventually released by the state Board of Pardons and Paroles.

"Life does not mean life in South Dakota," Jackley said.

The penalty does serve as a deterrent, he argued, but it also serves to expedite justice for victims. Prosecutors are required to give notice of their intent to pursue the death penalty, and Jackley has done that four times.

On two of those occasions, the defendants pleaded guilty to avoid the death penalty.

"But for the notice to seek the death penalty, those cases would still be litigated today," Jackley said.

The other two cases were tied to the same crime – the murder of Correctional Officer Ron "R.J." Johnson in 2011. Eric Robert and Rodney Berget, both of whom have since been executed, wrapped Johnson's head in plastic, beat him to death with a lead pipe, stole his uniform and tried to walk out of the South Dakota State Penitentiary.

Both were serving life sentences.

"If you take away the death penalty, there would have been absolutely no penalty for what they did," Jackley said.

Lincoln County State's Attorney Tom Wollman, who managed the appeals for Moeller until his execution in October of 2012, used the details of that gruesome killing in part as an answer to the question "is it worth the expense?"

The death penalty is used sparingly, Wollman said, and only for the worst cases. "Absolutely, it costs money. All important things in our lives cost money," Wollman said.

Slain officer's widow testifies

Officer Johnson's widow, Lynette Johnson, wept as she described learning that her husband had been murdered on his birthday, a day he'd come in to work to cover someone else's shift.

Johnson's testimony recounted the moments in their family's life that her husband missed as a result of his murder, holding up photos of her grandchildren as she listed off the milestones they'd hit without their "Papa" there to see them.

"We have to protect the law enforcement," Johnson said.

In his rebuttal, Nesiba told the committee "Ron Johnson should be here today." The state prison system failed to protect him, said Nesiba, who argued that the case points to why it's important for the state to build a newer, safer prison.

But the situation doesn't support the notion that the death penalty protects law enforcement, he said.

"The death penalty was in place," Nesiba said. "It didn't deter them."

In the end, the committee voted 4-3 in favor of a motion to move the bill to the 41st day of the 38-day legislative session, effectively defeating it.

Sen. Jim Stalzer, R-Sioux Falls, referenced the repeat attempts to ban the death penalty before casting his vote.

"I worked with Ron Johnson for six years. I had morning coffee with him. I had lunch with him," Stalzer said. "It just breaks my heart to see Lynette have to come up here every year."

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.

Noem confirms \$1.3 million of border assistance was a gift to Texas

Governor also meets with tribal-member legislators after cartel comments

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 4:01 PM

PIERRE — Governor Kristi Noem confirmed Thursday that when she sent South Dakota National Guard troops to help Texas secure the U.S.-Mexico border, she did so with the understanding that the costs would not be reimbursed.

"If you look at the amount of dollars that Texas has spent in protection of the southern border, which is a federal government responsibility, it's over \$4 billion," Noem said. "And so they were very clear: 'You can come and help us, but this will be a financial responsibility that you as a state will need to take on.'"

She made the comments during an impromptu press conference at the Capitol, her first with the Capitol press corps so far this legislative session, which began Jan. 9. The press conference came one day after Noem spoke to a joint session of the Legislature about her trip last week to the border.

Noem sent South Dakota National Guard troops to the border twice in 2021 and once last year. One of the deployments was federally requested, and the troops were on federal pay status. Noem ordered the other two, resulting in costs of at least \$1.3 million that she paid from South Dakota's Emergency and Disaster Fund. Another \$1 million came from a private donor in Tennessee.

"So those two previous deployments that we paid for, we knew we were going to have to pay for them as a state," Noem said. She added, "And it is one of the considerations that I'm looking at as well before we decide to send the Guard again."

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State aid agreements typically reimbursed

A Texas official separately confirmed Thursday that the state has an agreement with South Dakota through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, known by the acronym EMAC. The compact is a nationwide mutual aid agreement among states.

"The state of Texas' EMAC Resource Support Agreements that have been signed with the state of South Dakota for border support, from July 2021 forward, clearly state that the support and resources provided are at no cost to the State of Texas," wrote Seth Christensen, of the Texas Division of Emergency Management.

Christensen said that "due to the nationwide benefit of a secure international border with Mexico," the state of Texas "has requested that assisting states absorb associated costs with this mission in support of the entire country."

Earlier this week at the South Dakota Capitol, a Noem administration official testified during a legislative hearing that similar aid to other states has been paid back.

"All of our EMAC missions have been reimbursed by the states that have requested our assistance, except for the state of Texas," said Kristi Turman, of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

South Dakota Searchlight asked Noem on Thursday why she made an exception for Texas. Noem disputed the notion that all other aid agreements with other states are reimbursed.

"There are times when there's agreements, and some are reimbursed by other states, and some aren't," Noem said.

Native American legislators meet with Noem

Also Thursday, Noem said she had met with Rep. Peri Pourier, D-Rapid City, and Rep. Tyler Tordsen, R-Sioux Falls, who are both members of Native American tribes in South Dakota. Noem's Wednesday speech to the Legislature included numerous statements about Mexican drug cartel activity on reservations.

"I understand that some of the words, they would've appreciated being changed," Noem said Thursday while describing the meeting to the media. Noem also said everything in her speech was true.

In a separate interview with several members of the media Thursday, Pourier and Tordsen described the meeting as productive. Tordsen said he encouraged the governor to share advance copies of her speeches with tribal leaders if she plans to make significant comments about tribal matters.

"That consultation with us can go a long way, so it doesn't have to be meetings after the fact — we could be meeting beforehand," Tordsen said.

During Noem's press conference, she also clarified a statement from her Wednesday speech about her plan to support an Oglala Sioux Tribe lawsuit against the federal government "very publicly." The lawsuit alleges that the federal government has failed to honor its treaty obligations to provide law enforcement on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Noem said Thursday that her support could take the form of a legal brief in support of the lawsuit. She's also offered to appear with tribal leaders in Washington, D.C., to push for better federal support, she said.

— *South Dakota Searchlight's Joshua Haiar and John Hult contributed to this report.*

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

Social media threats to police could net a year in jail

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 5:10 PM

PIERRE — Threatening a police officer on Facebook could land people in jail for up to a year under the terms of a bill that passed the state Senate on Thursday.

That's less time behind bars than the bill's sponsor wanted.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, presented his bill as a way to update state laws on threats of serious bodily

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harm or death to law enforcement to include threats made electronically.

Originally, Senate Bill 77 did three main things: include electronic threats in the existing law, affix a felony penalty of up to five years in prison to such threats, and remove the word "serious" from the definition of threatened bodily harm.

Under current law, written threats via mail are a class 1 misdemeanor.

"If you're going to threaten harm, whether it be ink and paper or on social media, I believe the consequence should be greater than a misdemeanor," Reed said.

Slightly more than half of his fellow senators disagreed.

Sen Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, moved to amend the bill and reduce the penalty to a class 1 misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail.

The notion that a one-off social media threat would serve as a basis for a felony, particularly for young people, didn't sit well with Mehlhaff. The senator served on an interim committee in 2023 studying ways to keep young adults out of prison through targeted diversion programs.

"I'm thinking about the impulsive nature of social media, the impulsive nature of young people, and the impulsive nature sometimes, frankly, of people my age," Mehlhaff said.

Sen. Herman Otten, R-Tea, agreed. A felony follows a person around for years, he said. It makes it harder to get a job or an apartment and affects voting and firearms rights.

"In the state of South Dakota, we make far too many people felons," Otten said.

Reed countered that lowering the penalty for threatening police officers disregards the potential seriousness of an electronic threat.

"Are we going to make it OK to do something flippant like that?" Reed said, making a point a handful of other opponents to the amendment also made.

Mehlhaff's amendment passed nonetheless, on a vote of 17-14.

The amended SB 77 passed 27-4. The bill now moves to a House of Representatives committee.

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.

Drivers could get opportunity to support wildlife habitat with license plates

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 3:25 PM

PIERRE — South Dakotans may soon be able to purchase a special license plate to support the state's wildlife habitat conservation efforts.

The yet-to-be-designed plates would cost an as-yet undetermined fee that would go to the Game, Fish and Parks Department. The funds would be used to help improve everything from wetlands in the north-east part of the state to the ponderosa pine forests of the Black Hills.

A bill that would authorize the license plate plan passed the state's House of Representatives 64-3 on Thursday, with two representatives excused. The bill now goes to a Senate committee.

"Habitat is the foundation of wildlife management," Game, Fish, and Parks Secretary Kevin Robling told the House Transportation Committee on Tuesday, where the bill passed 12-0.

He said further details about the plates would be decided through the department's typical proposal process. That would involve the GF&P Commission, a body appointed by the governor that regularly conducts public meetings.

Robling said the plan is to offer various designs, likely costing somewhere around \$20 to \$40 per plate, per year.

"We want to make sure there are options for people to choose from," he said.

Robling said the bill gives people who do not purchase hunting or fishing licenses an opportunity to help

fund the department's conservation efforts. The program would start on March 1, 2025.

Various hunting and conservation groups supported the bill during the committee hearing.

"This is a good bill that's going to help people become a walking billboard for habitat," said Paul Lepisto with the Izaak Walton League of America, a conservation group.

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.

Stiffer penalties for fentanyl dealers in overdose cases moves to full state Senate

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 1:17 PM

PIERRE – Drug dealers who knowingly sell fentanyl to someone who later dies of an overdose would be in line for longer sentences under a bill that passed the state Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously on Thursday.

Those who sell illegal drugs that kill their users are already in line for up to 50 years in prison if the deceased user is an adult, or up to life in prison if the deceased is a minor. Those sentences are based on the discretion of prosecutors, however, who can choose to enhance the typical 10-25 year potential sentences for drug distribution to higher levels.

Senate Bill 6 would take away that discretion and boost the penalty for distributing drugs that cause death to a class 2 felony, punishable by up to 25 years in prison. For deaths involving the synthetic opioid fentanyl, the penalty would be a class 1 felony carrying up to 50 years in prison and up to life for deaths involving minors.

The bill's prime sponsor is Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron. Wheeler told the committee that his bill is a recognition of the dangers of opioids, responsible for 45 deaths in South Dakota in 2022.

Dealers are "using fentanyl in drugs that people might not know about," Wheeler said.

A lobbyist for the state's defense lawyers argued that the enhancements wouldn't be appropriate for "low-level" dealers who don't realize what's in the drugs they sell.

Just before that testimony, however, the committee added an amendment, at Wheeler's request, that would require a defendant to know what they sold contained fentanyl to be eligible for the enhanced penalties.

Committee Chair Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, asked if it's possible to prove that a dealer knew about the presence of fentanyl.

"It's not always easy to prove, but it's possible to do if the proof is there," Wheeler said.

The bill, which passed 7-0, now moves to the full Senate for consideration.

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.

Public-private campground dispute flares again in debate over failed bill

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 1, 2024 11:15 AM

PIERRE — A bill seeking to restrict the expansion of state campgrounds was defeated Thursday following spirited testimony from a campground owner who said the legislation was about “broken trust.”

The legislation aimed to amend state law to prevent new state campgrounds or additional state camping sites from being built without the approval of legislators.

Rep. Trish Ladner, R- Hot Springs, said she brought the bill on behalf of some people she represents. One is Steve Saint. He owns Fort Welikit Family Campground, just south of Custer State Park. He is also the president of the South Dakota Campground Owners Association.

Saint said the Department of Game, Fish, and Parks – which manages state-owned campgrounds – broke his trust when it made plans for a multi-million-dollar campsite expansion at Custer State Park in 2022. He said the department does not listen to feedback.

“My experience has been ‘we hear what you say, but we don’t care,’” Saint told the state House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. He said running a private campground “costs us a lot of money,” and it’s frustrating when the government is the biggest competition.

The department manages 390 campsites in Custer State Park, according to Jeff VanMeeteren, the department’s director of parks and recreation.

VanMeeteren said needing legislative authorization for expansions, renovations or new sites would put a burden on the department.

“That is a lot of legislation,” he said.

Under existing law, the department has the authority, with approval from the GF&P Commission (a body appointed by the governor) to purchase, construct and acquire facilities within state parks and recreation areas if deemed necessary and feasible.

VanMeeteren told the committee that under current state law, people like Saint have their voices heard during the monthly commission meeting, and that “we follow up with everybody.”

Saint replied, “I’ve been to those meetings. GF&P is rolling their eyes the whole time.”

Saint said the problem is government competing with private industry. Lawmakers on the committee empathized with that feeling, “especially when you’re competing against your own tax dollars,” said Rep. Julie Auch, R-Yankton.

However, she and others ultimately felt “this bill appears to use a sledgehammer to kill a fly,” in the words of Rep. James Wangsness, R-Miller. “To have us try and approve every single project would be very cumbersome and a waste of time and money, in my opinion.”

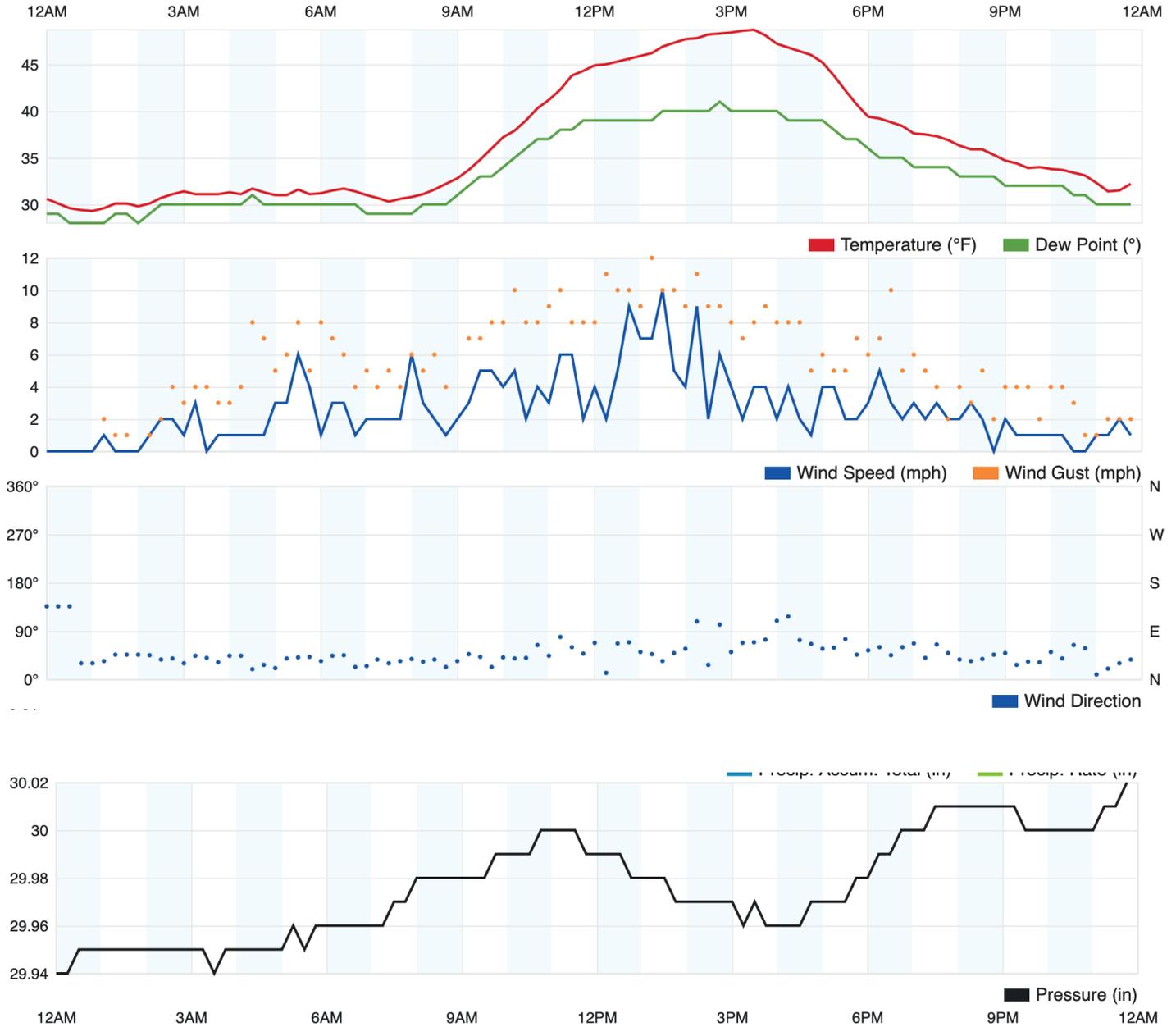
The Custer State Park campsite expansion debate in 2022 centered around the state’s plan to add 175 new campsites to accommodate growing tourism and visitation rates. In response to the backlash, the proposal was abandoned.

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



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Fri Feb 2	Sat Feb 3	Sun Feb 4	Mon Feb 5	Tue Feb 6	Wed Feb 7	Thu Feb 8
45°F 35°F	48°F 32°F	47°F 29°F	46°F 33°F	50°F 35°F	48°F 35°F	43°F 29°F
ESE 12 MPH	SE 12 MPH	E 6 MPH	S 9 MPH	S 16 MPH	SSE 13 MPH 20%	SE 15 MPH 50%



Persistent Fog - Weekend Showers - Much Above Normal Temps

February 2, 2024
3:17 AM

Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
Highs: 38 - 46°F	Highs: 42 - 47°F	Highs: 43 - 46°F	Highs: 46 - 52°F	Highs: 50 - 55°F
15-20 mph	5-15 mph	5-10 mph	15-20 mph	15-25 mph

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Looking forward to the weekend and next week we will continue to deal with fog for the next few days. Showers will mainly affect western and central South Dakota over the weekend. Temperatures stay much above normal as well.

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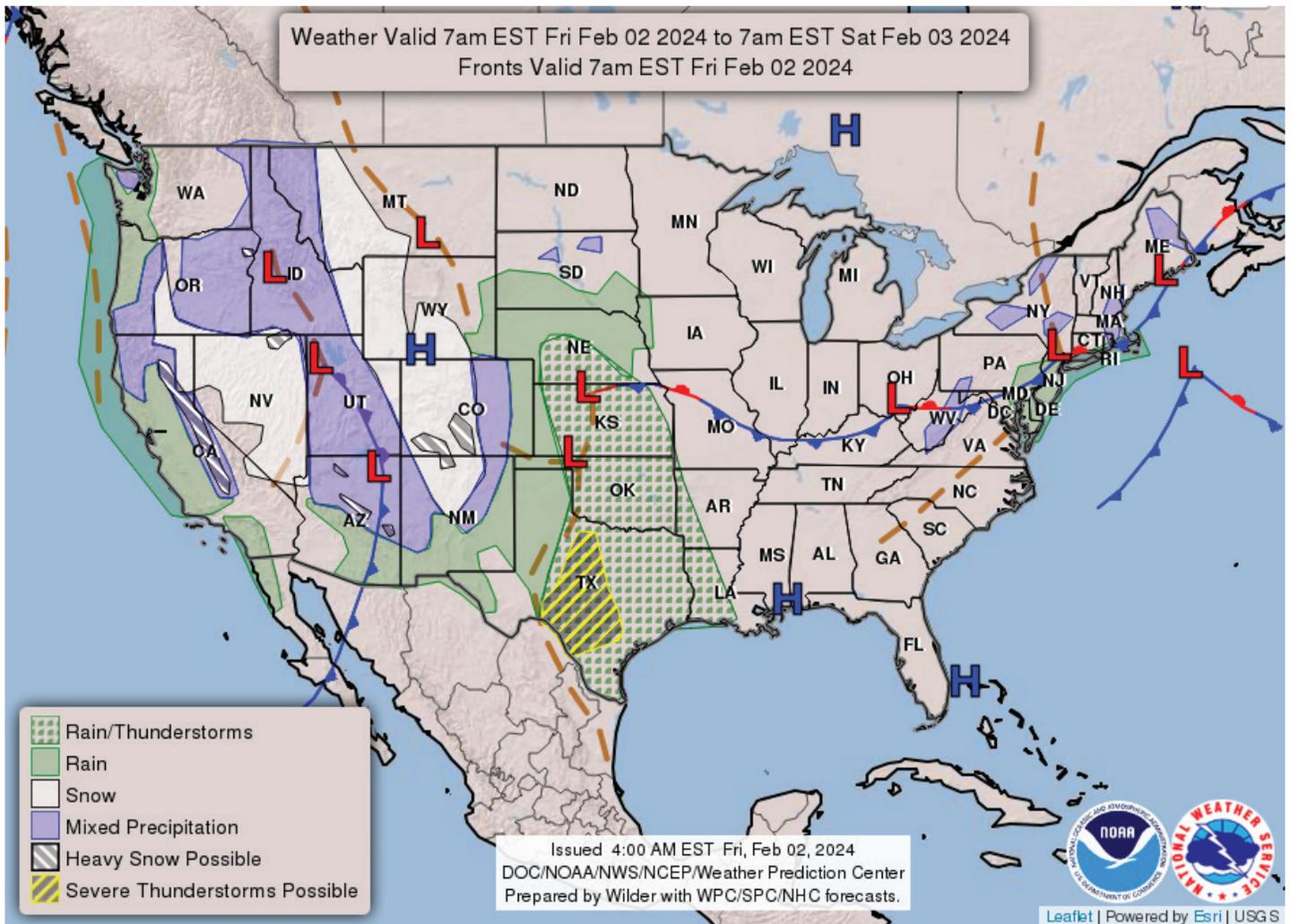
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 49 °F at 3:08 PM
Low Temp: 29 °F at 12:50 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 12:21 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 50 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1991
Record Low: -39 in 1917
Average High: 25
Average Low: 2
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.04
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.59
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:41:30 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:49:21 am



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Today in Weather History

February 2, 1960: Heavy icing from freezing rain accumulations from the afternoon of the 2nd to the afternoon of the 3rd occurred mainly across the eastern half of the state. Severe damage to power lines and telephone service happened in the Watertown and Wessington Springs area. Ice coatings of up to 3 inches thick and has an estimated weight of nine pounds per foot of wire formed around the telephone and some power lines over a wide area of the eastern counties. A 300-foot tower high collapsed at Wessington Springs, and in some areas, utility wires were entirely down for stretches of 2 to 3 miles. Some 170 long-distance telephone circuits were knocked out in larger cities, and 19 towns from Bonesteel to Watertown on the north were without phone service for two to three days after the storm. Many highways were treacherous, and numerous vehicles collided or slid off the road into the ditch. Many schools were also closed.

February 2, 2003: Widespread freezing rain developed across parts of central and into northeast South Dakota through the late-night hours producing significant icing of a quarter to a half-inch by the late morning hours. No significant tree damage or power outages occurred. However, travel was significantly disrupted with many accidents and vehicles sliding off the road. The freezing rain changed over to snow during the mid-morning hours and became heavy, with 6 to 9 inches of snow accumulating before it ended in the late evening. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Ree Heights, Miller, and Faulkton, 7 inches at Clear Lake, 8 inches at Bryant, and 9 inches at Milbank.

February 2, 2011: Blizzard conditions developed along and east of the Sisseton Hills late on February 2nd and continued into the mid-morning hours of February 3rd. Strong southwest winds of 30 to 40 mph, gusting to around 55 mph, picked up the existing snow cover causing blizzard conditions wreaked havoc along Interstate-29. Whiteout conditions and massive drifting brought traffic to a halt along a stretch of Interstate-29 from north of Wilmot to Sisseton. One-hundred fifty to two-hundred vehicles were stranded along this stretch. A full-scale rescue operation ensued during the night and continued into the next day. Interstate-29 was closed from Watertown to the North Dakota border as it took most of the day to clean up all of the stalled vehicles. There were also many accidents along the stretch of the interstate, with people stranded for up to twelve hours. No injuries occurred as a result of this incident. The Roberts County Emergency Manager was stranded and conducted emergency operations from his vehicle. Interstate-29 reopened the evening of the 3rd.

1870: Congressman Halbert Paine, who represented Wisconsin's Second District, introduced a joint resolution in the House of Representatives "to authorize the Secretary of War to provide for taking meteorological observations at the military stations and other points in the interior of the continent, and for giving notice on the Northern Lakes and seaboard of the approach and force of storms."

The House adopted the resolution by unanimous consent and, two days later, it passed the Senate. Five days later, on Feb. 9, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the joint resolution into law, officially creating the nation's first weather service.

1898: The naming of hurricanes after women was always the center of controversy. In the Southern Hemisphere near Australia, tropical cyclones were once called Willy-Willies. An Australian Meteorologist, Clement Wragge, is credited for giving girls names to tropical cyclones by the end of the 19th Century. On this date, Wragge's weather journal showed a Willy Willy named "Eline."

1952: An area of low pressure moved out of the Gulf of Mexico and across southern Florida during the evening and late-night hours on February 2, 1952. It produced 60 mph winds and two to four inches of rain on February 2 and 3. The low pressure remains the only tropical storm to impact the United States in February.

1956 - A record snowstorm in New Mexico and west Texas began on Ground Hog's Day. The storm produced 15 inches of snow at Roswell NM, and up to 33 inches in the Texas Panhandle. (David Ludlum)

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1987 - A fast moving arctic front brought snow and high winds to the north central U.S. Winds gusted to 69 mph at Brookings SD. Big Falls MN reported nine inches of snow. Record warmth was reported just ahead of the front. Burlington IA reported a record high of 59 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A dying low pressure system over southern California deluged the San Diego coastal mountains with more than four inches of rain causing half a million dollars damage. Arctic air invading the north central U.S. sent the mercury plunging to 38 degrees below zero at Park Rapids MN. Raleigh NC reported a record high of 75 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Bitter cold air covered much of the central U.S. Butte MT reported a wind chill reading of 91 degrees below zero, Salt Lake City UT was blanketed with 11.9 inches of snow in 24 hours, and winds around Reno NV gusted to 80 mph. Unseasonably warm weather continued in the southeastern U.S. Twenty-eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Wilmington NC with a reading of 80 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather in the Lower Mississippi Valley during the late afternoon and evening hours. One person was injured in a tornado near Reidheimer LA. Thunderstorms northeast of Brandon MS produced hail three inches in diameter along with high winds which downed or snapped off one hundred trees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1996: An Arctic outbreak that lasted from late January through early February produced nearly 400 hundred record lows, 15 all-time low readings, and over 50 new record lows. Four states recorded their all-time record low temperatures, including Tower, Minnesota, on this date with a reading of 60 degrees below zero, canceling Tower's annual Icebox Days festival because it is too cold. Locations that reported their all-time record low or tied included: Cresco, IA: -36°, Osage, IA: -34°, Charles City, IA tied their record low with -32° and Lancaster, WI tied their all-time record low with -31°. International Falls, MN, and Glasgow, MT set records for February with -45° and -38°, respectively. The temperature at Embarrass, MN, plummeted to -53°. Rochester, MN, dipped to -34° for its coldest temperature in 45 years. Green Bay, WI only reached -16° for the high temperature for the day, their coldest high temperature on record in February. The place to be this day was in Orlando, FL, where it was a balmy 85 degrees.

2006 - New Orleans is struck by two tornadoes, collapsing at least one previously damaged house and battering Louis Armstrong International Airport. The Weather Doctor

2008 - Hilo, HI, is deluged by 10.82 inches of rain in a period of 24 hours, breaking the previous record set in 1969 by 3.5 inches. The Weather Doctor

2011 - A high temperature of 44°F registered at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, AZ, sets an all-time February record for the coldest high temperature for the city. The Weather Doctor

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

ANSWERING THE RIGHT QUESTION

A young student was sitting before Socrates anxiously wanting to learn from "the master." With a penetrating gaze, he asked, "Where can I find the best things in life?"

The young student was overwhelmed with the breadth of the question. He thought of the various places that had the best fabrics and most beautiful robes. Then he recalled sights of the market places that had exotic merchandise. Then, in his mind's eye, he returned to the restaurants that had the best food and drinks he had ever visited.

As the student was about to answer, Socrates held up his hand as if to interrupt the student's thoughts. He then asked, "Must we not first, however, ask what the best things are?" That question changed Plato's life forever.

David once said, "You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of Your presence and the pleasures of living with You forever."

Most individuals spend most of their time searching for the "best things of life" - things they believe will bring them joy, satisfaction, and happiness. David realized, however, that despite everything he possessed, God was the One who could make a difference in his life and bring him peace, fulfillment, and completeness. He realized that only God would be able to comfort him in his moments of distress and discouragement, sorrow and sadness, and relieve his anxiety.

Everything in life is temporary, except God, and through Him, we discover "the best things in life." Worshiping and honoring Him, then, is the most essential thing we can ever do. If we do so, then, all will be well!

Prayer: Help us, Heavenly Father, to place You at the center of our lives. May we find contentment within us knowing that we have found the best thing in life. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of Your presence and the pleasures of living with You forever. Psalm 16



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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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.30.24

3 5 16 58 59 11

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$333,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 47 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

3 30 38 39 48 8

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,750,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 2 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.01.24

16 21 23 26 45 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 17 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

1 19 22 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$36,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 17 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

13 15 18 21 58 25

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 46 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

15 18 19 41 43 14

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$206,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 46 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 68, Northwestern 35
Beresford 73, Madison 63
Centerville 61, Bridgewater-Emery 57
Dakota Valley 87, Elk Point-Jefferson 68
DeSmet 65, Elkton-Lake Benton 24
Dell Rapids 56, Tri-Valley 52
Dell Rapids St Mary 76, Iroquois-Lake Preston 41
Deubrook 66, Arlington 49
Estelline-Hendricks 77, Colman-Egan 61
Faith 60, McIntosh 25
Freeman 72, Alcester-Hudson 54
Great Plains Lutheran 67, Wilmot 36
Groton 69, Deuel 35
Hanson 66, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 50
Hot Springs 50, Custer 48
Lakota Tech 74, Todd County 51
Lemmon High School 56, Bison 17
Leola-Frederick High School 49, Warner 36
Marty 71, Burke 65
Miller 75, Ipswich 59
Mitchell Christian 58, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 45
Mobridge-Pollock 65, Belle Fourche 49
Philip 75, Lead-Deadwood 72, OT
Rapid City Christian 72, Red Cloud 49
Sioux Falls Lincoln 62, Brookings 59
Sioux Valley 44, Flandreau 35
Stanley County 65, Chamberlain 55
Takini 27, Harding County 26
Tea 49, West Central 47
Timber Lake 67, Tiospaye Topa 27
Wagner 54, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 44
Wakpala 61, Herreid-Selby 47
Waubay/Summit 59, Florence-Henry 36
Waverly-South Shore 56, Flandreau Indian 35
Webster 79, Redfield 42
Wessington Springs 73, Lower Brule 65
Western Christian, Iowa 68, Lennox 49
White River 92, Wall 61

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 57, Milbank 41
Arlington 55, Deubrook 41
Avon 44, Bon Homme 38

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Belle Fourche 59, Mobridge-Pollock 53
Brookings 67, Sioux Falls Lincoln 39
Burke 48, Colome 22
Chamberlain 55, Gregory 50
Crow Creek Tribal School 67, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 36
Custer 65, Hot Springs 38
Dell Rapids St Mary 58, Iroquois-Lake Preston 44
Elk Point-Jefferson 60, Dakota Valley 53
Elkton-Lake Benton 45, DeSmet 23
Faith 60, Timber Lake 38
Freeman 65, Alcester-Hudson 45
Garretson 52, McCook Central-Montrose 40
Great Plains Lutheran 62, Wilmot 32
Groton 42, Deuel 30
Hill City 52, Newell 18
Jones County 35, New Underwood 27
Lennox 73, Baltic 34
Lyman 69, Highmore-Harrold 23
McLaughlin 55, Dupree 49
Miller 38, Ipswich 29
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 62, Hanson 54
Northwestern 47, Aberdeen Christian 33
Philip 57, Lead-Deadwood 32
Pierre 55, Yankton 29
Platte-Geddes 53, Scotland 25
Red Cloud 73, Rapid City Christian 30
Sisseton 60, Clark-Willow Lake 25
St Thomas More 39, Winner 22
Tri-Valley 48, Dell Rapids 31
Vermillion 43, Sioux Falls Christian 39
Wagner 70, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 56
Wall 74, White River 57
Warner 57, Leola-Frederick High School 51
Waverly-South Shore 45, Flandreau Indian 30
Wessington Springs 49, Lower Brule 42

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

Skunberg, Feddersen lift North Dakota State over South Dakota State 74-73 in OT

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Boden Skunberg had 14 points and 11 rebounds and Noah Feddersen made a layup with one second left in overtime to rally North Dakota State to a 74-73 victory over South Dakota State on Thursday night.

Skunberg also had six assists for the Bison (10-12, 3-4 Summit League). Andrew Morgan scored 12 points and grabbed five rebounds. Jacari White hit two 3-pointers, scoring 10 with six rebounds. Feddersen scored eight with seven rebounds.

Zeke Mayo finished with a season-high 35 points, six rebounds and two steals for the Jackrabbits (12-11, 5-3). William Kyle III totaled 12 points, six rebounds and four blocks. Luke Appel pitched in with 10 points,

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11 rebounds and four assists.

Mayo hit a 3-pointer with six seconds left to force overtime tied at 65.

Omot scores 25, North Dakota knocks off South Dakota 95-81

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — B.J. Omot had 25 points in North Dakota's 95-81 victory over South Dakota on Thursday night.

North Dakota won in Vermillion in back-to-back years for the first time since 1998-99.

Omot shot 8 for 16 (3 for 7 from 3-point range) and 6 of 8 from the free throw line for the Fightin' Hawks (13-10, 5-3 Summit League). Tyree Ihenacho scored 21 points while shooting 8 for 15 (3 for 6 from 3-point range) and 2 of 3 from the free throw line. Amar Kuljuhovic shot 7 of 11 from the field and 3 for 3 from the line to finish with 17 points, while adding 17 rebounds.

Kuljuhovic was the first Fighting Hawk to grab that many rebounds since Marlon Stewart in the 2019-2020 season.

The Coyotes (9-14, 2-6) were led in scoring by Kaleb Stewart, who finished with 18 points. Paul Bruns added 18 points for South Dakota. In addition, Max Burchill had 16 points.

A fire set off by a gas explosion in Kenya kills at least 3 people and injures more than 270 others

By TOM ODULA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — A vehicle loaded with gas exploded and set off an inferno that burned homes and warehouses in Kenya's capital, killing at least three people and injuring more than 270, officials said Friday, with the death toll expected to rise.

Many residents were likely inside their homes when the fire reached their houses in the Mradi area of the Nairobi neighborhood of Embakasi, government spokesman Isaac Mwaura said.

The truck explosion ignited a huge fireball, and a flying gas cylinder set off a fire that burned down a garment and textile warehouse called Oriental Godown, Mwaura said. Several other vehicles and businesses were damaged by the inferno that started around 11:30 p.m. Thursday.

At the scene after daybreak, several houses and shops were burned out. The shell of the vehicle believed to have started the explosion was lying on its side. The roof of a four-story residential building about 200 meters (yards) from the scene of the explosion was broken by a flying gas cylinder. Electric wires lay on the ground. Nothing remained in the burned-out warehouse except the shells of several trucks.

Alfred Juma, an aspiring politician, said he heard loud noise from a gas cylinder in a warehouse next to his house. "I started waking up neighbors asking them to leave," Juma said.

He said he warned a black car not to drive through the area, but the driver insisted and his vehicle stalled because of the fumes. "He attempted to start the car three times and that's when there was an explosion and the fire spread into the (warehouse) setting off other explosions."

He said he grabbed two children and they hid in a sewage ditch until the explosions ended. His family hadn't been present, but Juma lost everything he owned in the fire.

"Police were turning away everyone and so it was difficult to access my house and I had to seek a place to sleep until this morning," neighbor Caroline Karanja said. She said the smell and smoke were still choking, and she would have to stay away for a while because she had young children.

Police and the Kenya Red Cross reported three deaths. The toll may rise after daybreak, said Wesley Kimeto, the Embakasi police chief.

The government and Red Cross said 271 people were taken to several hospitals with injuries.

The proximity of the industrial company to residences raised questions about enforcement of city plans. Officials at the county government have been accused of taking bribes to overlook building codes and regulations.

Live updates | Hamas is expected to respond soon to a proposal that includes hostage releases

By The Associated Press undefined

A senior Hamas official said Friday the group will respond "very soon" to a proposal that includes extended pauses in Gaza fighting and phased exchanges of Hamas-held hostages for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

Hamas and other militants in Gaza are holding dozens of hostages, after having abducted about 250 during their deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel that killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and sparked Israel's blistering offensive on the enclave. More than 100 hostages were released during a one-week truce in November, in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Over 27,000 people have been killed and 66,000 wounded by Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza, the territory's Health Ministry said Thursday. The Health Ministry does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths, but says most of those killed were women and children.

Israel's war in Gaza threatens to spill over into neighboring countries, despite persistent efforts by top officials around the globe to tamp down regional tensions.

Currently:

- Analysis shows destruction and a possible buffer zone along the Gaza Strip's border with Israel.
- Half of U.S. adults say Israel has gone too far in its war in Gaza, AP-NORC poll shows.
- A U.S. company says hostage-taking by gunmen at its factory in Turkey in Gaza protest has been resolved.
- Biden sanctions Israeli settlers accused of attacking Palestinians and peace activists in West Bank.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

IRAN-BACKED MILITIA WARNS IT WILL CONTINUE OPERATIONS AGAINST US TROOPS

BAGHDAD — In a statement released Friday, one of Iraq's strongest Iran-backed militias, Harakat al-Nujaba, announced its plans to continue military operations against U.S. troops, despite allied factions having called off their attacks in the wake of a drone strike that killed three U.S. service members in Jordan Sunday.

Kataib Hezbollah, another powerful Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, which has been watched closely by U.S. officials, said Tuesday it would "suspend military and security operations against the occupying forces" to avoid embarrassing the Iraqi government.

Akram al-Kaabi, leader of the Harakat al-Nujaba militia said in a statement Friday that "we respect their decision" but announced the continuation of his group's military operations against U.S. troops. He dismissed U.S. threats of retaliation.

Al-Nujaba, which emerged from the larger Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia in 2013, has fought both opposition forces in Syria and the Islamic State militant group in Iraq.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coalition of Iranian-backed militias that the U.S. has blamed for the deadly attack in Jordan, has launched more than 160 attacks on bases hosting U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria since Oct. 7, amid tensions over U.S. support for Israel in the ongoing war in Gaza.

These attacks have put Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in a difficult position. Although backed by Iran-aligned factions, al-Sudani has sought to maintain favorable relations with Washington and has denounced the assaults on U.S. forces.

HAMAS SEEKS RELEASE OF KEY PALESTINIAN PRISONERS

BEIRUT — A senior Hamas official says his group is still studying a proposed multi-stage deal of prolonged pauses in Gaza fighting, accompanied by swaps of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, but at the same time he appeared to rule out key components of the proposal.

Osama Hamdan said the release of all hostages, believed to number more than 100, will only be possible if Israel ends its war on Hamas in Gaza and releases the thousands of Palestinian security prisoners Israel is holding.

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He singled out two prisoners by name, including Palestinian uprising leader Marwan Barghout, who is serving multiple life sentences in Israel for his alleged role in several deadly attacks carried out a generation ago. Barghout remains popular among Palestinians and is viewed as a unifying figure.

Hamdan said he believes his group holds enough hostages to be able to win the freedom of all prisoners serving sentences in Israeli prisons.

A priority is to win freedom for those serving life sentences, regardless of the groups they belong to. In addition to Barghout, he named Ahmed Saadat, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine as well as Hamas prisoners and those from the Islamic Jihad group.

Hamdan told Lebanon's LBC TV that Hamas insists on a permanent cease-fire, rejecting the proposal's staged approach, with several pauses in fighting.

"There is no way that this will be acceptable to the resistance," he said.

"We have tried temporary truces and it turned out that the Israelis don't respect these truces but always violate them," Hamdan said in an apparent reference to a weeklong truce in November after which Israel resumed its offensive.

Hamdan said Hamas wants an end to the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip as well as promises for the reconstruction of the territory.

UN WARNS OF A 'PRESSURE COOKER OF DESPAIR'

GENEVA — The United Nations is warning that Rafah is becoming a "pressure cooker of despair" as thousands of people flee into the city from Khan Yunis and other parts of southern Gaza as the Israel-Hamas war grinds on.

Jens Laerke, spokesman for the U.N. office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, also said the situation in Rafah is "not looking good" amid concerns that the city may be a new focus of Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza.

"Rafah is a pressure cooker of despair and we fear for what comes next," he told a regular U.N. briefing in Geneva on Friday. "It's like every week we think, you know, it can't get any worse. Well, go figure. It gets worse.

"It's very important for us and for OCHA to put on record today our deep concern about what's happening in Khan Yunis and Rafah in the southern part of the strip, because it's really not looking good," Laerke added.

Speaking from Jerusalem, Dr. Rik Peepkorn, the representative for the World Health Organization in occupied Palestinian areas, said the U.N. health agency estimates that at least 8,000 Gazans should be sent abroad for medical care.

Of those, some three-quarters, or 6,000, need care for war injuries — such as treatment for burns or reconstructive surgery — while the rest require medical attention for conditions like cancer or other diseases, Peepkorn said.

Since the start of the war on Oct. 7, a total of 243 people has been referred abroad, he said, adding: "That's a pittance ... that is way too little."

He went on: "Rafah used to be a town of 200,000 people -- a bit of a sleepy town ... and now it's harboring more than half of the Gazan population. So mind you, where should those people go? Maybe the point should be: it should not happen. And Rafah should not be attacked."

HAMAS EXPECTED TO RESPOND SOON TO PROPOSAL THAT INCLUDES RELEASE OF HOSTAGES AND CEASE-FIRES

BEIRUT — A senior Hamas official says the group will respond "very soon" to a proposal that includes extended pauses in Gaza fighting and phased exchanges of Hamas-held hostages for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

The official told The Associated Press on Friday a lasting cease-fire is the most important component for Hamas, and that everything else can be negotiated.

The multi-stage proposal was drafted several days ago by senior officials from the United States, Israel, Qatar and Egypt, and is awaiting a Hamas response. In Cairo, a senior Egyptian official with direct knowl-

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edge of the contacts said Hamas has not submitted a formal response but that it has sent positive signals.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the indirect talks are still ongoing.

The proposal being presented to Hamas includes a significant increase in aid trucks entering Gaza and allowing displaced residents to gradually return to their homes in the north, but does not explicitly call for a permanent cease-fire. Israel has said it would not agree to end the war as a condition for hostage releases.

Hamas and other militants in Gaza continue to hold dozens of hostages, after abducting about 250 during their deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. More than 100 were released during a one-week truce in November, in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Bassem Mroue in Beirut and Samy Magdy in Cairo contributed.

AN ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE HITS A DAMASCUS SUBURB

BEIRUT — An Israeli airstrike on a southern suburb of Damascus early Friday caused material damage, state media reported, while an opposition war monitor said two Iran-backed fighters were killed.

There was no immediate comment from Israel.

State news agency SANA quoted an army statement as saying that Israeli warplanes fired the missiles while flying over Syria's Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. It gave no further details other than saying that Syrian air defenses shot down several missiles.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the airstrike killed two Iranian-backed militants in a farm south of Damascus.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of war-torn Syria in recent years. Israel rarely acknowledges its actions in Syria, but it has said that it targets bases of Iran-allied militant groups, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, which has sent thousands of fighters to support Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces.

Haley insists she's staying in the GOP race. Here's how that could cause problems for Trump

By STEVE PEOPLES and JAMES POLLARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — For months, the underdog in the presidential primary refused to concede defeat. He fought hard in state after state, even as the front-runner amassed a delegate advantage that would be virtually impossible to overcome.

The extended feud between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton in 2016, which turned more bitter as time passed, left behind Democratic divisions that would ultimately contribute to their party's crushing general election loss.

Eight years later, some Republicans fear that history may soon repeat itself.

Nikki Haley's path to the GOP nomination is rapidly shrinking following recent losses in Iowa and New Hampshire. But she's vowing to stay in the race indefinitely, backed by thousands of committed donors, a key slice of the party's moderate wing and a new willingness to attack the mental fitness and legal baggage of 2024 Republican front-runner Donald Trump. And the harder Haley fights, the more Republican officials fear she may hurt his long-term prospects in the all-but certain general election ahead against Democratic President Joe Biden.

Former Trump adviser David Urban described Haley's continued presence as a distraction, a drain on resources and a source of frustration.

"Nobody on Trump's team thinks (a Biden matchup) is going to be easy. It's going to be a bumpy road. It's going to be a tough race. They want to hit the starter's pistol and get going," Urban said. "People need to start coming together and working together. But right now, none of that is happening because she's still out there stoking the anti-Trump fire."

'I am not going anywhere'

Of course, Haley is in a much different position than Sanders was during the epic 2016 campaign. The Vermont senator actually won contests, including his 22-point victory in the New Hampshire primary. Un-

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less she manages a dramatic turnaround, Haley's 11-point deficit in the same state last month may prove to be the high point of her presidential bid.

Haley decided to skip Nevada's presidential caucuses next Thursday in favor of a state primary election two days earlier that does not award delegates. Trump could embarrass Haley in her home state of South Carolina later in the month, where the former president has a loyal following. A Washington Post-Monmouth University poll on Thursday found Trump with a 26 point lead in the state.

Yet in practical terms — and in Haley's calculus — the GOP primary has barely begun. Just two states have voted so far in a process that will ultimately span all 50 before concluding at the GOP's national nominating convention in July.

"I am not going anywhere," she told reporters on Thursday. "We have a country to save. And I am determined to keep on going the entire way. As long as we can keep closing that gap, I'm gonna keep staying in."

Such comments increasingly draw Trump's ire as he's eager to move past the primary completely and focus on Biden. At roughly the same time Haley was speaking, Trump was attacking her on social media. One post he shared said, "Nikki Haley is bought and paid for by our political enemies," and another described Haley as "deeply disliked" by a growing number of Americans.

Some Republicans worry that Trump's preoccupation with Haley, whom he frequently calls "birdbrain," might further alienate moderate voters and suburban women.

HALEY ASSETS GROWING

Haley is getting stronger by some measures.

Her campaign has raised \$5 million from small-dollar donors in the days since she finished in second place in New Hampshire, according to spokesperson Nachama Soloveichik. She's also in the midst of a four-state fundraising tour that will feature at least 10 closed-door events with wealthy donors. This week's initial swing through New York netted more than \$1.5 million, Soloveichik said.

Republican fundraiser Eric Levine, who co-hosted one of the New York events, said the few hundred Haley donors who gathered earlier in the week "remain as committed to Haley as ever."

Haley campaign manager Betsy Ankney highlighted the candidate's commitment to the race during a meeting with some of the GOP's leading donors earlier in the week in Florida, according to two Republican officials in the room granted anonymity to share private discussions. Trump senior adviser Susie Wiles also delivered a presentation to the group, which was designed to highlight the former president's tightening grip on the nomination.

Many major donors remain critical of Trump, but some of the biggest would-be Haley supporters are essentially in a holding pattern ahead of South Carolina's Feb. 24 primary. They believe she is essentially fully funded for the rest of the month and there's little more they can do in the short term, according to the officials.

Two of the group's founders, billionaire hedge fund managers Ken Griffin and Paul Singer, each donated \$5 million to Haley's 2024 bid in recent weeks, according to federal filings made public this week.

Trump also continues to report strong fundraising totals. But his legal troubles are consuming a huge portion of his donors' dollars.

Two of Trump's political action committees spent roughly \$50 million in donor funds on the former president's legal fees last year, according to federal filings made public this week. And his legal costs are continuing to grow.

HALEY'S AGGRESSIVE STRATEGY

Haley has begun to ratchet up attacks against Trump, a deliberate strategy designed to highlight the former president's glaring liabilities, including his legal baggage and his age.

The campaign lumped Trump and Biden together in a new attack ad this week calling them "Grumpy Old Men." She's also working to link the 77-year-old Trump's refusal to debate to questions about his mental acuity. And in a Wednesday interview on the "Breakfast Club" radio program, she blamed Trump for the state of the nation's politics.

"He's made it chaotic," she said. "He's made it self-absorbed."

Her message appears to be resonating with a key group of swing voters who play a pivotal role in general elections.

In New Hampshire's recent primary, for example, Trump won a decisive victory against Haley backed by his popularity among traditional Republican voters. But he lost a majority of moderates and about two-thirds of those who identify as independents, according to AP VoteCast. He also lost about 6 in 10 who have college degrees, and he's shown a persistent vulnerability among voters living in suburbs.

But the Republican base is still decidedly behind Trump. And a growing group of Republican elected officials on Capitol Hill are calling for Haley to quit the race. Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel said recently that it was time to unite behind Trump.

B.J. Hopper, an 81-year-old self-described "Never Trumper, is doubtful that Haley will catch Trump, but she attended Thursday's stop in South Carolina's capital city because she's trying to be hopeful.

"It'd be a miracle," Hopper said of a Haley victory in the state's upcoming primary.

As much of the attention shifts to South Carolina, Haley's campaign insists her goal there isn't to win, but simply to show growth compared to New Hampshire. She's building campaign infrastructure in next-up Michigan and several states that host primary contests on March 5, also known as "Super Tuesday."

The Haley campaign has already rolled out leadership teams and "Women for Nikki" chapters in all 15 Super Tuesday states. A pro-Haley super PAC is also coordinating get-out-the-vote efforts in South Carolina, Michigan and multiple super Tuesday states. That's in addition to the Koch-backed conservative group, Americans for Prosperity, which has devoted its army of grassroots activists on the ground in several key states to helping Haley.

Specifically, the group is knocking on doors, sending pro-Haley mail and running online ads in Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas and Virginia.

But the Koch network will not continue to support her if it determines there is no path to victory, according to conversations between Koch officials and donors at a private retreat last week in California, where Haley discussed the state of her presidential campaign during a short video call.

During a separate session with top donors, AFP Action senior advisers Emily Seidel and Michael Palmer reaffirmed the group's decision to endorse Haley given that she is the last Trump alternative standing, according to an official with direct knowledge of the conversations who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss strategy.

Seidel and Palmer also made clear to donors that the group would not make future investments to any campaign if there is no opportunity to win, the official said, pointing to the Kochs' longstanding business-like approach to politics.

Meanwhile, other Republican operatives believe Haley's continued candidacy creates unnecessary risks for the notoriously undisciplined Trump.

"The longer she hangs around and the more Trump focuses on her, the greater likelihood you get unforced errors," said Republican pollster Neil Newhouse. "She's giving ammunition to Biden's campaign."

US jobs report for January is likely to show that steady hiring growth extended into 2024

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Few saw this coming.

A year ago, most economists envisioned a bleak 2023 for the United States. The economy, they warned, seemed sure to falter, probably sinking into a recession, with employers adding barely 100,000 jobs a month on average, enough to keep up with population growth but not much more.

No recession arrived. Instead, lots more jobs did — a monthly average last year of 225,000. The job market defied the doomsayers and shaken off the ever-higher interest rates that the Federal Reserve engineered to fight high inflation.

The economy, in fact, it delivered job growth at just about the ideal pace: Fast enough to support

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household incomes and job security yet not so fast as to accelerate inflation pressures. Inflation, which had erupted in 2021 and 2022, cooled throughout 2023, making it likelier that the Fed would achieve a “soft landing” — taming inflation without derailing the economy.

That Goldilocks picture is thought to have extended into the new year, with likely consequences for the 2024 presidential election: When the Labor Department issues the January jobs report Friday, it’s expected to show that employers added a solid 177,000 jobs, according to a survey of forecasters by the data firm FactSet.

“Job seekers still have plenty of job opportunities, employers are finding hiring less difficult and policymakers have been pleasantly surprised with prospects for a soft landing,” said Nick Bunker, economic research director for North America at the Indeed Hiring Lab.

A series of high-profile layoff announcements, from the likes of UPS, Google and Amazon, have raised some concerns about whether they might herald the start of a wave of job cuts. Yet measured against the nation’s vast labor force, the recent layoffs haven’t been significant enough to make a dent in the overall job market. Historically speaking, layoffs are still relatively low, hiring is still steady and the unemployment rate is still consistent with a healthy economy.

For January, the jobless rate is forecast to come in at 3.8%. That would be a tick up from December’s 3.7% but would still mark two straight years of unemployment below 4%, the longest such streak since the 1960s.

Consumers as a whole have proved more resilient than expected in the face of the Fed’s rate hikes. Having socked away savings during the pandemic, they were willing to spend it as the economy reopened. And a wave of early retirements, some of them related to COVID-19, limited the number of people available for work and contributed to a tight labor market.

The economy is sure to weigh on voters ahead of the presidential election. Despite signs of the economy’s fundamental strength, polls show that most Americans remain dissatisfied. A key factor is public exasperation with higher prices. Though inflation has been slowing for a year and a half, overall prices remain well above where they were when the inflation surge began.

Still, public spirits appear to be improving, gradually. A measure of consumer sentiment by the University of Michigan has jumped in the past two months by the most since 1991. A survey by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found that Americans’ inflation expectations have reached their lowest point in nearly three years. And a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 35% of U.S. adults call the national economy good, up from 30% who said so late last year.

Diane Swonk, chief economist at the tax and consulting firm KPMG, said she expects a “January jobs boomlet” — 250,000 added jobs, well above the consensus. One reason is technical — seasonal factors. In January, businesses typically lay off much of the help they hired for the holiday shopping season. But in 2023, retailers didn’t hire as many holiday workers as usual, so there won’t be as many January layoffs to lower overall job growth.

Swonk also envisions strong hiring by healthcare companies and by state and local governments that are still flush with cash” and looking to fill vacancies that have been open since the economy began to recover from the pandemic recession.

The December jobs picture, healthy as it was, revealed a couple of blemishes that might have troubled the Fed: The number of Americans who either had a job or were looking for one — the labor force — dropped by a sizable 676,000.

From an inflation-fighting perspective, a smaller labor force means employers can’t be so choosy about hiring and might feel pressure to raise wages to keep or attract workers — and to increase their prices to make up for their higher labor costs. That cycle can perpetuate inflation.

And average hourly wages in December rose 4.1% from a year earlier, up from a 4% gain in November. Lydia Boussour, senior economist at the consulting firm EY, foresees another 4.1% year-over-year hourly wage gain for January. But she expects wage pressure to ease and for average annual pay growth to drop to 3.5% in the second half of 2023, roughly consistent with the Fed’s 2% inflation target.

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The rate at which Americans are quitting their jobs, which Boussoir calls a reliable predictor of wage trends, has slowed to pre-pandemic levels. That suggests that workers have grown less confident of finding a better job elsewhere. Employers, as a result, are less likely to feel pressure to raise wages to keep them.

Though hiring remains brisk, it has clearly slowed from the breakneck pace of a couple of years ago, a trend that is pleasing to the Fed and should help clear the way for rate cuts to begin later this year. The economy added a still-solid 2.7 million jobs last year, down from 4.8 million in 2022 and a record 7.3 million in 2021. Employers are posting fewer openings but not laying off many workers.

"It is still a good labor market for wages and finding a job, but it is getting back into balance, and that is what we want to see," Chair Jerome Powell told reporters Wednesday after the Fed left rates unchanged but signaled its intention to start cutting them later this year.

North Korea tests more cruise missiles as leader Kim calls for war readiness

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Friday extended a provocative series of weapons tests by firing cruise missiles into the sea, as leader Kim Jong Un called for his military to step up war preparations and toured a shipyard.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the U.S. and South Korean militaries were analyzing the North Korean launches into its western sea. It said South Korea's military detected multiple missiles but it did not immediately provide a specific number or an assessment of their flights.

The launches, which were North Korea's fourth round of cruise missile tests in 2024, came hours after state media reported that Kim reiterated his focus on strengthening his naval forces as he inspected unspecified naval projects at a shipyard in Nampho on the west coast.

Kim in recent months has emphasized efforts to build a nuclear-armed navy to counter what he portrays as growing external threats posed by the United States, South Korea and Japan, which have stepped up their military cooperation in response to Kim's nuclear weapons and missile program.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency did not specify when Kim visited Nampho. It paraphrased Kim as saying that the strengthening of the navy "presents itself as the most important issue in reliably defending the maritime sovereignty of the country and stepping up the war preparations."

KCNA did not specify the types of warships are being built in Nampho, but said they were related to a five-year military development plan set during a ruling party congress in early 2021. During those meetings, Kim revealed an extensive wish list of advanced military assets, which included nuclear-powered submarines and nuclear missiles that can be launched from underwater.

During the inspection, Kim was briefed on the progress of his naval projects and remaining technological challenges and ordered workers to "unconditionally" complete the efforts within the timeframe of the plan that runs through 2025, KCNA said.

Kim Inae, a spokesperson for South Korea's Unification Ministry, said it was the first time the ministry was aware of that state media reported on Kim Jong Un conducting a military inspection in Nampho. That could suggest an expansion of naval projects from the country's eastern shipyard of Sinpo, which has been the North's base for submarine construction. Kim didn't provide a specific answer when asked whether Seoul believes the North is using Nampho for its efforts to build nuclear-powered submarines.

"By making military threats routine, North Korea is trying to create a sense of insecurity among South Korean people to undermine trust in their government and to attract international attention to build an atmosphere in which its demands must be accepted to resolve the crisis on the Korean Peninsula," she said.

South Korea's army said its special operation troops wrapped up a 10-day training with U.S. Green Berets on Friday in a region near the country's capital, Seoul, in the allies' latest combined military exercises. The countries in past months had staged larger drills, including trilateral exercises involving Japan.

Kim Jong Un also called for naval might on Sunday while inspecting a test of a new nuclear-capable cruise missile, the Pulhwasal-3-31, designed to be fired from submarines. The North also last month conducted tests of a long-range cruise missile, which it has described as nuclear-capable and can cover ranges of up to 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles), which would potentially put U.S. military bases in Japan within reach.

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While North Korea has demonstrated quick progress in expanding its lineup of land-based nuclear-capable missiles, experts say Kim's naval ambitions may require significant more time, resources and technology breakthroughs. Most of its aging, diesel-powered submarines can launch only torpedoes and mines, and experts say Kim's stated pursuit of nuclear-propelled submarines is largely unfeasible without significant external assistance.

North Korean military scientists and engineers in recent months have been making progress on Kim's 2021 list of goals, testing for the first time last year a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile, named Hwasong-18, which added to the North's arsenal of weapons targeting the U.S. mainland.

The North on Jan. 14 also tested a new solid-fuel intermediate-range missile, which underscored its efforts to advance its weapons that could target U.S. assets in the Pacific, including the military hub of Guam.

The North also plans to launch three more military spy satellites in 2024 after sending its first one into orbit in November, as Kim has described space-based reconnaissance as crucial for monitoring U.S. and South Korean military activities and enhancing the threat of his nuclear-capable missiles.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are at their highest point in years, after Kim accelerated his weapons development to an unprecedented pace while issuing provocative nuclear threats against the United States, South Korea and Japan. The United States and its Asian allies in response have strengthened their combined military exercises and updated their deterrence strategies.

There are concerns that Kim, emboldened by the steady advancement of his nuclear arsenal and strengthened ties with Russia, would further ramp up pressure against his rivals in an election year in the United States and South Korea. Experts say Kim's long-term goal is to force the United States to accept the idea of the North as a nuclear power and negotiate security concessions and sanctions relief from a position of strength.

While most analysts downplay Kim's threats of war, some say there's a possibility that he can attempt a direct military provocation he can likely contain without letting it escalate into a full-blown conflict. One of the potential crisis points is the disputed western sea boundary between the Koreas, which had been the site of several bloody naval skirmishes in past years.

Half of US adults say Israel has gone too far in war in Gaza, AP-NORC poll shows

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Half of U.S. adults say Israel's 15-week-old military campaign in Gaza has "gone too far," a finding driven mainly by growing disapproval among Republicans and political independents, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Broadly, the poll shows support for Israel and the Biden administration's handling of the situation ebbing slightly further across the board. The poll shows 31% of U.S. adults approve of Biden's handling of the conflict, including just 46% of Democrats. That's as an earlier spike in support for Israel following the Hamas attacks Oct. 7 sags.

Melissa Morales, a 36-year-old political independent in Runnemede, New Jersey, says she finds herself watching videos and news from Gaza daily. Images of Palestinian children wounded, orphaned or unhoused by the fighting in Gaza make her mind go to her own 3-year-old boy.

"I just can't even imagine, like, my son roaming the streets, wanting to be safe. Wanting his mom. Or just wanting someone to get him," she said.

Israel's offensive has gone too far, Morales says, and so has the Biden administration's support for it. Biden has supported Israel militarily and diplomatically since the first hours after the Hamas militant group's Oct. 7 attacks, which Israel says killed 1,200 people.

The U.S. has become increasingly isolated in its support of Israel as the Palestinian death toll rises past 27,000, with two-thirds of the victims women and children. The Biden administration says it is pressing Israel to reduce its killing of civilians and allow in more humanitarian aid.

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"These kids ... they're needing the end of this," Morales said. "It's such an unfair fight."

John Milor, a cybersecurity expert in Clovis, California, who describes himself as a Republican-voting independent, says he remains "100%" behind Israel.

But Milor notices more young people in his circle speaking out against Israel. A visit to a family friend led to Milor being aghast when the man's stepson denounced Israelis as "warmongers."

"And I'm like, "You're kidding, right?" Milor recounted.

"It's not like they asked to be attacked, you know," Milor said by phone this week. "And they still have hostages over there."

The poll shows 33% of Republicans now say Israel's military response has gone too far, up from 18% in November. Fifty-two percent of independents say that, up from 39%. Sixty-two percent of Democrats say they feel that way, roughly the same majority as in November.

In all, 50% of U.S. adults now believe Israel's military offensive has gone beyond what it should have, the poll found. That's up from 40% in an AP-NORC poll conducted in November.

The new poll was conducted from Jan. 25 to 28. That overlapped with the killing of three U.S. troops in Jordan, the first deaths among American service members in what's been widening regional conflict since Oct. 7. U.S. officials blamed a drone strike by a Hamas-allied militia.

The new poll's findings include more worrying news for President Joe Biden when it comes to support from his own political party.

Fracture lines are growing in his Democratic base, with some key Democratic blocs that Biden will likely need if he's going to win a second term unhappy with his handling of the conflict.

About 6 in 10 non-white Democrats disapprove of how Biden is approaching the conflict, while about half of white Democrats approve.

Notably, about 7 in 10 Democrats under 45 disapprove. That's the opposite of the attitude of older Democrats, among whom nearly 6 in 10 approve.

Sarah Jackson, a 31-year-old professional closet designer in Chicago, is a Democrat. She says Biden has been about right in his level of support for both Israel and the Palestinians.

But as Israel's air and ground offensive goes on, Jackson's thoughts turn to finding the best way to phase down U.S. support for it, she says.

"At first I was very supportive, because I did believe they need some type of help," Jackson said.

"But yes, as it goes on, I do become more worried," she said. That includes worrying a new leader will take office here, and phase down support for Israel too abruptly, she says.

About 7 in 10 of the Democrats who disapprove of Biden's handling of the conflict say it's extremely or very important for the U.S. to help negotiate a permanent ceasefire.

The poll also shows about half of U.S. adults are extremely or very concerned that the latest war between Israel and Hamas will lead to a broader conflict in the Middle East.

About half have heard "a lot" or "some" about the airstrikes from the United States and British militaries against Yemen's Houthi rebels. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults approve of the airstrikes, including about 6 in 10 of those who say they've heard a lot or some about them. About an additional 4 in 10 say they neither approve nor disapprove, and about 1 in 10 disapprove.

The poll shows 35% of U.S. adults now describe Israel as an ally that shares U.S. interests and values. That's back in line with the views from before the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, after a brief increase in November to 44%.

Thirty-six percent of U.S. adults say the U.S. is not supportive enough of the Palestinians, up slightly from 31% December.

About 6 in 10 call recovering hostages being held by Hamas an important U.S. priority, but only about 3 in 10 say it's highly important to provide aid to Israel's military to fight Hamas.

A similar share of U.S. adults say that about negotiating the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

"If Hamas were in charge, absolutely not," Milor said on the subject of an independent Palestinian nation. He said he worried that any Palestinian state would become a base for broader attacks.

But Morales, the woman from northwest New Jersey, said Palestinians should have a safe state, or at least a safe community.

"Everyone deserves a safe space where they can just be. Without interference because of who they are," she said.

It's so cold and snowy in Alaska that fuel oil is thickening and roofs are collapsing

By MARK THIESSEN and BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Much of Alaska has plunged into a deep freeze, with temperatures well below zero. Anchorage has seen some of its coldest temperatures in years and the mayor opened warming facilities for people who are homeless or don't have reliable heating.

To the south in the state capital, Juneau, snow blanketed streets and rooftops as part of a two-day storm that helped set a new January snowfall record of 6.4 feet (2 meters) for the city, which is nestled in a relatively temperate rainforest. That's after back-to-back storms walloped Juneau earlier in the month.

Anchorage surpassed 100 inches (2.5 meters) of snow this week, the earliest date the state's largest city has ever hit that mark.

HOW COLD IS IT?

For much of the last week, temperatures were minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 40 Celsius) or colder in Fairbanks, an inland city of about 32,000 that's a popular destination for seeing the northern lights. In other far-flung towns, the thermometer hovered between minus 30 Fahrenheit (minus 34.4 Celsius) and minus 20 Fahrenheit (minus 28.9 Celsius) for days.

"That's a pretty solid streak," National Weather Service meteorologist Dustin Saltzman said, adding that it was the coldest outbreak in at least several years.

It's not only Fairbanks: Much of Alaska saw temperatures in the single digits or below zero on Thursday.

Anchorage, which hit minus 17 Fahrenheit (minus 27.2 Celsius) late Wednesday night, is experiencing its coldest temperatures in 15 years, said Brian Brettschneider, a climate scientist with the local weather service office. The forecast called for temperatures there to remain below zero through Friday before climbing into the teens by Sunday.

In the small town of Kotzebue, 550 miles (885 kilometers) by air to the northwest, temperatures of minus 30 Fahrenheit (minus 34.4 Celsius) and below caused heating fuel to thicken so much that home heating systems and stoves stopped working, the Anchorage Daily News reported. City Manager Tessa Baldwin told the newspaper that water lines have frozen across town.

That coincided with challenges that south-central Alaska's largest utility, ENSTAR Natural Gas Co., has had with two wells at a gas storage facility that was built to address the peak winter demand. The system was "the most strained I've seen," in large part due to gas delivery issues related to the well problems, company president John Sims told a news conference in Anchorage.

Anchorage resident DuShan Vujnovic, a native of Serbia who is working for the Alaska Railroad, said this winter has been "too much."

This is Vujnovic's fifth winter in Anchorage and it's been the coldest. If that weren't bad enough, last week his job took him north to Fairbanks.

"I've never experienced anything that cold, but here I think I'm mostly annoyed with the snow," he said. "I drive a white car, so sometimes it's hard to even find it in the snow after two days of not leaving the house."

Meanwhile, parts of southeast Alaska were almost balmy by comparison, including in Ketchikan, where it was nearly 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius) and raining Thursday. Ketchikan is closer to Seattle than it is to Anchorage.

HOW ARE PEOPLE COPING?

Anchorage Mayor Dave Bronson last week signed an emergency declaration effective through Feb. 9

and added the warming centers, some of which are open around the clock.

A man believed to have fled a fire at a home in the south-central community of Sutton was found dead early Wednesday, possibly due to exposure, Alaska State Troopers said.

Anchorage sent a letter to 1,000 businesses warning them to vacate their properties until snow is removed from the rooftops. At least two commercial buildings have suffered collapses under the weight, and crews are shoveling thick layers of snow from rooftops around the city.

An elementary school in Anchorage was closed Thursday due to problems with a boiler, and schools have had six days of remote learning so far this winter.

Paul Ferucci, a retired Anchorage doctor, was testing his cold weather gear including clothing, gloves and facemasks as he trains to participate in the Iditarod Trail Invitational. That's not the famous dogsled race but rather a competition for humans in which they run, bike or ski either 300 or 1,000 miles (482 or 1,609 kilometers) along the same unforgiving route.

Ferucci said he saw the temperature was minus 20 Fahrenheit (minus 28.9 Celsius) in one part of Anchorage on Thursday and couldn't remember the last time it went that low.

"It's been cold, and we've had a ton of snow," he said. "And really, if you like the outdoors in the winter, it's been one of the best winters so far that I can remember."

A year on, a small Ohio town is recovering from a fiery train derailment but health fears persist

By JOSH FUNK and PATRICK ORSAGOS Associated Press

EAST PALESTINE, Ohio (AP) — Daily life largely returned to normal for most of the nearly 5,000 residents of East Palestine, Ohio, months after a Norfolk Southern train derailed and spilled a cocktail of hazardous chemicals that caught fire a year ago, but the worries and fears are always there.

Some people still report respiratory problems, rashes or headaches, or say they feel ill whenever they return to the village not far from the Pennsylvania border. At least several dozen haven't returned to their homes, concerned about chemicals like the vinyl chloride that was released and burned when officials blew open five derailed tank cars because they worried the cars might explode.

But others believe the EPA's findings that their air and water are safe. They say they're ready to move on and take advantage of all the money the railroad and governments are investing in the area. They don't want the derailment to define their town.

"We're going to move forward with our lives," said Village Council member Linda May.

It's just harder for some residents to do that.

Misti Allison said that over the past year, her 8-year-old son Blake has asked whether he is going to die from living at their home, or whether one of the really bad nosebleeds he's started having will ever stop.

"I remember once he jumped in a puddle, and he stopped and looked at me and said, 'Is vinyl chloride in this puddle?' And that is just so sad," said Allison, who testified before Congress last spring about the derailment alongside the railroad's CEO and later ran unsuccessfully for mayor to try to get the town to focus more on health concerns. "It's really robbed our children of some of their childhood, and hopefully not more than just that."

Sam Chirico said she's still experiencing a rash that her doctors call chemical dermatitis. They've prescribed different creams and lotions that don't seem to work. Steroids did help, but as a diabetic they raised her blood sugar levels too much, so she stopped taking them.

"I'm kind of scarred for life," Chirico, wearing a shirt that read "East Palestine Strong," told The Associated Press inside her home just over a mile away from the crash site.

She said she's careful about talking about her symptoms or posting online about them because "If you say one thing on social media that you got some kind of symptom they would crucify me."

"Not everybody has a rash like mine, not everybody's gotten sick or whatever, and that's great if you haven't got sick, but be kind because there's some people that have," she said.

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Experts say it will likely take years and extensive research to understand the derailment's health implications. They note it's simply not possible to say yet how many cancers or chronic respiratory conditions might develop down the road.

Dr. Beatrice Golomb said she's already seen people with symptoms similar to health problems military veterans developed after working around toxic burn pits during the Gulf War, but that it's hard to predict what might develop in East Palestine because there isn't good research on the chemicals that spilled.

"We don't have good data on the individual chemicals and their human impact, and we certainly don't have good data on the combined impact," said Golomb, who is based at the University of California San Diego.

Dozens of chemicals spilled and caught fire after 38 cars careened off the tracks on Feb. 3, 2023. Federal investigators have said the derailment was likely caused by an overheated bearing that got as hot as 253 degrees F (122.8 C) above the outside air temperature before triggering an alarm, but the crew didn't have enough warning to stop the train.

Another early health study being done in town by the University of Kentucky's Dr. Erin Haynes offers some encouraging results. Haynes said blood tests performed on a handful of residents last summer revealed that none had alarming levels of the cancer-causing dioxins that were feared to be released when the chemicals burned.

Tests by the Environmental Protection Agency also suggest there's a low chance that dioxins were released.

But more research is needed, requiring significant new funding. The National Academy of Sciences held a workshop on the concerns in East Palestine last fall, but the federal government hasn't yet announced major research grants.

Air and water tests that state and federal health officials have been conducting haven't shown concerning levels of vinyl chloride, butyl acrylate or other chemicals in more than 115 million measurements since an evacuation order imposed after the derailment was lifted.

EPA Response Coordinator Mark Durno told The Associated Press he's "feeling pretty confident that vinyl chloride isn't going to be a trigger for long-term health effects." But he also knows that some in East Palestine are still having a "crisis of confidence" about the test results because when they first came home after the evacuation they could smell the chemicals officials were telling them weren't at toxic levels.

Those doubts have only grown through the fall because residents keep seeing a chemical sheen atop the creeks that flow through town anytime they stir up the sediment on the creek bed. Pictures of the rainbow-colored residue atop Leslie Run and Sulphur Run keep popping up on social media pages dedicated to the derailment.

Durno said tests show the surface water in the creeks is clean, but officials are still completing a detailed assessment that included stirring up the creek bed every 25 feet (8 meters) to determine how best to deal with lingering substances in the sediment like lube oil.

Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw said he knows there are also plenty of doubts in town about the railroad's commitment to helping the town recover, but "the way they'll trust is you make promises and you keep promises. And that's exactly what we've done over the past year."

More than 176,000 tons of contaminated soil and over 44 million gallons of tainted water were removed from the area around the derailment last year. That work was largely done in October, and crews are now replacing the soil.

Thousands of tests are being done to make sure nothing was missed. If there aren't any surprises, Durno predicted the cleanup will be complete sometime around the middle of this year. The work will then shift into a long-term monitoring project.

For residents who believe the government's assurances and don't know anyone having any health problems, the recovery effort seems like a golden opportunity.

Norfolk Southern has promised to spend \$25 million refurbishing the town's park and another \$4.3 million to upgrade its water treatment system — things East Palestine would likely struggle to afford itself. The railroad is spending another \$20 million to build a regional training center for first responders to help

prepare them to deal with the kind of hazardous materials that spilled in this derailment.

The railroad has also created a fund to compensate homeowners for any lost value if they sell and promised to create funds to help pay for any water contamination or health problems that develop down the road. Details of those funds are still being negotiated with state and federal authorities who say they are holding Norfolk Southern accountable for the disaster.

Barb Kliner, a former area school district chief financial officer, said that before the derailment East Palestine was going downhill, like so many small rural communities, after losing its downtown businesses to big-box stores in surrounding towns and seeing many of its young people move away.

"We were floundering," Kliner said. "And you know it's sad that something like this happened, but it's also probably the thing that's going to save our town because — unfortunately or fortunately for us — the railroad is putting a lot of money into town."

Meet the newscaster in drag making LGBTQ+ history in Mexican television

By MEGAN JANETSKY and FERNANDA PESCE Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Guillermo Barraza buzzes with a nervous energy as he watches himself transform. Hands delicately paint stripes of bright pink eyeshadow onto Barraza's angular face as newscasters and makeup crews bustle around him.

Tonight, in a small studio set in the heart of Mexico City, Barraza is making history.

Through his drag character Amanda, the 32-year-old journalist is the first-ever drag queen to host a news program for Mexican TV.

By stepping out under the glow of the studio lights, Barraza has sought to push the boundaries of society in a place where both LGBTQ+ people and journalists are violently targeted. And he is doing it at a moment when the issue has roared back into the public discourse with the violent death of one of the very guests on his program, one of the most prominent queer figures in the country who was later found dead along with their partner with dozens of cuts across their body.

"Having an alter ego, you have fewer problems because they can't harass a character. You have more freedom to speak out," he said. "There are many things that Guillermo wouldn't do or say that Amanda wouldn't think twice about."

As he says it, his makeup artist helps him pull on a bright blonde wig, and Barraza shrugs on a purple sequined blazer. Each piece goes on like another layer of sparkle-studded armor until all that remains of Barraza is a playful smile under purple lipstick.

"Let's go, let's go," Barraza says, striding through the halls, each clack of his leather boots ringing out like an act of defiance to a society that has long rejected people like him.

"Rock star," he adds, pushing through the heavy metal doors and onto his set.

From its inception, the program "La Verdrag" was meant to radically transform the way the LGBTQ+ community is viewed in Mexican society. First broadcast in October, the program goes against the grain in a highly "macho" country where nearly 4 in every 5 people identify as Catholic.

The program — a play on words in Spanish mixing the word "truth" and "drag" — first came to fruition when Barraza, a journalist of 10 years, took the helm of the newscast of his public television station, Canal Once, during Mexico's Pride celebration in June dressed in drag.

The crush of hate comments that followed first scared Barraza, who had already received two death threats working as a journalist in northern Mexico. But it soon pushed him and the TV station to create a show to make a space to discuss LGBTQ+ issues with a serious tone.

"This just years ago, would be completely unthinkable, talking about transsexuality, gender, drag," said Vianey Fernández, a news director at Canal Once. "We want to open up spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, and we need to do it with a serious perspective, recognizing not just their rights but also their abilities."

In Mexico, drag — the act of dressing up in exaggerated outfits that challenge gender stereotypes — has been long employed in entertainment and comedy shows like "El Show de Francis," "Las Hermanas Vampiras" and "Desde Gayola."

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The shows would often use gay slurs and cartoon-like stereotypes. Still, they took key steps in carving out space for the queer community in Mexico, said Jair Martínez, researcher for the Mexican LGBTQ+ rights organization Letra S.

"They're pioneers, showing how you can transform yourself from a victim to someone with agency, with the capacity to resist," he said.

Growing up gay in the hyper-conservative northern city of Culiacán, Sinaloa, Barraza never saw gay characters he identified with on a deeper level staring back at him from the screen of his family's clunky television.

On news channels, the only time gay people were brought up was following a hate crime or a brutal murder. In school, people would go out of their way to not appear gay. With a family that continues to struggle to accept his public gender expression, Barraza said he only grew into himself when he became involved in a theater community, where his character of Amanda was born.

"In Sinaloa, they teach you not to be gay," Barraza said. "Historically, we were always ridiculed, an object of entertainment."

In other countries, with the rise of shows like "RuPaul's Drag Race," drag has gradually mixed with mainstream culture. But drag has long been used as a tool of resistance when the LGBTQ+ community is "under attack", explained Michael Moncrieff, a University of Geneva researcher who has studied the history of drag queens.

Early examples date back to 18th century England's "molly houses," secret meeting places where people would cross dress and which were often raided by authorities when homosexuality was still a capital offense. Later, drag would become an integral part of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, and the faces of resistance in key moments like the McCarthy-era.

In the past 15 years, the practice has rippled across the world from Israel to Moscow to parts of Africa, Moncrieff said, and continues to be used in the U.S. to combat a wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and bans.

"These are the fighters of their community," Moncrieff said. "Drag queens were willing to do the things that no one else wanted to do."

Barraza opens his program with a characteristic flourish, standing on a stage surrounded by three hefty broadcast cameras and earpiece-donning producers counting down "four, three, two, one."

Today, wrapped in a puffy blue-and-purple ball gown, Barraza spins around, looks into the camera with his chin tilted upward and says: "Welcome to La Verdrag, the program where minorities turn into a majority."

Running 40 minutes in length, Barraza's show cycles through the day's biggest headlines – gender in Mexico's 2024 elections, human rights in a historic migration to the U.S., and violence against queer populations. He pivots the rest of the program to deeply reported stories and interviews that each pull back a different layer of the world of queerness in Mexico.

One week, it's a deep dive on transgender youth in Mexico, the next it's an interview with Ociel Baena, the first openly nonbinary person in Latin America to hold a judicial position. One of most recognizable LGBTQ+ figures in the country, Baena smashed through barrier after barrier, becoming emblematic of the fight for visibility long championed by drag queens of the past.

"This hate speech against me continues to grow and grow. I've seen it on social media. What's most regrettable are the death threats I've been receiving recently," Baena said. "They're ingredients that create a breeding ground for homicides."

Donning a blazer, silver pumps shrouded by a white skirt and their signature rainbow fan, it would be the last TV interview the magistrate would ever give. Just weeks later, Barraza would be reminded that breaking out of that box in a place like Mexico can come with deadly consequences.

Baena was found dead next to their partner in their home in the conservative central Mexican state of Aguascalientes. What appeared to be nearly two dozen razor cuts slashed across their body, haunting Barraza and many queer people in Mexico.

Just hours after Baena's body was found, local prosecutors quickly described the deaths as a murder-

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suicide, a move often made by authorities to dub a case a crime of passion and quickly shelve cases in a country where nearly 99% of crimes go unsolved.

Local prosecutors said it appeared that Baena's partner had killed the magistrate then killed himself, a theory quickly rejected by other Mexican officials and Mexico's LGBTQ+ community, which said it was just another attempt by authorities to brush aside the violence against them.

Activists continue to demand a deeper investigation, taking into account the mounting death threats against Baena and historical violence against LGBTQ+ populations. In the first month of 2024, authorities and rights groups registered at least three more transgender people killed.

Gathered with a group of friends in his Mexico City apartment after watching the first broadcast of "La Verdrag," Barraza flicks through rows of hate comments flooding Canal Once's social media, something that would only continue to grow with each broadcast.

"God prohibits perversion, only Satan is happy with the rotting of this world. What a disgusting creep," Barraza reads with a roar of laughter, tossing out jokes with his characteristic ease.

Behind it is a blanket of fear, a reminder of the weight of what he's undertaking.

In addition to being one of the deadliest places to practice journalism in the world, Mexico has some of the highest rates of violence against LGBTQ+ communities in Latin America, a region where hate crimes and gender-based violence already run high.

"I wouldn't be the first journalist to be killed and I wouldn't be the last," he said. "My biggest fear is that what I'm doing is going to hurt other people, my partner, my mom, my brother."

Over the past six years, the rights group Letra S has documented at least 513 targeted killings of LGBTQ+ people in Mexico. Cases of violence have only risen in the past year, said Martínez, the Letra S researcher tracking the deaths.

Slayings of gay and transgender people are often characterized by a particular brand of brutality, bodies left mutilated by their victimizers. While a normal homicide victim in Mexico may be stabbed once and show signs of beatings, Martínez said he's seen cases of gay people being stabbed up to 20 times, their genitals cut off and hate messages written across their bodies.

"They don't just try to put an end to the victim, but rather send a message to the entire population. This brutality is intended to sort of discipline or to make an example of what could happen to other LGBTQ+ people," Martínez said.

Barraza peers down at a sea of thousands of mourners carrying candles and Pride flags in mid-November, a somberness painted on his normally animated face.

Speckling nearly every surface are photos of the magistrate Baena, who just weeks before sat across from Barraza speaking about mounting death threats they received for their activism.

Their violent death sent shockwaves through Mexico's gay community, that once looked to Baena as a vocal leader in their fight for visibility. Chants of "justice, justice!" floated over Barraza, whose mind cycled through the hate comments popping up on La Verdrag's social media.

"They're both sick in the head," read one. "Divine justice."

"One week drunk celebrating their killing, the world is a better place," another would read.

He sees flashes of Baena smiling and laughing next to him behind the cameras of his studio.

"My mom wrote to me this morning incredibly worried. A couple friends wrote to me saying, 'Man, step out of the spotlight. Don't talk politics. Protect yourself,'" Barraza said. "I don't want my mom to have to be the one out here marching."

As Barraza marches alongside thousands of others winding through Mexico City's main artery, tears begin to stream down his face. His partner, Francisco, wraps his arms around Barraza and they step forward hand-in-hand, walking until the wind whipping around them dries their tears.

"In this country, no one is safe," Barraza said. "The more visible you are, the more you want to fight for change, the more you put a target on your own chest. And if we have to put our lives on the line, that's what we'll do, because we won't let fear win."

President Joe Biden to attend dignified transfer for US troops killed in Jordan, who 'risked it all'

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden will join grieving families at Dover Air Force Base on Friday to honor three American servicemembers killed in a drone attack in Jordan, a solemn ritual that has become relatively uncommon in recent years as the U.S. withdrew from conflicts abroad.

The Bidens will attend a "dignified transfer" as the remains of the troops killed in the overnight assault Sunday return to U.S. soil. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will join the Bidens for the transfer in Dover, where such events take place when U.S. servicemembers are killed in action.

The service members killed Sunday were all from Georgia — Sgt. William Jerome Rivers of Carrollton, Sgt. Kennedy Sanders of Waycross and Sgt. Breonna Moffett of Savannah. Sanders and Moffett were posthumously promoted to sergeant rank.

The deaths were the first U.S. fatalities blamed on Iran-backed militia groups, who for months have been intensifying their attacks on American forces in the region following the onset of the Israel-Hamas war in October. Separately, two Navy SEALs died during a January mission to board an unflagged ship that was carrying illicit Iranian-made weapons to Yemen.

"These service members embodied the very best of our nation: Unwavering in their bravery. Unflinching in their duty. Unbending in their commitment to our country — risking their own safety for the safety of their fellow Americans, and our allies and partners with whom we stand in the fight against terrorism," Biden said earlier this week. "It is a fight we will not cease."

At Thursday's National Prayer Breakfast at the Capitol, Biden acknowledged Rivers, Moffett and Sanders by name, again vowing to never forget their sacrifice to the nation.

"They risked it all," the president said.

Rivers, Sanders and Moffett hailed from different corners of Georgia but were brought together in the same company of Army engineers that was based in Fort Moore. Sanders and Moffett, in particular, were close friends who regularly popped in on each other's phone calls with their families back home.

Moffett had turned 23 years old just nine days before she was killed. She had joined the Army Reserves in 2019, but also worked for a home care provider to cook, clean and run errands for people with disabilities.

Sanders, 24, worked at a pharmacy while studying to become an X-ray technician and coached children's soccer and basketball. She had volunteered for the deployment because she wanted to see different parts of the world, according to her parents.

Rivers, who was 46 years old and went by Jerome, joined the Army Reserve in New Jersey in 2011 and served a nine-month tour in Iraq in 2018.

Biden will not speak during the dignified transfer, a mournful ritual that, in recent years, has become increasingly uncommon as the U.S. withdrew from conflicts abroad, most notably the war in Afghanistan where U.S. involvement lasted two decades.

According to the most recent statistics available from the Defense Department, no servicemembers were killed as a result of hostile action in 2022. Thirteen servicemembers were killed as a result of hostile action the year prior during the fall of Kabul in Afghanistan, when a suicide bomber at the airport's Abbey Gate killed 11 Marines, one sailor and one soldier. Nine service members were killed as a result of hostile action in 2020.

Friday will be the second dignified transfer Biden attends as president. In August 2021, he took part in the ritual for the 13 servicemembers killed during the suicide bombing in Kabul. As vice president, Biden in 2016 attended a dignified transfer for two U.S. soldiers killed in a suicide blast at Bagram Airfield. He also attended one as a senator in 2008 after the family requested his presence and the Pentagon gave him permission to do so.

The U.S. government said this week that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Iran-backed

militias that includes the group Kataib Hezbollah, had planned, resourced and facilitated the overnight drone attack. While Biden and White House officials have stressed that they don't want a broader war with Iran, the administration has also warned that its response to the deadly assault won't be a "one-off."

More than 40 troops were also injured in the Sunday drone attack at Tower 22, a secretive U.S. military desert outpost whose location allows U.S. forces to infiltrate and quietly leave Syria.

Taylor Swift could make it to the Super Bowl from Tokyo. Finding private jet parking, that's tricky.

By KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — If Taylor Swift is jetting from her upcoming Tokyo concert to Las Vegas to see boyfriend Travis Kelce play in the Super Bowl the next day, she'd better already have a place to park her plane.

Places to leave private aircraft at airports in and around Las Vegas have been spoken for, airport and Federal Aviation Administration officials said Thursday. Just over a week remains before the Kansas City Chiefs and the San Francisco 49ers face off in the NFL championship game.

The four airports immediately around Las Vegas have about 475 parking spaces combined, said Heidi Hayes, a spokesperson for the Clark County Department of Aviation.

"Oh, they're full," said Rick Breitenfeldt, FAA spokesman for his sixth Super Bowl.

NOT THE FIRST TIME

Las Vegas-area airports also reached capacity for private planes during the inaugural Formula 1 Las Vegas Grand Prix auto race in November, Hayes said.

Clark County handles Harry Reid International, one of the busiest passenger airports in the U.S., along with busy general aviation airports in suburban North Las Vegas and Henderson. Hayes also checked Boulder City Municipal Airport, about 24 miles (39 kilometers) east of Las Vegas.

Air traffic is expected to be heavy. Commercial airlines have added flights and the Las Vegas airport reported Wednesday it handled a record 57.6 million passengers in 2023. That's an average of nearly 160,000 people per day.

COULD SWIFT MAKE IT TO THE GAME?

The last of four scheduled Tokyo shows of Swift's Eras Tour is on Feb. 10. Due to time zone differences, if she flies out at midnight, it will be 7 a.m. Saturday in Las Vegas.

A spokesperson for Swift didn't respond Thursday to questions about whether Swift plans to attend the Super Bowl, has made travel arrangements, or where her pilots could park a plane.

Swift has more than one private jet, including a Dassault Falcon 900 that can typically seat at least 12 people and fly at up to 590 mph (950 kph).

Barring delays, if Swift's flight to Las Vegas takes 11 or 12 hours, she could arrive in Las Vegas the day before the game after crossing nine time zones and the international date line.

WHY IS AIRCRAFT PARKING SO SCARCE?

There aren't as many airports around Las Vegas as there are around Glendale, Arizona, where the Super Bowl was played last year. The WM Phoenix Open golf tournament also was played during Super Bowl week in 2023. Breitenfeldt at the FAA said all 1,100 aircraft parking pads in the Phoenix area were claimed.

The NFL doesn't handle aircraft reservations, league spokesman Brian McCarthy said, but it does coordinate with the FAA, National Business Aviation Association, host city airport authorities and commercial private aircraft service companies during Super Bowl events. McCarthy said the league doesn't comment on individual requests.

McCarthy noted that players and fans of the Saudi-funded LIV Golf league also will be in Las Vegas for a tournament on Thursday, Friday and Saturday at Las Vegas Country Club before the football game Sunday at the 60,000-seat Allegiant Stadium.

CAN PLANES PARK ELSEWHERE?

There might still be slots available for what Hayes and Breitenfeldt termed "drop-and-go" flights. That's

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where pilots leave passengers and then fly to another airport to park.

Airports within 100 miles (161 kilometers) of Las Vegas include Mesquite Municipal Airport in Nevada and Laughlin-Bullhead International Airport in Arizona. Jean Sport Aviation Center, an airstrip visible from Interstate 15 that has no control tower, lies south of Las Vegas.

The closest large California airports are Ontario International, San Bernardino International, Palm Springs International and Palmdale Regional, which are each less than 200 miles (322 kilometers) away.

Los Angeles International, John Wayne International near Santa Ana, Long Beach International and Hollywood/Burbank airports are each within 250 miles (402 kilometers) from Las Vegas. Phoenix is about 255 miles (410 kilometers).

WHAT DOES IT COST TO PARK?

It might be cheaper for aircraft owners to park a multi-million dollar jet for the Super Bowl than an automobile owner attending the game, where seat tickets were selling at upwards of \$8,000 apiece.

Hayes said aircraft parking fees during Super Bowl weekend at Harry Reid International were unchanged from the standard rate. That's \$20 to \$150 a day, depending on the size of the plane.

Meanwhile, just one MGM Resorts International casino near the stadium, Mandalay Bay, was still offering game day garage parking reservations on Thursday, at \$100. The company's nearby Luxor and Excalibur had nothing available.

Biden left with few choices as immigration takes center stage in American politics

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (AP) — Almost immediately after he walked into the Oval Office on his first day as president, Joe Biden began rolling back his predecessor's immigration policies, which he had assailed throughout the 2020 campaign as harsh and inhumane.

A lot has changed in three years.

Biden, now sounding increasingly like former President Donald Trump, is pressing Congress for asylum restrictions that would have been unthinkable when he took office. He's doing it under pressure not just from Republicans but from Democrats, including elected officials in cities thousands of miles from the border who are feeling the effects of asylum seekers arriving in the United States in record numbers.

With the 2024 presidential campaign shaping up as a likely rematch between Biden and Trump, immigration has moved to the forefront as one of the president's biggest potential liabilities. Biden, looking to neutralize it, has already embraced a sweeping bipartisan measure still being negotiated in the Senate that would expand his authority to put strict new limits on border crossings.

"If that bill were the law today, I'd shut down the border right now and fix it quickly," Biden said last weekend.

The bill's future is uncertain, and Trump has weighed in against it, but Biden's Democratic allies have grown impatient for the president to act.

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs, a liberal Democrat, recently called on the president to call up the National Guard, and when he declined, she did it herself at the state's expense.

"Every Arizonan should know we are taking significant and meaningful steps to keep them safe, even when the federal government refuses to," Hobbs said in her state of the state address in January.

The influx has strained social services in cities including New York, Chicago and Denver, which are struggling to shelter thousands of asylum seekers without housing or work authorization. Images of migrants with nowhere to go camping out in public have dominated local newscasts.

Nine Democratic governors from all across the country sent a letter last week to Biden and congressional leaders pleading for action from Washington "to solve what has become a humanitarian crisis."

States and cities are spending billions to respond but are outmatched by the record pace of new arrivals, wrote the governors of Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and New Mexico.

They asked for money to help with their immediate needs and a commitment to work toward modern-

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izing immigration laws.

"It is clear our national immigration system is outdated and unprepared to respond to this unprecedented global migration," the governors wrote.

Trump, meanwhile, is eager to rekindle the passions that the border fueled during his successful 2016 campaign, when his vow to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico became perhaps his most familiar rallying cry.

"It has been a message that has resonated not just with Republicans or Democrats, but across the country, because now even those liberal cities, those blue cities, those blue mayors, they're saying we can't handle the crisis anymore and give us help," said Corey Lewandowski, Trump's first 2016 campaign manager. "It is a fundamental shift in thinking over the last eight years on the issue."

Trump lamented over the weekend that his border message didn't resonate when he ran for reelection in 2020. He said it was because he'd done such a good job controlling the border that he "took it out of play," though at the time voters were largely focused on COVID-19 and the pandemic had dampened job prospects for migrants.

"Literally we couldn't put it in a speech," Trump said at a campaign rally Saturday in Las Vegas. "Nobody wanted to hear about the border. We had no border problem. But now we can talk about the border because it's never, ever been worse than it is now."

As president, Trump separated children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border as an effort to deter people from crossing in a policy that was maligned as inhumane by world leaders, U.S. lawmakers and even Pope Francis. When he ran for office the first time he referred to Mexican immigrants as "rapists and criminals" and this campaign has gone farther, saying migrants are "destroying the blood of our country."

In the end, total deportations were higher under the first term of President Barack Obama, who enacted enforcement priorities similar to Biden's, than under Trump. That was due in part to a lack of cooperation from many cities and states whose leaders opposed Trump's immigration policies.

By the end of Trump's administration, the U.S. had completed more than 450 miles (720 kilometers) of new wall construction along the 2,000-mile (3,145 kilometer) border. Much of the construction was in areas where there had already been some form of barrier.

An immigration deal in Congress that had been in the works for weeks is now crumbling largely because Trump is loath to give Biden a win on immigration, an issue he wants to hammer as his own as he seeks a return to the White House, and his supporters in Congress are following his lead.

White House spokesperson Angelo Fernandez Hernandez said House Republicans under Speaker Mike Johnson are blocking Biden's efforts to improve border security.

"It's long past time for Speaker Johnson and the House GOP to join President Biden and work across the aisle in the best interests of the majority of the American people, who back President Biden's approach," Fernandez Hernandez said in a statement.

Frustration among voters has escalated.

Wayne Bowens, a 72-year-old retired real estate agent in Scottsdale, Arizona, said he's disgusted by both Biden and Trump's recent border moves. Biden is only changing his tune because he's worried about losing, he said, and Trump is hoping to block the Senate deal to help him win.

"Ukraine, Israel. People are dying. And yet other people are thinking, 'How many votes can I get if I play this right?'" said Bowens, a Republican who dislikes both leading candidates but will likely vote for Trump unless a viable third-party candidate emerges. "It's become a very disgusting world."

Immigration remains a major worry for voters in the 2024 election. An AP-NORC poll earlier this month found that those voicing concerns about immigration climbed to 35% from 27% last year. Most Republicans, 55%, say the government needs to focus on immigration in 2024, while 22% of Democrats listed immigration as a priority. That's up from 45% and 14%, respectively, in December 2022.

Arrests for illegal border crossings from Mexico reached an all-time high in December since monthly numbers have been released.

The Border Patrol tallied just under 250,000 arrests on the Mexican border in December, up 31% from

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191,000 in November and up 13% from 222,000 in December 2022, the previous all-time high.

The situation on the border makes Biden vulnerable with two voting groups he'll need to win — Latinos and college-educated white Republican women, said Mike Madrid, a California-based Republican strategist who has worked to defeat Trump and has a book on Latino voters set for release this summer.

Biden has no choice but to embrace tougher border security and restrict asylum, even though it will anger progressives in his base, Madrid said.

"It is his single biggest problem," Madrid said. "And it is the single biggest opportunity, because I think if he can put the Republicans on defense he's in a very commanding position to win reelection."

Think the news industry was struggling already? The dawn of 2024 is offering few good tidings

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — On Friday, the National Press Club is offering solace — and a free meal — by giving recently laid-off journalists tacos in recognition of a brutal stretch that seems to offer bad news daily for an already struggling industry.

For anyone who works in the news media, the list is intimidating — and unremitting.

The news website The Messenger folded on Wednesday after being in operation since only last May, abruptly putting some 300 journalists out of work. The Los Angeles Times laid off more than 100 journalists in recent weeks, Business Insider and Time magazine announced staff cuts, Sports Illustrated is struggling to survive, the Washington Post is completing buyouts to more than 200 staffers. The Post reported Thursday that The Wall Street Journal was laying off roughly 20 people in its Washington bureau; there was no immediate comment from a Journal representative. Pitchfork announced it was no longer a freestanding music site, after digital publications BuzzFeed News and Jezebel disappeared last year.

And journalists at the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, New York Daily News and the Conde Nast magazine company have all conducted walkouts to protest how management was dealing with business problems.

Seeing all the damage is what led to the Washington-based National Press Club to open its weekly Taco Night to laid-off colleagues and offer a one-month free membership to people who need a networking opportunity.

"It's very important when people have lost their jobs to know that they have some support behind them," said Didier Saugy, the club's executive director.

THIS IS NOT A NEW ISSUE

The news business has been in a free fall for the past two decades, starting when much of its advertising moved online to opportunistic tech companies. Advertising is still a huge part of the problem, although there are more complex reasons and circumstances unique to individual outlets that also play a part.

The situation is dire at larger, more national organizations and in smaller communities. A Northwestern University study released in November estimated the United States has lost one-third of its newspapers and two-thirds of its newspaper journalism jobs since 2005.

The nation loses 2.5 newspapers per week — a pace that is accelerating, the study found. Through the end of November, the employment firm Challenger, Gray and Christmas estimated 2,681 journalism jobs were lost in 2023, and that tally has increased by hundreds since.

One industry observer, Jeff Jarvis, wondered on his Buzzmachine website this week: "Is it time to give up on old news?"

"There's an inevitability to what is happening," Jarvis, author of "The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and its Lessons for the Age of the Internet," said in an interview. "Publications have been trying to preserve their old ways and their old models, and it is time for them to realize that it's not working and now it's too late."

While there have been some successes in news outlets shifting their business to paid digital subscriptions — most spectacularly at The New York Times — failures are much more numerous. Even The Washington

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Post, whose subscriptions boomed during the Trump administration, has seen a falloff, leading its management to acknowledge that it was too optimistic in expansion plans and needed to cut costs.

Optimism created by billionaire owners at the Post, with Jeff Bezos, and Los Angeles Times, with Patrick Soon-Shiong, has faded as it became apparent they didn't have magic fixes. With COVID and the Hollywood strike constricting the advertising market, the Los Angeles Times estimated it was losing between \$30 million and \$40 million a year.

Philanthropy has offered a boost to some news organizations, including The Associated Press. The MacArthur Foundation and Knight Foundation last year pledged \$500 million to seed solutions in the news industry, but such efforts can't match the scale of the problem, Jarvis said.

"The industry," he said, "leaps from false messiah to false messiah."

Tech companies are also backing away from news, said Aileen Gallagher, a Syracuse University journalism professor. Through its AI-powered search generative experience, Google is much less frequently directing users to individual news sites, she said.

Publishers have also complained of losing significant business with Facebook much less frequently featuring news articles that bring people to news sites. Twitter, now X, was once like a second home to journalists, but that's become much less the case since Elon Musk's purchase of the site.

"What the news companies may have finally woken up to is that nothing good will come from accepting the scraps that social platforms and search platforms will give the news business," Gallagher said.

The 2020 election proved a boon for many news outlets, but there are questions about whether the public will have as much interest in following political news this year.

THE PATH FORWARD IS JUST AS BUMPY

Some of the troubled outlets also have unique issues that contributed to their problems. Sports Illustrated sent layoff notices to employees after the company that publishes its content lost its license to do so. The Messenger's failure angered observers because its business plan — a centrist website that tried to appeal to many instead of a tightly-defined audience — was an uphill battle to start.

"It was business malpractice and human cruelty at an epic scale," Jim VandeHei, co-founder of Axios and Politico, told the Puck newsletter. "Anyone who knew anything about the economics of media knew it would die quickly, spectacularly and sadly."

That sadness is apparent in messages left on social media by laid-off journalists from The Messenger and elsewhere.

"I was laid off from my political writing job back in August and haven't been able to find another one since," wrote Tara Dublin, author of "The Sound of Settling: A Rock and Roll Love Story," on X. "I am terrified about the future of journalism and how anyone is going to be able to trust any news source."

Steve Reilly, an investigative reporter at The Messenger who saw his job disappear this week, wrote: "If you've been affected by recent journalism layoffs at the Messenger or elsewhere, please know that it is not your fault. It has nothing to do with you or your work."

Jarvis, who also teaches journalism, said he doesn't pretend to know the answers. He said there needs to be an attitude change from searching for a way to monetize content to seeing journalism as a service to the community.

"We need journalists in society, and we will find a way to fill that need," he said. "I'm optimistic in the long run. But in the short run, it's going to be ugly."

Rising seas and frequent storms are battering California's piers, threatening the iconic landmarks

By JULIE WATSON and HAVEN DALEY Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — More storms, rising seas and huge waves are taking their toll on California's iconic piers that have dotted the Pacific coast since the Gold Rush, posing the biggest threat yet to the beach landmarks that have become a quintessential part of the landscape.

At least a half dozen public piers are closed after being damaged repeatedly by storms over the past

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two years. Repair costs have climbed into the millions of dollars.

Among those shuttered is the pier in Capitola built in 1857 that predates the northern California town and is a popular spot to watch passing whales and dolphins. Another damaged by storms in San Diego, the Ocean Beach pier, offers a bird's eye view of surfers carving waves below.

More damage is possible this year with El Nino, which is expected to bring additional storms to California caused by the temporary warming of parts of the Pacific that changes weather worldwide. Back-to-back atmospheric rivers began drenching California on Friday.

City engineers are looking at redesigning piers to withstand bigger surf with a rise in sea levels. Others face relocation or removal.

"We are very much in a changed environment," said Mike Beck, director of the Center for Coastal Climate Resilience at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "And we're not going to be able to rebuild back in the same places and in the same ways that we did before. We're going to have to think more clearly about how we design and where we put these."

Most piers have undergone major repairs after enduring everything from fires to erosion. But officials say they are now being damaged at an unprecedented rate.

Waves rising to heights topping 20-feet (6-meters) in late December pummeled the 855-foot-long (260.6-meter) Capitola Wharf in Santa Cruz County, only months after repairs following storms in January 2023 that collapsed a large section. The Capitola Wharf is a pier by nautical standards since it runs perpendicular to the shore, versus a traditional wharf running parallel.

San Diego's Ocean Beach pier, a nearly 2,000-foot (609.6-meter) concrete structure built in 1966, has been repeatedly battered since 2019. The pier was still undergoing repairs after beatings from high surf that closed it twice last year when a monster swell in January wiped away a piling.

The city is exploring replacing the structure after spending more than \$1.7 million in fixes over the past five years. It has secured \$8.4 million in state funds for a new one. Among the three proposed designs is one with interconnected pathways, giving it a different look.

California's state park service demolished the 93-year-old pier at Seaside State Beach near Aptos in Santa Cruz County after a January 2023 storm surge smashed it in half.

Communities are grappling with whether they can afford to keep their piers, which will need taller and stronger pilings that could make their historic look more industrial, Beck said.

But those are tough conversations for many who consider the piers almost sacred.

"It's sometimes a little bit of a funny thing here in California, the way that we love our piers," he said.

For generations, the structures have provided families, fishers, tourists and others a peaceful place to experience the ocean without getting wet.

In Ventura, west of Los Angeles, the Visitors & Convention Bureau waxes poetic about the pier built in 1872 that it calls the city's centerpiece.

"Walk Ventura's beaches and, in the distance, it wavers like a child's matchstick project," the bureau states on its website. "Sit on the sand at its base (on a calm day) and it whispers a lovely song any ocean (and pier) lover knows."

California's oldest piers served steamships and were lifelines for settlements to get lumber, bricks and cement with much of the coast decades from being reached by a railroad. Piers were later built for tourism like the Santa Monica pier, which has an amusement park with the world's first solar-powered Ferris Wheel.

In December, Ventura's pier already was undergoing repairs from the January 2023 storms when the monster swell that damaged San Diego's pier around New Year's eve also wiped away or damaged 19 pilings supporting Ventura's pier.

Rising sea levels from global warming is causing the waves to be bigger off California's coast, according to research. The coast is also seeing some of the highest tides of the season.

"We're really seeing the confluence of all these factors coming together. And that's going to keep happening," Beck said. "And here in an El Nino year as well, we also see increases in sea levels, even over and above the kinds of increases that we predict long term with sea level rise."

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During a visit to Capitola last year to assess California's widespread storm damage, President Joe Biden said global warming is challenging rebuilding efforts.

Capitola's Public Works Director Jessica Kahn said climate change was taken into account for its \$8 million pier project slated for completion this fall.

"The city went over many iterations and different designs and different tactics to make the wharf more resilient and finally settled on widening the wharf," she said, adding that the narrow part of the trestle will go from three to six pilings.

The new pilings also will have the ability to be raised as sea levels go up.

Kahn said she has no doubt it is worth investing millions to preserve a relic of the past whose sole purpose today is for pleasure, given the number of memories soaked into the wooden wharf.

"When we had our damage here this past January of 2023, you would not believe the amount of phone calls we got. We got obviously from people nearby, but from people who come here annually, people who are out of the country," she said.

Over the years, Inge Jechart has spent time on the pier gazing down at schools of anchovies being chased by seals as birds circle overhead.

As it undergoes repairs, she now stands on a bluff to watch the crews.

"I think they're going to do a great job. Yes, we're having stronger storms, and the weather is changing. But I think we can do it so that it'll last longer," she said. "And I think it's absolutely worth it. It brings a community together. People love walking out there."

Punxsutawney Phil prepares to make his annual Groundhog Day winter weather forecast

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. (AP) — Punxsutawney Phil's winter weather forecast will be announced sometime after sunrise Friday in Gobbler's Knob, the scene of the country's largest and most well-known Groundhog Day celebration.

The annual event is a tongue-in-cheek ritual in which Phil's handlers, members of a club with roots in the late 19th century, reveal whether the groundhog has seen his shadow — ushering in six more weeks of winter weather — or hasn't, presaging early springlike weather.

About 10,000 people have made their way in recent years to Punxsutawney, where festivities begin in the dead of night and culminate in the midwinter forecast.

Phil predicts more winter far more often than he sees an early spring, not a bad bet for February and March in western Pennsylvania. A federal agency took a look at his record last year and put his accuracy rate at about 40%.

The tradition of celebrating the midpoint between the shortest day of the year on the winter solstice and the spring equinox goes back many centuries in European farm life.

There are more than a dozen active groundhog clubs in Pennsylvania, some dating back to the 1930s, and weather-predicting groundhogs have appeared in at least 28 U.S. states and Canadian provinces.

The 1993 blockbuster film "Groundhog Day," starring Bill Murray, fueled interest in Punxsutawney Phil and inspired informal observations far and wide.

When he's not making his annual prognostication, Phil lives in a customized space beside the Punxsutawney Memorial Library, with a window where library patrons can check out his burrow. Back in 2009, library workers said Phil had somehow managed to escape three times, climbing into the library ceiling and dropping into offices about 50 feet (15 meters) away. He wasn't injured.

Skyscraper-size asteroid will buzz Earth on Friday, safely passing within 1.7 million miles

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — An asteroid as big as a skyscraper will pass within 1.7 million miles of Earth on Friday.

Don't worry: There's no chance of it hitting us since it will pass seven times the distance from Earth to the moon.

NASA's Center for Near Earth Object Studies estimates the space rock is between 690 feet and 1,575 feet (210 meters and 480 meters) across. That means the asteroid could be similar in size to New York City's Empire State Building or Chicago's Willis Tower.

Discovered in 2008, the asteroid is designated as 2008 OS7. It won't be back our way again until 2032, but it will be a much more distant encounter, staying 45 million miles (72 million kilometers) away.

The harmless flyby is one of several encounters this week. Three much smaller asteroids also will harmlessly buzz Earth on Friday, no more than tens of yards (meters) across, with another two on Saturday. On Sunday, an asteroid roughly half the size of 2008 OS7 will swing by, staying 4.5 million miles (7.3 million kilometers) away.

India begins to flex its naval power as competition with China grows

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

SRINAGAR, India (AP) — For decades, India has focused its defense policy on its land borders with rivals Pakistan and China. Now, as its global ambitions expand, it is beginning to flex its naval power in international waters, including anti-piracy patrols and a widely publicized deployment close to the Red Sea to help protect ships from attacks during Israel's war with Hamas.

India sent three guided missile destroyers and reconnaissance aircraft in November when Yemen-based Houthi rebels began targeting ships in solidarity with Hamas, causing disruptions in a key trading route that handles about 12% of global trade.

The deployment highlights the country as a "proactive contributor" to international maritime stability, said Vice Adm. Anil Kumar Chawla, who retired in 2021 as head of India's southern naval command.

"We are not doing it only out of altruism. Unless you are a maritime power you can never aspire to be a global power," Chawla said. India, already a regional power, is positioning itself "as a global player today, an upcoming global power," he said.

India is widely publicizing the deployments, signaling its desire to assume a wider responsibility in maritime security to the world and its growing maritime ambitions to regional rival China.

"It is a message to China that, look, we can deploy such a large force here. This is our backyard. Though we don't own it, but we are probably the most capable and responsible resident naval power," Chawla said.

The Indian navy has helped at least four ships, three of which were attacked by Houthi rebels and another that Washington blamed on Iran, a charge denied by Tehran. It has also conducted several anti-piracy missions.

Iran-backed Houthi rebels have targeted dozens of ships in the Red Sea, saying they are seeking a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip. The U.S. and its allies have responded with multiple rounds of bombings of rebel positions. India has not joined the U.S.-led force battling the Houthis.

On Jan. 26, the Indian guided missile destroyer INS Visakhapatnam assisted the crew of a Marshall Islands-flagged tanker in fighting a fire after it was hit by a missile in the Gulf of Aden. About 10 days earlier, the Visakhapatnam responded to a distress call by the U.S.-owned Genco Picardy merchant vessel following a drone attack in the same waters.

"Maritime security has not been a strong pillar of India's foreign policy engagements in a way we are beginning to see now," said Darshana M. Baruah, a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "China is a factor in this."

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The rivals are already locked in a military standoff along their disputed border high in the mountains. China has built up its presence over the years in the Indian Ocean, a key route for its energy supplies. It has the world's largest navy by number of ships, more than three times the size of the Indian navy. China also operates a powerful fleet of large coast guard ships and what is referred to as its maritime militia consisting of fishing vessels that cooperate with the coast guard in asserting territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Beijing has deepened its engagement in the Indian Ocean mainly through infrastructure deals with India's neighbors, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and most recently the Maldives.

"The Chinese are looking for more and more naval bases in the extended Indian Ocean," said Lt. Gen. D. S. Hooda, a former Indian military officer and now a strategic expert. "Seeing that, India doesn't have any other option but to keep building up its own."

The Maldives government last week gave clearance to a Chinese research ship to dock in its port. Similar Chinese ships have made port calls in Sri Lanka in 2022 and 2023 amid fears in India that they could be used to surveil the region. India's concerns led Sri Lanka earlier this year to declare a one-year moratorium on foreign research ships entering its waters.

Experts say the growing competition with China is energizing India to acquire more advanced ships, submarines and aircraft and invest more in technology and infrastructure. The navy's share of India's burgeoning defense budget, which reached \$72.6 billion last year, has increased to 19% from about 14%. The Indian army has traditionally received the lion's share of the military budget.

The navy has also built strategic partnerships through participation in joint exercises with other nations in the region and beyond.

Baruah, who directs the Indian Ocean Initiative at the Carnegie Endowment, said there is a "need for Delhi's strategic thinking to be maritime-oriented, not just as an option for crisis response but as a theater to advance India's most pressing geopolitical and strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific."

India, the U.S., Australia and Japan are members of the Indo-Pacific strategic alliance known as the Quad, which has repeatedly accused China of flexing its military muscles in the South China Sea and aggressively pushing its maritime territorial claims. The navies of the four countries regularly hold drills seen as part of an initiative to counter China's growing assertiveness in the Pacific.

Beijing maintains that its military is purely defensive to protect what it says are its sovereign rights, and calls the Quad an attempt to contain its economic growth and influence.

For Indian naval planners, the South China Sea remains a top concern, with about 60% of India's cargo passing through shipping lanes in the Beijing-dominated region.

Chawla said India doesn't have "strength to project power into the South China Sea right now" because of the vast Chinese maritime assets there.

"Frankly, if it comes to a shooting war, India does not really have the capability and Quad does not have the mandate," he said. "You know, it's not a NATO-like alliance yet."

Guatemala's new president appeals for society's help to overcome entrenched powers

By SONIA PÉREZ D. Associated Press

GUATEMALA CITY (AP) — President Bernardo Arévalo said Thursday that with his political party suspended, little support in congress and an attorney general in hot pursuit, he will appeal to the Guatemalan people to help him overcome the entrenched old guard and achieve the change he campaigned on.

"We are clear that in the current context, we depend on society and convincing them that together we begin to row," Arévalo told The Associated Press in an interview two weeks after his inauguration. "We can't depend on a political system where those criminal and patronage networks still lurk."

Arévalo won the presidency in August, beating the establishment candidate by a comfortable margin. He is the son of a former president credited with implementing some of Guatemala's key labor protections, but Arévalo's strong showing in a crowded field was still a shock.

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The politician with a background in academia and conflict resolution caught fire with a message of challenging the country's entrenched power structure and resuming the fight against corruption.

The face of the resistance to change is Attorney General Consuelo Porras. Sanctioned by the U.S. government for allegedly undermining Guatemala's democracy, Porras has used her office's autonomy to pursue Arévalo and his party since he won a spot in the presidential runoff election last year.

Arévalo wants her out, but she has so far refused to go.

The president said Thursday that Porras' office "is where the perverse system remains anchored and we are looking for the legal means of resolving this."

Her term runs through 2026.

"We're not sure she's going to finish her term because there are actions in congress and legal actions," Arévalo said. "What interests us is that the Attorney General's Office stops acting against the law and against the democratic institutionality of the state."

Porras has denied that her office's investigations into how signatures were gathered for the registration of Arévalo's Seed Movement party and into electoral officials' handling of the election among others are politically motivated. The Organization of American States has argued otherwise.

Last week, she refused a meeting with Arévalo, instead releasing a video in which she asserted her office's autonomy and said she would not resign.

A spokesman for her office, Juan Luis Pantaleón, said Thursday he was unaware of Arévalo's comments, but that Porras' office had always acted in line with the law. He said that dismissing the investigations as politically motivated without seeing the evidence was mistaken. Evidence collected in the cases has not been shared publicly.

Pantaleón said Porras had invited Arévalo to an inter-institutional meeting next week.

With only days in power, Arévalo said the level of existing corruption was evident.

"There are ministries where you just have to open a drawer and (the corruption) jumps out at your face, because the arrogance about the impunity was such that they didn't even try to hide it," he said.

But he asks: "To whom would you take the complaints, to an entity in which there's no confidence?"

That's an issue for Guatemala's relationship with the United States, one of the foreign powers that kept pressure on the outgoing administration to ensure a smooth transition. In exchange, he said, the U.S. government wants a partner they can trust.

"If their worry is drug trafficking and transnational organized crime, they can't trust a corrupt government, nor the political parties that elect narco deputies and narco mayors," Arévalo said.

As for U.S. concerns over immigration, Arévalo said the solution is Guatemala's development. "If the arrival of undocumented immigrants is a problem for them, the country's development is part of the answer that they need and it is precisely what we want to make happen," he said.

Meanwhile, Arévalo recognizes that the Guatemalans already living in the U.S. are a key source of income — larger than exports or tourism — through the remittances they send home. In exchange, they should have some sort of political representation, he said, suggesting an overseas district be established through which they could choose congressional representation in Guatemala.

Speaking in the wood-paneled presidential office, Arévalo said that upon his inauguration his 98-year-old mother, Margarita de León, gave him advice: "Now you are president, respect your father's memory and may God enlighten you."

Arévalo's father, Juan José Arévalo Bermejo, served as president in 1945-1951, ushering in what came to be known as Guatemala's "spring." He later went into exile in Uruguay where the younger Arévalo was born.

Top UK diplomat says Britain could recognize a Palestinian state before a peace deal with Israel

By FAY ABUELGASIM Associated Press

RIYAK, Lebanon (AP) — Britain's top diplomat said Thursday that his country could officially recognize a Palestinian state after a cease-fire in Gaza without waiting for the outcome of what could be yearslong talks between Israel and the Palestinians on a two-state solution.

Foreign Secretary David Cameron, speaking to The Associated Press during a visit Thursday to Lebanon intended to tamp down regional tensions, said no recognition could come while Hamas remained in Gaza, but that it could take place while Israeli negotiations with Palestinian leaders were continuing.

U.K. recognition of an independent state of Palestine, including in the United Nations, "can't come at the start of the process, but it doesn't have to be the very end of the process," said Cameron, a former British prime minister.

"It could be something that we consider as this process, as this advance to a solution, becomes more real," Cameron said. "What we need to do is give the Palestinian people a horizon towards a better future, the future of having a state of their own."

That prospect is "absolutely vital for the long-term peace and security of the region," he said.

Britain, the U.S. and other Western countries have supported the idea of an independent Palestine existing alongside Israel as a solution to the region's most intractable conflict, but have said Palestinian independence should come as part of a negotiated settlement. There have been no substantive negotiations since 2009.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for his part, has publicly rejected the creation of an independent Palestinian state after the war, and has even boasted in recent weeks that he was instrumental in preventing Palestinian statehood.

A move by some of Israel's key allies to recognize a Palestinian state without Israel's buy-in could isolate Israel and put pressure on it to come to the table.

Cameron said the first step must be a "pause in the fighting" in Gaza that would eventually turn into "a permanent, sustainable cease-fire."

He added that in order for his country to recognize a Palestinian state, the leaders of the Hamas militant group would need to leave Gaza "because you can't have a two state solution with Gaza still controlled by the people responsible for Oct. 7," referring to the deadly Hamas attack on Israel that triggered the war in Gaza.

Hamas has so far taken the position that its leaders would not leave the enclave as part of a cease-fire deal.

Cameron said his country is also proposing a plan to deescalate tensions on the Lebanon-Israel border, where the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and Israeli forces have been trading fire near-daily for the past four months, sparking fears of a wider war.

The plan would include Britain training Lebanese army forces to carry out more security work in the border region, he said.

Biden meets with friendly autoworkers in Michigan, but avoids angry Gaza protesters

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WARREN, Michigan (AP) — President Joe Biden chatted with a friendly union crowd inside a United Auto Workers hall in Michigan on Thursday as pro-Palestinian demonstrators held back by police with riot shields voiced their anger nearby at the president's full-throated support for Israel in its war with Hamas.

The tension highlighted the challenges ahead for Biden in holding on to this critical battleground state in November over likely rival Donald Trump, and underscored the Democrats' concerns about flagging enthusiasm among voters who have been key to their coalition.

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Biden's visit with autoworkers making phone bank calls for him ahead of the state's Democratic primary came just days after union President Shawn Fain announced their endorsement of him. Fain praised Biden's ties to the working class, saying, "We know who's been there for labor and who wasn't," adding that the union's mission now is to "keep Joe Biden as our president."

Biden, who joined striking workers on the picket line last year, replied, "Supporting you is the easiest thing I've ever done."

However, Biden's Michigan schedule did not include any meetings with Arab Americans, adding to increasing frustration over his support of Israel in its war with Hamas as the Palestinian death toll has mounted.

"Why not have a meaningful conversation for how you change course with a community that has first-hand accounts of what it's like to live in the countries where your decision-making is unfolding?" said Abdullah Hammoud, the mayor of Dearborn, one of the largest Arab American communities in the nation.

Despite the White House offering no advance details about Biden's planned meeting, close to 200 pro-Palestinian demonstrators were waiting for Biden near the UAW Region 1 building in Warren ahead of his event there. The president's motorcade bypassed them using side streets.

Protesters chanted "Hey Biden, what do you say? We won't vote on Election Day" as well as pro-Palestinian slogans, including "Free, free Palestine."

Amir Naddaf, 34, traveled with friends from Ann Arbor to protest the president's UAW event after having supported Biden in the 2020 election

"We came here to send a clear message to the administration that they're not welcome in Michigan," said Naddaf.

Dozens of riot gear-clad police officers and an armored vehicle kept the protesters from approaching the union hall.

More than 26,000 Palestinians, mostly women and minors, have been killed in Gaza since Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory. Hamas killed more than 1,200 people and kidnapped about 250 more, mostly civilians, in the attack.

Michigan has shifted increasingly Democratic in recent years, with the party controlling all levels of state government for the first time in four decades. Biden is looking to build on that power as he seeks reelection and the state's critical 15 electoral votes.

The president faces no serious challenge in the primary, but his campaign is trying to build energy for the tougher fight to come in the fall. Michigan was part of the so-called blue wall of three states — with Wisconsin and Pennsylvania — that Biden returned to the Democratic column when he won the White House in 2020.

He kicked off his visit to Michigan by meeting with Black religious leaders at They Say restaurant in Harper Woods, outside of Detroit, before thanking autoworkers for their support.

Warren, where Biden met with union workers, is in Macomb County, an area that Democrats lost by a wide margin to Trump in the past two national elections. Biden's outreach to workers there came amid concerns within the party over rising tension between Biden and Arab Americans in the state, many of them in Detroit's Wayne County, which is the Democratic Party's largest base.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Air Force One with Biden that senior administration officials will travel to Michigan later in February to hear from community leaders on the conflict in Israel and Gaza. She did not specify which officials or with whom they would meet.

The early endorsement by the UAW was a clear win for Biden, who came to Michigan to stand alongside striking autoworkers last year. His latest meeting with union members comes on the heels of Trump's visit with another one of the U.S. most influential unions, the Teamsters, in Washington on Wednesday.

Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., a longtime Biden ally, said Democrats need to tend to a multitude of constituencies in Michigan to hold on to the state in 2024.

"Michigan is a purple state. I say that to everybody," she said. "Clearly, the Arab American community matters. But young people have to turn out. They were very decisive two years ago in voter turnout. A lot of the union leadership has endorsed the president, but we've got to get into the union halls and do the contrast so people really understand what it's about. And we've got to make sure women and inde-

pendents turn out. You know, we're a competitive state."

Biden's campaign manager, Julie Chavez Rodriguez, led a group of campaign advisers to the Dearborn area last week as part of her ongoing effort to meet with core supporter groups around the country. She spoke with some community leaders, but the trip ended abruptly when Arab American leaders declined to show up for a meeting with her.

Ahead of Biden's visit, demonstrators held a community rally in Dearborn on Wednesday night to protest administration policies backing Israel.

"The people in the Middle Eastern community are not confused. They are crystal clear on how Palestine has been handled versus Israel," said former Democratic state Rep. Sherry Gay-Dagnogo, who is from Detroit. "Just to come and visit them without changing your positions is not going to move them. African Americans are not confused either. And so you can't just do visits. A visit is not enough."

Biden and his aides have said they do not want to see any civilians die in Hamas-ruled Gaza, and the U.S. is working to negotiate another cease-fire to allow critical aid to reach the territory.

During an October visit to Tel Aviv, Biden warned the Israelis not to be "consumed by rage." But the president and his aides have also said he believes Israel has the right to defend itself and he has asked Congress for billions to help Israel in its war effort.

On Thursday during a National Prayer Breakfast in Washington ahead of his trip, Biden spoke of the threat of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

"Not only do we pray for peace, we are actively working for peace, security, dignity for the Israeli people and the Palestinian people," he said.

A December AP-NORC poll found that 59% percent of Democrats approve of Biden's approach to the conflict, up from 50% in November. But Democratic voters in New Hampshire's primary were roughly split on how Biden has handled the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to AP VoteCast.

___ AP writer Zeke Miller in Washington contributed to this report.

The Senate is headed for a crucial test vote on new border policies and Ukraine aid

By STEPHEN GROVES, MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate will hold a crucial test vote next week on legislation that would pair new policies at the southern border with wartime aid for Ukraine and other American allies, leaders pressing ahead despite heavy skepticism from Republicans and some Democrats.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he will set in motion a test vote on the national security package for Wednesday. However, with some Republicans resisting the timeline and many remaining uncommitted to supporting the border policy changes, the bill's future remained uncertain.

"Our southern border is in urgent need, in urgent need, of fixing," Schumer said in a floor speech.

Senate negotiators are expected in the coming days to release the text of a bill that would overhaul the U.S. asylum system with tougher and quicker enforcement as well as send tens of billions of dollars in military assistance to Ukraine, Israel and other allies in Asia. Negotiators, toiling for weeks to finish the deal, have kept the bill's details a closely guarded secret, but have come under heavy pressure from Republicans who are both frustrated they have not seen the bill's contents and are wary of making any compromise on border security.

The Senate deal could be President Joe Biden's best chance to enact policies to address a southern border that has been marked by historic numbers of migrants seeking asylum as well as deliver on one of his top foreign policy goals — buttressing Ukraine's defense against the Russian invasion. The Senate readied to proceed towards a vote next week, but widespread support from Republicans, especially House Speaker Mike Johnson, remained doubtful.

"We'll see. I will try," Biden told reporters Thursday morning as he entered a prayer breakfast at the Capitol with Johnson.

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Many Senate Republicans have declined to offer support for the bill until they can dig into its details. They are also facing a headwind of criticism from Donald Trump, the likely Republican presidential nominee who has called the proposals insufficient to clamp down on illegal immigration.

The lead Republican negotiator, Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, has tried for weeks to convince his colleagues that the proposal represents Republican's best opportunity in decades to gain control of illegal immigration — an issue they have made central to their political campaigns. He hoped that releasing the bill would counter the heavy criticism it has received from conservatives and activists.

"I've explained it a lot, but people just need to read the text," Lankford told reporters. "They hear it, but then they read the internet and try to make a decision — which one they believe the internet or me. And so they got to see the text."

Both Trump and Johnson, the House speaker, have derided one of the bill's main compromises: an expulsion authority that would automatically kick in on days when illegal crossings reached more than 5,000 over a five-day average across the Southern border. They both argue it amounts to greenlighting 5,000 migrants to cross the border daily.

But Lankford and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who also crafted the bill, have pushed back hard on that claim. They said the expulsion authority is only meant to prevent authorities from being overwhelmed with asylum seekers and that any migrant seeking asylum will face both tougher standards in initial interviews to enter the asylum system and a fast-track system that either grants their asylum application or deports them.

If migrants apply for asylum at a port of entry, they would be placed in a "removal authority program" and have their asylum case decided within six months, Sinema said. Migrants who cross the border illegally would be put into detention and removed within 10 to 15 days if they fail initial interviews, known as credible fear screenings.

"The process is really set up to be able to process more people faster, make decisions faster, deport faster," Lankford said.

The overhaul of the asylum system, as well as Biden's promises to "shut down the border" if the bill is enacted, have alarmed immigration advocates who say it would deprive asylum seekers of the ability to have their claims fully considered by immigration courts and undermine the U.S.'s role as a safe haven for people fleeing violence.

"The Biden administration has shown itself to be completely consumed with border apprehension numbers rather than focusing on what is happening at the border with a humanitarian lens," said Robyn Barnard, who directs refugee advocacy at Human Rights First.

Biden's handling of the border could become one of his largest re-election vulnerabilities, and Democrats in the Senate have mostly warmed to the idea of passing a bill aimed at tamping down the number of asylum seekers at the border. The package is also expected to send billions of dollars to the immigration system, including for more Border Patrol agents, asylum officers and immigration judges.

Sinema said that the border policy parts of the bill were being finalized Thursday and she expected the funding aspects to wrap up soon after. The bill's release will likely set up a frenzied effort in the Senate to gain support. GOP senators have said that a strong showing of votes from their conference would give Johnson, the speaker, a reason to put the bill on the House floor.

But Sen. Chris Murphy, the Connecticut Democrat who negotiated the bill, expressed frustration that support from Republicans remained doubtful after they last year had insisted on pairing the border policy changes with Ukraine aid.

"It's wild to me that after working for four months to get a breakthrough deal to fix the border, Republicans are talking about walking away from it just because Donald Trump doesn't like it," he said.

Resistance from the right has stymied past efforts in Congress to pass bipartisan border security and immigration legislation, and lawmakers have not made major revisions to immigration law in decades.

Still, Sinema, who has been central to Senate deals on fraught political issues, departed the Capitol on a note of confidence: "I feel like we are going to get this done."

Lupus and other autoimmune diseases strike far more women than men. Now there's a clue why

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Women are far more likely than men to get autoimmune diseases, when an out-of-whack immune system attacks their own bodies — and new research may finally explain why.

It's all about how the body handles females' extra X chromosome, Stanford University researchers reported Thursday — a finding that could lead to better ways to detect a long list of diseases that are hard to diagnose and treat.

"This transforms the way we think about this whole process of autoimmunity, especially the male-female bias," said University of Pennsylvania immunologist E. John Wherry, who wasn't involved in the study.

More than 24 million Americans, by some estimates up to 50 million, have an autoimmune disorder — diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis and dozens more. About 4 of every 5 patients are women, a mystery that has baffled scientists for decades.

One theory is that the X chromosome might be a culprit. After all, females have two X chromosomes while males have one X and one Y.

The new research, published in the journal *Cell*, shows that extra X is involved — but in an unexpected way.

Our DNA is carried inside each cell in 23 pairs of chromosomes, including that final pair that determines biological sex. The X chromosome is packed with hundreds of genes, far more than males' much smaller Y chromosome. Every female cell must switch off one of its X chromosome copies, to avoid getting a toxic double dose of all those genes.

Performing that so-called X-chromosome inactivation is a special type of RNA called Xist, pronounced like "exist." This long stretch of RNA parks itself in spots along a cell's extra X chromosome, attracts proteins that bind to it in weird clumps, and silences the chromosome.

Stanford dermatologist Dr. Howard Chang was exploring how Xist does its job when his lab identified nearly 100 of those stuck-on proteins. Chang recognized many as related to skin-related autoimmune disorders — patients can have "autoantibodies" that mistakenly attack those normal proteins.

"That got us thinking: These are the known ones. What about the other proteins in Xist?" Chang said. Maybe this molecule, found only in women, "could somehow organize proteins in such a way as to activate the immune system."

If true, Xist by itself couldn't cause autoimmune disease or all women would be affected. Scientists have long thought it takes a combination of genetic susceptibility and an environmental trigger, such as an infection or injury, for the immune system to run amok. For example, the Epstein-Barr virus is linked to multiple sclerosis.

Chang's team decided to engineer male lab mice to artificially make Xist — without silencing their only X chromosome — and see what happened.

Researchers also specially bred mice susceptible to a lupus-like condition that can be triggered by a chemical irritant.

The mice that produced Xist formed its hallmark protein clumps and, when triggered, developed lupus-like autoimmunity at levels similar to females, the team concluded.

"We think that's really important, for Xist RNA to leak out of the cell to where the immune system gets to see it. You still needed this environmental trigger to cause the whole thing to kick off," explained Chang, who is paid by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which also supports The Associated Press' Health and Science Department.

Beyond mice, researchers also examined blood samples from 100 patients — and uncovered autoantibodies targeting Xist-associated proteins that scientists hadn't previously linked to autoimmune disorders. A potential reason, Chang suggests: standard tests for autoimmunity were made using male cells.

Lots more research is necessary but the findings "might give us a shorter path to diagnosing patients

that look clinically and immunologically quite different," said Penn's Wherry.

"You may have autoantibodies to Protein A and another patient may have autoantibodies to Proteins C and D," but knowing they're all part of the larger Xist complex allows doctors to better hunt disease patterns, he added. "Now we have at least one big part of the puzzle of biological context."

Stanford's Chang wonders if it may even be possible to one day interrupt the process.

"How does that go from RNA to abnormal cells, this will be a next step of the investigation."

Republican lawsuits challenge mail ballot deadlines. Could they upend voting across the country?

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO, EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS and JACK DURA Associated Press

Republicans are challenging extended mail ballot deadlines in at least two states in a legal maneuver that could have widespread implications for mail voting before the presidential election in November.

A lawsuit filed last week in Mississippi follows a similar one last year in North Dakota, both brought in heavily Republican states before conservative federal courts. Democratic and voting rights groups are concerned about the potential impact beyond those two states if a judge rules that deadlines for receiving mailed ballots that stretch past Election Day, Nov. 5, violate federal law.

They say it's possible such a decision would lead to a nationwide injunction similar to one last year when a Texas judge temporarily paused the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the abortion pill mifepristone.

"This effort risks disenfranchising Mississippi voters, but we don't want that to also be precedent for other states," Abhi Rahman, communications director of the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, said in response to the most recent lawsuit.

Mississippi and North Dakota are among several states that accept late-arriving mailed ballots as long as the ballots are postmarked on or before Election Day, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. That includes political swing states such as Nevada. Some states, including Colorado, Oregon and Utah, rely heavily on mail voting.

Former President Donald Trump has long railed against the use of mail voting, in particular when many states expanded its use during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when the Republican lost his reelection bid to Democrat Joe Biden. Trump has falsely claimed that changing vote tallies after Election Day are an indication of widespread fraud. In the wake of his loss, several Republican-controlled states moved to tighten rules around mail voting.

The Republican National Committee, the Mississippi Republican Party, a member of the state Republican Executive Committee and an election commissioner in one county filed a federal lawsuit on Friday against Secretary of State Michael Watson and six local election officials.

The suit challenges a Mississippi law that says absentee ballots in presidential elections will be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day and received within five days. It argues that Mississippi improperly extends the federal election beyond the election date set by Congress and that, as a result, "timely, valid ballots are diluted by untimely, invalid ballots."

"Federal law is very clear -- Election Day is the Tuesday after the first Monday in November," RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel said in a statement announcing the lawsuit. "However, some states accept and count ballots days and days after Election Day, and we believe that practice is wrong."

RNC spokesperson Gates McGavick said the group hopes for a ruling before the presidential election that state deadlines allowing ballots to be received after Election Day violate federal law.

"This case could have major ramifications in future elections — not just in Mississippi but across the country," he said.

The Democratic National Committee said it is watching the cases closely and will fight any attempt to disenfranchise voters.

"Democrats will always stand on the side of voters against unlawful attacks on Americans' fundamental

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right to make their voices heard at the ballot box," DNC deputy press secretary Nina Raneses said in a statement.

Democratic state Rep. Bryant Clark called the Mississippi lawsuit "another effort to try to stifle votes and stop the votes of a certain segment of the population." He said the suit may also lead to similar efforts across the country.

Thessalia Merivaki, a political science professor at Mississippi State University, said the state's mail voting process is already difficult to navigate and that eliminating the five-day window would "unfairly punish" voters.

In North Dakota, a similar federal lawsuit against the state election director was filed by the conservative Public Interest Legal Foundation on behalf of a county auditor, Mark Splonskowski, who cited what he said is a conflict between state and federal law. A court is expected to decide soon whether he has the legal right to bring the lawsuit.

Foundation spokesperson Lauren Bowman said while the lawsuit deals with North Dakota's law, a ruling that finds extended ballot deadlines violate federal law would affect other states with similar policies.

State Election Director Erika White has asked the case to be dismissed. Her attorneys characterized the county auditor's lawsuit as "a bid to overthrow longstanding North Dakota law and rewrite it according to his own preference." Attorneys with the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division filed a statement of interest in the case defending the existing state law, saying it was consistent with federal law and ensures that military and overseas ballots would be counted.

North Dakota Republican Secretary of State Michael Howe declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Republican state Sen. Kristin Roers said the lawsuit could have unintended consequences, such as for military voters, and would effectively penalize voters who live in areas with slow postal service.

"I don't see that this is something that is a huge, glaring issue in our election system," she said.

Richard L. Hasen, a University of California, Los Angeles law professor and election law expert, criticized the legal basis of the lawsuits. In the Mississippi case, he said the RNC appears to be trying to gain a political advantage because it "believes late-arriving mail ballots are more likely to favor Democrats."

He noted that the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which includes Mississippi, has historically been quite conservative "and not protective of voting rights."

"It would be a far reach for a challenge to Mississippi law to lead to a national injunction against this," he said. "But it's possible."

Analysis shows destruction and possible buffer zone along Gaza Strip's border with Israel

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Satellite photos show new demolition along a 1-kilometer-deep path on the Gaza Strip's border with Israel, according an analysis by The Associated Press and expert reports. The destruction comes as Israel has said it wants to establish a buffer zone there, over international objections, further tearing away at land the Palestinians want for a state.

The demolition along the path represents only a sliver of the wider damage from the Israel-Hamas war seen in Gaza, which one assessment suggests has damaged or destroyed half of all the buildings within the coastal enclave.

Israeli leaders have signaled that they would like to establish a buffer zone as a defensive measure, which they contend could prevent a repeat of the Oct. 7 cross-border attack by Hamas that triggered the nearly four-month-old war. That's despite U.S. warnings not to shrink Gaza's territory.

Israel's military declined to answer whether it is carving out a buffer zone when asked by the AP, only saying it "takes various imperative actions that are needed in order to implement a defense plan that will provide improved security in southern Israel." However, the military has acknowledged it has demolished buildings throughout the area.

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An Israeli government official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing internal deliberations, said a "temporary security buffer zone" is under construction.

But the scope of the demolitions calls into question how temporary the possible buffer zone will be.

WHERE IS THE PROPOSED BUFFER ZONE?

Gaza has a nearly 60-kilometer (37-mile) border with Israel, with its back up against the Mediterranean Sea. Creating that buffer zone would take some 60 square kilometers (23 square miles) out of the Gaza Strip, which has a total landmass of about 360 square kilometers (139 square miles).

Toward the southern part of the Gaza Strip, much of the land in the imagined buffer zone is farmland that abuts the vast \$1 billion border barrier constructed on Israeli land that separates it from the enclave. But near the town of Khirbet Khuzaa, where the border turns to the northwest, it's a different story.

Satellite images from Planet Labs PBC analyzed by the AP show significant destruction of buildings and lands bulldozed in a roughly 6-square-kilometer (2.3-square-mile) area. Just over 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) north, farmland has been torn up into bare dirt along where the potential buffer zone would sit.

Further north is an area in central Gaza's Maghazi refugee camp. There, Israeli reservists preparing explosives to demolish two buildings near the Israeli border were killed in January when a militant fired a rocket-propelled grenade at a tank nearby. The blast triggered the explosives, collapsing both two-story buildings onto the soldiers, killing 21.

A large complex of warehouses sits destroyed just southeast of Gaza City, also within the potential buffer zone.

The AP's visual analysis corresponds with data from scientists studying satellite data to make sense of the war's damage.

Adi Ben-Nun, the manager of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Geographic Information System Center, has surveyed damage along the potential buffer zone up until Jan. 17. Of some 2,850 buildings that could potentially face demolition, 1,100 already have been damaged, he told the AP. Across the Gaza Strip, he estimates 80,000 structures have been damaged during the war.

Corey Scher of City University of New York and Jamon Van Den Hoek of Oregon State University put the damage even higher. They estimate at least half of all buildings in Gaza, some 143,900 structures, have been damaged or destroyed during the war. The most intense damage has been around Gaza City — the first city targeted in the ground offensive — though damage has increased in the southern city of Khan Younis.

In the area where the 1-kilometer buffer would be, at least 1,329 buildings have been damaged or destroyed since the war began, the U.S. analysts told the AP.

Gaza's border with Egypt already has a narrow buffer zone known as Philadelphi Corridor, which was created as part of Cairo's 1979 peace deal with Israel.

HOW HAS THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY RESPONDED?

In December, Israel informed Western allies and regional Arab nations about its plans to create a buffer zone between the Gaza Strip and Israeli territory, Egyptian and Western diplomats told the AP. The discussions then did not include specifics.

News of the buffer zone sparked worries from the international community about eating further into Palestinian territory, particularly in the U.S., which has been Israel's main backer during the war.

"We do not support any diminution of the territory of Gaza," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on Jan. 25.

The State Department did not respond to questions from the AP on the analysis of the demolition in the possible buffer zone. However, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller on Wednesday told journalists that officials had "raised with (Israel) the issue of the establishment of a buffer zone."

"I will say we have made clear to them the same thing that we have said publicly, which is we are opposed to any reduction in the size of the territory of Gaza," Miller said.

WHAT DO THE PALESTINIANS SAY?

Meanwhile, there has been a continued growth of Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

That further undermines the prospects for an independent Palestinian state in the long-sought two-state solution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian crisis. The Palestinians want the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for their future state.

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry, under the Palestinian Authority that oversees the occupied West Bank, said in a statement that "Israel continues to implement its occupation and colonial projects in the Gaza Strip, evident in its recent initiation of what it calls 'buffer zones' along the borders of Gaza Strip."

Senior Hamas official Basem Naim said Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, was "determined not to let this happen" when asked about the possible Israeli plans for a buffer zone. He did not elaborate.

Biden sanctions Israeli settlers accused of attacking Palestinians and peace activists in West Bank

By COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday issued an executive order that targets Israeli settlers in the West Bank who have been accused of attacking Palestinians and Israeli peace activists in the occupied territory, imposing financial sanctions and visa bans in an initial round against four individuals.

Those settlers were involved in acts of violence, as well as threats and attempts to destroy or seize Palestinian property, according to the order. The penalties aim to block the four from using the U.S. financial system and bar American citizens from dealing with them. U.S. officials said they were evaluating whether to punish others involved in attacks that have intensified during the Israel-Hamas war.

Biden's order is a rare step against America's closest ally in the Mideast who, Biden says, has the right to defend itself. But the Democratic president has pressed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to show greater restraint in its military operations aimed at rooting out Hamas. Netanyahu denounced the U.S. penalties, which his government was notified in advance, U.S. officials said.

Palestinian authorities say some Palestinians have been killed, and rights groups say settlers have torched cars and attacked several small Bedouin communities, forcing evacuations.

"This violence poses a grave threat to peace, security, and stability in the West Bank, Israel, and the Middle East region, and threatens the national security and foreign policy interests of the United States," White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said in a statement.

Biden is facing growing criticism for his administration's strong support of Israel as casualties mount in the conflict, which began when Hamas, the militant group that rules Gaza, attacked Israel on Oct. 7.

The order notes that the violence by settlers undermines U.S. foreign policy objectives, "including the viability of a two-state solution and ensuring Israelis and Palestinians can attain equal measures of security, prosperity, and freedom."

Biden has reinvigorated calls for an independent Palestinian state that would exist alongside Israel, a goal that has eluded American presidents and Middle East diplomats for decades. Biden has said that finding a way to achieve Palestinian sovereignty once the Israel-Hamas war ends is essential to building a durable peace.

Netanyahu has rejected such an idea throughout his political career and has told U.S. officials he remains opposed to any postwar plan that includes establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Israeli leader quickly denounced the sanctions. "The vast majority of settlers," he said in a statement, "are law-abiding citizens, many of them these days are fighting as conscripts and reservists for the defense of Israel." He said his country "takes action against law-breakers in every place, and therefore there is no place for exceptional steps on this measure."

The State Department, in a statement, identified the four settlers and described the accusations against them:

—David Chai Chasdai allegedly led a riot in Huwara in which a Palestinian civilian was killed.

—Einan Tanjil is accused of assaulting Palestinian farmers and Israeli activists.

—Shalom Zicherman was reportedly filmed assaulting Israeli activists in the West Bank.

—Yinon Levi regularly led a group of settlers from the Meitarim Farm outpost who assaulted Palestinian

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and Bedouin civilians and threatened them with more violence if they did not leave their homes.

Biden has spoken out against retaliatory attacks by Israeli settlers and pledged that those those responsible for the violence will be held accountable. He said in late October that the violence by "extremist settlers" amounted to "pouring gasoline" on the already burning fires in the Middle East. "It has to stop. They have to be held accountable. It has to stop now," Biden said.

Israel Defense Forces stepped up raids across the West Bank after the war began. Hamas militants are present in the West Bank, but largely operate underground because of Israel's tight grip on the territory. Palestinians have accused the Israeli military of not preventing attacks by settlers.

Israel's wartime mobilization of 300,000-plus reservists included the call-up of settlers for duty, and many were put in charge of policing their own communities. The military said that in some cases, reservists who live in settlements replaced regular West Bank battalions deployed in the war.

The order will give the Treasury Department the authority to impose financial sanctions on settlers engaged in violence, but is not meant to target U.S. citizens. A substantial number of the settlers in the West Bank hold U.S. citizenship, and they would be prohibited under U.S. law from transacting with the sanctioned individuals.

U.S. lawmakers have zeroed in on the role of Americans or dual citizens in the settler violence and intimidation. In a letter last month, Sen. Ben Cardin, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked the White House to take action against any U.S. citizens involved in attacks against Palestinians. He said that could include criminal charges and financial sanctions.

"There's got to be a strong message against the extreme activities taken by some settlers on the West Bank, jeopardizing the lives of Palestinians as well as the peace in the region," Cardin, D-Md., told reporters Thursday.

Biden's order was first reported by Politico.

In conjunction with the executive order, the Treasury Department issued an alert to financial institutions to look out for transactions that might benefit "extremist" settlers in the West Bank.

The alert provides banks with four possible red flags to consider when determining whether to mark transactions to the department as suspicious. They include transactions with nonprofits related to "extremist" settlers and groups, memo-line data that suggests support for extremism and purchases of tactical gear for nongovernmental use in the West Bank.

Biden's order was released not long before a visit to Michigan, a key presidential battleground state where his campaign team has seen alarming signs of the growing rift from Arab and Muslim leaders over his handling of the war.

Last week, the president's campaign manager, Julie Chavez Rodriguez traveled to suburban Detroit and found a number of community leaders unwilling to meet with her. Some frustrated by Biden's Israel policy are working to discourage voters from supporting the president in the general election.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the administration would send officials to Michigan to engage with community leaders on a range of issues, including the war.

When National Security Council spokesman John Kirby was asked whether the timing of the order was related to domestic pressure facing Biden, Kirby said, "Not at all." Kirby said officials have been working since November on potential action to respond to violence by settlers.

The State Department announced in December it would impose travel bans on extremist Jewish settlers implicated in a rash of recent attacks on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. While the department did not announce individual visa bans, officials said at the time the bans would cover "dozens" of settlers and their families, with more to come if the violence continued.

European Union overcomes threat of Hungary veto to seal \$54 billion aid package for Ukraine

By LORNE COOK and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Leaders of the 27 European Union countries sealed a deal Thursday to provide Ukraine with 50 billion euros (\$54 billion) in support for its war-ravaged economy after Hungary dropped weeks of threats to veto the measure.

European Council President Charles Michel said the agreement “locks in steadfast, long-term, predictable funding for Ukraine” and shows the EU’s determination “to support their future, to support freedom.”

The aid package — about two-thirds loans and one-third grants — is not intended to help fight off Russia. Apart from supporting the economy and paying for rebuilding, it’s also aimed at setting Ukraine up for future EU membership. The EU has a separate plan for funding arms and ammunition.

Almost two years after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Ukrainian economy is in shambles. The first months following the 2022 invasion saw the country lose a third of its economic output to wartime destruction and occupation by Russia, which controls Ukraine’s heartland of heavy industry.

Inflation soared to 26% because the central bank had to print money to cover budget gaps. The economy rebounded somewhat last year, but Ukraine spends almost all of its tax revenue on the war. That leaves a huge deficit because other bills must also be paid, including pensions and salaries for teachers, doctors, nurses and state employees.

Political infighting in the EU and the United States has held up funding. A combined total of more than \$100 billion is at stake.

Michel said the EU’s move would also send “a signal to the American taxpayers,” which could help the Biden administration in its efforts to get a Ukraine support package through Congress.

In a statement from the White House, President Joe Biden commended the EU’s “steadfast support for Ukraine as it continues to defend itself against Russian aggression and fulfill the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of its citizens.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed the assistance in a post on X, formerly Twitter. He said that continued financial help from the EU would strengthen Ukraine’s long-term economic stability, “which is no less important than military assistance and sanctions pressure on Russia.”

His country could receive the first tranche of money as soon as March, once the European Parliament has endorsed the deal.

That Hungary lifted its veto, and so quickly, came as a surprise.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the EU leader with the closest ties to Russia, raised staunch objections to the financial aid in December and blocked its adoption. He threatened to do the same in recent days.

The populist leader’s government has been in a dispute with the European Commission, the EU’s executive branch, over Hungary’s alleged democratic backsliding. Some of his country’s own funding was withheld as a result.

Asked what Orbán was offered in exchange for lifting his veto, French President Emmanuel Macron said Hungary “didn’t receive a gift. It simply got the guarantee that the approach toward it will not be discriminatory.”

In December, the 26 other EU leaders agreed that the \$54 billion package would run from 2024 through 2027. They also agreed to make Ukraine a candidate for EU membership, which Orbán reluctantly accepted.

But the aid package was part of a review of the EU’s continuing seven-year budget, which requires unanimous approval.

A few leaders, including Michel, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, met with Orbán on the eve of the summit to test ideas for overcoming his veto. Diplomats then worked late into the night on the final wording of the agreement. The breakthrough came at another small-group meeting early Thursday.

A senior EU official said the last-minute consultations in small groups helped to seal a common position

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and made Orbán understand he was isolated. The official with direct knowledge of discussions asked not to be identified in accordance with EU practices.

To help assuage Orbán, the leaders agreed that the commission would review the budget in two years, if deemed necessary. But such a review would not include an opportunity for a future veto.

Orbán cast the deal as a victory.

"Mission accomplished," he trumpeted on X. "Hungary's funds will not end up in Ukraine and we have a control mechanism at the end of the first and the second year. Our position on the war in Ukraine remains unchanged: we need a ceasefire and peace talks."

On the way into their meeting, some leaders lashed out at Orbán, accusing him of blackmail and playing political games. The tensions come amid mounting concern that public support for pouring more money into Ukraine has started to wane, even though a Russian victory could threaten security across Europe.

"There is no problem with the so-called Ukraine fatigue issue. We have Orbán fatigue now in Brussels," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told reporters. "I can't understand. I can't accept this very strange and very egoistic game of Viktor Orbán."

Orbán is angry at the European Commission's decision to freeze his government's access to billions of euros in joint funding.

In response, Hungary has vetoed statements at the EU on a range of issues. Orbán exported the problem to NATO, by blocking high-level meetings with Ukraine until only recently. Budapest is also holding up Sweden's bid for membership in the trans-Atlantic military alliance.

"I don't want to use the word blackmail, but I don't know what other better word" might fit, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas told reporters as she arrived at EU headquarters.

"Hungary needs Europe," she said, highlighting the country's own economic problems and high interest rates. "He should also look into what is in it for Hungary, being in Europe."

Tusk insisted that there could be "no room for compromise on our principles, like rule of law. And for sure there is no room for compromise on the Ukraine question."

The recently elected Polish leader added of Orbán: "If his position will dominate in Europe, then Ukraine will lose for sure."

Nikki Haley has called out prejudice but rejected systemic racism throughout her career

By MEG KINNARD and MATT BROWN Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Four years after South Carolina removed the Confederate battle flag from its Statehouse grounds, Nikki Haley offered two separate explanations of the flag's meaning in less than a week.

Haley, the state's governor when the flag was pulled in 2015 from its place of honor in Columbia, said in a 2019 interview with conservative radio host Glenn Beck that the man who shot and killed eight Black churchgoers in Charleston — murders that were the impetus for the flag's lowering — had "hijacked" a symbol that many people took to stand for "service and sacrifice and heritage." Two days later, she wrote in the Washington Post, "Everyone knows the flag has always been a symbol of slavery, discrimination and hate for many people."

The two messages capture Haley's sometimes contradictory messages on race. Throughout her career, the South Carolina-born daughter of Indian immigrants has generally called out acts of individual prejudice and the people responsible. But Haley, now a Republican presidential candidate, has avoided denouncing society or groups of people as racist.

As the GOP primary race moves to South Carolina and its Feb. 24 contest, Haley is trying to cut into former President Donald Trump's advantage. He has repeatedly attacked adversaries throughout his career with racist language, trying to appeal to as many voters as possible without alienating conservatives who reject the idea that systemic racism exists in the United States.

But Haley's approach has drawn bipartisan criticism at times, particularly after a December town hall

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when Haley refused to say slavery had been a cause of the Civil War. She later walked back those remarks, saying that "of course the Civil War was about slavery."

Haley was pushed for more answers on her feelings about race when she was interviewed Wednesday on "The Breakfast Club," a nationally syndicated hip hop morning radio show on which presidential candidates and other politicians have discussed issues of race.

Asked about the 2015 shooting at Charleston's Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Haley told co-host Charlamagne tha God that the national media "came in and wanted to define" the event and "wanted to make it about racism." Haley acknowledged, after being pressed, that the killings were "motivated" by racism. Dylann Roof, a white man, was convicted and sentenced to death.

The Haley campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

Haley and Trump are competing for votes both along South Carolina's rapidly growing coast with its booming aerospace and defense industries and in the rural swaths of a state where the Civil War began more than 150 years ago. Some in South Carolina still venerate the Confederate cause and play down the fact that Southern political leaders wanted to secede to keep slavery intact, as well as the lasting legacy of official federal and state discrimination against Black people.

Haley, who was Trump's U.N. ambassador, has described facing prejudice in her upbringing in rural Bamberg.

"My parents never wanted us to think we lived in a racist country," Haley told reporters recently. "I don't want any brown, Black or other child thinking they live in a racist country. I want them to know they can do and be anything they want to be without anyone getting in the way."

Hajar Yazdiha, a sociology professor at the University of Southern California, argued that Haley was making a conscious choice to better appeal to conservatives.

"Nikki Haley will strategically deploy her identity in one moment and not the next. So in one moment, she's drawing out that history," Yazdiha said. "She's really claiming her ethnic identity and using it to tell a compelling story about the American dream. And then on the other, she's minimizing it and erasing it and acting like it has no bearing on who she is."

At a recent Haley rally in North Charleston, Terry Holyfield said she applauded Haley's push to bring down the Confederate flag. Holyfield said it was "the right thing to do at that time, and I applaud her for standing by her beliefs."

About the cause of the Civil War, Holyfield said she stood by her preferred candidate's answer.

"She answered that question intelligently and correctly," Holyfield said. "Our government was different than it is now, and our Constitution was different, and she answered that question spot on."

People of color seeking high office have long faced disproportionate pressure to talk about race, especially before white audiences.

During his own presidential bid last year, U.S. Sen. Tim Scott, a fellow South Carolinian and the only Black Republican in the chamber, often talked to all-white groups in Iowa about personal responsibility and how "we don't have Black poverty or white poverty. We have poverty." Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who is Hindu, was often challenged by Christians in Iowa about whether they worshipped the same God. Both Scott and Ramaswamy have dropped from the nomination contest and endorsed Trump.

Haley sometimes ties her upbringing to politics, mentioning how her mother criticizes people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without permission because she herself immigrated legally. But Haley has also had to contend with attacks from Trump based on her ethnicity.

Trump called Haley "Nimbra" on his social media site in a recent post. That was an apparent intentional misspelling of part of her birth name, Nimarata Nikki Randhawa. Haley has used her middle name, "Nikki," since childhood.

Trump also has promoted false conspiracy theories about whether Haley was eligible to run for president because she is the U.S.-born daughter of immigrants. Her birth in South Carolina makes her a natural-born citizen, one of three qualifications to hold the U.S. presidency. Trump's promotion of this false claim echoes his "birther" rhetoric about Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president.

When asked by reporters whether Trump's criticisms of her are racist, Haley has instead portrayed him

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as “desperate to stop our momentum,” using any means necessary to attack his opponents.

“That’s what he does when he feels threatened. That’s what he does when he feels insecure,” Haley said during a town hall on CNN when asked about Trump’s false allegation that she was ineligible to be president. “I know that I am a threat. I know that’s why he’s doing that.”

She often uses her own story as an example that the U.S. is fundamentally good.

“We live in the best country in the world and we are a work in progress, and we’ve got a long way to go to fix all of our little kinks. But I truly believe our Founding Fathers had the best of intentions when they started, and we fixed it along the way,” Haley said as she struggled to make her point during a CNN town hall last month in New Hampshire, where host Jake Tapper asked her if, from a historical perspective, she believed that America had “never been a racist country.”

Tapper argued that “America was founded institutionally on many racist precepts, including slavery.” Haley responded with a reference to the line that “all men are created equal,” but then finished her thought by saying that “the intent was everybody was going to be created equally.”

In her memoirs and public appearances, Haley has often recounted experiencing discrimination during her childhood: bullying, comments about her ethnicity in school, being disqualified from a beauty pageant for being neither white nor Black. Her father, a professor at a historically Black university, was racially profiled at a farmer’s market.

Haley says she dealt with racism through bridge-building.

“This habit of finding the similarities and avoiding the differences became very natural to me over time,” she wrote in her 2012 memoir.

During a 2014 visit to India, Haley spoke with an Indian news channel about her heritage and discrimination. Asked whether she felt the need to “disown” parts of her heritage to work in American politics, Haley said her background was core to her identity.

“I’m very, very proud of being the daughter of Indian parents, and I talk about it because it’s something that’s very special to me,” Haley said. “It is who I am.”

US hints large response to Iran-backed militias is imminent as Houthi rebels target another ship

By TARA COPP, LOLITA C. BALDOR and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday it’s time to further disable Iran-backed militias that have struck at U.S. forces and ships in the Middle East and the U.S. is preparing to take significant action in response to the deaths of three U.S. service members in Jordan.

For days the U.S. has hinted strikes are imminent. While the threat of retaliation for Sunday’s deaths has driven some militant groups to say they were stopping hostilities, as late as Thursday Yemen’s Houthi rebels were still attacking vessels and fired a ballistic missile at a Liberian-flagged container ship in the Red Sea.

“At this point, it’s time to take away even more capability than we’ve taken in the past,” Austin said Thursday in his first press conference since he was hospitalized on Jan. 1 due to complications from prostate cancer treatment.

Previous U.S. strikes have not deterred the attacks. Since the war between Israel and Hamas broke out in October, Iranian-backed militant groups have struck U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria at least 166 times with rockets, missiles and one-way attack drones, drawing about a half-dozen U.S. counterstrikes on militant facilities in both countries. The U.S. military also has carried out airstrikes targeting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The U.S. has attributed the attack on Tower 22 in Jordan to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Iran-backed militias that includes the militant group Kataib Hezbollah.

While Iran has denied involvement, Austin said Thursday that “how much Iran knew or didn’t know, we don’t know. But it really doesn’t matter because Iran sponsors these groups.”

Austin said “without that facilitation, these kinds of things don’t happen.” He said the Pentagon is still looking at the forensics of the drone that struck Tower 22, a secretive base in northeastern Jordan that’s

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been crucial to the American presence in neighboring Syria.

"I don't think the adversaries are of a 'one and done' mindset. And so they have a lot of capability. I have a lot more," Austin said. "We're going to do what's necessary to protect our troops."

In the Red Sea, the Houthis have fired on commercial and military ships almost 40 times since November. In the latest attack, they fired a ballistic missile at the M/V Koi, a Liberian-flagged container ship on Thursday, U.S. Central Command said. The ship's management could not immediately be reached for comment. The Houthis did not claim responsibility for the assault.

The attack happened west of Hodeida, a port city in Yemen long held by the rebels, said the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, a British military group overseeing Mideast waterways.

Also on Thursday, Central Command said it had destroyed two more Houthi-fired drones. One overhead drone, fired at 5 a.m. in Yemen, was shot down in the Gulf of Aden. A few hours later, an uncrewed surface vehicle, a drone that travels through water, was "determined to be an imminent threat" and was struck in self defense in the Red Sea, Central Command said.

The Houthis say they are targeting ships over Israel's offensive in Gaza against Hamas. But they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade between Asia, the Mideast and Europe.

The Houthis hit a commercial vessel with a missile on Jan. 26, sparking a fire that burned for hours.

The Pentagon has the aircraft carrier Dwight D. Eisenhower in the region, along with at least a half dozen other major U.S. warships, U.S. Air Force fighter jets and radar aircraft. It has already been regularly using those assets to conduct strikes and defend ships.

Late Wednesday, American F/A-18 fighter jets struck and destroyed 10 Houthi drones that were prepared to launch, as well as a ground control station used by the rebels, the U.S. military said. The U.S. also intercepted a ballistic missile and other drones already in the air during the day.

Austin says he never told anyone on his staff to keep White House in the dark on hospitalization

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday he never told his staff to keep his cancer surgery and hospitalization secret from the White House, but acknowledged he should have handled it differently and he apologized for keeping President Joe Biden and others in the dark for weeks.

"We did not handle this right and I did not handle this right. I should have told the president about my cancer diagnosis. I take full responsibility," Austin told reporters in a lengthy Pentagon briefing. "I have apologized directly to President Biden and I've told him that I'm deeply sorry for not letting him know immediately that I received a heavy diagnosis and was getting treatment."

Known as an intensely private man, Austin provided his most extensive comments to date on the secrecy surrounding his cancer diagnosis and struggles with complications since his surgery on Dec. 22. It was the first time he has answered questions from reporters since his cancer surgery, and his answers were often bluntly personal, offering rare insights into the deeply private matter.

"The news shook me," Austin, 70, said about getting the initial diagnosis in early December. "It was a gut punch. And, frankly my first instinct was to keep it private."

While he said he "never directed anyone to keep my January hospitalization from the White House," Austin dodged questions about any repercussions on his staff or any decisions they made about disclosing it.

He said he doesn't believe he has created "a culture of secrecy" in his office. And he said he did not tell his aides to ask first responders to avoid using lights and sirens when calling for an ambulance on Jan. 1. But, he acknowledged, "there will be security officers, there will be other staff members who may perceive that they're doing things in my best interest."

His lack of disclosure prompted changes in federal guidelines and triggered an internal Pentagon review and an inspector general review into his department's notification procedures. Both reviews are ongoing, and members of Congress have called for hearings on the matter.

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Austin was taken by ambulance to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Jan. 1 after experiencing extreme pain due to complications from the surgery. He was admitted to the intensive care unit the next day. He was released from the hospital on Jan. 15.

He transferred decision-making authorities to Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, but did not tell her why. Some top staff members were told about his hospitalization on Jan. 2, but no one told the White House or the president until two days later. His hospitalization was publicly announced on Jan. 5, but his cancer diagnosis and surgery were not disclosed until the following week.

A key question is why Austin's chief of staff Kelly Magsamen or his senior military assistant, Lt. Gen. Ron Clark, didn't inform the White House or key leaders more quickly.

Austin's solo appearance in the Pentagon briefing room was also a rare moment. He is known for avoiding the media as much as possible. But he appeared calm and even joked a few times during the 35-minute press conference. His ongoing leg pain was evident as he walked carefully to the podium, but he said he expects to recover, although it will be incremental and take time.

Pressed on why he didn't tell the president and others about his diagnosis and surgery, Austin said, "I'm a pretty private guy. I never like burdening others with my problems. It's just not my way." He added that the president has a lot of things on his plate and he didn't want to add his personal issue to that.

"I apologize to my teammates and to the American people," he said.

He said he has learned from the experience. "Taking this kind of job means losing some of the privacy that most of us expect," he said. "The American people have a right to know if their leaders are facing health challenges that might affect their ability to perform their duties even temporarily. So a wider circle should have been notified, especially the president."

Austin also acknowledged that he missed a crucial opportunity to use his prostate check and early discovery of the cancer as a teaching moment, for his many male troops and workers across the department, and, even more importantly, for the African American population.

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

"I'm here with a clear message to other men, especially older men," Austin said. "Get screened, get your regular checkups. Prostate cancer has a glass jaw. If your doctor can spot it, they can treat it and beat it."

Asked about the matter earlier in January, Biden said it was a lapse in judgment for Austin not to tell him about his hospitalization, but he said he still has confidence in his Pentagon chief.

Austin, who worked from home for two weeks after his release from the hospital, returned to work in the Pentagon on Monday. He had not been in the building since Dec. 21.

Farmers create chaos outside an EU summit and wrest some promises of relief

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Farmers burned bales of hay, threw eggs and firecrackers at police — and wrested some promises of relief from European leaders on Thursday, the culmination of weeks of protests across the continent over excessive red tape and competition from cheap imports.

Eager to reassure a key part of the electorate and end disruptions in several cities, leaders at a European Union summit in Brussels showered the farmers with compliments and compassion — if few concrete proposals. In France, the government did make significant concessions — enough that two major farmers' union promised to suspend the chokehold their tractors have placed on Paris for days.

For weeks, farmers have complained that it's becoming harder than ever to make a decent living as energy and fertilizer costs surge because of Russia's war in Ukraine, more and cheaper farm imports enter the bloc, and climate change-fueled droughts, floods or fires destroy crops.

Their protests have snarled traffic in cities, preventing millions of European citizens from getting to work or school, while blockades of ports and major traffic arteries meant flowers wilted in trucks and supermarket shelves were left bare. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán even complained the endless honking

of tractors kept him up at night.

On Thursday, as thick smoke from burning bales of hay and tires hung over parts of the Belgian capital, security forces used water cannons to douse fires and keep a farmer from felling a tree on the steps of the European Parliament. They could not prevent one bronze statue being pulled off its pedestal and scorched. In Greece, farmers rallied outside an agricultural fair, while others drove their tractors into Milan.

But ahead of EU parliamentary elections in June, most leaders at the summit were clearly keen to win over farmers, especially as populist and hard-right politicians have latched on to the their plight in recent weeks.

"Don't demonize the farmers. Don't send the army on them. But talk to them," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said.

Leaders welcomed the plan of the European Commission, the EU's executive branch, to shield farmers from cheap imports from Ukraine during wartime and allow farmers to use some land that had been forced to lie fallow for environmental reasons.

EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen also promised Thursday to prepare by the end of the month new plans to cut reams of bureaucratic rules to make sure farmers can spend more time in their fields, not in their offices. The suggested speed seemed light years faster than some other EU initiatives take.

And in France, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal announced a new set of measures, including hundreds of millions of euros in aid and tax breaks, and also promised not to ban pesticides in France that are allowed elsewhere in Europe.

In Brussels, many leaders also said they would not approve a trade deal with South American nations that is under consideration unless any imports would meet the same regulatory standards that EU farmers face, a key demand from the sector.

"The priority for us should be implementing existing rules and regulations and not imposing new additional ones on farmers over the next couple of years," said Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, adding to a chorus of soothing words from leaders on the subject.

France's 2 key farmers unions suspend protests after the government offers new measures

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's two major farmers unions announced they would lift country-wide blockades Thursday, shortly after the prime minister introduced new measures aimed at protecting their livelihoods that they described as "tangible progress."

However, farmer activists who have snarled traffic along major highways around Paris said they would stay put at least another day to see the government commitments in writing, and both unions said they would closely monitor any government implementation.

"We don't want to hear words of love. What we want is proof of love," said Thierry Desforges, a farm union member at road blockade of the A6 highway in Chilly-Mazarin, south of Paris.

Thousands of French farmers have been demonstrating for a couple of weeks across the country in protests over low earnings, heavy regulation and what they call unfair competition from abroad. Similar protests also have extended across Europe, including at the European Union headquarters in Brussels.

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, whose earlier promises to address farmers' issues had failed to quell the French protests, announced a new set of measures Thursday.

They included tens of millions of euros in aid, tax breaks and a promise not to ban pesticides in France that are allowed elsewhere in Europe — which French farmers say leads to unfair competition. Attal also said France would immediately ban imports from outside the EU that use a pesticide banned in the bloc.

Arnaud Rousseau, president of France's biggest farmers union FNSEA, and Young Farmers union President Arnaud Gaillot said Thursday that they were calling on their members to suspend the protests.

"We have been heard on a number of points, with tangible progress," Rousseau said, though both unions

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said they would give keep a close eye on whether the government implements its promises by June.

"We call on our members to suspend the blockades," Gaillot said.

French President Emmanuel Macron, at a Brussels news conference, said that the French government's latest pledges to farmers meant that he had heard their concerns. He said he won major concessions from the EU, describing it as a "deep revision of the logic" of European farming policy.

Attal's speech earlier Thursday came as hundreds of angry farmers driving heavy-duty tractors created chaos outside the European Union's headquarters, demanding leaders at an EU summit provide relief from rising prices and bureaucracy.

"The question is currently being asked throughout Europe: Is there a future for our agriculture? Of course, the answer is yes," Attal said.

At road blockades across France, protesters watched the speech on smartphones and televisions they had set up.

Attal promised there would be no new pesticide ban "without a solution" and said no pesticides would be banned in France that are authorized elsewhere in the EU. Also, Attal announced that France was banning, starting immediately, imports of fruits and vegetables coming from outside the EU that have been treated with Thiaclopride — an insecticide currently banned in the bloc.

France will propose the creation of a "European control force" to combat fraud, he said, particularly regarding health regulations, and fight against the import of food products that go against European and French health standards.

Attal also reaffirmed France would remain opposed to the EU signing a free-trade deal with the Mercosur trade group. "There is no question of France accepting this treaty," he said.

The government's goals with the newly announced measures are "to give food its value back" and "to boost farmers' income, to protect them against unfair competition and to simplify their daily life," he said.

Attal also announced 150 million euros (\$162 million) in aid to livestock farmers and a decrease in taxes on farms being transferred from older generations to younger ones.

Agriculture Minister Marc Fesneau, speaking after Attal, announced a 2 billion euro (\$2.16 billion) package to make loans for those who are setting up as farmers.

The French government has also doubled the numbers of controls to sanction food industrial groups and supermarkets that don't comply with a 2018 law meant to pay a fair price to farmers. The fine can reach up to 2% of sales revenues to companies that don't comply.

At the Chilly-Mazarin blockade, Damien Greffin, a FNSEA representative, said farmers still need time to "better analyze the measures" as some appeared to him "a bit deceptive."

Desforges, a fellow FNSEA member, remained cautious about proposals that concern the EU because "we know how Europe works, the countries still need to agree."

Regarding domestic proposals, "we really need to wait and see if they are turned into law," Desforges added.

UK judge dismisses Trump's lawsuit over dossier containing 'shocking and scandalous claims'

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A judge in London on Thursday threw out a lawsuit by former U.S. President Donald Trump that accused a former British spy of making "shocking and scandalous claims" that were false and harmed his reputation.

Judge Karen Steyn said the case Trump filed against Orbis Business Intelligence should be dismissed. "There are no compelling reasons to allow the claim to proceed to trial," she said.

The ruling comes as Trump, the front-runner for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, faces legal problems on both sides of the Atlantic.

Orbis Business Intelligence was founded by Christopher Steele, who created a dossier in 2016 that con-

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tained rumors and uncorroborated allegations that caused a political storm just before Trump's inauguration.

Trump said the dossier was fake news and a political witch hunt. He sought damages from Orbis for allegedly violating British data protection laws.

Steele, who once ran the Russia desk for Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, also known as MI6, was paid by Democrats to compile research that included salacious allegations that Russians could potentially use to blackmail Trump.

At a hearing in London in October, Trump's lawyer said the former president filed his lawsuit over two memos in the dossier that claimed he had taken part in "sex parties" in St. Petersburg and consorted with sex workers in Moscow.

Attorney Hugh Tomlinson said the former president had "suffered personal and reputational damage and distress."

Tomlinson said the dossier "contained shocking and scandalous claims about the personal conduct of President Trump" and included allegations he paid bribes to Russian officials to further his business interests. Trump's case "is that this personal data is egregiously inaccurate," he said.

In a written witness statement, Trump said the allegations were "wholly untrue" despite Steele's assertions that they never were disproven,

Trump said he had not engaged in "perverted sexual behavior including the hiring of prostitutes ... in the presidential suite of a hotel in Moscow," taken part in "sex parties" in St. Petersburg, bribed Russian officials, or provided them with "sufficient material to blackmail me." He also said he had not bribed, coerced or silenced witnesses.

Orbis said the lawsuit should be thrown out because the report was never meant to be made public and was published by BuzzFeed without the permission of Steele or Orbis. It also said the claim was filed too late.

The judge agreed, concluding Trump had "chosen to allow many years to elapse -- without any attempt to vindicate his reputation in this jurisdiction -- since he was first made aware of the dossier" in January 2017.

"The claim for compensation and/or damages ... is bound to fail," Steyn said.

Orbis attorney Antony White argued during last year's hearing that Trump had a "deep and intense animus against" Steele and the firm, as well as "a long history of repeatedly bringing frivolous, meritless and vexatious claims for the purpose of vexing and harassing perceived enemies and others against whom he bears a grudge."

A U.S. federal judge in Florida in 2022 dismissed a Trump lawsuit against Steele, 2016 Democratic rival Hillary Clinton and former top FBI officials, rejecting his claims that they helped concoct the Russia investigation that overshadowed much of his administration.

Trump is currently awaiting a verdict in a civil fraud trial in New York alleging he and company executives deceived banks, insurers and others by overvaluing his assets and exaggerating his net worth to secure loans and make deals.

He also faces four separate criminal cases for allegations that include mishandling classified documents, trying to overturn the results of the 2020 election, and paying hush money to a porn actress to cover up an affair.

Today in History: February 2, 'American Sniper' Chris Kyle killed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 2, the 33rd day of 2024. There are 333 days left in the year.

Today in History:

On Feb. 2, 2013, former Navy SEAL and "American Sniper" author Chris Kyle was fatally shot along with a friend, Chad Littlefield, at a gun range west of Glen Rose, Texas; suspect Eddie Ray Routh was later convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Groton Daily Independent

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On this date:

In 1536, present-day Buenos Aires, Argentina, was founded by Pedro de Mendoza of Spain.

In 1653, New Amsterdam — now New York City — was incorporated.

In 1887, Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, held its first Groundhog Day festival.

In 1913, New York's rebuilt Grand Central Terminal officially opened to the public at one minute past midnight.

In 1914, Charles Chaplin made his movie debut as the comedy short "Making a Living" was released by Keystone Film Co.

In 1925, the legendary Alaska Serum Run ended as the last of a series of dog mushers brought a life-saving treatment to Nome, the scene of a diphtheria epidemic, six days after the drug left Nenana.

In 1943, the remainder of Nazi forces from the Battle of Stalingrad surrendered in a major victory for the Soviets in World War II.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman sent a 10-point civil rights program to Congress, where the proposals ran into fierce opposition from Southern lawmakers.

In 1980, NBC News reported the FBI had conducted a sting operation targeting members of Congress using phony Arab businessmen in what became known as "Abscam," a codename protested by Arab Americans.

In 1990, in a dramatic concession to South Africa's Black majority, President F.W. de Klerk lifted a ban on the African National Congress and promised to free Nelson Mandela.

In 2006, House Republicans elected John Boehner (BAY'-nur) of Ohio as their new majority leader to replace the indicted Tom DeLay.

In 2016, health officials reported that a person in Texas had become infected with the Zika virus in the first case of the illness being transmitted within the United States.

In 2017, using a backhoe to smash through a barricade of water-filled footlockers, police stormed Delaware's largest prison, ending a nearly 20-hour hostage standoff with inmates; one hostage, a guard, was killed.

In 2018, at a sentencing hearing in Michigan for former sports doctor Larry Nassar, a distraught father of three girls who the doctor had sexually abused tried to attack Nassar before being tackled by sheriff's deputies and hauled out of court. (Randall Margraves later apologized; the judge said there was "no way" she would fine him or send him to jail for trying to attack Nassar.)

In 2020, the Philippines reported that a 44-year-old Chinese man from Wuhan had died in a Manila hospital from the new coronavirus; it was the first death from the virus to be recorded outside of China.

In 2021, the Senate approved Pete Buttigieg (BOO'-tuh-juhj) as transportation secretary, making him the first openly gay person confirmed to a Cabinet post.

In 2022, four men were charged with being part of the drug distribution crew that supplied a deadly mix of narcotics to actor Michael K. Williams of "The Wire," who had overdosed five months earlier.

In 2023, a huge, high-altitude Chinese balloon sailing across the U.S. drew Pentagon accusations of spying while sending excited or alarmed Americans outside with binoculars.

Today's birthdays: Rock singer-guitarist Graham Nash is 82. Television executive Barry Diller is 82. Country singer Howard Bellamy (The Bellamy Brothers) is 78. TV chef Ina Garten is 76. Actor Jack McGee is 75. Actor Brent Spiner is 75. Rock musician Ross Valory (Journey) is 75. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, is 72. The former president of South Korea, Park Geun-hye, is 72. Model Christie Brinkley is 70. Actor Michael Talbott is 69. Actor Kim Zimmer is 69. Actor Michael T. Weiss is 62. Actor-comedian Adam Ferrara is 58. Rock musician Robert DeLeo (Army of Anyone; Stone Temple Pilots) is 58. Actor Jennifer Westfeldt is 54. Rapper T-Mo is 52. Actor Marissa Jaret Winokur is 51. Actor Lori Beth Denberg is 48. Singer Shakira is 47. Actor Rich Sommer is 46. Country singer Blaine Larsen is 38. Actor Zosia Mamet is 36.